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Illustrator Kinta

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My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World II

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Prologue: The Chief of the Fairies

The Black Forest was a place that evoked fear in the people of this world. Dangerous beasts prowled about, and at times, monsters emerged to wreak havoc. Thanks to dense foliage that grew abundant and wild, the forest was dark, even in the middle of the day.

However, some people lived relaxed lives in the forest. For example, the beastfolk were a race who'd inhabited the Black Forest since ancient times. The fairies also called this place home, and they lived leisurely lifestyles, free from the dangers that people usually associated with the forest.

The fairies had built a tiny, tiny village among the trees. They didn't need food—all they required for sustenance was magical energy from the forest. Fairies also had no reason to busy themselves with work. However, for some inexplicable reason, they wore clothes, used tools, and led lives similar to those of humans.

The fairy village, located in a sunny spot within the forest, was concealed with magic. No one could just stumble upon them. Their role within the ecosystem was to rid the forest of stagnant magical energy and to create pathways where magic could freely flow. Unfortunately, this task was not without danger. Perhaps because they were forced to constantly manipulate stagnant energy, fairies would often succumb to a mysterious illness that would drain away their magic. The true cause of this disease was unknown, but one thing was clear: it was fatal.

Over the years, many fairies suffered from this malady, but finally, they found a sliver of hope—Gizelle, the chief of the fairies, discovered a curative item that Forge Eizo could produce.

As Gizelle approached the forge, the blacksmith appeared from within.

"Ah, Gizelle, welcome."

This man looked intimidating, but she knew that he was kinder than he

appeared.

“Hello, Eizo,” Gizelle replied with a bow.

Eizo smiled and took a sip of water from his cup. “I’m just about to take a break. Do you need something from me?”

She shook her head. “Oh, it’s nothing like that.”

Her words weren’t completely true. She had indeed come to ask for something. Eizo had managed to create crystallized magic—he called them magical jewelstones—which served as medicine that could cure the fairies of their mysterious illness. Unfortunately, these jewelstones didn’t last long and would quickly crumble away, preventing the fairies from keeping some in stock to use whenever one of their kind fell victim to the fatal condition.

And so, Eizo had promised to search for a way to make the jewelstones last. Until then, he had asked the fairies to come to him during times of emergency and vowed to personally heal them. Still, a jewelstone could mean the difference between life and death for a fairy, so no one could blame Gizelle for wanting an update on the status of her request.

As though reading Gizelle’s mind, Rike the dwarf said, “It’d be great if we could supply you with some stable jewelstones soon.” Rike was Eizo’s apprentice, and she was always carefully observing his work.

Gizelle hesitated to reply, and another voice came from behind her. She turned around and saw a familiar face.

“Hey, it’s the fairy chief!” exclaimed Samya, a member of the beastfolk who was half tiger. She had apparently just returned from hunting—her body was covered with dirt. Other members of the family strolled up beside her.

“Welcome back,” said Eizo.

“I’m home!” Samya called out energetically.

“We’re home too!” exclaimed the others.

Gizelle had been told that Diana and Anne were ladies of noble status, but they had seemingly adjusted well to life in the Black Forest. Diana hailed from the house of a count, and Anne was an imperial princess. The fairy chief didn’t

quite understand how human society worked, so she was clueless about exactly how high these ranks were.

“Perfect timing.” Lidy the elf turned to Gizelle and smiled. “Would you like to have dinner with us?”

Helen eagerly nodded beside her. Gizelle remembered Eizo mentioning that Helen was an extremely powerful mercenary.

Suddenly, a dog—or rather, a wolf pup—bounded over, jumping energetically.

“Arf! Arf!”

This pup was named Lucy, and her barks seemed to encourage Gizelle to stay. The fairy’s half-closed eyes shone with happiness. Behind the pup was Krul the drake, and her eyes contained the same joy. It seemed that both Gizelle and Krul were thinking the same thing—Lucy’s adorable antics soothed their souls.

It’s true that I want to hear about progress on the jewelstones, but it’s also important for me to watch over Forge Eizo. After all, a lot of magical energy tends to gather around his forge, even by the standards of the Black Forest. I’m required to visit them on occasion, but I can’t deny that I’m unexpectedly enjoying myself. It’s nice to spend time with this happy family.

When the realization hit her, she smiled and turned to Eizo’s family. “I’d like to stay for dinner, if you don’t mind.”

Chapter 1: Summer's End

At Forge Eizo, the days passed by, and the completion date for another order came and went. By the time we finished the order, the sun rays were starting to weaken—the breeze was getting chilly, hinting that autumn was just around the corner. All the while, our days were slow and peaceful. In a sense, this was the quiet life I'd always wished for, and I was enjoying it as much as I could.

And yet...I knew I had a mountain of work to do, so I was starting to panic.

It was now past noon. Samya and the others had come back from their hunt. Lidy and I were harvesting crops (vegetables, herbs, and the like) while tilling the garden for our next batch of plants.

Huh. I'm not sweating very much anymore. Just a few days ago, I'd been sweating buckets while gardening. I grabbed the towel hanging around my neck and wiped away the slight beads of moisture on my brow. The cool breeze felt nice.

"Summer's ending," I murmured.

"Mm-hmm," Lidy replied, wiping off her own sweat as she gazed at the trees.

The shrubs, trees, and tall foliage all had flat leaves. According to Samya, almost all of them were broad-leaved evergreens. This was why animals like foliage birds and boars were green—to blend in. Though the trees were evergreens, they would still shed some of their leaves (technically, evergreens lost leaves gradually to replace their old foliage, so it wasn't odd to see leaves falling). I spotted a few that were slowly changing into fall colors.

The temperature was a bit chilly. *Despite the seasonal changes in the climate here, there are a lot of evergreens. It's probably because of all the magic in this forest. Maybe I should've told Lluisa about that.*

"Well, I'm happy that work will be a little easier on me now," I remarked.

Lidy giggled. "You really are no good in the heat, Eizo."

“Guess not. I think I’m better in the cold.”

I hadn’t lived in a particularly snowy region in my old world, but it had gotten pretty cold there, so I was used to enduring low temperatures. *Though...I’ve heard that people in snowy regions will just put the heater on full blast. I’ve experienced cold winters, but nothing so frigid that I needed to rely on the heater. I suppose that’s made me more resistant to cold.*

“You came here quite recently, didn’t you?” Lidy asked.

“It feels like a while, but it hasn’t even been a year,” I confessed. “Samya’s told me stories about how cold it gets here, but I haven’t experienced it for myself.”

“I’m not sure about this part of the Black Forest, but it gets pretty chilly in the kingdom.”

“Hmm... Should I start making preparations for winter?”

What does that entail, exactly? Clothes made of fur from boars or bears? I imagined myself looking like a *Matagi* hunter and gave a tight smile. Back in my old world, everyone would wear leather coats when it was cold. That was probably an outfit most suited for travel, but surely leather would be useful for protection against the cold wind and rain. *Wait, speaking of cold weather...there’s something more important I want to consider.*

“It’s about time we prepare to build the hot spring.”

This was a must-do for me. I had high hopes, and since Gizelle had recently provided us with a detailed map of the subterranean hot water vein, all we needed to do was get to work. Honestly, though, planning the facility and other structures for the hot spring seemed like a lot of effort, and I’d been putting it off.

“That sounds great,” Lidy replied. “It was fun digging that well.”

I smiled. “I’m happy to hear you say that. You’re so kind.”

“It’s true!” she insisted, her expression pouty.

I did my best to calm her down as we finished working on the garden.

“All right, so we’re going to begin building our hot spring,” I said to everyone.

“Woo-hoo! Here we go!” Helen cheered loudly.

Maybe she’d enjoyed being able to bathe every day with the well water during the hot summer months. She was a mercenary, so she was used to being soaked in sweat, but that didn’t mean she liked to *reek* of it.

“Here’s the general gist—the process will be similar to when we dug the well,” I explained. “We’ll build a space where we can wash our bodies near the spring, a partition to block the view of any outsiders, and a building where we can change our clothes.”

“And a covered walkway leading there, right?” Diana asked.

I nodded. “Yep.”

It might feel nice to jog through the rain to the baths on stormy days, but...it’s not like we need to do that.

“Arf!” Lucy barked in agreement.

She puffed out her chest proudly, and I could see that she was already closer to an adult wolf than a pup.

“You’ve grown so quickly...” I murmured.

“Arf! Arf!”

When I petted her fur, she wagged her tail furiously. Her appetite *had* increased, but her growth spurt seemed wildly out of proportion to her food intake—no doubt because she was a magical beast who absorbed magic from the forest. She was likely eating just enough to allow her body to grow.

“We might need to expand Krul and Lucy’s hut,” Rike said, turning toward Lucy and me. “Maybe we can think about building Lucy her own space.”

I knitted my brow. “We’ve...got a lot to do.”

“I think it’s fine,” Samya said, stuffing the last bit of meat into her mouth. “I don’t get bored here, and I like doing all sorts of stuff.”

Everyone nodded in agreement, and our day soon came to a close.

I’ll work hard again tomorrow.

####

The next morning, we prayed in front of the *kamidana* for another safe day and then headed outside. The sky was clear like it had been yesterday, and the sun shone down, blessing us with its warmth. The days were no longer as sweltering as they'd been in the summer months we'd had to endure, but it wasn't yet cool enough to indicate that winter was approaching. This would be a warm, comfortable day punctuated by cool breezes.

The map made it look like the hot water vein was close by—it was just around a hundred meters away—but we still got Krul to carry our tools, lunches, and other supplies. She seemed to be in high spirits as we walked the short distance.

"This is the spot, isn't it?" I asked. I glanced back and forth between the map and the land while pointing to the ground.

This place didn't look much different from the rest of the area—a few thickets speckled the land here and there. I was sure this was the correct location on the map, though—Gizelle had literally poured her magic onto the paper to draw it accurately for us.

"Looks like it," Samya said.

Lidy nodded. "Agreed."

Samya had lived in this forest her whole life, and though Lidy hadn't lived here specifically, her village had been in a forest, so she was acquainted with this type of environment. Since these two ladies had agreed on the spot, I was certain we were in the right place.

We stopped in a clearing and unloaded our stuff from Krul's back. She rubbed her snout against Diana and looked a little disheartened that her job was over, but we were actually just getting started. We would need her to complete the important task of carrying out the dirt we would dig up, and I planned on praising her to bits after we were all done.

First things first: we need to find that hot water vein before we can decide on the location of our structures. If we built a changing room first and found out that the spring welled up beneath it, I would be positively gutted—that much

was as clear to me as this fine day.

“I’m sure we don’t have an *exact* location,” I said. “It might be a bit of a pain, but we should probably dig across a wide area.”

“I guess so,” Anne agreed, glancing at the map before turning to the soil. “It’s probably better to do that than to just dig deep in a random spot.”

Diana and Helen nodded along, and Lucy barked too, though I wasn’t sure whether she understood what we were talking about.

“All right, let’s start digging here,” I declared.

Everyone voiced their agreement, and we all grabbed our tools. Rike, Helen, Anne, and I (those of us who had some muscle) were on the dig team while Samya, Diana, Lidy, and Krul were tasked with carrying out the dirt or bringing in wooden planks to keep the soil from collapsing. Lucy had the important role of cheering us on and making us smile.

I was given the honor of breaking ground on the hot spring. As everyone watched on, I plunged my shovel into the dirt. This shovel—which was extremely high-quality thanks to my cheats—cut easily through the hard dirt. I scooped up a small mound of soil and placed it to the side.

Applause rang out in the Black Forest alongside the chirping of the birds, and we thus began the arduous process of digging up a hot spring.

At first, the four of us on the dig team worked in silence. When the hole became deep enough that Rike had difficulty climbing out, I decided that we needed to build a slope on one side and a retaining wall on the other. *Unlike when we dug deep for the well, airflow isn’t an issue for this type of excavation. Not yet, at least. Plus, adding a slope and retaining wall worked great on the well project.*

Lucy helped us dig a little with her paws, and Krul was in high spirits as Diana heaped praise on her. We continued our work peacefully.

After a while, I suggested that we take a break for lunch. Sitting atop a picnic blanket, I drank the herbal tea that Lidy had prepared for us and stuffed my cheeks with a simple sandwich filled with boar meat.

“I wonder if we can use the water from the hot spring to make a rice paddy?” I asked pensively.

When you created a paddy, nutrients in the soil and water permeability were obviously important factors. However, the most vital thing by far was the water supply. We were digging at a spot that had been recommended by Lluisa herself, so while the water supply was technically finite, I didn’t think that the spring would run dry while I was alive.

Of course, we couldn’t use hot water for plants, but since we had a source that provided ample water, I was thinking that we could create a small reservoir to cool it before sending it to the garden or paddy.

Lidy, who was pouring Samya a cup of tea, placed a hand over her small chin and mulled over my words. “Hmm... I wonder if the effects of the hot spring would be good for plants.”

“Ah, right...” I replied.

Every hot spring had various effects that determined its quality. Whatever minerals were dissolved within the hot water vein determined these effects. However if this one ended up being a sodium chloride spring, well...salt water was less than ideal for plants. In fact, if we watered them with salt, I would likely find myself pulling a merciless *Carthago delenda est* on the poor crops.

“We’ll just need to test it out little by little once we get the water,” I concluded.

“I agree,” Lidy replied with a nod.

We probably need to know the pH too. How can we measure that? Well, I suppose I’m trying to measure my hot spring before it’s been dug.

I sighed and swallowed my mouthful of food.

####

It was after midday a few days later, and by this point, we’d managed to dig up a sizable hole that was supported by wooden planks—just like we’d done for the well. We’d also created a slope on one side, allowing us to easily walk in and out of the bottom of the hole. We were slowly but surely approaching the hot

water vein...or so I hoped, but I hadn't seen a drop of water just yet.

"I wonder if we really have the right spot," Anne muttered.

I couldn't blame her for being skeptical. I was just as anxious, and I had my own doubts.

"Well, the map says we do..." Rike replied, staring at the paper tacked on the wooden wall of the hole.

To prevent dirtying or losing the original drawing, I'd made a copy that detailed only the location of the hot water vein around the cabin. I wasn't sure what the extent of my production-related cheats were, but I was pleased that they'd allowed me to draw a high-quality copy of the map.

"Maybe we just need to dig absurdly deep or something," I speculated.

"How deep are we talking?" Helen asked, tossing a shovelful of dirt into the mound behind her.

"Enough to make a mountain or something."

"Ugh..." She stuck her tongue out.

Back on Earth, I'd heard that in order to find a hot water vein in Tokyo, one only needed to dig to a depth of one thousand to fifteen hundred meters. It didn't matter where, apparently, though I had no way of confirming the truth now. In any case, if hot springs operated in the same fashion in this world, we'd need to dig at least a thousand meters.

Sure, things would've been different if we'd had drilling equipment, but without it, we'd need a pile of dirt about a thousand meters tall behind us. Therefore, we would indeed be creating a man-made (with the help of a drake and a wolf) mountain. That didn't seem very reasonable.

Even if we asked Gizelle again, I guessed she'd only reconfirm the location and details with Lluisa. Not to mention that I had zero idea how to contact either of them. It was good that no one in the family got easily restless, but I still wanted a quick way to reach Camilo, Marius, Gizelle, and Lluisa during times of emergency.

"Why don't we stop for the night and continue digging in the morning?" I

suggested. “If we’ve still had no luck by tomorrow night, we can put this project on hold for now and confirm with Gizelle that we’ve got the right spot.”

The other three diggers agreed, though they all seemed less energetic than before. I sympathized.

The following day, we continued to dig. The hole was now deeper than the well. We weren’t suffering from a lack of oxygen just yet, but it seemed like a good time to start worrying about it. More importantly, we hadn’t made any progress. We continued to dig with no end in sight as Krul and the others carried out the dirt. My thoughts drifted to the fact that we would have to fill all that soil back in—I was trying to escape reality by keeping my mind full.

Just as Helen was trying to scoop out another shovelful of dirt, she muttered a quiet “Huh?”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Take a look.”

We gathered around her as she used her shovel to push some of the soil aside. She was a bit faster at digging than the rest of us, and she had hit something. Beneath her shovel, there was a rock—well, it was more like a boulder, honestly. And this meant...

The rest of us hastily started to dig deeper, our sluggishness from moments ago evaporating. We were as energetic as Lucy when she was digging for fun. The tip of my shovel soon hit something hard, and I looked up to meet Rike’s and Anne’s eyes. It seemed they had hit something similar.

“You guys too?” I asked.

They nodded. We’d dug up a few rocks before, with some large enough to be boulders (which Krul had delightfully carried away), but we’d never run into anything this huge. This could probably be called the bottom of the hole. In other words...

“We’ve hit bedrock,” I said. “If we dig past here, we might be able to get to the water.”

The other three members of the dig team cheered as Samya, Diana, and Lidy approached us curiously with Krul and Lucy in tow. When I told them that we were close, they also looked overjoyed. Now that we'd come this far, our next task was at hand.

"We need something to crush through this bedrock," I said. Everyone fell silent. "We can forge a tool to do that."

The rest of our family excitedly agreed, and of course, Rike cheered the loudest.

The next morning, we prayed in front of the *kamidana*, and I lit the forge and firebed. Then, I called everyone to our meeting space.

I stood in front of them with folded arms and asked, "All right, how shall we go about this?"

After some discussion, we came to a decision: everyone except me would prioritize forging all the items needed for Camilo's next order. It would only take a week or so to make everything, but since we had the time, they wanted to forge extras. This would certainly come in handy if unforeseen circumstances arose that kept us out of the workshop.

When I asked if Samya and the others were going hunting this week, they replied that we had more than enough meat in storage. Our meat consumption was probably on the greater end, but if we continued hunting without selling much (we only sold to Athena's for now), then we'd have way too much meat. So, it was good to stop while we were ahead—we didn't have to needlessly take lives.

For now, I would focus on creating a tool that could break through the bedrock. The first thing that came to mind was a pickaxe. I wasn't sure just how thick the bedrock layer was, but a pickaxe was the most obvious tool for slowly chipping away at it. Another method was to use a wedge and a hammer—the idea was to drive a wedge into a rock with a hammer, break off pieces, and carry them away. The con of using these methods was that it would be difficult to dodge the pressurized hot water that would spew out from below.

Depending on how hot the water was, getting hit with a stream of it could

cause serious burns—an 80°C splash of water would hurt just as much in this world as in my last. *Though, I'm sure things would be different if we were in a world where the average Joe could grow metallic scales.*

Judging from Lluisa's words, I guessed that the water wasn't so hot that it could cause serious damage, even if you received a direct hit. Considering her goal of keeping me around, I was sure that she'd warn me if my life was potentially at risk. Still, she was different from a regular person. There was a chance she'd go, "Whoopsie, I forgot how hot it was! Silly me!" It was better to be safe than sorry.

I guess it's time to use my knowledge from Earth...

"Can I borrow this place for a bit?" I asked Rike, who'd been making a longsword in the firebed.

"Of course," she replied with a smile. "There's nothing more important than your work, Boss."

Well, *their* work was actually paying the bills in this cabin, so I felt like their job was more important, but I decided to view things through her lens for now.

I stacked three sheets of metal and placed them in the firebed. The crimson flames licked the surface of the metal, and it slowly started to glow red. Once it was hot enough, I pulled the sheets out and hammered them together to form a single chunk. I didn't imbue the metal with magic since my goal was just to shape everything into a lump—adding magic would only make the metal harder to manipulate, and that would be troublesome.

I reheated the lump and hammered it into a cylindrical shape. Perhaps because I was using more metal than usual, a dull sound rang out with every swing of my hammer. Once I'd created the desired shape, it resembled a large battering ram without a handle—something that a SWAT team could've used in my previous world. *If I add handles, I'm sure we could smash down a door or two.* Of course, that wasn't my goal.

At this step, I used my cheats to add in some magic as I flattened one end of the cylinder. It took some time because of the large size, but I managed to mold what looked like an enlarged version of a flathead screwdriver bit.

Setting aside the tool, I grabbed a large chunk of material from the pile of odds and ends that remained after we'd expanded the house and built the walkway. Then, I walked outside. After all, I didn't want to test out this new rock-crushing tool indoors and accidentally destroy a section of our floor.

Since we'd already had lunch, I knew it was past noon, but when I placed the material on the ground and looked up, I was surprised to see that the sun was getting ready to set. The season was approaching autumn, so we were losing daylight—even so, I'd taken more time than expected. *I guess that's the way the cookie crumbles when I'm working on a large piece.* In any case, I just *had* to test it out.

I returned to the forge.

"Oomph," I grunted as I carried the heavy rock crusher outside. I spotted Krul and Lucy waiting near the material that I had set down. "Good girls. This'll be dangerous, so stand back, okay?"

I predicted that everything would be fine, but I wanted to avoid the worst, so it was best if they stood a good distance away. When I petted their heads, they obediently walked back. *They're really the best girls I could ask for.*

By then, word had spread that I was testing something out—the rest of the family stopped what they were doing and gathered outside. I was still in the experimental phase of my project, but they were all doing more routine work like digging or standard smithing. This was probably a good change of pace for them.

"All right, let's do this," I said. "Up we go."

I raised the heavy rock crusher above the test material with the flathead side down and then dropped it. The tool fell to the dirt with a heavy *thud*. Yep—the tool just fell straight through, all the way to the ground. It cleanly sliced through the test material and bit deep into the soil. It almost looked like the tester had been in two pieces from the very start. The tip of the tool was buried in the dirt, which explained the thunderous noise it'd given off moments ago.

Guess I can call this experiment a success. I just need to use it on the real deal tomorrow.

Samya pointed to the rock crusher poking upright out of the ground. “Did it work?”

I nodded. “Yep. I think this is a moderately safe way to start chipping away at the bedrock.”

“Ooh!”

“I knew you could do it!” Rike shouted enthusiastically. Her voice echoed through the darkening Black Forest as the sun dipped below the horizon.

“I’m not surprised, but it’s impressive that you made something so large,” Anne said after managing to somehow elegantly swallow a mouthful of deer meat.

“Well, it’s a much simpler design than a knife or sword,” I replied. “It’s large, so that’s a bit of a hassle, but if we’re talking about size, your greatsword was much larger.”

“Fair enough.”

Anne folded her arms and nodded. Every now and then, her mannerisms slipped and became less than ladylike. I wasn’t sure if this was because she’d been affected by her surroundings, or if she had always been like this.

Lidy, who was normally silent during meals, suddenly spoke up. “The rock crusher is a tool created for a specific purpose. It’s quite roughly made, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, this is a single-use tool,” I agreed. “You can still see the hammer marks on it.”

“It looks more natural that way. I quite like it.”

As Lidy nodded, I realized what she was focused on. *I see. I’m not sure if she’s aware of it, but she can sense a more natural, unpolished vibe from this tool—the finish is certainly different from the results of Rike’s hammering.*

Rike, who absolutely added her own flair when hammering, chimed in. “Does that mean you won’t use it for anything else?”

“I can’t think of any other way to use it,” I said. “We could add handles and make a battering ram, but I don’t think we’d ever rely on it for anything.”

“I guess so...”

If we tested it out as a battering ram, we might’ve even been able to smash through the huge gates of the capital... Well, it’d be more like *slice* than *smash*. But doing so would guarantee our arrest, so I had no plans of testing out my tool in that fashion.

Would it have been better to keep it outside as a way to intimidate any visitors? We could fake some danger—maybe even make it seem like people couldn’t enter the cabin because it was riddled with traps. But would the rock crusher succumb to the elements if left outside? Back on Earth, there was the Iron Pillar of Delhi in India that never rusted. I took good care of our knives and swords so that we could use them during emergencies, but I wondered just how long metal imbued with magic could last without rusting. *It might be a good idea to keep one outside to test it out.* Naturally, I was a little hesitant to leave an item I’d made to the mercy of weather and other factors.

“It sounds like it could be the most dangerous item in our house,” Anne said, her eyes glimmering for a second at the mention of a battering ram. “It’s heavy, but it *could* be carried by a single person. It could potentially open steel doors in one hit, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“That’s dangerous, all right,” Helen remarked with a strained laugh. “I can think of a couple of scenarios where an item like that would be useful.”

She probably didn’t siege castles often, but as a mercenary, she was probably experienced in taking down a citadel or two. As such, Helen’s words sure were convincing.

“I went all out to make this item, so it won’t leave our cabin,” I said firmly. “It’s heavy—I’m sure it’s not worth the effort to steal it.”

With a few exceptions, I had no intention of circulating or selling any of the elite items I made, even if that item was just a simple twig. But, well, if someone were to point out that I’d made more than a *few* exceptions to that rule, I wouldn’t be able to refute them.

Meanwhile, Samya was practicing the art of drinking soup gracefully. (Diana

was a strict teacher—only Anne had enough training in etiquette to point out Samya’s minor faux pas.) Samya swallowed her last mouthful and asked, “Speaking of, how’ll we use it to break through the rock?”

“You see...” I murmured.

The next day, we returned to the hole we’d dug. Nearby was a stack of thin logs that Krul had worked hard to carry over. I used the logs to set up a very simple scaffold in the hole—the base of which was set in a narrow triangular pattern. It was similar to types of scaffolding back on Earth, and I’d be using it in a similar way. It ended up resembling a large version of a tripod used above campfires.

The pointed top of the scaffold, which was lashed together with rope, was equipped with a pulley that we’d taken from the well. The weather was getting cooler, and we weren’t using the well while we were working here, so I thought that borrowing it would be fine. Another rope was strung through the pulley and it slithered down into the hole. The rock crusher I’d made yesterday was tied to that end.

All that was left was to use the scaffolding logs to guide the tool and have it fall in a precise spot. Friction would decrease the rate at which this rock crusher would fall, but since this was a tool I’d made with my cheats, I believed that the quality could cover for this speed decrease. *Right? You can do it, right, rock crusher?*

We hadn’t narrowed the hole yet, just in case we didn’t hit water after breaking through the rock. If that was the case, we would assume that we’d hit a thick spot in the bedrock and we would shift our location accordingly. There was actually a rock-crushing tool back on Earth that had a much more complex design, but the shape was so specific that I hadn’t been able to remember it. As such, my tool was much more crude. *Still...I hope you can do your job well, rock crusher.*

“We’ll pull the tool up from above and release,” I said. “If it falls from a high place, I’m hoping that we can break through some rock.”

“I was lost when you explained it, but I’ve got a better idea now that the

mechanism is in front of me,” Samya said. She appeared interested, and her ears perked up—it looked like she was excited.

“All right, let’s start,” I said.

Krul let out an especially loud cry as the laughter of our family rang out within the forest. She then grabbed the end of the rope tied to the rock crusher with her mouth. We’d probably have to help out too, but this was our first step to getting closer to building that hot spring.

“Kulululu.”

She nimbly pulled it back. The pulley was designed to handle slight changes in direction quite well, but our girl Krul stepped back in a beautifully straight line. Once the rock crusher was raised a bit higher than ground level, I called out to her.

“You can let go, Krul!”

“Kulululu!”

She released the rope, and gravity did the rest. (*At least, I think this world has something like gravity... My installed knowledge doesn’t really mention anything about a natural force making things fall.*) The rock crusher fell onto the bedrock.

I walked down the slope and into the hole. Just as I was thinking that hot water could potentially gush out at any moment, I felt like it was getting warmer down here. *But is it actually? Probably not.* I could only give a forced laugh at how my senses had conveniently misinterpreted the atmosphere based on my desires. When I arrived at the bottom, I saw the rock crusher. It was being supported by the scaffolding guides around it, and it hadn’t sunk into the rock.

Slowly, I approached the tool. I didn’t think we were a hit away from running into a fountain of hot water, but it didn’t hurt to be careful.

I gingerly glanced at the end of the rock crusher—which looked like a flathead screwdriver—and noticed that a bit of the bedrock had been chipped away. There were some pebbles and sand around the blade that had probably been broken off.

I wasn't sure just how many times we'd need to do this, but the tool was indeed doing its job. I looked up and shouted, "It's working!"

Our family was peering down at the hole—they erupted into cheers. When I noticed the rock crusher slowly being raised again, I left the bottom of the hole. Was this...going well? I'd never experienced anything like it, so I couldn't be sure. Every now and then, I had Krul take a break, and the rest of us (along with a bit of help from Lucy) pulled the rock crusher up.

We continued to chip away at the bedrock.

Back on Earth, machines were often powered by compressed air, but my wind magic couldn't apply nearly enough pressure—Lidy's magic couldn't either. When I'd asked her about her wind power, she'd said that her strongest gust could prevent people from walking toward her for a short amount of time. She could apparently break a few tree limbs too, so it was pretty powerful...but not strong enough to power a machine.

That aside, machines using compressed air were quite modern inventions, and I wasn't willing to make new technology that might revolutionize this world. The best course of action was to slowly but surely keep doing what we were doing.

Perhaps we could've taken turns hammering the rock by hand, but it would be dangerous if we got blasted by hot water. And so, we repeated the slow process of chipping away at the bedrock with the rock crusher.

We kept this process up, chipping away at the bedrock until the tool was about half buried in the hole it'd made. At this point, I decided to take a break for lunch.

Rike had her cheeks full with a stewed-meat sandwich as she said, "I guess it'll take time, even with your high-quality items, Boss..."

True. We're up against rock, after all...

"Or, more optimistically, we can say that things have been going so smoothly thanks to Eizo's tools," Diana said.

"No doubt about that," Rike agreed with a nod.

We had no machines, so we were doing everything by hand. Despite us taking quite a bit of time for each drop of the rock crusher, we were making fast progress. *At least, I think so...* We'd also been carrying out the bits of debris that had been chipped away.

If I'd been more knowledgeable about Earth's civil engineering, we would've probably been able to progress even faster, but I was a complete amateur in the field, and I was trying things out as I went. My cheats hadn't activated during this task either, so I just had to slowly continue the process.

As we were getting ready for a productive afternoon, Helen, who had polished off her third sandwich, asked, "By the way, Rike, have you decided?"

"About what?" Rike asked.

"You know, the do-whatever-you-want-with-Eizo thing."

Oh yeah... I was so busy that I completely forgot about it. I don't remember giving them permission to do whatever they wanted, though...

"Oh, that?" Rike replied. "I have a few ideas in mind, but nothing certain yet."

"I see," Helen replied.

"If you have something you want to do, I don't mind switching places with you."

"No, I'll keep the order as is."

Personally, I didn't mind who went first, so I couldn't give them a proper answer even if asked, but Helen was the honest sort.

"No need to be so hasty about it," I said to Rike. "Just tell me when you've decided. As you might already know, I'm a blacksmith in a backwater forest, so I've got plenty of time."

"Right!" she replied.

Just like how we were chipping away at the rock, I was determined to slowly but surely deepen my bonds with the family.

I stretched out, ready for another busy afternoon.

Back on Earth, there was a saying: slow and steady wins the race. There was

even a phenomenon in nature where water droplets could gradually hollow out stone—I wondered if this world had such a saying.

Of course, we were currently dropping a steel blade onto bedrock instead of water. The rock crusher followed the scaffolding as it dropped into the ever-deepening crevice it was making. The tool wasn't very long, but the small indentation it'd made wasn't deep enough to bury it yet. I continued to watch on as Samya and Helen went to the bottom of the hole to scoop out the chunks of rock that had been chipped away.

Back on Earth, there was a way to dig through stone with compressed air before using air power to blow out the debris, but our old-fashioned tool wasn't capable of doing anything like that.

"Be careful!" I warned.

"I know, I know," Samya replied casually while waving her hand.

They carefully approached the rock crusher before quickly scooping out the chunks of stone with their shovels. It didn't matter how many times they did it—this process made me worry for them. Water could gush forth at any moment. Anything could trigger the hot spring to suddenly well up.

Samya and Helen had been put in charge of scooping out the debris because they were the most nimble of the bunch. It was best to have the fastest people down there so that they could flee at a moment's notice. I wasn't sure if their speed would be useful when dodging a torrent of water, but I decided not to worry about that for now.

I prayed to the heavens—or in this case, Lluisa—as I continued to watch them work. The two slowly made their way back after they removed all the rocks. We repeated this process several more times, and just as the sun started to set, we lost sight of the rock crusher in its crevice.

I decided to call it a day. If we had no luck tomorrow, we'd need to test this method out in a different location. I prayed that it wouldn't happen, but only God (or the Dragon of the Land, in this case) held the answer to that question.

"Phew, you get pretty dirty going down there," Samya said.

"Well, I'm not surprised that you're—" Helen looked down at her clothes.

“Wait, I’m kinda filthy too.”

“Bwa ha ha! Want me to pat the dust off your back?”

“That’d be great.”

While we were packing up, Samya and Helen were patting each other down—small clouds of dirt and dust danced in the air. This was precisely when we needed the hot spring to wash off, and I found it rather ironic that we were getting ourselves dirty in hopes that we could find water to clean ourselves.

“This is where the hot spring comes in—it’ll let us wash off during times like these,” I said. “I think we’re getting close, so let’s keep at it.”

Along with creating structures for the hot spring, we had a ton of things left to do, but as soon as we had privacy partitions up and could store enough water, we’d be able to start taking refreshing dips.

But how would I drain some of the water from the vein? It was a free-flowing spring, so any excess hot water would overflow into the forest. Since I was a good distance away from this place, I wasn’t going to make anything too fancy, but it was probably something I needed to think about. A warm river could potentially be born from this dig.

This is something I should confirm with Lluisa...but I guess the most urgent task is to find a way to contact her when we need to.

####

The next morning, we once again headed to the hole. We hoped that we’d hit the hot water vein soon, but if we got unlucky again today, we would have to change our digging location. However, this wasn’t the only project on the docket—we also had the standing order for Camilo and our daily duties to think about.

In other words, if we fail today, this hot spring mission will be put on hold for a while.

As I arrived at the hole, I prayed to the Dragon of the Land that we wouldn’t be put in such an unfortunate situation. We prepared for another day of digging.

“Kulululu.”

Krul pulled the rope back, tugging the rock crusher up, and then let go. She’d done this dozens of times already, and the one saving grace was that she didn’t seem to tire of this work. Naturally, her enthusiasm was due in no small part to —

“Arf! Arf!”

—Lucy, of course. The pup barked as though cheering her older sister on. She energetically ran around Krul, trying her best to be encouraging. I had no doubt that Lucy’s spirit was truly helping her older sister. And if my daughters were happy, I didn’t mind that the health bar on my shoulder was continuously decreasing due to Diana’s vigorous assault.

Lucy continued to encourage us when we started pulling in Krul’s stead. She probably wanted to join in, but she was holding herself back. Diana and I discussed spoiling her to bits when this work was over—I chose to ignore Anne’s weary expression.

We continued to work, only taking a small break for lunch before getting right back to it. Just when I was thinking about changing our digging location, Krul released the rope once more, and I heard her cry out.

“Kulu.”

The rock crusher fell into the hole it had chipped out and disappeared from view. A dull *thud* reverberated in the air. We’d repeated this painstaking process so many times and had never sensed a difference, so we assumed nothing had changed this time either. But then, a sharp *crack* reached our ears.

“H-Hey, did you hear...?” I stammered.

Lidy confirmed it. “I did.”

The rest of our family nodded. Something had clearly changed, and it wasn’t long until we were able to spot the difference. There were a few dull thuds and hot water began gushing from the hole. It wasn’t strong enough to be a geyser—especially not one several meters tall—but water was undoubtedly pouring out.

We all erupted into loud cheers and hugged each other happily.

But of course, we had no time to celebrate. Krul, Samya, Helen, and Anne quickly pulled up the rock crusher and set it aside. We grabbed wooden planks, stakes, and hammers, then headed down the slope into the hole.

The rock crusher had apparently been plugging the hole at first, so pressure had built up underneath—this had caused the initial energetic gush. After Krul and the others had pulled the rock crusher up and out of the hole, the water had lost its initial gusto. Fortunately, it was still pouring out steadily like a spring (*which, duh, it's in the name: hot spring*).

A bit of hot water had accumulated at the bottom of the hole. I reached out, dipping my fingers in for just a split second. It didn't *feel* hot, so I slowly submerged my fingers again. It didn't burn me—it was warm and comfortable to the touch. At this temperature, I would be willing to take a dip. Perhaps we were a bit far from the source. The water had likely cooled considerably on its journey to this hole.

Since the temperature of this hot spring was on the low side, I had to consider heating the water so that we could take a bath. I wasn't particularly invested in having a one-hundred-percent natural hot spring, so I didn't mind.

The current water level seemed like enough for a footbath, but I was afraid of taking my shoes off and scratching the soles of my feet on sharp rocks and debris. While I was waffling over whether to try it or not, I heard a loud *splash* beside me.

Lucy had jumped in—she was frolicking within the small puddle of water. She probably felt like she was jumping into the lake. *And...now she's rolling around.* Diana hastily rushed in to stop Lucy from getting overly muddy, but it was probably way too late for that.

In any case, Lucy and Diana had made it clear that the water was safe (though I wasn't exactly planning on bathing here today). I kept my shoes on and waded into the small pool at the bottom of the hole. I felt the water slowly seep into my shoes—it was comfortably warm, and I figured the source must've been a bit warmer. I decided to examine the area where the water welled up from the ground and check the temperature there.

Gradually, I made my way closer to the source, but perhaps because I was used to the water, my toes didn't feel any warmer. When I dunked my hand in, it was still just lukewarm.

I steeled my resolve and leaped toward the source. The water was still gushing forth, but again, it didn't feel all that much warmer. *Perhaps the water is mixed with some substance to help it retain a bit of heat while flowing a long distance underground...*

Lucy, Rike, Diana, and Lidy approached me with big splashes.

"I figured that the source should be hotter," I remarked.

"It usually is," Rike replied with a nod. The hot spring in her hometown must've followed that same logic.

Then my knowledge from Earth should make sense here too...I think.

"But it *is* warm," Diana said with bemusement.

"Arf!" Lucy gave a confident bark.

"Yeah, but the source feels practically the same as the water at the edge of this pool," I replied.

If I could've used my smithing cheats, I would've been able to take a rough estimate of the water's temperature, but unfortunately, they didn't activate here. I had nothing to go off of. All I was able to glean was that this water was relatively warm.

Lidy scooped up some of the water and stared at it intently. "Hmm... I knew it."

"Did you find something?" I asked.

"I think so," she replied with a firm nod and a serious gaze. "I suppose this is fitting for the Black Forest. Or perhaps the location *she* told us about is special."

I gulped nervously. Did this water have some insane capabilities? If it gave us immortality and eternal youth, we'd have to be careful of our Achilles' heels and sprigs of mistletoe.

"Magical energy runs thick within this vein," Lidy continued. "The amount of

magic in the water is far above any other dissolved substance.”

“Magic? In the water?” I repeated.

“Quite right.” She nodded once more. The water she’d scooped up dripped between her fingers. The falling droplets were glittering, but they weren’t reflecting the light of the sun—the gleam was due to magic. “It’s not as dense as what’s in the magical jewelstones, but there’s still quite a bit of magic in this water.”

“So...it’s like a magical spring?” I asked.

“I’m not sure if there’s anything else within this water, but if you want to state the most prominent substance, then ‘magical spring’ would be an apt name for it.”

“I see...”

I placed a hand on my chin. If this spring didn’t have as much magic as the jewelstones, we couldn’t use it to treat the illness of the fairies. Still, it seemed like a perfect place for them to recuperate after treatment. *Maybe I’ll discuss this with Gizelle later.*

Now that I thought about it, we were in the residence of the Dragon of the Land—and at her mercy—which was why the Black Forest was so thick with magical energy. I was certain that Lluisa’s presence had some sort of effect on the place. I also doubted that any beastfolk or fairies would try to dig past the bedrock, much less any animals. This hot spring had therefore flown under the radar.

There might’ve been a natural hot spring welling up somewhere in the vastness of the Black Forest, but few people would be able to spot such a place. And even if someone did, there were even fewer people who could sense the amount of magic present in the water.

I dropped my hand from my chin as a realization hit me. “Hmm? Wait, so there isn’t a discernible difference in temperature because—”

“Of this magic, I presume,” Lidy finished.

“But if the temperature never drops, that’s also a bit problematic.”

I thought about the overflowing water. If it was just lukewarm for a short while until it flowed into a river, that would be fine, but if it maintained its warmth forever, that'd be no good.

"I don't think that'll be the case," Lidy said. "The magic will slowly fade, so I don't think this water will maintain its temperature."

"Do you think a monster will be created if we keep water here?" I asked.

Lidy took another scoop of the water and once again stared at it. "I can't say for certain, but I don't think we need to worry about that either. It looks like the magic is moving around within the water, so nothing is stagnant."

If a leviathan or something could be created here, I'd have to quickly bury this water vein, but since that wasn't the case... *I guess we can keep this hot spring—it seems to work differently than places with stagnant magic.*

This world apparently did have aquatic monsters. But I'd only heard about them from Helen, and she'd only heard a few rumors. *Or maybe the stories were exaggerated and people assumed that a normal creature was actually a monster.*

"Well then, if we can maintain this temperature and prevent any monsters from spawning, we can make this our hot spring," I decided.

"Sounds good to me," Lidy answered.

This magic-filled hot spring probably had a variety of other uses, but I decided to place thoughts like that on the back burner for now. We'd already removed the scaffold, so what we needed to do now was surround our water source with planks, dirt, and stakes.

Luckily, we hadn't hit a geyser that was several meters tall, so we managed to continue our work without having to contend with rushing water. Krul and Samya, who'd disassembled the scaffold, joined Helen and Anne in digging out a small depression around the source where water could collect—this created a mini well of sorts. The hot spring continued to gush water, and our mini well immediately started to overflow, but we placed a wooden plank over it as a lid and tossed some dirt on top to hold it down. Water still trickled out, but it was no longer pouring, and the leaking water was quickly absorbed by the

surrounding soil.

That was enough for me. *As long as water's not completely flooding this hole, we can work down here. From tomorrow on, we'll have a different task to work on.*

I looked up and noticed the sky turning orange. *This took more time than I expected.*

"All right, let's call it a day," I called out. "If it's absolutely flooded here tomorrow, we'll think of a plan B!"

Everyone voiced their agreement under the light of the setting sun.

"All right, let's move on to the topic of communication," I said over dinner. I swallowed my mouthful of roasted, salt-cured deer meat before I continued. "It would be useful if we could readily contact Camilo and Marius, but I also want a way to communicate with Gizelle and Lluisa. During the incident with Diana, I went to the entrance of the forest every day to check for a letter from Camilo. I'm not keen on doing that for days and days, especially if I never find any letters."

My mailbox was a good four to five kilometers away—there weren't many oddballs who would enjoy that daily trek. *I'm starting to miss the convenience of mail back on Earth.*

The image of Lluisa fumbling with a smartphone popped into my mind. I pictured her mumbling, "Oh my, how do I send a text again? X? What's that?" I immediately chased her troubled visage out of my head.

"With our current numbers, we *could* take turns checking and see if we've got any mail," I suggested. "But, well..."

"The location is just so inconvenient," Rike finished. She chugged down her second mug of hard liquor.

I nodded. Samya, Helen, and Anne could certainly handle the journey, but it was risky to send Rike, Diana, or Lidy by themselves. Plus, there were no guarantees that *anyone* would make it home safely. I thought back to how Samya had come to live with me in the first place—I couldn't ensure that the

same thing wouldn't happen again. Also, Diana, Helen, and Anne were technically in hiding while they lived here. I didn't want them to head toward the road alone and risk bumping into outsiders.

"Should we take turns in pairs?" Diana asked.

"That could work, but I honestly don't want to risk exposing you guys to others..." I replied.

"A bit too late for that, don't you think?"

"Hrmm..."

I folded my arms. She wasn't wrong. We *did* go to the city pretty frequently, so it might've been futile to worry about stuff like that. Maybe it *was* best to break them off in pairs—one suited for combat and the other not (though Diana was skilled with the sword). If Krul and Lucy also tagged along, maybe it wouldn't be an issue.

Once we finished building the hot spring facilities and the walkway, we wouldn't need to build anything for a while...or so I hoped. Even if our family grew, we had more open rooms available, so that wasn't an issue. If I really wanted to, I *could* expand the storage sheds, but that was a simple task—it wouldn't be a problem if we were short some people for the construction. This plan was also a good way for Krul and Lucy to get some exercise.

I decided to go with it for now.

"If it's not too much trouble for everyone, I'm fine with doing that," I said. "But if anyone senses any danger, come back straightaway. And if a group takes too long to return, we'll all go out and search for them, just to be safe. How does that sound?"

Everyone agreed. And so, a new routine had been added to our lives. I could only hope that this would go well, but not so well that it'd resemble a certain father with an eyeball for a head tagging along with his *yokai* son. I didn't think anyone at this table would get that reference, so I chose to keep silent.

"The biggest issue will be contacting Gizelle and Lluisa," I said, folding my arms.

Samya nodded. “Yeah. It would be nice if we could see them like once a day.”

“They might agree to that if we ask them.”

It was never an issue for *them* to contact *us*. We were generally always here, though we had a set date every two weeks when we were gone for the city, and every once in a while, we left our cabin due to unforeseen circumstances.

“It would probably be best if they came to us once a day, but...” I started.

“Gizelle might be fine with it, but Lluisa is a bit...” Samya added.

I nodded in agreement. “Exactly.”

Gizelle was the fairy chief; she could likely send us a fairy or two, even if they weren’t ill or in need of information. That would benefit both us and the fairies.

Lluisa was the bigger issue. It was easy to forget because she seemed a bit airheaded at times, but she was a part of the Dragon of the Land. I wasn’t sure just how many people (deities?) of her caliber existed, but it was clear that she was her own existence who wielded a lot of power. So yeah, of course I’d hesitate to casually go up to someone that important and say, “Hey, dude, hit me up once a day!”

“If only there was a way for us to call out to her,” Anne said as she snagged the last of the meat and polished it off.

Helen, who’d apparently been aiming for the same meat, froze in place—her fork had stabbed nothing but air.

“It’s not like we can light up the sky with a bat symbol,” I muttered.

“A what?” Anne asked. “Is that some sort of tradition in the Nordic region?”

“Nope. Nothing like that.”

Y’know, I wouldn’t be surprised if that billionaire got reincarnated in this world. Didn’t he have a Ninja series? I mean, anything can happen.

That aside, after dinner was over, we discussed some ways to call for Lluisa. Namely, signal fires or making a loud sound by swinging a hammer into a tree. Someone suggested hammering a stake into the ground—a Dragon of the Land would surely notice that. A heated discussion followed, but none of us came up

with a solid plan.

Our debate was soon interrupted by a knock.

“Coming! Just a second, please!”

Lidy opened the door to a familiar face.

“It seems to me that you’re in need,” said Lluisa. “Gizelle nagged me about knocking on the door to be polite, so that’s what I’ve done.”

Her impeccable timing was a godsend from the heavens (or from the land, in this case), and I was secretly grateful for her appearance. I welcomed her inside.

“You’re right that we’re in need, but perhaps not for the reason you think—we managed to hit the hot spring vein,” I said. “We *do* need assistance, but it’s for a different matter entirely.”

She sat at our postdinner table (I offered her a meal, but she replied with “I don’t eat food”) and tilted her head quizzically. She was beautiful, so whatever she did made her look elegant, but her actions were casual in contrast to her overpowering words. This nonchalant demeanor was a bit strange since she was supposed to be the master of this forest.

“I-In any case, I’m very grateful you came here,” I said quickly. “After all, we don’t have a way of contacting you.”

Lluisa gently clapped her hands together. “Oho, now that you mention it, that’s true. I can sense large changes in the land, but I can’t have you altering the forest’s terrain every time you need something from me.”

I forced out a laugh. “That goes without saying.”

Our family could probably damage the Black Forest considerably if we went all out. But the payoff wasn’t worth it—we would be exhausting ourselves and damaging the environment just to call for Lluisa. Doing that just didn’t make any sense.

“Actually, that’s exactly what we need to figure out,” I explained. “I wanted to ask you a few questions, so my family and I were discussing how we could contact you.”

Lluisa smiled. “If you don’t mind a slightly delayed response, you can send

Gizelle a message, and she'll relay it to me."

"How long will that take, exactly?" I asked. I wouldn't be surprised if Lluisa casually went, "Hmm, maybe a year or so!"

I cautiously awaited her reply.

"A week at most. At earliest...the next day? It's a whole process."

Our family breathed a sigh of relief when we heard the news.

Lidy looked deep in thought. She placed a hand on her chin. "Huh? Lluisa, is it not possible for you to treat the fairies when they're ill?" she asked.

Yeah... She has a point. Lluisa's a dryad and a fragment of the Dragon of the Land. She definitely has ample magical energy. Since the fairies can relay messages to Lluisa, surely they can also ask for that kind of help.

Lluisa shook her head. "I'd love to do that—really, I would. But I'm not allowed to personally lend my aid to certain organisms. If I did so, all accidental deaths in this forest would disappear."

"That makes sense," Lidy replied with a small nod.

"Then what about that troll?" Anne asked.

During the incident with the troll, Lluisa had mentioned that she'd change the forest's terrain if push came to shove and we failed our mission. If we hadn't defeated the troll, her power would've directly affected the monsters and creatures living in the forest. I wasn't sure if monsters born from stagnant magic could be called living creatures, but perhaps Lluisa had decided that the damage from killing the troll would be worth it as long as everything else was saved.

The dryad's shoulders slumped. "I can say this now, but if I had crushed that cave... Well, I have no idea what the ramifications would've been. Destroying the cave would've likely caused the surrounding area to collapse."

Anne sighed. "Makes sense..."

Fair enough. Lluisa didn't possess some kind of uncontrollable power that could decimate a troll—she'd needed to send people in or manipulate the environment to defeat it. Frankly, to kill a monster as large and powerful as that

troll, Lluisa would've had to terraform a huge swathe of terrain. In gaming terms, it was like her power could be used only in build mode—she could change the terrain as she pleased, but she couldn't directly attack anything. If she wanted to initiate combat with a monster, she had to rely on people like us to do it for her.

"I couldn't guarantee that only the troll would be harmed, which was why I went to you guys—the strongest folks in this forest," Lluisa confessed.

"I see," I replied. "Then I'll go to Gizelle if I want to send you a message. Oh, and I wanted to ask you about the overflowing water of the hot spring."

"Ah, you want to know whether you can just let it flow wherever it pleases, right?" Lluisa asked.

I nodded. "Exactly."

I didn't want to say this out loud, but if that question was answered, we wouldn't need to call her out again for a good while.

Lluisa pondered for a while, crossing her arms. *Wait, did she not have a plan ready for when we found the hot water vein?* The silence continued for quite some time. Just as I was thinking that we should perhaps offer her a suggestion, she spoke up.

"Can you dig a shallow pond to the south of the vein to store the pooling water? I'll make it so that the water flows underground from there."

"I can do that," I replied with another nod.

Problem solved, I guess. We can start working on that tomorrow.

Suddenly, Lluisa leaned forward. My heart anxiously hammered in my chest. *Is she going to say something to me?*

"When will the hot spring be ready?" Lluisa asked slowly.

Everyone, barring Lidy and me, almost collapsed from the anticlimactic nature of this trivial question.

"It'll still be a while," Lidy said calmly. *She's being more reliable than ever.*

"I'm sorry, but we just reached the vein," I added. "We'll have to fill in part of

the hole and build a bath structure, so it'll be quite a while until we can take a dip."

"Ah, I see. I'll be looking forward to it," Lluisa said, nodding nonchalantly. She seemed to perceive time differently, so the wait probably wasn't a huge issue for her.

"Oh, one more thing," I said. "Is it possible for you to tell Gizelle to come visit us?"

"Here?" Lluisa asked. "Ah, right, to work out a way to communicate with her."

"Exactly. We won't be able to contact you if we can't meet up with her regularly. We'll be either here at the cabin or at the hot spring. Even if we visit the city, we'd be back by a bit past noon."

"Got it." Lluisa nodded.

All right, guess that's cleared up. Still, we'll need a buffer of a week every time we want to contact Lluisa...

"All right, I'll come again sometime," Lluisa said.

"Once the hot spring's finished, we'll be sure to contact you through Gizelle. It'll be a good way to test out this new communication method."

Lluisa smiled. "I'd appreciate that."

She stood up to leave. We saw her off at the front door, and she left quietly, unlike her announced entrance.

The following day, we visited the hot spring location early in the morning. I was worried that our lid might've blown off, but nothing of the sort had happened—only a bit of water had leaked out from the sides.

"That won't keep us from backfilling the rest of the hole," I said.

"It shouldn't." Rike gave a firm nod. "Everything seems fine."

Her agreement was reassuring, but that didn't mean we could take our sweet time. I wanted to fill in the hole, dig a channel to divert the water, and then dig a small pond where the drained water could collect. *With our large, capable*

family, it should be possible to do that in a reasonable amount of time. At least, I'd like to think so...

We all got to work. Samya and Lidy were tasked with digging the pond while the rest of us filled in the hole. Carrying dirt back was an arduous process, but Krul was a huge help. She was like a machine efficiently hauling the heavy soil for us; she played a huge role in making our work go faster. I was willing to tank a few hits to my shoulder if it meant that I got to see Lucy's adorable cheering...though I didn't want to get hit too many times since being sore would affect my work.

This process didn't differ much from when we'd engineered the well. We erected some planks as temporary walls and packed soil behind them, pressing and compacting everything so that the hole would retain its shape. This resulted in a rectangular hole—hot water would flow out from the bottom and rise to the top. We ensured that our hole was narrower than our well to decrease the time it would take for the hot water to rise. However, this meant we needed to pack the outside edges with even more soil. I didn't even want to think about how much time it would've taken without our trusty Krul.

I'd better reward her too. It was unfortunate that she couldn't tell me exactly what she wanted.

We took a short lunch break and then got right back to work. Just when I was satisfied with what we'd done, the curtain of night fell across the sky. I wasn't planning on pulling an all-nighter for this, but I'd brought some torches just in case we decided to work overtime. I used my magic to light them. We were only a short distance away from our cabin, but the Black Forest didn't have a single streetlight, and it was dangerous to walk around in the darkness without a source of light.

Illuminated by the flickering flames of the torches, the hot water was glittering. The water level rose as I'd hoped—the overflowing water traveled along the channel and started filling the pond Samya and Lidy had dug.

We'd prioritized digging—not clearing away dirt—so mounds of soil still surrounded the pond, but that would be work for tomorrow. When I dipped my fingers into the channel, the water was just as warm as it was at the source. It

seemed the magic was maintaining its temperature. As long as we built the hot spring nearby, we would be able to enjoy the same lovely warmth.

The rest of our family walked over to the pond—they dipped their hands and feet in the water, playing around.

“Oh, it’s warm!”

“Is it? Whoa! It really is!”

“This only makes me look forward to a hot spring even more.”

“We should build the other facilities soon.”

“I hope this water can help heal injuries.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised if it could.”

They all frolicked for a short while, their hopes swelling for the future hot spring. Finally, we left the warm pond that was slowly accumulating water and took the short trip back to our cabin.

####

Though we couldn’t take a dip just yet, all that was left was to build a bathhouse, a bath, and a covered walkway. But since we now had a supply of hot water and a means to keep it from overflowing, we could actually start using the hot spring. *That is, of course, once we build a privacy partition...*

The following day, we went to the forge to start our work. I grabbed the tongs, moved around some hot sheet metal, and started hammering away.

“Well, the hot spring is great, but we still need to work every day to make ends meet.”

We had more than enough supplies for now, but our family included one man, six women, and two daughters. *It’s not as though our futures are assured without us doing a thing.*

I tried to hammer my grumblings away. Loud clangs of metal rang throughout the forge—it was almost like the noise was drowning out my worries. Though I did whine a bit, I had no particular complaints about my current lifestyle.

Honestly, I was grateful that I was able to make ends meet doing what I liked,

and I wasn't so busy that my job completely stopped me from pursuing other endeavors. I also thought that I shouldn't completely drift away from working society.

Even if I had ten trillion yen (or the equivalent in this world's currency), if someone asked me to spend the rest of my life not doing anything, I wouldn't agree. I was happy spending at least once a week—or even a few times a month—working outside so that I could connect with society. In a sense, I guess that made me a workaholic.

As my mind filled with meaningless ideas, I continued my work. I placed my sheet metal into the firebed.

Rike glanced at me. “Despite your grumblings, you still do your work flawlessly. It's sorta unfair.”

“Oops, did you hear me?” I mumbled. “That's not good. Sorry.”

I thought I'd kept my voice low, but Rike had indeed heard me. It was embarrassing to learn that my apprentice could hear my whining. I'd already been shamelessly relying on my cheats, and now I felt even more abashed for complaining.

As a simple blacksmith and the boss of this forge, I couldn't make products that would embarrass me. *I'll put my all into my smithing—I'll work hard.*

After work in the forge, we went to check up on the hot spring. The small pond we'd dug hadn't overflowed and had formed a river. It was filled just enough, and I knew we could leave it be for a while. The pond had been somewhat rushed, and it resembled a stout, upside-down pyramid shape with shallower ends—it wasn't deep enough for us to use for a relaxing bath.

As we approached the pond, I noticed something—several wolves and raccoons (I think) were bathing together for some reason. *Are they boys or girls? I have no idea.* They'd been the first to sense the existence of this bath, and it was apparently perfect for them. The animals were frozen in place with their eyes closed. Their ears and noses twitched, clearly on alert, but they showed no signs of fleeing even after we were relatively close. We didn't want to harass them, so we kept a respectful distance.

Surprisingly, my shoulder was spared from a relentless attack—Diana was busy carrying Lucy. *Actually, I take that back... Diana's left arm is gripping my shoulder with immense strength and she's shaking me pretty hard, so it's not like I'm entirely free from pain.*

Our pup didn't seem too keen on mixing in with the other wolves, even after seeing them in the pond. I was a little happy to see that, but also somewhat sad to learn that she didn't want to mingle with her own kind. *Will she always be my daughter, I wonder?* That was my hope, but this wasn't a choice I could make for her. It was her life, and she'd be the one to make the decision about how she wanted to live.

"By the looks of it, we should give up on turning that pond into a bath and dig a new one somewhere else," I said.

I would've been more cautious if bears frequented this place, but the ones I'd defeated were a bit too large for this small pond. *I might need to fortify the outer walls of our bathing facilities, though. Maybe I'll add a steel sheet or something.* The picture of a bear taking a footbath flashed across my mind. I didn't mind if they came in peace, but they were still dangerous beasts.

"This hot spring is a blessing from the Black Forest," Lidy said with a smile as we were walking back from the hot spring. "I'm happy to share it with other residents living here."

She'd been watching the wolves soaking with twinkling eyes—Helen hadn't been able to hide her excitement either. If they were happy with it, I didn't mind keeping the pond as is.

Just as we made our way back to the front of our cabin, we spotted a familiar, tiny figure waving at us.

"Over here, Eizo and company!" Gizelle called. "Thank goodness! I'm glad we didn't miss each other!"

Now then, it's time for a serious discussion. We'd felt relaxed after watching the animals bathing, but the atmosphere turned tense as I greeted her.

"I see... That's a thought," Gizelle said, taking a sip with her tiny mouth.

We'd just finished having dinner together, and I'd suggested that we should develop a method for communicating during times of need. The problem was that this arrangement didn't really benefit the fairies. Barring a few extenuating circumstances, we were always at our cabin; if Gizelle needed to contact us, she'd know where to find us. I wasn't sure if she was willing to cooperate for *our* convenience.

Luckily, it seemed like she was indeed willing.

"Well, Eizo, I wouldn't consider establishing a method of communication for normal humans, but this is *your* family we're talking about," Gizelle said with a gentle smile.

I noticed Helen's shoulders trembling as though she was holding herself back from a cuteness overload, and I thought that the kindest thing I could do was pretend I didn't see it.

"Thank you," I said, bowing my head.

Gizelle waved her hands. "No worries at all!"

"So how should we do this?" I asked. "For example, is there a spot that you visit regularly where we could meet up?"

"Let's see..." She placed a finger over her small chin, and this time, Lidy's shoulders started to tremble. Pretty much everyone in our family loved cute things. "We regularly patrol the forest so that we can see for ourselves whether there are any pockets of stagnant magical energy. Should we swing by the cabin during these inspections?"

"I think we're a bit out of the way—will that be a problem?"

"Not at all. It won't take us too much time, and since we fairies can fall ill at any point, it'll benefit us if we all know the location of your cabin."

"Ah, makes sense."

Fairies were composed almost solely of magical energy. The illness, which sapped their magic, required them to visit my forge—I could create crystallized magic to cure them. It would be convenient for the fairies if all of them could quickly find my place during times of emergency.

“How about I leave out a message board for you to write on?” I asked.

“Sounds great,” Gizelle replied. “If we’ve got something to tell you, we’ll be sure to leave a message.”

“How often do you think you’ll come?”

“Let’s see... About once every two to three days.”

“Sounds good.”

I stuck out my finger, and we shook on it. Our sizes may have been different, but this was our handshake.

And so, we’d managed to arrange regular contact with the fairies of this forest. But it was best if we never had to reach out to them (no news is good news), so we’d need Lluisa, the master of this forest, to work a little harder.

The topic shifted to the forest. There weren’t many pockets of stagnant magic these days, and there hadn’t been a lot of lost people either; things had been rather peaceful. Gizelle presumed that the troll had used up most of the stagnant energy.

While there were still people who got lost every now and then, the vast majority were found wandering the edges of the forest—Gizelle told us that they used a secret method to lead them out. Apparently, none of these lost people had seemed capable of reaching this forge. Well, we *were* pretty deep in the Black Forest, and we even had a spell around the cabin to protect us from any outsiders. I didn’t expect people to be able to easily reach us.

“I’ll come again soon,” Gizelle said.

“Great,” I replied. “I’ll be in your care should anything happen.”

“Of course. How could I say no?”

Gizelle took her leave just as we were thinking about going to bed. I offered for her to spend the night with us, but she said she had some matters to take care of. *I feel a little bad. I hope I didn’t take up too much of her time by calling her here.*

She floated away and melted into the dark forest. As I was watching her go, I eagerly thought about the message board that I’d install for the fairies.

####

We fulfilled our order quota two days before we left for the city. In other words, we had tomorrow completely off. However...

“Not sure if that’s enough time to build a bathhouse,” I muttered while wiping off Krul and Lucy during our morning wash.

We couldn’t finish the structure in one day no matter how much we rushed. I didn’t mind seeing how far we could get tomorrow; however, that meant we’d have a gap day in the building process since we needed to go to the city for our order. Plus, it would take at least a week to forge our next order.

Well, there’s no need for us to rush and start on the bathhouse tomorrow.

“I guess I’ll make the message board instead.”

I didn’t want to make a slate blackboard. Back on Earth, I remembered learning that blackboards and colored chalk were rather modern inventions. *I could make something resembling a portable whiteboard—the board part would be blackened steel, and we can use a slate pencil as the writing utensil. I could also make a little hood to protect it from the rain, and steel is tough against water anyway. That would do the job just fine.*

The words would disappear if we rubbed them, and though the written letters could potentially be a bit too faint for my liking, I figured that they should be legible enough to read. *If I don’t plan anything too elaborate, I can finish this project today.* I already had a few slate pencils on hand since I thought that I’d need them to label items for my orders. But since we usually didn’t make that many different kinds of items, this pencil hadn’t seen the light of day...until now. *Finally, it’s found its use.*

Once we finished our morning routines, Rike and I saw everyone else off. They were going hunting today. They hadn’t traveled much recently, so this was a perfect change of pace.

“See ya,” I said. “Be careful.”

“I know!” Samya exclaimed, energetically waving her hand alongside the rest of the family.

“Arf! Arf!”

Lucy ran around in circles before disappearing into the forest with them. Rike and I continued waving until they were gone.

“All right,” I said. “Today’s work might be a little boring, but let’s do this.”

“Yes, Boss!”

Rike seemed awfully pumped as we returned to our workshop. I lit the furnace and heated my metal. While it was getting hot, I decided to make a sand mold. This was different from the clay molds we usually used—I didn’t often use this method because it took much longer, but since the message board was a onetime project, I figured this would work.

First, I took two large thick pieces of wood and carved out the insides—when I was done, they looked like identical trays with high sides. I stuck the two trays together, carved sides inward, with a flat piece of wood in the center. At this point, it looked like a hollow wooden box. I carved a hole in the top of the box.

After that, I poured sand through the hole—we usually used this sand to surround clay molds. The grains slipped down the hole and started filling the hollow space within the wooden box. We poured more and more, and we used a wooden rod to pack the sand tightly inside. For a sand mold to work, the sand had to be extremely compact. Rike’s muscles and my cheat-fueled strength enabled us to compress the sand until it was solid.

Once we had enough sand, we pulled apart the two halves of the box, removed the wood in the middle, and pulled out the wooden rod. This rod had created a groove in the sand that would serve as the mold’s spout, and the wood in the middle had made a flat indentation where we could pour metal to create our message board. The one caveat of using a sand mold was that the bottom side of the board would be rough—sand-textured. This was fine, though. Frankly, it would be more convenient for one side to be coarse.

The metal had been melting nicely in the furnace, and I poured it in. The sand greedily swallowed the red-hot, dripping steel. Once I poured in enough metal that it reached the spout, I noticed the steam rising all around us.

The intense heat within the forge caused Rike and me to start sweating

profusely. While we waited for the metal to harden, she and I escaped the forge and sought some cool shelter outside.

I sighed heavily. “I always thought it was hot when we worked, but today the forge was scorching—way hotter than normal. I wonder if it’s because the message board is so large.”

“Yeah, it was definitely hotter,” Rike agreed. “But, as always, I’m impressed by your skills.”

“I just poured in the metal.”

“But that’s already more than half of the process.”

“Guess so.”

My skills were all thanks to cheats, so I couldn’t be loud and proud about them. Would I be able to do all of this with my own abilities one day? Would I ever stop relying on my cheats? It seemed I needed to continue learning every day, just like Rike was.

After Rike and I cooled down outside for a bit, we went back to the forge. We quickly deburred the metal and heated the sheet to blacken it. This process was similar to when I’d given a gold sheen to Helen’s armor.

Once the metal had darkened nicely, I took it outside. I found a large log, cut it to a random length, and then cut that length in half. This left me with two logs of equal size. Next, I used my saw to create identical grooves on both logs—these grooves were as tall and thin as the left and right edges of the message board. I stood the logs up parallel to one another, grooves facing the center, and slotted each side of the message board into the grooves.

Now I had two solid logs holding up the message board in the middle. This was structurally sound; however, the exposed metal would be vulnerable to the rain, which would cause it to rust.

“Now for the protective hood,” I said.

“Right,” Rike replied. “I’ll bring a nice branch.”

“Thanks.”

Once I had the branch, I cut it to the exact length of the message board,

carved another groove, and then fit that branch onto the top edge of the board. All I had to do now was nail a wooden hood onto this branch, and then...

“You’re done!” Rike cried, clapping her hands.



It looked like one of those guides or maps that were common along mountain trails back on Earth—the ones made from concrete and decorated with fake branches. The only difference was that this board was blank and blackened.

For the test run, I took a slate pencil from storage and wrote down three letters.

“All right, I can read it,” I said.

“What do these letters say?” Rike asked.

“Hmm... It’s part of a secret language.”

“Huh, you really do know all sorts of things, Boss.”

“No— Uh, well, sure, I guess.”

What I’d written down were the last three letters of the English alphabet. I forced a smile as I rubbed away the letters. Then I wrote, “No messages today,” in this world’s language.

Since we still had some time until everyone returned, I grabbed a bit of leftover wood and started carving a specific design. It was Forge Eizo’s signature—the relief of the sitting fat cat that I usually carved on the pommels of my blades. When I finished, I attached the wood to the message board. *An outsider will have no idea who these messages are addressed to, but anyone who recognizes the cat symbol will know.*

I stared at the board for a moment, and then something struck me. “We don’t have a sign for the forge,” I muttered.

Nothing on or around our cabin said “Forge Eizo.” We didn’t have anything to identify us—nothing that could tell others what we were doing out here. *And even if I do make a sign, it probably won’t reach the eyes of many.*

“Do you have a sign at your home workshop, Rike?” I asked.

“Us? We do have one, albeit something rather simple. It has a picture of a hammer and an anvil, and it just reads, ‘Moritz.’”

“Huh... Is that a tradition of sorts?”

“No, there are other forges that don’t have a sign at all. We only have one

because the founder of our workshop made it, and we've just kept it up."

"I see."

Rike laughed awkwardly and I smiled back. It sounded like the founder had made the sign on a whim.

"We should make one with our symbol on it one day," I said. "Though it's not like a lot of people will see it."

"Oooh, our founder wants to create a sign for the forge?" Rike asked with a chuckle. "That's a heavy responsibility."

I laughed with her. "Yeah, guess it is."

With one last look at the new message board, we returned to the cabin.

###

The next morning, we were prepared to head to the city.

The hunters had been successful yesterday, so there was an animal soaking in the lake that we needed to process and store. I never told Camilo exactly when we would drop by on our delivery days, so I figured we had some time to spare before leaving for the city. If we all worked together, we could quickly drag the animal back to the cabin—Krul always made this part easy—and dress it. I suggested that we head to the lake to collect it, but Samya and the others said that they'd wait until after we got back from the city.

And so everyone, including Krul and Lucy, would go to the city today. This outing would mostly consist of Krul pulling our cart while we sat in the back. I just hoped that no animal would eat the game in the lake before we returned.

"Eh, if it happens, it happens," Samya said casually as she loaded some cargo onto the cart. This dispelled my worries. "There are times when we go to collect it first thing in the morning and it's already been eaten."

I'd never heard her mention that before. They always sank the carcass into a deeper part of the lake, which masked the scent and made it difficult to drag out. *I've got a sneaking suspicion that we have some luck on our side...* Regardless, this hunt wouldn't make or break us—we had lots of meat already stored and plenty of vegetables from our garden, so there was no chance we'd

starve.

“All right, let’s head out,” I said.

“*Kululu!*”

With a loud cry, Krul slowly started to pull us through the forest. As we traveled through the trees and then onto the road, we felt the occasional breeze rush past—it no longer felt warm and reminiscent of summer. I could hear the footsteps of autumn just around the corner, and I was curious to see how this forest would transform.

I was glancing around eagerly at the scenery when Lucy, who was sitting atop Diana’s lap, entered my field of view. It was difficult to sense minute changes in her body since I saw her every day, but as I continued to stare at the pup, I became certain of one thing.

“Lucy, you’ve grown.”

“She has,” Diana replied, petting her.

Lucy used to look so small on Diana’s lap, but she now seemed large and proud. It was only a matter of time before she wouldn’t be able to fit on *anyone’s* lap. She would have to curl up on the floor of the cart. That idea probably made Diana feel lonely—after all, she was practically Lucy’s mother—but it was all a part of growing up. Lucy’s face also seemed more dignified, but it still retained its adorable charm. Was her cuteness due to her youth, or was I just a doting parent?

“Probably both,” I muttered to myself as I gazed at the grass blowing in the wind.

We made our regular journey through the city. I waved to the guard and greeted him. We saw the old man who always sat outside his shop, and as usual, his heart swelled when he spotted my adorable daughters.

After a while, we made it to Camilo’s store. I brought Krul and Lucy to the back, and the apprentice flew out to greet them. The wooden plank they’d used for shade during the hot summer had been either dismantled for scrap or sold off—it was no longer there. Well, there was no need for cooling shade in autumn anyway.

“As always, thank you,” I said. When I patted the apprentice’s head, I noticed that something else had changed. “Hey, did you get taller?”

“Hmm? You think so? Heh heh.” The apprentice offered a happy yet embarrassed smile.

This kid’s growing too. I ruffled his hair and left my daughters in his care, to which he replied, “Of course!” with his chest puffed out.

We made our way upstairs to the meeting room. I told Camilo and the head clerk what we’d brought today and then gave them the list of items we wanted to purchase. The exchange went off without a hitch. After business had concluded, it was time for gossip—I wanted to know about anything that’d happened over the past two weeks. I’d dubbed this “Camilo News.”

I also had something to tell him. Just as we were wrapping up, I found my chance.

“I want to organize some method of contacting you,” I said.

“Contacting me? In what way?” Camilo asked, playing with his mustache.

“I don’t mind meeting every two weeks like we’ve been doing, but what should we do during times of emergency? You know where my forge is, and though clients need to come alone if they want to commission me, I don’t mind if a group comes along for just a visit. Still, I think it’d be better if we had a way to contact each other...aside from physically showing up somewhere.”

“Hmm...”

This would benefit Camilo as well. I expected him to jump at the opportunity, but he seemed a bit reluctant... *Or am I just imagining things?*

“Pffft!”

After a moment of what looked like serious consideration, Camilo burst out laughing. The rest of us stared at him, bewildered.

“Ah ha ha ha ha! Sorry, sorry! I was actually *just* thinking about the same exact thing. The timing was way too convenient. I couldn’t help but play around a little.”

He laughed boisterously, and I realized that his mischievous streak had taken

the reins for a moment. I shot him an exaggerated frown.

“Good grief, both you and Marius sure are a handful...” I muttered.

“Ba ha ha! I’m sorry. Forgive me.”

It was little wonder that he was a part of the Three Rowdy Rascals (according to my family). He couldn’t help but play around and prank others. Diana probably thought that Camilo, Marius, and I were birds of a feather.

“So, how do you wanna do this?” I asked. “We were thinking of setting up a mailbox at the forest entrance.”

“Not a bad idea, but it’d be troublesome for you guys to make that long trek for some letters,” Camilo replied. “I’ve actually got something better prepared, though it does come with a condition.”

“And what condition would that be?”

“Oh, you’ll find out soon. Wait here.”

He left the meeting room.

“Wonder what it is,” I muttered.

“If it’s something silly, it’s better to just decline,” Anne replied with a furrowed brow.

“Seems like he’s got some communication method for us, but he wants us to take something in exchange,” I reasoned. “As long as his request isn’t too far out, I don’t think it’ll be an issue.”

“If you’re fine with it, I don’t mind...but if he’s clearly up to no good, I’ll speak up,” said Anne.

“Please do.” I gave a strained smile. In terms of rank, Camilo had little choice but to listen to the words of the seventh imperial princess.

After a few moments, the door opened once more. Camilo reentered the room with a woman in tow. Something strange caught my eye first: she had two small buddies with her. On either side of her shoulders were tiny dragons—or would they be called wyverns? After all, they each had two legs instead of four and a pair of wings.

They're almost like birds. Are they the communication method Camilo mentioned?

The woman was dressed in attire that I was familiar with—traditional Japanese clothes. To be precise, her outfit looked *similar* to Japanese cultural garb but not quite the same; it was a lot more lavish than the clothes I knew. Still, she was wearing a *hakama*, and she didn't struggle to move around in it.

While all of this was eye-catching, the most curious thing was that she had a reptilian tail. Scales seemed to cover her entire body, including her tail, and while her face looked humanoid, a few scales peppered her skin.

She must be a lizardman or a dragonewt.

I froze in awe.

"She came asking for you," Camilo said.

The woman bowed deeply. "Pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Karen Katagiri. I'm from the Nordic region."

She raised her head and her vertical reptilian pupils narrowed. Was she smiling, or was there something deeper hidden within her mysterious eyes? I couldn't tell.



Chapter 2: The One from the North

“The Nordic region?” I repeated.

“Quite right,” Miss Katagiri replied with a nod.

“I know her from my business in the north,” Camilo said. “Remember when you said you wanted some rice?”

“Yeah...” I replied. To me as a person from Japan, rice was the food I’d missed the most after coming to this world. I was eager to learn about the rice that grew here—the crops were likely different from the ones on Earth, and I was sure the taste would be slightly different too.

“She asked me why a merchant from the south would want rice, and when I mentioned that one of my clients wanted some food from the north, she became interested in you.”

“I see.”

I gave a small sigh. *Turns out, I’m the one who stirred up the hornet’s nest.*

“But that’s not all,” Miss Katagiri said, her beautiful voice tinkling like wind chimes. “I saw your wares, Eizo, and wanted a closer look at your other items for sale.”

She hadn’t used my family name. In this world, no matter the region, it was common sense to call a person by their last name if they had one. Even I called Marius “Count Eimoor,” in public places. If she didn’t call me “Tanya,” it meant that she didn’t know my last name—though for a blacksmith, it wasn’t odd for me to lack one.

“Pardon me, but that’s a *katana*, isn’t it?” she asked, pointing at *Diaphanous Ice*, which was propped up nearby.

“It is,” I replied.

“May I take a closer look?”

“Please feel free.”

I handed *Diaphanous Ice* to her. I heard a small metallic *clink* behind me—Helen must've placed a hand over her own blade.

"Thank you," Miss Katagiri said respectfully.

She gave another bow and unsheathed my sword in one fluid motion. The faintly blue *katana* emerged in all its glory, and I felt like the temperature of the room dipped just a hair.

"Amazing!" she gasped. "Is this made from appoitakara?"

"That's correct," I replied. "I have some connections and managed to get my hands on some. Well, by 'connections,' I'm mostly referring to Camilo." To be precise, Marius had brought me the information, and I'd paid Camilo to take care of the rest.

"I didn't think *anyone* could make something this fine..." Miss Katagiri said. "I imagine it cuts very well."

She continued to gaze at *Diaphanous Ice*, and I saw Rike fold her arms and nod firmly.

After spending quite a while inspecting my sword, Miss Katagiri finally straightened. "Thank you very much." She bowed, sheathed the sword just as elegantly as she'd unsheathed it, and offered my blade back to me.

"No problem at all." I took *Diaphanous Ice* and placed it right beside me. Someone breathed a small sigh of relief.

Miss Katagiri seemed familiar with a sword. Was she an expert of some kind? A few questions popped into my mind, but I had to confirm something first.

"Is this all you want in exchange for a method of contact?" I asked Camilo.

He slumped his shoulders in an exaggerated motion. "Of course not."

"Right, of course."

Miss Katagiri wouldn't come all the way here just to see my sword. She fidgeted nervously.

"I understand I'm being rather brazen..." she started.

I sensed her hesitation. My installed knowledge told me that it was quite far

from here to the Nordic region. *Since she made the journey all the way to Camilo's store, she must have a request for me.* I didn't care if she spoke her mind, but something was preventing her from doing so.

"May I please visit your forge, Eizo?" she asked, staring straight into my eyes.

I heard loud sighs in several places around the room.

"This is apparently her condition for handing over the petite wyverns," Camilo added, stroking his mustache. "She doesn't know where your forge is, and she's not powerful enough to make it through the forest by herself."

Hmm...

I stared right back at her. "Miss Katagiri, just to be clear—you aren't trying to commission a weapon from us, right?"

If she wanted a custom model, my stipulation was that she had to come to the forge by herself. But if she just wanted to visit, well, it depended on how I felt.

"No, I promise that's not what I want," Miss Katagiri replied. Her brow was slightly furrowed. "In fact, I'd be troubled if you made something for me."

I was sure I must've looked just as perplexed as she did. She looked down and continued her explanation, "I understand that my words are confusing. It's just...I want to be able to forge a sword with my own hands, away from the Nordic region."

She raised her head. "I'm aware that the method for forging a *katana* originated in the Nordic region. Usually, it's not something that one can learn elsewhere, and I know that it isn't something you can teach easily. But even so, I'd like you to allow me to stay at your workshop. I won't be audacious enough to ask to be your apprentice, and I don't mind just watching you work. Would you please allow me to do so?"

Hesitation had faded from her expression. Her face was filled with resolve.

I nodded. "Ah, I understand now."

"Then..." She leaned forward.

I stopped her with my hand. "Just a moment. I've got some stuff going on, so I

can't just accept without learning more about you. I know that it might be difficult to talk about your situation, but could you at least tell us why you're asking?"

Her eyes immediately started to wander. It seemed that she also didn't want to divulge the details of her life to someone she'd just met. But I wasn't from this world, and I had no idea whether House Tanya actually existed in the Nordic region. Also—and she may have been told this already—Diana and Anne were supposed to be hiding out at the cabin.

On top of that, we often had unusual visitors. There was Lluisa, the master of the Black Forest, a person (well, not a *person*, exactly) who was a fragment of the Dragon of the Land. There were also the fairies. I didn't mind if Miss Katagiri stayed a few days, maybe a week at most, but judging by her story, it sounded like she wanted to be around for a while.

Maybe it would've been different if she'd been extremely skilled. But if she were, then why would she come to me with this request?

After a few moments of thought, Miss Katagiri looked at me, eyes filled with determination. She gave a firm nod.

"I understand. I'll tell you." She exhaled before continuing. "I come from a household of *samurai*. Um, you might be familiar with this term, Eizo, but it's akin to knights or nobles in this region."

In short, she was a lizardman (and not a dragonewt). Six hundred years ago, her ancestor had fought in the Great War and done exceptionally well, allowing them to become the city lord (which Miss Katagiri referred to as a *daimyo*). Ever since, her family had steadily found its footing and become important figures within the Nordic region. She claimed that her family had quite a few matrimonial relations, and I guessed that her status was like a margrave within the kingdom. This meant that women born into their house were often used for political marriages.

This world was rather progressive when it came to the advancement of women in society, but as a person from Earth, I'd noticed that some places still clung to old practices. This issue applied to Diana and Anne as well—they had to keep up appearances.

Apparently, Miss Katagiri had been destined to meet the fate that hounded many noble women. But then, one day...

“I found our heirloom *katana*,” she said, looking a touch sheepish. “I wondered if I could make such a superb weapon. I yearned to learn how, and I could barely sit still in my excitement. I began frequent visits to a blacksmith that my father was familiar with.”

She’d studied under this blacksmith, and just when she’d thought that she might be able to forge her own blade, her father had discovered what she was up to.

“My father was furious,” Miss Katagiri said. “He went as far as declaring that he’d slice up the blacksmith, but I managed to stop him from doing so. All would’ve been well if I’d given up on my dream...” She sighed quietly, and her smile was strained. “But I continued to desperately appeal that I wanted to forge my own *katana*. And so, my father gave me an ultimatum...”

Miss Katagiri trailed off for a moment. Tension filled the dead air in the room, and the silence felt sharper than a blade.

“‘If you can leave the Nordic region and forge a blade I approve of, I shall allow it.’ That’s what he told me. Just as I was thinking about what to do, Camilo let me know that a certain southern client of his was looking to buy some *miso* and rice.”

Camilo nodded and pointed at me. “Eizo asked me to search for those things.”

I was sure he’d probably sent someone on behalf of his store to scout out the Nordic region, but the premise was the same.

Miss Katagiri nodded along. “Exactly. I was certain that this client must’ve hailed from the Nordic region, and I asked Camilo if he knew of a blacksmith who forged *katanas* in the kingdom. As it turned out, the client looking for Nordic goods is a blacksmith originally from the north.”

“Impeccable timing,” I said.

“Precisely. He showed me some of your work. The quality is superb. In no time, I’d arrived here in the kingdom with these wyverns.”

“And now we’re here.”

“Right.”

She stared into my eyes, and I pieced her story together in my head. Even if she didn’t want to become my full apprentice, she wanted to study under me so that she could prove herself to her father. I groaned and crossed my arms. Honestly, since I relied heavily on my cheats, there wasn’t much I could teach her. If I hadn’t already taken Rike in, there was a good chance that I would’ve declined this request.

Rike had actually forced her way into becoming my apprentice, and while I was still a bit abashed to be called “Boss,” I knew I could always rely on her to help out around the forge.

“Could I have a moment?” I asked Miss Katagiri.

I turned around and our family leaned into a group huddle. This wasn’t the most polite way to have this discussion, but there were a few things I wanted to ask them.

“About whether we can accept her or not—it’s true that we want a method of contacting Camilo, so I don’t mind taking her in. I’ve already heard her story, so it’s difficult for me to decline.” The six members of my family stared at me, listening intently. “But I plan on prioritizing our family. This might sound harsh, but the only things we’d gain are those wyverns, and having Miss Katagiri around could potentially hold you guys back.” I peered into Rike’s eyes. “And if I *do* take her in, I’ll require your help, Rike.”

The dwarf looked at me in shock. “Me?”

“That’s right. I can only tell her to watch and learn. If Miss Katagiri wants further details on the process, I’ll have to rely on you.”

Though she would only be watching, I’d basically be gaining another apprentice. I wanted to hear Rike’s thoughts.

“Leave it to me,” she said, happily accepting the responsibility while quietly pounding her chest. I believed that she’d decline if she wanted to, so it didn’t seem like she was disgruntled at the appearance of a new rival.

“If you don’t want to, you’re free to tell me,” I replied. For some reason, Diana and Lidy nodded along.

“It’s only natural for a skilled blacksmith to have more apprentices!” Rike replied with a smile.

“I’m grateful and proud to have such an excellent apprentice.” The words came from the bottom of my heart. “What about the rest of you?”

Everyone else shook their heads. They weren’t expressing their dissent, but signaling that they had nothing more to say. In other words, they’d leave the decision-making up to me. I gave a small sigh.

“Very well.” I turned around, breaking up our huddle, and gazed at Miss Katagiri. “I’ll allow you to stay with us for a while.”

As I pondered over what the next steps would be, Miss Katagiri broke out into a beaming smile that resembled a blooming flower. “Thank you so much!” she cried, bowing deeply.

When I saw her long dark hair, I was reminded of the people in Japan.

“Hey, it’s too early for a bow like that,” I said to her. “It’s not like we’ve done any smithing yet. Why don’t we head to our cabin?”

She raised her head and nodded. “Okay!”

“You know all about these little wyverns, don’t you?” I asked Camilo.

I received a thumbs-up in response. *All right, then.*

We left the meeting room with an extra member in our group. We went around to the back to pick up Krul and Lucy—my two daughters were very friendly. Even when they were playing with the apprentice, they’d often run toward the other employees if any approached. I didn’t think it would be a problem if we had Miss Katagiri with us, but I wouldn’t know until the two parties met. If either Krul or Lucy disliked her, I’d need to apologetically rescind my offer.

But my fears proved baseless.

Krul nuzzled her snout against Miss Katagiri while Lucy wagged her tail furiously and ran around her feet. The two wyverns jumped onto Krul’s back

while the drake was nuzzling Miss Katagiri, and they started licking their wings to groom themselves. Our drake didn't seem to mind, and Lucy didn't growl to intimidate them.

The only issue was that my poor shoulder was continuously taking damage. *Maybe I should get a spiked shoulder pad like those brawlers.*

"These two are like my daughters," I explained. "The drake's called Krul, and the wolf is Lucy."

"Pleased to meet you both," Miss Katagiri said, greeting each of them while petting their heads.

My two daughters happily barked and trilled to welcome her. After all the greetings were finished, we loaded her belongings onto our cart and departed. The gate guard looked at us a little wearily on our way out. We were both used to this scene, though it was a bit too late to worry about how others might see a man surrounded by a cart full of ladies.

"A hot spring?!" Miss Katagiri exclaimed beneath the sunny skies.

The grass was slowly losing its green vibrance. Diana had just revealed that we had a hot spring.

"Yes, but we can't use it just yet," I said.

I could probably scoop out a jugful of warm water, but all we had on that bare plot of land was a spring, a small pond for drainage, and a water channel that connected the two. Hygiene aside, it wasn't ready for young women to take a bath in.

"Judging by your reaction, I have no doubt you're from the Nordic region," Lidy said with a serious look. "When Eizo learned that we could dig a hot spring nearby, he was over the moon."

Everyone nodded along. To be precise, it was because I was Japanese—it had nothing to do with the Nordic region. But I couldn't say that...nor did I plan to.

Samya shook her finger in the air. "Speaking of, the north is where that *thing* comes from too, right? The altar we see every morning in the forge."

“A *kamidana*,” Anne replied.

“You’ve got a *kamidana* too?” Miss Katagiri replied in shock before looking pensive. “But I suppose you would if you’ve got a workshop and you’re from the Nordic region...”

“It’s just a simple one,” I said. “I’m not praying to any particular deity, so it’s more for show.”

“Oh no, I think it’s splendid that you’re not forgetting your spirit even after leaving the region!” She frantically waved her hands at my words.

I saw Samya’s shoulders trembling as she gazed outside of the carriage. She wasn’t on guard—she was likely trying to stifle her laughter at Miss Katagiri’s attitude. Every now and then, Samya would tease me like this, and I sighed when I saw her act this way. *You’d better remember this moment because I’ll get you back!*

I proceeded to tell Miss Katagiri about our routine. She seemed surprised that I went to fetch water instead of Rike, my apprentice, but she nodded when I told her that it was so I could take a walk with my two daughters.

All the while, Krul pulled the carriage, and we soon arrived at the entrance of the forest. It seemed that even people in the Nordic region had heard rumors about this place.

“S-So *this* is the Black Forest...” Miss Katagiri murmured. She gulped nervously and tensed up.

“That’s right. Dangerous beasts prowl about, and if you get lost, you’ll never find your way out!” I smiled teasingly. “It’s also where our beloved home is.”

Sunlight peeked through the dense foliage, and a chilly breeze blew past the tree trunks. The thickets rustled—had a boar or a wolf passed through? In the distance, between the trees, a deer was nibbling on some buds. Birds and squirrels gathered on the branches, and an occasional chirp rang out. For us, everything was normal, barring one newcomer. To Miss Katagiri, no one other than the beastfolk dared to step inside this realm.

The two wyverns were once again perched on her shoulders—they were yawning and relaxing. Much like us, they didn’t seem to fear this place. Oh, and

Miss Katagiri had mentioned that both dragons were female.

“Once you get used to it, this will become a relaxing view,” I assured her.

“R-Right, of course,” Miss Katagiri replied with a nervous smile.

Rike and Diana had adapted to this environment almost immediately, but I was sure that Miss Katagiri’s response was par for the course for a normal person.

“Hey, we’re by your side!” Samya said with a smile. She was unusually encouraging...though it might’ve been rude for me to think that. “Relax and take it easy! You won’t be in any danger.”

I mean, my family *was* called the strongest in the Black Forest. Miss Katagiri had no way of knowing that, but nonetheless, Samya’s words put her at ease.

For the finishing blow, Lucy jumped on Miss Katagiri’s lap and started licking her face.

“Eek!” Miss Katagiri shrieked. “Hey, that tickles! Ah ha ha!”

Our pup’s friendly attack completely eased her tension, and by the time we reached our cabin, she was relaxed enough to slowly glance around. It was now time for us to unload our cargo. I had Lidy take care of Miss Katagiri while the rest of us put everything away. Since we didn’t buy any plants or seeds this time around, Lidy seemed to be the best one for that role.

We all split the work, and it was done in a flash—we quickly carried items into our storage shed. On delivery days, we usually had a free afternoon, but today, we had one extra job.

“You could stay at the cabin, but since we’ve got the opportunity...why don’t you come with us, Miss Katagiri?” I asked.

We still had to collect the animal from the lake and dress it. We had plenty of people to help, so perhaps there wouldn’t be much for Miss Katagiri to do. Still, it was best for her to watch and experience the process at least once so that she could help during times of need.

After we placed Miss Katagiri’s stuff in the guest room—our spare room beside the storehouse would be hers for the time being—she happily went

along with my suggestion.

We gathered outside of the house. Miss Katagiri still had the two wyverns on her shoulders, but before we left, she spoke to one.

“I’ll be relying on you, Arashi,” she said.

“*Kree!*” one of the wyverns cried before flying off at incredible speed, shooting off faster than Samya’s arrow.

“Arashi and Hayate have memorized this place and the path back to Camilo’s store, so they can travel there at any time,” Miss Katagiri told us.

“We can have them carry letters for us,” I replied.

“Exactly.”

We now had carrier pigeons, or in this case, carrier *wyverns*. Generally, a whole flock of carrier pigeons was released in case a few got picked off by a bird of prey, but a wyvern was stronger and more intelligent than a bird. They could certainly handle themselves just fine, even if they were alone.

If the wyvern flew at the rapid pace I’d just seen, I imagined that letters would be delivered rather quickly. Our small mailwomen were very efficient at their jobs.

“Arashi and Hayate,” I said. “If the one that just left is Arashi, then this remaining lady must be Hayate.”

“That’s right,” Miss Katagiri said, petting the tiny wyvern’s head. Hayate narrowed her eyes, seeming to enjoy the attention.

“I’ll be in your care, Hayate,” I said, lowering myself to the dragon’s eye level.

“*Kree.*”

It didn’t look like she was trying to intimidate or attack me, so I assumed she’d replied.

“Guess we’ve got more cute family members,” I said.

“Oh my, then I *must* greet her too,” said our resident mother of cute things, Diana.

After receiving permission from Miss Katagiri, Diana patted Hayate’s head and

said, "It's nice to meet you."

The rest of our family, Krul and Lucy included, wanted to greet the wyvern, and we had a small welcoming party before we went to collect the animal from the lake.

"All right! Let's head off, shall we?" I asked.

Everyone agreed, including Miss Katagiri and Hayate. Krul and Lucy seemed happy to be on their second trip of the day—they jumped for joy as they walked ahead.

We all took a leisurely stroll through the woods. The scenery was different from what we'd passed on the cart earlier. It was a bit difficult to see far ahead, and I couldn't blame people unfamiliar with this place for feeling a bit of fear. Even Helen and I weren't willing to wander around this place empty-handed.

"This forest is a lot larger than I imagined," Miss Katagiri said as she glanced around.

"Agreed," I replied, looking around with her. I was being cautious of any danger. "I haven't even gone to the opposite end of the Black Forest yet. Our forge is in the eastern region."

To be precise, we were located in the east-southeast region of the forest. I noticed Samya glance my way. She used to reside in the western to northern areas, but she'd come to the east around the lake...and met me.

"Before coming here, I'd never left the northern and western areas," Samya explained. "I hadn't known what it would be like in the east, though I'd heard it wasn't that much different from my home territory. I do know there's a mountain somewhere in the forest 'cause I've seen it before."

I'd never seen this mountain from the lake. Samya was surprised when Miss Katagiri told her that there were mountains where snow never melted in the Nordic region. I guessed, then, that our local mountain couldn't be very tall. But a mountain near the Black Forest... I felt like the Dragon of the Land was involved somehow, and I wasn't keen on entering the area unless necessary.

As we kept moving, I thought about gathering medicinal herbs that were effective on wyverns. I also considered what types of fruit they might like. We

were on a path lined with various herbs and fruits, and I pointed several of them out to Miss Katagiri.

Finally, we made it to the lake.

Miss Katagiri gasped in shock. “Wow, it’s huge!”

“Yep,” I replied with a nod. “No one in our family knows exactly how big it is.”

Mountains aside, this lake was so vast that you couldn’t see the opposite end. It apparently stretched all the way to the center of the forest, but Samya had never been to the southern side, so we weren’t sure of its exact size. *Should I build a boat to explore more of the western region?* I could only consider it if my production-related cheats activated.

If I build a small pier and a shed for a boat... Actually, that’ll take way more effort than I first thought. That project will definitely have to wait. Just because there weren’t boats here didn’t mean that boats saw zero use in this world. Surely someone had to be using one for transportation. I didn’t mind walking around the shore to look for someone using a boat—maybe a specific shape or size worked best for this lake.

As my mind was filled with these thoughts, I helped Samya pull their catch out of the water. It was a tree deer this time—a large one, around a meter and eighty centimeters tall. It’d been heavy to start, but its fur had absorbed water, so it’d gained even more weight. Still, it was no match for our family’s pure muscle. We easily managed to drag it up onto the shore.

“Wow!” Miss Katagiri gasped, unable to hide her surprise. “I didn’t think there were animals this large around here!”

I doubt that anything like this exists in the Nordic region. Miss Katagiri confirmed my hunch—she said that Nordic deer were only about as large as horned deer.

She helped us place the deer onto the carrier, which we’d constructed using logs Rike had cut for us. As we were heading back to the cabin, Miss Katagiri pointed at the carrier.

“Wait, when was this made?” she asked. “There couldn’t have been enough time to build something like this while we dragged the deer from the lake. Did

you make it yesterday?”

“Heh heh!” Rike chuckled smugly, as proud as can be. She walked with one of my axes slung over her shoulder. “Boss made this tool, and it can cut down any large tree in one swing!”

I remembered people telling me how weirded out they’d been by the exceptional quality of my tools. Apparently, Rike wanted to boast about the axe’s capabilities a bit.

“A-Amazing!” Miss Katagiri gasped once more and turned to me.

How many more times will she be left astonished during her time staying with us? My mind was filled with trivial thoughts.

After dragging the tree deer to the cabin, we strung it up in a tree. Since Krul had done most of the heavy lifting, Diana and the rest of our family praised her to bits, which put our drake in high spirits. I usually told Krul that she was free to play around with Lucy while we cleaned and dismembered our catch, but she would often watch us work. Then, after we finished, Krul would romp around the yard with Lucy. *I think she’s interested in the (rather loud) process and wants to cheer us on.*

We had plenty of skilled hands at work, so the family managed to cut up the deer within a few minutes. We left sinew, hide, and horns out in the sun—I would pop them into our storage for later use once they were dry. Most of the meat was prepped for drying or salt-curing, though I reserved a portion of fresh venison for us to cook immediately.

After all was said and done, the sun was sinking low on the horizon. Diana and the others would be practicing their swordplay in the yard, and Miss Katagiri planned to watch them with Hayate on her shoulder.

I, on the other hand, had to prepare dinner. And I knew just how I wanted to use the raw meat.

“Cheers!” The voices of our family rang out in our home, signaling the start of Miss Katagiri’s welcoming party.

“We’ve only got a simple cabin in the woods, so we can’t do much,” I said.

“Oh, don’t say that!” Miss Katagiri exclaimed, downing her glass of wine. “I’m humbled to receive such a lavish welcome!” I saw her visibly shrink into herself. She looked a little bashful.

Today’s menu had been prepared with Miss Katagiri in mind. I’d grilled some fresh venison marinated in *miso* and some seasoned with a garlic-like plant and soy sauce. Of course, this was after a good chunk of fresh, unseasoned meat had disappeared into Lucy’s and Hayate’s bellies. We also had our usual unleavened bread, vegetables, and salt-cured boar soup. It took a bit more effort than normal to prepare this small feast, but it wasn’t much different from our usual meals. The garlic-and-soy-sauce venison was a hit with Miss Katagiri and the rest of our family. It reminded me of a few dishes back on Earth, and I got a little excited.

As we ate, the family members introduced themselves to her, and this led to a discussion about everyone’s backgrounds.

“This family really *is* quite diverse,” Miss Katagiri remarked.

She’s right. Our family consisted of a tiger beastfolk, a dwarf, an elf, a giantess, and now a lizardman. The only humans were Diana, Helen, and me. The numbers didn’t lie—there were more nonhumans in our family than humans.

“We are,” Rike said. “If you have a specific question about our races, or something else, please feel free to ask away. I think we can answer most of them.”

Miss Katagiri nodded. When it came to looking after others, Rike was the best, and she felt like the older sister of our group. She was so considerate that I’d often inadvertently rely on her. *Sometimes too much...* I had to be careful to not overwhelm our favorite dwarf.

The most popular topic for the night was obviously Miss Katagiri’s homeland, the Nordic region. I didn’t talk much about it—I had nothing much to tell them since I wasn’t actually from there, though I’d always claimed to be. And so, she was peppered with questions about clothing and culture.

The Nordic region was broken up into several countries that belonged to a federation, and Miss Katagiri hailed from a nation that seemed to resemble the

early years of the Azuchi-Momoyama or Edo period in Japan.

Her nation had clothes like the traditional Japanese attire that she was wearing, and her meals also resembled what people during that historical era used to eat. Her country boasted a vast coastline, so the fishing industry had flourished.

Hmm... It might be difficult for me to get my hands on raw fish like sashimi, but I wonder if I can at least get something like pickled mackerel that uses vinegar to prevent the fish from spoiling. Might be hard to find, honestly... I'll ask and see if I can get my hands on some dried fish later.

"So your clothes are from the Nordic region," I said.

"That's right," Miss Katagiri replied. "I thought it might exhaust me to wear clothes I'm not used to during the long trip here. But I definitely stand out, so I was thinking that maybe I should get some southern-style clothes."

She looked back at me, implying that the clothes I wore were indeed in a southern style. *Well, I just sorta arrived in these clothes... I don't really have anything else.* Naturally, I couldn't tell her that, so I just nodded and gave a vague murmur of agreement.

"Our family stands out either way, so I don't mind if you choose the clothes that are most comfortable to you," Diana said as she finished the rest of her glass of wine. By "stands out," she must've been talking about our family's diversity.

The family did include a lot of different races, but I felt like the most eye-catching of us was Lidy, an elf. When I pointed that out, Helen looked at me weirdly and burst out laughing. The laughter spread, and everyone else started to guffaw as I glanced around in confusion.

"Even if we were all human, I think it's rather conspicuous that there's one man in the midst of all these women," Lidy said quietly.

"Right..." I mumbled back. I couldn't agree with her sentiment more. In an unusual move for me, I chugged the rest of my liquor.

"Ah, that reminds me!" Miss Katagiri suddenly said, putting her hands together. "Eizo, you have that *katana*, don't you?" She leaned forward, her eyes

glimmering. “Could you show it to me one more time?!”

Diaphanous Ice was currently in my bedroom. After all, it was too large for me to wear at all times, and I didn’t need to constantly carry around a deadly weapon.

I didn’t have a reason to refuse, so I nodded. “Sure, I’ll bring it out.”

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience, and thank you so much!” Miss Katagiri exclaimed.

I waved at her and then went to my room to fetch my sword. When I got back to the table, I handed it over to her.

“Here you are.”

“Thank you again!”

Miss Katagiri looked at it solemnly before carefully unsheathing the blade. *Is it a good idea to give a dangerous weapon to a person who’s been drinking? Eh, I doubt she’ll do anything.* Of course, I wouldn’t have acquiesced so easily if she’d been extremely skilled with the sword.

I glanced at Helen and noticed that she was drinking her liquor while keeping an eye on Miss Katagiri. She didn’t look ready to pounce, so she didn’t seem to think that Miss Katagiri was much of a threat.

Meanwhile, Miss Katagiri looked enchanted—she apparently didn’t care at all about what we thought of her.

“This really is amazing!”

She gazed at *Diaphanous Ice*’s pale blue blade. *Seems like people from the Nordic region are obsessed with katanas.* I couldn’t deny that I’d also been excited while forging my sword—this was enough for me to assume that her mindset was similar to the people of Japan.

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“I really didn’t expect the master of this forge to be fetching water...”

It was the next morning, and Karen was looking at me strangely as I returned to the cabin with Krul, Lucy, Hayate, and the water jugs in tow.

“Well, yeah. I am.”

Why am I calling her Karen now, you ask? Let's turn back time a little—it happened last night as our welcoming party was coming to an end.

“I'd like to thank all of you for celebrating my arrival,” Miss Katagiri said politely as the party drew to a close. “I cannot thank you enough. I know I'll be in everyone's care for a good while, so please call me 'Karen' from now on. There's no need to act so reserved.”

The rest of our family voiced our agreement. Karen wasn't quite a family member yet, but she was undoubtedly a lodger in our cabin.

“Um, Rike... May I ask what title you use for Eizo?” she asked.

“I call him 'Boss.'”

“I see...”

Karen folded her arms pensively. I'd felt a bit awkward about being called a “Boss,” but I was finally getting used to it. *Though I'm not sure if I actually am one.* Regardless, it'd just become routine.

I braced myself, hoping that I didn't get stuck with another odd nickname.

“I'll call him 'Master,'” Karen finally said. “I wouldn't want to intrude on Rike's name, since she's my senior.”

I had no idea what kind of consideration this was on her end, but our entire family, especially Rike, agreed to this. I could only reluctantly nod in agreement.

“In any case,” I said to Karen, “I'm the one who fetches water for the forge. Krul and Lucy always come with me, and now Hayate can too. It's a good way for them to get some exercise and play around. Oh, but if we run out of jugged water, you can use the well in the back. You don't need to ask.”

“Well noted, Master,” Karen replied.

It seemed that both of us had some things to get used to. I was actually a little surprised that Hayate had come along for our morning routine, but as she'd followed us, she'd happily cried out, “*Kree! Kree!*” I assumed that she'd come with us tomorrow too.

Back in the present, I smiled at Karen and said, “I thought you’d sleep in, but you’re up pretty early.”

Anne was still asleep. She usually woke up a little after I finished fetching the water, so this wasn’t strange for her.

“I heard that we’d start working from today. Nerves and excitement woke me up,” Karen replied.

“I see.”

I couldn’t blame her—it would be her first day in the forge. Anne was actually the bold one for sleeping in as usual, though I couldn’t fault her for that. After all, the princess had single-handedly made her way through the Black Forest. She had the skills to back up her audacity.

“You can only do good work if you eat and sleep well,” I said. “I’ll do what I can to make delicious meals, but I can’t do much to help you rest. Telling you to do your best might sound a bit weird, but make sure to not become sleep-deprived. If anything’s on your mind, feel free to talk to me or Rike.”

Maybe Lidy has a spell for ensuring a good night’s rest...but it’s probably not too wise to rely on that. It’s better for Karen to develop good sleep habits on her own.

“Got it, Master!” she replied.

I forced out a smile since I was still not quite used to being called “Master” and then headed inside to make some breakfast.

Karen gasped as we headed into the workshop after our meal. “Wow, you really do have a *kamidana*!” It was the first thing that caught her eye.

I hadn’t seen anything like it in Camilo’s store or Marius’s estate (though they might’ve had a small altar hidden away from guests). Our *kamidana* was clearly a cultural artifact of the Nordic region.

“Two bows, two claps, and then one last bow,” I instructed.

This was actually not customary for *Izumo Oyashiro*, a famous shrine in Japan. I thought Karen might take issue with these traditions if she wasn’t used to

them, but she just nodded and obediently followed what everyone else did. This custom was apparently normalized in the Nordic region, though Karen came from a *samurai* household, making her views a bit unique.

After we prayed for another safe day of work, we got down to business.

“First, I’d like for you to watch Rike making a knife,” I said.

“Will do!” Karen replied energetically.

It was good to see her all fired up. We decided that it wasn’t good for the boss of the forge to kick things off, so I had her observe Rike instead. To truly honor Karen’s request, it might’ve been better for me to show her, but Rike said that it was all a part of an apprenticeship to watch the senior apprentice’s work and gauge their skills. And so, I took our resident dwarf’s advice.

Rike smoothly went through the entire process. She heated the metal, hammered it into shape on an anvil, quenched the steel, and polished the blade. She was quick and precise, even more so than before. She’d also clearly improved when it came to imbuing the metal with magic—she managed to make the metal sparkle more than before.

I felt like Rike could work anywhere, whenever she liked. In fact, she could probably even become the personal blacksmith of the imperial family.

Rike produced the knife in a flash, and Karen watched on.

“You say that she’s just an apprentice of yours?” Karen murmured in awe.

“Guess so,” I replied, my shoulders slumping.

Karen stared intently at Rike working, just as Rike had done—and still did—whenever I took up the hammer. Every now and then, Karen moved her hands, no doubt trying to mimic Rike’s movements.

When the knife was done, Rike turned to me. “How is it, Boss?”

I took the knife and stared at it intently. I used my cheats to confirm the quality—it was on par with my elite models. If I mixed it in with the other elite models, I didn’t think that I could tell the difference.

“It’s very well-made,” I said. “You can go anywhere with this skill.”

“I still don’t hold a candle to you, Boss,” Rike replied.

“You’re just on a whole other level, Rike,” Anne chimed in as I handed Rike’s knife to Karen. “Honestly, if I brought you back in lieu of Eizo, I think my father would still be overjoyed.”

Apparently, my assumption that Rike was capable of serving as the imperial family’s blacksmith was right on the money. But of course, I felt like she’d decline this offer.

“Of course, if the person in question has no intention of serving the emperor, then there’s nothing we can do,” Anne finished with a wink. “I’m a hostage, after all.”

Rike grinned right back. Karen, our greenhorn apprentice, was staring at the knife intently. It seemed like both she and Rike could learn by observing. Still, we had to know how skilled Karen was.

I called out to her while she was still scrutinizing the knife. “All right, Karen. Now it’s your turn. Can you create the same knife that Rike just made? If our process looks different from how you learned, you can start forging however you like.”

“Huh? No, I’m fine!” Karen immediately replied. She looked a little stunned, but she quickly handed the knife to me. “I’ll make one!”

She placed her hands over her cheeks and then grabbed some tongs to place a sheet of metal in the firebed. Magic automatically blew in some wind from the bellows, and the coals glowed, increasing the temperature of the firebed. Soon, the metal turned red.

She took the metal out after a while, and I noticed that her timing was a bit off—she’d removed the metal a little too soon, so the temperature was a bit low for optimal shaping. Nevertheless, once the metal was on the anvil, she started hammering. *She’s not adding any magic to the metal. It’s been a while since I saw metal change its shape as it should without the aid of magic...* The sheet smoothly transformed into her desired shape.

“She’s got the basics down well,” Rike observed.

“Yep,” I said. “Seems like she’s got a knack for it.”

“Agreed.”

The two of us conversed in hushed whispers and nodded at each other. Karen still had much to learn, but if her goal was to forge a *katana*, I felt like she’d reach her goal sooner than expected. She wouldn’t be able to make anything on the level of *Diaphanous Ice*, though.

Not once did she show any hesitation when forging. Her quenching temperature was also a bit off, but it was still within the margin of error. There’d be no issues if this knife was meant for daily use. When Karen finally finished, she sheepishly showed the knife to us.

“H-How does it look?” she asked.

I took the knife and examined it. The structure of the blade was rather uneven, and there wasn’t even an ounce of magic in it, but it was finely made. For lack of a better word, she was as good as any old blacksmith out there. And yet, her father hadn’t given his approval (though he might not have been keen on giving it). In any case, if this didn’t satisfy him, it meant that she had to *surpass* the average blacksmith.

“As a product, I don’t think it’s that bad,” I said. “Hmm... Now that we’ve seen your knife, could you make us a sword?”

I showed her my unfinished shortsword. It hadn’t been deburred yet, and its shape had warped little as it cooled. The blade hadn’t even been quenched or polished yet, so as a weapon, it was about as useful as a stick of metal. The bare basics of *katana* and shortsword forging weren’t so different. Since she’d made a knife, I was sure that she could make a shortsword too.

As I’d expected, Karen hesitantly nodded. “All right. I’ve never made one before, but I’ve seen Camilo handle a few of them.”

“I’ve got a finished product right here that you can use as a reference,” I offered.

“All right!”

This time, she gave a firm, determined nod and grabbed a hammer. First was the deburring process. It may have looked easy, but if you weren’t careful, you could easily damage the blade—it wasn’t something you could just do casually.

Since I'd already seen Karen forge a knife, I didn't think that she'd fail here. I wasn't sure if she could sense my support in her, but she managed to finish deburring without much trouble.

Next up was fixing the warped blade. She seemed quite skilled at this too. In fact, she was a lot better at it than when she'd been making the knife—so much so that I was convinced she could've improved on her knife quite a bit. But midway through, she lost her gusto. *Did her concentration run out? Strange. It looks to me like she's more concentrated than ever before...* Still, the resulting quality wasn't much different from that of a regular blacksmith.

"Done!" Karen exclaimed, showing me the finished shortsword.

I examined it with my cheats. *She could've done this a lot better. Why didn't she?*

I fell silent.

"Boss?" Rike asked.

I snapped back to reality. There were a few issues with her work, but her craftsmanship was more than enough, so I chased away the oddity that plagued my mind.

"They're both made well," I said. "But you've still got a lot of room for improvement..."

"I understand," Karen said with slumped shoulders. "Rike's knife made me painfully aware of that."

I gently clasped her shoulders. It may have been difficult for her now, but as long as she could improve with time, it would be okay.

"All right, then," Rike said with a mischievous grin. "Why don't we make you even *more* painfully aware?"

I sighed and grabbed the tongs. *Guess I've gotta live up to my first apprentice's expectations, eh? I'm her boss, after all.* My process wasn't much different from Rike's or Karen's—I was just more precise with my work. Though, admittedly, that made a world of difference.

The metal plate in the firebed started to turn red. Unlike the other two ladies,

I had a very clear sense of the optimal temperature. Once I removed it, I placed it on the anvil and started hammering away. I quickly shaped the metal, adding magic with every swing.

“You’ve gotten faster again, Boss,” Rike noted.

“So...does that mean there’s a chance he could become even faster than *this*?” Karen asked.

“Very much so.”

“Whoa...”

Ignoring their conversation, I concentrated and maintained my pace. I felt kind of like a machine. Our family might not have known what machines were, but perhaps they noticed that my movements had a sort of rhythmic, robotic quality to them (even if they couldn’t conceive of a robot).

I heated my shaped knife. At just the right moment, I removed it from the firebed and dunked it into the water. A loud sizzle hissed in the air as the knife hardened. I removed it from the water when it was at precisely the correct temperature, made some minor adjustments on the anvil, and added the Forge Eizo cat insignia on the pommel. I finished it off by polishing the blade on a whetstone.

Finally, I raised the knife above my head and gazed at it.

“Yeah, I think this is well-made for an elite model,” I remarked.

The blade gave off a dull sheen, reflecting the light of the flames from the firebed and forge. It glittered with magical energy. I gave it to Rike, and she placed the knife under the light. She closed one eye, stared at it, and said, “If you can make something of this quality at that speed, I can see some blacksmiths quitting their jobs.”

“I can’t mass-produce these like our usual models, though.” My shoulders slumped.

Rike looked away and laughed. “But of course. If such high-quality weapons flooded the world, it would be chaos!”

I gave a forced smile and nodded. An item of this caliber could be handled by

normal people, and I *did* have some for sale, but it wasn't something that I felt comfortable mass-producing.

Rike handed the knife to Karen, and she solemnly received it from her senior apprentice. She stared intently at the blade.

"Be careful," I warned.

"Right, I will," Karen replied.

I wasn't sure if she really understood, but I couldn't say much when I saw her serious expression. She spent quite some time scrutinizing the blade before quietly returning it to Rike.

"I'm sorry for taking so long," Karen apologized.

"Oh, not at all," Rike replied with a smile. "Don't be sorry."

"Yep. When Rike first examined a sword of mine, she stared at it for *much* longer," I added with a mischievous grin.

I thought back to our first meeting at the Open Market—I remembered that she'd looked at an elite model. *That day feels like years ago. If I hadn't met Rike then, I wonder how my life would've changed. I feel like I would've just left during the big black bear incident.*

"Well... Yeah, I can't refute that," Rike grumbled with a pout as she stared at my knife. She giggled soon after, so I didn't think I'd made her too angry... *I hope.*

Once the knife was returned to me, I turned to Karen. "Now then..."

"Y-Yes!" she replied nervously, straightening her posture.

Are these reflexes a product of her military training back at home or something? Or is she just really nervous? I handed the knife to her, and she looked back at me, perplexed.

"One day, you'll be able to make something of this quality," I said. I didn't add that I'd be incapable of making weapons like these without my cheats. "Just know that your end goal is to make something as high-quality as this knife."

Of course, there were things she needed to learn beyond just how to make a

good knife, but now wasn't the time to mention that.

"Someday, I will!" Karen replied enthusiastically.

"Then this knife is yours," I said.

"A-Are you sure?!"

"It's better to have a clear goal, don't you think? Sorry it's not a *katana*, though."

She gingerly received the knife, looking more surprised than when she'd been observing me.

"It cuts dangerously well, so be careful," I warned. "You can ask Samya or Rike about how to wield it. Oh, and you can go ahead and create your own handle."

Karen quietly nodded while staring at the knife.

Once my work was complete, I didn't have enough time to start a new task, so I decided to call it a day. I sent Karen outside to train with the rest of our family while I cleaned up the forge.

"Since we've got the opportunity, why don't we fetch some water from the hot spring?" Diana suggested.

The season was slowly drifting into autumn, and the breezes were getting cooler. However, the heat of the forge was enough to make us sweat quite a bit, and training afterward only made them sweat even more. We might not have been able to take a dip in the hot spring, but it would still be refreshing to clean the soot and sweat from our skin.

No one disagreed with Diana's suggestion. Though Krul and I could handle carrying the water just fine, we all decided to go for a short walk.

I was surprised by the view that greeted me at the hot spring.

If I could summarize it in one word, it would be...peaceful.

My shoulder was steadily having its HP drained. Raccoons, deer, wolves, and rabbits were all taking a dip in the small pond that we'd dug for drainage. If this wasn't peace, I didn't know what was. They all had their eyes closed and were

enjoying the warm bath. All the animals were spaced a good distance apart, possibly showing their consideration for one another.

We just so happened to stumble upon this group, but it seemed like boars, bears, and tigers also came for a dip at different hours. As long as they didn't cause trouble or do anything mischievous, I didn't mind. Who was I to stop them from enjoying a bath?

Krul, Lucy, and Hayate didn't seem to mind either, though they noticed the large crowd. They didn't react defensively or try to intimidate the other animals. This meant that none of the other forest creatures were trying to cause any harm.

Is Lluisa ensuring that there are no evildoers here? I had a sneaking suspicion that she was actually coming for a dip in the afternoons when no one was present.

"Wow, amazing!" Karen gasped with sparkles in her eyes.

She was only staying with us temporarily, but I was sure that she'd see this sight many more times in the future. *I'm glad she's happy. I want her to enjoy her time here.*

"Since all the animals are taking a bath, why don't we get some from the water channel?" I suggested.

"Yep," Samya agreed with a nod.

I didn't want to disturb the other residents of the forest, and it didn't seem sanitary to scoop water out of the animals' pond either. We dunked two empty jugs into the channel to collect our water. Karen crouched nearby, dipping her fingers into the warm spring. She was farther downstream from where we were collecting our water.

"This really *is* a hot spring," she murmured in awe. "I'm surprised you found the right spot to dig."

"We got lucky," I replied.

Truthfully speaking, we'd been personally told about this spot by the master of the Black Forest—a being who stood as the root of this world and was a

fragment of the sacred Dragon of the Land. With Lluisa's help, we'd been practically guaranteed to hit a hot spring vein, but I wasn't sure if I could tell Karen about that just yet. In lieu of revealing that detail, I'd decided to just brag about our fortune a little.

"We can't take a dip yet, can we?" Karen asked.

"The residents of the forest are bathing in our drainage pond," I replied. "We can probably bathe there, but we've got no privacy partitions set up, and no structures built yet. In other words, I wouldn't recommend it."

"So...are you planning on building a bathhouse of some sort?"

"Yep. We're planning on constructing one between the drainage pond and the source so that we can take a relaxing bath."

"If you're planning on building it while I'm here, I'll help you out!"

It seemed the residents of both this world and Earth yearned to take baths. I wanted as much help as I could get, so if she was fine with it, I wanted to start building as soon as possible. Of course, doing so would only lengthen her stay here.

After a short while, I placed our two full jugs around Krul's neck. She cried out happily and started to make the short trek back home.

The hot water from the spring was perfect for wiping ourselves down, but I had no plans to use it for drinking or cooking...yet. Sanitation reasons aside, I wasn't really sure what would happen to our bodies if we ingested water imbued with magic. Since the animals of the forest were lounging in the water, it didn't seem like taking a bath was harmful, but ingesting the water was a different matter entirely. There were myths back on Earth about unfortunate souls who ate food from another world, leading them to face unique circumstances. *It's best to be wary of stuff like that.* Admittedly, it may have been too late for me to fret—I was a man from Earth, and for the past few months, I'd been surviving by eating the food of another world.

When we returned, we saw a small familiar figure perched atop our message board.

"Arashi! You're back!" Karen cried.

“Kree!”

The petite wyvern flew toward Karen with a tiny letter wrapped around her leg. It was a message from Camilo.

“Can I read it?” I asked.

“Of course,” Karen replied with a nod.

I gently took the letter from Arashi’s leg and opened it up. The rest of our family looked on nervously. I wondered whether Camilo had written—the handwriting was a bit messy, but the contents weren’t about anything too important.

In short, he stated that he’d be leaving the city for a while and asked if I could fulfill my next order in three weeks. Regardless, the head clerk would be present, so he didn’t mind if I came in two weeks instead; the choice was up to me. He added a bit more information at the end—the margrave and Marius were a bit busy with *something*, though the cause was still unknown.

“I feel like the contents of this letter don’t matter much,” I said. “This is more like a test run to see if it would be delivered.”

Obviously, he wanted to know when my next visit to the city would be, but if the choice was left to me, he knew that the head clerk could handle our meeting. There was no need to go through the trouble of using a precious wyvern to send a letter for that trivial bit of information.

The family had been tensely waiting to hear if there was any bad news, and they all breathed a sigh of relief. I could relate.

“Well, it’d be trouble if this method of communication didn’t work during emergencies,” I said.

“Absolutely,” Lidy agreed with a nod.

The forest she’d grown up in had met an unfortunate demise, so she likely knew the importance of quick communication. It was logical to do a test run during times of peace so that no one would panic during emergencies. In the worst case, if there was no reply, Camilo could just leave the head clerk behind.

“I think I should write a reply quickly,” I said, turning to Karen. “How are

Arashi and Hayate at night?”

It was growing dark, and if the wyverns were relying solely on sight to fly, it was best to have them stay the night and leave first thing in the morning. There was no need to take the risk of them getting lost.

Karen nodded. “They’ve got decent night vision. Even if they can’t see very well, they’ll remember the route to their destination, so it shouldn’t be a problem. Since they’ve already made a round trip to the city and back to this cabin, they already know the way.”

“Got it.”

I wondered whether Camilo knew that and had purposely sent Arashi at this hour. There were no guarantees that we’d communicate in the middle of the day, and it was best to prepare for less-than-ideal situations.

“All right,” I said. “I’m sorry to make her work so hard, but I’ll quickly think of a reply.”

Before I could even finish my sentence, Rike had flown into the cabin and come back out with a paper, pen, and some ink. I expressed my gratitude as I took the items from her and wrote a simple line on the paper: “See you in three weeks.”

The situation with Marius and the margrave bothered me, but I didn’t think I’d be able to extract any more information at the moment. I reread what I’d written one last time, and Karen popped up next to me to peer at my letter.

“Your handwriting is neat,” she said.

“You think so?”

“I do.” She nodded and looked into my eyes. “As I thought, you’ve been raised with *a very good education*.”

“No way,” I replied with a strained laugh.

It was true that I hadn’t attended any form of school in this world. My handwriting was only neat because of the cheats bestowed upon me by the Watchdog. However, telling Karen this would only make her go, “No way.” The rest of the family hadn’t mentioned my family name, and Camilo’s letter had

addressed me by my first name.

Wait...

“But you can use magic,” Karen reasoned. “I don’t think uneducated people can use spells.”

“Right...” I replied.

Crap. Using magic had been a force of habit—I hadn’t thought much about it when cooking meals or lighting up the forge. *My skill with magic isn’t due to my education, though...*

“Well, I *have* received an education,” I said. And I had—back on Earth.

“Then...do you have a family name?” Karen asked, still peering into my eyes as though trying to discern the truth.

“I do, but...”

Tanya wasn’t really my family name from this world—it was my last name back on Earth. I wasn’t sure if a House Tanya existed in the Nordic region, and my installed knowledge offered me no insight.

“And what would that name be?” she inquired.

Once more, it looked like she was trying to ascertain the truth. I felt like she was digging deep, but Karen had a family name of her own and was Nordic. It was natural for her to be curious about stuff like this—she may have thought that she knew my family. *As her master, it’s not right to withhold all my personal information from her.*

Once the ink on the letter dried, I tied it onto Arashi’s leg and let out a small sigh.

“My name is Eizo Tanya.”

“House Tanya?” Karen asked with a dubious gaze.

If such a house existed, I’d act like I was an illegitimate child who’d hightailed it away from my family. And if there was no such house, I’d claim that Tanya was an alias.

“Why are you here, Eizo?” she asked.

“I’ve just got my reasons,” I replied. “I can’t really say... No, to be precise, I don’t really know how to explain it. I haven’t told the rest of our family about my past either.” I gave a quiet yet deep sigh. “I’m just an old man who wants to live a quiet life in this forest as a blacksmith. And my name’s just Eizo.”

There was a brief moment of nervous silence, but Karen didn’t pursue my last name any further. She stroked Arashi’s head.

“All right, I’m counting on you,” she said.

“*Kree! Kree!*” Arashi cried before setting off for Camilo’s.

The rest of our daughters saw the wyvern off.

“*Kree!*”

“*Kululu!*”

“*Arf! Arf!*”

“All right, let’s wash up and prepare for dinner!” I said loudly, and we all headed back into the cabin.

Perhaps due to magic, the hot spring water that we’d lugged back was still warm, despite the amount of time that had passed. We each went to our own rooms with our share of the water. Rike and Helen said that it was a bit of a luxury to wash in their own private spaces, but as a person from Earth, I couldn’t overlook young ladies stripping in the living room. I wanted them to be able to retain their modesty.

Lidy’d had her own room growing up, but she’d lived with her older brother, and Samya had lived by traveling through the forest. Neither of them seemed to care much and didn’t mind either way. However, Team Noblewomen, which included Diana and Anne, had grown up with their own rooms—they didn’t find anything odd about having privacy.

And so, the fact that I’d insisted on washing privately only cemented the fact that I was of noble origin.

“My own room?” Karen replied to my question during dinner. “Yes, I had one.”

I asked about what her house was like, and from her explanation, I thought it probably resembled a typical *samurai* household that I'd envisioned. *It probably has fusuma and shoji.*

"Huh?! Your house was partitioned by paper?!" Diana cried in absolute bewilderment.

Fusuma was a solid partition made of paper, and *shoji* was a wooden latticework divider with paper that was thinner and allowed light to pass through. Both of these apparently existed in this world. Our forge was made of stone masonry to be sturdy against the heat, but the cabin was mostly made of wood.

I gave a strained smile. "Those types of partitions are made from wooden frames and covered with paper, so it's not like there's only a thin sheet dividing the rooms."

If I'd had a smartphone with me, I could've easily shown them a picture to clear up the misunderstanding, but without one, I could see how imaginations could run wild. I felt like this was kind of how Marco Polo had started out.

"There are some that are made only of wood," Karen said. "My room had a divider like that."

It sounded like she had a sliding *fusuma* comprised solely of wood—one that didn't have paper glued on top. I remembered seeing one back on Earth made of hinoki cypress and decorated with Japanese painting. It had looked quite nice, though it hadn't been made for Earth's contemporary society, and it'd definitely been more traditional.

"We might not have *tatami* or bamboo mats here, but if it's uncomfortable, just let me know," I said. "I'll just ask Camilo to get us some. I think we could easily build a *fusuma* too."

It was a bit of a throwback for me. I probably couldn't change all the walls of the cabin to *fusuma*, but I could certainly do so for the door, and any old stick could be propped up to lock it shut. Or I could even insert one under the *fusuma*, which was also a bit nostalgic for me.

"No, I'll be fine," Karen replied. "I was able to sleep just fine last night, and

you got used to these walls, didn't you, Master?"

"Well, I mean, yeah, I guess..."

I wasn't sure if this was quite right. When I'd started living alone on Earth, my home had more of a Western layout, and I'd slept on a bed. I decided to keep quiet about that. It was true that a bed was more comfortable for me now.

"My house also had a room lined with planks, so I don't have an issue with it," she added.

I nodded and breathed a sigh of relief. "If you say so. But if you need anything, let me know."

Food and sleep were two major factors that would slowly drain your health over time. If she couldn't feel comfortable while sleeping, it'd affect both her mind and body later. I knew this from personal experience—I'd slept on the chairs at my company for nights on end, working overtime.

"Three weeks until the next delivery, huh..." I pondered, changing subjects. "We'll have about two weeks of free time. How shall we spend it?"

If we'd had the usual two weeks, I could've spent one filling the order and the other for Karen's training, all while making something new. But we had an extra full week of free time, and I felt it was wise to use that to build our bathhouse—we needed as many hands as we could get for the construction.

Naturally, this would only delay Karen's return, and it seemed like she wanted to get home as soon as possible. This wasn't good news for her.

But shockingly, Karen was the first to speak up. "Let's build that bathhouse!" she declared.

"Huh? Are you sure?" Samya asked, voicing the concerns that I had. "It'll only delay your return home."

The rest of the family nodded and glanced at Karen with worry.

"I'm sure!" Karen replied energetically, her eyes sparkling like never before. "The hot water I experienced earlier was very nice! I'd love to take a dip!"

I'd never seen her this excited before. We all watched on, our eyes filled with sympathy as though we were looking at a pitiful child.

Chapter 3: Hot Springs Are Important

And so, we decided to start building the bathhouse. Our goal was to complete it within two weeks (or in *about* two weeks), but I knew that this was a tall request.

This project would be completely different from building a new room onto the cabin—the bathhouse had to accommodate quite a few people in one space. In order to build a structure like this, we would need to learn as we went. My cheats allowed me a little bit of leeway, but they had their limits.

If we were at least able to build a women’s bathhouse, I’d consider the project a success. The men’s bath was more like an add-on, really.

We decided to draw out a plan, thinking that this would make all the difference. My cheats activated, and we managed to cook one up in no time. Once we’d finished, the family stood around the blueprint and examined it.

“I see...” Rike murmured. “So this is where we’ll change clothes.”

“Exactly,” said Karen. “And we’ll wash our bodies here before taking a dip in the hot spring.”

Helen peered at the blueprint from behind her. “Can’t we just jump in? When I’m in the water at the lake, I don’t really wash my body or anything beforehand.”

“In the Nordic region, it’s bad manners to enter a hot spring while dirty,” Karen replied.

“Huh...”

Helen gave an impressed nod. Obviously, when she was in her mercenary company marching into battle, there was no time to relax and stay in the water. And frankly, a perfunctory wash in cold water couldn’t compare to a nice warm bath, so I couldn’t blame her for getting in and out quickly.

“But we’re in the bath to wash ourselves, right?” Samya asked. “So why do we

gotta clean our bodies and then clean 'em again?"

I understood her query all too well. Since our spring was free-flowing, the old hot water would be cycled out quickly. We probably didn't need to worry about making the water filthy.

"You'll see when you start bathing," I said.

"Yeah?"

I smiled and nodded. "Yep."

She has to experience it for herself to understand. Because I could use fire magic, the family didn't have to think about this much, but hot water was actually a precious resource since it required fuel to heat. And though hot water may have had some medicinal properties or health benefits, those came at the cost of valuable fuel and water. Simply wanting to warm up your body couldn't justify all the resources, so in this context, I couldn't blame her for failing to understand why washing twice was necessary.

"Let's start by bringing in the lumber and cutting it up!" I said.

"Okay!"

"Got it!"

We all left the cabin. Krul shone the brightest when it came to transporting lumber. Helen and I helped out, but Krul was far, *far* more efficient than the both of us combined. Still, I knew that any bit helped my daughter, so I managed to keep myself motivated as Helen and I carried some lighter logs through the forest.

All the while, the rest of our family used the blueprint as a guide to hammer in some stakes. These would serve as markers for where to build pillars, walls, or places to store hot water.

Rike and Diana were in charge of hammering the stakes in while everyone else strung rope between the stakes as dividers. Lucy and Hayate were doing their part as our cheering squad. At first, I wondered if Hayate would stay back; there wasn't much for her to do. But Karen had claimed that the wyvern wanted to tag along.

We took short breaks in between log-carrying trips—I reclined on Lucy’s back as she was also taking a rest from cheering us on. *She’ll become a splendid wolf one day. What choices will she make? I want to see her life through until the very end.*

We managed to finish carrying in the lumber just as the sun was setting. Though, if our supply wasn’t enough, we would need to cut down some trees. Lluisa had told us that we didn’t have to worry—it didn’t matter if a few trees were felled since it wouldn’t affect the forest in the long run. I didn’t plan on holding back if the time came when I’d need to do some deforesting.

Still, the fewer trees cut down, the better. Doing so would only delay our building plans, even if we could slice them to pieces in a flash with my elite saw. I hoped that our wood supply, which had been harvested from the carriers we’d built to drag animals from the lake, would be enough.

The rest of the family had finished partitioning the different areas, and everyone was looking at the blueprint while cheerfully talking about where they’d change clothes. We still had a long way to go, but I felt like everyone was relaxed and in no rush.

####

We’d plotted out the foundation of our bathhouse, and so while everyone was preparing to head back to the hot spring the next day, I had Karen make a knife. After examining the item she made, I gave her a few pointers and showed her how it could be done. It was a bit like morning training. After that was done, we headed for the construction site.

“Now that I look at it, the scale of this bathhouse is pretty grand,” I noted, looking at the rope dividers.

“It should be fine,” Diana replied.

I nodded back. The structure of the women’s bath was about the size of our storage shed—and this didn’t include the men’s bath. However, this was a size we were used to building, so I wasn’t too worried about how the construction would go. No, I was more concerned about the bath itself. We would need to dig a spacious bathing area, and filling the bath would require quite a bit of hot water.

Thanks to the magic permeating the water, we didn't have to worry about it cooling down, so we just needed a small channel to divert the water.

As for the bath itself, we decided on a large wooden tub set into the ground. We had to dig the hole a little deeper than we wanted the bath to be so that we could accommodate the tub, and we would also create a slope so that water could flow down into the bath. Helen and I would be in charge of digging. Krul would've been the perfect one for the role, but she was currently working as hard as a machine to assist with building the bathhouse structure.

Anne, who boasted height and muscle, was helping to build the bathhouse. Samya and Rike were more experienced with construction than I was, so I had them on that team too. We were all working relatively close by, so if we really needed help with digging, we could call for Samya, Rike, or Diana to help out.

"Umph."

I grunted, hurling away the pile of dirt on my shovel. The soil we'd dug up had created a mound, and it painted the ground a darker color. *When we finish digging, we'll have to gather the dirt and carry it away.* I noticed some rocks in the mix—I would need to pick the larger ones out later.

Helen was a legendary mercenary who was almost always victorious against her enemies. Her greatest asset was her speed, but her well-toned muscles were powerful and impressive. I watched her using her strength without holding back, and it almost looked as though she was digging through a massive pudding with her shovel.

She's so fast...

For every shovelful of dirt I scooped out, Helen managed to fit in two or three. However, even her stamina had its limits, though when she just kept going and going, it was hard to imagine where those limits were.

After a long while, I noticed her taking a breather.

"I've always thought you were amazing, but it's been a while since I've witnessed you in action," I said. "Seeing you like this, I can't help but compare your strong points..."

Helen cocked her head. "My strong points? Which are...?"

“Your strength and speed.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. I think you’d be very popular if you decided to return to mercenary life.”

“I’m just good at mindless tasks like this. Though, it’s not like I hate the work my company does.” She turned around and gazed at the rest of our family—they were making pillars, cross bracing, and cutting planks of wood. It was an altogether noisy affair.

Rike was in charge of that group. She busily ran around their small worksite, helping everyone out.

“Y’know, I’ve been thinking,” Helen said. As she watched everyone work, she squinted like she was staring at something bright. “A quiet life here might actually suit me better. I get to train in the evenings with everyone, and we’ve got Krul and Lucy here too.” She turned back to the hole she was digging and sank her shovel into the dirt with a *shunk*. “I don’t hate fighting or anything, but lemme stay here for a bit longer.”

She flung a large clod of dirt behind her. *Huh. She might’ve put in a bit too much strength in that one—dirt’s flying everywhere.*

“Whoops,” she said, skillfully gathering the soil into a small pile.

Well, if she wanted to be here, I had no reason to refuse her request. “Of course,” I replied. “I’m not trying to chase you out.”

Helen smiled as she plunged her shovel back into the dirt. Thanks to her good mood, the digging process for the bathtub proceeded smoothly. A small pile of soil had been growing beside us, and when I turned to look at the others’ progress, massive pillars reminiscent of the Parthenon had been erected.

One person was on the ground looking completely exhausted—Karen.

I downed a cup of water from the jug I’d brought, and Helen stood beside me, also wanting a drink. I took another cup, filled it, and handed it to Karen.

“Be sure to take frequent breaks,” I said, “And stay hydrated.”

Karen gulped down the water. Once she was done, she murmured, “All right,”

and slapped her tail on the ground. “The others said the same thing, so I’m resting here for a minute.”

Her hair was tied up, probably so that it wouldn’t get in the way. I wondered if Rike, the resident big sister of the group, had tied it up for her. After Karen finally caught her breath, she sighed and gazed at everyone else working away.

“Did everyone build the room I’m staying in?” she asked.

“Yep,” I replied.

The Watchdog had initially provided me with a simple cabin—it had come with a living space, a small study, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a kitchen. We’d started adding on rooms when Samya and Rike had moved in. And after, we’d continued to expand. Karen’s living quarters had been built completely by our family, and right now, we had another open room, which we used to house some odds and ends.

Would we have to expand again? I’d considered creating a second story, but I didn’t want the heat from the forge to rise to the upper floors—that was an issue I’d have to solve if a second story did someday become a reality.

“I wish I already had this sort of experience,” Karen said with a sigh.

I chuckled awkwardly. “Well, this is gonna sound weird, but our family’s the odd one out for having these skills.”

Lidy and Rike knew about these things due to their backgrounds, but it was clearly unusual for a daughter of a count and an imperial princess to be experienced with construction.

“I heard that Anne is quite highborn,” Karen remarked.

“Yep. So high that I don’t even know if I’m allowed to be her audience.”

Anne’s status wasn’t of concern within our cabin—she accepted orders from everyone else and helped out when we needed her. But in truth, I was but a simple blacksmith, and I had no right to be in the presence of someone with ties to the imperial family, even if she didn’t have much claim to the throne.

Diana’s and Anne’s true identities hadn’t been revealed to Karen yet. Privacy concerns were an issue, but the biggest hurdle was that we didn’t want to

overwhelm her with too much information. If she stayed for a while, she would be told all of this sooner or later—it wasn't as though only Diana and Anne could reveal their identities. Karen might've had an inkling about Diana's status, but I doubted that she could guess Anne's true identity. It was clear that Karen saw her as someone of high status, but she surely couldn't have imagined that Anne was a princess.

"And yet, they're all working together," Karen said. Her eyes narrowed as she smiled. "I just feel like...it's kind of nice."

"Really?" I asked teasingly.

"Really!" she replied with an exaggerated pout.

Within our family, only Karen had a clear goal in sight. That wasn't to say that Rike didn't, but her destination was so far away that it hardly counted. *Karen might not stay for too long, but it'd be great if she could fit in here.*

"Karen!" Anne called. "Can you help me?"

"Sure! Coming!" Karen shouted back, rushing toward Anne.

It seems my worries were all unnecessary. I felt happy as I rejoined Helen for another afternoon of work.

A bathtub might have sounded a bit too grand, but all we basically needed to do was create a wooded container that could store water. Since the water would be slippery, I just needed to make sure we had proper footing.

Our mini reservoir—water tank—had lost its use once we'd dug the well. We were blessed with enough water now, so the tank sat languishing, and we'd left it as is. *That's fine by me—we might need the extra water in case of an emergency like a fire.* Since we didn't use the water in that tank for drinking or cooking, I guessed that moss would grow on it one day and give it a nice, nature-y aesthetic. Imperfections of facilities only enhanced their beauty, but I felt like only Karen would understand this feeling. *Though...it would suck if black mold grew on the tank instead.*

Back to the tub—the hole we'd dug was fairly large, so the tub would need to be large to match. Luckily (I guess), our wooden planks had been cut from large

trees, so we were able to start building the tub's frame without much trouble.

"We should decide the size first," I said to Helen.

"Gotcha."

I lined up planks in a rectangle on the ground, then added vertical planks at the four corners, one vertical plank in the middle of each side, and finally, a top rectangular frame to match the bottom. If you looked from the side, the skeleton tub was a squared-off U shape with an open top. I didn't nail the planks too tightly; the planks would swell after being exposed to water, and at that point, they would fit together snugly. *I hope...* Any issues about the water pressure loosening the planks or soil would be resolved when we fit the tub into the hole. *Again, I hope...* My cheats wouldn't quite activate, so I figured this type of work didn't count as production related.

Next, I lined up planks on the ground in a zigzag pattern—they looked like chevron flooring back on Earth. This process definitely fell into my production-related cheats, so I innately knew the perfect size to cut everything. I planned to make several panels like this—four for the sides and a larger one for the bottom. Once we secured these panels to the sides and bottom, we'd be finished with the tub.

Since we were repeating the same process over and over again, I focused on cutting out the chevron pieces exactly while Helen put them together. She was strong—I wasn't sure if she'd been influenced by the people who'd raised her, but regardless, she was fairly skilled with her hands. She wasn't a total expert, but we could only blame her biological parents for that. If genetics worked the same way in this world as they did on Earth, then her DNA had come from the margrave. He was open-minded and very intelligent, but he didn't seem like the type that was good with his hands.

The sun had started to set, and this signaled the end of our workday. We were only about halfway there with the tub. Still, this was good progress after a single day, and I had no complaints about the speed at which we were working.

I turned around to see how the rest of my family was doing, and I was impressed by what I saw.

"Whoa, you guys are pretty quick."

“We sure are!” Samya exclaimed proudly.

They were nowhere near finished, but they’d built enough for me to have a vague sense of the bathhouse’s shape. The pillars were standing upright, and the joists for the roof had been set. It wasn’t set too far off the ground, and a portion of the floor had been lined with planks already. *I feel like we won’t need two weeks for this... Wait, the building itself might be smooth sailing, but it’ll still take time for us to divert the hot water here. Guess we’ve still got a ways to go.*

Thankfully, we had plenty of time to spare. There was no need for us to rush, and if we finished early, we could take some time off. *We’ll need to be the caretakers of this hot spring, and in return, it’ll take care of us for decades to come.*

“Let’s pack it in for the day,” I called out.

“All right!” the rest of our family called back. Krul, Lucy, and Hayate were in the mix too, of course.

We gathered our tools into one area and made the short trek back home. Needless to say, we filled our jugs with some warm water before we left.

On days like these, when we were able to pinpoint the progress we’d made, I felt like we all had heartier appetites than usual. Helen and I had probably exerted ourselves more physically yesterday, but this didn’t seem to curb our appetites in any way. The mountain of food that was piled high steadily disappeared.

It reminded me of a scene in an anime film that I’d watched back on Earth—a gang of air pirates were seated around a table to feast. Though, in that scene, a girl was making a meal for the men, and here, our dynamic was the opposite.

“We have more than enough food, don’t we?” I asked worriedly as everyone munched at their dinners with gusto.

Lidy politely swallowed her mouthful and then said, “We don’t have a pantry, but there’s still plenty of salt-cured meat in the storage.”

“Then does that mean you won’t need to go hunting anytime soon?”

“For now, we should be fine with what we have,” she replied with a nod.

Lidy elegantly polished off her food, but her speed was on par with the other family members. We actually had a food surplus—we stored a bit more food than we ate, and our reserves steadily increased. I made sure to rotate our stores so that we ate the older meat first, but a time could soon come when we would need to off-load some of it. Smoking the meat could drastically increase its shelf life. *It would be useful to have a smoker shed...*

However, there was no need for us to go that far and gather that much meat. In fact, even with the addition of an extra person and her wyverns, we were easily able to maintain the balance of our food stores. *I shouldn't be worrying about what we're going to build next when we haven't even finished the bathhouse yet.*

Currently, the forge was acting as a drying room for meat. Because smithing required the use of fire, the temperature within the room was often rather high, and the air was very dry. I couldn't deny that this was a perfect place to dry meat. However, having meat dangling above us made the forge seem a bit *too* lived-in, so I was sort of bothered by it. For a blacksmith living in the forest, it may have looked charming, and I couldn't deny that the forge was a part of my daily life...but still.

A little hut with a stove and a chimney puffing out smoke... That type of building could be used as a drying and smoking room. Plus, I wouldn't be bothered by having hanging meat in our forge. I didn't know when I'd discuss this project with the family, but one day, I would.

“It's more than enough if you can manage to live like this in the Black Forest,” Karen said to Helen while downing her glass of wine.

“Guess so,” Helen replied with a smile.

It'd only been two days since Karen had arrived, but she was fitting right in. It helped that we were all living under the same roof. Even now, she was steadily working her way through boar meat that'd been slow-cooked in a soy-sauce-and-fruit base.

“Oh, this is good...” she murmured. In between bites, she said, “I might not ask for liquor, but I can see the temptation for rice.”

“Really?” Rike asked politely.

Karen nodded back. “The Nordic region tries to pair everything with rice. There are some who heap food like this over rice and gobble it down. Though, I wasn’t allowed to do that—apparently, it’s bad manners.”

Rike looked interested, and I silently nodded. It seemed parts of this world also had the culture of wanting to put everything over rice, though some had shunned this practice, finding it to be bad table etiquette. At the very least, a household of a *samurai* wouldn’t serve anything like that.

“So, Karen, how do you like construction?” I asked. “It’s different from smithing, so I know it’s not something you’re used to.”

As the words left my lips, I realized that I sounded like a father asking about his daughter’s day at school or work. *Whatever. That analogy’s honestly not too far off.* Based on Karen’s age, we could’ve been father and daughter.

“Well, it’s true that I’m not used to it, so it’s a bit tough, but everyone’s helping me out,” Karen replied with a smile. “I think I’ll be just fine.”

Anne gulped down the rest of her wine. “She’s skilled with her hands and quick to pick up on things. There’s nothing for you to worry about for now, Eizo.”

“All right, then I’ll leave you to it.”

“You got it, Master!” Karen replied jokingly.

We all started laughing, and our high spirits helped us regain energy for another day of construction.

####

We headed to the hot spring after Karen’s morning training in the forge. The sight that greeted us made me doubt my eyes. I knew it would happen one day—in fact, seeing one was practically inevitable. Still, I had to ask whether my eyes were playing tricks on me.

“That’s...a tiger, right?” I asked.

Samya nodded. “Yep, that’s a tiger.”

The health bar of my shoulder was steadily decreasing. A tiger was bathing alongside deer, rabbits, and raccoons. Nearby there were also a few small birds splashing around with their wings. Droplets struck the tiger, but it didn't seem to mind at all—its eyes were closed, and it seemed to be enjoying the hot spring. Its ears were pointed at us, so it surely recognized our presence, but it didn't move a muscle and just continued enjoying the bath.

I glanced at Samya. “Well, I mean, if it's just enjoying the bath, we can leave it alone...”

“Yeah...” she said, looking back at me.

All right—back to work.

Today, we'd be picking up where we left off. Helen and I were building the tub as the rest of our family constructed the bathhouse. The sounds of nails being hammered and wood being filed rang out in the air. None of us talked much while we worked. Every now and then, I heard a curt order or two and the occasional question—these were, of course, mixed in with Lucy's energetic barks.

When I glanced at Lucy, I noticed her and Hayate chasing each other around. According to Karen, the little wyvern had already reached her full maturity despite her small size—I wasn't sure how old she was. Frankly, it'd be a bit troublesome if she got any larger. In any case, Hayate was the eldest sister (since Krul apparently hadn't yet reached maturity), and she was playing with Lucy, the youngest of the trio.

I wonder if my dad ever looked at me like this when I was a kid...

As a few thoughts filled my mind, I headed back to work.

“Eizo, your eyes right now look really kind,” Helen pointed out.

“Do they?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“Well, I'm looking at my cute daughters. Every parent feels this way.”

“Even toward Hayate?”

“Yeah. She's practically my daughter now.”

It hadn't been long since Hayate had arrived, but I had a passionate motto: anyone kind to our family is family of mine.

"Gotcha." Helen smiled gently before returning to work.

We squeezed in lunch and a few breaks, including time spent playing with Krul. We even stepped out to observe the drainage pond. The tiger was long gone, and there were no signs of a struggle. It had just taken a bath and quietly left.

Relatively peaceful animals had visited thus far. There weren't any forest wolves in the bath now, and I didn't expect carnivores to drop by all that often. Still, it was wise to pop in every now and then to check on things—if there were any issues with the animals, I'd deal with them. Though, if the situation seemed dangerous, I trusted that the herbivores would be the first to sense that and flee.

"We're running out of nails," I said to Helen while we were building the tub. I glanced into my container of nails and saw that our supply was severely depleted.

I went to check on everyone else's supply of nails, and I saw that they'd gone through quite a bit too. The bathhouse was a moderately large structure, and while not every area required nails, we were still steadily going through them. It was as clear as day that our work would stall until we resupplied our nails. I figured I should forge a fresh batch, even if that meant I'd be out of commission for a short while.

So, I got Helen's permission to do just that and returned to the cabin. I opened the door to my forge and lit the firebed with my magic.

Suddenly, I noticed the door open.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Karen was standing there looking a little sheepish. She'd been working on the bathhouse with everyone else just moments before.

"Um, I noticed you heading back, Master, and I assumed that you'd be doing some smithing," she managed to say. "May I stay and watch? I already got permission from everyone else."

“Ah, I see.” She didn’t seem to have any ulterior motives. “If everyone says that it’s fine, I’ve got no reason to refuse. I’ll just be making nails—is that fine with you?”

“Of course!”

Making nails wasn’t an arduous process, due in no small part to my cheats. I heated a sheet of metal in the fire, grabbed a chisel, and divided it up into thin square bars. Then, I rounded out and flattened one end of each bar to fashion the nail’s head. I heated up these square bars with their circular disc heads and rotated each nail in the fire to form a more uniform shape. Lastly, I hammered the bottom third of each nail into a sharp point. Of course, this was a process to make a single nail—in order to increase my production efficiency, I had to sharpen the points while the other nail heads were heating up.

Needless to say, this task fell squarely within the realm of smithing—my cheats were out in full force and providing me with assistance. I knew the exact order of steps that would lead to the most efficient nail production. Obviously, a machine would’ve been much faster, but I was still pretty quick.

“Amazing!” Karen gasped, holding the finished nails in her hand. They made soft *clinking* noises as they rolled together. “You’re so quick, yet they are practically uniform! The length and thickness is so precise!”

“This is easy enough,” I replied, still working away. “I think you’ll be able to do something like this in no time.”

I was able to go much faster because I wasn’t imbuing the nails with much magical energy. All I had to focus on was precision. Anyone who was used to smithing and manipulating basic magic could do this—Karen was no exception.

“Do you really think so?” she asked.

I glanced her way. “Yep, I truly do.”

“I’ll do my best!”

Renewed determination filled her voice, and the forge was filled with our cheery laughter.

Once we returned to the construction site with more nails, work proceeded

smoothly, and we finished the tub. Since we didn't have a bathhouse or a partition yet, it looked like a bathtub had suddenly appeared in the middle of the forest.

"It's good enough for us to take a dip in...but I think it's best if we made a lid to prevent children and small animals from falling in," I noted.

"Seconded," Helen agreed. "I'll go get us a sheet of wood."

"Thanks."

"No problem."

She ran off, and I observed a wall of the bathhouse being built. It didn't seem like it would be finished tomorrow, and we still had the men's bath to think about. I turned back to the tub, which was half buried in the ground. We still had sunlight on our side, so we could make out what it was, but at night, it'd be more akin to a pitfall.

I was planning on heading here tomorrow too, so if an animal happened to fall inside, we could still rescue it. However, I didn't want that to be a regular occurrence, and I wasn't keen on striking fear in the others, even if that fear was only temporary. Thus, in my mind, a lid for the bath was a requirement.

Helen swiftly returned with a large sheet of wood. It looked pretty heavy, but her footsteps were light and graceful—she couldn't mask her joy that the tub was finally finished.

"Got one!" she said.

"Nice! Thanks," I replied. "All right, let's just gently nail this on."

"Sure thing."

We swiftly hammered the plank of wood onto the tub's opening using the bare minimum amount of nails. Once that was done, it resembled a giant well.

As I cleaned up the tools for the day, I felt eagerness swell in my heart. I wanted to see that tub filled with water, not covered by wood.

####

The next morning, Rike made some more nails for us. I'd made plenty

yesterday, but it didn't hurt to have a few extra, and I wanted Karen to try making some as a part of her morning training.

Once the hot spring was done, we could move on to actual training—I would teach her how to make good knives. As everyone but Rike and Karen prepared to head out for the hot spring again, I watched over my two apprentices as a boss and a master.

“Uh, let's see...” Karen mumbled to herself as she tried to remember what she'd seen me do yesterday. “I saw Master doing this first...”

Karen looked slower than usual beside a nimbly working Rike, but that wasn't her fault; she wasn't used to the work just yet. In the end, Karen wasn't able to make nearly as many nails as Rike. But in terms of quality, while Karen couldn't match Rike's, her nails were just fine.

As I cleaned up the forge, I said, “Once you're used to the work here, you'll be able to forge a sword in no time.”

“Agreed.” Rike nodded. “I can't slack off either—as your senior, I have to keep growing.”

“I've still got a long way to go,” Karen said humbly, visibly shrinking at the praise she received.

“All right, let's meet up with the others to work on that hot spring,” I said.

“Right!” they both replied.

We stepped outside—the skies were a crystal clear blue. The warm bathing pond was at full capacity, and there weren't any carnivores today. The fact that all these animals continued to stay at our hot spring implied some kind of effect from the water. There hadn't been any fights so far, and Lidy hadn't said a word, so I didn't think the magic in the water was causing any adverse effects. *No need for me to butt in, I guess.* Besides, we would be able to gauge the water for ourselves when we entered the bath.

“We'll do the same thing we did yesterday, but for the men's tub,” I said.

“Got it,” Helen replied with a nod, a shovel in one arm.

Yes, the process would be the same, but we'd be digging a much narrower

space and building a smaller tub. Plus, since we'd already finished a tub, we had experience with this kind of thing now.

And so, naturally...

"We finished this one in a flash," Helen said.

"Yep."

In front of us was a tub half buried in the dirt. It was much smaller than the women's bath, and only large enough to fit two or three people. For some reason, I was the only man in this household. *I'd honestly like to ask the Watchdog about that...*

It hadn't been long since we'd finished eating lunch. In fact, I felt like we could make another whole tub before the day was over. We didn't need one, though. Instead...

"Why don't we help the other team out?" I suggested, rolling my shoulders.

"Yeah," Helen agreed.

We turned around to the bathhouse where the rest of our family was busily hammering. The floor was practically finished, and they just needed to build the walls and the roof. I went over to Diana, who was taking charge.

"You guys are quick," I observed. "You've done so much."

"Hey, Eizo," she replied, glancing at the tub. "Yeah. Karen's quick to pick up on things and we're splitting the work efficiently."

I knew just how skilled Karen was with her hands after watching her forge. She seemed to be doing her work just fine. I had no idea what she'd been doing until she came here, but it seemed like she'd have no issues working at our forge for the time being. Her smithing this morning was proof of that.

"Need some help?" I asked.

"Um, let's see..." Diana replied, placing a finger over her chin.

It wasn't good for us to barge in and throw a wrench in their process. I wanted to let Diana, who was taking charge, decide our roles for us.

After a short while, she said, "I think we're fine. It might be better if you

worked on the channel for the hot water or started on the connecting walkway.”

“Ah, got it,” I said. “You’ve got a point. I’ll start one of those.”

“Good luck.”

“Leave it to us.”

I pounded my chest—Diana met my gaze and laughed. I returned to Helen and told her what Diana had suggested. *Should we work on the channel first, or the walkway?*

“What do you wanna do?” I asked. “I’m fine with either.”

“I want work where I can move my body,” Helen said, folding her hands behind her head.

Fair enough. “Then let’s start with the walkway. We might need to cut down some trees.”

“Yeah? Sweet, leave that bit to me!”

She rolled up her sleeves and practically flew outside to grab an axe from the cabin. I chuckled as I watched her go. Her speed was fitting of her nickname—Lightning Strike.

“All right, what do I need to cut down?” she asked.

“Well, since the cabin is that way...” I glanced in the direction of our home.

Even if I were to find the path with the fewest number of trees, we’d need to cut a few down to clear out the space for a walkway (building around them wasn’t really an option). *We’ll cut them down and respectfully use the lumber for our building projects.*

I approached one of the trees that we would be cutting down.

“This one... This one... And that one,” I said, marking the trees with my knife. An X symbol could be clearly seen on the bark.

I didn’t want to cut too deep since that would make it difficult for us to use the wood, but if the cuts were too shallow, they’d be difficult to see. Since my cheats didn’t activate here, I carefully checked each tree.

“M’kay, let’s do this!” Helen exclaimed, raising her axe as I finished marking the trees.

She swung with great energy—it was a fabulous swing that would’ve put pro baseball players to shame. A pleasant *thunk* echoed in the air as the axe made contact with the trunk. And as predicted, the tree slid off the stump and fell with a loud *thud*. It was a clean cut, as though a machine had done it.

“Which one next?” Helen asked, losing interest in the prey that she’d already hunted.

I was oddly impressed by how cut-and-dried she was—perhaps these were the skills of an expert mercenary—and pointed to the next target. Once the trees were all cut down, we had another important task at hand: dealing with the stumps. Usually, I let them be after we cut down trees.

“If the roots are still alive, it’ll grow back,” Samya had said.

And so, I usually didn’t remove the stumps—this was one way of maintaining the forest. Lluisa probably knew that and allowed me to cut down trees as I wished. It’d take some time until the tree grew back, but as long as it was alive, it could continue to regenerate. However, we needed to create a walkway, so the stumps would be in the way of our construction.

“All right, here we go!” I said.

“Roger!” Helen called out. “One, two, and hup!”

“Kulululu!”

I’d asked Helen to call Krul away from Team Bathhouse. Before that, we’d tied a rope to the stump and tried to pull it out. Helen and I may have been the strongest of our family, but work like this clearly couldn’t be done alone—it required the help of heavy machinery, or in this case, Krul.

I thought borrowing her might slow down Team Bathhouse’s work, but they had plenty of powerful people on their side. In fact, except for Lidy and Karen, they were all quite muscular. They’d already finished the heavy lifting like erecting thick pillars and adding joists; all that was left was to line the building with planks. So, Krul’s loss wouldn’t tank their efficiency too much. At least, that was what Diana and I had guessed. Still, I told them that if things got tough on

their end, they should let me know.

We dug up a bit of the surrounding soil along with the stump. We may have cut down its trunk, but the stump was large and powerful enough to support such a large tree. *This won't be easy.* It felt like we were pulling up a gigantic turnip, just like in the fairy tale. The stump put up a good fight, but it eventually gave way with a resounding *thud*, and its roots peeled away from the soil.

It fell on its side—its thick, long roots were on display for all the world to see. One could easily tell just how it'd supported a massive tree. A giant hole was left in its wake.

"I'm sorry," I said to the stump, putting my hands together as a show of respect.

This world was chock-full of deities: a Dragon of the Land, dryads, and fairies. Perhaps this tree also had its fair share of history. With that thought in mind, I figured I'd better show my respect. Helen saw what I was doing and put her own hands together, following my lead. Krul closed her eyes and bowed her head. When I petted her head, she let out a soft, happy cry.

We'd dug up a significant amount of soil in our quest to bury the bathtub, and we decided to use that soil to fill the hole the stump had left behind. *We certainly have plenty to spare.*

Once the hole was filled, we had to complete another task—this one required all three of us to use our full strength.

"Hnnngh!"

"Graaah!"

"Kululululu!"

We used everything we had to yank on the rope tied to the stump. The rope started to creak—we slowly dragged the stump away.

We'd completed one stump removal, but there were still several left. By the time we finished digging up two more, it was late enough to call it a day. *And even if it wasn't late, I would've called it anyway.*

"I'm...at my limit," I huffed.

“Yeah...” Helen agreed.

“Kulu...”

The three of us were absolutely exhausted, though it sorta looked like Krul was just acting the part to empathize with us—she usually seemed just fine when lugging around heavy cargo. But I felt like she’d used her energy differently today. It was like she was used to running marathons, but this time around, she’d been forced to sprint in short bursts. She was undoubtedly quite tired too.

“All right, let’s head back...” I said wearily. I told the rest of our family to pack it in for the day, and everyone agreed to head back.

I pray I don’t get severe muscle cramps. It’ll be bad if body pain keeps me from work tomorrow. I massaged my waist to relieve a bit of the soreness.

Over dinner, we once again asked Karen whether she had gotten used to the work. She’d just started living with us, so I couldn’t blame everyone for checking in frequently.

“She’s helping us so much!” Diana exclaimed. “She’s skilled with her hands, and above all, she knows what a hot spring is. In other words, she knows what to build. Eizo, if she weren’t here, we’d probably have to keep bothering you and asking you what we should do next.”

“Ah, makes sense,” I replied.

Now that she mentions it... Diana had barely needed to consult me while we’d been burying the tub and building the walkway. They’d gotten started immediately and chugged along steadily, building floors, walls, and a ceiling. Their success was due in no small part to Karen’s assistance.

Karen’s eyes sparkled—she was delighted to hear Diana’s words of praise.

I took a sip of tea and turned to Diana. “Then I guess I can be completely hands-off. It’s convenient that you guys can just ask Karen if you’ve got any questions.”

“Really?!” Karen’s eyes widened. “Aren’t you trying to bring your vision to life, though?”

I gave a strained laugh. “Oh, it’s nothing that grand. Until now, no one here besides me knew much about the Nordic region.”

“Hrmm... I know it might be too late for me to say this, but am I butting into your affairs a bit *too* much?”

I shrugged. “We don’t really care about stuff like that, even if you’re a newcomer. If any questions from the family confuse you, you can come talk to me anytime.”

I felt almost like an evil corporation forcing a newcomer to supervise a project, but I was determined to support her. Besides, a good chunk of the bathhouse was already completed, so I doubted that there was much left to plan or question.

Since that’s the case, it’s better for me to leave the construction to them and focus on my own work. Or am I being a bit too naïve? Deep down, I also wanted Karen to collaborate with the others and overcome hardships alongside them—that would deepen their ties. I recalled similar situations back on Earth, like when students became friends after working together to host a cultural festival or something.

I wasn’t sure if she was able to read my intentions, but Karen thought for a few moments. I didn’t want to force her too much; I felt like it’d be an abuse of my power to make her do something she was against. But soon, she made a fist and held it up in front of her chest.

“I’ll do it!” she declared with a determined gaze. “I’ll do my best!”

I was glad to see her so energetic, but it also worried me slightly. “Don’t work too hard,” I said. “Try to find a happy medium.”

I smiled faintly as I ate a bite of grilled venison with soy sauce. I was fond of food like this, and it seemed like Karen was too. The work must’ve left her famished—her hearty appetite was on par with Rike’s, and our resident dwarf was the hungriest member of our family.

Karen switched topics and started talking about hunting with Samya and Diana. She agreed to tag along on the next hunt. *I guess working together really did deepen their bonds.* If Karen went hunting, she’d lose an entire day of

training in the forge, but that was probably fine. After all, we'd already had her help us with building a bathhouse—a task that had nothing to do with smithing. I even made her supervise the entire process, so it was definitely too late for me to worry about stuff like that.

As long as Karen enjoys her stay here, even a little, I'll consider it a win.

Our family members cheerfully bantered and discussed what to hunt next. I gazed at them fondly as I bit down on another piece of meat.

####

Slowly but surely, the bathhouse and the walkway were taking shape. It'd been about a week since we'd started, and the bathhouse was already looking quite magnificent. We were only able to spare a few hours in the mornings for Karen's smithing training, but that was progressing smoothly too. It wasn't like she'd made huge progress in such a short time, but she was slowly getting better.

"Hrmm..." Rike said as we headed to the hot spring after our morning in the forge. "Maybe we should change up how we do things."

"Oh no, I'm fine with the way everything is now!" Karen replied. "I couldn't possibly cause you more trouble. I'm sorry. If only I were a bit more talented..."

"I think you've got the basics down fine," I said. "All you need is that little spark, and when you ignite, I'm sure you'll grow exponentially. Let's keep at it."

"Right!"

We finally made it to the hot spring site. I was sure that Karen was going all out in her role as supervisor—I saw that the front of a bathhouse now had a Japanese-style—or Nordic-style—gable. This structure clearly had a Nordic flair to it, and I was quite satisfied with the aesthetic.

As I was taking the whole thing in, Diana stepped up beside me. She was looking up at the roof.

"We still haven't done much around the tub," she said.

"The changing room's done, though, right?" I asked.

"Yep."

Her confident reply was all I needed. The rest of our family seemed proud of their work, and I decided to take a peek at the changing room, just to confirm its construction. The entrance was split into a men's side and a women's side. This time around, I decided to enter the larger bath which belonged to the women. This would likely be my only chance to peek inside and check to see if the structure was well-built.

I felt a little apologetic and guilty as I entered the women's side. Near the door, a sign read "women" in both Nordic and in our local language. I slid the door open and heard the loud sound of a clapper ring out. *That's a nice touch—they'll be able to tell instantly if anyone enters.* Also, the door was there in the first place to prevent any of the animals from enjoying a dip in the hot spring meant for people. *Maybe I'll find some time to make that drainage pond larger for them...*

I gingerly stepped inside and saw a shelf filled with a bunch of boxes. The lower shelves had smaller boxes, while the ones higher up were larger.

"Oooh, so we've even got a shoe cabinet," I said, impressed.

"Pardon?" Lidy asked, tilting her head.

In this area, it was normal practice to keep everything in one place when stripping down—that included shoes. We even wore shoes around the cabin, and we took them off along with our other clothes when undressing. Because of this, it was no wonder that the phrase "shoe cabinet" was unfamiliar to them.

"This is a place to store shoes," I explained. "You separate them from your clothes when you undress to enter the bath."

"Huh..." Lidy replied.

Back on Earth, I'd been told that, in the old days, there'd been some sort of meaning in leaving shoes like *zori* and *geta* behind as hostages. However, I wasn't sure whether there was any truth to that. Usually, we received a wooden tag as a key to collect our shoes later, but we didn't have anything of the sort here—the shelves were open for anyone to take whatever pair of shoes they desired. This would work just fine for us. After all, this wasn't a public bath, but a private one just for our family.

“You’ve got a very keen eye, Master!” Karen said.

“Ah, well...” I scratched my head. “As a person from the Nordic region, stuff like this catches my attention.”

I cast a sweeping glance around the changing room and saw two moderately sized benches in the corner. I guessed that Rike had made them using some leftover materials. Since they’d been built with scraps, they were a bit smaller than ideal, but they would be enough to use for cooling down and resting after warming up in the hot spring.

“This is great,” I said. “Does the men’s bath look the same?”

“It does,” Rike replied. “It’s a little smaller, but the general layout is the same.”

For the most part, I’d be the only one using that room. Some bathhouses utilized multigender changing rooms by splitting up bathing times (women would bathe during a set hour while men would bathe at a different hour). However, we had designed separate rooms since we’d wanted to avoid troublesome situations—especially if any of our future guests happened to be men. Also, I’d feel guilty about using such a large space, one that was supposed to be for all the women, by myself. I certainly didn’t think these young ladies would want to share a space with an old man like me. Still, creating a separate room just for me had only increased their work, and I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t feel guilty.

“I know I was the one who drew up the blueprint, but now that I’m seeing this place in person, it gives off a completely different impression.” I smiled, unable to hide my awe at how nice this room looked.

As I stepped toward the bathtub, the scenery changed completely. The flooring hadn’t been completely installed yet (it was intended to be a bit elevated to allow water to drain below) and the walls weren’t finished. My eyes fell upon what was essentially a forest scene with a bathtub sitting in the center. This had its own charm, and it didn’t look half bad, but... *Yeah, we can’t just leave this place as is.* I shook my head with a forced smile.

“I kinda left it all to you guys without contributing much, but you’ve done so well,” I said. “I think it looks great.” Cheers rose from the team as I turned

around. “All right then, why don’t we take tomorrow off?”

“Really?!” Samya asked with a sparkle in her eyes.

She was undoubtedly trying to find the perfect opportunity to do some hunting. Since she’d promised to bring Karen along, she must’ve been raring to go.

“Yep,” I replied with a nod.

As I’d expected, everyone, including Samya, immediately suggested hunting, and they divvied up their roles. *Will this place become a venue for discussion in the future?* I couldn’t help but wonder as I left the bathhouse behind me.

“Huh? Are you and Miss Rike staying behind?” Karen asked in surprise.

“Hmm?” After a delay, I realized what she was asking and nodded. “Oh, right, yeah. Rike and I don’t go hunting.”

We’d been invited out on several occasions, and neither of us had any issues in terms of stamina, but we didn’t want to drag the rest of them down. Thus, we’d chosen to stay behind. I’d once gone hunting with only Samya, but I wasn’t used to wielding a bow and our prey had almost escaped.

I’d never used a bow in my past life. The fact that I’d been able to hit my target without my arrow flying off to nowhere must’ve been thanks to the Watchdog, who’d given me the bare minimum in terms of combat abilities. Still, there was a right man for every role—for example, it was best for the baker to bake the bread. In other words, I left hunting to the pros of the Black Forest like Samya, and anyone who wished to tag along could do so.

Karen seemed a bit reluctant to depart, but after much encouragement, she finally left while carrying a bow. I had her also bring Hayate along, just in case anything happened.

Until now, we hadn’t had a means of communication over long distances—I’d only been able to anxiously wait for the party to return, and if something had ever happened on their hunt, I wouldn’t have known. I was sure that everyone was safe around the cabin, but if they ventured any farther, they could risk getting lost.

But since Hayate was with them this time, she would surely fly her way back to let Rike and me know if something was amiss. Even if she didn't have a letter on her, the fact that she returned would imply that an emergency had occurred, and that was already more useful than just waiting around and hoping for the best.

It reminded me of my life back on Earth when my parents had made me carry a pager (which later became a cell phone) in case of emergencies. This must've been how they felt.

I returned to the cabin alongside Rike and stretched my limbs out. "All right then, we should do some work, hmm?"

We would only need a week—or perhaps only three to four days—to fulfill Camilo's order, so we had plenty of time to spare. Regardless, it didn't hurt to forge them in advance. Then, if we had some free time, we could go out on a little trip or teach Karen some smithing (though Rike would bear the brunt of the work on that end). We could also just live as we saw fit.

We'd completed our morning prayers before everyone had left to hunt. I entered the forge and lit the firebed. The flames started to roar and grow hotter until the firebed was at the perfect temperature for the metal. I grabbed a sheet using the tongs and slid it into the fire. When the metal became hot enough, I placed it on the anvil and started hammering away to form my desired shape.

The sound of my hammer striking the hot metal rang out. As Rike's hammering joined in, we formed a melody of sorts within the forge. Once we finished making a couple of knives, Rike gazed at the sheet metal within the firebed.

"They should be locating their prey right about now," she said.

"If they're lucky, yeah," I replied.

It was a bit before noon. If they hadn't found anything, they might've been taking a break for lunch. However, if they'd had luck on their side, then right now, they would be chasing down some tasty animal. Were they after a boar today? Or a deer?

“I’m not sure if this is good or bad news for Karen—she’s the beater,” I said.

The sooner they found their prey, the sooner she’d have to jump in to fulfill her role. Her task was to chase the animal toward the archers, meaning that she’d have to move around quite a bit. Lucy acted as a hunting dog—or hunting wolf, rather—and was quite skilled at it, but it was apparently tradition for the newcomer to learn the forest by becoming a beater. I’d previously overheard Samya and Diana telling Anne that.

I had no idea when they’d formed this tradition. Samya must’ve always been here, but it hadn’t been long since Diana entered the forest. It was true that they were a lot more knowledgeable about the world than me, who rarely left the forest, so I never questioned their methods.

“I hope Karen’s okay,” Rike said.

“She came here all the way from the Nordic region,” I replied. “We’ve been making her physically exert herself, but she hasn’t been quick to tap out. I’m sure she’s fine.”

We had a daughter of a count and an imperial princess who boasted their stamina, and Karen was from a *samurai* household. She’d also had the courage to make the long journey here, so I knew that she could handle herself just fine.

This conception of mine was soon shattered.

“I can’t...anymore...” Karen groaned, rolling on the floor.

Wait, are you that exhausted?

“The chase was longer than usual today,” Lidy quietly explained. Elves unexpectedly had quite a bit of stamina, though I supposed that was only natural for a race that called the forests their homes.

Anne gave a forced laugh and lifted Karen up bodily. “I don’t think I ran for as long as she did during my first hunt, but I remember being completely exhausted too.”

Oh yeah—Anne had rolled around on the floor too. She’d come back exhausted from a hunt not long after she’d started living here. Or was she not

quite part of our family just yet? Feels like that was ages ago.

“You gotta move differently in the forest than on the plains or in the cities,” Helen said, giving Anne a hand. “I can’t blame anyone for not being used to that. It even took *me* some time to get used to.”

If it’d been tough for Helen, then Karen, who probably only had a bit more stamina than the average person, must’ve found it absolutely exhausting. Of course, Helen was on a different level if she was able to adapt so quickly.

As they each headed back to their rooms, I called out to them.

“I’ll have dinner prepared soon, so wash up. I’ve already brought in the hot water, so use as much as you like.”

“Okay,” everyone replied, though Karen’s voice was the most feeble.

I headed to the kitchen. *All right, I’ve gotta think of a menu to replenish all that lost stamina.*

####

The next morning, I saw Karen rubbing her entire aching body. I’d been told that she hadn’t fallen down or anything, so I guessed that she was more bothered by sore muscles than scratches. *Wait, is it okay to rub sore muscles? I don’t remember, but I thought it was bad because they’re inflamed.* I wasn’t sure, but Lidy prepared her homemade antipyretic paste made from ground herbs (which didn’t smell very nice) to make a compress for Karen. I was sure that the pain would subside soon.

Karen was still young. The fact that she’d felt pain immediately the next day was proof of this. The Watchdog had gifted me a bit of youth when I’d come to this world, but back on Earth, aches and pain had come at a delay. I’d go through the aging process again in this world, but I wasn’t sure if I’d exert myself as much.

“Just take it easy today,” I said.

“Yes, Master,” Karen replied, her shoulders slumping.

When Samya clasped those shoulders as encouragement, Karen gave a soft grunt of pain, causing Samya to look worried.

“She’ll get better soon enough,” Helen assured us. “It’s not life-threatening. She’s fine.”

Samya had never really gotten sore muscles. I wasn’t sure if I was totally envious of her situation. Karen was still suffering, but I wanted her to at least come along for our routine of collecting the hunted animal and dressing it. I wasn’t going to have her exert herself, of course. She would just be watching and learning.

And so, we did our usual trek to the lake with Krul and Lucy in tow. It was a gigantic boar this time. We hoisted it out of the lake, cut up a few trees to create a carrier, and had Krul pull it back to our cabin.

Today, Lucy was helping out. She grabbed the rope with her teeth and pulled alongside her big sister. I wasn’t sure just how helpful she was, but it was the thought that counted. My shoulder was getting more beat up by the day.

Lucy quickly gave up helping and walked alongside Krul, just a few paces in front. We soon arrived at the cabin. Lucy was no longer a pup—she was growing more and more into an adult wolf—but she still wasn’t strong enough to help Krul out.

Lucy didn’t seem too down about it. She looked satisfied that she’d been able to help out, even just a little. Once we were back home, she sat in front of Krul, wagging her tail. My shoulder continued to suffer. I felt like I should worry more about my shoulder than Karen’s, but I knew when to choose my battles. *I should keep quiet...*

Our family was used to the work—they swiftly cut the large boar into manageable chunks of meat. Karen watched on excitedly.

“You’re all so good with your knives,” she observed.

“Well, we’ve done this quite a few times already,” Diana replied with a bit of an awkward smile. When she’d first arrived here, she hadn’t even known how meat was portioned from an animal—to be honest, I hadn’t either. But now, Diana could easily cut apart a boar into manageable pieces. It all came with experience, and I assured Karen that she’d soon be able to do it too.

“I’ll try my best!” she replied earnestly.

I was sure that she'd be involved in a lot more hunts in the future. She would certainly get more opportunities to slice up meat. I hoped that she'd improve this skill along with her smithing.

"All right," I said. "Back to the hot spring, then?"

Everyone agreed, but I stopped Karen, who was picking up her tools to lope along with the rest of the crowd.

"Miss Karen, I've got a *very* important mission for you," I said, trying to sound as dignified as I could while Karen looked at me quizzically. I cleared my throat once. "Ahem, I order you to be in charge of being Lucy's playmate for the day! Don't push your sore muscles too much. I leave her in your hands!"

"Arf! Arf!"

Lucy wagged her tail happily, and Diana clearly looked like she wanted to volunteer for that role. Karen looked hesitant, wondering if she was allowed to take that task. Meanwhile, the rest of our family returned to the forge to grab their tools for the bathhouse.

A gale.

I had no other way to describe her speed. Hayate, who was no doubt named for her swiftness, cut through the air in a flash, but the dark gale that blew right past me was running on the ground. This gust of wind soon returned with an energetic bark.

"Arf!"

Lucy dropped the item she'd been carrying in her mouth in front of Karen and politely sat down, her tail wagging furiously. Her speed couldn't be matched. Karen once again took the ball made from a bit of rope and threw it, all while bearing her muscle aches. Lucy carefully watched the trajectory of the ball, predicted where it'd land, and shot off to catch it before it touched the ground.

"She's gotten faster," I observed while carrying wooden planks for the walkway.

Helen, who was also carrying some lumber, saw Lucy play another round of

fetch. “We always bring her along for our hunts. The terrain’s rough, but she just shoots past it all. We haven’t taken her to the mountains yet, but I reckon she’s far faster than I ever could be on flat land within a forest.”

“Really?”

Helen nodded. During combat, she could close the gap in a flash, even from quite a distance. But if Lucy could surpass even Helen’s speed, perhaps my gale metaphor wasn’t that far off.

I continued to check up on my daughter from time to time, but she didn’t look at all tired despite maintaining her impressive fetching speed. No doubt her stamina was also due to the effect of her becoming a magical beast.

Karen, who was playing fetch with Lucy, must’ve noticed that the pup had a lot more stamina than a normal wolf, yet she didn’t ask a single question about it. It seemed like she understood that the Black Forest was a special place. Since there was a bit of truth to her beliefs, I wasn’t planning on explaining Lucy’s circumstances to her yet.

It must’ve been tough for Karen to keep throwing the ball, though she did get a few breaks in between. At first, she was able to throw moderately far, but the distance was becoming shorter and shorter with every round of fetch. Unfortunately, this only hastened Lucy’s return, increasing Karen’s number of throws. *That’ll tire her shoulders for sure.*

I told Helen that I’d be slipping out for a few moments, and I walked over to a pile of wood. I picked up a leftover piece and used my knife to start carving. My cheats activated, and I completed my small project sooner than expected.

I’d ended up with a thin wooden disc, and I brought it over to Karen. She was just in the middle of taking a rest—Lucy was sitting in front of her and wagging her tail excitedly.

I gave an awkward smile and said, “I know I ordered you to play with her, but you can rest a bit more.”

“Thank you,” Karen replied. “I’ve been sneaking in some rest, but when I see Lucy’s sparkling eyes, eagerly waiting for the next throw...”

I totally understood her thoughts, but I remained silent. She must’ve felt

guilty resting when Lucy was eagerly waiting to play. I could see how that bothered her.

“Why don’t you try using this?” I said, showing the disc to Karen.

She tilted her head. “What is this?”

“You’ll see. Hey, Lucy.”

When the pup caught sight of the disc, she stood on all fours and gave an energetic bark. She was ready to go. I held the disc close to my chest and snapped my wrist, throwing the disc forward. The wooden circle glided through the air elegantly and at great speed—Lucy chased it down as fast as she could.

My pup, who flew faster than the wind, caught up to the disc and jumped to catch it in midair. She was around forty meters away, and she darted back as quickly as she had left.

“Good girl! You’re so talented!” I praised, taking the disc from her as I petted her head. Her tail wagged faster than before. “All right. This time, I want you to stay.”

“Arf!”

I once again threw the disc and told Lucy to stay. I wasn’t sure if she understood my command, but my smart daughter didn’t move an inch while she prepared to run. When the disc was flying through the air around twenty meters away, I gave my next command.

“Go!”

Lucy quietly flew forward, closing the gap between her and the disc. When she was around sixty meters away from me, she slowed down and caught it before returning—maintaining the same speed, of course.

“Good girl!” I exclaimed, petting her head like before. “You’re so smart too!”

“Arf! Arf!”

Lucy’s tail wagged so fast that I could barely see it. I suppressed the urge to keep playing with her and turned to Karen.

“I’ll leave the rest in your hands,” I said.

“O-Okay. I just need to copy what you did, right?”

“Yep. But make sure to take breaks in between.”

I returned to work. Every now and then, I could hear Karen’s commands of “stay,” and “go.” It made me a bit envious—I wanted to play with Lucy too. Before I knew it, the sun had started to set.

####

I wasn’t sure if it was due to the magic within this forest or her youth, but Karen’s muscle pains were gone by the next day.

“I’ll work hard today!” she declared, her own invisible tail wagging with gusto.

It seemed like she’d regained her energy. I surreptitiously observed her, but she looked like she was moving around just fine. *Could she be turning into a magical beast too?* I decided to secretly check in with Lidy during work breaks, just to be sure. She shook her head, so I guess I didn’t need to be worried about it.

“It’s very rare for a person to turn into a monster or a magical beast in the first place,” she quietly told me. She was referring to humanoids as a whole, including lizardmen, beastfolk, dwarves, elves, and giants. “I suppose, on rare occurrences, people can turn into demons,” she added.

Apparently, demons and elves were very similar—both races required magical energy to stay alive. This was why elves struggled to live in cities or towns where magic was sparse, and it was also why Lidy lived with us in the Black Forest. Demons needed magical energy to survive too, but they’d adapted to an environment where *stagnant* magical energy was present and evolved the skills to absorb it. Because demons absorbed stagnant magic, they had developed a few unique physical traits like horns and darker skin tones. But aside from these factors, demons were practically the same as elves, which may have been proof that the two species had once been one and the same.

“So the fact that demons utilize stagnant magic is the *only* difference between your races?” I asked.

Lidy nodded. “Right.”

Do humanoid creatures like vampires or banshees exist in this world? If they do, I wonder if they're made of pure magical energy like spirits and fairies. My installed knowledge didn't have any insight for me. Perhaps this information just hadn't been included, or perhaps creatures like that didn't really exist.

"Well, I'm glad it doesn't seem like anything too serious," I said.

"I think we'll be fine," Lidy assured me.

With a guarantee from our expert, I knew I had nothing to fear. I concluded that youth played a large role in Karen's recovery speed, and I tried to shoo away my envious thoughts about being young.

The bathhouse and the walkway were steadily being built. The floor for the bath had already been installed, and we'd finished erecting the pillars for the walkway. We had some distance to cover, but we just needed to pave the ground and build a roof.

It only took two more days before the walkway was finished. Now, we could shield ourselves a little from the rain while we went to the hot spring. The bathhouse was also nearly completed, and we even had a duckboard—an elevated floor—to let water drain through and into a small pond (we'd dug a new one separate from the pond that the forest's residents liked to use).

And so, we would be able to stay clean and dirt-free after taking a bath, and hot water wouldn't pool underneath us, ruining the wood. Naturally, we'd need to do some routine maintenance on the structure. But Samya told me that aside from the rainy seasons, this forest was quite dry and didn't get much rainfall. I didn't think we'd need to do much work on the bathhouse.

We were almost done, and I was already impressed with what we had, but now was the time to add the finishing touches. The bath itself was open for the world to see. Indeed, the walls hadn't been erected just yet because they would get in the way of the next part of the project. I stood in front of the open bathing area and placed my hands on my hips.

"Now for the home stretch," I said. "We need to divert the water here."

"You're going to create a gutter and direct it over here, right?" Rike asked.

I placed a hand on my chin. "Hmm..."

I could create a gutter and draw up the hot spring so that each bath would have an ample supply of water. Any excess would flow into the drainage pond, and some would be directed to our forest friends. That would allow us to take a bath soon. I remembered watching a TV show where someone created a long channel on an uninhabited island.

Walls would actually get in the way while I was creating a gutter to direct the water, which was why they hadn't been built just yet. In hindsight, it might've been better for me to create a gutter first, but it's not like there were any problems with our current method.

"Yeah, let's go with that," I finally said. "If any problems arise, we'll tackle them then."

"You got it," Rike replied with a nod.

When I turned to the rest of our family that had gathered, they all were nodding in agreement with this plan. The skies were growing dark, and we returned home, hoping to replenish our vigor so that we could soon finish building our bathhouse.

As I reached the cabin, I saw a familiar figure—not a human, but a small wyvern. Arashi had returned from Camilo's place. She was standing by the message board, and upon noticing me, she gave a small cry and flew toward Karen. A small tube was tied to her foot.

A letter now? I thought we'd meet again in a few weeks, but maybe his plans were hastened by a few days or something.

I took the letter and unfurled it, noticing that the paper was a bit large for a wyvern of Arashi's stature. I read the contents.

Camilo had apparently gone toward the Nordic region. That wasn't a journey that could be completed in one to two weeks, even with the carriage suspension system. In other words, if he was still able to conduct business, he likely had someone heading due south beforehand to meet him somewhere along the way.

He'd apparently met with someone from House Katagiri. Though he hadn't met with the lord of the house, in short, he'd been told that it was outside of

their calculations for Karen to be here in the Black Forest.

Though Karen's father had requested that she learn to forge a *katana* outside of the Nordic region, he'd expected her to stray just beyond the borders but still within the reach of House Katagiri. Perhaps he'd even thought that she would stay within the Nordic region after all. However, Karen had quickly formed ties with a merchant from the south and had used those ties to come here. This had caused quite the uproar within her house.

Some had suggested bringing her right back, but they'd ultimately ended up nixing that idea, much to Karen's relief. I could relate to that decision. I mean, the lord of her house had basically said, "Get out! Don't come back until you become a full-fledged blacksmith!" So now, he couldn't just be like, "Oh, wait, I didn't think you'd go that far—please come back."

Karen had left the nest with hopes of becoming a blacksmith to prove herself to her father, and her resolve was the real deal. She wasn't willing to obediently nod her head and return just because he offered her a simple apology.

I was tempted to laugh it off. Like father, like daughter—they were both equally stubborn in their ways. But the letter didn't end there; the person or messenger that Camilo had met offered a word of warning.

Apparently, the *samurai* lord himself would make his way here.

I didn't think he'd come to take Karen back, but I had no idea what his business would be here. I'd likely hear the details when Camilo returned. We'd initially planned on meeting in three weeks, which meant we had a bit over a week until our next meeting. I'd probably talk to the messenger then, further solidifying that Karen wouldn't be dragged back home. *Though that ultimately might become the case.*

"In short, while we won't know any more details until we hear what this messenger has to say, it seems your father didn't expect you to make the journey here," I concluded. "I'm guessing that he just wants to talk and decide on your future steps."

Everyone frowned, Karen included. Only Krul, Lucy, Hayate, and Arashi maintained their indifference.

“Camilo probably gave us this letter now with the idea that Karen might have to return home,” I continued. “During Anne’s incident, she’d ended up staying here, but it had been a bit of a fuss.”

Judging from Camilo’s writing, he’d likely dispatched this letter back to his store using a swift horse, and from there, he’d used Arashi Postal Service to deliver it to me. *It probably cost him a pretty penny to use a swift horse. He’s so considerate during times like these...*

We fell silent, since we’d expected to be with Karen for the long haul. Sure, we’d had *some* time with her, but it had still been barely over a week, and that wasn’t enough time to do much of anything. *And we’re almost finished with our hot spring...*

I broke the silence, though I held back on the volume of my voice. “If we consider Karen leaving, it might be better to increase her training time,” I said.

“Agreed,” Rike replied with a nod.

We might not have enough time to help Karen achieve her goal, but I want our new apprentice to improve as much as possible.

“Huh?” Karen gasped, waving her hands in front of her face and looking apologetic. “Please don’t mind me! I’d feel so bad if you did that!”

I forced a smile. “An apprentice shouldn’t worry about stuff like that.”

“Then what about the hot spring?” Samya asked. “Are we gonna put it on hold or what?”

I shook my head. “Let’s finish the hot spring too. I want Karen to remember that she bathed in a splendid hot spring in the south. Things’ll get busy—are you guys all right with that?”

No one voiced their reply, but they all firmly nodded at me. Knowing that things would get busy starting tomorrow, I thanked Arashi for the letter and retired to the cabin.

Chapter 4: A Meeting in the Moonlight

We washed our filthy bodies and finished dinner. Everyone was determined to work harder than ever starting tomorrow, and we soon retired to our rooms for a good night's sleep.

After a while, I quietly slipped out of bed and slowly opened the door of my room.

The cabin was as quiet as a tomb, and the moonlight that spilled in faintly illuminated the rooms, only accentuating the silence. I slowly made my way to the front door, trying to make my footsteps stealthy like a cat's. After carefully unbolting the door, I gently opened it and stepped outside.

"Whoa," I whispered in awe at the sight before me.

The moonlight illuminated the garden in front of our cabin, making it look like a stage. If a lyrical opera were hosted here, I was sure that it'd fit the mood. Of course, I had no such cheats, and I wasn't going to do anything that romantic.

I walked across the garden and made my way between the trees. Moonlight peeked through, creating a spotlight. I hid behind the trunk of a tree and waited for a while.

Soon enough, a figure emerged from the open door of the cabin, and I knew at once that this was the person I was waiting for. I stepped away from the trunk and waved the person over. She noticed my gestures and quietly made her way toward me. Her tall figure and beautiful face were illuminated by the moonlight.

Anne.

"Sorry about this," I said.

"Don't be. I don't mind," Anne replied with a smile. She was like a night-blooming cereus flower—colloquially known as a "princess of the night." Her beauty was on par with their stunning petals.

I chased unnecessary thoughts out of my head as we both hid behind the trunk of the tree.



“So, what did you think?” I asked.

“We can chalk it up as a coincidence, but I agree that the timing is a bit *too* perfect,” Anne replied.

“Thought so.”

It’d been around two weeks since Karen had come to our place from the Nordic region. That was more than enough time to glean some information. Her skills as a blacksmith weren’t bad, meaning she hadn’t been lying when she’d said that she had some experience. And since she hadn’t known that she might be forced to cut her stay here short, it made sense that she wanted to prioritize the hot spring—that would, of course, be important for someone raised in Nordic culture. Her story checked out for now.

But what if she wasn’t here to genuinely gain experience as a blacksmith? What if she was only skilled enough because she’d practiced making knives? And what if she’d tagged along with the hunt so that she wouldn’t be forced to make anything else?

“It’s unwise to ignore the possibility that she was eager to do work outside of smithing to hide her lies about her forging experience,” Anne said. “I’m sure she had no idea that we were building the bathhouse, but regardless of her interest in that project, she could’ve tried to obsess over making the perfect knife.” Anne glanced at the forge before turning back to me. “You went ahead knowing that she might have some sort of plan, right?”

“Well, I think she truly is passionate about smithing, but something about her just feels a bit...off.” I sighed.

Karen may have had some forging ideas of her own, and I felt like she did indeed have some interest in smithing. A person who didn’t care wouldn’t have the basics down so well. If she truly was here as an apprentice, I wanted to hammer everything I knew into her...which was impossible with the time we had left. If I’d been given my way, I would’ve worked day and night to produce an immense number of knives—a number that would’ve surprised even Camilo—and I would’ve had Karen watch every step so that she wouldn’t miss a thing.

However, a smidge of doubt plagued my mind—I couldn’t vouch for her

innocence. My apprehension had nudged me in the direction of building the bathhouse, and I'd skipped over opportunities to train her in blacksmithing. Of course, there was a chance that Karen was genuinely trying to become an apprentice. If so, I'd made sure that her efforts were in vain. And if that was really the case, I was prepared to accept her anger and live with a guilty conscience.

"Yep," Anne replied. "If she has ulterior motives, then what are her goals?"

I pitched up my voice and tried to mimic Rike's mannerisms as I said, "'Boss, I think the loss of you is a huge blow to the Nordic region.'"

"Huh. Rike's got a good understanding of the situation."

"She told me that once before when she saw a sword that I'd made." In fact, she'd told me that just as she'd arrived at the cabin.

"I think Rike's exactly right," Anne agreed with a nod. She then lowered the pitch of her voice to mimic someone too. "'Hey, we've been getting some fine knives from the south recently. Who made them? What? A guy from the Nordic region? You're saying a man from our region could make products of this quality?!'"

I was tempted to clap at her fine acting, and I would've if we hadn't been in such a tense situation.

"And so, they want to know if I'm really the one who forged these knives. They want to know my identity," I finished.

"Yeah, probably."

"Do you think I should've declined her apprenticeship request?"

"I wonder..." Anne said, folding her arms. "Even if you had, they would've just tried to use another method. This mindset's the same in the empire too. It's a problem if someone with excellent skills starts supporting one side."

"And...they have no means of knowing that I've got no such intentions."

"Unlike the empire, the Nordic region might actually have the power to drag you back."

I shook my head. "I'm just a simple blacksmith... I can't go against orders from

those above me.”

“You’re still going on about that?”

“But it’s the truth.”

I furrowed my brows slightly. If push came to shove, perhaps they would try to kidnap me, but that was a high-risk maneuver within the borders of the kingdom. The next logical step would be to use political means. Karen may have become my apprentice as the first step to their plan—she would do the job of scoping out who I actually am.

If that were the case, it was extremely convenient for her to work separately from me. It would be conspicuous if she tried to pry all the details out of me, but she could skillfully split up her questions and ask around within our family. Using that method, she wouldn’t be seen as too invasive. In fact, it seemed like she was trying to fit in better, learn more about me, and deepen her ties with all of us.

Indeed, when I asked Anne a little about it, she reported that Karen had inquired about where exactly I was from within the Nordic region. I could see Karen’s point of view. She was probably thinking something like “Master’s a bit of a mystery despite both of us hailing from the same region. He doesn’t talk about himself much, so I’ll ask Anne about him.”

I could only nod my head or shrug at that information. If Karen was trying to find my identity based on where I was from in the Nordic region, she’d miscalculated—I wasn’t actually from this world. And thus, I had nothing to reveal to her.

“But if the plan is to just drag you back, there’s no need for a messenger to warn you about it,” Anne said. “They could just wait at Camilo’s and catch you when we arrive with the order. At the very latest, it would only take two weeks for us to show up.”

“Right...” I said, folding my arms.

Anne gave a small sigh. “I don’t want to doubt a person I’ve gotten friendly with, and I’m hoping that this is all just some sort of coincidence, but it’s best to be wary.”

“Maybe we’re acting way too late, and there’s no reason for us to change our attitudes toward her after all this time.”

“Well, I’m sure the margrave and count aren’t willing to let you go so easily. Otherwise, my father would’ve already used force to drag you to the empire.”

“I certainly hope they’ll vouch for me.” I gave a forced smile and gently patted Anne’s shoulder. “I’ll maintain my current attitude with Karen. If things start getting hairy, I’ll consult Camilo or Marius about it.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

“Thank you. You’ve been a huge help.”

“You’re welcome,” Anne said, smiling serenely under the moonlight.

We returned to our cabin just as quietly as we’d left it, though we moved at different times so as not to disturb our slumbering family.

####

The following morning was as normal as could be. Karen was her usual self too. Even if her plan was to infiltrate our cabin—and even if she knew that her motive had been discovered—I didn’t expect her to go all evil villain on us. It’s not like she would shout, “Mwa ha ha ha! That’s right! My plan was to sneak into this family!” and cause us to all gasp in shock. Regardless, we only had about a week until Karen’s future was decided.

I guess I’ll handle any problems when they happen...but I’ll still be thinking about them.

I shooed these thoughts away and decided to focus on work. Today, we would be building gutters so that we could direct hot spring water into the bathhouse. We grabbed the tools that were lined up outside of the cabin and marched to the hot spring with Krul, Lucy, and Hayate in tow.

Water gushed from the hot spring vein, and we all went to quietly check up on the drainage pond. It was crowded as usual with the forest’s residents, and my shoulder steadily got a beating.

“I feel a bit hesitant to start working here,” I said.

Diana stopped her shoulder attacks and placed a hand over her chin. “Yeah.

We might startle them.”

They would probably come back once we left, but I still wasn’t keen on surprising or scaring them. Luckily, there was some distance between the hot spring source and the drainage pond, and we just needed to connect the drainage gutter for the bathhouse to the channel that had already been dug from the source to the pond. When I suggested that to the rest of my family, they all agreed, and we got to work. Since we had some leeway with the placement of the drainage gutter, I knew that I could improve upon it should any issues arise.

“All right, let’s split up and do this,” I said.

“Okay!” everyone replied.

And so, we were approaching the home stretch. We divided ourselves into three teams: one would build the gutters, one would build the support frames for them, and one would dig a new channel that would connect the bathhouse’s drainage gutter to the already established drainage pond channel. Rike and I were in charge of making the gutters, Helen and Diana were in charge of the digging, and everyone else, Krul included, would be building frames to support the gutters.

There were a few reasons why I placed Anne on building duty instead of digging. Her height would certainly be useful, but it was also so that she could keep an eye on Karen.

Rike and I started cutting up a log. We were used to this kind of work, and the log quickly transformed into a set of long planks. We cut the planks to the proper lengths and arranged them as so: one plank on the bottom, and one each on the left and right sides, creating an upright U shape—the shape of a gutter. There could potentially be some leakage, but I obviously wanted to keep that to a minimum, so I needed them to fit just right. Wood expanded a little when it absorbed moisture, so I kept that in mind. I also didn’t want too tight of a fit, which would cause the support frame itself to expand. That would do us no good. But if the planks were too far apart, water would leak everywhere, so we needed to find the perfect size. Luckily, I had my cheats on my side, and Rike had her experience.

We quickly built all of the gutters.

I also realized that I needed something like water stoppers. Water needed to keep flowing if we wanted to avoid overflowing the source—this was what the drainage channel to the pond was primarily used for. If we built gutters leading to the baths on the opposite side of the source from the drainage channel, then we could redirect all the water to the baths simply by stopping up the channel. Likewise, we could drain the tubs by stopping up the gutters from the source to the bathhouse and letting bathwater in the drainage gutter flow into the channel. And if we needed to clean the baths, we could also use this to stop the water flow temporarily.

So, I made stoppers too.

As I worked, I sneaked in some glances at the team building the support structure. They were progressing at an impressive speed. For the frame, they had hammered some uniform, twigless branches into the ground at regular intervals from the source to the bathhouse. For each gutter, there were two rows of these branches running parallel to one another, and the gutters Rike and I had built would fit snugly in the middle of each support structure—the branches would hold up the gutters and keep them secure.

The bathhouse was a short distance away (we didn't want to make it too close to the vein since that'd make the bath too far from our cabin) and it looked almost like the branches were sprouting up from the ground, equidistant from each other. I'd given them a piece of wood that was the same width as the planks we'd used to build the bottom of the gutters, and this had become their guideline for spacing the rows.

When complete, these gutters would direct hot water to the bathhouse. The tub would fill, and we would soak, soothing our bodies like the animals in the drainage pond. Before returning to my work, I gazed at the support structure and envisioned the perfect bath.

All three teams finished working on their parts of the gutter project just before the sun set, and we were free to do as we pleased for the rest of the day. Some practiced their swordsmanship, while others played with Krul and Lucy. Usually, I'd be using this hour to prepare dinner, but from today on, Rike

and I would be using this time to help Karen with her training.

Unfortunately, Karen hadn't gotten much better at smithing.

"You've come this far," Rike encouraged. "You're almost there!"

Karen saw incremental improvements...but it wasn't much at all.

####

In the end, we'd managed to build gutters, the support structures, and dig the drainage channel without a hitch. Time passed for Karen, and unfortunately, her skills remained stagnant. Even if she had nefarious motives, it wasn't as though she could easily attack anyone in our family. And if someone turned up murdered, she would clearly be our prime suspect. I also knew that she didn't possess the skills to escape this forest on her own. This feedback had come from Helen, who'd crossed swords with Karen several times. Of course, if Karen was hiding her true skills, there was nothing we could do about that.

Today, we'd be assembling and setting up the gutters. There would be two gutter systems coming from the source: one for the men's bath and one for the women's bath. We would also have a third gutter for drainage, which would lead out of the bathhouse and connect to the drainage channel. While we could stop the water from coming to the baths by going to the source, we had also added stoppers to the gutters, which made it possible for both baths to temporarily block out water, leaving only the drainage channel free—we could also block the men's bath and make it so that only the women's bath could intake water and vice versa. *It'll be more convenient if we can stop the flow of water without needing to go into the bathhouse or to the spring itself.*

Finally, we started working on the walls of the bathhouse. The gutters needed to pass through the walls, so I created "lids" for the gutters where they exited the walls, making sure that all the planks fit snugly together. That way, no one would be able to peep inside at the people bathing.

The rest of the walls could be built normally. We first built a crosspiece, which looked almost like the wooden lattice frame of a *shoji*. For the design, we alternated using the fronts and backs of wooden planks, and we made sure to line the edges neatly together. Now that we had the crosspiece, it was time to fill in the rest of the wall. We cut short planks and aligned them in a decorative

chevron pattern on the inside of the wall, with the crosspiece being on the outside—this would allow air to flow through and make it difficult for people to see into the baths. We had the walls pretty far from the tub and the bathing area, so people wouldn't be able to peek unless they got real close anyway.

We left quite a bit of space between the roof and the top of the wall, allowing steam to flow out. I was sure that we'd be able to bathe just fine on rainy days, but if the wind was too strong, rain could end up falling into the bathhouse. Needless to say, we'd get soaked on our trek to the bathhouse if the wind was that strong.

After several days of working on the bathhouse, we needed to switch gears and focus on making knives for our standing order—after all, we only had six days before we went to Camilo's with Karen. However, I wasn't in the forge. No, I was at the hot spring vein, where we could open the gutters, let water flow into the bathhouse, and have it drain out.

"All right, here I go!" I said.

"Go for it!" came a reply from a short distance away.

I'd already confirmed many times that removing these stoppers allowed water to flow into the men's and women's baths. The water should gush out energetically through the bathhouse and then out toward the drainage.

The time had come for us to finally fill the baths and enjoy the hot spring for ourselves.

"Hup!" I removed the stoppers that had been keeping water from the source from flowing down the gutters and into the baths. I placed the stoppers in the drainage gutter, which would stop the baths from draining and allow water to fill up the tubs.

As soon as I removed the stoppers, water started to eagerly flow through the gutters.

"Ooh! I see it! It's coming!" Samya cried happily.

Everyone clapped and cheered. Lucy, who was happily in Diana's arms (Diana noted that our pup was getting heavier by the day), wagged her tail happily

when she saw the water. The hot spring water made it to our family in no time at all. Everyone chased after it as it flowed into the bathhouse. The wall blocked the view, so everyone except me jumped into the bathhouse to get a closer look. I soon heard cheers and laughter, implying that the bath was steadily being filled. I could hear water splashing around too.

I was watching over everyone while checking the flow—I wanted to see if hot water flooded the channels that we’d built. Finally, I headed to the bathhouse. I also wanted to see the moment when hot water first began to fill the tub, but I knew I’d get my chance one day—we’d have to periodically stop the water to clean the tub, and then we’d need to refill the baths. I noticed some water spilling from the channel that connected the source to the baths, but then, I saw the gutters expanding. *They’ll soon be able to hold all the water.* We would need some periodic checks, but it seemed there were no immediate issues for now.

I chased after everyone and entered the women’s bath. This would likely be the last time I’d ever set foot in here. My next attempt at entering would undoubtedly be unforgivable.

“Whoa, looks pretty nice,” I said.

Because our source was gushing out hot water, some had overflowed the gutter, but water was still flowing into the tub with incredible speed. It would take a bit more time until the tub was filled, but I was sure that it’d be ready for us after we cleaned up and had a good workout or two.

“I’m so excited!” Karen cried.

For the past two weeks, I’d felt like she was earnestly doing her best to complete building tasks that she’d never done before. She wasn’t completely in the clear, but I thought her hard work should be genuinely rewarded. And, even if she had secrets of her own, I felt like her excitement about finally getting to bathe in a hot spring was the real deal.

I smiled. “Yep, I can see how a person from the Nordic region would be eager for this bath. You’ve worked really hard.”

And so, today, we decided to take our first bath in the hot spring. There was no way we’d be able to keep ourselves from immediately enjoying the fruits of

our labor.

First, I cleaned up all the tools we'd been using. The sun would be setting soon, so we were all in a bit of a rush to clean up the construction site. We could make some light using magic, and the sky was clear, so the moonlight was bright, but none of us wanted to take a bath when night had truly fallen. It seemed like everyone else's daily training had been put on hold for the sake of bath time.

We used water from the well to wash our tools, then dried them off and lined them up inside the forge. *We might need to inspect these tools for any wear.*

"We'll have to wait a little before we can clean these up properly and put them back into storage," I said.

"Yeah," Diana replied with a nod.

It looked a little weird to see tools lined up in a space used to greet guests. *Our place really looks lived-in, huh?* It'd be a bit of a problem if we really did welcome any new guests, but if we did, I'd ask everyone to throw these tools into the shed or something.

Once everything was all cleaned up, we headed down the walkway. We all had a bit of a pep in our step in anticipation for the long-awaited hot spring soak. I wasn't sure if Krul, Lucy, and Hayate wanted to come along, but when I gave them my offer, the three of them turned back to their hut. I talked it over with Diana and we decided not to bring them—we'd just have to wash them tomorrow morning.

Just to be safe, I prepared a magical lamp for each bath. I could light up my own, and Lidy could handle it on the women's side. She assured me that she'd be fine.

"See you later," I said.

"Yep." Samya waved before heading into the women's side.

I waved back. Unlike that song I'd heard back on Earth, no one would be waiting for me when I was done. Each of us would soak, get out when we were ready, and make the short trek back to the cabin, all in our own time. However, just to be safe (since it'd be dark outside), I asked Rike, Lidy, and Karen to return

home with Samya, Diana, Helen, or Anne. Since this was also a way to keep an eye on Karen, I was sure that Anne would volunteer herself for that role.

I slid the door open with a clatter and found a space that was smaller than the women's bath, but otherwise identical. There was a shelf where I could place my clothes and a shoe cabinet. I threw my boots into the cabinet, quickly stripped down, and gently patted some dirt from my clothes before placing them onto the shelf.

Back on Earth, I'd visited a luxurious public bath—a bathhouse equipped with various other facilities. I never really understood the whole "revitalize" experience with a sauna. This revitalizing routine consisted of entering the sauna, taking a cold bath, and resting. Rinsing and repeating this process about three times apparently revitalized and detoxed the body. We *did* have a well with fresh cold water, so it might've been worth it to try and see if this routine could be duplicated in this world.

When I entered the bath, only a faint layer of steam greeted me. There was enough space for ventilation, the water wasn't too hot, and though autumn was just around the corner, it wasn't too cold just yet. Water gushed into the overflowing tub. The hot spring vein was also supplying the women's bath with water, yet I found that there was still plenty to spare for me too.

I scooped up some water with a wooden bucket and dumped it over my head. Warm water dripped down my body. *It's completely different from the icy water of the lake.* It'd only been around six months since I'd come here, and usually, all I did was wipe my body with water that I'd boiled. Before now, I'd never had the luxury of just pouring warm water over myself. I took another bucketful and dumped it over my head, reminiscing about what I was able to do back on Earth.

Maybe this is a bit greedy, but I would also love to have a shower. Didn't the ancient Greeks or Romans use a cow's bladder or something to create a showerhead? That seems possible to do in this world too. Something to think about.

Usually, I soaked a cloth in warm water to wipe my body down. I was grateful that I had a seemingly endless supply of warm water to use in abundance

instead of slowly using a small pot of water that gradually turned cold. By the time I'd poured warm water over myself several more times, all the dirt had been washed away. And though I wasn't using any soap, I still felt much cleaner than before.

I slowly dipped my toes into the bath before submerging myself fully. I let out a groan. Who could blame me? I was internally forty, and the warm water seeped into my middle-aged bones. It'd been six months since I'd gotten to experience something like this. The warmth permeated through my body, and I felt like a piece of meat being defrosted. My aching shoulders were slowly being soothed—was this the effect of the water glittering with magic? Whatever it was, I knew it was working. And this was coming from a man who, on Earth, had visited a chiropractor three times a week. They'd told me that my shoulders were harder than rock.

When I looked up, I saw that the blue skies had already taken on the orange hue of the setting sun. I could faintly still make out the green of the trees.

"It's a much better view than I thought," I said to myself.

"You have to clean yourself a bit better before you get in!" Karen's voice suddenly echoed.

I could hear them splashing around and having fun; while there was a tall wall between the men's and women's baths to prevent any peeping, we were in the middle of a quiet forest. I didn't have a stool or anything to make myself taller, so I couldn't see anything, but there was a gap between the roof and the wall that allowed voices to pass through.

From the grumbling reply, I guessed that Samya had tried to jump into the bath without washing herself off properly. As a person from the Nordic region, Karen likely couldn't overlook the lack of manners.

This bath had been built specifically for them, so I didn't think they had much to worry about, but I was grateful that basic manners were being taught—no matter who the teacher was. *Maybe I should've taught them first.*

"Well, whatever," I muttered.

It was something to keep in mind if I received any complaints, but for now, I

decided to indulge myself in the comfort of this warm water. I felt like all my worries melted away into the hot spring as I sank deeper into the water.

While I was relieving my tired body, I decided to think about the future. *It might be a good idea to ask about Karen's true motives when we deliver our order or when her family comes to pick her up.*

I wasn't sure if she'd obediently tell me the truth, but if I could gauge her reaction even a little and glean a bit more information from her, that'd be enough. *I'm not sure what kinds of ideas Anne has, but I think asking Karen directly should be possible. And if she plans on playing dumb, she must have her reasons. That's fine with me.*

"It'd be great if our worries were also completely washed away with this water," I muttered in a low voice so that no one else could hear.

The loud trickles of the water drowned out my complaints and washed them away.

That evening, the hot spring was our main topic over dinner.

"I'm still not used to this hot spring stuff," Samya confessed. "It kinda feels weird, y'know?"

"You *did* say that you weren't used to taking long baths," Rike replied with a giggle.

Before Diana had arrived at our cabin, Samya and Rike would often go to the lake to clean their bodies. However, Samya was apparently not used to that, and the frequency of her using the lake as a bath had decreased recently. She only agreed to go for a full wash with the rest of the women at the lake when she was completely covered in mud. *Perhaps this hot spring might increase her number of baths.* Since we saw a tiger enjoying a dip, I guessed that Samya would eventually take a liking to it...hopefully.

Karen, on the other hand, was all smiles. "There aren't many hot springs this grand!"

Anne nodded along. This opinion likely had nothing to do with whatever Karen had in mind. Anne probably genuinely agreed since she'd apparently

been to a hot spring in the empire. Perhaps she was just making a mental comparison.

Helen swallowed her mouthful of meat and said, “I’ve heard there are nobles that bathe everyday. I can see why now.”

“Only a handful of them can,” Diana replied. She drank the rest of her tea and added, “It takes a lot of effort to provide enough hot water for a bath—at just the right temperature—every single day. Normally, if someone were to request that, they’d be turned down for being ridiculous.”

“Yeah, if you’d said that to us, we would’ve asked if you were insane.”

“Exactly.”

In this world, it wasn’t normal to use precious fuel to boil enough water for a bath. Some places didn’t even have an ample supply of water. Even in this forest, where we had more than enough trees to burn and a massive lake with a seemingly endless supply of water, I wasn’t keen on building a traditional bath. We’d only built a bathhouse because we’d hit a hot spring vein that nullified any issues.

“But I do feel rather refreshed after the bath,” Lidy said.

“Maybe the magic in the water affects us somehow,” Anne surmised.

“I can’t be certain, but it’s a good possibility.”

I noticed Anne glance at Karen for a split second, so her question may have held a deeper meaning.

“Why don’t we all do some smithing tomorrow?” I suggested.

I wasn’t in any rush, but if we finished up quickly, we’d have more time on our hands. No one seemed to be against it, and we hadn’t been smithing much for a while. Maybe everyone else also wanted to return to our normal lifestyle.

####

The next day, I woke up as usual and started on my water-collecting routine. Hayate had only been with us for a short while, but she blended right in. It was now normal for her to be with us as I filled the jugs with water from the lake and washed my daughters off.

I'd taken a bath last night, so I had no need to wipe myself down. Krul and Lucy looked at me quizzically, but once I petted their heads, they seemed happy and didn't pursue the subject. After I got back to the cabin, the family ate breakfast as usual, prepared for a day of work, bowed twice, clapped twice, and bowed once more in front of the *kamidana*, and finally, prepared for work in the forge.

Since everyone would be joining in to help, we wouldn't be making many elite models—we'd be focusing more on entry-level ones. Our family was used to this work, and everything was progressing smoothly...barring one person's contributions.

"Hrmm..." Karen said. She was currently in charge of forging shortswords.

I checked up on her work in between finishing blades of my own. The quality was good enough to be sold to Camilo; however, by the standard of our quality assurance, her blades barely made the cut. She was also quite slow. Since she wasn't used to this kind of work, I didn't expect her to be fast like Rike, but judging from the speed I'd seen her use before, I expected her to be just a bit quicker. We hadn't done much smithing since she'd arrived, so perhaps her skills had dulled a little and now she was in a slump. I couldn't do much for her since I heavily relied on my cheats, but maybe it was better for her to help me out. That would be a good change of pace for her too.

Just then, Rike called out to her. "Karen, I'm sorry, but could you lend me a hand for a second?"

"Me?" Karen replied in surprise. The dwarf smiled and nodded back. "Okay."

Karen jogged over. Rike told her a few things, and she nodded. I continued to watch over Karen as I worked, but she and Rike were dividing things up pretty well. Rike would straighten the blade while Karen quenched it, and they'd switch roles every now and then. I was a bit bothered to see Rike tilt her head to one side while watching Karen straighten a blade. But thanks to my older apprentice's support, the finished products were finely made—enough to be entry-level models for Camilo's order. I internally breathed a sigh of relief.

By the end of the day, we'd made more than enough for today's quota.

Over dinner, I swallowed my spoonful of soup and turned to Samya. "By the

way, I know it's been a while since your last hunt. If you wanna go hunting, you can."

"Huh?!" Samya replied. Her voice was filled with shock and joy, and her eyes widened. Her tail rose straight up too, but it soon drooped, and she frowned. "But what about the order?"

I smiled. "I made a few yesterday, and if I put in some effort tomorrow, we should be able to make it with some time to spare."

To be precise, there wasn't really a set quantity for our orders. The deal was that Camilo would buy whatever I brought, implying that I could bring as many or as little as I wanted. Camilo would pay us for the order, minus the cost of whatever everyday supplies we bought from him, and generally, we received a good amount of money. If we didn't sell Camilo enough to cover the cost of supplies, I'd just need to pay him the difference.

For our daily necessities, I always requested a bit more than we needed. Right now, our reserves could last us a month or two without a problem. So even if we completely missed an order, we'd be just fine. I'd built a storage for our reserves, and it was better to see them used.

"We'll be fine, won't we?" I asked Rike.

"Yes, I believe so," she replied with a firm nod.

Samya finally broke free of her hesitation. "Then I guess I'll go hunting."

When I told everyone else that they were free to tag along on the hunt, the rest of our family, minus Rike, said they'd join in. Among them was Karen—she apparently was ready for another round of hunting.

Anne and I locked eyes. It seemed my seeds of doubt wouldn't be disappearing for a while.

####

After my usual morning routine, I sent everyone off. Everything was normal. I lit the firebed and the forge steadily grew warmer. I liked this feeling when I was just starting the day. With every rise in degree, my determination also increased.

However, I felt a bit different today. As the coals slowly started to glow red, my mind was filled with various thoughts.

Samya was good at sniffing out lies. However, she relied on her sense of smell for this, and she couldn't pick up on them unless she was actively looking for a liar. Plus, if the speaker was technically speaking the truth, she couldn't see (or smell) through the lie. In other words, if the general gist of Karen's words was true, any tiny lies would go undetected.

I tried to simplify Karen's motives: she'd basically been chased out of her household, she couldn't return until she became a full-fledged blacksmith, and so she'd decided to become an apprentice here. If, for example, she was actually on a *mission* that had caused her to leave her hometown, and if she'd become an apprentice under the *guise* of needing to become a blacksmith, then her story wasn't technically a complete lie...even if she hadn't told us the whole truth.

I can corner her right now and ask for the truth, but there's a chance that she'll somehow shift the topic or muddy the waters...

"Boss! Boss!" Rike called out.

I snapped back to reality and noticed that the firebed and forge had gotten hot enough. "Whoops. Sorry, sorry. Let's get to work then, shall we?"

Rike looked confused for a split second, but she soon gave her energetic reply. "Right!"

All right, time for another hard day of work. We made knives until just before lunch. Metal sheets were heated in the firebed, hammered with magical energy at the perfect temperature, formed into desired shapes, quenched, tempered, and finally, polished.

We weren't making any custom models, only elite ones, and we were using material we were used to. Work continued without any issues. Honestly, I felt like I could make these with my eyes closed, but I wouldn't dare do anything silly like that. I had to personally ensure that each and every one of these knives was up to quality. That was my responsibility.

It took some time to pour metal into the sword molds and wait for them to

cool. We quickly completed that task, pouring the metal into molds that the others had made for us. My cheats activated, telling me how to tip the container when pouring in the metal.

“Hrmm...” Rike groaned as she finished helping me pour. Just as I was about to call a time-out for lunch, she cocked her head to one side.

Did I make a mistake somehow? No, no, I’m being a bit too restless today.

“I just think it’s weird, Boss,” Rike said.

“What is?” I asked, tilting my head along with her.

She nodded at me. “I wonder why Karen wanted to go hunting.”

“Ah...”

Yeah, I can’t blame her for that question. Samya might’ve been oblivious, but I was sure Diana must’ve had her fair share of suspicions.

“Why don’t we talk about it over lunch?” I suggested.

“Huh? Uh, yeah, sure,” Rike replied.

I lowered the heat in the firebed and forge—I did this by stopping the bellows from blowing air into the firebed. The two of us then headed into the cabin.

“A...spy?” Rike asked, gulping her soup.

I stuffed my cheeks with bread and nodded. “Well, it’s just a possibility.”

I started to tell her about the conversation Anne and I’d had the other day. As the senior apprentice, Rike had been watching over Karen, so I expected her to be a bit more shocked by the news.

“I see,” she finally said.

I was surprised by her blasé response. Her adorable face was usually quite expressive, but she didn’t seem at all disheartened by this revelation.

“You don’t look too surprised,” I pointed out.

“Oh, I am. But...” Rike looked hesitant. But as a breeze blew outside, her uncertainty vanished. “How shall I say this... When she was helping me out, it felt rather odd.”

“What do you mean?”

“You remember yesterday, don’t you? When I had her lend me a hand?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“The products that she’d made alone were barely acceptable for sale. But she was able to make the blades just fine when working with me.”

“Right.”

I agreed with her sentiment. When Karen had started helping Rike out, the blades they’d produced were of fine quality. They could be proudly sold to others, though there was still room to improve.

“And I thought that was weird,” Rike said.

“Huh?”

“Don’t you think...” Rike placed her spoon down and stared straight at me before continuing. “Maybe she can actually forge better products, but she’s *hiding* her skills?”

I could tell that my eyes went wide with astonishment. “You mean, she’s not avoiding smithing to hide the fact that her skills aren’t up to par...but she’s reluctant because we might find out that she’s actually better than she claims?”

“Precisely.” Rike nodded firmly. “Think about it. If a total amateur is sent to a blacksmith who can produce superb items, the amateur will just report back something like, ‘Yeah, I saw him and he saw my work. He’s good so I’m pretty sure we’ve got the guy.’ And that’d be that, right?”

“I...guess so.”

This logic was so simple that I couldn’t believe I’d overlooked it completely. I’d even given Karen an elite model—something I’d actually worked quite hard on. Anyone could’ve discerned that the elite knife was impressive, but a normal housewife, for example, wouldn’t be able to point out exactly how and why it was so good. They weren’t equipped with enough knowledge about smithing to provide critique. And as for an Earth example, everyone knew that knives from Solingen, Sakai, and Seki were of superb quality, but the average person wouldn’t be able to tell which knife came from which city.

If our doubts held water, it would mean that Karen had the ability to recognize knives made by my hand specifically. *If she can do that, she must have quite a bit of skill and experience. That means Karen's forging abilities are actually...*

"Boss," Rike said worriedly, snapping me back to reality. "If you're told to return to the Nordic region, will you?" She stared straight at me.

I quickly shook my head and tried to sound as bright as possible. "Nope. I'm planning on staying here until the day I die. I've got no intention of going back."

It wasn't like I had anyone waiting for me there. I wanted to protect my days of normalcy here in this forest. Nowhere else.

Rike let out a loud sigh, and I tousled her hair. It'd been a while since I'd done that.

After lunch, we resumed working on the swords. Once the molds cooled, we popped them open and took out the metal. We reheated each sword and hammered them into smoother shapes while imbuing our swings with magical energy. We then quenched, tempered, and sharpened the edges of the blades. We were both used to this work, and we made them so swiftly that I thought we might run out of molds.

At this point, we'd created an impressive pile of swords in the corner of the forge—I placed the new knives in a wooden box. They weren't individually wrapped, but each had a sheath, so the blades were safe from harm.

"I guess we've made enough," I said.

Rike nodded. "Looks like plenty."

The forge was still hot—Rike and I were sweating as we gazed at the fruits of our labor. This was mostly the same as any other day in the forge, except for one major difference: as of today, we would be able to take a nice warm bath to wash off our sweat.

"We can start making our usual models from tomorrow on, so we've got more than enough time," I said.

"Agreed," Rike replied. "Quite honestly, it's odd that we can produce this

many so quickly.”

“Yeah.”

Normally, it would take three full weeks to make this quantity—if I’d been just starting out, I would’ve undoubtedly used that time in full. But it’d been a while since I’d become a blacksmith, and now I was able to swiftly make all sorts of items. Some jobs were tougher than others, and I was still heavily reliant on my cheats, but I felt like I was slowly getting used to the flow of the work.

If the plan was to live in leisure as a blacksmith, I would’ve been satisfied with working at my current pace while taking some breaks or time off to do other projects. *But, well, since I’ve got my cheats, it’d be great to know my limits. I guess I’ll be working hard for a bit longer.*

It was still pretty early, but we decided to call it a day. We put out the fire and cleaned up our tools. Soon, I started to hear voices outside—it seemed the rest of our family was back from hunting. When Rike and I stepped outside to greet them, we were met with a shocking sight.

“Whoa, you guys are muddy,” I said.

Even a boar rolling around in mud wouldn’t be so dirty. They were absolutely caked with dirt from head to toe.

“We were chasing after a boar but there was this muddy area...” Samya said, scrunching her nose as she picked the dirt off her furry paws.

“We wounded it over the mud, and it fell in,” Helen continued. “We still had to finish it off, though, and boy did it put up a good fight.” She was also dirty, but she was the cleanest of the bunch. *I guess the Lightning Strike managed to dodge a few muddy attacks.*

“And once we finally killed the boar, Krul and Lucy decided to play around in the mud...” Lidy finished.

“Oof...” I sighed.

Lidy’s beautiful hair was caked with mud. Krul and Lucy must’ve thought that everyone else was playing around—I could easily imagine them happily joining in the fun while making quite a mess.



My two daughters must've had a blast. They were still running around happily.

"We cleaned ourselves a little at the lake when we submerged the boar, but we thought it would be best to hurry home and jump into the hot spring," Diana said.

She looked a bit weary, but she smiled at my daughters. I was thrilled to hear that our most recent building was being put to good use. Still, if they had cleaned themselves at the lake and were *still* this filthy, it meant that they'd been in an even worse state after taking down the boar. Everyone looked tired (I wasn't sure if I could actually see Anne under all the mud), and I couldn't fault them for that.

"Rike and I are done for the day, so let's go to the hot spring," I said. "Don't track too much mud into the cabin, and make sure to wash off your shoes with well water before you enter the hot spring."

Their replies all sounded simply exhausted.

####

We put the hot spring to good use that evening, and we decided that the next morning would be spent dragging the boar back to the cabin. Then in the afternoon, we would work on some forging.

I woke early the next day, completed my morning water routine, and ate some breakfast.

"I just realized that the breakfasts you make aren't Nordic cuisine," Karen said languidly.

The thought of her collecting information crossed my mind, but I soon realized that Karen knew I'd been wanting some rice.

"Well, we don't have any rice," I pointed out.

"Right, you did mention that," Karen replied. "So when you get your hands on some, will this breakfast have more of a Nordic flair to it?"

"We could have dried fish. There are streams where we could catch some in this forest. It wouldn't be bad to have a Nordic breakfast from time to time."

I took a sip of soup. It was no *miso* soup, but the saltiness from the meat and the umami from the vegetables blended together well. If I added *miso*, the soup would get too salty, but if we removed the meat, it might have the perfect balance. *Some kelp or bonito flakes could heighten the flavor of the broth for a truly delicious soup.* I'd heard back on Earth that the first *miso* soups were made by simply dissolving *miso* into hot water and adding random stuff. Since this world apparently had something similar, I wouldn't mind pairing it with rice one day.

"Ah, dried fish and rice sounds great. I would've loved to have a taste," Karen said forlornly. She seemed like she was already preparing to be dragged back home.

Camilo's letter stated that she wouldn't be immediately sent back; however, she was acting like there was a good possibility of that happening. *But is that part of your plan?*

"You'll be able to try Eizo's Nordic breakfast if they decide that you don't have to go back," Samya said. She was the first to polish off her breakfast. "Sounds like this isn't about you going back anyway."

Samya had been awfully friendly with Karen. *Huh. Do lizardmen and beastfolk have some sort of connection? Or is it because they went hunting together?* Depending on the situation, Samya might be forced to learn a painful truth about Karen...but I wasn't keen on telling her my doubts about our newcomer.

I'd been able to talk to Anne and Rike about it, but for some reason, I hesitated to tell Samya. I felt that my theory might be a bit odd or at least half-baked. *Or maybe, if my doubts turn out to be true, I just want someone to see Karen innocently without knowing the truth. That way, she can remain a part of someone's happy memory.*

"Right," Karen replied with a smile to Samya.

I could only gaze at them. My mind was filled with a myriad of emotions.

Once breakfast was over and the table was cleared, we did our usual prayer in front of the *kamidana*. Karen, our resident Nordic citizen, expertly went through the ritual along with everyone else. We prayed for another peaceful day of work as we headed outside to collect the boar.

“I can see why you’d be caked in mud after chasing this big thing around,” I said as I peered at the boar submerged at the bottom of the lake.

Samya told us that especially large boars would appear on occasion, and Lidy added that it could be due to the magic within the forest. Despite its size, we managed to drag it back without issue.

Sure, it was large, but our process remained the same. We hung it from a tree, skinned it, and sliced it up into manageable chunks of meat. We got a lot more meat than usual, and I knew that it would satisfy our family’s hunger for a good while. There were only a couple of days left until we would find out whether Karen would remain in the mix.

I took some fresh meat—a treat only available right after successful hunts—and grilled it for lunch. I used three different types of flavoring on the meat: soy sauce, *miso*, and wine. The rest of the meat would be dried. This would be a big meal for us, but since we’d be working in the forge later, it was important to replenish everyone’s energy.

Once the forge and firebed were lit, it was time for our afternoon work. Everyone skillfully got to smithing, and I had Karen watch over my work. I wasn’t sure if this would be useful for her, but I thought it’d look unnatural if I didn’t show her my process.

Our mass-produced entry-level items followed the same process as our elite models—the only difference was in how they were finished. Still, that didn’t mean the job could be done with two or three swings of a hammer. There was surely something Karen could learn from watching me.

When I told Karen to observe me as part of her training, she immediately nodded. She watched my every move, never missing a moment as I worked.

I watched Karen back. In the moment, I felt like my worries were all groundless—it was like I’d been fearing a ghost that had never existed. Frankly, I wished that was the case.

I swiftly finished up the knives and realized that this was the first time I’d worked while genuinely trying to teach her.

####

For the next three days—or two and a half, to be exact—I made swords and knives while Karen watched. At the end of each day, as part of her training, we had her forge a few items by herself. Rike observed that it was like Karen’s skills were stuck in a loop of taking one step forward and then one step back. I agreed with that assessment, though perhaps it was still too early to tell.

The day before our trip to Camilo’s, I made dinner a bit more luxurious than usual. It was like a going-away party of sorts. If Karen would indeed be going back to the Nordic region, I thought she should experience how we did things here.

I sautéed some of our special cuts of venison and boar meat with some wine-and-brandy sauce. I didn’t really have leafy greens for a salad, so I made some blanched vegetables with herbs and lined up some fruit in between.

“It isn’t exactly gourmet,” I said apologetically. “I can only do so much in the forest.”

Karen immediately waved her hands in front of her face. “Don’t say that! This is more than enough! Everything’s delicious!”

We made a toast and started the meal. Samya and Helen immediately got absorbed in gobbling up the meat while Rike was busy downing alcohol. Diana and Lidy were calm as usual, but they were drinking their wine at a relatively quicker pace than usual. The discussion turned to Nordic customs and how they handled celebrations or farewell parties.

Karen slowly swished her tail. “Well, it’s not that different. There’ll usually be a feast with alcohol.”

“Alcohol from the Nordic region?” Rike asked.

Karen nodded. She explained that there was unrefined and refined *sake* (like on Earth), and they even had something like *kasutori shochu*, a type of distilled alcohol made with *sake* lees. Rike’s eyes glimmered with interest—it was an adorable sight. *Maybe I’ll ask Camilo to get his hands on some if we can get more stuff from the Nordic region.*

Speaking of luxurious food—while people in the Nordic region apparently ate raw fish, they generally pickled it in vinegar. They also ate stewed dishes or

grilled meat from animals hunted in the mountains. In other words, a feast in the region usually meant something that took time to prepare or was difficult to obtain. That wasn't so different from the customs on Earth.

Karen stated that her favorite food was a dish that resembled *kamaboko*, a type of Japanese fish cake. I wasn't able to ask if that was a personal preference or if all lizardmen were partial toward it. *If it's something that can be preserved and transported from the Nordic region, I'd like to have a taste...but I bet it's a no-go. Could I make that dish here?*

The party was simple but cheerful, and it went on for a bit longer than usual as we prepared to head to the city.

After finishing our morning routine, we pulled out the cart and loaded it up with our wares. I brought a bundle of swords and the little wooden delivery box containing the knives. These were our main products for sale. I hadn't made other tools that could be used for daily necessities since they hadn't sold well at the Open Market. I'd make an occasional spear or two, though. According to Camilo, spears did sell pretty well—his friend had bought one to use for protection. *Maybe I should start making more of them to sell.*

My three daughters, sensing that we'd be going out for the first time in a while, were excitedly jumping around. Hayate, who'd been quiet when she'd initially arrived, was softly crying out alongside Krul and Lucy. *Or maybe, as the eldest sister, she's trying to calm the other two.*

We got Krul hooked up to the cart, and we all climbed in before setting off. Lucy was getting good at expertly jumping aboard. I still found her adorable, but I was finally having to admit it—she was no longer our pup. She looked like an adult wolf now.

I think cats can still be called kittens if they're less than a year old. If I apply the same logic to wolves, I can call Lucy a pup for about half a year longer.

I wasn't sure if Lucy sensed my concerns, but she rubbed her head against my legs, and I gently petted her. Krul and Hayate—who was perched atop Krul's head—cried out, and we set off for the city.

Chapter 5: A Messenger from the Nordic Region

The carriage clattered on. It was a bit unfortunate to see clouds in the sky—the usual rays of sunlight that cast spotlights on the Black Forest were dim today. The forest was dark even during sunny days, so it seemed darker than usual during cloudy weather. I was used to the gloominess of the Black Forest, but I still found it creepy during these cloudy days; those not used to this place undoubtedly felt more intimidated by the lack of light.

Karen glanced around. “It’s really starting to sink in that I’m in an amazing place.” She’d had the shortest stay of anyone within our family, but I could relate to that thought.

“Yeah, I think about that from time to time,” Diana replied.

“Same here,” Lidy added.

Anne and Helen were quiet, but they nodded along. Samya was excluded from this sentiment, and Rike didn’t seem to agree either—was it because she admired this place?

“Well, that’s also why everyone’s here,” I said.

There were rumors about the Black Forest that said a person couldn’t aimlessly wander inside without being killed. One of the greatest advantages of living here was that people couldn’t imagine anyone living in this forest, and if someone did live here, they couldn’t be touched. While this was a bit of a secret, our cabin also had a spell that shooed people away. Only a select few people could ever make it to us.

Speaking of, if Karen were to return to the Nordic region, what would happen to Hayate and Arashi? I glanced at the wyvern perched on top of Krul’s head. She was currently grooming one of her wings like a bird.

Perhaps this sounded a bit brash, but we’d made a deal that said we could keep the wyverns as long as we trained Karen. Just because Karen was forced to return, it didn’t mean that we had to give her wyverns back. But if this

agreement were to end amicably with her finishing her training, there was a good chance that we could pretend like none of this had ever happened. This would mean that Hayate would return to Karen, but I was determined to negotiate a little since I'd paid my end of the bargain.

If Hayate and Arashi ultimately ended up leaving with Karen, we would require a new method of communication. *Maybe I'll have Camilo find us a new pair of wyverns when that time comes.* I wondered if I should give the new wyverns names related to wind, like Kogarashi, Fubuki, or Hayakaze. Thoughts swirled within my mind as I watched Hayate skillfully trying to sleep atop Krul's head—I hoped that we wouldn't need to part ways.

The breeze usually felt nice under blue skies as it swept through the grassy plains. Unfortunately, the gray skies today made the atmosphere gloomy, and the usually calm breeze seemed to be more restless today as the grass rustled. There weren't any birds hunting in the sky today, and we all heightened our wariness.

"I never know what'll happen during days like these," I warned. "The wind's strong too, so let's be careful."

"It's been a lot safer thanks to Count Eimoor, though," Helen pointed out.

She spoke casually, but her gaze was sharp. Samya sniffed the air while glancing around. We went to the city intermittently, and I knew we'd be out for around half a day if we made good time. However, our trips practically always kept to the same schedule, so it would be easy to plan an ambush for us here. Luckily, we had Samya and Helen on our side. They were quick to sense danger, and if anything happened, we could quickly retreat into the Black Forest.

It was a shame that it was cloudy during today's trip, but the road was as peaceful as usual. It'd been three weeks since I'd gotten to see the entrance to the city—this had only been a week longer than our usual schedule, but it still felt nostalgic. I passed by some guards who were just about to set off and patrol the area. To increase mobility, they had donned pieces of lighter armor strategically—each carried a spear in one hand and a sword sheathed at their hip. They looked formidable.

I saw a familiar face walking along in a line and decided to call out to him.

“Out on patrol?” I asked. “Thank you for your hard work.”

“Ah, you again,” he replied with a smile. “If you guys arrived here safely, it seems like the streets are fine.”

“Thanks to you all.” I smiled back, and we waved at each other before parting ways.

The usual guard was by the entrance. He smiled and raised a hand as he let us in. We bowed in response and rolled into the city. The streets were bustling with a larger crowd than usual; perhaps they wanted to get their errands done before it started to rain. Lucy popped her head out of the cart, to the surprise of a few, and the usual scary-faced man at the stall smiled with the rest of the crowd. Lucy usually had to stretch her body to peer over the side of the cart, but there was no need for that anymore. She’d grown up.

“It’s fine right now, but maybe we’ll have to tell her to not stick her head out one day,” I said, my face filled with worry.

“I think it’s fine as long as she doesn’t bite,” Diana said, stroking the pup’s back. “If she tries to bite at all, we can stop her then and ban her from sticking her head out.”

“There aren’t any rules like that in this city...are there?”

“Nope.”

Well, if I’ve got the word of the younger sister of this city’s lord... It was easy to forget Diana’s status sometimes. In any case, I had no issues with her proposal. I nodded in agreement.

We eventually made it to Camilo’s store. For the first time, I found the place looking rather creepy. *Is it because it’s cloudy? Or am I dreading what future awaits us inside?* Maybe I expected the outcome of this discussion to turn out disastrous. My opinions aside, the store was there as usual, and I could see the bustling business at the storefront as people walked by outside. We had no business there, so we went around to the back where it was a bit more relaxed. Nothing was out of the ordinary. The usual apprentice saw us and ran outside.

“Good morning!” he called out.

“Morning,” I replied.

We hadn’t placed our cart into the warehouse yet, so we had him help out. The rest of the work wasn’t our job.

“I’ll be in your care today too,” I said. “We might be coming out a bit later than usual, though...”

“I’ll be fine! Leave it to me!” the apprentice replied, pounding his chest.

I patted his head and we all walked toward the meeting room. Usually, we’d be in the room first and the employees would tell Camilo of our arrival. But today, he was already waiting for us inside with the head clerk. It wasn’t like we’d taken our sweet time putting our carriage into the warehouse—it looked like he’d been waiting for us since the morning. Documents were scattered across the normally clean desk in front of him. I was a bit surprised when I opened the door to the room, since I hadn’t been expecting anyone to be there.

“Ah, there you are,” Camilo said.

“Sorry to suddenly barge in,” I apologized.

There was a chance that he had a different customer today—I was clearly careless for opening the door without warning.

Camilo gave a strained smile and a nonchalant wave of his hand. “Nah, it’s my fault too for not saying anything about it.”

“Thanks,” I replied, taking a seat.

We first proceeded with our normal business conversation. It went off without a hitch.

“We were a bit preoccupied,” I said. “Still, I think we’ve got more than enough for the order, so feel free to check.”

“Got it,” Camilo replied. “Did you need anything else from the shop?”

“Nothing for now. But if you have any stuff from the Nordic region, I might want some.”

“I’ve got nothing this time around.”

“I guessed as much.”

My shoulders slumped. Camilo had personally made his trip to the north. Even if he'd found a separate route to import items, that wasn't his main concern right now.

At Camilo's signal, the head clerk left the room and immediately returned. It seemed the other work was left to someone else.

"Let's get to the meat of today's topic," Camilo said.

Someone gulped nervously. It could've been me, Karen, or maybe someone else in our family. Camilo once again glanced at the head clerk, who left the room.

"I want you guys to sit with me," Camilo said. We obediently moved to his side of the table.

"Um... What about me?" Karen asked, gingerly raising her hand.

"You...should be with us, young lady."

Karen also sat on our side. She tried to sit on the very edge, but as she was today's main topic, I positioned her in the middle. A brief while later, the door to the meeting room opened once more. The head clerk was the first to enter, and he gestured for the others to step inside. Several lizardmen walked into the room wearing clothes of the Nordic region (similar to Japanese-style attire). Their faces didn't look too lizard-like—they resembled normal Nordic folks with scales scattered across their skin.

The most unique characteristic I saw was on their bodies. They each had a tail like a lizard, and it seemed difficult for them to line up close to one another. Each person maintained some distance as they walked inside.



Karen glanced at an older-looking lizardman and gasped. “Father?!”

Ah, so this is Karen’s father...

“I’m Kanzaburo Katagiri—Karen’s father.” The older lizardman bowed his head.

I didn’t expect him to personally make his way here today—I thought we were going to speak to a messenger. I’d heard that he was a highly ranked vassal, but he was unexpectedly humble and quick to act. The only other high-ranking man of action I knew was the emperor.

The younger lizardman bowed and introduced himself. “I’m Kanzaburo Katabuchi. You may see me as an attendant of House Katagiri.”

The two ladies behind them also bowed in tandem and introduced themselves softly. These ladies also served as attendants. It seemed Katabuchi was the one who’d arrived as the messenger.

“Thank you for coming all this way here. I’m Eizo of Forge Eizo.” I stood up and bowed.

When I looked up, I saw Karen’s father peering at me with narrowed eyes. “May I know your family name?”

“I had my reasons for leaving the Nordic region, so please think of me as someone who lacks a family name. I hope for your understanding. As you can see, I cannot hide my origins—I am indeed from the Nordic region, so I’ve left my first name as is.”

I gave him the response I’d prepared beforehand. It wasn’t a total lie, so I didn’t expect Samya to notice. I figured there was a fifty-fifty chance that they knew my last name, but it seemed they didn’t. There was a chance that Karen or Camilo had told them, but neither had been the case. Karen had been in our family for a while—if I looked into her behavior, would I find some secret communications she’d had with her family? Or perhaps she hadn’t done anything like that at all.

“I see,” her father said, immediately backing down. I expected him to question me further, but he didn’t seem to care much about family names.

Diana tried to introduce herself next, but I gestured behind me and silenced them all. I didn't want any of them to reveal their identities; it was best to withhold as much information as possible here.

"And you're also Karen's master, I take it?" Kanzaburo asked, glaring at me as though he was trying to read my thoughts.

"I suppose you can say that," I replied casually.

"Hmm... Pardon me for asking, but is that a *katana* you have?"

"That's right. I'm just an amateur swordsman, though."

We kept our weapons on us just in case when we entered the store. I always set mine aside because it got in the way when sitting. My *Diaphanous Ice* and Anne's blade couldn't be worn while seated.

"May I take a look?" Kanzaburo asked.

"Of course," I replied, handing my sword to him. "Here it is."

I noticed Helen standing diagonally behind me. She wore her two shortswords, and they could be unsheathed in the blink of an eye. Meanwhile, Diana stood on the opposite side. The plan was likely for Diana to push me away while Helen attacked...if needed.

"Thank you," Kanzaburo said, bowing his head before unsheathing my blade.

The faintly blue glow of the appoitakara revealed itself along with my sword. I felt like the room became cooler by a few degrees. He proceeded to inspect *Diaphanous Ice* thoroughly before sheathing it. However, he didn't return it to me. I'd once told Helen about *iai*, the art of drawing one's sword to attack, and I noticed her murderous intent steadily growing behind me.

Kanzaburo finally let out a loud sigh. I had no idea if this was due to admiration or exasperation.

"Master Eizo, I'd like to make a single request," he said, his voice ringing out clearly.

He placed *Diaphanous Ice* on the table—I noticed the murderous intent behind me lessen ever so slightly. I took my sword back and spoke.

“Please forgive my audacious attitude before you make your request...but are you hiding something from me?”

I was planning on discussing my suspicions about Karen. I knew my words were clumsy, but I was trying to scope them out. When I glanced at Samya, she nodded quietly—I knew they couldn’t lie to us.

I saw Kanzaburo’s eyebrow twitch. Had I made him angry somehow? Unfortunately for him, my past life on Earth had given me resistance toward unreasonable anger. I didn’t bat an eye.

In contrast to my suspicions, he gave a deep bow. “I deeply apologize for our insolence. You’ve taken my daughter in and you’ve gone through the trouble of coming here. I should’ve provided you with my show of gratitude first. I’m very sorry.”

“Er, uh, no...” I stammered.

If I were to use an analogy from Earth, this was like going to a client to clarify that some problem hadn’t been our fault, only to have the president of the company personally bow their head to me. I couldn’t hide my surprise. *But I can’t have them get away here. I’ll hold my ground.*

“Um, it’s not about gratitude or anything,” I said. “I’d like for you to tell me about Miss Karen’s true motives.”

Kanzaburo’s eyes widened. “True motives, you say?”

Well, I expected as much. When I glanced at Samya, I noticed her ears expertly twitching around. His response alone wasn’t enough to formulate a lie—it might’ve been difficult for Samya to sniff out. *Guess I’ll pry a little deeper and find out if his replies are indeed lies.*

“I believe that Miss Karen’s true motive isn’t to become my apprentice—she’s not looking to become a blacksmith,” I said. “Am I wrong?”

For a split second, I noticed his eyes waver ever so slightly out of hesitation.

“I...” he started.

“Father— No, uncle, I believe we should tell him the truth,” Karen quietly cut in, much to her father—I mean, uncle’s surprise. “As a beastfolk, Samya can

detect lies.”

He glanced at Samya in shock before turning back to me, and I nodded in reply. I guessed that Samya had told Karen about it while on a hunt or something.

“I apologize for hiding that fact from you,” I replied.

He frowned. I expected him to indignantly leave the room, but he looked pensive. He must’ve been trying to gauge just how much he could state without lying. At the very least, it didn’t look like he was trying to end this situation out of pure rage.

“I believe that Miss Karen didn’t just suddenly want to become a blacksmith,” I continued. “She likely has quite a bit of experience. I can sense that she’s a fully-fledged artisan. She saw my skills and came here to scope out my identity. Whatever the case may be, she planned on cutting her apprenticeship short. That’s what I think, anyway.”

I heard Diana’s small voice of surprise beside me. *I need to apologize to her later.*

Truthfully speaking, there was no need for me to be so honest and forthcoming with my thoughts. But if they denied my claims and any of that was a lie, Samya would be able to detect it immediately. So, if Kanzaburo wanted to lie to us still, I’d just leave the room. *Though, I might ruin Camilo’s reputation, and I’d probably have to find a new buyer...* I’d be causing trouble for everyone around me. I knew this was my selfish choice, but I didn’t want to hold back too much for my second life.

“I’m sorry,” Karen’s uncle said after a brief silence. He bowed deeply while Katabuchi looked on in astonishment.

“Everything you’ve said is exactly right,” Karen’s uncle said. “I received news that someone from the Nordic region had made his way outside, and we couldn’t quiet these rumors, so we had Karen go and scope you out.” He looked up at me, his eyes more serious than ever. “All she did was listen to my request. I understand that I’ve got no right to say this, but I beg you to not think of her badly.”

“Uncle...” Karen said, her face riddled with worry.

When I glanced at Samya, I saw her nodding. The man wasn’t lying.

“I won’t pry any further for now,” I said.

If he could provide me with any other details, that would improve our impression of him. If he still wanted to keep quiet, then his situation was something he couldn’t talk about here. It made little sense for us to push the subject he wanted to keep quiet about.

“Thank you, and I’m sorry.” Karen’s uncle lowered his head.

“And what request did you want to make of me?” I asked.

He shook his head. “It’s not something I can ask for now.”

If we’d met under different circumstances, I’m sure we could’ve become friends. I felt a little sad as that thought crossed my mind. The same could’ve been said for Karen too. At least to me, it looked like her passion for smithing was the real deal.

Suddenly, Karen did something unexpected. She prostrated in front of me—a *dogeza*. I was so stunned. She was so close that I took a step back.

“I’m terribly sorry!” Karen cried out. Her head was touching the ground. “However, I want to ask you once again if you’ll allow me to become your apprentice!” She raised her head. “I was told that the very first item you showed me wasn’t even your best work—you can produce even higher-quality weapons. I may not be satisfactory yet, but I’m still a blacksmith, and I’d truly like to see how far I can go. I understand that I’ve been awfully rude to you, and I realize that I’m in no position to be so audacious, but still...I beg you to consider my request!”

I mulled over her words for a few moments. “To be honest, it’s difficult for me to just nod my head and accept your proposition.”

Karen and her uncle didn’t seem particularly disappointed to hear that—they likely understood where I was coming from. Karen had just admitted to being a spy in our midst. *I don’t think many people would say, “Sure, you can still be my apprentice,” after a betrayal like that.*

Our family didn't respond. It's not that they had zero interest, but the matter of an apprenticeship was something they left up to me. They probably weren't keen on butting in.

"I understand where you're coming from—you feared that technology from the Nordic region might've leaked elsewhere," I said. "I also can see that you've got thoughts of your own. However, you've lost my trust, and I'm not generous enough to have you stay by my side as an apprentice. I'm sorry."

I hesitated for a moment but soon lowered my head as a display of good manners. I had shown them my *katana*—that was the only other instruction they would receive from me. And I was only able to risk that because I was relying on Helen to protect me. *Can't blame her if she scolds me for it later...*

Rike had also wanted to learn from my abilities. She'd barged in and told me that apprenticeship was a dwarven custom, and I could've easily doubted her. After all, I hadn't been able to find any such information about dwarven apprentices in my installed knowledge.

That knowledge was the bare minimum—I had only enough information to help me survive in this world and nothing more. I knew enough manners so that I wouldn't seem overly rude to nobles and end up with my head lopped off, I knew which crops were edible, and I knew what medicinal herbs were effective against cuts and fevers. These bits of knowledge were included because I needed them to live, but I knew nothing when it came to detailed information about certain regions or customs of certain races. I had no knowledge about animal biology either. I decided to believe that this was the Watchdog's way of doing things—frankly, I'd had fun finding stuff out on my own anyway.

That aside, Rike had started with nothing and built up trust over time. Karen, on the other hand, was now working with negative trust. I could only make her my apprentice after she brought that up to zero.

"I understand." Karen exhaled sadly. It didn't sound like a sigh of sadness, but rather, one of relief. It was as though she was finally able to let everything out. "I was being too shameless. Please forgive me."

She lowered her head once more. I kept mine up so that we wouldn't keep bowing at each other.

“If you’ll excuse us,” said the Nordic delegate (or whatever his title was). The whole delegation made for the exit without putting up a fight, and the head clerk hastily followed them out. I’d braced myself, expecting a bit more of an argument, but I was stunned to see that none came.

As they left, I gazed at Karen. She didn’t seem too upset, but she wasn’t all smiles either. I wasn’t sure what her true feelings were.

The moment they left, the tension in the room dissipated. However, there was one thing I had to confirm.

“And?” I asked, turning to Camilo. “How much did you know?”

Camilo touched his mustache—his expression was as serious as it ever got. This was his habit when he was debating just how much he could tell me. I could sense Helen’s impatience, but there was no use in rushing him.

After a short while, he finally opened his mouth to speak. “I didn’t know that Lady Karen was a spy of sorts. I want you to at least believe me in that regard.”

“A merchant of your caliber didn’t do any research on her?” I asked.

“I did.” He forced a smile. While securing a means of communication had been a driving force behind our acquaintanceship with Karen, it wasn’t as though he’d randomly decided to introduce her to me without doing his due diligence. “I admit that I was a bit naive because you were both from the same region. And for that, I apologize.”

He lowered his head. Since Karen and I both supposedly hailed from the Nordic region, there was a chance that he had let some things slide—perhaps he’d assumed that this was how the people in the north communicated with each other.

“There’s no need to bow your head,” I said. “I left everything in your hands without moving a muscle. Surely I should take some of the blame.”

I couldn’t deny that I’d been a bit careless. If I noticed the issue earlier and had been able to point it out, Karen likely wouldn’t have lost my trust this much. At the very least, things could’ve taken a different turn. That part was my fault.

I decided to change the topic. “They backed down a lot more quickly than I thought they would.”

“They’re planning on heading to the capital after this,” Camilo answered. “I didn’t expect them to leave so easily either.”

“Oh? Wait, does that mean...” I remembered what I’d been told three weeks ago when certain nobles had been busy.

“Yep,” Camilo answered. “They’re going to meet the margrave and the count.”

“About...?”

Camilo shook his head, implying that it was nothing I should know about. “If anything comes up, I’ll let you know immediately. Don’t worry—I won’t screw up this time.”

He grinned from ear to ear, but I felt like he was masking his rage.

Chapter 6: Their Days of Normalcy

I had no other business at Camilo's shop, and we decided to leave for the day.

"In two weeks?" I asked, rising from my seat.

Camilo nodded. "Yeah. I'll let you know if anything happens."

"Got it."

I nodded back. We received our earnings from the delivery—the cost of our supplies had already been taken out—and we left the room. As usual, I handed the apprentice a tip (I gave him a little more since Hayate was in the mix), and I welcomed my daughters back. We loaded up our supplies, fastened Krul's harness, and climbed aboard the cart.

All the while, no one spoke a single word. We were so quiet that even the young apprentice looked at us in befuddlement. Rike grabbed the reins, and the carriage clattered forward onto the city streets.

The streets were as crowded as when we'd arrived, and it seemed like the deity in the sky was finally ready to shed her tears. People had their hands full of items, and I could tell that they were hoping to finish everything before the rain. Krul skillfully made her way through the crowd, we bade farewell to the guard, and finally, we left the city.

As we traveled down the road home, I turned to our resident magic expert.

"All right, Lidy," I said. "Can you take a look?"

She turned to me and looked confused for a second, but she quickly nodded when I reached for Hayate. "Ah, okay then."

I wasn't sure whether the wyvern understood that Karen was no longer here with us, but she was perched on my arm looking as calm as ever. Lidy gently placed a hand over Hayate. The wyvern tilted her head to one side in confusion but didn't seem displeased. After a brief moment of petting, Lidy took her hands away.

“So?” I asked.

“She’s fine,” Lidy replied.

I breathed a sigh of relief—Hayate started to groom her wings.

“What did you just do?” Diana asked gingerly.

“I just wanted to see whether any spell had been cast on Hayate,” I replied.

I was worried—what if they’d put a spell on Hayate that shared the wyvern’s vision and hearing with others? If Hayate had such a spell on her, anything we did or said would be known to the other party. It wasn’t like we had anything to hide, so if we’d wanted to ignore it, we could’ve, but still...

“There was nothing on her,” Lidy added, raising her voice so that everyone could hear. “And even if there were some kind of spell that could share senses over a distance, it’s not like that would be Hayate’s fault. Besides, we should be fine *there*.”

“*There?*” Helen asked, making everyone else nod along in agreement. “Does it have some defense I don’t know about?”

“Our place is thick with magical energy, so while it’s convenient to use magic inside, it’s easy to disrupt spells from afar—spells like ranged vision or hearing.”

“Huh, I had no idea.”

Helen sounded impressed. *I see...* I figured that they were referring to our cabin and forge—our home. Magic was so thick in the clearing around the cabin that even trees refused to grow (though a few blades of grass did), and no normal animal would approach. There was even a spell on our forge meant to chase people away. The average person couldn’t approach us, even if they knew our location. That was protection enough for me, but it apparently had the added benefit of jamming spells that could spy on us from afar.

“So, if they left quickly because they thought that they could use ranged vision...” Anne started.

“Then they must be disappointed right now,” Lidy replied with a bright smile.

Such magic couldn’t be cast unless the precise location of one’s quarry was known. *I’ll give an extreme example: even if Lidy can use ranged vision, it*

doesn't mean she can scope out the Nordic region without knowing the precise spot she wants to spy on.

"Perhaps that's why they sent Karen to snoop on our family in person," Lidy added.

"Well, I'm glad there's nothing spying on us now," I said.

"You'll give me an explanation when we get home, won't you?" Diana asked. She was smiling, but I could only timidly nod at her overwhelming pressure.

After we returned home and did some errands, we decided to finally settle down, eat dinner, and talk.

"So, you're saying that you realized something was off during her stay?" Diana asked.

She and Lidy sighed, while Samya looked a little impressed.

"It's not like I had proof, though," I hastily added. "I just thought that my line of reasoning made the most sense. And, I just so happened to be right this time around. It sounds like an excuse, I know."

Diana sighed again. "Fine, I get it. I'm not sure if we pulled the short straw or if Anne did."

The imperial princess shrugged. I felt bad for dragging her into this mess, but I knew she'd been the right one to ask—my hunch might've just looked like a misunderstanding to the others.

"Above all, I was worried when you handed them *Diaphanous Ice*," Helen said.

"Uh, well... Yeah, sorry about that," I replied with a bow. I'd been completely relying on Helen's skill in that moment.

"We were fine this time around, but that Nordic geezer isn't half bad with a sword."

"Is he that skilled?"

"Yep." She nodded and grinned. "Well, I had my appoitakara weapons, so I'm

sure I could've taken 'em."

"Then..." I trailed off, unable to finish the rest of my sentence. I couldn't optimistically state that I had nothing to worry about.

"Still, that doesn't mean you can just keep handing your weapon to any old guy who comes your way," Helen said with a serious gaze. "Keep that in mind."

"Yes, ma'am..."

Diaphanous Ice was made from appoitakara, meaning that it could slice through ordinary blades. It'd certainly been careless of me to hand that to a suspicious person. *Maybe it's better for me to make a wakizashi out of steel to show others.*

Time to forcibly change the subject. "That aside..." Everyone turned to me. "What do you think Karen will try to do now?"

Everyone pondered over my words for a while.

"If they went to the capital, it means they might try to worm their way in using high-ranking nobles," Anne mused.

"Will my brother allow that, I wonder?" Diana asked.

"I doubt Count Eimoor will just nod his head agreeably. There are too many drawbacks to establishing a friendship."

Diana looked visibly relieved to hear this.

"Which leaves the margrave," Lidy said.

Anne nodded. "That's their best shot."

"But..."

"Yeah, I'm guessing the margrave doesn't want to get on Eizo's bad side. If he sours their relationship, Eizo might run for the empire."

I frowned. "Do I look like such an obstinate old man to others?"

"Oh, but you *did* come here from the Nordic region, didn't you?" Anne asked with a smile.

"Ugh..." I couldn't refute her.

Right... My backstory is that I left the Nordic region because of some "circumstances." I hadn't told the margrave about my affairs, nor had I explained that this forest allowed me to unleash my full abilities. To an outsider looking in, I was a blacksmith who'd fled my hometown out of disdain for troublesome affairs, and I had come to live in a remote region—the Black Forest. This place, infamous for being difficult to reach, was where I'd chosen to hide myself.

No one could predict how a man like me would act after being dragged into one of the kingdom's sticky messes. It didn't help my case that I'd personally met with the emperor, and I had a direct line to the imperial family within our household.

"Besides, didn't you call yourself an obstinate blacksmith, Boss?" Rike asked, sounding unexpectedly relentless.

"I...might've." I raised my hands in surrender. "All right, all right. I concede that point."

Laughter filled the room.

"My stubbornness aside, what if I was told that the kingdom had come to some sort of agreement with the Nordic delegation?" I asked. "What if the conditions of that agreement involved me accepting Karen into our household again? How should we react to that?"

"Well, you've got no obligation to accept," Anne said, placing a hand over her chin.

Indeed, while it'd be detrimental to the kingdom, quite frankly, that was none of my concern. Still, I couldn't help but mull over my choices. I placed my hands behind my head.

"Honestly, I've got no reason to be vehemently against it either," I said.

Karen had ended up being a corporate spy of sorts, but if she truly just wanted to get better and then go home to a Nordic forge, that would undoubtedly make her my apprentice. While there was a possibility that she could harm the rest of our family, I doubted she'd do anything like that and truly make me an enemy of her homeland. All that was left were my hurt

feelings. *That's the main reason I declined her request at Camilo's.*

Though my emotions had played a big part in my decision, it wasn't as though I *couldn't* endure her being here and pretend as though nothing had ever happened. What she'd done wasn't enough for me to hold too big of a grudge against her. In the end, I had to put my choices on a scale. Would it all be worth it to have the margrave and the count owe me one? It was true that I wanted to end things amicably.

Just then, I heard a knock at the door.

Our family completely fell silent. I heard a loud *clack* echo within the cabin—Helen had grabbed her knife. Krul, Lucy, and Hayate hadn't made a fuss, so it was likely a friend, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Coming," I called out, trying to sound as sunny as possible. I headed for the door.

Sensing Helen following close behind, I removed the bolt and gently opened the door.

"Ah, Lluisa," I said. "Hello."

"Hi there," she replied, as casual as ever.

Now that I think about it, if she can just appear and disappear whenever she wants as the master of this forest, couldn't she just pop into our cabin? I led her to the table and asked her as much.

"But that's bad manners, isn't it?" Lluisa replied. "Gizelle told me so."

I mean, she's not wrong...but is Lluisa really getting lectured by Gizelle?

"Besides, it's a bit troublesome for me if I don't have plants nearby," she added.

"Is that so?" I asked.

"I'm a dryad, after all."

"Ah, right..."

Oddly, she felt more like an older mortal sister than a deity. Still, I could see how plants would make things easier for her as a dryad. *Or maybe she's just*

saying it in a way that makes sense to me.

“What business do you have with us today?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing much.” Lluisa waved her hand like an aunt who’d just dropped by.

She could’ve been thousands of years older than me, so an aunt didn’t seem too far off, but I was afraid to speak or think that too intently. *I should be careful.*

“I heard you finished your hot spring,” she said.

“Ah, yes, we did.”

We’d been busy, so I’d completely forgotten about reporting back to her. The message board outside should’ve read, “No news today,” as usual. *Maybe I should write a “Be back soon!” message when we go on our biweekly trips to the city. I might get an emergency patient, and they would need to know where we are.*

“You could’ve just taken a dip without coming to us,” I said.

“Ah, well, I would’ve felt a touch guilty if I’d tested it out without asking,” Lluisa replied.

Oh, you’re bothered about stuff like that? I imagined you’d be a bit more, um, ill-mannered. I didn’t think she’d be taking a dip with the animals in the drainage pond, but I’d definitely expected her to use the hot spring without our knowledge.

“We usually try to bathe in the evenings everyday, so you can take a dip whenever you like.”

After we’d returned from our trip to the city today, we’d completed some tasks, and then we decided to take a bath. I had no problem with Lluisa using our bathhouse. *In fact, I wouldn’t mind if she called for Gizelle and took a dip right now.*

Lluisa, however, looked a little sheepish—she had a troubled look on her face. “I don’t know how,” she murmured.

“Ah, got it,” I replied.

I see what's going on. If the bath were just some kind of pond, she would've probably taken a dip, but she saw an impressive building and didn't want to mess things up, so she came here looking for advice. I knew that my thoughts were a bit insolent, but I'd bet I wasn't too far off. There was no need for me to tease her, though.

"Can you all go with her?" I asked the family.

Everyone quickly nodded. This would be their second bath for today, but none of them seemed reluctant about it—they clearly enjoyed the baths. As a guy, I couldn't help her out. Even though she was a dryad, she was still a lady.

I lit the magic lantern, handed it to Lidy, and watched them all head to the bathhouse. I watched the soft light fade into the distance, then turned to head back inside.

Suddenly, I heard a loud flapping pair of wings.

When I turned toward the noise, I saw a familiar wyvern perched by the message board—Arashi. A letter was tied to her foot. *Oh yeah, I didn't see Arashi when we left the store. Maybe the Nordic delegation took her to the capital, and then she came directly here.* According to Karen, Arashi remembered the route to this place. If it was within her flight distance, she could come here whenever.

My relaxed expression soon faded. I gulped nervously and took the letter.

"Thank you for your hard work," I said, petting Arashi's head.

She nuzzled against my hand and let out a soft "Kree!"

She quickly left without greeting Hayate—her body looked like an arrow whizzing through the darkness. I guessed she was off to the capital. Once she faded from view, I opened the letter. I wasn't familiar with this handwriting, but I had a good guess about the writing utensil that'd been used—an ink brush. The cursive script was written very neatly, and it reminded me of the letters and missives written by military officers in the Sengoku period of Japan. I checked the sender and spotted Karen's name. I couldn't tell if she'd written this herself or if Katabuchi had drafted it in her stead.

Beside her name was Marius's. This meant it hadn't been long since they'd

arrived in the capital and written this letter. Marius must've also been aware of the letter's contents. *If any lies are present in this letter, I probably won't be able to detect them.*

I skimmed the letter. *Welp... Didn't see that coming.* As I'd thought, the Nordic delegation had traveled to the capital to conduct official negotiations. The general gist of the conversation had gone something like this:

"I know you have a skilled blacksmith originally from the Nordic region. Please give him back."

"No such person resides within our kingdom. Perhaps he has gone elsewhere."

"Is that so? That's a pity to hear."

And that was that. At the very least, the official records stated as much. *Huh. Guess this means that, according to official records, I don't reside within the kingdom.* I remembered discussing taxes with Marius and Camilo—technically, the Black Forest wasn't under the kingdom's complete jurisdiction. It was a territory that belonged within the kingdom, but it was not under its control. *I wonder how I was recorded during the monster subjugation efforts.* Indeed, the beastfolk of the forest didn't pay taxes and their population wasn't recorded either—Samya had told us that she'd never paid taxes.

Myself and the rest of our family that resided in the Black Forest were treated the same way. Thanks to the kingdom not keeping close tabs on this forest, it was the perfect place for me to hide.

Back to the letter: their conversation had been a crude farce. Karen had seen me, after all, so I definitely lived in the kingdom. In any case, it seemed it was convenient for the Nordic region to also assume that I didn't exist. They likely had requests that they'd rather not disclose.

Personally, this was convenient for me—it gave me more freedom—and I was grateful that my name wouldn't remain within the records of history. If someone were to really look into it, they could easily discover that a fat cat pommel originated from a certain place, but that was all.

The conclusion of their meeting was unexpected—Karen could no longer be

an apprentice at my place, but she would remain within the kingdom.

I was a little perplexed. I continued to read that the Nordic region was in a bit of an uproar, and in case of emergencies, they had wanted someone related to House Katagiri to leave their region. Karen wasn't of direct lineage, but as part of her training, she had decided to remain within the capital.

There was a good chance that she'd been hiding her skills for this very reason. If she'd gone all out as my apprentice, I wouldn't have had as much to teach her—I might've quickly deemed her a master and then sent her away. I wasn't sure if this was her true reason for pretending to be mediocre at smithing, though. Her behavior may have been a ruse for something else.

I can't help but think that things would've gone more smoothly if she had just come to me honestly.

When I reached the end of the letter, I discovered the first truly unsettling issue.

"I understand how audacious I'm being, but even so, please hear my request. I'd like for you to be my adviser, Master Eizo. Would you check up on my work every now and then? If you would accept rice made from the land of House Katagiri in exchange, I would be most pleased."

Frankly, I was ecstatic to hear about the rice. I'd been ready to give up if obtaining rice had been completely out of reach, but now that I knew there was a chance, I yearned to have a tasty bowl. Considering the recent incident, I was willing to pay Camilo extra to find another supplier. However, if I could get my hands on some rice without going through all that trouble, I'd be grateful.

An adviser, huh? The letter ended with wanting to hash out details for this arrangement. I was requested to tell Camilo which schedule worked for me; Hayate only knew how to get to his store, after all.

I returned to the cabin, unsure of how to provide an answer. This had nothing to do with Lluisa, so I considered pressing this issue once she left, but it seemed she enjoyed taking long baths. By now, it was rather late at night—I waited for her to finish bathing and resting in the changing room.

Left with no other choice, I decided to bring this up the next morning. The

ladies returned a little while later, and we sent a happy Lluisa off before retiring to our rooms.

Today had been jam-packed with all sorts of things. As I climbed into bed, sleep quickly took me away, and I drifted off into the land of dreams.

The next day, after we did our usual work—mass-producing knives—I decided to bring up last night’s note over dinner.

“I received a letter yesterday,” I said, showing it to everyone as I summarized its contents. I told everyone, partly because I didn’t want to hide anything anymore, but I also knew that this might affect our daily routine.

“I see...” Anne said, folding her arms. “There’s nothing particularly suspicious about this. The only question is why she’s so insistent on *you*, Eizo.”

“She’s asking me to drop by once she starts living in the capital,” I added.

“If she wants you to check her work, I imagine that she wants you to consider her as your apprentice one day.”

Rike nodded. “I’m not surprised that people are dying to become your apprentice, Boss.”

“Er, well... It’s complicated,” I replied.

My skills were heavily reliant on cheats and magic. I couldn’t call them my own skills, and while I could perhaps take in another apprentice or two after Rike, that was it. I couldn’t teach many more.

“So, this adviser thing...” I started.

“Are you pondering over whether to accept or not?” Diana asked.

I nodded back. “I know my duties will likely be situational, but I just wonder what they’ll entail.”

I could certainly gauge the opposing party’s reaction. For example, if the Nordic delegation agreed to pay me in silver coins for every trip, that would be exceptionally great. But...

“I don’t really want to test them,” I said.

The tester would always be tested back. On Earth, I'd constantly been tormented by this kind of tiresome exchange, so I wanted nothing more than to protect my peaceful life here. Since we'd been tricked once already, it was unwise to have nothing prepared.

"I don't think it's a bad idea for us to have a connection with the Nordic region," Anne stated. "It's best to avoid cutting all ties here and losing sight of them."

Samya and Helen were yawning. Lidy was smiling, but she likely didn't understand the situation much either.

"By 'us,' I'm referring to the forge," Anne added hastily.

I smiled. "I know. In this situation, I doubt the empire could form any connections."

Since Anne had technically been forced to live here, she was unable to contact the empire. She might've been able to if she'd tried, and I had no intention of stopping her from doing so, but she didn't seem to be doing anything like that.

"Unlike nobles, I don't really have any honor to protect," I said. "But considering what Karen's done to us, I don't think rice alone would be a fair deal. We can accept her offer if she gives us some money too, I'd say."

"Agreed," Anne nodded.

"I think that's a good idea," Diana added.

"Is that all right with the rest of you?" I asked.

"I'll leave stuff like that to you, Eizo," Samya replied.

"Ditto to that."

"I trust your decision, Boss."

"And I do as well."

I slowly nodded. "Thanks, everyone. And as for the meeting date..."

"Why not bump up our order schedule a week and meet them then?" Diana suggested.

Everyone else nodded, and I felt how reliable they all were. It was my turn to smile and nod back at them.

“All right, then it’s decided,” I said. “Guess I’ll quickly write back...”

I stood up and headed to my room to fetch some writing utensils.

####

The next morning, after I went to collect water with my three daughters, I gave my letter to Hayate. I placed the letter inside a small leather tube with a belt that sealed it shut. Then, I tied it to Hayate’s leg.

“I’m counting on you,” I said.

“Kree!”

And with that, she was off, soaring through the blue skies. To Camilo, I’d written the date of our next order and stated that I’d discuss details about being an adviser then. I’d added that accepting this offer depended on the terms. I wondered how matters would proceed during our next meeting with him.

I started my work for the day. As it approached noon, I noticed that it was getting noisy outside. When I stepped out to check and see what the fuss was about, I found that Krul and Lucy had noticed Hayate returning, and they were trying to play with her. It was a wholesome sight, but Hayate’s work wasn’t done just yet. She flew onto my right shoulder. Krul and Lucy, noticing my presence, ran toward me as though they’d just spotted their dad. I kept Hayate perched on my shoulder as I petted my other two daughters. Diana and Helen came out (along with the rest of our family) to take over playing with the two.

“Krul, Lucy, you should play with your mommies over here,” Diana said.

“A mom? Me?!” Helen gasped.

“Huh? A bit too late for that, don’t you think?”



When I stuck my left arm out, Hayate quickly moved to that side. I was a bit hesitant to mention weight to the ladies, but the wyvern wasn't at all heavy. I wondered if she was built like a bird—did she have brittle or hollow bones fortified by magic? I was full of questions, but the matter at hand was the letter.

I pointed my left arm toward Rike and asked, "Sorry, could you get it for me?"

I didn't mind if Samya, Lidy, or Anne took the letter for me, but Rike was the most skilled with her hands—there was no need to make Hayate restless. Rike nodded and removed the tube from her leg. The wyvern quickly flew toward Krul's head. *Another job well done.* Krul and Lucy finally got to play with their big sister too.

I took the tube from Rike and found a letter inside. The reply was rather brief. At first, I thought they'd just returned Hayate without responding, but I turned out to be wrong.

"This isn't very long..." I said.

I'd sent my letter out first thing in the morning, and Hayate had returned before noon. As expected, Camilo had written back to me with sloppy handwriting, though surprisingly, it looked like it'd been edited a little. In short, he basically wrote, "Got it. I'll be waiting."

"What do you think?" I asked Anne, who was peering at the letter beside me. I just wanted to check and see if she could sense Camilo's thoughts with these words.

She pondered for a short while. "Honestly, the reply's too short for me to glean anything," she finally replied. "I can see how considerate he's being since he gave us the reply so quickly."

"That makes sense," I answered with a shrug.

He'd probably replied to us pretty instantaneously. Even if the Nordic people were still there, it didn't sound like the meeting had become complicated. While Camilo's handwriting and words weren't flowery, it did look like he was trying to be considerate toward me. *Guess he feels bad about this incident...maybe.*

“I suppose we just have to wait and see.”

I gazed up at the skies. The sun was dazzlingly bright, without a care about our troubles below it. *I guess there's no point in worrying about it now.* I stretched myself out and said, “It’s a bit early, but why don’t we go out in the front yard for some lunch?”

Cheers rose from our family in the middle of the forest. I wasn’t sure if Krul, Lucy, and Hayate understood what I’d said, but they also looked happy. Maybe I was just pushing things off. However, today, I wanted to spend my quiet life in normalcy.

With that in mind, I opened the door to the forge.

####

In the Black Forest, we were literally isolated from the rest of the world. *Well, actually...that's no longer true.* Now that Hayate and Arashi had joined us, we were able to stay more connected. Still, if we chose to ignore outside communication, our movements would be completely unknown to most people.

If we switched to a mostly carnivorous diet, we would be pretty close to self-sufficient out here—we could stay holed up within the forest for quite some time. Unfortunately, we required daily necessities including salt, fuel, iron for forging, and other supplies, so it just wasn’t feasible for us to completely shut out the world beyond the forest.

Neither Camilo nor Karen contacted us for the next week or so, and we received no other letters. As such, we were able to live quietly and enjoy several days of normalcy. But now, we were once again preparing to travel to the city. We had our usual entry-level knives and shortswords—we hadn’t made many elite models.

As we finished loading the cart that Krul would be pulling for us, Samya said, “Huh... Our delivery is pretty light this week. Feels like it’s been a while since we last forged so little.”

“Yeah,” I replied with a nod, reminiscing about the past. “We used to go to the city every week, so this amount was fairly normal. But now that we go every

other week, we tend to make a lot more items.”

During my first few months here, I’d been trying to find my footing, so I hadn’t been able to make many knives. Now, we were pretty quick when it came to mass-producing entry-level models. I could chalk it up to me getting used to utilizing my cheats, but I had little doubt that Rike, Samya, and everyone else had improved their smithing.

Diana might also be able to start hammering some of the knives. As for Helen, while there was no set date for her departure yet, if she were to return to being a mercenary, it would be useful for her to know how to take care of her equipment. Lidy lived in the forest, but she would certainly need to forge items at times. Anne would probably benefit from smithing skills the least, but it was nice for a person governing a region to have practical skills, however niche those skills might be.

“We did worry about the future quite a bit back then,” Rike added.

“Yeah,” I agreed with a nod.

I’d wanted to enjoy a quiet life as soon as possible, and as a result, I’d become a bit of a workaholic. Thinking back, I’d had the tendency to get wrapped up in all sorts of situations, and so my life had been far from quiet.

We all boarded the cart, and as Samya had noted, we had a lot less cargo than usual. I thought I was repeating the cycle of my regular everyday life, but it seemed I’d gained more than just family members—I’d made friends too.

I signaled that we’d be setting off.

“Probably best to be more careful than usual,” Helen said right before we left the Black Forest. “Since we know the people on their side, I’d like to hope that nothing’ll happen, but if the Nordic delegation wants to strike, now would be their last chance. Better safe than sorry.”

Ostensibly, our forge didn’t exist, and I didn’t live in the Black Forest. However, this was obviously a lie—I was alive and well. If the Nordic region tried to hinder us in some way, it could cause a huge international issue behind the scenes. *Probably... But a count likely can’t launch a battle by himself, and even if the margrave gets involved, there’s no reason to go to war over this*

situation.

If something happened to Anne, who was staying in the kingdom under the guise of diplomacy, the emperor might take charge and start causing a fuss. But again, this would all be away from the public eye.

On the other hand, wouldn't it also be difficult for the Nordic delegation to mess with me? I was just a single blacksmith supposedly from the Nordic region, but research could easily show that I hadn't brought any trade secrets from my predecessors (which was a fair assessment, since my origin would be a complete enigma to them). It simply wasn't worth the risk to hurt or kidnap a mysterious middle-aged man. However, this was a logical take—I couldn't say an attack was completely off the table. If they couldn't forgive me, and if they moved with an emotional motive in mind, I couldn't predict how they would act.

"All right," I said. "Let's be more careful than usual today."

Everyone nodded along. I was unsure if Lucy understood, but she frowned and barked energetically. We all laughed with her.

Usually, we were wary of bandits who might suddenly pounce on us during our journey, but thanks to the diligent guards patrolling the city, we'd never run into any. Also, as residents of the Black Forest, we were aware that wolves rarely left the premises. There was no need for them to take the risk and wander on the roads or the grassy plains; they could easily find prey within the forest. Aside from our family, only the beastfolk knew about this, and they didn't engage with the city's residents often. Normally, regular people would be cautious of any attacks that could originate from the forest.

But as for us...

"It'll be troublesome if the Nordic delegation tries to hide their presence," Helen said.

"I've got a keen sense of smell, so I can sniff them out if needed," Samya assured us.

"I'll keep a lookout, but I'm counting on you."

"Mhm."

The Nordic delegation had some skilled fighters in the mix, and they could easily mask their presence. Helen was more experienced with combat than they were, but if they were completely obscured, they would be difficult to detect. Scent, however, would be their downfall. If they were hiding thoroughly, they would obviously be up to something unnatural, and Samya wasn't naive enough to miss spotting (sniffing?) that out. Samya and Lidy could fire their bows the moment anyone sensed danger, and we had Helen, Diana, Anne, and even me, the most unskilled, for close combat. As long as we could find our enemies, we could take care of them.

And so, we made our way to the city, albeit more cautious than usual. Ultimately, our worries were all for naught, but we were clearly on guard, and that might've caused the opposite party to back off. At the very least, no bandit would've ever dreamed of trying to attack us as we glared at our surroundings. When we saw the usual guard at the gate, he looked to be standing listlessly (though he wasn't actually so relaxed, of course). We were relieved for a brief moment, and we greeted him as usual. He looked at us dubiously when he saw how on edge we were.

We tensed up again after entering the city proper—we couldn't let our guard down until we reached Camilo's store. There were quite a few people bustling about on the streets, and Lucy kept popping her head out of the cart as usual. If someone had tried to attack us, they would've hesitated after seeing her. Our pup was just curious about her surroundings, though. *No, I see her nose twitching more than usual. She might've intuited our tense atmosphere. Maybe she's on guard too. I should praise her for that later.*

We reached Camilo's store without any issues. As always, we put our cart in the warehouse in the back, and the apprentice flew out as he usually did to greet us. I noticed Helen trying to stand behind me, but I gestured behind my back and called her off. It didn't hurt to be cautious, but it also didn't feel right to doubt this kid.

He was all smiles. "Welcome! Everyone's waiting for you!"

I gently patted Helen's shoulders, and she slumped before heading inside. She would scout the area for us first.

“Thanks,” I said to the apprentice. “I’ll once again leave my daughters in your care.”

“Of course! Leave them to me!” he replied.

I tousled his hair and he looked a little awkward. Then, he ran to the yard, calling for Krul and Lucy.

“Kululu!”

“Arf! Arf!”

My daughters called out energetically as though to say, “Wait for me!” and they ran after him. It was just like it always was. Hayate, the eldest sister, casually glided behind them. After taking in the wholesome scene, I felt my heart grow a little heavy.

What awaits me inside?

I soon headed upstairs. Helen already had the door open for us.

With Helen in the front, we headed to the usual meeting room. The streets could’ve concealed nefarious actions by the Nordic delegation, but if anything happened within this store, it would affect Camilo’s reputation—he would need to take responsibility. *The nation sees me as a simple blacksmith, and Camilo’s only a moderately well-known merchant. I can’t assume that nothing will happen.*

Helen was wary partly because it was her job. The best we could hope for was a peaceful meeting, so if she was willing to facilitate that, there was no reason to stop her. Helen opened the door to the meeting room—there was no murderous intent lying in wait, and there were no blades or spears pointed at me. It seemed the delegation had no intention of taking things that far.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Camilo and the head clerk were in the meeting room when we arrived. Karen was also present—she wasn’t all smiles, but she didn’t look meek either. Finally, there was the city’s lord, Count Marius Eimoor.

That was all—just the four of them. No one else from the Nordic delegation was there. *Maybe they’re in the room next door.*

“Hey, Eizo,” Marius said, raising a hand and giving me a cheery greeting.

I waved back. “Hey. How’s it feel to be a newlywed?”

“More fun than I thought.”

“Truly, I’m glad to hear that.”

I was all smiles. Marius was my friend, and it was infinitely reassuring to hear that he was leading a happy life with his wife.

Camilo changed topics with a quick clap of his hands. “Let’s get to business, shall we?”

“We brought our normal stuff,” I replied. “I don’t want to purchase anything from you today—I’ll probably just buy stuff on my next visit. That is, unless you’ve got something special you’d like to sell me.”

“Nah, nothing today. Thanks for asking, though.” Camilo nodded and glanced at the head clerk, who nodded back and left the room.

“Now then, I’d like you to hear me out first,” Marius started. I was all ears. “Oh, and just to note, there isn’t anyone from the Nordic region here aside from Miss Karen. And that’s not because they’re underestimating you.”

“Since this involves the Nordic region, I understand that it’s rather rude for everyone else to be absent, but they figured you wouldn’t want to meet with them again,” Karen added. “They all left for home a few days ago.”

Sounds like they wanted to avoid complicating matters further. I wasn’t sure if this was a satisfactory response for Diana, who rose a little from her seat, but she quickly sat back down without saying another word. I gently patted her shoulders and silently offered her my gratitude. I heard a loud sigh, so I guessed that things were settled for now.

Marius’s sigh was much smaller. “Now, onto the discussion of Karen and the Nordic region—you’ve probably already gotten the general gist from Master Camilo, and I’ve heard that your response will depend on the terms.”

We all immediately looked at Karen—she visibly shrank.

“I don’t like beating around the bush here, so I’ll be frank,” Marius continued.

I nodded back. If it was beneficial to me, I wouldn't mind accepting a deal. I had a few thoughts, but I wasn't staunchly against working with Karen in the future.

"Despite knowing that she's practically a spy, the margrave and I think it would be a huge benefit for the kingdom to have ties with the Nordic region. We've never had an opportunity like this before, and the kingdom would like to deepen its bonds."

"It would benefit those in the margrave's faction too," Anne sharply pointed out in a low voice.

Marius gave her a strained smile and continued. "But, Eizo, I want you guys to stay within the kingdom. And so, I want to give Forge Eizo the best terms I can—we keep you all happy, and we establish ties with the Nordic region. That's killing two birds with one stone."

"Whoa, that's a lot more honest than I expected," I replied. They didn't seem to think I'd be angered by this proposition. *Does this count as being underestimated? I suppose it depends on who I'm talking to.*

"I'm not officially living within the kingdom," I pointed out.

"Right," Marius replied. "I think we can handle that somehow. Remember the official who tagged along during the monster subjugation campaign?"

"Ah, Miss Frederica." She was the officer in charge of supplies who'd managed rewards during the mission. She reminded me of a small animal.

"She's very good at what she does, you see," Marius replied. "I only found that out rather recently, but we can leave things to her."

"I'm a little reassured that it's someone I know, but don't drag her into anything weird."

"I know. I'm not gonna put her in danger just to protect a friend." He shrugged as I nodded. "Lastly, the Nordic region will never officially or secretly go over the kingdom's—or rather, my or the margrave's—head. They will not try to seek you out."

He winked at me. *It's not fair. A wink suits a handsome guy so well. I wouldn't*

be able to look that good doing it. He was so confident in his words, and to me, this meant that some sort of agreement had already been established. Frankly, I didn't want to be privy to the details.

Marius sighed softly. "So, here are the conditions." Everyone fell silent, though I heard someone gulp nervously. "First, as initially promised, rice will be sent to you through Camilo. Once or twice a month, Miss Karen will send Camilo products that she's made. You'll take a look at them, Eizo, and give your honest thoughts or advice."

"Mm-hmm," I replied. I'd been prepared to hear all of this.

"For every check of her items you do, you'll receive this many silver coins," Marius said, holding out his hand.

I peered at the money. "That's quite a bit."

The money he'd offered could buy a truly quality item—something between an elite and a custom model. *If I receive this much money every month, I won't need to work anymore. But I won't stop just because I got my hands on some cash.*

"Yep," Marius said. "Now, about the Nordic region. I received this information from one of the margrave's connections—in short, the house in charge of blacksmiths had to take responsibility for allowing a skilled smith such as yourself to leave the Nordic region."

"And that house is..."

He nodded. "House Katagiri. To be precise, I'm not talking about the main house that Master Kanzaburo belongs to, but rather, a branch of that house. Karen is a part of that branch." He smiled and turned to Karen. "Did anything sound amiss?"

Karen looked stunned but she awkwardly replied, "No, you're exactly right."

No wonder they seemed to be in a rush. Kanzaburo likely didn't want to call attention to the internal fuss within their household. That was understandable, and I could see how Karen could possibly be in harm's way. I knew logically that it would've been impossible for them to tell me all this, but I couldn't help but feel that things would've turned out differently had they just exposed the truth.

“In exchange,” said Marius, “I’d like you to listen to one request.”

“And what would that be?” I asked.

Karen replied instead of Marius. She bowed her head as much as she could. “I want you to allow me to be your apprentice one day. I know that I’m being very selfish, and I really do feel bad about hiding my initial motives.” Her head still down, she continued, “There’s no way I can ask you to take me in right now, though.”

She raised her head. Her relaxed expression from moments ago was gone, and she looked tense and nervous. She seemed like she was about to burst into tears at any moment. I glanced at our family. Every one of them locked eyes with me and gave a small nod, implying that they’d leave the final decision up to me.

I thought for a moment. It would be beneficial to have someone easy to predict nearby—the scariest thing was to be blindsided by an attack. To prevent such a thing, it was an effective strategy to keep Karen within the kingdom. And frankly, she already knew the route to our home, so she didn’t need to go off rumors. If she wanted to harm us, she could.

In that case, it felt most effective to keep her close. I knew very well that it wasn’t all water under the bridge—I was still wary of her. But she’d said that she would wait for me, and if a time came when I could truly grow to trust her, I didn’t mind taking her in. If she gave up before that, it would be on her. However, in that case, it was probably best to fortify our cabin or find a new home with more powerful magic.

It wasn’t as though I was absolutely devoid of fault. I’d been lying to everyone and saying I’d come from the Nordic region because I thought that nobody would understand my origins.

Silence filled the room, and for a moment, it felt like time had stopped. Slowly, I opened my mouth. “All right,” I said. Karen’s face immediately brightened. I wasn’t finished, though. “I’ll let this past incident slide, and I’ll even see your request in a positive light.” I paused for a moment as Karen gazed at me solemnly. “But if you lie to me or my family *ever* again, I’ll be moving elsewhere.”

I noticed Karen gulp and Marius awkwardly smile—he likely knew that I was also telling *him* not to lie to me either. He wasn't totally right, but he wasn't completely off either—I might not move away as I was threatening to do, but I also wasn't going to accommodate his every little request just because we were friends. Our relationship was often beneficial to both parties, but it didn't always even out in the end. How much that mattered to me differentiated family, friends, and strangers from each other.

“Got it,” Karen said, lowering her head.

“I thank you for your understanding,” I replied with a bow. There may have been no need to bow, but it wasn't like I was too proud to do so.

Marius sighed so faintly that I almost missed it. “I guess the talk's over, then?”

“Seems so,” I replied, raising my head with a grin. *I simply can't be as handsome as Marius.* I turned to Karen. “I know we started off on the wrong foot, but I hope we can form a relationship one step at a time.” I extended my right hand for a handshake, as was customary in the south.

“Right!” Karen replied energetically, shaking it.

We could just build a new connection from here. I wasn't sure what this would entail, but I knew my family could overcome anything that came our way.

Marius and Karen left first, leaving us and Camilo behind. While we were engaging in some small talk, the head clerk returned, and that was my cue to leave.

I felt brighter than when I'd arrived. I wasn't all smiles exactly, but I tried to leave the room energetically. Then, Camilo stopped me. I told everyone else to leave, and finally, only the two of us remained in the room.

He sighed and said, “He'll never admit it himself, so I think I should do the honors.” He hesitated a moment before continuing. “Marius knew that this deal would not be completely in your favor. As a compromise, he wanted to personally put his reputation on the line for you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I could imagine Marius doing that, but if Camilo knew the truth, I thought it was best to confirm the details.

“Both he and the margrave know about your exceptional abilities and value you quite highly. As part of the mainstream faction, they don’t want to let you go.”

“I see.” As a person who wanted to live freely in leisure, I wasn’t too happy about them keeping tabs on me, but I was nonetheless very grateful for their praise.

“But the Nordic region came with so many people in tow,” said Camilo. “They stand out. It’s not surprising that they caught the eye of the duke’s faction.”

“The duke? You mean, the leader of the nonmainstream faction?”

Camilo nodded while twiddling his mustache. “We’re keeping several secrets: the location of your forge, the frequency at which you visit this city, and even your name. To the duke’s faction, you sound like a normal blacksmith who’s just a bit more skilled than your peers.”

“And that’s not wrong.”

Camilo gave a forced smile. “Yes, but if you’re so normal, why would we be so protective of you? And why would people from the Nordic region come to collect you? Despite our proclamations otherwise, the duke’s faction would obviously pick up on your value and say, ‘Hand him over without a fuss before matters get complicated.’ Sounds reasonable, doesn’t it?”

“Ah, you’re right...”

It was my turn to give a strained smile. Without my cheats, I was truly just a normal blacksmith. It was illogical to take risks and protect a person like that. So, if the margrave or Marius became too overprotective, it would prove that I was a far more important person than they’d implied.

“And so, Marius created an excuse. He said that you frequent the city often because Miss Karen is staying here, and that was enough to silence the duke’s faction.”

“I see...” I knew that his request had sounded odd, but it seemed like my friend had put himself on the line more than I’d thought. I laughed. “I’ll try to discreetly offer him my gratitude next time.”

“Yep, you should,” Camilo replied, chuckling back at me.

“Then, I’ll see you around.”

I stepped out of the meeting room, determined to walk back to my life of normalcy, which was changing by the day.

Epilogue: The Nordic Person in the Capital

Various species lived within the kingdom's capital. The city was teeming with humans, beastfolk, dwarves, malitos, giants, and lizardmen. Some had been born there, while others had immigrated from the empire or the Nordic region.

They all had their reasons for doing so. Some were unable to go back home because of what they'd done in their hometowns, and others had remained unnoticed in their place of birth, so they'd come to the city for one last hurrah. Still others resided in the capital because of secret agendas from their homeland.

A certain lizardman lady was here on a covert mission of her own: to become an apprentice of a certain blacksmith. This had unfortunately ended in failure. Under normal circumstances, she should've headed home once her plan failed, but she'd been allowed to stay within the kingdom, devote herself to her studies, and become that blacksmith's apprentice once more—if she put forth some effort.

Because there was still hope that she could continue her mission, Karen, the lizardman blacksmith from the Nordic region, had been allowed to remain.

She wasn't used to the customs in the kingdom. Later down the line, when all was said and done, she realized how relaxed she'd felt at the blacksmith's cabin—the first place she had stayed. There, the family had a *kamidana*, and they practiced other customs that were familiar to her.

She sighed as she reminisced about those days.

She was currently using a forge managed by Count Eimoor (a household that was known for its military prowess). She had been allowed to forge weapons and armor for their private army, and she was kept under strict surveillance by a person from the kingdom. She wasn't allowed any funny business. Even so, now that she had a clear goal in mind, she was fired up like never before. She helped people in the forge while finding time to make items of her own.

“You’re working hard, Karen,” a woman called out.

“Hello, Petra,” Karen replied.

Petra was a human Karen had become friends with during her time working in the forge. As fellow ladies, they got along well, and they were both in training. Ever since they’d passionately started talking about smithing, they’d become close enough to call out to each other when they had the chance.

Petra didn’t know why Karen was there. Karen was far more precise and speedy with her work than the average apprentice, and it made little sense why such a skilled person had come here for training. But when Petra had asked her about it—

“I learned that my skills simply don’t hold a candle to others,” Karen had replied.

—she’d dodged the question. To be precise, she hadn’t exactly dodged it. Her words had been so earnest that it’d sounded like she truly felt them from the bottom of her heart.

“What are you making now?” Petra asked.

Karen raised the metal that she’d been hammering on the anvil. “Just a knife.”

A small knife was slowly being shaped. Petra thought that if this level of quality was maintained, the knife would undoubtedly be splendid.

“It looks amazing,” Petra said honestly, expressing her admiration.

For a split second, Karen scrunched her nose. “No, I’ve still got a long way to go. I saw one far more magnificent, and I’d like my products to be as close as possible to that one. I can only keep getting better everyday.”

“Was it *that* amazing?”

“It sure was.” Karen nodded, raised her head, and nostalgically stared into the distance. “The knife was so beautiful, and it cut really well. It even sliced through things that would usually be impossible for such a small tool. It cut through *everything*.”

Karen seemed entranced, while Petra was a bit taken aback. Then, as if realizing something, Petra said, “Ah. You must be referring to the blacksmith

that the count favors.”

Petra had heard about Count Eimoor’s wedding. That blacksmith had successfully shaped meghizium into rings, and on top of that, he’d gotten a fairy to bless them. She found it all rather difficult to believe, but she knew how highly the count valued that blacksmith.

“I believe he was allowed to use this forge,” Petra added.

The forge they were in had been kept a secret from outsiders. The count had chased out all of his usual blacksmiths and allowed the special blacksmith to use the facilities. She remembered how unusual it had been—that kind of exception hadn’t really been made before. It had implied just how important this blacksmith was to the count.

“Wait, really?!” Karen asked in awe. Her eyes were glittering with a passionate fire.

“Y-Yeah,” Petra replied, taken aback.

“Mas— I mean, Eizo... He used this place...”

Karen hadn’t been accepted as his apprentice just yet. She’d been about to call him “Master,” but she’d quickly corrected herself. She glanced around. What tools had Eizo used here? Even if he hadn’t made a knife, Karen was sure that anything he’d made must’ve been amazing.

She now realized why she’d been sent to this forge. If Eizo could make incredible weapons in this place, then surely Karen’s products could come close. In truth, Eizo hadn’t been able to use much magic here, but Karen had no way of knowing that.

“All right, I’ll do my best!” Karen said energetically. She was raring to go.

“Yep, good luck.” Petra, on the other hand, sounded a bit weary, like she’d given up.

Years later, word would spread—the best blacksmithing pair the world had ever seen had been born in Count Eimoor’s forge. This was the origin of two incredible, extraordinary blacksmiths. They’d just taken their first step forward.



The Story of How We Met IX: The Katana Blacksmith of the North

Two male lizardmen, wearing the clothes of the north, stood in front of a single blade. One was the loyal vassal of the local lord, Kanzaburo Katagiri. The other was a lower-ranking vassal, Kanzaburo Katabuchi. By the window, on a pedestal in the shadows, sat a seemingly normal shortsword. Kanzaburo took the sword and placed it under the light.

“Is this it?” he asked.

“Indeed,” Kanzaburo replied with a nod.

It looked like a standard shortsword of the south. The only difference seemed to be the smith’s signature—a fat cat on the blade’s pommel. This adorable insignia seemed unfitting for the boorish shortsword, and it was the heart of their issue: the blade had clearly made its journey a short while back from the south to the north. The journey itself wasn’t an issue; the route it’d taken was completely legal, and there were no laws forbidding the trade of shortswords between the north and south. No, the problem was the blacksmith who’d forged it.

Kanzaburo turned the blade over in his hand as it glistened under the sunlight. He narrowed his eyes and frowned—not due to the bright light it reflected, but because there wasn’t a single distortion to be found. Normally, no matter how flat a blade seemed, it would look slightly warped, so a whetstone would be used to polish the surface. However, this blade showed barely any sign of being polished.

Kanzaburo frowned and kept his eyes on the blade. “Was this the best one out of all the wares?”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been told,” said Kanzaburo. He nodded while remembering the southern merchant who’d sold him this blade. The merchant had looked as though he was selling any old item—he’d acted like the

shortsword was nothing special to him.

“Is he trying to hide things, I wonder?” Kanzaburo murmured.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps this blade really *is* nothing special to him,” Kanzaburo surmised.

The man of House Katagiri nodded. The two were curious because this shortsword had apparently been forged by a blacksmith originally from the Nordic region.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if a blacksmith of this caliber was rumored to be from some distant province...” Kanzaburo said.

“I’ve checked with Bizen, Mimasaka, Seki, Sakai, and Kyo, but they all reported that they’ve never heard of him,” Kanzaburo replied.

“What about his family name? Can we find him with that?”

“His family name is unknown.”

“Hmm...”

Kanzaburo fell deep into thought, and the wrinkles on his face became more pronounced. He belonged to the main branch of his house, while a subbranch was in charge of the blacksmiths. It was customary for the main branch and subbranches to have different last names, however, this was not so for House Katagiri. Because their subbranch was in charge of the blacksmiths of the Nordic region—in contemporary terms, they were a business group of sorts—they were allowed to use the same family name. However, this also meant that anything the subbranch produced was dedicated to the main branch.

Kanzaburo had initially assumed that the mysterious blacksmith who’d forged this shortsword was within a similar organization, but now, he felt sure that his guesses were incorrect.

There was one more thing bothering him.

“Do you think he can forge a *katana*?” Kanzaburo asked.

“That, I cannot say,” Kanzaburo replied. “But with skills like these, I believe that he can.”

“I agree. In that case...”

“We must see him for ourselves.”

Kanzaburo nodded. If a blacksmith this superb had been allowed out of the Nordic region, that not only decreased their productivity, but also affected the pride of House Katagiri’s subbranch, which was in charge of these blacksmiths. He turned toward another figure, who was observing them a short distance away.

“Do you understand now?” he asked.

“Yes. This is why you called for me,” a woman called Karen Katagiri said with a nod.

She was from the subbranch of House Katagiri. At first, she’d wondered why she’d been called instead of her father, but she now understood that she was the best fit for this role.

“I’ll need you to become his apprentice,” Kanzaburo said. “Is that all right with you?”

“Certainly,” Karen replied with another firm nod.

As she was part of the subbranch, the delivery of her goods was restricted to certain clients only. However, if she could improve on her skills and forge an ideal *katana*—if she could make a blade that could cut through anything—then perhaps people ranking higher than the main branch of her household would covet her skills. She held no animosity toward the main branch, but she couldn’t let an opportunity to make her own household and develop her own renown slip through her fingers.

Upon listening to the explanation by Kanzaburo and Kenzaburo, Karen looked to the mysterious south, where her new, peculiar life awaited.

Afterword

Hi there. I don't think anyone will start reading from this volume. It's been a while—I'm Tamamaru, a part-time light novel author who's nearing fifty (currently forty-five). We're finally at our ninth installment of this series, and the next one will be the big two-digit volume!

People who don't read the afterword until the end will understand that this volume wasn't just a checkpoint—some important matters developed here. But to those who start with the afterword, I want to assure you all that this part of the story will be filled with exciting developments.

I actually had a few concerns when I was uploading the stories online. I knew I had to write an arc about a person coming from the Nordic region one day, especially since Eizo claimed to be from that area himself. I suppose that was a given. While the Nordic people would naturally be cautious of their new environment, I struggled to come up with how I wanted them to act.

Another issue was, of course, Karen. In the webnovel version, her goals and motives were a bit vague, but above all, the biggest question I had was this: should I make her become an apprentice or not in the book version? After all, she has a few characteristics that would completely overlap with Rike, and I wanted to make her distinct. Maybe I could've designed her so that she had her own set of knowledge about smithing—sort of like how I write Diana and Anne having different perspectives on nobility—but I thought it'd be weird if I cut Rike at certain times.

And since Karen's motives were less than ideal, I felt like even Eizo would be strict toward her. Like the webnovel version, I decided to not make her into an apprentice. However, since she's a character with passion and serenity, I'd love for her to make a reappearance in a more peaceful fashion one day. It might be far in the future, but I think there's a chance that we'll get to meet her again.

Now for some acknowledgments. As usual, thank you to my editor, I-san. I know I always trouble you, and I know you worked a lot for this volume—it

must've been tough. Thank you so much. And as usual, I'd like to also thank Kinta for the lovely illustrations. They always generate a sort of spark within me. I didn't describe the Nordic people's appearance much, especially Karen's, but the illustration was so beautifully done that I thought you'd read my mind. I appreciate you so, so much.

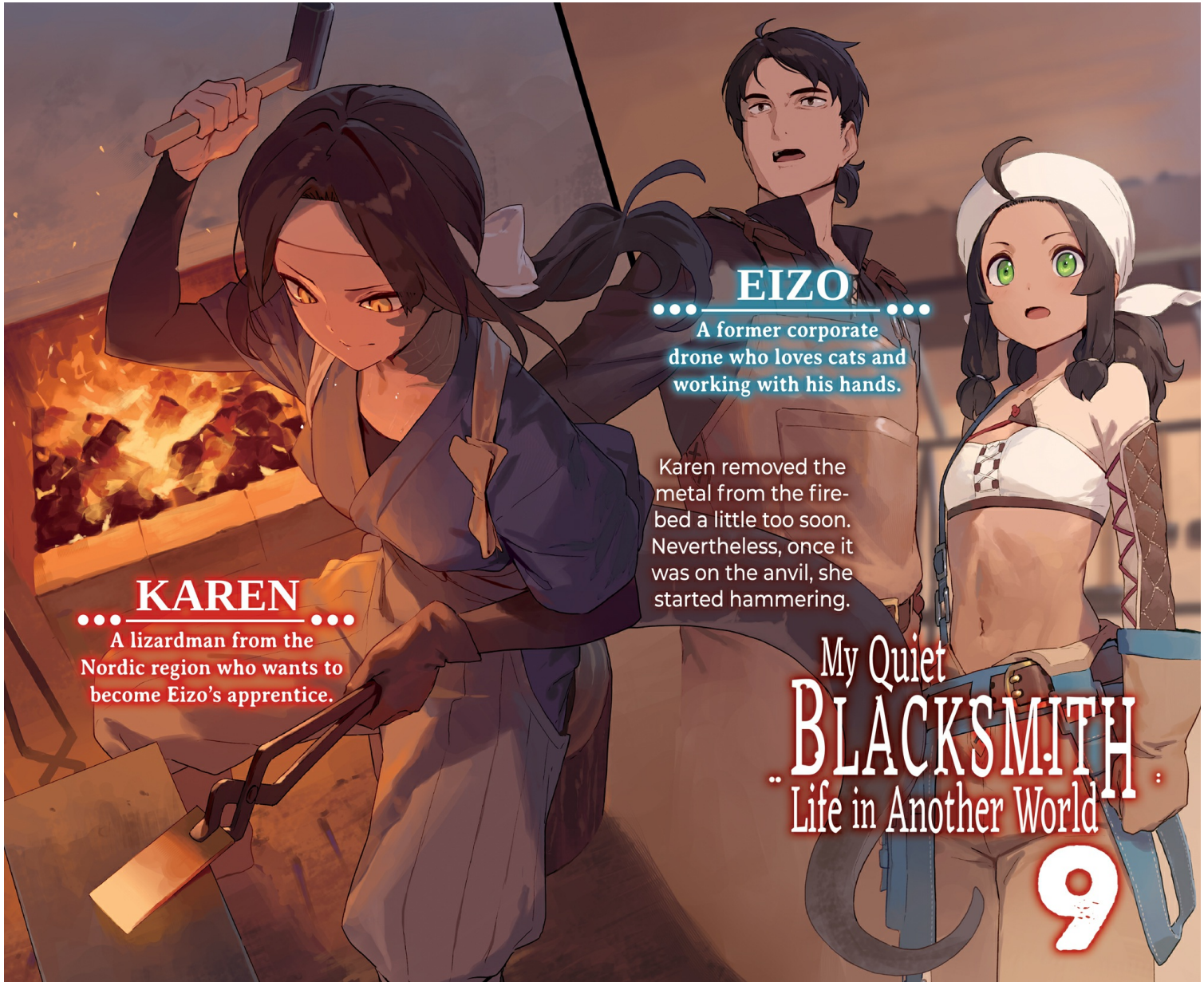
Thank you to Yoshino Himori, who's in charge of the manga version. I know I wrote some stuff in a confusing way, but it's always portrayed so wonderfully in the manga, and for that, I'm very grateful. As of January 2024, there are four volumes of the manga out, so if you're interested, please check it out!

I'd like to express my gratitude to the people in charge of releasing the audiobook and those releasing these books overseas.

Thank you to my mother and younger sister, as well as my cats: Chama, Konbu, and Shijimi. They're always there to support me. Thank you to my online and real-life friends. I can continue this series thanks to you guys.

And of course, lastly, I'd like to give my biggest and most heartfelt gratitude to the readers who have continued to follow and support this series. This series has managed to sell a total of 1.2 million copies! That's largely due to the manga version, but it's still great to learn that we managed to make it to such a large number. I'd like to thank everyone from the bottom of my heart!

Let us meet again in the next big two-digit volume!



... **KAREN** ...

A lizardman from the Nordic region who wants to become Eizo's apprentice.

... **EIZO** ...

A former corporate drone who loves cats and working with his hands.

Karen removed the metal from the fire-bed a little too soon. Nevertheless, once it was on the anvil, she started hammering.

My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
"Life in Another World"

9



ANNE

The seventh imperial princess.
Came to live with Eizo after
the peace conference.

RIKE

A dwarf who begged for
an apprenticeship with Eizo
after being captivated
by his skills.

LIDY

An emissary from an elven
village. Knowledgeable
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DIANA

Daughter of the House
of Eimoor. A tomboy
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A mercenary nicknamed
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SAMYA

A tiger beastfolk.
Came to live with Eizo
after he rescued her from
the brink of death.

Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta

9

My Quiet

BLACKSMITH

Life in Another World



An anime-style illustration of a blacksmithing scene. In the foreground, a woman with long dark hair and yellow eyes, wearing a blue apron, is hammering a piece of metal on an anvil. Behind her, a man with dark hair and a surprised expression watches. To the right, another woman with green eyes and a white headscarf stands with her hands on her hips. In the background, a large fire burns in a furnace.

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My Quiet Blacksmith Life in Another World: Volume 9

by Tamamaru

Translated by piyo Edited by C.D. Leeson

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