
Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta
11
My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World


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Prologue: Winter at the Drinking Goose

"Ugh, it's still a bit cold," said a young woman as she rubbed her cold fingertips together.

In this city, which was near the capital of the kingdom, winter was drawing to a close, and the warm footsteps of early spring were approaching. Still, it wasn't rare to experience a few frosty days that ate away at the body.

The woman opened the door to the Drinking Goose, a small restaurant located downtown.

The owner of a tinkering store near the Drinking Goose was waiting outside the door. He laughed and called out to the woman, "Morning, Athena! Brrr! Still cold, isn't it?"

Athena had been friends with the store owner since her parents were still alive, and the two went way back—this exchange about the weather had become a yearly greeting of sorts. Lending credence to their words, the store owner wore thick layers, something they'd never do while working.

"Yeah," Athena agreed with a small sigh. "I hope it warms up in a couple weeks—that'd make my life a lot easier."

Her mind wandered to the Black Forest. It wasn't far from where she was—in fact, the road leading out of the city toward the nearby capital curved around the bounds of the forest. No doubt the Black Forest was experiencing a chilly morning as well.

What of that man—the grumpy geezer—and his family? He lived in the Black Forest, and right before winter, he'd claimed that he couldn't provide her with much meat for a while. Simply put, there was just nothing to hunt during the cold season. *I've heard rumors that the Black Forest is a deadly place and that no one who sets foot there ever returns. He does, though. And he always seems so...laid-*

back. The man consistently provided her with the highest-quality meat around, and she could do nothing but trust his words.

Athena allowed the owner of the tinkering shop to head inside ahead of her—she did a little stretch and muttered to herself, "Hmm, spring is close, but not quite here yet."

She was busy thinking of new dishes to add to her menu using the meat from the Black Forest, but that process wasn't going so smoothly. The man who provided the meat had once even offered to help think of a dish or two, but Athena had promptly refused.

"Should I have not done that?" she wondered.

Was it due to the cold? Athena couldn't help but allow herself a moment of weakness before she hastily slapped her cheeks to give herself some energy.

"No, I made that decision myself!"

With that, Athena stepped inside her restaurant. The moment she set foot into her humble establishment, her frosty fingertips gradually grew warm. She glanced at the sunlight that shone in through the window, which gently illuminated the space.

"All right! I'm going to give it my all today!"

Athena slipped on her apron and headed into the kitchen. Her first order of business was to prepare some warm soup for her morning regulars. After pouring some water into a large pot, she turned on the heat, then chopped some vegetables and prepared the spices, working swiftly and efficiently. She'd learned her kitchen skills from her parents.

"Since the days are still cold, I think I'll add an extra dash to the pot," Athena muttered.

She tossed in her spices and stirred the soup once more. An inviting aroma soon filled her restaurant.

A short while later, she heard the door open.

"Welcome!" she called out.

When she popped her head out of the kitchen, she spotted one of her regulars—he was rubbing his nose, which was red from the cold, and he flashed her a smile.

"Morning, Athena," he said. "Still so brisk out, isn't it? Could I have the usual?"

"Coming right up!" Athena replied.

She ladled warm soup into a bowl and brought out some freshly baked bread for her customer.

"Hot soup's just the best," he said. "Eating yours makes me feel like I have enough energy to last the whole day!"

He grinned with satisfaction and took a sip of the broth while Athena smiled at him happily. She didn't have too many customers come in after him, and when the morning rush was over, Athena went back to thinking of a new dish to add to her menu. *A dish that uses meat from the Black Forest...* She'd tested several ideas but she wasn't content with any of them.

"Hmm... What about...? No, not this..."

While Athena busily tried to come up with a new addition to the menu, snow—late for the season—began to fall. She gazed out the window and saw a dusting of white on the branches of the trees lining the streets. It was a lovely sight to behold.

Just then, the door opened, and an unfamiliar face stepped inside.

"Excuse me, are you open?" the young man asked in a quavering voice.

"We sure are. It must've been cold outside, huh?" Athena quickly brought out a warm drink for her new customer. "Here you are. That'll warm you up nicely."

The man voiced his gratitude and slowly sipped his drink. "Thank you. Actually, I'm on my way to the capital, but I heard that you serve interesting meat dishes, and I just had to visit."

Athena raised an eyebrow. The fact that she served meat from the Black Forest wasn't well-known just yet, but she knew that the man who supplied the meat had a merchant for a friend. Perhaps word had spread from there. The man from the forest was also apparently friends with the lord of this city, but she'd assumed that had been his attempt at a joke.

"Why don't you try some of this soup?" Athena offered.

She brought out a bowl—it was a new dish she was testing—and her customer gingerly yet gratefully took the soup.

The man tasted it, then gasped. "My word! This...is just superb!

Delicious!”

His eyes sparkled with delight, and Athena’s eyes widened with shock and joy.

“Is it really?” she asked. “It’s actually a new menu item I’ve been experimenting with. It isn’t quite to my liking just yet...”

“What?! This is absolutely delectable! This’ll give me plenty of energy even during this cold snap!”

The customer’s praise boosted Athena’s confidence. Could *this* be the recipe she was after? The man then raised a spoonful of meat into the air.

“Is this the specially sourced meat?” he asked.

Athena nodded. “That’s right. Isn’t it absolutely delicious?”

“It really is. The flavor is a lot milder and gentler than the rumors led me to believe.”

Maybe the meat’s flavor took on the personality of the man who brought it to me... Nah, I doubt it. Yet, oddly enough, she couldn’t completely dismiss this idea.

“The one who provides me with the meat is a very gentle person,” she said.

The man chuckled, amused by what he assumed was a joke.

Snow continued to fall throughout the evening, and people swiftly walked through the streets, eager to get out of the cold. Customers in a steady stream made their way into the Drinking Goose.

“Athena, I’d like something warm, please,” one of her few regulars called out. Their voice echoed inside the restaurant.

Athena was bustling around, and though she had her hands full, her smile never faded. Little by little, she began to see more people ordering the new soup that she’d just put on the menu.

“Is this new? It’s delicious!” one customer said.

“Yeah, it warms you right up,” another added.

Athena smiled with delight. As the night wore on and the customers all left, she entrusted her tired bones to a nearby chair. Gazing outside, she watched the snow quietly flutter to the ground.

“It was cold, but today was a good day,” Athena said with satisfaction. Her new soup was a resounding success, and many customers had been greeted by a bowl of warmth. This tiny bit of

happiness warmed her very soul.

As she took a break, her mind once again wandered to the resident of the Black Forest. How was the grumpy, unfriendly man doing? And what about his family? No doubt they were also crowded around a table of warm food—despite living in a forest rumored to take the lives of those who entered it.

Athena's resolve was renewed. "I want them to try out this new soup too."

Winter would continue for a little while longer, but the warmth of spring was beginning to sprout within her heart.

Chapter 1: God's Metal

When the winter had been at its coldest, and the frosty wind had nipped at our skin, we at Forge Eizo had been notified that counterfeit versions of our knives were circulating around the kingdom's capital. These blades even had our fat cat insignia engraved on their pommels. I wasn't planning on getting into a confrontation over the issue, but merchants liked to make money, so they would probably keep selling the fakes. Our forge could potentially suffer a bit of an economic blow.

I had quite a bit of money saved up, and we were practically self-sufficient, so there weren't any immediate concerns. But if I were no longer able to make a living as a blacksmith, I'd have no choice but to close up shop, which would cut off all my income. Marius, who was a part of the ruling political faction of the kingdom, was in hot pursuit of the mastermind behind the fakes. So far, we'd learned that they were being produced and distributed by people within the duke's nonruling faction, but we could only catch those low on the social ladder. And since those people could easily be cut off from the mastermind, catching them would do us no good.

Thus, a plan was hatched to publicly pursue the counterfeiters. I would forge a blade that would be handed over to an emissary of the empire as a kingdom souvenir. This emissary (who would be in on the ruse) would claim to have bought the knife in the capital. And when the emissary showed the knife to Marius, the count would point out that it wasn't a genuine Forge Eizo product, but a fake.

This would create a larger fuss and would force an even more serious investigation. House Eizo—that is, beastfolk Samya, Rike the dwarf, Marius's sister Diana, Lidy the elf, the famous mercenary Helen, Seventh Imperial Princess Anne, and I—was briefed on the plan in Camilo's shop, located in the city. My primary concern was about this "fake" blade I'd be offering.

"What material should I use?" I asked Camilo.

He turned toward the head clerk, who nodded and left the room.

"Ah, well, we'll need you to forge a bit of a farce," Camilo admitted. "I'm sorry to always drag you into things, but..."

"Hey, it's too late now," I replied.

Camilo flashed a strained smile. "I can't deny it, but it'd be great if you could phrase that a little kinder."

"Two geezers don't need to be overly sensitive with each other, do they?"

"Guess not."

The head clerk returned holding a sturdy box. It wasn't very large, maybe just big enough for a cat to happily squeeze into. The head clerk handed the box to Camilo, who placed it on the table. It was roughly in the shape of a treasure chest one might see in an RPG back on Earth, but the top of the box wasn't rounded—it was flat and made of wicker.

"Here it is," Camilo said, opening the box.

An item emitting a blinding light appeared before my eyes, but that light immediately died down. *The glow must've come from magical energy*, I guessed. When I was able to take a good look at the object, it resembled gold, but the sliver of sunlight it reflected gave off a rainbow sheen. It sort of looked like a bit of gold caked in oil slick.

I glanced at Camilo, and he nodded back at me. I took that as my cue and reached out to take the item from the box. It was cold to the touch, and when I pressed it, the surface didn't give way to my finger.

"Color aside, this feels metallic," I said.

It wasn't malleable like meghizium, and it wasn't faintly warm like hihiirokane. I lifted it into the air and found that it was a lot heavier than it looked.

"It's hefty."

"Well, yeah, I guess it is," Camilo replied.

"What is it? It's not adamantite, hihiirokane, appoitakara, or meghizium—I know that much."

I'd seen every single one of these ores, but this metal didn't look

like any of them. If I had to choose, the lump most closely resembled adamantite, but it clearly had a unique characteristic that differentiated it from the adamantite I was familiar with. I'd never seen or felt this metal before.

"I guess there's some stuff that even you don't know," Camilo observed.

I sighed. "The world's filled with so many things that I don't know—it's sometimes depressing."

My smithing cheats rarely gave me details on items or a guide on how to process them. My installed knowledge, which was the source of my information about this world, wasn't much help either, unless it directly pertained to my life or safety. Many times, there was just a chunk of information missing, and it would only be filled in when I learned the name of whatever I was handling. Sure, there was some fun in learning new things, but there were many occasions where I just needed the information immediately—there were upsides and downsides. In any case, no matter how long I gazed at this metal, I just couldn't identify what it was, and I raised my hands in the air in surrender.

"Nope. Haven't got a clue," I said.

"You see..." Camilo began, his smile growing broader. The room fell silent—someone nervously gulped, and even that small sound seemed deafening. "This, my friend, is orichalcum."

Everyone stood up with a loud clatter as they saw me almost drop this precious bit of metal from sheer shock.

"This?!" I cried.

Silence settled over the room once more, and the orichalcum flashed another rainbow glimmer—I could've sworn that it smiled at me. Only then did my installed knowledge provide me with further information, all too late. But I didn't need cheats and installed knowledge to know about this metal; it was extremely famous, even back on Earth. It was a divine metal that literally everyone must've known about.

While mithril was similarly sturdy and lightweight, orichalcum was said to be exponentially better. A blade made of this metal wouldn't rust, bend, or break and was light to wield.

I'd restored a mithril sword before—it'd been shattered to pieces, but I'd been able to faintly tell that it'd been used in battle. Mithril didn't show much wear and tear compared to other metals, but it was still obvious when it had been used. Orichalcum was likely capable of hiding those traces completely.

Now, my concern was how my smithing skills (cheats) would fare against this priceless metal. I was certain I could make a terrifying blade, and I was only keen on working with this metal when a hero came to me asking for help, claiming that the Demon Queen was invading the land—or something like that.

"Does it have any special powers?" I wondered. "Like maybe it can call forth water or something."

Diana's eyes glimmered with excitement. "Like how appoitakara glows!"

"Yeah, but that just glows—nothing more."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah. It'd be great if it could summon water, but unfortunately, no dice."

"Now that you mention it, I've never seen appoitakara do that before."

Diana frowned pensively, and I could relate to her all too well. In fact, if appoitakara *was* capable of summoning water, I'd be way more excited for it than anything.

"I've heard that orichalcum can call forth lightning," Anne said.

"From who?" I asked.

"A minstrel who visited our home."

"Interesting..."

Her home was the imperial palace, and a minstrel that had been invited to such an honorable place must've had some stories that were worth listening to. God existed in this world, so even absurd tales could potentially be true. *To be honest, my cheats are very close to the realm of absurdity...* Still, minstrels were known to speak of tales and legends, and Anne's casual demeanor made it clear that she took that story with a grain of salt. *And I should too.*

"I've heard that it can bring forth earthquakes," Rike said.

"At that point, the quality of the weapon itself doesn't really

matter, huh?" I replied.

"Agreed. I think the rumor just implies how impactful and astonishing the metal is."

It seemed even the dwarves had stories of their own. Rike wasn't a noble, but dwarves were a race mired in tradition, and they excelled in smithing. While I hesitated to just brush that story away, I agreed with Rike—it was probably an exaggeration, a mere metaphor to express just how awesome orichalcum was. For example, if someone was so fast that people said they *practically* soared through the sky, the rumor mill would start and eventually circulate that the person could *actually* soar through the sky.

Camilo twiddled with his mustache. "Personally, I haven't heard of orichalcum being capable of supernatural feats."

"It might not come with any bonus powers, but are you sure that you should hand over this precious metal to the empire?" I asked.

"Well," he said as he scratched his cheek, "truth be told, the orichalcum actually *came* from the empire."

I raised a bemused eyebrow; Anne clearly looked restless.

"So technically, while this is a gift from the kingdom, we're just returning an item back to the empire, its rightful owner," Camilo explained.

"I'm shocked that the empire trusted us with this," I said.

I assumed that a top secret mission had transported the orichalcum from the empire to the kingdom. If the kingdom feigned ignorance and claimed the orichalcum as our own, the empire would have no way of getting it back.

Camilo looked thoughtful. "You could call it a show of the empire's generosity—or rather, them flaunting their power and wealth."

I gave him a quizzical look—he toyed with his mustache again.

"They're tacitly implying that they don't even care if it was stolen from them..."

"Because they've got more from where that came from," I finished.

I glanced at Anne, who gave a troubled tilt of her head and furrowed her brow, implying that even the imperial princess had

been kept in the dark about this. In other words, the precise amount of orichalcum the empire possessed was highly confidential information that even the imperial family wasn't entirely privy to. Indeed, the empire was casually—no, pretty openly, in this case—showing off their power, allowing them to gain the advantage in diplomatic relations in the future. By showing their flexibility and generosity with this precious item, they were only proving their might.

"So? What do you wanna do?" Camilo asked as he crossed his arms.

For the umpteenth time today, I gazed at him, perplexed. "What do you mean?"

He let out a loud sigh. "Will you accept this request?"

"To forge an orichalcum knife?" Camilo nodded, and I grinned back. Even *I* knew that my smirk was laced with malice. "You think *not* accepting this request has ever crossed my mind?"

Laughter filled the meeting room. *All right then, guess I've gotta use some elbow grease for this one.*

Camilo sighed heavily. "That's a relief. I don't know what I would've done if you'd declined."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I replied with an exaggerated shrug. "Though I can't deny that this seems a bit...troublesome."

He offered a strained smile. "I really *do* feel bad about pushing things onto you."

"Hey, I'll trust you at your word." I smiled back—though I also had to force it.

Camilo had his position to maintain, and I was more than willing to take on some troublesome matters. While I couldn't deny that my willingness came from a feeling of friendship, in terms of business, it was also best to have him owe me one here so I could turn to him if needed. *Plus, orichalcum!* I was genuinely grateful that I could challenge my skills against such a precious item. If my knowledge back on Earth was any sort of metric, under normal circumstances, I would've never been able to lay eyes on this metal—it wasn't so easy to come by in this world either.

To be fair, our house *did* have a small collection of precious ores,

but orichalcum was by far and away the most widely renowned metal (in this world and on Earth), and that just made me excited. The one complaint I had was that, despite its fame, my installed knowledge didn't provide me with any useful details—orichalcum was something still shrouded in mystery. *My cheats don't tell me exactly how to process a certain metal when I look at it. I was outta luck with meghizium too.*

"I'd love to accept, but how much time do I have?" I asked.

My experience back on Earth forced me to become accustomed to unreasonable product delivery time frames (which, honestly, isn't anything to be proud of). However, if they wanted the orichalcum blade right away, I couldn't do much there.

"I won't tell you to bring it back next week, but if possible, I'd like it in a month," Camilo replied.

Since I had to somehow find a way to process the orichalcum before I could even begin to forge with it, a month was still pushing it. *Back on Earth, I'd definitely try to ask for an extension before asking to add a premium as an expedited fee—but my requests were never quite heard, were they?*

"All right," I said. "But I won't be able to bring you as many wares for our regular order."

Since I'd be focused on the orichalcum, Rike and the others would be entrusted with making the usual knives for me—I'd be too busy to forge any at all. No matter how powerful my smithing cheats were, I could no longer single-handedly match the speed of my entire family. Obviously, as they worked more in the forge, they all became better smiths. I was definitely happy to see it, but admittedly, I felt a bit lonely too.

"I don't mind," Camilo replied. "I'm the one making this unreasonable request. I'll make do with what I've got during that time, so you don't need to worry about it."

"Roger that," I replied casually.

Camilo offered me a hand, and I shook it, signaling that the deal was struck. He then glanced over at the head clerk, who nodded and left to check on the order I'd brought in. Our meeting went on as usual as we peppered in some casual conversation; I hadn't been in

the city for a while, but I received his "newspaper" in the mail, which provided me with general updates about any significant affairs. For now, we mostly spoke about any new occurrences within the past two weeks. The city was peaceful, more or less, barring the fact that counterfeits of our knives were circulating on the market. Or so he told me. But it seems that right after I received his biweekly paper, a rather large ruin was found within the kingdom. That discovery made the rounds, and numerous pathfinders had flooded the capital, hoping to strike gold.

"Is there a chance that pathfinders might bring in the fake knives and spread them around the capital?" I asked. "Our opponents should've realized by now that we've discovered their current routine."

"Hm, nah, I don't think the pathfinders will be tasked with anything like that," Camilo replied with a shake of his head. "They can only bring in so many, but if the duke's faction employs more people, the danger of their scheme being brought to light will only increase."

"Fair enough."

Sure, pathfinders traveled around the world, but if most of their belongings were knives, that'd surely raise a few eyebrows. They could bring several knives and still avoid suspicion, but not more than that, so the counterfeiters would need to hire more people to distribute them. *People talk*, I thought, recalling the adage from Earth about how easy it was to spread rumors. If one in a hundred people loved to gossip, then in a group of one hundred, information would undoubtedly leak.

The reality was that there were probably way more loose lips that could sink ships, only increasing the likelihood of secrets being spilled. Camilo's guess was that the counterfeiters weren't willing to cross such a dangerous bridge.

On another note, pathfinders flooding the capital was a genuine business opportunity for many legitimate merchants, and it seemed the order I'd brought in this time around was a huge help for Camilo's store.

"I actually ran out of stock," he confessed. "I was biting my nails

with fear that I'd miss this business opportunity."

"So, what now?" I asked.

"We'll deliver your wares to the capital immediately."

I could only hope that the percentage of counterfeits circulating the market would decrease with our fresh batch of real stock, but I just had to sit back and endure it all for now. After all, the final blow might be the orichalcum knife that I'd forge, and the mere thought made me clench my hammer-free fists with anxiety.

The head clerk soon returned to tell us that he'd taken inventory of the items we'd brought. It was time for us to go. As I left the room, I turned back to face Camilo.

"Ah, right, about the order. Presuming that I get it done in a month..."

"Yeah?" Camilo replied.

"What'll I get paid?"

"Ah, yes..."

I just had to ask because I feared future surprises. Personally, I was more than happy to settle on whatever he offered, but things weren't so easy for me. *I can feel my family shooting daggers into me...*

"For now, you'll be getting this many gold coins from the kingdom," Camilo said, holding up his fingers to indicate a number.

It was a hefty sum. Though I'd be working with orichalcum, I'd receive a handsome amount merely for processing this material. A normal family in this world could easily get by for over a year with the money that I would receive. Camilo had mentioned gold coins from the kingdom; naturally, the empire had its own currency that was valued differently. The empire's gold coins were larger and possessed higher gold purity, making them a bit more valuable than the kingdom's coins. Since the orichalcum was coming from the empire, I wouldn't have questioned it if the money came from them, but it seemed the kingdom had appearances to maintain.

"Well, if I'm already set to get paid that amount, I don't mind," I replied.

For a moment, the air of the room turned icy, just as the wind had felt in the middle of winter, before it immediately passed. *Jeez,*

they keep me on my toes. I gathered myself together and gave a casual wave of my hand before I left the room for good.

The orichalcum was carefully stored in a box and placed into Rike's hands. No one in the city would be able to tell that we had such a precious metal kept tightly in that box, but when we returned home, my family would be free to view the orichalcum as they pleased (at least, until I had to turn it in to Camilo). I couldn't blame Rike for being so excited about it.

Rike was our coachman, so she would be driving us back to the forest and would be unable to catch even a glimpse of the box while she was doing so. *I mean, she could probably occasionally glance back, but still—if she wants to hold on to it for now, I'll let her.*

When we made our way to the backyard, the apprentice spotted us and trotted over with my daughters and Arashi in tow.

"Thanks, as always." I patted his head and handed him a tip.

"I should be the one thanking you," he replied.

"Nah, I'm just paying you what you're owed for your work... Well, I suppose Camilo does that, so this is more like a small allowance for my daughters' important friend."

The apprentice clutched the coins close to his chest while Krul and Lucy rubbed their heads against him.

"Oh, you girls are so smart!" I cooed. "You can say goodbye to him now."

"They really are very intelligent," the apprentice said. His kind gaze swept over them as he petted their heads. My two daughters cried out with delight.

"I'll see you next time."

"I'll be waiting!"

He waved his hand high in the air. Krul and Lucy joyfully bolted across the yard, dirt under their feet as they raced ahead. Hayate was perched gently atop my shoulder, and I fervently prayed that we could keep experiencing this kind of happiness.

I hitched Krul to the wagon, and we all piled on. She strutted forward with languid steps, though her power was all too apparent as the wagon lurched forward. Our cart now contained a small box—a new addition to our belongings. My mind eagerly wandered to the

future that lay dormant within the orichalcum.

Chapter 2: Testing and a Welcome Back

The dregs of winter still lingered, unwilling to loosen their grip on the changing of the seasons, but an impressive crowd still wandered the city streets. Krul pulled our rather slow cart through the streets. While it might have been unusual to see a drake-drawn cart, no one would assume that our humble transport carried a bit of orichalcum. Some people glanced at us, but none seemed overly concerned with my unusual family. *Besides, if anyone's so openly suspicious and bothered by us, I'm sure Helen would notice and tell them off.*

The wagon clattered along ever so slightly; the suspension system was unable to fully absorb all the impact, so I had to entrust my body to the bumpy road. I gazed at the people walking about and compared them to blood traveling through the veins—the streets—of the city. When I left, I spotted the same soldier that guarded the gates when I entered. I raised a hand in greeting.

"See you around!" I called out.

"Yeah, be careful out there," the soldier replied with a casual wave.

My next visit to the city would be in a month, and I hoped that life would be peaceful for the guards until then. Out on the road, we were greeted by the same icy breeze that'd brushed against our cheeks when we'd entered the city, and the roadside grasses fluttered in that chill. The cold didn't let up even in the Black Forest, and I spotted a few deer huddled together for warmth against the frosty air.

Aside from my daily water runs, the next time I'd trek through this forest would be in a month. If I finished the orichalcum before then, I might be able to tag along with a few hunts, but it was tough to coordinate my schedule around them. *After a month, when I'm*

done with the orichalcum knife, I should probably take a day off.

Once we arrived at our cabin, we all worked together to carry in the month's worth of supplies we bought from Camilo. Food, small items, and other necessities were put into storage or the forge. With that, our last order for the winter was safely delivered.

During dinner, Rike turned to me, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Boss, do you have any idea on how to work with the orichalcum?"

"Not a clue, I'm afraid," I replied with a shrug. "I plan on testing every method I can think of, though."

I'd start by just heating up the metal and hammering it. If that didn't work, I wanted to try using the meghizium route, where I added a ton of magical energy to make it more malleable. And if that also didn't work, I could even try extracting all the magical energy from the metal.

The city contained trace amounts of magical energy, though it wasn't dense enough for races like elves and demons to live on. If orichalcum used those trace amounts and amplified it to gain that toughness and heat resistance, I guessed that I might be able to process it if all the magical energy was drained out. Regardless, testing would begin tomorrow with tons of hammering.

When I explained my thought process to Rike, her glittering smile became rather forced. *I just hope it won't be too difficult for me.*

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After I finished my morning water-fetching routine, I completed my breakfast preparations as usual. Since I'd be beginning an important project, I didn't mind making a more dignified breakfast, but I didn't want to be too ceremonious about it all.

I placed my hands together as I glanced at the hihiirokane and the adamantite enshrined in front of the *kamidana*. *Sorry, guys. I need you two to sit on the sideline for a short while, but I'll make you into something soon.* I placed my orichalcum on an open space on the *kamidana*. Was it the trick of the light? I thought I saw it

glimmer for just a second. After two bows, two claps, and one bow, I finished my normal morning routine. My prayers for the *kamidana* had taken a bit longer than usual since I'd hoped my work with the orichalcum would go well. *I'm not even sure who I'm praying to since the mysterious goddess statue enshrined here is something I just made...*

"All right, let's get started," I murmured to the quiet forge.

I lit up the firebed, filling the room with the sound of roaring flames, and prepared to work. Helen and Anne were tasked with creating molds for the blades, Diana and Lidy would pour the melted steel into the molds, and Samya and Rike would remove the cooled blades and hammer them into shape. Since we all had our own roles, we busily got to work.

Clang! The sharp clattering of hammers and steel rang within our forge.

I'd taken the orichalcum down from the *kamidana* and set it on the anvil. I didn't want to give it my all lest something...*unusual* happen, so I just gave it a light tap with my hammer. Normal steel would be dented by the strength of my swing, but the impressive orichalcum remained unscathed and as dignified as ever—it was famous in this world and back on Earth for good reason, and this was proof of it.

"Oof..." I muttered.

I'd meant to give only a light tap, but my steel hammer was actually scratched by the orichalcum just a little. *Hrmmm...*

"All right."

I grabbed a different hammer, a smaller one meant for detail work, and used it to imbue my usual hammer with magical energy. With a dull *thud*, shimmering particles—magical energy—began to fill my larger hammer. When that hammer could take in no more magic, I stopped.

"Should be good enough," I said.

When I placed my hammer under the gentle sunshine that shone through the window, it glimmered and shone with magical energy. Any normal metal hit with this hammer would bend and morph. Though, well, I did have adamantite, hihiirokane, and appoitakara,

the three exceptions to this rule.

"Hup!" I said.

I used the same amount of force as before (thanks to my cheats, I could even be precise with my arm power) and swung down. Another sharp *cling* rang out from the orichalcum, but it was the same as ever. I checked my hammer and saw that it was unscathed too—the orichalcum was simply far too tough. According to my installed knowledge, orichalcum wasn't mined from ores mixed with impurities; it instead formed geometric shapes like bismuth or salt crystals. The valuable metal could be mined simply by removing the surrounding rock.

There were times when pathfinders would find orichalcum—and they probably dug it out the same way. *The surrounding rock is hammered away to reveal the orichalcum, but even as the rock crumbles away, the orichalcum remains totally unscathed. In other words, it's tough enough to take a fair bit of abuse.*

I swung my hammer down again, harder than before. A loud *clang* rang out once more—my hands tingled from the impact. But still, the orichalcum and my hammer remained ever the same, both refusing to give way for the other. *No, wait, the head of the hammer's fine, but the part between the handle and head's getting loose. Must be from that swing.* As I fixed my hammer, my mind wandered to the orichalcum. *It's really tough, and that sound earlier wasn't just metal against metal. It's...*

"Magical energy," I muttered aloud.

I was familiar with the feeling of magical energy clashing with magical energy—I'd made such items and hit them together. *And my earlier swing felt similar to that. Maybe I'll try draining the orichalcum of its magical energy.*

As I pondered that, Rike was busy with her own work. "You look happy, Boss."

I smiled back in response. My products—though most were made of plain steel—were tough and sturdy thanks to magical energy. Usually, I imbued custom models with magic, adding as much as I could. Entry-level models didn't have as much magical energy in them. While the physical quality of my blades differed by model, the

largest difference was in the amount of magic each one carried.

But this time around, I had to do the opposite—I had to *drain* the magic.

While it was difficult to see just how much magic the orichalcum contained, when I had Lidy inspect it for me, she claimed that there must've been quite a bit in there. That was how I'd come up with the idea to remove it. Perhaps it was a simple characteristic of the orichalcum—it contained magical energy that wasn't discernible to the naked eye. If that was the case, then removing this energy would allow it to become much more malleable, just like how meghizium was before I added magic into it.

One couldn't add magical energy to meghizium with normal methods—it was like trying to fill a sieve with water. The metal allowed magic to slip right through and was soft like clay—one could even shape it with their hands. I'd tried a few methods to ensure that magical energy wouldn't seep out, and finally, I'd managed to toughen it up to the point where no normal blade could possibly damage it. *I just hope I can do the reverse with the orichalcum and it'll all work out perfectly.*

"Hmm..." I said as I grabbed the bit of metal and touched its surface.

Ugh, I just can't tell what state it's in. If only there was a way to know just how much magic's in this orichalcum. The orichalcum was dazzling in my eyes, as though to mock my struggles.

But I couldn't give up here. I decided to transfer as much magical energy as I could to a metal sheet and work from there. After a small sigh, I placed the orichalcum back onto a sheet of metal.

After our usual, simple lunch, I continued to spend my afternoon draining the magical energy from the orichalcum. Behind me were a few sheets of metal, imbued with as much magic as they could hold.

"There's gotta be some change by now, right?" I mumbled.

I felt like I could easily be hammering away into the middle of the night, so I decided to briefly check on the orichalcum. The magical energy I'd drained could've filled ten longswords to the brim and then some. Honestly, I was surprised that this small clump of metal,

barely enough to forge a knife, contained this much magic.

"Hup!"

I once again used my hammer to swing down on the orichalcum, using a bit more force than usual. I didn't want to use too much power; just this morning, I'd made that mistake and loosened the handle of my hammer. Another *clang* rang out, but I felt like the sound was less clear than this morning. *I hope my ears aren't playing tricks on me. But if I'm hearing correctly...*

I took the clump of orichalcum and checked to see if it was dented at all. My heart pounded eagerly. But contrary to my hopes, there wasn't a single scratch on it. My hammer was fine too, so I could safely call this a tie.

"No dice..."

I sighed, and my shoulders slumped with disappointment. Part of me prepared for a tough road ahead, but it was still so demoralizing to see no results at all. *Eh, if orichalcum was so easy to forge with, it wouldn't be seen as the greatest metal of all time. The fact that it takes a bit of elbow grease fires me up...I think. I just have to be positive about it, or else.*

Now then, what approach might work? I hadn't tested heating up the metal yet. If that allowed me to more easily manipulate it, I'd have no troubles at all, but I had a sneaking suspicion that things weren't so simple. *Still, might as well try it out.*

"I've got nothing to lose. Let's try it."

I waited for an opportunity to use the fire, being extra careful not to disturb Samya and the others' workflow. Sure, I could ask them, and they'd easily allow me to do as I pleased, but I wasn't keen on abusing my power like that. The flames of the firebed roared away, hotter than usual. I didn't mind keeping the flames at their normal strength, enough to melt steel, and I didn't expect heat to allow me to hammer orichalcum so easily anyway. *And if I can, I pray that the high temperature will do the trick.*

I placed the lump of precious orichalcum into the firebed. The flames licked at the metal, causing it to glow a shimmering orange.

Perplexed, I continued to observe the lump, but it only reflected orange light. Nothing else changed.

Thanks to my cheats, I knew the exact temperature needed to forge steel, and the orichalcum had turned a bright orange, signaling that it was ready to be molded. However, my cheats told me that it wouldn't budge under my hammer.

In fact, they showed that there was no change whatsoever to the metal's composition. It was a lot hotter, of course, but not ready to be hammered at all—it was stuck in this weird, awkward sort of limbo. Still, I clung to this sliver of hope and used my tongs to grab the metal, transferring it out of the firebed and onto the anvil. When I placed my hand over it, I could sense its heat, and I knew that this thing must be burning hot. I swung my hammer down hard enough to bend steel, and a clear *cling* reverberated throughout the forge. But as I'd thought, the orichalcum refused to budge.

Hmm... At this point, I don't even know where to start. If I knew the trick—like how I'd needed to imbue meghizium with magical energy—I could work toward my goal, but right now, I don't even know what direction to head toward. I don't know where I can improve. I had a whole month, so there was still some time to test things out, but my experience from my past life told me that if I was completely lost on the first day, there was a decent chance that I'd remain lost and unable to solve the issue.

So, what should I do?

"Give up and go for a change of pace," I mumbled.

Too early for that, maybe. I should wrestle with this for a bit longer. There was a decent chance that I'd be flailing desperately and all my efforts would be in vain, but I still had to do what I could. I renewed my determination as I stewed in thought.

"What's wrong, Eizo?" Samya said, looking at me with concern.

"Oh, things just aren't going well, is all," I said honestly.

"I didn't think you struggled with anything in the forge. I assumed you knew all there was about smithing."

Rike approached and nodded along.

"Well, this *is* orichalcum we're talking about here," Diana pointed out. "I don't blame you for struggling."

"It's valuable and rare for good reason," Lidy said.

"Yep," Anne agreed.

As everyone cheered me on, I felt like I regained a bit of my composure.

All right, what method should I test out next? Just then, I felt a very familiar presence enter the forge. In fact, I'd felt this very recently—it was something I'd assumed would be a daily occurrence.

This presence slowly took form, and a humanoid appeared before my eyes. She was pretty like a doll, and she smiled from ear to ear.

"I'm back!" she cried happily.

She puffed out her chest proudly, her small body standing tall. This girl was none other than the fire spirit, born out of my daily prayers to the *kamidana*, and my youngest daughter. She emerged with delight, flames flickering all around her.

"Maribel!" Diana cried loudly before I could even react.

She was the first to call out my daughter's name. *Diana seems to be the closest with Maribel, so I can't blame her.*





Everyone slowly stopped their work. They couldn't just drop their tools, especially since some were working with very, *very* hot metal, and one wrong move could turn into a huge accident. I didn't need to warn everyone about the dangers of fire, and watching them take the proper safety precautions moved me somewhat.

But that didn't mean that we were calm about this reunion. We paid no heed to our dirty hands as we petted Maribel's head with joy, and the fire spirit didn't seem to mind our sooty hands as she squealed happily. After everyone petted her, I gently placed my hand on her head.

"Welcome back," I said.

Maribel giggled and flashed a beaming smile. "Glad to be home!"

Just then, I felt another presence in the forge. My body didn't sound the alarm; if the presence was this close to me, Helen would've been the first to react, and she would've instantly gotten rid of the danger. The new presence didn't move much and had likely tagged along, just in case. She managed to squeeze herself between me and Maribel before slowly taking form. It was as though she gradually appeared from thin air—her familiar face soon greeted me.

"Hi, Lluisa," I said.

"Hello there," she replied with a small wave of her hand.

Fitting for her moniker as the master of the Black Forest, she emanated an air of dignity.

"Has Maribel's...?" I trailed off, turning down to Maribel, who gazed at me quizzically, before I turned back to Lluisa. "Has my *daughter* finished her training?"

The master of the Black Forest smiled and nodded. "She has indeed. She's learned the bare minimum to wield her power without causing anyone trouble."

Maribel grinned proudly at me, and I petted her head, causing her to squeal joyfully once more. *How long can she be happy about this exchange, I wonder? Will she one day ask to have her laundry done separately from mine because geezers are dirty or something?* My mind raced to the tropes I'd seen of adolescent girls in their rebellious phases, and my heart was filled with needless worries of

the future.

"The fire spirit will never accidentally set this house on fire," Lluisa said with a wink. "You can be assured of that."

Her winks make her look so beautiful—they're a far cry from Camilo's or my attempts.

"And..." Lluisa said, picking up the orichalcum that lay on the anvil.

The lump had remained unchanged since I'd gotten it from Camilo, and I felt like it symbolized the defeat of this forge. I couldn't help but wince at the sight of it now.

"With her help, you just might be able to work with this metal," Lluisa finished.

It took me a moment to process the words that had casually slipped out of her mouth.

"What?!" I gasped.

My voice echoed throughout the forge, situated in our sleepy little corner of the Black Forest. And my youngest daughter stood proudly before us once again.

"C-Could I hear any details?" I asked.

I turned to Lluisa, hoping for some clue—any clue—that could get the ball rolling on the orichalcum. I'd be willing to try pretty much anything...unless I had to sacrifice Maribel somehow. I'd *immediately* abandon any method requiring that. *But, well, anything else is worth trying out, right? Ain't got nothin' to lose! Even if it takes nearly a month, I'm willing to push forward.*

"Eizo," Lluisa said.

"Yes?"

She narrowed her eyes, and I stood up straight. Her gaze looked more solemn than ever before.

"You use normal fire, don't you?" she asked.

"Er, yes," I answered. "The forge itself might be a bit special, but the fire itself is nothing out of the ordinary."

This magical forge allowed me to maintain high temperatures without the need for me to monitor the fuel levels—it also didn't produce slag or any other waste. While the forge truly was a work of magic, the fire itself was nothing unusual. We just used charcoal as

fuel. As for the firebed, while magic controlled the ventilation, it was also just normal. I could light them both up with a spell, but that was the extent of anything magical.

Further on that point: While I could spark enough fire to light the forge and firebed, the magical fire I could produce was minimal, so I used it purely as an igniter and then let the fuel burn as it naturally would, producing natural fire. Small bits of magic were the most I could do, and I couldn't really learn anything greater. In this world, unless you were an elf, you could only learn magic if you received higher education—so the people who learned were pretty much exclusively nobles. Only then could a person use spells like me. For now the only ones in our family capable of producing any magic at all were Lidy and me.

In any case, all the fire in this cabin, the kitchen included, was normal and natural. *And if Lluisa asked me about that...*

"I see. Then—" I started.

"Normal fire can't heat up orichalcum!" Rike interrupted, vibrant excitement in her voice.

Her eyes sparkled eagerly, and it was clear that this revelation had flipped some sort of switch in her. Lluisa was a touch taken aback by the dwarf's energy, and she could only nod, wide-eyed. It took a few moments for Lluisa to gather her thoughts.

"Ahem," she said, clearing her throat. "Indeed. Normal fire won't do."

"What if I made the flames hotter?" I asked. "Let's say that I threw that orichalcum into the forge."

When iron melted and mixed with carbon (the process used to make steel), the melting point was around 1,200°C. The temperature of magma was between 800°C and 1,200°C, so if we found some cooled molten rock and we threw it into the furnace, we could see it turn into lava. Theoretically, that is. What would happen if we tossed the orichalcum into those conditions?

But Lluisa calmly shook her head at me.

"Well, what about fire made from magic?" Lidy asked quietly.

She could cast fire spells—could I process orichalcum with her

help? *The metal's filled with magic energy anyway, so maybe I should've gone to her for advice first.*

But Lluisa slowly shook her head once more.

"Fire spells can cause fire to appear, but the ensuing flames aren't purely composed of magical energy," Lluisa explained. "However, you have a child here capable of this feat."

She winked again, and I did my best not to react.

"You mean Maribel?" I asked.

"Indeed," Lluisa replied. "She's now capable of wielding that fire. She may have retained some memories from her past, but as the years pass, one can easily forget."

Lluisa's face was filled with nostalgia as she smiled and turned back to Maribel.

"You mentioned during your training that you recalled being at a forge."

"I did," Maribel replied with a nod.

Both Rike and I gulped. The master of the Black Forest smiled.

"And could you tell me the name of the blacksmith you were with?"

The fire spirit hesitated for a moment before she spoke once more.

"Don Dolgo."

That name rang a bell. According to the stories that Rike had told me, a great war had broken out six hundred years ago between demons and other species. During that time, a dwarven blacksmith with talents bestowed by God had forged a sword for the hero. This smith's name was none other than Don Dolgo.

Just as Rike was familiar with this name, this legendary blacksmith remained etched into the annals of history—stories of his feats had been passed down through many generations. Rike claimed that Don Dolgo had forged an orichalcum greatsword that was sixty centimeters wide and two meters long. And apparently, *Maribel* had been the one to help him do that, along with his God-given powers. If God had sent Maribel to Don Dolgo, it wasn't a stretch to imagine that she had received some divine power as well.

"Speaking of," Rike began. Everyone turned to her, and she visibly

shrank beneath the weight of our gazes. "Uh, what kind of person was the hero—the one who received the blade from Don Dolgo?"

I was also curious about a person capable of swinging around an orichalcum greatsword that was two meters long and sixty centimeters wide. That was practically a giant hunk of metal.

"I'd like to know too," Diana said. *Even the Rose of the Duel Grounds has had her curiosity piqued, it seems.*

I felt like Lluisa might've personally remembered the war six hundred years ago, but she would probably try to muddy the waters about that fact. She wouldn't want to admit that she'd been around for such a long time.

"Umm, I think the hero came around one time. I just remember a really huge person!" Maribel replied.

"How big? As tall as Helen?" I asked.

Helen immediately stood tall at attention—it seemed fitting for a skilled mercenary. I wasn't sure if that was the right way to compliment her, but her refined posture looked very cool. Helen was even taller than me. I was by no means short, but the fact that she towered over me meant that she boasted plenty of height. Yet, I imagined that even *she* would struggle swinging such a greatsword around.

Maribel shook her head. "No, the hero was actually taller than Big Sister Anne!"

"Me?" Anne asked, pointing at herself.

The imperial princess had a giantess for a mother, while her father was a human. She was certainly taller than Helen, and though she could easily fit into the forge, her bed was much larger than everyone else's. If the hero was larger than her, then he was astonishingly tall. In other words...

"Was the hero a giant?" Rike wondered.

I silently nodded. I'd assumed, for some reason, that the hero had been human and that he'd swung a greatsword around with his muscular pecs and bodybuilder physique. *Don't misunderstand—I'm not implying any kind of personal attraction to that sort of thing.*

But if he was a giant and tall to begin with, maybe the sword was simply made to fit his stature. *Ugh... Sometimes, when you*

romanticize history and learn the truth, things end up having a mundane explanation.

"She was beautiful," Maribel recalled.

"Wait." I paused for a moment. "The hero was a lady?"

Maribel nodded once more.

That was also a mistaken assumption on my part; I'd thought that the hero was a man. *That reminds me... I heard that the war six hundred years ago broke down a lot of barriers between races and genders. I wonder if the gender of the hero came into play when she became responsible for unifying every race—excluding the demons. Surely, the world wasn't so simple. Something as trivial as gender wouldn't have possibly solved all her woes in banding everyone together, but maybe it was a factor.*

"I'll admit that I wanted to learn more, but I feel like I discovered something that turns common sense on its head," Diana said with a sigh.

I flashed a wry smile. "Yeah, it feels like we're unraveling the truth of history."

Some incidents were so impactful that they remained within the annals of history, passed down to this day, but oftentimes, the details were lost to time. Even back on Earth, it was all too common for progenitors to embellish some details or straight up fabricate stories, which were then passed down through the generations.

Any gaps in history were added on to by others—generally with information that strayed from the truth—and rewritten before being solidified as truth over the years. *Maybe I can learn a thing or two from these tactics to mold a story about myself.*

I snapped back to reality, focusing on the spirit who was responsible for assisting the forging of the hero's blade. It seemed even Maribel couldn't remember all the nitty-gritty details, but she was willing to grace us with her presence.

What if there comes a time when I'll have to forge the hero's blade? The mere prospect was so detached from reality that I'd only dare joke about it, but I couldn't deny that the fire spirit's company was an undeniable step in that direction. With that in mind, I once again straightened my posture.

"All right, then," I said. "Let's start trying to process the orichalcum."

A round of applause filled the forge. *I'll be using my cheats, but I'll give it my all.* According to Lluisa, I needed *magical* fire to process orichalcum. I might have been a simple blacksmith, but I was skilled enough, at the very least, to be trusted with a lump of this precious metal. People held me in high enough regard for that. Besides, my skills fit the bill for this project: The use of magic in forging was rare, and magical items sold for a higher cost. And even on top of that, there must've been *very* few people capable of using fire created purely out of magical energy. I could now do both.

So the fire needs to be maintained for a while, and it has to be kept at a high temperature. Maribel could apparently keep flames around indefinitely, as long as she had a supply of magical energy. She certainly wouldn't run out of fuel within the Black Forest, which was renowned for its ample supply of magical energy, and our cabin also seemed to be replete with magic.

Just to make sure, I asked Maribel about it.

"Easy peasy!" Maribel shouted with a confident smile. She didn't look like she was bluffing or anything.

"Can I ask you to help me out for a bit?"

It was getting late. The sun hadn't set, but I still needed to prep for dinner. I decided I'd call it quits if I could make even a minor dent in the orichalcum. Until Lluisa and Maribel had shown up, I hadn't even known where to start. Frankly, I'd been ready to throw in the towel. So at this point, I was willing to try practically anything.

"Aye aye!" Maribel said.

She nodded vigorously. The fire spirit was, unsurprisingly, enveloped in flames, but they didn't burn me or feel warm when I petted her head. Maribel always controlled her fire and never intended to hurt us, but apparently, before her training, her fire would unwittingly burn her surroundings if she let her guard down. This was precisely why she'd slept in the hut outside instead of in our cabin (though she had planned to flee from Krul, Lucy, and Hayate before she burned any of them). It had all been to mitigate harm and keep damages to a minimum. *God, all my daughters are*

so nice and thoughtful.

I stopped sending wind to the firebed and let the flames die down. What remained with the glowing embers was a monochrome world of white, black, and gray, devoid of any other colors. Maribel sat neatly in the middle of it all. *I'll have her "mothers" wash her off in the hot spring later.*

"Ready?" Maribel asked.

Immediately after she gave her verbal cue, the fire around her roared loudly and blossomed before my eyes. Unlike the flames that I was familiar with, hers were *blue*. Usually, fire changed color in accordance with its temperature or some sort of chemical reaction, but my cheats told me that neither was the case this time around. For some inexplicable reason, the flames didn't ignite the charcoal. This was, without a doubt, magical fire—and it was high-quality since Maribel was creating it.

"It's beautiful..." Diana murmured softly in awe.

I couldn't blame her. The blue flames, containing a hint of white within, were reminiscent of the vast, sunny sky speckled with clouds. The sight was nothing short of breathtaking.

"Place the metal here," Maribel said, pointing to an area of the firebed.

I did as she ordered. The orichalcum added a splash of gold to the quaint garden of white, black, and blue. Maribel then gently placed her hands on the lump.

"Hup!" she grunted.

She seemed to exert herself just a bit more, and her fire roared louder than ever. The cabin could always be rebuilt, but I was worried that Maribel was pushing herself too hard—I was fretting over her. I couldn't help but turn to Lluisa, but the master of the Black Forest only smiled and nodded. *Well, if she gives me her personal seal of approval, I guess I should just sit back and watch.*

Maribel held her hands to the orichalcum, and after a while, I noticed that the lump seemed close to the consistency of hot, workable steel.

"You're good to go!" Maribel shouted, drawing her hands away from the metal.

I swiftly grabbed my tongs, placed the orichalcum onto the anvil, and swung my hammer down. *Cling!* The sound it made was sharp and clear. *Sounds a bit different from before...* I swung down again, making the orichalcum cry out once. Then, I raised it into the air with my tongs and used my cheats to analyze the metal's surface.

"H-How does it look?" Maribel asked worriedly. Even if I'd failed, it was by no means her responsibility, but she couldn't hide her curiosity.

I peered at the orichalcum. Though slight, the surface sported two small dents—the swings from my hammer had won out.

I grinned and gave Maribel a victorious thumbs-up. "A resounding success."

Admittedly, I had a long way to go, but this was a large, definitive step toward my goal.

I mean, before, I hadn't been able to lay so much as a *scratch* on the orichalcum. But now, I knew my hammer could shape it. I was delighted to spy the light at the end of this dark tunnel. My future was looking bright.

I felt compelled to celebrate right away, but I couldn't deny that this was barely a first step. It was a bit too early to throw a grand party. Judging from the progress I'd made, a month was more than enough to forge a knife from the orichalcum, but times like these tended to invite unforeseen emergencies.

Back on Earth, there were many instances when I thought I had more than enough time, only to barely make it on schedule. Ugh. And each time, I had to pull all-nighters. I'm sure I could do that again for most projects, but not when working with orichalcum. To process this precious metal, I required Maribel's assistance, and I wouldn't want to drag her into an all-night forging marathon. I could only do that if I was working alone—I didn't want to trouble Maribel at all. *Maybe I* should *work a bit more today while I can, but...*

"Let's clean up and call it a day," I decided.

Everyone looked at me puzzled—I wasn't the only one concentrating on my work. When I pointed toward the window, everyone voiced their agreement. Orange light was spilling into the forge, signaling that the world was about to end its day too.

"Our celebration for orichalcum will come later." I stood up and patted my waist, then gave them a wink, knowing full well that the gesture didn't suit a geezer like me. "But we gotta host a welcome-back party for Maribel, don't we?"

Maribel blinked blankly for a moment before a huge grin stretched across her face, and everyone else, Lluisa included, smiled back at her.

Ah, right, and...

"Of course, you're free to join us, Lluisa."

The master of the Black Forest smiled as wide as Maribel when she received my invitation.

"Samya, Rike, can you fetch me some good meat?" I asked. "And Lidy, Anne, could you bring me some vegetables?"

"What about us?" Diana asked with Helen beside her.

"You two can..." The ladies' eyes started sparkling. I felt a bit apologetic for getting their hopes up. "Just do what you normally do. Sword training is important."

They comically slumped their shoulders.

"It's not that I can't trust you guys with work or anything," I hastily added. "I just want you two to conserve your energy for if the worst comes to pass. Otherwise, we'd be in danger."

Both Diana and Helen wouldn't lose their touch if they skipped sword practice for a day, but I believed that raising their strength was more important than work. I genuinely just wanted them to get stronger to ensure the safety of our cabin.

"And playing with my daughters is also a very important role," I said.

More often than not, my daughters were allowed to play around for a bit before they obediently observed sword practice. Lluisa was here with us today, so while it wasn't *required* to be overly hospitable, it was best if Diana and Helen provided her some company.

The two ladies, tasked with this vital role, beamed brightly. If asked to choose the family members who played with my daughters the most, those two ladies would claim that title. But of course, I knew better than to vocalize my thoughts.

"Eizo, you really are an excellent cook," Lluisa said thoughtfully as we dined at the table on the terrace.

As the master of the forest and a part of the Dragon of the Land, Lluisa didn't need food to survive; even if she sat down and ate a meal with us, she was simply mimicking our mannerisms. The food she consumed didn't turn into energy for her body, nor was it expelled out of her body. I couldn't bring myself to ask where the food she ate went—I could only bow my head.

"Thanks," I replied.

Krul and Hayate, who mostly survived off magical energy, and Lucy—whose appetite had increased lately, but she still didn't eat much—had already finished their meals. They were just frolicking around the yard with Maribel, who, like Lluisa, didn't require food. They romped about, illuminated by the lights of the terrace.

Maribel is blending right in again. It's like she never left. I suppose that's par for the course for our family.

"I'm surprised they can run around so much in the dark," I observed. "But I guess they can see better than me."

My daughters were dragon-like creatures, a wolf, and a spirit—when it came to night vision, a human like me didn't stand a chance against them.

"Can you see them, Samya?" I asked.

"Huh? Yep, sure can." Samya held a cup of wine in one hand and gestured to the tree line with the other. "They're playing around in the forest."

I could only see darkness where she was pointing, but I caught glimpses of them occasionally when they strayed into the areas where we'd set up clappers, so I could vaguely imagine where they were.

"You're amazing, Samya," Rike said.

"Can you not see that far in the dark?" I asked.

"Nope," Rike replied. "I can see fairly far, but not all the way into the forest like Samya can."

"That's more than me." I let out a dry laugh. Even if the nearby light was turned off so my eyes could adjust to the dark, I doubted

I'd be able to see very far.

"I guess this is a difference between races," I muttered.

"I can see very well too," Lidy chimed in, puffing her chest out proudly. Her elven traits must've included night vision.

"Being able to see in the dark will make a world of a difference."

Anyone who wanted to attack us might just do it under the cover of night. *Eh, to be fair, the Black Forest is dangerous even in the middle of the day. I doubt* anyone's *got the chutzpah to launch a strike at night.* Still, that didn't mean that the chances were zero. And actually, someone who attacked us at night would likely be an expert in combat.

"I can see as far as Rike," Helen said, taking a swig from her mug. "We should be fine."

She can see as far as a dwarf? Do pro mercenaries train for that? Or does it just come from combat experience? Her speed is completely outside of human capabilities, but I guess she's got other attributes that separate her from normal people. Her power's not completely off the charts, but she's still plenty strong.

"I can't see a thing," Diana muttered with a dejected slump of her shoulders. "I don't think I can be useful at night."

"Don't feel bad," I assured her. "The people around us are just way too amazing."

Anne nodded along, her face already red. Normal people had to do their best within their means too. I patted Diana's and Anne's shoulders. Aided by the liquor, I joined in on my daughters' playing around—their energy inspired me to give it my all in the forge tomorrow.

And under the blanket of that cozy darkness, our tiny party within the forest drew to a close.

Chapter 3: The Orichalcum Knife

When I awoke the next day, I stepped outside our cabin and stretched my limbs in the morning fog.

"Mm, this feels refreshing."

The cold wind didn't sting as much as before, but there was still a chill. I took a deep breath of that crisp air, and the revitalizing coolness helped my mind wake up and ready itself for another day.

"Morning!" Maribel called out.

"Good morning." I turned to her and saw my other daughters all lined up. "And good morning to the rest of you as well."

Krul, Lucy, and Hayate quietly greeted me back, careful not to wake up their "mothers" still slumbering in the cabin.

"All right, let's go," I said.

I patted all of their heads and handed water jugs to Krul and Lucy before we set out for the lake. During our trek, I didn't ask Maribel what she had learned during her training. I'd refrained from questioning her during yesterday's party as well, partly because I felt like I shouldn't, but also because I thought that I wouldn't understand what she'd gone through. I hoped that whatever she'd learned would help her grow as a spirit and encourage her—peppering her with questions wouldn't do any of us any good. And so, instead of asking her about her training, I told her about our days while she'd been away.

"Wait, a raccoon visited you guys?" Maribel asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "Well, not visited per se, but it was sick and passed out on the road, so we took it in for a while."

"Aw man, I wanted to see it."

"You just might. You never know."

"Really?"

"Yep."

I nodded. The raccoon we'd sheltered was an upright fellow. To

thank us, it had found and given us some rare ones that were hard to find, and even now, it periodically brought us medicinal herbs—some of these herbs tended to evade the eyes of humans (and beastfolk, dwarves, elves, and giants). Thankfully, there was no opportunity for us to use all these herbs, but it was best to plan for the future. And so, we offered our gratitude in return. Lidy busily dried and preserved them with a smile on her face.

"If you're lucky, you might run into that raccoon in the forest," I said. "Or maybe you can spot it when it leaves us some herbs."

It was quite intelligent, so it might do its best to avoid us if it sensed our presence, but perhaps the same couldn't be said for Maribel the fire spirit. She was, in a sense, a part of nature. There was indeed a good chance that she'd run into it in the forest—there were only so many routes devoid of obstacles it could take when it came to deliver those precious herbs.

Maribel's eyes sparkled with excitement. "What do you guys do again? Hunting? I'll ask to tag along during these excursions!"

"Go for it," I replied.

All my daughters tagged along with hunts. I needed Maribel in the forge when she was vital to my work, but that generally wasn't the case—barring the orichalcum, of course. And I couldn't imagine that I'd have constant requests for orichalcum weapons. *After all, that metal is absurdly precious within this world.*

When we reached the lake, it really did feel like the water was a bit warmer...albeit still cold. This lake was always cool, even in the heat of the summer, so the current temperature felt only a bit more tolerable than the water in the dead of the snowy winter. Krul and Lucy didn't jump into the lake, but they energetically ran around near the water's edge; it was warm enough to at least do that. Hayate expelled what sounded like a small sigh (maybe she really was a touch weary) before she chased after the energetic duo.

"Can I go with them too?" Maribel asked, looking up at me.

I nodded. "As long as you don't vanish into thin air."

She was a spirit, so I didn't think that a bit of water would extinguish her flames and make her dissipate, but I just wanted to be sure.

"I won't, of course," Maribel said.

"Go on, then."

"Woo-hoo!" She zoomed toward the lake, dipped her feet into the water, and squealed happily. "Brrr! So cold!"

"Don't get too carried away! You can really catch a cold in this weather!"

"I know!" Maribel called back.

I knew that my warnings didn't matter in the case of a fire spirit, but I just couldn't help myself. Not doing so felt a bit...weird.

As I gazed at my youngest daughter having fun, I dipped another jug into the cold lake.

After I made our usual breakfast, our family surrounded the dining table, beginning another normal day. Maribel didn't need food to sustain herself, but she always looked joyful enjoying a meal with the rest of us, so we (especially Diana) happily watched her eat. It was a wholesome sight. Her dining etiquette left much to be desired, but we still had plenty of time—she could fix that in the future.

As Maribel took her fork and stuffed her cheeks with gusto, Diana spoke.

"Maybe it's about time I learn how to cook."

"Good idea," I replied.

I'd been preparing all our meals because Samya claimed that I made the best food, but there were no guarantees that I could always be in the kitchen. Luckily, I hadn't gotten sick in the past year, but it was bound to happen one day, no matter how careful I was. And illnesses usually came with no warning.

When I'd left on the expedition for the monster subjugation, Rike had taken over cooking duties, but she couldn't always stand in the kitchen either. It seemed reasonable that everyone should be able to cover household chores.

Diana thought for a moment before she spoke once more. "Could you teach me?"

"Sure. If you don't mind that it's *me*," I replied. "I'll show you what I can."

"Thanks," she said with a smile.

Helen raised her hand. “Teach me too!”

“Huh? Can’t you cook?” I asked.

Helen was a mercenary. Sometimes she went on solo missions, and sometimes she traveled in a group, but in either case, cooking was a vital skill to have for survival. When she was alone, she probably made simple meals that hardly required cooking, and I doubted that she made anything intricate for a group meal. Even so, some cooking needed to be done. A hot meal made a huge difference in morale and overall energy.

I was sure that Helen had the basics down just fine, but when I pointed it out, she pouted.

“It would be better if I improved a bit, don’t you think?” she asked.

“I certainly won’t complain about that.”

“Then what’s the harm?”

“All right, all right.”

“Score!”

She struck a small victorious pose as I let out a forced chuckle. I then turned to the rest of my family.

“What do you guys wanna do?” I asked.

“I’d like to learn as well,” Lidy said.

“Me too,” Anne agreed.

Rike waved her arm in the air. “Same here!”

“Wait,” Samya said, “then count me in too.”

They all raised their hands.

“So...*everyone* wants to learn. Got it.” I’d expected some people to decline the offer, but they’d proven me wrong. “Well, let’s all cook together sometime soon.”

“Okay!”

I needed to focus on orichalcum for a while, but doing daily household chores like cooking might form a routine and a decent change of pace. *I’ll get started on that once I’m less busy.*

“Let’s check our schedule for today,” I said. I didn’t mind spending a lazy morning, but I had to get back to work at some point. “Today, Rike and I will work on the orichalcum and—”

“Can I?!” Rike exclaimed eagerly.

I nodded, a bit intimidated by her energy. “When I hammered on it yesterday, I realized that the orichalcum cools quickly, and this is probably a great opportunity for you to experience forging with a new metal.”

Yesterday, I’d struck the orichalcum twice. It’d felt stiffer after my second swing, implying that it’d cooled down considerably after the first. My cheats had even told me as much.

Orichalcum was full of magical energy. Luckily, Rike had improved leaps and bounds in her magic practice, so she could help me work with it. The knife didn’t have to be perfect either—since it was more ceremonial, its forging could be less precise. Taking all of these things into consideration, why not let Rike work on the knife? This would be the perfect opportunity for her to test her skills.

Besides, we won’t come across orichalcum again so easily.

Usually, I told Rike to watch and learn, but that wasn’t enough when it came to knowing how every swing against the metal felt. This was a rare chance to work with such a precious metal.

“I think I’ll be counting on you quite a lot, Rike.”

“Right! Looking forward to it, Boss!”

Her eyes twinkled like bright stars, and everyone else smiled at her.

“As for everyone else...”

I wanted to know Samya’s and everyone else’s schedule—more precisely, when they’d head out into the forest. All the while, I internally calculated the help I’d need from Rike and the preparations I’d need to make.

“What should we do about our usual order for Camilo?” Rike asked.

“We told him we would bring less next time. In fact, it would be fine if we brought nothing at all,” I replied. “If we really need to, I can forge a decent amount of items if I work late into the night.”

I watched Samya and the others head out to the forest before Rike and I headed for the forge. Maribel was with us too.

“Can I help?!” Maribel offered.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I’m really all outta options with the orichalcum, so I’m counting on you.”

"Roger that!"

She stood there proudly, and I patted her head.

"Let's begin!"

"Yeah!" Rike and Maribel shouted, pumping their fists into the air.

I feel like we're a bit too laid-back—after all, we're facing off against a legendary metal. But that's just how Forge Eizo operates.

I rotated my shoulders, ready to start another day.

"Here I go!" Maribel said.

"Have at it."

She stepped into the firebed, stood in the center, and braced herself, exerting her power. In the blink of an eye, blue and white flames burst out and roared away.

"Hnnngh!" Maribel grunted.

I immediately grabbed the orichalcum with my tongs and offered it to her. She hugged the lump tightly, which was an adorable sight. *But I don't have the time to find everything so wholesome right now.* I activated my cheats, analyzed the state of the orichalcum, and saw that it'd undergone a bit of change—different from the times when it had refused to yield under normal fire. I could see that the orichalcum was gradually becoming forgeable. Rike also peered at the metal beside me, a large hammer in her hand.

Amid the flames of blue and white that licked away at the golden metal, I could see occasional rainbow glimmers. The entire process was so different from our usual process of hammering steel that I felt like this method couldn't be used for anything else. But even without possessing my cheats, Rike could learn the techniques for working with orichalcum and bring the knowledge back to her hometown forge, as dwarven customs dictated—that would be more than enough. Not much was known about orichalcum within this world, and if she knew the proper steps to forge it, it'd give her a huge advantage. The only issue would be securing pure magical flames, like the ones coming from Maribel's body.

She's generating them, right? Yeah, it's not easy to find fire like this... Others will have to make do somehow.

"All right, that's good enough," I said.

"M'kay," Maribel replied. She released the orichalcum from her

grasp and fell onto the firebed.

Good work. I'd love to thank you and spoil you to bits, but your "father" has some work to do right now.

I placed the hot orichalcum onto the anvil and swung down with my hammer. A clear sound echoed in the forge. I didn't have time to carefully observe the metal, lest it cool and regain its toughness, but I could tell that it gave way slightly beneath my hammer.

Cling! Cling! The sound of my hammer clashing against the orichalcum filled the room like a tiny symphony, and right on cue, Rike swung down her large hammer, adding another layer of music. *Clang!* It was louder and clearly rang out. *My top priority is to mold it into the size of a knife.*

After Rike hit the orichalcum, I swung down in a different area, only to be followed by another strike of her hammer. Every now and then, I'd tap the hammer onto the anvil and tell her where to strike and what precise timing she should use. Soon enough, the orichalcum cooled down and was as hard as ever, refusing to budge. I offered this cold lump back to Maribel, who'd been eagerly watching us work from the firebed.

"Here ya go, Maribel."

"I'm on it!"

"Sorry about the trouble."

"It's all good!"

She once again exerted her powers, using her flames to envelop the bit of orichalcum. I was more focused now than when I'd been hammering away at it—the ore was priceless, after all. Rike also had her eyes glued to it.

"Y'know," Rike said. I tried to turn in her direction but was ultimately unable to tear my eyes away from the orichalcum. "It's been a while since we've done stuff like this."

"Now that you mention it..."

Generally, Rike was in charge of making entry-level and elite models for our orders. During special requests, I usually just asked her to sit back and watch without asking for her help.

"Feels like we're really a boss and an apprentice, huh?" I pointed out.

"Yeah," Rike agreed.

The two of us smiled. *Since Maribel's working so hard, we'd best do our utmost too, as a boss and his apprentice.* I once again received the hot orichalcum from Maribel and used the tongs to set it onto the anvil.

"Is it getting too hot for you, Maribel?" I asked.

"Huh? No, I'm fine!"

"Got it."

I couldn't look away from the metal, so I couldn't gauge Maribel's expression, but her tone was laced with delight and joy.

"All right, time for another round!" I said.

"Right!" Rike replied.

The smaller hammer gave the cue before the large hammer swung down. I joined in on the hammering, and the orichalcum slowly but surely took shape.

"Jeez, this really is tough," I muttered.

Rike nodded. "Yeah."

"It is?" Maribel asked as she approached us.

"Yeah. Phew, this is a workout," I told her. "And don't get too close. It's dangerous."

"All right."

I didn't have any sharp blades on me, but I was still swinging around a hefty, blunt weapon. Perhaps physical attacks wouldn't work on a fire spirit like Maribel, but I certainly wouldn't feel good about accidentally striking her. She must've noticed my concern since she obediently drew back. *Normal fire doesn't work on orichalcum, so I'm using magical fire, but it's still so darn tough.*

Still, it now gave way with every swing of our hammers. I had no doubt that the orichalcum was thinner than it'd originally been, and the surface was covered with countless circular indents from the heads of our hammers. Had I been working with steel, I would've been able to shape this lump long ago—it would've already looked like a weapon. If I were to offer up this orichalcum to someone in its current state, they would still see it as an awkward lump that needed to be forged. The marks on the surface would show that *some* work had been done, but that'd be all.

"I hope it doesn't crack," Rike said.

"Hup! Don't think we have to worry about that for now."

Metal that was too hard had a tendency to crack. *Katanas* had a bit of softer steel on the inside to remedy this issue. Luckily, my cheats didn't detect any minute cracks in the orichalcum.

"But that just makes me more nervous," I added.

"Yeah," Rike agreed.

This process was just so different from the norm. I was overcome with anxiety, and I wasn't sure if I was going about this the right way. Sure, my cheats gave me the rough idea and told me that I was still okay, allowing me to relax a bit more, but it was nerve-racking to work with precious metals, and this bit of orichalcum was no exception. I could only imagine that Rike was even more anxious, since she didn't have any cheats to help her. *But there's only one thing we can do.*

"Let's just keep going. The only path is forward," I said.

"Right!" Rike replied.

We continued to work; loud *clang*s rang out, filling the forge.

"Hmmm..." I groaned.

Rike sighed. "I guess we're finally getting *somewhere*..."

We'd sandwiched a lunch break in the middle of our day but otherwise kept constantly forging. Maribel had worked so hard for us. It was now late enough for the rest of the family to return from their hunting trip, and that meant we'd be done for the day.

It was the last round of hammering, and the orichalcum had cooled down enough to harden again, preventing us from working on it. The three of us stared at the lump of still-warm metal on the anvil.

"Hasn't changed much, has it?" Maribel asked.

"Not really..." I replied.

She gave a carefree cackle. I wasn't angry at her reaction. That was partly because she was my daughter, but I also felt bad for making her work so hard with little to no progress. Above all, it was the truth.

"But it's changed considerably from its original shape!" Rike said brightly.

This was also true. We weren't completely at a loss. We'd slowly formed a vague—*very* vague—shape of a knife. *Sorta looks like prehistoric stone tools.*

I crossed my arms. "I guess we can brute-force our way through this over time, but it's still incredibly hard to work with. Could someone really make a two-meter-long blade out of this stuff?"

Rike and Maribel pensively crossed their arms as well, though I had a sneaking suspicion that Maribel was just copying our actions.

"I guess a smith can take plenty of time to forge a sword for the *hero*," I muttered.

That had been a *legendary* sword, after all. *Maybe the smith needed a few years to finish forging it. Obviously, a blade of that size can't be made in two to three days, but if the smithing process takes too long, surely the situation of the battlefield would shift.* In other words, the smith forged the blade in a reasonable amount of time. *But maybe I shouldn't employ common sense for a material out of the realms of normalcy.*

"Are you saying that there might be a method aside from using Maribel's flames?" Rike asked.

"That's my guess. But..." I trailed off.

I glanced at the fire spirit, who looked back at me with her head tilted in confusion and her arms crossed in front of her. She was so adorable that I couldn't resist petting her head, and she squealed happily, finding it ticklish.

"I'd feel like she'd say that we're doing something wrong," I finished.

"Fair enough," Rike said.

"Maribel, do you recall anything that Don Dolgo did all those years ago?"

"Huh? Hrmm..." Maribel groaned, this time crossing her arms thoughtfully.

"It could be anything. Like the meals you ate or stuff like that."

"Meals? Hmm... I think he just ate normal food."

I saw her doing her best to dig through her memories. I was just about to tell her that she could just drop it, since I had to learn how to process this orichalcum myself anyway. But before I could open

my mouth, her face lit up cheerfully.

"I remember now!" she cried.

"You do?!" I gasped.

"Yep!" She gave a firm nod. "Um, the hammer! I remember it being more sparkly!"

"This thing?"

"Yeah!"

I showed her the hammer, which I hadn't put away yet, and she nodded firmly.

"Sparkly, huh?" I muttered. "Which means..."

"Magical energy, presumably," Rike finished.

In other words, this Don Dolgo must've added an ungodly amount of magical energy into his hammer before he'd struck the orichalcum. I'd been so focused on hammering the metal as fast as possible that I hadn't added any magical energy to my tools.

"All right, let's test it!"

"Agreed!" Rike exclaimed.

I rolled up my sleeves, and Rike stood up with gusto. But suddenly, the door of the forge slammed open.

"We're home!" Samya called out, stepping inside.

Oh, right... Crap. It's getting late.

"W-Welcome back," I stammered. I decided to clean up my tools for the day.

"Really? They're *that* common?" I asked.

It was dinner at our cabin, and I brought a spoonful of soup to my lips. According to Samya, this year, deer, rabbits, and other herbivores were a common sight, despite it not being spring just yet. *Though Samya's only turning six this year, so she really only has a couple of years to compare this one to...*

"Hmm, I think I might know why," I said, gazing up at the ceiling before I turned to look at Samya. "Remember when I first got here? And I defeated that big black bear?"

"Oh yeah..." Samya replied, catching my drift.

Indeed, I'd thrown myself into a grisly battle shortly after I'd arrived in this world. Samya had just decided to stay at the cabin,

Rike had become my apprentice, and Camilo had been my new client who'd decided to purchase my wares.

"Maybe much of the ecosystem's changed now that the bear's gone," I said.

"Sounds right," Samya agreed with a nod.

Rike nodded as well. "Probably."

That bear had been so powerful that I'd feared for my life. It could've easily taken on a horned deer or two, and it'd been pretty darn aggressive. It might've eventually been taken out by a herd of deer, or maybe hunted by a pack of wolves, but in the meantime, it would've caused devastating damage as it ran amok. Even if the bear could've been stopped, it wouldn't have gone down without a fight; it would've killed as many deer or wolves as possible. Perhaps the bear's very existence had been to keep population density in check.

"We defeated another after that, didn't we?" Helen asked, sinking her teeth into a chunk of grilled, bone-in meat.

I'd been told that they'd managed to nab a rather large deer today, and I'd decided to clean out some of our food storage to create room for fresh meat.

"We did," I replied.

I'd felt silly for struggling so hard against the first bear when Helen had skillfully and gracefully taken down another with little effort. That was when we'd managed to pick up Lucy, who'd been a wolf pup at the time. My daughter had grown since, though she still had a slender physique, but back then, she could've curled up and fit on my lap.

In any case, it seemed we'd gotten rid of not one, but two predators likely responsible for keeping the population of herbivores in check. Many deer and rabbits had been spared as a result, and they were prospering in the Black Forest.

"Should we not kill bears from now on?" I asked. "Just firmly encourage them to head back?"

"I wonder..." Lidy murmured, having already polished off her plate. "We got rid of quite a few predators in the elves' forest, but doing so didn't really cause any trouble for us."

"I see..."

"And," she said, glancing at Lucy before she continued, "our Lucy is just fine, but if a large predator becomes overly aggressive, we'll have a difficult time taking care of it when it morphs into a magical beast."

One of my beloved daughters, Lucy the wolf, was a magical beast. She showed no aggression, though. I wasn't sure if this was due to her environment—she'd been raised showered by love from her family—or if she had heightened intelligence thanks to her magical beast qualities. Lidy's guess was that if Lucy wasn't aggressive at this point in her life, she likely would remain docile.

On the other hand, a large black bear was already an aggressive beast to begin with, and its transformation would make it more bloodthirsty still. Lidy explained to us that there was a very good chance a bear like that wouldn't kill for food, but just for sport. Diana and Anne shuddered when they heard it.

"I've only seen one once, but I wouldn't want to lay eyes on a beast more aggressive than that," Diana said.

Anne nodded at that. "I've never seen one before, but from what I've heard, I feel like it's best if I don't. I guess things won't be so easy. Meeting one sounds almost inevitable."

The topic shifted to what measures we could take *if* we ever ran into a vicious beast, and the discussion continued after dinner and well into the night. A normal large black bear could be handled, but if we ever ran into one that turned into a magical beast, we'd face it with whomever was present at the time. And in the case that battle turned grisly, we settled on retreating, regrouping at the cabin, and rushing out again to defeat it. We had to gauge the degree of danger accurately, and we probably had to take preventive measures as well—that is, to get rid of black bears if needed.

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The next morning, Rike, Maribel, and I got back to work on the orichalcum knife. Everyone else was tasked with forging the usual weapons for our order, and I also asked if they'd patrol the forest.

"Going forward, there'll probably be more cases where the two of you are too busy to forge the orders, yeah?" Samya asked. "Best to do a practice run here so that we can help cover for you guys if necessary."

Diana nodded. "Plus, I want to test my skills and see what I can make."

They have *been my assistants for a long while...* I had no plans to stop them—I was honestly super grateful for their help, and I just asked them to do their best.

Team Orichalcum can't dawdle, or we'll get beat. All right, I'll give it everything I've got! Now that I knew magical energy was an important factor in this process, I knew what to do. I just wasn't sure if our strength and magic would be able to shape this stubborn, precious mineral.

"I wonder if we can figure out a more efficient method..." I mused.

"Yeah..." Rike murmured, looking thoughtful.

We both stood there trying to come up with a plan; Helen mentioned later that we looked like a father and a daughter at a loss about what to do next. *Couldn't we at least pass as siblings or something? I think in terms of the age difference, we're in that range.*

Oh well. Back to work. I need to figure out a way to concentrate some magic.

"You want to hammer in a lot of magical energy with every strike, right?" Rike asked.

"Yep," I replied.

Is there a way for me to work harder and compensate for Rike's fledgling magical abilities? Or does she have to conjure up enough magic within herself? Hrmmm...

"What if we use a magical jewelstone?" Rike suggested.

"Well..."

To forge meghizium, I'd needed to create a dense, enclosed pocket of magical energy. And the byproduct of forcibly creating an area thick with magical energy was a magical jewelstone—a crystallized drop of pure magic. Jewelstones were powerful enough

to cure fairies who were ill with the disease that sapped their energy away. If I could use one when working with the orichalcum, I could possibly harness the crystallized magic.

The issue, then, was time. Orichalcum cooled down alarmingly fast, and magical jewelstones didn't last long before they dissipated. If I waited too long or missed the timing, our efforts would literally go up in smoke. This meant that I had to make the jewelstone while Maribel was heating up the orichalcum and then immediately try to fuse the two together.

I explained this entire process to Rike and Maribel.

"Yeah, that sounds difficult," Rike said.

"It does?" Maribel asked with a tilt of her head.

I nodded. "If we can't match our timing, the already narrow window of opportunity we have for shaping the orichalcum will decrease drastically."

If I could finish the magical jewelstone just as the orichalcum reached temperature, that would give us the longest period possible to work with the metal...theoretically. I said as much to Maribel.

"Uh... I...see?" she replied.

"I can coach you on the timing—I just want you to match that rhythm," I said.

"Oh, you can leave that bit to me!"

She pounded her chest and accepted this request. *My cheats will help me find the perfect timing.*

"Okay, let's get to work."

"Yes, Boss!" Rike exclaimed.

"Gotcha!" Maribel cried.

I heightened my focus and got to work creating a magical jewelstone. I knew how to make one, or to be more precise, I knew one of the methods for producing crystallized magical energy. I would need to find a more efficient way to generate them sooner or later, and I also wanted to experiment with keeping the jewelstone in its solid form for as long as possible.

I prepared the magical jewelstone kit that I always had at the ready in case of a fairy emergency. It was just a hollow steel box, but the metal was filled to the brim with magical energy. And since

the steel was already full, when I hammered in more magic, it would densely flood the empty space inside the box and crystallize into a jewelstone. During the meghizium forging and the fairies' illness, speed had been of the utmost priority—the faster I could make the jewelstone, the better. But this time around, that wasn't what I was looking for. I had to match my stride with Maribel. This would require me to slow down to give her enough time to finish heating up the metal.

"I'm starting now!" Maribel called out.

"Roger that," I replied.

When I saw her flames roar, I began hammering magical energy into the steel box using a decent amount of my power. *Cling!* Metallic rings filled the room, and the sound was much sharper and clearer than the times when I hammered normal steel. Metal imbued with magical energy had a beautiful resonance. Mithril, for example, sounded like glass. But right now, I didn't have the time to enjoy this sweet symphony. I glanced at the orichalcum in Maribel's hands while I hammered away at the steel box.

Was she more fired up (literally) than usual? The orichalcum was getting hotter quicker than usual, and I began to rush a bit too—hasty swings of my hammer rang out. I almost felt like the orichalcum was getting hotter with every strike; this was actually ideal, since I needed to sync up the timing of our tasks.

"Hnnnngah!" Maribel groaned, giving it her all. Her bluish-white flames flared proudly.

"Hup!" I grunted, refusing to be left behind.

Her flames, my hammering, and around us, everyone else bustling away—all of this created a small concert of sorts, illustrating our busy daily routine. I noticed Rike staring at us intently, hoping not to miss even a moment of my teamwork with Maribel. She was the only one who was able to enjoy this little symphony.

"I think it's ready!" Maribel announced.

"Aye aye!"

I managed to finish up the magical jewelstone just a moment before she got the metal to temperature—this was still well within the margin of error. With the help of my cheats, I swiftly used the

tongs to place it on the anvil as I opened the lid of the steel box and dug my fingers inside. I felt something knock against my fingertips, and as I thought, I'd managed to create a small crystal. I pinched it between my fingertips and placed it on top of the orichalcum, which was already resting on the anvil.

"Give it all you've got!"

"Yes, Boss!" Rike shouted.

She carefully but energetically swung her hammer down—if she was careless, the magical jewelstone could fly out and hit someone. My apprentice expertly hit her mark; the wave of impact shot through the magical jewelstone and into the orichalcum. *Riiing!* No longer did I hear a metallic *cling*, but rather, the clear sound of bells. It was deafening as it reverberated within the forge. The sound was so beautiful that I almost stopped working, though I knew that I had to hammer in tandem with Rike.

"Looks like it's going well," I observed.

"Seems like it, Boss!"

We continued to hammer away, allowing the clear ringing to fill the room. We swung our hammers down on the orichalcum, and the magical jewelstone didn't shatter—it gradually grew smaller and smaller before it vanished.

I peered at the orichalcum. "Looks like it's slowly beginning to take shape."

Rike scrutinized it too. "Yeah, I can see the progress."

The orichalcum had cooled down to the point where we couldn't hammer it anymore, but it was still very hot and dangerous to touch. It was a lot closer to the shape of a knife than it had been yesterday. We'd managed to work fast enough too.

Now, only one more question lingered within my mind.

"Lidy, sorry, but could I borrow you for a sec?" I asked.

Lidy jogged over to me. "What's wrong?"

"Could you take a look at this? It's still really hot, so be careful."

I pointed to the orichalcum where the magical jewelstone had dissipated moments before, and she observed it intently. The lump of metal glistened and reflected the light. While I wasn't sure of the intricacies behind this phenomenon, it emitted a prismatic glow.

"I feel like we're on the right track, but I want you to check and see if the magical jewelstone's energy was transferred to the orichalcum," I explained.

She nodded and knit her brows. "All right."

Her narrowed eyes reflected that rainbow shimmer—it almost seemed like her eyes *shone* rainbow. A deafening silence settled in the room, and I realized that everyone else had stopped to observe as well.

Did I gulp nervously? Or was it Rike? Maybe it was the both of us...

After that long moment, Lidy smiled and broke the silence. "It looks good."

Cheers erupted within the forge.

"But," Lidy said, causing Rike and me to pause. She looked at us apologetically. *Is something wrong?* "You can add so much more magic into the orichalcum."

"I didn't think it would be full with only a magical jewelstone or two more, but is there really so much room?" I asked.

Lidy nodded again. "I wouldn't call it an infinite amount, but there's still a ton of room left inside."

"Hmm..."

I crossed my arms. Using that new information, I could judge our speed and calculate how long it would take to finish the knife. A couple of weeks—that was how long it would take to shape it, polish it, wrap the handle with leather, and add a fancy sheath. That would fall well within the deadline Camilo had set. The issue was exactly how much magical energy I should imbue. Obviously, I could just add as much as the orichalcum could take and push it to the max, using every single day I had. And maybe it would reach its limit somewhere along the way. *But is it ethical to put something with so much magical energy out into the world?*

The moment the kingdom came to me with this request, they knew that this knife would ultimately end up in the empire. That was fine by me. But weapons forged with the maximum strength of my cheats would be sharper and tougher, and this effect was further amplified when I added magic. Was it okay to let an extremely

dangerous weapon circulate in society?

I already knew that my custom models were stronger than most, and I'd accepted the fact that these weapons would be wielded by people, but I had my limits. Was this orichalcum crossing that line?

"Boss?" Rike peered at me worriedly.

I hastily waved my hands. "Oh, sorry, it's nothing."

You know what? I'll just aim for the top and do the best job I can. Someday, someone else might be able to reference my methods when they need to forge something out of orichalcum.

I might have my cheats, but I've still got a long way to go on the path to becoming a proper smith—I can't get scared and back down. I internally slapped my cheeks, hoping to amp myself up.

"We'll just have to keep at it and slowly observe our progress," I concluded.

"Yeah!" Rike exclaimed eagerly.

"I wish you all the best of luck," Lidy said, calmly cheering us on.

Fueled by that encouragement, I rolled up my sleeves to make another magical jewelstone.

"Time for another round! You ready?" I asked, handing Maribel the orichalcum.

"I was born ready!" Maribel replied.

I once again swung down to create a magical jewelstone. *A while ago, I did this so many times that it caught the eyes of the fairies—they noticed the energy collecting here. Without them, I probably wouldn't have thought about building this apparatus so that I'd be able to make a magical jewelstone at a moment's notice.* Jewelstones faded away so quickly that they hardly seemed useful, and forging meghizium certainly wasn't a request I received every day. Had the fairies not come to me, I would've thrown away the steel box after I'd finished with that job. *I feel like I should thank the fairies somehow. I'll try to find the time and ask if they want anything.*

I continued swinging my hammer down. The sound wasn't nearly as clear as when I'd hammered the orichalcum with Rike—it was the sound of cold steel, and it echoed across the forge.

Meanwhile, Maribel was hard at work. "Hrnnnngh," she groaned,

doing her utmost best to heat the orichalcum.

I glanced her way every now and then. She was steadily getting faster at heating up the metal, and I figured she was probably getting used to the process (though this wasn't her first rodeo with orichalcum).

It makes sense—she worked with Don Dolgo to forge a whole orichalcum greatsword, and now that the process is coming back to her, it's no wonder she's picking up the pace on a much smaller knife. It's all about finding the right balance, and I'm sure she'll settle into the groove with experience. I gotta work hard so that I won't get left behind. I couldn't be huffing and struggling to keep up while Maribel was casually doing her work. Still, I needed to work with haste; as she increased her speed, I needed to match her.

I hammered away at the steel box to create the magical jewelstone, and Maribel soon called out, "I'm ready!"

"All right! Here I go!" I said.

I opened the lid of the magical jewelstone kit (my name for the steel box) and found the crystallized energy inside. I swiftly grabbed Maribel's orichalcum and transferred it onto the anvil, then set myself up to repeat the hammering process with even greater speed and care.

"And...swing!" I signaled.

"Yes, Boss!"

Our hammers created another symphony of ringing, and I noticed that Rike seemed more certain of her hammer than before. Her motions were growing more confident and powerful. It seemed our earlier round had allowed her to find her bearings. *My apprentice is exceptional.* The one regret I had was that I couldn't find the time to praise her on the spot.

Beneath our constant hammering, the magical jewelstone gradually grew smaller and smaller until it faded away completely. And what remained was...

I gasped in awe. "Wow..."

The golden lump of orichalcum now glowed an even more vibrant rainbow of hues, and its shape was slowly growing more and more refined. While it obviously wasn't complete, it'd been shaped enough

to see what it would become in its final form. Perhaps it was a touch too dainty to be called a knife, but I was working with a precious metal, and it was a gift, to boot. I'd rather overdecorate it with intricate designs than leave it plain and simple.

"Boss, do you hammer away with the end shape already fixed in your mind?" Rike asked. She'd taken a break from her hammering, and her shoulders rose and fell as she caught her breath. I was huffing and puffing along with her.

"Nah, not at all," I said. "I just use my best guess and work with that in mind."

I'd read that a certain famous sculptor had once said, "The sculpture is already complete within the marble block before I start my work. It is already there—I just have to chisel away the superfluous material." And honestly, I kinda followed that philosophy. Of course, in my case, my cheats were doing much of the heavy lifting. They told me that I should hit around a certain area, and I just followed those guidelines. These precise thoughts ran unconsciously through my mind, though only because of my cheats. *But to be the best smith I can be, I should be able to shape metal without my cheats telling me what to do.*

Rike stared hard at the orichalcum. "This looks good so far."

"Ahh, glad to hear it," I replied.

She smiled at me, and I smiled back. I then grabbed the orichalcum with my tongs and showed it to the restless Maribel.

"How does it look?" I asked.

"Oooh! I think this'll end up being so cool!" she exclaimed.

"Excellent. With your seal of approval, I have nothing to worry about."

I grinned once more—Rike and Maribel followed suit. *I'd like to foster a workplace environment where we're always smiling, but that tends to slip when we're concentrating.*

"Shall we continue?" I asked.

"Yeah!" Rike and Maribel replied energetically.

I couldn't help but feel my heart grow warm at their energy, and

for the third time today, I grabbed my steel box.

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"Whew. We finally finished shaping it."

For the past two weeks, our work had progressed at a snail's pace. We did the same thing over and over again, and finally, we'd managed to shape the orichalcum—the knife looked like a lightning bolt, but instead of sharp angles, it was curvier and softer around the edges, sort of like an elongated S. At a glance, one could tell that this knife was not practical. It definitely looked like it was used for ceremonial purposes.

It wasn't sharp yet, but it still could cut well enough—if I casually swung it at an enemy, I could do decent damage. But that was only thanks to the magical energy inside (I think). The unusual shape didn't actually help with its sharpness. *I guess, in a sense, this is a magical sword.*

When I'd finished the shaping, Lidy had confirmed that there was already quite a bit of magical energy in the orichalcum, so imbuing more wouldn't do much. And so, I'd stopped adding magic.

"Let's see..."

When the knife cooled down enough, I grabbed a steel knife and knocked the back of it against the orichalcum. *Ring!* It sounded like a bell, and that clear sound filled the forge. The orichalcum seemed even more resonant than before.

I then placed the steel knife onto the anvil. Gripping the unfinished orichalcum knife like a hammer, I swung down on the steel knife with a little more power than before. *I remember doing this with the first knife I ever made.* I was hoping for a clear ringing sound and nothing more. *It's probably better to hit something with the orichalcum than the other way around.*

I wasn't doing this just for fun; it was an experiment. Though I was working with a different metal, this scenario was similar to when I forged the mithril sword—by listening to the changes in tone as I struck the metal, I could tell how much magical energy the orichalcum contained, as well as its temperature. *Testing with such a*

precious metal isn't an opportunity that comes around every day.

Also, my cheats really help me out, but Rike has none, and she still strives to match my abilities. I should learn how to forge with my own skills and rely less on my Watchdog-given abilities. I was in the clear so far, but who knew when my cheats might dull and become less likely to activate. I might even lose the ability altogether. *Maybe I can be Rike's apprentice then.* In any case, I wanted to prepare for the worst and gain as much experience as possible.

I bet the orichalcum knife will slice through anything like butter after it's sharpened. I swung it down and felt the orichalcum knife—still dull and unfinished, mind you—easily cut through the steel knife with a dull *thunk*.

"Huh?" Rike and I said simultaneously.





She stood next to me as she gazed at the knife. Neither of us could believe how easily the orichalcum had cut through steel. *Reminds me of when I first arrived in this world and made my first super sharp steel knife... No, no, now isn't the time to feel nostalgic.* I was almost hesitant to finish the orichalcum knife since it was capable of slicing through steel even without a sharp edge. It wasn't the power that scared me—it was the danger of that power falling into the wrong hands.

"Wait, we need to calm down," I muttered. "Let's do a bit more testing."

Rike nodded shakily. "A-Agreed."

I picked up the steel knife and gently pressed it against the orichalcum's edge. That pressure wasn't enough for the orichalcum to slice through the steel—when I pulled back, the steel remained in one piece. The orichalcum had left a small groove on the steel's surface, but any tough metal could scratch steel.

"Normal so far," I said.

"I guess the orichalcum isn't wicked sharp," Rike noted.

"Yeah."

If the orichalcum had been "wicked sharp," it would've cut the steel by now—in fact, my steel knife would've been gone the moment I knocked the back of it against the orichalcum.

"It cut right through the first time. What did we do then that we didn't do just now?" I asked.

"You swung down a lot harder last time. Maybe it's about the force behind the strike...?" Rike suggested.

"Maybe."

Rike and I crossed our arms. *What changed? The only thing that comes to mind for now is the power behind the swing, but...*

"Wait a sec..." I muttered.

I recalled what I'd done earlier, and a hypothesis soon dawned on me. *Maybe I'll test this out.* I grabbed the orichalcum again and swung it down at the steel knife. *Clunk!* I used the exact same swing as I had when I'd cut through the steel, but it felt *different* this time around. It rang out loudly like a bell—a unique characteristic of the orichalcum—but it felt like it was an octave lower.

I looked down at the steel knife and saw that it was still in one piece. My current test had been to see whether or not I could cut steel if I swung down blindly—that is, without any intention of slicing it in half.

Next, I vaguely envisioned a steel knife cut into pieces. This time, I didn't put power behind my strike—I slowly and gingerly swung the orichalcum knife down.

Ring! Another clear sound filled the air. This one was a higher pitch than before. Was it because I envisioned slicing the metal? I peered down and saw that the steel knife was cleanly sliced through and shorter than it had been.

"Hmm..." I sighed.

"May I ask what you're doing?" Rike asked. She gingerly picked up the bit of knife I'd just sliced off.

"It's just... This result is what I expected," I answered.

"It is?"

I nodded. "If I blindly swing the orichalcum knife with no intent to actually slice something off, I can't cut anything."

I brought the orichalcum knife down again. A small *cling* filled the room, but both the orichalcum and the steel were fine.

"But if I swing it with the intent to cut..." I said.

I brought the orichalcum knife down again, and this time, a sharper *cling* rang out. Steel was sliced away.

"In other words, intent will greatly affect the capability of the blade," I explained.

"I see..." Rike replied.

Then why had my first swing cut the steel? It was because I'd *envisioned* the orichalcum's sharpness and assumed that it would cut well. If I rid my mind of those thoughts, it couldn't cut a thing. In other words, I could accidentally touch the orichalcum, and I'd be just fine since there was no mental intent to cut. I was worried about that bit the most; I didn't want to accidentally slice off a finger or two, and it was a relief to learn that the orichalcum knife was relatively safe.

"But I still can't believe it cuts this well without a sharp edge," Rike said, staring at the fragment of steel in her hand.

It wasn't a clean cut, but I could hardly believe that the steel had been sliced by a blade without a sharp edge (though "sharp" in this case was certainly a relative term).

"A frightening blade, truly."

Rike nodded. "Agreed."

I'd fashioned the orichalcum into only the vague shape of a blade, and even though I hadn't sharpened or polished it, the edge was sharp enough to slice steel. *I feel like I could skip the sharpening, but if there ever comes a time where I need to create a fine edge with orichalcum, I'd like the experience. Sharpening this blade would give me that experience.*

"Helen," I called out.

"Yeah?" She had been taking a break and was able to answer my call immediately. "What's up?"

"Say you needed this knife to fight against an army," I said. "How long could you make this weapon last before it breaks?"

I showed her the knife, and she glanced at it before holding out her hand. I nodded and put the handle in her palm (not a full handle yet—just the grip), then had her inspect the blade.

"Hmm..." she muttered.

She could tell that, though the orichalcum was indeed sharp, I hadn't actually sharpened it. Gently, she traced her fingertip along the edge.

"Since *you're* the one who forged it, and it's made from orichalcum, I know it'll cut well. It won't easily chip either." Helen twirled the knife in the palm of her hand, expertly fiddling with the blade despite it not having a proper handle. "If I'm efficient and clean with my strikes, I could make it last for half a day's worth of enemies."

"That long?" I asked.

"Though if I had the option to flee, I'd choose that instead."

"Yeah—if you're fighting for that long, there'd be plenty of opportunities to map out an escape route."

Helen was absurdly strong and skilled—but even in her capable hands, I hadn't expected that a single knife might last so long without breaking.

"As for a normal steel knife... I would probably break something like that after only about an hour of fighting."

"Even an hour is enough time for you to do some serious damage," I replied. My shoulders slumped. *Just how many people could she destroy in that hour?* "What if Diana were to wield the orichalcum knife instead?"

"Hmmm..." Helen pondered, crossing her arms.

To Helen, beating Diana in combat was like taking candy from a baby. But Helen was an anomaly—Diana, sister of a count and the Rose of the Duel Grounds, could beat the vast majority of soldiers with ease. How would she fare with the orichalcum blade?

"At her skill level—accounting for misstrikes against armor or other things that could damage the blade—she could probably make it last an hour or two," Helen concluded.

"I see..." I replied.

That was still a rather large threat. Even so, it wasn't like the blade was totally unstoppable—Helen, the most skilled warrior I knew, would wear down the orichalcum knife within half a day. That was all I needed to know for now.

I gave a firm nod. "If that's the limit for you two, I guess this blade isn't too powerful to be circulated in society."

"Uh... Yeah, I guess," Helen replied with a hesitant nod of her own.

This was just a final confirmation—if the orichalcum knife was used against us, we'd still be able to stop it. I knew that the wielder of any blade was responsible for their crimes; our forge wasn't ever to blame. But if I played a part in turning the world into a more dangerous place, I wanted to be able to clean up my messes.

"Boss, I feel like you can call yourself a legend at this point."

I shook my head. "Nah, I've still got a long way to go."

I still relied heavily on my cheats, and in terms of raw talent, Rike was undoubtedly above me. Until I could somehow find a way to forge without cheats, I felt like I had no right to call myself a legend. Also, as a guest in this world, I didn't want to stand out *too* much.

Rike cast a troubled glance at Helen, who shrugged wearily. I gazed at the two ladies as I contemplated my next move.

Ultimately, the day's work ended after I refined the shape of the knife just a bit more. It sort of looked like it had a sharp edge now, but it just *looked* that way; I hadn't actually put it to the whetstone or anything.

"Even unsharpened, it's a beautiful blade," Diana marveled, raising the knife into the air.

Just to be safe, I told her to be careful and avoid the edge. The light of the setting sun trickled into the forge, painting the orichalcum the slightest tinge of scarlet, which mixed with its brilliant rainbow sheen. It was beautiful enough that I had half a mind to frame it. Heck, it would probably reflect light even in the middle of the night and look just as mystical and breathtaking.

"It's nice to know that it makes a beautiful piece of decor," I said. *I hope it will remain just that—and that it'll stay away from the battlefield.* "What do you all think?"

"That you're right," Anne replied with a shrug.

The empire had provided this precious piece of orichalcum for the knife. Sure, the empire's mountainous terrain allowed for ample mining resources, but orichalcum wasn't something that could be so easily given away. And this knife, created from this priceless material, would be a gift. It would almost certainly be granted to the emperor—that is, to Anne's father.

More likely than not, the knife wouldn't be wielded for practical purposes—it would instead serve as a decoration and be enshrined somewhere as a symbol of the friendship between the kingdom and empire. When I asked Anne about what she expected to happen, I learned that my hypothesis wasn't too far off. Still, the blade could be used if needed. It didn't hurt to take precautions on the off chance that it might see battle.

"Knowing my father, he would be *dying* to use it, though," Anne added with a large sigh.

The emperor's face flashed across my mind. He exuded dignity and nobility, but he also had a mischievous streak, just like a child.

"I can see him throwing a tantrum and asking to use it just once," I said.

"Exactly," Anne replied.

I forced out a chuckle as Anne scrunched her face. But then, a smile stretched across her lips.

In any case, if this blade was only used for aesthetic and political purposes instead of for war, my worries were completely unfounded. *That's the best-case scenario. I hope it ends that way.*

"That aside..."

Diana handed me the orichalcum knife, and I examined it. *There's still much to do before it's complete.* Usually, I ensured that my work wouldn't rust (though I obviously didn't need to worry about that if I was gonna work on it the next day) and left it on the anvil or my workbench, ready for the next forging session. But I was hesitant to leave something so precious just lying around.

"Where should I put this?" I wondered. I glanced around the forge, searching for a suitable spot.

"Why not there?" Samya suggested, pointing.

I followed her finger and nodded. "Fair enough."

It was a decent spot in the forge that stood out. It was also lined with other precious materials like adamantite—the orichalcum would be a beautiful addition to this lineup. Above all, it was arguably the most sacred place within our cabin—a makeshift shrine that housed a goddess statue.

And so, I gently placed the unfinished knife onto the *kamidana*. Along with the other ores, it felt almost like an offering of sorts. I turned to the *kamidana*, which looked more dignified than ever before, and clapped my hands together in prayer—to no deity in particular.

"Time to clean up," I said.

As everyone agreed, I turned back to the *kamidana* for just a moment. Were my eyes playing tricks on me? I felt like the orichalcum glimmered brighter than before.

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"Oh, you made quite a lot," I said.

Krul was right beside me, and I offered her some grilled,

unseasoned meat.

"*Kululululu!*" my daughter cried, gently pecking at the meat with her snout before devouring it.

Diana was nearby, feeding Lucy in the same fashion, and the pup chowed down voraciously. *She's gotten even bigger...* Hayate, who was perched on the railing, must've gotten some meat from someone too (or else grabbed some on her own)—she was busy chomping away.

The weather had warmed slightly, and I'd made some progress on the orichalcum, so we'd decided to eat dinner outside on the terrace.

The knife wasn't finished yet, so it was a bit too soon for an after-party, but even without anything to celebrate, we ate outside on the terrace every now and then. I had made tonight's food more luxurious than usual.

I'd spent the past few weeks with my hands completely full with the orichalcum, so I had no idea how our usual order was faring. I asked everyone about the number of knives they'd made, and Diana rattled off a number that was a lot larger than I'd expected.

"Everyone's gotten used to the work," Lidy huffed proudly, flexing her arm to show off her muscles.

She doesn't really look powerful or brave—she just looks adorable.

I managed to keep my mouth shut, and I heard Helen grumbling beside me.

"It's not fair that she can still manage to look so cute," she muttered.

I nodded, causing Lidy to turn red and stare at the ground. Helen flexed her muscles next, and it was clear that she was the buffest of our family. She wasn't as muscular as male bodybuilders (I mean, her biceps would have to be thicker than Lidy's waist to match that), but her toned, large muscles were obvious and intimidating.

"Wow!" Rike cried out, impressed.

Our resident dwarf sported a stocky build herself, but height was the one thing out of her control.

"Let's see 'em, Eizo," Samya urged.

"Huh? Me?" I asked.

I'd thought Samya was busy stuffing her cheeks with meat, but her comment attracted the attention of my entire family. *I guess it's only fair. I've seen Lidy's and Helen's muscles, and I gotta answer to my fans... Just kidding.*

I flexed my arm as the ladies had done. I hadn't been this buff when I'd been thirty back on Earth, but smithing, combat, and production-related cheats had changed my body. My muscles had been boosted to increase my raw power—when I flexed, that much was clear.

"Not bad," Samya remarked.

"Well, I *do* use them every day."

I was practically lifting weights with my daily water runs, and I swung my hammer down in the forge every day. I was doing more than enough to maintain and even increase the muscle mass I'd received from my cheats. *If I'd been this healthy back on Earth, maybe I could've done things differently... No, I was super busy with work and hardly had time for anything else. It probably wouldn't have made a difference, and I would've lost all my muscle mass in a flash.*

"Right, I wanted to ask you guys something," I said, lowering my arm. Now wasn't really the time to compare our awesome muscles. "I can probably spare a day or two from the orichalcum to help make knives for our order. Do you need my help?"

With the loss of Rike and me from the forging team, our family could only make entry-level models. I'd glanced at the knives they'd made during breaks from the orichalcum, and the quality was good enough to sell—they had my seal of approval. Elite models were still beyond their capabilities, so I told them that they didn't need to worry about those. They focused instead on making as many entry-level models as possible.

Camilo will be fine with that. Entry-level models sell best anyway, and since he often runs out of stock, I doubt he'll complain if we give him more entry-level models than usual.

"Nah, we're totally fine," Diana replied. "You and Rike should focus on the orichalcum. If you ever do have some extra time, it'd

be great if you could make some elite models."

"All right, got it," I replied.

Looks like I'll have time to make a pretty intricate sheath after I finish the knife. I stewed in my thoughts. Suddenly, I felt two tongues lick my cheeks, and a weight landed on my head.

"Okay, okay, here's some more meat," I said.

As I gave my daughters more treats, I felt reenergized and inspired to work hard tomorrow.

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Ultimately, I decided not to sharpen the orichalcum knife. There was no need to, since it cut plenty well already. Usually, blades were polished and sharpened so that they could cut well, but I could completely skip those steps since the orichalcum could slice through anything. Still, I felt bad handing over a knife without a proper blade, so I made sure it *looked* sharp, even if it never touched the whetstone.

It was now time for the final touches.

"Hup!"

Maribel heated the orichalcum for me, and I hammered away. I didn't need Rike's help yet. Detailed work usually wasn't worth the trouble of two people coordinating their movements, and she was definitely skilled enough to complete this part without my help. However, because I was more efficient, and because they'd ask *me* to forge the knife, I decided to take charge.

Rike stood beside me, her eyes wide and focused, intent on not missing a single moment. I felt like staring for so long would tire her eyes, and I wanted her to take breaks in between or rest if she could. *If memory serves, blacksmiths actually do damage their eyesight because of the intense heat and light from the fire. I think I read in a book back on Earth that this was precisely why gods of smithing usually were often cyclopes or one-eyed. It might be too late to worry about it, but I do want Rike to take good care of her body.*

I was acutely aware, of course, that I could only show Rike my

work instead of giving her detailed instructions. It was a bit frustrating, but I decided to let Rike decide on the best way for her to learn. The orichalcum rang out clearly in the forge. If the sound was sustained for longer than expected, it meant that the shape of the blade was crooked and awkward. This came as no surprise when weapons were cast—burrs were common when you used that method. But when I forged the weapon from start to finish on the anvil, I could prevent burrs and unevenness. This was all thanks to my cheats (though I wasn't really proud of that fact).

"How do you feel today?" I asked Maribel as I handed her the cooled orichalcum knife.

"Hmm? Just peachy!" she replied with a wide grin. "I'd be lying if I said heating orichalcum didn't take some effort, but, well...it's really fun! I don't mind at all."

"If you get tired, be sure to let me know right away, okay?"

"Roger that!" She pounded her chest and once again worked on heating up the orichalcum.

"Good."

After lunch, I went through another round of hammering before I was satisfied. The glimmering knife dazzled in my hand. I raised it into the air to check—Rike and Maribel gazed up with me. At a glance, it looked like a ceremonial blade, one used only for special occasions, but the edge looked proper and loudly boasted its sharpness. *And despite not putting it to the whetstone, it really* is *sharp.*

"Looks incredible," Rike said, mesmerized.

She'd improved her skills considerably over the months, and she now spoke her mind more frankly. I knew I could trust her words, but...

"I have to make sure that the handle and sheath can match the greatness of this blade," I murmured.

Even if the blade was splendid, if its other components fell short, it would ultimately look unimpressive. I needed to make the rest of the knife as magnificent as the orichalcum.

"But what can possibly match an orichalcum blade?" I wondered.

The most difficult part of the process was complete, but the knife wasn't completely finished yet. Rike, Maribel (who was likely just copying us), and I crossed our arms, deep in thought. We still couldn't come up with an idea.

"I feel like some kind of divine motif—one that resembles some kind of god—would match it, but..."

Rike shook her head. "It's not quite right."

"Yeah. Just feels off."

The beautifully elegant form, rainbow flow, and the clear sound it made—these attributes were nothing short of divine. I mocked up a few rough sketches to brainstorm, but nothing quite suited the blade. I showed my ideas to Maribel too.

"Hrm..." she groaned without saying anything more.

Seems like she doesn't like any of these options either. I didn't want to stop everyone else from working, so I didn't ask the others. *Maybe I'll bring it up over dinner tonight.*

That evening, I prepared dinner as usual. The nights weren't as cold these days, and we'd recently spent more time eating out on the terrace with Krul. *I want to say that the world falls silent at night, but every now and then, I can hear the birds and other animals crying out within the darkness.* I recalled what I'd been told back on Earth: Japan's countryside is often wrongly depicted as quiet. In truth, the insects and frogs are pretty noisy. *Since I never really spent any time in the boonies, I can't confirm this.*

"They won't venture out here, though," Samya assured us, and we chattered away, ignoring the sounds of wildlife.

"I did hear you guys mumbling earlier," Samya continued. "That's what's been on your mind, huh?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I can't seem to find a design that matches the vibes of the knife."

"Could we see your sketches?" Diana asked.

"Yeah, gimme a sec."

I stepped into the forge, which was completely quiet now that the fire was out, and grabbed the rough sketches I'd made, along with a writing utensil.

"I drew these." I lined them up on the edge of the table, away from the dishes.

"They all look quite nice," Anne said, peering at them from above.

Krul, who was the same height as Anne, let out a small "*Kululu.*"

I don't think my daughter really gets it, but she's so cute, and I'm willing to let her do anything she pleases.

"I guess they look okay on the page," I said. "And..."

I sketched our usual steel knife onto the paper. I wasn't sure if my smithing or production cheats worked here, but I was decent at drawing. I added a design for the handle and sheath as well. The knife looked a bit solemn and dignified—it wasn't half bad.

"Not bad, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, looks all right," Anne replied with a nod.

"A bit too flashy for me to use, though," Helen said.

I gave a faint smile. "I'm not thinking about practical purposes this time around."

Helen nodded. "Fair enough."

I didn't worry much about providing a smooth grip or making the knife easy to unsheathe. As long as the weapon as a whole looked nice and presentable, that was good enough for me.

"But this same design on the orichalcum knife isn't quite right..." I said.

I did a quick sketch of the orichalcum blade and fitted it with my previous designs.

Diana clearly looked befuddled as she tilted her head to one side. "Huh? Hmm..." she muttered.

"Looks a bit weird, doesn't it?" I asked.

Everyone nodded along. The design just didn't feel right with the orichalcum blade. My cheats didn't really work when it came to design, likely because they determined that the blade was usable enough, and ornamentation was superfluous. Even if it looked a bit wonky, the blade was fine as long as it could be used—that satisfied my cheats.

I gaze up at the night sky; our view wasn't very vast when surrounded by all the trees, but countless stars twinkled down at me.

"I'm also not sure if a simple design will suffice," I explained. "This is gonna be a gift, so..."

"I doubt father will mind, but both nations have appearances to maintain," Anne said.

"The kingdom will probably keep the fact that they received the material from the empire a secret," Diana added, "but we would like to at least show how much time and effort went into crafting the blade."

The two nobles shook their heads. The kingdom had more than enough incentive to provide a gift that was meticulously and painstakingly crafted. Not only could a splendid gift curry favor with the receiver, but the gifter could also boast the skills and technology their nation possessed. As for the empire's perspective, if the kingdom provides a magnificent and lavish gift, it speaks volumes about how much the kingdom values the alliance and friendship of the two nations. In either scenario, a simple knife wouldn't do, and it was better to have a beautifully adorned—if not a touch garish—blade to present.

"Yeah, it can't look too plain..." I muttered.

My family and daughters tilted their heads with confusion, just like I'd done that afternoon. All the while, Krul poked her head into the terrace, sensing a change in the air as everyone tried to think of a solution.

"*Kululu.*"

Guess we worried her.

"Good girl," I said, stroking her head.

She narrowed her eyes comfortably and gave a faint growl from the back of her throat, signaling her pleasure. Her mannerisms were so adorable that it was so easy to forget she was a type of dragon (though I'd been told that she was more like a distant relative to the dragons).

"Wait... A dragon," I muttered.

I placed a hand on my chin, my mind racing to piece together a design. *If I can make those gentle curves resemble a dragon's tail or claws, the entire piece might look pretty cool. I just need to avoid drawing a caricature or exaggerated features of a dragon, and I*

don't want to make it all cutesy like a mascot either. No, the motif should be simpler and more true to life... Maybe this can work. A powerful symbol was the perfect match for a powerful blade. Maybe the motif of a god was too abstract and vague for the knife. *Besides, I feel like that emperor would enjoy the design of a dragon better than a deity. My only other concern is...*

"Are dragons seen as omens of evil?" I asked. "Or are dragons unpopular symbols or something?"

I turned to my family. Back on Earth, quite a few cultures treated dragons as harbingers of sin. If the design was unbefitting of an emperor, the gift would become a rather rude one. *And I'd like to avoid any problems if I can.*

In general, dragons were often seen as symbols of the land, rivers, mountains, and other elements of nature. Defeating one also implied that a portion of nature was now under the victor's control. But in this world, the core of the realm was none other than the Dragon of the Land. In other words, an item with the design of a dragon could also imply that one had the intent of controlling a portion of nature with their very hands. Very quickly, this symbol of friendship could turn into a dangerous one.

My installed knowledge allowed me to steer clear of extreme dangers (probably so that I wouldn't unwittingly screw up and get myself killed), but it didn't include anything about that. I doubted that I'd be given the death sentence for having the design of a dragon, but I wasn't keen on being severely punished either.

I turned to Diana and Anne. "This'll be a gift from the kingdom to the empire. Would this design be a sort of taboo in either nation?"

Diana and Anne thought long and hard with crossed arms—they were so in sync that they were like a pair of sisters.

"Haven't heard of anything like that in the kingdom," Diana said. "In fact, some families use dragons on their crests."

"Same goes for the empire," Anne agreed. "I don't think any of my mothers would be bothered by it."

The emperor had quite a few empresses, but it seemed like none of them would be upset by this. And the kingdom apparently didn't have much issue with the motif either.

"How about everyone else?" I asked.

"Dwarven culture has no problem with dragons as a symbol," Rike said, the first to respond.

Dwarves usually made their homes near mountains and would use the abundant ore—the blessings of the mountains—to do their work. If they viewed the Dragon of the Land as the root of nature, they'd probably be grateful toward it, and they wouldn't worry about using it as a design. They certainly wouldn't view it as a source of evil.

"No issues with the beastfolk either," Samya added.

"Nor with the elves," Lidy chimed in.

Both were residents of the forest and must've shared some similarities with the dwarves. *Guess dragons aren't that much of an issue for folks living with nature.*

"I see..." I mused.

Since I can probably greenlight the dragon idea, I'm good to go. And if I'm ever asked to handle a Dragon Killer *weapon, I'll know what to do.*

"All right," I said. "I might need to tweak the design a bit, but I'll test the motif out tomorrow. Let's see if dragons will fit the bill for this blade."

Everyone else nodded back. Krul could sense when the air was turning more optimistic, and she cried out happily, sharing my joy. I gently patted her head.

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Ever since I'd decided on a design, my mind had been filled with ways to depict a dragon. I contemplated throughout the day, morning to night, from the instant I stirred awake until the second I fell asleep. A dragon would look majestic no matter what design I used—I didn't even have to portray the entire body. Claws, a tail, and even just a head were plenty powerful—I could even just add a scale pattern to make it stand out.

I could do whatever I liked for the motif of this blade, and that was precisely why I struggled to find an answer. The possibilities

were endless.

"Hrmmm..." I mumbled.

I continued to stew in my thoughts from breakfast until the beginning of my workday. As for my family...

"You were frowning more than usual, so I kinda didn't want to call out to you," Diana said to me. Everyone else nodded along.

Well...worrying about it will get me nowhere.

I'd managed to draw a few sketches last night, and I held them up against the finished blade. The model for my illustrations was, of course, Krul. Her legs and hands (front legs?), her head and tail, and even her scales stood out as beautiful design options for the blade.

Would my cheats activate fully for crafting the handle of the knife? That task technically fell within the realm of "production-related," so I'm sure my cheats would give me a little boost—after all, they were somewhat flexible. This would allow me to create a lovely design. *But unfortunately, my cheats do have a tendency to prioritize practicality above all else. And I don't really want to have the entire body or head be part of the handle. It feels...*

"Cheesy. Like it would belong in a gift shop or something..." I muttered.

"A what?" Samya asked, tilting her head to one side.

I gave a nonchalant wave of my hand. "Oh, it's nothing."

When I included the full body or head of the dragon in the design, I thought that it looked a little cringey, sort of like those demon sword key chains that kids on Earth bought. I'd thought this might work with the blade itself, but it turned out that a full head or body design didn't really match the curved body of the knife.

"How about the tail?" I muttered. "No, that's not it either. Maybe the claws work best."

I placed the blade against my illustration. If I just used the tail of a dragon, it resembled a Plug Type Asa○○ that I'd seen back on Earth. My family didn't seem to mind this design, but knowing what I did, I wanted to avoid that.

I then set my illustration of the claws against the knife.

"Yeah," Diana said, crossing her arms with a nod.

Krul's mom is giving me the go-ahead. With this hilt design, the

blade would resemble a claw protruding from a dragon's foot (or hand?). This also seemed a bit on the nose, and I'd likely give it a more artistic tweak, but I thought that I was finally headed in the right direction.

Lidy peered at the illustration as she stood next to Diana. "Are you going to color it?"

"Hmm, yeah," I decided. "I at least want it to have a green tint."

I noticed Lidy nod eagerly when she heard the word "green."

I think I've still got my dye from last time, and if I run out, I'll just go and forage more. It'd be a nice change of pace for me. And now, I just need to worry about the recipient.

"Will His Imperial Majesty like this design?" I asked.

"Are you worried that it looks too grandiose or gaudy?" Anne asked.

I nodded. I'd needed to know whether a dragon motif was a taboo of sorts, and now that I knew it wasn't, I wanted the emperor to be at least indifferent about the design. He didn't need to *love* it, but I wanted him to find it acceptable enough to use as decor. This was purely a matter of preference.

"It looks fine to my eyes," Anne said. "In fact, I think he would like the design."

Now that I had the approval of the giftee's daughter, I knew that this knife would be an acceptable product from our forge. I thanked everyone for their help and then got to work on making the hilt and sheath.

Though I'd decided on the overall direction of my design, I tried a few options to see which details I liked best, and I ended up settling on one right before lunch.

"Hmm..."

I quickly prepared lunch (by adding a few more ingredients to what was left from our breakfast) and snuck in bites as I gazed at the paper with my final design.

"Bad manners, Eizo," Diana pointed out.

In my defense, I didn't have much time to spare, and I wanted to begin work first thing in the afternoon. I'd even taken the time to

prepare lunch. Considering all this, I wanted her to turn a blind eye to my lack of etiquette. *I also said "itadakimasu" before I ate.*

When I told her as much, all I received in reply was a small sigh. *Guess I get a free pass this time*, I thought before resuming my mental planning. Instead of using regular wood for the hilt, I decided to use a material that was quite unusual for us—a deer's antler. We were actually flush with the splendid antlers of tree deer. We caught them quite often for food but used very few of the antlers.

As the name suggested, the antlers resembled the branches and leaves of a tree. The branches—that is, the main part of the antlers—were made entirely of bone, and the "leaves" of these antlers were made of skin and fur, which further mimicked foliage. The "leaves" also changed based on the season, and the fur and skin would slough off at times to resemble bare branches, allowing the deer to camouflage with its surroundings year-round.

Much like normal deer or reindeer, tree deer's antlers would fall off and grow back just before spring; Samya claimed that it was rather common to see these shed antlers on the ground, buried in branches. These antlers weren't like the normal ones one might envision with vertical grooves that grew upward. Instead, tree deer antlers had a bumpy, almost scaly surface reminiscent of pine trees—I thought this was perfect for mimicking the skin of a dragon. Though Krul's scales were rather small and fine, I thought coarser scales would give the hilt more *oomph* visually, and the texture would keep it from slipping from the wielder's grip. And so, I was determined to use the antler as a handle.

"Hmm, maybe if I do this..." I muttered.

I tried to use my mind's eye to visualize how the hilt would turn out. But even with my cheats, I struggled to imagine it. *Well, working with a rough idea is better than nothing at all.*

Having a mental image of the final product allowed for a smoother transition into actually making the item. Plus—while this was my little secret—I quite liked getting lost in my thoughts, imagining potential designs, and watching my visions become a reality. *I like it so much that I don't even mind getting scolded for*

my bad manners.

I ignored the sighs around me, and once I finished lunch, I returned to my forge. I grabbed a splendid pair of antlers and used my knife to carve out the desired shape.

The antlers didn't feel like wood or pure bone (a feeling I'd often experienced when cooking with boar meat or venison). My cheats guided me on how to carve, allowing me to form whatever shape I desired. Once I had the rough shape, I fitted it with the finished orichalcum knife to check my progress. The antlers didn't align with the blade perfectly, not yet, but I knew that if I stayed the course, it was only a matter of time before things clicked into place. My apprehensions turned into convictions as I continued my work.

It's kinda funny that the dragon claw will be made from a pair of deer antlers.

Silly thoughts flashed across my mind as I envisioned the completed handle and sheath, and all the while, my hands skillfully worked toward my goal. I wanted to keep the natural surface of the antlers as much as possible, and finally, after much carving, I formed a shape that fit naturally in my hand. I once again slotted the antler hilt onto the orichalcum blade. Everything fit together quite nicely. The antler hilt was still in two parts—front and back, not yet glued together. But still, I could see what I'd been trying so hard to visualize: a blade in the shape of a massive dragon talon.

"Looks decent, but yeah, this isn't practical," I said.

Sure, a person *could* wield it if they wished, but it just wouldn't be as useful. If asked which blade was more suitable for combat between the orichalcum knife and a steel elite model, I'd choose the elite, no contest.

Just to be sure, I called Helen over and handed her the orichalcum knife. The hilt was only temporarily fastened to the blade with a rivet and some strips of leather.

"You think you can wield this?" I asked.

Helen casually swung the knife around, and there was a *whoosh* as she sliced through the air. That strike alone felt like enough to bring forth a whirlwind. *Uh... Can this knife actually be wielded like a normal knife? Because it sure looks like it.*

But Helen soon spoke to the contrary.

"Nah, this is kinda tricky to use," she said. "I *could* use it if I needed to, though."

She shrugged, and I breathed a sigh of relief. If *she* struggled to use this knife, I knew that a normal person wouldn't be able to wield it at all—it likely wasn't useful for actual combat.

"If I came at you with an elite model knife and you had to fight back with the orichalcum one, who do you think would win?" I asked.

"Probably you," Helen replied. "I might be able to eke out, say, two wins out of ten clashes... Maaaybe three, but that's really pushing it."





She spoke without hesitation. While I didn't have a solid grasp of my own combat skills, I'd been told that I was pretty strong. Still, I didn't stand a chance (or so I believed) against the Lightning Strike. With Helen's assessment as acknowledgment, I could safely say that the orichalcum blade trod the fine line of usefulness, just like I'd intended. Indeed, my aim had been to make a blade that could practically only be used for decor—using it for anything else would bring higher risks.

If, for whatever reason, this blade was stolen from the imperial palace (like if a thief took it from the empire many, many years in the future), it wouldn't be effective as a combat weapon. It was better if the blade just wasn't worth the trouble of stealing it—that was good enough for me. Sure, this would only last until the hilt was changed one day (which would need to happen eventually), but if it resulted in one less victim of the orichalcum blade until then, that was a win in my book. After all, there was a chance that the blade might one day be pointed at my friends or even at their descendants.

But the blade itself is extremely precious. I bet it'll be safely and securely stored for the foreseeable future. I think I'm worrying a bit too much...but it's fine. I'd already made quite a few custom models, and I was prepared for them to hurt others in battle, but it seemed I was still a touch naive and set in my ways.

I thanked Helen for her opinion and slapped my cheeks. *All right, I won't dwell on the future. I'll do my best to create the most exquisite blade I can.* I rolled up my sleeves, which had managed to slide down a bit, and got to work.

The hilt, which I'd slowly carved to match the blade, was difficult to hold, but it looked dignified and solemn—like it had once been part of an actual dragon.

"Shape looks good," I said, raising it into the air. "All that's left is the color."

"May I please take a look?" Rike asked.

"Of course."

I handed Rike the hilt, which resembled a disembodied dragon's claw, and she carefully scrutinized it. Her observant eyes refused to

miss even a single detail.

"You see..." Rike said, her eyes narrowing. She placed the blade under the light of the setting sun, which shone into the forge. "Normally, work for the different parts of the blade would be divvied among artisans. A hilt artisan would make the hilt, for example. And that's how it is for dwarves too." She moved her eyes away from the sunset. "For knives and shortswords, a smith could at least wrap some leather around the hilt before handing it off to the next person. But a blade and handle of this quality..." Her eyes wandered to me. "Boss, when I compare myself to you, I realize that I'm lacking in so many ways—so many that I can't sum everything up in one sentence."

Her eyes were filled with a tinge of sorrow, but I pretended not to notice—I just shrugged.

"All I can say is this: Before I knew it, I was able to make it all," I explained.

I wasn't lying either. It wasn't like I went through strict training to gain my cheats. As the word "cheat" implied, I wasn't playing fair.

Rike nodded. "I've been observing how you work for a while now, Boss. At first, your craftsmanship seems consistent, but in truth, it feels like you're working solely on instinct."

"You can tell?" I asked.

"Well, I'm just *beginning* to see that. Until recently, I had no clue just how you were able to make all these high-quality items."

She gave a forced smile. I wasn't able to do much for her, but I was genuinely happy to see that my apprentice could sense her own growth.

"Oh? What's going on here?" Samya asked, glancing at Rike and me. She'd already finished cleaning up.

"We were talking about how much Rike has grown and improved," I said.

"Oh yeah! For sure!" Samya nodded.

"What?" Rike gasped with surprise.

"Hey, I've been watching you this entire time. You're *tons* better compared to when you first came here. Leaps and bounds."

The fact that Samya can tell implies that she's also improved

quite a bit with her own smithing, but I probably shouldn't say anything about that. I just nodded and kept mum.

"Eh heh heh... Man, this is a bit embarrassing!" Rike chuckled.

"Yeah, the average blacksmith can't even touch your skills," I added. "You should hold your head up high and be proud."

Dwarves were naturally more adept at smithing than other races. Thus, a blacksmith having a dwarf as their apprentice was an honor in and of itself. This dwarven custom wasn't lost on me.

"I'm not saying you could return to your home forge whenever you want, but..." I trailed off.

"But you just did, Boss," Rike pointed out.

Once a dwarf was skilled enough, they returned to their family's forge with their knowledge. After they relayed to their family all that they'd learned, the dwarf was apparently free to do as they pleased. They could stay with their family forge, open up their own, or return to where they'd apprenticed. I knew that Rike was now skilled enough to take whatever course she wished.

"Sorry..." I chuckled at Rike's strained smile.

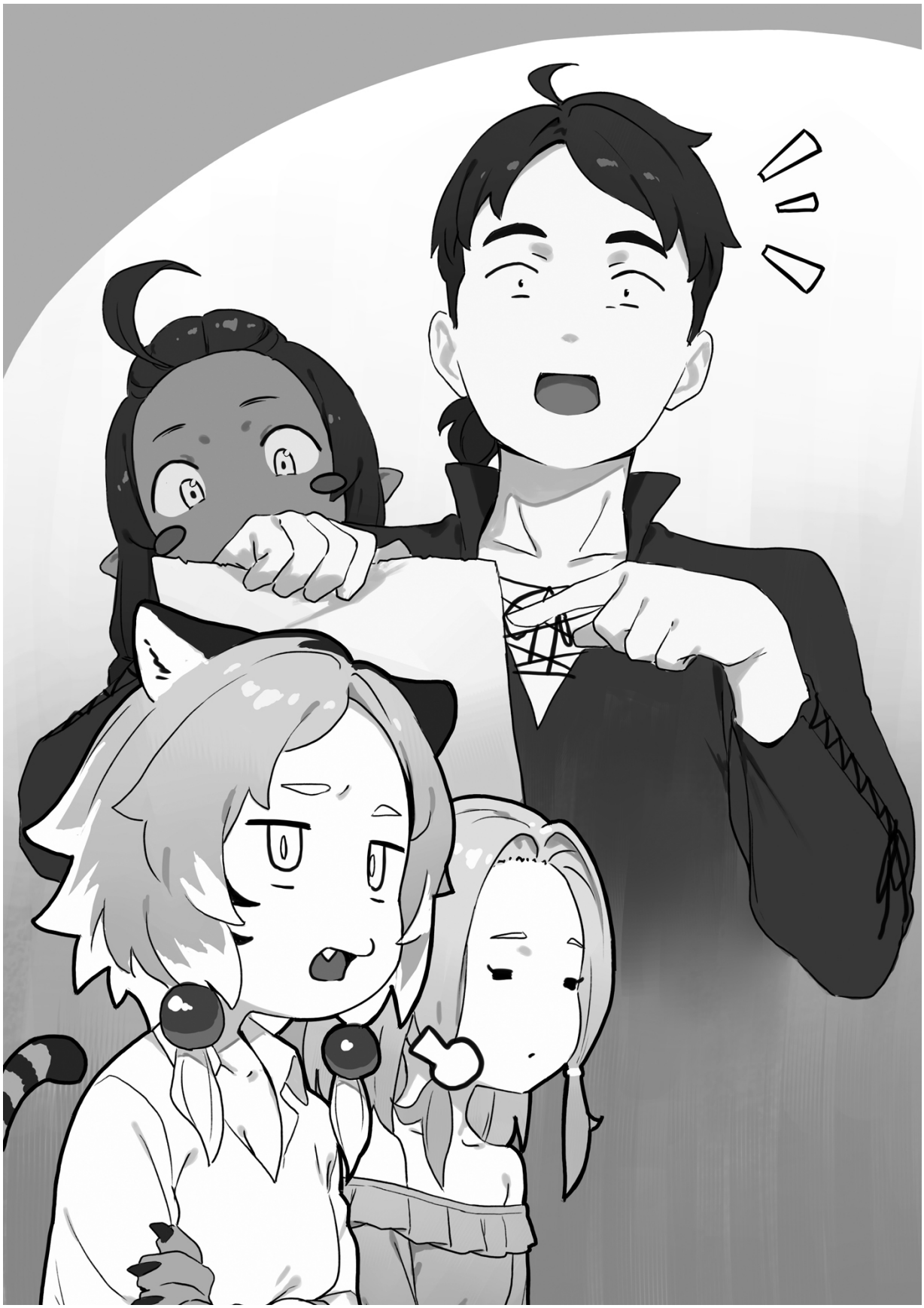
But when the time comes for her to leave, I'll feel indescribably lonely.

"Well, it's not time yet, is it?" Samya asked, smacking Rike's shoulder.

"Gah! Ouch!" Rike yelped, unable to suppress a real smile. "But...yeah. You're right."

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The next day, I decided to add some color to the finished hilt. I currently had brown and green dye with me, along with a splash of red. But when I'd colored my illustration, I'd received less than stellar feedback.





"Ugh, looks weird," Samya had said, scrunching her features and making a face of utmost displeasure.

Never seen that expression on her face... Well, red's out, then. Man, I thought it looked pretty cool.

And so, I decided to use Krul as my model once more—I would paint in green, just like her skin tone. I already was pretty partial to using green, and the empire would eventually piece together that I'd crafted this blade (the kingdom planned to say that the blacksmith who'd been the target of recent rumors had fashioned the weapon; the emperor and those close to him would likely intuit that I was the smith). Knowing all that, I felt it was best to add a bit of Black Forest flair to this hilt. *Green's perfect for that.*

Lidy would help me with the painting part—she'd recently been dyeing some items around the cabin. She hadn't really done anything like that before I'd made that blade for Marius's wife, but it seemed I'd lit up a passionate fire within the elf's heart. Whenever she went out for hunts, she would also forage a few plants that could be used as dye, and I spotted her planting some seeds in the corner of the garden as well. In other words, if I wanted something dyed, Lidy would be my boss for the day.

Neither Rike nor I have ever dyed anything aside from that one knife. Color also tends to change based on the oil used in the varnish, so we have to be precise and account for all these factors. Lidy knows better than any of us.

"Do you want the hilt to be the exact same color as Krul?" Lidy asked.

Obviously, "green" wasn't descriptive enough. There were so many shades of green, from deep forest to brighter and lighter hues. If I was allowed to choose on this spectrum, then naturally, I wanted to choose Krul's color. I asked Lidy if it would be possible to imitate that color.

She cocked her head to one side. "What color's the hilt naturally?"

I showed it to her. Since I'd already planned on dyeing it, I'd chosen an antler that was a shade whiter than most; it was a nice, light hue, but there were a few flecks of black. According to Lidy,

this was due to magical energy.

After staring for a while, she concluded, "Starting from this shade...I think you can get a close match."

She smiled at me; Rike and I exchanged a small high five. *All right! We're getting closer to our goal!*

Once we decided on the color, Lidy headed for the storage shed—Rike and I hastily followed her. The moment she set foot in the shed, she made a beeline for the shelf lined with various herbs and bark. Thus began her selection process.

"Uh, this one...and this one..." Lidy muttered.

Rike and I stared at her as she handed various materials to me. I carefully inspected each item she chose and tried to commit it to memory, hoping that this knowledge would come in handy in the future. No matter how good my cheats were, I couldn't quickly come up with a color combination that would match my needs. Outside of smithing, my production-related cheats usually did the heavy lifting, and while these abilities made me better than the average artisan, my skills were nothing too impressive. Both Rike and I wanted to learn new things at every opportunity. But as I saw Lidy digging through the shelves while humming a tune, I wasn't quite sure just how elaborate this process would be. I quietly watched over her, worrying a little bit.

"You just need to boil this for a bit to bring out the color," Lidy explained.

She took one of our workshop pots (one large enough to fit all the plants), boiled some water, and used her special knife to chop up the ingredients before tossing them into the water. She also used a mortar to grind some herbs, then added those too. At a glance, it almost looked like she was trying to make some kind of medicinal potion, and I probably wasn't too far off. The temperature of the water went down as the ingredients were added, and it took a moment before it heated up once more—soon the various herbs were dancing in the bubbles.

Once Lidy saw the water boil again, she turned the heat off. "We just need to wait for the water to cool, then we should be good to go."

She was so quick and skilled at the entire process that Rike, the rest of our family, and I could only gasp with awe. *We really didn't have enough time to learn anything. But at least I memorized the items she used, and I roughly know how she went about it. With a bit of testing and coaching from Lidy, I'm sure I could manage.*

Once the mixture cooled and the green color turned a shade deeper, it was time to paint. I took my brush, dipped it into the dye, and dragged it along the handle's surface. After one swipe, the hue was faintly reflected on the hilt. I could tell that the whiter parts of the hilt had a bit of color, but I could hardly see the green on the darker spots. This process couldn't be finished in one coat—I had to paint many layers, slowly dyeing the hilt to my desired color. With every stroke that glided across the hilt's surface, I could see it turning greener and greener.

After I finished the first coat, I had to set it out to dry before beginning the process anew. Luckily, the forge was always hot and dry thanks to the fire, and the dye would dry rather quickly. I wanted the thinnest layer possible—that would make for faster drying, thereby allowing me to apply a new coat as quickly as possible. And in our family, we had a bit more help on top of that.

"I'm counting on you," I said.

"I've got this!" Maribel exclaimed.

My youngest daughter could apparently control her fire precisely enough to avoid burning the hilt or changing the dye's color while drying it.

"That's what I trained for!" Maribel said.

I trusted my reliable daughter and borrowed her help to continue my work. Even so, the dyeing process couldn't be completed in a day. So for now, I wanted the color to somewhat resemble my goal—that was good enough.

After closing down the forge for the day, I quickly polished off my dinner and prepared for tomorrow. Everyone seemed to notice that the orichalcum blade was almost complete, and the usually noisy and cheery dinner table was a touch quieter. We all retired to our

rooms earlier than usual.

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The next morning, as dawn brought in a refreshing breeze, I knew that spring was closer than ever. There was still a nip in the air, but I could also sense a hint of spring's warmth. I set out to fetch some water with my daughters; the mere thought that I would finish the orichalcum knife today put a little pep in my step.

I wasn't sure if my daughters caught on to my mood, but they were more energetic than usual as we all headed for the lake. After we brought back the water, I made some breakfast, swiftly polished off my plate, and prayed in front of the *kamidana*. Two bows, two claps, one bow. Another normal morning routine complete.

I felt like the goddess statue, the hihiirokane, and the adamantite shone brighter than usual as I tried to pump myself up for work. I tightened my focus. I just needed to continue what I'd done yesterday: painting, drying, and painting again. But I'd also ask Lidy for her help and astute eyes, just to see if the knife was aesthetically pleasing.

As I continued the dyeing process, a dragon's fingers and claws slowly emerged right before my eyes.

"Oh..." I muttered.

It looked quite lifelike, though I took some of my own artistic liberties. The hilt wasn't totally realistic, but if it had begun to move on its own like it was part of an actual dragon, I wouldn't have been surprised. *Did I try too hard on this? Nah, the hilt* has *to pair with* the *orichalcum blade. I'd rather make an overly intricate hilt than one that's way too plain.*

"Are you finished?" Diana asked, noticing that I'd taken a breather.

"Just a bit more."

One important step remained. I went to the *kamidana* and took the orichalcum blade that decorated (or enshrined) the little altar. I positioned the grip end of the knife, slipped it between the two halves of the hilt, and added a rivet to secure everything into place.

The head of the rivet had been made from a dyed piece of tree deer antler as well. At a glance, it was hard to tell if there was a rivet at all.

"And now, it's done."

Cheers filled the forge as we all celebrated the blade's completion.

"Will you name it?" Rike asked me.

"A name? Hmm..."

I'd never really named my creations, except for my personal blade, my *Diaphanous Ice*. My other works were kind of just...passed on to the client. *But I did work with orichalcum, the greatest material there is, and this is probably my best work to date. I don't think it would be too absurd to give it a name. But I also don't want to get too creative—the name needs to make sense with the design of the knife. Guess I'll be pretty straightforward with this one.*

"All right, then how about *Dragon's*...?" I trailed off. *Come on, I need a name fitting for orichalcum! I can exaggerate a little, right?* "How about *Divine Dragon's Claw*?"

Another round of applause rang out within the forge. The knife was finally, *finally* finished.

That night, to celebrate, we threw a bit of a party on the terrace. Delectable dishes lined the table (I'd made them), and in the center sat *Divine Dragon's Claw*, nestled on a little pedestal.

"Now then, before we make a toast..." I began.

Usually, I was quick with my toasts—they were more like a ritual I used to send off my work, and I found them to be an essential part of closing out any job. This time, I raised *Divine Dragon's Claw* in the air, treating it with the utmost respect.

"I'm counting on you," I said to Helen.

I held the blade out to her, and she nodded solemnly before reaching for it. We all stood, then stepped down from the terrace into the backyard. Illuminated by our magic lantern was a roughly made suit of armor—it was simple, just a vague humanoid shape covered in thick steel plates. This was where Helen would test the sharpness of the blade.

I'd purposefully made *Divine Dragon's Claw* difficult to wield, and I'd already had her fiddle with the blade, so this was purely a test of sharpness. The Lightning Strike didn't don her usual armor, of course. She was dressed casually, like she was ready for bed, but her attire was easy for her to move around in. And since there wasn't anything heavy weighing her down...

"Hff!" Helen grunted.

She hardly needed any time to accelerate—she reached her top speed in a flash. In the blink of an eye, she was beside the armor target. *Divine Dragon's Claw* glistened in her hand, creating a metallic streak. She was so fast that most of our family could barely keep up with her movements. And as for Rike, who had no combat training, it probably looked like Helen had vanished one moment and then reappeared the next with the knife drawn.

The glint of cold orichalcum was unmistakable, but I could sense no change on the target. *I know that the orichalcum knife's difficult to wield, but did even Helen misread her distance? Did she actually miss?* All too soon, I realized that my worries were completely unnecessary as the center of the armor began to shift. It'd been split in two—the upper half of the suit fell to the ground with a deafening *thud*.

Even when I forged a knife using the maximum power of my cheats, it would always make a sharp, metallic ring when it clashed against another bit of metal. But the orichalcum made no sound at all when it made contact with the suit of armor. And though roughly assembled, the armor was made from thick plates of steel and crafted well enough to prevent it from being sliced in two in one swing. Usually, a soundless strike wouldn't even be possible.

"Did you swing twice?" I asked Helen.

The Lightning Strike turned around casually, acting nonchalant, like she'd never ever swung a blade.

"Of course I did," she said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to cut it down." She scrunched her nose ever so slightly and added, "But yeah, this knife's hard to use."

Helen had swung not once, but *twice* in a flash. And she'd done so with a knife that she claimed was difficult to wield—one so hard

to handle that she'd predicted she could barely eke out two victories out of ten fights against me. *Honestly? I feel like I'd lose to her for a hundred battles in a row, no matter what disadvantages she had.*

"It's difficult to strike with my usual power, and it's hard to steady my hand on this hilt," Helen explained. "Since I have to put myself in an awkward position and force a weird grip, it's hard to aim and cut where I'd like. It only went well because this target's stationary, but if it had moved so much as an inch, I don't think I could've adjusted in time."

Only after I heard her explanation was I able to nod and kind of understand. *Is that what usually runs through her mind when she's swinging her swords around?*

In any case, since our leading expert had confirmed the knife's edge, I told myself that I was on the right track. I mustered only a wry remark: "Guess it cuts well enough."

Another round of applause filled the dark forest, and when Helen gave a neat bow, the applause grew louder.

"It might be sharp, but if you bring this out to battle and automatically expect a win, you'll be in for a world of pain," Helen said, scrutinizing *Divine Dragon's Claw*.

I mean, that's what I hoped for, so I'm grateful that's the case, but...

"Not a very convincing argument after we saw that incredible speed," Samya mumbled.

We all nodded along. Helen puffed out her cheeks and loudly clicked her tongue—she wasn't actually furious though, and her angry scowl was immediately replaced with a smile.

"But hey, if Helen struggles to use the blade, it must be *really* tough to wield," I pointed out.

"Oh yes—that, I guarantee," Helen agreed.

"Then I've got nothing to worry about."

Helen laughed once more and crouched slightly as she solemnly handed *Divine Dragon's Claw* back to me. I neatly accepted the blade and placed it back in the center of the terrace table—its rainbow glow was a mesmerizing feast for the eyes. It truly looked heavenly and was clearly the guest of honor for today's party. We all

grabbed our mugs or cups and raised them into the air.

"Now, for the moment we've all been waiting for—" I started.

Diana couldn't wait. "Cheers!" she cried out, getting ahead of me.

We all laughed and raised our mugs higher. "Cheers!"

We tapped our drinks together—our cups were made of wood, so instead of the dainty glass *clink*s that one might usually hear, our mugs collided with dull *clunk*s. Krul's and Lucy's happy cries reverberated within the nighttime forest, matching the tune of our joy.

This was indeed a party, but we were a house in the middle of the forest, isolated from the world, and we hadn't made any trips to the city recently. As such, the celebration was slightly muted—there wasn't much we could do about that, but I tried my hardest to make this night special. I'd made skewered chicken coated in sauce (a recipe from Earth), fried boar meat with ginger, and stewed venison in wine, and I'd added more spices (and a larger variety of them) to the soup. It took quite a bit of effort to lay out all the dishes, so I felt they were fitting for a celebration. Everyone seemed to like the food; I breathed a sigh of relief.

"So once you hand over the knife to Camilo, the request is done, right?" Rike asked. She'd impressively downed her fourth or fifth cup of liquor of the night.

I, on the other hand, was nursing my wine, taking small sips. I nodded. "Yep. It was tough work, but it was a great learning experience."

The biggest win, of course, was that I'd learned how to work with orichalcum, the precious, fabled, *legendary* metal. An opportunity like this didn't come around every day. Even if I had to test other theories out in the future, I already had a procedure—I would no longer have to grope through the darkness in search of ways to process new metals. At this point, I'd be able to handle the request of the hero or the Demon Queen...but I might've been getting a bit too cocky.

"Boss, when I'm with you, I get to try so many new things," Rike said casually.

I let out a strained chuckle. "Glad to hear, but frankly, orichalcum

might be as far as I can go."

"Well, we've still got the hihiirokane and the adamantite, don't we?"

"Right."

I glanced at the *kamidana* in the forge, which was obscured from view where I stood. Surely, my mind was playing tricks on me, but I thought I saw the two precious metals glisten proudly. They likely wouldn't be as troublesome as the orichalcum, but they were still legendary metals, and anything was possible. It was best to be prepared.

"If you learn how to forge with all of them, you'll become unstoppable," I said to Rike. "A dwarf who can work with any and all metal..."

Rike blinked at me for a moment before the widest grin stretched across her face. "That sounds *wonderful*. I think I'll aim to be a dwarf like that."

Chapter 4: The Forest in the Spring

Diana had mentioned that I could help them finalize Camilo's order if I wanted to and had the time. However, I honestly wanted to take it easy for a bit.

I went to her the day after I'd finished making the *Divine Dragon's Claw* and asked for her permission to kick back. But it didn't feel right to just do *nothing* while I sat on a chair on the terrace, watching time pass.

"The wind's starting to feel nice," I murmured.

I began to do some stretches. Patches of sunbeams trickled through the canopy, shedding light onto the dark forest. Every now and then, I spotted some flower buds basking in the sunshine. Flora whistled in the breeze, fluttering ever so slightly, like the leaves were bowing for a performance, and the wind that blew throughout the forest tickled my cheeks, refreshing my body and mind.

Because magical energy was so thick in the air, plants that usually didn't bear fruit during this season did, making it difficult for one to learn what exactly was in season at any given time. Also, trees that kept their leaves were generally darker in color. This year-round gloomy atmosphere presented the illusion that the forest didn't really experience the changing of seasons, but that couldn't be further from the truth. There were actually quite a few signs of the seasons changing.

The easiest way to tell was the breeze within the Black Forest—it had a different personality for every season. In the summer, it was sweltering and passionate; in the fall, the wind was more gentle and refreshing. In the winter, it grew fierce and icy, ready to bite one's skin; in the spring, the breeze was like a breath of fresh air, pouring new life into the forest and its inhabitants.

This was the first time I was getting to experience the early spring breeze—I was nearing a whole year since I'd come to this world.

To commemorate the new season, my family and I decided to go for a little expedition within the forest—one that would welcome spring. We weren't out hunting this time, so our group was surrounded by lively chatter as we walked along.

"I've never done stuff like this before!" Maribel squealed, clearly the most excited of the bunch.

She first arrived at our cabin during the winter, and that wasn't exactly strolling-in-the-forest-for-leisure kinda weather. The moment she'd returned, I'd forced her into orichalcum duty with me. I noticed everyone gazing at her with soft eyes, Hayate included—the wyvern was perched on Krul's back, and the excited Maribel sat atop Lucy's back. Our pup was acting a bit like an older sister today.

She's grown so much—about as big as an adult Siberian husky, I think... Siberian huskies take a year to a year and a half to fully mature, right? If Lucy follows the same timeline, she isn't quite an adult just yet.

Lucy was also acting a bit calmer and more intelligent than she had a few months ago. Needless to say, she was still adorable above anything else, but if I were to put her in human years, she was at a difficult age. Luckily, she hadn't had a rebellious phase (yet), and she eagerly joined me on my water runs every morning. Since Lucy was very much a magical beast, it was more likely than not that she had a bit more growing to do. *Since we've got Hayate and Maribel now, maybe I should expand or remodel their hut.*

"Huh? What's that?" Maribel asked, pointing to something that seemed almost glued to a tree. It looked like a fold or a gill of sorts.

Thanks to my knowledge from Earth, I had a vague idea of what it was but didn't have any specifics. *A type of Polyporaceae, right?* Or, in layman's terms, a type of mushroom.

"Oh, I think that's a mushroom," Samya said.

"What?! Seriously?!" Maribel asked.

Samya nodded back. These types of fungi weren't common here,

but they stood out and were eye-catching.

"You can't eat those," Samya said. "I think my gramps said that they're used as medicine, but I've never seen him use one."

She glanced at Lidy, who was focused in a different direction (probably searching for medicinal herbs of her own). Lidy turned to Samya to offer her expertise. "Back in the elf village, I'd say opinions were divided," Lidy explained, gazing into the distance, her eyes glossed over with nostalgia. "Half of them said these mushrooms could be used as medicine, and the other half said they couldn't."

Does Samya notice that wistful look in Lidy's eyes?

"Why the difference of opinion?" Samya asked.

"Well, the mushroom's effects aren't surefire," Lidy replied. "I think it's said that these fungi are useful for soothing coughs, but when people brewed and drank the mushroom tea, some were cured while others weren't."

"Huh," Samya said thoughtfully. "Fair enough. Guess we shouldn't bring these guys back, then."

Samya looked a bit reluctant to leave as she gazed at the mushrooms, but Lidy just smiled and said, "I think that's for the best."

"The expert has spoken," Samya said, turning to Maribel.

My youngest daughter, possibly figuring that these mushrooms were no longer intriguing, had already been seduced by some other sight.

"Hmm... Oh! What's that?" Maribel asked.

Someone else answered with a strained smile. As we walked along, the gentle breeze brushing against our cheeks, we proceeded deeper into the Black Forest.

The Black Forest was also home to a massive lake and a river that flowed from it. The lake didn't border on the ocean, so I couldn't enjoy the springtime sea. *Since leaving Japan, I haven't had any opportunities to recall that one iconic song—the one that often played at supermarkets or on loop during New Year's TV specials.*

As we wandered around the forest, enjoying our stroll, we all decided to head to the river. Maribel claimed to have never seen one

for herself, and we wanted to give her new experiences. However, Samya's casual remark was the thing that really pushed us to go.

"The fish in this season are the best. Never had one tastier."

Maribel and the rest of our family were all in, and we had Krul carry our fishing poles for us (if we hadn't had any prepared, we could've made some at the river). We hoped to secure tonight's dinner. Instead of going to the riverbank we usually visited, we headed for a spot where the river was wider, and the bank was larger too. Back on Earth, this would've been a perfect camping spot.

"Camping, huh..." I muttered.

As long as I stayed in the Black Forest, in an area thick with magical energy, I could help out the fairies if they needed me—I could create magical jewelstones that could combat their illnesses and save them when time was of the essence. *But it doesn't matter* where *in the Black Forest I am... Why not tour around? I've heard it's huge. Maybe I could camp out for three nights and enjoy what this place has to offer.* I didn't feel like I could take that much time off in the near future, but maybe I could make some preparations to do camp in autumn.

While I was lost in my thoughts, the ladies laid out a blanket by the riverbank—they set down several baskets containing our lunches on top. Our other stuff was lined up beside the blanket, and we kept our weapons on us as we lit a little fire a short distance away. We'd all picnicked many times before, and it wasn't long before we all got comfortable. In minutes, a perfect area for a picnic had appeared right before my eyes. The only difference from our past picnics was how easy it was to start a fire, all thanks to Maribel.

"Is this good?" she asked.

"Perfect. You're amazing—such a big help," I said.

She puffed out her chest proudly, and I petted her head roughly before she looked satisfied and headed over to Rike.

After we were all ready, we each went out to gather bugs for bait. We skewered the bugs on our hooks and flung the lines into the water. The river was limpid and allowed a clear view of the fish, but they weren't stupid—they could see us too, and they knew that

we were out to get them. Even if we threw our fishing line near them, they didn't readily bite.

Diana gave me a crash course on fishing in this world. Apparently, she'd used the same tactics as me as a child, and when she'd thrown a tantrum, Marius had taught her a few tricks. And so, we all threw our hooks a good distance away from the fish, allowing the gentle flow of the spring water to manipulate our fishing lines as it pleased.

That reminds me... Not long after I came here, I went fishing with Samya and Rike. I think that was during the spring too. I never really thought about the changing seasons back then. I'd figured it was normal for the three of us to spend our lives together, but now, my family's grown to eleven *members. Seriously, how in the world did my household grow so large?*

Is it fate? Or a prank played by the Watchdog?

Suddenly, I realized that a fish had stolen my bait and darted off. I reeled in my line and then placed another insect onto the hook. Gently, I cast my line once more amid the flowing stream.

Time ticked by slowly as I relaxed in nature. Every now and then, I'd hear a whoop of joy as someone caught a fish—we piled our catches near the edge of the river.

"Whoa! Awesome!" Maribel yelped.

She'd hooked a whopper. Her small body wasn't strong enough to fully use a fishing pole, so Rike helped her hold it and cast her line. Still, it was more than enough for Maribel to enjoy the thrill and the feeling of her line being tugged by the fish. After they reeled in her catch, Maribel proudly presented a trout that was as large as she was. She chattered excitedly with Rike.

Everyone else, Anne included, had caught a fish. Samya, a beastfolk native of the Black Forest, showed off her skill—she was the only one who'd caught three fish almost immediately. As for me...

I groaned. "I'm the only one with zilch. Ugh..."

My shoulders slumped with disappointment. I didn't think I let my feelings show too much (I was *so* desperate to catch something), and I didn't think I was exuding a murderous aura either, but every

time I thought I had a tug, my bait was skillfully stolen, leaving me with a goose egg on the end of my hook. *I'm just gonna keep telling myself that I'm up against really smart fish. Just me. That's how I'll cope.*

And if that were the case, then fishing was just a battle of endurance. If we kept fishing at this pace, we'd each have a fish and then some, even if I caught nothing at all. I asked Samya if we were overfishing—she flashed an expression that implied, *There goes Eizo, worrying about weird stuff again.*

"Even if we fished up this entire area, we should be fine," Samya answered.

Since she sounded so firm and sure of herself, I continued fishing all by myself, refusing to throw in the towel. Everyone else took a few breaks or played around with my daughters. *I don't need to stubbornly stick with it.* Yet, contrary to my thoughts, I cast my line for the umpteenth time today.

"Hrmmm..." I groaned as I chowed down on my lunch.

Krul rubbed her snout against my cheek, allowing me to feel her warmth through her flexible, slightly stiff scales.

"Good girl," I said.

I petted her head—I knew that she was worried about me in her own way. In fact, Lucy was surprisingly glued to my side as she sat down, and Hayate was seated right in front of me. Maribel caught more fish after her initial catch, and she desperately conveyed her delight to the ladies using the least amount of words possible.

Eureka! An idea suddenly hit me.

Yeah, this could be it. Maybe I'll test it out once I'm done eating.

"Nice! Good going!" I said.

"*Kulululu.*"

A fishing pole rested in Krul's jaws. She tugged upward, and the tip of the pole splashed out of the water—at the end was a large, lively fish.

"*Kululu!*"

When she saw the fish splashing around on the riverbank, she raised her voice joyfully. I'd given up on fishing myself, but I wanted

my daughters to have some fun too. I mirrored what Rike had done for Maribel and tried to help Krul. When I saw my beloved daughter smile happily, I knew that I had made the right choice.

I may not be able to catch anything myself, but if my daughters can enjoy their time here, I have no qualms.

I really don't! Seriously! No regrets.

I helped Lucy and Hayate out as well—my two daughters managed to catch huge trout pretty quickly, and they also cried out, delighted.

They all did the same thing, yet all three of them fished in their own ways. Was it a personality difference or a species one? No matter the case, it was an interesting observation to make. Krul tended to let the river do all the work—she allowed the flow of the water to drag her line around and didn't do much else. Only when she felt a tug on her pole did she brace herself. Lucy, on the other hand, took the pole and just ran with it (honestly, it was a bit tough to keep up with her). At times, she'd go against the flow of the water, and she was an expert at knowing when she had prey on the hook. *Maybe those are her wolfish instincts.* While Hayate let the river do most of the work, she occasionally tugged at the pole and controlled the bait's motions. She was also the best when it came to creating tension in the line and setting her hook. Sure, each of them had their own way of fishing, but what shocked me the most was that they all understood the basic concepts of fishing.

Was it because Krul and Hayate were draconic, and Lucy was a magical beast wolf? I honestly didn't know, but for future reference, I thought it was best if I knew just how much and how well they understood their situation. In the worst case, I would someday have to ditch our cabin and flee. *But for now, I'll just devote my time to enjoying a leisurely day out with my daughters.*

I flung the fishing line quite far and allowed Krul to do the rest.

Ultimately, I rolled my fishing dice and came up snake eyes. Nothing at all. *But as long as my daughters had fun, that's good enough for me. Yep.*

After we returned home, and before making dinner, I cut open some of the fish we'd caught and placed them in salt water. Since

we had quite a bit, I wanted to hang them up to dry and preserve the meat. As spring rolled around and the weather became warmer, I knew that this sort of food wouldn't keep forever. However, my forge was relatively dry, so they'd last for a good while.

If it dried too much, it'd resemble a dish called salmon *toba*, a type of dried fish that was seasoned well. To eat it, you peeled flakes of meat from the skin. It paired perfectly with alcohol but wasn't quite enough for a full meal.

We should probably eat all the fish before they go bad or dry out too much.

For dinner, I grilled our freshly caught fish with some salt. Aside from Maribel, I left my daughters' portions unseasoned. I added soup and bread to round out the fish—though the soup used the same recipe as usual, Lidy had put her heart and soul into raising the (elven) vegetables and herbs. This might not have seemed impressive, but these ingredients elevated the soup's flavor tremendously. All in all, the food was simple but delicious.

It was hard to come across this kind of meal outside the forest, even if you went looking for it. In a way, this dinner was quite lavish. Also, since we'd just had a little party, no one drank tonight—it wasn't like I restricted anyone though, because alcohol wouldn't affect them the next day. (Anne hated to wake up early, but that had nothing to do with drinking.) I didn't drink daily because I couldn't hold my liquor well, and everyone else usually held themselves back. Rike would drink once or twice a week, and some family members joined her—usually Helen. But surprisingly, the other person most likely to drink with Rike was Lidy.

"I would drink quite often when I lived in the elven forest," Lidy admitted.

And her claim was backed up by fact—she probably drank the most after Rike. *Do dwarves and elves just have a higher alcohol tolerance? I sorta thought that they were more resistant to poisons, so maybe it checks out...* Anne and Diana were next in line in terms of alcohol consumption, followed by Samya. According to the Samya, she just hadn't gotten many opportunities to drink during her life before the forge. *And that's fair. If we calculate her age from her*

birth, she technically turns six this year...

"But I like alcohol! It's good!" Samya insisted strongly. Diana refrained from scolding Samya, though she wanted to at times because Samya was still so young.

"I had to attend all sorts of events as the imperial princess," Anne reasoned. "So, yeah, I've had to learn to drink."

"Same goes for me, though I didn't have to attend them as often as Her Highness," Diana said.

As an imperial princess and the sister of a count, Anna and Diana were high-ranking nobles. *Since the ability to hold your drink highly depends on the person, I guess they've mastered the art of how to drink and savor liquor.* I had very low alcohol tolerance. Usually I was unable to pace myself well and would be out like a light in no time. I was envious of their classy skills.

As we drank, we indulged in fatty, grilled fish. We smacked our lips in satisfaction, getting into a good-natured debate over who had caught the tastiest one. And in this happy atmosphere, our leisurely holiday drew to a close.

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The next morning, I went to fetch some water as part of my routine. The lake water was cold year-round, but there were still some minute temperature fluctuations. Now that winter had passed over us, the water no longer seemed icy and biting. As I trekked back carrying water (there was a jug around Krul's neck as well), a loud flapping sound reached my ears. Not many birds in the forest flapped their wings so loudly; most of them had owllike wings that allowed for silent flight. Smaller birds, left with no other choice, would beat their tiny wings as fast as they could, emitting adorable little *flip-flap*s.

But this loud flapping didn't belong to any birds in this forest. I looked up and spotted a familiar creature.

"Arashi!" I cried.

She was a wyvern that stayed at Camilo's. When Arashi heard my voice, she flew straight to me. I set the water jug on the ground and

held out my arm—she skillfully perched on top.

"You're such a good girl," I said, stroking her head.

"*Kree! Kree!*" she called out happily.

She acted as our carrier pigeon—or carrier wyvern, rather. She would periodically deliver a newspaper detailing recent events that'd occurred within the city or capital. But today wasn't the usual delivery day. *Which means she's here to send me some other info.*

"Pardon me, my lady," I said.

I removed the small tube strapped around her leg and took out a piece of paper.

It read, *"If you've finished my request, head straight to the capital."*

Chapter 5: Straight to the Capital

"So yeah, that's what I was told," I said.

We were eating breakfast on the terrace when I gave everyone the news. It took some time to move the table out to the terrace, but we went through the trouble because Arashi didn't head home right away—she'd decided to rest her wings here with us for a bit.

"Was nothing else written on the note?" Diana asked. She fed Lucy bits of meat in between her own bites.

I shook my head in response. "Hmm... Maybe there's a reason he can't write much else." Diana pondered this, placing a hand on her chin.

Camilo's note didn't list any reason at all—it honestly felt more like an order. Though it wasn't odd for him to use as few descriptors as possible. He wanted to make sure that nothing would be leaked should the message be intercepted.

Rike looked at Diana with a wry smile. "Or maybe this is his prank of sorts."

I couldn't argue with that. We were talking about Camilo and Marius, and this behavior wasn't out of the ordinary for them—if their prank was intended to hasten my trip and have me head to the capital earlier, then it was a fun one.

I cocked my head to one side. "Well, if it *was* a prank, I feel like they'd make some sort of excuse that would entice me to head out immediately."

Camilo and Marius's pranks were usually exaggerated and grandiose. If they really were trying to prank me, they'd offer a plausible reason—like maybe they'd state that someone from the empire arrived at the kingdom sooner than scheduled, so we needed to leave early too. Usually, these excuses were half-truths. Perhaps the person from the empire really *had* arrived early, further giving credence to their claims.

But this time around, the letter was a simple, one-line note urging me to head immediately to the capital the moment I finished forging the orichalcum knife.

"What if they thought you'd catch on to their joke if they wrote some kind of half-baked excuse?" Samya asked.

I nodded at her. "Well, that's fair. Maybe they don't expect me to actually travel to the capital as soon as possible. But perhaps the seriousness is intentional, to make it abundantly clear that this isn't a prank they're pulling."

Anne sighed heavily. "So they decided *not* to give a reason, just to prove that this isn't a prank? What a troublesome friendship you share."

"Oof, can't refute that." I let out an awkward chuckle. I could only nod in agreement when they pointed out how complicated our friendship was.

Anne smiled. "The world's a big place. It's fine to have a friend or two like that."

I mean, it's two geezers and a handsome guy—I think it's easier for us to maintain our ties when there's a bit of trouble brewing.

"Well, the knife *is* done," I said. "If needed, we can set out today, but..."

I gazed around at everyone; they stared back at me. My daughters were probably just copying their moms, frankly.

Samya huffed loudly, shattering the small moment of silence. "We're going there either way, aren't we?" she asked. "It's just a matter of sooner or later. So let's just hurry up and get it over with. The capital's a bit farther away than the city."

"Yeah." Lidy nodded along.

We had to turn in the knife either way, so even if this was a prank, it didn't make much of a difference to us.

"All right, then," I said. "We'll change all our plans and head for the capital."

"Roger that!" everyone agreed.

"*Kulululu!*"

"*Arf!*"

"*Kree!*"

Our voices echoed throughout the calm forest.

"Last one out's a rotten egg!" Helen announced.

I thought it was weird that she'd been silent so far, but she swiftly finished her breakfast, and the Lightning Strike—in a manner befitting her sobriquet—cleaned up her utensils in a flash and returned into the cabin.

"No fair!" Samya shouted as she hastily followed.

The rest of us all laughed and more slowly followed the two ladies. We all quickly made travel preparations. We didn't do anything special though, and we dressed as we normally did except for perhaps adding thicker capes to shield us from the brisk air. Soon, we were ready to go.

Helen was the only one who hesitated for a moment—she wasn't sure whether she should wear her armor or not. But the capital wasn't all that dangerous, and since we would be traveling in a group, she ultimately chose to leave it behind. Her greatest weapon was, by far, her speed, and if she was willing to sacrifice some of her armor to maintain that swiftness, it would work in her favor, especially in the city.

"Hey, Arashi! I see you're still here," I said.

"*Kree.*"

As we all hastily loaded our cargo onto the cart, I noticed Arashi perched alongside Hayate. I thought Arashi would head home after she got some rest, but it seemed she'd take it easy for just a bit longer. *Or maybe she received orders to stick with us until we reach the capital. It's fine—another petite wyvern won't increase Krul's workload or anything.*

"Hup!" Rike grunted as she tied Krul to the cart.

Krul had grown, and we now had to fasten the cart a bit higher up. I didn't think there'd come a time when Krul would grow so tall that she'd be out of Rike's reach, but if that time ever *were* to come, then someone else would have to take over (maybe me). The orichalcum knife—*Divine Dragon's Claw*—was safely stored within a box. This box didn't look lavish like a chest and was instead very simple.

A flashy box would scream that there was something important

stored inside, and if we encountered bandits, the orichalcum knife could be at risk. As a means of camouflage, I also placed several entry-level model knives in a couple of different boxes, though *Divine Dragon's Claw* was stored by itself. If anyone held the box or looked inside, the differences would immediately give it away, though—the subterfuge was mostly to calm my anxiety.

Once everything was packed up and ready, we boarded our drake-drawn cart. Lucy still acted very much like a puppy, but she was large enough to be an adult wolf—she no longer needed a boost to get up onto the cart. This realization was sad in a way, but it was also proof that my daughter was growing up, which was something to be celebrated. At least, I kept telling myself that, hoping to suppress my complicated emotions.

Was Lucy aware of her parents' feelings? I didn't know, but she immediately went over to Diana and plopped down by her feet. Diana, who'd always assaulted my shoulder and squealed when Lucy had done these things as a pup, only smiled now. She gently stroked Lucy's head.

"Time to head out!" Rike announced.

"*Kululu!*"

The rest of us cheered, and when Krul took a step, the cart slowly creaked forward, rolling through the Black Forest. Once we reached the road and the exit to the forest path, we could see early signs of spring dancing across the landscape. The most obvious were the grassy fields beside the road, now a lush, rich green. The sun, which now rose earlier than it did in the winter, shone upon the verdure, sparkling with morning dew and reminding me of the surface of a placid lake. The breeze wasn't as harsh and cutting as it had been in the winter.

"*Kree!*"

"*Kree! Kree!*"

Arashi and Hayate began to cry out, and then Arashi quickly took to the skies. I didn't even have the time to call for her as she flew high into the air. She did a lap above our heads before zipping off at impressive speed.

"She's not heading for the city, is she?" I asked.

"Nope. That's the direction of the capital," Samya answered.

The city and the capital were in opposite directions along the road. When you exited the forest, you could turn left or right—to the city or to the capital. If Arashi had been headed for the city, she would've flown in the direction opposite the one we were traveling. But since we were headed in the same direction, we were all clearly headed to the same place: the capital.

"Which means Camilo must also be there," I surmised.

"Yeah." Diana let out a small sigh, still gently stroking Lucy's head.

Camilo isn't the type to call for me while he isn't there. I also know that aside from Marius's wedding, there wasn't much happy news in the capital during our last visit. So, combining that information with Camilo's simple letter... I began to fear that clouds of suspicion loomed over the capital's skies.

The road that led to the capital was pretty popular, so many people and carriages used the path; the carriages were usually loaded with goods, and at most, two riders. Yet here we were with minimal cargo, several women on board alongside a wolf and a wyvern, and a conspicuous drake pulling our cart. We definitely stuck out like a sore thumb. It was hard to *not* attract attention. Usually, our cart was visibly packed with wares, allowing others to roughly guess why we were on the road. But this time around, we didn't have much with us. *I just hope no one suspects us of anything nefarious, like, for example, people trafficking.*

I was already familiar with the guards in the city, so they always let me pass with a quick greeting. The same couldn't be said for soldiers patrolling other areas. *I might need to come up with an excuse for entering the capital.*

"Maybe I should've asked for a token or something that I could show during times like these," I muttered under the clear blue skies.

Something like that would prevent any unnecessary trouble. Clearly, the people questioning us wouldn't be to blame, but what soldier would believe us if we told them the truth? Besides, I couldn't possibly tell them why Diana was here with us, much less Anne. *It'd be nice to have some kind of ID or pass so that I wouldn't*

have to explain myself. The secret peace treaty between the kingdom and empire and Marius's wedding were special cases that had allowed us entry to the capital without much questioning. But that wouldn't have been possible without Marius's power and help.

"You might be able to get one, provided you don't use it for nefarious purposes," Diana said with a chuckle. "And I don't think you'd do anything like that."

I nodded back. Even if I were able to get my hands on some kind of pass, I wouldn't use it to cut lines when entering the capital or anything. That wasn't really my intention.

"I'll stand in line just like everyone else," I said. "I just want something to flash to the soldiers when my turn comes. Other than that, a pass might be useful for avoiding sticky situations, but that's about it."

"Yeah," Diana agreed. "Restraint is key. If you use your pass all willy-nilly, people will start to wonder why you even have one."

"I'm just a normal blacksmith, after all."

"You *could* become a personal blacksmith for House Eimoor. That might work."

"Nah, I don't think I'll do that."

That would be, by far, the easiest explanation for why I had a pass. The only point of suspicion would be why I was located outside of the capital, but I could easily come up with some sort of excuse. Still, I hesitated to shackle myself to service under even a close friend. I wasn't worried about the hostility between us should our relationship turn sour—it was more about public appearances. I thought it was better if we didn't have any public ties.

"Hee hee, I'm just kidding," Diana said. "I know you're not interested in anything like that, Eizo."

"I wouldn't say nev— Well, yeah, actually. You're right." I gave an obedient nod. *It's true that I don't like being tied down.* "Maybe I'll ask Marius about it when the current *situation* settles down."

"You wouldn't ask the margrave for a pass?" Anne asked.

"I'm inclined to avoid having him prepare something like that for me..."

No doubt, the margrave would happily and swiftly prepare a pass

for me to use, but I wanted to avoid being indebted to him at all costs. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what kind of unreasonable repayment task he’d saddle me with. I must’ve looked exhausted by the mere mention of the margrave since everyone laughed. Our laughter attracted the attention of other carriages on the road, and we traveled onward to the capital.

Chapter 6: At the Capital

Our cart clattered along conspicuously, but we were swift on the road, and no one had time to ask us any questions. I called out to Rike, who was gripping Krul's reins.

"Hey."

"Is something the matter?" she asked, turning to me.

"Haven't we been passing some rather fast carriages?"

None of these carriages traveled at breakneck speed; the horses were pulling a wagon full of goods, after all. Still, we spotted a few passing by us from the opposite direction and noticed that they were pretty speedy. We also came across a few (not many) carriages going our direction that would take even our quick cart some time to overtake.

"Yeah, normally, Krul could catch up to most carriages pretty quickly, but it took some time," Rike observed.

"Thought so," I replied.

"Wait, do you think...?"

"I'd say it's likely."

I nodded, knowing that Rike had drawn the same conclusion. Our carriage was simply constructed, but it utilized a leaf spring suspension system. The speed of Forge Eizo's carriage was due, in no small part, to Krul's raw power, but the springs also supported our vehicle and increased our pace.

The roads throughout the kingdom weren't paved or well maintained. These paths were hardened and timeworn thanks to many people walking and riding over them. They might've been maintained on occasion, but the wheels of carriages would still clatter along the rough surfaces, making for a bumpy ride. Leaf springs absorbed the impact of the bumpy road, creating a gentler experience for riders, and they also helped the carts move along smoothly.

I'd taught Camilo about this technology. I wanted to avoid affecting the technological advancement of this world too much, but the leaf spring suspension system was a simple design, and I didn't think it would change history too much. I'd hoped my friend could capitalize on my idea. Last I heard, he was just shy of being able to mass-produce the leaf springs idea...but all these swift carriages around us made me think that he'd successfully monetized the suspension system.

Maybe a day will come where Krul will struggle to overtake other carriages. How will I console and cheer her up then? Well, I guess I don't need to worry about Krul feeling down just yet.

As I pondered this, our drake-drawn cart, helped by the suspension system, rolled along the road, headed straight for the capital.

After a while, stone tiles overtook the packed dirt of the rural road—this was proof that the capital was just a stone's throw away. In terms of military tactics, it was probably unwise to make the path to the capital an easy and smooth ride, but the kingdom's center had appearances and dignity to uphold. It would be uncouth to have a bumpy road into the capital. Our cart, which had been bouncing around slightly before, began to roll more smoothly. The road was clearly much more even here.

Diana looked off into the distance. "We're close."

We all nodded. It would still be a good while until we found out what exactly was happening in the capital, and we were rather nervous about what the future held.

The mood was suddenly shattered when a loud, relaxed voice called out, "Hello there!"

That came from the side of the road, right? It sounded like a lady's voice... I turned toward the voice and spotted a familiar face.

"Catalina!" I cried.

As I greeted her, the rest of my family waved. She darted toward our cart with incredible speed. Rike tugged on the reins slightly, slowing Krul down, and that was more than enough for Catalina to catch up. She jumped onto our cart with the utmost elegance and grace. *Agile as usual, I see... I'm not really sure if a servant is*

supposed to be this nimble, frankly...

"You're ferrying something important!" Catalina exclaimed. "I considered picking you up in the forest, but I didn't want to miss you!"

"I see," I replied.

"Rike, I can take over—you can just sit back and relax!"

"Huh?" Rike's eyes widened. "Oh! Thank you very much."

Taken aback by Catalina's energy, Rike obediently stepped away from the coachman's seat. Just as the capital's buildings began coming into view, I asked Catalina if she knew anything about the situation we were involved in.

"Well," she said. "It's not looking good! I can tell you that much!"

She seemed to have some insight but didn't provide much information. *Which means I probably shouldn't pry further for now.*

"You know, just the other day..." Catalina started.

She was like a radio—she rapidly informed us of current events without stopping to take a breather, and we all fell silent, nervously listening to her report. When our cart reached the entrance of the capital, she took a wooden token from her pocket, allowing us to roll inside without any issues. For the time being, this drake-drawn cart belonged to House Eimoor, the coachman was an employee of House Eimoor, and we even had a pass for entry—there was no need to explain our identities to the guards at the gate.

And so, despite the early hour of the day, we managed to skip the long line of people that were waiting to be admitted into the capital. I could practically feel some people shooting daggers at us as we cut the line and sped right in. *It seems we're in a rush today, so I can turn a blind eye, but I wouldn't want to cut the line to the capital during less urgent times (though I also wouldn't visit the capital for less urgent matters anyway). Receiving these glares doesn't feel good; it's not worth cutting the line normally. Ugh, this mindset of refusing to stand out must come from my Japanese background. I don't really want to be thought of as weird—I probably shouldn't touch upon this topic with anyone else.*

Our cart raced through the capital. A drake wasn't a common sight, even in a diverse place like this. Under the curious gazes of

the populace, we headed straight for the city's center—the heart of the capital protected by two layers of walls, where nobles mostly resided. While we attracted some attention in the center, no one was rude enough to ask to buy our drake. Our coachman was an employee of the house of an up-and-coming count who had ties to the margrave—this fact probably helped too.

After a short while, our cart rolled into the Eimoor residence. Matthias immediately stepped out to greet us. He was slightly standoffish, a man of few words, but he was very considerate and kind. He was the horse master for House Eimoor, and I'd become acquainted with him during the monster subjugation campaign.

"Hey," Matthias said, raising a hand to greet me. He wasn't smiling at all, but by his standards, he was being very friendly with us.

"Hi there," I replied. "Sorry to trouble you, but I'll leave them in your care."

I was talking about Krul, Lucy, and Hayate. Maribel was currently hidden in Helen's pocket; she didn't make a peep, and Matthias didn't notice her. I'd had Maribel hide during the trip too, since it would only raise further questions if a fire spirit was in the public eye. I hid her from Matthias for his sake—I didn't want this secret to take a mental toll on him. He wasn't expressive, but he seemed terrible at lying, and ignorance truly was bliss. I thought this would be better for him.

"Sure thing," Matthias replied with a nod. He even clumsily cracked a smile. This was the brightest expression he could muster, and I knew that all too well.

We stepped off the cart, carrying the box that contained *Divine Dragon's Claw*. At this point, we had to part ways with Krul, Lucy, and Hayate for just a short while. Catalina, despite maintaining her usual, laid-back tone, rushed us ahead and led the way into the manor.

I was already quite used to this view. This was my friend's house, but even so, I didn't feel like a simple blacksmith should have the honor of visiting his lavish residence so frequently. And yet, the reality was that I knew this place well—well enough to know the

rough layout of the rooms and where I was headed. If my memory served me correctly, we were headed for a sitting room large enough for groups, and I assumed that this was where we'd learn some more details about the present debacle. *Which reminds me...*

"Where's Bowman?" I asked Catalina.

Bowman, who sported a large physique, was the head servant within this manor. Usually, he was the first to greet us and guide us into the manor. *Is he busy handling other guests within this residence?*

"Ah, well, he has *other* work to tend to," Catalina said, glancing my way and furrowing her brow slightly.

"I see." *All right, I won't pry.*

Catalina turned to face forward when we reached our destination. She knocked on the door that was all too familiar.

"We're coming in," she called.

"Go ahead," Marius replied from inside.

She opened one of the double doors and ushered us inside; we all bowed to Catalina as we stepped into the room. I wasn't surprised by the faces that were gathered before us: Marius, Camilo, and the margrave. *Referring to them as the "usual crew" makes me feel like I'm a part of that, and I don't really want to be...*

After a quick greeting, we were encouraged to take our seats, and we all sat. I placed the box with *Divine Dragon's Claw* on the table. Once we all got comfortable, Marius broke the silence.

"Now then, shall we begin?"

"Very well." The margrave nodded solemnly.

He looks a bit annoyed by all the trouble. Is this a political affair? I mean, to be fair, I didn't expect this to be anything but political.

"Ah, sorry." Marius pointed at the box on the table. "Before we get to business, is that what I think it is?"

I nodded. "You can peek inside if you like."

"Really? Don't mind if I do..."

He grabbed the box and gently opened it up. Camilo and the margrave crowded around Marius to also peer inside. *Camilo doesn't have the status, but if the margrave had been so curious, he could've just opened it himself.*





Marius gasped.

"Whoa..."

He reverently took *Divine Dragon's Claw* from the box, almost as though he were offering it to a god. He ran his fingers across the blade, looking restless.

"I also gave it a name," I said. "*Divine Dragon's Claw*."

"Amazing," Marius replied. "It really does look like you cut a claw from a real dragon."

Camilo and the margrave nodded along. Camilo then said, "I trust your skills, Eizo, so I knew you'd make something breathtaking, but this? This...is absolutely stunning. It'll be a *more* than suitable gift for the empire."

"And if they even dare to decline this present, I'll buy it off your hands at a good price," the margrave added.

Everyone laughed, but the cheery mood died down quickly.

"Now then, shall we get down to business?" Marius asked.

I heard someone in the room gulp nervously.

"We'd planned on keeping this orichalcum knife gift confidential until the day we presented it to the empire," Marius explained.

"That was gonna be the first step in the investigation of the counterfeit Forge Eizo knives, right?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yep."

Fake Forge Eizo knives had been circulating in the capital, and this orichalcum knife was supposed to be a trigger—an envoy of the empire would claim that they had bought a popular knife in the kingdom. That was when we could openly claim that they had a fake, thus prompting a proper investigation.

During interrogations, the dissident duke's faction would be the first to fall under the line of fire—he was currently in a political conflict with the margrave and Marius, who belonged to the mainstream faction. While his faction wasn't huge within the kingdom, the duke was still related to the king, and he thus wielded quite a bit of power. Our plan was to deal a heavy blow to the duke and his underlings.

Needless to say, the duke's faction wasn't supposed to know about any of this before the plan was put into action. If he did catch

wind of it, and Marius pushed this plan anyway, the duke would likely try to find out where the orichalcum knife had come from. Then, it would only be a matter of time before he sensed the entire farce, which would hurt the mainstream faction.

Wait, that means...

"The duke's faction discovered our scheme," Marius said, stating exactly what I'd imagined.

"Do you know who leaked the info?" I asked.

He furrowed his brow slightly. *I feel like my question isn't out of pocket, but was I not supposed to ask?*

Marius gave a small sigh. "Sort of, yes," he confessed.

Since only a select few knew about the plan, by process of elimination, it probably wasn't hard to pinpoint the suspect. *And I'm probably one of the suspects too.* I lived quietly in the Black Forest, so I had ample opportunity to casually let this plan slip to the duke's faction while skillfully covering my tracks. *I would be the suspect...given that the rest of my family keeps quiet about it, of course.* I could only hope that I was at the *end* of the list of potential perpetrators instead of at the beginning.

"Is it curtains for this orichalcum knife, then? No role to play?" I asked, pointing to *Divine Dragon's Claw*, which had been returned into the box.

Marius shook his head. "Whether we go public or not, we have to hand the knife over to the empire's envoy. We were only borrowing the orichalcum, after all. But the biggest issue is—"

"How we can handle the issue of counterfeit Forge Eizo knives," the margrave finished. His powerful, dignified gaze was directed at me, emanating pressure.

"Well, truth be told, I'm in no rush to solve the problem," I revealed.

"Oho?" the margrave asked, raising an eyebrow. *Did he expect me to be furious about the fakes circulating the market?*

I grinned at him. "I can't imagine that our products will be inferior to those fakes."

The margrave's eyebrow soared even higher.

"It goes without saying, but the knives that I make easily surpass

any fake on the market," I said. "And the same can actually be said for the knives that my family members forge. If you need to kick the can down the road for a bit—if you need more time—Forge Eizo is quite all right with that."

"Are you sure?" the margrave asked.

"Yeah. Though obviously, I wouldn't want you to let them run wild forever. That would hurt not only our business, but Camilo's as well."

"Of course." The margrave gave a deep nod.

If business went south for Camilo, the margrave would have one less merchant he could rely on. Sure, losing one wouldn't be a huge deal for someone as powerful as the margrave, but Camilo was friends with a blacksmith (me) who possessed mysterious skills, and he also had connections in the empire and the Nordic region too. While I wasn't sure if Camilo was publicly recognized by the empire, it was true that he'd received permission directly from the emperor himself to sell goods within the kingdom. The margrave definitely wasn't keen on letting such a merchant fail. Doing so would cause the empire to doubt the margrave's skills and, by extension, those of the main faction of the kingdom. No noble was willing to be underestimated.

"I know very well that we must pursue them one day," the margrave said.

"Well, maybe we can just wait and see for the time being," I offered.

"But..."

The margrave crossed his arms as Marius tried to lend a helping hand.

"You see, while His Majesty himself might not be present this time around, some higher-ups will apparently be there," Marius explained.

"If you make a big stink in front of these people, you can ensure, at least, that this matter won't be silenced," I guessed.

"Exactly. If only the empire's envoy is present, it would mean very little. The people from the empire will return home, and they frankly couldn't care less about matters in the kingdom. But if we can make

a big fuss in front of them, people will definitely care—and with orders from one of the higher-ups in the empire backing us, we could have a chance to corner the duke's faction without caring about how they might try to meddle or stop us."

"Fair enough..."

I'd experienced something similar back on Earth. By involving my boss or other supervisors, the matter had been escalated, thereby forcing a company to act and forcing a certain situation to progress. *This must be like that.* The trick was to involve people above you but also to ensure that it wouldn't go *too* far up—you didn't want people with far more power alerted to this situation. *But I don't think I'll need that trick here.*

"We don't know when we'll get an opportunity like this again. We really don't want to miss this chance," Marius said.

"And it'd suck if they used *Divine Dragon's Claw* against us, forcing us to reveal where the orichalcum came from in the first place," I added.

Marius nodded. "But I don't think it would do much if we brought out one of your knives for reference during the meeting."

"Yeah. At a glance, my real knives and the fakes look almost identical."

"We'd only humiliate the empire's envoy. The orichalcum gift would probably cancel out any offense, but..." Marius paused as he stared at the rest of my family. "While it pains me to ask, I'd like to enlist your assistance, my lady."

He was staring at Anne, who pointed a finger at herself blankly.

"Me?" she asked, perplexed.

Marius nodded. "This is awkward for me to say, but you still *are* the seventh imperial princess."

"Indeed. Though admittedly, I'd like to forget about my status."

She sounded firm; obviously, she was off the record and keeping her position a secret (though her identity wasn't all that much of a secret since she didn't disguise herself). That didn't matter here, though—we were discussing highly confidential matters anyway, and anything said wouldn't leave this room. There were no concerns of our conversation being recorded either, so unless it was written

down somewhere, everything would be hearsay.

As an imperial princess, Anne must know the weight of what she just said, though...

Camilo and Marius weren't the only ones present—the margrave was too, and the idea that Anne wanted to abandon her title must've been big news to him. If Anne was serious about her claim, the margrave would, undoubtedly, find a way to allow her to officially live in the kingdom, no questions asked. But neither Camilo nor the margrave seemed eager to take advantage of Anne's words, and they seemed as unfazed as Marius went on with his request.

"In other words, you're higher ranked than the envoy," he said.

"As long as my older brothers and sisters don't come," Anne replied.

She was the seventh imperial princess, and as her title implied, she had six older siblings. *I think I've heard of two of them, but she must have quite a few older brothers too.* And in terms of hierarchy, they ranked above Anne. Roughly put, those closest to the throne wielded more power, and if she had any younger brothers, they would rank above her too.

"Any chances that they might make an appearance?" I asked.

Anne shook her head. "I don't think so."

She gave an exaggerated slump of her shoulders. Anne had journeyed to my cabin for negotiations, so it wasn't totally implausible for the sixth imperial princess to come with the envoy. But I was aware that Anne's case was exceedingly rare and just an exception to the rule. *The imperial family won't leave the imperial stronghold so easily...that is, barring His Imperial Majesty himself.*

"Then let's disregard that possibility for now," Marius said with a smile. For a moment, the air of the room softened. "In short, I would want you to escalate this matter as a person of the empire."

Anne narrowed her eyes. "And how exactly would that benefit the empire?"

Before she'd joined my family, she'd occasionally shot us this look, reminiscent of a predator who'd spotted its prey. Anne's query was an exceedingly simple one. Sure, if she made a fuss, the kingdom could rally behind it and make it into a noble cause. But if

the kingdom were to use the intricacies of the imperial princess's backing to make their argument, any responsibilities that came from it would partially fall upon the empire. And so, needless to say, the payment had to be worth the risk—Anne clearly wasn't willing to agree to this scheme with nothing in return.

"I'll prepare a fitting reward," Marius said. "I can promise you that."

"And there'll be a reward for *us* too, right?" Anne asked.

The two parties smiled, and while it seemed like an amicable conversation, the air was anything but.

"They're like a snake and a hawk glaring at each other," Samya muttered.

We all discreetly nodded in agreement.

"Yes, of course," Marius replied with a nod of his own.

I wasn't sure if he hadn't heard Samya's observation or if he'd decided to ignore it, but Marius pushed the conversation along. The "us" Anne had referred to wasn't the empire, but our family—Forge Eizo. Frankly, we'd actually received quite a bit of kindness and goodwill from the kingdom. A man like myself, who supposedly hailed from the Nordic region and had provided little to no information about my history, was allowed to live in a mysterious place like the Black Forest, no questions asked. My circumstances were beyond suspicious.

Usually, I'd be tied up and sent back to the Nordic region or be forced to live in the city and kept under strict surveillance. Admittedly, the forest I lived in was a place of secrets within the kingdom—or at least within the area around the city—and it was fairly dangerous too. *The perfect place to keep a person hidden from the populace.* Still, I felt like this was a give-and-take relationship. I was probably one of the best blacksmiths in this world, though I had my cheats to thank for that, and I provided my goods almost exclusively to the kingdom. I also wasn't involved in many (only some) political affairs, likely thanks to Marius and Camilo protecting me as much as they could.

And I would bet that the margrave didn't want to upset Marius either. If Marius strongly requested something, more often than not,

the margrave would give in. The two were now related, after all. And who could blame the margrave for spoiling the young, up-and-coming noble whom he had once taken under his wing? The count had now become a part of the margrave's family. But of course, I suspected that the margrave had plans of his own.

I knew that it was all thanks to the efforts of Marius and Camilo that I wasn't dragged into any troublesome affairs, and since I was indebted to them for that, I really didn't need much in return. *But saying that here would be a bad call. Practically my entire family (barring Samya) has recently been telling me to take anything people are willing to give me. They've been nagging me to no end.* And so, I remained silent at Anne's request.

"First, I can provide the empire with seeds that'll allow you to grow crops even in the valleys of your nation," Marius said.

Anne gasped, wide-eyed. "Really?!"

This was a big get for the empire. The landscape there was mountainous, and the flatlands were desolate. Those crops could be a genuine boost to their national power.

"Of course. And we won't just *give* them to you," Marius replied.

"What do you mean?" Anne asked.

The count glanced at the margrave, who gave a composed nod.

"The republic has been acting pretty suspicious these days," Marius divulged.

"Oh?" I replied. The republic shared borders with both the kingdom and the empire, according to my installed knowledge.

Anne furrowed her brow slightly as she stared at Marius. "Didn't they maintain a neutral stance against the kingdom and the empire?" she asked.

"Indeed. They were supposed to, at least," Marius replied. "But recently, they've been gathering some troops."

"They still need weapons and armor, don't they? I heard that the republic doesn't have much stockpiled."

"Precisely."

As they moved the conversation along, I couldn't hide my shock. *How do the kingdom and the empire both know all this highly confidential information? Are the two nations adept at gathering*

intel, is the republic just full of openings, or is it a bit of both?

"Ah, I see now," Anne said with a nod.





The other members of Forge Eizo were befuddled by this exchange.

"Just in case, we've agreed to supply the empire with weapons. And of course, those weapons will feature a fat cat on their pommels. So, in exchange for your cooperation, we'll provide the *seeds* to aid your nation," Marius explained with a wink.

Anne looked a touch troubled as she smiled. "So? What will I need to do?"

"Oh, nothing special at all."

The princess's eyes grew wide with surprise.

"I just need you to act as the seventh imperial princess," Marius clarified. "Seriously, that's all."

"Could I ask for more details?" Anne inquired.

Marius nodded. He didn't turn to the margrave this time, so they must've planned to explain this all to us from the start. We were getting to the meat of this discourse, and sensing this, Anne sat up straight.

"It's all very simple, really," Marius said. "Who bears the highest rank among us?"

"Probably me," Anne replied.

"Precisely. We'll undoubtedly have some highly ranked people present as well, but *you're* a guest of our kingdom."

Anne's expression shifted ever so slightly—everyone probably missed it except for her family. *We know her too well.*

"If we want to escalate this issue, we don't need you to cause a stir," Marius went on. "The orichalcum knife will still be presented to the envoy all the same, but if a Forge Eizo counterfeit is also discovered on the spot... Well, the matter would automatically become more serious. Especially if the seventh imperial princess is present."

"What if, ultimately, everyone decides that buying from Forge Eizo is too much of a hassle? That separating authentic weapons from the fakes is too much effort? What if all our customers decide to just procure weapons from another forge?"

"If that happens..." Marius paused. Silence settled over the room, and the rest of us waited for him with bated breath. "Camilo might

have to suffer a little."

The count smiled, and I almost lost my composure. Camilo gave a loud and strained laugh while Marius turned to me.

"And Eizo, I'm really sorry, but if that's the conclusion the kingdom comes to, I'll have to obey—we won't be able to outfit our soldiers with your weapons anymore," he said. "But of course, our primary goal is to escalate the fakes issue and conduct a thorough investigation."

I nodded at this logic. "I don't mind."

Yes, Camilo's profits would take a temporary hit in this scenario, and yes, he might lose the kingdom as a client for a while (at least in regard to weapon sales), but those were his problems. I was sure he'd immediately find another place that wanted to buy my wares. And if one of our regular orders was canceled, it didn't really affect us. *Frankly, there are lots of projects I could complete with more free time.*

Marius smiled once more. "That's a relief."

He didn't seem visibly at ease because he'd probably already predicted my answer. He wasn't taking advantage of me or anything. He just trusted me...I think. *I mean, we're friends, right?*

"But I don't think that'll happen," he continued.

"Why not?" I asked.

"You might not really care, Eizo, but once the kingdom promises to purchase something, unless the goods are all utterly terrible, we have to uphold our end of the deal and complete the transaction. Our dignity and trust would take a hit otherwise."

"Fair enough." *Yeah, this isn't the thought process for us average Joes. If fakes of a certain brand are discovered, you'd naturally begin to doubt other items of the same brand.*

Regardless, this was a matter between two nations. *Or so I assume.*

"I see," Anne said, flashing a slightly terrifying smile. "All right. I now understand what I'm supposed to do and what my nation will receive in exchange. But what will *we* receive? Would you kindly enlighten me?"

Anne was indeed smiling, but I knew that her next move would

be dependent on Marius's response. The rest of Forge Eizo collectively gave a nervous gulp.

Once again, those two look like a snake and a hawk glaring at each other... I mean, they're both smiling, and they look *calm, but that only makes them more terrifying. I'm sorta glad that Diana won't be involved in situations like these very often.*

Though Marius was engaged in a somewhat heated exchange with Anne, he probably wanted to assuage Diana's worries and ease her mental strain as soon as possible.

"I feel like tracking down the fakes and destroying the culprits will benefit you more than enough," Marius began.

Diana tried to stand up in protest, but Anne shot her a glare—Diana remained seated. Still, Marius was right. Out of all the players in this kerfuffle, our forge would benefit the most from the elimination of this counterfeit scheme. And since we would be getting something out of this, it was only natural that we lend a hand. Marius wasn't wrong to insist as much, and had I been alone, I would've agreed and returned home, satisfied with this arrangement.

Marius smiled once again. "But..." he murmured. "I suppose that won't suffice. The kingdom would be gaining far too much and providing very little in return."

"Quite right," Anne agreed. "Even off the top of my head, there are plenty of ways for the kingdom to turn this situation to its advantage."

I wasn't sure if Marius was acting coy, but Anne was taking advantage of it. I glanced at the margrave, who remained as indifferent as usual—he didn't object to this exchange. If one didn't know better, they'd assume that the margrave was upset, but this was his neutral face. *I'm not one to talk... My resting face is apparently pretty scary too. But hey, I'm not gonna touch on that.*

"And to fill in that gap, officials on our side have discussed a suitable reward," Marius said.

Someone gulped nervously. This reward would likely determine whether we'd accept or decline his request. *I* would probably need to make that final decision. *I'm genuinely curious to hear what*

reward he wants to offer us for our trouble.

"We first thought of gold coins, but I'm sure you have enough of those," Marius said. "And then I thought of rare ores, but I don't have any to offer."

Marius's requests usually net me a tidy profit—I earned a neat sum from this recent commission too. And while I make most of my money by selling to Camilo, I sometimes earn some cash from other sources.

Putting aside things Forge Eizo might need, what do I *want?* I usually coveted rare ores, but they weren't easy to come across. *And if they* were *common, then they wouldn't be rare to begin with! Plus, our forge currently has a small collection of precious metals already. I don't think I'd bat an eye at mithril at this point.* I was joking, of course, but we already had adamantite and hihiirokane enshrined on the *kamidana*, and I wasn't keen on working with mithril again before forging with those two.

That reminds me, back on Earth, I bought a plastic model kit of a mech at an electronics store. I was excited on my day off and made an impulse purchase, but I never did build that thing...

"But you're not interested in land or a title, are you?" Marius asked, flashing a strained smile at me.

I nodded firmly. *I really don't want to get involved with anything like that... In fact, I don't even want my name scrawled on a corner of this world's history. If I ever get some land, I'm positive that Lady Frederica would make proper note of it, and I'd be in the records. I'd rather avoid it altogether.*

"So, here's what we have," Marius said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out something made of wood.

Anne looked astonished. "This... Huh?"

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Is this bad or something?"

Anne gently took the little wooden tag in her hands and showed it to me. Two emblems decorated the surface. *Wait, I feel like I've seen this somewhere in my installed knowledge... Where is it again?*

As I dug through my memories, Anne provided the answer. "This is a pass—a pass engraved with the crest of the kingdom's royal family and the emperor's crest," she explained.

The emperor's and *the royal family's?!* In other words, both would be vouching for my identity.

"Just to be clear—this crest isn't the one that His Majesty himself uses, right?" I asked.

"Right. Our king himself cannot give you his personal support, nor can his brothers or his son," Marius explained. "The crest on this pass represents a separate, smaller branch of the royal family. But rest assured, you've received their support, and they are still quite powerful."

For the umpteenth time today, Marius smiled at Anne.

"And my father—I mean, the *emperor* provided his crest?" Anne asked.

"Well..." Marius said, looking a touch befuddled. "I did mention that an emblem from the empire as a whole would suffice, but he actually ended up sending his personal insignia."

Anne let out the biggest sigh yet. I could practically imagine the emperor's mischievous grin taunting her.

"I'm sure he did it as a joke, but if the empire doesn't mind, that's fine," Anne said.

"The envoy who brought it to us looked rather troubled," Marius remarked.

"No doubt because the crest the emperor provided was different from what was requested."

"Indeed. The envoy made a point of telling us that your father placed his *personal* crest onto this tag."

"He's the type to do that." Anne gave another heavy sigh.

Helen stared between us, seeming rather lost in this exchange, then asked, "Um, so what does this mean?" She was by no means dull, but both Anne and Marius lived in a totally different world.

Anne turned to Helen and launched into an explanation. "If you carry this pass around, then for the most part, someone of the royal family will vouch for Eizo within the kingdom, while the emperor himself will assure Eizo's status within the empire. Frankly, even in the kingdom, the emperor's personal crest will be more than enough to guarantee one's identity and trustworthiness."

"Huh..." Helen drawled. She seemed to be struggling to wrap her

head around just how impressive this pass was.

"In other words, we can freely go in and out of any city or town in the kingdom or empire," Anne said. "We can even go to the outskirts or the capital's center as we please, no questions asked."

Diana, who must've understood the implications of the pass, kept quiet. The margrave and Marius were obviously aware of this fact, and they also remained silent.

"In fact, we can even move freely between the kingdom and the empire," Anne added.

"What?!" Helen was shocked. "That's super convenient!"

"It really is."

It was usually fairly difficult to cross the borders of any nation—the kingdom and the empire included. Peddlers, merchants, and pathfinders who plunged into labyrinths for a living found ways to get across, but normal people—like an average blacksmith—couldn't easily enter foreign countries. Before the Great War six hundred years ago, it had apparently been impossible to cross any borders, and though the rules had relaxed since then, it was still no easy task.

But this pass in front of us allowed us to cross borders, no questions asked. No one had the right to question us or our identities. After all, we had the seal of approval from the royal family and the emperor himself—any sort of questioning would imply that the person was casting doubt on both monarchs (obviously, the authenticity of the pass would be questioned, but that was all). One wrong move and the interrogator's head might be on the chopping block.

Marius fixed us with a serious look. "I'd like you to be very careful with this."

"Right. Don't ever lose it, and don't put ourselves in a position to have it stolen," Anne replied with a smile. Her words might have had an extra layer of meaning underneath, but her smile was genuine.

Marius nodded. "So? Will this suffice?"

Anne turned to me. I immediately nodded as well; I'd been hoping for a pass from just House Eimoor, so this was convenient and even more than I'd hoped for. I was more than grateful for the

privilege.

"Then I'll gladly pass this along to you," Marius said. He paused before adding, "Oh, and just to let you guys know, the meeting will be held tomorrow."

We all stared at him, stunned, as he flashed a genuine smile.

"That's...pretty sudden," I muttered, still shocked.

Marius let out a small sigh. "That's partly why we wanted you to rush here."

"Did the empire's envoy arrive early?"

"You could say that."

"Shouldn't they have lodgings somewhere?"

Even if a guest arrived two days early, there was no need to push schedules up by two days. The envoy could tour the city and spend the extra time investigating the capital, though they'd probably be spied upon pretty closely. Plus, an esteemed noble of the kingdom would be present for this event; surely they had to consider that noble's schedule as well.

"Are the higher-ups okay with this?" I asked.

"I can't say this too loudly, but their post is a leisurely one—they have a lot of time on their hands," Marius divulged. "Because their name is closely tied with the royal family, they're often called out for times like these."

"Huh..." I feigned disinterest.

Back on Earth, people who had jobs like that often acted lazy and seemed *like they did nothing, but they actually gathered a ton of intel behind the scenes. I'm not sure if this is the case for this particular noble, but if it is, I wouldn't want Marius and Camilo to stress because I guessed this fact and made some careless remark. If I'm right, they might just think that I made a lucky guess and let it slide, but the margrave is a sly old fox with plenty of worldly experience. It's best if I don't do anything unnecessary.*

"When we told the noble that the meeting was pushed up to tomorrow, I received an alarmingly immediate reply of acceptance," Marius said.

I gave an awkward chuckle. "My, oh my."

High-ranking people with leisurely posts have so much time to

spare that they will usually just go along with things. And they get so excited to be part of the action...

"So, given all this, the meeting will be held tomorrow," Marius confirmed.

"I see..."

As a high-ranking foreign representative, Anne would be staying at the Count Eimoor estate. I didn't want us all to leave and abandon her here alone, though. *Maybe I should leave Diana and Helen as her guards.* This was Diana's home, and surely, she could relax at her house on occasion. Marius's wife was apparently childhood friends with Diana, and no doubt they must've wanted to catch up more than they'd been able to at the wedding.

Just as I turned to Anne, Diana, and Helen to tell them to stay, Marius spoke up. "You're not leaving now, are you? Why don't you all stay here today?"

"Really?" I asked. "All of us?"

"Of course. I've already got the rooms prepared—the fellas and the ladies have separate accommodations, of course."

I was a bit shocked—then, I noticed Camilo and the margrave grinning from ear to ear. *Marius, Camilo, and I have been called the "Three Rowdy Rascals" before, but are we sure that we aren't talking about* those *three? I shouldn't be included, right?*

I glanced at Lidy, who noticed my gaze and seemed to understand the unspoken concern I had. She gave a tiny nod. *Seems if we're only staying for one night, Krul, Lucy, and Hayate won't have to worry about running out of magical energy. Lidy either.*

I realized something else—when Catalina had said that Bowman was focusing on "other work," she'd meant that he was busy preparing rooms for us. She hadn't been able to tell me at the time, lest she ruin the surprise that we would get to stay in the manor.

"Well, if it won't be a huge burden on you, we'll take you up on that offer," I said.

"Glad to hear it," Marius said with a smile.

I smiled back. *The whole family rarely ever stays the night anywhere except our cabin. This'll be practice for the future, I hope.*

Interlude: The Assassins

The capital of the kingdom was bustling year-round, but there were certain districts that were devoid of crowds. A certain house resided in one such district, and no one was around on the street to eavesdrop on the conversation held inside. Even if one peered in the window, the dimly lit building made it hard to make out anyone's face. And if an unsuspecting bystander ever unwittingly laid eyes on the people inside, their lives would end right then and there. After all, at least one of the two people in the house was an assassin.

"Have you finished the preparations?" the assassin asked.

"Yeah," the other person replied. "The one who made the request didn't have much info, so that was a bit of a pain, but we managed."

"Are you positive?"

"Of course I am. Have I ever made a mistake before, Juliet?"

The assassin called Juliet smiled, but there was nothing cute about it. In fact, her face was laced with a tinge of sorrow. She immediately corrected her posture.

"I could get rid of *this* child, along with the bad guy," she said. Almost mesmerized, she took a knife from her pocket—the tip of the blade was curved like a scythe.

The other watched her and nodded. "Yeah, we've always been like that, haven't we? We're doing the same this time around too."

"Yeah. Same as usual," Juliet murmured.

"Exactly. Then you won't ever fail."

"You're right."

As the conversation dragged on, the emotions gradually faded from Juliet's face. She soon wore a mask of indifference.

"I'll be calm and coldhearted about it."

And with that, she melted into the darkness. The other person also quietly left, allowing pure silence to settle within the room.

Chapter 7: The Meeting

After we hashed out some details, Camilo and the margrave immediately went home. I thought they'd stay in Marius's manor for a bit longer, but it seemed they had much to do before tomorrow.

Both Camilo and the margrave have residences in the capital, don't they? I think Camilo's got a branch of his store here, and the margrave's got a villa. In any case, I'd meet the two men again tomorrow. The other family members—except for Anne, of course—would meet them again in the evening after the meeting was over. Or later, if things dragged out.

I can't imagine the meeting being completely smooth sailing. Highly ranked people with plenty of time on their hands tended to talk at length and also hold prolonged meetings.

Now that Camilo and the margrave had departed, only Count and Countess Eimoor, along with the members of Forge Eizo, remained in this residence. *Oh, Bowman and the other servants too.* Diana and the rest of the women of Forge Eizo (so, everyone except me) took Marius's wife, Julie, and the rest of the women who served the manor (those who had some time to spare, at least) to visit Krul, Lucy, and Hayate. The Japanese had a saying that when three women gathered, they tended to chatter loudly, but it seemed this was the case in this world too. *Though, admittedly, there are more than three...*

Besides Diana, the members of Forge Eizo weren't familiar with the staff of House Eimoor, but they were already chatting away like good friends. I considered tagging along, but it felt a bit...*awkward* for a geezer to join in on a conversation between ladies. I stayed behind. *I'm always playing with my daughters anyway, and the other ladies will probably be busy helping Anne get ready tomorrow morning. I can visit my daughters then.* I watched Diana and the others leave—and they were so close and lively that they reminded

me of a close-knit family.

As soon as Bowman saw me, he bowed. "I deeply apologize for being unable to greet you."

I hastily waved my hands in front of me. "No, no, don't be. You must've been busy making some last-minute preparations, huh?"

"Precisely so."

He raised his head and flashed his usual gentle smile. Then he walked ahead of me, and I slowly followed. A familiar tapestry appeared before me, one depicting the battle that had given the Eimoor name its status. I glanced at the artwork.

"All these last-minute changes must be tough for you too," I said.

"Oh, not at all," Bowman replied. "This type of thing is not unusual for my young mas—I mean, my *lord*."

"Ah, so you're used to his antics."

"Hmm... I wonder."

We both laughed. Bowman was easy to talk to, and I wondered if it was due to his easygoing nature. In my opinion, there was no better man to welcome and greet guests. *Marius's father must've had a keen eye for character.*

"Right this way," Bowman said.

We proceeded down the corridor, and he opened a door. When I stepped inside, I noticed that the room was furnished with pieces similar to the ones I'd seen in Camilo's meeting room at his store. The only striking difference was that House Eimoor's furniture was much larger; the pieces tended to be austere and sturdy, which was perhaps a characteristic of their household.

"I'll bring him right away," Bowman said.

He expertly prepared some tea for me, then swiftly yet quietly left the room like a fleeting spring breeze. I sipped on the tea. *Ah, Bowman did mention that this tea came from the Nordic region. Seems he was right*. The Nordic region had a culture similar to Japan—this tea was green, and I was familiar with the taste.

My knowledge from my days on Earth told me that powdered green tea was a relatively futuristic innovation that should have been too advanced for this world. However, ground pepper wasn't a luxury item here either (though commoners couldn't just generously dump

it in everything). *Since the nations on this continent are connected by land, I guess some things have advanced faster than I expected.*

The only unfortunate thing was that there was no Japanese teacup—that would've given me the full Nordic experience. The teacup I'd received was a bit too fancy. *But I'm just getting petty and greedy at this point.*

As the sun was beginning to set, the tapestry hung on the wall took on an orange glow. It illustrated some sort of war from many years ago, and the young warrior (or young knight, rather) who stood on the front lines of battle sort of looked like Marius. Had one of his ancestors accomplished a feat of valor in this battle?

I doubt this ancestor would've ever imagined that the treasured sword of his family would be replaced. I flashed the tapestry an apologetic smile.

Suddenly, Marius opened the door with a loud *clack* and strolled right into my room. "Good grief." He sighed heavily. No longer was he wearing stiff, formal attire—he looked much more relaxed.

"Not even a knock, huh?"

He shrugged. "Thought you were taking it easy anyway."

"You aren't wrong..."

This is his *manor, after all. And he must be exhausted, so I guess I don't really have the right to say anything.*

"You must be tired," I said.

"Eh, today's the easy day," he replied. "There isn't anyone here throwing a silly tantrum." He winked at me, but his exhaustion was apparent, so he didn't look nearly as handsome as usual.

"Yeah? You really do seem exhausted, though."

"When I think about tomorrow and the things that'll come..." Marius trailed off and gave another loud sigh.

Tomorrow was the real deal. In a sense, the meeting would partially decide the fate of Marius, the margrave, and Forge Eizo. If only people from the empire and the kingdom's main faction would be present, I probably could've been present for tomorrow's meeting. But because members of the duke's faction would be there too, I'd be out of place. A normal blacksmith had no reason to attend.

I assumed that Camilo wouldn't be at the meeting either. He probably had some preparation to do, along with pulling strings behind the scenes. But despite all his hard work and the power he wielded, he would still be seen as a mere merchant, and nothing more. Considering only his status, it would be absurd for him to attend the meeting. In other words, neither he nor I could offer any sort of direct support. I felt a bit vexed and impatient, but I didn't want to fool around and somehow make things more complicated. It was best if I just sat tight. *All I can do is pray that the margrave, Marius, and Anne do well.*

I forced a cheery tone, trying to dispel any sense of anxiety. "I heard you went on a bit of a honeymoon—a vacation with your wife."

"Technically not a vacation," Marius replied. "I went to the empire to arrange this meeting. At least, that was the excuse I gave."

"Huh."

"The empire has already completed a lot of restoration since the revolt. And since we were there anyway, she and I couldn't possibly have returned home without seeing the sights. We just took advantage of the spare time we had there, that's all."

"Oooh. Any interesting stories?"

"Huh? I mean, sure, I guess. Well, it all began when..."

And so, Marius began his story, partly about memorable moments from his trip, but he mostly bragged about his wife and how they were so happy together. For the next hour, I listened to him dote over his wife, and I didn't even get bored. I wasn't sure if he was just an engaging speaker or if his sightseeing trip in the empire was really that interesting. (Though I was reminded that I'd never actually asked Anne about her home.)

Unlike on Earth, tourist attractions in this world weren't well maintained to attract guests—rumors were really the only way to discover interesting sights. A tourist might hear through the grapevine that a certain location was pretty or that an attraction was fun. The empire had mountainous terrain, boasting a few peaks that were taller than anything in the kingdom. Marius and his wife had spent time enjoying the view of one of these tall, distant mountains.

He excitedly told me just how majestic and awe-inspiring it'd been.

When I'd visited the empire, I'd headed straight for my destination before immediately turning around to return home. I hadn't gotten time to enjoy the sights, and even if I had, I wasn't sure if I had the right mindset to fully appreciate the natural beauty of the landscape. As I tried to live vicariously through Marius's description, I considered seeing that mountain with my own eyes if I ever had the opportunity to visit the empire again. *Maybe that'll be enough to make me reassess my opinion of the empire.*

"Did you climb it?" I asked.

"Nah," Marius replied. "But I *have* tackled a mountain in the kingdom. It just wasn't as tall."

I carefully made sure not to mention anything about Earth as I moved our conversation along, but apparently, mountain climbing wasn't really a popular pastime here. *I think even on Earth, people were only able to attempt tall mountains way later in history—more technology and knowledge were needed to make the hobby safer. Some early mountain climbers became famous by putting themselves in great danger and accomplishing the climb, but that alone didn't put food on the table.*

My installed knowledge told me that this world had a few mountains that were over eight thousand meters tall. Regardless, special gear was required to attempt even a shorter peak, and some of these required items didn't and shouldn't exist in this world just yet. *But I might be able to make the gear, frankly.*

It seemed the empire was home to several steep mountains along with some that were a lot lower in elevation, but it also had flatlands, lakes, and mountains, as any nation would. Marius had apparently visited the lake and the forest with his wife.

"The lake was elegant and gorgeous, but a little frightening too," Marius said.

"Oh? Why's that?" I asked.

"It was shrouded in a layer of mist, and whenever a breeze blew past, more mist would pour onto the surface, seemingly out of nowhere. I was told that the cause for the phenomenon was unknown."

"Oh... Yeah, that's scary."

"Right?"

The two of us chuckled. *Mist only appears under certain conditions. If it's constantly just there, maybe it defies the laws of physics—something supernatural.* Apparently, because of the obscuring mist, there weren't any ferries to take people across the lake, so travelers had to go around the shore instead. If water transportation became possible, it would likely become a more convenient tourist attraction. *I just pray that I won't be saddled with the request of exploring the cause of that mist.*

There was a pretty large lake in the Black Forest too—and no dinghies or boats to take us across. The beastfolk really didn't have any reason to quickly cross the lake (in fact, many could probably sprint around the perimeter faster than they could row across). Since outsiders rarely made their way into the forest, there really was no need for any boats.

And apparently, the empire's forest was also no walk in the park either; no normal person would usually feel compelled to stroll through a massive wood. My senses were numbed because I lived in a forest, but any forest (not just the Black Forest) was a dangerous place—it was as simple as that. The dense foliage made it easy for one to lose their sense of direction and mindlessly wander about. The animals living there could be plenty dangerous too. Hence, I was a bit puzzled as to why Marius went out of his way to visit such a place with his wife.

"Well, you might live there in the future, right, Eizo?" Marius replied with a smile. "I was just scouting the area beforehand."

Does he assume that I won't leave the forest because I want to be cut off from society and detached from all worldly problems? The sad thing is, he isn't totally wrong.

I reassured him with a faint smile. "Don't worry. I don't plan on leaving the Black Forest for a good while."

It wasn't just that I didn't *want* to move—I actually *couldn't*. The forest was rich with magical energy, and so far, I'd never experienced any other place like it. This magic was exactly how we of Forge Eizo were able to produce such quality products. I wasn't

really keen on moving to another place with less magical energy, unless the kingdom treated me so terribly that I had little choice. *But that hasn't happened yet, so I don't have to worry about it.*

"It'd be great if you could stay," Marius said rather solemnly.

He then flashed his usual smile and told me more of his stories, along with episodes of him doting over his wife. After he'd exhausted those, he moved on to current events. Naturally, he updated me on the employees at the Gold-Tusked Boar, along with Karen and her goals. Finally, the sun started to set. I lit the lamps and closed the curtains.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Marius called out.

The door quietly opened, and almost immediately, the lamps mounted on the walls of the room were snuffed out. Marius and I were instantly on high alert, unable to utter a single sound, as the opened door quietly shut again.

At first, I wondered whether a gust of wind had blown through the open door and cast the room in darkness, but my cheats notified me that this wasn't the case. These weren't my smithing cheats, but my combat ones. My skin instantly grew prickly and sensitive, just like when I'd fought against the big black bear in the forest shortly after arriving in this world.

"Damn it," I muttered with annoyance.

There was a small gap where the door met the frame (not from shoddy workmanship, mind you, but from wear over time). A bit of light trickled in through that gap, but it would take some time before Marius's and my eyes adjusted to the darkness. We both knew that moving around blindly would only work against us, but my ears picked up on the light footsteps of an intruder.

Just then, the set of footsteps rushed at me without hesitation.

They can see perfectly fine in the darkness, can't they? If they can move this nimbly with just that sliver of light guiding them, then they likely had one eye shut for a while to adjust to the darkness, or maybe they entered with both eyes closed while someone led them by the hand. The former is more plausible than the latter; requiring multiple people for an infiltration would be way too conspicuous, so I

can rule that out.

My thoughts were more laid-back than I would've expected, but now wasn't the time to be so relaxed. I unsheathed my knife that I kept in my pocket, ready to defend myself. But in this darkness, it was more dangerous to blindly wield that wickedly sharp blade. Even if I was going against someone who wanted to murder me or take me hostage, I didn't want to deeply wound, or in the worst case, kill them. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I did that.

The presence continued to make a beeline for me. If Marius had been the target, they would've likely aimed for him first—he was closer to the door than me. I was just a guest of this house who might not even know my way around this manor. *Which means...*

"They're looking for *me*!" I shouted. By calling out, I could not only communicate with Marius but also keep the assailant focused on me and no one else.

And then, I saw a glimmer of cold steel within the dark.

I only saw the blade for a split second, but it looked eerily familiar.

That gleaming blade lunged at me, and I used my knife to defend myself. *Clang!* The sharp sound of metal clashing against metal rang out. Cold sweat poured from me as panic struck my body. My knife was custom-made by yours truly, and if my assailant had used a normal blade, the clash would've shattered their weapon and rendered them powerless.

But it didn't shatter. It didn't break. I was only able to successfully *parry* the attack.

I'd used quite a bit of force, enough to rival Helen's strength when I fought against her, all in hopes that my assailant's weapon would be blown out of their hands. No such noise indicated that I was successful in my attempt.

Which means my attacker still has their weapon!

I prepared myself for a second strike, my knife gripped firmly in my hand. *I don't wanna do this, but I'll try to lop off a finger or two—maybe get their hand at the wrist. I just hope that my eyes get used to the darkness before then...*

They probably went low, hoping to end me in one powerful blow.

That didn't work out for them.

I heard their feet slide across the floor, likely wary of my counterattack. Then, the same light footfalls came for me once again.



As I tried to defend myself, I heard another footstep a short distance away—Marius. Was he hesitating to face the presence in front of him? I knew that it was difficult to blindly swing a weapon around here. *No, his aim is probably...*

There was a loud *whoosh* as he slashed open the curtains and let light pour inside. My eyes, which had been straining to get used to the dark, were now blinded by the light. *But now, I can finally see who I'm up against...*

"Huh? Why?!" my assailant cried, the first to speak up.

I realized that she wore an off-white shirt, but her vest and pants were black, allowing her to melt into the darkness very well. But that face... That voice... They were familiar.

I could hardly believe it.

"Miss...Juliet?" I asked.

"Yessir, that's me." Her voice sounded no less casual than it usually did.

Though we were pointing our blades at each other with intent to harm, I'd managed to reunite with a former client.

"Seriously...why?" Juliet wondered. "Eizo, you're not a bad person at all. I know that for a fact."

I stared back at her, puzzled at her words. She lowered her karambit (that Rike and I had custom-made) and shifted around awkwardly. I followed suit and let my arm drop to my side, but I kept my knife unsheathed, just in case. Juliet once again shoved her hand into her pocket. *Is she trying to take out another weapon? To drink some poison?* I braced myself, ready to pounce if she tried anything funny.

Chirp! A tweeting, birdlike sound filled the room. She quickly removed her hand from her pocket.

I noticed Marius slowly approaching her from behind, but I used my hand to call him off. *Juliet mentioned that she only takes jobs against bad people, and judging from her reaction earlier, I don't think she was lying. Is this a request gone wrong? Or did her client lie to her?* I was the victim in this clash, but if she meant no ill will, I didn't want to force her to do anything.

First things first—let's talk it out.

"Why don't we all take a breath and calm down?" I offered.

"S-Sure," Juliet stammered. "But... But..."

I hoped to get a few answers once she caught her breath, but she was still clearly confused by her own situation. *I don't think she'll calm down anytime soon. Maybe I'll call for someone...*

Just then, the door quietly began to open once again.

"Marius! The door!" I shot him as loud a warning as I felt I could, given the circumstances.

He jumped away from the door. If a servant was coming to check up on us, that was all fine and well, but if it was another assailant, things were about to get ugly. I raised my knife once more, ready to fight.

"Please don't attack," implored a voice from the doorway. "We truly don't mean to harm you. I only rushed in here after receiving that signal from her. Clearly, this situation is different from what I thought."

Our eyes were glued to Juliet as the shadow that peeked beyond the door spoke to us. Neither Marius nor I could hide our astonishment.

The voice sounded exactly like Juliet's.

But our surprise only grew when the figure appeared from beyond the door for all to see.

She had the same face as Juliet too.

If someone told me that this wasn't a doppelgänger but a monster fashioned in the exact same shape as Juliet, I would've believed it. *But reality must be far more simple.*

"Are you two...twins?" I asked.

"Bingo." The person who looked exactly like Juliet smiled. "The name's Romeo. I'm this kid's older brother."

He gave an elegant bow. The aura he gave off suggested that he belonged in a manor, and that was all the more eerie to me. I was shocked to hear that Romeo was an older brother—if Samya were here, she would've instantly noticed how taken aback I was. Romeo didn't seem to mind, though. He glanced at Juliet and shook his head.

"My younger sister—and myself, of course—have troubled you

greatly," Romeo said. "I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience. Doing research and confirming the requests we receive is the most basic practice of our trade, and yet it seems we've been duped."

"You admit your error so readily?" Marius asked.

One wrong move, and his life could've been lost as well. He was rightfully allowed to interject in this conversation.

"Of course," Romeo said, turning to me. "You must be Mr. Eizo. I believe you forged her blade, and if so, you cannot possibly be an evil man. I didn't expect my sister's and my pride to be utilized like this. We were coerced into doing the exact opposite of what we preach."

His face was filled with resentment, and I couldn't blame him. If they'd been fed false information with a phony request, they could've hurt innocent people.

"You only take out evil people, correct?" I asked.

"Did my younger sister tell you that?" Romeo inquired.

I nodded, recalling the tidbits that Juliet had told me when I'd agreed to make her a weapon. "She did."

"Then this explanation will be easy," Romeo said. "We have no reason to target you. In fact, if there's anyone we should be— Ah, apologies. This is something we should handle."

I could sort of intuit what he'd been about to say, but I knew that it was better to feign ignorance.

"We'll take our leave," Romeo said.

"Oh, I don't think so," Marius murmured, doing his best to suppress the rage in his tone. "You came for our lives. Do you think you can just merrily stroll out of here, claiming it was all a mistake? You have no right to complain if I restrain you both here. Surely, you understand that?"

I mean, I get it. An "Oopsie, I'm such a klutz!" isn't gonna cut it here. I'd been lucky, since I had decent combat skills, but if I were less adept, this mistake could've ended me for good.

"We shall offer a token of apology, of course." Romeo glanced at Juliet. "However..."

She no longer looked to be in quiet panic, but she wasn't totally calm yet either.

"I promise we'll return," Romeo said. "You have my word. Would you please wait for us? We at Morgana have only one absolute rule: Only kill evil. That's how we operate. And yet, we were fed false intel, forcing us to cast away our conviction, our pride. And for that, *they* must pay dearly."

He bowed his head. When he looked back up, the fury was apparent on his face—I didn't need Samya to point it out for me. Marius scratched his head, surely wondering if he was allowed to just let them go.

I decided to help Romeo and Juliet out.

"Well, I don't mind, personally," I said. "No one's hurt, and it seems like Miss Juliet really does feel bad for what she's done."

While, yes, I'd almost just died, ultimately, nothing *did* happen. And I felt bad seeing Juliet look so baffled and lost.

"Thank you," Romeo said, lowering his head.

If the rest of my family were here, they'd all yell at me and say that I was letting them off easy, but only Marius and I were around.

"If you say so, Eizo," Marius said with a large sigh. He then gazed sharply at the two assassins. "But if you try *anything* at all..."

"Oh, we wouldn't dream of it—I can promise you that," Romeo replied. "And as a token of our good faith..."

He dug around in his pocket, took out an item that resembled a semicircle, then went down on one knee, offering it to Marius. The count gingerly plucked the item from Romeo's fingers.

"This is one half of a coin," Romeo explained. "Juliet has the other half, you see. This symbolizes our oath—we swear that we'll visit you once more to apologize, and we will not touch you or your family until then. When we return, I ask that you return this half to us, but please keep it safe until then."

"If you're trying to protect us while dishing out punishment to your enemy, I presume that will take a rather long time," Marius said.

But Romeo didn't respond. He only cast us a solemn gaze.

The count waved his hand, signaling that the two siblings should leave. None of us had been very loud, but we hadn't kept completely silent either—if someone grew suspicious and came to check up on

us, this whole incident would be exposed.

Romeo thanked us again before he retreated with Juliet, making no noise at all—it was as though they melted away into the background, never to be seen again.

"I need to tighten the security around here," Marius muttered, scratching his head. "Maybe when they visit us next, I'll ask them where the weak link is."

"What now? Should we tell the others?" I asked.

"Nah—we keep quiet about this. We can't tell your family...or my wife...or the servants."

"Right."

Marius was in the same boat as I was—he wasn't eager to get scolded by family. We exchanged a look and each flashed a faint smile.

"Oh dear." Bowman stepped into the room. "The lamps aren't lit, and the door's still open. Did something happen?"

I visibly shrank, but Marius looked as composed as usual.

"No, nothing at all," he said. "What's up?"

Bowman gazed at us dubiously for a moment, then smiled at us. "Dinner is served, and I came to fetch you two. The madam and everyone else are already waiting."

"I see." Marius turned to me.

I nodded, and we both stood up. I almost cleared away my teacup by habit, but I quickly stopped myself. *No need to do that with servants in the manor.* I straightened my posture.

Bowman pretended not to notice my clumsiness (at least, I think). He took the lead and guided us to the dining room. When I left the room and glanced out the window, I realized that the sun had already set completely, and the lamps in the corridor had been lit up, illuminating our surroundings. These lamps didn't smell foul, likely because they used plant-based oils instead of animal fats.

The last time I'd been in this manor at such a late hour was when Marius had been fighting over succession to his household. Back then, I hadn't been used to noble life at all, and I also hadn't had time to casually stroll down the halls and observe.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the lamps' oil dishes were

placed within a metallic hoop on the stone wall. Judging from the size of this hoop, I assumed that the lamps could be taken down and used as torches during times of need. Torches tended to get soot everywhere, and the large flames could cause other objects to catch on fire. This danger made them unpopular with nobles. However, torches were used during emergencies, when those types of concerns were the least of their worries.

This manor was certainly prepared to outlast dire circumstances.

While this was befitting of a household that had earned its name due to feats of military might, I began to wonder if they were going a touch overboard with their preparations. *That reminds me, the back entrance of this manor is built to deter any intruders. I guess this is normal for them.* As we walked on, Bowman opened a door that I was vaguely familiar with. *And the dining room should be beyond here, I think.*

I followed Bowman and Marius inside. As expected, dishes already lined the table, and the ladies were already in their seats. Helen didn't seem alert or tense, so she must've not realized what Marius and I had just been through. *Those two assassins really* are *experts in their craft if they're capable of evading the notice of a famed mercenary. It seemed like a misunderstanding in the end, but if one thing went wrong during our encounter, I don't think I'd be able to sit here at the table and feast with everyone right now.*

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Marius said.

"No, we just got to our seats too," Julie replied.

She was in more casual attire, unlike when she'd been decked out at her wedding. *Which is only natural. Who doesn't dress up for a wedding? She's just eating with us today, so obviously, she won't be as formal.* The dishes that lined the table weren't overly luxurious either. There was the usual soup and bread (*leavened* bread, so maybe they did get a bit extravagant for us), and roasted chicken with salt and pepper. I gazed at the spread, interested to try the food.

Marius flashed me an apologetic smile. "I couldn't really get fish in time."

"Oh no, that's fine," I replied. "We don't always eat fish either.

Our daily diet consists mainly of boar meat or venison."

"Really?"

He raised a perplexed eyebrow, and I nodded back. In this world, there were apparently some parts of the Nordic region that bordered upon the ocean, so people tended to assume that those in the Nordic region only ate fish. This was similar to my experience on Earth as someone culturally Japanese.

It seemed raw fish was difficult to come by in most regions of this world. *Maybe I can make some* sashimi *if I ever get my hands on fresh fish from the ocean.* It was worth a shot, though I'd have to be practically right next to the sea to even attempt it.

"Now then, it seems the ladies are quite famished too," I said. "Can we dig in?"

"Of course," Marius replied.

The two of us chuckled as we got to our seats, and Bowman poured me a glass of wine. Marius remained seated as he raised his glass in the air for a toast; this wasn't an overly formal occasion, so there was no need to stand up and give a lengthy speech. We raised our glasses in the air too.

"Cheers!" Marius exclaimed.

And so, the dinner hosted by my friend and his wife began.

"So, how are my daughters doing?" I asked.

Rike was the first to answer. "When we went to check on them, they were relaxing."

"And they perked up immediately when they spotted us!" Samya added.

I was worried about Krul, Lucy, and Hayate, but if they were relaxed, it meant they trusted Matthias. He was a man of few words—too few, in fact, often causing misunderstandings. His unfriendly demeanor made him seem like a grumpy guy, but he was actually very considerate and kind. No doubt my daughters picked up on that and liked him very much.

"They are *so* adorable," Julie gushed.

I was tempted to excitedly nod along and agree, but I managed to hold myself back—I just smiled back at her. I feared that if I got going, we'd only talk about my daughters throughout the entire

dinner.

I noticed Lidy sipping her soup quickly—she must've found it tasty. When she put her soup down, she said, "All of us got to play with them."

"Really?" I asked. "You played with them this whole time?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

Marius and I had gotten in a long chat before the incident with the assassins, so they must've all been playing together for quite some time. If Lidy hadn't told them to stop and rest, it meant that we didn't need to worry about my daughters having enough magical energy to sustain them.

Diana gave a small sigh before she said, "Julie was the most excited today, by far."

Julie giggled. "I want daughters like them in our house too—if at all possible."

Marius let out a small sigh as he glanced at his smiling wife. His mannerisms closely resembled Diana's, reminding me that the two were siblings.

Marius smiled gently at his wife. "The only animals we've got are horses, huh? We don't have dogs or anything."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, the horses are adorable too! But we can't really *play* with them, can we?"

"Why not ride them?"

"Hmm... I wonder if they'll run with me."

"They're smart, so I'm sure they can be trained."

My daughters were used to running alongside us when we romped in the yard and took treks through the forest. People could probably ride on Krul if she allowed it, but none of us had ever attempted that; she was much better at running next to people. As a sidenote, the Eimoor residence didn't have thoroughbred horses created solely for speed and agility—they more closely resembled driving horses, which had muscular builds, and sturdy *ban'ei* steeds, draft horses bred in Japan that were used in races to pull heavy sleds up ramps. House Eimoor's horses were like a mix of these two varieties.

I think Marius's horses tagged along during the monster

subjugation campaign. Marius had brought along some of his servants, as many nobles had, and the horses had been needed to carry supplies. These horses probably weren't used to running alongside people for fun. They probably weren't used to being ridden either, though they were large and strong enough to allow people on their backs. *The horses seem docile enough and will probably get used to it in no time. Marius isn't wrong to suggest some horseback riding. All of our ladies, even Lidy, are pretty strong, so they can take a few gentle hits from Krul, but I imagine that Julie is a bit frailer and daintier. I can see why Marius is concerned about the possibility of a horse bumping into her.*

"Our do—I mean, *wolf*—was a unique case," I said. I was about to refer to Lucy as a dog, but when Diana gave me a *look*, I immediately corrected myself. *I guess they told Julie everything.* Both Marius and Julie turned to me.

"We got our hands on a drake thanks to Camilo," I explained. "Why not ask him if he can acquire another? Krul doesn't eat much, but I'm told some can have voracious appetites, though."

I told a small lie here. Krul didn't eat much thanks to the magical energy of the Black Forest—it wasn't because she had an incredibly small appetite. I wasn't sure if all drakes were the same in this regard, but if Krul didn't consume enough magical energy, she ate more to make up for it. In other words, if drakes lived in regions that didn't have much magical energy, they ate heartily.

And indeed, Krul apparently *had* possessed a voracious appetite until she'd come our way. Julie's eyes sparkled with hope as she turned to her husband, her gaze practically begging for a pet, and Marius turned thoughtful for a moment. The rest of us at Forge Eizo quietly observed how wholesome and happy they looked.

"All right, all right," Marius said, finally giving in. "I'll ask Camilo about it."

Julie's smile grew wider than ever, and she looked like the happiest lady in the world. *If House Eimoor gets a drake, Krul will have a friend. If her friend's male and ends up becoming her boyfriend...then as her father, I wonder how I should act.* I was clearly getting ahead of myself, so I quickly shook my head, chasing

away that silly idea. I neatly took a bite of my meat, then turned to Marius.

"That reminds me, what about getting a dog for hunting or battle?" I asked.

Diana had told me that House Eimoor didn't have any dogs, but as a household built upon military valor, I suspected that some of his ancestors had owned dogs of war. Nobles also went hunting together; it was a popular pastime, and hunting dogs were essential for this hobby. As a young, up-and-coming noble—not to mention a noble with the esteemed title of "count"—it wouldn't be strange for Marius to keep a dog or two around.

"Hmm, I haven't heard any stories of my grandfather owning a dog," Marius murmured pensively.

Diana swallowed her mouthful of food before she spoke. "I tried asking father about it once, but he just laughed and waved me off."

"Do you guys have some sort of family rule prohibiting you from keeping dogs?" Anne asked jokingly.

Marius chuckled as he shook his head. "In all my years, I haven't heard of a family rule like that."

"Well..." Diana started pouting. "There must be a reason our ancestors insisted on being dog-free."

Her brother nodded back. "Maybe it's an unspoken rule passed down verbally or something."

"Really? Then that means..." Julie trailed off, looking absolutely crushed.

"But," Marius said with a smile, "*I* haven't heard anything. I don't see any issues with keeping a pet, and I don't think there're any laws that restrict it either. I must ask Ms. Schurter about it, but knowing her, I think she'll find us a law that allows us to keep pets if we ask."

Julie looked genuinely relieved. Even if a drake was out of the question, it seemed she'd be allowed to keep a dog or some other pet. Matthias would likely be in charge of the pet, but seeing how excited Julie was, I was sure that she'd also take good care of anything she kept. And if that was the case, Marius would too.

Just imagining a handsome man and a beauty frolicking around,

giggling, while they play with a dog... It feels like a scene straight out of a fairy tale. I know that my daughters look like they leaped out of a painting, but location's key—instead of being cute, they might seem a bit intimidating with the backdrop of a forest. What a pity.

Julie's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Maybe I'll ask Diana and the rest of you for some pointers while I can," she said cheerfully.

"Pointers? What kind?" Marius asked, raising an eyebrow.

She beamed back at her husband. "On how to raise a drake and a dog, of course!"

Oh, buddy, looks like getting a pet is set in stone. I knew that Marius was in for a bit of trouble now, and I internally wished him the best of luck. In the end, most of our conversation was about Krul and Lucy, but that was just unavoidable—my daughters were so adorable, and it was impossible *not* to talk at length about them. After dinner was over, the ladies stayed out as they always did, wanting to talk a bit more before heading for bed.

"Just don't stay up too late," I said.

I followed my usual routine and headed for bed a little earlier. Though I'd barely done anything today, I was still inexplicably tired. I was in the home of a close friend of mine, but I must've been more tense or nervous than I expected. There was nothing I could do about that, though—it was best to head to bed early and prepare for tomorrow. Without enough rest, I wouldn't be able to react to any emergencies.

"Gotta sleep whenever I can...and for as long as I can," I muttered.

It was an important lesson I'd learned while I'd been a corporate drone at an abusive company. The older I got, the less I could recover from lost time—that is, bounce back when I didn't have time to spare. Back in my old life, I could work longer hours to make up for lost time, but over the years, I'd grown too weary to work so much and sleep so little. I could pull an all-nighter just fine when I was younger, but the older I became, the more impact it had on my body. It was important to get to sleep early so I didn't start my days utterly exhausted. *Though waking up tired can always happen, I*

guess. Unfortunately, at times, sacrifices just have to be made.

That was why I'd decided to go to bed early. Bowman was in front of me, leading the way to the bedroom. Though I was roughly familiar with the layout of this manor, I wasn't sure what guest room I'd be staying in. A map would've prevented me from accidentally stumbling into a place I wasn't supposed to be in.

Suddenly, a voice called out from behind me—it was Marius.

"Going to sleep already?" he asked.

"Yeah. The older I get, the harder it is for me to function without enough sleep," I replied.

Marius laughed. "Come on, you're not *that* old yet. Care to humor me for a bit longer?"

I wasn't totally joking. Even a geezer like me needed my beauty rest, and it was getting difficult to stay awake. *The Watchdog gave me cheats to enhance my combat abilities and my muscle, but I should've asked for the ability to bounce back and regain my energy too. Dang it.*

Despite my regrets, I didn't want to coldly turn down my friend's request. It wasn't often that I stayed in this manor, and if I returned to the Black Forest a bit tired, I could easily recuperate there, in a place that I was familiar with.

I nodded to Bowman and Marius. Bowman nodded back at me and swiftly departed, leaving Marius to guide the way. I'd assumed that Bowman would take us to a room, but apparently, the house's lord would personally take the lead. Marius carried a candlestick in his hand—he lit the wick using the flame from one of the lamps on the wall, then turned to me.

"This way," he said.

We walked in a completely different direction from the location of the guest rooms—a route I'd committed to memory. He led me down a corridor of pure darkness, and I could only follow. I was used to the ambient gloom of a world without electrical lighting, and even without my cheats, I could see well enough to make my way. The flame of Marius's candle wavered. Our shadows on the wall followed suit, flickering and dancing with the fire. If I'd been on Earth, I would've been creeped out. But I knew I was at a friend's house,

which put me at ease, and I didn't feel particularly alert or vigilant. Still, I *was* curious.

"Where're we going?" I asked.

This wasn't a corridor I was familiar with—I had a sneaky feeling that we were going somewhere unusual. In fact, I felt like we were straying farther away from the living quarters, but since I'd never lived in a mansion before (not even back on Earth), I couldn't be certain. *To be fair, the cabin in the Black Forest is large enough to be a manor on its own, but it's mainly a forge, only has one story, and has a mere two guest rooms. All the other rooms are for us.* Marius flashed me a mischievous grin, meaning that he wasn't intending on telling me. The man was oddly stubborn at times, and if he wanted to keep his mouth shut, my questions would be all for naught. *I don't think he's gonna kill me or anything, so I'll just follow.*

Two wavering shadows proceeded along the wall as he headed deeper into the manor. Eventually, Marius stopped in front of a seemingly normal wall.

"We've gotta climb up from here," he said with a smirk.

He pushed the wall pretty forcefully, and it slid back, revealing a large hole for us to pass through.

"A secret door?" I asked.

"Yep," Marius replied. "There's a staircase in the back. Watch your step."

"O-Okay."

Marius stuck his candlestick into the hole and proceeded inside, shedding faint light onto the staircase. Just as he claimed, there was a path deeper inside. The cobblestone steps looked sturdy, and I closed the secret door behind me before gingerly following my friend. *I don't think I've climbed a flight of stairs this long since coming to this world.* The cabin I stayed in only had a few steps, and I'd climbed up a ton of ladders, but that was all. Luckily, my knees didn't give way as the two of us walked on.

At the top of the stairs was a door, and Marius opened it. I peeked out and realized that we were now on the rooftop of the manor. It was more spacious than expected, and there were a few boxes in the corner.

"Oh... Wow..." I murmured.

Countless stars twinkled in the night sky above us. If I'd been told that this was a designated stargazing site, I would've believed it. But from my several visits to this manor, I would've never guessed that a place like this existed—this space was truly hidden from anyone below. The secret door implied that not just anyone could be here. I examined the wall around the rooftop and noticed that several embrasures had been built into the corners.

"Is this where you fight back during an enemy assault?" I guessed.

"Ding ding ding," Marius replied. "That box over there contains bows, arrows, and extra bowstrings. If the light's placed down like this, you're able to observe your surroundings while making it nearly impossible for those below to see you."

He was all smiles, but I could only sigh. The back entrance of the manor seemed to have some sort of dangerous trap installed, and now, seeing the roof, I realized that this place could actually become a fortress during times of emergencies. *I know that House Eimoor's a military household, but just what kinds of battles have they endured? They must've been quite intense if the family felt the need to construct such an elaborately fortified home.*

"And now we can talk without others hearing us, just as long as we don't yell," Marius said.

"So, if I shout, will someone rush to my aid?" I asked.

He nodded back. If he'd wanted to speak in secret, Marius's personal room would've done just fine, but here, someone would immediately notice if I raised my voice—though it would take them a while to actually get up here. *Guess he just wants to say that he doesn't plan on hurting me.*

"So? What did you want to talk about here?" I asked.

I acted like my usual self, but even *I* could tell that my voice was strained. The fact that we needed to talk in such a secret place implied how serious the topic was.

"Well..." He paused for a moment before he went on. "Frankly, I want to talk about your house."

"My house?" I asked quietly.

Marius nodded. “I know that it’s in the shelter of the Black Forest, but it’s not completely safe, is it?”

“Hmm, I wonder...” I replied.

There were deer, wolves, and bears wandering around acting as our natural guards, and I’d also set up traps around the perimeter of our cabin. A small force would probably be wiped out (quite literally) before they could launch a single arrow at us—or so I thought. And while I wasn’t keen on relying on Lluisa (since we shared different perspectives), she might be willing to give us a hand should push come to shove. Still, we weren’t totally safe. When Anne had come to us, she’d waited at the entrance of the path to the forest, so there was room for improvement.

“I’m confident that we could swiftly take down a personal army, though,” I said.

“When you say it like that, it doesn’t sound like a joke,” Marius replied. “Wait, you aren’t kidding, are you? You’ve got that sword, and the Lightning Strike’s with you too...”

I nodded. When it came to pure fighting power, Forge Eizo was pretty high up there, and we were treated as the strongest force in the Black Forest. Rike, Krul, and Hayate might not be able to be directly involved in combat, but Lucy was pretty large now—if she utilized her speed alongside Helen, no one would be able to lay a hand on them. And while those two were the most powerful, the rest of the family was still plenty strong. Even Anne, who was the least experienced in combat, had grown considerably stronger thanks to Helen’s personal training (plus, Anne just had raw strength). We didn’t really have any weak links.

“Then I guess I’m just needlessly worrying,” Marius muttered. “But...”

“You sound awfully hesitant today,” I observed.

He groaned softly before he looked me in the eye. “I’ll give it to you straight. The duke’s faction is snooping around to find your location. I truly believe that the assassins we ran into earlier were just a part of that scheme.”

His claims didn’t come from left field. If I hadn’t expected as much, I wouldn’t have placed nets and clappers around our cabin or

prepared a crossbow. Still, this development was coming sooner than expected, and I felt my eyes go wide in surprise.

"I plan on doing my best to prevent that, of course," Marius said. "But I can't guarantee anything. So, here's my idea: After the kingdom and the empire hold the meeting tomorrow, I was thinking your family could go to the empire under the guise of sending the imperial princess back home. Then, you could live a bit of a nomadic life for a while, going here and there to confuse the enemy."

"Is that why you gave us that pass with those crests?" I asked.

"Yeah. You might stand out if you use it—after all, you've got the backing of both the kingdom's royal family and the emperor himself. But I think any guard who sees it would hesitate to report back to the duke."

"Did you hesitate like that when you were a guard?"

"Frankly, I would've been scared to check you at all. You're a seemingly normal blacksmith, but you've got lots of ladies with you *and* a pass provided by the royal family and the emperor? I would've been so baffled about your social status."

He flashed a strained smile. It was cruel to force a simple guard to willingly step on a land mine. *Obviously, it wouldn't be a physical explosion, but a political one...*

"So? What do you think? No, wait—what do you think is best for your family?" Marius asked. "I know that the Black Forest is important to you guys, but how do you feel about stepping away for a short while? It's a bit awkward for me to ask now since you got attacked when you left the forest, but still..."

He looked more serious than ever, and I knew he was aware of the magnitude of what he was suggesting. He knew that I'd have to potentially part ways with my family—that I'd have to give a brief goodbye and wander around different forests.

"Of course, we'll happily cover your living expenses," he went on, maintaining his earnestness. "And if anything happens, we'll be on it in a flash."

I stayed in the Black Forest partly because I needed the magical energy there to forge quality items. If I could no longer do that, I wouldn't be able to provide a steady supply of goods to Camilo, and

I'd quickly run out of funds to support myself. Marius's offer implied that I didn't need to worry about money—that I could just spend my time lazing about, making anything I wanted while kicking back.

But...

The smiling faces of my family filled my mind.

"Sorry—no can do," I finally said, staring straight at my friend. He gave me a forlorn grin as I went on. "I can't deny that it sounds like fun, though."

I refused to look away from him. It really did sound like great fun, and it'd be awesome if I could help people wherever I went—ideally using my smithing skills to assist them—while touring the world and enjoying the sights. I'd broaden my horizons with worldly experiences, and going on a little adventure sounded like an exciting idea. If my entire family came along, I'd have no complaints; I was certain that my days would be filled with happiness and joy.

But I just couldn't take the offer.

"That forest has accepted me," I said.

Marius must've assumed that this acceptance had occurred after I'd wandered into the forest from the Nordic region, but that couldn't be further from the truth. I'd come from a completely different world, and the Black Forest had allowed me to call it home—I felt I owed an indescribably immense debt to the land. Leaving for a mere week or two wasn't much of an issue, though I still hesitated to do so now that I knew about the fairies' plight. But now that I'd received the title "Protector of the Black Forest," I couldn't leave my home for an extended period of time. Especially if I didn't know when I'd return. In my eyes, that would be extremely ungrateful behavior, and I just couldn't do it—of course, I couldn't tell the truth to Marius either.

"I just don't feel like leaving the forest before I can repay my debts to it."

Marius let out a small sigh. "Even if you end up alone there?"

"Probably even then."

Was it even possible that I'd be alone? Soon after Diana had joined our family, I'd been tasked with making a mithril rapier, and I'd told them my agonizing fears about releasing my weapons into

the world. If they were going to abandon me, they would've surely done so then. Besides, Samya was a resident of the Black Forest. Even if she left, she would surely visit me from time to time to check up on how I was doing. *And even if she didn't, I doubt I would hold that against her.* Knowing all this, I would still decide to stay in the Black Forest, even if I were alone. I'd steeled myself for a solitary life upon coming to this world, but that hadn't happened. Perhaps it would just come later than expected.

"Are you planning on just living there forever, Eizo?" Marius asked.

"Hmm..." I crossed my arms.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to do that either. I didn't need to revolutionize the world with the cheats I'd received, but I did want to satisfy my desire to tour around the world and broaden my horizons.

"Well, once I repay my debt to that forest and a lot of my concerns are cleared away, I'll probably think about moving."

Marius stared blankly at me for a moment before he let out a low chuckle—he was clearly trying not to make much noise. "Won't you be a world-renowned smith by then?"

"Nah, I don't think so."

My abilities were due to my cheats. Sure, I wanted to use them while I had them—my cheats made my smithing possible—but there were many people like Rike who were out there honing their natural talents to become masters of their craft. I was a staunch believer that people like *her* were the ones worthy and deserving of fame and honor. I just wished to live quietly without making much fuss, even if I couldn't remain in the Black Forest.

I told Marius this—my feelings on the matter weren't anything I needed to hide.

"Eizo, a little greed might do you some good."

"I think I'm greedy enough."

I'd been able to come to this world, make friends, and live with a family. I certainly hadn't expected this life, and I couldn't hope for more. *The only little issues I face are occasionally having to go to battle or dealing with spies...*

"This is precisely why I want to be friends with you," Marius muttered, his voice so faint that it could melt away into the darkness. He looked a bit troubled before he broke out into a smile, an expression laced with a touch of disappointment and relief. He turned to face me directly. "I just want to be abundantly sure—your house will be okay, right?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty confident. You can rest easy."

If the enemy came at us with overwhelming numbers, I'd be outta luck, but it would be difficult to amass a sizable army within the forest anyway. Aside from the clappers and traps that we set around the cabin, my daughters also acted as our guards. They weren't tied down or anything or kept in a small enclosure; they were allowed to roam around as they pleased, though they had a little hut to rest in at night. Since they were given so much freedom, they could easily come up to us and alert us of any intruders. *Though, honestly, Helen will probably be the quickest to pick up on any dangers. The sixth sense of a pro mercenary can't be underestimated.*

"All right," Marius finally said. "If we receive any intel that your forge might be in danger, we'll let you know immediately."

"Yeah, that'd be great. Thanks." *I really mean it.* "By the way, does your house now use wyverns?"

"Oh, I started using them recently," Marius replied, huffing proudly. "Got 'em from House Katagiri just the other day as a sign of friendship. Does the Nordic region have a lot of them?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure," I replied.

My installed knowledge didn't tell me whether the Nordic region had a lot of these little dragons. Honestly, it sort of seemed like Karen and her household were raising them on their own, but I wasn't sure, so I decided to refrain from voicing any opinions for now.

"They're named Tsujikaze and Maikaze," Marius explained. "Maikaze stays with me while Tsujikaze is in the city with Camilo. I contact the city the most, and if I ever want to speak with you, it's more convenient to do so through Camilo."

"I see," I replied.

Nothing in our communications would change except that the one delivering my mail would be a wyvern. The delivery speed would likely increase immensely.

"Then I'll let you know by wyvern if anything happens," I said.

"Yeah, please do." Marius then turned around and prepared to go back inside.

Our talk must be done for the night. I said nothing more and slowly followed him. As we descended the hidden staircase and made our way out, Bowman was there waiting for us. He glanced at Marius, who nodded back.

"Master Eizo," Bowman said.

"Yeah, thank you," I said, giving him a bow. I was grateful that Bowman would be escorting me to my room. Diana would've known exactly where we were in the manor, but as for me, who'd never been here before, I was utterly lost. "See you later, Marius."

"Yeah. See ya tomorrow," he replied.

As we parted ways, I found myself wondering what the next day would bring us.

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The next morning, I woke up and saw that the skies were clear and sunny. The weather didn't really matter since the meeting would be held indoors, but it was much more refreshing to conduct business under clear skies rather than cloudy ones.

I cheerfully ate breakfast with everyone else. It seemed that last night's conversation was still the main topic—the ladies were all talking about pets. *Pets? Daughters?*

"Speaking of which, this manor has wyverns, right?" I asked.

"Yes, but I can't play with them too much," Julie said sadly. "I wouldn't want to tire them out when they have to fly off and do their jobs."

"Fair enough." I gave a sigh of pity.

"The capital's farther away from the city than our house is," Diana consoled. "There's nothing you can do about that."

Plus, it was difficult to recharge on magical energy in the capital

and the city. *Best to have the wyverns conserve their stamina until it's needed.*

"But if I had a drake and a dog..." Julie muttered.

Those two pets would help satisfy her wishes. Marius expelled a loud sigh while the rest of us laughed loudly, and our lively breakfast drew to a close. Aside from Anne, who would attend the fateful meeting as a representative of the empire, we were excluded from this conference. In short, we were on standby until the meeting was over.

The meeting wouldn't be held in the margrave's villa as it always was; it would instead be hosted at the Eimoor residence. This meant that we couldn't wander about the manor as we pleased, and we couldn't make noise playing with Krul and Lucy in the yard either.

But the prospect of wandering the capital and fooling around while Anne was hard at work made me feel guilty. And so, while still a bit awkward, we all decided to wait in a room a good distance away from where the meeting was being held.

The room was spacious, but I noticed some small repairs that needed doing—I didn't want to cause too much noise though, so I could only sit and wait.

The employees of House Eimoor were working away as they usually did—business as usual. If anyone questioned why their mannerisms were slightly different than normal, they could insist that they were tending to guests who'd arrived the day before. We were in the manor for precisely this reason—we served as cover. After all, guests who traveled great distances had to be welcomed warmly. Any change in the servants' routine could be attributed to that.

"I wonder if Krul and Lucy are staying quiet," Diana wondered. She took a sip of tea that Bowman had poured for her.

"They're smart," Samya replied. "I'm sure they're fine."

I nodded along. It sounded like my daughters were close with everyone at the manor, and if someone told them to remain quiet, I was certain they'd do just that. But that didn't mean that my mind was free of worries.

"I wonder if they're hungry..." I muttered.

Everyone glanced at Lidy, our leading expert on magical energy in House Eizo. She took a sip of her tea. "I think they'll be fine," she said quietly. "Judging from how they were yesterday, they should be fine until the end of tomorrow, I presume. It's thanks to the dense magical energy of the Black Forest—they usually have more than enough, so having less right now won't harm them."

We all breathed a collective sigh of relief. *And thank goodness Matthias is treating them well. But I still have to be careful during prolonged travel. During long trips, I'll have to let them eat enough food to fill the magical void.*

Helen glanced toward a wall. The walls weren't made of glass or anything, but she seemed to stare beyond the solid surface, like she was seeing through them.

"They're here," she muttered.

Samya nodded. "Yeah."

I couldn't hear a single thing, but I knew that these two ladies had honed senses that allowed them to pick up on people's presences.

"Good luck, Anne," Diana said, putting her hands together.

She'd likely made that pose instinctively, and we all followed suit, praying that Anne would be well.

"Oh?" Samya said in a low voice.

Right around lunchtime, her ears twitched energetically. We determined the time based on the sun we could see through the windows. We also had our trusty, stalwart stomachs—our internal clocks—which would growl when it was time to eat.

"Is it over?" I asked.

"I think so," Helen replied, sensing it as well.

A short while later, I could just barely tell that the atmosphere outside of the door was becoming rowdy. "Ah, looks like they're about to leave."

Everyone else nodded, implying that they'd caught on and heard the noise too.

"I didn't hear much of a fuss, so Krul, Lucy, and Hayate must've been quiet and acting like good girls," Diana said.

I smiled. "We need to praise them to bits later."

"Yes, we do!"

I'm positive that they love to play around with everyone, but that's all. I wonder what their favorite foods are...? Lucy almost certainly prefers meat (though she occasionally eats some vegetables), and Krul will chow down on anything in front of her. Still, considering their small appetites, I'm not sure what their favorite things are. You know, something they'll happily make room for, even if they aren't hungry. I don't have a clue, honestly.

Hayate, like Krul, was dragon-like, and she didn't eat much either (though that could be attributed to her tiny stature). I also wasn't sure about her dietary preferences. *Maybe I'll ask Matthias about it later—ask what they ate lots of while here.*

"Will Anne return to us?" Lidy asked in a feeble whisper. "She won't just go back to the empire after this conference, will she?"

We all grimaced, unable to provide a clear answer. All of us had worried about this, though we'd been too scared to vocalize it. I'd be lying if I said that I *wasn't* concerned. But fretting over this question did me no good, and I did my best to shove it into the recesses of my mind, hoping to put it off until I absolutely couldn't ignore it. Considering Anne's standing, circumstances, and her current situation, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for her to return to the empire.

Anne was the highest-ranking figure at the meeting. Others would assume that once the meeting concluded, she would elegantly make her way back to the empire. The high-ranking official of the kingdom would assume so, at the very least. In fact, if they had some time to spare, they would surely want to send off Her Imperial Highness warmly.

Will Anne have any choice but to head home then? The fact that she's a hostage hasn't been publicized, so if she returns to the empire, she really has no reason to come back to our cabin. Even if she wanted to, I doubt anyone in the empire would send her back to us with a smile. Wait, actually, I feel like the emperor would be true to his word and send Anne back to the kingdom...but there are no guarantees that she'd be sent to the Black Forest again.

I decided to blindly cling to hope. "She's got excellent manners,

so maybe she's just been delayed with pleasantries."

"She *is* the princess," Rike said lazily.

"Right!" Lidy said, huffing energetically.

Samya and Helen kept their mouths shut, but they couldn't hide their faces—it was clear as day that they hoped she would come back.

"All right, maybe we should take our leave," I said.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in."

The door quietly cracked open, and a certain figure appeared, her head down.

"Anne!" Samya cried, raising her voice. She hastily clapped her hands over her mouth, but I thought she'd be fine. *I don't think it was loud enough to echo throughout the manor... At least, I don't think so.*

"Oof, I'm exhausted," Anne said wearily. "Huh? What's wrong, guys?"

She stared at us blankly, and we must've looked at her back in the same fashion.

"Uh, we just didn't expect to reunite with you *here*," Diana confessed.

We all nodded along.

"I mean, there was a chance that you wouldn't return to us," Helen said with a strained smile. "And even if we did meet again, I'd assumed it would be outside of the capital."

"And if you were waiting for us somewhere, I thought we'd be told as much," Lidy added.

"Plus, there still must be nobles of the kingdom wandering about in the manor," Rike said. "I'd figured you'd have to leave the manor."

Anne grinned, wide and a bit strained. "Yeah, I thought so too. I was also surprised. But the moment I left the manor, I was steered toward a hidden corridor."

"A hidden what? Do we have something like that?" Diana asked in surprise.

Diana had been born and raised in the manor—she'd left only last year to join our family. If *she* didn't know about it, then this secret

must've been kept from even family members.

"Aside from pretending to leave the manor, it's apparently used to sneak back in without using the front or back exits," Anne explained.

"Huh..." I said.

"But one wrong move, and you'll run into a trap! They didn't show me what these traps were, of course."

"Fair enough. So they allowed an imperial princess to use that secret corridor, huh?"

"Yeah." Anne nodded.

The members of our forge considered Anne to be family, but she was undoubtedly still the imperial princess. A person of her social rank and status shouldn't know the secrets hidden in the manor of a kingdom noble. The fact that Anne had been allowed to take a peek meant that the place boasted powerful security measures that couldn't easily be broken.

"If I'd been a spy, I would've learned the location of the corridor, its front and back entrance, and one other exit," Anne said. "However, that secret space probably has even more ways in and out."

"Probably," I replied.

I wouldn't be surprised if the corridor had many exits, and I bet there were other secret passages just like it in the manor. *I know the Eimoors are a military household, but they exercise caution to an almost absurd degree. The security measures within this manor are just as, if not more, numerous than the ones around our cabin in the Black Forest.*

I voiced my surprise, and in response, Helen muttered, "Yeah, they're probably wary about those close to them. I don't know what happened way back when, but this manor is in the heart of the capital. They clearly don't fear invasions from outside—if an army makes it this far, the manor might as well wave the white flag of surrender. No, they fear treachery from *within* the manor."

"So, those on the inside," I replied.

"Yeah." She nodded as she gazed out of the room. "The placement of these windows allows one to view only the immediate area outside the manor. If the windows were meant to spy on

invaders, they would allow for a view much farther into the distance. Diana's ancestors who built this manor are cunning."

Diana wasn't the one receiving praise, but I noticed her puff out her chest with pride.

"So? How did it go?" I asked Anne.

"Huh? Oh, well..."

I wanted to know what the conference had agreed upon. But I couldn't easily ask for details on the ride back, and since people of the duke's faction and kingdom higher-ups were still around beyond this room, we couldn't discuss the situation openly. Right now was the only private moment I'd get to learn about the meeting until we got home, and I really wanted to assuage my anxiety before then. *That's an excuse, but whatever.*

"I know I'm being selfish..." I murmured. But I was so curious. And though I couldn't change the results, I wanted to find out what had happened as soon as I could. "Of course, if hearing the details now will affect the mood on our ride home, I can wait until we get back to the cabin."

I hastily tried to give Anne another option, knowing full well that the outcome of this conference might've not been positive. We had a long ride ahead of us, and it'd be awful if the entire trip to the Black Forest was plagued by a depressive atmosphere. We could hear any bad news at home, where we had plenty of opportunities to cheer ourselves up. *Though if I ever mentioned being cheery in the Black Forest to anyone outside of our family, they'd be baffled by my claim.*

"Nah, nothing like that," Anne replied. "We settled on a solution that won't exactly affect us."

With that, she began to shed light on the morning meeting. Two nobles of the duke's faction had been present for this meeting (according to Anne, they were boring, average nobles—not anyone special). Louis Alexandre Antoine de Valois, the king's younger brother, was also in attendance. The king had a few siblings, and His Highness Prince Louis was the youngest brother. There were about five other older brothers between him and the king, and Prince Louis wouldn't attain the throne unless there were some truly absurd

circumstances at play.

Still, he was part of the royal family and had been given the title of duke (*not* the duke who had his own faction and was opposing Marius). As a duke, he couldn't possibly do menial tasks for those lower on the ladder. But he also wasn't given an important role either, lest he shoulder too much responsibility and gain influence unbefitting of his rank. And so, he'd been given a cushy post that required a decent rank, but he never had to do much work.

The man didn't seem to be humiliated or vexed by his position, and unless he was called out for meetings like these, he usually spent his time kicking back and taking it easy. *Are we sure that he isn't gathering intel, though?*

Marius and the margrave had been present, of course. Just like I was a normal blacksmith, Camilo was a normal merchant, so he wasn't allowed to attend. The envoy of the empire was the same slender man that I'd seen before—he'd looked a touch surprised when he'd seen Anne, but he'd immediately regained his composure. *A man allowed to travel across nations has to have some nerves of steel.*

The meeting had kicked off with fairly mundane conversation. The two sides had mainly spoken of the current state of the nation and had confirmed a few details here and there. The fact that Anne was being kept as a hostage in the Black Forest was the only detail kept secret, though it was likely that the duke's faction and Prince Louis knew already. Since it wasn't publicized, there was no need to touch upon the topic anyway.

The conversation had then shifted to the orichalcum knife. Anne recalled the scene in vivid detail.

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According to Anne, the meeting started with a glance: Marius looked at Prince Louis, who calmly nodded back.

"Now then, here is our gift to the empire." Marius offered a small box to the envoy. He knew that it was far too rude to personally present this item to Anne, the imperial princess.

"May I take a look?" the envoy asked.

"Certainly. Go right ahead."

Marius smiled at the envoy, who wore a mask of indifference and gave only a slight nod. The envoy remained calm, even in front of the king's younger brother—this was likely just his innate temperament. He placed his hand atop the lid and slowly opened it to reveal the blade. The metal gleamed like a large talon at the tip of a finger.

"Was this forged to mimic a dragon's claw?" the envoy asked.

Marius nodded. "It was indeed. In fact, the smith actually named this piece *Divine Dragon's Claw*."

"Oho..."

The envoy gingerly raised *Divine Dragon's Claw* into the air. Suddenly, a loud clatter rang out. When Marius glanced at the noise, he noticed that the prince had risen from his seat in hopes of getting a better look. This was the first time he'd laid eyes on the blade. Though he had a cushy job, he was certainly no fool—he must've already gotten intel describing roughly what the gift would be. And while it was typically customary to show gifts to higher-ups before they were presented to the emissaries of other nations, the prince would have certainly begged to purchase it. Thus, to avoid that troublesome behavior, he hadn't been able to see the gift with his own eyes until now.

Those from the duke's faction subtly scowled, though they physically remained as subdued as the envoy. Still, they made no attempt to hide the fury and annoyance on their faces—after all, the very important role of providing a gift to the empire had been stolen away from them by the main faction. Marius internally tried to give the enemy a word of advice: *During times like these, it's abundantly important to act happy and affable.*

Marius couldn't see the margrave's face, but the man would've no doubt been guffawing had he not been in this solemn meeting. The count had a sneaking suspicion that the margrave was flashing the brightest of smiles—one that made him seem on the verge of bursting into laughter.

Distracted by the noise, the envoy glanced at the prince for a split

second, but he quickly returned his focus to *Divine Dragon's Claw*. He then turned to the imperial princess, who nodded in response, and quietly offered the blade to her. Naturally, Anne was well-informed on the blade and how exactly it'd been made, but she feigned ignorance and inspected the weapon carefully. For a split second, she wondered whether she should act like she didn't know how to wield a blade at all—needless to say, she could wield not only small knives but even greatswords with expert precision. Still, acting like a frail princess would sometimes help accentuate her social rank. She abandoned that idea ultimately, thinking that she'd be going a bit overboard with her acting.

As she mentally chuckled a little, she scrutinized the orichalcum knife. *What did Eizo call this type of blade? A karambit, was it? He made one for that assassin too.* Anne recalled that the weapon type was very unique and needed to be wielded in a specific way; even Helen had expressed her struggles with using it.

"This is wonderful," Anne said, returning the knife to the envoy.

She did her best to crack a calm, gentle smile, causing the prince and the duke's faction to smile back.

"Indeed. It seems the kingdom is home to an excellent blacksmith capable of forging such an exquisite blade," said the envoy.

"Your words are far too kind. Truly, it brings me great honor to hear them." Marius offered a deep bow.

The envoy narrowed his eyes. "Ah, yes... That reminds me—there has been a popular model of knife making its rounds in the kingdom as of late."

"I've heard of those rumors myself, I confess. They're not worth reaching the ears of His Highness."

"I see."

The envoy nodded as he placed a hand into his pocket. Marius and the others were alert, just in case. The envoy revealed a small knife—a knife that looked identical to the ones made by Eizo.

"During my trip here, I had the chance to speak with some people on the streets," the envoy explained. "I was told that this blade is very popular and highly rated, so I decided to purchase one

for myself. If the knife is just as fine as rumored, I'd like to request quite a few. I'll happily pay the market price, of course."

He smiled as he showed the knife to the count.

"I see," Marius said. "Indeed, this knife is... Oh?"

He furrowed his brow, causing the envoy to also frown in concern.

"Is something the matter?" the envoy asked.

"This...is a counterfeit, good sir," Marius replied.

"Preposterous!"

The envoy clearly looked shocked, though Anne felt that his acting was a little too...exaggerated. His poor skills would give the farce away, and she felt compelled to bury her face in her hands. However, the prince and the duke's faction ignored the envoy's poor acting and didn't say a word.

"Ahem, pardon me, but may I take a closer look?" Marius asked.

"O-Of course. Most certainly," the envoy replied. "Here it is."

"Thank you."

He offered the knife to Marius, who accepted it gingerly. Needless to say, this was all part of the scheme; both the envoy and Marius were abundantly aware that this knife was a bona fide fake.

Marius carefully inspected the knife as he snuck a glance at the duke's faction. One looked genuinely surprised while the other grimaced uncomfortably, implying his knowledge of the duke's plot. Marius felt like this clear display of emotion was rather careless of the opposing faction. *But I can't tell if he's the ringleader or if he just knows a bit of the duke's plan*, Marius thought. And cornering his enemies now wouldn't lead him to the duke. No doubt the people present today were carefully selected to protect the duke from being questioned.

Marius expelled a sigh from deep in his heart and focused back on the knife. He couldn't help but be impressed by this fake—he'd seen it before, and it was indeed well-made. At least at a glance, it looked almost identical to the ones that his friend, Eizo, made. However, there were striking differences—it couldn't truly compare to even Eizo's entry-level models.

"Truth be told, I've got a knife of this model as well," Marius said,

digging through his pocket.

He took out his own blade and compared the two. They did *look* very similar. But of course, Marius's blade was genuine and made by Forge Eizo.

"See here. This looks a bit off, don't you agree?" Marius asked, lining the two knives up side by side. He pointed to a part of the blade and indicated the differences.

"I see... It's evident when you do a direct comparison," the envoy agreed.

Once again, this was all a silly farce. Since the duke's faction was present, Marius went out of his way to point out differences, though he didn't actually identify any deviations—he would just randomly point to a certain area, and the envoy would play along. *I'm sure the duke's faction knows that the two blades are slightly different, but there's no reason to tell them where those differences are*, Marius thought*. That would only help them make better fakes.*

All the while, he and the envoy waited for the next cue.

The margrave spoke in a low voice. "Deplorable." Though he said only one word, the aura he emanated was so intimidating that one could practically see the air around him waver and tremble. "Had this only been circulating within the kingdom, we could've dealt with the issue discreetly, but for someone from the empire to get their hands on a fake? This shall incontrovertibly affect the dignity of the royal family." The margrave glared at the two members of the duke's faction. They jolted and shuddered under his steely gaze. "Do you not agree?"

The two frantically nodded. Had Eizo been there, he would've thought they were headbanging to some music.

"We must investigate this matter thoroughly, Your Highness Prince Louis," the margrave said.

"Indeed. I wholeheartedly agree," the prince replied. It was unclear just how much he understood of this situation.

The margrave bowed his head. "Then please leave it to me. I shall get to the bottom of this nonsense."

"All right. I'll trust you."

The margrave received the prince's permission without allowing

anyone from the duke's faction to utter a word of protest. Now the main faction would be allowed to investigate the counterfeits without having to sneak around. This was akin to a declaration of war—the main faction would be targeting the duke's—and they had just fired the first shot.

Marius was surprised that the meeting had gone much more smoothly than he'd expected. Perhaps there'd been no need for him to trouble the imperial princess. Or perhaps the two representatives the duke had sent were also part of the ploy. Had they already been cut off and abandoned by the rest of the faction? Marius could only discreetly offer some sympathy to the pair of them, who were clearly unable to hide their panic.

"Your Imperial Highness, I apologize for troubling you, but we will handle this matter," the margrave said.

"Of course," Anne replied with a smile. "That's quite all right with me."

She seemed like a lady completely clueless about worldly matters, but that didn't matter. The margrave had personally received permission from the king's younger brother and the empire's princess—and right in front of the duke's faction, no less. This was an important step that allowed the investigation to be a bit rough or elaborate if needed.

But it seems like this debacle will end with a representative of the duke's faction being pinned as the mastermind. That person will take all the blame, Marius thought. While nothing was set in stone until the investigation was underway, the duke's faction would inevitably lose some steam.

Plus, this was a huge opportunity to look for treachery *beyond* the knives—no need to stick to only investigations about the counterfeits like an honest sucker. This chance couldn't be squandered. Indeed, the main faction actually had quite a few suspicions about the duke's faction. While it was unlikely that the duke would be careless enough to get caught by someone just snooping around, both Marius and the margrave wanted to catch the tail end of whoever was involved in the schemes. The duke's faction was going to be like a thorn in their side for a while still—painful and

annoying—but they hoped that they could be completely rid of it one day.

Anne, on the other hand, internally let out a large sigh. She'd been away from the political scene for a while, but she'd still caught a whiff of the schemes that were running through everyone's minds. No words spoken could be taken at face value; every action was thoughtful, cunning, and calculating. She was hit with a hint of nostalgia when she saw everyone acting so fishy, but she definitely preferred not being one of the players in this game. She almost knit her brows, wondering if this political maneuvering was ingrained in her body as well, but she thought back to her family in the Black Forest and found the strength to endure it.

She wondered if she should send Camilo a letter that he could deliver to her father, but she trusted that the envoy would share any information he deemed necessary. He was excellent at his work, but acting was just not his forte. Anne maintained a smile on her face, pantomiming the role of a clueless imperial. She wore the mask of her fake self, but her true self remained safe and concealed—it would burst forth when she reunited with her family in the forest.

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Anne reported to Eizo and the rest of her family that the remainder of the meeting consisted of mundane conversation until, finally, it drew to a close. She felt no guilt or uneasiness about relaying the details of the meeting—though she was an imperial princess by name, she wasn't the princess of anything right now, and she couldn't care less about the secret truce between the empire and the kingdom.

Thus, Anne filled Eizo in on all the details. She wondered whether he was even interested in these affairs, since he maintained his usual stoic demeanor—he didn't furrow his brow or look excited at all. Diana, Helen, and the rest of the family also seemed rather indifferent, implying that all of Forge Eizo, Anne included, weren't impressed by the politics of it all.

But in my case...

Anne thought back to the time she'd spent at Forge Eizo. Her stay there had felt so long yet so short. In that forest, she felt like she could completely forget her social status as princess. *Though Eizo does occasionally ask for my royal advice on something. One day, I'll have to leave the forest and the cabin. I'll have to go back home...*

Anne was soon snapped back to reality by Eizo's words.

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"I guess the duke's faction won't have time to bother with us," I told Anne.

"That's right," she replied. "They won't want to act recklessly and get caught."

"Fair enough." I knew that neither the margrave nor Marius would let any mistakes evade their notice.

"But I don't think the duke will stay quiet forever," Helen pointed out.

"He definitely won't," I agreed.

It seemed likely that the duke and his faction would eventually target us—this investigation had merely put things on hold. We'd bought some time, but they would surely try to mess with us in the future.

"We should prepare ourselves when we return home," I said.

Rike laughed. "Are we going to make our cabin into an even sturdier fortress?"

I nodded. "We can't push it too far, though. Like if we soak our surroundings in oil and set things on fire, I think Lluisa'll give us a good scolding. Oh, and Lidy will too, I reckon."

Lidy, right on cue, puffed out her cheeks angrily, and we all giggled at her humorous antics, making sure not to be too noisy. She ended up cracking a smile.

Just then, we heard a gentle knock on the door. Samya, who had approached the door even before I'd known someone was there, glanced at me, and I nodded. Behind her was Helen, ready for anything that might bust through.

Samya didn't answer. She just turned the knob and opened the

door. Helen didn't reach for her blade either. Judging by how they both reacted, the presence beyond the door wasn't dangerous—we seemed a bit too on edge at our friend's house, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Bowman stood in the doorway with a large smile. He didn't seem at all alarmed that the door opened suddenly. *He's definitely an expert at his job.*

"Everyone has now departed," he reported.

"Thank you for letting us know," I replied. "Guess we should take our leave too."

"I'll get everything prepared for you." Bowman then turned and left.

"Well, everyone," I said. "Time to head home."

Everyone quietly agreed. Though we could probably shout at the top of our lungs now, we all remained subdued—it was a bit funny. Once we had collected all of our things, we stepped outside the manor.

"Krul!" Diana exclaimed.

Krul rushed toward us and nuzzled her face against Diana.

"*Kululululu!*"

"Were you a good girl?" Diana asked.

"*Kululu!*"

Krul licked Diana's face, and the feel of the drake's tongue seemed to tickle her.

"*Arf! Arf!*"

"Hey there, Lucy!" I said. "Looks like you were quiet too."

The wolf pup charged at me, her tail wagging furiously. When I petted her head, she licked my hand eagerly. *Man, it feels like a while since I played around with them.* I stroked Lucy's face lovingly.

"*Arf! Arf arf!*"

Her tail wagged faster still with delight, and after I enjoyed my time with her, she raced off to Lidy and Helen to receive head pats from them too. As we enjoyed our reunion (though we hadn't been apart for that long), Matthias approached us.

"All three of them were very good," he said.

"I'm so glad to hear it," I replied. "Sorry to trouble you."

"You didn't. See ya."

As usual, he was a man of few words, but when he turned to leave, I saw him crack a beaming smile. *Seems like my daughters won him over.* I was convinced that Matthias would happily take care of them next time too, though I knew that he wasn't the type to slack off just because he didn't like a certain animal. Still, it was best to have fun on the job.

"Okay, let's head home!" I said.

"Yeah!" everyone cheered.

"*Kululu!*"

"*Arf! Arf!*"

"*Kree! Kree!*"

Guess I'll pray for a safe trip back home.

Chapter 8: Homeward

We had just finished tying Krul to the cart and were about to leave. Marius and Julie walked over to see us off.

"Heya. Leaving already?" Marius asked.

"Yep," I replied. "We'll be taking our leave. If we head out now, I think we can make it home a little after sunset."

"You don't have any work piling up, do you?" Marius asked.

"Nope. No rush jobs, at least."

"Then you don't have to be in a hurry to leave. Why don't you take it easy here for another day or so?"

As Marius and I spoke, the ladies were struggling to say their goodbyes—I could tell they would have rather stayed.

I grinned. "Got my reasons. I can't stay out of the forest for too long."

We hadn't been gone a whole week, so my daughters weren't struggling due to a lack of magical energy. However, if the fairies got sick, I needed to treat them as soon as I could. Lluisa could probably track us down anywhere in the Black Forest, but even a dryad like her, a part of the Dragon of the Land, couldn't possibly hunt us down all the way out in the capital. Considering this, I thought it would be best if we left as soon as possible. *If I can find a way to make a magical jewelstone with a stable shelf life, I can just give that to Gizelle, but...*

Marius's eyebrows drooped, visibly disappointed. "Well, all right..." he said glumly. "If I hear anything, I'll be sure to tell Camilo about it."

"Great," I replied. "I'm counting on you!"

We exchanged a handshake. I hoped that my next visit would be more casual—perhaps even a cheery celebration. The ladies finished their goodbyes too.

This wasn't farewell forever. There were ways to contact the city

from the forest. *Maybe I should schedule some trips for fun...though I'd have to return within the day.*

We climbed aboard the cart. Rike tugged on the reins—Krul gave a small cry as she pulled us forward. In a flash, the employees of House Eimoor all lined up to wave us goodbye. We all waved back until they were out of sight. The cart rolled through the streets of the capital, which weren't very crowded, but plenty of curious gazes landed on us.

"Wait just a wee bit more—just until we leave the capital," I muttered under my breath. I felt a small tug on my sleeve, but I couldn't see the hand that had done it.

I wasn't speaking to Anne—who was hiding her face to prevent anyone from recognizing her—but to Maribel. If the fire spirit had carelessly appeared in front of people, it would've caused confusion. So, I'd told her to conceal herself, and she responded to my words with tugs: One tug meant yes, and two meant no. She could still talk, even while invisible, but if distracted, she could lose control of the illusion and reveal herself. Right now, Maribel stayed silent as she focused on keeping herself hidden.

Krul pulled the cart out of the capital's center and into the outer parts of the city. When we were stopped at the inner-city gates, we showed our pass to the guard—the overpowered pass stamped with two important crests. The guard's eyes widened with shock for just a moment, and we were immediately waved through. *I feel like the guard just straightened their posture, but I must be imagining things... I hope.*

The outer areas of the city were filled with crowds—the clamor and energy of the place were overwhelming. I wanted to show Maribel these awesome sights too. *I should think of a way to let her take a peek.* More piercing gazes fell upon the cart, due in no small part to the sheer number of people bustling on the streets. *I've got faith that they find the drake-drawn cart unusual—it's not because a geezer's escorting a group of ladies.*

"We can't stop by Pops's place, can we?" I asked.

"There isn't really an area to park our cart," Rike replied.

I wanted to visit the Gold-Tusked Boar, where Sandro and his

friends were working, but luck wasn't on my side today. *I'll think of something next time. Maybe I can leave the cart at the Eimoor residence or something.* Our cart parted the sea of people like a ship slicing through the sea, and then we finally rolled onto the main road that would take us home.

Much like the gates of the city (though the capital's were far grander), the capital had an outer gate to check all those entering and exiting. Needless to say, inspections at the capital gates were stricter than those at the city gates. Also, people leaving the capital were scrutinized less than those entering. I still showed them our pass, and when the guards saw it, they stood up straight and let us through immediately—they didn't even give us a second glance.

"Wow, this really is powerful..." I murmured, impressed.

"Of course it is." Diana sighed. "Top figures from our nation and the neighboring empire have given you their seal of approval."

"I know..."

I took the pass out of my pocket once more; the seals of the royal family and the emperor glimmered under the sun.

"I probably shouldn't take this out in the city, huh?" I asked.

"You shouldn't," Diana replied with a firm shake of her head. "The guards there are already familiar with our faces. Using that pass would only make them needlessly worry, which wouldn't be good for them."

"Right. Yeah, I'll keep this hidden."

Reminds me of an inro *back in Japan, which could both hide small objects and act as an identifying seal. But even if I go, "Silence! Bow your head! Who do you think you're in the presence of?" I'm just a regular blacksmith...and a geezer at that. No important post there.*

As we continued down the road, we spoke of the food we'd enjoyed at Marius's manor. Finally, the entrance to the capital vanished from sight, and there were fewer people on the road.

"I think the coast's clear, you two," I said.

Anne removed her hood, and Maribel appeared before my eyes. *It was a good call to have her stay hidden from view.* When we'd been so close to the city, I'd feared that someone might see us. But

on the road, we just needed to be wary of any approaching people or carriages.

"Whew!" Maribel groaned, stretching herself out.

I didn't think she felt suffocated by hiding herself, but I could see why she'd felt restrained while everyone else had been free to do as they pleased. *She* had *to remain hidden, though.*

"I know it's tiring," I said to her. "Sorry that it took a bit longer than planned."

"Nah, don't sweat it!" Maribel replied with a hearty laugh. "I got to see a whole bunch of stuff!"

"How's your magical energy level?" Lidy asked worriedly. "I know I asked you to tell me if things were looking rough."

"Yeah, I'm just fine! That was no big deal!" Maribel replied.

"I see. Glad to hear it."

Lidy patted Maribel's head, and the fire spirit smiled happily.

And so, our ride back continued on, with Maribel occasionally ducking to hide and Lucy greeting every carriage that went past. Krul pulled us steadily forward. The sun above us gradually dipped, dyeing the sky a brilliant orange, and just as it was about to fade completely from sight, we reached the entrance to the Black Forest. To be precise, this place wasn't really a proper entrance at all—it was just a clearing by the road that allowed a carriage through. But for us, this was the path home.

"I should prepare a torch," I said.

It'd take just a bit longer until we reached our destination. We were quite familiar with the Black Forest, but we couldn't reach our cabin before the sun completely set, and it was difficult to proceed through the darkness without a light source. Everyone nodded as Samya and Helen rummaged through our belongings and took out a few torches. We didn't light them just yet, though my past self might have done so. Lighting anything in the dark when we couldn't see what we were doing was a tough task, but when I reached for my flint, Maribel said that she could use her flames to light our torches. This allowed us to save the torchlight for when it got completely dark.

"You sure?" I asked Maribel. "You don't have to push yourself if

you're tired."

Maribel gave a big smile. "It's no biggie. I can handle it."

Is she worried that she wasn't able to do much of anything during our trip? If that's the case, I'll let her do as she pleases and give her the chance to lend us a helping hand.

"Then, thanks," I said. "That'll be a big help."

"Aye aye!" Maribel replied energetically.

She was so adorable that our laughs rang out through the trees. One could hardly believe that we were in a place that instilled terror in the rest of society.

Chapter 9: We're Home!

The Black Forest really lived up to its name—it was as black as a void in no time flat. The clearing around our cabin could enjoy the sunset for a bit longer because there weren't any trees around, but any area with dense foliage turned pitch-black the moment the sun went down.

"All right! Hiyah!" Maribel said, waving her hands.

At once, all our torches were ablaze. Bright light and heat immediately filled the gloomy Black Forest.

"Whoa, awesome," I muttered.

"Isn't it?" Maribel exclaimed proudly.

She stood tall and confident as I petted her head with my free hand. The fire had appeared out of nowhere, but Krul, Lucy, and Hayate didn't seem at all surprised. I wasn't sure if they just assumed that torches magically lit themselves, but regardless, I was grateful that they were so intelligent—they didn't stick their faces or feet close to the fire.

"Let's get a move on," Rike said from the coachman's seat up front.

Everyone, including my daughters, agreed. The light of the torches cut through the darkness and lit up the forest as Krul pulled the cart along. A bird resembling an owl began to hoot, signaling the early nightfall.

"Ultimately," Helen muttered, "we need to remain vigilant and alert, huh?"

"Afraid so," I replied with a nod.

The whole fake knife debacle would simmer down sooner or later, and while we still had some time before the duke's faction came after us, we couldn't hold them off forever. More likely than not, they'd try to attack us one day. I wasn't sure if they'd try something in a month or a year, but I was certain it would happen sometime in

the future.

"We don't really wander around the forest by ourselves anyway, and we've got a terrain advantage," I said. "We prepared well too. Plus..."

"Plus?" Helen asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I think Marius and his allies can 'resolve' everything before the duke's faction tries to lay their hands on us. It's a possibility."

Helen grinned; Diana looked a touch troubled. I felt like I'd proven my worth to the kingdom. And as long as the kingdom wasn't planning to get too aggressive with the duke's faction, they had no need to drag a mere blacksmith's wares into the farce—nor would they need to enlist the help of the empire. *Though I can't deny that I trust Marius because he's my friend.*

"We can't live the rest of our lives on edge," I said. "We'll have to put an end to this ordeal one day, but now's not the time."

I looked up at the sky—the twinkling stars winked at us through the gaps in the canopy.

"If you want to leave the cabin, now's your chance," I muttered.

The words just tumbled out of my mouth—I felt like I'd said the same line many times before. I knew that there was a part of me that acted spoiled when I was around my family. Still, I couldn't deny that leaving this cabin was the safest choice right now.

"You wish," Samya replied with a grin. "It might make sense for *me* to take off when we reach the cabin, but if anyone else had wanted to leave, they would've done it before we entered the forest."

Everyone else nodded earnestly.

"I see."

That was all I said as I gazed into the distance. For a moment, my vision blurred, but surely my eyes were playing tricks on me. As we discussed what we could do tomorrow and how we didn't need to jump back into work, we reached the clearing.

We're finally home.

"Feels like we were gone for ages," I said as I unloaded the cart.

We didn't have anything to carry to storage, so we just untied Krul from the cart, then lined up in front of Forge Eizo.

“Are we ready?” Diana asked.

We all nodded. There was no need to explain what we were about to do. One of us took a deep breath, and we all followed suit.

Samya was the only one who didn’t take a deep breath. Instead, she said, “One, two...”

And together, as a family, we shouted, “We’re home!”

Epilogue: God's Hammer

"W-Wait! Please!" I called, raising my voice despite being in the middle of a conversation.

I was speaking with the successor to the house of Margrave Eimoor. He'd taken some time out of his busy day to meet with me, and interrupting his sentence was beyond insolent—truly, there was no better word to describe my behavior. Had these been more historical times, I might've been thrown in prison for my audacity, but the soon-to-be Margrave Eimoor didn't seem at all annoyed. He just smiled at me.

"I don't blame you for your reaction," he said, staring into the distance. "When I first laid eyes upon the documents of my house, I could hardly believe it either." He took a sip of his tea. "Even in the long history of dwarves, there are *very* few who could make it, and yet, it was recorded that this item was indeed made—and by a *human* blacksmith, no less."

He let out a small sigh as I regained my composure.

"Just to be sure," I started gingerly, "this person forged *orichalcum*, correct?"

"Indeed," he replied with a firm nod. "Are you aware of *Divine Dragon's Claw*, perchance?"

"Ah, yes. I think it's stored in the empire's museum."

I'd been informed of the item when I'd been graciously allowed an audience with the empire's princess—or more precisely, the great-aunt of the current emperor. And so, I'd visited the museum to lay eyes upon it. *Divine Dragon's Claw* was a knife that sported a unique shape. I recalled being awed by the beauty and seeing how it truly did resemble the claw of a dragon.

"That was a gift, wasn't it?" I asked. "Provided by the kingdom to the empire as a sign of friendship and goodwill."

While the exhibit didn't give any details about the forging of the

knife, I remembered seeing the date when this present was received. *Wait, a gift from the kingdom to the empire? That was when the kingdom and the empire became really close, though it probably also implies military cooperation and a nonaggression pact. It fits the time frame when the imperial princess was supposedly residing within the kingdom. If I piece all my information together... Back then, there was only one convenient place to hide if one wanted to conceal themselves within the kingdom.*

"Then the one who made *Divine Dragon's Claw* is..." I started.

"Quite. It was forged by none other than Eizo, and the knife is made of orichalcum," Margrave Eimoor replied. "Judging by your reaction, I presume that this fact isn't listed within the empire's documents."

The future margrave nodded once more. I sat, gobsmacked by the truth, and slowly tried to come to terms with it.

"The lord of my household was still a count then," he went on. "And in his later years, he wrote down many secrets. He hid these secrets not only within our manor, but in various places around the world."

"Hidden?" I asked. "Why would he do that?"

The descendant of Count Eimoor shrugged as he shook his head. His mannerisms were a touch less refined than those of his predecessors.

"I remember finding a fragment of Marius Eimoor's story within my manor, and I asked my grandfather about it," he said. "But he just languidly shook his head and replied, 'He always liked to play tricks, no matter how old he got.' I honestly don't know any other details."

"I see..." It seemed the count was a mischievous and playful man. *And judging by this future margrave's mannerisms, I see that the family trait is alive and well, handed down through the generations. But of course, I'm better off keeping quiet about that.*
"In any case, you're saying that Eizo made that knife," I said. "Was it stated in your ancestor's writing that the knife was made of orichalcum?"

"Indeed," he replied. "It's not clearly stated, but are you aware of

Eizo's sobriquet? A man who possesses the 'Hands of God,' I believe."

I nodded. "I'm aware, of course."

He had other nicknames, including "The Bearer of the Hero" and the "Hammer of Inhibition." "Hands of God" was one of his many names.

"The document read, 'The man with the Hands of God forges the claw of a dragon using metal bestowed by God.' The entire sentence sounds oddly theatrical and exaggerated for dramatic effect, but most of these details seem to be about Eizo," the future margrave explained.

"The 'bestowed by God' bit seems awfully similar to the other name that orichalcum goes by," I pointed out.

"Precisely. We know *Divine Dragon's Claw* to be one of Eizo's works. But the metal it's made of is unclear. Would a symbol forged of normal steel be used as a sign of friendship between nations, only to be held forever in the empire's possession? I highly doubt it. Surely, mithril would be used, at the very least. It's a luxury metal that's fairly easy to obtain if you have the means to purchase it."

"You're right..."

While a commoner couldn't easily get their hands on mithril, a fairly affluent person was certainly capable of doing so. And since the knife was forged as a symbol between nations, those commissioning it surely had the power and capital necessary to procure mithril. On top of that, since mithril wasn't all that rare, it was easy to find on the market, and there was no need to conceal buying it.

"Still...I suspect he's talking about orichalcum," Margrave Eimoor said.

I nodded firmly in agreement. But then, I tilted my head to one side, befuddled. "How in the world was he able to forge orichalcum?" I wondered. "Judging by the accounts of those who have been successful in that endeavor, I believe it's a fairly unique process..."

The future margrave eagerly answered, "The process actually wasn't documented! Not one bit! Even with other metals Eizo

worked with, I've only read that they were forged—the details of the actual metalwork are unwritten."

"It seems much of his work process has been...lost to time. Would you happen to know why?"

"Unfortunately, not a clue. My ancestor might not have been informed of the intricacies of forging either."

"Makes sense."

Miss Rike, his apprentice, had claimed that he wasn't a skilled teacher—Eizo would always ask her to just watch and observe. It wasn't surprising that he hadn't explained his process to the count, who'd been a complete amateur at smithing.

"But there's one other thing I know for sure from the documents that I've read," the future margrave said with a grin.

Naturally, I'd never met the former Count Eimoor, but I wondered if this successor to Margrave Eimoor was just like him. I could feel myself raising a bemused eyebrow.

"My ancestor was deeply indebted to Eizo, and in return, Count Eimoor hid or covered up many things pertaining to him," he revealed.

"Wh-What?! Please tell me more!" I cried.

I once again raised my voice, knowing that an outsider would surely find my attitude rude. The future margrave flashed a mischievous grin—likely a trait he'd inherited from his ancestors—and I gripped my pen once more, dying to hear his story.

The Story of How We Met XI: A Small Flame

It's like I've been dreaming for a long time. When was the last time I felt this? Six hundred years ago? Or maybe it was long before that. I had so much fun back then.

I vividly recalled waking up and surprising everyone. I stayed with them for a long while, and when I helped them out, a person who lived in the household smiled at me.

"This must be why you came here," I was told.

I felt like I met a large, older sister too. And whenever I helped, she said to me, "You can stop anytime you feel tired, okay?"

Truth be told, I was a fire spirit, so using fire really didn't take much out of me. But still, I was so happy to hear their concern that I went all out and did my best.

I don't remember much of anything else, just that I lived with them until the person passed away. My memories of the details are a bit fuzzy.

And now, I was trying to awaken from my slumber once more. My body was still made of flickering flames, but I felt something approach me. It was less of a presence and more of a heat. It slowly seeped and permeated throughout my body, providing me with a warmth that was so cozy.

"I hope we can all get through today safely," a voice said.

It was a man's voice. Was someone praying in some sort of home? Slowly but surely, these prayers gradually made their way through to me...

My body began to take shape. I was completely reborn again. In front of me was a man and a woman, their eyes wide with astonishment.

I opened my mouth. "Hello!"

Afterword

Hello, this is my eleventh time greeting everyone! I'm Tamamaru, the part-time light novel author who's nearing fifty. The previous volume was the first "To be continued..." in the series, and this volume is the continuation of the previous arc. I doubt any readers did this, but if you skipped straight to this afterword without reading the tenth volume, I highly recommend you do so before you crack this one open.

Now then, volume 11 was jam-packed with all sorts of events, including the orichalcum knife, learning of Maribel's true identity (though I already revealed that she's a fire spirit), Juliet and Romeo, and the end of the fake knife debacle. I think it was a hefty read! I hope that readers like you enjoy it.

I wrote in volume 10's afterword that Maribel had been set to appear since pretty early on in the series. She made a swift retreat from the series for a short while, but her reappearance really allowed her to shine and use her powers to her full potential. This volume was the payoff for the bit of foreshadowing I did in the previous volume, where she was set to fill a certain role. She's also one of the few people who knows about the past hero's true identity. This is a freebie nugget of info here, but I thought it was an important turning point for Eizo, who would eventually forge a blade for the hero and Demon Queen.

I think Maribel's abilities will shine every now and then from here on out, so if you've taken a liking to her character, please look forward to it!

Now, for Juliet and Romeo, I had them appear a bit more in this volume. As for the infiltration route of the siblings into House Eimoor, I haven't touched upon it yet since Eizo doesn't know either, but there might be an opportunity to shed light on it later on. The siblings are also well-versed in the seedy underbelly of society, and I

hope that they can become characters who'll provide some more context about unexplored parts of Eizo's world. Mercenaries like Helen and Flore might know a bit about the less savory bits of the world too, but not as much as Juliet and Romeo.

The siblings will continue to work behind the scenes to support this story, so if you enjoy stuff like that, please look forward to it!

And now for some acknowledgments. As usual, thank you to my editor, I-san, who helped me out a ton, and to Kinta, who creates the illustrations for every volume. They're always spectacular, and they help me imagine what the characters are supposed to look like. Whenever I look at the illustrations, those visuals really lock in, and that's how I'll begin to envision the characters in my head.

Thank you to Yoshino Himori, who's in charge of the manga version. Every time I read those books, my eyes are always blessed with the most wonderful images and stories. By the time you're reading this, the fifth volume of the manga should be out, so please give it a read!

Thank you to everyone involved with distributing the series to foreign nations. I know there's an English version along with a French and German translation of this series. Thank you so much.

Thank you to my mother, younger sister, and my cats Chama, Konbu, and Shijimi. They give me so much energy every day. Oh! And Konbu's finally taken a liking to me recently! Thanks also to both my online and offline friends.

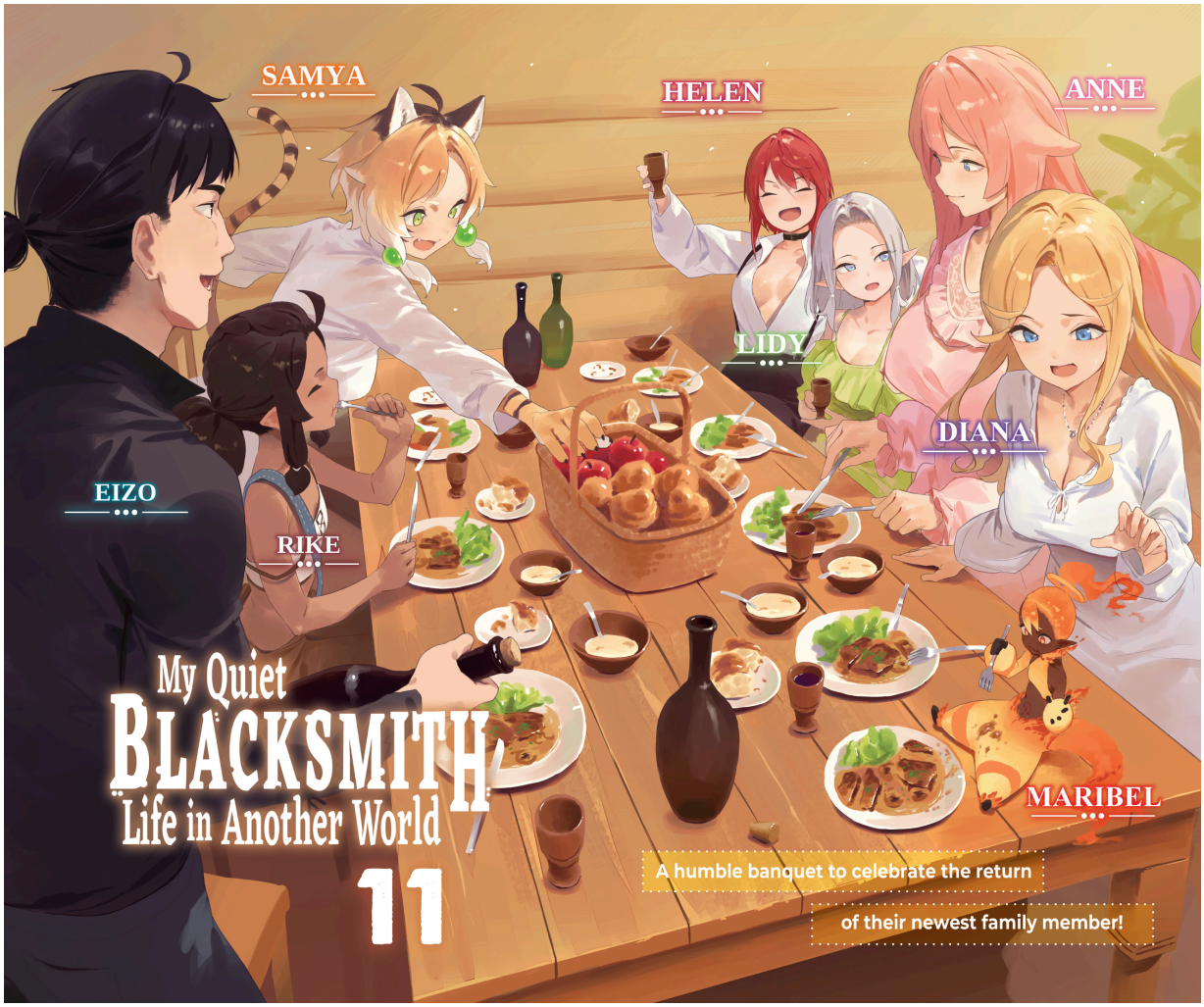
And of course, a huge thank you to *you*, the reader! I'm most grateful to you for reading this series!

I hope we'll meet again in the next volume!


SAMYA
HELEN
ANNE
LIDY
DIANA
EIZO
RIKE
MARIBEL
My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World
11
A humble banquet to celebrate the return
of their newest family member!


A sudden attack by a pair of assassins!
And their target...is Eizo?!


Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta
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Epilogue: God's Hammer

The Story of How We Met XI: A Small Flame

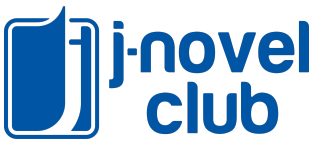
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My Quiet Blacksmith Life in Another World: Volume 11
by Tamamaru

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