



FROM OLD COUNTRY
BUMPKIN
TO **MASTER**
SWORDSMAN

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

5

Shigeru Sagazaki

Illustration

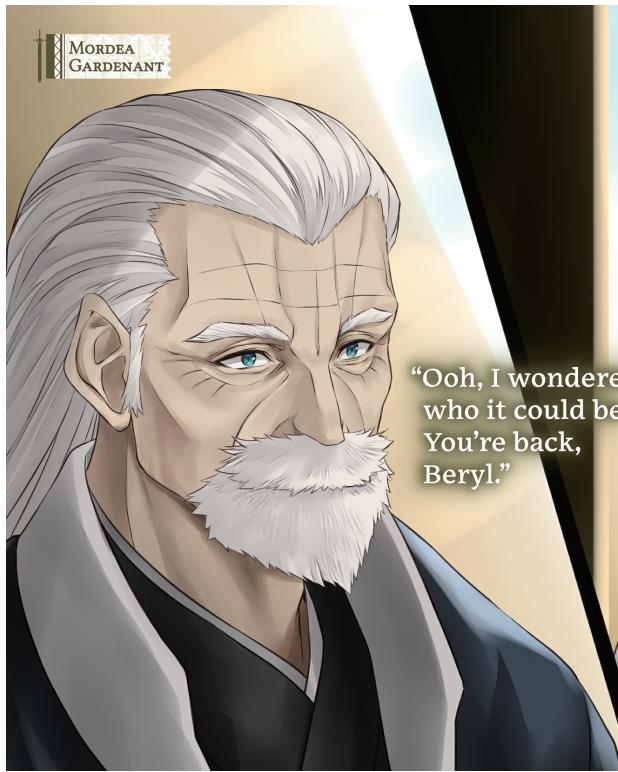
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

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“GRAAAAWR!”

“HAAAAAAAHAH!”

I screamed, putting all my fighting spirit behind my conviction. When had I stopped doing this? My last memory of it seemed so far away. That was how much I'd distanced myself from the mental state of an ideal warrior, and I'd made excuses for it all the while.

CHARACTERS

|| BERYL GARDENANT

An old man who taught swordsmanship at a dojo in the countryside. He 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.



|| HENBLITZ DROUT



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

|| MEWI FREYA



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

|| CURUNI CRUCIEL



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

|| ALLUCIA CITRUS



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

|| EDEL KLEIN



A quiet boy who attends the dojo. He is Adel's twin and respects both Beryl and Randid.

|| ADEL KLEIN



A strong-willed girl who attends the dojo. She is Edel's twin and respects both Beryl and Randid.

|| RANDRID PATTEROCK



Beryl's former pupil. He was an extremely talented adventurer, but he now serves as a temporary instructor at the dojo. He has always respected Beryl.

|| MORDEA GARDENANT



Beryl's father. He's lived a carefree life in Beaden since handing over the dojo to Beryl.

STORY

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

Lucy tells Beryl that Ficelle is a terrible teacher, and she asks him to be a temporary lecturer at the magic institute’s sword magic class. Thus, he spends his days instructing Mewi and the other students while giving teaching tips to Ficelle.

One day, while seeking the secret of eternal youth, the magic institute’s vice principal unleashes the named monster Lono Ambrosia, which had been sealed within a secret room under the institute. With the campus in a panic, Beryl and Ficelle protect the students and charge in, ultimately overcoming Lono Ambrosia in a tough battle. Ficelle learns from her experience, and her eyes now carry the spark of a proper teacher.

Beryl, seeing his former pupil’s growth even after all these years, gives her a gentle smile.

OLD BUMPKIN - MASTER SWORDSMAN

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Chapter 1: An Old Country Bumpkin Visits Home

“Okay, I’ll be off, then.”

“Mm. Have a nice day.”

It was early in the morning. After parting ways with Mewi at the front door, I left my new home, which I was now getting thoroughly accustomed to. Well, I called it *my* new home, but it was really nothing more than a hand-me-down from Lucy. *Everything is a matter of perspective.*

This was my first true residence in Baltrain, though I had stayed at the inn for quite a while, and back in Beaden, I’d lived in my family’s home. This also happened to be my first experience living with someone else besides my parents. So far, our curious cohabitation was going well—it was about time for both Mewi and me to truly settle into this environment. However, I wanted to be extra careful to avoid instigating any strange disputes.

“Ugh... It sure is hot today,” I grumbled.

Setting such household matters aside, I squinted at the sun pouring energetically down on yet another morning. Yes, it was unbearably hot. Summer was upon us.

Liberis had a relatively predictable climate all year round. No matter where you went—whether it was the capital city or out in the sticks somewhere—there wasn’t a huge range of weather patterns. The temperature didn’t change much by region, though it did vary by the seasons. It got appropriately cold and hot.

Lately, we’d been on the hot end of the spectrum. *The sun sure is healthy up there...* I did a decent amount of physical training, so such temperatures didn’t bother me much, but I felt like my resistance to heat was deteriorating every year. Was this also part of getting old?

In that sense, my dad was amazing. He was well over sixty and seemed even more energetic than I was. I wanted to be like him, but my goal still seemed so

far away.

"If it's like this outside, the training hall is probably gonna be crazy hot by the middle of the day..."

My thoughts drifted toward my destination. The knights of the Liberion Order were selected from talented aspirants across the kingdom. They were definitely robust, but they were still human. I was a little worried some might collapse in this heat. It was part of an instructor's job to bring a training session to an end before that happened. Allucia and I would just have to make the right judgment call.

Even back at the dojo, some of the more energetic children had collapsed from being overly active. The knights had more self-restraint than children, but they were still passionate practitioners of the martial arts. I had to make sure they didn't take things too far.

"Mewi's constitution seems a little frail. I'll have to keep an eye on her too."

Naturally, the concerns of overexercising applied to Mewi and the other students taking the sword magic course at the institute. I still dropped by there every now and then. But now, there were far more students in the course than when I'd originally taken the job, so I doubted I could put a name to every face.

The only ones I could recognize at a glance were the five initial students. I would probably remember the others if I attended their class every day, but I had few opportunities to talk to them face-to-face and even fewer to register each as an individual. Frankly, I had plenty more opportunities to forget them.

As for what those students were up to now, well, they were on break. It turned out the magic institute had summer and winter vacations. *I'm jealous...though maybe I shouldn't be.* We'd had scheduled days off at the dojo too, and as dojo master, I could've technically taken a break whenever I wanted. Even at the order, I was only going nearly every day because I wanted to. If I needed a break, I could take one. Still, getting more rest than necessary would make me feel out of shape in no time. It was like everything I'd slowly built up would go to waste in an instant, so I never really rejoiced in the idea of taking time off. I'd been entranced with swinging a sword ever since my childhood.

Anyway, Mewi was in the middle of her vacation, so I was now getting the valuable experience of having someone see me off in the mornings. It felt a little strange to have someone at home wish me a nice day. Normally, it would be the role of my wife or child, but unfortunately, that seemed like a distant prospect.

And with such thoughts in mind, I arrived at the order's office.

“Good morning. Sure is hot, isn’t it?”

“Hello, Mr. Beryl. Ha ha, yeah! Summer is definitely here.”

I exchanged greetings with the royal garrison guards at the gate, who were carrying out their duties splendidly. It wasn’t like they could take a break just because it was hot outside, and I felt sorry for them. They smiled back at me, but I could see the sweat pouring down their temples. They weren’t even allowed to dress lightly when it came to defending public order, so the heat must’ve felt even worse.

“Training again today?” one of them asked. “Make sure to stay hydrated.”

“Thank you. You be careful too.”

After we showed appreciation for one another’s work, I passed by them and entered the office. Getting out of the direct sunlight definitely made things better. The building was pretty huge, so ventilation was good—the heat would only get worse inside a stuffy space. I reminded myself to keep the windows at home open during the summer.

“All righty, looks like everyone’s going at it.”

I made my way straight to the training hall, and despite being early in the morning, a fair number of people were already practicing diligently. This kind of heat made you want to slack off, so I was glad to see that the knights were maintaining their willpower.

On a side note, to get to the training hall, I’d needed to pass through a courtyard. This layout meant that the training hall couldn’t be seen from the outside. There were multiple reasons for this, ranging from crime prevention to diplomatic ones. I honestly wanted the populace to see how hard the knights were working for their sake, but that was the perspective of a civilian. There

were more than enough official reasons to keep the hall obscured.

“Good morning, Master.”

“Yo. Morning, Allucia.”

The knight commander greeted me as I walked in. As always, she maintained a composed demeanor, but the heat was definitely affecting her too. Much like the garrison guards outside, she had sweat trickling down her brow—and it wasn’t from physical exertion. It was somewhat rude to think this, but seeing her a little sweaty made her seem human. Back in her days at the dojo, she’d been far more expressive and full of youth, but now she was more stoic—it was like she’d taken a step toward being a mature woman.

“It’s gotten awfully hot, but I see everyone is the same as usual,” I remarked.

“Yes,” Allucia agreed. “I’m making sure they’re taking frequent breaks and staying hydrated.”

“Sounds good.”

Allucia knew what kind of effect this climate had on a fighter’s condition. There were ridiculous instructors out there who scolded their students for lacking willpower if they were incapable of moving their limbs due to fatigue or if they collapsed from the heat. As an instructor myself, this screamed of ignorance and negligence.

Everyone had their personal thresholds, but there were also clear limits to human endurance. Once beyond that point, even the greatest masters would be rendered immobile. Naturally, this applied to the knights of the Liberion Order too. As knights, there were times when they *had* to push themselves beyond what they could tolerate, but training was not one such time.

“Anyway, it’s rare to see you here so early in the morning,” I said.

“I’ve been able to focus more on my office work ever since you started here as an instructor,” she replied.

“Glad to hear it.”

Allucia was both the knight commander and the order’s instructor. Just being the commander surely made her more than busy enough, so overseeing her

subordinates' training on top of that... Well, it was a harsh schedule. Anyone else likely would've been overwhelmed.

If my meager efforts were enough to lighten her burden a little, then I could ask for nothing more. After all, it was no exaggeration to say that she was one of the country's most valuable assets. With my appointment here as special instructor, she'd apparently reduced her visits to the training hall so that we didn't overlap, which had allowed her to focus more on her office duties.

"Also, I have something to give you," Allucia said.

"Hm?"

However, she'd explicitly chosen to overlap her schedule with mine today. I had no clue what she wanted to give me, though. There was no reason for me to be receiving any sort of present, and I hadn't earned any kind of award from the order or royal family...probably.

"Here."

And as I wondered what it could possibly be, Allucia handed me an envelope.

"A letter?" I asked.

"Yes. It appears to be from Beaden."

"Aaah..."

Now I remembered. After moving in with Mewi, I'd sent a letter home reporting on recent affairs. Things had been so busy lately that I'd completely forgotten about it. I hadn't even expected a reply.

"Have you inspected it?" I asked.

"Not really. I decided that was unnecessary based on the sender and recipient."

"I see."

I gave it a once-over, and just as she'd said, there were no signs it'd been opened. It wouldn't have been a problem if it'd been delivered directly to me, but since it had been sent to the order's office, it fell under Allucia's jurisdiction. I was working for the order, after all, and if she had enough cause, she could

inspect any mail. She'd decided not to this time around, though—the contents of the letter were definitely harmless and trivial.

"Hmm. I'm curious, so I guess I'll open it now," I muttered.

I was sure that the letter didn't contain anything dire, but that didn't mean I was indifferent to what it said. I'd exchanged letters with Allucia during my days at the dojo, but back then, I had never expected to leave the village. This was my first time getting a letter from home.

Judging by the thickness, there weren't that many pages inside. I wanted to know what it said, and not opening it would likely distract me during training, so it was best to check it out sooner rather than later.

"Let's see..."

What could it be? I really hope my dad isn't moaning about me not finding a wife or having even the slightest prospect of finding a lover.

I broke the seal with a finger and pulled out the letter. It was only two pages, so I had enough time to read through it now.

"Okay..."

After exchanging glances with Allucia, I started reading. The letter began with an expression of relief that I seemed to be doing well. My dad's idiosyncrasies were still there, but it was well written.



I don't have any children of my own, but if I did, would I also worry this much about my kid leaving the nest? I felt like I would worry about Mewi, and we were only living together—not blood relatives. It would probably be far worse with my own child.

Thinking back, the letters I'd exchanged with Allucia had also largely focused on asking how she'd been doing. In her case, she'd been doing far too much and far too well for her own good but still.

“I guess it makes sense to wonder about that...”

The next section concerned Mewi. It wasn't really possible to explain everything about her situation in a letter, so I'd omitted quite a lot from my report. Regardless of the circumstances, the son who hadn't left home for forty-five years was suddenly looking after someone else's child. My parents had to be uneasy about it. The words “Explain yourself thoroughly” were written pretty bluntly.

Hmm. My dad told me not to come home until I'd found a wife, but dropping by every now and then is probably fine. In truth, there was a lot about Mewi that was hard to explain in writing, and since she happened to be on vacation from the magic institute, the timing was just about right for a visit. I kept a return trip to Beaden in mind for the near future as I flipped over to the second page.

“Aah... That reminds me. It's almost that time of the year.”

The letter finished with a request for me to drop by Beaden for a short while if possible. It wasn't an order or anything—my dad made it clear that it was up to me. So why did they want me to come back after throwing me out? Well, it wasn't only because of Mewi.

“Did something happen?” Allucia asked as I finished the letter.

Guess I can talk to her about it. She knew about Mewi, and as my former pupil, she knew Beaden very well.

“It's mostly trivial stuff. Wanna take a look?” I offered.

“Are you sure?”

“There’s nothing problematic—you can read it if you’d like.”

I’d already talked to Allucia about why I’d left Beaden, and she knew a lot about my circumstances. The letter itself was addressed to me, but the second half was actually meant for the order, or more specifically, for *Allucia*. After all, my returning to Beaden meant leaving my post for a little while, and the knight commander naturally had to authorize that.

“Then allow me to take you up on the offer...” Allucia said hesitantly.

“Go ahead.”

I handed her the letter. I could’ve just explained it, but I’d technically been appointed as a special instructor here by the king, so to visit home, I needed a reason—even if only on paper. I felt like a verbal rationalization for my leave was somewhat weak, and though I was sure it would be approved, this kind of thing was better when put in writing.

The content of the request was trivial—my dad wanted to borrow me, someone relatively insignificant, for a short time. However, the Liberion Order was an organization with status, authority, and power. It was best for them to have a perfect grasp on matters of national defense, which involved having everyone in the organization present. After all, there was no telling when or where someone might try to start something.

“I see...”

As I thought of such things, Allucia finished reading the letter and raised her head with an understanding expression.

“Now that I think back, it happens every year around this time,” she said.

“Yup. That’s why they’re hoping for an extra hand.”

Allucia knew why my dad was going out of his way to ask for me to come back. It happened every year in the middle of summer—exactly around this season. In a sense, it was a kind of festival, but to be specific, it was a hunt that took place annually due to a certain local phenomenon, and the village used it as a form of entertainment. A festival alone wasn’t enough to call me back, but Beaden’s hunt required a fair number of skilled hands to pull off.

“The scale...is still unknown, I assume,” Allucia said.

“Yeah. They’ve probably just started investigating.”

The only village I knew anything about was Beaden, but it was likely that other remote villages went through something similar. Though Liberis was a well-established kingdom, that didn’t mean all of its lands were safe. If some extremely dangerous monster popped up, or if there was some great disaster, the order and the magic corps were sure to make a move. Depending on the circumstances, even adventurers could be mobilized.

However, the order had limited personnel, wizards were in even shorter supply, and though adventurers and soldiers were far more numerous, they had finite resources. Because of this, the only option was to prioritize incidents as they came up. Inevitably, problems that weren’t judged to be a national threat were steadily pushed back. I wasn’t criticizing those organizations or anything—everyone had their limits, and every organization aimed to do what they could within said limits as efficiently as possible.

Knowing this, it was often best to solve more “minor” problems ourselves. That way, we avoided having to prepare the large sum needed to put out a request for adventurers or the order. As far as I could recall, Beaden’s hunts had never involved a large number of people from the outside. Once in a while, mercenaries or adventurers who just happened to be staying over had lent a hand, but that was about it.

“That’s the gist of it,” I said. “If possible, I’d like to take two or three weeks off.”

“I don’t mind. This position wasn’t meant to bind you to the capital anyway.”

“Thanks.”

And with that, my application for a vacation had been approved without a hitch—I would be going home to take part in the hunt and introduce Mewi to my parents. I thought I’d have to fill out a form or something, but Allucia was the highest authority here, and her verbal agreement would probably be enough.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, she said, “I do need you to fill out a

document, though.”

“Aah, sure.”

I didn’t want to believe it was possible for anyone in the order to slack off whenever they wanted, so this made sense.

“When will you be departing?” Allucia asked.

“Hmmm... I’ll think it over after I explain things to Mewi. I won’t be going right away, but there’s no point in leaving it too late.”

“Understood.”

What’s the procedure for when an instructor like me wants to take a vacation? I have no idea. Maybe it only involved a signature on a single piece of paper, or maybe it was an unimaginably complex web of bureaucracy. Either way, Allucia said she would take care of it, so I figured it was best to leave it to her. She wouldn’t have gone along with my request if it had been unreasonable, and she wasn’t the type to do anything unreasonable herself...probably. I didn’t like the idea of relying on others too much, but this was *Allucia*. The fact that she could, somehow or other, get anything done was one of her virtues.

“Commander, Mr. Beryl. Good morning.”

“Hey. Morning, Henblitz.”

“Good morning.”

And as that conversation came to an end, the lieutenant commander entered the training hall. He was also very busy, even if he didn’t quite have Allucia’s workload. Regardless, he came to the training hall almost every day, which gave us a glimpse into the dedication he felt to the order. His physical strength was something neither Allucia nor I possessed. The only one barely capable of rivaling him in this respect was Curuni.

“Oh, right,” I said. “Henblitz, I guess I should tell you too.”

“Yes? What is it?”

Since I had both leaders of the order here, I figured I might as well share the details of my trip home. Allucia was sure to fill him in later, but it was best for those in charge to know as soon as possible.

“There’s some stuff happening back in my home village,” I explained, “so I’ll be stepping away from the order for a bit.”

“I see... How long do you plan to be away for?” he asked.

“It’ll probably take two or three weeks.”

“Understood.”

Much like Allucia, Henblitz accepted immediately—our conversation ended in under ten seconds. I didn’t mind if they wanted to pester me for all the details, but it was nice that they had such trust in me. My title as special instructor probably played a role in this. Still, it was reassuring to have the faith of those in charge. *Not that I’m planning to exploit that trust in any way...*

“Paying your home a visit is always a good thing,” Henblitz added. “I feel the need to let loose every now and then too.”

“Aah, that’s not why I’m going back,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

My dad had told me not to come back without a wife. If I showed up just because I wanted to let loose, he would immediately kick me out again. I was sure of it.

“Every year around this season, a pack of saberboars pop up near the village,” I explained.

“I see.”

Henblitz nodded along. A saberboar was a subspecies of boar. Unlike their common counterparts, who were hunted as a food source, saberboars were far more aggressive and had huge tusks they used to impale their prey. They were technically edible, and though the meat could be somewhat tough, it still tasted good. Also, their tusks and hide were fairly valuable. However, because of their aforementioned features, it was rare for anyone to go out of their way to hunt them—they were too dangerous for the average hunter, and the reward wasn’t necessarily worth the risk. Adventurers got extermination requests for them every now and then, but apparently, they weren’t popular jobs. I recalled idly chatting with adventurers during their stays in Beaden, and there’d been plenty

of grumbling about saberboar jobs.

Still, despite being relatively troublesome, saberboars weren't considered a major problem, so society at large constantly put off dealing with them. As a result, small communities like Beaden were forced to do something about it themselves. For better or worse, we'd managed to handle it all these years.

"You'll be returning to investigate the pack's scale, and then you'll send a request to the order or adventurers, right?" Henblitz surmised.

I cocked my head. "Huh? Not at all."

"Not in the least," Allucia added.

"Hm?"

There was some kind of strange dissonance in how Henblitz had perceived the situation.

"Ummm... We're talking about saberboars, yes?" he asked.

"Mm-hmm. That's right," I confirmed.

"So...it must be a very small pack?"

"I'm not sure. Last year, I think there were a few dozen."

Henblitz fell completely silent. Saberboars were dangerous animals. They were obviously a threat to children, but even full-grown adults would suffer a devastating defeat against one without proper combat experience. Conversely, anyone with enough experience could manage. That didn't mean the danger was nonexistent though, so I could understand his concerns.

"Henblitz," Allucia said, calling him out of his stupor.

"Ah, yes?"

"Master Beryl... No, *Beaden* is simply that kind of place."

Henblitz was once again rendered speechless.

Actually...Allucia's statement was pretty ridiculous. What did she mean by *that* kind of place? Living in such a remote region was more dangerous. A city dweller might consider it a nice, tranquil place to live, but that wasn't exactly the case. Be it farming or hunting, every day could get pretty harsh. I didn't

expect everyone who complained about city living to try surviving in the backcountry, though.

Still, even after taking such rigors into account, village life wasn't all that bad. Taxes weren't too high—but not particularly low either—and it wasn't like we had bandits or thieves to worry about around the clock. Despite being in a remote region, there were proper trade routes, so a fair number of adventurers, mercenaries, and merchants dropped by. And after witnessing Mewi's circumstances, one could describe country life as almost being drunk on peace.

Beaden was still fundamentally a nice village, and the land around it was good country. Even if saberboars were a threat, they were a significant step down from the likes of Zeno Grable or Lono Ambrosia.

"Still..." Henblitz muttered after a long silence.

"Hm?"

"If you're not making any requests for help, does that mean the village...has enough strength to deal with dozens of saberboars on its own?"

"Yeah, I suppose we do. I plan on returning, and we have the dojo's pupils too. Above all else, my dad is there."

Say that a completely defenseless village was threatened by a large pack of saberboars—it would definitely be a major incident. They would surely ask adventurers or the order for help as soon as possible. However, Beaden was home to Mordea Gardenant. He was getting on in his years, was constantly nagging me to get a wife and give him a grandchild, and had lately been complaining about back pain, but he was still the strongest swordsman I knew.

The dojo's pupils and I were basically a bonus. And Randid was around too, making for an unnecessarily large bonus. Not all of our pupils were at a level where they could go fighting wild beasts, but we still had more than enough manpower to handle the situation. We'd done so every year.

"If Mordea is still active, I feel like you don't even need to go back," Allucia remarked.

"He probably just wants to see Mewi," I said.

“Aah...”

Mewi wasn’t my child, so she wasn’t my dad’s granddaughter. Still, after going so many years without even the slightest prospect of a lover, let alone a wife, I was now looking after a child. He was obviously curious.

It would’ve been entirely possible for me to keep Mewi hidden for a while, but unless I completely severed relations with my family, they would’ve found out eventually. I had no intention of cutting ties, and I wanted to go back to the dojo one day too. When that time came, maybe I could officially get Ragrid to become my assistant instructor—if his family was okay with it, at least. That was if I could figure out what to do about my dad’s unreasonable behavior, though...

It was *really* late to comment on this, but I was the chief instructor at the dojo, so I was supposed to be in charge. I still had to respect my parents, of course, but my dad was retired. I’d been so busy ever since coming to Baltrain that I hadn’t really paid it any attention, but thinking back on it now, I’d had no reason to listen to his ridiculous order.

Yeah. That’s right. Let’s go complain to the old man when I bring Mewi back to Beaden with me.

I knew he was worried about me. The dojo did need an heir, and I understood how anxious he was as a father—after all, my life had been utterly devoid of romance. I couldn’t argue if he said it was my duty as the current head of the family to prepare the next generation. Still, kicking me out of my home didn’t sit right, even with Allucia’s visit and the offer of becoming a special instructor.

“Master?”

“Hm? Aah, sorry. I was just thinking.”

Allucia’s voice had called me back from my wandering thoughts. *Oops, now’s not the time to be pondering all this.* It really was too late to complain. Ruminations on whether I would or wouldn’t return to the dojo full-time could wait until after I got back. Also, just as I mentioned before, I wasn’t particularly dissatisfied with my current lifestyle, though it was still pretty hectic. There was a lot of pressure on me, and I had plenty of responsibilities. Being a dojo instructor in the sticks had been nothing like this. Nonetheless, my sense of

fulfillment and my need to complain to my old man were separate matters.

“Well, that’s the gist of it,” I said. “I’ll be going back to Beaden for a bit. I want to introduce Mewi to them too.”

Just as I’d told Allucia, I still had to figure out when exactly to leave Baltrain. At the earliest, I would finish today’s training, talk it over with Mewi, prepare, and then leave in two or three days. It also depended on how fast things could be processed at the order.

“I would love to come along, but...” Allucia muttered.

“No, no, there’s no need for that,” I said.

That would definitely be excessive. Also, we couldn’t keep the Liberion Order’s commander in a remote village. There was a mountain of work that only *she* could do. Having the knights dispatched would be welcome, but the matter didn’t seem serious enough to ask for that.

“Is that so...?” Allucia sounded somewhat disappointed.

“It’s not like you came to Beaden for previous hunts,” I told her. “There’s no need to feel so down about it.”

She *had* actually participated in the saberboar hunts while attending the dojo, but she hadn’t gone out of her way to come help after graduating. I had alluded to the hunts going on while exchanging letters with her, but she’d been far too busy to join in. If anything, ever since finding employment at the order, she’d only gotten busier. The hunts weren’t that serious—we didn’t need someone as powerful as the commander of the Liberion Order to come and take charge.

“Now then, shall we get to training?” I suggested.

Allucia nodded. “Yes... Our time is limited, after all.”

“You’ve got that right.”

It wasn’t like I’d come to the office just to chat. I was here to train with all the knights, and I had to do my job.

I picked up a wooden sword as I continued talking to Allucia. For some reason, Henblitz’s silent expression left a lasting impression on me.



“Okay. Shall we call it a day?”

“Yes. Thank you for your hard work.”

A few hours into the morning, with the sun high in the sky, a wave of heat washed mercilessly over the area. We had decided to wrap things up today just before noon. We’d made sure to allow for frequent breaks and hydration during training, but the knights were still considerably fatigued. Even the robust members of the Liberion Order couldn’t withstand this high temperature for very long. Allucia and Henblitz were drenched in sweat too.

Above all else, things were getting pretty bad for me. My position involved guiding others, so I wasn’t moving around as much as the knights. Still, I could feel my fatigue and discomfort escalating with every passing minute. I could’ve kept going if I’d had to, of course—the same surely went for the others. But there was no need to push ourselves to our limits. Leaping over an unreasonable chasm at the eleventh hour was an act reserved for the rare occasions in actual combat that necessitated it.

Also, if you constantly drove yourself to the very limit, you’d no longer have the energy to handle the unexpected. Training was important, but it was meant to prepare you for the real thing. It would be ridiculous to be unable to move at a critical moment because of habitual fatigue. Well, the best situation was to never *have* to experience the real thing, but still...

“I’ll be off, then,” I said. “See that everyone stays hydrated and gets some rest.”

“I’ll make sure they do,” Allucia replied.

No one had collapsed during training, but that didn’t mean we could relax just yet. It was entirely possible for people to fall to the ground after training was over. So, even if we sounded a little pushy, we had to give strict orders for them to drink water and rest. It would be too late to warn them after they collapsed, so it was best to pester them about it while they still had energy to spare.

“Commander, may I have a moment?”

“Yes, what is it?”

As I left the training hall, I heard Henblitz addressing Allucia. It probably had something to do with the order's management, which had nothing to do with me, so I ignored it and went on my way. If I needed to be involved, they would call out to me.

"Phew... That feels nice. It's still hot, though..."

I took one step out of the training hall, and a pleasant wind brushed against my flushed skin. *If only the sun weren't so scorching hot.* Sweating was necessary to maintain a healthy body, but there were still limits, and I was dripping quite profusely. *Makes me want to down a good mug of ale.*

Why was it that alcohol tasted so good after intense physical exertion? It was quite a mystery. If I'd been living on my own, I would've made my way straight to the nearest tavern. But I had Mewi now. That wasn't to say that I would get dead drunk in the middle of the day, of course. Still, I was planning to invite her on a trip back to my home in Beaden. This was pretty serious for her, so I wanted to do it completely sober.

"What do I do if she refuses...?"

The question naturally came to mind as I made my way back home. I didn't want to *force* Mewi to come along—after all, she had no reason to go to Beaden to meet my parents. I wanted to get her sincere consent and depart without any misgivings.

Mewi had mellowed out significantly since we'd first met, but she still had a rougher temperament than the typical child. I doubted she would throw a tantrum, but she had every right to balk at going to a remote village for an extended period. If anything, her refusal was highly likely.

Unlike during her days spent alone as a pickpocket, she now had a place where she belonged—the magic institute. Even if I went back to Beaden on my own, she would manage as long as I left her enough money. And if she insisted on playing with her friends during her precious summer vacation, I couldn't deny her that. If she didn't want to be alone, I knew I could entrust her to Lucy again while I was away. Lucy was sure to accept, and Mewi wouldn't be completely against it either. Interacting with Lucy as a student of the magic institute might also lead to Mewi's growth.

“Crap, now I really feel like she’s gonna refuse...”

The more I thought about it, the fewer reasons I saw for Mewi to come along with me to Beaden. Also, my objective was to eradicate the beasts that were popping up around the village. To put it bluntly, this had nothing to do with her. I could clearly picture a future where she told me to go enjoy myself while she stayed here.

“But I have to tell her...”

If I was only going to be gone for one or two days, then we could pretty much wrap up the discussion with a brief “I’ll be going out for a bit.” But that wasn’t the case. It would be absurd to leave the house for a few weeks without telling her where I was going or why. Dragging her along against her will was out of the question, as was leaving without saying anything. So, the only choice was to explain the situation and yield the decision to her.

“Hmmm.”

Ultimately, it was up to Mewi. No matter how much I worried myself over it, the outcome wasn’t going to change. Nonetheless, once I’d started thinking about it, I couldn’t stop. Did all the parents of the world worry like this?

“Oh...”

And with such thoughts in mind, I found myself in front of my house without realizing it. Baltrain must’ve looked lively to match the summer season, but I didn’t recall any of the scenery. I hadn’t dropped by a tavern on my way back, and the idea of buying a drink to have while I walked had flown out the window.

Still feeling like Mewi was going to refuse, I called out timidly as I opened the door, “I’m back...”

“Welcome...” said Mewi. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, uh... Nothing?”

Peeking out from within, Mewi easily picked up on my nervousness. *Dammit. Now that I think of it, she’s pretty good at reading emotions.* I doubted this was an inherent skill—it was something she’d learned during her time as a

pickpocket.

“Hmmm.” Mewi’s eyes pierced me with a somewhat sharper gaze than usual.

There wasn’t really anything wrong with me, but it was difficult to explain my current mental state. So I entered the house while ignoring her suspicious stare. It was a little awkward.

“Want lunch...?” Mewi asked, perhaps unable to take the atmosphere.

“Hm? Oh, yeah.”

Reading emotions and acting considerately were not the same thing. Mewi was adept at the former, but she’d been completely incapable of the latter. She’d never even *tried* to be considerate. But now, she was trying to console me in her own awkward way. How could I not be happy about it? It blew my melancholy away. Also, I was actually hungry—famished, even. That was what training first thing in the morning did to a man.

“It came out pretty good this time...I think,” Mewi said.

“Hmm. I’m looking forward to it.”

Ever since the magic institute’s summer vacation had started, Mewi had taken over a lot of the cooking. I hadn’t asked her to—she was just at home more often than I was. Thanks to this, it seemed her cooking was steadily improving, and she was more confident in her work. It made my expectations soar.

“Let’s dig in,” I said.

“Mm.”

Today’s lunch was bread and pot-au-feu. Her cooking repertoire hadn’t exactly expanded, but the soup was clearer, showing she’d definitely improved.

“Ooh, nice. It smells great—there’s no odor of scum,” I remarked.

“Mm...”

When I took a sip of the soup, umami oozed out of the sausage and vegetables and rushed through my mouth. It was delicious—definitely a success, just as she’d claimed. The clean umami flavor was proof that she’d continuously removed the scum during the boiling process. *Of course she did—*

this is Mewi I'm talking about. She definitely waited patiently in front of the pot the whole time. This glimpse of her touching effort made it all the more delicious.

“Yup. Tastes great. You’ve gotten better.”

“Thanks,” Mewi mumbled, awkwardly staring at the table.

She was being shy. I knew her well.

“So?” she asked, shaking off her embarrassment.

“Hm?”

“You have something to tell me, right?”

“I’m surprised you can tell...”

“It’s written all over your face.”

I didn’t think it was *that* obvious. My entrance had been a little pathetic, but that was about it. Her keen eye was praiseworthy. It was true that I had something to tell her, but I’d failed to communicate, and now she was worrying about it.

“Yeah... To tell you the truth, a letter addressed to me from back home was delivered to the order,” I explained.

I couldn’t just pretend like nothing had happened, so I prepared myself for the worst and began telling her about my day. That said, the majority of the letter didn’t really concern Mewi, so I chose to omit those parts. She wasn’t the type to prod too deeply about it either.

“My village wants some help, so they’re asking if I can come back for a bit. I’ve told them about you too. My parents probably want to meet you. I was wondering... Would you like to come to Beaden with me?”

“Mm. Sure.”

“You don’t have to go to the institute right now, and you have your friends to consider, so I won’t force you. If anything, you can stay with Lucy while I’m—” My eyes widened. “Huh? What did you say?”

“I said sure. I’ll go.”

I'd been trying to explain things so that she wouldn't feel guilty about refusing, but I was thrown off by her response.

Did she just say "sure"? She did, right? And almost immediately...

"What? You got a problem with that?" Mewi pouted.

"Ah, no! Not at all! Uhhh...thanks."

"Hmph."

She was back to hiding her embarrassment. I hadn't expected her to agree so readily, so her answer had come as quite a shock. She wasn't the type to grumble about things, but I'd still been under the impression that she'd refuse.

"When are we going?" Mewi asked.

"Earlier is better, but there's the order to consider too. I'm guessing it'll be at the beginning of next week."

"Okay."

Even though I'd gotten Mewi's consent, we weren't going to be leaving right away. That was simply how society worked. Allucia had mentioned a document I needed to sign, so it would probably take a few days to get everything settled. In the meantime, I had to get ready to leave—not that Mewi and I had much luggage. I'd had almost nothing on me when my dad had kicked me out. *That damn geezer.*

"Thanks, Mewi."

"Whatever..."

I showed Mewi my gratitude once more, and she gave her usual curt reply. Still, I sensed a slight but certain growth behind her voice.



"Morning, everyone."

"Good morning!"

It was the day after I'd talked to Mewi and gotten her consent, and my schedule remained the same as ever. As always, I went straight to the order's training hall. It was dawn—the sun had just peeked up over the horizon. No

matter what time I showed up here, it was never empty. That was simply how much the knights devoted themselves to their art.

This was a good thing, but with the ongoing heat, I had to remain focused as their instructor and make sure they finished up at the right time. However, I wasn't here around the clock to stop them from overworking, and the training hall was open during my absence. If anything, it was far more common for people to be here when I wasn't. Nevertheless, I was an obstinate instructor who refused to let anyone overdo it while I was watching. Everyone in the order was an excellent knight in both mind and body, so they weren't really the type to make mistakes like that.

"Mr. Beryl! May I have a match?"

"All right—let's do it."

Those who intentionally chose to come this early in the morning were knights with a great dedication to self-improvement. If anything, their drive could be called hunger. The young knight addressing me—Evans—was one such person. He was about the same age as Curuni, had a good heart, and was full of energy. That was just my opinion of him, though—I had no idea how he held up in his professional duties.

"Here I go!"

We backed away from each other, bowed, and in a flash, Evans charged.

Mm-hmm, he's pretty fast.

There was no comparing him to Allucia or Surena of course, but as far as I knew, he was still fast relative to the average knight.

"Hup."

"Hngh!"

He thrust his wooden sword, and I used the tip of mine to entangle his blade. My eyes were the one thing I had absolute confidence in. I was sure I could handle attacks that came at me at an average speed. Evans looked like he was about to lose his balance, but somehow, he managed to steady himself using only his muscles.

In terms of pure physical strength, Henblitz was far beyond him, but Evans was still impressive enough to live up to the Liberion Order's reputation. His body was splendidly flexible. Every knight possessed different levels of various skills, but all of them had at least one outstanding quality. Curuni's power was one such example. Allucia had two, three, or four outstanding qualities, though.

"Hyah!"

"Oop."

Evans twisted his body to right himself and simultaneously unleashed an attack. However, such reckless motions were easy to read. These types of attacks could technically catch someone off guard. However, even if this was just training, it was a proper match. No matter the opponent, I wasn't conceited enough to let my guard down.

"Hmph!"

"Whoa! Oh! Ugh! Gah!"

I parried Evans's hearty attack and went on the offense. This was practice—my goal wasn't to give everything I had to cut down my opponent. I put a fair amount of strength behind my strikes and focused instead on delivering multiple blows.

Surprisingly, Evans withstood the barrage on pure reflex. His eyes and instincts were pretty good. He also had plenty of muscle. *If he continues training like this, he's sure to become an impressive knight.* I could see a clear image of it in my mind.

Since his eyes were good, I had to attack from a place he couldn't see. It was easy to put into words, but I'd trained for years to acquire this technique. I wasn't going to lose.

I chose the moment his right arm was raised—he'd drawn it back—and struck at his blind spot from the left. My sword hit his body. A finishing blow.

"There, that's one," I said.

"Gaaah! You got me!"

"Evans, your eyes and reflexes are pretty good," I told him.

“Thank you very much! I’m still lagging so far behind both you and Commander Allucia, though...”

“Don’t worry about me, and Allucia is...well, you know. Let’s just try our best.”

“Yes, sir!”

Evans had an excellent foundation. I considered my own eyes to be better than average, but that was less of a learned technique and more something I’d been born with. You could say it was an innate talent of mine. *Actually, it’s rather hard to train your eyesight—I have no idea how to do it.*

I’d noticed my good eyesight and kinetic visual acuity around the time I’d started learning swordsmanship. Still, the world wasn’t soft enough that eyesight alone could bring you victory. I’d had a nonstop series of losses against my old man, and he was supposed to have worse eyes than me.

“However, you rely on your eyes a little too much,” I added. “You’ll have an easier time if you can predict your opponent’s movements based on their sword and center of gravity. Let’s steadily brush up on that.”

“Understood!”

No matter how excellent your inborn talents were, they were meaningless unless you fostered techniques that made full use of them. In that sense, Evans was still developing. He was a shiny raw gem in need of polishing.

Back in the dojo, on very rare occasions, we had pupils who learned extraordinarily quickly. To put it simply, they were geniuses, or very close to it. Ficelle and Allucia were good examples of this; Surena was probably one too, but she’d left Beaden before I could genuinely start teaching her swordsmanship. She’d either been self-taught since then or had grown under a different teacher. That was amazing in its own way.

The Liberion Order was, in essence, a gathering of geniuses (and those who were *almost* geniuses). Maybe it was absurd to compare a dojo in the sticks to the country’s greatest order of knights. Still, I definitely had a lot to learn out here.

As a special instructor, I couldn’t overlook someone’s talent—I wanted to foster their growth. Honestly, I felt a lot of pressure, but that just made it all the

more worthwhile. Each and every knight possessed a talent that would shine after some polish, and it was a joy to teach them.

However, unlike the knights, I wasn't young anymore. At some point, I would no longer be able to swing my sword at full strength, and that deadline was steadily closing in. Even my dad had been unable to win against the sands of time, and he'd set aside his sword. For how much longer would I be able to cross blades with these young, sturdy knights? A part of me wanted to keep going, at least into my sixties, but there was no telling whether things would shake out like that.

"Mr. Beryl?"

"Aah, sorry. I was just lost in thought."

Evans's voice brought me back to the present. Now wasn't the time to be thinking of such things. *In the end, whatever happens, happens.* I would do everything I could to greet that distant future, and I had to pay attention to my health and avoid any serious injuries or illnesses. In other words, it was the same as usual.

"Looks like you've been training your core," I said. "That's a good thing."

"Yes. I tried focusing on it, just as you told me to. At first, my whole body ached..."

"Ha ha ha."

I hadn't wanted to linger on my idle musings, so I'd forcefully changed the topic. Core strength was important not only for swordsmanship, but for any art that required the body to move. However, unless you consciously focused on it daily, the core was unexpectedly hard to train.

"I didn't lose right away when you did that thing where you twirled the tip of my sword, so it looks like my training was worth it," said Evans.

"Aah, branch breaker..." I mused. "With your good eyes, I think you'll be able to learn that technique too."

"Really?!"

"It's tough to master, though."

“Figures...”

Branch breaker was one of the techniques taught at our dojo. It involved entangling the tip of your opponent’s sword to throw them off-balance. I favored it quite a bit, it was an extremely effective way to take the upper hand without having to completely knock down your opponent.

Though it sounded simple on paper, that was actually pretty hard to pull off. The technique worked on the premise that you were able to completely read your opponent’s sword strokes. It also necessitated a perfect understanding of their posture, center of gravity, and movements. Though the degree of perfection differed from practitioner to practitioner, all those who’d graduated from our dojo—like Allucia and Ficelle—were capable of doing it.

Conversely, that meant Surena and Curuni hadn’t learned it. Maybe Surena could pull it off if she put her mind to it, but it didn’t really suit her fighting style. A part of me was glad that she hadn’t really been influenced by my style—Surena’s technique was unique. No matter how much you trained at my dojo, you would never end up with her skills. Allucia and Surena both stood at the pinnacle of swordsmanship, but their styles were completely different.

“At any rate, your eyes and reflexes are splendid weapons,” I continued. “Keep training your core and do more freestyle sparring. Don’t move only by reflex—get some predictions in there too. Over time, your precision will improve.”

“I see... Understood!”

He wouldn’t be able to learn branch breaker for now, but Evans had good enough technique to have joined the Liberion Order. Each knight was an accumulation of their own guidance, style, and habits—it made their swordsmanship very personal, and they had very little uniformity. I did my best to guide them without ruining that individuality, but it was hard to completely ignore my own preferences. *Is bringing over all the techniques from my dojo the right choice?*

They worked fine back home. All those who came to our doors did so with the intention of learning our style. But things were different here. The knights all had their own techniques and training methods. I felt like it wasn’t quite right to

simply push my style onto them.

I'd consulted Allucia about it before, but she'd told me to just do as I liked. She was one of our dojo's graduates, so she simply assumed that the techniques I taught were correct. I'd given it quite a lot of thought already, but this was a difficult problem to solve. After all, there were definitely those who weren't suited to my style and techniques.

Shortly after my match with Evans, as more and more knights shuffled into the training hall, Henblitz and Curuni arrived together.

"Good morning."

"Top of the morning!"

I nodded at them both. "Hey. Morning, you two."

They were as passionate about their art as ever, but I felt it was still unusual for them to show up together. They'd probably just happened to bump into each other at the gate or something.

"Curuni, let's spar!" Evans said—he was fired up after our match. "First to three!"

"Ooh, sure thing! I'm not gonna lose!"

He was about the same age as Curuni, and they'd apparently joined the order at a similar time. Because of this, the two got along pretty well. As for their sparring record, Curuni had gotten a string of early victories, but Evans had made a comeback. However, after Curuni had switched to using a zweihander, she'd once more overtaken him. The two spurred each other's growth. Having someone around your level to constantly spar with definitely made a big difference.

"Mr. Beryl, may I have a moment?" Henblitz asked.

"Hm? Sure. Something happen?"

I wondered what it could be. Anything to do with the order's management wouldn't involve me. Was he going to request some private instruction?

"Let's talk outside," he said.

“Got it.”

It seemed this wasn’t something he wanted to discuss in front of everyone. The two of us stepped out of the training hall. I really had no idea what this could be about.

It was still morning, so it wasn’t very humid outside. A refreshing wind befitting the fine summer morning brushed against my cheek.

Now then, what could Henblitz want? He was likely coming to me for advice, but would I be able to meet his expectations?

“Allow me to get straight to the point,” he started. “It’s about your return to Beaden. Please allow me to accompany you.”

“Huh?”

Why? And why are you bowing so low?

“Th-This is pretty abrupt,” I said, completely bewildered. “What brought this up?”

I somehow managed to ask him for his reasons. *Seriously, why would he want to come along? Let’s make the wild assumption that the order has deemed a pack of saberboars a significant threat. In that case, he’s acting as a knight and offering to go with me. That almost makes sense. The pack shows up pretty much every year, and we’re used to it, but we still can’t be careless.*

However, even taking that reasoning into consideration, this wasn’t something that the lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order should personally get involved with. In my opinion, someone of such high standing shouldn’t vacate his post at the order for an extended period.

“I discussed it with the commander yesterday,” Henblitz said, straightening his posture and meeting my eyes.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Facing an individual saberboar would be one thing, but I questioned whether a backwater...sorry, a *remote* village truly possessed the strength to repel a pack.”

“Uh-huh.”

Henblitz was under the impression that Beaden was a backwater village. He wasn't wrong—it really was in the middle of nowhere. It made sense for him to question our defenses, but we'd managed fine so far. I'd even taken part in the hunts in my late teens, back when I'd only just started learning swordsmanship.

"She told me that if I still had doubts, I should go see it for myself. This is only if you consent, of course."

"Hm?"

Ah, so this request was Allucia's idea. But did that logic hold up? "If you don't believe it, go see for yourself." This was correct, in a sense—a picture was worth a thousand words, after all. But even so, that didn't seem like a good enough reason to thoughtlessly mobilize the lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order. By my estimates, the hunt would take at least two weeks. At worst, it could take three weeks to a month. What were they going to do about the order's leadership in the meantime?

"Is that really okay from the order's perspective?" I asked.

"The commander said to go if it'll expand my horizons."

"I see..."

If he had Allucia's permission, it meant she'd decided that there wouldn't be a problem in his absence. Still, though she was extremely talented—and a genius—she was *human*. It was impossible for anyone, including her, to instantly finish a mountain of paperwork. She wasn't one to misjudge that.

Going by that logic, it wouldn't be a problem for Henblitz to come along. If Allucia was putting up a stoic front, or was recklessly cramming in her office work, then it would be best to refuse him. However, Henblitz was very familiar with her pace of work, and he didn't believe her judgment was wrong.

"Well...if Allucia has given permission," I said, "then I guess I have no reason to refuse."

"Thank you very much! I'll strive not to be a hindrance."

"Oh, there's no need to worry about that."

Honestly, this was an extremely welcome development for Beaden. We would

be getting help from the Liberion Order's *lieutenant commander*. It was like adding a hundred men to our ranks. In fact, Henblitz was undoubtedly far stronger than a hundred normal men.

But how will I explain his presence? I could think of a few excuses. Perhaps, as his instructor, I wanted to observe him in the field. Or, to inflate my ego, maybe I should say that he was here to see my hometown after receiving my guidance. Henblitz would surely play along either way.

"Mewi will be coming along too, so hopefully we'll have a safe journey," I added.

"Aah, that girl from before—the one with the magic accessory, right?"

"That's right."

Mewi wasn't personally acquainted with Henblitz. I'd told him the bare minimum—like how I'd gotten a house from Lucy, become Mewi's guardian, and that I was living with her now. However, Mewi had only come to the order's office that one time, and the only knight she knew was Allucia. It seemed Allucia still didn't have a great impression of Mewi for some reason.

Not too long ago, I would've refused Henblitz's request out of consideration for Mewi's mental state. But her emotions had stabilized a fair bit since then, and she was far less thorny. If anything, it would be a good thing for her to get involved with someone of Henblitz's status and good nature.

"By the way, I know it's not really my place to ask," I said, "but will your work be all right?"

"Not a problem. The commander and I have already finished making adjustments."

"Good."

As to be expected, they'd worked things out—I now had one fewer thing to worry about. Though I doubted Allucia would've given him permission if that had been a problem.

"When do you plan on departing?" Henblitz asked.

"Hmmm, I'd like to leave next week. I don't really have that much to prepare,

so the trip is just pending Allucia's paperwork."

If it were up to me, I would've left the next day. The only issue would be whether I could get a carriage to travel all the way to Beaden, but if I didn't need one on the spot, it wasn't much of a problem. Allucia had gotten a carriage when she'd taken me to the capital and back, so I doubted it was that hard to arrange.

"Knights need to leave their posts every now and then too for personal reasons," Henblitz explained. "The documents don't take that much time."

"I see."

According to Henblitz, the majority of these cases were for family events such as funerals or weddings. But my situation didn't really fit that mold. Maybe it would take a little extra time to get my paperwork processed because of that.

I'd technically been hired by the nation, so I wasn't really allowed to do whatever I wanted without any documentation. I couldn't just leave without finishing the paperwork, so my only choice was to sit back and wait. I wanted to believe that Henblitz was right and it wouldn't take all that much time.

"Well then, I must be off," said Henblitz. "I need to apply for my own leave and do my paperwork."

"Oh, right. Makes sense."

If I needed paperwork to take leave, then he would obviously need it too. He was the lieutenant commander, so he even had to work on it himself. He probably didn't want to be the cause of any delays, so I prayed he could get it done quickly.

"Okay, back to training."

After getting a quick bow from Henblitz, I made my way back to the training hall. He probably didn't really want the other knights to hear about this. The lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order was a big shot among big shots, and there was no telling how others would react to him going out to the countryside just to satiate his personal curiosity, even if he did have permission. The knights had to be informed of their lieutenant commander's absence but not necessarily the details. However, it would be far too much of a social faux

pas to tag along without telling *me* about it. That was why he'd pulled me aside to chat.

"Ah, Master! Welcome back!"

"Hey, sorry for stepping out."

Once I was back in the training hall, Curuni greeted me energetically. Her expression was cheerful, but she was already sweating profusely.

"Did you spar with Evans?" I asked.

"Yuppers! Three to one! I won again!" Curuni smiled like a blooming flower.

She'd shown remarkable growth lately. Before that, she'd possessed raw strength and good fundamentals, but ever since switching from a shortsword to a zweihander, perhaps due to greater compatibility, she'd sketched a frighteningly steep growth curve.

This was definitely an important period for her development, and failing to grasp it now could affect her greatly. As an instructor, I couldn't let this time pass me by.

"Huh? Where'd the lieutenant go?" Curuni asked.

"He had something to take care of," I said vaguely.

If I'd answered her honestly, it would've ruined Henblitz's efforts to speak in private. I'd just brushed off the question. I wasn't really lying, so it was okay.

Oh, right—Allucia and Henblitz know I'll be absent for a while, but the other knights haven't been informed yet. I wondered if it was best for me to tell as many of them as I could myself. I was a special instructor, so I wasn't obligated to show up every day. Still, I had nothing else to do, so I usually came by daily. If I vanished without saying anything, it would just make them unnecessarily anxious.

"Something on your mind?" Curuni asked.

"Hmm... No, it's nothing."

After pondering over it a little, I settled on just letting it be. Allucia and Henblitz were sure to realize the same thing—it was best to leave it to their

leadership. I didn't need to do anything unnecessary.

"Okay, let's give it our all for another day, shall we?"

"Yessir!"

I decided to focus on today's training. Including Curuni, there were plenty of promising knights with the makings of great swordsmen, and it was an instructor's duty to face them with all sincerity. If anything, letting talent stagnate in such a wonderful environment would be an instructor's greatest shame.

I did have Beaden on my mind, but nothing would change by worrying about it now. Besides, my dad was there, so nothing serious was going to happen.

For yet another day, I devoted myself to my duty.



"All right, that should about do it."

"Mm, this is fine...I think."

A few days after my conversation with Henblitz, Mewi and I did our final luggage check for the trip to Beaden. If I had been on my own, I would've been rather carefree about it, but things were different with Mewi around.

I was fine as long as I had my sword and traveling expenses, but she needed stuff like a change of clothes for each day and textbooks from the magic institute so that she could study. This made for a lot more luggage. I wasn't against it or anything—it was simply a refreshing experience for a lifelong bachelor.

Frankly, it was somewhat moving. I felt like all men with a wife and child went through such hardships when they had to plan a trip. Fortunately, Ibroy's box—the one he'd gifted to Mewi—had contained plenty of clothing, and Mewi wasn't the type to dress up that much to begin with.

Personally, I wouldn't have minded buying her one or two nice sets of clothes, but she remained uninterested in getting anything new. She gave me a pretty sour look when her clothes were too flashy or cute, but that didn't stop her from putting them on. The nicest outfit we had for her now was her uniform for

the magic institute, which really showed how amazing the institute's budget was.

"Forget anything?" I asked.

"Nope."

The morning sun was as scorching hot as ever as we did our final, *final* check and left the house. This would likely be Mewi's first experience riding in a carriage over a long distance. I had to be careful of her condition along the way, and if necessary, we would take more frequent breaks. Naturally, I was carrying most of the luggage—I couldn't make Mewi carry anything heavy for our journey.

I'd consulted Henblitz about arranging the carriage. He'd ended up offering to get one for us, so I'd gratefully accepted. Since we weren't traveling on an invitation from the order like when I'd first come to Baltrain, I was paying for it myself.

This was also when I learned how expensive getting a carriage to Beaden was.

Carriages within Baltrain or the regular commuting carriages to other cities were pretty cheap. They were priced so that almost anyone could ride in one without concern for their finances. They emphasized convenience for their customer base, so making them cheap would get as many people on board as possible, which was a sound business choice.

However, things were different when getting a carriage to a remote backwater village at a specific time. I could technically hitch a ride with a merchant or something who happened to be going our way, but our schedule was somewhat fixed. If we had to wait for a merchant, there would be no telling when we could leave. There was also no guarantee we would be able to get a ride with them at all.

I had Mewi this time around, so a private carriage was the better idea, even with all that money flying out the window. I had no problem paying such a sum on a few occasions, but I would be hesitant to spend that much on a daily basis.

On that point, I was grateful for my current income. Lucy had mentioned that it was best for me to have money, and it turned out that she was exactly right. I

didn't believe everything in the world was about money, but having an abundance had expanded the choices available to me. Though I hadn't been conscious of that until recently, I was now learning how important it was to have enough money—it helped me avoid being inconvenienced.

"Oh, right," I said as we walked the streets. "I mentioned this already, but Henblitz will be at the meeting point."

"A knight, right?"

"Yup, the lieutenant commander."

I trusted him quite a bit. Mewi was young and had somewhat complex circumstances, but he was sure to get along with her. At the very least, he wouldn't treat her harshly. I wasn't going to tell them to be friends, but he was never going to do anything to make her hate him.

"What kinda guy is he?" Mewi asked.

"Hmmm... He's honest and good-natured. I trust him."

"Got it..."

I'm glad she's been showing interest in others lately. Up until now, she truly hadn't cared about anyone but her sister. The world she'd lived in had been so narrow, but it'd been enough to provide her with the emotional support she'd needed.

However, now that she was living with me and attending the magic institute, her world was expanding—whether she liked it or not. I was glad to see that this change in environment was having a positive effect on her.

Noticing my gaze as I rejoiced over her growth, Mewi curtly turned to me. "What?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Hmph."

She was a lot less thorny now, but her tongue was still sharp when it came to such frank exchanges. Would she change as she grew into adulthood? Such growth was worth celebrating, but the idea also made me feel somewhat lonely.

"Are we there yet?" Mewi asked.

"Just a little farther. It's on the main street in the central district."

We were meeting up at a carriage stop in the central district. Our house was located at the edge of the district, so it was a bit of a walk to the main street where our destination was. It wasn't particularly close but not too far either. This distance was perfect for getting in some good exercise with a nice walk.

We were leaving Baltrain early in the morning, so accounting for breaks along the way, we were scheduled to reach Beaden around sunset. As long as no major issues arose, we would definitely get there within the day.

It was a little worrying that we didn't have guards to accompany us, but with me and Henblitz around, we shouldn't have problems unless something drastic happened. If anything, I was more concerned about how to evade my parents' criticisms once I got back home.

The first day will be fine because Mewi'll distract them. However, we couldn't talk about only Mewi for the entire visit. My folks were guaranteed to steer the conversation toward the reason I'd gotten kicked out of Beaden to begin with—my search for a wife.

They had called me back because of the saberboar hunt and so they could meet Mewi. However, a part of me wondered whether their true motive was to probe into my progress in finding a wife. There was no way I would ever write to them about that. My parents—especially my dad—knew that well.

It would definitely be hard for them to ask me to come back and report on my progress, especially after kicking me out and telling me not to return. So, the saberboars' breeding season and the events surrounding Mewi had conveniently lined up—they'd provided my dad with the excuse he needed to ask for a check-in. *That is absolutely something he would do...*

Still, this was nothing more than my own conjecture. It was entirely possible that they didn't have ulterior motives. Ever since moving in with Mewi, I'd come to better understand how guardians felt, and I could understand how my dad and mom were worried about me.

However, unlike Mewi, I was an old man, so was it appropriate for my parents

to worry *that* much?

“Ah, I can see it. Over there.”

“Mm.”

Our destination was now in sight. It was early in the morning, and the commuter carriages that traversed the interior of Baltrain didn’t stop here, so there weren’t many people around. The vast majority of Baltrain’s citizens spent their whole lives within the city itself. There were plenty of jobs to go around, so very few people chose to live in the city and work in the country—even fewer chose to commute to some remote village every day. I questioned why people like that had chosen to live in the city to begin with. In general, people lived where they worked. I would find living in Beaden while working in Baltrain, or the opposite, rather unreasonable.

“Oh, there he is.”

As we walked closer to the meeting point, I was able to identify the few people present. I simply had to look for a relatively tall, handsome, blond man. It was easy to spot him.

He also saw me around the same time.

“Mr. Beryl! Good morning!” Henblitz called out loudly.

“Morning.”

“Good morning, Master!”

“Hm...?”

There was another person with him—a cheerful woman with light brown hair, carrying enough luggage to go on a trip.

“Why...? Ummm...Curuni?”

“Yppers!”

Don’t “Yppers!” me...



I was utterly stumped by the sight of her carrying her favored zweihander and her luggage. I'd only told Henblitz and Allucia about my return to Beaden, and one of them must've informed the other knights at some point. It was a little weird for someone to just suddenly tag along. *Why is Curuni here?*

"Henblitz?" I inquired.

"Sorry... I lost to her enthusiasm."

"Whaaa...?"

What does that even mean? At the very least, judging by his apologetic expression, he hadn't asked Curuni to come. My absence had probably become public knowledge at some inopportune time, and he hadn't been able to tell her no. If I'd been on my own, having another person tag along would've been perfectly fine, but I had Mewi with me, so the situation was a little different.

Curuni wasn't a bad person or anything, but her personality was pretty much the exact opposite of Mewi's. I glanced reflexively to the side, and just as expected, Mewi was looking at Curuni like she was asking what was wrong with her. I honestly sympathized. *Mewi, I have no idea either.*

"Oh, I guess I should introduce you," I said. "This is Mewi. On paper, I'm her guardian."

"Hello..." Mewi murmured.

It was fine to question Curuni's presence, but I couldn't ignore Mewi, so I started by introducing everyone. As expected, Mewi seemed a little nervous around strangers, and she stopped conversing after the briefest of greetings.

"I've heard about you. I'm the Liberion Order's lieutenant commander, Henblitz Drout."

"Knight of the Liberion Order, Curuni Cruciel! Nice to meet'cha!"

The two of them greeted her courteously without treating her like a child. Mewi's expression was a little mixed. She hadn't come to hate them right away, but she didn't see them favorably yet.

And dammit, Curuni, you're totally planning on coming along, aren't you?

Now that introductions were over, I cut to the chase. “So? Why are you here?” I asked Curuni.

She was my former pupil, but she’d only spent two short years at the dojo. She’d left to take the order’s enlistment test and had managed to pass. I was glad to have a connection to her again due to my role as special instructor, but we didn’t really need to revisit our past together. Curuni’s lifelong desire had been to join the order, and now that it’d been granted, she had no reason to join me on my return to Beaden.

“Erk... I know I’m being a bother...” Curuni said, her expression even more apologetic than Henblitz’s. However, her eyes remained clear. “But I’m curious to see how much I’ve grown. Back when I attended the dojo...I didn’t get to fight any saberboars.”

“Hmm...”

Her answer was very knightly. We had never brought Curuni along on the annual saberboar hunts. She’d had good foundations, but she’d still been in development. At the time, it’d been too risky to expose her to such danger just for the sake of experience.

Before she could join us on the hunts, she’d passed the Liberion Order’s enlistment test and had left the village. And now, she wanted to know how strong she was as a knight and as a swordswoman. How much had she grown? I could understand her desire to find out.

To add to that, Curuni had shown significant progress since switching to a zweihander. She rarely lost her matches against Evans now, so her technique had definitely improved. It did make sense to use a saberboar pack as a test of her training. Still, agreeing to her inclusion on our trip at the last minute was a bit much to ask.

“I understand your reasoning,” I said. “But I can’t say I approve of forcing your way in without consulting me beforehand. I’m not a knight, so maybe it’s not my place to say this, but I don’t believe your behavior lives up to that of a model knight.”

“Erk... I know...”

I started by reprimanding her. It was possible the knights had simply learned too late, and there hadn't been any time to consult me, but just showing up out of nowhere and assuming she could come along was going a bit too far.

"Henblitz, losing to her enthusiasm is a pretty weak excuse too," I continued. "You're her boss. You should've taken a firm stance, or at worst, reported it to me."

"You're right... I have nothing to say in my defense."

What was more, Henblitz's actions here weren't laudable either. A subordinate's failure was their boss's responsibility. Even if this wasn't necessarily a failure on Curuni's part, the lieutenant commander had some responsibility for not remonstrating her over her selfish behavior.

"To be blunt, I'm a little angry about this," I said.

"Sorry..."

They both lowered their heads despondently. I had no intention of scolding them harshly or yelling out in rage. If anything, I was more confused and shocked than angry. It would be petty to raise my voice.

However, I still had to draw a clear line. I'd decided to go back home after getting a letter from Beaden. It'd been out of the blue, so I was indebted to the order for getting the paperwork done and adjusting their schedule. Allucia had said it would be okay, so the order had clearly approved my leave. Henblitz coming along was one thing, since he'd discussed it with her beforehand, but Curuni was another matter. I felt like she should've had to clear it with someone else first.

"From now on, be careful not to act purely on the momentum of your own whims. That's all I have to say."

"Y-Yessir!"

When scolding someone, it was best not to drag it out—you got better results when you concisely told them what they were doing wrong and how they could improve. Being sour might've been okay in a once-in-a-lifetime encounter with a person, but I was planning to maintain a long acquaintanceship with these two. Even if it was just putting on airs, I needed to convey my thoughts on their

behavior. They were knights, so I wanted them to maintain their rules and morals. Still, it was kind of hard to scold the famed knights of the Liberion Order in the middle of a street, even if there weren't that many people around.

"Mewi, what do you think about Curuni coming along?"

"Huh? Me?"

"Mm-hmm."

I threw the decision over to Mewi. She'd probably been under the impression that this had nothing to do with her, and she was now making a face like a pigeon who'd been hit by a peashooter. This trip was my homecoming, but Mewi was also the main focus. If she had an opinion, I couldn't overlook it. I wasn't leaving it completely up to her, of course, but if she was against someone else coming along, I would feel bad if I ignored her and brought them anyway.

Sensing that her next few weeks were entirely in Mewi's hands, Curuni began pleading with her. "Erk... Please, Mew Mew!"

"Don't call me that..."

"Please! Mewi!"

It seemed Mewi didn't like nicknames, so things were off to a bad start.

"Whatever..." Mewi mumbled. "You're not a bad person or anything, right?"

"Nope, I can guarantee she's good," I said for Curuni—the answer would've had less credence coming from her. A bad person wouldn't have been able to join the Liberion Order to begin with.

"Then I don't really mind," Mewi decided.

"Really?! Thank you so much!"

Mewi unexpectedly accepted without spending much time thinking about it. I'd been planning to let Curuni come as long as Mewi didn't throw a tantrum or something. And even if things hadn't really progressed in the right order, I did understand Curuni's desire to test her skills.

Now that we had Princess Mewi's permission, I was fine with our travel party

being me, Mewi, Henblitz, and Curuni. It was double the number I'd originally planned, but things would work out one way or another. There was plenty of space back home—the village was a total backwater, after all—so it would be no problem for them to stay awhile.

"However, I'm gonna have you two help out with cleaning the dojo during your stay," I told them.

"Yessir! Understood!"

"Not a problem," Henblitz said. "Forgive me for being such a bother."

And so, I decided to have Curuni and Henblitz do some work as "punishment"—Curuni for selfishly tagging along, and Henblitz for overlooking his subordinate's behavior. They understood my reasoning for this. It was better to be clear about my expectations so that they weren't left feeling any emotional unease...even if cleaning the dojo wasn't a *real* punishment.

"Oh yeah, that means we have more luggage," I said. "Will the carriage be okay?"

"Not a problem," Henblitz told me. "We've arranged for a reliable coachman."

"That's good."

Henblitz had made a reservation for a carriage for three people. I was wondering what we would do if there wasn't any space for Curuni, but it seemed there was no need for concern.

Hang on, is the carriage relatively expensive because we went through the Liberion Order's purveyor?

And as such thoughts crossed my mind, our carriage arrived.

"Sir Henblitz Drout, thank you for waiting."

"Just in time."

"Oooh..."

It was a splendid four-horse carriage. The outside was gaudily ornamented to fit a noble's tastes, and it was big enough to easily fit four people and their luggage. It was definitely expensive.

“Please board first, Mr. Beryl, Ms. Mewi,” Henblitz said, bringing me out of my bewildered state.

“R-Right. Let’s go.”

I warned Mewi not to trip over the step, and we each boarded. The seats were solid, and the interior wasn’t gaudy, but tasteful. If it’d been too extravagant, Mewi and I would’ve probably felt mentally exhausted by the end of the trip, so this particular carriage was the right choice.

“Then let us depart.”

After checking that we were all aboard, the somewhat elderly driver signaled that we were leaving.

All right, time for my first trip home in a while. I’m probably not gonna get to relax once I get there, so let’s kick back and enjoy the ride.

Chapter 2: An Old Country Bumpkin Has His Fill

“Oh, we can see it now.”

Our carriage had left Baltrain early in the morning, and with several breaks along the way, we’d proceeded without any major problems. As we’d traveled, Curuni had energetically tried to get along with Mewi. We’d taken lunch by the riverside with our horses, and things had been so peaceful—or rather, boring—that Curuni and Mewi had dozed off. I’d casually watched these scenes play out.

Before I knew it, we’d reached Beaden.

I wondered what time it was. The sun hadn’t set, but it felt like our trip had taken most of the day. A four-horse carriage could pull plenty of weight, but filling it with people and luggage still placed a burden on the horses. Add in the current summer heat, and it meant that the horses got exhausted quickly. Ultimately, the carriage hadn’t gone all that fast, and we’d had to take multiple rests for the animals. This had led to our trip taking quite a bit of time.

Still, it was a good thing that no real problems had occurred along the way. Things were safe in Baltrain’s vicinity, but this far out into the country, it was entirely possible to be attacked by bandits or beasts at any hour of the day.

“Ugh... Are we finally there?” Mewi asked with a tired sigh. She was as exhausted as I’d expected after her first long-distance carriage ride.

“Just a little longer,” I said.

Looking over a gently sloping plain, we could see the faint outline of buildings in the distance. The only real human settlement in this area was Beaden, so they couldn’t have been anything else.

“Looks like we’ll manage to get there before dark,” Henblitz remarked.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I’m glad nothing happened on the way.”

Things would’ve been very different if a battle had broken out during the journey. It would’ve taken us even more time, and at worst, we could’ve been

forced to camp outside. The knights of the Liberion Order were probably used to a forced march, but I wanted to avoid such things with Mewi in tow, so our luck had been good.

I listened to the gentle *clip-clop* of the horses' hooves. In Baltrain, there was always the hustle and bustle of people, except in the dead of the night—it'd been a while since I'd found myself in such a tranquil atmosphere.

Unfortunately, the day was practically over, so we couldn't enjoy the scenery to our hearts' content. That could wait for tomorrow. For now, we would arrive safely and get some rest.

"We're here."

Shortly after the village came into sight, the horses pulled up to the defensive perimeter—which looked meager compared to Baltrain's, but we'd actually put some effort into it for a small village—and the driver informed us of our journey's end.

"Thank you," I told him. "It was a pleasant ride."

"Glad you enjoyed it. I look forward to your continued patronage."

I stepped out of the carriage. The ground wasn't paved with stone like in Baltrain but was covered in natural grass. This sensation was more familiar to me than those hard roads. I'd lived my whole life in the countryside, so this really did feel more comfortable to me.

"Mmm! It's been so long!" Curuni said, stretching herself out.

She'd slept for a long while in the carriage, and now she was full of energy. It certainly had been a while since Curuni had visited Beaden. In fact, pretty much none of our pupils went out of their way to visit after graduating. Allucia's visit had been a truly rare occasion. This did make me feel somewhat lonely, but it was a good thing in its own way.

It might sound strange coming from me, but Beaden was a backwater among backwaters. I was glad my pupils had come to learn our swordsmanship, but that didn't mean they had to be forever bound to this village in the middle of nowhere. There were many futures beyond learning the sword, like becoming a knight, adventurer, or wizard. Everyone had their own path to follow, and that

was perfectly fine.

“Let’s go to my house,” I said. “I’ll lead the way.”

Once everyone was out of the carriage with their luggage, I started walking toward the dojo. The coachman turned his horses smoothly in the direction of the relay station—it seemed this wasn’t his first time here, so I didn’t have to worry about him.

Of our group, the only ones who knew the local geography were me and Curuni. She was taking it easy, as this was all familiar to her, but there was an air of tension surrounding Mewi and Henblitz. Mewi in particular was looking around restlessly. She wasn’t a very talkative girl to begin with, but she was even quieter than usual. Henblitz was probably used to going to unfamiliar places for expeditions, but this was genuinely a first for her, so I could understand why she was nervous. And she was sure to be anxious in an entirely different way when we reached my house. My parents were going to latch on to her and refuse to let go.

The sun still hadn’t set, so I doubted they were already asleep. This far into the country, it was pretty common to have nothing to do but sleep once the day was over. In contrast, Baltrain had plenty of taverns and such to go to in the evenings and after dark. Unfortunately, such pleasures weren’t available in such a remote village.

“Here we are. This is my house and dojo.”

“Ooh... It’s huge,” Henblitz observed.

A while after getting off the carriage at the village’s entrance—well, it was a small village, so it wasn’t *that* long a while—we safely arrived at my house. Just as Henblitz had said, it was on the larger side of things. It was nothing compared to the order’s office or the magic institute, but the countryside had plenty of land relative to the number of people who lived there, so it *could* be larger. Safety and land had a tendency to be inversely proportional, though.

“I’m pretty sure my parents should still be awake...”

Standing in front of my familiar home, I felt a little nervous for some reason. It really reinforced the reality that I’d left Beaden to live elsewhere.

With everyone behind me, I placed a hand on the door.

“I’m back.”

I hesitated a little over what to say, but decided to just act the same as usual. This was my home, so saying “excuse me” like a stranger didn’t feel right.

“Ooh, I wondered who it could be. You’re back, Beryl.”

Without showing any hint of sensing my internal turmoil, my old man, Mordea Gardenant, came to the doorway. It hadn’t been that long since we’d last talked, but it still felt like it’d been a while since I’d seen his face.

“It must’ve been a long trip for all of you,” he said to the others. “There’s nothing to do outside, so come on in.”

“Thank you for the consideration,” Henblitz replied. He was the most familiar with meeting strangers. “Pardon the intrusion.”

Now that I thought of it, my dad had only ever taught swordsmanship. I’d rarely ever seen him go outside for other tasks. He’d been a strict instructor and had almost never spoiled me. He’d sent me that letter, so he must’ve considered the possibility that I would come back, but he couldn’t have known that I would bring additional guests. Nonetheless, he wasn’t shaken or reticent in the least.

“Pardon me!” Curuni exclaimed cheerfully. “It might be my first time coming in this way.”

“Hm? You one of ours, little lady?” my dad asked.

Between the two of us, my dad had probably sent more pupils out into the world. I could see myself catching up, though. After all, I’d spent less time as an instructor than him so far, and I was sure to continue training pupils in the future. We hadn’t had an explosive increase in students, so it was simply a matter of how long each of us had been teaching. After he’d handed the dojo over to me, he’d only dropped by occasionally, which was why he didn’t remember many of the pupils I’d taught. Curuni hadn’t spent that long at the dojo, and she’d left for the Liberion Order halfway through her training, so it would be unreasonable to ask him to remember her.

“Yup! I’m Curuni Cruciel! I’m learning a lot from Master Beryl!”

“Ooh, it’s good to have so much energy. You may already know, but I’m Mordea Gardenant. I’m technically this guy’s father.”

“There’s no *technically* about it,” I quipped.

“Oh, hush. It’s a figure of speech.”

Dammit, dad, think of how I feel being called technically your son.

“Thank you for having us. My name is Henblitz Drout, and I serve as the lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order.”

“Ooh, a real big shot. I appreciate you taking care of this brat of mine.”

My dad was a little taken aback by Henblitz’s introduction. No one in Beaden would imagine that the Liberion Order’s lieutenant commander would come all the way out here. Allucia had come to recruit me, so that had technically made sense, but not even I had been able to predict Henblitz tagging along. He wasn’t one of our pupils, so he had even less of a reason to do so.

“That means the little one here is the girl you mentioned in your letter, right?” my dad asked, looking at Mewi.

“That’s right,” I said. I turned to Mewi. “C’mon, introduce yourself.”

“Uhh... Hello...I’m...Mewi.”

“Ha ha ha! I guess being surrounded by all these old men would make anyone nervous! Come on in. Think of this as your own home.”

My dad blew away Mewi’s stiff greeting with a hearty laugh—in a good way. It was my first time seeing Mewi so tense. She’d been rather nervous during our first visit to the magic institute, but it hadn’t been *this* bad. The institute and the order had been completely outside her world, however, this was *my* home. On paper, that made it her home too, and Mewi had no idea how to respond to that. It was adorable in its own way.

“There’s no point in standing out here and talking,” I said. “Come on in, everyone.”

I urged the others into the house. Today’s plan was to relax, get our

introductions over with, have some food, and get some sleep. Our business in Beaden, including the saberboars' investigation, could start tomorrow. I also wanted to take a look at the dojo. Lessons were likely over for the day, but the pupils would be there tomorrow.

As we walked down the mid-length corridor into my house, my dad turned around.

"By the way, Curuni, was it?"

"Yuppers!"

"Are you Beryl's potential wife?"

"HEY!" I yelled.

This goddamn geezer!

"Hwuh?! Wuh?! W-Wife?!" Curuni exclaimed, heating up in an instant.

"Curuni, don't pay this old fart any mind," I said hastily.

I could understand Curuni's total panic. She'd come all the way to this remote village to find out how far her abilities had grown, and upon meeting this geezer for pretty much the first time, he'd asked her if she was this other old man's wife. I wouldn't have blamed her for suddenly resorting to violence.

Fortunately, Curuni wasn't belligerent by nature, so there was no need to worry about that. *This stupid father of mine seriously shouldn't complain if someone suddenly punches him one day—it wouldn't be an unreasonable reaction to him at all, just a consequence of his behavior.*

"Huh? You're not?" he asked with a blank look.

"She's not!" I shouted. "Do you think about your pupils like that?!"

He was acting like he'd done nothing wrong. If this hadn't been my house and my father, I would've hit him already. Well, even if I tried, he would've probably warded it off with ease. Violence wouldn't achieve anything beyond venting my frustrations.

"I see..." my dad mumbled.

"What're you acting depressed for?!"

His emotions were totally incoherent. I understood his lament over his aging son's inability to get married, and while I questioned his way of expressing it, I didn't mean to reject his concern. However, this definitely wasn't the time or place to be so frank about this topic. This incident had surely damaged Curuni's mental image of me and caused a misunderstanding. It also wasn't something I wanted to talk about in front of Mewi. This geezer had finally gone senile. Despite him being my father, I couldn't help but think that.

"Wife...?" Mewi muttered with a frown.

"Mewi, don't pay it any mind," I told her. "Just ignore him."

She likely knew the word, but it wasn't really something she was used to hearing. Considering Mewi's educational needs, it would be wonderful to have a wife to fulfill the role of a mother. Mewi wasn't an infant who needed constant supervision, but there was a limit to what a single man could do.

Still, that was a difficult future to achieve. Hypothetically speaking... Just *hypothetically* speaking—say a woman appeared who felt affection for me and wanted to get married. That would be worth rejoicing over. It was a bit selfish, but even *I* felt a desire to have a beautiful wife by my side. *Though none of that is actually possible for now...*

On paper, Mewi was now my daughter. And though I didn't really want to put it this way, she was part of the package. To a woman who was in a position to marry me, that could be a hindrance. After all, looking only at the superficial facts, Mewi was an orphan from the slums whose bloodline was a complete mystery. Even taking her talent for magic into consideration, would a woman who wanted to look after a stranger's kid ever appear before me?

The situation could change after Mewi graduated and became independent, but that would be in a few years at the earliest. I would only get older in the meantime, and fewer and fewer women would be interested. Not that that was even the primary issue. The probability of finding anyone was already close to zero, so those conditions pushed things even further in that direction.

I wasn't shifting the blame to Mewi, of course—it was definitely my fault that I'd gotten this old without even the slightest hint of romance in my life. There were some questionable aspects to how I'd become Mewi's guardian, but I

didn't regret any of it.

"I thought you'd bring back at least one love story after going to the capital..." my dad grumbled.

"Sorry I didn't live up to your expectations," I said. "I'll say this over and over, but you're the one who raised me this way."

"I have Frenne, though."

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

Frenne Gardenant was my dad's wife—my mother. Unlike him, I'd never heard anything about her being a rising swordswoman or even being ridiculously strong. It was possible I was the only one kept in the dark about it, but I'd never seen her show up at the dojo for training or anything.

To me, she was a kind mother who snapped when it was time to get angry. I couldn't recall her ever getting angry without a good reason, though. Maybe this was a son's bias, but I believed she was a good mother. How had a woman like her ended up getting married to my dad? I'd never asked them about it. My whole life had been dedicated to the sword, so for a long time, I'd never had any interest in romance. Also, it was pretty embarrassing to ask your parents about that stuff.

From my perspective, they got along very well as husband and wife. They did fight every now and then, but it was usually my dad's fault for doing something stupid. At those times, he would apologize to her in a feeble voice—one that was hard to imagine given his usual behavior. There were times when my dad had clearly gotten less food at the table than everyone else—that had likely been the outcome of said fights.

"Ha ha. Oh, forgive me."

And as I continued this fruitless conversation with my dad, I heard a laugh from behind me. It was Henblitz.

"I see you can't win against your father, Mr. Beryl."

"As embarrassing as it is...yeah."

To be precise, I couldn't win against either of my parents. My dad always had

me beat in a martial contest or swordsmanship, while my mom was unbeatable in all sorts of other ways—she stood head and shoulders above us.

“So...was this one of the reasons you ended up coming to Baltrain?” Henblitz asked.

“Ooh, that’s the lieutenant commander for you,” my dad said. “You’ve got keen insight. I don’t suppose you can use your influence to find him one or two nice girls...?”

“Cut it out, dad. You’re being a bother—to both of us.”

Henblitz was suddenly putting his “keen insight” on display while my dad went along with it shamelessly. I didn’t want to be introduced to a wife through the use of authority—that made it seem like a noble’s political marriage. I’d rather just be an eternal bachelor. Actually, I wanted this conversation to come to an immediate end. I’d been prepared for it to come up, but not in front of everyone like this.

“Augh...”

Curuni’s spirit still hadn’t returned to her body. I really did understand why she was frozen, but I questioned whether it was all right for a knight to have such a poor recovery rate. On the battlefield, a moment’s distraction could lead to death. Compared to Ficelle, who was around the same age, Curuni’s mental fortitude still had a long way to go. Of course, this exact situation would never come up on the battlefield. I must’ve been quite shaken myself for that ridiculous thought to come to mind.

“Anyway, sorry about that,” my dad said, not looking or sounding sorry in the least. “I guess that wasn’t a topic to bring up out of the blue.”

At least he’d apologized. It would be pretty lame to stubbornly stick to this topic. A small part of him probably didn’t want Mewi to see him as a narrow-minded person.

“Mewi,” my dad called out. His expression was suddenly so soft.

“Huh...? Ah, yes?”

“Allow me to say this once more,” he told her. “There’s nothing out here in

the sticks, but please be at ease. You're my granddaughter. That fact will never change."

His voice was unbelievably gentle compared to the sword instructor I knew. I hadn't told my dad about all of Mewi's circumstances—there'd been a limit to what I could put on paper. Still, there was determination behind his words. I didn't know how to explain it exactly, but I could sense my dad's resolve, and that definitely wasn't a bad thing.

"Mm..."



Mewi wasn't very book smart. She wasn't stupid or anything, but she hadn't gotten much formal education. However, she had a sharp eye for human emotion. She was capable of identifying the feeling my dad had put behind his words. She was also a good enough person at heart to realize his intent and avoid acting in a way that would put it all to waste.

"Shall we start with dinner?" my dad suggested. "We can get into the details then."

"Sounds good," I agreed. "We're pretty hungry."

During the carriage ride here, we'd taken breaks and had even eaten, but that had been no more than the bare minimum for the voyage, and quite some time had passed since then. I was hungry enough to devour anything placed before me.

This would be my first taste of my mom's cooking in a while. She wasn't an extraordinary chef or anything, nor did she make anything particularly intricate. Objectively speaking, the food in Baltrain was higher quality. However, a mother's cooking was something else—it had a charm that couldn't be replaced by any fine dining. Unable to suppress my excitement, my stomach let out a loud grumble.

"Yo, Frenne. Beryl's back."

We proceeded down the corridor and entered the living room. My house was large, and this was the biggest room. Even if there were more of us, there would be plenty of space for everyone to relax.

As a child, I'd wondered why this place was so needlessly large, but taking into consideration any guests we had to entertain, it was just about right. There was a long table big enough to comfortably seat everyone around it. Farther within, I spotted a woman restlessly moving around the kitchen.

"Welcome back, Beryl. Oh my, you brought so much company."

"Mm. I'm home, mom."

The woman turning around with a large pot in her hands was Frenne Gardenant—my mother. Her hair was half brown and half gray, cut to a

moderate length, and tied back. Neither my dad nor mom had been gray-haired when I was a child. I vaguely remembered their hair starting to turn around the time I became an apprentice swordsman.

My dad's hair had gone gray relatively quickly. Now, both his hair and beard were completely gray. It made him seem like even more of an experienced veteran, so it wasn't a bad thing. I just had a small clump of gray in my bangs—in my opinion, it wasn't all that attractive.

My mom's hair was changing very gradually. More and more of her hair turned gray over the years at around the same pace that wrinkles formed on her skin. Now, she looked like a complete granny, but in a sense, she had more vigor than my dad.

I felt like I could never win against either of them. No matter how much older I got or how much I improved with a sword, this was something I simply couldn't overcome.

"I'm sorry we can't provide much in terms of hospitality." Her voice was cheerful yet apologetic.

"Don't be!" Henblitz exclaimed. "There's no need for you to worry about that, madam. We're the ones intruding."

This was my home, and Mewi was a little young to be received like a guest, but she was my daughter on paper, so there was no need for such formalities. Also, the original plan had been for only Mewi and me to come here. Henblitz and Curuni had technically forced their way in. It made sense for Henblitz to speak up, but his words did seem a little too stiff for me.

"You're so well-spoken for someone your age," my mom observed.

"You humble me with your praise. My name is Henblitz Drout. I serve as the lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order."

"Oh my, a real VIP!" my mom said, wide-eyed. "Thank you for the courteous introduction. I'm Frenne Gardenant."

The lieutenant commander of the order really was a considerable big shot. He definitely wasn't someone who should be visiting a backwater village on personal business for an extended period. I'd almost forgotten after seeing him

in the training hall every day, but he wasn't someone who would normally have anything to do with me.

"I'm Curuni Cruciel! Nice to meet'cha!"

"My, what a cheerful girl."

My mom had pretty much never come to the dojo during training, but many pupils had come and gone through our doors, so she was very used to interacting with strangers. She had plenty of experience chatting with the guardians who'd come to pick up their kids too. Little by little, she'd built up some significant social skills.

My dad wasn't the type to care about that stuff, so maybe my mom had been a major influence on why I did my best to socialize with my pupils and their parents. Perhaps that was why we had more pupils now than during my dad's time. Even to this day, his skill with a sword went without saying, but he was not the type to be kind and thorough with his instructions. He was like an artisan in that respect—he wove his art into the future, and while it sometimes took the right shape, sometimes it didn't. It was simply a difference in methodology—my dad and I had slightly different philosophies, and depending on the desired result, the optimal process differed. That was all there was to it.

"I'm...Mewi."

"Oh! Oh my! Oh dear! So you're Mewi Mewi!"

And as I pondered somewhat unnecessary thoughts, Mewi finished off the introductions, raising my mom's spirits to astounding new heights. She knew the bare minimum about Mewi thanks to my letter, which had only gotten her more excited about it. Normally, Mewi would be complaining about the nickname, but perhaps she was overwhelmed by my mom's vigor or something because she didn't voice a single objection.

"Come, come, everyone sit," my mom said, her voice still somewhat shrill.
"You must be starving."

"Yeah, I'm definitely hungry," I said.

Sharing a fun meal together was the best way to open up conversation. It was better to talk over food than to awkwardly stand face-to-face exchanging

pleasantries.

“Hmm, but I wonder if we’ll have enough,” my mom mused.

“If there isn’t, you can just make more,” my dad said.

“Oh! In that case, you’ll be making any second helpings, my dear.”

My dad fell silent. *Just as I remember... This is how their arguments always go.* I didn’t remember a single instance where my dad had won.

Cooking was hard labor. Thinking up a menu was troublesome on its own, and judging how much to make was a pain. And that’s not even *mentioning* the actual cooking part, which always took a good amount of time. My mom managed pretty much everything about our kitchen, so her voice carried extra weight when it came to matters of housework.

At any rate, cooking was just a matter of one’s state of mind. I was proof of that—after all, I didn’t mind making food for Mewi whatsoever. That said, it was easy to take my dad’s earlier statement as “Food will appear without me having to lift a finger.” My mom’s cold retort had been justified.

“Are you worried this won’t be enough?” I asked. “It almost seems like a bit too much...”

The contents of the pot felt like overkill. It was a stew filled with large cuts of meat and vegetables that was clearly too much for my mom and dad alone. My letter to them had been sent quite a while ago, and I’d received a reply recently, but there’d still been no telling when I would return to Beaden.

In other words, they shouldn’t have known when I was going to be back. It was supposed to have been a mystery whether I was even coming back at all. The letter had even phrased my return like it was an optional thing. It didn’t make sense that they had so much food here—they couldn’t have known that I’d be returning today.

“A bit too much? Did you forget about Randid?” my dad asked.

“Oh, right.”

I slapped my knee. I’d completely forgotten.

Sorry, Randid. Seriously.

“Okay then, guess I’ll go get him,” my dad said, getting up and walking out of the living room.

After their previous argument, he couldn’t possibly tell my mom to go collect him. My dad’s back seemed just a *little* smaller than usual.

“Master! It’s good to see you again!”

“Yeah, it’s been a while.”

Some time after my dad left the living room, he came back with the dojo’s current assistant instructor—Randid—along with his wife, who was carrying a small baby in her arms. If I remembered right, the woman’s name was Fanery. During our first meeting, she’d given the impression of being the quiet type while doing whatever she could to support her husband. She was a courteous and good wife. The baby was... *What was the name? Oh, right, Jayne.* He was still too young to hold his own head up.

I hope he grows up splendidly. Children are adults’ greatest treasures.

“So you’ve been lodging here?” I asked.

“Yes. I’m borrowing one of the detached rooms,” Randid confirmed. “I’ve been teaching swordsmanship while helping out the villagers when I can.”

“I see.”

Just as I mentioned, our house was rather large, so there were a good number of rooms—Randid’s family had borrowed one. He had mentioned moving in to the village but hadn’t yet settled on where to live. It took both time and money to build a new house, so he was probably saving up funds and getting to know the villagers in the meantime.

“Randid... You’re Randid Pattlerock!” Henblitz exclaimed.

“Hm? You know him?” I asked.

There was clear shock in Henblitz’s expression. At first glance, you’d think the Liberion Order and adventurers didn’t really have anything to do with one another. However, Allucia and Surena seemed to have known one another for a while, so maybe the upper echelons were acquainted.

“He’s an extremely talented adventurer who was on the verge of becoming

an ocean rank,” Henblitz explained. “It would be rude for any who study the sword to be unfamiliar with his name.”

“Huh? Is that so?”

I knew Randid was a platinum rank adventurer. I also knew he retired after Fanery blessed him with Jayne. However, this was my first time hearing about him being on the verge of ocean rank.

The general public’s appraisal of ranks placed gold as a full-fledged adventurer, platinum as top class, and ocean as the elite. This really made Randid’s retirement seem like a waste. That said, we’d already had this conversation when he’d decided to move to Beaden, so there was no point in bringing it up again.

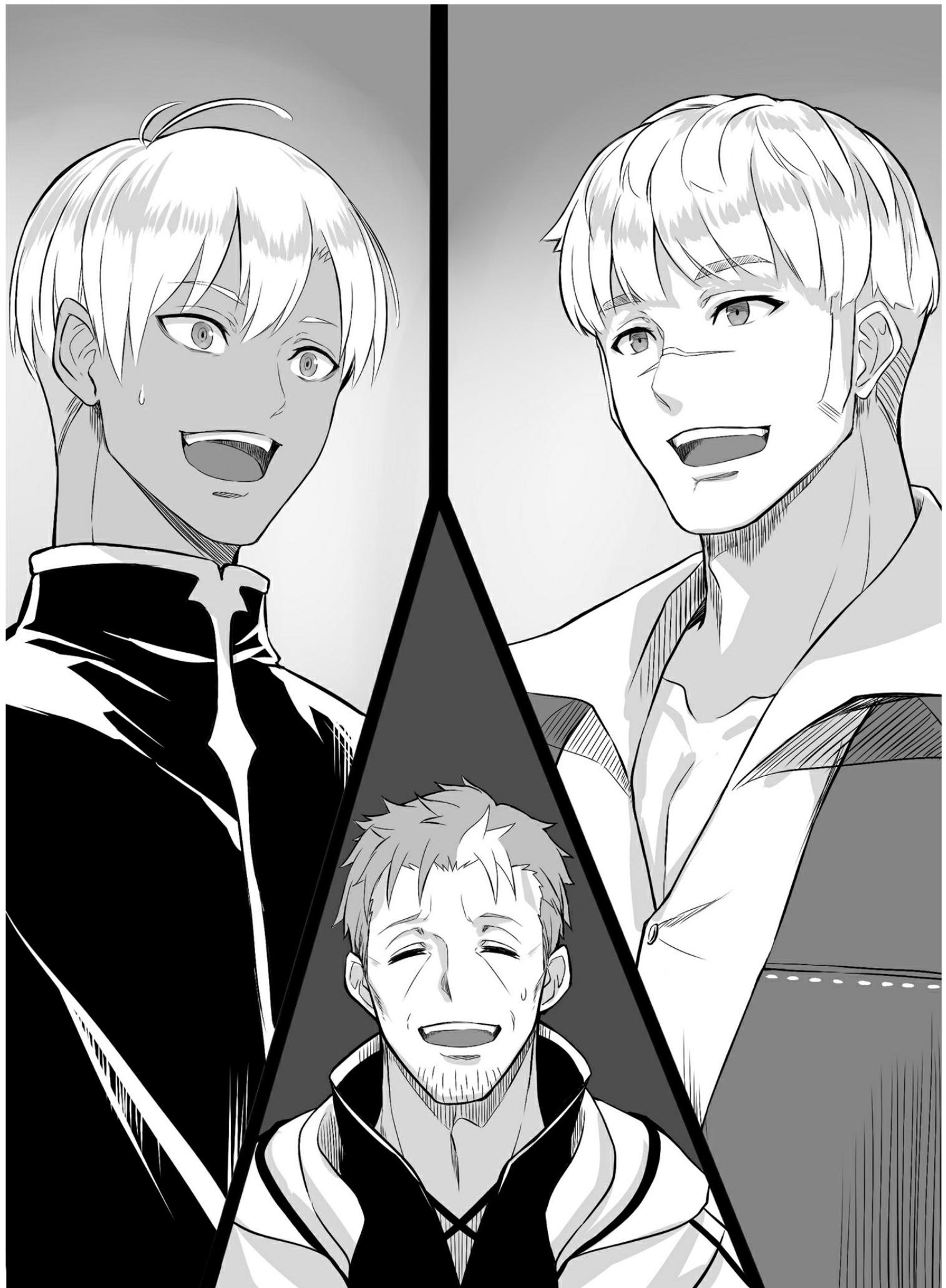
Randid chuckled. “Ha ha ha. That’s an overestimation of my abilities, Sir Henblitz.”

“So you know Henblitz too, huh?” I asked.

“Yes. The Liberion Order’s name roars throughout the kingdom like thunder. It would be rude not to know about its lieutenant commander.”

He seems to have a lot of respect for Henblitz. Randid really seems to have mellowed out.

During his days at our dojo, he’d still been an agreeable youth, but there’d been more of a wildness in his eyes back then—in a good way, that is. What had changed and when? Perhaps he’d calmed after meeting his wife or after the birth of his child. Maybe coming to Beaden and getting away from the hustle and bustle of the big city had done it, or even just the simple passage of time. At any rate, I believed it was a change for the better. There were things to gain by falling back from the front lines of a conflict to raise a family. After all, my outlook on life had expanded in all sorts of ways after taking in Mewi.



“Now that we’re all here, shall we start dinner?” my mom asked with a clap of her hands.

The bare minimum of introductions was over, so it was time for all of us to enjoy a meal, chat, and get to know one another. Henblitz, Curuni, and Mewi would be staying here for the next few days, so we had plenty of time for that.

“Frenne, allow me,” Fanery offered as my mom began pouring soup for everyone.

My mom refused with a smile. “Oh no, it’s fine. You have Jayne to take care of.”

I did understand Fanery’s restlessness. From her perspective, she was freeloading at the house of her husband’s employer. I could easily declare that my mom and dad weren’t the type to work her to the bone because of that. Frankly, I would’ve ended up with a far harsher personality had I grown up in such an environment. My mom’s intentions had been good when she’d refused Fanery’s help—the new mom couldn’t let go of her baby, after all.

“Fanery, we’ve told you many times now that there’s no need for such consideration, remember?” my dad said.

“Mordea... But I’m...”

Fanery remained unconvinced. She couldn’t honestly accept that when she was so indebted to them. Just from this exchange, I could tell Fanery was a good person. My parents knew this too, which was why they didn’t want to cause her undue anxiety.

“You have a duty to raise Jayne properly,” my dad said. “You can repay us when you no longer need to look after him.”

That was a great way to put it. After observing Fanery’s personality, it looked like forcing their good intentions on her could leave her with bad feelings. On that point, telling her she could repay them would alleviate the mental burden. Dad also scored highly for saying she could do so when she was done with her duty.

Now then, was my dad really the kind of man capable of such consideration?

Maybe this had been an order from my mom. Or maybe I'd simply never known because he'd never acted that way toward someone who was both his son and pupil.

I thought back on my younger years. Despite having spent a lot of time together as a family, I didn't know much about my father's public-facing personality. With the dojo's pupils, he'd always been the same as usual.

"Understood..." Fanery said. "Then allow me to take you up on your generosity."

"Mm. Please do."

Just as that conversation came to an end, our food was lined up in front of us at the table. There was bread, cheese, and a soup lavishly filled with meat and vegetables. Considering that we were out in the sticks, this was a terrific menu.

In Baltrain, you could eat anything as long as you had the money to pay for it, but that didn't apply in the backcountry. There were far fewer goods in circulation, so even if you had all the money in the world, there were ingredients you simply couldn't buy. For better or worse, that made living in the city very cut-and-dried. As long as you had money, you could get what you wanted, and if you didn't have money, you couldn't act as freely. Fortunately, I didn't currently have any money problems, so my life in Baltrain was going relatively well.

At any rate, I was a little afraid of getting used to my city lifestyle. I wasn't thinking of becoming someone wealthy and out of touch who basked in luxury and extolled the righteousness of honorable poverty—nothing so extreme—but I wanted to avoid ending up thinking that life in the capital was the norm. After all, I planned on returning to this village one day.

"Thank you for the food."

I set those thoughts aside for now and focused on dinner. Everyone gave thanks in unison. Jayne couldn't speak yet, but he seemed to find it amusing that everyone was speaking at once, so he offered up his own "daaah" to match us. It was pretty cute.

Thinking back on it, I didn't have much experience sharing a meal around a

table with so many people. Here, we had me, my parents, Henblitz, Curuni, Mewi, and Randidr's family. Even if we didn't count the baby, that was eight people.

"Ooh! This soup is delicious!"

"Oh my, thank you."

"What a calming taste. I feel like I could eat this forever."

"It's...really good."

"My! My! Mew Mew, don't hold back! Have as much as you like!"

"Ah... Okay..."

With more people at the table, things were much livelier. I usually had my meals with just Mewi, and though we chatted sporadically, it could never be considered lively. I could have a lot to say when I felt like it, but Mewi definitely wasn't the talkative type. This meant we naturally tended to have silent meals.

"Mewi, you all right?" I murmured, worried that the atmosphere might be too boisterous for her.

"Mm... I'm fine. There's someone nosier at the institute."

"Aaah..."

I thought Mewi would be unaccustomed to such a lively meal, but that didn't appear to be the case. Now that she mentioned it, the magic institute did have a cafeteria. Of her school friends, I could guess who the nosier one was. It was very likely—or rather, guaranteed—to be Cindy.

"So Mewi attends the magic institute?" my dad asked.

"That's right," I answered. "She has a talent for magic."

"That's nice. Her future is secured."

Even those who'd spent their whole lives in rural villages like me knew that being a wizard put you on the fast track to some of the highest positions in the country. That was how improbable it was to manifest a talent for magic.

"Hmm, so she's a budding wizard," my dad said. "It seems there's a lot to look forward to."

“Yeah, she also started learning swordsmanship,” I said.

“Swordsmanship?! Now that’s a novelty...”

“The institute has a new sword magic course. I’m actually helping out there as a temporary lecturer.”

“Meaning Mewi is also your pupil... Hah! Just like you and me.”

“I do think she has talent. She’ll surpass me in no time.”

“Hey! Cut that out!” Mewi protested.

“This is how she hides her embarrassment,” I told everyone.

“HEY!”

Ha ha ha. I could talk about Mewi forever.



“Master, you’ll be staying here for a while, yes?”

“Yup, that’s the plan.”

As we continued our lively chatter over dinner, Randid tossed the conversation my way. If he was living in the dojo, he almost definitely knew about the letter I’d sent to Beaden and the one my parents had sent back. In other words, he knew my reason for returning. His question was basically confirming that I was participating in the saberboar hunt—he knew that my visit wasn’t just a temporary homecoming.

“How many are there this year?” I asked.

“We haven’t gone that far out yet, so we aren’t sure,” Randid explained. “However, there are signs that there are more than last year. There have even been sporadic sightings of saberboars nearby.”

“Hmmm...”

Randid had studied the sword under my guidance for six years. In that time, he’d absorbed all my techniques and had graduated from the dojo. In other words, during his time as my pupil, he’d participated in the saberboar hunts—and not just once or twice. I’d only just arrived and hadn’t gotten a look yet, but according to Randid, the pack was larger than last year’s. Eliminating them

would be kind of a boring job for a platinum rank adventurer who'd been on the verge of becoming an ocean rank, but it was a necessary path to walk if he wanted to live in Beaden. I was going to rely on him greatly.

"By the way, have you changed swords?" my dad asked out of the blue.

"Oh, this?"

I realized that I hadn't told him anything about my sword yet—it hadn't seemed important enough to include in my letters. Since I was in Beaden to fight, of course I had my sword on me. Henblitz was equipped with his longsword, and Curuni had her zweihander.

The only one who'd come without a weapon was Mewi. She was learning how to fight in the sword magic class, but she hadn't had enough lessons yet. She was not yet skilled enough to challenge a saberboar—not even close. The plan was for her to watch the house and relax with my mom and Fanery.

"My last one got sliced in half," I said. "So I had a new one forged."

"Hmmm..." My dad observed my sword with sharp eyes. "It's not just simple steel."

"Sure isn't. It's so good that it's wasted on me."

To be precise, the blade had been forged from the remains of the named monster Zeno Grable. I felt like it wasn't really my place to spread that information though, especially since Surena had been the one to actually defeat it.

"Master Beryl's sword is amazing!" Curuni exclaimed. "It's forged from the remains of the named monster Zeno Grable!"

"Ah..."

I'd kept quiet to stop the topic from becoming an uproar, but everything had been exposed thanks to Curuni's swift attack.

"That *is* impressive," my dad said. "Did you defeat it?"

"No, Surena was the one to finish it off," I answered. "You remember her?"

"Of course I do. So Surena defeated a named monster... How's she doing?"

“Very well.”

“That’s good to hear.”

My dad narrowed his eyes as he basked in memories. Surena hadn’t been one of our dojo’s pupils, but we’d taken care of her for around three years until we could find someone to adopt her. Neither I nor my dad saw her as a pupil. She was kind of like what Mewi was to me now, or perhaps a little sister who was far younger than me. To my parents, she was something like a granddaughter.

“Surena!” my mom exclaimed, raising her voice joyfully. “How nostalgic!”

I was an only son, and I’d be lying if I said I’d never wanted brothers or sisters. I didn’t know whether my parents hadn’t been blessed with more children or if they’d intentionally chosen not to have more. It wasn’t something I could really ask them about.

“Twin Dragonblade Surena Lysandra, you mean?” Randid asked. “I never knew she was from this village...”

“She wasn’t—not really,” I said. “Hmmm... How do I explain it...?”

It seemed Randid was unaware that Surena had lived in Beaden for a while. Well, I doubted Surena had told many people about that. I didn’t know how to explain it. This was personal information, so I was reluctant to disclose it without permission, and also, I didn’t want to mar her reputation when she held such an outstanding position and a dazzling history of achievements.

The Surena I’d known in the past had been a quiet and timid girl. Now, she was a splendid, powerful woman—it was hard to reconcile the two versions of her, and I didn’t want to spread any negative rumors.

Henblitz then spoke up, changing the topic. “Oh yes. Mr. Beryl, shall we work out our plans for the near future?”

“Yeah. Let’s see...”

Now that our bellies were full and things had calmed down a little, it was time to discuss our plans. He and Curuni had forced their way onto this trip so that they could help suppress saberboars. It would leave them ill at ease if we didn’t discuss how we would go about doing that.

"Dad, no one has gone into the mountains yet, right?" I asked.

"They haven't. We've been keeping an eye on the base of the mountains, but we haven't had enough hands for a hunting party."

If they hadn't entered the mountains yet, it meant the investigation hadn't really started.

Let's talk geography for a bit. We were referring to the Aflatta Mountain Range that ran across northern Liberis. Our nation occupied a large portion of northern Galea, with its capital located somewhat northwest of the center. Going straight west from Baltrain would get you to Beaden. Farther to the west was the Aflatta Mountain Range.

The mountains were inhospitable. Quite frankly, people pretty much never went there as it was completely wild territory. The environment was simply too harsh for anyone to live in, so almost none of it had been cultivated. It was possible that there were untapped resources in the mountains, but the return on investment was too poor for anyone to find out.

What made things even more complicated was that the mountain range extended southwest into the neighboring Salura Zaruk Empire's territory. Honestly, no villager knew exactly where the national borders were in the middle of those craggy mountains. Clear borders had apparently been decided upon, but once you were in the mountains, there was no way to identify them.

It wasn't a huge issue for travelers or residents of the local villages to accidentally cross these borders. There was room to consider the extenuating circumstances, so there was a tacit understanding between the two sides. However, things would be really bad if members of the military, like the order or the magic corps, were to cross the border—even if it was to conduct an investigation. A breach like that could even lead to war. Both sides wanted to avoid such an incident.

Say the situation was reversed and the *empire* was sending knights to investigate after giving a formal notice. Our side would still see this as a military exercise right on the border or as the first steps to an invasion. Even if the incident didn't immediately break out into a war, it would raise international tensions. War was one means of diplomacy, but no one resorted to bloodshed

for the fun of it. At the very least, I couldn't imagine anyone wanting that.

So, very little of the Aflatta Mountain Range had been investigated or cultivated. I had no idea how things were on the empire's side of things, of course, but if I had to guess, things were likely similar over there.

And, before any governmental considerations, the mountains were filled with ferocious beasts and monsters. Even without the problems concerning national borders, it was a harsh environment to be in. Saberboars were native to the mountains too. When their numbers increased during their breeding season, they often came down from the mountains in search of prey. Settlements like Beaden, which were situated close to the Aflatta Mountain Range, suffered the effects of this breeding season. We had the dojo, so we were capable of defending ourselves, but their incursions were likely harsher for other villages.

When it came to monsters and beasts, it was impossible for humanity to completely drive a species to extermination. Our sphere of influence simply wasn't wide enough. So, our only choice was to cull them when they propagated enough to cause harm. The saberboar hunt was, in essence, necessary to thin out their numbers. We couldn't exterminate them, so we only reduced their numbers until they were no longer a threat.

"Hmmm... First, I guess I'll take a look at the dojo's lessons for a day or two," I said.

"The dojo?" Henblitz asked incredulously.

"Yeah, to recruit any kids who seem like they'll be able to help," I explained.

In short, I wanted to check and see how many people we could take into the field. To that end, I wanted to look for any kids who were interested in participating—and any who could endure a fight against a saberboar *and* a trek through the mountains. I wasn't going to force anyone just because they could fight. The bare minimum to include them among our numbers was their ability *and* their willingness.

Not everyone attending the dojo was trying to reach the pinnacle of swordsmanship. I felt like we had a large ratio of pupils who were, but there were also kids trying to learn the basics for self-defense or those who were trying to overcome a lack of athleticism. There were even some who had no

intention of ever fighting, even if they had a tremendous talent lying dormant within them. It was pretty meaningless for such pupils to get any combat experience, so their presence would only make things more dangerous.

That was why we had to see who was available. If I had to guess, there were a few who would be willing to go. I hadn't been away from the dojo for long, so I could mostly rely on my last memories of its pupils to draw up a fairly accurate estimate.

Even in the worst-case scenario where no students could come, it wouldn't really be a problem. After all, we had me, Randid, Henblitz, and Curuni. There were more than enough frontline fighters, and my dad could handle protecting the village on his own.

"How nostalgic," Randid said. "I was a volunteer back in the day."

"You were always raring to go," I remarked.

"Ha ha, how embarrassing..."

My thoughts drifted to the past as I chewed on what little cheese had been left on the dining table. I wasn't so old that I had nothing but my memories to keep me going, but I'd taken in so many pupils and had sent so many out into the world. Even now, those days remained vivid in my mind. When I could no longer swing a sword, maybe it would be nice to spend my days basking in such memories.

"May we also take a look at these lessons?" Henblitz asked.

"Of course," I answered. "If anything, I'd love to get the lieutenant commander's opinion."

"Ha ha ha, what a heavy responsibility."

Our dojo did teach people how to fight, but the knights who fought on the front lines were supposed to have better senses when it came to sniffing out people who could contribute in the field. So, I planned to rely heavily on Henblitz and Curuni's opinions.

"Well, that's the gist of it," I said. "Let's just rest for today."

I was planning to go scouting once we finished checking out the dojo, so I had

to recover from the fatigue of our journey while I could. Mewi was watching the house, so it didn't really matter in her case, but the two knights had to be properly rested.

"I can't move the way I want to anymore," my dad said. "It's in your hands, Beryl."

"Ha ha, how shameless."

You sure got a mouth on you, you damn geezer. His skills had deteriorated since his prime. However, even in his old age, he was still the greatest swordsman I knew. There was no way he would lose to a run-of-the-mill fighter, and he could easily hunt saberboars. Still, I wanted to avoid exploiting my dad now that he was retired. That was why I'd gone out of my way to come home.

"Okay then," my dad said. "Beryl has his own room, so he can just use that. If we give the lieutenant commander a room of his own... Well, we didn't plan for this many guests, so I guess Curuni and Mewi can share a room."

"That works for me!"

"Whatever..."

"Hm?" My dad cocked his head. "Mewi, would you prefer to stay in Beryl's room?"

Mewi paused for a long moment, then muttered, "I'll go with Curuni..."

"Ha ha ha!"

Ah, Mewi hesitated for a sec there. She's so damn cute.



"Morning. You sleep well?"

"Yes, without any issues."

"Yup! Like a rock!"

The day after we arrived in Beaden, after sleeping in my own bed for the first time in a while, I found Henblitz and Curuni already in the living room. *They're ready early...* Still, I'd pretty much expected them to be like this—they had forced their way onto this trip, so they didn't want to be a bother first thing in

the morning. I would've been fine with them relaxing a bit more, though.

"Curuni, where's Mewi?" I asked.

"Aah, she was still sleeping, so I let her be... Should I have woken her up instead?"

"No, it's fine. I'm sure she's exhausted from the trip."

Mewi had slept in the same room as Curuni, and it seemed she wasn't awake yet. Just as I'd said, she must've been tired from the carriage ride. Even if it hadn't been a particularly rigorous journey, it was exhausting for those who weren't used to traveling long distances. So, it was best for Mewi to get some proper sleep. *They say sleep brings up a child well, after all.*

"Oh, good morning, Beryl."

"Morning, mom."

My parents were also in the living room. My dad was seated and having some tea, and my mom was preparing breakfast. That meant, excluding Mewi, that I had been the last to wake up. It wasn't a competition or anything, but it was a little vexing. I was pretty confident in how early I tended to get up.

"Shall we start with breakfast?" my mom suggested as she placed food on the table.

For now, it was time to eat. My mind wasn't going to work without refueling. After that, I wanted to wash up in some cold water. It didn't matter whether I was in the countryside or the city, it was still summer. And though it was just a little after sunrise, it was still hot enough for me to build up a slight sweat.

I wasn't going to ask for the luxury of a hot bath. In this weather, a splash of cold water was more than pleasant enough. Fortunately, Beaden had no issues getting fresh water—we could be generous with the stuff. I didn't know if this would still be the case if we had more fields and villagers, though. There were definitely advantages to having a small population.

"Thanks for the food."

Everyone's voices sounded in unison. It was important to have good manners in all things. I'd been raised fairly strictly in this regard—my parents were big on

manners. Henblitz and Curuni were also conscientious. You always had to give thanks for the food on your table and the person who made it.

Today's breakfast was bread, salad, and chicken soup. Baltrain's inn would've provided milk too, but unfortunately, Beaden didn't really have any animal husbandry. We got almost all of our meat from hunting and trade, so we were lucky to get any milk or eggs. *The standard of living in Baltrain really is amazing. Well, it makes sense that a large gathering of people means a large gathering of goods, so maybe I shouldn't be surprised by that.*

"Will we be dropping by the dojo after this?" Henblitz asked after some lively chatter over breakfast.

"Yeah. There's still some time before lessons start, so how about I give you a tour of the village? We can wash off in the river while we're at it."

"The river! That sounds great!" Curuni exclaimed, jumping on my suggestion immediately.

Not that I really care, but shouldn't you be more conscious of being a woman? Even though Henblitz was with us, I would've preferred for her to be somewhat reluctant to bathe with an old man. *It would be kinda depressing if she were plainly revolted by the idea, but still...* My state of mind on the matter was awfully complicated.

"I brought plenty of extra clothes, so it's a-okay!"

"I-I see..."

Curuni ignored my concerns entirely—she was fully intent on playing in the river. Beaden was close to the Aflatta Mountain Range, so there were plenty of brooks running nearby. And since they were all natural, the water quality was great. Having access to bathing spots and drinking water nearby was a big deal for a settlement. Even if it was hard labor to carry it back to the village, access to water cost us pretty much nothing.

"Okay, once we're done eating, shall we take a stroll to the river?" I suggested.

"Yeah!"

Curuni was in high spirits, and Henblitz looked interested too. The hot weather did make you want to dunk yourself in some cold water. Also, a trip to the nearest river would just happen to provide a good tour of Beaden. That said, I doubted that there would be anything new and exciting for them to see here.

“Breakfast was great. We’re heading out.”

My body couldn’t handle entirely skipping my morning meal, but that didn’t mean I could eat a huge breakfast right after waking up. Bread, salad, and soup was a perfectly arranged breakfast menu. I expected nothing less of my mom.

“Please take care of Mewi if she wakes up while I’m out,” I added.

“Yes, yes, of course. Have a good day,” my mom replied.

With breakfast over, I grabbed my sword, a towel, and a change of clothes, then left the house. Henblitz and Curuni also brought the bare essentials with them.

“What a peaceful morning,” Henblitz commented with a smile. “You never see this in Baltrain.”

I chuckled. “Ha ha, you know just what to say.”

Put another way, we were out in the middle of nowhere, and he had chosen a very apt way to describe the village. Baltrain was lively and noisy first thing in the morning, so this was probably very peaceful for people who were used to that. It could grow tiresome given a few days, though.

About the only sounds we heard were birdsong and the rush of the wind shaking the trees. I’d been in Baltrain until yesterday too, so it’d been a while since I’d experienced such tranquility. The stillness was very comforting. That said, the dojo was an exception. It was going to get rather noisy there soon after our pupils arrived. I decided to enjoy the familiar peace and quiet until that time came.

“That’s the village’s only relay station. And that’s the village’s only smithy,” I said, casually giving a tour as we walked.

“What does the blacksmith make?” Henblitz asked.

“Mostly farming tools. But there are people like me around, so he technically makes swords too.”

Pretty much every facility in the village was the only one of its kind. Our house was the only dojo too. This far out into the country, there was nothing to gain by trying to start a second dojo—it would just lead to a scuffle over an already small customer base. The only real exceptions were hunters and farmers. Hunters usually tried to specialize in different types of prey, and farmers decided what to grow based on what their land could sustain.

Those were two professions you could get a late start in out here and still catch up, given the right skills and assets. One other option for finding success was becoming an adventurer and striking it rich. Those who failed usually ended up returning to the village, and those who succeeded had no reason to come back. At any rate, adults who put down roots in such a remote village usually had a good reason for doing so—be it good or bad.

“Looks like you all have everything you need,” Henblitz observed.

“Well, yeah. It’s small, but this is still a proper village.”

In terms of scale and quality, there was no comparing it to Baltrain. We had a blacksmith, and though his skills weren’t bad, he was never going to be making any masterworks. Balder’s skills far surpassed his. Nevertheless, we had everything you needed to make do one way or another. I was sure there were other villages that had it far worse.

“Anyway...it’s a little unexpected,” Henblitz muttered.

“Hm? What is?”

“Beaden isn’t that far away from Baltrain, yes? I thought it’d be somewhat more developed...”

“Aah, that. To put it bluntly, we have no reason to do so.”

“Why not?” Henblitz asked, somewhat bewildered.

Just as I said, the village had no reason to develop further. This wasn’t about me hating the village or anything—it was an objective fact.

“What’s over there in the distance?” I prompted, pointing.

“The Aflatta Mountain Range, yes?”

“That’s right.”

In terms of simple distance, there were countless cities and villages that were farther from Baltrain than Beaden. Just as Henblitz had mentioned, we were relatively close. As long as there were no issues along the way, a carriage could make the trip in a day. However, despite this proximity, our population hadn’t grown, and we’d continued to be a backwater village.

“To add to that, while the land isn’t barren, it isn’t particularly fertile either,” I added.

“Hmm...”

Agriculture in Liberis was prosperous, so there was a lot of knowledge in that field. Our land wasn’t exactly *unfit* for agriculture, but it took time and money to cultivate. That meant people needed a reason to spend time and money developing the land. We required something to draw people here.

“Also—and this might be the most important fact—geographically, there’s nowhere to go from Beaden.”

“What do you mean?” Henblitz asked.

“It’s a dead end for traffic.”

Things would be different if Beaden was a key point between cities. However, the only thing beyond our village was the Aflatta Mountain Range. There was no reason to stop here, even if you were on your way to Salura Zaruk.

Still, even as small as it was, Beaden was a village. We had connections with nearby villages and traded with Baltrain. This wasn’t for the sake of expanding the village, but it was the bare minimum people needed in order to get by.

Because of all this, Beaden had always been a backwater village. *If anything, it’s actually developed relatively well. Normally, there wouldn’t even be a relay station at a dead end like this.*

“Things would be different if the continent was a little more peaceful, though,” I added.

“Well...the same applies everywhere.”

Above all else, monsters all across the land were a tremendous issue, and this far into the countryside, even the main road wasn't perfectly safe. It was unreasonable for a village to freely expand without a care in the world. Beaden had to deal with saberboars pretty much every year, and they had countless smaller incidents.

"Can nothing be done about that mountain yet?" I grumbled.

"At present...it would be very difficult."

"Figures."

It was all the fault of the Aflatta Mountain Range! Though the rivers were a blessing of the mountains, so it wasn't all negative. Still, if those mountains had been a flat plain instead, Beaden could have been a checkpoint between Liberis and Salura Zaruk, making it far more prosperous. Maybe it would've even been a full-fledged town by now.

"It sure is complicated," Curuni said.

I nodded. "Yeah. Things are never simple."

In the future, as the population increased and technology developed, things might change, and the threat of monsters could wane. However, that would take decades at best, and centuries at worst. In short, there was nothing we could do about it in the present day. From a national perspective, Liberis was pouring effort into the research of magic to fulfill that future, and we could only place our hopes in the tomorrow promised by our statesmen.

"Ah, there it is."

"Oooh!"

And just like that, after walking and chatting a while, I spied a clear stream running across the plains. It had a gentle flow and was shallow—the deepest part only came up to my knees, so if our goal here was swimming, it would be inadequate. However, it would be hard to drown here. It was also close to the village, so we were greatly indebted to this spot for everything—from drawing water to letting children play.

"The river is small and the view is unobstructed, so there shouldn't be any

danger,” I said.

“Roger that! Hyoh!”

The moment I finished talking, Curuni dashed straight for the river.

How badly did you want to play in the water?

She kicked off her shoes clumsily, got down on her knees, then plunged her face into the water. After a short while, she whipped back her head and shook off the water.

Are you a dog?

“Lieutenant! Master! It feels great!” Curuni shouted with a terrific smile.

“Ha ha ha, that’s good to hear,” I said.

Well, getting into some cold water first thing in the morning on a hot summer day was quite the luxury—one you couldn’t experience in Baltrain. While the city had thriving steam baths and such, there were no nearby rivers to enjoy.

“But, how do I put it...?”

“Agreed...”

“I don’t know where to look...”

“Indeed...”

Henblitz, Curuni, and I were all lightly dressed—it was summer, after all. Getting wet naturally made any clothing stick to the skin. At worst, your clothes could turn transparent. Due to a combination of these factors, Henblitz and I couldn’t look directly at Curuni.

“Let’s cool ourselves off a little farther away,” I suggested.

“Yes...let’s.”

At a glance, there were no other villagers around, which was a small mercy. Henblitz and I plopped down into the river. The water was pretty chilly, and it cooled our flushed bodies nicely.





Henblitz and I soaked our feet, washed our faces, and refreshed ourselves by wiping away the grime. Curuni, meanwhile, had become soaking wet and, without our intervention, would have kept playing in the water until she'd gotten hungry or sleepy. So, we had her get changed before we all returned to my house.

"We're back."

"Yo, welcome."

My dad came out to greet us. He was moving as sluggishly as ever. After retiring and handing me the dojo, he'd mellowed out considerably. He was still far nimbler than he should be, but he'd changed significantly compared to his prime. Anyone who'd known him in the past would probably be shocked to see him now. Still, he was doing what exercise he needed to keep his body moving, and on very rare occasions, he still peeked in on the dojo to see how things were going. Nowadays, he was an old geezer who only ever grumbled about being hungry, or his hips hurting, or why he didn't have a grandchild yet.

"Mmm! That was *sooo* refreshing!"

Curuni was in a terrific mood. It must've felt great to play around in the water that much. Though, with all her bouncing around, I'd needed to avoid looking directly at her. Curuni was a little too old to be called a girl, and she was now a full-fledged knight, so it was only proper to treat her like an adult.

Yet despite her age and station, she seemed to lack modesty. She retained the cuteness of youth, and she could also display plenty of charm as a woman. However, she was completely unaware of this. From a man's perspective, it was a bit problematic.

Henblitz also seemed to be troubled by it, so maybe Curuni's lack of self-awareness was a problem within the order too. I wanted her to figure it out already, but I felt like it wasn't my place to say anything. It sure was a complicated issue.

"Mm... Welcome...home?"

“Yup, I’m back.”

Mewi, who hadn’t been with us for breakfast, had woken up while we’d been on our walk. It seemed she still wasn’t sure how to process her current situation, and her voice sounded quite bewildered. She was probably confused about greeting me in someone else’s home. *She’s so damn cute.*

“Did you have breakfast?” I asked.

“I did...”

She’d eaten, but she was still only half awake. She probably still hadn’t gotten over the fatigue of the ride here. Since she didn’t have much stamina to begin with, and her body still wasn’t very healthy, it would take time for her to get used to being here.

“You could’ve slept in more,” I told her.

“No... I’m fine...”

“That so? Just don’t push yourself.”

One goal I had for this homecoming was to let Mewi kick back, so I didn’t want her to exhaust herself. It would be problematic if she lived in complete self-indulgence, but since the institute was on break, I wanted her to let loose and enjoy herself.

“Dad, where’s Randid?” I asked.

“Oh, he should be in the dojo about now.”

Ah, it *was* about time for the dojo to open. He was probably doing warmups in there. Instructors—as long as we weren’t taking part in nonstop sparring—got far less exercise than our pupils. That was fine for someone who’d retired, but being an instructor was somewhat insufficient for maintaining a good physique. If you focused entirely on teaching, your body would gradually weaken.

Even though Randid had retired from being an adventurer, he was a little too young to start withering away. He knew this too, so he made sure to get some real exercise in on top of giving lessons at the dojo. It was a truly wonderful mindset.

The order's training was far more intense than what we did at a backcountry dojo. That was a great boon for me, though sometimes it was a little *too* intense and my stamina couldn't hold out. The knights of the Liberion Order were basically all stamina monsters. There were times when I found it too harsh to train among them, but for cases like this saberboar hunt, they were reliable allies. After all, having exceptional sword skills was useless if you didn't have the stamina to do something like trek through the mountains.

"Okay, shall we take a look at the dojo?" I suggested.

Henblitz nodded. "That sounds good. It's been on my mind."

"How nostalgic!" Curuni exclaimed.

The two knights seemed to be looking forward to this. That made me pretty happy.

The sun was higher in the sky now, so the serious pupils were likely trickling into the dojo already. Our dojo was out in the sticks, so we didn't have a fixed schedule or anything, and our pupils showed up at fairly disparate times. We never ran all that late either. Both my dad and I had generally held lessons in the morning. Things were likely still that way if Randid hadn't made any major changes.

The dojo was a separate building from our house, and I still didn't know which had been built first. There was probably some history behind it, but no detailed records remained. If I had to use my imagination, I figured that one of our ancestors had built a place to train and hone their swordsmanship. This had likely attracted people hoping for instruction, so the dojo and house had been built. Neither my dad nor I had any idea what the truth actually was, though.

"Ooh."

As we moved from the house to the dojo, faint sounds could be heard from within—voices and the noise of objects clashing together. In other words, today's lesson had started. This was supposed to be *my* dojo, but I felt a little nervous as I put my hand on the door. *I've been away for a while...* I wanted to believe that my pupils hadn't already forgotten me, but what if there were a ton of new kids who'd shown up during my absence? Randid had been a talented adventurer, so it was entirely possible that rumors about him had

attracted many hopefuls.

“Master! It’ll be okay! I’m sure of it!” Curuni called out cheerfully as I hesitated in front of the door.

“Yeah... You’re right.”

She really was good at cheering other people up. I wasn’t sure whether she was aware of it, but I’d been saved by her fathomless optimism in the past too. Joining the Liberion Order hadn’t changed that part of her. I had a hunch that she’d been allowed to join—despite her sword skills still needing some polish—because they’d seen this attribute in her. If that was true, then the knights who’d given Curuni a passing grade during her test for the Liberion Order had good eyes. It made me proud.

“Okay, let’s go in,” I said, not quite steeling myself but at least calming down a little before I opened the door. “Ooh, looks like they’re all working hard.”

The door clattered open to reveal a space far more cramped than the order’s training hall. Inside, several students were receiving lessons from Randid.

“It’s Master Beryl!”

“Ha ha, long time no see.”

The pupils gathered around me with their wooden swords still in hand. This made me happy, but I felt a little bad about interrupting Randid’s lesson. At a glance, it didn’t look like the number of pupils had changed much. Actually, almost all of them were familiar faces.

Most of our pupils were relatively young. The reason was simple: very few people chose to start fresh and learn swordplay after reaching adulthood. Usually, by that time, people already had an established livelihood. It was rare for someone to be whimsical enough to cast that aside to learn to use a sword from the bottom up. Balder was one such rarity.

“Are the people behind you here to observe?” one of the kids asked.

“Hmm, something like that.”

It was only natural that a bunch of kids in the sticks didn’t recognize individual knights of the Liberion Order. Curuni had left the dojo quite some time ago too,

so I doubted there was anyone here who'd met her.

"A pleasure to meet you. I'm the lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order, Henblitz Drout."

"Liberion knight, Curuni Cruciel! I'm Master Beryl's former pupil!"

"The order?! Wow!"

The room was astir at the knights' introductions. Even if they didn't know the names and faces of individual knights, the order itself was well-known across the entire kingdom. Also, they were excited that Curuni had come from this dojo. The Liberion Order's reputation sure was amazing. It really reinforced how powerful a title could be.

"Randid, I'll leave the lesson to you," I said. "I'll be watching with these two."

"Understood! Knowing you're watching has me pretty nervous, though."

My pupils were glad to see me return, even if it was only for a little while, and I was grateful for that. However, I had to return to Baltrain once this matter with the saberboars was cleaned up—I had my duty as a special instructor to fulfill. It was only right to have Randid continue to give the lessons here, and it would be meddlesome for me to get involved.

"Master Beryl and the knights are watching, so let's give it our all," Randid told the pupils.

"Kaaay!"

It seemed they wanted to show us what they could do. As an instructor, I could ask for no greater happiness.

"Hmph! Showing off to Master Beryl is one thing, but I'm betting the knights are no big deal!"

And just as things were proceeding with a nice mood in the air, one voice resounded through the dojo. It was a short girl around the same height as Curuni. Her bluish-black hair was of moderate length, and her confident golden eyes were slanted at the corners much like Mewi's. She had a strength of will behind those eyes that made up for her slight stature.

In truth, she didn't have a rough temperament—she was just very willful. The

girl was very serious and diligent during training, but once she had her mind set on something, she was too stubborn to budge. That didn't mean everyone hated her or anything. Her characteristic optimism and competitive spirit actually attracted people to her, and her personality was well suited for swordsmanship.

"Adel! Don't be so rude!"

"How is that rude?! I didn't say anything wrong!"

Even after getting scolded by Randid, her attitude remained unchanged. It was pretty hard to stop her once she got started. That hadn't changed at all from the day I'd started teaching her. Randid seemed to have problems reining her in, and it'd been rather difficult for me too, to be honest.

At any rate, the atmosphere in the dojo was pretty tense now. It didn't look like they were going to have a harmonious lesson anymore.

"As a knight, I'm curious as to why she's come to believe that," Henblitz muttered, still calm despite the verbal attack.

He lived up to his title as lieutenant commander of the kingdom's greatest order. Flaring up from some country girl's provocation would be disgraceful for a knight. Curuni, on the other hand, was in a completely speechless panic. She could definitely learn to be more knightly.

"Adel," I said. "I'm not going to deny you your personal opinion, but shouldn't you at least start with an introduction?"

At any rate, while Henblitz was fine, Adel needed calming down. She tended to put her emotions on full display, but that didn't mean she was stupid. If anything, she was rather clever.

She suddenly gulped and fell silent. She was the type of girl to immediately consider anything you said as long as you had a point. Therefore, if I could get her to calm down for a moment, we could talk things out properly.

"Adel... Adel Klein," she started, her expression, tone, and gaze still as aggressive as before. "I'm Master Beryl and Master Randid's pupil. I'm going to become a great adventurer like Master Randid one day."

“A wonderful goal. Allow me to introduce myself once more. I’m Henblitz Drout.”

Adel Klein was one of my pupils and Randidr’s pupil now too. She was around fifteen years old. She hadn’t grown up in Beaden, but in the neighboring village of Ard. We were the only swordsmanship dojo in the general vicinity, so we had quite a few pupils who’d been born elsewhere.

Adel had a talent for the sword. She’d spent about three years at our dojo and had picked up on things very quickly, but her swordsmanship differed from the likes of Allucia and Ficelle due to her aggressive personality. She was far more similar to Surena, though Surena hadn’t technically been my pupil.

There was also one other peculiarity about Adel’s upbringing.

“S-Sis, calm down... Everyone’s shocked...”

“Edel! Don’t you agree with me?!”

A timid boy cut into the conversation. This was Edel Klein, Adel’s twin brother. Twins weren’t exactly an uncommon sight, but it was rare to see ones of different genders. He was somewhat taller than Adel, had shorter bluish-black hair, and his golden eyes had a reddish tinge. However, what differentiated him the most were his downturned eyes. In a sense, they reflected his nature perfectly.

Adel and Edel had similar facial features and were naturally the same age, but their personalities were polar opposites. The sister was self-assured and knew no fear, while the brother was docile and reticent. What made it even more interesting was that Edel was the slightly stronger of the two. There wasn’t a clear gap in their abilities or anything—they simply fought differently.

Edel’s swordsmanship was influenced by his personality. He specialized in a careful and fluid style. In contrast, Adel always charged in greedily, so she was poorly matched against him. However, that did mean there were opponents Adel could beat that Edel couldn’t, and they were ultimately closer in ability than not.

“Edel, do you share her opinion?” Henblitz asked gently.

“U-Um... I, uh...”

The fact that he didn't deny it immediately showed he did share Adel's opinion, even if not to the same degree. I hadn't expected them to feel this way. After all, during my time teaching them—in other words, before I'd left for Baltrain—this line of conversation hadn't come up a single time.

Public opinion placed the knights of the Liberion Order at the pinnacle of an already honored occupation. They received exceedingly high praise on the streets, and there were many like Curuni who'd striven to learn the sword for the sole purpose of joining the Liberion Order. Naturally, adventuring was also a very popular occupation, but in a direct comparison, knights came out on top. That made the acceptance rate that much lower, so joining the Liberion Order was no small feat. Regardless, this was my first time hearing anyone look down on knights. That was simply how famous, popular, and strong the Liberion Order was.

"He's acting all timid, but his opinion is pretty much the same as mine," Adel declared bluntly, tired of waiting for Edel's reply.

"That makes me all the more curious..." Henblitz said. "May I hear why?"

I shared Henblitz's curiosity. The Liberion Order rarely came all the way out here, but that also benefited its reputation—it was strange to have such a negative impression of the order without ever having encountered a knight.

"I've never met a Liberion knight before today," Adel said, puffing out her chest as if to say her opinion was irrefutable. "Even when my village was attacked by monsters, even when a poor crop yield threatened us, and even when Master Beryl and the others went to defeat the saberboars, not a single knight ever came."

Henblitz remained silent.

"The ones who saved us were adventurers, hunters, and Master Beryl," Adel continued. "You're always just holed up in the capital. How can anyone like that be impressive?"

"That really hits home..." Henblitz said with a dispirited look.

I understood where she was coming from, even if she was a little too blunt about it. No knights would get dispatched just to clean up a backwater village's

issues. They had their own priorities to maintain, as well as their limits.

The royal garrison existed to cover such gaps, but they didn't exist across the entire kingdom either, and they didn't have a local presence in Beaden. So, people who lived in such remote villages relied on adventurers or their local hunters. Mercenaries were also technically an option, but they couldn't expect good pay in the sticks, so while their reasons differed from any knights, they pretty much never came out to villages like this.

I personally understood why the Liberion Order was incapable of protecting every corner of the kingdom. They simply didn't have enough personnel. Liberis was vast, and even if the entire order was mobilized, they could only defend a fraction of the nation. That might prompt the question "Why don't they just hire more knights?" but that was an entirely separate problem. Increasing their numbers would mean lowering the difficulty of the entrance exam. In other words, an increase in quantity would come at a drastic loss in quality—both in terms of martial prowess and a knight's spirit.

To add to that, if the quality of knights deteriorated, their reputation across the kingdom would also plummet. That would lead to an inevitable decrease in budget from the nation and also cause management issues. At worst, the organization itself could become corrupt.

For any organization, it was necessary to be somewhat selective to retain a level of quality. If a knightly order only needed to be a gathering of martial force barely any better than a bunch of ruffians, they could just recruit endlessly. No one wanted that, however.

Given all this, Adel's opinion made sense. In fact, it was pretty normal for someone to only consider events they'd personally witnessed. I would've liked for her to expand her outlook somewhat, but there was a limit to what could be accomplished out in the country. Compounding the issue, an adventurer had become an assistant instructor at the dojo, which had reinforced her opinion further.

"As one of the kingdom's knights, it is disheartening that we are unable to secure the people's safety," Henblitz responded sincerely. "On that point, I can say nothing in my defense."

I was grateful for his attitude, but it wasn't really enough to change Adel and Edel's impression of knights.

"However, this doesn't mean the order has given up on it," Henblitz continued. "It may sound like a poor excuse, but we train every day to that end. I can only devote myself to this path in hopes that you come to accept that, even if only a little. If necessary, I'm not opposed to showing my resolve."

The Liberion Order wasn't protecting all of the kingdom's citizens. It would be an impractical feat, but even so, their policy was a serious problem for those exposed to real threats. However, the order had its pride. They were the strongest force in the kingdom. They defended their homeland. Those emotions were clear behind Henblitz's voice.

"Hmph. Are you trying to claim you're strong?" Adel snorted.

"Not as strong as Mr. Beryl, but yes, strong to an extent," he replied.

"Just say you're strong..." I quipped without thinking.

Why bring me up as part of answering the question? Have some confidence. You're plenty strong enough as is.

"Master Beryl? Is this guy actually good?" Adel asked.

"Don't call him 'this guy.' Be polite," I said. "Well, I guess it's weird coming from me, but he is. At the very least, he's stronger than you."

"Hmmm... Bring it on!"

Oops, I didn't mean to egg her on. But what else could I say? Henblitz was very strong. Adel was talented and had a great foundation for swordplay, but it was unreasonable for her to win against the lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order. Even Curuni was more skilled with a blade than she was.

In short, Adel still didn't know how vast the world was. She saw degrees of strength entirely from the tiny world of a dojo in the middle of the sticks. I wanted her to see how huge the world was and how many kinds of strength there were out there.

Randrid seemed to be of the same opinion. He wasn't making any attempt to stop the conversation. He only watched on with a half look of resignation. Well,

if he could've stopped her with words, he probably would've by now.

The next words to come from Adel's mouth were something pretty much everyone present had expected.

"Sir Henblitz, if you're willing to back that claim, then have a match with me."

However, Henblitz's response was far from expected.

"I don't mind," he said before pouring more oil onto the fire. "If you'd like, both you and Edel may come at me at once."

"Why you...! Don't look down on us!"

"H-Henblitz?" I said.

"Sorry... Am I overreaching?" he asked, an air of regret in his voice.

He thought he'd been a little too provocative. He wasn't thinking a two-on-one would be harsh in any way. In other words, he didn't foresee any problems with facing Adel and Edel at the same time.

"Hmm... I wonder about that..." I muttered.

Looking only at the outcome, it seemed like Henblitz had been the one to provoke them into this, but my statement had technically sparked it off. Tracing it all the way back, Adel had been the one to pick a fight. That said, his assessment of their respective strengths was correct. As long as Adel and Edel didn't pull off some extreme surprise attack, Henblitz was sure to defeat them—even two-on-one. That was simply how skilled he was compared to them. I knew this because I was aware of all their individual abilities, but it would be impossible for the twins to understand that before seeing him fight.

"Master! Are you saying this guy is stronger than us?!" Adel protested.

"Not 'this guy.' Henblitz. Anyway, even if you both take him at once, he's still stronger."

"WHA?!"

I felt like I was repeating myself, and my answer wasn't going to change. The twins were talented, but to put it harshly, they were nothing more than trainees with barely any practical experience. It would be a different matter in a

twenty-on-one, but the Liberion Order's lieutenant commander wasn't such an empty title that he would lose to these youngsters.

I'd won against Henblitz during our first match, and I hadn't taken even the slightest graze of his sword, so you could say it'd been a complete victory. However, I'd never once looked down on him or doubted his abilities. I wasn't just assuming based on his title or anything. He was genuinely strong.

He could draw out significant power and speed from his well-built physique. He had more than enough toughness, stamina, and technique too. He also had a good sense for the flow of battle. The reason I'd beaten him was simply because I'd had a larger accumulation of experience over the years. If I'd fought Henblitz back when I was his age, I would've lost—even with my good eyes.

Incidentally, I'd never seen Henblitz lose to any knight other than Allucia. This was despite him showing up to the training hall pretty much every day and having a good number of bouts. Also, during the royal escort mission where we'd fought alongside Gatoga and Rose, he hadn't lost against the assassins. It was only because someone ludicrous like Allucia was always next to him that you could forget how ridiculously strong he was.

“In that case, let's see it! Edel, let's do it!”

“Wh-Whaaa...?”

“No complaining!”

“F-Fine...”

Unable to take it any longer, Adel finally snapped and challenged Henblitz alongside Edel. Normally, this would be the point where she challenged him one-on-one, but Adel was a clever girl.

At heart, she refused to believe she could lose. However, having gained some information on Henblitz from me, her internal assessment of him had gone up significantly. Being able to honestly take that information into account was one of her strong points—the ability to properly measure your opponent's strength was a matter of life or death for a swordsman. *Well, she still doesn't have a good measure of her opponent. If she did, she wouldn't have picked a fight with the Liberion Order's lieutenant commander...*

Henblitz looked eager, so I decided to use him to expand Adel's outlook on the world.

"Um, Master? Is this, like, really okay?" Curuni asked.

"As long as Henblitz is fine with it."

I wasn't quite sure which side Curuni was worried about. Either way, it was going to be fine. Henblitz wasn't going to slam his full strength into them or anything. *You're not going to, right? Right? You totally went all out against me, though...*

"Let me ask you this, then," I said to Curuni. "Two or three years into learning swordsmanship, do you think you could've won against Henblitz? Let's assume there were two of you too."

"No way," she answered instantly. "I doubt even five of me would've been enough."

"That's the gist of it."

I couldn't imagine myself winning against Henblitz as a newbie swordsman either.

"You good with this too, Randid?" I asked.

"So long as you are, Master."

"Then there isn't a problem."

Now that we had the current assistant instructor's permission, things could go ahead. Honestly, I didn't believe Adel and Edel had any chance against Henblitz, but I was interested in how the two would fight and how Henblitz would handle them.

"You can keep going until you're all satisfied," I said. "However, if Randid or I decide things are getting dangerous, we'll put a stop to it. You good with that?"

"Not a problem."

"Sounds good!"

"Ugh... Understood..."

In large contrast to Adel, Edel was acting like he'd gotten caught up in some

accident. Still, he wasn't the type of kid to hold back or slack off in a sword fight. If he was really against this, he would've never agreed to participate in the first place. He clearly believed that the two of them could put up a fight, even if they couldn't win. It was hard to call Edel cheerful by any metric, but that didn't mean he lacked confidence. He had pride in his swordsmanship too, and that pride was being put to the test here and now.

"Okay then, get in position," I said. "The rest of you kids keep your distance."

The three backed off from one another and readied wooden swords. The other pupils moved to the walls. There wasn't as much space here as the order's training hall, but it was still large enough for a two-on-one fight.

A sudden silence filled the dojo. I liked this kind of atmosphere.

"Then...begin!"

"Haaaaah!"

The moment I gave the starting signal, Adel let out a tremendous battle cry. *Yup, yup, that's a splendid display of spirit.* This was the way of an aggressive swordsman. Her choice of move to open the match was correct. Shaking an opponent with pure spirit was honestly pretty effective. This was especially the case against an unfamiliar opponent. Creating even an instant of hesitation could lead to an advantage. However, that was only against an opponent of your level or one who was weaker than you.

"Shaaaaah!"

Henblitz roared in response. This was also the correct choice. If your opponent was mustering their spirit, you just had to meet them with even more of your own. It was very simple logic, but a sword fight could be decided in such a fashion. And, if your spirit was about equal to your opponent's, all that was left was to settle things another way—with genuine technique.

"Gh! Guh!"

Adel charged in with a two-handed vertical strike. Henblitz chose not to dodge it at all and catch the blow head-on. Their blades locked, but the equilibrium was broken in an instant. Henblitz's physical strength far surpassed Adel's.

“Hrrrm!”

Henblitz put even more strength behind his sword, and unable to escape it, Adel’s knee buckled. He was making sure she could see the difference in their strength.

Henblitz can be more mischievous than I thought... His approach wasn’t exactly wrong, but it was kind of mean-spirited.

“Hmph!”

“Shaaah!”

Seeing Adel was in a bad situation, Edel lunged with a sharp thrust from the side. However, quickly sensing his presence, Henblitz pulled back his sword and parried the thrust.

“Wh-Wha?!”

A violent thud, one you wouldn’t imagine coming from wooden swords, resounded in the air and Edel was blown back by the impact.

Wow, he smacked the core of his sword as hard as he could.

It was impressive that Edel had kept a hold of his sword. A strike like that against someone’s body would definitely knock them out.

Is this really okay? I’m starting to get worried now.

“Edel! Together!”

“M-Mm!”

Regaining her balance in the meantime, Adel yelled an order. She’d deduced that going at Henblitz one at a time just meant they would be crushed again and again. Seeing that they couldn’t beat him alone, she’d had them shift tactics —they would attack simultaneously or in waves. The twins had pretty good instincts for fighting.

“Hiyaaaaah!”

“Hah!”

Adel charged in with another battle cry. Unlike before, Edel also charged at a subtly different angle.

“Haaah!”

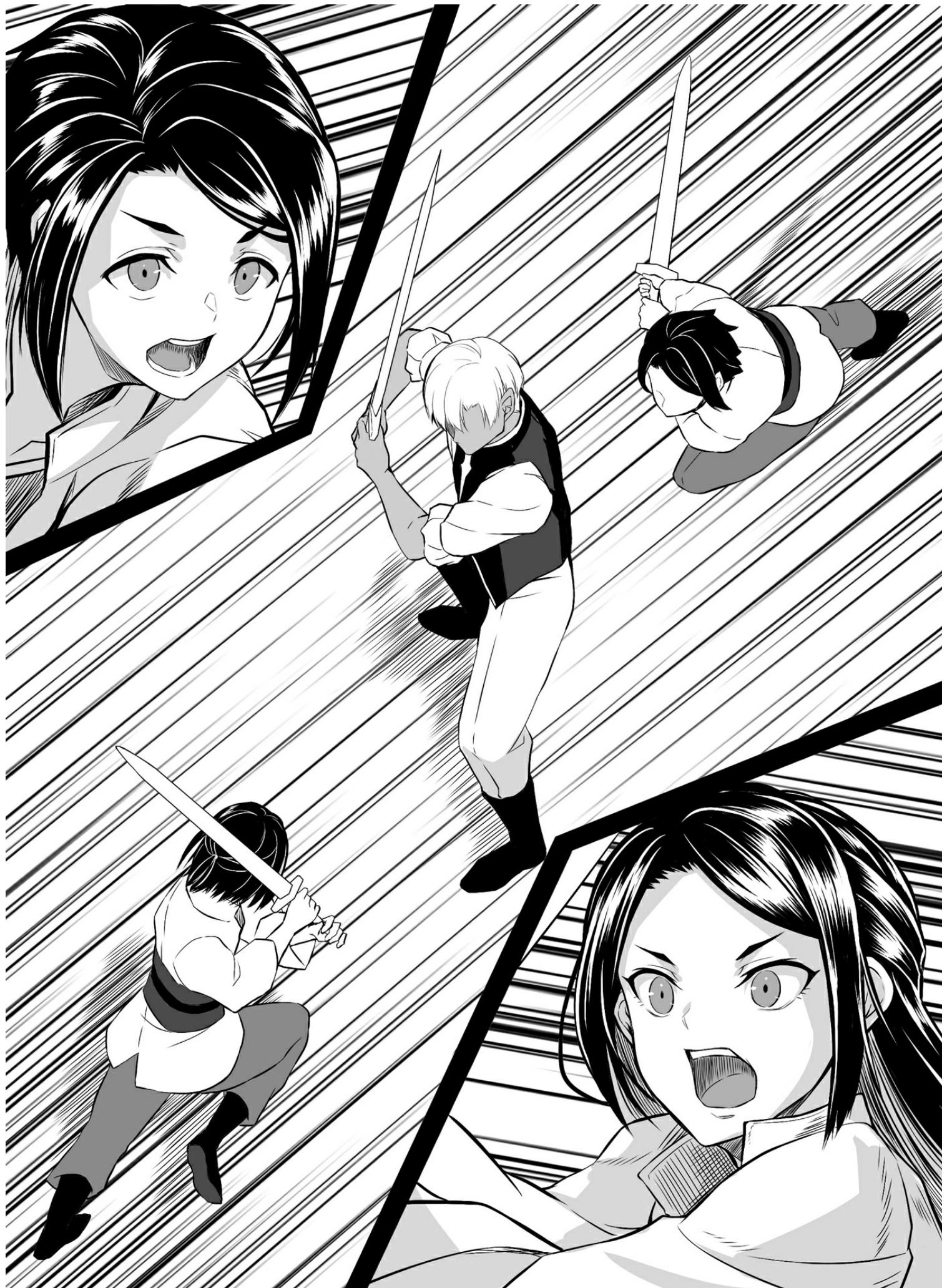
“Wha?!”

Just like before, Henblitz met them with an intense battle cry of his own. He faced Adel and stepped in close. No longer at the correct range, Adel couldn't muster a proper swing—her sword was blown back by Henblitz's violent strike. By moving forward, he'd also managed to escape Edel's initial range.

Using the instant Adel was stumbling from his blow, Henblitz swiftly turned and intercepted Edel's sword. In terms of pure physical strength, Edel was physically weaker than Adel. There was no way he could oppose Henblitz's might. As a result, the twins were once more repelled with ease.

“Hmmm...”

Man, Henblitz really is strong. He was obviously skilled with a sword, but he also knew how to fight multiple opponents at once. As a lieutenant commander, he was in a position to command other knights, so maybe it was natural that he was used to fights that involved great numbers.



“Tch! Not yet!” Adel shouted.

“That’s the spirit!” Henblitz roared. “Come!”

Despite being knocked back so splendidly, Adel’s fighting spirit remained. She charged in once more. This time, she came at him with a thrust but pulled back with a feint just as she was about to come into range. She was giving this a lot of thought. *It’s important to keep your brain active in the middle of a battle.*

Meanwhile, Edel circled around Henblitz and attacked from behind, but Henblitz sent him flying backward with a kick.

Do you have eyes on the back of your head?

While waiting for Edel to recover, Adel stopped her big flashy attacks and focused on smaller quick strikes, but all of them were knocked aside or dodged.

Adel and Edel were now on the defensive. It was pretty much over. They didn’t possess the technique to manage Henblitz’s strength.

“He’s pretty amazing...”

Surprisingly, despite the considerable strength Henblitz was putting behind his blows, he hadn’t struck their bodies a single time. Every clash had been between wooden swords. The only direct hit so far had been that kick.

He’s probably trying to avoid injuring them. This was despite Adel and Edel mercilessly trying to hit him with everything they had. There was an absurd gap in technique and experience between them.

“Aaaaaah!”

“Gh!”

Even though it hadn’t been that long since this had started, Adel and Edel’s clothes were already rumpled and dirty from tumbling across the ground over and over. Regardless, they didn’t give up. Their willpower was worthy of praise, but this couldn’t go on for much longer.

One’s mental condition was very important in a fight. A slight difference in ability could be compensated for with strength of heart, but this worked both ways. At first, Adel and Edel had been sure of their victory. However, that had

changed to a desire to win at any cost, then to a desire to at least get a hit in, and now, to knowing they had no chance. Once things progressed that far, they were a lost cause. They were already at a strength and technique disadvantage, so if they were losing the mental battle too, there was no way they could win.

“Enough!” I yelled.

I’d watched over this for a while but decided they were at their limits. Henblitz remained silent at my declaration, while Edel looked despondent. Adel maintained a look of uncontrollable anger, but she lowered her sword too.

“Why?!” she asked. “We can still keep going!”

“It’s no good,” I told her. “You’ve clearly lost focus. Any more of this and you might get injured.”

“Ugh!”

She still had plenty of stamina. My pupils all started their training with a lot of running and conditioning, so she wasn’t exhausted yet. Nevertheless, her mind was considerably fatigued. A single mistake in that state could lead to a major injury. Adel had to know this too. She didn’t argue and just hung her head.

“Well done, Henblitz,” I said.

“Thank you very much,” he replied after taking a single breath, not showing much fatigue. “I must say, they’re far stronger than I initially estimated. I suppose I should’ve expected that from your pupils, Mr. Beryl.”

Despite being faced with such animosity, he made sure to show due consideration. He really was a capable man.

The mood wasn’t quite right to get back to lessons. Just as I was wondering what to do next—

“Sorry!”

“Whoa.”

—Adel suddenly apologized. She kept her head high and puffed out her chest, though. *Adel, that’s not the right way to say sorry.*

“You really are strong! Forgive my rudeness! But I’ll definitely catch up and

overtake you!"

"That's the spirit. I'll be ready to accept your challenge at any time."

Adel's declaration was so bold it was refreshing. This had gotten across to Henblitz, who replied with a genuine smile.

I guess that settles it. Well, as long as they're all okay with it now.

I still didn't know how her skills would develop or what kind of person she would become in the future. It was entirely possible she would stop walking the path of swordsmanship halfway. Maybe she would become an adventurer just like she'd claimed. Maybe she would even become a knight. Regardless of what it was to be, I prayed these children had bright futures. We adults could pave the way for them to an extent, but what path they chose was ultimately up to them.

"Randid, sorry for taking up your time," I said. "You can go back to the usual."

"Ah, yes. Understood."

Our goal in coming to the dojo wasn't to have Henblitz fight Adel and Edel. That had been more of an inexplicable accident. We were here to select pupils we could take along on the saberboar hunt.

It was time to fulfill our original objective.



Some time after Adel and Edel's sudden mock battle, the atmosphere in the dojo had pretty much returned to normal. The pupils swung their swords as they repeated after Randid.

"Next, second defensive form! One! Two!"

"One! Two!" the students called out.

"This really takes me back," Curuni muttered as she watched.

"Right?" I nodded. The order never practiced forms, so even I felt somewhat nostalgic watching this.

"Are these your school's basic forms?" Henblitz asked.

"Yeah. We have five offensive forms and eight defensive ones."

Despite having just finished sparring, Henblitz's breathing was perfectly regular. *That probably didn't even serve as a warmup for him. The lieutenant commander's looking more and more superhuman.*

This was a dojo, so we had proper forms that defined our style—as mentioned, we had five offensive and eight defensive. To put it simply, these were fixed sword-fighting patterns that we drilled into our pupils, and we taught them to react in certain ways depending on their opponent's movements. The reason we had more defensive forms was mostly due to our style, since we prioritized countering and blocking an opponent's attacks.

That said, these drills were nothing more than the basics, and our students were practicing fundamental movements. You could hardly ever use an exact form in a fight. Still, having the patterns drilled into your mind came in handy at critical moments. You couldn't underestimate the power of practice by repetition. And even though swordsmen couldn't often use exact forms in a fight, there would be moments when they realized, *Hey, I've gone through this flow of offense and defense before when practicing basic forms!* Humans were capable of remaining remarkably calm when dealing with familiar phenomena. The forms existed to widen that breadth of familiarity.

Incidentally, the techniques passed down in our dojo were all pretty much within these forms or derived from them. The branch breaker technique I often used was part of the fourth defensive form. That said, though the movement was built into the form, using it in combat was an entirely different matter.

Once Mewi was in better physical condition, I wanted her to try experiencing a lesson at the dojo. There were a ton of things that couldn't be conveyed in the sword magic course, and if Mewi took a liking to swordplay, I would gladly lend her a hand.

However, leaving her out today ended up being the right choice. Much like Adel and Edel, Mewi's impression of Henblitz probably wasn't set in stone yet. Seeing such a violent side to him might freak her out, and I certainly didn't want that.

"So? Any hopefuls?" Henblitz asked.

"Hmm... Well, Adel and Edel are basically locked in."

He was referring to the saberboar hunt. Those two had more than enough talent, especially considering how young they were and how much experience they had. Henblitz was honestly just too strong. I wasn't going to do anything reckless like abandon trainees on the front lines, but if they were interested, I wanted them to get some valuable combat experience.

There were things you could only learn through lessons and things you could only learn in combat. Adel in particular wanted to become an adventurer, so it was best for her to get as much practical experience as possible.

"As for the others...let's go over our list after watching a bit longer."

To put it less diplomatically, at a glance, none of the other kids seemed advanced enough to bring along. Allucia, Randid, Ficelle, Curuni, and Rose had all been strong students with splendid attributes—and now they could all boast a fantastic set of accomplishments. However, I couldn't use them as a standard. If I did, the bar would be way too high for most novice students.

Setting a standard based on a small group of geniuses is sure to lead to disaster. As an instructor, I can't afford to make that mistake.

Naturally, there was no telling how these pupils would grow up. I could only make a judgment based on the present, so since we would be fighting dangerous monsters, we couldn't take anyone who wasn't currently strong enough.

There were also pupils who coincidentally hadn't come to the dojo today. The plan was to keep an eye on things for another day. The dojo's doors were open at all times except for some fixed days, but that didn't mean our pupils showed up whenever it was open. The days that students trained differed from person to person, so we couldn't make our decision in a single day. After all, it was physically impractical for those who lived in other villages to attend the dojo every single day.

In addition, I was just observing the students drill through basic forms. It was difficult to measure true strength this way—an instructor could get a general grasp of students' abilities based on the precision of their form, but more observation was needed to pinpoint their actual skill levels. This only really

applied to pupils of *our* dojo, though. There were definitely kids who could suddenly showcase their strengths when doing striking or attack practice. Knowing all of this, it would be overly hasty to finalize our saberboar hunting roster on the spot.

“This is rather interesting,” Henblitz said. “Their footwork in particular appears very distinctive. Is that a result of prioritizing parrying?”

“You have a good eye.”

Our style focused on defense, and this was evident from the number of defensive forms we had. However, we didn’t just block attacks head-on—we honed our skill at *diverting* attacks. The crux of this technique was in how you used your lower body, and the footwork could look strange to someone not familiar with it.

Our fighting style was less about winning and more about not losing. That was why we had pupils like Allucia, Ficelle, and Rose, who prioritized reacting rather than pushing forward to take the first move. It was also why I didn’t believe our style suited Surena. Her current style wasn’t very compatible with mine.

Powerful types like Curuni and Adel did pop up every now and then, though. Having brute strength was definitely an advantage, but a sword that depended entirely on power was surprisingly brittle. I didn’t want my pupils to end up like that.

“This lesson truly reinforces why you place such an emphasis on core strength,” Henblitz remarked.

“Ha ha, I’m glad you understand.”

The core was indispensable for properly manipulating your lower body. When trying to perform our style’s basic forms with precision and speed, the inexperienced often found that their center of gravity was thrown off. That made it impossible to move as you wanted.

“The lessons here are super strict in that regard,” Curuni joined in. “I’m pretty confident in my core and abs too.”

I nodded. “That’s probably one reason you adapted to a zweihander so quickly.”

“R-Really? Heh heh heh heh!”

Core strength was important for longsword users like Henblitz and me, but it was even more important for Curuni and her two-handed sword. Arm strength was enough to just lift the thing, but not enough to skillfully manipulate such a long and heavy blade. Thinking back on it again, a two-handed sword really did suit Curuni well. Her abs were practically bulging. Though defined muscles weren’t necessarily a sign of immense strength.

“Mr. Beryl, I assume you’re the best at the forms, right?” Henblitz asked.

“No, that would be my dad,” I answered immediately. “But I *am* pretty confident.” I’d spent years with our sword style, but my dad was still the best at it.

“I see... He must be very strong.”

“He is. He’s the strongest swordsman I know.”

I didn’t have much else to say—I wasn’t the type to be brimming with confidence. However, when it came to my dad, I could make a definitive declaration: he was the strongest. Allucia and Henblitz were plenty strong, but one-on-one, they could never win against him.

“So that means, even you can’t...” Henblitz started.

“Yeah, I’m weaker than him.”

“He’s *that* strong...?” Curuni asked. “That’s kinda scary.”

“Ha ha, he’s a happy-go-lucky geezer when it comes to everything else,” I said. “He’s just a devil when it comes to swordplay.”

Quite frankly, my dad was abnormally strong. I’d been swinging a sword for as long as I could remember, putting in significant effort over decades to master the blade, and I still couldn’t imagine coming anywhere close to beating him.

In truth, I’d never seen him lose. It didn’t matter if it was sparring with a pupil or a dojo challenger, or participating in a contest between schools—my dad had always won a conclusive victory. I couldn’t even remember him taking a hit. As far as I knew, the only person who would have any chance against him was Lucy. That would be a fight between monsters—one I would pay money to see.

Thinking back on it, my dad had always been several steps ahead of me on my path toward mastery. I had confidence that I was far stronger than before, and I was aware of my growth. However, no matter how much others praised my skills, as long as my dad remained so far beyond me, I couldn't honestly accept any of it. How could I take pride in my skills when I still couldn't beat my aging father? Those feelings always hounded me.

"The summit is so far..." Henblitz muttered.

"I couldn't agree more," I said. "We've got a long way to go."

Every now and then, I wondered what the view was like from my dad's perspective. The world was vast. I wasn't going to claim that my dad was the strongest in the world. However, I remained incapable of picturing what kind of techniques a swordsman could use to defeat him. That didn't mean I was going to stop aiming for the summit. I wanted to reach those heights one day, but they still seemed so far away.

"Well, let's focus on the pupils," I said.

"Indeed."

We returned our focus to the lesson. For now, the plan was to pick any hopefulets today and tomorrow, and then, depending on the weather, head into the mountains. We dealt with saberboars pretty much every year, so we had a general idea of where they roamed. It would be too dangerous to venture deep into the mountains, though. We weren't really adventurers or explorers or anything, after all—well, except for Randid. Our goal was to cull their numbers at the base of the mountain so that they would no longer threaten the nearby villages. There was no need to recklessly charge in. Even if there were more saberboars than usual, we had plenty of helping hands this year. As long as we remained vigilant, there weren't going to be any major problems.

"Nine! Ten! Okay, take a break!"

"Yes!"

And just like that, forms practice came to an end, and the students took a short breather. Befitting a former adventurer, Randid's lesson plan left plenty of room for recovery. It was hard to get anywhere if you just pushed nonstop,

and above all else, the dojo was really hot. With so many people moving inside an enclosed space, it only got warmer and warmer.

“Good work,” I told Randid. “It was a nice lesson. Sound, steady, and faithful to the basics.”

“Thank you. I’m still fumbling around a lot, though...”

“You’re doing fine. Have some confidence.”

He really was doing a good job. He was probably better than I had been when I’d just started as an assistant instructor. His skills and experiences as a top class adventurer were definitely playing a big role. These days, I had plenty of opinions when it came to teaching swordplay, but at first, I really had been fumbling around. Even though I’d seen my dad teach, there was a world of difference between watching and doing. I’d stumbled quite a lot before establishing my current teaching style.

“Make sure to stay hydrated,” I added.

“Yes, I will. The summer heat saps away your willpower and stamina rather quickly.”

“Ha ha ha, I guess I don’t need to tell that to an amazing adventurer.”

A platinum rank adventurer must’ve seen some harsh environments. He probably had far more experience in the field than I did.

“Honestly, what do you think?” Randid asked, changing the topic.

“Judging by their current skills, a few at most,” I answered.

“Thought so. Only a few...” he said, his tone a little bitter.

If possible, I would’ve liked to bring all of our pupils along. But that couldn’t happen. Each was talented to a different degree, and they were growing at different rates. That naturally limited the number of those who had the strength to withstand actual combat.

And also, not everyone here wanted to fight at every opportunity they had. A fair number of kids were just studying swordsmanship for self-defense. However, even some who *wanted* to fight were going to be left behind. That was one thing we really couldn’t do anything about.

“Things never go the way you want, huh?” I muttered.

There were always kids whose talents and bodies couldn’t keep up with their desire to learn swordsmanship, make a name for themselves, or become mighty. Even if they did have dormant potential, there were plenty who didn’t manage to draw it out in their lifetime. For example, Curuni had the makings of a great swordswoman, but during her days as my pupil, we hadn’t taken her out to hunt saberboars.

Maybe things would be easier if the degree of talent decided everything, like in the world of wizards. However, *anyone* was capable of wielding a sword. *I guess it would be problematic in an entirely different way if geniuses like Allucia came pouring out of the woodwork. I don’t really want to imagine a world where that’s considered normal.*

“Maybe all we’re capable of is teaching each student with sincerity,” Randid said.

“Ha ha, you’re not wrong.”

I couldn’t help but agree with him. There was a persuasiveness to that argument, especially coming from someone who’d been on countless adventures. Yes, an instructor couldn’t refuse to teach someone because of a lack of talent—that would be an insult to all those who strove to master the blade. The only thing we could do was teach each and every pupil with the utmost sincerity. By doing so, we could reconcile their dreams with reality.

“Well, it’s about time to get back to it,” Randid said. “Everyone! Break’s over!”

“Kaaay!”

After a bit of rest, Randid got the lesson started again. I had no idea how many of the people in this dojo would find success and how many would give up on the sword. However, at least for the moment, it was Randid’s role to oversee it, not mine.

Being a special instructor for the Liberion Order was indeed a great honor, and it was pretty fun for me too. Tempering career knights who’d passed a grueling selection process was something I couldn’t experience at the dojo. It

was very fulfilling.

Nevertheless, I felt a little vexed that I couldn't see where the pupils I'd trained from scratch were going to end up...even if only for a little while.

"It's possible that more future knights will be born in this dojo," Henblitz said.
"Something to look forward to, huh?"

"Yeah... You're right."

This emotion was only just now building up within me, and it had been triggered by coming back to the dojo after an extended absence. I found myself unable to come to grips with it.

Interlude

Mornings in Beaden started early. To be precise, the farther you went into the countryside, the earlier mornings were. Since agriculture was the primary industry in the area, it was common to see villagers out and about the moment the sun peeked over the horizon—or even before that.

Similarly, nights fell early too. Unlike in urban areas, where there was entertainment available after-hours, a remote village had problems even securing proper illumination. It made sense that villagers would go to sleep once the sun had set.

Currently, it was just around sunset. Pretty much all of the village was getting ready to settle in for the night. That was when the head of the house, Mordea Gardenant, paid a visit to the young man who'd accompanied his son on his homecoming.

“Henblitz, do you have a moment?”

“Mr. Mordea? Is something the matter?”

“I just want to chat.”

The one to answer the door was the young lion of the kingdom’s elite Liberion Order, Henblitz Drout. He wasn’t exactly dressed for battle, but he held himself as if he were ready to go at any moment. Mordea wasn’t overly impressed by this, though he did admire such mental conditioning. However, Henblitz’s behavior was also proof that he didn’t see this space as somewhere he could relax. After wondering what to do about this for a short moment, the good-natured old man decided on a course of action.

“If it’s not a bother, could you come with me for a bit?” Mordea asked.

“It’s not a bother at all. I’ll gladly accompany you.”

Henblitz didn’t hesitate over the sudden invitation. He’d unreasonably asked to come along on this trip, so there was no way he would insist on having everything go his way. He’d decided that, during his stay in Beaden, he would

do everything in his power to cooperate—much like when he'd agreed to clean the dojo. It didn't matter whether it was manual labor or anything else. If the head of the house was asking for his presence, Henblitz would gladly go along as long as there was no other urgent business to attend to.

Upon entering the living room, the two men were greeted by Mordea's wife and Beryl's mother—Frenne Gardenant. She appeared to be preparing for tomorrow and was in the middle of stirring a large and worn-out pot.

"Oh my, what is it, dear?" asked Frenne.

"Nothing serious. I was just thinking of getting better acquainted with our guest."

"Mrs. Frenne," said Henblitz, "if there's anything I can do to help, please do not hesitate to ask."

"My, my, there's no need to worry about that."

Henblitz smoothly offered a hand, but he was refused with a cheerful smile. Incidentally, he'd been referring to her as "madam" before this, but Frenne had told him he was being too formal. She'd felt like he'd been putting too much distance between them, and there'd been no reason for the Liberion Order's lieutenant commander to act that way around her.

"You're technically a guest here," Mordea said. "You can relax a bit more."

"While I appreciate the consideration, I am technically the one imposing on you."

"Well, I won't force you..."

Henblitz called it imposing, but from Mordea's perspective, this was one of the leaders of the organization that was looking after his son. Mordea wasn't going to ask Henblitz to speak frankly or anything like that, but he believed Henblitz could afford to be a bit more selfish. Henblitz had enough strength and social status to allow for that. On the other hand, it was precisely because he acted with such courtesy—despite his title—that Mordea and Frenne had assessed him highly.

"Do you happen to be a drinker, Henblitz?" Mordea asked, pulling out a bottle

of wine.

“I enjoy it to an extent.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Henblitz could hold his drink *very* well. He was still no match for Allucia, but few knights could compare to his stamina. If he wanted, he could drink most people under the table. Still, he had enough self-restraint to avoid heavily drinking in someone else’s home when he hadn’t, strictly speaking, even been invited to visit in the first place.

Mordea’s house was one of Beaden’s landmarks, and it possessed considerable authority and assets. The dojo had a significant history, and the villagers saw it in a good light. However, even with considerable wealth, it was hard to procure goods in the countryside. Beaden wasn’t on any trade routes, so very few merchants came out this way. Daily necessities like food were one thing, but acquiring luxury goods like alcohol was difficult, and there was very little of it to go around. Also, unlike in Baltrain, you couldn’t expect any chilled ale in a village like this. That was why they favored relatively cheap drinks that could be preserved for a long time without affecting the taste.

“Wanna keep me company for a few cups?” Mordea asked.

“Yes, I’ll gladly accept.”

Mordea poured wine into two tankards, and they knocked them together heartily. Henblitz wet his lips with a small sip, while Mordea gulped his wine down.

“It might be a little crude,” Mordea said. “I’m sure the stuff in Baltrain is far beyond comparison.”

“No, not at all.”

This certainly couldn’t be called first-class wine. The liquid was cloudy, the taste thin, the alcohol content low, the sweetness faint, and it was quite bitter. However, sometimes the quality of the drink didn’t matter. The mood was important, in which case there wasn’t a problem as long as the drink wasn’t so horrible you wanted to pour it out. On that point, this wine passed the minimum qualifications. Henblitz managed to drink it calmly without the

slightest grimace.

After drinking in silence for a while, Mordea muttered somewhat timidly, “Is he doing well...?”

Henblitz could only think of one person he could be referring to. “Of course. He treats us all very well.”

This was his honest and frank impression. Henblitz would be the first to admit that he’d been extremely rude during their initial meeting. *My doubts concerning Beryl and Allucia were utterly disgraceful.* However, looking at it in hindsight, Henblitz believed it hadn’t been a bad thing. It’d still been a shameful act, but the results had been worth it.

At first, from the perspective of the order as a whole, they’d not had a particularly favorable impression of Beryl. If they’d let that drag on, it could’ve led to more serious problems. Just maybe, all of the knights with rasher temperaments would’ve challenged him one after the other, only to be beaten repeatedly. Had that happened, the knights’ opinion of Beryl would probably be different. Instead of letting things deteriorate like that, having the lieutenant commander—someone all the knights knew was strong—challenge him first had been a good thing. That was only in hindsight, of course.

“Is that so? He has a strange lack of confidence, you see...” Mordea said.

“That, well... That might be the case.”

Even to Henblitz, Beryl had far too little confidence for how capable he was. With such mastery, no one would complain if he was domineering about it, but Beryl never acted like that. That did, of course, come across favorably as a lack of arrogance, but it was still questionable whether that was the right mindset for a swordsman to have.

Henblitz never went out of his way to ask about it, though. Beryl could just be a genuinely softhearted soul, or maybe some incident in the past had made him that way. Because it seemed to be so deeply ingrained, Henblitz had judged it wasn’t something for him to pry into. He believed it would be nice to hear about it one day, but wasn’t going to rudely bring up the topic himself.

Not even Allucia knew the reason for it. If the person who’d brought Beryl to

Baltrain didn't know, then of course those beneath her wouldn't either. That was how the lieutenant commander saw things, at least.

"I'm a father. I want him to have a good life."

Somewhat red in the face from the wine, Mordea began speaking from the heart. Henblitz didn't say anything in return. He didn't have a wife or child, so there was no way he could understand a parent's distress. However, he could at least understand a parent's care. His parents had shown him plenty.

"So, I wanted to consult with you about something..." said Mordea.

"Yes?"

Henblitz had been expecting this. Mordea had chosen a time when Beryl, Curuni, and Mewi weren't around. The wine and any conversation before this had just been a greeting. Henblitz assumed this was some kind of request regarding Beryl, but he didn't have enough information to be sure about what it could be.

"Do you know any nice women out there who could be his wife?"

"Hmmm..."

This was the conversation they'd had at the door on the first day. Henblitz had thought it was a joke at first, but it seemed Mordea was serious. However, this was a somewhat difficult request.

Henblitz was extremely popular among women. He had status as the lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order, the abilities to match that title, good looks, and a stellar personality. There were plenty of women out there who saw him as an example of the ideal man.

However, Henblitz himself wasn't particularly enthusiastic about the topic. After all, he was too busy walking the path of swordsmanship. He didn't consider a lover or spouse to be a hindrance to his art—nothing like that—but he devoted everything he had to reaching that summit, and he questioned whether he had time to pay any attention to a significant other.

Humans were incapable of showing unconditional love. Maybe someone out there could manage it, but that was practically the realm of a saint. Henblitz

didn't wish for someone else to devote themselves to him when he had nothing to give in return, and this was why he'd never really gotten close to the opposite sex.

"That sounds difficult..." Henblitz said. "I'm not particularly well-versed in that field either."

"Huh? A man like you must be used to having women talk to him."

"Well, they do approach me regularly, but...when it comes to love, I'm not really..."

"Hmm..."

Mordea sank into thought. He was considering whether the lieutenant commander truly had no interest or if he was being humble. It was possible that Henblitz was acting in a way to avoid being dragged into his son's troublesome issues.

Mordea was indeed trying to force this issue on someone else, but there was no helping it at this point—it wasn't going to be solved without outside interference. He truly wanted his son to have a happy life. He wasn't going to claim that it was impossible to find happiness without a spouse, but having a partner definitely added color to a man's life.

"Should I just try setting up a marriage interview...?" Mordea muttered.

"I wonder about that..."

Mordea could set one up if he wanted to. The reason he hadn't yet was because he was respecting Beryl's will. He could solicit help from bachelorettes in the nearby villages or go to Baltrain and search there. Beryl was getting a little old, but he had a splendid title as special instructor for the Liberion Order. Naturally, Mordea would have to look into any candidate's nature and background, but he was sure he could entice one or two women.

Henblitz, meanwhile, disapproved of Mordea's idea. Considering Beryl's personality, it was possible he would accept just to avoid being a bother to the other party. That could lead to an undesired marriage.

However, the bigger issue in Henblitz's mind was the knight commander he

respected so much—Allucia Citrus. He'd touched upon her feelings slightly before. He'd chosen a time when Beryl hadn't been around, and he'd asked what she thought about him. She'd told him about her yearning, longing, and regret. Unfortunately, she couldn't honestly express her feelings. From what Henblitz could see, her emotions were in a really complicated place. So knowing this, he couldn't react positively to a marriage interview.

If Beryl did get married to someone Allucia didn't know, she would honestly give them her blessings. She might resort to heavy drinking and maybe take a short break from work, but she was capable of giving her blessings. She also wished for Beryl's happiness, and she didn't believe she was an indispensable part of it. She did want to be with him, but she didn't think it *had* to be her. To push it to an extreme, Allucia was Beryl's passionate fan. It was too much for Henblitz to understand though—he just had the relatively shallow understanding that his commander would be greatly saddened if Beryl started looking to date.

"If only someone whimsical like Frenne was out there," Mordea grumbled.

"Are you asking me to hit you?" Frenne said from the side.

"I'm kidding! I'm kidding!"

"Ha ha ha. Well, Mrs. Frenne is a wonderful wife," Henblitz remarked.

"Aah, you too?!" Frenne exclaimed. "The kingdom's knights certainly have clever tongues."

Henblitz knew that there was already at least one whimsical woman out there. He was reluctant to mention it, though. Actually, there was definitely more than one. To put it bluntly, Beryl was past the suitable age for marriage. Nevertheless, even from the perspective of another man, Beryl had plenty of charm. Henblitz doubted Allucia was the only woman who saw him in a favorable light.

"There's no need for concern," Henblitz said. "I'm sure he'll one day be blessed with a suitable partner."

"Hmm? What makes you say that?" Mordea asked.

Mordea didn't know what Beryl was like in Baltrain. He figured his son was

still the same as when he'd holed up in Beaden, showing no interest in anything but swordsmanship. Mordea hadn't been present for lessons in the dojo after handing it over to Beryl. He hadn't even known Curuni, who'd been a pupil during Beryl's era. That was why Mordea believed Beryl's love life was impossible without outside pressure.

Henblitz didn't know what Beryl had been like before coming to Baltrain. He knew the man had taught at this dojo, but what kind of life had he led? Henblitz didn't even think of trying to find out such minute details. However, given the degree of perfection of Beryl's swordsmanship and his good character, Henblitz was sure a suitable candidate or two would come tumbling Beryl's way. He knew of one very accomplished woman who just had to perform that tumble, but for some reason, she didn't think it was a good idea.

"No, well, I'm only guessing..." Henblitz said.

"Oooh, you mean things like that have been happening to him too?" Mordea asked.

"I believe it's entirely possible."

"Ha ha! Very good!"

These two had somewhat disparate views of Beryl, and in the end, those views remained as they were.

"Well, if only we knew his tastes," Mordea said. "He never talks about that stuff, though..."

"Aah, I understand what you mean."

Everyone found it embarrassing to talk about their taste in the opposite sex. This was especially the case when speaking to your own parents, so it was perfectly reasonable that Mordea had no idea.

"Ah..."

"Hm? Ooh, Mewi. What's wrong?"

And just as the conversation regarding Beryl hit an end and the two men went back to drinking wine, another figure entered the living room. It was the little girl with blue hair, Mewi Freya. Mordea was the first to notice her and called

out in a gentle voice. His tone was several times gentler and more considerate than when he spoke to Beryl or Frenne.

“Uhhh... Um...”

“Ha ha ha, I guess you have more time than you know what to do with out here in the sticks,” Mordea said. “C’mon, over here. Frenne, get something for her.”

“Yes, yes. Mew Mew, take a seat.”

“Sure...”

Several days had passed since Mewi had arrived in Beaden with Beryl. However, that hadn’t been quite enough time to melt away her wariness. She wasn’t hostile or anything, but she still didn’t feel comfortable here. Mordea, Frenne, and Henblitz could all see this. They’d tried to help her loosen up, but things hadn’t progressed very well.

Mewi also believed it would be wrong to bluntly refuse an invitation. However, that only came from being reserved and nervous—she didn’t feel carefree around this family. Actually, she didn’t consider anyone but Beryl family to begin with. Beryl’s parents were nothing more than kind strangers to her.

“Here, you go. I’m sorry, but this is about all we have.”

“Thanks...”

Frenne placed a cup of hot water in front of Mewi. There was no way they could give her any wine, so this was the only thing that could be prepared at a moment’s notice. Mewi timidly took a sip. Naturally, it lacked any taste, but it helped her calm down a little.

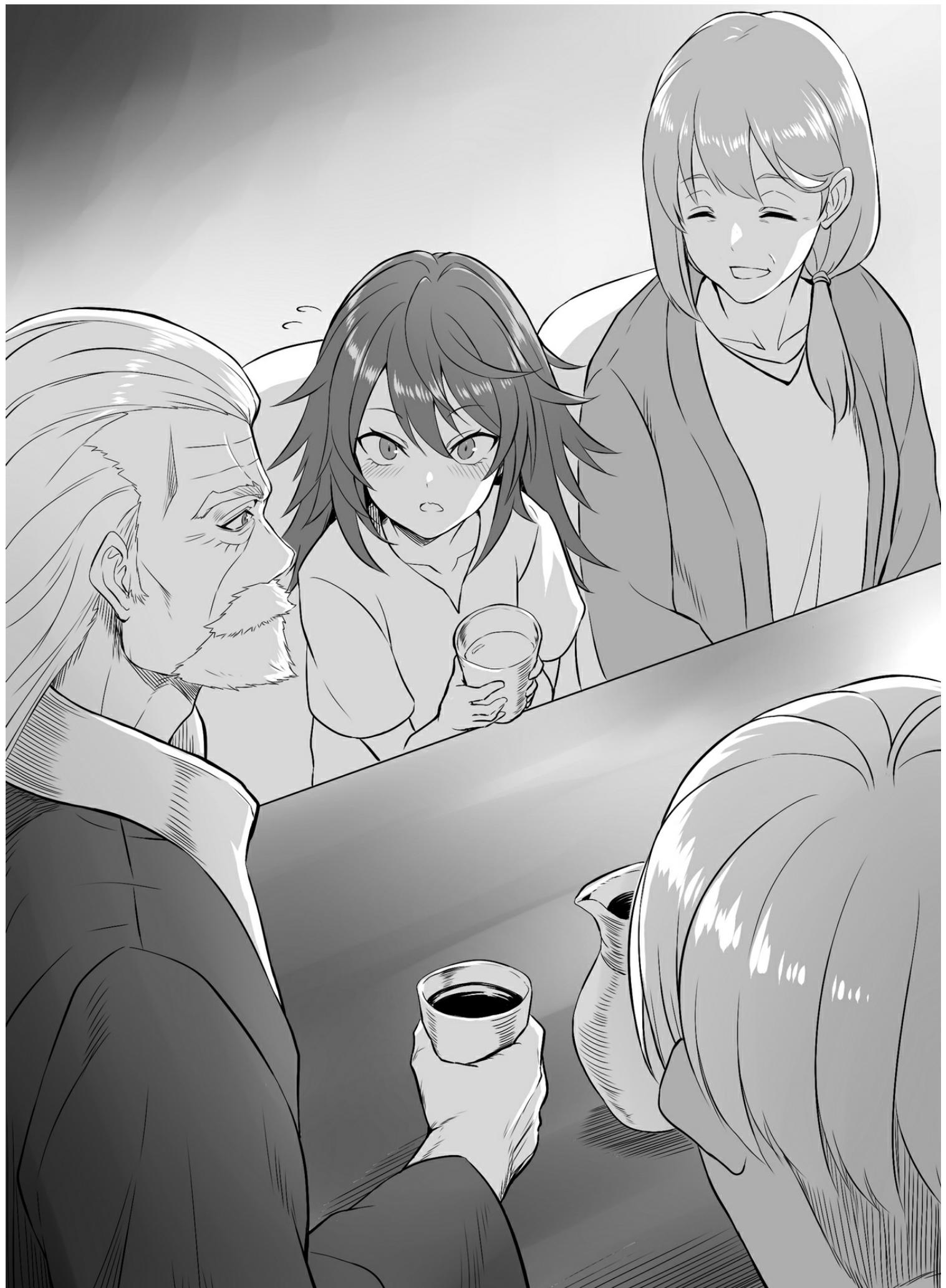
“Hmm. How do you find life here, Mewi?” Mordea asked after watching her for a little while.

“I think...it’s nice...”

It would definitely be too awkward to continue the conversation with Henblitz. After all, Beryl getting married would mean Mewi getting a new stepmother. Mewi had opened up considerably to Beryl, but Mordea decided it

was too sensitive a topic to suddenly bring up.

Mewi had come out of her room because she'd been thirsty, and she hadn't expected to be invited to take a seat. She was full of anxiety over how to weather this storm.



"She must be nervous with so many adults around her," Henblitz said. "I'll excuse myself."

"Sure, thanks for keeping me company," Mordea told him.

Henblitz finished his wine with a gulp. He wasn't the type to leave anything he'd been given behind. Mewi didn't actually seem more at ease now that he was gone, though. She'd gotten slightly more comfortable with him during the carriage ride here, and she'd heard from Beryl that he was trustworthy—Mewi had spent more time with him than with Mordea, if only by a slight margin. Mewi could also more easily get used to someone around Henblitz's age. Her nervousness came from the simple fact that she was dealing with someone who was even older than Beryl.

"I won't ask you to stop being so tense, but... Mewi, am I scary?" Mordea asked.

"Erk... Uhhh..."

"Ha ha ha ha! I guess I am! Sorry for being scary!"

Despite asking the question, Mordea arrived at an answer on his own and started laughing. Most people would see him as having a frank personality, but he was nothing more than an inexplicable grandpa to Mewi. How could she not be scared?

Mewi had a dry throat, and anxiety welled up inside her. The cup of hot water was empty in no time. Her eyes wandered for a few seconds before settling on Mordea's tankard.

"Hm? Curious about this?" he asked. "Well, it's still too early for you to try some. You'll learn of the taste one day. Just wait until then."

"Sure..."

Mordea knocked down her meager desire for a drink with a teasing laugh. She didn't actually want alcohol—she just had a slight interest. She'd seen the person closest to her look so satisfied every time he knocked back an ale, so she couldn't help but be curious.

"Oh yes, I won't let you have any yet, but..."

“Hm?”

Mordea’s teasing smile deepened a little before adding, “Beryl might let you try a sip if you ask him.”

Mewi looked a little surprised by the suggestion. He had a point. Beryl was very kind to her. He could be called soft or even overprotective. As long as she wasn’t being utterly unreasonable, he was very likely to listen to any of her requests. She’d opened her heart to Beryl enough that she’d unconsciously come to that conclusion. You could say she relied on his kindness, though she wasn’t really self-conscious of that fact.

Now that Mordea had brought up this topic, she felt her wariness toward him wane just a little. She could sense he wasn’t a bad person. However, he was an old man who didn’t show the same softness that Beryl did, and that was enough reason for her to not want to get involved with him.

Mewi was far warier toward strangers than other children her age. This instinct had been fostered by the environment she’d grown up in. However, from another perspective, this meant her threshold for wariness could change with her environment. Unbeknownst to her, she had already relaxed a lot since moving in with Beryl and starting at the magic institute. That was because, on top of her new lifestyle, she suddenly didn’t have to fear the people closest to her. That was why it’d only taken her half a day to stop being nervous around Curuni and Henblitz, who were practically complete strangers.

She’d simply not spent enough time with Mordea. But if she continued talking to him face-to-face, her wariness would come undone sooner than later. Now just so happened to be that time.

“Ummm... Mister...Mordea...”

“You can call me gramps.”

“Now, now, none of that,” Frenne said reproachfully.

“Ha ha ha ha ha, sorry!”

The old man seemed to be in great humor. Mewi had never met someone she could call gramps before, so despite putting his proposal immediately on hold, she found herself a little less nervous than before.

“Sorry, sorry. So, did you want to ask me something?” Mordea asked.

“Mm... You’re...a fighter, right?”

“Well, yeah. I’m a swordsman, to be exact.”

A fighter—such a vague word could be applied to adventurers, knights, or wizards. She wasn’t technically wrong, but Mordea corrected her. He was a swordsman. He couldn’t use magic and had no idea how it worked. However, when it came to the blade, he was in his wheelhouse.

“Between you and the old guy...who’s stronger?” Mewi asked.

“The old guy? You mean Beryl?”

“Yes...”

“Hmmm.”

Mordea’s expression suddenly changed. The eyes of the carefree old man looking at a granddaughter were replaced with the sharp gaze of a swordsman.

Mewi knew that Beryl was strong, but she didn’t know exactly how strong he was. The scale she possessed in her mind was incapable of measuring him. She simply saw him as “very strong.” However, she couldn’t even begin to quantify that. That was why she’d asked Mordea.

After thinking it over for a while, Mordea gave his answer. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t?”

“Nope.”

Those weren’t his true feelings, of course. His senses as a swordsman had been honed for decades. There was no way he didn’t know how strong he was relative to another, especially his son. He’d watched Beryl closer and longer than anyone else.

However, this old man had both his pride as a swordsman and his consideration for his granddaughter. He couldn’t plainly claim to be stronger, nor could he admit his own defeat and say Beryl was stronger. If father and son were to have a match, they could find out in an instant—that was how big the difference was now. Mordea hadn’t yielded the dojo to Beryl while still being in

his prime because of a simple whim. No, he'd done so after acknowledging his son's abilities.

"Are you curious?" Mordea asked.

"Well...yeah."

However, ever since yielding the dojo, Mordea had intentionally chosen to decrease the number of direct contests between them. There were several reasons for this. Mordea knew that Beryl viewed him as the ultimate swordsman. A part of Mordea didn't want to break down this image, and his obstinacy refused to allow him to lose so easily. Just maybe, there was a risk of his son becoming arrogant if Mordea bent a knee too quickly. Mordea was also spurred by a desire not to destroy a son's admiration for his father. In other words, he was hopelessly a swordsman while also being hopelessly a parent.

"I see. I suppose that makes sense..."

As a result, his consideration as a father and his petty pride as a swordsman had considerably delayed Beryl's realization of his own abilities. Beryl hadn't found a wife yet, and he was getting old—he'd aged a bit *too* much. Nevertheless, even if it was just on paper, he was finally looking after a daughter. So Mordea now had a granddaughter. This conversation didn't really have any deep meaning, but as a parent, it made Mordea feel like one of his roles had already come to an end.

"Dear, isn't that enough already?" his wife said, her voice full of affection.

"Frenne..."

He didn't have to ask what she meant—her intuition was right on the mark. She'd chosen her words precisely because she had a perfect read on Mordea's thoughts and emotions.

"Heh... Ha ha ha! You're right! Let's go with that!"

"Hwah?"

Mewi was puzzled by Mordea's sudden laughter. She was somewhat less wary of him now, but he was still an inexplicable grandpa.

"Yeah! It's about time to teach him which of us is stronger!"

Mewi noticed the contradiction—earlier, he'd claimed not to know who was stronger, but he seemed to have some idea now. She couldn't figure out the reason for this, though. After all, she was incapable of telling which of the two was stronger. She could at least see that there was an air of resolve behind Mordea's hearty laughter.

"Mewi. Thank you."

"Hm? Ah, uh... Sure?"

She had no idea why he was thanking her. There was an accumulation of time between this father and son that she could never imagine. In the end, her curiosity on this topic wasn't that great—it was just a small question in her mind. Beryl was strong, so his father had to be strong too, and that was about as far as her thought process went. She didn't show much interest in Mordea saying he would teach Beryl who was stronger. She was curious, certainly, but not enough to say anything.

"Whew... Looks like there's one more thing to look forward to," Mordea muttered as he gulped down the last of his wine.

"Hm?"

Mewi couldn't understand his state of mind, so she couldn't parse the meaning behind those words. What was there to look forward to? In the end, she just couldn't figure it out.

"Ummm..."

"Oh my, sorry about that. Here, a refill."

Mewi gave up on thinking about it. The important thing right now was her dry throat. Frenne had noticed Mewi's mumbling, and she'd quickly refilled her cup with hot water.

As expected, it didn't taste of anything either.

Chapter 3: An Old Country Bumpkin Surmounts a Wall

“Hup... There we go.”

Several days after returning to Beaden, I left the village to enter the Aflatta Mountain Range to investigate the saberboars’ current state. The mountains were relatively tall, and the path into them was rather harsh. Even if things were perfectly peaceful, it would be backbreaking to climb this area for a picnic or something. We were ascending the mountains to investigate an overabundance of monsters, so it was pretty exhausting.

“You two okay?” I asked.

“Yes, this climb isn’t unreasonable.”

“I can totally keep going!”

“Ha ha, just what I’d expect.”

Henblitz and Curuni were currently accompanying me. I wasn’t intentionally working them hard, but they’d come along on my return to Beaden knowing what my objective was, so I figured they could pick up some slack.

Either way, despite a march through such mountains being a rare experience, the knights seemed to be fine—they were living up to the reputation of the Liberion Order. Besides, they must’ve gone on expeditions to all sorts of places. I wouldn’t go so far as to claim I was *used* to mountainous terrain, but I had decent experience from growing up in a village right next to one. Anyone who could keep up with me and have stamina to spare was plenty impressive.

“I’d like to reach our objective within the day,” I said.

We weren’t in the Aflatta Mountain Range to defeat the saberboars or anything. It would be unrealistic to try and hunt a specific monster in this ridiculously vast mountain range without any prior investigation.

Our only objective today was reconnaissance. Ideally, we would get extremely

lucky and find the saberboar pack. That was far too optimistic an outlook, though. The weather was supposed to be stable for another two days, so I wanted to get the preliminary inspection done in the meantime.

There was no way we would figure everything out on a single trip. Luck was indeed a factor. We couldn't explore the mountains nonstop for an entire day either, and I absolutely wanted to avoid being in the Aflatta Mountain Range after sunset. That would definitely end in disaster.

"Are we certain about the weather?" Henblitz asked. "Not that I'm doubting you, but still..."

"Yeah, not a problem," I told him. "My mom's forecasts are pretty much never wrong."

"That's rather impressive..."

The reason we'd chosen to enter the mountains at exactly this time was because it'd been determined that the weather would remain calm for a while. The one who'd made that call had been my mom. She hadn't done anything special—it wasn't like she could use magic. However, for some reason, she was capable of figuring out the weather for the next few days by examining the sky. I'd heard her mysterious weather forecasts ever since my childhood, and she'd never gotten it wrong.

Naturally, she was sometimes slightly off—maybe she would predict that a cloudy sky would hold but a light drizzle would come down or vice versa. Regardless, when she said there would be clear skies, it never rained. And if she said it was going to rain, it wasn't going to be a sunny day. I couldn't remember a single instance of her being wrong.

According to her, she somehow knew based on sight, smell, and the sensation of the air on her skin. Her accuracy seemed abnormally high. Still, her forecasts were a big help to everyone in Beaden, so no one was going to nitpick about it, but the more we heard about it, the more mysterious this ability seemed.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the same special skill, so it was more of a personal trait than a hereditary one. Well, in all likelihood, my good eyes had come from my mom rather than my dad. He didn't have bad eyesight or anything, but he couldn't hold a candle to my mom in that regard.

"Look, droppings," I remarked. "Hmm, they're closer than I expected."

"Are those saberboar feces?" Henblitz asked.

"Probably."

After walking for a while with such thoughts in mind, we found some dark brown balls scattered around an area of sparse vegetation. I wasn't a biologist, so I couldn't say for sure that it had come from a saberboar. Still, I could at least see whether it was from a carnivore or herbivore—even if we were well within the mountain range, finding a carnivore's feces this close to the village was a bad sign.

During my past hunts, it'd been rare to find any traces so quickly. Normally, it would take several days to *maybe* find something like this. Wild animals and monsters were generally very good at hiding. The animals here, except for the apex predator, were always on the hunt or being hunted. And at least within the Aflatta Mountain Range, saberboars weren't at the top of the food chain. If I had to guess, they were somewhere slightly above the middle.

Taking that into consideration, finding traces of their presence so easily was a little unusual. I could think of three possibilities on the spot: a pack of saberboars or some other similar carnivore had their turf somewhere in this area, the pack had gotten big enough for them to come this far down the mountain, or the mountain's ecosystem was in the middle of collapsing.

The first possibility wasn't really a problem. It was a threat, but we had gathered enough of a force to eliminate it. The second was an issue, but manageable as long as the pack wasn't *too* large. The third would definitely be bad. I didn't think that could happen so quickly, but if it was, things would get out of control.

At present, I couldn't say for sure which answer was right, but I prayed it wasn't the third case. If the ecosystem of such a vast expanse of nature was collapsing, a small gathering of humans wouldn't be able to do anything about it. So, I discounted that possibility for now. If we had more circumstantial evidence, it would be a different matter, but there was no point worrying about it now.

"Hmmm... It hasn't decomposed yet, so it doesn't seem that old," I observed,

turning some droppings over using a random branch.

The feces were very stiff but hadn't turned into soil yet, so they couldn't have been here that long. It was highly probable that one or more animals were somewhere close by. I could see why Randid thought the scale was relatively large this time around. It would've been a trivial matter for him to patrol the area surrounding the village between lessons. Maybe he'd even gone into the mountains on his own.

"What else is out here other than saberboars?" Curuni asked.

"Well..."

That was a pretty hard question to answer. There were endless varieties of animals in such a large mountain range, many of which I knew nothing about.

"I guess there's a bit of everything," I said. "You won't see goblins and the like, though."

"Wow..."

In terms of animals, there were deer, boars, and bears. As for smaller critters, there were surely rabbits and weasels too. However, when it came to monsters, small species like goblins were pretty much nowhere to be seen. Some worm-type monsters popped up every now and then, but they weren't really threats.

The Aflatta Mountain Range was vast, but it wasn't thick with greenery. It wasn't exactly barren, but the Azlaymia Forest was far denser—it was a mature woodland everywhere except for the routes adventurers used. This was probably because of the mountains' elevation and climate. Or maybe the soil here simply didn't have enough nutrition for an abundance of trees.

Anyway, the mountain range's ecosystem was certainly different from that of a plain or forest. That was why goblins, the quintessential small monster, couldn't be found here. Not that I really wanted to be reminded, but griffons were far more common in this kind of locale. There weren't many eyewitness accounts of them near Beaden, though—it would be a major problem if griffons were spotted with any frequency.

"I must say, you seem rather accustomed to marching through the mountains," Henblitz commented.

"Not really. I guess it's just this area specifically," I replied. "I happen to have a rough idea of the terrain here."

I wasn't really doing anything impressive. I'd just hiked through this area frequently over the years to deal with saberboars, do some hunting, or even just test my skills, so I happened to have some familiarity with the local geography.

I wasn't, however, going to foolishly let my guard down because of that. A single misstep on a mountain could mean immediate death. This area wasn't that far from Beaden, plus I had a decent grasp of the terrain and an extremely accurate weather forecast to rely on. My success here had nothing to do with me being impressive.

"Found some..." Henblitz muttered cautiously.

"Hm? Where?"

"To the right. Not many, I think."

The creatures native to the Aflatta Mountain Range were generally ferocious. It was pretty rare for humans to enter this territory, so those who did without preparing adequately were pretty much always attacked by something. We were nothing more than prey to the predators here.

"Oink."

"Ah, there."

We advanced carefully for a while, our hands on our weapons, and stayed grouped up to cover one another's backs. Just as Henblitz said, there was a saberboar to the right.

"So that's a saberboar..." Curuni muttered.

"First time seeing one?" I asked.

"Yup."

There was only one of them. Judging by its size and tusks, it wasn't a baby, but not quite an adult yet either. It'd probably been weaned for a while and had just started hunting for itself not too long ago.

Much like normal animals, a saberboar's age could largely be determined by its size, but it was even easier to tell based on its tusks. The bigger the tusks, the older the individual. If they were broken or chipped, then it was a pretty dangerous specimen—that meant the saberboar had a lot of experience, having survived despite the damage to its weapons.

The saberboar before us had adequately sized tusks. However, they were relatively unscathed, so it couldn't have much combat or hunting experience. That didn't mean we could be careless, though. Even if it wasn't quite an adult, getting rammed by it head-on would still be fatal.

"Now then, did this one get lost or driven out?"

Saberboars generally formed packs as families. They were pretty similar to wolves in this respect, so it was rare to find one alone when it'd yet to reach full maturity. It'd either been separated from its pack or had been driven out. They were unexpectedly humanlike in this regard. Being careless or impudent could get one segregated from the group.

"Curuni, give it a go," I said.

"Huh? Me?"

From the looks of it, there weren't any other saberboars around. These animals functioned in packs, but they didn't have the intelligence to leave one of their own in the open as bait, so I was certain that this saberboar was alone. Given the opportunity, I wanted to see Curuni adapt to fighting against a monster. Getting experience in relatively safe environments was pretty valuable.

"Henblitz and I will keep an eye on the surroundings," I told her. "If it gets dangerous, we'll support you."

"Y-Yessir!"

Curuni readied her zweihander and steadily approached the saberboar.

"Grrr..."

When the young saberboar spotted her, it let out a menacing growl. These things were ferocious and lacked the intelligence of humans—they never ran

away unless their opponent was overwhelmingly larger than them. This was especially the case among younglings who'd yet to experience failure. The saberboar was sure to attack. This was one reason it was dangerous when such monsters descended the mountains and invaded human territory. Our solution was obviously to cull their numbers periodically.

“Grawr!”

“Bring it!”

I thought for a moment it would turn into a staring match, but the saberboar suddenly charged. Curuni yelled, matching its fervor. It was a good battle cry, but monsters and wild animals weren't going to falter because they heard one. Getting startled by fighting spirit was reserved for those with intelligence.

Now then, it was time to see what she was made of. That said, I planned on intervening the moment it got dangerous.

“Hnnngh!”

A stiff clang resonated through the Aflatta Mountain Range. Curuni stood her ground and stopped the saberboar's ramming attack. Charging was essentially a saberboar's only weapon. It sounded simple to describe them as brainless beasts who only knew how to run with their tusks forward, but the damage they could inflict was no laughing matter. Even if you succeeded in blocking an attack with a sword or shield, if you didn't have enough physical strength, you would easily be pushed back. Actually, a normal person wouldn't even try to block. It was far easier to dodge.

“Mrrrrrgh...!”

“Oink?!”

“Ooh, amazing.”

However, Curuni had braced her little legs and killed the charge's momentum entirely. Her feet had dug trenches into the ground for the length of a few paces—this showed the tremendous force behind that ramming attack. It also showed how staggering Curuni's strength was. She was able to stop such a charge while only being pushed back a little. I could probably do the same if forced, but it wasn't something I wanted to test.



“Mrrrrrrrrgh!”

Curuni gradually pushed back the saberboar. *Is this girl seriously taking on a wild monster in a straight up muscle contest? Scary.*

A typical human’s strength was insufficient to compete with a saberboar like this. Having two legs to brace versus four made a huge difference, and the amount of muscle mass at their disposal was like the difference between heaven and earth. That was why the typical strategies were to evade the charge and slash at its flank, use a spear or other weapon with reach to nullify the charge, or eliminate it at long range with bows or magic. Saberboars were reckless too, so setting traps was also effective.

When I hunted them, I would get them face-to-face, then dodge their charge before attacking. It would be pretty dangerous to receive a charge from the side, after all. However, the sight before my eyes ignored all those standard tactics.

“Ooooooh!”

“Oink...”

Having stopped the saberboar in a contest of strength, Curuni stomped her foot on its tusk. She raised her zweihander and rammed the blade straight into its head. The young saberboar let out a somewhat pathetic death cry, then perished.

“Wow...”

Hang on, aren’t you being a bit too wild? I hadn’t expected her to challenge a saberboar in a contest of strength before delivering a blow to its brain. I’d figured she would stave off the ramming attack and then slash at it, but her strategy was far more muscle-brained.

That’s weird, I don’t remember our dojo teaching that kind of fighting style. Even making allowances for her using a heavy two-handed sword, she’d bulldozed her way through... It’d been a bit much.

“Is...Curuni always like that on missions?” I asked Henblitz.

“No, she’s supposed to be...somewhat more composed,” he answered,

bewilderment clear in his voice too.

This was apparently different from her usual behavior. Curuni might have been beefy, but she wasn't a meathead. So why did she choose to go with such a boneheaded approach?

"Aw yeah! I won!"

Ignoring our concerns, Curuni was greatly delighted by her victory over the saberboar.

"Curuni, why did you fight like that?" I asked.

I felt bad about putting a damper on her mood, but a part of me needed to know. She was skilled enough that I hadn't ever expected her to lose against this saberboar. She'd been slightly unreliable during her time as my pupil, but when I'd reunited with her in the Liberion Order, her naivety had died down and she'd grown considerably. That was why I'd allowed her to accompany me on my return to Beaden.

However, her choice of tactic here had sacrificed not only her safety but had even lowered her chances of winning. There were times when it was necessary to gamble in a fight, but this hadn't been one of them.

To give an example, during the recent royal assassination attempt, I hadn't been able to prioritize my personal safety during the fight. Had I done so, Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia could've died. There were no such circumstances this time around. Curuni could've fought however she'd liked, but she had chosen to jump into the jaws of danger.

"Erk... Well..." Curuni said, scratching her head awkwardly. "I couldn't fight them back in the days at the dojo, so...I wanted to test my current strength. I wasn't thinking..."

"Hmm..."

I understood where she was coming from. Regardless, what had she planned to do if she'd lost the contest of strength? *I guess Henblitz and I would've flown to her aid...but it was still a dangerous strategy.*

"I get how you feel—I do," I told her. "But there's a limit to testing your

courage. Ignoring safety and getting caught in an unfortunate accident has nothing to do with mastering swordsmanship.”

“I know... I won’t do it again...”

I decided to reprimand her. If I offered praise, she could end up charging in like that more and more in the future. It was important to find a path to victory but far more valuable to avoid defeat.

“Still, it’s honestly impressive that you won with a brute-force approach,” I added. “You can have confidence in that.”

“Yessir!”

An average swordsman would’ve been thrown back and defeated if they’d tried fighting like that. This had demonstrated Curuni’s growth, so I left it at that.

“What do we do about it now?” Henblitz asked, looking down at the saberboar.

“Hmm...”

Good question. I honestly hadn’t expected to come across one on this trip. That said, we’d defeated it and couldn’t just leave it out here.

“Let’s take it with us and head back,” I decided. “I’d leave it if we were in danger, but it seems like it was alone.”

From what I could tell, the tusks were in good condition, and given the single strike to its brain, its hide was unharmed too. Draining the blood would take some work, but the meat was still edible. A backwater village like ours wasn’t exactly wealthy, so it was best to take everything we could get.

“Curuni, can you carry it?” I asked.

“No problem! One should be a cinch.”

“A cinch, huh...”

Curuni hefted the saberboar up, and it really did look easy for her. She had the muscle strength to casually carry around such weight without even using a cart.

At any rate, my plan was to take it back to the village and ask someone to butcher it. If a peddler happened to be paying us a visit, we could sell the tusks and hide immediately, but merchants very rarely came to remote regions like ours. After all, even if they visited, there were too few people living here to expect a decent profit. If we asked a village hunter to butcher it and tan the hide, we could sell the parts at a later time.

"I'll keep an eye on the front," I said. "Henblitz, you watch the rear."

"Understood."

Curuni's hands were full, so we couldn't count on her to fight. I kept a careful watch as I led the way, and I entrusted the rear to Henblitz. Curuni stayed between us.

Man, I hadn't planned to do any hunting today. I guess the best plan of action is to do what reconnaissance we can on the way back...? It would be fortuitous if we could find any traces of the pack or get an idea of its scale, but things didn't tend to be that easy. Still, I hadn't thought our investigation would end in a single day, so maybe it was best to see this as a good omen.

"Curuni," I said, "if it gets dangerous, throw that thing down immediately."

"Yessir!"

Everything would come to naught if she threw away her life because of a fixation on the spoils. In the worst-case scenario, Henblitz and I could at least buy some time, so I wanted her to quickly get rid of that saberboar while we did.

"Can saberboars normally be found so close to the foot of the mountains?" Henblitz asked.

"Normally, no," I said. "That's what we're here to investigate, so— Oh."

"Oink?"

As I was answering Henblitz, I spotted another saberboar. It hadn't been that long since we'd killed the first one. This one was similar in age to the one Curuni had defeated. It was still too early to say for sure, but perhaps this generation of saberboars was particularly numerous. It was a problem that they'd

encroached upon the village instead of staying deeper in the mountains.

Huh? That's pretty bad...



"Phew, that was rough..."

Eventually, we decided to end our expedition into the Aflatta Mountain Range for the day. We hauled back our spoils, and the path soon changed from craggy mountain terrain to a smooth plain. Once Beaden's defensive perimeter was in sight, we finally felt the tension leave our bodies, only to be replaced with fatigue.

"This is actually getting kinda heavy..." Curuni grumbled.

"Sorry. Just hang in there a little longer."

She was now carrying *two* dead saberboars. One was heavy enough, and here she was with *two*. Her strength was nothing to laugh at. Still, it seemed even Curuni was having a hard time with it—she wore a clear expression of exhaustion. It would be entirely possible for me to take one of them, but by doing so, we would no longer be able to guarantee our safety, so that was a last resort.

"That was some harsh terrain," Henblitz commented nonchalantly. "If we could come out this way, the order could use it for training."

"I don't really want to recommend it..." I said.

He seemed perfectly fine. While he was probably experiencing some fatigue, it wasn't enough to show on his face. He was considering using this mountain range for training, though I personally didn't want him to try it. I wasn't underestimating the order's abilities—my reasoning was more about the bigger picture.

If any of the kingdom's institutions entered the Aflatta Mountain Range, they risked causing an eruption of international problems with our nation's neighbor. If Liberis decided it was worth bearing that risk to conquer the mountain range, there was nothing I could do about it. However, the ones who were most likely to get the short end of the stick were those who lived closest to the border.

Beaden could be put in a bad situation. I wanted to avoid getting caught up in the ravages of war, especially when the conflict had nothing to do with us.

“By the way, what are we gonna do with these?” Curuni asked as we walked toward the village. She was referring to the saberboars.

“We’ll ask the villagers to drain the blood and butcher them,” I answered. “Just maybe, tomorrow’s dinner will be a little more luxurious.”

“Meat?! That sounds great! I suddenly feel motivated!”

I wasn’t an adventurer or a hunter, so I had no idea how to drain an animal’s blood. Perhaps I could make an attempt by mimicking others, but considering the risk of damaging the goods, I didn’t really want to try. It was best to rely on the experts. Discounting amazing geniuses, there was a limit to what each individual could do, and people were best off utilizing their own skills and outsourcing the rest.

“Anyway, what’s the plan for dealing with this situation?” Curuni asked. “It looks pretty bad, right?”

“Yeah, sure seems that way...” I agreed.

After finishing the first saberboar, we’d encountered three other stragglers on the way back to the village. I didn’t know if we should’ve rejoiced over avoiding the pack or whether we should’ve lamented over only encountering individuals. Either way, the saberboars had come pretty far down the mountains compared to last year.

Maybe this was a coincidence caused by the saberboars just happening to have a lot of young this season. We were capable of dealing with the increased workload. However, it would be frightening if that weren’t the case. If there were too many boars, we would have to ignore international friction, gather a significant force to march into the Aflatta Mountain Range, and uproot the monsters within. That was the worst of worst-case scenarios, though. I wanted to believe such a fate didn’t await us.

“For now, let’s just get back and take it easy,” I said. “We’ll be searching again tomorrow, so keep that in mind.”

“Yessir!”

“Understood.”

We could figure out the cause of their increased numbers later. For now, we needed to keep up our reconnaissance. If things seemed too dangerous, we could retreat and even evacuate the village, but we didn’t have enough information to make that decision yet.

We planned to continue exploring tomorrow. Consecutive trips in the mountains were pretty rough, but without someone who knew about the local geography, scouting would be useless. *No one can act as a substitute in my stead, so I’ll need to keep going into the mountains.*

With such thoughts in mind, I continued walking toward the village.

“Oh, if it isn’t Beryl. What’s up? Back from hunting?”

“Hi there, Rob. Just who I was looking for.”

Right as we reached the village’s defensive perimeter, an older man called out to me. He had a nice thick beard and was the same age as me or a little older. Rob was one of Beaden’s oldest hunters. He didn’t take risks and rarely brought back a big haul, but he had a high success rate catching small and occasionally larger prey.

“Hm? Aaah... You mean those saberboars?” he asked.

“Exactly. I was hoping you could butcher them.”

He was just the man I was hoping to ask. Our village focused more on agriculture, so there weren’t many hunters like Rob. There was plenty of prey in the Aflatta Mountain Range, but it was dangerous, so hunters didn’t go there often. With the shortage of hunters, and excluding any provisions we got from merchants, Beaden’s meat supplies were largely in his hands.

“All right, leave it to me,” he said. “Carry them over to that hut over there.”

“Thanks. Curuni, you got that?”

“Yessir!”

Now that we had Rob’s okay, I directed Curuni to deliver the saberboars. In Baltrain, there were probably specialized companies for importing, transporting, butchering, and whatever else needed doing. However, out in the

sticks, you couldn't expect any grand enterprises like that. We largely relied on individuals with specialist skills.

The same went for our armed forces. The capital had the knights, and the royal garrison was deployed all over urban areas, but out here, we could only rely on self-defense. We were blessed with some fighters due to the dojo, but we couldn't match a true martial force—not in terms of quantity or quality. At most, we could repel a few small monsters and beasts, but we would be forced to give up against large groups of monsters.

Some of our pupils and graduates did possess outstanding talent. However, it was unexpectedly hard to flourish as an individual in a fight where numbers were to your disadvantage. That was the stuff straight out of fairy tales and legends—not reality. A heroic figure like Lucy might be able to turn the tide of a battle on her own, but there had to be a limit to that too.

So, the only thing we could do now was use what forces we had to reduce the threat little by little. At least this wasn't a conflict between humans—it made things far easier for us. Even if our opponents swarmed together, it was unthinkable for them to form a large organized mass. That gave humanity a chance to win.

“Okay, I’m gonna go set this down!”

“Thanks.”

Curuni zoomed off to set down the saberboars. Despite mentioning her exhaustion earlier, she was now brimming with energy.

“She’s carrying two whole saberboars...” Rob said, his mouth agape. “That girl’s pretty strong.”

“Ha ha, she’s a pupil I can be proud of.”

That was definitely an impactful first impression. A grown man would find it difficult to carry even one of those things around.

“Well, I’m grateful to have someone strong about,” Rob said. “I’ll bring the meat over later.”

“Thank you.”

Saberboar meat was pretty tough, but with proper cooking and preparation, it was perfectly edible. I was looking forward to adding it to the menu starting tomorrow. My mom would handle it fine.

After giving his impressions of Curuni, Rob headed after her toward the hut. He was probably going to get started with draining the blood or something. I was going to leave the hide and tusks to him as payment—he would be able to sell them at the next opportunity. My personal finances were pretty good, so if the villagers could live a little easier, I could ask for nothing more.

“By the way, are the three of us going again tomorrow?” Henblitz asked.

“Yeah, and I also plan to have Randid join us,” I replied. “The dojo’s closed tomorrow.”

We were going to go as a group of four. It was a little too dangerous to bring our pupils for a march through the mountains, so only our strongest were taking part in reconnaissance. My dad could go if he wanted to, but on top of his stamina deteriorating with age, his hips were liable to give out.

Randid had taken part in the saberboar hunts before and had some knowledge of the local geography. The plan was to cover a wider area this time and get much more information. To add to that, he’d been an amazingly talented adventurer until not too long ago—he was probably more familiar with marching through a mountain than the rest of us. I had high hopes for him.

“I see, how reassuring,” Henblitz said.

“Yeah, I can’t think of a better helper,” I agreed.

We still couldn’t be careless, but Henblitz and Randid weren’t the types of amateurs to let down their guard. It would be ideal if we could strike down a few groups tomorrow. Even if we couldn’t, I wanted to get a broad grasp of the pack’s scale and the location of their breeding ground. Henblitz and Curuni must’ve figured out what scaling the Aflatta Mountain Range was like by now too, so tomorrow would go far smoother.

“Master! I’m gonna go wash off!” Curuni yelled, dashing back to us after setting down the saberboars.

“S-Sure.”

It seemed she wanted to soak off the dirt and fatigue from today's reconnaissance. *Makes sense—that animal stench will seep into her clothes otherwise. That's pretty unappealing for a woman.* Also, playing in the water like we had before wasn't quite possible in Baltrain. If you really wanted that kind of experience, there were public bathhouses, but they cost money and could get pretty crowded. Having a nearby source of water was one of the few advantages that Beaden had over the city.

"We'll go back ahead of you," I said. "We've got to report to my dad and Randid."

"Understood," Henblitz agreed.

Watching Curuni dash off yet again, I returned to my house. It was a little unexpected to find multiple saberboars so far down the mountain, but things weren't beyond our control. I could only pray that the situation didn't get more complicated.



"More droppings... Do you suppose the main pack is nearby?"

"Here's hoping."

The next day, we once more challenged the Aflatta Mountain Range—now with Randid added to our ranks. The weather was still good, but the mountains were hotter and more humid than the plains. We'd prepared enough food and drink, but I honestly didn't want this to drag on too long.

Also, according to my mom, the weather was going to take a turn for the worse tomorrow. I trusted her words more than any fortune teller's. We were all hoping to achieve the majority of our goals that day.

So, with the addition of the veteran Randid, we were able to scout the area more aggressively than before. We'd now ventured far enough that we could no longer see the landscape surrounding the village. This was pretty deep into the mountains, but it looked like it was all worth it.

"Anyway, to come this far and still only find strays..." Randid muttered. "It's rather unexpected."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Hard to tell what's going on."

It was a good thing we were finding traces of saberboars. That helped us narrow down where our prey had built their base. However, despite coming far enough to discern that, we'd still failed to detect any presence of the pack.

"How many did we get so far?" Curuni asked.

"Five," I answered, "but each one was alone. That's why we've given up on retrieving the corpses."

That was right—despite the sun only now reaching its apex, we'd already encountered *five* saberboars. The good news was that each had only taken a single blow to finish, but we had to question why we'd encountered them all individually.

Why couldn't we find the pack? The answer to that question remained a mystery. Saberboars generally formed packs as families, but that didn't exclude the possibility of lone animals. Still, it was bewildering that we'd yet to find at least two of them together.

"I doubt the pack was destroyed," Randid said. "Something must be going on."

"Agreed," I said. "Hopefully, it's something we can handle ourselves..."

A creature's nature wasn't liable to suddenly change. Monsters who'd formed packs until a generation ago weren't going to start functioning as individuals out of the blue. We could pretty much discount that possibility.

Even if we assumed the saberboars had changed lifestyle in one generation, that wouldn't turn into a major problem. Much as I mentioned before, saberboars posed a decent threat, but they weren't the apex predator of the Aflatta Mountain Range—if every saberboar was acting independently without a pack, they would get hunted by other monsters. It could even turn into a turf war between fellow saberboars. This was less a matter of intelligence and more about instincts, so it was hard to imagine that the behavior change was intentional. All this together would gradually kill them off, and that was a situation the saberboars would want to avoid. At the same time, by being more dispersed across the entire mountain range, they would have less of an effect

on human settlements.

“The only possibility I can come up with is some kind of human interference...” Randid said. “But I can’t think of anything to gain from that or what they could’ve done.”

“Yeah, same here.”

From a deeply twisted perspective, someone could be experimenting on monsters, and this could be a secondary effect. That was pretty unrealistic, though. After all, there was far too little to gain from doing something so bold and risky in the Aflatta Mountain Range.

“For now, all we can really do is continue our search...” I grumbled.

We could only come up with baseless theories, so if we wanted to discover the truth, our only choice was to continue onward—and thin out any saberboars we found in the process.

“Where were the largest concentrations last year?” Randid asked.

“They were pretty scattered, but not too far into the mountains,” I answered.

I definitely didn’t want to go into the depths of the mountain range—neither did other humans, animals, or even monsters. A named monster could potentially have its nest there. Even if there wasn’t one, there were plenty of large monsters like griffons and king allosauruses. There was probably also a great variety of other large monsters I knew nothing about.

I could never have enough lives to charge into such a place. The same went for the saberboars. Even if they’d mutated, they had no chance against large monsters. So, I estimated that, just like last year, they were loitering somewhere between the foot of the mountain and just a little farther up.

The best outcome would be for them to be concentrated far away from Beaden. That meant we would be able to ignore them this year. Still, finding so many strays lurking about was pretty bothersome. Even one was a significant threat to a regular human.

“There are more animal trails, so I’d like to believe we’re getting closer,” Randid muttered.

"We definitely are," I said. "I don't know if we're just unlucky or if they're being extra cautious, though."

We weren't randomly wandering around this vast mountain range. We'd located easy-to-spot traces like feces and had gone down a series of animal trails. Curuni had no experience with this kind of reconnaissance, but Randid and I had plenty of experience hunting saberboars, and Henblitz likely had a similar resume.

I doubted it was possible, but it would be pretty rough if the saberboars' leader was clever and had the pack on the move after detecting our presence. That sounded pretty unlikely. *Actually, maybe this is a bit rude, but I'm thinking of too many possibilities—they're just saberboars. It's starting to irritate me.*

"Maybe a scholar would be able to figure out this mystery," Curuni grumbled.

"I wonder about that," I said. "I've never met a scholar who studied monsters."

We had experience hunting saberboars and generally knew what kind of monsters they were, but that didn't mean we had specialist knowledge. All of this was just empirical data. Experience was often better than knowledge, but it didn't account for irregularities. You had no precedent to refer to, so you had no choice but to build your information from scratch.

At any rate, while the world was vast, I doubted many people researched monster ecology for fun. It would be a different matter if there was money to be made in that field.

"Now that I think of it," Henblitz joined in, "when will your pupils be taking the stage?"

"Hm? Oh, right..."

He was asking a good question. How were we going to let my pupils participate in this situation? Last year, my dad and I had gone ahead to discover the saberboar pack. We'd driven them back while reducing their numbers, and when they'd reached the base of the mountains near the village, we'd had the pupils finish them off. Bringing those inexperienced kids into the Aflatta Mountain Range was far too dangerous. There were even years when we'd

done so well that not a single saberboar had made it out of the mountains. This was lucky for the village as a whole, but a bit of a letdown for our pupils, who'd been looking to gain valuable experience.

"They're generally there to defend the village," I told him. "We're the only ones entering the mountains."

"I see. We can't put them at an unreasonable risk," Henblitz said.

That was exactly it. No matter how much wisdom you had or how much of your outstanding talents you could put on display, the world of swordsmanship—or fighting, to be precise—was one where a single accident could lead to death. There was no such thing as leaving too large of a safety margin.

Fortunately, we'd yet to lose a pupil to the saberboar hunts. Yet injuries were not only possible, but they had, in fact, happened. No matter how much you practiced or struck a wooden dummy, it was no match for practical experience in a real battle. All who chose to walk the path to mastery had to place themselves in danger's path at some point.

We'd thoroughly selected only those with sufficient ability and motivation. Nonetheless, accidents still happened. I wanted my adorable pupils to grow in their swordplay, but I also didn't want to put their lives at risk. Maybe this was a dilemma all swordsmanship instructors faced.

"Hm...? Looks like we're finally getting close," I said.

"Oh, a territory mark?" Henblitz asked.

As I walked on with such thoughts in mind, I found an animal trail that was far more firmly tread upon than the others, and there were some damaged trees around it. These marks on the trees hadn't come from anything like claws—they were holes, pierced by something far larger driving straight into the wood. This meant we were finally closing in on the pack. However, one question still came to mind.

"Isn't that...kinda big?" Curuni asked.

"It is," I agreed. "Whatever made that must be absolutely huge."

One of the trees had an exceptionally large scar on it. Tusks were part of a

saberboar's body and were relative to the animal's size. It'd be extremely unlikely for only the tusks to grow abnormally large, much like a human wouldn't exclusively grow huge teeth. In other words, large tusks meant a large body to match, and judging by this mark, the saberboar was huge.

"If I had to guess, a powerful individual must be leading the pack," Randid surmised.

"Well, you're probably right," I said. "A mark this big is pretty unheard of."

It wasn't uncommon for a mutated individual to dominate a group—it happened in every world. This was especially the case in the world of monsters, where power was often the deciding factor. Having a large body made an individual much stronger because the size of the skeletal frame defined the limits of how much muscle mass could be supported. The only exceptions to this power rule were wizards...and maybe Curuni too. How did such a petite girl have so much strength? It was a mystery.

"Stay alert as we proceed," I told the others. "Be careful of ambushes."

"Right!"

If the pack was close, it meant we were likely to find saberboars loitering around. Even if things were more open than a forest, visibility was still poor here. We couldn't afford an attack from the flank or rear, so we had to keep our eyes open. I was more confirming our plan than telling them what to do. Randid and Henblitz were experts, and even Curuni wouldn't commit such a blunder. I could put my faith in all of them.

We advanced carefully for a while, and then Curuni suddenly said, "Ah! Master, there."

"Hm? What is it?" She'd been watching our right. Judging by her tone, she'd discovered something. "Well done, Curuni," I said, keeping my voice down to avoid being detected. "I'm surprised you spotted it."

"Heh heh heh. Just takes a little effort, that's all."

Curuni understood our situation and was quieter than usual. She was pointing at a gap between some of the sparsely scattered trees and weeds. That spot of land seemed to be a bit of a depression, and it would be difficult to spy on a

normal march. Inside the clearing was a pack of ten saberboars. They were loitering about, circling the depression in the ground, their noses and tusks moving about warily. In the center was a single saberboar, cockily relaxing. *That's definitely the boss.*

Well, we'd predicted there would be a pack leader, so this wasn't unexpected. The problem was the saberboar itself.

"Uhhh..."

Isn't that thing a little too big?

"It's crazy huge..." Curuni muttered, shock clear in her voice.

"Yeah..."

It looked at least twice as large as a normal saberboar. We hadn't expected it to be this huge. There was no questioning how it'd become the boss—no average-sized saberboar could win against it.

"It's dangerous," Henblitz said, his voice penetratingly cold. "Shall we bring it down?"

"Hmmm..."

There were about ten saberboars around the boss. That meant each of us would need to take down three or four, which was technically doable. However, it was a considerable risk to take on such numbers all at once. In general, humans weren't made for one-on-two fights. We had a tendency to lose when attacked from the front and back at the same time. That was part of the logic behind war strategy—numbers meant violence.

However, you could see real-life examples of masters taking on multiple opponents at once. The mechanism behind this was simple: opponents were incapable of perfectly coordinating with each other. If there was a timing error of just a few fractions of a second, then the fight could be broken up into two separate instances of one-on-one combat—just fractions of a second apart. That was the key to victory. Adel and Edel losing against Henblitz could be summed up this way.

I'd once described Henblitz as being superior to a hundred normal people.

This was the difference in their cumulative strength when taking all facets of their combat skills into consideration. Setting aside the physical logistics, no one could actually win against a hundred adult males simultaneously. However, this was an ideal situation for the other side too—it depended on a superiority in technique and being in the right environment.

With the unstable footholds and poor visibility here, the environment wasn't suitable for combat. I didn't believe that Henblitz and Randid, the proud elite of the order and adventurer's guild respectively, could lose in a place like this, but that was neither here nor there. We didn't need to take risks and place our hopes on wishful thinking.

"No, let's not attack today," I decided. "Finding this place is good enough."

"Is that so...?" Henblitz muttered.

We had plenty of force gathered here: me, Henblitz, Randid, and Curuni. We might not be able to get every last one, but if we fought seriously, we were likely to win.

"Huh? We're not fighting?" Curuni asked.

"If we were guaranteed to wipe them all out, we would," I replied. "But that's not the case. If even one gets away and heads toward the village, it'll be bad." Our objective wasn't just to defeat as many saberboars as we could—we wanted to remove any threat to the village.

And besides, I'd never fought a saberboar this large. The same probably went for the others. There was no telling how much damage it could take before going down. In the worst case, it could get away wounded and charge right for Beaden. That would be a disaster we couldn't allow to happen.

Also, as things stood, we hadn't prepared Beaden enough to intercept any incoming monsters. It wasn't exactly defenseless during peacetime, but the village didn't possess a force that could calmly deal with a sudden saberboar charge. If the royal garrison or the order were there in numbers, it wouldn't be a problem, but that wasn't the case.

Curuni was probably the fastest on her feet among us, but even so, it would be difficult for her to catch a saberboar in full flight over this terrain. There was

much to gain from trying to finish them now, but it didn't balance out the risks. It was less a matter of any harm coming to us and more the possibility of the damage spreading to the village.

"Hmm, I guess you've got a point..." Curuni said.

"This isn't a normal monster-killing quest," I told her. "If we could just kill it and be done, I would go right ahead."

If this had been a request for the adventurer's guild, then we would throw everything at it, defeat the boss, and call it a day. But the situation here was a little different.

"It would also be terrible if another pack made a move while we were dealing with this one," I added.

Henblitz nodded. "I see. I didn't think of that."

It was hard to imagine there being only a single saberboar pack. That stupidly big one was definitely the leader of this group, but there could be others. To add to that, there was no guarantee the ten or so saberboars here constituted the whole pack. Taking all of this into consideration, attacking now wasn't wise.

"Let's check out the surrounding area while avoiding their attention," I said.

"Understood."

We now knew this was one of the bases we had to destroy, so we would prioritize searching around here. When it came time to deal with them, it would be ridiculous and inconvenient to trip up over the terrain, so we had to get a good grasp of the area.

From what I could see, the boss was pretty confident in itself. Even if a few humans were sniffing around, it wasn't going to move its base so easily. It would still be problematic to be discovered and attacked by the saberboars though, so we had to be careful while scouting.

The four of us dispersed somewhat, approaching the beasts little by little as we searched around. We'd discovered their base, so now it was time to figure out how to attack it.

On the assumption that this was the full scale of the pack, my plan was to

surround them and attack from every direction. That made it difficult for us to support one another, but if we tightened our formation, the saberboars were more likely to run away.

“Over there...looks too unstable.”

On one side of the depression, as if to make up for the rockfall, the terrain was particularly steep. It would be possible to climb and move over it, but I wasn’t sure whether I could get over it quickly in the heat of battle. I could imagine getting charged from behind while trying to scale it and getting a big hole in my back. From another perspective, the saberboars wouldn’t be able to scale it quickly either, so cornering them there seemed like a good idea.

“Hrm...?”

As I continued looking around and building a strategy in my head, the sky suddenly darkened. The source of the sweltering heat that had been pouring down on us was now blocked by a dense cloud to the west.

“I thought it’d just barely hold out for the rest of the day...”

We still had time before it started raining, but even dense cloud cover could be pretty dangerous. A downpour could start out of the blue, even if it didn’t happen immediately. This was unlikely because my mom had predicted it would somehow remain stable for the whole day, but there were no absolutes, and it was unreasonable to ask her to get things correct down to the minute.

“Master, the sky is looking pretty bad,” Randid said. Being a former adventurer, he was the fastest to realize it.

“Yeah, I just noticed too.”

He had rushed to my side quickly but silently, avoiding detection by the saberboars. In the dojo, we taught pupils how to erase all sound and presence while closing the distance, but that was on the flat ground of a training hall or on even soil. It wasn’t used in an area of unstable footing like where we found ourselves now.

Randid seemed to have used our swordsmanship as a base, but he’d definitely made adjustments to his technique during his activities as an adventurer. Allucia was extraordinary at techniques like this, but perhaps on

bad terrain, Randid was actually better. That was how splendid his movements were.

“Shall we link up with the other two and fall back?” he suggested. “It’ll be dangerous if it starts pouring.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “We didn’t bring anything to weather a storm.”

Randid properly understood the dangers of a sudden deterioration in weather. I wasn’t implying that Henblitz or Curuni would make light of it, but it seemed to me like adventurers had far more practical experience in the field. A greedy part of me wanted to keep going because the rain would affect the beasts’ sense of smell. However, we hadn’t packed any gear to deal with rain. Continuing would be just a little too dangerous.

Hunting monsters was part of a knight’s job, but they spent far more time escorting VIPs and going on expeditions to maintain public order. To put it nicely, they were a systematic authority. Put less nicely, they weren’t used to fighting dirty—that was the territory of adventurers and mercenaries. You could sum it up as “the right person for the right job.” It was fortuitous that we had Randid with us.

Just as we started moving toward the other two, they also noticed the change in the sky and came over to us.

“Mr. Beryl, the weather seems to be taking a turn for the worst.”

“Master! It’s getting kinda dark!”

Hmm, these two really are good. Even if there was a difference in their degree of comprehension, they’d made the right choice to link up with us rather than continue the search.

“We just noticed too,” I told them. “It’s possible it’ll start raining, so let’s get out of the mountains quickly.”

“Understood,” Henblitz acknowledged.

No one raised any objection. If we were on the open plains, we could keep going somewhat if it rained, but unfortunately, this was a mountain range. It was already dangerous out here as it was, so it was best to get out now. I

absolutely didn't want to go down these slopes if they turned muddy from rain.

"There we go..." Randid muttered, marking particularly conspicuous trees and rocks with a knife as he went.

"Randid, what's that?" Curuni asked.

"Something like a landmark," he answered. "If it sticks out too much, the local wildlife will be on alert, so we keep it small enough for only us to notice."

"Ooh, I get it."

This methodology was effective in dense forests and caves too. There was no changing the actual scenery, so he made marks just big enough for those looking out for them to see. We'd identified one of the saberboars' lairs, and his marks were a means of leading us back to the area. Frankly, this would prevent a disaster. Getting lost in the middle of a mountain range was pretty much as bad as it could get. These marks were pretty useless once the sun set, though—not that we would ever enter the Aflatta Mountain Range after dark. We didn't have to worry about that.

At any rate, *this* was the difference between knights and adventurers. In terms of pure combat ability, it was difficult to say if Henblitz or Randid was better, but in terms of survival skills, Randid very likely had the edge. These skills were difficult to pick up without spending a long time living in such environments. Adventuring was also a world where those who didn't acquire them tended to die. Those who took command of harsh environments gained fame and riches as top-class adventurers, so they were pretty valuable skills to have. *Doesn't have anything to do with me, though.*

"Whoa, it's getting darker and darker," Curuni remarked.

"Yeah." I nodded. "Let's pick up the pace a little."

It looked like the clouds covering the sun to the west were getting even thicker. I wanted to get to the foot of the mountains before it began raining. It wasn't pitch-black, so we weren't going to get lost, but no one wanted to descend a mountain in a downpour.

"Hurry! Hurry!"

“Eeep!”

I urged Curuni from behind. She was the least used to marching through the mountains among us. It was important to keep an eye on our surroundings, but we had to prioritize speed for now. If things took a turn for the worst, this party could manage pretty much any opponent in a fight. It was more dangerous for us to go too slowly and get caught in the rain before we were clear of the mountains.

“Bwah?!”

“Curuni?!”

Randrid was leading the way, followed by Henblitz, Curuni, then me, but Curuni suddenly vanished from my sight. She’d lost her balance on the unstable ground and had pitched forward face first.

Wow, that looks like it hurt. Not only had she fallen, she’d done so on a slope —her body slid down from the momentum.

“Ooow! That hurts like crazy!” Curuni yelled, shooting back up to her feet in tears.

“Y-You okay?” I asked.

She didn’t have any noticeable wounds on her face, so that was a relief. It seemed she’d reflexively used her arms to protect herself.

Falling was pretty common in the mountains, so we had to be careful. It was pretty hard to trip just from running across a level surface, but it happened easily on the uneven ground of the mountains. At least this had happened on a somewhat familiar path. Had she gone headfirst off a cliff...

“Curuni, are you all right?” Henblitz asked.

“It was just a small slipup! A total gaffe!”

“Good. Be careful.”

“Yessir!”

It didn’t seem to be a big deal, so Henblitz returned his focus to the fore. Normally, you’d think he would be more worried, but he lived up to his role as a

knight—scrapes were everyday occurrences to them. I almost felt like he'd call a fracture no big deal so long as she could still move. That was a frightening thought, especially since I knew Curuni would push through the pain. That was just the kind of girl she was.

Still, it was good it wasn't raining when she tripped. A wet slope was even easier to slip on, and the resulting injury was far more likely to be worse. Accidents could happen no matter how careful you were, so I wanted to hurry while one was least likely to occur.

"Sorry, but we're keeping up the pace," I said. "It's far riskier to still be in the mountains when the rain starts."

"Got it!" Curuni replied. "Not a problem!"

I didn't have the same nonchalant attitude about her pain as Henblitz, but as long as she said she was fine, I was good with it. I continued hurrying her down the mountains, praying that it wouldn't start raining.

Did the heavens answer my meager prayer? By the time the sound of rain drizzling against the soil was audible, we'd reached the base of the Aflatta Mountain Range.

Curuni was greatly delighted to play in the water and wash off the dirt, but she immediately wailed about it stinging her wounds.

I get it. Water on a fresh wound definitely hurts. But you gotta get the dirt out of it, so put up with it.



"All right. Is that everyone?"

"Yes!"

Several days after finding one of the saberboars' lairs, the sky was cloudless, just as my mom had predicted. It was absurdly hot first thing in the morning, but that was better than rain. It was the perfect day to carry out our plan.

Today, we were going to do away with any threat to the village. We'd gathered twelve members for our hunting party—not that I'd done much of the gathering.

“I’d love to see this stupid big saberboar for myself...” my dad grumbled, “but I guess I’ll yield the trophy to you youngsters.”

“Please just stay put,” I told him. “You’re our last line of defense in case anything happens.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Despite always complaining about his stamina and hips and whatnot, he was still the strongest swordsman I knew. In the worst-case scenario of us getting annihilated and the pack of saberboars attacking the village, he would be able to at least buy the time for everyone to evacuate. Maybe it was even possible for him to beat them all. That was how much trust I could put in his swordsmanship, if nothing else. It would actually be difficult to find a swordsman I trusted more. Maybe Allucia or Surena, but we couldn’t exactly get them to come here now.

“I want to go into the mountains too!” Adel protested.

“Ha ha, if you get some experience this time, maybe you’ll be able to go next year,” I told her.

“I-I don’t really mind staying here...” Edel mumbled.

“Oh, come on!” Adel yelled.

I had no intention of letting my pupils into the Aflatta Mountain Range. They were going to be stationed at the foot of the mountains, a little more to the front than where my dad was going to be waiting.

This was actually a considerable concession. By all rights, my dad should’ve been within reach of our pupils. However, Adel and the others had protested that they wouldn’t get any experience that way, so I’d reluctantly allowed them to get closer.

I understood how they felt: they finally had the chance to test their swords, so it would be vexing to have my dad as a babysitter watching them from within the village’s defensive perimeter. There was a precedent for having our pupils close to the front lines too. Those had been students like Allucia and Randid though—people we’d had significant trust in them, even as children.

Aside from Adel and Edel, Randid and I had selected two other kids. The pupils' first battle was going to take place as a group of four. In truth, I'd wanted to leave Randid with them as a supervisor, but our target was dangerously large, so I had him going with us to defeat it instead. That said, as long as we could defeat the boss, it wasn't a bad idea to have at least one person with the students. Henblitz or Randid could fall back in that case.

"To repeat myself over and over," I told the pupils, "the moment you think it looks bad, just accept it and fall back to the village. My dad will manage one way or another after that. Especially you, Adel. Be careful."

"I can properly judge the situation!" she protested, before adding, "Probably..."

"Edel, keep an eye on her," I said.

"R-Right!"

Adel was the foolhardiest among the pupils here by a long shot. If she got too into the battle, she was liable to try to take down a saberboar at the cost of her own life. I left command over the students to Edel, who would be able to keep a calm appraisal of the situation better than the others. It would be nicer to have them within reach, but it was too dangerous to bring them with us into the mountain range. The terrain was just that frightening.

"Um... Good luck," Mewi said awkwardly to close things off.

"Yeah, leave it to me."

Mewi seemed to give me unlimited strength, and I felt more motivated than ever before. I couldn't look lame in front of her. Mewi was going to be watching the house with my mom and Randid's family, so she wouldn't be witnessing my fight. Nonetheless, her words of support granted me great strength.

"Okay, let's get going."

Having fired myself up, I led the group toward the Aflatta Mountain Range. I wanted to get things done by the end of the day. We'd made preparations to that end, and though I still had misgivings, we had enough information to put up a proper fight. The rest was up to our own efforts.

"At any rate, I'm glad the pack itself is pretty small," Randid said on the way there. He seemed to be cataloging what information we had about our foes.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I guess we have the boss to thank for that."

After discovering what appeared to be the saberboars' boss, we'd spent one more day searching the mountains. We'd figured out that, aside from the boss's pack, the saberboars weren't really gathered in groups.

There could be many causes for this, but the one that made the most sense was that stupidly huge boss. There were far fewer packs than last year, but to make up for that, we'd found far more isolated saberboars. If I had to guess, the pack had been much larger at first, but the boss had taken control and had exiled all the saberboars who'd challenged it.

As a result, there were fewer saberboars forming packs and more wandering around in isolation. The fact that all the saberboars we'd found on their own had been so young supported this theory. In other words, they hadn't been in a position to lead a pack.

The young saberboar population had increased, and as a result of challenging that abnormal boss and losing—or just being forced out—they hadn't had the flexibility or the time to form new packs. That meant we didn't have to do as much hunting, which made things easier for us.

"We're lucky none of the lone saberboars ended up reaching the village," Randid muttered.

He had a point. The saberboars who'd refused to obey the powerful boss could've caused harm after being exiled. Lone saberboars didn't really have any defined turf. Their field of activity was limited to an extent, but they could wander much farther than a pack. We'd simply been lucky that none of them had come out of the Aflatta Mountain Range and onto the plains.

"We got to strike down a bunch of strays, so there are plus sides to it too," I said.

"True," Randid agreed. "I suppose we won't be wanting for meat for a while."

We'd collected what saberboars we could during our reconnaissance. It had

been unreasonable to try to bring back any that we'd found too deep into the mountains, but we had the best courier we could ask for in Curuni.

We'd left all the saberboar corpses to Rob. This had left him hollering in joy, but he did have to skin and butcher each one for the village to benefit. The saberboars were definitely a source of income for us, and we made use of everything we could. We just had to wait for a merchant to coincidentally pass by Beaden so we could sell all the tusks and hides. Maybe we were asking for too much luck in that case, though.

Either way, unlike the meat, the tusks and hides could be preserved, so having something we could always sell for money was good for our mental health. The meat was also a treat for the whole village—we weren't planning on saving any of it.

"At that size, I bet the boss's tusks will fetch a great price," Curuni commented.

"Ha ha ha, I guess we'll want to try to keep them intact," I said.

She had a point. If we could keep tusks that large undamaged, they would probably sell for a considerable sum. That did make finishing the boss somewhat harder, but it wasn't a bad idea. Of course, to harvest the tusks, we had to *win*. Getting them wasn't our ultimate objective, but it was something else we could strive for.

The hide would also sell for a higher price the less damaged it was, but it was pretty hard for a swordsman to finish their prey cleanly like that. Our opponents tended to move around a lot and resist. Archers and spearmen were more suited to the task, but I didn't know any. I was a swordsman, so all of my acquaintances were swordsmen—plus a few wizards.

"Oh, here we are."

After a while of casual chatting on our way to our destination, the grand Aflatta Mountain Range towered before us, and the plains stretched out behind us. We were near the boundary between the two regions.

"You kids keep on alert around here," I told the pupils. "Don't even think of entering the mountains."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Adel said, disappointment clear in her voice.

Is she really going to be all right? I mean, I have to trust her, but I'm still anxious. A part of me wanted to tell her to go back to the village, but there was no way she was going to listen.

"It'll be fine," Randrid said. "She's stubborn but not disobedient."

"Well, I guess you're right..." I said.

I decided to just go with the initial plan. Just as he'd said, I wouldn't have brought her here if she was just some unruly child. We'd placed an emphasis on sword skills when selecting which pupils would come with us, but we hadn't decided purely on those merits. And she was here now, so we couldn't turn back—we could only trust in our prior judgment of her.

"This'll be different from our scouting trips," I said. "We're actively eliminating any threats as we make our way to our objective. Got that?"

"Yes!" the others responded.

Our goal was the depression where the saberboar boss was. Unlike before, we were actively hunting any targets we found along the way. We had more than enough of a force gathered for that. The plan was to crush anything we found on our way to the depression, check the situation once we arrived, decide on a strategy, and then attack.

It was a pretty crude plan, but it was the only thing we could do considering how vast the mountain range was and how few people we had on hand. If we'd had an army, things might've been different. Though I had no idea how to command an army, so that would pose its own challenges.

"Okay, let's get to work," I said.

"Yessir!" Curuni replied.

I turned to look at the Aflatta Mountain Range once more. It was time to begin the hunt.



"Hiyah!"

“Oink...”

Curuni’s zweihander caught the head of a charging saberboar. She brought it straight down, dead center on her target, halting its momentum and crushing its cranium. It died instantly. *I never want to try to block an attack from that zweihander head-on. She puts such strength behind it... Is anybody in this world strong enough to directly block her strike?*

“A saberboar’s skull is supposed to be pretty tough...” Randid said with a strained smile.

“Well, that’s Curuni for you...” I muttered alongside him.

It was definitely a shocking sight. There were probably other adventurers who fought like that, but her strength still seemed extraordinary. Randid had considerable strength too, but he would probably be hard-pressed to duplicate such a feat. I doubted I could.

The only one who could probably give Curuni a run for her money was Henblitz, but he made full use of his strength in a sound and steady style to defeat his opponents. It was somewhat different from Curuni’s way of doing things.

“Still, it was a good strike,” I said. “On the assumption you’re hitting the opponent, a downward swing is very powerful.”

“Yessir!”

She got a passing grade for making the right decision based on my earlier lecture regarding the use of two-handed swords. She wasn’t just mindlessly swinging it around. This also reinforced my opinion of Balder—Curuni’s sword skill was splendid, but a weapon capable of matching her strength and style was equally magnificent.

“It’s mostly easy ‘cause they come right at me, though,” she said.

“I think there’s something wrong with calling that easy...” I muttered.

She made it sound like she wouldn’t lose to anyone in a straight up contest of strength. To be honest, there were probably very few beings out there who could win against her. But Curuni technically had a point. Assuming you weren’t

completely outclassed, it was generally easier to fight an opponent who was coming at you rather than one who turned their back to run. A fleeing enemy meant you were unlikely to suffer any injuries, but it also made it hard to deal a telling blow.

Saberboars pretty much never ran away as their first move, so you could say they were the ideal foe for Curuni's style. Wild animals and monsters were typically ferocious. Excluding those with intelligence or small bodies, their first impulse was to attack. Even though it was mentally tiring to be on guard for constant ambushes, if you could place them right in front of you, it made things relatively simple to handle. To add to that, being able to deal certain death to a foe who was directing their hostility toward you was a big boon. A wounded beast was a lot of trouble, and it would be problematic for them to escape with information on how dangerous we were. There was nothing easier to handle than an opponent who lacked caution, be they monster or human.

"At any rate, there sure are a lot of strays," I said. "How many exiles are there?"

The saberboar that had just attacked Curuni had been yet another stray. I checked the area just in case, but there were no signs of any others. We'd taken out a fair number of them the other day, but it didn't feel like there were fewer of them now. There were just a lot of saberboars this year, and plenty of them had been driven out of the pack. How tyrannical was this boss? I was starting to feel sorry for the other saberboars.

"At least we aren't getting surrounded," Randid said. "Strays also keep our fatigue down."

He was right. Facing lone opponents meant we had time to rest. I had the least stamina in this group, but even I had energy to spare. The others could probably keep going far longer. At this rate, we would reach our destination with plenty of stamina in reserve. There was no telling how much time that ridiculously large boss would take to defeat, so I wanted us in as good a condition as possible.

"This place really is suitable for training," Henblitz commented, nodding in satisfaction.

“I-Is that so...?”

He'd been mowing down not only saberboars, but other beasts and monsters who'd made their home in the Aflatta Mountain Range. I was glad he seemed to be having a fulfilling experience, but I really didn't want him to make this place the order's campground. Even ignoring the international problems, I felt like the mountain range's ecosystem would change drastically if such a martial force were to stay for too long.

While we were mainly hunting saberboars, if other monsters or beasts got in our way, we dealt with them too. It was unwise to cull too many of them without a good reason, but we had to ward off whatever attacked us. Still, due to the increase in saberboar activity in this area, we didn't really find many other beasts.

Most of the larger monsters were located deeper into the mountains. I still didn't understand why Zeno Grable had been where we'd found it. In terms of fighting ability, saberboars were far inferior to any named monster. The boss's size was indeed a threat, but it wasn't going to fly through the skies or use magic or anything. Considering our forces, it would be odd if we lost.

The terrain was our greatest obstacle. If we'd been in an open field, I would've taken the dojo's pupils with us. Things just never seemed to line up, and I was beginning to wonder why that was. There was no point in grinding my teeth over it, but it was hard to say whether I'd always made the best choices. *Well, that's all in the past—I have to focus on the present.*

“Master, what're we gonna do after finishing the big one?” Curuni asked during a break between killing saberboars and other small creatures.

“Hmm... Carrying it back seems unreasonable, so maybe we can call Rob over to collect it later.”

At that size, I couldn't imagine Curuni hefting it back to the village all on her own. It would take several of us to transport it, but that would make our journey back too risky. Depending on how exhausted we were after the fight, we could possibly call in reinforcements to come and collect it.

Unfortunately, even with escorts, we couldn't allow regular villagers into the mountains, so the only people available were Rob and the other hunters.

Maybe after we were done scattering the saberboars, we could bring my pupils to help too. Their task would be less about defeating monsters and more about simple physical labor, though.

Randrid pointed to a cut on the tree he'd left last time. "There's a mark," he said. "We're getting close."

"Got it," I confirmed.

We were almost at the depression in the ground—we could only hope the boss was still there. If it wasn't, I wanted to keep searching, though I needed to keep in mind how long it would take us to get out of the mountains. No matter how many saberboars we hunted, the threat would remain if the boss was left at large.

"Ah, over there..."

Visibility was poor, but a while after discovering the first mark, I spotted a unique feature of the terrain through the trees.

"The boss...is right there. It's kicking back and relaxing," I said.

"It kinda looks full of itself," Curuni said.

"Well, it's the hotshot of its pack."

Much like last time, the boss saberboar, who was twice the size of the others, was lounging about in its base. It really was cocky. It had probably exiled all the saberboars who hadn't taken to its attitude.

There was a benefit to kicking out all those who didn't obey, but going too far would make it impossible to maintain a community. In all likelihood, if we simply sat back and observed the situation, the pack would eventually fall apart. A part of me wanted to see this, but that would scatter saberboars all over, leading to potential collateral damage. *Too bad for the boss—we have to finish it here.*

"What's the plan? Shall we charge in?" Henblitz asked.

"That's the idea, but we'll spread out first," I said. "I want everyone to corner them near that steep incline over there."

"I see..."

In a one-on-one fight against a saberboar, no one here was going to lose. Their accomplishments to date had proven that. So, rather than making a tight formation and creating an escape corridor for the saberboars, I wanted to surround them and crush their chances of fleeing.

“Once I see everyone in position, I’ll throw this rock,” I added. “Use that as the signal to charge in. What do you think?”

“Understood,” Henblitz said. “That sounds good.”

The pack was a little bigger than what we’d confirmed the other day. At least from what I could see, there were somewhere around twenty saberboars. If you looked only at the numbers, it seemed bad for us—four against twenty was unreasonable. That was why I wanted to take the initiative with a violent surprise assault and reduce their numbers a little.

We couldn’t shout to one another while spreading out and coordinating, so I’d chosen a stone as a signal, which was confirmable by sight and didn’t have any lag. Though it was somewhat primitive, it was enough to declare the start of the battle.

“Haaah...”

The others dispersed, and I was now alone. I took the time to meditate.

This is an opponent I can beat. I’ve beaten saberboars a ton of times. But that doesn’t mean I’m guaranteed to win today. If I show the slightest bit of carelessness, arrogance, or conceit—these things could easily overturn the victory I should achieve.

“Okay...”

I clenched the large stone in my left hand. Using this as a signal to start the fight might seem lame from an outside perspective, but I didn’t care about that. It didn’t matter how cool it looked. Taking the best option available to achieve victory was what fighting was about.

“Hup!”

I wound my arm back and threw the first and last ball of the game. A dull thud resounded inside the depression as four figures—including me—leaped out

from the trees at the same time.

“Haaah!”

“Oink?!”

The first to strike was Henblitz. A saberboar just happened to be in his path. It had registered the sound of his approach, but it hadn’t been able to react to his swift blade. A splendid horizontal slash severed both its forelegs in one strike. *A smart decision. There’s no need to deal immediate deathblows—we only have to disable them.* The forelegs had been the easiest thing to hit in that situation.

A ferocious monster’s bones and muscles were in no way soft. Even if they were relatively easier to cut compared to the cranium, Henblitz had severed two limbs in one considerably powerful blow. His longsword was also a splendid piece of smithing, having withstood such force with ease.

“Ooooh!”

“Hiyaah!”

Randrid and Curuni also slashed at the first saberboars they encountered. The former went from a thrust to an upward stroke to split his opponent’s nose and fighting spirit, then aimed a return stroke at its neck. The latter used a downward swing to once more finish her target in a single blow.

Curuni’s attack had terrifying power behind it, but I was a little worried this experience might give her some bad habits. A downward strike straight from above as an opening move was pretty much only good in a successful ambush or against an opponent who was already off-balance. It was only succeeding now because she was faced with monsters who possessed no intelligence or technique. In a fight between skilled combatants, it wouldn’t go this well. *I’ll have to warn her about it later.*

“There we go.”

“Oink...”

I couldn’t just watch the battle—I had work to do too. I dodged the saberboar who charged at me, then delivered a single strike to its abdomen as it passed. My sword tore through half of its torso without any resistance, sending a spray

of blood into the air.

No matter how many times I used it, my sword's edge was nothing to laugh at. It performed at ridiculous levels, living up to the fact that Balder had poured his soul into this one blade. I was constantly reminded of how I had to one day live up to the quality of this sword. *Will I ever truly feel like I deserve it?*

“Oink! Graaaaaawr!”

After our successful initial strike, the ridiculously big boss roared in anger. Well, uncouth intruders had suddenly barged into its territory, so its anger was reasonable. That didn't mean I was going to let it get away, though.

“Oink!”

Contrary to my expectation, the boss's order was to attack, not flee. Even though our initial strike had gone well, they still had more than ten healthy saberboars. Turning tail and running would muddy the boss's dignity, so we didn't have to worry about our opponents fleeing. That was good—it meant there was no current threat to the village.

“Here they come!” I yelled. “Just make sure not to get flanked!”

“Right!”

Our ambush had gone well, but now it was time to start the real battle. Though the objective was the same as before, the difficulty had gone up. Our opponents now saw us as the enemy, and they were coming at us all at once in greater numbers. Not only did we have to stay on the offensive, but we had to endure attacks from multiple sources. This was the time for a swordsman's skills to shine.

A saberboar charge involved a mass far greater than any human, and they closed in at tremendous speed. No matter how great your technique, it was all too common to freeze up when faced with such a threat. Experience and knowledge were the most important factors in a fight like this.

“Haaah!”

“Oooh!”

Good thing the people by my side were elites with mountains of experience.

None were rookies who would falter in the face of a saberboar's charge. Our opponent had speed, and their strength was immense, but they had no strategy or intelligence. We weren't soft enough or trained so poorly that we would lose to such meager opponents. *We just have to keep our eyes on what's happening. They're all going down here.*

"Graaaaaawr!"

"Oh, looks like the boss has decided to personally step in."

Around the time we finished two or three saberboars each—seeing its pack reduced to half its number—the boss seemed unable to endure witnessing the slaughter. It roared and charged.

"Graaah!"

"Whoa there!"

Perhaps seeing me as the frailest of the four, the stupidly huge saberboar made a beeline for me.

Oh man, aren't you a bit quick for your size? Not only that, its deadly tusks were ridiculously large and seemed very sharp. A single hit could lead to instant death. Also, considering that its tremendous mass far surpassed mine, even a collision that didn't involve the tusks seemed very dangerous. This wasn't just some small fry who was all show—it definitely lived up to being the leader of the pack.

"Grawr!"

"Guess you won't just...go down quietly!"

The saberboar boss shook its head left and right as it charged, swinging its huge tusks. Its momentum alone was troublesome, but it was also capable of stopping suddenly. And it did just that—the moment it got within striking range, it halted and changed directions, still swinging those tusks. Despite being a monster, it was pretty smart.

Due to the beast's sudden braking and the shaking of its head, I couldn't deal a decisive blow. It was a bit of a pain. Against a normal opponent, I could circle around to the flank and cut it down. However, this saberboar's tusks were far

too big, so I had to dodge far enough away that my blade could no longer reach it.

I definitely didn't want to resort to throwing my weapon. I could probably hit it, but I wasn't confident I could take it down in one blow, and a move like that would leave me unarmed.

"Mr. Beryl! I'll supp—"

"I'm fine!" I yelled, cutting Henblitz off. "Use this time to whittle down their numbers!"

There was no need to fight this thing two-on-one yet. The boss was focused solely on me, so the three others didn't have to worry about it and could take out its underlings.

Now then, how to break this deadlock? The saberboar boss was huge and fast, but its strength, speed, and agility were all inferior to the named monsters I'd fought before. Zeno Grable had been far faster and more agile. Lono Ambrosia had been more of a pain to deal with, and the victory conditions had been far harsher.

Things were relatively easy on me this time around, but in a contest of stamina, I would definitely lose. I couldn't mess around and drag things out for too long. The safest and most reliable approach would be for me to stall, preserve my stamina, and wait for the others to exterminate the saberboars—then we could take the boss four-on-one. There was no need to take unnecessary risks. I understood this from a logical standpoint. I also had the confidence to dodge all of its attacks until this choice was possible. I was still a little concerned about my stamina, but I hadn't exerted myself much before this, so it was probably okay.

"Haaah... I guess I really am a swordsman at heart."

"Oink!"

But that wouldn't be fun. *Not fun at all.* I had nothing to say in my defense if someone called me crazy for thinking this in such a tense situation. It simply wasn't the time for such thoughts.

Have I always been this much of a thrill seeker? Wasn't I the type to prioritize

safety and certainty? I couldn't really fault Curuni now—that would be like the kettle calling the pot black. Had I remained as nothing more than a dojo instructor in Beaden, I wouldn't be thinking such things. But my life plan had changed drastically ever since Allucia had shown up out of nowhere and thrust the title of special instructor for the Liberion Order into my hands.

Well, maybe I hadn't really had a proper plan before that. Nonetheless, my time in Baltrain had been filled with fascinating events—some a bit stormy, and none of which I could've experienced in the sticks. That was both good and bad.

Just maybe, these colorful days reminded me a little of the dreams I'd had as a child. To sum it up briefly, I was reminded of the curiosity I'd had about how close I could get to the summit of swordsmanship, my desire for plain and simple strength, the pursuit of technique, and the groundless confidence that I could accomplish it all. I could feel it all bubbling up to the surface. My heart was screaming at me and asking why I was being stalled by such a weak opponent.

How could I forget? Creatures known as swordsmen were selfish by nature. We believed we were better than all others, and we competed ruthlessly with our lives on the line. We happily threw ourselves into a never-ending vortex of battles. Wasn't that the lifestyle I'd wished for with all my heart as a child?

“Haaah...”

“Graaawr!”

I didn't rebel against this smoldering emotion within me. Instead, I lowered my stance. I wasn't positioning myself to dodge—if I failed here, I was sure to suffer a serious injury. I could even die. But mysteriously enough, I didn't feel any fear of death. I wasn't worried about failing.

I emptied every last bit of air in my lungs and absorbed everything with my eyes. Holding in all my vigor, I felt my nostrils flare open.

“Haaaaaaaaaaah!”

I screamed, putting all my fighting spirit behind my conviction.

Man, it feels surprisingly good to unleash all my spirit in the face of a charge. I was supposed to already know this. I'd done it in the past. When had I

forgotten? My last memory of it seemed so far away. That was how much I'd distanced myself from the mental state of an ideal warrior, and I'd made excuses all the while.

“Graaah!”

As if hailing my roar, the saberboar boss charged at me. A pair of tusks thicker than my arms closed in right before my eyes. I wasn't going to dodge. It was already too late to try. The moment I'd taken this stance, there'd been no other choice but to meet the boss head-on.

“Shhh!”

With my sword held before me, I stretched one leg back. I didn't use my strength to lunge forward. By bracing my entire lower body from the hips down and shifting my weight backward, I used my opponent's momentum to throw forward a sufficiently powerful slash as the distance closed. This was a reversal.

“Oink?!”

Serpent lash—this was a technique that coiled around the opponent's charge, sealing it and retaliating with a strike in the process. The saberboar and I had intersected for an instant balanced on a knife's edge. Its charge had even torn a fragment from my clothes. However, my sword had cleanly severed one of its great tusks right at the root.

“Shaaah!”

“Oink?!”

Without sparing a glance at the severed tusk, I swept my blade up, cutting the saberboar's neck with pinpoint accuracy. In my hands, I could feel definite feedback from the blow.

“Graaaaaah!”

“Guess you're not going down in one hit!”

However, its massive frame was a tremendous threat on its own. I'd stepped in more than usual for the strike, but one hadn't been enough to finish it. A flashy spray of blood shot out, so it was indeed bleeding considerably. Given time, the saberboar would no longer be able to move, but it had proven to be

too difficult to neutralize immediately.

“O-Oink...”

The saberboar who’d been charging in heedlessly seemed shaken—its tusk was gone, and there was damage to its neck.

“To cut it off without breaking it... Just what I’d expect!”

I could hear Henblitz voice his admiration. He’d apparently seen my strike by coincidence. The tusk hadn’t snapped off—I’d severed it cleanly at its root. This was made possible not only because of my technique, but thanks to the sword made of Zeno Grable’s materials. Even so, it felt pretty good.

In terms of simple feedback, Lono Ambrosia’s core had been much harder. Unlike the core’s abnormal material, this was nothing more than an animal’s tusk, even if somewhat large. This was only clear after the fact, but it wasn’t all that hard to cut.

“Grrrr...!”

“If you’re just gonna sit back, then I’ll make the move.”

Having quietened down significantly from its initial display of bravado, the boss gradually stepped back. Maybe it was hoping for reinforcements, but unfortunately for it, most had already been cut down. I’d taken it one-on-one but only with the help of the others. Though I’d ended up repelling its charge, if another saberboar had attacked my flank, I would’ve been helpless.

“Hah!”

“Oink?!”

I closed in with a single lunge and started by robbing my opponent of its mobility. I thrust my longsword straight into the saberboar’s right foreleg.

My emotions were running high. The long-dormant pride I had as a swordsman was being stimulated—this was very clear to me. Still, I wasn’t going to yield to such emotions and let down my guard. I couldn’t lose myself to it.

My opponent was wounded, and judging by the amount of bleeding, it didn’t have long to live. Nonetheless, I couldn’t let it be. There was no guessing what a

desperate monster would resort to.

“All right, let’s end this.”

I wasn’t generous enough to show pity to an animal who’d lost the use of a leg.

“Oink...”

Without really giving it the time for a death cry, I thrust my sword up into the saberboar’s mouth, piercing its brain. I’d managed to cut its tusk, so I could probably do the same to its cranium. Still, there was nothing better than a finishing thrust that took minimal effort. The insides of most living creatures’ mouths were very tender, so piercing that spot was a very efficient way of dealing a fatal blow without having to go through the skull. You did need to aim carefully, though.

“C’mere!”

After finishing off the boss, I checked the situation around me once more. It seemed the extermination was pretty much over. Curuni was energetically chasing the last saberboar.

Ah, she caught up to it and chopped off its back leg. Well, that’s the last of them. Anyway, it’s pretty crazy to catch up to a fleeing saberboar... She’s way too fast on her feet.

“Mr. Beryl, we’re done here,” Henblitz said, swinging the blood off his beloved longsword.

“Yup, well done.”

Every last drop of animal blood flew off his blade. *Damn, that’s cool. The gesture really suits a man like Henblitz.*

“Master, your serpent lash was perfect,” Randid said. “Truly amazing.”

“Oh, you saw that? Thanks.”

This was one of our dojo’s techniques, so all of our graduates could use it too. This naturally applied to Randid as well. It felt kinda nice having my skills praised by a former pupil.

“Now then...” I muttered, taking another look around.

It was a pretty ghastly scene. There were around twenty saberboars scattered about and bleeding all over. Just leaving things as they were was liable to create some other problems, which was a somewhat frightening thought. If possible, I would’ve liked to collect all the bodies, but we had nowhere near enough people to pull that off. We’d expected this, at least.

“Just to check, did any get away?” I asked the others.

“Not likely,” Randidr answered. “I believe all those that were here are dead.”

“Splendidly done.”

It seemed our swift attack had gone well. This had likely been the result of Randidr and Henblitz participating. Curuni was also a fine fighter, but everything from the search to the ultimate subjugation of our targets had gone smoothly because we had the strength of two veterans.

“Curuni, think you can lift that thing?” I asked.

“Uhhh... I’ll give it a go.”

I just wanted to see whether or not we could bring back the stupidly big saberboar. It was probably impossible—guaranteed impossible, some would say—but a part of me felt like she might be able to pull it off.

Curuni gave it her all, but she ultimately conceded. “Nope... It’s too big.”

“Oh well.”

Yup, no good. Guess that was pushing it. Even if Curuni could actually lift the thing, it would be physically impractical to transport it. Our only option was to come back later with more helping hands.

“At any rate, there are still no signs of another pack making a move,” Randidr said.

“True,” I agreed. “I’d like to check the area a little more, just in case, but...”

This had been a pretty flashy raid, but at least during the battle, no other saberboars had come this way. Even now, there were only small critters in the area. Though we couldn’t be certain, it was possible that this had been the only

pack. That was something to be extremely grateful for. And considering the rapid increase in lone saberboars, it made sense.

"For now, how 'bout just taking the tusk back?" Curuni suggested.

"Yeah, let's," I said, nodding.

I didn't really want to go back empty-handed, so taking the boss's tusk sounded pretty good. It was big, so it would serve as proof of what we'd done.

"It's been severed so brilliantly..." Henblitz observed.

I picked the tusk off the ground. "Ha ha, not too bad, if I do say so myself."

The blade really *had* sliced through it cleanly. Anyone who saw it without any explanation would never guess it'd been cut off using a sword in the midst of battle. I ran my finger along the cross section—it was extremely smooth. This result was likely only possible because of the sword made of Zeno Grable's materials.

I really was endlessly indebted to Balder and my sword. I was also starting to feel like no other sword could satisfy me. *Was I a little late coming to this realization?* A part of me felt like it was more than I deserved, but I also doubted I would ever let it go willingly. It was like some messed-up love affair.

"Anyway, that battle cry was pretty amazing, Master!" Curuni said.

"Ah, well, ha ha ha ha..."

It was only natural that everyone had heard me shouting so loudly—it was a little embarrassing for her to bring it up. My emotions had been running high at the time, so it did feel a little out of character. Still, those emotions hadn't been a trick of the mind. They were truly a part of me. I wanted to be sure not to lose them again.

"Heh heh, have you broken free of some kind of shackles, Mr. Beryl?" Henblitz asked.

"Hm... I wonder about that," I said. "Well...I think I've made a change for the better, at least."

"That's good to hear."

Randrid and Curuni saw me as their master in swordsmanship. Henblitz, on the other hand, wasn't my pupil. He saw me as a fellow swordsman. His sharp senses had somehow detected my emotional change. *His eyes are keen as ever.*

I didn't think I'd made a bad change. Naturally, self-restraint was important, and I planned to keep mine, but it wasn't good to keep a swordsman's instincts too dormant either.

"Okay, not to say we're making a grand and triumphant return, but shall we head back?" I said. "We did finish some big game, after all."

"Yes!"

The fruits of battle were as sweet as we could ask for. We had no noticeable injuries, and none of us were exhausted. It was pretty much the ideal result. The only remaining concern was whether my pupils stationed at the foot of the mountains had gotten caught up in any unnecessary trouble. Still, we'd dealt with the majority of the saberboars, so things were probably fine...

"Oink?"

"Curuni."

"Yessir!"

Or so I'd thought, but we bumped into yet another lone saberboar on the way back.

Seriously, how many of them are there? Haven't they bred a bit too much this year?



"Ah, Master Beryl!"

A while after eradicating the saberboar pack, we safely made our way out of the Aflatta Mountain Range. It was somewhat disconcerting that we'd bumped into several lone saberboars on the way, though. Still, all things considered, we'd culled their numbers in the vicinity significantly. I didn't know whether they would have a breeding season again like this next year, but things were probably fine for now.

"Adel, everything fine over here?" I asked.

“Yes! I’m here, after all!” she responded energetically.

“Glad to hear it.”

We linked up with my pupils at the foot of the mountains. Not that I really cared, but even when we’d been a fair distance away, I’d spotted her in a noticeably imposing stance. Perhaps she’d been doing that during the entire operation. Her attitude was in no way inferior to that of the saberboar boss.

“U-Um... G-Good work everyone...” Edel said, being rather considerate.

“Mm. Thanks for your hard work too, Edel,” I told him.

Despite being Adel’s twin, his personality was so very different from hers. It was somewhat strange, but it gave them individuality, so it wasn’t a bad thing.

“Hmm... Did no saberboars come this way?” I asked, taking a cursory look around.

There were no signs that any fighting had taken place. I couldn’t see any blood, and my pupils were completely unharmed. I was relieved to see that the damage hadn’t extended beyond the mountains, but this might have been an unsatisfying day for my pupils, especially Adel.

“One did!” Adel responded. “But it ran away immediately...”

“Oh, is that so?”

So it hadn’t been completely uneventful. One saberboar had gotten close enough for both sides to notice each other. It was hard to imagine a saberboar withdrawing upon spotting a human, though. There had to have been some kind of circumstance behind that.

“We were being pretty flashy on our way there, so maybe it learned to be wary of humans...?” Randid suggested.

“Aaah... That’s entirely possible,” I agreed.

It was true. We’d been actively mowing down saberboars, so perhaps one had witnessed that and had run away. Upon spotting more humans, it had chosen to flee yet again. While monsters didn’t possess intelligence, they did have a capacity to learn through instinct. A young monster with little to no combat experience was liable to recognize the threat a human poses and ultimately

choose to run away.

“In short, it freaked out due to my strength!” Adel declared.

“Ha ha ha.”

There was a glimmer of truth to that—it had definitely returned to the mountains after seeing humans. Still, Adel’s confidence was astounding. She had a strong will and supreme confidence in her own skills—or perhaps, in her future. This self-important behavior was important if one wanted to live on as a swordsman. I was supposed to have settled my feelings and given up on that long ago, but it was difficult to stop dreaming about it once you started.

Randrid and I had to guide these young sprouts so that they could chase their dreams. We couldn’t tug them along from the front—that wouldn’t lead to their personal growth. We could only show them the path. Whether or not they walked it was up to them. That was how one became both a splendid person and swordsman. At least, that was what I believed.

“Th-That tusk... W-Were you the one to defeat the saberboar it came from, Master Beryl?” Edel asked.

“Hm? This?” I said. The thing was rather conspicuous—it was too large to carry in my hand. I’d lugged it back over my shoulder instead. “Well...yeah.”

“You really are amazing!” Adel exclaimed in high spirits.

I was half happy and half embarrassed. This was only one of the tusks, so if we went back to the site of the battle, there was another to retrieve. That was under assumption that no one pilfered it, but humans rarely went that deep into the mountains, so it was probably all right.

A hunter would keep one of the tusks in their home as a trophy, but I had no such fixations. It was a magnificent tusk with very few scratches on it, so it was bound to fetch a good price. At this size, it could even be popular with nobles and the like too—so depending on the merchant’s sale, it had great resale value.

“Oh, right,” I said. “The saberboars are largely dealt with, so I’d like to retrieve the spoils. The four of us aren’t enough to do it on our own, though.”

“I’ll do it! I’m in! Me!” Adel shouted immediately.

I couldn’t forget about postbattle looting. All the bodies would eventually return to nature, but given the chance to secure a source of income and meat, I wanted to do what we could to retrieve it all.

We were lacking in manpower, but Adel was ridiculously motivated. This was better than her refusing, but I didn’t see the reason for her to be so excited over collecting some carcasses. *Well, as long as she’s having fun, I don’t mind.*

The dangers of the Aflatta Mountain Range weren’t completely gone, but with the saberboars exterminated, it was relatively safe now. We would be returning along the route we’d already cleared, so that would considerably reduce the effort and time needed to get back to the boss.

We still had to be careful about selecting who would go into the mountains with us, though. It was too dangerous to go there acting like we were on a picnic. I wanted to ask Rob and the other village hunters, and if we were lucky, any adventurers who happened to be staying in the area. We could use the saberboar parts to pay them, and since there wouldn’t be any fighting involved, people were sure to sign up. Luck was definitely still a factor, though. It would be hard to retrieve *everything*.

Speaking of adventurers—it wasn’t prohibited to bypass the guild when making requests. However, the guild’s stance was that they weren’t taking any responsibility whatsoever. That meant if the adventurer took part in any crimes or were scammed, they were on their own. That said, fulfilling a simple request where they happened to be staying was pretty common for adventurers. We’d asked adventurers who’d coincidentally been in Beaden to do things before. Nothing had ever been worth going through the guild to call someone over, but if someone was already around, then there was no harm in asking.

“Looks like everyone is safe,” I said. “Shall we head back to the village?”

Henblitz nodded. “Yes, I’d like to clean up and calm down.”

Even though no one had taken any visible wounds, we all stank of sweat and animal stench. There was also quite a bit of saberboar blood on us. I definitely wanted to wash up and get changed.

"Master! Can I try holding that tusk?" Adel asked, brimming with interest.

"Yeah, sure. It's pretty heavy, so be careful."

I handed it over to her. The moment the weight left my shoulders, both of Adel's arms sank momentarily. However, she toughed it out and held it up to her chest—the tusk filled her arms completely.

"Whoa... Heh heh! One day, I'll take down something just as big!"

"Ha ha ha, I'm sure you will," I told her. "Even I managed to."

She was seeing a vision of herself achieving the same thing one day. Randid and I had to do our best to guide her so that her dreams wouldn't end as delusions. I had my job as a special instructor, so at present, this was Randid's duty.

"The next generation's growth is always something to celebrate," I said. "This really reminds me of that."

"Indeed," Henblitz said. "But I don't suppose you have any intention of letting them catch up so easily, right?"

"Of course not," I replied. "We must grow too."

He had his pride as a swordsman and his pride as one who stood above others. Back when I was his age, I'd had my hands full just trying to be an instructor. It really highlighted how amazing he was, not only in skill but in mental fortitude as well.

"Huh? Back already?"

"Hm? What're you doing out here, dad?"

It was a short while after linking up with my pupils and starting our walk back to Beaden. A fair distance away from the village's defensive perimeter, we bumped into my dad. He had his sword at his waist, so it didn't seem like he'd been on a pleasure jaunt.

"The weather was nice, so I was taking a stroll," he said.

"Uh-huh. With your sword?"

"Oh, this? It's like a chronic disease."

He was probably worried about the pupils and had come out a little closer. He was strict as a father and *extremely* strict as an instructor, but he could also be awkwardly affectionate like this. Any kind of compliment would go straight to his head though, so I'd never said anything.

After verifying that everyone was safe, my dad's eyes settled on the tusk in Adel's arms.

"Hmm, that's pretty big," he said. "I doubt the little tyke was the one who took it down."

"She wasn't," I said. "I've never seen one that big before."

Unexpectedly, Adel didn't react to what he'd said. She probably understood that she didn't possess the ability to win against the beast that had grown that enormous tusk. She was unyielding and rowdy but not foolish.

"I guess I don't get a turn after all," my dad grumbled, huffing like a child.

"Don't be like that," I told him. "We were able to charge in precisely because you stayed back."

If it hadn't been for him protecting the rear, we wouldn't have taken all our main combatants into the mountains. Randid probably would've stayed behind, at least. In that case, the battle might've gone somewhat differently.

"You didn't bring back any meat?" my dad asked.

"How can we possibly bring back such a huge carcass?" I said.

"Oh man, how pathetic. Back in my day—"

"You're a senior now."

"Shut it!"

My dad was in a great mood. His company made the walk back to Beaden rather lively.



"There's plenty of meat left! Eat up! Eat up!"

"Yahooooo!"

About a week after subjugating the saberboars in the mountains and settling all manner of affairs, the village was in a festive mood. All the saberboars we'd laboriously retrieved had been butchered, their tusks and hides sold, and Beaden was now feasting on the surplus of meat.

You could technically call this a yearly tradition, and the revelry tended to continue for several days. It was rare to be able to fill your stomach with as much meat as you could ever want, so everyone's spirits were through the roof.

What was more, with extremely fortuitous timing, a merchant happened to be visiting the village. Thanks to that, we'd quickly been able to cash in the tusks and hides, as well as buy some alcohol and other goods for entertainment.

"Mm... That's delicious."

I gazed at the celebrating villagers and knocked back some lukewarm ale we'd gotten from the merchant. Out here, there was no way to get chilled ale like in Baltrain's taverns. Nonetheless, for a village lacking in luxuries, alcohol was extremely welcome.

As I loitered around with a wooden tankard in hand, a plump man called out to me.

"Yo, Beryl. You got quite the haul this time."

"Hi, Fuphil. Yeah, it was great. You really helped us out again."

This was the key figure behind the curtains of the festivities—the merchant Fuphil. He was the same age as me, and he was originally from this village.

As the word "again" implied, he'd dropped by with impeccable timing more than just once or twice. Since this was his hometown, he naturally knew about the saberboar problem. In other words, he knew when he could get a large haul of cheap goods to turn into profit.

Saberboar hides and tusks went for a pretty good price. However, considering where you had to hunt them, very few adventurers bothered. It just wasn't worth the effort. Things were different for our village, though. We took down a fixed number of saberboars every year without relying on outside help. Fuphil didn't have to pay adventurers or mercenaries to do the hunting. Instead, he

traded directly with the village and took zero risks.

“This is a profitable time of the year for me,” he said. “And there was a real big one this time too. You’re the ones helping me out.”

“Ha ha, think you’ll get a good price for that tusk?”

“Yeah, I’m hoping to make a hefty sum.”

Fuphil was a merchant but not a villain. He had plenty of affection for his hometown. That was why he sold luxury goods like alcohol as well as everyday necessities to us wholesale at pretty cheap prices. Taking that discount into consideration, the village had no need to make things difficult by haggling. Besides, we had no connections with the outside to sell them ourselves, so it was only natural for the profits to fall to him.

“You’ll have to treat those kids you got as guards,” I told him.

“Of course. It ended up being a worthwhile job for them.”

Transporting the saberboars had been a laborious task. This was a consequence of there being far more lone saberboars this year that had dispersed from that stupidly huge boss’s base. So, we’d had the four adventurers Fuphil had hired as guards for his trip here help with the work. They were all young, but they were silver ranks with the abilities to match.

It was apparently pretty much unheard of for white and bronze ranks to be hired as guards on a journey. You couldn’t entrust your life to a novice who possessed no accomplishments or abilities, so that made sense. It was the path of a newcomer to slowly build trust by taking on relatively safe investigation requests or suppression requests for small monsters—much like Porta and Needry now did.

“Pwah! Ale after a job well done really hits the spot!”

“Curuni, try not to drink too much,” I told her.

“Yessir!”

She’d once confessed to being a lightweight, and here she was, knocking back tankard after tankard. This wasn’t a mission for the order or anything, so it was fine for her to let loose—to an extent. Still, I wondered whether she would be

all right tomorrow if she kept drinking at that pace. I'd given her a warning, but it didn't really look like she was going to listen.

Either way, I hoped this trip to Beaden had served as a good breather for her. Even if she did get wasted, we could just let her rest and recover in my house. If she collapsed, the least I could do was carry her there.

"Okay, I'm going to join the adventurers," Fuphil said.

I nodded and repeated my warning to him. "All right. Try not to drink too much."

"I'll be careful. Neither of us are young anymore."

Fuphil's belly shook as he cackled, and he walked off in a great mood. It was hard to believe we'd swung wooden swords together back in the day. We were the same age and from the same village, but the paths we now walked had diverged so much. One wasn't better than the other, of course. I had my way of life, and he had his. It was rude to decide whether one was a success or failure. Besides, he was doing pretty well as a merchant.

With Fuphil gone, I was on my own again, staring at the festivities. Mewi soon came over to say hello.

"Hey, old guy... Thanks for the hard work..."

"Yo, Mewi. You eating your fill?"

This was an unfamiliar place and lifestyle to her, so she'd been really nervous at first. However, thanks to my dad, mom, and Curuni's gallant efforts, she seemed to have loosened up significantly.

"The meat...is really good," Mewi said.

"Glad to hear it."

We had as much meat as we wanted, but there were no real cooking facilities or any kind of specialized seasonings. So we simply roasted the meat, and the only things we could add for flavor were salt and some herbs we'd procured. We could also smoke some meat to preserve it for later. Regardless, it was still meat, and it was apparently enough of a treat for Mewi's palate that she had felt the need to be honest about her delight.

"So, how do you like Beaden?" I asked. "Not that there's anything out here to be proud of."

From the perspective of a student attending the magic institute in the big city, the backcountry had to be pretty boring. Still, getting away from the hustle and bustle of the capital for a slow and easy life was time well spent. Especially considering Mewi's background and upbringing, I wanted her to let loose without having to worry about all the eyes around her.

"Mm... I think it's nice," she said.

"That's good."

The villagers had welcomed Mewi warmly. In such a small community, newcomers were generally accepted or ostracized by everyone at once. Mewi had the advantage of coming with me, so there'd been no ill feelings toward her at all. Also, my dad's influence in this village was tremendous. On paper, Mewi was his family, so the villagers couldn't treat her poorly. Not that Mewi needed to know any of this. She just had to understand that she was welcome here in Beaden.

"Is that ale?" she asked after a while of staring at the festivities in silence.

"Hm? Yeah, what about it?"

It was pretty rare for her to show an interest in things, but it seemed she was wondering about the contents of my tankard. My drink was nothing special, though—just lukewarm ale. Regardless of whether a child like Mewi could have alcohol, the drink didn't seem all that eye-catching to me.

"I...want to try some," she said.

"Whaaa...?"

Is she at an age where she's interested in alcohol? What do I do? A reasonable adult should refuse her. But plenty of people try a drink or two before coming of age. Should I let it happen in front of me?

"What? I can't?" she asked, pouting.

"Ah, um, well... Hmmm..."

Crap, what do I do? Personally, I wanted to let her. Mewi was rarely self-

indulgent, but here she was, pleading with me. However, on the off chance she got addicted to the taste... The thought was rather frightening.

Such experiences were meant to be taken step-by-step with the passing of one's years. However, given the way she was speaking, she'd already considered my refusal. Still...she was the one who'd brought it up. Could I really say no and ignore her courage? My desire to meet her expectations as a parent clashed violently with my common sense telling me I should refuse as an upstanding adult.

"Just...a little, okay?"

"Mm."

Aaad common sense lost. Whatever. It's fine. Nobody else is looking. I just have to make sure she doesn't have too much. Yup. That settles it.

Mewi accepted the tankard and started by sniffing it. Ale had a low alcohol content, so the smell wasn't too harsh. It seemed that the first barrier preventing her from trying it was cleared. She timidly brought the tankard to her lips and tilted it back. The slightest amount of the flat, lukewarm ale entered her mouth and assaulted her tongue.

"Erk... Bitter..."

"Ha ha ha ha!"

Mewi's taste buds immediately threw up the white flag. Her expression matched her "Erk" perfectly. She never really smiled for anyone, and this rare grimace was also precious.

"I've had enough..." Mewi shoved the tankard back into my hands.

"Heh heh, looks like it's a little early for you."

"Hmph."

To be fair, I hadn't always favored ale. My first memory of trying alcohol had been back when I'd just become an adult, and I'd wondered why anyone would drink it. Nonetheless, perhaps admiring an adult's tastes, I'd continued drinking the stuff and had eventually gotten used to it until it had become an indispensable pleasure of life.

In other words...the same thing was happening to Mewi. She hated being treated like a child. However, regardless of her own feelings on the matter, Mewi was just a child in the eyes of the public. I wanted to cherish her rebellious side, to an extent, but that was the objective truth. That was why, even if only superficially, she was trying to become an adult by trying the alcohol I enjoyed on a daily basis. It also could have been out of genuine curiosity, but I believed I'd been a definite influence.

"There's no need to hurry," I told her. "You'll develop a taste for it one day."

"That so...?"

I understood how she felt, but either way, she would one day become an adult and her sense of taste would change. Once she grew up, those around her would also naturally come to see her as an adult.

Yes, one day, it would be natural to see her as an adult. Growth in body and mind would change the public's perception of her. On the surface, I was also a proper adult. I'd ended up in a position to send tons of pupils out into the world, and now I even had a splendid title. I believed I was doing my best.

But had I truly matured? Had I become an adult by pretending to be one? I'd never even questioned it before, but lately, it seemed like I was constantly conscious of it. This had been on my mind ever since Allucia had taken me from Beaden.

Some people could probably sense this in me, much like Henblitz had. Still, I didn't think this was a bad change—I could see it as still having room for growth. I couldn't do much about my deteriorating stamina, though.

"Ooh, Beryl. So this is where you've been."

And as such thoughts ran through my mind, a new voice called out to me. It was my dad. Judging by his tone, he'd been looking for me. *Has something happened?* I didn't think I had anything in particular to talk with him about.

"Mewi," he said, "mind lending me this guy for a sec?"

"Mm... Sure..."

"Ha ha ha! Thanks!"

“Wh-What? Something happen?” I asked.

“Just be quiet and come with me,” he said.

“Whaaa...?”

Guess I have no right to refuse? I mean, isn't this weird? Why ask Mewi for permission before asking me? I'm right here. This old man is the same as ever...

“So? What do you want?” I asked. “Something you don't want Mewi to hear?”

“Now, now, just come with me.”

I figured it was something he didn't want to say in front of a child, but that didn't seem to be the case. I really had no idea what this could be about. He just kept pestering me to come along without telling me why. It made no sense.

“Here...?”

“This is a rare opportunity,” he said. “Keep me company for a while.”

Still not knowing what was going on, I found myself in the place where my swordsmanship had been fostered—the dojo.

“Keep you company with what?” I asked.

“There's only one thing two swordsmen can do once they're in a dojo, right?”

I couldn't figure out what he was getting at. I understood what he meant but not *why*.

Ignoring my bewilderment, my dad took two wooden swords that were leaning against the wall, then threw one to me. “I wanna check on my brat's skills now that he's finally gotten off his ass and gone to the city... Is that so strange?”

“Not really...”

He was technically making sense—it wasn't that unreasonable. But if that were the case, we could've done this at any time during my stay in Beaden. I still couldn't tell why he'd chosen *now*. Even though the village had welcomed her, I didn't really want to leave Mewi alone. Maybe I was being overprotective.

At any rate, since he wasn't being unreasonable, I couldn't really refuse. *It's useless to try and figure out what's going through this old man's head. Probably*

just his usual whimsy. He sounded pathetic every time he grumbled, “Oh, my hips, my hips, they hurt,” but I understood how important the hips were to a swordsman.

There were differences in the human body from person to person, but once you passed your peak, it was all downhill from there. The best you could do was try to maintain the status quo. Even then, it got harder and harder as the years went by. I knew this very well. My dad was older than me, so it had to be very hard on him.

Ironically, I’d only learned that after getting old myself. I hadn’t had any problems with my body during my youth. However, even taking that into consideration, I didn’t feel like I could win against my dad. I’d *never* won against him. It’d always ended with me being toyed with and beaten black and blue. I had a better technique now than during my youth, but this absolute conviction remained rooted within me.

“All right, now that you’ve accepted, let’s get to it,” he said.

“I don’t remember saying yes...”

He really didn’t listen to anything I said. My objection fell on deaf ears, and my dad readied his wooden sword before him, his hands at waist level and the tip of the blade held up diagonally. This was our dojo’s standard stance. Well, it was standard for pretty much any style.

“Haaah... Fine.”

Just as always, he wasn’t going to listen, no matter what I said. I could only go along with it. Not one part of me thought of holding back because he was an old man—I had to give it my all if I wanted to even stand a chance. If I did hold back, I would just be beaten to a pulp like always. I wanted to avoid losing pathetically, even if no one was watching. I did have *some* pride.

“Shyah!”

The moment my dad saw me take a stance, he kicked off the ground.

What?! No starting signal?! C’mom! This is all too sudden! My dad’s opening move was a thrust to gauge his opponent’s reaction. Among all sword strikes, this required the least preparatory movements and left very few openings.

Block or dodge? In the smallest fraction of a second, I chose to sway my upper body to evade. As I did, I swung my wooden sword up from below. My timing was supposed to be perfect, but my dad pulled back his weapon immediately and blocked my counterattack.

“Heyaaah!”

Using the momentum of repelling my sword, my dad stepped in and launched a chain of attacks. Horizontal slash, thrust, upward slash, downward strike, switching the grip, another horizontal slash, counterattack, thrust—

“Hmph!”

I dodged all of them. My dad’s sword was fast and flowed like water. No matter how much he withered with age, the techniques he’d fostered hadn’t vanished. He was likely putting in effort out of sight so that the light of his techniques wasn’t snuffed out. These weren’t the strikes of a man who’d set aside his sword for many years while constantly lamenting about back pain. If I had to guess, I’d say he was only a little slower than Allucia...

“Haaah!”

Right. My dad is strong. He’s unmistakably strong. An average swordsman would’ve already lost in this exchange. But I can see everything. I’m dodging. I’m counterattacking. These attacks are just a little slower than Allucia’s. My brain can keep up. It’s become able to keep up.



Up until now, I'd never been able to properly follow my dad's sword strokes. My eyes were supposed to be better than his, but he was abnormally good at weaving his attacks through gaps in my awareness. A blade's speed was definitely important, but an attack that had nothing but speed going for it was actually relatively easy to read. In other words, the crux of my dad's strength wasn't supposed to come from simple speed.

"Shyaah!"

My dad stepped in with fervor, closing the gap splendidly with no unnecessary movements. But I could see it. It wasn't easy, but I could handle it.

"Dad, are your hips—"

"You dare insult me like that?!" he shouted.

His expression showed that his stamina had in fact deteriorated with age, but he wasn't worn out. He didn't show any signs of an aching back either. Only a short while had passed since the beginning of this bout. Only a failure of a swordsman would be exhausted at this stage.

I understood all this. I really did. My dad—Mordea Gardenant—wasn't in bad condition. Well, he wasn't suffering from any condition at the moment. I could tell at a glance—he was facing Beryl Gardenant with every ounce of strength he had.

And I, Beryl Gardenant, could win against Mordea Gardenant.

"Shhh!"

I repelled his thrust, stepped in, and slid my wooden sword along his blade. I held nothing back. I swung my sword with all the might I could muster. The tip of my blade went unerringly for my dad's neck. And just as it was on the border of touching his skin, I pulled it to a stop.

"Gaaah!" he hollered, his voice raspy. "I couldn't win!"

I looked at the tip of my sword near his neck, and he quietly set his own sword down onto the floor. "Dad..."

I didn't sense anything tragic in his behavior. It was as if it had been perfectly natural for him to lose—as if he'd never intended to win from the very

beginning.

“Dad... I...”

I had no idea how to explain this feeling inside me. I was, of course, happy that I’d beaten my dad. My eyes had perfectly captured the sword strokes I’d spent years being unable to see. It had been a tremendous performance, and it was no exaggeration to say that this was the outcome I’d been dreaming of for years. What else could I be but happy?

“Hah? You won, but you still have some kinda problem?” my dad asked.

“Ah, no...”

However, a vague sadness kept running through my heart.

“Thank you...for the bout...” I said.

“Yeah... You’ve gotten strong, Beryl.”

“Huh?!”

It was weird. Why did I feel like crying? Beating my dad had been my goal for many, many years. And here, I’d bested him with no room for argument. I’d won against Mordea Gardenant, the father who was always so irritatingly easygoing but so ridiculously strong with a sword. I was supposed to be happy. I should’ve been cheering. No one would’ve faulted me for saying things like “Yeah! That’s for making fun of me all these years!” or getting on my high horse with some resentful complaints. I was the victor, after all.

Also, my dad’s behavior was unusual. Wasn’t he vexed about losing to his son? He’d done nothing but win against me before this.

“You know...I’ve definitely gotten old,” my dad said. “Both my stamina and muscles have deteriorated.”

His tone was so light and easygoing—it was as if he were possessed. I couldn’t hear a hint of regret in his voice, and I didn’t know what kind of face he was making. My body was still bent at the waist, and my head hung low. I didn’t want to imagine what kind of face I was making.

“However, not once have I ever considered my caliber as a swordsman to have degraded.”

I was shocked into silence. In other words, if he was so inclined, he could still move as he had during his prime. He hadn't considered that a good thing, though. He'd yielded the dojo to me—the next generation. I'd been nothing more than a fledgling at the time. I was able to beat him now, but I couldn't imagine my younger self accomplishing the same. In truth, I'd done nothing but lose.

"You thought I gave you the dojo simply because I was starting to deteriorate, right?" he asked.

"Didn't you...?"

"Of course not, dumbass."

I could tell my voice was trembling a little, but my dad didn't point that out. Normally, he would've taken joy in teasing me. However, the important thing right now was that, contrary to what I'd believed for years, he hadn't bowed out due to his aging body. So why had he?

"It's 'cause I thought you were stronger than me," he explained. "What other reason could I have possibly had for handing it over? Well, I admit I missed the opportunity to tell you that for quite a while."

I'm...stronger...than my dad? I couldn't bring myself to say, "You should've told me that right away!" Back then, I doubt I would've believed him no matter what he said. I would've just continued brushing it off, telling him he was being ridiculous or that he had to be joking. I never would've taken him seriously. Part of this was because of my dad's personality. I knew him well, and it must've been really hard for him to honestly tell his son that. As a result, we'd ended up dragging this strange misunderstanding on for many years.

I felt so pathetic.

"Beryl."

A weight suddenly fell on my bowed head.

"You've gotten strong," my dad repeated. "You've definitely gotten strong. Take pride in it."

"Y-Yesh...!" I replied, fumbling over my words.

I couldn't hold it in anymore. A rugged, rocklike hand covered in calluses patted my head. Something within me ruptured.

On that day, I, Beryl Gardenant, finally inherited the legacy of my predecessor in the truest sense. I was released from the emotional restraints—the curse—that had been binding me for years.



Epilogue: An Old Country Bumpkin Senses Defeat

“Haaah... I’m back.”

A while after my bout with my dad, not quite sure where to go, I’d ended up settling on simply going back home. I mean, my face was a total mess. I couldn’t let Mewi see me like that. The sun was still high in the sky, and she wasn’t going to leave the village, so I’d decided it was fine for me to go home on my own.

Honestly, I had no idea what kind of face I *should* be making. I hadn’t been able to look my dad in the eyes the entire time before we’d parted ways.

“Oh, welcome home.”

So, as I opened the door in a heartbroken mood, my mom greeted me. *Huh. I’m only just thinking about it now, but what would’ve been my plan if my dad showed up instead? It really feels like my brain isn’t working.* At any rate, I just wanted to settle my feelings and calm down.

“Hm? Where’s dad?”

Something was a little off about his absence. He’d left the dojo ahead of me, so I figured he’d be here.

“He said he wanted some meat and left,” my mom explained. “You didn’t bump into him?”

“Oh, I see...”

So he was just as cheerful as ever. And he did have a point—this was a rare opportunity to have as much meat as he wanted. The me from last year would’ve been trading stupid jokes with him and enjoying some by his side. However, though it might sound a little twisted, I could get as much meat as I wanted in Baltrain so long as I spent a little money, so I didn’t have a particular craving for saberboar meat. Was this an adverse effect of living in the city?

“Want something to drink?” my mom asked.

“Aaah, sure.”

My dad had called me out before I could finish my lukewarm ale, so now that she mentioned it, my throat was pretty parched. I hadn't drunk enough to get tipsy, and even if I had, I would've sobered up by now.

"Here, have this to help you calm down."

"Aaah, thanks..."

She placed a cup of hot water before me. I wasn't in the mood for alcohol, and the only wine we had in our house was that stupidly bitter one anyway. Water was the perfect choice for calming my heart and throat.

Hang on, help me calm down? Do I look that flustered? The scary part about my mom was that she was always dead-on about people's mental states even without anyone saying a word. Her keen eye was a cut above the rest. She didn't even have to ask.

"Haaah..."

I slowly sipped the small cup of hot water. Having something to drink definitely seemed to calm the heart better than food. This was just plain water, so it was flavorless. Regardless, it helped settle my restless feelings.

"So? How was it?" she asked after seeing I'd calmed down somewhat.

"How was what?"

"You overcame it, right?"

Overcame what? She was intentionally keeping the subject obscure. She probably saw through the fact that I wouldn't honestly accept it if someone else told it to me straight. She was terrifying in an altogether different way than my dad.

"Mm, well... I guess so," I said, looking up at the ceiling.

This was the same ceiling I'd known for decades—old and sturdy, with maybe a few more stains than before. Had my perspective changed at all after the bout? The scenery around me was the same as always. I was deeply moved, but it didn't feel like anything had changed dramatically.

My mom possessed no strength in the martial sense—she knew nothing about fighting. She might even lose against the local brats, and at most, she

would hit my dad's shoulder or back jokingly. Nevertheless, I felt like I could never win against her. Just because I beat my dad didn't mean I could win against my mom. I didn't know if this was because my mom was special...or if that was simply what it meant to be a mother.

"Isn't that nice?" she said.

"Uh... I guess? Yeah..."

My mom didn't dig too deeply. She simply uplifted her son's spirits and chose her words wisely. Also, she had to have mixed feelings about it. I was her son, but my dad was her husband. I didn't want to argue about who ranked higher, but I didn't think it felt good to have the one you loved knocked down—even against his own son.

Still, I hadn't said a single word about fighting my dad or winning against him. How had she inferred so much just from me coming back home? It really was a little scary.

"Were you actually watching...?" I asked, wondering if she'd been sneakily peeping on us.

"Watching what?"

"Oh... Never mind."

My suspicion vanished instantly. It would've been really embarrassing for her to see me fighting, but she wasn't the type to go that far. Although, maybe my mom had imagined this outcome already. Both my dad and I were incapable of winning against her. Much like with the weather and people's hearts, when my mom was "looking" at something, she was never wrong.

"Hey, mom?"

"What is it?"

My mom had a lot more white hair and wrinkles now, but she still maintained her beauty.

"Who do you think is stronger? Me or dad?"

I regretted it the moment the words left my mouth. What answer was I hoping for? She wasn't a fighter. She couldn't discern a swordsman's strength.

Did I want peace of mind from hearing her say it? I couldn't help but feel like, despite winning against my dad, it would take far longer for me to have confidence in myself.

"Him, of course," she answered, making a face like she didn't have the vaguest idea what I was expecting to hear.

"I-I see..."

"I don't know how strong you are with a sword. I have no idea how to fight, after all. But he protected a woman while raising a son. That is a splendid feat. You can't do the same yet, right?"

"No, I can't..."

She wasn't speaking with any passion in her voice. She stated it like it was a simple fact. He'd protected a woman—my mother—and had raised a son—me.

I was definitely grateful for my parents. I didn't see myself as a potentially awful parent, but it was easy to imagine how hard it was to raise a human being from scratch. I was made to fully realize this due to the odd circumstances that had brought Mewi to me as an adopted daughter.

Mewi was an intelligent child. Given the environment she'd grown up in, she'd ended up with a sharp tongue, but she was an awkward and kind girl at heart. That must've been because her big sister had raised her so earnestly. It certainly wasn't a result of my guidance.

Say, for argument's sake, I had a child of my own. I was confident I could shower them with affection. But could I raise them into a splendid adult? My answer to that was a definite no.

"So once you're able to, you'll win against him, right?"

There was a hidden meaning behind her declaration. She was right. I'd gotten the better of my dad in a bout, but that simply meant I'd surpassed him in terms of swordsmanship. It didn't prove that I was superior as a human in any way whatsoever. It was naturally wrong to rank people based on their merits, but in the sense of coming to terms with matters in my heart, it was a necessity.

"In that case, you'll have to find a wife quickly," my mom added. "You'll

always be on the losing end at this rate.”

“You make it sound so simple...”

This was the truth of the matter—I was still too lacking to tell my dad to his face that I’d won. Even though I’d defeated him with a sword, my dad was over sixty. He was already more than enough of a monster to move like that at his age.

Also, I didn’t believe my mom was being serious. Naturally, she wanted her son to grow up into a fine man, but being able to find a spouse didn’t really mean you were winning at life or anything. This was simply provocation. “How old are you going to get without finding a single lover?” If only I could let that stir me into action, but I just didn’t have any confidence in that particular field. It was rather depressing.

“Ah, but if you get desperate in your search for a wife and ignore Mew Mew, I won’t forgive you.”

“I know that!”

This time, she was dead serious, but I would *never* do such a thing. If I did, my mom would kill me. And she was several times more terrifying than my dad.

“Man...I really can’t win,” I muttered.

“Against who?”

“Dad *or* you.”

“Ha ha ha! You’re a hundred years too early for that. Try again after getting more experience in Baltrain. Oh, would you like a refill?”

“Sure.”

My cup was empty before I knew it, so my mom filled it with more hot water.

“Whew...”

It was just water—it didn’t taste of anything. Regardless, it nourished me like a mother’s cooking. One way or another, I was deeply moved by it.

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 5*. We're finally five books in, and it's truly because of you, the readers, that we've come this far. Please allow me to thank you again.

In the last afterword, I think I mentioned how I pushed things rather close to the deadline. To tell you the truth, the same happened this time. If anything, it was even worse. My days spent silently typing at my keyboard, my heart trembling as the deadline closed in, were honestly mind-numbing. I never want to go through that again. I might've said the same thing last time, but people tend to repeat their mistakes.

Sometimes the words just flow, but when they don't, they *really* don't. In the end, I wrote about thirty thousand characters in the last two days. When I told my editor that, he said, "Sagazaki, you're the type to do your summer homework on the last day, aren't you?" Yeah, I am. I probably never would've finished without a significant reason to do so. Everyone, try not to become an adult like me. That said, I don't think many of my readers for this series are students.

Anyway, the stage for this volume is the changing of seasons. It was summer when I wrote this, but by the time it goes on sale, it'll be winter... I only realized that after finishing half of it. If any of you have personal experience, please recall the days you spent on summer vacation visiting your grannies and grandads in the countryside while you read this volume.

Touching on this volume's plot, I'm personally satisfied with how it came out. I believe everything was tied up rather nicely in the end, including Beryl's significant realization. And now that Beryl knows his true strength, there's more to write. I'm finding that I have to change myself a little too.

I definitely have something I want to write, so I just need to wrap it up nicely into a plot. This time, I'm hoping to take things easy—I do not want to be

hounded by the deadline. I have a feeling that's already an unachieveable dream, though. Please let it be my imagination...

Also, thanks to Akita Shoten reprinting the manga version, the series as a whole has broken five hundred thousand sales. I am deeply grateful to every reader who has bought a book. On the other hand, I'm trembling in fear at how outrageous the number has gotten. What I want to write and what pleases the readers is not always the same thing, so I'm hoping to keep that in mind as I continue writing.

I'd like to keep going with Beryl at the center—sometimes being kind of lame but sometimes being really cool. I'd truly appreciate it if you could continue to follow this story.

I believe we'll meet again around summer. The season I'm writing in and the publication dates are totally different, so we might end up with another out-of-season story. If we do, please read it, and feel free to poke a little fun at me.

The Reiwa era has been really crap at taking care of the globe, so I pray you all find yourselves in good health.

Until next time.



FROM OLD COUNTRY
BUMPKIN
TO **MASTER**
SWORDSMAN

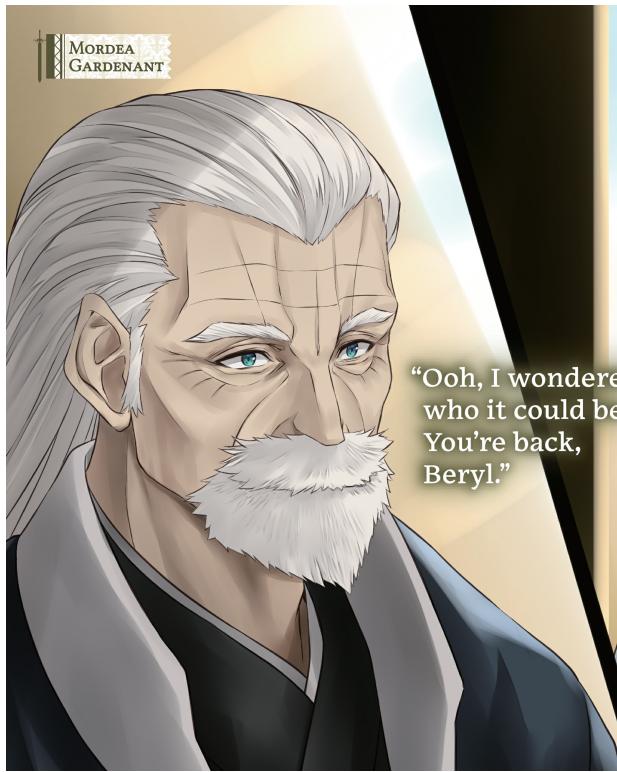
My
Hotshot Disciples
Are All Grown Up
Now, and They
Won't Leave
Me Alone

5

Shigeru Sagasaki

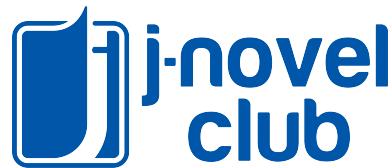
Illustration

Tetsuhiro Nabeshima





I screamed, putting all my fighting spirit behind my conviction. When had I stopped doing this? My last memory of it seemed so far away. That was how much I'd distanced myself from the mental state of an ideal warrior, and I'd made excuses for it all the while.



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From Old Country Bumpkin to Master Swordsman: My Hotshot Disciples Are All Grown Up Now, and They Won't Leave Me Alone Volume 5

by Shigeru Sagazaki

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KATAINAKA NO OSSAN, KENSEI NI NARU～TADA NO INAKA NO
KENJUTSUSHIHAN DATTA NONI, TAISEI SHITA DESHITACHI GA ORE WO
HOTTEKURENAI KEN vol. 5

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