

FROM OLD COUNTRY BUMPKIN TO MASTER SWORDSMAN

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

Shigeru Sagazaki

Illustration

Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

4

FROM OLD COUNTRY BUMPKIN TO MASTER SWORDSMAN

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

Shigeru Sagazaki

Illustration

Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

4



BERYL
GARDINANT

"Ficelle,
wait a sec."

"Then, let's begin today's class.
Everyone get your wooden swords.
One thousand swings."

CINDY
LOBEAUT

MUI
FREYA

FICELLE
HABELER

Ficelle took a breath, then brought down her sword. In my eyes, it looked less like a sword strike and more like a waterfall of light.

“Secret art,
Curtana!”



CHARACTERS

|| BERYL GARDENANT

An old man who taught swordsmanship at a dojo in the countryside. He's left home to take up a post as a special instructor for the Liberion Order. He's very humble, but his swordplay can be seen as a work of art. He loves ale.



|| FICELLE HARBELLER



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

|| CURUNI CRUCIEL



Beryl's former pupil. She's always full of energy and is a mood-maker for the order. She respects Beryl from the bottom of her heart.

|| SURENA LYSANDRA



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

|| ALLUCIA CITRUS



Beryl's former pupil. She's the proud knight commander of the Liberion Order. She has tremendous respect for Beryl.

|| IBROY HOWLMAN



A man of influence of the Church of Sphene, the neighboring Sphenedyardvania's state religion. He once requested Beryl to solve an incident and has since formed ties with him.

|| KINERA FINE



A teacher at the magic institute. She has a gentle demeanor and is a master of defensive magic.

|| MEWI FREYA



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

|| LUCY DIAMOND



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

S T O R Y

Beryl Gardinant, a self-proclaimed “humble old man,” is a sword instructor at his dojo in a rural, backwater village. One day, his former pupil Allusia—who climbed the ranks to become the young knight commander of the Liberion Order—summons him to serve as the special instructor for her knights.

The Backwater Swordmaster’s name is starting to spread among the capital. On the occasion of a visit from the neighboring Sphenedyardvania’s prince, he is charged with serving alongside knights from both nations as an escort for a royal sightseeing tour. While surprised that his former pupil Rose has become the lieutenant commander of Sphenedyardvania’s Holy Order, he works with her and Allusia to guard the delegation.

However, the existence of a group plotting a royal assassination comes to light. One of the ringleaders is none other than Rose, looking to overthrow her nation’s government. After an intense one-on-one fight with her, Beryl unravels what’s truly going on in Sphenedyardvania and, as her teacher in swordsmanship, he shows her the path she should truly walk.

Having unwittingly stopped a coup, Beryl is invited to a party at the palace as a hero, where he is forced to have a very awkward dinner.

OLD BUMPKIN - MASTER SWORDSMAN

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Characters](#)

[Story Summary](#)

[Chapter 1: An Old Country Bumpkin Takes Up Teaching](#)

[Chapter 2: An Old Country Bumpkin Nurtures Friendships](#)

[Interlude](#)

[Chapter 3: An Old Country Bumpkin Dances with Shadows](#)

[Epilogue: An Old Country Bumpkin Thinks of the Future](#)

[Afterword](#)

[High-Res Color Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: An Old Country Bumpkin Takes Up Teaching

“Ummm... I think it’s this way.”

After my daily training, I left the office and started heading somewhere besides home. Though I had a set destination, I didn’t really know the way there. I was pretty sure I was going in the right direction, at least. *Should’ve asked Curuni to come along... But I didn’t want to bother her.*

“Oh, there it is.”

Either way, it seemed I’d chosen the right path. I spotted a small smithy squeezed into a row of compact buildings a little off the central district’s main street.

Made it here.

“Excuse me.”

“Yo, welco— Ooh, Master!”

A hearty voice greeted me as I opened the door. This was Balder’s Smithy, the shop run by my former pupil. We’d bought Curuni’s zweihander here, and Balder had forged my sword from Zeno Grable’s materials.

Balder’s as big as ever. I guess a blacksmith needs to be bulging with muscles to do his work.

“What’s up?” Balder asked.

“I’d like you to check my sword.”

“Hmmm?”

I saw a suspicious glimmer in his eyes. I hadn’t done anything I should feel guilty about, so why was he looking at me like that?

“Something happen?” he asked.

“Well, I used it a bit *too* much.”

I removed the sheathed sword from my belt and handed it to Balder. From what I could tell, the blade wasn't visibly damaged. But that was the opinion of an amateur—it was best to leave this stuff to the experts. The idea of walking around with a sword in questionable condition made me anxious.

“Hmmm... All righty, then. Lemme take a peek.”

“Yeah, please do.”

Balder drew the sword. His eyes were so intense that it was like he was having a staring contest with the blade. He touched it every now and then and ran a cloth along its edge. I got tired of watching him pretty quickly, so to pass the time, I turned my attention to the weapons decorating the shop.

They were really nice swords. Surena, an adventurer of the highest rank, favored this smithy, so that was pretty much a guarantee of Balder's skill. I was also satisfied with the sword he'd forged for me. *I doubt I'll ever depend on another blacksmith for as long as I remain in Baltrain. Balder being my former pupil is a point in his favor too.*

“You sure used the edge a lot... What happened?” Balder asked.

“Uhhh... You hear about the recent uproar?”

“Yeah. Heard the rumors, at least. Right, you're with the knights, huh?”

“Technically.”

I'd cleaned my blade after the incident, but Balder could still see how much the edge had been used. I had no idea what he was looking at or how he'd figured it out, but this level of expertise was one of the reasons I wanted him to check it out. Even if the blade hadn't dulled, I'd used it to cut down a ton of people—it could be chipped or damaged in ways I couldn't see. So, to clear such anxieties from my mind, I'd decided to come here after today's training.

“How is it?” I asked.

“Hmmm...” Balder's expression wasn't grim, but it wasn't cheerful either.

“Well, it'll be fine after a quick sharpening. It's not that worn out.”

“That's good to hear.”

My sword was truly outlandish. After such a lavish feast of foes, no normal blade could be returned to its prime with just a little sharpening. The way I'd abused it, a standard iron sword probably would've broken in the middle of the battle. Its strength had to be due to Zeno Grable's materials. *Also, I think it was called...elven steel?* He'd apparently thrown some rare metal in the mix, so that had probably made the blade even more durable. Not that I knew much about metalwork.

"Anyway, Master, you sure are amazing," Balder said as he started cleaning the specks of dirt and dust off the blade.

"Hm? How so?"

"I mean, it don't matter how sturdy a sword is if you can't use the edge properly—a bad swordsman will dull or break a blade in no time flat. You gotta handle swords with skill. And yet, despite all your skill, you still abused the heck out of this thing. Must've been one hell of a fight."

"Ha ha ha, thanks."

It felt pretty nice to have my swordsmanship complimented, even if it was the biased opinion of a pupil. Anyway, it was pretty uncommon to take on that many foes at once. A normal sword would dull after cutting down five people—maybe ten at best. On that point, this sword continued to demonstrate how abnormal it was. A part of me thought this masterwork was wasted on me, but I couldn't guarantee that something like the assassination plot wouldn't happen again. It was best to have as nice a weapon as possible. Because of that, I wanted to persuade Allucia to get a new sword, but she wasn't going to listen to me. It was a little dispiriting.

"Hmmm... Guess I'll redo the coating while I'm at it... Hey, Master?"

"Hm?"

"Mind leaving this with me for a day or two? I wanna reapply the elven steel coating after I sharpen it."

Hmm... What to do? There was nothing going on right now that I would need a sword for. A few days without it was probably fine—I'd spent over a week without a sword before getting this one.

“You can take any of the swords lying around here as a replacement,” Balder offered.

“Oh, sure. In that case, I don’t really mind.”

I was just thinking that my waist was going to feel awfully light, but I had nothing to complain about if he was offering a replacement. It was nice to think that my weapon would be restored to prime condition. Also, I doubted an incident like that was going to come up again in only a few days.

And so, I decided to leave my sword with Balder and choose a new temporary partner. Not that I planned to be very picky about it. However, setting the right mood was important when making these kinds of choices.

“Now then, which to pick? Hmmm.”

I selected one at random. It really was a nice sword. The blade was very sharp, and its center of gravity was just right. If possible, I wanted something the same size and weight at my hip. Wielding something too different, even if only temporarily, would leave me feeling restless.

“I guess this works.”

After looking at a few with the eyes of an amateur, I settled on a totally plain-looking longsword. There was nothing outstanding about it, but I could tell it was a solid weapon. I made a living wielding a sword, but I wasn’t any good at forging them, and I didn’t have a trained eye for choosing the best ones.

“Mm. Not bad.”

I placed it at my hip. The weight and size were just as I thought they’d be. *It’ll be good enough to trick my brain for a few days.* And since Balder had forged all the swords in this shop, none of them were going to be shoddy.

“Okay then, the sharpening and coating fee will be ten thousand dalcs,” Balder said.

“Yeah, sure thing.”

I’d come here initially hoping to get my sword sharpened, so this expense was within my expectations. Also, I’d gotten the sword for free, so paying this much would make me feel better about that. Getting free stuff sounded nice in

theory, but I made a living teaching swordsmanship, and from my perspective, skilled labor deserved appropriate payment. Balder was an excellent blacksmith, so it was only right to compensate him accordingly. *Well, Surena paid him to forge my sword, but I personally hadn't given him a single dalc.*

"All right, come by again the day after tomorrow," Balder said. "I'll have it done by then."

"You got it."

I paid him, fitted the replacement sword to my belt, and then left the smithy. It really had been the right choice to let Balder, a specialist, take a look at it. No one distrusted my eye for detail as much as I did.

"Okay, time to head home."

I had nothing left to do today. Well, that wasn't entirely true—I still had the important mission of going home, having dinner with Mewi, and showing her affection. She was getting accustomed to her new lifestyle, and once in a while, she even talked about her time at the magic institute over dinner.

It was fun listening to her stories. Above all else, I was relieved to hear that she was settling in as a student. Still, even though I frequently asked her what was going on and what kinds of classes she was taking, she kept a lot to herself. I didn't really need to force it out of her, so as things were now, I simply listened whenever she decided to share something.

The sun was sinking to the west, and my shadow stretched out long and far. *If I head straight home, I'll get there well before sunset.* I pondered over what to have for dinner and also thought about how comfortable our financial situation was.

"Hmmm... I guess we still have enough ingredients."

I considered the state of our food stores. If I remembered right, we still had plenty. Generally, Mewi and I spent most days outside the house, so we prioritized food that could be preserved for a long time.

Mewi had been eating very well lately. She was currently at the age where she should be growing like a weed, but since she hadn't gotten enough to eat in her early years, she'd been malnourished. But now, to put it nicely, she was a

hearty eater. To put it poorly, she was a noisy one. Manners aside, it was a salve for the heart to watch a child eat so much. I was looking forward to her growth.

Incidentally, our household bought groceries every few days—Mewi and I primarily ate at home. Because of the escort mission for Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia, I hadn't really taken her out to eat much lately, so maybe it was a good idea to treat her to something.

"I'm back."

With such thoughts in mind, I reached my house, which I'd finally gotten used to. I'd been given this place due to a strange connection to Lucy, and it was practically perfect for my life with Mewi. Now, if one more person joined us, our home might become a little cramped, but I had no current plans to get another housemate. *I'd need to find a wife for something like that to happen.* To repeat—I didn't have any plans in that regard whatsoever. It felt a little pathetic of me as a man to admit that, though.

"Mm, welcome home."

"Yo, welcome back."

"Hmm...?"

Two voices? Again? Another familiar voice had greeted me alongside Mewi's. Lucy was lounging around in my home again without asking. This house had belonged to her, but it was ours now, so I felt like it was fine to complain a bit.

"Welcome back, Master."

"Oh?"

And just as I entered the room, planning to give Lucy a piece of my mind, a third voice brought me to a stop. *Someone else?*

"Ah, if it isn't Ficelle. What brings you here?"

A woman with black hair wearing the robes of the magic corps was sitting quietly at the table and sipping at a cup of tea Mewi had likely prepared for her. *Huh. This is the first time one of my pupils has visited my home. I never imagined it would be Ficelle.*

"The commander brought me," she explained briefly.

“I-I see...”

She didn't show much emotion when she spoke, but that wasn't unusual for her. I knew it was part of her character, so I wasn't going to say anything about it.

“Hm? What happened to your sword?” Lucy asked.

The red sheath for my sword was pretty conspicuous—so much so that it made people curious about why a plain old man had one at his hip. But that also meant it was obvious when my sword was absent.

I didn't really have a reason to keep that information from her, so I said, “I left it with my blacksmith. This guy's filling in.” I patted the blade at my hip. “So? What do you need?”

I was starting to get used to Lucy's eccentric behavior. I knew she wasn't the type to show up someplace when she didn't have any business being there. She'd gone out of her way to bring Ficelle too, so she had to need something from me. *Whether I'll comply is a different matter...*

“Right. I have something I want to consult you about,” Lucy said.

“Hmm...” That was unusual. Judging by her personality, I figured that everything she brought to my doorstep would either be an order or a coercive request. But I was fine with giving advice.

I nodded and took a seat at the table, which was only big enough for four. I sat next to Mewi, whereas Lucy and Ficelle were across from us. It really did feel cramped in here with four people. *Looks like two or three is the limit for permanent residents.*

“By the way, have you been to the magic institute yet?” Lucy asked.

“Yeah. I brought Mewi there a couple times.”

“I see. I see.”

So this had something to do with the institute. I had plenty of knowledge regarding swordplay, but none about magic.

“At the start of this year, a sword magic course was established at the magic institute,” Lucy said.

“Yeah, I heard from Ms. Kineria.”

It was a course to raise sword magic users like Ficelle. According to Kineria, there weren't that many students taking it. *Is Lucy here to get some help with shoring up their numbers? I'm pretty sure there isn't much I can do about that.*

“Oh? You've met Kineria?” Lucy asked with a surprised look.

“Mm-hmm. She toured us through the school. She's also Mewi's homeroom teacher.”

Kineria was a teacher at the institute, so I didn't think it was strange for Mewi and me to know her. Still, I didn't know how many teachers they had there—if there were tens or even hundreds of them, meeting one specific teacher was likely improbable.

“Kineria is talented,” Lucy said. “Her defensive magic is first class.”

“Hmm.”

Did that mean all the teachers were relatively talented with magic? Perhaps they needed to be in order to serve in their roles. I'd never seen defensive magic for myself. *Wonder if it can block Ficelle's sword magic. Maybe she'll show me next time if I ask. Maybe it can't block sword magic, but I am genuinely curious about what it's like.*

“Ah, we've gotten off track,” Lucy said. “Back on the topic of the sword magic course, Fice here is serving as the teacher.”

“Oooh.”

My eyes naturally shifted toward Ficelle. The fact that she was my former pupil remained prominent in my mind, but now she was in a position to teach others. *Time sure flies. Oh, Ficelle is looking awfully proud. I feel like a ton of my pupils make that face.*

“But she sucks at teaching,” Lucy added.

“Uhhh...”

Ficelle's expression stiffened. It was usually hard to interpret the emotions behind her voice, but her face was always easy to read. She was a little like Curuni in this respect. Well, in Curuni's case, every facet of her behavior was

easy to read.

“Um... Ficelle?” I prompted.

“People are only cut out for certain things,” she answered, averting her eyes.

“I-I see.”

Her behavior really highlighted her youth—it made me feel a little warm and fuzzy inside.



Lucy didn't specify how exactly Ficelle was bad at teaching, but knowing Ficelle's personality, I doubted she was high-handed or anything.

"I like Ms. Ficelle's classes, though..." Mewi said quietly, joining our conversation.

"Hm?"

Ms. Ficelle...? Miss? Huh? Ficelle is Mewi's teacher?

"Mewi is taking the sword magic course," Ficelle said, her triumphant expression making a comeback. "She is indeed my student."

"Oh, I see."

That wasn't what I was getting at, though. This was the first I'd heard about Mewi learning sword magic. She never really talked about her classes at all.

"Huh? You didn't know?" Lucy asked curiously.

"Nope. This is news to me."

Among the people here, I was the only one who hadn't known about Mewi taking this course. *I'm technically her guardian, dammit.* At any rate, it was surprising that Mewi was taking a course that had anything to do with swords. By nature, swordsmanship and anything related to it were techniques meant for conflict. Kinera had mentioned Mewi having an aptitude for offensive magic, but I hadn't expected her to learn how to use a sword.

"You could've told me," I said to Mewi.

"It's not like you had to know or nothing..." Mewi said, huffing and turning to the side.

Yup, she's being shy.

"Ha ha ha!" Lucy cackled. "It makes sense that she wouldn't tell you—Mewi joined the class out of admiration for your swordplay!"

Mewi gasped. "Hey!"

Ooh, I haven't seen Mewi panic like this often. I mean, it's gotta be embarrassing for me to find out.

It wasn't like I had to learn stuff like this from Mewi—with Lucy around, the truth would reach my ears eventually. I felt a warmth in my heart at how Mewi had tried to keep it a secret from me, and I was also happy that a child like Mewi had been impressed by me. Swordplay was a skill, an art, and I wanted to teach my pupils more than just the act of slaughter.

"Dammit... Why did you tell him?" Mewi mumbled, making a complicated expression. It was like she had no idea what to do about her embarrassment.

"Hee hee, sorry about that." Lucy apologized, but she'd known exactly how Mewi would react. She had as rotten a personality as always, but I'd gotten to see Mewi being cute, so all was forgiven.

"So? What do you want from me?" I asked.

"Oh yes. That."

We'd gone off track with all this stuff about Mewi, but it was time to get back to the matter at hand. If I had to guess, Lucy had brought Ficelle here because she was bad at teaching sword magic. I knew nothing about magic, but I had plenty of knowledge regarding swordsmanship *and* teaching. In short, Lucy wanted me to teach Ficelle how to teach others.

"Want to try teaching at the magic institute?" Lucy asked.

"Huh?"

Wait. Seriously? That's what you want?

I was flabbergasted. "No, no, no, no... What?"

"You'll be paid appropriately," Lucy added. "I don't think it's a bad deal."

"Uhhh... That's not really the problem."

Don't move things forward on your own, dammit! Be it swordsmanship or magic, teaching others meant passing along one's techniques to another, so it was only proper to be paid for it. That part made sense, but nothing else did. Why would a swordsman teach at the magic institute?

"Are you sure I'm the right fit?" I asked. "I can't use magic."

Would the students be okay with a teacher at the magic institute not being

able to perform magic? After all, the students there were highly motivated to nurture and grow their inherent magical talent. It was just like my dojo—that was a place to learn swordsmanship, so it had naturally been a gathering spot for people with a great interest in swordplay. Would students brimming with an interest in magic really accept an old man barging in without knowing the first thing about magic? I was used to Lucy’s reckless behavior by now, but this still sounded unreasonable.

“Don’t worry about that,” Lucy said. “I’m not asking you to teach magic. You’re quite clearly a swordsman.”

“So you do understand...”

That was exactly my point. I’d only gone to the magic institute to accompany Mewi. They couldn’t expect anything more from me, nor did I want to get more involved than that.

“I want you to teach them how to use a sword instead,” Lucy explained. “That’s what you do to begin with, isn’t it? I don’t see the problem.”

“Hmmm...”

I didn’t hate teaching or anything. I wouldn’t have taken over the dojo if I had. However, it felt too strange to be teaching swordsmanship at a school for magic. Maybe it was just my own prejudice speaking, but I couldn’t accept with such unease rooted in my mind.

“I’m in agreement, Master,” Ficelle said. “I want to see your swordplay again.”

“R-Right...”

And now I had the support of the current sword magic teacher. A part of me wondered if she should really be fine with this. Essentially, Lucy was attempting to make me steal my pupil’s spotlight. People did have things they weren’t cut out for, and I understood that Ficelle’s personality wasn’t suited to teaching new pupils. However, dragging in someone from the outside wouldn’t help the next generation grow.

Ficelle couldn’t just keep claiming that she was bad at teaching. Not everything was decided by seniority, of course, but spending a long time in the same environment meant she would steadily gather more juniors and

subordinates. Even setting aside my personal reluctance, a part of me worried that taking this on without due consideration could hamper Ficelle's growth.

"What do you think, Mewi?" Lucy asked, trying to get the opinion of an active sword magic student.

"Either way works..." she answered.

A part of me would've been depressed if she'd outright objected to it, but if she had, I could've used it as an excuse to refuse. It seemed everyone was in favor of me going to the magic institute.

Maybe I can use my title to get out of this. "But I'm serving as a special instructor at the order, remember?"

"Allucia said she wouldn't mind if it's just once a week," Lucy said. Apparently, she'd already gotten this approved.

"Oh..."

I was once more reminded how fast Lucy was to act. *Don't run around removing any obstacles in the way before trying to convince me, dammit!*

I decided to bring up the other thing that was bothering me. "Oh yeah. Regardless of Allucia's approval, is it really all right for someone with a royal appointment to take up a second job?"

Ultimately, I was just hired help, but the main issue was the man who'd hired me: the king himself. I didn't feel more obligated than necessary just because he was royalty, but I had to at least perform the duties expected of me. If I was criticized for not fulfilling my obligations as a special instructor because of this job, I would lose face.

"Mm. That's not a problem," Lucy said.

"How so?"

"I can't go into detail, but I made sure it's not a problem."

"Whaaa...?"

How much clout did Lucy have, exactly? Was she like this in front of royalty too? I couldn't even imagine how she'd made the problem go away. Still, I knew

she wasn't the type to lie or spout nonsense. If she said it was fine, it was fine. How she'd accomplished it remained a mystery, though.

"I'm not forcing or ordering you to do this," Lucy added. "I'm simply consulting you."

Now she's easing off. On the surface, this put me at ease, but a part of me felt like she was doing this to reel me in. *Hmm, what to do...?* As I've mentioned before, I wasn't against teaching swordsmanship. But I did have two solid concerns: I would be teaching somewhere foreign to me, and I was unsure about whether I could moonlight at the academy while being a special instructor of the Liberion Order.

Even during my first visit to the order, a ton of the knights had stared at me like they were questioning who the hell I was. It wasn't hard to imagine how much worse it would be at the magic institute. If I was going to teach, I preferred to do so in a place where I was comfortable. My bout with Henblitz had cleared things up at the order, but how were things going to end up at the institute? Lucy had likely confirmed the logistics of the situation with the key parties, but had she considered the minor details and emotional aspects? Probably not. She was the type to sort those things out in the heat of the moment.

Those who were directly involved were going to suffer the most from this. I found it hard to feel motivated when I imagined being stared at like that again. However, it was really hard to refuse when Lucy had already cleared it with Allucia, when she'd somehow worked things out with the king, when the actual teacher, Ficelle, was okay with it, and when Mewi, her student, was in agreement.

"How about going there and seeing the students before deciding?" Lucy suggested, providing me with a compromise. "Feel free. I'm sure you're curious about them."

This wouldn't be my first visit to the magic institute, but it would definitely be my first time as a potential teacher rather than a visitor. Checking out how the students would react sounded like a good idea to me. This was different from my time in the dojo, though. There, students would come to me to test the

waters—here, I was going to them.

“Hee hee, sounds fun,” Ficelle said, smiling slightly. She was in an awfully good mood.

“It’s settled, then,” Lucy said. “I’ll get the papers ready.”

“Hang on, I haven’t decided yet,” I protested.

“It’s best to be prepared, isn’t it?” Lucy insisted.

“You’re not wrong, but still...”

Say I did go to the magic institute to teach swordsmanship—it would mean being a new hire. In that case, there was paperwork to do. A part of me felt like getting all that ready ahead of time blocked off my path of retreat.

“The magic institute has some quirky students, but they’re basically all good kids,” Lucy said.

“Here’s to hoping...” When it came to teaching, obedient children were easier to handle than quirky ones.

Lucy nodded. “Okay then, I’ll get things rolling for you to come take a look.”

“Yeah, sure.”

It was almost like this was being forced on me, but nothing was decided yet, so I figured it was fine to approach this in a carefree manner. Besides, I was also curious about Mewi’s behavior in the classroom. That last bit of curiosity was purely personal, though.

“I’ll contact you when a schedule is set,” Lucy added. “I don’t think it’ll take that long.”

“Got it.”

How was she planning to contact me, anyway? Was she going to barge into my house again? Passing a message through Allucia or Ficelle would be far less of a surprise, so that would be preferable.

“See you, Master.”

“Yeah, take care.”

Lucy left with Ficelle in tow. In the end, things had been settled without much input from Ficelle, but Lucy probably just wanted her around for this. She was the current teacher, after all, so her consent would help convince me.

“Hmph...”

After they left, Mewi huffed somewhat awkwardly. *You’re still embarrassed? Are you that shy about me seeing your swordplay? What an adorable girl.*

“You could’ve told me you were learning sword magic,” I said, teasing her because she was so cute.

“Hmph!”

This time she was seriously pouting. I felt just a *little* bad about it.

“Well, let’s get ready to eat.”

Our guests were gone and the sun was about to set. I’d stood up and was about to get dinner ready when I spotted a bundle of clothes sloppily strewn around the room.

“Mewi, if you leave your uniform out like that, it’ll wrinkle.”

“Hmph.”

“You wear it every day. It’ll reflect poorly on you.”

“I get it already...”

With that annoyed grumble, Mewi left the living room and reluctantly folded her uniform. She had been supplied with a uniform to attend the magic institute—it was primarily blue and distinguished by a skirt and pelisse. It was a very cool and clean design appropriate for a school of elites.

The robes Ficelle and Kineru wore were apparently proof of them being full-fledged wizards, so students didn’t wear them. Instead, they had a uniform to show they were affiliated with a school of wizardry. Incidentally, the boys wore trousers instead of skirts.

“It suits you, so take care of it,” I added.

“Shut up...”

“Ha ha ha.”

This could've been me playing favorites as a parent, but the blue uniform matched Mewi's blue hair very well. Even considering her naturally thorny eyes, the sense of unity suited her wonderfully. It would be rude to say that clothes could make anyone look good, but it was touching to see this temperamental tomboy in such a formal outfit.

I wasn't trying to tell her to be girlier or anything—she was free to grow up however she liked. Still, I wanted her to acquire at least the bare minimum education and culture that I could provide her with. Ultimately, Mewi would be the one to suffer if she lacked these things. I couldn't be her shield around the clock. One day, she would grow up to be independent, and I didn't want her to end up in a situation where she would be ashamed of her upbringing. So, even if she didn't really like it, I sometimes had to scold her.

"Swordsmanship, magic, and culture. You sure have a lot to learn," I said.

"Hmph."

One day, she would no longer need me to intervene. I was happily looking forward to that time...but I was also a little sad about it.



"Ooh, they're really going at it."

The day after Lucy and Ficelle's visit, I dropped by the order's training hall, just as I always did. Noticing my arrival, Allucia came over to greet me.

"Master, good morning."

"Mm, morning."

No matter how this thing with the magic institute ended, my regular job wasn't going to change. My role here was the same as usual. I had to train the knights—and get some training in for myself too. After all, slacking off at this age would have an immediate effect on my body. I was already a plain old man, so I had to do what I could to maintain my physique.

"Master, what happened to your sword?" Allucia asked curiously.

Hmm, why does everyone I know bring that up right away? I guess that red sword really does stand out when paired with an old man like me.

“Aah, I’m just having it sharpened,” I said. “I’ll have it back the day after tomorrow.”

“Is that so?”

That was the end of it—there was no reason to elaborate.

It was early in the morning and the sun was just about to rise, but inside the training hall, several knights were already swinging their wooden swords enthusiastically. I was an early riser, so while I found it admirable that they were here before me, it also worried me a little. Allucia in particular also had her official duties as knight commander to attend to. I really wondered when she ever got a break. I’d casually brought it up before, but she’d simply said, “I’m not pushing myself, so it’s fine.” Well, she wasn’t the type to act recklessly to get things done, so if she said it was fine, it probably was.

“Anyway, you’re here awfully early,” I remarked.

“Things just worked out that way today,” Allucia said. “Now that our escort mission is over, office work seems to have settled down too.”

“I see. That’s good to hear.”

I often mused over how much free time people in power had, including the commanders of the order and the magic corps. If things were slow for the leaders of powerful military forces, it was probably a good thing for the world because it meant things were much more peaceful. From another perspective, things being too peaceful could lead to a deterioration in strength and morale, but there was no need to worry about that within the Liberion Order. Lucy was maybe a bit too much of a free spirit, though.

“Oh yeah—Lucy and Ficelle visited me yesterday,” I said, stretching my muscles before my training. Lucy had already told Allucia about my offer from the magic institute, so I figured it was fine to bring it up.

“Ficelle was there too? Their visit must’ve had something to do with the institute, right?” Allucia asked.

“Yeah, that. They want me to teach swordsmanship there. Didn’t Lucy tell you?”

Allucia's reaction wasn't quite what I expected. I was a little uneasy about how much Lucy had actually told her.

"Umm... I heard the institute would like to borrow you, but nothing more than that," Allucia said.

"I see..." *Dammit, Lucy. You really didn't go into detail. Now I have to explain it.* "Um, the magic institute wants me to take up a teaching position for their sword magic course."

Allucia nodded agreeably. "Ah, that sounds nice. It'll help your reputation."

This response was better than her outright rejecting the idea, but it bothered me a little how she was fixated on something as useless as my reputation. I was pretty sure she was the only person who cared about that.

"My reputation, huh? That doesn't really mean anything to me."

"You don't pay it enough attention," Allucia retorted. "Normally, it's something to be delighted about."

"Is that how it works...?"

"Yes, it is."

It was true—taking up a teaching position at the well-renowned and storied magic institute would be a considerable honor to my name. I didn't really care about that stuff, though. If anything, I didn't want to draw more attention to myself.

"Regardless, as long as you don't spend every day at the institute, it won't be a problem for us here," Allucia said.

"Right. That's good to know."

Say that I do go along with their idea—how often do they expect me to teach the class? Lucy had mentioned once a week, and this was infrequent enough that it wouldn't be much of a problem for the Liberion Order. I certainly didn't want to neglect my duties here just so I could teach over there. *Also, how long do they expect me to teach at the institute for? I have no idea. I hope Lucy gets all the details ironed out soon.*

I could set those thoughts aside for now. Here in this training hall, I was a

special instructor. I had to do my duty.

“Guess I’ll get warmed up and start training everyone,” I said.

Allucia smiled. “I’ll accompany you.”

“Sure, thanks.”

Not wanting to get in anyone else’s way, Allucia and I went to a corner of the training hall. As usual, we began our training session by closing our eyes.



It wasn't complicated—we always started off with some meditation. This helped me to get settled in body and mind so that I could face my sword properly. I'd followed this routine ever since my days of teaching at the dojo, and it was something Allucia was accustomed to as well.

It was still early in the morning. The spirited shouts of the training knights and the sounds of wooden swords clashing resonated through the sparsely filled hall. The amount of time I spent on meditation varied from day to day. Sometimes, it took only about five minutes. However, if something unpleasant had just happened or if I couldn't really get in the mood, it could take up to half an hour.

"Haaah..."

I estimated that around ten minutes had passed since I'd closed my eyes. Things today were looking just a bit better than average. It was difficult to keep both body and mind in perfect condition around the clock—doing so would inevitably exhaust the spirit. Working that hard was fine in a fight for your life, but when it came to daily training, things were a little different. A bit better than average was the best balance to maintain, and it was important to be able to bring out a certain level of strength in any given situation. That was what I believed, at least. Though, in an *actual* battle, there was no time to casually stand around meditating.

"How'd it go for you, Allucia?" I asked.

"I'm done too. Not bad, I would say."

"Very good."

Allucia opened her eyes when I did—she seemed to have reached the same state of mind. She was far younger than me but was already making steady progress toward developing the presence of one who walked the path of swordsmanship. This was the result of her rare talent and constant effort, and I was once more reminded of just how splendid my former pupil was.

My one anxiety was whether my teachings had wasted all her talent. This wasn't something I was going to bring up with her, though. I knew her personality, and even if my anxieties were true, I was sure she wouldn't answer

me honestly. The only thing I could do now was serve in my role as a special instructor to the best of my ability. This position had suddenly fallen into my lap, but now that I was here, I had to do it properly.

“Then, shall we?” I asked.

“Yes, Master.”

I kept an eye on all the knight’s movements, going around and focusing on face-to-face attacking and strike practice. This wasn’t the dojo, and the knights weren’t really “pupils,” so we pretty much never went over the basic forms. Instead, I decided to concentrate on practical exercises. As to be expected of members of the Liberion Order, they all had terrific fundamentals. It was my job to demonstrate my experience and slowly add my personal techniques to their repertoires.

The path of swordsmanship couldn’t be walked in a single day—it was the same for any other path. Frankly, if everything could be easily learned, then nobody would have it hard. Daily accumulation of skill was the true secret to mastery.

With such thoughts in mind, I continued instructing the knights, sweating it out with them, and the time flew by.

“Okay, that about does it for the day,” I said.

“Yes. Good work.”

Before I knew it, the sun had already passed its zenith. I’d gotten in a good sweat, and my fatigue was at just the right point. Pushing yourself too hard every day didn’t lead to anything good—growth required a moderate burden accompanied by adequate rest. Back in the dojo, we hadn’t ever spent the whole day on training either. Well, most of my pupils had been children, so they hadn’t possessed the endurance or attention span necessary for that anyway.

And just as my duty was over for the day and I was wondering what to do next, an awfully tyrannical and childish voice resounded through the hall.

“Don’t mind me!”

“Hm?” I turned toward the voice and spotted yesterday’s guest. “If it isn’t Lucy.”

Once she saw me, she waved her hand high in the air. “Oh! There you are.”

“Lucy, it’s rare for you to come all the way here,” Allucia said, still wiping away her sweat.

“Mm-hmm.” Lucy nodded. “It’s about that recent matter.”

By that, she probably meant the thing with the magic institute. We’d only talked about it yesterday afternoon, so it hadn’t even been a full day yet. She was as fast as always.

“To get right to it, I’d like to borrow Beryl tomorrow,” Lucy continued. “Do you mind?”

“I don’t,” Allucia agreed, ignoring my feelings.

Is this really okay? I feel like this old man is being toyed with a little. Why is it that things I should have a say in always seem to be fully under the control of others? Guess I’m starting to get used to it, though.

“That’s the gist of it,” Lucy said, turning to me. “Beryl, can you come to the magic institute at nine in the morning?”

“I can... That makes for an unexpectedly relaxed schedule,” I said.

So my plans for tomorrow had been decided. Nine was awfully late in the morning for me. I could almost consider coming to the office to get a bit of exercise in first.

“You just wake up too early,” Lucy retorted.

“Ha ha ha, you’ll feel better if you get some proper sleep and wake up early too,” I said.

“I have my own rhythm.”

I didn’t really intend to tease anyone for their daily routine. Lucy did indeed have her own lifestyle. Still, I got the impression that she was prone to staying up late for research.

“I’ll have Fice wait for you in front of the gate,” Lucy said. “See you later.”

“Sure thing.”

Having said her piece, Lucy left the training hall. She really was like a storm—getting too close was harmful, and she left a trail of destruction in her wake. At least it wasn’t boring around her, so knowing her had been ultimately positive. Probably.

Even though this would be happening tomorrow, I didn’t have to rush to prepare anything. I could visit the institute with nothing more than my sword.

Oh, I guess I should tell Mewi about it once she gets home today. I’m pretty sure she’ll pout.



The next morning, I did as I was told and headed to the magic institute in the northern district instead of the order’s office. I had plenty of time—I wasn’t escorting Mewi there or anything—so I took a casual stroll from my home all the way to the institute. There was a certain charm to slowly taking in the sights around me.

“Oh, I’ll have to check out that place later.”

On the way, I made a mental note of buildings that looked like restaurants. There were still so many spots I knew nothing about in Baltrain. I needed to improve my knowledge of the local geography, even if only a little at a time.

The central district was home to various organizations that served as the pillars of Liberis, like the order’s office and the adventurer’s guild branch building. None of the buildings were as large as the palace, but they were all relatively tall, which offered a sense of how prosperous the city was.

By comparison, the western district focused on commerce. It had many street stalls and shops, so the buildings weren’t very large. It still had the atmosphere of the big city, but was almost like a lower city crammed with people. That was only compared to the central district, though. The western district was definitely thriving too.

Today’s destination—the northern district—was home to important buildings like the palace, the magic institute, and Sphene’s church. This was also where nobles and other big shots owned homes and villas. While there were houses in

the central and northern districts, most civilians lived in the eastern district. Both Curuni and Ficelle lived there too, if I remembered right.

Now, who was it that said the central and northern districts are way too expensive to live in? Even if it was somewhat far from the city center, I now had a home in the central district. I recoiled a little at the thought, though perhaps it was a little late to be having that reaction. I'd already accepted the house, so there was no point in grumbling about it now. I decided just to make the best of it.

I continued down the streets while observing the tide of people who were out and about in the morning. I had thought I'd be able to walk with Mewi, but she'd left the house early in the morning. *Maybe she's embarrassed.* We'd gone to tour the institute together and I'd taken her to register, but it seemed things were different this time around. After scarfing down today's breakfast—which had been the same as usual—she'd left the house immediately.

"I guess she doesn't like the idea of walking there with me..."

In all likelihood, she didn't want to be seen with me while wearing her uniform. Ever since she'd enrolled at the magic institute, we'd hardly even left the house together in the mornings. Her classes had a fixed schedule, but both my start and end times at the office were very flexible, so I could always accommodate her. We'd strolled around aimlessly or gone to the marketplace a bunch of times, but never while she'd been wearing her uniform. *She must be shy about it.*

I was far too old to be her brother, and we looked nothing alike. Sometimes, I honestly wondered if we would ever have a proper father-daughter relationship. I didn't think people looked at us weirdly, so that was good. To me, she was like a daughter, but I didn't know how Mewi felt about me as her father. I was definitely her guardian, at least. And since I didn't feel comfortable asking her about it directly, her true feelings on the matter remained a mystery. At any rate, there was no need to rush her answer or force one out of her. I hoped she could just take her time digesting the present at her own rate.

With such thoughts in mind, I reached the front gates of the magic institute. A woman with black hair wearing a robe—Ficelle Harbeller—was standing there

waiting for me.

“Ah, Master.”

“Yo, Ficelle. Did I keep you waiting?”

“No. Not at all.”

Today’s plan was to observe how Ficelle taught sword magic—I would also learn what the contents of the course entailed. That said, I didn’t know anything about magic, so it was possible this would end with nothing more than that. Lucy had told me it would be fine, but I still felt really out of place. I didn’t want to display any negativity in front of my former pupil...but a part of me wanted to go home.

“Where’s Mewi?” I asked.

“Oh, she went on ahead,” Ficelle answered with an expressionless nod. “Seems she was shy about you two arriving together.”

“I see.”

I was definitely interested in how Ficelle taught sword magic. According to Lucy, she sucked. Still, if there was anything I could do to help her improve, I was planning to teach her in private after class was over.

“Let’s go to the classroom,” Ficelle said. “Today’s lecture is in the morning.”

“After you.”

Ficelle passed through the gate and toward the school building with smooth strides. This was my third time visiting the institute, but I was still in awe at the size of the building and the extent of its grounds. I was starting to wonder whether the entirety of Beaden could fit inside. *Well, probably not.* The countryside had an abundance of fields, so they took up a ton of space. Back in the day, I’d run around all over the village with seemingly endless energy. *Ah, how nostalgic.*

“Ms. Ficelle! Good morning!”

“Mm. Morning.”

As we walked through the school building, the students we passed greeted

Ficelle. It was touching to see her in the role of teacher. Allucia was the knight commander, Surena was an adventurer of the highest rank, and others among my pupils had reached the greatest heights of success, but for some reason, I couldn't help but look at Ficelle with the eyes of a parent. It was probably because she was so much like Curuni, though I couldn't even begin to imagine Curuni teaching anyone anything.

"Oh yeah, how many students are taking the sword magic course?" I asked out of curiosity.

According to Kinera, it wasn't a very popular class. How many people did "unpopular" entail, exactly? I didn't think it would be down to one or two students, but it would also be problematic for Ficelle if there were too many. When it came to teaching, it was naturally easier with fewer pupils—you could cater to each student's individual needs that way. Things were different with a big group. Magic in particular was supposed to be a world brimming with talent, and if everyone had a different starting point, their goals would differ greatly too.

"Now, there's five," Ficelle answered. "Not a lot."

"I see..."

Ficelle's expression remained unchanging, but I could tell by her tone that she was a little disappointed. Five did seem like a small number. According to Kinera, around six hundred students were currently attending the magic institute, so only a very small percentage were taking this class. Maybe it was because learning to use a sword in a school for magic was considered heresy or something. That thought made me a little sad as a swordsmanship instructor.

"But now that you're here, it'll be fine," Ficelle added. "It'll get popular."

"Y-You think...?"

Allucia and Surena had acted the same way—why did she have such unconditional trust in me? It did make me happy, but sometimes, it felt like my heart would burst because of the tremendous expectations they had for me.

"Here. We'll be in this classroom today."

After walking through the building for a while, Ficelle stopped in front of a

room. Five students were waiting beyond the door. I wasn't going to be teaching them or anything, but I was still a little nervous. They were probably going to give me that "Who's this old fart?" look, which was something I'd never experienced back in the dojo. The first time I'd been exposed to it was when I was first introduced at the order's office. I still couldn't get used to it.

Well, it wasn't decided yet that I would be teaching here—today I was only here to observe. It was best to take it easy.

"Morning, everyone."

While I prepared myself, Ficelle opened the classroom door. I followed her in. Just as she'd said, there were five students seated within. One of them was Mewi. *She really is taking the sword magic course.* Much like Mewi, the other students were also wearing blue uniforms, and the sense of unity was really nice. The knights of the Liberion Order also drew quite the picture when they were all formally clad in their armor, though during most of the time I spent with them, they wore training clothes and wielded wooden swords.

The students looked at me with a clear mix of suspicion and curiosity. This was to be expected. They were here for their usual sword magic class, and their teacher had suddenly brought in an unfamiliar old man.

"Good morning!"

One of the female students replied to Ficelle's greeting, but she was the only one. The others bowed slightly or glanced over at us. *Hmmm, I don't get the feeling they hate Ficelle or anything. It's like none of them are assertive.* The girl who'd raised her voice looked full of motivation, but nobody else did.

"Ms. Ficelle, who is that?" one of the other students asked.

He was somewhat younger than Curuni or Ficelle. He had short brown hair and somewhat almond-shaped eyes. He also seemed to exude some sort of aura—something similar to Princess Salacia and Prince Glenn—so he was either a noble or from a wealthy family. This was just my own impression of him, of course.

"This is Master Beryl," Ficelle answered with a triumphant look. *Why do all my former pupils make that face when they talk about me?* "He taught me

swordsmanship. In short, he's your teacher's teacher."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said. "I'm Beryl Gardenant. At Ficelle and Lucy's—I mean, at the *headmistress's* request, I'll be sitting in on today's class. Please don't mind me. Act as you normally would."

I got my introduction out of the way as fast as possible and passed the baton to Ficelle. I was nothing more than a visitor today. First, I had to see how Ficelle taught her class, and if anything came to mind, I would make a suggestion without interrupting. That was my plan, at least.

The students' reactions were just as expected—a mix of understanding and doubt. Well, that didn't really matter. The important thing was for me to see what Ficelle was made of.

"Let's begin," Ficelle said. "Everyone pull out your wooden swords. One thousand swings."

"Ficelle, wait a sec," I said, interrupting immediately. We never did anything like that, even back at the dojo.

"Hm? Master? What's wrong?" Ficelle asked, her tone the same as usual.

Oh come on, you're not questioning this one bit? What you said was a total shock for me, just so you know.

Back in the dojo, Ficelle *had* put a lot of focus on repeating practice swings, but going for a thousand out of the blue was definitely too much.

"Isn't a thousand swings overdoing it?" I asked. I hesitated to straight out reject her lesson, so I tried easing her into it as gently as possible.

"One swing a second is a thousand seconds," she replied. "Not even twenty minutes."

"No, no, no, no, no."

What's with the muscle-brained logic? I don't remember teaching you that! I was starting to understand why Lucy thought she sucked at teaching. A sword magic course was still a class on magic, so weren't there other things that needed to be taught? What about how to activate magic, or how to weave the necessary mana, or other stuff like that? And yet, Ficelle's instructions had

nothing to do with magic whatsoever. What she was trying to accomplish was pretty much the same thing you would learn at a dojo—and in a really severe style too. Also, the people here were younger, or at most, the same age as Ficelle. A grown and trained adult might be able to pull off one thousand swings, but that number was generally too much of a burden on the body.

“This is how I practice swordplay,” Ficelle said.

“That may be so, but still...”

She had, in fact, done a ridiculous amount of practice swings at the dojo. I could acknowledge that, but it was unreasonable to expect that of everyone, even if there were only five people here.

“I can do it!” the energetic girl who’d greeted Ficelle earlier shouted cheerfully. “I’ll swing one or even two thousand times!”

Being energetic and obedient was a good thing, but I felt like she could get stronger by focusing that energy in a better way.

“I admire your spirit, but just swinging won’t really... You know what I’m saying?”

I implied that she wouldn’t really improve that way. Practice swings were certainly important. We did them at the dojo too. However, doing those and nothing else wouldn’t make anyone any better.

“Mrrrgh! This sure is complicated!”

The girl put her hands on her head and sank into thought. It was rather nostalgic. We had plenty of children back at the dojo who could claim that “Cheerfulness is all I have going for me!” In general, kids like that were very generous—it felt rewarding to teach them. And this girl was attending the institute, so she had a bonus talent in magic.

“Um,” mumbled the boy who’d asked who I was. He really did have an aura about him. Taking a closer look, I saw that he had really intelligent eyes. He seemed exceptional, and I was almost starting to think that Ficelle’s practice swing hell would’ve been fine.

“Hm? What is it?” I asked.

“Ummm... Mr. Beryl, what would you...?”

He was probably asking what I would do to teach them. Well, since I’d interrupted, I had to make some kind of suggestion. I didn’t want to become someone who just said no to everything.

“Well, let’s see... First, I’ll have to see what everyone’s swordplay is like,” I said. “Oh, if possible, I could use some introductions too.”

Before we continued, I wanted to at least know these kids’ names. I’d practically stolen Ficelle’s teaching position, but she didn’t show any signs of arguing. I was grateful for that in a way, but I also thought that it would be best to teach her a little about teaching.

“Yes! I’m Cindy Loveaut! Age fifteen!” exclaimed the cheerful girl.

“I’m Lumite Bafang,” said the boy with the aura. “My father holds the title of viscount.”

After watching things play out, the others introduced themselves too.

“Fredra Eneq...”

“Nesia Gand. I don’t really care what we do, but let’s get to it already. I don’t wanna waste time.”

And lastly, Mewi joined in. “Mewi Freya...”

I nodded. “Great, thanks everyone. Once again, I’m Beryl Gardenant.”

Okay, now I have a name for each face. Lumite really was a noble—he did have a certain refinement to him. I didn’t want to be rude, but I wondered why the son of a viscount was taking a sword magic course. There was no point in questioning it, though.

As for the other two, Fredra and Nesia, neither seemed to be adults yet. Cindy had introduced herself as fifteen years old. I had a sense that they were all around that age. Lumite was probably the oldest among them—he seemed to serve as a kind of leader here.

“Okay then, let’s start with five,” I said. “I’d like everyone to show me five practice swings.”

I needed to get a feel for their current capabilities. At any rate, starting with a thousand practice swings out of the blue was definitely too harsh. Maybe Ficelle had been doing nothing but practice swings this whole time. If so, the way she'd stated "Now, there's five" made sense.

I bet there were more students at first, but they got tired of practice swings and stopped taking the course.

"Okay! Here I go! Heya!"

The first to get right to it was Cindy. *Yup, it's great to have so much energy.* However, there was no polite way of putting it—she wasn't particularly good. With each swing, her center of gravity pitched about. Her arms weren't held to her sides either.

"Cindy, mind if I adjust your form a little?" I asked.

"Go ahead!"

At times like these, it was faster to correct her faults by adjusting her body directly rather than telling her what was wrong. Those talented enough to absorb everything from purely verbal instructions were very rare. Back in the dojo, Allucia had been pretty much the only one who could do that.

"Keep your legs apart like this—you'll maintain your center of gravity better that way. Each time you swing, keep your arms together more like this. Yeah, that's the spirit."

"Ooh! I get it!"

I shifted the position of her stance from behind and then had her swing again. It was looking a fair bit better than before. Having the correct form was really important for practice swings.

"Mr. Beryl, please take a look at my form as well," Lumite said.

"Yeah. Let's see it."

Lumite gave me a practice swing. *Hmm, he's got better form than Cindy, but...*

"You're extending your arms more than necessary," I said. "There's no need to swing all the way to the floor. Focus at your eye level and get a grasp for when to pull back your elbows."

“Understood... Like this?”

“Yup, just like that. Good, good, very good.”

Lumite repeated his swings with earnest eyes. He had a good foundation. On a side note, even though he was the son of a noble, he didn't look down on me or boast about his social status. In that regard, he must've been in the minority. *Actually, he's the first noble I've met, so I'm just guessing. It would be nice if they were all like him.*

“M-Me too, please...”

“And me. Check me out too, Mr. Beryl.”

“Go ahead.”

After watching Cindy and Lumite, Fredra and Nesia joined in too. It reminded me of my days back at the dojo, and I was starting to get really motivated. *All right! Let's keep up the pace!*

“Hee hee. You really are amazing, Master,” Ficelle mumbled in satisfaction for some reason.

Hey, Ficelle, this is for your sake. You can't continue teaching like this.

“Ficelle,” I said. “You need to properly consider what it means to teach swordsmanship.”

“Erk...”

Her expression didn't change, but I could tell that she was sulking a little. In terms of temperament and personality, Ficelle wasn't really suited for teaching others. Unfortunately, she couldn't just insist she was bad and refuse to do her job. Now that she'd accepted this position as a sword magic teacher, she had to put in some effort and take responsibility for the students attending her lectures.

Though this was the reason I had come here, guiding the students while simultaneously seeing to Ficelle's growth felt like a lot to do at once. Also, I could teach the kids how to use a sword, but sword *magic* was a different matter. Being entrusted with everything would be an issue. In short, there was a right person for the right job, and I could only pray that Ficelle would learn to

teach sword magic properly.

“Hmph...”

Watching us from the corner of her eye, Mewi swung her sword too. Her major problem was that she wasn't as physically strong as the others. Her life up until now had been far too impoverished, and her muscle mass had suffered for it. I felt like it was my duty to continue filling her belly with plenty of good food.

“Mewi, you're pitching forward,” I said. “You can't swing using only your arms.”

“I know...”

So, as I provided guidance for the students, Mewi included, the minutes flew by. Having taught at the dojo, I was pretty used to this, but instructing these students at the institute was a somewhat fresh experience. They listened to what I had to say, and after a while, they no longer looked so bad.

After getting a look at everyone's practice swings, Cindy threw me a sudden question. “Oh yeah! Are you strong, Mr. Beryl?!”

“Hm? Hmmm...”

Strong? Am I? I wonder about that. I don't think I'm weak, but I find it hard to confidently claim that I'm strong. I'd won against Henblitz, Surena, and Allucia, but I'd taken advantage of their weaknesses to sneak in my victories. In that unreasonable fight against Lucy, she'd held back, and it'd ended in a draw.

As I continued to ponder that question, Ficelle answered for me.

“He's strong. Very strong.”

As expected, she was wearing that proud look again. I was starting to get used to it.

“I know you're strong, Ms. Ficelle, but...” Fredra said shyly.

“He's stronger than me,” Ficelle said, raising her voice somewhat. “Have a complaint?”

“N-No... That's not what I mean...”

“Now, now,” I cut in, trying to calm Ficelle down.

It was only natural for them to question my skill when they hadn’t seen it for themselves. That was especially true when I wasn’t just watching them, but *teaching* them. It was proper to want to know the extent of my abilities.

“Then why don’tcha give us a look?” Nesia said. “Let’s see how strong this guy is.”

“Hmmm...”

So it’s come to this. Well, he has a point. Can’t blame him for being curious about how strong this mystery old man is.

“Ficelle, is it possible for us to go outside?” I asked.

“We can,” she answered. “The schoolyard should be empty.”

To be honest, I was a little interested too—I wanted to experience sword magic for myself. I’d witnessed Ficelle’s sword magic when she’d apprehended that pickpocket in the western district and during Bishop Reveos’s arrest. A glance was all I’d needed to know it was amazing, but how would it feel to fight against such a thing myself? Having this type of interest and curiosity was part of being a swordsman.

“Okay, then,” I said. “How about if you and I have a casual bout outside?”

“Mm, sure,” Ficelle agreed.

So, we put our practice swings on pause and then left the classroom to go outside.

“Isn’t this exciting?!”

“Yes. It should be educational.”

Cindy was full of expectation, while Lumite’s interest took the fore. I didn’t really want to spoil the mood, but I couldn’t guarantee that this would be a good match. Though I was definitely interested in sparring against a sword magic user, I couldn’t claim that I was capable of winning. Frankly, I had no idea, and if she constantly threw long-distance slashes in succession, I could easily see a future where I was utterly defeated.

“Hmph...” While all the other students were getting restless at this sudden match between teachers, Mewi—the only one who knew of my abilities—huffed, showing no interest in this at all.

Even if I did lose to sword magic here, I didn’t want to look pathetic. I had to put up a strong fight, even if I was ultimately defeated. This was, in part, because I wanted to maintain some pride in front of Ficelle and the other students...but mostly, I wanted to save face because Mewi would be watching. According to Lucy, she admired my swordplay, though Mewi had never told me that directly. Still, now that I’d heard that, I couldn’t just fight sloppily and yield.

“Hee hee...”

“Um, Ficelle?” I said. “Take it easy, okay? The goal here is to put on a show for the students.”

“I know. Hee hee...”

The whole time we walked from the classroom to the schoolyard, Ficelle maintained an eerie smile. She was definitely motivated. If she unleashed her magic at full throttle, forget winning or losing, it wouldn’t be much of a demonstration for the students. I tried conveying this to her, but I wasn’t sure she was getting it.

Is this going to be all right? I’m a little worried now.

After walking through the school building for a while, we found ourselves in a corner of the magic institute’s enormous grounds.

“Mm, it’s empty,” Ficelle said. “Here should be fine.”

“The campus sure is huge.”

I was once more reminded of how vast the grounds were. This was probably so the students could really let loose and relax during their time here. It had surely taken a ridiculous amount of money to set this place up. *Guess that shows how much Liberis is investing in cultivating wizards.* I didn’t know whether they were actually getting a return on their investment, though. Maybe I could ask Lucy about it later.

“All right, let’s start off slowly with no magic,” I suggested.

Ficelle nodded. “Got it.”

Sword magic was important here, but swordsmanship was the foundation it was built upon. I decided it was best to begin by showing the students what pure swordplay looked like.

“What? Not gonna use magic?” Nesia grumbled.

“Ah, no,” I said. “To be precise, I can’t. I’m just a swordsman.”

“Really...?” he said, looking suddenly less excited.

Yup. Sorry for butting in when I can’t even use magic. But that’s not my fault—blame Lucy for pushing this on me. It was none other than your headmistress who said this would be fine.

“I’ll be in your care,” I said to Ficelle.

“Mm, likewise.”

We got our wooden swords ready and bowed. I was honestly happy to see that everyone I’d taught at the dojo still remembered their manners. Ficelle would hopefully pass the etiquette along—I didn’t want to see these five students become ruffians who would just swing their swords around recklessly.

Now then, even back in her days at the dojo, Ficelle could be called a prodigy. Had she gotten rusty during her time at the magic institute? It was time to find out.

With our greetings over, we backed away from each other and assumed our fighting stances. Ficelle stepped in first with a keen thrust.

“Hm!”

“Hup... Hoh!”

I took half a step to the side to dodge it, but the moment I thought I’d gotten out of the way, she drew back her sword and thrust again. I knocked her blade to the side, and the shrill sound of wood clashing against wood resounded around us.

“Hah!”

Keeping up her momentum, Ficelle spun on her heels and attacked with a

horizontal slash.

“There!”

I blocked the strike at her sword’s center of gravity, then counterattacked with a downward slash. Ficelle calmly analyzed the trajectory and did as I had, swaying her upper body a little to evade the blow.

“Hoh.”

“Mrgh.”

I stepped in, slashed up, down, rotated my wrists, and attacked horizontally. I was far from going all out, but the speed and power behind my strikes were in no way lax. Ficelle blocked and evaded the chain of blows, then jumped back a little.

“Mm. Swordplay’s looking good,” I complimented.

“Ahem.”

Ficelle casually danced back a few steps with a proud smile. Her footwork was exactly as I remembered it. If anything, her movements were a little more refined than they’d been back at the dojo. It seemed she hadn’t been slacking off on her training, even after becoming a wizard. As her instructor in swordsmanship, I couldn’t have been happier.

“Wow. That’s pretty crazy.”

“So fast...!”

“Oooh! Amazing!”

I could hear the students’ astonished voices. Naturally, neither Ficelle nor I was giving it our all just yet—we were still warming up and checking things out. Ficelle’s swordplay was very close to perfection, and she had very few weaknesses. Among my pupils, Allucia was probably the closest to perfecting her swordplay. In terms of stamina and the number of attacks she could unleash, Surena was a step above the others. And in terms of raw strength, Curuni possessed significant potential. As for defense, Rose was very likely the best.

However, Ficelle’s strength lay in the fact that she had taken all these facets

to a very high level while also being able to attack from afar with sword magic. In terms of the flexibility to adapt to any situation, Ficelle's techniques surpassed everyone else.

"Okay. Time to start using it," Ficelle said.

"Sure thing," I agreed. "I'm looking forward to this."

The next moment, mana surged from Ficelle's wooden sword. This was my third time seeing it, but I was still pretty nervous. Just the thought of those swift, sharp slashes flying at me had my sweat running cold.

Also, you're not going all out, right? You're gonna hold back like when you caught that pickpocket, right? Even with no knowledge of magic, that mana around your sword is looking awfully concentrated. Is it just my imagination? Please be my imagination...

"Mgh!"

"Whoa?!"

Ficelle swung her sword far, far faster than before. A magic slash shot out, nearly matching the speed of her swing. It grazed my clothes.

Holy crap! That was close! She's definitely serious!

"Hmph!"

A second slash, then a third followed. Ficelle swung her wooden sword while taking steps forward. With each swing, a torrent of mana flew my way at a terrifying speed. And at the same time, she was closing the distance, so I had to focus more and more on everything within my field of vision as she got closer.

"Hup! Whoa?!"

I warded off one of the magic slashes with my sword. The impact was several times heavier than when we clashed blade-to-blade. I felt a numb tingling run up my arm, and I could tell by instinct—this was bad. I definitely couldn't take a direct hit. Not only was she attacking from outside my range, but the speed and power of each strike were remarkably amplified.

To put it frankly, she was pretty much cheating.

Still, she did seem to understand that this was a performance. She was holding back in her own way. If she hadn't been, the magic would've split my wooden sword in two. Seeing how the impacts were still very real gave me a glimpse into her tremendous control. Though, it wasn't like I had another sword magic wizard to compare her to.

I had almost no experience fighting wizards. The only one I'd battled before this was Lucy, and she was a pure wizard who didn't use weapons. Nevertheless, I could still tell that Ficelle's sword magic was at a very high level. I could also tell how troublesome it was to deal with it.

Unlike Lucy's magic, Ficelle's was based on her swordplay. Thus, it was fairly easy to tell when an attack manifested and where it would come from based on her stance and movements. What was more, she was my former pupil, so I knew her form well.

However, there was one huge difference between Lucy's and Ficelle's fighting styles: while Lucy had fought at a distance, Ficelle was closing in.

If I only paid attention to her magic, I wouldn't be able to react when she attacked me directly. And if I only watched out for her sword, I would get tripped up by her magic. She also had the option to just keep her distance the whole time if she wanted to. In short, if she felt like she was about to get counterattacked, she could send flying slashes at me and retreat to safety. She had very little need to overreach and step too far in, so it would be extremely difficult to take her by surprise with the same trick I'd used against Allucia. Ficelle was pretty much never going to get close enough for me to grab her.

Sword magic is a real pain to deal with.

"Ey!"

"Oooh!"

Ficelle's wooden sword slipped through the gap between her magic slashes and whizzed past my face. *Dammit, I already knew it'd be like this, but this is really tough! She's totally cheating!*

In terms of the simple volume of attacks, Surena exceeded her. However, because Ficelle's strikes ignored range completely, there were fewer

opportunities to fight back.

“Whoa there!”

I was forced into the rather lame position of desperately dodging Ficelle’s attacks. I was barely getting by, but Ficelle had complete control over the pace of the fight. As proof of that, I was starting to sweat, but she remained perfectly composed. Since she didn’t feel particularly pressured, there was no need for her to rush things, and with less burden on her mind, she didn’t have to physically exhaust herself.

“Mrgh... I really can’t get through.”

However, even though her expression remained cool, it seemed she was unsatisfied that she was incapable of getting through my defenses.

You’re unsatisfied? I’m the one who swore to myself not to look horrible in defeat, and I was the one to suggest this bout, so that puts more stress on me.

Either way, things were looking pretty bad.

What do I do about this? I’m pretty sure it’s only a matter of time before she gets through.

“So how about this?” Ficelle muttered.

“Hmm...?”

Her approach to the battle changed. Her movements were still the same as before, but the wavelength of her magic was different. To be specific, the speed at which magic slashes came flying at me was now all over the place.

Huh? Seriously? You can adjust the speed? Nobody told me that.

“Sword magic sure is amazing!” I exclaimed.

“Mm. But only because I learned your techniques, Master Beryl.”

I couldn’t help but grumble and admire this feat. When the magic slashes were fast, it was extremely difficult to counter them, but it was even worse when Ficelle let loose a mix of slow and fast slashes. Attacks I expected to reach me right away were overtaken by other magic slashes or by Ficelle herself. Even if I wanted to parry them, it was very hard to estimate the power behind each

magic slash at a glance. If I put the wrong amount of strength behind my sword, I would lose my balance and give her an even bigger opening. This was horrible for my nerves.

“You little—!”

I parried an incoming magic slash. As I did, Ficelle’s wooden sword came flying at me. I dodged it, and she used that opportunity to back off again and throw more magic slashes. This sequence repeated over and over. I had no opportunity to counterattack. Technically, I could’ve if I’d wanted to, but if I did, I would definitely take a hit. The thought of what would happen if I got hit by that magic made it very hard for me to resort to such tactics.

So what do I do? It would be too difficult to attempt the trick I’d used against Allucia. There were needle thin openings in Ficelle’s form, just like there’d been with Surena, but Ficelle was out of range so I couldn’t take advantage of them. Resorting to pure strength like I had against Rose wouldn’t work either—all I had on me was a wooden sword.

If I could only get in range, there would be a way to survive this.

Oh, right.

“Then let’s try this!”

It was the same loop as usual. The moment I parried a magic slash, Ficelle closed in. I repelled her, and she backed off. The moment she did, there was the slightest gap—something that couldn’t *really* be called an opening. That was when I recklessly attacked her with my wooden sword. To put it simply, I threw it.

“Wha?!”

Having calmly dominated the pace of the fight this whole time, Ficelle finally raised her voice in shock. I couldn’t blame her. The moment she thought she was back at a safe range, a spinning sword had come flying at her.



“Hyup!”

“Mrgh!”

For the smallest instant, she came to a stop. Ficelle reacted quickly and struck down the wooden sword, but the unexpected attack had created a blank in her mind and movements. Taking advantage of that, I closed in, grabbed her by the back of her collar, swept her legs out from under her, and tossed her to the ground.

“That’s one.”

“Mrgh... I lost...”

My finishing move hadn’t had anything to do with swordsmanship, let alone sword magic, but I was glad to display the art of fighting on a broader level.

“A-Amazing! That was amazing!”

The first to raise a delighted cheer was Cindy. Still clapping her hands repeatedly, she lingered in the excitement of the moment.

“He really handled all that...? Crazy.”

“Th-That’s our teacher’s teacher for you...!”

“Magnificent... Simply magnificent!”

The other kids’ impressions weren’t bad either. *If anyone says I cheated, I’ll be a little depressed.*

“Hmph.”

Having watched silently from beginning to end, Mewi huffed as she always did, but there was an air of satisfaction to her expression.

“That was some astonishing skill you put on display,” I said, helping Ficelle back to her feet. “Just what I’d expect of you.”

“I didn’t predict a throwing attack... I still need more training.”

Much like in the bout against Allucia, when faced with opponents who possessed skill beyond a certain level, my physical abilities and techniques reached their limits. So, to win against such opponents, I naturally had to

exploit their weaknesses or somehow force my way into a momentary opening.

At this high level of combat, victory was less about perfect swordsmanship and more about experience in battle. So, with all my years behind me, I was capable of eking out a win. In an honest battle, it would be extremely harsh to withstand all of Ficelle's attacks *and* launch a strike of my own. Knowing this now was more than enough of a boon. I wasn't planning on picking any fights, but I knew very, very well how little a chance I had against a wizard if I approached the battle with foolish honesty.

"Do people really just chuck a sword like that?" Nesia asked.

"Hmm, maybe not in a formal contest," I told him. "In an actual battle, it's more than possible."

"It's just as Master Beryl says," Ficelle added. "Use anything you can in battle. There's no need to fuss over things. If you do, you'll lose."

"I see..."

Ficelle was young, but she had proper knowledge regarding combat. This was the major difference between her and Curuni, who was about the same age as Ficelle. In this respect, she was at the same level as Allucia and Surena. It made me wonder whether Ficelle's maturity was a result of Lucy's guidance.

"So what you're saying is that adding magic to swordplay is only one such means to victory..." Nesia said.

"Exactly," Ficelle said. "I'm happy you're studying it, but there's no reason to get fixated on sword magic to the point of excluding other methods."

Ficelle would be lying if she said she didn't have a fixation on sword magic. However, she didn't let that show—she made sure to try and teach these kids that sword magic was only one method of fighting. Her attitude was definitely praiseworthy. *Being able to make that clear distinction is part of her inborn nature, I guess.* Normally, you'd show more bias toward your own techniques.

"Will I be able to fight like that too...?" Mewi muttered.

"You will," I said, plopping my hand on her head and ruffling her hair.

"Cut that out..." she mumbled, staring at the ground.

“Ha ha ha.”

“I said cut it out!”

It wasn't like she was really against it. She was just embarrassed. I knew Mewi well.

“Ah! Mewi! So sneaky!” Cindy yelled. “I wanna be able to fight like that too!”

“Right, so do I,” Lumite added.

“Ha ha. I'm sure you'll all be able to,” I told them.

Even an old country bumpkin like me had reached the status of special instructor for the Liberion Order (to be specific, I'd been forced into it). It was up to their own effort and luck, but I wasn't going to ruin the hopes of such young budlings by saying so. Whether their efforts came to fruition also depended on the effort shown by their teachers. Ficelle and I both bore great responsibility in this regard.

“Master, Master.”

“Hm?”

“Ahem.”

“Right. You've gotten even stronger than before, Ficelle. Well done.”

“Hee hee.”

Ficelle slid in beside me and seemed to want some head pats too, so I complied. *Huh. I've been reunited with several of my pupils since coming to Baltrain from Beaden, but haven't praised any of them like this.* I wasn't pampering her or anything, but I was delighted to see someone I'd taught show so much growth. I couldn't help but feel proud.

“U-Umm... Mr. Beryl, the class...”

“Oops, right.”

And as I ruffled Mewi's hair with one hand and Ficelle's with the other, Lumite shyly called out to me. *Oh yeah, we're in the middle of a sword magic class. No point in just patting heads. Let's get back to teaching.*

“All right, since we're already outside, let's enjoy the weather and get some

practice swings in.”

“Yes!” the students replied in energetic unison.

So, under the clear blue sky, surrounded by students with gleaming hope in their eyes, I spent a while providing them guidance. This was time well spent.



“Hoh! Hiyah! Taaah!”

“Mm-hmm, everyone’s looking good.”

Cindy’s spirited shouting resounded beneath the clear skies. I’d gone around watching everyone do their practice swings while pointing out flaws here and there. They were still rough around the edges, but all of them were somewhat better than when we’d first started. If they got a grasp of the fundamental forms and repeated this daily, they were likely to develop proper instincts for swordsmanship.

“Hmph! Hmph!”

The two boys, Lumite and Nesia, had passable forms. As was to be expected, boys and girls had different musculature. Given the same environment, upbringing, and training, men often ended up being a bit stronger. To put it bluntly, swordsmanship could be summed up as waving around a heavy stick. As such, muscular men often had an advantage. In that sense, Allucia, Surena, Curuni, Ficelle, and Rose all defied convention.

Now that I think about it, aren’t a lot of my successful pupils women? I’m pretty sure we had a fifty-fifty ratio back in the dojo, though.

“Hrmmm.”

Anyway, as for what the actual teacher here was up to, Ficelle simply watched me teach. I wasn’t going to reprimand her for that or anything. She was trying to learn how to teach others in her own way. When it came to sword magic, I had no knowledge whatsoever, so Ms. Ficelle would have no choice but to take over. She had to learn what she could as soon as possible.

After a while longer spent under the sun, Ficelle suddenly raised her voice.

“Ah, Master.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Class is almost over.”

“Oh, already?”

If I had to guess, it'd been about an hour since we'd started. *Man, time really flies when I'm teaching swordsmanship.*

“Okay, everyone. Let's stop here. Back to the classroom.”

At my instruction, the students stopped swinging.

“Yes! This was fun!” Cindy replied cheerfully, having raised a good sweat.

Cindy really was a good girl. She was a little simple in a way, but being obedient was more than enough of a positive point for a student. I wanted to see her grow more and more. And if possible, I wanted her to be Mewi's friend. I had a feeling she would be able to close the distance with Mewi.

“Thank you very much,” Lumite said, setting aside his wooden sword. “This was time well spent.”

“You're welcome.”

It wasn't very strange for the son of a noble to learn swordsmanship as a hobby. However, having the groundings for magic and going out of his way to choose sword magic felt somewhat unique. I was curious about what had brought him to this decision.

“This was very interesting.”

“Yeah, I really feel like I'm getting better.”

Fredra and Nesia also had a positive opinion of today's class. This did make me question how Ficelle had been teaching them to date. She probably hadn't given it much thought and had resorted to the mindset of “Anyway, just swing your swords.” This was something that needed to be improved in the future. After all, I wasn't going to be here to watch over these students until they graduated.

“Hmph...”

As for Mewi, she was the same as usual. She'd also listened to my instructions and had done just as I'd told her. I didn't have anything to say to her—and if I did, I could just bring it up when we got home.

“Oh right, there's something I want to ask everyone while I have you all here.”

With classes over, there was still something on my mind. Now that I felt like I was a little closer to everyone, I raised a question on our way back to the classroom.

“Why did each of you choose the sword magic course? If you're aiming to be wizards, I'm pretty sure there are a ton of other courses to take.”

The magic institute was huge and well-known by the populace. It was no exaggeration to say that all things related to magic in this country converged in this one spot. So, I wanted to know why they were learning sword magic specifically.

For example, Lucy didn't use sword magic. That meant there were other paths to mastering wizardry. She used a great variety of spells, so there had to be classes for those too. Of the six hundred or so students enrolled in the institute, only five attended this class. What had inspired these five to take up sword magic?

“Because I like to move my body!” Cindy answered energetically—as usual, she was the first to respond. “I don't hate magic...but I figured I might as well do it the way I enjoy most!”

“I see.”

That made sense. Simply having the groundings for magic didn't mean you loved it. There had to be those like Cindy who preferred getting physical with a sword or any other kind of weapon over using magic.

“I was interested in it from the very beginning,” Lumite said next. “I've practiced with a sword a little at home too.”

Well, nobody would take such a minor course without any interest in it. This was especially the case for the son of a viscount. He'd learned to use a sword back at home too, so this was a reasonable development. I still wondered why he hadn't quit after Ficelle had put them through practice swing hell, though.

“I, um...wanted to join after seeing Ms. Ficelle...” murmured Fredra.

I laughed. “Ha ha ha. Isn’t that nice, Ficelle?”

“Mm. Watch me all you want.”

Fredra apparently admired Ficelle’s sword magic. For any who pursued the path to mastery, having a junior who aspired to be like you was a delight to witness. I also felt great when people looked at me like that. It did make me feel a little itchy, though.

“I’m pretty much the same as Cindy,” Nesia said, playing with the wooden sword in his hand. “Swinging a sword suits me more than magic.”

He had an honest personality when it came to martial arts. One way or another, he reminded me of Henblitz. I couldn’t tell their exact ages, but Nesia had the best build among the five students here.

“I just felt like it...”

As expected, Mewi was the last to speak. Her answer was pretty much what I’d anticipated too. According to Lucy, she admired my swordsmanship, but she was never going to say something like that in front of me. I had no reason to tease her about it either—I didn’t want her to pout again. If possible, I wanted her to take that admiration to the point where she came to enjoy swordsmanship itself. A sword was too heavy to swing based only on admiration.

“Thanks, everyone,” I said. “I’m sure you’re all here for sword magic, but I’m glad to hear you enjoy wielding a sword on its own too.”

What one likes, one will do well—or so they say. People learned things faster when it involved something they liked, and this was true for every field of study. It wasn’t impossible to get stronger by swinging a sword begrudgingly, but I doubted there was anyone out there who would do such a thing.

I turned to Ficelle next. “I won’t always be around to observe, y’know. Make sure you watch them properly too.”

“I’ll try...”

“I-I’m counting on you here...” I stammered.

Is this really going to be okay? I'm getting a little anxious. Either way, my main job was at the Liberion Order. I was only helping out at the institute because they were in a pinch. I didn't have the qualifications to be a teacher at the magic institute—I couldn't use magic and I wasn't a staff member. It wasn't hard to imagine how Lucy had forcefully pushed things through to get me here.

Ultimately, it was Ficelle's role to guide these five. If there were any other skilled sword magic practitioners, they could be potential candidates too, but that wasn't my job here.

"Mr. Beryl, you're only here for today?!" Cindy yelled in shock.

"Not exactly. I do plan on making this more than a onetime thing...but my primary job is as a special instructor for the Liberion Order."

I would definitely feel bad about ending things as they were now, so I wanted to teach them what I could. However, I only expected to be involved up to a point—maybe until I was confident that they could wield a sword beyond a suitable minimum threshold. They weren't here to learn swordsmanship. They were here to learn sword *magic*.

"Special instructor for the Liberion Order... No wonder." Lumite nodded in understanding.

The other students didn't say anything, but their expressions seemed a little different now. Titles were awfully convenient at times like these. As long as the title applied to the current situation, it guaranteed a certain level of superficial appreciation.

At least in Liberis, being a special instructor for the Liberion Order was a big deal. I was of course not going to brandish that title around meaninglessly, but it was nice to be able to quickly establish a certain level of trust. It'd felt like nothing but a heavy burden at first, but I planned to rely on it for situations like this in the future too.

"Wow... Mr. Beryl, you're a real big shot, huh?!" Cindy shouted in excitement.

Ficelle agreed for some reason. "Yup. Master Beryl is amazing."

I didn't know whether to feel happy or itchy. To be precise, *I* wasn't amazing—my title was.

“Ah.”

“Oh?”

And just as we got back to the classroom, an unfamiliar bell echoed through the building.

“The ending chime,” Ficelle said. “Today’s lesson is over.”

“Aaah.”

Having a signal to set a fixed time for classes *did* make this feel like a school. There was no such thing for the knights at the training hall, and back at the dojo in Beaden, we didn’t have anything so clear-cut either.

“Mr. Beryl, thanks so much for today!” exclaimed Cindy.

“Of course. See you later.”

With Cindy’s cheerful farewell, the students got their stuff and dispersed. Since classes had a fixed end time, they probably had other lessons to attend. They couldn’t be at the institute to only learn sword magic, after all.

“All right, I guess I’ll head over to the office,” I said.

“Right.” Ficelle nodded. “I’m leaving too.”

I’d come here in the morning and hadn’t done much more than teach, so I hadn’t personally gotten to swing my sword much. As such, I was planning on going to the order’s office to say hi and get some training in. It seemed Ficelle didn’t have any business left at the magic institute either.

“Oh yeah, how often is the sword magic course held?” I asked after we saw the students off.

“Twice a week.”

“I see.”

That was similar to the typical dojo—or maybe somewhat less than typical. At least, that was what I thought as an old man who’d been holed up in Beaden for all his life. I didn’t know what was normal in the big city.

Twice a week would make it a little hard for me to show up for every lesson. Just as I’d told the students, I was a special instructor for the Liberion Order, not

a teacher for the magic institute. Allucia had said that once a week wouldn't be a problem, so it was only appropriate to come here that often. I decided to consult Lucy about it later.

Lucy had said that today's trial run would consist of nothing more than letting me observe today's class, so I hadn't actually agreed to teach here or anything. At this stage, I could probably still refuse. However, after seeing Ficelle today, I didn't believe she could properly teach this course. I would feel bad just saying, "Okay, do your best," and abandoning her.

So, I was planning to support her without getting in the way. I would join in here and there to spur Ficelle's growth. The magic institute was a gathering of haves over have-nots, and here we had five whimsical students who'd chosen to learn the way of the sword. I did feel a desire to see their growth.

"Ficelle, you're gonna have to learn how to teach," I said.

"Erk..."

"Don't sulk about it..."

I was suddenly a little anxious about the future. Was this really going to be all right? It would be problematic if she continued assigning nothing but practice swings. I wasn't sure how much this course was going to go into practical battles, but there had to be a certain number of practice matches involved. Sword magic was clearly a technique for combat, so she had to teach these kids how to fight.

"You could just watch them forever..." Ficelle grumbled.

"Things would be easier if I could," I said. "But you can't be so halfhearted about this."

"Ugh..."

"Come on now."

"I know... I'll try..."

I only had one body and I couldn't clone myself. Also, I was incapable of using magic. Ficelle was now in a position to teach at the magic institute, and regardless of how that'd happened, it wasn't acceptable for her to make light of

that, ignore it, or entrust it to me just because she wasn't suited for it.

"I don't know the details, but you accepted this job," I told her. "You have to fulfill your responsibility."

"Mm..."

Ficelle had learned everything there was to learn at my dojo and had graduated without a hitch. It wasn't quite right to treat her as a pupil again at this stage. Maybe it was best to interact with her as an experienced teacher instead. Regardless, I was delighted that she'd gone from learning swordsmanship to being in a position to teach it. If my techniques and experiences could be of any help, I wanted to do everything I could for her.

"Hee hee. I still have a lot to learn."

"I've got great hopes in you, Ms. Ficelle."

"Mrgh."

Exchanging such idle chatter, we left the classroom.

"Phew, I'm a little beat."

"Hee hee, good work today, Master."

It was a little while after the five students had left for their next classes. I stretched and grumbled a bit as Ficelle and I walked down the corridor. The lesson had only been an hour long, but teaching unfamiliar students in an unfamiliar environment had been mentally taxing. I'd even had a match with Ficelle, so I was worn out. Still, I felt more satisfaction than fatigue. A greedy part of me wanted to see those five students' growth to the very end, but that wasn't my duty.

"There really are a lot of students here," I commented, looking at the people coming and going around us.

"Yes. Just not a lot taking sword magic," Ficelle said.

Six hundred students felt very different from my days at the dojo. We just so happened to be walking around while students were between classes—a ton of kids were hurrying through the corridors.

I knew that pretty much all of them were aiming to become wizards. It was easy to imagine the vast amount of knowledge they had to absorb. Swordsmanship was about more than just swinging a sword. Practical experience was of course important, but classroom lectures, or more specifically, acquiring knowledge, was also key. This was probably even more important when it came to magic.

“Oh yeah, you attended the institute after leaving the dojo, right?” I asked Ficelle.

“I did. I worked really hard.”

“Very impressive,” I said, praising her honestly.

“Heh heh heh.” Ficelle’s expression was unusually soft for her.

Back in her dojo days, I hadn’t known that Ficelle could use magic. During the five years she’d spent with me, I’d never heard anything about it. I had no idea when she’d awoken to her magical talent, but she’d definitely only started studying it *after* graduating from my dojo. In other words, it was a relatively recent thing.

She’d set her mind on swordsmanship first—from my perspective, she’d grown considerably at it—and then, she’d set pure swordplay aside to follow a new path. This must’ve required a ton of effort. Even if I suddenly manifested a talent for magic, I probably wouldn’t put my swordsmanship aside to learn to wield it. In that respect, her youth had probably played a part in her decision-making. At my age, if I discovered a new talent for anything, I would need considerable courage to devote myself to it—especially if I wasn’t sure that my talent would blossom.

“Today, I taught them just as I used to back in the dojo. Was that fine?” I asked Ficelle somewhat belatedly.

“Sure. Not a problem.”

I didn’t know how much sword magic relied on swordplay as a base, but judging from what I’d seen from Ficelle, its fundamentals were completely reliant on the blade. Though she was a wizard, Ficelle’s core talent focused entirely on swordplay. It was like she was using magic to assist and reinforce her

own style.

“The sword magic course only started this year...but it’s not popular,” Ficelle muttered, her expression darkening a little.

“Well, five definitely isn’t a lot.”

It was probably hard to get people to attend a class where magic served an auxiliary role. Many who attended the magic institute likely had a genuine interest in magic.

“If not enough people are interested...it’ll get canceled,” Ficelle muttered.

“Huh? Really?” I hadn’t heard anything about that. Lucy had never mentioned it.

“It won’t vanish right away,” she continued. “But if the roster consistently has so few people on it, the school will decide that there’s not much purpose in continuing to provide the course.”

“That makes sense...”

The school wasn’t a charity—it was a place of learning, but it was also meant to teach students skills that benefited the nation. Things that didn’t lead to a profit would eventually be weeded out. The same went for a swordsmanship dojo.

“But it should get popular now that you’re here...probably,” Ficelle said.

“Ha ha ha... Those’re some serious expectations I have to live up to.”

It suddenly felt like I was burdened with the heavy responsibility of reviving this class. I did intend to do everything I could, but I honestly didn’t know whether it would get popular. I was ignorant when it came to magic—my teaching here would basically just be an extension of what I did at the dojo. Still, even if there were only a few of them, now that I was in a position to teach, I wanted to give the students a good experience. But I didn’t want to overextend myself either, so I was simply going to do what I could.

“Anyway, what’s it feel like to be able to use magic?” I asked, not wanting to drag the previous topic out too long.

“At first, I kind of just realized, ‘Oh, this is mana.’ I’m sure the same goes for

most people.”

“Hmmm...”

Mana. Mana, huh? I guess that's essential when it comes to magic, but as someone who can't use it, it sure is a mystery. That said, I'd personally witnessed Lucy and Mewi's magic, as well as Ficelle's sword magic, so I couldn't deny its existence.

“It sure is a luxury to be able to use both long-range magic and a sword,” I said. “I'm jealous.”

A sword was naturally used at close range. I was pretty envious of being able to add a long-range option without having to switch weapons. I'd wielded a bow before—and it'd felt rather clunky—but sword magic was very different from that.

“Don't be,” Ficelle said. “Not a lot of people know this, but magic actually can't be used from that far away.”

“Huh? Really?”

I'd been certain that magic had a very long range, so Ficelle's statement was unexpected. What did she mean that magic couldn't be used from far away? It sure looked suitable for long distances to me. Even if mana limited the amount of firepower available, it seemed far easier to use than bows and such.

“Hmm... Mana is a medium,” Ficelle started explaining. “The farther it is from the body, the harder it is to control. Also, it gets weaker. If you try to send it flying too far, you get tired fast, and it becomes less powerful.”

“Is that so...?”

That was honestly surprising. But judging by what she'd said, this was something that anyone who had a talent for magic already knew. Was controlling mana that hard a feat? In my arbitrary image of how it worked, it was like weaving invisible dough and sending it flying. It turned out it wasn't that crude.

“For example, what does it feel like to throw a magic flame far away?” I asked.

“It’ll disperse once you’re no longer able to control the mana,” Ficelle answered. “Anyone with talent can manifest magic, but maintaining the scale and extent of a spell is very difficult.”

“I see...”

That meant it wasn’t a valid strategy to line up wizards like some kind of fortress battery. Magic was surprisingly inflexible. I was starting to realize just how amazing Lucy was for being able to shoot a never-ending barrage of magic.

This also explained things with Mewi. She had a talent for magic and could create fire from thin air. However, making that fire bigger, maintaining it, or sending it flying required specialist knowledge and techniques. That was why Mewi was currently only capable of igniting a flame.

“Then...what exactly *is* sword magic?” I asked.

“Strictly speaking, it can be done without a sword. However, having a medium makes it easier for the caster to maintain a clear image. Also, adding an ‘edge’ to magic is a new thing. I don’t know of anyone who practices with other types of mediums, but technically, staff and tome magic should also be possible.”

“Hmmm...”

Holding a book in one hand and shooting magic fitted the image of a wizard perfectly. However, wielding a sword and magic simultaneously was a far more exciting thought for a swordsman. To put it bluntly, it was just plain cool.

Lucy had once told me that the magic humans were currently capable of manifesting was less than one percent of the magic present in the world. If so, further research could create many other new kinds of magic. *Turns out, sword magic is relatively new too.*

“So you’re at the forefront of the study of sword magic,” I said.

“I wonder...” Ficelle pondered for a moment. “Well, there are other practitioners, and the commander was the one to teach me.”

Ficelle looked somewhat pleased, but she didn’t affirm my words. According to the one who’d taught her, Ficelle was better at sword magic than anyone else. If so, it was no exaggeration to say that she was the foremost practitioner.

“Either way, you’re still extremely talented,” I said. “You’ll have to keep giving it your all.”

“Mm...”

Was sword magic going to one day gather more and more practitioners and become one of the greatest forces among wizards? I certainly hoped so. But judging by the current state of Ficelle’s class, things were looking pretty grim.

“Hm? You’re...Ficelle?”

“Ah, Vice Principal.”

As we went through the school building talking about such things, an old man—someone clearly different from all the students we’d seen in the corridors—walked toward us. *He seems to be a staff member here. Vice principal, huh? I assume he’s rather important.*

“And who is this?” he asked, turning a vigorous gaze toward me.

“A pleasure to meet you,” I said. “I’m here as a temporary lecturer for the sword magic course at the institute’s request. My name is Beryl Gardenant.”

Since he’d put me on the spot, I’d called myself a temporary lecturer, but that wasn’t necessarily wrong. My first impression of this man was that he was very old—he seemed a fair bit older than even my dad. His hair and beard were completely white, and deep wrinkles ran across his face. However, despite his advanced age, he stood up straight. He didn’t use a cane or anything either, so he definitely had a capable lower body.

“I see... I’m Faustus Brown—the vice principal of the magic institute.”

Huh? Did he just sigh? Was it something I said?

“Please refrain from making a mess here,” he said.

“Right...”

With that, he immediately turned on his heels. *What did he mean by that? I was just teaching kids how to wield a sword.*

“Allow me to give you a warning,” Brown said, suddenly coming to a stop and turning around.

“What is it?” I asked.

“As long as you have the headmistress’s permission, I won’t say anything about your presence here. However, be sure to stay away from the lower levels.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”



“Then if you’ll excuse me.” With that, he walked away for good, leaving behind a strange atmosphere.

“Ficelle, the school has a lower level?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. I don’t know what’s down there either. We were also told to stay away.”

“I see...”

Even the staff here didn’t know the details. That meant it must be a highly classified secret. Lucy might be able to tell me about it if I asked, but I didn’t have any intention of delving too deeply. I didn’t like someone keeping their eye on me, so I decided to just do as I was told. Besides, if Lucy hadn’t divulged the information, it meant I didn’t need to know. It would be a waste of effort to wonder about it.

“What kind of person is the vice principal?” I asked.

“To him, magic is above all else,” Ficelle said. “He’s very earnest when it comes to his craft. He’s also very strict.”

“Hmm.”

Magic above all else. That didn’t have a great ring to it. Sword magic was relatively new, so perhaps he didn’t really accept the use of magic in support of swordsmanship.

“Hey, does the vice principal...?” I started to ask.

“Mm. He doesn’t really approve of sword magic...I don’t think.”

“I see.”

His reaction had been bad. What was more, if someone with the influence and status of a vice principal had such an opinion, the current situation looked grim. I wanted to do something to help, but the fate of the sword magic class was entirely up to those in charge.

“Are there factions among wizards?” I asked.

I was just a little curious now. Just recently, I’d gotten involved in the neighboring country’s dispute between papists and royalists, so I couldn’t help

but wonder. I doubted it was going to devolve into a civil war—at least, I wanted to believe so—but I wanted to avoid getting dragged into something weird again.

“I wouldn’t really call them factions,” Ficelle said. “There are all kinds of magic. Everyone has their favorites. But there are people who are anti-wizardry—people who say things like, ‘Who the hell do you think you are, distorting the mysteries of magic with your filthy human hands?’”

“Th-There’re people like that too, huh...?”

I doubted there was anyone like that in the magic institute, but it was good to know that they existed. In all things, there were supporters and dissenters. There were surely some who criticized swordsmanship for being barbaric too.

But since this faction explicitly described themselves as “anti-wizardry,” they weren’t against magic itself. In short, they recognized the existence of magic, but they didn’t accept it being used by human hands in the form of wizardry.

“There sure are all kinds of people in the world,” I said.

I’d never even thought of such things during my days in Beaden. Pretty much my entire life had been spent in that village. Coming to Baltrain had been eye-opening—it had certainly broadened my views on the world.

While I was still curious about how the dojo back home was doing, my new lifestyle was so fresh and stimulating compared to my days teaching swordsmanship in Beaden. Even this current matter was something I would have never experienced in the countryside. So, even though Allucia had practically dragged me here to take the job with the order, things weren’t so bad.

“What’s wrong, Master?” Ficelle asked as I basked in nostalgia.

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about how amazing Baltrain is.”

“Hm?”

I gotta cut that out. Now’s not the time to be so moved. I’ve got work to do at the order. Gotta keep it together.

Chapter 2: An Old Country Bumpkin Nurtures Friendships

“Yo, Balder. I’m coming in.”

“Oh, Master. Welcome, welcome.”

It was the day after I’d gone to the magic institute with Ficelle. Following my morning training, I dropped by Balder’s Smithy to pick up my sword.

“Your sword’s all sharpened up. Gimme a sec.”

“Yeah, sure. No rush.”

Balder quickly figured out what I was there for and vanished behind the counter. While he went to get my sword, I looked at the fine weapons crammed onto the walls. I spied quite a few that I’d seen on my previous visits. *They haven’t sold, huh? Balder’s Smithy isn’t exactly flourishing.*

The shop itself was pretty small, and there wasn’t exactly an abundance of stock. In comparison, the smithy Allucia had brought me to upon coming to Baltrain—the purveyor to the Liberion Order—seemed to be far more customer-friendly. That shop was nice and big, had plenty of stock, and above all else, had an area where shoppers could test out weapons.

However, that didn’t necessarily mean Balder was starving for sales. He was both a blacksmith and a former swordsman, and though he wasn’t particularly skilled with a sword, a blacksmith who knew the ins and outs of using a sword was a very precious thing indeed.

Because of his unique perspective, Balder was highly valued by adventurers like Surena but not by organizations like the order and the garrison. Those organizations demanded uniformity among their equipment, whereas the adventurers favored weapons that matched their personal skills, techniques, and tastes.

Balder was my former pupil, so if he was having trouble putting food on the

table, I wanted to do something to help. It seemed this was needless worrying on my part, though. And he was making a living doing what he loved, so that was probably enough.

Also, Balder showed no signs of taking on any apprentices or pupils—he did everything himself. As such, he wouldn't be able to meet everyone's needs if he got too many customers.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Master."

"It's fine. Just looking at the weapons here is fun."

"That so? Wanna try forging one yourself?"

"Ha ha ha, that's definitely pushing it."

I accepted my red-sheathed sword from Balder. Then, I drew it and held it under the window's light—the faint red glow of the blade was dazzling.

"Mm. Great work as always," I said.

"Heh heh."

It had the same shine as when I'd first picked it up. Having it sharpened had definitely been the right choice. It was now as good as new.

"Oh yeah," Balder said. "Surena was asking how your sword is working out."

"She was? If she drops by again, tell her I'm ecstatic with it."

"Yeah, leave it to me."

This sword had been made from Zeno Grable's materials, and it'd fallen into my hands through a strange series of connections I'd made in Baltrain. A part of me still thought it was more than I deserved, but having a nice sword felt great.

I renewed my determination to devote myself even further to my craft so that I wouldn't be an embarrassment to my blade.

"On that note, has Surena been doing well?" I asked.

"Sure seems like it. As usual, she's been traveling all over the place."

"That's good to hear."

Allucia and Curuni were knights, whereas Ficelle was part of the magic corps.

Surena, though, was an adventurer, and a black rank at that. Unlike the other three girls, I had very few opportunities to meet Surena in Baltrain, even though this city was the heart of Liberis.

Famous adventurers spent a lot of time away from the city for work. Their duties went beyond national borders—on paper, at least. A good twenty years had passed since we'd looked after Surena at the dojo, so she was a splendid adult now. I didn't have to worry about her after all this time, but now that we'd reunited, I couldn't help but wonder how she was doing.

"All right, I'll see you later," I told Balder.

"Sure. If anything happens, don't hesitate to drop by."

I handed over the replacement sword I'd been using, then left the shop. It really was relaxing to have my usual blade back at my waist. It was a little flashy for me, but my body had long since become familiar with its weight.

"Okay, then..."

My business for the day had concluded. The knights' training had gone fine, and my sword had come back to me. All that was left was to go home and have dinner with Mewi. It was still a little too early for that, though.

"Maybe I should stock up on groceries..."

I changed directions and headed toward the western district. I went there once every few days with Mewi to buy food, but with a growing child and a fully grown adult living together, our food supply diminished faster than expected.

Fortunately, I had nothing to worry about from a financial perspective. I could provide Mewi with an above-average standard of living. I had my original savings, my wages as a special instructor, and the gift from Ibroy. And, in all likelihood, I could expect additional pay from the magic institute for serving as a temporary lecturer. That last one I was only going to consider as *temporary* extra income. I didn't want to rely on it. Ibroy's reward had also been a onetime thing. Still, with all the money I was making, it was simple to provide for one child and an adult. Since I'd also been relieved of having to pay for an inn, my plan was to take good care of Mewi until she could be independent.

"Ooh, that meat is pretty cheap."

While thinking about my finances, I walked over to the western district's marketplace. Having a surplus of money didn't mean I could be wasteful. I was going to spend when I had to, but it was practical to not splurge on frivolous things.

"Welcome! Our recent delivery included a lot more meat than usual, so it's on sale right now."

"Hmm, just what I like to hear."

I exchanged a few words with the butcher while scrutinizing the meat on display. Baltrain's southern district was an enormous agricultural zone. Their primary focus was on dry field crops, but that didn't mean the entire region was dedicated to that. Their animal farms were relatively prosperous too. In Beaden, we had village hunters to meet our demands. I wondered if Baltrain had dedicated hunters too. Maybe they managed entirely off livestock.

"I'll take that cut over there."

"Sure thing. Thanks for the business."

Well, I didn't really have to delve into that. Either way, Baltrain had an abundance of meat—supply certainly met demand—and I had nothing to complain about when I benefited from that. I didn't make a living off hunting or anything, after all.

"Okay then."

I'd ended up buying the meat on impulse, but I was sure we would finish it quickly. I had a full appetite, though I wasn't exactly a glutton. Mewi was in a growth spurt, so she also ate a fair bit, and she was learning swordsmanship on top of everything. I needed her to eat properly and train properly.

Having quickly finished my shopping, I went straight to my home in the central district. The city was as lively as ever. Around this time back in Beaden, the only noises I could hear were lumberjacks cutting down trees and the cries of birds and animals. Here in Baltrain, the sound of humanity was far more prominent.

Despite spending so many years out in the sticks, I was now accustomed to city life. "Home is where you make it," so they say. On the contrary, now that I

knew about the convenience of the big city, I was starting to feel a little reluctant about confining myself to the countryside again. At the very least, I intended to continue my life in Baltrain until Mewi graduated from the magic institute and struck out on her own.

As for after that, I didn't know yet. My role as a special instructor at the Liberion Order probably wasn't going to continue forever, and I had the dojo back home to think of. My dad had probably sent me out here after considering these factors already.

This matter of heirs was difficult. I wasn't particularly proactive on that front, but I also couldn't force the responsibility of bearing a child on a woman just so I could have someone to take over the dojo. The ideal path would be to raise a kid with a foundation of mutual love.

I knew my pupils saw me in a favorable light...but that didn't mean I could just settle down with one of them. *This is pretty difficult. It'll probably take a while to figure something out.*

"I'm back."

And with such thoughts in mind, I was home before I realized it. When I'd first moved here, I hadn't known the streets at all, but now, I remembered the local geography. I was capable of getting to our home without any issues.

"Mm. Welcome back," Mewi said, peeking out to greet me. "What's with that?"

"Oh, this? It was cheap, so I bought it."

"Hmm."

Her eyes were fixed on the meat dangling from my hand.

"You really love meat, huh?" I asked, teasing her a little.

"Shut up." She sounded somewhat peevish.

In my own mind, being able to poke fun at her favorite foods like this was part of offering her a decent lifestyle. Due to her upbringing, Mewi wasn't the type to make selfish demands, so I had to be sure she didn't grow anxious or dissatisfied without me knowing about it.

“How ’bout meat for tonight’s main dish?” I asked.

“Mm.”

I’d already bought the meat, so there was no point in excluding it from the dinner table. We were going to treat ourselves to a nice hearty meal tonight. That said, neither Mewi nor I were capable of cooking anything elaborate.

When I cooked, I pretty much just used the basics of bachelor cooking; when Mewi cooked, she stewed everything. Well, she’d recently improved her chopping skills at least, so there were a lot fewer uneven chunks of various sizes.

The world wasn’t so simple a place that you could live entirely using just your sword or magic. Allucia, Surena, and Ficelle were exceptions—asking the average person to reach such heights would be far too demanding. Cooking was yet another skill that was necessary for becoming independent. There wasn’t much I could teach Mewi in this regard, but I had to at least fulfill the minimum that was expected of me as her guardian.

“What to make today?” I mused. “Not that my repertoire is particularly big.”

“Hmm... Roasted meat is nice.”

“Okay, let’s go with that.”

The princess’s word was final. Today’s menu was decided. *All right, time for this old man to put in some work. Well, I’m just gonna season the meat and roast it...*

I quickly got dinner ready, took a seat at the table, gave thanks for the food, and started eating. Finding the complete silence somewhat awkward, I brought up something that’d been on my mind.

“Oh yeah,” I said.

Mewi glanced at me. “What...?”

“How’d it feel to swing a sword?”

“Hmm...”

Mewi groaned a little, then took a sip of her vegetable soup. Today’s menu

was roasted meat, brown bread, and a chunky vegetable soup. For the meat, I'd only sliced it and roasted the whole thing over a fire. The bread had come ready-made, and the soup involved nothing more complicated than chopping up the ingredients and tossing them all in a pot together.

Making soup, stew, or pot-au-feu all took quite a bit of time, but not a lot of work. It was also easy to adjust the portions, so we could make more than enough for two whenever we wanted. Any leftovers, we could finish the day after, but to reiterate, Mewi had a fairly large appetite.

"Using a sword is hard..." Mewi mumbled. "I can really tell how amazing you and Ms. Ficelle are."

"Ha ha ha, I'm glad to hear it."

I couldn't help but smile at her answer. The art of swordsmanship wasn't as simple as it looked—it was more than just swinging a sword around. For each stance and swing, there were techniques that linked everything together—it was impossible to master them all in one day. Learning swordplay required extreme repetition and will, all for a fragment of mastery. Whether you were capable of this was dependent on your own effort and talent.

However, there was no telling how much talent lay dormant in a person or how much effort was required to awaken that talent. The only way to find out was to spend time swinging a sword in earnest. It wasn't like magic, where being able to use it at all signified talent. The same also went for many skills beyond swordsmanship.

Fortunately, thanks to my dad's genes and training, I'd been blessed with respectable talent and an environment in which to foster it. I wanted to at least take my techniques and experiences and pass them on—both to Allucia and the knights of the Liberion Order, and to the fledgling Mewi.

"You have relatively good control over your body," I said. "If you try hard, you should be able to get pretty strong."

"Hmph..."

Mewi huffed a little, then bit into some meat. From what I'd seen at the magic institute, Mewi wasn't devoid of talent for swordsmanship. Because of

her destitute past as a pickpocket, she wasn't well-built, so that needed improvement. However, she was relatively agile—she knew when to put the right amount of strength into each body part to move in a precise way, and she likely did this mostly by instinct. Of the people I knew, Allucia and Surena were extraordinarily good at controlling their bodies. I wasn't going to declare that Mewi was capable of reaching the same heights as them, but if she continued swinging a sword seriously, I figured she could get pretty far.

“How's magic going?” I asked.

“Mm... I'm still on the basics. So far, I can only tell it's kinda hard to learn.”

“I see.”

I was a master at swordsmanship but completely ignorant when it came to magic. Though I doubted the institute was lax when it came to its lessons, I could only trust them on that front. Much like with Mewi's swordplay, I just had to sit back patiently and watch her grow. If magic was something that could be taught and mastered with the snap of a finger, they wouldn't have needed the institute to begin with.

“But I guess...it's kinda fun,” Mewi added, her lips curving a little.

“Mm. I couldn't ask for more.”



Mewi had mellowed out a little since moving in with me and attending the magic institute. She'd stopped yelling about every little thing, and I could see that she was putting effort into rectifying her provocative attitude. Of course, a change in environment wasn't enough to immediately correct the personality and manner of speech she'd built up over the years. Still, those who knew her could tell that she was changing little by little.

I'm sure that's a good thing.

If possible, I wanted her to keep it up and make some school friends, rejoice in her school life, and grow in both body and mind. Cindy from the sword magic course seemed like she could be Mewi's friend. Even though I'd ended up going to the institute due to a strange twist of fate, I had no intention of butting into Mewi's personal relationships yet. As long as things didn't get out of hand, my policy was to stand back and watch attentively. But if things took a turn for the worst...I was liable to come flying to her side.

"You're coming again next week?" Mewi asked.

She's asking if I'll come back? That's a rare inquiry from her.

"Mm-hmm... Probably. I need to work out the details with Allucia and Lucy first."

"Hmm..."

It seemed she was concerned in her own little way. At least, I was hoping so. Now that I thought of it, I'd explained my relationship with Mewi to Kinera, but what about the sword magic students? Did they even need to know? If Mewi didn't feel out of place, I felt like things were fine as they were. I wanted to avoid having her circumstances prodded at, and I didn't want people to look at her weird because we were related.

Fortunately, Mewi didn't seem to care about that stuff. Even if I was the type to play favorites, it was in her nature not to see that in a good light. So, because of these factors, we were capable of maintaining a public image—I was just another temporary lecturer, and she was just my student. Ficelle seemed to be avoiding that subject too, so as long as there were no weird circumstances, I planned to maintain the status quo.

“Why do you ask? Did something happen?” I asked.

“No... Um... Nothing.”

I tried digging into why she’d asked about my schedule, but she hesitated to answer. Figuring it was best not to force it out of her, I didn’t pursue the subject.

The sense of distance between Mewi and me was rather peculiar. We weren’t complete strangers, but we weren’t friends of greatly differing ages either. On paper, we were father and daughter, but it was difficult to quantify—was that how things truly were? We were in fact living together, and I was officially her guardian, but what was the right word to describe our relationship? Nothing immediately came to mind, and that didn’t really bother me. However, for the sake of Mewi’s future, it was best to draw a clear emotional line.

Well, either way, this wasn’t something for me to decide on my own. Her feelings on the matter were of utmost importance. And until she discovered what those feelings were, I would watch over her patiently and support her as best I could.

“How was it...?” Mewi mumbled as she tore little bites of her bread.

“Hm? How was what?”

“Um... Me and the others...”

“Aaah...”

She was probably referring to the students in the sword magic course. It seemed she wanted a broad idea of my perspective. “Just as I said before, you have good control over your body,” I started. “As for your sword handling...well, you’re just getting started. You’re on the right track.”

“Mm...” Mewi nodded shyly.

It seemed she wasn’t used to getting praised yet. My plan was to give her more and more whenever I had the chance.

“In terms of pure instincts, I guess Lumite is ahead of everyone,” I continued. “But that’s only how things stand right now, though.”

As the son of a viscount, Lumite had learned to use a sword at home. Having

knowledge of the fundamentals made a pretty big difference. Everyone's efforts would play a role in closing that gap, but at present, Lumite was the most accustomed to wielding a sword.

"As for Nesia, he's got the best build of the bunch," I said. "He's got the most physical strength."

"And Cindy...?"

"Oh? You curious?"

"Not really..."

"Ha ha ha."

It was pretty rare for Mewi to refer to anyone by name, and from what I'd observed, Mewi was hardly ever curious enough about someone to bring them up herself.

"I can't say much at this stage," I told her. "Still, her honesty and stamina are both wonderful weapons."

"I see..."

I doubted Cindy had been blessed with an environment to learn the fundamentals like Lumite, and she wasn't as well-built as Nesia. She was a girl, so in terms of pure physical strength, it would be difficult for her to keep up with the guys. Regardless, her simple honesty and boundless energy were impressive, and she had enough endurance to keep up in a real battle. It was still unclear whether she had any talent lying dormant within her, but either way, it felt great to mentor such an obedient kid.

It still felt somewhat strange to teach fundamental sword skills at the magic institute, but that was just how sword magic worked. Nobody expected anything regarding magic from me, so I decided to just do as Lucy had told me—take it easy and teach some swordsmanship.

"Do you talk with Cindy often?" I asked.

"Not really... She just talks to me without asking first..."

"Heh heh. I see, I see."

“What? What’s so funny?”

“Ha ha ha, it’s nothing—my bad.”

Mewi was sure to pout if I continued teasing her, so I backed down. It seemed her school life was relatively fulfilling. I had to do my best at my duties so I didn’t end up shackling her in any way.



Some time passed. By now, I’d taught at the magic institute a few times. Today’s lesson involved having our five sword magic students run around the needlessly vast grounds of the institute.

“Yup. Two more laps,” I said.

Ficelle nodded. “You heard him. Run, run, run.”

“Yes! Hi-yaaaaah!” Cindy shouted a cheerful reply and sped up.

“Mm-hmm. It’s good to be energetic,” I remarked. She really *did* have a lot of stamina. She could probably give some of the pupils who’d gone to my dojo for a few years a run for their money.

Nesia and Lumite were stronger in terms of pure muscle, but Cindy deserved a special mention for her endurance. It was enough for me to wonder whether she was more suited to being a swordswoman than a wizard. I was a little curious about how things would turn out if her talent for magic didn’t blossom.

“Tch...! Like hell I’m gonna lose!”

“Neither am I!”

Witnessing Cindy speed up, Nesia and Lumite—the two boys—refused to back down. They picked up the pace. In all things, having someone to compete against was for the better. No matter how tremendous a talent you had lying dormant, there was a limit to what could be achieved on your own. By competing with others and going to someone for guidance, you fostered your own growth. I doubted I would still be wielding a sword to this day if not for my dad.

“Haah... Haah...”

“H-Haaah...! Gaaah...!”

Meanwhile, things seemed a little rough for Mewi and Fredra. In particular, I was a little...well, *considerably* worried about Fredra’s stamina. I didn’t know anything about her upbringing and character, but she didn’t have Cindy’s boundless energy. She was just managing to shuffle her legs and suck air into her lungs.

As for Mewi, she didn’t have much endurance...which was just as I’d expected. Her age and sex did limit how much strength she had at her disposal, but her body also didn’t yet have a firm foundation. There was no other way to build that foundation than to train her physique and make sure she had proper eating habits. Much like with swordsmanship and magic, the body couldn’t be built in a single day.

“This brings back memories,” Ficelle said as she watched the students go. “I ran a lot too.”

“Yeah. We did a lot of running at the dojo.”

At a glance, Ficelle looked somewhat dainty, but she actually had significant stamina. She’d put this on display during Bishop Reveos’s arrest. Though her top speed was only so-so, she was capable of maintaining that speed for a pretty long time.

We did teach swordsmanship techniques at the dojo, but we put an equal amount of effort—or maybe even more—into sculpting the body. That was why many of our pupils boasted tremendous stamina. My dad had first modeled this policy for me, and according to him, this was how things had been done at our dojo for generations. I’d spent a lot of time running in the past, as had my dad, and as had his father before him.

It was precisely because of such training that I was able to maintain a reasonable amount of stamina despite having forty-five years under my belt. And since I agreed with this policy, I had all my pupils run too. *Well, it’s probably impossible for me to run as much as I used to. I have pretty good stamina for my age, but there’s no winning against the sands of time.*

“When it comes to swinging a sword or anything else, the most important thing is stamina,” I said.

“I think so too,” Ficelle agreed.

You really couldn't make light of stamina. Those who couldn't understand its importance would find it hard to maintain focus after just a few swings. Muscle training was also important. The Liberion Order, on the other hand, actually put more emphasis on physical strength. That wasn't necessarily wrong, of course. You needed an appropriate amount of muscle to swing a sword reliably. Willpower was also important, but that certainly wasn't enough on its own. All of these factors were required at the same time if one wanted to truly master swordsmanship, and my dad and I sought to train every one of these areas.

So, what was the condition for being the strongest swordsman? Was it being able to swing a sword faster and harder than any other? That was one answer, at least. Against a near-equal opponent, the one who was stronger, faster, and had the longer sword won. I could take that even further—if, after an intense bout, one side saw that they couldn't win but had the stamina to run away, *they* would be the one to survive in the end. In other words, those who were quick on their feet got away with their lives.

I wasn't particularly fast, but I was confident in my ability to quickly judge my opponent's abilities and know when to give up. There was no winning sometimes. In those cases, it was best to run away, devote yourself to training, and challenge your foe again later. I wasn't sure whether our budding wizards would ever be confronted by such a scenario, but it was best to be ready for it.

Regardless, having stamina is essential to wielding a sword at a satisfactory level.

Such thoughts crossed my mind while I was chatting with Ficelle, and soon, Cindy came energetically running up to us.

“Yeaaaah! I'm done!” she shouted.

“Welcome back,” I said. “You sure have a lot of stamina, Cindy.”

“Yup! It's my only saving grace!”

A little later, Nesia and Lumite arrived too. They weren't completely worn out, but they were gasping for breath.

“Hgh...! Dammit, you're way too fast...”

“Haaah...!”

And finally, as the three of them started to cool down, Mewi and Fredra arrived.

“Phew...”

“Gah...!”

These two had consumed a significant amount of stamina. Fredra was clearly spent, and while Mewi wasn't letting it show, she seemed to have found this exercise pretty rough.

“Good work, everyone,” I told them after confirming they'd all settled down. “We'll be checking your stamina like this during sword magic class every now and then. If you keep running as a daily habit, something nice might happen.”

I'd gotten Ficelle and Lucy's approval, so for the moment, I threw aside all thoughts of wizards and magic. I was no more than a swordsman, so when I taught, it was best to approach things from that angle. I honestly didn't know if this was necessary for these young wizards, but for swordsmen, building up the body was absolutely essential.

“Yes! Stamina is important for swinging a sword! That's what you mean, right?!” Cindy shouted energetically. *It's hard to believe she was just running...*

“To put it bluntly, yes, exactly that,” I confirmed.

She really was a serious girl. Her physical strength and instincts for swordsmanship were somewhat behind the others, but she pushed her way through on sheer stamina. It was very impressive. I was almost jealous. If possible, I wanted to help her talent blossom.

“M-Ms. Ficelle...did you also...used to...run...?” Fredra asked, still gasping for breath.

“Of course. A lot,” Ficelle answered.

“Hwah... I-Is that so...?”

Fredra had professed her admiration for Ficelle's sword magic. The girl lacked endurance, and it also seemed like she hadn't done much running before.

“Phew... I kinda get that we need to build our endurance, but still...” Nesia grumbled.

“That’s not the only point to this,” I said. “You need more than arm strength to swing a sword properly. Your lower body is important too.” This applied to wielding any kind of weapon.

“I see...”

“Just as I mentioned during your practice swings, those who don’t know anything swing using only their arms,” I elaborated. “However, by properly using the strength in your legs, waist, and arms, swordplay will be a lot easier on you while being far more efficient.”

“I kind of understand,” Lumite said. “When I learned swordsmanship back at home, I was taught how to move my legs too.”

I didn’t claim to be the better teacher, but I was glad to hear that the instructor at Lumite’s home had also taught him the importance of the lower body. If arm strength was all it took to decide your skill with a sword, everyone could just do endless push-ups and nothing else. That didn’t work in reality, though.

“Okay, let’s call it a day here. Time’s just about up anyway.”

The moment I said that, the bell chimed to signal the end of class.

“Yes! Thank you very much!”

Cindy bowed cheerfully and maintained that energy as she ran off. It was a truly refreshing sight.

“Are you leaving too, Master?” Ficelle asked.

“No, I’m going to meet Lucy after this,” I answered. “She’s apparently waiting for me in the headmistress’s office, but...”

“I’ll show you the way,” Ficelle offered.

“Thanks, that helps a bunch.”

This apparently had something to do with finally getting the official contract and stuff worked out regarding my employment here. After seeing Ficelle’s class

for the first time, I'd been spurred by an impulse to do something about it and had formally agreed to be a temporary lecturer. However, despite her usual rapid responses to things, it'd taken a surprising amount of time for Lucy to get the paperwork sorted out.

Ficelle guided me through the buildings. It was a little late to ask, but was it really all right for me to be so casual with the magic corps's commander, who also happened to be the headmistress of the magic institute? We'd both kind of fallen into that habit on our first meeting, but there was a tremendous gap between us in terms of social status and authority.

Well, let's just look on the bright side. I've built an easygoing relationship with her. She's not complaining about it either. I doubt I'll ever end up in a situation where I have to stand on ceremony around her.

After walking through the vast school building for a while, going up some staircases, and then down long corridors, we came to a stop.

"This is the headmistress's office," Ficelle said. "I'll be off, then."

"Mm, thanks for guiding me."

Now that her role was over, Ficelle turned on her heels and left. It would probably have been fine for her to tag along, but I was the only one who'd been called here.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, then..."

I knocked on the profoundly thick door.

"It's open!" came a casual reply.

"Excuse me." I opened the door and entered the room.

"Ooh, Beryl. Good work today."

Seated behind a desk by the window was the magic institute's headmistress, Lucy. Once she saw it was me, she quickly moved over to what looked like a reception area.

When she saw that I remained frozen at the door, she asked, "What? Something wrong?"

“Well...”

I had imagined that the headmistress’s office would be far more cluttered, but it was unexpectedly tidy and sparsely furnished.

“I thought your office would be more of a mess,” I answered honestly.

“Who exactly do you take me for?” Lucy asked with a bitter smile.

“Ha ha ha, sorry.”

I mean, can you blame me? Publicly, you’re the commander of the magic corps and the headmistress of the magic institute, but whenever you get involved with me, you never leave a great impression.

Honestly, I couldn’t help but think that she had devastatingly poor household skills when it came to her private life. It would definitely be rude to say that to her face though, so I kept it to myself.

“Sorry for calling you in right after your lecture,” she said. “How about some tea?”

“Oh, thanks. I’ll take you up on that.”

I got seated in a nearby chair as Lucy offered me a drink. Somehow or other, seeing Lucy be considerate, like a normal person, was an unusual sight. Her typical insolence had left too strong an impression on me thus far. *Well, according to her, she’s even older than I am.* I suppose she was being courteous because she had her position to consider—as a headmistress, her being familiar with decorum wasn’t a stretch of the imagination.

“Here,” she said, placing a cup before me. “I’m pretty sure it should taste fine.”

“Thanks.”

The tea was a pale color just a shade darker than plain water, and it gave off a faint aroma. I was pretty ignorant about tea, but I could guess that this was something expensive.

“I have Haley to clean up at home,” Lucy said unprompted. “And this is my workplace, not my research lab.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I’m just answering your suspicions.”

At first, I wondered if she’d used magic to read my mind. I wanted to believe that something ridiculous like telepathy didn’t exist, but if it did, Lucy would definitely have tried to learn it. That was simply the kind of person she was. Maybe it actually did exist in the big wide world, though I couldn’t imagine the mechanisms behind it.

“Mm. This is good,” I said.

“I prepared it, so that’s only natural. I’m glad you like it.”

“Ha ha ha, you’ve got talent.”

Taking a sip of the tea, I was treated with a refreshing aroma and faint sweetness that soothed my throat. It wasn’t excessively sweet, which was just the right flavor for an old man. Lucy took a sip from her own cup. Her refined gestures reminded me that, by all rights, she was far too high up the social ladder for me to interact with. And yet here we were. It was almost touching.

“So? How’s it going?” Lucy asked, not really referring to anything in particular. Still, it was easy to guess what she was getting at.

“They’re all good kids,” I said, taking another sip of my tea. “It reminds me of the dojo back home.”

At first, I’d felt really out of place teaching swordsmanship at the magic institute, but after actually acting as their instructor, I’d found that it was going unexpectedly well. Honestly, what I was teaching here wasn’t that different from what I’d taught in Beaden. Just one thing lingered in the corner of my mind: I wasn’t actually teaching anything related to magic.

“Heh heh heh. Children do seem to take a shine to you,” Lucy said.

“And what about you?”

“I’m obviously popular everywhere I go. Haaah... It sure is rough being famous.”

“The mouth on you.”

Her tone and expression didn't match what she was saying whatsoever. Setting aside her personality and going strictly by appearance, it did seem like children would get attached to her. After all, she looked like a ten-year-old girl.

"You'll keep going, then?" she asked.

"Well, yeah. I'll teach them what I can."

"Very good. I'm glad you're here to guide them."

I'd already decided after seeing that first lesson. I couldn't stick with these five students forever, but I honestly wanted to see their growth, and I wanted to see to Ficelle's growth as a teacher.

"I still can't guide them when it comes to magic, y'know," I added.

"There's no need to worry about that."

Lucy's reaction was the same as always. She actually had nothing but praise for sword magic. And for good reason—I'd seen Ficelle's techniques for myself, and I knew how powerful they were. Still, I couldn't completely rid myself of this sense of being out of place.

"Besides, you know plenty about swordplay, right?" Lucy said.

"More than average," I agreed.

That was why I was giving instruction just as I had back in the dojo. I wasn't positive that my methods were suitable for the magic institute, but I was grateful that Lucy was accepting what I had to offer.

"I have high hopes in you," Lucy said. "I won't be around for a while, you see."

"Hm? Where are you going?"

Lucy had said that she devoted every day to her research, so it felt strange for her to be away. Though, I wasn't sure how long she meant by "a while" or where she meant by "not around."

"I will be embarking on a small business trip to the empire," she explained. "It'll probably take one or two months."

"Hmmm... Sounds like a lot of work."

On the Galean continent, she could only mean the Salura Zaruk Empire to the

southwest of Liberis. The two nations had a history of war, but relations were relatively good right now. If Lucy was going on a business trip, it likely had to do with international matters.

“I’m actually quite famous, you know?” Lucy teased.

“Yeah, I know. Technically.”

“How cheeky.”

Regardless, it was hard for me to imagine someone going on a personal trip across the border for international matters without involving any royalty. Even Allucia rarely left Liberis unless it involved the royal family.

It probably had something to do with magic, but I had no idea what kind of standards they had across the border. I’d never left Liberis, and I didn’t have much interest in other countries. I hadn’t even imagined leaving Beaden until very recently.

After chatting a little and having some tea, Lucy slid some papers across the table. “Oh right, about why I called you here. I finally have things ready.”

“Let’s take a look,” I said, picking the papers up and skimming through them.

During times like these, I was glad I was literate—I had my dad to thank for providing me with a proper education beyond just swordsmanship. I had no idea what the literacy rate was in Liberis, but I was grateful that even out in the sticks of Beaden, it was possible to get a basic education.

On that note, Mewi’s studies were going relatively smoothly. As long as you had a talent for magic, the institute didn’t care about your background—the teachers here taught everyone, from the sons and daughters of wealthy merchants and nobles to those who were one step short of being street hooligans. With such a wide array of students, it was only natural for them to provide everyone with a fixed level of education. *Liberis has fairly high education standards, huh?* And as a result of those standards, Mewi was now walking down the path of both literary and military arts. Not that she’d been completely illiterate before this.

Anyway, the important thing right now wasn’t Mewi’s literacy. Nothing in the papers looked particularly complicated. It detailed my employment at the magic

institute as a temporary lecturer but didn't specify any fixed dates. Basically, it outlined how I would be paid a set amount based on the number of classes I taught. In other words, there was no predetermined end date, and I was free to come and go at my discretion. Even just skimming through it, it was clear they were being very mindful of me.

"Uhhh..."

"What? Dissatisfied?"

However...when I got to what was technically the most important part of this contract, I unintentionally raised my voice.

"I mean...isn't this a bit high?" I asked.

The sum of money listed—what they would be paying me per class—was far beyond what I'd expected. After looking at it once, I checked again to make sure I hadn't misread it. Then, I closed my eyes for a moment, opened them, and checked a third time.

"I do believe it's proper compensation for your talents," Lucy said.

Hmmm... Compensation for my talents? I'm already being compensated pretty well by the Liberion Order...or to be specific, by the kingdom itself.

I wasn't going to impart my techniques and experiences for free, of course, but this seemed like a little much. It was an entire decimal off from what I'd expected.

"I'm pretty sure I'm getting paid too much for what I'm doing," I said.

"Think of Mewi. You're going to need money."

"That's true, but still..."

Attending the magic institute wasn't free, and even after she graduated, I would need money until Mewi was capable of making a living for herself. I understood this. With her in the house, all of my living expenses were essentially doubled, and there was nothing better than having spare money. However, it was still relatively important that I received a sum that made sense to me.

"I actually put in a lot of work for this," Lucy said. "This place is full of

sticklers.”

“You didn’t really have to work that hard for this...”

Since my employer in this case was the magic institute, Lucy couldn’t just bulldoze her way through to hire me at her own discretion—she’d needed to get the institute’s seal of approval. I doubted they’d unanimously agreed on this sum of money, and Lucy couldn’t have written this contract on her own either. She might’ve drafted it, but the institute as a whole must’ve gone through its contents and approved it.

“Did anyone oppose it?” I asked.

Lucy nodded. “They sure did. That youngster Faustus was adamantly against it.”

Faustus... Isn’t that the old man I passed in the hallway? Vice Principal Faustus Brown? He’s a total grandpa, but she calls him a youngster? Hold old is Lucy, exactly?

“I’ve been wondering this for a while now...” I said.

“Hm? What is it?”

This wasn’t exactly the kind of question women enjoyed hearing. However, I couldn’t help but wonder, considering her usual behavior.

“Lucy, how old are you?”

“You should know how I’m going to answer that! It’s a maiden’s secret.”

“Whaaa...?”

It’d taken a fair amount of courage to ask that question, but she’d dodged it with casual ease. I wasn’t going to pester her about it or anything, though. Much of Lucy’s persona remained a total mystery to me. And yet, she’d brought a ton of trouble to my doorstep ever since our first meeting.

“Heh heh heh... Well, I suppose I’ll give you a hint,” Lucy added. “I’m probably older than you imagine.”

“Got it... I’ll leave it at that.”

“Please do. You shouldn’t be asking such a beautiful young girl that question.”

“You *just said* you’re older than me.”

My imagination had placed her at around fifty or sixty, but maybe she was actually even older than that? Could she be over a hundred? That sounded ridiculous, but it was curiously possible when it came to Lucy. Regardless, I could tell that she wasn’t going to indulge me, even if I pressed the matter. *I wonder if Allucia knows... Or maybe Ficelle.* I’d asked because I’d wanted to try and unravel the mystery, but it had only gotten more confusing.

“Back to the point,” Lucy said. “I told Faustus to wait and see for now. The students need time to grow. After all, this isn’t the kind of matter where we’ll see results right away.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. I’m pretty sure the same goes for magic.”

Hypothetically speaking, say that I was an outstanding teacher who had remarkably talented students. Even with such ideal conditions, skill took time to develop. Among my pupils, Allucia and Surena were abnormal. You couldn’t expect that kind of immediate growth from everyone. If the world worked by their standards, we wouldn’t need teachers.

“This is actually the sum *after* getting the institute’s opinion and shaving it down somewhat,” Lucy added. “It’ll be problematic for me if you don’t accept.”

“Whaaa...?”

Shaved down? From what? How much was she trying to spend to get me in her clutches? Well, unlike the case with Ibroy and the Church of Sphene, this was a right and proper request, and I didn’t have many responsibilities. If anything went wrong, it would be Lucy’s fault for endorsing me and Allucia’s for approving it. That was only if I did something nefarious, of course.

“Hmmm...”

I had no idea how long I was going to be working as a temporary lecturer for the magic institute. I also didn’t know how long I was going to be a special instructor at the Liberion Order. This matter with the institute was meant to be temporary from the very beginning, so I didn’t think it was going to drag on for years. Though, if it did, my presence might hinder the development of the next generation of teachers.

At any rate, if I considered the request to include teaching Ficelle on top of the five students in the sword magic course, then maybe the offered sum was appropriate. *Nothing's really making sense to me anymore.*

"Your pay will drop if you're found to be lacking," Lucy said. "I doubt that'll happen, though."

"Mm, that's only fair."

Nobody wanted to pay an unnecessary amount for someone who didn't get any results. It felt weird to be negotiating about a pay cut rather than a raise. Still, Lucy was offering, so it was only right to accept. I didn't have anything to feel guilty about.

"Got it. I agree to these terms," I said. "I'll put in the effort to match that sum."

"That really saves me the trouble," Lucy said. "Here, sign this."

So, after worrying about it a little, I ended up taking her up on the offer. *Now that I think about it, I didn't sign anything for my royal appointment as a special instructor for the Liberion Order. And the dojo was my home, so we didn't need any formal contracts.* It was a fresh experience for me to sign a document like this.

"Does this work?" I asked.

"Mm. All good."

I handed the signed document to Lucy, and she checked it over. With this, I was officially working for both the Liberion Order and the magic institute. I could never have imagined this situation during my days in Beaden, and I wasn't sure if I should thank Allucia for dragging me out of the countryside. It didn't feel bad, but I still wasn't used to being elevated to such high places after all these years. If anything, it was bad for my heart.

"Very well, then. I have high hopes for you, temporary lecturer Beryl Gardenant."

"Ha ha ha... I'll do my best."

Lucy grinned. Now that I'd accepted, I was going to give it my all—without

impeding my work at the Liberion Order.

Anyway, for today's dinner, I decided to take Mewi out to get something nice to eat. Somehow, I was just suddenly in the mood.



"All right then, thanks for your time."

"Mm. See you later, Beryl."

A while after signing the contract and savoring Lucy's tea, I said my farewells and left the headmistress's office. It was just around noon. Allucia had arranged things so that when I was teaching at the magic institute, my training sessions at the order were put on hold—she'd said it was okay not to show up at the order on these days. I could drop by the office now if I wanted to, but I was also free to laze around town or go home.

"Man, I've really climbed the social ladder..." I mumbled to myself after closing the office door.

I wasn't under the exaggerated impression that the world was working explicitly in my favor, but recently, things had seemed to be going better than I deserved. Up until not too long ago, I'd had an easygoing life teaching my pupils at the dojo out in the sticks. But then, I'd been appointed as a special instructor for the Liberion Order, had reunited with pupils I hadn't seen in a long time, had taken down a named monster with Surena, had obtained a masterwork sword, had somehow ended up with a child, and just now, I'd been granted the status of temporary lecturer at the magic institute.

I wasn't going to rest on my laurels, of course. To be blunt, this flow of events had all been due to luck. Well, it was questionable whether being half abducted by Allucia because of her appointment letter from the king could be considered *luck*...but still.

At any rate, ever since starting my new life in Baltrain, I'd rarely ever thought that I would've been better off staying in Beaden. After all, I had such good people around me here. And in that sense, I really did have good luck.

Also, I was now able to take the techniques, experiences, and training I'd fostered as a backwater sword instructor and put them to use in a whole new

way. It was very fulfilling. My life in Beaden hadn't been bad, but I wouldn't have been able to experience such strong emotions out there.

"Now, what to do today?"

I pondered over my plans as I walked down the magic institute's long corridors. I'd scheduled to go out for dinner with Mewi tonight, but there was still a lot of time before that. Considering the hour, grabbing some lunch made the most sense. Now that the standards of my daily life were excellent—and now that I was in the city with so many more options available to me—I had to spend more time thinking about what to do each day.

When I was teaching swordsmanship in Beaden, I hadn't needed to consider anything else. I'd come to grips with my own skills and position and had refrained from overreaching. But now I had a new title, and I even had a certain amount of status. For some reason—and I still believed this to be some kind of mistake—the royal family even knew my name and face.

These were things I could be proud of. I was a special instructor for what was reputed to be the strongest knight order in the kingdom. The royal family knew who I was. However, I couldn't exactly say that this was what I'd wished for. I wasn't dissatisfied with my current situation, but everything had happened far too suddenly. I was definitely bewildered by it all.

Anyway, enough of that. I had my duty as a special instructor, my duty to the students at the magic institute (even though there were only five of them), and above all else, my duty to Mewi. This would go on until she safely graduated from the institute and became independent, and that would take a few years. The problem was what came after that.

I didn't have much ambition to begin with, so I never really thought about my own future. Ultimately, I wanted to return to Beaden and take over the dojo. However, my dad had stipulated that I needed to find a wife before returning home, so I had to accomplish that first.

"A wife... A lover... Hmmmm..." I muttered as I continued walking.

I wouldn't say my life was bereft of encounters with women. Unlike when they'd attended the dojo, Allucia, Surena, and Ficelle were all splendid adults now, and I knew it was only proper for me to interact with them as women

rather than as students. They were all beautiful, and they had terrific personalities. Nonetheless, I couldn't bring myself to look at my pupils that way. That could change given a certain impetus, but as things stood right now, I simply couldn't. Frankly, my personality, disposition, and mental attitude prevented me from doing so.

As I continued walking with such hazy thoughts in my mind, a sudden voice startled me.

"Oh, if it isn't Mr. Beryl. Hello."

"Whoa...?! Good day, Ms. Kineria."

I made quite a pathetic sound. This was one of the magic institute's teachers, Kineria Fine. She was dressed in a very wizardly robe.

"I heard something from the headmistress," she said. "You've taken up a teaching job at the institute, right?"

"Yes, well... I'll do my best not to be a bother."

"You're not a bother at all. I have high expectations of you," Kineria said in a slightly teasing tone.

"Ha ha ha..."

When I first brought Mewi to the institute and met Kineria, I got the impression that she was a very composed woman. But despite her cool demeanor, she never appeared cold. She was the very image of a well-adjusted adult, and her wavy hairstyle only served to reinforce that impression.

I wondered how old she was. I assumed she was younger than me, but I couldn't tell her exact age. If I had to make a guess, I would say that she was just a little older than Allucia...though I wouldn't be bold enough to ask her outright. That would be rude, especially because she and I weren't particularly close.

It was all rather curious. Hypothetically speaking, if I were to find a wife, I wanted a tolerant and kind woman like her. But...would anyone like that ever have such feelings for me? Would they be able to accept me as I am?

"Something on your mind?" Kineria asked.

“Hm? Aah, no... Well, yes. Something like that.”

I couldn't possibly tell her I was thinking about my future wife and my preferences. Either way, it was true that I had something on my mind, so my answer ended up coming out rather stuttered.

According to Lucy, Kinera was a very talented wizard who specialized in defensive magic. I didn't know what exactly that entailed—it was difficult to imagine. I wondered if she would show me if the opportunity presented itself.

“Oh, right. How is Mewi doing?” I asked, changing the topic before she could dig deeper into my thoughts.

It was the first thing that came to mind, but I was actually curious. Mewi didn't talk about her schooling much at home. If anything serious happened, Lucy or Ficelle were sure to tell me, but I never really got the minute details of her daily life at the institute.

“She's still not sure how to interact with others, but she's a good, honest girl,” Kinera said. “She hasn't come into conflict with any of the other students either.”

“Is that so? I'm glad to hear it.”

If I had to guess, she was like a cat in an unfamiliar environment. I wasn't surprised to hear Kinera describe her as good and honest. Her personality was somewhat thorny due to the environment she'd been raised in, but she was a great person at heart. My one fear was that Mewi wouldn't fit in well at the institute, but that was a problem only time could solve. Both Lucy and I had needed a while for her to relax around us too.

However, from the few conversations we'd had about school, and from how things were going during sword magic classes, it seemed I didn't need to worry about Mewi. At the very least, she was blessed with friends at school.

“Hee hee.” Kinera smiled gently. “As her father, I suppose you must be curious.”

“Yes, well, something like that. It's a little embarrassing...” I returned an ambiguous smile of my own.

As her guardian—her father—I was indeed curious about how things were going. However, I was also burdened with anxieties about whether I would be able to leave anything behind for her after I departed this world. That was one thing I couldn't rely on my talented pupils for. Nobody in my immediate vicinity was working hard to raise a child—they were all single. Among my pupils, only Randrid came to mind. My dad was probably the most reliable when it came to this stuff, but it was hard to bring this topic up with him. *It would be a huge pain to explain the whole situation to him anyway.*

“I can see the effort she's putting into improving herself,” Kinera added. “I do believe that is because of your support.”

“You do...? Thank you very much.”

I hadn't told Kinera much about Mewi's circumstances. About all she knew was that, for documentation purposes, I was Mewi's guardian. It was possible Lucy had told her more, but either way, I was glad to have someone who could sympathize with Mewi and me like this. Once more, I realized how blessed I was when it came to personal connections.

“Are you already leaving for the day?” Kinera asked.

“Yes. The sword magic class ended before noon. I was thinking of relaxing and having some lunch.”

As I answered, I took a look around me. There were quite a few students and teachers walking about. Considering the time, it had to be their lunch break. I'd ended up walking all the way from the headmistress's office to the institute's entrance with Kinera without really thinking about it. That was when she threw out a certain question.

“I see. Oh yes, do you often come to this neighborhood?”

“No, I'm still clueless when it comes to the northern district,” I answered. “I'm pretty much only familiar with the institute and the palace.”

I usually just rode the public carriage here, and if I had spare time, I walked. Regardless, I only knew my way to the institute. If I needed to buy something, I could go to the western district, and the central district had all the restaurants I could ask for. There was no reason for me to come all the way to the northern

district. Going sightseeing on my own didn't sound too enticing either.

"Then how about accompanying me for lunch?" Kinera suggested. "I know a cheap restaurant that's pretty good."

"Huh?"

I froze for a moment at the unexpected question. I'd never imagined I would ever be invited out to lunch by a woman who wasn't my pupil. Kinera obviously meant well, but this invitation had been so sudden that I was struck speechless.

"Am I being a bother...?" Kinera asked, her brow drooping a little at my reaction, which she had surely taken as a refusal.

"Ah! N-No! Not at all!" I was really thrown off by this. But it was lunchtime, and there was nothing strange about going to lunch with a coworker. "Sorry, I'm just not used to this kind of invitation... If you're fine with me tagging along, then please allow me to join you."

"Hee hee, there's no need to be so tense."

Despite my flustered behavior, Kinera's smile remained unchanging. *Man, I really do lack some major life experience.* I was sure I was older than her, but I'd spent my entire life in a rural dojo. Out in the sticks, everyone was already acquainted, so it was difficult to foster new friendships. *Ugh, now I'm just making excuses...*

"We're colleagues now, so I was hoping to get to know you better," Kinera said.

"Right... I'll take you up on that."

I wasn't going to turn down this chance, and I didn't have a reason to refuse her invitation anyway. Still, even if we were fellow teachers on paper, it was a little awkward being with a VIP of the magic institute. She wasn't looking at me with clear disdain like Vice Principal Brown had, but as someone who couldn't use magic, I felt out of place.

Nonetheless, I was grateful she'd spoken to me. I'd already met her, and she was one of the few people here who knew anything about Mewi and me. Also, if we managed to get closer, it would be easier for me to find out if something

happened to Mewi. I could only pray that nothing happened, though.

“Then shall we?” Kinera said. “It’s a short walk from the institute.”

“Sure. Allow me to accompany you.”

“Oh dear, there’s no need to be so formal.”

With that, we passed through the magic institute’s gates. I turned my eyes to the sunlight pouring down upon us. The palace’s spire was shining brightly under the clear blue sky.

“This is the place. The portions are good and the food is delicious.”

“Oooh...”

After leaving the magic institute, we’d walked for around ten minutes before arriving at a restaurant. The northern district was the home of Liberis’s palace and many of its nobles, so this restaurant had a clean, high-class air befitting its location, even if it was a little small. It had a similar atmosphere to the clothing store Allucia had once brought me to, so I did feel somewhat out of place. *Is this really going to be okay?*

Incidentally, on the way here, I’d gotten some weird looks. There wasn’t much I could do about that, so I gave up on worrying about it. I felt a little sorry for Kinera, though. Being around Allucia and Surena had kind of warped my sense of whether someone was “famous” or not, but even I knew that a teacher at the magic institute was definitely one of society’s elites. In that sense, Kinera was a celebrity in Baltrain, so seeing her walk around with an old man was sure to attract attention.

However, despite passersby staring at her, Kinera showed no bewilderment or fear. I couldn’t tell whether she was just bold or already accustomed to it. If I had to guess, it was the latter.

“As for seats...looks like there are some available,” Kinera said, taking a peek inside. “Shall we?”

“Y-Yes.”

I followed Kinera into the restaurant. This had been a rather common

occurrence ever since I'd moved to Baltrain—women were constantly leading me places. I felt a little pathetic, but why should this old man put on a strong front after all these years?

A quiet, tinkling bell rang as we passed through the door. Even the doorbell was elegant compared to the one at my favorite tavern.

"Welcome. Table for two?" a waiter asked.

"Yes," Kinera answered.

"Please follow me."

This is going smoothly—she must be a regular. I did my best not to ogle the place as I followed along behind her, but I definitely felt a little lame.

We were guided to a terrace seat where we could enjoy the quiet townscape of the northern district while having our meal. *It's so chic to have lunch under the early afternoon sun like this.*

"Hee hee, you're acting nervous again," Kinera said once we took our seats.

"Yes, well... I don't come to this kind of restaurant often."

I went out fairly frequently with Mewi, but most of the restaurants we visited were geared toward the common folk. We never went to high-class places where we had to worry about the atmosphere and our table manners. I also knew that Mewi would get even more nervous than me at a place like that.

"You can take it easy," Kinera told me. "This restaurant isn't that strict."

"Ha ha, thank you..."

It turned out this place was high-class but not that formal. The meal I'd had with King Gladio at the palace had been far beyond anything I'd experienced when it came to formalities. *I hope I'll never have to go through that again.* Today, I was just here to have a meal at a somewhat fancy restaurant with a colleague from the magic institute. When I thought about it like that and compared this meal to the events at the palace, I managed to loosen up a little.

Though I was a teacher, it was only a temporary thing. I went to the magic institute once a week when they had sword magic class, so I had pretty much no interactions with the other teachers. I could talk about Mewi with Kinera—

more than with anyone else at least. My pool of acquaintances at the institute was small, and I only ever spoke to the sword magic students, Lucy, and Ficelle. I didn't go to the staff room either, so I wasn't making any new connections.

"What'll you have?" Kinera asked. "The ravioli here is excellent."

"Aah, then I'll go with that."

We exchanged a few words while looking over the menu and sipping some water. I knew I couldn't go wrong with Kinera's suggestion. Also, the quality at a restaurant in Baltrain's northern district was pretty much guaranteed, so I doubted anything they made would be inedible. Choosing something delicious was all a matter of personal tastes and preferences.

Kinera called the waiter over. "Excuse me. Two ravioli."

"Certainly," he said. "We offer both a tomato and a cheese base."

"Mr. Beryl, which will you have?" Kinera asked.

"Ummm... I'll have the tomato," I decided.

"Two of those, please," Kinera told the waiter.

There was a certain elegance to her speech and gestures—she really did feel like part of the upper class. The way she presented herself was like a softer version of Allucia's public image. *That's a pretty weird example, though.*

"Have you gotten used to teaching at the institute?" Kinera asked while we waited for our food.

"Yes, well, they're allowing me to teach however I want."

In fact, they were letting me do things the same way I had at the dojo. I also had fewer students to look after, so I could spend time watching each one individually. The fact that I was their teacher's teacher had made a bigger impact than I'd expected. All the students listened to everything I had to say.

I decided to bring up something I was curious about. "Oh yeah. Lucy—I mean, the headmistress—told me you're a skilled practitioner of defensive magic."

"Oh dear, it's nothing worthy of such praise," Kinera said, smiling gently. "Mr. Beryl, do you have an interest in magic?"

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t. I’ve only ever devoted myself to the sword, so it’s all new to me.”

Magic was generally classified into five categories: offensive, defensive, healing, reinforcement, and livelihood. Ficelle’s sword magic and Lucy’s barrage of spells were pretty easy to classify. It was also easy to tell by sight what effect a spell had and how much power was behind it. I knew a little about reinforcement and healing magic. Those zealots from Sphenedyardvania had used them under the name of miracles. Livelihood magic had never come up in conversation, but I could guess that it didn’t have an aggressive nature. Maybe it was used to create magical tools or something.

As for defensive magic, even knowing what the word meant didn’t give me any idea of how it worked. I could tell it was meant for protection, but I had no idea how exactly magic could be used to accomplish that.

“I kind of understand other types of magic, but I can’t really picture defensive magic...” I said.

“Hee hee, I suppose you have a point,” Kinera said. “Even its appearance is difficult to describe compared to offensive magic.”

She apparently shared my opinion. I couldn’t even imagine what it could look like. I could picture stopping a fireball with another fireball or canceling it with a jet of water, but I felt like that would still be offensive magic.

“Well, do you want to try it out?” Kinera asked.

“Huh?”

I was at a loss for words. *Try what out? Magic? In the middle of a restaurant? Is she actually the same kind of person as Lucy? If so, that’s a bit of a shock.*

Ignoring my bewilderment, Kinera held out her right hand.

“Please try squeezing my hand,” she said. “Nice and tight now.”

“U-Uhhh...?”

She maintained her bright smile and kept holding out her hand. *Hmmm, should I just shake it? I feel like I shouldn’t be touching a woman’s hand so casually.*

“Go ahead. No need to hold back,” Kinera urged me on.

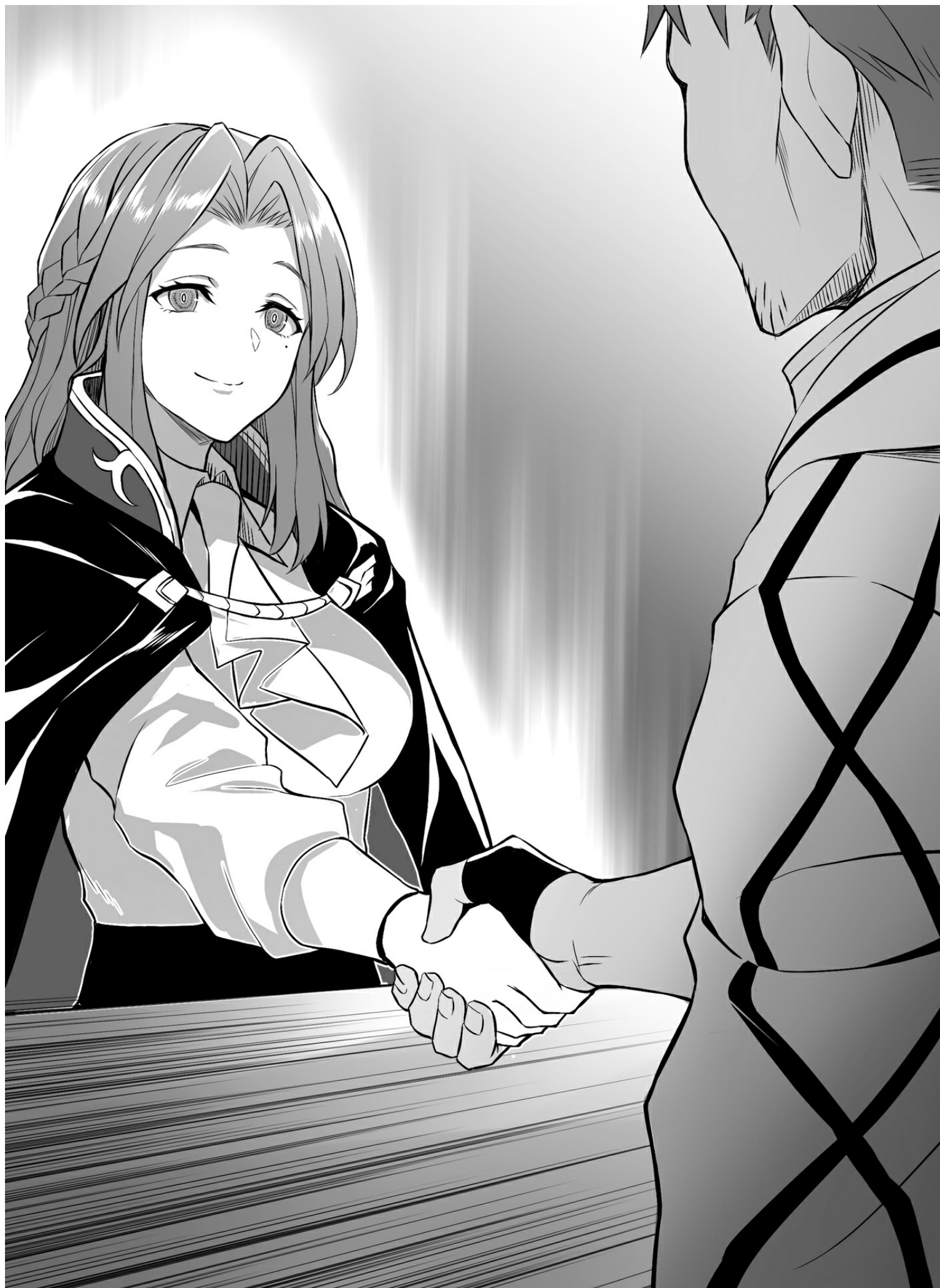
“U-Understood... Here I go.”

I hesitated for a moment, but she was insisting. *After coming this far, I can't back down.* This wasn't really something I needed to steel myself for, though. I was being given a rare opportunity to touch upon a facet of magic, so I decided to take her up on the offer.

“There... O-Ooooh...?”

I squeezed a little harder than when I shook someone's hand but still kept it light enough that it wouldn't be considered a violent act. When I did, I felt an inexplicable sensation in my palm.

“Hee hee, you can squeeze a little harder, you know?” Kinera said, completely composed.



Her words weren't exactly provocative, but judging from her own grip I believed it wouldn't be a problem to put more of my strength into it.

"Okay... Don't mind if I do...!"

I squeezed tight. To be honest, I really went for it. It wouldn't be strange for an average woman to scream in pain from this.

"Hnnngh...!" I grunted, pretty much squeezing as hard as I could. I was practically trying to crush her hand.

"So, this is defensive magic," Kinera said. Her expression hadn't even twitched.

"Phew... I understand now. That is pretty amazing."

"Thank you very much."

I loosened my grip and let go of her hand. I'd put all my strength behind it, so my palm was a little stiff. However, thanks to Kinera, I now had an idea of what defensive magic was.

"Fundamentally, defensive magic is used by creating a membrane of mana. It works just as you saw," Kinera explained as she pulled back her hand. "The membrane's strength and size are dependent on the caster's technique and the current situation. In this case, using it only on a single hand, some people can make a rather powerful shield."

The sensation I'd felt from her hand hadn't been the skin of a woman's soft palm—it had been something cold, flexible, and tough. A membrane of mana was definitely the only way of describing it. *It would've been impossible to crush her hand, no matter how strong my grip was.* Depending on the caster's skill, it was entirely possible that defensive magic could deflect attacks from swords or arrows.

"A simple attack—something like what you just did—is relatively easy to defend against," Kinera continued. "But against more powerful weapons or magic, the process changes somewhat."

"I see..."

As someone who had no talent for magic whatsoever, I was a little jealous.

Being able to fight in close combat with a defensive membrane deployed would make you an invincible swordsman—both your offense and defense would be exceptional. That was nothing more than my imagination, though. Just as Kinera had said, reality wasn't so simple. Still, as a swordsman, I was charmed by the idea of defensive magic, just as I was by offensive magic.

“What a tremendous power,” I remarked. “I suddenly have a keen interest in it.”

“Hee hee. I'm glad to hear it.”

In all likelihood, Kinera hadn't gone all out. She'd just protected her right hand from an old man's grip strength. How would things go if I put all my strength behind a single sword slash? As one who participated in martial arts, I couldn't help but wonder.

“The headmistress can do the same thing far faster and with far more strength,” Kinera added. “She's extraordinary when it comes to any form of wizardry.”

“I'm pretty sure I already knew this, but she really is amazing, isn't she...?”

“Yes. She absolutely is.”

From my first meeting with Lucy to the present day, I'd had a rather frank relationship with her, so there was a slight gap between my perception of her and her true abilities. I'd known she was an amazing wizard, even during our first meeting, but she'd somehow or other also ended up as an affable friend—one who often brought trouble to my doorstep.

I didn't know whether this was a good or bad thing, but I wanted to believe we'd built a solid friendship. If our relationship deteriorated to the point of open hostilities, I doubted I could win against her. She would beat me to a pulp, and I wouldn't be able to do anything about it since she far surpassed me in both strength and authority. Maybe it would be better to call her Mistress or Lady Lucy next time I saw her. Lucy's magic—and magic in general—was simply so amazing that I couldn't help but want to show them proper respect.

“Thank you for waiting. Here are your tomato ravioli.”

And just as I finished getting a glimpse of defensive magic, our food arrived.

Ooh, this looks good. The slight char to the pasta really ignites my appetite.

“Shall we?” Kinera asked.

“Let’s,” I agreed. I put my hands together and gave thanks for the food.

I started by slicing open a piece of pasta with a knife. Steam rose gently into the air, tickling my nose with a refreshing, oil-scented aroma. *Ooh, there’s ground meat and potato inside. It’s a simple combination, but that only amplifies my hopes for the taste.*

“Hom... Mm, delicious.”

The meat juices, the scent of oil, and the acidic tang of tomato melded in my mouth. The flavor was exquisite. This place lived up to its reputation as a restaurant in the northern district. It was a little pricey, but having an elegant lunch like this wasn’t so bad every now and then. *I don’t think I’d want to come here alone, though. Maybe I can bring Mewi as part of her education.*

“I’m glad you like it,” Kinera said as I devoured my lunch.

“It really is great. Thank you.”

I couldn’t thank her enough. She’d worried about me and had brought me to this terrific restaurant. I felt my cheeks relax. *Thanks to my connection to Ficelle, I made a new acquaintance. And speaking of my former pupil...*

“Hey, wasn’t Ficelle really talented among the students of the magic institute?” I asked.

“Yes, she was very quiet and well-behaved,” Kinera said. “She poured through all sorts of grimoires during her academic studies. She was quite the bookworm.”

“That does sound like Ficelle...”

“What was she like when you taught her?”

“She spent the whooole time doing practice swings. I guess you can also call her a sword-worm.”

“Oh my. Hee hee.”

Ficelle really had done practice swings whenever she’d had the time. She was

likely the type of person who found it easy to put her entire focus into one thing. Even after moving from the dojo to the magic institute, she'd been able to draw out this talent in equal measure.

"Although...that girl does get lost in whatever she's doing," Kinera said. "She'll even stop listening to others."

"I get you. Her concentration can be intense."

Still, concentrating a little *too much* was the one flaw in Ficelle's crystal. Focus was an important aspect of mastering any art, and it seemed that this was no different in the magic institute.

"Oh yes, in the institute she also..."

"Hmm, that's quite..."

Kinera was a very considerate person—she was also quite sociable. So, while chattering idly and savoring the taste of our elegant meal of ravioli, I found my tongue loosening up.

And just like that, we had a truly enjoyable lunch.



"Thank you for today. The ravioli was terrific."

"I'm glad you liked it."

After I enjoyed a nice chat with Kinera over lunch, we left the store, and I thanked her once again. The food really was delicious. *I mean, I still like my favorite tavern and Mewi's home cooking, but this type of cuisine is refreshingly different.*

I was starting to think that having a slightly luxurious meal every now and then wasn't bad. It could serve to educate Mewi on the finer things in life, and fortunately, I had enough income and savings to indulge in some extravagance every once in a while.

But...before bringing Mewi to a restaurant like this, I need to make some corrections to her table manners. She always tears into her food, so she might end up getting a little too excited at a nice restaurant.

“Sorry for taking up so much of your time,” I said.

“Oh no, it was nothing.”

Kinera and I had ended up chatting a fair bit while pecking at our ravioli. She’d made a good impression on me during our first meeting, but after spending some time with her, I was even more impressed. She was a very good listener and conversationalist—overall, she was just a great person. Also, she hadn’t made a single disagreeable expression while keeping this old man company.

“I have great expectations for you, after all,” Kinera said.

“Expectations... What for?”

I had no idea what she was alluding to. *Does she have her hopes pinned on me to guide the five students of the sword magic course in the right direction? If so, that honestly feels like a really heavy burden.* I wasn’t going to slack off or anything, but there was only so much I could support on my shoulders.

“Are you aware of the current state of the sword magic course?” she asked.

“Yes, well... I’ve heard a little from Ficelle.”

“Sword magic is essentially a new academic field,” Kinera explained, her tone changing a little. “I would hate for it to get shut down before it has a chance to grow.”

“I understand how you feel... I’ll give it everything I’ve got.”

“Please do. I expect much from you.”

“Ha ha ha...”

She was probably trying to tell me the same thing I’d heard from Ficelle. If so few students continued to take the sword magic course, it would get canceled. At any rate, their expectations definitely felt a little much for me—I was glad that they trusted me to help support the course, but taking this job had heaped a lot of pressure onto my plate. Also, Lucy was really slipshod about disclosing important information, and if she’d told me about how dire the situation was from the very beginning, I might’ve refused to teach at the institute.

“I’m of the belief that people should try new things at every available opportunity,” Kinera said. “Well, I say that, but I can only boast about knowing

old-fashioned defensive magic.”

“That’s not really...”

Old-fashioned. That was a loaded term with negative connotations, but it also implied that defensive magic had a long history. The magic institute had a long history too. If I had to guess, many of the teachers stressed the importance of tradition.

“Hee hee, sorry for making things somewhat gloomy,” Kinera said. “If that’s all, I’ll be returning to the magic institute.”

“Yes. Good luck with your afternoon classes.”

Ah, so she’s going back to work. I was only responsible for the sword magic course, whereas she was a full-time teacher. Her schedule was definitely far busier than mine, and though I was grateful she’d spent her precious lunchtime with me, I also felt somewhat guilty about it. Still, she *had* gone out of her way to invite me, and it felt like a total waste to put an end to our association here. Kinera was also just a wonderful person, so I wanted to keep in touch.

“If the opportunity presents itself, let’s share another meal some time,” I said.

“Oh my.” Kinera grinned. “Then I assume you’ll be my escort? I’m looking forward to it.”

When she said that, my own smile became strained. “Ha ha ha... Please don’t be too hard on me.”

Hmm, I’m gonna have to look for a good restaurant. I could just walk around and look randomly, but maybe Lucy or Allucia can offer some advice.

“I’ll see you later, then,” Kinera said as she turned to leave.

“Yes, until next time.”

All right—what should I do with the rest of my day? I had some good food in my stomach, so now I wanted to burn a few calories. I’d arranged things with the order so that I would have a day off whenever I taught at the institute, so nobody would complain if I just went straight home. Still, I would feel restless if I just lazed around all day.

I haven’t explored much of the northern district... Maybe I can take a look

around?

“Hm...?”

Suddenly, I heard the *clang, clang* of a bell resounding through the clear skies. It had a different ring to it than the institute’s chimes or a restaurant’s doorbell.

“Aah, that must be the church.”

I turned to the source of the sound and spotted the Church of Sphene sitting on a small hill in the distance. I hadn’t gone near it since the night raid involving Bishop Reveos, and I still didn’t know the full details of how that incident had been resolved. I’d heard from Gatoga that the bishop had indeed been punished, but what was the current status of the Church of Sphene in Baltrain?

The catalyst for the bishop’s arrest had been Lucy and Ibroy’s reckless request, and if not for Ficelle and Curuni’s assistance, the battle could’ve gone far worse. There was also the matter of that girl—the one I thought might’ve been Mewi’s sister.

That church isn’t good for my heart.

“But, hmmm... Guess I can at least drop by.”

I hadn’t met with Ibroy since that incident—mostly because our schedules had never lined up. Everything had also gotten quite chaotic due to the escort mission for Sphenedyardvania’s delegation. But I had the time to drop by now, and since it had been a while since the incident, the aftermath had surely been cleaned up. *If Ibroy happens to be there too, maybe I can ask him about the present state of things.*

And so, I decided to walk off my meal by going to the church. It wasn’t that far from the carriage stop in the northern district, and about the same distance away from the carriage stop to the magic institute. The church, institute, and palace were relatively close to each other, so traveling from one to the other was simple enough.

I strolled down the well-maintained stone pavement and let my eyes wander left and right. Unlike the central district, this place wasn’t crowded by multistory buildings, but that made tall buildings like the palace’s spire and the church stand out all the more. There was a moderate amount of pedestrian

traffic compared to when I'd last come here at night, but the crowds weren't on the level of the central or western districts. Still, it was bustling enough to live up to the reputation of Liberis's capital.

On the way to the church, I greeted a member of the royal garrison who was on patrol.

"Good work today," I said.

"Thank you. Going to worship? Take care."

We were near the palace, so there were a lot of patrols. I regretted not going with a normal "hello" as a greeting—telling someone they were doing a good job when you first met them in the middle of the street sounded a little wrong. I'd just gotten in the habit of greeting members of the garrison this way because of the guards in front of the order's office.

Fortunately, the man didn't seem to think that my greeting was unnatural. He was a little older—definitely middle-aged—and he'd just taken it in stride and replied calmly. He was under the impression that my destination was the church, and though he had that right, I wasn't going there for worship.

I'm actually an atheist.

I hadn't always felt that way, of course. As a young child, I hadn't possessed the kind of insight I had now. When was the last time I relied on God? It might've been that moment as a kid when I'd knocked over an entire plate of my mom's cooking while trying to swipe some food. She'd scolded me really badly for it, but it had been less about the theft and more about all the food waste. That moment had lingered in my memories all this time, and I could recall it very, *very* vividly.

As a quick aside, this event from my past wasn't the sole reason for my preferences about food, but it had definitely played a part. To this day, I remained pretty open-minded about food and strict about waste. I certainly attempted to eat anything I was served, and I tried to see the value in every meal.

Anyway, my prayers had gone unanswered—my mom had gotten insanely angry at me. So, instead of relying on God, I'd come to put my faith in my dad,

mom, and the path of swordsmanship. This didn't mean I denied religious faith and the gods that propped up people's spirits. I just happened to have different beliefs.

"Oh, here we are."

And as I reminisced over childhood memories, I arrived in front of the hill leading up to the church. During my last visit here, I hadn't gone inside, and visibility had been poor due to it being nighttime. Now that I'd gotten a good look at the building, I could see that it was splendid.

The church was made of stone, and it looked like it'd been here for a long time. I pricked up my ears, but couldn't hear anything beyond the thick doors. This wasn't exactly the place to make a ruckus, so the silence wasn't unnatural.

I took a quick glance around and saw that there were no corpses or bloodstains left. Everything had been cleaned up—civilians wouldn't have been able to come here otherwise. I gave thanks to whoever had been responsible for cleaning the place up so well, then put a hand to the church's door. It was far lighter than it looked. I pushed, and it opened easily, revealing the church's interior.

"Oooh..."

Benches were systematically lined up in an expansive space where they held service. The statue in the back was probably a figure of Sphene. I glanced around and spotted a few of the faithful with their hands clasped in prayer and their heads bowed.

A man soon walked over to me. He looked to be about my age, and he had gentle features. He was wearing priest's robes and holding a thick book—what I assumed to be his scriptures. He smiled at me gently.

"Good day to you. Have you come to pray?"

"Hello, pardon the intrusion," I said. "Um...is Mr. Ibroy here?"

I felt a little guilty that I hadn't come here to pray, but I nonetheless got right to business.

"Bishop Howlman?" the priest asked. "Excuse me, but may I ask your name?"

“Aah, yes. I believe he’ll understand if you tell him Beryl is here.”

Hm? Bishop? He said bishop, right? Ibroy isn’t a bishop, is he? Did he get promoted after all that fuss with Reveos? I was curious, but I wasn’t going to quip about it to the man in front of me.

“Understood. Please wait a moment.”

The man bowed, then vanished into one of the side rooms. Since he’d asked me to wait, I figured that Ibroy must be here. I’d planned to give up and go on a stroll if he wasn’t, but it seemed I was going to get the chance to speak with him after all.

A while later, Ibroy appeared from farther inside the church.

“Hi there—sorry to keep you waiting,” he said. “Welcome to the church, Beryl.”

“Ah, hello.”

I was glad this had taken less time than expected—I’d been standing inside this worship hall on my own with nothing to do.

“I doubt you’re here to join our faith.” Ibroy chuckled. “Shall we talk further inside?”

As usual, his speech and conduct ran counter to my image of a devout believer. His frankness made him easier to interact with, but a part of me wondered whether his behavior was appropriate for a man of the cloth.

“I’m glad to see you in good health,” he said as he led the way.

“Thanks. You seem to be doing well too.”

I could sense people in the worship hall staring at us. It was hard to describe my relationship with Ibroy. I didn’t have to explain myself to strangers, but I could understand why our encounter looked weird. Here was an old man—not even one of the faithful—suddenly wanting to meet with the local bishop.

“Here, come on in.”

“Excuse me.”

He guided me to some kind of parlor. It was a snug little room farther back

from the side rooms of the worship hall. As to be expected of a church, it wasn't luxurious—it was simply furnished with only what was necessary, which was just the right atmosphere for two men having a chat.

"Well then, what brings you here today?" Ibroy asked as we took a seat. He then jokingly added, "Are you here to repent for your sins?"

"If only. I'd like to believe I've been leading a life of decent morals."

Nothing came to mind that I needed to repent for. I'd spent the majority of my life holed up in the sticks living seriously—maybe even too seriously.

"Is that so? Oh yes, did my gift reach you safely?" Ibroy asked.

"It did. I've been putting them to good use."

"I'm glad to hear it."

By gift, he was referring to the box that'd arrived containing money and some clothes for Mewi. *Ah, so it had come from Ibroy.* I'd put the money away in my personal savings, and as previously mentioned, the clothes were being put to good use. It would've been embarrassing to go buy clothes for a growing young girl.

"By the way," I said, "I heard from the man earlier that you're a bishop now."

"It's all thanks to you. I'm finally getting ahead in life."

It turned out he really was a bishop. Was it something worth celebrating? I knew the backstory of his promotion, so I found it a little hard to celebrate.

"So? Did you have something you wanted to ask me?" Ibroy's smile was as gentle and shady as when I'd first met him at Lucy's house.

"I was just thinking that I have no idea what's going on in Sphenedyardvania."

Bishop Reveos's arrest had been followed by the conflict between royalists and papists, and they'd used the royal sightseeing tour as a stage. I'd only been involved in a fraction of this power struggle, but having heard Lucy's prediction, I had some interest in the outcome.

Lucy probably had information on this too, but she was part of Liberis's magic corps. Ibroy was closer to Sphenedyardvania's side of things. There was also

Gatoga, though I figured it would be hard to get in touch with him—or rather, I had no idea how to. Going to Rose would be even more impossible. Things had to be hectic for her right now.

“Hmm. I’m a citizen of Liberis, you know?” Ibroy said with a chuckle.

As always, this old man looked very shrewd. I didn’t believe he was a villain or anything, but I would hesitate to say he was an indisputably good person either.

“But you know more than me, right?” I asked.

“I suppose I do.”

He wasn’t outright refuting me, but he seemed somewhat reluctant to speak on this topic. However, since I was involved, I believed I had a right to know, at least to a certain extent. I wanted to hear what he felt he could share with me.

“Well, let’s start with Bishop Reveos,” Ibroy said. “He was sent back to Sphenedyardvania to face trial. He avoided excommunication but was stripped of his rank as bishop. However...”

“However?”

Huh, so Bishop—or rather, former bishop—Reveos has been properly punished. That much I heard from Gatoga. I don’t know the minute details, but being stripped of a title is significant to anyone religious. It’s better than being excommunicated or executed, but it seems like there was more to the story.

Ibroy spoke again, pulling me out of my thoughts. “A while after the trial, he passed away in an *accident*. How pitiful.”

“That’s...”

I was speechless. *An accident*. That was likely putting it as mildly as possible. He’d been killed. The timing was simply too convenient.

“You’re awfully well-informed,” I said.

“It just happened to cross my ears.”

The fact that he’d gotten this information while remaining in Liberis had me curious about his authority and information network. He gave me an ambiguous smile. I wondered what Ibroy’s actual position was in Sphenedyardvania. He

was pretty close to Lucy too.

“He broke the greatest taboo...” Ibroy said. “To the papists, and to the royalists.”

Now it made sense. Neither faction could allow his sacrilege to be made public. The royalists couldn’t overlook it, and while the papists had tacitly consented to it, that was only on the premise that it was kept an absolute secret. What was more, it would’ve been bad had Reveos declared he’d been under the papists’ protection. That was exactly why he’d been publicly stripped of his rank and why they’d eliminated him behind the scenes. It sounded nice to say that he’d sacrificed himself for his faith, but he’d been involved with human trafficking and violating the dead with magic.

“I believe it was the right choice to hire you,” Ibroy added. “The outcome might’ve been different if we had called the Holy Order.”

“That’s certainly true.”

Judging by what I’d heard from Gatoga and Rose, Reveos had been affiliated with the papists. If the Holy Order had been called to arrest him, the whole incident could’ve been hushed up, or in the worst case, Ibroy’s position in the church—or even his life—could’ve been in danger. Gatoga had called himself neutral, but there was no telling what each individual knight believed. Rose’s case had fully demonstrated that.

“By the way, Beryl,” Ibroy said after seeing my reaction. “How much do you know of Sphenedyardvania’s present situation?”

“Umm... I know there’s discord between the papists and royalists. That’s about it.”

“Hmm.”

I only knew that there was some kind of power struggle going on, and even that was borrowed knowledge from Lucy—I possessed no information of my own. I’d been on-site during the chaos, but I hadn’t been able to deduce any of the details or hidden facts.

“As far as I know, nothing has drastically changed since the incident,” Ibroy said. “Publicly, at least.”

That addendum probably meant that big moves were being made behind the scenes. A major incident had already occurred involving their neighboring nation's royal family. If things weren't getting even *more* serious now, then when would they?

"Meaning...things are already on the move?" I asked.

"Pretty much. It can't really be made public, though."

He had a point. However, even though our incident had involved Liberis's princess, the uproar afterward had been minimal. As far as I knew, rumors had spread right after the commotion, but not to a great extent within Baltrain itself. Still, it hadn't been forgotten, though maybe I was under that impression because I'd been directly involved—it'd been impactful enough that I couldn't forget even if I wanted to.

"There should be major changes before long," Ibroy said. "Especially considering what happened."

"Given all of that, you seem awfully positive..."

"I'm a follower of the Church of Sphene, but not a citizen of Sphenedyardvania."

"Right..."

It was hard to believe that this statement was coming from an adherent of Sphenedyardvania's state religion. This old man was really something else. He made full use of the discrepancy between his status as a bishop of the Church of Sphene and his Liberion citizenship.

"At any rate, even a citizen of Sphenedyardvania's who'd ascended to the seat of a bishop couldn't avoid punishment," Ibroy added. "That in itself is worth celebrating."

That was the end of his information on Reveos. I'd seen Reveos's evil deeds for myself, so none of this made me particularly uneasy. However, Rose seemed to have believed in Reveos and the pope, so there was definitely some kind of information control going on.

Still, Reveos hadn't been able to avoid punishment. As a regular citizen,

knowing that the justice system worked as intended was indeed worth celebrating.

Thinking back on it, there'd been no allusions to any of this during my meal with King Gladio at the palace. That dinner had been no more than a show of thanks, but from another perspective, they probably couldn't talk about it in front of someone who had nothing to do with the world of politics. Or maybe it was simpler than that, and they hadn't been at the point where they could say anything yet. I was pretty confident about my ability to keep a secret, but I wasn't confident I could keep calm while listening to international matters of import.

Anyway, there was no point in me asking about this stuff. Knowing something I shouldn't could pose a significant risk to my life. I felt it was best to leave it to Allucia and Henblitz.

"Also, if there are any movements among the Holy Order, I'd like to know," I said.

"Hmm. Do you have an acquaintance there?"

"Well...yes, something like that."

What I was currently most worried about was Rose's fate. I couldn't even rely on Allucia or Lucy to tell me what was happening with her—Rose's circumstances were a secret between Gatoga and me. That made it sound like we were up to no good, but the truth was far crazier than most people would think. After all, she'd been the key figure behind the papists' attempt to overthrow the royalists. The fact that she was the Holy Order's lieutenant commander made it even worse.

However, it was hard to openly gather information on Rose, and it was anxiety-inducing to those who knew her situation. So, I'd had no choice but to ask Ibroy about it ambiguously. I didn't have an issue with telling him I had an acquaintance there, but there was no telling how information could leak, so it was best to be careful.

"I don't get much information on the Holy Order," Ibroy said. "Oh, but I did get news that several in its upper echelon have changed."

“Like the lieutenant commander, for example?”

“Hmm. You *are* well-informed.”

“I’m just guessing,” I said, dodging his inquiry.

“I see.”

I doubted he actually accepted my excuse, but he said no more and simply nodded. The fact that he didn’t deny it meant Rose had definitely stepped down from her position, and he’d even implied that there was a new lieutenant commander already. *I can imagine the headache Gatoga must be enduring.* He’d had three lieutenants in a short period: Hinnis, Rose, and whoever the new person was.

But nobody knew more than that. It wasn’t like I could prod Ibroy about Rose’s whereabouts. I gave it some careful thought—the prevailing story was probably that Rose had stepped down due to her injuries and had subsequently retired.

Where was she now, and what was she doing? I was worried, but she was a strong girl. This old man’s concerns would be nothing but a bother to her. If possible, though, I wanted her to be able to find a new purpose in life.

“Is there anything else?” Ibroy asked. “It’s about time for afternoon prayer.”

“No, that’s it. Sorry for taking up your time.”

“I don’t mind. After all, I intend to maintain close ties with you.”

“Ha ha ha...”

With that, Ibroy once more put on his gentle, shady smile. *Hmm. He’s connected to Lucy, so I’m pretty sure he isn’t a bad person, but I’d rather not get more involved than this. I can go without being used in such a reckless way again.*

“Oh yes, is Mewi doing well?” Ibroy asked.

“Yes. She’s currently studying at the magic institute.”

“Is that so? That’s wonderful news.”

It turned out Ibroy really did know about Mewi for some reason. I hadn’t told

him, so Lucy must've shared some information. Well, he was familiar with Lucy's home and acquainted with Haley, and since Mewi had lived there for a short spell, it wasn't strange for him to know about her. Still, a selfish part of me didn't want Mewi getting too close to him.

I was reluctant to fully trust this man. What made it worse was the fact that Ibroy seemed to be acting this way on purpose. I'd met a lot of new people since coming to Baltrain. Back in Beaden, I'd gotten by just knowing my pupils, but that wasn't going to fly anymore. It would be one thing if I was alone, but I wanted to avoid dragging Mewi into unnecessary trouble. Not that I was saying Ibroy was up to no good or anything.

"I'll see you to the door," Ibroy said. "If anything happens, feel free to come to the church. And if there's something you want to repent for, I'll be glad to hear you out."

"Ha ha, I'll pray that never happens."

We rose from our seats and walked to the church's front doors. I didn't feel remorse about anything right now. Just as I'd told him, I could only pray I would never need the confession booth.

Interlude

“Hi there. So what’s today’s menu?”

“Stew. There’s plenty for second helpings too.”

In the early afternoon at the magic institute, inside the large cafeteria on the school grounds, the cheerful chatter of students filled the air. It was an enormous facility meant to support the stomachs of some six hundred aspiring wizards. Students in refreshing blue and white uniforms sat where they liked, enjoying their meals while talking with their school friends.

Sitting at one of these tables was a young girl who was heartily—or crudely, if one chose not to mince words—gulping down a bowl of stew. This girl with dark blue hair was named Mewi Freya, and she had no issue with eating alone. She simply enjoyed her food while thinking about how the flavor was slightly different than the meals back at home.

Some time had passed since Mewi’s enrollment at the magic institute. If necessary, she would exchange one or two words with other students, but she had no idea how to close the distance between herself and other people. Having lived alone most of her life with nobody but her older sister by her side, she’d never felt the need to get closer to anyone.

“Oh? Mewi, you’re having lunch too!”

“I am...”

That didn’t mean she refused to let people try to get closer to her, though. As a result, she’d been able to form and maintain connections with some of the more whimsical students.

“I’ll be taking the seat across from you!”

“Do what you want...”

This endlessly cheerful girl—Cindy Loveaut—was one of her few acquaintances. From an outside perspective, they looked like they were in this

vague relationship of being more than acquaintances and less than friends.

Cindy was holding a tray containing a bowl filled to the brim with stew, and she took a seat at Mewi's table. Cindy had a loud voice—she always spoke at an exceptional volume. And with that loud voice, she was able to get along with anyone. Mewi had been unable to escape this girl who called out to everyone in sight.

“Thanks for the food!” Cindy shouted cheerfully—her voice projected very well.

She started eating, and in contrast to her voice, her mannerisms were very refined. Mewi could tell the difference between Cindy's etiquette and her own lack of it. Mewi knew nothing about culture or manners or anything of the like. Up until now, she'd never had the leisure of worrying about such things.

However, her situation had changed a little. There hadn't been any problems yet while living with Beryl, but now that she was experiencing the communal life in the magic institute, she was starting to get vaguely anxious—she felt like, if she wanted to grow, she couldn't stay the same. However, just being conscious of manners and culture wasn't enough to acquire such skills. Beryl had been relatively lax about this, so she hadn't shown much progress.

“Today's cafeteria food is as good as ever, isn't it?!”

For better or worse, nobody around Mewi was particularly strict about this. It'd been that way all her life. Only in this new environment had she started to compare herself to others, but no one was taking a strong stance to correct her, which had led to the current status quo.

“Ah, Mewi, you got some stew on you!” Cindy said, quickly pulling out a handkerchief and wiping Mewi's stained sleeve.

“Mm...”

Due to Mewi's petite stature and young age, the few acquaintances she had at school treated her like a little sister. Even her thorny personality was a minor matter when they viewed it as the rebellious behavior of a growing girl. Students from all walks of life attended the magic institute, but fortunately, Mewi was surrounded by a congregation of people with strangely generous

personalities.

“Yo, Cindy, Mewi.”

“Good day, everyone.”

“Mind if we join you?”

“Ooh! It’s Nesia, Fredra, and Lumite!”

“Whatever...”

While Cindy and Mewi enjoyed a lively meal—well, one of them was lively and the other was subdued—the three other students who attended their sword magic lectures joined them at the table. Unlike Mewi, they didn’t have small social circles or anything. Lumite in particular was the son of a viscount, so he’d had plenty of acquaintances before even attending the institute.

Still, as fellow students of the sword magic course—which was quite the novelty—they happened to get along pretty well. During lunch or on the walk back to the dorms after classes were over, these five gathered naturally.

Mewi didn’t consider time spent with them as particularly welcome, nor did she think poorly of it. She’d spent the majority of her life in solitude, so she was often bewildered by such socializing, but it was also a fresh and stimulating experience.

“How did you all do on the test for Fundamental Magic I?” Lumite asked.

“I did so-so!” Cindy answered. “It really reminded me that I’m just better at moving my body!”

“I did okay...” Mewi said.

Everyone enjoyed their stew while chatting away. One way or another, their conversation was pretty much entirely focused on magic or the courses they were taking. They were passionate when it came to both studying and playing, but the magic institute was a rather special environment. Unlike normal students, their interests leaned a little more toward their studies. Mewi found that this made it easier to chat with them. After all, she wouldn’t really know how to respond if they talked about their hobbies.

“I did pretty good this time around,” Nesia said. “The same went for the rest

of you, huh?”

“So did I,” Fredra agreed. “I suppose it really is important to train the body.”

Unlike Mewi and Cindy, these two were pretty confident about their results. Mewi could understand that a little—she felt a clear sense of understanding toward magic that she hadn’t had before enrolling in the institute. But that could also be because Mewi hadn’t received any proper education before this.

“The sword magic lessons are making a surprising amount of sense now too.”

“I believe that’s because of Mr. Beryl. I find he’s rather good at teaching.”

“You’re telling me! The Liberion’s instructor is amazing!”

“Hmph...”

The topic moved on from magic to Beryl, which provoked a slight twitch from Mewi. Beryl couldn’t use magic, so all he was capable of teaching in the sword magic course were the movements and knowledge required for swordsmanship.

Still, even if that was all he was teaching, to these young students who were in an emotional stage of their lives, his lessons seemed to provide more excitement than the average course. The five students taking the sword magic course showed genuine motivation for learning swordsmanship—this had trickled down to their magic classes that had nothing to do with swordsmanship, and it seemed to have a positive effect.

That effect didn’t necessarily apply to just anyone, of course. These five in particular had considerable potential dormant within them.

Had Ficelle been the only one teaching them, things probably wouldn’t have looked so promising, and even if they had, it would’ve taken far longer for their talent to blossom. Beryl was aware he had some talent for teaching others how to use a sword—in the realm of swordplay and all matters related to swordsmanship, he was an excellent teacher. Whether he was an equally excellent parent or adult was a different matter, of course.

Everyone was finishing their stew just as lunch was about to end. The conversation began to die down when Cindy then broached another topic.

“Oh yeah, I’ve been wondering this for a while now!”

“What...?” Mewi asked.

“Mewi, are you personally acquainted with Mr. Beryl?”

“Wh-Why...?”

Mewi jolted a little at the unexpected question. The others didn’t know that, for documentation purposes, Beryl and Mewi were father and daughter. Beryl and Ficelle had also dodged the topic, deeming it unnecessary to explain. Mewi herself didn’t want to talk about it, so she didn’t feel it was necessary to tell anyone.

“Hm? You are?” Lumite asked.

It seemed Cindy had been the only one to guess any part of this. The other students were somewhat shocked by her question.

Mewi was stumped. Should she tell them the truth? Setting aside her relationship with Beryl for the moment, she had no intention of unveiling her entire past. This was information pretty much only Lucy, Allucia, and Ficelle knew. Even her teacher, Kinera, had no idea what Mewi had done in the past and what she’d gone through.

Admitting to her relationship with Beryl meant touching upon that past a little, so Mewi wasn’t sure what to do. It wasn’t like she didn’t trust them, but even with her lack of social skills, she could tell this wasn’t a very welcome topic.

“Well...I guess I am...” Mewi said.

“Thought so!” Cindy exclaimed.

In the end, Mewi admitted only to being acquaintances with Beryl. To this day, she still had no idea how to interact with this assertive friend of hers. Still, she understood that Cindy wasn’t just treating her as a curiosity. This was a bit of relief. Mewi couldn’t bring herself to hate her.

“Hmm, is that so?” Lumite muttered. “Cindy, how could you tell?”

“I mean, I just kinda thought Mr. Beryl and Mewi act differently toward one another than they do with the rest of us!”

“You’re quite observant...” Fredra remarked.

The unexpected change of topic had pulled all five students into the conversation, at least somewhat. Mewi wasn’t aware of her attitude changing when she interacted with others—she’d meant to act the same with Beryl as she did with Cindy, Lumite, Nesia, and Fredra. However, with her abundance of personal connections, Cindy was somewhat more sensitive to such subtleties.

“Mewi is personally acquainted with Liberion’s instructor?” Nesia muttered. “That’s kind of a shock.”

“Right?! So how did you meet him?!” Cindy asked, fully of interest.

Mewi wasn’t quite sure how to handle the situation. A fleeting thought crossed her mind: *why not just tell them everything?* However, she didn’t know what kind of relationship she would be building with these students in the long term. It was possible they were all going to go their separate ways after graduating, but they might also remain in contact. Due to her age—and especially due to her lack of social experience—Mewi couldn’t really predict how revealing everything now would affect her future.

However, right as Mewi was about to speak, Cindy’s loud voice cut her off.

“Oh! Sorry! I didn’t mean to pry! No matter the circumstances, you’re still Mewi! Ha ha ha ha!”

“Hmph...”

Cindy had observed the minute changes to Mewi’s expression and she’d judged that this wasn’t a happy topic. She had then made sure that those around them didn’t develop a bad impression of Mewi, and she’d even turned any negative attention toward herself, just in case.

“You’re right,” Fredra said. “Whatever the case may be, Mewi is still a friend and rival.”

“Rival? You’ll have to start by putting on some muscle first, Fredra,” Lumite pointed out calmly.

“E-Erk...”

Compared to the others, Fredra had an overwhelming lack of endurance. She

ran out of breath even faster than Mewi, who'd spent most of her life malnourished. It was only reasonable for Lumite to tease her when he excelled at both the military and literary arts.

"Friends..." Mewi repeated without really thinking about it.

"That's right! Aren't we friends?!" Cindy exclaimed loudly.

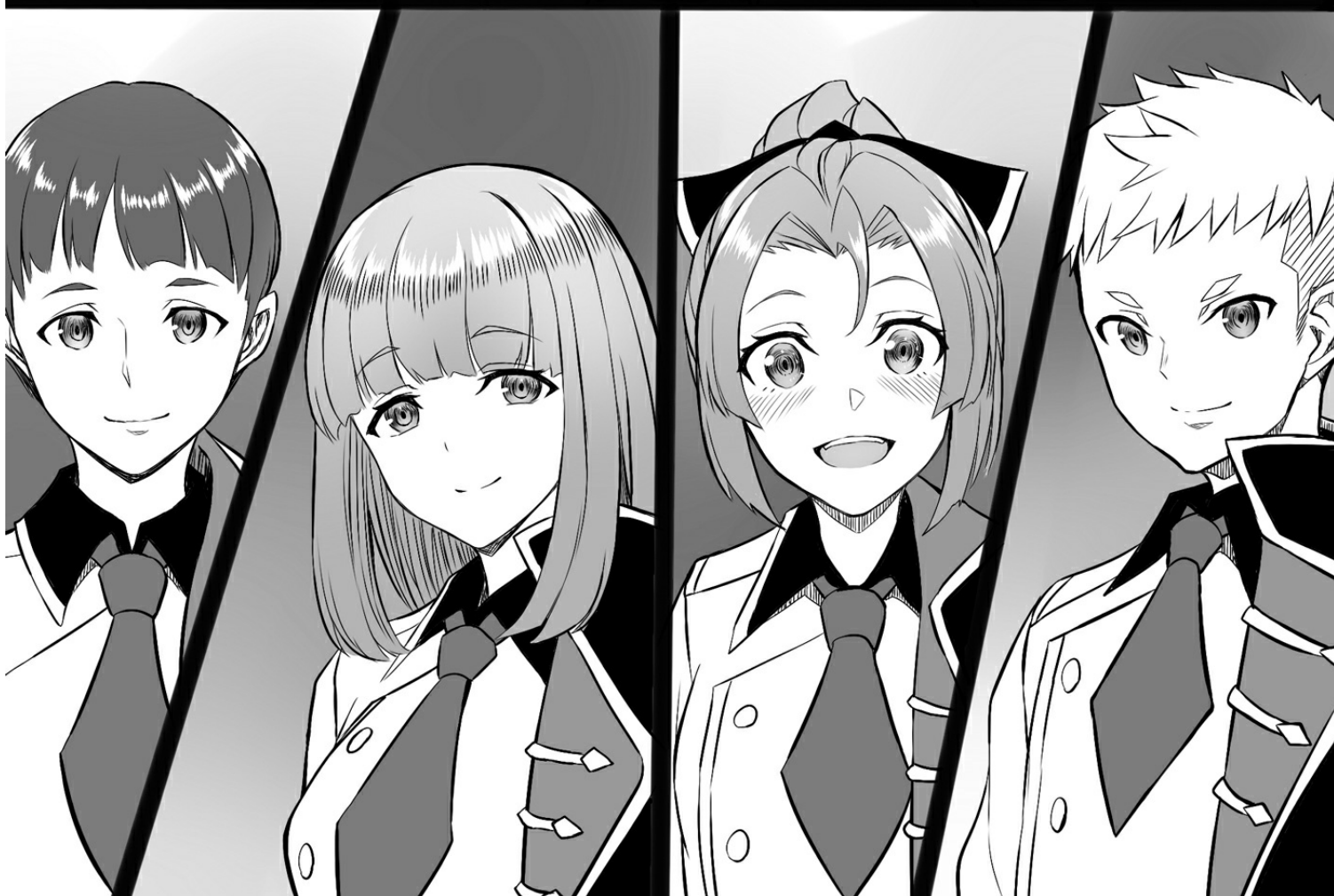
Mewi didn't reply. She didn't even look at Cindy. *Friends*. Mewi had never had anyone around her who could be classified as such. All she'd ever known was her kind sister, those who'd pushed her around, and the busybody who was far older than she was.

"But I'm hard to deal with..." Mewi mumbled shyly.

"That's totally fine," Nesia told her. "It's way easier to get along with you than some toadies."

"That's right!" Cindy agreed. "It gives you individuality too!"

"You could do with being a bit quieter, Cindy..." Nesia said.



Due to Nesia's build and personality, people often feared him. Mewi was far smaller than him, younger, she didn't speak much, and she interacted with him bashfully—despite all these things, he didn't have a bad impression of her.

Cindy was the same with everyone. As long as nothing absolutely horrible was done to her, she wouldn't push people away or come to hate them. Inside her head, Mewi had long been part of her circle of friends.

Fredra was a fundamentally serious girl but was sometimes quite careless. She was like Cindy in the sense that she seemed to make good impressions on everyone around her. Fredra had a lot more pride, though. She'd chosen the sword magic course because of her admiration of Ficelle, and she saw Mewi as a friend who worked hard toward reaching the same goal.

Lumite was friendly with basically everyone—his behavior somewhat akin to noblesse oblige. Mewi was his junior at the institute, and he considered her to be a fellow friend taking the same course.

Each of them saw her in a somewhat different way, but they were all better friends than Mewi had imagined.

"Thanks..." Mewi murmured.

"Whoa, Mewi just said thanks! It might rain tomorrow."

"Hmph!"

"Ow! You ass! Don't kick me!"

"That was your fault, Nesia."

"Lumite's right. You should watch what you say."

And just like that, lunchtime at the magic institute came to an end with the students raising a fuss that was appropriate for their ages.

Chapter 3: An Old Country Bumpkin Dances with Shadows

“Ooh, looks like you’ve gotten better.”

“Right?! Right?! Heyaaah!”

A week had passed since I’d had that delightful lunch with Kinera and heard about Sphenedyardvania’s situation from Ibroy at the church. I was teaching my weekly sword magic class—something I was getting accustomed to now—and observing how everyone’s swordplay was looking.

I realized they were all moving quite a bit better than before. They hadn’t just improved overnight, of course. Much like any martial art, swordsmanship wasn’t something you just suddenly got better at out of nowhere—it was built on an accumulation of minor daily improvements.

However, on any path to mastery, there were times when you noticed a clear change. As far as I could tell, today’s class was one such instance.

“Seems you’ve grasped your own little knack for it. That’s a good thing.”

“Ahem!”

I offered some honest praise and got an equally honest reaction from Cindy. Her mannerisms still reminded me of Curuni—both her characteristic cheerfulness and her inexhaustible supply of energy.

“Hmm!”

“Hah! Hah!”

“You’ve both stabilized your technique considerably. Looking good.”

Taking my eyes off of Cindy for now, I focused on the others. Both Lumite and Nesia were shaping up well. Lumite had learned a little swordplay at home, and Nesia had the best build of the bunch. One had the foundations in place, and the other had the qualities of a swordsman. Given some proper instruction,

they were improving relatively fast.

“Hmph...”

“You’re getting better too, Mewi. That’s the spirit.”

“...Hmph.”

Unlike Mewi’s mouth, her sword was rather honest. She didn’t have any weird quirks. She’d never used a sword before this, so her skill was a result of obediently absorbing my and Ficelle’s teachings.

“Yo...! Hoh!”

“Ooh, nice. Your axis has stabilized a lot.”

“Haah... I’ll show...I can at least do...this much!”

Even Fredra, though still somewhat shoddy and wheezing for breath, was shaping up well. Her stamina was definitely still a problem, though. This was one thing that required an extended amount of time in order to build a proper foundation, so while I couldn’t say anything positive about her stamina now, it would indeed improve with continuous effort.

Mewi and Fredra didn’t have the proper groundwork in place. They were like clean white sheets, and that was what made them all the easier to dye.

Even though my students’ dormant potential was still an unknown quantity, all five of them were excellent students who gave me a glimmer of hope and expectation. How far could they go if they continued their training?

“It’s all thanks to you, Master Beryl,” Ficelle said, putting me on a pedestal as always.

“Not at all,” I told her. “Their efforts, and yours, play a part in it.”

“Heh heh.”

I didn’t really need to be propped up like that, but I wasn’t going to deny everything she said either. I accepted a modicum of her praise while making sure she knew it wasn’t only my effort that was paying off.

I had some talent for teaching the sword—even looking at things objectively, that was the truth. However, no matter how talented the teacher, the student

had to have a decently solid foundation if they wanted to produce any results. These five had more than enough potential to make good swordsmen.

To take things further, I hadn't taught them how to use a sword from scratch. Even excluding Lumite, who'd learned a little back at home, the other four had started their lessons with Ficelle. Indeed, their growth was also her accomplishment.

"At this rate, if they keep putting in the reps and practice, I think they'll have no problem grasping the fundamentals," I said. "What's the plan after that, Ms. Ficelle?"

"Mm... Practice swings in tandem with mana drills."

"Hmmm..."

Since I was unable to use magic, I couldn't really give any input about that. I had no idea what mana drills were. In all likelihood, once they passed a certain threshold, Ficelle was planning to shift their lessons to focus on the magic component of sword magic. The true thrill of this field of magic wasn't just swinging a sword—it was getting mana to ride the blade and unleashing it as an attack.

"My grades in fundamental magic have been pretty good lately," Nesia said, taking a short breather from practice swings. "It's thanks to you, Mr. Beryl."

"Yes, the same goes for me," Lumite joined in. "I feel like I'm able to concentrate far better than before."

"Ha ha ha, that's good to hear," I told them, chuckling. "Thank you."

It seemed these lessons had a positive influence on their personal growth. If that was truly the case, then I couldn't be happier. I knew nothing about magic, but the path to mastery had to be the same for both swordsmanship and wizardry. The mental fortitude and focus you built up for one had to apply to the other, even if only a little.

"Also, we haven't been told to do an unreasonable thousand practice swings lately," Nesia added.

"Hmm?" I muttered in interest.

“Mrgh.”

Ficelle was pouting...or maybe she was embarrassed? *She really is still young.*

“Hgggh... Haaah... Recently, we’ve been learning how to charge our swings with mana,” Fredra explained as she wheezed for breath. “It’s quite difficult, though...”

I wouldn’t mind if they did that while I was present too, but I would end up as no more than a decoration. Ficelle’s judgment was correct.

Sword magic classes were held twice a week. I attended one of these where we focused on swordsmanship and building muscle. On the other day, Ficelle was apparently no longer forcing her students to do a reckless number of practice swings, but she was instead teaching the fundamentals of sword magic.

I wanted to quip that she should’ve just done that to begin with, but I had an idea why she’d done it that way. Ficelle had combined her swordsmanship and wizardry on her own to learn sword magic, so she surely had no idea how to teach it to others.

She’d concluded that she should teach things the way she’d learned them. In other words, her plan had been to hammer swordsmanship into them, then open things up to magic. However, though Ficelle had graduated from my dojo, this was her first experience on the teaching side of things—she’d been under the impression that the students would figure things out by simply doing practice swings. After witnessing that first class with Ficelle it was perfectly understandable for Lucy to say, “She sucks at this.” Lucy was a master of magic, but an amateur at swordsmanship.

Well, I would be lying if I said Ficelle’s teaching style had been problem-free. That was why I’d cut in upon witnessing it for myself. Still, in this short period of time, Ficelle had been thinking about the proper way to teach these students in her own way. I was honestly glad to see it.

I taught swordsmanship, while Ficelle taught magic. By watching me, she would be able to steal my techniques for teaching swordsmanship too.

“It’s not difficult,” Ficelle said. “I can do it, so everyone can.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s pushing it...” Nesia grumbled.

“Ms. Ficelle, you can only say that because you’re talented...” Fredra added.

You could easily call Ficelle a talented genius, but she was the type who developed based on extreme practice and intuition. That was what made it difficult for her to teach her juniors anything based on theory—yes, theory was important for swordsmanship, but it was probably doubly so for magic.

“I think it’s important to have conviction on an emotional level, though...” Ficelle said.

“Yeah. You’re right there,” I agreed.

The will to see things through, an unyielding heart, an objective to reach, admiration—it didn’t really matter what exactly it was, but these kinds of mental support were important. Even I’d set my sights on the lofty objective of reaching the same heights as my dad. This had supported my swordsmanship from childhood to the present day. I didn’t feel like I was ever going to reach that goal, though. He was seriously way too strong.

Anyway, enough of my life story. The important part here was that Ficelle was giving proper thought to the teaching progress and showing growth. Just being able to witness that made becoming a temporary lecturer for the sword magic course worth it.

“It might be about time for us to start attack and strike practice,” I remarked.

“What’s that?” Lumite asked.

“In short, you work in pairs...you wield your sword with someone actually in front of you,” I explained. “I’m sure you’re all getting tired of just swinging and running on your own, right?”

Magic seemed to have plenty of applications, but sword magic was a technique meant specifically for combat. It was fine to learn it simply for appearance’s sake, but I doubted these five wished to stop at that level. Besides, just as I said, no matter how motivated you were, doing the same thing over and over again definitely got boring. Using training dummies like at the order’s office would work too, but I couldn’t exactly bring one to the magic institute.

“That sounds great,” Nesia said, clearly more enthusiastic than the others.

“I’m suddenly looking forward to this.”

He did seem like the most warlike of the bunch. Naturally, just letting them go at it right off the bat would lead to injuries and bad habits, so we were only going to do this after repeating some basic forms. Still, it was definitely going to be more stimulating for them than swinging a sword at empty space.

“Got it. I’ll beat everyone black and blue,” Ficelle said.

“How ’bout...you don’t?” I muttered.

“Erk...”

It was fine to show off her strength as their teacher, but beating up her students was out of the question. Anyway, this suggestion wasn’t only for the students’ sake—Ficelle wasn’t exactly prone to confrontation, but she was actually fairly muscle-brained by nature. Watching her students exercise while she did nothing had to be a strain for both her mind and body. It was fine for me since I got to exercise at the order’s office pretty much every day, but a member of the magic corps probably didn’t have that luxury.

“Starting next week, let’s teach them the process little by little,” I suggested.

“Mm.”

Now that the general direction of our lessons had been decided, it was about time to call it a day. After teaching at the institute several times, I now knew that all classes were about an hour long. This made it pretty easy for the teachers to have a set plan.

“Oh.”

And just as that thought crossed my mind, the chime rang, signaling the end of class. I was genuinely curious about where the sound came from. As far as I could tell, there was no giant bell anywhere on campus. Was it some kind of magic?

“Thank you for today’s lesson.”

“Mm, good work everyone.”

“Thank you!”

I exchanged polite farewells with the students. *Yup, this stuff is definitely important.* Manners were key to everything. Even if they were learning how to fight, they weren't here to kill each other or anything.

And just as I was considering a stroll through town on my way back home, Lumite called out to me.

"Oh right. Mr. Beryl, may I have a moment?"

"Hm?"

I wondered what it could be. Was it a question regarding swordsmanship? He was diligent in an altogether different way from Nesia. By nature, he seemed more suitable for wizardry than swordsmanship.

"Are you available this weekend?" he asked.

"Well, I can make time if I want... Do you need something?"

His question wasn't about swordsmanship, but instead about my schedule. I was just getting more and more curious. The only thing I really had to do was train at the order's office. And if I let her know ahead of time, Allucia would surely give me a day off.

"It's Cindy's birthday," Lumite said, lowering his voice a little. "We're planning to throw a little celebration, and we were wondering if you could attend."

"Hmm, that sounds nice."

A birthday, huh? This old man is forty-five, so I don't have that much emotional attachment to counting the passing years. Still, I guess it's a pretty important event for a student.

"Are you sure I should be participating?" I asked, wondering if such an old man should be hanging out with the youngsters.

"Yes, I insist."

Well, I could've expected that answer based on the fact that he'd invited me in the first place. Still, there was a good thirty years between us. I couldn't help but feel a little reserved.

"By the way...are you going too, Mewi?" I asked.

She paused for a long moment. “It’d be awkward to refuse...”

“Ha ha ha, it sure would.”

It seemed she didn’t want to be left out. Though she was somewhat socially clumsy, she was slowly building up a circle of friends with the help of those around her. I couldn’t ask for more.

“All right, no point in turning down an invitation,” I said. “I guess I’ll drop by for a bit too.”

“Great! I’m sure she’ll be pleased,” Lumite said.

Hmm, now that it’s decided, I’ll have to think of a present. We can’t have an adult showing up empty-handed. That said, I had no idea what a young girl would like. Handing over something expensive or high-class seemed wrong too. I considered wandering around the western district to figure something out.

“They’re planning to hold it at night in the dorm’s cafeteria,” Ficelle explained. “I’ll bring you.”

“Sure. Please do.”

She’d obviously been invited too. It would’ve been weird to invite me and not her. I also took her up on her offer of guiding me to the party. An old man wandering into the school dorm alone at night... That could get me arrested by the guards.

“Okay, everyone,” I said. “Don’t be late for your next class.”

“Right! Then please excuse us!”

The students ran off in a hurry. *Yup, that’s youth. Study diligently, foster friendships, and grow.* My parents had provided me with what education they could, but I hadn’t ever really experienced this kind of communal life. We had plenty of people at the dojo, but it wasn’t like I’d lived with my pupils. I felt somewhat envious about this as I prayed for Mewi to be able to grow in this environment in both body and mind.



“All right, time to get going.”

It was the weekend of Cindy's birthday party. I'd woken up early as always, had spent the afternoon taking a stroll around town, and was now leaving the house to meet Ficelle.

Incidentally, there were no classes at the magic institute today, so Mewi would usually be home. She'd left ahead of me, though. It seemed she was still shy about being seen walking with me. I knew she didn't hate me or anything, but this sense of distance between us was still hard to grasp. Well, there were a good thirty years separating us. I could somewhat understand a young girl not wanting to walk around with a boring old man.

I didn't have much interest in fashion or the like, but I wanted to avoid bringing Mewi any shame. So, I started paying a bit more attention to my personal appearance...just a little, though. I didn't buy any new clothes or anything—I simply gave more care to my daily cleanliness. Frankly, I had no idea what was in style anyway.

“Did I forget anything...? Nope.”

Normally, I didn't carry much more than some money and my sword, but today, I had Cindy's present too. *It would be ridiculous to forget it here.* I had to put on a little pride as an adult.

On that note, it'd taken me several days to choose a present. I'd spent my afternoons after training strolling around the western district, but nothing had really struck a chord. I'd tried asking Mewi for advice, but that conversation had ended quickly with a “dunno.” I was a little sad about that, but maybe I shouldn't have asked my adopted daughter about that at my age.

In the end, I'd settled on somewhat fancy leather gloves. They were clearly nicer than what I usually used, and I figured they should work for wielding a weapon. Cindy was a budding wizard, but from what I'd seen during our lessons, she enjoyed the simple act of swinging a sword. So, I'd made my choice in hopes that her fun could continue, even if only a little. I wasn't entirely confident that it was an appropriate gift for a growing girl, though. Still, it wasn't like I knew the latest fashions—I had no idea what girls wanted.

I could've probably gone to others for ideas. However, Mewi, the closest one to me, had given a one-word refusal; Allucia and Curuni seemed like they would

say anything worked; Henblitz was also an option, but he was a tried-and-true warrior. So, I'd decided to pick something on my own.

Speaking of Henblitz, he had the looks and personality that made him very popular with women, but I'd never heard of any such stories. It was possible it was happening where I couldn't see it, though. Anyway, the lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order didn't have the time to play around like that, so it just showed he had integrity.

Incidentally, I'd told Mewi she needed to prepare a present for her friend's birthday—I'd even given her some spending money. She'd been shy about going shopping with me, so I'd left it entirely up to her own sensibilities. *I wondered what she ended up picking.*

In a sense, Mewi was more distant from the way the world worked than I was. Luckily, she was shopping for Cindy this time, and I was pretty sure the girl would be happy with anything Mewi gave her. Mewi had sneaked out whenever she'd had the time and diligently looked for something appropriate. She wouldn't tell me what she'd bought, though. *She doesn't have to be that shy about it.*

And as I walked through the town with such thoughts on my mind, the sun was setting to the west. I soon arrived at the magic institute, and someone was waiting in front of the gate.

"Ficelle, thanks for waiting."

"Mm. Evening, Master."

"Yup, good evening."

She wasn't wearing her usual robe but was instead dressed in loose-fitting trousers and a top with cold-shoulder sleeves. Now that I thought of it, it'd been a while since I'd seen Ficelle in anything but formal attire. During her days at the dojo, I'd only ever seen her in training wear too. She hadn't worn such feminine clothes around me for a long time.

However, she still had a sword at her waist. This had to be her pride as a swordswoman showing. Her fashionable clothes were somewhat unbalanced by the weapon, but as a fellow swordsman, I understood her well. No matter

where I was or how I was dressed, I was restless if I had nothing at my hip.

“Did you buy a gift?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. You too?”

“Yeah. It might be a bit boring, though.”

“I’m sure it’s not. She’ll be delighted.”

This was why I found it hard to go to my pupils for advice regarding presents—they were bound to give me this reaction. For some reason, they found unconditional joy in any present I had to give, so they were useless as a point of reference for what might actually be a good gift.

I wasn’t planning on giving anything weird, of course. But still, getting such a high assessment from those around me felt like it would one day make a mess of my common sense. It was a frightening thought.

Well, I could always rely on Mewi. She was pretty distant from concepts like reading the room or partiality. The same went for Lucy, but it was hard to go to her for advice in an altogether different way.

I took a sidelong glance at the school building as the setting sun dyed it red. We were walking toward the student dorm. This was my first time going this way, and I noticed that the dorm was somewhat smaller than the school building. Regardless, it was ridiculously large compared to anything normal. Whenever I came here, my sense of the ordinary was blown away by the ludicrous scale of the campus. This place was far larger than the inn where I’d stayed.

“Ah, Ms. Ficelle, Mr. Beryl.”

“Yo, good evening. Pardon us.”

Right as we entered the dorm, we came into a spacious room where the five sword magic students had already gathered. They were seated at a table in the corner. It was a day off with no classes, so none of them were in uniform. Their casual attire was a fresh sight. I only saw them during class, after all—excluding Mewi, of course.

“Everyone! Thanks so much for putting this together!” exclaimed the star of

the day.

“You got it,” Nesia said. “Happy birthday.”

“Happy birthday,” Lumite joined in. “Let’s give this year our best.”

It seemed Ficelle and I were the last arrivals. Other than Mewi, the others all lived in the dorm, so they’d been able to gather immediately.

Food was already lined up on the table. They’d probably each bought something themselves and had pooled it all together. It was a repertoire of relatively cheap foods that could fill the stomach like meat, beans, and bread. They were at an age where they grew in both body and mind, so coming up with this kind of hearty meal was probably natural to them. Even Mewi ate quite a lot for a girl as young as she was.

“Shall we start with a toast?” Lumite suggested.

“Yeah,” Nesia said, turning to Cindy. “C’mon, today’s your day. Take a seat and leave it to us.”

“Right! I’ll take you up on that!”

Lumite and Fredra poured drinks into several wooden tankards. I was relieved to see that it wasn’t alcohol. They were sure to acquire a taste for it in the future, but it was too early for Mewi to start drinking.

“Okay, then. To Cindy’s birthday! And to her good health—”

“Cheers!”

“Mm...”

After Lumite’s simple toast, everyone clanked their tankards together. As to be expected of the son of a viscount, he seemed to be very familiar with preparing and running this kind of event. Mewi also raised her mug shyly and gave it a reserved *thunk* against the others.

“Wow! There’s nothing better than having friends!” Cindy shouted cheerfully as she dug into the food.

I wasn’t here to be a statue, so I picked at the food too and joined their conversation.

“Cindy seems like the type to have a ton of friends,” I remarked.

“I wonder about that... From an outsider’s perspective, you might think she’s just noisy,” Nesia said.

I was raised in the countryside, but I took pride in treading the path of swordsmanship for my entire life. From my personal experience, people who were constantly cheerful were considerably more likable than the quiet ones. Naturally, diligence and seriousness were also important traits, but people who were overflowing with energy were simply suited to swinging a sword.

“I guess there are a lot of quiet types at the institute, huh?” I asked.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Lumite said. “People like Cindy are definitely rare, though.”

“Ha ha ha! Thanks!”

“Pretty sure that wasn’t a compliment,” Nesia quipped.

Cindy was as positive as always. As long as she wasn’t being blatantly slandered, she always saw the bright side of things. This was a talent, in a sense. Mewi had the exact opposite talent—she saw everything in a negative light, so I hoped she could learn from Cindy.

After everyone enjoyed the food for a while longer, Nesia suddenly muttered as if he’d just remembered something.

“Oh, right. Take this before I forget.”

“Hm? Ooh, thank you!”

He practically threw a small package at Cindy, and she broke into a huge smile. *I guess now’s the time to hand over presents.* I was glad Nesia had gotten things started.

“I’ve got something for you too,” I said. “Happy birthday.”

“Mr. Beryl?! Thank you very much!”

Judging by her reaction, she hadn’t expected to receive anything from me. I resisted the urge to ask if I looked like that rude of a person. Maybe it was uncommon to get something from a teacher, even if only a temporary one.

“I have a gift too,” Ficelle followed up. “Use this to take your studies further.”

“Yes! I’ll gladly put it to use!”

Ficelle’s package was clearly rectangular—definitely some kind of book. In all likelihood, it had to be something like a grimoire for wizards. I’d read several books on swordsmanship before, and I wondered what books on magic were like in comparison. They would be useless for me to read, but I was at least interested.

“Please accept my gift as well,” Lumite said. “Happy birthday.”

“Happy birthday,” Fredra joined in, handing over a present of her own.

“Everyone! Thank you so much!”

Cindy now had too many gifts to hold in both her arms. Her smile was practically bursting at the seams. She still hadn’t checked what the gifts actually were, but simply receiving birthday presents was that big of a deal to her. Her smile was even grander than usual.

“Happy birthday...”

“Mewi...! Thanks!”

To finish things off, Mewi handed over a gift somewhat shyly. *Hmm, even if it’s just a little at a time, Mewi is definitely growing.* Before this, she would’ve never participated in this kind of social event, let alone picked out a gift for someone. That in itself made it worth enrolling her in the magic institute. I wanted her to continue growing healthily to the point where she could recover from everything that’d happened to her.

“Now if only more people start picking the sword magic course, I’ll have nothing to complain about!”

“Mrgh...”

Ficelle puffed her cheeks out as Cindy rounded things up. Ficelle wasn’t really pouting or anything—she simply wasn’t satisfied with the present state of things and wasn’t sure how to break the deadlock.

“I suppose it really isn’t that popular?” I asked hesitantly.

“It isn’t,” Lumite answered. “There were a few more people taking it at first, but...”

Well, I’d pretty much figured that out from the fact that there were only five students. It seemed the class wasn’t really popular as a whole. I didn’t know whether this was because it was sword magic or because of the problem with Ficelle’s teaching.

“There were more people at your dojo,” Ficelle said. “We should have more students for the sword magic course too.”

“Hmmm, so you say, but still...”

I hadn’t intentionally spread the word about my dojo or anything. Beaden was pretty far in the sticks, to begin with. For some reason, we’d had a lot of pupils who’d come from afar, but if asked why our dojo was relatively popular, I couldn’t really give a logical explanation for it.

“Ficelle, do you want more people to take the sword magic course?” I asked.

“Mm... That’d make me happy,” Ficelle answered quietly but clearly.

“Then let’s see... Why did you choose to learn swordsmanship?”

Ficelle’s expression turned meek at my question. The students had been making a ruckus, but they were now also listening carefully to my words. *Huh? Things seem to have gotten really serious. Crap. I don’t think I’m about to say anything really smart here.*

“Why...? Um, maybe because it was fun...?” she said, not entirely sure of her answer.

“That’s a prerequisite, of course,” I agreed.

The reason people learned the ways of the sword naturally differed depending on the individual. Some started because their father or someone similar had told them to. Others wanted to become strong. There were even those who chose it just as a way to distract themselves.

Of those who’d graduated from our dojo, Allucia had started almost entirely on a whim. In contrast, Curuni and Ficelle had taken the initiative to learn the ways of the sword themselves. However, regardless of their reasons for

starting, those who didn't enjoy learning wouldn't continue for very long. What made things even more complicated was that, even if one person enjoyed it, it didn't mean others would too.

"So why did you find it fun?" I asked.

"Hmm..."

From what I'd experienced, everyone had their own sensibilities. There was an infinite variety of personalities and dispositions out there, so it was hard to guide her to a universal answer. Ficelle and Curuni in particular were the type of people to find considerable joy in the simple act of swinging a sword. It was a little harsh to expect that of everyone.

Ficelle fell silent for a while. She definitely enjoyed swordplay, but she was a little stumped over how to explain it logically.

"Ummm... Because...I get praise?" she finally said.

"Mm-hmm. That's not a bad reason."

Receiving acknowledgment from others was more than enough of a good reason in my opinion. Put another way, she had people close to her who praised her—who acknowledged her—if she did well with a sword.

"I dunno if I'm really one to talk, but is that kinda reason good enough?" Nesia asked. He seemed to have found Ficelle's rationale somewhat unexpected.

"It's fine," I told him. "Taking it too far isn't good, but it's a perfectly legitimate reason."

"Is that how it works...?" he muttered.

Honestly, any reason taken too far wasn't admirable, but having a layman's reason and attitude for learning anything was completely okay. For example, wanting to be strong was a splendid motive, but taking it too far was bad for the body and mind. Everything was best in moderation. That applied to how much you trained and the degree of your feelings too.

"I did get a lot of praise from you," Ficelle added.

"Ha ha ha, it's my belief that praise should be given when it's earned," I said.

“Getting praise is so delightful!” Cindy shouted. “Ha ha ha ha!”

Unless someone did something really, *really* bad, I pretty much always provided words of encouragement. Objectively speaking, my dad was very harsh with his lessons, but the reason I still continued to wield a sword to this day was because he praised me every now and then too. It was great to be acknowledged by others, regardless of whether it came from a teacher, a senior, or a friend.

“Oh...”

“Did you figure it out?”

Ficelle’s expression had softened while reminiscing over her days as a student, but it immediately stiffened again when she came to a realization. “I...never give any praise...”

Ah. That has to be one reason there are so few students taking the sword magic course.

That was exactly it. To put it harshly, despite coveting acknowledgment from others, she very rarely praised anyone else. This wasn’t because she had an abrasive personality or anything—Ficelle’s standards were simply too high.

She was a genius. She had both a talent for swordsmanship and a great aptitude for magic. She also possessed more than enough concentration and drive, so she could bring the best out of her talents without foolishly sitting on her laurels.

Conversely, she expected others to be able to do the same. From a certain perspective, this could be said to be a virtue—her words held that much more weight. However, for a teacher, this had adverse effects too. It was the same inclination that drove her to assign a thousand practice swings. *She* could do the swings. She *had* done them. Not that we’d made her do anything of the sort at the dojo. This was just the kind of training she’d independently imposed on herself.

“I understand that you enjoy getting praise,” I told her. “So you need to turn that around and give some to your students.”

“Mm...”



The five remaining students taking the sword magic course were oddities. Despite getting no acknowledgment from their teacher and enduring her tactlessly frank instructions, they'd swung their swords simply because they'd wanted to. That was why we were able to speak about this topic so plainly in front of them. It would normally be hard to drag normal students into this kind of conversation. Naturally, not every student could be like these, and Ficelle's lessons had verged on being acts of penance. Of course, the overwhelming majority of people would retire midway through.

As an instructor, I wanted others to enjoy the process of learning new things. I wasn't perfect, of course, so even our dojo had those who'd left partway through their training.

"Okay. I'll do my best," Ficelle said. "Cindy, you're doing great."

"That's awfully half-assed," Nesia retorted.

"I'm not *that* good! Ha ha ha!" Cindy exclaimed.

"That worked on you...?" Nesia grumbled in confusion.

Cindy was extraordinary in that way—she would probably be genuinely delighted if she got praised for waking up early in the morning.

"Ummm... If I praise the students, will the class become popular?" Ficelle asked, racking her brain.

"Hmm, I don't know about that," I told her. "I think it'll be pretty hard if that's all you do."

Watching her like this, it was difficult to see her true intentions, but I believed she was giving serious thought to her instructional methods. She wanted to teach others the swordplay she'd learned at my dojo, and she wanted to popularize the sword magic Lucy had taught her. These were both feelings she had to maintain. If the teacher lacked passion, her lessons were never going to get through to anyone.

Anyway, in practice, most teachers at least gave their students praise in the spare moments between classes. I felt like that wouldn't be enough to increase the popularity of the sword magic course, though.

“Just to give an example, if you all only ever did practice swings and were praised for it, do you think you’d keep going?”

Seeing that Ficelle had reached an impasse, I tried turning the conversation to the students. The whole birthday party atmosphere had vanished, but there wasn’t much that could be done about it now that the conversation had gotten to this point.

“I’d be happy!” Cindy exclaimed. Well, that was probably the case for her. However, on this one point, her opinion wasn’t very useful.

Lumite and Nesia also gave their thoughts on the matter.

“I think I’d like it at first...but if it were always the same thing, I’d probably get used to it eventually...”

“Yeah. We ain’t dogs or nothing.”

They were right. People got used to things through repetition—the same went for both training and receiving praise.

“But Mr. Beryl, from what I’ve heard of your teachings, I believe the fundamentals are extremely important,” Fredra joined in.

“You’re right. There’s no mistaking that,” I agreed. “I’m sure the same goes for magic.”

Swordsmanship and magic couldn’t be mastered in a day. If they were that simple, we wouldn’t have institutions to study these arts. Training through repetition was an inevitable necessity, however, I believed it was extremely important for a teacher to be able to give their repetition some flavor.

Doing something brand new all the time would certainly attract attention, but it wouldn’t help improve anyone’s techniques. That said, people would definitely grow tired of focusing single-mindedly on practicing the fundamentals. That was especially the case for something simple like practice swings.

“So it’s important to have a balance...”

“Exactly. Well put, Mewi.”

“Quit it...”

Mewi was pretty close to the right answer. I praised her out of habit, and as always, she pouted.

“So it’s important to teach the fundamentals properly while adding in other things every now and then to draw interest. And also...I should give praise?” Ficelle asked.

“Mm-hmm. Looks like you’ve got the idea now.”

Ficelle still didn’t seem to have gathered all her thoughts, but she was mostly right. Well, that was my method of teaching—I wouldn’t claim to be the arbiter of good teaching methodology.

“I see... Back when you taught me, you showed me all kinds of things,” Ficelle said. “You praised me a lot too. It was really fun.”

“Thanks. Now it’s your turn to make others feel that way.”

She’d managed to derive an answer to this problem in her own way. Finding this perspective was something you couldn’t really get just from teaching. Much like how someone strong didn’t always make a good leader, the talent to acquire techniques and the talent to impart them to others were different skills. I did, of course, enjoy swinging a sword on my own, but maybe I actually liked teaching others how to use a sword even more than that.

“Mm. Strict and fun,” Ficelle said. “I’ll do my best.”

“Keep the strictness in moderation, okay...?”

Her brakes did have a tendency to stop working once she got started. I was going to have to get her to learn how to hold back a little.

“No more one thousand practice swings,” I added.

“I’ll do it if I feel it’s necessary.”

This got various reactions from the students.

“Ugh...”

“Ha ha ha.”

Well, practice swings were important in their own way, but humans weren’t strong enough to repeat them endlessly.

“Things got a little serious, huh?” I said. “Sorry for derailing your birthday party.”

“Not at all!” Cindy shouted cheerfully. “It was worth listening to!”

Even if this had been necessary for Ficelle’s growth, maybe doing so in the middle of a celebration had been inappropriate. Today’s star didn’t seem to mind though, and this was a great virtue of her personality. I wanted her to continue growing healthily, and while she was at it, get along with Mewi.

“Okay, that’s enough of that,” I said. “There’s still plenty of food. Eat up.”

“Yes!”

It would be a waste to let the food go cold. We had five growing children with hearty appetites here. Unfortunately, they were too young to drink alcohol, but I wanted them to eat and hydrate and get plenty of nourishment.

“———!”

“Hm...?”

We had wrapped up that conversation at a good spot and returned to chatting cheerfully. Suddenly, right as we were polishing off all the food and it was about time to call it a night, we heard a faint shout from the direction of the school building.

There were no classes, and it was late at night, so the place was supposed to be deserted.

Something was wrong.

“What the...?”

I got up from my seat and looked out the window. The student dorm was a fairly tall building, but the cafeteria was on the first floor. Because of that, I couldn’t see very far away. Combined with the fact that the sun had set, visibility was poor.

“Is someone making a ruckus out there?”

“Well, we’re making a ruckus in here too! Ha ha ha!”

The students were also drawn by the sudden voice—they came over to the

window to peek out. It was the weekend, so I could understand if students were just having fun. However, the voice hadn't seemed like anything so innocent to me. If anything, it had sounded urgent.

"Ficelle, is there anyone in the school building at this hour?" I asked.

"Pretty much just teachers," she answered. "Even if they're studying late, there are never students there at this hour."

"Hmmm..."

If it wasn't a student, that voice was likely a teacher or someone from the outside. We could've passed it off as horseplay or a prank if it'd been a child, but that was very unlikely behavior for a teacher who served at the prestigious magic institute. Could there potentially be a trespasser? We couldn't say for sure as things stood.

"—run! —get—!"

What we heard next was far clearer than before. There was an air of panic to the voice now.

"Ficelle."

"Mm."

Ficelle nodded back to me, and our hands naturally went for the swords at our waists. Some kind of trouble was going on out there. I didn't really want to imagine what kind of incident might be taking place inside the magic institute, but it was the adults' job to handle it.

"Ficelle and I will take a look. All of you, stay here."

"U-Understood."

The students sensed something out of place too. They obediently accepted my orders.

Man, way to ruin a good birthday party. If this is a prank, I'm seriously considering giving someone a good smacking for it.

There was the slim possibility this could lead to a fight, so I couldn't get the students involved. Even if this was just me being overly cautious, there was no

point in taking unnecessary risks. And though I wanted this potential danger to just be a trick played by my imagination, lately, I'd gotten dragged into all kinds of trouble.

"You think this is some kind of violent incident?" I asked.

"I don't know," Ficelle said. "Things like that don't really happen here."

"You have a point..."

We left the student dorm at a half run. Just as Ficelle said, this wasn't a normal school. This was the magic institute, a place where educators guided the chosen elite, and the teachers were all first-class wizards. Even if there was a trespasser, it would be extremely difficult to start any trouble without significant organization and skill. An instigator would need to plan something on the level of the recent assassination attempt against Sphenedyardvania's prince. If possible, I wanted to be spared from going through that again.

"What's going on here...?"

"Everyone's...running away?"

As we headed to the school building, we saw the teachers—probably the few who'd still been inside—pouring out in a panic. There weren't that many. Few had remained in the school at this hour on the weekend, so only about a dozen scattered from the building.

The teachers of Liberis's great magic institute were running away. This was an extremely abnormal sight. So, *what* exactly were they running away from?

"Ficelle!"

As we approached the school building, we suddenly heard the sound of shattering glass, and the answer to my question came bursting outside.

"Wha?!"

It wasn't all that big. At most, it was probably the size of a large dog or a wolf. I say "probably" because I could only see a faint outline of its body. I had relatively good eyesight—it was one of the few abilities I could take pride in as a swordsman. Yet despite this, I had no idea what exactly had come through the window.

At a glance, it was kind of like a big canine of some sort. The shadow ran on four legs and had a distorted space at its head that resembled wide-open jaws. Despite it blending into the dark night, I could see ominously glowing fangs closing in on me.

Still not sure what exactly I was facing, I drew my sword unconsciously and slashed at the incoming shadow. It seemed my attack worked. Whatever had attacked me fell to the ground without a sound. But then...

It vanished with equal silence.

“It disappeared...?”

I had cut it, but I hadn’t felt any kind of feedback. It was as if my sword had passed through slightly thick air. If someone had told me there’d been nothing there at all, and the air had been coincidentally dense in that area, I would’ve believed them.

“There’s more...!” Ficelle cried.

“Dammit! What’s going on?!”

More windows shattered, and more shadows were definitely heading toward us. That meant these things were capable of physically affecting the world. They were also hostile toward us. If they meant harm, we had to eliminate them.

“Hmph!”

I cut another wolf-shaped shadow down with a rising slash. It seemed they weren’t particularly durable. I was glad that a single slash from me was all it took to repel them. Still, I couldn’t get a grasp on the situation. Were there actually monsters pouring out of the magic institute? That sounded impossible.

“Hah!”

A shadow attacked Ficelle instead of me, and it vanished after she swung her sword through its body. These things weren’t particularly agile either—it didn’t feel all that different from facing wild dogs or wolves. They were somewhat fast on the charge, but Ficelle and I were more than enough to handle them. Against opponents like these, it wouldn’t be a major problem even if they swarmed us.

“What the hell is going on here?” I grumbled.

“I don’t know...” Ficelle replied. “But it’s clearly abnormal.”

After taking down a few more shadows, the enemy offensive came to a temporary pause. Taking a look around, we spotted one of the teachers who’d escaped the building intercepting one of the shadows with magic. *Just as I thought—the teachers at the magic institute were accomplished wizards.* But that only made the situation more confusing. What had forced them to run away? Ficelle and I were capable of easily overwhelming these opponents, so why would magic experts need to flee from them?

I had a hunch something serious was going on, but I also had an overwhelming lack of information. I didn’t even know if it was the right choice to charge into the school building. We had to protect ourselves and the students in the dorm, so it could be a poor choice to move from this spot.

“Mr. Beryl! Ficelle!”

“Ms. Kiner?!”

And just as I was wondering what to do next, a familiar voice called out to us. It was Mewi’s homeroom teacher.

“What are you two doing here?” she started. “Wait, no, that doesn’t really matter right now. You really saved us. Thank you for your assistance.”

“It was nothing,” I said. “An explanation would be nice, though.”

It was a relief to see a familiar face, but now wasn’t the time for a casual chat. I kept my greeting brief and tried to get a grasp of the situation. Kiner seemed to understand my intent, and after catching her breath, she got to the point.

“I don’t really know much either. Those shadows suddenly started flowing out of the school building... We’ve been hard-pressed trying to deal with them.”

“I see...”

Even Kiner, who’d probably been inside the building, had no idea what was going on. That still left me with questions. She was supposed to be a master of defensive magic, so even if she couldn’t outright defeat these shadows, she wasn’t going to lose to one. Also, there should’ve been no need to panic. I could understand being taken by surprise, but they should’ve had time to rally. I

simply couldn't come up with a reason she and all the other teachers needed to evacuate as fast as possible.

"Oh, here they come again!" I shouted.

And just as Kinera finished explaining, more windows shattered and shadows came flying out. On an unrelated note, the repair fees were going to be through the roof after this was all said and done. *Not that I should be thinking something like that right now...*

"Mr. Beryl, please take two steps back!"

"Hm?!"

Around ten shadows were charging us. Just as I was wondering how to handle them all at once, I reflexively jumped backward at Kinera's request.

"Hah!"

She let out a spirited yell, and the charging shadows slammed into an invisible wall and tumbled backward.

"Forgive me—now's your chance!" Kinera shouted.

"Understood!"

So this was defensive magic. I'd experienced no more than a thin layer on her hand, but when she got serious, she could cover a pretty wide area. I'd been under the impression that it could only be used to protect your own body, but it could be adapted quite drastically depending on the caster's skill.

"Hup!"

Now wasn't the time to be admiring it, though. The shadows had slowed down significantly after running into Kinera's wall. I charged them, and with Ficelle's help, they weren't particularly difficult to handle. We were going to be fine as long as we weren't ambushed.

"Seriously, there's no time to gather ourselves..." I complained.

"This is indeed troublesome," Ficelle agreed.

We finished eradicating the new shadows, but I could sense more within the building. Could they spawn infinitely? That would be a bit of an issue. Each

individual shadow wasn't all that impressive, but there were limits to my stamina and willpower.

"Thanks for the help, Ms. Kinera. But why did you all run away?" I asked.

Now wasn't the time to beat around the bush. I could tell from this short interaction that Kinera wasn't only an expert in defensive magic, but she was also experienced in battle. She'd immediately given me orders based on the situation and had deployed the appropriate magic to deal with it.

More and more, I couldn't see any reason for her to run away from these opponents. Even if there was a never-ending source of them, she had more than enough skill to create the time to calmly think of a way to overcome the situation. What was more, she wasn't alone—there were other teachers. If they'd worked together, they wouldn't have been driven on the back foot like this.

"To tell you the truth...for some reason, we can no longer use magic within the school building," she said with a disconcerted look that answered all my doubts. "We believe some kind of power is interfering."

"You can't use...magic?" I repeated.

"Yes. Fortunately, as you saw, we're able to use it again outside the building...but inside, it doesn't work at all."

They couldn't use magic. That was, in fact, a *serious* problem. I didn't know the mechanisms behind how magic worked, but this was definitely abnormal. It also explained why the teachers had been so overwhelmed by the shadow wolves. The majority of those who worked at the magic institute had found their primary means of attack sealed. They'd been helpless.

"Just to be sure—has this ever happened to you before?" I asked.

"It hasn't," Kinera said. "Not ever. I believe the same goes for Ficelle."

"Mm-hmm," Ficelle confirmed. "I've been in a poor condition, but never to the point of not being able to use magic."

Their answer was just as expected. Them losing their magic would be similar to me suddenly being incapable of wielding my sword. I would definitely be

unsettled if that happened, yet the same mysterious phenomenon was happening to these wizards.

There had to be some kind of source behind the anomaly. This couldn't occur naturally, so it was only right to assume someone was behind it.

"Seems like we're best off looking for the source..." I suggested while fending off more shadows. "Hup!"

"Agreed. It's inconvenient without magic," Ficelle said.

We got the conversation moving while cutting down the wolves. At this rate, things would only get worse, but that didn't mean we could just tuck our tails and run. Fortunately, I seemed more than capable of dealing with this, so it made sense for me to search the school building while scattering these shadows to the wind.

"I'll check inside the institute," I said. "What about you, Ficelle?"

"I'll go too. Even without sword magic, I have the techniques you taught me."

"How reassuring," I told her. "But don't push yourself."

It looked like Kinera could use her magic as long as she stayed outside, so she wasn't going to lose against enemies of this level. The fact that I didn't have to worry about such things was a significant relief on my nerves.

"Understood. Please leave the students to us," Kinera said.

"Right. They're in your hands," I said.

The students of the magic institute all had varying degrees of knowledge regarding magic. In terms of sheer numbers, they could technically be relied upon in a fight. However, almost none of them had any combat experience. Combined with the abnormal situation, it was unreasonable to suddenly ask them to take part in this.

So, someone had to protect them. It looked like I could put all my hopes in the teachers. I was confident Kinera could handle it—I had a pretty good eye for people, after all.

"Let's start by forcing our way in and taking a look around," I suggested. "That work for you?"

“Mm-hmm. Not a problem,” Ficelle agreed.

Now that it was decided, we needed to take action. Things weren't going to improve for the better if we waited here, so it was a good idea to break into the building as soon as possible. The magic institute's campus was pretty huge, after all. We were keeping damage outside of the school building suppressed for now, but it would be no laughing matter if these things got out.

Now that I was a teacher, even if only a temporary one, it was my duty to protect the students. Well, even without such a title, as a swordsman, I couldn't overlook a situation like this when it was happening in front of my eyes.

We had two major objectives here: identify the source of these hostile shadows and determine why magic couldn't be used. The troublesome part was that we had no idea how to solve either problem. So, we had no choice but to search the place with a fine-tooth comb.

Still, we had one advantage. I didn't know why, but our enemies had no durability, so I didn't have to worry about my sword's edge. I could cut them up all I wanted without chipping the blade. That definitely wasn't the case against humans or beasts.

“All right, let's get to work,” I said.

“Mm.”

“Please be careful!” Kinera yelled as we ran off. “I'll protect the dorm with everything I have!”

As we went straight into the building, we were spotted and attacked by several shadows.

“Oh, coming to greet us already?”

I slashed the charging shadows. Following after me, Ficelle attacked with fluid strikes and took down several enemies with ease. Much like during our bout, her swordplay was beautiful yet practical. I had no problem entrusting my back to her.

The shadows we defeated vanished like bubbles. Having slain several of them at this point, I could see they didn't really have any physical substance. *It's*

awfully convenient that they didn't leave corpses behind, I thought casually before cutting down another group of shadows that came around the corner of the corridor.

I wondered whether I was able to cut them because of their nature or because my sword was special. Ficelle's sword was striking them down as well, so it was probably the former. But if their only weakness had been magic—and magic could no longer be used—the situation would've been pretty bad.

"There's only one kind of shadow?"

After defeating a good number of them, I noticed the shadows all looked like wolves. I couldn't sense any of a wolf's intelligence in them, though. They also didn't coordinate their attacks—they simply charged their enemies on sight as individuals. Also, they weren't suddenly appearing out of thin air. They were being created somewhere specific and charging us from that point. In that case, one possibility came to mind.

"There's probably a mastermind behind this," Ficelle said, arriving at the same conclusion.

"Yeah, I think so too."

I wasn't too familiar with this stuff, but the shadows were probably something like a wizard's familiar. Maybe they were summoned or something.

"So you really can't use magic?" I asked.

"Nuh-uh... Something is getting in the way when I try to knead my mana."

Ficelle was still using pure swordplay to deal with her enemies. Despite this, her movements were in no way inferior to mine. This was likely a result of training and focusing so that she didn't need to rely too much on magic.

"So, about where this mastermind might be..." I muttered. "Any ideas?"

"Hmm..."

At this rate, we could just search the entire building, but if possible, I wanted to have a general destination in mind. Besides, I didn't know the whole layout of the institute. Moving around at random would be a waste of stamina and time.

“Maybe...underground?” Ficelle suggested.

“Hmm...”

Good guess. Vice Principal Brown had mentioned there being a lower level to the magic institute—one that he’d told us not to approach. Ficelle didn’t know what was there either.

I didn’t really like the idea of going somewhere I’d been warned away from, but considering the situation, I didn’t have much of a choice. It was best to keep it high on the list of places to search.

“Okay, let’s head there now,” I decided. “If it’s a miss, we’ll figure out what to do afterward.”

“Got it. This way.”

With our destination set, Ficelle led the way at a run. We repelled the shadows in our way, proceeded onward, encountered more shadows, and defeated them too. This repeated over and over, and now I was convinced—these things weren’t popping up randomly out of nowhere. They were all coming from one specific point.

As proof of that, the moment we started heading toward the lower levels, the shadows stopped attacking us from behind. They were all coming at us head-on. In other words, it was highly likely they were being created at our destination in the underground.

“Looks like we hit the bull’s-eye,” I commented.

The entrance to the lower levels was next to the staircase at the center of the building. An overly large and elaborate door stood at the end of a somewhat long and empty corridor. However, this overbearing door was now partly open. It didn’t look like it’d been damaged.

“Someone went in ahead of us...?” I muttered.

“It’s usually sealed,” Ficelle said. “I don’t even know where the key is kept.”

If the shadow wolves were being created beyond this door, it would be normal to assume they’d damaged it on their way out. It was usually sealed, so they wouldn’t have had any other way to escape. However, the door was open,

and it *wasn't* damaged, so someone had definitely unlocked it.

The person behind all this was definitely in the lower levels.

In that case, had someone stolen the key specifically to trespass? Or had someone who knew where the key was stored taken it and had gone underground legitimately?

"Guess we'll just have to go and see," I said.

"Mm..."

I prepared myself and stepped through the door. This was unknown territory for Ficelle too. I wanted to believe there was nothing weird down here, since the magic institute was right above it. Still, this was a prohibited area. It was best to assume anything could come jumping out at us.

Beyond the door was an unexpectedly long staircase that slowly descended into the depths. I couldn't even see the end of it.

"Hup!"

I thrust my sword at yet another sporadic shadow that charged us. The passageway wasn't very wide, so there was no space to swing my sword. That meant a thrust was the natural remaining option. I was glad our enemies lacked intelligence. They simply charged us on sight, so once accustomed to it, combat became less like fighting and more like busywork.

"Master, are you all right?" Ficelle asked.

"Yeah, this is nothing. But just in case, keep an eye behind us."

"Got it."

Ficelle and I couldn't walk down this narrow passage side by side, so I took the lead. I doubted it would happen, but getting caught in a pincer attack here would be bad. I decided to leave my back to her, and we proceeded carefully.

"Hmm. Another door," I remarked. "It's also open."

Going down such a monotonous path messed with my sense of time. It'd taken both a short and long time to reach the end. And now, there was another door. This one was very plain, and I could sense the years behind it. I was just

guessing, but the heavy door at the entrance to the lower levels had likely been created long after this one. That was simply how much older this door seemed.

“A room...?”

Passing through the door, we found ourselves inside a somewhat wide space instead of another passageway. The fact that it was illuminated, even if not well, meant this place hadn't simply been sealed for years. Someone had been coming here. The frequency with which they did so and their objective remained a complete mystery, though.

Ficelle peeked over my shoulder into the room. When she spotted what was inside, a rare and pronounced air of shock highlighted her voice.

“Master, that's...”

“Yeah...”

“Hee... Hee hee... Hee hee hee hee...!”

What we saw was an old man on his knees in a corner of the room, his intermittent sobbing and laughing echoing around us.

“V-Vice Principal Brown?!” I shouted.

It was a strange sight. The old man continued laughing and crying on his knees in this room deep beneath the magic institute.

“Hee... Hee hee hee...?”

Upon noticing us, Brown's laughing ceased. His eyes turned unsteadily toward us. I had no idea what was going on. Judging by the look in his eyes, he'd clearly lost his mind. I'd only met Brown that one time after my first sword magic class, but back then, he'd given the impression of a man who stood firm in contrast to his age. That first impression was far and away from the man I saw now.

“Vice...Principal...?”

Ficelle was speechless. I didn't blame her. With one of the magic institute's great veterans in such a horrible state, anyone would be shocked dumb.

He held what looked like a shortsword in one hand, but it was chipped all over. He'd likely been using it to repel the shadow wolves who'd been attacking

him. I couldn't see another reason he might still be alive down here otherwise. The question of why a wizard was carrying a shortsword came to mind, but it was a small one—it wasn't strange for a wizard to have one for self-defense.

The room as a whole was a huge mess too. Books and furnishings were scattered all over the place. It might've been tidy and clean at one point, but just maybe, the vice principal had wrecked the place himself. That was simply how little of his original intelligence was left in his eyes.

"Wh-What happened here?!" I yelled as I ran over to him.

I didn't get a good reaction out of him. He recognized that I was present, but my words weren't getting through. I figured it was best to take him under my protection for now. The situation still wasn't clear, but he probably couldn't use magic here either. Even though he was acting weird, that didn't mean I could just abandon him.

"Hee hee... Hee... Nothing... There was nothing."

"Hm?"

He finally spoke, but I had no idea what he was saying. What did he mean by nothing?

"I just don't get it... Hee hee... The headmistress's secret to eternal youth... The ultimate mystery... I was convinced it was down here... Hee hee hee...! And look what happened. When I opened the door, it was nowhere in sight... Hee hee... Hee hee hee...!"

His vacant eyes weren't focusing, but there was still a glimmer in them as he spoke in a hoarse voice. The secret to eternal youth. The ultimate mystery. If I didn't know better, it would've sounded like an extreme exaggeration. However, I had a feeling I knew what he was talking about. He was referring to the headmistress's—Lucy's—secret.

She'd introduced herself as being older than me during our first meeting. She'd also told me she was far older than I imagined. If I remembered right, Allucia had mentioned Lucy using magic to alter her appearance. Up until this point, I'd figured that was pretty neat and nothing more. However, if she wasn't simply altering her appearance—if she had instead acquired eternal youth—

things were a little different.

Lucy had once told me that wizardry to resurrect the dead didn't exist. But what if she'd cast a spell on herself to make her immortal? Resurrection and immortality were very different things, but they were similar in that they defied the providence of life.

Lucy had called Brown a youngster. In other words, she was older than him—maybe she even saw him as no more than a child. No matter how you looked at him, this man was even older than my dad.

The mysteries surrounding her were only deepening. However, pressing Brown for answers now wouldn't improve the current state of affairs in any way. Right now, we had other things we needed to confirm. I postponed all matters related to Lucy for the time being.

"Vice Principal Brown," I said, "do you know anything about why magic can't be used in the institute right now?"

I still didn't know if the vice principal was directly related to this incident, but it was extremely likely that he was somehow involved. I wasn't sure whether he could give me a straight answer, but I had to ask anyway.

"Aah... I canceled it all... Hee hee... This underground area is equipped with a magic seal... For decades... For many, many years... I created a tool... Hee hee hee... I was sure the headmistress sealed it... The timing was just right... She's away for an extended period, after all... Hee hee...!"

In contrast to my expectations, he talked about everything with a vacant expression.

"I see..."

In other words, *he* was the culprit behind this turmoil. I'd had a faint feeling a complete outsider wouldn't have come all the way to the magic institute just to cause this incident, but I'd never expected someone of Brown's stature to be responsible.

"Ficelle, do you know anything about this seal?" I asked.

"I don't. I knew this door couldn't be opened, but that's all..."

Going by what Brown had said, nobody was allowed into this underground area. It'd been sealed the entire time, and he'd spent many years developing a magic tool to undo the seal. I didn't know anything about magic, so I had no idea how much work that required. Going by the years he'd spent on it, I could imagine it hadn't been easy.

"Then what about those shadow monsters?" I asked, turning back to the vice principal.

"Hee hee... I don't know. The moment I undid the seal, they came into being from this room... I don't know anything... Hee hee hee...!"

It seemed these shadows had indeed come from the lower levels of the magic institute. Two thoughts came to mind: something outrageous had been sealed down here, and why had the seal been placed *here* of all places?

I doubted the shadow wolves themselves had been sealed here. *This might sound strange coming from me, but they are far too weak to be locked away in the magic institute.* It was confusing to bump into them out of the blue, but it wasn't hard to repel them. Anyone with a modicum of interest in martial arts would be able to do it with relative ease.

It made more sense for the shadows' boss to have been sealed here. That brought up the new question—what such a thing was doing here in the first place?

"One last thing," I said. "Where is this magic tool you made?"

"Aah... I set it up in one of the first-floor classrooms... I simply couldn't undo the seal, you see... I've been working this whole time to dismantle the mana itself... Hee hee hee...!"

His babbling had unveiled pretty much all the details behind this incident—assuming he was telling the truth. The reason magic couldn't be used was because of the tool Brown had created. It was probably because of this dismantling of mana. Not that this part made any sense to me.

Anyway, the source of the shadow wolves was this underground area. I still had no idea what the boss was like, but striking it down would probably bring things to an end.

From what the vice principal had said, he'd been under the impression that Lucy had created this seal. So, he'd had his eyes on the lower levels, thinking that Lucy's secret to immortality was down here. Her appearance was difficult to explain. There was definitely something magical involved, but even if that was the case, I was pretty sure he could've approached things from a different angle.

Still, it was unclear how involved Lucy was regarding this underground area. It was entirely possible that all of this had simply been a product of the vice principal's delusions. I doubted she was completely uninvolved, but Lucy might've inherited this place from someone else too.

"I'm done for... Hee hee... Everything was for naught... Hee hee hee...!"

Brown was answering all of my questions, but he was far from sane. He'd likely broken upon finding out that the secret of immortality he'd been coveting wasn't here. What was more, knowing that what he'd done couldn't be forgiven, his heart could no longer keep up.

I was already forty-five myself. It was hard to imagine my physique would improve at all from this point onward. Everything was downhill from here. In the years and decades to come, I too would grow old and weaken. Even if I did live a long life, I was sure to pass away far earlier than my pupils would.

If, upon approaching my deathbed, I knew someone right next to me had undone the effect of age and the deterioration that came with it...maybe I would cling to such possibilities too. I couldn't say with conviction that my future self wouldn't do so.

"Master."

"Yeah...I know."

That being the case, it was too early to bask in sentimentality. I was still in my active years, and both my mind and body were working fine. In my opinion, I'd led a life of high morals up to this point. So, if there was a problem I'd gotten involved in, I wanted to do something to help resolve it.

"Ficelle, evacuate the vice principal from the building," I said. "After that, turn off the magic tool in the classroom. If you can't, destroy it."

“Understood.”

If we could at least do something about this tool on the first floor, we could resolve the problem of magic being unusable. I was worried about whatever was sealed in these lower levels, but the tool took priority. So, I decided to have Ficelle take the vice principal into custody and search for it. I would be fine going along with her, but I knew nothing about magic tools—it was more reliable to leave this part to a specialist.

In the meantime, I was thinking of greeting the big bad boss who was somewhere down here. If whatever it was ended up being way beyond me, I could just fall back. Once magic was restored, the institute’s teachers could make a move. At worst, it would be more than enough if I just bought them some time.

“Master, be careful,” Ficelle said.

“Yeah, you too.”

She held her sword ready in one hand and used the other to support Brown’s shoulder as she headed back upstairs.

Okay, all that’s left is the boss. I wonder what it is.

I took another look around. This seemed to be something like a personal room. There was a table, a chair, a bookshelf where the books on the floor probably belonged, and a bunch of mysterious utensils. The one who’d been taking care of this room had definitely noticed the existence of the being farther into the depths—they’d created this facility to do something about it. The scenery here was so strange that my imagination ran wild, and I came to that conclusion.

So who then was the person taking care of the room? Was it Lucy or someone else? I still didn’t know the answer to that, and it wasn’t something I could figure out on my own.

“That way...”

On the opposite side of the room from where I’d entered, I spotted another door. This one was also half open. Like all the other doors leading into the lower levels, it showed no signs of being damaged, and it hadn’t been forced open.

Either something had made it open itself, or someone had intentionally opened it. Had Brown done this too? Or was it a result of the magic seal being undone?

“Whoa!”

The moment I peeked through the door, I sensed a distortion in space and jerked back a step. My instincts were pretty reliable for this stuff. A beat later, a shadow jumped through the door and lunged at me. I cut it down by reflex.

“That was close...”

Man, why am I exterminating these inexplicable monsters at my age? There’s no telling what the world has in store for you...

The source of these shadows was definitely beyond this door. What was more, they weren’t being created randomly or unendingly. From the moment we’d heard a commotion coming from the school building to my arrival here in the underground area, the shadows had attacked us at fairly fixed intervals.

“Okay then...”

I fired myself up and opened the door. It wasn’t all that heavy, but it wasn’t flimsy enough that I could break it. Still, even with my meager strength, it opened easily. It hadn’t been kept shut physically, but magically.

“Awfully roomy in here...”

Beyond the door was a space that seemed far too open to be some lower level of the institute. I doubted it had been built—it made more sense if it had existed here before the institute. I took a look around. The walls weren’t man-made but were closer to natural rock formations. My eyes turned to the farthest corner. I could sense a presence there that was far stronger than any of the other shadows.

There’s no mistaking it. That’s where the boss is.

“What the...?!”

After taking ten steps in, I saw an enormous shadow wolf with chains wrapped all over it.

“It’s huge...”

I was now facing an unidentifiable giant. If this had been some kind of heroic tale, such a development would've been welcome. A minstrel recounting the story would've probably attracted a lively crowd at this point. I was no more than a commonplace swordsman, though—I was neither a hero nor a legend. My honest first impression was “Man, I don't wanna deal with this.”

The shadow boss was right in front of me, but it didn't look like it was free to move around. The chains coiled around it were keeping it restrained. I didn't know whether this was a physical or magical property of the chains, though.

I readied my sword and approached slowly. Since I didn't sense any imminent danger for now, I figured it was probably all right to get a little closer and check things out. This underground hollow was far larger than the corridor and room I'd gone through to get here. There wasn't much light, so visibility was poor. Regardless, I could tell this wasn't a confined space, and I didn't know whether someone had dug the place out in the past or if the cave had existed to begin with.

“Hm?”

After getting a little closer, the shadow monster became clearer. That was when another fact came to light.

“They're...eating it? No, they're trying to break it free.”

Several shadow wolves that'd probably been created by this thing were biting on the chains. They seemed to know by instinct that this giant was their boss, and they were trying to destroy the chains to free it. There was, however, limited space to gnaw on the bindings—the shadows that hadn't been able to find a spot to gnaw must've left this cave for the surface. That was just a guess though, and not a confident one.

“Hmm...”

Now then, what to do about this? Even if I cut down the shadows chewing on the chains, more are sure to spawn. A part of me felt like I couldn't just strike down the boss itself without consulting anyone. It'd been sealed down here in such a grandiose way. Was it really all right to lay a hand on it? Still, now that some damage had actually been done, I couldn't just turn a blind eye.

“Hrm?!”

I considered just striking down the shadows biting at the chains for now. *It would probably be best to do that and then keep an eye on things until Ficelle or some other reinforcements arrive.*

Suddenly, a creaking and cracking I really didn't want to hear started echoing around me.

“It's on the verge of breaking?!”

Yes, the chains binding the giant wolf were clearly coming apart. This wasn't good. Up until a moment ago, the small wolves had been doing their best but accomplishing nothing, but something had suddenly sped up the process.

“Dammit!”

Still not sure what to do, I slashed at one of the shadows chewing on the chain. Much like the shadows who'd surged to the surface, it vanished right away, but another took shape at the boss's feet to replace it. Something really had to be done to this thing or the shadows would spawn endlessly. What was more, due to the chains weakening, the boss was starting to stir.

“Ugh!”

I tried cutting down the shadows one by one, but it didn't seem like that would stop the chains from breaking. *What do I do? What the hell do I do? Should I just consider this beyond me and back off for now? No, if this monster gets out of here, it'll be really bad.*

“————”

“I have no idea what you're saying!”

The giant wolf had opened its massive jaws and spoken in a wordless voice. I couldn't make any sense of it. Was it joy at finally being released? Or maybe a cry of resentment over being held captive? *I'd rather you calm down and be quiet. Can you? No? Dammit.*

“———”

The chains sealing the giant wolf continued to clatter and come apart. The boss then opened its jaws even wider, and in that instant, all the chains

shattered and fell to the ground, freeing the beast from its restraints.

Yup, it's huge.

If I had to compare it to something, it was about twice the size of the named monster I'd encountered in the Azlaymia Forest. However, much like the shadow wolves surging forth beneath it, it had a hazy contour, so I couldn't get its exact dimensions. At any rate, the pressure I felt emanating from its body was annoyingly easy to understand.

Hmm. Seriously, what do I do about this? Now that it was free, the best outcome would be to defeat it right here. However, I had far too little information on my opponent. Ficelle didn't seem to know what was down here either, so it was unlikely I'd be able to call on someone well-informed about this situation.

Dammit, Lucy, why the hell did you have to go on a business trip now? I mean, I know the vice principal chose this moment to act exactly because of that...but at least let me complain a little.

"Whoa!"

And as such thoughts went through my mind, I'd yielded the initiative to the giant wolf. With sluggish movements, it swung what I assumed to be a foreleg downward at me. I didn't know whether I could parry it with my sword, so I dodged to the side. It was a good thing it was so spacious down here—if this cavern had only been just big enough for the giant wolf, that attack might've crushed me to death.

"——"

"I don't suppose...you'll just let me go?!"

I jumped backward to dodge a horizontal sweep. Even if my opponent was a mindless beast, I would be able to read some kind of emotion behind its expression. This applied both to animals and monsters. However, I couldn't read any such emotion from the shadow in front of me. I hadn't expected to be able to chat with it or anything, but it seemed things had reached the point where I needed to let my sword do the talking.

"Hmph!"

To keep it at bay, I slashed at what I thought was its attacking foreleg. Much like with the other shadow wolves, I felt no resistance. My blade passed clean through a shadowy part of its body—that part distorted slightly and faded away. But unlike before, my opponent as a whole showed no signs of vanishing. *Is this gonna be an unproductive battle of attrition? That'd be a bit of a problem for me. Can you not?*

“——, ————”

It was crying—no, saying something. Unfortunately, I couldn't make out any words. I didn't even know if this was some kind of language. It was like a wordless sound echoing chaotically in my ears.

“Hm?”

There'd been one other development since the giant wolf had begun moving. The smaller shadows that'd been swarming to the surface were now melting, as if fusing with the main body. This really was a boss and its spawns. Now that the core was free, the little shadows had fulfilled their purpose. All of the shadows made a beeline back to the giant wolf.

At any rate, my opponent was being relatively docile. I wasn't going to claim I could beat it like this, but I did feel confident I could buy time without losing. Still, not being able to win was a bit problematic. Slashing at it didn't appear to do any damage, but that didn't mean I could just ignore it. Though I had plenty of energy now, the prospect of a long, drawn-out fight honestly sounded backbreaking.

Above all else, I felt significant pressure from the mysterious nature of its attacks. There was no telling whether I could block one of its strikes, let alone take a hit. I exhausted a fair bit of stamina making sure I wasn't careless. In the most extreme case, the slightest touch from its body could potentially seep into my being and defeat me. My sword strikes were working, so I doubted this was the case, but being cautious was far better than being dead.

“Hah!”

I slashed at the incoming shadow and then fell back a step. *Well, this is a problem. It's pretty rough not knowing what this thing is, but it's even harder on me since I have no idea whether my attacks are working.*

Zeno Grable had been a tough opponent, but I'd been able to target its soft spots like the eyes and the interior of its mouth. At a glance, I couldn't spot any such weak points on this opponent. It had something like a mouth, but all I saw within it was the abyss. I doubted jamming my sword into it would achieve anything, and that act was liable to get me killed too.

Still, at least the shadows vanished when my sword struck them—I didn't want to believe my physical attacks were being completely neutralized. That was pretty much the only bright spot in this battle, but at this pace, the sun was likely to rise before it was over. Maybe the moon would even be up in the sky again. *I definitely don't have the stamina for that.*

“— — —”

“Aah! What a pain in the ass!”

What was even more annoying was the fact that my opponent was clearly learning. The first vertical strike into a horizontal sweep had been a simple chain of attacks relying on brute force. However, after taking a few hits from me, its movements were shifting between offense and defense.

Now it was launching rapid attacks with no openings, then almost always leaping away. It was a picture-perfect hit-and-run strategy. This would be shocking, even coming from a wild wolf. I was managing to get some strikes in by matching my opponent's pace, but they were all shallow. Well, maybe there was no deep or shallow when it came to striking an insubstantial enemy. At this rate, I didn't feel like I was getting any good hits in.

Still, this also meant my attacks were having an effect, even if minimal. If it was capable of ignoring my sword, it could've just charged forward without caring about being hit. Maybe that was something to be grateful for, but it would still be problematic for things to continue this way. It was also rough that I couldn't get a read on my opponent's stamina.

I'd never fought an enemy like this, so I didn't know how to approach it. If my opponent had been a human or a wild beast, my experiences would've applied somewhat, but they weren't of much use now. It was similar to a wolf in both movement and appearance, but I doubted that was all there was to this thing. If anything, Zeno Grable has been easier to handle. I didn't even know if this wolf

was alive.

“Whoa!”

I wasn't able to keep the giant wolf within my reach. Right as we glared at each other from just out of range, it did something new: it launched a long-range attack. A shadow split off from the main body and flew at me like a sharp arrow.

“What a lousy joke!”

If I wasn't imagining things, my opponent was getting better and better as time went on. Just maybe, it'd been groggy from waking up. If that were the case, things were looking pretty bad.

“Oop!”

Shadow arrows flew at me in rapid succession. *Reminds me of my bout with Lucy.* I was forced entirely on the defensive. It was breaking off parts of itself as projectiles, so I'd hoped for a second that it was shrinking, but that seemed unlikely. The giant wolf was perfectly healthy and as large as ever.

What to do? This is seriously bad. I can't think of a way to win at all. If anything, things are just getting worse and worse. I'm definitely gonna lose.

“Master, sorry to keep you waiting.”

And just as I was thinking I was really in trouble, much like a certain incident some time ago, *something* flew right past my side and saved me from my predicament.

“Ficelle!”

I didn't turn to look since my opponent's offensive was only growing more intense, but I knew who was there without having to check. Ficelle launched sword magic at every incoming projectile. The shadow arrows and her magic slammed against each other—the shadows lost the clash and were intercepted one after the other.

Things had gotten really dicey there. If all I'd had to do was avoid and strike down the shadow arrows, I probably could've pulled it off. However, due to them being an unknown quantity, I'd wanted to avoid touching any of them

directly. I was glad Ficelle was here—she had a means of intercepting the arrows with projectiles of her own.

There was one other thing of note too: Ficelle had used sword magic. In other words, one of our major problems had been solved.

“Thanks, you saved me!”

I jumped away from the giant wolf and stood side by side with Ficelle at the entrance to the cavern. I was larger than her in terms of physique, but she’d become so reliable. Now wasn’t really the time to dwell on this, but I was deeply moved by the growth my former pupil had shown. She was now able to stand shoulder to shoulder with me.

This was the second time Ficelle had saved me. The first had been during Reveos’s arrest, and now, we were faced with an inexplicable beast that I had no idea how to handle. *I’m placing great faith in your skills, Ficelle.*

“I broke the magic tool,” she said, keeping her sword at the ready.

“I see. That was quick.”

“Mm. I hurried.”

She’d resorted to destroying the vice principal’s device. Honestly, that had saved me a lot of trouble. Had Ficelle taken the time to analyze the thing instead, things could’ve been quite dangerous for me here. *I doubt she would’ve done that, but still...*

“Mrgh... It looks strong,” Ficelle commented.

“Yeah, attacks kinda seem to work on it, but I’m not making any progress. We have too little information.”

It was now two-on-one, but that still wasn’t a complete relief. It was a lot easier on me now that I wasn’t alone, but even with Ficelle’s flexibility and ability to fit any combat role, I couldn’t think of any plans to win. In short, we lacked information. We simply didn’t know what kind of attacks would work against the giant wolf or what abilities it possessed.

“Let’s start by trying a few things out,” Ficelle suggested.

“Got it. I’ll match your movements.”

It seemed she had no intention of withdrawing either. It wasn't clear what would happen if we tucked our tails and ran, but I didn't plan to lose, so it was best to try everything we could.

“——, ——”

“It's talking?” Ficelle muttered. “I can't understand it, though.”

“Mm, I can't either. But there isn't really any time to worry about that.”

The giant wolf seemed to have thoughts about the new arrival. It came to a stop for a moment and spoke in a wordless voice again. Ficelle had no idea what it was saying either, though I hadn't expected her to understand. Now wasn't really the time to be brooding over that. Our opponent was definitely hostile toward us, so our only choice was to fight. If things got genuinely dangerous, I was at least planning to take Ficelle and run away.

“It's coming!” I yelled.

After letting out that strange murmur, the giant wolf burst into action. Much like before, it chose to split off pieces of its body to fire arrows at us. But by straining my eyes, I could read the preparatory movements it made for this strike. A part of its body would bubble up unnaturally, so as long as I paid attention to that, it was a simple matter for me to dodge.

“Hm!”

Weaving her way through the attacks, Ficelle approached and slashed with her sword. Much like when I'd done it, the part of the shadow her blade passed through was shaved away, and it vanished into thin air.

“It doesn't feel like I'm cutting anything...” she grumbled.

“I couldn't agree more...”

If things were going exactly as they appeared and our opponent was weakening with every bit of shadow we scraped away, then the situation wasn't all that bad. Still, even with two people here, this was far too inefficient. Things might've been different if we'd been using large weapons like hammers or great axes, but we both used longswords. Maybe there was a limit to what we could do with physical attacks.

“Next is this.”

After taking a breath to digest that information, Ficelle jumped in once more. This time, she didn’t attack directly with her blade—she launched sword magic like she had against the shadow arrows.

Ficelle’s sword magic plunged into the giant wolf’s body. A few moments later, the places she’d hit bubbled up, and the shadows in those areas vanished, melting away. It seemed sword magic worked somewhat better than physical attacks. That said, there was no telling how many attacks it would take to defeat this wolf.

“I’ve gotta put in some work too...!”

I couldn’t leave all the fighting to Ficelle. I still had no idea how much intelligence our foe had, but it would be problematic if all the attacks it’d focused on me were instead redirected to Ficelle. We finally had a two-on-one advantage, and there was no reason to let that go.

As the giant wolf’s focus shifted over to Ficelle, I approached and attacked it. *Hmm, that felt a bit deeper than before, but it doesn’t really feel like it’s working.* I was slicing at it, but the feedback was all wrong—the information I was processing in my head was remarkably different from the sensation in my palm. This was something I didn’t want to get used to as a swordsman.

“—, ——”

“Dammit, this thing is really throwing me off!”

Even with its wordless voice, things might’ve been different were I able to read some kind of intention behind it. Unfortunately, I really couldn’t understand a thing it said. Was it even putting emotion behind its voice? The shadow boss might’ve been trying to tell us something in its own way, but unfortunately, it wasn’t getting across to us. I wasn’t asking it to speak in a way humans could understand, but at the very least, I wanted it to convey *any* emotion.

“Hmph!”

I slashed downward while Ficelle attacked it with sword magic. The feedback was the same as usual. Even if there was no tactile feedback when I struck it, I

would've at least liked a sound or something to tell me when I'd hit home. Unfortunately, there was none of that either. It was like constantly swinging at empty air, which made things feel extremely eerie.

"Hmmm..."

Ficelle groaned as she kept up the attack. The giant shadow wolf wasn't just letting us strike it nonstop. After taking a hit or two, it always jumped away. Even if the room was big, we were still underground, so it couldn't back off too far. It did wander all over the place though, sending shadow arrows at us from every direction out of spite. It was mentally exhausting for both me and Ficelle.

On that note, my body wasn't sturdy enough to have my nerves strained like this for a long period. Even if I hadn't sustained any visible damage yet, just as I'd initially predicted, my stamina was fading. *It's gonna be bad if things continue like this.*

"It's working...but we don't have enough instantaneous firepower..." muttered Ficelle. She was still moving about and analyzing the situation.

She was right. If there was a means of winning here, it would be to attack with enough firepower to destroy every last scrap of shadow with a single blow. An enormous explosion might be able to break the deadlock.

However, we were underground. The whole place could cave in if we unleashed some kind of tremendous magic, and that was a frightening prospect. *Well, it's not like I can use any magic anyway.* Maybe Ficelle was worried about a potential cave-in too, and that was why she was at a bit of a loss.

"Master, I have a suggestion."

"Hm? What is it?"

Backing off a little, I linked up with Ficelle. She seemed to have some kind of plan to defeat it. At times like these, I really admired wizards. Being a swordsman sounded cool, but all we really did was swing a sword at our opponents. When that couldn't be applied, there was nothing we could really accomplish.

"I'll build up enough mana to blow it away in one hit," Ficelle said. "But I want

you to protect me while I do.”

“I see... Roger that. I’m looking forward to your firepower.”

“Mm. I’ll do my best.”

The plan was simple: it was my job to become the enemy’s target until Ficelle finished gathering her mana. I was to be a decoy. *That’s a harsh job for an old man, but let’s hang in there as long as we can, shall we?*

“I’m starting... Mgh!”

“Whoa!”

Ficelle immediately began gathering her mana. During our bout, her sword had been glowing to the point where I’d been able to see it despite my inability to use magic. This time, it was already far beyond that point. I could clearly see the mana swelling up around her sword with every passing second. She’d definitely been holding back during our little match.

“Right then, time for me to get going too!” I exclaimed.

In her current state, Ficelle couldn’t really move around. Well, she probably could, but doing so would disperse the mana she was gathering or something. I’d been told before that constructing and maintaining magic required tremendous technique.

My role was clear—I had to be an utter nuisance to draw the enemy away from her.

“———, ——”

“Over here!”

The giant wolf reacted to Ficelle for an instant, but it shifted its focus to me as I closed in. The attacks it launched at close range were pretty fast, and I couldn’t tell how powerful the blows were, so I had to dodge them. To add to that, I couldn’t back off to get away from it anymore. I had to maintain point-blank range, and simply evading nonstop wouldn’t keep its attention, so I had to proactively go on the offense too.

“Whoa there!”

To be blunt, this is stupidly tough. Did that shadow just graze my clothes? Damn, that was close. I took a quick glance down at where I'd taken a hit. My clothes were cleanly cut, as if a sharp blade had passed through them.

Dammit, it really is the kind of attack I can't tackle head-on. The fact that it had an edge meant it could be dangerous to block with my sword too. I doubted my blade would lose in a single exchange, but it would be ideal to avoid testing that theory.

"Hrmmmmm...!"

Behind me, I could hear Ficelle groaning. What I assumed was mana was surging around her sword to terrifying proportions. *Holy crap! You wouldn't even leave bones behind if you hit a person with that!* Once again, I couldn't help but admire how amazing magic was.

"Oh! Now's not the time to look away!"

I turned back to face my opponent right as a giant foreleg came down on me. Instead of dodging backward, I slid to the side. Quite frankly, doing this was terrifying. I didn't have much experience baiting an enemy like this. However, if I backed off, all the mana Ficelle was gathering would go to waste. In all likelihood, this wasn't a feat she could attempt multiple times. I knew very well that pouring all your concentration into an attack, only for it to misfire, made it very difficult to concentrate at that level again.

"Hmph!"

So, the only thing I could do now was coil around my opponent and force it to target me. I fired myself back up, unleashing attack after attack, ignoring whether my slashes were having any effect. I could feel the slight surplus of stamina and willpower I'd had fading away rapidly.

"Gah!"

I continued narrowly dodging the giant shadow wolf's attacks, and I kept its attention on me by striking back—all just to buy time. It sounded simple on paper, but doing it for real was nerve-racking. As long as jumping backward to get away from it was out of the question, I was forced to remain at a distance, where a single hit would signal my defeat.

I thought I was ready for this, but my energy and willpower were deteriorating pretty badly. I felt this even more acutely because I knew that any attack could be fatal. I could probably get away from a grazing blow, but a direct hit would spell the end for me.

“Hyup!”

I narrowly dodged a horizontal slash by stepping backward. Taking a small step like this was fine, but if I went too far, I would get too close to Ficelle. *This is a ridiculous tightrope act.* If there was one saving grace, it was that my enemy didn’t exactly have an abundance of attack patterns. As long as I kept an eye on it, I’d be able to dodge anything it had to offer. So far, we’d seen two attacks: close-range strikes from its forelegs and the shadow arrows that flew out of its body. The close-range strikes weren’t difficult to dodge since it didn’t seem to understand the concept of feints.

Now then, for how long would I be able to hold out? There was a limit to how much time a human could stay in constant motion. My stamina was on the decline too. My technique was currently better than it had been during my youth, but my physique was definitely falling behind.

“Haah... Ha ha...!”

Using the reflexes I’d developed through constant repetition over the years, I dodged my enemy’s attacks. I was beyond the point of making moves based on logic and analysis—using my brain to plot every action was a waste of energy, so I yielded myself to my instincts for dodging and attacking. As I repeated that feat, a slight smile came to my face.

Practicing the fundamentals was boring. It was hard to get a sense of growth, and it took an accumulation of months and years to feel like you’d improved the slightest amount. However, when facing a formidable foe like this, you got a wonderful sense of your growth. Back then, I wouldn’t have been able to dodge this; back then, I wouldn’t have been able to get any attacks in.

I cleared my mind. When the beast attacked, I dodged, struck back, dodged, struck back, and dodged again. The circumstances of this battle were extreme, and I repeated this pattern over and over. What unconsciously came to mind was practicing my forms as a child. That slow accumulation of daily training

came to life as techniques in combat.

Due to the lack of sensation when I struck my opponent, my senses fell into an exceedingly intense training session of repetition. I didn't even know if this state of mind was good or not—that question went unanswered as this exchange of offense and defense went on and on.

“Hmph!”

I weaved through a hail of shadow arrows and delivered an upward slash. Any normal beast would've had their jaw split open. But here, all I'd managed was to shave away a little bit of the shadow's total mass.

This is fun. A totally inappropriate feeling was budding in my heart. It was definitely enjoyable to have bouts with my pupils—I was able to get a real sense of their growth that way. In contrast, I hadn't had any fun fighting against Zeno Grable because I'd been filled with unease at how bad that situation had been. So why was I having fun now? Maybe it was because I couldn't feel anything when I cut my opponent, so my brain was interpreting this as going through the basic forms.

“Hah!”

I crouched and dodged the attack aimed at my face. If I couldn't back away, my only choices were to dodge left or right—I could also step closer. Now that I thought of it, Curuni did this kind of full-body evasion all the time. Her technique was still developing, but she was in no way lacking in terms of endurance, so she favored big movements.

“One more!”

I leaned to the side to evade the follow-up downward strike, then retaliated with two chained slashes of my own.



Allucia never overlooked even the smallest opening, and her specialties included delivering surefire counterattacks. Comprehensively, her technique had already long surpassed mine. She was still my former pupil, but after spending time teaching at the order, I'd found there was no small number of things I could learn from her.

My mind also drifted to the five students I was teaching in the sword magic course. They were soon going to be shifting away from practice swings, and they would begin learning the basic forms. I wondered what their swordplay would look like in the future.

Cindy had the stamina to match Curuni, so she was sure to make lavish use of that energy in a fight. Nesia also had a powerful build, so maybe he would favor a high-handed approach like Surena. Lumite and Fredra gave me the impression that they would fight like honor students, similar to Allucia and Ficelle. Fredra in particular had joined the sword magic course out of admiration for Ficelle, so she was sure to mimic her style. Mewi...I wasn't so sure about her yet. If anything, she was very agile, so in terms of fighting style, maybe she would be similar to Allucia or Surena. It could be amusing to have Mewi learn to use two swords.

They all still needed to learn the fundamentals. As swordsmen, they were like raw minerals—it was up to Ficelle and I to refine them. You could even say it was our duty.

I was well aware that now wasn't the time to be thinking about this stuff. Still, when taking part in a battle where I got a true sense of everything my training had brought me, I couldn't help but imagine how the next generation was going to pull ahead of my skill.

I continued to harbor these distorted feelings as the fight went on for a while longer. Suddenly, a shadow arrow finally grazed my cheek.

"Ugh!"

For the first time in a good while, I felt a sharp tingle of pain run through my body.

Sometimes, concentration pushed to the utmost limit could surpass the flesh.

That couldn't be maintained for long. The fact that an attack I'd been dodging with ease had now hit was proof that my body was starting to fall behind the movements my brain envisioned.

My sensation of fun was gradually turning to one of unease. My stamina was just about at its limit, and my concentration was waning. Both my body, which had been in constant motion this whole time, and my brain, which had been giving it orders, were flashing warning signals.

Still not ready? How many seconds has it been since Ficelle started gathering mana? Twenty? Thirty? A minute? Maybe five? When concentrating, it was easy to lose grasp of time. Being able to focus to such an extent sounded nice, but it couldn't be maintained for long.

The blood running down my cheek trickled into my mouth. It was bitter and tasted of iron. The cut was a very small wound, but the simple fact that I'd taken a hit at all—that I'd failed to dodge—was rapidly deteriorating my focus. I felt sweat beginning to form all over my body. I forced my focus away from the bead running down my brow and desperately kept my body moving, waiting for the moment of victory.

Crap. Any more of this and my lungs won't keep up. I need to catch my breath, even if just for a second.

"Haaah!"

"D-Done...!"

Just as my concentration and stamina finally gave out and I gasped for breath, I heard Ficelle's reassuring voice from behind.

"Master! Get back!"

"Right!"

Taking advantage of the situation, I matched the giant wolf's attack and then jumped backward. That finally brought me a sense of relief, and I fell to one knee involuntarily.

"Pwah!"

Man, that was really close. I took a deep, deep breath. Another ten seconds

and I might've taken a far more serious hit than a scratch on the cheek. That was how close to the brink I'd been. I could feel sweat pouring down my back.

I turned to look next to me. The mana Ficelle had gathered to her utmost limit was gushing not only from the tip of her sword, but along its entire length. It was like a geyser. I could tell at a glance that there was tremendous power behind it. In fact, there was so much pressure coming from her sword that I started worrying whether she would cause a cave-in.

"Eat this..."

Ficelle took a breath, then brought down her sword. In my eyes, it looked less like a sword strike and more like a waterfall of light.

"Secret art, Curtana!"

"Ooooooh?!"

Without any flashy sound, a powerful shock wave of heat engulfed the area. It was so powerful that I reflexively stabbed my sword into the ground to stabilize myself.

Shock ran through my body, and my eyes steadily weakened. As the intense light blinding me started to fade, I saw that most of the shadow before us had been blown away. Its hazy contour was even more of an indistinct mess, and what had been a giant wolf appeared to be nothing more than warped dregs hanging in the air.

"A-Amazing..."

So this is Ficelle's full power? Well, the attack certainly wasn't practical because of the amount of time it required in the middle of a fight, but the ridiculous firepower definitely made up for that. The shadow wolf hadn't so much as twitched from any of our earlier attacks, and now it had been reduced to a miserable state.

Was it even still alive? There was nothing left of its shadowy body, and was no longer vanishing or growing. Only a hazy shadow continued to float in the cave.

"Haah... I'm beat..." Ficelle said. "I was wondering what to do if that didn't work."

“You did great,” I told her.

We kept our distance for a while, just in case, but it showed no more sign of moving. I wasn’t sure if we’d killed it, but at the very least, it’d been neutralized. The sound that’d been echoing in my ears had also stopped.

I would never have been able to beat this opponent alone. It had only been possible because I’d stuck it out as a decoy, and frankly, the destructive power behind Ficelle’s attack was shocking. She was still young too. If she continued her studies, her abilities were sure to grow far, far greater. How strong was she going to get? How high was her summit? I was endlessly curious.

“Hm...? That’s...”

Judging that the danger had passed, I walked toward the dregs of the shadow beast. If it attacked us again, we would have to figure something out, but it seemed that wasn’t going to happen. After getting to where I assumed the center of the giant wolf had been, I spotted something like a black crystal floating in the air. It was unstable, and a faint shadow surrounded it.

“A crystal...? What is it?” I muttered.

“I don’t know...but I’m getting a bad feeling from it.”

“Hmmm...”

It was just about as big as my palm. It reflected almost no light and was emitting an ominous black aura. Judging by how it was floating in the air, it didn’t seem to have physical substance. I didn’t even know if it was all right to touch. However, I felt like it was a bad idea to leave it as it was and go back outside.

“It wasn’t even scratched by my magic...” Ficelle observed. “It’s probably unbelievably hard.”

“Meaning it’s more than just a rock.”

One way or another, I had a feeling this rock was *alive*, for lack of a better term. Even with the giant wolf gone, there was still a faint shadow around it. Also, it was floating. Ficelle’s attacks hadn’t damaged it at all, so unlike the shadows, it had significant resistance to magic.

Maybe this was just my imagination running wild, but perhaps this rock was the giant wolf's core, and that massive shadow had existed to protect it. Not that I had anything to back that theory.

"Hm!"

"Whoa?!"

And as I continued to ponder the black crystal's true nature, Ficelle slashed at it with her sword. I yelped at the unexpected action. *Jeez, that got a jump out of me. At least tell me before you do something!*

"It really is hard..." Ficelle muttered sullenly, putting a hand to her blade's edge. "Doesn't seem like I can cut through it."

"That bad, huh?"

Ficelle had exceptional technique. There was no way she'd misaligned the edge of her blade or anything. In other words, the crystal was sturdy enough to withstand both Ficelle's magic and sword.

"Okay... Guess I'll give it a go next," I said.

"Mm, got it."

Since I'm here, I might as well. Some of my stamina was back after taking a breather, so there was nothing to lose from testing my blade before we left. Besides, an object Ficelle's magic and sword were incapable of damaging piqued my interest. I probably wouldn't have bothered if the sword at my waist were some common, off-the-shelf weapon. For better or worse, what I had was a masterwork that Balder had diligently forged using the greatest of materials—as a swordsman, I couldn't escape the desire to find out how sharp it truly was.

Above all else, Ficelle had a bad feeling about this mystery object. I couldn't personally tell how dangerous it was, so a wizard's opinion on the matter couldn't be ignored.

I took a breath and held my sword at the ready in front of me. My target was pretty small, but it wasn't moving much. Slashing it was pretty much the same as striking a dummy or a straw post. If I calmed down and swung as usual, I wasn't going to miss.

If my sword was lost in the exchange, I could just apologize to Balder later, explain the situation, and have him fix it. It was sure to cost some money, but it would be a necessary expense.

“Shhh!”

I crouched and then slashed. My fatigue from the battle seemed to work in my favor since the swing drained just the right amount of strength. This slash scored quite highly, if I had to say so myself. Unlike fighting the shadows, I had definite feedback from striking something. It was no exaggeration to say that swordsmen thrived off this type of sensation—a good slash naturally improved my mood.

“Impressive, Master. That was really pretty.”

“Ha ha ha, thanks. I’ve gotta say, that was a pretty good swing.”

A few beats later, something hard thunked to the ground.

“Ah, you split it.”

“Ooh, it went right through.”

Turning our attention to the sound, we spotted the black crystal cleanly bisected on the ground. The faint shadowy aura around it had also been dispersed by the impact. I wondered if it was completely dead now. Despite the nice feedback I’d felt in my palm, it didn’t quite feel like I’d finished it.

I was surprised that my blade had cleanly bisected a crystal that Ficelle’s magic hadn’t damaged at all. I took a quick look at my sword, but couldn’t spot any nicks or chips along the edge. It really was splendidly durable. Top-notch materials and a first-class blacksmith—combining these two elements had truly created a masterwork. I was once more in awe over what had fallen into my hands, and I felt a deep respect for Balder.

“I wonder if it’s okay to touch now,” I mused. I poked at the crystal with the tip of my sword.

“Should be. That bad feeling is gone.”

Once I saw that nothing was happening, I picked up the broken crystal halves. They were no heavier than normal stones, and the cross section was just as

pitch-black as the surface. *I have no idea what this thing is.*

I knocked the two pieces together. Just as Ficelle had said, it did seem awfully hard. I was a little moved by the fact that I'd chopped it in two.

"Guess I'll hand this over to Lucy later," I murmured.

"Mm. I think that's for the best."

At any rate, this thing had definitely been sealed down here. I wouldn't really call this a spoil of war, but it was only right to return what we'd acquired from this battle to the one in charge. It was possible that she would get angry at us for defeating it without asking, but this had been an emergency situation—she was going to have to forgive us.

"Okay, shall we head back up?" I suggested.

"Mm. My mana's spent. I'm beat."

"Ha ha, yeah. I'm exhausted too."

Now that we'd defeated the giant wolf, the shadows that had been surging out of this cave had probably vanished too. But since we'd beaten their boss, not many of them should've been leaving the school building, anyway. Kinera and the other teachers were out there, so I could only pray that everyone was safe.

"By the way, what's with the whole secret art thing?" I asked.

"The commander named it, not me."

"But you said it aloud. You like it, yeah?"

Ficelle paused before nodding. "Mm-hmm."

"Ha ha ha, nothing wrong with that. A secret art sounds cool."

"Erk..."

"If you're gonna get embarrassed about it, you don't have to say it aloud..."

"Hmph!"

"Ow! Ow, that hurts!"

Well, I understood how she felt. Secret techniques sounded really cool, and it

was even better when they lived up to their names. *Hers has more than enough firepower to be called a secret art.*

“Maybe I should think of one for myself,” I said.

“That sounds good,” Ficelle agreed. “Make it something cool that settles things in a flash.”

“Ha ha ha, you’re asking for a bit much from this old man.”

I was completely spent both physically and mentally, so with that last joking complaint, we left the underground area of the magic institute behind.



“Beryl, you really did well this time around.”

“Thanks. Man, it was pretty rough.”

Several days had passed since the turmoil beneath the magic institute. Lucy had called for me, so I was now in the headmistress’s office. After finishing off the giant shadow wolf, the shadows that’d been surging to the surface had vanished. I was just content that no further harm had been done.

Kinera and the other teachers had asked about the details behind the incident, but I’d only told them that it was resolved for now. I kept the rest to myself—I wasn’t sure whether it was all right to divulge what was beneath the magic institute.

Ficelle had already known that an underground existed, so the other teachers probably did too. However, it seemed nobody knew what was actually down there. Even the vice principal had been totally in the dark. Alluding to the giant shadow wolf I’d found there could have unnecessary repercussions.

Lucy sighed heavily after hearing my full report. “That stupid youngster. Faustus did seem like he was up to something, what with all that sneaking around...”

“Were you suspicious of him already?” I asked.

“More or less, but I never thought he would go so far. Thanks to him, my whole business trip went up in smoke.”

“Sounds rough...”

Her trip to the empire had been cut short, and she’d been forced to return immediately to Liberis. Information about the incident had reached her ears somehow. How, specifically, I had no idea. Generally, you’d assume a fast horse had been sent, but this was Lucy Diamond. It wouldn’t be all that surprising to hear that she’d obtained information through some extraordinary means.

Well, I couldn’t care less how Lucy had gotten her information. The important part right now was that I learned the full details of the incident.

“So what was that thing down there, anyway?” I asked.

“Hmm. I suppose you have a right to know.”

Judging by her reaction, she really did know about what was under the magic institute. I wasn’t sure how much I should prod in this regard, but I’d gotten involved already, so I at least wanted to know my opponent’s identity.

“Lono Ambrosia,” Lucy said. “A named monster.”

“A named monster...”

I figured it wasn’t a normal monster. Named, huh? That’s why it was so tough.

“What was a named monster doing beneath the institute?” I asked.

“For two reasons: to seal it away, and for research. I’m sure you know this after facing it, but it can’t be killed.”

“Hmm...”

True. The giant wolf—Lono Ambrosia—hadn’t died even after getting hit by Ficelle’s maximum firepower. And Lucy could use even stronger magic than Ficelle, so when she said it couldn’t be killed, it *really* couldn’t be killed.

“It’s easy to simply clear the shadows,” she added with a sigh. “But not even I’m able to break its core. No matter how many of the shadows you destroy, it’ll regenerate if the core is still there. That’s why it was sealed away.”

“That’s considered easy...?”

She really was on a whole different level as a wizard. If I’d been on my own, I would never have defeated it, no matter how long I spent slashing. In theory, it

was probably possible to shave away all the shadows using only physical attacks, but I didn't want to imagine how many hits it would take—it would probably require a siege weapon or something.

Wait. Hold on. I've got a real bad feeling about this. Have I been carrying around a named monster's core?

"Uhhh, just to ask... Is that core...?"

"Hm? Did you see it? It's a pitch-black crystal."

"You mean this thing...?"

I took out the black crystal I'd retrieved—I'd been storing it under the same roof as Mewi—and put it on the table with a clunk. What would have happened if it'd regenerated in my home? It was a good thing nothing had happened while Mewi was around. I let out a huge sigh of relief.

"Wuh...?"

Seeing the crystal, Lucy had a look of absolute shock plastered on her face. It was very rare to see her like this. She was always so calm and composed—to the point of being annoying. I felt like just being able to see this made it worth coming to the institute.

"Did you...split this in two?" she asked hesitantly.

"Huh? Yeah," I answered honestly. "Was that maybe...a bad idea?"

So I really shouldn't have. She did say it was research material. Still, it's not like I could've just left it alone. It was an emergency, so please forgive me.

"Pffft... Ha ha ha... HA HA HA HA HA HA!"

"Whoa?!"

While I was wondering how to evade blame, Lucy burst into raucous laughter.

"Ha ha ha! I see! I see! You split it in two! You really are amazing!" Lucy exclaimed. She had faint tears in her eyes as she laughed and slapped my shoulder.

"H-Huh...?"

That kinda hurts. Anyway, I could use an explanation for the sudden laughter.

I guess it's at least a relief that she's not angry with me.

"Not even I could break this thing," she explained, poking the crystal on the table. "Do you understand the meaning of that?"

In other words, even Lucy's great magic had been incapable of destroying this core. Ficelle had described the crystal as being incredibly hard. Even when I'd slashed through it, despite its size, the feedback had been considerable.

"Haaah... So I cut something amazing?" I asked with a sigh.

"Oh, come now. Feel free to brag."

"So you say..."

I'd cut something neither Ficelle nor Lucy's magic had been able to break. That was, in fact, quite the accomplishment. However, perhaps the core had simply been highly resistant to magic, so some amount of effort had been enough to physically break it. I couldn't get all arrogant about it.

"I'm pretty sure I was able to 'cause of this," I said, pointing out my sword.

"Hmm, your red-sheathed sword, huh?"

The blade made of Zeno Grable's materials had to be the greatest factor at play. I was sure that if Ficelle had been the one to swing this sword, the result would've been the same. The weapon was made from a named monster's materials, so it'd been able to cut the core of another named monster. That made far more sense to me.

"Mind lending me that sword just a *teensy* bit for research?" Lucy asked.

"Never," I answered immediately.

"Tch."

Well, I did understand the desire to find out if there was some hidden power within my sword. However, I was scared she would dismantle the thing if I gave it to her. For now, it was more than enough to just assume this was the finest of blades that boasted a terrific edge and sturdiness. I could only pray that the day never came when I would need to know more.

Lucy shifted her focus to the black crystal. "Hmm... Pretty much all traces of

mana have vanished.”

She picked it up and scrutinized it closely. I had no idea what a trace of mana would imply. Still, I could at least guess the thing was completely dead now.

“I doubt it’ll revive from this state, but I suppose I might as well seal it just in case,” she concluded. “Mind leaving it with me?”

“Yeah, sure. I was going to do that anyway.”

I’d never intended to swipe the thing for myself. The plan was always to give Lono Ambrosia’s crystal to Lucy. It seemed we didn’t have to worry about it reviving anymore, but it would be a huge pain if it did. The best option was just as Lucy said: seal the thing away.

“Anyway, to cut this thing clean in two...” Lucy muttered. “You really are amazing.”

“You’re exaggerating. If anything, it’s my sword that’s amazing.”

“You’re the same as ever.”

Lucy chided me over it a bit, but I didn’t really want to consider this as my own achievement. Ficelle’s magic had been responsible for destroying the majority of that giant shadow wolf, and I’d only been able to cut the crystal because of my sword. That did mean I had been the one to ultimately break it, but that fact alone didn’t make it entirely my achievement. Also, as mentioned earlier, Ficelle could’ve done the same thing with my sword. The same went for Allucia and Surena too.

In short, anyone with a certain level of technique could’ve achieved the same result. I didn’t think my technique was lousy or anything, but I had no intention of letting this victory go to my head.

“Well, I suppose I have a little more confidence than before,” I said.

“Is that so? That’s a good thing.”

My life had gotten hectic in the short period since Allucia had half dragged me out to the city. Everything had seemed far too heavy a burden for me, but one way or another, I honestly thought it was all something to be proud of.

That didn’t mean I was going to become overly arrogant and conceited about

it, though. I wanted to keep my self-restraint intact. I'd wielded a sword for many years, but the pinnacle was still so far away. I wanted to continue to devote myself to my art in a way that matched my abilities.

"Oh yeah, what about Vice Principal Brown?" I asked.

"His case requires consideration. Either way, I doubt he'll be able to stay at the institute."

"I see..."

Naturally, the culprit behind the incident wasn't going to be acquitted. In the end, the royal garrison had noticed the commotion and had gotten things under control alongside the other teachers. Afterward, the vice principal had been taken away by the garrison as a suspect. We would have to wait to see how he would be punished, but as Lucy said, it was unlikely for him to come back to the institute as a teacher. Even if no major injuries had been sustained, the scale of his crime couldn't be ignored.

"Haah... Good grief," Lucy said with a sigh. "There's a mountain of things to do and consider."

"Ha ha, hang in there."

As the head of the magic institute, I was sure she had a mountain of stuff to deal with regarding this incident. I could understand her reluctance to do so since she hadn't even been present, but handling things like this was part of her job. As the one in charge, she would have to take some level of responsibility.

On that point, I was glad I had relatively carefree titles like special instructor for the order and temporary lecturer for the institute. I would obviously take responsibility for my own actions irrespective of my title. However, I didn't have to take responsibility for a stranger's or an organization's actions, so my titles suited me just fine. I really didn't want to end up in some lofty position where I had mountains of responsibilities. I just wanted to do my best with what little was within my reach.

"There is still plenty to worry about," Lucy said, "but I do believe that inviting you here was a good thing."

She walked over to the window and looked down at the courtyard. I followed

her gaze, spotting Ficelle and about thirty students with wooden swords.

“I won’t force you. Though, it’ll help if you can come and see them every now and then. I’m sure she’ll like that too.”

“That’s my plan. I don’t want to abandon them halfway.”

After the incident, the number of people taking the sword magic course had increased significantly. It seemed that while Ficelle and I had been fighting underground, the five students of the sword magic course had taken on the shadows who’d reached the surface. That was what Kinera had told me.

I wanted to yell at them for doing something so dangerous, but I really, *really* understood how they felt. It was a swordsman’s nature to want to put their skills into practice. Even if they knew it was dangerous, they probably wanted to get a feel for their progress. It was extremely difficult to escape that temptation. In that sense, while those five were still very inexperienced in terms of technique, they were developing the mindsets of fully-fledged swordsmen.

Even if I couldn’t approve of what they’d done, they *had* made the sword magic course more popular. That was only a positive in hindsight, though—it would’ve been terrible if any of the students had gotten hurt.

Anyway, producing visible results like that was a great advertisement for the sword magic course. I was pretty sure they’d succeeded because of the protection of Kinera and the other teachers, but the way they’d put up a good fight with wooden swords must’ve shined in the eyes of their fellow students.

“Fice has a different look in her eyes now as well,” Lucy said. “That is the light of one who guides others.”

“So it looks that way to you too, ‘*professor*’ Lucy?”

Another big factor behind the sudden popularity was the major change in Ficelle’s perception. Before, she hadn’t hated teaching or anything, but it seemed like she’d found it tedious.

Ficelle was very talented, so she must’ve felt somewhat stressed over teaching inexperienced children. However, now that she’d been given the opportunity to be a teacher, she’d done her best to search for her own teaching

style.

It would be difficult for her to master, and it was also going to take time for her to get used to teaching. Many of my memories of when I'd first started as an instructor at the dojo in the sticks were filled with anxiety. I was pretty used to teaching now, but I didn't believe everything I'd done had always been correct.

"Mind if I open the window?" I asked.

"Go ahead. Curious?"

"Yup."

With the headmistress's permission, I opened the window. It wasn't all that humid outside, so a refreshing wind blew into the room.

"Like I said, magic is important, but to use sword magic properly, you need to learn how to wield a sword. This is what the fundamentals are like."

With the window open, I could faintly hear Ficelle's voice.

"Heh heh, if you're that worried, how about joining them?" Lucy said.

"No. Now that she's trying to change, I'll just be in the way."

Unlike when she'd first started, Ficelle was doing her best to teach theory. She was very intelligent, so once she found the knack for it, she was sure to figure it out quickly. Meddling too much when someone was doing their best to change had a tendency to hinder growth. I was still a bit worried though, and I had no intention of abandoning her, so my plan was to just show up every now and then.

However, unlike before, I wanted to avoid taking over her class entirely. Besides, as far as I could tell, there was no need for me to go that far anymore. A part of me wanted to see things through like Lucy wanted, but that was mostly me being selfish. At any rate, my initial goal of making the sword magic course popular had been accomplished.

With that many students, it was harder to teach, but it came with an equally large sense of fulfillment. Also, with more students, a greater disparity existed between them—this was always a troubling issue for a teacher. Still, that was a

subject to solve later. I was curious about how Ficelle would clear it. I had endless hope for this young teacher's future.

"That's all. Got it?"

"Yes!"

Oh, looks like Ms. Ficelle's explanation is over. Just as Lucy had mentioned, she had a different look in her eyes now.

At any rate, if two or three masters of sword magic were to reach Ficelle's level in the near future, the popularity of the class was sure to reach even greater heights. I was honestly glad to have been a part of that brilliant future's starting point, even if my role had been relatively unimportant. I prayed I would be able to continue seeing to both the students' and the teacher's growth.

"Okay, give it a go for yourselves," instructed Ficelle from down below. "Everyone get your wooden swords ready. One thousand practice swings."

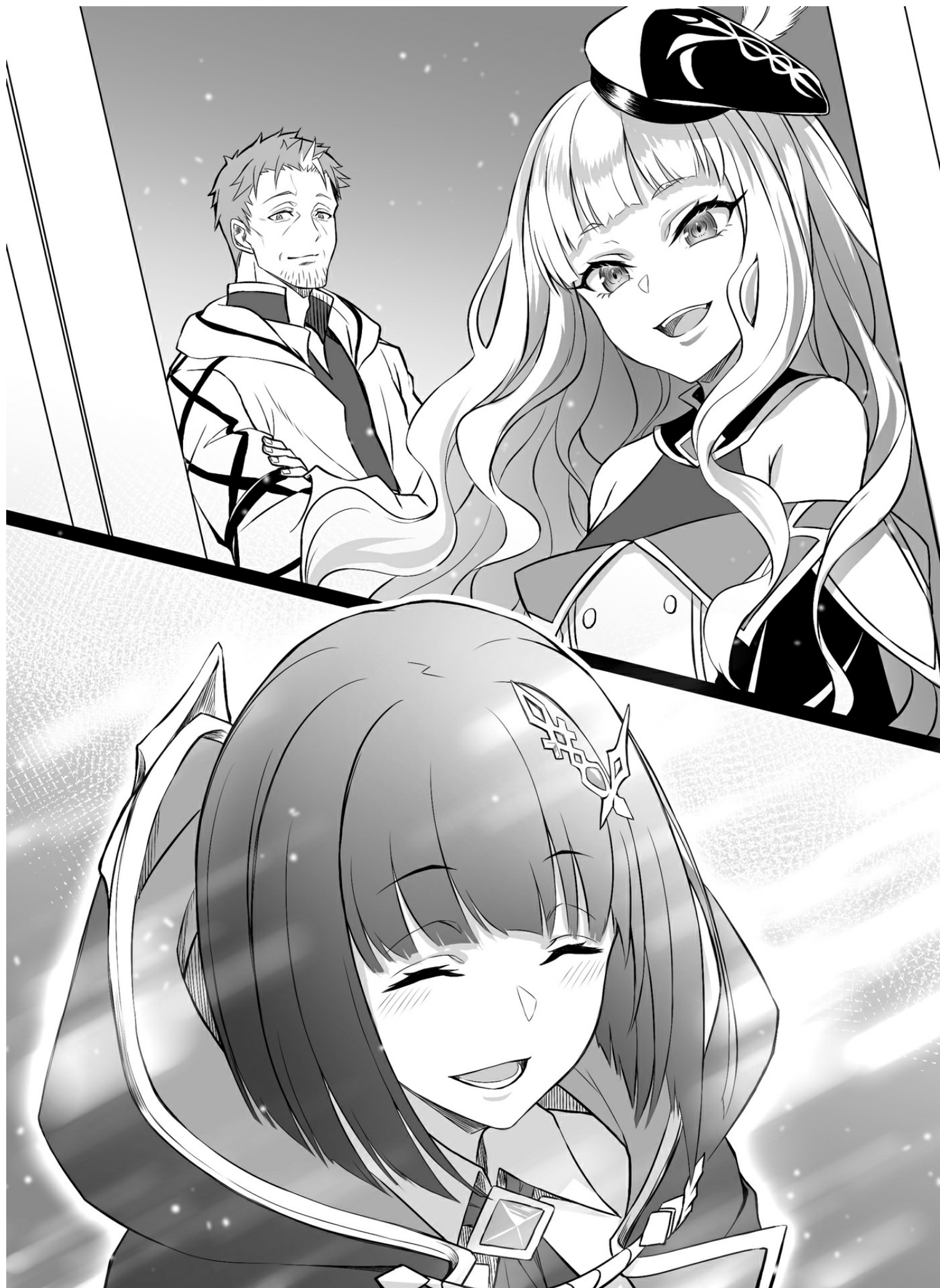
"Uh, Beryl... You sure you don't need to interrupt?" asked Lucy.

"Well... Ha ha ha... Let's just watch for now..."

It was a nice, sunny day. The students' energetic voices resounded from the courtyard, and among them, I could faintly hear Ficelle doing her best.

"Yup, that's the spirit," Ficelle encouraged. "Nice. Good."

"She's giving it her all. For now, it'd be insensitive to butt in."



Epilogue: An Old Country Bumpkin Thinks of the Future

“Are you really fine with this place?”

“Mm-hmm. Anywhere works.”

As the day came to an end, the setting sun dyed the world red. I walked through the streets of Baltrain with Ficelle. I’d gone for walks with my pupils several times now, but doing so at this hour was pretty rare. The last time must’ve been when I’d gone to a tavern with Allucia, Curuni, and Henblitz.

As for why I was out with Ficelle, my reasons were twofold: I wanted to commemorate her reaching a new stage with her teaching, and I also wanted to celebrate the resolution of the incident at the magic institute. I’d also never gotten the time to sit down, relax, and have a meal with Ficelle since reuniting with her.

She’d been no more than a child back at the dojo, but now we were both adults who could share a drink together. I wanted to continue treating such connections dearly in the future.

So, since we had the chance, I’d wanted to pick somewhere a little fancy—much like when I’d taken Mewi out for dinner. But Ficelle had insisted that a normal place would be better. Well, I could relax more at a street-corner tavern than some high-class restaurant anyway, so I was a bit grateful. Still, that was only an old man’s perspective. Ficelle was a talented young woman who possessed great abilities and status, so a part of me felt like this was the wrong choice.

“A reasonably cheap place is better than an expensive one,” she said. “It’s more comfortable.”

“That’s true.”

Ficelle seemed to have read my mind. I didn’t know if she was being honest or considerate. Still, if she was going to go that far, it was difficult to insist on going

to an expensive restaurant. She'd really grown into a considerate woman.

"Okay, let's go with this place," I said. "Not that there are any bad taverns in Baltrain anyway."

"Mm-hmm."

So, after meeting up in front of the institute, taking a stroll, and looking for a random place to eat, we settled on a modest tavern around the border between the northern and central districts.

"Welcome!"

As I opened the door, a young waitress greeted us cheerfully. *Looks like this place is doing pretty well.* That said, I hadn't found any desolate restaurants since coming to Baltrain. There was always a fair number of people inside every establishment. Shops that couldn't meet that standard probably hadn't been able to open to begin with, or they had ended up closing almost immediately, only to be replaced with more successful restaurants. That was how healthy the economic activity seemed to be here. Back in Beaden, we'd had the same stores in place for decades.

"I'll start with an ale. How 'bout you, Ficelle?"

"An ale for me too."

"Then two ales please."

"Coming right up!"

We took a seat at a table and started with drinks. It seemed Ficelle was going to celebrate with an ale too. Much like with Allucia and Curuni, I was glad to see everyone was able to enjoy some alcohol now. Well, it was a little questionable whether Allucia actually enjoyed her drinks... Her alcohol tolerance was too far off the charts. It was scary how she chugged down ale like it was water.

"Hee hee, dinner with Master Beryl."

While we waited for our drinks, Ficelle rocked about cheerfully. There was a significant age gap between me and my pupils. People would normally refrain from or be reluctant to have dinner with someone of the opposite sex who was so much older, but I was relieved to see there was none of that coming from

her. I didn't know if she was just being considerate, though.

"Ficelle, do you drink often?" I asked.

"I just sip at it every now and then. I'm pretty much a lightweight."

"It's good to know your limits."

It turned out she didn't really drink much and didn't have a particularly high tolerance. Well, Allucia was an abnormally heavy drinker—this was far more normal.

"Here're your drinks!"

After chatting a little about nothing in particular, our long-awaited ale arrived. The golden glow and popping hops were exactly what was to be expected of this sweet nectar.

"All right, then. Cheers."

"Cheers."

We tapped our tankards together with a moderate *thunk*, then got to it. *Mmmm, that's great. The quality lives up to that of a tavern in Baltrain. Since coming here, I haven't had a bad drink.* It made me want to look for even more new taverns during my free time.

"Pwah!"

"Mm. This is good."

In contrast to me chugging down my drink, Ficelle held her tankard in both hands and sipped at it. It kind of reminded me of Curuni, who wasn't a particularly strong drinker either.

"Now, what to order...?" I muttered.

"I'm pretty hungry."

Drinking on an empty stomach wasn't good for you. That said, filling an empty stomach with ale was exquisite. I couldn't stop myself. I went through the menu as I stole glances at the other tables. The vast majority were having meat, and the portions were pretty big too. It seemed this tavern put an emphasis on quantity. This was the right answer when trying to satisfy the ravenous

appetites of adventurers and knights. Thinking back on it, the tavern I'd favored while living out of an inn had prioritized quality. It was pretty fun to compare restaurants like this.

"Ficelle, is there anything you want?" I asked.

"Ummm... Meat sounds good. I can't have too much, though."

"Hmm..."

It seemed Ficelle didn't have all that big of an appetite. This was something I hadn't known while teaching her at the dojo. Anyway, I was at a bit of a loss. Ten or twenty years ago, I would've had plenty of room in my stomach—I was a little worried that Ficelle and I would end up with leftovers.

"Aaaaah!"

"Whoa?!"

And just as I was wondering what to get, I heard a hysterical cry behind me. I jumped and whipped around to find a familiar face approaching me, tankard in hand.

"Well, well, if it isn't Curuni," I said.

"Master! And Fice too! What a coincidence!"

It was none other than the young knight of the Liberion Order, Curuni Cruciel. She seemed to have already had some to drink—her cheeks were a little red. She wasn't wearing plate armor but was in something similar to her usual training clothes. Still, she was technically on duty, so she also had her sword on her.

"Mm, hiya."

"Heya!"

Ficelle was as low-energy as usual, whereas Curuni was always high-energy.

"On your own, Curuni?" I asked.

"Yup. This is part of my patrol!" she answered.

"I see. Thanks for your hard work."

Now that she mentioned it, the Liberion Order often showed up at taverns as part of their patrols. Henblitz had told me this before. Using the maintenance of public order as an excuse, the knights popped into restaurants all the time, so the citizens had to be on their best behavior.

“Want to sit with us?” I offered. “My treat.”

“Really?! Don’t mind if I do!” Curuni replied immediately.

“Mm, over here,” Ficelle said, pulling out the chair next to her.

It was very relaxing to see these two smile and sip at their drinks. I felt my cheeks softening at the sight.

“Have you eaten yet?” I asked.

“I just got here, so not yet!”

“Perfect.”

I was actually grateful we’d bumped into Curuni here. I wasn’t worried about my wallet at all, so having someone who could eat plenty meant I could order food without restraint.

“Excuse me,” I called the waitress. “A sausage platter, whole-roasted chicken, and boar skewers please.”

“Got it! Thank you very much!”

Ficelle had asked for meat, so this was a reasonable choice. Even if she didn’t eat much, Curuni and I could surely finish the rest.

“Anyway, it’s rare to see you and Fice together,” Curuni commented as we waited for our food.

It was true—Ficelle and I didn’t go out much together. We were members of different organizations, so we didn’t have much of a reason to do things together on a day-to-day basis. I’d naturally had more opportunities to see her since becoming a temporary lecturer at the magic institute, but that didn’t mean we shared our private time too. Honestly, the person I spent the most time with was Mewi—by an enormous margin. Everyone else was lumped together beneath that, even if it didn’t seem that way.

Allucia was busy with her job as knight commander, so she didn't come to the training hall every day. I'd bumped into Surena on the way back from the magic institute that one time for lunch, but I hadn't seen her since. I would've liked the chance to sit down and chat with her, but as a black rank adventurer, she was insanely busy. Our schedules never really lined up.

"There's a reason for it today," I explained. "Curuni, have you heard about what happened at the institute?"

"Aah, ummm... Just the rumors."

It turned out she had. Well, even if it had happened on a weekend evening, the incident had been at the *institute*—it was normal that a knight had at least heard rumors about it. The fact that the streets weren't in more of an uproar meant that information on the situation was actually being kept pretty tight. If it got too out of hand, the magic institute's reputation could take a major hit.

"Anyway, that ended safely, so we're here to grab some dinner," I said.

"That's good to hear!" Curuni exclaimed. "Peace really is best."

Curuni was an optimist—she was cheerful through and through. Ficelle's personality contrasted with hers somewhat, but that seemed to work in their favor. They'd built their own friendship and definitely seemed to get along very well. I couldn't ask for more. Despite being a part of separate organizations, they were able to get a glimpse of each other's efforts. They still had plenty of room for growth, so I hoped they continued to get along.

"Thank you for waiting!" the waitress called out.

"Oh, here's the food."

After we chatted a little and I ruminated over their future, our meal arrived. *Yup, that sure is a lot of meat.*

The sausage platter was piled up on a large plate, and the roasted chicken was a good size. The boar skewers also looked delicious. Boar was available in relative abundance in Baltrain, and I'd seen it as a staple on several menus already. I was grateful the country was prosperous and stable enough for me to eat such large amounts of meat so cheaply.

“All right, shall we dig in?”

“Yay! Thanks for the meal!”

“Mm, thank you.”

With that, we started eating. I went with the boar skewer, seeing as it was the easiest to grab; Curuni devoured some sausage while Ficelle diligently cut up chicken. It was interesting to see our personalities at play here.

I took a bite of the boar. Savory juice flooded my mouth. *Mm. Delicious. It's a little tough, though.* Boar was a somewhat tough meat to begin with, but comparing it to the kebab place, I could see the difference in how this place prepared it. To put it bluntly, they were a lot cruder here, but the tavern made up for it with quantity. Still, it was more than good enough—I had no complaints.

“Mmmm, delish!” Curuni cried. “Meat really is awesome!”

“Ha ha ha, what a hearty eater,” I said.

“Curuni, you should learn some manners,” Ficelle told her.

“Mrgh! How rude! I’m still a knight, you know?!”

We enjoyed our meat and ale while engaging in some lively chatter. Having a calm meal at a fancy restaurant wasn’t so bad, but this kind of atmosphere suited me better. I hadn’t even been able to taste the food during that dinner at the palace. I understood the necessity of such formal meals, but I couldn’t relax in that kind of environment.

“Oh yeah, I hear you’re teaching at the magic institute too, Master,” Curuni said between bites of meat.

“Aah, yeah. Only temporarily, though.”

I’d told Allucia about it, but I had no idea how much the order as a whole knew. If Curuni was aware, I imagined all the knights were.

“What’re the kids at the institute like?” Curuni asked. “I’m guessing they’re, like, super elitist!”

“Hmm, I don’t really get that impression,” I said. “They’re all good kids.”

“Yup. Good kids like me,” Ficelle added.

Setting aside whether any of them were like Ficelle, they were all well-behaved. Each one had a quirk or two, but that was just part of each pupil’s individuality. That was the case for the students I’d interacted with directly, at least.

“Think we’re gonna get more sword magic users like Fice?” Curuni asked.

“Not right away,” I told her. “Ficelle is really talented, after all.”

“Ahem!” Ficelle huffed with a triumphant look.

She was a talented pupil I could be proud of. However, even though I truly wanted to see her raise her successors, a part of me revolted at the idea of heroic figures of her level popping out of the woodwork. Still, at the very least, I hoped the first five sword magic students would continue to reach new heights. That included Mewi, naturally.

“What’re you teaching over there?” Curuni asked.

“Fundamentals. We’re still on practice swings,” I said. “I’m just there for support. Ms. Ficelle is the main teacher.”

“We have more students now, so we’re back to basics,” Ficelle added. “Those five are doing their best too.”

Mewi and the other original students were about ready to start on the next step, but for better or worse, the sword magic course had suddenly gotten more applicants. Pretty much none of the new enrollees had done any swordsmanship before, so the lectures had gone right back to the beginning. *It could be a little boring for those five.* I was glad to hear they were still patiently attending. Besides, there was no overdoing practicing the fundamentals. The path of swordsmanship was endlessly long.

“Practice swings sure are important, huh?” Curuni commented.

“Yup.” I nodded. “The basics are essential in all things.”

Curuni was still developing, but she understood very well how important training was. She’d recently switched from a shortsword to a zweihander, so while some of the basics had transferred over, she’d largely started from

scratch. Nonetheless, she swung her sword every day with a smile on her face. She really was worth teaching.

“Anyway, teaching is really hard,” Ficelle said somewhat seriously, cutting up the chicken cleanly and eating it a little at a time like a small animal. “I’m really coming to learn that.”

“That’s a huge step forward on its own,” I told her. “But you’re only just getting started.”

“Mm, I’ll do my best.”

I hadn’t managed perfectly from the beginning either, and the same probably went for my dad. Everyone experienced a beginning where they had to acquire new knowledge and techniques. Swordsmanship followed that logic too.

“Maybe the day will come when you’ll teach others too, Curuni,” I said.

“Hmmm... I can’t really imagine it,” she muttered.

“Ha ha ha, neither did I at first.”

Allucia was now the knight commander. Surena was the highest rank of adventurer. Ficelle was the ace of the magic corps and a teacher. One day, Curuni would surely rise through the ranks too. With the passage of time, rookies became budding talents, budding talents became accomplished regulars, and accomplished regulars became seasoned veterans. Eventually, those seasoned veterans retired.

I didn’t know how much longer I’d be able to wield a sword. I had no intention of retiring anytime soon, but one day, my stamina and willpower would reach a limit. Would I be able to greet that day with a smile? Would I be able to smile when my juniors surpassed me? I wanted to remain pure at heart, but I could envision a part of me burning up with competitive spirit and refusing to be outdone.

“It’s all right,” Ficelle said. “You’ll always be strong, Master.”

“Here’s to hoping...” I mumbled.

Is that the right thing to say to comfort me...? Whatever, I’ll take it. Still, it’s not like I’m going to be active forever. Even my dad had set aside his sword. One

day, I was sure to follow in his wake and entrust my sword to the next era. Those carrying my banner had grown more than enough, so that was a relief. My pupils really were more than I deserved.

“I’m not giving in anytime soon,” I said.

Fortunately, my body was still healthy, so it was a little too early to think of retirement. During my sessions at the order, I learned that watching youngsters grow quickly was good stimulation. The same went for teaching at the magic institute. As long as my sword still had a use in this world, my intention was to hang in there as long as I could stand on my own two legs.

“I’ve still got a long way to go too!” Curuni shouted cheerfully. “Missy! Another sausage platter!”

“Ooh, that’s a growing girl for you,” I said. “You sure have an appetite.”

“Swordsmanship is built on the body!”

“Hee hee, I’ll have to give it my all too,” Ficelle said.

Eat well, sleep well, exercise well—this was all a swordsman could ask for. If possible, I personally wanted to keep that up forever, but that was practically impossible. So, at the very least, I didn’t want to mistake the time for my retirement, and I didn’t want to throw cold water on these girls’ gallant rise to greatness.

“Okay, then...” I muttered. “Miss, another boar skewer set, please.”

“Ooh, you’ve got an appetite too, Master!” Curuni said.

“I’m not losing yet,” I told her.

Being surrounded by youngsters really was good stimulation. I had more motivation now. If possible, I wanted to maintain such connections forever.

“Master, you seem kinda solemn...?” Ficelle remarked.

“Hm? Not really. I’m actually enjoying myself.”

“Oh? That’s good, then.”

Oops, got too serious. I can’t spoil the mood. We’re going to keep things cheerful today, even if I end up with a stomachache tomorrow.

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 4. I truly believe it is because of all your support that I've come this far. Thank you very much.

To tell you the truth, I turned in my manuscript for this volume at the very last second. Up until now, I've always written things and met my deadlines pretty naturally, but this time around, I went through the experience of being chased by my deadline.

Partially due to health reasons, I went through a period where I couldn't get my pen to move. I ended up making it, and we published safely, but this was my first time panicking about my writing. If possible, I never want to go through that again.

Now then, the story this time around involves Beryl becoming a lecturer at the magic institute, meeting students and teachers there, and chitchatting with Ficelle. I was also hoping to get stuff in about Mewi's daily life and Ficelle's growth. Did you enjoy it? As for our main character's growth, I believe it's a key factor in continuing the story, so I'll do my best to continue to express that.

A second printing of this series has been decided on, and including the manga version, we've surpassed two hundred thousand in sales. I'm truly happy that so many people are reading my work. Please continue to favor me with your patronage.

The manga's second volume went on sale last month, so please pick that up too. Satou draws awesome action scenes. They're so cool! You must see them.

A lot of great things have happened, but I'll try not to sit on my laurels or get cocky about it—I'll continue writing at my own pace. I've been maintaining a pretty steady schedule up until this point, and I'm hoping to keep that up. So, let me end this section with expectations that we'll speak again after the same interval.

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

Shigeru Sagazaki

Illustration

Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

4



BERYL
GARDINANT

"Ficelle,
wait a sec."

"Then, let's begin today's class.
Everyone get your wooden swords.
One thousand swings."

CINDY
LOBEAUT

MUI
FREYA

FICELLE
HABELER

Ficelle took a breath, then brought down her sword. In my eyes, it looked less like a sword strike and more like a waterfall of light.

“Secret art,
Curtana!”





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. 5 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 4

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. 4

©2022 Shigeru Sagazaki, Tetsuhiro Nabeshima/SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.

All rights reserved.

First published in Japan in 2022 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 ©2024 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: November 2024