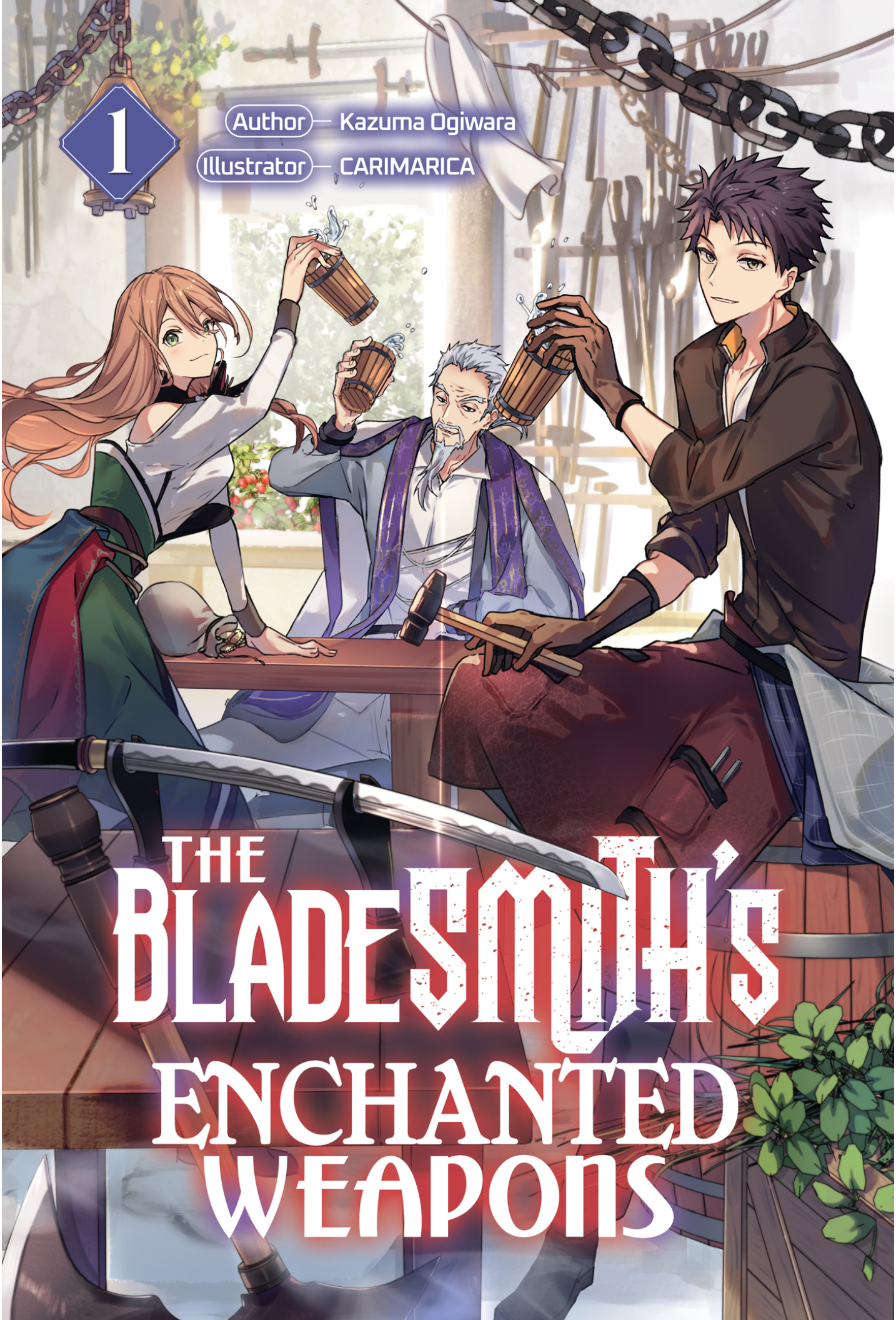
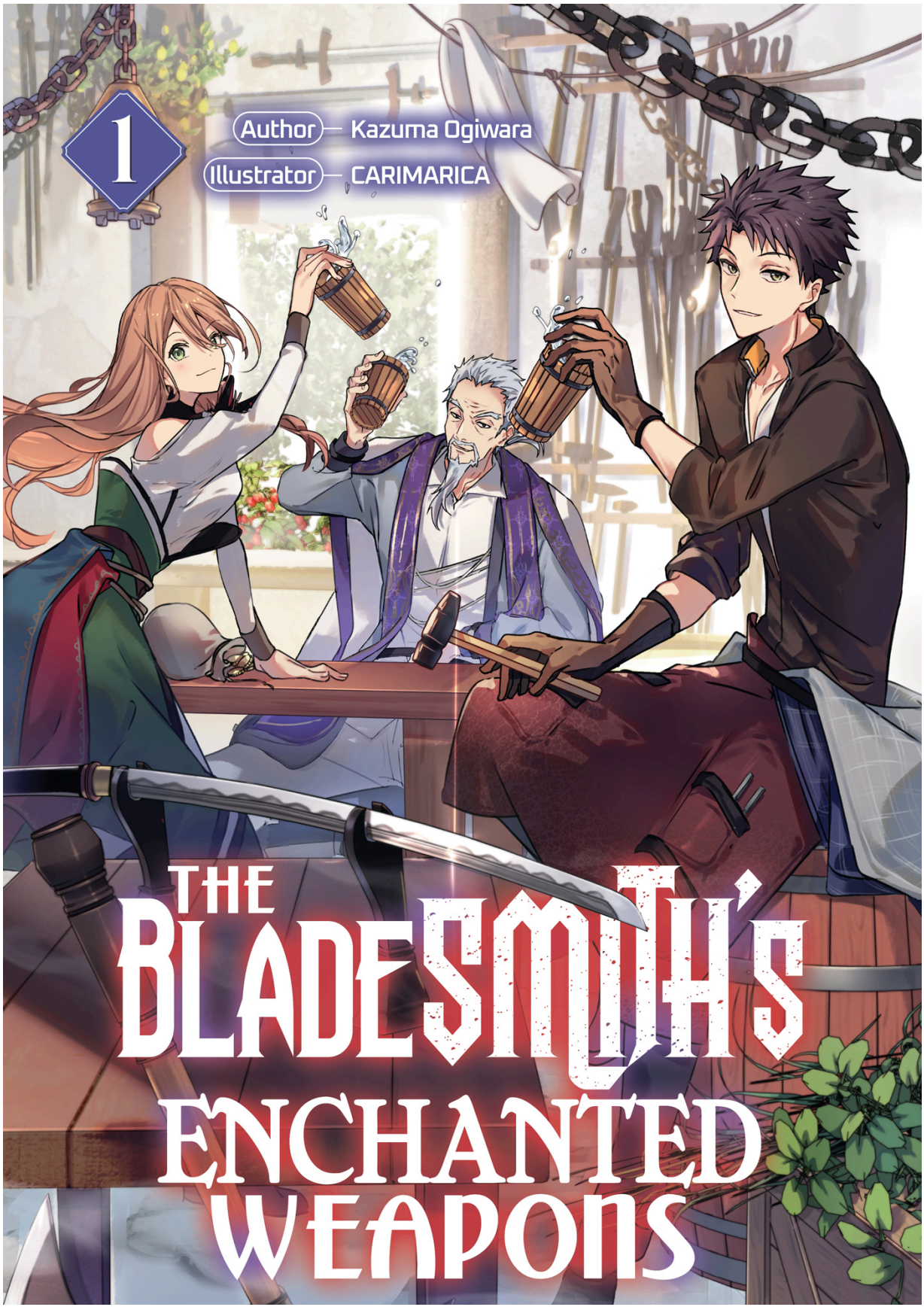

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Author — Kazuma Ogiwara
Illustrator — CARIMARICA
THE BLACKSMITH'S ENCHANTED WEAPONS


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THE BLADESMITH'S ENCHANTED WEAPONS
Merchant
Claudia
"Ha ha ha!
I'm home, Lutzy!
Listen and be amazed,
I bring you a contract
for an order!"
"How the hell
did you get
an insane order
like that?"
Blacksmith
Lutz


(Sorry, this is just how he is.)
"Right now, I'm seeing to a prior customer's order."
"Hey, we've got a noble waiting over here, you know?"
Enchanter
Gerhard

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Prologue

"Magnificent. Oh, truly magnificent..."

Sitting on his throne, the burly old man gazed upon the sword in his hand, utterly entranced.

No, looking at it more closely, it was no mere sword. It was what they called a *katana*, a blade forged by techniques from a land across the ocean, far to the east. Due to the fineness of their cutting edge and the beauty of their craftsmanship, katana were seen as extremely valuable across the mainland continent. The one that the king held in his hand had been gifted to him as a peace offering.

What's more, it wasn't an ordinary katana. The dimly glowing runes of an ancient script were engraved upon the blade, proof that it was made with the enchantment techniques of the mainland. It was a katana fit for a king, a true ruler.

Remembering how his troops instantly knelt in fealty when he raised the katana before them, the corners of his lips twisted into a smirk.

Well then, what next? Shall we insist they provide the craftsmen responsible as a peace offering? What to do, what to do...

"Aha ha..." A laugh came out from deep within his belly. He had just about given up on everything in life, but the single katana in his hands suddenly brought color to the world around him.

The aides and close advisors surrounding the long table in front of him were also transfixed by the beautiful blade. Just looking at it, all thoughts cleared from their minds except the overwhelming desire to follow and be acknowledged by the wielder of that glorious blade.

The king noticed the strange demeanor of his advisors and sheathed the katana, a false smile spreading on his face. Even the *saya*, the scabbard of the katana, was of the finest quality—surely the handiwork of a master ornamentalist.

"Excuse me for the delay; let's start the meeting," the king said.

For a moment, everyone's expressions seemed crestfallen, but it didn't take long for them to snap out of it and begin the postwar discussions.

At that moment, the man sitting at the very end of the long table whispered something into the ear of a soldier, who then sprinted out of the room. There were some who saw this quick interaction, but none felt the need to question it. Everyone present at the meeting was a member of a noble family with vast territories to govern, so it stood to reason there were times when one may suddenly receive reports or need to give orders.

The normally egotistical advisors listened quietly to the king's words, and so the meeting went smoothly, getting to the closing statements in only around thirty minutes.

Suddenly, the sturdy doors of the conference room were kicked down with great force, and armed soldiers flooded in, crossbows at the ready.

The king saw the man standing in front of the soldiers and, at first, was bewildered. Soon, though, he smiled fearlessly back at them. "Oh, I see. *You* were after this too."

"Don't let him draw his katana!"

On command, dozens of bolts were loosed in unison.

So, a single katana has moved the course of history, the king thought as he watched the bolts' flight. *No, I suppose what it moved was the hearts of man.*

The bolts impaled the king's body to the throne—like needles pinning down cloth—as blood poured out of him like a leaky bucket.

As the king's consciousness slowly faded, he tried to recall the names of the three craftsmen who made the katana, not in resentment, but to thank them.

That's right... I remember. Their names were Lutz, Gerhard, and Patrick.

With a peaceful smile, the king slipped into eternal slumber. Even in death, his hands gripped the katana so tightly that the soldiers struggled to pull it from him. In the end, they decided it would be easier to simply cut off his fingers.

Chapter 1: Sharp Enough to Split the Soul

There was no greater sin than to take another human life. Then how? How could a tool created to kill people be so magnificently beautiful?

The blacksmith, Lutz, stared in fascination at the katana he had just polished. He inspected the blade's *hamon*, the pattern along the cutting edge that formed during the hardening process. It flowed almost like water—a shimmering river of platinum that ran along the length of the katana. Lutz simply couldn't take his eyes off of it.

"It's beautiful..."

It wasn't a very elegant description, but he couldn't think of any other way to say it. Trying to express the wonder of art through words was an exercise in futility, anyway.

He couldn't believe that he had taken raw materials and forged them into such an incredible thing. Still staring at the blade, he could nearly convince himself that the God of blacksmithing must have taken him over, though he knew the thought was ridiculous.

How long had he been there admiring it? All notion of time, hunger—even sleep—seemed to slip from his mind. While he was caught in this reverie, hours passed.

"Waah!" Lutz suddenly cried out, averting his gaze from the katana. He arched his back with such momentum that he fell off the stool he was sitting on and hit his head, but he didn't allow a single scratch on the katana. The pride of a blacksmith was not to be underestimated.

Wait—what was I about to do?

He thought hard, rubbing his muddled head.

That was right, he had brought the katana so close to his face that it was about to cut into his eyeball. If it had taken him even one

more second to return to his senses, he surely would have lost an eye. While the reaction was a bit delayed, Lutz felt fear enveloping him. His breathing grew erratic, and he wrapped the katana in a random piece of cloth, as he had yet to make a saya for it.

"*That*—that was insane..."

Lutz crossed his arms in thought and stared at the katana through the thin cloth veil. He was continuously assaulted by the strong urge to remove the cloth and stare directly at the blade.

He had truly forged an incredible katana. The problem now was what to do with it.

He could sell it. That was the most obvious option as a blacksmith, but he didn't have any established relationship with any sellers who were used to handling something of that quality. He could always just bring it into a shop and ask if they were interested in purchasing it, but Lutz wasn't a member of the Blacksmiths Guild. If an unlicensed blacksmith were to turn up with something of that much value, worst-case scenario, he could be reported to the authorities, imprisoned, and have all of his property and assets seized—katana and all. It wouldn't even be unusual for someone to do so for the sole purpose of seizing his katana.

If he couldn't sell it, perhaps he could go over the Guild's head and gift it as an offering to someone in a position of power. It was possible that he would be able to serve as the personal blacksmith to a wealthy noble family in return. However, he didn't exactly have any connections to nobility to make that possible either.

From most people's perspective, Lutz was nothing but a shady guy living outside the city walls in a run-down hut, making weapons all day. He was a criminal who just hadn't committed any crimes yet. At least for some phony politicians, that was more than enough reason to lock him up. It didn't make one difference what Lutz thought about the matter either.

Crafting a piece that he was proud of and selling it—even something as commonplace as that was a challenge for him. In his frustration, he let out a deep sigh.

They say that a bit of happiness escapes you with every sigh, but that wasn't a problem for Lutz. You couldn't lose what you didn't

have.

Perhaps he could just keep the katana and use it for himself. That didn't sound so bad, but it wasn't like he was an adventurer or mercenary. When he left home, he made a habit of carrying a weapon to deter bandits, but carrying around a katana so incredible it could be considered a national treasure was a bit overkill. In fact, it would probably have the opposite effect and draw their attention.

For now, it was probably best to stow it away in his workshop cabinet and live on, forgetting this day had ever happened. At that moment, there wasn't anything else *to* do. But was he really okay with that? Would anything change if that was all he did with it? He had forged the perfect katana—the culmination of his skills and techniques. Was this not his chance to turn his life around? Could he really afford to turn his back on such an opportunity? Even though his meager existence was something he could do little about, he didn't want to have to lie to himself, to disrespect the skills he had built up over the course of his life.

I just don't know... What should I do?

The question rang through his head as he stared at the impossibly beautiful katana through the cloth, almost as if asking it for an answer. Of course, no such answer came.

"Well, good day there, Lutzy!"

The loud voice of a certain woman broke the silence.

"Have you ever heard of knocking?" Lutz turned around in surprise.

"Oh, I'm sorry! Were you in the middle of...*polishing your spear* or something?"

This coarse and crude woman was Claudia, one of Lutz's few trading partners. At least from his perspective, she was a merchant out to make a profit by buying cheap goods off of a sketchy blacksmith and selling them at a high profit margin.

Despite that, she possessed a beauty that was like braided sunlight. She had perfectly fair skin and was plump in all the right places too. With lips as red as roses and breasts so voluptuous it seemed they might burst, she was an enchanting beauty.

For Lutz, all of this came second to her ass. The size, roundness,

and smoothness all came together into a fantastic work of art. Of course, he could never say it to her face.

"Jokes aside, even if I did knock on the dilapidated door of a place as noisy as this workshop, it's not like you would have heard me anyway."

Not only was she unapologetic, but she snuck a jab in there too. Lutz thought it best to give it up as a bad job.

"If you came here for the pieces you ordered, they're all finished." He pointed to some wooden boxes in the corner of the room.

Claudia reached into one of the boxes and pulled out an axe that was buried in straw for protection. Each box held five axes and there were four of them stacked together, making twenty axes total.

She held one of them in her hands and gave it a swing.

It was important to check the feel of the grip and the balance of the axe as a whole. The weight balance of inferior axes could be so bad they tended to slip out of one's hands. The grip would also wear out quickly, making it even more labor-intensive to use.

Claudia gave a satisfied nod. "Not bad at all. Quite wonderful, actually. The lumberjacks are going to be very pleased when they get their hands on these. Right, go ahead and load these into the carriage."

Lutz groaned. "Would you hire some help already?"

"I don't think the lonely blacksmith over here has any right to criticize me on that front."

She got him there. He glanced quickly at the katana before getting up from his stool.

Claudia didn't miss this gesture, following Lutz's gaze toward the long cloth-covered object. "Hmm... Lutzy, is this a new piece of yours?"

"It's not for sale."

"For sale, not for sale—that's something that only gets decided once a merchant and a blacksmith begin negotiations."

Lutz didn't even have time to stop her before she pulled off the dirty old cloth, grabbed the katana by the *nakago*—the unsharpened part where the grip would be placed—and stared at it intently.

If she had directly touched the blade itself, she might leave

sweat, oil, and fingerprints on it, which wouldn't be good. If she had done anything so impermissible, Lutz was prepared to kick her out, literally—right in the back. At this point, though, he didn't really have much choice but to show it to her. He was looking to get someone else's opinion on it, anyway.

Claudia was frozen in place, gazing at the katana. All emotion left her face, as though she'd been transformed into some wax figure, her vision solidly fixed on the blade.

Lutz was convinced that it wasn't just him; that katana had a terrifying ability to infatuate people, to charm them.

There was a suspicious, dangerous glint in Claudia's eyes. Almost as if being pulled in, she brought the katana closer and closer to her face.

"Okay, you're done."

"Ngaa!"

Lutz pulled at her collar from behind, which seemingly choked her for a moment, but at least it brought her back to her senses.

Claudia spun around and gave him a grudging glare. "Hey, that's dangerous! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you *trying* to give yourself a snake tongue?"

"Hmm?" Claudia resembled a cat that forgot to put its tongue back in its mouth. "Wait... What was I about to do? The past few minutes are really fuzzy for some reason."

"You were about to lick it."

"Well, you don't say..."

Lutz wrapped the katana back in the cloth, but she was still staring at it longingly. However, she seemed to be aware that what she was feeling was strange.

"Hey, Lutz... Does this katana have a charm spell cast on it?"

"I can't use magic and don't exactly have the funds to hire an enchanter."

"Yeah, that makes sense." She nodded.

"I wish at least part of that made a little less sense."

"Well, we poor folk have a way of knowing how bad each other's financial situation is," she said proudly.

Lutz couldn't really argue with that. He'd give her that one.

The two of them directed their attention back to the cloth-covered katana held between them.

"Shall I take a shot at guessing what's on your mind?" said Claudia. "You have absolutely no clue where to sell this, am I right?"

"What are ya, a damn psychic? What about you, then? Do you know any place that'd take it?"

"I mean, if you wanted to sell it cheap I know a guy," she said, "but I don't exactly have any connections to wealthy nobles or hardcore enthusiasts either."

"Yeah, I figured as much." He clicked his tongue. "By the way, let's say that you *did* have some friends in high places, about how much do you think it would sell for?"

"Hmmm..." Claudia seemed deep in thought, stroking her chin. It was the look of a serious businesswoman.

They were a blacksmith and a merchant. While the two of them had radically different professions, Lutz could recognize the studious gaze of a professional. It was the sort of thing that you didn't want to interrupt, so he kept quiet.

That wasn't all though. The profile of her face while she was so deep in thought was undeniably beautiful, and Lutz found himself gazing at her.

"Fifty gold coins. If the buyer was a weapon fanatic with well-lined pockets, you could probably negotiate up to a hundred."

"That's—holy shit. I could build a house for that..."

"That being said," she continued, "without a serious buyer, there's not a whole lot you can do. Tell me, how's it feel to stare at a katana worth a hundred gold with an empty stomach?"

"Let's talk about something else... I think I'm going to tear up." Lutz sulked.

"Listen, I'll have a bit more of a think about how to sell this thing too. The fact remains that this katana smells like money and—as a merchant—I'd be a fool not to take a bite."

"Well, let's start by taking care of the business that you came here for."

Claudia gave a little shrug, picked up one of the wooden crates, and carried it to the carriage.

Lutz grabbed another crate and followed behind her, not missing a chance to stare at her butt swaying from side to side. He received the payment for the axes and watched as Claudia's carriage disappeared into the distance.

At that moment it dawned on him that he hadn't slept in more than twenty-four hours. Assaulted by the sudden awareness of his tired muscles and heavy eyelids, he fought through his exhaustion long enough to place the katana in his workshop cabinet and collapsed onto his hard bed.

***

A week passed, then two. Usually, Claudia would have placed a new order by that time, but she had yet to grace him with her presence.

As for Lutz, who was unable to get the thought of that katana out of his head, he spent his days crafting a saya, then a *tsuba*—the hand guard of a katana. He also tried his hand at crafting an ornate *tsuka*, or handle, but without much artistic sense for that kind of thing, all he could produce was something more fit for a toy sword than a grand katana. His failed attempts further whittled at his pride as a craftsman.

Pottering around his workshop all day only further steeped him in those feelings of frustration, so he decided it was more productive to engage in some day drinking at the bar.

While Lutz called the structure that stood outside of the walled city a "bar," it was so shoddy that—even if completely destroyed—it could be rebuilt in a day. In fact, it looked as though all it would take was some exceptionally windy conditions to bring the whole thing down.

Walking in, Lutz was greeted by a familiar grin.

"Hey, boss. Glad to see business is booming!" The barkeeper laughed as he spoke.

At that, Lutz shot him a glare. "I see your humor's as awful as always. I haven't had any orders come in from my client in two weeks, so I'm stuck here without anything to do but drink cheap

booze."

"Oh, so you haven't heard?" he said with an almost disappointed sigh.

"Hmm?"

"That girl Claudia got herself arrested."

"Hmmm?!"

Lutz had yet to drink a single drop, but he suddenly felt as though he were completely drunk.

"What are you talking about? What the hell happened?" he asked, leaning forward, but the barkeeper simply shook his head in silence.

Around those parts, that wasn't the gesture of a man who didn't know anything. Lutz begrudgingly pulled out his wallet and slammed five coppers down on the table.

The barkeeper snatched the coins and shoved them into his pocket.

Lutz knew that information wasn't something to be given for free, but at times like this when he was in a hurry, that kind of attitude was beyond frustrating. If he said that five coppers weren't enough, Lutz was ready to leap over the counter and put his fist through the barkeeper's face, but luckily he seemed like the understanding type.

"It's a bit of a long story, but to start, have you heard about how the Knights Order has been cracking down on bandits lately?"

"What?" Lutz snorted. "Are you telling me those thug knights were capable of doing something other than taking bribes?"

The barkeeper laughed. "That's what you're surprised about? Well, it's not like this current crusade is exactly about restoring world peace either—they're just lining their own pockets."

Lutz nodded. He had figured about as much. They left the bandits to steal what they could from merchants, and when they'd collected a decent bounty, the knights swooped in and collected it in the name of justice.

Of course, the stolen goods would never be returned to the victims. After all, it would be difficult to accurately attribute each item to a certain merchant. Even if there were cases where it was obvious, it wouldn't be *fair* to the rest of the victims if some merchants had their items returned and others didn't. Then,

wouldn’t it be better for everyone if those items were used to help fund the valiant efforts of the Knights Order in protecting the peace of the city?

At least, that was the argument they presented to the public.

It goes without saying that no one actually believed it, not even the knights themselves. After all, the knights were nowhere to be seen, even as bandits operated on major roads in broad daylight. And when they did take action, they purposefully targeted the weaker groups.

“It’s like they think of bandits as little piggy banks that, given a bit of time, magically fill up with cash all on their own.” The barkeeper sighed deeply.

“But how does that have anything to do with Claudia being arrested? I’d get it if she somehow ended up getting caught up in a fight with some bandits or something, but...”

“Well, you see, the knights have been tortur—interrogating some of these bandits. As a result, they’ve learned that some merchants have been financially backing them and selling the stolen goods on the black market.”

“*Claudia* financially supporting bandits? That’s not exactly an accusation that I can just shrug my shoulders and accept.”

The barkeeper nodded. “Yeah, the whole thing reeks. I guess it’s our fault for trying to rationalize the actions of those shitbuckets from the perspective of a sane person. However, the fact is that those merchants don’t have much hope of getting out if they can’t pay a ridiculous bail.”

When the topic of money came up, Lutz felt a pit grow in his stomach. The knights were so greedy that they’d surely use any minor infraction they could find to justify the detainment of those merchants.

“What happens if they can’t pay bail?” asked Lutz, Claudia’s words ringing in his mind.

“Well, we poor folk have a way of knowing how bad each other’s financial situation is.”

She probably was a bit better off than him, but it didn’t sound like she had stacks of gold lying around either.

“Can’t say for sure,” said the barkeeper, “but you could always put a bid on her if you see her at a brothel!”

Those words were far beyond the realm of what Lutz was willing to accept as a joke. Maybe before he could have laughed along with that kind of dark humor, but it was different now. He stood from his seat and turned his back on the barkeeper.

“Hey, at least buy a drink before storming off!”

Walking toward the door, Lutz didn’t turn around once, nor did he bother gracing him with a response.

***

The next day, Lutz passed through the gates of the walled city. He tried to look as presentable and unassuming as possible, but he still got stopped by guards. It only took a few coins placed in the palm of their hands to make them change their minds, though.

As he wasn’t licensed with the Guild, he couldn’t exactly identify himself as a blacksmith officially. From the guards’ perspective, he was just a homeless, unemployed slob. It was only natural that they would stop him.

The view of the city was quite pretty. Just looking up a bit, you could see the small castle where the lord of the city resided. The streets were bustling, people moving with long strides and a clear sense of purpose.

However, there was no place for Lutz there.

Loneliness came in two forms. The loneliness of solitude, and the loneliness that he felt in the middle of a crowd. For Lutz, the latter was far more palpable. His mind was drowning in the river of people.

Even the pigs, whose job it was to eat the filth from the ground, roamed free in the streets, people making way for them as they went. Even the pigs had a purpose and received some level of respect for it.

Lutz decided to think about something else. He hadn’t fallen so far in life that he would allow himself to feel jealousy for a pig.

His mind swirling with such thoughts, he arrived at the knights’ station. The station itself was a dark and dingy two-story building.

The horses in the nearby stable looked mistreated as well, with horribly matted manes.

While they all shared the title of *knight*, they were an eclectic bunch. Some adorned themselves in beautiful plate armor and rushed into battle to defend the interests of the nobility. Others behaved so slovenly that they practically advertised the fact they got in on family connections alone, nothing more than bandits in their own right. It went without saying which of the two were stationed there.

As Lutz entered, a rough-looking man walked up to him.

"What the hell do ya think *you're* doing here? We don't have any money for beggars."

Laughter erupted from behind him. Every last one of them had the same condescending laugh. It wasn't like Lutz was expecting anything more of them, though, so he decided to continue with his business.

"You *detained* a woman named Claudia, right? I'm here to pay her bail."

"Huh?" For a moment the man looked confused. "Oh, you mean that merchant? No one's come for her yet, so we were planning on selling her off to the slaver in a few days." A lecherous grin spread across his face.

Once someone was designated as a criminal, there was no limit to what could be done to them. If anything, Lutz was reassured by his words. Claudia was still safe.

Even if the knights often operated in a legal gray area, they were still working within the confines of the system.

It looked like they still hadn't stooped so low as to physically abuse the merchants that they captured. If they were to go that far, the Merchants Guild surely wouldn't stay quiet. Even the higher-ups in the Knights Order would have to reprimand them if they wanted to keep out of trouble.

"The bail's been set at twenty gold. You can pay that?"

The man's greedy gaze made Lutz feel so uncomfortable it was like he was licking him with his eyeballs. He had probably never seen that kind of money in his entire life.

"I can't pay that in cash," Lutz admitted.

"Well, see ya. We'll make sure to take real good care of that girl of yours, don't worry." The man shooed Lutz off with a disinterested expression.

Lutz ignored this gesture and silently pulled the katana—saya and all—from his waist, and revealed the beautiful blade.

The knights' eyes grew wide as they immediately stood up, ready to retaliate.

"Wait, I haven't come all this way to fight. I'm here to negotiate. If you're willing to free Claudia, I'm prepared to offer you *this*."

"Are you telling me that thing's worth twenty gold?" The knight cocked his head. "Where's your proof?"

"Use your eyes! Can't you tell? If you think the crap all those nobles in name—second or third in line of succession—are carrying around their waists outclasses *this,* then I have nothing more to say. Reasoning with you would be a waste of time."

The knights obviously felt called out by him, but not one of them seemed able to take their eyes off the katana. Their eyes spoke to Lutz. Oh, what they would sacrifice to, just for once in their life, walk around the city with such a beautiful katana on their waist—like filthy flies trapped in a honeypot.

"I'll accept that trade. Go on, hand it over." The man in front accepted the offer on everyone's behalf, but Lutz just shook his head.

"Claudia's release comes first. When both she and I are safely outside the station, I'll give it to you."

"Do you have any idea who you're trying to negotiate with here? It's entirely up to us whether we accept this deal of yours. In fact, it wouldn't be that hard for us to surround you and beat that smug face until all the light goes out of it."





"I'm not sure that *you* fully grasp the situation either. If you let this chance go, you may never get the opportunity to own a katana as grand as this for the rest of your life. It sounds like you're not against using force either, but..." With a wicked smile, Lutz pointed the tip of the katana directly at the man.

Why was he able to stay so calm—so confident? Perhaps he was getting drunk on the illustrious power of the katana. Lutz searched the rational part of his mind and found—buried underneath the sudden charisma—he was scared shitless.

He continued. "Do you really think that the owner of a katana like *this* would just be some bum off the street?"

"Uuugh..." Seemingly overwhelmed by Lutz's ad-lib intimidation tactics, the man shrunk back.

Lutz shot him a cool grin. He split the air with one swift swing of the katana before sheathing it into its saya. He—and seemingly everyone else present—felt the tense atmosphere dissipate almost immediately.

"All right, lead the way."

The man clicked his tongue, obviously trying to project his frustration. "Follow me." A bad attitude was about all the defiance that he could muster.

***

It was dark and damp. The stench of dust and mold leaked from the stone construction of the underground prison cell.

Alarmed by the approach of several footsteps, Claudia noticed her shoulders weakly trembling.

What was going to happen to her now? Was she going to be executed? Or perhaps something worse...

She looked up slowly, unable to hide the fear in her eyes, and saw a knight carrying a torch. But to her surprise, he was accompanied by a familiar face.

"Lutz..." Her voice was raspy.

In a second, she understood everything. She knew that she was saved, but she also knew what Lutz must've given up to buy her

freedom. A katana worth one hundred gold. It was more than enough for him to pull himself out of his life of poverty. He might have even had a chance at becoming a well-renowned blacksmith, serving under nobility.

He threw away his future... All to save me.

She felt unbelievable relief well up inside her, but she hung her head down, unable to look him in the eyes. Showing him her selfish feelings would be an insult to the massive sacrifice he had made.

"Come on out. You're free to go." The knight twisted the key in the lock, and the rusty cell door creaked open.

"Let's go." Lutz held out his hand.

With some apprehension remaining in her heart, she slowly took his hand.

He held her hand firmly and quickly pulled her up to her feet, but she was more exhausted than she had thought and her legs gave out, sending her falling into Lutz's arms. His strong body held her up without so much as a flinch. It was the firm body of a blacksmith, hardened by the steel that he forged day in and day out.

Claudia was so physically and emotionally exhausted that even walking in a straight line was nearly impossible.

Recognizing this, Lutz gave her his shoulder to lean on and carefully guided her up the stairs.

The glares of the knights were filled with tangible bloodlust, but they pushed through the station. It wasn't until the sun kissed Claudia's skin that she allowed herself to truly believe that she was safe. She wanted to collapse right there onto the ground, but Lutz held on to her firmly.

"Hey! A deal's a deal. Hand over that sword." The knight that had opened the cell door yelled out to them. He didn't seem to fully be in his right mind and gave off a dangerous presence. If they delayed it any longer, the peaceful deal could quickly turn into a bloodbath.

"This isn't a sword, it's a katana! Don't you forget it!" Lutz threw the bewitching katana into the entrance to the station.

The knights hurried to catch it before it hit the ground inside. They must've been pretty desperate because, in the chaos, one of the tables flipped over, causing a loud crash.

Lutz, however, paid them no mind. Without looking back even once, he led her away from the station.

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Lutz and Claudia strolled down the street, bathed in the light of the setting sun. They passed by merchants closing up shop and residents of the city preparing for their supper—people going about their daily lives. The two of them felt out of place somehow.

"Why did you decide to rescue me, Lutz?" Claudia broke the long silence. She had to squeeze the words out of her, in the way one would wring out a wet towel. "I understand wanting to help out a friend. I think that's a beautiful thing. But even a beautiful sentiment like that has its limits. For you to just throw away a sword worth a hundred gold coins, I must be worth at least that much to you, or there must be some reason you absolutely had to save me."

"It's a katana, not a sword."

"Is that really the part that stuck out to you?" Claudia didn't even try to hide her somewhat annoyed expression. "Of course, I'm incredibly grateful that you *did* save me. But until I understand the *reason* you saved me, I just don't think I can shake this weird feeling I have."

"The reason, huh? I'm not sure myself, to be honest."

"Hey, I'm being serious here. I want to know."

Lutz twisted his face in thought while scratching his head.

Claudia thought he was just trying to play it cool, but it seemed like he really didn't know how to explain the reasoning behind what he did.

"It's true that I wanted to help out a friend in trouble. Also, even if that katana was worth a hundred gold in theory, it's not like I had any way of selling it. Just holding on to it wouldn't do me any good. Without you around, I'd be losing a valuable business partner, and I couldn't stand how the knights were so obviously abusing their power. So... In short..."

Lutz unconsciously placed his hand on his left hip and realized that there was no longer anything there. There was still some regret

left in his heart, but he didn't let it show.

"If you want reasons, I've got plenty, but it's not like any single one of them will give you the answer that you're probably looking for. All those little reasons just kind of piled on top of each other until I felt that I had to do something, I guess."

"Is that really all?"

"It's not like everyone in the world goes through life guided by some unwavering principle or reason."

"Mm-hmm, okay. I think I'm starting to figure you out. I can say your reason for saving me in a single sentence. Do you want to hear it?"

"Please, go ahead."

"It's simple, you're absolutely smitten with me."

"I'm sorry... What was that?" Lutz turned to her with a look of shock.

Claudia firmly grabbed his face with both hands, her lips forming into a bewitching smile.

Through their time together, Claudia had shown him many faces, but this one was new to him.

They pulled ever closer together until their lips gently met. Five seconds, six seconds... They parted, a strand of saliva stretching as they pulled away.

When he opened his eyes, Lutz half expected to see the face of a predator, but standing in front of him was just Claudia, her face nearly melting from embarrassment.

"I'll make sure to pay back my debt. Think of this as, well...a deposit."

He didn't understand a single thing. Claudia was simply beyond the realm of understanding. To be honest, he still didn't even understand what it was that made him rescue her, but he was convinced he wasn't wrong to do so.

"O-Okay..." It took every ounce of remaining reason for him to stammer out a response.

After that, they continued walking on, but the silence was unbearable, so Lutz blurted out the first question that came to his mind. "I heard that the reason the knights have been rounding up all

the merchants is that they were supposedly financially aiding bandits, but is there any truth to that?"

"Oh come on now, Lutzy! Surely you don't actually believe that drivel, do you?"

"Not at all. No matter how much I thought about it, it just didn't make any sense. That's why I thought I'd ask."

"Good. As long as you understand. If you really believed I'd do such a thing, I'd have no choice but to punch you right in the face and run away whilst crying like an idiot." She let out a massive sigh.

She was so tired—not the sort of tired that would go away with just a bit of rest.

"There's no one in this whole world that despises the act of theft or robbery more than us merchants."

"Oh?"

"If we take the example of those axes that I ordered from you, let's suppose that a single one of those got stolen. To recover the losses I'd take from that single axe, I'd have to sell ten more axes."

"That many?"

"If it was something with an even lower unit price, that number would only increase, as well. Making a profit as a merchant isn't as easy as people think."

Claudia's face twisted into a hateful grimace.

"Just thinking about how those bandits take those products—our lifeblood—by force, make an easy buck, then throw it all away on booze, women, and gambling... They're a disease. If possible, I'd like to kill them with my own hands," she said, her voice raised.

Her gaze was fixated on the heavens as if she were waiting for some kind of divine answer. When she was convinced that no such thing would come, she released the tension from her shoulders and continued walking.

"It's really pathetic... But even though we hate them more than anyone, we merchants still had no choice but to give them money in the form of a *toll*. When faced with the threat of losing our entire stock—or perhaps even our lives—what else could we do?"

"Are those bandits really satisfied with just a toll?"

"If they brutally murdered every merchant that passed by, no one

would take that road anymore. If that were to happen it would impact their *business* as well. Being able to collect a reliable income with little effort is a much more attractive option for them."

"Bandits looking for a reliable income, huh?" Lutz scratched his head. "That's a bit surreal."

"I couldn't agree more. If that's what they're looking for, why not get themselves an honest job? Bandits running their operations like a proper business just feels like a bad joke."

They looked at each other and let out a laugh. It was a dry laugh, not the sort of belly laugh that resonated throughout the taverns in town. Nevertheless, their hearts felt a bit lighter for it.

"Anyway, word got out to those damn knights that merchants were paying a toll to the bandits, and they decided to use that to press charges. All because they wanted the bail money."

"Can they really get away with doing that to merchants without some kind of retaliation?"

"They make sure not to touch the rich merchants with connections to noble families and the like. It's just the small businesses and merchants that they go after—the sort of people that could scream as much as they like about how unjust it all is without anyone even lending them an ear. Actually, if they were to try such a thing, the knights would probably just tack on a charge for disturbing the peace. The more they struggle the better for those assholes." Claudia shook her head. "I'm fully aware that this world isn't governed by morality or justice, but there are days where the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness just makes you want to cry."

Lutz couldn't find the words to say in return. He was no stranger to the burden of powerlessness in an unjust system. Surely they weren't alone in that either. Probably half of all people born into the world went through life with that same burden.

"It's not really my place to say after you gave up so much to save me, but that swor—" Claudia stopped herself. "That katana. It might not be such a bad thing for you to have given it up."

"In what way?"

"It means that your creation has been unleashed onto the world. Knowing how those self-absorbed idiots are, they won't be able to

hold themselves back from showing off such a bewitchingly beautiful katana."

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

"Eventually, one of their superiors will hear about it and try to take it for themselves. It's not like they could refuse; they didn't get it through just means to begin with. Then it'll just keep changing hands, higher and higher in the domain—maybe all the way to the count. Actually, it might not even stop there... It might end up in the hands of His Majesty the King himself."

"What a wonderful dream. Doesn't change the fact that it's no longer with me, though..."

"I wouldn't be so pessimistic. If it keeps going up in the world—knight to count, count to duke, duke to king—surely word will spread throughout the nobles. They'll start to wonder who it was that made such an incredible katana. That's when you step out onto the world stage as the great katana smith Lutz!" She gave him a confident smile.

"Hmmm..."

It certainly was a lovely thought. Lutz wasn't so self-important as to consider himself the best katana smith in the realm, but there was a part of him that believed it possible. If it were *that* katana, maybe it could really happen.

Lutz would have loved to optimistically look forward to a bright future, but there was something lingering in his mind that wouldn't let him. He was forgetting something—something important.

"Aaaaaaaah!" Lutz screamed out.

Claudia's eyes shot wide open at the sudden outburst. "What?! What is it?!"

"I forgot the inscription!"

When katana smiths were particularly proud of one of their works, they would inscribe their name and the katana's name on the *nakago*, the part where the grip would be added. Sometimes they would even add the month or year it was completed, but Lutz had forgotten to inscribe anything at all.

That bewitching katana would remain an unnamed work from an anonymous smith.

“Yeah, um... That’s a problem.” Claudia tried to find the words to comfort him, but as far as she knew, they didn’t exist. If the plan was to eventually claim himself as the smith that forged that katana, it was a huge obstacle.

Without an inscription, there’d probably even be others that would come forward, claiming it to be their work. If they were asked to make something similar, they could just say that they only were able to make the first one by divine intervention. It wasn’t a great excuse, but it would be hard to disprove. Works of art like that weren’t something that someone could be expected to mass-produce anyway. For a craftsman, their art was similar to a live performance, no two works being exactly the same.

It was enough to make Lutz’s knees go weak. He had placed his hand on the door to glory only to find that it had been locked.

“Well, that’s how it goes.” He sighed.

Claudia was safe. His everyday life remained unchanged. Even that alone was something to celebrate.

He was aware that this relief was likely due to some unconscious fear of change, but he was reassured by it nonetheless.

Just that day he had gotten a glance at the abhorrent world of noble society. He wasn’t sure he could make it in that world anyway. If the inner workings of society consisted solely of liars deceiving fools, Lutz was happy not to participate in it.

He stopped for a moment. “Wait, wasn’t your house in the opposite direction?”

A lot had happened that day. He thought that she might’ve been so out of it that she forgot, but Claudia turned to him confidently.

“I don’t have a house anymore. My house, furniture, carriage, horse...those knights took it all, you see. The house was only a rental, but still.”

“That’s...rough.”

“Anyway, that’s how it is, so I’ll be staying with you for a while!”

She said it like it was completely obvious, just a little thing she had forgotten to mention.

“Wait, wait, I’m not sure if I’m able to go that far. That could be a bit...problematic. For various reasons.”

Ever since his father died, he had been living alone. If an illustrious woman like herself were to suddenly start living under the same roof as him, Lutz wasn't confident he could hold himself back.

He thought back to the softness and warmth of her body when he'd held on to her back in that basement—the sensation of her lips pressed against his. Those thoughts gave birth to a particular feeling in his chest, and his panic continued to mount.

Claudia nodded. "Okay then, I got it. Just to be sure, you're asking me to sleep on the streets, is that right? While we're still within the city walls, there are still plenty of degenerates hanging around... Were you perhaps wanting to see the morning sun illuminate my strangled corpse, lying naked on the cold pavement?"

Lutz cringed at the thought. "All right, I get it. Did you really have to be that graphic?"

"Mm-hmm, very good. That straightforward side of you is truly a virtue, Lutzy." Claudia let out a joyous laugh, a smile spread out on her face.

Lutz still had absolutely no idea what she was going on about.

The two of them set off again together in the same direction, wearing exact opposite expressions.

***

"Home sweet home..."

"Ha ha ha! Perhaps I should be saying the same from now on when I walk through these doors!"

Lutz had returned back home, bringing with him an extra burden to carry.

So much had happened that day, but now he was just tired. The sun was already setting, and he wanted nothing more than to eat something quick, then go to sleep. Unfortunately, though, that wasn't quite possible yet.

"Follow me, I'll show you to your room."

"Oh, you have a spare room?" Claudia said, sounding surprised.

What exactly was that woman thinking about doing if he had only one bedroom? It seemed like she really had said all of that before

thinking it through.

Lutz knew she didn't really have much of a choice, though. If the only other option available to her was to sleep on the streets and get assaulted by some random thug, crashing in an acquaintance's room was clearly way better, even if that acquaintance was a man.

While he felt a bit like he was dancing on the palm of her hand, he couldn't voice his complaints—not when she was so open to him, both in feeling and motivation. Lutz wasn't sure if that was one of his strengths or one of his weaknesses. It was probably a bit of both.

At the very least, he certainly couldn't just kick Claudia's plump ass and tell her to leave.

Passing through the workshop, they entered into a space serving as both a living room and a kitchen. At the other end of the room were two doors. Opening the one on the left, Lutz revealed a nearly barren bedroom that smelled strongly of dust, the only furniture to speak of being a bed and a cabinet.

"Make yourself at home."

"What do you use this room for?" Claudia looked around.

"Ah, actually it was my father's old room. I haven't really used it in the three years since he passed."

"Hmmm. Speaking of Papa Lutz, he was your smithing master as well, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. Apparently he learned to be a katana smith while training in a foreign country. The way they are made is quite different from the swords in this country."

Claudia nodded along, walking over to the bed—lacking even pillows or a comforter cover—and gave it a pat. She wrinkled her eyebrows at the cloud of dust that plumed into the air.

"For the record, I do actually clean up around here from time to time..."

"I don't think there's anything one should trust less than the words of a man claiming that he *cleaned up*. The worst thing about it is most men actually believe what they're saying too. By *clean up*, perchance do you mean that whenever the mood struck, you opened up a few windows and wiped away a bit of the dust?"

"What else do you need to do?" Lutz said defensively. "Even growing up I was often scolded for not taking proper care of my smithing tools, but never once did my father tell me off for a messy room. If anything, his room was far worse than mine. It took me a whole month to go through all the belongings he had lying around here."

"Oh God, this place really needs a woman's touch." Claudia cleared as much of the dust as she could in a half asleep daze and collapsed onto the bed. She had plenty of other things to say, but the weight of her eyelids beat out the compulsion to complain. "All right, I'm going to sleep. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Gotcha. Good night."

"Oh, and one more thing..." She opened one eye.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"No problem."

After hearing Lutz's response, Claudia's breathing slowed to a calm cycling, and she drifted to sleep almost immediately.

Lutz quietly closed the door and let her rest in peace. There were plenty of things he still wanted to ask—things that he wanted to tell her—but more than that, he just wanted her to get some much-deserved rest.

Returning to the living room, he heated up some soup left in the pot on the stove and had a late supper. With his mind still buzzing from the events of the day, he had thought that he wouldn't be able to get to sleep, but even while eating, he caught his head drifting down several times. In the end, he didn't even make it to his room. Laying his head down on the unusually inviting table in front of him, he fell into a comfortable sleep.

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A sliver of morning light leaked onto Lutz's face through a gap in the curtains, waking him. He pulled his face off the kitchen table and looked around, but it seemed that Claudia wasn't up yet.

It was said that free time was too expensive for the poor. Perhaps

it was more accurate to say that those gifted with too much free time *became* poor. He had some confidence in that assertion as he himself fell squarely into the latter.

He would have been more than happy to forge a hoe, a kitchen knife, any tool or weapon under the sun, but he didn't have any orders.

He thought about making up a stock of more popular items, but it would take a considerable amount of space to store it all. Even if he could find the space, the blades could rust rather quickly if they weren't stored properly. Furthermore, outside the city walls, theft was a constant threat to worry about. And even if he managed all of those risks, he couldn't just use one of the items in his stock if a customer had any specific requests.

In short, it just wasn't worth the effort and needless risk, so Lutz had always made everything to order. If he was recognized by the Blacksmiths Guild, he could make up as many katana as he liked and line them up for potential customers. For an independent blacksmith such as himself, however, it was a pipe dream.

He wanted to talk with Claudia about how to conduct business from there on out, but she was still practically comatose.

He was assaulted by the familiar frustration of wanting so badly to do something—anything—but not being able to. That, of course, was the fault of his own impatience, and he had no intention of taking it out on Claudia.

While he was *gifted* with that free time, perhaps it was a good chance to forge a replacement to the bewitching katana that had just slipped through his fingers. However, despite his abundance of time, he felt the walls of his life caving in around him, and he didn't have the spare headspace to focus on such a project. He also couldn't forget that no matter how immaculate a katana he was able to forge, he would again be stuck with no way of selling it.

"Uuuggh! What the hell am I supposed to do?!" He held his head in his hands and rolled around on the floor like a twenty-two-year-old toddler.

Suddenly before him was a pair of feet. Bare feet, rather feminine—beautiful even. Looking up, he made eye contact with an obviously

annoyed Claudia.

"Lutz... What in the world are you doing?"

"I'm looking for something that I must've dropped somewhere along the way in life, something very important."

"Did you find it down there?" She cocked her head.

"You know what, I don't even remember what it is I lost."

After watching Claudia silently take a seat at the table, Lutz peeled himself off the floor and sat down on the other side.

"For the time being, I'd like to do business exclusively with you," said Claudia. "I'll collect the orders, you make the orders, I deliver the orders. We repeat that process in perpetuity."

"That's all well and good, but do you have any potential buyers?"

Claudia giggled confidently. "You can just leave that to me. I'm going to need a bit of capital in advance, though. I'm assuming you still have the money I gave you for those axes, yes?"

"You're a more expensive woman than I thought."

"And don't you forget it. A good woman doesn't come cheap."

Lutz began to pick out a few silvers from the small leather bag he used as a wallet, but Claudia reached out and snatched the entire bag.

"Huh? No—wait!"

"You just sit back and await some good news," she said before rushing out the door with a little skip in her step.

It was only yesterday that she was being detained by knights on false charges. Worse, by that point, she had already been held there for several days.

"Well, good to see she's feeling a bit better anyway." Lutz scratched his head, a smile coming to his face.

He decided it was best to stock up on coal and steel in the meantime. He knew Claudia. She wouldn't be coming back empty-handed.

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"Ha ha ha! I'm home, Lutzy!"

Claudia came back at dusk, even more energetic—and louder—

than when she had left that morning.

"Oh, welcome back. So, did you manage to find anyone that needed their kitchen knives sharpened or something?"

"Listen and be amazed. I bring you a contract for an order of five shortswords. Eighty silvers each."

Lutz's mouth fell open, and he froze in disbelief. Seeing this, Claudia's expression settled into a satisfied grin.

"Yes, that's it! That's the reaction I was looking to see!"

"How the hell did you get an insane order like that?" asked Lutz.

"Simple, I just went over to the knights' station."

"Weren't things a bit...awkward? I mean, it's not even been twenty-four hours yet."

"If there's a profit to be made, there's no opportunity too awkward to pursue," said Claudia proudly.

Merchants had to be mentally resilient. The woman standing in front of Lutz at that moment seemed incredibly grand, a master of trade. Surely, it was his mind playing tricks on him. The one thing he could admit was that she definitely had *something* that he didn't.

"I just figured that after seeing that katana, there would be loads of them looking to get something from the same smith. Of course, I did remind them that a katana of that quality wasn't something you could just pop out whenever you wanted. Also, it would be a bit too much of an investment for most to order a longsword, so for a first order, we settled on a set of shortswords."

Just hearing her talk about that katana was enough for a dull pain to flare up in Lutz's chest. That very well might've been the greatest katana he would ever forge in his entire life. He didn't have much choice given the situation, but at the very least, he would have liked to have given it a name. He felt as though he was a parent who had abandoned his child at the doorstep of thugs. The guilt was unbearable.

"What happened to that katana, anyway?" Lutz asked reluctantly.

"Well, it's a funny story, but it seems one of their superiors took it off them."

"If it's funny, I must be missing the joke."

"I heard that one of the knights was staring at it a bit too closely

and ended up slashing their cheek down to the bone."

"Must've really gone out of their way to be extra stupid."

"He mustn't have been in his right mind, I'm sure. They all said that blood was spurting all over the place, and I believe it. There were bloodstains everywhere."

Lutz didn't have a particularly strong stomach for that kind of gruesome talk. It was certainly a funny story, but not in the humorous sense.

"Anyway, one of the higher-ups in the Knights Order heard about the poor fool and ended up confiscating the katana. I feel a little bad saying this about potential customers, but when I heard what happened... God, it felt so good, truly refreshing! Is that what they call schadenfreude?"

"After seeing all that, those knights still wanted to order shortswords from me?"

"Humans are the sort of creatures that can't resist true beauty. They had no choice but to give up owning that katana, but at least they could have something from the same smith."

Claudia nodded along to herself like she had said something profound.

"All right then, I've kept my promise. Now it's your turn."

Lutz gave her one confident nod of his head.

Claudia had marched herself into what was essentially enemy territory to get him that order. If he forged something substandard now, it would mean besmirching her good name and putting her incredible effort to waste. He couldn't stand those thug knights, but if it was for Claudia's sake, he was going to give it his all.

"If they like the shortswords, it might lead to some bigger jobs too. No slacking off, you hear? Impress me."

He shot her a smirk. "Just who do you think I am? Oh, also..." Lutz's eyes wandered around the room, the confidence from a moment ago slipping from his face. "Would it be okay to...kiss you again?"

For a second, Claudia looked shocked, but she soon settled into an entrancing smile.

She giggled gently. "I knew you were smitten with me, Lutzy."

“And what about you, Claudia? How do you feel?”

“Why don’t you take a guess?” She wrapped her arms around the back of his neck.

Lutz felt her delicate body press up against his. To think that someone of her stature had just barged into that den of thieves and negotiated them into submission only made him fall harder for her.

Women were a lot like katana. Bewitchingly beautiful and so very dangerous. Yet, even knowing that, Lutz simply couldn’t pull himself away.

He had thrown away his proudest creation and gained something new. While there was a lingering sense of loss, he wouldn’t call that feeling regret.

In the soft flickering of candlelight, their two shadows became one.

Chapter 2: Awakening of the Enchanted Swords

In the center of the walled city stood a magnificent castle. In a particular workshop in that castle, an old white-haired man twisted his face in anguish. His sharp gaze was focused on a longsword, which was letting off a light blue glow. It was resting on an ominous ritual stand, surrounded by shattered jewels.

The man was Gerhard, a renowned enchanter serving under the Count. He had just finished imbuing the longsword with magic, and looking at it filled him with disappointment.

It was a well-made sword with a featherweight enchantment to make it easier to use. Just a normal, boring, incredible sword. No interesting quirks, no surprises, not a single aspect of it that allowed him to proudly proclaim it as his handiwork.

"This is no good. I simply won't allow it."

Gerhard had no idea what he could do, mired as he was in the greatest slump of his life. The mere thought that the uninspired slop sitting on the ritual stand could be his limit was enough to send shivers down his spine.

However, as long as he was under the employment of the Count, he couldn't just say he was having a bit of enchanter's block and take the week off to get through it. His research was also funded by the Count's domain. If he was told to produce results, he had no choice but to do so, no matter the cost. Even if he had to put his name to something he was ashamed of.

In his mind's eye, he could see the not-so-distant future where people in the palace whispered behind his back. "The age of the enchanter Gerhard has finally come to an end," they would say.

No, absolutely not. He couldn't bear it.

If he was going to end up besmirching his name, he'd rather just

run away in the night and live out the rest of his miserable life as a vagrant.

"God, I beg of you, guide me to the right path. Or if that isn't possible, perhaps you could smite every other enchanter in the kingdom."

As Gerhard was saying his somewhat unsettling prayers, a knock came at the heavy doors to the workshop.

"It's open," Gerhard said with an annoyed tone.

The doors opened and in walked Gerhard's apprentice. While he had chosen to become an apprentice enchanter in his thirties, he was much better known as a brave and high-ranking knight.

"Oh, it was you, Djoser. What's the matter?"

"A messenger just arrived by horseback. We have received a report regarding the wyvern subjugation that the hero was sent on..."

"What about him? Did something finally manage to kill him?" Gerhard didn't even try to hide his frustration.

Djoser didn't quite know how to answer that question. While he recognized the man before him as his master, it didn't change the fact that he could be very difficult to deal with when he got like that.

The hero in question was only called that as a nickname of sorts. It wasn't like he had received a divine mission to fight off a demon lord, or anything of that variety. He was simply a favorite of the Count, a reliable adventurer who would take on quests to cull bothersome monsters in the domain.

It was a bit peculiar, but upon completion of these quests, the hero preferred to be rewarded with weapons rather than money. It was Gerhard's job to create enchanted weapons that were a fitting reward for his heroic feats.

"No, he is still quite alive," Djoser began. "We got word that he has finished his quest and will be returning after making sure the area is entirely safe, around ten days' time."

"Making sure it's safe, huh? If by that he means indulging in orgies with the village girls, I could believe it."

"Master, why do you have to say things like that? It's not like the hero has done anything so unscrupulous."

Gerhard could only groan in response. He held a deep resentment in his heart, but they weren't exactly sworn enemies; it was more an aggressively one-sided grudge.

Up until then, the hero had accomplished countless deeds, and so Gerhard had presented him with a great many enchanted weapons as a reward. In their respective roles, while they were far apart enough in age for Gerhard to be his grandfather, between them was a tangible sense of respect and trust.

However, last time Gerhard presented him his reward during an audience with the Count, something was different. Surely, it went unnoticed by all else present, but Gerhard couldn't have missed it.

The Count greeted the hero with great vigor as he returned from slaying a colossal monster. As a reward, he was given a longsword, forged by the greatest blacksmith in the city and enchanted by Gerhard himself. After asking for the Count's permission to unsheathe the sword, he inspected the blade. His expression, while he only showed it for an instant, was one of disappointment.

The people around him were smiling in celebration, but Gerhard alone felt a pit in his stomach at the momentary reaction. If at all possible, he wished that he hadn't noticed it at all. Maybe then he could have carried on in blissful ignorance, but it was too late.

It was only a split second, but Gerhard knew exactly what the hero was thinking. It was a look that said, "What? Is this the best they could do? A good sword, but nothing special that would add value to my collection."

It was shameful, humiliating...so embarrassing that Gerhard's cheeks flushed pink before turning red with anger. It was as if the hero were denying his entire way of life, all the years he had devoted to his craft.

However, even Gerhard could admit that that longsword was not his proudest achievement. He questioned himself after that event. Had he really put his soul into it, or was he just relying on his years of muscle memory to do the work?

The only way that Gerhard could restore his name—as well as his faith in himself—was to enchant a sword so great that the hero would gaze up at him with admiration and respect.

Reality was never quite so kind, though. You couldn't just wake up one day and decide that was the day you were going to craft your magnum opus. The mana emitting from the swords he had enchanted could only be described as mediocre at best.

If the hero showed the same disappointment with his next reward and said that he no longer wanted to receive weapons, that would mean the practical death of the great enchanter Gerhard.

The fact that his apprentice had come during this time of worry must have been some kind of sign. He might have been grasping at straws, but he would take any help he could get.

"Djoser, fetch me a weapon, a canvas worthy of being enchanted with my magnum opus."

The quality of the weapon greatly affected the amount of mana one could imbue in it. To make even greater enchantments, he needed an even greater weapon.

"About that..." Djoser's gaze wandered to the sword on the ritual stand.

It was a longsword forged by the greatest smith in the city, Borbus. When the order was placed, they were told that money was no object. It was a sword of the absolute highest quality they could produce. How was he supposed to get something better than that?

The only people in the kingdom who would call such an impeccable sword ordinary—a failure—were people like Gerhard and the hero, weapon maniacs who had long forgotten common sense.

If such a weapon were given to a mid-level adventurer, they would burst into tears of joy after being presented with such a fine sword. It's possible they would even kiss the feet of the person who gifted it to them. If Gerhard or the hero didn't want it, Djoser would gladly accept it.

"This sword was forged personally by Borbus, the best blacksmith in the Count's domain, one of the top five smiths in the entire country. If you require something of greater quality than that, it might be a bit...difficult."

"Hmm. Borbus, you say?" The annoyance in his tone remained the same, but his expression was colored with melancholy. "He truly is a great blacksmith. The quality of his work hasn't fallen over the

past ten years. That is to say that he hasn't improved in the past ten years either."

Gerhard and Borbus were old friends, and not just from ten years ago. Even still, Gerhard was left with no choice but to cut off such a longtime partner if he were to reach his further potential. It was a bitterly cruel thing, but if he showed mercy here, Gerhard would die without seeing what lay beyond his current limit. He had to make a choice.

"Djoser, I beg of you. You are the only one I can entrust with this."

While Djoser was an apprentice enchanter, his main role remained that of a high-ranking knight in the Count's domain. Perhaps there were strings he could pull that Gerhard couldn't.

However, counter to his hopes, Djoser simply shook his head. "The only way I could acquire something of greater quality would be to sneak into the royal treasure vault and steal a legendary sword or something of the sort."

Djoser had said that as a little joke, but his master wasn't smiling. Quite the contrary, a dangerous glimmer came to his eyes. He decided it best to change the topic.

It would likely be okay for the time being, but if he felt truly trapped in a corner, there was no telling how far his master would go. He still had a hint of common sense, but if he was forced to choose between his healthy reasoning and his art, he would choose the latter every time.

"I will give it my best," said Djoser cautiously. "However, I must warn you that the likelihood of finding what you are looking for is rather low."

He tried his best to respectfully say that he shouldn't get his hopes up; however, he wasn't sure whether that message got across to his master.

After seeing him in such a depressed state, he couldn't help but want to be of some assistance, but there was a dark corner of his heart that told him it might also be prudent to put some distance

between them.

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A few days later, Djoser asked every blacksmith or merchant that he could, even visiting the Adventurers Guild in the hope that someone might give him a hint as to where to find a sword that would satisfy his master.

When he explained his situation, people turned their noses up at him, surely thinking that he was mad. All of his efforts were in vain. Unfortunately, legendary or sacred swords weren't things that people just had lying around.

It all strongly reaffirmed Djoser's original belief that the sword in his master's hands was of the highest quality one could procure.

When a craftsman made something fantastic, they always wished to make something better the next time. Then, something even grander the next time. When that process of constant growth began to feel like the norm, it would inevitably lead to a ruinous sense of inadequacy when you reached your limit.

Djoser believed Gerhard to be the greatest enchanter in the Count's domain. Maybe even the best in the country or the whole continent. He didn't want to see such a man crumble under the weight of his own expectations for himself.

What should I do?

As Djoser mulled over the situation in a private room of the castle, a young knight's apprentice entered apprehensively.

"Sir Djoser, there has been an incident with the knig—my apologies, guard unit at the knights' station. It appears that there have been some injuries as well."

"Those fools again, huh?" Djoser whispered with a pained expression.

Coming as they did from families of modest stature, most of the guards couldn't quite be called nobles, nor could they be called peasants. They were just second-or thirdborn, half-baked half-wits who hadn't even officially taken the rite of knighthood.

They were boorish, ill-mannered, and slovenly. Their cheap and

neglected gear was an obvious reflection of that as well. Djoser hated to even call them knights. They were more like a band of mercenaries who'd received permission to ride on horseback.

The reason the young knight's apprentice referred to them as the *guard unit* was that he knew Djoser disliked hearing them referred to as knights.

"So, what did those idiots do this time? Did they drown themselves in drink and start to kill each other? If so, I would gladly drink to that as well."

"It seems that one of them cut their cheek on a sword they had newly acquired. Apparently he was bleeding quite profusely."

"I had long since known they were idiots, but perhaps my evaluation of them was still too favorable."

How in the world did those destitute knights get their hands on a new sword, anyway? He would have to investigate that as well. There was no doubt in his mind that it couldn't have come by proper, just means.

To be honest, it was nothing but a bother. Djoser let out a deep sigh. His legs complained as he lifted himself out of his chair. It felt as if he had lead weights strapped to his waist. He wrapped his cape around himself and strapped his sword to his hip.

"By the way..." As he looked up at the ceiling, a thought came to Djoser's mind. "Did they say anything about what compelled that idiot to do such a thing?"

"He just said that the sword was simply too beautiful. His memory was foggy, though. By the time he came to his senses, his cheek was already split open."

"What kind of reason is that?" said Djoser in surprise.

It was completely insane, but hearing about that *too beautiful* sword certainly piqued his interest.

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"And just what do you all think you're doing?"

Djoser had arrived at the knights' station and was nearing the end of his patience.

Seeing the anger in the high-ranking knight's eyes, everyone present braced themselves as if they were simply waiting for the hurricane of complaints to blow over.

Djoser could accept them taking funds from bandits. He had some issue with their detainment of merchants over their payments to said bandits, but he had no intention of reprimanding them for it at that time. It cost a considerable amount of money even to just maintain a show of force in the Knights Order. If Djoser were to deny their methods, the balance in funds would have to come from somewhere, namely from the house of the Count. He couldn't put any more financial burden on the domain than already existed. While he was deeply unsettled by their actions, he found solace in the fact that at least they hadn't gone after any of the wealthy merchants that had major influence in the region.

After he heard their explanation, it seemed that they had accepted the sword in question in lieu of a bail payment, but Djoser was still confused as to how that led to someone slashing their own cheek down to the bone.

The man who had done it was sent to the hospital. Unfortunately, he seemed to be in stable condition.

"All right then. To start, show me that sword."

Djoser didn't think he was making an excessive demand. Wanting to see the object in question that nearly turned the place into a bloodbath was perfectly reasonable. However, one of the older knights bore a terribly grim expression.

"The sword was willingly given to us as a substitute for payment, you see..." said the knight.

"*Willingly* doesn't equate to *rightfully*. Would you prefer that I defer to the Count—perhaps the church—regarding this matter?"

The knights shook their heads so vigorously it seemed they might twist right off their necks. If such a thing were to happen, surely they would not be able to avoid punishment. Not only would it affect them, but it would also besmirch their family names.

One of the knights slumped in submission and headed toward the back of the room, returning with a sword, one like Djoser had never seen before.

He went to draw the sword, but there was something in the back of his mind that stopped him. It wasn't impossible that some form of curse had been placed on the sword. He decided it was best to consult with Gerhard first.

"I will handle this incident personally. In the meantime, be sure not to incur too much resentment from the merchants. They are a far more formidable bunch than you all seem to think."

Leaving them a parting warning, he vacated the station, his angry footsteps resonating as he walked.

After Djoser left their sight, the knights all sank into a strange combination of relief and loss. They were glad that their bothersome superior had left, but something else had vanished along with him, something very important.

They surely would never have another chance to hold that incredible sword. The knights all directed resentful stares at the older knight who had so easily given over their prized sword. All were silent, the room enveloped in a dense air of hostility.

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In the afternoon of the very same day, another strange visitor arrived at the knights' station. It was the merchant they had detained, the one that had that marvelous sword traded for her freedom.

"Well, hello everyone!" She greeted them with such a cheery expression, it was as if she had totally forgotten the torturous days she'd spent in that underground cell.

The knights had no idea what could have brought her there, but it smelled of trouble.

"Do ya need something?" said one of the knights.

"That incredible sword—or *katana,* should I say. After seeing such a beautiful masterpiece, I was wondering if there was anyone who was beginning to want a piece forged by the same blacksmith." Claudia noticed a peculiar smell and scanned the room, her nose twitching as she went. "I do believe I smell blood. Was there perhaps some kind of duel to the death over the katana?"

“What do ya take us for?! Some idiot just accidentally cut his cheek on the thing!” After he had finished yelling at her, he clicked his tongue in frustration, realizing that he had already said too much.

He couldn’t help it, though. He needed to make it clear that it was an accident involving one careless individual. If a rumor began to spread that it was caused by infighting, they would all end up being held accountable. Even if it was proven to be a false claim, it wouldn’t look good for them. There was also the fact that he was still irritated by having the katana taken from them earlier that day, making it all the harder to hold his tongue.

God, this damn woman’s smirk is so annoying!

He wanted to throw her back in a cell right that instant, but they had just been warned by Djoser not to rock the boat too much. Not to mention that he didn’t have any charges to bring against her.

“That sword you gave us didn’t have some sort of curse on it, right?”

“Of course not, nothing of the sort. That katana was simply far too beautiful to resist. As proof, none of you felt any mana emitting from it, correct?” said Claudia.

In all honesty, the knights had little knowledge of magic, but they couldn’t admit it to her face, so they just nodded along as if they understood.

Little did they know that Claudia also didn’t know the first thing about magic.

“So, what will it be? We pride ourselves on being able to deliver quality for any price range! Perhaps a longsword could be too much of an initial investment, but how about shortswords for eighty silvers apiece?”

The knights all nodded excitedly. After seeing such a sword, their appetite for good-quality weapons was higher than ever, but there was only so much they could afford.

They had been extracting funds from bandits and merchants, but most of that money went to the upkeep and operation of the Knights Order, as well as a good bit being taken by the higher-ups in the organization. Out of what was left over, most sent the money to

their families who, while technically still nobility, were drowning in debt. Only a tiny fraction of the money actually ended up in their hands.

One younger knight decided to bite the bullet and put his hand up. “I’d like to place an order for one shortsword!”

“Thank you for your patronage! Can I get your name? Also, if there are any specific requests, such as a preferred thickness of the grip or length of the blade, we’d be happy to customize the order to your liking.”

As Claudia skillfully drove the conversation forward, more and more knights began to place orders as well. After all was said and done, Claudia had received five orders for shortswords.

“As this is your first order, we won’t ask for any advance payment,” she said with a dazzling smile. “Please be prepared to pay the price in full upon delivery. Good day, gentlemen.”

She left as suddenly as she had appeared. As for those who had placed an order and those who had missed their chance, every one of them wondered whether what had just happened was truly reality or a strange group illusion.

Who was this blacksmith? Where did he live? They had so many questions, but they couldn’t find the time to ask.

They couldn’t do anything about it now anyway, so everyone returned to their normal duties. In other words, they went back to taking naps or dabbling a bit at chess. There were a few who went to do a bit of sword training, but even that was simply to pass the time.

Even just at that moment, there were several brawls taking place throughout the city, but not one person came to the knights’ station for assistance. Time was a limited resource. It seemed the residents of the city didn’t want to waste any more time than they had to.

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Djoser presented Gerhard with the katana, along with the information that he had gathered from his trip to the station. Slowly, a bit of life began to return to his master’s pale complexion.

"Now this...*this* is interesting!" In his excitement, Gerhard tried to draw the katana immediately, but Djoser stopped him.

"Master, there is a chance that this sword may have a curse placed on it. Please treat it with caution."

Gerhard laughed through his nose. "I don't feel any mana coming from this katana at all. Besides, I make it a habit to wear magic items that resist any kind of psychological influence."

"My apologies. However..."

"Even still, you're saying that I shouldn't let my guard down, huh? All right, if it seems like I'm starting to act strangely, I'll trust you to stop me. How about that?"

"Understood." Djoser nodded powerfully. "By the way, master, just then you said the word *katana*, but what does that refer to?"

"Ah, yes. A katana is a blade that is forged using the techniques of a land to the east, quite different from the swords made in this country. It isn't exactly a mistake to call them swords either, though."

How had it ended up in such a place? Who on earth was the man that so willingly gave it up? Djoser still had so many questions, but at that moment, the katana before him took precedence.

Gerhard drew the blade from its saya, inspecting it with furrowed brows. "Those idiots..." he mumbled in frustration.

The blade was tarnished with blood. After the accident, someone must have just carelessly wiped it with a piece of cloth. If it had stayed in the hands of those fools, too incompetent even to maintain their own weapons, even a grand katana such as that would have eventually rusted and chipped away.

Gerhard silently stood and pulled out a whetstone. Even in an enchanter's workshop, there were the bare minimum tools for maintaining weapons. As Gerhard began to rub the cutting edge over the dampened whetstone, he felt a strange sensation rush up his back. Was it just the cold? Or perhaps something more...pleasurable?

There was a mysterious allure. Was he sharpening a katana, or was he caressing the body of a woman? He was beginning to lose track of the difference.

The sixty-five-year-old enchanter was, at that moment,

experiencing an erection so severe it was almost painful, and all just from sharpening a katana. No, he wasn't sharpening her; he was *servicing* her.

He managed to finish the job, just barely able to pull himself back to reality. With his breath still heavy, he admitted that without Djoser's prior warning, he might very well have been sucked in so deep that he wouldn't be able to maintain his reason.

Gerhard wiped away the excess moisture from the blade and applied a thin layer of oil to protect it before sliding it back into its saya. It wasn't until then that he noticed Djoser staring at him with worry in his eyes.

"Did you notice anything strange in my behavior while I was handling it? To be honest, my memory is a bit hazy."

"If you will forgive me for saying so, you appeared to be terribly aroused. I wondered at many points whether I should step in and stop you."

"I see." Gerhard stroked his beard. "Djoser, I have come to a realization."

"Yes, master?"

"This is love."

"Pardon?"

Djoser didn't have a clue what he was saying, but from the look on his face, he could tell his master was serious.

"I must act quickly. As I am now, I believe I can engrave my greatest enchantment, perhaps the greatest enchantment I will ever achieve in my whole life. This is the joy that no king nor pope could ever experience—the express privilege of a true craftsman." Gerhard held the katana tightly to him, releasing a laugh that teetered on madness.

Djoser didn't know what to think of the sight before him. Had his master succumbed to the entrancing power of the katana, or had it simply inspired him to show the desires innate in him?

After laughing for a while, Gerhard spoke gently to his apprentice. "Djoser, you have done me a great service. For allowing me and this katana to meet, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Those words are wasted on me, master."

"I will begin the enchantment immediately. You can go home for today."

"Is there anything at all that I can assist you with? If possible, I wish to see my master create his magnum opus with my own eyes."

As Djoser was training to become an enchanter himself, it was an entirely natural request, but Gerhard apologetically shook his head.

"I'm sorry. I want to concentrate on my work alone. To make it up to you, I'll ensure that you are the very first person to bear witness to the finished enchantment."

If he said that he wanted to concentrate, Djoser couldn't insist any further.

Gerhard noticed a twinge of sadness in Djoser's face as he stood up to leave and gave his apprentice a quick bow to offer his apologies and his thanks.

Refocusing his attention, Gerhard placed the katana on the ritual stand and set jewels around it in a geometric arrangement. As he began to pour mana into it, the ritual stand sent out a wave similar to a heartbeat. To resist the backflow of the curse, he was wearing an expensive variety of magic resistance items. The preparations finished, Gerhard sat in front of the ritual stand with a serious expression.

Already, he could feel a torrent of mana unlike anything he had felt before. If he made one misstep, he would surely be swallowed by the curse and perish, but he was unafraid. Moreover, he was overcome by a sense of enjoyment.

Just who was the smith that had forged that katana? Out of curiosity, Gerhard skillfully removed the pin holding the tsuka and tsuba, or grip and handguard, revealing the metallic shine of the nakago, where katana smiths would usually engrave their name. However, to his surprise, there was nothing there.

How could such a spectacular katana be unnamed? It couldn't have been that the smith left it unnamed out of disappointment. There must've been a good reason. The more he probed, the more suspicious it all was.

If only he had known the smith's name, he would have been able to ask them directly. If possible, he would love to sponsor their

work, ordering several katana, but it wasn’t to be. He didn’t even know whether the smith was still alive.

Before the ritual stand that was letting off waves of ominous light, Gerhard began to carve ancient runes into the blade with his graver.

After engraving each rune, a few of the jewels around the ritual stand shattered and turned to dust. To ensure that his hand didn’t slip, that he didn’t miss a single step, he focused his entire being into the process. On several occasions, he even forgot to breathe, nearly losing consciousness.

A few dozen jewels had turned to dust, and eventually, the light of the ritual stand slowly dimmed. Gerhard was completely covered in sweat, his eyes so dark that it looked like he had spent several days without sleep. Nevertheless, on his face was a satisfied, triumphant smile.

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The day after, Djoser had finished his daily duties as a knight and headed toward the enchanting workshop. He knocked on the door, but no answer came.

His mind immediately rushed to the worst possibilities. Had his master given into the allure of the sword and injured himself, or worse, taken his own life?

The door was locked, but it wasn’t the most sturdy of constructions. Djoser gave the door a powerful kick, and it easily gave way.

“Master, are you all right?!” Relieved that there was at least no smell of blood in the air, he scanned the room, but Gerhard was nowhere to be seen.

He placed his hand on the grip of his sword and cautiously proceeded into the room, but noticed something was lying on the floor by his feet.

It was Gerhard. He was in a most peaceful and satisfied-looking sleep, holding tightly to the katana. The sight brought to mind the image of a child, falling asleep holding their favorite toy.

If Djoser had told someone that the man on the floor was the greatest, most honored enchanter in all of the Count's domain, would anyone have believed him?

His master was sleeping so peacefully that he hesitated to wake him, but it felt worse to leave an elderly man asleep on the floor like that. It was better to disturb him momentarily than to allow him to catch a cold or something of the sort.

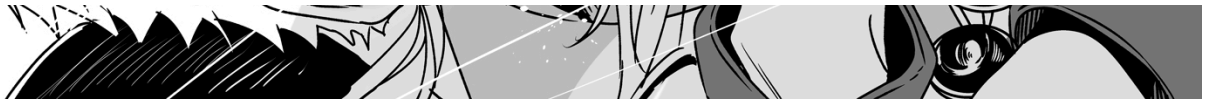
"Master," Djoser said, shaking him gently by the shoulders, "please wake up. If you wish to rest, let's at least get you to a proper bed first."

"Hmm? Oh, Djoser, you're up quite early."

"It's well into the afternoon."

Gerhard looked around the room with a confused expression. It appeared that he had only just realized the fact he was sleeping on the floor, clinging to the katana. "Well, I don't have any recollection of telling the sun to rise..."





Djoser wasn't sure if his master was still just half asleep or whether he was serious.

"Master, that swor... No, katana. How did the enchantment go?"

Gerhard gave him a grin that said he was waiting for Djoser to ask that question. He, of course, wanted to brag a bit, but he was also proud of his apprentice. If Djoser hadn't had any interest in how it turned out, he wouldn't have been fit to be an enchanter.

"Do you want to see it?"

"But of course."

Gerhard stood and walked over to a cabinet, retrieving an ominous, ornate necklace, then giving it to Djoser.

"It's a magic item that increases your resistance to psychological interference. Put it on."

As a true knight, Djoser wanted to say that he could mentally withstand any manner of illusion, but pressured by the stern face of his master, he wore it without complaint.

At the end of the day, it was merely a weapon—a simple katana that had been imbued with magic. However, as he slowly pulled it out of its saya, he felt as though he were opening the cage door of a ferocious beast.

A sweet scent filled the air. No, there was no way that such a smell could come naturally from a katana. It was a hallucination.

It was like the strange sensation of realizing the real you was asleep, a fully lucid dream. Even though he was entirely aware, his body wouldn't move.

Before his eyes, a beautiful naked woman appeared. A viscous crimson dripped from her, as if she had been doused with a bucket of blood. She was holding a katana exactly like the one Djoser was tightly gripping in his hands. Her smile was like that of a saint, or the holy mother. She lifted the katana, but Djoser still couldn't move an inch.

The moment Djoser braced for the katana to come slashing down on him, the sharp sound of a stone shattering rang out. The image of the woman and the sweet scent surrounding him faded into nothing.

Looking around, he was once again standing in the dimly lit

workshop, the blade of the katana pressed against his neck. Gerhard had grabbed Djoser's wrist, holding him back. As he realized that he was only one second away from pointlessly taking his life, a cold sweat leaked from his every pore.

His hands shaking, he just barely managed to fully sheathe the katana back into its saya. He then looked down at the necklace he had worn for protection and saw that the jewel in the center of it had completely shattered.

At that moment a different kind of fear flooded through him. He had broken a magic item so valuable that he couldn't even imagine the price. He couldn't put a number to it, but he was certain it would be more than a knight could afford. He was too afraid to even check how large the shattered jewel was.

"Master, I offer my deepest apologies. Because of my incompetence, I have broken the magic item you entrusted to me." While apologizing, he handed his master the katana.

"Don't worry about it," Gerhard replied in a kind voice. "To an enchanter, these kinds of magic resistance items are simply disposable tools. On the contrary, if one is too careful about using them for fear they may break, they will meet an early grave. Just think of it as a valuable experience."

"Master...thank you." Djoser's heart was filled with reverence. He had chosen the right man to follow.

That as it was, Djoser decided not to ask how much the magic item would have cost.

"Right then, Djoser. What vision did the katana show to you?"

"Ah, yes. It was..."

He told Gerhard about the sweet smell, the blood-covered woman, the feeling of being in a dream—every single detail that he could remember.

Gerhard nodded along to his description. "While I don't want to brag, I truly have created a terrifying katana, haven't I?" He chuckled.

He himself had called it terrifying, but his tone of voice told a different story. He seemed to be having the time of his life.

"Master, what manner of spell did you engrave that katana with?"

“A charm spell.”

“Oh, dear...”

In most cases, when enchanting a sword, one would imbue it with a spell to make it lighter or make the blade sharper. It was also common to imbue it with fire, water, or some variety of elemental magic.

It was one thing if it was before battle, but a spell-like charm that only had the opportunity to activate after you had been cut down by your opponent wasn’t seen as a worthy enchantment for a sword whose material value alone was so high.

However, Gerhard had done just that.

“It was this katana, you see? It talked to me—told me that it wanted me to engrave a charm spell. And you’ve already experienced the incredible result of it.”

“Are you saying that the katana chose the enchantment for itself?”

“Of course, it didn’t actually speak. It was purely a sense that I had. When you work as an enchanter for long enough, you get a feeling for what best suits a weapon just by looking at it.”

With a grim smile, Gerhard repeatedly drew the katana a few inches and then resheathed it, the ominous clinking of steel resonating throughout the workshop. “Surely now that young’un won’t have any complaints.”

“But there’s a possibility that the hero may injure himself in the presence of the Count, or worse, lose control of himself and direct his blade at the Count himself.”

“And what would be the problem with that?” said Gerhard, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“I believe that would cause nothing *but* problems...”

“The hero and I would both be held accountable, I’m sure. We’d kneel down side by side and wait for our heads to be lopped off. However, the more of a ruckus it causes, the farther word of this katana will spread. I would die fulfilling my purpose in this world as an enchanter, don’t you think?”

Djoser remembered something he had forgotten somewhere along the line. The person before him was not of sound mind—

moreover, he never had been. Showing kindness to one's apprentice and being kind to the rest of the world did not necessarily go hand in hand.

Djoser thought it best to at least give the hero a word of warning.

Chapter 3: The Door to Paradise

Five *tanto*, or short katana, rested on the slightly unlevel table.

Claudia grabbed one of them by the glossy black saya. "If I unsheathe this, I won't get the sudden urge to carve myself up like a Sunday roast, will I?"

"Don't worry, I can't just pop out katana that beautiful like it's nothing," Lutz said, raising an eyebrow.

Claudia gave a little nod before drawing the blade. "Oh..."

It had a strong glimmer that would impress any who looked at it. It was a bit heavy for a self-defense weapon, but that added weight gave it a feeling of quality and reliability. She didn't feel anything akin to the dangerous allure of the other katana, but it was a high-quality weapon that would surely fuel the courage of those who used it. However, there was one problem.

"Can't really put a value of eighty silver on this, though," she said with a twinge of discontent.

"Yeah, I figured as much... What's your appraisal?"

"I could bargain for five gold."

Unable to find the words to respond, Lutz just silently scratched his head. If a smith received an order for an eighty-silver piece, it was an important skill to be able to do a job worthy of that money, no more and no less.

Of course, it was also important to produce quality items, but forging something five times the value of what a customer ordered was overkill. He hadn't made *any* compromises on the folding of the steel or the sharpening of the blade.

When he'd received the order for the axes a couple of weeks before, he'd held himself back and kept them at just good-quality axes.

His father, who was also a katana smith, had taught him how to show some restraint with lower value orders.

It wasn't like his pride was keeping him from cutting any corners either. He wasn't that straitlaced a person.

Claudia looked back and forth between the tanto in her hand and Lutz's expression, a little smile coming to her face. "Oh, okay. So that's why. You did it for me?"

"Who could say?"

Claudia had gone so far as to get him an order from people who had only recently detained her on false charges. If he were to hand her some cheap scraps of metal or even a lazily made katana, it would be an insult to her good name and her enormous effort. Knowing all that, he might have been a bit more fired up than usual.

"When forging blades, there's always a bit of variance in quality. I just spent a bit of extra time and energy to keep it as consistent as possible, but it's not like I used more expensive materials or anything, so I won't be in the red. I might have used just a bit more coal than usual, but not so much that it'd be a problem..."

Forging was the process of striking hot steel to stretch it. Casting, the process of pouring molten steel into a mold, was often more suited to mass production, but the end product didn't have the same kind of strength as forged steel.

For example, the axes that he had previously made for Claudia had been made through casting, and then Lutz had sharpened and polished them up. For ordinary everyday use, that was just fine.

"I see, I see. Hmmm..." Claudia smiled and stood up. She walked behind Lutz and wrapped her thin arms around him. "Lutzy, do you know how lonely it felt being down in that underground cell?" She whispered into his ear as if caressing it with her lips.

"You mean when you were detained by those thugs? I can guess to some extent, but can't say that I *really* know."

"In that dimly lit cell, I just kept wondering how many days I had before those filthy animals came down to violate and humiliate me, then send me off someplace where only further suffering awaited me. Those thoughts just kept spinning around my head. I was on the verge of being crushed under the weight of those worries. At times, I couldn't breathe, my empty stomach throwing up nothing but bile." Claudia's voice was shaky.

Citizens being threatened by low-level officials such as those knights was an everyday occurrence. But for those who had to go through such a thing, it was hard to shrug it off. Because it had become so commonplace, perhaps there was a part of Lutz that had become a bit numb to it before.

Lutz had given away a katana worth a hundred gold to save her. However, he wasn't sure if he could say that he'd really tried to confront and understand how Claudia must've been feeling about the whole situation. She had seemed so like her normal, energetic self that he might have neglected to try to really understand her.

Just how did Claudia see Lutz after he had saved her from that deep, deep despair? He didn't dig any deeper into what that meant for her.

"Lutzy, I really like you. But don't think that I just fell for you because you saved me."

Lutz nodded. "All right."

Claudia gave his earlobe a little lick before continuing. "For quite some time, I have thought of you as someone rather favorable. When I saw you fling that katana at those assholes, I thought to myself, 'Ah, this person is willing to go to such lengths for someone like me.' That's what I felt. No matter what kind of dangers the future held, you would do anything—give up anything—to save me. You are a person who can take action when you need to. It's that part of you that I deeply respect and ended up falling in love with."

Lutz felt her squeeze him tightly from behind, nuzzling her head into him. Was she crying? He couldn't find the words to say to her.

"When I said that I'd be staying here for a while, you must've thought of me as the most impertinent, audacious woman you had ever met."

"I might have thought something like that..." he said, quickly adding, "Sorry."

"God, what am I going to do with this clueless man? I had to build up a lifetime's worth of courage to say that, you know? To be frank, I was scared shitless that you were going to kick me out." Claudia let out an exasperated sigh.

Her breath gently played with Lutz's hair. The sensation was

somewhere between ticklish and pleasurable.

"I've been saying it for a while now, haven't I? That you're smitten with me. I've been thinking a lot about how I should be reciprocating those feelings."

Claudia pulled away, her arms unraveling as she went. When Lutz turned around, he saw that a warm smile had spread across her lips, and a twinge of embarrassment reddened her cheeks. Lutz had many times before then thought of Claudia as beautiful, but it was the first time he felt that she was so absolutely adorable.

"When I see you—the man that threw away a hundred gold coins for my sake—counting up small change with a miserly face, I feel so incredibly aroused."

"I'm not sure I needed to hear that."

"Sorry, my tongue slipped. What I mean to say is, well..." she stammered a bit. "I want to give you my everything. I want to love you with my whole body and soul. That's what I'm trying to say."

"Claudia..."

She meant every word of it, but it was still embarrassing. Until only recently, he had just been a trading partner, someone she would only reluctantly call a friend.

Claudia continued with hurried speech. "If it's for you, I'll do anything. Of course, within reason. Is there anything that you want me to do?"

Lutz stood up and looked directly into her glimmering eyes. He knew exactly what he wanted.

"I want to make love to you. Right this instant."

Hit by such a sudden fastball, Claudia simply stood for a moment while her mind caught up.

The light of the summer sun leaked through the windows. It was still quite bright outside. It wasn't like Claudia would have been freaking out any less if it was darker, though.

She'd considered that Lutz might say something like that. Part of her was even hoping he would. Was there any reason for her to refuse? If there was, she couldn't see any. Claudia gave Lutz a gentle smile, worried that he might hear the pounding of her heartbeat.

"Okay, sure... Why don't we make this thing official, then? That I'm all yours and that you're all mine." Claudia grabbed Lutz's arm and nestled close to him.

It was a small house. The bedroom was only a few steps away, but for Claudia, those steps felt like some manner of sacred ceremony.

From that moment forward, there wasn't a second that Lutz ever doubted his decision to give up that katana.

***

When Lutz opened his eyes, he noticed the sun was already setting. The bed also felt even narrower than usual. Looking next to him, he saw Claudia sleeping peacefully, her breathing like a gently lapping lake.

He stood up, pulling down the comforter cover, though it was really thin enough to be called a blanket or sheet. He was struck, briefly, by the alluring vision of her bare skin, almost glowing in the twilight. While it was a strange comparison, he thought her more beautiful than even the finest katana. Especially her ass.

He explored her ample cheeks with his hands. The sensation was so smooth, but there was something about it that further drew him in. He was convinced that he could actually spend the entire day doing nothing more than feeling her butt. He feared he might even become addicted.

Soon though, her butt—no, her whole body—started to move.

Sitting upright, Claudia gave him a confused and judging look. One which said, "*And just what do you think you're doing?*"

After a moment, she finally spoke. "You really do have a thing for my butt, don't you, Lutzy?"

"I want to have it recognized as a national treasure."

"If such a thing were to happen, it wouldn't just belong to you anymore, though. Would you be okay with that?"

"That would be a problem. I'll have to rethink it."

Claudia gathered up her clothes that were scattered around the room and began to get dressed. Lutz watched her with a bit of

disappointment in his eyes, seemingly sad that his fun was coming to an end.

"Don't you give me that look. Whenever you're looking for some more, I'll gladly oblige. Even if you don't come looking for it, I'll soon pin you down and take it for myself."

"God, this is amazing, truly incredible. The only issue is this cramped bed."

"How about we take the bed from the other room and put the two of them together," said Claudia. "Yes, that's not a bad idea. Lutzy, go ahead and do that while I start getting some dinner around."

"Got it."

While they called it a bed, it wasn't anything fancy—just a simple wooden frame, really. Having trained from a young age as a katana smith, Lutz found it wasn't any problem for him to move it.

"Oh, one more thing." Claudia looked back for a moment.

"Yeah?"

"Would you go ahead and put *that* away already? It's a wondrous thing for man or woman, but if you just leave it out, it loses some of its allure," she said, waving her hand at it before leaving the room.

A grin naturally came to Lutz's face, and he began to pick up his clothes as well.

They really had gotten so close in such a short time. But even though their relationship had changed quite dramatically, some things remained the same as ever. That made Lutz happy too.

***

The next day, Lutz and Claudia went together to the knights' station.

Claudia had said to him, "I'm just going to deliver the merchandise and collect the money, like any other job."

However, Lutz insisted, "Having an irritated, katana-wielding man behind you can do wonders for smoothing over deals like this. I won't say anything; I'll just cross my arms and make sure everything goes as they agreed."

Claudia didn’t have much choice but to let him come along.

Lutz had only just yesterday heard from Claudia the trauma that she experienced in that cell. There was no way he was letting her go back all alone. He was pretty sure that the knights wouldn’t do anything to her now after everything that had happened, but it still couldn’t feel good for her to have to go in there.

“Funny, I didn’t peg you as the overprotective type,” said Claudia. However, in her heart of hearts, she felt a deep relief.

They walked along, exchanging a few lighthearted quips, and eventually arrived at the awful knights’ station. If possible, they’d have liked to never have to see the place again.

Claudia stepped through the door to the station. “Good day, everyone! I’ve come to deliver the orders that you placed the other day!” Her voice was incredibly high-spirited.

Looking around, the atmosphere was less like a knights’ station and more like a cheap bar. It wasn’t like they were expecting any different, though.

Claudia laid the tanto out on a nearby table, and the knights began to gather around. She handed them out one by one, checking their names as she went to make sure everyone received the right order.

The knights unsheathed and inspected the swords, letting out various sounds of approval.

They weren’t as good as the bewitching katana, but the blades were exquisite. If anything, it would’ve been a bit problematic if they were to be the same as that terrifyingly incredible katana. They were just the right amount of beautiful.

When they gave the tanto some practice swings, they felt how impeccable the balance was. It felt like a natural extension of their hands. It made them think of every knife they had used until then as a poorly made toy.

“Oh man, I can’t wait to stab someone with this!” said one of the knights.

The rest of them burst into laughter.

Claudia and Lutz weren’t sure how much of that was just a joke.

While the rest were seemingly having fun, one of the knights

tried to haggle down the price of his tanto, saying that the saya was just a boring black—that it wasn't fit for a man as regal as himself and would require someone to add some intricate carvings into it. He went as far as to call it a defective product.

Lutz and Claudia weren't sure if there was a single knight in the whole station that could be described as regal. Surely that knight had something wrong with his head.

The knight seemed like he was doing his best to be intimidating, but Claudia didn't look afraid. She was probably used to that kind of thing. She was, however, very clearly annoyed.

Lutz, who had been standing near the doorway, reached the end of his patience. He walked up to the man and took the tanto out of his hand.

"Deal's off. For you anyway."

"Say what now? Keep out of this!"

"Keep out of it? You're asking me to keep out of this? You know, to be honest, I put way too much effort into making these tanto. If we sold these normally, they'd go for five gold each, not eighty silver. However, we had an agreement to sell them for eighty silver, and that's what we're doing. That's what it means to run an honest business."

Without breaking eye contact with the belligerent knight, Lutz tossed the tanto over to Claudia.

He continued. "But you... Let alone recognizing the value of this tanto, you go so far as to ask us to lower the price to sixty silver? You absolute scumbag. If you think that we're going to sell this to someone that doesn't have the eyes to recognize its worth or the balls to actually go through with a deal, you must be dumber than you look."

"Huh? You should've just kept your damn mouth shut. I'm only tellin' the truth, the sheath looks boring! Don't get mad at me for pointing out something you know is true!"

"Did you say in your order that you wanted the saya to include carvings or any kind of ornamentation with gold, silver, or jewels?"

"Why should I have to? That should just be common sense!"

"You know, you can't just spout out a bunch of drivel and justify it

by calling it common sense.”

The man placed his hand on his sword. Lutz also reached for the tsuka of his katana. They could draw their blades and swing at any moment. The air was dense with an anxious, dangerous sense of anticipation.

Lutz wasn’t worried about taking on one of those losers, but they were in enemy territory, and he didn’t just have himself to worry about. He would have to fight while protecting Claudia. He couldn’t make any reckless moves.

The man, intimidated by the bloodlust in Lutz’s eyes, began to wonder whether he could really win one-on-one. However, with all of his peers watching, he didn’t feel like he could stand down.

“Thank you for your patronage!” Claudia’s cheery voice rang out.

The tension between Lutz and the knight slowly dissipated, like air leaking out of a balloon. They turned to see the other knights happily handing over the money to Claudia.

Eighty silvers, no more, no less, multiplied by four. A successful deal.

While Lutz and the other knight were arguing, there was a very different conversation going on elsewhere.

“Wait, did he just say five gold? Really?” said one knight.

“Really. Absolutely and indisputably,” said Claudia. “You see, my guy over there got a bit too fired up, considering it was his first big job in a while. Just look at the hamon on this blade! It’s more beautiful than the waves of the sea. He folded and hammered the steel over and over to get this effect. The heating of the steel was also done perfectly. If it wasn’t, you couldn’t get this kind of result.”

“Hmm...”

The knights had previously stayed quiet in case the one knight who tried to haggle successfully brought down the price, but after hearing all of that, they knew that they couldn’t let the opportunity to buy them for such a reasonable price slip through their fingers, and they started lining up one by one to pay.

The haggling knight felt betrayed, like his friends had let go of the ladder he was still climbing. How could they do such a thing when he was out there fighting for them? It made him furious.

“Maybe you’re the one that needs to stay out of it, huh?” said one of the other knights. “Don’t go and mess up this deal for everyone else!”

By the time the direction of the argument began to change and the knights started grabbing at each other’s necks and spitting profanity, Lutz and Claudia had already left the station behind.

The two of them walked side by side down the street, gently lit by the setting sun. This was the second time for them, but the distance between them was considerably closer than the last time.

“Sorry... I ended up butting in after all,” Lutz apologized.

Claudia let out an exhausted laugh. “Eh, it’s okay. I don’t exactly have a strong desire to make those lowlifes regular customers, anyway.”

They’d somehow managed to get full price for the tanto that they did sell, but if they had to go through that kind of thing every time they did business with them, it just wasn’t worth it. It wasn’t an arrangement they could keep going forever.

“Anyway, what shall we do with this, then?” Claudia held up the tanto that they’d refused to sell.

The arrangement to sell it for eighty silver had gone to pot, but it was that knight’s fault for trying to haggle down a previously agreed-upon price, so Claudia wasn’t that upset about it.

“At this point, you might as well just keep it as a self-defense—”

“Hey! Wait up!” A knight called at them from behind, cutting Lutz off mid-sentence.

Lutz placed his hand on the tsuka of his katana and instantly moved in front of Claudia to defend her.

Upon closer inspection, it wasn’t one of the knights who had ordered a shortsword, nor was it the knight who had tried to haggle with them.

Lutz was still suspicious of him, but he decided it was best to hear him out.

“Those shortswords—you have one of them left over, right? Will you sell it to me?” the knight said, his breathing erratic.

He must have really been in a hurry to catch up to them.

“I’m afraid I can’t afford five gold, but...”

The knight still seemed a bit suspicious, but he handed over a leather bag filled with a mix of copper and silver coins. All together, there were probably about a hundred silvers' worth of coins in there.

Lutz and Claudia looked at each other and Lutz gave her a shrug, basically saying that it was up to her—whatever she thought was best.

"We'll sell it for the original price of eighty silver. We're always happy to do business with customers that have a good eye for quality!" Claudia said with her huge customer service smile, handing over the tanto and deftly picking out exactly eighty silver from the leather bag.

She did it so quickly, it was almost like witnessing some kind of magic trick.

The knight pulled the tanto out of its saya and gazed at the dazzling blade, a beaming grin coming to his face.

They figured that he must've seen the other knights get their orders and got jealous, so he followed them after they left.

The knight gave them a simple "Thank you!" before turning back toward the station.

Lutz and Claudia watched as he left, then continued on their way.

"Well, it seems we have another satisfied customer..."

However, Lutz had been halfway through saying that he wanted Claudia to have that tanto as a present in place of a dagger. It was good that they'd sold it, but it left Lutz feeling a bit regretful as well.

"Lutzy, if you want to give me a present, I'd prefer that you make something expressly with me in mind, not just some random thing we have left over." Claudia handed over the bag of coins.

Totaling around four hundred copper and silver coins, it was rather heavy.

"Besides," she continued, "handmade gifts are incredibly romantic, don't you think? That's the sort of thing that makes a woman's heart dance."

"I'm not sure there are too many guys that would give a woman a handmade katana as a gift, though..."

"You'd be the only one!" Claudia suddenly gained an extra skip in her step.

Seeing her surprisingly excited reaction, Lutz thought it might not actually be such a bad idea. If it made her happy, he'd be happy.

"What? Are you starting to feel a bit jealous of those knights?" Lutz said jokingly.

"Of course I am! Those assholes get to have a piece made personally by the great smith Lutz, yet I still don't! Make me something fitting to protect the woman you fell head over heels in love with."

"Very modest today, I see."

Claudia giggled. "Well, you aren't denying it either."

"What am I going to do with you..."

Lutz gave in completely to Claudia's persuasive nature, already thinking about what kind of katana he was going to make her. He was forging countless designs in his head.

At that time, the streets of the city were buzzing with the rumor that the hero had finished his latest quest and returned home. Lutz and Claudia didn't pay much attention to it, though. It wasn't anything that concerned them. At least, not yet.

***

Nobles were usually busy with their official duties throughout the morning, so the hero's audience with the Count was scheduled for three in the afternoon, giving the Count some time to rest in between.

He had sent word by messenger on horseback that he had completed his latest monster subjugation, so there was no need to rush.

The young man continued down the wide hallway, the layout of the castle so familiar to him it was like a second home. There was a guard who was charged with showing him the way, but they both had a mutual understanding that it really wasn't necessary.

The young man's name was Ricardo, an adventurer who had just finished slaying a horde of wyverns. While heading to the Count's court, Ricardo saw an acquaintance in the Knights Order, Djoser.

He gave Ricardo a little nod and walked up to him. He must've

had something he wanted to talk about.

"Well, hello there, hero," said Djoser. "I hear you did quite marvelously in the wyvern subjugation."

"You know I don't like the whole hero thing," Ricardo spoke in a half-joking, half-serious tone.

His nickname of *hero* wasn't an official title or anything. The Count just liked to call him that, so everyone around him had started to call him the same.

From the Count's perspective, he probably just wanted to add a little bit of weight to the position of the Count's personal adventurer.

However, for Ricardo, the title felt somewhat childish, almost like he was being made fun of, so he didn't like it at all.

Djoser looked around a bit before leaning in with a lowered voice. "Ricardo, for your recent work you'll be rewarded again with a magic sword, however..."

"Yeah, I'm super excited. It's the main reason I've come here at all, to be honest."

Ricardo was a peasant by birth, ordinarily not someone who could speak to a high-ranking knight like Djoser so casually. However, he was a guest of the Count and an adventurer who had dealt with countless dangerous monsters in the territory. Djoser had to be careful with how he treated him as well.

As they both struggled to figure out what level of respect they should address each other with, they eventually settled into a polite yet casual manner of speech.

"You may say that now, but this one is a bit of a piece of work," said Djoser. "Honestly, bordering on dangerous."

"Oh?"

Djoser intended to warn him, but Ricardo's eyes glimmered with interest. While cursing his poor choice of words, Djoser decided to swallow his pride and tell Ricardo about the hallucination that the katana had shown him, as well as how close he'd been to cutting into his own neck.

"But even if I tell you not to accept the reward this time around...knowing you, I doubt you'd listen," finished Djoser.

"I really do appreciate the warning, but I'm afraid I simply can't

decline.”

If Ricardo were to suddenly say that he didn’t want to be rewarded with weapons anymore, that would be an insult to the Count and would sully the name of the enchanter as well. More than that, as a true weapon maniac, his soul wouldn’t allow it.

Djoser expected such a response. He furrowed his brows, pulling out a strange-looking bangle with ancient runes engraved into it and handing it to Ricardo. “Take this. It’s enchanted with a spell that increases mental fortitude.”

Ricardo was almost insulted at first. He had taken on countless monsters and was confident that he had the mental fortitude to resist any manner of hallucination. While Djoser was surely just trying to show kindness to him, it was as if he were completely ignoring Ricardo’s achievements up until then, which wasn’t exactly pleasant. However, he took it anyway in order to not disrespect Djoser. There wasn’t any point in making a scene there by rejecting a well-meaning present. Even Ricardo had that level of common sense.

***

Count Maximillion Shander happily greeted the hero as he entered the Count’s court.

Because the Count’s body had been quite weak from a young age, he had little knowledge of actual combat. But perhaps because of his affliction, he always loved to hear the heroic tales of adventurers and did his best to encourage the production of the finest weapons he could provide.

The stories that Ricardo told were far from the pretty and noble tales that bards would sing of, but they had a sense of reality that those tales were missing.

“Yes, excellent work. You truly are the divine protector, the champion, the hero of this domain!”

“Your words are wasted on me.”

It was a huge exaggeration. It didn’t go as far as being unpleasant, but it made Ricardo a bit uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure

how to react to such high praise. While the advisors around the Count were smiling, there was a coldness in their stares.

"Let me present you with your reward. Gerhard, you have everything prepared, right?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

Gerhard held out the katana, and Ricardo respectfully accepted it.

At that moment, Ricardo thought he could sense a competitive glare in his eyes, but perhaps that was just his imagination.

First Djoser, then Gerhard. It seemed everyone was behaving strangely that day. Maybe there really was some kind of terrifying power in that sword. Ricardo grew anxious.

What am I thinking? No matter what kind of mana is imbued in it, a sword is a sword.

It was a tool for killing, nothing more and nothing less. Ricardo liked weapons—liked to collect them. However, he had never once misunderstood their true purpose.

"Your Grace, may I have your permission to draw the sword?"

"Yes, feel free, go ahead!"

If Ricardo were to just suddenly draw the sword during an audience with the Count, it would be a serious enough offense to be considered treason. Therefore, he made sure to ask for permission, and the Count happily granted it to him.

This was the usual routine. Truthfully, Ricardo wouldn't have minded just taking it home and thoroughly looking over it in private, but the Count enjoyed seeing that he was pleased with his reward firsthand.

The Count had many of those rather innocent, almost childlike tendencies. However, that didn't mean that he was an incompetent ruler. On the contrary, when monsters appeared in his domain, he always acted swiftly to deal with the issue. Even that alone made him quite a favorable ruler.

In most other territories, so long as there wasn't a siege on the major city walls, they didn't seem to care less what happened to the peasants outside the city. It was commonplace to just let the monsters eat their fill and hope they wandered off somewhere else. It was irresponsible and cruel, but that was the nature of most of

the nobility. They didn’t even consider peasants to be the same species, so letting a few of them become monster food for the greater good wouldn’t make them lose a wink of sleep.

There were two reasons Ricardo made the territory of Count Shander his base of operations. Of course, he was happy that he was able to acquire good weapons, but perhaps more importantly, he didn’t hate that kind-to-a-fault Count either.

He didn’t mind putting on a bit of a show if it made him happy. Last time, the sword had just been all too plain, too predictable, so he’d had a hard time figuring out how to react. This time, however... There was only one way to find out.

With some anticipation, Ricardo began to draw the katana. He drew the blade only four inches before stopping himself. Djoser’s words and Gerard’s strange smile made him hesitate, and he was very lucky that he did.

A sweet smell permeated all around him. At first, he thought someone had simply worn far too much perfume, but it seemed strange that he only noticed it after drawing the katana.

He felt a presence behind him. Whatever it was, he felt it place a hand on his shoulder and whisper something into his ear. He couldn’t tell if it was speaking words of love, some terrible curse, or perhaps even both.

He felt the strong urge to look behind him, but at the same time, he knew that if he did, it would mean his death. In his mind, he was already screaming, but nothing came out of his mouth.





There was a tingling sensation in his left wrist, where he was wearing the bangle Djoser had given him. He felt like he might be able to move his left arm. Still unable to move the katana itself, though, he slid the saya up the exposed portion of the blade. In an instant, the sweet aroma disappeared, along with the threatening presence.

Ricardo stood there trembling, all the color drained from his face. The Count and his advisors stared at him with concern.

"What is it, Ricardo? Are you displeased with your reward?"

"Nothing of the sort!" Ricardo blurted out without thinking.

While he had only just felt the touch of death, he simply couldn't stand the thought of someone suggesting that katana to be anything short of impeccable. Moreover, if someone were to suggest they replace it with another reward, he wouldn't be able to bear it. The Count was likely to do such a thing out of the goodness of his heart.

Seeing the atmosphere of the room suddenly change, though, Ricardo realized what he had done. In his panic, he had greatly disrespected the Count by raising his voice in such a way.

"Even in all of my travels, I have never laid eyes on such a splendid sword," said Ricardo, bowing deeply. "It moved me so immensely that I failed to contain my emotions. I pray for your forgiveness."

"Ah, yes, I see. If you were that moved, it's only natural. We are all gathered today to celebrate your achievements. I have no intention to fault you for such a simple thing."

The aides and advisors around him didn't seem entirely satisfied, but if the Count so happily forgave him, they couldn't really do much but accept it. If they were to rebuke the hero further, that would be going directly against a decision of the Count.

"Please continue to lend us your strength in defending our wonderful domain."

"Yes, Your Grace."

In that way, the audience with the Count came to an end without incident, or at least without staining the court with blood.

When Ricardo lifted his head, he made eye contact with Gerard. He had a smug grin that annoyed Ricardo to his core, and he

promised to himself that someday he would beat that old geezer to a pulp.

***

Gerhard and Djoser returned to the enchanter's workshop and celebrated the successful end to a very difficult job with some warm beer.

It was quite difficult to procure clean drinking water in the region, so adults and children alike generally drank beer in place of water.

Wine would have been nice for the occasion as well, but the production of wine was mainly overseen by the church and its monasteries, making it a bit expensive for most. Gerhard preferred to drink beer, especially considering that lining those corrupt monks' pockets made even the finest wines taste off.

"I've got to say, seeing that hero's face turn so pale was absolutely fantastic, a real masterpiece. Now that—that was exactly what I wanted to see! Aha ha!"

Gerhard seemed to be in high spirits, but Djoser was still conflicted about whether it was the right thing to do to let such a terrifying katana out into the world.

"It's probably about time, don't you think? That he shows up..."

Gerhard gave him a nod. "Oh, yeah. He'll come."

That hero Ricardo was bound to show up and ask about the katana. But if he decided to take on the challenge of mastering that katana by himself, it would be quite the impressive display of courage as well.

After they had sat for a while, talking about enchanting, a knock —or more accurately a desperate pounding—came at the door.

"Master Gerhard, are you there? It's Ricardo!" His voice was laced with both anger and confusion.

Gerhard snickered. "The door's open, come on in!" He said, raising his tankard.

He had no choice but to leave it open, as Djoser had completely destroyed the locks the other day when he kicked it down. Right now, that wasn't important to him.

"Master Gerhard, what in the world is this sword?" said Ricardo as he barged in, holding the katana in front of him.

"*What* is it? I'm afraid there's not a simple answer that I can give to that question."

"I'm asking whether there is some manner of curse placed on this sword."

"Of course not, no such thing!"

"Then, why did I..." Ricardo yelled before stopping himself, unsure of how to explain the bizarre experience he'd had.

"First, let me just correct something. That isn't a sword from our country, but a katana from a different land."

"A katana?" he asked, pronouncing it as "cat-anna."

"It's single-edged, with a wavy pattern along the length of the blade called the hamon, which is a defining characteristic. It focuses less on brute force and more on sheer sharpness."

"Do all of these so-called cat-anna have the same kind of strange power?"

"No, that would be ridiculous. I have laid eyes on many katana in my life—I even own one—but I've certainly never felt the urge to cut myself up. That one's just a little...special, shall we say?"

Gerhard's sharp gaze wandered to the katana.

As if to protect it from being stolen, Ricardo held firmly to the glossy black saya.

"It's just beautiful, far too beautiful. Enough to drive the hearts of all who behold it to madness. Out of pure curiosity, I enchanted such an already-beautiful katana with a charm spell, and it turned into something that far exceeded my ability to fully control."

"When you say *it turned* into something you can't control, shouldn't you really say that *you created* something uncontrollable?"

Djoser tried his best to calm Ricardo down, getting him to sit down for a moment. As a mere adventurer, he was far out of line addressing a man of Gerhard's stature in such a way, but in this case, it was perhaps deserved.

"If you don't feel confident you'll be able to master it, I'll gladly take it off of your hands. In exchange, I'll give you a *nice normal* sword. So? What'll it be?" Gerhard placed extra emphasis on the

“nice normal” part, still holding on to his grudge from last time.

Ricardo was lost for words. No matter how many times he thought about it, he came to the same conclusion that the katana was far too suspicious, far too dangerous. However, he wouldn’t even indulge the thought of letting it go for a moment.

Gerhard saw the dismay in Ricardo’s face and nodded to himself. He was expecting as much. No swordsman could give up such a katana.

“That katana is all yours now. I have nothing further to say in the matter. You’ll just have to equip magic items that boost your mental fortitude and repeatedly draw it a little before sheathing it again. If you do that for long enough, you should build up a resistance to it.”

“Thank you...for your words of advice.”

The moment he heard Gerhard say that the katana was *all his*, he made a decision deep in his heart. Understanding the allure, the danger... If he still wanted to become the master of such a katana, he would simply have to figure it out himself somehow.

“Oh, one more thing. Make sure to give that bangle back to Djoser, okay?”

“Was that not a gift?”

“What kind of idiot would give such an expensive item to someone that wasn’t even their apprentice? Djoser just insisted that we lend something to you so the throne room didn’t turn into a bloodbath. Even then, I was reluctant.”

“Oh...”

Ricardo was aware that he’d only been saved thanks to the help of that bangle. He would need it if he was going to continue to train to resist its alluring power. He would offer to buy it, but magic items that increased mental fortitude were all very expensive.

Gerhard groaned as he stood up from his seat. “I’m about to go request a meeting with the Count. If you come with me, I suppose I could lend you that bangle for a little while.”

“That would be incredibly helpful, but what are you requesting a meeting for?” Ricardo looked over at Djoser, but he just shook his head like he didn’t know either.

“Oh, nothing major, just a little conversation about abandoning

my station," said Gerhard as if it were completely natural.

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When Gerhard asked for a private meeting, the Count agreed to it almost immediately. However, considering they had only just met two hours prior, he was a bit confused as to what he could want to discuss.

"I would like to take a leave of absence from my duties as personal enchanter to the house of Shander."

"Oh, dear... Do you have any complaints regarding your current station?"

"Nothing of the sort. Having had the opportunity to work on many interesting projects, I feel that I have grown as an enchanter as well. I hold no complaints, only a sincere gratitude."

"Then, why?"

"The magic sword that was presented to the hero today, that was the greatest work that I have produced in my entire life. As I am now, I believe it would be impossible to perform a finer enchantment. Therefore, I would like to take some time to train again from the very basics, to discover the true limits of potential."

"Hmm, you say a man of your capability still has more to learn?"

"Not only in enchantment, but to be a craftsman is a journey without end. Recently, I have been painfully reminded of that fact."

The Count thought for a moment while stroking his chin. Gerhard claimed that he couldn't produce a magic sword greater than that one. It would mean he wouldn't be able to provide the usual rewards to the hero for a while, but Ricardo surely wouldn't be happy accepting something of lower quality than he already had, anyway. Thinking back, perhaps he had been placing too much pressure on Gerhard to begin with.

"How do you feel about this, Ricardo?" asked Count Shander.

Ricardo took a step forward. "I also believe that I will need some time to truly master this katana. During that time, I likely will not be using any other swords, anyway. In fact, I may spend the rest of my life using this katana alone."

“You would go as far as to say such a thing?”

The enchanter and the hero seemed to be in agreement. In that case, as their benefactor, it wouldn’t be right of him to stop them. While he was a little somber at the notion, that was the conclusion that he came to.

“Very well, Gerhard. For the time being, you may dedicate yourself to your training. However, if you create something truly great, make sure to come and show it to me.”

“I am eternally grateful for your kindness.”

“In the meantime, Ricardo, we will reward your efforts in physical coinage. Is that agreeable?”

“Yes, Your Grace. Thank you very much!”

With the Count’s approval, Gerhard was free from his life of chasing deadlines and could focus entirely on his research. Even he was surprised at how much lighter his shoulders felt. It seemed he had been pushing himself more than he realized.

“With that, we will take our leave...”

They turned around to leave.

“Oh, yes...” the Count called after them, like he had just remembered something.

The three of them turned back to him in unison. They couldn’t quite place why, but they had a bad feeling about what he was going to say next.

“They call that kind of sword a katana, right? I’ve started to feel like I might want one as well. It doesn’t have to be anything extravagant, but would you mind making me one of my own?”

He said that it didn’t have to be extravagant, but that was the kind of request that was the most troublesome. There was no way they could present a subpar katana as an offering to the Count. Surely that was just another display of the Count’s kindness, but there wasn’t a single thing they could compromise on if it was a gift to someone of such high status.

They had no need to create something like the bewitching katana, but they needed something that at least looked more impressive than Ricardo’s katana at first glance. The difficulty was that the Count didn’t want a sword; he wanted a katana. They would

need to find a craftsman that was capable of making a weapon from a foreign land, and quickly.

Just seconds before, the Count had listened to Gerhard's selfish request. He had an obligation to him, a debt to repay. He couldn't refuse.

"A-As you wish, Your Grace."

Chapter 4: To My Dearest

Lutz was making the tanto that Claudia had asked for. Thanks to the events of the other day, they had achieved at least a little financial flexibility, and as long as Claudia didn't find any more orders for him, there was little else to do.

The finished blade was a bit long for a tanto, but not so much that it would be bothersome to walk around with.

Why did Claudia suddenly say that she wanted a tanto?

Lutz thought about it while sliding the blade back and forth across the whetstone. As far as he knew, she didn't even have any training in swordsmanship. Surely she didn't think that carrying a tanto alone would be enough to protect herself if things really went bad.

What did she say when she asked for it again? Something along the lines of "Isn't it weird that those assholes get to have something that you made, but I still don't?"

Was it really just something she said out of jealousy?

"Prove to me that I'm the most important woman in the world to you, Lutzy. That is, unless you want to be feeling up those knights' asses instead!" An imaginary Claudia spoke in his head.

He could see her saying that.

So that's it, huh?

As he finally pinned down her reasoning, he felt the resistance in the whetstone lessen and switched out the rough *arato* whetstone with a finer grained one. He could tell already that it was going to turn out great.

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"I'm back..."

Claudia, who had been out peddling goods, came home for the

first time in three days.

"Lutzy, prepare something for me to eat. I'm going to eat, get a little sleep, and after that, let's get freaky."

Claudia didn't so much sit in her chair; it would be more accurate to say that she fell and the chair just happened to catch her. She laid the upper half of her body firmly on the table.

She heard the thud of something heavy being placed on the table and picked up her head. There, she saw a glossy black tanto.

"I'll go warm up some soup," said Lutz. "In the meantime, have some fun with that."

After hearing his words, the fatigue left her body, and she shot straight up, grabbing onto the tanto by the saya.

The tsuka was made of wood and the same glossy black finish was applied to it, matching up perfectly with the saya when fully sheathed.

It was a type of tanto referred to as an *aikuchi*, a tanto with no tsuba to serve as a handguard. It was generally used for self-defense because its streamlined form made it easier to carry around. It was also easy to conceal, apparently making it popular with various less-savory groups.

First, Claudia paid very close attention to the black finish.

"You always go with this black finish, don't you, Lutzy?"

"Do I? I hadn't really thought about it much..."

Claudia didn't miss the faint hesitation in his voice. A mischievous smile spread on her lips, like a child that had just thought up a little prank.

"It's not like you have a particular affinity for black. You just figure that it looks the part if you give it a nice glossy black finish, am I right?"

"Uh..." Lutz struggled to say anything back.

Bull's-eye. That man didn't have any artistic sense for anything but the blade itself.

It was like pointing out to a painter that all the people in their painting were facing the exact same way.

"Claudia... I'm not the kind of guy that derives pleasure from being made fun of."

“Aha ha! Is that so?” Claudia laughed while holding up the aikuchi and looking at it all over.

“While I have no intention of siding with that knight from the other day, it is true that there might be some room for improvement in the ornamentation. It’s not unusual to be able to hike up the price of this kind of thing by two or three times based on aesthetic value alone.”

“That much?”

“There’s no set market price for works of art, you see? If you can convince a buyer it’s worth something, then that’s what it’s worth. Having people around you understand what an impressive sword you have without ever having to draw it is valuable.”

Lutz placed a bowl of soup and a spoon on the table. The church discouraged eating with utensils, but Lutz was a utilitarian person. Random rules from the church were nothing but a bother.

They even looked down on the use of plates or bowls, preferring followers to bake hard bread, place it in an indent in the table, and fill the bread with soup. However, Lutz couldn’t see even an ounce of meaning in it. If they were inside the city walls, it would be one thing, but outside the city, where the eyes of the church couldn’t reach them, he couldn’t have cared less. It was one of the only good things about their current living situation.

“There is one misunderstanding that I want to clear up,” said Lutz, searching with his spoon for the best bits in the soup. “Usually, a katana isn’t something one makes on their own. A *kaji-shi* to forge the blade, a *togi-shi* to sharpen the blade, a *shirogane-shi* to affix the thicker metal part at the base of the blade, a *saya-shi* to make the saya, a *tsukamaki-shi* to wrap the cordage around the grip—they all generally work together to make a single katana. I can forge and sharpen the blade. I can sort of make the saya and tsuka...but even sort of being able to do it is quite the thing!”

His voice lost a bit of confidence toward the end, his eyes wandering around the room as he spoke.

“All right, I understand that asking you to do the decorations on top of everything is a bit too much. In that case, it could be worth it to look for a good ornamentalist to work with.”

Claudia hurried her soup down and traded the spoon for the aikuchi. Eating quickly was a speciality of hers. Lutz had only gotten about halfway through his soup.

"So, this tanto—"

"It's called an aikuchi."

"Ah, right, aye kuchy... Aikuchi? Anyway, the glossy black doesn't look bad at all, but don't you think it would be even better with a phoenix in gold leaf, for example?"

She was right that something like that definitely would make it look more expensive; not just a supremely functional blade, but a piece of treasure.

"Even if we took all the time and energy to do that, the problem remains that we have no way of selling something that expensive at the moment," said Lutz.

"Yeah, that is the problem..."

As they lived outside the city walls, it was obvious that neither of them had any connections to nobility or wealthy merchants. No matter how magnificent a katana they made, it would just end up collecting dust in a cabinet in the workshop.

There wasn't any problem with doing little bits of business privately like they had been up until then, but without the opportunity to join the Guild, they couldn't do anything so bold as opening up a shop in town and letting people come to them. Within a week, the shop would be surrounded by rough-looking men coming to ask under what authority he was conducting business.

Claudia had been detained by those knights under false charges, but if they were to try to open up shop, that would be an actual crime. They lived in a world where it was even said that bakers were the only people that should bake bread. Sticking your hand into another person's profession was as good as theft, a punishable crime.

In that case, it seemed to make sense for Lutz to just join the Guild, but there were all too many problems with that as well. First of all, Lutz didn't have anyone who could act as his guarantor. As his father was a drifter, they had always been seen as suspicious vagrants, without even any papers to identify them. There wasn't a

single blacksmith's workshop that would hire someone like that.

The Blacksmiths Guild also put a limit on the number of master smiths that could exist at any one time. He wouldn't be able to just move into town and open up a workshop. He would need to first serve as an apprentice under an established blacksmith. He would have to train and work under them for about three to five years before even becoming a full-fledged smith.

For someone like Lutz who had the collective knowledge of his father's life of training in several countries hammered into him, it was pointless. Lutz couldn't afford the years of wasted time.

It was rather extreme, but if a master smith in one town was driven to move to another due to the fires of war, they would need to start again from the lowest level of apprentice. If they got along well with their new master, they might be given some better jobs, but they would still be in a very unfavorable position.

If Lutz were to join such an organization, there was no way that he would be allowed to continue forging something as strange as katana. He'd work for years to get to the station of master smith only for his skills as a katana smith to have rusted away by the time he got there. For him, there was nothing greater than the techniques that his father had gifted him. It would be unbearable.

"Oh well, no use in worrying about it. Besides, I'm sure there's got to be somebody in town that desperately wants a katana," said Claudia.

"You think so?"

"Rumors about that bewitching katana and the various tanto that you made are sure to spread before long. Then you'll be able to take the stage as the great craftsman Lutz!"

Lutz didn't quite know whether Claudia was just trying to cheer him up or if she really believed such a thing would happen. He really couldn't tell, but he knew that if he was with her, it would all work out somehow. Maybe it would be okay to take her words at face value.

"All right, it's about time for the grand reveal." Claudia held up the aikuchi after seeing that Lutz had finished his soup. "Let's see just what shape your love for me has taken..."

“Don’t put it like that. If you say that and it turns out to be disappointing, it’s like saying that I don’t love you at all.”

“Oh, are you saying that it didn’t turn out well?”

“It turned out incredible, of course.”

Claudia giggled. “Well, then I guess there shouldn’t be a problem.”

She drew the aikuchi from its saya and revealed the blade. It was very thin, but it projected a great sense of strength. It also seemed a bit long for a tanto.

“Wow, this is...” She looked at the blade from every angle and gave it some practice swings, nodding and letting out a few satisfied mumbles here and there.

“Do you like it?”

“If the Grim Reaper himself appeared before me right now, he would surely hold out his scythe and ask me to trade with him.”

“If such a thing were to happen, please turn him down. I’m not sure I like the mental image of the grim reaper chasing people down with an aikuchi.”

“I can’t really be conducting my business while carrying around a scythe either, so I guess I’ll just have to carry this.” While Claudia was laughing, she didn’t take her eyes off the aikuchi for a second.

She stared deeply into her reflection in the blade. Looking into her own eyes, she was surprised at how focused they looked.

“Is there a reason that the blade is a bit longer than the other tanto?”

“I made it that length so that if you were to drive it into someone’s chest from any side or angle, it would be able to reach the heart.”

“Oh, right... To be honest, I wasn’t expecting that gruesome of a reason.”

“Keeping it short because it’s only for self-defense isn’t the right way of thinking about it. Precisely because it’s for self-defense, it has to be frightening—to tell anyone that could mean you harm that they’re going to die if they come after you.”

“Make them think that it’d be trouble to mess with me, huh? I’m sure that it’d still end up with me having to pay some kind of toll to

get by, though."

"Did I go too far with it?"

"No, having that kind of leverage is an important thing when dealing with those scumbags."

Claudia pointed the blade at herself and felt a strong, panicked beat of her heart. It was a blade that made one picture death just by being on the wrong side of it. If one were to wield it with a real intention to kill, she wondered what it would feel like to be the one standing against it.

It gave her more options when negotiating with those bandits, that was for sure. And all of it was born of Lutz's feelings of wanting to protect her.

"Well, for a present, it may be lacking a bit in romantic appeal, but I suppose I'll accept it."

While her words were sharp as ever, she must have really taken a liking to it as she carried it with her everywhere she went from that day on. Even in the house, she always had it on her hip. She went as far as to carry it into bed, but Lutz somehow managed to stop her.

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Gerhard and Djoser silently returned to the enchanter's workshop. Ricardo had already run off, saying that it wasn't his problem.

"Say, Djoser..."

"I can't," said Djoser, as though holding a shield up to his master's words.

He knew exactly what Gerhard was going to ask of him: find him another katana like the last one. Getting a hold of that bewitching katana was a mere stroke of luck. He basically had to pry it out of his subordinate's hands, but in essence, the katana simply came to him, not the other way around.

It wasn't like Djoser was a particularly skilled tracker of anything of the sort, and he was fully aware of that.

"Master, you said before that you own a katana, right? Would it

not be possible to use that one?”

“It’s not like I’d be unwilling to part with it, but...” Gerhard stood up with a grumble and pulled a katana from the shelf that held his collection, handing it to Djoser.

“Allow me to inspect it,” Djoser said before drawing the blade.

It was single-edged, it had a recognizable hamon, it had a tsuba and a tsuka. It was undeniably a katana, but the construction felt so incredibly cheap. Compared to the bewitching katana, it was nothing but a toy.

“It’s just a cheap piece of junk I picked up because it looked unique.”

“I see what you mean...”

Djoser still wasn’t at Gerhard’s level, but he had a rather appraising eye. That katana was nothing more than a metal stick shaped like a katana. It had been mass-produced by casting and then had at least gone through some hardening.

“Oh, I just remembered. I still haven’t properly thanked you for finding that bewitching katana in the first place,” Gerhard said kindly.

Djoser had a bad feeling about what he was going to say next. “I didn’t exactly find it; rather, I would say that I stumbled upon it...”

“Well, either way, I’ll give you this.” Gerhard began to place gold coins onto the table, one by one.

Djoser’s eyes were fixated on them. All together, there were twenty gold coins, about his entire yearly wage.

Gerhard didn’t miss the look of temptation in Djoser’s eyes.

“Your wife, she’s having your second one, isn’t she?” said Gerhard while drawing an arc with his hands around his stomach.

Even at the income of a high-ranking knight, they were just getting by financially. One could never have too much money. The reason that Djoser was studying to be an enchanter was also so he would have a stable job to do after relinquishing his estate to his son.

If his second child was also a boy, he wondered what he would do. With the estate left to his first son, would his second son be forced to join the lower ranks of the Knights Order, so vile that Djoser hated to even refer to them as knights? No, never. If

possible, he would have him wed into another reputable noble family in the Order or perhaps even start his own noble house.

Gerhard knew that Djoser deeply loved his wife and son. Surely he would pour just as much love into the new life about to be born. For Djoser, those gold coins would be like a sturdy bridge leading to his family's bright future.

"If you find another katana, or the craftsman that made the other katana, I'll give you ten gold coins. If you form a favorable relationship with the smith, I'll give you twenty more."

"T—twenty..." Djoser's voice cracked.

With that much, he would even be able to send some money to his wife's parents, a struggling baron and baroness. His wife had also put up with a lot after marrying him, a man of lower status. If he could repay the person that he cared for so dearly, even such an impossible mission seemed like nothing to him.

Djoser thought for a moment before speaking. "I'll go down to the knights' station and see what I can get out of them. If I can find that woman they detained or the man that bailed her out with that katana, we might be able to track down the smith."

When he'd heard the story from them the first time, he'd thought that it was strange, but he hadn't pursued it any further. Now, he regretted that complacent oversight. All he could do was hope that those bird-brained twits actually remembered anything useful.

"I can't say for sure whether I'll be successful, though. If I reach a dead end, what do you plan to do?"

"I guess we'd just have to go down to Borbus's workshop with this cheap katana and ask him to make us something like it but better."

"Could he do it?"

"No way in hell he could! But we'd have to try it anyway. If we polished the blade until it sparkled, decorated the saya and tsuka with beautiful engravings and jewels, then at least we'd have something that looked the part. Even a guy like him that does nothing but work to maintain his status as master smith would have to do that much," said Gerhard as if spitting the words out; then he looked up at the soot-stained ceiling.

“Though I believe the Count to perhaps be a bit naive at times, I don’t hate that part of him. If possible, I don’t want to take advantage of his trust in me to deceive him...”

Djoser nodded deeply in agreement.

***

The inside of the knights’ station was roughly split into two different groups of people. There were those who owned one of Lutz’s tanto and those who didn’t.

The knights that had bought the tanto had naturally gathered together and began to look down on all the other knights, telling them that a true knight spares no expense when it comes to weapons and gear. However, considering it was only their backup weapon that was of any quality at all, they weren’t very convincing.

It made it a bit uncomfortable for those that missed their chance to buy a tanto, but especially so for the knight that tried to haggle down the price, who was treated like an absolute fool.

“No matter how good the weapon, it doesn’t matter if you can’t use it properly,” said the haggler knight, his frustration mounting.

However, the tanto group just gave him cold smiles, filled with contempt.

“Well, well. You sure bark a lot, but not sure about your bite. On our next bandit hunt, you can just stand back and shout at them while we show you what a real knight looks like.” They pointed and laughed at him.

Arguments within such organizations had a tendency to be less about who was right or wrong and more about which side had the most people.

There wasn’t a single person that came to the haggler’s defense. The other knights were getting tired of how they would pick fights with each other day in and day out.

“Why don’t you see for yourself whether I’m all bark?” The haggler put his hand on the grip of his sword.

Seeing this, the tanto group all stood up.

“Are you planning on swinging around a longsword indoors? What

an idiot!” said one of them.

The five of them formed a semicircle around the haggler.

He knew that he was at a huge disadvantage, but he couldn’t back down and apologize now. If he’d been the type of person who was capable of doing that, he wouldn’t have ended up fighting with Lutz in the first place. He steeled himself in preparation for the incredibly unnecessary violence he was about to partake in.

Staring each other down, the knights could have kicked off the fight at any moment, but the sudden bang of the station doors flying open drew their attention away.

Standing in the doorway was a man whose scowl was scarier than anyone else in the room. It was their superior, the high-ranking knight, Djoser.

“Good to see you all busy with your official duties, you slovenly worms.”

Faced with Djoser’s disapproving glare, the knights who had been throwing profanities at each other all stopped in their tracks.

“I’ve come here today because I have something to ask you all...” Djoser said before noticing the tanto dangling on the knights’ hips. The sheath and the grip—or rather saya and tsuka—were clearly not of their country. “What in the world... Show me that sword.”

“Um, you see...we actually bought these, like, with money and everything...”

“I’m not trying to take it off of you. I just want to see it.”

One of the knights reluctantly held out their tanto, and Djoser quickly grabbed it from them and drew the blade.

It was absolutely beautiful. He didn’t feel the incredible temptation that he had with the other katana, but he got the feeling that it may very well be the work of the same smith. It wasn’t a masterpiece, but it was clearly made with great attention to detail. In all honesty, Djoser would personally have preferred it over the terrifying bewitching katana.

“Where did you get your hands on this?” Djoser asked while giving the tanto back.

“That woman came back to take orders for new weapons, asking if we wanted something from the same smith that made that

katana."

The knight seemed confused as to why he would ask such a thing, but for Djoser, it was like he had hit the jackpot.

Yes, this—this is what I wanted to hear!

The katana smith was not only still alive, he was likely somewhere in the Count's territory. That female merchant was connected to him directly.

It was starting to look a lot more possible to procure a katana for Count Shander. Those thirty gold coins were within Djoser's reach.

My lovely wife, my son, my child that I have yet to see, daddy is going to do his best for you all!

Djoser covered his mouth for a moment to hide the grin spreading on his lips.

"Then, after a little while, the merchant lady came back with a guy that seemed to be a blacksmith, and they brought the tanto."

"Yes, very good. And the names of those two were? Oh, and where do they live?"

There was silence. For a while, they steeped in the awkward atmosphere.

"Don't you dare tell me that you don't remember..."

The joy Djoser felt in his heart was short-lived.

"Well, the guy basically forced himself in both times, so we never got his name, and the woman... What was her name again?"

The knights exchanged looks with each other, but no one came forward with an answer.

They had arrested her on false charges, negotiated a ridiculously expensive bail for her release, and after all that, not one of them remembered her name? Could they get any worse than that? Djoser thought it might be better to bring the whole building down and rebuild it as a dog kennel. Djoser was forced to face the fact that there was no limit to the stupidity that mankind could achieve.

He gave them a sharp gaze, pushing them to answer quickly, their panic making it even harder to remember.

"Claw... Clay— Oh, Clodia?"

"No, it was something more like Cla... Clarisa?"

"That's it! That's the one!"

Djoser had made a serious mistake. Under the immense pressure of their superior's presence, they felt that they had to give an answer immediately. They certainly didn't feel like they could ask for a bit more time to properly remember.

As a leader, being excessively harsh was something that often led to mistakes.

"Y-Yes, that's got to be it!"

"All right. Do you know her address as well?" pressed Djoser.

"We know where she used to live, but we seized all of her property and belongings, so she moved..."

"So, you're saying that you haven't a clue?"

"Well, um, yes—but just to let you know, even though we seized all her property, it didn't really amount to much money in the end. It was just her horse, some random clothes that she was going to sell, and her carriage. All in all, it ended up being a little less than ten gold coins..."

"So, what?!" yelled Djoser.

Was he trying to say that it wasn't much of a crime because they didn't end up profiting that much in the end? Djoser wasn't asking him about the money.

Frustrated beyond belief, Djoser asked them to describe the man and woman down to the last detail, then left the station behind. As he left, he looked back only once.

Would it kill those parasites to actually do their rounds every once in a while?

The words wanted to escape his mouth, but he stopped them. Having those lot wandering about the streets would only be a further nuisance to citizens of the city.

Before returning to the castle, he asked around a few places if anyone had heard of a merchant named Clarisa, but everyone just cocked their heads at him. He couldn't find any leads at all.

Djoser returned to the workshop where his master awaited him, apologizing in his heart to his wife and child.

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Gerhard listened to Djoser's disheartened report with a sense of excitement.

"Why do you look so despondent? If you've found out that much, you've practically tracked them down!"

"Yes, but the other merchants in the area didn't seem to know anything..."

Gerhard sighed, remembering that his apprentice had the obvious blind spot of only being able to see things from the perspective of a knight.

"First of all, it's highly likely that her name isn't actually Clarisa. Expecting those idiots down there to remember something so clearly is a mistake in itself, just pointless."

"Ah, um..." Djoser struggled to respond. While he absolutely hated the thought, he did technically hold some responsibility for them as their superior. He couldn't exactly be seen agreeing wholeheartedly with such a statement.

"Also," Gerhard continued, "I'd say it's likely that they conduct their business from outside the city walls, so they wouldn't have a shop open in town. That would explain why the more prominent merchants didn't seem to know anything."

Djoser nodded vigorously. It was true that he had only asked merchants that had their own stores. It was that kind of thinking that Gerhard was talking about when he called him narrow-minded at times. If he really wanted to gather a wide range of information, he should have asked around with the smaller peddlers and traveling merchants as well, but such a thing hadn't even crossed his mind.

"You say that the man assumed to be the blacksmith looked to be around twenty, yes? I'll bet he also lives outside of the city."

"Does something about his age tell you that?"

"In the system maintained by the Blacksmiths Guild, an apprentice must spend several years doing more menial work. At twenty, most craftsmen would be able to handle some simple jobs, but not a lot more. Becoming a master smith would be out of the question at that age. However, this man seems to be hammering out katana as he pleases. That tells me he must be working outside of the strict system enforced by the Guild."

"Is it possible to acquire that high level of skill by such a young age?"

"Surely it would depend a bit on his God-given abilities, but if he had received one-on-one training from a very young age, it wouldn't be impossible."

Djoser still wasn't entirely convinced. He couldn't understand how someone outside of the city walls could possibly be more talented than those who lived inside it. Outside of the city, it was said that ninety percent of the population was made up of peasants, and there were an overwhelming number of them compared to those inside the city. Of course, there were many merchants and craftsmen that did business among them. However, their workshops and equipment were generally just haphazardly put together, absolutely abysmal in comparison to the facilities available to craftsmen in the city. That was simply common sense to him.

There were likely plenty of issues with the Guild's system as well, but outside the city walls, anyone—no matter how unscrupulous—could just pick up a hammer and claim to be a blacksmith.

"Well, if we can deduce that much, then it shouldn't take too long to track them down. I'll go ahead and ask around a bit."

"You intend to go look for them yourself, Master? There's no need for you to do such a task personally. Allow me to go."

"No, I'll go. I'm afraid you still have a habit of looking down on those outside the city walls. Even if you found him, if he sensed that he wasn't being respected and got upset, it would all be for nothing. Be honest, you were thinking that if you just said that you were working under the Count, he would shut up and do as you say, weren't you?"

"Well..."

Djoser couldn't deny it; in fact, he didn't want to. That was how things were supposed to be. He wanted to say that some stray blacksmith wouldn't have the right to go against the wishes of the Count, but it seemed like his master was looking for a very different answer.

"At least allow me to accompany you as a bodyguard. I promise not to say a word during negotiations."

“A bodyguard?” Gerhard directed a cold stare at him. His usual kind old face dissipated as if peeling away, revealing a terrifying, sharp expression.

They had just entered into the summertime, but Djoser felt a cold chill run up his back. He had forgotten. While Gerhard’s approach was different from Djoser’s, it was true that his master had also dedicated his life to the sword.

“M-my apologies...”

After that, he couldn’t press any further. He didn’t have the courage or naivety to try.

Gerhard’s expression returned to his usual relaxed smile. “Right, well, we haven’t exactly found the blacksmith yet, but I’ll give this to you.” He handed Djoser ten gold coins.

“Master...”

“For a little while, go and spend some time with your family. When we do find the blacksmith, things might start to get a bit busier.”

Djoser quickly put the coins into a bag and bowed deeply to Gerhard. That gesture contained his feelings of appreciation for his master, his hope that Gerhard would find the blacksmith, and his desire to hide the slovenly grin that leaked from his lips.

Gerhard saw right through him but just gave him a grin in return. He knew that it was less that Djoser loved money and more that he loved the thought of spending that money to make his family happy.

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The next day, Gerhard changed into some unassuming light-brown clothes, took a single donkey out of the stables, and headed outside the city.

To those around him, it would just seem like he was a retired merchant or shop owner, engaging in some leisurely travel.

The guards at the gate recognized him, but Gerhard simply put a finger up to his lip and gave them a smile.

“Ah, right...” said one of the guards.

It appeared the old man was up to no good again, so the guards

figured it would be better to pretend they didn't see anything. If something did go wrong, they weren't going to have anything to do with it.

It wasn't like Gerhard was trying to cause anyone trouble; he was just sincerely enjoying the start of a new journey. If at all possible, he would have liked to show his apprentice that the entire world wasn't contained within those city walls, but given how he had been raised, it was quite hard to change those deep-seated biases.

First, Gerhard went to a small farming village and handed over a few copper coins to the locals to loosen their lips, but they didn't seem to know of any skilled blacksmiths in the area. Many of them went as far as to say that he was better off looking for a blacksmith in the city if he was looking for something of higher quality. To that, all Gerhard could do was give a forced smile and thank them for the advice.

He went to the next village, but they didn't have any useful information either.

Next, he visited a fishing village. The fishermen there seemed to have an unlicensed blacksmith that they ordered fishing hooks and harpoons from, but when asked if he was particularly skilled, they just shook their heads.

He even asked a group of mercenaries that were really more like bandits, but that didn't lead to anything either. To them, weapons were something you either took from the battlefield or threatened merchants to give over, so they didn't have any need for a blacksmith.

He traveled around a few more farming villages before arriving at a settlement of lumberjacks. The men seemed to be out at work, so Gerhard went up to talk to the women that were gathered around a well.

They seemed a bit wary of him at first, but when Gerhard offered them some cloth cuttings, saying they were just some leftover scraps from a different product, they started to warm up to him.

They were quite small cuttings of cloth, but they were happy to receive clean, brand-new fabric, and it wasn't something so expensive that they would be suspicious of him.

Because of the gift, they also seemed to believe that he was the retired owner of a clothing store, which made things easier.

But again, when Gerhard asked if there were any skilled blacksmiths around, they couldn't think of anyone off the top of their heads.

They were apologetic that even though he had given them something so nice, they couldn't provide him any information. But then, one of the middle-aged women suddenly spoke up as if remembering something.

"Oh, now that you mention it, my husband really seems to like the new axe he bought recently."

In response, several other women said that their husbands had also mentioned they like their new axes. They must have bought them as a bulk purchase.

"Can you tell me about the merchant that sold those axes?!" Gerhard asked, leaning forward. He was aware that he was showing a little too much excitement, but he couldn't hold himself back.

"Well, we didn't really place the orders, you see..."

"Would it by any chance have been a woman by the name of Clarisa or something similar to that?"

"Hmmm... I'm afraid I haven't heard of a Clarisa."

"I've also heard that she's a merchant with quite an impressive rear."

Right as he was about to give up, one of the women clapped her hands together with a laugh.

"Oh, wait! That's not Clarisa; that's got to be Claudia!"

The other women all joined in at the sudden realization.

"Oh, sorry, Claudia, was it? It seems I'm getting a bit forgetful in my old age. I can't compete with you young'uns!"

They all burst out laughing.

Gerhard clenched his fist tightly in his mind. At last, he had a real lead. It seemed like the women had let their guard down a good bit as well, so he could squeeze a bit more information out of them.

From what they said, it seemed they didn't know Claudia's address, but she would come to the settlement once a month to take orders for axes or repairs.

“By the way, it seems like Claudia got herself a good man recently too.”

“So you’re saying there’s a guy out there that gets to have his way with that ass every night? I can’t help but feel like my cheeks are getting all saggy.”

“That doesn’t stop you and your husband from having fun every night, though, does it?”

They all broke into laughter again.

In these situations, it was hard for men to get a hold of women’s sense of humor, so Gerhard just stood there awkwardly. However, he had a feeling that this new boyfriend—or perhaps husband—was the katana smith that he was looking for. He was beginning to see the whole picture. Knowing the relationships between people beforehand was very useful when trying to make a good first impression.

However, it was getting around the time that Gerhard would have liked to get home. In the end, he couldn’t find the right timing to escape and ended up chatting about nonsense for over an hour. The latter half of the conversation didn’t even have anything to do with blacksmithing, so Gerhard just asked them what day Claudia was likely to come next and ducked out while he could.

On the road back home, his expression was one of utter exhaustion, the life drained from it like a skeleton.

“Women are...scary.”

They were indeed the most formidable opponents of the entire trip.

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Two weeks after Gerhard had visited the logging settlement, Claudia arrived there. She brought with her a cheery-looking donkey and a gloomy blacksmith. Before the entirety of her belongings were taken from her, she had a horse and carriage, but now that the business had downsized considerably, a donkey was just fine.

Donkeys didn’t carry the same kind of esteem as horses did, and they were a good bit smaller, but that also meant that they ate less and were easier to care for in general.

Above all, Lutz had taken a single look at it and said, “It’s so cute...” He’d even ended up building a little stable for it. It seemed he had grown rather attached.

Claudia spoke with the lumberjacks who had all gathered around a clearing that they called their meeting place, sitting on logs in place of chairs.

“Is there anyone that needs any smithing work done? Today, as a special treat, our blacksmith has come in person to take care of any sharpening or maintenance you might need!”

One of the older men came forward first to speak for the rest of them. “So, you’re saying that we wouldn’t have to wait for you to deliver them back to us?” He stroked his wild beard and gave Lutz an intrigued glance.

Lutz silently gave him an affirming nod. This time, for sure, he was actually going to be a help and not a hindrance to Claudia’s work.

“Happy to be of service to you all—for a price of course! Right here and right now, I’ll make the tools of your trade shine brighter than they did when you first bought them!”

Hearing that, one of the lumberjacks spoke up, seemingly less out of serious interest and more out of playful curiosity. “Okay, you wait a second.” He stood from the log and brought an axe back from his house.

“All right, boy, can you fix this one up?”

The axe was in awful disrepair. The cutting edge was entirely blunted, and rust had begun to eat away at it. It certainly was no longer able to cut down a tree. Dispatching a chicken was about the most it could do.

Lutz took up the axe and inspected it from every angle.

“The rust seems to just be on the surface. It’s not yet rotten to the core, anyway. How about fifty copper to make it shine again?”

“You’re okay if I pay after the job’s done, right?”

The underlying meaning to that statement was obviously that he wasn’t going to pay for it if it didn’t turn out like he said. Lutz took that as a challenge, and it only further fired him up.

I’ll make sure it’s so shiny that you can see that dumb face of

yours reflected clear as day.

First, Lutz got his equipment off the back of the donkey and put together a footpedal-operated grinder. He sat on his toolbox and placed the blade of the axe against the spinning grindstone.

The high-pitched noise of grinding metal rang out with a fierce rain of sparks.

"Oooh!" The small crowd gathered seemed impressed by the spectacle.

Because the friction generated so much heat, this method wasn't suited to work that required a lot of precision, but it was perfect for when you just needed to get something into the right shape before doing finer work.

To fix something so severely rusted, it was necessary to file the entire blade down as much as the rust had eaten into it.

If he tried to do the same with a katana, it would end up being filed down so thin it would end up looking more like a needle than anything else, but for something as thick as an axe, it wasn't a problem.

After letting out a flood of sparks, Lutz inspected the blade. The cutting edge appeared more uniform and there was no rust remaining. He pulled out his arato whetstone and poured a bit of water on it.

The audience around him was still staring at him intently, making Lutz feel a bit awkward.

"Um, from here on out, there isn't anything too interesting to watch, I'm afraid. There won't be any more sparks or anything like that."

"Don't worry about it! Go ahead, continue," said one of them.

The rest didn't show any signs of wanting to leave either. It seemed that some of them were thinking about having Lutz service their axes too if that one turned out well.

For a lumberjack, the condition of their tools was a major factor in how efficiently they could do their work, so if possible they wanted everything to be in top shape. If they were to try to work with a blunted axe, it would just be an absolute waste of effort.

On the other hand, it wasn't a field that produced high profit

margins, so they couldn't afford to spend too much money on maintenance either. It was completely natural that they would want to get their axes sharpened by a skilled blacksmith at such a fair price.

Knowing all that, Lutz couldn't just tell them that it was hard to work with everyone watching him. The very fact that he had come all the way out there to offer his services meant that he was going to be working in the open with people watching anyway.

It was no longer a one-on-one challenge; it was a battle between a single blacksmith and an entire settlement of lumberjacks.

Lutz steeled himself and locked in, rubbing the axe back and forth against the whetstone. He kept going until he didn't feel any resistance, then changed the arato out for a finer-grained whetstone. Repeating this process over and over, he began to feel less and less pressure from the stares of his audience. Eventually, the sounds from the world around him didn't even enter his ears.

There was Lutz, the axe, and the whetstone. The entire world was composed of those three things alone.

Eventually, his hands naturally came to a stop. In that instant, the sights and sounds of the world around him rushed back into his consciousness. It seemed he had been more focused than he thought.

Some of the lumberjacks must have lost interest somewhere along the way because the audience around him was about half as many people as he remembered from before.

"All right, give it a look." Lutz handed the axe over to the lumberjack, glaring at him all the while.

If he were to try to cheap out on him after all of that, Lutz would challenge him to point out a single detail of his work that was substandard or perhaps have him name a single blacksmith that could do the same for so cheap. However, it seemed that wasn't necessary. The lumberjack looked absolutely thrilled.

"This is amazing! The rusted hunk of metal sitting in the corner of my barn has turned into some kind of legendary weapon!"

Lutz thought that his exaggeration was a bit much, but it didn't feel bad either.

In the end, he happily paid the fifty copper coins in full.

It seemed that Lutz's last engagement with that haggling knight had affected him more than he thought. He felt bad that he doubted a customer before they even did anything to deserve it.

"Okay, is there anything else you guys want me to sharpen?"

Lutz opened and closed his hands repeatedly to check he was still able to keep working. When he looked back up, he saw a crowd of lumberjacks holding up their axes. Some of the women in the settlement were even bringing knives and scissors.

Roughly guessing, there were probably at least twenty axes alone. Lumberjacks often ran through axes quite quickly because of how much they used them. That meant there was no shortage of blunt, old axes lying around. There were sure to be even more axes coming.

"C-Claudia?" Lutz looked over at his business partner, his last hope of salvation.

However, Claudia just looked back at him with a cruel yet alluring smile. "Anything for our regular customers!"

Until then, they hadn't gotten many orders for sharpening jobs. The waiting time for the customer was often quite long, and it also put a large burden on Claudia, who would have to travel back and forth to deliver it.

The idea of actually going out there to do the work was a major success. It was something that they never would have done while Claudia was just someone who ordered from Lutz from time to time. Only now that they had committed to sharing their fates with each other were they able to do something like that.

As a blacksmith, there was a lot more money in making weapons, but he could never know when orders were going to come in. Finding regular customers like that settlement of lumberjacks, where there would never be a lull in demand for maintenance, was an incredible lifeline for a blacksmith.

As Claudia carefully explained all of that to him, he didn't even have a chance to do anything but put his head down and get to

work.

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As Lutz worked, the orders only kept coming. In the end, they had to spend three nights in the settlement to get through it all. In the afternoon of the third day, when they were completely exhausted to their very cores, a strange visitor came to see them.

"Is he...another customer?" Claudia asked while giving water to the donkey.

"Oh, yeah," said one of the lumberjacks' wives, "That older gentleman came by around two weeks ago. He said he was looking for a female merchant with a really nice butt, so we all figured he must've meant you."

"Is it just me, or does it seem like I'm beginning to get recognized more by my butt than my face?"

Either way, to a merchant, making connections was incredibly important. If someone had come all that way to find her, there was no way she wasn't going to meet with them.

She made her way to the meeting place to see Lutz, still working away at the grindstone, as well as an older man watching him work with great interest.

From his relaxed appearance, Claudia guessed that he was perhaps a retired merchant of some variety.

The old man noticed Claudia and bowed deeply to her. "You must be Claudia, the merchant."

"Oh, yes. I believe it's our first time meeting, right?"

"My apologies, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Gerhard, the personal enchanter to Count Shander."

"Oh... Wait, what?"

A master enchanter under the employment of nobility, the Count himself. He was a person from a world entirely removed from them. Claudia's brain completely overloaded for a moment.

"You see, recently, a strange sword was brought into the knights' station..." Gerhard didn't miss the slight spasm in Claudia's cheek when he mentioned the knights' station. "No, more accurately, it

wasn’t a sword.”

“A katana, perhaps?”

The two of them were trying to figure out just how much the other knew.

“That’s right, a katana. One that was so beautiful it almost cast a spell over all who looked at it, a bewitching katana. Unfortunately, it was offered to the Count and gifted as a reward to another man, but after seeing such a piece, I’m beginning to want a katana myself.”

“And that’s why you were looking for me?”

“I’ve heard word that you have yourself a very skilled blacksmith.”

They both looked over to Lutz.

It seemed like the old man had a decent grasp of the situation. Claudia had the feeling they might get dragged into something troublesome, but they couldn’t really talk their way out of it now. Rather, perhaps this was exactly the chance that they were waiting for. The waves that had been made by throwing that katana out into the world had finally reached back to them.

“Lutzy, looks like we have an order,” said Claudia with a slightly apprehensive tone.

“Wait a second, I’m almost finished.” Lutz’s voice was lifeless.

“Hey, we’ve got a noble waiting over here, you know?”

“Right now, I’m seeing to a prior customer’s order.”

Claudia turned to Gerhard and gave him a shrug as if to say, “Sorry, this is just how he is.”

Gerhard would have been lying if he said he wasn’t a little annoyed at the nerve of the young blacksmith, but he also felt in his heart that was exactly how a craftsman should be, so he held his tongue.

At that time, Lutz wasn’t saying that out of his pride as a craftsman. It wasn’t like he was doing anything that wouldn’t allow him to stop for a moment either. At most, it would just disrupt his momentum a little bit. What Lutz really needed was time to calm his bustling mind.

A nobleman, what the hell? An enchanter? Why?

Lutz had been waiting for someone who could become his benefactor, but it was just all too sudden.

Lutz sharpened and polished the axe until it was likely better than it had been when it was brand-new. He couldn't reasonably buy any more time than that.

He carefully removed any moisture left on the axe with a cloth, set it aside, and faced toward Gerhard.

"Thank you very much for waiting. I'm Lutz, the blacksmith."

"It is an honor to meet you. Today, I have come to ask if you would be so kind as to take on a job from me."

"You want me to make you a katana, right?"

"Indeed. I do have some questions I would like to ask first, however. Was it you who forged the katana that ended up in that knights' station?"

"It was. It was I that forged it, and I that gave it away."

"I beg your forgiveness, but would you mind if I see the katana that you are carrying?"

"So, in short..." More than taking time to think it over, Lutz was still just trying to process his words. "You think that I may just be saying that I was the one that made that katana, so you want to see the one that I carry with me to check if it's of similar quality. Am I right?"

"Yes, I suppose that is one way of saying it." Gerhard forced a smile. It seemed to him that Lutz was the sort of man that grew impatient when people talked around things too much.

He had also heard that when they went to deliver the tanto to the knights' station, he had fought with one of them, but Gerhard had a feeling that he just stepped up to the fight that the knights started. If he wasn't that kind of man, he wouldn't have been able to throw away such an invaluable katana to save a woman.

In actuality, Lutz was able to take action in the heat of the moment because of his feelings for Claudia and his anger toward the knights' abuse of power.

"The katana I'm carrying right now isn't a very good one, to be honest, just something I don't mind getting a bit beat up." Lutz had an expression like he had something bitter in his mouth.

Gerhard had disappointment in his eyes, thinking that he might have hit another dead end, but suddenly, a glossy black aikuchi was

handed over to him.

"Have a look at this. This is a masterpiece forged by the katana smith Lutz." Claudia was upset that anyone would doubt Lutz's abilities. She also didn't like how the flow of the conversation was being entirely controlled by Gerhard.

You might be testing us, but best not to forget that we're also testing you. If you can't see the value of this aikuchi, then you don't have much of an eye anyway.

Thinking this, she handed out her beloved katana.

Gerhard drew the blade, and his eyes widened. "Oh! Now this... It's as though it was forged for the sole purpose of driving straight through a person's heart, a perfect combination of function and beauty. Just looking at it sends chills down the spine! However, there seems to be something more..."

Gerhard was confused. He didn't know if it was okay to say what had come to his mind. It would be embarrassing if it were a mere misunderstanding.

"Please, go on," said Claudia to give him a bit of a push. After saying that much, she was incredibly curious about what he was going to say next.

"There seems to be a kindness to this blade. For a moment, I thought it may want to cause a painless death to its victims, but that's not right. I just don't get it." Gerhard looked at the aikuchi from every angle, deep in thought.

Knowing that the missing piece that Gerhard was looking for was certainly Lutz's love for her, a little smile leaked through her lips. She also was incredibly impressed with Gerhard's appraisal. He could even read the emotions that the smith hammered into the metal. Certainly that wasn't something just anyone could do.

"Would it be okay if I removed the grip and looked at the nakago?"

"Please, be my guest."

"Actually, wait a second..." Lutz said with some apprehension.

The two of them were getting pretty fired up, but for some reason, Lutz didn't seem like he liked the idea.

"Even if you look at the nakago, it's not like there's anything too

interesting there."

"What's wrong, Lutzy? You didn't forget to engrave your name again, did you?!"

"I didn't forget to engrave it per se, but—"

"Well, it should be fine, then! Before entrusting us with such a big job, Gerhard just wants to confirm that it's you who forged it. We've shown him such a magnificent aikuchi. If we just make it clear that you were the smith that forged it, I'm sure it will settle everyone's concerns."

"Um, well...it's just that I don't have my *mekugi* remover."

A mekugi remover was a tool that helped separate the tsuka from the blade itself by knocking out the mekugi pin that held everything together. For those who were used to working with katana it wasn't exactly necessary, just something that helped out the process.

Unfortunately for the ever-persistent Lutz, though, Gerhard was indeed used to working around katana. He pressed his fingernail into the mekugi and gave the tsuka a little tap. In seconds, he removed the tsuka from the blade.

Gerhard inspected the nakago, and Claudia stretched to look over his shoulders. However, Lutz's name was nowhere to be seen. The only thing engraved into the nakago was the words *To My Dearest.*

Claudia started laughing loudly along with Gerhard, who was laughing so hard that he was holding his stomach in pain. Lutz looked the other way, his face colored red by a combination of embarrassment and regret.

"Hey, Lutzy! I've thought this for a while, but don't you think you love me a little bit too much?!"

"I thought it was a good idea at the time! It just kinda popped into my head..."

"It *is* good. It's great, even! I love you too, Lutzy!"

"Well, good to hear."


TO MY DEAREST



Doing his best to hold his laughter, Gerhard put the aikuchi back together and handed it to Claudia. "I must say, I have been shown something truly wonderful. This katana is undoubtedly yours, and yours alone. I certainly couldn't ask you to sell it to me."

"I guess we'll just have to make you a new one, then. I'm sure my guy over there won't say no."

Their words no longer held any apprehension of hostility. Claudia and Gerhard were speaking to each other almost as if they were old friends already.

"Well then, Lutz, would you be willing to listen to my request for a job order?"

"Actually, I'm really sorry, but there are still so many things that I need to sharpen before I can take on any more work. Would you mind visiting my workshop in a couple of days? I'll let you know where it is."

"You can't fit me in any earlier for a job worth several hundred gold coins?"

"If I were to give jobs priority based on money, I would lose the trust of my clients—from these lumberjacks, and from you as well."

"From me as well, huh?"

If he based priority on monetary value alone, it wasn't impossible that someone else would come around offering a larger sum, and he would switch over to that job. Impressed by Lutz's words, Gerhard promised to meet them again in a few days and went along his way.

After that, Lutz continued to sharpen his axes and watched happily as Claudia hugged her aikuchi close to her for hours.

A few days after meeting Lutz and Claudia in the logging settlement, Gerhard arrived at the agreed rendezvous.

Along the riverside was a line of rustic huts. A little farther from the river was a small house.

Living by the river was rather convenient, especially for a blacksmith, as their work required the use of a large amount of water. However, if the river swelled, there was always a risk of it washing your house away. Hence the comfortable distance from the water.

"Hi Gerhard, welcome to our home," Claudia greeted him.

"Hello there! Thank you for having me."

After everything that had happened at the logging settlement, they had become fast friends and spoke casually.

Claudia put the donkey in the stable, a simple fenced construction with a roof over it, and then they entered the house.

"Lutzy, Gerhard's come to see us."

Hearing Claudia calling him, Lutz peeked out from his workshop with a smile on his face.

"Are you prepared to listen to my request today, Lutz?"

"Yes, of course. Please, have a seat."

The blacksmith, the merchant, and the enchanter all surrounded the small table in the living room.

First, Gerhard was sure that Lutz would be curious as to what had become of that bewitching katana, so he decided to let him know. He told him about how they had confiscated it from the knights at the station, how it had become even more fearsome after Gerhard had enchanted it, and how it had now ended up in the hands of the hero. Finally, he talked about how the Count had seen that katana and asked for one himself, sending them on a journey to find him. With that, they were caught up to the present situation.

While listening to Gerhard's explanation, Lutz and Claudia often exchanged glances, furrowing their eyebrows. Especially hearing about how it had become something so powerful that it was beyond control had them feeling a strange mixture of surprise, fear, and just a little bit of pride as well. While it may be an irresponsible way of looking at it, thinking that one's work had a great influence on the world was simply blissful for a craftsman.

"About that hero, will he really be able to wield the bewitching katana?"

"To be honest, I don't have a clue. From here on out, it's his problem. He very well may be lying deep in a forest somewhere with it sticking into his throat, but I'm not having anything to do with it," said Gerhard like it was nothing.

Lutz wondered whether it was really okay to just leave it at that, but he also couldn't think of anything that he could really do for that Ricardo guy. In the end, he came to the conclusion that it was

probably for the best that he hadn't engraved his name into that katana.

"So, do you understand my request now? I want a katana of high enough quality that I can offer it to the Count. I would then enchant that katana by engraving runes on the blade. Do you have any reservations about people modifying your work after you've finished with it?"

"Hmmm..." Lutz took a moment to think. "I don't really mind."

"Is that so?"

"I mean, it's pretty common for the owner of a katana to adjust the base of the nakago when they feel like the blade is too long, but it's not the katana smith's place to say anything about it. For the person who is actually wielding it, ease of use can be a matter of life or death."

A katana was, on the one hand, a work of art, but it was important not to forget its true nature as a weapon. At least, that was how Lutz felt about it.

At the end of the day, a katana was just a big knife made for cutting people.

He was not to take those words as an exaggeration or metaphor, but to understand that they were the simple truth. That was how his father, the katana smithing master, had thought about it.

"Then in regards to it being enchanted, I think that collaborating with a craftsman with a different skill set could be a good thing."

Gerhard nodded along at Lutz's pleasantly simple position on the matter with a satisfied look on his face. "Wonderful. When I enchant it, I promise to put everything that I have into it."

After the two craftsmen had truly forged a mutual respect, they went on to talk about the specifics of the katana.

"So it's a katana for the Count, who's terrib—well, not very experienced with martial arts? In that case, it's probably best to pay more attention to the aesthetics of the katana and keep it on the lighter side."

"I'm sure that he doesn't expect to be able to stand up alone to an assassin, anyway."

The aikuchi that Claudia had shown Gerhard the other day was

forged with the sole purpose of driving through the hearts of those that stood in its way, but with this katana, such a thing would be unnecessary.

Claudia, who had been quietly listening to them until then, raised her hand. "Wait a second, Lutzy. It's likely that nobles who are more fanatical about their weapons will gather together to show them off. In that kind of situation, the Count may be asked to present his katana as well. It may even be possible that the Count would want the katana for nothing aside from bragging rights. But if it's just a nice-looking katana with no practicality, he may end up being ridiculed for it. Whether he actually uses it or not, I think that we should be making something that focuses on actual practicality."

She looked over at Gerhard, and he gave her a little nod of affirmation.

"A katana that's lightweight, a bit flashy, and above all, incredibly practical..." Lutz moved around his fingers as if folding the metal between them, trying to form an image of the katana, especially to get an idea for the width of the blade.

"Can you do it?" asked Gerhard.

"Um, let's see... This goes like that, then... Oh, okay, yeah. That should work."

Gerhard wasn't sure if his words were even reaching Lutz.

After Lutz had spent a while in a world of his own, he finally came back to reality. "I think I can do it. Can you come back in around two weeks? I'll be able to at least get it into shape by then."

"Is that so? That's reassuring." Gerhard grabbed Lutz's hand and shook it happily.

At that moment, Lutz noticed that Gerhard's hands were unexpectedly rough. At first, he thought that it might be because he was a craftsman, but he was an enchanter. Enchanting wasn't a process that involved a lot of heavier labor. He realized that what he was feeling was calluses from swordsmanship training. Not only that, but he could tell that he must've been very skilled. Lutz wondered if he could beat him in a fair fight. Honestly, he wasn't very confident. He certainly was a mysterious old man.

"By the way..." said Claudia. "You see, Gerhard, Lutzy isn't

specialized in decorating the saya or tsuba. Really, he's just awful. He just thinks that if it's usable, then that's all you need, and it really shows in the finished product. His artistic sense just goes out the window."

"Claudia, couldn't you word that...you know, a bit softer?"

"Well, that's how it is. So, Gerhard, would you mind if we left the ornamentation up to you?"

Gerhard thought back to the bewitching katana and the aikuchi that they had shown him the other day. Both of them were entirely black. It had a simplicity that Gerhard was actually rather fond of, but it was entirely too plain to be offered to the Count.

"Okay, I'll go ahead and look for a craftsman to help out on my end."

In this way, the discussions came to an end. Gerhard went on his way, and Lutz got straight to his workshop to work on the katana.

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Lutz stood, arms crossed in his workshop, deep in thought. He had never made a katana for a noble before. And it wasn't even like it was a lower-level noble, it was for a count, one of the highest levels of the aristocracy.

"What's up, Lutzy? It can't be that interesting just staring at a hunk of steel."

Claudia thought it was strange that she wasn't hearing the usual banging coming from the workshop, so she went to check up on Lutz.

"I guess I'm feeling nervous...maybe a bit scared? I'm just thinking about how this single katana could so drastically change the course of my life."

"Ah ha ha! What, that's all you're worried about?" Claudia laughed off Lutz's worries.

Lutz glared at her. He was a bit upset that Claudia was treating his concerns like they were no big deal.

"The biggest turning point in your life was when you threw that bewitching katana at those knights. Everything else is nothing

compared to that."

"You're really never going to let that 'you're absolutely smitten with me' attitude go, are you?"

"If you're looking for proof, I've got it. Want to see?"

"I'll pass."

"It was like a love letter yet to be opened, such a dear thing. I'll bet you didn't expect me to find it so soon, did you?" Claudia said while pulling her aikuchi out of her bag.

It seemed she was still carrying it on her person constantly.

She continued, tracing around the tsuka of the aikuchi with the tip of her finger. "So someday when we're all gray-haired and wrinkly, we'd be sitting out in the sun and you'd suddenly say to me, 'Actually, on the nakago of your aikuchi...' or something. Was that what you were looking to do? I have to admit that sounds pretty romantic too. A bit unfortunate, but oh, well."

After going on about it for a while, Claudia went back to the living room, leaving Lutz alone in the workshop.

"*Everything else is nothing compared to that*, huh?" he whispered to himself.

Whether he was a poor blacksmith or a master smith employed by a noble, Claudia wouldn't mind either way. She would surely follow him anywhere he went. Being able to just say such a thing so casually, it really was so like her.

Lutz knew what he needed to do. He lit the furnace and used bellows to push air into it. As the flames danced and grew larger, Lutz stared into them with intense focus, his pupils fixated somewhere deep within the fire.

In a few days, he had forged a katana that looked like a giant version of the sort of knife you would use to fillet fish.

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Exactly two weeks after Gerhard placed his order, he returned, but he didn't hear the usual hammering that would come from a blacksmith's workshop.

Could it already be finished? Or perhaps had Lutz made no

progress at all? Peeking his head into the workshop, he saw Lutz sitting in front of an unvarnished wooden saya.

The saya was just plain wood without any ornamentation or finish applied at all. It wasn't something that one would want to walk around with, but seemingly something made specifically to protect the katana.

They had previously agreed that Gerhard would handle the ornamentation somehow, so he wasn't bothered by that, but he did wonder why Lutz was staring so intently at the saya.

"Lutz, what appears to be the matter?"

"Oh, Gerhard. Sorry I wasn't there to see you in."

"Have you finished the katana?"

"Yeah, you could say that it's finished, I suppose."

Gerhard tilted his head, a bit thrown off by Lutz's wording. "Do you mind if I inspect the blade?"

"Please, go ahead."

What kind of katana had he forged? Excitement welling inside of him, he drew the katana from its saya, revealing an incredibly thin blade that was as straight as an arrow.

"Magnificent... Absolutely breathtaking."

It felt as though just holding it in his hands would be enough to slice him. Gerhard unconsciously let out a sigh of admiration. If at all possible, he wouldn't give it as an offering at all and would have run away with it right there and then.

"Is it okay if I give it a practice swing?"

"No problem. Let's step outside first, though. Without actually swinging that katana, you probably won't be able to understand its true nature."

"Oh? Now I'm even more interested."

Bathed in the heat of the summer sun, Gerhard placed the plain saya at his hip, slowly drew the katana, and assumed a stance known as *seigan*, the katana pointed directly in front of him with the tip of the sword at the eye level of an imaginary opponent before him.

Looking at his stance, you could tell there was no way that he was an amateur. It seemed he not only had mastered the

swordsmanship of this country but had trained to use katana as well.

With a sudden burst of energy, he swung the sword down in front of him. Lutz could somehow see the blood spurting from the head of Gerhard's invisible foe.

He also displayed a beautiful *yokonagi*, *kiriage*, and various other techniques. The usual happy-go-lucky old man was nowhere to be seen. Lutz wondered what enemy he could be envisioning for his expression to turn so fearsome.

Lutz could hear the shriek of the wind with every strike. When swinging a very sharp sword, there were times when you would hear a similar sound, but this was even louder and higher-pitched.

Gerhard's stance relaxed, and he sheathed the katana back into the saya, then handed it back to Lutz. "It's as if the wind is crying."

"I forged it with the single-minded focus of creating the sharpest cutting edge possible. It isn't suited to drawn-out fighting on the battlefield, but it's perfect for a noble person's everyday carry."

"I agree. If there were to be an assassination attempt, his guards would take care of it as long as he could survive the first strike. And when it comes to landing the first strike, there's likely very few katana that could beat this one."

Not only was it beautiful, but it was also supremely functional. It also had the interesting quirk of being so sharp that it made the wind shriek as it glided through the air. However, there was one point of concern for Gerhard. What on earth could have made Lutz reluctant to call it finished?

"So, what work is left to do on this katana?"

Gerhard would really have preferred to take it back immediately and begin enchanting it. He unconsciously spoke in a tone of voice that sounded like he was rushing Lutz along.

"You see... I still haven't engraved the name."

"Again?!"

The whole ordeal had started because Lutz forgot to engrave the bewitching katana. Because of that, Gerhard had to search far and wide for him. How could such a talented smith forget such an obvious detail?

"If that's all it is, you should be able to do it right away. If the

smith is left anonymous again, it'll be even harder to explain to the Count."

"I just can't decide on a name for the katana," said Lutz, scratching his head with an awkward expression. "It's just not something I'm good at, thinking up names and stuff."

"Don't tell me the reason that you left the bewitching katana unnamed was—"

"While I was thinking about it, Claudia got captured by those knights."

Gerhard was confused about who to blame for this mess. Should he blame Lutz's abysmal standards for names or the band of thieves that called themselves knights?

"Anyway, I'd like to take this katana back as soon as possible. Right here, right now! Think of a name and engrave it."

"If you rush me like that, my head starts to spin, and I can't think. Um, it's a katana for a count, so...how about the Count sword?"

"I'm begging you, be serious."

"Unfortunately, I'm one hundred percent serious."

"Oh God!"

They both held their heads in their hands.

That was when their savior, Claudia, arrived. "And just what are you two doing?"

"Oh, you've come just in time. Actually..."

As Gerhard explained their predicament, Claudia looked half disappointed and half like she'd expected something like that to happen, nodding her head as she listened.

"Name... A name, huh? It's honestly a trivial matter, but I guess we can't move forward without deciding on something. I do, however, think it best not to name it something too flashy."

"What makes you say that?" asked Lutz.

"In this world, there are surely countless pieces of scrap metal that have been given the name Excalibur."

"Oh, I get you."

As soon as a blacksmith made something they were proud of, they might not look at it objectively; to them, the weapon they were

holding could easily resemble a legendary sword. In the heat of the moment, it was easy to give something a name far more regal than it really deserved.

As fellow craftsmen, Gerhard and Lutz understood this on a subconscious level, which made it hard to criticize. They both had a few moments that made them cringe when they looked back. They decided not to dig any deeper into the topic.

"Assuming anything Lutz thinks up is going to be an absolute disaster, do you have any ideas, Gerhard?"

"Oh, me?"

"You're about to do the enchanting on it, so I think that you have just as much right to name it as one of its creators."

"Hmmm... The katana's name. It cuts through the wind, so 'crying wind'... No, I don't want this katana to hold the connotation of crying."

"You know, I don't think that's a bad direction to go in, actually," said Claudia. "Maybe if we focus not on the wind crying, but the wails of something even grander."

"In that case, what about demons, or perhaps oni?"

"Oh, I like that! A katana that makes oni wail with every stroke of the blade, how about Kikokuto, the blade of weeping oni?"

Hearing Claudia's suggestion, Lutz gave her a little smile. "Let's engrave it," he said before rushing to his workshop.

While it wasn't a grandiose reaction, Claudia knew that was how he acted when he really liked something. With a warm gaze, she watched as he went to the workshop.

"Kikokuto, huh? It's a fine name, but perhaps a bit too heroic still. It kind of makes you imagine some huge katana rather than a super thin blade."

"Well, it all rests on your enchantment now whether it fully lives up to the name," Claudia answered with a smirk.

Gerhard let out a little laugh. "You sure don't pull any punches."

From there on out, it was his turn. Just thinking about it, Gerhard was filled with excitement. Things were going to get interesting.

Lutz returned after finishing the engraving and showed them the nakago. The words "Kikokuto, the blade of weeping oni, Lutz" were

engraved into it.

"All right, I entrust it to you."

"Thank you."

Lutz sheathed it back into the plain wooden saya and held it out horizontally, carefully handing it over with both hands as if it were some manner of sacred ritual. Gerhard's expression was just as serious as he accepted it.

Gerhard got his donkey out of the stable and was about to return to the castle, but he remembered something. "Oh, yeah," he said, pulling a small burlap bag out of his pack. "Your payment. If the Count takes a liking to it, you can expect even more." He gave them a confident grin. "Though I don't think there's any chance that he won't like it."

With that, Gerhard got on his donkey and quickly left.

They watched as he rode toward the city. Even knowing what they did then, he still didn't look like anything more than an old, retired shop owner.

The two of them brought the heavy bag of coins into the living room and took a look inside. The bag was filled with blindingly brilliant gold coins.

"If we used one of these at the bakery, do you think they'd have change for it?" said Lutz jokingly.

Even with it physically in front of them, it was still difficult to believe. They poured them out onto the table, and Claudia let out a huge laugh when she finished counting.

"Lutzy, the coins, the gold coins!"

"What about them? What's wrong?!" Lutz feared that they were actually fake gold or something and went into a momentary panic.

Considering Gerhard's social stature, no matter what they said, he could likely just pretend that he never met them, and that would be the end of it. It's even possible that his claim of being the Count's personal enchanter was a complete lie from the beginning.

Then he started to think more rationally. If Gerhard was a con man, it would be very strange that he was so familiar with the bewitching katana that Lutz forged. Even more importantly, Lutz could recognize the pride of a craftsman within Gerhard. He truly

was a craftsman, one who would never take advantage of his skills to deceive another craftsman.

"These gold coins... There's one hundred of them," said Claudia.

"Oh, right. A hundred?" For a moment, Lutz didn't quite understand why Claudia was saying it like that. "Oh, wait, that's what you mean! A hundred gold coins, huh?"

He had finally remembered. That was the price at which Claudia had originally appraised the bewitching katana. By some miraculous work of fate, those hundred gold coins had come right back to them. Lutz picked up one of the coins and stared at it intently.

"Even if it takes a few detours here and there, things eventually come back around to us."

Claudia nodded along to Lutz's words.

With those one hundred coins, Lutz could truly say that there wasn't a single thing that he'd lost on the fateful day.

Chapter 5: Branded into Their Eyes

The katana that Gerhard had entrusted with one of the city's ornamentalists had come back to him. The saya was a magnificent silver with the carved relief of a lion. The tsuba and tsuka were also well polished, making it a work of the finest quality. The only problem was that the saya looked more like a normal sheath, so it was difficult to tell that it was a katana without actually drawing the blade. However, if he thought about it as a unique blend between the swords of the East and the West, that had a nice ring to it as well.

Patrick, the ornamentalist who had worked on it, went as far as to say, "Please, won't you sell me this katana? I'll give you as much money as you want!" while breathing erratically through his nose.

Being so proud of your work that you didn't want to let it go was common among craftsmen.

It was precisely because the ornamentalist was so entranced by the beauty of the katana that he was able to produce such an incredible result. To a craftsman, being able to work on something so amazing was an excellent opportunity to heighten their skills even more.

"This is meant to be an offering for the Count. Are you looking to throw yourself in the middle of that?" Gerhard sighed.

Patrick just let out a frustrated groan in response, then looked down at his feet like he was going to cry. Gerhard could tell that he still hadn't given up, though. He seemed like he was desperately searching his mind for any possible excuse to keep it for himself, all in vain of course.

He said that he would pay anything for it, but a town ornamentalist like Patrick could probably only pay around twenty gold coins. In a pinch, he might have been able to scrounge together fifty gold coins max. He simply couldn't match the financial

power of a count, no matter how hard he tried.

Also, if he were to do something so stupid as to try to take something that was supposed to be an offering, he would lose his privileges to do business freely in the castle. He might not even be allowed to stay in the city.

Gerhard would also end up taking responsibility for it in some shape or form, so he had no reason to play along with Patrick's delusions.

This much was completely obvious to Gerhard, and he knew that someone such as Patrick, who had worked his way up to being able to freely enter the castle as he pleased, simply couldn't be stupid enough not to understand the situation too.

In fact, Patrick understood completely in his mind, but his heart simply couldn't come to terms with it. If he were to let go of it now, he would surely never be able to lay eyes on it again.

It was foolish, but Gerhard could understand how he was feeling.

"When I present it to the Count, I'll make sure to let him know that it was the ornamentalist Patrick that designed the saya. For now, you're just going to have to be happy with that," he said with a sigh.

It was truly a great honor. If the Count was pleased with it, it could very well lead to more big jobs in the future as well. If things really worked out, it could even lead to him moving his workshop into the castle itself.

"If you would be so kind..." said Patrick.

Even after Gerhard offered such an amazing deal, it seemed like Patrick's heart was still filled with regret. He looked back at Gerhard three whole times before finally leaving the room.

Pieces of art that moved the soul were truly terrifying things.

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Gerhard unsheathed the Kikokuto and placed it on the ritual stand. Behind him was a very nervous-looking Djoser. This time, there wouldn't be any concern about losing his sense of reason, so Gerhard allowed his apprentice to watch the process up close.

“Master, have you decided on which spell you are going to enchant it with?”

“Yes, I’ve chosen to enchant it with wind magic.”

“So, you intend to make it an elemental sword?”

“With wind magic, I can simultaneously make it both lighter and sharper than it is now. If I was just enchanting a normal sword, it would end up being underwhelming, but with this Kikokuto...” Gerhard began his work with an entranced light coming to his eyes.

He started by generously placing large jewels around the ritual stand and pouring mercury on top of it. Slowly, it began to let off strange waves, almost as if Gerhard were breathing life into it.

Just that preparation alone had already cost around fifty gold coins in raw materials.

“Master, do you never feel afraid?” Djoser’s voice was shaky.

“Afraid of what?”

“If on the off chance you were to fail, all of those jewels would shatter for nothing—the katana itself may even start to form cracks. Just thinking about that is terrifying to me.”

It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that a single jewel could buy a life for someone. To sit in front of so many of those gems and complete the enchantment under that immense pressure... Just how would that feel?

“It doesn’t matter if you just don’t think about it.”

“Surely something that simple—”

“No, I’m being very serious. It’s not like I’m unaware of how valuable these jewels are, but once an enchanter has it in their hands, they have to think of it as nothing more than an ordinary rock. Don’t allow yourself to think about how much it costs or what you could buy with it.” Gerhard’s eyes were distant, as if he were seeing into his own past. “I don’t even know how many times I’ve failed before getting to this old age, and I certainly don’t want to think about how much money I’ve lost from those failures... Oh, it looks like the ritual stand has built up enough mana. Enough with this topic; let’s stop there.” Gerhard turned to the ritual stand, cutting off the conversation.

Watching his master begin his work, Djoser gulped audibly.

Gerhard engraved ancient runes into the blade along with the rhythm of the pulsing of the ritual stand. When a rune had successfully been imbued with mana, it let off a pale glow.

When Gerhard finally finished after working in this way for three hours, his white hair was drenched in sweat.

"It may be a bit shameful after saying all of that so confidently, but God, that was nerve-racking." Gerhard let out a deep sigh. His expression was one of exhaustion but with a good bit of satisfaction mixed in there.

"Marvelous work, Master."

"Ah, thank you."

The blade, imbued with wind magic, radiated a light green glow.

A normal sword could hold two runes—at maximum, three or four if everything was done professionally. If you tried to force more than that, the blade wouldn't be able to contain that much mana and would end up fracturing. However, the katana before them had successfully held up to the strain of five runes being engraved into it, and the more runes engraved into a sword, the more mana it contained.

While Gerhard was working, the katana spoke to him, saying that it could handle even more, so Gerhard took on the incredible risk. It was the greatest success of his entire career.

"All right, shall we head to the courtyard and give it a try?" Gerhard took the Kikokuto in his hand and stumbled to his feet.

"Master, would it not be best to get some rest first?"

"Yes, thinking logically, that probably would be for the best. But, you see, I'm just too excited. I won't physically be able to rest until I confirm for myself how this katana turned out," said Gerhard, walking to the courtyard.

"Master! The saya—you forgot the saya! Please don't walk around the halls of the castle with a drawn blade!" Djoser rushed after him, carrying the saya.

"Oh..." Gerhard replied in a daze before taking the saya from Djoser.

Was he really fully awake? Still worried about his master, Djoser

tagged along.

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It seemed that Djoser's worries were unnecessary. As Gerhard drew the katana in the courtyard, his back straightened out and the foggy stare sharpened into a focused gaze. Just being next to him was enough to send shivers down Djoser's spine.

Gerhard slowly lifted the blade, then brought it down in a swift motion.

The high-pitched sound of the wind rang out as the blade split the air. You could tell just how sharp the blade was merely by hearing that incredible sound. It wasn't a katana that you would want to stand on the wrong side of. If you were to try to block that swing with a sword—unless it was quite the extraordinary work itself—the katana would cut straight through it and slice into your head.

Gerhard swung the sword a second time, then a third, and each time the wind cried out. It was a sound of great fortune to the wielder, but to the enemy it would sound like the battle horn of the grim reaper himself.

Gerhard nodded strongly and sheathed the katana back into its saya. "Djoser, would you like to give it a try?"

"Would that be acceptable? It being an offering to the Count..."

"We haven't offered it to him yet. If you try it now, we can just call it a test. It's one of the perks of the job!" Gerhard laughed, holding out the katana.

Djoser graciously accepted it into his hands. There was no way that he wouldn't want to swing such a glorious blade. While he was now an enchanter's apprentice, at his core he was a knight. Because of his position as a knight, he showed great restraint for anything that could go against the wishes of the Count, but he was absolutely enthralled by the new weapon before him.

"A katana is generally wielded with two hands. Other than that, just swing it however feels right."

Djoser did his best to copy his master's stance from before, raising the katana up and swiftly bringing it down in front of him

with great force. The wind danced around the blade as it glided through the air, but the sound that he produced seemed somewhat dull in comparison to Gerhard.

Djoser tilted his head in confusion, then proceeded to do ten more practice swings before his master called out to him.

"Leave it at that, Djoser. If the sweat from our palms gets on the tsuka, it would be disrespectful to the Count."

"I couldn't produce the same sound as you, Master." Djoser's frustration showed on his face.

"Depending on technique—or rather the way in which you cut through the air—it seems that the sound can vary. It looks like this katana can be a bit finicky about that kind of thing. You don't have any training in the correct way to handle a katana, so I'm afraid that it's completely expected that it wouldn't sound the same."

"Master, would it be possible to swing it just a few more times?"

"No. Any more than this, and you will be unable to let it go. Unless, that is, you want to run away with it now and leave your wife and child behind."

"I would never. The reason that I seek power in the first place is to defend my lord and my family."

"In that case, best to give it up now... Don't give me that downtrodden gaze. Sometime soon, we can have Lutz make a katana for me and you as well. Instead of coveting someone else's katana, start thinking about what kind of katana you would like to have made, a katana of your very own."

"I like the sound of that very much, just wonderful."

After his master had said that much, he didn't have any choice in the matter. Djoser gave up and handed the Kikokuto back to Gerhard.

"However, I won't be the one to enchant your katana, Djoser."

"Huh?"

"You will be the one to enchant it. After you've built up enough confidence in your skills through practice, you will be the one to engrave the ancient runes into your very own katana."

"Yes, Master. I will devote myself to my training!"

As Djoser bowed deeply to him, Gerhard nodded along

approvingly. He had nothing but appreciation for that katana smith with the world's worst naming sense. Not only had he made that incredible katana to offer to the Count, but he had also lit a fire in the heart of Gerhard's apprentice.

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A few days after offering the Kikokuto to the Count, Gerhard was still being assaulted by a feeling of loss. Even after saying all of that to look cool in front of his apprentice, if he was being honest, he also wished he could have kept that katana. He seriously pondered what he would have to do to make it his, but he couldn't arrive at an answer, so he reluctantly offered it to the Count.

He had heavily criticized Patrick, the ornamentalist, but Gerhard was no better at his core. Rather, it was something that was completely natural for craftsmen who worked with such weapons.

Still completely exhausted from the enchanting process, Gerhard didn't have the energy to do much of anything for a while. He was just milling about the halls of the castle when he heard the faint sound of wind, almost like there was a draft somewhere in the walls.

He followed the sound to the castle's courtyard, where a familiar man was swinging a katana. It was Count Maximillion Shander.

"Hmmm?" Gerhard's thoughts came to a halt for a moment.

The Count had always been sickly and frail, so he had never had any weapons training to speak of or even tried to go through any. He had always had an admiration for those who stood on the battlefield, but Gerhard thought that was as far as it went for him.

Gerhard approached him out of curiosity, and the Count noticed him, giving him an embarrassed smile.

Count Shander was in his early forties, but when he smiled, he looked as if he were still a young boy.

"Do you find it strange that I would be practicing with a katana?"

"It's not like it's anything that you shouldn't be doing, but I must admit, I was a little surprised."

"Yes, I'm sure. Even for me, it's just kind of something I'm doing on a whim."

The Count sheathed the katana back into its saya, but his handling of it was so unsteady that Gerhard nearly had a heart attack just from watching him, thinking that he might cut himself.

"This katana is truly fantastic. I give you my thanks, Gerhard."

"Such words are wasted on me..."

"There was just one thing that was bothering me. If I were to have one of my guards carry this weapon, or if I were to just wear it as an accessory around my waist, would I truly be able to say that I was the owner of this katana?" The Count's eyes pleaded for an answer.

"It may come across as a rather rude metaphor, but..."

"I don't mind. As long as it's easy to understand, that's all that matters."

"It would be like completely ignoring your wife after your wedding, without feeling the connection between your hearts or tasting the nectar of her body. You could brag as much as you like that you had a beautiful wife, but at the center of everything would be nothing but emptiness."

Only after he finished speaking did Gerhard begin to regret saying such a stupid thing to the Count. The faces of a certain couple of lovebirds popped into his head. Surely it was their fault.

However, the Count didn't appear to be put off at all by Gerhard's words. If anything, while it was a bit of a roundabout way of saying it, he seemed happy that Gerhard approved of his efforts.

"I want to get to know this katana better. If I was asked about how it was to use this katana and not be able to answer, then I couldn't truly call myself its owner, now could I?" said the Count, once again drawing the katana and giving it a swing.

However, the sound coming from it amounted to nothing more than what one would expect from a small draft.

"The sound is rather pitiful, isn't it?" the Count said with a pained smile. "But, as I keep swinging it, once in a while, a nice sound rings out. It's almost like this katana is complimenting me, telling me that the last swing was along the right line. It's incredibly encouraging."

Gerhard was impressed with the Count's words. It was certainly a different way of thinking about it. Djoser had just grown frustrated

when he couldn't produce the same sound as Gerhard, but if you thought of it like the katana speaking to you, letting you know when you were doing something right or wrong, there surely was no better teacher in the entire world.

"Your Grace, when swinging the katana, try squeezing a bit more with both hands."

Gerhard spoke without regard for their tremendous difference in status, but the Count didn't appear to be upset by his unsolicited advice. On the contrary, he carefully listened to Gerhard's instructions.

"Squeeze it firmly, but without putting more strength into it than necessary... Yes, that's much better."

"I see. This is how one handles a katana. It feels a lot better than what I was doing before."

Gerhard had about fifty more pointers that he wanted to give to him, but there was no way that someone who had just started learning could take in all of that information at once. It was best to let him gently sink into the bottomless swamp. He grinned deep within his heart.

"Umph!" The Count swung down the Kikokuto with all his might.

The sound was different from before. That time, Gerhard could hear the sound of the air splitting cleanly. It still wasn't much compared to Gerhard or Djoser, but it was a massive improvement from before.

"Oh, I could hear the wind crying!"

"Incredible work, Your Grace."

"What else is there, Gerhard? What can I improve on?" the Count said excitedly.

"You can't master everything in a single day. For today, let's just focus on getting the grip down."

With those words, Gerhard was really trying to say, "Let's do this again." Swordsmanship was a bottomless swamp. If he just sank down to his knees, the swamp would pull him down the rest of the way.

For a while after, the Count continued his practice swings but suddenly covered his mouth in a coughing fit.

"Your Grace!" Gerhard rushed over to his side. He'd been having so much fun watching his progress that he had forgotten how frail his body was. "Your Grace, let's stop here for today."

"But, I..."

He wanted the katana to acknowledge him. Gerhard fully understood how the Count felt. He even respected his desire. His body might not yet have acquired the techniques, but his heart was already that of a full-fledged swordsman.

Gerhard gently shook his head. "No matter how brutal the training, swordsmanship isn't something you can learn in a single day. First, we have to build up your body."

"You may be right..."

"There is nothing to worry about, I assure you. The Kikokuto will surely guide you as you follow this path."

The Count laughed weakly. "Kikokuto, the blade of weeping oni. For a katana with such a fearsome name, it holds such a kindness." After catching his breath, he stood and sheathed the Kikokuto back into its saya, a smile coming to his face.

Seeing the Count stand tall with the Kikokuto on his hip, any regrets that Gerhard still had in his heart cleanly slipped away. It now truly was the Count's katana. There was no space for Gerhard between them.

Thrilling for those who wielded it, fearsome for those who stood against it, a katana with the single-minded pursuit of sharpness. Was there anyone else in the world that would appraise such a katana as being kind?

Gerhard watched from behind as the Count left to return to his official duties. In his eyes was admiration, understanding, and just a drop of envy. He had gotten over any regret that he had, but a different desire had worked its way into his heart.

Oh, how I wish to have a katana of my own. One greater than Ricardo's or even the Count's.

He had told Djoser that he would take him to Lutz's workshop to get him to make them katana as well someday, but at that time, he'd been okay with that being *someday*. He didn't think that he would be filled with such desire to have a katana of his own made

right that instant.

It wouldn't be a request from the Count, so he would have to fund the entire project himself. Gerhard went deep into thought, considering how much he would reasonably be able to spend.

He would request Lutz to forge it, then think of a name along with Claudia. As for the ornamentation, he could commission Patrick again. His personality was questionable, but his skills were the real deal. He could tell that from taking one look at the Kikokuto.

Gerhard would do the enchanting himself, so that wasn't an issue. If he was going to do it, though, he couldn't be stingy with the material costs.

"Two or three hundred gold coins directly out of my pocket, huh?"

In less-archaic terms, it would be like pouring your entire pension and retirement savings into your hobby. Gerhard was single, so he had a bit more freedom in how he used his money, but if he did have a partner, it wouldn't be strange if they stabbed him for even thinking about doing such a thing.

Even still, Gerhard wasn't wavering on *whether* to do it, he was contemplating *how* he was going to do it. He was simply that envious of the bond the Count shared with the Kikokuto.

Just once more, I wish to fall in love with a katana.

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It was supposed to be a walk in the park.

Orcs were a type of monster with a deep green coloration, as if they were covered in moss. They were social creatures that moved in groups and could even understand human language, but they had not yet reached the level of civility at which they could abandon violence as a central pillar of their society. As for weapons, they mainly used primitive stone axes or clubs. Even a hero only in name, such as Ricardo, should have had no difficulty taking on several at once. However, Ricardo was confronted with a life-and-death situation in that moment.

Generally speaking, orcs tended to be about the same height as a grown man, or perhaps a bit taller, but the orc standing before him

was over ten feet tall. In the orc's right hand was a giant axe. Such an exceptional specimen was called a monster variant.

Ricardo's breathing was erratic. His legs were shaking at an extraordinary frequency, and he lacked the strength to even properly grip his sword. If he dropped his focus for even a second, it felt like he was going to pass out.

Each time he attempted to block the orc's strike, he was sent flying backward, hitting trees or landing on the hard ground, taking considerable damage each time.

I've got to run. I can't win like this.

His senses as a swordsman were yelling out to him.

However, the giant orc's underlings had completely cut off his escape route. It wouldn't be that hard for him to fight his way through the smaller ones, but if he turned his back on the orc leader for even a moment, it would surely spell his death.

What should I do? What can I even do?

No matter how many times he thought it through, he came to the same conclusion. He would have to use the bewitching katana that he carried around his waist as a spare. To be honest, he wasn't even sure what would happen if he drew it. He had never used it in a real battle before, but he was certain that if he didn't do anything, his life would soon come to an end. It was a deadly game of roulette—one where not even the dealer knew the odds—but he had no choice.

Ricardo threw the sword he was holding to the side. With his hands shaking so badly, he wasn't sure he would be able to properly guide it back into its sheath.

The orc laughed with the squealing tone of a pig. "What's wrong? Giving up already?"

Ricardo could feel the tepid breath of the orc blow past him as it continued to mock him. The smaller orcs around him started to laugh as well.

Ricardo ignored their unpleasant laughter and drew the katana, settling into the seigan stance, with the katana pointed directly in front of him and the tip at his eye level.

A sweet smell permeated the air in every direction. The blood-drenched woman was directly behind him, whispering something

unintelligible into his ear. If he responded, he would surely die. Ricardo shook off the temptation of death itself and glared at the orc leader.

"Oink, what a pretty sword. I'm going to kill you and take it for myself!" The orc directed a slovenly grin at Ricardo and swung his giant axe once again.

Nothing's happening?

As Ricardo began to panic, the orc swung the axe directly into his own neck.

"Oh, ooooh! Oink, Oiiiiink, Oink!"

The orc wasn't screaming in pain. With every spurt of blood that shot out of his carotid artery, it seemed like he was feeling some kind of sexual pleasure. Perhaps he was under an illusion that made the gallons of blood appear to be some torrent of erotic secretions.

The axe appeared not to have even been properly sharpened. It only made it a third of the way through the orc's neck. As if seeking even greater pleasure, the orc leader wiggled the blade, trying to push it further in.

It didn't manage to cut all the way through, but it was more than enough for the orc to bleed out. He dizzily wobbled on his feet for a moment before falling directly forward, kicking up a cloud of dust as he hit the ground, before letting out one last horrible squeal.

The surrounding orcs went into a state of panic. More than half of them turned and ran away. Some cowered on the ground, unable to move. Others passed out where they stood. There was not a single one of them who dared stand up to the terrifying wielder of the bewitching katana.

"What is this? Just what the hell is going on?" Ricardo just didn't understand. His teeth still chattering, he sheathed the katana back into its saya with trembling hands. The cloying fragrance around him dissipated, but the freezing sensation running along his spine remained.

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The Count and his aides cheerfully greeted the hero as he

returned from his mission to cull monsters in the region. They intended to be there to honor his efforts, but the Hero's expression was far from what one would expect of a triumphant return.

"I wish to speak in private," said Ricardo grimly.

The Count's aides very purposely made a big deal of the hero's disrespectful attitude.

"How could he be so insolent!" one of them protested.

Ricardo didn't bother to seek the source of the shout. It didn't matter if one person said it or if all of them said it. They were all likely thinking the same thing.

"It has to do with the katana you bestowed upon me," Ricardo proclaimed.

The Count thought for a moment. "Very well. Clear the room. Gerhard and Djoser, you two may stay."

"But, Your Grace!" protested another advisor.

"What is it? I've already given you an order." The Count silenced the advisor with a single sharp glare.

Those who observed the exchange were confused by the Count's unusual disposition. He had always been so sickly and frail. He certainly wasn't the sort to speak out so strongly against his own advisors. They had all thought that the Count would either listen to his request to remain in the room, or at the very least, apologetically ask them to leave. It seemed like the Count was unusually confident that day.

When Ricardo calmed down from the initial shock and looked at the Count a bit closer, he noticed one more unusual thing. The Count's sword wasn't in the hands of his guards, but was resting on the small table beside him. He must've really taken a liking to it. Even from a distance, he could tell what a valuable sword it must have been.

Just what happened after I left for my mission?

The aides and advisors left the room while mumbling in discontent. Among them were those who shot hateful stares at Ricardo or Gerhard. They were upset that the Count had gained a bit of confidence and would no longer dance on the palm of their hands. It was a grave problem that would greatly affect the power

struggle within the castle.

Gerhard saw them off with a mocking grin, but Ricardo still seemed confused as to what was going on behind the scenes in the castle.

"All right, let's hear what you have to say." The Count sat back down in his seat. Though the Count was one step closer to the world that he had dreamed of, he no longer had the usual childlike look of wonderment in his eyes as he spoke with Ricardo.

"Ah, yes. The truth is..." Ricardo explained everything that happened during his battle with the orcs. He told him how a giant orc variant appeared, how he had taken the risk of drawing the bewitching katana, and finally, how the orc leader had killed himself with a look of ecstasy.

He struggled greatly to explain the orc's final moments. In the presence of a noble person, he couldn't exactly say, "Then the fat pig got a massive erection while driving an axe into his neck." However, he couldn't leave out those crucial details either, or else his report would be incomplete.

"And that finishes my report..."

After hearing such a horrifying tale, everyone was left speechless.

It was Gerhard who finally broke the silence. "What an absolute fool!" he yelled, as if spitting the words at him.

Ricardo thought that those words might have been directed at the orcs, or perhaps at the locals in the area for not providing accurate information about the number and strength of the monsters, but the old enchanter's sharp gaze was pointed straight at Ricardo himself.

Wait, me? An absolute fool? What did I do?

He had no idea what he'd done to make Gerhard that angry.

"Regardless of the smaller details, your life was saved by that katana. In that case, instead of calling it strange or horrifying, shouldn't you be expressing gratitude?"

He spoke as if he considered the katana a sentient person. Ricardo thought it was simply a peculiar quirk of Gerhard's, but the Count also nodded along. Ricardo looked over to the high-ranking knight, Djoser, for support, but he returned only a blank expression.

It certainly didn't seem like he had any intention of backing Ricardo up, anyway.

"Um, you do understand that this is a katana—a tool—don't you?"

Gerhard breathed loudly through his nose. "Do you really think that something that a craftsman puts his soul into, something that a warrior entrusts his life with, can really be so reductively called a mere tool?" His stare was enough to freeze Ricardo to the core.

Everyone had to be crazy, surely insane. Or was Ricardo the strange one? Ricardo found himself in a crisis of identity.

Just then, the Count, who had been listening to their conversation quietly until then, spoke up. "Perhaps it's because it doesn't officially have a name yet? Simply referring to it as the bewitching katana makes it hard to form a real attachment."

"Ah, yes. That is an excellent thought," said the old enchanter.

"Gerhard, write a letter of introduction for Ricardo to that katana smith. As for Ricardo, ten gold coins, as well as that letter of introduction, will serve as your reward this time around."

Gerhard and Djoser bowed deeply. Ricardo followed their lead. The conversation had progressed quite a bit without even confirming how Ricardo felt about the matter, but it wasn't the sort of discussion that he would be allowed to interrupt.

"By the way, did the people of the settlement not realize that there was an orc variant among them when they requested aid?" asked Djoser.

Gerhard shook his head. "Even if they didn't know the correct terminology for it, surely they at least saw how gigantic that orc was. If not, they wouldn't have so desperately put in the request."

"Then why didn't they say anything? If they had accurately conveyed the gravity of the situation, we would have been able to respond by sending more troops, and the hero wouldn't have had to be put in such danger."

Ricardo was also confused by this. While he had somehow made it out okay, all it would have taken was a single misstep for him to meet an early grave. It wasn't something that you could make up for by simply saying, "Sorry, it looks like we made a bit of a mistake in our report."

“It isn’t unusual for people to leave out some important details in their requests for aid. They probably thought that if they included information about the orc leader in their report, then we wouldn’t bother sending anyone out there due to the possible risk involved.” Gerhard had a bitter look on his face as he spoke.

It appeared to Ricardo that Gerhard was speaking from experience. He certainly was a mysterious old man.

“So even if they have to lie, they figure that if they can just drag someone there, they won’t be able to back out of it after accepting the job?”

“Exactly. Even though the first person to go out there would probably perish.”

Ricardo’s stomach twisted. The thought that he’d been sent out there as a sacrificial lamb was deeply unsettling.

“Ricardo, while you are charged with protecting the weak and poor, it’s best not to assume that all you defend are your allies.”

“I shall keep that in mind...” Ricardo nodded his suddenly heavy head.

The Count took in the room around him before giving his closing remarks on the matter. “I believe this has been bred from a distrust between the people of this territory and me. I won’t pursue any penal action for those settlers. Djoser, head over to that settlement and let them know my decision. Also...” The Count’s gaze sharpened. It was truly the face of a cold-blooded ruler. “Tell them that next time, I will not be so merciful.”

“Yes, Your Grace. I will tell them right away.”

In that way, the audience with the Count came to a close.

When Ricardo tried to leave the room, Gerhard called to him from behind.

“When you visit the katana smith, if there is only a single man there, leave and then come again another day. I can’t stress how serious I am.”

“Would that man not be the katana smith?”

“Make sure that the merchant woman is with him when you visit. If not...” Gerhard no longer had the cold expression from earlier, but looked at Ricardo with concern and compassion. “You may end up

with a katana called *the hero blade*."

It was a day filled with things that Ricardo struggled to comprehend. He couldn't even quite grasp what Gerhard's words of advice meant. However, he decided to at least take his words of warning to heart.

After leaving the room, Ricardo walked alongside Djoser through the dimly lit hallway. To be more accurate, Ricardo stayed by Djoser's side in order to speak to him.

"Djoser, did something happen to the Count?"

"What do you mean by that?" Djoser said in a scolding tone.

Ricardo sensed that he was trying to tell him not to say anything that could be mistaken as an insult to his lord. As it was, it seemed that there was a good bit of debate regarding the changes in the Count within the castle.

"Forgive my rudeness. I just meant to say that he seemed to have regained a good bit of color to his face and was in good spirits."

Why did the innocent Count suddenly become a weapon maniac like that rotten old enchanter?

Ricardo wanted so badly to ask, but he couldn't put together a respectful way of asking that in his head with his limited vocabulary.

"You see, the Count has taken a strong liking to his new katana."

Perhaps Djoser could sense what Ricardo wanted to ask without him even having to say it.

Djoser continued. "It seems that before his official duties for the day, he has been doing practice swings in the courtyard under the instruction of my master. Of course, only to the extent that his body can handle."

"The Count has been doing practice swings?"

It was surprising to hear something so opposite to Ricardo's image of the Count. Was taking a liking to a katana really enough to change the mind of someone who had shown no interest in learning swordsmanship until then?

"It is simply that magnificent a katana."

Ricardo accepted that if Djoser was saying that much, then it must have been so. However, he despaired at the fact that Djoser,

someone whom he considered a fellow rational person, also seemed to have fallen under the influence of those katana maniacs. Just what the hell was going on with everyone?

"I can't wait to have a katana of my own as well. In that way, I'm quite envious of you."

Even if Djoser said that he was envious of Ricardo's position, it was a bit hard to accept as someone who was presently being swung around by his katana and not the other way around.

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After receiving Gerhard's letter of introduction, Ricardo made his way to the hut that he had been directed to go to. Ricardo didn't really have that much interest in giving his katana a name, but the Count had suggested it so strongly that it was essentially an order.

"Hello, is there anybody in?" He knocked at the door a few times before he heard someone moving around inside, then the sound of the latch on the door.

The door opened, and the face of a young woman peeked out. "Ah, hello there. Who might you be?"

She was a gorgeous woman with an adorable face and a bountiful chest. Not to mention a butt so perfectly round that it was as if it were crafted by the master sculptors of old.

Ricardo only barely held back his urge to propose to her there and then. Suddenly, he recalled the reason he was there in the first place and took out his letter of introduction.

"I'm here on the recommendation of Master Gerhard. If possible, I would like to meet with the katana smith."

That woman, Claudia, opened the letter and skimmed through the contents. Ricardo was a bit surprised that she was able to read. He wasn't a noble, nor was he employed by the church. In that age, if one wasn't a part of the academic class, it was rather unusual to be able to read and write. As an adventurer, Ricardo was at least able to write his own name and had a basic understanding of numbers, which was important when collecting rewards for different quests. However, that was the extent of his reading ability.

“All right then, Ricardo, come on in.” Claudia guided Ricardo into the house.

She had just correctly called him by his name. That meant that she wasn’t just looking over the paper, pretending to understand it. She was likely able to read the letter of introduction in full. She must have been the merchant woman that Gerhard had spoken of.

Stepping into the living room, Ricardo saw a young man around the same age as he was. The man stood up and gave him a little bow.

Ricardo had heard from Gerhard that the katana smith was young, but because it took many years of training to become a master smith, Ricardo couldn’t help but imagine someone middle-aged or perhaps beginning to enter their old age. Seeing such a young man claim to be a master smith was nearly unimaginable.

“Lutzy, we have a customer who has come with a letter of introduction from Gerhard. Apparently, he’s the new owner of that bewitching katana.”

“You don’t say... That katana has finally made its way back home, huh?”

Ricardo wasn’t aware of the significance that the katana held to those two, but even from such a short exchange, he could sense their closeness. It would seem that Ricardo’s love story had ended before he even had a chance to express his sudden feelings.

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“Go on, have a seat then, Lutzy—Ricardo too. You’re okay with me reading out the letter, right?”

Lutz had learned how to read and write a bit from his father, but it wasn’t something he excelled at. Even to just read a letter like that would take him a good bit of time, so it was faster to just have Claudia read it out.

“Let’s see... Ricardo is the owner of the bewitching katana, and just the other day, he was facing off against a giant orc. When he directed the katana at the orc, it gruesomely killed itself while doing an ahegao. Scary, very scary indeed.”

“Ahe... What now?” Lutz cocked his head.

Even for a quick summary, it was just so halfhearted.

“When I pointed the katana at the orc, it made an expression that would suggest it was experiencing some kind of sexual pleasure,” said Ricardo, trying his best to address Lutz’s all too reasonable confusion. “It drove its own axe into its neck... I wish I had never seen it make such a face, but even now, I see it in my nightmares...”

“I’m not sure anybody would want to watch some green macho pig’s bloody ahegao suicide show. Ha ha ha...”

It seemed that Lutz finally grasped what they were talking about after Claudia’s incredibly direct description. That certainly was something that no one would want to witness. Lutz was just impressed that Ricardo had managed to watch that without biting off his own tongue.

“Let’s get down to business, then,” Claudia continued. “Ricardo has come here on the recommendation of the Count to give the bewitching katana a proper name—that’s right, isn’t it?”

“Yes. He said that if it were given a name, then I may be able to feel more of an attachment to it,” said Ricardo with a disinterested tone.

Gerhard had told him to be thankful to the katana, but after seeing what it was capable of, it was hard to think of it as anything more than the cruel harbinger of death itself. Forming an emotional attachment to something as dangerous as that felt purely idiotic. Truth be told, he just wanted to quickly give it a name and head home.

“Ricardo, can you tell us exactly what kind of hallucination you experienced when you drew the blade?”

“Ah, yes. You see...” He explained how he had first smelled a sweet scent in the air, followed by the vision of the naked woman, dripping with blood. He told them how she held tight to him, pressed up against his back, whispering something into his ears. He also told them how he felt that if he were to have turned around for even a moment, he would have surely died.

Ricardo was worried that after he told such an outrageous story

they would think that he was insane, but Lutz and Claudia listened to his every word with a serious look on their faces.

Both of them had also been inches away from cutting into themselves with that katana, so they understood from experience what Ricardo was saying. They had also heard about the one thug knight who cut deeply into his own cheek. It was just that kind of katana. With the extra mana given to it after the charm enchantment, it wasn't hard to imagine what kind of impact it could have on the minds of those who laid eyes on it.

"A blood-covered woman, huh? I've got it!"

"Lutzy, whatever you're about to say, no." Claudia shut down Lutz's idea before he even got to say it.

"I haven't even said anything yet!"

"Considering that 'blood-covered woman' was your starting point, I don't even need to hear the rest. For better or worse, a person's level of class is something that unconsciously leaks from their lips, Lutzy."

Lutz let out a groan. Thinking it over again, it probably was a pretty awful suggestion, so he decided it was best to just take a step back from the conversation.

"A glorious, sweet smell and the vision of a woman... In short, that katana is a girl, right?" said Claudia without a hint of facetiousness.

Really, this again?

Ricardo narrowed his eyes in frustration. Those two were just as bad as the bunch back at the castle, treating a katana like it was a real person or something. What the hell was wrong with everyone?

"If it's a girl, a flowery name would be nice." Claudia thought for a moment. "All right, let's name her Tsubaki, after the camellia flower."

Hearing Claudia's suggestion, Lutz gave her a strong, affirming nod. It wasn't like he was just going along with it either; he really did love that name.

Tsubaki, also known as camellia. It was a flower that didn't shed its petals; the whole flower would just drop off the plant, almost as if its head had been cut cleanly off. There were those who avoided

them because of this strange quirk, but others still enjoyed how easy it was to clean up after the flowers dropped off. The flower also held meanings related to strength, beauty, youth, and virginity, making it the perfect name for such an alluring katana.

Ricardo thought that the name sounded far too elegant for such an ominous katana, but he didn't have any better ideas, so he went along with it.

"Tsubaki, huh?" Ricardo held on to the katana. "Your name is Tsubaki."

Actually saying the name out loud, Ricardo began to think that it might not be such a bad name after all.

Lutz stood from his chair. "All right, now it's time for my job. Mind handing her over for a bit?"

Ricardo couldn't believe how relaxed Lutz's disposition was. "I've just explained how terrifying this thing is, haven't I? Do you even own any magic items to boost your mental fortitude?"

"No need, no need. She won't do me any harm, anyway."

"How can you be so sure about that?"

"I'm the one who forged her. I can tell that much." Lutz casually took up the katana in his hands and headed to his workshop.

Ricardo furrowed his brows at Lutz's absolute lack of caution when handling such a dangerous item. Perhaps just hearing about the chilling fear he felt when drawing the blade or the horror of seeing how the orc so brutally killed itself wasn't enough to truly believe it.

"No matter what happens, it's not my fault. I warned you." As Ricardo mumbled under his breath, there was a dark corner of his mind that began to wonder if it was actually he who hadn't fully believed in the katana yet. With that thought, Ricardo's frustration slowly began to build.

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Lutz sat down at his workstation and removed the bewitching katana's saya and tsuka. This would be the last time that he would call that katana by such a name.

A sweet scent drifted through the air. It wasn't like the smell of perfume or freshly baked cookies, but a sweetness so strong that it seeped into your mind.

"Now this one is quite scary indeed..."

Contrary to his words, a huge smile spread across his face. More than being afraid of the hallucination he was experiencing, he was filled with simple curiosity, especially considering that the katana originally came from him.

He took out the graver from his toolbox, along with a small hammer, and began to engrave the name into the nakago. The room was void of all sound, except for the gentle scraping of metal. Lutz actually found that rather strange.

It was still early in the afternoon. Claudia and Ricardo were just in the other room as well. Outside, they had their adorable donkey. Nearby, there was a flowing river. There was no way that he wouldn't be able to hear something, but Lutz found himself surrounded by a deafening silence. It must have been another effect of the katana.

Lutz could feel the presence of someone behind him. From the sound of their footsteps, he could sense that it was likely a woman. At first, he thought that perhaps Claudia had come to check on how he was doing, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

Lutz felt the sensation of thin fingers wrapping around his neck from behind. It was as if she were preparing to strangle him at any moment. If Lutz were to turn around, he was sure he really would be killed.

He probably wouldn't actually be strangled to death, though. That was just a hallucination on his end. In real life, he would likely just end up slicing into his own neck.

Even in his current situation, Lutz didn't feel a drop of fear in his heart. He was so relaxed that he even surprised himself, continuing to engrave the nakago with the fingers still pressing gently into his neck.

"You might be trying to tell me that it's too little too and too late, after throwing you out like that..." Lutz didn't stop his hands for a second while speaking to the presence behind him. "But because of

you, I was able to save Claudia, even form a deep and precious relationship with her. After everything that happened that day, Claudia has helped me out countless times as well. I've also been able to meet a load of interesting people and been entrusted with some really big jobs. My life really has changed so much since that day. My world has become wider."

The fingers around Lutz's neck stayed firmly in place, but it didn't seem like she had any intention of putting any strength into them.

"You were the start of everything good in my life. Thank you." Lutz's expression remained unchanged, his gaze focused sharply on the katana in front of him.

No response came from the woman behind him.

Before long, Lutz finished the engraving. The words "Tsubaki, the camellia flower, Lutz" were carved into the nakago.

Before he'd let her go, there hadn't been enough time to name her, but in that moment, Lutz was sure that was exactly how things were supposed to have been. He still didn't know whether to call it a romantic twist of fate or just a sheer coincidence.

"From now on, your name is Tsubaki." While speaking to her, Lutz wiped off the old oil with a cloth, then applied a new layer.

Her hamon was just as beautiful as the day he'd lost her. Even the crimson runes that Gerhard had engraved only added to her allure.

Lutz reattached the tsuba and tsuka, then sheathed her back into her saya. As the blade disappeared from his view, her fingers pulled away from his neck. He noticed that the sweet scent and the chill in the air had also disappeared.





“What was Ricardo on about, huh? Calling you horrifying...” Lutz sighed, then stood up with Tsubaki in his hands. “You’re a sweet girl at heart, aren’t you?”

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When Lutz returned to the living room, Ricardo looked at him with a terribly pale complexion.

“Were you all right?!”

“What do you mean? All I did was engrave the nakago—of course I’m all right.”

“I mean, if it were a normal sword, that would make sense, but you never know what kind of tricks that bewitching katana will try to pull!”

Lutz gave the katana to him as if shoving him with it. “Tsubaki. From now on, be sure to call her that. Not the bewitching katana.”

“O-okay...”

“I’ve just finished a job that I had left incomplete, so I don’t need any money for it. Lutz’s blacksmith workshop is now officially closed for the day. It’s closing time, so go ahead and get on your way. We’ll be somewhat happily awaiting your next visit.” Lutz pushed on Ricardo’s back, practically kicking him out by force.

When Ricardo stepped outside, the door closed behind him, and he could even hear the sound of the latch closing from the inside.

Ricardo was surrounded by the relaxing view of the countryside, the warm sun kissing his skin. The donkey was braying, the butterflies were dancing, and the river was flowing. It was such a sudden change in atmosphere that it felt like he had just been teleported somewhere.

He felt like he still had a mountain of questions that went completely unanswered, but he struggled to put those questions into words, so he gave up and started on his way home.

“Do you think they’ll be all right?” asked Claudia.

“The great katana Tsubaki has found its way to exactly where it belongs,” said Lutz, staring at his right hand, the one that he’d used to engrave her name. “At least, that’s what I want to believe.”

"You always seem a bit dry, Lutzy, but you're a romantic on the inside, aren't you?"

"Even I'm a bit surprised about how sentimental it made me feel." Lutz put on a smile for her. "Oh, that's right! Speaking of names, your aikuchi still doesn't technically have a name, does it?"

"Not necessary. I have no intention of getting rid of what's already written there. And besides, I've already given it a name that I thought up myself."

"I'm scared to ask, but... That name would be?"

"I've called it '*love letter*.' Lovely name, don't you think?" She gave him a smirk.

Lutz's eyes wandered around the room in embarrassment. "The great katana, love letter. A message that drives directly into one's heart. Quite a fitting name if I just overlook the fact that it's a public display of one of the cringiest things that I've done in my entire life. I feel like I'm never going to live it down as long as I live," said Lutz with a gloomy expression.

In response, Claudia let out a whistle from her lips. "Oh my, oh my... Are you saying that you're looking to spend the rest of your life with me?"

Lutz hadn't expected her to take his words in that way, but thinking it over, he was pretty happy that she did. "If you're all right with it... I'd like that very much."

She giggled at his reaction. "Well then, I might just have to hold you to that." Her tone was joking, but her eyes were filled with love and pure joy.

I just can't resist that smile of hers.

Lutz wanted to catch up to Ricardo and let him know something very important. The hallucination of a woman was nothing compared to the horrifying power of a real one.

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Ricardo was in a sour mood. Recently, he had been told by many that he had been gifted with a wonderful katana, so he should be more appreciative of it. However, it was he who had to deal with the

strange and terrifying curse of that katana, not them. Could they say such an irresponsible thing if they weren't just watching him from a safe distance?

What was even more frustrating was the fact that Ricardo still felt it necessary to carry around such a cursed katana, just in case. When he was facing off with the orc leader, who knew how things would have turned out if it weren't for the bewitching katana. Even after thinking about it long and hard after the fact, he wasn't sure, but the mental image of the orc's giant axe splitting Ricardo's head in two was enough to make him tremble.

For this reason, even though Ricardo wasn't a swordsman who used dual blades, he carried two weapons on his hip at all times. Honestly, it just felt heavy. That was yet another source of frustration for him.

Even though he carried it with no intention of actually drawing it, it wasn't long before his hand was forced. He had been assigned to take out a werewolf in a small village.

In the Count's territory, there were labyrinths that spawned monsters. They were dangerous places, but that made them a perfect place to hide for refugees or criminals on the run. However, after being subjected to the miasma of the labyrinth for days—sometimes even months—there were cases where humans would begin to transform into monsters themselves. The werewolf that Ricardo was hunting was that kind of creature.

According to the people of the village, there was a lone werewolf that was hiding out in the forest, and it was making a mess of their crops, as well as taking their livestock.

Ricardo thought that he would be fine alone if it were just a single werewolf, but this proved to be a grave mistake.

With claws and fangs as sharp as knives, the werewolf ran through the forest like the wind itself. It was a formidable foe, but Ricardo predicted the werewolf's moves perfectly. Ricardo lowered his center of gravity and sliced up into the arm of the attacking werewolf, then he slashed into its chest, making use of the momentum.

That should do it.

Just as Ricardo thought that, the werewolf let out one final howl, as if squeezing out the last bit of air from its lungs. The horrible sound reverberated throughout the forest. The werewolf's expression was so incredibly human that Ricardo was reminded of the fact that it indeed once had indeed once been a normal person. What bothered him more, though, was the fact that its face wasn't one of despair. Before collapsing onto the ground, the werewolf gave Ricardo a crafty look that said, *Take that*.

Soon after, Ricardo heard the rustling of trees around him. Something was approaching—something that was neither man of beast. Another werewolf emerged from the underbrush. Then another, and again another. In seconds, Ricardo found himself alone against five werewolves.

Ricardo was confident that he could beat them if they were so kind as to attack one by one, but if they were to gang up on him, he didn't have a chance. If one were to sneak up on him while he was dealing with another werewolf, it would be nearly impossible to deal with on his own.

Popping in and out of Ricardo's sight, they ran through the forest, surrounding him completely. Before they started to come at him in unison, he had to do something.

"I'm going to kill every last one of you!" In desperation, Ricardo drew the bewitching katana and held it at the ready in front of him.

The werewolf closest to him brandished its claws with a huge smile, then used those claws to relentlessly gouge a hole into its own face, fresh blood spurting out everywhere.

That wasn't even the end of it. It quickly dragged claws down the right side of its face, tearing away fur and skin as it went. Its right eyeball looked as if it were about to fall out onto the ground. On the left side of its face, Ricardo could still make out a sickening look of ecstasy.

Lost in a world somewhere between suffering and euphoria, the werewolf's life came to an end.

The next closest werewolf had ripped open its abdomen and was playing with its own intestines while letting out a crazed laugh. It was as if it achieved some sort of orgasmic pleasure every time it

pulled out another stretch of its innards.

Even though they were his enemies, Ricardo couldn't help but feel pity for them. To die in such a way was an insult to life itself.

If he were asked whether the katana he was wielding was weak or strong, he would obviously appraise it as strong. Two master craftsmen had poured all of their techniques and their very souls into crafting it. It was an undeniable masterpiece.

However, if he were asked whether it was good or evil, he would likely have to answer with the latter. He wondered what would happen to him if the church found out he was using such an ominous power. Worst-case scenario, he could very well be burned at the stake.

Maybe it's for the best that I relinquish this bewitching katana.

He couldn't deal with all the maniacs around him that couldn't tell the difference between a person and a katana any longer either.

It seemed like two of the werewolves had managed to run away, but the last werewolf still stood in Ricardo's way. What was visible of the skin of its face had turned red, its breathing erratic. At first, it looked like it was unsteady on its feet, but on closer inspection, it seemed that it was purposely rubbing its inner thighs together. Fighting through the temptation, it inched closer and closer to Ricardo. However, there was no longer any real life to its movements.

"Grrraaahh!" The werewolf charged at him with a wretched scream.

But to Ricardo, it was as if the werewolf were moving in slow motion. In an unusual state of calm, he took a single step forward, then sliced the werewolf in half down its center as if he were splitting a log. After that single stroke of the katana, the werewolf's body fell to either side, cleanly split down the middle.

It was incredible. The cutting edge on that katana was just too incredible. Still staring at the corpse, he couldn't believe that he'd been able to accomplish such a feat. The thought alone excited him greatly.

"This is amazing!"

It wasn't just the curse of the katana that was so powerful, but in

terms of sheer cutting ability, it was also of the very finest quality.

He wanted to brag about it—tell someone about how fantastic it was. He still wasn't sure about the first two werewolves, but he definitely wished that someone had been around to see him cut down the third one.

At that moment, he felt a presence behind him and turned around without thinking. "Hey, take a look at thi—"

Before him was a naked woman, completely dripping with blood.

"Oh..."

In the heat of the moment, he had done something incredibly foolish. He didn't know what to do. Would he also die drowning in a sea of pleasure? While he was frightened to his core, he didn't take his eyes off of her for a second.

She had hair long enough to cover her face, but her eyes peered through the gaps in her silky black hair. They stared right back at him with a glossy shimmer to them. Her eyes were more beautiful than anything Ricardo had ever seen, more beautiful than the finest jewels, or even the sun itself.

Ricardo had completely lost himself in her radiant beauty, but the woman turned away from him and began to fade into the air.

"No, wait!" Ricardo reached out his hand, but she was no longer there.

He tried to sheathe and draw the katana over and over again, but the woman didn't show herself. Ricardo could still feel the mana as well as her unique presence coming from the katana, so it wasn't like she had really disappeared for good.

"Tsubaki..." Ricardo whispered while holding the katana close to him.

The beating of his heart wasn't that of exhaustion or fear, but something entirely different. He only fully realized that halfway through his journey back to the castle.

***

Gerhard walked through the halls of the castle, his mind swirling with regret. He realized that he had been far too harsh on Ricardo,

unjustly so. Ricardo wasn't his subordinate or apprentice. They were of equal status as fellow servants of the Count. For Gerhard to so one-sidedly criticize him like that, it wouldn't be unreasonable for Ricardo to think that he was trying to pick a fight.

He couldn't even claim that he had the right to scold him due to their vast age difference. Gerhard hadn't lived an honorable enough life to be able to do such a thing. In fact, he wasn't even in a position to be able to tell people to learn from his mistakes. The mere thought of anyone learning from his long history of embarrassment and regret was enough to breed fear in his heart.

In his life, he had seen people lose their lives due to poor handling of their weapons. He had also seen those who had perished from becoming so attached that they refused to relinquish their weapons. There was no right way to forge a relationship between weapon and wielder. It was something that varied greatly from person to person, something that Gerhard shouldn't have stuck his nose into.

He still didn't think that he'd necessarily said anything that was wrong, but it simply wasn't his place to say it. However, they didn't have the kind of relationship where Gerhard could just casually go up to him and say, "Sorry, I said too much back there." Gerhard would likely remember the look of disappointment on Ricardo's face when presented with one of his weapons for the rest of his life.

He had no intention of directly apologizing, but at the very least, he figured he could afford to be just a bit nicer to him to make up for it. Just then, he saw Ricardo approach him from the other end of the hallway.

"Oh, Ricardo! Good work on your recent werewolf culling."

"Gerhard, glad to see you in good spirits as well."

Ricardo's demeanor seemed no different from usual. It seemed like Gerhard might have been the only one worried about their last encounter. He felt a bit stupid, but he had already decided to try to be nicer, so he was going to follow through with it.

"You see, I've been doing some thinking, and I've decided that if you truly no longer want the bewitching katana, I would be willing to buy it off of you. Or we can even ask Lutz to help make it a bit more

controllable.”

As Gerhard finished, he could see even in the dimly lit hallway that Ricardo’s had gone wide and he was clutching firmly to his katana, turning his right shoulder to Gerhard as if to protect it from him.

“Tsubaki is my beloved katana! I would never relinquish her to anyone!” he yelled before angrily making his way to the Count’s court with an exaggerated gait and booming footsteps.

“Who the hell is Tsubaki?”

Gerhard did his best to avoid saying cliché things like “kids these days,” but at that moment, he really wanted to say it. He just didn’t get it. It was almost impossible to guess what that young’un was thinking.

***

A few days after fighting the werewolves, Ricardo paid Lutz’s workshop another visit to get some maintenance done on his beloved katana.

However, Lutz returned to the living room after only working on her for around ten minutes. “There doesn’t seem to be any issue.”

“Hmm?”

“There isn’t any sign of any warping or chipping of the blade. I’m sure it got some blood on it, so I’ve at least applied a new layer of oil over it, but that’s about all there is to do.”

“I thought there might be more damage due to my rough technique.”

“When you get a katana of this quality, it’s actually better to put a good bit of force behind your swings—no need to hold back. From what I’m seeing, you must have actually made a super clean cut.”

Lutz wasn’t there to see the corpse of the werewolf that he had split in two. Still, the fact that Lutz had complimented him like that made him happy, even a bit bashful.

Lutz handed Tsubaki back over to Ricardo and then sat down next to Claudia.

“Also, you were saying that even though you turned around and

looked at her, she didn't do you any harm, right? That is a bit strange... Both last time, when I did the engravings, and this time, I felt the same chill of death down my spine while I was working on her."

"Do you think that means Tsubaki has fully accepted Ricardo as her wielder?" said Claudia.

Ricardo nodded vigorously in response.

It all seemed very strange to Lutz. Just a few days ago, Ricardo had treated the katana like it was some evil entity, hadn't he? But now, he smiled brightly when his katana was complimented, and his eyes brimmed with a gentle affection whenever he looked at Tsubaki. What could have possibly happened to make him change so much in such a short time?

"Anyway, it seems that you've gotten used to using the katana, so that's good. However, there are a few issues that I want to discuss."

"What do you mean? Tsubaki is perfect!"

Tsubaki was completely infallible. Both the power of her curse and the cut of her blade were second to none. Ricardo gave Lutz a look of suspicion. Just what could he possibly have to say?

"That's exactly the issue. Tsubaki is too perfect. Ricardo, if you depend too much on her, your skills as a swordsman will begin to rust."

If he continued to use a katana that caused his enemy to kill themselves just by having the katana directed at them, Ricardo would eventually lose all sense of what it really meant to do battle. He would forget how to fight for himself and begin to take the battlefield far too lightly.

Lutz warned Ricardo that he should use Tsubaki only as a last resort, if he was completely surrounded by enemies, for instance. When fighting something one-on-one, it was in his best interest to use a normal sword. "Oh, and one more thing..."

"There's still more?"

"You have to think about what would happen if you were fighting alongside somebody. If I had to wager a guess..." Lutz mimicked a katana with his hands and whacked his neck repeatedly.

"I generally work alone, so I don't think I have to worry about

that too much, but, well... I'll keep that in mind."

"Do you not get asked to guard the Count when he goes outside of the castle?"

"Ah, that does happen from time to time..." Ricardo looked up at the ceiling with a sigh.

If, in the process of defending the Count, everyone around him were to suddenly start killing themselves—friend or foe—he wouldn't exactly be fulfilling his role as a bodyguard. Worse still, Ricardo would probably be forced to kill himself too, in order to take full responsibility. What kind of sick joke would that be?

Especially considering that the Count had started to take a greater interest in swordsmanship, it seemed that he had started to feel a bit of camaraderie with Ricardo, so it was possible that he would call on him more often.

To not be able to use his greatest weapon during his bodyguard duties, when he needed it most—a mission where he couldn't afford a single misstep and certainly couldn't just run away on his own—was a glaring contradiction.

"It's not like there aren't ways that you could use it, even in those kinds of situations," said Claudia.

"What?" Ricardo's head shot up.

"At least from what I've heard so far, it seems like there is a specific range to the deadly effects of Tsubaki's charm. The normal-sized orcs that you fought were able to run away fine, and there were a couple of werewolves that managed to get away as well."

"Ah, so if I'm able to draw an enemy far enough away from others, it might still be possible to use Tsubaki, huh?"

"If you get a better feel for the precise distance at which the effects are strongest, it will certainly be a lot easier to use in a variety of situations. It may even be possible that if you form a deeper bond with Tsubaki you may learn to specifically target something or someone."

"That's it, Claudia! That's got to be it!" Ricardo stood up in excitement.

He had once thought of his katana as something horrible—evil even—but now, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he felt

love for her. He used to fear for his life every time he drew her, but now, he knew that she would never cause him harm. The two of them were undoubtedly growing closer together.

If they were to deepen their bond even further, it stood to reason that they would be able to do even more than they could now.

"There's still so much that I have to learn about Tsubaki. All right, I'm going to head out right this instant and do some testing on the range of her effects." Ricardo skipped his way out of the house with an elated laugh.

Lutz and Claudia were left behind in the living room, even more confused than when he first arrived.

"Do you think that his personality was influenced by the katana, or did it just pull out a side of him that he was trying to hide before?" said Claudia.

"I'm sure it's probably the latter, especially considering that he's a friend of Gerhard's."

"That's an awful way of putting it, but rather convincing all the same."

Lutz stuck his head out the window and tried to look for Ricardo, but he had already gone out of view.

"Tsubaki found her way to exactly where she belongs, huh..." Lutz's gentle whisper faded into the wind without reaching a single person's ear.

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Ricardo returned to the forest where he had fought the werewolves.

When he got there, he told the nearby villagers, "I've just come back to make sure that no more werewolves have been popping up after I left. Oh, no, there's no need to thank me, I'm just fulfilling my mission from the Count, ha ha ha..."

The villagers even thanked him by providing him with food and lodging for the night, but his intentions lay elsewhere.

The next day, he left in the early morning and searched for the traces of his previous battle. The corpses of the werewolves had

seemingly been eaten away by wild dogs or tanuki, but the bones remained intact. Even reduced to a skeleton, the werewolf that had been split in half still looked very peculiar.

"Let's see... I was standing here, and the one that killed itself was standing there..." He looked around. "And then, the ones that managed to run away were over there, huh?"

He used the rope that he brought along to get more accurate measurements. It seemed that the strongest effects of Tsubaki were at a range of about sixteen feet. It could be difficult to face off against an archer, but on the other hand, in a narrow environment like a labyrinth, he would be nearly invincible.

Perhaps if their bond grew even deeper, like Claudia suggested, he might even be able to control the range of Tsubaki's effects, or focus on a single enemy in the distance and force them to take their own life.

"We still have so much room to grow together. When I have mastered this great power, it will mean the birth of a true hero, not just one in name alone!"

For the first time, Ricardo began to feel the weight of his nickname become a little lighter.

I love Tsubaki. And through that love, I may even be able to love myself a bit more.

Chapter 6: To Live by Steel, and Die with It in Your Arms

"Hey, Gerhard! Are you there?!"

On a peaceful day in the mellowed heat of late summer, a knock—or more accurately, a desperate pounding—cut through the still quiet of the castle.

In his enchanter's workshop, Gerhard looked up from the book he had been reading with an annoyed scowl and a sigh. While truly regrettable, he recognized the voice of his acquaintance on the other side of the door. It was Borbus, the master of the blacksmith's workshop in town.

It wasn't like they asked him to do it, but a master smith had personally come all the way to his workshop. He couldn't just leave his apprentice to deal with him. It was a pain, but if Gerhard started to slack on basic etiquette, it could come back to bite him down the line. It was that sort of thing that got people to start spreading rumors behind your back. In his frustration, a pronounced wrinkle formed between his eyebrows. It truly was a pain to deal with.

He opened the door to reveal an old, tan, bearded man. At his feet was a heavy-looking wooden box.

"Hey there! Here you go. Ten swords, fresh out of the forge."

"Ah, nice work. Djoser, carry them inside, will you?" After calling to his apprentice, he pulled out his wallet. "Here's ten gold coins; go ahead and check it over."

Borbus quickly counted the coins in his hands, then slipped them into a small bag.

All right, end of conversation.

Gerhard went to close the door on him, but he noticed that Borbus was still standing there, like he still had something he wanted to say.

"What? You can go home now."

"You know, Gerhard... Making shortswords is all well and good, but when is the next big job going to come? It's about time that you'll be needing something, right? I've been hearing that the hero has been making quite a name for himself recently." Borbus looked as if he were trying to hide his desperation behind a friendly smile.

For a blacksmith, being entrusted with crafting weapons that would be used for such offerings was a great honor. It was also very generous in terms of gold. It was also one of the things that supported his position as the greatest smith in the Count's territory.

For all of that to just suddenly stop, it wasn't unreasonable for Borbus to be anxious.

"The hero is quite obsessed with the katana that he acquired recently. He likely won't be needing any new weapons for a while," said Gerhard coldly.

"And how long is *a while*?"

"How am I supposed to know? Could be ten years, twenty years —he may even dedicate the rest of his life to using that katana. He's just *that* in love with it."

"I'm desperate over here! How can you say something so irresponsible?"

"Irresponsible? Irresponsible, huh?" Gerhard laughed through his nose. "I think that you're misunderstanding something here. Those jobs for rewards or offerings to the Count weren't expressly for your sake. We don't have a need for new weapons right now, so we won't be placing an order."

Borbus seemed to have lost the will to even muster up a response.

"Go home," said Gerhard. "That is, unless you want me to call some knights over to come to kick you out?"

"I'm sorry... I'll take my leave for today. Can you just tell me one thing? What do you plan to use those shortswords for?" asked Borbus.

"They're for my apprentice, so he can get some enchanting practice in."

"Just for enchanting practice?!" Borbus's eyes shot open in shock.

The shortswords that he'd put sweat and blood into forging were just going to be used as disposable practice swords. If the flow of mana wasn't controlled properly, they would just fracture into pieces.

Just for that?

The words spiraled in his mind. Before he even realized it, he had been pushed out into the hall, and the door had been closed on him. He reached for his bag and felt the gold coins inside. It felt as though he had sold something more than those shortswords, something very precious indeed. With a shrunken arch of his back, he turned heel and left Gerhard's workshop behind him.

"Have you known Borbus for a long time?" asked Djoser, closing the latch on the door.

"Yes, unfortunately, you could say that. It's not like he isn't a skilled blacksmith, but..." Gerhard checked the contents of the wooden box, and disappointment swept over his face.

Djoser peered into the box as well from the other side. "Oh my, the design is truly fantastic," he said in awe.

The grips and the sheaths of all the shortswords were decorated elaborately. There were even some smaller jewels embedded in them. From the unique style, they could recognize whose handiwork it was. It was likely done by Patrick, the same ornamentalist who had worked on Kikokuto, the blade of weeping oni.

"Could he really have made any profit from selling these for one gold coin apiece?"

"No way. It would have cost him at least three gold coins each. A business-minded person would have to sell them for around ten gold each to make it worth their effort. That fool..." Gerhard spit out the words. Looking at those shortswords, he could tell exactly how desperate—how incredibly sad—Borbus must have been feeling.

He had likely thrown any thoughts of profit out of the window in the hope that the Count would like them so much that bigger jobs would start coming his way again.

Not only would the Count never even lay eyes on them, but their fate was to be used as practice for enchanting, completely disposable. When Borbus learned of that, the sense of despair must

have been unbearable.

Gerhard took one of them in his hand and inspected the blade. It was made with great attention, and he had no complaints about the strength of the steel either. However, that was all.

"There's nothing exciting about it at all."

"Exciting, you say?" Djoser cocked his head at his master.

"Remember how you felt when you first swung Kikokuto. You seemed as though you wanted to swing that katana forevermore. That isn't something that you can feel with just an ordinary sword."

"Yes, that's true."

"It may be a bit extreme, but a sword that doesn't make you want to cut someone down isn't a sword at all in my view."

"I believe that wording may be a bit excessive..."

"I see, I see... Excessive, is it? Ha ha ha!" Gerhard laughed while sheathing the shortsword, then his expression suddenly turned serious again. "To tell you that man's tale, I'll have to subject myself to a good deal of embarrassment as well..."

He sat back in his chair and thought for a moment. Where could he even start?

"Djoser, in your eyes, what do you consider a legendary sword to be?"

"Hmm?"

The topic was so out of the blue that Djoser didn't know how to respond.

"I'm not trying to get philosophical on you here, and it's not like I have a particular answer that I'm looking for either. Even if your answer is very different from mine, I won't be angry or anything. I just want you to tell me what you imagine when you hear those words."

"In that case, I suppose that there is a certain romance to the idea of a legendary sword."

"Romance, huh? It definitely is something that has been rather romanticized. However..." Gerhard looked out the window. His gaze was fixated on something far beyond the courtyard of the castle. "As a craftsman, I believe that one should feel something stronger than romance."

Unable to fully discern what his master meant by that, Djoser continued to listen quietly.

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The skills of a craftsman are constantly being pushed to greater and greater heights. If a sword crafted one hundred years ago were put up against a modern sword, the older one would lose every time. That was how it was supposed to be.

However, even that simple logic was often crushed by the romantic ideals of man, clouding the eyes of the masses.

I suppose it's already been forty years since then... I was an adventurer in a four-man party that delved into the labyrinth in search of the sacred sword.

Over the course of the years, Gerhard had explored that Labyrinth many times. He believed that if he were to just find the sacred sword, everything that he could ever want would simply fall into his hands, even though there wasn't a single person who could guarantee any of that to be true.

He had lost count of how many expeditions they had made, but eventually, they had managed to make it down to the very deepest floor. On the way there, they had been blessed with great luck. Everything that they did just seemed to work out somehow. They knew that there would likely never be another chance like that. If they were to let it slip between their fingers, they might never be able to make it to the final floor again. They all knew that there was no choice but to push through, no matter the challenges that would face them.

The most dangerous trap in a labyrinth was perhaps the complacency bred by good luck. The four of them had thrown away the most important rule for any adventurer: If things get dangerous, run the hell away.

A giant monster appeared to defend its treasure. It was the first time they had seen that kind of monster, so they had no idea what any of its weak points were.

To say that they bravely stood up to the monster would certainly

sound better, but the truth of the matter was that they were simply drunk with greed.

They defeated the beast, but at the cost of the lives of two of Gerhard's comrades. Standing over the corpses of his friends that had so died so miserably, only then did Gerhard realize what a foolhardy thing they had done.

But even that regret only lasted for a moment. Saying that they couldn't go back empty-handed—for the sake of those that lost their lives too—the two of them placed their hands on the treasure chest. In reality, any thoughts of their comrades had already left their minds.

They were about to get their hands on the world's greatest sword, or perhaps even the strongest katana. The fame, the riches, everything they could ever dream of, they believed it all to lie inside that single treasure box.

However, inside it was nothing but a bronze sword.

Gerhard had fallen in love with the idea of the sacred sword, sacrificing the lives of his dearest friends and comrades, even letting go of his own humanity along the way, all for a bronze sword.

It likely wasn't the case that the ancient texts that talked about it were wrong, necessarily. In an age where most were still using stone axes and makeshift staves, it would make sense that a hero wielding a bronze sword would dominate the battlefield. But that was several hundred years ago. If such a sword were to be used in the current world of steel, it would break upon first contact with a steel blade and wouldn't even have a chance of piercing steel armor. That was just the natural advance of the craft.

In a fit of rage and regret, Gerhard destroyed the *sacred sword*. Then they returned to the surface.

They didn't even report to the Adventurers Guild that they had found that so-called sacred sword. Other foolish adventurers would possibly repeat their mistake in search of it, but they no longer cared. It wasn't their problem.

It may be obvious by now, but the other man who made it out with his life was Borbus. After that, we both retired from the Adventurers Guild. We believed that we had no right to continue. In

our second chance at life, we decided that we had no choice but to create the world's greatest weapon with our own hands. I became an apprentice enchanter, and Borbus knocked at the door of a blacksmith's workshop.

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"Perhaps I've said a bit too much..."

"No, um... I believe that I have learned something very valuable."

Djoser was about to say that it was an interesting story, but he stopped himself in time.

"You're free to go home for today. From tomorrow on, we'll be starting your training as an enchanter in earnest."

"Master..."

"Maybe it's because I was talking so much about the past, but I'd like to be alone for a while."

After his master said that, Djoser could no longer object. He simply bid him adieu for the day and made his way home.

Left alone in the quiet workshop, Gerhard took one of the shortswords back up in his hand. Borbus truly was a skilled blacksmith. The reason Gerhard had done business with him up until then wasn't because of their history together. It was because Gerhard recognized him as the greatest smith in the Count's territory. However, it had been ten years since he had become a master smith, and in that time, his techniques hadn't improved one bit. He dedicated all of his time and energy to simply maintaining his status as the master of his workshop.

"The fool..." Gerhard muttered under his breath, his voice tinted with sadness.

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Borbus couldn't accept it. There was no way that he could. To accept it would be a denial of how he had spent the latter half of his life.

As there were only so many people in the industry, rumors spread

fast. He had heard that the Count was infatuated with his new sword. He had also heard that the hero had been making waves with his new weapon. Both of which were jobs that he'd had absolutely nothing to do with.

At a Blacksmiths Guild meeting, he'd tried to ask around with the other master smiths to see if anyone knew who forged those swords, but they'd all said that they didn't know anything. If any of them actually had a smith who was so skilled, they would be bragging about it, so they were likely telling the truth.

When delegating the distribution of raw materials and various orders from the Knights Order and merchant companies, Borbus was stung by the gazes of those around him. They all had pity in their eyes.

One day, he was the go-to for all of the Count's offerings, the next it was all stolen from him by some unknown smith. It really was pitiful.

It's a load of bullshit... What right do people who have never even worked on a project for the Count have to look down on me?

Suddenly, Borbus felt a sharp pain shoot through his chest, and he curled up into a ball on the ground, sweat pouring from his body.

"Borbus, are you okay?" The man next to him showed some obligatory care.

"I'm fine, it's no issue."

"Oh, okay then." The man backed off without any hesitation.

He probably was thinking that he had at least shown a bit of concern, so even if anything were to happen, it would be Borbus's fault for not seeking help.

He had been experiencing that kind of chest pain for the past several years, but each year, the time between attacks grew shorter and shorter.

Don't pity me. Don't look down on me. Don't deny my way of life.

In a fit of hatred and pain, he repeated the words in his head as if they were a curse.

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The next day, Borbus visited Patrick's ornamentalist's workshop. Patrick had recently been blessed with some very fulfilling, not to mention financially attractive, jobs. That was likely why he seemed in such good spirits.

"Well, hiya there, Borbus! What can I do for you today?"

"I want to ask about the sword that was offered to the Count recently."

"Oh, that one, huh? That was a fine one. Absolutely gorgeous. Making a dress for such a beautiful young lady was such a privilege, I almost felt bad accepting payment for it. Best job ever. Honestly, I felt aroused." Patrick looked absolutely infatuated just thinking about it.

Borbus tried to press the conversation forward, not wanting to play along with Patrick's strange fetishes any longer than he had to.

"Did you happen to see the name of the smith anywhere when you were working on it?"

"Borbus, I'm afraid that's a no-go, no can do. You know, I can't just be breaking client-ornamentalist confidentiality like that. It's a breach of privacy! It's not something I can just say all willy-nilly!"

Borbus scattered silver coins onto the table in front of Patrick. "I just want to ask you as a fellow craftsman."

"Well, well... I can feel your earnestness." A corner of his lip turned up as he felt one of the coins between his fingers.

Patrick was aware that Borbus's skills had remained the same for the past couple of decades. He wasn't just looking for someone to make pleasant conversation with about smithing, he was searching for the object of his jealousy. However, that wasn't something of Patrick's concern, especially when so many silvers were in front of him.

"If you're looking for a name, there was an engraving on it. The sword itself was named Kikokuto, the blade of weeping oni, and the smith went by the name of Lutz."

"Lutz... I've never heard that name before."

"Then perhaps he lives outside the city walls?"

"Outside the walls?! Some stray smith that isn't even registered with the Guild? Someone who hasn't received any formal education

and doesn't have access to any proper facilities? Are you trying to suggest that some peasant like that would be capable of forging a quality weapon? If that's your sick idea of a joke, keep it to yourself next time!"

Faced with Borbus's outrage, Patrick returned a cold smile. "That Guild that you're so proud of is precisely the problem. Hey, Borbus, exactly what purpose do you think the Guild serves?"

"What are you even asking? That much should be obvious, especially considering you're registered with the Guild as a precious metals craftsman too."

Inside the Guild, there was a hierarchy of craftsmen based on the value of the materials that they worked with. The more valuable the material that you worked with, the higher your status. While Borbus and Patrick were both the masters of their own workshops, Patrick was technically of higher status. For someone like that to be questioning what the purpose of the Guild even was, he didn't know how else to respond.

"Oh, come on, just answer the question. What purpose does the Guild really have?"

"They ensure the fair distribution of raw materials, the stable flow of commerce, as well as the education and protection of craftsmen," answered Borbus plainly. There were few things more annoying than suddenly having to answer some pointless quiz in the middle of a conversation.

"I'll give you some points for that. They make sure that there is never a shortage of coal or steel in one place and a surplus of it in another. That is a very important thing indeed. I can understand that much. They keep a stock of things like nails and horseshoes so that the town's people never run into a shortage. They all also attempt to assign work equally across the many forges in the city. However, I do take issue with your final point."

"What aren't you satisfied with?"

"I get the feeling that it's not so much a system that provides protections for craftsmen as a whole, but one that defends the status of those who have achieved the title of master."

Under the Guild's system, there was a strict limit to how many

people could be masters of their own workshops. Therefore, up-and-coming craftsmen who displayed great skill were often viewed as a threat to that system, and the master craftsmen of the Guild used their power to maintain their status within it.

By claiming more advanced methods to be secret techniques or trade secrets, they put off having to teach them to their apprentices. When someone began to show a bit too much promise, they would abuse the old tradition of sending people out as journeymen to train their skills in different places. In reality, it was something more akin to exile.

"Isn't it only natural to limit the flow of that kind of knowledge? If their trade secrets were to be stolen, that workshop would lose any advantage that it had in the market. It could lead to good craftsmen having to sleep on the street!"

Borbus did his best to explain his favorable position on secrecy in the industry, but Patrick just shook his head.

"It's all well and good to protect those skills, but what sense is there in blocking that education for everyone that just happened to come after you? With that kind of attitude, there isn't even any reason for the tradition of setting out as a journeyman. If masters won't even teach their own apprentices anything, they sure as hell won't help out some wandering craftsman from a different workshop. No matter where they go, they just get doors slammed in their faces or get treated like some kind of servant. You must've experienced that yourself! Did you learn anything at all from your time as a journeyman?"

"I learned that the world is filled with shitbags, but that was about it."

"Oh, wonderful! What an excellent and worthwhile experience. Although I believe that may be a lesson with no shortage of opportunities to learn, so it's probably not necessary to go so far out of your way to figure that out." Patrick collected the silver coins on the table. "But I fear we've gotten a bit off topic. To put it bluntly, Borbus, you have dedicated the last many years of your life to protecting your status without even trying to polish your own skills. Do you think that may perhaps be the reason you have been let go

by the Count and even Gerhard?”

“What the hell do you know?” Borbus demanded. “I’ve been working my ass off!”

“If you have been, not a shred of that effort has gone into educating your apprentices, I’m sure. Do you have any idea what people say about your workshop when you aren’t in earshot? They call it the graveyard. As soon as a young craftsman enters, they’ve already reached their end.”

“That’s a load of bullshit... I give my apprentices food and good pay, and I share my knowledge of the craft with them...” Pain shot through Borbus’s chest. He couldn’t quite tell if it was just from his chronic illness or whether it was a different kind of pain altogether.

“Is that so? Then I suppose it was just a misunderstanding on my part. Borbus’s workshop has a good future ahead of it. Honestly, that’s such a relief to know.” Patrick spoke with complete disinterest.

He didn’t really want to say things that would put Borbus in a bad mood either, but as he had been paid for it, he figured the least he could do was steel himself and try to get Borbus to face the truth of the matter. But if Borbus himself didn’t want to accept it, there was nothing more he could do for him.

Borbus couldn’t allow himself to accept it. He had been forsaken by everyone around him. However, if he was being honest with himself, he understood what Patrick was telling him.

He hadn’t grown one bit as a blacksmith, and he had neglected his duties as a teacher as well. Those two thorns had been digging into his heart for quite some time.

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When Borbus returned to his workshop, he called over his most talented apprentice.

“I want you to pour all of your years of training into forging a single sword for me.”

“Is it a really important job? Are you sure that you are okay with me handling it?”

“Think of this as your first step to inheriting this workshop as a

master smith. A test, to put it bluntly."

His apprentice's face lit up with excitement. He was no longer a young man either. He had prepared himself for a future of simply being domesticated as an apprentice, but the road to becoming a master smith had finally opened up before him.

"I will forge the very finest sword for you!" His shoulders were trembling as he ran over to his workstation.

From his apprentice's joyful strides, Borbus sensed a clear reliability, but there was something that worried him as well—something dangerous.

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A few days later, a single longsword was presented to Borbus. The instant that Borbus saw it, he fell to his knees. His cheeks felt hot for some reason... It took him a while to fully realize that tears were falling down his face.

"Um... Master?" His apprentice was confused as to whether that was a good or bad reaction to his work. It certainly didn't appear like he was crying tears of joy, though.

The sword was forged very well, but that was all. It was the work of a teacher's pet, whose sole focus was to not do anything that could be perceived as wrong. Everything was done directly by the rubric, without any sense of individuality or experimentation. It was just a sharp metal stick.

He had molded his apprentice into a defective copy of himself. In that moment, Borbus finally realized that the one who had been denying his way of life for all this time was none other than himself.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything—for all these years..."

Borbus repeatedly apologized, but his apprentice was still unsure as to what was going on.

"From today onward, I am going to teach you every last thing that I know. After that, you can forge another sword, and we'll submit it at the next regular Guild meeting. Before that, we'll get a recommendation from Gerhard, so the Count will put his seal of approval on it as well. With all of that, promoting you to master

shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Y-Yes, Master!”

His apprentice was over the moon, but Borbus was looking straight through him. After he had fulfilled all of his responsibilities, he wanted to train as a blacksmith again from square one. If he could get Gerhard to introduce him to Lutz and spend some time learning under him, there was nothing more he could ask for. He simply wanted to get back the ten years he wasted there.

Even in that moment alone, Borbus was a blacksmith in the truest sense.

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For everything that people did in life, there was a first time. Using the shortswords that had arrived the other day, Djoser began his real training as an enchanter.

On his first attempt, he poured too much mana into the blade, and it fractured into pieces. He had reduced the valuable shortsword, as well as the expensive jewels, to rubble, but his master didn’t show any anger in the slightest. In fact, he pointed at it and let out a hearty laugh.

“That’s it, that’s the one! Everybody makes that mistake at first!” Gerhard collected the broken pieces on the ritual stand and threw them into a dustbin.

It appeared to Djoser like Gerhard might have been playing down the severity of his mistake a bit, but that also likely came from his prior teaching that enchanters couldn’t let themselves be so concerned about potential losses.

No matter how much those jewels had cost, they would be nothing but dust as soon as the ritual was over.

On Djoser’s second attempt, he poured so little mana into it that he just ended up with a shortsword with faintly glowing letters on it.

On that attempt, Gerhard seemed more upset than on the first. “Don’t get all nervous on me now. If you hold yourself back out of cowardice, that’s as far as you’ll ever go,” he said sternly.

After Djoser completed his third attempt, Gerhard placed a piece

of cloth over the blade. They waited five seconds, six seconds, seven seconds... Then, with a flicker, the cloth caught fire.

"Hot, hot, hot..." Gerhard hurriedly waved it around to put out the fire. Then he turned to his apprentice and gave him a smile filled with childlike joy. "You've gone and done it, Djoser! You've successfully enchanted this shortsword with a fire spell!"

"You have my greatest gratitude, Master! Although, considering how slow it was to activate, it may not prove very useful in battle..."

"To have a tool that can so easily light something on fire is a very useful thing indeed. There is no shortage of adventurers who would dream of something like this. In terms of sheer versatility, it's hard to do better than a fire enchantment."

"So that's why you had me do a fire spell for my first enchantment?"

"In terms of market value, I'd appraise this at about fifteen gold coins."

"Right... Wait, what?"

Considering the initial cost of the sword, as well as the material costs of the jewels and the mercury, and the fact that everything went smoothly, he still ended up just breaking even with no real profits whatsoever.

Gerhard could tell what Djoser was thinking by the sudden droop of his face, and he let out a powerful laugh. "To really make a killing in this business, you need to learn a couple more tricks."

"Tricks, you say?"

"For example, learning the right way to order weapons, or how to earn the good favor of other craftsmen. For now, you don't need to worry too much about that, though. Right now, all you have to worry about is learning how to consistently succeed in engraving a single rune into a weapon."

"Yes, Master."

"Let's call it there for the day. You're free to go home. I have a guest coming a bit later, though I didn't exactly ask for them to come..."

Gerhard's expression conveyed to Djoser just how much he was

annoyed by it.

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"Sorry that I keep butting into your busy schedule," said Borbus unapologetically.

"As you should be. Don't you know that it's rude to disrupt people unless it's about a lucrative business opportunity?" Gerhard refused to pull any punches either.

They were eating some hard jerky and washing it down with beer. It was almost like they had returned to their days as adventurers.

"I must say, you sure gave up your position as master of your workshop pretty easily."

"I was too obsessed with status... I should have given it up a long time ago."

He thought that he would be able to do whatever he wanted if he just became a master. That was why he worked so hard to become one, but as soon as he got there, all of his energy just went into defending his position.

He had hardly felt any growth in himself for the past ten years. After it was pointed out to him by his friends, and he had come to accept it, there was no way he could hold on to it any longer. The title of master had been nothing but heavy chains around his feet.

"Under the condition that I get to freely use a single forge, I've left the rest in the hands of my apprentice."

"So you've slagged off all your responsibility to him, huh? The poor thing." Gerhard laughed between swigs of his beer.

Borbus had been sipping at his beer a bit as well, but there was still plenty left in his tankard.

"So, exactly what kind of nuisance are you planning on making for me today?" Gerhard narrowed his eyes.

"I want you to introduce me to the man called Lutz."

"Ah, Lutz, huh? And why would you like to meet with him?" Gerhard made no attempt to hide his suspicion.

Lutz was absolutely essential to Gerhard's dream of making the greatest weapon in history. If the Guild were to find out about him,

they could take him into custody, or worse, try to eliminate him. Gerhard wanted to avoid that at all costs.

"Wait, I want you to know that I no longer have any connection at all to the Guild. I wish to go to him personally and request his tutelage."

"Do you think you can just show up and ask him to give away all of his techniques?"

"In return, I'm prepared to teach him everything that I know as well. I'm sure that should at least interest him a little bit."

It wasn't clear how Lutz had learned his skills as a katana smith, but it surely couldn't have been through formal education. If he were able to learn the smithing techniques of their country as well, it would likely be appealing to him.

"Okay... Don't get your hopes up, but I'll at least ask him for you."

"I'd love to hear something a bit more reassuring than that."

"Just to let you know, Lutz is quite a young guy. Are you capable of bowing your head to such a young'un and asking him to train you?"

"I've got no problem with that. Looking back, I'd say we've spent half our lives bowing down to people younger than us."

When they both entered the world of craftsmen, they were already in their late twenties. They were yelled at—even beaten—by their younger colleagues, who happened to have seniority over them in the Guild. That was the start of everything for them.

That being said, if they ever started going too far with the bullying, Borbus made it a habit to draw them into an alley to *have a little chat.*

"All right then, if you're that serious about it, I don't have any objections. I'll go along and ask with you."

"You're a lifesaver."

The two of them drank for a while in comfortable silence, then Gerhard looked up as if he were remembering something.

"When we're all finished with this matter, what do you say we go and visit those two's graves?"

It took Borbus a few seconds to realize that by *those two*, Gerhard was talking about their fallen comrades from more than

forty years ago.

"Those two never even got a grave. Are you suggesting we go back down into the depths of that labyrinth and leave some flowers there?"

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting."

It was just all too stupid an idea. It had been more than forty years since they retired as adventurers, and they were now in their mid-sixties. For Gerhard to invite Borbus on a trip to the depths of that labyrinth with the same attitude as one would invite a friend out to lunch, Borbus figured it must have been the heat of late summer getting to his head. Logically, it was an impossible task, but there was some part of Borbus that was drawn to the idea as well. He had nearly forgotten just how fun it could be to challenge yourself.

"You know what? If we're going to do it, we might as well leave a sword of our own creation in the treasure chest down there. I'm sure whoever found it would be a lot happier with it than that damned bronze one."

"Don't go making something too great now—you won't be able to let it go!"

The two looked at each other and laughed until it hurt.

It was a fun night, one that reminded them of those long-gone days of their youth.

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"Yeah, no problem."

Lutz answered his request so casually that Borbus was worried that he might not understand what he was asking for.

Gerhard, Borbus, Lutz, and Claudia were all gathered together at Lutz's workshop.

"Lutz, are you sure that you don't have reservations at all about it? If we make this deal, there is a risk that your techniques may begin to spread outside the realm of your control," said Gerhard with a cautious tone.

"You guys are the ones who said you wanted to do it. Why are you trying to talk me out of it all of a sudden?"

"Well, uh... You have a point..."

"Even if I have my own unique methods and techniques, considering I don't even have any way of selling directly to people inside the city, there isn't much point in me keeping them all to myself, anyway. Also..."

"What else?"

"Even if the techniques for making katana spread across the country, it wouldn't change the fact that I'm still the best," said Lutz without a hint of doubt in his eyes.

His words contained no arrogance either. Lutz's confidence was backed up by the results that he produced.

"In that case, it would be an honor to exchange teachings with you." Borbus bowed his head.

Lutz gave him a deep bow in return.

They then moved over to the forge, and Lutz proceeded to make a katana while explaining every step of the process.

Lutz hammered out the glowing hot *tamahagane*, a special kind of refined steel, until it was flat, cooled it with water, and then split it into even pieces. He stacked those pieces together and heated them again until they formed a single bright-red mass of steel. He continued to hammer out all the impurities in the steel and made creases in the steel with a graver. He then folded the blade along those creases and hammered it out again.

For Borbus, everything was just so new and exciting. Right before his eyes, Lutz was breathing life into the steel. When was the last time he had just sat and watched another craftsman at work?

Considering that Lutz was explaining his actions the whole time while being watched, he wasn't really able to concentrate too much on the katana itself, so the final katana was far from his proudest work. Even still, Borbus was incredibly satisfied with being able to take in so many new techniques.

The next day, Lutz came over to Borbus's workshop and practiced forging western swords under his instruction, thus completing their deal.

"So, how was it? Did you learn everything that you wanted to?" asked Gerhard.

Borbus's eyes glowed with wonder. "It's interesting—such an enthralling technique. I've been reminded that there's no time in a craftsman's life for boredom."

"Agreed. Though there have been times where life hasn't blessed us with the right inspiration, neither you nor I."

"I'm sure those periods of time were also necessary. When one's passion begins to fizzle out, it only burns brighter once something reignites it. We might have taken the long way around, but not a single thing has been for nought. Right now, it feels like I'm one with the heavens, the earth, even God."

He was so excited that he was starting to sound crazy. Gerhard knew from experience that when his friends got like this, it was best not to push them any further, so he kept his mouth shut.

"But I'll tell you, that young Lutz... He's got quite a mouth on him, saying that even if he taught me his techniques, it wouldn't change the fact that he was number one."

"Well, he has been continuously forging near-legendary katana. Overconfidence can be an unsightly thing, but if it's matched by skill worthy of that confidence, that's what we call dignity."

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden? Praising a young'un like that... Act your age by complaining a little, why don't you? You know: 'Kids these days!' or something."

"I've rather come to like a lot of those young'uns. They're a precious bunch that connects us to the future."

"I wonder, if I had been a halfway decent master to my apprentices, would I be able to say stuff like that too? Even after giving up my station, I have a bit of difficulty seeing those guys as *precious,* per se."

"God, those guys really hit the jackpot with their master, huh?" Gerhard laughed so hard it shook his shoulders.

Borbus laughed along as well. "Even in my old age, I just keep finding more and more things that I want to do. I can't say for sure, but I think this is what you'd call happiness."

In the profile of Borbus's smiling face, Gerhard could see a shadow of sorrow. But when one put that kind of thought into words, it had a tendency to become true, so Gerhard held his

tongue.

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After speaking with Gerhard, Borbus all but locked himself in the workshop. He modified his workspace to be more convenient for forging katana.

On his first attempt, all he managed to produce was a misshapen lump of steel.

On his second attempt, he forged a steel stick.

On his third attempt, he got it into the right shape but failed in the quenching process, fracturing the blade.

Whenever he hit a wall, he would go to Lutz's workshop and ask for advice. Perhaps compelled by Borbus's passion, Lutz answered all of his questions without asking for anything in return.

On his fourth attempt, he managed for the first time to forge something that could be called a katana, though far from a good one.

It was true that in terms of experience working on katana, Borbus couldn't even hold a candle to Lutz, but he hadn't spent the last several decades of his life working with steel for nothing. He likely wouldn't be able to make something quite like what Lutz could, but he could make his very own kind of katana—one that incorporated all of his years of dedication to the craft.

He set off on his fifth attempt. He was beginning to get the feel of how to breathe life into the steel with every strike of the hammer.

As his heart was stolen by the glimmer of the flying sparks, in that incredible air of excitement, Borbus witnessed a masterpiece taking shape upon his anvil. It was a feeling that only someone who had devoted their life to the craft could ever truly experience.

He wanted to see his magnum opus, he wanted to bring it into the world. He quickened the pace of his hammer.

"Uuggh... Aah..." Borbus grabbed hold of his chest and fell to his knee. It was like someone had driven a dagger right through his heart.

I'm okay...absolutely fine. If I just stay like this for a while, the

pain should go away.

However, that day, the pain in his chest proved to be quite persistent, continuing to slash away at his heart.

"Gahh... Ack!" He coughed over and over. As his cough became stronger, he felt as though something inside his chest had suddenly burst. He looked down at his right hand to see it covered in thick blood. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that he would die right there.

But why then, of all times? He had yet to complete his magnum opus. It was only so recently that he had finally found what he wanted to do with the remainder of his life.

"Oh, God, I beg you not to deny my way of life. Just a little longer, just a few moments more..."

No, the truth was that he had been blessed with plenty of time. But he had sat idle on his title of "master" for far too long. Now, he would face his punishment for wasting all of those precious years.

As tears of pain and remorse streamed down Borbus's face, he reached out to the katana, lying with him on the cold ground.

As he laid his fingers on the unfinished katana, everything became clear to him.

No, this katana is complete as it is. I won't be dying here without leaving anything behind. I will be leaving this earth, having fulfilled my purpose in life.

"Gerhard, Lutz, the rest is up to you. This is what we have been striving for all these years, our very own sacred swor..." Borbus's aged body collapsed completely to the ground. On his face was a peaceful smile, without a trace of suffering or regret.

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After Borbus's funeral had ended, Gerhard made his way directly to Lutz's workshop. Upon his arrival, he placed an unfinished katana on the table.

Lutz cocked his head at him. "What's this?"

"He kicked the bucket right in the middle of forging this katana. It probably would have been fine to just throw it out with the rest of

his stuff, but it seems they found the old bastard dearly holding on to this, you see? So, I decided to accept it on a whim."

"Did none of the people over at Borbus's workshop have anything to say about it?"

Gerhard let out a frustrated laugh through his nose. "They just seemed happy that someone was going to get rid of it for them. It seems they wanted to clear out anything that smelled of their old master and give the whole place a fresh coat of paint, so to speak. I suppose that's just the natural psychology of a successor."

"I don't know what to say..." A wrinkle formed between Lutz's brows.

Gerhard shook his head. "Don't think of them as being particularly cold or anything. Borbus hadn't exactly been the ideal master to his apprentices either, I'm afraid. If you work people like slaves and refuse to teach them anything worthwhile, it's only natural to garner their discontent. He chose not to forge that bond with them, and this is simply the result of how he lived his life."

"Would you say that your desire to protect his final work was also the result of how he lived his life?"

"I suppose so... He was a good friend to me. Looking back, he got me into nothing but trouble, but even still... He was a good friend, I guess." Gerhard smiled while nodding his head.

Lutz could tell that they really must've been close. He was also convinced that if Borbus was still there, he would say the same about Gerhard, who had gotten him into nothing but trouble.

"So, Lutz, I've come here today with a favor to ask of you."

"You want me to put the finishing touches on this, right?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth. Can you do it for me?"

Lutz picked up the unfinished katana and studied it closely. "It's already about eighty percent finished as it is. All that's left is to harden and sharpen it. It's a bit hard to tell how well a katana turned out until after it's fully sharpened, so I can't say too much about its quality yet, but I'll finish it up for a gold coin, if that's okay."

Gerhard pulled a gold coin out from his pouch and flipped it onto the table with the clean ring of metal. There was no telling if it

would turn out to be a great katana or just a piece of scrap metal collecting dust in Gerhard's cabinet, but he didn't hesitate for a second.

"I'll have it ready by tomorrow afternoon." Lutz placed the coin in his pocket and headed to his workspace with the katana in hand.

As Lutz's workshop had almost begun to feel like a second home for Gerhard at that point, he made his way out without any formalities and went home.

He didn't feel the need to recount any of his memories with Borbus. Surely, anything he wanted to tell Lutz, that katana could say better. For a conversation between two craftsmen, that was more than enough.

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Lutz began to apply a layer of wet clay with a paint-like consistency over the blade. He applied a thin, wavy layer of clay over the cutting edge, then a thick layer over the blunt side of the blade. When the blade would be placed in the furnace, the uneven layer of clay would create a temperature difference that curved the blade and made the hamon more visible.

Lutz placed the katana in the scorching furnace, then quenched it with water once it had been heated all the way through. It was a process that was absolutely necessary to strengthen the blade, but one misstep could lead to fractures in the steel.

It was work that required a great deal of experience as well as excellent intuition, but Lutz pulled it off with little trouble. If he had failed there, he wouldn't know how to face Borbus or Gerhard ever again.

"That's the first part done, anyway..." Lutz ran to the kitchen and drank from a bucket of boiled water that had been cooling there as if he had been wandering for days in the desert. His throat was completely dry from the heat of the furnace and the immense pressure of the job at hand. After drinking around two liters of water, his thirst finally subsided.

After calming himself down fully, he entered the sharpening

process. He wet the surface of the arato whetstone and moved the blade back and forth over it. As he carefully ground down the exterior, the hamon of the blade began to shine.

Could this perhaps be quite the incredible katana? I took on this job for the sake of two old men's nostalgia, but I'm starting to feel a change in the wind here.

It was true that Borbus was a complete beginner at making katana, but in terms of forging weapons in general, his experience far surpassed Lutz's—a true veteran of the craft. Those many years before the anvil were beginning to show themselves in the form of that one katana.

Lutz switched the arato over for a finer-grained whetstone and continued sharpening the blade.

It didn't have the same kind of artistic beauty as Lutz's works. It still evoked the image of a hunk of steel, a battle-axe that took on the shape of a katana. It gave off a sense of power, one that said it could cut through anything that was unlucky enough to fall within the arc of its blade.

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"So this is the katana that the old bastard forged..." whispered Gerhard. Seeing how Lutz had turned an unfinished metal stick into such a beautiful katana, he was reminded of what a truly skilled blacksmith Lutz was. Gerhard was both impressed and incredibly grateful.

"I like it. Can you give it a name?" Gerhard looked over not to Lutz, who was sitting in front of him, but to Claudia, who was by his side.

"Are you sure you want me to name it? I don't really know a whole lot about Borbus," said Claudia with a bit of hesitation.

"Whatever first comes to your head when you see it is just fine."

Gerhard wasn't the best at naming things, and Lutz's naming sense was so disastrous that Gerhard questioned whether he had simply left it behind in his mother's womb altogether.

Judging from their experience together so far, Claudia was the

safest bet.

"All right then..." Claudia held the katana in her hands, immediately struck by the sturdy weight of it. She drew it and inspected the impeccable shine of the blade. Then it came to her. "How about... Ittetsu?"

"Hmm... What meaning does that hold?"

"Coming from the words for the number one and steel, it resembles the single-minded focus of creating the strongest steel possible. It feels fitting for this katana, somehow."

A life lived alongside steel—that was how the katana represented Borbus's life to Claudia in that moment. Gerhard had no objections. Ittetsu, that would be his epitaph.

After that, Lutz engraved the words "Ittetsu, to live by steel, Borbus" into the nakago. Gerhard accepted it in his hands and left Lutz's workshop behind him.

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In the end, Gerhard decided to enchant it with a spell that would further strengthen the cutting edge of the blade. Since he believed the true nature of the katana to be one that purely sought out strength and durability, it wouldn't have felt right to engrave an elemental enchantment.

For the saya and tsuka, he decided to go with Lutz's usual glossy black design. It wasn't flashy, but Gerhard quite liked it.

He made the katana his everyday carry, wearing it around his hip wherever he went, though it was admittedly a bit on the heavy side. He thought about filing down the end of the nakago a bit to shorten its length, but if he did that, it would almost feel like he was losing to Borbus, so he kept it as it was.

"Oh, I guess it was too heavy for an old man like you, huh?"

He could just picture him saying something like that while laughing his ass off.

If he couldn't change the katana, he would just have to change himself to match it. Half out of frustration, Gerhard went on to train on his old body like he hadn't done in many years. When he was

back in his adventuring days, he had swung around a sword about the same weight without issue. There was no reason to believe that he couldn't do the same again.

He put some bread, wine, and jerky into a basket and set out to train in the forest.

On the first day, his entire body was screaming at him after just doing some practice swings, but after the second day and the third day, he began to get used to the extra weight. It would seem that his body hadn't forgotten that it was still that of an adventurer deep down. That thought made him surprisingly happy.

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One day, as Gerhard was wandering the forest, he came across a massive boulder. Ordinarily, he wouldn't think anything of it at all—just a big rock. If it were in his way, all he would have to do was walk around it.

This boulder... I'll bet I could split it.

Almost as if under some manner of spell, that reckless thought popped into his mind.

A katana was far from a tool meant to cut stone. If he were to strike a boulder of that size with a katana, it would obviously chip—worst-case scenario, it could even break in half.

If you wanted to split a boulder like that, you would place a wedge into a crack and hit it with a hammer. Either that or heat it until it was red hot, then douse it with water, using the temperature shock to crack it. It was quite a difficult job—certainly not something one could do with a swing of a katana.

It was unfeasible, unreasonable, and quite honestly unproductive. Even though he understood all of that in theory, he drew the katana anyway, raising it above his head and slowly approaching the giant boulder.

"How am I supposed to resist? There's something taking me over—something that's telling me I can do it..."

As excuses went, it was a pretty poor one, but Gerhard continued to study the boulder. Soon, he could sense the line that seemed

most fragile. If he struck it there, it felt like the katana might just glide all the way through.

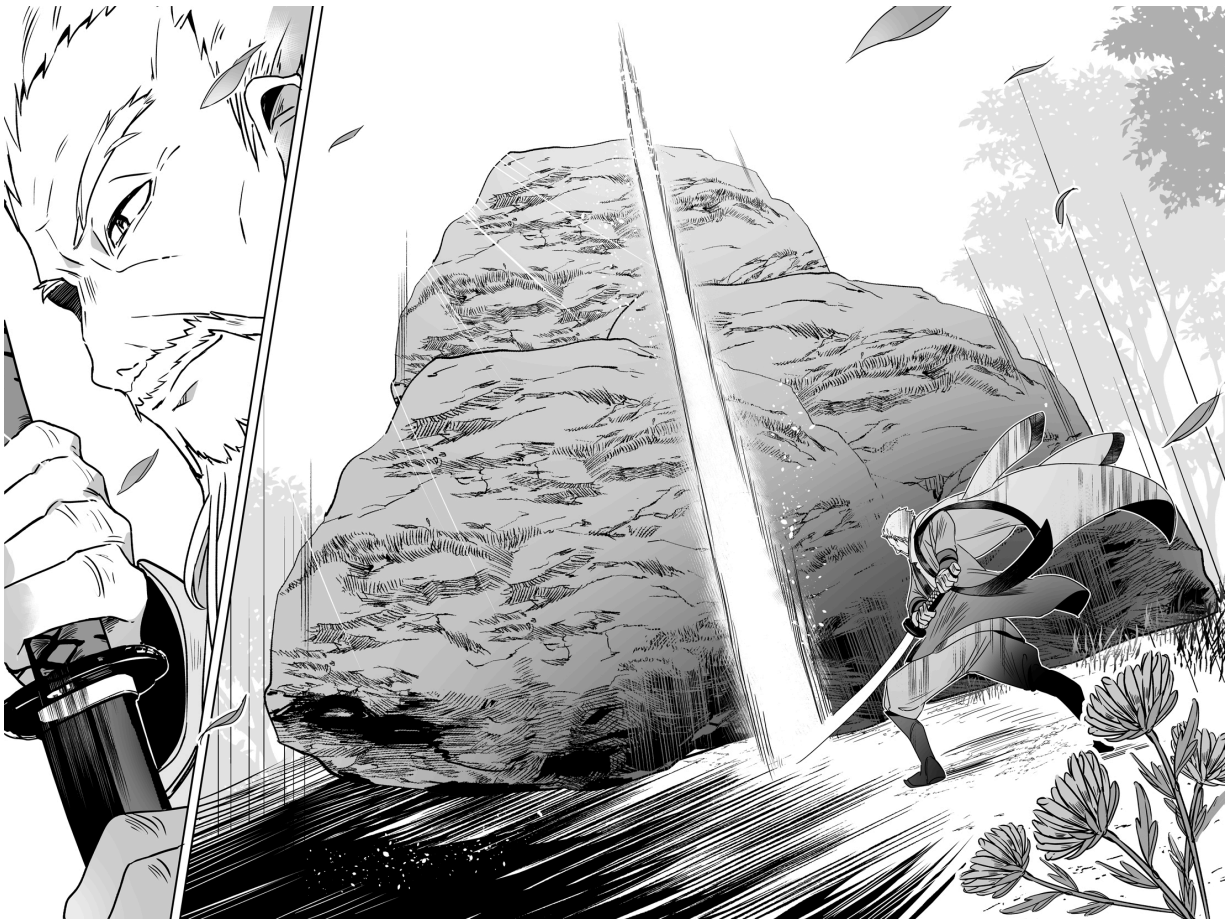
"Haaa!" In a single flash of power, Gerhard brought the katana down on the boulder, then took a few steps backward.

The boulder split in half and fell to either side. When Gerhard inspected the katana, there wasn't a single scratch on the blade.

"What do you think, Borbus? At long last, we have our sacred sword..."

There was no one around to hear the old swordsman's words. The only answer came from the soft rustling of the trees around him.

The dream they had chased for over forty years was finally there in his hands.



Chapter 7: Just a Kitchen Knife for Cutting People

Lutz stared at the broken katana that was laid out on the table. It was entirely split in two, fractured right in the center of the blade. On one side was the half bearing the tsuka, on the other side was the half that had the tip of the blade, and right in the middle of them was Lutz, inspecting them from close up with a gaze that carried a twinge of grief.

"Good morning, Lutzy!" Claudia came in from the other room. Even though it was still early in the morning, her voice was chipper as ever, and for some reason, she was completely naked.

As he considered her bountiful boobs, smooth skin, and slim figure, Lutz had trouble figuring out where to rest his eyes.

"Would you mind putting some clothes on?"

"Oh my... Lutzy, have you already developed an immunity to my charms? You have some nerve saying that after all the fun you had with me last night..."

"I'm more worried about someone else seeing you. Gerhard might drop by out of the blue, or our neighbors might stop by to get their tools sharpened."

Claudia giggled. "Oh, I get it, you want to keep me as your very own Venus. Is that right?"

"You're not wrong, but I didn't go that far either."

"I'll at least compliment you for not denying it right out of the gate." The naked woman laughed while going back to the bedroom. After a little while, a respectable merchant wearing a long skirt and blouse came out.

Lutz couldn't help but feel he had done something very regrettable indeed. Was he especially dumb, or was his current internal battle simply the plight of all men?

“So, Lutzy, what are you looking so worried about first thing in the morning? The katana? Yes, definitely the katana. It does seem to be very broken.” Claudia peered over Lutz’s shoulders, talking so fast that Lutz didn’t even have time to answer.

“It’s something I keep to remember my father by.”

“Hmmm...” Claudia went around and sat on the other side of the table, still looking a little confused. “Is it okay if I touch it?”

“I don’t mind, but be careful. This one’s scarily sharp.”

What was that guy trying to say? As a merchant and as Lutz’s partner, Claudia had handled countless weapons. There was no way she would do something so dumb as to cut herself accidentally.

A bit annoyed that she was being looked down on, she stretched out her hand. “Ow!” A sharp pain shot up from her fingertips, and she pulled her hand back.

Claudia looked back and forth between the broken katana and Lutz in utter disbelief. Something very peculiar had happened. It wasn’t like she had injured herself out of a lack of caution. She could say that with absolute certainty, as she had yet to even touch the katana.

She inspected her fingers, but there wasn’t a scratch on them. The only thing that she could say was real was the gradually fading, throbbing pain in her fingertips.

“You see,” said Lutz, “this one’s just entirely too sharp. Just getting close to it, you feel like you’re being cut.”

“There’s no way...”

There’s no way a katana could do such a thing.

Claudia stopped the words before they left her mouth. In actuality, she had already seen quite a few katana that had some form of unusual power within them. It was only a few months ago that one of them had almost driven her to split her tongue in half like a snake.

“When you realize that’s just the kind of katana this is and steel yourself a bit, the pain generally stops. If you don’t prepare yourself, it’s not even possible to hold it.”

“Even if there’s a trick to it, you don’t often get to face the same opponent twice with real blades, so that’s still plenty powerful,” said

Claudia. “While your opponent falls to the ground in pain, wondering what the hell just happened, all you’d have to do is swoop in for the kill. It doesn’t get much easier than that.” She returned her gaze to the faintly shining blade. At the very least, she could easily tell that it wasn’t only an illusion. If she were to carelessly lay her hands on it, it likely would cut her.

Of course it would cut you; being cut was the only natural outcome. Perhaps those thoughts became so strong that they tricked your brain into actually feeling the cut of the blade. It had the power to coerce those primal instincts innate within you.

“If it were in its original form, this would basically be a national treasure, wouldn’t it?”

“Either that or it would be condemned by the church as a demonic sword and sealed away somewhere,” said Lutz.

“It would be quite like the church not to destroy it or get rid of it some other way too.”

“Those guys just love finding convenient reasons to take valuable items for themselves, after all.”

They looked at each other and let out a weak laugh. It was one of those things that made you think about how little power you had in such a system. It wasn’t just the church. The Knights Order, the Guild, even when confronted with such blatant corruption, they couldn’t do anything to fight it. They had no choice but to live within that broken system.

Because they were so aware of this, it made them all the more thankful to have a partner to lean on in such difficult times.

“All right then, my next question would of course be this: Why is it broken?”

“My father did tell me about it once, but...” Lutz paused for a moment in thought.

From his reaction, it didn’t seem like it was going to be a story about vanquishing some giant monster, or some honorable tale of that variety.

“Go on, tell me. Now that you’ve said that much, I can’t help but be curious. After all, Lutzy, your papa is basically my papa-in-law now too. I should have the right to know that much, I think.”

“Is that how it works? I guess it works like that...”

“It’s not like he did something crazy like getting ten women pregnant at the same time and running or anything, right?”

“Luckily, it isn’t anything that embarrassing... I might as well tell you about it, I guess.” Lutz picked up a broken half of the katana by the tsuka and stared at his reflection in the blade. He didn’t feel any pain, but there was an ever-present sense of danger. It was like holding on to a lit gunpowder grenade. Just holding it made his breathing a bit heavier.

Lutz prefaced everything by telling Claudia that it was all just something that he had heard from his father, then he began to recount the story.

“My father, Rufus, wasn’t always a vagrant. He was a full-fledged citizen with a house in the walled city and worked as a blacksmith within the Guild. He simply lived as an ordinary craftsman, but it seemed that he was especially skilled compared to his peers.”

All the proof that Lutz needed of that was right there with him. He was likely skilled enough that it threatened the position of the master of his workshop.

“That was until one day, he was told to set off as a journeyman.”

“Oooh...” Claudia gave him an understanding nod.

A journeyman was a craftsman who, before they were able to take the test to become a master, would travel to other places to further refine their skills and help them grow as a person. However, that was just what the system was in theory. In reality, it was usually just a way of getting rid of people who posed a threat to a master’s status.

There were only a limited few that could hold the status of master within the Guild’s system. Good craftsmen were in high demand, but if you were *too good*, you would be nothing but a bother. There wasn’t anything harder to control than a slave who had lost their collar.

Basically driven out of his workshop, Rufus decided if he had to leave, he may as well cross the vast ocean and acquire entirely new skills instead of just rotting in a nearby town, doing the same old thing as ever.

"To actually be able to go through with that, he must have been quite a fantastic person."

"It was probably half out of spite for the old masters who just refused to give up their status, but he was certainly a man who could take action when he put his mind to something. Even in that country across the ocean to the east, it seems like he did just fine for himself."

Everywhere he went, he would trade his knowledge of western blacksmithing for instruction in katana smithing. Rufus became completely enthralled with the art of crafting katana, though. While most journeymen would return home in a couple of years, he stayed in the east for more than ten years.

When he finally did make his way back home, he had no intention at all of returning to his old workshop. He figured that if he had to work inside the system, he wouldn't be able to forge katana as he pleased, so he built up a small hut outside the city walls, put together a makeshift forge, and continued to hammer out katana after katana.

To support himself financially, he would take up work sharpening kitchen knives or axes, doing maintenance on large pots, making horseshoes, and all manner of odd jobs. He was making a pittance compared to when he worked at a large workshop, but even still, he was happy.

For the next several years, he simply continued forging katana after katana, honing his craft. Word eventually got out that there was someone outside the walls making interesting weapons, and he began to gain quite a reputation among the weapon maniacs of the elite. Then an opportunity came for him to forge a katana that would be offered to the Marquis.

"You just kind of said it like it was nothing, but isn't that a pretty insane achievement?"

"It must have been the result of incredible effort on his part, but my father never really talked much about that. He just brushed it off by saying, 'A lot happened.' I don't think he was really a fan of talking about that sort of thing."

Filled with nostalgia, Lutz continued the story.

The katana that he forged as an offering to the Marquis was none other than the one on the table before them, a katana that pursued the very physical limit of sharpness.

Surrounded by dozens of nobles in the courtyard of the Marquis's mansion, Rufus demonstrated the cutting ability of the katana. He cut through stone. He cut through armor. He cut through thick logs. With every swing of the katana, the crowd would burst out in applause. Everything was going so well.

In his mind, he proved himself to be a katana smith so great that the decrepit Guild system couldn't control him. He was different from all those people working in filthy workshops, fighting tooth and nail to claw their way to the status of master rather than actually improving their skills.

Just when Rufus was sure that the unveiling party was coming to an end, the Marquis's young son stepped forward and said that he wanted to try to cut something as well. Rufus had a bad feeling about it, but he also didn't have a reason to refuse the request. It was a katana to be gifted to the Marquis. As long as the Marquis had no objections to it, Rufus didn't even have a *right* to refuse.

The Marquis's son held the katana in front of him with a pronounced slouch. He had obviously not even been taught the very basics of how to handle a sword. Even still, his expression was filled with unfounded confidence. He had said something about going through some swordsmanship training, but that too was surely just performative—an opportunity for those around him to shower him with praise until he rotted.

He haphazardly swung the katana at a suit of armor, and the blade broke in half.

The katana was sharp beyond belief, but if one were to reword that statement, it could also be said that it was incredibly thin. In pursuit of sharpness, there was no choice but to sacrifice some durability. When the cutting edge cleanly sliced into its target, there was no stopping it. However, if the plane of the blade was ever so slightly slanted, its effectiveness would greatly decrease, and the brunt of the stress would be placed on the blade itself.

His face red with embarrassment, the son spat vitriol at Rufus,

saying that the katana was just a dull piece of scrap metal and Rufus was nothing more than a scam artist.

Jumping in instantly to back the son of their lord, the applause of those around turned into a barrage of insults.

No, that's not right! This katana really is impossibly sharp!

He wanted to defend himself, but it wouldn't be allowed. He couldn't exactly look the Marquis in the face and tell him that his son was a disgrace to swordsmanship. In the end, without even being able to say one word to defend himself, he was exiled from the Marquis's territory. If the Marquis's son had managed to injure himself with the katana, Rufus likely wouldn't have been able to leave with his head still attached, so looking back, he considered himself lucky. Whether that little bit of luck was able to truly save him, however, was a different story.

"He wandered around from place to place in his despair, and eventually he met my mother. Not long after that, I was born."

"Then your dad decided to teach you, his only son, all of the skills that he had acquired over his lifetime, huh?"

"Pretty much. But he never asked me to take revenge on his behalf or told me what kind of blacksmith he wanted me to become. After teaching me everything that he could, he said that it was all up to me from then on out. That was all."

Rufus learned not to expect anything from the world around him. He wasn't one to get his hopes up. To call him pessimistic wouldn't be quite right, but Lutz could clearly remember the emptiness that often resided in his eyes.

"On his deathbed, he told me that when he was making this katana, he hadn't thought at all about usability, nor did he think about the person that would eventually wield it. As a result, he made a katana as thin and brittle as his own life. He told me that after he died, he wanted me to just get rid of it, but..." Lutz paused.

"The fact that it's still here means that you didn't abide by those wishes."

"Yeah. I don't want to write this katana off as just a failed piece of scrap. It was a brilliantly experimental piece that fell victim to its one weakness, but there is no doubt in my mind that it's an

incredible katana."

If Rufus had really wanted to get rid of it, he could have done it at any time over the years. The fact that he didn't surely meant that he couldn't find it in himself to fully reject that katana as a failure either.

"I feel a bit bad for going against my father's words, but on days where I find myself wondering what the world's strongest katana—the world's greatest katana—would look like, I always end up sitting here, staring at this." While speaking, Lutz ever so carefully wrapped the broken katana in cloth and placed it in a chest.

His every move was filled with respect for his father. It certainly wasn't how one would treat something that they considered a failure.

"Sorry, I ended up losing track of the time a bit. Let's go get something to eat, shall we? Recently, my pockets have been feeling a bit heavier, so why don't we go all out and put some salted fish in the soup too?"

Claudia watched with narrowed eyes as Lutz made his way to the stove in the kitchen. "A man's pride—a craftsman's dignity—what bothersome qualities they are... At least to me, I've already got the world's greatest katana in my possession." She gently placed her hand on the aikuchi that was tucked away under her clothes. That action had become a constant habit of hers.

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Summer had come to an end, and so too had the hot and humid nights of the season. Even still, Lutz found himself unable to sleep. He just stared blankly up at the ceiling. Even without any real source of light, his eyes adjusted pretty well to the darkness after a while.

"What's got you worried now?"

Claudia had been sleeping pressed up next to him, naked. Lutz had been trying to stay as still as possible so he wouldn't wake her, but she must've sensed something and woken up anyway.

Her gentle eyes lit up even in the darkness. They were so beautiful that it almost made Lutz shiver.

"I was just thinking about that katana that Borbus forged..."

"The one that you finished up, right?"

"Yeah, that one. When I finished sharpening and polishing it up, I couldn't help but be entranced by it."

Even if he was looking to be nice, he couldn't call it a beautiful katana. However, its utilitarian focus on pure cutting power was enough, if just for a moment, to steal Lutz's heart.

He had long wondered what form a katana was truly meant to take. Borbus's katana was certainly one possible answer to that.

"It might come off as a bit rude, but I honestly never thought Borbus would be able to pull something like that off. I was entirely convinced that I could never be beaten when it came to forging katana."

"Even if Borbus managed to forge one great katana, that doesn't equate to you losing, right?" Claudia pouted.

She didn't like that the man she fell in love with was making self-deprecating remarks. There was no doubt in her mind that Lutz was the greatest katana smith on the continent. She wouldn't stand for it to be any other way. She had seen Borbus's katana as well, and while it was a very well-made katana, she simply couldn't imagine it beating out Tsubaki or the Kikokuto.

"I get what you're trying to say, but Borbus wasn't a katana smith by trade. Even still, he was able to make a katana of that quality. If he was able to do that much, then I'd have to make a sword that was at least as great, or else I won't be able to get it out of my head."

As a fair trade for Lutz teaching Borbus about katana smithing, Borbus had, in turn, taught Lutz about forging western swords. Thinking back, that might have even been something akin to a challenge that Borbus was setting for him.

I put up a good fight with you on your own turf. Do you think you could do the same on mine?

He could almost hear the words in Borbus's voice.

"So, next you're planning on making a sword, then?"

"I'm sorry, Claudia. I feel like I've been focused on making pretty much everything except money."

"I don't mind. The best things that have ever come to us have all taken the long way around to get there. Isn't that right?" With a huge smile, Claudia rolled her naked body over on top of Lutz and gently kissed his lips.

***

The next day, Lutz went out to gather some more iron sand. After completing job after job over the last couple of weeks, he had completely run out.

Unlike at the Guild-sanctioned workshops in town, no one was going to come around to deliver charcoal and iron, so Lutz always had to procure everything himself.

He could quite easily get charcoal from the neighborhood charcoal burners, but he had no choice but to collect the iron sand with his own hands. As Lutz was actually looking for a bit of time to just get lost in thought, it wasn't bad timing for such a job.

"Right, what kind of sword shall we make?"

When he thought about katana, different shapes of blades easily popped into his head, but he didn't even know where to start with western swords. It felt like he was feeling his way down a dark cave.

That wasn't to say that he was thinking about throwing in the towel. Borbus had already spectacularly proven it was possible to produce a great work outside of your field of expertise. In that case, there was no reason that Lutz couldn't do it as well. If he couldn't, that would mean it was his loss.

"So this is the price you pay for giving up your techniques, huh? Damn it, I guess there is some merit in listening to your elders from time to time."

Even while complaining, Lutz had a big grin on his face. For Lutz, who had always been alone in his small world, the feelings of competitiveness welling inside him were a fresh new experience. It was almost fun to just sit and feel the strange mixture of jealousy, rivalry, and impatience running rampant in his heart.

Generally speaking, katana were single-edged and held with two hands. Western swords, by contrast, were often double-edged, and

there were a variety of ways to hold them depending on their specific use cases. Even the way they were drawn from their sheaths was different from katana.

He couldn't just jump into making it with a vague image in his head; if he wanted to make something truly worthwhile, he needed to think more specifically about what the sword would actually be used for.

The sun was still far from setting, but there was a limit to how much iron sand he could load onto the donkey's back, so Lutz decided to call it there for the time being and bring it all home.

He had a feeling that this project was going to take a while.

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When Lutz returned, Claudia quickly prepared some dinner for them. She set out a modest meal of vegetable soup, rye bread, and beer. But even if they went into town to buy meat, they'd only be able to get their hands on some half-rotten scraps, so Lutz was just fine with what they had. All that mattered was that they were going to share the meal together.

"Dear, is there perhaps anyone that you would want to slice in half?" Lutz asked in between slurps of his soup.

Claudia cocked her head at him. "Might I ask why you're suddenly asking about that during dinner?"

"I'm looking for a purpose for the sword that I'm going to forge. Regardless of whether it will actually be used for that purpose or not, I just want something to help me get a clearer image of how it should turn out. Let's say, hypothetically, you had legal permission to kill anyone that you wanted to, who would you use that on?"

Hearing Lutz's reasoning, Claudia decided to go along with it, even if it was a bit gruesome for the dinner table. "If that was the case, I'd probably use it on those good-for-nothing knights, I guess," she said without a single change in her expression, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

It seemed that her grudge from being falsely imprisoned was still as strong as the day Lutz bailed her out.

“Let’s say I were to barge into the knights’ station alone. It would end up being a close-quarters battle inside, so a shorter blade would be better. Something that could be held one-handed and was flexible enough to stab as well as it slashed... It would also be good to make it on the thicker side so it could parry a variety of weapons without taking too much damage.”

In his mind, Lutz stabbed one of the thug knights in the throat, then cleanly lopped off his arm. In his mental simulation, he was eventually overpowered and died time after time, tweaking the design of the blade with each defeat and charging straight back in. After stacking up about ten of his own corpses, he finally found a design that managed to murder every last knight.

“Hmmm... Okay, I think I’ve got something. Thanks, Claudia; I’ve got a feeling I should be able to make something pretty interesting. It really is an important thing to collaborate with other craftsmen and reinvigorate yourself, isn’t it?”

“Lutzy, I hope I don’t have to tell you this, but don’t actually go on a murder spree for me, okay?”

“Hey, hey, what do you take me for? I have at least that much sense.”

“The look in your eyes was just getting a bit scary there... Unfortunately, killing someone on account of their idiocy isn’t a recognized defense under the laws of this country.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

Swords and katana alike were tools designed to kill people. If Lutz got too worked up with the project, there was a chance that he might even start thinking about using it himself. Lutz decided to take Claudia’s warning to heart.

He would be careful, but there was also a part of him as a katana smith that was so excited to get started on a new sword that he could hardly bear to wait another moment. Such was the folly of man.

***

A katana was a tool made to cut people. Lutz had long been

aware of that simple fact, but he had never forged a blade with the express purpose of cutting down specific targets—targets that weren't even monsters, but fellow humans—the knights of his own country. If he were to actually act on it, he would instantly turn into a fugitive. In fact, even just carrying such a sword could put him in a dangerous situation.

To make matters worse, the sword that he had just forged seemed a bit too incredible for comfort. After Borbus had left behind such a beautiful blooming flower, even in his death, Lutz felt that he had no choice but to do something truly great, or he would never be able to pick up his hammer again out of shame. That stoked the fire inside of him to the point where he spent three days and three nights before the furnace, working tirelessly.

"Lutzy, might you happen to be...the sort of person born without self-restraint?" Claudia looked up from the sword with a sigh.

Lutz just shrugged his shoulders, grinning like a child who had been caught in the middle of making mischief.

They both stood around the table where the brilliantly shining sword was casually lying out. Even a complete amateur could tell how well it would cut with a single glance. It would glide through human flesh like tender steak. Apart from the polished shine of the blade, it was also giving off a dark aura that said it would only truly be complete once it was bathed in blood.

When Lutz went into his workshop, Claudia never knew what he would come out with. Broadly speaking, he could create a great katana, a sacred sword, a piece of scrap metal, or some ominous, cursed blade. It seemed like this time it was option number four.

"Once I got started, I just couldn't stop myself..." said Lutz awkwardly.

Claudia didn't know whether she wanted to praise him or tell him off.

The sword was made with the single purpose of murdering the thug knights within the walled city. The fact that it came out so well was a direct result of Lutz empathizing with Claudia's frustration and grief. Thinking about that made her want to push him down and kiss him right then and there.





On the other hand, though, she worried that if he held on to such a cursed object, he really might barge into that knights' station and start slashing. It wasn't impossible for a sword to have that kind of deceptive influence over its wielder. She had learned that through firsthand experience over the last several months.

"Lutzy, it's probably best to get rid of this one as quickly as we can. Don't even think about putting your name on it either."

Its mere existence was basically a declaration of treason against the Knights Order and, by extension, the Count himself. At the very least, it wouldn't be difficult for someone to interpret it as that. Putting your name on something like that was like putting a noose around your own neck.

Lutz's goal was to forge a sword that could match Borbus's katana, out of both rivalry and respect for his life. Now that he had succeeded in that, there wasn't any reason not to let it go.

"Dear, I fully understand that just having this in my possession is somewhat dangerous. Even still, before the sword leaves my hands, I want to at least give it a name."

"Hmm... A name, huh?"

In the past, Lutz had let go of the bewitching katana before giving it a proper name. Considering the situation at the time, there wasn't much he could have done about that, but it seemed that somewhere in his heart, he still held some guilt and regret. When he made something that he was proud of, it was the obvious desire of a katana smith to at least give it a name. Furthermore, it was an act of respect toward the work of art he had forged.

"What do you want to do? Should I come up with something real quick?"

"That's all right. Even if just this time around, I'd like you to let me name it by myself."

"By yourself?" Claudia's eyes widened at the surprising remark.

Even Lutz was aware of how catastrophically awful he was at naming things. Because of that, for the past little while, he had been relying entirely on Claudia to name things without even trying to think of anything by himself. For such a man to suddenly say he wanted to name the sword by himself, Claudia worried he might

have gone insane. What were they to do if he decided to name it the "stupid knight choppy choppy blade" or something?

"Don't worry, I'm not looking to give it some weird name. There's just something that I had in mind, and I couldn't imagine this sword by any other name."

"And...that name would be?"

"Knight Killer."

It certainly was short and simple. Once Claudia heard it, she couldn't think of any name more fitting for it either.

"What do you think, Dear? Does it pass the Claudia test?"

"Not too bad—no, even good. I think that's a very fitting name."

"You think so? With your seal of approval, that's one less thing to worry about, anyway."

After finishing off the engraving on the sword, Lutz stored it away at the very bottom of a storage chest, right alongside the broken katana of his father. That would have likely been its final resting place. That was, if it weren't for a very keen-nosed old enchanter.

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"Lutz, have you finished your new piece?"

A week after Lutz had hidden the Knight Killer away, Gerhard showed up without warning or invitation and asked Lutz to pull out the new sword he had worked on.

"Gerhard, I don't have any recollection of you placing an order with me." Lutz shot him a suspicious look.

"I'm sure. Don't worry, I haven't gotten that forgetful yet either."

"Uh-huh..."

"But you have made something, am I right?" Gerhard was smiling, but his eyes carried a sharp gaze that said he could see straight through Lutz. "Borbus, that old geezer, forged a truly fine katana. I figured that by now, you probably would have made a western sword too out of the unbearable sense of competition." Gerhard proudly patted his hand on the katana around his hip.

Even just from his body language, Lutz could tell what Gerhard was trying to say. He could tell because, if he were a blacksmith, he

would have done the very same thing.

"Lutzy, looks like we won't be able to talk our way out of this one. Might as well just show him." Claudia sighed.

Gerhard gave a satisfied nod in return.

Lutz gave up as well and rummaged around the storage chest. He lifted up the false bottom to pull out the sword and placed it on the table in front of them.

"Oh my, this is quite the piece of work. You could lop off quite a few heads with this one."

The blade was just the right length for swinging around in enclosed spaces, and it was also very thick.

Gerhard took the fearsome sword up in his hands with an excited grin. "Have you already given it a name?"

"I've named it *Knight Killer*. It's designed to easily decapitate enemies on the battlefie—"

"You're a bad liar," Gerhard immediately said with a smirk.

"Huh?"

"This sword is simply too incredible to be used as a side weapon. Sometimes it's possible to make something too good, don't you know, Lutz? The moment I took it up in my hand, I felt like I could easily take a life. Actually, if anything, it felt like it was made for ambushing an indoor space and taking on several dozen enemies at once. How am I doing?"

It seemed Gerhard had totally seen through the initial concept for the sword.

He could really tell all of that from just picking it up for a moment?

Faced with Gerhard's all-too-accurate deduction, Lutz lost all of his will to lie to him. "While I am well aware of how bad it sounds, it was forged with the hypothetical objective of launching an attack on the knights' station in mind."

"No need to get so uptight about it. I don't have anything to do with the Knights Order, and I certainly have no intention of doing something so straitlaced as reporting this to anyone. If anything, I want to compliment you on how magnificent this sword is. If someone rather skilled were to attack that station with this, well... If

it were me, I'd reckon it would take about five minutes to slaughter every last one of them." Gerhard let out an unsettling chuckle.

Just for a moment, Lutz regretted hiding the sword instead of just sticking it in the furnace and letting it melt.

"Say, Lutz, would you be willing to sell this one to me? An artist must always be working with the best canvases, after all. It's getting about time that I'd like my apprentice to be able to carry a truly great sword around his waist."

"If you're willing to take it off our hands, we'd be more than happy to sell it."

"How does fifty gold coins sound? I'll bring it around tomorrow, and we can finalize everything then."

"Sounds like a deal to me."

After exchanging a firm handshake, Gerhard headed directly on his way home.

Claudia watched as he left with crossed arms and a slight look of confusion.

"What's wrong, dear? Was there something that bothered you?"

"I was just thinking... If my memory serves me right, wasn't Gerhard's apprentice quite a high-ranking knight or something?"

"Hmmm?"

Lutz couldn't think of it as anything but a truly awful joke.

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Djoser stood, arms crossed, and let out a troubled groan. Before him was the Knight Killer sword.

His enchantments master, Gerhard, had gifted him a magnificent sword as he had promised before. Gerhard again insisted that not he, but Djoser was to enchant his perfect sword with his own two hands.

That was fine. If Gerhard were to enchant it as well, Djoser would be left with nothing at all to do. On the contrary, Djoser was happy to have a goal to strive toward in his training.

There was one problem, however. Why had Gerhard given him a sword with such a sinister name as *Knight Killer?*

While Djoser was an apprentice enchanter, his main responsibilities were still those of a high-ranking knight in the Order. When he first laid eyes on the sword, he understood exactly what that name really meant. If it were a claymore or spear, for example, Djoser could see a weapon of that name being used to slay enemy knights on the battlefield. But the Knight Killer was too short to be used effectively on the battlefield, yet too long to swiftly cut the throat of an enemy within arm's reach. In other words, it was a sword that was most fit for fighting in enclosed spaces.

What purpose would there be to a knight-killer sword meant to be used indoors? Could it be designed to lay siege to an enemy fortress? No, that wasn't right either.

Djoser could feel a distinct grudge, a desire to kill, that was hammered into the steel. It was a sword made to kill knights indoors, to purge them.

"Why would you give this to me of all people?" In his confusion, Djoser attempted to seek the answer from his master.

"There isn't any deep reason in particular. I just wanted to give you a good sword, so I did. Besides, what kind of meaning a sword holds or how it is used is entirely up to the wielder. In other words, it's your problem now." Gerhard cut the conversation off there.

For Gerhard, the Knight Killer was a sword that had already passed into the hands of another. If he thought too deeply about it himself, he would simply start to regret letting it go, so he purposefully gave a thoughtless answer. He could say that he wasn't interested or couldn't care less about it all that he wanted, but his eyes continued to wander to Djoser's left hip.

Both the katana that Borbus forged and the sword that Lutz forged were amazingly unique. Carrying around both of them as a complete set was a very attractive idea, but it would be a bit heavy for a sixty-five-year-old. It would also be quite unbecoming of him to suddenly take back the sword that he'd given to his apprentice, so his pride as a craftsman wouldn't allow it.

If you could see the childish reasoning behind Gerhard's cold attitude, you would realize that it was nothing to worry about, but Djoser couldn't stop himself from overthinking it, needlessly

worrying himself. He was a serious man, and his proclivity to refuse help from others and keep his worries to himself only worsened the matter.

A sword by the name of Knight Killer had fallen into the hands of a high-ranking knight. In that fateful occurrence, Djoser saw the hand of God at work.

Was it God's will for Djoser to purge the Knights Order of those impudent dogs in the Count's domain who dared call themselves knights? No, if he were to do such a thing, it would form a rift between the low-ranking knights and the Count, causing even more unnecessary trouble for His Grace.

Trying to decipher the inaudible voice of God, Djoser lost seven pounds in three days.

"Master, I have a request I'd like to ask of you."

"What is it? If it's about you wanting to return that sword, I'm all ears."

"No, I'd like you to introduce me to the katana smith, Lutz. Thinking back, I have now heard his name countless times, but I have yet to see him even once."

"So you want to meet Lutz, huh? What are you planning to do if you do get to meet him?"

If at all possible, Gerhard wanted to keep Lutz all to himself as an ace up his sleeve. Even if it was the request of his dear apprentice, he couldn't help but hold some suspicion.

"I want to ask him a question. What is the true meaning of this sword, and how should I strive to fulfill that meaning as its wielder? I'm sure that Lutz may not have all of the answers, but I feel like he could be a light that points me toward the correct path."

"The true meaning, you say..."

Gerhard was fully aware that for Lutz to make something he was so unaccustomed to, he just needed a more specific theme to get his head around it. Considering his lover had been held captive by the knights on false charges, it wasn't hard to imagine why the theme of "Knight Killer" was one of the first things to come to their minds. There was no deeper meaning, divine truth, or will of God. It was just the work of man.

But, even if I explained all of that, would it get through my apprentice's thick skull?

He'd likely nod along and pretend to understand, then spend the next week still worrying about it. He might even go off looking for Lutz on his own. In that case, it would be better to send him over there with a good couple of strict warnings.

"All right then. I'll tell you where Lutz lives. Before that, though, I have a few things that I need you to agree to."

"Of course."

"Lutz is a blacksmith who has made his life outside of the city walls, and you have a bad habit of looking down on those who live on the outside."

"I don't believe that I—"

"Are you saying that I'm wrong?" Gerhard snorted. "Best not to doubt the eyes of your elders."

"My apologies." Djoser bowed his head.

In truth, Djoser himself wasn't even aware of the fact that he looked down on peasants, especially ones who didn't have full citizenship in the city. As a high-ranking knight, he simply considered the social hierarchy to be a natural thing.

"This isn't the time or place to lecture you about how you view social status, but as you will be going to visit Lutz through my introduction, I must stress that you should treat him with respect. Instead of an outsider, I want you to treat him as if you were visiting a noble person. If you were to be disrespectful toward him and he decided to stop doing business with us, I would have no choice but to punish you accordingly. Of course, I would also have to inform the Count of that failure. Prepare yourself to carry that level of responsibility."

Djoser was to treat someone who lived outside the walls as a noble? In the era in which they lived, difference in status was a fundamental building block of society. To do such a thing would be like bringing out a cup of tea for a slug in the garden. Djoser peered at Gerhard's face, but his eyes showed that he was entirely serious.

"Don't think about his title; pay respect to his skills. I want you to look past his status and see directly into his soul. As a high-ranking

knight, you have learned to see through to the truth of a situation. You can do it!”

“Yes, Master!” For some reason, Djoser was so moved by the words that tears began to well in his eyes.

Gerhard told Djoser where Lutz and Claudia lived and talked a bit about their unique personalities. Then, he watched his apprentice as he bowed deeply and rushed out the door with the Knight Killer tightly gripped in his hands.

Gerhard’s eyes were colored with exhaustion and exasperation. “Once that guy gets something stuck in his head... Oh well, it’s got nothing to do with me now.” Gerhard returned to doing maintenance on his sword, whistling all the while.

Gerhard was busy enough taking care of his beloved katana, so he decided to leave the rest up to the young’uns.

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Right from the crack of dawn, Lutz and Claudia were in good spirits. Recently, they had been able to sell Lutz’s sword and katana at a very good price, so they had a little bit more wiggle room in the household budget. As a result, they had been able to add an extra side dish here and there to their meals.

Along with their usual rye bread, soup, and beer, they were able to eat a bit of cheese or salted herring. Even that alone greatly increased the enjoyment they felt with every meal. It also meant that it was easier to get more protein into their diets.

The salted herring was made with preservation in mind, its flavor being more of an afterthought. At times, it almost made Lutz doubt that he was actually eating a fish and not just a lump of salt.

As for Claudia, she was quite all right with just a small slice of it, or rather, that was about all she could handle. She would eat it a little at a time with the soup or bread to give it some extra depth, but it was still quite enjoyable.

As Lutz spent most of his day sweating in front of a sweltering furnace, though, he found himself craving that extreme saltiness.

“God, this is good. It’s so good!” Lutz ate the whole herring,

crunching on the head and tail.

Claudia struggled to understand how Lutz could do that, but in the end, she decided to just chalk it up to a difference in lifestyle.

After finishing their meal, they spent a bit of peaceful time in each other's company. Lutz figured that it would be a nice day to go dig up some iron sand as well, but as he was thinking about that, a vigorous knocking came at the door.

"Is Lu—is the blacksmith in?! My name is Djoser, a high-ranking knight in the Order. I have come by the introduction of my master, the great enchanter, Gerhard!"

It would seem that in the early hours of their peaceful morning, a very loudmouthed guest with a propensity for exaggeration had arrived.

Wondering what was going on, Lutz looked over to Claudia, who was wearing a very bitter expression indeed. It seemed her hatred of knights was as strong as ever.

"I don't know, I've got a really bad feeling about this one. What do you want to do? Shall we just pretend we aren't in?"

"That's certainly a very attractive idea, Lutzy. The question, though, is whether that would be enough to stop him from coming back again tomorrow, then the next day."

"Probably not..." Lutz stood up with a forced smile.

It was a nuisance—a truly bothersome thing. Lutz was half joking when he suggested that they pretend not to be in, but the other half was completely serious.

However, it would be an even bigger problem to end up on the bad side of a high-ranking knight. Considering that he was also coming there with an introduction from Gerhard, it would be disrespectful to him to refuse to see one of his acquaintances.

In the past months, Gerhard had been so kind as to purchase his katana at some very generous prices. Lutz also respected him on a personal level as a fellow craftsman. He didn't want to put any unnecessary strain on that relationship.

With somewhat burdened steps, Lutz made his way to the door and lifted the latch. When he opened the door, he saw a huge man, likely over six feet tall.

“Hello, I’m Lutz, the blacksmith. Do you have a reason for your visit today, Sir Knight?”

The man who had called himself Djoser removed the sword around his waist, sheath and all, then held it out in front of Lutz. “I have a few things that I wanted to ask you about this sword.”

Lutz would never mistake one of his creations. He recognized it the instant it entered his field of vision. Without any doubt, it was the Knight Killer. But why was the sword that he sold to Gerhard in the hands of that man?

Had he killed Gerhard and taken it off of him? No, that would be nearly impossible. The man before him did seem strong—likely even stronger than Lutz if they were to fight head-on. Still, he didn’t feel the same kind of mysterious, unknown power that he felt from Gerhard.

Perhaps he had stolen it? No, that was just as improbable. If someone were to steal a sword from Gerhard, who had dedicated his entire life to enchanted weapons, he would tear apart heaven and earth to find the culprit.

At that point, Lutz finally remembered. He had the feeling that Gerhard had said something about how he wanted his apprentice to be able to carry a truly fine sword. Putting the puzzle pieces together, Lutz realized that the uninvited guest at his doorstep was likely Gerhard’s apprentice. If that was so, he had no choice but to show him a good amount of hospitality.

“Well then, let’s go ahead and talk about it inside. Please, come in.”

Claudia usually took the initiative when guests came around, but when Djoser walked in, she simply rested her chin on her hand with a look of discontent. It didn’t look like she was going to offer to put out any drinks for him; that was for sure.

“Ah, and would this be your lovely...wife?” Djoser was taken aback by the air of malice that he had no recollection of doing anything to deserve.

Reacting to Djoser’s question, the two of them looked at each other with a puzzled expression for some reason.

“Say, dear, what exactly would you call our relationship?”

"Business partners, friends, lovers, plus a good bit more, I suppose."

"Yeah, I'd say that's about right. But it feels like it may be a bit difficult to explain that to every person that asks."

"How about we just make things simple and call me your wife or spouse. That should be easier to explain to most people, don't you think?"

"I do."

"I do too."

They both nodded in unison before Lutz turned back to face Djoser. "So, that's how it is, apparently."

"Apparently?! Are the two of you married or not?!"

"We are, as of a couple of seconds ago," said Claudia.

Thinking that they were trying to make a mockery of a high-ranking knight, Djoser was about to give in to his anger and place his hand on his sword, but he stopped himself after remembering his master's words of warning.

First, he was to treat them as if they were of the nobility.

Second, the two of them were quite unusual.

"The words of my master have a way of making more and more sense as time goes on..." Djoser shivered.

Lutz and Claudia stared at him with a frosty expression. It would seem a very strange individual had come to see them that day.

In other words, every last person present was thinking the exact same thing.

This person is absolutely insane.

"Is it really that important an issue whether I'm Lutzy's wife or not?" said Claudia with a pout.

"Of course it is!" Djoser waved his arms about in a passionate outburst. "If you are his wife, then you have a duty to protect the household, therefore, you have a right to participate in this discussion. If you were an utter stranger or perhaps a mistress, you wouldn't have the right to speak!"

"Ah, right..." said Claudia.

It wasn't like she was intimidated by his tantrum and couldn't say anything in return. More than not being able to correct him, she just

understood that it wouldn't be worth the effort to.

"Sir Djoser, would you be so kind as to get the point of why you've come today?" Lutz tried his best to rush the conversation along.

Djoser placed his sword on the table.

Sometimes, it felt like that table saw more weapons placed on it than it did food.

"This sword is named Knight Killer, correct? I want to know why you created such a thing."

"Why I created it...is a bit difficult to explain."

He couldn't exactly say that he made it out of pure hatred for the entire Knights Order. Unlike Gerhard, Djoser didn't seem like the sort of man to be able to laugh something like that off.

As Lutz stood there twisting his head around in thought, Djoser continued speaking. "I'm not here to reprimand you, nor do I have any intention of letting this sword go. A sword by the name of Knight Killer has fallen into the hands of a high-ranking knight, and I don't believe that to be a mere coincidence. I can't help but feel the hand of God at work. I simply want to know what I am supposed to accomplish with this sword. How am I to lead my life from now on?"

Watching in silence as Djoser passionately spoke about his worries, there was only one thing that was going through Lutz's and Claudia's minds.

What the hell is this guy talking about?

Djoser appeared to hold a different type of romanticism toward his sword than Lutz or Gerhard.

Lutz felt a finger poke at his back. It was, of course, Claudia who was by his side.

Claudia gave him a look that said, "Do you mind leaving the rest up to me?"

Lutz looked back with a nod that said, "No problem, it's all yours."

All it took was a quick glance between them to have a full conversation.

Claudia cleared her throat. "From here on out, on behalf of my husband, I, his wife, Claudia, will explain everything." She spoke as though she were delivering a monologue on a grand stage.

“And... Why you?”

“Because my husband doesn’t really have a way with words, I’m afraid.”

After she so plainly insulted Lutz to his face, Djoser couldn’t quite put up a further argument himself.

“First of all,” said Claudia, “regarding the making of the Knight Killer, it wasn’t actually forged by Lutz’s will at all. It just kind of happened—or if I were to phrase it differently...”

“If you were to phrase it differently?”

“He was guided by something to forge it.” Claudia’s voice exuded confidence.

Djoser seemed intrigued as well, as he started to lean forward toward her.

Claudia continued. “It all started when Gerhard’s friend, Borbus, decided he wanted to forge a katana in the pursuit of new knowledge and skills. The katana that he created was the culmination of an entire life before the forge—truly a magnificent katana. Were you aware of everything that I have said thus far?”

“Of course. I am my master’s most favored apprentice, after all,” proclaimed Djoser with pride.

Claudia glossed over his statement with a quick nod and moved the conversation forward. “A blacksmith specialized in western swords forged a katana, and a katana smith forged a western sword. Gerhard’s Ittetsu and your Knight Killer... While they are weapons that differ in type and creator, they might be called two halves of the same blade.” She tried her best to add a sense of romance to the two weapons’ origins. “So, have you understood that the story of these two swords all began with Borbus?”

“I can see that you’re at least trying to say that the story didn’t begin with Lutz having a particular hatred toward knights.”

Claudia nodded silently in return. She hadn’t lied, anyway. It wasn’t Lutz who held a fierce hatred toward knights, but Claudia herself.

“Out of a sense of rivalry and respect for Borbus, Lutz began to work on forging a western sword. However, at that moment, he had no intention of creating something like the Knight Killer. While he

was in his workshop, he felt like he was no longer truly himself, like he was overcome by someone or something else entirely. When he finally came to his senses, the Knight Killer was lying on the anvil before him."

"Are you saying that he was controlled by the hand of God?"

"At the very least, that is a possibility."

Djoser, who had gotten himself rather worked up over the course of their conversation, suddenly started to look at Claudia with suspicion. It seemed that her tall tale might have been a bit too big to swallow.

However, Claudia didn't back down. She would sprinkle in another little *coincidence*. "Djoser, surely you have realized that while the name of Knight Killer is engraved in the blade, Lutz's name is nowhere to be seen. Am I right?"

"Yes, that much is true..."

"That is because Lutz couldn't fully recognize it as a piece that he had forged, so he refrained from claiming to be its creator. It was a work of God."

"I see! So that was the meaning behind that!" Djoser was once again imbued with passion.

Lutz narrowed his eyes at the sly profile of Claudia's face.

I certainly don't have any recollection of that, but I suppose that's the meaning behind it now...

Lutz had just needed a theme to get his creative juices flowing, so he'd made a sword that could kill a bunch of people he hated. Then it had turned out so well that it seemed likely that it could get him into trouble, so he'd refrained from putting his name on it. Claudia was, of course, fully aware of that as well. If anything, she was the mastermind behind it all, so it was quite a thing to watch her string together eight hundred lies as easily as she breathed.

"So, you're saying that the birth of this Knight Killer—the fact that it ended up in my hands—was all by the divine will of God?" Djoser moaned in elation.

Lutz wanted to ask whether he was dropped on his head as a child, but looking over at Claudia, she seemed to be having the time of her life, so Lutz decided it best not to comment. He didn't want to

interrupt her fun.

Djoser forcefully slapped his thigh. It made a sound so loud that Lutz worried that he might have really hurt himself, but the knight's expression suggested he hardly felt it.

"Yes, I finally understand! I can hear the voice of God!"

"Huh?" said Lutz and Claudia simultaneously, absolutely dumbfounded.

"I mustn't only protect the Count from our enemies, but from the incessant insects that have squirmed their way into the castle as well. I must strive for true loyalty to my lord! To that end, God is telling me that I shouldn't fear directing my blade at anyone, even at our allies."

While Claudia was just poking a bit of fun at Djoser, she had accidentally assigned him his entire reason for living. At this point, even she had no idea what kind of face she should be making. The knight's level of lunacy far exceeded her expectations.

"I feel like you have opened my eyes, and I am truly seeing for the first time! Lutz, Claudia, I thank you from the bottom of my heart! Ah, the words of my master have proven true—I must look through to the soul, not to some flimsy title. I am so honored to have been able to meet with you, so glad that I chose to come!"

Profoundly moved by Claudia's words, the giant man grabbed his sword, flipped his cape, and rushed out of the living room. The sound of joyous laughter and the galloping of his horse slowly faded into the distance. By the time Lutz and Claudia made it outside, Djoser was already nowhere to be seen.

"What are we going to do if God files a complaint against us for fraud?" said Claudia in a state of exhaustion.

Lutz looked up at the vast heavens above them. The sky was almost frustratingly blue, as if to say that their petty struggles of the morning were nothing at all in the grand scheme of things.

"If that happens, let's just pretend we aren't in next time."

Chapter 8: The Three Men of the Workshop

The ornamentalist, around forty years of age, was squirming uncontrollably. His name was Patrick, and he was known to be the greatest master ornamentalist in town. His skills had earned him unrestricted passage to and from the Count's castle. From his current state, holding his head in his hands and undulating on the floor, you wouldn't feel an ounce of the respect and dignity that he had earned, but his skills were the real deal.

"I want to see my little Kikokuto..."

A little while before, Patrick had been the one to craft the ornate saya and tsuba of the katana that was presented to the Count.

It was amazing, truly a fantastic katana. As if pulled along by its divine beauty, Patrick was able to surpass what he believed to be his limits as a craftsman.

After that, he pleaded with Gerhard, the enchanter, to sell the katana to him. He didn't care if it would take every coin that he had to his name. That would have been just fine.

"Are you really so brain-dead that you want to poach an offering to the Count?"

Gehrard didn't say it quite that directly, but his cold stare sure did. And as much as Patrick hated to admit it, he was right. It wasn't like Patrick was unaware of what a ridiculous request it was, but he still couldn't stop it from escaping his mouth.

Ever since the Kikokuto had left his side, he had been ravaged by a somber loneliness. He hadn't been able to work on anything in the past several days, leaving all of the orders they had received completely to his apprentices. Even in such a difficult situation, the fact that the workshop was still running smoothly was a testament to Patrick's rigorous instruction.

The thing that really got to Patrick was the fact that the Kikokuto would be going to that frail middle-aged man-child of all people. Surely he was just going to admire it a few times before throwing it into storage to collect dust. Patrick couldn't stand the thought of it.

If he were its owner, he would never do such a thing. If it were his katana, he would take care of it properly. If only it were his.

My poor little Kikokuto...

Patrick let out a deep groan. "I can't. I'm at my limit. I can't stand it for another second!" He wrapped his cape around and charged out of his room.

"Master, are you going somewhere?" asked one of his apprentices.

"Just going to pop by the castle."

"Do we have an order from the Count?!" The apprentice's face lit up.

Orders from the nobility were on an entirely different scale from their usual work in terms of pay, and they were also an indispensable opportunity to earn distinction among the noble class. It had a large impact on how those who worked in the town's number one ornamentalist workshop were viewed by others as well.

"I'm afraid it isn't for work," said Patrick.

"Oh, okay..."

"I'm going in search of the love that I lost somewhere along the way."

"Oh... Okay?" The apprentice watched with suspicion as his master ran out of the workshop. He was curious, but he eventually gave up trying to understand what had just happened and went back to his work.

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It wasn't rare for someone to be so entranced by weapons that they began to treat them as if they were thinking, feeling humans. Well, maybe it was a little rare, but through living a long life as a craftsman, you would eventually come across such people. You would see it to the point where you could just write it off by saying,

“Oh, looks like we’ve got another one.”

However, even Gerhard couldn’t help but think that the man before him had strayed distressingly far from the path of sanity.

“I want to see my little Kikokuto. I beg of you, Master Gerhard, would you be so kind as to put in a good word with the Count so I could meet with her?” The middle-aged man, Patrick, spoke in a pitiful tone.

Gerhard had so much he wanted to say that he ended up uncertain where to begin. First of all, who the hell was *his little Kikokuto*?

“Let me get this straight. You want me to go to the Count and ask him if you can see his katana. Am I right?”

“I beg you!” said Patrick with an abnormal intensity.

“You see, Patrick... I’m going to try to explain this in really basic terms for you, but the Count is a very important person.” Gerhard’s face drooped, overcome with exhaustion. “He isn’t someone that just any craftsman can go up to and ask him to show you his katana.”

“I know, even I understand that much. But my very soul as a craftsman is stirring around inside of me. That’s why I’ve come here to plead with you!”

Gerhard silently shook his head. Whether he pleaded with him or even bowed his head to the cold floor, it wouldn’t change the fact that it just wasn’t possible.

Gerhard was confident that he had garnered the trust of the Count. However, if he started to abuse that trust for personal reasons, it would surely lead to his bitter end. Things were difficult as it was with different factions in the castle vying to curry favor with the Count. Gerhard wanted to remain as docile as he could.

“But, Master Gerhard, don’t you feel frustrated? A katana of that caliber has been given into the hands of a man who can’t understand its true value. It may very well end up just being shut away into storage somewhere.”

“What, Patrick, haven’t you heard? The Count has had the Kikokuto on his hip wherever he goes. Every morning, before his official duties, he has been doing practice swings in the courtyard. I’ve been seeing to his training, so there is no mistaking it.”

“What did you just say? That frail as a flatfish man—no, that Count whose constitution has always been rather weak—has been doing practice swings with a katana?”

“He has indeed. According to His Grace, he wanted to be able to hold his head high as the wielder of that katana.”

Patrick was in a state of confusion. Half of him simply couldn’t believe it, but the other half of him knew that with the Kikokuto in hand, it wouldn’t be impossible. If he just thought of it like a boy wanting to show off in front of a girl he liked, it all made sense.

“In terms of actual swordsmanship skill, he may not be as talented as you or me, but his desire to grow alongside his katana is the real thing. The Kikokuto belongs entirely to the Count. I advise you to throw away any lingering regrets that you have with it, because there’s no longer any room for anyone else to come between them.”

Patrick let out a pained groan. “So, you’re telling me not to come between a man and his katana, huh?”

Gerhard supposed that was one interpretation. He still couldn’t quite tell what Patrick was thinking from his expression, but he gave him a little nod anyway. “By the way, I enchanted it after you finished working on it, so it’s now an even more incredible katana than when you last saw it.” Gerhard laughed with a mockingly victorious grin.

“Why would you say that right when I was about to give up on her?! It’s almost like if my first love, whom I never even had the chance to speak with, moved out to the city and became even more beautiful!”

“What an easy-to-understand yet nauseating analogy...”

“Even a single glimpse would be enough. Isn’t that desire just what it means to be human?” Patrick pressed further.

Gerhard waved his hand as if he were shooing a rabid dog. “I’ve already told you everything that I know. I can’t do anything more for you, so go home.”

“At least... At least could I observe the Count during his practice?”

“Do you think it would be acceptable to bring a complete stranger along to watch a nobleman during his limited personal time?

Recently, my apprentice seems like he's been itching for the opportunity to cut somebody down, so don't even think of trying to sneak in either."

"Did something happen?"

"Beats the hell out of me."

It seemed like no matter how much Patrick begged, there were some things that just weren't possible. Patrick stood to leave, not wanting to strain his relationship with Gerhard any more than he already had. Right as he was about to reach the door, though, he remembered something and turned back to Gerhard. "By the way, you did give my name to the Count like you promised, right?"

"Hmm?" Gerhard racked his brain, trying to figure out what he was talking about.

Patrick was staring daggers at him all the while. "When I handed you my little Kikokuto, you promised that you were going to tell the Count that the saya was designed by the ornamentalist, Patrick. You're the one who brought up the idea in the first place!"

"Oooh..." Gerhard finally remembered. He may or may not have said something like that when he was trying to get Patrick to stop begging him to sell him the katana. He looked around the room as he tried to fully remember, avoiding eye contact.

"You forgot, didn't you?"

"It's not that I forgot. I just, you know...forgot a little bit."

Patrick threw his head down in frustration, but when he lifted it back up, there was a conniving little grin on his face. "It looks like you owe me one, I'd say."

"What the hell do you want me to do?"

"Putting aside for a moment whether it's possible or not, I want you to at least tell the Count that there is somebody who would like to observe his training. If he rejects the idea there, then I'll give up."

"I'll ask, but that's it, okay? I won't be held responsible for any answer that he gives."

"Yes, of course. Thank you." Patrick bowed deeply to Gerhard, then left Gerhard's workshop behind.

Gerhard remained with a bitter expression on his face. He was kicking himself for making such a careless promise. It wasn't like

they had it down in writing anywhere, but a promise like that was akin to a verbal contract. If he went back on it, it would affect the trust that he had built up over the years. It was indeed his fault for forgetting about it.

He tried to remember why he had forgotten about it in the first place. That was right, at the time, he had only just finished the arduous task of engraving five runes into the Kikokuto, and everything else had flown from his mind in exhaustion.

"I guess I'll try to bring it up nonchalantly..."

Whether it was right or wrong to do so, Gerhard couldn't rest while in debt to someone. That was just the sort of person he was.

***

As a craftsman, as an enchanter, he had obtained the greatest of honors. Even still—or perhaps precisely because of that—when Gerhard had a real problem, there wasn't anyone whom he could talk to about it.

The ornamentalist Patrick had pleaded with him to ask the Count whether he would be willing to show him his beloved katana, but there was simply too large a difference in status between a nobleman and a peasant to ask such a thing. It was true that it was Patrick who crafted the saya and tsuka, but it had already left his hands.

Gerhard thought about speaking with his apprentice, Djoser, as he was also a high-ranking knight, but he quickly thought better of it. If he spoke with Djoser, he would likely either try to eliminate Patrick or intimidate him into giving up. Gerhard could see it already.

Trying to get him to give up on it was probably the proper course of action in all honesty, but considering he had a debt to repay Patrick, he didn't want to resort to that, if possible.

He had said that he would at least try asking, but even just that could get people to look at Gerhard with suspicion. He wanted to avoid that at all costs.

Just thinking about it, Gerhard got himself worked up in frustration. Why did he have to worry himself over something so

patently insane? The fact that he would have to stick out his neck for a perverted ornamentalist who couldn't tell the difference between a woman and a katana was infuriating.

You know what, I don't give a damn. I'm just going to drink myself to sleep.

Just as Gerhard was about to give in to his bad habit of throwing everything out the window, he had an idea. If he didn't have anyone in the castle walls that he could ask for advice, all he had to do was go outside of them.

***

"Haaa!" Lutz let out a shout as he poured cold water over his head. He was standing in the river, completely naked.

Lutz was of average height, and though he couldn't be described as burly, his body was densely adorned with lean muscles. The water ran in rapid rivulets over the many scars he had collected from burns over the years.

He collected water in the bucket again and poured it over his head. It was as though it was washing away all of his worries, along with the accumulated sweat.

"Sometimes, I feel like I keep on blacksmithing just for moments like this..."

He was exaggerating, but it sure did feel good.

Next, Lutz washed the donkey that he had brought down there. He poured water over it and used a makeshift straw brush to go through its fur. The donkey shook a little every time as if it were enjoying it as well. When it shook off the water, it splashed all over Lutz's face, but he just laughed. He would just have to wash himself off again. He wasn't one to get worked up over little things like that, at least outside of his workshop.

When the winter eventually came, he wouldn't be able to go out and rinse himself off in the river like that anymore. He decided he would go to the river a bit more often before that happened.

Suddenly, Lutz felt the presence of someone near him. When he turned around, he saw a familiar old man with a donkey in tow,

same as Lutz.

"Oh, were you having a wash?"

Lutz had *the tools of his trade* fully exposed, but Gerhard didn't touch on that subject. He understood very well how good it felt to wash yourself off after a long day of work.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"Go ahead. Oh, would you like to use the bucket?"

"Thank you." Gerhard took the bucket and took off his clothes, carefully folding them.

Seeing his naked body, Lutz's eyes popped wide open. Gerhard was the buffest old geezer he had ever seen. Perhaps from his time as an adventurer, he was also covered in scars. From Lutz's perspective, he seemed lucky to still be alive after bearing wounds like that.

Gerhard stepped into the river and poured the water over his head with a grunt. He poured it over him again, then once more. "Ah, this truly is refreshing. You can't exactly do this sort of thing while living in the city walls," said Gerhard in a quiet, satisfied voice.

Lutz nodded back to him. It surely wouldn't be easy. If someone reported a sighting of a scarred, macho nudist geezer splashing around in the water well, the knights would be sent there in an instant. The rumors would also spread like wildfire. If he got kicked out of the castle for exhibitionism, that would just be all too pitiable.

In terms of that kind of personal freedom, living outside the walls was far better. It was about the only upside, however.

The two men didn't have an inch of cloth covering them. As they were facing directly toward each other, the *tools of their trade* were fully in view. As the awkwardness began to build, they both silently put their clothes back on. Even though it was something they were well used to seeing, there was some mysterious part of them that didn't really want to look at someone else's tools.

"So, Gerhard, did you come here today to place a new order for something?" Lutz put his arms through his shirt.

"No, nothing like that, I'm afraid. I just wanted a little bit of advice."

"Advice?"

Not a job, but advice? Lutz had no idea what he could want to speak with him about.

The two of them held on to the reins of their donkeys and made their way to the workshop while talking.

"Lutz, let's say that you crafted a brilliant katana and some stranger asked you if they could see it. What would you think? Would you happily brag about it to them, or would you just turn them down flat?"

"I suppose it would depend on the person."

"Hmm, and how so?"

"If it were someone that I knew, or at least understood to a certain extent, I would be more than happy to show them. However, if it were somebody whom I knew nothing at all about, I would definitely have my suspicions. I'd wonder what they were really wanting to do."

Gerhard thought about Lutz's answer in the context of his current situation. The Count and Patrick had never been acquainted. They were complete strangers to each other. If Gerhard asked the Count to show him his katana, he would probably happily oblige. But what if it were a random craftsman that he didn't know by face or name? Gerhard couldn't imagine the Count would be too enthusiastic about it.

"Yes, that much makes sense..."

"Has something happened?"

"Hmm, you see..." Gerhard paused.

"What? We've seen each other's dicks. What's there left to hide?"

"Do you really want to know?"

Even Gerhard recognized it would be strange of him to suddenly go quiet after coming all the way there for advice. He made up his mind to tell Lutz everything, but as they had just reached his workshop, he decided he would like to hear the opinion of the very talented Claudia as well. At times like that, Claudia always seemed to have some insightful words.

Claudia greeted the two of them, coming out from the front door.

Gerhard and Lutz put the donkeys in the small stable. It seemed that the two donkeys had already become fast friends and were

huddling up next to each other. After the three of them admired the adorable sight for a while, they all headed inside and sat around the usual old table.

"I'm being troubled by a pervert," said Gerhard.

"Huh?"

Of course, that wasn't nearly enough information for them to understand Gerhard's predicament, but it was at least enough to get across the fact that it was a very bothersome problem indeed.

Gerhard went on to talk about Patrick, the ornamentalist. However, he chose to leave out the part about him forgetting to tell the Count his name and instead made it sound like he just wanted to grant Patrick's wish as a fellow craftsman, a tale of his boundless chivalry.

"Hmm... *His little Kikokuto*, huh?" Claudia didn't know how she felt about a katana that she named being referred to that way.

"Is that person all right in the head? If you let him see the Kikokuto, he wouldn't start licking it or something, would he? Even though it isn't cursed, he wouldn't start trying to cut himself up with it or anything, right?"

Lutz was half joking when he asked, but he was surprised to see Gerhard seriously thinking it over.

Gerhard gave a little nod. "Beats me. He might actually do it, that guy..."

"Is he really that severe of a degenerate?" asked Claudia.

"Maybe it would just be better to put him down...for the sake of the world and all who inhabit it," said Lutz.

Gerhard was inclined to agree with Lutz on that one, but he was afraid that just wasn't an option.

"Come to think of it, the two of you never got to see the Kikokuto in its finished form, did you? While that pervert's personality is rotten to the core, his skills really are something to admire. You could even say that to let him go would be a huge loss for the Count's domain. The saya that he crafted in the image of a lion was spectacular. If you can just overlook his personality..."

Gerhard was really pulled between wanting to work with him more and never wanting to see him again. It was quite a confusing

spot to be in.

"In any case, I was wondering if you two had any reasonable ideas for letting Patrick see the Kikokuto again."

"If that's all you need, I have an idea," said Claudia without hesitation.

Had she really so easily come up with a solution to something Gerhard had been spending sleepless nights thinking about?

"Hmm, I'm all ears," Gerhard replied slyly, as if challenging her. Could she really do it?

"If you can't directly get an appointment with someone, you just have to attack it from a different angle. It's the very basics of being a merchant. If the Count won't show you his katana, you just need to go and see it."

What the hell is she going on about?

From Claudia's smile, Gerhard could tell that she wasn't just trying to blow smoke. She looked rather amused, like she was waiting for Gerhard to find the answer to her riddle.

"Oh, wait... Maintenance."

If Gerhard told the Count that they needed to inspect the katana for maintenance purposes, his problem could easily be solved. It would be a bit strange for the ornamentalist to perform that kind of maintenance alone, but with the enchanter Gerhard there, it would give it some more viability.

Patrick's goal wasn't to watch the Count's amateurish practice swings. If he had the chance to hold it in his hands and examine it closely, surely he couldn't ask for anything more.

"Wait a second." Lutz raised his hand. "The Count has just been doing practice swings, so he hasn't actually cut into any monsters or people with it, right? What would be the point of doing maintenance on it?"

If it were just a matter of applying a new layer of oil to it, that could be done in a few minutes. It would be pretty damn suspicious to carry off a katana that basically had nothing wrong with it for any serious maintenance. It wouldn't work.

But wait...

Mulling it over a little more, Gerhard thought that the idea itself

might not be so bad. They just needed an excuse.

"That's it. Every six months or so, the Count attends a gathering of weapon-fanatic nobles. He is sure to bring the Kikokuto along with him this time around. Of course, there won't be any major wear on the blade yet, but at an event like that, there can't even be any minor scratches present on the blade, so if I ask him to let us inspect it for him, it wouldn't seem out of the ordinary."

"It sounds like you have your answer," said Lutz. "In that case, it wouldn't be weird for an ornamentalist to be present as well."

"Don't talk about it like it doesn't concern you too, Lutz. Of course, we'll have you there with us."

"Oh... Huh?"

While Lutz didn't really want to get dragged along with the twisted fetishes of an ornamentalist, he was curious to see how the Kikokuto looked in its finished form, so he agreed in the end.

"So, when is the next weapon maniac meeting, anyway? We'd have to all get together before then, right?"

"When was it again? I forgot..."

Gerhard had been forgetting quite a lot recently, but it wasn't that he was being complacent. Things that didn't interest him simply didn't enter his mind. It was a bad habit that he had carried throughout his entire life. If he wasn't interested in something, he didn't even try to remember it. If you thought about it that way, it sounded even worse.

"Gerhard?" Lutz cocked his head.

"Oh well, it's fine. When I find out, I'll make sure to let you know, so just sit tight until then. If we iron out some of the smaller details, it'll get Patrick to calm down a bit too, I'm sure."

Gerhard stood from his chair and thanked the two of them for their help before leaving the workshop behind him.

Afterward, Lutz and Claudia shared a laugh while preparing dinner, talking about how he was as free-spirited an old geezer as ever.

***

After returning to the castle, Gerhard asked his dear apprentice about the Count's upcoming events.

"Oh, the usual gathering? He'll be heading out for it in three days," said Djoser without hesitation.

Gerhard had to quickly explain everything to the Count and get the other craftsmen together. He ran around the castle halls as if there were a fire lit beneath him.

This was the result of his treating plans and promises so carelessly. In life, something always came to collect your debts right when you had just managed to forget about them.

***

A man in his sixties, a man in his forties, and a man in his twenties. They were a group that could pass for a grandfather, father, and grandson, but it was a gathering of experienced craftsmen.

"Oh, it's incredible!" Lutz grunted approvingly while admiring the Kikokuto's saya in Gerhard's workshop.

The visage of the silver lion was so dynamic in nature that it seemed like it would jump out and attack at any moment. Up until then, Lutz had shown very little interest in ornamentalist work. To him, the important thing was what was inside—whether the katana could cut or not. He had seen many swords that looked beautifully ornate on the outside but were pieces of garbage at their core. Because of this, he had developed a certain amount of contempt toward such works. That was also why the saya, tsuba, and tsuka that he always made had pure practicality in mind.

For him, seeing Patrick's work on the Kikokuto was a moment that completely changed how he viewed the craft. The engravings were so masterful. If he were asked whether he wanted it or not, he would say he wanted it in an instant.

Having heard beforehand that Patrick was an irredeemable pervert, he had honestly been looking at him with a bit of suspicion, but after seeing his work, Lutz couldn't deny that he was a master of his craft.

If Lutz were to dedicate the next ten, twenty years of his life to engraving alone, he wondered whether he could produce such a fantastic result. No, it would likely be impossible for him.

Lutz turned to Patrick with a look of deep respect.

The man in question was staring at the Kikokuto with a lascivious gaze, doing his best to stop the drool pouring from his mouth. "Oh, she's so lovely. My precious little Kikokuto..."

The blade that shined as bright as polished platinum, the delicate yet bold wave of the hamon, the faint green glow of the ancient runes... It all captured Patrick's heart in a never-ending dance. It wasn't just like his first love had gotten even more gorgeous. She had become a beautiful princess.

"Hey, Patrick, don't even think about putting your filthy tongue on it. Your face is getting too close. Don't even breathe on it!" Gerhard gave him an exhausted look of disapproval.

Hearing Gerhard's warning, Patrick pulled away from the katana for a moment, but he soon brought it right up close to him again. His face was flushed, his breathing rapid. Honestly, he looked like someone who should be locked up somewhere, and if a certain high-ranking knight had been there with them, he likely would have been.

"Haaa, haaaa... My little Kikokuto, I can't believe that you're still a virgin..."

He likely meant that it hadn't yet been used to cut anyone down, but the way he said it was just stomach-churning.

"I am honored to have been able to study such incredible work close up." Lutz handed the saya back over to Gerhard.

Patrick reluctantly followed suit while being assaulted by Gerhard's look of disgust.

Gerhard carefully sheathed the katana back into its saya, then looked back and forth between the other two. "With that, the inspection comes to an end, I suppose. I'll ask just in case, but there weren't any scratches or imperfections on it, right?"

"Nothing," said Lutz. "I mean, we had a feeling that would be the case from the start, anyway."

Their job was officially over. However, not a single one of them moved from their seat.

Lutz was the first to speak up. “It’d be a shame to just go our separate ways now, wouldn’t it? We’ve gone through the trouble of getting together the number one craftsmen of our respective disciplines, after all.”

“Calling yourself number one, huh? How humble of you.” Gerhard chuckled.

“With this katana in front of us, I don’t get the feeling that I need to be humble,” said Lutz definitively.

It was exactly the kind of answer that Gerhard expected from him. He gave Lutz a satisfied nod.

We were the ones who created this wonderful katana. That is truly something to be proud of.

“With the three of us here, we could make countless swords that could go down in legend. Just thinking about that possibility gives me the strangest feeling,” said Gerhard proudly.

Lutz and Patrick nodded back to him.

No matter your craft, there would always be some variance in how a piece turned out in the end. Furthermore, forging a katana was an arduous task that almost seemed to shave away at the soul. Saying that it would be possible to mass-produce such incredible swords as the Kikokuto was obviously an unreasonable exaggeration. Even still, the thought of the three of them making even one more katana of similar greatness was almost like a dream.

“What do you guys say? While we have the three of us together, how about we make another katana? A katana so great that it surpasses even this Kikokuto.” Patrick’s voice was bright with joy.

“Unfortunately, there are a few problems with that, though...” said Gerhard, disheartened.

Patrick had thought Gerhard would have thrown his hands up in the air and celebrated the idea, so he was a bit displeased at Gerhard’s unexpected reaction.

“The first problem is, of course, who will pay for it? Just thinking about the cost of the raw materials that I used when enchanting the Kikokuto sends shivers down my spine.”

Gerhard had repeatedly told his apprentice that once an enchanter sits before the ritual stand, they shouldn’t think for a

moment about the money it costs, but when enchanting the Kikokuto, Gerhard had used up such a large amount of jewels and mercury that it terrified even him.

There was such a difference in enchanting a sword with three or four runes and enchanting it with five runes that the cost was nearly incomparable. You'd have to be joking to ask him to do that again out of his own pocket.

It was also worth mentioning that after he'd spent so much money on the katana around his hip and a sword for his apprentice, his savings were reaching an end.

"Surely the ornamentation is costly for you as well, Patrick. Also, Lutz would need to dedicate his livelihood to forging that one katana for a while. It isn't something that we could do without a sponsor."

They needed to get a sponsor. To put it a bit crudely, it was the dream of every craftsman to find a rich man to support them. Success in that often had less to do with one's skills as a craftsman and more to do with their luck and communication skills.

Lutz had always thought that was the wrong kind of mindset for a craftsman to have, so he wanted to object, but when he thought about it, he had only really started taking off as a katana smith once he had the full support of Claudia by his side. If it weren't for her, he would still just be sitting around his little hut with no work coming through his doors. Without finding someone to fund your work, there was nothing you could do. That was the reality of being a craftsman.

"The next issue is, if the three of us make it together, who will be the eventual owner? Surely you won't suggest that we take turns with it."

"Regarding that, if possible, perhaps I could work something o—"

"Patrick, you just want the katana all to yourself. Why not try being honest with us?"

"I want a beautiful katana like my little Kikokuto!"

"Thank you for your sincerity, but it's not happening. Give it up."

"That's so mean!"

Gerhard ignored the crying middle-aged man and continued his assessment of the situation. "Finally, one more thing. There is quite

a high chance that a new order will come in once the Count returns from that gathering. Right now, it would be best to wait while doing a few preparations here and there."

"And why are you so sure that an order will come in?" asked Lutz.

"It's a gathering of fanatical weapon lovers. The Count is sure to show off the Kikokuto to everyone. You could even say that is the sole reason he will be attending. What do you think the other attendees will think? They'll either ask for the Count to sell them the Kikokuto, or perhaps—"

"Or they'll ask for something similar from the same craftsmen, right?" Lutz smirked.

"If the Count were asked by a baron or prominent merchant, for example, he would likely give them a vague answer and try to laugh it off, but rumor has it that the Marquis also attends these gatherings."

"You're saying that he might give in to the Marquis if he asked?"

"That's just how the power balance is between nobles. If he turned him down, he probably wouldn't be punished directly, but he could be driven out of the Marquis's faction, and many other influential nobles could cut ties with him to distance themselves. Long term, it could amount to a net loss of several thousand, maybe even tens of thousands of gold coins. On top of that, as long as the Count didn't rectify such a situation, the territory would only continue to bleed with no opportunity to heal."

Most peasants had never even laid eyes on a gold coin. Lutz couldn't even begin to grasp what tens of thousands of such a precious thing amounted to.

Gerhard forced a smile. "That's just the kind of money that people play with in politics." He understood what Lutz was likely thinking. While Gerhard was a craftsman employed by the Count, he'd started his journey as an adventurer, far from someone of noble birth. At his core, he was closer to Lutz and Claudia than to the nobility.

"Be that as it may, I still don't have a great feeling about this. A katana being used as just some political tool..."

Gerhard snickered. "Oh, Lutz, you are still young indeed."

“I don’t want to think of growing up as a process of killing off your own ideals,” said Lutz with an unwavering gaze.

Gerhard squinted at Lutz as if he were almost too bright to look at. His words probably amounted to nothing more than selfish whims, but Gerhard didn’t want to call them that. It was the passion of a true craftsman. Besides, considering that Gerhard had held a grudge with the hero for ages over being a bit disappointed with a reward he received, Gerhard wasn’t exactly in the position to lecture Lutz about acting like an adult.

“Best not to think too deeply about it. At the end of the day, our job is the same either way. We get to go all out, making whatever we want with someone else’s wallet. Just think of it like that. It’s a perk of the job.”

“I guess you’re right...” Lutz rubbed his chin in thought. He couldn’t care less about politics or the muddy world of the nobility. The only thing that mattered to him was being able to create a truly great katana. That was all.

The greatest katana smith would forge it, a top-class ornamentalist would spiff it up, and the foremost enchanter of the territory would engrave the magic into it.

The opportunity to create something that could go down in history held an irresistible temptation for any craftsman. On top of that, they could do it with the Count’s money. Who could find any fault with a chance like that?

It would be used for political purposes? That was just fine. They just needed to turn the tables on the nobility and make use of them too.

“Shall we do it, then? Shall we make the world’s greatest katana?”

“I’m in.”

“Count me in too!”

The three of them exchanged strong nods of approval. On each of their faces was a smile that you would associate more with a villain than a hero. At the same time, it somewhat resembled the smile of a young boy.

None of them was aware yet that the katana they would create

would go on to greatly impact the future of the kingdom. They had no possible way of knowing. In that moment, holding on to a deep mutual respect for one another, they simply looked forward to the bright future ahead of them.





Epilogue

A fabulous ball was held at the luxurious mansion of Marquis Beowulf Eldenburger. At the very height of the banquet, several people slipped into a different room, one by one, but no one took notice. In that room, where the music and laughter of the ball could only faintly be heard, about twenty men and women gathered together. In the midst of them was Gerhard's sponsor, Lord Maximillion Shander.

To the nobility, that kind of entertainment wasn't merely for the sake of leisure. In an age without television or phones, being able to speak with someone directly and have them remember your name was something of dire importance. Therefore, as the head of his house, it was his responsibility to stay abreast of the latest trends of the upper class, become as knowledgeable as he could about such pastimes, and actively participate in them whenever possible. In a modern context, it would help to picture the golfing habits of the powerful and wealthy.

For Maximillion, that assembly of weapon lovers was very convenient indeed. Unfortunately, he wasn't the most sociable of people. He struggled to start conversations, and he struggled just as much to continue them once they had begun.

All he had to do there, however, was find someone with their blade drawn proudly and say a quick "What a wonderful sword." If he did so, the other party would light up with joy, and the conversation would go smoothly.

Having participated in that gathering several times, Maximillion had come to know many of the people there. As he had always held curiosity in weapons and heroic tales from battles, it wasn't something that he had to go out of his way to show interest in. He could simply interact with people as his normal self.

A Viscount that Maximillion recognized, but had forgotten the

name of, waved his hand as he approached. “Oh, if it isn’t Lord Maximillion. I see that you’ve brought a sword today.” His eyes quickly settled on the katana around the Count’s hip.

“Yes, I’ve finally got my hands on something I can proudly display to such a discerning crowd.”

“You don’t say. Let me see...” The Viscount was smiling, but the look in his eyes told a different story. They were challenging the Count. Would the sword really be able to satisfy his standards?

Maximillion looked around to ensure no one was so close that they could accidentally be injured, and drew the Kikokuto.

The Viscount gulped audibly. His eyes were pinned on the blade. He had thought that he had seen the most splendid weapons ever created, but that moment made him realize he was gravely mistaken. He was so impressed that he completely forgot to hold himself back.

“It’s beautiful! Absolument magnifique! Fantastique et érotique! Even if my life were to come to its end by the edge of this incredible katana, I may find myself satisfied with that!”

Maximillion was taken aback by the Viscount’s sudden flood of passion, but there was a particular word in his sudden rant that caught his attention. “I noticed that you said ‘katana.’ Do you have experience with them?”

Happy to have his knowledge of the subject recognized by the Count, a huge smile spread on the Viscount’s face. “I have seen quite a few of them carried here by traveling merchants. Or perhaps I should say that I believed I had seen several of them before. I now realize that tonight is the first time I have seen a real katana.” The Viscount lowered his voice. “I must ask... Hypothetically, of course, if you were to sell that katana, how much would you ask for it?”

“My apologies, but I have no intention of letting this katana go.”

The Viscount was disappointed, but he was also half expecting such an answer. “Yes, of course. If I were its owner, I surely wouldn’t let it go for any amount either.”

For a weapon fanatic like the Viscount, that was the highest level of praise that he could ever say. The Count gave him a little nod to thank him for his kind words.

“In that case, would it at least be possible to take it in my hands and inspect it more closely?”

“Please, go ahead. I’m sure the katana would be happy to have someone who understands its value inspect it as well.” Maximillion held the katana up vertically, with the cutting edge facing himself, and handed it to the Viscount.

The Viscount graciously accepted the katana in his hands. Taking a closer look at the runes engraved in the blade, he was again left in awe. “Five runes?! Wha—how on earth... The blade is strong enough to withstand that much mana?!” He continued to look at the Kikokuto from every angle, even contorting his body to get a better look, drawing quite a bit of attention to himself.

Others, quietly observing from their periphery, started to collect around them to see what the fuss was about.

“What is that strange sword over there?”

“Apparently, it’s called a katana.”

“Five runes? That can’t be real, right? It’s got to just be for decoration.”

“No, take a look at their glow. It’s the real deal. I can feel mana coming from it as well.”

“Is it even physically possible to enchant something with five runes?”

“I’ve heard that such a sword might exist in the royal vault, but...”

Maximillion somehow managed to hold back the slovenly expression trying to leak past his refined façade. How good it felt to be the center of attention, to have everyone around talking about him like that. He had brought quite a few swords that he was proud of before, but never had he received that level of attention for them. In that moment, he learned why so many people loved to show off in front of others. It was a form of pleasure that he hadn’t experienced before.

Just then, the crowd around him opened a path for a burly-looking man as he approached. It was the master of that castle, Marquis Beowulf Eldenburger. In his youth, he had bravely fought in many battles. Perhaps because of that, he had a peculiar aura around him that Maximillion found intimidating.

“Would you mind showing it to me as well?” The Marquis was in his early fifties, but his silky and sonorous voice resonated around the room when he spoke.

Just hearing a few words made it all make sense to the Count. If soldiers were to receive commands from such a voice, they would gladly charge to their deaths.

The Viscount respectfully handed the katana over to the Marquis. Regardless of their immense difference in status, it would have been the very basics of etiquette to first get Maximillion’s permission before handing it over, but the Viscount was so nervous that he forgot even that.

Maximillion also didn’t go out of his way to rebuke the Viscount for doing so. It would surely only make more trouble and leave a bad impression for him to interrupt the Marquis like that.

“Hmm... Mm-hmm.” Beowulf grunted while looking over the blade. He had decided to take a look out of simple curiosity, but the more he gazed at it, the further he was drawn in.

He wanted to wear it on his hip. He wanted to swing it. If at all possible, he wanted to cut someone in half with it. He wanted to chop someone’s head off and carefully inspect the cross section. It would surely be such a clean cut that it would look like some sort of carefully preserved specimen.

While thinking about such things, the Marquis realized that those around him were still waiting for him to say something about it. He had gotten too absorbed in his own world. He was the one who was supposed to be in control of the whole event, but he’d allowed his heart to be stolen by that katana.

“Let me answer the question that all of you are surely asking yourselves.” Beowulf turned to them all with a huge smile plastered on his face, and spoke as if he were delivering a powerful monologue. To be a noble was to always be standing on such a grand stage. “Regarding the five-rune enchantment, it’s the real thing. It truly is enchanted with a wind spell. The mana within it is also extremely potent.”

The crowd erupted with a roar. The Marquis had essentially confirmed that the katana was of the same class as a legendary

sword, a national treasure.

"Lord Maximillion, what is the name of this katana?"

"It is named Kikokuto, the Blade of Weeping Oni."

"A blade that makes even oni cry, huh? That is quite a unique name, indeed."

"I believe that if you were to swing it, you would come to understand why it was given such a name."

"Hmm..." Beowulf swung out his hand, parallel to the floor, and all those watching opened up a wide space around him.

As the decorated general held the katana above his head, the room went quiet, as if the air itself had frozen in place.

"Haa!"

The crowd around him didn't even want to blink in case they missed a moment of such an incredible sight, but the Marquis's swing was so fast that it couldn't be perceived with the naked eye. Before they even knew what had happened, he had already swung the katana and was standing at the ready in seigan. The only evidence that he had swung the katana at all was in the sound of the wind, still ringing out in their ears. It was a sound so pleasant that it was as if the wind spirit herself were gently caressing the lobes of their ears.

As everyone around was looking at the Marquis with adoration, the Count alone wore a rather difficult expression to read. The Marquis had produced a much cleaner sound than the Count ever had. To put it simply, he was envious.

It was as if he had caught his wife sleeping with another man, letting out all kinds of blissful moans that she never did with him, and all he could do was watch. He felt like his brain was going to explode.

After thinking it through that far, the Count returned to his senses, frustrated at his own stupidity. The Kikokuto was a katana, not a woman. However, even though he could settle that matter in his mind, a strange, unsettled feeling remained deep in his stomach. He decided that he would refrain from letting people hold it in the future.

"Ah, I see. It sounds almost as though the katana is crying out.

Lord Maximillion, sell me this katana. Name your price; I'll pay anything. I'd even give you an entire castle!" Beowulf yelled with excitement.

Even still, Maximillion shook his head. "With all due respect, I wish to decline your generous offer."

"Huh?" Beowulf allowed his bafflement to escape from his mouth. He struggled to understand exactly what the Count was saying.

Every single person at that gathering was looking for a chance to develop a stronger relationship with the Marquis. Half of the reason that people brought their weapons there was to be able to offer them to him to curry favor. If Count Shander had succeeded in drawing his attention yet still refused to sell it, just what had he come there for in the first place?

Confronted with the frigid gazes of those around him, like needles sticking into his body, Maximillion went to quickly explain himself, as it would all be too late after he was forcefully kicked out. "This katana was designed specifically for me. Its length and weight are also matched perfectly to my body. Because of my lack of physical strength, it was made to be incredibly light and thin. The reason that it was enchanted with a wind spell was also to make it even lighter. Your Grace, did the katana not feel entirely too light for a person of your stature?"

"Yes, it did a bit..."

For a man the size of Beowulf, wielding the Kikokuto felt no different from swinging around a toothpick. If a weapon were too heavy for a person, it was entirely useless, but if it were too light, one couldn't reach their full potential either.

Very well then... So, what is it that you're after?

Beowulf's eyes were painted with suspicion.

"How about this? Instead of offering this katana, I will instruct the very capable craftsmen of my domain to forge a new katana designed specifically with Your Grace in mind. From the length, the weight, the spell that it is enchanted with, everything down to the engravings would be entirely as you desired." Maximillion said it just as he had prepared with Gerhard. He wanted to deepen his relationship with the Marquis, but he also wanted to hold on to the

Kikokuto at all costs. That was how they arrived at the idea of making the Marquis's katana to order.

According to Gerhard, he already had all of the craftsmen needed at the ready. There was no one that the Count could rely on more than Gerhard with that kind of weapon-based diplomacy.

The Count's refusal to sell wasn't just a product of his attachment to the Kikokuto. He also wanted to use the opportunity as a catalyst to develop an even deeper relationship with the Marquis. Maximillion's only miscalculation was the fact that he was an abysmal actor and delivered his lines with all the conviction of a child telling his first lie.

Beowulf saw directly through him from the very outset. The Count's intentions aside, it wasn't a bad deal for Beowulf either. To have his very own katana forged to his liking would certainly be far better than forcefully taking the Kikokuto off of Maximillion. That way, it wouldn't leave any bad blood between them either. The only drawback would be the slight frustration of playing directly into Maximillion's hand, but that was a trivial matter.

Beowulf gave him a smile. "That is an excellent idea. All right, let's go with—" He quickly retreated his outstretched hands to cover his own mouth, cutting off his words halfway through.

Seeing the Marquis's strange reaction, Maximillion's heart suddenly sank as he wondered if he had done something to offend him. If he had angered the Marquis, it would mean a huge loss for the entire Shander territory. There was no such thing as being too cautious.

"Is something the matter, Your Grace?"

"It's nothing... Lord Maximillion, regarding the request for this new katana, would you mind waiting a little while?"

"Oh— Uh, no problem at all. We aren't in any particular hurry either, so whenever is most convenient for Your Grace is perfectly fine."

"Very well, then," Beowulf responded to the Count, but it seemed as though his mind was elsewhere. "It seems that I might have drunk a bit too much. I'm going to get some fresh air. Please, everyone, continue to enjoy yourselves."

The Marquis made his way toward the balcony. From his body language alone, he was giving off a strong aura that said he wished to be alone, so not a single person tried to go along with him.

Maximillion was half relieved that he had successfully finished speaking with someone of such a high status and half confused as to what had just happened.

As Beowulf was handing over the Kikokuto, he had whispered something to Maximillion with a sharp gaze.

"You come along too."

It smelled of nothing but trouble. Lord Maximillion Shander's long night had only just begun.

The Count stepped out of the dance hall and onto the balcony, gently illuminated by moonlight. The two of them were completely alone. If it had been a beautiful girl who had invited him, it would have been ever so romantic. Unfortunately, the person who was awaiting him was a huge, burly man.

Now that they were alone, the Marquis must have felt that there was no longer any need to put on a friendly smile. He glared at Maximillion with a scowl. "What I am about to say, you aren't to tell another soul."

In that case, Maximillion would rather not have heard it at all, but that didn't seem to be an option. Resigning himself to his fate, he gave the Marquis a reserved nod.

"We have been secretly working on forging a peace treaty with those barbarians, and it seems we are coming close to a deal."

"I suppose I should give my congratulations," said Maximillion.

"If we manage to do it without too many unnecessary expenditures, it would be quite a fine thing, indeed."

Over the past decade, there had been many small conflicts with the country of heathens to the south. While it had not escalated to a full-scale war, it was still a large drain on resources to continue to send troops and supplies to the border. The surrounding villages were also in a constant state of unrest, and the two countries had even cooperated in the past on issues like culling the overgrown population of wild dogs in the area.

There was no increase in territory, no spoils of war, and no

compensation for damages. To make matters worse, it expended money, precious food, and human lives.

Was there any justice in war, any evil? At the very least, in the case of that conflict, the only thing that was there for certain was waste.

"Those guys with the church, they said all of that about wanting to claim the territory and convert all of the heathens there, but as soon as it looked like the fighting was going to draw out longer than they expected, they pulled right out."

"Your Grace, it may be best not to say anything that could be misconstrued as a criticism of the church."

"Misconstrued, huh... It would indeed be a shame if my intentions were misunderstood. I am a devout believer in God; I'm simply worried for the future of our country." Beowulf spoke as if spitting out something bitter.

Maximillion finally understood why he would have to be so secretive about something as benign as forming a peace treaty. He was concerned about the reaction of the church.

Just looking at the pros and cons of a conflict that had no merit, any rational person would want to end it as quickly as possible. It would be far more constructive to direct the energy spent on such a war to developing one's own territory. Even the priests of the church understood that much, but among them were those who truly believed that it was their mission from God to exterminate the believers of heathen gods. They were the most difficult to deal with.

They didn't care about the cost, the loss of life, the difficulty of maintaining one's territory... No matter how much you explained it to them, it went in one ear and out the other. The will of God was to be put before anything else.

"Those bastards are so filled with faith that they must've stuffed their ears with it too," said Beowulf with hatred in his eyes.

Maximillion looked around in a panic to make sure no one could hear them. It seemed nobody was there.

As the Shander territory was quite far from the southern border, they hadn't participated in any of the skirmishes. Maximillion had only begrudgingly provided financial aid when requested by the royal

family. As a result, he had always viewed the conflict as something that didn't concern him.

Oh, it seems that there's a conflict going on at the border. It sure does cost a lot of money. Why not just stop, then?

That was how distant the Count was from the conflict. He still had no clue how hard it would be to juggle the egos, interests, and hatred of all those involved to forge a peace treaty.

"The real problem starts from here. In the barbarians' culture, it is customary to exchange gifts as a symbol of peace. After paying off one of their officials, he informed me that they were preparing to give us a special diamond by the name of *the iris of the overlord*."

"A special diamond, huh? That sounds wonderful, doesn't it?"

"Easy for you to say... The thing is, we have to prepare something of equal value. If we don't, then the kingdom will be viewed as inferior. Could you imagine it? We'd be looked down on as culturally inferior monkeys by the barbarians!"

If the peace talks simply broke down because of it, that still wouldn't be the end of the world. However, if they weren't able to arrange a fitting gift, word of that would spread to neighboring countries as well. Then it wouldn't just be the barbarians, but all of the countries around them that would begin to view them as inferior.

You only had to plug a single hole to kill a colony of ants. If the peace talks went awry, it could spell the downfall of the royal family and the kingdom itself.

"Exactly how big is this diamond in the first place?"

"I'm not even sure myself. That's why I'm over here scratching my head about what the hell to give them in return. Could we get away with giving them a nice vase or sculpture? Could we give them an existing ornate katana, or should we perhaps have one made to the liking of the King of the barbarians?"

Maximillion started to catch on to where the Marquis was going with the conversation. The fact that there was such a need to go along with the customs of the barbarians suggested that the idea of a peace treaty had likely been brought up by the kingdom.

The barbarians probably specialized in that kind of diplomacy where they crushed their opponents with the value of their gifts.

They had built up their country by absorbing territory and integrating the people into its culture.

Barbarians... Perhaps that epithet wasn't right either. They called them barbarians or heathens just because they happened to believe in a different God, and they looked down on them for it without even trying to understand how the other side thought. Now they were paying the price for it.

The church, of course, wouldn't even recognize that they had made a mistake. If they were to acknowledge that, it would lead to a decline in their power. Was there not a line in their holy book that told them to apologize when they made a mistake? At the very least, the priests seemed to have no intention of doing anything of the sort.

There was only one true God. Those who worshiped any other God were all followers of evil, and the clergymen of the one true God were the most elite of all who walked the earth. They couldn't have it be seen any other way.

It was a messier situation than Maximillion could have imagined before coming there. Even their own kingdom was broken into two camps: those who wanted the peace treaty to go through, and those who wanted it to fail.

"Lord Maximillion, I'm sorry, but depending on how things go, it may be necessary for you to give up the Kikokuto."

"And can I expect anything in return?"

Beowulf smiled faintly. It seemed that he would have to raise his initial assessment of Maximillion. He didn't ask why, nor did he object to it. That showed Beowulf that he had a proper grasp of the situation at hand. If he wasn't in a position to decline, at the very least, he at least wanted to come out of the deal with something that would put him in a more advantageous position. More than the speed at which Maximillion understood the situation, Beowulf was impressed with how he directly asked for something in return.

As a noble, that's how you've gotta be.

A person who bowed their head to the floor out of fear of the Marquis's authority was unfit to be his partner, or rather his partner in crime.

"I'll arrange for you to be permitted to freely come and go from the royal palace as you please. On top of that, on a personal level, I'll owe you one."

"It seems to me that the latter should prove more valuable."

"Don't ask for anything too scary, okay? Also, I like to settle my debts as quickly as I can."

The two of them laughed. Through sharing a mutual secret, it seemed as though the tension between them had somewhat dissipated.

"While I'm at it, there is one more thing that I'd like to apologize for. I'm afraid that we can't put this agreement in writing."

"I don't mind. In place of a formal contract, would it be possible to receive some kind of collateral?" Maximillion persisted.

If Beowulf just said something like "What? You can't just take me at my word?" he would surely be able to wriggle his way out of it, but that would only give birth to further distrust. There was nothing more untrustworthy than commanding someone to believe in you.

Beowulf went deep into thought while feeling the sword on his hip with his left hand. It would surely be enough to satisfy him. What would it mean to hand that sword over to him? Could he really trust someone whom he had only really spoken to at length that night?

Every so often, there comes a time when a man has to gamble a bit...

Beowulf took the sword off his hip, sheath and all, then handed it over to Maximillion. "This sword is the treasure of the house of Eldenburger. A great many people have witnessed me in battle with this sword."

The more people had seen it, the more people understood, from a glance, that it was indeed the Marquis's beloved sword. If Beowulf were to betray him, Maximillion could take it to one of the Marquis's political enemies and make a formal complaint. While it likely wouldn't be fatal for the house of Eldenburger, it would certainly gravely damage their public image.

Even if Beowulf were to claim that Maximillion's complaints weren't based in fact, he wouldn't be able to explain why his

treasured sword was in the Count's possession. That was how valuable a thing he was offering to him.

Maximillion was the one who had asked for collateral. He couldn't very well go home empty-handed at that point.

I think I finally understand... To not offend in these kinds of negotiations, one must offer up something of equal value to what they are receiving. It's quite a difficult thing indeed.

The Count gritted his teeth and handed over the Kikokuto.

Beowulf simply stared at the katana for a moment before taking it up in his hands. "Are you sure it's okay for me to take it now?"

"If everything works out okay, let's trade them back."

"Yes, of course. I'll make sure to take good care of it in the meantime. If anything happens, I'll be sure to get in touch."

Maximillion bowed deeply before leaving the balcony behind him.

Beowulf scratched his chin in thought as he watched Maximillion go.

The katana was a great find, but the real treasure might be having that guy on my side.

Beowulf pretended not to see how much Maximillion was leaning to his left because of the weight of the sword.

Side Story: A Family Portrait

In that age, noble people ate twice a day and laborers generally ate three times a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Lutz, of course, fell into the second category, and Claudia ate along with him, just not quite as much.

The two of them had just finished breakfast and were spending a bit of quiet time together in the living room when something popped into Lutz's mind.

"You know, I was thinking, dear... I don't really know that much about you," he said casually.

Claudia gave him a horribly dissatisfied look and started to push up her boobs. "Hey, hey, hey... You've got a lot of nerve saying you don't know that much about me after playing with these like you do every single night."

Seeing her slender fingers squishing into her supple breasts was truly a sensational sight. While fighting off a slight discomfort in his pants, Lutz waved his hand to object to her accusation. "Sorry, I worded that poorly. What I meant was that I don't know a whole lot about your past, that's all."

"My past? In that case, you should be well aware of that as well. I was just a simple traveling merchant, buying wares from a certain unlicensed smith and selling them off wherever I could."

"That! That's what I'm talking about."

"Hmm?" Claudia cocked her head, still confused about what he was going on about.

"For a simple traveling merchant, you're far too intelligent and have way too much foresight. You feel like someone who has gone through some very good formal education."

She could try to write herself off as a normal traveling merchant, but there was so much more to her beneath the surface. Among the other traveling merchants that Lutz had met, there were those who

couldn’t read or write, and some who even felt more like bandits themselves. In fact, half of all the merchants outside the walls were like that. Among that lot, Claudia’s knowledge and elegance made her stand out like a sore thumb to Lutz.

“Oh, that’s what you meant...” Claudia stared off into space with a slightly troubled expression, twirling her pointer finger around in circles. “You really are smitten with me, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve already devoted my present and future to you, but you can’t stop yourself. You want to claim even my past, is that right?”

Was that right? In a sense, maybe so. A variety of questions still lingered in Lutz’s mind, and he gave Claudia a nod with a serious expression.

“Well, it’s not like it’s something that I need to hide from you, anyway. A little while ago, you told me all about your papa, so maybe it’s a good time to tell you about my father too.”

Claudia thought for a while about where to begin while softly rubbing the underside of her chin. After a while, she opened her mouth to speak. “There was something that my mother told me once. She said that my father was in love with me.”

“Hmm?”

“Hold on, Lutzy, no need to make that face. I’m not talking about anything illicit. You should know that better than anyone, after all.”

“Ah, right. Our first time was amazing, but that was the cherry on top.”

“I get what you’re trying to say, but that sure is a blatant way of phrasing it. Anyway, let me continue.” Claudia’s long eyelashes drooped as she closed her eyes and began to recount her story.

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For many generations, my family has been a house of venerable merchants. About a hundred years ago, we even had a huge mansion within the city walls, apparently. But by the time I came around, we had already fallen from grace. Far from distinguished, we were really closer to being extinguished. Even when I was told that

we were an incredible merchant family in the past, all I could say in response was “Oh, really?”

However, it seemed that my father thought about it differently. We lived in a small shop that we rented. My mother manned the shop, and my father traveled around to sell our wares elsewhere. That was how we lived our lives together. It wasn’t a luxurious lifestyle by any means, but we were getting by.

For better or worse, I had a pretty good head on my shoulders from a young age. I was brought up with all the delicate affection with which one would grow a precious flower. All the while, my father began to dream.

This child of mine just might be able to restore our family name.

From then on, he bought me stacks of books and assigned several tutors to me, as well. It wasn’t the sort of education that a poor merchant family could realistically afford. Of course, daily life became even harder than before.

My once-loving parents suddenly started to fight with each other at every opportunity. No, looking back, it probably wasn’t best to call it fighting. It was simply the pained begging of my mother to my father.

“Please, stop this...”

Those words never truly left my ears.

At times like that, my father wouldn’t show any anger. He just looked at her with this confused expression that said, “Why doesn’t this woman understand what I’m trying to do?”

No matter how desperately my mother pleaded, he would just say, “This is an investment for the future of our family. One day, we will be truly happy.” It was like he didn’t even hear her anymore.

He would go out to order new wares and come back with new books for me instead, and he always did it with the biggest, proudest smile. That sort of thing just became the usual.

My mother would break down again in tears, and he would distance himself from her as if it were a nuisance to him and hand me a book with that smile. As a child, I had no idea of the proper way to react to such a situation, so I wore a fake smile and accepted them.

To be honest, I didn’t even want them in the first place...

The sounds of my weeping mother and exasperated father became the lullaby to which I went to sleep every night. I felt like I was going to go insane.

My father was always so kind to me—to me alone. But one day, when I told him that I didn’t want to study like that anymore, his face twisted, and he punched me in his rage. Immediately after that, he looked at my swollen cheek with remorse and hugged me tightly while sobbing.

“That must have hurt. I know it must be hard, but I’m doing all of this for you.”

More than being frightening, it all just felt so very bizarre. While the man before me was my father, I was sure that we would never truly come to understand each other.

One day, my mother asked me to take over the shop for a little bit while she went out. As she walked away, I sensed a strange determination in her usually frail steps, so I called out to her.

“Mom, are you not going to come back?”

My mother spun around in surprise, then spoke to me with an almost mournful voice.

“Your father is in love with you. There’s no longer any place for me here.”

I didn’t know how to respond. My mother was trying to abandon her family, but I couldn’t help but think that was probably the right thing for her to do, something inevitable even. She had worked, toiled, and striven to bring our family back together like it used to be, but it just wasn’t enough. Who had the right to blame my mother after all of that? At the very least, that right wasn’t with me.

“Mom... Take care of yourself, okay?”

Those words were all that I could muster.

“Do you...”

My mother spoke that far before her voice trailed off. She was probably going to ask if I wanted to come with her, but there must have been some reason that she couldn’t have taken me along.

From here on out, it’s just my personal assumption, but I suspect that she decided to run away with another man. If they were going

to be on the run for a while, a child would only have been dead weight.

Was my mother that popular, you ask? Dear, dear, Lutzy, what a dumb question indeed. It was my mother that we were talking about. Even withered, a flower was still a flower. If there was a beautiful woman who was tired of her everyday life, there were countless men out there ready to stretch out their hands, although I'm sure their hands weren't the only things they were offering to her.

Getting back on track, my father returned from his travels a few days after my mother left. I didn't tell him that my mother had run away; I just feigned the ignorance of a child and told him that she had left for some errands and never came back.

During that time, my father kept asking why she would do such a thing. It likely never once occurred to him that the blame rested on himself. Instead, it was my mother's fault for not understanding what he was trying to do.

We no longer had the funds to afford a tutor, but that was fine by me. I was a bit hesitant to bring another man into a house with a single father and daughter, anyway.

After that, I kept on reading and studying by myself. I had already learned how to read and write with ease, so that wasn't an issue.

Because my mother left, we had no choice but to close the shop. With the sharp drop in revenue, our lives became even harder. My father worked himself half to death from morning to night, then bought me new books whenever we had enough saved up.

I stopped saying that I didn't want to study anymore. Really, I wanted so badly to go outside and play with the other girls my age, but I couldn't afford to slack off. Whenever my father returned home, he would ask me what books I had read and what I had learned from them.

Although it wasn't like he was physically forcing me to study, he just seemed so happy whenever I talked to him about what I had learned while he was gone. After we talked about it, he felt like he could work just as hard the next day too. I didn't want to see him

look sad anymore, so I dedicated myself to my studies. Because of that, I didn't make a single friend my age. Truly a tear-jerking story.

The next few years carried on without change until one day, my father's heart simply stopped. I didn't feel any shock or grief, but it wouldn't be quite right to say that I felt free from my chains either. It was something that I had thought would happen for quite some time, and it finally did. That was all.

I sold off all of the books that had stacked up over the years to pay for my father's funeral. Then, I took the remaining money, along with our horse and carriage, and started to work as a traveling merchant.

But the reality of the job was far from what I had read about in my books. To be honest, I was quite full of myself. Sometimes I even looked down on people around me as idiots. It turned out that knowledge was just one of many weapons to use in life, not a surefire ticket to a glimmering lifestyle. To phrase it more like a blacksmith's wife, no matter how good a weapon is, its not better than scrap metal if its wielder doesn't know how to use it. I still didn't know how to make use of the knowledge I had accumulated.

Anyway, I did my best to get by as I learned the ropes of the job, then I heard a rumor about a certain skilled blacksmith outside of the city walls and decided to strike up a business relationship with him.

And with that, we are caught up to the present day. Thank you very much for your time and attention.

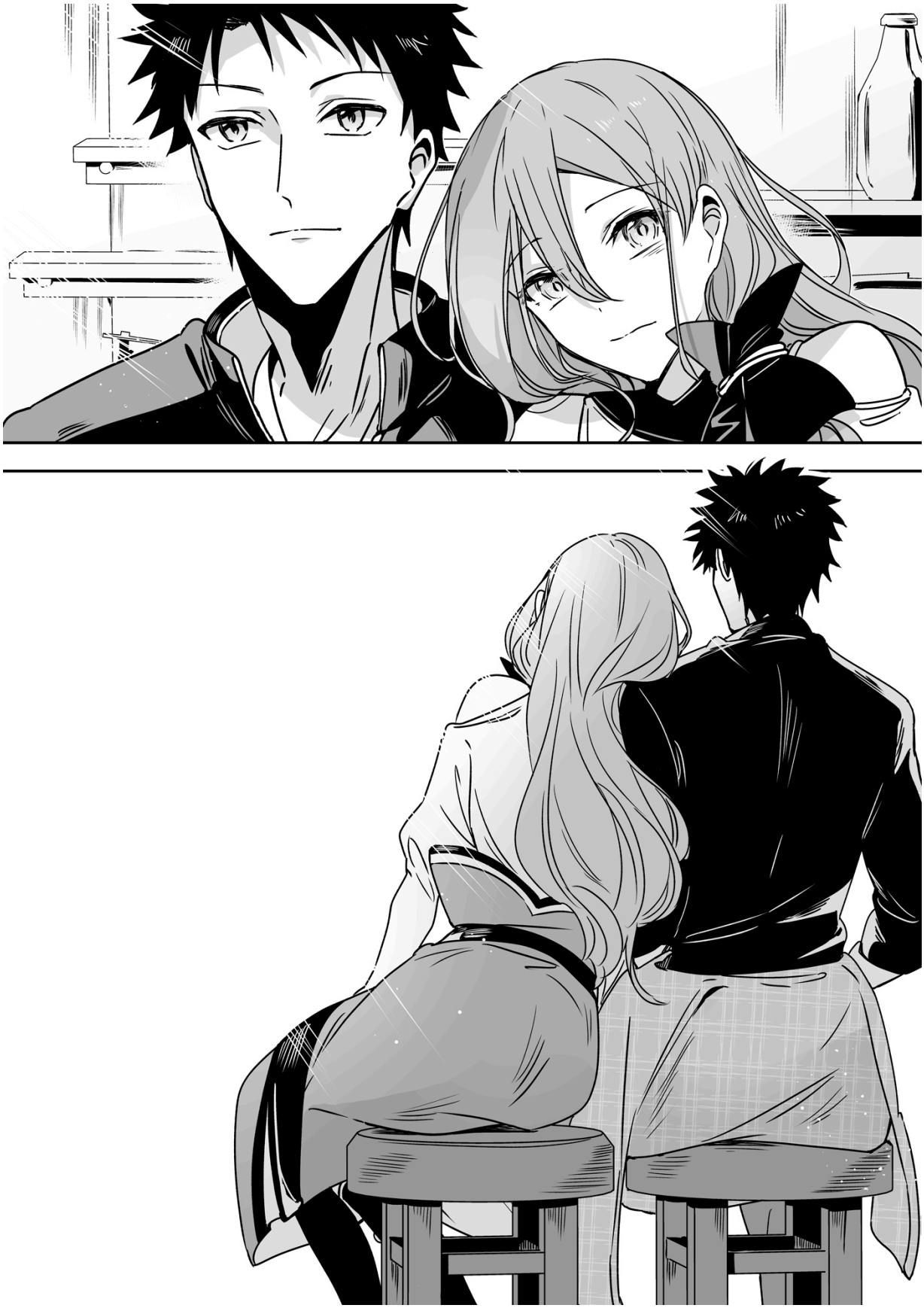
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With a large rise and fall of her chest, Claudia let out a sigh, then carried her seat over next to where Lutz was sitting. She rested her head on his shoulders and whispered to him gently. "I wonder... If I had a child of my own, would I finally be able to grieve the loss of my mother and the death of my father?"

"I don't want you to think that not being able to cry about something makes you a coldhearted person, because it doesn't."

"I know. Thanks..."

It wasn’t like there was anything of interest in front of them, but the two of them stayed facing that way in silence for some time. Simply sitting there, facing the same direction, felt like something of great value somehow.





“I went ahead and started talking about having a child of my own, but you don’t have any particular aversion to children, do you, Lutzy?”

“Honestly, there’s a part of me that really can’t imagine myself as a father, but if it were your child, I’m sure they’d be adorable. I’m confident that I could love them with all of my heart.”

“Well, I’m flattered.” Claudia gave him a relieved smile.

Lutz’s words were always right to the point, but they carried an air of kindness and reliability.

“Parents should never argue in front of their children,” said Claudia. “If anything, they should be so lovey-dovey that their kids start groaning at them for it. That’s the level of warmth that I want to strive for.”

“We’ll be fine, then. Even without putting any thought into it, we’ll just naturally work out that way.”

“You’re not wrong.”

The two of them rested their intertwined hands between them, on their laps. In another ten years, twenty years, surely they would still be doing the same.

Afterword

To everyone who has read this novel, those who have supported this series from the web novel, the illustrator CARIMARICA-sensei, my editor O-shi, and each and every one of the staff members, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you from the very bottom of my heart.

All right then, I am currently updating the web novel *isekai tousho maken seisakuki*, which this novel, *isekai tousho no maken seisaku gurashi*, is based on, almost every single day, and I do my best to let everyone know in advance when I do take any breaks.

If someone were to ask me if such a schedule wasn't overdemanding, to be quite honest, I'd have to say that it is a bit. Even on days when I don't have much time and ideas are in short supply, I still have to write. You can find me rolling around on the floor with my head held in my hands on a daily basis. From an outside perspective, I must look like a total lunatic.

"I can't take it anymore! It's just not possible! There's no way I can do it! Oh... I did it."

And thus, the cycle continues.

The web novel site Kakuyomu allows you to schedule uploads ahead of time, but I've hardly ever used it to schedule an upload before leaving the house, for instance. That's because I'm not even a single part ahead of what I post for a day. You might say that if I were to even stay one part ahead of my upload schedule, then I could have a little bit more wiggle room in my lifestyle and wouldn't always be chasing the unrelenting clock, and you would be right.

I may be exposing an unfavorable side of myself here, but I'm the sort of person who can't type a single word without the pressure of a time constraint. Even as a child, I always got to around August 20th before I finally started on my summer homework in a frantic panic. No, to be honest, August 20th was when I would start to

pretend to panic about it. I wouldn't really start work on it in earnest until August 28th, perhaps.

While I don't take any pride in it, I used to pile up homework like hamsters pile up sawdust.

When we were assigned a summer diary, I would fill it mostly with things that I completely made up, but I'd prefer not to think that was where I built the foundations of my writing career.

It's not like anyone is telling me that I have to post something at the same time every day, nor am I being coerced by anyone into this lifestyle. I am simply torturing myself with rules that I set for myself. If someone were to call me an idiot for doing so, I couldn't do anything but nod deeply in response.

At the same time, however, I believe this to be the essence of what we call effort.

Of course, it's not all hardship. When I write something that I'm proud of, it makes me happy, and when I get positive feedback from my readers, it makes me even happier.

From scribbles in my textbooks, to game development, to making ASCII art—a type of art that uses typable characters to make pictures—to posting on web novel sites, in one way or another, creating stories is the one thing that I have continued throughout my entire life.

From ten years in the past to ten years in the future, I'm sure that I will be doing the same.

Bringing this novel out into the world is something that I was only able to do thanks to everyone's incredible support. I would like to close this message by once again giving my sincerest gratitude to every single one of you who made this possible.

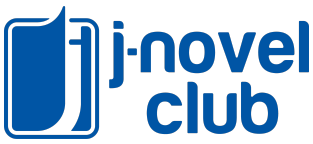
Kazuma Ogiwara


1
Author — Kazuma Ogiwara
Illustrator — CARIMARICA
THE BLACKSMITH'S ENCHANTED WEAPONS




THE BLADESMITH'S ENCHANTED WEAPONS
Merchant Claudia
"Ha ha ha! I'm home, Lutzy! Listen and be amazed, I bring you a contract for an order!"
"How the hell did you get an insane order like that?"
Blacksmith Lutz


(Sorry, this is just how he is.)
"Right now, I'm seeing to a prior customer's order."
"Hey, we've got a noble waiting over here, you know?"
Enchanter
Gerhard



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The Bladesmith's Enchanted Weapons: Volume 1
by Kazuma Ogiwara

Translated by Ryan Burris Edited by Aldia Elwood

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