FROM OLD COUNTRY BUMPKIN TO MASTER SWORDSMAN



My Hotshot Disciples Are All Grown Up Now, and They Won't Leave Me Alone

7

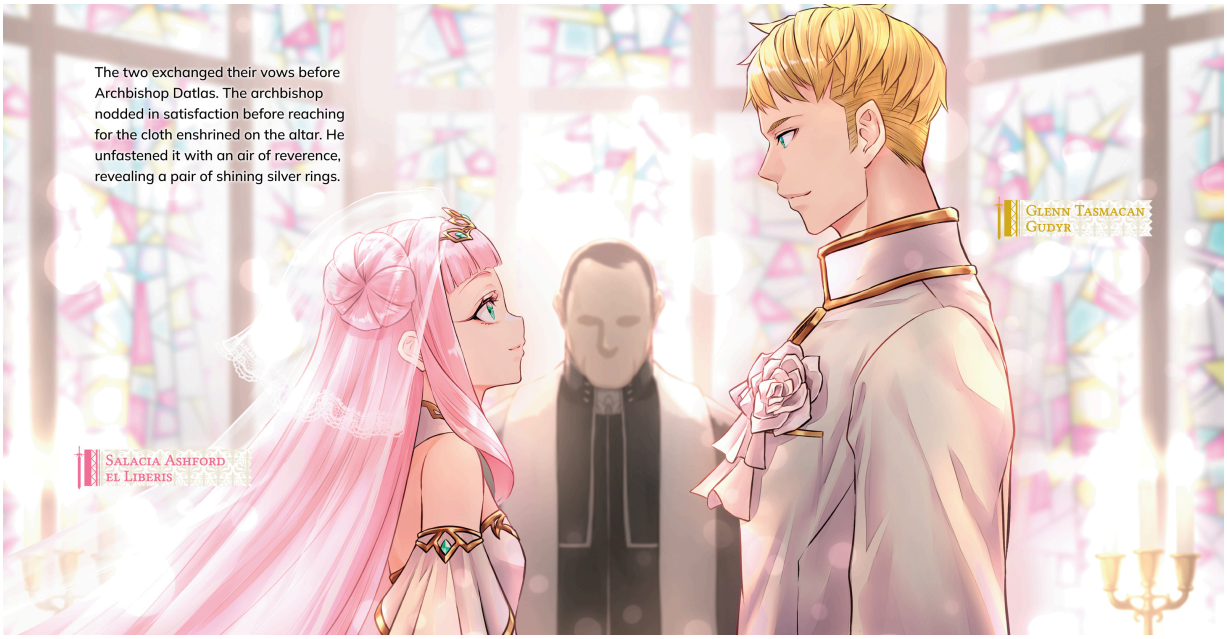
Shigeru Sagazaki

Illustration

Tetsuhiro Nabeshima


FROM OLD COUNTRY BUMPKIN TO MASTER SWORDSMAN
My Hotshot Disciples Are All Grown Up Now, and They Won't Leave Me Alone
7
Shigeru Sagazaki
Illustration
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima


Gatoga Lazorne
Beryl Gardenant
Allucia Citrus


The two exchanged their vows before Archbishop Datlas. The archbishop nodded in satisfaction before reaching for the cloth enshrined on the altar. He unfastened it with an air of reverence, revealing a pair of shining silver rings.
Salacia Ashford el Liberis
Glenn Tasmacan Gudyr

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 finally defeating his father in a sparring match, he is beginning to see his swordsmanship in a new light.

Lucy Diamond



The commander of Liberis's magic corps. She immerses herself in the research of powerful wizardry day and night. She looks like a child, but how old is she, exactly...?

Rose Marblehart



Beryl's former pupil. She took part in the royal assassination attempt, and Beryl defeated her. Since then, she's had a change of heart and has gone into hiding. She feels that she owes Beryl a lifelong debt.

Surena Lysandra



Beryl's former pupil who has respected him for many years. She's attained the highest rank possible within the adventurer's guild: black rank.

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.

Ibroy Howlman



A bishop of the Church of Sphene and Lucy's acquaintance. Ever since he asked Beryl to resolve a certain incident, he has remained a personal connection.

Gatoga Lazorne



The knight commander of Sphenedyardvania's Holy Order and Rose's brother. He works with the Liberion Order to guard the two royals.

Shueste Flumvelk



The eldest daughter of House Flumvelk and little sister of Beryl's former pupil Warren Flumvelk. She hopes to deepen her relationship with Beryl during his visit to the mansion.

Henblitz Drout



The lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order. He has come to idolize Beryl as the order's special instructor.

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.

Beryl and the Liberion Order are invited by his former pupil—Margrave Warren Flumvelk—to the province bordering Sphenedyardvania to attend a noble’s party. While deeply troubled by the unfamiliar gathering of the rich and powerful, Beryl somehow manages to endure with the help of Warren’s sister Shueste.

Then, on the way back to Baltrain, the Liberion order is ambushed by the Verdapis Mercenary Company. They narrowly manage to fend off the enemy, and the knights suffer heavy losses. Beryl has never faced such a dangerous and formidable foe, and a fire ignites in his heart, fueling his passion for swordsmanship.

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Characters
4. Story Summary
5. Jnovels
6. Chapter 1: An Old Country Bumpkin Feels the Onset of Winter
7. Chapter 2: An Old Country Bumpkin Travels to the Holy Capital
8. Interlude
9. Chapter 3: An Old Country Bumpkin Becomes a Savior
10. Epilogue: An Old Country Bumpkin Makes a Promise
11. Afterword
12. Bonus High-Res Color Illustrations
13. About J-Novel Club
14. Copyright



Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

Zerobooks Universal

Zerobooks USA ONLY

Zerobooks IOS

Download all your Favorite Light Novels

Jnovels.com

Join our Discord and meet Thousands of LN readers to chat with

Chapter 1: An Old Country Bumpkin Feels the Onset of Winter

"Okay, good work, everyone."

"Good work!"

By now, I was completely accustomed to teaching at the order's office. After bringing the usual drills to an end, I exchanged farewells with the knights. Currently, it was just a little after noon. I always came to the office in the morning, loosened up my muscles a bit, then brought things to an end around this time. There were knights who trained continuously from the morning onward and others who only showed up when the sun was high in the sky. Regardless, ever since Allucia had brought me here and had made me a special instructor, I'd stuck to this routine.

Training for too long actually made things less efficient. Frankly, I didn't have the stamina for that to begin with. I'd kept this daily schedule ever since my childhood in Beaden, so I had no intention of changing it now. Allucia, Henblitz, and the other knights respected this—I was grateful I could do things the way I wanted to.

"Whoa, so cold..."

After I put away my wooden sword and stepped outside, a serious chill brushed against my skin. The oppressive heat of summertime had faded, and just when I'd gotten used to thinking it was now autumn (with autumn's confusing temperatures), winter's breath was already rapidly closing in. It didn't bother me at all when I was sweating it out with everyone, but once I stopped moving and went outside, I was forced to notice the changing of seasons—whether I wanted to or not.

Summer and winter were perfectly normal in both Beaden and Baltrain. Things could be different farther to the north or south in Liberis, though. Anyway, this was my first winter in Baltrain, but

from what I'd heard from those around me, it was pretty rare for snow to pile up or for a severe cold snap to sweep through the area. That said, the winters weren't mild enough to casually ignore, so I had to prepare a bit to protect myself from the chill.

I'd brought my favorite coat with me from Beaden—the knights of the order were apparently supplied with coats. Even indoors, it got pretty chilly during winter, so people went through firewood at a tremendous rate.

If I'd still been living on my own, I could've just toughed it out, but I had Mewi with me now, so that wouldn't work. I actually had quite the stockpile of firewood back home. The days were generally fine, but nights could get quite harsh without a fire going.

"Maybe I should go shopping for winter clothing for Mewi," I muttered, my breath visible in front of me.

The box from Ibroy had contained many types of clothing, but it hadn't included anything that would be perfect for winter. That made sense—I'd gotten that gift during the summer. I felt like it was wrong to be fully dependent on him, anyway. I wanted to buy all the clothes she needed to withstand the upcoming winter. The magic institute technically provided a coat to wear over her uniform, but it was inconvenient not to have anything else. *I have to complete these preparations before it genuinely starts getting cold.*

After passing through the courtyard, I exchanged greetings with the soldiers of the royal garrison who stood guard at the gate.

"Good work today."

"Hello, Mr. Beryl. Thank you for all your hard work. It's awfully chilly today, isn't it?"

"It really is. Be careful not to catch a cold."

I was completely familiar with them now. The soldiers on duty usually only wore thin mantles, but that would be pretty harsh in this weather, so they were dressed in thick coats. In contrast, the townscape didn't paint a particularly wintry scene. Things could change with some snow, but the same street stalls were still open all over. It didn't seem like the town's energy changed at all, regardless of whether it was spring, summer, fall, or winter. Only the clothing people wore on the streets changed with the seasons.

In Beaden, the slightest hint of winter had everybody shutting themselves indoors. It was different in the big city. There were simply more people and more stores, and there was also plenty of entertainment available, like taverns and houses of ill repute, making things lively all year round. *Not that I've ever been to any of those seedy places...*

"Hmmm..."

I considered going straight home, but since I was already outside, I decided to drop by the western district. If I was going to bring Mewi out to buy winter clothes, I had to at least scope things out first. I did most of my shopping in the western district, but that was generally for food. Neither Mewi nor I tended to fuss over more than the bare necessities, so we pretty much never went out to buy anything else.

I didn't know what kinds of shops sold cold-weather clothes. *And what kind of gear would a shop like that sell anyway?* It would've been fine to drag Mewi around randomly during autumn, but bringing her with me in the cold without a coat sounded wrong. So, my plan was to go alone and take a look around the western district for places that sold winter clothing. I'd also grab a small bite to sate my appetite.

With that, I made my way to the western district. Upon arriving, I heard an energetic merchant's voice.

"Come take a look! You can't beat my prices!"

The hustle and bustle here was different from that of the central district. Things were lively over there, but there was a certain boisterousness to this area. The western district was a place to buy and sell goods, so the noise was a good sign. It was probably bad for the ears if you were here around the clock, though.

As I perused some of the foodstuffs lined up in front of the buildings, an old man with a hearty build called out to me. Attracted by his voice, I turned to look.

"How about it, buddy? I've got fish for sale."

"Hm?"

Just as advertised, I was met by a line of fish. This was honestly a rare sight.

"Fish, huh? How unusual."

"Hm? Your first time in Baltrain?" the man asked. "You're gonna see a lot more fish soon. It's getting colder and all."

"Aah, I see what you mean now."

From what Lucy had told me before, fresh seafood was very rarely available on the market due to problems of preservation and transportation. Even when it *was* for sale, it was extremely expensive. Wizards made its transportation and preservation possible at all. Freshness was a huge bottleneck when it came to transporting seafood, but things were different during the winter.

Fish was impossible to obtain in Beaden even during the peak of winter, so this definitely had me interested. There was a river close to the village, but fish were pretty much nonexistent in those waters. *Even if there were any, the animals and monsters upstream in the Aflatta Mountain Range would probably snatch them all up. The only things we could catch were tiny fish you could eat in one bite.*

"I guess it's gotta be more expensive than meat, huh?" I commented.

"Obviously. It's a lotta work to transport this stuff from the sea."

The fish was around two or three times the price of a similarly sized chunk of meat—that was how much of a luxury good it was. However, looking at it from another perspective, I could get some fish for *only* three times the price of meat. I didn't think wealth could solve all of life's problems, but a certain amount of money did solve some of them.

"How do you cook fish?" I asked.

"Grilling and boiling both work. If you're gonna boil it, the meat crumbles real easylike, so be careful. Also, just like other types of meat, make sure you remove the guts. Oh, and one more thing: I'm sure you can guess, but you can't preserve the stuff. You'll wanna eat it within the day."

"Hmmm."

His explanation was nice and thorough. If he failed to sell these, he would probably either have to eat them himself or throw them away, so he had to be desperate. I could understand how he felt. Fish was a rare curiosity, but you couldn't buy that many at once

when you had to eat them the same day. It probably wasn't impossible to dry or smoke a fish to preserve it somewhat, but I could imagine the futility of an amateur trying that.

"All right, I'll take these two," I decided.

"Thanks for the business!"

I would usually hesitate to spend that much on meat, but my personal income was so detestably high that I could spend this on impulse. Well, maybe "detestably" was an exaggeration—I was grateful for what I received.

So, I ended up purchasing two of the fish that looked a little bigger than the others. I was planning for Mewi and me to each have one. Fish was too pricey to have on a regular basis, so my plan was to use the meal as a fun topic of conversation.

Mewi had definitely never had the chance to taste fish. I was really looking forward to her reaction. The problem was how to cook it—I figured it was best to be safe and just grill it with salt. I was curious about what kind of broth I could make with it, but with only two fish of this size, I wasn't sure how much taste I could get out of them. Also, the meat apparently fell apart when boiled, so grilling sounded easier.

"I really bought them..."

My original plan had been to look for stores that sold winter clothing, but I'd immediately found myself with fresh food. *I'm a little disappointed in my lack of planning ability...* I picked up my pace to at least scope out some stores.

On the topic of buying clothes, I recalled the time Allucia had taken me out to buy that fancy jacket not too long ago. That shop had been a small, stylish, and expensive one in the central district, but style wasn't really a concern this time around. The primary objective was to find something to fend off the cold, so I didn't really care about how fancy or high-class the store was. For now, I just had to find somewhere that sold clothing and see what they were like.

"Oh, that looks nice."

After striding through the western district for a while, I found an unexpected abundance of stores that met my criteria. There were, of

course, many places with a focus on accessories or shoes or other assortments of items, but there were still plenty I could explore that sold what I wanted.

At this time of the year, pretty much everyone was selling *something* for the winter, so I was unlikely to fail as long as I located a few stores that handled clothing. The western district lived up to its reputation as Baltrain's largest marketplace. However, I was well aware of my lack of fashion sense, so I didn't want to pick something myself—Mewi might dislike whatever I chose.

At any rate, my first visit to the western district had left me dazed at how lively it was and how many stores there were, but I felt pretty accustomed to it now. As I walked around, I still commented to myself that it was as lively as ever, but I wasn't overwhelmed in any way. People really were capable of adapting to any environment.

Was this another form of growth? I didn't really know. At the very least, I was used to it now. Maybe you could call it growth in that sense. Not that saying, "Hey, I don't get dizzy from the city's sights anymore" at my age was something to be proud of. I wanted more things I could actually take pride in. *Though I definitely don't want to brag...*

"Oh, this place is also— Hm?"

So far, I'd marked a few shops to take Mewi to, but I soon spotted another one that seemed packed with winter clothing. The vibrant atmosphere of the western district sort of diminished this shop, but it still looked pretty nice.

And just as I approached to check it out—

"Master?!"

"Oh, Surena. What a coincidence."

—I bumped right into Surena, who likely had the same goal as me. She was inspecting a fairly thick jacket. It was definitely a little too cold outside for her usual outfit. I was genuinely worried about whether her belly ever got chilly.

"It's been a while," she said. "It really is quite a coincidence."

"No kidding. Out shopping?" I asked.

Surena had looked utterly shocked when she'd first spotted me, but she'd recovered quickly. She was a lot like Allucia in this regard.

They both had a tendency to get flustered when confronted by the unexpected, but they would regain their composure an instant later, even if only outwardly. It was a feat I would be hard-pressed to duplicate.

"Yes. My winter clothing is in a dire state, so I'm thinking of just getting something new," she answered.

"I see."

Surena had been checking the feel of the jacket in her hands, so I figured that was the case. Commoners like me typically wore the same clothes for a very long time—we simply didn't have the money to constantly change them, and it was far cheaper to mend any tears. That was why we carefully scrutinized the fabric, stitching, and price of clothing that was expected to last a long time. It was pretty difficult to buy new clothes in the countryside, too, so when given the opportunity, you really wanted something that could be worn for years.

This probably didn't apply to rich city-dwellers and nobles, though. From what I'd heard, there were people out there who bought flashy clothes for a party, only to throw them away right after. I found that pretty hard to believe.

On that note, Surena was definitely rich—that much was clear from how casually she'd paid for my sword, which had been made using Zeno Grable's materials. She was the highest rank of adventurer, after all, so her income was very likely far greater than mine.

Still, she didn't give off the impression of someone who wasted money frivolously. She was slowly inspecting what she wanted to buy rather than just buying first and figuring it out later. In her case, these clothes would be used in battles and on requests from the guild, so she couldn't compromise.

"Are you shopping for clothes too, Master?"

"Yup. I've also gotta find something warm for Mewi."

"Mewi..." Surena repeated, sinking into thought for a moment. "Aah, that girl."

"Yup."

I was glad she remembered. The two had only met that one time

over lunch. Surena had been rather overbearing toward her.

"She's not an infant," Surena commented. "There's no need for you to go out of the way to buy clothes for her..."

"No can do. I'm still her guardian."

"That's true..."

It seemed Surena saw me as rather overprotective. Still, I didn't really have anyone around me to use as a reference. When I tried to recall how my mom and dad had been during my childhood, my only impression was that they'd sometimes been kind and sometimes strict. It had all happened too long ago for me to remember clearly, and above all else, my dad had been *very* strict once I'd started down my path as a swordsman. I didn't really want to use that as a reference for Mewi's upbringing.

So, with no examples to go off, I was basically doing things blind. I hadn't been given any time to prepare either. I wasn't disgruntled about how Mewi had come into my care, but I still held a bit of a grudge against Lucy for the whole process. *I can't do anything about that grudge now, though.*

I was pretty sure I made a clear distinction between being kind to Mewi and spoiling her. *Do I draw that line correctly, though? Who knows. There are too few people around me that I can go to for advice about raising a child. Wait... Maybe Mewi is a little too old to call it "raising a child."*

"Well, I'm just laying the groundwork today," I added. "She's better off picking her own clothes."

"You're not wrong. I also find it hard to wear clothes someone else has chosen for me."

Surena approved of my logic. As the highest rank of adventurer, she had to pay extra attention to her appearance.

"But aren't you cold...?" I muttered.

"I can put up with it," she explained. "I'm shopping for clothes for when I can't. Besides, I don't really like wearing too much."

"Well, it does make it harder to move. It's better to stay agile with your fighting style."

"Exactly."

Surena went back to rummaging for new clothes. Incidentally, the

shop owner had probably never expected a black rank adventurer to be here—he'd completely faded into the shop's background. I understood how he felt.

Choosing clothes largely came down to personal taste, but there were times when that didn't work. This was especially the case for people like Surena and Allucia. To take it to an extreme, if Surena ever told me she absolutely loved armor and would like nothing more than to wear a full suit of plate, I would be opposed to it. After all, that didn't suit her fighting style. Prioritizing your taste in clothing at the cost of impeding your ability to fight could be a fatal mistake. On the other hand, someone who focused heavily on defense like Rose was better off wearing as much protection as possible.

Surena's greatest strength was her extreme mobility—she also had the stamina to maintain that mobility for prolonged periods. I had no idea how that little girl I'd met had turned into such a powerful adventurer. Anyway, her style focused on moving and evading rather than defending, so heavy armor didn't suit her whatsoever. Similarly, I'd never worn metal armor, nor did I have any intention to. I did wear formal attire when the situation called for it.

"By the way, what's that you've got there, Master?" Surena asked as she continued looking for clothes.

"Oh, this? Fish." I held them up by the string tying them together. "It was a novelty for me, so I bought some."

It was possible to carry them around like this due to the cold temperature. But...now that she mentioned it, shopping for clothes while carrying raw fish was pretty odd.

"I suppose it's just about the season for them to be on sale in Baltrain," Surena commented.

"Oh, so it really is."

She was probably well-informed when it came to the distribution of goods across the world. After all, she fulfilled requests in all sorts of big cities beyond Baltrain. This was a bit of a mixed blessing—because of her work, I had far fewer opportunities to meet with her, unlike with Allucia, Curuni, and Ficelle, who were all based in Baltrain.

"Have you ever had fish?" I asked.

"I have. It's an altogether different flavor from meat. I rather like it, but they tend to have many little bones, making them somewhat hard to eat."

"Aah... Little bones, huh? That makes sense."

I had pretty much no experience cooking fish, but Surena was very knowledgeable. In most meat, the bones were nice and big—when the cuts even *had* bones. Honestly, meat was rarely sold in the marketplace with the bone attached. Biting into a fish as if it were a hunk of meat seemed like a horrible idea. Back in Beaden, the only fish we had were tiny, and we could chew through their bones.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind," I said.

"Please do. Also, I'm sure restaurants will have fish in stock for the upcoming season."

"Hmm..."

She had a point. Fish probably wasn't going to be available at any cheap taverns, but since it was now in season, it was very likely to be on the menu at some restaurants. I hadn't been to many fancy establishments—the only ones I could think of were the places Lucy and Kinera had taken me to. They were both pretty hard places to go to on my own, and I would be worried about all the formality if I brought Mewi along.

"By the way..." I started.

"Yes?"

"Do you know any restaurants where I can order fish—and some alcohol at a reasonable cost—without the atmosphere being too formal?"

I was aware of how unreasonable this question was, but I wasn't asking just out of simple curiosity. Ever since coming to Baltrain, I'd had the opportunity every now and then to share a meal with my former pupils and new acquaintances. Rose's circumstances hadn't really allowed for it, but I'd gotten to eat with all the others.

I realized that this was more of a rarity with Surena. She was very busy, and her work extended far beyond the city, so that couldn't be helped. Of my acquaintances, she was the hardest to contact. But today, I'd coincidentally managed to bump into her, so I

wanted to grab a bite to eat together if it wasn't a nuisance.

The only time we'd had a meal together was by coincidence over that charcuterie plate. As such, wanting to plan out a meal with her beforehand and take it easy wasn't a strange notion. I also had plenty I wanted to talk to her about.

"Hmm... I think I know one," she answered. "I don't really like formal restaurants either."

"Ha ha ha, so you have problems with those places too."

"Well, yes," she admitted with a self-deprecating smile.

She seemed a little embarrassed about it. I was glad we shared the same opinion. Fancy places really didn't suit a commoner like me.

"If it isn't a bother, could we go there some time?" I asked. "Only when your schedule is open, naturally."

"Hm?! Yes! Of course!"

"R-Right. Thanks."

I'd meant it as a casual suggestion, but she was *immediately* on board with the idea. Well, at least this was better than her refusing or being reluctant.

"I'm sure you have to carve out a time slot for it," I continued. "So how about coming to... Well, the office would be awkward for you, so you can come to my house or send me a letter."

"Y-Your house?!"

"Yeah. To, you know...let me know when we can share a meal?"

"Ah, right."

As far as I could tell, it wasn't a good idea to have Surena bump into Allucia too much—it would be difficult for Surena to come to the order's office, so I figured my home would work.

"Oh, but now that I think of it, I haven't told you where I live..." I muttered.

"True."

"That's easy to solve. It's in the central district—"

As I gave her the exact location, a sudden thought came to mind: I hadn't informed *anyone* of the location of my new home. I'd forgotten, since Lucy and Ficelle had dropped by randomly. It had been Lucy's place to begin with, so she obviously knew where it

was, and she'd brought Ficelle with her.

I hadn't even told Allucia or Henblitz. I saw the knights at the office every day, so I never had the need to inform them of where I lived. That would make Surena the first person to learn where my home was directly from me.

It wasn't like my house was particularly valuable; I certainly didn't own anything worth stealing. Mewi and I were the only residents, after all. There was no need to go out of my way to conceal where we lived. I was rather surprised that I hadn't told anyone before this. Looking back on it, the dojo had been my home for so long that it was a rather fresh experience for me to tell anyone my address.

"I'll drop by in the near future with a housewarming gift," Surena said eagerly.

"Uhhh, there's no need to go that far..."

It was a little odd for her to be so excited over something so trivial. Both Mewi and I would probably recoil at the sight. And since this was Surena we were talking about, her simple housewarming gift was likely to be something scarily expensive.

"Anyway, sorry for getting in the way of your shopping," I said. "See you later."

"Ah, yes! See you soon."

I was only here to window-shop, while Surena was intent on picking something out today. Even if we'd met by chance, I didn't want to stall her.

Baltrain had *far* more people than Beaden did, and there were always more strangers around than acquaintances. Finding someone I knew within that crowd had pushed me to say hello. I still didn't know whether this was a good or bad decision—I didn't want to be an annoying old man who always butted in. *Or...have I already become one?*

"Maybe I should've asked about this stuff when I had the chance..."

To add to all that, my fame was on the rise—I understood this well after my visit to Flumvelk. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to casually greet an acquaintance in the streets. In that respect, Surena and Allucia had already been celebrities for a while, so they

definitely knew how to act in public.

I saw Allucia all the time, but it was pretty rare to meet Surena. It would've been a good idea to ask her about how to handle fame while I had the chance. *Oh, but then I'd be getting in the way of her shopping... Man, this is complicated.*

"Seriously, there are so many new things to learn, even at my age..."

I didn't claim to be wise because of my long years, but it was pretty lame to remain so ignorant as an adult. It was also a bit late to be coming to that realization.

Anyway, I never would have felt this way had I stayed in Beaden, so it was best to look at my circumstances as an opportunity. I had plenty of room to grow beyond my skills with a sword.

◇

After bumping into Surena in the western district and chatting a little, I went back to my house. I strung up the fish I'd bought in a cool spot, and after pondering what food I should pair with them, I started a fire and tossed in some ingredients for a hearty soup. That was when Mewi came back from her classes at the magic institute.

"I'm back."

"Welcome home."

She was wearing the coat the school had provided over her usual uniform. She wouldn't get too cold while she was moving around for her sword magic class, but sitting down for a lecture and the commute to and from school would be pretty unpleasant without one.

"Ugh... So cold..." she grumbled.

"Ha ha, wanna warm up by the fire?"

"Mm."

I'd just gotten it lit for the soup. Being indoors was already an improvement from the outdoors, and the kitchen was even warmer than the rest of the house. It was perfect for winding down after spending time in the cold.

At any rate, Mewi had mellowed out significantly compared to

when I'd first met her. This thought had come to me many times before, but I couldn't help but feel it again. She no longer shouted at every little thing, and she had lowered her guard around others; her speech had softened, and recently, she'd become much more honest with herself. This was a good trend. At this rate, she was sure to grow into an upstanding adult. I thought about how I was partially responsible for that outcome, but I realized that I couldn't simply rejoice over her growth and kick back. As the closest adult in her life, I had to set a good example.

As Mewi warmed up, she took a look around and immediately spotted today's dinner. "Huh...? Is that fish?"

"Yup. My first time seeing it in the market, so I bought some."

They did stand out since they were hanging there—especially since fish wasn't a regular feature in our kitchen.

"I figured we could have it for dinner tonight," I added.

"Hmph..."

Mewi acted cold, but judging by the glances she was giving the fish, she was full of curiosity. She was so cute.

"Ever had fish?" I asked.

"No."

"Me either."

She was clearly restless, so I decided to empathize with her. Strictly speaking, I'd had fish before, but those had been the tiny ones in Beaden you could down in one bite. I didn't consider it the same as what I had dangling in the kitchen. So, I wasn't lying—it was simply a matter of interpretation.

"I was thinking of just grilling them," I said.

"Mm, sounds good."

"Then let's go with that."

Now that I had the princess's consent, tonight's menu was set: a soup full of tasty ingredients, bread, and grilled fish.

On a side note, I wanted to do something about my cooking repertoire, but that change wouldn't come anytime soon. Things kind of worked out when I crudely chopped up ingredients to toss into a pot, and that was good enough for both me and Mewi. Being an amateur cook wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Still, I was a little

scared of handling ingredients I'd never seen and cooking things a way I'd never tried before. In that sense, my mind was still that of a commoner from the sticks. Even though my wallet was in a much better state now, I didn't like the idea of messing up recipes and wasting ingredients.

Lately, if I wanted to eat anything unconventional, I was fine going out to eat. I was grateful for how prosperous Baltrain was in this regard, as restaurants were plentiful here. There were times when I wanted to chow down on tons of meat and others when I wanted to chug ale without a care in the world. However, I indulged in such desires only when I was on my own—it didn't seem right to bring Mewi to a tavern.

I doubted she would throw a tantrum or something. I trusted her not to. Still, I didn't want her to get involved with any weirdos. My face and name were somewhat well-known among the knights and the royal garrison, but not so much within the populace. *Not that I want to become famous or anything...*

That being the case, I still wasn't an adequate shield for Mewi. Bringing a child to a tavern was questionable, but given the opportunity, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea one day. I didn't know when exactly that would be, though.

"Mewi, once you're warmed up, go get changed."

"Mm."

I didn't mind her thawing out for a minute, but her school uniform was finely made, and it was better for her to change to avoid dirtying it. Taking part in the sword magic course was naturally going to lead to it getting spoiled and torn, but getting it dirty out of necessity was worlds apart from messing it up due to sloth. This wasn't a matter of aesthetics or anything—I simply wanted to ingrain that mentality within her.

"Fold it properly too," I added while stirring the soup.

"I know..."

She had a tendency to just toss her uniform on the floor if given the chance. She probably figured it didn't matter since she would just pick it up the next day to wear again. I'd told her before not to act so immodestly in front of the other sex, but she didn't seem to

count me as a man. *But hey, I'm not some sleazebag who would feel any desire for my adopted daughter! That's not the point!*

She probably hadn't had the leisure to worry about such things while working for Twilight. But since she was living a proper life now, I wanted her to care a little more. This kind of thing was more about society as a whole than my personal relationship with Mewi. There was a limit to what I could teach her at home. It would've been nice to have a proper role model for her, but asking someone to fill those shoes was also rather difficult.

In that sense, maybe it would've been better for her to live in the magic institute's dorms. She'd stayed there temporarily during my expedition to Flumvelk but had apparently been in a private room. Raising a child really was complicated. I'd never thought it would be easy, but there was a never-ending stream of problems that hadn't occurred to me. I had serious respect for the world's mothers and fathers.

"I'm hungry," Mewi announced after changing and coming back to the kitchen.

"Just a little longer."

"Mm."

I was too, to be honest. The soup was pretty much done—it was time to cook the fish.

Umm, I start by taking out the guts, right? You can just eat tiny fish whole, but I guess that doesn't work at this size. I was somewhat curious about how the innards tasted, but I had no reason to defy the instructions of the guy who'd sold me the fish. I decided to do exactly as he'd told me to.

"Yup... Uhhh... Huh?"

"You suck."

"Qu-Quiet!"

I slid my knife through the fish, but it wasn't going well. I managed to pull out what looked like guts, but I made quite a mess of the edible meat.

Man, preparing fish is pretty hard. I could manage better with meat. This was how things turned out without prior experience, though. It was pretty embarrassing with Mewi watching. If I could

handle a knife like a sword, I wouldn't have had any issues, but they were completely different skill sets.

"I'll eat this one..." I said before focusing on the second fish. "Okay, this time—"

"Hand it over, old guy."

"Hm? The knife?"

"Mm."

Hmm, I guess she won't ruin the whole thing if she messes up. This'll be a good experience. It's also hard to say no after screwing it up myself.

"Be careful," I said, handing over the knife without any hesitation.

"I can use a knife just fine."

It was time to see what she could do. Not that I was in any position to act like I was better.

"Hmm..."

Mewi carefully pressed the blade against where the fish's innards were, using what I'd done as reference. The tip sank into the flesh, and, moving her hand very slightly, Mewi created a tiny slit. She widened the hole to about the size of a finger, then shifted the angle of the knife and scraped out its innards.

"Probably...like this," she muttered.

"Ooh, pretty good."

Scraping instead of cutting it out, huh? She must've learned from my failure. I mean, I was pretty sure I was doing it wrong. But just so you know, I wasn't going to make the same mistake on a second try.

Anyway, setting aside such childish thoughts, Mewi's knife work was looking a lot better now. I could see a huge difference from when she'd had problems cutting vegetables. This had to be a sign of growth.

"Finished," she reported.

"Nice. Very skillfully done, Mewi."

"Hmph..."

In no time at all, the fish's innards had all been removed cleanly. She'd really done well. You wouldn't have thought this was her first time preparing a fish. Her past as a thief must've trained her

dexterous fingers. However, before this, she hadn't been able to apply that skill to anything else. It was a modest talent, and I was glad she felt comfortable putting it on display in the open without having to feel guilty—even if she only used her skill to prepare a fish.

"I think I have a knack for it," Mewi said.

"That's great. I guess I should ask you to handle the fish if I ever get my hands on some again."

I didn't say anything insensitive like "Why can you prepare fish when you're bad at cutting vegetables?" After all, I was pretty confident when it came to cutting meat, but I was garbage at handling fish. It was the same thing.

"Okay, now all that's left is to skewer and salt them."

The first fish was a mess, but the second had been properly prepared. It was now time to cook it. This part wasn't as complicated—like I said, the fish just needed some salt before being put over the fire. Still, this was kind of fun. There was a certain sophistication to grilling a whole fish over just throwing ingredients into a pot.

"Oooh..."

We enjoyed the sound of crackling fire for a while, and gradually, the fish's skin darkened to a nice crisp, and it let out an appetizing aroma.

"Looks tasty..." Mewi mumbled.

"Right?"

Both Mewi and I already knew that fish was available to the general populace. Still, this was our first time seeing it cooked. It honestly looked delicious. Fish was a truly fascinating food.

"All right, let's get everything else ready."

I left watching the fish to Mewi so I could finish up the soup and get the bread. Other than our main course, this was the exact same dinner as usual. How did adding fish make dinner seem so much more colorful? I never knew it was possible to have fun at home like this. I felt like I was catching a glimpse of new horizons, despite my age.

"Mewi, how's the fish looking?"

“Good.”

“Excellent.”

It seemed things were going well as I set the table. We weren’t doing anything beyond salting and grilling the fish, though. The scent of meat and broth mixed with the fragrance of cooking fish, and that was enough to make me even hungrier than I already was.

“All right, let’s eat.”

“Mm, thanks for the food.”

With that, we got right to it. I took a bite of the crispy fish skin.

“Oh, this is tasty.”

“So good...”



It had a distinctly different taste, texture, and umami from meat. The flesh was all very tightly packed, and it seemed like I could make some great broth by boiling it. The guy who'd sold it to me hadn't been lying. The meat was very light, and it wasn't oily, so a simple seasoning of salt was a nice accent. Fish also seemed like it would go great with some booze.

Also, if a fish of this size was so good, then a larger fish would probably be packed with even more flavor. Considering the cost of transportation and preservation, I could understand the additional cost.

"This really whets the appetite, huh?"

"So good..."

Defeated by the brand-new flavor, Mewi's vocabulary had been annihilated. *Adorable.* She hadn't shown much excitement toward anything before now, but lately, I'd observed her showing a lot more emotion. I was glad to see this change, and I looked forward to what would come of it. One day, when those emotions developed fully, she was sure to become independent of me. I both anxiously awaited and dreaded that day. No matter how much time passed, that feeling remained the same.

"More," Mewi demanded.

"Ha ha ha, that's all the fish we have today."

"Oh..."

It seemed the princess took quite a liking to salted and grilled fish. I didn't really want to give her what I was already eating. Still, I agreed that it was good enough to want more. It was apparently available in the marketplace during the winter, so it sounded like a good idea to be more proactive about buying some whenever I saw any—depending on the price, of course.

"I'll buy more fish if I find some again," I told her. "As long as it isn't too expensive."

"Mm..."

There was nothing better than good food. Nobody out there preferred a lousy meal over a good one—that was a universal constant. In that sense, buying this fish had paid off marvelously. While our cooking skills could potentially be a problem, indulging in

a luxury like this every now and then was pretty nice.

◇

"Okay, I'm off, then."

"Mm, have a good day."

It was the day after Mewi and I had enjoyed the grilled fish, and I left the house as usual. The magic institute had classes today, but I left for the office far earlier than when classes started, so I was usually gone before Mewi. Her sleep schedule still matched mine, though. I'd told her that she didn't need to go out of her way to wake up at the same time as me, but she still did, even now.

According to Mewi, since I was the owner of the house, it only made sense. *I guess she has a point? She's not forcing herself, so maybe it's fine.*

Anyway, I also got home ahead of her, so I usually took care of preparing dinner. We both benefited from this arrangement: I had no need to change my sleep schedule, and in exchange for waking up early, Mewi had dinner waiting for her when she got home. *I'm discounting any criticism of a grown adult using a child for his own benefit...*

"Man, it's cold in the morning!"

I left the house full of energy, but I shivered as a blast of cold wind struck me. Much like in Beaden, my daily lifestyle didn't change much depending on the season—I wouldn't think of sleeping in just because it was cold, nor did I ever stay up late because it was too hot to sleep. Doing so would immediately mess up my circadian rhythm.

So, regardless of how relentlessly cold it was in the mornings, I went outside. I had a job to do, after all. But that didn't mean I was perfectly fine in the cold—I didn't like how it was harder to move my muscles. I wasn't the type to bundle up in clothing either, so that made it even colder.

However, I'd long decided to live the path of a swordsman, and I wasn't going to change my habits now. It would be a different story when I got even older and set aside my sword. Even Surena, whom

I'd bumped into by coincidence the other day, had to deal with the cold. Her fighting style greatly benefited from light equipment, and her usual outfit abandoned any defense beyond the bare minimum—this was so she could focus on offensive strikes. Her armor only protected her vital organs and her limbs.

Since she had an abundance of stamina, a metal breastplate was feasible for her, but that would normally be ill-suited to her agile style—breastplates were heavy, and they hindered movement. That was also why I only wore cloth and, at most, hardened leather.

Anyway, all fighters had their own fixations—knowing what suited your fighting style provided a great advantage in battle. Still, these preferences were sometimes quite inconvenient during daily life, and that was exactly what I was going through now. *It's damn cold.*

"Brrr... I want to get inside and start swinging my sword already..."

Warming up by a fire was nice, but getting the heart pumping with exercise was even better. To that end, I had to reach the order's office quickly. My commute was also a valuable chance to exercise, so I picked up the pace, focusing on loosening up my muscles. After that, I broke into a slight run.

Walking and running were unexpectedly important motions. At my age, there was a desire to kick back and use a stagecoach or something, but it wasn't good for a swordsman to indulge in the big city's conveniences. A stagecoach's hard seats were bad for the back too.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Mr. Beryl. It's awfully cold today, isn't it?"

"Sure is."

And just like that, after hurrying my way to the order's office, I arrived and greeted the usual soldier who stood guard at the gate. He was dressed for the weather, but since his job was to stand around for most of the day, the cold had to be even worse for him. Nonetheless, he fulfilled his duty without complaining. I really respected that—if anyone had asked me to just stand around on guard, I would definitely be grumbling.

I passed through the gate, and right as I entered the courtyard

before the training hall, someone called out to me.

"Mr. Beryl! Good morning!"

"Hm? Morning, Evans."

Evans was still very young, but he was a splendid knight who kept up with the Liberion Order's strict training. I didn't think he was the type to just lounge around outside.

"I've been waiting for you to arrive," he said. "Commander Allucia would like to see you in her office."

"Got it. But wait... You stood out here just to tell me that?"

"Yes!"

"I-I see... Thanks—try not to catch a cold."

"Your concern is much appreciated!"

Apparently, the request from Allucia was all it took to get Evans to wait in the cold. I felt a little sorry for him. If he had wanted to see me, he could've just waited inside the training hall. However, Allucia had deemed that unacceptable for some reason, and she'd insisted that Evans find me before I got there. *Something must've happened that requires my immediate presence with the utmost priority.*

I could more or less guess what the issue was—Sphenedyardvania. Also, it seemed that this wasn't a problem that could just be delivered to me in a message. We had reached a stage where things had to be discussed in person.

I didn't feel much of an urge to gripe and dismiss this summons as a pain to deal with. Maybe this was also a minor change in my mindset. Not too long ago, I would've grumbled about Allucia dragging me into these things, but when it came to the issues with Sphenedyardvania, I wanted the order to be able to rely on me.

This was probably a change for the better. I was getting on in years, but I was only just reaching mental maturity in the truest sense. I hadn't intentionally acted immature before this, but in hindsight, some of my behavior had been rather childish. Maybe it was best to view this change optimistically. Even at my age, it was still possible to improve. Though, it was hard to completely understand how I'd grown—the only person I had to compare myself against was my past self. It wasn't something I could really ask

someone else about either.

"Okay then..."

I needed to quickly respond to the knight commander's summons, so I tucked away such emotions in the corner of my mind. I turned from the training hall and made my way to her office. This was my third time going there. For normal matters, we would just use the reception room, or Allucia would come to the training hall. Was it even possible for this meeting to be as serious as the last two?

Either we'd discovered the Verdapis Mercenary Company's objective, or there had been some kind of development regarding Sphenedyardvania's involvement. All I knew was that the Liberion Order and the magic corps were handling the investigation. No matter how hard I tried, I wouldn't be able to contribute to that. Still, as an involved party, there was essential information I needed to know. My basic stance was that I wanted to know what was going on, and that if my sword was needed, the order should not hesitate to call on me.

I walked through the white interior of the building. I was quite accustomed to this scenery now, though not too long ago, I would've never imagined that I'd be working in such a place. I was in awe at how quickly time flowed—people really *could* get used to anything.

The order's headquarters was quite large, but I'd only visited a few locations within it. In fact, aside from the training hall, the only rooms I'd been to were the reception room and Allucia's office.

I followed the familiar route and soon arrived at my destination.

"Right..."

I didn't *need* to adjust my appearance or make myself more presentable, but I paused to compose myself before knocking on the door. I was meeting Allucia, so I could be rather casual. Still, she was the Liberion Order's knight commander, and I absolutely didn't want to barge into the room without warning.

"Come in."

"Excuse me," I said, entering the room.

Allucia was examining papers at her desk. "Sorry for calling you

so early in the morning, Master."

"Don't be. It's perfectly fine."

She really had nothing to apologize for. If a knight had come to my house first thing in the morning to drag me here, then maybe I would've complained a little. However, she'd had Evans send me here only after I'd arrived, so this meeting wasn't any trouble at all.

"Please take a seat," Allucia offered.

"Thanks."

Much like the other times I'd been here, I took a seat on the sofa located in a corner of the room. The order's headquarters was sturdy and well-built for security purposes—it was sealed tight, so no drafts slipped in from outside, and you couldn't even feel a hint of the cold air. This made it easy to discount the weather. My home wasn't so impervious to temperature changes, so I was a little jealous...but comparing my house to a key complex of the nation's security was a ludicrous thought.

"Let's get right to it," I said, skipping any chitchat.

"Of course," Allucia agreed. Her time was finite too. "I called you here because Princess Salacia's wedding schedule has been determined."

"Hmm..."

The information Allucia had for me was a little different from what I'd expected. Even though we'd been attacked during the practice expedition, Liberis couldn't call off Princess Salacia's wedding. After all, this was a marriage between nations. To put it bluntly, there was no way the royal family's schedule would be thrown off just because some commoners were attacked.

So, it was expected that the wedding would proceed exactly as planned. The problem was whether things were safe enough for the royals. Had Sphenedyardvania been identified as the culprit behind the attack? It was fine if they weren't in any way related. But if they were, we had to consider the possibility of another attack and the reasons why one might occur.

"When is it?" I asked.

"The princess will be leaving Baltrain at the end of the month. She'll stay in Sphenedyardvania for a while, and then the wedding

ceremony will be held at the turn of the new year."

"I see."

There was nothing to gain from asking about Sphenedyardvania. The king wasn't going to change his plans because of my opinion. So, I turned the conversation to the schedule instead.

To state the obvious, Sphenedyardvania was farther away than Flumvelk, so it took longer to reach. Our last expedition had involved a few dozen people, but Princess Salacia's escort would be much, *much* larger. More troops meant a slower march. From what I'd heard, the journey alone would likely take a full month—or longer if major issues occurred. Everyone involved was desperately making preparations to avoid any such problems.

"We would like you to join Princess Salacia's escort," Allucia added.

"Got it. Count me in."

I'd also expected this, and I'd been ready to accept. I would've preferred if they hadn't asked me at all, but considering the attack during the previous expedition, this escort mission put the entire Liberion Order's reputation at stake. I was honestly glad that I was counted among them, though I was dreading the upcoming strife they anticipated.

"Thank you... I'm sorry to have to put this burden on you, Master."

"Don't be. It's nothing for you to worry about."

This was a heavy responsibility, but it wasn't Allucia's fault. She felt serious remorse—that was just the kind of person she was. This was a virtue of hers, but from my perspective, she was taking on many burdens she didn't need to. She couldn't relax while on duty, but she could do with a break every now and then. People who remained on edge all the time exhausted themselves surprisingly quickly, though that could just be my opinion as someone in a position with nowhere near as much responsibility as the commander.

"There will be several meetings before our departure," Allucia continued. "They'll take up some of your time."

"I see... I'm not sure what I can contribute by attending, but if

I'm needed, I'll be there."

I honestly just wanted to have orders handed to me so that I could skip the meetings, but that probably wasn't going to happen. I was both unsuited for and uninterested in these planning phases, but if I was being called on, I had to attend.

"For the next few weeks, please push the knights to their limits," she added. "We'll gradually ease back as we prepare for the mission."

"Got it."

We needed to prepare the knights and ensure that the order was in tip-top shape, so it was a good idea to set a rigorous training regimen. Doing so naturally led to exhaustion, so when it was time to start moving for the real mission, we would have to ease off to get rid of any fatigue.

"That's all I have to tell you today," Allucia said. "I'll be in touch soon."

"Sure. I'll head to the training hall."

I didn't really mind meeting frequently. However, much like on the expedition, I was out of my element when surrounded by strangers. You could say I just had to get used to it, but my personality got in the way of that.

Anyway, my business with Allucia was done for the day, so it was time to head back to the training hall. *After I leave the order for the day, I have to figure out how to tell Mewi I'll be gone for so long. Oh, and I probably won't be able to catch a meal with Surena until the expedition's over. Since I was the one to extend the invite, I have to think of a way to make it up to her.*

"Okay..."

I slapped my cheeks as I left Allucia's office. There was plenty to think about, but nothing I had to solve right that instant. My biggest priority was training the knights to the best of my ability.

I refocused and calmed my swirling thoughts. It was time for me to become a demon instructor for a while and push these knights to the brink.

◇

"Dash! Dash! Keep it lively, people!"

"Ooooh!"

The knights bellowed in response to my orders. Winter was nearly upon us, so in the training hall, it got pretty cold unless you were moving or wearing extra clothes. Despite this, all of them were drenched in sweat.

Dehydration wasn't as much of an issue in the winter compared to the summer, but still, nothing good came from totally draining the body. *Once this drill's over, I should give them the chance to get some proper rest and to rehydrate.*

"I-I can't...!"

Another knight dropped out. He looked like he was on the verge of death. Just as Allucia had requested, I was seriously driving them to the edge. The process was extremely simple—I just made them run. However, just sprinting around aimlessly would be pretty pointless. It placed a momentary burden on the muscles, but it didn't push the body to the brink. Just being strict wasn't enough.

The training hall was completely indoors, which prevented outsiders from seeing the knights train. As such, I wanted to avoid having them run outside like we'd done with the provincial army in Flumvelk. They did drills inside the training hall instead.

First, everyone lined up side by side and ran from wall to wall. Once they reached the other side, they turned around and did it again. Each knight was free to set their own pace. However, the group only started the run to the other side when everyone reached the wall. In other words, the first to get there could take a short break, while the last got none at all.

There was a flaw in this method: if the last person in line ran too slowly, it would make the training useless. So, after the first person touched the next wall, a countdown would begin, and there would be a forced start after a certain amount of time. Anyone who didn't make it before that would have to drop out.

It would be cruel to have the knights look around and make that call themselves while they were running so desperately, so *I* gave the start signals. I had to carefully watch everyone and judge when someone reached the wall and when a certain amount of time had

passed.

Anyway, this was way more tiring than running aimlessly. The burden on the muscles from the constant stops and starts was pretty nasty. But in return, one's muscles were strengthened considerably. Of course, that only worked if you had the ability to keep up with this reckless training. Thankfully, there was no need to worry about that with the Liberion Order.

This training also had no fixed limit. It wasn't like they were doing a predetermined number of laps—I had them running to the very limits of their willpower and stamina. We kept going until only one person was left.

Doing this type of training alone made it easy to give up quickly, but the knights had others running beside them, so they were motivated by their pride. This was the perfect training for pushing them to the edge, both physically and mentally. Allucia had personally told me to run them ragged in preparation for Princess Salacia's wedding procession, so I was ready to be utterly merciless.

On a side note, if I'd participated in this training, I was absolutely confident that I would've been the first to drop out. I just happened to have decent stamina relative to the average forty-five-year-old man. There was no way I could keep up in a direct contest against the young, active knights of the Liberion Order. *That's not really something to be proud of...*

"Heh! Heh! Heeeeh...! Piece of cake!"

Anyway, to state the obvious, those with more stamina lasted longer. There was very little room for technique in this kind of contest. Curuni was a perfect example of this. She was a step above the other knights when it came to pure strength and endurance. Though she was gasping for breath like everyone else, she constantly led the pack.

"Hrrrk...!"

In contrast, Evans had just dropped out—he looked like he could hurl at any moment. He'd hung in there for a long time, but he was poorly matched against Curuni. When it came to swordplay, the difference between them was small enough for them to spur each other on, but she was utterly superior in terms of stamina.

"Ugh...!"

Another knight dropped out, unable to make it to the wall before the forced start. I wanted to at least say something to those who were finished, but I had to keep my eyes on those who were running—I had to signal the start of a new lap. This applied even to Frau, who'd just returned to training. She'd rested for a while to recover from her shoulder injury, and she'd still managed to hang in there until this point. She had some serious willpower.

After coming back from the expedition, Allucia had ordered Frau to get some rest. That had been a perfectly reasonable decision. Training with an injury most always led to lousy results. It was better to get some proper rest, then go back to serious training after recovering. This rest period had also been for more than just her physical recuperation—she'd had to recover mentally as well. But now, she was successfully back on duty. Unfortunately, though he'd survived, Vesper wasn't anywhere close to returning. He couldn't even walk properly yet. His injury and the deaths during the attack surely lingered as enormous shadows hanging over Frau's heart.

This had to have been a huge internal conflict for her. Was it right for her to continue being a knight? Did she have the resolve to persist in the Liberion Order? I didn't believe she'd settled things yet. It was possible she was lost but didn't have the determination to resign either—perhaps she was focusing on moving her body to distract herself.

This was a perfectly valid answer. Humans wouldn't suffer as much if we could always just sit back, think on it, and automatically choose the right answers. I was also familiar with this tactic—in the past, I had recklessly swung my sword to avoid having to think about things. It was akin to running away.

In that sense, you could say Frau was taking a step forward. It was still unclear what future she would ultimately choose, but just coming to get some exercise without wallowing in despair was something I wanted to praise her for.

"Ugh... Oooooh!"

"Mrrrrgh...!"

After glancing at Frau, I returned to focusing on the training drill.

It was now down to two knights: Henblitz and Curuni. This was pretty much as expected. Curuni was a beast when it came to stamina, and Henblitz's title as lieutenant commander wasn't just for show. His stamina and strength towered above the others. To add to that, both were the type to give everything they had, even when training—they'd spent nearly the entire time dashing at full speed.
To come out on top, even when constantly sprinting at full speed... They both have crazy levels of endurance. I doubt I would've had any chance against them even if I were twenty years younger.

This drill technically wasn't supposed to stop until there was only one person left, so calling it a draw would cheat them out of that. I had no choice but to continue watching, though I was starting to question how long this was going to take. Neither of them had any composure left, but even if they ran out of stamina, I felt like they might keep going entirely on guts.

As the lieutenant commander, Henblitz couldn't afford to lose. On the other hand, Curuni had great pride in her stamina, so she wasn't going to throw in the towel either. You'd think it would be perfectly fine for someone other than Henblitz to win, but...well, a person with such a weak spirit would never last in the order.

Actually, it was a little late to ask, but was it really all right for me to drag the lieutenant commander into this hell training? I was starting to get a little worried.

"Ugh... Gh...!"

"Ooh."

And just as that thought crossed my mind, Curuni finally started falling behind. It seemed Henblitz's musculature really was a cut above hers. People had a certain animalistic strength they could tap into, like when they needed to escape the scene of a fire. It was pretty convenient to have a font of strength you didn't normally have access to, but it couldn't be maintained for long. If anything, it was only meant to last for an instant. There were those who could maintain it on guts alone, but if anything, that was to prevent their abilities from deteriorating over time rather than for pushing themselves beyond their limits.

At any rate, now that she was near her breaking point, it was

tremendously hard to catch up. That was especially the case against Henblitz.

"Stop!"

"Blagh...!"

Curuni was getting slower and slower, so I brought the drill to an end. The moment I did, she toppled to the ground. Regardless of her loss, there were very few people who could muster such stamina and willpower. This was a splendid quality to possess.

"Pwah...!"

Even Henblitz, who was usually composed when he beat all the knights in sparring matches, was pretty exhausted. From what I could tell, he'd been right on the brink as well. It seemed he'd beaten Curuni by the slightest margin, driven entirely by his obstinacy.

"Good work," I said, handing him a towel.

"Th-Thank you...!"

It was pretty rare to see him gasping for breath. It really showed how merciless this drill had been. I'd made them do it, but I definitely never wanted to participate. *Don't give me that look. I did it in the past, okay? I just don't want to do it* now*.*

My dad had run me through this exercise too. At the time, I'd constantly complained and whined about why I had to go through such torture. Now, I could see it as one of the foundations for my current strength. My dad's training had been harsh but effective—that was why I was following in his footsteps.

"Haaah...! That's some good training...! Very stimulating...!" Henblitz gasped between sentences.

"G-Glad you liked it."

I felt a little sorry for dragging him into this dull but hellish drill—he didn't seem to mind at all, though. If anything, he looked invigorated. Still, if this was the only training he did, he would definitely get bored and lose motivation. That was why it was best to use this exercise sparingly. Right now, I happened to have a just cause for driving the knights to the edge.

"L-Lieutenant... I'll win next time..."

"Curuni, start by getting up and drinking some water..." I told her.

"Yessir..."

She was still sprawled on the ground, not moving a muscle. That was how far she'd pushed herself, so it looked like this training session was a success.

"Frau, you okay?" I asked.

"Y-Yes... Thank you...for your consideration..."

Her breathing was still ragged, but she'd recovered enough to talk. *Good*. Despite being driven so hard, none of the knights had passed out. That was pretty amazing. It really showed how high the standards for the order were.

"Try not to push yourself too hard," I told her.

"No... Now is the time to do exactly that."

"I see."

There were times when you really did have to be reckless. I couldn't deny that now was one such time for her. I didn't see any desperation in her eyes—she was intent on participating in Princess Salacia's wedding procession next month, and my concerns were unnecessary.

She'd come to this decision all on her own. She was going to continue being a knight. She was going to bear that burden to the very end.

"Then I won't hold back," I said. "I'll drive you to your limits just like the others, so be ready."

"I couldn't ask for more."

I wasn't going to brush off her determination with my trivial concern for her. That was why I was going to train her mercilessly. The Liberion Order was truly quite the gathering. There was a definite willpower and pride here that had been built up over the course of history. Now that I was involved, I didn't want people to say there'd been a drop in quality—that would be far too insulting not only to Allucia but to the knights I was training as well.

"Get some water and rest, then we're moving on to sparring!" I yelled, now full of motivation. "You've gotta be able to fight even when exhausted!"

"Yes, sir!"

I planned to take part in the sparring as well. I had to push

myself to the limit too, even if I couldn't manage it the same way I had during my heyday when I'd possessed never-ending energy.

All right, time to fire myself up. Let's start by defeating everyone in this room.

◇

"L-Let's call it a day here..."

"Thank you for your hard work!"

"Mm... Likewise..."

I'm beat. Super beat. I really shouldn't get so excited about this kind of training at my age. I could feel that truth seeping into my bones. I wanted to punch the me from earlier who'd thought it was a good idea to train to my limits. Well, pushing myself was a good thing on its own, but I'd miscalculated how much my stamina had declined over the years.

Due to the dashing drill, the knights had suffered from considerable fatigue. I'd felt guilty for being the only one relaxing the whole morning, and I'd also been rather motivated after seeing their effort.

However, there was a clear difference in standards when it came to stamina between me and the knights. I'd gone in intent on beating everyone in a sparring match. I'd managed to pull it off, but I was in a precarious state now.

Despite it being winter, my body was hot, and I was drenched in burning sweat. If I didn't hydrate properly, I was liable to collapse. That would be quite unsightly—I was going to keep it from happening with sheer willpower.

"All right, I'll excuse myself ahead of you guys... Haaah..."

"Take care," Henblitz told me.

"Mm, thanks..."

I leaned my wooden sword against the wall and left the training hall. I really did have to be careful not to collapse, and I prayed that my body would hold out until I got home. At this point, I really didn't mind if Mewi saw me being a little lame.

That was just how much of my private life I shared with Mewi.

She saw me doing stupid stuff all the time, and I'd seen her doing similarly silly things. I wondered if not needing to be careful about how we acted was a sign of faith or reliance. Before I moved here, the only people in my life I could trust like that were my mom and dad...and some fellow students like Gisgarte. Before I'd even realized it, Mewi had become a part of that circle.

If I ever started a family of my own, being able to show this side of me would be one of my conditions for a partner...but there wasn't much I could do about that just by thinking about it.

"Whoa! Sure is cold outside...!"

I had taken only a single step out of the training hall when a cold gust slammed against me. The chilly wind rapidly cooled my flushed body. I was liable to catch a cold if I just stood here in a daze. Not only did I have to get back home quickly to get my body back to its normal state, but I also had an important mission to accomplish today: inform Mewi about the upcoming expedition.

This trip was going to be far longer than the last. Our destination was farther away, plus we had to stay for longer. I would be leaving Mewi on her own, but she could probably stay at the institute's dorms again. We didn't have any problem affording it, and the dorms were the perfect environment for her. I also had to clear it with Lucy. Though, considering her position, she surely knew about the expedition already.

"Right, let's get back quickly..."

I was exhausted, but I couldn't drag my feet all the way back home. Even if nobody was really watching, a part of me wanted to keep up appearances somewhat when I was in public. It was difficult to pay attention to every minute action of my body, but I at least wanted to avoid being seen as a total slacker at a casual glance. My time spent holed up in the countryside hadn't exactly prepared me for this. I had to get used to it, though.

I guess this is another form of growth. According to Allucia and Warren, I was definitely going to be invited to more occasions where I would have to watch my behavior, so it was best to get accustomed to it during my daily life.

It felt nice to have others rely on my sword, and I was intent on

giving it everything I had, but I was well aware of how bad I was at all the other stuff. Much like my budding confidence, I felt like this was going to need a lot more time to develop.

"We still have plenty of food, so I guess I'll head straight home today."

We stocked the kitchen in a couple of different ways: Most of the time, Mewi and I would go on shopping runs to the western district, but occasionally, I would stop by somewhere on a whim as I walked home from the order's office. On those days, I usually only picked up enough for a single meal—much like the fish I'd bought the other day.

I didn't have the energy for that today—I just wanted to go straight home. I was hungry, but I wasn't going to wander around the marketplace looking for something in my current state. *I'm really feeling the limits of my age.* Despite my fatigue, I didn't want to take a stagecoach. Slacking off at times like these would lead to bad habits, and since I was already in decline, taking it easy would surely send me down a never-ending spiral.

Worn out, I walked back home—nothing of note happened along the way.

"I'm home."

My voice echoed quietly through the empty building. Mewi wasn't going to be back for a little while, so I started preparing dinner while my body could still move. *If I lie down flat, I'm going to pass out right away, and it's a little too early for that.*

"I guess I'll stew some stuff..."

Making a stew truly was convenient at times like these. Things more or less worked out by chopping random ingredients and tossing them into a pot. I had to watch the heat, but it was still a forgiving way of cooking.

I filled the pot with water and set it over the fire. In the meantime, I chopped some meat, potatoes, and vegetables, then chucked them in. Some salt and herbs helped give it a little flavor. This wasn't going to help me expand my cooking repertoire, but it was so easy—I couldn't help it. *It makes sense that Mewi only ever cooks this kind of dish.*

“So sleepy...”

Now that I was back home, all the tension had drained from my body. A tremendous drowsiness assaulted me while I cooked dinner. I wanted to go to sleep right away, but that would be dangerous with the fire going. That said, putting out the fire would leave dinner incomplete. I didn’t want to eat a half-cooked meal, and more importantly, I didn’t want to feed Mewi one.

“Hmph! Ow...”

I pinched my cheek hard to help me focus. It hurt like hell, but it did wake me up. It’d been a long time since I’d felt so drowsy at this hour...which meant it’d been that long since I’d driven myself to the edge. It was nice that I hadn’t been in any situations where this kind of strain had been necessary, but I was no longer in a position to do this often. There wasn’t much I could do about my declining stamina—all I was capable of was slowing the slump a little bit. I had to at least put the effort in for that.

And so, I waged this war against exhaustion for a while. Around the time the food was ready, Mewi returned home.

“I’m back.”

“Ah, welcome home.”

S-Somehow, my duty is finally over. Well, I still had to tell Mewi about the expedition, but I could honestly leave that for tomorrow. My job today was done.

“You look awfully tired,” Mewi remarked as she came into the kitchen to warm up by the fire.

“You can tell?”

The two of us had been living together for a while now, so it was only natural to notice abnormalities right away. Mewi had always possessed a particularly sharp eye when it came to human subtleties, so it was a simple matter for her to see that I was exhausted.

“I’ve gotta train hard for a while,” I explained as I taste-tested the food.

“Hmm...” Mewi muttered with disinterest. “Going somewhere again?”

“Uhh... Yeah, that’s right.”

I was pretty shocked by her observation. Her comment instantly blew my drowsiness away. I'd known from the beginning that she was pretty sharp, but I hadn't expected her to guess correctly without me saying anything. So now, I didn't have to hide it. I'd planned to tell her anyway, but now that she'd brought it up herself, it was best to consider this a boon and get it over with quickly.

"The order is going on another expedition," I said. "It's gonna be a little longer than last time."

"I see."

Much like before, I didn't mention anything about the princess or any international affairs. Mewi had nothing to gain from learning about that stuff, and I didn't want to cause her any unnecessary concern. Well, it was the princess's wedding procession, so she was sure to hear about it sooner or later. Still, it was currently confidential information, so I couldn't give her any details.

"You know..." she mumbled after a prolonged silence by the fire.

My ears perked up. "Hm?"

"I can manage on my own...even if you're not around."

"That so? Don't want to go to the dorms?"

"No, that's not what I mean, but..."

I thought it over. Mewi probably didn't hate the dorms. She'd gone there last time, after all, and she wasn't the type to refuse just because she didn't like something. If her stay had been unpleasant, she would've said something—though I couldn't say whether she would've revealed what had bothered her.

There must be a reason she's mentioning this. Was she going through a rebellious phase where she didn't want to be treated like a child? I understood how she felt. During my childhood, I'd hated it when my dad had treated me like a brat. Looking back on it now, that was the definition of bratty behavior, but that was something I could only see after getting older and being in my current position.

Telling a child, "Don't be like that—you're still a child," wouldn't convince them. Also, strictly speaking, Mewi was already past the age where I had to constantly watch her. She'd often managed on her own up until now, so in that sense, maybe she was a little more mature than other girls her age.

I was, of course, worried, but maybe I really was being too overprotective. Lucy had criticized me for that last time.

"I'll be away longer than last time, just so you know," I said. "Somewhere around two months."

"I'll be fine."

"I see..."

I was at a junction. I had to decide whether to wholly trust her.

"Got it," I concluded. "If anything happens, go to Lucy. I'll talk to her beforehand."

"Mm."

I was anxious. We had plenty of money, so she wasn't going to starve or anything. Still, it was hard for me to leave her completely home alone without any supervision. I wanted to trust her, though. *I'll set up as many safety nets as possible. I'll get Lucy involved, and after that, I can secretly discuss things with the institute as well. Kinera is sure to take such things into consideration.*

"When are you going?" Mewi asked.

"Hmmm... At the end of the month, I think. I'll be back around the new year."

"Got it."

I had no idea what I was going to be doing once I got there. Either way, a princess's wedding wasn't going to be settled in one or two days—we would be staying in Sphenedyardvania for a while. That made two months a pretty good estimate.

I would be lying if I claimed I wasn't going to be worried about Mewi during that time. Frankly, I was going to be *super* worried. But now that I'd decided to trust her, I couldn't grumble about it. *A man never backs down on his word.*

"Then I'll do the shopping and cooking starting tomorrow," Mewi said. "It'll be good practice."

"Oh? Sorry to make you do that."

"There's nothing to be sorry for."

Mewi had put some proper thought into this. The idea of rehearsing while I was still around was splendid. If she failed at this task, it was going to be easier for me to make her go to the dorms too. She'd probably taken that into consideration already. She wasn't

just being stubborn—she was taking responsibility for what she'd said, and that made me very happy. It was touching to watch a child grow so quickly.

"Feel free to use my money," I told her. "Please keep it in moderation, though."

"I know."

I was sure she wasn't going to go on a spending spree, even if I hadn't said anything. For better or worse, Mewi's time as a thief had given her a sense of the value of money—something that was uncommon for people her age.

"Also, make sure you fold your clothes and put them away properly," I added.

"Erk... I know..."

In complete contrast to her earlier replies, this one came back a little stiff. She really was bad at tidying up. That was kinda cute, though.

◇

As the days went by, I received more details from Allucia about Princess Salacia's wedding procession. I also got a sense of Mewi's growth and made the necessary arrangements with Lucy and the magic institute (mostly with Kinera). Life was slightly different from normal, though not by much. I still trained the knights at the order's office, and once in a while, I watched over the students of the sword magic class at the institute.

After some time had passed like that, I was once more summoned by Allucia. I made my way to her office.

"We've been awaiting your arrival, Master."

"Mm, sorry to keep you... Hm? Henblitz, you're here today too?"

"I am."

I'd figured I was there for some more information on the expedition, but Henblitz was taking part too. This was now a secret meeting with the knight commander and her lieutenant. I wasn't particularly nervous—I was familiar with them, after all—but someone who only knew them by their titles would be shaking at the

thought of a private meeting. *Well, I guess I also have a fine title as the special instructor for the Liberion Order.*

"So, what is this about?" I asked, taking a seat on the usual sofa.

"Before we get to that, there is something I'd like to give you, Master."

"Hm?"

This was somewhat unexpected. What could Allucia have to give me? I had no idea. It had to be something important if she needed to call me to her office.

"Here." Allucia handed me a thick bundle of cloth.

"This is..."

"An overcoat," Henblitz explained. "It's part of our order's equipment."

I unfolded it, revealing a wide coat that seemed like it was made to fit over armor. It was an unassuming yet clear ultramarine. The color matched the order's equipment.

"Hmmm."

Even before unfolding it, the weight had made it clear that the fabric was thick. It also felt nice, and I could tell at a glance that the coat was made of high-quality cloth. It was pretty long—the length would probably fall past my knees. It would definitely be effective against the cold, and it even had a hood, making it suitable for bad weather too. Emblazoned on the back was the large emblem of the Liberion Order.

"So you want me to wear this for the expedition?" I asked.

"Precisely," Allucia confirmed. "You don't have a knight's armor, after all."

"Well, that makes sense."

The princess's wedding procession was a huge endeavor with all the might of the nation behind it. As such, the order was understandably deploying much of its forces. It would be hard to explain if I were the only one among them with completely different equipment.

This hadn't been a big deal during Prince Glenn's visit to Baltrain. I'd spent most of that time inside a carriage, and even though I'd been the only one without armor, I hadn't looked out of place—

they'd most probably just thought I'd been an attendant.

It seemed that wouldn't work this time. I hadn't been knighted, so it wouldn't be appropriate for me to wear their armor. Just giving me some wouldn't be right either. So, with the winter season as an excuse, it made sense to use an overcoat to add some uniformity.

"Just to ask...do I have to return this afterward?" I asked.

"No, it's not a loan," Allucia answered. "Even after the expedition, you are free to use it."

"Got it."

I'd figured I would have to give the jacket back after the expedition, but that wasn't the case. I now had an unexpected garment for the cold season ahead. *Pretty lucky.* That said, I wasn't too enthusiastic about walking around outside with a huge emblem of the order on my back.

"I'll gratefully put it to use," I said.

"Please do."

And just like that, I now had the order's overcoat. But was this all I'd been called for? Giving me a coat didn't seem important enough to warrant a private meeting in Allucia's office with Henblitz in attendance. Perhaps it had simply been a coincidental convenience that they'd had the coat prepared for this meeting—there had to be something else more pressing.

"So, about why I called you here," Allucia went on, confirming my thoughts. "The route and schedule for the expedition have been decided on."

"I see..."

The schedule was set. If that had been all, she could've just announced this in front of all the knights, but that wasn't how things worked. If the route and schedule were made public, it would make us targets—it would be easy for assailants to track our movements and attack. Plus, this time, the princess was going to be with us. The Verdapis Mercenary Company weren't necessarily the only people out there with foul intentions in mind. So, the route was given only to the upper brass. Those in the lower ranks just had to do as ordered and protect their charge. That was how things were done in the military.

I didn’t really want to consider it, but we had to eliminate any possibility of information leaking due to a knight or soldier being captured. It made sense for information to be shared among those in positions of leadership like Allucia and Henblitz—and technically me. Not that I was ever really going to be in a position to take command of anyone. I’d been given the role of special instructor, but I wasn’t a knight. It wasn’t good for someone like me to take command of knights—that would harm both the organization and reputation of the order.

This case in particular was going to put the Liberion Order on display for another country’s populace. When that happened, it would be problematic for me to look like a civilian who’d been invited from the outside.

“Things will generally follow the same process as the last expedition,” Allucia continued. “There are changes to pretty much all vital points, though.”

“Mm. That makes sense.”

Things would’ve been fine had the last expedition gone off without a hitch. However, we’d suffered a severe injury among the knights, and several provincial soldiers had died. We would have to change plans for this trip.

“Here’s a map of the stops we’ll be taking,” Allucia said, showing me a map of Liberis’s major cities and towns with our route highlighted on it.

“Let’s see...”

This map definitely wasn’t something I could take with me—it was seriously classified information. Would it have been better if they hadn’t shown it to me at all?

I compared the route on the map to the one in my memory. It was largely the same as last time, except we were continuing on from Flumvelk into Sphenedyardvania. That was where the border was. However, some of the towns we would be stopping in were different. They’d probably adjusted this based on the attack and the information gathered during the party in Flumvelk.

“Not that I can judge the merits of the route...but I’ve got the gist of it,” I said.

"Thank you. We can't let you take this map with you."

"Thought so."

It would be impossible for me to memorize all the names of the towns and their lords during this meeting. I could probably manage if I had more time to study the map, but there was no way I was going to take such confidential information out of this office.

So, I confirmed no more than the basics. The rest would work out one way or another if I just went with the flow. This was an extremely naive outlook, but I doubted that anyone would ask me about where we were going during the expedition. And since we were going to be marching in a large group, there was no need to worry about that.

Allucia wasn't expecting that from me, anyway. In short, this was her telling me I wasn't an outsider. I didn't particularly mind being one, though—it wasn't like I served much of a purpose beyond wielding a sword.

"I get why you called me here, but why is Henblitz present too?" I asked.

The matter of the coat and map could've been solved between me and Allucia. There was no reason to go out of the way to have the lieutenant commander here too.

"Right—it's about the composition of forces during the expedition," Allucia began.

"Hmmm..."

I nodded along. Princess Salacia's wedding was a major event that had the entire nation's backing. They couldn't take *all* the knights and leave Baltrain completely undefended, but this expedition would involve far more troops than the previous one. It was also reasonable for the leaders, Allucia and Henblitz, to be included. How I fit into things was probably a little more complicated.

"Henblitz and I will each lead a squad."

"That makes sense."

They were the commander and her lieutenant—it was only natural for them to be leading. Who exactly was supposed to be in command if you excluded them?

"It has been proposed that you should lead a squad too," Allucia added.

"Why?"

Seriously, why? I had no idea how that idea had even come up. I hadn't been knighted. You couldn't just let some outsider butt in and take command of the kingdom's knights. At the very least, my common sense said that wasn't right.

Wait, hang on. I think I get it. This is Princess Salacia's idea.

Considering Allucia's personality, she wouldn't do anything unreasonable like throw out rules and traditions. She was very assertive, having forced this title of special instructor on me, but she never did anything outright absurd. At most, I'd been appointed on the recommendation of the knight commander—she hadn't broken any rules or laws. I had plenty to say about the whole process, but that, at least, was true.

So, with Allucia at the head of the Liberion Order, there were very few people who could go over her head to try to push an idea like this through. Only members of the royal family could propose such a thing. Lucy was technically an exception too, but she wouldn't go out of her way to request that I lead a squad.

"I'm guessing Princess Salacia brought it up?" I asked.

"It's just as you say," Allucia confirmed. "This changes the composition of our forces a fair amount, so I judged it would be faster to discuss this with Henblitz present as well."

"I see..."

Even Allucia couldn't ignore the princess's request. However, simply rejecting it on the spot wouldn't have been good either. She'd put it off until now so she could go over it with me.

"Sorry, but I can't go along with the princess's idea," I decided. "I'm confident with a blade, but I shouldn't lead anyone. I don't have the knowledge or experience."

The princess's request couldn't be refused outright, but going through with it was an entirely different matter. Though I was confident in my swordplay during a one-on-one fight or against a small number of opponents, I was completely unsuited for military command. I simply had no experience.

I knew Princess Salacia held me in high regard. I was grateful for that, but being an excellent swordsman required an entirely different skill set than being a military tactician. Doing something I was unfamiliar with would only invite unnecessary chaos, possibly exposing the princess to danger.

"Understood," Allucia said. "I'll refuse this request and present your reasons for it."

It seemed she'd been under the assumption that I'd say no. To repeat myself over and over, being personally strong and being a capable leader were totally different attributes—I didn't possess the qualities for both.

"Sorry about that," I told her. "By the way...what were you planning in the event that I'd said yes?"

Theoretically, I could've been the type of man who would develop a bloated ego based on my rising reputation. If I'd agreed to lead a squadron, it would've been difficult to overrule Princess Salacia's suggestion. I was curious about what Allucia would've done in that case. Now that we were basically done here, I figured it wouldn't hurt to sate my curiosity.

"Hee hee, the only answer you could have given from the start was no," she answered with a smile. "That's just the kind of person you are."

"Ha ha ha, you've seen right through me."

She had a point—I was never going to agree. I had some confidence in my swordplay after defeating my dad, but I wasn't ever going to get up on my high horse. At any rate, the trust she had in me was pretty crazy. It was pleasant sometimes, but it made me wonder if I truly lived up to it. I had no idea.

"A part of me wants to see you take command, though," Henblitz remarked.

"Let me put it bluntly," I told him. "It would be impossible for me. This isn't a matter of humility."

Even if I'd wanted to give him a demonstration of my poor leadership, doing so during a huge event like Princess Salacia's wedding would be out of the question. Failure wasn't an option, so we had to avoid unnecessary risks.

“Very well. Once your role has been decided, I’ll call for you again,” Allucia said, wrapping things up.

“Sure thing.”

I wasn’t going to be leading a squad, but figuring out what to do with me was still a tough choice. It wasn’t my place to interject on this topic, so I could only wait for her decision. I trusted Allucia not to do anything stupid—she’d expected me to refuse command, after all.

There wasn’t much time left until the expedition began. I had to devote myself to the knights’ training so that I didn’t have any misgivings going into it.

Chapter 2: An Old Country Bumpkin Travels to the Holy Capital

"All right, I'm off, then."

"Mm. Be careful."

The days went by somewhat busily—though not so different from usual. Before I knew it, the day I'd been planning for had arrived, and Princess Salacia's wedding procession was about to begin—the expedition was leaving Baltrain. I wasn't going to be able to come home or see Mewi for a while. Even if everything went perfectly smoothly, I wouldn't be back until after the new year.

Winter had fully descended upon the capital. Despite it being early in the morning, it was still dark outside. While eagerly waiting for that red ball of heat to rise over the horizon, I left the house, hearing Mewi's voice at my back.

In the end, I'd decided to let Mewi stay at home while I was away. I'd properly calculated how much money I had to leave for her, and if she needed anything, I'd told her not to hesitate to rely on Lucy and the institute.

She had pretty sound judgment, so she was unlikely to do anything reckless. I trusted her in this, but I still felt like a father who had problems letting his child go.

"This thing really is warm."

Once outside, I could see that not even the big city could win against Mother Nature. This early in the morning, the cold wind slashed at my skin mercilessly. However, the coat Allucia—or rather, the Liberion Order—had given me was a terrific bulwark against the cold. There wasn't much I could do about my exposed face, but I felt the rest of my body maintaining its temperature pretty well.

I hesitated to use it every day because of the Liberion Order's emblem on the back, but this really made me want to keep wearing

it. The knights wore armor for these kinds of public events, so they had to be even colder than I was—without their coats, of course. They'd been supplied to them, just like mine had been given to me, to keep them toasty. I admired how the order's upper management really thought things through.

"Haaah..."

My breath misted before me as I walked. I had my coat for my torso, gloves for my hands, and boots for my feet, but it was still chilly. At any rate, we were about to start a long march for this expedition, so my body was sure to warm up, whether I liked it or not.

I'd met with Allucia and Henblitz multiple times in preparation for today. Unlike the royal sightseeing tour some time ago, my position had been settled on rather quickly. Apparently, had Princess Salacia not said anything about me leading a squad, it would've been decided far earlier.

I wasn't being treated like the rank and file. That said, I wasn't a knight either. I had a fancy title as the special instructor, but that only applied within the order itself. However, thanks to Allucia, I'd been introduced to Prince Glenn as a special instructor during the sightseeing tour. My name and title had spread beyond the nation's border, setting the groundwork for this quite some time ago.

So, I was directly beneath Allucia in the chain of command. While I didn't have a squad, I served as one of the elite guards charged with protecting the princess and her entourage. I was consciously trying not to act overly humble regarding my skills, but I also didn't want to be the center of attention. Honestly, Allucia's scheming was kind of an unwelcome favor.

I could understand if I'd increased my fame by wielding my sword. However, every now and then, Allucia put some *serious* effort into rapidly elevating my reputation to extreme heights. I was glad that she regarded my swordsmanship so highly, but that kind of thing made me really uncomfortable. I'd spent my whole life in the countryside, and the personality I'd cultivated over the years wasn't easy to change. Still, I was well aware that she wouldn't stop, even if I asked her to, so I had no choice but to grow into my new

reputation. Honestly, if my refusal had been enough to stop her, I wouldn't have been forced to become a special instructor to begin with.

"Sure is rough... It's a little late to be realizing that, though..."

Now that I was in a position where I was exposed to the public eye, I understood why my dad had chosen to stay in Beaden despite his great skill. He'd probably gotten tired of it all. He was tremendously good with a blade but had never shown the faintest interest in politicking or fame.

I couldn't help but agree with him on that front, and this notion had only been reinforced during the party in Flumvelk. I just couldn't imagine myself stepping into that world on a daily basis. However, having definitely played a role in resolving several incidents, I had to accept the accompanying accolades. As ever, I didn't want to, but throwing a tantrum wouldn't get me anywhere.

I wasn't going to cut corners or slack off on a mission just because I didn't want to become more famous. That would go against my creed. So, I could only do my best to fulfill the duties assigned to me. This brought up the entirely different concern of whether I would one day be charged with a serious mission that would be far beyond my capabilities.

"I'm begging you, please calm down before that happens..."

I'd underestimated my own skills somewhat before defeating my dad. I was okay with admitting that now. However, it would also be problematic if things went in the complete opposite direction and all those around me completely *overestimated* my abilities.

He can do it. He'll manage. He's the only guy who can. Just like that, more and more responsibilities would be heaped upon my shoulders until they were more than I could bear. If things seemed like they were getting out of control, I planned to say something about it. However, Allucia, the knights, and those close to me didn't seem like they would pay my opinion any mind.

Well, things were probably going to work out fine as long as I didn't get too full of myself. Because nobody in my vicinity was liable to stop me, I had no choice but to exercise self-restraint. Even Lucy had told me that those with power should live in a way that matched

said power.

Thus, I had to make sure that the duties assigned to me truly matched my abilities—but I also couldn't act overly humble. I had to make this judgment call on my own. Having skill and being able to endure my responsibilities were different matters. Though I was confident with a sword, I wasn't capable of participating in any politicking or high-class conversations—nor did I want to. It would be problematic for me if people didn't understand that.

Things would've been a little different in my teens or twenties, when I'd had plenty of energy to go around. I'd never in my wildest dreams imagined that I would have to worry about this stuff at my age. From becoming a special instructor to adopting Mewi, there really was no telling what the world had in store.

"Well, whatever happens, happens..."

Partly because it was an early winter morning, there were very few pedestrians about. It was pretty refreshing to walk the quiet streets of the big city. There were usually far more sights and sounds to assault the senses. Because of the solitude, I found myself thinking of all sorts of things and mumbling to myself.

I'd been early to bed and rise ever since my days in Beaden, so meeting at this hour wasn't really a problem for me. Though, if I had to guess, some of the knights would find this schedule to be pretty harsh. *Well, they were probably ready for this kind of thing when they signed up for the order.*

And so, after a while of walking with such idle thoughts in mind, I approached a large building in Baltrain's central district. Its fiery lights illuminated the gloomy air. No matter how many times I looked at it, the order's office was impressively huge. A fair amount of time had passed since I'd started commuting here, so I was mostly used to it by now, but every now and then, I found it hard to believe that I worked in such an amazing place.

"Okay..."

Normally, I didn't feel the need to steel myself to pass through the gates. This time, though, I couldn't help but feel a little nervous. I wasn't here to do anything at the office—this was simply where we were gathering.

"Good morning, Mr. Beryl. Good luck out there."

"Morning. Thank you."

I exchanged greetings with the guards at the gate just as usual. They were part of the royal garrison, but they weren't going to be accompanying us on the expedition. The garrison covered a wide range of duties and had many members.

It seemed our upcoming schedule had been shared with everyone. There was a different implication to their words today—I understood they weren't wishing me luck with training.

Instead of heading to the training hall, I went to the courtyard that had been designated as our rendezvous point. Even though it was still dawn, there was more than enough illumination to light the place up. I once more found myself admiring the scale of the order's finances.

"Good morning, Master."

"Morning, Allucia."

Allucia and Henblitz were already finished getting things ready in the courtyard. A handful of knights were also on standby. It seemed I was relatively early. Naturally, everyone was wearing the Liberion Order's overcoats. They looked really cool when lined up in armor, but the uniformity of the coats had a different kind of impact. Despite this, I felt a little out of place being among them. *They're all so young...*

On a side note, wearing plain clothes for an international mission involving multiple royal families would've been far too rude, so I had donned my formal attire under my coat. This was the set I'd bought some time ago, but I'd packed a few more.

After my visit to Flumvelk, I'd started thinking that I had to pay more attention to my personal appearance. While it was an unwelcome necessity, these issues tended to come up in ways that I couldn't choose to refuse. At the very least, I figured I'd be better off with clothing that suited the occasion—I'd bought a few jackets that were similar to the first.

Unlike plain clothing, formal wear was rather expensive, but my current income made it relatively easy to accommodate the extra expenses. I didn't have to worry about purchasing things for Mewi,

and I could buy things that would allow others to perceive me at the status I actually was. Much like Lucy had told me before, money was good to have. I was honestly very grateful.

After exchanging greetings with Allucia, I quietly waited for the knights to gather. The mood wasn't quite right for idle chatter. Allucia, Henblitz, and I had arrived somewhat early. Not too long after, the knights who would be accompanying us on this expedition filed in one after the other.

There were around fifty in total. If I remembered right, there were just over a hundred knights stationed in Baltrain. That meant a good half of them were going on this expedition. Not only that, but both Allucia and Henblitz were participating too, so the majority of the Liberion Order's forces were being deployed.

The royal garrison was also participating, so in total, the escort detail probably numbered in the hundreds. While knights were individual forces to be reckoned with on the battlefield, they were also in a position to lead soldiers. Each knight was going to be leading squads from the garrison. *I can't say I'm an expert in military organization, though.*

After all the knights arrived, Allucia judged that it was time to start. Her voice rang throughout the courtyard.

"Listen up, everyone!"

The knights who'd been quietly chatting and greeting each other fell silent. They immediately stopped what they were doing and stood at attention. Anyone would think that Allucia's leadership was astonishing, even if they only saw this one instant.

"We will now be commencing the mission to escort Princess Salacia. Our destination is Sphenedyardvania's capital: Dilmahakha. It'll be a long march, but I expect everyone to put all of their effort and devotion on full display. We begin by heading to the palace to link up with Her Highness and the royal garrison. Move out!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

The elite knights started marching at Allucia's command. It was time for a long, *long* job to begin. There was no point in being tense, but we *were* going to be meeting the royal family. I couldn't exactly go there with a lazy attitude. It was time to get fired up.

"Everyone, stand by and await further orders."

Soon after leaving the order's office at the break of dawn, we arrived at the palace in Baltrain's northern district. Unlike the previous expedition, we had fifty knights. They couldn't all stomp their way into the palace, so it only made sense for them to wait outside.

It turned out we weren't the first to arrive at the palace—the princess's carriage was here too. This was going to be a long journey, so there were many things that had been prepared ahead of time. Since this was going to be a march with royalty under our protection, it made sense for there to be a good number of larger carriages. There was no margin for error, after all. Every possibility had to be considered and prepared for.

"I will go to receive Her Highness the Princess. Henblitz, with me."

"Ma'am!"

Allucia and Henblitz headed into the palace on their own. This made sense. I'd been ready on the off chance she might call for me too, but that would've been a bit much. *What a relief.* To repeat myself over and over, I was an outsider hired as a special instructor, not a knight. So, when it came to national affairs, it would normally be strange to even count me among their numbers. To be blunt, something was wrong with Princess Salacia for even suggesting that I lead a squad. I could never say that in public, of course. But if she'd instead requested that I join that exclusive royal guard they'd formed for her, I might've had to get verbal about it.

Allucia understood all this, and that was why she'd gone to meet the princess with just Henblitz. Regardless of my hesitancy to go with her, my being there would also be strange from an etiquette standpoint. Allucia wasn't one to disregard that.

After Allucia and Henblitz had stepped into the palace and were out of earshot, I muttered, "Now then, how will things turn out...?"

I'd agreed to join this expedition, but I didn't know every detail about the schedule. I knew we would leave the office in the morning, move toward the palace, link up with Princess Salacia and

her people, then reorganize our ranks for departure. After that, though, I didn't know who was going to do what or how.

Allucia had actually tried to tell me every detail, but I'd refused outright. The minutiae of a march wasn't my domain. I might've heard parts of the plan from pieces of the conversation, but I consciously pushed that info out of my mind.

While this kind of long-term mission had a general framework for the schedule worked out beforehand, it was fundamental to adapt to circumstances on the spot and deal with any issues as they arose. I had no confidence whatsoever that I'd be able to provide any good ideas in those situations.

This wasn't me wanting to take it easy or anything. Due to my nature, as well as my role as an instructor, having too much going on in my head would genuinely dull my blade. The same went for anyone, to varying degrees. The more you could focus on one thing, the better you performed at it.

Allucia and Henblitz were tremendously talented for being able to think about so many things at once, regardless of how important or trivial they were, and still being able to focus on fighting. Unfortunately, I didn't possess the same qualities.

I was going to do as told, and if fighting was necessary, I would lend my sword to the cause. It was best for me to only have a basic grasp of the expedition plan. I was pretty confident in my ability to make snap judgments in the heat of battle, but it seemed I was lousy at looking at the big picture. I felt like that was something training wasn't going to fix.

"Your Highness, please watch your step."

"I'll be fine, Allucia."

Some time later, Princess Salacia came out of the palace's gate accompanied by Allucia and Henblitz. Behind her were the maids, diplomats, officers of arms, and other such functionaries who were going to be accompanying her on her journey.

Aside from the diplomats and officers of arms, it seemed they were trying to have as many women as possible around the princess. I understood the intent behind that—much like during Prince Glenn's sightseeing tour, the maids' duties extended beyond

just taking care of their charge. The way they carried themselves was too clean. I could tell immediately from the way they walked that they had combat training.

Still, judging from how things had gone last time, I wasn't sure how much they would actually contribute in the case of an emergency. There wasn't much that could be done about that. There were too few opportunities to accumulate real combat experience in the palace.

No matter how much technique and knowledge you acquired, it didn't matter if you couldn't manifest it. In simple terms of fighting potential and capabilities as bodyguards, the maids were two or three steps below the Liberion Order. But that was exactly why the knights and the magic corps existed.

I didn't have an overabundance of combat experience either, but it was hard to imagine that the people who served in the palace saw any fighting on a regular basis.

"Thank you for gathering here today. I'll be in your care during the journey."

Standing before us, the princess put on a beautiful smile as she gave the knights words of encouragement. Even the Liberion Order was considered lower-class to the royal family. It was nice that she maintained decorum around them. Everyone preferred serving someone who was nice and courteous over a tyrant.



“I swear upon my sword that we shall protect you flawlessly, Your Highness,” Allucia replied.

“I expect much from you.”

Even this simple exchange was something I couldn’t see myself doing. I definitely couldn’t pick out the right formalities to say on the spur of the moment like Allucia could.

“Your Highness, this way.”

“Thank you.”

Now that the greetings were over, a maid guided Princess Salacia into her carriage. The plan was to have the princess, two of her maids, and Allucia in one carriage. It really did seem like they were trying to keep only women around her when possible. I’d considered the possibility that they would make me sit inside the same carriage, so I was honestly grateful for this arrangement. My spirit couldn’t handle spending a prolonged period in such a royal space.

Now that the princess and the knight commander had boarded their carriage, Henblitz took command and addressed the knights.

“Just as discussed, we’ll rendezvous with the garrison outside Baltrain.”

“Yes, sir.”

If necessary, the lieutenant would get instructions from the princess or Allucia and deal with things accordingly. As for my role in all this...

“Mr. Beryl, this way.”

“R-Right.”

I was once more going to be riding in a carriage. This had been decided by process of elimination. Our formation had the soldiers of the royal garrison forming an outer perimeter. Princess Salacia’s carriage was naturally in the center. Knights were going to be dispersed among the soldiers to take command, while Henblitz and other elites were deployed near the princess’s carriage to protect it.

So, where would that leave me? They were never going to place me among the rank and file protecting the outer perimeter. I actually would’ve been fine with that, but apparently, my title didn’t allow for it. I somewhat understood that argument.

The other option was to treat me like one of the knights. Had I

accepted command of a squad like Princess Salacia had proposed, that would've been possible. The knights' duty on this expedition was to guard the princess, but they were also expected to take command of the garrison during emergencies. Thus, it would be problematic for everyone in command to be inside carriages. Had I been given command of a squad, I would've been outside.

But that isn't the case. So where does that leave me? Yup, inside a carriage. There was a fitting explanation for this too, apparently: I was a special instructor invited from outside the order, so they could technically treat me like a guest. Basically, I was participating in the princess's escort as an instructor, not a knight.

That didn't make too much sense to me either, but it was apparently a problem for someone with my title to be on foot among the troops. I hadn't been able to come up with any alternatives, so this was how things had ended up.

Well, whatever. This in itself isn't really an issue. The real problem is one that's far more personal for me.

"Hello, seems we'll be traveling together for a while," I said.

"Hi there. We've heard much about you."

"Ha ha ha..."

Yup, it's the people I'm riding with. On the trip to Flumvelk, the order itself had been guests, so Allucia, Vesper, Frau, and I had ridden in the carriage. But this time was different. Princess Salacia was the guest of honor, and those accompanying her were functionaries who'd worked out the details of this marriage between nations. The knights were nothing more than the princess's escorts, so aside from their commander, it was normal for them to be guarding the carriages from the outside.

That being the case, the ones riding in the carriages were Princess Salacia, the maids who attended to her, and the functionaries. If anything, they'd twisted things to jam me into that last group. In short, I now had to spend my time in a carriage with high-ranking officials I'd never met before. *This is pretty much hell. Wouldn't I have been better off walking outside?*

"How about we start with introductions? I'm Thracias Senple. I'm here as Prime Minister Griesmoore's representative."

"Keifo Quanda... Officer of arms."

"My name is Addelat Masika. Like Keifo, I serve as an officer of arms."

There were four of us inside the carriage. Addelat was a woman, while the rest of us were men. We were all a little too old to call ourselves spring chickens.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Beryl Gardenant. I serve as a special instructor for the Liberion Order."

I somehow managed to maintain a smile and return their greetings. I was, at least, getting used to this one phrase. *Is that a good thing, though?* I wanted to believe it was.

The most important person here was Thracias, the representative of the prime minister. The prime minister was the person charged with handling all political matters in the nation. I had no idea what the higher-ups had decided, but if I had to guess, this representative had been sent out of obligation.

Considering the relatively recent assassination attempt on their prince, it was hard to believe that Sphenedyardvania's internal power struggle had reached a conclusion. So even though the wedding was an auspicious occasion, it wouldn't be wise to send all of the nation's key figures into potential turmoil. Liberis had to be able to recover in case something happened. That was why they'd chosen to send a representative in the prime minister's stead.

I agreed with the decision. This also explained why King Gladio and Prince Fasmatio weren't going with us, even though it was Princess Salacia's wedding. After all, if a battle broke out and the entire royal family was killed, Liberis would be toppled in an instant.

I could see why they'd chosen to send as few important personnel as possible and had resorted to a representative instead. Still, it made me think of how lonely Princess Salacia's fateful day would be because of that. *But maybe that sentiment is just the commoner in me talking.*

"Anyway, we'll be together for a while," Thracias said, his tone friendly. "Let's just take it easy."

At least in the carriage, he seemed to be in a position of power—he served as the peacemaker. Not that I had any intention of making

trouble. I was glad they didn't see me as unwelcome here, and I really didn't want to have to explain myself. Things were much easier for me this way.

"Yes, it seems it'll be a long journey," I commented.

We would be stopping at inns along the way, so it wasn't like I was going to be with them around the clock. Still, considering these were the people who would be accompanying me any time we were on the move, I was sure it was going to wear on my nerves.

So what was actually better? Being surrounded by Allucia and the princess, or these bigwigs I'd only just met? I had no idea.

"Oh, looks like we're setting off."

And with such thoughts in mind, all preparations had been completed, and the carriage started shaking gently.

Things were now beyond the point of no return. Just as Thracias had said, there was no point in being overly tense. Still, I could only pray that this expedition concluded without any issues.

◇

"Pardon me. We will be arriving in Flumvelk shortly."

"Is that so? Understood."

A knight knocking on our carriage door signified that our journey was finally reaching a climax. We were just about to enter Flumvelk, but this wasn't our final stop—we would be continuing into Sphenedyardvania. Still, this was the last town we were visiting within Liberis, so I had a feeling it would be our final chance to take a breather.

It would take several days longer to reach Flumvelk compared to the last expedition. After all, we were marching with a much larger force, making our progress slower. We also had the princess with us, so the plan was far more detailed, and we couldn't sleep outdoors. I wasn't complaining—we had a bed to sleep in every night, and that was good fortune, but it also contributed to our slow marching pace.

"Shall we get ready to step out?" Thracias suggested.

"Sounds good," I agreed.

This part was the same as last time. The provincial soldiers

accompanying us changed as we moved through different regions, so we had to step out and exchange greetings. Because Princess Salacia was with us this time, we couldn't afford to have any strangers slipping in among us, so we needed to confirm who the provincial soldiers were. And they did the same to us—they scoped us out and memorized our faces to confirm there was nobody hiding among our ranks.

It was pretty hard to picture such a thing happening, but it was possible for a skilled assassin or spy to slip into a carriage and kill the people inside. Though that idea might've seemed absolutely ridiculous, considering such possibilities and eliminating threats was an absolute necessity for this expedition.

"We've arrived at Flumvelk's checkpoint."

I didn't really have anything to prepare before going outside. *I just have to ready myself to be in public...* As I thought such useless things, our carriage came to a stop. We were stepping out to see everyone and swap our escorts, and though this was the same procedure as the last expedition, the scale was on an entirely different level.

"Wow..."

I exited the carriage with Thracias, Keifo, and Addelat. We were greeted by the sight of people, people, more people, and horses. There were around fifty knights and three hundred soldiers of the royal garrison. To add to that, there were somewhere around a hundred provincial soldiers with us. It was an outrageous number of people.

I'd never really seen that many horses before either—the sight overwhelmed my vision all the more. To explain, upon linking up with the royal garrison outside Baltrain's northern district, they'd had around fifty horses prepared for the journey. This was why we'd met them outside the city. That many people and horses standing around would've brought traffic inside the northern district to a complete standstill.

The Liberion Order was mounted atop the horses. *The knights sure are living up to their titles.* Before this expedition, there'd simply been no need for the knights to mount up while inside the

city walls, so I'd never had the chance to witness it.

Gallantly straddling his horse and crisply bellowing orders, Henblitz looked even cooler than usual. I'd ridden a horse plenty of times back in Beaden, but I wasn't capable of handling one with such skill. More importantly, I was no good at fighting from horseback. *A fighter's swordplay shines brightest when their feet are firmly planted on the ground.*

"I am Sergeant Major Sahat Ranvaren of the Flumvelk Provincial Army. Please leave your security to us up until the Sphenedyardvanian border."

"We'll be in your care, Sergeant. Here are our papers."

"Allow me to inspect them..." Sahat scanned the documents. "It seems all is in order."

After a while of walking and taking in the crowd, we arrived at the checkpoint where the provincial soldiers performing the exchange were all on standby in a neat formation. Excluding the princess and her personal maids, everyone who'd been riding in the carriages was checking in with Sahat.

Sahat Ranvaren was the sergeant in charge of Warren's provincial army. As always, his narrow eyes were quite intimidating. He couldn't afford to fail this mission, so I decided to take that as a sign of his motivation.

I recalled the time Warren had asked me to train Sahat during the last expedition. It looked like he'd been keeping up with it since then. He'd progressed to new heights; his willpower and ambition were in no way lacking. A part of me wanted him to continue polishing his skills, while another hoped he wouldn't have to put those abilities on display during this expedition.

While they handled the papers, Princess Salacia remained in her carriage. Even if this was a ceremony to check who exactly they were guarding, this wasn't the time or place for the princess to casually show her beautiful face. If anything, anyone who wanted an audience with her needed special permission. In a sense, it was out of the question for her to be seen by some measly provincial soldiers.

This expedition had a very diplomatic element to it. While Allucia

was outside the carriage, the ones standing to the fore were politicians like Thracias and officers of arms like Keifo. Allucia was just a guard, so she really didn't have the right to speak here.

The same was true of my position. Even though I was somewhat acquainted with Sahat, I couldn't casually exchange a greeting with him. *It really is a pain in the ass.* There certainly was a lot to gain from status and fame—mostly money and accommodations—but now that my name was known, I was rapidly getting involved in more and more of these bothersome events.

I could view this optimistically—perhaps it was a sign that I'd put in the work for the fame and status I'd gained. I'd never wanted any of this, though, so it was also possible to view this pessimistically—annoying obligations were now being forced upon me.

I understood that it was better to have a certain level of status, fame, and influence. These attributes would help me wield my sword against powerful warriors I'd yet to meet. So on that merit, I accepted all of this. Had I remained nothing more than an instructor in the countryside, such ambitions would've been impossible to fulfill.

On the flip side, I would have never had such ambitions if I'd stayed in Beaden. *It's like a chicken-or-the-egg kinda scenario.* I was largely satisfied with my current life, but if anyone asked me if I was dissatisfied in any way, I would struggle to give a clear answer.

It wasn't like I wanted to make a huge sum of money and kick back in a life of luxury. I simply wanted to walk the path of a swordsman and reach levels yet unknown to me. Having some amount of status and fame made it easier to do that. I understood this, but being enthusiastic about it was a different matter—for me, at least.

"Let us get moving."

With all the checks safely completed, it looked like we were now entering Flumvelk. I was never going to be crossing any borders by myself, so I figured I didn't have to learn any of these procedures. Any time I was going to travel long-distance, it was pretty much guaranteed that someone else would be taking me. *Well, maybe things will be different if Mewi declares that she wants to see the*

world or something.

Now that the security check was finished, Thracias addressed the three of us accompanying him for the journey.

"Now then, shall we return to the carriage?"

I nodded. "Yes, let's."

I'd maintained what cordial conversations I could with the three of them during our time together. We'd hardly talked about anything serious, nor had we talked with much frequency. It would be a stretch to say that we were getting along.

At any rate, it was pretty tough to remain in complete silence when surrounded by strangers. Vesper and Frau were specialists at melting into the background. *I think that skill must've taken a significant amount of training to master.*

"I hear Flumvelk is flourishing," Thracias remarked. "Let's look forward to some good food and drink there."

"Ha ha." I chuckled. "Be careful not to drink *too* much."

"Right back at you, Mr. Beryl."

Having these kinds of superficial conversations was gentle on my nerves. Thracias liked to throw in jokes to be friendly, though I doubted he was really speaking from the heart. I still wasn't good at reading people, but just being able to see this simple fact meant I'd learned something during the last expedition—whether I'd liked it or not. Maybe this was another form of growth.

Much like last time, we were on our way to Warren's estate. Warren would probably be busy keeping Princess Salacia company, but I didn't know whether the same applied to Gisgarte and Shueste. I was one of the little people on this expedition, so it was doubtful Shueste would be attending to me again.

It hadn't been that long since our last meeting, but I was still somewhat curious about how much she'd grown. If possible, after the expedition ended, I wanted to ask her how she'd been expressing her selfish desires. It was unlikely I would get the chance, though. Flumvelk was a little too far away for me to drop by on a whim. *Quite the conundrum indeed.*

"Mr. Beryl, have you been to Flumvelk before?" Thracias asked.

"Well...yes."

This wasn't really something I needed to hide. It wouldn't be strange for those who governed the nation to know that the Liberion Order had been invited to a party in Flumvelk. That said, I didn't know who'd been informed about the secret details of that mission, so I couldn't talk about it freely—hence my somewhat hesitant answer. I didn't really want them to prod too deeply.

"How did the food suit your palate?" Thracias asked.

"It was very good," I answered. "The milk they serve at the inns is particularly exquisite."

"Hmmm."

I'm glad this is just more idle chatter. I wasn't exactly a gourmand, so everything tasted good to me. Still, the milk we'd had in the mornings was definitely delicious. It was rich yet didn't catch in the throat—a full and refreshing taste of nature.

I had no idea what people like Thracias and Keifo usually ate. It was relatively easy to get high-quality goods of any kind in Baltrain. However, even if Flumvelk was relatively prosperous, it was—to put it bluntly—still a remote border region. It made sense that dignitaries would worry about the quality of the food.

"My, my, it seems we'll be enjoying dinner tonight," Addelat said casually. "Right, Keifo?"

"Better than having lousy food..." Keifo muttered.

That was basically how the carriage ride went. The mood wasn't exactly friendly, but it wasn't hostile either. The one exception was Keifo—he was a man of few words who was generally unfriendly, and he'd been like that since his initial greeting. *At least he responds when addressed, so it's not like he's ignoring me.*

One way or another, I was very grateful for people who maintained this kind of distance. They didn't outright ignore me, so it was possible to talk. If they needed anything, they spoke up, and they didn't pry either—I was able to demonstrate that I wasn't going to tell them more than necessary.

Could I really call them "companions" for the journey? Maybe not, but they were strangers I could remain at ease around. *I suppose this is also a problem I have—I'm unfamiliar with how to socialize among strangers, especially those of a high rank.*

I got the impression that they'd realized this about me and had chosen to only touch upon harmless and inoffensive topics. I was truly grateful for their consideration. To judge one's abilities and take immediate and appropriate action—this was something I specialized in when it came to swordplay, but I'd never learned how to do it in social situations. It was pretty depressing to compare myself to them in this regard, but I decided to consider this expedition as a chance to gain experience.

◇

"Welcome to my humble abode, Princess Salacia. Though it'll only be for a short while, please relax and make yourself at home."

"Thank you. I'll be intruding on your hospitality, Margrave Flumvelk."

"Oh please, it isn't an intrusion at all."

Things had proceeded much like our last visit. Some time after passing through the checkpoint, with the sun completely gone from the sky, our expeditionary force had arrived at Margrave Flumvelk's estate—Warren's home. We'd had to leave the carriages to enter the grounds.

Warren had put every ounce of his effort into welcoming us. As a result, House Flumvelk's members—Warren, Gisgarte, and Shueste—were gathered outside to greet the princess, along with all of their servants.

The princess would definitely spend the night in Warren's mansion. There was no place more luxurious in all of Flumvelk. But where would the rest of us be staying? Naturally, the princess's personal maids would be staying with her, but even discounting them, there were a lot of people left. We had maids, butlers, Thracias and the other politicians, me, Allucia, and all the knights of the order.

Not even a margrave's mansion could provide sufficient hospitality for all of us. If we'd just needed any open space to sleep in—jammed together, even—then that would've been different. But we had people of varying ranks, and those ranks also had to be

considered when deciding who would sleep in the same building as the princess.

Well, they'd surely made plans for all this already—I just didn't know about them. I was hoping to get a private room where I didn't have to worry about my appearance. It would've been great if I could stay at a cheap inn in the middle of town. That seemed pretty unlikely, though.

On that topic, I was barely high-ranking enough to be allowed to sleep in rooms at inns. We had hundreds of people accompanying the princess on this expedition, and there were very few towns that could provide lodgings for all of us. The royal garrison generally camped outside, and if the town was very small, the knights did too. I'd taken that possibility into consideration from the very beginning, but seeing as we were in the middle of winter, camping outside would've been pretty rough. There were advantages to having some amount of status, though I wasn't sure whether I'd done anything to warrant such privileges.

"Your Highness, this way, if you please."

"Of course."

Now that the greetings were over, Warren directed Princess Salacia into the mansion. The princess's personal maids followed her in, along with the servants Warren had personally selected for the task.

It seemed the princess really was the only one who was going to be staying here—maybe everyone else would be imposing on the villa like last time. That would leave the knights staying at an inn and the royal garrison having to figure out whether they would be inside or outside town for the night.

Picking up the torch from Warren, Shueste continued the explanations. "I shall guide the rest of our guests to the villa. As for the guards, we've already reserved an inn for you."

"Thank you for your consideration."

It seemed that, just as I'd predicted, the other diplomats and high-ranking officials were going to be staying at the villa, while everyone else would be going to an inn.

I wonder if I can just go to the inn too...? I might be able to

sneak out and have a drink at a tavern. I have a feeling that's not going to happen, though.

"Sahat and his men will show you the way to the inn," Shueste said.

Allucia nodded. "Understood. Henblitz, gather the troops and follow Sergeant Sahat's lead."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Henblitz and the knights would be going to the inn. The fact that Allucia had ordered Henblitz to take care of it meant she would be staying at the villa. I felt like it was wrong for me to use the villa while the lieutenant commander went to an inn. However, for formality's sake, I was technically a guest while he was a guard.

Having some amount of status really was quite a pain. It was also pretty rough on my nerves. People kept telling me to get used to it, but if I had the choice, I would simply remain at the bottom of the ladder. I had a pretty good handle on my self-restraint, but it was frightening to see how these luxuries seemed like they could dull my blade.

"Please allow me, Shueste Flumvelk, to show you to the villa."

"Thank you," Allucia replied.

With the absence of the knights, the courtyard was now nice and empty. There were the four people from my carriage, Princess Salacia's maids and butlers who hadn't followed her into the mansion, and a dozen or so functionaries. That would make it difficult to give everyone their own rooms, but the villa still had enough space to accommodate all of us.

I was hoping for a private room, though I wasn't really in a position to be selfish. I could only hope Shueste pulled through for me.

Around the time we boarded the carriages again to go to the villa, Thracias raised his voice in admiration. "That was quite a solid mansion. I suppose it's to be expected of a margrave."

I guess he's never really left the capital. At the very least, it's probably rare for him to visit territory all the way out at the border. Baltrain had set his standards for architecture, which were extremely high. Even with such standards, he was impressed by the building's

sturdy construction. But the mansion *had* to be fortified—it was a matter of national defense. Flumvelk was right on the border, after all. We weren't at war or anything, but you could never be too cautious.

"This territory bears the responsibility of having protected our nation for generations," Addelat said. "It seems we'll be able to remain at ease during our stay."

"Ha ha ha, you've got a point there," Thracias agreed.

While this easy conversation was far better than the strained atmosphere in the carriage, I found it hard to join these kinds of talks. I lacked the technique to hop in when I wasn't directly addressed. But who would steer the conversation toward me if I wasn't specifically needed? When bigwigs were talking, they hardly ever spoke directly to anyone. Sometimes, I even thought they were just talking to themselves, though they were usually just addressing the room, and it was up to everyone else to keep things going. *It really is a pain in the ass.*

Much like during Warren's party, nobles and big shots who had to keep up appearances had to be extra careful about every word they said. Put another way, they were all very devious. It used to be that I could wrap things up nicely by just staying out of it and letting them talk on their own. But that wasn't really an option anymore—I'd been thrust into the world of high-class society, and staying silent didn't quite work. *Will I ever get used to it?* This was even more of an issue when I didn't have Shueste's expert assistance. *Not that the conversation in the carriage right now sounds like anything important...*

I rode along with such thoughts in mind, and our carriage quickly reached the villa.

"Oh, it seems we've arrived."

I'd known beforehand that it wasn't far away. And now, I was finally going to get the chance to stretch my legs and enjoy a soft chair and bed. There was also a hot meal to look forward to. While the carriage was nice and sturdy, it wasn't completely capable of keeping out the cold night air.

"Allow me to show each of you to your rooms."

Once we were out of the carriage, we followed Shueste into the building. From the way she put it, rooms had already been allocated to us.

"Please make use of this room, Master Thracias. Your meal will be brought to you shortly."

"Ooh, thank you very much, Lady Shueste."

"The room to the left is Master Keifo's, while the one to the right is Mistress Addelat's."

"Thank you."

"Thanks..."

The others entered their rooms as Shueste guided us onward. On a side note, the maids were going to be sharing a room. It really was pushing it to allocate everyone a personal room, and there was no need to prioritize the maids over the diplomats.

However, if they were prioritizing the importance of one's work, I would be the one least in need of a personal room. My job so far had amounted to nothing more than sitting in a carriage. I was glad to be able to rest indoors, but I felt somewhat guilty about it.

"Master Beryl, please make use of this room."

"Thank you."

After the train behind Shueste had diminished quite a bit, we arrived at my room.

Oh, I get my own. Hell yeah. I immediately stifled my excitement, but I figured I could at least pump my fist internally.

Shueste had requested that I speak with her frankly, but this wasn't the place for that—there was no telling who could be listening. However, once I was in my room, I wouldn't have to worry about other people anymore. I'd had to watch my behavior throughout the day, so I was glad to have a private space to myself.

Once I entered my room, I exchanged some parting words with Shueste.

"Your meal will arrive shortly," she said. "If you'll please excuse me."

"Thank you very much for the hospitality."

She took her leave, and I closed the door. Only then was I finally able to let loose. I started by taking off my coat and hanging it on

the wall.

"Haaaaah..."

The moment I plopped down on the sofa, I let out a huge sigh like an old geezer. I wasn't physically tired, but my mental fatigue was considerable. I had spent the last two weeks having to remain focused inside that carriage. I'd somehow managed to endure it—thanks to getting my own room at the inns most of the time. However, if I'd been sharing a room now, or if I'd needed to sleep in a huge communal space, I might've just exploded.

"She said dinner is going to be brought to me later, right...?"

I couldn't spend all my time lazing around on the sofa. I removed the sword from my waist and started to get changed. I'd had my jacket on under the overcoat—just wearing it had made me pretty tense. I wanted to relax, have some delicious food and drink, then maybe calm my heart by taking a bath. I wasn't sure I'd be able to take one, but with so many visitors, they would need to have the bath available for us, right?

I'd come this far, and my plan now was to make full use of my status as a guest to relax as much as possible. Once we entered Sphenedyardvania, there was no guarantee I would get the chance to take it easy.

"Master Beryl, I've brought your dinner."

"Aah, right."

After I got changed, put my stuff away, and took a look around the room, someone knocked at the door. It was probably one of the maids with my meal. I doubted anyone of status would come, but I still had to pay attention to my appearance*. If it were Allucia, Henblitz, or Curuni, I would be fine looking a little sloppy. The fact that I have to worry about being unkempt right now is somewhat troublesome.*

"I'll be right there."

I placed my hand on the doorknob. I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to be opening it or if I had to give permission to open it from the outside. I didn't really like ordering people around, so I usually ended up taking the initiative in these cases. I could only pray the person on the other side didn't give me a weird look.

“Sorry to keep you wai—?”

Figuring I was better off polite than bossy, I opened the door. On the other side was a trolley with a delicious-looking lineup of food and drink. The woman who’d brought it to me had a smile on her face. That much was fine. It was perfectly normal. The problem was the identity of the woman in question.

“Shueste?”

“Yes. Pardon the intrusion, Master Beryl.”

Ignoring my bewilderment, she pushed the trolley into my room.



“Please excuse me.” Shueste shut the door behind her with an innocent look.

“Wait, what? Hang on.” I waved my hands in bewilderment.

“Is there a problem?”

“No, umm... Hmmm?”

I have no idea how to answer that. I didn’t have a problem with it personally. I was already acquainted with Shueste, so this was easier than having to greet an unfamiliar maid. However, I wasn’t on some personal vacation, and it didn’t feel quite right for House Flumvelk’s eldest daughter to be wasting her time on me, out of all the people on this expedition.

I did understand why she might want to entertain guests. That didn’t mean she had to personally attend to *me*, though. Thracias and the others were far more important. I had the exaggerated title of special instructor for the Liberion Order, but that had no worth on this diplomatic mission.

This was also a rare opportunity when a bunch of politicians were passing through to go to Sphenedyardvania, so it was a great chance to build connections. There was nothing to gain by tending to me instead. It was pretty sad to think about it that way, but it was the truth.

“Then there isn’t a problem,” Shueste said. “Shall we eat?”

“Aah, sure... Thanks...?”

I was hungry and grateful for the meal, but all of this was too abrupt. Having a noble lady set the table for a country bumpkin made me feel extremely guilty. There were no maids in the room with us. It was just me and Shueste.

“Ah, I’ll help,” I offered.

“It’s fine. Please just sit back and wait.”

“O-Okay...”

Letting Shueste do all the work didn’t sit right with me, but she flat-out refused my help. Her charming smile exuded a mysterious power that made it hard for me to take a firm stance. This wasn’t like Allucia’s way of refusing to take no for an answer—it was something more maternal, like being wrapped in a soft, gentle embrace. *She’s supposed to be far younger than me, though. Maybe*

this is just a difference in life experience. I've only ever known how to swing a sword, after all.

She lined up one dish after the other on the table. Nobles didn't usually do this kind of stuff themselves, but Shueste seemed to know her way around the task. I didn't think she was the type to typically have her meals without her maids, so her competency was somewhat mysterious.

"Shall we?" she asked after setting the table.

"Uhh, yeah. Thanks for the food."

There was bread, meat, and soup—among other dishes—just for the two of us. I already knew the food in Flumvelk was good because of my last visit, so it was an unexpected relief not to have to worry about the taste. That wasn't really a concern in big cities like Baltrain and Flumvelk, but it wasn't necessarily the case in the towns and villages along the way. In fact, if I invited someone out to Beaden, we really wouldn't be able to serve much of anything that could be deemed "cuisine."

During this expedition, the quality of food had varied greatly depending on where we'd gone. And even when there had been something good, the best had always gone to Princess Salacia.

"Mm, delicious as always," I remarked.

"Hee hee, thank you."

Not too long ago, I would've been too nervous and anxious to be able to taste anything when dining alone with the upper class. But thanks to my previous experience, that trepidation all but vanished when I was with Shueste. The meat on my plate had been roasted wonderfully in a good amount of fat, and the bread had a soft bounce to it.

"There's ale as well," Shueste pulled some from the bottom of the trolley. "Please go ahead."

"Ooh, thanks."

I was glad there was ale, but she could've just set it on the table instead of the bottle of wine. Was there a reason for her to go out of her way to mention it like this? Not that it really mattered. Ale was the best. She probably remembered that time after I'd trained Sahat and his soldiers—I'd asked to try the local ale. It made me feel a

little embarrassed, but it was nice that she'd remembered my preferences.

"Allow me," Shueste said, pouring ale into my glass.

"Ha ha, sorry about that..."

"It's fine. Today, much like before, it is my duty to entertain you."

"I-I see."

Looking at this scene in isolation, one might've thought we were an intimate couple. That was how masterfully she performed every little gesture. It was as if the meal had been tailored to me personally. A part of me even suspected that Warren had provided her with an unnecessary excess of information.

"I hear you will be leaving tomorrow for Sphenedyardvania," Shueste said. "Please take your time tonight to enjoy yourself and relax."

"Mm... Thanks."

As was to be expected, someone of Shueste's class knew about our general schedule and objective. If I had to guess, who was to keep company with whom had all been decided beforehand. As Warren was the current head of the house, this would've been at his discretion. Though Gisgarte and Shueste might've had a say in it, the decision had ultimately fallen to him.

If that was the case, then Shueste keeping me company had been the general consensus of the entire house. During our first meeting, she'd been mysteriously affectionate. That hadn't changed at all. If anything, she'd drawn closer—during the last visit, we hadn't even spent time together alone after dark, not even for a meal.

I couldn't help but feel that Warren was scheming something. But regardless, I *was* rather curious about how Shueste had been doing since I'd last seen her.

"Oh right," I muttered. "Now that I think about it..."

"Yes?"

I wanted to ask about how things had been going for her, but there was also something I needed to inform her of.

"I used the pressed flowers you gifted me last time to decorate my house. It's a small place, but I feel like it's added a lot of color."

"My! Thank you very much!"

I was referring to the framed flowers Shueste had given me at the end of my last visit to Flumvelk. They were currently hanging on the wall back home, providing some modest color to the room. Mewi's reaction to the flowers had been awfully glum, though. Due to her upbringing, she had no interest whatsoever in the fine arts. Not that I did either, but with the feelings Shueste had put behind making it, there was no way I was going to treat her gift like some bundle of dried weeds.

"Hee hee, that makes me really happy."

"A display of your willfulness is decorating my house. I'm sure that's a good thing."

"Yes... Thank you very much."

It was the product of Shueste's first small but selfish request—a work of art that represented the beginning, so to speak. I had to treat it dearly, though it was somewhat mysterious how such an item had ended up in *my* house.

"How have things been since then?" I asked. "With Warren and Gisgarte, I mean."

This had been on my mind for a while. Shueste had been raised as both House Flumvelk's youngest child and its eldest daughter. Her upbringing had been a great success, and she was now a top-class lady. Even though she wasn't in any way dissatisfied with her lot in life, she must've had some thoughts about not being blessed with any beneficial marriage proposals and having to spend her whole life in the mansion.

I'd been the one to ultimately fan a meager flame from the slight ember in her heart. I wouldn't go as far as saying I felt responsible for it, but I was at least curious what changes this had brought to her.

"Oh yes," she said. "I spoke with my brother and am now managing a section of the garden myself. I'm enjoying it greatly."

"That's good to hear. You'll have to do your best to make it your ideal garden."

"I will."

Not all that much time had passed since our last meeting—it had

only been a few months, so I wasn't expecting any dramatic changes. After all, she was the daughter of House Flumvelk, and Warren *had* to have plans for her. Shueste wouldn't want to impose any unreasonable demands either. As a result, the change she was undergoing so far was modest and charming.

"I also conveyed one other selfish request..." she continued, eating her dinner with elegant manners, much like that time we'd shared a meal in the courtyard. She was still smiling, but there was a troubled look to her expression, as if she were just the slightest bit discontent. "I haven't been able to receive a positive response, though. It seems it will take a while to resolve."

"Hmm, you've got me curious now."

Warren was a smart man—he wouldn't have been able to serve as Flumvelk's lord otherwise, and if he hadn't been up to the task, Gisgarte wouldn't have yielded the house to him. Warren was also very good with words. Even taking their acquaintance into consideration, it was no easy feat to completely talk Allucia into something she was against.

But now, Warren was being troubled by Shueste's selfish request. That was just as I'd anticipated. It was also somewhat unexpected. Shueste had begun expressing her own ideas in a way she hadn't before, and I'd guessed that Warren would be having a hard time figuring out how to deal with it. Conversely, it was strange that Warren had been unable to find a resolution to one of her requests and had left the matter at large.

Shueste understood her own position—I doubted she would ask for something completely unreasonable. Despite this, her wish had yet to be granted. *What could it possibly be?* I just had to know.

"I asked to move to Baltrain, but my brother won't agree to it," Shueste answered with a bitter smile.

"What?"

That's totally ridiculous. Of course he said no.

"T-To Baltrain...?" I repeated incredulously, just to make sure I'd heard her right.

"Yes."

I'd never imagined she would start with such an utterly selfish

request. This was one thing her charming smile wouldn't help her with.

"Mind if I ask why?"

"Because you're there, Master Beryl," she answered immediately.

I nearly spat out my ale. I didn't know what to do. *She said that so seriously...* If she'd always wanted to be in Baltrain, it would've made sense to me. Baltrain was Liberis's greatest city, and its population and the luxuries available there were on an entirely different order of magnitude. Flumvelk was definitely also a major city, but Baltrain was still a cut above.

However, her reason for wanting to move was *me*. I couldn't make sense of it. Even if I took her request at face value, I would still *never* say anything irresponsible like "That's great. Wanna come to Baltrain, then?"

To propose a hypothetical scenario—really, just hypothetically speaking—what if she were a commoner who had fallen in love with a man who'd visited her hometown? And what if she had then resolved herself to chase him to the capital? To an extent, I would be able to understand that. There would naturally be arguments for and against it.

However, Shueste wasn't a commoner—she was the eldest daughter of a margrave and had received the best education available. To put it bluntly, she had far more value than a peasant girl from the countryside.

Things would be different if she were marrying into someone's family in Baltrain. Women of certain statuses were obliged to marry into good families. I doubted Warren made light of that responsibility. He had to be working out marriage proposals for her even now.

However, now that I thought about it, Warren had first introduced Shueste as an incompetent sister who'd missed her chance at marriage. I didn't know whether this was because they hadn't been able to decide on someone or if their standards were too high.

"Isn't it a bit unreasonable to move all the way to Baltrain just because I'm there...?" I asked.

"Why is that? You're an attractive man."

"I-Is that so...? Th-Thanks..."

I was aware she was putting her affection on full display. That much was clear, but I couldn't see any reason for her to do so. Gisgarte and Warren must've fed her favorable information about me. Logically, it was extremely unrealistic for a young lady from a noble family to fall in love at first sight with an old man from the countryside. Her impression of me seemed *way* too good.

During the last expedition, I hadn't exactly shown my best side during the party. The only time I would've looked the slightest bit impressive was during the training with Sahat and his soldiers. It was hard to believe that this would be enough for a woman to suddenly fall in love with me. After all, she had plenty of people around her who excelled in the martial arts. Even Sahat fell into that category.

Even without focusing entirely on martial might, there were plenty of men in the country who were more attractive and skilled than me. With Shueste's beauty and influence—not to mention her inherent charm, wisdom, and social skills—I felt like she could pick any man she wanted.

"Just to ask... What did Warren say?"

I wanted to know what his opinion was. After all, he'd had to deal with this request directly. If Warren had given her permission, things would've gotten out of control. I suddenly felt grateful that he'd managed to stop her.

Shueste went on to list all of Warren's opinions while counting on her fingers. "He said, 'You can't intrude like that. Barging in without first discussing it would be a nuisance. What about a place to live? What about your reputation? It's all too premature...' That about sums it up."

"He's quite right..."

I was *really* glad he had proper common sense. Even if Shueste had suddenly intruded on me, I probably wouldn't have taken her in. That would be especially true if her brother, the current head of the family, hadn't given her permission. Letting her stay for one or two days would've been one thing, but I would've done everything I could to return her to Flumvelk. I would've even been fine with

guarding her on the way back.

Either way, no matter who it was, my common sense was against someone suddenly intruding in my home. Actually, I didn't think that Shueste was the type of girl to be so irrational. What had driven her so far? As always, I couldn't read her.

"That's why I eagerly awaited your arrival during Her Highness's visit," Shueste added with a smile.

"I see."

I didn't know whether she knew what my mental state was. Actually, she probably knew *exactly* what it was. She was the type to read such subtleties in emotion, and her skill far surpassed mine.

Hang on. Doesn't that mean this reckless request was all part of the plan? I doubted Shueste believed that she would get sudden approval to move to Baltrain, but she'd definitely known that I would be coming along on this expedition. It was possible she'd achieved this situation here tonight by conveying her selfish request to Warren.

After all, the eldest daughter of House Flumvelk was in a position to entertain people of far higher standing than me. There was nothing to gain politically by currying my favor. I didn't have the connections or influence for that, nor did I plan to gain such things. If I'd had such intentions, I would've gotten the gears moving in my head to acquire status from the moment Allucia had invited me to Baltrain.

I doubted Warren had misread the situation. By all rights, Shueste's role should've been to entertain Thracias or someone else of his standing. Regardless, he'd decided to pretty much ignore any political benefits and send her to me. *There has to be a reason for that.*

As I thought such things over, Shueste's tone suddenly shifted.

"Master Beryl."

"Hm?"

She sounds dead serious. I'd long stopped touching my meal. I didn't have the force of will to casually chow down during such a conversation.

"I love you dearly," she admitted. "It is my heartfelt desire to

further deepen this bond we have—hand in hand."

She looked me right in the eyes and spoke without hesitation. Her smile remained as always, but instead of its usual charm, there was an air of tranquility to it.

I paused for a long moment, then asked, "Why me?"

It was a pretty pathetic response to her confession, but I had no idea why she would have such feelings for me. I was, of course, glad to be liked. Both friendship and love were better than being hated. However, I hadn't spent that much time with Shueste. You could sum it up as love at first sight, but it still felt like too much when the man in question was no more than a commoner.

"You have a handsome face, a magnanimous personality, you show care and consideration for others as if it were perfectly natural, both my father and brother assess your swordsmanship highly, you have great strength but aren't arrogant... Need I say more?"

"Uhh, no... Thanks... This is kinda awkward..."

I'd been the one to ask, but her nonstop barrage of compliments had been extremely embarrassing for me. It was technically a good thing that she liked me so much, but having such tremendous affection turned toward me so bluntly had still made me recoil a little.

"Hee hee, thanks to the words you graced me with in the courtyard, my heart has cleared up considerably," she added.

"Is that so...? I'm glad to hear it."

When she said that, her words had an entirely different emotion behind them. Apparently, my remarks had opened a door for her. That was worth rejoicing over—my advice had benefited someone. I'd decided to walk the path of a swordsman, but that didn't mean I wanted to ignore everyone around me. Though she wasn't my pupil, she was my junior in life. I'd lived far longer than her. It was worth having pride in the fact that my accumulation of experience over the years had positively affected her.

"My parents and brothers provided me with plenty of love and a splendid education," Shueste continued, casting her eyes down with a charming, affectionate expression. "I am grateful for that. However, that was the first time anyone showed me such

consideration and care in a slightly different way. It was also my first time wanting to return such feelings in kind."

"Ha ha ha, you're making me a little self-conscious..."

I didn't hate her. If anything, you could say I liked her as a person. One part of me was happy to receive such affection, while another was extremely embarrassed.

"I won't deny that it was out of calculated self-interest at first," she added. "However, I now yearn to be by your side without any such concerns."

"Thank you... That honestly makes me very happy."

She was more than I deserved. Not only was she nobility, but both her looks and her personality were impeccable. She was very refined and possessed techniques that could make any partner she ended up with look good. If anything, the fact that she'd honestly admitted that there'd been a calculated aspect to her behavior reflected favorably on her. I could easily declare that it would be impossible to find a better woman than Shueste Flumvelk. There was no mistaking that.

I didn't have a bad impression of her—she was honestly a good girl. That was exactly why I felt like she didn't really match the likes of me. However, she'd chosen to face me directly with her feelings, and this wasn't anything like the admiration of a young girl in her tender years. These were the words of an adult woman. I had to respond with all due sincerity.

"But... I'm sorry. I can't answer right now," I told her.

"Am I lacking in some way...?"

"No, no, no, not at all. That's not what I mean. You're more than I could ever deserve."

If I claimed she was lacking, I would be making an enemy of all the men and women of the world. They'd be yelling, "Who the hell do you think you are?!" at me. However, no matter how many people showed me any amount of love, I was very unlikely to be able to respond in a satisfactory manner. At the very least, I couldn't give an immediate reply.

"I've recently become a little girl's guardian," I started to explain. "So...how do I put this? It all kinda just happened, but you could say

she's a precious daughter to me now."

"My, how splendid."

"Ha ha, thanks."

One reason for my reluctance was, of course, Mewi. I wouldn't absolutely refuse to get married just because she was around—I wasn't using her as an excuse. However, right now, getting married simply wasn't my top priority. After becoming Mewi's guardian and living with her for a while, I was far more concerned with her happiness than mine.

I did believe she would be better off with a mother figure. Had I been raised only by my dad without my mom around, I would've turned out *very* differently. However, the fact that I thought of it that way was proof that I was seeing a partner more as Mewi's mother than as my wife. Having that perspective from the get-go was quite rude toward any potential partners.

I didn't think Shueste was incapable of being a mother. She would probably be bewildered at first, but she seemed like she would be able to handle Mewi with ease. If anything, Mewi might quickly grow attached to her. There was no telling how things would turn out until we tried living together, though.

It was too difficult to take that risk without knowing. That was especially the case with the eldest daughter of House Flumvelk. It was necessary to consider her compatibility with both myself and Mewi. It would be ridiculous to say, "Sorry, but you'll have to leave" if things didn't work out. *She would seriously think I was just screwing with her.*

I had desires too. I liked the idea of having a beautiful wife. But that wasn't my life's goal. My greatest desire was to complete my path as a swordsman. Mewi's future had then forced its way second into my list of priorities. After those two, I just wanted to make sure I wasn't unhappy.

As I was now, I didn't feel any unhappiness. If anything, I was experiencing a life I'd never expected to have. And because I was satisfied with my life, I wasn't actively looking for a spouse. If I'd been twenty years younger, I would likely be jumping at Shueste's proposal, but I was now a little too old for such impulsive behavior.

"That's the gist of it," I said. "I just can't think of it right now. To repeat myself, I think you're a wonderful woman—I have plenty of affection for you. However, it's the same kind of affection I have for Allucia and the other girls."

"I...understand."

I'd explained my feelings, as awkward as I was. Shueste acknowledged what I had to say, but it was probably difficult for her to come to terms with it. *I truly am sorry.*

"To look at it from another perspective..." Shueste added. "Once your daughter sets off on her own and you've reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship, then will there be another chance for me?"

"Huh? Uh... I guess?"

I was daunted by how guilty I felt, while Shueste had recovered with shocking speed. Her charming smile was back in full force. She had tremendous emotional strength.

In theory, she was perfectly right—once Mewi was independent of me and I was satisfied with my progress as a swordsman, I would no longer have a reason to refuse. I didn't know if I would be taken by then, but the likelihood was pretty low.

"Then I shall wait until that time," Shueste said. "Although, it would be problematic if you forget about me before then. Will you allow me to exchange letters with you?"

"I'm fine with that. But are you really okay with a man like me...? Mewi—oh, that's my adopted daughter's name—will grow up in a few years, but there's no telling when I'll be satisfied with my swordsmanship."

"Yes. I'm far younger, after all. Master Beryl, you won't refuse me just because I've grown old, yes?"

"I would never say something so rude... You really are more than I deserve."

"If you believe so, then take me right now."

"Th-That's a little..." I trailed off. "Sorry for being so pathetic."

"Don't be. That's exactly what I love about you."

"I-I see... Thanks."

Great looks, profoundly refined, quick to change gears, and deeply considerate—she was a woman who could easily captivate as

many fine men as she could ever want. She really was wasted on me.

"There are a ton of better people than me out there, though," I told her. "If you meet one, don't hesitate."

"Ah, you cannot speak like that, Master Beryl. At times like these, you're supposed to say, 'I don't know how long it will take, but please wait for me.'"

"H-Ha ha ha... How harsh..."

And with that final criticism, this topic came to an end. All that was left was to finish the meal I'd stopped eating. Not that I could taste it anymore—I felt so awkward and guilty that my stomach and heart already seemed stuffed.

"Mind if I have more ale...?" I asked.

"I don't mind...but do be careful not to have too much."

"It won't have an effect on me tomorrow...probably."

In the end, the only thing that tasted the same as usual was the ale. I'd chugged it down faster than usual to try and distract myself from my worthlessness, and Shueste had needed to warn me about having too much.

It was going to be fine. I wasn't going to have a hangover. *Maybe. Probably. Surely.* Still, this was one night when I felt like drinking. It was pretty pitiful to run away to alcohol, which led me to a vicious circle of just wanting to drink more. My mind once more escaped to thinking about how things would be so much easier if she ended up getting disgusted with my pathetic display. This thought, in turn, made me drink even more. *I'm a lousy old man.*

"Ugh... Sorry, Shueste..."

"Don't be. It's fine, Master Beryl."

With my thoughts gradually becoming more and more incoherent—and my body worn out—the night carried on.

◇

"Margrave Flumvelk, I had a very pleasant stay."

"Your words are more than I deserve, Your Highness."

It was the day after Shueste confessed to me—the day after my

truly pathetic act of escapism. Princess Salacia's expedition would be leaving Flumvelk as planned, and we were set to enter Sphenedyardvania.

Honestly, I had a bit of a headache. Part of it was mental strain, but *a lot* was physical pain. As expected, I hadn't gotten away unscathed after drinking so much last night. I'd actually gotten dead drunk and had missed the opportunity to enjoy the bath I'd been looking forward to. Still, even after passing out pretty early, I'd somehow managed to wake up with enough time to wash myself off.

I usually felt guilty when my daily schedule was less busy than the others', but today was an exception—I was grateful to have fewer duties because it meant I could secure some personal time to make myself presentable again.

This was because our entire schedule was centered around the princess. We departed in the mornings whenever she was ready to go, and the princess generally wasn't in the habit of waking up at the crack of dawn. Perhaps we would leave early at some point if the expedition was extremely behind schedule or some kind of circumstance forced our hand, but thus far, we'd always left around midmorning. This schedule was par for the course for those who worked in the palace, but it was awfully easy for me and the knights, who often began before dawn. *Not that I have the leisure to really kick back and enjoy it...*

Much like yesterday, we were now gathered in front of House Flumvelk's main estate. The sun was already high in the sky, and Warren and Princess Salacia were exchanging their farewells.

"I pray that your journey will be a peaceful one. Do be careful, Your Highness."

"Thank you."

For a princess and a margrave, their conversation was splendidly plain. The more elaborate talks would have already taken place within Warren's mansion, so this was no more than a farewell before her journey and probably also a show for her escorts. Above all else, it wasn't good for a margrave to expose the princess to the winter air for too long.

"Princess Salacia, this way, if you please."

"Of course."

With the farewells over, Princess Salacia boarded her carriage along with her two maids and Allucia. Perhaps they'd gotten more comfortable during the journey—the atmosphere between the princess and her maids seemed more gentle than before.

Now that the princess was ready, there was no point in the rest of us standing around doing nothing. We all immediately got ready to depart.

Right before boarding my carriage, I threw a glance at Warren. He and his entourage seemed intent on standing there and waiting until the expedition was gone. Shueste was there too. I casually shifted my eyes over to her and met her gaze directly.

She had the same charming smile as usual, and she maintained it the whole time. I didn't know the meaning behind her gaze. *Maybe it's love. Maybe it's disdain.* I was about to say something, but I shut my mouth in a hurry. Now wasn't the time for it. My chance during our time together last night had long passed.

I truly am pathetic. A part of me wondered what was so good about an old man like me—another part figured it was precisely because of me, an old man, that she hadn't had any satisfactory marriage proposals. I had no regrets about walking the path of the sword, and there wasn't the slightest shadow hanging over my resolve. However, in all other paths of life, my dad was still so far ahead of me. *In this moment, I can't help but think about that.*

With such depressing thoughts in mind, I finally boarded the carriage. I let out a sigh now that I was no longer in Shueste's sights.

"Whew..."

"Oh? Tired, Mr. Beryl?" Thracias asked.

After all that, I wanted nothing more than to spend some time alone, but I had to ride in this carriage instead.

"Ha ha, it seems I drank a little too much last night," I said.

"My, my, you must've had a great time. Do be careful with your health, though. It gets rather cold these days."

"I couldn't agree more."

He kept up the conversation to a minimal degree. I was honestly

glad he didn't prod more than necessary. My condition wasn't a problem as long as I could still perform my duties. Thracias knew that, and since we weren't particularly close, he seemed to understand how meaningless it would be to inquire about my private life. In a sense, this was the kind of conversation meant for a cheap tavern in town, not something to dive into during an important expedition.

Still, I really *had* drunk too much, so just as he'd said, I needed to pay attention to my health. I was pretty used to the weather, but being exposed to winter's cold winds increased the likelihood of getting sick. It was a small mercy that it wasn't snowing. Piles of snow on the ground would impede the march. *I don't even want to think about the princess being stalled in the cold.*

"Now then, it's finally time to cross the border."

Thracias's words were met with silence. Going south from Flumvelk would bring us right out of Liberis and into Sphenedyardvania. This was new territory for me—I'd actually only recently learned that the capital was named Dilmahakha.

Ever since coming to Baltrain, I'd been dragged into all sorts of things related to Sphenedyardvania, and I honestly didn't have a great impression of them. I didn't think Prince Glenn or Gatoga were bad people, but I distrusted the country itself.

Most importantly, I needed to consider Rose. She'd told me she still had things to do in Sphenedyardvania, and I'd never found out if she'd gotten away safely after that whole incident. Even if she'd successfully fled the country, it wouldn't help her at all to tell me that—there was no need to expose herself to danger. *I can only pray that she's safe.* My selfish wish was to see her safe and sound with my own eyes, but it would be more than enough if I only heard rumors on the wind that she was alive.

On a journey this long, sitting in silence the whole time would be horrible. Thracias had turned the topic to the border, so I asked, "Have any of you been to Sphenedyardvania before?"

"Several times, on diplomatic missions," Thracias answered. "The holy capital is a beautiful city."

"I have also been a few times," Addelat said. "Though we officers

of arms serve as nothing beyond simple attendants."

Keifo shook his head. "I haven't... This will be my first time."

A beautiful capital city certainly *sounded* nice, but I could only pray that the beauty wasn't merely skin-deep. Rose's words still bothered me—I couldn't help but think of the papists as villains who'd resorted to using children as hostages. *Well, maybe the capital is beautiful because Prince Glenn and the royalists are governing it properly. I'll soon be able to see for myself.*

"Is that so?" I asked. "It's my first time too, so I'm looking forward to it."

This was half a platitude and half serious. I had nothing to gain from telling them, "Well, I actually don't have a great impression of that country." Though I wasn't particularly wise to the world, even *I* knew that there was no need to mention my reservations.

Despite my hesitancy, I was excited to venture out of Liberis for the first time. Even living in Baltrain had been full of surprises, so I was curious about what towns looked like outside the country and how their culture differed from mine. Also, it would be awesome if I could sample the local cuisine. I'd found myself thinking about food a lot more lately, probably because of all the delicious dishes I'd sampled since moving to Baltrain.

I'll bet they have an inn booked for us once we get to Sphenedyardvania. I doubt they'll offer us lousy food—I'm really looking forward to whatever they might serve.

Maybe I was slowly growing accustomed to being received and entertained by others. According to Allucia and Warren, I would need to get used to it because I would keep being invited to more and more events. I was starting to get a feel for keeping up a public image, but a strange part of me also felt like getting *too* accustomed would be a bad thing.

Everybody preferred being treated well over being hated or underestimated—that was just mentally more comfortable. However, if I started to think of high-society flattery as normal, my body and mind would start to misunderstand what the real world was like. If that happened, my sword might dull or even break.

In that sense, Allucia was quite successful. She was in a position

to be showered in constant praise, but her sword skills showed no signs of deteriorating. If anything, her swordplay was only getting better. She never rested on her laurels, regardless of how much recognition she received.

Even if future me had more opportunities to be in the public eye, would I be able to dedicate myself to improvement with a spirit as pure as Allucia's? I was doing the best I could, but it was truly terrifying what could happen when people grew accustomed to taking it easy. *I need to actively admonish myself so such a future doesn't await me.*

I didn't mean to belittle my abilities, of course. Before this, I'd been fine focusing entirely on swinging my sword, but now I knew there was so much more to my life. *Gaining fame isn't unconditionally bad—it just makes things awfully complicated.*

"Anyway, I'm glad today's weather is ideal for a march," I muttered casually.

"Ha ha, I couldn't agree more," Thracias said, picking up the conversation.

With the splendid winter calm contrasting with the turbulent state of my mind, the carriage moved on.

"I must say, that was a long journey," Thracias said, stretching his back.

He'd opened up quite a bit during the carriage ride. A man like him would normally avoid showing any needless vulnerabilities, but it seemed he'd decided that the people in his carriage were worthy of some trust. Despite his splendid title as the representative of the prime minister, he was awfully playful.

"True—sitting all day really does a number on the back." I took advantage of the situation and did some stretching of my own.

"Ha ha ha! Well, we should both be careful," he agreed.

It was seriously rough to sit around all day—the carriage's shaking made it even worse. I hadn't been able to exercise much on this expedition. Even though we had some free time in the evenings, I wasn't going to do practice swings in my room or anything. The journey itself was tiring, but maybe having to put my training on

hold was worse. Getting used to an easier schedule at this age was a slippery downhill slope.

After leaving Warren's estate, we'd spent a night in southern Flumvelk and were now finally approaching Sphenedyardvania's border. Even for a prosperous province like Flumvelk, the difference between the north—where Warren's mansion was—and the south was vast. It wasn't as rural as Beaden, but the land on either side of the road looked like it was just about finished being developed for agriculture.

Now that we'd traveled this far, it was time to say farewell to Sahat and his soldiers. A noble's private army couldn't be allowed across the border. Much like crossing between provinces within the nation, when you crossed into another country altogether, you would obviously enter someone else's territory. Traffic had to be restricted.

Unlike the last time, I'd spent almost no face-to-face time with Sahat and his soldiers. The scale of this expedition was simply too large. The knights were mostly clustered around the carriages, and farther out was the royal garrison. The provincial army was deployed even farther toward the outer edge, so they were too distant for me to interact with.

I wanted to chat with them about how things had gone since that training session we'd had, but it seemed I wouldn't get the chance. *Too much status comes with its own problems.*

"Whoa there..."

The carriage rocked and started slowing down. We were probably at the checkpoint. Normally, we would be exchanging provincial guards here, but this time, we were crossing into another country. I wondered if there would be any complications. I doubted anyone would try to get in the way of Liberis's third princess, though.

"Seems we've stopped," Thracias remarked. "Shall we step out?"

I nodded. "Yes, let's."

Once the carriage came to a complete stop, the four of us exited the carriage. The soldiers were already in formation—there were knights and soldiers in neat lines on both sides, creating a pathway to the checkpoint for the most important people on the expedition. *I have to walk down this? Even if I'm in the back, this makes me feel*

super nervous.

Around the time we reached the gate, Princess Salacia had been invited out of her carriage. *The most important person should be the last to arrive.* Once she reached the front, a remarkably large man among Sphenedyardvania's knights—a man wearing full plate armor—stepped forward.

"It is an honor to be graced with your presence, Princess Salacia Ashford el Liberis. I am the commander of the Holy Order of the Church of Sphene, Gatoga Lazorne. From this point onward, we knights of the Holy Order shall devote ourselves utterly to guaranteeing your safety."

"I appreciate it," replied Princess Salacia.

I was glad to see Gatoga in good health. He must've had all sorts of problems after the assassination attempt on Prince Glenn. I couldn't even imagine what he'd gone through.

This wasn't Princess Salacia's first time meeting Gatoga, but it would have been awfully crude to point that out, what with the ceremonial nature of these greetings. I wasn't foolhardy enough to raise my voice. The only thing I was capable of was watching in silence.

"We've finished confirming your papers, Your Highness. You are welcome within our borders."

With our documents in order, Gatoga signaled for the gate to open. I was glad to see our entry had gone off without a hitch.

Incidentally, the knight who'd whispered into Gatoga's ear about the papers wasn't someone I recognized. *He's probably Gatoga's lieutenant.* It wasn't Rose or Hinnis, of course. He had a solid build—even if he couldn't match Gatoga—but he looked awfully unbalanced because of the slender estoc he wielded. Judging by how he carried himself, he was quite the warrior.

I had no idea what the state of the Holy Order was right now. Gatoga had mentioned thoroughly cleaning house, so I could only pray that he'd pulled it off successfully. It really would be too much for him if he had yet another traitor as a lieutenant. I hoped this was a man who could properly support Gatoga and Prince Glenn.

With the greetings over and our papers in order, I figured we

would be going right back to the carriages. Before I headed back, I met Gatoga's eyes. With so few chances to speak with people directly, I felt like I was conversing via eye contact more and more. I hadn't learned to read minds, though, so I had no idea what he was thinking. Judging by his expression, things didn't seem so bad. *What a relief... Though it would be kinda out of place for him to give me an "oh crap" look.*

"Lazorne, I look forward to working with you."

"Yeah, likewise. As for the security formation, we'll go as discussed and—"

Allucia and Gatoga started discussing the security details. This wasn't something they were just deciding on the spot—they'd come to some sort of agreement beforehand, and this was nothing more than a final check.

A part of me wanted to go the rest of the way on foot, even if I had to be all the way at the edge of the formation. That was just my nature. That said, Allucia had spent the whole time sitting in a carriage with Princess Salacia too, so my complaints were a little toothless.

I wondered what Gatoga would be doing. His country had invited the guest of honor, so if I had to guess, he would be joining the security detail. I still had no idea how the subtleties of politics worked. Either way, it didn't matter so long as I never rose to a position where I had to worry about that stuff. If things got that far, I needed to refuse. I could only pray that such an appointment wouldn't come with yet another royal seal.

"We're departing."

After we returned to the carriage and sat for a while, the driver signaled that we were on the move again. Crossing into another country sounded pretty grandiose, but ultimately, we were just passing through a checkpoint. That didn't really evoke any strong feelings in me. Maybe I would feel something if the scenery suddenly changed, but it was pretty rare for territory to be prosperous right up against the border. There was just the imposing checkpoint, fortresses dotted here and there on the landscape, and dangerous-looking soldiers keeping an eye on us.

I felt even less since we were traveling in such a huge group. Had I crossed on my own, maybe it would've been a somewhat more moving experience. Besides, the landscape was essentially the same. We'd been in the countryside before crossing, and we were still in the countryside after. It was hard to get a real sense that I was in another country. And while I didn't *need* some kind of big moment, this just seemed anticlimactic.

I had no idea how far Sphenedyardvania's capital was from here—it was hard to imagine Dilmahakha being right on the border, so it was sure to take several days to get there. Still, we'd crossed the border and were approaching the end of this long journey. *I feel rather accomplished.*

"Whew... Just one last stretch, I suppose?" I said, putting my hands against my back and stretching.

"Indeed." Addelat nodded. "My butt is really starting to hurt, so I'd love to settle down already."

I wasn't quite sure how to react. You couldn't make light of how much strain was placed on your back by sitting all day, but I had no idea what to say to a woman talking about her butt. I certainly couldn't make a slip of the tongue in front of this group.

"Let's hope we are allocated a nice inn with good beds, shall we?" Thracias responded smoothly.

"I couldn't agree more," Addelat said.

Hmmm, even when it comes to a simple conversation, people with status are on another level. I don't think I'll ever be that good. Setting aside this meaningless idle chatter, I was honestly glad there hadn't been an attack during our long journey—though frankly, someone would have to be seriously stupid to attack this huge convoy.

We now had the Liberion Order, Sphenedyardvania's Holy Order, and Liberis's royal garrison with us. If anyone were capable of breaking through these defenses, they wouldn't be human. It would probably be hard even for Lucy.

That didn't mean we could be careless. I was sure everyone standing on guard thought so too. Thus, it was pointless for me to be the only one inside this carriage being cautious—it was better to

just put my trust in Allucia and Gatoga.

"It sure is quiet," I remarked, looking out at the scenery.

"Ignoring the sound of the marching army," Thracias quipped.

The sound of clopping hooves and marching feet repeated on loop. Still, the journey was so safe that I couldn't help but feel like it was quiet. If not for the back pain from the shaking carriage, it would've been perfect. *This soreness is no joke.* Once we reached Dilmahakha, I had to find some time to get some serious exercise in, or I would be in trouble.

It's decided then—once we reach our final destination, I'm taking some time to train, even if I have to be reckless about it.

I doubted there would be a parade or anything the moment we reached the holy capital. There were surely all kinds of things to prepare, so I was assuming I would get some free time. I was going to use that time to get some feeling back into my weakened body. Otherwise, I would seriously be done for as a swordsman. I wasn't going to drop dead or get sick or anything, but it was the motivation that truly mattered.

"Thinking about something, Mr. Beryl?" Thracias asked.

"Well, yes. I suppose you could say I was thinking of what to do once we reach the capital..."

"I see. As long as there are no major delays on the way, you should have some time for sightseeing."

His guess didn't exactly hit the bull's-eye, though I doubted he would ever have imagined that I was thinking of getting some exercise the moment we arrived. *Now that I've made my decision, I have to quickly put it into action.* I was looking forward to our arrival in Dilmahakha all the more now. In all likelihood, the other people in the carriage—or rather, the vast majority of the expedition—were excited for an entirely different reason.

Our destination—the capital of the religious state of Sphenedyardvania, the holy city Dilmahakha—drawing closer, minute by minute.

◇

"Shuh!"

I exhaled and swung my sword downward—my blade glimmered with the faintest red hue, and I could hear the sharp *whoosh* of it cutting through the air. My senses really were somewhat dull. An ideal downward cut slashed straight without the slightest deviation. However, my hands and eyes sensed something slightly off about the trajectory.

"Hmmm... Looks like it was the right choice to do practice swings."

No matter how old I got and no matter how much technique I accumulated, it was pretty depressing to be unable to do something I'd managed just fine before. It was a small mercy that I'd noticed the issue at this early stage—it wasn't too much of a mistake to correct. I just needed some calibration to get my senses back.

Maybe my dad had been unable to keep up with this type of training when he'd decided to set aside his sword. He was more than strong enough physically, but no matter how much other people told him that, it was meaningless unless he believed it too. *I probably understand that better than anyone.* It was awfully ironic—no matter how much people kept telling me that I was strong, it was difficult to change my perception of myself.

"I'd like to do some running, but..."

If my sword arm was a little dull, then my general physique had to be worse. About three weeks had passed since our departure from Baltrain, and I hadn't done any kind of serious exercise since then, so my body felt uncomfortably sluggish.

I wasn't a regular civilian here, though. I was the special instructor of the Liberion Order who'd come along for Princess Salacia's wedding procession. This also wasn't Baltrain, so I wasn't sure whether it was okay for me to run around thoughtlessly.

We'd reached Sphenedyardvania's capital just yesterday. Prince Glenn and other bigwigs from the Church of Sphene had formed a huge row to greet us, but I honestly didn't remember anyone but the prince. I hadn't really been close enough to see anyone else's face.

The expedition had finished their greetings with the royal family,

and I had then been guided to a noble's villa to spend the night. Now, I found myself borrowing the garden first thing in the morning to swing my sword. It'd been somewhat difficult to communicate *why* I wanted to make use of the garden like this, but I'd somehow managed to get permission by emphasizing that I was a swordsman and the special instructor for the Liberion Order. Though I didn't usually twist people's arms to get what I wanted, I'd had to this time. *I really need the exercise.* And in hindsight, it was the right decision.

"I don't really feel like sightseeing..."

I'd secured the time to do some training, but I couldn't just spend the entire day swinging my sword around. I had to eat, and there was probably some work to do in town. *Though if I wander around on my own, I'll likely get lost.* It was best to have company when traveling, but I'd come along on an extremely important mission involving two nations, so I wasn't exactly free to do whatever I wanted.

This wasn't, of course, because Dilmahakha had nothing worth seeing. The holy capital was just as beautiful as I'd heard. It was maybe a little less functional as a city compared to Baltrain, but the roads and architecture were still very well built, and there was quite a bit of pedestrian traffic. The one thing it lacked compared to Baltrain was a clean delineation of districts.

Baltrain's districts made the city a very easy environment for walking around, though maybe that was just my impression because I primarily went to the central and northern districts. The western district could be pretty chaotic, after all.

Even disregarding that, Baltrain and Dilmahakha were very different cities. This was pretty obvious, considering their distinct cultures. Was it a reflection of the statesmen who'd built up the cities over the course of history? I couldn't be sure because I hadn't walked around Dilmahakha for long enough to have an opinion. I was here for work, not sightseeing. I couldn't forget that.

As I continued swinging my sword, one of the house's maids called out to me.

"Master Gardenant, you have guests."

"Ah, thank you for informing me."

I would've been perfectly content with staying at a random inn, but that apparently wasn't going to fly when I was a guest from abroad. So, I was staying at a noble's villa. *Wait, are members of Sphenedyardvania's upper class even called nobles?*

Because I was at the villa, my movements and actions were somewhat limited. Visiting someone was a lot of work, and it took a lot of planning to even invite someone to take a walk around town.

This went both ways, of course. If anyone needed something from me, they couldn't come to me directly—the message had to be passed through a servant. Now that I thought of it, when I'd visited Lucy's home, Haley had generally been the one to welcome me. Maybe this was perfectly natural to the upper echelons of society, but it seemed like an awful lot of useless steps to me.

"Now then..."

I sheathed my sword and made my way to the front gate. Considering the season, it was pretty hard to get a sweat going from some light outdoor exercise. This was especially the case at my age. The small saving grace from this was that I didn't need to keep my visitors waiting long.

Who could be visiting me? I honestly couldn't think of many candidates. The most likely case was one of the Liberion knights. I doubted Thracias had come to invite me for some sightseeing. Well, the probability likely wasn't zero, but he seemed like he had a plethora of people to ask aside from me. I figured it was Allucia or Henblitz.

Upon reaching the gate, I saw two people waiting for me.

"Ah."

"Good morning, Master."

"Yo, Gardenant. Long time no see."

I was half right and half wrong.

"Morning, Allucia. And it's good to see you again, Gatoga."

One was the commander of the Liberion Order, her silver hair dazzling under the sun. The other was the sturdy and wise commander of the Holy Order. Even though I was somewhat accustomed to seeing them, it was strange for them to be together.

And though it was rude of me to think so, it was also a dangerous combination... I felt like their business with me couldn't be anything good.

That said, now that they were here, I had to listen to what they had to say. I wasn't in a position to turn them away at the door, nor was this a situation that would allow for that.

"Umm, did something happen?" I asked.

"We were wondering if you'd like to take a stroll around town to get a grasp of the layout while we share some information," Allucia said.

"That's the gist of it," Gatoga added. "It's your first time in Dilmahakha, yeah? I'll show you around."

"I see."

Seems I was overthinking things. They were here for a perfectly reasonable matter. Also, Gatoga had a point—I didn't know the city. I really knew *nothing* about it. I didn't even know which roads went where, so I would be pretty useless as a guard.

Thinking back, during Gatoga and Rose's visit to Baltrain, they'd also walked around the city to get a grasp of the geography. While the Liberion Order hadn't served as a guide at the time, it had been important for them to have a general grasp of the area before needing to do escort duty.

From that perspective, I'd been awfully haphazard about this expedition. My position was relatively unimportant, so this wasn't a huge problem, but maybe I'd been just a bit too thoughtless about the whole thing.

"All right—let's get to it, then," I told them.

It wasn't a bad idea to fix the problem right away. Regardless of the circumstances, it was good to have a general understanding of the area.

"P-Please wait a moment, Master," Allucia said, stopping me in a fluster. "At least inform the estate's lord and get your coat..."

"You're gonna cause an uproar if you go out like that," Gatoga added.

I didn't have anything to get ready, so I'd figured we could just go right away—I'd completely forgotten that I was being treated as a

guest here. And if their guest suddenly vanished without a word, it would be a huge problem. I had to go inform them that I was going out and get my overcoat.

Because I'd been swinging my sword, I'd also forgotten it was early morning in the dead of winter. I'd warmed up quite a bit, but I was definitely going to freeze if I walked around like this. I'd nearly gotten sick for no good reason. *I probably wasn't paying attention to these things because of excitement or nerves.* Whatever the reason, forgetting important stuff like that was a faux pas. Maybe moving my body for the first time in a while had stimulated me a bit *too* much.

At any rate, I had to fix this. Taking a walk around town while being shown the sights would do the trick. *All right, let's get this town memorized and rebalance my spirits.*

I quickly went back into the building and told a servant I would be heading out with the commanders of the Liberion and Holy Orders. I doubted there would be a problem with that. I then grabbed my overcoat from my room and put it on. Underneath, I was wearing my plain clothes, but that was probably fine. Allucia and Gatoga were both in armor—they weren't completely off duty and couldn't be seen as such.

I didn't own any armor, and the only gear I had from the order was this overcoat. My face was totally unknown in Dilmahakha, so the coat was my one and only means of identification. *Maybe it's best to avoid going out in plain clothes while on this expedition.* There was no telling whether someone might try to start something with me, and even if I did resolve things through force, that would complicate things.

Having equipment that identified my position was unexpectedly powerful. It was similar to Mewi's uniform, but on a somewhat larger scale. Though she could be pretty unsociable, very few scoundrels out there would try to lay a hand on a student of the magic institute.

"Thanks for waiting," I said after returning to the gate. I felt somewhat at ease knowing that the Liberion Order's overcoat would protect me from getting into any weird disputes.

"It's not a big deal," Allucia said.

"So, what's our route today?" Allucia surely had a plan—I doubted we were going to be wandering around at random.

"I'll show you to the main thoroughfare, for starters," Gatoga answered. "The parade's not gonna be going down any side streets."

"Makes sense."

Now that I thought about it, of course Gatoga knew more about the local area than Allucia. As such, it was best to go along with whatever he recommended. Just as he said, the big celebratory parade for Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia's marriage had no reason to go down any alleys—it was probably going to be a grand display down the largest street in town. We did still need to keep an eye on the alleys, but I wanted to believe the Holy Order's knights would take on that responsibility.

"At the very least, I'm hoping to learn enough not to get lost," I said.

"You don't really need to worry about that," Allucia told me. "Churches are pretty much the only buildings with high spires in Dilmahakha. If you walk toward any tall structures, you should end up on the main street."

"Hmmm..."

I wasn't planning to go out on my own or anything, but I wanted to avoid getting lost during the all-important guard duty during the parade. It turned out there was no need for concern—being able to find the main street by heading toward any tall building was a great boon for travelers.

"It's called the holy capital, after all," Gatoga added as we continued walking down the streets. "The church has maximum authority here. They're not gonna give permission to anyone who tries to build any other tall structures."

I understood the logic behind that, but it still seemed so different from the way Baltrain was governed. The largest structure in Baltrain was the palace, but there was a good distance between it and the central district, where many other tall buildings were situated. Maybe the palace *did* have a law restricting how tall buildings were allowed to be, but that didn't really matter to most of the people living there.

"Oooh, you're right."

However, in Dilmahakha, it seemed this law was being strictly enforced. I glanced up and took a look around. There were very few buildings that stood out, and the majority had steepled roofs. Those were very likely churches. It seemed like I could get a general idea of the area by simply memorizing where a few of the churches were. Even during the parade, as long as I could tell where the larger buildings were and how far away they stood, it was doubtful I would lose my way.

"Once you get a knack for it, it's pretty much impossible to get lost," Gatoga continued explaining. "Just so you know, this area we're in now is the Ranpaulo Parish."

"The Ranpaulo Parish...?" I repeated, unfamiliar with the name.

"Baltrain's districts are split up into north, south, and such," Gatoga elaborated. "Dilmahakha is divided into municipalities called parishes."

"I see..."

For those governing the city, it made sense to have names for their municipalities. It would be hard to give directions otherwise. What had me more interested was that they were called parishes. The Church of Sphene was the state religion here, so it wasn't that weird, but I wondered where the name "Ranpaulo" had come from. I felt like "North" and "South" would've worked too.

"And why's it called 'Ranpaulo'?" I asked.

"Some bigwig's name when the place was built," Gatoga answered. "I don't know that much about it either, but to sum it up —"

Gatoga went on to give me a history lesson. Sphenedyardvania was an old country, but it hadn't been established with that name from the start. Long ago, the monarchy had recognized the Church of Sphene as the state religion in an attempt to unify the nation. They'd changed their name to match. In the strictest sense, that was the true starting point for Sphenedyardvania.

Not that the name of the country really matters. Anyway, just as planned, the nation had developed greatly thanks to the help of the faithful, and with that development, the city had expanded in size to provide more housing. With each expansion, they'd given names to

the new districts or changed existing ones.

The candidates for said names came from higher-ups who'd governed the area at the time—like bishops and archbishops. That meant Ranpaulo was an actual person from the past. This naming system made perfect sense. Rewarding those who'd accomplished great things by naming land after them had been pretty common back in the day.

Maybe Beaden was actually a person long ago too. I didn't know that much about my village's history. Nobody really had an interest in it. *God only knows, so they say.*

"And that's the gist of it," Gatoga concluded. "This is the stuff they teach everyone in Sphenedyardvania."

"I see. Thank you."

Every land had its own history—it was only a matter of whether I went out of my way to learn it. To be perfectly frank, I didn't have much interest. There was nothing to lose from having the knowledge, but I was never going to proactively find this stuff out. Say, for example, Sphenedyardvania had a sword style that was unique to the region—I would be *far* more interested in that.

"I'm assuming the Holy Order uses estocs due to some historical heritage too?" I asked.

"That's right," Gatoga confirmed. "It's said the one and only god Sphene used an estoc."

I wasn't faulting them for their choice of weapon. A thrusting sword was relatively difficult to use compared to a standard longsword. It had a cutting edge, so you could technically use one the same way, but an estoc put much more emphasis on stabbing and was unsuited for blocking. The slightest mistake could break one quite easily.

A master was capable of using one to unleash an onslaught of slashes and thrusts, which posed a considerable threat. That applied to pretty much any weapon, though—it was just a matter of how difficult it was to reach such heights.

From that perspective, Rose had significant skill, as did the knight named Spur, whom I'd faced during Bishop Reveos's arrest. Honestly, he'd been ridiculously strong. If not for my sword made

from Zeno Grable's materials, I'd have very likely lost.

I didn't know what the standards were within the Holy Order. Rose had served as the lieutenant commander, so I assumed she was a cut above the others. But if Rose, Gatoga, and Spur were considered "average" knights, Sphenedyardvania would've had a much larger presence in the world.

"And here we are—the main street," Gatoga announced.

"Oooh..."

After getting a history lesson from Gatoga and discussing whatever came to mind as we casually strolled through town, we arrived at Dilmahakha's main thoroughfare.

"It's pretty big," I commented. "Looks like the parade won't be a problem."

"Yup. Going straight down that way leads to the cathedral."

If I had to guess, that was the most prominent building in the holy capital—comparable to Baltrain's royal palace.

"It's a beautiful city," I remarked as I took in the view.

It was pleasing the way this huge road stretched out in a perfectly straight line. It had a different appeal to it than the streets of Baltrain and Flumvelk.

"Baltrain and Flumvelk are nice places, but Dilmahakha has an appeal of its own," Allucia said.

"R-Right...?"

I wasn't quite sure how to react for a moment—she'd pulled the words right out of my mind. This also reminded me of what had happened with Shueste during our stay in Flumvelk. It would be far too rude to treat that as a dream, so I had to accept it as reality, but I just wasn't accustomed to the other sex having any interest in me. Recalling the event made me feel awkward.

"Master?"

"Hm? What's up?"

Perhaps somewhat suspicious of my reaction, Allucia threw me a probing glance. I definitely wasn't going to report what had happened that night to her or ask her for advice about it. I had to carry that burden on my own—it was my duty and privilege as a man.

I doubted Allucia truly had suspicions about what had happened, but she had surprisingly good intuition in the strangest ways. I honestly didn't want her to pry too much, so I did my best to dodge the subject.

"No...it's nothing," Allucia said, either sensing my intentions or just giving up on asking. "Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia's wedding will be held at the cathedral. The parade will then take place three days later."

I had no objections regarding the schedule. That said, holding the ceremony right at the start of the new year defied common sense for me. I'd been under the impression that you did this kind of thing when the weather was nice and warm. Maybe this was just the country bumpkin in me talking, but winter was usually the season for shutting yourself indoors—you couldn't grow any crops, and it was unsuitable for manual labor. Perhaps things were different in major cities like Baltrain and Dilmahakha, but it still seemed strange to choose the turn of the new year for such an auspicious day.

"I wonder why they're doing it when it's so cold outside," I said.

"'Cause of Sphene's teachings, naturally," Gatoga told me. "The belief is that the new year is when everything begins anew, good or bad. That's why a ton of people get married during this season."

"Haaah... I see..."

It turned out it was due to religious belief. *Makes sense.* I didn't really believe in gods or religion, but if there was a god of swords who told me that swinging my sword during the cold winter would bring me a step closer to enlightenment, I would probably do it. I'd never heard of that kind of god, though.

"Princess Salacia is currently undergoing lessons regarding Sphenedyardvania's customs," Allucia added.

"Sounds rough having to marry into another country's family," I said.

Regardless of whether there was anything to gain or lose personally through the marriage, living in another country meant needing to follow a different culture. Princess Salacia was marrying into their family, so she *had* to learn Sphenedyardvania's ways. It didn't really matter which culture she preferred.

A change in culture was sure to bring about changes in daily life, even if very minor. This was amplified in the case of formal ceremonies. I didn't think it would be enough for the princess to feel discouraged, but it would definitely lead to an accumulation of stress until she got used to it. *It would be pretty hard for me, at least.*

"Anyway, let's leave the lessons there," Gatoga said. "If you end up wandering into an alley, just look for a spire and walk toward it. You'll pretty much always end up on the main road, and at worst, you'll reach a church. You can get directions there."

"Understood. Thank you."

Unlike in Baltrain, the buildings here were generally not more than a couple of stories tall, so it was easy to spot a spire unless you found yourself in a really cramped alley. It would then be a simple matter to find the main street—or at least find someone who could tell you the way.

This was a lot easier than memorizing a map from scratch. *Very practical.* I wasn't bad with maps or anything, but reading them wasn't my specialty either. Adventurers seemed like they would be great at it.

"Oops..."

As I enjoyed the sights of Dilmahakha, my stomach suddenly let out a rumble. I'd done some light training first thing in the morning before coming out with these two, so I hadn't really eaten anything yet. We'd pretty much been walking nonstop, so while I wasn't tired, I *was* pretty hungry.

"All right, let's go grab something to eat," Gatoga suggested. "You'll generally find something or other along the main road."

"Ha ha ha, sorry about that..."

I was indeed hungry, but it was a little embarrassing for him to hear my stomach like that.

"Allow me to accompany you as well," Allucia said.

"Uhhh, sure. We're just getting food. No need to stand on ceremony like that..."

I didn't have any problems with Allucia coming along, but I wasn't sure how to react when she put it like that with such a serious expression. *We're just grabbing an early lunch...* Allucia and

Surena were very similar in this regard. However, saying that they were in any way alike was sure to displease them both, so I had no intention of pointing it out.

"Let's just find a place at random," Gatoga said. "You good with that?"

"Sure," I agreed. "I'll trust your judgment."

"Ha ha ha! The pressure's on!"

I had no idea what the restaurants here were like—the same probably went for Allucia. So, Gatoga led the way.

Even though we technically had free time, I felt like it would be a horrible idea to drink during the day while here on a mission. I wanted to savor the local beverages, but that would have to wait for another opportunity.

Interlude

Feeling the full force of the winter season seeping into her, the magic corps's commander, Lucy Diamond, sipped some warm tea that her servant Haley had prepared for her.

"What do *you* want so early in the morning?" she asked the man sitting before her, throwing him a rather crude look.

"There's no need to put it like that." The man returned her gaze defiantly and took a sip of his own tea. "Haven't I provided you with all sorts of information?"

This was Ibroy Howlman, a bishop of the Church of Sphene in Liberis's capital of Baltrain. There was a certain refinement to his clothing that distinguished him from the typical believer. His robes were clearly of high quality.

This wasn't the first time Ibroy had gone out of his way to visit Lucy in her home. Much like his first meeting with Beryl during the arrest of the former bishop Reveos, he'd come here many times to see Lucy face-to-face to provide her with information he'd obtained.

Haley, who'd served in Lucy's house for a relatively long time, saw him as one of her mistress's few frequent guests. Even when he visited with no warning, she generally let him in without question.

The strange part was that he'd never once visited Lucy at the magic corps or the institute. Though no one had shared her schedule with him—at the very least, Haley hadn't—he only ever appeared when Lucy was home. What was more, Lucy wasn't a morning person, yet he only showed up on the rare days when she did wake up at a normal hour. It was almost like he was aiming for those days specifically. Haley couldn't help but think that there was some kind of mysterious power at work. Everything was always too perfect. Today was yet another example of that.

The visit occurred right after Princess Salacia's wedding had been planned and her guards had departed from Baltrain.

"Information, huh?" Lucy asked. "Are you skipping Princess Salacia's wedding ceremony?"

"Perish the thought! I'll go once I finish up some work. They're marching in a huge group, so I'll catch up by horse in no time."

He had a point—the enormous escort and large retinue they'd taken along couldn't move that quickly. Taking the princess's physical condition into consideration, a forced march was also out of the question. Even if Ibroy left a few days later, he would be able to catch up, if not overtake them, even if he took a few guards with him.

"What about you, Lucy?" Ibroy asked. "Are you not going to witness the third princess's grand stage?"

"I'd love to, but things would get complicated if I went."

"Ha ha ha! That's true."

Lucy wanted to quip that he'd already known the answer to his question, but she swallowed those words with her tea. The nation of Sphenedyardvania got along poorly with Liberis's magic corps. Wizards were treated as heretics who messed with the miracles bestowed upon man by their god Sphene. Naturally, the magic corps had no intention of dismissing the church's teachings—it just happened their ideologies differed across the border. Most believers of the Church of Sphene knew this too. From Lucy's perspective, Sphenedyardvania's royal family understood very well.

However, there were some believers who absolutely abhorred the magic corps. Even if the magic corps did nothing at all, such negative emotions swelled within that nation. It would have been one thing if Liberis and Sphenedyardvania were at war, but relations were good enough for the third princess to be sent off as a bride. Lucy was avoiding getting publicly involved with Sphenedyardvania so that she didn't put an unnecessary damper on the delicate diplomatic situation.

"By the way, don't you have some intel for me?" Lucy asked, urging him to cut to the chase now that they'd had some tea to soothe the throat.

But Ibroy refused to let her control the pace. He seemed to want to take this conversation slowly. "Aah, right. I received a letter from

my subordinate. It's almost guaranteed something will happen at the wedding ceremony."

"I see..." Lucy digested that information, a stern look on her face. "So the papists have finally been driven into a corner."

"They must be panicking."

The papists were extremists within the Church of Sphene. They didn't call themselves that, nor did the people on the streets see them that way, but taking into consideration what they'd done and what they were planning, "extremist" was a perfectly suitable label. They were now plotting something on the joyous day of Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia's wedding. This wasn't welcome news to anyone.

"Reveos's downfall and their previous failure must've hit home," Lucy said.

"Indeed. The papists lost both researchers and soldiers."

Bishop Reveos Sarleon—now a former bishop, deceased—had been secretly researching the miracle of resurrection in Baltrain. His schemes had been brought to an end in large part due to Beryl's efforts—the two currently drinking tea had dragged him into it.

Following that, the extremists had attempted to assassinate Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia. The royals had gotten away safely thanks yet again to the Liberion Order's special instructor, and the incident had ultimately ended in absolute failure for the papists.

Having continuously hemorrhaged personnel, the papists were falling behind significantly in the political power struggle that was taking place behind the scenes.

"I know you well," Lucy said. "I bet you've already played your hand."

"Of course," Ibroy confirmed. "Why else would I be gathering all this information?"

A faction within the Church of Sphene was going to try something at the wedding between Sphenedyardvania's first prince and Liberis's third princess. Normally, one would assume a mere bishop couldn't do anything about it, but these two kept the conversation going as if that weren't the case at all.

"I've won over a few people to my side," Ibroy explained. "It

burned through a fair bit of money, but I suppose that's a necessary expense."

"They won't get sniffed out?"

"They won't. I like to think I was careful with my selection."

"That's fine, then."

The two continued chatting away, smiling as they enjoyed their tea. However, in complete contrast to how they appeared, the content of their conversation was rather nasty. They'd quickly detected a threat against royalty and were secretly maneuvering to try and prevent it. By all rights, they absolutely shouldn't have been speaking of this in such a personal space.

"How are things on your end?" Ibroy asked.

"That lad Gladio is well aware of it. That's why he sent such a ridiculously large escort—and why he and the boy Fasmatio aren't going."

"That makes sense from a safety perspective. In the worst case, the whole royal line could be killed all at once."

"A frightening possibility. I'd rather not think about it."

The magic corps's commander referred to the reigning king as "that lad." The bishop was, for some reason, sticking his neck into national affairs. Everything happening here was cause for serious concern, but nobody working in Lucy's household was boorish enough to say anything. After all, this was the house of not only the kingdom's but the *continent's* greatest wizard.

"I'm sure we'll still need Beryl and Allucia to give it their all, though," Ibroy added.

"That's their job. You don't need to worry about that part."

Those two were likely to bear the full brunt of this incident, but Lucy saw no need for concern. It was indeed their job—the duty they were meant to fulfill. Lucy actually placed a lot of importance on such things. This was, of course, under the assumption that those in question possessed the abilities to fulfill such duties.

From that perspective, Lucy and Ibroy were playing their roles properly too. The former was unable to get publicly involved due to diplomatic issues, so she took those who *could* get involved and shared information with them, got everyone to recognize the

situation, and took proper action to handle it. The latter was unable to directly influence anything—he played his hand behind the curtain.

Much like them, the knight commander of the Liberion Order and its special instructor had a role to play. They were sure to obstruct whatever incident was to come. Martial might could only prove its true worth in battle—and not in some simple sparring match either. The responsibility this entailed was further amplified when fighting for a just cause, like protecting the people and royalty. The fruits of their labors would be put to the test, but both Lucy and Ibroy believed they'd selected the right personnel to endure such a heavy responsibility.

"Good grief... A simple bishop shouldn't have to do this much work," Ibroy grumbled.

"I don't want to hear that from you. Honestly, you look like you're enjoying yourself."

"If this'll put Sphenedyardvania in order, then it's a wager I'm willing to make."

Ibroy was a follower of the Church of Sphene. He definitely welcomed the stability of the country that had established it as its state religion. Though he wasn't from Sphenedyardvania, he was a devout man who prayed for the peace of his fellow adherents.

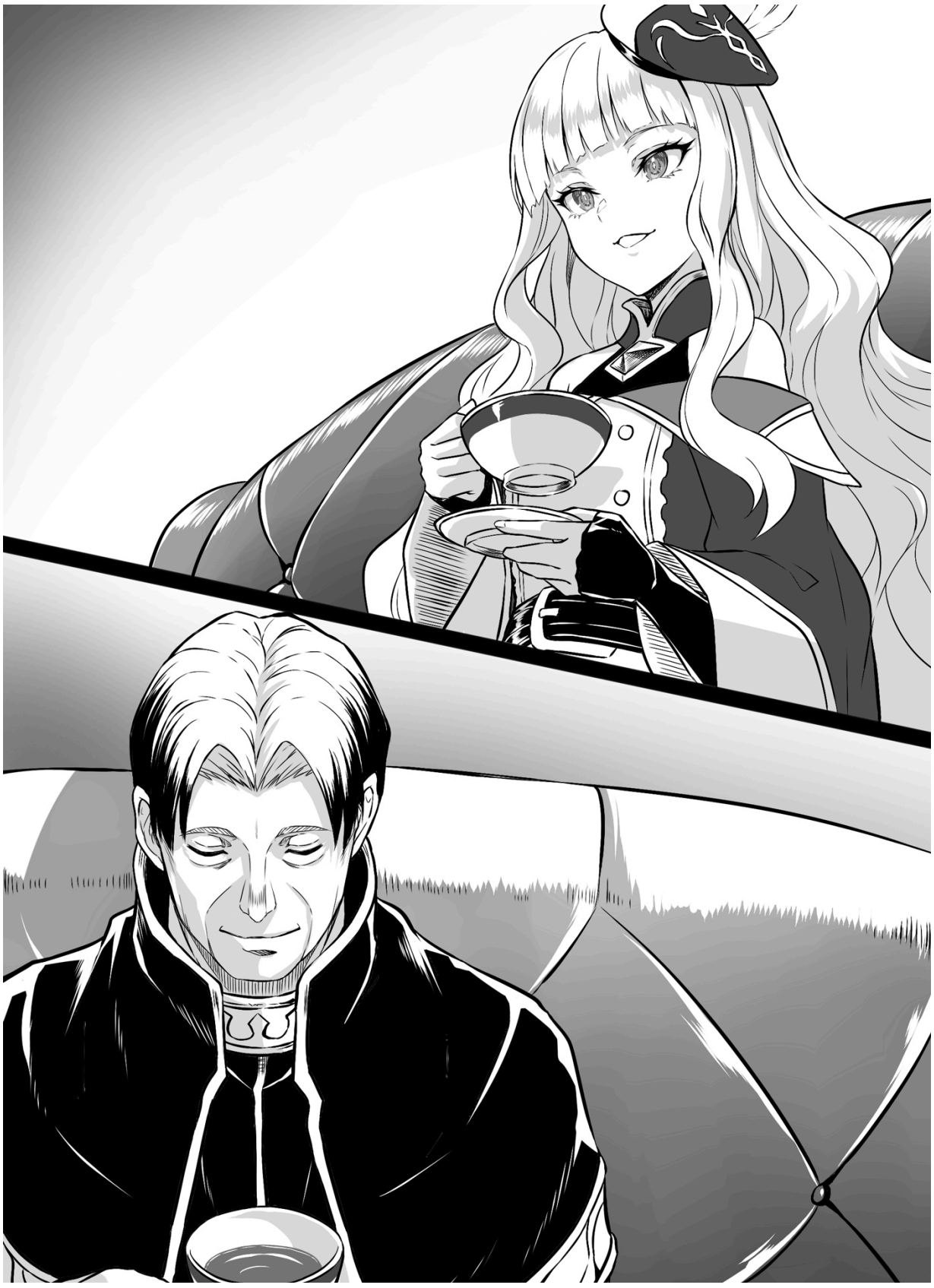
In contrast, he was merciless toward the small portion of believers who were running wild and making their own selfish interpretations of Sphene's sacred scriptures. Anyone could easily see how outrageous it was to expose royalty to danger. Just as Ibroy had said, it wasn't a bad wager if he could help steer the Church of Sphene in a better direction.

In this respect, he placed his trust in the martial prowess of the Liberion Order and Beryl. The Holy Order was in no way weak, but they just didn't match up when compared to the outstanding Liberion Order. With the additional participation of Beryl and other skilled collaborators, Ibroy was very likely to win this bet unless something outrageous happened. The chips he had on the table were his entire future. It was somewhat extreme for a wager.

"Is that all?" Lucy asked.

"I suppose so. I will make small adjustments to the plan when I'm on-site."

"Very good."



The two finished what tea was left in their cups and ended the conversation for the time being. The mood in the room was unique to them: It could be seen as two friends getting along or as two top-class professionals with great self-respect working together. Lucy rather liked this kind of atmosphere.

Lucy Diamond was the commander of Liberis's magic corps, the headmistress of the magic institute, and the continent's greatest wizard. Even superficially, there were surprisingly few people out there who could speak on equal terms with her. Pretty much everyone felt no small amount of awe in her presence.

She believed this was fine. It was far sounder for a wizard of her status and abilities to be treated this way than to be looked down upon. The extremists of the Church of Sphene were pretty much the only exception to this, but they didn't look down on her so much as they acted openly hostile. This sentiment wasn't reserved for Lucy personally either—their hatred was for the entire magic corps.

Things had been like this for many years, and because of that, reactions toward her were generally split into the two extremes of awe and hostility. Hostility was one thing, but she actually saw the awe as a positive. Thus, she'd never tried to improve the situation for the better and had worked to reinforce these opinions even more.

Despite all this, there were two rare individuals who talked to her as equals—Beryl and Ibroy. Beryl, in particular, was a master swordsman whom Lucy's wizardry was incapable of dominating. It only stood to reason that she had a great interest in him.

"By the way, Ibroy."

"Hm? What is it?"

People who could speak to her like equals—going only by that definition, Beryl and Ibroy were the same. However, in truth, they were nothing alike.

"How many years have you been doing this job again?" Lucy asked.

Even though her cup was empty, she couldn't call Haley into the room due to the nature of these discussions. Lucy stood up and poured her own tea.

“Let’s see... About twenty years?” Ibroy answered. “Now that I think of it, I’ve been at it for quite a while.”

“That long already? You’ve gotten awfully used to it.”

“After all this time, I *should* be used to it. My stint has been nowhere near as long as yours, though.”

After pouring her own tea, Lucy poured some for Ibroy too. There were surprisingly few people Lucy Diamond saw fit to pour tea for.

“And you were *this* small back in the day,” she added.

“Hmm. I recall meeting you only after I reached adulthood, yes?”

“I’m kidding. Can’t you tell?”

“Ha ha ha. Sorry for being dense.”

It was a meaningless conversation. They’d already discussed what business they had, and this was something like idle chatter. However, there was a strange inconsistency in what they were saying. Ibroy had claimed that he’d been an adult by the time he’d met Lucy. This was the truth. He’d only received a title beyond being a simple believer of the Church of Sphene after meeting Lucy too.

On the other hand, Lucy’s claim that he’d been small was also the truth. Lucy Diamond knew of Ibroy Howlman’s early childhood. He didn’t remember because he’d been too young. He’d also been influenced by the long passage of time since that chance meeting.

Lucy had always done things like this. She didn’t do it for just anyone, of course. She carefully selected those who had the qualities to become someone. To put it bluntly, she marked the sprouts who had potential and harvested them when they bore fruit —having new titles and duties ready for them when they did.

The fruit known as Ibroy Howlman had ripened in a truly ideal way. This wasn’t out of self-interest, of course. Liberis was known as a major power in the field of magic, and she scouted people lawfully to further its development. It was a form of national administration.

“I’m so sad to see that humble little boy end up like this,” she said, doing the worst job of feigning tears.

“I also recall you being the one to make me this way,” he retorted.

Ibroy was Lucy’s friend. There was no lie in that statement, but it wasn’t the entire truth either. He also had no complaints about his

current circumstances. Naturally, he'd been reserved, anxious, reluctant, and nervous at first. But after twenty years of such a life, he'd gotten used to it—whether he liked it or not. He also had the wits to be able to adapt to such an environment.

"Haaah... Sorry, sorry. I'm just playing around," Lucy told him.

"Is that so? I figured you'd suddenly lost your mind."

"It's still too early for me to go senile."

When exactly would this woman start going senile? Ibroy didn't have enough of a grasp of Lucy's true nature to be able to keep such wild thoughts out of his head. The Lucy he'd met all those years ago looked exactly like the one he was chatting with now. She hadn't changed the slightest bit; nothing about her gave the sense that time was passing.

He at least knew that she was no simple human. However, much like with the miracle of resurrection, humanity hadn't even dipped a toe into the study of immortality, let alone fully developed it. The true nature of the miracles that some members of the Church of Sphene lionized was a rip-off of necromancy. At the very least, that was what Ibroy believed.

The woman known as Lucy Diamond was the one and only person to have walked through the doors of truth—a door that no other was even allowed to gaze upon. No matter how many decades passed, that fact never became less terrifying.

At the same time, Ibroy was glad that Lucy was the one to have reached that door. Had anyone else gotten there first, it most likely would've led to a brief moment of prosperity followed by ruin. Gods were gods precisely because humans could never enter their territory. Miracles were miracles because they never happened. Ibroy saw those as simple truths.

"Well, it's about time for me to go," Ibroy said. "I've told you what I know, and now isn't the time to be relaxing."

"Good work."

"The hard work is only just beginning."

"Hee hee hee, you're not wrong. Give it your all, youngster."

"I'm already over fifty..."

All humans were youngsters to Lucy. This was yet another simple

truth. Faced with this unreasonable fact, Ibroy smiled wryly, creasing the deep wrinkles on his face.

"Ibroy," Lucy called as he reached for the door.

"Hm? You don't need to see me out," he said, turning his head. She'd never seen him off before.

The glorious commander of the magic corps and a mere bishop—it was precisely because their relationship had remained as it was that their face-to-face meetings were so personal and informal. That was why he'd gone out of his way to pick a time when nobody was around.

"Don't die," she told him. "Not even *I* could resurrect you."

"I have no intention to. When I do, I'll obviously pass in peace while being seen off by the devout faithful. It is not yet time for that."

"All right. Then make your way back, even if you have to crawl through the mud to do so."

"What a horrible expression. But I suppose I'll do my best."

"Mm."

With that ominous farewell, Ibroy opened the door and left the room. Now on her own, Lucy took a breath and finished her tea in one gulp—the refreshing scent and heat rushed down her throat.

"Give it your all, youngsters..." she murmured.

Who was she addressing now? Her quiet words were drowned out by the sound of the cold wind rattling against the window.

Chapter 3: An Old Country Bumpkin Becomes a Savior

"Lady Allucia Citrus and Master Beryl Gardenant, yes? Welcome to the San Gragie Cathedral."

After we safely arrived in Sphenedyardvania's holy capital of Dilmahakha, and I got a casual tour from Gatoga and Allucia, nothing of particular note happened until the new year. I had finally gotten the estate's owner to understand my desire to train, and so I'd thus spent the entire time devoting myself to swordsmanship in the garden.

But now, I was at Dilmahakha's cathedral to witness Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia's wedding and to protect them. Even though it was a new year, it honestly didn't really feel like it. Had I been at home, I would've probably held a modest celebration with Mewi, but that unfortunately wasn't the case.

I was glad that my outlook on life had expanded greatly from my time in the narrow confines of Beaden. Still, that had also come with an increase in status and fame. It would be problematic if I had to go on more and more expeditions. In the future, I might even have to put my foot down and compromise on my presence at events. However, it would be even *more* problematic if my status evolved to a point where I couldn't decide on that compromise at my own discretion. *Having just the right amount of status is an awfully complex issue.*

As such useless thoughts crossed my mind, I looked up at the cathedral towering before me.

"It sure is huge up close..."

I'd had a general idea of its location. The main road led here in a perfectly straight line, so it was super easy to spot. However, since I'd never had any business here, I hadn't gone out of my way to see

it. I'd figured I would be in the cathedral anyway during the wedding, so I could just enjoy the sight then. Now that I was here, I wished I'd made the time earlier to take it in at my leisure.

"It's Sphenedyardvania's pride, after all," Allucia commented.

"I can see why..."

It was enormous. One couldn't help but feel awe when looking at such a large structure. But beyond sheer size, the San Gragie Cathedral had an impact and solemnity to it that I was keenly aware of yet found hard to describe. I wasn't deeply religious—I wasn't even a believer in the Church of Sphene. Still, I couldn't help but feel the holiness of this place.

I could sense the significant passage of time on the surface of the intricately laid stone walls. I doubted the building had been constructed using the latest and greatest techniques—it had been built from scratch a long time ago, though it had to have undergone repairs, of course. Still, the tenacity to have built such an enormous stone structure was remarkable. Simply being able to witness this had made the trip to Sphenedyardvania worth it.

It was difficult to express my thoughts using the meager vocabulary of an old country bumpkin who'd spent many years ignoring the extent of the world by shutting himself in Beaden. Even though I had no interest in the arts or history, this whole thing made me feel a little pathetic.

"So this is where the ceremony will be held?" I asked. "I'm sure it'll be amazing."

"Yes, I couldn't agree more."

Swearing eternal love on such a grand stage was sure to be spectacular. This was a royal wedding, so it wasn't a marriage of pure love. Still, it was wonderful to be blessed in such a cathedral.

I wondered how it would go for me. Even if I were blessed with a partner, I felt like such a magnificent location would make me too nervous. It would be more than enough for me to be able to confirm our love for each other in a modest but sincere way.

After passing through the main gates, the first thing that came into sight was an enormous garden.

"It's awfully spacious," I said.

Sphenedyardvania was much smaller than Liberis and other nearby countries, yet they'd decided to dedicate a significant space to a site of worship. That was how much influence the Church of Sphene had here.

While the weather was clear, the wind was strong and cold. The garden was surrounded by walls, but the space was large enough for the wind to blow through unobstructed. If not for my overcoat, I probably would've been shivering in a corner. After all, I couldn't exercise to warm up in a place like this.

We were probably going to be on standby out here in the garden until the ceremony began. I would've preferred to be let inside somewhere, but the cathedral was a holy place. Maybe it was normally open for worship, but with the royal wedding coming up, it made sense for it to be sealed to all but a select few until it was time for the unveiling.

There wasn't really much to talk about with Allucia. After a while of standing around in boredom, I heard my name being called.

"Oh? If it isn't Beryl. Long time no see."

"Ibroy?"

I turned around to see the clergyman with narrow eyes—Ibroy Howlman—wearing the same robes I was accustomed to seeing him in. He was staring at me as if he found my reaction somewhat unexpected.

"I didn't know you'd be here too," I said.

"Of course I am," he replied. "I'm a bishop of the Church of Sphene, after all."

"I guess you've got a point there..."

I hadn't expected to see him here at all, but now that I thought of it, Ibroy *was* a faithful of the Church of Sphene and had recently been promoted to the rank of bishop—someone you normally couldn't meet with so easily. My senses in this regard had been paralyzed somewhat. I hadn't recognized his status at first, but it was no exaggeration to say that he was one of the major connections I'd made in Baltrain.

Allucia greeted him too. "Bishop Howlman, it is good to see you again."

"I'm glad you're in good health, Allucia."

I was once more reminded of how Allucia seemed to know all the important people—not only in Baltrain but in all of Liberis. If anything, it would probably be difficult to find a big shot whom she'd never met before. She really did have an outrageous level of status.

Ibroy certainly had some guts to treat her so casually. He did the same with Lucy. He now had the title of bishop, but that had been a relatively recent acquisition. His wasn't even Liberis's state religion, so it had to have been difficult for a random priest to get to the level where he could speak as equals among Allucia and Lucy. *I guess you could say a similar thing about me. I don't really want to hear it, though.*

"Hmmm... I don't suppose you two are here on a sightseeing trip?" he asked.

"Of course not," Allucia answered. "We have been charged with Princess Salacia's protection."

"Ha ha ha, I know. I'm just joking."

It actually wasn't strange at all for Ibroy to be attending the wedding. If anything, *I* was far more out of place than he was. Being here gave me a nebulous sense of alienation. If not for my job, I wouldn't have much of a reason to leave Baltrain, let alone Liberis.

"Anyway, Dilmahakha isn't a bad place to visit," he told us. "If you find the time, take a look around."

"We'll keep that in mind."

Just as he'd said, this was a prosperous city. Taking in the sights sounded pretty fun. Having spent so long in the countryside, a part of me felt like going on a trip only for that purpose, though I didn't have any particular destination in mind. The fact that I'd been able to see a little of the world recently could be almost entirely attributed to Allucia.

Once everything calmed down, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to take Mewi on a trip somewhere. *You can't really call visiting Beaden a vacation...* If I thought about it as a way of getting Mewi experience instead of traveling for my own sake, going out at a moderate frequency sounded completely plausible.

I felt like my opinion on many matters was slowly changing. That

just meant I had that much more to think about—and that many more anxieties about my future.

"Oh, it looks like it's about time to start admitting people inside," Ibroy said. "If you'll excuse me."

Allucia nodded. "Go ahead. We'll see you later."

It seemed things were starting to get moving around the cathedral's narthex. I could see a wave of people gathering there. Just as Ibroy had said, they were letting people in.

Now that Ibroy was gone, I idly said, "The exterior is already a sight to behold. Makes you curious about the inside, doesn't it?"

"I haven't been inside before either," Allucia replied. "I can imagine how beautiful it must be."

"Definitely."

While we couldn't see inside the narthex from here, I had high hopes for the interior of the San Gragie Cathedral.

Things were getting really exciting, and after a little while, it was finally our turn to enter the cathedral. As we did, one of the knights of the Holy Order stopped Allucia and me.

"Excuse me. Please hand over your weapons."

"We are of the Liberion Order..." Allucia objected. "I do believe that was explained to you beforehand."

"I am, of course, aware," he said. "However, for the safety of Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia, please show some understanding. We knights of the Holy Order will take responsibility for the area's defense."

I understood the logic behind disarming all guests. After all, this was a wedding between the royal families of two nations. It was only natural for those in general attendance to be refused their weapons.

The problem was that we *weren't* in general attendance. Allucia—the commander of the Liberion Order—hadn't even been told about this beforehand. To add to that, while this was more of a sentimental argument on my part than a logical one, Sphenedyardvania's Holy Order wasn't entirely trustworthy.

Gatoga had gone through great efforts to clean up the

organization. I didn't suspect his nature or abilities at this point. However, had Gatoga been the one to advise disarming everyone at the venue, he would've informed Allucia about it.

It was possible that this change had been decided in a hurry. Talks had proceeded under the assumption that both the Liberion Order and Holy Order would be armed, but perhaps someone had butted in somewhere along the line to change that. We had no way of confirming that right now, though. Things would've been different if Gatoga had been here, but he wasn't.

Incidentally, our mission was largely Prince Salacia's protection, but no Liberion knights were stationed at the palace where she was staying. That made sense—they couldn't allow foreign knights to stay at the palace. That was why I'd been assigned to a different house.

Ever since our arrival in Dilmahakha, the Sphenedyardvanians and the royal garrison had taken care of her safety. There was a logic behind this—in all likelihood, those in her immediate vicinity were going to be staying behind with her and serving in her dedicated royal guard.

While she would remain of royal lineage, by marrying Prince Glenn, she would effectively lose all authority in Liberis. That was what it meant to marry into another country's family, and she would no longer be able to mobilize the Liberion Order. Not that the princess was ever going to lead an army or anything. Still, her environment was going to change compared to her time in Liberis, and her current living situation was something like a rehearsal for that.

"Does Lazorne know about this?" Allucia asked.

"Of course. This order has Commander Gatoga's approval," the knight confirmed. "We will keep everyone's weapons off to the side in the aisle. They'll be within sight, and we'll have two knights stationed by them to avoid any theft... Please understand that this was arranged by Commander Gatoga."

Allucia's attitude was somewhat overbearing. I understood her reluctance to part with her weapon. We weren't wizards, but swordsmen—we couldn't fight bare-handed. Still, I was starting to

see what was going on. On the assumption this knight wasn't lying, it was possible the original order had been to confiscate all weapons outright. That was when Gatoga had interjected, leading to the current arrangement. *That's just my guess, though. It doesn't sound too far off. Probably.*

"Very well. I'll comply," Allucia answered after considering it for a while. "However, as a swordswoman, my sword is my very life. Do handle it with care."

"I am well aware," the knight said. "I, too, am an aspiring swordsman."

"Then it's agreed. Do you mind, Master?" Allucia asked, turning to me.

"If you're fine with it, then I am too. I'll have to ask to have mine handled with care as well."

"Of course. Then we'll leave them with you," Allucia told the knight.

She'd ultimately caved to Gatoga's conditions for our disarmament. Part of her reasoning was that obstinately refusing wasn't really going to accomplish anything. The weapons were apparently going to be kept in sight too. Our only option was to trust them.

Allucia and I removed the sheaths from our waists. It was pretty stressful to part with my sword when, by all rights, I should've been armed. Everyone else had to feel the same way, though, so I just had to put up with it.

"Received and understood," the knight said, taking our weapons with an air of reverence.

By the looks of it, this man wasn't going to be treating them recklessly. If they were going to remain in sight, then maybe there was nothing to be anxious about. It would be best if nothing happened, but if something did, I wanted to be able to retrieve my sword right away.

"Haah... I feel restless," Allucia muttered.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Just as you said, a blade is a swordsman's life."

"There's that too, but the thought of handing over the sword you honored me with, even if just temporarily..."

"How about taking this opportunity to get a nicer one...?"

"No, that one will do. It's *my* sword."

"I-I see..."

That sword really had just been made by the blacksmith in Beaden. It definitely wasn't high-quality enough to be used by the knight commander who represented the entire country. However, it felt like it was going to take a *very* long time to convince her otherwise.

I wondered which would happen first: Allucia arming herself with a more appropriate sword or me getting married. These weren't generally situations you compared, but the hurdle to clear both was similarly high.

"Then shall we, Master?"

"Ah, right. Let's go."

With such idiotic thoughts in mind, I stepped into the San Gragie Cathedral's main building.

"Oooh..."

The first thing that came out of my mouth was a sigh of admiration. I'd known how large the building was from the outside, but seeing the exterior and being inside was like the difference between earth and heaven. The ceiling was unbelievably high—high enough that it seemed like I would hurt my neck by looking up at it. All of the inner walls seemed to have been built with perfect calculation. Even without any knowledge of the arts or architecture, I could somehow tell.

High up on the walls, well out of reach, were lines or large windows. I couldn't even imagine how they'd gotten them up there. With today's good weather, the sun pouring through those windows gave the space a mystical air. The building certainly lived up to its name as a cathedral, and that was my impression after only taking a single step inside.

"I didn't think it'd be this grand... How marvelous," Allucia said.

"Yeah, I couldn't agree more."

It seemed she was of the same opinion as me, though the beautiful knight commander maintained her composure in front of the holy spectacle while the old man next to her had his mouth

agape in awe. We were awfully different in terms of presentation.

"It feels like they can accommodate as many people as you could possibly want in here," I marveled.

We were only standing at the very entrance of the church's nave. Still, there was significant space inside the room. I doubted they *would* cram such a holy place with people, but I wondered how many they could fit inside if they packed the place to the brim.

I turned my gaze farther into the building. At the end of an extremely long nave was a choir, and beyond that was a somewhat elevated space. To put it very crudely, it was like a fancy dance floor. That had to be the church's sanctuary—it was likely where Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia were going to exchange their vows. Simply imagining the sight seemed to give the place a sacred aura.

I didn't have any particular attachment to the prince and princess. Still, the atmosphere in the room made me feel like I would be deeply moved once they were up there. That was simply how amazing the inside of the San Gragie Cathedral was.

"Our swords...are right there," I said.

"Indeed. I suppose that, at least, is a relief."

I turned my attention to the side, spotting another wide aisle. This one was nowhere near as large as the central aisle, and the ceiling was much lower there. That was only in comparison, though. The standards for size in this place were just off the scale. It was like entering the building had rendered my senses numb.

In that aisle, all the swords the visitors had entrusted to the guards were lined up in neat order. I'd figured they'd have tossed them into a cask or something, so this was a little unexpected. They were being handled with plenty of care. It almost looked like a weapons exhibition.

A knight of the Holy Order stood at each end of the line, just as the one at the door had told us. It looked easy enough to go over there and grab my weapon. It was also in plain sight, so it would be a nearly impossible undertaking to go there and steal something without anyone noticing, and the two guards would surely see it happening.

If the time and situation permitted it, I would've loved to check

out what kinds of weapons everyone favored. Unfortunately, this was not that kind of situation at all, so I had to settle for glancing at them from afar.

"Are we free to sit wherever we want?" I asked.

"It seems so," Allucia confirmed. "There were no arrangements in particular regarding that."

There were benches arranged on both sides of the central aisle. I didn't know whether these were already there for the purpose of worship or if they'd been prepared specifically for this ceremony. Either way, setting aside any comfort they provided, they looked awfully classy—to my little commoner brain, at least. *I have a strange internal conflict about not wanting to sit in the front, but I also find it undesirable to slink off to the back. What to do...?*

As I pondered this, Henblitz called out to us.

"Commander, Mr. Beryl, good morning."

"Good morning."

"Hey, morning."

I'd spent a lot of time separated from him during this expedition, so it had been a while since we'd been able to chat. Much like Allucia and me, he was without his favorite longsword. Taking a quick look around, I could see only the Holy Order was armed. In that sense, they were properly fulfilling their duty.

"Henblitz, have there been any other changes?"

"No, ma'am. Everything is in order."

I was glad there didn't seem to be any issues. It'd be a major problem if there were any at this point.

By all rights, Allucia should've been moving around with Henblitz. However, she'd gone out of her way to travel to the house where I was staying and accompany me to the cathedral. She probably had all sorts of expectations. Whether I was actually going to answer them, I still didn't know.

I'd never had to worry about this stuff before—I had largely looked down on myself and had been convinced that Allucia's affection was nothing more than a momentary delusion on her part. However, regardless of my own will in the matter, the environment around me was definitely changing. My resolve to continue down the

path of a swordsman wasn't going to waver, but the changes still felt pretty bad.

"Mr. Beryl?" Henblitz asked, snapping me back to reality.

"Hm? Aah, sorry. I was just lost in thought."

Nope. That's no good. My brain is going off in weird directions. It was something I had to think about, but now wasn't the time for it. Not that I knew when the right time was. You could say I was mostly reaping what I'd sown, but it was still an awfully difficult problem to solve.

"Shall we get seated?" Allucia suggested.

"Sounds good," I agreed.

I glanced at the entrance where other attendees were filing into the cathedral in droves. Even if there weren't enough people to force some to stand, it would be easier on us if we secured seats while we could.

The question was where exactly to sit, but Allucia strode off briskly. With no room to even ask where she was going, Henblitz and I followed.

Huh? I guess we really are sitting in the front... It was better than the back, but still. Was it the commoner in me that made me feel nervous about it? Allucia was supposed to be a commoner too, though. For better or worse, status and titles changed a person. I could truly see that in this instant.

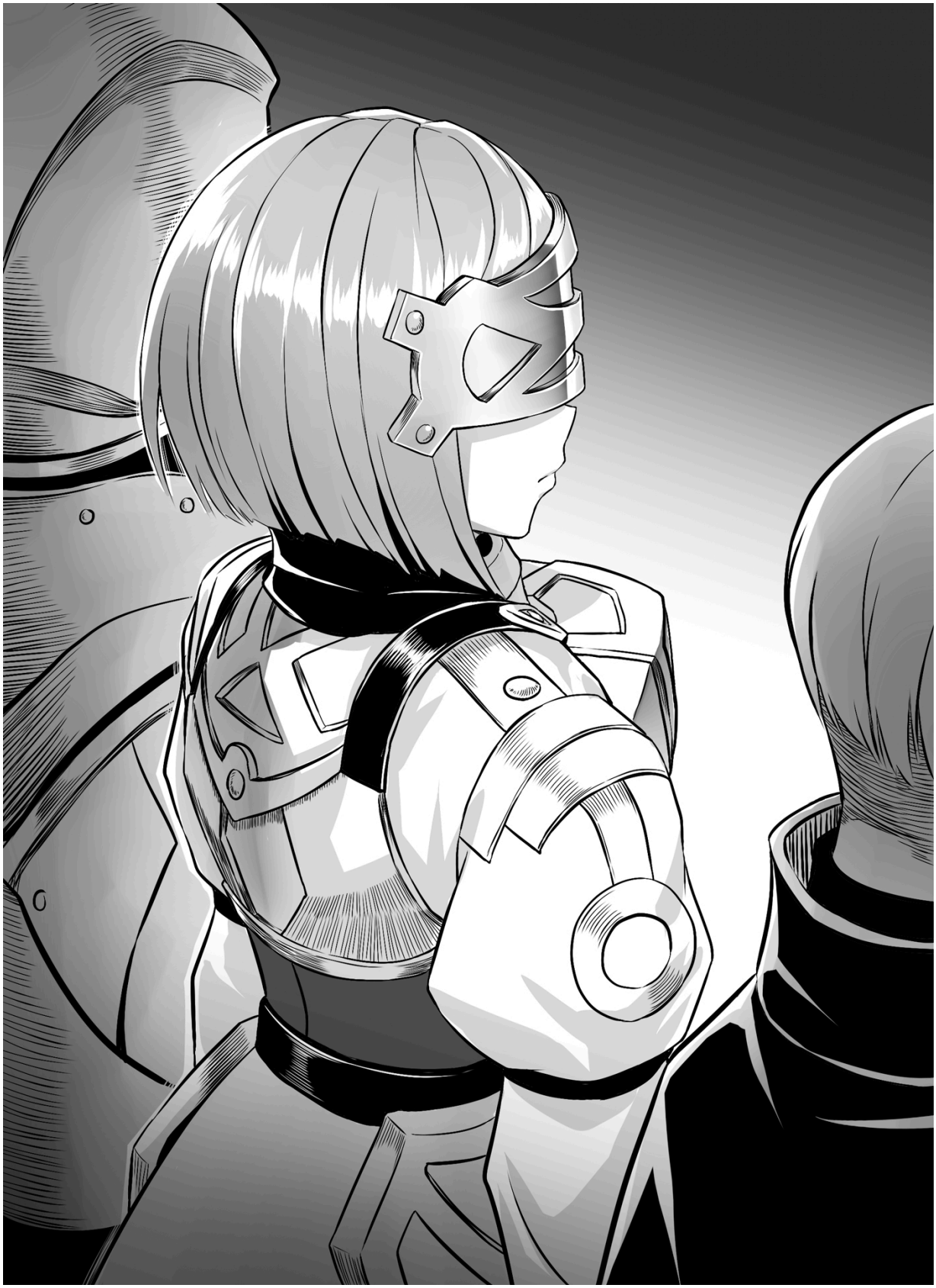
"There are all sorts of people here..."

As we headed toward the seats at the front, I observed those who were already seated and those who were just entering the cathedral. I'd imagined a huge variety of people would be attending. There were those dressed in clearly high-class clothing—probably nobles, merchants, presidents, and the like. These made up a good proportion of attendees. There were also many people dressed in robes similar to Ibroy's. These would be members of the Church of Sphene. Some people were wearing armor but weren't part of the Holy Order. I wondered whether they were foreign knights or knights who served some local nobles. Or maybe they were like Sahat back in Warren's territory.

Actually, is it really okay to attend a royal wedding in armor?

Nobody is saying anything, so it's probably fine.

Even more shockingly, someone was wearing a mask. This I *really* questioned from a security perspective. Judging by her build, she was a woman. She was unarmed, having most likely handed over her weapon at the entrance. However, she wore a sturdy breastplate and a functional fauld skirt. These, combined with the mask covering the upper half of her face, honestly made her look really out of place.



I'd ended up staring because of her peculiar outfit. Perhaps sensing this, the woman turned my way, and I averted my gaze in a fluster. She looked strange, but since nobody was saying anything—including the Holy Order—maybe her mask was perfectly acceptable. Perhaps it was a cultural thing in Sphenedyardvania. *It was rude of me to stare.*

"Master, is something the matter?"

"Aah, no... It's nothing."

Allucia had noticed my somewhat suspicious behavior. She was right next to me, so that only made sense. The masked woman gave off an aura similar to someone I knew, but I doubted they were the same person. For starters, the woman I knew didn't dress like that, and there was also no way she would be here. I couldn't see the masked woman's face to confirm anything either.

"How about here?" I said, pointing at a nearby bench, to change the topic.

"Here? Very well."

The bench was around five rows from the front. It wasn't all the way up at the front, nor was it too far back to be able to see. This was just about right for me. If anything, going farther than this would be nerve-wracking. Allucia agreed with my suggestion, and the three of us took our seats with Allucia between myself and Henblitz.

I knew nothing about the general etiquette for a normal wedding, let alone one going by Sphenedyardvanian customs. At most, I recognized it as an auspicious day to celebrate the birth of a new bride and groom, and I knew it was a sacred ceremony. However, unlike the party in Flumvelk, I hadn't been told how to conduct myself. This was, in large part, because I wasn't playing a major role this time. I was here as a guard, so in essence, I was just one of the guests. It would be pretty easy if all I had to do was keep quiet and not mess things up.

"Oh..."

"Hm?"

A while after taking our seats and spending the time observing the flow of people coming in, I heard the *clang, clang* of a loud bell.

Despite its volume, it wasn't oppressive, and it sounded rather refreshing. Following this, an old man slowly walked down the aisle all the way to the front.

This was the priest who was going to officiate the prince and princess's wedding. Or maybe it was someone way higher up the ladder, considering this involved the absolute upper echelon of society. I could picture him being a bishop, or even an archbishop. Not that I knew any of their names or faces.

"Everyone, thank you very much for gathering here on this wonderful day. I, Archbishop Datlas Caiman, am honored to officiate today's ceremony."

The bell had silenced the entire cathedral, allowing the old man's quiet voice to echo throughout the entire building.

Ooh, he really is a big shot.

I didn't know how much of a difference there was between a bishop and an archbishop. Still, he had to be some kind of VIP. Not that I was ever going to get directly involved with him.

After Archbishop Datlas's greeting, while the attendees clapped, Allucia murmured next to me, "That's strange..."

"Hm?"

Did the archbishop say something weird just now?

"This is the prince and princess's wedding," she said. "The original plan was for Pope Morris to officiate it..."

"Hmmm..."

Princess Salacia was marrying into Sphenedyardvania's royal family, so this ceremony conformed with their culture. What was more, her groom was the first prince. On paper, all citizens here were followers of the Church of Sphene, so it was extremely strange that the wedding of its highest-ranking member wouldn't be officiated by the religion's leader. This was especially the case if the original plan had included him.

Also, the planning for a royal wedding was worked out to the finest details—it wasn't something decided upon in one or two days. The pope should've matched his schedule to what was going on way in advance.

Also, the turn of the new year was a predetermined day of

celebration for the Church of Sphene. It definitely didn't make sense for the pope to be absent from a ceremony held at the cathedral on this day. It was possible he was sick or something, but I somehow doubted it.

"Let us greet the bride and groom who will be exchanging their vows today."

Without giving us the time to digest Allucia's suspicions, the ceremony proceeded. There was no other option. Only an idiot would shout, "Hey! Where's the pope?!" at this point.

After a graceful gesture from the archbishop, a voice announced the couple's entrance from the narthex.

"Announcing His Highness Prince Glenn Tasmacan Gudyr and Her Highness Princess Salacia Ashford el Liberis."

With a solemn and holy atmosphere filling the building and faint suspicions in my mind, their blessed wedding ceremony began.

"Oooh... What a sight..."

The cathedral was astir with sighs of admiration as Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia entered. The princess was wearing a long dress that flowed all the way to her feet and was ornamented with an abundance of lace. Almost all of it was white and sparkling. It was an article of beauty suited for a woman getting married.

Prince Glenn was also dressed in white. He wore a jacket that was perfectly tailored, giving him the refined elegance of royalty. As he walked down the aisle, I could see a bit of nervousness in his expression. That I could understand. It would be unreasonable to ask him to remain calm in this situation. If anything, Princess Salacia was the unusual one for looking the same as usual—aside from her dress.

On a side note, while it was entirely too late to be realizing this, the prince's full name was Glenn Tasmacan Gudyl. That was my first time hearing it, though it wasn't like I was ever going to use it. Was Princess Salacia's name going to change after this? She was going to keep her first name either way, but I wondered what they were going to do with the rest of her really long name. Now wasn't the time to be asking such stupid questions, though.

"They're so beautiful," Allucia murmured.

"Yeah, they sure are."

This applied to their clothes and their natural features. Princess Salacia was not only blessed with terrific looks, but she also possessed an elegance and grace that was surprising for her age. There was also a strength of will in Prince Glenn's eyes and expression. A certain level of charisma was required in those who would rule a nation. I could easily see how little a sword helped on the path of a statesman, and I doubted I would ever be in such a position—not for all eternity.

"Today is a holy ceremony where the two before us will receive the sacrament of communion and the duty bestowed upon us by our God Sphene."

Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia proceeded down the aisle toward the sanctuary where Archbishop Datlas awaited them. Matching their pace, he began his speech. *Quite a majestic ceremony, truly.* It had to feel good to have so many people here celebrating their marriage, but with things this overblown, the bride and groom were probably very tense. Well, maybe this was normal for royalty. I wouldn't be able to handle it.

Once they reached the archbishop, the two turned around, smiling and waving to the entire audience. Yet another elegant round of applause followed. The crowd was lively, but the atmosphere was awfully different from the sightseeing tour in Baltrain. The citizens of Liberis had been very rowdy, whereas the ones here kept things disciplined while celebrating.

"Very well, then... Prince Glenn, do you swear to take Princess Salacia as your wife, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, for richer or for poorer, to love, to support, to cherish, to honor, and to devote yourself to, with all your heart, until death do you part?"

"Yes, I swear."

The ceremony had moved on to the wedding vows. This was the standard for any couple. I wondered when luck and timing would bless me with getting to swear the same vow. Even if it was just for a ceremony, I would probably hesitate—not over having to cherish my partner or anything, mind you. If I were lucky enough to grow

that close with someone, I would absolutely treasure her. Looking back at my mom and dad's relationship, being married sounded nice.

However, as always, my first priority was my swordsmanship. I was never going to say that I could ignore everything except my sword. Still, the fewer things I had to worry about, the more I could focus on my training. This wasn't necessarily the right thing to do, though—my thought process was pretty far from the norm.

Still, I felt like it would be very difficult for me to cherish the partner I was sworn to for life while also honing my blade. It was hard to imagine myself prioritizing love over swordsmanship.

Mewi was my adorable adopted daughter. If I ever found a partner and was blessed with a child of my own, I knew I would be an *extremely* doting father.

I wonder how mom and dad got together before deciding to confine themselves to the countryside. Despite his current appearance, my dad had apparently been quite fiery in his youth. Now he was an old fart who always complained about back pain. *Not that I'm making fun of back pain or anything...*

There had to have been many reasons. At any rate, my dad had ultimately chosen to be with my mom and had stopped chasing the summit of swordsmanship. That was one way to interpret it, at least. I couldn't denounce his decision—if I did, it would be like refusing my own existence. After all, it was because of their marriage that I'd been born, raised into a healthy man, and lived to this day.

I always thought of things this way, which was why I felt like I was never going to win against my dad. Even if I could never overtake him as a man, I wanted to catch up to him somehow. But to accomplish that, I had to start my own family and protect it.

That wasn't my highest priority right now, and quite frankly, I was contradicting myself. I understood that. I'd spent a lot more time worrying about this kinda stuff lately, but I seriously had no idea how to resolve my quandary. I was stuck at a complete impasse.

"Princess Salacia. Do you swear to take Prince Glenn as your husband, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, for richer or for poorer, to love, to support, to cherish, to honor, and to devote yourself to, with all your heart, until death do you part?"

"Yes, I swear."

The hands of time didn't stop or turn back for my cyclical thoughts. Even as I puzzled over my issues again and again, the wedding ceremony continued smoothly.

I had no idea how this marriage would change the world. The battlefield they stood upon was different from mine. I wouldn't say I was completely disinterested, but any influence they wielded would take a while to reach anyone like me, and it would probably be unnoticeable to me.

Still, this was a definite turning point in history for Liberis and Sphenedyardvania. Being able to stand witness to that moment was a side benefit of my new status. After all, only the chosen were here in attendance.

"Your vows have been seen and delivered under the eyes of Sphene."

The archbishop nodded in satisfaction before reaching for the cloth enshrined on the altar. He unfastened it with an air of reverence, revealing a pair of shining silver rings—wedding rings. It was nice to have something material to assert the vows spoken. But while I admired the thought behind it, a ring could change your sword grip. *Maybe I'm really not suited for marriage.*

The wedding was reaching its climax. All that remained was for Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia to place the rings on each other's fingers.

"Then, as proof of your eternal love—"

Suddenly, a noise from the narthex rang out, cutting off the holy ceremony.

"Ah—!"

"Hm...?"

The door was closed, so the noise hadn't been particularly loud. However, due to the silence inside the cathedral, the sound had penetrated the thick door enough for us to hear it.

"Stop! A sacred ceremony is taking place within the cathedral right now!"

I could hear someone speaking—probably the knight standing guard outside the door. The inside of the cathedral was now filled

with bewildered voices. Due to everything that had happened before this, I could pretty easily imagine what was going on. Very few people would dare to start a commotion at the cathedral during the royal wedding. In fact, I could only think of one possibility.

Going by what I'd seen on my way into the building, the Holy Order was deployed in significant force. They were there to stop any rioters, and everyone in the vicinity would've been aware of the knights' presence well before the ceremony started. With that being the case, it was best to assume that the interlopers had known a way to break through before, or maybe they'd gained access by some prearranged route.

"Allucia..." I muttered.

"Yes."

It seemed most of the people inside the cathedral still had an unconcerned outlook—no one was trying to run away or anything. After all, who would dare to crash a royal wedding? Even if someone—perhaps a political enemy—really wanted to ruin it, they'd probably resort to a quiet assassination plot rather than making a fuss. The vast majority of guests were probably under the assumption that someone outside was just being a nuisance. Most people didn't develop intuition for this stuff until they spent some time on the battlefield. That same intuition was telling me that the disturbance wasn't just a heckler.

"How long would it take you to get your weapon from the aisle and get back?" I asked.

"On the assumption that I can find it right away...eight seconds," Allucia answered.

"Excellent."

If anything happened, I would take up my beloved sword and fight. I was perfectly ready for that, but I didn't have said sword to hand. Of the three of us sitting here, Allucia was by far the fastest. It would be a lot quicker to have her rush ahead and grab our weapons rather than have all of us make a mad dash for them.

"If they break through the narthex...get mine and Henblitz's while you're at it."

Allucia nodded. "As you wish."

We didn’t have to worry about our weapons now. Allucia wasn’t going to mistake her favorite sword for any other, mine stood out because of its red sheath, and she’d known Henblitz and his weapon for a while now. She could definitely find them all. And if she couldn’t, she would’ve said something.

“Halt! If you don’t stop, I’ll cut you down!”

Outside, things were finally about to get violent. The assailants were almost certainly assassins, but this seemed like an awfully clumsy approach. Even if their targets were guaranteed to be inside, walking up to security and having a scuffle with the knights was a sloppy way of carrying out an assassination.

It was possible that the papists had almost nothing left but were still doing whatever they could to stop the wedding. Maybe they were even hoping to press false charges or something. If that were the case, things would be a lot easier on us, but I doubted their plan was so crude.

“Dammit! Don’t resent me for this!”

It seemed things were reaching a climax. The knight had drawn his sword, which meant the assailant hadn’t backed off after three warnings. However, that also meant they’d given the knight plenty of time to draw his weapon. Why would they do that? It just didn’t make sense. If they were planning an attack, it would be better not to give the knight any chance to react. After all, just making a bunch of noise wasn’t going to accomplish anything. I would’ve done it that way, at least. I couldn’t get a read on what these people were thinking.

“Huh?! Sto—oooh?!”

“Allucia!”

“Right!”

We still didn’t know what exactly was going on outside. The narthex’s door hadn’t been forced open yet. Nevertheless, I signaled Allucia to go, and she ran off in a flash. I could faintly hear a ruckus through the door.

I could guess what was happening—I imagined it was a horrible scene.

Just to put this out there, the Holy Order was in no way weak. I

knew exactly how strong they were because I'd faced Holy Order knights during Bishop Reveos's arrest. *That's not sarcasm, I swear.* Much like the Liberion Order, some knights were stronger than others. However, this was the first prince's wedding ceremony—they had surely picked their best for the security detail. Gatoga definitely would've seen to that.

In other words, the knights stationed at the door were the elite. A swordsman of that caliber had resorted to force but hadn't been able to stop the assailant. That was what I could infer from the sound coming from the door.

Judging from the way he'd shouted, "Don't resent me for this!" the knight had gone for the kill with his first attack. It was possible he was facing a monster, but I doubted he would've yelled for a beast to stop. His attacker was tough, no doubt about it—or perhaps it was an opponent who couldn't be stopped by a simple cut.

Just as I got my thoughts in order, Allucia reached the aisle where our weapons had been stashed.

"Master!"

"Throw it!"

She tossed me the red-sheathed sword with perfect accuracy.

"Thought so..."

I immediately strapped it to my waist and drew my blade. Under the light pouring in through the windows, it glowed a faint red.

At that exact moment, the narthex's doors burst open from the weight of bodies pressing against them. *Something* taking the shape of human beings was now inside, not a hint of intelligence in the many vacant eyes.

"Wh-Who goes there?! Stop!"

Now that the intruders had broken down the door, the knights of the Holy Order stationed inside finally took action.

Aren't you guys a bit slow on the uptake? I trusted Gatoga, but this response had me worried about the Holy Order's skill. Maybe he'd been forced to make drastic cuts while cleaning house—it was possible he'd purged those who'd been ideologically suspect despite their achievements and skill, leading to a lack of veterans.

That didn't really matter right now, though. We had to protect

Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia from these assailants and escort them somewhere safe. This reminded me so much of the incident in Baltrain's southern district. *But now's not the time to casually observe the situation!*

"B-Be careful! They don't stop when—argh!"

One of the knights outside yelled a warning—probably one who'd first tried to hold back the attackers. However, before he could finish speaking, he was trampled by the mass of bodies and fell silent. I didn't know if he was still alive. All the knights of the Holy Order wore solid plate armor, so I could only pray he hadn't been killed by the crush.

"Allucia! Protect us!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Before anyone else could say anything, Princess Salacia shouted an order from deep inside the cathedral. In contrast, Prince Glenn's expression was colored by fear. While he hadn't gone as far as fainting, he wasn't in a state to be giving any orders right now.

The princess had tremendous mental fortitude. Without any personal experience in battle, it was supposed to be impossible to take command in a situation like this. I was already impressed that she wasn't screaming in fear, but the fact that she'd ordered Allucia to protect "us" rather than "me" summed up her strength very well.

Allucia is the only one she called for, but I've been appointed as a guard too. Time to get to work.

"Allucia, cut clean through their torsos or legs," I said. "Otherwise, they won't stop."

"Understood."

Our opponents looked like people, but they weren't. A little pain wasn't going to be enough to stop them. They had to be rendered nonfunctional. Luckily—or unluckily, depending on your perspective—I had experience fighting them. Well, "fighting" wasn't really the right term for it either. I had cut them down, driven purely by anger.

Their movements resembled those of the corpses that had come out of the boxes after Bishop Reveos had chanted some kind of spell. The differences now were that I didn't hesitate to slay any of them—none of them would be Mewi's big sister—and that there

were *far* more of them.

While being able to cut them down without reservation was something to be thankful for, I couldn't possibly show any gratitude to the culprit behind this. There really was a *ton* of them. It must've taken a lot of work to gather so many corpses.

"Anyone who can fight, to arms! Protect the prince and princess!"

Allucia charged in with a war cry. She dived into the surging mass of intruders ahead of everyone else, living up to her moniker "Godspeed." In a one-on-one fight against these enemies, Allucia, Henblitz, and I were never going to lose. The problem right now was the sheer number of bodies.

My personal environment was usually filled with so many skilled fighters that it was easy to forget how much of a battle came down to numbers. No matter how masterful one's swordplay was, being completely surrounded and attacked all at once would spell the end. To add to that, our opponents couldn't be stopped through the application of pain or shock.

This also wasn't a battle where we could focus entirely on annihilating the enemy. We had to protect the two royals, making the mission a lot harder. It would be dangerous to push too far forward.

"Dammit all! There's no other way!"

"Hey! Where's my sword?!"

Thanks to Allucia and Princess Salacia, the attendees finally started moving. Everyone raced to the aisle to secure their weapons. *I made the right decision—with such a sudden rush of people, it would've been difficult to get my sword.*

"Hmm?!"

Just as I was about to join the fray instead of watching things unfold, something clearly different from the others jumped out of the wave of intruders.

"You're not getting through!" I yelled, obstructing the figure.

"Gh!"

He was clad completely in black, and he wielded a sharp dagger.

These bastards are hiding assassins in the mountain of corpses! Whoever was behind this plot had come up with quite a nasty plan.

At any rate, this was reminding me more and more of the assassination attempt in Baltrain. *I'd bet good money on the papists as the masterminds.* My suspicions were further enhanced because the pope, who was originally supposed to officiate this wedding, was absent. *Maybe it's because he knew this was going to happen.*

I felt sorry for Archbishop Datlas. He had to bear the full brunt of this in the pope's stead. It was possible that he was also a papist, but he looked like he was freaking out, so I doubted it.

"Hmph!"

"Gah...!"

The assassin twisted his wrist and made a thrust for my neck. Unfortunately for him, I could see what he was doing. I grabbed his wrist with my left hand and stabbed him in the stomach. Unlike a walking corpse, a fatal wound was enough to stop a human. He didn't have the willpower to ignore the pain and push on. I wouldn't have been able to either.

"Princess Salacia! For now, please keep low!"

"Understood!"

Even if we wanted to escort her out of here, we had to clear a path first. That wasn't going to be a quick task—she needed to do what she could to keep herself safe in the meantime.

I'd ended up yelling out spur-of-the-moment instructions to her. *This* is *playing out just like the incident in the southern district...* I recalled shouting something similar back then too. The difference here was that the princess showed no hesitation. She pushed Prince Glenn's shoulder down, and the two of them stooped low. She really was a strong woman.

Meanwhile, more and more people retrieved their weapons from the aisle and were intercepting the horde. One who stood out among the throng was the masked woman I'd spotted earlier. She wielded a shortsword and was cutting down intruders with great skill. When attacked from the side, she used the buckler on her left arm—something she'd apparently turned in alongside her weapon at the door—to cleanly repel her opponent.

"That's... I see."

Her swordplay and footwork were excellent, and I could see she

was quite the master. I had no idea what organization she was affiliated with, but I was glad she wasn't an enemy.

However, what stood out even more was how familiar her movements were. The weapon she wielded was different, and the woman I knew hadn't used a buckler either. Still, those movements were strangely similar to how *she* fought. Due to her equipment and hair being different and the mask covering her face, I hadn't noticed until the fighting had started. *Please ignore the fact that I only managed to recognize a woman because of the way she handles a sword.*

I had no idea what kind of karma had worked to bring her here at this exact moment, but I doubted she was here without a good reason. Rather than worry about that stuff, it was better to be grateful to have such a reliable ally on the battlefield.

"Ugh... Eeeeek!"

"Dammit!"

While my attention was momentarily preoccupied by the masked woman, one of the attackers pushed down a man not too far from me. Not everyone here was capable of fighting. The Holy Order was battling fiercely, but with the number of enemies involved, it was extremely difficult to differentiate between those who were capable of fighting, those who weren't, and those who could manage on their own.

As a result, everyone was maintaining their own kill zone and focusing entirely on defending the central aisle. Somehow, this was enough to hold the tide back, but those who were incapable of adapting were destined to fall.

"There sure are a lot of them...!"

Quite frankly, it was impossible to protect everyone. We had to assign priorities—and the two at the top of that list by a large margin were Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia. Now that we knew assassins were among the corpses, we could no longer allow anyone to get remotely close.

We could win if we paid no heed to the casualties suffered. There were many enemies, but the vast majority were walking corpses who were extremely weak as individual soldiers. However, we had

personnel we couldn't allow to fall, no matter what. Running away involved pushing through the mass of walking dead, so while this was possible for some individuals, doing so while protecting two royals was next to impossible. Unlike the incident in Baltrain, we weren't in an open space, making this so much harder.

Thankfully, Allucia and Henblitz were perfectly capable of protecting themselves, but there were quite a few others here I wanted to see safe. It would weigh heavily on my mind if I let Thracias, the other diplomats, or Ibroy die.

"Hoh! What a vulgar lot!"

Just as I wondered how Ibroy was doing and turned to look, I spotted a bishop in a magnificent low stance letting loose with his fist.

That geezer can fight?!

Well, Sphene was famous for performing miracles in the form of healing and reinforcement magic. Maybe it wasn't strange for him to have learned such things. Even so, I felt like his movements were more than just wizardry. He'd always seemed like a fishy guy, but I'd never imagined that he'd be able to physically fight. *A pleasant miscalculation on my part—one less person to worry about.*

"Anyway... What're we supposed to do about this?!"

I sank into thought as I cut down the incoming horde of corpses. Breaking through was out of the question. The combination of the walking dead and assassins meant we were sure to take casualties. The fighters among us could take a few hits, but we couldn't risk the prince and princess like that.

We have to escape using another exit, I concluded. Unfortunately, I didn't know the internal layout of the building. There had to be a back door or two in a building this large, but I had no idea where they were. We couldn't allow our charges to run away ahead of their escorts either. Furthermore, with so many enemies pouring in through the front, it was doubtful any back exits were safe. It was entirely possible that they'd charged in from one direction so that they could lay an ambush for anyone running away through a rear exit. We needed someone to scout ahead of us, but choosing someone for that was difficult in this situation.

I couldn’t do it. I was unfamiliar with the place. The same applied to Allucia and Henblitz—they’d mentioned that this was their first time inside the cathedral. We also couldn’t fully trust the members of the Holy Order. They were skilled, but there were no guarantees that they were our allies. Sending the prince or princess to scout would be absurd. *I guess that leaves Ibroy or the masked woman?*

“Hm...?”

Just as I was about to call out to one or the other, fog suddenly began billowing from farther inside the cathedral. Soon, it was so thick that I could only see a few feet in front of me.

“Erk.”

This was *extremely* familiar. I’d encountered this phenomenon on my way back from Flumvelk.

Seriously? Fighting them *now is gonna be really tough. I’m starting to think we won’t be able to keep the royals alive.*

Just as everyone was starting to panic from having their vision impaired, I heard a loud boom followed by a raucous shout.

“Raaaaaah! Your Highnesses, this way!”

Several people in black trench coats burst in from the transept.



"Hanoy...!"

For better or worse, the Verdapis Mercenary Company's leader, Hanoy Cressa, the man responsible for the hell we'd gone through on our journey back from Flumvelk, broke the stalemate in the flashiest way possible. Much like last time, he wielded a huge greatsword. He was accompanied by several others who were charging in from the side opposite the walking corpses.

"Who are you?!" Princess Salacia yelled at him.

She'd been keeping low while observing her surroundings. Shock was clear in her voice. I couldn't blame her for that—the mercenaries looked awfully dangerous. She didn't know whether they were friend or foe, and she had no reason to follow along just because they'd asked.

Actually, I had no idea what their goal was either. Judging by what they were saying, it seemed unlikely they were here to abduct the princess. They could've done that using the fog.

"Name's Hanoy Cressa. I got hired to protect you two."

"What...?"

I had immediate misgivings about his claim. After all, it hadn't been that long since they'd attacked me and Allucia. They'd gone as far as setting up a carriage on the road as a decoy before launching a violent assault. Sphenedyardvania's papists had been behind that attack. We had no hard evidence, but it was pretty much guaranteed.

Now, those same mercenaries were trying to save the head of the royalists and Princess Salacia. It sounded absurd—it was impossible to trust them, and this was far more likely to be a trap. But facing Hanoy and his mercenaries right now would be a tremendous undertaking.

I was faltering over what to do when Ibroy's voice gave me the most unexpected push forward.

"Beryl, they're all right! Please work with them to protect the prince!"

"Wuh?!"

Uhhh... What? I don't get it. Why does Ibroy trust the guys who attacked us? Nothing makes sense. How does Ibroy know Hanoy,

anyway? I mean, it's not impossible, but it still seems weird. Ah, whatever! This isn't something I'm going to figure out on the spot.

"Dammit all!"

Gaaaah! I don't get it. Nothing makes sense. Our priority is getting the prince and princess out of here! I don't need all this extra information!

Nonetheless, if Hanoy really was on our side, that was something to be grateful for. I had no intention of letting my guard down around him, but we were currently stuck in a stalemate. Was it best to trust Ibroy and go along with Hanoy?

I continued hesitating, but Ibroy suddenly addressed the masked woman.

"Come! You go along too."

She'd been fighting on the front lines, and upon hearing his command, she immediately withdrew and ran down the aisle toward the prince.

I just don't get it. I can't even begin to guess who from where is related to this... And in what way are they connected? But if she's *going along with it, then Ibroy's worth trusting. Time to accept my fate.*

"Allucia! We're moving out!" I yelled.

"Acknowledged! Henblitz!"

"I'll hold down the fort here! Commander, you go to Her Highness's side!"

"Very well—we're counting on you."

"Understood!"

Henblitz's decision was sound. If Allucia, Henblitz, myself, and the masked woman all withdrew, the front line would weaken significantly. Only the knights of the Holy Order and several of the attendees who were capable of fighting would remain.

The prince and princess were our absolute priority, but that didn't mean we could just abandon everyone else. We had to save what lives we could. From that perspective, Henblitz staying behind was the right choice. A man of his skills wasn't going to lose against such opponents.

We linked up with the royals and were now face-to-face with the

mercenaries. There was no mistaking it—this was the same Green Hornet we'd fought previously. Allucia noticed this immediately and turned a wary look his way.

"You're..."

"Ah? Ooh, the silver-haired gal and the old-timer. I remember you from before."

Hanoy recognized us too, but he didn't seem to think much about it. To them, maybe we'd been nothing more than targets back then. I couldn't understand that mindset. However, we had no time to argue about it. We had to get Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia out of here as soon as possible.

"Anyway, just come along," Hanoy said. "The way we came in should be mostly clear."

"Very well... Prince Glenn, Princess Salacia, we're withdrawing."

"Understood."

Hanoy dashed back through the transept he'd broken in through. Allucia quickly urged the prince and princess to begin moving and got their consent right away.

I didn't actually trust Hanoy Cressa. I approved of this action only because Ibroy and the masked woman were going along with it. If he acted suspicious in any way, I was ready to instantly cut him down from behind.

Currently withdrawing from the cathedral were me, Allucia, the prince and princess, the masked woman, Hanoy, and the people I assumed to be his subordinates. It wouldn't be too hard for us to protect the royals with such a lineup—on the assumption that Hanoy didn't turn his fangs on us.

The inside of the transept was a bit of a mess. There was a huge hole in the wall—Hanoy had probably busted through. As ever, he had ridiculous strength. A single punch from this guy was liable to send a person to heaven.

"Oh yeah. Prim, that's enough. Get rid of the fog."

"Righto!"

Once we got to the door, the pink-haired wizard raised her hand. With that single gesture, the fog engulfing the inside of the cathedral rapidly faded. She was definitely the same wizard as last

time. I was glad to have Verdapis on our side, but I still wasn't going to let down my guard.

"Prince Glenn, Princess Salacia, please watch your step," Allucia said.

"I know."

Due to the sudden battle, there was a lot of rubble on the ground. Now wasn't the time to be falling over. The prince and princess seemed to be doing fine on that front.

We passed through the transept and ran down the corridor for a while, then came across another shattered door. This one led outside. We burst out of the cathedral filled with war cries and into the cold air, where we were met by several people in black trench coats standing guard.

There were a good number of bodies on the ground at their feet. Walking corpses had likely circled around to this side too. It was obvious that the Verdapis Mercenary Company was against whoever was controlling the corpses—the papists, in all likelihood. This actually helped improve their credibility.

"Oh, welcome back."

"Kuriu, any changes?"

"None."

"Excellent."

The blue-haired man named Kuriu seemed to be in charge out here. His exchange with Hanoy was very brief, and he didn't appear to have any gripes about our presence.

"Erk. *That* woman again?"

Or so I thought. The moment he saw Allucia, his graceful features twisted.

Allucia ignored him completely. She had no reason to play along.

"We'll take y'all to the palace for now," Hanoy said. "That good with you, princeling?"

"Y-Yes. Please do."

We were out of the cathedral, but now it was time to decide what to do next. As Hanoy had suggested, the palace was a good idea. There was no better destination from a strategic standpoint.

"You have my thanks for saving us, but who exactly are you

people?” Prince Glenn asked, having finally calmed down somewhat now that there were no enemies in sight.

“We’re the Verdapis Mercenary Company. Doubt you’ve ever heard of us. Just so ya know, I’m not gonna reveal our client. That’s how the contract works.”

“I-I see. V-Very well.”

Prince Glenn didn’t ask for any further explanation. On a side note, Hanoy really kept the same tone no matter who he was speaking to. Even a bumpkin like me showed proper respect when faced with royalty. Normally, his behavior would probably warrant the death penalty. I wondered whether he even cared—it would be no simple matter to arrest him, after all.

“Why are you helping us?” I asked.

Even as we made our way to the palace, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. How had they ended up helping the royalists? It wasn’t that strange for mercenaries to change clients, but these guys had harmed Vesper, Frau, and several soldiers of one of Liberis’s provincial armies. I wasn’t capable of just accepting them as allies. Now that we were away from the battle, I had time to think about this stuff, and I couldn’t help but feel irritated by their presence.

“Aah? Pretty sure I already said why,” Hanoy said, exasperation clear in his voice. “We got hired to. Weren’tcha listenin’, old-timer?”

“Gh!”

I reflexively grabbed him by the collar. *I really can’t accept this.* It was true that they’d saved us today. However, this and that were separate matters. I simply couldn’t get along with a guy who happily shook hands with yesterday’s enemy just because he was asked to.

Despite the abruptness of my action, he should’ve been able to easily dodge me or push me back. In terms of pure physique, he was far superior. However, he chose to simply take it. That was how it looked to me, at least. That didn’t do anything to dissipate my anger.

“Because of you, Vesper and Frau were...!”

“The hell are they? They die?”

“You son of a...!”

I clenched Hanoy’s collar hard. Frau had returned to duty. She

wasn’t back in perfect condition, but I knew how determined she was. I wanted her to continue devoting herself to being a Liberion knight. In contrast, Vesper hadn’t returned to duty. No one knew whether he would ever be able to walk properly again.

I knew that now wasn’t the time for this. Our top priority was getting Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia to safety, not squabbling. I understood that—me grabbing this guy by the collar was completely selfish behavior. But I just couldn’t accept it. It came down to the value of human life. Not everybody saw it the same way.

“Your guys offed two of ours too,” Hanoy said. “Jules and Wandice. They were my cute little juniors. But they’re dead now. They just didn’t have enough skill and luck.”

“That’s ’cause you attacked us!” I hollered.

“Yup. That’s how it goes. Oh, we don’t got no grudge against you or nothin’. A job’s a job. This job and that one are different. If anything, it was my fault for lookin’ down on you lot and sendin’ the juniors into battle.”

His eyes really showed no resentment toward us. It was like everything that had happened had been down to simple chance. I had no idea which of us was correct. We were probably both right and wrong. Our circumstances were just so different.

I understood his logic, though. These guys were mercenaries and had taken a contract to attack us. As a result, Vesper and Frau had suffered severe injuries, and two of Verdapis’s mercenaries had died. Though their reasons for doing so were different than ours, they’d all chosen a life of battle. And just as Hanoy said, dying as a result of that decision was simply a matter of skill and luck. I understood all this, but I felt like something important inside me would break if I just nodded along and accepted it as a simple fact.

“Master... Now’s not the time,” Allucia murmured, placing a hand on my arm.

Her hand wasn’t trembling. She didn’t appear to be shaken by what I was saying or by the mercenaries’ presence. I really was childish. She was far younger than me, but her resolve was so much stronger. It seemed I was never going to be capable of cleanly coming to terms with everything that went on in the world.

“Sorry...” I quickly calmed myself down. “Your Highness, forgive me for the sudden act of violence.”

“I don’t mind,” Princess Salacia said. “You must have your reasons.”

“Thank you...”

I knew as well as anyone that now wasn’t the time for argument. The fact that I’d done it regardless was proof that I wasn’t able to control my emotions. Whether I was morally right or wrong didn’t matter—I had to reflect upon my actions.

“Done yappin’?” Hanoy asked, lightly brushing off my hand after I let him go. “Then let’s move.”

He had nothing more to say. Now that I thought about it, none of his mercenaries had so much as budged when I’d grabbed him—not the swordsman Kuriu, not the wizard Prim, and not any of the others. *Why didn’t they?* This was surely something I just didn’t understand. If anyone did the same to Allucia, I would’ve flared up in anger. Once again, this wasn’t a matter of right or wrong. Our mindsets were just too different—so much so that you couldn’t just sum it up as “Yup, there sure are all sorts of folks out there in the world.”

“You’re strong, old-timer, but you ain’t suited to being a warrior,” Hanoy muttered as we got moving again.

“Well, I’m a swordsman, after all.”

“That so?”

A warrior—maybe he was right. It didn’t suit me. I found it really hard to march onward without ever looking back. That was too much of a burden on this old man’s shoulders. The older I got, the more time I had to stop and reflect on the past. This was likely an unnecessary tendency for someone who lived only for battle, but I was never going to cast aside that part of me.

Was it equally unnecessary for reaching the summit of swordsmanship? This new yet profound question was now scorched into my mind.

Our group quickly ran out of the cathedral’s back entrance. By the time we reached the main street, we could hear all sorts of yelling coming not only from the building but also from its surroundings.

Considering all the walking corpses, I could see why.

The fighting had probably spilled out of the cathedral. While it seemed our enemies could control the corpses to an extent—what with the assassins among them—I doubted they were capable of individually identifying targets. That meant there would be casualties beyond the cathedral too.

"I wonder what those things are," the princess said as the chaos slowly spread through Dilmahakha.

After being attacked out of the blue, it made sense that she wanted to know the truth. I had an idea as to their identity, but that was likely something everyone here could infer too.

"Probably some kinda wizardry, if I had to guess," answered the only wizard in our group. It was Prim, the pink-haired woman with Verdapis. "They're wrapping corpses in mana to move them."

"How could they...?"

On a side note, none of the mercenaries were showing any respect to the royals. I wasn't exactly one to talk on that point, but I wasn't as bad as they were. I maintained a minimum of decorum, at least. These guys weren't even trying. I wondered if all mercenaries were like them. Adventurers had dropped by Beaden every now and then, but we'd rarely had any mercenaries visit, so I wasn't sure how they viewed the world. Since this was an emergency, Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia overlooked their behavior, though that likely contributed to it more. Regardless, they sounded a bit *too* outspoken.

"Such desecration cannot be allowed," the princess muttered with the bitterest of expressions.

From the perspective of a good statesman, the current situation was *far* beyond the laws of decency. I had a pretty good idea of who was behind this plot, but I wasn't sure if I could say it in front of Sphenedyardvania's royalty.

"It'd be one thing if they stopped at profaning the dead," Hanoy chimed in. "Apparently, that ain't even all there is to it."

"What do you mean?" Princess Salacia asked.

She was likely thinking about how to capture and punish the culprits behind this incident. I didn't know how they were going to

get any evidence out of walking corpses, but some kind of investigation was sure to take place. However, Hanoy was implying that there was more to this attack than just the desecrated dead. Even though I had to listen to this conversation in my current position, a part of me really didn't want to hear it.

"I think they're called chimeras...?" Hanoy elaborated. "Seems they're gonna be scattered all over the city. So I'm told, at least."

"Wha...? Chimeras?!" Prince Glenn exclaimed.

I've never heard of a chimera. Is it something like that creature beneath the magic institute? That was a named monster that had been sealed for research. If there were several of those out there, then right now certainly wasn't the time for a wedding parade.

"Prince Glenn, are you aware of what they are?" Prince Salacia asked.

"Y-Yes... I've seen descriptions in historical documents...or rather, criminal records..." he answered somewhat incoherently. "They're the product of a forbidden art that combines beasts and monsters into one being and manipulates them through mana."

"A forbidden art..."

That sounded both terrifying and repulsive. Tampering with human corpses was already creepy enough. Stitching together beasts and manipulating them was even more preposterous. Regardless, I could understand the reasoning somewhat. If that were possible, it would make a powerful addition to an army. Corpses could be reused, so in theory, the only cost was mana.

However, if this art had reached a stage of actualization and mass production, Lucy must've tried it at some point. She was the greatest wizard alive, after all. I was just guessing, but I was pretty sure she had. Setting aside the whole "resurrection of the dead" stuff, she didn't seem like the type to be deterred by rules and restrictions. If she was interested, she would try it. Though it wasn't like I knew *everything* about her or anything—I didn't know where she drew the line. However, from what I'd seen of her, it wouldn't be strange for her to have tested it. Lucy probably understood every magic technique in existence.

To continue talking theoretically, there had to be a reason for

something to be classified as forbidden. While there could be societal taboos, a larger reason was likely a simple matter of profit—if it wasn't worth the labor and defied morals, it was easier to forbid it. I wasn't knowledgeable about magic, but I couldn't help but imagine that this was how things worked.

"How do you know this?" Princess Salacia asked.

"Haven't seen it for myself or nothin'," Hanoy said. "The intel came from that masked woman."

"Huh?"

His answer was utterly unexpected. Everyone turned to the masked woman at once. She didn't falter, nor did she say anything. She only nodded to confirm.

"The White Maiden, was it?" Hanoy said. "Pretty fancy name for a wanderin' mercenary."

"Hmm... I've never heard the name..." Prince Glenn muttered.

Adventurers and mercenaries often took nicknames to raise their fame and prestige. The same theory applied to Surena's Twin Dragonblade and Allucia's Godspeed. Henblitz was publicly known for his tremendous strength and was called the Roaring Blade; Hanoy's moniker was the Green Hornet. There were differences here and there depending on whether they'd started calling themselves that first or if others had, but these nicknames were basically indications of a celebrity's achievements and skill.

Incidentally...I was apparently being called the Backwater Swordmaster. *Is that actually a nickname? It seems way worse than Godspeed and Roaring Blade...* I'd never heard anyone aside from Allucia and the others mention it. Maybe it still applied...though it wasn't as if I would ever call myself that.

At any rate, it was strange for Verdapis and Prince Glenn to be unfamiliar with the masked woman's nickname. There were people out there who gave themselves a name despite their lack of renown, but this woman was clearly skilled. There was a huge disparity between her abilities and her fame.

Well, I knew the truth of the matter: She'd never called herself that before. She'd only recently had to start going by a different name. After all, she'd served as one of this country's knights and

was publicly treated as having retired.

"I can't go into detail, but she's definitely an ally," I said, wanting to crush any unnecessary suspicions about her. "I can at least guarantee that much."

"I see... If you're willing to vouch for her, then I'll believe you."

Unexpectedly, Prince Glenn accepted my explanation without question. My efforts during the last assassination attempt seemed to be paying off. *There's no telling what could come back to benefit you in the future.*

"But chimeras...? Who could possibly...?"

The prince and princess sank into thought. If the culprit was researching magic secretly, it would be pretty hard to locate them. Making chimeras likely required significant space, though, on second thought, I didn't know how big these chimeras actually were. Maybe that wasn't necessarily the case.

That was when the White Maiden first spoke.

"Pope Morris Pasyushka."

She said nothing more than a name, but that was enough to shock everyone around her. She probably hadn't been speaking because it could expose her identity—Prince Glenn in particular was liable to figure it out right away. However, she'd decided that the sacrifice was worth it to speak that name. That simple act gave a glimpse of her determination.

Prince Glenn was clearly surprised by the suggestion. "You can't mean...*Pope Morris* is behind this madness...?!"

This time, the White Maiden only nodded. That was enough to convey the truth—she wasn't the type of woman to tell a stupid lie in such a situation. At any rate, the pope being the culprit was pretty consistent with a lot of facts. It explained why he hadn't been at the ceremony, and, going by what Lucy had told me, he was definitely trying to expel Prince Glenn and the royalists from power. His method for doing so was absolutely wrong, though.

As the head of the Church of Sphene, he could easily commit a taboo act in secret from the royal family. Lucy had sealed Lono Ambrosia beneath the magic institute for research and had kept it a secret too. There was a precedent. With enough authority,

something like this was relatively easy to pull off.

Allucia fell deep into thought as she absorbed this new information. “True...” she murmured. “Since their targets are the prince and princess, then the scene at the cathedral would never have been enough...”

She was exactly right. The very presence of the walking dead had a tremendous impact, but the corpses clearly lacked firepower. The attack would’ve made sense had the two royals been somewhere alone. However, the cathedral had been filled with knights and others who were capable of fighting. Even though they hadn’t gotten away completely unscathed, it’d been possible to escort the prince and princess out of there.

Pope Morris had to have considered that possibility. I didn’t know anything about his temperament, but he was a leader of a whole religion and had gone as far as researching a taboo. Would a person like that really stop at corpses? He was trying to kill royalty, so his plan had to be surefire, or he could lose everything.

In other words, it would’ve been a bonus if those corpses and assassins had managed to kill Prince Glenn. However, the pope needed to have something else ready assuming they failed. Considering the scale of the first attack, it was best to assume there was something worse waiting for us. It seemed this involved chimeras. *A disturbing thought. Well, trying to end a royal line is even more disturbing, but still.*

“Do you know roughly how many chimeras there are and where they’ll appear?” Allucia asked.

The White Maiden silently shook her head. Had she known, she probably could’ve handled the situation better. At most, she had fragmented information and was doing as much as she could based on it.

However, that brought up another question. How had she acquired all this information? She didn’t have her past status and authority. No matter what she did, the amount of intelligence a wandering mercenary could gather was limited. It would’ve been impossible to acquire information on the chimeras and the pope without getting the intel from someone deep within their ranks.

In all likelihood, she had someone working with her—and a powerful ally at that. Her apparent acquaintance with Ibroy seemed to hint at something. But in that case, it meant a bishop in Baltrain had knowledge of circumstances in Sphenedyardvania. And even if she had Ibroy's help, it would also be very difficult for him to get information, considering the scope of his authority. Well, it seemed that fishy old man knew a whole lot more than I'd assumed, but there had to be a limit to what an individual could achieve.

In that case, did they have the support of a whole organization? But then the question was, who were these people, and where were they from? Hanoy didn't seem to know. Mercenaries didn't make much of a difference in matters of espionage. While they were skilled warriors, they didn't have the status necessary to gather this type of information.

The key to this was likely what Hanoy had revealed earlier—the client he couldn't name. Even now, I couldn't figure it out. *Lucy could probably solve this.* It seemed I'd developed a habit of depending on her whenever I was stumped. I decided I'd ask her once we managed to return to Baltrain safely.

"Well, ain't no reason for them to give it a rest for the day," Hanoy said. "Better to keep an eye out."

"True..." Allucia agreed.

He was telling us the chimeras could attack at any moment. There was no reason to wait for the chaos from the cathedral attack to die down before resorting to the chimeras—it would be a total waste of resources. They would have to come soon. Even if they weren't going to suddenly pop up in the middle of town, it was safe to assume they'd already been released from the research lab or wherever it was they'd been stored.

Now we needed to know how strong they were and how many there were. Regardless of numbers, it was best to assume they weren't weak. If they were all like Lono Ambrosia, we could only run away, do our best to drag the prince and princess all the way to Flumvelk—or even Baltrain—and wait for reinforcements from the magic corps.

Having an *international* incident really dragged things down. It

was pretty unreasonable that the magic corps hadn't been able to attend their princess's wedding. After all, Lucy was likely the greatest contributor to Liberis's development. Now that I thought of it, it was abnormal to forbid her from giving a congratulatory address, let alone from attending at all. I wondered if things would improve with Prince Glenn on the throne. Now wasn't the time to be worrying about succession, though. We had to get him out of here safely for that scene to even be a possibility.

On our way to the palace, a mercenary in black jumped out of an alleyway and yelled for Hanoy.

"Commander!"

"Yo, what's up?"

"A message from the scouts. Several unidentifiable monsters have been sighted on the capital's outskirts."

"Got it. Give it a go for now, and if it looks bad, pull out. It'd be great if you could buy time, but don't push it. Kuriu, you go help."

"Roger that. A slave driver, as always..."

Hanoy's subordinates immediately responded to his swift orders. Just from this exchange, it was easy to see how skilled they were as an organization—they conveyed information and orders very clearly and quickly to each other. Setting aside personality and mindset, they were extremely valuable in terms of being a simple martial force. Nonetheless, if you asked me whether I wanted to fight by their side, I would still say no.

"How much does your contract cover?" I asked.

Now that the chimeras were here, this whole uproar was finally getting started for real. That had me curious about how much these mercenaries were willing to do.

"To protect the prince and princess until the end of this chaos," Hanoy answered. "Escort duty to the palace is a hell of a boring job, but we don't always get what we want."

"I see..."

To escort Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia safely to the palace—was that really enough to protect them? I couldn't answer that. After all, the enormous threat of the chimeras remained at large. In other words, we could count them among our forces until this was over.

That was good news for Sphenedyardvania.

It was possible they would run away in the middle of it, but mercenaries cared about money more than status, fame, or trust. I didn't know who their client was, but until they paid up, Verdapis wasn't likely to take off.

"That's the gist of it. Now let's pick up the pace," Hanoy said. "To be blunt, you two are total nuisances on the battlefield."

The prince and princess were completely unnecessary on the bloody front lines. To protect them until the end, it was best to get them safely to a secure location away from the fighting.

The weather was clear, but the wind was strong. Despite the dry, chilly gale blowing fiercely under the cold sky, I was starting to feel a faint humidity on my skin from anxiety and unrest.

"Man, things are lookin' rough, huh?"

Less than an hour after learning information on the chimera attack, we finally reached Sphenedyardvania's royal palace with Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia in tow. On the way, we witnessed the chaos on the streets. The majority of the walking corpses had been suppressed, but several extra large monsters were attacking the outer edges of the city. There was no asking the populace to calm down in such a situation.

Sphenedyardvania's palace was somewhat small compared to Liberis's. Still, it gave off a different sense of refinement with its dazzling ornamentation. *This place is definitely where the highest echelon of society lives.* I felt like I would go dizzy living in a place like this, but maybe it was just the standard for royalty.

Due to the chaos, the area surrounding the palace was on high alert. Many knights of the Holy Order were restlessly coming and going, practically in a frenzy. Several spotted us and came running over with an entirely different look in their eyes. A particularly large man was among them, and he quickly called out to us.

"Prince Glenn, Princess Salacia! You're safe!"

"Gatoga. Princess Salacia and I are just fine," Prince Glenn reported. "How are the others?"

"Sir! The cathedral is completely under our control. There were only a few casualties."

"I see. Good work."

After that quick exchange, Gatoga took a short breath. I didn't quite understand why he hadn't been at the cathedral, but it seemed he had a lot going on too. Perhaps to make the corpse attack more of a success, the papists had pulled strings to keep him away. That was why Prince Glenn wasn't saying anything about it. In other words, regardless of his opinion on it, Gatoga's absence had been decided beforehand. Or maybe he'd been removed moments before the ceremony. That strengthened the credibility of what the knight at the narthex who'd confiscated our weapons had told us.

"Citrus, Gardenant," Gatoga said. "Sorry. You two really saved me again."

"Think nothing of it," Allucia replied. "That's a knight's duty."

"Yeah... Yeah, you're exactly right."

Gatoga's expression was dark. He clearly felt guilty about being unable to fulfill said duty, which reinforced the idea that he'd been pulled away from the cathedral against his will. The power struggle between the papists and royalists was finally beyond the point of holding anything back. Maybe we'd *long* passed that point.

What did it mean to seize power, anyway? Control of money, people, and territory. That would be the normal answer. Being the highest authority in an entire nation meant having the most of all those things.

That was why it was weird for the papists to be destroying their own. There was supposed to be no appeal to ruling over an uninhabited land. Had the papists gone mad? Or did they just have nothing left to lose? I had no idea what their intentions were, but they had to be bad.

Gatoga then turned his attention to the Verdapis mercenaries, whom everyone was surely wondering about.

"So? Who are you people?" he asked.

"Mercenaries," Hanoy answered. "We took a contract to escort the prince here. Can't tell you who the client is."

He seemed like an awfully talkative guy, but when it came to his job, he never said more than necessary.

"I see... That helps," Gatoga said. "Allow me to offer my thanks."

"No need. That's the job."

For the majority of the knights here, it was unclear whether Hanoy could be trusted. However, since he'd safely escorted the prince here, they had no choice but to do so for now.

"The remaining problem is those things out there..."

Gatoga shifted his gaze toward the edge of town. While Dilmahakha wasn't as large as Baltrain, it was a solid city. In a world rampant with monsters, any gathering of people had to be well-defended. If an enemy could appear at any time and get to the center of a civilization immediately, the population would never have grown to begin with.

That was why it took something on the level of a natural cataclysm to cause a city to collapse on the spot. So far, Dilmahakha was living up to this reputation and withstanding the chimera attack. However, that was something I could only say from the safest place in the city. The outer edge had to have been utter pandemonium. We'd successfully gotten the prince and princess to the palace, but that didn't mean we could pack it up and call it a job well done.

"Has the Holy Order come in contact with them yet?" Allucia asked.

"We sent out a few scouts, but they haven't returned yet," Gatoga answered with an annoyed look.

Nobody here had personally seen the chimeras. We had no idea how large or strong they were yet. Sending out scouts was the right choice.

"Our guys still aren't back either..." Hanoy muttered.

He'd sent out scouts as well. Were they being held up because they were helping the evacuation and rescue efforts? Or had they already been defeated? The former was possible for the Holy Order. I wondered if the same could be said about Verdapis. I was hoping they were putting up a good fight, but it was entirely possible they'd been wiped out without even getting the chance to "give it a go." I was really hoping the monsters weren't *that* strong...

"There's no point solidifying our defenses here," Allucia said. "Let's sally out."

"You're perfectly right," Gatoga replied, "but we can't leave the

palace undefended either."

"It's only a matter of time before they break through."

The two knight commanders continued discussing the matter. This was a very pressing issue to figure out—something had to be done about the chimeras rampaging in the city. However, it would be meaningless to send all of our forces to subjugate them at the cost of the palace's defenses. There was no guarantee the chimeras were our only remaining enemies. Our top priority was still protecting the prince and princess. Defeating the chimeras was a means to that end.

When all was said and done, we needed to split our forces between defending the palace and defeating the chimeras, but that was a difficult decision to make. By all rights, it was best to wait for information from the scouts so that we knew how much of a threat our enemies posed. We weren't capable of that now, though, which had resulted in a small difference in opinion. Allucia favored setting out in full force, while Gatoga wanted to prioritize defending the palace.

"I suppose our only choice is to set out with an elite few..."

"Seems so..."

After exchanging a few opinions, the two settled on one answer. In short, we would launch an assault using only a select few fighters. There wasn't really the time to sit here and discuss it—I agreed with Allucia's plan. Judging by how the Holy Order and Verdapis's scouts hadn't returned, there was no point in sending out a half-baked force. It would just invite unnecessary casualties.

We had to carefully choose people who were likely to be able to put up a fight against the chimeras on their own. Even if they were incapable of repelling the monsters, it would be good enough if they were capable of bringing back intel. If we sent out a huge force, there would be too much variation in skill to guarantee anything, and above all else, it would thin our defenses here. *Things would be so much easier if Lucy and the magic corps had been invited...but I guess there's no point in moaning over what we can't have.*

"Lazorne, please take command of the palace's security and remain here to protect the prince and princess," Allucia requested.

"I'll go for the chimeras."

Gatoga nodded. "Sorry... I'm counting on you."

The problem now was who to send. Just as Allucia had said, Gatoga was in a position to command the knights of the Holy Order and protect the prince. It would be a poor plan for him to abandon his post here.

"I'll go for the chimeras too," I said. "I take it you don't mind, Allucia?"

"Ah! N-Not at all! I intended to ask you from the beginning. I'll be accompanying you, of course."

"How reassuring."

I was ready to participate in defeating the chimeras too. If anything, that was the *only* thing I was capable of. I couldn't take command of anyone, nor did I have the brains to come up with strategies. I only knew how to swing a sword—but that I could do well. What I'd once told Allucia was no lie. If my blade was capable of resolving a situation, I would gladly wield it to that end.

There was some self-interest in this as well. I wanted to know how far my techniques could take me. I was honestly thrilled—even if this emotion was somewhat inappropriate. A part of me was excited about taking part in a battle that would decide the fate of a nation, even if it wasn't my own. I couldn't help but laugh inwardly at how belligerent I'd become.

"Allucia, Beryl, I have great hope in your blades," Princess Salacia said, motivating me all the more. *Things'll get really bad if we screw up...*

"Please leave it to us, Your Highness," I told her. "We will prevail at all costs."

"Me and Prim are goin' too," Hanoy said. "That's the job, and I wanna know how Kuriu's doing."

"I'm going wherever you go, Commander!"

The two elite Verdapis mercenaries were set to join us. Setting aside our differences in mindset, I was glad to have them on our side in a fight. Having a wizard was especially reassuring. Without her, our only option was closing into sword range.

"Lazorne, have you seen Henblitz?" Allucia asked.

"Yeah, our guys linked up with him at the cathedral. After getting things under control, I had him and the Liberion knights help with the evacuation."

"Understood. Please tell him to continue with those efforts."

"Roger that."

It seemed Henblitz had successfully repelled the walking corpses from the cathedral without getting hurt. I was glad to hear it. Not that I'd ever imagined he would lose, but it was still good to receive such reliable information about his safety.

The prince and princess were going to remain at the palace. Gatoga and the Holy Order were focusing on defending the populace and the palace. The Liberion Order, with Henblitz in command, was guiding the evacuation. The royal garrison was likely devoting themselves to Dilmahakha's defense. That meant there was only one more person here whose role wasn't decided yet.

"White Maiden," I said, turning to face her.

She was no more than a wandering mercenary now. I didn't know who'd hired her, but at the very least, there was nobody here to give her orders. That meant there was nobody to object if I did so.

"You stay here by Prince Glenn's side and protect him. That's your role."

She looked clearly shocked by my suggestion. It honestly hurt not to have her on the front lines. That was especially the case because I knew her true strength. However, even if we successfully defeated the chimeras, there might be yet another attack on the prince and princess. If they fell, she was surely the one who would fall into the greatest pits of despair.

She'd once attacked what she'd been meant to protect. Nothing could erase that fact. However, she stood here now with that giant scar on her past. As such, her most important mission was to protect Prince Glenn, no matter the cost. That was what I believed, at least. I was sure that would help her atone.

"Beryl, can she be—" the prince muttered.

"She can be trusted," I answered immediately, "both in skill and in character."

It was *extremely* rude for me to cut off royalty like that, but the

situation being what it was, I hoped he could forgive me.

Our roles were decided. All that was left was to set forth. However, there was one more thing I had to know.

"Your Highness," I said, addressing the prince, "may I be so bold as to ask one question?"

He paused before nodding. "I'll allow it."

"Do you trust the Holy Order and Gatoga Lazorne?"

"Of course," he answered without even taking the time to consider the question. "They are our nation's prized spear and shield. How could I not?"

There was a clear conviction in his voice. That was a relief. With how things were going, it would probably be impossible for the White Maiden to hide her identity forever. If her plan was to seclude herself from the world, she should never have gotten involved in this country's strife as a mercenary. I wasn't particularly wise, but I could think of plenty of other ways she could have kept herself hidden. She was far smarter than me—she'd had to have considered a plethora of options.

"In that case, you can trust her," I told the prince. "Without question."

Regardless, she was here now. She'd chosen to get involved in this country's future. So, even if it was impossible for her to regain her former status, I believed she could win Prince Glenn's trust. He was in no way a fool, after all. Besides, Gatoga wasn't saying anything. He'd definitely guessed who she was. And if he truly thought her staying with the prince was a bad idea, he would've objected. He had enough influence to do so.

"Very well... I'll take your advice to heart," the prince said.

"Thank you."

I didn't know whether Prince Glenn would realize who she was or if she would expose her identity on her own. However, I wanted to believe that both their concerns for the future of the country were the real deal. If possible, I wanted them to be able to work toward a better future together once more.

"We'll get horses for you," Gatoga said after silently watching my exchange with the prince. "Please make use of them."

The holy capital was a large city. There was a limit to how fast we could go on foot—especially in my case.

"Mind if we use them too?" Hanoy asked.

"Yeah, but don't steal them," Gatoga told him. "Make sure you bring them back."

"Ooh, scary. That's a promise in front of the princeling. Can't go back on that now, can I?"

I guess it would *be weird for us to go on horseback while forcing Hanoy and Prim to walk.* They were definitely a reliable force in battle. We still didn't know who they were working for, but judging by their behavior so far, they were very unlikely to abandon their contract.

"Then, Prince Glenn, Princess Salacia, we'll take you inside the palace," Gatoga said.

"Please do."

There was no point in making them wait outside while we got our horses ready. Gatoga quickly arranged for some knights to escort them inside to safety as soon as possible. I could see the masked woman hesitate over whether to follow them.

"Go," I told her. "I have my role, and you have yours."

"Right."

With that short reply, she ran off to follow the royals into the palace. That was for the best. She had an important duty to fulfill—to keep Prince Glenn alive until this chaos was over. This wasn't only to see him safe. Now that she'd chosen to return to this world, she had to settle the bill.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

Shortly after, some knights arrived with a few strong-looking horses. We could finally depart. I prayed the front lines hadn't already collapsed, but there was nothing we could do about it until we got there.

"Hup..."

I straddled the horse and surveyed the city from a slightly higher vantage point. I could see several flashy clouds of dust not too far from the palace. Apparently, the chimeras were going on quite the energetic rampage.

This should be good.

"Let's go, Master."

"Yeah, seems like this'll be quite the hunt."

Allucia took the lead, and our four horses ran off.

I'd given the White Maiden—Rose Marblehart—her role. It was now time to fulfill mine as a swordsman.

◇

"Hah!"

I gripped the horse's reins, driving it through the holy capital at full speed. Dilmahakha's layout was pretty extreme. The main road that led to important buildings like the cathedral and the palace was excessively well maintained—a multitude of much smaller roads forked off like branches on a tree. This was why it was possible for a horse to gallop at full speed down the central thoroughfare.

Also, there were pretty much no pedestrians in sight. The majority had already shut themselves inside their homes or in evacuation shelters. The only people we saw were those evacuating from the outer edge of the city and the knights guiding them.

"That's a knight for ya." Hanoy complimented Allucia with an accompanying whistle of admiration. "You've got a real good handle on that horse."

I had experience with horses too—there were plenty of opportunities to ride out in the countryside. However, what I knew was nothing more than "riding" a horse. I hadn't reached the level of "handling" one.

Watching Allucia control her steed, I could see the clear differences in our skill. This was actually my first time witnessing her on horseback. We hadn't done any horseback training in the dojo in Beaden, and it was rare to have to ride a horse in Baltrain.

Nonetheless, even from the perspective of an amateur, I could tell she was very skilled. She'd probably trained in horsemanship after becoming a knight. I could only describe her riding as *splendid*. Frankly, I'd never thought I'd see another side of Allucia's tremendous talent, especially at a time like this. Part of me was

happy I'd gotten to witness this, but there was nothing truly positive about the current situation.

"The town looks surprisingly undamaged," I remarked.

"Indeed," Allucia said. "Is it because the chimeras are slow, or are they successfully being stalled? Time to find out..."

As we rushed down the street, the scenery around us was unexpectedly clean. There were, of course, citizens being evacuated by the Holy Order, but that was because they lived around the outer edges and were hurrying toward the center. The buildings hadn't been destroyed, which meant the chimeras were still farther away from us. Just as Allucia had said, either they were slow by nature or the fighting squads were successfully stalling them.

The entire city was on high alert, but the actual damage to infrastructure wasn't that great—not yet, at least. If we managed to reach the chimeras and defeat them, we could keep casualties to a minimum. Dilmahakha's city center looked peaceful enough for me to hold out hope.

"Oh..."

As we got closer to the chimeras, we saw more and more people. The majority of them were either injured or tending to the injured. They were leaning against the walls of safe-looking buildings as if waiting for a storm to pass.

While I'd expected some carnage, it seemed like these opponents were beyond the Holy Order's capabilities. The chimeras were near the city limits, so because we had been in the city's center—near the cathedral and the palace—we hadn't seen much damage. However, when monsters rampaged, there were sure to be casualties. The brief optimistic hope I'd held just moments ago had shattered spectacularly.

Right as we passed what looked like an evacuation shelter where the injured were gathering, a voice yelled at us from the side.

"Hey! Wait up! Hang on a sec!"

"Kuriu!"

Hanoy and Prim slowed their horses. The blue-haired swordsman, Kuriu, was doing his best to run alongside them.

"I see you're holdin' up fine," Hanoy said.

"Yeah, somehow! But those things are nuts!"

Allucia and I slowed down to match their pace. We were pressed for time, but we couldn't ignore any intel Kuriu had regarding the chimeras—after all, we could never have enough information on our opponents. *Plus, if a swordsman capable of crossing blades with Allucia is calling these monsters "nuts," then they must be seriously bad news.*

"They're big and fast," Kuriu elaborated. "That wouldn't be so bad on its own, but they're tough as hell too! My swords couldn't cut them, so I pulled out. I doubt anything but your weapon will get through. That's how hard they were."

"I see. Roger that," Hanoy said. "Kuriu, go support the others."

"Aye, aye!"

Having conveyed everything he had to say, Kuriu ran off in another direction. It was actually pretty crazy that he'd managed to stay running alongside us on foot for a short period, even considering how we'd slowed down a bit. This mercenary group was a wild gathering of experts.

"That tough, huh?" I muttered. "Sounds like a difficult enemy."

Allucia nodded. "Yes. Here's hoping my sword can cut through..."

An enemy with a tough hide posed enough of a threat on its own because it was difficult to damage. My old sword had been completely incapable of cutting Zeno Grable anywhere except its softest parts, and physical attacks had barely worked at all against Lono Ambrosia. If we were faced with a similarly armored opponent, Allucia would be the one lacking sufficient firepower—she was still using the farewell sword I'd gifted her upon her graduation from our dojo.

She'd surely sharpened and maintained it since then, but if the chimeras were tougher than Zeno Grable, it would be difficult for her to even scratch them, let alone deal a fatal blow. Against truly tough opponents, technique hardly mattered—it was just impossible to get the blade to bite. A human could be cut with any sharp implement, but that didn't apply to all monsters. Many had naturally thick hides and tenacious muscles that long, slender metal sticks could do nothing about.

My sword, on the other hand, had been forged with an abundance of Zeno Grable's bones and claws, and it was coated in elven steel. Its cutting edge was nothing to laugh at—it'd even bisected Lono Ambrosia's core. *I'm pretty confident it'll work on those chimeras too.*

Hanoy's greatsword also possessed terrific offensive potential. His superhuman strength, combined with his solid technique, crushed his opponents more than cutting them. So, if his blade couldn't penetrate, it wasn't much of a problem. I doubted any opponent in existence could put his fighting style at a disadvantage.

I hoped Allucia would take this opportunity to start showing an interest in a nicer sword. Now wasn't the time to be mentioning that, but as the one who'd taught her swordsmanship, I felt strongly about it. Her weapon wasn't exactly flawed or anything—it just wasn't first-class, and using it was a waste of her tremendous talent. It didn't really matter against a human opponent, but when facing tough monsters, a weapon's grade could play a major role.

Because Allucia Citrus was an excellent swordswoman, she had to have noticed this problem by now. I was glad she was using my farewell sword, but considering her rank as a knight commander, she was better off letting it go.

I pondered these issues while urging my horse onward. As my field of view started to open up down the main street, I finally spotted the rampaging chimeras with my own eyes.

"There!" I cried out.

"They're awfully big," Hanoy commented. "Worth crushin', at least."

They really *were* large. We weren't close yet, but this fact was still abundantly clear from a distance. Measuring by eye, I figured that each chimera was around twice the size of Zeno Grable. There were four of them in total, and they weren't grouped together—all of them were rampaging wildly.

"Four chimeras..."

We'd heard there were several of them, but now that we had an exact number, it was difficult to decide what to do. We also had four fighters on our side. Normally, you'd think we could each take one

on. However, that plan only worked on the assumption that each of us could manage alone. Against monsters that large, challenging them individually could pose the risk of all of us getting defeated. To add to that, we had a wizard—unless she was on Lucy's level or wielded sword magic like Ficelle, she was at a disadvantage against a sturdy opponent without a vanguard to help her. That said, I wanted to avoid a big battle royal with all four chimeras at once. It looked like it would be best to take them on as small groups and eliminate them one by one.

"How cruel..."

Now that we were at the epicenter of the chaos, we knew why the rest of Dilmahakha was perfectly fine despite the four abnormal monsters on the loose. The chimeras definitely weren't slow-footed. Or, well, they didn't give a sluggish impression. Honestly, they looked as agile as Zeno Grable. They didn't lack strength either. They were large enough to trample over most buildings with ease, and there were wrecked houses all over. Despite all this, the chimeras still hadn't advanced toward the city center, resulting in fewer casualties on the whole. The reason for this was right before our eyes.

"Ugh... Gh..."

One of the chimeras was toying with a human. The man's left arm had been torn off, and both his legs were bent the wrong way. Judging by his equipment, he was a knight of the Holy Order. He was clad in heavy full plate armor—seemingly the symbol of Sphenedyardvania—but that wasn't enough to stop the chimera's claws and fangs. The dying knight wasn't being eaten, and he wasn't being tossed aside. The chimera was biting him and whipping him around like a toy.

"Dammit!"

These things hadn't been stalled. They'd simply been *playing* with their victims.

Normal monsters didn't do this. They either killed people whom they saw as obstructions or fed on them. There was a certain evil oozing out of these chimeras. It was as if they were a reflection of the mastermind behind this tragedy.

"Hmph... These things are fuckin' disgusting," Hanoy muttered.

“I couldn’t agree more...”

Our personalities were in no way compatible, but I concurred with him. That was how uncomfortable this scene was for a fellow human.

Even if the poor knight’s sacrifice meant damage to the rest of the city was being kept to a minimum, we couldn’t just sit back and do nothing. Quickly reading the situation, Hanoy and the pink-haired wizard picked out a chimera who was more isolated than the others.

“Me and Prim will off that lone one on the right flank,” Hanoy said. “I’ll let you take the glory.”

“Got it... We’ll leave that one up to you two.”

“All right! Let’s get to work, Prim!”

“Mm!”

The two Verdapis mercenaries spurred their horses toward their target. The chimeras’ strength was still an unknown factor, but judging by how the Holy Order had been defeated, they definitely weren’t weak. A four-on-four between monsters and humans would certainly put us at a disadvantage—if it came to that, we would really have no chance of winning.

So, the plan was to take them on in separate small teams in isolation from each other. In terms of teamwork, those two were likely best together. The problem was how to divvy up the rest of the chimeras. Hanoy and Prim were heading toward one, so that left three more. Only Allucia and I were left to handle them. Unless one of us was capable of splitting into two, it was impossible to take them all on at once.

Hmm, what to do?

Even if Allucia and I took one each, that left one at large. Would it be better to team up and finish them one at a time? That would leave two monsters rampaging while we fought the first, though. I doubted we could kill these things quickly, even if we worked together, so the damage would gradually spread while we fought. If the unengaged chimeras chose to join the battle, that would be even worse. I doubted I could win against two monsters of that size at once. The same probably went for Allucia.

“Master, let’s split up. We must strike down as many of them as

we can.”

“Guess there’s no time to think about it...!”

Just as she’d said, our priority was minimizing casualties. Our only choice was to split up. I would’ve liked more help, but now wasn’t the time to be asking for luxuries. In terms of weapons, Allucia was at a clear disadvantage. So, I *really* had to do my best to bring down one chimera, then go help her or take care of the last one. There were no other options.

“Huh...?”

Just as I was pumping myself up, one of the three chimeras who’d been roughly clustered together suddenly shifted course far to the left.

“Did someone lure it away...?”

“Master, this works perfectly for us. Let’s take them one-on-one while we can.”

“Right. Sounds like a plan.”

Well, no matter the circumstances, this was convenient.

“Allucia, don’t die.”

“Of course. I pray for your good fortune in battle too, Master.”

With those last words to each other, Allucia and I split up. A single misstep could be fatal, but I couldn’t just turn tail and run away. As long as someone had hope in my blade, I’d decided to do everything in my power to meet those expectations.

“All right!”

I felt my grip strengthening on the reins.

Okay then, it’s time to exterminate some monsters. Let’s do this.

◇

“Hup... Thanks.”

After parting ways with Allucia, I made my way toward one of the chimeras. I dismounted some distance away along the road—there was a risk of getting the horse killed if I got too close with it. I was technically borrowing it from Sphenedyardvania, so I wanted to avoid getting it hurt. Besides, I was incapable of fighting from horseback. I could probably manage somewhat if I really tried, but

my forte was fighting with my feet on the ground. It would be ridiculous to be defeated because I'd decided to do something I was unfamiliar with. This battle had to be on foot.

Hanoy and Prim were facing the chimera on the right flank. Of the three that were left, one had diverted to the left flank. If Allucia and I each faced one of the remaining two in the middle, we could prevent any further casualties for now. That plan hinged on the harsh condition that none of us lost, though.

"It sure is big..."

After hitching my horse to a nearby pillar, I hurried over to the chimera. The one I'd chosen was pawing at a civilian who'd fallen prey to it. Say I gave that thing the benefit of doubt—I could understand hunting humans for survival's sake. However, this chimera was an artificially created calamity. I strongly believed that I had to avenge the innocent people who'd fallen to it, though I didn't know if death was a sufficient parting gift.

Noticing my approach, the chimera stopped playing with the corpse and turned my way.

"Grrr...?"

I couldn't sense any intelligence behind its eyes. I wasn't particularly knowledgeable about monsters or anything, but of the ones I'd fought and defeated, it reminded me most of Lono Ambrosia. While that one had looked completely different, it'd shared this lack of intelligence.

These beasts were meant to have abided by nature's rules—they should've been resting after death. I felt the slightest sympathy that they'd been roused in such a state, but I couldn't overlook their deeds. It was inevitable that more people would die if we didn't kill them now.

"Resent the one who created you..."

"Grrrr! Graaaaah!"

I drew my sword as the chimera roared. It'd recognized me as its next prey. Well, that was better than it being strangely friendly or running away. It was easier for me to kill this way.

The chimera was of considerable size. Just as I'd estimated from afar, it was about twice as big as Zeno Grable. Stitching monsters

together did theoretically mean the end result would just get bigger and bigger the more you used. At any rate, I had no experience fighting anything this large. The chimera had the head of a lion and the body of an ox or griffon. Its tail was a snake too, making it utterly grotesque. I wasn't quite sure how it was going to fight.

"Well, let's have at it and see!"

I charged in and started with a horizontal slash to test things out. Kuriu had called these things extremely tough. I had to check its defenses for myself before genuinely trying to find a way to defeat it.

"Grrr?"

I'd put plenty of killing intent behind my charge, but it seemed this creature didn't react to such things. This was the key difference between it and the likes of Zeno Grable. I wasn't sure whether that made the thing more tractable, though.

"Shh!"

The chimera recognized my presence but also seemed to be zoning out in a way. I slashed at it with plenty of force, aiming to take a foreleg. However, though I managed to penetrate its skin, my blade stopped before really digging into its meat. My strike hadn't been enough to cut its dense muscles.

"Gyah?!"

"Sure is tough...!"

I pulled my sword free and took a step back. An instant later, a paw crashed down where I'd just been standing.

It was a little tougher than I'd imagined. A part of me had believed this brilliant sword would be able to cut clean through its limbs. Now, I had to think of a way to fight it. Unless it left me a huge opening, it would be difficult to kill quickly.

The other thing that caught my attention was its slow reaction time. It hadn't defended against my sword, nor had it even been wary of it. That was rather bold. Maybe a puny human like me wasn't worth being cautious of. *That kinda pisses me off.* Not too long ago, I would never have thought this way. Was this also a form of growth? I could only pray it had nothing to do with getting full of myself.

At any rate, my sword was at least capable of drawing blood. I'd considered the possibility that I wouldn't be able to deal any damage at all, so in theory, it *could* be defeated. I just had to do my utmost to avoid its lethal attacks while continuously slashing at it. You could say this was far easier than having to face the likes of Lono Ambrosia.

"Graooooh!"

"Whoa!"

It seemed the damage I'd dealt had forced it to reevaluate me as an enemy worth being wary of. It let out a jarring roar, then brought its forelegs smashing down over and over. The repeated *booms* of its massive paws hitting the ground resonated deep within me. However, this accomplished no more than flattening the spots where I'd been standing.

"Hmm..."

A certain thought immediately came to mind—really, it was nothing more than my first impressions from this short interaction.

Is that all?

It was definitely big. Its attacks also had an astoundingly destructive force behind them. A regular civilian—and even a fully armored warrior—would die from a single blow. That was how powerful it was. I definitely couldn't be careless around it.

But that was all. The attacks were fast—in no way sluggish. If anything, it was rather agile for its size. However, it was slower than Zeno Grable. It was, at least, faster than a saberboar.

It was possible that the thing was still hiding some kind of trick up its sleeve. Regardless, I could easily defeat an opponent of this level. The same went for Allucia and Hanoy. The problem was its toughness. The inside of its mouth was probably soft, but it would be even harder to get my sword in there than it had been with Zeno Grable—the chimera was so large, making its mouth difficult to reach.

"Then how about this?"

"Grah?!"

Deciding on a new plan, I charged in once more. This time, I delivered a thrust to its foreleg. As expected, the tip of my blade

sank in but didn’t penetrate all the way through. It came to a stop after biting into the meat just a little.

But that was fine. Having gotten a feel for it, I immediately pulled my sword out and backed away. A moment later, the chimera’s fangs snapped closed where I’d been standing, biting nothing but air.

It was pretty much impossible to finish my opponent in one strike. At least, it was with my current level of firepower. In that case, my only choice was to shave away at it. However, depending on how I approached this, it could take too long without giving me a real advantage. I had to chip away at my opponent in a way that led to a situation where I could deliver a fatal blow.

My plan was to slash at its forelegs until it could no longer keep its balance, forcing it to lower its head. That would also prevent it from escaping, all while putting its face within reach of my sword. I didn’t know what the chimera’s weak point was, but it moved like a living creature, so it likely had similar soft spots. If destroying the brain didn’t work, I could go for the heart. And if that still didn’t work, I just had to keep hacking until there was nothing left to cut. It would be a simple matter once it lost the use of its forelegs. The path to victory was long but clear.

“Hmph!”

I approached, slashed, backed off, then approached again. I had a general grasp of my enemy’s abilities. This wasn’t a fight—it was just busywork. The tail probably had snakelike abilities, but I was only fighting from the front, so the tail didn’t have the chance to do anything. Fighting this thing on my own was actually easier. If we had several people surrounding it, the tail’s fangs could come into play.

The chimera didn’t seem to possess any projectile attacks. It just had tough skin and bulldozed its way through any obstacles. That would be enough against an amateur but not against masters like Allucia and Hanoy. *Actually, the lack of projectiles so far doesn’t necessarily mean it doesn’t have any...* I’d gone through quite the ordeal with Zeno Grable, so I wasn’t going to let my guard down now.

“Graaaaah!”

After a period where I was carving it up and observing its behavior, the chimera finally snapped. It stomped both forelegs down, shaking the earth violently. Any normal creature would be unable to ignore the amount of blood it was hemorrhaging.

I didn't want it going on more of a rampage than it already was, but this was still several times better than it running away. If it dashed off with everything it had, I wouldn't be able to catch up with it. But since it was meeting me face-to-face, I simply had to fend it off and draw some blood from its head.

It seemed my work of slowly chipping away at its forelegs was finally starting to pay off. Because of how hard it'd stomped with both legs, it'd torn open its wounds, sending out a spray of blood.

Now was my chance. It was convenient that my opponent was in a frenzy—I could attack more readily when it came at me in such an imperfect state.

"Haaah..."

Glaring at the chimera, I dared it to come at me. I corrected my grip on my sword and held it high overhead. This was a stance rarely used in our dojo. Our style focused largely on dodging and following up with counterattacks, and that was fairly incompatible with the entirely offensive high stance. This was the kind of thing Curuni or Henblitz would specialize in. However, "rarely used" wasn't the same as "couldn't use." There were few purely offensive forms in our school, but that didn't mean we were weak with them.

"Grrrraah!"

Flailing its limbs around clumsily, the chimera closed in. It seemed it couldn't ignore the damage to its forelegs—its charge was far slower than before. Regardless, it tenaciously pushed forward. I wondered if this was the nature of the original creature or whether it was bitter about being given life again in such an abnormal way. There was no telling which it was, but either way, it was guilty of having murdered many people. It was only right to settle the bill here.



“Shhh!”

I didn’t take a single step to the side as the chimera approached—I met it head-on. There was no way I could use a technique like branch breaker to lock up my opponent’s strike. That simply didn’t work against monsters of this size. I didn’t use a counterattack like serpent lash either. While that was useful for closing the gap while striking my opponent, it wasn’t enough to deal a fatal blow against something so big.

“Grrr...?”

Therefore, making use of every muscle in my body, I swung straight down. This was a strike designed to slay a foe without question: hawk killer. It was the only technique in our dojo that started from a high stance, and it was capable of bringing even a soaring hawk down from the sky. *Not that the strike can extend high up beyond the reach of the blade, mind you.*

My sword smashed through the chimera’s cranium, ending its life at the price of a significant jarring in my hands.

“Phew...”

The enormous monster sank to the ground with a *thud.* This was a little different from my initial plan, but it had all worked out in the end. Ultimately, the thing was dead, and I hadn’t taken any damage. I prodded it with my sword just to be sure. Wild animals and monsters sometimes feigned death when they sensed they were at a disadvantage. Though this was an artificially created chimera, I didn’t discount the possibility.

“Mm... Looks dead.”

I lightly slashed its face just to be sure. It didn’t react at all. Well, it would’ve been a bit of a problem if it managed to survive a strike right through its skull. The sight of blood and all sorts of other viscera pouring out was rather ghastly. I definitely didn’t want to have to clean up later.

After confirming that it was finally dead, I sheathed my sword. This wasn’t over yet, and its death had been possible thanks to Zeno Grable’s sword. It would’ve been quite difficult to exchange blows with a chimera using a normal weapon. My attacks would’ve struggled to bite through the beast’s flesh. That was why it was

necessary for me to support Allucia. She wasn't going to lose, but it would be quite the undertaking for her to win with her current equipment. It was better to spend my time linking up with her quickly rather than standing around idly.

"All right, time to go help Allu—"

"Shaaah!"

"Gh?!"

The instant I took my eyes off the chimera, I heard a disturbing sound from the corpse. I turned around in a panic.

The snake that made up the chimera's tail was lunging for me with tremendous ferocity.

"Cra—"

The body parts can move independently of each other?! I messed up! Draw my sword? No, not enough time. Dodge? I just relaxed my muscles, so I can't move fast enough.

"Master!"

And just as an idiotic part of me casually figured out that I was about to lose an arm, something pushed me aside. My field of vision was obstructed by a shining silver shield.

"Wha?!"

Unable to brace myself against the unexpected impact, I fell on my butt. My arm was still intact. I didn't feel any pain. Well, my backside hurt, but it was nothing compared to what I'd been preparing myself for. It seemed someone had just barely saved me.

The snake slammed into the shield that was covering me.

"Hyuh!"

"Hssss!"

Who could that be? As that thought crossed my mind, the person wielding the shield let out a peculiar exhalation and decapitated the snake.

"Master, are you all right?"

The one who'd cut down the snake in one strike showed tremendous concern for me. A gust of wind beneath the cold sky toyed with the strands of her blue hair.

"Y-Yeah. Thanks...Rose."

I wasn't quite sure whether to refer to her as the White Maiden.

She was using a shining silver kite shield instead of the buckler I'd seen her using earlier, but all of her other equipment was the same.

She wielded a shortsword, was armored in a breastplate, and wore a fauld skirt. Even her mask was still on. That meant she was still going by the White Maiden persona. However, she was also calling me "Master," and we were the only ones here. I doubted calling her by her name was a major issue.

"But what are you doing here?" I asked.

She'd saved me. Had she not covered me, I would've lost an arm at least. I was extremely grateful she was here. However, I'd asked her to protect Prince Glenn. What was she doing on the front lines?

"His Highness commanded me to come here," Rose answered. "He told me to protect Dilmahakha."

"I see..."

That meant Prince Glenn now knew her identity. The kite shield she wielded was proof of this. I didn't know whether Rose had confessed or if he'd figured it out, but that wasn't the important part. The prince had accepted her as an important asset to the nation. From what I could tell of Rose's feelings, she wanted to protect Prince Glenn, but she couldn't do much about that if he'd directly commanded her to assist us.

Given her current position, she had no real reason to obey his commands—she simply wasn't obligated to. However, she'd decided to obey. It would be difficult for her to be reinstated into the Holy Order, and she would have to clear many obstacles to make that happen. Still, she didn't *need* to be a knight to work for her country. I was hoping they could find a good compromise on that front.

"Oh, I don't have time to waste here," I said suddenly. "I need to go help the others!"

While I was rather moved by her dedication, now wasn't the time to be indulging in that emotion. Allucia still needed help, and there was no telling if the chimera that had split off to the left was going to come back. One monster was dead, but the situation hadn't been resolved yet.

"I'll assist you," Rose said. "That's my role."

"Got it. Very reassuring."

Now that I knew my sword was enough to kill a chimera, it was extremely nice to have a defense specialist like Rose with me. I doubted I would have any more accidents with her by my side.

"I guess it'll be faster to run than to get the horses," I said.

"Yes, most likely."

It would take too much extra time to go back to where my horse was and untie it. Fortunately, it was easy to tell where the fighting was going on because of the flashy clouds of smoke.

On a side note, while I knew the masked woman was Rose, she spoke in a completely different way now—her words felt really out of place. Her playful and dragged-out manner of speech was liable to get her recognized on the spot in Sphenedyardvania, so maybe there was no helping that. From the moment she'd donned that mask, she'd likely been very deliberate about choosing every word that came out of her mouth. One reason for this was probably to stop the papists from finding out her identity.

However, even if just for a short time, she was no longer donning that persona. It would've been so much easier for her to survive had she kept her neck out of such troublesome affairs. This showed how determined she was to save her country. Maybe she'd decided it would be faster to purge the bad actors in Sphenedyardvania than to keep herself hidden. As always, such political matters seemed awfully complicated to me.

"Okay, let's hurry."

"Yes, Master."

Such thoughts could wait for later. We had to bring order to the city first. I didn't know who between the papists and royalists was correct from a political perspective, but I couldn't forgive the papists for dragging regular civilians into such an incident. They definitely had to pay for that—with interest.

"Wouldn't it be better to stop calling me Master?!"

"Sorrrry! We finally got to talk, so it just kinda slipped out!"

Rose and I chatted as we ran to our next objective. It seemed somewhat inappropriate, given the situation, but *I* was the one who'd started it. At any rate, I didn't think now was the right time to make Rose's identity public. Just calling me "Master" would be

enough for some people to figure it out, so I was hoping she could maintain the facade a little better.

"There!"

A while after making our way toward the clouds of smoke, Rose and I finally reached the source of all the destruction. From what I could tell, Allucia was maintaining the advantage, but she couldn't finish the chimera off. It seemed she really *was* incapable of penetrating its thick hide. For better or worse, it was just as I'd expected. The worst-case scenario would've been her sword breaking, stripping her of any chance of going on the offensive. I was glad to see that hadn't happened.

"Allucia! I'm here to help!"

"Master?!"

Allucia and the chimera shifted their focus to me for a moment. I was hoping I could get the monster to be somewhat cautious of these new reinforcements. That would lower the probability of Allucia taking a hit. Though, since she was far more agile than I was, the chance of her getting hit by such attacks was extremely low to begin with. Nevertheless, I wanted to make sure it didn't happen. Almost impossible wasn't the same as impossible.

"Hah!"

I maintained my momentum, slashing down at the chimera while it remained frozen in response to our sudden intrusion. I had plenty of speed behind my strike, but my blade was held back by muscle and bone, so my sword stopped halfway through my swing. *At least I dealt some damage. If my attack slowed it down some, that's good enough for me.*

Incidentally, I'd discovered something during the last fight: These things weren't truly living creatures. They were being forcefully manipulated through forbidden arts, so their movements involved only the slightest muscle contractions, if any at all. I was grateful I couldn't end up in a situation like I'd been in with Zeno Grable—the beast had clenched its muscles so tightly around my blade that I'd been unable to pull it out. Though the chimeras had tough armor of muscle and bone, there was nothing else going for them. It made them relatively easy to handle.

"Shaaaah!"

"Whoa!"

Unlike against the first chimera, I was attacking from the side, within range of the snake. Its thick body twisted in the air, and it launched a furious attack from above, led by two enormous fangs. Because I'd just yanked my sword out, it was a little hard to ready myself for another slash. So, I decided to back away and put some distance between us.

"Hah!"

Practically switching places with me, Rose swung her shortsword. However, the twisting body of the snake instantly retracted out of her range. Unlike the main body, the snake seemed to react quickly. It was clear that they were separate creatures—I knew this for a fact due to my earlier bitter experience.

Seeing Rose beside me, Allucia raised her voice in shock. "You're...?!"

"She's here to help," I explained. "She just saved me. We came over to finish this thing quickly."

"Is that so...? Understood."

I could decide later whether to tell Allucia about the White Maiden's identity. There was certainly no need for Rose to reveal it right now. We had one more skilled ally—that was more than enough information on the battlefield.

"The head and tail are separate beings," I told Allucia as I lined myself up next to her. "Don't let your guard down, even when the lion is dead."

"Acknowledged."

It would've been difficult even for Allucia to see through such a trick without knowing about it. Conversely, it was no big deal when you already knew. To avoid any careless accidents, the three of us had to kill this thing with absolute certainty.

"Graoooh!"

Thanks to the reasonable wound I'd dealt its torso, it now saw all three of us as clear enemies. We had a clear grasp of its abilities, so the biggest problem would be if it ran. *Glad it's coming after us.*

In the meantime, I was worried about the condition of Allucia's

weapon. I glanced away from the chimera to take a look.

It's pretty beat-up. Honestly, it was hard to say whether it could actually kill the monster. It was already surprising that the sword I'd given her so long ago was still in active service. Still, no matter how long she made it last, the blade itself wasn't getting any better—not until it was completely reforged or something. The more a weapon was used, the more it deteriorated. However, in the midst of battle, factors like familiarity and the sense of relief it brought could be just a little more important than a slightly sharper blade. Still, in terms of pure performance, one could say it was ideal to buy a completely new weapon and discard it after a single use—that was an extreme example, though.

"Allucia, does your sword work on that thing?" I asked, returning my focus to the chimera.

"Unfortunately, no..."

Just as I expected. The monster didn't have any noticeable wounds on it, aside from the one I'd dealt. It was impressive that she hadn't ruined her sword after slashing against its tough hide. However, you could also interpret that another way: She was unwilling to put all her strength behind her strikes out of unnecessary concern for her weapon. I was the one who'd taught her swordsmanship, so perhaps this was the time for me to put my generosity on display.

"Once things are settled, I'll give you a new sword," I said. "So wield that one with everything you've got."

Allucia flinched visibly, then said, "Very well. I shall take your words to heart."

Mementos were, of course, valuable. As an instructor, it was more than I deserved for her to treat the four years she'd spent at our dojo so dearly. I doubted there was anything that could make me happier. However, to repeat myself over and over, the girl who'd been my pupil and the woman who served as the Liberion Order's commander lived in vastly different environments and possessed greatly different skills. At the time, I'd never imagined Allucia would become such a big shot. So, it was my duty as her instructor to gift her a weapon that suited her as she was now.

“White Maiden, I want you to take on the snake,” I said. “Allucia and I will take the head.”

Rose confirmed my order silently. She’d deemed it too dangerous to speak carelessly in front of Allucia. I didn’t want to waste her efforts, so I nodded silently to end the conversation.

“Okay, let’s do this!”

“Right!”

“Graaaaah!”

Now that we had our plan in place, it was time for action. I charged in as the chimera roared. It would either bite me or go for a headbutt. Despite the wound to its torso, it wasn’t that much slower than before.

Still, with the three of us fighting together, our victory was pretty much guaranteed. This monster possessed astounding physical strength, but unfortunately for it, that wasn’t enough to defeat a top-class swordsman.

“Shhh!”

Allucia, who specialized in speed, collided with the chimera ahead of me. Using her practically godlike footwork, she dodged the chimera’s snapping fangs and delivered three thrusts faster than the eye could follow.

“Graaaah!”

Her strikes didn’t hurt it much. The chimera roared in annoyance and stamped down at her with a foreleg. And with that attack, it focused its attention entirely on Allucia. The chimera’s defeat—and consequently, our victory—was decided.

“Hmph!”

As its foreleg came crashing down, I intercepted it with an upward slash, putting all my might behind the strike. Unlike in my previous one-on-one, I was able to position myself correctly for this. I pushed up with my lower body and used my opponent’s mass against it.

“Gyaaah?!”

Sure enough, the chimera’s momentum and weight pressed back down against me. It felt like the muscles in my arm would burst. Enduring the sensation, I successfully severed the limb at the elbow.

“Graaaaah!”

Now missing a leg, it was no longer able to support its excessive weight—it lost its balance. I immediately moved to finish it off, but I quickly came to a stop.

“Haaaah!”

Allucia let out a battle cry as the chimera’s head came careening toward the ground. The beast never had any means of dealing with her speed to begin with. She put everything she had behind a thrust, piercing the chimera’s throat as an expression of shock remained plastered on its face.

Having delivered certain death, Allucia’s face showed clear delight in victory, but that was quickly replaced by despondency. That last attack had likely ruined her sword. The throat was a soft spot on pretty much any creature, but that wasn’t the case all the way through. Due to the length of a sword, it was entirely possible to reach a creature’s spine, and no matter how perfect Allucia’s control of her sword was, nothing could be done after slamming it into such a hard, bony surface. Oddly enough, this was much like when Surena’s broadswords had slashed my old blade to bits, even if the situation itself was somewhat different.

“Hah!”

“Hsss...!”

At pretty much the same time, Rose finished the snake at the rear. She’d taken advantage of the opening created by the main body dying and had severed the tail in one strike—much like she had with the other chimera. I was glad to see her skills hadn’t deteriorated since leaving the Holy Order.

“Haaah...” Allucia sighed.

“This is your sword’s resting place,” I told her. “You protected the people of Dilmahakha. A sword could ask for no better grave.”

“Yes... You’re right.”

She was clearly depressed. I’d told her to wield her weapon with all her might, so I had to take responsibility. In all likelihood, she hadn’t intended to lose her sword here. That was why she’d chosen to finish it with a thrust. However, the chimera’s toughness had betrayed her expectations, and her blade had lost its luster. This was

her sword's grave in that sense as well. Losing mine had been quite the shock too, so I couldn't tell her not to worry about it.

At that moment, I remembered that the battle wasn't over just yet...

"Oh yeah, there's still one more...!"

Hanoy and Prim had gone to face the chimera on the right flank, but there was still the chimera which had diverted to the left flank for some unknown reason. It'd probably found some new prey in that direction. Given its toughness and destructive strength, there were very few people who could hold it back—it was best to go support them as soon as possible. Withstanding even the *glare* from these chimeras was a tough ask for an experienced warrior, let alone a normal civilian.

Just as we were about to get moving, several riders on horseback approached from the direction of the chimera on the left.

"Are you all unharmed? We've dealt with the monster over there. How are things— Wait, Master?!"

One horse that was clearly in a class of its own was spurred ahead of the others. Its rider had red hair and wielded two broadswords—these traits were practically her trademarks. She was an ace among aces, recognized by the adventurer's guild as one of its highest-ranking members.

"Surena...?"

Twin Dragonblade Surena Lysandra was now before us at the head of a group of adventurers.



"Lysandra...?"

Allucia made a weird noise as she spoke Surena's name. She was giving her a "What the hell are you doing here?" kinda look. I wanted to ask the same question. I had no idea why adventurers were here in force, participating in this battle.

"Citrus, and...I haven't seen you before. You're not of the Holy Order either... A mercenary? Well, whatever. I'm glad you're all safe."

Surena brought her horse to a stop and dismounted, verifying the position. A top-ranking adventurer wasn't going to misread the situation. We'd won, and the chimera had lost.

"Surena, what are you doing here?" I asked once she was on her feet.

We were getting unexpected reinforcements one after the other. This had ultimately saved us, but I wanted someone to explain what was going on.

"To get right to the point, we were commissioned to be here," she answered. "There are all sorts of complicated details, though..."

"I-I see."

In all likelihood, she wasn't allowed to make those details public. I could infer that much from her expression. It was kind of similar to Hanoy's circumstances—his mercenaries had been hired by someone to come to Sphenedyardvania, but he was keeping everything about his employer to himself. That was how his contract worked.

The same probably went for the adventurers. They'd accepted a job and were contractually obligated not to reveal the details. I *really* wanted to know what was going on, but I was reluctant to try to force it out of anyone who was implying they couldn't talk about it.

"I'm not entirely convinced...but I understand," I conceded. "Did you lure out the chimera on the left flank?"

"Yes. We judged it would be unwise to face multiple at once."

"Very smart."

"Thank you!"

Her decision-making skills were definitely top-notch. Even *she* would be hard-pressed to face more than one of those things at a time—and this was with the other adventurers backing her up. I wasn't conceited enough to think I could do it either. Lucy could

probably pull it off, though.

"That just leaves one more..." I muttered.

I'd killed one, Allucia had finished the second, and Surena and the adventurers had taken care of the third. That meant only Hanoy and Prim's remained. Prim's abilities were completely unknown, but even without her, a warrior of Hanoy's level was liable to win. It would be even easier for him with the support of a wizard. That was on the assumption they weren't facing reinforcements, though.

"Let's go check on them," I suggested. "I doubt they'll lose, but just to be safe."

"Agreed," Allucia said. "We need to take stock of the situation for ourselves."

This only made sense. After all, they say "seeing is believing," and that was doubly important on the battlefield.

Allucia stared longingly at the tip of her ruined longsword for a little while, then sheathed it. Just from what I could see, it was beyond repair. The question was, should she keep the hilt and completely remake the blade? Or would it be better to forge an entirely new sword? Either way, she could think about it after everything was over. And anyway, my wallet was pretty thick these days—even if I wasn't as wealthy as Surena or Allucia.

I turned to address Surena. "There's one more chimera. I'm sure you saw it. We're heading that way—what about you?"

"We'll accompany you, of course."

With me, Allucia, Surena, and Rose, I honestly doubted it was possible to lose. The adventurers accompanying Surena had to be pretty skilled too, even if they weren't at her level. This whole incident was likely to be resolved quickly, barring some other hidden scheme.

"We need to go get our horses," I said. "They're a ways away."

"Right. We'll link up on-site," Surena confirmed.

Rose, Allucia, and I had come here on horseback, but we'd each hitched them in different places. Going to get each horse in a group would be a waste of time. It was only logical for us to split up temporarily.

"We'll see you there, then. Let's go!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Surena and the adventurers already had their horses, so they spurred them ahead to the last chimera. There were four adventurers with her. I caught a glimpse of their plates as they went by—most of them were platinum rank. *They're more than enough of a threat on the battlefield...*

"I'll see you shortly, Master."

"Yeah, see you there."

I parted ways with Allucia and headed to get my horse with Rose. In a sense, this was our last chance to talk without worrying about anyone overhearing us. So, I decided to ask what had been bothering me.

"Rose, you said the mastermind behind this attack is the pope, yeah?"

"It's true," she replied immediately. "The Holy Order is currently deploying its forces to churches all over. It seems they haven't found anything yet."

"I see..."

I didn't doubt her. Spoiling the prince's wedding and unleashing monsters into the city sounded like it couldn't possibly be the work of a religion's leader, but I had no evidence to refute her claim.

"How did you get this information?" I asked.

It definitely seemed like far more than a mercenary could ever find out—I was sure she had someone on the inside. I couldn't help but wonder about the details.

"I'm sorry, but...I can't say," she answered.

"I see... Got it."

I'd pretty much expected this. If she could've, she would've given everyone a little more detail. There was no way mere rumors on the wind would've been enough to spur her into action. Besides, even though she'd been tricked into it, she'd been an active part of the papists' plans. She had to know how valuable information security was. This only added to the credibility of her claims.

"Oh, there it is."

"Brrrrr!"

After running for a while, I found my horse. Though it was pretty

worked up from the sounds of the fighting, it didn't appear to be wounded. I was sorry to ask for more when it was mentally taxed like this, but I needed one last burst of horsepower.

"Hup."

I took the reins and straddled the horse in one leap. It resisted somewhat, but not enough that it was out of control. I didn't possess the technique to handle a completely wild horse.

"Then let us be off, Master."

"Yeah."

Surprisingly, Rose's horse wasn't too far away from mine. She'd come to help with my chimera, so she must've followed the same route as me. It was nice that this had saved us the effort of going to find her mount.

"Hah!"

I spurred my horse on toward our destination. The last chimera was pretty far away, so honestly, I didn't know whether I could figure out the right path to get there. I just steered my horse in that general direction for now.

If the battle was still ongoing, we would be able to hear it as we got closer. And if it was already over, there would be some landmarks to go by—such an enormous monster rampaging about would've left plenty of destruction in its wake.

As I straddled my horse, my thoughts drifted. What would be Sphenedyardvania's fate once this incident was over? Time and energy would have to be spent on restoring Dilmahakha. It was meaningless to rule over a dead land. But the main problem would come afterward—if the pope truly was behind all this, the Church of Sphene wouldn't be able to continue as they were. The same went for the entire nation of Sphenedyardvania, since they'd chosen the Church of Sphene as their state religion.

In all likelihood, we were standing at the center of a major turning point in this nation's history. Not that the details surrounding this turning point were particularly welcome. I could only pray that our two nations could work together to solve these issues. *That makes it sound like this has nothing to do with me. It doesn't, after all. I'll help if asked, though.*

However, those busy days would only come after we settled things here—we had to keep this nation from falling into ruin. If my sword was capable of clearing the way, I would happily wield it to that end.

"Looks like it's that way..."

I turned off the needlessly wide main thoroughfare and onto one of Dilmahakha's side streets. Riding toward the chimera at this angle would get us there the fastest. Probably.

It turned out that I was right. I saw traces of destruction ahead of me—the chimera had definitely been this way. I couldn't hear any fighting, so maybe it'd already been defeated. Even without me, Hanoy, Prim, Surena, and Allucia could've brought it to a quick end. There wasn't really a need to wait for me and Rose to arrive.

I followed the trail of destruction toward the chimera. I arrived not at a major street or a place with any big structures like a church, but at a wide-open space that seemed to be used for agriculture. It reminded me of Baltrain's southern district, though it was on a much smaller scale. Coincidentally, the southern district had also ended up being the site of the royal assassination attempt. *Man, for once, I want to take in the sight of wheat swaying in the wind when things are nice and peaceful.*

"Wha?!"

Deep inside the vast agricultural expanse, I saw the chimera stretched out on the ground. That would've been fine on its own. It signified our victory, after all.

"Tch!"

But Hanoy—*that* leader of the Verdapis Mercenary Company—was on his knees. I couldn't see the pink-haired wizard. Had she already withdrawn? Or had she collapsed somewhere in these fields? I felt a bad premonition, and an unpleasant sweat ran down my spine.

Had Hanoy taken a hit? I'd fought him one-on-one before. I didn't believe he could possibly have lost against this chimera, even if he'd faced it alone. He wasn't the type to let down his guard either. So why was he on his knees? It seemed to me like the figure standing some distance away from him might be responsible.

"Hm? Reinforcements? Sounds like a lot of work... Oh well. I

suppose it's best to simply pluck any troublesome sprouts at their roots."

To be perfectly honest, the figure in the distance—a man—looked nothing like a fighter. His deep wrinkles told of his age. Though he wasn't quite as old as the former vice principal at the magic institute, he was far older than me.

To put it simply, everything from his mannerisms to the atmosphere around him strongly suggested that he couldn't fight. That was how much of a civilian this man appeared to be—except for the stately robes he wore. Robes that belonged to the Church of Sphene.

"Pope...Morris..." Rose muttered.

"You're... Aah, you put in quite a bit of work last time, didn't you? I heard that, if not for you, we would've only needed one more push. I suppose this must be fate."

The man spoke as if he were just having an everyday conversation. And despite the situation, he was actually smiling. He was so sincere and earnest that something inside of him was just broken as a human.

I felt tension and unease running sharply through every inch of my body. It was an entirely different sensation from how I felt when facing a formidable swordsman.

"Master!"

Right then, Surena and the adventurers arrived. One beat later, Allucia also came rushing in on her horse.

"Forgive me," Surena said as she dismounted. "There weren't many roads we could use on horseback. It delayed us."

"Don't worry about it," I told her, keeping my eyes fixed on Pope Morris.

Something was really odd about this. I understood that an enemy couldn't be judged entirely by their looks. Still, even taking that into consideration, this was throwing me off. There was absolutely nothing about this man that gave off the impression that he could fight. If someone had told me that he was no more than a devout priest in the service of Sphene, I would've been compelled to believe them. Only the fact that Hanoy was down on his knees refuted such

a claim.

"Hmm, it's just one after another. A traitor...? No, there must've been some sort of leak."

Pope Morris continued muttering to himself. I seriously couldn't see him as a fighter on a battlefield. He looked like an old man gazing at the fields, casually wondering what to do that day. However, both Hanoy's state and Rose's strained expression told me otherwise. If he really was just as he appeared—a civilian who could easily be subdued by force—things would have never ended up this way.

"I thought the chimeras would end things. Perhaps four wasn't enough? But there wasn't any time left... Dear me, things never go as planned."

He just kept on muttering. I understood speaking aloud to get his thoughts in order and process the current situation, but doing it so casually seemed deeply wrong.

Allucia took a step forward, unable to listen to him any longer.

"Pope Morris Pasyushka, you're under arrest on suspicion of being the mastermind behind this chaos."

She hadn't gotten orders from the higher-ups to arrest him or anything. Still, there was enough circumstantial evidence to take him in. Even going only by what he'd just said, he'd unleashed these chimeras, so we couldn't let him get away.

"Under arrest?" repeated Pope Morris. "That would be problematic. I have no intention of running away, but I can't afford to be restrained either."

Considering everyone present, there was no way we could lose. Even if I took myself out of the equation, Allucia, Rose, Surena, and the four adventurers weren't amateurs. Platinum ranks were all first-class fighters. My one concern was the fact that Hanoy hadn't been able to restrain the pope despite being such a force of nature on his own.

"Careful...!" Hanoy shouted. "That guy's using some weird—"

But before he could finish his warning, two of the hot-blooded platinum ranks charged in with a battle cry.

"Raaaaah!"

“Oh dear,” said the pope. “Having to kill everyone here really is such a loss for humanity.”

“Gah?!”

The next instant, the two adventurers were blown back. I understood that the pope must have done something. It was impossible for platinum rank adventurers to mess up and self-destruct somehow. However, I had no idea what exactly he’d done. I hadn’t taken my eyes off him the whole time, but I hadn’t *seen* what he’d done. I’d spent a relatively long time living a life of battle, but this was a first for me.

“Allucia, did you see anything?” I asked.

“No... Not at all.”

Even the knight commander’s outstanding eyes hadn’t spotted what he’d done. It was entirely possible that something had coincidentally happened just as the adventurers had reached the pope. With multiple people in such close proximity, blind spots were inevitable. However, I had scruples about charging in defenselessly with such optimistic thoughts in mind.

“I suppose once the miracle of resurrection is achieved...this will be no more than a noble sacrifice.”

The pope continued muttering to himself without so much as glancing at the fallen men. These adventurers groaned while clutching their stomachs. They weren’t bleeding, so they had to have taken some kind of crushing blow. But how? The pope didn’t seem to be wielding any kind of weapon. And if he’d had some sort of concealed knife, it would’ve left lacerations.

If I had to guess, it looked like he’d punched them. But, again, how? He hadn’t taken any kind of martial stance, and swinging your arms around while standing perfectly upright didn’t exactly produce much force.

Suddenly, an idea came to me.

“Reinforcement magic!” I exclaimed. I’d seen this phenomenon before.

“Hm? No,” the pope replied, as if I were completely off the mark. “Call it a miracle bestowed upon us by Sphene.”

This was what the knights had used against me during Bishop

Reveos's arrest. By forcefully amplifying his strength using mana, he could certainly have delivered a significant impact, even from a perfectly upright stance. It also made sense for the pope to have a deep understanding of healing and reinforcement magic—after all, those things were lauded as miracles by the Church of Sphene.

But even taking all that into consideration, his power was on an entirely different level from what I'd seen before. Reinforcement magic wasn't supposed to be so strong that an old man with arms like withered branches could send two experienced combatants flying back. The magic I'd seen before hadn't been capable of such feats.

"Surena, Allucia, with me," I said, drawing my brilliant sword.

"Understood."

I couldn't hold back. If I did, I would be the next one sent flying backward. If we didn't challenge him with the intent to kill, we would surely all end up lying in the dirt.

Matching me, Allucia, Surena, and Rose all held their swords before them. It was four on one. Normally, we would never lose, but against Pope Morris, victory seemed uncertain. It felt like we were walking on thin ice. Even so, if we could overcome that danger, we would surely win.

"Hah!"

I kicked off the ground with determination. An instant later, I could hear the three behind me do the same.

"Hm. I don't understand much about swordsmanship, but it seems to me that you all must be quite skilled."

I started with a low sweep. Pope Morris calculated the range perfectly and took half a step back to avoid it. But that was fine. Nobody was under the impression that my first strike would decide things.

"Haaaah!"

"Hyuh!"

Surena and Rose swung their swords next. Surena approached with crossing slashes from the left, while Rose attacked with a thrust from the right. It was actually pretty difficult for a human to take one action immediately after another. In this case, the pope

should've had a hard time dodging an attack right after avoiding an earlier strike. This was especially the case against two specialists working in tandem who boasted explosive speed and strength.

"Oh dear. This is rather harsh on these old bones."

However, without even twitching his brow, the pope twisted his body and dodged Surena and Rose's coordinated attacks.

That kind of movement should've been impossible. It didn't surpass the restrictions of human mobility or anything, but twisting like that would make all the muscles in your body scream. Did mastering reinforcement magic truly allow for such outlandish feats?

"Haaah!"

Though we were bewildered by the pope's baffling movements, our assault wasn't over. Allucia made full use of her speed to circle around him and deliver a diagonal slash to finish him off. He was off-balance. Allucia's strike couldn't possibly miss. No matter how outlandish his movements were, there were things humans were simply incapable of. The tip of Allucia's longsword was broken, but the blade itself was fine. As long as she struck closer to the base, it was plenty sharp enough to cut. She wasn't one to mess that up in a dire situation like this.

"Hup."

"Guh...?!"

Regardless, Pope Morris didn't accept such an outcome. He twisted his body even more and delivered a kick that no normal human could have pulled off from that posture and angle.

He sent Allucia careening through the air.

"Gah!"

Even if she'd expected him to dodge everything up to that point, she hadn't foreseen the possibility of taking a counterattack in the middle of such a perfectly coordinated strike. The impact to her abdomen sent her tumbling, leaving her sprawled across the ground and writhing in agony.

"Citrus...! You bastard!"

"You were all intent on killing me. I only responded in kind. Is it really something to get so angry over?"

Nobody here had expected Allucia to be blown back like that.

Surena recovered from the shock the fastest, pushing Pope Morris back with continuous slashes that lived up to her name as the Twin Dragonblade—or, at least, it *looked* like she was pushing him back.

Something's wrong... I mean, I get that he's amplifying his strength with magic, but still...

The pope looked old enough to be called a senior citizen, but he was displaying a strength that far surpassed his physique. I could understand that being a boon of magic. It also explained his ability to shift from dodging to attacking while in an unreasonable posture.

However, there had to be a limit. It was possible that he was nowhere near that limit yet, but no matter how well he could move his body, it was hard to believe he could actually dodge *all* of Surena's blindingly fast attacks. There had to be a trick to it. After all, if simple strength decided the outcome of a battle, I would lose to Henblitz every time.

Aah, I get it... So that's *what's going on.*

"Surena! Back off for now!" I shouted.

"Hm?! Okay!"

Surena's surging wave of attacks wasn't a bad strategy, but her blades were unlikely to find their mark. Reinforcement magic made a battle of attrition a poor plan. So, I instructed Surena to stop. The important question was how Pope Morris was able to continue dodging every attack. It was best to share what information I had.

"His eyes," I said. "The pope is using magic to amplify his sight...and probably his brain."

"Hmm? You noticed?" Pope Morris asked. "How very observant. But it's not magic. It's a miracle. My goodness, it's like talking to students who never learn."

Who'd decided that reinforcement magic could only be used to strengthen your muscles? We'd simply been under that impression. Turns out, he was also using magic to amplify his kinetic vision, his reflexes, and even his ability to process information. To put it bluntly, he was outright cheating.

"That makes sense," Surena said, lining up next to me again. "He moves like a complete amateur, but I still can't hit him."

"He's forcing his body to comply," I explained. "Normally, you

can’t keep that up for very long...but I doubt we can rely on that fact.”

Allucia...is still conscious. She’s not rejoining the fight anytime soon, though. Due to her slender figure and beautiful looks, it was easy to forget that she was the commander of the kingdom’s strongest knights—she was far tougher than most people. Even so, a single kick had taken her out. I had no intention of finding out for myself how much force was behind such an impact. Hanoy had probably been defeated in the same way. Prim was likely unconscious due to a similar blow. At worst, she was already dead.

Still, no matter how destructive an attack was, it was meaningless if it didn’t hit. It also didn’t matter how tenacious one’s body was—continuously flailing around would lead to deterioration.

“We still have a chance...” I muttered. “White Maiden.”

I addressed the one and only woman who could actualize my plan. Pope Morris’s senses and kinetic vision were currently amplified to a ridiculous degree. No matter the master, it was practically impossible to land a hit against an opponent like that. After all, he’d dodged Allucia’s attack, and there was nobody who could wield a sword faster than her.

That left us with the option of a human-wave attack combined with projectiles, but we didn’t have the personnel or weapons to pull that off—we’d come here under the assumption that we would only be facing mindless monsters. Pope Morris would get away before we could prepare everything.

“And that’s it—you can pull it off, yeah?”

I shared my plan with Surena and Rose. We were lucky the pope wasn’t going on the offensive. Was this because he didn’t know how to do anything but react? Or did he simply have *that* much composure?

Surena and Rose both agreed to my plan. We didn’t have time to rehearse things, so we would have to pull it off mid-battle. Still, it was better than nothing—continuing the fight as we had been would’ve gotten us nowhere.

“Let’s go!” I shouted.

“Right!”

Surena and I launched ourselves at the pope. My plan wasn't going to accomplish anything unless we kept him stationary, so we had to press the offensive.

"God imposes trials upon us... That goes both for me and for you."

The pope wove his way through my attacks, offering me another glimpse of his incomprehensible movements. In a normal fight, I was capable of predicting my opponent's moves to a certain extent. However, that ability wasn't much help in this case. He moved counter to my expectations, so my reactions were half a beat late.

"How splendid. I'm an amateur when it comes to fighting, but even *I* can tell it's a bad idea to carelessly counterattack."

"Ugh...!"

Surena's twin swords slashed nothing but air, followed by my single blade doing the same, and then back to hers. Even though Lono Ambrosia hadn't possessed any physical substance, I actually found the pope to be a more troublesome opponent. He was human, but despite tracing all the correct trajectories with my sword, I couldn't hit him. He was messing with my brain in an entirely different way from Lono Ambrosia.

While Surena and I fought, Rose steadily closed in, but she didn't attack. She had the most important role to fulfill.

Surena's blades cleaved the empty air for the umpteenth time. I twisted my body and delivered a grandiose upper slash.

"Hmph!"

"Ooh, here? I'm finally starting to see it."

I'd put plenty of force behind my attack, but it'd left me quite open. With his mind and sight amplified to such an extent, Pope Morris could easily see this. His eerie eyes rolled toward me and spotted the opening.

"Hah!"

"Oh?"

The pope unleashed an unbelievably sharp punch, but it didn't reach me. Instead, his fist collided with Rose's shield as she forced her way between us. A heavy thud resounded in the air—it was hard to imagine that sound as the product of skin striking metal.

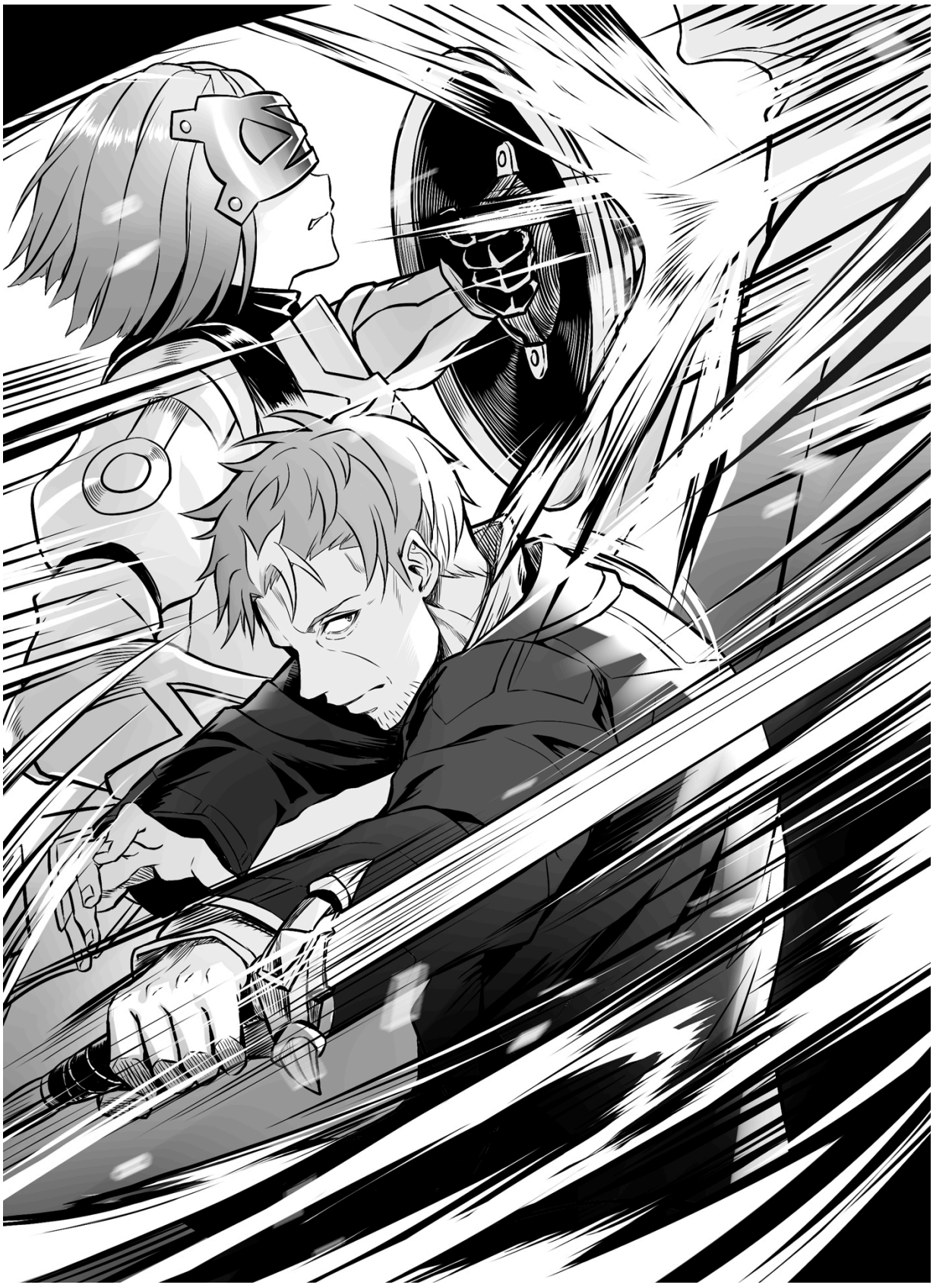
This wasn’t enough to render the pope motionless, of course. We’d only stopped a single punch. However, that wasn’t the only thing Rose was blocking with her kite shield. For a single instant, she’d successfully blocked his *sight.*

Rose, the pope, and I were in close proximity. With her now between us, I now had plenty of space to swing my sword around, though I didn’t have the time to brandish it and gather my strength. I didn’t need to do any of that, though—my blade simply had to reach Pope Morris’s body.

Holding my brilliant sword in a reverse grip, I used the blind spot created by Rose’s kite shield to stab my blade deep into the pope’s abdomen.

“I see... No matter how good my sight, it’s meaningless if my vision is blocked.”

“That’s right. I’m glad you’re an amateur at this.”



"Hmph!"

I pulled my sword out, quickly raised it above my head, then brought it down through the pope's shoulder, pinning him in place. If I hadn't gone that far, it was possible he would've run away. I had no idea how effective healing magic actually was, but since Pope Morris was a high-level practitioner, it wouldn't be strange for him to instantly recover from a severe injury. It was best to render him physically incapable of moving.

It turned out Pope Morris wasn't invincible. The initial injury had slowed his movements just enough, allowing me to expose an opening and deal the final blow.

"What an amazing sword..." murmured the pope. "Not even *my* strength can break it."

"Isn't it?" I asked. "An excellent smith poured his soul into making it."

"I see. There are times when powerful emotions can bring about great power. That goes for both a blacksmith and the faithful."

The pope gripped the blade lodged in his left shoulder with his opposite hand, but it didn't so much as budge. I was keeping it in place with all my strength, but the sword itself was a masterwork for withstanding such forces.

"Hak..." Allucia coughed and then spoke for the first time since she'd taken that hit. "Mas...ter..."

"Don't push yourself," I said. "No one will blame you for getting a little more rest."

Allucia staggered toward us anyway, but judging by her complexion, she was still heavily affected by the damage. We'd successfully captured the pope, so I wanted her to focus on recovering.

Now that I had time to think about it, a foreigner skewering the Church of Sphene's pope made for an outrageous scene. And since *I* was the one responsible for this act of brutality, I was glad we didn't have a crowd of spectators.

"This is quite problematic. It seems I've lost. Hmm, things really never go as planned."

Pope Morris continued muttering indifferently, as if the lacerations

to his shoulder and abdomen were no big deal. I really couldn't figure this man out. He was more mysterious than anyone I'd ever met, even accounting for the fact that we'd barely spoken. I had absolutely no idea what was going on in his mind.

"Why did you do this?" I asked him.

It was the most basic of questions, and the only one I could think of. I didn't really even want a clear answer—no matter how logical he tried to make it seem, there was no way I could understand the thoughts of a person who'd committed such a heinous act. Still, as someone who'd been thrown into this maelstrom, I had to ask.

"Why? Why, you ask? I can only say that it was God's will."

The pope didn't seem to have given it any thought. I had no idea what the Church of Sphene taught or what kind of god Sphene was. But had anything gone wrong, this incident would've ended in a massacre. I wanted nothing to do with a god who wished for that. Could I think this way because I wasn't a believer?

"Was it God's will to throw so many of the faithful into this chaos?" I argued. "To murder them?"

"You have things backward," the pope stated bluntly. "First, God exists. Then, the faithful gather. God or the people—it is clear which is more important. Myself included, naturally."

I wasn't convinced at all, but I had a feeling any further questions would be pointless. His thoughts were simply too far out there. This went beyond simply being eccentric. Despite being a fellow human, he seemed like an entirely different life-form. And, to be quite frank, he *wasn't* human. This was the first time I'd been able to communicate with someone while simultaneously being completely incapable of engaging in a conversation.

"I can't understand that," I spat.

"There's no need for you to," the pope said. "Only a scant few *need* understand. Aah, I don't mean to insult you or anything. It's simply a matter of what's more important."

That didn't validate his actions at all. It just didn't make sense. Still, with this, I was finally getting a grasp of what he was saying.

In short, Pope Morris didn't see all life as equal. This wasn't incredibly unusual—after all, I valued those who were close to me

more than the lives of strangers. However, to the pope, God was more important than all else. Those who truly understood God's will came second, and everyone else was equally unimportant. That even applied to him and the members of royalty.

"And what exactly is Sphene's will?" I asked. "What could God possibly want that would make you go this far?"

"The miracle of resurrection," Pope Morris answered. "As long as it is accomplished, the world will change. The innocent who have vanished into the darkness of history, our brethren from the past, and even your loved ones—all will find salvation."

This I could also understand...to an extent. If the miracle of resurrection could truly be actualized, there was no mistaking how blessed the world would become. It was only natural to want to be able to talk to those who'd lost their lives meaninglessly. Under different circumstances, the willingness to sacrifice anything to reach that goal could be seen as noble.

However, while his self-sacrifice sounded nice on paper, he was researching taboos. I had no intention of applying common sense to him at this point, but his way of seeing the world was just *so* far from the norm.

"You forced these sacrifices on others for a legend that might never come true?"

"It's not a matter of might or might not," he replied. "It *will* come true. Such is faith."

This was meaningless. It was impossible to get Pope Morris to feel any guilt over his actions. Well, he was a man who'd ascended to the very top of an entire religion. It was presumptuous of me to think I could get him to change his ways. He'd sacrificed himself for his ideologies, and he was likely fully aware that the world saw his acts as serious crimes.

"Now then, is that all you wanted to ask?"

"Yeah..."

Before I knew it, his shoulder was already healed. He couldn't do anything about my sword still being lodged in his flesh, but he was definitely a master of healing magic. He'd completely recovered from such injuries in just a matter of seconds. If left alone, he would've

definitely been able to escape—he might've even planned a counterattack.

"Hmm. My own will remains unfulfilled, but I suppose this is fate. Come now. Kill me."

"Huh?"

My thoughts froze for an instant. Flustered, I focused on the pope's expression. He didn't seem to have fallen into despair or anything. From beginning to end, his expression and complexion had remained completely calm. Even if this wasn't the outcome he'd wished for, he clearly thought that this was all Sphene's will.

"I believe you have a duty to atone for your sins," I told him.

"I don't. I haven't committed any sins. Aah, I'm well aware these are serious crimes by *your* standards. However, my heart is entirely devoted to my faith. Going by that creed, I will never admit to having committed any sins."

Capturing a criminal meant having him admit to his crimes in public, then forcing him to rehabilitate and repent for what he'd done. However, Pope Morris didn't recognize his own sins. We hadn't talked for long, but I was sure it would be impossible to change his mind. I wouldn't be the one to judge him, but the prospect of rehabilitation seemed hopeless to me.

As I stood in complete silence, Rose suddenly raised her voice.

"You..."

The pope glanced at her. "Hm?"

"You say that the lives, history, and culture built by the innocent are all worthless in the face of faith, yes?"

"Not at all. Such things are to be valued. However, all are secondary to faith."

"I see..."

I wondered what kind of expression Rose was making. Her mask was small and light, but it served as a firm wall hiding everything behind it.

"Goodbye, Morris Pasyushka."

"Yes, goodbye. Till we meet again."

With that brief farewell, her sword pierced the pope right between his eyes.

"Ro—?!"

I almost shouted her name. Surena, Allucia, and the platinum rank adventurers had all been unable to stop her. My eyes had caught her blade coming up, but my hands had been entirely focused on keeping my sword in Pope Morris's shoulder. I hadn't been able to move that quickly—even though I'd been the only one in a position to stop her.

"Pope Morris Pasyushka sacrificed himself for his faith. That's the answer to your questions."

Rose's voice was unwavering. It was as if it had been her duty to end his life with her own hands. I found myself incapable of just nodding along as I normally would've. No matter the circumstances, the fact that she'd killed the pope would follow her for the rest of her life. Even if she'd done so for the sake of her country and people, it didn't wipe away the blood staining her hands.

Even to the end, the pope's calm expression remained unchanged. Even his own life and death seemed to be none of his concern—like he'd given in entirely to the tides of fate. To the very end, I had no idea what had driven him so far.

One day, I too would meet my end. Would I be able to make that same expression when the time came? He looked so at peace that I couldn't help but imagine such a future.

◇

A few hours after defeating the chimeras and the battle with Pope Morris, we returned to the palace. We carried the wounded, as well as the pope's body, and requested an audience with Prince Glenn, Princess Salacia, Gatoga, and the knights of the Holy Order.

When we explained the situation to the knights at the gate, they granted us an audience with the prince. And after telling him everything that had happened in Dilmahakha, he thanked us for our hard work—his voice was flooded with emotion.

"I see... Well done, all of you."

He wasn't a fighter, but he could still guess what had happened. It would have been meaningless to vent at us about the outcome.

"Pope Morris was formidable... We weren't able to capture him alive. I truly must apologize."

The prince shook his head. "No, this is more than enough. The situation has been resolved. We're not in a position to ask for luxuries."

I was hesitant to mention that Rose had gone out of her way to kill the pope after he'd been successfully restrained. Revealing that was liable to cause all sorts of problems. I wondered *who* would bear the stigma of killing him. His death clearly hadn't been an accident—his injuries were enough to indicate that there had been purposeful intent behind his murder. Even if we didn't say who exactly had killed him, the death of a huge public figure would have to be announced to the people. But how should they do that? It was an agonizing conundrum for all of this country's politicians.

"Each of you will be rewarded for your distinguished service," said Prince Glenn. "You've put in more than enough work to deserve that."

"You honor us with such praise."

A reward... Normally, that sounded nice. But this time, it left an awfully bad taste in my mouth. I couldn't honestly rejoice over it. Regardless, I had no choice but to accept. Things were different from when I'd turned down a reward from the adventurer's guild. Refusing a reward from the leaders of a nation would make me all sorts of enemies.

"A reward?" Hanoy said. "Make mine cash. We don't need no titles or honor."

"Of course," Prince Glenn agreed, letting his impolite tone slide. "We'll make arrangements to match each of your wishes."

"Ha ha! It's nice when a prince really *gets* it!"

I recalled Prince Glenn having quite the innocent countenance back in Baltrain. He'd grown a lot in such a short time. The circumstances around him had forced him to. His emotional maturity and growth would normally have been something worth celebrating, but it was hard to find any joy in this situation.

After the battle with the pope, we'd spent some time treating the wounded. That was when we'd discovered that Hanoy had suffered

an accumulation of damage from multiple strikes—each as strong as the one that had taken out Allucia. Prim had also been knocked out by a single hit. Hanoy's toughness was truly astounding. I was pretty confident a single punch from the pope would've been enough to take me completely out of the fight.

I had pride in my sword technique, and I could certainly put up a serious fight even against tough swordsmen. However, human endurance was more of an innate talent—it wasn't something that could be acquired through training. Just as individual bodies varied, an individual's pain tolerance was unique, though there were some levels of pain that nobody could withstand.

Fortunately, the hit Allucia had taken hadn't broken any bones or caused any internal bleeding—she was back to normal again. The fact that she'd taken a hit at all had wounded her pride, though. Her expression had remained gloomy for the entire trip back to the palace. Or perhaps losing the longsword she'd favored for so many years had affected her usual luster. *I* was primarily responsible for that, so I had to make up for it.

"Allow me to thank you once more," the prince said. "Rest your bodies for the next day or two. If you require an inn, we shall make the necessary arrangements."

"Oh, guess I'll take you up on that," Hanoy replied. "I don't need rooms for everyone. Just enough for me, Prim, and Kuriu."

"Very well."

Even though he wasn't demanding rooms for *all* of his mercenaries, he had some serious guts to latch on to the offer without even giving it a second thought. Were I in his position, I doubted I could've done the same. Perhaps I had something to learn from his nerves of steel.

Throughout this incident, the mercenaries had remained consistent in their behavior. They had never once abased themselves before anyone. Even though they'd played a major role in solving things, they could have had their rewards revoked for such insolence. Execution could even have been a consideration. Regardless, they showed no fear when faced with such authority.

They probably had the confidence to strike back, even if they

were put on the wanted list. Or maybe it had something to do with their client. Either way, for better or worse, I'd gotten a good look at a mercenary's way of life today—not that these guys were necessarily representative of mercenaries as a whole.

"We'll take the information you've given us and use it to inform our future policy. This meeting is adjourned."

"Understood."

With our report over, Prince Glenn dismissed us. Knights accompanied him out of the audience chamber. I was surprised they'd managed to keep their cool all throughout Hanoy's display of overbearing behavior. Perhaps the prince had warned them ahead of time.

A couple of other knights escorted us respectfully out of the palace. Once in front of the gate, I let out a sigh.

"Haaah... Good work, everyone."

I still had no idea how much damage Sphenedyardvania had suffered. Everyone was desperately working to get everything back in order. But from what I'd heard, none of my personal acquaintances had suffered any major injuries. Henblitz and the other knights of the Liberion Order had successfully accomplished their mission; Thracias, Keifo, Addelat, and the rest of the delegation were safe too. Old Ibroy had shrewdly survived as well.

From that very limited perspective, this battle had ended in an overwhelming victory. It was only right to compliment everyone for a job well done.

"No matter the circumstances, it was an honor to be able to stand by your side once more, Master."

"Ha ha, you really saved us back there. Thanks, Surena."

It was probably better not to say anything about the aforementioned "circumstances." Everyone had their own motives for being here. The same went for Surena—or more specifically, for the adventurer's guild. Had she and the adventurers not been here, there was no telling what would've happened with that last chimera, so now wasn't the time to be questioning them about *why* exactly they'd come to Dilmahakha.

"What's your plan after this?" I asked.

"We'll be staying the night and leaving Dilmahakha tomorrow. I'll see you again in Baltrain, Master."

"That so? Be careful on your way back."

"Thank you—we will be."

As expected, she wasn't going to have the time to take it easy and do some sightseeing. A black rank adventurer was far busier than the likes of me.

"Citrus."

"What?"

Before leaving, Surena addressed Allucia. Those two had never really gotten along. Allucia's blunt response was the same as ever, but it lacked its usual fire.

"You lack training," Surena said. "But I suppose it's a good thing you're in good health."

Allucia blinked in confusion for a moment, then was back to her normal self. "Yes, I suppose so."

Surena was worried about Allucia in her own little way. Though they definitely weren't friends, I could still hear concern in her voice. Surena had also been the first to react to Allucia getting hit by Pope Morris. She didn't like Allucia, but she recognized her when necessary. Perhaps this was one reason she'd climbed all the way to becoming a black rank adventurer.

"Guess I'll link back up with my guys too," Hanoy said. "Later, old-timer. Here's hopin' we're enemies next time around."

"If that happens, I'll knock you down a peg for good next time."

"Ha ha ha! Lookin' forward to it!"

It seemed Hanoy was off to see to his mercenaries. Kuriu appeared to be perfectly fine—at a glance, at least. The wizard Prim had to be injured. There was no guarantee the other mercenaries in black were all okay either, and it was his job as the commander to check on them.

To be perfectly honest, I couldn't bring myself to *like* these guys. If we ever met again on the battlefield, I wanted to crush them completely. Still, Hanoy was a decent reference point for how one who stood above others should behave—in an entirely different way from Allucia. In that way, I'd learned something from my chance

meeting with him.

"Whew..."

With Surena and Hanoy gone, the only ones left were me, Allucia, and Rose. I had a bunch of questions for Rose, but since Allucia was here, I couldn't say anything carelessly.

Allucia broke the silence first and addressed Rose. "Um... Are you...?" A moment later, she shook her head. "No, never mind... Do you know a woman named Marblehart?"

There was an air of conviction in her voice, but the masked woman answered with silence, returning Allucia's shake of her head with one of her own.

"I see. Um, sorry for asking such a strange question." Allucia shrugged, acting as if it were no big deal.

She'd definitely wanted to ask if the White Maiden was Rose. However, she'd judged that there had to be a reason for Rose to wear a mask, take another name, and become a mercenary. She didn't press for answers. An awkward silence fell over us once more.

"Master, I'll return to the knights as well," Allucia finally said. She probably wasn't entirely convinced, but she decided to leave things there. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"R-Right. Make sure you get some proper rest."

"I will."

She had a lot of work to do after this, like gathering all the knights and preparing for our departure. I was basically just tagging along, so I was very grateful for all of her efforts.

Once Allucia was far enough away that she could no longer hear us, Rose spoke up. "Master, shall we walk a little?"

"Yeah, sure."

There was no point in just standing here in a daze, so I went along with her suggestion. Dilmahakha's townscape was beautiful. The destruction caused by the chimeras and Pope Morris hadn't reached the city center, but its usual liveliness had been replaced by an entirely different flurry of activity. This in itself was a graphic account of the battle that had just taken place.

Feeling that tension on my skin, Rose and I walked side by side down the city's main road with no particular destination in mind.

“Hee hee... It’s like the opposite of our time in Baltrain, don’t you think?” she remarked.

“Yeah... It is.”

Back when Rose had still been the lieutenant commander of the Holy Order, she’d come to Baltrain with the delegation from Sphenedyardvania. At the time, I’d taken a walk with her through town just like this. I’d technically been her guide, but I hadn’t really told her anything about the city. Much like now, we’d just walked around aimlessly. Rose hadn’t suggested this little stroll to show me around Dilmahakha.

After a while of walking in silence, I decided to speak up.

“Do you have any regrets?”

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting by asking such a question.

“I don’t...” Rose answered before correcting herself. “I... I suppose that would be a bit of a lie. Still, I believe this is the path I must take.”

“Is that so?”

After being manipulated by the papists’ schemes, she’d exposed Prince Glenn to danger. She’d then resigned from her post as lieutenant commander and had chosen to become a mercenary. Taking action while keeping her identity hidden, she’d ultimately killed Pope Morris with her own hands. It would be difficult for her to claim that she had no regrets about her choices. I hated myself a little for asking such a meaningless question.

“What’ll you do now?” I asked.

There was no turning back or stopping the hands of time. Reflecting on the past was good, but looking to the future was more important.

“The same as before,” she answered. “I will make certain that this country’s future is bright. I want to see it with my own eyes. My title is just different from before.”

“I see...”

Rose’s mask hid her expression, but judging by her tone and body language, she wasn’t depressed about her circumstances.

“However...” she added, smiling shyly.

“Hm?”

“Unlike before, I no longer want to die. In the past, I would’ve gladly thrown away my worthless life for a greater cause...”

“Is that so? That’s certainly a change for the better.”

She didn’t seem to be burdened by any of the self-deprecation she’d had when she’d fought against me in Baltrain. She no longer placed her own life on a scale frivolously, always content, no matter the outcome. This was a good thing. People tended to do their best when death was near, but they weren’t resilient enough to maintain their sanity when constantly betting on their lives. Rose’s mental state had finally returned to normal.

“I have to keep living so I can witness the future... That’s part of why I had a change of heart,” she said. “However, I also still haven’t repaid the debt I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything. Though I’m sure you’ll come to repay me anyway, huh?”

“Yup. Of course.”

During the assassination attempt in Baltrain, I’d confronted Rose using the swordsmanship I’d been taught and had taught others. I didn’t see that act as something that needed to be repaid. However, a debt of gratitude wasn’t something you could just unilaterally refuse.

I now had one more reason to stay alive—I couldn’t die until she repaid me. If I did, her mind would surely sink into an irrecoverable abyss.

This was a form of atonement for her. Looking at things in hindsight, I’d been the one to set her on this course. So, it was only right for me to take responsibility for it, even if only in the slightest way. No matter her circumstances, she was sure to shoulder many tremendous burdens—ones I couldn’t take on in her stead. I was sure she would be eternally remorseful. If she’d been capable of carelessly forgetting about it, she would never have wanted to see this nation’s future.

“Rose.”

“Yes?”

I stopped walking. The people around us were all in a rush. None spared us a glance as we remained still on the roadside.

"You've fulfilled your role," I told her. "The past can't be changed. However, the outcome you grasped today is a priceless medal you should wear proudly. I'll never forget it."

If she could never forgive herself, then *I* would forgive her. This might've seemed empty coming from an old man with no real authority who just happened to be a little good with a sword. But I understood what emotions she'd harbored and how much resolve it had taken for her to accomplish what she'd done today. It was honestly vexing that I could never tell anyone about it.

So, just for this one moment, I praised and forgave her. This wasn't out of self-interest; it wasn't an empty platitude either. These were my genuine feelings on the matter.

"Thank you very much."

I couldn't see her full expression because of her mask. Still, her lips were definitely smiling. If my words were all that she needed, I would speak them as many times as she wanted. This was my duty as her teacher. That was how I saw it, at least.

"By the way, Master..." Rose shuffled up to me.

"What is it?"

She now stood at an angle so that her face couldn't be seen from the main road. Reaching up, she slipped off her mask.

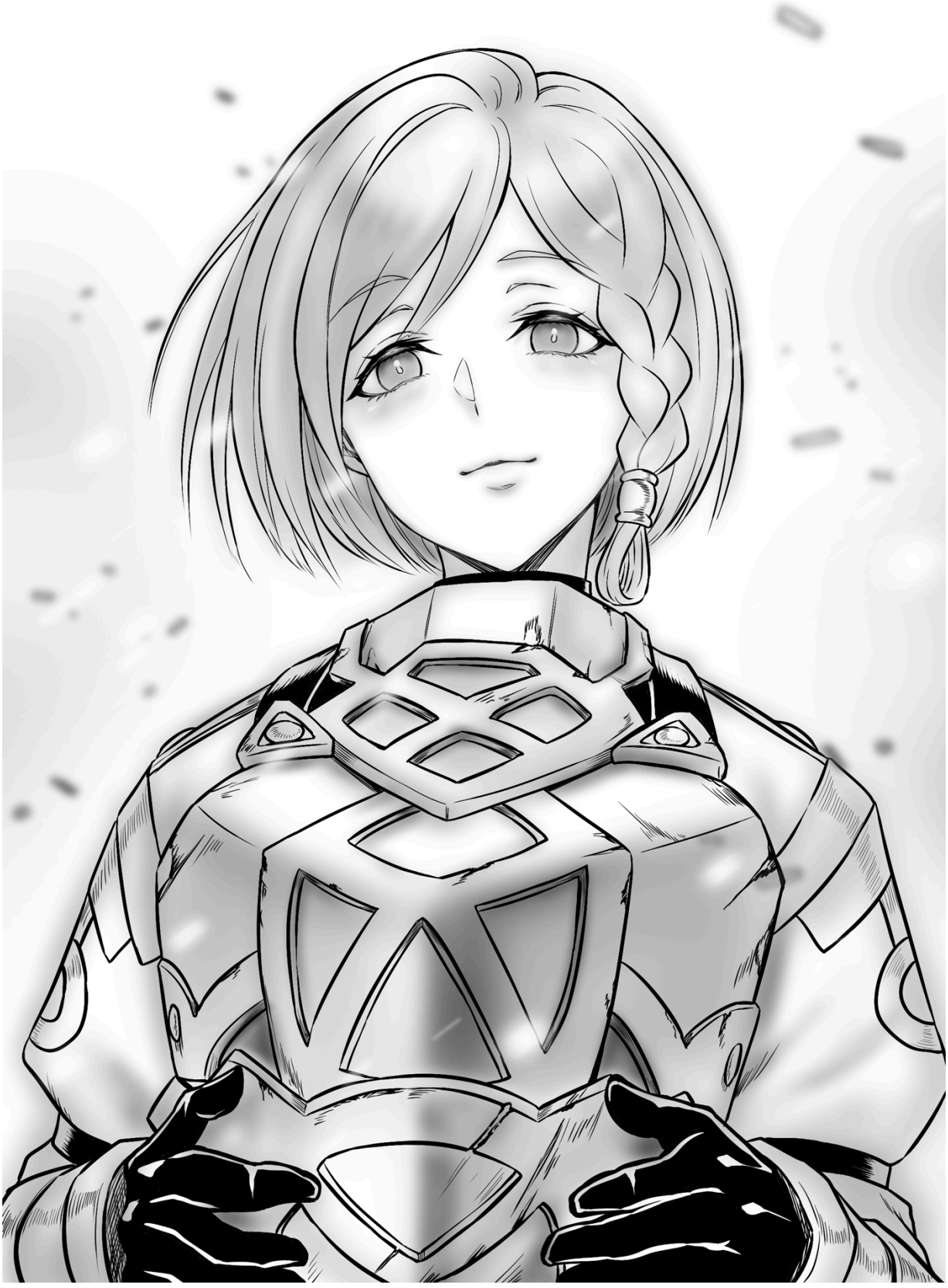
"If I ever end up on the streets with nowhere to go, will you pick me up?"

Aah, there it is. That's the Rose Marblehart I know. Just being able to see her eyes again had made this all worth it.

"This and that are different matters," I told her.

"Awww."

The sky was clear, but the cold wind was strong. Regardless, I felt a warm gust blow gently against my cheek. I was sure it wasn't just my imagination—this was an affectionate breeze conjured by the woman Rose Marblehart. That was what I believed.



Epilogue: An Old Country Bumpkin Makes a Promise

Our encounter with walking corpses, chimeras, and Pope Morris had come to an end. While the central figures of the nation worked hectically to get things back into order, Allucia invited me to a meal.

"Welcome. For two?"

"Yes. A table, if possible."

"Certainly."

We were still in Sphenedyardvania's capital of Dilmahakha. After all that chaos, Liberis's delegation couldn't exactly say, "Well, we took care of the pope for you, so see ya later." With all the cleanup and inquiries taking place afterward, these past few days had honestly been very busy.

That said, we were foreigners here. It would be in poor taste for the Sphenedyardvanians to rely on us for everything. Now that we'd conveyed what information we had, we were finally allowed to take it easy.

That was when Allucia had asked me out to dinner. We now found ourselves in a somewhat fancy restaurant.

"It's a nice place..." I muttered.

"It is," Allucia agreed. "It seems Lazorne's information was right."

"Yeah..."

Neither of us was particularly familiar with Dilmahakha. I doubted there were any genuinely *bad* restaurants, but Gatoga's advice would ensure that we didn't end up anywhere mediocre.

The atmosphere inside the building was very tranquil. While different from the kind of liveliness found in cheap taverns, even nice restaurants had a tendency to be bustling with energy. However, fancy places in Dilmahakha appeared to be very quiet. I could hear some modest chatter here and there, but it looked like

everyone was largely having their dinner in well-mannered silence. Not that this was necessarily representative of the entire city—my sample size wasn't large enough to draw a proper conclusion.

It was possible Gatoga had simply chosen this restaurant to match Allucia. This kind of quiet atmosphere did seem to suit her. I had no objections—if anything, I was worried about fitting in here. I'd known it would be nice ahead of time, so I was wearing my jacket instead of my casual clothes. Still, I felt pretty out of place.

"Please have a seat here."

"Thank you."

The waiter guided us to a table. A simple sliding door separated the tables, so while I couldn't expect much soundproofing, it did obstruct people from seeing us. It was about time for me to become more acquainted with my reputation in public, but that seemed unlikely to happen soon. Though I'd stopped bashing myself when it came to swordsmanship, I just couldn't get used to being seen as a celebrity. I felt like this was more a matter of nature than something I could learn. I would've given up on it already.

"Now then, what to order?"

"What indeed..."

Sitting across from each other, Allucia and I perused the menu. I was actually quite hungry. Despite getting involved in all sorts of stomach-twisting matters, I hadn't lost my appetite. The body was a swordsman's greatest asset, so we were pretty brazen on that front. I felt like I was discovering new aspects of myself, even this far into my life.

I was aware that I was a pretty big eater for my age, but Allucia, Curuni, and the other knights were *gluttons*. Curuni in particular gobbled up so much food that I wondered how she could possibly contain it all inside her slender frame. She didn't have bad manners or anything, mind you—she just seemed to be able to eat endlessly at a rapid pace. Being a healthy eater was actually rather charming in a growing girl. I was glad Mewi was starting to eat a lot too.

"Oh, this seafood platter sounds pretty good," I commented.

"It does. Seafood isn't very common in Baltrain either."

Sphenedyardvania and Liberis had very similar climates, so I'd

had a decent idea of what would be on the menu. However, seafood was one item that wasn't really readily available in Baltrain, and when it was, it was expensive. Sphenedyardvania's territory was far smaller, but it was on the coast, meaning it was easy for them to get fish.

I really wanted to enjoy something I couldn't get in Baltrain. Ever since eating that fish with Mewi, I'd started to take an interest in the stuff. And this menu didn't even mention fish specifically in the description of the seafood platter, so I was getting pretty excited about experiencing an entirely new flavor.

"Excuse me," Allucia said, calling over the waiter. "We'll have two ales and two seafood platters, as well as a cheese and sausage platter."

"Certainly."

She had cheekily added a cheese and sausage platter to the order. It was a staple, so I could see why.

While we waited for our food, I turned the conversation to focus on current events. "Things have finally calmed down, huh?"

"That they have. I can't really rejoice, though. Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia must have many worries about the future..."

"You have a point there."

We'd been released from work, but the prince and princess, the current king, and all of the leaders of the Church of Sphene were still neck-deep in it. They had to get their domestic affairs in order, of course, but they also needed to provide some kind of explanation to Liberis. I was sure finding the right point of compromise was a huge headache for them. Well, Liberis had to have known about Sphenedyardvania's fishy internal affairs ahead of time. They'd sent Princess Salacia here despite knowing that, so I wanted to believe they would be somewhat accommodating.

"Thank you for waiting."

While I pondered such things, our ale arrived. I'd had a few drinks since arriving in Dilmahakha but hadn't gotten many opportunities to sit down and relax in a private setting like this. Though I'd been given my own private rooms all throughout the trip, big group dinners had been unavoidable. It had been quite a while

since I'd been able to have an ale with someone I felt at ease around.

"A toast...seems like it might be inappropriate," I said. "Any ideas?"

"Let's see... Then how about a toast to getting out unharmed?"

"Sounds good. Cheers."

The royals' marriage was a happy occasion, but the events surrounding it weren't. Still, now that we had drinks at the table, we had to toast something. Celebrating our safety seemed like a good compromise. The delegation from Liberis and the Liberion Order had suffered no losses, and nobody had gotten seriously injured. Had there been casualties, diplomatic relations could've been soured.

"Mm, that's good," I said, taking a gulp of ale and putting such thoughts to rest for now.

"It is."

It was great how you could never go wrong with ale—it was delicious no matter where you ordered it. This was partially because of my fondness for alcohol, but still, ale was a terrific drink.

"Haaah..."

"Same as always, huh?"

Around the time I had my second gulp, Allucia's glass was already empty. *She really is a heavy drinker. That was far faster than should be humanly possible.*

"Forgive me," she said. "It's been a while since I've had a drink..."

"There's no need to apologize. Relishing good food and drink is a form of happiness that everyone is entitled to."

She was somewhat shy about her drinking habits. I didn't think it was a problem as long as she minded her surroundings. She had to be careful about her public image as the knight commander, but I was the only one here right now. It was fine for her to cut loose a little.

"I find myself restless with nothing at my waist," Allucia added, smiling impishly. "Perhaps that's affecting me too."

"Erk... Well, I understand how you feel."

I seriously had nothing to say to that. She wasn't carrying a sword right now. Part of her unease probably stemmed from her

being in civilian clothing, but not having her favorite weapon at her hip made it even harder for her to retain her composure. Swordsmen truly were tiresome creatures. That simple absence was all it took to make us restless.

"Excuse me. Another ale," Allucia said to the waiter before turning to me once more. "Master, I'm looking forward to my new sword."

"Please do. I'm gonna put everything I have into it."

A sword worthy of the Liberion Order's knight commander was a tall order, but meeting such requirements was an instructor's job. It had really lit a fire under me. I'd been the one to push her to wield her sword in a way that would ruin it—I had to take responsibility for that.

Balder should be the smith. The question was what materials to use. Balder was sure to make a magnificent blade if I asked him to, but it was hard to say whether that would be sufficient to match the skill of Allucia Citrus. I planned to take my time to think about it once I was back in Baltrain, though I couldn't leave her unarmed for too long.

"What'll you do with your old sword?" I asked.

"I'll have it repaired as best I can and decorate my house with it," she answered. "It's a keepsake, after all."

"Right..."

I was honestly happy she adored the longsword I'd given her ten years ago. From what I'd heard, she hadn't even replaced the hilt or handguard. All this time, she'd been using the exact weapon I'd given her. While it was impressive that she'd been able to make it last that long, her emotional attachment had my happiness peaking and turning into embarrassment.

As I shivered at the thought, our food arrived.

"Thank you for waiting. Two seafood platters and a cheese and sausage platter."

"Ooh, looks good."

Cheese and sausage were common features in the taverns of Baltrain, but the seafood platter was a new sight for me. It featured plenty of items I'd never seen before—some looked only questionably edible, and I would've second-guessed eating this dish

had we not explicitly ordered it. That was simply how different this food was from what I normally had.

"Then, shall we begin?" Allucia asked.

"Yeah, let's dig in."

I cleansed my palate with a gulp of ale, then reached for the platter. I started with an unidentifiable white, squishy offering.

"Mm... That's got some chew to it," I said. "The flavor is nice and mild too. I like it."

"Is this squid? I've had it a handful of times before... This one really is good." Following my example, Allucia went for the same food. I felt like she didn't have to go that far to match me, but it was nice to hear an explanation of what I was eating.

This was apparently squid. The more I bit into it, the more flavor oozed out. In contrast to its pallid appearance, it was densely packed with umami. It felt like I could chew on it forever without it running out of taste. I'd had dried squid before, but this was totally different. *Food really is best when fresh.*

"And this...is shellfish?" I asked, picking up a solid shell.

"Yes. And an awfully large one, at that..."

The flesh inside matched the shell's size. I used my fork and knife to pluck it out, and it jiggled as I put it in my mouth.

This taste was less pronounced than the squid, though neither was as bursting with intensity as meat. Instead, flavor oozed out of each bite gradually—nice and gentle on this old man's stomach. This kind of subtle flavor paired really well with ale. It was wonderful to be able to stuff my face with reasonably priced foods I couldn't really get in Baltrain.

"And for an accent to the meal... Yeah, this works best." I reached for the cheese and sausage platter to add a bit of punch.

"No doubt about it."

Sausage was a fantastic food—one that was good pretty much no matter where you ordered it. I could see why it was a standard menu item in all kinds of restaurants.

"Whew... Ah, excuse me," I said, calling the waiter. "Another ale."

"One for me too, please," Allucia added.

"Certainly."

After nibbling on some of the cheese and sausage, I emptied my first glass of ale. Allucia was already on her third. I doubted I could replicate such a feat even if I were twenty years younger.

Some time later, after tasting a bit of everything and settling down somewhat, Allucia straightened herself up.

"Master."

"Hm? What is it?"

"Thank you very much for accompanying us on this expedition. If not for you, the worst could have come to pass."

"There's nothing to thank me for. If my sword is needed, I'll wield it... I was simply putting those words into action." Such were my honest feelings on the matter, though I understood that I had been *ordered* to come along.

In hindsight, my sword had helped move things in a slightly better direction, and I wanted to believe I'd fulfilled my role. The resolution of the matter had left a bad taste in my mouth, but we couldn't have done anything to avoid that. The royals had gotten away unscathed. To me, that was good enough.

"Nonetheless..." Allucia said. "I am honored to have been able to fight by your side."

"Is that so...? Thanks? Ha ha, that's kinda embarrassing."

Thinking back on it, there were unexpectedly few occasions where Allucia and I had worked together to achieve anything. Even during the royal assassination attempt in Baltrain, I'd faced off against Rose pretty much on my own. The only occasion before this had been the attack by the Verdapis Mercenary Company. But did that really even count?

"So..." she continued.

"Hm?"

"So that I can continue fighting by your side... Please, Master! Please let me come with you when you pick out my new sword!"

"Mm... Yeah. Let's decide on what will work best for you—together."

"Thank you very much."

Picking out a sword together—as a swordsman, there was no greater honor. Receiving praise from the king had made me happy,

but that kind of stuff went against my nature. Supporting the growth of my precious former pupils like this made me far, *far* happier.

That said, the task of finding her a sword was still going to be a major challenge. Would we find one? Or have one made? Regardless, it had to be a blade worthy of Godspeed Allucia Citrus. I hoped we could find the best possible sword for her, and I prayed that her life as a swordswoman would shine even brighter from this point onward.

"Hee hee... Picking out a sword with Master Beryl... That's unmistakably a da—"

"Hm?"

"No, it's nothing."

"R-Right."

The way Allucia's expression changed so much made her look both dignified and endearing—and also adorable. It seemed that, even among my precious pupils, maybe she was a little special.

Gazing at her charming figure from up close, I prayed to myself that this new year would be just as hectic and fulfilling as the last.

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 7. We're already seven volumes in... I say this every time, but the fact that we're still in publication is all thanks to you, the readers. Truly, thank you so much.

As ever, I had a lot of trouble writing this one. There were times when my pen simply wouldn't move, and because of an accumulation of all sorts of circumstances, I ended up keeping all of you waiting.

First, I caught that widespread disease in July. That sent about two weeks of progress flying out the window. After recovering, I lost my sense of taste for a month longer, which took all the joy out of eating meals and stressed me out more than I thought it would. Honestly, I never want to go through that again. I'm sure everyone who's caught it feels the same way. It was really rough.

Also, right around that time, my bad hips finally started reaching their limit. Just sitting in a chair is pretty hard on me. It doesn't get better with stretching, showers, or soaking in a bath either. So, I've started going to an orthopedic clinic.

Maybe thanks to that, as I write this afterword, I've gotten a fair bit better. At my worst, I had to wear a back brace and go to the clinic three times a week. I think this book should be published around the new year, and I can only pray that I feel better by then. Everyone, please be careful with your posture.

Okay, so I wrote volume seven from summer into fall, but the book actually takes place during winter. As an author, it's pretty strange to have the publication season be the same as the setting's season.

As for the contents of the story, I made it to one of the more major plot points I had planned. There weren't any big shifts from

my original outline either. The overall plot is going mostly as intended, which is strange for me. The small details vary widely, though.

This volume ended up surpassing 180,000 characters. I never really focus on the character count when writing—I just have a general grasp of how long the whole thing will probably end up being. Needless to say, my calculations were *way* off this time.

But in exchange, I believe the story is nice and dense. I'm not the one to decide whether that's the case, though—it's ultimately up to the readers. I pray it measures up to your expectations.

The manga version published by Akita Shoten is also progressing smoothly, having recently broken 3.5 million sales. The numbers don't even make sense to me anymore. I really can't thank Sato—the artist responsible for the manga version—enough. Allow me to use this opportunity to show my thanks once more, and to thank all of you who've picked up the manga and light novel versions of this series.

Incidentally, volume five of the manga is planned to come out at the same time as volume seven of the light novel. This one will come out at the beginning of the month, while the manga will come out at the end. I hope you're looking forward to both.

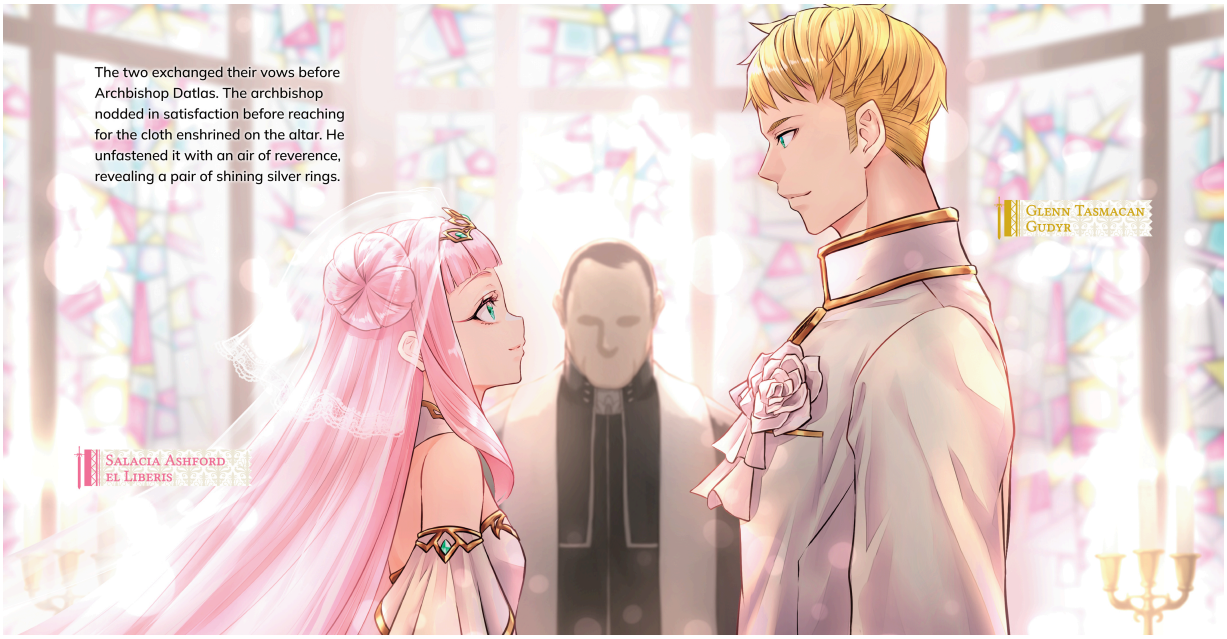
I've talked with Sato a lot about the interpretation of this series and future developments. There are parts that differ greatly from the light novel, and we largely discuss how to interpret things that can't really be conveyed from Beryl's perspective. I'm glad that the manga version has been well received. Please continue supporting the light novel and manga from here on out.

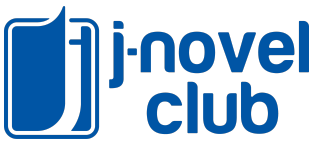
One part of the story has wrapped up nicely, but there are still plenty of things I want to write and other things I *have* to write. I'll continue doing my best so that I can deliver these stories to you.

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
7
Shigeru Sagazaki
Illustration
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima


Gatoga Lazorne
Beryl Gardenant
Allucia Citrus


The two exchanged their vows before Archbishop Datlas. The archbishop nodded in satisfaction before reaching for the cloth enshrined on the altar. He unfastened it with an air of reverence, revealing a pair of shining silver rings.
Salacia Ashford el Liberis
Glenn Tasmacan Gudyr



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 8 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

From Old Country Bumpkin to Master Swordsman: My Hotshot Disciples Are All Grown Up Now, and They Won't Leave Me Alone Volume 7
by Shigeru Sagazaki

Translated by Hikoki
Edited by C.D. Leeson

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

KATAINAKA NO OSSAN, KENSEI NI NARU ~ TADA NO INAKA NO KENJUTSUSHIHAN DATTA NONI, TAISEI SHITA DESHITACHI GA ORE WO HOTTEKURENAI KEN vol. 7

©2024 Shigeru Sagazaki, Tetsuhiro Nabeshima/SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.

All rights reserved.

First published in Japan in 2024 by SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.
English translation rights arranged with SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. and J-Novel Club LLC through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc.
Translation ©2025 by SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: July 2025