

Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta

3

My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World



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C O N T E N T S

Prologue

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Amid the Forest

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Welcome to the Family

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The Demon and the Blade

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Deploy the Troops! Here Be Monsters...

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The Demon of the Law

The Story of How We Met IV

To Grow Strong

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Afterword

Prologue

In the deepest recesses of the demon kingdom stood a castle. Here, the Demon Queen lived and presided over her lands.

A demon woman was walking through the venerable corridors of this palace, her steps light as snow. Although this demon was attractive in both face and figure, what really drew the eye was her blade—it rested in its scabbard, strapped to her waist. For whatever reason, it was a Japanese-style sword. It was exquisitely made and had drawn many admiring gazes since she had received it.

And now, one such admirer was approaching.

“Nilda.”

Upon hearing her name spoken and registering the voice behind it, the demon woman stopped in place and dropped to one knee. “My Queen,” she acknowledged.

As should be obvious by now, the voice who had called the demon’s name was none other than the ruler of the castle herself—the Demon Queen.

She, too, was alluring... Her visage was beautiful like a painted portrait, almost as if she had stepped out of a gilded frame just a second prior. The queen signaled for Nilda to stand with a wave of her hand and then gestured to the sword at Nilda’s waist.

“You’re in a rather pleasant mood,” the queen remarked. “It’s thanks to your sword, no?”

“Yes, My Queen,” Nilda answered. “The scabbard is the work of one of our craftsmen—I commissioned it upon my return to the kingdom. However, the sword was forged by a smith of human blood. It is sturdy, beautiful, and cuts like a dream. I intend to treasure it.”

“Aaah, a human,” the Demon Queen responded simply.

Nilda furrowed her brows. “Does that displease you?”

The Demon Queen smiled and waved her hand to assuage Nilda’s worries. “No, not at all. I do not know how the opposition thinks, but I, for one, have no reason to seek further animosity between our kingdoms.”

The queen did not mention the great swathes of hostile history between humans and demons that had predated her era. The fact of the matter was, Nilda’s purchase would not have been viewed so kindly during the great wars a few centuries ago. But those battles had been fought under the previous reign’s banner, during an age that the current queen had little connection with.

Nilda sighed in relief—she was being let off the hook without a dressing down. She could’ve hoped for no better outcome.

“May I see it?” the Demon Queen asked.

“Of course.” Nilda unstrapped the sword and handed it to the queen, who slid it from its sheath.

The blade was long and slender. It glowed from the light cast by the corridor’s candlesticks.

“You said it cuts well? You’ve blooded it, then?”

“Yes. It has felled its fare share of foes,” replied Nilda. “I had a need to test its performance in battle.”

“I see,” the Demon Queen mumbled before returning her gaze to the blade.

A sword accumulated nicks and dents in proportion to its kill count, and each repair left marks of its own. However, this blade was flawless.

“It seems that this sword has not needed repair.”

“You are quite right, My Queen. I handle routine maintenance such as wiping the surface to prevent rust, but the blade has yet to chip or bend,” Nilda answered.

The Demon Queen’s eyes narrowed in consideration. “Is that so...?”

A sword with little need for upkeep... That was perfect for the queen’s lifestyle, busy as it was. She considered acquiring a blade—a rapier, perhaps—for herself. “And your human smith serves demons as well?”

“Yes,” Nilda said. “According to the smith, he does not discriminate. Nevertheless, there is a single condition he enforces.”

“Tell me.”

“The commissioner must go alone to his forest forge to plead their case.”

“That’s it?” The Demon Queen was thrown by the simple requirement. She had imagined the blacksmith would want gold and jewels, or perhaps the client’s most treasured belonging, just as people did in stories.

The queen was doubly surprised by Nilda’s next words.

“I must admit, the journey was harrowing.”

“Harrowing?” the Demon Queen parroted incredulously. “For you?”

And it was no wonder that the queen was skeptical, for Nilda’s duty was to patrol the border between the demon kingdom and the outside world. The large forest adjacent to the border was home to ferocious beasts that posed a threat to demons, even those who were veterans in battle. With Nilda’s abilities and experience, she should’ve been more than used to forest terrain. Yet, the journey to this blacksmith had been tough? Unimaginable.

But then, a thought struck the Demon Queen. “Perhaps...is *that* the forest you’re referring to...?”

“Exactly,” Nilda said, confirming the queen’s hunch. “The forge is in the Black Forest.”

At that, the Demon Queen sighed deeply.

The Black Forest was the largest in the world and was a place best avoided by unsuspecting travelers. The beastfolk claimed its peripherals as their territory, and dangerous creatures skulked about in its depths.

According to Nilda, that was the place her smith had chosen to live. It was difficult to believe, but Nilda had visited the forge in person. If she said so, it must’ve been true.

“Of course, there is a benefit to us—magic is thick within the bounds of the forest. But the wolves pose a great threat. They have powerful noses and razor-sharp wits,” Nilda explained. “As if the dangers of the forest weren’t enough to contend with, the workshop itself is shielded with magic to repel visitors.”

The queen’s eyes widened. “We are still talking about the forge of the blacksmith, yes?”

When had the queen begun to show her emotions so openly? Nilda stopped to ponder. After a breath, she answered, “Yes, the very same.”

What kind of blacksmith would purposefully use magic to discourage visitors? Clients equaled money, so common sense dictated that the more clients one had, the better.

“And another thing,” Nilda added.

“There’s more?”

“Payment is determined by the commissioner.”

The Demon Queen was at a loss for words. This blacksmith operated outside the bounds of her comprehension, and there was simply no

use in trying to understand him any further. “What an eccentric fellow,” the queen remarked, chuckling.

With eyes reflecting on a past unbeknownst to us, Nilda echoed, “Yes. He truly was.”

Chapter 1: Amid the Forest

The Black Forest was home to a great number of creatures, dangerous and docile alike. I was currently trekking through this forest alongside the three women I lived with.

Samya was one of the beastfolk, a tiger-type who'd moved in with me after I'd saved her life. Rike was a dwarf who I'd taken on as my apprentice. And Diana had joined our household after I'd helped to resolve her family's internal conflict.

Just then, a squirrel with green fur scampered out of the shadows. The first time I'd seen one of its kind was...that's right, the day I'd awoken in this new world. It was the first living creature I'd encountered.

As usual—though, perhaps nothing about this was “usual”—the squirrel blended into its surroundings. However, it was standing right in my line of sight as if it had purposefully moved to a spot I could see.

“It's a squirrel,” I said to the others.

Samya spotted it right away, but Rike and Diana weren't able to find it until I pointed. When the two of them caught sight of it, they practically melted from the impact of its cuteness.

“Adorable,” Rike cooed.

“Hard to believe that cute animals like that live here,” said Diana. “I always thought that everything in the Black Forest had sharp teeth and claws.”

I turned to Samya. “You know, it's not the first time I've seen these squirrels,” I said. “Are they harmless? They're not poisonous, right? And they won't try to attack people?”

I'd been curious about them since way back. The whole time I'd been in this world, I hadn't interacted with them at all—not because I'd fallen for their fluffy tails and precious faces, but because I hadn't wanted to risk the chance that they were secretly dangerous.

"Nope. Not poisonous and not jumpy either," Samya answered.

"So, we could eat them?"

Diana swallowed heavily. Catching small critters for sustenance was probably not a custom amongst the noble class.

"Yup, we could. They're honestly pretty tasty," Samya replied.

"But...there's little meat on their bones." She pursed her lips in dissatisfaction.

Is she thinking about a bitter memory?

She continued. "They're nimble, smart, and more wary than foliage birds. Slippery little fellas... It's tough to catch enough of them to make it worth the effort, so I usually don't bother."

"Aaah, I see."

I'd heard that there were regions on Earth where squirrel meat was a major component of the diet, but that seemed far from the case in this forest. Particularly for Samya, hunting wasn't a sport but a matter of life or death. There was no reason for her to expend time and energy without the promise of a reward.

The squirrel stared down at us from the branches for a while longer as if it could sense that we had no intentions to harm it. Then, it suddenly darted up the tree and disappeared into the canopy.

We made our way deeper into the forest. The undergrowth rustled as we pushed through.

“Come to think of it, what about the horned deer? They’re different from tree deer, right?” I asked, recalling that Samya had mentioned them before.

Tree deer had antlers that resembled the branches of trees in the forest. They were a regular sight around these parts, but I’d never seen a horned deer before.

Could it be that Samya had been steering us away from horned deer before we encountered them? When we traveled to and from the city through the forest, Samya was always on lookout duty. Personally, I thought that if horned deer weren’t a threat, I wanted to see one at least once.

“Horned deer have short, straight antlers. It’s no joke if you get stabbed by one.” Samya used her hands to mimic the antlers, which was a cute sight in and of itself. “Tree deer can be dangerous when angered, but horned deer are more temperamental.”

Rike nodded appreciatively. Her family home was near a mountainous region where it was easier to mine ores and minerals, so she was often as unfamiliar as I was with the fauna of the forest.

“Horned deer will attack if you so much as set a wrong foot toward one. Every once in a while, I’ve seen them take the upper hand against wolves.”

“Wow,” I mused. I’d assumed that since horned deer were, you know, *deer*, they were herbivores, but the idea of being cornered by one when you’d intended to be the hunter... That was a frightening proposition. Of course, kill or be killed was the same from both the hunter’s and the horned deer’s perspectives.



I glanced around to distract myself from the brutal reality of the food pyramid, and my eyes landed on the branch of a nearby tree. “Look, it’s a foliage bird!” It was pecking at some fruit.

Foliage birds were named for their feathers that resembled leaves. When they sat still, they blended perfectly into the flora. Did this world have predators with sharp eyes that were skilled climbers? Perhaps a reptile of sorts? Why else would foliage birds have evolved a camouflage mechanism even though they nested high up in the trees?

“Are there any snakes that are good at climbing?” I asked.

“Uh-huh, there are,” Samya said offhandedly like it was everyday knowledge. Maybe it was. After all, snakes populated every corner of Earth except for the polar regions, so the chances were slim that they didn’t exist here at all.

“There are tons of different species, but there’s one type of brown snake that looks like a tree branch and is known for being an exceptional climber,” she explained. “Fast too.”

“And the foliage birds’ camouflage is a tactic to fool the eyes of those snakes?”

“Could be. Though, bough snakes in this forest tend to be peaceful,” she replied. “But you gotta watch out so they don’t end up in your belongings. They like tight spaces.”

“Pardon?” Diana said, shocked.

Is Diana scared of snakes? I had no problem with snakes, and judging by Samya’s composure during her explanation, she was at least used to them.

“I’ll be careful...” Diana murmured.

“Sure, but don’t worry too much,” Samya reassured her. “I’ve accidentally tried to grab them plenty of times before, and they’ve always slithered away without striking. They’re not venomous either, so you’ll be okay even if you’re bitten.”

“Th-That’s good,” Diana said anxiously.

“Still, it’s better to be careful if you’re nervous,” I said. “Samya, you too. There’s no helping it if you don’t notice one, but try to avoid them.”

“I got it, I got it,” Samya said.

There was a type of snake back in my old world called the tiger keelback. Their venom glands were located in the very back of their jaws, but they had no muscles to trigger their venom, so a quick bite was unlikely to leak any into the victim. Because of this, they were thought to be nonvenomous for a long time.

The bough snake could have a similar backstory, though there was no guarantee—the best thing would be to avoid getting bitten, period.

As we continued walking, Rike asked Samya, “Are there any other cute animals in this forest?”

“Tanuki, wolf pups, ummm...foliage birds, and the squirrels? But otherwise...” Samya crossed her arms and screwed her eyes shut in thought. I could practically see a montage of different creatures playing through her head.

Soon, she blinked open her eyes and said, “I got one. We should be able to find some in this season...” She took the lead and gestured for us to follow.

Apparently, we were in for a seasonal treat.

The grass and undergrowth rustled beneath our feet as we walked. When we had been roaming around the forest for a little under an hour, Samya stopped. Rike, Diana, and I came to a halt where we were. Looks like we'd reached our destination.

Samya waved us forward.

I took a cue from her silence and stayed quiet. The three of us padded over to join Samya.

She pointed in front of her to a fluffy ball that was bouncing around on the ground. The pom-pom critter wasn't alone—there were at least ten of them, all in a group, jumping and frolicking together.

It was a strange sight, but I had to admit that they *were* cute.

We watched the balls of fluff for a while before retreating as quietly as we'd approached.

"You were right. Those were adorable, but what were they?" I asked.

"Rabbits," Samya replied.

"So they're a different kind than the ones with grass-like ears?"

"Mmhmm. In this season, the kind we just saw are still floofy with a full coat of fur. When it gets warmer and the rainy season begins, they'll start shedding. Their coats would grow too heavy if they got soaked."

"Wow," Diana said. "Are they even tinier beneath all the fur?"

Samya gave a big nod. "Yup. When they shed all the winter fluff and grow spring coats, they're no bigger than mice. They have little meat to speak of, and their fur is coarser and tougher than it looks. We beastfolk never hunt them."

I thought their fur, fluffy as it was, might've been a good substitute for cotton...but it seemed like it would be easier to raise sheep for wool than to catch those rabbits.

“Still, they were precious,” Rike said.

“When I run into some while on a hunt, I always feel at peace just looking at them.” Samya grinned, and we all smiled back at her.

I glanced up at the sliver of sky that was just visible through the trees. “We’ve come pretty far, so we’d better return soon.” Judging by the location of the sun, if we turned back now, we would get home around dusk. In other words, if we stayed out any later, it would be dark by the time we arrived at the cabin.

The other three chimed in with their agreement, so we turned around and retraced our path back home.

Chapter 2: Welcome to the Family

Having finished up the repair work on the elven sword, Forge Eizo was back to its regularly scheduled programming.

For our weekly delivery into the city, we forged the regular lineup of knives and swords. Occasionally, Samya and Diana would go out to hunt, and all of us would help bring back their kill in the morning. Our lives were now back on track.

The days passed quietly until a fateful trip into the city.

It was beautiful weather. The sky, cloudless and blue, spread out high above us, and the breeze rustled through the grassy plains and caressed our skin. As usual, Rike and I were on cart duty, but all of us went along, and the mood was buoyant.

Halfway to the city, we had a rare encounter with a party coming from the opposite direction. Each member of the party had on silver armor, and on top of that layer, they wore a surcoat decorated with the city's crest. In other words, these were city guards. I'd known that they patrolled this road, but this was the first time I'd come across guards outside the city.

"Hello there!" I called out, trying my best to sound friendly. "Great weather we're having."

There were four guards altogether—one of them was the guard we always met at the city entrance. He grinned at us. "Well, well, look who we have here."

"What brings you out here? Have you got any news?" I asked casually as if I were just making small talk. Considering their line of work, they were likely privy to information that they couldn't share with me.

Nevertheless, the guard didn't hesitate a second before responding. "Actually, I do. There've been rumors of thieves in this area, so we've increased the rounds of patrols."

Petty crooks didn't usually warrant increased patrols... In any case, even if the guards weren't able to eliminate criminal activity completely, the patrols served as an additional layer of protection.

"Is that true?" I asked.

"No lie," he said. "But you see, there's a twist to the story."

"A twist?"

The guard nodded. "The thieves have been raiding travelers...but they haven't stolen anything or killed anyone."

"Even though they're the ones attacking?"

"Yeah. It's almost as if they're looking for something. Well, that's one theory at least," he remarked. "The strangest part is that no one remembers anything about the assailants."

"Not a single person?" I asked, confused.

"No. Nobody remembers their faces nor their physiques."

"How are you meant to find them, then?"

The guard sighed deeply. "There's the rub—that's precisely why we've increased the patrols. Nothing else we can really do."

"I see."

"Whoops, didn't mean to talk your ears off!" the guard said apologetically. "Are you folks heading into the city?"

"Yes, we're just going in for our usual delivery."

"Best be careful," he said. "Though, I'm sure you don't need to hear that from me."

"We will be," I told him. "Thank you."

After that, we parted and went our separate ways—my group kept on toward the city.

“What did you think?” I asked Diana.

This road was part of the Eimoor family’s domain, or more relevantly, Diana’s family’s domain. If anyone knew anything about the criminals, it would be her.

“About the rumors?” she asked.

I nodded, and she said, “Well, at the very least, I can say that they shouldn’t have any relation to Karel.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“Eizo...you’re thinking that these crooks are looking for you because of *that* incident, aren’t you?”

“How did you know?”

The incident in question was the battle for succession between Diana’s second brother, Karel, and third brother, Marius. I’d been dragged into the conflict, along with Camilo, the merchant we were visiting today. The two of us had been on Marius’s side, and the conflict had ended with Karel’s death.

Camilo and I were the most likely targets for Karel’s allies. But if they were searching for Camilo and they had even a shred of sense in their heads, they would’ve gone straight to his store and popped in with a quick “How do you do?” The fact that they were roaming around the road meant that they likely didn’t know the location of their quarry, so the logical conclusion was that they were searching for me.

But Diana had just refuted that entire theory. “If Karel had hired master crooks,” she explained, “he would’ve brought them out sooner.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

Diana had been a target during the family dispute as well—Karel had sent assassins after her. I wasn't sure what trick the rumored thieves were using to erase their victims' memories, but if Karel had employed such dangerous people, it was unlikely that Diana would've survived long enough to be speaking with me.

“So, it's safe to say that we know nothing about these thieves,” I stated.

“I suppose so,” Diana agreed. “There's not much we can do, right? Besides, Samya is watching our backs so we don't get attacked.”

Samya's eyes widened when her name came up in the conversation, but she smiled and said, “Leave it to me!” She flexed her biceps, provoking laughter from the rest of us with her antics.

In the end, we didn't encounter any trouble before we reached the city. I'm sure that was thanks in part to the guards' diligence. As we made our way to Camilo's store, I noticed nothing out of the norm in the city, other than a heightened alertness in the guards on duty at the gate.

When we got to the shop, we pulled the cart around to the storehouse. We notified the clerks that we'd arrived and then headed up to the conference room. Camilo soon walked in with the head clerk.

As usual, I gave him the details of our inventory and requested the supplies we needed to take home. After we finished the shoptalk, Camilo instructed the head clerk to check and see if they had the right items in stock.

We spent a while swapping news and rumors. Life in the middle of the forest made it hard to stay informed. Camilo did business all over the region, so he was up-to-date on the latest information. I always

took time during our weekly trips to catch up on current events. Most of Camilo's news was irrelevant to me, but you never knew when vital intelligence would drop through the rumor mill.

Today, I had news for Camilo. "Did you hear about the robbers?"

"I did," he replied. "None of my people have been attacked, but I've been keeping an eye out."

I was relieved to hear that Camilo hadn't encountered any thieves. He did little traveling himself, but his workers made regular trips between this city and the capital. In times of turmoil, caution was key.

Then, with no prelude, Camilo rose to his feet. "Can I get you all to follow me?"

"Hm? Sure," I answered. All of us stood and trailed after Camilo. We were heading in a different direction from the storehouse, and I wondered where he was taking us.

"Isn't it about time you got a horse?" Camilo said as we walked.

"I've thought about it," I replied. "We're reaching the limits of our manual pull cart. Do you have a horse for us?"

"Something like that," he said vaguely.

We rounded the back of the shop and arrived at a yard—it was hidden from the front of the shop, and difficult to see from the storehouse. My theory was that it was probably used as a stopover when unloading deliveries. Usually.

But, at the moment, we found ourselves faced with something quite extraordinary.

"I don't have a horse for you," Camilo said, the pride evident in his voice, "but this here is a drake."

The creature was short and stout and had lizard-like features. It turned its cute, round eyes toward us and offered a quiet trill, which sounded like “kulululu.”

“What did you say it was?” I asked. My installed data only covered general knowledge, so I didn’t have any detailed information about this world’s animals.

“A drake,” he repeated. “But in spite of its name, it’s closer to a lizard than a dragon.”

The classification was not entirely surprising. In my previous world, there had been giant lizards named after dragons too. The Komodo dragon sprang to mind.

Upon first look, the drake had seemed like a squat lizard, but when I peered at it carefully, I realized it was more similar to the raptors I’d seen in movies... Except it was plump, sweet-looking, and the size of a horse. In short, it was a small, adorable dragon without wings.

Its scales were a beautiful emerald green and so delicate that they looked like flower petals. They were similar to the scales of the green tree pythons or emerald tree boas on Earth. Its eyes were large and round with the vertical pupils typical of reptiles. Anyone who had any love for reptiles in their hearts would fall under its spell.

None of the three women appeared to have a phobia of reptiles, especially not Diana. My shoulder had been bearing the brunt of her excitement since we’d met the drake; she’d been smacking me non-stop.

I see it, I see it. It’s cute, I know. Calm down!



“What does this little one eat?” I asked Camilo.

It looked like an herbivore to me. I remembered hearing that carnivores tended to have short necks because they needed strong neck and jaw muscles to chew through meat. However, animals in this world could have evolved differently, given that there was magic here. Or rather, if evolution had been exactly the same as in my last world, elves and dwarves wouldn't exist. Nor would dragons, though I had yet to see one with my own eyes.

“It'll eat anything,” Camilo answered. “We've tried feeding it both meat and fodder while we've had it, and it's happily eaten both.”

“Good,” I said simply, though I was actually surprised that it was an omnivore. At least there would be no shortage of food for it where we lived. There was plenty of grass in the forest, and we could prepare meat for it too.

Did it have a primarily meat-based diet like a feline? Cats ate meat most of the time but were able to digest vegetables as well. I remembered watching videos of cats happily munching on pea sprouts and basil.

I suppose there was no way to know but to try feeding it different foods.

The amount it ate was another variable we'd have to factor in. Depending on its diet, Samya and Diana would have to hunt more or we would need to purchase fodder from Camilo.

“How much does it normally eat per meal?” I asked.

Camilo paused a breath to think. “Hmm, I was told that it was a light eater, but it's had a voracious appetite while it's been with us.”

“Is that right?”

Had the stress of a new environment caused it to eat more? But usually, animals ate less when they were stressed; it didn't make sense that the drake would start eating more after spending time with Camilo.

Well, setting the details aside, I would indeed like to retire the human-powered cart.

"One last question," I said. "You don't want to keep it here?"

"No. Given the scale of my business ventures, one drake would hardly be enough," Camilo replied. "Besides, they stand out too much on long journeys."

When Camilo said it stood out, he was referring to more than its appearance—food costs for an animal of this size weren't cheap, so logically, owning one was an indicator of a certain level of wealth.

It would be suspicious for a run-of-the-mill blacksmith to own a drake, but seeing as we ventured out of the forest once every one to two weeks at most, there was less opportunity to attract attention. Furthermore, even if someone were to take an interest in my whereabouts, it was unlikely that they would instigate trouble with a fishy guy like me... After all, I was an upstart blacksmith who was tight with a distinguished merchant and Count Eimoor.

"We'll take it off your hands then," I decided.

"Pleasure doing business," Camilo replied. "It won't be cheap though."

"That's fine." We had a fair amount of savings from various jobs and little opportunity to spend it. At the moment, our forge was flush with cash.

"Then, it's yours. You can pay me next time you come."

"I was planning on making the next delivery in two weeks. Will that be a problem?" I asked.

“Not at all. As long as you’re coming, whenever is fine.”

“I’ll prepare the money for next time, then.”

“Okay. I’ll go tell the workers to prepare your cart for this fellow,” Camilo said, turning toward the direction of the storehouse.

“Thanks.”

The four of us were left looking at our newest family member.

“Do you think I can pet it?” Diana asked tentatively.

“Why not?” I replied. “It’s part of our family now.”

Diana slowly approached the drake. It watched her without any sign of fear or wariness. Even when Diana placed a hand on its shoulder, it did nothing but stare at her.

“Oh my, it’s warm,” Diana gushed.

It’s warm-blooded? That’s unexpected, considering its reptilian appearance.

She stroked its shoulder, and in response, it jerked its head around.

Did it not like that?

I was concerned for a split second, but the drake started nuzzling Diana’s shoulder with its snout as if it was mimicking Diana’s own actions.

Diana petted its head, and the drake obviously didn’t have any aversion to being touched by people. In fact, it went heavy-lidded with contentment and trilled again. Diana grinned dopily. It looked like she was about to melt into a puddle of bliss right where she was standing.

Are all drakes friendly with humans, or is this fellow particularly cuddly? Either way, petting animals is a great way to relax and ease stress. I’m counting on you, buddy!

Seeing Diana's success, Samya and Rike walked up to the drake with hesitant steps. The drake seemed perfectly happy to be petted. Sometimes, it would nuzzle the person in return and let out an occasional warble.

I gave it a try too, stroking a hand down its neck. The skin was warm beneath my fingertips. It wasn't quite the same feeling as stroking a reptile, but the drake had the sleek texture of a snake's hide. After a little while, the drake rubbed its head against mine with a gentle "*kululu.*"

Camilo returned shortly. "The cart's ready to be hitched. However, it's a makeshift setup, just to get you back. Make sure you modify the cart properly once you're home."

"Got it," I replied.

With a drake, we could travel at higher speeds, though faster often meant bumpier. To counteract the jolting, I could install a simple suspension system using leaf springs. That would also be the perfect opportunity to repair any damages.

"I'm throwing in a harness as a bonus," Camilo added. The harness was probably originally made for horses.

I offered my thanks and watched carefully as one of the shop workers harnessed the drake. I would have to remember how to do it for the future. When I glanced at the other three, I saw that they, too, were focused on the worker's movements.

Harnessing didn't look too complicated. I might have some trouble the first one or two times, but I thought it would be easy to learn.

Once it was in the harness, we led the drake over to the storehouse where the cart was waiting. The horizontal handle that Rike and I used to pull the cart had been removed; in its place, two poles had

been slotted in, and they extended out from the cart. These poles would be where the drake was hitched.

It looks as makeshift as Camilo said.

A worker brought the cart up behind the drake and attached its harness, positioning everything so that the poles extended out on either side of the drake's body. The whole rig looked like a cloak draped over the drake's back.

Behold. A horse-drawn cart. Or, drake-drawn, I suppose.

There was one caveat: anyone driving the cart would have to sit on a box in the cargo area since there was no driver's seat.

Rike had the honor of being our first driver. She was the only one with previous experience, having steered a horse-drawn cart back when she'd lived with her family.

My cheats and installed data hadn't included this type of skill. Once we got home, it'd be best to give everyone an opportunity to practice driving.

Camilo handed over our earnings for the day, and the workers loaded our supplies. All four of us climbed into the back of the cart with the cargo.

Rike picked up the reins, then slapped them against the drake's flank to urge it forward. The drake chirruped and slowly began to walk. Our cart was heavy, so it had to pull hard to get things rolling. From where I was sitting, I could feel both the cart's resistance and the drake's strength. Once we'd started moving forward though, the drake's footsteps lightened considerably.

I waved farewell to Camilo from atop the cart and marveled at the fresh vantage point. Usually, I was the one pulling the cart. The novelty might wear off in the future, but at the moment, I was deeply moved.

We progressed through the streets of the city at a slow pace. As we passed, people stared at us, probably because the drake was such a rare sight. Staring was one thing; I just hoped that no one would start asking questions.

Once we'd left the city and were on the road, Rike urged the drake to go faster. With the increased speed, the cart started to sway and shake more violently. It wasn't unbearable, but it certainly doubled my determination to install suspensions as soon as possible. With leaf springs in place, the ride would be much more comfortable.

Nevertheless, the sheer speed of our cart as we went flying down the road made up for the rough ride.

"Feels good to take it easy," Samya commented.

"Doesn't it?" said Diana. "It may be a little bumpy, but at least we don't have to walk."

"I wonder how much this fella can carry," Samya mused.

I was curious too. "It usually takes my and Rike's combined strength to pull the same amount of cargo. The drake's pulling us as well. How much weight is too much?"

Our drake could be having a grand old time or it could be reaching its limit. We wouldn't know for sure unless we tested it out, but I didn't want to purposefully burden the drake with dead weight either. I had my fingers crossed that the chance to experiment would naturally arise someday.

We chatted throughout the journey and were soon back at the forest entrance. Our trip to this point had gone nearly twice as fast as it did when Rike and I had to pull the cart. We'd be home before we knew it.

The drake proceeded into the forest. I didn't expect it to have any problems with the woods, not in terms of physical obstacles at least; the cart had always been able to pass between the trees and cross over the underbrush. On the other hand, I was worried that the drake would be afraid to travel through the forest. The creature had been calm so far, but what if it sensed a beast? I couldn't discount the possibility that it would startle.

"What'll happen if there's a bear nearby?" I asked Samya. "Will the drake be afraid?"

"I can't say for certain...but I think so," she replied. "The bears 'round here are ferocious and tough. You've fought one, Eizo, so you'd know."

"Sounds about right."

Enough time had passed that the events from that fateful day now felt no more real to me than a dream, but I remember it being a close fight. If I hadn't possessed my cheats, I would've died for sure.

"We should be careful in case it panics, right?" I asked.

"I guess? But if there was anything in the area, I would notice first," Samya said.

"That's true."

Samya had the best nose of us all. I didn't know who'd win between Samya and the drake, but at the very least, Samya would smell a beast coming well before it was close enough to become a threat.

Today, neither Samya nor the drake smelled anything dangerous. The wolves that lived in this forest only hunted weak prey, so in a way, we were safer in the forest than on the city road.

The drake continued onward at a quick clip despite the rough footing and lack of a proper road. The cart shook something awful. But the one saving grace was that we were moving much faster than we

would've on foot, so we wouldn't have to endure the torture for long.

I kept an eye on the supplies, but nothing seemed in danger of falling out of the cart. Everything was stashed in boxes or barrels, so nothing was lying around in the open. Even so, when the cart ran over particularly large bumps in the road, the boxes would jump and clunk against each other.

I should start on the suspension system right away if only to spare our hips and butts from further pain.

As I had expected, we arrived home considerably earlier than usual. Apart from the road conditions, the journey had been as smooth as could be. I regretted not purchasing a mount earlier, but I comforted myself with an excuse—I couldn't have known just how much easier the trip would be with a drake.

Diana and I brought the supplies into the house while Rike and Samya unhitched the drake from the cart. I asked them to double-check how the harness and hitching equipment was attached. Back in my previous world, remembering something was as easy as taking a picture with your phone, but here, we had to rely on the power of memory.

After we freshened up, it was the drake's turn. I soaked a cloth in warm water, wrung it out, and used it to wipe down its scales. The drake closed its eyes in pleasure and trilled happily.

"You worked hard today. Good job, good job," I murmured and patted it on its neck.

"Kululululu!"

It licked my face with a soft tongue, which felt completely different from the sandpapery tongues of cats. The lick tickled.

I filled an empty barrel with water and brought it to the drake along with a portion of unsalted meat from the animal we'd butchered the day before.

"You're free to graze around here if the grass suits your tastes, but don't go too far," I said. There was plenty of grass in the clearing, certainly more than enough for one animal, no matter how voracious its appetite was.

The drake chirped back as if acknowledging my instructions. I stroked its head one last time before heading back into the cabin.

Over dinner, there was only one topic on everyone's minds: what should we name the drake? We couldn't call it "the drake" forever.

"First off, we don't know whether it's male or female," I said. I'd forgotten to ask Camilo, though I had a sneaking suspicion that he wouldn't have known, even if I'd asked.

As far as I'd seen, it didn't have any distinguishable sex organs like mammals, and considering how big it was, if there'd been anything to notice, I definitely would have.

Diana's face was pensive. "We'll have to give it a name that'll work in either case."

"Are there any conventions for naming horses?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Diana replied. "I know of a horse owned by a noble family in another country whose name is Henning Herman the Third. Isn't that bizarre? Apparently, it's the descendant of an exceptionally fine horse."

A horse with a family name and a generational title... How about that? Though, I did understand the owners' feelings; after all, a steed wasn't some cheap, disposable item. But if a name like Henning

Herman the Third were to pop up in conversation, a natural follow-up question would be, “Is he a margrave?”

“Can’t you think of anything, Eizo?” Diana asked. Her eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

I smiled wryly. “I’ll leave this one to you three. My naming sense is nothing short of tragic.”

“That’s your one weak point, right, Boss?” Rike said.

Samya crossed her arms, nodding in agreement. “I still get chills when I remember the last time you suggested a name.”

My naming sense was the one flaw I couldn’t do anything about...

We traded suggestions back and forth for a while, and then Samya struck on an idea. “How ’bout we name it after the sound it makes? Something like Krul?”

The name was on the cuter side for a male, but it still fit the drake nicely, more so than a stiff and formal name would’ve.

“Good idea!” Diana agreed.

“It looks like a Krul!” said Rike.

Seeing as neither Diana nor Rike had any objections, I said, “Then it sounds like we’ve got a winner—Krul it is.”

And so, we officially welcomed the newest member of our little family, Krul the drake.

“I was thinking of building a small hut for Krul,” I proposed.

“Something simple. Four walls. A roof. A place where Krul can shelter if it rains.”

While it didn’t rain frequently here and the trees provided coverage, it just didn’t feel right to leave a family member outside to brave the whims of the weather. The other three agreed, so we decided to set

the plan in motion tomorrow. It was better to build the hut sooner than later. Only the gods knew when the next storm would come.

Before we turned in for the night, we all ventured outside one last time. When we told Krul its new name and said good night, Krul cooed softly in response. Then, it curled up on the ground and closed its eyes. It was the perfect Instagrammable moment...well, if I'd still been back on Earth.

As we headed into the cabin to prepare for the day ahead, I was subjected to another round of Diana's vigorous shoulder slapping.

☞☞☞

By the time I rose to make my daily trip to the lake, Krul was already awake. It wasn't roaming around the clearing but was sitting motionlessly. When I drew near, it turned to look at me.

"Good morning," I said. "Do you want to come fetch water with me?"

"Ku," it chirruped, and it climbed to its feet slowly.

I took that as a yes.

"Whoops. Wait here a sec." I rushed back into the house and brought out an additional water jug, which I hung from Krul's neck.

"Not too tight?" I asked.

It cooed again in response.

"Good. Follow me."

I took the lead with Krul plodding behind me.

Do drakes need to be walked? We won't be going to the city for another two weeks. Until then, if I take it to the lake every day, it'll at least get some exercise. I'll use today as a trial run and see how Krul feels when we get back.

I hiked at my usual pace. When we arrived at the lake, I decided to wash up. With four people sharing it, the washing area in the cabin was tight on space.

I wiped down Krul's body as well and used the opportunity to check the drake's eyes for grime and mucus. I didn't find either and concluded that Krul was in good health.

What do I do if Krul catches a cold? Are there veterinarians that specialize in drakes?

After the both of us had freshened up, I turned to the water jugs. I only filled up the extra jug halfway, and then hung it over Krul's shoulders. "It's not too heavy?"

"Kululu!"

"Let's just try half a jug today," I said, turning away from the shore. "All right, back home we go."

I watched Krul for any signs of discomfort while we walked, but it followed me at a steady pace without stopping or faltering.

I'll try giving Krul a little more to carry tomorrow.

I relieved Krul of the water jug once we returned to the cabin.

"Good work today," I told the drake. "I'm counting on you tomorrow too."

Krul replied with a bright "Ku!"

Am I imagining things, or does Krul look happier than before we went to the lake? It wouldn't be so bad to have company on these morning trips.

Unburdened, Krul went to snack on some of the meat from yesterday night. Judging from the amount left, it'd only eaten a little bit for dinner. If that was its normal intake, then there was still enough meat left in the dish to last until tomorrow.

Camilo said Krul was a big eater, but could he be wrong? Is there something special with Camilo's shop environment after all? The owner before Camilo did say that Krul doesn't eat much, so there's a distinct possibility that the amount it ate last night is the right portion size.

I took one more look at Krul. It didn't seem like it was ravenous from the trip.

With a final "see you later," I returned indoors.

After our normal breakfast routine, we got to work on building the hut. I hoped to finish it within the next week. It was going to be a bare-bones shelter with simple foundations, so I didn't expect it to take long.

I chose a spot for the hut facing the courtyard area and dug up holes for the supporting pillars. My custom model shovel was the tool of the day. The earth around this area was hard, but between my increased strength and the shovel, I finished digging in no time.

To figure out the dimensions for the hut, I brought Krul over to help. The drake plopped down and stretched along the ground, and I marked out an area around Krul that left ample room for it to move. It was a rather sizable space.

Next, we had to install the pillars. We tied up the logs for the pillars with rope so we could drag them over to the construction site. Krul helped as well. I might've gotten a muscular boost from my cheats, but I was no match for a drake, a power specialist. With all of us working together, we moved the pillars and stood them up in the holes quickly.

Once the pillars were in place, next came the beams and joints. I wasn't planning anything fancy here—my goal was to install the minimum framework needed for structural support. I carved out

joints and my cheats helped to ensure that everything aligned perfectly. Then, I used nails to secure everything else and make the hut extra sturdy. The structure wasn't going to be collapsing anytime soon on my watch.

By the time I installed the ridge beam of the roof, the hut was starting to look like a proper shelter. Of course, it still needed siding for the walls and shingles for the roof, but first came the floor. I took the excess earth I'd dug out for the support pillars and spread it across the floor of the hut. The soil was layered thick so that the floor was slightly elevated from its surroundings.

This was an important step to prevent storm runoff; when the rain came, we wouldn't want the water flooding Krul's home. That would defeat the purpose of building the hut.

Overall, the construction progressed without a hitch. Samya and the others had building experience, and this time, we had Krul to aid with the heavy lifting. Even given the others' help, we were making progress at a speed that defied common sense. All I had to say by way of explanation was "Thank you, cheats."

The sun was starting to set, so I told the others that we would be wrapping up for today. The walls and roof could wait until tomorrow.

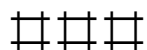
I started on the preparations for dinner with thoughts of Krul still swimming in my mind.

Had Krul been born in the wild or bred? I wasn't sure, but I did know one thing: Krul was smart. It understood what we said to it, at least the big picture if not the finer details. Along with the rarity of drakes, their intelligence was likely one reason for their high price.

Well, even if it hadn't been so clever, Krul still had its adorable looks.

I felt like we were building a room for a family member—detached and sparse as it was—rather than a stable for livestock.

For Krul's sake, I wanted to finish the hut by tomorrow.



When I went to the lake the next day, Krul tagged along again. I filled Krul's water jug three-quarters of the way full, and it carried that amount of weight easily. It was probable that Krul could handle a full jug just fine.

Today, we were installing the siding and roofing for Krul's hut. First, we had to saw logs into planks. Samya and I cut the wood in the storage area where we kept our lumber, while Rike and Diana (assisted by Krul) hauled the planks over to the hut.

Krul carried the planks in its jaws. The first time it picked up a plank, Diana was thrown into a tizzy—she went full mother hen mode, fussing over Krul as if it were her own flesh-and-blood child. However, Krul proved to be perfectly adept at the task.

I understand how you're feeling, Diana, but you don't need to take it so far. Krul will be just fine.

The VIP tool of the day was the custom model saw. We were able to turn the logs into planks at an unbelievable speed.

In the process, we used up most of our lumber reserves, so we'd have to replenish them soon. Up until this point, we'd only been felling trees around the cabin, but since we now had Krul to help us, we could take trees that were farther out. I resolved to carve out the time to secure a larger batch of lumber soon.

The next task was to attach the planks to the hut, which we did by nailing them to the framework. If we had wanted a more polished result, we could've carved out space for the plank in the supporting pillars so that the wood would sit flush against the frame. However, time was of the essence, so we opted for the simple option. We didn't lay the planks all the way up the wall but instead left a space

under the roofline. In theory, the opening would be covered by the roof's awning, so rain wouldn't be able to find its way in.

We constructed the roof using wooden shingles, and my vision was to make something similar to *tochibuki* roofing in Japan. For this design, we laid each shingle so that they overlapped. There wasn't enough time to install every shingle perfectly, but the roof would still have the same weather-proofing effects I'd been going for. I didn't think there would be any leaking, but we wouldn't know for sure until the next time it rained.

And so, the day passed by in a flurry of activity. Whether due to our efficient labor distribution or my cheats, by the time the sun had set, the hut had come together.

We didn't put up a fence or door. I'd briefly considered it—what if we received an unwelcome visit from the bandits in the rumors? However, a door was unlikely to stop a human (or beastfolk or dwarf or elf or lizardman or...you get the picture). Besides, Krul was clever. In the end, we unanimously decided that additional barriers were unnecessary.

In my previous world, it'd been illegal to own livestock unless you had a proper enclosure, but those laws didn't exist here. Besides, drakes would've hardly fallen under the provisions of those laws anyway. Krul would be free to roam wherever it pleased!

The structure now looked like a hut, and the construction was complete, but practically, it was less a place to live than a place to enter and exit. When we had time in the future, we could remodel it into a storage shed and build a proper stable for Krul.

I walked up to Krul and patted its neck lightly. "This'll be your room from now on."

The drake chirruped a reply before ducking inside the hut. It spun around, plopped onto the ground, and collapsed with a snort of satisfaction. It seemed happy with its new home.

Thank god! Seeing Krul content made all the hustle and bustle worth it.

Diana stroked Krul and said, “When it rains or when you get sleepy, come and rest here. If you need us for anything, just knock on the walls of the cabin, okay?”

Krul cooed in acknowledgment.

Side note: it is my greatest pleasure to report that, because I was standing away from Diana, my shoulder escaped harm during this conversation.

Over dinner, the four of us discussed our plans for the upcoming days. Our next delivery to Camilo was scheduled for two weeks out. We had some leeway when it came to forging our quota of blades, but we also had a backlog of tasks that needed seeing to. I thought that the most urgent one was the remodeling of our cart.

I expected the work on the cart to take about four days. In the meantime, I would have Rike and the others continue their usual schedule: making plate metal and entry-level models, hunting and foraging, and tending to our small vegetable plot. Then, once I finished the remodeling, I’d return to my blacksmith duties.

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The next day, I went to refill our water supply. When I exited the cabin, I found Krul waiting for me, and I hung the empty jugs over Krul’s shoulders for it to carry. Only three days had gone by, but Krul had already grown used to our morning routine.

At the lake, I filled the extra water jug to the brim, and Krul shouldered it with no trouble. The water must have felt like a feather compared to everything it'd hauled on the way back from the city. What was a little water compared to ore, charcoal, and the weight of four adults?

"Thanks as always," I said.

"*Krul*," it replied.

Together, we started on the road back home.

I was kicking off the cart remodeling today.

Our current cart was simply built—it was nothing more than a box sitting atop front and rear axles with four wooden wheels. Since the cargo platform sat directly on the axles, every bump and dip in the road was transmitted through the wheels straight into the cart itself.

To give an extreme example, if the road were littered with one-centimeter-wide stones all along its length, the cart would rise and fall one centimeter every time it rolled over a stone. The faster the cart traveled, the more extreme the bounce, and that was guaranteed to be an unpleasant experience for anyone riding in the cart. What's more, the cargo was very likely to be damaged in the process.

Introducing...the suspension system. The role of suspensions was to dampen the motion picked up by the wheels, making the ride smoother and more comfortable.

The simplest type of suspension system involved installing springs in between the axles and the platform. The springs would compress to offset protrusions on the ground and extend to offset divots, thus guaranteeing that the body of the cart body would stay at an equal height.

However, with this setup, the cart would be difficult to turn. It would be better to attach the front wheels to an arm connected to the axle. In this case, the springs should be installed near the wheels.

When building a car, the wheels needed to turn independently of the axle, but I was thankful that our cart wouldn't require that. I also wouldn't have to worry about installing a power transmission system to shift power to the front and rear wheels.

Other than the suspension system, I'd need to figure out a better way to hitch Krul to the cart. I could reuse the cart body and wheels, but they needed minor repair work. Once again, I was faced with the decision to fix what I had or rebuild from scratch, and this time, the repair option eked out a narrow victory.

Next, I had to decide what material I should use to make the leaf springs. The logical choice was steel, but wood was a strong candidate as well, considering the impressive durability of the wood in this forest.

With my cheat abilities, I could easily create the springs from wood. I was also hesitant to use metal for fear that I would be affecting the balance of the world too much—I didn't want to introduce metal leaf springs unless they'd already been invented.

I thought for a while. Just as I was about to commit to wooden leaf springs, I pivoted at the last second. My reasoning was simple: if someone were to see the wooden springs I made, they could decide to make a steel version. At that point, the final outcome would be no different than if I'd made steel springs in the first place.

Steel leaf springs it was, then.

I would, however, be making a prototype out of wood. My cheats went a long way, but crafting everything in the right dimensions still took effort. With wood, I could chisel the parts down to the correct

size quickly with my trusty knife.

Rike and the others were on plate metal production duty. I asked them to make as much as possible.

Really, I should've made the plates myself, but when I said that to Rike, she protested. "No, Boss," she replied. "It's my responsibility to follow your instructions. That's what it means to be an apprentice."

Thanks, Rike. I owe you one.

I planned to use the planks we had leftover from constructing Krul's hut for the test model of the leaf springs. I cut the planks into slender ribs, making sure that each successive strip was shorter than the last. I boiled water to soak the wood in and help make it more pliable—this enabled me to bend the strips into arcs. I stacked the curved pieces on top of each other to create what was functionally a leaf spring.

Since this was only a trial run, I secured the strips by driving a nail through the center. To test the spring, I placed it on a plank which acted as a makeshift platform. This way, the spring wouldn't fall over. Then, I placed another plank on top of the spring and a small barrel on top of the plank.

I supported the plank with one hand and pushed down on the barrel. My weight was met with a buoyant resistance. When I let go of the barrel, it popped back up, proving that the spring functioned as intended. This was a green light for me to continue with the current design.

The leaf spring had taken a surprisingly short amount of time to make. Apparently, my cheats considered this type of work to be "production-related."

How far do my production-related cheats stretch? Cooking falls under that umbrella too. Maybe I would even be good at sewing.

I'd tried helping with the laundry in the past, but I had been no faster than the others. Laundering clothes had yielded nothing new in the end, so my cheats were of no use there.

I had plenty of work to keep me occupied, but one of these days, I would have to sit down and figure out the full extent of my skills once and for all.

For the time being, my hands were full with the cart modifications.

I built a twin to the leaf spring. Then, I sawed off four rounds of a log to use as wheels and found two sticks of the right length to turn into axles. With the pieces gathered, I just had to put everything together.

I attached the wheels to the ends of the axles. To connect the front and rear wheels, I affixed two boards perpendicular to the axles, ending up with a hash shape. If the axles turned the way I expected them to, I'd be able to use the same structure on the real cart.

Of course, the entire point of this venture was to dampen the motion, so I installed the two wooden leaf springs to the rear wheels in between the axle and the wooden board. I left the spring off the front axle, instead adjusting the cart's height to make sure the front and back ends were even.

Up through this point, my cheats had taken care of any precision work that'd been required. I wanted to do everything by my own power, but how would I be able to distinguish my cheats from the skills I'd acquired through practice?

At the moment, the reason an amateur like me could construct rooms and remodel carts was all down to my cheats. But what about ten years from now? Twenty years? *Once I've gained actual experience, will I still be able to draw a line between my hard won skills and my cheats?*

*It's too easy to get lost in my thoughts when I'm working alone...
Time for a break.*

When I looked up from my work, I saw that Krul was sitting nearby watching me. There'd been no work for Krul today beyond the morning lake trip.

"When did you get here?" I asked.

Krul trilled in response.

"Want to give me a hand?"

I laid a couple more planks on top of the two that connected the front and rear wheels. The end result resembled the wagon of a freight train. This cart could be useful for hauling light items but would fall apart in a second with any serious use.

I placed the empty barrel from earlier onto the platform and then fastened a length of rope to the front for Krul to pull.

"It's not too tight, right?" I asked once I'd hitched Krul to the cart. "It doesn't hurt?"

"*Krul!*" That was a no.

"Good. Can you walk around the courtyard for me?"

"*Kulu!*"

As I'd instructed, Krul started circling the courtyard.

As the cart shook, the barrel jolted with it and soon tipped over on its side. And the first time Krul turned, the barrel rolled right off the platform. Given the design of this cart, it was strongly affected by torque. Krul saw what happened with the barrel and started to slow down.

"You can keep going!" I called over.

Krul picked up speed again. Since the cart was extremely light, it was difficult to gauge the exact impact of the leaf spring on the back axle,

but the suspension did seem to have a dampening effect as intended.

“I’ll go with this design for the back axle,” I noted to myself.

For a while, I watched Krul happily run laps around the courtyard.

I experimented for a little longer with the placement of the leaf spring, so that when I made the steel springs, I would already know the best way to install them. In theory, I shouldn’t have any problems when putting the real cart together... In theory.

I was thinking too far ahead. First, I’d have to make and test the prototype for the front axle, but that was a job for tomorrow.

Why tomorrow? Well, it was already dusk. Rike and company had already wrapped up their work for the day.

Krul was, however, still full of energy. Anyone would have guessed it’d spent a whole day playing, and I was happy that it was having fun. Maybe I’d have Krul assist me tomorrow too.

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I started the next day by removing the front axle from the test cart. I made two more wooden leaf springs for the front wheels by copying the designs I’d used yesterday.

Broadly speaking, I wanted to install the leaf springs while maintaining independent motion of the left and right front wheels. That would be the last piece of Forge Eizo’s custom cargo cart, but it was easier said than done. Much easier.

I was filled with appreciation for the pioneers in my past world who had to work out all of these designs from scratch. Even though I had a vague idea of what the end result was meant to be, I still had a hard time constructing it.

I experimented with a variety of ways to install the leaf spring and eventually settled on a solution that involved what looked like an

over-the-door hook. Orientation-wise, the top of the hook (the part that went over the door) faced the front of the cart and was turned toward the outside edge. The leaf spring was attached to the auxiliary back side of the hook, whereas the log wheels were installed in the curve of the hook. This setup allowed for the wheels to move independently of one another.

Krul came to observe my work again. Or, to be more precise, Krul came by hoping to play.

I had it pull the cart around the courtyard for me, the same as yesterday. It chirruped excitedly as it trotted around the garden, and looked to be having a much easier time than yesterday. The cart was also bouncing much less.

I signaled for Krul to stop and come over to me.

The barrel I'd previously used was too light and had fallen off immediately, so I supplemented the weight of that barrel with some water before loading it. I estimated that it weighed around ten kilograms—it was heavy enough that the cart sank slightly.

"Can you pull this for me?" I asked Krul.

"*Kulu!*" it cried, then away it trotted.

This time, even when Krul turned, the barrel stayed put, weighted down by the water. Whenever Krul passed over uneven ground, the cart would rock gently, causing a bit of water to spill out of the barrel. But I was glad to see that, thanks to the suspension system, the cart no longer jolted or jumped.

I was concerned about the stress points where the cart bore the load's weight. However, I figured that since I would be using my cheats and custom-model quality steel, everything would work out one way or another...even if the cart was a pain to assemble.

Considering everything I had working to my advantage, I felt a sense of guilt toward anyone in the future who might try to reproduce these leaf springs. Nevertheless, I would leave it to them to advance the cart construction industry along with any improvements to my suspension system.

I found myself reminded of moments in my previous world when lost technologies had been discovered. These artifacts had been impossible to reproduce with modern materials and techniques. Even if someone were to try to make something similar, the resulting copy would never exceed or even match the original.

By dusk, I'd finished the cart prototype. Tomorrow, it was time to build the real thing.

□□□

The following day, I installed some leftover boards on the sides of the cart's platform so that any cargo would be properly contained. In the future, this prototype mini cart could come in handy when hauling supplies around the forest.

Including the wheels, the cart was entirely made of wood. I'd used my cheats to shave the wheels into circles that were as perfect as possible, but they were still nothing more than slices of log. I had my doubts as to their durability and usability. Nevertheless, the cart would suffice for the occasional chore, and it was the perfect toy for Krul to play with. Also, if it broke, it would be no real loss.

Finally, it was time to start remodeling the real cart.

The first thing I did was remove the wheels. Then, I repaired minor damages to the cargo platform. There were a few spots that looked like they could hold up a while longer, but I fixed those too while I was at it. Where parts of the wheels had cracked off or broken, I made and swapped in replacements.

Thanks to my cheats, I was able to carve joinery instead of relying on nails. The color of the wood varied from piece to piece, but the appearance was...how do you say...just a matter of taste.

That was it for the woodwork. Next up on the docket was metalwork, so I moved into the workshop. Rike and the others were already busy forging shortswords and longswords.

Diana was making molds, Samya was filling the molds with molten steel, and Rike was in charge of alterations and final touches. They worked with the efficiency of an assembly line. By the time I arrived at the workshop, they had already forged a good amount of swords.

I picked up one of the finished swords. It was an entry-level model, but its quality was on the higher end of the scale, closer to an elite model. Rike was improving.

"These look quite good," I said, complimenting her.

"I still have a ways to go," Rike replied. "I want to be at the level where I can consistently make elite models the way you do, Boss."

Good. It was good to set a high goal. But I didn't tell Rike that because I didn't want to come off as insensitive. Instead, I just said, "I believe in you." Then, I turned to focus on my own work.

Step one: make the metal strips of the leaf spring.

I grabbed a few plates of steel and slid one into the fire to heat. Then, I transferred it to the anvil to hammer out. It'd been a while since I'd last felt the sensation of steel beneath my hammer. The impact of the blows reverberated through my bones, and a wave of fondness crashed over me.

My life here in this world started less than a year ago...but this warmth I'm feeling must mean that I've become a blacksmith in both body and soul.

I was embarrassed at myself for thinking something so cheesy.

Nonetheless, sentimentality filled me as I hammered the metal into long, thin strips. Using my cheats, I was able to judge the appropriate length and thickness of each strip. I was aiming for the durability of a custom model, and since I was only elongating the plates to the right size, I quickly finished the first one.

I needed seven ribs of decreasing length for each leaf spring, so I made six more strips. I curled the two ends of the longest strip into tubes.

Step two: quenching.

When forging knives, this was the point in the process when I would've shaped the blade. However, in this case, I could jump straight to the finish line.

It's uncanny how easy it would be to change these strips into knives. Was it like this back on Earth too with the ribs of leaf springs? If a blacksmith had extras lying around for some reason, wouldn't they be the perfect base for knives?

It honestly felt like I was meant to be making knives but was purposefully changing them into leaf springs instead. The contrast was funny when I thought about it.

The ribs took hardly any time at all to forge, but my morning experiments with the front axle system had eaten up time, so the day was nearly over. I would have to delay making the extra fixtures and accessories, as well as assembly. Onto tomorrow!

☐☐☐

The next morning, when I went to fetch water, I took the mini prototype cart with me. I covered the water jugs with lids and secured them to the cart using ropes. I was hoping that the cart could be used to haul cargo in the future, but I hadn't gotten a chance yesterday to test it out properly. If the trip today was a success, I could use the mini cart with confidence.

Krul was waiting for me outside the cabin again today, so I tied the drake to the rope that was attached to the front of the mini cart.

“Can you help me pull this to the lake today?” I asked.

Krul trilled in reply.

We started walking, and the cart clunked along behind us. The water jugs were empty, so they would’ve been no heavier than unfilled barrels. I’d tied them down tightly though, so apart from the occasional hop, they sat squarely in place. Krul seemed to be having an easy time too. So far so good. The real test would be the trip home when the jugs were full.

We soon arrived at the lake, and I dipped the jugs into the water. I carried them back to the cart and set them down; the cart sank beneath the burden.

The weight of three full water jugs is nothing to sneeze at.

I put the lids on and tied the jugs up by their necks with rope.

Time to see what this thing can really handle!

The mini cart performed admirably well. Seeing as the jugs were tied down and lidded, no water spilled and the jugs stayed upright. The cart rolled smoothly with minimal shaking. I had my fingers crossed that the real cart would perform just as well.

However, there was one aspect of the trip that I counted as a failure—it had bored Krul. Apparently, Krul would rather carry the jugs itself than pull the cart with the water.

Krul’s sulky mood drew a wry smile from me. I promised that from tomorrow onward, I would let Krul handle the water as it wished.

After the morning chores, I set up in the workshop to forge the extra pieces of the leaf spring. Rike and the others were working alongside me to make more shortswords and longswords.

The parts I was making today would be used to assemble the leaf springs and attach them to the cart. I was also planning to forge a few small metal strips—these would be used to repair the wheels, axles, and cart body. I focused on how the prototype looked and made larger versions of all the hardware, sized up to match the real cart.

My cheats helped, of course. Without them, I would've had to calculate every single dimension of every single piece; I shuddered at the thought. The parts needed to secure the leaf spring to the cart were complex in shape, but I got both the dimensions and the shape correct on the first try.

I thought that I could probably build an early model of a car if I could figure out the basic structure and mechanisms, but I had no intentions of trying to do so at the moment. Instead, I wanted to focus on creating items that were compatible with this world.

The parts accrued quickly, but compared to the assembly line chugging along beside me, this work was much different. Whereas Rike and the others were producing many identical items from the same mold, I was making unique bits of hardware, and oftentimes only one of each piece because they had separate functions. I found the contrast between my work and the others' work intriguing.

Once I had a full set of parts, I gathered them together, picked them all up with a grunt, and returned outdoors to the disassembled cart—it was time to start piecing things together. Not everything was the same as what I knew from Earth, so I would have to work around those limitations. For example, I didn't have any nuts or bolts. Instead, I had pins and wedges.

The different parts were less durable than their Earth counterparts and would likely make cart maintenance more difficult. From now on, regular inspections would be a must. The fact that I'd made the parts with my cheats would help alleviate some of the issues.

However, I hoped that people copying my work would figure out a more permanent solution to these types of problems.

I started assembling the cart from the rear wheels. First, I attached the mountings for the leaf spring to the rear end of the cargo platform and installed the longest strip of the leaf spring by driving pins through the tubes on its ends.

The leaf spring had an overall arc-like shape so that it could compress and expand the way a bow did. The length of the horizontal distance between the two ends of the bow—the bowstring, if you will—changed with the sharpness of the arc. It was important that the fittings could adapt to changes in the spring.

The next step was to assemble the leaves in the spring. This spring was curved, and when attached, was concave and facing the sky. The middle of the arc, where it dipped to its lowest point, would be closest to the ground. A tubular fixture was attached to the bottom of the arc, and that's where the axle was inserted.

I finished installing one set of leaf springs and then moved on to the opposite rear wheel set. Then, I replaced the wheels on either side of the axle.

In my previous world, before mineral oil had become widely available, the most common lubricant had been lard or pig fat. In my case, I was using boar fat.

Canola oil could be a viable substitute, but boar fat was easy to obtain in the forest. Why change what wasn't broken?

I intended to test the rear assemblage, so I provisionally attached the front axle using fixtures I'd carved from wood instead of the metal ones. I was about to pull the cart myself to see how the suspensions behaved, but then I realized that Krul was waiting next to me, snorting excitedly.

Since there was no need for Krul to pull the cart very far, I figured I wouldn't need proper hitching equipment. For the time being, I just tied a rope to the front of the cart for Krul to pull.

"It doesn't hurt, does it?" I asked.

Once Krul gave the okay, I had it walk around the courtyard. The suspension mechanism was working smoothly, but occasionally, I would notice something on the mounting that required tweaking.

I went through several rounds of adjustments before finally being satisfied with the performance of the rear axle. I then called it quits, as the sun was starting to set. Tomorrow, I'd properly install the leaf springs around the front axle.

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The next morning when I went to the lake, I left the cart behind and had Krul carry the water around its neck. Krul seemed delighted.

I wondered what motivated drakes to carry and haul cargo. They were intelligent, so there must be a deeper reason than simple animal instinct. Tragically, none of my cheats so much as grazed the topic of animal science, and my installed data yielded no search results either. The answer would remain a mystery.

At least Krul was happy—that was what mattered most.

Now, it was back to work on the real cart. The front axle system differed slightly from the rear, but the work was more or less the same. Needless to say, I didn't have any nuts and bolts today either and was still using pins to assemble everything.

The important aspect of the front axle was mobility—the left and right wheels needed to react independently of each other. Durability was crucial for some of this hardware, so I made them out of steel at custom-level quality. To erase any trace of doubt as to whether the

pieces would hold up, I imbued them with magic. Between the focus needed to draw out custom quality from the steel *and* weaving magic, making the parts took a lot out of me.

I planned to do an overall inspection of the cart, but before that, I wanted to improve the way the harness was attached. I first removed the harness, then quickly made high-quality replacements of the original fixtures out of wood. Where I could, I reused the existing parts. Once I was done, I harnessed Krul (a time-extensive process for a newbie like me) and had it walk forward with the cart. Every once in a while, I'd stop Krul to make a few adjustments. It took a few rounds to get everything hooked up just right, but when I was done, Krul and the cart moved as one.

I have to improve so that any future repair work will go more smoothly.

I moved on to the final inspection, with Krul acting as my assistant again. The front and rear suspensions were working like a dream, which I was pleased about, but there was still some awkwardness in how the cart moved. Again, I had Krul stop several times while I tweaked everything. By the time I was satisfied, the sun was already beginning to set.

My forging and smithing skills were extremely efficient, but my production-related cheats weren't as high-level as my blacksmithing ones, leaving me no choice but to rely on trial and error.

I finished off the cart's modifications with one last check on the pins that held the wheels to the axles—I tapped them in with a wooden hammer to make sure they were extra secure.

The cart would be a much more comfortable ride going forward, and the smoother motion should enable it to go faster. If we could shorten the travel time to the city, we could use the extra hours for things we wanted to do.

With that complete, I started to tidy up and got lost in my dreams about the different ways we could spend our hypothetical free time.

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I had finished the cart modifications yesterday, while Rike had practiced the magic-weaving techniques Lidy had taught her, and Samya and Diana had gone hunting.

In other words, today we needed to go collect the spoils of the hunt from the lake.

It wasn't the first time we'd traveled in a group of five, but instead of Lidy, Krul was joining us as our fifth member. Samya and Diana had caught some monster prey before that'd been tough to haul, even with five of us. But with Krul by our side, we should have no problems.

We took neither the cart nor its miniature twin with us since we normally made a carrying pallet from the trees around the shore. Once we returned home, we would reclaim the lumber to dry and reuse in the future.

Overharvesting wasn't an issue...or at least, it *shouldn't* be an issue. Samya and Diana always sank their catch in the part of the lake that was closest to where they brought down their target, so the location changed every time. However, we were still cutting trees down weekly, so there could come a day when we'd have to reconsider our lumber-harvesting strategy.

The first leg of the trip was no different than usual; we went together to the lake, dragged the catch of the week to shore, and tied it to the wooden platform. The only difference was that, from today onward, Krul would be in charge of pulling the pallet back home.

Originally, I'd also considered having Krul help drag the carcass from the lake, but after discussing it with the others, we decided to do it ourselves. None of us wanted to push Krul too hard. We were

perhaps being a touch overprotective, but it made logical sense too—drakes were valuable, after all.

Obviously, it would be inhumane to overwork Krul, but Krul seemed to genuinely enjoy pulling the carrying platform. Seeing how happy the drake was...I thought that maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to bring Krul along every time.

Thanks in no small part to Krul's help, we returned home earlier than usual.

When we got home, Diana stroked Krul's neck and said, "Thanks." The rest of us—me included, of course—offered our praises as well.

Krul's eyes narrowed into crescent moons as it chirruped happily.

The next task for the day was butchering the carcass. Samya and Diana had caught a boar this time. I made sure to set aside about two weeks' worth of meat for Krul's meals, along with a portion to dry without curing.

I wasn't entirely sure why, but Krul ate very little. Once in a while, when the mood struck, Krul would graze on the grass in the clearing. I had been worried that poisonous plants were growing in the area, but so far, Krul hadn't gotten sick from anything it'd eaten. I was now starting to trust Krul's judgment.

Krul's small appetite weighed on my mind, but I decided to not stress about its nutritional intake or similar issues. There weren't any animals back on Earth that I could reasonably use as a reference anyway. As long as Krul stayed cheerful and loveable, I was content.

On days after Samya and Diana's hunts, we always got a chance to eat fresh meat for lunch. Sometimes, I cooked up thick, juicy pork medallions, but today, I was in the mood for something different. I

had a craving for *yakiniku*, so I sliced the pork up thinly and grilled it. *Someday, when I find some bread for a crumb coating, I'd like to try my hand at making cutlets or schnitzel...*

After lunch, I headed into the workshop to forge elite models. I had two weeks' worth of goods to make before our next scheduled delivery.

Everyone else technically had the rest of the day off, but they all chose activities that were more like work than relaxation. Rike joined me in the forge to observe my technique; Samya and Diana were taking care of the vegetable patch in the courtyard.

I had shortswords and longswords on the docket today. Rike and the others had set aside a few of the casts that they'd made over the last few days, so all I had to do was finish them off. After that, I could move on to knives.

While I was working on the swords, Diana burst into the workshop. She looked terribly flustered.

Wasn't she working in the field? What happened?

She opened her mouth and blurted out, "Krul's settled in front of the mini cart and refuses to move! What should I do?"

I got it now. Panic was a natural reaction to seeing an animal behave in a way you didn't expect.

"There's a rope attached to the cart—try slinging it over Krul," I suggested. "It just wants to pull the cart around."

"Really? I'll try it," said Diana. She flew from the room so fast that she left an afterimage in her wake.

I knew it! Towing things around—be it water, the mini cart, or the wooden pallet—is just entertainment to Krul.

I wondered if Krul was going to feel the same way about pulling the cargo cart into the city. The drake would have to be harnessed, and

the journey was going to be much longer than it was used to. I hoped Krul would treat the delivery trips as work and something to take seriously.

A few moments after Diana had darted out of the room, I heard Krul's signature trill from outside, followed quickly by the clunking of the cart. These sounds were a new part of our family routine, and the knowledge filled me with a warm sense of contentment.

By the end of the day, I'd forged a perfectly average number of swords...but less than my potential. Was this decreased output a result of having taken a break from blacksmithing? Or should I be happy that I produced this much in spite of my break? In any case, I'd be satisfied as long as I fulfilled our quota.

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The next day, Rike and I holed up in the workshop. The other two left to forage for food, taking Krul with them to pull the mini cart. The cart was more for Krul to play with on their walk rather than for carrying back food; they would've needed to clean out several berry bushes to fill up that cart, which was way more than we could eat anyway.

As for me, I started my workday off by making a longsword mold. It had been a while since I'd made one with my own hands, and going through the motions brought back memories. Once I finished the mold, I melted down steel and poured it into the mold slowly and carefully, with my cheats helping to control my movements. While the cast cooled, I made the next mold.

Rike said to leave the molds and casts to her, but I declined her offer. She had enough work on her plate.

How can I call myself her teacher when I can't think of anything to teach her?

I'd asked her to mass-produce plate metal before, but I wanted to keep busy work like that to a minimum. It was against my principles; just because she was my apprentice didn't mean that I should use her willy-nilly, especially when I hadn't fulfilled my side of the bargain.

Back to the molds—they were made by covering a wooden model of the sword with clay. I was making the second generation of molds, but the design was the same as the previous ones, so nothing much had changed.

When the cast hardened, I unmolded it.

There's definitely something different about the casts I make myself. The quality is just beautiful. There was indeed a noticeable difference in the magic imbued into my casts versus Samya and Diana's casts. *Thank you, cheats.*

When it came to producing a single sword, long or short, it was fastest for me to cast it and finish myself, overseeing the production from start to finish. However, there was only one of me. It was impossible to make molds or melt steel at the same time as I made casts, so it was more efficient to divide up the work and have Samya and the others help out. The pieces I forged might be exceptional, but forging alone was, in a way, missing the forest for the trees.

Custom model commissions were where my skills took center stage. When it came to order-made items, it made sense for me to forge the piece myself, from both a speed and quality perspective.

I showed Rike the cast I'd made.

"You haven't even quenched or tempered it, but it's already very impressive. I have no idea how to begin making something like this," she told me despondently.

Rike had just begun her forays into elite models, so it was natural that there were things she didn't know yet. Even so, the blades she

forged were already remarkable compared to those made by an average human blacksmith.

Come to think of it, what was the average skill level of a dwarven blacksmith? For human smiths, I'd been told that there were a few in the capital who could forge swords at the quality of my elite models. That was to say, the median production quality likely fell around the range of my entry-level items, or perhaps slightly lower.

When I asked Rike about dwarves, she answered, "Compared to the human smiths in the capital, there should be ten times as many dwarven smiths who specialize in weapons and can match your level, Boss."

That's quite a lot.

"Most dwarves won't fuss too much with magic. Instead, they focus on drawing out the full potential of the materials they work with. Dwarves have trouble with metals like mithril but are experts with silver and gold," she explained.

Mithril's quality changed with the amount of magic that was weaved into it. It was a superb metal as it was, but if the smith couldn't imbue it with magic, it was not much different from a low-density steel.

"Dwarves are more skilled in general than humans. The reason we journey far and wide to search for an apprenticeship—including at human forges—is to hone those skills."

"Yes, I remember you saying that," I said.

"However..."

"However?"

"There are very few dwarves that can forge swords with delicate detail work like you can, even among those who have a comparable

skill level,” she stated. “Your custom models may even surpass the works of the famous Don Dolgo.”

“Was he renowned for his skills?” I asked.

“He’s a legend. During the great wars six hundred years ago, he was bestowed powers by the gods and went on to forge the sword that the hero carried into battle.”

According to my installed data, the war had been fought between demons and humans along with a few other races.

In the early years of the war, the demons had the humans cornered. But then, the hero turned the tide by felling the Demon King in combat. However, in the subsequent charges led by the humans and their allies in retaliation against the demons, the hero perished as well. Having both suffered heavy damages, the two sides called a cease-fire. It was a dissatisfying conclusion to be sure, but sometimes there is no other recourse but to cut your losses and accept the reality of your situation.

According to Rike, the dwarven smith named Don Dolgo had forged the sword that was used to slay the Demon King.

“You’re saying that I stand on equal footing with such a legendary figure? Are my skills so great?”

“Of course they are,” Rike replied. “Just think about the sharpness of your knives.”

I nodded, having no choice but to accept what she was saying. If the sharpness of my knives wasn’t considered exceptional, then what would be?

“The sword Don Dolgo forged was glorious. It measured two meters long and sixty centimeters wide. It was made of orichalcum, I think, or another divine mineral.”

“Sounds like it could cut through anything you put in front of it.” I smiled wryly. “It’s incredible that he forged such a sword.”

Wielding a sword that big must have felt like swinging around a steel girder.

Speaking from my experience with mithril, forging with orichalcum must’ve been back-breaking work. I can’t imagine that securing enough of the precious mineral had been easy either...even if it had been forged with the backing of the kingdom.

No one would’ve stood a chance against an orichalcum weapon of such caliber. I wondered if the hero in question had been a true macho man or if the stories had just gotten exaggerated through the ages.

“Anyway, Boss, your talents are formidable too,” Rike said. “You have the ability to make sharp but small blades, and more impressively, delicate items, don’t you?”

“I won’t know until I try,” I answered.

It was possible that I was more proficient at magic than Don Dolgo had been, so if I were to attempt to replicate his work, I might actually end up with a higher-quality product. Although, it wasn’t as if I could check, seeing as I’d missed Don Dolgo by a few centuries.

On the other hand, Rike did say that he’d been granted powers from the gods, meaning that his magical ability could’ve been surprisingly high. If that was the case, I wasn’t sure whether I could measure up.

I had been blessed with the chance at a second life as a blacksmith in this world, so it would be a lie to say I had absolutely no aspirations whatsoever of leaving a mark...perhaps by forging a one-of-a-kind weapon. However, more than fame, I wanted to live a quiet and peaceful life.

Perhaps in my sunset years, I'd surprise the world with a god-tier weapon and then retire to live as a hermit. Though I was well into my forties, there was a part of me that was frozen in my middle school years, and that part of me was captivated by delusions of grandeur. After leaving behind one final masterpiece for the fawning masses, I'd turn my back on society, never to be seen again.

"A legend..." I mumbled.

I'd meant it for my ears only, but Rike had overhead. "I have every faith that your name will go down in the history books, Boss."

I turned away to hide my abashed pleasure at the compliment and then returned to my work.

When the sun started to set, I heard the clatter of wagon wheels outside. Krul was home, which meant that Samya and Diana were back as well. The two of them soon showed up in the workshop.

"Welcome home," I said in greeting, and I received two calls of "I'm home" in response.

"Find anything good today?"

"Mostly fruits," Samya replied. "We were hoping to find something to plant but no dice."

I figured that we should consult with an expert if we wanted to turn our small plot of soil into a true vegetable garden. I could only think of asking Lidy; she might know since she was an elf. I'd ask the next time we ran into each other.

I took a portion of the fruits Samya and Diana brought back and fermented them with wine. As for the rest, we'd eat them while they were fresh. Fruits always added a pop of color and excitement to the dinner table.

With my work complete, I began the prep for dinner. Today, I was making herb-roasted boar. I served it with apple-like fruits for dessert.

On a separate note, Samya and Diana had harvested a large number of these apples. I figured I could spare some to make yeast, so I chopped up a few. I slipped the pieces into a jar that I'd previously sterilized by boiling it. Along with the apples, I filled the jar with sterilized (also boiled) water. I screwed a lid on the jar and then stored it away in the workshop.

Yeast was the key to unlocking a much-needed upgrade in my bread-baking. All I could do now was pray.

Everyone raved about the dinner menu. The boar had been one of the more difficult dishes to prepare, but it was worth it. It was important to mix up the flavor profiles of our meals.

The next time I see Camilo, I'll ask if he has anything like butter or cheese that I could purchase...

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The following day, Samya and Diana continued to work on the vegetable plot, preparing for the eventual day that we would receive the promised seeds from Lidy's village.

I was holed up in the forge again. For the next couple of days, I would have to rush to fill our delivery quota.

But surely I can take a break once in a while to see what Samya and Diana are up to.

The others were going to join in on the smithing work tomorrow, so today, I switched to forging knives. It didn't much matter who made the mold and cast for the swords, but knives were a different story.

Rike was working on knives today too. Camilo had told me that the entry-model knives Rike made were top sellers, which meant that we

needed to deliver a large number of them. On the other hand, we *could* get away with forging fewer elite model knives; the number of customers looking for a knife as sharp as an elite model was comparatively minuscule. Camilo had told me that it wouldn't be a problem if we didn't deliver many elite model knives.

Because of this, both Rike and I were forging entry-level knives. This way, I could help share Rike's burden and give her some extra time to work on her personal projects.

When I explained my intentions to Rike, she protested. "No way, Boss, it wouldn't be proper of me to accept such kindness."

But I didn't back down. "As Forge Eizo's apprentice, you have to learn to forge pieces of your own," I told her. I felt a little like I was abusing my power, but I hoped that she would forgive me for this one selfish request.

I didn't have to focus hard to forge entry-level models, and I was still able to make them quickly. The workshop was filled with the rhythmic clanging of my and Rike's hammers, but soon, a different note jumped into the music. This new sound was the clunking of the mini cart's wheels. Krul must've coaxed Diana into letting it play with the cart.

Maybe I should make a plow for Krul; it might find it fun to help us expand the vegetable patch. Of course, I had no grand aspirations when it came to farming.

And so, Rike and I continued to produce knives one after another to the resonant sound of metal striking metal, which was mixed in with the muted thumps of Krul's antics coming from outside.

When we had a chance, we took a breather to check on Samya and Diana in the field. They'd plowed the soil into neat furrows, and it looked ready for planting.

"Hey!" I called as I approached. "Looking good."

“It’s nothing. We’re not quite finished yet,” Diana said, but she was clearly proud of their work. With a hoe in hand, she didn’t look at all like the young lady of a comital family... No one would’ve believed it if you told them. Diana had adapted completely to life out here in the forest.

Samya joined us, holding her own hoe. “I’ve never done any farm work before. It’s exhausting!”

I remembered her saying that the beastfolk in the Black Forest didn’t rely on agriculture.

“You’ll get used to it soon,” Rike chimed in. “Beastfolk are as strong as we dwarves are.”

“Same with swordsmanship. I’m sure you’d have a knack for it,” Diana added.

I’d started to think of Rike as the eldest sister. Diana felt more mature than Samya too; she was technically much older judging by the number of years they’d each lived (though beastfolk aged differently from humans).

Satisfied by what I saw, I decided to get back to my work. “I’m heading to the forge.”

“See ya,” Samya said, and Diana called out a quick “Bye.”

Rike bowed to me, and I returned to the workshop alone.

At least, that’s what I tried to do, but I was spotted by Krul before I could do so. It trotted up to me, mini cart in tow. I patted its neck and then stayed to watch it frolic around the courtyard for a while.

Its balance while hitched to the cart had improved. The day before yesterday, the cart had been swaying around dramatically behind Krul, but it was more stable now. Though, maybe it was just me seeing it.

Could Krul be practicing and not just fooling around like I thought?

I complimented Krul when it came back over to me. “Good work! You’re a genius.”

Krul trilled happily and nuzzled my face. I stroked it gently before breaking away to return to work for real this time, though I dragged my feet as I went.

After that, I finished up the rest of the day’s work as planned.

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I was wrapped up in my smithing obligations for the next couple of days: I spent two days forging swords and another two forging knives. Rike worked on the same things I did, but occasionally, as when Lidy was around, she also practiced imbuing magic into metal. Samya and Diana were the busiest of us all, assisting with the smithing work, hunting, and foraging in turn.

In a way, Krul had an eventful few days. Krul helped bring back Samya and Diana’s catch from hunting and their spoils from foraging. The rest of the time, it played around in the courtyard.

When I checked in on the jarred apples I’d left soaking in water, I saw that the yeast was developing nicely. It would be ready in a few days, right after our next delivery trip.

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The day before our delivery trip, we discussed building a storage shed.

“I’ve been thinking that it’s about time we construct a proper storage space,” I said. “How about using the spare room?”

Diana looked at me dubiously. “I don’t think we should keep using the extra room as storage. If anything, we should build a new room.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with it,” I protested, but I had clearly lost my audience. Samya and Rike were on Diana’s side.

“What if Helen comes back to stay?” Diana said.

“I bet she will,” Samya chimed in.

“She seems to be taken with you too, Boss,” Rike commented at the end.

Listening to the three of them talk, I felt like I was losing face with every word they said. “She probably won’t come back,” I tried cutting in. As far as I knew, Helen was busy with her travels and mercenary work, and as far as I could tell, she was thoroughly invested in her nomadic lifestyle.

But Diana shot me right down. “She’ll be back once in a while. She might come visit just for a place to stay while she’s in the area.”

I didn’t see any hope of winning this debate. “Would you look at the time! I really need to start preparing dinner.”

The other three saw right through my exit strategy. “Don’t be a sore loser!” they teased as I ran away, but they soon dove back into discussing whether Helen would visit and if we needed to build another room.

In the end, they decided to postpone construction. When I asked about it at dinner, they told me that we could always house the next long-term guest in the spare room temporarily and build storage then. Now that we were four people plus a drake, construction was sure to be a breeze compared to before.

I felt let down... I’d been hoping they would decide against needing new rooms in the future, period.

□□□

The next day, we set off for Camilo’s to deliver the swords and knives. It was time to put our new cart to the test.

I refilled the water jugs at the lake and finished my morning chores. Then, we prepared to head out. Rike and Diana worked together to harness Krul. In the meantime, Samya and I loaded up the cart.

When I'd modified the cart, I'd built a simple seat for the driver to sit on and benches for passengers. After making sure Krul's harness was secure, Rike hopped onto the driver's seat, and the rest of us climbed in the back.

I felt the springs depress under my weight, but they didn't bottom out, not even when all four of us were seated. This thankfully meant that the suspension system could handle our weight combined with the burden of the cargo. I let out a sigh of relief... That was the first hurdle cleared.

The supplies we would be hauling on the way back—charcoal, ore, salt, and the like—were going to be even heavier than our current load, so it would've been a massive failure if the springs couldn't handle the initial weight. I had been confident enough that the cart was up to par, especially since I'd built it using my cheats, but it was nice to have concrete proof.

Krul let out a rallying cry and then started to walk forward.

The cart wasn't as comfortable to ride as, say, a car—the wooden wheels were no match for rubber tires—but the suspensions had improved the experience significantly. There was less bouncing and hardly any sharp jolts. However, the cart did sway a lot from side to side. I hoped no one would get motion sick.

It'd been a while since the last time Krul had pulled a full-sized cart, and Krul was raring to go. In the forest, the trees were packed in close and the trail was rough. The terrain limited our speed; our pace was only slightly faster than a jog.

The last time Krul made this trip was when we were coming back from the city, and we had been traveling slower since I hadn't yet installed the suspensions. At our current speed, I expected to reach the city much faster than usual.

The quick pace also meant that we emerged from the forest earlier than we normally did. The rest of the journey was on the road, where we could pick up further speed. The cart swayed more intensely, but it wasn't unbearable, and though the cargo shook with the cart, it wasn't bouncing around either. Most importantly, everything stayed undamaged.

At the speed we were traveling, we could even make a round trip between the city and the capital in a single day; before now, a single leg of the journey would've eaten up the full day. If horse-drawn carriages could all travel this quickly, both goods and information would circulate more freely.

I realized that the consequences of my decision could ripple out into the world in unexpected ways. The Watchdog had said that my presence here wouldn't drastically affect this world, but could I take her word for it?

Perhaps it was only a matter of time—as long as I worked within the constraints of this world's physics and principles, I'd only be making things that someone was bound to come up with sooner or later.

While we were on the city road, we kept an eye out for suspicious activity, but we could relax more than usual. Krul had set a pace that was similar to a human's running speed. Any bandits that had their sights on us would have to chase us at a dead run...assuming they weren't riding horses.

Bandits could try to cripple Krul by shooting its legs, but it was extremely difficult to aim while running. And honestly, if they had such superior marksmanship, they wouldn't have had to become a

bandit in the first place; plenty of other professions would want that level of skill.

Nonetheless, it would've been naive to treat this as a joy ride. We stayed vigilant and actively scanned the horizon for signs of threats throughout the trip.

I must ask Camilo today if he's heard any recent news about the thief.

At the entrance to the city, the usual guard was on duty today. Today, his spear was absent—in its stead was a halberd. In other words, the halberds I'd forged had finally made their way into the city arsenal.

The guard caught sight of Krul before he saw us. He looked startled upon coming face-to-face with a drake, but then he noticed us sitting in the back. "Of course it'd be the four of you," he said with a knowing expression. He must've thought of us as quite eccentric, and given the members of our party, I'd be hard-pressed to deny that assertion.

"Morning!" I called out from the cart.

"Hello," he replied. "Now, I'm sure you all know the drill by now, but just in case, don't go looking for any fights or start any trouble, all right?"

"Will do," I said.

Krul was clever, so I was confident it wouldn't run amok. Or was that just the foolish arrogance of a doting parent?

Krul was indeed perfectly behaved as it walked sedately through the city streets. Drakes were a rare sight, so our group turned many onlooking heads as we passed by. I also noticed a few people who

were staring at the cart's wheels. The only thing that could've drawn their attention was the suspensions.

Good, good. Take a long look, and go forth to build them yourselves.

"Hear ye, hear ye! I hereby announce Forge Eizo's Limited Edition Product: the Fat Cat Suspension System—"

—was not a line I would be saying. Seeing as I couldn't file for a patent or utility model right here, there was no benefit to subjecting myself to that publicity. But in exchange, I would explain how the leaf springs worked to Camilo if he asked.

We arrived at Camilo's shop before long since a drake's "sedate" pace was still brisk compared to a human's. Krul pulled us to the storehouse where it stopped obediently.

I declared cart version 2.0's first test run a success. It had been a surprisingly comfortable ride. We all helped unharness Krul and then removed the fittings from the cart.

Krul shook itself spiritedly as if it were a dog that'd just come out of the water. "Ku!" it chirped gently.

We asked a store clerk for water and fodder before leading Krul around to the yard where we'd first met.

"Be good and wait for us here, okay?" Diana said, patting its neck gently.

"Krul," it chirruped back and lay down. It was as if Krul were saying, "Okay, I will."

Aww, who's a good boy?!

The five of us headed up into the conference room. Soon, Camilo and the head clerk joined us. After a round of hello's and how-do-you-do's, I took out a pouch from my pocket which held the entire sum of

our savings. I placed it on the table and said to Camilo, "Please, take what we owe you for the drake from here."

Camilo peeked inside the pouch. "This is quite a stash."

"The portion from His Lordship is included there."

Camilo instantly knew what I was talking about. With a chuckle, he said, "Aaah, I remember. His sense of duty had practically been oozing out of his pores." His words were curt, but his expression was kind. Camilo might've been practical when it came to profits and losses, but he was a warm and generous person at heart.

He took a few coins out of the bag, though fewer than I'd expected. "With this, we'll call it even," he said.

"Is that enough?" I asked.

"Yeah. I bought the drake for cheap from an aristocrat in another empire," explained Camilo. "The family had been on the brink of financial ruin and didn't know how to get rid of the drake. That's when I swooped in and snatched it up. Considering the price I paid, I'll still turn a profit."

The empire Camilo was talking about bordered the kingdom we lived in. We weren't at full war with them, but I'd heard the occasional rumors (from Camilo) of skirmishes along the border.

"All right. Thanks, Camilo." The possibility crossed my mind that Camilo was holding back for my sake, but I decided to trust in his business sense and pride.

More importantly, since when has he been trading with that empire? Doing business with a less-than-friendly neighbor seems highly risky, even if there are no rules against it.

Regardless, Camilo's success in navigating the tricky political waters was more proof of his business acumen.

"How is the drake doing?" Camilo asked.

“It’s a big help. Very clever,” I said. “By the way, I meant to ask—do you know its sex?”

“Female, from what I heard.”

Aaah, so Krul is a “she.” I was a little bummed by the news because it meant that I was still alone as the sole male member of Forge Eizo.

“There’s something I’m curious about too,” Camilo said. He lowered his voice, and I leaned forward without thinking. “The cart that you guys came riding in on... How do I put it?” He paused for a moment.

“Oh, right, that.”

“It’s peculiar, is all,” he murmured. “Is there a story behind it?”

Rumors spread fast. I was impressed. We’d only just arrived, but he’d already heard about the modifications to our cart.

I had no reason to keep the suspension system a secret, so I gave him an overview of the mechanism and its effects.

“I see,” Camilo said when I was finished. “The workings are there to absorb shocks from rough roads, so you won’t feel the bumps and divots. That way, you’ll be able to travel at higher speeds. Did I get everything right?”

“You have the gist,” I said. “They’re not perfect by any means, but I imagine that a round trip to the capital would only take a day if you were traveling on my cart.”

“You don’t say?” Camilo fell quiet, and I could practically see the gears turning in his head. To a merchant that traded with neighboring kingdoms, a cart as fast as mine would be no small boon. If he believed my claims, he was surely thinking about how to get one of his own.

“You’re free to copy the suspension mechanism,” I offered. “I don’t intend to keep it as an exclusive invention nor am I looking for compensation.”

In a rare show of passion, Camilo jumped to his feet and burst out, “Do you mean it?” Then, seeing my surprise—and the head clerk’s—he sat back down awkwardly.

Camilo cleared his throat. Having regained his composure, he said, “I thank you, but you must let me reward you with something of similar value.” His tone was calm, but his gaze was intense.

He must have really taken a shine to the suspensions.

Camilo gave the head clerk instructions to prepare the supplies that we’d asked for and to write down everything about the leaf springs. I offered to help diagram the mechanism and detail how it worked, but he said his staff would manage themselves. In any case, we were going to be back in two weeks, so he said he’d ask us for advice if they couldn’t figure out how to install the suspensions in the meantime.

After that, we exchanged information about the comings and goings about town and any bigger rumors riding on the wind—call it trading news or merely small talk.

First, Marius had apparently been keeping himself busy.

Second, there’d been a few skirmishes on the border between our kingdom and the demon kingdom, but the situation was unlikely to break out into full-blown war. Neither kingdom was interested in escalating the conflict further.

The dispute had nothing to do with bad blood between our two races. Rather, the kingdoms were fighting over the rights to a mountain range that was rich with ore. The border in the area had never been a permanent boundary to begin with, but more of a provisional line that’d been drafted as a ceasefire after one battle or another.

“By the way, have you heard any news about the thieves that’ve been roaming the road?”

“As far as I know, they’re still on the loose,” Camilo replied.

“Tsk.”

If they’d already been caught, we would’ve had one less threat to watch out for on the way back...but no such luck.

“They haven’t injured anyone, but you folks should still be careful,” Camilo cautioned.

“Don’t worry. We will.”

He and I shook hands. Then, my housemates and I left the conference room and returned to the yard around back, where Krul was patiently waiting. Touched by Krul’s good behavior, Diana stroked it—her—on the head.

Don’t come crying to me if Krul gets annoyed because you bother her too much!

I tipped one silver coin to the worker who’d brought water and feed for Krul, then we headed over to the storehouse with Krul in tow.

The cart was weighed down with our usual assortment of goods along with a supply of clay. Krul didn’t seem to mind the excess cargo, and the suspensions were holding their own too. A knot of tension in my chest eased. I didn’t want the journey home to be too taxing for anyone involved.

We drew the same amount of attention on the way back to the city entrance. There was little chance that people would get used to seeing a drake, but at the very least, I hoped that the suspensions would soon become a commonplace sight. I was counting on Camilo to make that happen, and I would also be honored to see leaf springs become a small piece of the cityscape.

We said our farewells to the guard at the gate before leaving the city behind. The picturesque scenery along the road and the peaceful atmosphere tempted us to relax, but we persevered.

Nevertheless, there were some things it didn't even occur to us to watch out for. We were in a drake-drawn cart for goodness' sake! How do you halt a wagon that you can't catch up to on foot or stop with arrows?

Well, we would soon find out the answer to that rhetorical question.

A fair distance away from the city, we caught sight of a speck in front of us, growing larger with every second. Eventually, it resolved into a person standing alone smack in the middle of the road. In their hand, a sword glinted in the sunlight.

"You there! Halt!" the person shouted. "If you don't, you'll taste the edge of my blade!"

Yes, that was right—all you had to do to stop a barreling cart was block the road.

Without taking my eyes off of our unwanted visitor, I signaled for Rike to stop.

Chapter 3: The Demon and the Blade

Rike brought Krul to a walk and then to a complete stop. “Boss, what do we do?”

I glanced behind us to see that the road was still clear. “Let’s cooperate for now.”

“I understand,” she said, sitting motionless with the reins gripped tight in her hands.

The mysterious figure was cloaked and hooded, so I couldn’t get a good look. However, based on her voice, I thought it was likely that we were dealing with a woman. I wouldn’t have bet any money on it though.

“Good!” shouted the woman. “Don’t you move a muscle!”

I whispered to Diana and Samya to watch out for any signs of archers. I, too, kept a wary eye on our surroundings. In the worst-case scenario, we would’ve been slain by a volley of arrows while we waited like sitting ducks for the woman to approach.

If this were a bandit raid, this was the part where the decoy would be joined by their comrades to demand our surrender, our lives, our gold, or possibly even Krul. Yet, there was no one else in sight. Plus, bandits would have already flanked us to prevent our escape, but when I’d peeked earlier, I’d seen no signs of reinforcements.

There was one more thing that had struck me as odd: between one lone person and a horse-drawn—or drake-drawn—cart, the former was at a clear disadvantage. Why put yourself in harm’s way when a log strewn across the road would’ve done the trick? She could’ve even pretended that she was ill and needed help.

That she used none of those tricks had led me to conclude that she was no bandit, which left one alternative: she was the rumored thief.

Samya had drawn the same conclusion. Under her breath, she asked me, “Is she the raider?”

“It’s likely,” I murmured back.

I had told Rike to stop instead of running or shooting the woman with arrows because I wanted to know her aims.

“Her plan is sloppy,” I muttered. The woman wasn’t defenseless, but there was no way she would be able to stand against Krul charging at full speed.

Is this the first time she’s stopped a cart? Not many people could boast a wealth of experience in that area.

“It’s a miracle that she hasn’t been captured yet,” Diana whispered.

“I agree,” I said.

Suddenly, the woman turned her sword on Krul. Diana lunged forward, like a mother whose baby was being threatened, and I had to hold her back.

“You there!” the thief yelled at Rike. “Throw your weapon here.”

Rike glanced at me. I nodded.

Rike let go of the reins to unclasp her knife from her waist and threw it down to the ground still sheathed. The figure stooped down to pick up the knife, not bothering to defend herself. I could’ve seized this opening to blindside her but decided to wait. I was observing her, trying to glean any hints about what she was reportedly searching for.

But I’ll say this: all bets were off if she tried to harm a single hair on my family’s heads. I angled myself to be ready to defend at any moment.

The thief examined the knife in her hands and cried, “Aha!”

All of a sudden, bloodlust poured off her body in waves, and a dangerous mood hung thick in the air. We all shifted our hands to the hilts of our weapons unconsciously.

It's now or never. We have to make our move.

As I was steeling myself, the thief raised the knife overhead and called out, "Where did you buy this knife?"

We exchanged puzzled looks, and then, floored at the sudden turn of events, I burst into laughter.

"Wh-What's so funny?" she asked, half flustered, half angry. "I demand you tell me the name of your supplier!"

I sympathized with her indignation, but she'd think the situation was funny too if she could see our perspective.

"We didn't buy our knives," I said, chuckling. "I forged them."

"What?" All the bite had gone out of her voice from disbelief.

"We're on our way home from delivering our blades to the merchant we're partnered with. If you want to commission a sword from me, first sheathe your own, then we'll talk."

At the minimum, I wished she'd do me a favor and turn her sword away from Krul. I wasn't going to be able to hold Mama Diana back for much longer.

I hadn't noticed during our evening spars, but Diana had gotten much stronger. On top of that, there was a saying that was (somewhat) applicable here: the strength of a mother was second to none.

If the thief didn't stand down, I was ready to use force to make her talk. I'd deal with the consequences after, but I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

The woman hesitated, but after a moment, she slid her sword back into its sheath.

“Thank you,” I said. “Climb up. It’s a hassle to converse while you’re standing at a distance.”

Somehow, our role had been reversed. God forbid the guards come patrolling now; we’d have no choice but to hand her over, and then we’d never hear her story.

The thief hoisted herself up slowly, still on guard. I stayed vigilant as well. My cheats told me she was a better fighter than Diana but not as skilled as Helen. In other words, she was at a level that I could handle one way or another.

The thief sat herself down. She lifted Diana’s knife and pointed the hilt toward us. “I’ve been searching for weapons with this insignia,” she said, referring to the mark of the sitting fat cat. “I would like a blade of my own from this maker.”

The target of her search isn’t a person at all... She’s been searching for our blades all this time? I thought our wares were widely circulated around this region, but I guess I was off the mark.

Since Camilo did business with the neighboring empire, it was possible that he primarily sold elite models outside of this kingdom to drive up profits.

“As I said earlier, I’m the smith who forged that knife.” I removed my own knife from my inner pocket and showed her the pommel which bore, of course, the same insignia. I signaled to the others, and they each followed suit with their weapons.

We could’ve been lying. Obviously, it was possible that we’d all just purchased our knives from the same forge. Regardless, it wouldn’t make any difference to the woman, since she’d still have found an access route to the weapons either way.

“If what you say is true, then I’ve come to commission a sword from you,” she said, bowing her head.

She doesn’t seem to be a bad person at heart. Or...maybe I’m just naive and too quick to trust. Back on Earth, I had no need to hone a warrior’s instincts.

“I’d accept here and now, but actually, there’s one condition I require all my clients to fulfill first,” I said. “You must come visit our forge alone and unaccompanied. I’ll tell you the location. Come tomorrow.”

The thief nodded. “Fine.”

I told her where to find our cabin, and then she descended from the cart. She started to walk away but turned back at the last second. Nervously, she asked, “Do you take on demons as clients?”

I didn’t hesitate at all before saying, “I have no intention of turning away anyone who comes to our door.”

Her expression brightened. “Thank you. Until tomorrow.”

With those words, she went on her way.

I hope I didn’t just invite trouble to our doorstep. That standoff alone was exciting enough.

I climbed back into the cart. Krul walked forward, steadily gaining speed, and hauled us behind her into the forest.

Despite the hiccup, we arrived home with plenty of time left in the day, thanks to Krul’s speed. We arrived at the cabin around the time we used to when Rike and I had been pulling the cart ourselves.

We removed Krul’s harness and dusted off the accrued grime from our travels. Instead of spending the time freely as we would’ve on a typical day, we gathered in the living room to discuss how we wanted to deal with our soon-to-be guest.

“Do you think she’ll come tomorrow?” I asked the room.

Diana responded first. “Probably. She must be confident in her skills to have accepted your condition so easily. The infamy of the Black Forest should be well-known within the demon kingdom.”

“The chance that she won’t make it through the forest is slim, I suppose.”

I had been able to keep my cool (at least on the outside) during the confrontation because I knew I’d be able to cut her down if push came to shove. My cheats had assured me of that. But the fact that she would’ve lost to me did not mean that she was so weak as to be overwhelmed by the forest.

“My next question is...are there any consequences for forging a weapon for a demon?”

My installed knowledge had informed me of the great war six centuries ago, but in the current era, there had been nothing more than skirmishes between the two kingdoms. In a sense, our kingdom’s relationship with the demon kingdom was no worse than with the neighboring empire.

As a recluse of a blacksmith who’d left the north to settle where I pleased, it made no difference to me where my weapons ended up. However, I wanted to know if everyone else felt the same way.

“Not as far as I know,” Samya said in response to my inquiry. “I have nothing against demons, though I’m always surprised when I see them in person.”

“The same goes for me,” said Rike.

For the two of them, meeting a demon didn’t mean trouble; it was merely a rare event.

“If my brother were to grant a favor to a demon or host one in our estate, he would be accused of being a spy,” Diana answered. “But as a blacksmith, I don’t think you need to worry.”

I could see her point. Being chummy with someone from an enemy nation was sure to garner suspicion.

“Hypothetically, say I took on this commission and we end up going to war with the demons... One of my weapons could end up wounding your brother.”

“All the more reason for you to accept the job,” Diana said. “You’ve already forged a pair of blades for Helen, which means that the possibility you’re describing exists even now.”

“You’re...not wrong.”

Mercenaries like Helen fought for whoever had the coin, so there was no guarantee that she would be fighting on the side of our kingdom. For example, she could end up fighting for the neighboring empire in a battle that Marius was ordered to join. In that scenario, she—using the blades I forged—could end up hurting Marius. It wasn’t impossible.

Diana had already accepted what it meant for me to continue my work as a blacksmith, whereas I had failed to confront this possibility until now.

I already promised myself I wouldn’t waver anymore about my path as a blacksmith. I need to engrave that resolution into my heart.

When it came down to it, Diana’s opinion boiled down to “I can’t say I don’t mind at all, but I think it’s fine for you to take the commission.”

There was no reason for me to overthink what I was forging, considering that I, myself, wasn’t allied to anyone. I was close with

the count and his family, but our relationship was personal, not public.

I moved on to my next point. “The other thing that’s weighing on me is that she is a thief.”

“Normally speaking, it’s a crime to shelter thieves,” Diana said.

“That it is.”

To be honest, we were already complicit, considering we’d let her go today. But still...

“She...hasn’t actually hurt anyone or stolen anything,” I pointed out.

“That’s true, but the kingdom has had to expend its resources to keep watch for her,” said Rike. “There’s no guarantee that she won’t harm anyone in the future either.”

She’s right...

“If I forge her a weapon, she might return to the demon kingdom. Then, we would no longer have a thief problem,” I suggested. “Two birds, one stone. I’m not saying it’s ideal, but what do you all think? Is it stupidly optimistic?”

“The guards will just think that she’s shifted targets,” Diana responded.

I couldn’t deny that. However, knowing what I did, I couldn’t let the guards continue patrolling pointlessly, even if they were doing it for the safety of the community.

“Looks like we’ve no choice but to ask Camilo and Marius for help.”

I didn’t want to have to call on Marius for a favor so quickly, but we had a give-and-take relationship anyway. I decided to not overthink it.

“What are you planning to do?” Diana asked.

“If the patrols haven’t been discontinued by our next delivery, I’ll have Camilo pass on a letter explaining the situation to Marius,” I said. “Then, Marius can explain to the guards that the thief has moved on. That should be the end of that, right?”

“I know he’s my brother, but I don’t want you to end up indebted to him,” Diana said. “However...I don’t see any other option.”

“I feel the same, to be honest.” But as far as debt went, this was a small one, so I was confident I could pay it back many times over.

Some would say that it was overly soft for me to stick my neck out for a demon who was nothing more than a stranger...and I’d agree. But this was my way of doing things.

We talked for a while longer. Long story short, I would make her a weapon if she came. We wouldn’t treat her differently than any other client, and we would make her promise to return to her kingdom once I finished the commission.

There was a part of me that was still hesitant about forging a weapon for someone who may come back to harm me and mine in the future. This was a test of my resolve as a blacksmith, and it was up to me to decide whether or not to forge her sword.

The other three started to discuss what they knew about demons, though none of them were experts. I left my seat to start cooking dinner.

☞☞☞

The next day, Krul and I returned from our trip to the lake to find a suspicious, cloaked figure lurking on our doorstep. There was only one person who came to mind that matched the description of our visitor, but I didn’t want to get cocky—there was always the possibility that they were a burglar. I set down the water jugs as softly as I could, drew my knife, and crept closer.

When I was a fair distance away from the person, I demanded, “Who are you? What business do you have?”

My caution proved unnecessary as I recognized the voice when she spoke.

“I came because *you* told me to, so why am I being treated as a crook?” she asked, nonplussed. The voice was a definite match for the demon we met yesterday, though I still couldn’t see her face because of the hood.

It’s a problem that I can’t read her expression either.

“I had to make sure you were who I thought you were,” I replied.

“Fair enough,” she said. “I didn’t show you my face yesterday, did I?”

She removed her hood, revealing a face with almond-shaped eyes, long ears, and short, silver hair. Her dark, ash brown skin was covered with tribal-style tattoos. A knife scar ran through one such tattoo near her left eye.

She was a conventional beauty. If I were pressed to describe her in terms from my previous world, I’d say that she looked like a dark elf. Now that I’d seen her appearance, I could say for sure that she was female. That meant that, in this world, my only male friends were still Camilo and Marius.

Is there some sort of cosmic reason that almost everyone I meet is a woman?

“You’ll recognize me next time, right?” she asked loftily.

“As long as you show your face again.”

“I will.”

“Can you wait here a moment?” I asked. “I need to bring in the water jugs.”

I returned to the jugs and hoisted them up, thinking that I should face the reality of these jugs breaking if I'd had to fight an actual intruder. Placing the jug that Krul had been carrying nearby the cabin, I then led Krul back into her shed.

As I walked back to the cabin, I asked our visitor, "Did you have any trouble on the way here?"

"I had some difficulty with the stranger repellent," she admitted. "Magic is not my strong suit, you see."

"What repellent?" I asked.

"Huh? You didn't know about it? This is your home, right?" she asked, incredulous.

"It...is. I'm not skilled with magic either. I was given the cabin by someone else."

Everything I'd said was technically true. The demon seemed to accept my explanation at face value as well.

"The spell wards off anyone who doesn't fulfill certain conditions, but it's not foolproof by any means. People who can sense it's there, like me, can find a way around it."

"Oh, really?"

Lidy had told us before that magic is particularly concentrated around this clearing, which was why wild animals avoided the cabin, but this was my first time hearing the details.

Before I could leak any information, I changed the subject. "More importantly, you must not have eaten breakfast yet, right? You're here quite early."

"Indeed."

"Then you should eat with us," I offered. "Can you store your belongings in the guest room and freshen up?"

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. A guest is a guest.”

“You’re a peculiar one,” she remarked. “I’m a demon, you know.”

“A normal person wouldn’t choose to live all the way out here,” I retorted.

“True.”

“Besides...”

“Yes?”

“I don’t care one whit about whether you’re a demon or not,” I asserted.

“I see.” Her words were accompanied by a complicated smile.

I hadn’t overlooked the fact that she was a criminal, but her crimes weren’t so severe as far as I was concerned, and I was going to treat her the same as I would any guest. That was what we’d decided yesterday as well.

After I brought in the water, I filled a small bucket and brought it to the guest room. The demon woman trailed after me.

Come to think of it, I hadn’t asked for her name yet. I couldn’t very well address her as “demon woman.”

“If I may ask, what is your name?”

“It’s Nilda.”

“Well then, Nilda, here is the guest room. This cloth and water are for you. I’ll call you when breakfast is ready, so clean up and make yourself at home.”

“I got it,” said Nilda with a nod, and then she entered the room.

When I returned to the living area, everyone had just woken up.

“She came?” asked Diana.

“Yeah,” I said. “She’s just putting her things away now and dusting off.”

“Then we should wash up too.”

I nodded, and we all broke off to attend to our morning routines. Samya went into the guest room to collect the laundry, which was a big help since I couldn’t enter a woman’s room so casually.

Once we finished the chores and breakfast was ready, I had Samya call for Nilda to join us. We all gathered around the dining table. Samya, Rike, Diana, and I clapped our hands together and said *itadakimasu* in unison. Nilda copied our gestures and parroted us quietly.

As we started eating, I turned to Nilda. “Now that we’re all here, can you introduce yourself to the group? It’d be awkward if they called you Miss Demon, right?”

A grimace flashed across Nilda’s face. “My name is Nilda. I’m from the demon kingdom,” she said brusquely.

Her experiences as a demon may have made her more wary, but I thought she might be good at heart. Just now, and during our standoff at the road, she had been open to my requests, and she never said anything unnecessary.

Nilda’s gaze flicked between Rike and Samya. Did beastfolk and dwarves not live in the demon kingdom?

Regardless of her curt introduction and the fact that she was a demon, she’d introduced herself, so we did too in kind.

“I’m Eizo. Human,” I said. “This here is Samya. She’s one of the beastfolk.”

“My name is Rike. I’m a dwarf.”

“And I’m Diana. I’m human, like Eizo.”

“The drake that lives in the shed is Krul, and that’s everyone,” I finished. “Now then, getting down to business, how did you come to hear about our forge?”

“My party was patrolling the border between the demon and human worlds when we encountered a human reconnaissance unit,” Nilda said. “One of the members was a redhead named Helen. I learned about your weapons from her.”

Nilda had said “demon world” but all the races coexisted in the same world. The demon world was the region over which the demons reigned, and likewise for the human world. The terminology was a remnant from the great wars six hundred years ago.

“A redhead named Helen... Is she also called Lightning Blade?” I asked.

“Lightning Strike? That’s the name I’d heard,” responded Nilda.

Helen had said she’d be leaving the region, but who would’ve guessed that she would go as far as the demons’ territory.

And when had her nickname changed? Lightning Strike, huh? She was certainly fast enough.

Nilda continued her story. “We fought with Lightning Strike and her allies, but we suffered an overwhelming loss. They weren’t aiming for our lives. Instead, Helen destroyed all of our weapons. It all happened so fast, we didn’t even have a chance to react.”

Helen was wielding a pair of swords handcrafted by me, so an average steel blade wouldn’t have stood a chance. However, that was a rough way to treat swords—as proud as I was of my custom models’ durability, even they had their limits. I’d be sure to fix up her swords next time she returned.

“I saw through her strategy and purposefully angled my weapon away from her blade, but I couldn’t fend her off for long. Before I knew it, my weapon was in pieces. But she told me that I wasn’t half bad. I believe her exact words were, ‘You could’ve given me a run for my money if you had a weapon like mine!’”

“Is that what you meant when you said you heard about our forge from Helen?” I asked.

Nilda nodded. “Yes. I told her I’d like to buy myself a weapon like her dual blades, but I was rebuffed. She said, ‘I had these babies custom made. You won’t be able to find an equal so easily.’ That was where our conversation ended.”

Nilda then continued her tale. “Some of my comrades overheard us talking and came running, although they might as well not have bothered. Lightning Strike took care of them easily. She and her allies retreated after that for some reason, but before she left, she showed me the pommel of her blade and told me that, if I really wanted a sword, I should search for a blacksmith who used that insignia.”

“I understand now.”

“I begged for permission to go on leave and came here to begin my search. I only knew to look in this general area, but I figured that anyone carrying a weapon with a matching engraving would’ve either gotten it directly from the blacksmith or a merchant that the blacksmith did business with. The rest I’ve just made up along the way.”

I wonder why Helen didn’t tell her our location... Maybe because she didn’t have the time.

Now I knew the full story behind the rumors of the thief hellbent on a hunt for a mysterious target. Nilda had been looking for our fat sitting cat insignia. Who would’ve thought that Helen had actually been the original catalyst behind the whole chain of events?

“Why was it that no one could remember your face or appearance?” I asked.

“I was mostly hidden by my cloak, but remember-me-not magic is also very effective in these types of situations.”

“Aaah.”

That’s another new type of magic for me to remember. Nilda said she was bad at magic, but when push comes to shove, she can still wield it just fine.

“Any more questions?” she asked.

“No, that’s it,” I said. “For now.”

She nodded. “In any case, the food is delicious.”

“I’m happy to hear that, even if it’s just a courtesy.”

“Nothing of the sort. I’ve never met such a skilled chef before, not even at my honored elder sister’s household.”

“In that case, I’ll happily accept the compliment.” I bowed dramatically.

Watching my performance, Diana’s face took on a complicated expression.

I didn’t know what kind of character Nilda’s sister was, but judging by the change in Nilda’s tone, she must be someone important. Perhaps Nilda was even from an aristocratic family like the Eimoors. I was genuinely pleased that she found my cooking on par with chefs who served nobility.

I wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to ask her about the demon kingdom, so we chattered on through the rest of breakfast about nothing in particular.

After breakfast, we tidied up the table and then moved into the forge. When my housemates and I bowed at the *kamidana*, Nilda mimicked us.

“You don’t have to do that, you know,” I said. “Especially if it goes against any demon customs to honor the gods of humans.”

“There are no such rules. I found your ritual fascinating, so I wanted to try. That’s all.”

“As long as you’re sure.”

Are demons atheists? Or is it that the ruler of the kingdom sits at the absolute top of the hierarchy?

Nilda performed the steps of the ritual—two bows, two claps, and one final bow—with grace. Our usual prayer was for the day’s work to go smoothly, but what was it that Nilda had prayed for, I wondered. As a man, it’d be impolite for me to pry, so I shoved my curiosity out of my mind.

After we finished the prayer, Rike and the others started making plate metal. I lit the furnace with magic since that was the quickest way to do so.

Nilda’s gaze narrowed in on my hands.

I know what you want to ask, but I have questions of my own first.

I guided Nilda over to the table in the “shop” space on the other side of the counter, and we sat down across from each other.

I cut right to the chase. “What kind of weapon are you looking for?”

“It’s a type of sword that’s quite rare. It’s only forged in a specific region, so you might not be familiar with it,” she answered. “Rather than a standard double-edged sword, I would like you to make me a long, thin sword with a single edge.”

“A weapon for slicing and slashing,” I said. “Is there a slight curve to the blade?”

“Yes.”

I nodded and grabbed a scrap of wood lying around the workshop. Using my knife, I quickly carved it into a shape that would be familiar to any middle-school Japanese boy. During a class field trip, at least one person was guaranteed to buy one as a souvenir. The model I made was rough and unvarnished, but I thought it made a passable replica.

“How’s this for the general shape?” I asked Nilda when I finished.

“That’s exactly what I was imagining,” she said.

“Interesting.”

What Nilda had come to commission was a katana.

A katana.

The request rekindled the banked fire that was my Japanese soul.

However, there was a hitch—I might be able to make a sword shaped like a katana, but it wasn’t going to be truly authentic.

Katanas were made by wrapping a layer of hard steel around soft steel to create a sword that would neither bend nor break. The strength of a katana lay in its soft core, as counterintuitive as that sounded.

However, when I used my cheats, any steel I worked with ended up surpassing the potential of normal steel. I could mimic the technique by layering custom quality steel around an elite quality core, but custom quality steel was already practically unbreakable, so there was no point in going to the trouble.

Well...not *none*. There was always Rike’s training to think about.

In the end, I decided to forge a sword by layering custom quality steel on top of custom quality steel.

“With that settled, can I have you step out into the courtyard with me? Bring your weapon,” I told Nilda.

“What for?” she asked.

“I want to see how you wield your sword. I’ll fine-tune the length and weight of the sword based on your style of swordsmanship,” I explained.

“I understand,” she said. She returned to the living quarters briefly and came back with her sword in hand.

I opened the outside door and exited the cabin. Nilda followed behind me.

I had no reason to fear Nilda—there was no benefit for her to attack me—but I shifted my knife so I had easy access, just in case she tried anything.

“Eeep!” Nilda yelped as soon as she stepped outside.

Krul had come up to the cabin and was staring at Nilda from point-blank distance.

“When’d you come out here?” I asked Krul.

“*Kululul!*” She chirruped and nuzzled my shoulder.

I petted her neck and said, “All right, all right. But we’re going to be doing something dangerous, so stand back, okay?”

Krul followed my instruction and lay down in a spot away from me and Nilda. She started nibbling on the grass.

What a good girl!

“I-I forgot that you’re raising a drake,” stammered Nilda.

“You met yesterday. She was pulling our cart, remember?”

“Th-That’s right. She’s very attached to you.”

“Is that out of the norm for drakes?” I asked curiously. “Krul’s the only drake I’ve ever seen.”

“Drakes live in the demon world as well, but they’re wild and short-tempered,” she explained. “They’ll listen to instructions if they have to, but rarely are they happy about it.”

“Oh, really? I didn’t think drakes could be so different.”

“I’m not too familiar with them myself, but your drake is certainly an outlier as far as my experience goes.”

“I see.”

I wonder if Krul is a different breed of drake from the ones in the demon kingdom. That might explain why I’ve gotten conflicting information about their diets. Maybe drakes are like cats with all types of unique personalities.

Anyway, no matter her breed, Krul is Krul. She’s part of the family.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. It was time to focus on the commission.

“Is here a good place for me to demonstrate my swordplay?” Nilda asked.

“Yes. Feel free to run through a moveset you like or whatever moves come to mind.”

Nilda nodded. “Got it.”

She drew her sword and began to flow through a routine. Her movements were soundless and clean. She moved crisply when she was meant to move and stopped when she was meant to stop. However, I noticed that she didn’t always come to a perfect stop.

However, that was the only flaw I saw in her technique. It was the difference between her and Helen, but nevertheless, she was slightly more skilled than Diana.

Nilda had said she wanted a katana, but she was currently using a double-edged sword. So, why a katana? The answer didn't matter for my work, per se, but I thought I'd ask anyway.

"The sword you're requesting is different from the one you're wielding. Is there a reason for that?"

Nilda continued her dance as she answered. "My weapon of choice was broken by Lightning Strike. This sword is merely my backup." She sounded disgruntled, and I could imagine why.

"Sorry to ask such a strange question."

"It's no problem. If I'd been more experienced, it wouldn't have happened," she replied.

I continued watching Nilda's demonstration until midmorning. At that point, I'd seen all I needed to. "All right, that's good enough," I called out to her.

When I had her attention, I held my hands about two handspans apart from each other. It was too long to be called a *wakizashi* but was just about the length of a *kodachi*. "How is this for the length?"

"Looks a bit short," she said.

"Your swordplay favors speed over power, like Helen's, no? In that case, a shorter blade would be more agile," I explained.

"Hmm."

"I plan to make it as light as possible for the same reason."

"All right. I'll trust you with the specifics," she said.

Now that we'd agreed on the basic design and specs, all I had to do was make it.

Before we went inside, I called out goodbye to Krul; her reply chirrup followed Nilda and me as we returned to the workshop.

In the forge, Rike and the others were speeding through casting metal plates. The work was simple since it was mostly just pouring molten steel into a mold; three experienced workers out of four meant that efficiency was to be expected.

I rolled up my sleeves. "Time for me to get started too."

"Is it all right if I watch?" Nilda asked.

"Sure, if you want to, but nothing I'm doing today will be very interesting."

The first step was *sunobe*, which was elongating the katana to the right length. All I would be doing today was heating and hammering. Once I was done with the shaping and ornamental design, that was when I'd quench the sword.

"By the way, you don't have to stay in the house," I added. "If you'd rather, you can walk around the forest or train in the courtyard."

"I will stay," Nilda declared. "I've had an interest in this process since long ago, and seldom do I have the opportunity to observe it in my own kingdom."

"Fine by me."

I pulled out a few plates of metal from our reserves, then picked one up with tongs and slid it into the firebed.

First, I had to temper the steel.

Normally, you would also skim and remove any parts of the steel that were too impure to use. However, since I had my cheats, the structure of the metal was guaranteed to turn out uniform by the time I was finished, so the process looked a little different for me than it would for normal blacksmiths.

I heated the metal and hammered it out evenly. At the same time, I imbued the metal with magic. Because this was going to be a custom model and not an elite model, I worked with my cheats dialed up to the max. Elite models didn't have to be perfectly even, but for custom models, even the slightest imperfection was unforgivable.

Using my cheats, I suspected that I could make HSLA steel—high-strength low-alloy steel—but the question was, even if I made it, what would I use it for?

Back to the sword—once I was satisfied with the quality of the tempered metal, I moved on to the next step. This was called *tsumiwakashi*, and involved forge welding a stack of steel pieces into one solid chunk. A natural byproduct of this step was iron oxide, so to reduce oxidation, I covered the steel bundles with a layer of straw ash. I made two separate chunks of steel this way.

Next came the folding, which was called *orikaeshi tanren*. After heating and hammering, I used a chisel to mark out the seam where I would fold the steel. The folding was what gave the surface of katanas their characteristic ripples, and depending on how you folded the steel, the pattern would turn out differently. Manipulating the metal to take on the desired grain required both concentration and mastery. Unfortunately, in my case, the cheats would even out the structure of the metal, so the ripples would hardly be visible.

Figuring out how to mimic the beautiful appearance of layered steel while maintaining the perfect uniformity of my cheat-made blades was an exercise for a later time.

I'd been wanting to try my hand at *tsumiwakashi* and *orikaeshi tanren*, but who knew I'd get an opportunity so quickly? The workings of fate were truly mysterious.

Nilda watched me fixedly as I worked, her eyes bright with interest. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm making the amount of high-quality steel that I'll need for the sword," I explained.

"Oho!"

She must really like blacksmithing. Perhaps if she'd been born in a lower class, she would've even become one herself...not that I intend to ask her about it.

Since I was making a custom model, each step of the process took longer than usual. I didn't finish welding the two chunks of steel until after lunch.

When I was done, I called out to Rike. "Do you have a second?"

"Yes! What is it, Boss?"

"I'm forging a northern-style sword called a katana. The next step is critical to the process, so I want you to watch."

"I understand. Thank you for the opportunity." Rike joined Nilda to watch my demonstration. Nilda was observing as a guest, but she was considerate of Rike's training.

I hammered one of the pieces of steel out into a long and thin bar. The other piece I hammered into a flat sheet. Once the bar had cooled sufficiently, I reheated the sheet.

As I worked, I explained the process to my audience. "Typically, the sheet would be made of a hard steel and the bar would be made of a soft steel. The hard steel alone would make the sword too brittle. On the other hand, the soft steel alone would be too malleable."

In my case, both the steel pieces I'd made using my cheats were refined, high-quality steel. There was little difference between the two. The magic woven into the metal made it harder and more durable, unlike entry-level models where the metal contained little magic.

Once the sheet of steel was sufficiently hot enough, I set it on the anvil and bent it into a U-shape. I then slid the bar into the cup of the U. This technique of wrapping soft metal with hard metal was called *kobuse*.

"Weapons forged this way will have the strength of both types of metal," I continued. "They will be sharp and resistant to bending because of the hard outer shell, and be difficult to break because of the flexible inner core."

"I see. So, this is a technique practiced in the north, huh?" Rike asked appreciatively.

Next to her, Nilda was nodding along as well.

"Yes, it is," I said.

My installed data told me that weapons like katanas existed in the north, so I hypothesized that they were made in the same way. Fingers crossed I wasn't way off base.

Now it was finally time for me to properly start the *sunobe* step. I'd need to hammer out the steel to the right dimensions.

I wet the anvil with water and set the hot steel onto it. As I hammered, the water evaporated, making the air hazy. Occasionally, my strike would make a low cracking sound, as if gunpowder had been lit.

The first time this happened, everyone was startled.

"S-Sorry," I said when I saw everyone jump.

Nilda sat rigidly with her eyes open wide.

“What was that?” Rike asked.

“This will make the surface of the sword smooth and glassy,” I explained.

“Oooh, what an interesting effect,” she said.

From outside, we heard a loud “*kulululululu.*” I’d apparently scared Krul too.

I rushed outside to find Krul standing right by the door, looking worried. I stroked her head softly and explained that nothing was wrong. She quietly returned to her hut, so I hoped I was able to soothe her fears.

After that, I returned to repeating the heat and hammer cycle, shaping the steel to the right width, length, and thickness. When the dimensions roughly matched what I had in mind, I stopped.

It was already starting to grow dark outside, so the rest of the work would have to wait until tomorrow.

I was reluctant to retire from the workshop, but I repeated to myself over and over that working overtime was unhealthy as I tidied up my workspace.

□□□

The next day, I moved on to shaping the blade, which was known as *hizukuri*. Samya and Diana worked together on casting swords as usual, but from here on out, Rike would be observing me instead of forging.

I want to see a dwarven-made katana. There’s a certain je ne sais quoi to the idea. Work hard, Rike! For my sake too.

I began *hizukuri* with the final product of the previous *sunobe* step—a slim rectangular bar of metal. By the end of *hizukuri*, the cross section will have been turned into a pentagon, the apex of which was the edge of the blade.

Accordingly, the sides of a katana were not perfectly flat. A ridge, called the *shinogi*, ran along the blade on both sides. In other words, they were the two side points of the pentagonal cross section. The flat of the blade between the back and the *shinogi* was called the *shinogi ji*.

I took my time shaping the blade, heating and hammering out ten centimeters of steel at a time.

The tip of a katana could take many different shapes. There were long tips and stout ones; the edge side could be curved like a quarter of a circle or perfectly straight. For Nilda's sword, I decided to make an *ikubi kissaki* tip, which was curved and of middling length.

When I was satisfied with the rough shape of the blade, I lifted it to check the profile. Nilda and Rike's eyes sparkled with excitement as they stared, unblinking, at my work.

"It's starting to look like a proper sword," Nilda said in awe.

I understood exactly how she was feeling. "Amazing, isn't it?"

Like Nilda said, by this stage, the shape of the metal was recognizably a katana. I was always thrilled to see a block of metal transform into a sword.

Back in Japan, it had been possible to pinpoint the era and region of a katana's origin by examining the characteristics of its profile, but none of that history had anything to do with this world. So, I simply let my instincts and cheats guide my hand.

"While shaping the katana, it's important to anticipate how much the blade will arc when it is quenched and adjust accordingly," I explained. "Otherwise, the katana will end up more curved than you intended it to be."

Rike nodded firmly, and her expression was focused. "I'll remember that, Boss."

My cheats made forging a katana considerably easier than it should've been. Now that I was experiencing the process firsthand, I was filled with admiration for the blacksmiths in my previous world and their skills.

I refined the shape of the blade, changing it slowly to look more and more like the katanas in my memory. Nevertheless, *hizukuri* was far from being the last step, and I took a short break to wait for the sword to cool completely.

Once it did, I reheated the metal again, but instead of heating until it was glowing hot, I removed the blade at a lower temperature and then let it cool once more.

An oxide film formed on the surface of the blade. I used a whetstone to remove it.

Then, I hammered out the *shinogi ji* and *hira ji* (the flat of the katana extending from the ridgeline to the edge). The purpose was to thin out the sword's profile and make the edge sharper...apparently. To be honest, since I was mostly relying on my cheats, I couldn't be too sure.

After shaping came quenching...just kidding. I wasn't quite finished yet.

A natural consequence of using a hammer to shape a sword was that the surface of the katana was littered with divots, large and small. No cheats could prevent that reality. At this stage, rasps and specialty planes (I had to make do with my custom model knife) were used to smooth out the surface, and any warping in the blade was straightened out. The tang was shaped at the same time.

After all of that was done, I could finally count the *hizukuri* phase as complete.

"Are you finished?" Nilda asked.

“With the shape at least...more or less,” I answered.

“Isn’t all that’s left to sharpen the sword?”

“First, I have to quench it.”

“Quench? What does that mean?”

Oh, quenching isn’t a layman’s term.

I was debating how to best explain the process to Nilda when Rike jumped in and answered for me. “Quenching strengthens the metal and makes the sword more durable.”

“Fascinating.” Nilda looked genuinely impressed at the knowledge of her partner in crime (a bit of an exaggeration, I know).

I found myself breaking into a smile, and I began the next stage of forging in a good mood.

To prepare the katana for quenching, I mixed together clay, stone powder, and charcoal powder to make a mixture called *yakiba-tsuchi*. In my previous world, the composition of the *yakiba-tsuchi* was unique between different forges and smiths. As for me, I depended on my cheats to come up with the perfect ratios.

Then, application. Once the *yakiba-tsuchi* was applied, it would look like a black veneer over the blade.

Focus. Now comes the hard part.

The thickness of the *yakiba-tsuchi* layer controlled the rate at which the blade cooled during quenching. Rather than applying a perfectly even layer across the whole blade, swordsmiths normally varied the thickness across the width of the katana.

To apply the *yakiba-tsuchi*, I used a thin, wooden dowel, which I’d made from some wood scraps we had lying around. I was aiming for

a thin layer on the sharp edge, which would become thick on the back half of the blade, toward the blunt end.

“What are you doing?” Nilda asked.

“A technique that swordsmiths use—it guarantees that the edge of the sword will end up sharp and the back will be durable and strong,” I explained.

The quenching combined with the strategic use of *yakiba-tsuchi* would ultimately change the composition of the steel in the blade. In other words, the composition of the edge half of the katana would end up different from that of the back half. One distinctive trait of the katana can be seen on the boundary between these two halves: the *hamon*.

The *hamon* is the pattern that emerges along the boundary after the sword is quenched. Smiths apply the *yakiba-tsuchi* mixture in specific ways to evoke the *hamon* they desire.

There were many different patterns, and I’d rather not bore you with the details. The three patterns I particularly liked were the *suguha* (a straight line), the *notare* (a loose wavy line), and *gunome*, (a wavy line with sharper and more irregular peaks). I would be picking one of the three for Nilda’s katana.

In a way, the *hamon* was the face of the katana, so picking the right one was a test of a blacksmith’s taste.

“Let’s do this,” I muttered to myself.

I would’ve liked to draft the pattern with a brush, but I hoped my cheats would make up for not doing a mock-up. However, I made sure to tell Rike that normally, you would use a brush to trace the design. When working on the real thing without a draft, it was easy to get sucked into the what-if-I-mess-up panic spiral. And once you started second-guessing yourself, you were done for.

“But what are you making the draft for?” Nilda asked.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” I shot back with a grin. “Tomorrow.”

“Seriously?!” Nilda and Rike chorused. Birds of a feather.

To be honest, I had intended to quench the sword today, but it was starting to get dark.

I cleaned up my workstation and then took a quick detour outside with everyone else to spend some time with Krul before I prepared dinner. Krul was sulking, but she quickly forgave us when Diana and I started petting her. Once her spirits were lifted, she began running around the courtyard.

☐☐☐

Today, at last! It was time to quench the katana. Quenching was the most important step in the entire process... Well, that’s what I’d decided myself.

But it wasn’t without truth—failing here meant throwing away all the work up until this point.

Rike and Nilda would be observing again, and the other two were going out to forage and take Krul on a walk.

We said our prayers at the *kamidana* and saw Samya and Diana off. Then, back in the forge, I lit the firebed and fanned the flames with magic. The magic distributed the heat evenly across the firebed, so I didn’t have to top up the charcoal or arrange it in a particular way. Before long, the flames were roaring with heat and burning bright. Satisfied that the flames had heated the firebed evenly, I ceased my wind magic. I then picked up the katana—the *yakiba-tsuchi* mixture had dried on its surface—and drove it deep into the firebed.

First, I arranged the charcoal to direct the heat to different areas of the blade and then replenished the charcoal. I fanned the flames with wind magic whenever necessary to keep the temperature consistent and relied on my cheats to help me judge my next move.

Normally, quenching was performed at night because it was easier to distinguish the subtle changes in the sword's color as it grew hotter; swordsmiths could tell a sword's temperature by the color of the heat on the metal. However, I had my cheats, and Rike had her natural dwarven talents, so we didn't need to rely on the darkness of the night. Both of us could complete this step even in the middle of the day.

One downside in this particular situation was that it was more challenging for Nilda to follow our process, whether she had some understanding of blacksmithing or not. I consoled myself by thinking that there was always the possibility that demons could see infrared rays.

In any case, while Nilda seemed to be deeply interested in smithing, it didn't look like she had the skills or talent for it, so in the end, maybe I was overthinking.

After a short time, the blade reached the perfect quenching temperature. "This is it," I said to Rike.

She responded with a firm, "Yes!"

I quickly yanked the katana from the flames and plunged it straight into ice water. The temperature of the water was also crucial at this stage.

There was a legend back in my previous world of a hapless apprentice—he'd wanted to know the temperature of the water that his master was using, so the apprentice dipped a hand into the water. As punishment for the transgression (warming the water with his body heat), the apprentice's master cut off his hand.

That's how critical the water temperature was. Nevertheless, I could judge the temperature using my cheats and I taught Rike the proper method. I was a blacksmith in *this* world, so I could do things differently. Besides, all my knowledge came from my cheats anyway.

The sword hissed when it hit the water, and it cooled rapidly. Occasionally, we were graced with a popping sound as it cooled, and the sensation transmitted itself to my hands as well. Because of how the *yakiba-tsuchi* mixture had been applied, different parts of the blade cooled and contracted at different rates, and this caused the metal of the katana to arch.

In my previous world, this part of the process used to be compared to the first cry of a newborn, and now I finally understood why.

Soon, I drew the katana out of the water. The curve was perfect, exactly what I'd been aiming for. Katanas were classified based on where the blade arched along the peak. For Nilda's katana, I had decided on a *torii-zori* profile—the metal had a shallow curve, and the peak hit in the dead center.

I transferred the katana back to the firebed and allowed the flames to lick along the metal to heat it slightly. Then, I moved it to a log counter, just to fix the slight unevenness in the sword's surface that the quenching had introduced. I tempered the sword here as well. Once the blade was as smooth as I could make it, I left it alone to cool completely.

Next, I used a rough whetstone to hone the blade, which made the *hamon* stand out more distinctly as well. The wavy *notare* pattern had developed as I'd hoped. In my humble opinion, *notare* was undoubtedly the most iconic *hamon*, and for my first katana, I wanted to stick with something classic.

Nilda had been watching me work all this time. She was visibly excited and did not bother to hide her curiosity. “Is this what you were talking about yesterday?” Nilda asked.

“Yeah,” I confirmed. I held the blade up to the light. “This kind of pattern will appear once the sword is quenched. Here.” I pointed to the wavy line running along the length of the blade. “You can see it, right?”

“Wow!” Rike and Nilda chorused in unison, like a pair of buddies on a sightseeing tour.



“This is called the *hamon*. It’s one of the distinguishing characteristics of katanas,” I explained.

Rike nodded eagerly. “Amazing!”

Nilda was nodding along as well, though I wasn’t sure how much of the shoptalk she understood.

The blade was well-made as far as I could tell, so I moved on to polishing. However, this wasn’t the final round of polishing—it was just a preparatory step, akin to applying a surfacer when making plastic models or a foundation primer when doing makeup.

As I polished the sword, the metal went from dull to gleaming bright. It looked just as good as the famous katanas I’d had the chance to see back in my previous world...at least, in my admittedly biased opinion. I was no expert in judging katanas by any means, and this *was* my own work.

I held up the katana again, scanning the blade.

“Are you done?!” Nilda exclaimed.

“Hold your horses. It’s not quite ready yet. There are still a few more things I need to do.”

“Really?”

“Katanas from the north are said to be works of art, you know,” I said. “Of course, I’m forging this one to be used in battle as well.”

Nilda hummed an acknowledgment then fell silent, absorbed in her thoughts. I returned to my work.

The katana’s shape was good as is, so it was time to ornament the sword. I engraved a shallow groove along the length of the blade on the *shinogi ji*, which was said to help channel away blood. In reality, the groove served mostly as decoration.

After I finished the engraving, I checked the katana again. Thankfully, my cheats informed me that I hadn't weakened the sword accidentally.

Next, I cleaned up the surface one more time to make sure it was flawless. If I'd been making a PVC model, this was the step comparable to painting; if I were doing makeup, I would be applying the foundation. I used a rasp and grindstone to make sure that the trough was perfectly smooth.

Now, for the metal part of the katana, all I had left were the finishing touches.

I moved onto the tang of the blade, which would be inserted in the hilt. First, I opened up some rivet holes. Using a rasp, I refined the shape of the tang and cleaned up the metal's surface. I went over the surface one more time with the rasp, but this time, I scored the surface to make sure the tang wouldn't easily slip out of the grip.

In my previous world, scoring techniques differed from artisan to artisan and forge to forge, but I didn't put too much thought into it. Here, it was a detail that was pointless to fuss over.

I'd finally come to the last stage of the forging. Selecting a chisel, I used it to engrave our signature insignia onto the tang—the fat cat sitting on its haunches. I engraved it next to the rivet hole near the edge.

The clappers strung up in the workshop clacked together loudly, breaking my concentration just as I was touching up the final details.

Where did the time go? Guess I'll finish up the engraving and save the rest of the work for tomorrow.

Samya strolled into the workshop with Diana following behind her. "You're still working?" she asked.

“Yeah, but I’m almost done.”

I flipped the sword over and carved my name—Eizo Tanya—into the tang. It was a mirror to the insignia, in the same place but on the opposite side.

“Tomorrow, I just have to give the sword a final polish,” I said, lifting the katana up to the light.

“What was it that you engraved just now?” Nilda asked, pointing to the tang.

“You mean this? It’s our insignia. It marks this katana as one of our forge’s creations,” I explained. “And this here...well, this is my name and it indicates that I’m the swordsmith who forged this sword.”

“You mean, these symbols here, right?” she asked.

I nodded. I’d used Japanese kanji characters for my signature. The writing system in the northern regions in this world was subtly different from kanji (according to my install data), but they were similar enough that no one should be able to differentiate the two unless they could read kanji.

“This is my secret seal,” I said, implying that I had no intention of discussing its meaning further. I was sure Nilda understood that trade secrets were the same as an artisan’s life.

Well, mostly sure... Her eyes were twinkling in a worrisome way.

Everyone else gathered around, making noises of appreciation.

Maybe I should come up with kanji for the others’ names one of these days. Rike’s name was doable, but any kanji combination that worked for Samya and Diana’s names was sure to look over the top. There was a definite possibility that their names would end up looking ridiculous like those kids whose parents named them Glass Windows.

“Did you carve your seal into *those* two swords too?” Nilda inquired, her eyes still gleaming.

She must be talking about Helen’s swords.

“The custom doesn’t apply for non-northern swords, at least not as far as I’m concerned,” I said. “The insignia is one thing, but I didn’t carve my name. I only carved it this time because you commissioned a katana.”

“Okay, I see. I get it. Good. Good!” Nilda looked excited that her sword had something that Helen’s swords didn’t. I wondered if she saw Helen as a rival. It would have been funny if we hadn’t been talking about something dangerous like weapons.

Samya and Diana had brought back plum-like fruits and a variety of herbs.

I pinched some of the plants to make herb-roasted boar, and I didn’t feel bad about the thievery. After all, we still had plenty of herbs stocked up. The boar tasted like pork with a gamey edge, but the herbs helped lessen the pungency and lighten the dish.

When Nilda tried a bite, she exclaimed, “Delicious!”

Careful there. People are going to say you’re uncouth, my lady. Well, it’s not like I know for sure that she’s highborn.

Everyone in my family liked the dish too, so I’d be adding it to our regular menu.

The plums had a slight bitterness to them, but they were still plenty tasty. If I could get my hands on a lot of sugar, I could soak them in brandy. Unfortunately, sugar was a luxury here.

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After preparing breakfast the next morning, I checked in on the small jar I'd stashed in the workshop. The liquid inside was fizzing and bubbling merrily.

Looking good! Time for the next step.

The jarred liquid contained the yeast from the fermented apples. I mixed the miracle liquid in with some water and flour and then kneaded it all together.

I'm counting on you, my little yeast buddies!

In the workshop, we said our prayers before getting down to business. I started by sharpening the katana blade that I'd finally finished. Rike and the others were casting swords.

While the sword-making trio rushed around like busy bees, making all sorts of clanging and banging sounds, I settled down in a bubble of calm and started to whet the sword. Nilda watched over me.

Traditionally, sharpening the edge was performed by a specialist, and it took somewhere around two weeks to finish. On the extreme end, it could even take more than half a year.

My circumstances were far from traditional, for better or for worse. On the one hand, I had my cheats. On the other hand, I didn't have many of the proper tools. So for the time being, I wouldn't be trying to do anything fancy. My goal was just to ensure that the katana would perform well in battle.

Frankly, sharpening a katana was not much different from sharpening any other bladed weapon. I started on a whetstone with a coarse grit and worked my way through stones of increasingly finer grits, erasing any scoring as I went.

One purpose of polishing was to enhance the *hamon* and the organic texture of the steel, but that wasn't my focus. Well, it may be more honest to say I wasn't able to go that far.

I used a mixture of water and ash to help me sharpen the blade, working slowly and carefully. The katana was on the shorter side, but it was still no easy feat to sharpen the full length of a sword. I only managed it thanks to the cheats. This was my first attempt at forging a katana, so even if I wasn't a master polisher, I wanted to do right by the sword. With that resolve and determination, I threw myself into the work.

By the time I was done, the metal gleamed so brightly that the steel looked white. I rubbed a mixture of oil and powdered iron (normally used when forging) into the blade to darken the *shinogi ji* from the back of the blade to the center ridge. Then, I used an iron dowel to scrub the surface of the metal one last time.

I'd sped through the process with my cheats fueling my progress, and even though I left out half of the steps, the polishing still took all day. That was fine though—it was worth it.

The blade turned out stunning.

"I'm done," I declared.

"Finally!" Nilda said.

"I still have to make the hilt and scabbard," I clarified, "but the blade itself is complete."

The contrast between the darker *shinogi ji* and the white gleam of the rest of the katana was breathtaking. In the waning light of the setting sun, the *hamon* stood out in sharp relief. The sword was emblematic of what a katana should look like.

"I want to try it out as soon as possible," Nilda urged impatiently.

To placate her, I said, "Wait just one more day."

For now, I had to start cooking dinner, so I tidied up my workspace. I set the katana beneath the *kamidana*, and they seemed to match each other well. I was tempted to make another katana, not a

custom model, but just something simple to use for decorating purposes.

On a typical day, I would first spar with Diana before preparing dinner, but I had a different priority today.

I washed my hands and checked on the dough I'd made that morning. It had risen nicely. I punched the dough down and divided it into five pieces. Then, I topped off a boiling pot of water and covered it with a plank of wood. I arranged the dough on top of the plank before heading to the courtyard to train with Diana.

Fingers crossed that this works...

When I returned, the dough had doubled in size, and the pieces were ready to be baked. I had no oven, so I made a substitute out of a pot, making sure that the vessel would circulate heat evenly. I wanted to flex and call it a Dutch oven, but that might've been an overstatement.

While I baked the bread in one pot, I made a stew in another. I had high expectations of both dishes, and judging by the mouthwatering scents drifting out of the pots, I didn't think I'd be disappointed.

When everything was done, I dished out the soup and brought it to the table, along with a roll of bread for everybody.

Samya sniffed at the air, her nose wrinkling. "This bread's different from usual."

"Usually we eat flatbread, but this bread is leavened. It's much softer," I said.

"Yum. Time to dig in!" She reached for her bread immediately, but Rike slapped her hand away. We all laughed.

We said *itadakimasu* together and started eating.

The soup had the same flavor as usual, but the bread was light and had a faint trace of apple scent... It was delicious! I was grateful that my cheats helped me out in the kitchen and not just in the forge.

Samya tore a large piece from the bread. "It's so fluffy." She stuffed her cheeks full as if she needed to confirm the softness with her mouth.

"I like your flatbread, but fluffy breads are yummy too," said Diana.

"They are," I replied.

"This tastes as good as the ones I ate back home." As the daughter of a count, she must've eaten yeasted bread almost every day, so her praise meant a lot.

Rike munched on her bread contentedly, but she didn't say anything.

Nilda then spoke up. "Eizo..." Her tone was unexpectedly grave.

I found myself shying away from her intensity. "Wh-What is it?"

"Who in the world are you really?"

"I'm just a blacksmith."

"*Just* a blacksmith?" she echoed dubiously. "If you were *just* a blacksmith, you wouldn't live out here in the middle of nowhere, and you certainly wouldn't be able to bake such soft bread."

At Nilda's words, the other three nodded vigorously in agreement.

"Well, then I'm a blacksmith with other talents."

Nilda looked put-upon. "But what does that *mean*?"

But no matter how frustrated she was, I couldn't exactly admit that my skills were all cheats. There was no chance she'd believe me anyway.

"Can you let me off the hook with that for now?"

I could tell she wasn't satisfied, but she probably sensed that I didn't intend to explain further.

"Hmph," she grunted, and returned to her meal.

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The new day dawned.

Having finished the blade, today I was making the accessories—namely, the cross guard, hilt, and scabbard.

Under usual circumstances, each of the three pieces was usually made by a special artisan, but my cheats would have to suffice. I didn't need to make the world's best cross guard or anything—I only needed them to stand up to regular use. In the back of my mind, I wondered what the northerners did. Perhaps I'd have to take a trip to the north and see for myself.

But first things first. I had to make the *habaki*, which was mounted at the base of the blade, and its job was to keep the cross guard and hilt in place. It was also the piece that the scabbard locked on to, so it was a crucial piece of the katana.

Most people have seen one without knowing what it's called; it looks like a golden metal collar. Imagine a samurai unsheathing his sword... The first glitter of gold peeking out of the sheath was the *habaki*.

I broke a section off of some plate of metal and shaped it to fit the blade. The *habaki* could also be made from copper, with its components brazed together. In my case, I just relied on my cheats and made do with steel. However, the *habaki* was the keystone that held together the cross guard and scabbard, so even with my cheats, I had to concentrate and work carefully.

Once I was done shaping the piece and allowing it time to cool, I slid it onto the blade. I hammered to tighten the fit and push it into the

right position. After I was satisfied with the mounting, I gave it one last polish with a rasp.

“I didn’t know that blacksmithing required such delicate and detailed work,” Nilda commented.

I shrugged. “Like I said, I’m a blacksmith with many talents.”

Nilda laughed softly before smoothing her expression back into neutrality. I pretended I hadn’t seen anything and returned to work.

The *habaki* could be decorated with gold or engravings, but I left it unadorned.

Next up was the cross guard. There were elaborate guards with slots for a spike or a slim knife, but I planned to make a plain, circular guard this time. If Nilda wanted a secondary weapon fitted into her katana, she could arrange it with a smith in her own kingdom.

The design I chose was simple to forge, even without the benefit of my cheats. All I had to do was shape the metal into a circular disk and open a slot for the *habaki* and blade to sit in. I did fit a thin collar around the cross guard because otherwise it would have looked too spartan. Once she returned home, Nilda could commission someone else to engrave the guard if she so chose.

Accessory number two: the grip. It was made of two symmetrical wooden pieces. On both halves, I carved out a slot for the tang to sit in and then opened up a rivet hole, making sure they aligned with the one on the tang. Finally, I attached the two pieces.

The grip of a katana was usually wrapped with shagreen leather and braided cords, but neither was available to me, so I had to make do with the items on hand. I wound the grip with hemp fabric, and then I wrapped it again with a strip of leather, crisscrossing to form a repeating diamond pattern. To secure the wrappings, I fitted a steel cap on the end of the sword.

I wondered if the proper materials were available in the north. If they were, then northern smiths might be offended by my improvisational approach. However, I hoped that they would forgive my transgressions and instead choose to see my design as creative.

Unlike the *habaki* and cross guard, the hilt fell outside the scope of what my cheats could help me with, so it'd taken longer than I'd expected to make. I still had to construct the scabbard, but it was getting late.

Before I called it quits, I wanted to see what the katana looked like all put together. I mounted the cross guard over the *habaki* and slotted the tang into the grip. Using rivets I'd chiseled out of wood, I fixed the grip in place.

With everything affixed, the katana looked like...well, an unsheathed katana. Look at me, stating the obvious...

But Nilda was entranced. "Whoaaa."

Judging from her initial reaction, I was sure she'd be happy with the finished product.

I stored the katana away under the *kamidana* and then tidied up.

After closing up shop, it was time for dinner. We were having our usual flatbread today. Yeasted bread took too long to proof, regardless of whether I used the straight method or the sponge-and-dough method. Fluffy bread would have to be a once-in-a-while treat.

I told that to the others, and surprisingly, no one complained.

"What kind of forge serves fresh baked bread every day?" Nilda said flippantly. "That sounds more suitable for the dinner table of nobles."

Now that she mentioned it, I understood why none of the others were upset. It was one thing for yeasted bread to exist in this world and another thing for common folks like us to be able to eat it regularly.

“You’re right,” I told Nilda. “You must have good luck since you got to try our first batch of yeasted rolls.”

She nodded firmly. “I certainly do.”

With that, we wrapped up our bread discussion, and the rest of the dinner conversation flowed freely. Nilda had been staying with us for the last four or five days and had gotten to know not just Rike, but everyone else as well. Both today and yesterday, we’d asked Nilda to tell us whatever stories she could about the demon kingdom, and she obliged with a variety of information.

Nilda told us that demons needed to replenish their magical supply regularly like elves. They lived quite far from the Black Forest, but there was another forest in their kingdom where the magical energy was even stronger. She refused to give us any details about the terrain, although that was to be expected. Geographical knowledge was tactically significant in any world.

She did tell us that demons lived much like we did day-to-day. The big difference was that monsters spawned more frequently in her kingdom because of the dense concentration of magic. However, monsters did not normally attack demons. It wasn’t that they obeyed royal decrees made by demon monarchs; they were just seen as the equivalent of stray dogs rather than ferocious beasts.

A few merchants did trade across borders, but apparently, average humans weren’t able to travel very far into the demon kingdom because of the magical energy. Therefore, trade had to occur near the border.

I could certainly see Camilo being one of the merchants who did business with demons, although I didn't intend to ask him about it.

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The next day, I was finally on the last stage of the commission: making the scabbard.

Like the previous few fixtures I'd made, the scabbard was usually made by a specialist, but as long as I wasn't trying to make anything lavish, my cheats would suffice. The structure of the scabbard was fairly easy to design. Before this, I'd made scabbards for knives and swords, and a katana's scabbard was fundamentally no different. There was just one slight adjustment—the katana's blade was slightly curved, so the scabbard had to be curved as well. If the blade and the scabbard didn't match perfectly in shape, the katana would be difficult to unsheathe. In fact, there was a saying in Japanese that meant "not on the same wavelength," which actually originated from the art of making a sheath for a katana—literally, it described the problems that arose when a blade and its scabbard did not line up properly.

Using the wood stocked up in the workshop, I carved the rough shape of the scabbard using my custom knife. I also hollowed out the space where the blade would rest, and constantly checked the size using the katana blade. Ideally, only the back of the blade and the *habaki* would directly touch the scabbard. I kept that in mind while I carved.

I also made the mouth of the scabbard a hair's breadth more narrow than the *habaki*, so there was no danger of the katana slipping out accidentally.

After I crafted the two halves of the scabbard, I had to glue them together. Traditionally, a paste made of rice was used, but I used a glue made from the collagen of animal parts instead since that was

what I had on hand. I tried to minimize the number of contact points so that the scabbard would be easier to dismantle later on if need be.

Next, I cleaned up the surface. Unfortunately, I didn't have any lacquer, so I had to leave the wood unvarnished—Nilda would just have to hire a craftsman in the demon kingdom if she wanted the scabbard to have a more polished appearance.

Of course, I had to make the fixtures as well. This included the metal collar that lined the scabbard's mouth and the ring used to secure the scabbard, along with a metal piece—the *kurikata*—where cords were anchored to secure the katana to the wielder's waist. The last piece needed was the end cap, called the *kojiri*.

I made the ring, slipped it around the scabbard, and used the hammer to tighten it. The *kurikata* I welded to the ring, and then I inserted the metal collar into the mouth. Finally, I attached the *kojiri*, which I'd kept simple, to the bottom.

Done at last!

I called the set complete. There were normally few adjustments I'd have to make at this point, and I didn't usually measure the length. The most I'd do would be to compare it to the length of the blade itself.

Of course, scabbards usually took two or three weeks to complete. Making a scabbard in the span of a single day was practically unthinkable... My cheats were truly frightening. Overall, the katana along with the scabbard had only taken me a week. Though I'd forged the katana relatively quickly, a week was a week. This wasn't the kind of sword I could forge in great numbers.

"All right. It's finished," I declared.

I sheathed the katana and drew it out to test the fit. The scabbard felt neither too tight nor too loose.

In my opinion, the most important trait for a weapon was consistency—it needed to perform the way the wielder expected. Needless to say, that was my belief for katanas as well. The weapon was a failure if it presented a danger when it wasn't being used. Conversely, it was also no good if it proved useless when the wielder needed it.

With that baseline in mind, I would consider this scabbard to be one of the most well-crafted items I'd made thus far.

Nilda was on the edge of her seat. She looked like she would explode if she had to wait any longer. "You're done?!"

She'd observed the forging process from beginning to end. Had she found it interesting or had she just been watching to make sure I didn't do anything strange to her sword?

"Yeah. Take it outside and give it a try."

"Gladly!" She snatched up the sheathed katana and dashed out the door.

Lit by the last rays of the setting sun, she slid the katana clean from its scabbard and tossed the scabbard to the ground nearby.

"You are already dead, Nilda." The words had come to my mind unbidden. I'd muttered them to myself, but it seemed like I hadn't been quiet enough.

"What do you mean by that, Eizo?" she asked with a dejected expression.

"Sorry! My bad," I said. "Where I grew up, there's a legend about a duel between two swordsmen. Before the duel begins, one of the swordsmen tosses aside his scabbard and his opponent taunts him with that line."

"You are already dead, Kojiro." So Miyamoto Musashi had said to Sasaki Kojiro before their duel on Ganryujima.

I went on to explain. "His opponent's reasoning was, 'A warrior who intends to be victorious would not throw away his scabbard, for he would need it after the duel.'"

"Fascinating," Nilda said appreciatively. "I'll have to remember that."

"It's just folklore. You're not dressed for battle, so there's nowhere for you to tie the scabbard to anyway." I shrugged. "Go ahead and test out a few swings. That's what we're here for."

"Got it."

Nilda lifted the katana fully overhead, the tip of the blade pointing behind her. Then, in one big motion, she swung the katana down sharply, as if she were trying to split the air itself.

I can say with zero exaggeration that her form was truly exquisite. Her skin color, tattoos, and clothing notwithstanding, she was the embodiment of the samurai soul.

I found myself breaking into a cold sweat. Based on what I had just seen, I wasn't sure I could win against her.

Helen had no difficulty defeating her?

When Nilda had ambushed us on the road, she'd been using an inferior weapon that she wasn't used to. Not to mention, we hadn't actually exchanged blows. That was why I'd thought her movements were awkward. My combat skills (or whatever they were) hadn't indicated anything different.

I tried to keep my internal turmoil from affecting my voice as I called out to Nilda. "How is it?"

However, she didn't respond, just continued to run through her moveset without pause. She whipped the katana around in a sideways sweep, swung it quickly upward, and followed it all up with a few thrusts.

Bathed in the light of dusk, she looked like a dancer sheathed in a golden veil. I was mesmerized by her movements and all the questions I had lined up died on my tongue.



After a while, Nilda brought her dance to an end. I snapped out of my trance and shouted to her again. “How does the katana feel? If there’s anything that doesn’t feel right, I’ll fix it first thing in the morning.”

But Nilda didn’t say anything this time either. She was shaking slightly where she stood, katana gripped in one hand. Then, she brought her head up slowly and looked right at me, her gaze intense and inscrutable.

Damn... I messed up. I didn’t bring my knife. Since I used it to carve the scabbard, it must still be in the forge.

I glanced at the door to the workshop. If Nilda attacked now, I’d have no choice but to make a break for the door and try to grab my knife. My number one priority was making sure she didn’t cut me down while I was defenseless.

Adrenaline was pumping through my veins, and my senses were operating on hyperdrive. But Nilda broke through my thoughts with a single shout that was loud enough to be heard from the heavens.

“Brilliant!!!”

Samya and the others came flying out to see what the commotion was, and Krul trotted out of her shed.

Nilda coughed awkwardly when she noticed the company. Her face turned bright red, but she composed herself the best she could. “The sword is splendid.”

“G-Good. Th-That’s good to hear,” I said, quietly breathing out a sigh of relief.

Samya saw me and smirked. She could tell when people were rattled or emotional, so maybe she’d even sensed earlier how on edge I’d been.

I had indeed underestimated Nilda, so I'd brought nothing with me to defend myself. But I pushed away the protests in my head—this was a time to reflect.

Krul realized that there was nothing exciting happening, so she plodded back to her shed.

The rest of us watched her go and then returned indoors.

With the katana complete, there was no reason for Nilda to stay with us any longer. She announced that she would be leaving bright and early tomorrow morning, so I wanted to serve a more lavish meal in honor of her last day with us. I was personally disappointed that I didn't have time to bake more bread for the meal, but I hoped the premium cuts of meat would make up for it.

We chitchatted about this and that over dinner, and we all shared a few laughs at the rambling stories told around the table. Time passed leisurely. There was no rush to finish the meal since all there was left to do for the day was clean up and sleep.

Toward the end of our meal, Nilda said, "I can't thank you all enough for your hospitality."

"You're our guest," I replied lightly. "It was our pleasure."

"Nevertheless, thank you," she said and rose from her seat. She stepped into the guest room and soon returned with a leather bag.

"As a guest and client, I must remunerate you for everything you've done for me. How much is appropriate? Will thirty gold coins be enough?"

"What? Oh, right."

I really must cure my indifference toward payment...

“At our forge, we don’t have a set price for commissions,” I explained. “The payment is at the client’s discretion.” I chose to ignore the ludicrous number Nilda had thrown out.

“Is that so? Those are lofty principles for a blacksmith,” Nilda remarked. “Shouldn’t you care a little more about profits, Eizo?”

Rike and Diana nodded vigorously at Nilda’s words. Samya tilted her head slightly; it looked like she wasn’t quite following the discussion.

“You came here because Helen demonstrated to you how elite our products are, no? A good reputation will lead to more business. Besides, commissions are valuable opportunities for me to polish and grow my craft.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Nilda conceded. She didn’t look convinced, but she didn’t push any further. Instead, she dipped her hand into her bag and withdrew a number of coins. “Will this do for payment?”

She lined everything up on the table. All in all, there were ten gold coins and one small jewelstone. “This is what I consider to be fair compensation. Please accept it,” she said.

Surprisingly, the gold pieces were ones that we used in this kingdom. I wondered if she’d prepared them knowing that she’d be doing trade with humans.

The jewelstone was a rich red color, translucent, and about the size of a pinky nail. Was it a ruby? I couldn’t be sure since my installed knowledge didn’t come with a chapter on gems.

I was fairly sure that I would be able to work with it using my cheats, but I knew nothing about what type of stone it was. When I held it up to the lamplight, I spied particles dancing within it.

As I was inspecting the stone, Rike cut in and asked, “That’s a magical jewelstone, isn’t it?”

“It’s magical?” I asked.

Nilda answered, “It’s made from stagnant magical essence that has solidified. Stagnant magic is often the cause of monster spawns, but sometimes, it crystallizes without corrupting a living creature. When you shine a light on the jewelstone, you can see the trapped magical essence glimmering inside of it.”

“Is this safe to keep?” I asked.

“The magical essence is stable and will not leak once it has crystallized, though it’s regrettable that it can’t be extracted.”

Diana listened calmly to Nilda’s explanation and then picked up the stone. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, undeniably. It’s a piece of rare beauty even within the demon kingdom,” Nilda boasted.

Since the concentration of magical energy was higher in Nilda’s homeland, the jewelstone might not be so uncommon, and they clearly used them when trading with humans as well.

“So that’s what it is,” I mused, taking the stone back from Diana and turning it around to get a closer look.

“It is equivalent to forty gold at least,” Nilda added.

I was taken aback.

I knew it wasn’t going to be a cheap trinket, but I didn’t expect it to be worth that much!

“It’s certainly valuable,” Rike added, “and its price may even rise more from here on out.”

Nilda was offering to pay me fifty gold in total (or more!) for the katana.

“Are you positive?” I asked.

She smiled. “You were the one who told me to set my own price, and this,” she gestured at the riches laid out on the table, “is what this sword is worth to me.”

I was at a momentary loss for words, but I soon picked myself back up and replied, “Then, I will accept your generosity.”

“Please do.”

We exchanged a smile and a toast in lieu of a handshake, clacking our cups together and downing what remained.

###

The next morning, Nilda packed her belongings and prepared for her journey. Everyone in the family, including Krul, saw her off.

“Head directly back to the demon kingdom,” I instructed. “I’d appreciate it if you could try to keep the katana sheathed until you’re over the border.”

I’d accepted that she would have to use the sword sooner or later, but I would be grateful if she didn’t seek trouble unnecessarily. A small part of me wanted to tell her to avoid using it at all, even on the battlefield. But of course, that was unreasonable.

“You know, since I used remember-me-not magic, there’s little chance of me being captured anytime soon,” Nilda said. “Anyone coming now would be a step too late anyway.”

“I hope so. But just in case, head straight back to your kingdom. Don’t stray.”

“Fine, fine. You sound just like my elder sister.” Nilda responded with a twist in her expression like she’d just bitten into something bitter.

Her sister must be quite strict.

I hoped she would take her sister's cautions to heart and return safely home, but I was restless because there were no guarantees that she wouldn't meet with trouble on the road.

I tried to tamp down my anxiety, so I put on a smile. "Safe travels."

"Thanks."

We didn't shake hands. It didn't feel necessary to me, and it must've been the same way for Nilda. Samya and the others refrained from commenting as well, so I'm sure they understood.

Nilda raised her hood and set off into the forest. We watched her back disappear into the trees.

Chapter 4: Deploy the Troops! Here Be Monsters...

Beginning the next day, I returned to my normal blacksmithing duties. I'd been itching to test out the appoitakara, and thanks to Nilda, we wouldn't have to worry about money for a while. That said, our regular deliveries were important to our livelihood, so those were the priority. We couldn't just rely on commissions for income.

In that spirit, for the next three days, I worked on elite model shortswords and longswords. I left the casting to Samya and Diana, but I was in charge of adjusting the shape of the cast, quenching, and the finishing touches.

In the meantime, Rike was forging knives. She was responsible for entry-level models, so in other words, knives made for everyday tasks. Any blades of higher quality, like elite models, I forged myself.

Our work schedule could be easily adjusted to adapt to specific quantity requests, but Camilo had never made any, at least not so far. The one exception was when he'd commissioned a batch of halberds in proxy for the count.

Thus, the decision of how much of everything to make was left to me and my intuition.

It's important that we can adapt to sudden requests in the future. In life, surprises are bound to happen.

Before we met Nilda, Lidy had taught us a variety of things about magic. Today, I kept her teachings in mind as I worked on my first sword. As always, one of my tasks was to identify flaws in the metal and smooth them out.

The primary difference between elite and custom models was the magic imbued in each. Except for a smattering of magical particles, there was hardly any magic woven into an entry-level sword; the

magic contained in those was like a drop of water compared to the ocean of magic in a custom model.

Elite models were forged while leveraging the characteristics of the particular metal. It took considerable effort and talent to draw out the full potential of each metal, but doing so was well within the realm of feasibility, even for human blacksmiths. I'd been told that several smiths in the capital could forge items with the same quality as my elite models.

I've thought this before, but it really shouldn't be a problem if I wanted to push more elite models into the market. Custom models are different though... The amount of magic imbued into the metal could cause our forge to fall under suspicion, so I want to avoid making too many of them.

The three days passed quietly, and by the end, we had accumulated more than enough stock for our next delivery.

☐☐☐

The next morning after our chores, we prepared for our trip to the city, which largely involved loading the cart with swords and knives. As usual, we separated the items by type and rolled up each grouping with a length of cloth. We threw the sword bundles into the back of the cart, secured them with ropes, and then put the knife bundles into a lidless box. This work came so naturally to us now that we could do it half asleep.

Incidentally, the boxes were also useful for transporting small goods on the way back, like the pepper we purchased from Camilo.

After loading everything, we climbed into the cart ourselves. From the back, I called, "Take it away, Krul!"

Krul chirruped and started forward.

Before, Samya and Diana had been in charge of protection detail on these trips. They still kept eyes on our surroundings—that much

hadn't changed—but since they rode in the cart with everyone else, the job wasn't exactly the same.

Our cart wound through the verdant landscape, and the clatter of its wheels sounded particularly loud amid the forest. The only other sounds were birdsong and the rustle of the leaves when the wind rose. There were no ruts left by our previous trips, nor did we leave any now. We only passed through here once a week, and the soil in the forest was hard.

It wasn't *exactly* a problem that we left no tracks, but there was a part of me that wondered whether it was discourteous for us not to construct a proper road for the (admittedly) infrequent visitors to our home...like the potential clients undergoing our “trial.” It wasn't as if trails deterred wild animals from approaching. Perhaps it was time for us to consider laying down a road from the cabin to at least halfway through the forest.

We traveled through the trees, with a few breaks sandwiched in the middle, and soon emerged onto the road without incident, as was usual.

Along the way, Samya had changed our course several times, likely because she'd sensed something dangerous in front of us.

Adaptability was one reason why it would be difficult to lay a road all the way to the border of the forest—we had to be able to adjust our route in accordance with any obstacles along the way.

And so, we proceeded along the path to the city. The road here wasn't as elaborate as—to use an example from my previous world—the cobbled roads that led into the Roman Empire, but it *was* compact and level. This meant that the going was smoother than the path through the forest.

The open environment made for clear lines of sight. In addition, guards often patrolled this road, so bandit activity was rare. Funny

enough, there'd only been one rumor about a robber staking out the area, and that person had turned out to be...Nilda.

But rare, of course, didn't mean never, so we made sure to stay sharp and keep our guards up.

Overall, the journey was relaxing and peaceful, and we soon found ourselves drawing up to the city entrance. The guard was sweeping over travelers with a sharp gaze, checking them out with more care than normal. As far as he knew, the robber was still roaming free. The city guards had probably caught many criminals using these inspections, though I was hardly bold enough to put that theory to the test.

But when the guard glanced over at us, his gaze softened. We all said our hellos and how-do-you-do's and were allowed to enter.

The city was bustling with energy. Over the years, the streets had been stomped down by travelers and townspeople alike, so horse-drawn carriages like ours (well, drake-drawn, if we're splitting hairs) could proceed with ease. I glanced up at the walls that formerly made up the outer barrier of the city and wondered if the streets within that section were paved with cobblestones.

Our visit to Camilo's didn't deviate from the norm either. When we arrived, we brought Krul around back, left the weapons in the hands of the staff, and went up to the conference room.

As usual, we reported our inventory and requested what we wanted to purchase.

However, after we concluded our shop talk, instead of discussing recent events, Camilo cut in with an unexpected question. "What is the absolute maximum number of swords you can forge in a week, Eizo?"

“Assuming quantity precedes quality and every sword is the same model, I estimate we can forge six times our usual amount,” I answered. “We can greatly increase our output by repurposing the time normally allocated to elite models.”

Without the need to forge knives, Rike could work three times faster, and if I forged with speed as my goal, I could finish off casts for entry-level models at twice the rate Rike did. Three times two made six.

“That’s fortuitous,” Camilo remarked. He furrowed his brows in thought.

“We’ll do it if that’s what you need,” I offered. “Just understand that we won’t be able to forge anything else.”

“There’s the rub.” He pursed his lips, worrying over his decision.

Camilo always purchased all the inventory we brought, so he must have customers buying everything up. He wouldn’t tolerate an ever-increasing pile of weapons that couldn’t be moved...at least, that was my personal opinion. I had plenty of confidence in his business acumen.

Judging by his inquiry, I guessed that he wanted our blades for something other than retail purposes, and that was the problem he was currently pondering.

Camilo stayed lost in his thoughts for a time, mumbling under his breath. He was always the thinking type who disparaged rushed decisions, but this time, he was silent for an unusually long while. When he finally came to a decision, he looked up. “Okay.” His voice was filled with determination. “The next time you come, I’d like to ask for longwords. The more the better.”

“As I said earlier, that’s no problem on our end. We’re agreed on longwords then?” I asked.

He confirmed, then added, “Can you wait here? I’ll be right back,” and left the room.

I was curious about the backstory behind his request, but I wasn’t about to ask. As far as I was concerned, if he needed longswords, he needed longswords.

Camilo kept his word and didn’t make us wait for long. When he returned, he was holding two pieces of linen paper. They looked like they were made of flax or cotton rather than regular parchment, and I could see writing on them.

He handed them over. “Take a look at these. Verify for yourself that they’re identical and then return one copy to me.”

I read through the documents. In effect, they said, “In one week’s time, deliver as many longswords as possible. Upon receipt of the promised items, you will receive full compensation. To receive payment, hand in this document when making the delivery.”

Camilo’s signature was at the bottom.

In other words, Camilo had handed me a purchase order. He only left the exact compensation unlisted because the number of items was an outstanding variable. He could have written, say, fifty longswords, but as I saw it, he was giving us leeway to adjust to any unforeseen circumstances. It was vague for a purchase order, but the relationship between Camilo and I worked on a foundation of mutual trust and support.

The two purchase orders were identical. On each, there was one half of Camilo’s thumbprint. When the papers were aligned side by side, the prints came together to show that the documents were a pair.

“They’re the same,” I confirmed, folding one away in my pocket.

Come to think of it, aside from the halberds I'd suggested (ahem, pushed through), this was the first proper order I'd ever received. I was glad it'd come from Camilo.

Next, it was my turn.

"I have two favors to ask of you too."

"Really? How rare," Camilo responded.

"That may be so."

"What can I do for you, Eizo?"

I took out a letter from my inner breast pocket and held it toward him. "First, I'd like you to deliver this to Marius."

Camilo took the letter. "What is it about?"

"The robber on the city road." I then summarized everything that had transpired with Nilda.

After his initial surprised pause, Camilo said, "You never fail to amuse me, Eizo. So, has the matter been resolved?"

"Yes, if she did as I directed, she will have already returned to her own kingdom."

"Trouble follows you wherever you go."

I raised a brow. "You say that, but the biggest headaches have been because of you and Marius," I joked.

"Fair enough." Camilo chuckled. "Anyway, I'll make sure this gets safely into Marius's hands."

"Thanks."

"What's the second favor?" he asked.

"I'm looking to buy spices from the north and seed potatoes. Can you help me find a supplier?"

“Let me think.” He fell silent for a moment. The seconds ticked by.

“Is it going to cause problems for you? If that’s—”

I started to take back the request, but Camilo waved me off with one hand. “No, no, nothing like that. I can get as many potatoes as you need, but the spices may take some time. I’m not the most skilled negotiator when it comes to trade with the north.”

“There’s no rush. I can wait for the spices.”

“I’d appreciate it. Specifically, what did you have in mind?”

“Anything you can procure that can be easily preserved,” I answered.

“Got it. I’ll get you those spices. I’m staking my reputation on it.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“Don’t mention it. That’s my job,” he replied with a smile.

We shook hands on the deal.

Good weather and beautiful scenery accompanied us on the way home. I scanned the horizon as we went, but there was nothing to see. Sometimes, I found myself thinking it wouldn’t truly be such a big risk to relax and enjoy the trip.

But Camilo had told us that bandits occasionally struck on this road, and Helen had also mentioned that she’d had to subdue a brigade not too long ago.

I can’t slip up here. Disaster strikes the moment one eases their guard.

But in actuality, all was peaceful on the road today.

For normal humans, it was necessary to redouble their vigilance when venturing into the Black Forest, but we knew the forest as our backyard, both literally and metaphorically. Past the treeline, our group could relax slightly.

That said, we didn't want to fall victim to any nasty surprises that the beasts of the forest had in store—Samya kept a lookout and directed us away from any potentially dangerous encounters.

Once in a while, we had no choice but to pass close to an animal, but we always managed to avoid conflict.

Krul's presence must be deterring them to some extent too.

Back at the cabin, we unloaded the supplies. The rest of the day was free time.

Starting tomorrow, we would focus on making swords as fast as we could, so to give us a head start, I used my extra time to make longsword molds. I applied a layer of clay to the wooden model and allowed it to dry. It was the first time in a long while that I'd made molds myself; Samya and Diana had been in charge of that task and the casting step.

I kept at it until it was time to start cooking dinner and ended up with a tidy pile of molds.

This should easily tide me over tomorrow.

I nodded to myself in satisfaction and turned back to the living space, ready to report for dinner duty.

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After breakfast the next day, we discussed how to divvy up the work. Instead of conferencing at the table, we took the discussion into the workshop instead, making sure to say our prayers at the *kamidana* before we began.

“You were all there while Camilo and I talked,” I began, “so I'm sure everyone knows—Forge Eizo will be focused solely on longsword production by request of our client. Therefore, from today on, everyone will be working on longswords...including me.”

Everyone expressed their acknowledgments in their own ways.

“I want us to work as efficiently as possible,” I continued. “Diana, can you make molds like you usually do?”

“All right,” Diana said.

“Samya, I want you to cast the swords. You don’t have to deburr the casts.”

Samya nodded. “Gotcha.”

“Rike and I will be in charge of touching up the casts.”

“Understood, Boss.”

“Speed is of the essence, but take care not to injure yourself in the process. Keep your movements steady, and only work as fast as you’re comfortable. I want you to keep this mantra in mind: ‘Slow is smooth. Smooth is fast.’”

“Is that a northern saying?” Samya asked.

“Something like that,” I replied evasively. It was actually a proverb from my previous world that was often used during training for the special forces. “Let’s get down to it,” I said.

“Yes!” Diana and Rike chorused, and Samya whooped.

And so, the curtains opened on our forge’s first big order.

It was great that we were all fired up by the flames of our passion, but the firebed and forge needed to be heated by actual fire; I lit both. The four of us all made molds while we waited for things to warm up. If we worked quickly, we would be able to use all the molds today.

The molds didn’t change shape when they were fired, so we could reuse them. However, they would break after repeated use, so we

constantly had to make new ones. By the time we finished this order, we would likely need to replenish our stock of clay.

But that was a problem for another day—for now, we only had to concentrate on working as fast as possible.

Once the forge was hot enough, Samya melted some steel and poured it into the molds. The casts had to cool in the molds, so in the meantime, Rike and I had nothing to do.

Samya slaved away, jumping between filling the molds with molten metal and adding more steel into the fire. At the pace she was working, it didn't seem like we would have much downtime after we started refining the cooled casts. And, if Samya ran out of work to do, she could always help Diana.

The swords cooled after a while, so Rike and I were able to unmold the casts and finally get to work. Hammer in hand, I started by removing the burrs, then I reheated the sword in the firebed. I removed it at just the right temperature and hammered the surface until it was perfect.

I'd started my task first, but Rike plowed onward beside me, full of spirit. When I glanced over, I saw that the sword she was working on was on the higher-quality end of entry-level models, though it fell short of an elite model.

The clanging of our hammers rang throughout the forge, intermingled with the crackling of the flames and the whooshing of the wind. Sounds from Samya and Diana's work were interspersed into the medley as well.

We'd spent many days together like this in the past. Yet now, it really felt like we were working together as a family since we were all running toward the same goal.

Soon, I finished the first longsword of our family project.

With all our gears in motion, I was confident that we'd be swept up by the work—we would have a mountain of swords ready for Camilo in no time.

Since the molds had to be made one at a time, Diana's pace was a bottleneck. However, she was still finishing molds faster than Rike and I could finish our work, so we were in no danger of running out. And, if push came to shove, Rike and I could hold off forging and help Diana make them, but I wanted to avoid that if possible.

The work in our forge was speeding along with momentum, and there was now a small army of heated objects populating the workspace: molten metal in the casts, red hot steel plates, and swords in the middle of reheating.

In other words, the forge was deadly hot.

The workshop reached a similar temperature whenever we made steel plates (on the days following our deliveries to Camilo), and it wasn't much cooler when we were operating on our normal schedule. Even still, the space currently felt superheated.

I urged the other three to drink a lot of fluid in between tasks, and they all nodded back.

According to my installed knowledge, the region where we lived had a relatively mild climate. Rike, who'd experienced this heat while working in her family forge, was probably prepared for it, but there was a real possibility that Samya and Diana weren't familiar with the dangers of heatstroke.

Injuries were to be avoided, but preventing illness was also high on my list of priorities.

Since I'd jump-started our work today by making a few molds yesterday, we were able to finish ten swords before dusk.

Not bad! This is well over our usual production numbers.

We had compromised on quality, but they would still hold their own in battle. I selected a few of them that looked to be lower in quality, but they all cut fine when I tested the blade. Now I knew that there was no danger of the swords breaking during at least their first one or two battles. If we kept this pace up, we should surpass Camilo's expectations.

We ended the day with a healthy stock of extra molds, courtesy of Diana. She was working so fast that I was slightly concerned about whether we'd have enough clay to carry us through.

Once she'd made around fifty or sixty molds in total—which could be as soon as tomorrow—I'd have her switch to casting with Samya.

###

The next day was more of the same. We prepared what we needed and got down to the business of mass-producing longswords. The rhythmic sounds of striking hammers filled the workshop.

Speaking of rhythms...

"Do dwarves sing when they work in their home forges?" I asked Rike out of curiosity.

"What?"

Rike looked blindsided by the question. Maybe that was just a fantasy after all.

I rushed to explain. "It's nothing! I just thought there might've been songs that you sang while smithing. I haven't been in the business very long, and I don't come from a family of smiths either, so we have no such customs here."

"Oh, I see. Well, we do have songs."

I knew it!

"Will you sing a bit for us?"

“I don’t know...” Rike replied, suddenly bashful. She was acting exactly as if I’d called her out in the middle of a party to show everyone a trick.

“You don’t have to if you’re uncomfortable,” I said, backing off. “I was just curious.”

“No, I’ll do it.” Her face was still red, but I could see the resolve in her eyes.

Eizo, you’ve done it now... I forgot that there are people who can’t turn down their bosses. I shouldn’t have asked her so carelessly.

But Rike had already made her decision and was now fired up. I couldn’t very well tell her to forget it now... This was one train I couldn’t stop.

Soon, Rike began to sing in a sweet voice, swinging her hammer in time to the music. Suffice to say, neither the lyrics nor the melody resembled classic Japanese music, but it was charming in its own way.

Yoho! Yoho! Hail the sprites of the mountains.

Blacksmiths, swordsmiths, we be.

By the swing of the hammer, we thrive.

Forging a weapon worth its weight is our dearest wish.

Yoho! Yoho! Pots and pans and hoes.

To every challenge, we rise.

With the swing of the hammer, our work begins.

And when the sun sets, there’s liquor to be swished.

Yoho! Yohoho!

I stopped what I was doing and applauded. Samya and Diana joined in as well.

“You’re good, Rike!” I exclaimed. “Why were you embarrassed?”

Rike took the compliment but still seemed shy. “It’s not about whether I’m good or bad... It’s just a distinctly dwarven habit. I didn’t really think anything of it when I was living at home.”

I couldn’t say she was wrong. After all, the general “dwarveness” of her performance was a large part of what drew me in. But I’d also be embarrassed if someone told me I was a walking human stereotype while I was doing something perfectly ordinary. However...

“It’s perfectly all right to embrace your dwarven traits. I’m as human as you get. Samya has plenty of beastfolk customs as well. If anyone gives you a hard time for your race, none of us would let them live it down. That’s what it means to belong to Forge Eizo.”

Samya and Diana nodded vigorously.

Our family had ties to the count himself. Calling in a favor with him was a last resort, but for the sake of my family, I would do whatever was necessary without hesitation.

“I appreciate it, Boss,” Rike said. “I will become a great blacksmith and do my ancestry proud.”

She picked up the hammer again and dove back into her work with double the energy. And, in a merry voice, she began singing once more.

The work continued smoothly from there on out. We forged nine more longswords and were almost guaranteed to blow past our goal of fifty. However, it was unlikely that we would surpass sixty—it had become abundantly clear that, by tomorrow, we were going to reach the limit on the number of molds we could make. We would forge as

many swords as we could, but for the moment, fifty-five seemed to be a reasonable goal.

Over dinner, we talked more about music, and Diana stepped up to sing a refrain for us. She'd apparently studied it as part of her upbringing. In royal families, both girls and boys were taught to sing and dance to a certain extent.

Which meant...in this world, I, as a person who held a family name, should've had musical training as well. Alas, my cheats didn't come bundled with those particular skills... My installed data hadn't included anything on traditional songs either.

I couldn't very well sing anything from my previous world since the lyrics were all in Japanese or English; songs in English would probably sound a smidge more similar to the ones from this world, though not by much. The most appropriate example in my repertoire was Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, which was sung in German, but even if the language sounded more similar, the melody would be unfamiliar to everyone regardless.

My apologies to Rike and Diana, but the humble blacksmith declines to sing.

I knew it was unfair though. If I came to learn some of this world's songs in the future, I'd repay my debt then.

□□□

The sun rose on day three of our longsword production efforts. Our goal was fifty-five, and we had so far made nineteen. That meant we had to forge thirty-six more swords over four days, which divided to nine per day. At that pace we could even end up with extra time to rest on the sixth day, though it likely wouldn't be more than half a day.

I conveyed my calculations to the other three. Also, I let Diana know that once she finished crafting enough molds for thirty-six more swords, she should help Samya heat up steel and make the casts.

As long as we stayed focused, we would have no trouble meeting our target. So, first things first—concentrate on the nine longswords for today.

The workshop started out fairly quiet, filled by only the gentle sounds of flames and wind, but before long, the clashing hammer strikes joined in the symphony.

The singing from yesterday must've unlocked something for Rike; she occasionally added her singing into the medley, and had more than a few songs up her sleeves. Rather than Rike singing in time to our strikes (which was par for the course when it came to tunes written for manual work), Samya and I did the opposite: we started matching our strikes to the beats of her music.

In no time, the music wove itself seamlessly into the rhythms of our work. It wasn't distracting at all, but rather, it helped hone my focus more than if everything had been silent.

Back on Earth, there'd been two camps of opinion on working with background noise—some preferred to work in silence, and some liked when music was playing in the background. I fell into the latter category.

We ended the day with ten more longswords. Twenty-nine down, twenty-six left to go.

###

The next day, we also completed ten swords, so there were only sixteen left until we hit our goal. Diana had wrapped up her work making molds.

We would have to procure more clay soon, though we could make do for a little longer by reusing what we had on hand. If there'd been clay deposits in the area, we would've been able to harvest it ourselves. However, I didn't know where to look, so I had to rely on Camilo to procure some pliable clay for us. I'd need to remember to ask for some on our next delivery-slash-supply run.

Days five and six were spent forging the rest of the longswords, until we finally, without incident, reached our target of fifty-five. I had Diana join Samya on the task of casting swords, but Rike and I were already working at maximum speed. It was obvious in retrospect, but throughout this process, I discovered that ten swords a day was just about our limit. On the last day, we forged seven swords and were able to take back a bit of time for rest.

It had been grueling work, but I felt doubly accomplished at having met the goal we'd set for ourselves. I thought it might be a good idea to set clear quotas for our day-to-day work as well; we could use any extra time to rest and recover. From a business perspective, Camilo might prefer having a concrete number to work with too. I'd have to test that out in the future.

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The day after we completed the longswords was the promised delivery day. We rolled up the unprecedented number of swords into bundles of ten and loaded them onto the cart.

The journey was the same as usual, except that the swords *really* weighed down the cart. I was concerned that the burden would be too much for Krul, but she didn't mind. Or rather, she looked quite content to be hauling the heavy swords *and* the four of us.

As long as Krul has no objections...

We arrived at Camilo's doorstep much faster than if Rike and I had still been pulling the cart. Our interaction with him was the same as usual except for one difference—I'd brought the purchase order with me today. I passed it to Camilo when he and the head clerk entered the conference room.

"As promised, we forged fifty-five longswords, and we brought them all with us today," I told Camilo.

Technically, though, we never promised to deliver a specific number...

"Well, well, well. As always, you've blown my expectations out of the water, Eizo," Camilo said expansively. His tone had an edge of theatricality to it, and I couldn't tell how sincere he was.

"How many did you expect us to bring?" I asked.

"Forty or thereabouts," he replied. "It's not a disparagement of your skills. The task itself was no easy feat."

I had estimated we could forge six times more than our usual numbers. However, perhaps Camilo had set the bar lower because he knew we couldn't increase production simply by increasing the number of hours we worked. If so, I was grateful.

Some people might've demanded one hundred swords in the same situation, reasoning that if we just doubled the hours we worked from, for example, eight to sixteen, then one hundred swords was a perfectly tenable number.

Of course, that wasn't congruent with reality, so I was grateful to be working with a customer who understood our limits.

After I reported the numbers to Camilo, he signaled to the head clerk, who left the room. Most likely, the clerk was going to check that the inventory matched my report. Even if you trusted your business partner, it was always good to double-check.

“What about on your end?” Camilo asked when the clerk was gone. “Do you need anything apart from your usual?” This was all part of our normal back-and-forth.

“We need clay,” I said. “It doesn’t have to be today, but I’d appreciate it if you could find some soft and pliable clay.”

“Clay, eh? I’ll ask the ceramic atelier we work with.” As he said this, he winked.

That’s far from charming coming from you, Camilo.

“There’s something else I have to talk to you about.” He lowered his voice, and we all leaned forward. “You may have already guessed, but I didn’t order these longswords so they could be locked away in storage somewhere. There are going to be a large number of soldiers deployed soon.”

“Yeah, that’s what I assumed,” I said. What other explanation could there have been?

Camilo’s business was booming, but realistically, he wouldn’t need such an amount for his inventory—only the act of arming soldiers required so many weapons at once, whether those soldiers were in the kingdom’s army or in private employ.

“Now, I don’t expect there to be any faults with the swords you forged,” Camilo said, “but my contact has asked whether you would serve in the campaign.”

“Hmm.” So I was being conscripted. It wasn’t outside the realm of my predictions, but that would mean leaving the workshop for an extended time. I didn’t want to bring unnecessary danger to myself either.

Camilo saw my hesitation and clarified. “I said ‘serve,’ but you would be accompanying the supply train in the rear. There should be no danger to you.”

“Can I assume that my primary tasks will involve repair work in the encampment?”

“Precisely.”

So, the risk of injury was low. That was one less factor to consider.

“For how long?” I asked.

“Not more than nine days. Three days on the road to the camp, three days of work, and three days to travel back. If the repairs take less time, you could be back in a week.”

“I see...”

Bringing everyone with me was out of the question, but it would be dicey to only bring one person with me. However, bringing two people meant that the third person would be left alone in the house. Therefore, the best option was for me to go alone.

Nine days was short enough that I could leave the other three to take care of the house. *They'll have to figure out what to do for meals themselves, though.*

Regardless, logistics were separate from the decision of whether to go at all.

“Would it be a problem for me to go alone? Or does the troop need more hands?”

“They're self-sufficient,” he answered. “They have people to take care of meals, set up tents, and tend to any other needs. As a contractor, your job will be to set up your firebed and anvil to repair damaged weapons.”

“So, just to make sure, all I would be doing is tagging along on the journey and repairing weapons.”

“Yes.”

“What about compensation?”

“From what I was told, it will be about this much.” Camilo gestured to show an amount that was several times higher than what I could get for making knives and swords over the same time period. “But I’ll have to check the specific numbers. It’s true that there’s no reason for you to go otherwise.”

“One last thing—who are the soldiers employed by, and why are they being deployed?” I asked.

“I’ll answer your second question first. They’re being deployed to subdue a group of monsters.”

“It’s not a war?”

“We see the occasional skirmish, but currently, the kingdom is involved in no campaigns that require more than forty soldiers or so,” he answered. “As to who the troops are...” He paused briefly before continuing. “A squadron made up of the kingdom’s soldiers has been formed for the specific mission of bringing down these monsters. The campaign will be led by Count Eimoor.”

Besides me, Diana swallowed.

In other words, Marius will be leading the troops.

Not to sound conceited, but I now understood why I was being requested to accompany the troops. Marius was very familiar with my skills, and it wasn’t unimaginable that he would want someone with him who knew his family...just in case the worst came to pass.

“The question of the Eimoor family’s succession was an ordeal. The margrave approved the succession, so as far as the official record is concerned, there’s no problem,” Camilo explained. “However, it’s better for Marius to prove himself now to prevent any issues from cropping up in the future. Plus, the Eimoors were originally bequeathed their land and title for their triumphant victory against a monster.”

“I’m starting to see the bigger picture.”

It seemed that Marius had once again gotten entangled in a quagmire. I was grateful for Camilo’s much needed explanation. In my capacity as a humble blacksmith, I wasn’t often privy to the broad view of this world, and my isolation didn’t help matters. It wasn’t like I was really a member of a noble family either.

In any case, the compensation was generous, and I owed a lot to Camilo. Besides, the request was from the blood kin of someone I considered family, so there was no reason to turn it down.

“Considering the circumstances, I would be honored to take part in the expedition.”

Diana looked relieved to know that I would be there for her brother if anything were to happen. She, of all people, knew my prowess as a swordsman.

“When do I leave?”

“After you come to make your delivery next week, you’ll head straight from here to the capital. I’ll prepare horses and a cart.”

“I thought I’d have to go sooner.” In fact, I’d been steeling myself for the news that I’d have to set out today.

“There’s still squadron logistics and some basic training to figure out.”

“That makes sense.” The platoon was going to be a small one, but Marius wouldn’t have had much command experience. As long as the circumstances allowed, it was better to prepare as thoroughly as possible. That leeway likely meant that the monsters weren’t a critical threat. On the other hand, it was possible that most of the assigned soldiers were still green.

If the mission ends up being a success, the kingdom will have gained a leader with experience and a squadron of battle-toughened

soldiers. If it's a failure, the kingdom will only have to assess the new information and regroup. Overall, it's a win-win situation.

But...the Eimoor family had a lot to lose.

"I'll start making the necessary preparations based on what you've told me," I said to Camilo.

My primary mission was to repair the troops' weapons, but my secondary mission was to make sure that Marius came home safe. Of course, there were scenarios that even I wouldn't be able to help with, but even in the worst case, my priority would be to do whatever I could to bring Marius back with me.

One way I could help was by making sure that the soldiers were armed with the best weapons, at least within the entry-model category. Elite models required magic and time, and even for me, it would be too much to ask for considering the time frame.

As we were wrapping up the discussion on the details of the campaign, the head clerk reentered the room and handed Camilo a pouch.

"We should pack up your usual, right?" Camilo asked.

"Yeah, but for next week, can you prepare two weeks' worth of supplies for us?"

"Of course. And here are your proceeds for today."

Camilo passed me the pouch, which was heavier than it looked. I checked the contents, but the money seemed like more than fifty-five longswords were worth...especially since Camilo's staff must've already deducted the cost of the supplies.

I raised an eyebrow. "Surely, this is too much."

"I've compensated you extra since it was a rush order. There's also an additional bonus from a certain someone for the inconvenience

he caused you *that* time. I received the money straight from him, so don't overthink—just take it.”

It seemed like Marius had reconsidered the amount of money he'd offered me for forging the heirloom sword. But neither the bonus from Marius nor the rush order fee seemed like something I could return without inviting more trouble.

“I'll take it,” I decided. “Thanks.”

With that, we began our preparations for our journey home.

###

We spent the next six days following our usual schedule. We forged, we hunted, and we ate.

Over the course of the week, we fulfilled our regular quota of knives and swords for Camilo, but no more. We could forge at a faster pace if we wanted to, but there was no particular need to rush.

This wasn't the first time I'd be leaving the cabin for an extended time, and I felt like a dad who was going away on a business trip. The other three were similarly blasé and showed no sign of worry. Still, this was a momentous occasion, so the day before I was meant to head to the capital, we held a farewell party. I prepared a fancier menu than usual, though it felt odd to be putting in so much effort for my own send-off.

Of course, it wasn't a party without liquor. I made sure to drink just enough—I certainly wouldn't want to be hungover the next day. Good food, good wine, and good conversation... That was the golden trifecta, and we had plenty of all three.

Diana spoke up while we were eating. “I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried at all.”

“I’m worried too,” Rike responded sympathetically. “You’re setting off with an army to face monsters, and even though you won’t be on the front lines, you never know what might happen.”

Diana nodded vigorously. Her world had previously been turned upside down by a purported monster attack, so I could understand how she must’ve been feeling.

“This is Eizo we’re talking about,” Samya cut in. “He always has a trick up his sleeve. Don’t worry, don’t worry.”

I felt both bashful and pleased to have her trust.

It was rare to see Diana drink, but she did today. She collapsed onto the table with her head in her arms, but as I was clearing away the plates, I heard her mumble, “Take care of my brother. Please.”

I laid a hand softly on her head.

I promise.

On delivery day, we loaded up the cart with our inventory. In addition, I prepared what I needed for the second leg of the journey. I even made my own luggage by tying up a piece of cloth—which I’d disinfected by giving the fabric a precautionary soak in boiling water—into a simple sack. Then, I packed the sack with my trusty hammer and a few pieces of jerky (hey, you never know). Marius would have anything else I might need prepared.

Using terminology from my previous world, this gig was all-expenses-paid. My performance fees were still outstanding, but I expected to negotiate those with Marius directly. Of course, this was far more serious than a stage performance.

And so, we all set off for the city, keeping a lookout for trouble in the forest and on the road. Luckily, we reached Camilo’s store without incident. There was rarely anything out of the ordinary worth mentioning on these trips.

Even when we encountered the occasional deer or boar, they would usually run away or else we would navigate around them. On the city road, we often crossed paths with merchant caravans but not much else. However, trouble tended to strike as soon as it saw the smallest opening, so we always had to stay vigilant.

Our talks with Camilo were, as usual, by the book. We reported our cargo and purchased the supplies we needed. There was only one large difference—since I would be out of commission for a week and my family wouldn't be venturing to the city until I returned, Camilo and his staff had prepared two weeks' worth of supplies for us.

He also informed us that we'd have to wait a little longer for the clay, and the earliest we could expect to receive that shipment was two weeks out. Fortunately, our order wasn't urgent, so I told Camilo that we could hold out for a while without more clay. In the meantime, we could focus on forging knives instead of swords, and as a last resort, we could switch to forging knives exclusively.

After our usual discussions, Camilo said, "Well, then, shall we be off?"

I nodded. "It's about that time."

Camilo and I would be traveling with the rest of my household until midway—the women would then break off into the forest, and Camilo and I would continue to our destination. Camilo had prepared a horse-drawn carriage which he would be riding alongside Krul. Keeping pace with the horses was an easy feat for Krul.

If Krul hadn't joined our family, I would have ridden with Camilo—instead, I traveled with her and my cart for the first leg of our journey.

Soon, we arrived at the entrance to the forest, and it was time for me to part with the rest of the family. We wouldn't be seeing each other for another week... I hugged everyone.

“Take care of yourself!” said Diana.

“I will,” I replied.

“Don’t forget to hydrate,” Rike advised.

“Of course.”

Samya spoke last. “Come home safe.”

“I promise,” I said. “*Ittekimasu.*”

I’ll be off now. See you again.

We would be reuniting soon enough, so this wasn’t a time for the word “goodbye.”

At that, I climbed up into Camilo’s carriage. As we resumed our journey, I turned around and waved to see the others off. I watched until they disappeared into the forest.

The horses galloped toward the capital full of spirit and energy. The last time I’d ridden with Camilo, we were returning from the capital after the Eimoor family affair. We hadn’t brought much luggage that time, so there had only been one horse pulling the cart.

This time, two horses were hitched and pulling, and because of the extra hooves, it felt like we were practically flying down the road. Our speed made the scenery flowing past us seem more exciting, even though I was familiar with it from the last time we had passed through.

Before long, we arrived before the capital’s outer walls—I’d half-believed that I would never set eyes on them again. In the distance, I could see the mountain range that ringed the capital like a second set of walls. As we entered the city, I took in my surroundings.

I hadn’t been here in a while, so I was once again bowled over by the amount of noise and activity. Just like last time, we were soon

swallowed into a huge, diverse crowd that was on a different level from the ones in our “home city.”

In our home city, dwarves, Malito (a race even smaller than dwarves), and beastfolk were a common sight, but here in the capital I also saw lizardmen and even a few members of a race who were twice as tall as the average human.

When I asked, Camilo said that they were giants. According to him, giants were rare in the capital as well, but not unheard of.

Elves occasionally made appearances in both our home city and the capital. However, I’d learned from Lidy that they needed to frequently replenish their magical supply, so they normally stayed in regions that were rich with magical essence, which neither our home city nor the capital could claim to be.

The various races all mingled together in the capital’s streets. I didn’t know what it was like in other metropolises, but no one seemed to think anything of walking amongst races that were different from their own.

Inns and pubs probably had to think about logistics, like securing the right sizes of beds and chairs, but that was a minor problem in the grand scheme of things. People could come and go freely through the city without hesitating over how their race would be received.

The technology here was less advanced than on Earth, but in terms of diversity, this world was quite progressive.

We traveled along the main road, heading toward the capital’s inner walls. These used to be the outer walls when the capital was first established, but civilization had spilled out beyond their boundaries. They were old, but they’d been reinforced over the years.

In this way, the capital was laid out similarly to the city we frequented, though our home city’s outer walls were just a fence at

the moment. If that fence was remodeled into a proper wall, the two places would be almost identical.

The guards at the gate let us through easily. Camilo probably flashed them the wooden token that proved he was partnered with the Eimoor family.

Inside the old part of the capital, the roads were cobbled. It was peaceful here; the noise and bustle of the crowd beyond the inner walls seemed like they were a world away. The inner city wasn't without life, though—there was merely a more ordered kind of energy.

The horses clopped steadily down the road until we reached a plaza that was filled with tents.

This must be just a temporary military encampment—the gathered soldiers likely wouldn't be stationed here permanently.

When we came to a halt, I disembarked from the carriage.

“This is where I leave you,” Camilo told me. He held out a sheet of paper. “Here, take this with you.”

I skimmed through the document. It stated that I came here at the behest of the Eimoor family and that I was the blacksmith requisitioned for the campaign. I was meant to show the message to whatever constituted the reception desk.

“Thanks. I owe you one.”

“Don't worry about it.” Camilo waved and turned the cart around.

Marius must've been in the camp somewhere, but I felt no need to seek him out immediately. It wasn't as if I were his chief strategist, so there was no need for me to accompany him all the time. Rather, I wanted to get to know the members of the transportation corps I'd be traveling with.

I showed the document to one soldier in the camp, and he skimmed it before calling over someone else. The second soldier looked over the document and then said, "Please wait here a moment, sir."

I chalked up his courteous attitude to the fact that I had been invited here directly by Count Eimoor...especially since I was far from impressive appearance-wise; I was just your average middle-aged man.

The second soldier trotted off, leaving me with the man I'd spoken to first.

"Will you be joining the campaign?" I asked the young soldier.

"Yes," he replied with a fretful expression. "I will be escorting the supply train."

He must've been a new recruit. I'd talked to him without thinking, but maybe I shouldn't have. *Is he not supposed to answer this kind of question? Well, I stuck my foot in my mouth the moment I opened it—might as well keep going.*

"I'm sure you read it in the document earlier," I continued, "but I'll be with the supply train too. My job here is to repair the weaponry and armor. I'm Eizo." If he was escorting the train, I was going to be seeing him around, so I figured it was better to introduce myself.

"My name is Delmotte," replied the man. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance." He bowed gracefully, which made me think he could've been the second or third son of a noble family.

Maybe I should've given my family name as well...

We continued chatting idly. Delmotte seemed to be laboring under the impression that I was someone important despite my scruffy appearance. Craftsmen retained by nobility were generally considered relatively high in rank, although not as high as nobles themselves.

In my case, I wasn't officially retained by the Eimoors. I might've been a family favorite, but my standing was no different than a regular supplier.

Besides, I didn't particularly want to be granted a rank anyway; titles tended to come with a whole host of troublesome social obligations. I'd rather spend my free time thinking up and forging new classes of weapons.

Delmotte told me that Marius dined and slept with the rest of the company. Apparently, whenever Marius was drunk, he had a habit of talking about the good ol' days when he'd started out as a wee foot soldier just like everyone else. Delmotte chuckled as he recalled the stories.

It seemed like Marius was having no trouble winning over the hearts of his men.

After a little while, the second soldier returned. "The commander requests your presence."

"Then I will head there immediately," I replied.

God forbid His Lordship come *in person* to receive me here, at the entrance of the encampment. If he had, the rumors about me and my identity would've run wild. However, I didn't know where to go, so one of the soldiers escorted me to a tent that was more luxurious than the rest.

"Commander, I've brought him," the soldier announced when we were at the tent's entrance.

"Please, see him in," Marius called from within. His voice caused a wave of nostalgia to swell in me.

I entered to see two familiar faces. One of them belonged to Marius—no surprises there—and the other person was the guard,

Marius's friend, who used to be stationed at our home city's entrance. Both were wearing ornate clothing and both had one of my elite model swords strapped to their waists. The three of us were alone in the tent.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice, Eizo," Marius said, extending his right hand.

I shook firmly and grinned. "Thanks for providing me with such a lucrative opportunity." I replied without the formality that would normally be due to a count; no one else was here, so I figured that Marius must've explained some of our history to his fellow guard (though perhaps not the fact that I'd forged a fake to replace his family's heirloom sword).

I turned to the guard and said, "I'm glad to see that you look well."

"Yeah, it's been a while, hasn't it?" he said, and we also shook hands.

"Let me formally introduce myself. My name is Eizo, and as I'm sure you already know, I work as a blacksmith."

"The name's Leroy. I'm here as Marius's adjutant. Pleasure," he said.

"And loosen up. There's no need to stand on ceremony with me. We're all friends here."

"If you insist," I said with a smile.

We had already been acquainted before, so we were used to acting without the dressings of rank. With Leroy's blessing, I completely dropped all pretenses of formality.

I then turned to Marius. "My primary job here is repair work, correct?"

"Yeah, that's right," he confirmed. "There will be little for you to do while we're on the road, but once we arrive, your role will be to repair any weapons and armor that've been damaged."

"What about compensation?"

In Marius's stead, Leroy answered, "You'll receive the daily rate for foot soldiers along with a commission for every item that you repair. And of course, we'll cover all your meals during the campaign."

"Not bad."

Not bad at all.

Of course, there was no point in joining a military campaign if the compensation wasn't going to be more than what I regularly earned. That much was true regardless of who Marius had chosen for the job. The only difference was how fast I worked—because of that, it wouldn't be unthinkable for my per item commission to be higher than that of your average blacksmith.

"How will the total commission fee be calculated?"

"The civilian official assigned to the supply train will figure that out. She's responsible for the logistics regarding expenditures," Marius answered.

"All right. I got it. So, when do we depart?"

"We finished the training regimen yesterday and today is a rest day, so we'll be leaving tomorrow."

"Got it."

That must be why I haven't heard any sounds of sparring or drills.

I'd confirmed everything I needed to, so there was nothing for me to do now but wait for departure.

Marius called for a soldier, and they saw me to the tent I'd be sharing with other supply train personnel. I was both grateful and humbled to be escorted.

The tent reserved for the supply train was sizable. Wagons and horses stood nearby, and a little farther was a simple fire and stove, from which steam was rising.

I thanked my guide and started toward the fire. A stocky and bearded middle-aged man was laboring around a pot, along with two younger men.

I was worried I'd be bothering them, but I still called out as I neared. "Hello! I'm Eizo. I work as a blacksmith and was invited to join the supply train on this campaign."

The older man shouted, and his voice boomed loud enough to shake the ground. "Welcome! I'm the head cook, Sandro. That's Martin and Boris! We cook all the meals here."

The taller of the two younger men was Martin, and the shorter, Boris. They greeted me warmly as they continued to stir the pot. I'd been worried for nothing.

I waved at the trio.

"The man over there is the head groom, Matthias!" Sandro continued.

"Got it! Thanks!" I bellowed at the top of my lungs to try and match Sandro's volume. Then, I turned toward the stable area, where several horses were tied up. The horses were shifting around, stamping and pawing at the ground. A tall man was ambling around between them.

I waved—I didn't want to spook the horses by shouting—to draw the man's attention. He started weaving his way toward me, in no rush.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your work, but I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm a blacksmith by trade, and I've been asked to join the supply train. My name is Eizo."

“Thank you for your courtesy. You’re not interrupting at all—I’m merely checking on the horses’ conditions,” he replied. “I’m Matthias. I’m in charge of the horses.”

Matthias was tall and fairly handsome. He spoke in a slow drawl that gave him a laid-back and leisurely air.

“Are these the knights’ steeds?” I asked.

“No, there is a dedicated groom for the knights.”

“I see, I see.”

It was obvious now that he’d pointed it out. A variety of specialists would’ve been employed to service the higher ranks.

It wouldn’t have been odd for Marius to have a dedicated cook and smith for his own needs. However, despite his status as the third son of a comital family, he’d also spent time as a city guard, so Marius preferred to be treated the same as his men.

He’d compromised and brought along the bare minimum number of private personnel—a few personal aids and a groom for his steed—to keep up appearances.

“Is the logistics official in the tent?” I asked Matthias.

“Unfortunately, no. She’s returned home for the day,” he answered.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. Unlike the soldiers and me, she has no reason to stay here before we depart.”

“I won’t be able to meet her until tomorrow then?”

“That’s right.”

I nodded my thanks, bid farewell to Matthias, and headed into the tent. It was large, but there was no one inside. Except for a few items here and there, it was also empty of belongings. Since the company

was preparing to depart tomorrow, I guessed that everything had already been loaded onto carriages.

I dropped off my bag and lay down. My hips and butt were feeling the effects of the long, bumpy ride here. I knew we'd be riding for the next three days, and though my body may have been de-aged ten years, I still had to mentally prepare myself for the journey.

Since I had nothing to do, I killed time by carving a piece of wood with my knife. The crafting just barely fell under the definition of production-related, so my cheats were helping me. After an hour, I'd carved out a decent figurine of a goddess. I placed it on top of my belongings and said a prayer for the expedition's success.

Eventually, dinnertime rolled around, and soldiers started gathering around the tent, chattering energetically. They all held a bowl in hand and formed a line. I grabbed a wooden bowl I'd gotten from Boris and joined in.

When I drew closer, I caught sight of Sandro and Martin ladling soup and handing out bread. The line moved quickly, and soon it was my turn.

"We meet again!" Sandro bellowed. He filled my bowl up to the top. "Eat up, eat up!"

"Thanks!" I grinned and accepted the soup and bread.

Starting during breakfast tomorrow, we would switch to hard bread, but today's bread was soft and chewy. It was the last soft bread I would be eating for a while.

I walked over to the soldiers who were sitting around, picked a random spot to settle in, and started eating. The food wasn't mind-blowing, but it was palatable. The soup tasted similar to the ones I made at home, but the ingredients I used were a touch higher in quality, which affected the taste.

But, considering the limited access to ingredients, I was impressed at how good the soup tasted. A good number of soldiers must've been thinking that joining the campaign had been worth it if the food was this tasty.

Starting tomorrow, while we were on the road, we would be eating two meals a day, one of which was during our noon break. Instead of soup, we would be having bread topped with meat stewed in sauce, which would cut down on the work. Setting up the fire and stove was laborious, to say nothing of washing all the bowls and cutlery.

Once I finished eating, I returned my dishes.

Boris was in charge of collecting the dishware. He was a short but stockily built man with an intimidating presence; if I'd met him on the road into our home city, I might've pegged him as a threat.

I handed him my bowl and said, "Thanks for your hard work."

"Not at all. It's our job," he replied with a smile. "The campaign two years ago was much more exhausting."

"Well, I'll see you back in the tent then," I told him before retiring.

The sun set. Everyone turned in except for the few who were on guard duty. No one on the supply train was assigned to patrols because we all had specialized roles, so we all went straight to sleep, including me. I bunked next to Sandro and Matthias—they had returned to the tent once their work was done.

Thank god for my ability to fall asleep anywhere.

###

The next day, we quickly washed up and ate a breakfast consisting of the soup from yesterday alongside hard-crust bread. The bread was best dipped in soup so it could soak up the flavor and soften, but it was still soft enough to tear without dipping. It probably hadn't been that long since it had been baked.

I wolfed down the food. I recalled my traumatic experiences from my work life on Earth, back when I'd been swamped with projects with little time to eat. The experience came in handy at times like this, though I would've preferred not to have those memories in the first place.

After breakfast, we broke down the tent and loaded the parts onto a carriage as efficiently as we could. A dozen or so soldiers came to help, and it took just under an hour to get everything packed up.

In the meantime, Matthias hitched up all the horses. Soldiers would be driving the carriages, so Sandro, the others, and I climbed into the carriage that was assigned to the supply train.

Right before we were due to depart, a small young woman heaved herself onto our carriage. I hadn't seen this newcomer around the camp yesterday.

"Ph-Phew, I-I made it in time," she stuttered out. She was out of breath, so I assumed that she must've flat-out sprinted to make it. I was happy for her that she hadn't missed the departure.

Next to me, Matthias mumbled, "She's the one."

He and I hadn't exchanged much small talk, but I already had a feeling that Matthias was a man of few words once he knew who you were. He seemed to prefer a direct and brusque style of communication. From his short statement, I implied that he meant to say, "She's the official in charge of logistics that you were looking for," but he'd cut out all the important parts.

Well, whatever. I got the message, so that's what's important.

I went up to the woman, who was still panting. "Are you all right? Do you want some water?" I held out my canteen toward her.

"Oh, yes, please." She grabbed it and took a few sips.

Once she'd caught her breath, I introduced myself. "I'm Eizo. I've been invited as a blacksmith to join the supply train. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure's all mine," she said in return. "I'm responsible for the supply logistics of this expedition. My name is Frederica Schurter. Are you the blacksmith in charge of repairs?"

"Yes, that's what I was brought on to do."

"Any weapon and armor in need of repairs will be reported to me first, and I will route any requests to you," she explained. "That way, you can concentrate on your own work instead of the logistics."

"I understand."

I gathered that Frederica would be acting as a middleman and filtering the requests. I'd get paid more if I handled all the requests, even if they were minor, but that would be a strain on the campaign's finances. Plus, I would eventually get stressed if all my tasks were grunt work, so I was grateful that she would turn away anything that didn't require my skill set.

With everyone rounded up, we departed, and the horses plodded forward slowly.

The company rode through the main street of the capital, making our way toward the outer gates. There was a bit of pomp and circumstance to the procession, but the primary reason we cut through the main roads was that the carriages were too big to fit down any side streets.

When I stole a glance outside, the crowd, which was diverse as always, was lined up along the streets to see us off. The mood was ambivalent—there was neither admiration nor reproach in the gazes of the onlookers. I hoped we'd return to thunderous applause.

Once we left through the gates, we turned in a direction that took us away from the usual road into the capital. The ride was bumpy and rough. Matthias, Martin, and Boris were all young and hearty, but Sandro and I grumbled the whole way, our old bones aching with every jolt.

Miss Frederica also complained that her butt was starting to hurt, but I didn't inquire any further. I didn't know about this world, but back on Earth, that topic of conversation would've been skirting the boundaries of sexual harassment.

Maybe I'll try and find a cushion for her...

We took a break midmorning when the sun had yet to crest its apex. We all scrambled down from the carriage eagerly to stretch and loosen up, and my spine cracked as I flexed my muscles. The journey had been hard.

There was a river nearby, so we took turns refilling our canteens. The soldiers swarmed the river banks to refill their water supply as well, and several people went downstream to wash their faces.

I saw Marius and Leroy standing downstream. The body of Marius's carriage was suspended on chains from the frame instead of resting on the axles (as a type of movement-damping suspension system), but regardless, the journey must've been rough on them as well.

I massaged my hips and lower back thoroughly. If the carriages had been fitted with leaf springs, it might've been a smoother ride.

Please, Camilo, I'm counting on you! Make the suspension systems ubiquitous.

I returned to the carriage ready for a snack, so I cut off a hunk of the jerky I'd been carrying in my bag. Since I wasn't doing any physical labor today, the jerky would be plenty to appease my empty

stomach until dinner. Other people gathered around the carriages were also eating their own snacks.

Miss Frederica, however, wasn't eating anything. Instead, she flipped through a catalog of our inventory.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?" I asked her. "It's easy to get nauseous on an empty stomach, so it's better for you to have something. You won't be able to think when you're starving."

"I forgot to bring anything," she replied offhandedly.

"Is it your first time on a campaign like this?"

"Yes, it is. My work usually involves calculating the apportionment of levied taxes."

Which meant...her job was one hundred percent desk work. She was still young, so I suppose she didn't know enough to mind.

I cut off a portion of the jerky and offered it to Miss Frederica. "You youngsters have to eat."

"No, I can't accept this. It'll throw off the calculation of your expenditures," she said.

"I've already cut off the piece, and I brought plenty to spare. Just take it," I insisted.

Miss Frederica was still hesitant, but I doubled my efforts to get her to eat, and she finally relented. She brought the jerky to her mouth and took a tentative bite, chewing slowly. Behavior-wise, she reminded me of a squirrel eating a nut. Her eyes widened gradually as she chewed.

"I didn't know jerky could be so delicious!" she exclaimed.

I smiled at her look of astonishment. "It's a specialty homemade at Forge Eizo," I boasted.

The jerky was seasoned with salt and pepper, and the meat was a cut of premium-grade genuine Black Forest tree deer. It could have fetched a pretty penny on the market, but I had no plans of selling it; we were a forge, not a butcher.

I watched Miss Frederica munching happily on the jerky as I finished off my own morsel.



We resumed our journey a little under an hour later, and everyone climbed back into their carriages. I boarded the carriage in heavy spirits, but I had no choice but to bear with the unpleasant ride until evening.

Now that we'd already traveled together for half a day, everyone had gotten over their initial tension and nerves, so we were talking more freely. A popular topic of discussion was each person's work and their specialties.

Master Sandro and his crew usually ran a prominent eatery in the capital. With grins, they said that, if I visited them in their shop, they could feed me food that was much tastier. I asked them if they could afford to close up shop for a week, and they replied that they had borrowed help from other cafés. Apparently, they were popular back at home.

Matthias worked on the Eimoor estate as one of the stablehands. He was normally in charge of Marius's personal steed, but for this campaign, Matthias's boss, a grizzled old man, was attached to Marius instead. Matthias explained in his usual drawl that this arrangement was only natural since his boss had been working long before Matthias had been hired.

Frederica, as she'd said earlier, worked with taxes in her day-to-day job. She didn't collect taxes, but rather, was in charge of processing them, whatever that entailed. As I'd assumed, it was one hundred percent desk work.

When the plans to subjugate the monsters had been conceived, she'd been directed to join the troops by her higher-ups. Going by the chain of command, she technically reported to Marius, but practically speaking, she was employed by the kingdom.

Supplies for the expedition were provided by the kingdom, and since the kingdom's expenditures had to be disbursed, it was a conflict of interest for the commanding officer (Marius) to oversee the process.

I told everyone else that I operated my forge in a remote location and sold my pieces through Camilo. I also said that he was the one who'd pulled me onto this expedition, and I refrained from mentioning my ties to Marius—if I spilled the beans about my relationship with the count, they'd never believe that I was an average blacksmith.

When we arrived at a suitable location for a military encampment, we stopped for the day, even though it was well before the sun was going to set. The soldiers helped unload the tents and the cooking stove from the carts.

Everyone had their own role in making camp. Master Sandro and his gang were in charge of prepping the stove. Frederica oversaw which ingredients were being used and in what quantity. Matthias tied up the horses, cleaned them, fed them, and gave them water.

The only one who was free...was me.

I wanted to help, but I didn't want my ignorance to be a hindrance. Instead, I parked my butt down next to the horses once they finished eating and slaking their thirst, and we watched the bustle of the camp together.

"I'm so bored," I grumbled.

One of the horses snorted in my face.

Before long, tents dotted the plain. A fire was lit for the stove, and soon, a plume of smoke rose from the pot. The braziers had been filled with kindling, but since there was still light in the sky, they wouldn't be set aflame for some time. The soldiers who'd set up the tents relaxed while waiting for dinner to be served.

There were no sources of water nearby, so we refilled our canteens from the supply casks. The water needed for dinner was drawn from the casks too. They would be topped off the next time we were at a water source, most likely tomorrow when we rested at midday.

Frederica kept a record of how much water we were using. Since we'd set up camp, she had been constantly on the move, and it seemed like there was no shortage of work for her to do.

The logistics of military expeditions were complex. We were a company of fifty soldiers and workers. We'd brought along twelve days' worth of food and firewood, and three days' of water. Among our supplies was the stove and the other tools needed for cooking, along with my blacksmithing equipment. We had a small herd of horses hauling everything in carriages, and they even had to haul their own feed.

The number of soldiers required to fight a war was several magnitudes larger than the people needed for the supply train, but proportionally, the number of horse-drawn carriages that the soldiers used was actually smaller; the troops would travel by foot instead of on mounts, and supplies could be requisitioned by military command.

Once the food was ready, everyone formed a long line that snaked through the campgrounds. There was simply no way to prevent a line from forming when there was a prospect of warm food. The workers in the supply train waited until the soldiers had gotten their food before lining up—we all wanted to eat with the cooking trio.

Dinner was dehydrated meat that had been stewed and served on top of a round, flat slice of bread, which was hard but not brick-hard. It was certainly edible, and it also made a handy substitute for a plate, eliminating the need to do dishes. Since there was no running water, we would've had to waste our own casked supply to wash up, so this was a handy compromise.

The supply troop ate along with Delmotte and the other soldiers who were responsible for escorting us. In times like these, eating from the same pot helped foster a sense of camaraderie. Meals were the best way to cement trust and grow the kind of friendships where we'd have each other's backs.

We could choose to spend the hours after dinner however we chose. I asked Frederica if there was any unused cloth, needles, and thread. She scampered to one of the luggage carts, and I tailed leisurely behind her.

"You're free to use anything from this cart," she said. "It's from the Eimoors' personal supply."

"Got it. Thank you."

Frederica bowed quickly and ran off.

The supplies took a while to find, but I was able to locate a blanket, cloth, needles, and thread. They had probably been packed to repair any tears to our clothing, but there was plenty of everything, so I figured they wouldn't be missed as long as I returned them when I was done.

When I got back to the tent, I set to work. First, I made a simple, rectangular bag out of a scrap of cloth—which I wouldn't be able to return to the supply—by cutting it to the right size, folding it in half, and sewing both sides shut with large stitches. Since I wasn't planning on stuffing it with cotton or anything, the stitches didn't have to be particularly neat. I flipped the bag inside out so the seams were on the inside and then stuffed my blanket inside. Once it was filled, I sewed the last side shut to make a basic cushion.

Tomorrow, I planned to give it to Frederica as a present. I wouldn't see her again today, since the women slept in a different space, and a geezer like me stopping by the women's tent in the middle of the

night would be practically inviting misunderstanding.

We lit the braziers after sunset. Everyone besides the soldiers on patrol duty returned to their tents to sleep, and of course, the members of the supply train were no different.

I lay down, wrapped myself up in a blanket, and as soon as my head touched the pillow, I was whisked away by my exhaustion straight to the land of nod.

When I awoke the next day, it was still dark outside, and sunrise was still a little ways off. However, the cooking trio, hardworking as always, had already been up for some time.

I climbed out of my bedding, trying to keep the noise to a minimum, and took a drink from my canteen. Then, I went outside to stretch. I had to move my body while I had the chance since we would be spending another full day on the road.

Breakfast was served just as the sun was cresting the horizon. Despite the early hour, the meal was rowdy, the air was abuzz with chatter, and the supply crew was discussing the journey ahead.

After everyone had finished eating, we loaded up our belongings and got into our assigned carriages. It was time to depart.

Once we were all settled, I sought out Miss Frederica's attention.

She soon noticed that I was trying to talk to her. "Yes? What is it?"

I held out the simple cushion I'd made yesterday. "This is for you."

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's for you to sit on," I explained. "Hopefully, it'll make the ride more comfortable."

She took the cushion and smiled sunnily. "Thank you very much." Placing the cushion on the bench, she sat down.

*Now that I think about it, shouldn't I have made one for myself?
Too late now...*

The contentment radiating off her was contagious. Witnessing her pleasure over the cushion, I was reminded even more vividly of a small animal.

It was worth the effort to see her this happy.

Like yesterday, we took our noon break next to a water source.

When we disembarked, Miss Frederica told me honestly, "The cushion helped a lot with the pain in my hips and seat. Thank you again."

What an endearing and straightforward young lady.

I felt the same kind of fulfillment as I did with my smithing work—making an object that gave someone else joy made me exceedingly happy.

The next couple of days on the road to our final destination passed in much the same way. The weather held up, and we didn't run into any trouble on the road either...not that there was going to be a plethora of bandits or animals eager to attack a train of soldiers armed and armored to their teeth.

On the afternoon of the third day, we reached the flat plains next to a cave and set up camp. Tired from the journey, we took out only the supplies needed to provide sustenance and rest.

In the morning, we set up proper defenses. We were no longer on the road and were encamped at what would soon become the strategic center of the campaign—the soldiers brought out a large tent, bigger than the sleeping ones, to serve as the command post. Farther from the camp, they portioned off a part of the field with stakes to make a temporary stable area for the horses.

On my end, I worked to set up a simple forge. For the frame, I dug two holes, into which I planted wooden pillars. A sheet of cloth went over the pillars, trailing down to the ground at a slant. My makeshift forge was shaped like a triangular prism, with the cloth roof serving as the diagonal face. The ground was the bottom of the prism, and the front entrance was the vertical face. I left both sides of the structure open.

In the largest opening, I used bricks to build a firebed. The trickiest part of this was making sure that wind could circulate freely through; good airflow was required so that the bellows could work effectively.

Thankfully, my cheats covered the skills necessary for a forge, and I could intuit the ideal arrangement of bricks for the firebed. The better the firebed I built, the more efficient I'd be at my work later on.

The Watchdog must've gifted me these skills just in case I had to someday abandon the cabin in the forest and relocate elsewhere.

Unfortunately, my forge-building skills did not apply to erecting tents. I could look at a tent all I wanted, but I still couldn't understand how to improve its structure or reinforce it. In conclusion, tents weren't blacksmithing or production-related, though I suppose that went without saying.

I didn't plan to use a furnace for the repair work; instead, I would make do with the firebed, and I would turn down any repairs that required a full furnace. Had this contract been longer—say, two weeks or more—then I would've brought a furnace and raw ore with me.

I asked Delmotte to help me install the anvil near the firebed and also to move in barrels of charcoal and water. I repurposed three small barrels that had been emptied during our journey for my own use. I placed one by the anvil as a stool; the second I placed near the

first as a bench for my tools; the last one I set aside as a counter for the whetstone. By the time I was done, my little lean-to looked like a proper workshop.

I dug through my luggage and brought out my hammer and chisel—the one I'd reinforced to use on mithril—and placed them both on top of the barrel-turned-bench. I also unpacked the scoop I would be using for the charcoal, as well as my tongs, and leaned them against the same barrel. The last counter (barrel) held the whetstone, placed and ready to sharpen blades.

I also carved a shelf into one of the pillars onto which I placed the goddess figurine I'd carved; I couldn't very well leave her lying on the ground.

Thus, the first ever Forge Eizo branch workshop, fully equipped to handle any kind of repair emergency, was open for business!

As I marveled at my handiwork, Miss Frederica came scurrying by. When she caught sight of the workshop, she exclaimed in astonishment. "I-Incredible! It looks exactly like somewhere a blacksmith would work."

"Well, I *am* a blacksmith, and this is indeed where I'll be working," I said.

"I'd certainly buy a knife or a pair of scissors from you, if I had a need for them," she quipped with a smile. Amazingly, she continued to scribble on her documents as we spoke.

"There's a markup on the price since we're on the front lines."

"I didn't realize you were such a money-grubber, Eizo," she joked.

After some more bantering, Miss Frederica changed the subject. "Let me know if you start to run low on charcoal and water. I'll be at the command post during your working hours. Also, as I said before, all

repair requests will go through me first. Please only repair the items that I assign to you. You won't be compensated for requests that you accept on your own."

In other words, I'm free to take on other work as long as I don't care about payment...

I kept that thought to myself. To Miss Frederica, I smiled and simply replied, "I understand."

I was open for business, but of course, there was no work for me yet. I left my post and ambled to the camp center, idly thinking that I could make myself useful by sharpening the cook trio's knives.

As I walked, I caught sight of a few armor-clad lizardmen and Malito soldiers who were just returning to camp. Since they were coming back from the direction of the cave, they must've just completed a reconnaissance mission.

Other soldiers around the camp were building fences with chopped lumber. There were no elves or giants amongst the ranks, but there were a fair number of lizardmen and dwarves. A few dwarven soldiers were leading the fence-building efforts, giving out commands to their human brethren who were installing the lumber where the bosses directed.

I observed the goings-on around camp as I made my way to the cooking and prep area. There, I found pops in the middle of maintenance on his knives. The other two were nowhere to be seen.

By "pops," I meant Sandro. I called him that because, on the outside, I looked ten years younger than I actually was, but my true age wasn't so different from Sandro's.

"Hey, pops!" I called as I approached.

"If it isn't Eizo! Need anything?" he asked.

“Not in particular. I’ve set up shop, but there’s nothing for me to do,” I said. “I was wondering if you need any help sharpening your knives.”

“A squad’s supposed to go out today, but they haven’t left yet. Besides that, your time to shine ain’t gonna roll around ’til they return to camp.”

“Exactly. I’m free until then, and I want to be of service. Of course, I know that a chef’s knives are his life, so I understand if you don’t want me touching them.”

“Course not. If you don’t mind, it’d be a big help. I’m mostly done with mine, but I haven’t gotten started on the others’ knives.”

“Where are the other two, by the way?” I asked.

“They went with the soldiers to refill our water supply.”

“I see.”

Everyone had their hands full with work. Soon, I would too. Although, me being busy wasn’t a good thing—I would only have tasks if the soldiers’ weapons and armor were damaged by something. Thinking about it that way, I felt guilty that I’d looked forward to work.

“This one, this one, aaand this one?” I asked, picking up three knives of varying sizes and showing them to Sandro.

“Yup, right on the money.”

“Okay. I’ll have them back to you in under an hour,” I promised.

I strolled back to my workshop carrying the knives, which was something I definitely couldn’t have done in the middle of the city. Even here, I looked pretty suspicious.

On my way back, I saw a group of soldiers gathered loosely together. Above their heads, I caught sight of Marius, who must’ve been

standing on some kind of platform. He was probably giving a speech to the squad before they departed.

I have to hurry, otherwise they'll come back before I finish sharpening these knives.

Abandoning my leisurely pace, I rushed back to the workshop with purpose in my step. The first thing I did was moisten the whetstone with water, and then I got right down to business. The knives weren't dull by any means, but this was an opportunity to show my prowess as a (cheat-holding) professional.

My cheats helped me judge the right angle to hold the knife against the whetstone, so I slid the blade along the stone surface smoothly. I'd originally intended to put my hammer to the knives as well, but it looked like I had less time on my hands than I'd thought. So, I sharpened the knives to the best of my ability, but no matter how powerful my cheats were, there was only so much I could do just by whetting the knives' edges.

Well, I hardly need to try so hard. If I make the knives so sharp that they slice through cutting boards, the ones who'll be in the most trouble will be the two young cooks.

I finished my work on the three knives faster than I'd anticipated. They had been well-maintained to start with and the sharpening alone didn't take much time. I rinsed them off with water, wiped them clean with a cloth, and headed back to the food prep station.

The area where I'd seen the squad gathering was now empty, so they must have embarked on their mission. I guessed that they were doing reconnaissance today to survey the types of monsters in the cave, along with their numbers. In other words, the troops would come back before suffering too much damage. I didn't have much time to idle.

Boris and Martin had returned by the time I arrived and they were busy lining up barrels of water. Master Sandro was preparing the ingredients needed for supper.

“Pops, I brought back the knives,” I announced, holding them out.

“Thanks.”

Sandro took the proffered knives and inspected them closely. Then, he picked up one of the vegetables, washed it off, and diced it over the pot. His technique was awe-inspiring—the evenly-sized pieces all fell neatly into the pot.

“Amazing...” I remarked.

“That’s my line,” Sandro said. “You’re something else, Eizo. These knives are wasted on the likes of those two.”

“They were in good shape when you gave them to me. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“Well, I’m just doing my job.”

Sandro burst out into belly-shaking laughter. “Good man!”

“I can take a look at your knives tomorrow, pops.”

“I’m counting on you then!”

“It’s my pleasure,” I said before leaving with a wave.

Behind me, I heard Sandro bellow with a trace of menace in his tone: “You’d better not let me catch you treating these knives with anything but dignity and respect!”

I dropped by our supply tent to pick up a plate of metal I’d brought along just in case, and then returned to my workshop. There, I shoveled charcoal onto the firebed and began to nurse the flames to life. I could’ve waited until the scouting party was back and the first

requests came in, but I wanted to be as expedient as I could with the repairs. Plus, there was something I wanted to check today...

Once the firebed was heated hot and evenly, I picked up the metal plate using the tongs and slid it into the fire. Unlike when sharpening the cook trio's knives, I'd be able to put this project down if need be and pick it back up when I was free.

I'd be using up extra charcoal for this pet project, but I would just tell Miss Frederica to deduct the cost from my earnings if she confronted me about it.

So, I continued to heat the metal to its forging temperature by topping the bed up with charcoal and using the bellows. This stage took more time than usual because of the new environment and the fact that I couldn't use magic.

As I worked, I kept my ears alert for news that the party had returned to camp. Once the metal was hot enough, I moved it to the anvil and began to hammer it out, the same as I normally would.

Well...the same as I normally would when making a custom model, that is.

However, I wasn't forging a knife, but a spearhead, which didn't require much metal to make. I could even source the shaft from materials in the area. I figured that it might be useful while I was here, and when the campaign was over, I could dismantle it to recover the tip; the metal could be reused and melted down later.

I hammered the metal over and over to even out its composition. Then, using my cheats to their fullest, I began to weave magical essence into the steel.

By the time I was done, the spearhead had been imbued with a thinner-than-usual but sufficient layer of magic. At the very least,

there was enough magical essence in the tip to guarantee its strength and durability.

Lidy had told me that monsters spawned in areas where magic stagnated. From that information, I had drawn my own conclusions about the nearby cave, its monsters, and this surrounding area, but theorizing and seeing the proof in front of my eyes were two different things.

“Just as I suspected...” I mumbled while looking at my work. “There’s magical build-up in this area.”

The gears were still turning in my head when I sensed someone approaching. I grabbed the spearhead with my tongs and tucked it into a corner where it wouldn’t stand out.

My visitor turned out to be Miss Frederica. Two soldiers trailed behind her, carrying a barrel. “Eizo, can I have you repair the weapons in this barrel?” she asked, handing me a sheet of paper. “Here’s an itemized list.”

On that list were several longswords that had been chipped or bent out of shape, along with two damaged bucklers. It was just the amount of work I’d expected for a short reconnaissance mission. They wouldn’t take too long to repair.

“I’ll have these back to you soon,” I told Frederica.

“Thank you. Once you are finished, please notify me at the command post.” She gave a bobbing bow. Her resemblance to a woodland critter really was uncanny... Since her business with me was now taken care of, she turned and left with the soldiers.

She must be busy with work, especially if she has to account for all the nitty-gritty details like the number of arrows that’ve been used up.

I mused on Frederica’s workload as I got busy with my own.

I pulled out one of the longswords from the barrel. It was severely bent and could not be fixed without first heating it. Normally speaking, this degree of damage would take time to repair, but I relied on my cheats to speed the process along. I slid the blade into the fire to heat the metal at the bend.

How did it end up like this? Did the soldier thrust it into a rock and try to pry it out by force? I bet this damage is the handiwork of a dwarf, beastfolk, or lizardman.

Once the sword was hot, I hammered the blade flat.

Heating the metal to forging temperature negated the effects of quenching, and even once I quenched it again, the longsword wouldn't be as durable as it had originally been. Luckily, as the result of my experiment earlier, I already had a solution: as I hammered the metal back into shape, I weaved magic into the bent metal, so that when I quenched the sword, the portion I'd repaired would end up no weaker than the surrounding metal. It goes without saying that I relied on my cheats the entire time.

The end product had a high concentration of magical essence in one specific place—the area where it had been bent. After I quenched, tempered, and polished the sword, it looked as good as new, and I was confident that it would perform similarly well. This sword could take damage a second time, on the same spot, and the magic would prevent it from warping as severely.

Though the blade was sharp throughout, the underlying composition of the metal was different. A trained eye would be able to easily identify the fact that it'd been fixed with magic. However, I couldn't imbue the entire sword with magic because I'd run the risk of it ending up comparable to an elite model or better. So, the repairs I'd made would have to suffice.

I was able to hammer out the dents in the other longswords and the two bucklers without needing to heat them. I couldn't perfectly

remove the damage to the bucklers, but they would still function perfectly fine.

One of the larger longswords was chipped along its edge, so I ground the blade down as best as I could, just as a stopgap fix. For bigger chips, I could patch them with steel fragments. It wasn't something I would do normally in my line of work, but here on the battlefield, it was a necessary emergency measure.

I also had the final say as to which items could and could not be repaired. This time around, I was able to fix everything, but I'd have to write off weapons with large cracks or those that'd broken into pieces.

I could've shafted the bent longsword into the do-not-repair category as well, but I'd wanted to experiment with the technique I'd thought up; honestly, the repair had been a means to satisfy my curiosity.

But it hadn't *just* been a means to an end... The technique *was* an efficient means of repair. If all the reserve swords were broken or lost, I could straighten out any bent swords for soldiers to use. Securing a backup means of repair had been my secondary goal.

No, really! I wouldn't lie.

Once I was done with the repairs, I visited the command post, bringing the document from Frederica with me.

The sun had finished its exalted duties, the last of which had been to paint the world below a beautiful orange color. Soldiers were running around the camp lighting fires in braziers, preparing for the light to disappear below the horizon.

I should hurry. Wouldn't want to miss supper.

When I entered the command post tent, Marius, Leroy, and a few other soldiers were huddled together, speaking in serious tones; perhaps they were strategizing for the next day when the campaign was to begin for real.

I found Frederica sequestered at a table in one corner, bent over a sheaf of documents. I went up to her and added my paper to her pile.

"I've finished today's repairs," I reported.

"Speedy," she remarked. "You sure live up to your reputation, Eizo."

"There weren't too many items in the order."

Frederica ran a finger down the list and balked, looking up at me, "You fixed *all* of these?"

"Yes. There wasn't anything damaged beyond repair."

"All right. I'll have someone pick up the items from your workshop. Good work today."

"Thank you. Good night," I said. With one last bow, I left.

On my way out, I glanced at Marius and his group. Coincidentally, our gazes met and I tipped my head in acknowledgment. An expression of surprise crossed his face.

I can't very well greet the leader of the campaign with a fly-by "How goes it?" now can I? Not when I'm just a humble blacksmith, of course.

I returned to my branch office and tidied up quickly. I was wondering how to occupy my time, when, with perfect timing, a soldier came to retrieve the repaired swords and bucklers.

"Good work today!" I exclaimed. "Looks like you lot came out relatively unscathed today."

“Thanks for your hard work, Master Blacksmith,” he said. “We stayed near the cave entrance. Just testing the waters.”

“Is that so? In any case, good luck. Do your worst, and leave all the repairs to me.”

“Thank you. I’ll take my leave.”

In all likelihood, the soldier was probably slightly higher ranked than I was, but he spoke to me formally. He must’ve heard that I was here by direct invite from Marius.

Well, that’s a wrap for today’s work. Time to head to pops’s place, eat a quick meal, and turn in for the night.

Night had descended, thick as a velvet curtain, and the braziers burned fiercely amid the inky darkness. I strolled over to pops’s place—the food prep area—where soldiers were already lounging around in small groups eating dinner. Besides me and Frederica, everyone on the supply train team had already eaten.

Did I come right at a shift change? Sorry, Frederica, I’ll be taking my meal before you.

On the menu was stewed jerky as usual, but it had been cooked together with root vegetables, including one that resembled potatoes. The result was more of a stew than the saucy dish we’d eaten previously. It was rather tasty, and I gobbled it up.

Speaking of potatoes, I’d love to get my hands on some to plant in our courtyard vegetable patch. I already asked for seed potatoes from Camilo, but maybe once we’re done with the campaign, I should ask pops for his supplier too.

After I finished, I turned my bowl in and headed off to bed. Since the campaign would officially begin tomorrow, I was sure to be very busy soon. I had to turn in early if I wanted to have enough energy for the

day ahead, otherwise there was no telling what shape my thirty-something body would be in when I woke up.

Returning to our tent, I wrapped myself in my bedroll. I must've been more tired than I'd realized because I fell fast asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

□□□

I woke up just past sunrise the next day and started the morning with some light stretches. After I limbered up, I headed for the prep area where the cook trio was already preparing breakfast and waiting for the morning rush of hungry customers.

"Morning, pops!" I called out as I approached.

"Morning!" Sandro yelled back.

"You're full of energy as usual."

"You bet. Dishing out spirit's part of the job. It wouldn't do for me to be stingy about it, now would it?"

"Said like a true professional," I declared.

"What d'ya expect?"

I have a thing or two to learn from pops... Can't lose to his vigor.

I received breakfast—a bowl of soup and some bread—and walked over to a table. The soup was hearty and chunky, a filling meal to start the day right. Soldiers in particular would need the energy and stamina if they were to triumph in the battles ahead.

The bread was even softer than that which we'd eaten on the road, so I surmised that it'd probably been baked recently.

Since I could find myself busy before noon as well, I made sure to eat my fill.

I glanced sidelong at the soldiers shoveling down their meals as I took my time to eat. I felt a vague sense of guilt, but considering my advanced age and my role as a civilian, I hoped I wouldn't be judged too harshly.

While I was working on my soup, Miss Frederica came by with a bowl of her own. She still looked half asleep when she sat opposite me and set her bowl down.

"Good morning, Eizo," she said.

"And to you too, Miss Frederica. You seem drowsy. Did you have a late night?" I asked.

"Yes. His Lordship was discussing strategy until late into the night, and I had to be on hand to calculate the accompanying expenditures," she said with a yawn. Her head bobbed drowsily, and she rubbed her eyes.

Adorable.

"You've worked hard," I said. "It's not good for you to lose sleep, though. Lack of rest is the biggest enemy of a young lady's beauty, or so they say."

"I thank you for your concern, Eizo, but beauty doesn't really have anything to do with me."

Contrary to her words, she was just as endearing as the ladies I'd seen at Marius's party, at least in my eyes. If not for her rustic clothing, she'd have her fair share of men knocking at her door.

"You should have more confidence in yourself, Miss Frederica. You're just as pretty as any of the noble ladies I've met," I said, taking a sip of my soup.

"No, no, not at all," she mumbled.

I couldn't tell if I'd embarrassed her. I didn't want to sour the conversation at such an early hour, so I changed the topic. "By the way, will there be a lot of items for me to repair today?" I asked.

"Hmmm..." She took a sip of her soup and left her spoon in her mouth as she thought.

She was staring in my direction, but her focus seemed to be elsewhere. That was one of the things I'd realized about her in the few days I'd known her—she had a habit of staring off into the distance when she was lost in thought.

"More than yesterday, I believe. His Lordship said to prepare ourselves for 'losses.'"

"I see."

That meant that Marius was expecting the enemy forces to be either large in number or for there to be a few tough enemies. The scouting party must have uncovered some information on yesterday's mission.

I was sure Miss Frederica was hesitating in part because she didn't know how much to tell a blacksmith, but regardless, she seemed to be treating me as one puzzle piece in the overall supply strategy.

"Well, in that case, I estimate that I'll need another two barrels of charcoal," I said. "The firebed's a bit slapdash, but it still consumes a fair amount of fuel. If the situation's going to end up like Marius is predicting, then we'll both be busy soon enough. Better to restock while we have time."

Miss Frederica cast her gaze up to the sky. "Send two barrels of charcoal to Eizo's workshop," she mumbled, repeating it three times like a chant.

That was the second of her quirks that I'd noticed—when she needed to remember something important, she recited it to herself three times out loud instead of noting it on paper.

“Sorry for the inconvenience,” I said.

“It's no problem,” she replied with a smile, which, as always, resembled a cute animal.

We chatted a while longer while we finished our meal. I wanted to ask her how she'd been selected to be the civil official in charge of expenditures for the campaign, but I didn't get the chance. Perhaps she'd wanted to see what it was like on the battlefield first hand since she had no prior experience.

After breakfast, I walked back to my workshop. Along the way, I passed a group of soldiers in full gear. Since they weren't yet in formation, there must've still been some time before they were set to depart.

A few members of the group were new to me. They were willow and trim in physique, and their ears tapered to a distinctive point. In a word...elves.

“I knew it,” I mumbled to myself.

I wasn't surprised to see them, given the results of my experiment yesterday. There was a surplus of magic in the surrounding area, so it wasn't strange at all that elves, who needed to regularly replenish their magical reserves, could be found around here. It also made perfect sense that they would lend a hand in any efforts to eliminate the threat of monsters near their dwellings.

As I saw it, the elves were stuck between a rock and a hard place: on one hand, they had to settle in places where there was plenty of magic; on the other hand, they constantly ran the risk of that magic stagnating and monsters showing up on their doorstep, like what had happened with this cave.

I'd gotten distracted thinking about the elves' plight, but I soon refocused my thoughts on my own work and continued to the forge.

To be fair, my focus wasn't the issue at hand—since the soldiers hadn't set out yet, I didn't actually have any work. I might've been better off telling pops that I was temporarily closed for business and then napping until noon.

It would've been awkward to declare that I was headed back off to bed, but nevertheless, the soldiers were set to depart at any moment, so there wasn't anything I could help out with even if I wanted to.

There was only one thing left for me to do: when I returned to the workshop, I retrieved the spearhead I'd hidden in the corner. Forging it would double as a good warm-up exercise.

Having made up my mind, I lit the remains of the charcoal from yesterday and got to work.

Once the embers were lit and glowing, I used the bellows to urge the flames across the firebed. I slid the spearhead into the heat, feeding the flames with charcoal and wind as necessary to raise the temperature. When the steel was hot enough, I pulled it out and hammered the spearhead into shape.

It was just as well that I wasn't making the spearhead for a customer. I was aiming for custom model quality, but the magical essence in this environment wasn't as rich as the stuff in the forest around Forge Eizo's headquarters. This challenge would help to hone my skills, but the end product wouldn't compare to what I could've forged in the Black Forest.

A knife forged at my main workshop could easily cut through a log. A knife forged here, at the branch workshop, could only, *maybe*, slice a third of the way through, and certainly no more than half.

Although, I suppose that was impressive enough in and of itself.

As I worked, a group of four soldiers stopped by to deliver the two barrels of charcoal. I hadn't been expecting them until later, but I suppose Miss Frederica still had free time on her hands at the moment, just like me.

The peace and quiet wouldn't last for long though. The soldiers' return would mark the moment the gate to hell was opened.

"Thanks for coming by. You can set those down next to the other barrels," I directed.

"Understood," one of the soldiers said. They put the barrels down and left.

Given the hour, the soldiers on the offense should've already proceeded into the cave, so these four must've been part of the troop left behind to defend the camp.

Did they come to deliver the charcoal during their off hours?

I felt a flash of guilt at the conjecture.

They're still young. A few extra minutes of work won't kill them.

That toxic idea had risen unbidden in my mind. I shook my head to clear my thoughts and then got back to work. But right when I did, my concentration was immediately broken by someone hollering my name. "Eizo! Hey! Take a look at my knives, will you?"

The stupidly loud voice belonged to none other than Sandro.

Riiight. I did promise him that yesterday. Curse my age and degrading memory... I'm going to have to keep an eye on that.

"Welcome," I said, hiding the fact that I had completely forgotten our agreement.

Sandro handed me two blades that resembled chef's knives—one was bigger than the other. The three knives I'd worked on yesterday

had all been shaped the same way: two small and one big. I wondered if the long knives were used less often.

I appraised the two knives. As expected of pops, they were perfectly maintained. A first-class craftsman had first-class tools, and needless to say, these tools deserved first-class service. One's arms, hands, and fingers were tools of the trade as well.

If we were just talking about maintenance, pops's skills may have even outstripped Rike's.

"I'll need half an hour," I said.

"That's all? Mind if I watch, then?" Sandro asked in a quiet (well, for him) voice. Thanks to his booming voice, stocky physique, and middle-aged looks, he still managed to escape looking timid.

"I don't mind, but it might bore you," I replied.

"Naw, I'm thinking it'll come in handy when I'm looking after them myself."

It made sense. If I had any reason to refuse—which I didn't—my protests would've disappeared upon hearing his reasoning.

"In that case, please do," I said. "I'm starting now. Don't be surprised by the hammering." I didn't want the sudden sharp sounds to shock him.

"No problem."

I placed the first knife on the anvil and inspected it with the aid of my cheats. It was a beautiful knife worthy of a skilled chef like Sandro. I hammered out the slight divots and dents in the metal, working to make the composition of the metal uniform without changing the shape of the knife. I didn't use any magic; if I carelessly infused it with magic, it would become terrifyingly sharp.

Again, the reason I could do this kind of work was down to my battery of cheats.

There was no need to heat the knife; I could tell that it had been quenched when it had first been forged, so in fact, heating the metal would've made the repair process take significantly longer than an hour.

I evened out and deburred both knives. By the time I finished, the knives were comparable to Forge Eizo's elite model items.

Sandro let out a low whistle of admiration. "I don't have a clue what you did there," he admitted.

"That's not surprising. It was beyond the scope of routine maintenance," I replied. "It's the same for me, by the way. When I watch you and the others cook, I can't tell what you're doing at all."

"Right, right."

Sandro took my words at face value, but the real reason went further than knowledge—or lack thereof—of the profession. A normal blacksmith was unlikely to have understood what I was doing either, but I kept that to myself.

"You'll recognize this next part," I said.

"Yeah?"

The next step was whetting the blade, which Sandro would've been doing regularly even if he wasn't familiar with the nitty-gritty details of it. I sharpened the blade with movements that were slower than usual. Of course, with the cheats working in my favor, the knife soon took on a beautiful edge. The most crucial thing here was to preserve the angle on the knife's edge, but for me, I didn't put too much thought into the sharpening. The result was still satisfactory.

Since Sandro kept up his knives, the edge didn't take long to sharpen. Honestly, he didn't need me to look after his knives—he was quite skilled at maintenance himself, and his abilities were plenty good enough for his needs.

“Aaand there we go. Done,” I declared, passing over the two knives. “They’re well-maintained. You don’t need me at all.”

“Thanks,” Sandro said.

“I’m looking forward to eating some tasty meals prepped with these.”

His voice was as loud as usual. “Count on me, son!”

I accepted his promise with a smile.

Having completed the work on Sandro’s knives, I picked up the spearhead again to finish it off. The fire had diminished while I’d been working on the knives, so I pumped air back into it to raise the temperature back up. The charcoal was still hot and lively, and before long, the flames were burning and ready.

Picking up the spearhead with the tongs, I slid it into the firebed to heat. I topped up the charcoal and worked the bellows as needed, blowing life into the flames. I sussed out when the tip was at the ideal temperature for quenching using my cheats, and when my window of opportunity arrived, I took the tip out from the fire without delay and plunged it into cold water.

The sensation of the steel hardening was transmitted through the tongs and into my hand. My cheats knew how to translate the sensations into data, so I knew when to take the speartip back out. Steam drifted off the metal’s surface, almost as if it had just released a deep breath.

I used a whetstone to remove minor imperfections in the surface and to then whet the edges.

Behold, a spearhead!

Since the soldiers had yet to return from the cave, I put myself to the task of finding a haft.

I left my workshop and headed to the wagon that was loaded with the Eimoor family's private supply. This fell outside of Miss Frederica's jurisdiction, and I could always compensate Marius directly if I took anything that was missed...probably. For the time being, I was going to think of it as my personal treasure trove.

I have to hurry up and find a suitable shaft. The soldiers could return from the cave at any moment.

I rummaged through the knickknacks and provisions and found a bundle of wooden staves that had differing lengths.

These were probably left over from building the fence. I doubt they were meant for weapon-making purposes. They probably weren't needed anymore. We had no plans to move camp, so we wouldn't be building any more fencing.

I removed one staff that was slightly longer than the length I was looking for and then returned to my workshop.

Once back at my post, I cut the staff to the right length and kept the extra bit of wood to reuse. I inserted the staff into the opening at the base of the spearhead and used rivets to fasten the two pieces together. For this spear, I didn't plan to make an end cap since it most likely wasn't going to see actual combat, so as it was, the spear was complete.

Finally, I took up the short length of wood I'd cut from the haft and used my knife to carve out the inside to make a small cup. I filled it with water from my canteen, then placed the cup in front of the goddess figurine.

May the goddess protect me if I need to take the spear into battle.

That said, the fact that I didn't know *exactly* which goddess I was praying to was a bit of a hurdle to having my prayers granted.

In any case, the best scenario would be that I didn't have to use the spear at all.

That's everything on my to-do list...

Or so I thought, until Matthias came by the forge. "Can you repair horseshoes?" he asked.

"Hm? Oh, sure," I replied. It wouldn't earn me any coin, but I had no reason to turn him down. Contrary to my expectations, I was being kept occupied with a variety of work.

Matthias handed me several horseshoes. They were dented and battered but not to the extent that I would need to heat the metal—I could fix them just using my anvil and hammer.

"These are solid and sturdy," I commented. My cheats informed me that the horseshoes had been forged from good quality steel. A part of me thought the steel was wasted on horseshoes, though I didn't want to invite any misunderstandings by saying that.

"You can tell?" Matthias drawled in his usual manner, but I thought I could detect a hint of pleasure in his tone.

"Of course. I'm a professional. The metal is superb, as is the craftsmanship."

"Oh, really?" While Matthias's expression hadn't changed much, those three little syllables sounded even happier to my ear. He was proving to be a surprisingly easy-to-read man.

It took me a while, but I finished repairing all of the horseshoes. I used my cheats to good effect, and since horseshoes weren't weapons, I could strengthen them with magic without consequence. This would serve to extend the horseshoes' lifespans far beyond that of an average horseshoe.

"Here, I'm done," I told Matthias.

“I owe you one.”

I waved him off. “Don’t mention it. It’s good practice for me too.”

“You don’t forge horseshoes, Eizo?”

“I would by request, but I primarily forge weapons.”

“I see,” Matthias said. His expression stayed the same, but he sounded a tad resigned or possibly accepting.

I should prepare myself for the possibility that someone might commission a batch of horseshoes.

Matthias took the horseshoes and offered his thanks and goodbyes in that slow and measured way of his. Then, he ambled off back to the stable area.

Freed up again, I was wondering what to do... But then the next job came.

Miss Frederica came flying in with a list of items for me to repair. The soldiers had returned from the cave.

“Eizo! Can you fix everything on this list?” she blurted out, uncharacteristically hurried.

“Let me see,” I mumbled as I looked over the list.

There was quite a lot to repair, which indicated a similar number of casualties. If I’d wandered by the command post at this moment, I probably would’ve seen it in disarray.

“Got it. Bring them here, and I’ll see what I can do,” I concluded.

“Thank you!” she said and immediately whirled back out.

She must’ve had her hands full with tracking other supplies as well.

Once Miss Frederica had taken her leave, I checked through the document in detail. It listed a number of longswords, a few bucklers,

and one breastplate. I could envision the chaos that must've ensued during the battle.

Just as I finished checking the contents, some soldiers came with the items, which were divided into four barrels.

"There's a lot to be repaired today," I commented.

"Yes, we delved farther into the cave," one of the soldiers replied.

I see. It would've been ideal if they'd been able to clean out the cave today, but seeing as Miss Frederica came to me with a repair request, there must still be work to be done.

"I'll try and get it all done as fast as possible," I promised.

"Thank you."

I was rolling my sleeves up, about to get down to work, when one of the other soldiers piped up with an "Excuse me."

"What is it?"

"One of the swords you repaired yesterday was mine. I damaged it in battle," he explained.

"Yes, there were a number of longswords in yesterday's batch."

"To be honest, I had given up on the sword... But it was returned to me today, and when I tried it out, it was as good as new...no, *better*. It feels sturdier than before."

"Good."

"I really can't thank you enough."

"Not at all," I said. "I'm just doing my job."

The four barrels held a considerable amount of weapons and armor, and they made the workshop feel crowded. I lined up the barrels in

order based on contents—I'd start with items that needed the least amount of repairs, and end with the ones that required the most.

My strategy was to knock out the simple items first. I wanted to return as many items as possible to Miss Frederica in the shortest amount of time possible. The faster I returned them, the faster they could be used in battle again. They just might save a life at a critical moment.

I started with the longswords that were only slightly dented. They didn't need heat treatment and I easily hammered them back into shape.

"Easily" didn't mean one or two hammer strikes though. Anything with *that* little damage wouldn't have been brought to me in the first place. I only dealt with items that exceeded a minimum threshold of damage.

In any case, there was nothing to do but roll up my sleeves and jump in. I placed the first longsword on the anvil, inspecting where it had dented, and began to hammer it out. I was rough with my handling of the sword, but using my cheats, I was able to repair it quickly. Even so, I had no time to relax, as there were nearly a dozen swords. But I couldn't let myself be daunted by the task ahead.

I stuck the first repaired longsword into a barrel and picked up the next one.

I lost myself in the rhythm of the repairs. Once I finished all the lightly damaged items, I batched them up into the same barrel with items that needed sharpening. I then brought that barrel over to the whetstone counter, along with a second empty barrel.

I took out a sword and sharpened it with my cheats guiding me. These weapons didn't need to have a flawless edge; they only needed to be restored to a usable condition.

Since it was more efficient to focus on one task, I would be sharpening everything in one go. The first sword didn't take long. It probably would've taken longer had I not been using my cheats or if I'd been picky about the finish.

I steadily worked through my "to-sharpen" barrel, moving the finished items into the second barrel, until I'd emptied the first one.

"That's most of the swords," I muttered as I finished.

With these complete, I could return two barrels' worth of longswords into battle. There were still a few swords I'd set aside that had been dramatically bent out of shape, but at the very least, I'd repaired enough for now to replenish the weaponry supply.

I moved on to the two bucklers. One only needed to be hammered out. The other had been punctured in several places. To repair it, I'd have to heat it, which meant that I'd also have to remove the handgrip and dismantle the fixtures. Since it would take too much time to repair, I shelved it as a do-not-repair item.

My cheats told me that the first buckler, the dented one, would also take more time than the swords had, so I dove right in without delay.

The buckler was gently curved, so when hammering out the dents, I had to make sure to preserve the curvature of the surface. I would've preferred to have a wooden model to compare against as I worked, but I trusted my cheats to help me out instead.

To even out the dents, I hammered them from the back side, working to get them as flat as possible. Next, I hammered the flattened area to align it with the curved profile, all while imbuing the metal with a bit of magic.

Normally, a buckler wouldn't be as strong after it'd been repaired. It was like, for example, popping a metal can back into shape once it had been squashed. At a glance, the structure might look the same, but if you took a closer look, you'd notice warping here and there.

Likewise, hammering the dents flat from the back wasn't enough to restore the buckler to its original state, but by using my cheats and magic, I managed.

Before long, the surface of the buckler was mostly smooth again. There were a few small dents scattered here and there, but for emergency repairs on the front lines, the job was more than satisfactory.

The sun was well on its way to setting by the time I finished with the buckler. I still had the breastplate left to repair, but I had repaired the most pressing items.

The longsword that was more severely bent also had several large cracks and would have to be heated. It would take time to repair, so I didn't plan to fix it, but I'd have to check with Miss Frederica to be sure.

I headed out to the command post, grabbing the request list on the way out.

When I entered the command post tent, the post-battle furor had already died down. The soldiers had returned several hours ago, and I'd been busy with the repairs.

Marius and his advisors were conferencing around the strategy table. There were no heated arguments; rather, it looked like they were double-checking what had already been agreed upon.

The campaign would likely continue through tomorrow at least, considering Miss Frederica had come to me for repairs and Marius hadn't issued an order to withdraw. Whether the campaign was to end in success or not was still up for debate.

According to the original timetable, the campaign was expected to last until the day after tomorrow. Today, the soldiers might've withdrawn early to keep their losses light.

Miss Frederica was in the command post, up to her neck in work.

I called out as I approached. "Miss Frederica."

"Good evening, Eizo. Are you finished?" she asked.

"No, I still have the breastplate left to repair, but it'll be dark soon. If you want me to fix it today, I'll need a brazier to see what I'm working on," I explained.

"I see. Well, there are extra breastplates, so the repair can wait until tomorrow."

"Also, these longswords and this buckler aren't fixable," I said, pointing out the items in question. "I'll repair them if you tell me to, but the fixes will only be provisional."

"I understand," she said, grabbing another sheet of paper. She scribbled something on the page as she continued, "Leave anything you can't repair. I'll send men over to pick up the items you finished."

Since I wouldn't be paid for the items I couldn't fix, she would need to have the items repaired elsewhere once we returned to the city. She was probably taking note of the details.

I took the original list again and said, "I'll bring this back again tomorrow."

"It would be great if we could wrap everything up by tomorrow," Miss Frederica said.

"I'm hoping for that too," I agreed. We parted ways after that.

I left the tent and returned to the workshop, pondering what I needed to do tomorrow. While waiting for the soldiers to come by for the repaired swords and buckler, I cleaned up my workspace and inspected the breastplate. I could repair most of the damage with my hammer, but I would still need the firebed. I only had to heat the

parts that needed fixing, but just in case, I would have to remove the straps and belts first. That work would take time.

Shortly after I'd tidied everything back up, some soldiers came to take away the items I'd finished repairing. They sure were hard workers.

Once they left, I walked over to pops's place for supper before turning in for the night. The campaign was still running on schedule, so we hadn't needed to cut our rations or anything just yet.

After the meal, which was scrumptious as always, I returned to our tent and went straight to sleep.

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The next morning, I woke up, washed up, did some light stretches, and then went to eat breakfast. Many of the soldiers had already started eating. As far as I could tell, they were no less spirited than they'd been at the beginning of the campaign.

The troops were pumping themselves up to go all-in today, wrap up the mission, and return in triumph. An air of anticipation shrouded the camp.

On the other hand, if they didn't manage to clean out the nest of monsters today, they would likely be starting out tomorrow with injuries, losses, and low morale, which Marius and the command team would have to strategize around.

If that were the case, we'd have two choices, depending on the relative strength of our troops and the enemy forces at the time: either we'd have to retreat, regroup, and try again, or we'd have to wait for reinforcements. Supposing we sent riders out tonight, a vanguard of reinforcements could arrive with supply replenishments in as little as six days, with the main forces arriving two or three days after that.

One way or another, we'd finish the mission...but a loss here would etch a black mark on the Eimoor family's record.

Plus, though the kingdom *was* contributing, the Eimoors were personally footing part (likely the larger part) of the expenditures for this campaign. Because of this, dragging the conflict out would put a sizable dent in the family coffers.

As I ate, I resolved that I'd do everything in my power to help, but considering my role here, my hands were largely tied.

After breakfast, I took my post at the workshop.

I lit the firebed since I'd definitely be using it today. As I waited for the charcoal to heat, I removed the straps around the waist of the broken breastplate. Getting all of them off was tricky, but I managed it.

My cheats were all geared to help me succeed as a blacksmith, so I figured that they should cover armorsmithing too. However, Forge Eizo didn't work with armor normally; it took more investment to make per piece, and armor couldn't be marketed as daily necessities like knives could.

Once the fire was hot, I was just about to put the armor on to heat, when a young soldier came running over to me. He arrived panting. The workshop wasn't far from the command post, so he must've full-out sprinted to be so out of breath.

"Excuse me...but His Lordship has requested your presence at the command post," the messenger managed to blurt out.

"He has?" I asked.

"Yes. He says it's urgent."

"Understood. I'll come right away."

With a spare thought for the firebed—I concluded there shouldn't be any problems, even if I left it lit—I headed for the command post straight away.

I followed after the soldier. Along the way, we passed an open space where soldiers armored in metal and leather were gathered. Leroy was with the soldiers and looked to be performing final checks. It seemed like they would be setting off toward the cave at any moment.

It was my fervent wish that they'd fight hard and resolve the conflict by day's end.

When we arrived at the command tent, the soldier announced my presence formally to Marius: "My lord, I have brought the blacksmith."

The soldier had been correct to introduce me like that. Marius and I were friends in private, but right now, he was the count and I was but a humble blacksmith.

"Good work," Marius praised kindly. "Everyone, please leave us."

At his command, the soldiers filed out of the tent. Miss Frederica followed them, shooting anxious glances back at me as she left. I didn't *think* I was here to be punished, but I couldn't rule that out...or the possibility that it was something even worse.

"I'm guessing you have crucial news for me, seeing as you cleared the room," I said without preamble. I didn't need to be diplomatic when it was just me and Marius left alone in the tent.

"Yes, well, *crucial* may be overstating it somewhat," he replied. It seemed like he was struggling with what to say, which was unusual for him.

"No sense in beating around the bush. Give it to me straight. But of course, trust I won't be doing it for free," I joked.

“All right then,” Marius began. “I’m sorry to ask you to do this, but I need you to head into the cave as an escort. Not for me, but for an elf from the village nearby. They will be helping us destroy the spawn origin.”

“Is there a shortage of soldiers?” I asked.

“Nothing like that. Redistributing personnel is a possibility. The camp can spare a soldier or two to serve as guards. It’s not a problem of *quantity per se...*”

He hesitated.

“Aaah.” I nodded my understanding.

An escort was responsible not only for the safety of his charges but for his own safety as well. Therefore, when push came to shove, being an escort wasn’t only a matter of being willing to stake one’s life—an escort who was killed in action had failed their mission.

Veteran officers commanded squads of a dozen men each, but they had their own duties. Other than that, most of the soldiers who joined this campaign were still green.

“You’re asking a lot of an ordinary blacksmith,” I protested for formality’s sake, knowing that this wasn’t the kind of request a lord would normally make of a blacksmith.

“But you’re strong, aren’t you, Eizo?”

He’s not going to budge.

Marius knew I had the skills to undertake the mission. In the midst of his family dispute, he’d seen me withstand the margrave’s attempts to pressure me.

“Truth be told, I didn’t want to involve you in this either,” he said. His words may or may not have been genuine, but his demeanor was apologetic. Marius wasn’t my benefactor nor had he saved my life,

but he was a friend to whom I owed much. So, if he was in a bind and I could help, I would.

But I had one more reason to accept the request, a reason more important than anything else...

"I promised," I mumbled.

"What did you say?" Marius asked.

"Just talking to myself."

The day before I'd left, Diana had asked me to take care of Marius, and I couldn't break a promise I'd made to one of my precious family members.

"All right, I'll do it," I conceded at last. "But you'll have to explain to the troops why a smith who's past his prime is doing protection detail."

"I got that covered. I'll tell people you were originally an experienced fighter and became a blacksmith in order to obtain the ultimate weapon for yourself. You realized that you were suited for the profession and continued to do it. However, your combat skills never rusted, and you're still stronger than any new soldier," he recited glibly.

I reluctantly agreed to the cover story with a shrug. Marius had clearly thought through everything in advance. "Am I heading out immediately?"

"Yes. We'll be meeting up with your charge a little ways away from the camp," he explained.

"I got it. I'll go prepare."

"I'm counting on you."

I nodded, then left the command post behind me and returned to my tent to grab my shortsword. Next, I stopped by the workshop. I piled

up the extra charcoal outside and placed the heated breastplate on top, then I constructed a barrier around the charcoal with bricks.

On the way out, I grabbed the goddess figurine and slipped her into my pocket as a protective charm. I took the spear I'd made as well—it'd be a deadly weapon as long as the interior of the cave was spacious enough to accommodate its 120-centimeter length. As an escort, it was better for me to arm myself with ranged weapons than close combat ones.

And, if we had to make a hasty retreat, I could just abandon the shaft and bring the speartip back with me.

Armed with my two weapons, I trotted back to the command post where Marius was waiting. There was a piece of leather chest armor prepared. "If I may, is this meant for my use, my lord?" I asked, adopting a formal address since there were several other people in the tent, including Miss Frederica.

"Yes. Take them," Marius responded. He called over a female soldier. "Assist him."

"Yes, my lord." She brought over the armor and helped me put it on. I wouldn't have been able to make heads or tails of it myself. The woman was remarkably efficient with her movements, and when I took a closer look, I realized that she was one of the servants who'd helped me don formal wear for the banquet at the Eimoor estate.

She'd recognized me as well, and she shot me a faint smile.

Once armored, I looked like a proper foot soldier. Though, if I wanted to march in a phalanx, I'd still need a shield.

As the female servant departed, she whispered to me under her breath, "It suits you." I felt embarrassed by the compliment.

Miss Frederica witnessed my moment of discomfort. When our eyes met, she asked out of the blue, “Eizo, you have military experience, correct?”

“No, not even a little,” I admitted. “That’s why I needed help to put on the armor.”

“Well, you look good,” she said.

I smiled. “That’s very kind of you to say.”

All right. It’s time to go.

I glanced over in Marius’s direction where he was standing with the servant. They were both looking over at us with soft expressions.

Could it be that Miss Frederica is here as a soothing presence?

I soon left the command post and headed to the square where I saw the soldiers gathering. I took my place in line behind everyone else. Apparently, I would be joining the unit under Marius’s direct command.

Not long after I joined the group, Marius came out of the command post. The soldiers reorganized themselves into their units and greeted Marius. Instead of saluting, they brought a fist up to tap their chest.

Marius raised his hand in a signal, and everyone brought their fists down again.

As Marius cast his gaze upon the ranks of soldiers gathered before him, he raised his voice to speak. “My fellow warriors, today is the day we bring the hammer of righteousness down upon the scourge that has taken root in our lands. We shall emerge from this day victorious!” His voice projected across the lines of men.

“Unfortunately, I cannot promise you all the rewards you deserve for your part in this historic moment—the vaults of the Eimoor estate would be emptied of treasure. On the other hand, the vacant rooms

would make excellent lodgings for those of you who are looking to save coin on taverns, so one could call it a boon of sorts.”

Marius’s candidness earned him a round of laughter from the troops.

Good start. It wasn’t much of a joke, but laughter is a good sign. We’d really be against the ropes if no one could muster up a smile.

Marius continued. “Today is the first step on the path to riches and glory. I hope that you will step up to your futures with determination and excitement. My brothers-in-arms, this victory—the first of many—shall be written down in history, and so, too, shall be your bravery and valor!”

A cheer roared through the crowd at the end of Marius’s speech. The count had done his job, inspiring and invigorating the troops.

May we ride this momentum and successfully root out the monsters today.

Leroy took off first, taking the majority of the soldiers with him. The troops were lined up neatly, marching in lockstep, and they departed in high spirits. It was overall an intimidating sight.

The escort team, which included Marius and me, was heading in a different direction so we could rendezvous with the elven villager. It’s not like we were a special ops unit, not by any means—we were only splitting off from the main troops because it would’ve been logistically difficult to route the entire force to the village. After all, it was a complicated task to move ten thousand soldiers anywhere. Besides, Marius wanted to keep his hand of command as light as possible, so opting for a smaller escort team was ideal.

One of the soldiers took the lead. “The rendezvous point is this way.”

I remembered seeing him before on the Eimoor grounds, so he must’ve been a servant with martial arts training brought along as a personal guard.

Why didn't Marius just assign these men and women to the elf's protective detail?

But as soon as I had that thought, I realized that my idea would mean leaving Marius undefended.

After a short while, we entered an area that was too densely populated with trees to be called woods and too sparsely populated to be called a forest. The lower branches of many trees had been sawed off. I suspected that the trees here were cultivated as a source of wood.

We'd been walking for just under half an hour, and the trees had started to crowd around us. Suddenly, I caught sight of an elven woman standing with her back to us. Strapped to her waist was a valuable-looking sword.

I wonder if she uses that in actual battle...

Several men were chatting around her; they must've been sent to guard her on the way here.

The soldier leading us pointed her out. "She's the one," he said to me and Marius.

The woman turned as if she'd heard him. She had almond-shaped eyes and fine, silver hair that fell down to her shoulders. Her ears were long and pointed—no surprises there. In fact, none of her features were particularly remarkable, but nevertheless, I was shocked to see her.

My charge was far from a stranger to me.

It was Lidy.

I called without thinking. "Miss Lidy?" My brain short-circuited in shock. It would've been smarter to pretend that this was the first time we were meeting, but it was too late to put on that farce.

“Eizo?!” Lidy exclaimed, her voice surprisingly loud. Her eyes were wide open, an expression I’d never seen while she’d lived with us. Clearly, she hadn’t been expecting to see me either.

“The two of you are acquainted?” Marius asked, not even trying to hide his curiosity. Judging by his tone, it didn’t seem like he’d planned this reunion on purpose. If he had, he would’ve been grinning shamelessly right about now.

There was no reason to hide our relationship, so I answered truthfully. “Y-Yes. She is a former client of my forge.”

Lidy nodded without speaking. She’d schooled her expression back to its usual placidity, but I could tell that she was feeling a bit shy.

“Is that how it is?” Marius teased, his lips twitching into a smile. “I’d pegged you for a bit of a stiff, but it looks like you have a few tricks up your sleeve after all.” His eyes twinkled like he’d just found a shiny new toy to play with.

“I implore you to save your jokes,” I protested, striving to maintain a formal facade.



“Introductions won’t be necessary, I imagine. This woman is your charge. Your mission is to escort her safely into the innermost cavern of the cave,” Marius commanded.

“I understand. I will protect her with my life.”

It still felt awkward for me to speak so properly with Marius given that we were good friends.

“I can rest assured knowing that Eizo is the one guarding me. I’ll be in your care,” Lidy said. A smile bloomed on her face, delicate and elegant like a flower.

I couldn’t tell if she had sensed my embarrassment or not.

“You can count on me,” I replied.

The journey to the cave was rather relaxed. Though I was Lidy’s official escort, we were surrounded by other soldiers, so the chance of encountering a truly dangerous monster was slim. Nevertheless, I held my spear at the ready so I could whip it up at a moment’s notice.

After some time, we emerged from the forest onto a grassy plain. Across the level ground was a chain of low mountains where the rumored cave was no doubt located.

We caught sight of the tracks left by the main body of troops and followed them. There were no signs of other animals in sight, so perhaps they’d fled after seeing the ranks of humans filing through the area. Though our group was small, I doubted that any wild animals would try to attack us.

Before long, I saw the yawning mouth of the cave entrance set into the mountain wall before us. A dozen or so soldiers were standing guard. Everyone else must’ve already gone ahead.

The commander of the soldiers at the entrance watched as we approached. When we arrived, he said, "Let's go in."

We all nodded.

Marius gave no orders to his personal guards. They would be staying outside of the cave as backup, and would only join the battle if the situation became truly desperate.

One of the soldiers lit a torch from a campfire near the entrance, and the flame illuminated our path as we walked into the cave's murky depths.

Thanks to the diligence of the troops under Leroy's command, we didn't encounter a single monster for the first half hour.

"These passages run deep," I murmured.

"Yes, even more than they appear," the commander explained.

"Yesterday, we advanced to the innermost chamber. If we're unimpeded, it should take us an hour to reach it."

By my estimates, the passage went deep, some four kilometers in length. There were hardly any branching passages, and the earlier troops had left torches along the way to guide our path, so there was little danger of us losing our way.

"Magic tends to pool in complex cave systems like this one. Once the stagnant magic exceeds a certain threshold, monsters will spawn. At least, that's what I've heard, but I don't know the specifics," Lidy explained.

In other words, a monster encounter out in the wild was unlikely unless you came to a place like this one. Now I understood why we'd never seen a monster in the Black Forest despite its high concentration of magical essence. However, this mission had impressed something important on me—I needed to ask Samya

about any caves in the vicinity of the Black Forest. It would be a problem if monsters suddenly started appearing near our home.

We walked for a while longer, and soon, we started to hear the muffled sounds of metal clashing against metal. In this situation, that could only mean one thing: there was a battle up ahead. Because of the echoing, it was hard to tell how close we were. We increased our pace, but we didn't run—that would only tire us out before the main act.

“Hold on,” I said to the commander. “You said you went into the innermost chamber yesterday, right? But you weren't able to root out the monsters?”

“No, we weren't. There was an unexpectedly tough one amongst the enemy's midst, so we played it safe and retreated,” he answered.

“So why are Miss Lidy and I joining today?”

“As long as their chief is alive, the monsters will continue to spawn. Unfortunately, bringing down the chief is a difficult task for new soldiers. The elves know how to do it though, so we have requested their assistance.”

Lidy was the equivalent of a barrel of gunpowder, hauled into a monster's lair to blow it to smithereens once and for all. I didn't want to compare Lidy to a mere tool, but essentially, the mission's success relied on the safe delivery of the all-important weapon.

The sounds of fighting grew louder as we darted down the passage.

“Why is it mission-critical to take down the chief?” I asked the leader.

Lidy answered in his stead. “Monsters are the embodiment of stagnant magic,” she said in a soft but clear voice. “They are made of magic.”

“They're not living beings?” I asked.

“Not technically. Not most of them. Dragons, demons, and beasts corrupted by magic are exceptions, but monsters spawned by magic are not alive the way you and I are. They will continue to spawn out of control and attack living creatures of flesh and blood.”

The way she talked about them reminded me of the monsters in video games from my previous world. They spawned with no limit, for the sole purpose of attacking victims, and had no lifestyles or backstories. Truly, they lived an existence of mindless violence.

“What happens when you defeat them?” I asked.

“The magical essence that makes up their bodies will disappear. If the monster was originally a wild beast, the body alone will remain.”

So, the bear I killed previously might have been a magical beast, but it definitely hadn't been spawned from pure magic. I'd been thinking of magic as a type of energy, but it looked like I'd been slightly off the mark. Or rather, magic seemed to violate the law of conservation of energy—the types of energy I knew couldn't just vanish from a system.

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “If the chief isn't defeated, then the monsters will continue to spawn from the magic condensed within the chief's body.”

“That's right.”

“And if you leave them alone, they'll continue spawning infinitely.”

They're like mice with the way their population grows.

“Well, usually, they would only spawn occasionally. However, outside influence can cause their spawn rate to increase dramatically. That's what previously happened in this area.”

“Hm?” She'd just dropped a bomb on me without a second thought. I wanted to hear the full story but ultimately decided not to ask any further.

“We villagers gave everything we had to drive them back,” she continued, “but we couldn’t clear them all. We only bought ourselves some time. Monsters don’t respawn immediately, but since we didn’t destroy the nest completely, they were bound to come back sooner or later. That was why we called for the troops to come to our aid.”

“I see.”

The elves had the know-how to kill the chief, but they couldn’t secure a clear path to the boss battle; our subjugation forces could clear out the monsters, but they lacked the experience to kill the chief. Ultimately, the monsters could only be annihilated with both parties working together.

While we’d been talking, the sounds of battle had crescendoed around us. Ahead, I could see the flickering light of torches reflecting in different directions, likely glinting off the surface of swords.

The passage widened into a chamber, and I saw that the battle was an all-out brawl.

“We’re in the thick of it now! Protect the fair lady with your life!” the commander yelled at me.

“I intend to do just that!” I shouted back. I stepped in front of Lidy to cover her, holding my spear at the ready. The rest of the soldiers sprinted ahead of me to meet the enemies.

Now that we were at the front lines, I caught my first sight of the monsters we were dealing with in the light of the torches.

They had green skin, bald heads, and protruding noses. They were about as tall as dwarves (sorry, Rike), and beady yellow eyes glared out of their skulls. Unnaturally thin arms and legs stuck out of their torsos like withered branches.

The closest name I had for them was goblins.

However, the goblins I was familiar with were more civilized, or at least, they wore clothing and light armor. These “goblins” wore not a single thread upon their bodies and fought with their nails, which were grotesquely long, and teeth, which grew out of their mouth like stakes. They were no more than beasts.

They launched themselves at the soldiers relentlessly, but most of their attacks were repelled, and under the soldiers’ assault, they fell steadily. When the goblins were cut down, they didn’t bleed... Instead, they turned to ash and disappeared.

That’s what Lidy meant when she said they’re not truly alive.

Once in a while, I saw the soldiers swing through nothing but air, having mistimed an attack, and their swords slammed into the hard rock of the cave floor.

Now I see how the swords have been bent so severely out of shape. When I return to camp, I’ll repair whatever I can to the best of my ability.

Since the soldiers were guarding our front, acting as the first line of defense, I focused on our rear as we headed into battle.

One goblin slipped through the soldiers’ defenses and rushed at me. I brought up my spear and thrust it forward, trying not to hit any of the soldiers. The spear met its mark and plunged into the goblin’s torso with little resistance.

Seeing the spear slide into the goblin’s body gave me goosebumps... It was like its flesh was butter. I was creeped out by how little sensation there’d been when the blade cut through the goblin. Though I knew what my custom models could do, I still felt like I was cutting meat, not a creature.

When I pulled the spear out, the goblin dissolved even before it hit the ground. Nothing was left behind... It was like the monster had never existed at all.

I killed four more goblins before we reached the other side of the chamber. A few of the soldiers had been minorly wounded, but overall, we were relatively unscathed. The same couldn't be said of the goblins.

We left the free-for-all behind us and continued onward to the chief's lair.

"This way. It's just beyond here!" the commander yelled to Lidy and me. He pointed us to an opening in the wall. "Two of you stay and guard the entrance," he ordered the soldiers. A pair of soldiers nodded and peeled off from the pack, then took positions on either side of the entrance.

"Everyone else, we'll be pressing forward!" the commander called.

The soldiers guarding us were highly skilled; I'd thought as much while we'd been fighting our way across the chamber. They wouldn't have been assigned to Lidy's escort detail if they hadn't been competent. After all, Lidy had to be protected at all costs—she was the weapon that was going to win us the war.

We burst through the entrance, the soldiers in the lead, and emerged into a chamber that was slightly smaller than the main one we'd left. By the light of the torches, I saw that a large number of goblins were gathered here as well.

One of the goblins was considerably more muscular and taller than the others; I was by no means short myself, but it towered over me. Like its comrades, it wore neither clothing nor armor.

That must be the chief. I'll classify it as a "hobgoblin" for now.

"We'll take care of the little spawns. The chief is all yours!" the commander bellowed.

"Got it!" I yelled back.

I tightened my grip on my spear.

It's time.

Like he'd said, the commander and the other soldiers started clearing out the monsters around the hobgoblin. The commander could cut down a goblin with a single strike, but it took the others more time.

The hobgoblin wasn't standing around idle either. It was attacking the soldiers alongside the goblins, aiming for any soldiers who'd just killed an opponent and blindsiding them before they recovered.

The soldiers must've had to retreat yesterday after being driven back by this tactic. There would've been more enemies yesterday to contend with as well. Even with the decreased number of goblins, we were still far from the boss fight. A wall of goblins stood in our way.

Despite its size, the hobgoblin was fast. It attacked the soldiers with a variety of tactics, working around the goblins. While it had taken some damage, none of its injuries were critical.

If I could just get within range, I had confidence that my spear would cut through the hobgoblin's hide, regardless of whether it was tougher than normal. Having to wait was frustrating, but I held myself ready to leap the moment I was given an opening.

The soldiers fought hard and managed to clear a path through to the hobgoblin. Goblins fell left and right beneath their swords. Lidy and I seized our opportunity and rushed in.

It was now two on one. We had the advantage in numbers, but the showdown was unlikely to end with a single jab of my spear. I braced myself to fight.

I thrust my spear at the hobgoblin with the goal of isolating it from the other goblins. As I expected, it easily sidestepped my attack. I

surged forward for a second strike, following it closely. I wasn't so naive as to think I'd land a hit. The hobgoblin backed away further, dodging the attack.

I pressed my advantage with a flurry of attacks. It successfully evaded my strikes, but I was managing to drive it farther and farther away from the other goblins.

The hobgoblin threw in the occasional counter while dodging. As long as I was the target, I could take a few hits, but I couldn't afford to be so blasé if the hobgoblin went after Lidy. I also didn't have the luxury of focusing solely on the hobgoblin. We were constantly under assault by goblins when we came under their notice, and I was doing everything in my power to protect Lidy.

Asking for self-defense cheats was the right decision. Otherwise, there's no possible way I would've been able to lure the hobgoblin away from the pack while also fending off the goblins.

I said my thanks to the Watchdog woman(?) who'd blessed me with my abilities. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I thought I heard an amused "You're very welcome" off in the distance.

At long last I'd pushed the hobgoblin back far enough, so I was no longer having to field attacks by the other goblins. From here on out, it was Lidy's turn.

"What should I do?" I asked Lidy while continuing to defend against the hobgoblin. I was trying to kill it, but it was difficult to do so while covering Lidy.

"Please keep it contained while I prepare. When I give you the signal, drop down to the ground," she said clearly.

I nodded my acknowledgment and swallowed what I really wanted to ask, which was, "Can I kill it?" But, when I looked at the hobgoblin closely, I saw that its wounds from earlier had already healed over.

Could it be...?

“It’s regenerating using magic?!” I blurted out.

Lidy nodded. “Healing is impossible with normal magic, but stagnant magic can be used for restorative purposes as well.”

I finally understood the real reason why the soldiers had such trouble killing the goblins and why they’d failed to achieve victory yesterday despite their significant advantage in numbers.

What a pain.



There was no point in whining—time to buckle down. Until Lidy finished her preparations, my job was to keep the hobgoblin occupied. I'd planned to attack it and kill it, but its speed and regenerative abilities posed significant challenges. The hobgoblin was a whole different level from the bear I'd faced in the Black Forest. Slaying it would be my secondary objective; I'd focus on cornering it and cutting off its paths of action one by one.

I thrust and swiped my spear at the hobgoblin without giving it a moment's reprieve. When I landed the occasional hit, the wound always closed up before long.

The hobgoblin gave as good as it got, focusing its attacks on me. The few times it tried to go for Lidy, I discouraged it by throwing blows brutal enough to kill (had they connected). I wasn't sure if it was capable of emotion, but it certainly reacted to the negative stimulus in the way I wanted. So, at the very least, it was capable of learning.

The hobgoblin seized an opening between my attacks and kicked out. His foot flew at me. There was enough force behind the kick to leave me incapacitated, but I twisted to dodge and then countered with my spear. The hobgoblin sidestepped my attack.

I didn't know how much time passed as we continued to exchange blows. With life and death hanging on the line, minutes lost all meaning. At least half an hour must've gone by when Lidy finally screamed out.

"Duck!"

I dropped to the floor immediately (though "collapsed" may have been the more fitting word).

A bright, white light pierced through the air above me. The hobgoblin leaped away.

The beam switched direction in midair to follow its prey, and eventually, it hit a bull's-eye.

A thunderous roar shattered the air, and I was blinded by a piercing light. Fervent heat licked across my back, though since I was armored and standing away from the hobgoblin, I received little burn damage. The other soldiers should've been safe too. However, the hobgoblin, who'd taken the full brunt of the attack, wouldn't have been so lucky.

When the smoke and flames cleared, I saw that the hobgoblin had fallen flat on its face. If it dissolved into ash, the battle would be won.

But is it really going to be so easy?

I scrambled to my feet and brought my spear up at the ready. The other soldiers watched the fallen hobgoblin closely, their postures tense.

After that initial moment of tension, time began to flow again. We were all thinking the same thing—the fact that the body hadn't yet disappeared meant that the hobgoblin was still clinging to a scrap of life.

Someone just needed to nudge it over the edge.

One of the soldiers stepped forward, approaching the hobgoblin to deliver the finishing blow. He raised his sword overhead.

But before he could swing it down, the hobgoblin leaped up with a fearsome roar. His howl split the air, so loud it shook the ground. It wasn't dead. The soldier who'd been poised to attack panicked and tried to haphazardly chop at the hobgoblin, but the hobgoblin deflected the sword with a swipe of its claws.

Fortunately, Lidy's magical attack hadn't been for nothing. The hobgoblin's movements were noticeably more sluggish compared to

before. Still, it was too early to celebrate. Wild animals were more dangerous when they were cornered. Did the same apply to hobgoblins?

Ding, ding, ding. Round two. Begin!

However, the hobgoblin seemed to have been intimidated by the fortitude of our forces and proceeded to make a break for it. Of course, there was no way we were going to let it escape. We gave chase, keeping tight on its heels. The goblins put themselves in our way. Maybe they were smart enough to understand that even if they died, their kind would keep spawning as long as the hobgoblin was alive.

I cut down the goblins with swift swings of my spear as they rushed us, but no matter how many I killed, another was always there to take its fallen comrades' place. A glance around the chamber showed me that the soldiers were in similar predicaments.

I slew another goblin. When it fell, I caught a glimpse of the chamber wall behind it. We'd assumed that this was the innermost chamber...but there must've been a hidden passage.

I watched the goblin slip around a wall and disappear.

"Damn it!" I cursed, wanting to hurl my spear to the ground. I held myself back.

"It wasn't good enough," Lidy mumbled behind me, her tone numb. She hadn't expected the chief monster to be able to withstand her attack either.

"Retreat!" the commander hollered. "Retreat!"

"Yes, sir!" the soldiers chorused. I added my voice to the crowd.

We began to withdraw, slaughtering any goblins that got in our way as we backed out of the cave.

Our mission to vanquish the hobgoblin had ended in failure.

Everyone was in a somber mood by the time we emerged from the cave.

A tent had been erected near the cave entrance as an auxiliary command post. We gathered near it and treated the soldiers who had been wounded. Neither Lidy nor I had sustained any major injuries. Still, I lacked the energy to trek back to the base camp. An order to return to camp hadn't been issued either.

Lidy and the commander were summoned to the tent. I couldn't very well return alone, so I stood around twiddling my thumbs for a while. I'd begun to consider whether I should help with the first aid efforts when Lidy and the commander emerged from the tent.

"We're going to try again tomorrow," the commander relayed to me.

"I see."

We were out of time, but Marius was willing to make one last gamble. If he was determined to fight, I would be there to help.

"Today, we'll be camping here on the plains. You're relieved from your repair duties," he said. "The search party will depart at first light tomorrow."

"Understood," I replied, keeping my response brief.

The leader nodded firmly and then left to give the same information to his troops.

I turned to Lidy, who had come to stand next to me, and asked, "Will you be all right?"

"Yes. Considering the amount of damage it took, it won't be able to heal by tomorrow."

“We’ll be plunging even deeper into the depths of the cave, won’t we?”

“Exactly,” she confirmed. “And when we find it, the two of us will take it down once and for all.”

“Okay,” I said with a nod.

We’re going to settle this tomorrow, one way or another.

We returned to camp and ate supper. Afterward, I sat myself down by a campfire, resting and watching the dancing flames.

Lidy was staying the night in the command post tent. She was together with one of Marius’s female aides. Our campsite was a bit rough, but at least there were a few provisions made for guests.

I was absorbed in my thoughts about our plans for the next day when a shadow fell over me. I looked up into blue eyes framed by short, silver hair, out of which pointed ears peeked. It was Lidy.

“Can I sit next to you?” she asked.

“Of course, but shouldn’t you be turning in soon?”

“I can’t sleep,” she said, biting her lips, and sank down beside me.

We sat shoulder to shoulder, staring into the fire. The wood crackled and popped as it burned.

I tried to make small talk. “Your village is in the surrounding forest?”

“Yes. It’s not far from here,” she replied.

“This might not be the best time to say this, but this is a very charming area.”

“Magic is abundant here.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “I could make my living out here, but moving the forge would be a major hassle.”

Lidy chuckled.

Thank god. She still has the energy to laugh.

We chatted a while longer about the deer and animals in the forest. Finally, Lidy told me what she came for.

“My village was threatened by monsters here before,” she began.

“Really?”

She nodded. “We just barely managed to repel them.”

“Could it be?”

Again, she nodded. “Yes. Thanks to the sword.”

She was referring to the mithril sword I’d repaired, which doubled as a magical battery of sorts. Lidy and her villagers must’ve wiped out the monsters by drawing on the sword’s magic.

She wasn’t wearing that sword now. It was likely that she’d left it in the tent.

“You told me before that you can draw out magic from the mithril. How exactly does that work?” I asked.

“We give up our own life force in exchange.”

“Wh—?” I stopped, at a loss for words. Lidy had only commissioned me to repair the sword because it had broken into pieces...when too much magic had been drawn from it.

Lidy went on with no regard for my shock. “By giving up our own vitality, we can draw upon the magic within the sword and use powerful spells that would otherwise be inaccessible to us.”

“Don’t tell me...” I muttered, horrified.

“My brother, he...” Lidy trailed off. Then, she said, “The monsters that time were considerably stronger. To protect the village, as a last resort, he...”

“I’m sorry.”

Lidy gave a tiny nod before continuing quietly, “Once you clear the nest, they usually won’t reappear for some time. It’s much too early for them to have spawned...”

The timing must’ve led the elves to call in military support. They’d done what they could to hold off the monsters while waiting for help to arrive. And this wasn’t just a small-scale skirmish—the elves here had fought against the encroaching evil with valor.

“Don’t use the sword.” The words were out of my mouth before I realized it. “I beg you.”

Lidy didn’t reply.

“Miss Lidy, your brother made a heroic sacrifice to protect your village. I couldn’t have done the same,” I admitted, turning my face toward the sky. “It might be presumptuous of me to say, but I don’t want you to follow in his footsteps.”

We hadn’t known each other for very long, and I’m sure Lidy had a lot of different thoughts about her village’s predicament. I knew I was overstepping...but I was determined to prevent such a future from coming to pass.

“I promise that I will kill the chief,” I declared.

The crackling of the fire once again filled the silence between us.

After a while, Lidy whispered in a quavering and brittle voice, “Please.”

□□□

By the time I woke up in the morning, breakfast was already ready. Pops and the crew must have delivered it.

I wasn’t needed with the troops until after the hobgoblin was located, so fortunately, I didn’t have to rush through my meal.

However, I did eat near the command post—I dined with Lidy, the commander, and the other veteran soldiers.

The scouts could return at any moment.

Lidy was already awake and ready by the time I arrived at the tent. She greeted me with a “Good morning, Eizo.”

My passionate declaration from the night before replayed itself in my head. “G-Good morning,” I stammered, feeling awkward. “W- Would you care to eat together, Miss Lidy?”

“I-I’d love to,” she replied.

The troop leader watched over our bumbling exchange with warm eyes.

As Lidy and I dug into the breakfast the troops had distributed, several soldiers made their way into the cave, determined to finish the battle once and for all today.

The sun was almost at its peak when we heard someone shout. “We found it!”

Everyone on standby rushed over to the cave. Situated before the entrance, we all looked around at one another, exchanging determined nods. In no time, we readied our weapons and entered the cave.

The inside hadn’t changed since yesterday, except that there were fewer goblins. Maybe there were less because there’d been no time to spawn new ones, or perhaps the scouting soldiers had cleared them out earlier in the day.

As we made our way deeper down the main passage, we skirted a few ongoing fights. At last, we arrived at the chamber where we’d lost track of the hobgoblin.

A soldier waved us forward, yelling, "This way!" We ran to him. Hidden in the shadows of a boulder, we spied the mouth of a narrow tunnel. So this was how the hobgoblin had given us the slip...

"We've got you now," I muttered as I stepped into the tunnel. The words had slipped out before I even realized it. We darted through the tunnel, and soon, sounds of battle reached our ears. Sounds of clanging metal were interspersed with the bloodcurdling howls we'd all become familiar with yesterday.

They found it.

We spilled out of the tunnel into the chamber. The leader of our troops turned to Lidy and me, then yelled, "It's all yours!"

"I've got it!" I shouted back, matching his volume.

My eyes snapped to the hobgoblin as if by magnetic force.

I'm not letting you go this time. Today, you will die by my blade.

The other troops held back the smaller goblins as Lidy and I approached the hobgoblin. It immediately set its sights on Lidy. The blow she'd dealt yesterday was sure to be fresh in its mind.

Distracted by the sight of Lidy, it dropped its guard for a brief moment...a moment I was under no obligation to ignore. I seized my chance and thrust my spear at its torso. However, it must've anticipated my attack, because it switched its focus away from Lidy and cleanly dodged my stab.

I kept up the persistent attacks, launching a flurry of thrusts and swipes, but the hobgoblin evaded my every attempt. Compared to yesterday, my attacks more often met their mark, if narrowly, and what wounds I did open took longer to heal.

I can do this. I'm confident I can take it down.

But my moment of cockiness turned out to be my undoing—the hobgoblin saw through my momentary lapse of concentration and kicked me hard in the stomach. The force of the kick launched me through the air, and my internal organs felt like they'd been crushed by the blow.

“Urgh,” I groaned as my body seared in pain.

But I couldn't afford to curl up on my side and whine. I hauled myself back up and launched into a counterattack. The monster quickly backed away, putting space between us.

For a second, neither of us moved. I took the moment to assess the damage I'd taken. My stomach hurt like hell, but it seemed like none of my organs had been ruptured, and my ribs were intact.

I thanked the Watchdog who'd gone out of her way to give me a sturdy body.

As soon as I blinked, the moment's reprieve was over. The hobgoblin and I both simultaneously leaped back into the fray. I couldn't relax my guard even a little since the next blow I took could be life-threatening. But the hobgoblin was in the same situation.

Defend. Attack. Parry. Counter.

I landed glancing blows time and again while biding my time. As the battle wore on, I shifted my grip on the spear, adopting an irregular hold—one hand gripped the bottom half of my spear's haft, and my other hand held the base, near where an end cap would be if I'd installed one.

Neither the monster nor I had dealt or been dealt a critical blow yet, but the hobgoblin was starting to land more and more of its attacks. Where its strikes had connected with my body, I was peppered with a smattering of bruises and cuts.

Thank god its claws aren't poisonous.

Finally, I saw the opening I'd been looking for. I fainted as if going in for the kill. The hobgoblin leaped backward, but that was exactly what I was waiting for.

It'd fallen into my trap.

Right before my thrust bottomed out, I took my hand off the haft. With only one hand gripping the end of my spear, I pushed forward with all my might, launching the spear into the air. It wasn't as strong as it could've been since I wasn't in a proper spear-throwing stance, but thanks to my enhanced physical ability, there was plenty of speed and power behind it.

I'd been aiming for the hobgoblin's heart, but the spear punctured its abdomen instead. The hobgoblin had been moving in the same direction as I'd thrown the spear, so it had no time to react and dodge...all according to my plan.

The beast roared out in pain.

It tottered on its feet, and I took the chance to unsheathe my shortsword and swing it hard. The hobgoblin tried to recover its footing, but I held it down, pushing the spear deeper into its abdomen. When it faltered a second time, I brought my sword up and plunged it into its chest.

The hobgoblin bellowed a bloodcurdling howl and collapsed sideways to the ground.

It's over. I won.

I yanked the sword out and swung it down on the hobgoblin's neck, severing its head from its torso. Before long, the entire body disintegrated without a trace.

Once I verified that the hobgoblin's corpse was truly gone, I collapsed to my knees like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

I'd reached my physical limit.

In my periphery, I saw Lidy running toward me with tears in her eyes. “Are you okay?!” She leaned over me, staring at me intensely.

Her eyes are beautiful, as always.

“I-I’m all right,” I gasped. “My abdomen hurts where he kicked me...but I’ll survive.” After a pause, I said, “The promise—I kept it.” Lidy wrapped her arms around my shoulders and hugged me tightly.

The stagnant magic that had coalesced within the hobgoblin’s body had been boosting the other goblins too. With that magic gone, the goblins were easily falling under the attacks of the soldiers accompanying us.

Maybe I should have joined in to help, but I’d finished my mission. Besides that, my body was aching from the battering it had received; my abdomen was definitely bruised. I was covered from head to toe in scratches and cuts, and my energy was completely drained. In fact, I was just barely managing to stay upright. My only priorities now were to hydrate and recover. At this point, only the spawning of another boss-tier monster could spur me to jump back into the fray.

Lidy stayed nearby in case she was needed. However, it seemed to be only a matter of time before the goblins were exterminated completely.

With the magical source gone, new monsters couldn’t spawn, and the existing ones were significantly weaker than before. They behaved like an army that’d lost a critical supply source. The outcome was clear as day.

“It’s really over, isn’t it?” I asked Lidy.

“It is.”

“Your village will be able to rest easy.”

“Yes. The magic in this forest is hardly so concentrated that it could spawn a third round of monsters. A second wave is already highly abnormal.”

That’s a relief...

The sounds of battle had largely petered out. It seemed that the soldiers had finished slaughtering the goblins.

“Let’s join up with the others,” I suggested.

“All right,” Lidy replied. Her tone was calm and collected as usual, but to my ears, she also sounded sad. I pretended not to notice, and we went to reconvene with the troops.

When we arrived, the commander slapped me on the shoulder. “You sure are something! As expected of the man entrusted with the protection of the lady.” His enthusiastic hitting would’ve hurt even if I hadn’t been injured. He, too, looked like he’d seen better days, but he was nonetheless energized by the thrill of victory.

“Not at all. I’m just a simple blacksmith,” I demurred.

“Smiths are not usually so fearsome with a spear.”

Can’t deny that...

I smiled wryly. “It’s a long story. Please, keep what you’ve seen to yourself,” I requested.

“Don’t worry!” he reassured me. He then turned to address the group. “Time to head back!” The commander took the lead, and all of us exited the innermost chamber. Lidy followed close behind me.

God forbid I lose her to a stray monster now. That would be too horrible to even think about.

Back in the larger chambers, the rest of the troops were finishing their own battles. Leroy, who I hadn’t seen this entire time, was among them.

There must've been goblins hiding in the side passages too.

Leroy glanced over at our party. He tipped his head and I nodded back, the two of us acknowledging each other's respective battles. The soldiers who were unoccupied watched our party pass. They cheered at the fact that we'd returned safely, and their joyful exclamations echoed throughout the chamber.

We soon left the cheers behind us as we proceeded back through the main passage and finally emerged from the cave into the open air. A runner must've been sent ahead of us, because Marius, beaming from ear to ear, was waiting at the entrance. Miss Frederica stood beside him.

She looked relieved when she saw me exit the cave, but when she caught sight of Lidy, her expression twitched in irritation.

The commander and the soldiers lined up in front of Marius and kneeled down. Lidy and I followed their example and kneeled behind them.

The commander gave his official report. "The chief has been felled with the assistance of Master Eizo and Lady Lidy. Commander Leroy and his men will handle any remaining cleanup, but it is only a matter of time before our enemies are wiped out." Miss Frederica transcribed his words.

"You've done well," Marius said with a firm nod. He urged everyone to their feet. "Until the others have returned, please rest."

"Understood, my lord." The commander bowed deeply and turned to head for the open plain near the cave.

Lidy and I made to leave with the soldiers, but Marius stopped us. "The two of you, follow me." He started walking to the command tent. Lidy and I exchanged a look before trailing after him.

“I’ve asked you here to discuss the matter of your commendation,” Marius said once we were settled. Except for a few members of the “Imperial Guards”—aka, the Eimoors’ personal aides and servants—there was no one else in the tent. Not even Miss Frederica was present.

“I’ve called upon you for a duty well beyond your role as a blacksmith, Eizo,” Marius continued.

He hadn’t called me “Master Eizo,” which meant that I was free to speak on familiar terms with him too. “It’s nothing,” I replied. “I’ve been prepared to fight from the moment I received your summons. Besides, I didn’t kill the chief alone.”

Lidy seemed shocked by my casual tone. Or by my bluntness. Maybe both.

In any case, when the commander had made his report, he hadn’t said that I killed the hobgoblin; he’d said that it was a group effort with Lidy’s and my help. The account left room for interpretation as to who struck the final blow, and the ambiguity of that official record was just fine by me.

“Thank you for understanding,” Marius said. However, his expression was both troubled and sad. He might’ve wanted to credit me with the kill, but it was difficult for him to do so in his position.

“No problem,” I said sincerely. “I appreciate the thought.”

“Thanks. Anyway, you understand why I couldn’t have this conversation in front of the little lady,” he said meaningfully.

“Yeah. I thought it’d be something along those lines.”

If we’d had this discussion in front of Miss Frederica, our words would have gone into the public record. Since she was an official working for the kingdom—not a contractor employed by the

Eimoors—she'd write every piece of information down, regardless of if it were potentially disadvantageous to the Eimoors.

"Why did you ask for Miss Lidy?" I asked.

Marius only needed me for this discussion. So why bring Lidy into the fold and reveal our relationship?

"Lady Lidy came to me with one additional favor, and I called her here to discuss the terms," he said. "That, and so I can have both of your wounds treated." He followed his words up with a cheeky wink. Unlike Camilo and I—fossils, the two of us—Marius was young and handsome, so the wink looked good on him.

I mused on the disparities of life while one of the aides cleaned my wounds.

Marius continued. "You might have already heard, but before our current expedition, monsters had already spawned in this area once before. They wreaked havoc, including on Lady Lidy's village."

He was talking about the events that Lidy shared with me last night. I peeked over at her, but her expression remained unchanged.

"The elves managed to put an end to the monsters, but they suffered heavy losses in the process." Marius fell briefly silent.

Does he know all the details? Is he thinking about the tragedies that occurred?

"Many of the elves lost their lives in the battle. It was impossible to rebuild their village. They decided to abandon their homes and relocate elsewhere," he said.

"What will happen to this cave?" I asked.

"It will come under the governance of the kingdom. With the village gone, the area is under risk of being overtaken by bandits. To guard the cave and prevent criminals from settling, troops will be stationed

here, both near the entrance and in the plains where we're camping. This area will become training grounds for new soldiers."

I saw what he was getting at. "The cave can provide an infinite source of practice targets."

"Exactly."

The precise spawn rate was still unclear—the elves had their own lives to live and couldn't come often to the cave, so it was only when the monster population got out of hand that the village noticed.

The situation would be different if this area was under the control of the military. Assuming that practice runs were held twice daily, kingdom soldiers would be able to keep the monster population well under control. Under such a regimen, it was unlikely that anything as powerful as the hobgoblin would spawn again.

I was curious why such a solution hadn't been implemented before. Had it been out of courtesy to the elves?

"What is it that you need from me and Miss Lidy?" I asked.

"I won't beat around the bush," Marius replied. "I want you to take Lady Lidy into your household."

"Come again?" I blurted out.

Weren't the elves moving to another village?

"The other villagers will be moving," Marius said, as if he'd read my mind. "However, should an occasion arise when we need to borrow the elves' wisdom, it would become extremely time-consuming to arrange a meeting."

"Is this village the one closest to the capital?" I asked.

"Yes. That is why we'd like for one of the village's members to remain nearby. Of course, it would be ideal if they were to live in the capital, but the environment is apparently inhospitable for elves."

“That’s right.” Lidy nodded. Elves needed a supply of magic to draw from, so it was challenging for them to stay longer than a few days in the magical desert that was the capital. Technically speaking, an elf could travel to the Black Forest to replenish their magical supply, but it would be inefficient.

Marius continued his explanation. “If it were possible for elves to settle in the capital, they would’ve done so already. My informants say that the closest hospitable region is the Black Forest. In other words, your cabin is our best option. And that aligns with Lady Lidy’s request.”

Lidy gave another tiny nod.

Considering the search parameters, I couldn’t deny that Forge Eizo was the optimal location.

“Are you all right with living in the Black Forest, Miss Lidy?” I asked.

“As long as I am not a bother to you, Eizo.”

“Not in the slightest,” I said. “But you would have to part with the others in your village.”

Lidy looked at me with a steady gaze. “Yes. I am prepared for that.”

It was difficult to distinguish the age of an elf, but Lidy was no child. If she was okay with it, then I had no objections either.

“Okay, then you are welcome to stay with us.”

“Thank you,” Lidy replied.

“I’m grateful as well,” added Marius.

I waved them off. “Please, it’s nothing.”

Lidy’s presence was beneficial for Forge Eizo, the same as it was for the kingdom. The “elves’ wisdom” likely referred to magical knowledge, which was invaluable to us as well. After all, we’d been living in complete ignorance of magic and magical phenomena. This

was a good opportunity for Rike to learn to manipulate magic during the forging process, so from my perspective, the arrangement was a win-win situation.

That was the end of our postscript discussion.

Marius proposed providing me a fund for Lidy's expenses, but I turned down his offer—I wanted Lidy to become a member of our family, not a ward that I was in charge of. I couldn't think of any examples where a family member came with an allowance, so I had no intention of capitalizing on Marius's generosity.

However, I did make sure to give Marius fair warning: "Don't think I'll let you off the hook for all the repair work I did."

By the time the three of us left the command tent, Leroy and his troops had come back out of the cave. I didn't know whether the campaign was technically considered active until we returned to the capital, but at the very least, we'd fulfilled our main mission. Leroy spotted us and gave the order to gather. Everyone lined up rank and file, except for those who were injured and the people administering first-aid. Lidy and I hurried to distance ourselves from the line.

Marius addressed the crowd. "Men, you have fought hard these last days. It is thanks to your courage and determination that we were able to eliminate the evil festering in this area."

Miss Frederica was dutifully scribbling down Marius's words. For a moment, I wondered if she'd been sent by the kingdom as an auditor of sorts to investigate the Eimoors...but as a theory, that was somewhat outlandish.

"As I said before departure, I regret that we are not able to reward you with the amount you wish, but I believe that the experience you gained here is invaluable." Marius's words were pretty, but the gist boiled down to exploitation of labor—satisfaction of a job well done

was supposed to be a substitute for cold, hard gold. I suppose, in this case, there was nothing to do but accept the reality. Regardless, firsthand experience in battle *was* valuable.

“Fortunately, we did not lose a single soul in battle during this campaign,” Marius continued. “However, there were those who threw themselves behind the cause, suffering grave injuries in the process. I applaud those heroes for their courage and dedication!”

The roar of the men filled the field. Lidy and I clapped with the crowd.

“It is time to make our triumphant return home!” Marius declared. Clapping and cheers echoed around our surroundings, and the outpouring of excitement and joy seemed like it would continue forever.

When the hurrah did finally die down, the soldiers started preparations for the trek back to base camp. Lidy planned to return to her village with the other elves for the night and then join me on the journey back to the capital in the morning.

When we arrived at camp, pops and his crew were waiting for us with a hot, fresh meal. Noon had come and gone before I’d even realized.

“Eat up, everyone!” Sandro shouted over the clamor of the troops. “You’ve earned it!”

Without the tension and adrenaline of battle clouding their thoughts, the soldiers realized how ravenous they were and made a beeline for the food.

“Why the rush? The food’s not going anywhere!” Sandro yelled.

The soldiers who had lagged behind chuckled. The plaza was soon filled with the warm sound of laughter.

There was something I had to take care of, so I turned toward the forge. But before I could get anywhere, the commander who'd led the escort group called out to me.

"Thanks for all your help today, and...I'm sorry," he said with a frown. He must've felt guilty, knowing that I wasn't going to get any recognition for taking down the hobgoblin.

"Don't worry about it. A simple blacksmith like me doesn't need accolades. It wouldn't earn me any money either," I said with a smile and stuck out my hand.

The commander took it and shook, shooting me a look that was equal parts sheepish and conflicted. His palm was rough with callouses, which were proof of his long years of combat experience. Men like him deserved commendations much more so than me, someone who had been propped up by my cheats.

Back at the forge, I removed the goddess figurine from my breast pocket and reinstalled her on the shelf. I made sure to thank her for the campaign's success.

The spear had also been a big contributor to the victory, and I was reluctant to part with it. Nevertheless, I removed the tip from the haft with a whispered word of gratitude. When I returned home, I resolved to make a new shaft with an end cap for the spearhead.

Next, I went to the command tent. Actually, it would've been more efficient for me to have stopped at the tent first, but I'd wanted to return the goddess figurine to her proper place before anything else. The tent was a flurry of activity, with everyone still riding the high of the victory and busy preparing for tomorrow's departure.

I looked around the tent and found Miss Frederica glued to the table as usual. She was scribbling something in her cramped handwriting. Her job would be keeping her occupied for a while, so the only time she might have to rest would be in the carriage on the way back.

It pained me to bother her, but I'd come to talk about work, so it couldn't be avoided.

"Miss Frederica, do you have a minute?" I called.

"Ah, Eizo. Yes, but can you hold on a second?" she requested. Miss Frederica finished what she was writing since switching tasks midway was a surefire way to forget what you'd been doing when you eventually went back to your original task.

"What can I help you with?" she asked.

"I wanted to check and see if there was anything for me to repair from yesterday or today's battles," I explained. "That, and I wanted to ask for some help cleaning leftover materials and breaking down the forge."

"I understand." She rifled through the papers on the table. When she found the sheet she needed, she told me, "Looks like no more repair work for you. There are a few pieces of damaged weapons and armor, but we have extras of both for the way home. Anything damaged can be fixed collectively once we return to the capital. I understand that might not be what you want to hear."

I would only be paid for repair work I'd completed during the mission. Therefore, I'd be losing out on money for any pieces that the kingdom would repair after the mission.

"It's all right," I replied. "I'm pretty knackered. If anything, you're doing me a favor." I wasn't being humble—truly, I was exhausted. Diving into blacksmithing right after a battle seemed impossible to me, and I felt like I only had enough energy to carry me through the day.

"Thank you for understanding," Miss Frederica said. "I'll send over people to help you break down the forge later."

“Got it. I appreciate that. Good luck with your work, Miss Frederica, but remember to take a break once in a while.”

“I will,” she replied with a cherubic smile.

With her expression warming my heart, I left the command tent. Since I was now free from my smithing responsibilities, I just had to pack everything up.

Returning to my workstation, I started tidying up the ashes in the firebed, along with the bricks I’d used to construct the temporary forge. I rushed around, cleaning up whatever I could, and did everything I could, from moving the bellows to dumping the water from the barrels. Eventually, four soldiers came by, all of them young. I had them help me move whatever items I no longer needed.

“Sorry to make you do heavy lifting right after a battle,” I said.

“Not at all. This is our job,” one of the soldiers replied. They formed two groups of two and worked together, carrying out the items that were lying around the forge.

While they were gone, I brought the goddess figurine down from her shelf. Then, I took down the cloth roof and folded it up. After my efforts, nothing was left behind.

Although the time I’d spent here had been short, I was still sad to see my branch forge disappear. There were still marks on the ground from where I’d placed the anvil, firebed, and other things, but my heart ached with the wistfulness of seeing a demolished factory.

I crouched down and placed a hand over the marks on the ground. “You’ve done me well. Thanks for your service.” Then, I turned and put that space behind me.

On my way back to my tent, I saw several horse-drawn carts and soldiers on horseback passing through the camp. They were likely

the vanguard, setting off early before the main body of troops.

That night, the camp was in a festive mood, with people singing and dancing near the braziers.

We hadn't brought any alcohol along on the expedition, so the merrymaking was done entirely sober. Besides, everyone was drunk enough off the happiness of victory.

I watched the revelry as I ate dinner with pops, Matthias, and the other folks in the supply train. It was already quite late, so Miss Frederica, who'd put away her documents for the day, ate alongside us as well.

She'd come to sit next to me for some reason, and her mannerisms reminded me of a puppy who'd become attached to a person. If Diana were here, she'd be pounding my shoulder excitedly and asking if we could take Miss Frederica home.

Our conversation naturally turned to today's victory. Pops and the young cooks asked me question after question. I answered what I could but played dumb around the matter of who dealt the killing blow to the hobgoblin.

"Too bad you won't be turning a profit, Eizo," pops said to me.

"I don't think of it that way."

"Oho? Well, if you're happy, that's all that matters."

"Thanks, pops."

"You got it." He looked unusually bashful, and the other two cooks teased him for it. We all laughed as he yelled them down.

###

The next morning, I finished packing and headed out to the carriage, where I found Lidy already waiting.

“Miss Lidy, good morning.”

“Good morning,” she replied, still spaced-out from sleep.

I was about to offer to move her luggage, but I noticed that she had only one bag which she was carrying on her back.

“You pack light,” I commented.

“Yes. Elves aren’t much for material belongings.”

Because of their longevity, they must have less of an attachment to things.

I stood around, at a loss for what to do.

“Oh, I forgot to mention!” Lidy suddenly exclaimed, sounding flustered. “About the favor you asked of me... One of the elves who’s moving to another village will be taking care of it. Don’t worry, I didn’t forget.”

What favor is she talking about? Wait...aaah.

“This is about the vegetable seeds, right?”

“Yes. I believe they’ll be delivered to Camilo’s shop eventually.”

“Considering the circumstances, there’s really no rush,” I told her.

“You didn’t have to go out of your way to arrange this.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly ignore your request!”

The first time I met Lidy, she must’ve been aware that there was a good chance her people would have to abandon the village. So, she must’ve factored that information into her decision about whether to take on my request or not.

If she’d been moving to a new village with the rest of the elves—instead of coming to live with us—she might’ve been planning to travel to Camilo’s in person to deliver the seeds. I guess I made a mistake in asking her for that favor... In the future, I’d be sure to ask people where they lived before making similar requests.

Matthias soon joined Lidy and me at the cart. Miss Frederica was next to arrive. Last came the cooks, who rushed to hop into the cart after cleaning up the prep area.

Miss Frederica pulled out the cushion I'd given her and laid it on her seat.

She still has that thing?

"The beauty of an elf is out of this world," pops remarked bluntly.

Goosebumps broke out all over my skin. What he'd just said would've constituted sexual harassment in my previous world.

"Now I get it!" pops continued. "Who needs money when you have this gorgeous specimen as your bride? You've struck gold already!" He laughed heartily at his own comment.

Miss Frederica turned her head stiffly, as if she was a wind-up doll that needed to be greased. Her stare burned into the side of my head.

She's starting to scare me. I wish she'd knock it off.



“No, no, we’re not going to marry,” I countered with a scowl.
“Wouldn’t you feel sorry for the woman who has to tie the knot to an old hermit with a shady past like me?”

The Watchdog had told me that I wouldn’t be able to alter the fate of this world in any significant way...but I was, after all, a bug in the system. Given my circumstances, it was still hard for me to accept the idea of starting a family here.

Not that anyone would understand if I told them my reasoning, so I just had to keep my mouth shut.

Miss Frederica looked away from me after hearing my explanation, but I wasn’t out of the woods just yet. Lidy fixed her gaze on me instead.

What is it with everyone today?!

Besides that one glaring exception, everything else we talked about was benign. It soon came out that the elven village had been damaged, and *that* was why Lidy was moving (and *not* because we were getting married). Everyone grasped at least the broad strokes of what had happened.

Not many people would willingly step further into such a minefield, and even fewer people would have the courage to draw on such a dangerous magical battery, as Lidy’s brother had.

We spent the three days on the road back to the capital in relative peace. Once in a while, pops would throw around a colorless remark or two, but the atmosphere in our group never soured.

□□□

We were due to arrive at the capital three days after we departed from the campsite. The day began as usual, but we stopped at noon next to a water source. Many of the soldiers took the opportunity to wash their hair (with the running water alone), wipe their face and body with a wet cloth, and make themselves look presentable.

After the midday break, we once again set off on the road, maintaining formation. The mountain range encircling the capital became visible in the distance, so I knew it wouldn't be long before we arrived. Even the horses picked up pace as if they'd sensed everyone's anticipation. We weren't flying down the road per se—there was no risk of getting nauseous—but at our speed, I figured that we should arrive well before sunset.

Unfortunately, even with the saved time, there was still much for Lidy and me to do in the capital; there was no way we'd be able to return to the cabin tonight. Regardless, I bet pops and company, along with the troops, would be happy to arrive home.

Before long, the outer walls of the capital appeared on the horizon, and a hush settled over the procession. Hoofbeats and the clunking of the carriage wheels became our accompanying soundtrack.

As we neared the city gates, a shout from the lookouts on top of the wall broke through our nervous silence. "The subjugation force has returned!"

The travelers who were lined up to enter the capital all turned to look at us. What started as scattered applause and cheers soon turned into a tidal wave of sound.

Our train proceeded forward slowly, surrounded by cheering spectators. Our group was given priority in the queue for entering the city, and as far as I could see, there wasn't a single person who protested us getting special treatment. As we advanced through the gates, everyone eagerly yielded the road to us.

All along the street, people were waiting to greet us with exclamations of joy and celebration. The vanguard had probably circulated the news of our triumph before we arrived so we could enjoy such fanfare at the moment of our return. The cheering followed us through the inner city gates, and it continued even once we'd returned to the plaza we had departed from.

The soldiers lined up neatly in the plaza, alongside everyone who'd been part of the vanguard. We members of the supply train took our positions behind them.

The inner city was where the upper echelons of society resided, and this was reflected in the luxurious residences scattered across the neighborhood. A large crowd had formed around us, including servants of noble households (judging by their attire) and aristocrats, both male and female. The plaza was noisy with excitement.

I, too, felt heady from the festive atmosphere, and I twisted my head to look all around me. I met the eyes of several people in the crowd. At first, I thought that they were watching me, but then I realized that their gazes were glued to Lidy, who was standing next to me. Since elves were so rare, everyone's attention had been drawn to her.

Well, everyone, with one exception.

The margrave must have more free time on his hands than I thought...

We'd stared at each other for too long, so there was no way I could pretend that I hadn't seen him. I greeted him with a nod; he smiled and returned it.

He's not such a bad guy.

I continued glancing around until Miss Frederica, who was standing on my other side, tugged on my sleeve. I hastily refocused my gaze straight ahead.

Marius stepped onto a makeshift platform (that was normally a step used to climb into tall carriages). The hubbub in the plaza soon died away to nothing.

“To the brave men and women gathered before me today, thank you for your tireless efforts in making this mission a success,” he declared, his voice booming around us. “It is regrettable that the elven village had already suffered so much destruction and loss before we even joined the fight. I would like to observe a moment of silence for those who lost their lives.”

We all closed our eyes, taking a moment to honor the victims of the battle like Lidy’s brother. The crowd was completely silent, so it seemed that even the spectators, nobility included, were paying their respects.

“However,” he continued after the pause, “it is due to your courage and valor that we emerged victorious over our enemies. You should all be proud of what you’ve accomplished. In the future, I, on behalf of the Eimoor family, would be honored to call upon your services again. Once more, thank you all for everything!”

The soldiers unsheathed their swords and presented arms. It was a moving sight, even from my position behind the formation. We civilians of the supply train bowed our heads instead as a show of courtesy.

The crowd started clamoring again. Marius’s military success (in other words, the Eimoor family’s success) was going to be well-known amongst the upper ranks of society. Marius’s victory speech was just the cherry on top. The news would circulate fast, bringing boons to the Eimoors in the future.

Since the expedition had officially come to an end, I parted ways with pops, Martin, and Boris.

“See you! Drop by the restaurant some time!” Sandro exclaimed.

“I will. I’ll come by with my family,” I promised, waving goodbye to them.

We hadn’t even known each other for a week, but it was still sad to part with my new friends.

Next came Miss Frederica. “Eizo, thank you for everything,” she said. “You were so efficient with your work, and that really helped me out. Oh, and thanks for the cushion too.”

I *thought* her bag looked more full now than it had been—it turned out that she’d stuffed the cushion in with her belongings.

If I’d known she was going to like it so much, I would’ve put more effort into making it.

“Miss Frederica, I’m sure you’re going to be busy from here on out too, but make sure you eat and sleep properly,” I told her. “Nutrition and rest are crucial for beautiful women.”

“Sure, yes. I got it,” she said with an endearing smile.

I reached out and patted her head before I could think better of it. Miss Frederica didn’t seem to mind, so I didn’t stop, even when I realized what I was doing. Afterward, we shook hands and went our separate ways.

Delmotte and Matthias were busy cleaning up. I didn’t want to interrupt them in the middle of work, so I kept my farewells brief. I didn’t know if I’d meet Delmotte again, but Matthias worked at the Eimoor estate, so I was sure to see him around in the future.

Around us, the soldiers were all busy unpacking and moving supplies. The crowd had dispersed, and the margrave had disappeared as well.

I felt whiplashed by the whirlwind of activity and goodbyes. That was when one of Marius’s personal guards—a servant of his household, in other words—came calling for me. “Eizo, Master Marius has asked me to escort you to the estate,” she said.

“I understand. I’ll be in your care,” I replied. Lidy and I followed after the servant.

Time for me to join the worker bees.

The servant led us through the inner city streets. This neighborhood wasn’t half as loud as the ones beyond the inner walls, but it was still bustling. People’s eyes slipped right over me in favor of Lidy. I was grateful for the invisibility.

Previously, I’d traveled through this section of the capital by horse-drawn cart, so I hadn’t gotten the chance to take in and appreciate my surroundings. It was enjoyable to walk around on my own two legs and enjoy the sights.

Most of the residences were made of stone. The streets were maze-like and often too narrow for even horses to pass through. On top of that, tall walls of buildings loomed over everything. The layout reminded me of the towns in Japan built around castles, where the streets had been laid out in a confusing manner on purpose to protect against invasions.

Out of curiosity, I asked the servant about my theory for the labyrinthine streets.

“I’m sure defense was one reason, but there’s actually a simpler explanation,” she answered.

“Oh? What is it?”

“Today, the outer city walls ring the capital, but a long, long time ago, this neighborhood was the entire city. The people back then built their houses wherever they pleased, and as a result, the layout has no rhyme or reason.”

“Aaah. And because it was a good way to protect the city, the layout was kept the same even when the buildings were rebuilt,” I hypothesized.

“Exactly. On top of that, everyone living here in those days came from well-to-do families and would not have accepted the seizure of their lands...or so I heard.”

All very pragmatic reasons.

From what the servant had just told me, I concluded that this area had never been ravaged by war and burnt to the ground. Land that had been razed in a battle or disaster didn't generally need to be confiscated. There likely never existed a proper registry of landowners, so any rezoning was done ad hoc.

We continued walking through the twisting streets until at last, the servant stopped before a metal door—likely a servant's entrance—and said, “This way.”

Lidy and I walked through the door and emerged into a small room. There was a table in the center and its top looked surprisingly solid. The windows were little more than slits in the walls.

Like I thought, we'd come in through a back entrance.

There was a decorative bevel to the opening of the window which narrowed from the interior wall to the exterior wall—the intended effect of this construction was that it would be easier to shoot an arrow into the room.

The door leading farther into the building was thick and made of metal, which got me thinking... “Was this door built to deter any intruders who entered through the back entrance?” I asked.

“You have a sharp eye. That's exactly right. We couldn't leave this entrance as a hole in our defenses,” the servant said with a smile.

I'd have expected nothing less given that the nobility in the capital, or at least the Eimoors, had distinguished themselves through their military prowess. But I didn't know whether I should be alarmed or

impressed that even the servants had received training in strategy and defense.

Lidy and I were guided to a parlor I'd been in once before. "Please wait here," the servant instructed us as she took her leave.

For a parlor, the room's decoration trended toward sturdy and simple, which was a blessing to an everyday man like me. It was easier for me to relax in this atmosphere.

I had yet to discuss our future living arrangements with Lidy in detail, but since she'd stayed with us before, she was already familiar with everyone in the family and how we all lived. For now, I deferred that conversation in favor of another.

"Miss Lidy, once we're back at the cabin, is there anything you're interested in? Foraging? Carpentry?" I asked.

"Gardening, if possible," she answered.

"We have a small vegetable plot that you're free to use. If you need more space, I'll help you till the soil."

"Can I really?" she asked, her eyes sparkling.

I nodded. "You'd be doing us a favor. Rike and I are busy with blacksmithing, and Samya and Diana with hunting and foraging. None of us know what plants we can cultivate or grow...or really anything about plants. We've left the plot bare for now."

That was why the only thing I'd tried growing was peppermint, which didn't require much care. Now that Lidy was coming to live with us, I was glad that I hadn't tried to plant it in the ground.

"If that's the case, I'll be glad to help out!" she exclaimed.

"I'll leave it to you, then."

With her help, we would have two methods of sourcing food going forward: Samya and Diana's hunting and gathering, and Lidy's

farming. Of course, tomatoes didn't grow overnight, so for a while, we'd still be relying on the meat and berries that Samya and Diana brought home. Even once the vegetables started growing, it would be hard to feed five people unless we made some purchases from Camilo.

As we were discussing this, Marius strode into the room with two servants. He'd taken off his ornate clothing and armor from earlier in favor of something comfortable.

"Did I keep you waiting...or interrupt at a bad time?" he asked with a smirk.

Figures he'd say something like that the moment he walked in.

"Neither," I replied curtly.

"I'm sure both of you must be tired. I'm knackered, to be honest, so I'll keep this quick."

"I'd appreciate it," I said.

"First, I want to say thanks for all your help." He bowed his head, a move that would've caused a commotion if we'd been in public. A count shouldn't be lowering his head to a common blacksmith. But in the privacy of his home, he could do what he wanted.

"And I still have to compensate you properly for your work, Eizo."

"Aaah." That was right. I'd agreed to join the mission because of the promise of a reward.

Well, had any other nobility made the same request of me, I would've turned it down (if I'd been permitted to). A request from the margrave might've been a different story.

"This is what I owe you, according to the contract," Marius said, gesturing over one of the servants who brought over a leather sack, a document, and a pen.

The sack was filled with silver coins, almost enough to make up one gold piece. The soldiers wouldn't have been paid so well for the same length of time, so the repairs must've been factored in already.

"Looks right," I said before putting the sack into my own bag.

The document was proof that I was paid. Miss Frederica's signature was on it as well, designating her as the person in charge. I signed my name.

Tomorrow, this page would become one pebble in the mountain of paperwork Miss Frederica would have to scale. Her face when wrestling with her work floated into my mind, overlapping with an image of a squirrel munching on an acorn. Silently, I wished her good luck.

I returned the sheet to Marius, who glanced at it and then passed it to the servant.

That's it. I'm finally done with work!

Or so I thought, but it appeared that Marius wasn't finished yet.

"And this is your reward for fighting in the battle and the commission fee for the repairs," he said.

The second servant handed me another small leather bag. I hefted it in my hand and noticed that it was surprisingly heavy considering its size.

Gold coins were crammed tightly inside of it.

"Hang on a second. What's this supposed to be?" I protested.

"As you can see, it's money," he replied mildly.

"No, I understand that..." I'd been referring to the *amount*.

How in the world has this sum been calculated?

"This can't be right," I insisted. "Not for a bit of repair work and a trip into the cave."

Marius's lips twisted in a dry smile. "For a man who insists that he'd never do work for free, you sure are fussy when it comes to taking gold when it's offered."

"I can't take money that we never agreed upon."

"No one likes a craftsman who's a pain in the ass," Marius teased.

"Well, that's who I am."

"Oh, that's right, how could I forget?"

We both laughed.

"Don't be so suspicious. The numbers add up," Marius said.

"They do?"

Marius nodded. "Remember the other matter I commissioned you for?"

Hm? Oh, the heirloom replica. He must be dancing around the subject since Lidy's here.

"Right, yes, I remember."

"I could only give you so much in recompense because it would've looked suspicious for me to move so much money around. But this time, I have the perfect excuse to reward you as you deserve," he said. "The rest of what I wished to give you is in there. So, like I said, the numbers add up."

"I see." Marius felt he owed me more than what he'd originally paid me and was making up for it now. I decided not to pry further into his scheme. The man was too sincere. All this, even after he'd paid me extra for the large order of shortswords using the excuse that it'd been a rush order. Considering all the trouble that he'd gone through to get these coins to me, I couldn't very well refuse them.

"I'll accept your generosity this once," I finally said.

"Please do. It's no more than what you deserve," Marius replied.

I put the sack into my bag. No one would guess that a weathered, old guy like me would be carrying enough money around to pay for all the pleasures life has to offer.

“That’s all I needed to talk to you about,” Marius said. “Are you heading home, Eizo?”

“Yes. I have no other business here,” I replied.

“But you won’t be able to leave tonight, right?”

“Yeah, we’ll have to find lodgings.”

Lidy and I could have made it back to the forest tonight if we’d pushed ourselves, but there was no reason to rush. We’d find a place to stay overnight (in two separate rooms, of course) and depart early tomorrow morning. Even on foot, we could make it home before the end of the day.

“In that case, you’re welcome to stay here,” Marius offered. “There are plenty of guest rooms. We can continue talking over dinner.”

We were already here, so I figured that we might as well. I had been worried whether or not Lidy would be comfortable staying at an inn anyway, so I decided to take Marius up on his kind offer.

“Thanks. We’ll impose on you for the night then,” I said. “Miss Lidy, how does that sound to you?”

“I have no objections,” she answered with a nod. “I’m not very familiar with these neighborhoods.”

“All right. Let’s get you two settled in your rooms.” Marius motioned to the two servants, who tipped their heads in acknowledgment.

“Please, come this way,” one of the servants said.

The two of them, both women, led us out of the room. I sussed out with my cheats that they both had martial arts training. A bigot

looking to overpower an easy target would find themselves flat on their back in the blink of an eye if they tried attacking these two.

The Eimoor household: not people to be trifled with.

The corridor we proceeded down was neither gaudy nor austere. It gave off a distinct impression of uprightness and respectability. Lidy and I were guided to separate rooms.

“I’ll be up soon with hot water. Please, relax in the meantime,” the servant said to me.

“That would be great. Thank you.”

Over the course of the expedition, we’d only been able to wipe ourselves off with wet cloths. Rinsing in hot water versus cold water was a whole different level of comfort. In Japan, there was a type of bath called a *goemon buro* where the tub was heated directly by a fire from the bottom like a cauldron.

Maybe I should build one for the cabin.

I was given hot water and a change of clothes—a simple outfit I could put on without anyone else’s help—and that was all I needed to feel refreshed. The servant offered to wash my clothes, an offer which I gladly accepted; they should be dry by morning.

I lay down on the bed—it had been a while since I’d slept on something so soft. Those carriages had been truly uncomfortable to ride in, and my body was battered from the long journey.

There were two primary forms of suspension systems that I’d seen in this world: either the cart was suspended from the frame by chains, or by leather straps. I hoped Camilo would extol the virtues of the leaf spring suspension far and wide, for the benefit of Marius, the soldiers, and the luggage.

Now that I was on a comfortable bed, my mind started to grow sluggish, and soon, I slipped off into darkness.

“...ster...Master...ake up. Master Eizo!”

I drifted awake to my body being rocked.

Just when I was finally getting some sleep!

Perturbed, I snatched at whatever was shaking me.

A high-pitched squeal of surprise brought me to my senses. My eyes opened and I peered up into the gaze of one of the Eimoors’ servants. I was gripping her hand, which was on my shoulder.

When the sleep-induced fog in my brain cleared, and I finally processed what had happened, I released my grip hastily.

“I-I’m so sorry!” I apologized.

She smiled kindly. “It’s nothing—I was just surprised. Please don’t think too much of it.”

“How long have I been sleeping?”

“About an hour, I believe. After I left you, I made preparations for supper. I came to inform you that it’s ready.”

“You could’ve just twisted my wrist,” I said. “I would’ve woken up right away.”

She chuckled. “If you were a boor, I would’ve done so without hesitation, Master Eizo.” Then, she reached out a hand and said, “Please excuse me,” before proceeding to fix my hair.

After that, I got out of bed and followed her to the dining room.

Dinner was an intimate affair with just Marius, Lidy, and me. Our conversation naturally turned to tales of our journey. I expanded on

what had happened in the cave, Lidy added in the occasional detail, and Marius listened attentively.

Marius told a few stories about his experience as a commander as well. He'd been in charge of all the logistics: What quantity of supplies were needed? Where should wounded soldiers be treated, and where can they recuperate? There had, of course, been commanders for each individual unit, but Marius had overseen the movements of the forces as a whole. Even with Leroy leading part of the troops, Marius had the final say.

Our mission this time had been well-defined, and our enemies had been based in one stronghold, but Marius explained that a battle with demons or other humans wouldn't have gone so predictably.

The elites sure have it tough too...

War was a fixed constant in the world; it was difficult to avoid the grasping tendrils of conflict. I hoped that Marius would become a celebrated leader who would do everything in his power to get everyone, even one person, safely out of battle (including himself).

□□□

The next morning, I woke up and started packing. Ten days had already passed since I'd left, and now, I was going home.

Having made the decision to leave today, I was impatient to get back to my family as fast as I could. The cabin I shared with everyone now felt like the place where I belonged.

Marius had offered to eat breakfast with us, but I told him to rest instead, knowing he must've been even more exhausted than I was. As a substitute for his company (was that rude to say?), I requested to join the servants for breakfast.

I didn't know where the servants ate, so I planned to stand outside of my room, ready to be guided. When I stepped out into the corridor, I found Lidy already waiting.

"Good morning, Miss Lidy."

"And to you, Eizo."

Once we arrived home, Lidy would become one of our household...most likely. I still had to talk to the other three, but I didn't expect any resistance. Our family of five was diverse in race and background. The fact that we'd all be sharing our morning rituals and praying at the *kamidana* filled me with a joy like nothing else.

While Lidy and I were chatting, a servant came to guide us—it was Bowman. He was one of the higher-ranked servants in the household and was memorable for his sturdy build.

"Good morning, Bowman," I called out.

He looked taken aback for a moment before returning my greeting.

"Good morning, Master Eizo, Lady Lidy. I must say, I didn't expect you to remember my name."

Riiight. Normally, people didn't remember the names of servants. But even though I have a family name, I'm not actually from nobility.

"You told it to me, so of course I remember. It would be impolite not to, don't you think?"

"Not at all, Master Eizo."

His deferent attitude made sense given that I was friends with the head of the house. But, in public, I was no more than a middle-aged blacksmith. I tried to get Bowman to shrug off his courteous demeanor as Lidy and I followed him to the dining hall where the servants ate.

Everyone had breakfast together in the hall, unless they had other work or the day off, but even the servants on vacation tended to

wake up early and join the meal. In summary, attendance was nearly perfect.

The Eimoors weren't a large household, but they were still a comital family, so nearly a dozen people were eating in the hall. I spied a familiar face from the campaign too—Matthias, who oversaw the family's steeds, was breaking fast with everyone else.

The rumor that I was a nobleman moonlighting as a blacksmith had circulated amongst the staff. They were treating me like an innocent young heiress who wanted to visit a burger joint out of curiosity, a familiar trope from my previous life. I did my best to ignore it.

By request from one of the young maids, I talked about the expedition. The Eimoor family must have been a magnet for tomboys because she was more interested in hearing about the final battle in the cave than about life in the camp.

"It was black as pitch in the cave. I couldn't tell the commander apart from any other soldier," I told them.

Even though everyone here was employed by the Eimoors, I still hid the fact that I was the one who killed the hobgoblin. Lidy seemed dissatisfied, but I think she understood why I was keeping the depth of my involvement a secret.

Lidy and I decided to leave right after breakfast so as not to be a burden to the servants, but Bowman said it was part of their job to see us off properly.

That was when a surprise guest made an appearance.

"Well, well, if it isn't Camilo," I said.

"Good to see you," he replied, greeting me. "I came here for business yesterday and heard that the subjugation troops had returned. So, I sent a man to see if you were going home today and

wanted a ride. They told me that you'd be heading out any moment and I rushed over as fast as I could."

"Sorry to make you come out of your way. We were planning on walking back," I told him.

"Shall we go together?" he offered.

"I'll gladly accept your kind offer."

One's relationships were the greatest treasures in life. I was glad to have both Camilo and Marius as friends.

Lidy and I had just climbed into Camilo's carriage when Marius, who'd woken up just in time, came running to see us off.

"See you again soon!" I called out.

"Take care, Eizo," he said with a wave. Bowman and the other servants had come out of the house as well.

And with that parting, we were off.

Camilo's carriage cut through the streets, flew through the outer city, and left the capital through the front gates. Having ridden on Camilo's cart through the same roads before, the scenery was very familiar to me. As we pulled away from the city, I turned around for one last glimpse at the outer walls, the castle, and the mountain range encircling everything.

I wonder when my next visit will be. I want to drop by pops's restaurant next time.

Fat clouds heavy with rain loomed on the horizon. The stark white of the sky above us contrasted sharply with the green of the plains. This landscape was just as I remembered.

On the road, Camilo took his turn asking for tales about the expedition. Like I had with everyone else, I kept mum about killing

the hobgoblin, but Camilo could probably guess the truth even without me saying anything. However, he would never do anything that would potentially damage the Eimoors' reputation.

At the entrance to the Black Forest, we descended from the cart and parted with Camilo. Lidy and I headed into the forest, and I reveled in the fact that I was finally back in familiar territory.

We saw the occasional squirrel-like critter clambering in the trees. It felt rude to admit, but they reminded me of Miss Frederica.

I hope we don't encounter any wolves or bears...

Halfway home, we heard the sound of something heading our way, and fast. Judging from the noise, this stampeding thing wasn't just coincidentally running around in the area—it was making a beeline straight toward us.

I drew my shortsword and kept a sharp gaze out for whatever was coming. The footsteps were fast and even, unhindered by the undergrowth.

Suddenly, our would-be assailant burst out of the shadows.

Striped ears. A tail. Human face and figure.

"Samya!" I exclaimed, sheathing my sword. The tension drained out of me, and I immediately felt heavy with exhaustion.

Samya crashed into me and started pounding at my chest with her fists. She wasn't using her full strength, but it still hurt.

"Ow, ow, ow," I protested. "Why are you hitting me?"

"She's pouting," remarked a voice from farther away. It was Diana. "Or rather, she doesn't know how to react." Diana glanced over at Lidy and nodded in greeting. Krul came trailing behind.

Wordlessly, I caught Samya's fists gently with my palms.

"Did you come out to hunt?" I asked.

“Yes...” Diana said with exasperation. “Midway, Samya said, ‘I smell Eizo,’ and then suddenly darted off.”

I noticed that Diana’s breathing was fairly even despite having run after Samya through the forest. Her stamina was building nicely, but that was hardly what was important right now.

“So then, she doesn’t know how to react?” I asked, parroting Diana’s words. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been gone a long time. She’s happy to see you, but she doesn’t know how to get you to dote on her,” Diana explained.

Samya froze for a split second, and then punched my palms hard.

“Ouch!” I cried.

“Hmph! Next time, you better come home sooner.” Samya refused to say anything else after. She turned on her heel and began to pad away.

Toward home.

As we walked, I petted Krul on the head. Since I’d interrupted them in the middle of their hunt, I asked Diana, “Going home isn’t a problem?”

“We still have meat from a previous hunt. It can wait until tomorrow.”

“Good.”

Honestly, if our positions had been reversed and I’d been the one waiting for Samya to come home, I also would’ve tossed aside my work to welcome her the moment she returned. I decided to stop being stubborn and enjoy the time with my family.

“Don’t walk so fast!” I called out to Samya.

“Fine, fine,” she said, slowing her pace.

“No matter what she says, Miss Lidy’s not as used to the forest environment,” Diana said, roping Lidy into the conversation.

It was probably already obvious to both Diana and Samya why Lidy had come back with me.

“No, I’m just not—” Miss Lidy started to say. She’d likely been about to protest that it wasn’t *forests* in general, but just the *Black Forest* that she wasn’t accustomed to. However, Samya cut her off before she could finish.

“You said not to rush, but the sun’s gonna set if we keep dillydallying! Come on! You too, Lidy!” Samya ordered. She was already treating Lidy like family, so she had definitely guessed what was going on.

“Coming!” Lidy called back, her voice bright with happiness.

And so, the five of us made our way back home.

I’d come to think of the forest as my backyard. Every time I passed a tree that I recognized, the feeling of homecoming welled up within me. It wasn’t just Samya who was feeling sentimental at our reunion.

Soon, we arrived at the cabin. I cracked open the front door and heard muffled clacking in the forge followed by the pitter-patter of footsteps. Then, the door to the workshop opened to reveal Rike. She must’ve rushed over to see why Samya and the others had come back so early.

“Sa— Boss! Welcome home!” Rike exclaimed with surprise. Unlike Samya, she made no move to charge me or hit me...not that I’d expected her to.

“Yeah, I’m home.” The full weight of the words hit me as I said them.

I was finally back where I belonged.

And other than a few small injuries, I’d returned to everyone safe and sound.

May I be able to say the same after the next journey, and the one after that.

This was my precious chance at a second life. I couldn't let it go to waste.

I dropped off my bags and gathered everyone at the table. Looking around at them one by one, I said, "Now, as you can see, I haven't come back alone...but you all know my companion. Miss Lidy will be joining our family. I'll explain everything later, but I hope you're all on board with her staying."

On the (very very very) off chance that one of them hated the idea, I had no backup plan... So with that possibility gnawing at me, I peered into the eyes of Samya, Rike, and Diana in turn.

All of them were grinning with a mixture of fondness and exasperation.

"I knew this was gonna happen," Samya crowed.

"Boss will do as Boss does," Rike said.

"This is just like you, Eizo," followed Diana.

I was miffed by the way they expressed their approval, but I was relieved that no one objected.

"Welcome, Miss Lidy...no...wait."

She was one of the family now. Of course, it was common sense that one needed to treat friends and family with respect, just as one would a guest or anyone else...but calling her "Miss" was a little *too* stiff for our household. That wasn't Forge Eizo's style.

Samya, Rike, Diana, and I chorused together, "Welcome, Lidy, to Forge Eizo!"

Epilogue: The Demon of the Law

Frederica Schurter had been dispatched in service to the kingdom; she'd been sent to accompany the subjugation force as the personnel responsible for overseeing expenditures. Though she'd certainly been swamped with work during the expedition, the *real* battle began when she returned to the capital.

She was exempted from her responsibility over taxes for a whole month, which was how long she'd need to sort out the campaign's finances.

Expenditures on food, water, and fodder all had to be totaled up. Then, there was the pay for the soldiers (part of which was covered by Count Eimoor) and for the civilians.

There were seemingly endless items that she needed to factor in.

For her reference, she had managed to procure the filings from previous military expeditions. And just like in the past, the food expenditure accounted for the majority of the cost. But...the overall numbers didn't add up, no matter how many times she calculated them. There was something odd that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

This campaign had logistically been no different from past campaigns, and mission expenditures usually ended up being about the same every time, regardless of whether the campaign ended in victory or defeat. However, the cost of this particular expedition had worked out to be lower than normal.

One could say, "Isn't that a good thing?" But the lower cost did indeed concern her—it could only mean that owed money hadn't been paid in full. In other words, the kingdom was quite possibly in the count's debt.

It was imperative that Frederica investigate the discrepancy at once.

At the end of the day, it turned out that nothing had been wrong. Every record showed that Frederica's calculations were immaculate. She wasn't yet sure what the campaign had used less of, but it was an indisputable fact—expenditures were below average.

Frederica flipped furiously through the past accounts, diving into the problem. "I had a feeling this would be the case," she mumbled. Her eyes had locked onto a specific line item: the commission fees owed to the blacksmith for repairing weapons and armor.

"Eizo turned out to be the problem after all."

The total repair fee was noticeably cheaper compared to how much it'd cost during previous missions. So, Frederica looked at the past breakdowns in detail. According to the logs (whether they were reliable was another story), usually, more pieces of armor and weaponry needed to be repaired, resulting in a higher fee.

She then examined the numbers for the recent expedition. Eizo had still been busy with repairs, but he'd needed to fix a lot fewer items in total. Of course, this could be partially explained by the skills of the Eimoors' privately employed soldiers. Their training period had been condensed, but the results were hard to argue with.

Still, there should've been more items damaged during the battles. Except... She'd heard that the swords used during the campaign had all been forged by Eizo.

Therein must lie the solution to the mystery.

Frederica sighed heavily. "What should I do?"

She couldn't falsify the records. It was a crime to do so, even if she was employed directly by the kingdom. But, if she let the record stand as it was, that affable blacksmith was going to be dragged

along to every battle and military campaign. There was no way he would want that.

Her hand moved to brush the cushion on her chair without her realizing it. Ever since Eizo had gifted it to her, the pillow had become one of her cherished belongings.

Frederica worried over the problem for a while before she finally decided what to do: she would strike Eizo's name from the record. He'd also participated directly in the battle, so Frederica used that fact as a loophole; his name would be redacted as a military secret.

"Eizo doesn't know it yet, but he owes me one for this," she muttered.

Our heroine, Frederica Schurter, who'd worked so diligently for the benefit of the kingdom and a certain someone (though she'd never admit it to the person himself), knew every law and regulation by heart. She was famous for transfiguring discord into reason and for rejecting any disassemblage of reason into discord. Her meticulousness had even earned her the moniker, "the Demon of the Law."

Our heroine had no way of knowing that her work was just beginning.

The Story of How We Met IV: To Grow Strong

“Shit!” the dark-skinned woman cursed. Unable to suppress her anger, she threw a punch at the corridor’s walls. The dull thump of her fist hitting the stone was absorbed by the dense structure.

On the last patrol she’d commanded, things had gone awry—the mission couldn’t rightfully be considered a success or a failure. There had been only a few casualties; however, her troops had suffered major damage to much of their equipment.

But in the end, something intangible had taken the most brutal beating: the demon commander’s pride...*Nilda’s* pride.

To put it succinctly, Nilda had failed. She’d been defenseless in front of her opponent. If she’d been facing the strongest demon lord in the kingdom, then her inability to fight back would’ve been understandable...but her adversary had been a *human*, a member of a weaker race. She’d never anticipated losing to one.

And yet...

Nilda remembered the battle clearly.

It happened before any of Nilda’s subordinates even got the chance to take a single breath—their enemy, a human mercenary, destroyed every one of the demons’ weapons. Then, the human followed up with crippling blows to each demon soldier’s vitals. In an instant, Nilda’s forces were rendered unconscious.

The demons had gone into battle prepared to lose their lives, but the crimson-haired human woman stopped short of killing them. Nilda considered this less of a mercy and more of a humiliation.

Upon their return to the castle, Nilda went straight to the parlor to report the details of the incident to the Demon Queen. She

anticipated severe punishment for daring to live on so shamelessly in defiance of her defeat.

However, the queen barely looked up from the documents she'd been pouring over. She said only, "I see," before losing interest in the conversation and returning to her paperwork.

Nilda was now on her way back from the parlor, headed for her private room.

The biggest shock to Nilda was the queen's indifference to the report of loss. She hadn't been disappointed nor had she shown any other emotion. It may have been the queen's way of showing kindness, but Nilda would have rather faced her wrath or been scolded harshly.

Instead, Nilda returned to her room, her heart tight with pain. She had to think about what to do next.

Admittedly, from the demon kingdom's perspective, there were no issues with how the patrol had concluded. Her party had sustained few injuries, and even the heaviest wounds would heal eventually with rest and recuperation. The damage to their weapons was another story, but there was nothing to do about that except repair and move on.

Even so, Nilda felt responsible. Their failure had been her fault. She would step down from her duties as commander and take a break.

In the meantime, Nilda would pursue the hints that the red-haired human had given her and procure herself a weapon of equal caliber to the mercenary's. Or rather, she would hunt down the blacksmith who could forge a suitable weapon.

Having made up her mind, Nilda decided to set off early tomorrow morning. She turned in early.

The next day, she woke up unusually refreshed. After eating a hearty breakfast, Nilda paid an audience to the Demon Queen's chambers.

Bright-eyed and awake, Nilda sipped at the tea, which was one she liked. The Demon Queen listened to Nilda's decision with her eyes closed. After Nilda summarized her plans, the queen opened her eyes. "Do you really believe a new weapon is the solution to your problem?"

"That's..." Nilda's words trailed off and stuck in her throat.

Had her soldiers' weapons been of a higher caliber, then the demons wouldn't have lost so easily to the human's blade. However, that was only one detail in a much larger picture. Nilda would've been defeated anyway because of the mercenary's monstrous speed... *That* was her greatest weapon.

Nilda recalled that, when the woman's allies had come running, they'd called her "Lightning Strike." Certainly, she'd earned the nickname.

Obtaining a better weapon would be pointless if Nilda couldn't think of a way to combat that speed.

But...even so...

Nilda fixed her gaze on the Demon Queen and opened her mouth to speak. "No. I acknowledge that the weapon alone won't solve anything. I cannot train myself to move or attack as swiftly. However, once we are on an even playing field with respect to our weaponry's capabilities, I will strategize on how to deal with her speed. Even if victory is out of reach, I am determined not to lose again."

The Demon Queen returned Nilda's steady gaze. Time seemed to stop between the two of them for just a moment. Nilda swore she could hear the sound of her sweat trickling down her forehead in the perfect silence.

At last, the Demon Queen's composure cracked. "Heh," she chuckled.

Nilda's face twisted in confusion.

"Your words have pleased me more than I expected," the queen stated.

"You are too kind, Your Majesty," Nilda replied.

"If you'd been consumed by a desire for revenge or had merely been coveting a new toy, I would've stopped you from stepping down."

"Do you mean to say...?"

"Your growth benefits the kingdom," the Demon Queen declared. "In truth, I'd been thinking about relieving your party from their duties temporarily. Minor or not, most everyone suffered some sort of injury, no?"

"Yes, the most critically injured will need a month to recover," Nilda answered.

"In that case, you shall have your month of sabbatical. I will take over command of your troops in the meantime. You may go wherever you please for your search," the Demon Queen said.

Nilda kneeled. "Thank you very much!"

The Demon Queen, satisfied, nodded without another word.

By the time the sun had climbed midway up the sky, Nilda, dressed in traveler's garb, had come to the border between the demon kingdom and its neighbor. It wasn't her first time leaving the kingdom, but she still felt the creep of nervousness.

Nevertheless, filled with determination, she took a step forward and crossed beyond the border of the demon kingdom into the fate that was awaiting her.

The Story of How We Met V: Emergency in the Elven Village

“These numbers are concerning,” the young-looking man muttered with furrowed brows. Monsters had always spawned periodically in that cave, but upon investigation, the nest had turned out to be considerably larger than usual.

This handsome man had long, pointed ears, and despite his spry looks, he’d been alive for over three centuries. Old in spirit but youthful in appearance, this man was the chief of the elven village.

“We have to deal with this problem posthaste,” the chief mumbled to himself.

If the monsters had been few in number, then the elves would’ve easily taken care of them. But alas, that was not the case. Monsters spawned from stagnant magic, though the exact mechanism was still unknown—once they’d started to spawn, the monsters themselves became a source of stagnant magic from which new monsters spawned, leading to an insidious cycle. The population could increase limitlessly, and if left unchecked, the monsters would eventually overtake the village.

Wild animals corrupted by magic were one thing, but monsters born of pure magic had only one goal: to kill every living thing.

The village would be doomed. That deadly scenario had to be avoided at all costs.

The village chief rushed away from the cave and ran back to the village at top speed, trying not to waste even a second.

The monsters must be exterminated and the safety of the village secured.

□□□

“Are you positive?” I asked the village chief—my brother—after he’d explained the shocking situation. He’d burst into the house in a state of agitation.

“Unfortunately, I am,” he said grimly. “There may even be an alpha-type among them.”

I’d never seen an alpha before. I hadn’t even hit my second century in age yet, but my brother had encountered one when he was young. Immediately, I could tell how serious the situation was by his discomposure.

My brother grabbed the village’s sacred sword and ran back out of the door. I quickly followed him, taking up a post next to the wooden plank that was installed near our house. With all my might, I began striking the plate with a hammer, sounding an alarm that was part of a system to alert our people of danger.

Even with my meager strength, the sound of the hammer strikes boomed throughout the village, and in no time, folks dressed in armor gathered in the village square. It was difficult to tell everyone’s ages since elves kept their youthful looks, but young or old, man or woman, anyone who could fight would fight. Every warrior in the square was a familiar face to me.

To protect our home, everyone had answered the call to arms. I was moved by the pure showing of spirit and resolve.

Sheila, my childhood friend, was also among the crowd. Her presence alone gave me strength. I called out to her. “Sheila, you’ve come to help too?”

“Of course. I know how important this is for the village, and by extension, how important it is for you, my friend,” she said with a wink.

My brother strode in front of the crowd, the mithril sword gleaming in his hands. The hidden power of this sword was a secret to most;

only my brother, I, and a select few others knew. I fervently hoped we wouldn't have to draw on the sword's true strength.

"With my own eyes, I verified that monsters have spawned in great numbers within the cave. An alpha might have spawned as well," my brother reported to the villagers.

Upon hearing the news, several of them, the ones who knew how terrifying an alpha could be, swallowed nervously.

But there were other people like me who weren't familiar with alpha-level monsters. Nevertheless, we could read the air, and we all understood how serious this matter was. The eyes of everyone in the crowd hardened.

"We will set off immediately," my brother declared. "I want to eliminate this nest as soon as possible."

The crowd nodded as one. My brother gave a firm nod back. Together, all the villagers started moving in the direction of the cave.

Of course, I was going too. All elves could use magic to some extent, but my brother, Sheila, and I were the most powerful. Sheila would be staying behind in the village just in case anything happened.

If it came down to it, I'd face off against the alpha with my magic. A shiver ran down my spine just thinking about the prospect, but I couldn't run away. The fate of our village was on the line.

I was the younger sister of the village chief, so hiding away at home because I was scared...wasn't an option.

Determined, I followed along at the back of the crowd, keeping a close watch on our surroundings.

In the cave, the battle raged. My brother and I stepped to the side and prepared our spells. In the meantime, the situation grew grimmer around us.

There was a large group of monsters that had already spawned. The majority were small specimens, but monsters were monsters; they weren't the same as the animals we hunted in the forest.

We had been steadily hewing them down, but not without a cost. Three people had already been injured in a scuffle and two others incapacitated. Our numbers were dwindling.

Even so, we had the upper hand. At this rate, we would make it out victorious one way or another.

But the light of hope vanished before our eyes when *it* appeared.

A bellow shook the air when it emerged from the inner chambers of the cave.

“GROARRRR!”

It was as tall as two men—one stacked on top of the other's shoulders. Its muscles bulged, and horns sprouted out of its forehead.

We were facing an ogre.

“Damn it! Our luck's run out!” my brother cursed. He and I took out a few underlings as we tracked the alpha.

A few elves armed with swords approached the ogre, but it swept them aside with a single swipe of its arm. My brother and I cast spells, restraining it with our magic, but the ogre was going to be difficult to kill. If we could take it down, then a large portion of the stagnant magic in the cave would disappear all in one go. This would turn the tides in our favor, but...

“This is bad...” my brother mumbled beside me.

Stagnant magic always attracted more magic. If we didn't act soon, monsters were going to start spawning anew right before our very eyes.

“Lidy, buy me some time,” my brother said.

“Got it. But what are you—”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to use the sword,” he said, one corner of his mouth twisting upward.

The true might of the sword was not actually its mithril blade, but rather, its ability to store magical energy. By sacrificing one’s life force, a person could access the magic inside of it. Doing so could lead us to victory...but it could also force us to abandon the village.

It was a relief that I wasn’t the only one who wanted to avoid such a resolution. I threw out a series of minor spells, like *ember*, *flash flare*, and *whirlwind*, attacking the monsters with small bursts of flame, whizzing balls of light, and sharp gusts of wind.

The ogre was largely unaffected by my attacks, but I was able to protect the other villagers and keep blows from landing on my brother.

Of course, I had to watch my own back too. But the other villagers were looking out for me and intercepting any strikes that headed my way. So far, I was fairly uninjured.

I was grateful from the bottom of my heart for my brethren—they were risking injury and even staking their lives to protect me.

And so, I kept up my barrage of magic. I had begun to lose sense of time when my brother yelled out, “Everyone, get down!!!”

All the elves immediately dropped to the ground. As I crouched, I peered at my brother.

Our eyes met.

His expression was lonely, but he flashed me a gentle smile. His hand moved to the sword strapped to his waist.

“Brother! You mustn’t!!!” I screamed, trying to get back on my feet.

The moment my brother unsheathed the sword, a bright white light filled my vision and a thunderous roar echoed around the chamber.

By the time I came back to my senses, everything was over, and there were no monsters moving around me. The ogre had vanished...along with my brother.

He had disappeared, and the only traces of him left behind were the broken pieces of the mithril sword. These shards were the greatest proof of what he had done.

I rushed over and collected the pieces of the sword, ending up with pebbles and bits of rock clutched in my hands as well, but that was neither here nor there. I'd sort everything out later.

Once I had all the shards, I turned and looked around me. My fellow villagers, in various states of injury, were sitting or lying on the ground.

"There are a few monsters still remaining, but let's retreat for now!" I called out to everyone. "In our state, we won't be able to finish them off. We'll return another day to wipe out the rest! I swear it!"

Shouts of agreement rang throughout the cave. We lent our shoulders to the injured, carrying them when necessary, and together, made our way back to the entrance and then back home.

In that moment, I vowed to myself—I would repair the sword and return to hunt down every single monster.

However, I didn't yet know how much my life would change after meeting the blacksmith...

☐☐☐

"That's when you went to Eizo's forge?"

"Yes. A merchant who'd dealt with mithril told me the location."

“He’s the one who established the renowned Bertrand Company, right? Camilo Bertrand?”

“Exactly.” Lidy smiled softly, her eyes glazed with nostalgia.

She now gave her family name as Tanya. Elves didn’t share the dwarven custom of taking on a forge’s name as their own, but she’d made her excuses—after all, when she’d lived at the forge, she’d once been family with a dwarf.

I’d finally come here to the elven village after persistently questioning Rike for its location; she’d been reluctant to tell me. And when I asked Lidy about Eizo’s whereabouts, she’d sidestepped that question, also stating that she’d promised not to say.

Despite the years that had passed, Lidy still looked like a young woman. It had taken me a long time to arrange a meeting with her and even longer before she finally shared her story with me.

I encouraged her to continue the tale—no, the legend—of the blacksmith who’d changed her life.

And as she resumed her story, she wore an expression of joy.

Afterword

To all my new readers, it's good to meet you for the first time. For my three-peat readers, it's good to meet you for a third time. And for those rare unicorns for whom this is our second meeting, well, it's good to meet you again too. By day, I'm a man who's past the age that Japanese superstition deems calamitous, and by night, a light novel author writing under the pen name Tamamaru.

I owe you all my deepest gratitude for your glowing reviews, which helped to secure the birth of this third volume even as the second volume had just been put out into stores. Those reviews are the reason why you are able to read these words right now. Thank you very much.

We've finally reached the third volume of the series, and the plot of this volume has diverged greatly from the web novel.

In the previous volume, I made a couple of small changes and edits that didn't affect the story in any major ways, like the gang going fishing before Lidy returned home. However, the timeline of this volume is fundamentally different from the original. The last arc concludes the same way, but the journey to the destination is different. Lidy is gone for most of the book, so there are some discrepancies with the Tanya family's interactions with Krul.

When editing the manuscript, I worked to the bone to make sure I had included the right number of people. I also had to keep track of which characters were in the know at any given time.

Having done this, I've now gained a new appreciation for all the great web novelists upon whose shoulders I stand—they have made it look so easy to add and remove characters at the drop of a dime, along with cutting and editing major swathes of the story. They are true professionals.

The readers who have followed the web serialization likely already suspected this, but I'd planned for Lidy to make a comeback after the second volume. Her reappearance in this volume is why the story of her encounter with Eizo wasn't included in volume two.

Actually, there'd been a previous draft where Lidy didn't become one of the family—I'd originally conceptualized her to help explain the elven race in this world, and she was to pop in to give the occasional advice on magic and magical phenomena. However, Forge Eizo already had a forest expert, blacksmith expert, and society expert, so I decided that the gang needed a magic expert too. Thus, in order to bring Lidy into the fold, I prepared a rather elaborate plotline.

I'd intended it to be a more lighthearted story at first...

I'm serious.

But Eizo is fundamentally a man who's perfectly content with sequestering in the Black Forest and feeding himself off his blacksmithing work. It takes no small army to drag him out of his reticent lifestyle. That was how the monster subjugation force was born.

With respect to Miss Frederica, I have a feeling that I already know what all of you readers want to say... I was also conflicted from start to finish when compiling this manuscript, but in the end, I held back my tears and struck out those particular lines.

That's right. I'm talking about her glasses.

In Eizo's new world, convex lenses may exist, but concave lenses are rare. While rare is hardly the same thing as nonexistent, it didn't feel right that Miss Frederica, who is far from being the young lady of a noble family, should possess a pair of her own, so I sent them on their way.

By the time she earns herself the nickname "the Demon of the Law," it could be possible that she'd acquired glasses, so if I get a chance to

write a story about her later years, I'll be sure to show them off to all you readers.

There's a lot I have to ask for to make that happen...but I shall do my best.

In this volume, we see the appearance of yet another heroine (or is that label not applicable in Nilda's case?). I decided on her appearance relatively early in the process.

For those of you who read the prologue, I'm sure you already know, but Nilda is a critical character who bridges the gap between the Demon Queen and Eizo. Therefore, there was little question as to whether she needed to take the stage or not—she did.

On the other hand, the person who connects Eizo to the hero has never appeared in the web novel. Their only time in the spotlight was in the epilogue of the first volume. The first volume was highly rated by readers, so for those of you who have yet to read it, it would give me the greatest pleasure if you were to buy a copy and see for yourself (yes, this is an ad).

This work won the grand prize in the isekai fantasy category in the fourth Kakuyomu Web Novel Contest, which led to the series's novelization. When it was decided that Kinta-sensei was going to be the illustrator, I secretly resolved to keep the series going until I could see an illustration of Nilda. That wish of mine has been fulfilled with this volume. Surely this means I've met one more of my goals. No? Yes.

Of course, the series is still ongoing. The web serialization has many more chapters uploaded to both Kakuyomu and Shosetsuka ni Naro. The questions you are all curious about may have already been answered in the web series, so for anyone interested, please do check it out. And with your support, the novelization will continue.

For those of you reading this volume in a bookstore, I would sincerely appreciate you taking this book with you to the register.

On to the acknowledgments:

Once again, Kinta-sensei, you have outdone yourself with the illustrations. Every volume, I look forward to seeing the mockups and final renderings. Thank you sincerely for your hard work.

Himori Yoshi-sensei is in charge of the comic adaptation, which I await with anticipation every month. Thank you very much. The comic is serialized through Web Dengeki PlayStation Comic. Readers, please give it a try.

As always, I'm grateful to my editor, S-san, who never fails to deliver remarkable work.

And thanks to my friends, my mother and my little sister, and the two cats—Chama and Konbu—for giving me strength.

Lastly, my utmost gratitude to all of you readers who have made it through this volume with me. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

I hope we meet again in the afterword of the fourth volume!

RIKE

A dwarf who begged her way into an apprenticeship with Eizo after being captivated by his skills.

EIZO

A man who loves cats and working with his hands. Formerly a corporate drone.

KRUL

A drake who adores pulling carts around.

SAMYA

A half-tiger girl who's one of the beastfolk. She came to live with Eizo after he rescued her from the brink of death.

DIANA

The precious daughter of the Eimoor comital family. She's a tomboy who loves swordplay.

My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World

3



FREDERICA

A civilian official working for the kingdom. She oversees expenditures on the campaign to exterminate the monsters.

The monster subjugation campaign needed a blacksmith...

so Forge Eizo's first branch workshop is open for business!

Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta

3

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My Quiet Blacksmith Life in Another World: Volume 3

by Tamamaru

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Edited by C.D. Leeson

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