
FROM OLD COUNTRY BUMPKIN TO MASTER SWORDSMAN
My Hotshot Disciples Are All Grown Up Now, and They Won't Leave Me Alone
6
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Illustration
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"What?"
"Ah?"
"Master Beryl, I was thinking we should share a room."
Allucia Citrus
Beryl Gardenant
Shueste Flumvelk


"Ugh...!"
I pressed my wooden sword against the back of Sahat's neck as he fell forward. Had this been a real fight, his head would have already parted ways with his body.
"That's one."

# CHARACTERS



## Beryl Gardenant

An old man who taught swordsmanship at a rural dojo. He left home to accept a post as a special instructor for the Liberion Order. After defeating his father Mordea in a match, he is beginning to see his swordsmanship in a new light.

## Mewi Freya



A girl who has started living with Beryl. She has a talent for magic and is now attending Liberis's magic institute.

## Lucy Diamond



Though she looks like a child, she's actually the commander of Liberis's magic corps.
She immerses herself in the research of powerful wizardry day and night.

## Ficelle Harbeller



Beryl's former pupil and the young ace wizard of the magic corps. She's capable of wielding both swords and spells, and she's also Mewi's teacher. Naturally, she has great respect for Beryl.

## Allucia Citrus



Beryl's former pupil. She's the proud knight commander of the Liberion Order and is known by the nickname Godspeed. She has tremendous respect for Beryl.

## Shueste Flumvelk



Warren's little sister and the eldest daughter of House Flumvelk. She provides Beryl with the best of her hospitality during his stay in Flumvelk.

## Warren Flumvelk



Flumvelk's young margrave. He invited Beryl and Allucia to a noble party.

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# STORY

Beryl Gardenant, a self-proclaimed “humble old man,” is a sword instructor at his dojo in a rural, backwater village. One day, his former pupil Allucia—who’s climbed the ranks to become the young knight commander of the Liberion Order—summons him to serve as the special instructor for her knights. After some time in the capital, the Backwater Swordmaster’s reputation starts to spread.

When Beryl gets a letter from his father Mordea requesting that he visit Beaden, he travels to his home village with Mewi, Henblitz, and Curuni. Once there, he helps out at the dojo and goes on a monster hunt, ultimately living his life as usual with his sword at his side. The day before Beryl returns to the capital, his father challenges him to a one-on-one sparring match.

*There’s no way I can win.*

With such thoughts in mind, Beryl reluctantly accepts, and after the two swordmasters clash...he discovers that he’s surpassed his father without even realizing it.

The Backwater Swordmaster’s recognition of his own strength is changing, and a new chapter of his life begins.

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# Chapter 1: An Old Country Bumpkin Goes on an Expedition

“Ready!”

“All right, come at me.”

A young man charged at me with a spirited battle cry, a wooden sword in his hands. That said, it wasn’t the same length as what I or the knights usually used, it was just a little shorter. One day, he would use the real thing, but a wooden sword was actually pretty heavy for those who weren’t accustomed to the weight. Despite its long and slender appearance, it was still a solid lump of shaved wood. You needed a certain level of expertise to be able to properly wield something of that size.

“Hah!”

“Mm, much sharper than before.”

The young man—Lumite Bafang—let loose a diagonal slash. I used my own wooden sword to alter his blade’s trajectory. He’d studied swordsmanship before this, so was just a little ahead of the others, and he’d also kept up with Ficelle’s harsh training, which was coming along pretty nicely.

“Why, you…!”

“Hup.”

Lumite kept his grip on his sword, stepped in closer, and attacked with an upward slash. I kept my eye on his rising wooden sword as I lowered my own to meet it. The sound of wood scraping violently against wood resounded around us.

In a direct clash, there was no way for him to win against my muscle mass, so I shifted my weight to ward off the blow without bringing it to a stop. It felt better to be able to swing all the way through, after all.

Just as I mentioned earlier, Lumite’s swordsmanship was looking pretty good. However, that was only in relation to the other students of the sword magic course. As someone who regularly trained with the knights of the Liberion Order, there was no way I would get hit by his sword. It could be a different story in several years, though.

“Hggh!”

“Hm?”

With his training sword held overhead and his torso extended, Lumite forced his body to twist to bring his blade downward. I wondered why he chose to do that. Even if he was scared of a counterattack, he could’ve used his momentum to simply jump backward. And if he’d wanted to stay on the offense, there was no need to twist his body just to pull it off. Unable to read his next move, I went through my options in a fraction of a second. It was dangerous to sink into my own thoughts at this range, so I decided to take a step back. I could take action after seeing what he was actually up to.

“Hyah!”

“Oh?”

And even before I could finish processing that thought, Lumite struck. His sword was clearly out of range. It would have been one thing if I were standing just on the border of his reach, but anyone could tell he was never going to hit me. Regardless, he chose to swing his sword. A wooden sword slicing through empty air always creates a small puff of wind, but what came at me was more than a gust—it was a genuine wave of power.

“Ooh, impressive.”

In other words, Lumite had used sword magic. Its power and speed weren’t even worth comparing to the stuff Ficelle used. Anyone with a certain level of combat experience would be able to react and easily dodge it. I had done exactly that by swaying my upper body to the side.

Still, being able to manifest magic with a proper blade—in an entirely different way from a clashing of wooden swords—was a wonderful thing. It was enough for me to be moved by how quickly his talent was beginning to shine with proper guidance.

“But the fight’s not over just ’cause you managed one shot.”

“Ow.”

His growth was an entirely separate matter, though. Lumite had left himself completely open by using sword magic, so I stepped in and bonked him on the head with my wooden sword. He kept his voice down like the graceful young man he was, but he still yelped.

Had Lumite’s attack been blindingly fast, impossible to dodge, and a surefire way of bringing down his opponent, then an opening in his guard wouldn’t have been a problem. Perhaps one day it would be all those things, but at present, it wasn’t.

He'd left himself exposed after being satisfied with his accomplishment, so it'd been his inescapable fate to be hit with a wooden sword.

"Th-Thank you for the match," Lumite said, bowing as he rubbed his head.

"Likewise," I said, returning the bow. "Anyway, it's pretty amazing that you can already use sword magic."

I knew nothing about magic, but I didn't believe it was in any way easy to master. So, manifesting sword magic so clearly—albeit in a very rudimentary form—meant he'd grown at a terrifying rate.

"I practiced over the break," Lumite said. "But I definitely find it hard to weave my mana while moving."

"I see."

The magic institute had been on break during the summer, but that didn't mean every student had halted their progress. The serious ones like Lumite had diligently continued their studies independent of any lessons held at the institute.

I did value taking a breather when it was time to rest, though. It was pretty hard for me to continuously exhaust my stamina and strength at this age, so I rested when I could. Still, back in my youth, I'd swung my sword pretty recklessly. I didn't want to force this generation's youngsters to do the same, but it was admirable when they did so.

"Aww yeah! I win!"

"Ugh! That's unfair! You have way more muscle!"

"I mean, not much I can do about that..."

As such thoughts went through my mind, another match seemed to have come to an end not too far away from where Lumite and I were standing. It was Nesia and Fredra. They, too, had continued their personal training at their own respective paces without taking a break.

It looked like Nesia had come out on top. Fredra was complaining, but there really wasn't much that could be done about the difference in muscle mass between boys and girls—not to mention the fact that Nesia was blessed with a powerful physique.

"Now, now, sword magic exists to overcome that advantage, remember?" I told Fredra. "You're just getting started."

"Mrgh... If you say so, Mr. Beryl..."

In an artless confrontation, the one with more muscle

generally won. Technique existed to make up for that handicap. From that perspective, sword magic was amazing—if you mastered it to a certain degree, of course. Still, it had the potential to easily overcome such disadvantages. Allucia and Surena made up for such a difference without relying on any sort of projectiles, though. *Man, Henblitz would totally win against either of them in arm wrestling, and yet…* Technique truly was deep and mysterious.

"Hiyaaaah!"

"Gh!"

There was one more pair having a match—Mewi and Cindy. Cindy was making full use of her excess energy to remain on the offensive. Her swordsmanship was still a little unreliable to count on in actual combat, but handling a nonstop barrage of attacks from someone who never got tired was still tough work.

Mewi was fending her off well. She'd always been the agile type, so dodging all of Cindy's attacks must've been relatively simple for her. However, she was still too inexperienced to link her evasive maneuvers to counterattacks. That was a simple deficiency in technique and knowledge—she just didn't know what to do.

"Hmph!"

"Bwah?!"

"Oooh."

And just as I figured Cindy would win by draining Mewi's stamina, Mewi drove her wooden sword into Cindy's ribs with a sharp thrust. She'd splendidly spotted a gap where she could attack. *Damn, that looks like it hurt*.

"You okay, Cindy?" I asked, running over to her.

"G-Gah…! I-I'm totally fine!" she sputtered.

She didn't look fine at all. Mewi didn't have much muscle, so I doubted any bones were broken, but a thrust to the ribs with a wooden sword would definitely hurt, especially if one hadn't built up a resistance to blows. Having stamina and being tough were two different things. Frankly, it would be weirder to be *okay* after taking a hit from a wooden sword. *All of the knights of the Liberion Order are weird, huh? Well, maybe that tenet is only correct for those who live by the sword.*

"Mewi, I'm impressed you saw an opening and got in a hit like that," I said.

"Hmph…"

I received the same reaction as ever. She was like this at home too, but it was especially prominent during sword magic classes. I was used to it though—I didn't pay it any mind. This was just who she was. If her attitude was bound to put her in a bad situation, I was ready to say something about it, but so far, that didn't seem likely.

"Now then, how are they doing over there?" I asked, turning to look at the dozens of students doing practice swings with Ficelle.

Due to the incident with Vice Principal Brown before summer, the number of students attending the sword magic class had risen significantly. Even with the passing of summer and the beginning of fall, the number hadn't changed much, and there didn't appear to be many dropouts. There'd been a couple, but there wasn't much that could be done about that.

As for me, I didn't say much about how Ficelle conducted her class, nor did I come to the institute often. Summer break had, of course, paused my visits, so it really had been a while since I'd been here.

*"Master, I'd like you to supervise these kids. I'll go over the basics with the others."*

Those had been Ficelle's first words to me today. Naturally, the five students who'd attended her lessons from the very beginning were noticeably ahead of the dozens who'd joined later. To add to that, those five were the elite who'd endured Ficelle's unreasonable practice-swing hell. So, she had come up with a plan to do something about that gap. In short, the one guiding the students would change based on their progression.

That was only possible with both me and Ficelle here, but it was efficient. We couldn't toss those who couldn't even properly do practice swings into training bouts. Likewise, we couldn't keep those who'd finished learning the fundamentals in an eternal loop of doing nothing *but* the basics.

Even the novices Ficelle was teaching now would be able to participate in training bouts eventually. When that happened, I would no longer be needed here, and I'd only be able to contribute my skills as a sparring partner like I was doing with Lumite now. That, or I could come in to mix things up. I was capable of teaching swordsmanship, but nothing about magic.

That said, I had no intention of ever losing in these bouts at the magic institute—I would continue to win right up until their

graduation. Even if they used sword magic like Lumite had, I refused to accept a loss. I would hold back appropriately but never let my guard down.

Of course, I'd never once taken part in a mock battle with the intention of losing, but my feelings on the matter had been amplified ever since I'd won against my dad. The reality of that fact had come to me very slowly. I'd beaten my father and was now aware of my own strength. It wasn't until the carriage ride back to Baltrain that I'd come to the realization: *I want to live with my head held high.* But to counter that, I'd also developed a desire to refrain from becoming arrogant or haughty.

I had to change my perception of myself from "not weak" to "strong." Naturally, I wasn't going to claim to have reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship, and I planned to continue to devote myself to my art. I didn't want to be conceited—it was beyond pathetic to sit back and bask in my own strength. I hadn't dedicated my life to swordsmanship just to brag about it.

So, I planned to remain modest without being self-abasing. That was easier said than done, though. Even after I'd defeated the man I'd seen as the ultimate swordsman, the scenery around me hadn't changed drastically. In other words, my outlook on life couldn't be so quickly altered. Was this something I had to consciously focus on?

I pondered all manner of things as the five students I was supervising took a break, but as a temporary lecturer here, I couldn't stand around endlessly worrying about my own problems. I continued watching Ficelle shouting directions to her students as she swung her wooden sword.

Suddenly, something came to mind.

"Oh yeah, are you the only one who can use a little sword magic now?" I asked Lumite.

"No," Lumite said. "All the others can get it to manifest too."

"Is that so? Pretty impressive."

It seemed he wasn't the only one. Well, this *was* the magic institute—and the sword magic class at that—so getting it to manifest meant they were at the starting line. However, I hadn't seen any signs of sword magic in the other kids' bouts. Maybe it was just hard to weave mana while on the move, much like Lumite had mentioned.

"Hm? Does that mean you can do it too?" I asked Mewi.

"Well…technically…"

Lumite had said “All the others.” That had to include her too.

*Mewi using sword magic… Oh man, I kind of…*really *want to see that.* She would probably refuse if I asked her to show me at home, so I couldn’t let this chance pass me by.

“I see. I’d like to check what all of your sword magic looks like so far.”

If I’d said I only wanted to see *Mewi’s* sword magic, I would’ve been showing my partiality. That would be a poor move as an instructor. It was better to demonstrate an interest in *everyone’s* sword magic. I wasn’t lying either. The growth of the next generation was always worth celebrating—I was just borrowing Henblitz’s words, but he was exactly right.

I was going to have them show me the proof of their growth right here and now.

“Not that I really mind,” Nesia said, “but it ain’t all that impressive.”

“That’s always how it is at first,” I told him. “But that doesn’t mean you should postpone showing it to others until you’re completely satisfied with how it looks, right?”

“Well…you got a point there,” he conceded.

He seemed somewhat reluctant to show off his amateur sword magic. I understood this feeling well, but he couldn’t refuse to do so forever. It was embarrassing to show off an underdeveloped technique—I felt the same way. However, worrying about that too much would hamper your ability to improve. In my opinion, so long as there wasn’t a reason to intentionally conceal a technique, showing it to others was a perfectly viable means of polishing it to a shine.

“Looks like they’re going to need a bit more time anyway,” I said, glancing at Ficelle’s students. “Okay, how about you all line up side by side and shoot one spell each?”

I had them all face an empty space on these ridiculously vast campus grounds. A part of me wanted to face their magic head-on, but it probably wasn’t ready for practical use. I was confident I could dodge their attacks, but it would be unwise to do so and put a damper on everyone’s mood. Though, it would be somewhat problematic if the five of them surrounded me and fired at once. I wasn’t confident I could dodge at all in that case. Unleashing their magic toward empty space would be best for everyone.

“I’m pretty sure you’d be able to dodge even if we all attacked

you at once," Lumite said jokingly.

"I might be strong compared to you kids, but I'm not superhuman..."

No matter how strong I'd become, some things were physically impossible. I wouldn't be able to do anything against a hail of projectiles being launched from five people surrounding me. Maybe if I tried really, *really* hard, I could weather the storm. But such a feat wasn't worth trying in the middle of a lecture at the magic institute. That was basically a dance with death.

"Hgggh... Okay! I'm good enough to mo— OW!"

"Cindy, don't push yourself..." I said.

Cindy tried to force her body to move, but a thrust to the ribs wasn't something she could just walk off and ignore. If these kids were planning to join the battlefield in the future, they would have to get used to pain to a certain degree. Still, very few people would be able to move around freely after that. I decided to teach her how to chill the wound afterward. It would be difficult to get some ice, but a towel drenched in cold water would do the trick.

"Okay, let's have a look."

Cindy was going to need time to recover, so I got the other four to ready their wooden swords. It was weird for a man who knew nothing about magic to observe their sword magic. Maybe Ficelle would get angry about this later. But it was just one time, so hopefully she would forgive me.

"Hmm!"

After I gave them the signal, they each began weaving their mana at their own pace. As was to be expected, they were extremely sluggish compared to Ficelle. A vague hint of power I could somehow or other see was gathering around their blades.

*Yup, this definitely isn't practical in an actual fight.* They were sure to be attacked while gathering their power. And even if they were spared, their target could run away with ease. In all likelihood, it was a little faster to simply gather mana and fire it without the sword. They looked to be having a hard time due to the extra process of gathering their mana around a blade. Ficelle had once described the act of shooting magic as easy, but expanding its effect and maintaining it was very hard.

"Hah!"

The first to finish was Lumite. He'd used it in his bout against me, even though it'd left him completely open. He was probably

the best at it among this group. The wave from Lumite's sword traveled for about five meters before vanishing. It must've been too difficult to maintain beyond that point.

"Raaaah!"

"Hyah!"

Next were Nesia and Fredra. Nesia's sword magic looked stronger than Lumite's, but it only flew for about two or three meters. His strike seemed to have more destructive force, while Lumite's had range. Fredra's, on the other hand, was a long and thin wave that flew even farther than Lumite's. This one didn't appear to have much force behind it, but it had plenty of range. Each student was basically using the same type of sword magic, but it was amusing how they all had their own quirks.

"Hmph!"

Last was Mewi. She was technically capable of using sword magic, but she was likely the least skilled of the bunch. She seemed to have had a hard time gathering her mana around her blade.

"Ooh?"

Also, her sword magic was somewhat different from the others. Their magic had been somewhat yellow and nearly colorless—very similar to what Ficelle had used against Lono Ambrosia, but on a far smaller scale. Mewi's was clearly red.



*Hang on, is that actual fire?* Not only was the color clearly different, but I could sense a faint heat emanating from it.

"Oh man, you're all amazing," I told the group. "This'll definitely be an asset once you can use it in an actual fight."

Well, setting my interest in Mewi's magic aside for now, I had to praise all of the students. Focusing entirely on her would show my partiality, so I needed to withstand the urge. At any rate, I thought I'd already had a good idea about a wizard's strengths, but seeing it again now was still very impressive. It also reinforced how much Lucy and Ficelle towered above others by being able to perform such feats with casual ease. It didn't change the fact that the students training here were all very talented, but it really highlighted how much of a genius Ficelle was.

"I mean, I get it being strong and all, but I don't feel like I'm ever gonna be able to use it on the move..." Nesia grumbled.

"Ha ha ha. I suppose you just have to keep practicing," I told him.

"Tch. It's gonna be a damn long road..."

So he said, but I doubted he'd ever been under the impression that sword magic would be easy to master. He spoke with a sharp tongue, but his expression didn't show the slightest hint of desperation. I'd also spent years cultivating the techniques I now used. Life wouldn't be so hard if techniques were that easy to master. That was sure to apply to both swordsmanship and magic.

"I can teach you the movements that your swordplay is based on, but you'll have to listen carefully to Ms. Ficelle and your other teachers when it comes to mana and magic."

Put another way, there was nothing I could teach them regarding anything related to magic. This was one fact that couldn't be overturned by any amount of effort. I really looked up to the capabilities of wizards and would've loved to know more, but I'd long given up on that.

"If anything, I kinda wanna get just *one* hit in against you using only my sword," Nesia remarked.

"Ha ha ha. If you want to do that, you've got a ton of catching up to do," I said.

"Haaah... This road seems even longer..."

It really was like Nesia to want to get one up on me without relying on wizardry. Sticking to the initial impression I'd always

had of him, he seemed more like a swordsman than a wizard by nature. If his talent for magic had never manifested, perhaps he would've ended up aiming to be an adventurer or knight. He simply had that much martial spirit in him.

At any rate, even though I found his aspirations admirable, I had no intention of losing—I couldn't lose for, at minimum, the next fifteen years. I'd be sixty at that point, and this seemed like a good enough goal. My dad had set aside his sword before turning sixty, but a part of me thought it'd be nice to surpass him. And he was still plenty strong, even after retiring.

"Master, we're at a good stopping point too. It's about time for the end of class."

"Oops, it's already that late?"

That was when Ficelle came over to us. It seemed it was about time to wrap things up. Time spent chatting and crossing blades was so fulfilling that it made the minutes fly by. The students who'd had the fundamentals driven into them via practice swings looked totally exhausted. They all had a proper talent for magic—as was true of all students in the institute—so it was rather rare for them to possess any knowledge of swordsmanship...or rather, any combat technique that involved moving the body. If anything, Lumite and Nesia were clear exceptions.

Even though they were doing no more than practice swings, constantly raising and bringing down a heavy wooden sword was pretty rough at first. That said, those who were incapable of that wouldn't even be able to get started with sword magic, so I hoped they'd stick it out and try their best.

"I only caught a glimpse, but you've all got a ways to go," Ficelle said to the students. "You need more training."

"N-Now, now..." I said.

I was wondering if she could be a little gentler about it. They'd studied for far less time than Ficelle and I had. If they'd had enough skill to be able to shock us in such a short time, they would be surpassing genius level and shooting right into the realm of the superhuman.

"Also, you're as bad at converting your mana as ever, Mewi," Ficelle added sharply, having properly seen that last display of sword magic.

"Erk..."

"I noticed the color was different," I said. "Does that make it shoddy?"

“Mm-hmm. Very shoddy,” Ficelle confirmed, pouring salt on the wound.

*Maybe it’s my fault for asking. Sorry, Mewi. It’s too much to ask for Ficelle to carefully consider her words.*

Mewi fell silent. She wasn’t crying or wailing about it, so maybe she could tell that Ficelle had no ill intent.

“Well, it’s not exactly bad, per se.” Ficelle had corrected herself, likely sensing the awkward mood. “But she can’t convert her mana into anything but fire. It’s really clumsy.”

Thinking back on it, Lucy had manipulated an enormous variety of magic—fire, lightning, water, ice, and even other magics I couldn’t comprehend, like the one that had taken out Twilight in an instant.

Even if it wasn’t fair to compare Mewi to Lucy, being incapable of using magic for anything but fire did seem like a bit of a waste. I wondered whether this was something that could be changed with training or if it was decided at birth.

“But it’s really high output magic,” Ficelle added. “That part’s amazing. Still clumsy, though.”

“Hmph…” Mewi huffed.

By high output, she likely meant the amount of mana involved or how much could be converted into fire at once or something. I really didn’t have a clue, so I could only let my imagination run wild in that regard. If I could sense mana, maybe I could’ve provided some advice, but there was nothing I could do about that. It didn’t seem like a sense you could acquire through training.

“So…she’s really gifted but unpolished,” I said.

“You could say that,” Ficelle agreed noncommittally.

Having the talent for something and being able to skillfully demonstrate it seemed similar but were very different matters. To use an example that made more sense to me, even with a talent for swordsmanship, there were those who were completely devoted to offense. There was a clear difference between talent and skill—skill was something to acquire over time. In that sense, Mewi definitely had talent dormant within her, but she had yet to awaken it.

It was up to her instructor’s preference whether to force that talent out or to develop it slowly. Failing to awaken it at all meant the instructor was inadequate. Seeing that she was actually capable of creating fire from mana, Mewi definitely had a talent

for it, but it was up to Ficelle and the other teachers of the institute to do something about that, not me. To repeat myself over and over, I knew absolutely nothing about magic, so there was very little I could do.

"Ah."

And as I pondered over such things, a familiar *dong, dong* resounded in the air. It was the bell signifying the end of class. As always, I had no idea how this sound was being produced or where it was coming from. It was probably some type of magic. *The world of magic's awfully deep. I can understand why Lucy and other wizards are so eager to research it.*

"That's it for today," Ficelle said, addressing the students. "Good work, everyone."

"Thank you for the lesson!"

And with that, today's class was over.

Since I'd taken a break for all of summer vacation, it really *had* been a while since I'd been at the magic institute. I was glad to see that everyone had grown in their own ways. I was especially delighted that Mewi was steadily mastering the fundamentals of sword magic. As an instructor, I couldn't have favorites, but even so, it was probably fine to be secretly delighted.

Her swordsmanship was still immature but steadily improving. Partially due to the environment she'd grown up in, she had no restraint. This was a good thing—she never avoided hitting her opponent with a wooden sword. Honestly, that was pretty important for learning any martial art. It was good to be considerate, but that could sometimes be a flaw. Well, in Mewi's case, she was also lacking in terms of manners and decorum. We just had to make adjustments to that little by little.

"Oh man, I'm really looking forward to it," I muttered.

"Hm? To what?" Ficelle asked.

"Seeing the next generation's growth."

The students of the sword magic course weren't really my pupils. If anything, they were Ficelle's. Still, they were the next generation, and I was helping them grow. Walking my own path of swordsmanship was fun, but it was even better to be able to oversee their progress. This was definitely what made being in a position to guide and teach others worthwhile.

◇

“Morning, everyone.”

“Good morning!”

Yesterday, I had gone to the magic institute for the first time in a while, and today, I was back at my main job as a special instructor at the order’s training hall. I basically split my time up—eighty percent here and twenty percent as a temporary lecturer at the institute. This meant I was very busy; however, the sword magic class was only an hour long, and I wasn’t in the order’s training hall *all* the time. I was only on the clock for four hours or so. This was a little harsh on my stamina, but my working hours were on the short side compared to a normal job. Combined with my above-average pay, this life was unimaginable compared to my days in the countryside teaching swordsmanship and doing some farming on the side. It was, of course, nice to have money to spare, but that didn’t mean I wanted to work every day from morning to evening.

In hindsight, I found myself in a blessed environment, and I had Allucia to thank for that. She was far busier than I was, though. I wanted to do anything I could to reduce the burden on her.

“Now then, time to give it my all for another day.”

I wasn’t speaking to anyone in particular. These words were for myself. Unfortunately, I was incapable of thinking, *Well, I beat my dad, so I’m already the best. There’s no need to try anymore.* It was difficult to claim that I’d reached the summit of swordsmanship simply by narrowly defeating my aging father. There were surely plenty of strong people out there who I knew nothing about. I wasn’t conceited enough to claim I could win against all of them.

However, the problem now was what to aim for. I couldn’t think of anything at the moment. I’d spent many long years thinking my dad was the ultimate swordsman. Even now, that was still true. But I’d beaten him. I wasn’t sure whether this gave me confidence yet, but a win was a win. As a model for manhood, my dad was still my goal, but I had no idea who I could set my sights on as an even higher peak for swordsmanship.

I didn’t believe my dad was the best in the world, but I didn’t know any swordsman who was clearly stronger than him. You might ask, “Well, doesn’t that make you the best?” but I didn’t feel like that was quite right either.

To bring up a recent example, I didn't believe I could win against Lucy. Maybe I could beat her by catching her by surprise at close range, but that applied to basically any opponent. Surprise attacks were the ultimate battle tactic.

Getting back on topic, I hadn't given up on aiming for the summit of swordsmanship, but I'd suddenly lost my guidepost to accomplishing that. Incidentally, mastering swordplay to the extreme didn't necessarily mean becoming the ultimate swordsman. It was pretty hard to explain. Lucy was probably in the same boat. She was studying to push the limits of magic, but she didn't seem to have any fixation on being the ultimate wizard.

That was the same way I wanted to reach the summit—I had no desire to become the strongest swordsman in the world. I mean, it sounded kind of neat, but it was more of a curiosity than a goal.

However, the troublesome part was that perfecting swordsmanship inevitably came with strength. *If only it were a scholarly pursuit.* The accumulation of technique and knowledge in that case would have nothing to do with physical strength.

"Hmmm…"

I sank deeper into thought as I watched the knights before me engage in intense mock battles.

*Man, where exactly* is *the summit? What's the view like up there?* In all likelihood, nobody knew. None had ever reached the peak. My dad was supposed to be ahead of me on that path, but I'd overtaken him before I'd realized it. Now I either had to figure out a new goalpost or find my way based purely on my own efforts.

It was an extremely perilous path. I'd already passed the peak of my life, and walking down this road alone as an aging older man was harsh and disheartening. Maybe things would be different if I had a partner to walk with me, but that was impractical at this point, so I set the thought aside for now.

Still, I didn't have any desire to stop walking this path or turn around and go back. I'd come so far already, so I wanted to go as far as I could. And though I wasn't at the summit, I was clearly on the upper slopes. Before now, I'd been cognizant of the fact that I wasn't at the base of the climb, but now, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that I was pretty high up there.

"Well isn't this an awfully luxurious thing to worry about…"

My quiet muttering vanished among the tumult of the training hall. In a corner of my mind, I understood things, even if belatedly—I'd continued polishing my skills, had gone from the sticks in Beaden to becoming a special instructor for the Liberion Order, and had then defeated the man I'd set as my lifelong goal.

It'd all been rather unexpected, and I couldn't ask for more. If I tried to pursue more, I would be stuck going on a tour of the world to find strong warriors I'd yet to meet. Even if I disregarded that option as unrealistic, I wanted some kind of achievement…or *anything* to make me believe I'd reached the summit.

Seriously, the more I thought about it, the more luxurious my problem seemed. I could honestly end things by just declaring, "I've reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship." Still, before this, I hadn't thought of myself all that highly, so I found it hard to come to terms with the matter.

"Ah, there he is. Mr. Beryl!"

"Hm?"

After a while of immersing myself in my thoughts, I heard a voice call out to me from behind.

*Oops, that's no good. I can't go drifting away in my thoughts while watching the knights spar.* I shook my head slightly and turned to find Evans standing in front of me.

"Evans, something happen?" I asked.

"Umm, Commander Allucia is calling for you. She wants you to drop by her office."

"Hmm. Got it."

He didn't seem particularly rushed. This looked like less of an emergency and more like something she didn't want others to know about. My only choice was to make my way to the knight commander.

It was rare for Allucia to call for me. Perhaps out of consideration, she usually came to me when she needed something. She was head of this organization, so she could summon me without any reservation, but her nature meant that she usually didn't.

"Hm? Not the reception room? Her office?" I asked, coming to a sudden realization.

"Yes, that is what she said."

"I see… Thanks."

My destination wasn't the usual reception room, but the

knight commander's office. More and more, this seemed like an important matter she couldn't let others find out about—such matters tended to be rather troublesome. Also, she hadn't called for the lieutenant commander or any veteran knights, but for *me*. I was starting to get tense.

At least I knew where Allucia's office was. She'd taught me the rough layout of the building and where certain rooms were when she'd given me the tour during my first visit. Still, I hadn't once entered her office before this. I'd never had any business there, after all.

"Okay then..."

After thanking Evans, I left the training hall. Much like all the previous incidents, I wasn't going to figure things out on my own. I'd made many connections since coming to Baltrain from Beaden. Putting it this way might sound strange, but those connections had constantly dragged me into situations I'd known nothing about beforehand.

There wasn't much that could be done about that, and nothing of the like had happened during my days holed up in the sticks. I just couldn't get used to it. To add to that, the situations had all been pretty pretty serious. How could I *not* be on my guard? *Well, guess it's pretty meaningless to be wary about what's coming next when things keep popping up out of the blue.*

"Oh, I think this is it."

After walking through the uniformly white corridors, I found myself in front of the office where Allucia usually did her work. She was supposed to be waiting for me inside, but the solemn door gave off a particularly daunting impression, even compared to how indomitable the order seemed as a whole. I was getting pretty tense.

"Okay..."

I didn't exactly have a collar worth adjusting, but I straightened myself up, steeled my nerves, and knocked, sending a quiet and firm echo down the hallway.

"Come in."

A calm, dignified voice answered from within. It was definitely Allucia. I'd heard her voice pretty much every day since coming to Baltrain. It was as fine as it had been back in her days at the dojo. *Not that anyone would enjoy receiving praise about that from an old man.*

"Excuse me."

I wondered what Allucia's business was. Why had she gone as far as summoning me? I was curious, but I had a bad feeling. I wished this instinct of mine would be wrong every now and then.

I opened the door to be greeted by pretty much what I'd expected. Her office was large enough to not be cramped, and the walls were a calm white, much like the hallway and the reception room. Unlike the reception room, there were several luxurious decorations and a large bookshelf next to the desk where Allucia was sitting.

The Liberion Order had a long history. Even just their activity records had to take up significant shelf space, and there were likely other books here as well. Allucia also happened to have a voracious hunger for knowledge.

Seated at the desk by the window, there was a certain holiness to Allucia's dignified bearing as her pen ran across a piece of paper. I'd never seen her doing work at a desk before, but it really suited her.

"Master, forgive me for calling you here," she said, rising from her seat.

"It's fine—don't worry about it."

She was the knight commander while I was a special instructor. I wasn't going to nitpick about her being way higher up the social ladder compared to me, but I figured she could be a little more frank with me. I did, of course, understand that she felt somewhat sorry for forcefully dragging this old man out of his hole in the countryside. She'd even prepared the royal seal for that purpose. I was constantly reminded of her tremendously strong will.

However, even if I'd come here with a royal appointment, I'd ultimately been the one to accept. That was what had led us to our current relationship. It'd been rather sudden, but I was still grateful for it to this day. Had I stayed in Beaden, things would never have developed the way they had. This was all just hindsight, though.

"Please take a seat," Allucia offered, directing me to what looked like a guest meeting area along the wall.

"Oh, sure."

This was her private office, but she still took guests here. After all, there had to be discussions she couldn't have in the reception room. I never thought I'd be taking part in one such conversation.

“I must say, it’s refreshing to see you at a desk,” I told her. “It suits you.”

“Thank you, but I still have a long way to go,” Allucia said, apparently taking my words as empty flattery.

“Ha ha, you’re as hard a worker as ever.”

*Man, I was dead serious.* Allucia made quite the picture, whether she was swinging a sword or wielding a pen at her desk. I knew nothing about how effective she actually was at her office work, but I doubted she was poor at it. If so, this office wouldn’t belong to her.

“So…what’s going on?” I asked.

“Allow me to get right to the point.”

I’d had surprisingly few opportunities to sit down and have a nice relaxing chat with Allucia after moving to Baltrain. I spent most of my time here in the training hall, and she focused all her attention on running the order. We had spent time training together, but we’d spoken alone very little. Even now, we’d both had to interrupt our work for this meeting. I couldn’t waste her time with idle chatter, so we got right to the matter at hand.

“This was delivered to the order the other day,” she said, placing a letter on the table.

“Hmmm…”

I was guessing it was some kind of decree. I didn’t recognize the opened seal on it—the letter wasn’t from the royal family.

“It’s an invitation from Margrave Flumvelk,” Allucia explained. “It details a typical party hosted by nobles.”

“Hmmm…?”

*Who the heck is Margrave Flumvelk?* By margrave, I could assume it was a noble with territory on the border…with either Sphenedyardvania or Salura Zaruk. That said, I had no idea who the margrave could be. Even if an invitation addressed to the order was perfectly normal, I had no clue why this had anything to do with me.

“Ummm… So the Liberion Order was invited to the margrave’s party?” I asked.

“That’s the gist of it.”

It seemed I wasn’t misinterpreting the situation. I’d never been involved with such festivities, but a person of Allucia’s standing was sure to receive invitations to these kinds of events. Now that I thought of it, the letters she’d written to me had mentioned an increase in that kind of social activity.

But I still didn't know why she was informing *me* about it. Was she entrusting me with the knights' training while she was away in Flumvelk's territory? In that case, there was no need to go out of her way to summon me. She had her lieutenant too, so I didn't feel like that was quite right.

After thinking it through, I couldn't come up with an answer. So, I decided to ask her directly. She'd called me here to tell me about it, after all.

"I understand the situation, but…why did you want to discuss this?" I asked.

"I would like you to attend this party too, Master."

"Why?" I blurted out reflexively.

*Seriously, why?*

Allucia smiled gently.

*No, seriously, why?*

"This was delivered to the Liberion Order, but it is addressed to me…and you," Allucia explained.

"Why?"

I tried digesting her words once more, but the same word came to mind. I understood Allucia being invited. She was the knight commander who sat at the top of the country's most powerful military organization—I could imagine how imperative it was for her to have connections with important figures, not only in Baltrain, but the entirety of Liberis.

However, I wasn't quite sure how to react to being invited alongside her. Some time had passed since I'd obtained my title of special instructor, so I could somewhat understand my fame spreading within Baltrain. There'd been that royal assassination attempt not too long ago too, so that probably meant I was known outside the order. It technically made sense that some nobles might want to see me. However, the person inviting me was a *margrave*. I'd never been to such a remote territory, nor did I even know where it was. I couldn't see the reason for calling me there when I wasn't even a knight.

"There are several reasons…" Allucia began. "Master, you're familiar with Flumvelk, yes?"

"Not at all."

"Is…that so?"

*Hm? Allucia's reaction seems a bit…weird? Did she figure I already knew about Flumvelk and its lord? Well, that explains why we seem to be talking in parallel.* Still, Allucia was supposed to be well

aware of my normal daily life. It didn't make sense for her to think I was acquainted with a margrave. In an entirely rude possibility, I might've come to know this Margrave Flumvelk at some point in the past, but I'd ended up completely forgetting who that was.

I wanted to believe I hadn't forgotten some noble. As far as I knew, no noble had ever visited Beaden—I was pretty confident I would have remembered such an event. I wouldn't know if one had visited incognito, but there was no reason for a noble to go that far into the sticks, and even less reason to do so in disguise.

"Then let's start with the other reasons," Allucia said.

"Sure."

I was sorry to ruin her base assumption, but I really had no idea what was going on. The one other possibility I could think of was that this was somehow connected to my dad. He'd gone all over doing ridiculous things before coming to Beaden with my mother and having me. Also, considering my dad's personality, even if he did know some big-shot nobles and they visited, he wouldn't have introduced them as such. Regardless, even if he *did* have such acquaintances, I highly doubted that they would've gone all the way out there to visit him.

"Flumvelk is located along the border with Sphenedyardvania," Allucia started.

"Hmm..."

I couldn't find the link between myself and the margrave, so we moved on. I didn't like that it bordered Sphenedyardvania rather than the empire. Not that I'd been to either nation, but I was familiar with some of Sphenedyardvania's circumstances, and I didn't have a great impression of that nation. It carried a certain *reek*, so to speak.

That being the case, I kind of understood why she'd called for me rather than Henblitz. After the assassination attempt, Allucia and I had been the ones invited to dine with the royal family.

"Does this have something to do with the assassination attempts a while back?" I asked.

Now that it was on my mind, I couldn't help but think about it. Fortunately, Allucia was the only one here. Nobody outside the room would hear us unless we shouted for some reason.

"It does," she confirmed. "And just for safety, I'd like you to keep what you hear next to yourself."

"Of course," I agreed immediately.

“Thank you.”

This definitely had something to do with the royal family, and that explained why she’d gone out of her way to talk to me about this. I would rather die than spread a bombshell like that around. My heart wouldn’t be able to handle it.

“Princess Salacia’s marriage is moving forward in earnest,” Allucia said.

“Hmm.”

*Meaning her wedding to Prince Glenn has been decided.* If Allucia had been informed of this, then things between Liberis and Sphenedyardvania had largely been settled. About all that was likely left was to decide on a date.

“Thus, we have the true purpose of this gathering: confirming the transit route before the wedding and convening the lords whose territories are on that path,” Allucia explained.

“I see…”

This was a matter of significant weight. I could see why the order was being mobilized and why Allucia had to attend personally.

It wasn’t really my place to question it, but was this really all right? I only knew a bit about Sphenedyardvania’s current situation, but it hadn’t been that long since the incident with Rose. It was hard to believe they’d resolved all of their internal strife so quickly.

“So it’s not like we’ll be the only two going, right?” I asked.

“Indeed. At present, we’re planning to bring a few knights and a platoon of the royal garrison as escorts.”

“That’s a lot…”

It was a huge gathering. I understood taking the knights along, but a full platoon of the royal garrison increased the scale significantly. Well, thinking about it rationally, taking dozens of knights to a noble’s party was pretty weird too.

The reason the garrison was coming along too was likely because they’d be participating in escort duty for the princess’s marriage. In other words, this was like a rehearsal. If I had to guess, the participating members would be the royal guard King Gladio had mentioned before. A lot of things now made sense.

Also, to state the obvious, having the Liberion Order and royal garrison loitering around the border would cause unnecessary tension with our neighbor. Especially when it came to the papists, it was in Liberis’s best interest to avoid provoking

anyone.

"And that's where the written invitation comes in," I concluded.

"Exactly. On paper, it is to express thanks and recognize the service of the Liberion Order for preventing a crisis with Sphenedyardvania."

"On paper, huh..."

That solidified my belief that this was no mere invitation. The slightest—really just the *slightest*—part of me had been looking forward to a nice vacation. But this was the real world. This situation had ended up being some huge pain, just as expected. *Goddammit.*

"Just to be sure, Henblitz can't go instead?" I asked.

"He can't," Allucia confirmed. "A force must remain behind in Baltrain, including a leader."

"You're quite right."

They had to account for Sphenedyardvania using this opportunity to start something. Even without taking that into consideration, it would be an extremely poor decision to leave the city that housed the royal family vacant of knights or leadership. It would be dandy if nothing happened, but if something did, it would be ridiculous to be incapable of doing anything about it. So, Allucia and Henblitz couldn't both leave at once—one of the leading figures had to stay behind just in case.

"Anyway...I get why you're going, but how is *my* participation necessary?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say it's necessary... I believe you'll understand once we get there. The same goes for the initial reason I mentioned."

"Hmmm..."

By that, she was referring to knowing Flumvelk. Did that mean I would remember when I got there? I really didn't remember anything about it, and I would be seriously sorry if I'd simply forgotten. Allucia *could* just tell me now, but my lapse in memory could be entirely my fault too, so I couldn't press the issue.

"Also, it is my personal wish that you come," Allucia added.

"I-I see..."

*This girl never loses her stride when she says stuff like that out of the blue. Is that her wish as the knight commander?*

"At any rate, your name is clearly written on the invitation," she continued. "It appears that Princess Salacia recommended

you as well.”

“Personally nominated, huh…”

I couldn’t help but look up at the ceiling. It was the same as usual—the ladders were already at the walls before things ever got brought up to me. It sounded like I was being consulted, but my attendance was practically an order. *Hasn’t this happened a lot since coming to Baltrain? I’m not imagining things, right?*

What was more, Princess Salacia had requested me by name. I had no right to refuse. Even if this wasn’t a royal decree like when I’d been appointed as a special instructor by the king, it was impossible for me to refuse a nomination by the royal family.

I’d half given up when a certain question came to mind.

“Hm? Hang on a sec,” I said.

“Yes? What is it?”

“You said Princess Salacia recommended me *as well*… Does that mean Margrave Flumvelk knows me?”

“Of course.”

*Seriously? Apparently, I completely forgot who this margrave is. Sorry. Please forgive me.*

“So when will we be going, and for how long?” I asked.

I was extremely curious about who Margrave Flumvelk was, but if I’d forgotten, there was no remembering it now. Allucia probably wasn’t going to pry too deeply about it either. This was, at most, a rehearsal for the princess’s actual wedding. My acquaintance with the margrave was a trivial matter when looking at the big picture.

For now, I decided to set aside what I didn’t know and just ask about the details. It was a bad habit of mine to get way too lost in thought, and it was pretty rare for all my thinking to uncover new aspects of things or change them for the better.

“It’s next month,” Allucia said. “The journey will take about ten days each way, so including our stay, I believe it’ll take about a month total.”

“A whole month…”

Honestly, that sounded a little long. We were going all the way to the border, so it couldn’t be close to Baltrain. It wasn’t like Beaden either, which was a complete backwater due to several overlapping circumstances. This was the genuine *border*. I didn’t have much experience with traveling so far away, so I was a little anxious.

“I’m pretty sure I can’t refuse,” I said, “but I’m reluctant to agree on an emotional level… I have to think about Mewi too.”

My biggest concern wasn’t my lack of experience, but Mewi. One month was about the same span of time as my return to Beaden during the summer. However, this time, bringing Mewi along was out of the question. Even if she was my family on paper, she was a complete outsider to the order and the margrave.

To add to that, this was a command from *royalty.* That precluded the choice of bringing her. What would she do while I was gone? Well, she wasn’t an infant or anything, so she could technically manage without me. The institute was open too, and she had enough money to feed herself.

“Not to sound harsh…but judging by her age, I don’t believe there should be a problem,” Allucia said, stating something perfectly reasonable.

“Well, you know…I guess you have a point, but still…”

I was probably being overprotective. There were plenty of kids Mewi’s age who were completely independent. Above all else, she’d practically been living on her own until meeting me and Lucy. As long as she had money, she wasn’t going to go back to pickpocketing, so there was no need to worry about that.

“At least let me talk to her about it first,” I said. “It won’t take long.”

“Understood. But please hurry if you can. It’ll help.”

In the end, I couldn’t make my decision on the spot. I would’ve needed to under normal circumstances. To repeat myself, I had no right to refuse. However, a stubborn part of me wanted to delay the decision. It was less about logic and more about sentiment. Just as I’d told Allucia, I didn’t intend to take long. Mewi would be there once I got home, so I could talk to her about it today.

There were two major outcomes to this. On the assumption I was going to Flumvelk no matter what, I was either leaving Mewi on her own or asking someone to watch her. She wouldn’t refuse to let me go. And even on the off chance that she did throw a tantrum, it wouldn’t be a reason for me to turn down the invitation. *I kind of want to see her do that, though.*

In short, my only choice was to go. The question was how much I could convince Mewi of this before leaving. Even though I wanted to move things forward by accepting the invitation, I

couldn’t help but worry about Mewi. She was surely capable of managing on her own for a month, but I was reluctant to leave her without any preparation. After all, I couldn’t bring her with me this time.

*Oh well. Guess I’ll resort to my ultimate card—Lucy Diamond.* I’d also considered relying on Lucy had Mewi refused to go to Beaden. Mewi had ended up agreeing, so I hadn’t needed to draw from that well, but it seemed to be my only choice now.

I wasn’t sure whether Mewi could stay at Lucy’s place and depend on her completely, but there was nothing to lose by asking. If Lucy was watching her, I could leave for Flumvelk without any concerns.

The biggest problem was whether Lucy would take her in. Still, I’d been on the butt end of Lucy’s reckless behavior plenty of times before this, so I was planning to force the issue. She couldn’t just push all the troublesome stuff on me without expecting me to push back. That didn’t fly in my book. Lucy was a tremendous oddball, but she didn’t lack common sense, so I was expecting her to accept.

“Anyway, it’s a little unexpected,” Allucia said.

“Hm? What is?”

“I was under the impression you’d refuse and say you’re not suitable for the task.”

“Aah… Well, yeah. It does sound like a heavy burden. I’m a commoner, after all.”

“So am I, remember?”

“Ha ha ha, that’s true.”

My current image of her was so strong that I’d nearly forgotten—Allucia was a merchant’s daughter. She’d ascended to the rank of knight commander without any political backing whatsoever. It’d been an unbelievable climb. *Her parents must be so proud.*

“But…I suppose even if I did have a right to refuse, I would still go,” I said. “Princess Salacia isn’t a complete stranger to me, after all.”

“That’s…certainly true.”

This did feel like a lot of responsibility. Honestly speaking, I didn’t want to get dragged into international problems. But I’d decided to stop feeling like things were beyond my station. If my strength was required, I wanted to meet those expectations. Modestly claiming I was inadequate would be equivalent to

denying my dad's strength, and no matter how things actually stood, it was wrong for me to think that way. Maybe my view of the world had changed a little after all.

"Oh yeah, how are your parents doing?" I asked.

"G-Good. They're still traveling all over the place."

"Glad to hear it."

The topic of origins had come up, so I'd brought up her parents for some idle chatter. It seemed they were as healthy as ever. Merchants generally didn't stay in one place for too long. They did, of course, have a base of operations, but they naturally drifted from location to location in the hunt for cheap goods to buy and resell somewhere else for a profit.

That process had coincidentally brought them to Beaden with their young daughter Allucia. Thinking back on it, my initial connection with her had been rather strange. Seeing how it'd bounced back to the present situation, it was an outrageous connection to have.

At any rate, there was no telling what dormant potential someone had. Only when you tried to polish that potential could you faintly begin to see the glimmer beneath the surface. If talent was decided at birth, Allucia, Surena, and Ficelle wouldn't be where they were today. I might've still succeeded after my dad and mom, though.

"Master...you've changed a little."

"Really? Well...I guess I have."

I thought I was acting the same as always, but lately, people often pointed this out to me. I felt like Henblitz had said the same thing. I would be lying if I said nothing was different after winning against my dad. However, that didn't mean my personality had suddenly changed, nor were my sensibilities very different from before. I was making an effort to change my frame of mind, though.

Regardless, those around me seemed to notice the shift. Was it something only visible from the outside? I had a hard time confirming it since I couldn't see it myself.

"Hee hee, it's a splendid change," Allucia said, smiling gently.

"Here's hoping."

I wanted to believe it was a change for the better. At the very least, I was less pessimistic than before.

"Oh right, mind if I get going?" I asked. "I need to get back to the training hall."

“Yes, go ahead. We’ve discussed everything I had for you.”

Having a friendly chat with Allucia truly was pleasant, and time had flown by without me realizing it. However, I couldn’t slack off in front of the knight commander—it was time to get back to work.

“I’ll probably have an answer for you in a day or two,” I added before leaving.

“Right. I’ll be waiting.”

I was hoping to finish talking with both Mewi and Lucy within the day if possible. Lucy wasn’t a morning person, so I was probably fine dropping by once I was done with my job here. Waking up early and going to sleep early was probably better for getting immersed in research, but I wasn’t going to bring it up with her. She’d simply mentioned that her preferred schedule started later in the day.

If I was going to Flumvelk, I wouldn’t be able to train the knights in the meantime. I decided to give my best for the rest of the day so that I wouldn’t feel bad about it.

◇

“And there we go.”

A little while after talking with Allucia, I finished my day’s training at the order successfully, then headed home from the office. Potatoes were nice and cheap in the marketplace, so I’d picked up some and was now cooking them for dinner.

Potatoes were great. They were tasty, cheap, and filling. The more they were boiled, the softer they got, and flavor seeped into them well. If I’d been living on my own, I could cut back on the cooking and go out to a tavern, but I wasn’t alone anymore—I had to lead by example. *Not that I ever saw my dad cook anything…*

“There, that should make you tasty.”

I added the potato and some leftover meat into the stew I was making. All that was left was to watch over it and remove the scum. Lately, I’d found myself mumbling to nobody in particular when I completed tasks—I talked to myself a lot more than I used to. I was capable of swinging my sword in silence, so what was the difference when doing other stuff? It was a little mysterious.

In the past, I’d never proactively cooked, but when I thought

about Mewi coming back home hungry, I was so motivated. I wondered if my mom felt like this when she cooked. Ever since the magic institute's vacation had ended, my schedule had meant that I generally got home ahead of Mewi, just as long as I didn't have any other business to take care of. I finished training at the order in the morning, whereas the institute's classes ran into the afternoon.

As such, I often prepared our meals on the weekdays. The institute was on a break over the weekends, so Mewi often used that time to do a lot of the housework. Other than our meals, we didn't really have a fixed assignment of tasks. Be it cleaning or laundry, we each did our chores whenever we felt like it.

On the topic of cleaning, Mewi was unexpectedly fastidious, but in a weird way. It wasn't that she particularly liked to keep things nice and tidy—cleaning simply didn't bother her. That was why she didn't care about leaving her uniform in a crumpled mess on the ground, but she got to cleaning whenever there was trash or dust in her room.

I would've preferred that she treat her uniform better while she was at it, but that was apparently a separate matter. Mewi wasn't materialistic, and she didn't own any luxury goods. She had very few possessions at all. That was why she took care of trash and dust but didn't tidy up her things. It was awfully hard to scold her for that.

"I'm back..."

"Welcome home."

And as I continued stirring the pot with such thoughts in mind, the princess returned. I was glad she'd completely lost her reluctance to announce when she entered the house.

Things seemed the same as usual at first, but soon, I could tell that something was a little off.

"Hm? Did you get hurt?" I asked.

Her limbs looked fine, but she was carrying herself oddly. She wasn't favoring a leg, so it didn't seem like anything from the waist down. She was also standing straight, so her stomach was probably fine. She was walking okay, but due to the pain, she didn't seem to have a full range of movement. *In that case, it has to be some damage to her back or shoulders.*

"You can tell?" Mewi asked, clearly surprised.

"I can."

Someone who'd only just met her probably wouldn't notice it,

but I'd been living with her, albeit for only a short time. I spotted the abnormality immediately.

"It's nothing serious," Mewi said, pulling open her collar. "I just got hit in a match with Cindy."

*Ooh, that's quite a flashy bruise on her collarbone.* The bone didn't look broken, but that had to have hurt quite a bit. It seemed she'd gotten it during sword magic class. Mewi was nimble, so an amateur would have a hard time hitting her with a wooden sword. It was good to see that Cindy's technique was steadily improving. I hoped the two would continue pushing each other to greater heights.

"I see... Want a potion?" I asked.

Mewi paused for a bit, then nodded. "Yeah."

"Got it."

I wasn't going to be shocked by a small injury. It could be handled with simple treatment, after all. I took a potion bottle from the cabinet and handed it to Mewi, and that was the end of that. I only had the cheapest stuff on hand, which was made from herbs. Still, it made a significant difference when applied to the skin. I was greatly indebted to the stuff.

Studying the sword came with inevitable injuries. It was absolutely impossible for a swordsman to go their whole life untouched. Wounds, scrapes, and cuts had been an everyday occurrence for me. Broken bones had been pretty common too.

Naturally, it was up to an instructor to properly gauge the scale of an injury. A small wound wasn't worth excessive concern. Seeing how Ficelle had let Mewi go home like this, she'd concluded that the bruise was nothing serious. I made the same diagnosis.

Mewi also didn't like being a bother to others. If it was enough to break her heart or make her cry, I was sure she would depend on me, but when it wasn't, it was best to just leave her as she was. Normally, I'd be pretty worried, so why was it that I was suddenly unconcerned when it came to swordsmanship? Was it because of my dad's blood and education?

"Gh... Ow..." Mewi groaned as she rubbed a handful of the potion's liquid crudely against her bruise.

"You okay? How about a nap until dinner?"

"No... I'm fine."

Well, feeling pain was a sign that she was properly conscious. Maybe it would be difficult for her to sleep while the pain

lingered. This kinda thing really was a matter of familiarity. Getting *too* used to pain could lead to serious injuries, but being unable to move because of a minor wound was also bad.

"Drink the rest," I told her. "It heals different parts."

"Fine... Erk..." Mewi drank what remained of the potion and scrunched up her face.

*I get you. That stuff is bitter.* Potions extracted from medicinal herbs tasted like grass. *Not great...* I wondered if the potions made with magic had better flavor.

"Oh, right. I have something I need to report to you," I said.

"What?"

Mewi wasn't going to be able to relax until the potion kicked in and the pain went away, so I figured I would bring this up now. This kind of thing tended to get put off for later if I spent too long waiting for the right opportunity. But I couldn't delay this—so I had to tell her right away.

"It seems I'll be going with the order on an expedition," I explained. "I think I'll be away for a month, starting next month."

"I see."

I kept the fact that royalty was involved and the stuff about foreign affairs to myself. Mewi had no need to know, and the knowledge could potentially put her in danger. So, I stuck only to the main gist of it. I wasn't lying or anything, so it was fine.

"There's no way I can bring you along," I continued. "While I'm gone, I'm thinking of getting Lucy to look after you."

"Mm. Sure."

Mewi nodded along surprisingly quickly. She was a lot more honest than when I'd first met her. She was still thornier than other kids her age, but this was a huge difference compared to the days she'd spent shouting at everyone. At first, she'd been extremely grouchy, but now she was just kind of curt. I didn't think I'd done a great job or anything, but it at least seemed like her home education wasn't failing. Her enrollment at the magic institute had also had a positive effect. I could only pray she continued to grow in both body and mind.

"I can manage on my own, though," she added.

"Just in case," I told her.

"Hmph."

I'd completely expected that comment, but I didn't want to leave her on her own with nobody to rely on for such a long time. Still, from the look of it, she really would be fine on her

own, so Lucy was seriously just insurance.

◇

The next day, after finishing my habitual training with the knights, I got a light lunch in the central district before dropping by Lucy's place in the afternoon. As usual, Haley greeted me at the door before guiding me to the guest room, where I was treated to some delicious tea.

"Is that really necessary?" Lucy asked.

I nodded. "I'm telling you, it's just in case…"

"Beryl, aren't you being a bit too overprotective?"

"I'm aware of that, but that doesn't mean I can just leave her alone."

Lucy let out a tremendous sigh. I knew I was being overprotective. At the very least, I was fussing over Mewi more than my parents ever had over me when I'd been her age. Well, by the time I was that old, becoming a swordsman had already been the only thing on my mind, so my environment and circumstances had been somewhat different.

Still, even if it was okay to disparage my overprotectiveness, Lucy's indifference was a bit unexpected. I'd figured she would just say, "Yeah, I don't mind." It looked like I needed to change my approach.

To put it bluntly, my plan had been to get her to acknowledge the circumstances, then work out the details so that she couldn't really say no. That assumption had broken down right from the get-go, so I decided to plead using logic rather than emotion.

"I'm not asking to let her stay here or anything," I said. "It'll be easier on Mewi if she knows who to rely on if something happens, right?"

"I get what you're trying to say, but still… If you're *that* worried, you can just toss her into the dorms."

"Mewi said she'd rather stay at home than live in the dorms…"

Lucy was exactly right. I'd intended to get Mewi into the magic institute's dorms when she'd enrolled. That way, I wouldn't have needed to fret over anything. But that hadn't worked out, so now I was trying to find another solution. Still, I was glad Mewi had chosen to live with me rather than in the dorms, so I wasn't going to say anything about it now.

"Hm? No, I mean temporarily," Lucy corrected.

“Huh? That’s possible?”

And just as I was wondering what to do now, Lucy gave me some new information. It was possible to stay in the dorms *temporarily*. That was the first I’d heard of it.

“You need to submit an application,” she explained. “Parents being absent for work isn’t all that rare.”

“That’s true…”

She did have a point. It was perfectly common to have to leave the house for work or other circumstances while having a child who attended the magic institute. It made sense for the institute to have a means of supporting that. This might not have been the case for normal schools, but the institute was sponsored by the kingdom to raise wizards. It wasn’t strange for them to be accommodating.

The temporary use of the dorms would resolve our current problem perfectly. Mewi would have to get used to something new, regardless of whether she was staying at someone else’s place or the dorm. So, going to the dorm at the institute might serve to lower her stress. She didn’t have many personal belongings to begin with, and she kept her own room clean, so moving back from the dorms would also be simple.

“Oh, there is a fee, of course,” Lucy added.

“Yeah, I figured.”

I could make a guess at the cost too. The enrollment fee wasn’t that high, so it wouldn’t make sense for the dorm to be stupidly expensive. I was really glad I had money to spare. I was endlessly thankful for my current environment.

“Okay, I guess we’ll go with that,” I said.

“Very well. I doubt she’ll give you a hard time about it.”

In that case, I had to make my way back to the institute. If I hadn’t been in a rush, I could’ve done this errand on the side when I was there for a sword magic class, but I had to get this settled quickly. In the worst case, the dorms would already be full and unable to accept her. If so, I could ask Lucy again. She’d been the one to recommend a temporary stay, so if that didn’t work out, she could take responsibility.

“Anyway, Flumvelk, was it?” Lucy asked, naturally shifting the topic to the upcoming expedition. “I haven’t been there much.”

“Is that so? Because it’s on the border?”

I hadn’t informed her of anything more than the public reason for the expedition. She might be aware of all the stuff involving

royalty, but she was, at least, playing along. Still, I was against disclosing confidential information on my own.

"There's that too, but I simply don't have any business with Sphenedyardvania," she explained, elegantly taking a sip of tea. "Things may change if this goes well, though."

*If things go well, huh? I guess she really does know what's going on behind the scenes.* She probably meant the marriage between the Liberis and Sphenedyardvania royals. It was a political marriage, but Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia didn't seem to have a poor opinion of each other, so I was hoping they could build a happy family.

"Well, with you and Allucia there, I doubt it could go *that* wrong," Lucy added.

"I'm glad to have your confidence, but still…"

It was nice to have my skills appraised so highly, but any trouble would still be my problem. I definitely wasn't acting like this was a holiday, but the way she put it implied that something was likely to go wrong.

"Relax," Lucy said. "So far, Sphenedyardvania's royalty, the Pope, and the Holy Order have made no conspicuous movements."

"Why do you know that?"

"Because I'm me."

"Right…"

I didn't know anyone but Lucy who would give an answer like that. The amazing part was that this was enough to convince me. Lucy Diamond was a woman full of mysteries.

From my perspective, I was both indebted to and constantly troubled by her. I bounced back and forth between seeing her as a good friend and a bad one. Frankly, I found it hard to want to get more involved with this woman than I already was. I *did* owe her a lot, but a part of me also cursed at her.

At the very least, things weren't a problem as long as she wasn't an enemy. If that ever happened, it would be far worse than anything going on now. I didn't have the slightest intention of picking a fight with her. Even after beating my dad, I doubted I could win. This went beyond just a problem of swordsmanship versus wizardry—she was human, but…not.

Anyway, Lucy was openly blabbing about things Allucia had told me to keep quiet about, so I'd nearly gotten carried away by the flow of the conversation. I didn't want to let anything slip, so

I started thinking of another topic we could talk about.

"Oh, right."

"Hm? Do you need something else?"

The thought of wizardry brought back a question I'd nearly forgotten about. This involved Mewi too, so it was a natural change of topic. I was also genuinely curious, so it wasn't a bad time to ask.

"I went to the sword magic class the other day," I said. "And I had the students show me what they can do."

"Hmm." Lucy's brow jumped up in interest. She really loved talking about wizardry.

"Mewi's was red... Kinda like fire. Ficelle called it clumsy."

"I see." Lucy nodded in understanding. "To be exact, that's not quite clumsy."

"How so?"

My curiosity had been centered around Mewi's sword magic being different from the others and Ficelle calling it clumsy. In other words, I wanted to know how well her studies were going or how she was fitting in at the institute.

The degree of talent determined a lot when it came to magic, but did that mean the skill with which you manipulated magic was defined by the same talent? The instructor in me wanted to know. Well, to be perfectly honest, I wanted to know whether Mewi couldn't keep up or if she possessed a unique kind of talent. I wasn't going to do anything about it either way, but as a parent, I wanted to know how she was doing at school.

"It is believed that pure talent defines the possession of mana," Lucy started.

"Yeah."

"But in truth, the wizardry we specialize in—we call it familiarity—is largely influenced by disposition and the environment we grow up in."

"Hmm."

"For example, Fice has a high aptitude for sword magic. This is largely because she learned swordsmanship beforehand."

"I see."

It seemed there was a certain "personality" to magic, for lack of a better term. When she put it like that, swordsmanship was the same. Techniques differed a lot based on a person's temperament and their compatibility with the style. This even applied to pupils taught by the same instructor.

Even setting aside Mewi's original personality, the environment she'd grown up in had been extremely harsh. I could understand her blunt temperament being fostered there, as well as an aptitude for offensive magic, or more specifically, *fire* magic.

By that logic, maybe Kinera's specialization in magic was also due to her personality. She was magnanimous and kind to anyone. It perfectly matched the purpose of defensive magic.

"Naturally, wizards can be better or worse at certain magics too," Lucy continued. "In that sense, Mewi doesn't have a particularly high aptitude for sword magic at her current level."

"I have mixed feelings about that as her mentor... May I ask why?"

I couldn't ignore this when Mewi was going out of her way to learn sword magic. I didn't want her to have to quit because she didn't have the aptitude for it. I was aware this was just me being selfish rather than logical, though.

"The characteristic feature of sword magic is giving mana a sharp edge," Lucy explained. "It's easiest to bestow mana a property when it is as white as possible. A flame with a sharp edge makes no sense, right?"

"Aah... I kinda get it."

I couldn't put Lucy's words into practice, but I kind of understood what she meant. Endowing the white energy known as mana with flames or an edge were likely different processes. Doing both at once was probably pretty hard, much like it was difficult to imagine burning water or cold flames.

"But there's no telling what the future holds," Lucy added. "Just maybe, she'll create a cutting flame."

"Ha ha, sounds amazing."

I didn't even want to think about a fire flying at me from a distance with the ability to cut. Such a technique would definitely be extremely powerful. It was entirely up to Mewi whether such a thing would be actualized, though.

"On that note, can you do it?" I asked. "Making a fire that can cut, I mean."

"It's not impossible, but even for me, it fits into a rather troublesome category of magic. In our terms, I'm unfamiliar with it."

"So you have magic you're good and bad at too, huh?"

"Of course. Being capable of something and being *good* at it

are different things. The same goes for you, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

I understood what she was trying to say very well. I was perfectly capable of going on a nonstop offensive if I wanted to, but I wasn’t particularly good at it. Parrying blows and retaliating suited me much better.

“At the very least, Mewi is very likely better at converting mana into fire than the others,” Lucy said. “That is a splendid advantage and talent.”

“I see. Thanks.”

And with that pinpoint guess at what I was worried about, that conversation came to an end. I hadn’t told her the intention behind my question, so why was she able to see through me so easily? Her eyes were so keen—I couldn’t help but wonder if she was using magic to read my mind. Or did her instinct simply come from experience? I doubted I could do the same.

“Is that all?” Lucy asked. “The institute is still open, so if you’re in a hurry, you better go now.”

“Ah, right. I’ll do just that.”

It was best to get this stuff done early. The sun was still in the sky, and classes were just about to come to an end, so this was the most convenient time for both sides. I decided to make my way there immediately.

◇

“Okay, off I go.”

A while after I’d heard about the expedition from Allucia and discussed it with Mewi and Lucy, it was now the day of my departure. Unlike normal, my voice didn’t reach anyone from the entrance of my home—it simply vanished into the house.

Mewi had moved to the institute’s dorms a few days ago. The application for temporary use had gone through faster than expected, so that was now the center of Mewi’s daily life. I was grateful there’d just happened to be an open room, but I wasn’t sure whether that had been a lucky coincidence or if the headmistress had pulled some strings. It was uncouth to ask.

After my talk with Lucy, my days had been rather hectic. I’d dropped by the magic institute multiple times to handle the documents and had met with Allucia several times to go through the detailed schedule and travel plans. Well, the latter mostly

involved me listening and nodding along, so in that sense, they weren't really meetings.

I was glad Mewi hadn't resisted the idea of temporarily moving into the dorms. There wasn't any benefit to commuting from an empty home anyway. All her daily needs were guaranteed in the dorms, and thanks to Ibroy's gift some time back, she had plenty of clothes.

Both Mewi and I had been required to sign the necessary documents. It'd been really touching to see her write her name a lot more smoothly than when we'd first met. I kept that to myself, though. If anything, I was a little worried Mewi would take a shine to dorm life by the time I got back from Flumvelk. If she did, I would feel a little lonely, but I wouldn't object. I hadn't been a father long enough to call this becoming independent from her parents, but I knew she would one day set out on her own. It was generally a good thing for this to happen sooner than later. Though this argument didn't sound persuasive coming from a man who'd taken forty-five years to leave the nest.

"It's cooled down a lot."

Just as always, I was outside right as the sun was rising, but we'd entered early fall now, so it was pretty chilly early in the morning and late at night. When the sun was high up in the sky, it was still nice and strong, so this time of day was the real indicator of the changing seasons.

These in-between temperatures would continue for a while before we would dive into the far less pleasant winter. I didn't like being cold, of course, but snow piling up was even more of an inconvenience. It basically closed all the roads, so it was a big pain for a village out in the countryside like Beaden.

This would be my first time spending the winter in Baltrain, but the climate wasn't likely to be very different. Still, things could get pretty bad if firewood couldn't be delivered when the time came, so maybe it would be best to stock up before it got genuinely cold. I could take it, but I didn't want Mewi to be freezing at home. This would be moot if she chose to stay in the dorms, though.

Nothing was going to change just because I was pondering over Mewi right now, so I shifted my thoughts to Flumvelk and the secret orders behind the scenes. I still had no idea who Margrave Flumvelk was. Considering Allucia's personality, she

would normally tell me, but unexpectedly, she hadn't given me any more information on that front.

A part of me thought she was being a little mischievous, but she wasn't the type to prioritize such playfulness if it was important to the mission. This meant that keeping the margrave's identity to herself wasn't going to impede the mission in any way. In other words, my potentially being a personal acquaintance of the margrave wouldn't have any effect on this expedition. And if I was, in fact, a total stranger, I could just go from there. If I had forgotten who the margrave was, I could just apologize.

"I wonder who it is..."

I really didn't have a clue. Our dojo naturally had pupils from outside Beaden, but it wasn't exactly a regular occurrence. There were those who'd come from Baltrain, and some others had come from the neighboring villages. Still, I would've known if one of them had been a noble. Their clothes or attendants would've given them away. Even without any of that, nobles were clearly different from commoners like me.

You'd think that would mean the margrave had nothing to do with the dojo, but that was unlikely. I'd never really left the village before coming to Baltrain, so I didn't have any connections to the outside beyond the dojo. Not that this was something to be proud of.

That would make the margrave one of my former pupils or one of my dad's acquaintances. But I had surprisingly few acquaintances in common with my dad, so the former was far more likely.

"Well, I guess I'll find out when I get there."

I'd given thought to this ever since Allucia had brought it up, but I still knew nothing. Maybe I could get an answer from my dad, but it wasn't worth traveling all the way to Beaden just to ask. If the margrave was one of my former pupils, I could just apologize for forgetting. It wasn't like I remembered all of them perfectly.

"Oh, there sure are a lot of people here."

After a while of walking with such thoughts in mind, I reached the order's office to find a lot more guards loitering around outside than usual. The equipment they wore could be split into two categories—a few wore silver plate armor, while the vast majority wore leather armor and coats. The former had to be

knights, while the latter were soldiers of the royal garrison. Next to the crowd were several carriages. One was fancy like the carriage I'd taken to Beaden, while the rest looked a bit shabbier but very sturdy.

"Good morning, Master," the knight commander said as I got closer.

"Morning. Did I keep you waiting?" I asked.

"Not at all."

I was pretty sure I'd left the house with more than enough time to get here before the appointed hour, but with so many people already here, it felt like I was late.

Despite being a gathering of warriors, the atmosphere in the air wasn't bad. We weren't headed to war or anything, so there was no point in staying on edge when we hadn't even gotten going yet. Everyone seemed to be aware of this. Many were engaging in idle conversation or examining their equipment.

"Hi there. Would you be Beryl?" a man said, walking up to us.

He was wearing the standard equipment of the royal garrison: leather armor, a coat, and a longsword at his waist. His physique was similar to mine, and he looked around the same age too. The coat made it hard to tell, but at the very least, he didn't have a belly or carry any excess weight. He had short black hair, giving him a clean look, and he carried himself with a gentle expression.

"Yes. I'm the special instructor for the Liberion Order, Beryl Gardenant."

I still wasn't used to introducing myself this way. It was pretty embarrassing. *Whatever. There's no point in grumbling about that.*

"A pleasure," the man said. "I'm Zed Hanbeck, a platoon commander in the royal garrison. You can just think of me as the one managing this lot."

"I see. We'll be in your care on the road," I said, shaking Zed's hand as I took a look around at the soldiers.

His hand was firm—the hand of a man who handled a weapon on a daily basis. All those who practiced any form of martial art showed signs of it in the way they carried themselves or with their physique. It was the kind of thing you could see if you were in the know. I wasn't going to point it out or anything, but I was glad to be able to see it. In that sense, Zed was a proper practitioner who could be relied on.

"Hanbeck, is everyone ready?" Allucia asked.

“Yes, we’re all here. We can leave at any time.”

They were both very calm. Was this why they were commanders? The Liberion Order and royal garrison were separate organizations, so they naturally had different chains of command. The public likely saw the order as higher up the pecking order, but the garrison had many retired knights among their ranks. I felt like you couldn’t outright call them inferior. It was perfectly reasonable for a former senior officer to be in the royal garrison. *Maybe I can ask about this stuff on the road.*

“Then Master, this way.”

“Hm…?”

It seemed we were about to depart. Allucia directed me toward the luxurious carriage.

“I’m riding in *this* one?” I asked.

“Of course,” she confirmed. “You and I are the guests of honor.”

“I-I see…”

I still wasn’t used to the way she acted like all of this was perfectly natural. I knew I had to, but still…

“We’re setting off! To your posts!”

Right as we boarded, Zed’s calm voice suddenly turned sharp as he bellowed an order. I could hear the soldiers outside going about their business as our carriage started moving.

I listened to the clunking of the carriage’s wheels spinning over the stone pavement. The roads in Baltrain and its immediate surroundings were relatively well maintained and usually made of stone. Overall, the nation’s roads weren’t quite as nice. Beaden only had dirt roads, for example, and there were surely plenty of other towns and villages like that too. I had no idea how prosperous Flumvelk was, but I was pretty sure there hadn’t been any major wars on the border for a long while, so I was hoping it was a major city.

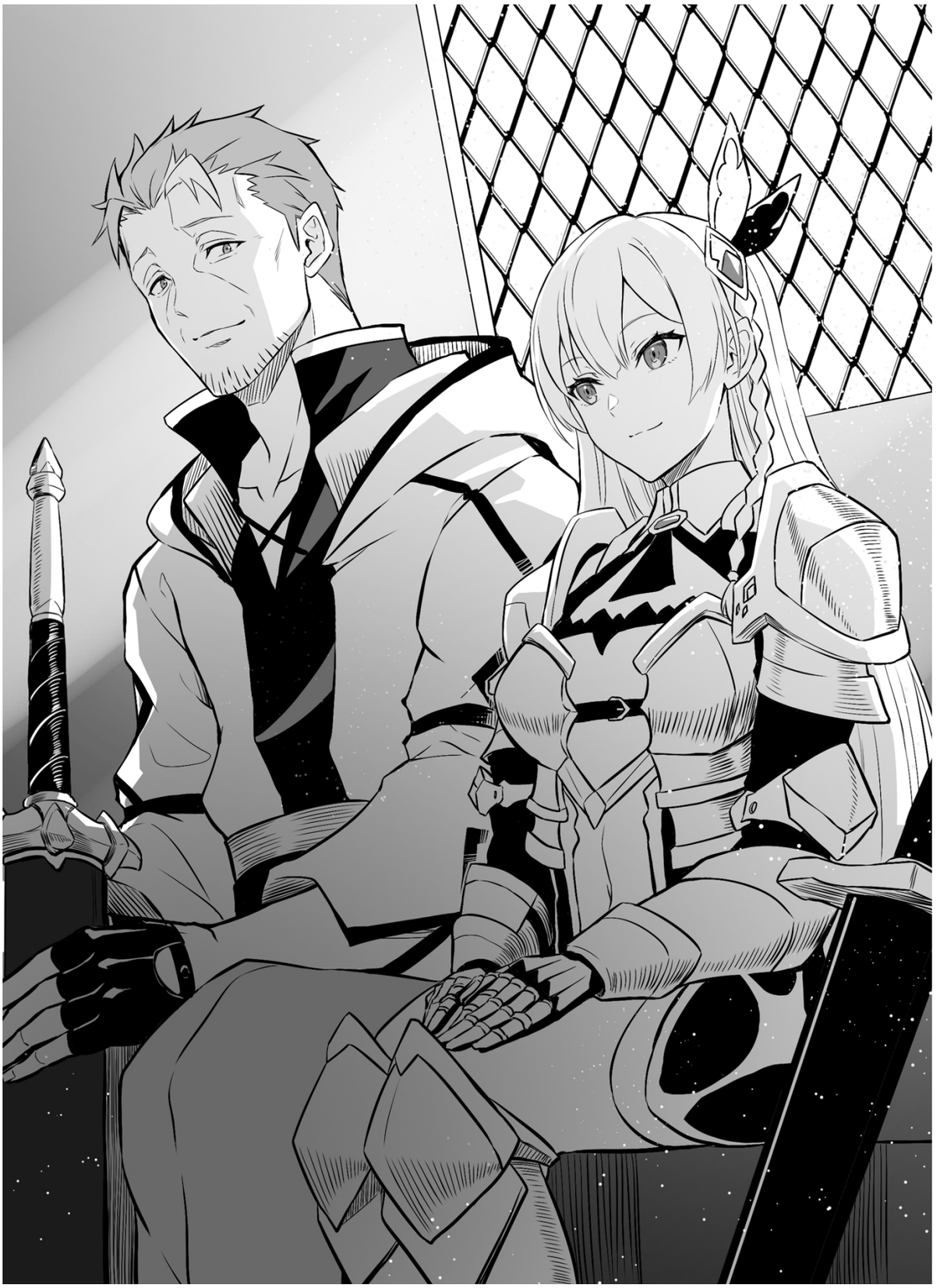
I could hear the tumult of Baltrain faintly from within the carriage. It really was quiet in here. The luxurious ride was carrying four people, including me—there were two other knights aside from Allucia and myself. It was relaxing for me that they were familiar faces. Staying in an enclosed space for a prolonged period with total strangers would’ve been mentally exhausting. The same comforting silence could instead feel very awkward.

Unlike a normal journey, the drivers were also soldiers. It seemed they'd only rented the carriages while all the manpower was being handled in-house. Considering the nature of the mission, this was inevitable, but it really made security seem far stricter.

"Guess we'll be riding by carriage for a while," I muttered.

"Yes. Please be patient," Allucia said.

"Aah, no, I'm not complaining or anything. It's a fresh experience for me."



As I said, I wasn't dissatisfied or anything. A part of me didn't like being personally named for this mission, but I didn't object. I simply hadn't ever gone on much more than a normal round trip between Beaden and Baltrain, so a longer journey was new to me.

Our meals and the entire travel plan had been fully worked out by the order, so all I had to do was organize and check my own luggage. It seemed like I was the only one who could just sit back and enjoy the ride. All I had to bring was some traveling expenses, spare clothes, and my sword. This wasn't some whimsical lone journey, so that was technically more luggage than usual.

"But I guess I'm the only one who's not used to this stuff," I said.

"Please try to get accustomed to it," Allucia said. "You were personally invited, after all."

"I know that, but still..."

My smile was strained. The only ones able to take a seat were myself, the knights in here, and the people who were taking turns driving the carriage. Everyone else was walking. From a security perspective, we obviously couldn't have *everyone* inside the carriages. I understood this, but I felt more at ease being the one protecting others rather than relying on protection. Well, there was an entirely different kind of tension from having someone to protect, but still.

This time around, the carriages were packed with food for the journey and the necessary equipment to camp outside if necessary. As such, there was nearly no space for people. Though, they would probably make space in an emergency like someone getting hurt.

"Master, if you need anything, please let these two know," Allucia said, turning her eyes to the other two knights.

"Oh, no, I can't do that."

One was a man and the other a woman. They weren't young enough to be newbies but not old enough to be veterans. They looked around the same age as Allucia, if not a little younger. The man was Vesper, while the woman was...Frau, if I remembered right. A fair amount of time had passed since becoming a special instructor, so I remembered most of the knights. It was still hard to put a name to every face, though.

I often saw these two in the training hall, so as far as I could

tell, they were very devoted to their art. You could say that was why I remembered their names. I wasn't confident I could do the same for knights who didn't show up in the training hall much.

"I'm sure you know by now, but this is just how he is," Allucia said, addressing the knights. "He won't ask for assistance, so if you notice anything, take the initiative."

"Yes, ma'am," they replied in unison.

"I-I'm really okay..." I protested.

Making use of knights any time something happened was fussing over me way too much...yet Allucia made sure to reinforce the point, making me feel even more ashamed. They didn't need to reply so enthusiastically either. But at times like these, if I acted with restraint, it would actually make them dejected.

I somewhat understood how painful it was to be unable to fulfill their commander's order. In that case, it was only natural for a situation to come up where I *had* to use them. I didn't think this would be a relaxing journey, but the prospect of that made me feel unnecessarily stressed out.

"By the way...may I ask how you selected the personnel for this?" I inquired.

The atmosphere in the carriage wasn't great—for me—but it didn't feel right to start some idle chatter. So, I brought up a topic related to the expedition to try and break the ice.

"They're relatively young, are strong of mind and body, have tight lips, and are somewhat acquainted with you already," Allucia explained. "I made my decision after an interview with all potential candidates."

"I see..."

I was curious as to why familiarity with me was part of the criteria, but there was probably no point in asking. Having people I knew from the training hall was definitely helpful. Requiring strong knights was an obvious requirement, whereas having tight lips implied Vesper and Frau knew the true purpose of this mission.

Even without the secrecy, being tight-lipped was important for a noble's party. It was good to have people you could trust not to say too much and leak unnecessary information to the outside.

It looked like I could assume that the knights accompanying us were aware of the secret orders from the royal family. I didn't

know if that applied to the members of the garrison, but there was no need to go out of my way to find out.

"Is there a reason you limited it to young candidates?" I asked.

This part was a curiosity to me. Due to the nature of a knight's job, there weren't many beyond a certain age. But that didn't mean there were *none*. Some knights in the order were older than their commander. Being young did come with great advantages, but the world of fighting wasn't so simple that stamina and muscle could determine everything. My dad and I were proof of that.

"It'll be a long journey, so stamina was taken into consideration," Allucia answered. "There are several other reasons for it too, though."

"I see... Thanks."

She was somewhat evasive about these other reasons. And, after giving it some thought, I could see why. It wasn't really something to discuss right in front of Vesper and Frau. My choice of question was somewhat impolite.

Still, even without saying anything, I could see several reasons that we couldn't speak of here. Everyone in the Liberion Order was talented. Only those who'd passed the extremely strict entrance exam could become knights of the order, so it was safe to assume they were all capable in battle.

However, in a gathering of talented people, there had to be those who were even more talented than the others. This applied to any group. It was impossible for humans to all be at exactly the same level, especially a high one. From that perspective, you might assume Vesper and Frau were among the best knights, but I wouldn't. That was just my personal opinion of them, though.

The two weren't weak, of course. There were simply many knights who were stronger than them. Considering the importance of this mission, you would normally select elites who were among the best. Even setting aside Henblitz, who couldn't come, the strongest right after him would've usually been chosen. But the ones who'd actually been chosen were the young Vesper and Frau, despite there being plenty of knights who were stronger than them.

"Is something the matter?" Vesper asked as I looked at him, maybe wondering if I had an order to give him.

"Ah, no, it's nothing."

*Sorry, I don't really need anything.*

Vesper had a very handsome face. Frau was also beautiful. They made quite the pair. *Was attractiveness also part of the selection process?* I could understand the reason for that. Allucia hadn't been lying about needing stamina for the long journey, and she was properly maintaining that stance.

Publicly, this invitation was to thank us for averting a crisis on the border. Allucia and I were the guests of honor. If we were to bring attendants, then looks could go a long way. There was also a demand for etiquette. With that in mind, I felt like these two would make a great showing. The Liberion Order prioritized ability above all else, so there were many commoners, but there were also more than a few nobles. That meant I probably knew the least etiquette here. I couldn't help but feel anxious now.

"I feel like my presence is fading when surrounded by young knights like this. Ha ha ha..."

I was trying to lighten the mood, but I wanted to die from embarrassment. The young and beautiful commander was accompanied by two attractive knights. Add an old man to the mix—I felt totally out of place. It was depressing enough of a thought for me to wonder if someone could substitute for me.

"Perish the thought," Allucia admonished me with a splendid smile. "Master, you possess a calm demeanor and the presence of a veteran. By simply standing there, you are the very symbol of a master swordsman."

"I-I do...?"

If she'd told me this when we were alone, I would've unwillingly accepted it while being extremely embarrassed. Saying it to me in front of Vesper and Frau was basically torture. *Please give me a break.*

"Don't you two think so as well?" Allucia asked. She turned to the knights with her usual tone and expression, but there was an unusually sharp glint in her eyes.

"Yes, ma'am! It's just as you say."

"I agree with Vesper. He is a wonderful swordsman."

"Th-Thanks..."

*Cut it out. Please cut it out. Is this a new form of bullying? Is this going to continue until we reach Flumvelk? Seriously, cut me some slack.*

# Chapter 2: An Old Country Bumpkin Meets a Noble

“Good morning, Master.”

“Aah, morning.”

It had been several days since we’d departed from Baltrain. After passing through many unfamiliar villages and towns, I was finally getting used to sleeping in a different place every day. I greeted Allucia in the morning on the first floor of a villa that belonged to the local ruling noble.

The journey so far had been utterly peaceful. We’d also been blessed with good weather, so there’d been no delays to our schedule. I didn’t really have any clue exactly where we were in Liberis, but I wanted to believe that we were on course, given how much time the knights and soldiers had spent staring at the map.

“If things proceed smoothly, we should enter Flumvelk within the day,” Allucia told me.

“That’s good,” I replied with genuine relief.

It wasn’t like I was anxious during the trip. I was glad things were going smoothly—we were slowly approaching our destination. If there was anything at all to complain about, it would be this: I was a little mentally drained from being surrounded by Allucia, Vesper, and Frau inside the carriage.

The two young knights weren’t crowding me in the carriage or anything. They kept an appropriate distance at every stop. However, being inside a carriage placed them physically close to me. I was happy that they didn’t hate me, but it was tough being admired from up close. It was a new experience for me, though I couldn’t say I’d ever wanted to go through this.

“Getting enough rest?” I asked.

“Yes, I’m all right,” replied Allucia. “Thank you for your consideration.”

“Got it. Try not to push yourself. Well, I say that, but it’s not like I can take your place…”

“It’s fine. Your concern is more than enough.”

I kept an eye on her as we talked, but just as she claimed, she

didn’t look particularly tired. She seemed to be sleeping at night. However, she couldn’t slack off with her subordinates present, so she needed to spend the majority of her day with a more formal demeanor. She wasn’t one to lapse in her duties as commander. As a result, she hadn’t had much time to rest without having to worry about appearing unprofessional to others. That would be fine for a day or two, but this had been going on for pretty much the entire trip.

Day after day, she had to meet a stream of high-ranking officials, most of whom she didn’t know. After that, she had to go over the itinerary with everyone. It reminded me of how much responsibility and pressure came with the title of knight commander.

This trip wasn’t exactly relaxing for me, but my responsibilities seemed so trivial in comparison. I was most stressed about staying in the mansions of nobles and other big shots. I’d figured we’d just be staying at regular inns, but that wasn’t always the case. I knew the nobles were entertaining us, and I was grateful for it. I just didn’t have enough nerve. It was pretty pitiful.

“Besides, the real mission is only about to begin,” Allucia said.

“Aah, I guess that’s true…” I nodded, smiling bitterly.

The towns and villages we were passing through were no more than incidental stops on the road—they were merely one-night associations. We met with new people and had meals with them, but we hadn’t yet participated in anything as luxurious as a noble’s party. That was what was awaiting us in Flumvelk. I was feeling more and more depressed about it, whereas Allucia seemed much more reliable. She had a lot of experience with this stuff.

And as Allucia and I continued chatting, an old woman who appeared to be one of the mansion’s maids came by.

“Good morning,” she said. “Would you like a drink?”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Allucia and I accepted, and she placed cups of white liquid before us—fresh milk.

“Ooh, this is really good,” I commented.

“Oh my, it *is* delicious,” Allucia agreed.

“I’m glad it suits your tastes,” the maid said.

The milk in Baltrain was good, but not as good as the stuff that was fresh off the farm. This region apparently specialized in

animal husbandry, and their dairy farms were particularly prosperous. They not only had enough to have dairy products for their daily meals, but they could even export goods both inside and outside the country.

Baltrain's abundance of goods could be explained by its ability to gather items from blessed regions like this one. Dairy products tended to spoil fast, except for stuff like cheese, but they could still be exported to Baltrain and beyond largely thanks to our wizards. During my fight with Lucy, she'd created ice as a projectile. In the same vein, ice magic could apparently be used to create a cold room to preserve goods.

Still, it was impossible to prevent deterioration over really long distances, so having fresh milk was a treat. Just being able to taste it was satisfying enough to make this long journey worth it.

Knights, soldiers, wizards, and adventurers all ran about busily throughout the lands to make sure such production bases and trade routes weren't being threatened. What each of these groups did differed in scope, but they were all sort of doing the same thing in the sense that they were securing the safety of the nation's people. This included protecting citizens directly or by making sure the people of Liberis could be supplied by trade routes. I truly admired them for it.

"Knight Commander, our preparations are complete."

"Thank you."

And just like that, after we took a small breather in the morning, it was time to get busy again. The one addressing Allucia wasn't the garrison's platoon commander, but a young man wearing gear that differed from both the soldiers and knights we'd left Baltrain with. He was part of the local noble's provincial army.

I hadn't known this before the trip, but even among fellow countrymen, having an armed group passing through was bad for public order and the ruling noble's reputation. It would be problematic if the group started any trouble, and even worse if they attacked the locals. The noble would be faulted with an inability to maintain their people's safety. That applied even if it was the Liberion Order passing through.

This was especially true when the knight commander herself was leading the group. It was very unlikely for the order to cause any problems of their own volition, but not completely out of the

question. So, the lords who ruled these lands mobilized their own troops as escorts to show their loyalty to the crown, to demonstrate their own martial prowess, and to prevent any problems from occurring within their lands.

At any rate, it had to do with a noble's honor or dignity or pride or influence or whatever. That was why we had new soldiers accompanying us along the way. I spent pretty much all of my time on the road inside the carriage, so I never really had the chance to speak with any of them. It sounded like a lot of work for the soldiers of the royal garrison, though. Working side by side with a group whose character and skill were a complete mystery was surprisingly difficult.

It would be best if nothing happened to put that to the test, of course. In all likelihood, adventurers like Surena had patrolled the route and mopped up the bandits and monsters along the way ahead of time to prevent such problems from occurring. Even back when Mewi and I had shared a lunchtime charcuterie plate with Surena, she'd mentioned being busy because of the upcoming visit from Sphenedyardvania's delegation. The success of this expedition was thanks to the efforts of many people.

"Shall we get going then, Master?" Allucia asked.

"Sounds good."

The preparations were finished, and we couldn't just sit back and enjoy our morning. We didn't want to keep our escorts waiting, as that could leave an unnecessarily poor impression on them. Unlike my days in the countryside swinging a sword without a care in the world, I was now more conscious of how I appeared to others. This, of course, included noticing both favorable gazes and suspicious ones. We were off to meet some pretty important people, so I was expecting them to view me with particularly harsh scrutiny.

I was trying to watch how I conducted myself, but I had pretty much no experience in this regard, so it was a pretty thorny path. Allucia didn't comment, and she seemed to be pretty good at it, so I wanted to believe I'd been doing fine so far. She was also strangely soft when it came to me, though... *Maybe I shouldn't trust her too much on matters related to my behavior. Man, this is rough.*

Before boarding the carriage, Allucia did a final check with Zed.

"Hanbeck, is everyone set?"

“Yes, all present and accounted for. We can leave at a moment’s notice.”

As to be expected, there were no shortcomings. The whole group was ready to go. After observing them these past few days, I had the impression Zed and all his subordinates were used to long expeditions on the road. I doubted I would be able to lead people on a long escort mission while maintaining morale.

I had a sense these were the elite of the royal garrison. And I was just guessing, but they were probably candidates for Princess Salacia’s royal guard. In that respect, this expedition to the party in Flumvelk was something like a dress rehearsal. When the princess married Prince Glenn, they would be taking this same route, so taking this trip now would only make the next one smoother.

At any rate, I couldn’t just ask the garrison members whether they were in the running to be Princess Salacia’s royal guard—it was simply a hunch I had. I wouldn’t gain anything by finding out for sure, nor would I act any differently on the journey with such knowledge. Sticking my nose where it didn’t belong would just shorten my life, so it was best to act within my station.

As Allucia finished her checks with Zed, Vesper, and Frau came over with their equipment. The two of them had been acting like our attendants during our meetings with nobles and other influentials. They had to be feeling exhausted by now, but it didn’t show on their faces—they seemed used to it.

“Commander, Mr. Beryl, sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Not a problem,” Allucia said. “Let’s get going then.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With that, we were back on the road. If we reached Flumvelk within the day, this part of the trip would be over. However, the next part would then begin, and this was sure to be far more awkward than my time in the carriage. I’d been personally invited to the noble’s party, so I couldn’t do anything about it, but I found myself quite unenthusiastic about the prospect.

◇

Around the time I was starting to get used to the atmosphere inside the carriage, surrounded by soldiers of the royal garrison and the local provincial army, Zed knocked on the door.

“Excuse me, Knight Commander,” he said. “We’ll be arriving in Flumvelk shortly.”

“Thank you,” Allucia told him.

“Looks like we’re finally at our destination,” I remarked.

Allucia nodded. “Yes. It was a smooth journey.”

We’d left the previous town early in the morning, and now the sun was low in the western sky, casting long shadows beneath us. It seemed Allucia’s claim in the morning that we would reach Flumvelk within the day had been true. Our journey here had pretty much been ideal.

I looked out the window. The road was well maintained and easy to walk on. The view was unobstructed too. Seeing as we weren’t in town yet, the road wasn’t paved in stone, but there was evidence of it being well-trodden. All of this indicated that Flumvelk was relatively prosperous. I wasn’t here for sightseeing, but since I’d come so far, I preferred a bustling town over a desolate one. I didn’t know if I would have any free time, but if possible, I wanted to try the local taverns.

I’d never been to Flumvelk before—I’d barely even left Beaden—so this trip was a pretty new experience for me. With the full journey now nearly half over, I came to realize just how blessed Liberis was. The towns and villages we’d passed through all flourished to different degrees, but at least from what I’d seen, none were impoverished. Well, the order and royal family were capable of setting a route to avoid such places, so this didn’t necessarily paint the full picture. Still, the places we’d visited were able to house and supply a group of dozens of soldiers all at once.

For example, it would be pretty hard for Beaden to handle so many visitors at the same time. We didn’t have that much surplus food, and even if we did, it would be better used for the emergency stores. That could also be a matter of Beaden being such a small village, though.

At any rate, excluding such backwaters, most towns were big enough to have food stored up for a sudden rush of visitors, meaning the country as a whole was really thriving. What was more, Liberis had a transportation network to meet its needs, and as long as there weren’t any huge natural disasters, goods kept flowing. I was constantly reminded of how nice a country I’d been born in.

“Platoon, halt!”

I continued pondering such matters as Flumvelk got closer and closer. Suddenly, Zed's sharp voice resounded in the air. Our carriage stopped, and he knocked on the door once more.

"Knight Commander, we've arrived in Flumvelk. Soldiers are here to meet us."

"Understood. Thank you."

It seemed we were finally within Flumvelk's territory. I tried poking my head out the window to take a look. It looked like a river was used as a simple means to mark the province's border. There were ten soldiers next to a checkpoint. They wore different armor from the provincial army that was already accompanying us, so these were likely the margrave's troops.

Zed took several of his subordinates, as well as one of the provincial soldiers who'd been accompanying us, and they made their way to the checkpoint. He was probably reporting in and doing the handoff among our escorts.

To state the obvious, a noble's provincial army couldn't enter another noble's territory without permission. Well, it was *physically* possible, but it would cause all sorts of problems. So, in the case of an escort mission, once we reached the next province, we reported in and got new escorts. I casually pondered how annoying these restrictions seemed for those involved, but it was a job they had to treat with deadly seriousness. After all, a single misstep could trigger a fight between the nobles they served.

"Vesper, Frau, we're stepping out. Master, please come with us too."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Sure thing."

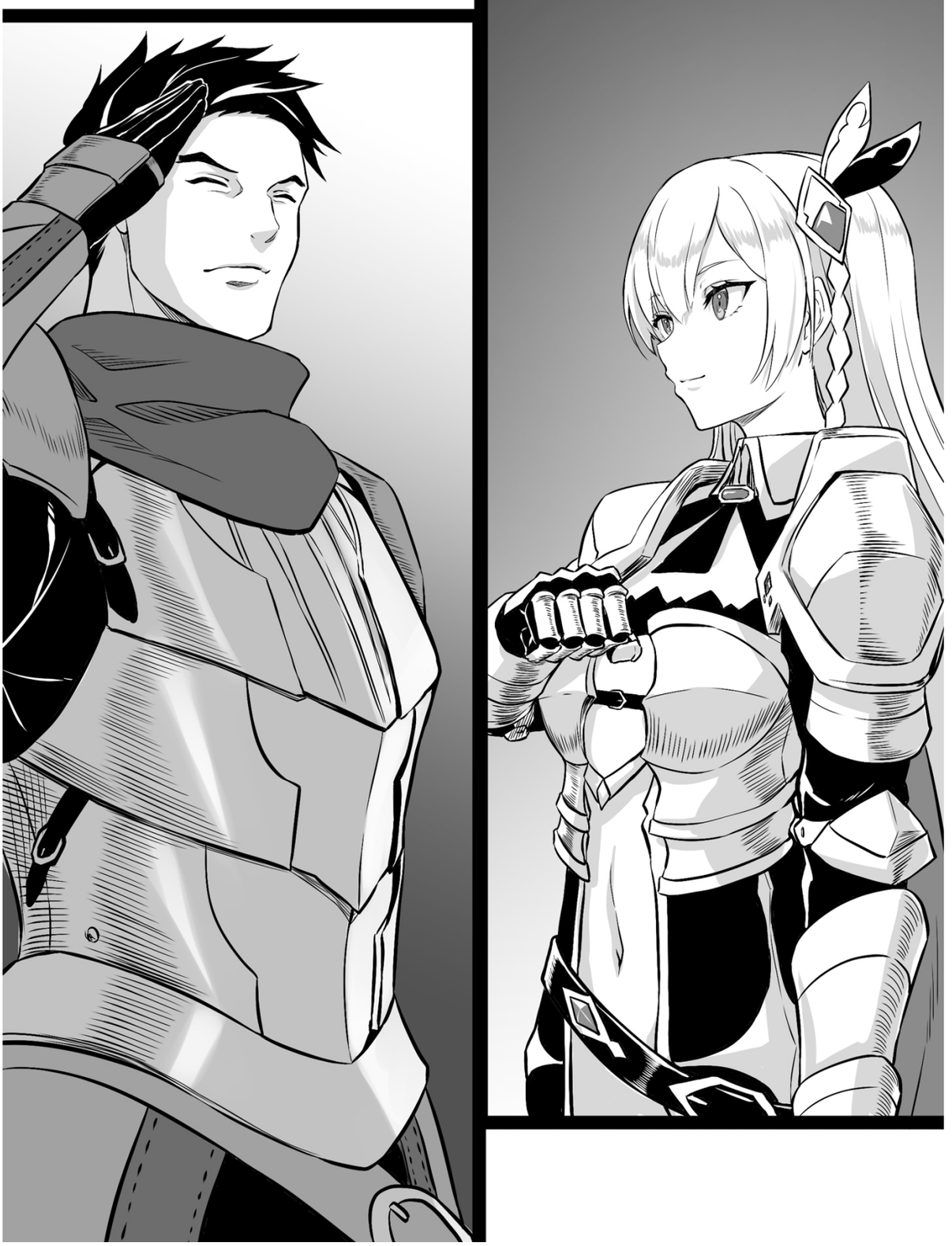
We'd repeated this short exchange so many times since leaving Baltrain that I was used to it by now. The soldiers who were escorting us were swapping out, so we had to give the new ones a simple greeting. It was pretty hard to protect someone in an emergency if you didn't even know what they looked like, so we had to acquaint ourselves to a certain extent. I really was experiencing so many new things, not only on this trip, but ever since leaving Beaden for Baltrain.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Sergeant Major Sahat Ranvaren of the Flumvelk Provincial Army. My lord has commanded me to see you to his estate."

"Commander of the Liberion Order, Allucia Citrus. We'll be in

your care along the way.”

“Yes, ma’am. Please leave it to us.”



Sahat looked around thirty years old. He had almond eyes and black hair that was swept back. To put it nicely, he really looked like a swordsman. To put it less nicely, he seemed rather curt. His skill with a sword likely matched his rank as a sergeant. I'd seen several provincial soldiers during my trip to Flumvelk, but going by first impressions, his squad seemed to be the most skilled, though they would measure up far less favorably against the likes of Allucia or Henblitz.

"Forgive me," Sahat said, turning a suspicious gaze my way. "Your companion doesn't appear to be a knight. Is he...?"

I felt like it'd been a while since anyone had looked at me like that. It reminded me of my first encounters with Henblitz at the office, and with Meigen at the adventurer's guild. It was a little nostalgic, though I wouldn't want to go through this endlessly.

"This is Mr. Beryl Gardenant, special instructor for the Liberion Order," Allucia said, her tone sharp. "Is there a problem?"

"No, not at all," Sahat replied after a short pause. "Let us depart."

"Let's. Lead the way."

Personally, I didn't really care. I was aware that I was still getting looks like this because of my demeanor, though I'd come to the realization rather late. I wanted to improve on that front, but I had no idea how to give myself a more commanding presence. I already had facial hair, so maybe it was my clothes. I did dress like a total commoner, but having clothes that were easy to move in was best for a swordsman, so I wanted to stick with what I had.

"He lacks discipline," Allucia said the moment we were seated in the carriage with Vesper and Frau again.

"Y-You're awfully harsh..." I muttered.

Well, in the extremely unlikely chance that I had to actually fight Sahat, I was pretty confident I would win. Still, latent potential and first impressions were separate matters.

"Emotions shouldn't be so clear within one's eyes," Allucia elaborated. "He needs more training."

"You're quite right, but still..."

Anyone would've noticed such a blatant display. Sahat had refrained from saying anything aloud, but it had been easy to see the "Who the hell is this old fart?" in his eyes. In that sense, he really did need more discipline. I personally didn't care about being looked down upon, but considering the political nature of

this expedition, it could affect the Liberion Order's reputation.

*Maybe it would be better for me to care about my outer appearance after all.* I wanted to complain about being dragged out into the public spotlight, but that seemed useless at this point, so I had no choice but to resign myself to it. If staying low-key had been an option, I would never have become a special instructor.

"Anyway, it sure is thriving here," I commented some time after entering Flumvelk.

*This must be the center of town where the margrave's estate is.* It was now possible to hear the hustle and bustle of the town from within the carriage. The buildings weren't too tightly packed together, nor were they particularly tall. In terms of simple prosperity, Baltrain was far superior. Still, there were many energetic pedestrians, and it was as if the downtown area had expanded to an enormous scale.

"Flumvelk is the keystone of national defense," Allucia explained. "People and goods naturally gather here."

"I see."

We weren't actually at war, but being on the border meant remaining in a constant state of tension. Also, due to the recent assassination attempt, nothing could be left to guesswork for Liberis or Sphenedyardvania.

In that sense, maybe the margrave's invitation to the Liberion Order was a way of keeping forces across the border in check. *I don't really understand any of this political stuff, though. It's all just guesswork on my part.*

I continued pondering such things as I enjoyed the view outside the window. It was getting dark outside, but there were lights here and there, and I could hear people going about their business. Out in the sticks, sunset meant getting ready to go to bed, but much like in Baltrain, this town had entertainment to offer at night. If I had the time, I definitely wanted to check out the taverns.

"Oh, is that it?"

I spotted a conspicuously large building outside the window. That was likely the margrave's estate. It couldn't be compared to the royal palace, of course, nor was it on the scale of the order's office or the magic institute. Still, its size caught the eye at a glance.

"Excuse me," Zed said. "The carriage can only go this far.

Sergeant Sahat would like us to walk the rest of the way."

"Understood," Allucia responded. "We'll comply."

The carriage stopped before the gate, and the long leg of this journey came to an end. We had to walk the rest of the way, but it was basically just from the gate to the estate. It was perfectly reasonable.

"I'll take you to the estate," Sahat said. "The rest will be staying at an inn. You lot, guide our guests."

"Yes, sir!"

It looked like we were parting ways with Zed and the soldiers of the royal garrison here. We couldn't go strolling into a noble's mansion with dozens of people in tow. Sahat was also leaving his subordinates behind to show everyone to the inn.

We were now down to myself, Allucia, Vesper, Frau, and Sahat. We soon walked through a garden and into the mansion. I couldn't see very well because of the darkness, but during the day, the blooming flowers probably drew a beautiful picture.

"I've brought the members of the Liberion Order," Sahat said, knocking on a stately door.

"Come in."

The voice that responded was far younger than I'd imagined. I'd figured a noble in charge of the border would be some wise old man.

"Excuse me."

Sahat led the way into the room, followed by Allucia, me, Vesper, then Frau. The room was larger than expected, but the lights on the desk and walls provided more than enough illumination. The free use of lighting was enough to prove the wealth at work here. As expected, Flumvelk seemed to be pretty prosperous.

Sitting behind the desk was the lord charged with ruling Flumvelk, who stood up to welcome us with a smile.

"It must've been a long journey," he said. "I am Flumvelk's lord, Warren Flumvelk."

"Thank you very much for your invitation. I am Allucia Citrus, commander of the Liberion Order."

The margrave and commander greeted each other courteously. Viewed in a box, this was truly a meeting between the kingdom's elite. Even if it wasn't on the scale of the dinner King Gladio had invited me to, it would normally be a tense situation. That wasn't how I felt, though.

*Dammit, Allucia, you knew and didn't say anything.* I had no memory of the name Flumvelk, but I knew this man well: *Warren.* That explained why I couldn't remember. This guy had never mentioned anything about being a Flumvelk.

"Good work, Sahat," Warren said. "You may take your leave."

"But…"

"Sahat, do you not trust the Liberion Order?"

"As…you wish."

Sahat tried to object for a moment, but he lost to the margrave's pressure and obediently left the room. I understood how he felt. It was concerning to leave the lord he'd sworn his fealty to alone with someone he'd just met, even if they were knights of the Liberion Order. That said, in this one case, his concerns were completely unnecessary.

"Knight Commander, these two are…?" Warren asked, gesturing to Vesper and Frau.

"It's all right," she told him, assuring him they could stay. She was likely implying that their lips were sealed.

"Then I suppose it's fine," Warren said. "Long time no see, Allucia. And Master, I'm glad to see you too."

"It's been a while…my lord?" I responded. "Is that right?"

"Ha ha ha. When the public isn't watching, you can treat me the same as usual, Master."

"That so? Then I'll take you up on that. Good to see you again, Warren."

His domineering aura instantly vanished, and he transformed into a young man befitting his age. Warren Flumvelk was one of my former pupils. He'd attended the dojo during the same period as Allucia, but unlike her, he'd often had a hard time with the basic forms. He'd always been quick-witted, but he had issues moving the way he wanted to—Allucia had acquired techniques two or three times faster than him.

"Allow me to start with introductions, Your Excellency. This is Vesper and Frau. They are knights, but are serving as something like Mr. Beryl's attendants for this occasion."

"I see. I suppose the two of you wouldn't have been able to come here alone."

He seemed to be meeting these two for the first time. They bowed without saying anything. They probably weren't going to speak unless addressed directly. Warren could see this too, so even though their silence would normally be interpreted as rude

in the presence of a margrave, he acted as if it were nothing serious.

"Anyway, shall we take a seat and chat?" Warren asked.

"That works for me," I said.

I sat on a sofa meant for receiving guests. It was *really* cozy.

"Allow me to thank you once more for making the journey," Warren said. "Baltrain is quite far away, isn't it?"

"It is," I said, "but the journey was pleasant thanks to all the work everyone put in."

The trip hadn't been a bother at all. I'd learned that a long journey wasn't all that bad with careful planning and preparation…though I hadn't done any of that myself. I'd relied entirely on the order's preparations.

"Oh, Allucia, there's no need for you to act on ceremony either," Warren told her. "We're out of the public eye here."

"Is that so? Allow me to take you up on that."

Allucia immediately let the tension drain out of her shoulders. I felt like I'd done something wrong by letting loose while Allucia had still been all stiff and formal, but Warren had been the one to tell me to act as usual, so I wanted to believe my dignity was intact.

"Warren, you've been too lenient with that Sahat fellow's discipline," Allucia commented right as she took a seat.

*You're still holding a grudge over his attitude? I mean, you could blame me for giving off that impression instead, but I guess she doesn't see it that way.*

"Did Sahat do something impolite?" Warren asked.

"He looked down on Master Beryl."

"I see…"

*What's with the serious look? Cut it out.* I looked like a plain commoner through and through, so Sahat's suspicions had been well-founded. Showing his opinion so clearly in his behavior was a separate matter, though. On that point, maybe he did need more discipline.

"I'll speak with him later," Warren said. "Sahat worked his way up to the rank of sergeant major, so his skills are at least reliable…"

"He's still not good enough to serve by a margrave's side," Allucia remarked.

Her assessment of him remained harsh. *I really hope this isn't some kind of personal grudge.* She wasn't one to mess up her

public character, but when it came to me, she had a tendency to loosen a screw or two every now and then.

Now that we were seated and had finished a slightly radical shift away from what was supposed to be a nice chat, I turned to Warren.

"So...mind if I ask for an explanation already?" I asked.

"Aah, right."

Warren was one of the pupils who'd devoted himself to the sword at our dojo alongside Allucia. He'd spent more time with us than her—somewhere around five or six years. He'd learned all of our techniques, and I'd given him a farewell sword upon his graduation.

However, he'd never called himself Flumvelk at the time—he'd gone by the surname Heleste. During his time as my pupil, I'd never questioned it. After all, the person who'd brought him to us had also gone by Heleste.

"Is Gisgarte doing well?" I asked.

"Yes, my father is retired now and still healthy," Warren answered.

"That's good to hear."

Gisgarte was Warren's father, and *my* fellow student. In other words, he was one of the men who'd studied under my dad, Mordea Gardenant. Gisgarte had left Warren with me, saying no more than, "This is my son—take care of him." So yes, he'd been my peer, but I was acquainted with him through my dad, so I'd never paid too much attention to his past. Both Gisgarte and Warren had come to us without guards and hadn't worn anything that would identify them as nobles.

"By retired...you mean he was also a margrave?" I asked.

"That's right. My father was the previous lord here."

"I see."

I seriously had a connection to an important noble without even knowing it. Baltrain and Beaden were pretty far from Flumvelk though, so I doubted we would get very involved, but it was a strange connection nonetheless. I hadn't built the connection, though—my dad had.

"By the way..." I said. "Why didn't you call yourself Flumvelk back then? Gisgarte didn't either."

"Ummm, about that..."

Now that we were caught up on the current situation, I got right to what had been bothering me. I didn't understand why

Warren hadn't named himself Flumvelk. You would normally wield the authority of a powerful family name. Not that this necessarily applied to Warren and Gisgarte, but those two hadn't done anything of the sort. That was why I hadn't once questioned that they might be nobles.

"Both my father and I had no intention of succeeding the family," Warren explained. "My father was the youngest child, and I'm the third of four siblings. Heleste is the surname of a servant who has been working for us since my father's generation."

"Why go out of your way to borrow another name?" I asked.

"To avoid confusion. If someone bearing the name of a margrave were to suddenly drop by, it'd be rather troublesome, wouldn't it?"

"Aah... I guess so..."

It would be serious news for the son of a great noble to be learning swordsmanship in some backwater village. It would turn into a huge uproar and could even become a political issue. On that point, Gisgarte's caution was warranted, but I never imagined it would come back around to a situation like this.

"So ultimately, both you and Gisgarte succeeded the house?" I asked.

"Well, that's how it ended up," Warren confirmed with a resigned smile. "It was a series of unfortunate events."

"I see..."

In most families, not even just noble ones, it was generally the eldest son who succeeded the house. If something happened to that son, it would then fall to the second, then the third, and so on and so forth. Going by my memory, there'd been no wars, so any deaths would've occurred by disease or conspiracy. I didn't want to pry though, so I left it at that. From a father's perspective, all the family's children were beloved, even if it was very unlikely for sons to succeed them. It was normal to want to do something for them. A daughter could be married into another family, but that was somewhat harder for a son.

The remaining choices for younger brothers were to have them become soldiers or knights, to have them support the eldest son, or to acquire some kind of vocation. Gisgarte and Warren had polished their skills with a sword while carefully considering options one and three. Instead, they'd unexpectedly succeeded the family.

They must've gone through hardships I couldn't even imagine. It was difficult to find the right words to say, considering the grief they must've gone through after losing family members.

"That's why I didn't use my family name," Warren continued. "I figured I wouldn't be part of the house for long. My father had me learn swordsmanship with that in mind."

"I understand," I said. "Sorry for bringing up bad memories."

"It's fine. Please don't worry about it."

Even if it was only natural for the conversation to flow in this direction, it wasn't something to be spoken of casually. Warren was the epitome of tolerance.

Now that the heavy talk was over, Allucia asked, "By the way, what are the plans from here?"

We hadn't come to Flumvelk all the way from Baltrain just to renew old friendships. The public reason was an invitation to a party. Behind the scenes, this was to prepare for Princess Salacia's wedding.

"The party will be held in three days," Warren said. "I'd like the four of you to stay in my villa until then."

"Understood," Allucia agreed.

As expected, we weren't going to be staying at a normal inn. I would've found one more relaxing, but I couldn't say that to a noble. I wasn't planning to be a total slob or anything, but being in someone's house where other people could see me was somewhat nerve-wracking. It was pretty hard being in a position that gathered public attention, and I was once more reminded of how amazing Allucia and Henblitz were.

"On that note, Master, are you aware of the situation behind this party?" Warren asked.

"The situation...?"

The question brought my thoughts to a halt. I had no idea what he was referring to. *Is this more than just a noble's party?*

"Not really... Is there something special going on?" I asked.

Warren smiled before answering, though it looked strained. "In all likelihood, many nobles and other influential people...especially women, will try speaking with you. It's almost guaranteed."

"Huh? Why?"

*The heck? How does that make sense?*

"I assume you're not aware of this. You're *extremely* famous

among certain circles," Warren elaborated. "You're known by the royal family *and* are linked to the Liberion Order. Everyone wants to make a connection with you."

"Whaaa...?"

I couldn't hide my bewilderment. How had it ended up like that? I hadn't heard anything like this during my time in Baltrain. Nobody had ever tried talking to me in the streets, nor had I sensed anyone eyeing me. I couldn't imagine how this was now the case in Flumvelk, so far away from where I lived.

"Things will work out fine if I just remain by Master Beryl's side and handle it."

Sensing my bewilderment, Allucia provided immediate support. That would be very reassuring. I had no idea how to interact with VIPs. Just greeting people during the journey had been a lot for me, so having to mingle with bigwigs at a glamorous party hosted by a noble would be pretty rough.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Warren objected.

"Why?" Allucia asked. "We're a knight commander and special instructor. I do believe it's an appropriate pairing."

"Allucia, I understand you're a lovely woman, but you're not attending this party to be a lady, right?"

Warren cut down her proposition immediately. I didn't know anything about noble etiquette, so I had no idea which of them was right. I just sat back and watched. *Huh, I don't have a say in this, do I?*

Vesper and Frau had splendidly kept their silence this whole time. They hadn't even whispered among themselves. That was amazing in its own way. It would've been much too awkward for me in their place. In that sense, they were well disciplined.

"I don't know how it is in Baltrain," Warren continued, "but due to recent events, interest and praise for the Liberion Order and Master Beryl has risen significantly. I'm sure everyone attending the party will want to speak with you."

"It's an honor...but it makes me kinda uneasy," I said.

Honestly, I wanted no part of it, but I couldn't say so. By recent events, he was almost definitely referring to the royal assassination attempt. Flumvelk was on the border with Sphenedyardvania. We weren't at war, but they had to keep vigilant against a hypothetical enemy at all times. It was perfectly reasonable for them to hear of an incident involving their neighbor.

Looking only at the result, the Liberion Order were heroes who had—right at the precipice of danger—prevented an extremely perilous international problem. That was exactly why they'd been invited to this party. So with heroes coming to their home, the local powers wanted to form a connection. That much I understood. I still didn't like it, though. It sounded like a pain, and I had no idea how to conduct myself. In this sense, I was a bona fide commoner.

"In that case, Vesper and Frau can stick to him," Allucia said, refusing to back down.

"Their presence is required, but given their status, there are many people they won't be able to stop," Warren refuted. "Even if they're knights, they are here as *attendants*. They won't be able to brush off the many nobles thinking of marrying Master Beryl into their families—and forgive the discourtesy, but *especially* the women."

*Hmm, what do I do about this?* I'd accepted the invitation, so I couldn't refuse to go to the party now. Even *I* understood that this would be a slap in the face to all those attending.

"I think it'll be fine if Master Beryl can handle it all on his own, but…it'll be pretty hard on you, right?" Warren asked, turning to me.

"Yeah, it sounds rough… Though I'm ashamed to admit it…"

He was one of my former pupils, and his dad had been my fellow student. He understood my personality well. And just as he said, I didn't believe I could pull it off.

"So, to prevent that to a degree—as bug repellent, if you will—and admittedly to add some value…" Warren said. "I think it'll be better for him to have another partner with him. What do you think?"

Allucia gave a long pause. "No…objections…"

It definitely looked like Warren was coaxing her into something. She was smart, but a man who served on the front lines of the noble class had way more experience with this stuff.

"B-But who exactly can we ask?" I interjected.

According to Warren, I needed a partner to go with me to the party. From what I could tell, I would be in pretty big trouble if I didn't have someone to stem the tide of curious VIPs. Vesper and Frau couldn't stand on equal footing with nobles—I couldn't either. This had nothing to do with ability but was a simple matter of status. Still, even if I did go with his plan, who exactly

could be my partner? It was too late to call someone from Baltrain, and I obviously had no acquaintances in Flumvelk besides Warren and Gisgarte.

"So, I'm thinking of having my younger sister Shueste be your partner," Warren answered with a splendid smile. "She should be able to pull it off perfectly."

"Huh?"

"Ah?"

My bewilderment was accompanied by intense pressure from Allucia.

"You have a sister?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm embarrassed to say she's an inept sister who missed her chance at marriage, though."

I'd never heard about his sister before, but he'd mentioned being the third of four siblings. That would make her Gisgarte's youngest. If I remembered right, Warren was about the same age as Allucia, which would put his sister in her early twenties at most. Wasn't it rude to see a woman so young as past the age of marriage? Or was that normal in the world of nobles? She sure had it tough. By those standards, I'd not only missed my chance, but I was already a mummified husk with zero prospects.

"Warren." Allucia's tone was sharp.

"Is there a problem, Allucia?"

The pressure coming from her was intense. *Well, uhhh, yeah, I get it.* I knew she had feelings for me. I mean, no matter how much of a blockhead I was, I could see that much. During her days at the dojo, she'd gone as far as telling me, "Master, when I grow up, I'm going to marry you." Those feelings probably hadn't changed after all these years.

Answering her feelings was a different matter, though. Even if it was because of my dad's pestering, I was out searching for a wife. I wanted to put a little effort into it. Just as I'd discussed with my mom during my return to Beaden this summer, even if I'd surpassed my dad as a swordsman, beating him as a man was still beyond me.

There was no reason I absolutely *had* to win against him, but he'd been my lifelong goal. I felt the urge to surpass him, not only in swordsmanship, but as a person. I probably never would've felt this way had I continued holing up in Beaden. Also, after stepping away and coming back, I felt envy toward the relationship my mom and dad had.

Up until now, I'd never had an interest in creating a peaceful future with a spouse for the rest of my life, but I was starting to believe it would be nice. At the same time, I wasn't thinking of proactively doing anything until Mewi was independent. Coming home and telling her she had a new mother would be too much for her. Besides, I doubted a lovely wife who met all of my criteria would pop up right away.

Well, even without any criteria, I still questioned whether any woman out there would willingly choose to spend her life with me. And though I felt somewhat regretful about it, I had no intention of laying a hand on any of my former pupils.

It definitely wasn't a matter of them lacking charm or not being to my tastes—it was something like a fixation of mine. Maybe I was being too hardheaded, but a part of me kept saying it wasn't right. If I had looser morals, maybe I would already be taking full advantage of Allucia's favor.

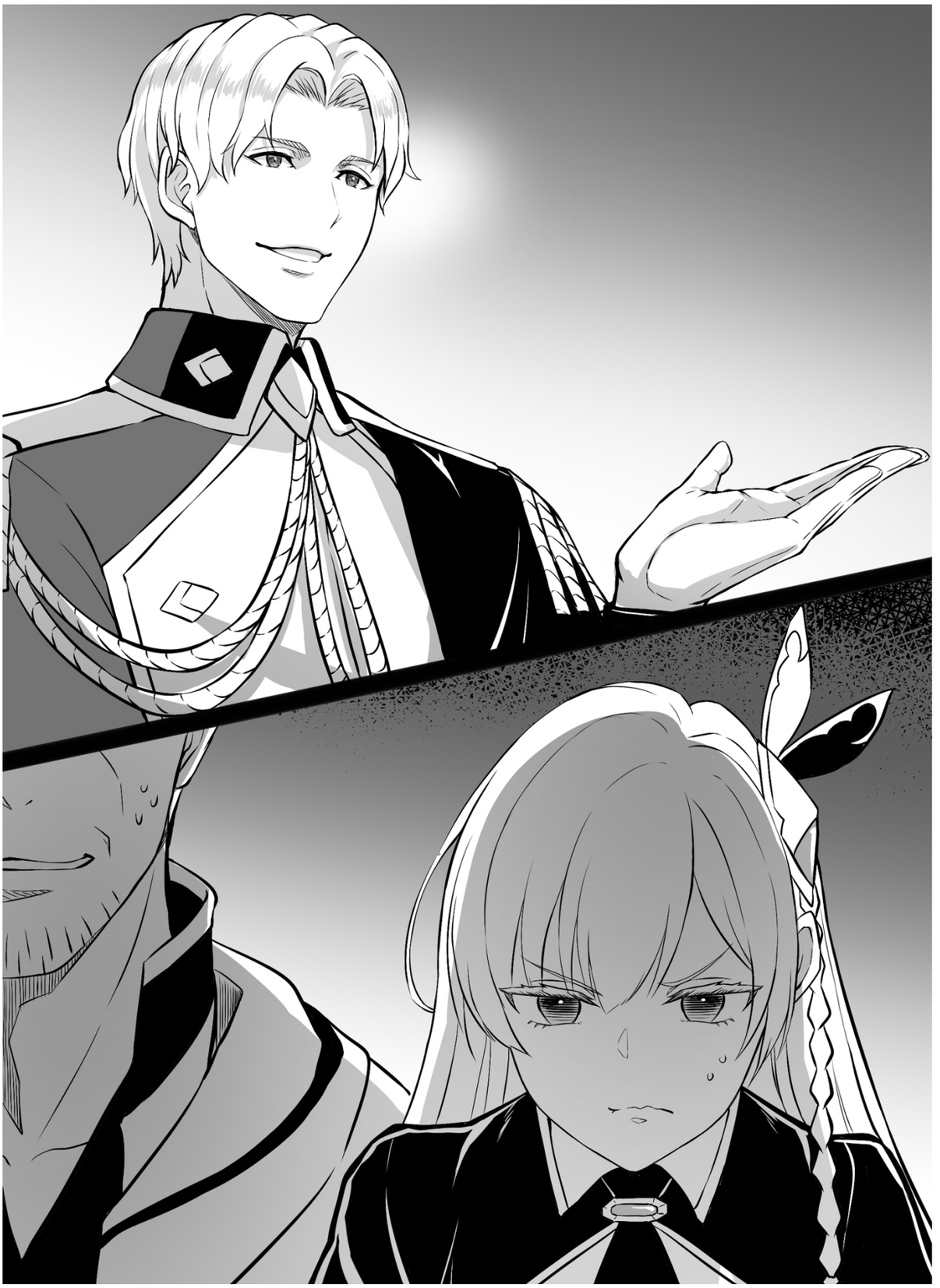
It was possible she saw me as a nasty old man who kept avoiding her approaches. A part of me figured things would work out if her feelings cooled down because of this. I didn't know whether to tell her directly or leave it to her heart, though.

"But that could cause an unwanted misunderstanding for Master Beryl."

"Wouldn't it be worse for him to make a sudden commitment with some noble lady? I'm telling you, it's bug repellent. If it's going to cause a misunderstanding, it might as well be with family."

"Mrgh... Mrrrgh..."

While I ruminated, the two continued their heated debate over what to do regarding my partner. From what I could hear, Allucia seemed to be in a losing battle. It was pretty rare to see her talked down like this.



This was almost nostalgic. Matters that were supposed to be my choice were once again being decided without any of my input. I was still grateful for Warren's consideration, though. Getting thrown into a gathering of nobles on my own would've been a bit too much for me.

"Uhhh, mind if I say something?" I cut in.

At this rate, the argument was going to go on forever—rather, Allucia was going to refuse to let it end. My voice brought their dispute to a complete halt. I was glad all of my pupils were so obedient. Allucia had a tendency to keep talking regardless, though.

"I think Warren's idea is good," I said. "I doubt there's anyone more suitable for the role, and we won't be able to call someone from Baltrain in time. Besides, it'll be far more dangerous on my own."

"M-Master?!"

The Liberion Order's commander was shocked—her current tone and expression wouldn't have been appropriate for the public eye. Vesper and Frau were here too, but they'd completely assimilated with the atmosphere in the room. *That's an impressive feat.*

At any rate, it was impractical for Allucia to be by my side at all times. Just as Warren had said, she had too many things to do as the knight commander. Compounding that, I had absolutely no experience socializing with upper society, so being left to my own devices would be horrible.

Setting aside the veracity of my fame in certain circles, I'd been invited to a margrave's party as a guest of honor. It was only natural for people to want to talk to me. I was glad to make more friends, but it would be a problem if they prodded for more than that. This was especially troublesome with big shots like nobles and major business owners—the typical attendees of a noble's party.

I would be extremely grateful to have someone to serve as a bulwark. What was more, having the status of Warren's family and being a bachelorette filled the role perfectly. Her being okay with it was another matter, though.

I made sure to make that point clear.

"That's only if your sister agrees to it," I told Warren. "If she doesn't, I don't want to insist. I'll tough it out on my own."

I didn't want her next to me in a state of constant irritation,

after all. If things were going to end up like that, I preferred to try my best to give everyone evasive answers on my own.

"There's no need to worry about that," Warren said. "I conveyed the possibility to her once the party was decided on, and she has already consented."

"I-I see..."

My reaction had apparently been fully within his expectations. All the necessary arrangements had already been made. Warren had predicted that I would attend from the moment he'd started considering this party, and he'd also guessed I wouldn't have a partner with me. I wasn't going to lose against him with a sword, but when it came to worldly wisdom, he had me utterly defeated.

"Then I guess it's not a problem..." I said. "It might be quite the burden for her, though."

"Very well, then I'll get things moving on that front," Warren said.

That wrapped things up nicely, but Allucia was making quite the face. Though Warren's logic held up perfectly, she wasn't convinced. I wasn't going to point any of this out, though. I wasn't the type of idiot to stir up the hornet's nest.

"The villa is some distance from here, but it has a stable, so staying there shouldn't be a problem," Warren continued. "There are servants too. I'll assign you a maid, so let her know if you need anything."

"You've really thought of everything..." I commented. "Sorry for being a bother."

"That's what it means to be the guest of honor," Warren said. "You should get used to it, Master. You'll be invited to more such occasions, so you have nothing to lose by doing so."

"Ha ha ha, I'll try... I feel like Allucia said the same thing on the way here."

I wanted to put in the effort, but I didn't feel like I would ever get used to it. If anything, I wanted to refrain from repeating this experience. But it seemed that was wishful thinking. I had to steel myself. *I'm not sure if I have the necessary resolve for anything but wielding a sword...*

"Sahat and his men will escort you to the villa," Warren said, then added, "just to be safe."

It seemed our escorts were sticking around. On the way here, I'd pondered visiting the local pubs if I had the chance, but that

wasn’t likely at this point. It was questionable whether I would get *any* time to myself.

I had no choice but to accept that. More importantly, I had to focus on the party coming up in three days. I would definitely have to do some speaking, even with Warren’s sister helping, so I wanted to learn what little I could. I didn’t mind bringing shame to myself, but it would be problematic if I disgraced the Liberion Order.

*Anyway, Warren’s sister, huh? I’ve never met her. I didn’t even know she existed. I wonder what she’s like.*

If I had to guess, she was courteous and well-mannered, being from a margrave’s house and all. Still, it was stressful having to go to a party with someone I’d never met. And just as I started wondering whether her hair was the same blonde as her brother and father, Warren’s voice brought me back out of my thoughts.

“Aah, one more thing,” he said.

I cocked my head. “Hm? There’s more?”

“Master, it’ll be difficult to manage if you meet Shueste on the day of the party, yes?” he said, as if just coming up with an idea. “I’ll send her to the villa, so you can use the time to get acquainted beforehand.”

“Huh?”

“Ah?”

Warren’s proposal was met with my bewilderment and Allucia’s intense pressure.

*This feels like déjà vu…*

◇

“Welcome, and thank you for taking the long journey here. It is an honor to make your acquaintance. I am the eldest daughter of House Flumvelk, Shueste Flumvelk. Though it may only be for a short period, I shall provide you with the best of my hospitality.”

After our brief meeting and reunion with Warren, Sahat and the provincial soldiers had guided us to one of the margrave’s villas. It wasn’t all that far away—the road was just long enough for some light exercise. We’d gone by carriage, though.

It seemed Warren had already completed all the necessary arrangements. Upon our arrival, a row of servants and maids

and whatnot had bowed to us. And as I'd been wondering whether the overly formal greeting was necessary, the woman at the center of the line—Shueste Flumvelk—had introduced herself to us with the utmost courtesy.

"I must thank you for the grand welcome. I am the Liberion Order's commander, Allucia Citrus. With me are the knights Vesper and Frau."

"Lady Allucia, Sir Vesper, Lady Frau, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

From what I could tell, neither the three knights nor Shueste showed the slightest hint of tension or anxiety. I could easily imagine how used Shueste was to such occasions. On that point, she seemed like a good choice to accompany me to the party.

Allucia followed up after a strange pause. "And this is the special instructor serving the Liberion Order, Mr. Beryl Gardenant."

"I'm honored to meet you," I joined in.

Allucia was probably affected by what Warren had said. Now wasn't the time to ask about it, though.

"Master Beryl, I greet you with great excitement in my heart. Long have I awaited the day when I could meet you. I look forward to our continued association."

"Uhhh, likewise...?"

The sun was completely gone, but as to be expected of a margrave's villa, there was an abundance of illumination, giving me a clear view of everyone's faces despite the veil of darkness. I could also see that Shueste's expression had brightened up considerably the moment I'd been introduced. It was supposed to be our first meeting, but she seemed to have an awfully positive opinion of me. Gisgarte and Warren had probably filled her head with half-truths. It was better than being hated, at least.

Her hair wasn't the same dazzling blonde as Warren's—it was instead a darker color similar to tea. Gisgarte also had beautiful blond hair, so she'd likely inherited this from her mother. She looked somewhere in her early twenties and was shorter than Allucia. Her large, chestnut eyes were accented by a gentle expression, making her seem like a sweet girl. Going only by aura, she was similar to how Rose had been during her youth.

"You must all be tired from the long journey, so how about starting with dinner?" Shueste suggested.

“That is certainly true,” Allucia said. “Please allow us to take you up on your offer.”

We hadn’t had anything to eat since entering Flumvelk, so I was grateful for a meal. The same seemed to apply to Allucia.

“Get things ready,” Shueste said, addressing the servants. “I shall show them the mansion. Sahat, good work bringing them here.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

At her command, the line of servants briskly got to work, and we finally parted ways with Sahat and the provincial soldiers. About the only servant I knew of who worked for someone really important was Haley, and these servants looked in no way inferior to her. It seemed those working at a noble’s mansion weren’t the type to set a bad example by lounging around.

Shueste led us into the building. Much like the outside, the interior was a splendid construction of stone. *Nobles are probably more focused on personal security than the regular commoner. During a war, this could even become a command post.* It was very sturdily built, just like the royal palace and the order’s office.

I wanted to live in a world where such things were unnecessary, but life was rarely so ideal. It wasn’t utter chaos, but considering the many countries that shared the Galean continent, smoke was bound to rise somewhere. Was it selfish to want them to at least do that stuff where I couldn’t see it?

I’d felt fine shutting my eyes to it back during my days of swinging a sword in the countryside, but with my new post, I felt like that no longer applied. I really didn’t want to be called on to participate in some international schism. It was frightening how I couldn’t completely discount the possibility.

“This is the dining room.”

“Oooh…”

Not too far from the entrance, we found ourselves in a room. While the ceiling wasn’t too high up, the space itself was vast, and it contained a long dining table lined with chairs. It didn’t compare to the dinner party I’d been invited to at the royal palace, but it was still more than splendid enough—certainly far beyond the inns and taverns I’d frequented before moving in with Mewi. A part of me wondered if I *really* had to get used to fancy dinners like this.

“The food will be arriving shortly, so please take a seat,” Shueste said, walking to the chair at the center of the table.

I wasn't quite sure what to do. As one of the main guests, it made sense for me to sit near Shueste. Allucia was the most important guest, so that meant she would take the closest seat to her. *Does that make me next in line? I don't get it. Allucia just marched right to the nearest seat like it was the most obvious thing. Vesper and Frau aren't moving at all. What do I do?*

"Come, come, Master Beryl, over here," Shueste said, urging me to sit right next to her, across from Allucia. I really *was* being treated on the same level as the knight commander. "Hee hee, I've been so eager to speak with you. I've heard many tales of your prowess from my brother and father."

"Uh... Thank you...?"

Shueste remained rather talkative, even as we waited for the food to arrive. She had a uselessly positive opinion of me. *What prowess? You guys only ever knew of me during my days in the sticks. Dammit, what do I do about this?*

From an outside perspective, I did have an impressive title as special instructor for the Liberion Order. In contrast, my outer appearance and mind were completely that of an old man. I had no idea how to act around a younger woman who possessed both status and beauty.

"Lady Shueste, it must be difficult having to deal with an old man like me," I remarked.

"Oh my, nothing of the sort. Also, please refer to me simply as 'Shueste.'"

"Ah, no, that's...I mean...it's inappropriate, or rather..."

"It's fine. Just address me as you would my brother or father."

Shueste was clearly quite enthusiastic. It was a little scary. I didn't know what was going on in her head. Was part of her behavior calculated self-interest? No matter how you looked at me, I wasn't the type of person a noble would take interest in. I just couldn't understand how their minds worked.

Meanwhile, Allucia was making a terrifying expression and unleashing some overwhelming pressure. *Didn't you* just *criticize Sahat for showing his emotions so easily? Don't repeat the same mistake so quickly.*

To add to that, Vesper and Frau were still maintaining their utter silence. I felt like they hadn't said a word since entering Flumvelk. I felt kind of sorry for them.

"Excuse me. Dinner is ready."

And as I found myself in this exquisitely awkward

atmosphere, it was finally time to eat. This situation was rather tough on my nerves, but my stomach was eager to have some food. I had to be careful not to devour my meal.

Several servants came in and set the table. There was meat, vegetables, soup, and even alcohol. I was *really* glad for some proper meat. It showed how strong production and trade were in Flumvelk.

Once everyone had food before them, Shueste offered a toast. “Then let us begin. In celebration of your safe arrival and in thanks for today’s meeting, cheers.”

As to be expected, this wasn’t a situation where I could knock back a tasty ale. There was a glass of deep red wine before me. I didn’t hate wine or anything—I’d had plenty of it back home. I simply preferred ale. I would never mention this though, so I gratefully sipped my wine.

“Oh, this is good,” I commented.

Shueste smiled. “Hee hee, I’m glad it suits your tastes.”

A rich aroma and faint sweetness dominated my mouth, followed a beat later by a unique bitter tang. It really was delicious. I couldn’t even compare it to the cheap stuff I’d had in Beaden. The wine they’d served in the palace had probably been equally exquisite, but I’d been so nervous at the time that I hadn’t been able to taste it. *Drinking that wine was a total waste…* But I could taste this one now, so I must’ve grown somewhat accustomed to high-society affairs.

“Are you enjoying it as well, Lady Allucia?” Shueste asked.

“Yes. It is delicious,” Allucia replied flawlessly as she manipulated her fork and knife elegantly. She really knew her etiquette. I wasn’t exactly clumsy with my tableware, but I was inexperienced with the manners of upper society. I was also pretty desperate on the inside not to bring shame to everyone.

“After dinner, I shall give you a tour of all the rooms and facilities here,” Shueste said.

“That truly helps,” I told her. “Thank you for your consideration.”

“Master Beryl, could you please act like your normal self around me?”

“Aah… I’ll put in the—I’ll try.”

“Yes, yes. That’s the spirit.”

I didn’t feel like I could win against her charming smile. She had a point, though. I was quite frank with her older brother, the

current head of House Flumvelk. Trying to act formally around him actually made me uncomfortable. Going by that logic, as long as she was fine with it, there was no problem doing the same for his little sister—when out of the public eye, at least.

Still, that was entirely based on the premise that I hadn't known Gisgarte's and Warren's identities. I didn't have the nerves to be so casual around the eldest daughter of a margrave's house when I knew who she was from the beginning. I wanted to put in the effort, though.

If anything, I wanted her to stop calling me Master Beryl. She didn't speak to me as a pupil would to an instructor, but she called me "Master" as if I were a really important guest. I already knew she would use that as an excuse to have me drop the titles around her too, so it seemed I had no choice in the matter.

"Individual rooms have been prepared for all of you," Shueste continued, gracefully taking a sip of wine. "And I have a proposal concerning that…"

"Hm? What is it?" I asked.

I was glad we all had our own rooms. We'd also gotten this treatment on the way here. Sharing a room with someone you didn't really know was stressful. I'd spent a long time living with my parents, so aside from Mewi and my family, I was a little nervous about sharing with anyone.

Anyway, I had no idea what her proposal could be. If we had individual rooms, then that worked out just fine. Did they really need to put forth effort on top of that?

"Master Beryl, we'll be attending the party together in three days," she started. "To get to know each other better before then and to make the party a greater success, I was thinking we should share a room," Shueste proposed.

"What?"

"Ah?"

*That's a tremendous statement to make with that blooming smile. You siblings really don't need to be* that *similar.*

Also, we were back to me being bewildered and Allucia exuding some serious pressure. How many times had this been today? This time though, I was in agreement with her.

◇

"Hwaaah…"

Things had been rather shocking since entering Flumvelk, but the day had somehow reached a safe end, and it was now the next morning. I was woken up by gentle sunlight pouring through the windows.

The rooms we'd been given were more than large enough. The excess space actually made me restless—my room was probably as large as my entire house in Baltrain. At least I now knew that a uselessly large living space was actually bad for the nerves.

I wasn't dissatisfied with my current house, and I was very grateful to Lucy for it. As long as I was living with Mewi, I was very unlikely to look for a new place. I had no reason to. I could think of only two reasons I might leave: if the house became too cramped for my family or if I vacated it to return to Beaden. The latter was entirely possible, but the former was pretty unlikely.

"Anyway, I'm glad I got to sleep alone..."

While pondering my household matters, yesterday's exchange came back to mind. Shueste's proposal had ended as nothing more than a proposal. She'd apparently been half joking. And after being faced with my bewilderment and Allucia's rapid-fire objection, she'd backed down with ease.

As a result, I'd managed to spend my night peacefully, but I still found myself somewhat uneasy around Shueste. It didn't seem like she was trying to trick us or anything. If she'd had ill intent, Allucia's sensitive instincts would've picked up on it. And before any of that, it was hard to imagine Warren plotting something with his little sister.

I also felt that she wasn't *quite* playing with me or teasing me. Hypothetically, had I agreed to it, I was pretty sure Shueste would've refrained from coming to my room. And yet, I didn't believe it had been entirely a joke either.

"Hmmm..."

There was some kind of ulterior motive, but I had no idea what it was. I didn't even know if it really involved me. It was generally useless to worry about these kinds of things, but once it was on my mind, I couldn't get it out. I definitely couldn't go to Shueste and plainly ask, "Are you plotting something?"

"Master Beryl, are you awake?"

"Whoa... Haaah... Yeah, I'm up."

A knock came at the door, as if someone were reading my thoughts. The voice on the other side was Shueste's. I was glad

she was visiting in the morning rather than at night—I wouldn't have known how to handle that.

"May I come in?" she asked.

"Go ahead."

"Please pardon the intrusion."

She entered the room and was the same Shueste as yesterday. Her clothing was somewhat more plain, though. To be specific, it was less flashy but still had a fine texture and featured calming colors.

"Good morning, Master Beryl."

"Morning, Shueste," I replied a beat later.

Yesterday had been really busy, but I'd had a night to rest up. We were also in my personal room, and Shueste had nobody with her. We were genuinely alone. Viewing this situation in a box, it would be impossible to remain calm. After all, a woman was visiting a man's room first thing in the morning. But unlike yesterday, I'd managed to calm my nerves somewhat, so I was able to act the same as always—just as she'd requested.

"Hee hee... Thank you very much."

I was worried for a moment that her request might've also been a joke, but it seemed that wasn't the case. I'd responded to her like I would to Mewi, and she returned a gentle smile. It looked like I had the right idea, so maybe it was best to be like this whenever we weren't in public. Adjusting my behavior based on the time and place wasn't really my specialty, though.

"Did you enjoy your evening?" she asked.

"It really is a nice house," I said. "It was a pleasant night. I've got nothing to complain about."

This was a margrave's villa. How arrogant would I have to be to be unsatisfied with it? Shueste's gaze remained unchanging. It was tender, cheerful, and without the slightest hint of hostility. In contrast, she did seem to make a lot of bewildering requests of me, but I didn't want to directly confront her about it.

Maybe, in her own way, she was trying to evaluate what kind of person I was. She wasn't causing any harm, so maybe it was fine to just go along with it until she was satisfied. After all, I was very unlikely to ever meet her again after this expedition was over.

"By the way, the whole Master Beryl thing..." I began.

"Oh dear. You're a guest, so it's only natural."

"R-Right..."

I'd stopped with the formal behavior, but my suggestion for her to do the same had been shot down instantly. It was pretty unfair. I mean, I could've told her, "You're part of House Flumvelk, so it's only natural for me to be formal."

Even if I had told her that, I was pretty sure she would've skillfully found some reason it didn't apply to her. I wasn't particularly good at arguing my point and didn't have any kind of force of personality or anything. Instead, I moved on to a simpler matter.

"So, what brings you here this morning?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. I'd like to invite you to have breakfast with me. I was thinking we could improve our friendship, even if only a little."

"Underst—got it. Ummm... Then allow me to acc—"

"Master Beryl. You're forbidden from being formal."

"Then...what about you?"

"I am the one inviting you, Master Beryl."

"Whaaa...?"

I was fine with having breakfast together, but now I'd even been banned from being formal at all. My objection had also been pitifully obliterated. I was far older than her, but maybe because she was a noble, she'd received an education on this front. I didn't feel like I could ever win against her in a war of words.

This was fine around Shueste—I could just laugh the whole thing off as rather harmless—but it would *definitely* be bad if some sly nobles attended the party. I was liable to make some kind of weird commitment without even knowing it.

From that perspective, I was grateful to have Shueste as my partner for the party. It was indeed important that we understood each other a little more in preparation for said party.

"Let us go immediately," Shueste said. "The weather is fine today, so I was thinking of eating in the courtyard."

"Ooh, that sounds nice."

I figured we would either end up in the dining hall or have the food brought to my room. Instead, we were going to eat outside. The courtyard was still on the premises, so it wasn't a security issue. And just as she said, the weather was nice. It was early fall, so it was cool in the mornings and evenings. This was sure to be very pleasant.

I made myself presentable—to the extent that I could—and left the room. On the way there, Shueste got the attention of a

maid who'd been waiting outside.

"You there—today's breakfast will be in the courtyard."

"Certainly. As you wish."

Naturally, while Shueste was very courteous with me and Allucia, she used a more commanding upper-class persona when dealing with servants. If she didn't, her servants could end up looking down on her. They could even spread rumors that would threaten her position. The worlds commoners and nobles lived in were different based on what each side viewed as common sense.

"Here we are," Shueste announced.

"Hmm. I didn't get to see it in the darkness last night. It really is beautiful."

I was guided to a space with well-pruned trees and a modest display of nature's beauty. There were all sorts of flowers—enough for none of them to look lonely, but not enough to be suffocating. The garden had a terrific atmosphere. Some kind of exclusive gardener must've been in charge here.

"I help tend to things here, just every now and then," Shueste said.

"Huh? You do?"

"Yes. Is that unexpected?"

"Well, a little."

It was hard to imagine the daughter of a margrave doing any gardening. Not that I believed it was a noble's job to lounge around and do nothing, but it was still surprising. In my terms, it would be like Allucia cleaning the training hall.

And just as I took a seat at the table with a clear view of the vivid trees, a waiter placed breakfast before me.

"Your meal, sir."

"Ah, thanks."

It was basically a reflex for me to say thanks. This was common sense for me, but was it the same for nobles? This was the kind of stuff I had to learn.

Breakfast consisted of a baguette, bacon, cheese, and milk. The menu reflected the region's specialty in animal husbandry.

"Thanks for the meal," I said.

"Please enjoy," Shueste told me.

I put the bacon on the baguette and took a bite. The bread wasn't dry or hard, and the bacon had a proper bite to it with plenty of grease. It was genuinely delicious, though I could've

guessed that before trying it.

Unlike eating at an inn or at home, there was a certain coolness to eating outside in such a liberating and quiet space. The restaurant Kinera had taken me to had a terrace, but a fair bit of the town's hustle and bustle could be heard from there.

After making sure I'd started eating, Shueste tucked into her meal too. She used her fork and knife with terrific manners and took tiny bites. It painted quite the picture. And, it was a little late to comment on this, but having a meal with a member of high society made me feel out of touch with reality.

Around the time we'd both had some of our breakfast and my stomach was beginning to settle, Shueste struck up a conversation.

"Master Beryl, I've heard from my brother and father that you've spent your whole life pursuing the sword."

"Hm? Well, I guess I have. Now and in the past, all I've ever been capable of is frantically swinging one around."

I didn't know what exactly Gisgarte and Warren had told her, but she was right. My life had consisted of nothing more than wielding a sword and teaching it to others. I didn't regret it, though. Looking back on things now, my only criticisms were things like, "I could've done that better had I done it like this instead." Still, it was hard to deny that I would've liked a bit more color in my life.

"I was somewhat envious of my brother," Shueste muttered quietly.

"You envied him...?"

She had the same friendly smile as usual, but the moment those words left her lips, a slight bitterness was apparent behind it.

"I am the eldest daughter of House Flumvelk. I feel no discontent toward being raised to live up to my name, and I believe my father and brother are worthy of great respect. I also know how dearly they cherish me."

Shueste set aside her tableware and cast her eyes down somewhat. There was no extra drama in her voice. She didn't seem to be lying.

"However, if I could be allowed one selfish request...I would've liked to see beyond the walls of this restricted world, just like my father and brother did. A part of me believes that, even now."

"I see..."

She'd surely been raised like a princess with plenty of affection. According to Warren, she had nothing but older brothers. Now that I was looking after Mewi, I understood how much I would dote on a daughter of my own.

On the other hand, there was a significant distance between Flumvelk and Baltrain, and Beaden was even farther. It would be a tough choice to send an adorable daughter on a journey like that, especially if she was the youngest child.

"Have you told Warren and Gisgarte that?" I asked.

"No... How could I...?"

Shueste looked somewhat bewildered by my question. Hypothetically speaking—really, just *hypothetically*—say Mewi told me she wanted to travel all over the world. Ultimately, I wouldn't stop her. I would, of course, be ridiculously worried and would confirm over and over that she was truly all right. We would also have to talk and talk until she finally convinced me. In the end though, I would choose to respect her wish. The same likely applied to Gisgarte and Warren.

Naturally, nobles were bound by far more fetters than commoners from the very moment they were born. Regardless, I didn't want to believe there were any parents out there who would disregard a beloved daughter's will. The same went for brothers with their younger sister. They would've done everything in their power to actualize her request—if, of course, it could be realistically achieved.

"Shueste, you've probably never told them what you really want," I said. "That's why you don't know how they'll react."

"Yes...that is definitely true."

She knew they cherished her, and that was precisely why she couldn't open up about her feelings. If she did, it was possible that things would all come crumbling down. However, I knew Gisgarte and Warren, not as nobles, but as individual people. In my opinion, even if Shueste expressed an adorably selfish request, they wouldn't treat her any differently.

"I bet it'll be fine," I told her. "I'm just not sure it would be possible to grant your request, though... Still, Gisgarte and Warren won't come to hate you because of it. If anything, they might rejoice."

"Rejoice...?"

"They would think, 'Shueste has finally told us her true feelings.'"

Being unreasonable and being selfish were technically different things. From what I knew, Shueste wasn't being unreasonable. *She could do with being a little more honest with herself.*

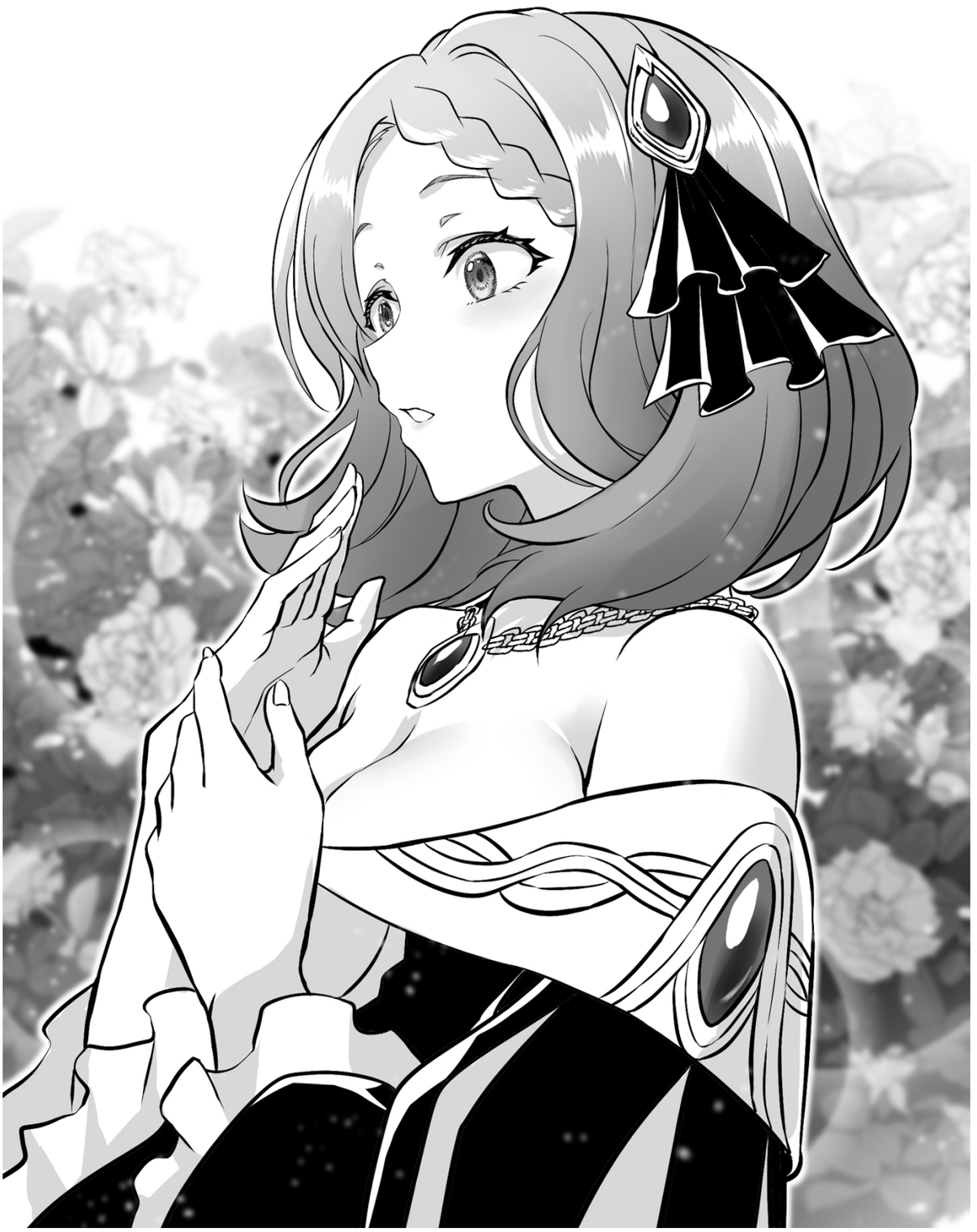
"But suddenly asking to go on a journey might pose too many problems…" I added. "To test things out, why don't you ask about tending to the villa's garden more freely?"

To state the obvious, it was probably unrealistic for a noble's eldest daughter to suddenly take a trip around the world—starting with such a request would only cause trouble for Warren. That was why I believed she could start with a far more meager indulgence.

"How…?" Shueste muttered.

"Hm? You like nature, right? I can at least see that much."

It seemed my suggestion had shocked her a little. The smile she'd maintained since our first meeting was falling apart. We'd only just met, but I'd been able to see right away that she loved flowers and nature. It'd been obvious from the smile she'd had when she'd guided me to the courtyard.



“Hee hee… I suppose so. You’ve watched both my father and brother for many years. I’m sure you’re right.”

“It’s a bit troublesome if you put *that* much trust in me, though.”

As a member of their family, she’d watched them for far longer than I had, but I *did* understand what she was getting at. I just knew a side of them that she didn’t, nothing more.

“I’ve decided,” Shueste said, seeming to find a new resolve in her heart. “I’ll try being more honest with my family. If they say anything, I’ll tell them it was your suggestion.”

“Ha ha ha, I bet they’ll get really angry with me.”

Her smile was far more invigorated than before. It was such a modest thing—a story that was perfectly commonplace in any household. However, there were families where such commonplace problems were never resolved. I was hoping that my words, as little as they were worth, could help give her the push on the back she needed.

“Now that we’ve talked about me, please tell me some more about yourself, Master Beryl.”

“Sure thing. But despite my long years, I don’t have all that much to tell.”

The morning with Shueste had started somewhat tensely for me, but it ended up being so modest, quiet, and fulfilling.

*Talking about stuff like this every now and then doesn’t seem so bad.*

# Interlude

“So? What’s the meaning of this?”

“That’s awfully abrupt of you, Allucia.”

In a room with nobody else present, Allucia turned sharp eyes to the man sitting before her. It was the day after her arrival in Flumvelk. As the knight commander and the one in overall charge of this expedition, she’d requested a private meeting with Flumvelk’s lord, Margrave Warren Flumvelk.

She’d wanted to broach the topic on the day of their arrival, even if she’d had to do so late at night, but from a social perspective, that would’ve been far too impolite to the host of the upcoming party. She’d somehow managed to put it off for a day and had rushed to him in the morning.

There were no guards or maids—they were genuinely alone. That was why Allucia had forgone any and all greetings and had cut right to the chase. It was precisely because she was so transparent that, while Warren had criticized her verbally, he didn’t feel any animosity toward her.

“About your sister,” Allucia clarified briefly, taking a seat on the guest sofa.

“I see.”

Warren remained calm, his expression and tone unchanging. She was referring to Warren’s one and only little sister, Shueste. And the reason Allucia was being so quiet—yet clearly showing her indignation—was because Warren had been the one to temporarily assign Shueste as Beryl’s partner.

Allucia understood the logic behind it. Beryl had never experienced the stormy seas of noble society. It was obvious what would happen if they tossed him into a party on his own. He was not only liable to make some kind of verbal promise or commitment on the spot but even three or four. That was exactly why he needed someone experienced with him to ward off the bugs. Allucia had meant to take that role herself, even if she’d had to force the issue. If not for Warren’s meddling, it would’ve been a simple matter to convince Beryl.

Allucia’s current state of mind was rather complex. She knew Warren had no ill intent, but at the same time, he was aware of

her feelings. That said, she was disappointed with her inability to make any use of the absolute advantage she had—he already knew about her adoration for him as his former pupil. Warren had no way of knowing that part, though.

"But were there any other good options?" Warren asked. "I couldn't think of any."

"That's true, but still..."

Allucia really did understand the logic behind it. That was why she couldn't criticize Warren's decision. And when the reasons were explained to her, she couldn't deny them. Still, logic wasn't enough to convince her emotions. She was in a strange state as both a woman and as the accomplished commander of the Liberion Order.

"Well, I get how you feel," Warren said. "You're worried Master Beryl will get snatched away from you, right?"

Allucia responded with silence. That was exactly the reason. She couldn't deny the possibility that Beryl might not only enter a relationship with another woman but suddenly marry her too. That wasn't only limited to Shueste either.

He wasn't exactly recognizable on the streets, but Beryl's skill and name were famous among those in the know. For someone of such prowess and character, it was still a bit insufficient, but his accomplishments were sure to continue piling up. If so, it was safe to assume his fame would shoot through the roof.

That would naturally lead to Beryl becoming connected to more and more people. And this was fine if it stopped at simple acquaintances, but there were sure to be those who hoped for more. Among those, there were also going to be plenty of unmarried women.

Allucia wanted to build Beryl's fame and status into an unshakable rock, spreading his name far and wide as the foremost swordmaster not only in Liberis but on the entire continent. This plan was still underway, but the path itself was clear now. Through this, she wanted him to find happiness—that was unmistakably her true intention. It largely didn't matter if she was there with him for it. That was also...supposed to be *her* true intention. At the very least, it was right now.

"But I think it's fine if Master Beryl and Shueste get married too," continued the margrave. "In fact, I'm half hoping for it."

"Warren!"

"It's only natural when considering the future of the kingdom

and my lands.”

Allucia grew angrier, but even when faced with her intimidating aura, Warren’s stance remained unwavering. He took a sip of his tea—something he’d prepared himself—and returned a sharp gaze that was in no way inferior to hers.

He didn’t possess the same skill with a sword as the commander of the Liberion Order. However, when it came to the battlefield of nobles, he’d survived far more carnage and was capable of demonstrating strength of an entirely different nature.

“Shueste is actually a fine sister, despite my calling her inept when I first introduced her.”

Shueste was a sister Warren could take pride in. She was his one and only little sister, so he admittedly doted on her quite a lot. Still, even without the biased opinion of an older brother, Shueste was extremely good at navigating the tides of society.

She’d been born with terrific looks and had a graceful and charming personality. Her wit was quick, and she had a natural talent for not only preventing anyone from hating her but also for getting others to like her. Among all of Warren’s siblings, she was the best at manipulating an interaction by uplifting the other party and bringing them into the conversation at her own pace.

Her initial favorable impression of Beryl during their first meeting had been real. To Shueste, Beryl was her father’s fellow student and her brother’s instructor. She’d learned of his temperament and skills from the two of them, so from the start, she never would’ve hated him.

But that was only one facet of it. She was tremendously good at getting others to like her and looking like she was fond of them at the same time. There was a calculated precision to her behavior, but she possessed the shrewd technique to make it seem like there wasn’t.

The reason she hadn’t been blessed with a marriage proposal to date was simply because there hadn’t been anyone suitable for her. Gisgarte’s and Warren’s standards for her spouse were extraordinarily high. Shueste also had enough value to match their standards.

Warren believed Beryl would be a suitable husband. Shueste also thought Beryl to be a fine person after meeting him for herself. Naturally, there was an aspect of self-interest in this, as a

noble house and as the eldest daughter responsible for continuing the family line. Still, Warren truly wanted Beryl to have a partner suitable for his prowess, and he was certain Shueste fit the bill. He was also confident Beryl would cherish her.

"Allucia, what do you believe the worst-case scenario here is?" Warren asked.

"Master Beryl's bloodline coming to an end," she answered after a long pause, an expression of anguish on her face.

"So you do get it."

These two shared the same opinion that the end of the Gardenant line would be the most frightening outcome. Beryl Gardenant was both an outstanding swordsman and instructor. His father, Mordea Gardenant, was also a terrific swordsman. There was no doubting the latent potential for the blade in their blood.

At present, only Allucia, Warren, his personal pupils, and a few others who were close to him knew of this. But one day, when he became famous, the importance of his bloodline would soar. It was out of the question for him to have no heirs when that time came.

Of course, this conclusion ignored Beryl's own desires, but as the commander of the Liberion Order and a margrave—both of whom were responsible for protecting the kingdom—it was an extremely natural decision. They had different standpoints on it, but their misgivings were ultimately similar to Mordea's.

So, they had to somehow preserve Beryl's blood for the future. His partner didn't necessarily have to be Allucia. If anything, the eldest daughter of House Flumvelk had more than enough status to suit him, and it was only natural for Warren to back her.

Furthermore, Beryl was no longer young. The time when he could no longer father a child was closing in, and this spurred their decision. On paper, he had a daughter in Mewi, but she wasn't his flesh and blood. Even taking into account her aptitude for magic, she was simply an adopted child. Only Allucia knew about this part, though—Warren had no way of finding that out yet.

"I know you adore Master Beryl," Warren said. "But this and that are different matters."

"I…understand."

Allucia yearned for Beryl. That was the truth, but she didn't think she was indispensable to his happiness. She didn't *have* to be the woman by his side. That was what she believed. No, that was what she *had* believed.

If those were her true feelings, she would've commended Warren's decision. These two were good friends, and though there was some distance between them, they both possessed status and authority. Shueste wouldn't treat Beryl with disdain, and Warren would never wield his authority to do evil. It was far more realistic and idealistic than having Beryl marry some random stranger. But Allucia honestly couldn't accept it. She'd known that this emotion had existed inside her, but it was far stronger than she'd expected.

Warren's tone suddenly changed. "Allucia, earlier I said I was only *half* hoping."

She returned his gaze with a look of confusion. He was no longer making the face of a margrave. He looked at her as a swordsman, an old friend, and as a fellow pupil of the same man.

"The other half hopes you'll marry him," he finished. "Even now, I think that."

Warren was speaking the truth. He'd been taken by his father, Gisgarte, to the dojo in Beaden. Allucia had attended the dojo at pretty much the same time. The two had devoted themselves to swordplay, but the difference in talent between them had been so cruel. Even with Warren's quick wit with the sword, Allucia had been far better. He would be lying if he claimed he wasn't jealous, but he was capable of making a clear distinction between himself and others. So, the two had spent their time there amicably.

In the end, Warren and Allucia had been honored with farewell swords a year apart, after which he'd returned to Flumvelk. Immediately following that, he'd lost his older brothers one after the other, had officially married the fiancée he'd had since before attending the dojo, had succeeded Gisgarte, and was now the lord of Flumvelk. His life had gone through many ups and downs.

Still, he'd spent his adolescence with Allucia, and he didn't have to worry about his family or status around her. He trusted her as a good friend and truly wished for her happiness.

"At any rate, I think it'll work out either way—Master Beryl

could marry you or Shueste,” Warren said teasingly.

“H-How can you say that?!”

He really was fine with it either way. His sister’s happiness was important to him, but so too was his friend’s. He was also sure both of them could make Beryl happy. As a noble, he was confident in his eye for people.

“I mean, when I sent the invitation, I was completely under the impression that you and Master Beryl were already in such a relationship,” Warren added. “At worst, I thought you’d just be engaged, and yet, look at you now…”

“Erk!”

His clear sarcasm shook Allucia’s steel spirit. Even though this involved Beryl, it was very rare to see her shaken up so badly. Not even Henblitz or Surena could get such a reaction out of her without significant effort, and the latter got along with her about as poorly as possible. In a sense, this was Warren’s unique privilege.

Warren had always planned to push Shueste on Beryl—that is, if Beryl had still been a bachelor by the time they reunited. However, Warren had assumed that Allucia would’ve made some progress with Beryl after appointing him as special instructor.

In summation, being half hopeful was how he truly felt—without a shadow of falsehood. He was fine with Shueste snatching Beryl away or Allucia being stirred into action by the attempt. Either way, the outcome would work in Flumvelk’s favor. They were both excellent choices.

“So, that being the case…” Warren said, gulping down his tea and getting serious again. “I’ll support Shueste as best I can, and if you try anything, I’ll support you too. If there’s something I can do to help, I’ll cooperate. However, I want to avoid anyone else making a pass at him. That’s the gist of it.”

Allucia paused in consideration, then answered, “Understood.”

“But what do we actually do? Simple seduction is unlikely to work with Master Beryl.”

“He doesn’t even see his pupils as the opposite sex…”

“Figures…”

This was something that had Warren stumped too. If simple seduction would be effective, he could just have Shueste wear something risqué and get Beryl in bed—even if she had to force him. That would’ve worked had the charms of the female figure

been enough to get the job done. Due to Warren and Gisgarte's education, they didn't hesitate to resort to such methods.

However, while that would be fine if it succeeded, failing would make Beryl question Warren's morals. As his former pupil, Warren wanted to avoid that. It was *extremely* likely to fail too. Besides, if seduction had been possible, Allucia would've won him over by now by being the closest person in his daily life. Even without a friend's bias, Allucia Citrus was a perfect woman in terms of appearance, character, status, and ability.

If Beryl wasn't swayed by her, then who in the world could they set him up with? Even a margrave would find it nearly impossible to locate an unmarried woman who was more perfect than Allucia. Paradoxically, this was also why Shueste had a chance of winning him over.

"Well, if we conform with time-honored traditions...the element of surprise?" Warren suggested.

Allucia tilted her head. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you've never really shown your side as a woman in front of Master Beryl, right?"

"That's true..." she answered a beat later.

"Huh? You seriously haven't? What have you been doing all this time?"

"Qu-Quiet you."

*Show a side of yourself that they don't normally see.* That was a technique for winning over the opposite sex that had worked since time immemorial. Warren had brought it up idly, but he'd thought that Allucia surely would've already tried it.

He looked at her with seriously reproachful eyes. "Okay, then let's start with that," he said. "You have a dress ready for the party, I assume. What's it like?"

"You want me to describe it...? It's a subdued black dress."

"*Way* too weak. Let's find a *real* dress for you. We don't have time to have one tailored, but I'm sure we can find something."

"Huh? But..."

"No buts. You keep that up, and Shueste really will get ahead of you."

"Erk..."

"Too much cleavage won't work—it's too crude... The back... Hmmm, open that up, and... Red. It'll accent your skin and hair."

"I feel like black works for that too..."

"It's not unexpected enough. I'm saying that the usual you is

no good. Oh right, let’s change your hairstyle while we’re at it. I’ll make preparations.”

“But…”

“No buts.”

“Right…”

And just like that, a strategy meeting unfolded between Margrave Flumvelk and the commander of the Liberion Order. The goal was the utterly trivial task of seducing a single man, but to these two, it was a priceless chance to have a fun chat with an old friend without having to worry about their statuses.

# Chapter 3: An Old Country Bumpkin Gets Worked Up

“There… I guess that does it?”

“It suits you well, Master Beryl.”

“Ha ha ha, thanks.”

After arriving in Flumvelk and spending three days in Warren’s villa, we were now in the main estate where we’d initially met Warren. We were doing our final checks before the actual party.

As to be expected of an event hosted by a noble, my usual attire was out of the question, and I only had one set of clothes for formal occasions—the outfit with the black jacket I’d bought for the escort mission for Sphenedyardvania’s delegation. I hadn’t ever expected to need to put it on again. It would’ve been a waste to throw it away, but I’d figured it would stay in a perpetual sleep on the shelf back home.

If I was going to be attending more events like this in the future, having only one outfit I could wear seemed pretty crude. I missed the days when I only needed something for going outside and something for training.

Once this was over and I was back in Baltrain, it would probably be best to get some variations of formal clothing. My personal tastes were unreliable, so I would have to ask someone to accompany me. By all rights, Allucia would be the first person to go to, but she had the prior offense of recommending that doublet to me. *Pretty frightening… Maybe it’s best to ask a fellow man like Henblitz.*

“You look very good too, Shueste.”

“My… Thank you very much.”

Naturally, I wasn’t the only one getting my appearance in order—everyone attending the party was in the midst of preparations. Shueste, my escort for the night, was in a gorgeous dress that she probably didn’t get to wear very often. It was intricately woven with blue as its primary color. Judging by how it sparkled under the light, it must’ve been inlaid with gems, or maybe the cloth itself had been enhanced with magic. I didn’t know how it worked, but no matter how much I stretched

beyond my means, I doubted I could ever afford clothing made of that stuff. I couldn't even imagine the ridiculous price tag on it.

"We're going in just a little late, correct?" I asked.

"Yes. You're the guest of honor, Master Beryl."

It didn't make any sense to me, but for noble parties and balls, the order in which people showed up was apparently important. Normally, lower-ranked people gathered first, then those of higher social status made splendid appearances once everyone else was present. It had something to do with gathering attention, sticking out, emphasizing rank and status, and other stuff like that.

On that point, I was a commoner without any kind of rank, but because of my post as special instructor for the Liberion Order and the fact that I was the guest of honor, I was making my appearance later. Wouldn't that mean the other nobles would feel slighted by the likes of me arriving like I was the star? I was a little worried.

"Please be at ease," Shueste told me. "I shall escort you properly."

"Ha ha, thanks."

It was embarrassing to have a younger woman fuss over me like this, but I was like a newborn fawn in these situations. Shueste had the same charming smile she'd been wearing since our first meeting. I would, no doubt, be endlessly grateful for how much that smile would save me today.

I'd spent a lot of time speaking with Shueste these last three days. The topics had ranged from how our lives had gone to the people we knew. Going by simple math, I'd lived over twice the time she had, so I had over twice the stories and had spent over twice the time talking. Thanks to that, I was able to keep my presence of mind when speaking with her now.

The path I'd walked mastering the sword and teaching my many students hadn't been shallow—I would never claim it had been. That would be an act of betrayal to all those I'd taught thus far. Nonetheless, the breadth of what I'd done and experienced was far narrower than Shueste's experiences. I'd gotten involved with all sorts of people and incidents since coming to Baltrain, but those were recent events. This time in my life was merely an instant in the microcosm of my existence.

I sighed. "Haaah..."

“What a strange gentleman. Wielding a sword is far more nerve-wracking than an event like this, isn’t it?”

“Ha ha, they’re totally different things.”

“Hee hee, truly?”

I could remember several instances in my life where I’d needed significant resolve while wielding a sword. Still, that wasn’t equivalent to the tension I felt now. They were clearly distinct situations.

“Lady Shueste, Master, thank you for waiting.”

And while I continued pondering such things, someone else entered the room Shueste and I were waiting in. It was another of tonight’s guests of honor, Allucia. It seemed we were going to be the last ones making an entrance.

Allucia…looked so different from normal. I didn’t even get to think before I reacted. My composure lapsed momentarily as she captivated my gaze and took my breath away.

“How beautiful…” I said. “It really suits you.”

“Thank you very much.”

A knight’s formal uniform was their shining silver armor. But this event didn’t concern national affairs, so it demanded an outfit that suited the occasion. Her dazzling, glossy silver hair was tied to the side, and instead of her telltale small braid, it was all intricately braided together. This in itself gave off a very different impression than usual, but the biggest change was her clothing. In complete contrast to Shueste’s blue dress, Allucia wore a long crimson dress. An ocean of deep red highlighted her lithe figure more than usual. To add to that, a deep slit down one side drew out an abundance of her womanly charm.

*Crap. How do I even put it? She’s a faultless beauty.* I mean, I was already fully aware of this, but this might’ve been the first time I’d ever seen her as a mature woman rather than as one of my pupils. That was how shocking her appearance was.

“Yo, Beryl. Long time no see.”

“Gisgarte… I’m glad to see you in good health.”

The reason I’d managed to peel my eyes away from her was because she wasn’t alone. Gisgarte Flumvelk, Warren and Shueste’s father and my former classmate, had entered the room too. His glossy blond hair hadn’t changed much over the years except for an increased ratio of white. He looked plenty healthy.

“What’s with that lame white hair?” he said.

“Oh, can it. Only part of my bangs have turned. I bet you’re going whiter every year.”

“Shut it, dumbass.”

It was the same kind of silly exchange we’d had decades ago. The former lord of Flumvelk was indisputably of a higher rank than me. It was strange how I didn’t feel the slightest urge to show him any respect. The relationship between fellow students was apparently even more special than the one between an instructor and their pupil.

“But if you’re here, that means…” I muttered.

“Yeah, I’m serving as the knight commander’s escort,” he finished for me. “Being alone looks bad. Warren’s the host and all.”

“I see.”

He had a point. It would be unnatural for Allucia not to have a partner while I had Shueste attached to me. In that respect, Gisgarte was the best choice. He had plenty of status, and the host of this party was Warren, so Gisgarte wasn’t bound by those responsibilities. It was the same logic as Shueste being my partner.

However, perhaps as to be expected, Gisgarte looked refined and full of dignity—unlike me. We’d learned the same swordplay during the same period, so was this a difference in bloodline and education?

“Anyway, I’m guessing *you’ll* be fine, but I might look totally out of place making an appearance with these two dressed-up beauties…” I mumbled in desperation.

“That’s not true,” Allucia responded crisply. “You look very good too, Master.”

“Th-Thanks…”

“Remember, they say the clothes make the man,” Gisgarte teased.

“Shut it.”

Appearing in front of a bunch of nobles while surrounded by top-class beauties like Allucia and Shueste had me seriously nervous. People were definitely going to give me weird looks, and I had no confidence I could withstand it for long.

Without giving me the time to settle my feelings, a servant came by with a message.

“Lord Gisgarte, Lady Shueste, Lady Allucia, Master Beryl, it is time.”

“Got it,” Gisgarte replied. “All right, shall we?”

With that, we started moving to the large room where the party was being held.

“I-I’m getting pretty nervous…” I grumbled.

“Hee hee, you only need to maintain the minimum level of decorum,” Shueste assured me. “I shall take care of all nuisances.”

“Ha ha ha, how promising…”

Was I even capable of that minimum level of decorum? Shueste had been teaching me a bunch of stuff over these last three days, so I wanted to believe I was going to be fine. Besides, her determination to take on all nuisances was extremely reassuring. A part of me wondered whether it was all right to be fine with that as a grown man, but she and I had lived on different stages. I had to apologize to that part of my pride, but I was going to rely on her immensely.

“Lady Shueste, if you ever determine it is too much to handle, please call me over,” Allucia said. “There are times when people are more docile when not faced with a noble.”

“I will, thank you. If such a case comes up, I’ll be relying on you.”

“And if you can’t be bothered anymore, you can call me too,” Gisgarte joined in. “I’ll boot anyone’s ass out.”

“Jeez, don’t be like that, father.”

There was probably no one attending this party who could outdo the three people with me. That made me feel all the more pathetic. *I want to at least get through this party relying only on myself and Shueste. I have to put in some effort.*

“It is in here.”

The servant guided us to a heavy door. Straining my ears, I could faintly hear friendly chatting on the other side. A crowd of nobles was likely waiting within.

*Oh, crap. I’m even more nervous now. Am I really gonna be okay?*

“It’s all right, Master Beryl.”

“Master, there is no need for concern.”

Perhaps sensing my unease, both Shueste and Allucia gave me words of encouragement. I was getting pretty fed up with my timidity, but I could only believe in them and ready myself. *Get it together. I’m not crossing blades with the nobles or anything. Nobody is even going to die.*

“Announcing Lord Gisgarte Flumvelk, Lady Shueste Flumvelk,

Lady Allucia Citrus, and Master Beryl Gardenant!”

The door before us opened and the servant loudly announced our arrival. The hall had been beautifully decorated, and many people with luxurious outfits pierced me with their gazes all at once.

“Ooh, so that’s the famed commander of the Liberion Order. How beautiful…”

“The man next to Lady Shueste… Would that be the rumored special instructor?”

The moment we entered the room, the murmurs began. Most were muttering in a daze at being captivated by Allucia and Shueste, but I could sense eyes and voices appraising me too. Those who’d been invited all possessed status or great authority. Also, they were all dressed to the nines, making everything within my sight far too dazzling. I felt like looking for too long would leave sparkles in my eyes.



Just as I was ready to flee, Shueste whispered, “Master Beryl, simply do as we discussed.”

“R-Right.”

By “do as we discussed,” she meant I should maintain a bright smile, wave my hand lightly, and walk with elegance. As I’d expected to an extent, noble society put a pretty large emphasis on appearance and reputation. If I faltered here, it would apparently be enough to damage my image considerably, and it would definitely be an issue for my reputation to deteriorate before I even said anything. So, I did just as Shueste said, kept my stride graceful, and acted as important as I could.

Things started with a greeting from the evening’s host.

“I must thank you two for making the long journey. Tonight’s event is in gratitude for your achievements. Please enjoy yourselves to your hearts’ content.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Lord Warren.”

After speaking with Warren, it was apparently going to be a free-for-all. Also, since we were now in public, Warren, Allucia, and I were speaking with all due formality. This was only my second time seeing Warren speak like a noble—he looked really good doing it. Was this thanks to Gisgarte’s education? Gisgarte had been a significant rascal during our youth, though.

“I would love to hear tales of your heroism right now, but there are many people gathered here today. Forgive me, but please entertain as many of them as you can.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Warren was basically telling everyone they were free to do as they pleased from this point onward. Even nobles couldn’t cut the line and talk to the guests of honor ahead of the party’s host. That was why it was necessary for Warren to set the stage.

*Man, everything that goes into just* one *party is such a pain in the ass.* Had Shueste not informed me about this stuff beforehand, I would’ve been at a complete loss by now. The aristocratic world really did have an absurd number of rules, and this moment reminded me of how little I wanted to jump into it.

“Then, Master, we’ll part ways for now,” Allucia said quietly.

“Yeah, sure thing,” I acknowledged.

“Just leave things here to me,” Gisgarte added.

We were going to be acting separately from this point forward. Allucia had many connections she needed to make—especially with the number of nobles in attendance whose

territories were near the border. She apparently had to use this opportunity to build relations and secretly link up with the lords of this region so that Princess Salacia's wedding could go smoothly.

I was constantly reminded of how much was demanded of the Liberion Order's commander beyond just skill with a sword. Not only did she need to manage the order and see to the knights' training, but she also had to handle many diplomatic matters like this. I could only pray that I'd taken some of the weight off of her shoulders by becoming a special instructor.

"Hi there, Lady Allucia. I see you've become even more beautiful since the last time we met."

"Thank you, Lord Terrence. I'm glad to see you're in good health too."

It was only natural for people to gather around a woman of Allucia's talents, status, and beauty. The moment she split off from me and Shueste, the local nobles started talking to her. But when I took a better look around, I saw a circle forming around me too. I wasn't going to be able to get out until I talked to all of them. *Man, cut me some slack. I could go without this siege.*

However, thanks to Shueste taking the role of my escort, I didn't see too many young women among those encircling us. Many dressed-up women were in attendance, but it seemed they couldn't find an excuse to come talk to me. *Good, good, just stay quiet for the rest of the night and save my heart a ton of stress. Please just let me blend in with the atmosphere... I want this night to end without incident.*

"Excuse me, would you be Mr. Beryl? Hmm, you've got quite a lot of muscle for how old you appear. I suppose that's to be expected of the Liberion Order's special instructor."

My modest hopes were crushed in an instant. *What do I do? Who the heck is this old man? I'm sure he's a noble, but I've got no information beyond that.*

Shueste quickly swooped into the conversation. "It has been a long time, Lord Ricanor. Master Beryl is unfamiliar with such social occasions, so please forgive me for responding in his stead."

"Oh, Lady Shueste. I'm glad to see you're doing well. Dear me, I should be the one apologizing. I just got so excited that I *had* to go first."

Before the confusion could even reach my brain, Shueste was

already greeting him. *Whew, that really saved me. At least I know his name is Ricanor now. I should be able to hold a conversation from here.*

"Please forgive me, Lord Ricanor," I said. "My lack of education is holding me back from even providing a proper greeting."

"Ha ha ha, I don't mind. I don't recall becoming such a narrow-minded man."

It was probably quite disgraceful to be unable to react to a greeting—not to mention the fact that the woman accompanying me had needed to step in and smooth things out—but this Ricanor fellow didn't seem like the type to nitpick about it. I was somehow still okay. I *was* dealing with a noble though, so there was no guarantee what he was *really* thinking. I had to remain vigilant.

"Just as you've surmised, I am Beryl Gardenant, serving as special instructor for the Liberion Order. Please excuse my ill-mannered display..."

"I really don't mind. You must be having a hard time with all these people you've never met. Oops, on that note, I'm Sullivan Ricanor. I've been honored with the title of count and rule the neighboring province of Ricanor. I heard the rumors and simply had to speak with you."

Ricanor's smile lacked any trace of malice—he even seemed friendly. He looked around the same age as me, if not a little older, and his elegantly trimmed beard was quite majestic. At a glance, I would describe him as a splendid grandpa with a sorta scary face. *Huh, Warren seems to have succeeded his family at an awfully young age. Not that I know the reason Gisgarte yielded the seat to him or anything.*

"I have somewhat of a taste for swordsmanship myself," Ricanor said. "So, what do you think? How do I look by your estimation?"

"You have a solid build. I can imagine how heavy your blows must be."

"Hmm, is that how it seems? My thanks. It seems it's still too early for me to retire."

"Ha ha ha..."

Ricanor took my evaluation with good humor. It was, of course, all flattery, though I wasn't necessarily lying. He did have a good build for his age, but from the perspective of a swordsman, it wasn't enough for him to fight on the front lines.

Just as he'd claimed, he only had a *taste* for it. Nobody had anything to gain from my being that honest, though. Skillfully picking only the positives to flatter them, leaving a good impression, and dancing around the issues—it sounded simple on paper, but for a commoner like me, it was a difficult mission.

"At any rate, it must be rare for you to come this far from Baltrain, yes?" Ricanor said. "If you'd like, come visit my lands too. You would always be welcome with open arms."

"I'll keep that in mind, thank you."

"Now, now, Lord Ricanor," Shueste cut in. "Everyone else is growing dissatisfied with you monopolizing Master Beryl like this."

"Oops, I suppose you're right." He turned to me one last time. "I'd like to have a nice long chat with you if we ever get the chance."

"Indeed, if the opportunity presents itself," I responded.

Over the last three days, we'd decided that Shueste would help me start and end conversations—I somehow had to manage the idle talk itself. I'd been invited as a guest of honor, so I couldn't act like a painting on the wall. It would be far too unnatural for me to attend but refuse to say a word.

So, I had to maintain the bare minimum level of conversation without making any unnecessary commitments. This was pretty hard to accomplish on my own, and that was where Shueste came in. While I talked to nobles, she would create a polite reason to end the conversation and move on to the next person. If she deemed there was no harm to be done, she would let the conversation continue for as long as possible.

I wondered whether it was rude to switch conversation partners so quickly, but in this instance, it wasn't. Allucia and I were the guests of honor, so there were a ton of people who wanted to speak with us. Anyone who tried to shamelessly stay too long would be on the receiving end of intense envy. It was very unlikely that anyone would be so reckless.

Also, from their perspective, the important part was "I had a face-to-face chat with the Liberion Order's famed special instructor." The length of the conversation itself hardly mattered. This was another peculiar noble rule—forming a connection with me was enough to get a passing grade. It also meant that those who were trying to stay too long were very likely plotting something, so I had to be wary around them. It really was a huge

pain in the ass. If it'd been my choice, I would've eaten what good food I could and gone right back to the villa.

"So that Lord Ricanor was disqualified?" I asked quietly.

"He is a leading proponent for military expansion in this region," Shueste explained. "He is probably looking for an excuse to invite you into his faction—or to drag you into it."

"Whaaa…?"

*Holy crap.*

From our short conversation, I had only seen him as a good-natured old man. I really couldn't let my guard down. Now that I thought of it, he'd insisted I visit his territory. So that was his ulterior motive? I had to be careful about even the most trivial exchanges, and I couldn't assent to anything in a way that could be interpreted as a promise. Not even Shueste would be able to negate a promise once made.

I wasn't even given any time to rest after Ricanor left. This time, a flashy woman in a pompous dress was greeting me.

"Master Beryl Gardenant, it is an honor to make your acquaintance."

"Ah. Hello, the honor is mine."

"My, if it isn't Lady Calatona. Good day to you."

"Oh dear, Shueste. Good day."

Lady Calatona was wearing a hat low over her eyes, making it hard to see her face, but based on her glossy scarlet lips and fine skin, it was easy to imagine her beauty.

"Hee hee, I see you're a far more rustic gentleman than the rumors say," Calatona remarked.

"Yes. As embarrassing as it is, I was born and raised in the lower class. Please do forgive me…"

There was an elegance to her giggling, and it wasn't disagreeable in the least. I didn't know whether this was a trait specific to her or if this was just a universal womanly charm.

"Oh, there's nothing to forgive," she said. "Those who live in the genuine pursuit of the military arts are worthy of respect. None would look down on you for it."

"I'm pleased to hear it."

Seeing that I was the guest of honor, everyone was starting our conversations under the pretense of being here to help. If this hadn't been a party of nobles, I would've started getting full of myself by now. So, what kind of scheme was this Lady Calatona hiding within that voluptuous chest of hers?

“I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I? I am Count Silverkinson’s eldest daughter, Calatona Silverkinson.”

“Thank you for the courteous introduction. I am Beryl Gardenant, serving as the special instructor for the Liberion Order.”

I had no idea how many times I’d repeated that these last few days. Did I have to do it for every noble in this room? I was starting to feel somewhat dejected.

“Tales of your valor have reached even these remote lands, Master Gardenant. I simply had to try speaking with you.”

“Ha ha ha… It’s an honor, but also rather intimidating…”

Warren had told me about this already, but those “tales of valor” were highly exaggerated. I recognized that the royal assassination attempt some time ago had been a pretty big incident, but I hadn’t made a name for myself there or anything. The incident was considered to have been resolved thanks to the efforts of the Liberion Order as a whole, and it would make far more sense for the commander and her lieutenant to receive all the kudos for it.

Calatona had called this place a remote region. It was pretty far from Baltrain, so it would be strange for only my name to have made it all the way here. This made me suspect that someone had tampered with the information before it could get this far.

“Hee hee. Lady Calatona, what do you think after seeing Master Beryl for yourself?” Shueste asked.

“He’s a splendid gentleman. It’s a wonder someone like him still doesn’t have a partner.”

“Unfortunately not…” I said. “That’s why I have the honor of having Lady Shueste accompany me for the day.”

I’d been waiting for someone to say this. My bachelorhood had been exposed in an instant—Shueste was amazing for having predicted this perfectly. According to her, those who proactively came to speak with me, especially women, would’ve thoroughly investigated me. In these cases, I had to avoid making any favorable replies, and even if we had to force it somewhat, Shueste would take charge and be evasive.

If I responded positively, those trying to court me would come crawling out of the woodwork—so Shueste had said. However, apparently, it was horrible manners to suddenly ask the guest of honor to enter a relationship or to get married on the first

meeting. That was why they used roundabout expressions like this. Their scheme was to continue doing it to get a verbal commitment.

If I'd had any interest in finding a wife here, it would've been a different matter. But since that wasn't my goal, I'd been thoroughly warned not to say anything careless. Things were going exactly as Shueste had feared—had I not known about this courting thing beforehand, I was pretty confident I would've ended up saying something seriously wrong.

This was especially the case with women of status who were praising me. This technique, of course, tickled the male sensibilities. Without a warning, I would've definitely engaged in shy, cordial conversation, and I would've ultimately said something careless.

"I am worried about whether I can live up to such a duty as his escort, but Master Beryl is very kind," Shueste said.

"Oh my. You're quite the match. It's very charming."

Now that Shueste had taken charge of the conversation, I caught my breath. Honestly, this was pretty dangerous. I was filled with a tension that was entirely different from being caught on the back foot in battle.

"Master Gardenant, please do find the time to pay a visit to the Silverkinson province," said Lady Calatona. "We may not have a city, but the lands are rife with natural beauty, and it is a wonderful place to rest."

"Thank you. If the opportunity arises, I'll consider it."

"Hee hee, I'll be waiting."

I dodged Calatona's invitation. Saying I would go was probably out of the question. That was likely to lead to an immediate formal invitation on paper, cutting off any path of retreat. I'd expected it to a degree, but this was really tough on my nerves. I wanted to go back to clashing swords with my life on the line.

"Lady Calatona, there is someone over there staring at you passionately," Shueste said, judging Calatona's time was up. I couldn't tell if there was actually someone staring.

"Oh dear. Tee hee hee. I'll have to go keep them company. Then I must bid you farewell, Master Gardenant."

"It was an honor to speak with you," I replied. "I hope we get another chance to do so."

With that, Calatona backed away gracefully.

“Master Beryl, the next one is on the way.”

“Erk… Got it.”

I ended up reacting like Mewi there. *Man, this is seriously exhausting. How many more times do I have to go through this? Please have this all end before I let something slip.*

“My, my! So you must be the rumored Mr. Beryl! Hmm! Hmmm! You really do look well trained!”

“Oh! It’s good to see you again, Lord Tanmelphit.”

Nobles and influentials came leaping in one after the other. Shueste took care of starting things off, I handled the rain of blows, and then Shueste sent them off. By the time I got to sample the venue’s food, this sequence had been repeated more times than I could be bothered to count.

◇

“Gaaah… I’m beat…”

“Well done, Master Beryl.”

It was late at night, and I was now back at the villa. I’d somehow made it through the entire party. I plopped down on the luxurious sofa in my room, loosened my tie, and tossed it onto a nearby desk. This wasn’t really admirable behavior, but I hoped I could be cut a little slack this time.

This whole evening—while talking to big shots, getting a break, and having some food, and even when it was all over and I was returning to the villa—I’d needed to remain alert for anyone who could be watching. How many people had I even spoken to? I’d stopped counting at twenty.

If I had to guess, I’d exchanged words with pretty much everyone who’d attended. I somewhat remembered those who’d left an impression, but it was useless for me to try to put a name to every face. Even though it was unlikely I would ever meet them again, I wasn’t confident I would be able to react properly if any of them called out to me on the streets by coincidence.

*Man, Shueste and Allucia already had all of their names memorized. Are their brains just made different from my commoner noggin?*

“Here, would you like some fruit water?” Shueste offered.

“Sure. Thanks, Shueste.”

I accepted the glass and gulped down half of it in an instant. Water mixed with a faint sweetness flowed smoothly down my

throat like a stream falling into my stomach.

*Whew, that really calmed me down.*

I'd had some food and even alcohol at the party, but it was nicer to have refreshments in a relaxing space. Not having to remain unnecessarily tense was great. Plus, I felt I could totally relax around Shueste now. I'd relied almost entirely on her during the party, but in a sense, I felt like we'd become war buddies.

"So…how'd I do?" I asked. "Did I let anything bad slip?"

A part of me wanted to collapse into bed and recover from my mental exhaustion, but the real world didn't work that way—we had to dive right into a review meeting of how things had gone. If I'd said anything I shouldn't have, we had to work on countermeasures. It would also be too difficult to do anything after returning to Baltrain. Besides, I would be pretty restless about having left any burning embers behind, so I wanted to put out any potential fires before they started.

"No, I believe it's all right," Shueste assured me. "You focused on not making any commitments, so as a whole, I think it wasn't bad."

"Is that so? Then that's good…"

I'd been pretty tense the whole time, but it seemed I'd managed without any major issues. With this, I could finally catch a breath.

And just as I was feeling genuine relief, a knock came at the door.

"Pardon the intrusion. Good job today, Master."

"Yo…Allucia. Likewise. It was pretty rough, huh?"

"Not a problem. Thank you for your concern."

For some reason, she was still in the dress she'd worn to the party. I'd figured she would've changed out of it by now, so it really threw me off.

"Hmm…"

"Um, Master…?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing, sorry."

"Hm?"

*Crap, that's no good. My eyes can't help but be drawn to her dress.* She'd ended up suspecting something because I hadn't been able to keep myself from staring. Well, getting a look at her again like this, it was clear how beautiful Allucia was. It was a little late to realize this, but the real problem was that I'd known

this from the very beginning—I'd gotten used to it.

I'd seen her lightly dressed plenty of times at the training hall, and though I'd never seen her in an immodest state, her skin was a common sight. In truth, even as I looked at her now, I believed she was beautiful. But no matter how dressed up she was, I couldn't accept my heart quivering at the sight of my pupil. Could I simply attribute it to the excess tension of the situation and the lingering atmosphere of the party? I was probably better off not giving it too much thought.

"M-Master."

"Hm?"

I somehow managed to pull myself together when Allucia spoke up once more. Her voice wasn't as gallant as usual. Momentary indecision filled her tone.

"Um... How is it?"



I wasn't so boorish that I had to ask what she meant.

"I'm pretty sure I told you right from the start… The dress suits you well. It's like your beauty is polished to an even greater degree than before."

"Thank you…very much…" Allucia said, bashfully giving me a light bow.

I wasn't lying. Those words had definitely come from the heart. Still, saying it aloud was extremely embarrassing, and a part of me felt like I *had* to say it. It was obviously embarrassing for Allucia to ask me about it too. After that, that was the same as implicitly asking for praise.

That was also why it would've been lame for me to refuse to say anything after she'd overcome her shame enough to ask. As tiny as it was, I, too, had some pride as a man. Fortunately, there was nobody here to tease me about it. Well, Gisgarte would definitely say something totally unnecessary in a really loud voice, but he wasn't here, so this kind of exchange with Allucia was possible.

"Lady Allucia, you did very well today," Shueste said.

"Thank you. Your performance was splendid too, Lady Shueste."

The two had opened up to each other somewhat, but there still seemed to be a clear wall between them. Well, that was only natural—I wouldn't normally be able to act so casually with either of them. I had to properly focus on decorum when we were in public.

It made some sense with Allucia because she was my former pupil. I had no such prior relationship with Shueste, however. She was the little sister of one of my old students, so we were technically connected, but I'd only met her three days ago. It was supposed to be my role to show *her* the utmost respect, but for some reason, she'd refused such treatment. In complete contrast, she was as courteous as possible with *me* regardless of the time and place.

This would make sense if she demanded the same casual treatment from Allucia, but that wasn't the case. Only this old commoner was acting casually around the eldest daughter of a margrave's family. It once more made me wonder whether there was some ulterior motive at play. Not that I had the nerve to ask. It was a little pathetic on my part.

"Anyway, our job here is technically done now…right?"

I brought my thoughts to a stop and decided to start discussing the immediate future. Our job had been to confirm the route for Princess Salacia's wedding and to lay the necessary groundwork. There hadn't been any issues on the trip to Flumvelk, and Allucia had made many connections during the party. Next was to bring that information back to the king and report in, marking the end of our mission.

"Yes. The majority of our objectives have been achieved," Allucia confirmed. "All that's left is to return, but I doubt there will be any problems."

"I see. That's a relief."

Her opinion of the expedition's progress was pretty good. I wasn't capable of properly evaluating it myself, so if she said it was fine, it definitely was. Now, we just needed to go home. Life in the villa wasn't bad, and a part of me enjoyed the luxuries, but I also felt like getting used to such high standards of living would be bad for me. There was no way I could hire servants in my little house, after all.

"I spoke with Warren—with the margrave," Allucia added. "The plan is to stay for a few more days before leaving."

"Why's that...?"

I'd figured we would be going right back now that the job was done, but it turned out that wasn't the case. I didn't mind either way. If anything, I wanted to use this extra leisure time to check out Flumvelk's taverns. Still, considering the nature of this mission, it was odd that we weren't returning right away.

"He wants us to oversee the local troops' training," Allucia elaborated. "It's an entirely separate request from the mission, so we're being compensated for the extra time."

"I see."

That made a lot more sense. The Liberion Order's fame resounded far across the entire kingdom, but they were a small, elite group who rarely left Baltrain, and it was unusual to see them outside the capital. In fact, Allucia had been the first knight of the order to ever visit Beaden.

Warren's plan was likely to have the provincial army experience the Liberion Order's strength firsthand to raise their morale and spur their growth. Here in Flumvelk, we were near the border with Sphenedyardvania, so they really needed a strong army.

"If that's the case, I'll help out too," I offered.

“Thank you. Your strength is as reliable as a hundred helping hands.”

“Ha ha ha, thanks.”

This wasn’t the first time I’d been told that. The majority of those who’d polished their skills under my tutelage had a tendency to flatter me like this. However, I’d decided I would no longer act excessively humble when they did. Even if it had only been in a practice bout, I’d defeated my dad. I now believed that I needed to bear the responsibility for that and be confident.

“Oh my, training, is it?” Shueste said. “If it is quite all right with you, may I come and observe?”

“I don’t mind,” I told her. “How ’bout it, Allucia?”

“Not a problem,” she confirmed. “I was already thinking of showing Lady Shueste the pride of the Liberion Order if we had the chance.”

All that was left was to get Warren’s permission, but he was unlikely to object. I hadn’t really gotten much exercise since the beginning of our journey by carriage, so my body was starting to feel a little rusty. At this age, falling out of shape was no laughing matter. It sounded like a great idea to get my exercise in with Sahat and the other soldiers of the provincial army.

“The margrave instructed us to hold nothing back, so please keep that in mind, Master,” Allucia added.

“Got it. Sounds like a plan.”

The order and provincial army served different purposes, but they were still both groups that placed an emphasis on combat ability. Warren understood that well. Guesswork wasn’t enough to get stronger—you had to experience situations for yourself. With that in mind, I was looking forward to this. I was curious about how skilled Sahat was since Warren had talked him up. It was time to see what they were all made of.

◇

Two days after Warren’s party, we now stood before soldiers of Flumvelk’s provincial army. The representatives—Sahat and Allucia—were in the middle of exchanging greetings.

“We are looking forward to training with you today. It is a great honor to be able to cross swords with the famed Liberion Order.”

“Likewise. Let us both strive for further improvement.”

There were approximately sixty soldiers participating in today's training exercise. From what I'd heard, the provincial army as a whole was made up of eighty soldiers broken up into four twenty-man platoons. That meant one of those platoons was busy and incapable of participating today.

"They've all got the right attitude," I remarked from the side.

All sixty people formed up in front of me wore the expressions of fighters. These weren't faces you could see from citizens on the street or from militia members who'd only been through a handful of training sessions. I'd been fretting somewhat about a majority of these troops not being particularly motivated for this, but it seemed that had been a needless worry.

"Hee hee. I don't get many opportunities to see everyone train. I'm looking forward to it."

Now that the greetings were over, Shueste smiled softly next to me. She'd apparently spoken with Warren yesterday and had gotten permission to observe today's training. Not only that, Warren wasn't able to attend, so he'd named Shueste his proxy. Even if their lord wasn't here, his sister was, elevating the troops' morale. I was glad to see Shueste's presence having a positive effect.

"Our lord has commanded us to comply with the Liberion Order in all things for today's training," said Sahat. "We look forward to seeing the best you have to give firsthand."

Allucia nodded. "Understood."

It seemed we were free to decide today's menu. *Hmm, what to do?* I'd thought up several training plans over the last day, but these weren't knights—they were soldiers of a private army who'd sworn fealty to the local lord. The breadth of their duties was likely subtly different from that of the Liberion Order.

"May I ask a question?" I joined in. At times like these, it was best to honestly get the information you needed.

"Yes, what is it?" Sahat replied, still standing ramrod straight.

"So far as you can share, I'd like you to tell me what your usual duties entail or the kinds of missions you undertake."

I wanted to know what kind of activities were expected of them in the crucial moments. That would tell me what kind of training they needed to do to prepare for that. This kind of foundation was very important.

To use the Liberion Order as an example, they were expected to guard royalty and nobles, deal with threats that were beyond

the capabilities of the royal garrison, and in emergencies, they were given overall charge of the army. So, even though the entrance exams didn't care about a knight's origins, the order placed emphasis on etiquette while demanding individual combat strength beyond the average fighter. There was a written component to the exams too, so intelligence and education were important as well.

But that was just the Liberion Order. These weren't necessarily the qualities demanded by every armed organization. Things would change depending on what Flumvelk's provincial army primarily focused on.

"Right... We are largely charged with security for our lord's mansion and the border checkpoint," Sahat answered. "Other than that, we also take care of harmful animals and monsters. In times of emergency, we are expected to take charge of the militia, lead an evacuation of the populace, and provide disaster relief."

"I see..."

I was a little surprised by his explanation. These soldiers covered a far wider breadth of duties than I'd anticipated. I'd figured they were no more than an armed force commanded by the local lord, but their job was pretty similar to the royal garrison's. He hadn't mentioned it, but they probably also patrolled the streets to maintain public order.

In that case, I was suspicious about whether swinging a sword nonstop would be the right choice. Being able to fight was, of course, important, but I felt like that wasn't enough on its own. After thinking it over for a bit, I came to my conclusion.

"Okay... Let's run laps."

"Wha?"

Sahat made quite the confused noise at that.

"Considering your duties, the most important quality to have is stamina and tenacity. Handling a weapon is a valuable skill, but to lead an evacuation or provide disaster relief, being able to move for extended periods is far more important."

"That is certainly true, but..."

Despite my explanation, Sahat didn't look convinced. Rather than being discontent with the training program, he seemed to find it rather anticlimactic. And he had a point—anyone was capable of just running. The same went for both the provincial army and the Liberion Order. However, I knew exactly how much

the knights of the order trained with single-minded foolishness. They were all stamina monsters. I wanted the soldiers of the provincial army to see that difference for themselves.

"I acknowledge that just running around won't be much of a training session," I added. "Vesper will lead the way. Frau will take up the rear. I want you to keep up with Vesper as best you can without falling behind Frau."

"So he says," Allucia chimed in. "Vesper, Frau, are you ready?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Please leave it to me."

The two knights answered without a moment's pause. My intentions had gotten across to them with ease. Much like I'd mentioned before, even the individual knights of the Liberion Order had clear differences in ability. However, the fact that they'd been able to join the order in the first place meant they met incredibly high standards.

I wasn't looking down on Warren's army or anything. The Liberion Order simply possessed abilities on an entirely different level from the average soldier. This also applied to their fundamental strengths like stamina and running speed.

"We'll follow up with some training bouts after running," I said. "But that's only if you have stamina left after running with Vesper and Frau."

"Understood..." Sahat acknowledged reluctantly. "Everyone! Ready up!"

The last thing I'd said was meant to light a fire under him. Stimulating someone's sense of pride was a tried-and-true technique to get them motivated. And with this, Sahat was unlikely to hold back—now that their sergeant was fired up, his subordinates were sure to get serious too.

"As for where to run..." I muttered. "Hmm, the estate's outer circumference seems about right."

We were currently in the garden of Warren's estate. They didn't have a training hall like the order did, so the soldiers usually trained outside. The fact that dozens of people could gather here without a problem showed just how much wealth the lord of Flumvelk had. This territory was considered the keystone of national defense, so the lord had to put on an impressive display of authority. The outer circumference of such an estate was *really* long—perfect for running.

"Let's start with five laps," I said. "Vesper, the pace is up to

you.”

“Acknowledged.”

To be honest, I wanted to run them ragged, but the goal this time around was to train with them, so it would be problematic to totally exhaust them. Warren was probably aiming to elevate his army’s morale and give them experience by having them trade blows with elite knights. Also, it would be somewhat boring to have the Liberion Order come here and do nothing but run around.

“Let’s begin.” Vesper signaled to the others.

“You lot! Lady Shueste is watching!” Sahat shouted. “Don’t fall behind!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Do your best, everyone,” Shueste encouraged.

The group of over sixty people broke into a run with Vesper in the lead. It was quite the sight.

“Now then, let’s see what the provincial army is made of,” Allucia said, remaining by Shueste and me at the gate. I wasn’t really sure it was right to make Shueste wait by the gate like this with nothing to actually watch. I felt a little sorry about it.

I shrugged. “I doubt Vesper will dash ahead *too* recklessly. I wonder how it’ll turn out.”

“Um… Will simply running around show that much of a difference?” Shueste asked.

“Hm? Yeah, sure will,” I answered.

People’s stamina tended to vary, and this made quite a difference. The same applied to muscle strength and tenacity. Your athleticism developed to a completely different extent depending on how much of a burden you placed on your body on a daily basis. In all likelihood, there was a significant gap in the standards expected by the order and the provincial army.

The same went for running. The Liberion Order’s standard for speed and stamina was on a different level. Running continuously at a pace you weren’t used to was tremendously exhausting.

“Oh, they’re coming back around.”

While I chatted with Shueste, the leading group was already on their way back to the gate. As expected, Vesper was still in the lead. I only caught a glimpse as he ran by, but he had plenty of composure left.

“Ugh…!”

A few seconds later, Sahat ran by. Being a few seconds behind after the first lap was a pretty bad sign. His stamina would hold out a while longer, but I could see that the constant speed he was capable of was lower than Vesper's. If he tried forcing himself to keep up, I wasn't sure he would even last the full five laps.

"Hah! Hgggh…!"

"W-Wait for us, Sergeant…!"

A few seconds behind Sahat, a surging crowd of provincial soldiers rushed by. *Talking is just gonna make you guys more tired…* Still, they would need to shout while being physically active during disaster relief efforts or leading an evacuation, so maybe this was good practice.

Several seconds behind the crowd of soldiers, Frau brought up the rear in silence, her expression completely unchanging. She still had plenty of stamina left too. At this pace, the five laps were going to end quickly.

"Okay then…shall you and I loosen up a bit too?" I asked.

"Yes," Allucia agreed.

After the knights and soldiers were done running, we would all be training with our swords, so Allucia and I couldn't just stand still this whole time—we needed to warm ourselves up. After all, making abrupt movements at my age without stretching wore out the body.

"Mr. Beryl, the five laps you ordered have been completed."

"Mm, good job."

Around the time Allucia and I were done stretching and getting ready for training, Vesper and the provincial soldiers finished their assigned laps. Vesper was breathing a little hard, but he was still nowhere close to worn out. He'd properly preserved his stamina. I wouldn't have expected anything less.

"Pwah…!"

In contrast, Sahat, who'd doggedly stuck to Vesper's heels until the end, looked to have expended himself considerably. It was the beginning of autumn but still warm enough outside to get hot if you moved around enough. Running continuously at an unfamiliar speed in these conditions was very tiring. Still, it was admirable that he didn't voice any complaints. His guts lived up to Warren's high appraisal.

"Frau, how many did you pass?" Allucia asked from a small

distance away.

"Eighteen, commander."

Of the sixty provincial soldiers, eighteen had fallen behind the end of the line. Quite honestly, more had persevered than I'd expected. Many of the soldiers were gasping for breath now that the five laps were over, but they'd still had the tenacity to keep up with Vesper and Frau's pace to the end. It was proof that Warren and Sahat trained them properly.

"Okay, now that we're all warmed up, let's get to some practice bouts…" I said. "Do you need a rest first?" I asked.

"No… We're fine…!"

Despite the state everyone was in, Sahat insisted that they didn't need a break. He really *did* have guts. Several provincial soldiers were sitting on the ground, but it wasn't like we could cross swords with all of them at once. They could catch their breath while they waited in line.

"Right, for this drill, we'll have the four of us in a line," I said. By the four of us, I meant Allucia, me, Vesper, and Frau. "You guys can line up for each of us and have a go one at a time. You're free to queue up for whoever you want to face."

"Understood."

When training adults who had some experience with fighting, you didn't start with practice swings. This was especially the case for career soldiers—nobody wanted to start from there. So, we had our four instructors line up to cross blades with the soldiers at their own pace. There were significant gaps in technique, even among individual knights, so I wanted the soldiers to properly experience that too.

"Lady Shueste, please step back a little so that you're out of harm's way," I warned.

"Very well."

It would be no joking matter if we accidentally hurt Shueste, so I had her step back. Since the others were watching, I couldn't act casually around her like I did in private. *I'm still not used to adjusting my behavior at the drop of a hat like this.*

*Actually, it's a little late to say anything, but I completely took over the training menu. Is this really all right? Well, whatever. Allucia isn't saying anything.* She was sure to comment if I was doing something stupid, so I decided to just do as I wanted until she did. And anyway, I was serious when it came to teaching.

"For now, here's the goal: Everyone should have a bout with

each instructor before calling it quits. After that, we'll determine the rest of the training based on the time and everyone's remaining stamina."

There were sixty provincial soldiers, so by simple math, that meant each instructor would be repeating a one-on-one sixty times. Even if they were all separate engagements, that was pretty rough. Still, it wasn't like we were going to be spending several minutes on each one, so it was probably going to be fine.

"However, let's limit it to ten strikes each. There's no point dragging things out too long."

"Understood."

Just in case, I set a limit for each exchange. Allucia and I would be fine either way. This was somewhat rude to Vesper and Frau, but they were a little behind in terms of skill. They weren't going to lose in a straight fight against the provincial soldiers, but they'd just finished running laps. If they used up too much stamina now, they were liable to mess up.

"Okay, everyone line up."

We four formed a line—we held the wooden swords provided to us by the provincial army at the ready. At times like these, you would think people would be ready to yield who got to go first to each other, but it was a good indication that they all completely ignored such niceties and scrambled to go first. Making concessions wasn't a warrior's way.

Just as I'd expected, the first lines were clearly lopsided. Allucia's was the most popular by a large margin. Around half of the soldiers were in the queue for her, while the rest were spread out evenly in front of me, Vesper, and Frau. This was only natural considering her established reputation.

"Let's begin. Everyone ready?"

"Ready and willing!" the soldiers responded in unison.

*Mm-hmm. That's the spirit. Looking good.*

"Mr. Beryl. A match, if you please."

"Got it. Come at me however you want."

As everyone got started with their own bouts, the first to face me was Sahat. I'd figured he would go straight for Allucia, so this was a little unexpected. Well, he was probably thinking, *I'm gonna see what this old fart with a weird title can do!* Of course, I had absolutely no intention of losing, but I was pretty curious to see how skilled the sergeant major was.

"Here I come!"

The moment we both took a stance, Sahat charged in.

*Mm. Not a bad lunge. A nice, sharp step. His speed is so-so.*

Just from the initial movement, I could tell that his title wasn't just for show. However, Henblitz was faster in every respect.

"Hup."

"Gh...! Whoa?!"

I entangled his blade with mine as he swung down vigorously. Branch breaker was a technique from my dojo, so I took pride in it, but even if it hadn't been, I would still think it was a marvelous technique. Not even Henblitz had been able to handle it upon first witnessing it, so it was inevitable for Sahat to lose his balance and pitch forward.

"That's one."

I pressed my wooden sword against the back of his neck as he fell forward. Had this been a real fight, his head would have already parted ways with his body.

"Ugh...!"

"Whoa there. We've got a queue waiting. If you want to go again, get back in line."

Shock and regret were clearly evident in his expression. He was ready to launch himself at me again right away. In a normal one-on-one training session, I would've welcomed it, but there were a fair number of soldiers waiting behind him who wanted a match with me. I couldn't show him partiality.

"Understood... I'll get you next time," he relented.

"Mm. That's the spirit. Don't ever forget it."

Wanting to win the next time was very important for any warrior—you could say it was indispensable. It was naturally rare to get a second chance in a real battle, but if you didn't treat training seriously, you were definitely going to freeze up during the real thing. On that point, Sahat was a splendid swordsman.

"Okay, next."

"Yes! I look forward to your guidance!"

The young man lined up behind Sahat greeted me energetically. He looked a little younger than his sergeant. On the whole, it seemed these soldiers were about the same age as the knights of the order. In groups like these, having only youngsters meant a lack of leadership, but having only veterans was no good either. In that sense, the provincial army was well-formed. Maybe it was important for the person on top to know a thing or two about swordsmanship.

“Ready!” the soldier cried out.

“Show me what you’ve got.”

And as I pondered such things, my opponent charged in vigorously. I could use branch breaker again to intercept him, but it was uninspiring to do the same thing over and over. I was confident in my technique, but I didn’t like the idea of being thought of as a one-trick pony.

Was my perception changing now that I was able to think this way? Before, I’d never really cared about how others perceived me. It was like my brain was finally starting to come to terms with my title as special instructor for the Liberion Order. Was that process granting me a little confidence too? I would never claim to be the strongest, but I refused to lose so easily. I also somewhat hated the idea of being seen as no big deal.

“Haaah!”

My opponent attacked with a thrust. He’d probably judged a swing was a poor choice after watching Sahat’s match. A thrust was indeed difficult to parry compared to a slash. It was just hard to see its trajectory. However, for me, it was only difficult at speeds Allucia and Surena could achieve.

“Hmph!”

“Whoa?!”

I swayed my upper body to dodge the thrust, took half a step back, and swung my sword down. This was serpent lash, the defensive technique I’d used to take down the saberboar boss. I could convert the momentum of falling back into an attack, making it a technique that suited my style—it was on par with branch breaker. I brought my wooden sword to a stop right above my opponent’s shoulder, and as if in concert with my movement, the soldier came to a sudden halt.

“I-I lose…”

“Thanks. Your thrust is pretty fast, but you always have to think about the next step when wielding a sword.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

My opponent bowed, and with that, the match was over. It was important to challenge a foe with the intention of ending things in one blow, but there were no guarantees in swordplay. If anything, fighting was about knowing that any single strike could be your last. It was pretty rough if you couldn’t reconcile your frame of mind with reality. I hoped this young man could learn a lesson from this.

“Okay, next!”

“Yes, sir!”

As I faced my next opponent, a thought came to mind. Considering Sahat’s and the other soldier’s skill, everyone else was probably somewhere around that level. In that case, I could probably beat them all in a single exchange, but doing only that was questionable as a teacher. Being merciless with the knights’ training was fine, but I wasn’t going to continue looking after these soldiers. This was pretty much a once-in-a-lifetime encounter for them, so maybe it was better to take that into consideration.

*Hmm, at times like these, it’s best to look to someone else for reference.* So, while getting into a fighting stance, I stole a glance at Allucia.

“Thank you. Next.”

“Here I go! Ha…ah?”

“Next.”

*Instant death for all. I guess that’s fine…?*

◇

“That brings today’s training to an end.”

“Thank you for your guidance!”

Our time spent crossing swords with the provincial soldiers had gone by without a hitch. As we wrapped things up, the sun was high and dipping into the western sky. We could technically keep going until nighttime, but there wasn’t much point to training until everyone dropped. The main focus of Warren’s request had been to show them the difference in skill, not to drill them hard.

So, we spent some of their stamina but left them with enough energy to be able to review and reflect on how things had gone. This was the best choice for a once-in-a-lifetime training session.

In the end, Allucia had gone through the most bouts by far, but she’d also been the fastest with each bout by a tremendous margin. She’d mercilessly struck everyone down immediately, so she’d processed her queue at an abnormal rate. Pretty much no one had gotten a chance at a second strike, let alone our ten-strike limit.

I’d dealt with some opponents the same way, but for those in whom I’d seen some potential, I’d kept them company for three

or four blows. Sahat had naturally been one such soldier. He was a good swordsman, and since he was still in his early thirties, he had plenty of room to grow.

In that sense, putting a damper on his initial enthusiasm had worked out well. Having confidence wasn't a bad thing, but arrogance could cause you to develop poorly. I'd ended up knocking Sahat down eight times over the course of this training session—he'd apparently had his sights stubbornly fixed on me alone. I'd welcomed an opponent with a backbone and had gladly accepted his challenges, but by the last bout, he'd been completely worn out, and his willpower had finally caved. His tenacity was intense. I hoped he could use this experience as nourishment to flourish as a sergeant and grow even more.

"Well done, everyone," Shueste said, wrapping things up as Warren's proxy. "I expect all of you to use this experience as an opportunity to aim for even greater heights."

"Yes, ma'am!"

I'd wondered whether watching our whole session would bore her. It was rather impressive that she'd stayed here patiently until the end. Unlike Gisgarte and Warren, she knew nothing about fighting, so she likely hadn't been able to follow every detail of these training bouts. And yet, she hadn't looked bored for a single moment—she'd stared seriously at the training the whole time. In a different way from Warren, she had the qualities of a splendid leader.

Sahat spoke up as the representative of the provincial soldiers. "I must truly thank you for your guidance today. We will use this experience to train even harder. Now then, if you'll please excuse us."

With that, the provincial soldiers dispersed. At a glance, very few of them had looks of resignation in their eyes. The vast majority were filled with motivation. By having the elite Liberion Order focus on them, their pride had been stimulated. And frankly, if this training session had been enough to break them, then they unfortunately weren't fit to be warriors. There would be a better job out there for them than being a soldier.

"Okay then... That marks this request as complete, right?" I said.

"It does," Allucia agreed. "All that is left is to get everything ready for our return to Baltrain."

With that, our work in Flumvelk was finally over. Well, training

the provincial army had technically been Warren's personal request. Our official business for this expedition had concluded two days ago. We still had to make the return trip, but since I'd come so far from home, I wanted to enjoy the local cuisine. That said, my name and face were well-known in this region now, so I only wanted to do it if I could go outside casually. It was quite the conundrum, as was the fact that I didn't have much time left to worry about it.

Bringing Allucia, Warren, or Shueste along would probably make things even worse. There was no telling what kind of people would swarm around us if I were accompanied by people who were even more famous than me. Besides, if I brought someone along, I would end up having to take the lead. This was especially the case with Allucia and Shueste.

That brought up an entirely different problem: I knew nothing about this region. I didn't even know where the restaurants were, let alone any good ones. How could I be an escort like that? Above all else, I didn't really like eating in a strained atmosphere. I just wanted to enjoy the local ale while relaxing at a cheap tavern meant for the masses, but that definitely wasn't the kind of place to bring someone from the upper class.

All the food we'd received at the villa had been delicious—the alcohol too—but it was all fancy stuff and quality wine. I wanted to bite into some average cuts of meat and chug down some cheap ale.

"Haaah... I guess I'll think about it after cooling off..." I muttered.

"I believe that is for the best. Allow me to have a bath prepared for you."

"Mm. Thanks, Shueste."

I was truly grateful. Baths were nice. It was far too expensive to have one built inside my house, along with other logistical problems. They were apparently pretty common in places like the palace and a noble's mansion, though. Our current lodging was naturally equipped with one too.

A bath was exceptionally effective at relieving fatigue. There was a clear distinction between this and a steam bath or wiping down with a wet towel. It was like all the day's fatigue melted away into the water. However, getting used to this lifestyle would be problematic once I was back in Baltrain. I had to keep reminding myself to keep things in moderation. Again, all of this

was quite the conundrum.

If possible, I would've liked to get in a bath every day, but it would cost a ridiculous amount to do so back home. Not even the order's office had a bath. It was possible Lucy had one, but visiting a woman's house just to ask to get in the bath was seriously out of the question.

"Something on your mind?" Allucia asked.

"Hm? Aah, not really..."

I couldn't go to her about a problem like this. She had a tendency to do everything in her power to grant even my most trivial requests. It was frightening to think about how quickly she would get everything ready if I let the wrong thing slip. To add to that, I didn't really want to proactively increase my fame, but she was all for it.

Nonetheless, I felt compelled to voice a small, selfish request. "I was just thinking about how I'd like an ale every now and then." *I doubt this will be enough to make Allucia go wild.*

"I see. In that case, how about asking the margrave or Lady Shueste to send for some?"

"Huh? That's possible?"

I hadn't expected to get a realistic suggestion. My commoner's brain hadn't even thought of being able to have some delivered. But was that really all right? Having spent the last few days here, I knew how much thought the cooks were putting into the meals they made for us. It would be pretty rude to say I was pining for some cheap ale and meat.

"It should be possible," Allucia said. "There are times when the food served for important guests doesn't suit their palates."

"Gotcha..."

Now that she mentioned it, that made perfect sense. It was entirely possible for a VIP to dislike the food being served to them. The more important the guest, the less you wanted to displease them with their meals. In that case, maybe I *could* get some ale. And if they told me I wasn't important enough to make such an order, I could just back down.

"Master Beryl, Lady Allucia, the bath will be ready in thirty minutes," Shueste reported. She'd come back from issuing orders to the servants.

"Thanks... And sorry, can I make one more selfish request?" I asked.

"Yes, ask for anything you desire."

I got right to it. If it was too hard to fulfill, I was ready to back down immediately. I wasn't childish enough to throw a tantrum over it.

"I was hoping to sample some of Flumvelk's ale today... Can I?" I asked hesitantly.

"My, is that so? Understood, I'll have some prepared immediately."

"Th-Thanks..."

"Please wait a moment."

*Thanks, Shueste. Looks like I'm gonna sleep well tonight.* After accepting my request, she quickly went down the hallway, flagged down a servant who'd been watching from a distance, and relayed what I wanted.

"You there, prepare ale for tonight's dinner. Be sure that the food served goes well with it too. Oh yes, gather several types while you're at it. Hurry."

"As you wish, my lady," the servant said before walking off briskly.

*She said "gather several types"—does that mean I get to compare the local ales? You're getting an old man excited here. And even the food is being changed to match? Man, I'm* really *looking forward to this.*

"Seriously, thank you," I said. "And sorry for the weird self-indulgence..."

"Think nothing of it," Shueste told me. "It is my duty to entertain you to the best of my abilities."

I truly couldn't ask for more. I could never thank her enough for it. During this expedition, the person I was most indebted to was definitely Shueste. Warren and Gisgarte had done their best to make all sorts of preparations for me, but that had been more about the big picture. When it came down to my personal surroundings, I was most grateful to Shueste.

"Oh man, I'm suddenly really looking forward to tonight," I said.

Shueste smiled. "Hee hee, I'm glad to hear it."

After getting a refreshing soak in the bath, I was going to enjoy the local ales and delicious food to go with it. Not only that, it wouldn't even be a drain on my wallet. It was a ridiculous luxury—perhaps the greatest of my life.

I did have a few things to say about my life taking this turn—I was at a point where I *could* experience such luxuries. However,

my mind was far more focused on having to put in the work to continually earn this privilege. Was this also a change in my frame of mind? I wanted to believe it was for the better.

"You too, Allucia," I said. "Thanks for coming up with a recommendation for this old man's whim."

"Think nothing of it," she responded, smiling gently. "So long as you're satisfied, Master."

During this entire expedition, Allucia hadn't once grimaced over her many duties—not that she ever did. It must've been a tremendous burden on her back, even if she wasn't letting it show.

"Oh yeah," I said. "Shueste, will there be a good amount of ale coming?"

"Yes. I believe we should be able to procure a satisfactory amount. Why do you ask?"

*It's only right to reward such a hard worker, even if just a little.*

"Allucia, if it's fine with you, will you keep me company? It's been a while since we've had a drink together."

"Ah! Yes! Yes!" she exclaimed. "I'll gladly accompany you!"

"Great. Thanks."

It was a little too early to celebrate the mission's success, but we could probably be forgiven for the slightly festive mood. Now that everything was decided, it was time to drink the night away with Allucia. I was ready to let loose to my heart's content—while being somewhat careful of getting a hangover.

◇

"Your Excellency, we are truly grateful for all you have done for us during our stay. Allow me to express my thanks once more."

"It was nothing. We were the ones to summon you here, after all."

Three days after our training exercise with the provincial army, it was finally time to say our farewells to Flumvelk and return to Baltrain. We could've departed yesterday, but we had taken Warren and Shueste's kind offer to lounge around for an extra day. The night before, Allucia and I had drunk a *little* too much, and we hadn't really been in any condition to do anything, which had led to this delay. Nobody needed to know that, though.

“Were you able to fully enjoy yourselves?” Warren asked.

“Of course,” Allucia answered. “It was only for a short while, but it was absolutely blissful.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

All of us were currently in front of Warren’s estate. We were in public, so the two of them had their public personas on. We had indeed enjoyed ourselves fully. Warren had provided us with all the care we could’ve ever needed. His treatment of us had been exactly what was to be expected of a noble receiving a guest of honor. It had been my first time being treated like that—I wasn’t aware of any other standards for nobles hosting guests, but I still couldn’t imagine anything more luxurious.

“Sahat, they’re in your hands all the way to the border,” Warren said.

“Yes, sir! Please leave it to me.”

Sahat, his subordinates, and the soldiers of the royal garrison who’d acted completely independently of us since entering Flumvelk were all here too. Zed and his subordinates had been staying at an inn Warren had prepared for them, so I had no idea what they’d been up to this whole time. If I had to guess, they’d been frequenting the local taverns or something. *I’m a little jealous.* I decided to ask them about it later if I got the chance to.

“Oh yes, Mr. Beryl. May I have a moment of your time?” Warren asked.

“Yes, my lord,” I replied, coming out of my daze a beat late at the unfamiliar term of address from Warren. “What is it?”

He began walking away from the others. This seemed to be something he didn’t want everyone else to hear.

“How was Shueste?” he asked quietly once we were out of earshot.

I wasn’t sure what he was getting at. My answer was pretty obvious.

“She’s a really good girl,” I said, keeping my voice down as well. I couldn’t let the others hear what I was saying or how casual I was being with Warren. “I’m really grateful for all she’s done. You’ve got an adorable little sister. Treat her well.”

Shueste really was a great girl. She was well-educated, charming, and very attentive. She could hold her head high as the eldest daughter of House Flumvelk. That was my impression of her from our very first meeting, and it hadn’t changed at all. If anything, it’d improved day by day.

Warren had called her an inept sister who'd missed her chance at marriage, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Given her amazing qualities, it was suspicious that she hadn't been blessed with any marriage proposals.

Maybe they were having a hard time finding someone of high enough class to marry her. I understood this was a factor when it came to nobles and royalty, but having witnessed her character up close, I hoped she would find someone to build a happy family with.

"Thank goodness..." Warren said. "So how about it? Wanna just take her home with you?"

"D-Don't be an idiot!" I accidentally blurted somewhat loudly.

*Seriously, don't be so stupid. What's this old man gonna do? Just take a noble's young daughter home? You're gonna start some kinda scandal. Maybe he's trying to palm Shueste off on me...? No way. That's out of the question. I may be a somewhat accomplished swordsman, but I'm a born-and-raised commoner from the sticks. My market value is nowhere near that high. Oh. But I guess a bunch of young noble ladies did approach me just the other day at the party. Does that mean my market value has actually shot up a bunch without me knowing it?*

"Make sure you find a suitable partner for her," I said.

"Yes, I understand. Until next we meet, Master."

"Yeah. Thanks for the hospitality."

It was no good. I wasn't going to get anywhere thinking about it. So, my only response was to wish her a happy future. That was how I truly felt, anyway. Shueste was a fantastic host. We'd been her brother's guests of honor, so she'd had to remain professional during our entire visit. Despite this, she hadn't grimaced a single time and had provided us with the greatest of hospitality. That was no small feat.

If all of that was a mask she wore over her emotions, I'd been too ignorant to see through it. And if she had such skills, she would surely be able to capture a groom with ease. That was exactly why I wanted her to be blessed with someone around whom she could just be herself—at least in private. That was truly what I wished for her.

"Lord Warren, it has been a pleasure."

"Indeed. May you stay in good health, Mr. Beryl."

With our private talk over, we were back to being a special instructor and a margrave. In all likelihood, I wasn't going to see

much of Warren again for the rest of my life. Not only did we live too far away from each other, but the worlds we lived in were completely different. It was possible I would see him again during another event like this, but such a thing was sure to be a rarity.

That made me a little lonely. I didn't feel the slightest desire to bind my former pupils to my life, but... *Their absence in my life does come with a certain feeling of solitude. I hope I can be forgiven for that selfishness.*

"We're departing!"

And with Zed's command—something I hadn't heard for a while—the royal garrison got moving with the carriages in tow. Much like on the way here, I was riding inside a carriage the whole way. I wasn't quite in a casual sightseeing mood, but having experienced this road once already, it was a little more relaxing than our departure from Baltrain.

"Master, what did Warren say?" Allucia asked once we were on the move.

"Hm? Aaah..."

*Uhhh, should I answer honestly? I'm not quite sure.*

"He asked what I thought about Shueste," I said innocuously. "I told him she's a good girl."

"I see..." Allucia responded after a pause.

She could probably guess there'd been more to it than that, but she wasn't the type of person to pry. What Warren had discussed with me was something I was ready to take to my grave. I couldn't think of any circumstance that would require me to dig it back up.

"Master, thank you very much for accompanying me on this expedition," Allucia said, naturally shifting the topic to our whole reason for being here. "We still haven't left Flumvelk, but allow me to thank you for a job well done."

"Likewise. The mission isn't over until we're back, but you did great."

"You honor me with such praise."

It was still a little early to celebrate, but Allucia had played a major role and had played it well. Every obstacle for our secret mission had been cleared already, so all that was left was to get back home.

"Vesper, Frau, the two of you also accomplished your duties admirably," Allucia continued. "Well done."

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Your praise is more than we deserve. It was simply our duty as knights.”

To put it bluntly, these two had just tagged along for the mission—they’d played a very minor role. Allucia was probably capable of performing the necessary tasks for this trip all on her own. However, considering the special nature of this mission, there’d been a need for a retinue. Publicly, it had been an invitation from a margrave to a party, and they’d given their all to ensure its success despite the nature of the job. They hadn’t stood out whatsoever, but their work had truly been admirable.

Had Curuni and Evans been in their place, I doubted things would’ve gone so smoothly, so Vesper and Frau had been the right choices for this mission. They’d stepped forward when needed, and when they hadn’t been needed, they’d vanished into the background. That sounded very simple, but few people were capable of doing it so thoroughly. Indeed, they were splendid knights who were faithful to their duty.

“Platoon, halt!”

“Hm?!”

A short time after we got moving, a sharp yell rang out, and the carriage came to a sudden stop. I peeked out to see what was going on and spotted a figure running toward us from the rear.

*Huh? Isn’t that Shueste? What’s she doing? Did something happen?*

“Lady Shueste! Is something the matter?!” Sahat shouted, turning pale as he went to greet her.

“Haah… Haaah… Forgive me, I wish to speak with Master Beryl.”

She apparently had business with me. I was slightly anxious that I’d committed some kind of horrible blunder.

“Master… You should step outside.”

“R-Right.”

It would be extremely impolite to stay inside the carriage with Flumvelk’s eldest daughter calling for me. I didn’t know what she had to say, but I steeled myself for the worst and climbed out of the carriage.

Shueste looked out of breath. The gazes I was getting—particularly from the provincial soldiers—were pretty intense. They suspected me of having done something. We’d crossed

blades for a whole day, but you could also say that was all our acquaintance amounted to. It was obvious who they treated with more respect when the options were the little sister of the lord they'd sworn fealty to and an old man who'd come out of nowhere.

"Lady Shueste, is something the matter?" I asked.

We were completely surrounded, so I couldn't act casually around her. If I did, the provincial soldiers were sure to become my enemy. It was a pretty tense moment.

"Forgive me for calling you to a stop when you were already on your way back," Shueste said. "I wanted to give you this."

"This is..."

With that, she handed over the object in her arms. It was a small picture frame with a beautiful arrangement of flowers pressed within it.



“I finally completed it,” Shueste said. “I made use of the flowers from the garden. I wanted to be sure to give it to you before you left.”

“Thank you very much…”

A crowded assortment of colorful flowers was pressed within the frame—the same flowers I’d seen while spending time with Shueste in the courtyard. However, they didn’t look cluttered or cramped in there. I could see they’d been spread out with careful calculation. I didn’t know much about the fine arts, so I had no idea whether this had any monetary value. It’d all come from the garden, so it probably didn’t.

But that wasn’t the important part. I had no idea why she had to go out of her way to chase us down—just to hand over this gift.

“Why…go through all this effort?” I asked.

“Hee hee. Because I wanted to make it and hand it to you directly,” she answered. “Master Beryl, is that not enough of a reason?”

“It’s more than enough… I’ll gratefully accept it.”

“Wonderful. Please decorate your home with it.”

As usual, her smile was overflowing with charm. However, I could see a certain sense of satisfaction behind her expression. She’d clearly done something she’d wanted to do. Perhaps she’d decided to be a little more honest with her desires. When there was something she wanted to do, she would see it through to the end. It was simple to put into words, but unexpectedly difficult to put into practice.

Naturally, this time, it had amounted to nothing more than wanting to make a pressed flower arrangement with her own hands. However, from her perspective, it had definitely been an expression of her selfish desires. That conversation we’d had in the courtyard had probably given her the push she’d needed. This was a good thing, in my opinion. At the very least, I wanted to be someone who could see it that way.

“Lady Shueste, please continue to exhibit your selfish desires to those around you. In a way that doesn’t inconvenience others, of course.”

“Yes, I plan to. If anyone says anything, I’ll blame you for it. There is no need for concern, Master Beryl.”

“That is quite a frightening thought. It seems I’ll be lying awake at night in fear of the margrave’s wrath for days to come.”

Shueste smiled. “Oh my. Tee hee hee.”

She and Warren were sure to have minor quarrels from this point onward. I could easily picture her expression when making bold yet careful requests and Warren racking his brain over what to do. If taken too far, it would reflect poorly on their family name, but I doubted Shueste was one to mistake where to draw a line. Her life was sure to have just a little more color than before, while also being just a little more turbulent. *That’ll be a good thing for her.* These pressed flowers were proof that she was starting to break out of her shell—I was going to cherish this present dearly and put it up proudly in my home.

“Forgive me for detaining you,” Shueste said. “I’ll pray for your safe return.”

“Thank you very much. I can think of no better support than yours, Lady Shueste.”

With that final farewell, Shueste gave me a lovely bow and turned on her heels. Watching this in a fluster, Sahat had one of his soldiers escort her back to the mansion. No matter how short a distance it was, he couldn’t let her go alone.

It was possible the provincial soldiers would also end up being at the mercy of her whims in the future, and I could only offer them my condolences in that regard. It was a part of their duty, so they just had to hang in there.

Once more, I was stuck getting showered in strange gazes from all the provincial soldiers as I got back into the carriage. *I get it. You guys have no idea how you should be looking at me. I don’t know how to act either.* I picked up the pace, trying to take cover in the carriage as quickly as I could.

“Whew…”

“You seem to be getting along rather well,” Allucia commented immediately.

“I-Is that so…? Ha ha ha…”

She was smiling gently, but I felt significant pressure emanating from her. Vesper and Frau were melting away into the background, refusing to poke the tiger.

“Oh yeah, are we taking the same route back?” I asked to change the topic.

We probably were, but I’d had absolutely nothing to do with any of the planning on this expedition, so I wasn’t sure where we were going.

“It’ll largely be the same, but we’ll be dropping by one or two

territories we didn't have time to visit on the way here."

"I see."

There'd been a clear time limit on our journey here. We couldn't have missed Warren's party, after all. It would've been no laughing matter if the guests of honor had been absent. We had arrived three days before the party, but that could only be taken into consideration in hindsight. Putting together a schedule with some leeway in it was one of the most basic skills involved in planning a trip.

In contrast, there was no real time limit for our return. Staying away indefinitely would be problematic, but I doubted we were going to delay our return by several weeks. At the very least, there were still nobles we had to meet with face-to-face in order to make Princess Salacia's wedding a complete success.

"I'd like to congratulate us on a job well done…but I guess it's not over yet, huh?" I said.

If there were still places we'd yet to visit, that meant we had to meet more nobles. I was starting to get used to it, but it was still pretty rough for me.

"Yes. But haven't you gotten somewhat accustomed to it, Master?" Allucia remarked.

"Compared to when we'd just left Baltrain, yeah…but it still makes me nervous."

I was nothing more than a commoner, so I got anxious whenever I met any VIP. *Well, at least it's going to end in a few more days.*

There were only four people in the carriage right now. It was the first time I could relax my focus in quite a while. Nobody could fault me for zoning out a bit.

"Hwaaah…" I yawned, somewhat embarrassingly.

"Hee hee, it's all right for you to get some sleep," Allucia told me.

"Hmm… In that case, I'll take you up on that…"

I'd gotten more than enough sleep during our stay at the villa, but maybe I'd been a little tense the whole time. It would be problematic to be sleepy when meeting these other nobles, so I decided to go ahead and take a nap.

I listened to the rhythmic *clop, clop* and *thud, thud* of the horses and soldiers marching along. Gradually, my consciousness faded away.

“Master. Please wake up, Master.”

“Mm…”

I was being shaken by something other than the rocking carriage, and I heard a voice calling me. My hazy consciousness slowly came back. My eyes cracked open, and I saw Allucia peering down at me from close up.

“Sorry… How long have I been out?” I asked.

“Not that long, but we will be exiting Flumvelk shortly.”

“I see. Got it.”

I slapped my cheeks lightly to wake myself up. I really had fallen asleep with surprising ease. I didn’t think I’d been that tired, but with all that had happened lately, perhaps I’d been pretty mentally exhausted.

“Whoa… It’s not good to sleep while sitting…”

I stretched my back and shoulders as I woke up, forcing my stiffened joints to loosen up—they emitted some pretty unpleasant noises. Napping in a weird posture had caused my muscles to lock up in strange ways. *Sleeping like that really is bad for you.* Back in the day, it hadn’t mattered at all, but now, there was no winning against my aging body. All of us in the carriage were swordsmen, but I doubted Allucia, Vesper, or Frau could understand. They were all still very young. Things only got worse midway through your thirties.

As I continued rotating my shoulders to loosen them up, a knock came at the carriage’s door.

“Excuse me, Knight Commander.”

The platoon commander of the royal garrison, Zed, peeked inside. I was glad I’d woken up just in time. It would’ve left a poor impression if he’d seen me sleeping soundly.

“We will be exiting Flumvelk shortly,” he reported. “We’re exchanging escorts at the checkpoint.”

“Understood.”

It seemed we really were right at the border. I’d gotten the chance to get some proper sleep, so I wanted to make sure I looked appropriate for this checkpoint. We’d done this multiple times on the way to Flumvelk, so I was already accustomed to it. It was time for the provincial soldiers who’d been escorting us to do the handoff with the soldiers from the next province over. I doubted that any big shots would show up, and any conversation would be very businesslike. Since we’d had no problems on the road, things would be kept even more brief.

So, at times like these, the group didn't go all at once. Instead, a small party was sent ahead to explain the situation, and they would come to meet us. That said, with such a large group on the move, it was pretty easy to see the situation from afar. Our route had been conveyed beforehand too, so this was mostly just a formality.

After arriving at the checkpoint, Sahat had exchanged a few brief words with us. "I shall pray for your safe return. Now, if you'll please excuse me."

"Of course. Thank you for seeing us here," replied Allucia.

Sahat then fell back to Flumvelk with his men. This was no longer Warren's territory, so we wouldn't be able to clear the checkpoint without proper documentation or some kind of extenuating circumstances. This process would repeat itself multiple times all the way back to Baltrain. It really was the same as it had been on the way here.

"It's getting awfully cloudy..." Zed muttered after the handoff was complete. "Let's pick up the pace a little."

"Agreed—please do," Allucia said.

I looked up at the sky. We'd had clear weather these last few days, but now a sparse gathering of dark clouds was approaching.

"Hmm, it's anyone's guess whether it'll start raining," I remarked.

It wasn't going to start pouring immediately. There weren't enough clouds for the weather to suddenly change like that. If anything, the clouds would lower the temperature to a comfortable degree, making it more convenient for the marching troops.

Still, it was better to hurry if the weather was taking a turn for the worst. I also understood the desire to get moving while conditions were perfect. Zed didn't maintain a simple and optimistic outlook—he was realistic about our situation, and he definitely knew what he was doing. Much like Henblitz and Randrid during our time in the Aflatta Mountain Range, he made quick decisions when the situation showed signs of change. It gave me a glimpse at the depth of his experience.

So, with such elite troops all around me, I had very little to worry about. My only contribution was praying that the camping equipment we had in the other carriages wouldn't see any further use.

“Let us be off.”

At Zed’s command, the carriages got moving again with our new escorts. On the note of escorts, they were all similar in that the local nobles fielded them, but they differed drastically in numbers. Amusingly, our escorts weren’t proportional to how vast the local ruler’s land was or how much authority they wielded. There were nobles who were peaceful and only maintained the bare minimum of a military force, while others were zealous about military expansion, even if they possessed very little territory.

Nobles naturally had a reputation to maintain, so the choice of refusing to provide an escort was nonexistent. Nonetheless, the problem of how many troops they could spare was pretty difficult to solve for them. To give an example, Warren had spared a dozen or so soldiers led by Sahat, while other nobles had provided up to thirty, and some had offered less than ten. However, things were even more complicated by the fact that going simply by numbers wasn’t enough to judge the noble’s decision. A ruler with a small territory might do everything in their power to provide only a few elite soldiers, whereas a major noble might spare thirty of the lowliest rank and file.

Allucia was apparently weighing every aspect of what the nobles were doing. In a way, this could be used as an index for how loyal each noble was to the king. Well, according to Allucia, the same nobles were likely to send several times more soldiers, if not tens of times more, when it came to Princess Salacia’s actual wedding.

An expedition by the order and the wedding procession for the princess were clearly two very different events in terms of importance and scale. This time around, the nobles were largely focusing on their reputation, whereas when the royal family got involved, they would be putting on airs on top of that. They were very likely to squeeze every last soldier they could afford to spare for the escort detail. Otherwise, they could become the subject of mockery from other nobles.

Seriously, the more I learned about this world, the more troublesome it seemed. This was all brand-new to me, so it was a relatively nice learning experience, but I *really* didn’t want to get involved. In fact, the more I found out, the less time I wanted to spend with nobility.

“Must be tough for you, Allucia…” I muttered.

“Hm? Is that so?”

“Aah, I guess not, if you don’t think so…”

She really was amazing. She was a merchant’s daughter, so it wasn’t strange for her to have touched upon this world somewhat before. Still, diving into it directly like she was doing now was supposed to be a relatively recent thing.

She’d studied swordplay at my dojo until the age of sixteen and had joined the Liberion Order after that. She hadn’t become the knight commander right off the bat or anything, so she had to have spent some time at the bottom of the ladder. With that in mind, she couldn’t have spent more than ten years as deep in this world as she was now.

Maybe ten years was enough to get used to it, but mastering so many different skills at such a young age required significant wits. Allucia was undoubtedly a heroic figure whose name would forever remain within the kingdom’s history books. Just ten years ago, she’d been learning swordsmanship at a rural dojo in the sticks. *There’s just no telling what life has in store for you.*

“I was just thinking of how splendid you’ve become,” I said.

“Hee hee, thank you very much. I am only here today because of your teachings, Master.”

“Ha ha ha… I’m pretty sure I only taught you how to use a sword.”

Facing her feelings so directly was a little awkward for me. Not only that, but Vesper and Frau were in this enclosed space with us. As usual, the two of them had melted into the background. Still, while I’d been nothing but humble before this, I felt like I was slowly developing the backbone to stand tall and face such praise head-on. This was all thanks to getting the better of my dad in that match.

How far could I take my swordsmanship? I still couldn’t claim absolute confidence, and I knew the scenery around me wasn’t going to suddenly change, but I felt like a new path had opened before me. Where that path led and what awaited me at the final destination was still a complete mystery, though.

The carriage moved on at a brisk pace just as Zed had said it would. Some time after our conversation, the carriage suddenly slowed to a stop.

“Huh…?”

“Oh?”

The moment the carriage halted completely, a knock came at

the door, and Zed peeked in.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Is something the matter?" Allucia asked.

"There's a carriage ahead that isn't moving. I assume it has a broken wheel, or perhaps an axle has come loose."

"Hmmm..."

This wasn't exactly a rare occurrence. Nowhere close to all of the kingdom's roads were paved. Stone pavements were actually very scarce. The road we were using now had simply been weeded—frequent use had packed the dirt and hardened it.

A simple dirt road actually posed several problems. If you took one step off the path, you could be going right into a grassy field or over rocks. That wasn't so bad on foot, but it was pretty rough for a carriage. Even with horses pulling it, it was possible for the carriage to be completely stuck due to its weight and size.

"If an axle has simply come loose, then please lend them a hand," Allucia decided. "If a wheel is broken, we'll unfortunately have to ask them to yield the way."

"Acknowledged."

A carriage was big and heavy, but with as much manpower as we had, it was entirely possible to lift one and move it. It was just a matter of whether we had to refit the axle or get it out of the way.

"Vesper, Frau, go keep an eye on the front."

"Yes, ma'am."

Allucia decided to send the two knights out. A stopped carriage naturally meant there were people out there too. It was unlikely they'd abandoned the carriage to walk. Perhaps they'd gone to ask for help, but a carriage was meant for carrying cargo—you would normally leave someone behind to keep an eye on it. If anyone was around, having knights would make any conversation go smoother.

"Should we step out too?" I asked.

"Hmmm... I suppose so. We won't be moving for a while anyway."

I didn't think Allucia or I needed to lend a hand or anything, but I figured we could step out to get some air. I'd been napping before this, so I felt the need to move my body.

"Whew..."

After stepping out of the carriage, I pressed my hands against

the small of my back and stretched. *Damn, that feels great. There are a ton of muscles you can't move while seated.*

"Okay then..."

After loosening up, I turned my attention ahead of our carriage. Several soldiers had gathered over there and were trying to move the other carriage. Had there been nobody left behind? It didn't look like they were speaking with anyone. The only voice I could hear was Zed's as he yelled at his subordinates to get the thing out of the way.

"It's weird that nobody was left with the carriage," I said.

"It is..." Allucia agreed, a puzzled look on her face.

It was unlikely that the people who'd been using that carriage had taken all the cargo with them. People used a carriage to carry goods they couldn't transport on foot, so the only other possibility was that they'd left all their cargo behind. Even then, it was strange that there wasn't a horse in sight either. Horses were valuable, so they weren't going to just let them go.

"Hm...?"

At any rate, we weren't going anywhere until that carriage was out of our way. Just as I figured we'd be stuck here a while longer, something suddenly felt out of place.

"Fog...?" I murmured.

"Everyone! On your guard!" Allucia yelled immediately.

The atmosphere around us suddenly changed. *This is weird.* It was early fall, and the weather had been stable all morning. Some clouds hung in the sky, but there'd been no rain. The environment around us was all woodland with no major rivers. In other words, it was impossible for fog to suddenly appear with no warning.

"Something's going on..." I muttered.

"Agreed," Allucia said. "Stay vigilant, Master."

"Of course."

My hand naturally fell to my beloved sword in its red scabbard. Now then, were we going to get humans, monsters, or something else entirely? I was hoping for monsters. After all, they could be mercilessly cut down without it affecting my conscience.

"Knight Commander!"

Zed came running back at Allucia's quick command. He had his hand at his hip, ready to draw his sword at any moment.

"Hanbeck, take command of the garrison soldiers," she

ordered. “Give up on the carriage for now. Visibility is poor—be careful not to space our forces out too widely.”

“Yes, ma’am! You lot! Link up with those close to you! Don’t forget to keep communicating!”

The conversation ended briskly and Zed bellowed at his subordinates. He seemed to be in a rush, but wasn’t panicking. *He really does have a lot of experience.* If people like him were to remain around Princess Salacia, then King Gladio would have nothing to worry about.

Seemingly switching places with Zed, Vesper and Frau came back too.

“Commander, Mr. Beryl!”

“You’re back. Both of you, keep on guard,” commanded Allucia.

“Yes, ma’am!”

They’d already drawn their swords and were ready for battle. The Liberion Order was quick and decisive. Their senses when handling an unforeseen circumstance were honed to a fine point.

“Charging through…would be pretty rough,” I said, turning down my own suggestion before finishing it.

“Agreed,” Allucia said. “Visibility is poor, and we don’t have a firm grasp of the region. It’s possible we’ll get attacked from all sides.”

If it’d been just me and Allucia, running might’ve been a good option. However, our group numbered in the dozens when you included the soldiers of the royal garrison and provincial army. With such poor visibility due to this mysterious fog, it would be very difficult to run while maintaining cohesion. What made things worse was that we had no idea how far the fog extended. It was possible we wouldn’t be able to get out no matter how much we ran. Our options were limited—we were better off fortifying our defenses here and meeting the attack.

“That carriage was probably a decoy,” I said.

“I believe so too,” Allucia agreed. “In that case, our opponents are very likely human.”

“Figures…”

It really was unnatural for a carriage to be completely abandoned here, so it must’ve just been a trap to stall us. Just as Allucia said, this meant humans were almost certainly involved. No monster would use a carriage as a decoy.

What could anyone possibly have to gain by attacking knights who were surrounded by armed escorts? I doubted they were bandits. Those types were cowards at heart, which was why they carefully selected their targets.

Some time had passed without an attack—Allucia and I had the time to discuss strategy, and Zed was able to order his subordinates. This meant that our opponents were very likely waiting for the fog to thicken and spread. Visibility was poor, but we could still see a little into the distance. What was more, there was no body of water large enough in this area to create such fog. Unless they had a wizard of Lucy's caliber, it couldn't be maintained for long.

From our enemies' standpoint, charging into insufficient fog cover and letting their target escape would be a fatal error. However, if they waited too long and the fog dissipated, an ambush would be impossible. They had to find the middle ground between those options—wait for the fog to thicken to a certain extent, maintain that level of density, then launch a surprise attack. That would be the best option for them. *At least, that's what I would've done if I'd created the fog.*

The question was who had generated this fog and why. They were targeting a fairly large armed group, so they had to have some kind of objective. *Their target is probably me or Allucia... Not that I know why anyone would be after my life.* Allucia was a different story, though. Living in the world of politics made as many enemies as it did friends.

But in that case, who could our enemy be, and where were they from? Even if there were nobles in Liberis hostile to Allucia, it would be extremely hard for them to attack the knight commander of the Liberion Order. That would be a one-way trip to complete ruin if anyone found out. It would be difficult to cover their tracks too.

Taking that into consideration, they were probably from outside Liberis. I didn't know much about other countries, so the only suspect that came to mind was Sphenedyardvania. They were our neighbor, but I didn't know why they would have any reason to go out of their way to target me or Allucia.

"Gaaah?!"

"Wha?!"

As I pondered over our enemy's identity, the situation suddenly shifted. *And so it begins.* From what I could hear, we

were being ambushed. Allucia and I were practically at the center of our formation, so this was likely an attack on the outer perimeter somewhere. I couldn't tell the situation from this far away. The fog was already too thick for that.

"Enemy attack! Enemy att— Gah?!"

"Over there too?!"

It also seemed like we were under attack from multiple directions. That meant we weren't facing a small group. Waiting for the opponent behind a wall of allies who were roaring and screaming was pretty tough. I would've charged into combat to help save even one of them, but my position didn't allow for that.

"Dammit...!"

"Please endure, Master," Allucia said. "If we move, the battle line will be thrown into further disarray."

"I know. I know that, but still...!"

Allucia and I were the core of this group. The others saw us as the VIPs they were meant to protect. If we charged in to try and help, it could make things even more dangerous for everyone. If we moved, our guards would be forced to move too, making an already bad situation worse.

Our opponents were likely a gathering of considerably skilled warriors—the way this ambush had been conducted already ruled out the work of amateurs. Our enemy had a clear advantage in terms of terrain and geography, and the chosen elites of the royal garrison were clearly on the back foot. *This is pretty bad.*

I would've much preferred a head-on attack. That would've kept casualties to a minimum and we could've faced our opponents properly. These thoughts were inappropriate as someone who was meant to be protected, but each time I heard the screams around us, I couldn't help but think that way.

"Outta the way, maggots!"

"Gaaah?!"

As the tumult of battle grew more intense, an especially loud roar rang out from the center of the guards' formation.

"Listen up! The silver-haired woman! You find her, you call for me or Kuriu! All the other trash you can— Oh, huh. There she is. Hey, Kuriu! Over here!"

The man yelled out orders as he charged through the line at incredible speed. When he spotted Allucia, he came to an immediate halt, then started advancing with an air of

composure. He looked somewhere around thirty years old—pretty much the same as Sahat. Even from within the fog, he stood out tremendously. He had slanted eyes and very unusual green hair tied up in a ponytail. He was around the same height as me but far more muscular, and he wore a thick black trench coat as if to hide his well-tempered body.

He seemed like the type to focus on raw strength, much like Henblitz and Curuni. In support of my conjecture, he wielded a large sword—it looked like a crude rectangular slab of metal had been stuck to a hilt. I wasn't sure how sharp the edge was, but even if it'd been completely dull, a hit wasn't going to end with just a few broken bones.

Judging by the man's words, their target was clearly Allucia.

*Sorry, but I can't let you fulfill your objective.*

I tightened my grip on my beloved sword.

"Ooooh!"

The man in black took one, then two steps toward us. Suddenly, a raging war cry came from his flank. My eyes clearly caught the royal garrison's platoon commander making a downward slash with his longsword.

"Outta the way, worthless trash!"

"Ugh...?!"

However, the man spared Zed only a single glance. He swung his huge greatsword at terrifying speed—using only a single hand at that. Zed reacted splendidly by guarding, but his assailant's strike wasn't an impact that could be stopped by a longsword. Zed's blade snapped at its base and the strike hit him in the arm, denting his leather armor greatly and sending him tumbling away. He would be completely out of the fight after taking a hit like that. I could only pray he'd survived.

"And who are you?" Allucia asked the man in black.

"Ain't got no reason to tell you that," the man replied.

It was already too late to talk things out, but it seemed he wasn't intent on leaking any unnecessary information. That made things difficult.

"Ooh, there you are. You're such a slave driver."

"You're late, Kuriu."

Another new figure appeared from the fog. In complete contrast to the green-haired man, this man with somewhat long blue hair had very delicate features. His choice of weapon was also the complete opposite—he wielded two swords that were

slightly wider and shorter than the typical longsword. They appeared to be katzbalgers.

The one commonality between the men was their black trench coats. Did that mean they were part of some uniformed military organization? I had no idea who they could be, though. Their weapons had absolutely no uniformity. *Though I don't exactly know anything about foreign militaries.*

"Vesper, Frau, go support the garrison," Allucia commanded.

"But...!"

"Quickly."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Now that our foes were this close, having one or two more people to help wouldn't make much of a difference. Also—and I was sorry to say this—the men before us weren't foes Vesper or Frau could contribute against in any meaningful way. The green-haired man in particular seemed very dangerous.

Vesper and Frau hesitated for a moment but quickly ran off. The men in black showed no signs of chasing them—they gave them nothing more than a parting glance.

"Not going after them?" Allucia asked.

"They're nothin' to me," the green-haired man said. "You're the only one I've got business with."

It took considerable nerve to call two knights of the Liberion Order "nothing." I had no idea who this guy was, but he *had* to know about the order. Even if we were close to the border, this was still Liberis.

"I'll take the green-haired one," I said. "Allucia, the blue-haired one is up to you."

"Understood," she acknowledged after a pause.

Well, there was no point pondering over who these guys were. Now that things had gotten to this point, we were way past that mattering. There were two of them, and two of us. However, having a proper two-on-two fight would leave us at a bit of a disadvantage.

I wasn't great at taking on multiple opponents at once. It was easier on me to go one-on-one. This was especially the case when one of them wielded a greatsword and could bulldoze his way through by swinging it around. We had to avoid getting mowed down in a single hit during the confusion of battle.

Now that we'd allocated our opponents, all that was left was to fight. And no matter the fight, taking the initiative granted an

advantage.

“Shhh!”

“Oh?!”

I lunged in with a thrust aimed at my opponent’s neck, but was narrowly blocked by the flat of his greatsword. Seeing how my blade made of Zeno Grable’s materials hadn’t pierced through his sword, my opponent’s blade was nothing to laugh at. Not that I’d expected it to be, given the size difference, but it seemed I had to discard the notion of destroying my opponent’s weapon.

“Hah!”

“Wuh?! So fast…!”

At the same time, Allucia slashed at the blue-haired man. The battle lines had been drawn. That man was also pretty skilled—he’d successfully avoided defeat from Allucia’s first attack. She hadn’t lost, but it was going to be difficult to deal with him quickly.

“I ain’t got no business with you, old-timer!” shouted the green-haired man.

“Ugh!”

My opponent swung his greatsword, pushing back my blade in the process. Just as I’d guessed, I wasn’t going to be winning the contest of strength. Even if I were twenty years younger, it would be useless. All it took was a single swing for me to realize how differently our bodies were made.

“Raaaaah!”

“Mgh!”

The moment I caught my balance, the green-haired man slashed at me.

*Dammit! Swinging something that big around that fast is cheating!*

Flustered, I took a quick step back, but the man gave chase immediately. The swiftness of his stride was abnormal. Unlike with Allucia, it was easy to predict what came next, but he was still stupidly fast. What was more, that ridiculously large sword came circling around for me again. I dodged it completely, but an eerie pressure grazed my cheek. I felt like the slightest touch from that thing would kill me.

*This guy’s seriously strong.* All of his blows were both far too heavy and far too fast. His weapon had too much mass, so I couldn’t effectively utilize branch breaker. If he were slower, I

could've carefully pulled it off, but I doubted he would give me that opening.

Blocking head-on was difficult too. My sword would probably withstand it, but my body wouldn't. It was crystal clear that I would get blown away just like Zed. In short, my only options against his attacks were to dodge or parry while trying to find a gap to counterattack.

"Shhh!"

"Whoa there!"

I somehow managed to weave my sword between his rain of blows, but I didn't have enough time to put all of my strength behind it. In the end, I had only managed a single strike, and my opponent wasn't soft enough to get hit by an attack like that.

"You're no maggot, old-timer... Who the hell are you?"

"I have no reason to tell you."

"Hah! Ain't that the truth."

Some space opened up between us thanks to my counterattack, and we exchanged short words. I got my petty revenge by repeating what he'd said earlier. He understood this too and immediately brought the conversation to an end.

"Kuriu! This'll take time! Don't die!"

"Speak for yourse—whoa!"

It seemed the green-haired man was now completely focused on eliminating me. I was grateful for that. It made things far more convenient. From what I could hear of this Kuriu fellow, Allucia had a clear advantage over him. Not that I wanted to believe there were many swordsmen out there who could cross blades on an even footing against her in a fair fight.

"Looks like Kuriu's not gonna manage on his own," the green-haired man said. "I'm gonna make this quick."

"Sorry, that's not gonna happen," I told him.

He took a strange stance, hefting his stupidly big sword one-handed over his shoulder and crouching low to the ground. It was obvious that he was readying himself to deliver certain death in a single strike. If I had to guess, he was hoping to bury me with one outrageously fast attack.

*Can I dodge it? No, before that, can I even win against this guy? I can't read how the scales are tipping or how this'll play out.* Mysteriously, that thought didn't make me fretful. The only thing I felt was a quiet excitement.

My senses focused to a honed point. These were the senses of

a hopeless swordsman—something that existed deep within me. My brain and body could tell that they were being acutely stimulated. When was it that I'd given myself to this sensation?

As a child, swinging a sword had simply been fun. As a teenager, I'd had great respect for my dad and had recklessly swung my sword to catch up to him. As a young adult, I'd believed in my own growth and had devoted myself to the blade.

I couldn't say it'd always been fun, but I'd been able to sense my growth little by little over the years. Teaching others had also been fresh, difficult, and entertaining. I existed today because of that accumulation of experience. That was the undeniable truth. However...

*When did I start feeling the way I do now?*

When had I begun to feel exaltation, not just from practice bouts and training, but from a clash to the death on a knife's edge? Maybe if I searched all of my memories, I could find the exact moment that had kicked it all off. However, the match against my dad had definitely brought it to life.

Now that I had been released from that curse—the illusion of my inadequacy compared to him—I couldn't help but get worked up when facing a formidable opponent. I wasn't entirely sure this was a change for the better.

"Haaaaah..."

I took a deep, *deep* breath. In the next moment, I was sure to face a force of sheer destruction that no normal person could escape. From having crossed swords with him, even if just for a brief time, I understood how skilled this man was. A blow with Curuni's superhuman strength and Surena's explosive acceleration was going to come at me. This man was a master who'd reached such heights.

The man remained unmoving. He was waiting for the right moment. Despite all the fighting between Allucia, Vesper, Frau, the royal garrison, the provincial army, and the forces led by this man, the world around me seemed silent. To be precise, I was indeed hearing the battle, but my brain discarded such information.

No matter how much you struggled to get the upper hand, no matter how long a fight was drawn out, victory was always decided in a single instant. We swordsmen were drawn to that single desperate instant. That went for both me and the man before me.

We both took a breath, and the man kicked off the ground with terrifying force, straining his strength to its very limit in one explosive burst. He didn't roar. Yelling could actually make his attack detectable. The two of us had long passed the point where we could intimidate each other with a burst of fighting spirit.

I could see my opponent's movements, but he was fast, and his attack was heavy. He closed the distance between us in an instant with superhuman leg strength and rotated the greatsword off his shoulder into a diagonal slash from below—that was unexpected, since gravity would work in his favor if he were to deliver a slash from above.

An upward slash was a pretty rare sight—it simply wasn't rational. However, because it was uncommon, an opponent's brain would take time to react to it. Also, this technique could only be pulled off because of the man's barbaric muscle strength. In that sense, it was indeed quite rational.

I could evade the attack, but he had an advantage in reach. In a simple contest of strength, I was no match for him. Even if I dodged the slash, a second would definitely follow. I had to dodge this devastating attack while dealing a telling blow of my own or shift into a position where I could keep the advantage.

That was unreasonable. It would be one thing if my opponent was an amateur, but I was trying to gain a definitive advantage against a master. Even the thought of being able to pull that off was pure arrogance.

*But I can. As I am now, I can do it.*

I could no longer disregard a choice I would've once cast aside as arrogant. I could feel myself grasping a one-way ticket to victory along a realistic yet optimistic path.

"Shyaaaaah!"

"Hm?!"

I stepped in with all my strength. I couldn't fall back from my opponent's pressure—I would never gain the advantage that way. An attack starting from below would leave an opening once the sword went high. So I stooped down low, moving toward the slash as it came up and swaying my upper body to slide past his right arm. I didn't have time to pull back my sword and gather my strength. I had to deliver the blow in the shortest trajectory possible.

I wasn't sure how much protection his trench coat offered, but

with all my technique riding behind *this* blade, I doubted it would repel my strike. His right arm was in the way, so I couldn't aim for his chest or head. His throat would also make a difficult target. Even if I hit his right arm, this guy was liable to keep fighting using only his left.

I had to aim somewhere easy to hit, hard to dodge, and in a spot that would definitely put him out of commission.

*In other words—a thrust to the abdomen!*



It all happened in the blink of an eye.

“Guh?!”

This was the result of running the scenario through my swordsman’s brain over and over again.

The greatsword sliced through some of my bangs, sending strands flying away in the wind. I felt the grim reaper’s breath against my cheek. And then…

My brilliant blade struck true, piercing the man’s waist.

“Haaah!”

I basked in my success for just a moment, then pulled out my sword with a parting slash across the stomach and took two jumps back. I’d felt my blade sink in. It had definitely worked. But had it been fatal? I’d gouged his abdomen, but perhaps because he’d twisted his body at the moment of impact, my strike had been shallower than expected. What was more, that trench coat was far tougher than I’d imagined—it hadn’t stopped my sword from penetrating, but it’d gotten in the way quite a bit. It was far better protection than some lousy armor.

“Ugh… You son of a bitch!”

“Whoa there!”

There was a significant amount of blood pouring from his right flank, but the green-haired man didn’t fall to his knees. Instead, he took a step forward and swung his greatsword twice. However, his technique had clearly deteriorated. He was now slow enough for me to dodge with ease. A regular soldier would’ve probably still been overwhelmed by this display of strength, but I wasn’t kind enough to take a hit from a wounded assailant.

“I wouldn’t mind if you just surrendered,” I suggested.

“Hah! No can do…!”

His answer was as I’d expected. In all likelihood, I could finish him off. A thrust to the heart or a slash across the neck would end this. However, this guy was probably the mastermind behind this attack. If possible, I wanted to capture him and squeeze him for information. I knew nothing about interrogations or torture, but I could ask Allucia or even Lucy if we dragged him back with us.

Despite taking damage to the stomach, he wasn’t out of the fight yet. I could aim for his legs next and take away his mobility. After that, slashing his arms would rob him of his offense. Once his limbs had been damaged, I could take my time to capture

him.

"Whoa?!"

And just as I was about to step in and put my plan into action, a huge fireball came hurtling toward me through the thinning fog. I'd been completely focused and had ignored everything around me, so I was a step late in getting out of the way.

"Hot?!"

I managed to avoid a hit to any of my vitals, but the fireball slammed against my arm. It was *ridiculously* hot. *That's definitely going to leave a burn.*

*Dammit, I know it's my fault for not paying attention, but gimme a break!*

"Commander! Time's up! The fog will disperse soon! Huh...? Commander?!"

"Prim! Who the hell told you you could come to the front?!"

A woman with pink hair ran through the fog. Judging by the staff she carried, which was about as long as she was tall, she was a wizard. I could only assume she'd been the one to throw that fireball at me. Just like the green-haired man and the blue-haired Kuriu, she was wearing a black trench coat. They were definitely some uniformed organization. And though I'd expected it because of the fog, they were clearly an elite group who even had access to wizards.

*Who the hell are these guys? And why are they targeting us?*

"A-Anyway, you need to get away and get treatment...!"

"I can still fight! Hey, Kuriu! You okay?!"

Listening to them, I suddenly thought about how Allucia was faring. She was also in the middle of a flashy battle. I couldn't imagine her losing, but that blue-haired man was quite skilled too. I'd focused entirely on my opponent, so I had no idea how she was doing.

"Allucia...!"

"All good over here!" she yelled back.

Not too far away, her battle was already over. Just as she'd claimed, she was standing, and the blue-haired man was sprawled on the ground. That was all I needed to know—it had been a complete victory.

"Kuriu...!" the green-haired man yelled in shock.

"Sorry," I told him. "The Liberion Order's commander is strong."

This wasn't a surprise to me. Being able to block Allucia's first

attack meant the man had possessed considerable skill. However, Allucia was *beyond* just having considerable skill. It was hard to hold her back when she was being serious. Grasping victory was a practically impossible task.

"Tch!"

The green-haired man clicked his tongue. He knew he was at a disadvantage. It was the most basic strategy to send your strongest fighters to take on the best your opponent had to offer. This man the pink-haired woman had called her commander and the one called Kuriu were definitely the best fighters in this group. The wizard was likely an officer, so she was still an unknown quantity, but this battle was still largely settled.

"Prim... We're pulling out. You got this?"

"Mm-hmm!"

"You're not getting away!"

The moment I heard "pulling out," I charged in, my sword at the ready. He likely had some means of getting away—something to do with the wizard, if I had to guess. I wasn't softhearted enough to just stand there and let him escape, though.

I could close the gap in two steps. I kept an eye on the green-haired man, but my target was the pink-haired wizard.

*I have to keep her from doing anything!*

"Haaah!"

"Wah wah wah wah?!"

However, before my blade could reach, the pink-haired woman shouted and unleashed her magic at me. A sudden gale erupted, blowing away the fog in an instant. The wind was violent enough that staying on my feet was impossible. The force hit me head-on and sent me tumbling. I'd made quite the embarrassing sound in the process.

"Listen up, you lot! We're outta here!" bellowed the green-haired man.

"Ugh! Stop right there!" Allucia shouted.

"Like hell I'm listening to you! Hey, Kuriu! Wake up!"

The wind was too strong for Allucia or me to move. It took me everything I had to try to get back on my feet. The woman was in the eye of the storm and didn't seem restricted at all. *Dammit, magic sure is convenient!*

Fortunately, the wind wasn't lethal in any way. It was intense, but it wasn't cutting me up or anything. That was why I'd gotten

away with just tumbling over.

“I hate to say it, but that was an impressive escape…” Allucia muttered.

“Phew… Back on my feet. They got away, huh?”

Once the wind died down…or rather, once the pink-haired woman had gotten far enough away for the wind to feel weaker, I finally got back up and took a look around. The trees all around us had been knocked over, and the group in black was completely gone, creating an empty space. I couldn’t even spot the man named Kuriu who Allucia had defeated. Just as she’d said, it was an impressive escape.

An extremely capable warrior and the quick wits to consider an immediate retreat—this was enough of a threat from an individual, so to have an entire group pull it off was something else. *Maybe they even rival the Liberion Order.*

“They really got us…” I groaned.

Now that the black coats were gone, all that was left were the soldiers of the royal garrison and the provincial army, lying on the ground all over the place. They hadn’t been annihilated, but those black coats had been a step or two above them on an individual level. Honestly, if faced with equal numbers, it would’ve been a rough battle for any group except for maybe the knights of the Liberion Order.

“Commander…! Thank goodness you’re unharmed…”

“Frau… Where’s Vesper?”

Vesper and Frau had gone to help the soldiers. Frau seemed to have taken a hit to the shoulder—her armor was dented there. She wasn’t bleeding, but she’d definitely broken a bone. I was seeing a lot of that lately.

Anyway, Vesper was nowhere in sight. A terrible chill ran through me.

“He’s severely wounded…” Frau reported. “I provided emergency treatment, but I’m not sure he’ll last…”

“Understood…” Allucia said. “We’ll focus on treating the wounded first. Master, please lend a hand.”

“Of course,” I responded. “I’ll do anything I can. Just let me know.”

What was supposed to be a peaceful trip back had become a ghastly scene. I could already smell death around us. I could only pray that Vesper and Zed weren’t among them.

Unable to bask in our worthless victory, we silently focused on

treating the wounded.

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I listened to the *clunk, clunk* of the carriage's wheels as an awkward silence dominated the interior. There were three people seated within: myself, Allucia, and Frau. Vesper was lying down inside another carriage. That one had been packed with camping tools and emergency supplies, but because of the attack, pretty much everything had been used. For better or worse, that allowed us to use the empty carriages to carry the wounded.

The casualties suffered were grisly: six dead and twenty-two wounded. Of the enemies, two were dead while their wounded remained an unknown quantity. They likely had a few, but we hadn't been able to take any of them captive. It was proof that they were all considerably skilled. Still, taking down only two of them wasn't exactly a job well done.

Our wounded included Zed and Vesper. Zed was far better off. One of his arms was badly broken, but he wasn't in danger of dying. It would take a long time for him to recover, and it was questionable whether he would be able to return to active duty, but he was lucky that the spark of life was still bright within him.

"I hope Vesper can be saved..." I muttered.

"Yes..." Allucia said. "Riders have been sent ahead to the next town—I've ordered that they have a wizard and a doctor ready for us. If he can hold out until then..."

The dead and those incapable of walking were all packed into the carriages while everyone else had reorganized ranks to march on the return route. While providing emergency treatment and planning our next move, Allucia had used two of our horses to send riders to the next town. This was to report the situation, and just as she'd said, to have a wizard and doctor made ready. They were likely making preparations right now to be able to provide specialist care the moment we arrived. As for our wounded, if their bodies held out that long, we could finally feel somewhat at ease, but it still wasn't clear whether that would come to pass.

"Forgive me..." Frau murmured.

"There's nothing for you to apologize for," Allucia told her. "Everyone did what they were capable of in the moment. You fought well. That's all there is to it."

“Understood…”

Ever since things had settled down and we’d gotten back on the move, Frau had continuously apologized. I didn’t know whether she was addressing us or Vesper. I would be devastated if Vesper died too. For better or worse, both society and individuals treated death unequally. It was obviously sadder to lose someone close to you than some unnamed bandit. I didn’t believe all life was equally precious either. However, those who walked the path of the sword had to overcome this. I wasn’t saying not to feel sadness, of course—it was necessary to mourn to settle your feelings. I also believed condolences had to be paid to the departed and the bereaved.

However, even if it took time, those who survived had to take a step forward. Swordsmen in particular lived casually on the precipice of death. Having your emotions stuck in the past would lead to moments of hesitation, and that was unfortunately not an option.

I wasn’t sure Frau could continue serving in the Liberion Order. She stood at a critical juncture that would decide that. Nobody would blame her for quitting. I would personally knock out anyone who tried.

That said, it was hard to find the right words to say in such a situation. Frau had to come to terms with her own feelings and convictions and face them head-on. Allucia understood this too, so she wasn’t saying any empty words to try to encourage or comfort her. Everyone in the Liberion Order was talented and strong; however, there were no guarantees they would all survive.

“Sure would be nice if we could find out anything about the attackers…” I muttered.

“It’s a small mercy that we managed to recover the two bodies,” Allucia said. “If we investigate their equipment, we should figure out something soon.”

“Here’s hoping…”

The conversation naturally shifted to the attackers. The two who’d been killed by some of the garrison’s soldiers had been retrieved. Much like the ones we’d faced, they’d been wearing black trench coats.

They were definitely a military force of some kind. We were likely to find out who after an investigation. The fact that nothing had come to mind upon seeing their equipment—especially for

Allucia—meant they were very likely from outside the country.

They definitely weren't Sphenedyardvania's Holy Order. And according to Allucia, they weren't imperial soldiers from Salura Zaruk either. That meant they were from elsewhere, or they were something like a mercenary company. However, that made for such a wide breadth of possibilities that there was no telling what country they could possibly hail from with our current level of knowledge.

Maybe Lucy would know, but she wasn't with us right now. We could only begin to analyze things once we brought the equipment back to Baltrain.

"But is this really going to be okay...?" Frau muttered anxiously.

"Hm? Is something the matter?" I asked.

"If...they come at us again for retribution..."

"I doubt they will. Not for some time, at least."

"It's as Master Beryl says," Allucia joined in. "Their leader is seriously wounded too. Focus on calming your nerves and healing your injuries."

"Yes, ma'am..."

Frau had to concentrate on herself for now. She was capable of speaking normally, but the wound to her shoulder was still serious. She wasn't going to be able to wield a sword for a while. But by my estimations and Allucia's, the black coats weren't going to attack again anytime soon. The reason was simple—the green-haired man and blue-haired man had suffered serious injuries.

Honestly, those two had exceptional skill. If that was the standard for their entire organization, our expedition would've been wiped out. It would've been like being surrounded by dozens of black rank adventurers.

My one concern was the wizard, but she'd seemed far more worried about the green-haired man she'd called her commander. She didn't seem like the type to come for revenge on her own. Even if she did, without the two powerful vanguards, a wizard's true worth couldn't be fully manifested.

That was why they weren't going to make a move until those two were healed. Even with healing magic, they weren't going to recover in one or two days. Allucia had intended to take her target alive from the start, so she'd cut him up like crazy everywhere except for his torso and head. It was possible he

would take even longer to recover than the green-haired man.

If they'd been bandits, it was very likely they could come back for us. However, those black coats were a well-organized group with extremely high standards. We'd suffered terrible losses, but the same went for them. They were unlikely to come at us again when their prospects for victory were so low.

Still, this was nothing but conjecture on my part. Maybe we were actually destined to cross blades with them again in the near future. However, looking at things realistically and actively fanning anxiety were different matters. We'd managed to severely wound their leaders, so even if they did attack, Allucia and I would handle it somehow. We were meant to be protected on this expedition, so fighting on the front lines wasn't commendable, but the situation would call for it.

"Allucia, you okay?" I asked.

"Yes…or so I'd like to claim…but this does have me feeling somewhat down."

She was acting stouthearted, but there was a slight gloominess to her expression. Things were only going to get harder for her. She had to report what had happened, send condolences to the bereaved, investigate the hostile organization, and make plans for the future. This was all on top of her already busy schedule. No matter how difficult her duties had been, she'd never once complained about them, but this was a definite breaking point.

"It's all right," I told her. "Anyone would feel depressed in this situation. You're talented but still human. Try not to torment yourself over it."

"Yes… Thank you very much."

I wasn't able to bear her burdens—I didn't have the skills to perform her duties. The only thing I was capable of was swinging a sword. However, when it came to swordplay, I couldn't afford to increase the burden felt by those around me. No matter who attacked us, I had to send them all packing. This incident just reinforced that feeling within me.

Did I have a little more confidence now? I felt like that wasn't all there was to it. It was a little different from a sense of duty—I wasn't wielding my sword because someone had forced me to. Calling it a sense of purpose was a little overblown too. My sword didn't exist for some great cause. If I had to name it, then perhaps it was obstinacy. There was something petty within me

that I personally refused to give up on. *Maybe you could call it pride too.*

"Allucia."

"Yes?"

This was the path I now walked—an old man's spirit. Naturally, I didn't believe at all that my personal feelings could wrap everything up nicely. I knew to a painful degree how much of the world didn't work that way.

"I'm a man who can't do much besides wielding a sword," I told her. "But I *can* do that. If you ever need it, don't hesitate to depend on me. If it can be resolved by the blade, then I'll resolve it—without fail."

There was a pause, and then Allucia spoke. "Understood. I will etch your words into my heart, Master."

In the parts of the world where a sword could solve problems, I wasn't going to lose to anyone—not until my body stopped moving the way I wanted it to, at least. I would cross paths with strong warriors I'd yet to meet; I would conquer and surpass them all. The joy of that thought seeped deep into my very being.

*I've become awfully selfish, huh?*

Even as I conveyed my determination, a part of me quietly laughed at myself. *My mindset is clearly different now, huh?*

◇

"Sorry, sorry. I'm late."

"It's all right, Lucy."

Three weeks had passed since the incident on the road. Allucia and I had hurried back to Baltrain—we'd shared information with the palace, the order, and the magic corps, and had then discussed our next steps. Despite my boasting about how Allucia should leave issues to me if they could be solved with a sword, I had nothing to contribute at this stage. As a result, my days hadn't been all that different from usual. I'd trained the knights at the office while dropping by the magic institute every now and then, just as always.

Today, while on my way to train in the morning, Allucia had personally summoned me. She, Henblitz, and I were in her office when Lucy entered the room.

"It must've been quite the disaster for all of you," Lucy

remarked as she took a seat.

"Well, yeah," I said. "At least we got back safely."

"Without a doubt."

This kind of conversation would normally take place in the reception room, but we couldn't let this intel leak, so to be safe, we were using Allucia's office.

Both Allucia and I had agreed that Lucy should get involved in an aspect of this case. After all, nobody who'd been present for the attack had any idea who the black coats were. Lucy was, by far, the most well-informed about this kind of thing.

*If anything troubles you, start by asking Lucy.* This idea was actually pretty sound, especially when the problem involved matters of national importance. She wasn't going to ask for anything in return for her help on these cases, so it was best to rely on her as much as we could. Surena would be another option for matters involving other countries, but she was unfortunately away from Baltrain on another request. Black rank adventurers were really busy.

"Will tea suffice?" Allucia asked as she got drinks ready.

"Mm, please," Lucy confirmed. "Now then, let me get right to the point. I'll start with the coats they were wearing. Just as you surmised, they are magically enhanced. I haven't had enough time to make direct comparisons yet...but those jackets are far sturdier than hardened leather armor."

"That tough, huh?" I muttered.

Allucia and I had instinctively known how tough the coats were. They couldn't possibly have been made of regular cloth, so we'd had Lucy analyze them. The result was as expected but also surprising—being sturdier than hardened leather was the territory of metal armor. That hardiness, combined with how lightweight the jackets were, made me jealous as a swordsman.

"But mass-producing magical equipment must be very difficult," Henblitz observed.

"Exactly," Lucy confirmed. "A wizard is an absolute necessity. The coats are embedded with magicite, but that would be pointless without a considerably skilled wizard."

Equipping so many people with such a thing would be very difficult without having a wizard exclusive to their organization. Did that mean the pink-haired woman who'd shown up during the fight had also been responsible for their gear? Or, it was possible they had *several* wizards at their disposal. I didn't know

where this group came from, but it was extremely abnormal for them to have so much martial strength and so many resources. This wasn't stuff you could just gather secretly on your own. As dense as I was to the ways of the world, even *I* knew that.

"As you predicted, the ones wearing these aren't from any national army," Lucy continued. "I've never even seen them in the empire."

"So…that makes them mercenaries?" I asked.

"That's Beryl for you. You've got the right idea."

I didn't feel like she was really praising me. My deduction wasn't particularly impressive. After all, there weren't that many martial forces beyond a nation's official institutions, so if they weren't knights or soldiers, a mercenary company made the most sense.

Mercenaries did anything as long as you could pay them. They weren't the only ones who functioned like this, but anyone else would typically refuse to attack the Liberion Order, no matter how much the paycheck was for. The only ones who would take on such a dangerous job were mercenaries. However, mercenaries usually had only one stream of income, so hiring them was naturally very expensive. That was especially the case for a job like this—they wouldn't have done it unless they'd been significantly compensated. With that in mind, even if we knew the perpetrators were mercenaries, the question remained: Who'd hired them?

"I can only think of one possibility in this case," Lucy said. "They're almost guaranteed to be the Verdapis Mercenary Company."

"Verdapis…?" I repeated.

"I suppose you wouldn't know of them," Lucy said. "How about you, Allucia?"

"No, I don't know anything."

"I haven't heard the name either," Henblitz added.

It turned out Lucy really *was* the only one who knew about them.

"That's reasonable," Lucy said. "They're from the Kingdom of Edeldia, after all. Oh…I suppose that's called the Edeldian territory of the Salura Zaruk Empire now."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Edeldia lost a war with the empire and became its vassal state," Lucy explained, taking a sip of her tea.

I'd never even heard of Edeldia. This was mostly because of my lack of education. Still, Lucy was impressive for knowing another nation's history. She hadn't lived such a long life for nothing. *She would probably get really angry if I pointed that out, though...*

"But if they're a vassal state, all of their military forces should be under the jurisdiction of their sovereign," I pointed out.

"Ever since the end of the war with the empire, Verdapis has been on the run. They haven't been caught," Lucy explained. "You must have some idea of their strength, yes?"

"Yeah... They're tremendously strong."

The Salura Zaruk Empire was the Galean continent's largest nation. Liberis was apparently slightly ahead in terms of magic technology, but when it came to pure military might, the empire had greater numbers and higher standards. That was the general consensus, at least.

If these mercenaries had withstood a battle with the empire and had even escaped them, that in itself was already more than impressive enough. Their abnormal strength made sense.

"Well, they aren't necessarily as strong today as they were back then," Lucy added. "Still, rumors say they're quite the gathering of powerful warriors."

That was high praise coming from a wizard of Lucy's caliber. Verdapis was ridiculously strong. It wasn't very nice to say, but the royal garrison had been completely out of their depth against them.

"Lucy, do you know the characteristics and names of their officers?" Allucia asked.

"Not all of them," Lucy answered. "The only ones I know of are Green Hornet Hanoy Cressa and Double Stinger Kuriu Rybark."

"Double Stinger Kuriu... That is likely the dual-blade swordsman I fought," Allucia commented.

"Then I guess my opponent was Green Hornet," I added.

This was also as we'd expected. The two men we'd faced were the top of the mercenary company. It would be problematic if people like them could just pop up all over the place.

"Anyway, I'm surprised you know all this," I told Lucy.

"It's technically part of my job," she replied.

"It is?"

"I'm actually pretty important, you know?"

"Ha ha ha, I know."

I'd meant it as a slight jibe, but I immediately gave in when Lucy glared at me. I definitely couldn't withstand that coming from the commander of the magic corps. The one thing that didn't really make sense to me was that Lucy had her hands in such intelligence-gathering activities. She was a wizard, and as far as I knew, she was predominantly a researcher. She was the type to find far more joy in devoting herself to studying magic than going out and crushing the enemy.

I understood that being part of the military included such work and that, over her long life, she had accumulated much knowledge. However, Lucy didn't *seem* like an intelligence agent. Still, it would be meaningless to point that out to her.

"Anyway, it must've been a disaster getting attacked by them…" Lucy said. "But you two came back alive. That's a job well done."

"Is it really…?" I muttered.

"It is." I wasn't sure whether she'd seen into my thoughts or something, but she made this statement with absolute confidence.

It was fortunate that we hadn't lost anybody in the Liberion Order, though we were saddened by the fact that a number of the royal garrison and provincial army had perished. Vesper had somehow survived thanks to the wizard and doctor in the town we'd stopped by. His recovery was going to take a very long time, though. We also weren't sure whether Zed would ever be able to return to active duty. Still, our victories were worth celebrating. The VIPs—Allucia and I—had returned unharmed, so just as Lucy had said, this could be classified as a job well done.

*Not all lives are equal.* I understood the logic behind that, but I was incapable of being completely pleased by the outcome.

"I guess the only thing left to figure out…is their objective," I said, finally getting to the real issue.

"They were after Allucia, remember?" Lucy said. "That gives us a pretty good idea."

Information on the Verdapis Mercenary Company and the functionality of their coats was all just a bonus. The real question was why they'd attacked Allucia. Lucy was right on this point. If you knew a bit about what was going on, one possibility came to mind.

"I guess it really is…Sphenedyardvania," I concluded.

"I bet it is," Lucy agreed. "We should avoid making a

declaration until we have all the information we need, though."

Even with what little information I had, this option made the most sense. If anything, nobody else had any reason to hire an external force to attack Allucia. However, this was only our conjecture at the moment—we had no conclusive evidence. That was why we had to avoid making a public statement. It made a lot of sense for Sphenedyardvania to resort to mercenaries. Swords for hire didn't leave a political trail.

"We must proceed with our investigation carefully," Allucia said. "We can't afford to create unnecessary friction between us and Sphenedyardvania."

"Agreed," Lucy said. "I'm taking part in the investigation myself. Still, we don't have time to take it easy."

Sphenedyardvania was suspicious, but if we publicly criticized them with such little evidence, cracks could form between our nations. The upcoming wedding was meant to *solidify* relations, so nobody wanted to suddenly drop a huge bomb in the middle of it.

On the other hand, it was difficult for Liberis to send Princess Salacia to get married while these suspicions remained unresolved. They were waiting for the investigation to be conducted carefully and swiftly to bring the truth to light. This much was evident from what Allucia and Lucy were saying.

Marriages for royalty and other members of high society were generally planned to the finest level of detail long beforehand. Naturally, with things having gone as far as they had, the schedule for Princess Salacia's marriage to Prince Glenn was pretty much set in stone. It wouldn't be simple to make any changes now. And the perpetrators definitely knew this—it was why they'd chosen this timing to set things in motion. Everything made sense.

"I have a hunch this is going to become pretty outrageous..." I muttered.

"I'm sure you know this already, but you can't sit on the sidelines," Lucy told me. "You're utterly involved at this point."

"I know. When my sword is needed, I'll wield it—no matter who my opponent is."

"Hmmm...?"

This was pretty much what I'd told Allucia right after the incident. I didn't know anything about international intrigue and the fetters that bound a nation from acting. I was well aware of

my lack of education on that front. All I wanted was to swing my sword at whim, without having to worry about that stuff. Before this, I would've used that as an excuse to run away.

But just as Lucy said, I was already neck-deep into this incident. I hadn't done so by choice, of course. This was a calamity brought on by my title as special instructor. However, I now knew that there was a small part of me that'd enjoyed it. Hanoy of the Verdapis Mercenary Company was a considerable swordsman. Double Stinger Kuriu definitely also possessed significant skill. How would I conquer a dual-blade master who excelled at speed? I felt a faint yet certain exaltation at the thought of facing off against viciously strong opponents. Such thoughts were beyond imprudent in this situation though, so I didn't voice them.

"Heh... Hee hee hee!"

"L-Lucy?"

And as that crossed my mind, Lucy's shoulders suddenly started shaking. It was kind of creepy.

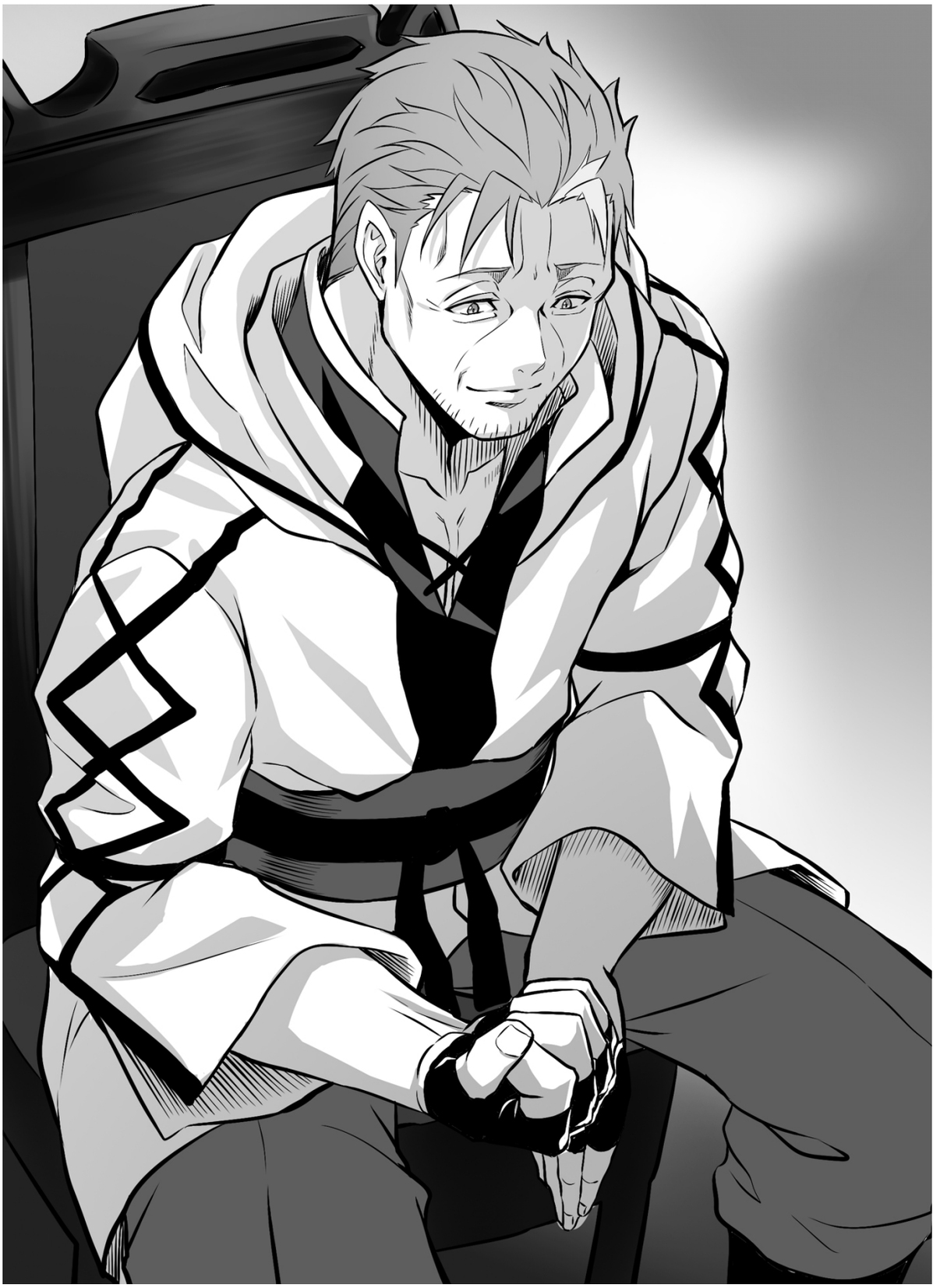
"Haaah... I was just thinking that you've really changed," she explained. "How about it? Wanna have another match with me?"

"Whaaa...? No way. Sounds like a pain in the ass..."

"Tch. You're no fun."

This was supposed to be an extremely serious conversation, but the commander of the magic corps had ignored that completely and suddenly tried to pick a fight. She was supposed to be pretty good at reading the room, but she had a tendency to make outrageous statements like that every now and then. Her personality was enviable, in a sense, but I didn't really want to be like her.

A small part of me had definitely changed, but that didn't mean my personality had undergone some drastic transformation. It was a small yet definite shift. The spirit to seriously aim for the very summit of swordsmanship was something I'd certainly possessed in the past. However, over the course of fulfilling my duties at the dojo and as a special instructor, I'd locked it away deep inside my heart. Was it a good or bad omen that this spirit was beginning to sprout again? It seemed like I would have to wait a while longer before finding the answer.



# Epilogue: An Old Country Bumpkin Enjoys His Fill

“Welcome, Mistress Lucy. For two?”

“Mm-hmm. The same private room as usual.”

“Certainly.”

After the successful secret mission in Flumvelk and the attack by the Verdapis Mercenary Company on the way back, we’d somehow managed to return to Baltrain, report everything, and even plan some for the future. After all that, I’d somehow found myself going out for dinner with Lucy.

I had no idea how it’d ended up like this. *Well, you can criticize me somewhat—I agreed the moment I found out that she would be footing the bill.* In my defense, I was also curious about what kind of place Lucy would choose when she went out to eat.

“W-Wow…”

“It’s nothing to gawk at. Anyone with a certain level of money can come here.”

“So you say…”

She’d brought me to a restaurant in the northern district. I immediately found myself in awe, and we hadn’t even gone past the entryway. The exterior and interior of the building weren’t flashily decorated or anything, and the furniture wasn’t as resplendent as the stuff I’d seen at the party in Flumvelk either.

However, there wasn’t a speck of dust on the floor or any stains on the calming coat of paint on the walls. I could see how much care was put into maintaining the place. All of the employees really put effort into their appearances too.

Above all else, there were private rooms. It was impressive for a restaurant to have partitioned rooms when the place wasn’t even an inn. Normally, you wouldn’t waste space—this would prevent more customers from coming in. There was just less profit to be made that way.

I had a feeling this place wasn’t somewhere you could enter only by having money. It felt like, while not restricted only to royalty or anything, it was a place for people of considerable status to be able to enjoy a friendly chat and sometimes discuss

things in absolute privacy.

"This way, please."

"Mm."

A primly dressed waiter guided us to a room. Inside was a table large enough to seat four. There were only two chairs around it, showing that they'd likely adjusted it for Lucy and me specifically. The room wasn't that large, but it didn't feel cramped at all—it was a really relaxing space.

The restaurant I'd taken Mewi to and the one Kinera had invited me to for lunch hadn't been seedy in any way, but this place was on another level. Lucy had brought me, so I didn't need to be nervous around her, but I was still a little worried about whether my anxiety would prevent me from tasting the food.

"I'll have wine," Lucy told the waiter before turning to me. "What about you?"

"Ummm... Ale, please."

"Certainly," the waiter confirmed before leaving the room.

I was a little relieved that this place served ale too.

"We're just here to eat," Lucy said. "Why are you so nervous?"

"I mean... I've never been to a place like this, so..."

"Eat better food."

I didn't think I had bad food on a daily basis. Did Lucy come to places like this all the time? I doubted my wallet would last if I did that. I would constantly feel ill at ease too.

After sitting restlessly for a short while, the waiter came back.

"Thank you for waiting. Here is your wine and ale."

My ale wasn't served in a tankard like it would've been in a tavern but was instead in an expensive-looking glass.

"Let's start with a toast," Lucy said.

"Ah, sure."

An elegant clink—something I wasn't used to hearing—rang out as we tapped our glasses together lightly.

"Oh... This is good."

I poured the frothing ale down my throat and was met with the rich flavor of barley. There was very little sweetness to it, but after passing over my tongue snappily, a pleasant aroma tickled my nose without leaving a bitter aftertaste. It was *really* good. The ale I'd had in Flumvelk had also been quite the delicacy, but this was an entirely different kind of flavor. In terms of flavor, I preferred this one.

“This is my favorite restaurant,” Lucy said. “It’s important to have a place where you can relax with some food and drink.”

“You’re not wrong.”

For someone as famous and influential as Lucy, there were surprisingly few places she could settle down and eat in peace outside of her home. It would be troublesome for other customers to make a fuss and even worse for the staff to do so. That kind of incident would make it hard to ever come back.

I’d never experienced something like that for myself, but someone of her status had likely gone through it more times than she could ever want. This restaurant definitely met all her needs, and it was no wonder she called it her favorite.

“Order whatever you want,” she told me. “It’s my treat today.”

“Thanks…”

I wasn’t bold enough to accept on the spot. I was definitely grateful, but Lucy was a repeat offender. I couldn’t help but feel like there was some ulterior motive. That said, it was rare to be able to eat at such a high-class restaurant, so maybe it was best to take her up on it and eat what I could.

“Once you’ve decided, ring that bell,” Lucy said. “A waiter will come quietly flying over.”

“G-Got it.”

*Come quietly flying over? That’s a pretty crazy expression. Does she mean he’ll come quickly so that we aren’t left waiting, but in a way we won’t notice? What kind of training do they undergo here? They almost seem more refined than a noble’s servant.*

“Whoa…” I unintentionally uttered as I looked over the menu.

There was a huge lineup. I figured we would be served a set course like at the palace or in Flumvelk, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Among the many foods I didn’t recognize, there were some pretty crazy ingredients on the menu. I didn’t see anything normal like boar, but I did spot *griffon*. There were also a lot of ingredients I’d never heard of. To add to that, there were no prices listed. *This is nuts.*

“You’re really picking up the bill…?” I asked. The menu was too frightening for me. That was simply how high-class this restaurant was.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Order whatever you want.”

“Okay…”

After thinking it over for a bit, I decided on something. I reached for the bell at the corner of the table and tapped it. It

chimed delightfully, and a waiter showed up in an instant. He was *seriously* quick.

"I'll have the braised griffon and the griffon tail soup," I said.

"The same as usual for me," Lucy added.

"Certainly."

I was set on challenging the first thing that had caught my eye: the griffon meat. It was being served at a fancy restaurant, so it couldn't possibly be bad. Normal chicken meat was very tender, but could griffon meat be classified as the same thing?

Lucy went with "the same as usual." *Man, that sounds kinda cool. She's a total regular.* She must've come here often enough for that line to work. And she'd called it her favorite restaurant, so we weren't going to be served lousy food. That was a relief, at least.

"So? What brought this about?" I asked after knocking back some more of the crisp ale.

"Hm?"

I wanted to know why Lucy had chosen to bring me to this restaurant. My relationship with her was somewhat difficult to explain in one or two sentences. You could call us friends, but the way we'd met had been the worst. For me, it'd been like coming across a random killer on the streets looking to test her new blade. Still, it was a strange connection formed through our mutual acquaintance in Ficelle, and we were definitely on friendly terms now. We weren't on bad terms at all. I couldn't find a reason for her to invite me to a high-class restaurant, though.

I would've understood if this were just a casual invitation to share a meal at an appropriately casual restaurant with some relatively cheap booze for us to split the bill over. I wouldn't have said anything in that case. In fact, I probably would've gone home tapping my belly, thinking about how a meal with Lucy every now and then wasn't so bad. However, the situation and atmosphere now were clearly different from that.

"Well, I suppose you can consider it a little bit of a celebration," she said.

"For what?" I asked, cocking my head.

*A celebration? I'm pretty sure nothing has happened recently worth celebrating.* Our expedition to Flumvelk had ended, and we'd survived the attack on the way back—I could almost understand celebrating that fact, but it wasn't a good reason for her to treat me to fancy food.

“There’s something I’ve always believed,” Lucy started, taking an elegant sip of what was probably some extremely high-class wine. “Those with power should live in a way that matches said power.”

I knew what she meant by “those with power.” It could be anything from simple combat ability to influence to knowledge. I also understood what she meant by “living in a way that matches said power.” For example, Allucia was my pupil, but her talents shouldn’t have remained buried in that countryside village. That was exactly why I’d given her a farewell sword, signaling that she’d learned everything I had to teach.

“I believe that self-awareness has finally sprouted within you,” Lucy stated. “This meal is in celebration of that.”

“I see…”

Self-awareness of the power I possessed—I wondered if that was true. These days, I was much less self-deprecating, and I didn’t deny my abilities as much, but that didn’t mean I was suddenly brimming with confidence. This feeling within me was far muddier and more primitive. In a way, you could call it filthy. I had nothing more than a simple desire to reach the summit of all swordsmanship, and I wasn’t sure you could call that a self-awareness of my own power.

“It’s nothing that nice,” I said. “I just want to be strong. I want to cross blades with new and formidable foes. That’s all it amounts to.”

I understood her thought process, but I didn’t know if I really fit the definition. Well, maybe I did. She was the one who saw me that way, after all. In this sense, I had a lot of trust in the woman known as Lucy Diamond.

“That’s fine. Totally fine,” she assured me. “The weak never develop the desire to fight stronger and stronger opponents.”

“I guess you’ve got a point there…”

It was true. It would be unnatural for the weak to want to fight the strong. From that perspective, I was indeed aware of my own strength now. Under no circumstance could I abase myself as a weakling when I had the ability to defeat my dad.

“Excuse me. Here is your braised griffon and griffon tail soup. And here is your charcoal-grilled Azlaymian mushrooms with Basel bream.”

“Ooh, thank you.”

Around the time our conversation reached a good stopping

point, our food arrived. Mine was the braised meat and soup. But going just off the name, I couldn't tell what Lucy's was—it certainly *looked* like mushrooms and fish, but none of the words the waiter had said were familiar to me.

"I can't calm down unless I have this at least once a month," Lucy said.

"Mine looks good too. Smells great."

My braised griffon had a beautiful light hue to it. The tail soup featured tender chunks of meat that looked like they could just fall apart. Even the very appearance of my meal gave me a glimpse into how concentrated the flavor was going to be.

"Thanks for the meal."

After giving thanks, I started with the soup.

"Wow... Delicious."

A flower garden of umami rushed through my mouth with a single spoonful. A slight saltiness was followed by an abundance of flavor. And yet, the salt didn't emphasize its presence, and the broth warmed my chest as I swallowed. It was indisputably delicious. The menu had no prices listed, so I didn't know how expensive the food was, but the soup still made enough of an impact for me to want to come and try it again if I ever got the chance.

"As for this one..."

The soup was already spectacular. What kind of explosive flavor would the braised griffon have? I couldn't even picture it.

"Whoa... So soft..."

I tried piercing the meat with my fork, but it practically fell apart the moment I touched it. Could any form of cooking really make meat this tender? I had no idea how they'd achieved this, but it must've taken tremendous dedication. My expectations were soaring to even greater heights.

"Hrm..."

It was difficult to stick the meat onto my fork, so I scooped it up instead. The moment I put it into my mouth, the meat crumbled apart. In the next instant, a light and refreshing taste surged through my mouth. The flavor was somewhat thin, but it was seasoned to a perfect degree so that it didn't seem entirely absent. It didn't have a burst of flavor like a fritter would, but this was just about right for an old man in his forties. I couldn't get enough of it.

"Pwah..."

The meat was further accented by its exquisite compatibility with the ale. My drink emphasized snappiness with just the faintest sweetness, matching the lightly seasoned dish to perfection. It was great to wash down rich flavors with a chug of strong ale, but this was splendid in a whole other way. It was like I'd discovered a new world.

"Ha ha ha! You sure do enjoy your food," Lucy observed.

"Well, yeah. This stuff is seriously good..."

It was in a whole different dimension. I could understand why this place was Lucy's favorite. If I ever had as much spare money as she did, I would definitely be a regular too. That was how much of an impact the flavors had on me.

"Your, um...fish platter? It looks great too," I commented.

"Mm-hmm. It sure is. It uses fresh Basel bream that has been transported here in ice."

"I-In ice...?"

"Such things are also part of our vocation."

"Aah... I get it."

I'd wondered how it was possible to transport anything in ice, but it seemed it was all thanks to the power of wizardry. Now that I thought of it, Lucy had created blocks of ice during our battle too. Magic had applications beyond fighting that could help with daily life. This was a new discovery for me.

It made sense, though. Not all wizards were part of the magic corps. Some chose to become adventurers, while others took on jobs more suitable for civilian life. It was a really flexible profession. In contrast, swordsmen could only swing a sword around. Despite the times we lived in, it was really hard to put food on the table using nothing but a blade. I'd managed somehow because I'd been blessed with wonderful connections.

"Wizards sure are amazing," I mused.

"The grass is greener on the other side," Lucy stated bluntly. "From my point of view, swordsmen are far more terrifying."

*The grass is greener on the other side... I know nothing about magic, so I think it's amazing. But if Lucy sealed her magic and used only a sword, I'm confident I could beat her with ease. That's how different our fields of expertise are.*

"I guess that makes Ficelle completely out of this world, huh?" I said.

"She's a genius. I'm surprised you managed to discover a talent like hers."

“It was just a coincidence.”

Ficelle was amazing, even in Lucy’s eyes. Only the word “genius” could describe the girl who’d mastered both sword and magic to such a degree. To top it all off, she was still so young. She had plenty of room to grow. Her talent was terrifying—she was also the type of person to dedicate everything she had to her own growth, making her even more amazing.

“Oh yeah,” Lucy muttered as if suddenly remembering something.

“Hm?”

“Am I not included among these formidable foes you wish to cross blades with?”

“Ha ha ha. Not at all.”

“Tch. You’re a cruel man.”

Given the opportunity, she was always asking for a fight. She really had a lousy personality. At least this was an improvement over our first meeting—she hadn’t even asked back then.

“I’ve thought up some new magic to use in close quarters, though…” she grumbled.

“Stop trying to test spells on me…”

I would be lying if I said I wasn’t interested in her new magic. Still, I didn’t want to get hit by it—not in a million years. Regardless, I honestly admired Lucy’s constant pursuit of greater heights despite already possessing great status and power. I, too, wanted to continue polishing my own skills—I didn’t want to forget that feeling.

“Oh, sorry for changing the subject, but…mind if I order this too?” I asked.

“Ooh, feel free. Go ahead. Don’t make me repeat myself. Order whatever you want.”

“Ha ha ha, then I’ll take you up on that.”

Well, it was time to enjoy this exquisite dinner to the fullest. I held back my impatience as I reached for the bell to call the waiter. Its chime rang out like a manifestation of the excitement within me.

# Afterword

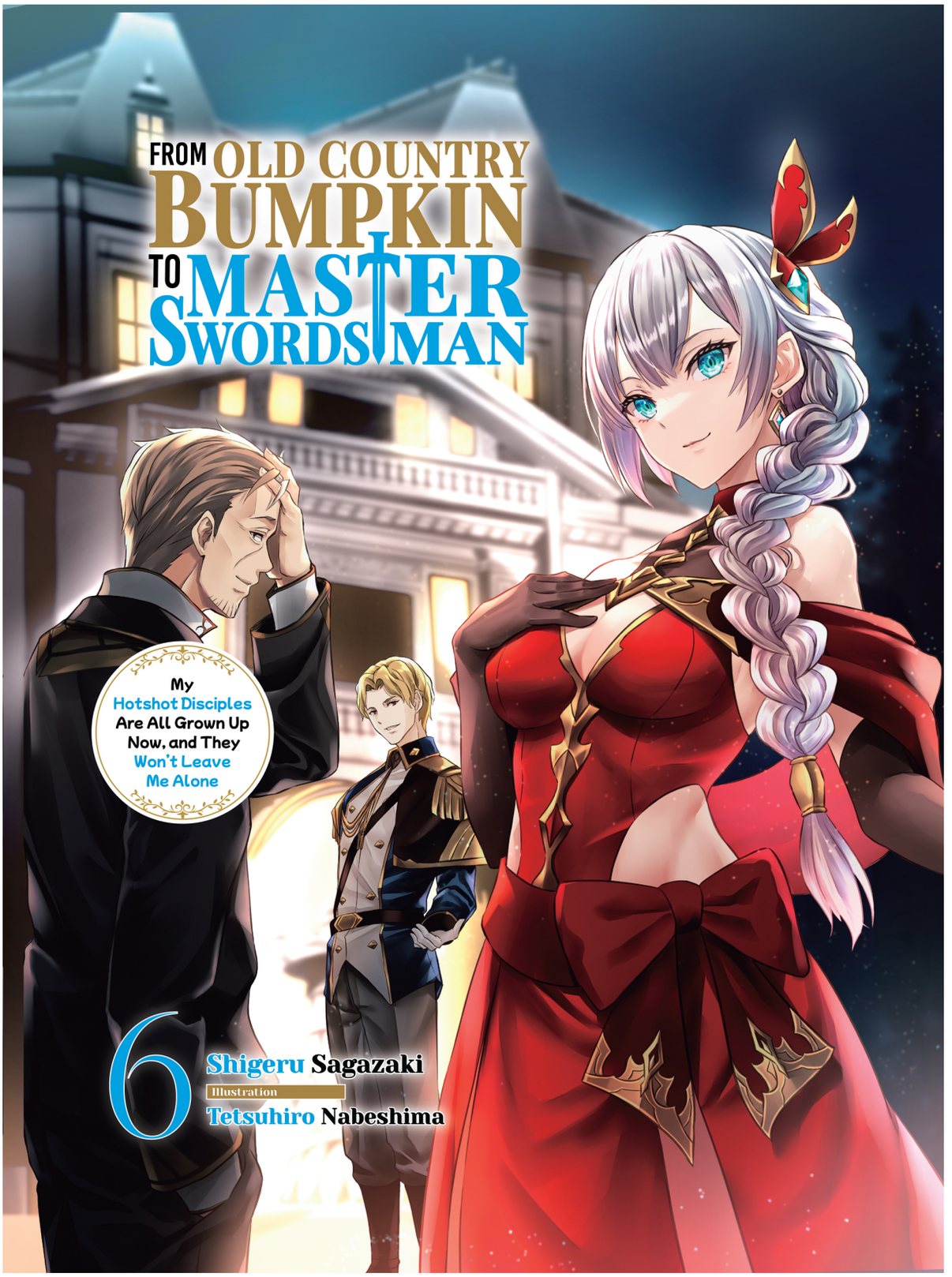
It’s good to see you all again. I’m Shigeru Sagazaki. Thank you very much for picking up *From Old Country Bumpkin to Master Swordsman* Volume 6. In my head, I feel like I’ve gone past the point of no return. I never planned to end this series in ten volumes or anything, but after passing five, I feel like there’s no going back—if that makes any sense.

To be perfectly honest, once again, things got pretty close to the deadline. I managed to make it in time, but it definitely feels like I’m never going to build up a reasonable backlog. I would love nothing more than to have some extra room to breathe, of course, but as long as I’m making the deadline, it’s all good. “I barely made it,” and “I failed to make it,” are like heaven and Earth from society’s perspective. I don’t enjoy living on the edge, but that’s just how things ended up. Hopefully, I can free myself from this cycle somehow.

Now then, in this volume, Beryl genuinely leaves Baltrain for the first time. There are a lot of circumstances behind this expedition, and everyone’s expectations are in a weird state of being somewhat at odds but also in concert. I hope you can all enjoy it as it plays out. Incidentally, I had a motif to go off for the mercenaries who show up at the end. Allow me to thank R and K for that now.

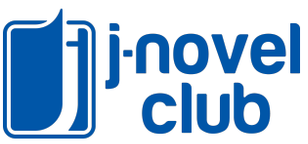
Also, with this volume, we’ve amazingly surpassed two million cumulative sales. In the last afterword, I’d just reported breaking five hundred thousand. It’s really become rather outrageous. I truly owe more than I could ever repay to Sato, the artist for the manga version, which is largely responsible for this. I am in awe at his ability to take my humble work to such heights. It has reinforced my resolve to write to the best of my abilities so that I don’t lose to his momentum. I’ll try hard so that I have more happy news to report in these afterwords. I would love nothing more than for all of you to stick with me for the ride.

Until next time.


FROM OLD COUNTRY BUMPKIN TO MASTER SWORDSMAN
My Hotshot Disciples Are All Grown Up Now, and They Won't Leave Me Alone
6
Shigeru Sagazaki
Illustration
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima


"What?"
"Ah?"
"Master Beryl, I was thinking we should share a room."
Allucia Citrus
Beryl Gardenant
Shueste Flumvelk


"Ugh...!"
I pressed my wooden sword against the back of Sahat's neck as he fell forward. Had this been a real fight, his head would have already parted ways with his body.
"That's one."



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From Old Country Bumpkin to Master Swordsman: My Hotshot Disciples Are All Grown Up Now, and They Won't Leave Me Alone Volume 6
by Shigeru Sagazaki

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KATAINAKA NO OSSAN, KENSEI NI NARU ~ TADA NO INAKA NO KENJUTSUSHIHAN DATTA NONI, TAISEI SHITA DESHITACHI GA ORE WO HOTTEKURENAI KEN vol. 6

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