

FROM OLD COUNTRY BUMPKIN TO MASTER SWORDSMAN



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

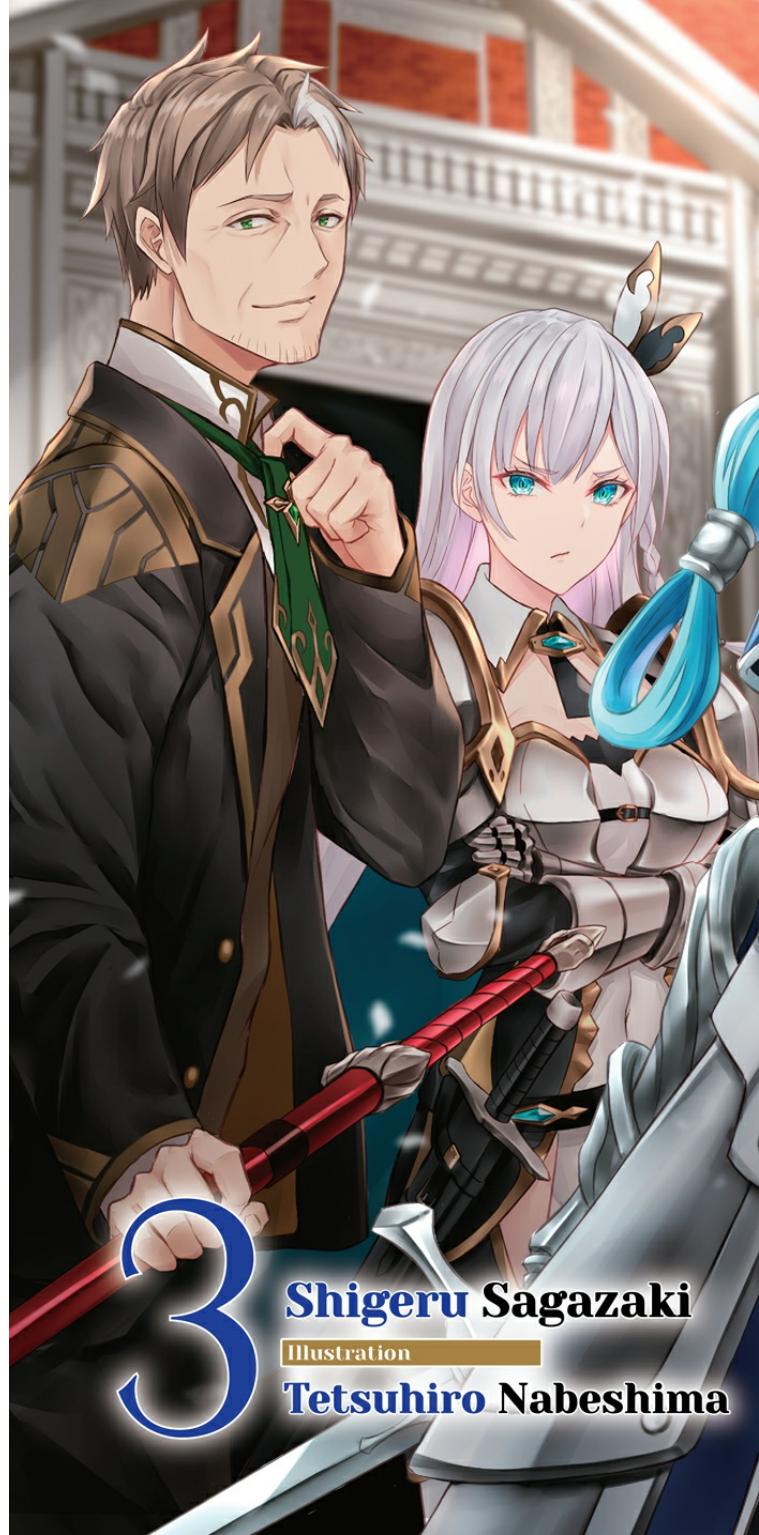
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Shigeru Sagazaki

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Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

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CHARACTERS

|| BERYL GARDINANT

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.



|| MUI FREYA



Formerly a pickpocket on the streets of Baltrain. She has a talent for magic and is now living with Beryl.

|| ROSE MABELHART



Beryl's former pupil. She serves as the lieutenant commander of Sphenedyrvania's Holy Order. Even after moving far away, she respects Beryl greatly.

|| SELNA LYSANDRA



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

|| ALLUSIA SITRUS



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

|| GATOGA RAZWON



The commander of Sphenedyrvania's Holy Order. He's part of a diplomatic delegation that travels to Liberis, and he escorts royalty from both nations.

|| HENBRITS DROUT



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

|| LUCY DIAMOND



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

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STORY

Beryl Gardinant, a self-proclaimed “humble old man,” is a sword instructor at his dojo in a rural, backwater village. One day, his former pupil Allusia—who’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 slaying a named monster, the Backwater Swordmaster’s reputation starts to spread around the capital. Beryl soon encounters Mui, a young pickpocket. While chasing the thugs who turned her to a life of crime, he secretly puts a stop to an inhuman plot concocted by Bishop Reveos—a holy official from the neighboring country of Sphenedyardvania.

Just when Beryl thinks the case is closed, he ends up taking custody of Mui. And now, for the first time in his life, he gets to live alongside a child of his own.

OLD BUMPKIN - MASTER SWORDSMAN

Chapter 1: An Old Country Bumpkin Buys Clothes

It was morning in Baltrain. I woke up, and since I no longer lived alone, I exchanged a brief greeting with my new housemate, Mui. After that, I quickly got dressed and had a light breakfast.

“Shall we?”

“Mm.”

Mui and I stepped out of my new home and onto the city streets. Our life together had started very suddenly, but it was going surprisingly well. Mui wasn’t really the type to try to get close to others, nor did she know how to. We tried not to meddle with each other more than we had to, so even though there were still some logistical questions about us living under the same roof, things had comfortably settled.

“Man, the weather sure is nice today,” I remarked.

“Better than it being lousy...”

Today, I was on an outing with Mui. To be precise, it was my duty to see her to the magic institute. Lucy had recently explained things about the institute in more detail. The magic institute was always recruiting those with a talent for magic, so even though they had a normal entrance ceremony, they accepted applicants at any time of the year. They were more than happy to welcome Mui right away.

The institute was also used to such procedures, so enrolling her had gone really smoothly. Of course, Lucy had a personal hand in Mui’s case, so that must’ve helped a lot. It turned out that Lucy was both the commander of the magic corps and the headmistress of the institute. *Seriously, how many titles can you have at once?* She apparently didn’t show up often at the institute, though. Lucy did seem more like a researcher than a teacher. It was probably rare for her to hold any classes.

“Hmm, so the institute is in the northern district,” I mumbled, staring at the

map Lucy had given me.

Unlike the order's office, the magic institute was in the same district as the palace. I couldn't care less whether the order or the magic corps was older (or which had more influence), but there was something special about a school in the same district as the palace.

And now, Mui was going to be a student there. As her guardian, it made me feel proud.

"You didn't have to come along or nothing..." Mui muttered.

I knew very well that these types of situations could feel very uncomfortable or even embarrassing for a child like Mui. In this case, I figured she was embarrassed. *I'm really starting to understand her.*

"I thought I should at least greet them as your guardian," I told her. "Also, I've got some interest in the magic institute."

"Hmph."

All I got in response was her usual snort. Mui was still young. But she was about to become a student, so naturally, I had to go say hello. It didn't feel right to enroll her and then just shove off, tell her to take care, and throw her out the door. Also, I was curious. The institute had been established so that the nation could secure talented wizards—this was rather exciting from the perspective of a swordsman.

I also wanted to see the place where Mui would be staying. Though I didn't want to butt in, I was pretty confident that I'd come flying to the school if I heard about someone bullying her. I could even imagine myself stomping in there and exclaiming, "Who the hell is bullying my kid?!"

This was what I was reduced to when it came to Mui. I suspected I would be *extremely* doting if I had a child who shared my blood. But to make that a reality, I would first have to find a wife, and I'd already given up on that. Things had only reached this point because my dad refused to let me give up.

Developments had granted me a house, but I had no idea what kind of life I would be living from this point onward. Would Baltrain really become my permanent residence? At the very least, I was going to stay in this house until

Mui could live on her own. My life plan for everything after that was a blank slate. Even if I wanted to retire in peace, my dad and Allusia weren't liable to let me.

"What's wrong?" Mui asked.

"Oh, it's nothing. Let's go."

Oops, no point thinking about that stuff now. It'll work out one way or another. The northern district was quite far away—I could manage it, but taking Mui for such a long walk would be no good. So, I decided to rely on the carriage that went all the way there. At this hour, there were plenty of people commuting, so the carriage stop was very lively. All sorts of people were boarding to get off at different places.

"Oops, excuse me."

As I got on the carriage to go to the northern district with Mui, I found myself with hardly any room to stand. I'd traveled on carriages a few times since coming to Baltrain, but this was my first time being in one that was so packed. I was worried about whether Mui was okay.

"Man, it sure is crammed in here," I mumbled.

"So tight..." she complained, wincing a little.

Hmm, I guess carriages are stuffed to the gills at this hour. The institute had a dorm where the students stayed most of the time, so I wouldn't have to throw Mui into this hubbub too often. *It'll probably be fine.* I knew I was being overprotective, but there was nothing to be done about it at this point. Mui had spent her entire life in a gloomy world, so she was relatively ignorant about being out in the light. She hadn't even received enough of an education to properly write her own name. I couldn't possibly leave such a little girl on her own. I wondered whether she would make friends at school, and I wondered whether she would do well with her studies.

As such parental thoughts filled my mind, the carriage shook and rattled its way to our destination.

"Sure is big..."

“Mm...”

We soon arrived at the magic institute. I hadn’t been to the northern district since capturing Reveos, but things looked awfully different when the sun was out. Coupled with the clear sky, the soaring spires of the royal palace were a sight to behold. To get to the institute, we had to walk quite a ways from the carriage stop in the northern district. Still, our destination wasn’t excessively far —just enough for Mui to stretch her legs and exercise a bit.

We’d relied on the map and billboards to find the place, and it was enormous, occupying a plot so large that I wondered whether it rivaled the palace. The entrance was flanked by a large gate, and through it, I could see a vast garden leading to what I assumed was the main school building. To the right was a large space that looked like a sports ground, and to the left had to be the dorms. *Yup, it sure is huge. How many students do they have? It’s presumptuous to compare, but my backwater dojo is realms smaller than this place.*

“Shall we go in and say hi?” I asked Mui.

“Mm...”

After coming this far, I couldn’t put my country bumpkin side on full display. After all, I was accompanied by a little girl who needed my guidance, so I couldn’t just stand here in a daze. First, I had to make my way to the staff room or something...probably. I’d gotten a map to find the building, but I had no clue where to go next. Not that there was any point in just standing around. I’d probably find a teacher inside, and I could just catch them, explain the situation, and get them to guide us.

As that thought crossed my mind, I heard a voice from behind me.

“Would you happen to be the new transfer student and her father?”

I took a quick glance left and right, but there was nobody else nearby. However, the voice seemed to be addressing us. When I turned fully around, I was greeted by a woman wearing a robe much like Ficelle’s. She was just about the same height and age as Allusia, or maybe a little older. Her gentle features and wavy hair gave her a friendly demeanor.

“The transfer student and her father,” huh? Do we look that way? It was at

least better than being mistaken for a kidnapper. It was actually pretty moving to be seen like that by a stranger. I glanced at Mui to check her reaction. She was a little flustered, though it didn't look like she was rejecting the idea. I couldn't ask for more.

"Umm, and you are...?" I asked.

"Excuse me," the woman replied. "My name is Kinera Fyne. I serve as a teacher here at the magic institute."

"A pleasure to meet you. I'm Beryl, and this is Mui."

The woman turned out to be a teacher. *That's great. Now I can have her guide us.*

"Just as you've surmised, Mui will be attending the institute," I explained. "I brought her here today, but was overwhelmed by how splendid the school grounds are."

"Oh dear," Kinera said, giggling. "The magic institute is, in fact, the grandest building in Baltrain."

The Liberion Order was filled with martial types like Allusia and Henbrits. Here at the magic institute, it seemed the people had a tendency to be more refined. Not that the knights lacked grace or anything. Wielding swords was ultimately a bloody business, so it didn't tend to attract people with docile temperaments. On that point, Kinera gave off a really gentle air. It made me believe that, if someone like her was in charge of Mui's class, Mui would be able to retract her claws and have a good school life.

"Would you like me to show you the way?" Kinera offered.

"That would help greatly," I said. "I wasn't sure where to go or what the proper procedures were."

"P-Please do..." Mui added stiffly. She wasn't sure what to say, what expression to make, or what tone to use, but she still tried. *Mui's really adorable.*

"Hee hee, there's no need to be so nervous!" Kinera said. "All the students here are good children."

“Whatever... Ah, I mean, yes...” Mui said, correcting herself. She was probably thinking that she had to fix her speech. Her charming efforts brought a smile to this old man’s face.

According to Lucy, the institute had no qualms about a student’s background as long as they had a talent for magic. In other words, there had to be no small number of rowdy children enrolled, even if none were quite at Mui’s level. Kinera looked accustomed to handling kids like that, so it seemed like it would be fine to entrust things to them. *But if anything happens, I’m still gonna come flying over.*

With that, the three of us began walking through the grounds of the grand magic institute.

“It *is* rather large,” I remarked.

“It is. New students sometimes even get lost in here.”

Kinera guided us through the school building. Currently, we were on the first floor. I wondered how many more floors the building had. There had to be at least four, from what I’d seen outside. Considering the sheer size of this floor alone, it was only natural that some students had gotten lost.

“You’ll have to familiarize yourself with the place quickly, Mui,” I said.

“I’ll be fine...probably,” Mui said. Her words had started off confident, but she’d trailed off at the end, her tone becoming rather meek.

She ogled at the unfamiliar sights around us. It was pretty unreasonable for anyone to get accustomed to such a huge building in a single day. I doubted I could. The exits to the building were easily identifiable, but locating specific things inside seemed like a much more challenging task.

“Good morning, Mrs. Kinera!”

“Good morning.”

Students greeted Kinera as we passed them in the hallways, and she returned their greetings in kind. I just gave each one a short nod because honestly, I had no idea what to do in my position. As for Mui, she awkwardly averted her eyes and hung her head.

Was she going to be all right? Would she be able to make friends? This old man was a little worried.

“They’re all very well-behaved children,” I said.

The students did indeed have good manners. They all made sure to greet and nod to Mui and me too. This was a school with a long history and much influence, so they were probably receiving an education in etiquette too.

Taking a quick glance at the students we passed, I saw students of all ages, ranging from some even younger than Mui to those who were very much older. There was no telling when a budding wizard’s talent would bloom, so age wasn’t much of a standard to go by. In that sense, it seemed Mui would be able to fit in here. When age and gender were more clustered together, it tended to make it difficult for outsiders to join in.

“These children may become wizards who represent the nation,” Kinera explained. “An education in manners is part of the curriculum here.”

“I see.”

My assumption had been correct. Well, that was only natural. The Liberion Order and the magic corps represented the whole of Liberis. The knights put an emphasis on physical strength, while refinement was more visible within the magic corps. Not that physical strength alone was enough to get you into the order.

“Oh yes, have you decided on a magic major yet, Mui?” Kinera asked.

“Magic...major?” Mui repeated, looking up at her in confusion.

The term didn’t make any sense to me either. Lucy had never mentioned it.

“Oh my, I’m sorry,” Kinera said. “Magic can be generally classified into a few different categories. Most people have some they specialize in and some they’re poor at.”

“Hmmm, so that’s how it works,” I said. Magic really was like any other field of study, and the system here seemed similar to other types of formal education.

“All I can do is make fire,” Mui answered timidly.

"In that case, you may have an aptitude for offensive magic," Kinera said.

We were now being introduced to more technical terminology. On paper, I was the father of a girl attending the magic institute, so perhaps I needed to do something about my ignorance regarding magic. *Maybe I can have Lucy teach me some more later.* She was a busy person though—I'd just ask for the basics if we ever found ourselves with the time.

"Pardon the question, but are you familiar with magic, Mr. Beryl?" Kinera asked.

"Oh, not at all," I answered. "I'm ashamed to say I know nothing about it. As you can see, all I know is how to wield a sword."

I tapped the sheath at my hip. It was a little late to consider this, but I wondered how much my title as a special instructor meant in a diplomatic sense. It came with the king's royal seal, so I doubted it'd just been thrown together internally. I didn't really know how stuff like this worked.

"I see. Please forgive the impolite question," Kinera said. "There's no telling where the talent for magic will bloom, after all."

"It's fine—there's no need to apologize."

She was talking as if an old man like me still had a chance at developing a talent for magic. It would be a little problematic for me to awaken at this age. Frankly, I was more than satisfied enjoying the leisurely pursuit of the sword.

"The magic institute has courses in sword magic as well, but honestly, there aren't many who practice it," Kinera added. "It'd be nice if more students could pick it up in the future."

"Hmmm, sword magic, huh?"

The first person who came to mind was Ficelle. Well, she was the only one I knew. As expected, not many wizards used that branch of magic.

"Ficelle in particular is—" Kinera stopped herself to explain. "Oh, Ficelle's a graduate from the institute. She is extremely talented at sword magic," Kinera said.

"So, Ficelle's really successful..." I never thought I'd hear about my former

pupil here. It was somehow moving.

“Huh? Ummm... Are you acquainted with Ficelle?” Kinera asked, a small hint of surprise in her voice.

“Yes,” I answered. “I happened to have taught her how to use a sword.”

“Oh my!” Kinera exclaimed, suddenly far more excited than before. “Oh, um... Forgive me.”

“It’s fine—please don’t worry about it,” I told her. “I don’t find it rude at all.”

In the next moment, Kinera wrapped her arms around herself and blushed. I had no idea how to react.

“Ficelle’s sword magic is so fluid,” she said. “I always believed that she must’ve been blessed with a good teacher.”

“Ha ha ha... You flatter me...”

If a staff member of the institute was going that far, then maybe Ficelle was actually accomplishing a ridiculous feat...despite being so low energy all the time. You couldn’t judge a book by its cover. And for some reason, I was getting praised for her accomplishments too. It was kind of embarrassing.

“A-Anyway, I’m curious about the classifications of magic you mentioned,” I said.

I felt like Kinera was starting to look at me with a weird glint in her eyes, so I quickly changed the subject. Maybe I was starting to get used to my pupils buttering me up... Well, not really. I still wasn’t used to it, so when a stranger started singing my praises, it seriously made my whole body prickle. I felt far more embarrassed than happy.

“Right, the classifications,” Kinera said. “Magic can be generally classified as offensive, defensive, healing, reinforcement, and livelihood. Though, there are magics that straddle several classifications and those that can’t be categorized anywhere.”

“Hm...”

That was a lot more types than I’d expected. Mui being able to create fire meant she could potentially specialize in offensive magic. However, Lucy had

once told me something: even all of this magic, which was known as wizardry in this nation, didn't even make up for one percent of all magic as a whole. Magic education was truly a bottomless pit of learning.

"To start, we build up a student's knowledge by teaching the fundamentals of all types of magic," Kinera continued explaining. "Students pursue a specialty after that."

Kinera seemed to be a very thoughtful person, which matched my initial impression of her. She was friendly toward everyone and very sincere. I couldn't help but think the world would be a far more peaceful place if everyone was like her.

And just like that, after hearing a little more about magic and the institute, we reached a room where the school's teachers were gathered.

"We've arrived," Kinera announced. "This is the staff room. Do you have the transfer papers?"

I did remember signing transfer papers, but I'd left them all to Lucy. She had taken the papers with her, so I *hoped* that she'd brought them to the institute. *Don't tell me she forgot about them...*

"Thank you for showing us the way," I said. "As for the papers, Lucy...um, the headmistress handled them for us."

"Is that so? I see. Then I'll confirm afterward," Kinera said. "I still have to explain the process of matriculation and the dorms, so come with me, Mui. What will you do, Mr. Beryl?"

"Hmmm..."

Maybe I should stick around for this? Though if I don't, I can probably ask Mui about it later too.

"Parents often stay to listen," Kinera added. "I suppose everyone is uneasy about entrusting their children to others."

"Then I'll listen in too."

I would be lying if I said I didn't care, though this had nothing to do with being a doting father. While I was at it, was it best to mention that Mui and I had

different family names? They could see that much from the papers. I honestly had no idea who I should tell about our circumstances or how much to reveal.

“I’ll be fine on my own...” Mui protested weakly, embarrassed about me sticking close to her.

“Ha ha ha, c’mon, I’m just a li’l curious,” I told her.

“Hee hee.” Kinera stifled a giggle.

“Hm? Is something the matter?” I asked. Was there something to laugh about? I couldn’t think of anything beyond Mui being cute.

“Not at all! You were just rather frank about it,” Kinera said.

“Aah... Sorry about that.”

This was plainly embarrassing. I’d done my best to keep my behavior prim and proper, but that was hard to maintain. My pretense had easily been peeled back.

“Please come in,” Kinera said. “I’ll explain all the details.”

“Ah, right. C’mon Mui, let’s go.”

“Shut up. I get it already.”

I urged Mui along, trying to hastily change the topic, and got a blunt reply. Even after seeing that, Kinera didn’t say anything. I hoped she could see that Mui just had a slightly strong temperament. The girl’s words were barbed, but she wasn’t harsh by nature.

At any rate, even if a whole lot had happened, I never thought I’d walk within the halls of the magic institute. There was no telling what the world had in store for you. Upon entering the room, a few adults who looked like teachers glanced at us. However, they seemed to be used to visitors and immediately returned to their work. I was glad they didn’t give us any weird looks—I’d had enough of those ever since coming to Baltrain. But that was mostly Allusia, Selna, and Lucy’s fault.

“Please take a seat.”

Kinera guided us to a reception area in a corner of the room. Mui and I sat

down on a well-made sofa. It was quite comfortable. There was a certain sense of quality to every piece of furniture in here. *Okay then, time to pay attention. This involves Mui's future, after all.*



After getting a full explanation from Kinera, we left the magic institute. By the time we passed back through the gate, the sun was high up in the east. It was almost time for lunch. I wondered what to do about food as we continued walking home.

“Did you understand everything, Mui?” I asked.

“Hmph. I’m not stupid.”

The majority of what we’d heard at the magic institute were the basics. Kinera had told us about the general curriculum at the school, how rooms were assigned at the dorms, how curfew worked, and other fundamentals we needed to know. On that point, students weren’t forced to live in the dorms. The only institute in the nation was in Baltrain, so the dorms had been built to allow those from outside the capital to attend. Those who lived nearby were indeed allowed to commute. However, parents of children who had the potential to be wizards tended to be very careful about their child’s surroundings, and thus, many applied to stay in the dorms. Lucy had mentioned something about this too—would it have killed her to share some of the details? She was quick to act, but sometimes, she was exquisitely sloppy.

“Anyway, want to find somewhere to grab lunch?” I suggested.

“Mm.”

We’d only come here today to say hello and get an explanation of how things worked. Mui wouldn’t actually be starting until next week. We did need time to process everything, so this timing was about right.

“Anyway, are you really sure?” I asked as we walked through the relatively quiet northern district.

“About what?” Mui replied somewhat awkwardly.

“Not using the dorms.”

“Whatever... I can just stay home and go to the institute every day.”

Mui had declined to use dorms. They'd mentioned it being optional, so that was fine with me. However, seeing that most kids chose to use the dorms, living at the magic institute had to be highly regarded. Even if the commute wasn't that far, living on campus would save a lot of time, making it easier for her to focus on her studies. What's more, the dorms guaranteed all her daily necessities. Well, not that staying at home was much different, but having the problem of food solved so easily was supposed to be a nice bonus.

Now that we were living together, the housework would likely be divided between us. I had no intention of pushing everything on a young child, of course, but it would also be unnatural for Mui to do no housework whatsoever. I was going to get her cooperation on that front. Also, the commute was nothing to sneeze at. I factored in my daily walk to the office as part of my exercise routine, so it wasn't much of a problem for me. For a child, it was only normal to want to be rid of what they saw as a waste of time.

“What...? You got a problem with me staying home?” Mui asked a little angrily.

“Ah, no. As long as you're fine with it.”

It definitely wasn't a problem. This wasn't my first time living with someone, so that part would work out one way or another. Mui had also spent time living with her sister. However, her having the choice to live in the dorms but choosing to live with me instead made me feel a little itchy. Ultimately, there was no point in interrogating the little girl about it. I'd accepted the house on the premise of living there with her to begin with, so I decided to just make the best of it.

“Are you fine with it?” Mui asked.

“Hm? With what?”

“Umm... You had work today too, right?”

Oh, that? I wasn't foolish enough to skip out on work without saying anything. It was difficult to get others to trust you at this age, and it only took moments to shatter that trust. That was why I'd discussed my absence with Allusia

already. I'd told her everything about getting a house and living with Mui. At the time, it'd seemed like all emotion vanished from her face for a moment, but I'd decided not to pay any attention to that reaction.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I adjusted my schedule."

"I guess that's fine..."

Besides, I wasn't obligated to show up every day. The original plan had been for me to come to Baltrain from Beaden periodically, so they weren't expecting a tight schedule from me. And frankly, after my dad had kicked me out, my schedule had become a big question mark—I'd decided on my own to go to the order every day.

"I have the day off today," I explained. "Your future is more important, Mui."

"Hmph."

Was that a little corny? Mui huffed and turned her head to the side once more. Still, I was planning to drop by the office today once things calmed down. Swinging a sword every day was a habit at this point, so I wanted to at least continue that.

"Oh yeah, about lunch," I said while riding the carriage back to the central district. "Is there anything you want to eat?"

"I'm fine with whatever..."

Her response was what I'd expected. Mui wasn't the type of girl to be selfish about her own tastes—she almost never exhibited such behavior. I didn't know whether this was because of her upbringing or because she was acting reserved around me. Probably the former. She hadn't lived a life where she could be picky about food.

However, seeing as I had a fair bit saved up and was making a decent amount of money, I wasn't going to let Mui live a life of poverty. I was ready to respond to an appropriate amount of willful indulgence. Though, even if I got that message across to her, she wasn't the type to nod along with it. I could only change her way of thinking little by little as we continued living together.

"Let's just find a random restaurant," I suggested.

“Mm.”

The carriage continued rattling as we rode along. I decided to just get off at the next stop and pick a restaurant that caught my eye. It would be a waste of time to fret over what to have. Besides, if we weren’t picky, Baltrain was overflowing with restaurants. That was especially the case in the central district. It just showed how many people lived here and how prosperous the place was. This reminded me, for the umpteenth time, how different the capital was from Beaden.

Not too long later, the carriage arrived in the central district. I paid the fee and we got off. The air was filled with an altogether different tumult from when we’d left this morning.

“Oh, how about over there?” I asked.

“Wherever’s fine.”

Baltrain was a large city that had been scrupulously planned out by the nation’s administration. Many shops peeked out over the sides of well-paved roads. It was just around noon, so I could hear lively voices coming out of various buildings. One of these had a banner that caught my eye—it looked like a charcuterie shop. I rather liked sausage, so I decided to go with that for lunch.

“Excuse me,” I called out as I entered.

“Welcome!” a friendly voice called back.

It was the right time for lunch, so there were many customers inside. If our party had been more than just Mui and me, it might’ve been hard for us to get seats. I wondered where to go. Since Mui was here, I wanted to avoid splitting a large table if possible. Just then, one of the seated customers raised her voice.

“Hm...? Master?”

“Huh? Well, if it isn’t Selna. What a coincidence.”

It was the adventurer guild’s black rank, Selna Lysandra. She’d apparently arrived here a little ahead of us. I saw that she was just about to dig into a plate of sausage.

“Would you like a seat?” she offered. “That is, if you don’t mind sharing a

table with me.”

“Yeah, that helps,” I said. “Thanks.”

Meals were naturally better when surrounded by familiar faces, so I gladly accepted.

“Um... Master? Who is that girl?” Selna asked, looking at Mui.

“Aah...”

Crap. Now that I think of it, I haven’t had a chance to see Selna lately, so I haven’t told her about the house or Mui. Now then, what to do? Well, I guess being honest is the only way.

“Mind if we sit down first?” I asked.

“Ah, yes, of course.”

Selna gave me a weird look, but there was no helping that. It must’ve been unusual to see an old bumpkin right out of the backcountry sticks suddenly appear with a child in tow. Still, we were here to eat. Chatting could take place on top of that.

I got myself situated, and Mui sat beside me. “Hmm, where to start...?” I asked, putting a hand to my chin.

“I can guess that there must be some complicated circumstances,” Selna said.

She could tell that some kind of inevitable flow of events had brought Mui and me together. I was grateful for her perceptive nature. Perhaps top adventurers simply had to be sensitive to such subtleties. That said, we were going to be eating together, so I decided to at least get the two acquainted.

“Well, let me introduce you,” I said. “This is Mui.”

“Hello...” Mui said quietly, lowering her head.

She wasn’t really used to interacting with people, but once she started going to school, she would familiarize herself with this scene more than she could ever want. *Maybe I should teach her how to greet people.*

“I’m Selna Lysandra. I was once in Master Beryl’s care.”

Selna seemed to know exactly how to interact with Mui—she was acting

rather casually. Though, her voice was just a little more austere than when she spoke to me.

“Let’s see...” I pondered for a moment. “To cut to the chase, I’ve become her guardian and we’re now living together.”

“Pffft!”

“Whoa?!”

Selna spat her drink out. *Hey! You don’t have to act so shocked.* Fortunately, there hadn’t been much in her mouth, so none had sprayed on us.

“Hak! F-Forgive me...” Selna mumbled.

“It’s fine. Sorry for surprising you.” I still questioned whether I’d said anything to be so shocked about.

“B-By the way, does Sitrus know about this?” she asked.

“Yeah, of course.”

Allusia was acquainted with Mui and knew some of her circumstances, so telling her had gone rather smoothly.

“W-Well, it’s not my place to interject, but...” Selna said, turning to Mui. “Hey, you.”

“Wh-What?”

Selna’s expression and tone were far more severe than before. If someone who didn’t know Selna saw her face, they would probably be frightened, but Mui and I had just seen her spit her drink. I’d also known Selna as a little girl, so I thought this change of attitude was somewhat charming.

“Don’t be a bother to Master Beryl,” Selna said, a sharp glint in her eyes.

“I-I know...” Mui responded, shrinking back.

“Ha ha ha, take it easy on her, Selna.”

Selna was an adult currently wearing a relatively scary expression—she’d definitely frightened Mui more than necessary. Mui was still young, so I wanted Selna to cut her some slack. I was paying due consideration in my own way, and I wanted Mui to be able to stretch out and relax.

“Anyway, let’s get something to eat.” I turned to the server. “Excuse me, I’ll have a sausage platter.”

“Coming right up!”

I was here for charcuterie, so my order was naturally sausage. I’d had sausage at the tavern near the old inn, but it was time to see how a specialty shop fared. I was going to savor it.

With nothing else to do until the food arrived, I struck up a conversation with Selna. “So, how’ve you been lately?”

Selna took a hearty bite of sausage and washed it down with water. “Pretty well,” she answered. “I’ve been spending most of my time lately hunting monsters around the capital. It’s the season, so there’s no helping it.”

“That’s good to hear. What do you mean by ‘the season’?”

I was a little curious about it. The distribution of monsters was complicated and all over the place. Large and small species alike lived in the wild, forming overlapping spheres of activity. Even in Beaden, there were beasts and animals who came out depending on the season. I was ignorant about such things in the vicinity of Baltrain though, so I wanted to expand my knowledge. Not that I wanted to go out hunting monsters or anything. No, as someone who lived by the sword, I was simply curious.

“You don’t know?” Selna asked. “Sphenedyardvania’s delegation will be visiting soon.”

“Hmm?”

I’d been under the impression that her activity had to do with monsters’ habits, but that apparently wasn’t the case. Selna looked at me curiously. I didn’t have a terribly good impression of Sphenedyardvania after recent events, though that sour taste had been left by the church’s knights, not the nation itself. I understood that much.

“They visit every year to improve relations,” Selna explained, still chewing her sausage. “So, we adventurers busy ourselves with improving public safety.”

“I see.”

Even though the adventurer's guild wasn't tied to any one country, they couldn't avoid such fetters when they were running an international business. And Liberis had put out an official request for the guild's help—not for the sake of the country, but to maintain public safety.

"Does that mean the knights will be involved with the visit?" I asked.

"I'm sure they will," Selna said. "How you fit into things is up to Sitrus, I suppose."

I wanted to avoid involvement if I could—having an old man from the sticks meeting with VIPs sounded troublesome. I just wanted to spend my days in peace teaching others how to use a sword. However, now that I'd been given this exaggerated title of special instructor, things probably weren't going to go my way. *Please spare me that. I don't even have a formal outfit.*

"Here's your sausage platter."

As we talked about such things, our food arrived. *Looks delicious.* It was served on a large plate—many varieties of sausage, some roasted and some boiled, were arranged. The spread really stimulated my appetite.

"Let's dig in. C'mon Mui, eat up."

"M-Mm..." Mui replied, still a little nervous.

I started with the boiled sausage first. I bit into the soft meat, and juices poured out. That was the way meat was meant to be. Mui was being somewhat shy, but she eventually used a fork to poke at the sausage and take a nibble. *Yup, eat well and grow well.*

"Oh right. Mui will be attending the magic institute," I said.

"Hmm? A budding wizard, is she?"

The way Selna looked at Mui changed a little. To be precise, it was like she went from looking at a little brat to looking at a little brat who had potential. Well, maybe it wasn't all that different. What was with Selna's aggressive gaze?

"The magic institute is a place of great competition," Selna said. "It's rather harsh there."

"Ugh... I-I know..." Mui muttered.

“Now, now,” I cut in. “Don’t scare her too much.”

It was true—the magic institute was a gathering of elites. In a world where talent decided everything, competition was inevitable. *But Selna, don’t go putting too much pressure on such a little girl. I’m a little scared of how convincing you are.*

“Even if only on paper, she’s now your direct descendant,” Selna continued. “She has to keep that in mind.”

“Seriously, what do all of you see in me...?” Selna and Allusia really put too much stock in my abilities. Calling Mui my direct descendant made it sound so grand.

“Well, I know the old guy is super strong...” Mui said.

“The...old guy...?” Selna repeated threateningly.

“Eep!” Mui shuddered and flinched away from her.

“Now, now. Enough of that,” I said.

C’mon, stop with the weird pressure. She can call me whatever she wants. I just want to enjoy a chat and have lunch. Why’s the air in here getting so tense?



It seemed like we weren't going to be able to have a peaceful meal like this, so I tried to correct our course in a hurry. "Just leave it at that, Selna."

"As you say. Forgive me—I couldn't help myself."

What do you mean you couldn't help yourself? You're confusing me. Anyway, I'd prefer it if we could all get along while having a meal instead of constantly prodding each other. I wanted to believe that Mui and Selna felt the same way.

"Don't worry about it, Mui," I said.

"Mm..." she replied, continuing to nibble at her sausage.

It was such a nice meal. Was Mui able to savor the flavor?

"Forgive me. I came across a little strong," Selna said. "It's not much of an apology, but allow me to get the bill."

"Hm? You don't have to go that far," I said. I wasn't so poor that I needed the young ones to pay for me, so I refused. What's more, it would make me look lame in front of Mui.

"Is that so...?" Selna said. She turned to Mui. "Um, sorry about that. Master Beryl is just that great a man."

"Mm... I kinda get it..." Mui agreed.

"You're overstating things," I protested. "I'm not all that different from any guy on the street."

What do you mean by that great a man? How overinflated is your perception of me, Selna? And Mui, don't just agree with her. It didn't feel bad to be admired, but I still wasn't used to being treated like this. I got it daily from Allusia and Henbrits, but I couldn't help but fret over it.

Whatever. At least Selna isn't projecting that threatening aura anymore. Mui seemed to have calmed down a little too and was enjoying her meal. So, just like that, we treated ourselves to lunch with Selna.

"Master, I'll excuse myself here. See you around, Mui."

"Yeah, until next time."

“Mm...”

After finishing our charcuterie, we parted ways with Selna in front of the shop. Things had been a little rocky at first, but ultimately, Selna and Mui had formed a decent rapport. Mui had very few acquaintances—practically none. She would probably make a friend or two at the institute, but to expand her world, making connections and communicating with others was indispensable. In that sense, meeting Selna was a big boon. If anything happened, she now had the option of relying on an adventurer. I could only pray that nothing like that *would* happen.

“Okay, then. Wanna go home too, Mui?”

“Mm... I don’t really have anything to do...”

Now that my stomach was full, I considered what to do next. I didn’t mind lounging back at home. After all, I did have the day off. However, having spent decades as a swordsman, I found it difficult to kick back and not swing my sword, even if just for one day.

“I’m going to drop by the office,” I decided. “Can you get back on your own?”

“I’m not stupid. I remember the way back.”

It was settled—I’d drop by the order to say hello and get in a few practice swings. At my age, if I skipped out on exercise, I tended to put on a stupid amount of weight in a flash.

“What should we do for dinner?” I asked.

“I’ll just whip something up...” Mui said.

“Is that so? I’m looking forward to it.”

“Hmph.”

I would’ve been fine with eating out, but it seemed Mui was going to cook something. She’d apparently done chores every now and then at Lucy’s house, and I was more than glad to be the poison tester for anything Mui made. It was a little exaggerated to call this “bridal training” for the future, but raising her housework abilities was vital if I wanted her to strike out on her own. I’d dabbled in cooking for myself, but I’d spent my life at home in the dojo, so I’d

never really taken the initiative to use the kitchen. I'd also been living out of an inn during my time in Baltrain, so I'd mostly eaten out for my meals. *Maybe it would be best for me to get some practice too.* It didn't really matter what I made for myself, but if Mui was going to be eating it, I didn't want to feed her anything lousy.

"Okay, see you later then," I said.

"Mm."

I chased away my thoughts of dinner, said my farewells to Mui, and headed to the office.

The sun was right overhead. I walked through town, basking in its brilliance. *The weather really is great.*

In both Baltrain and Beaden, the climate was generally warm and temperate throughout the entire year. There was no really distinct dry or rainy season—though summer was naturally hot and winter cold, the average temperature range made for easy living. That was why agriculture was so prominent here, and having more crops meant having a more abundant dining table.

Indeed, it was easy for humans to live in these environments, which meant that it was comfortable for pretty much all creatures too. Many monsters of all different varieties inhabited Liberis. Thus, knowing how to fight was important enough that I'd been able to easily provide for myself as a swordplay instructor out in the sticks. Basically, it was a mixed blessing. There was nothing better than a peaceful life, but since I depended on swordsmanship for my livelihood, it would be problematic if the demand for my particular skill set vanished.

I strolled casually through town with such thoughts in mind, and before I knew it, I found myself in front of the Liberion Order's office.

"Hi there. I see you're working hard as always."

"Ah, thank you."

I greeted the guard at the gate and then passed right through. I'd been coming here every day as a special instructor for a fair amount of time, so I was used to interacting with the guards. They seemed to remember my face too. At least, they didn't really question me and always let me through.

Incidentally, there were three main military forces within Baltrain. First was the Liberion Order—Baltrain served as their headquarters, and they were the pride of the nation. The magic corps were second. Lucy sat at the top of this organization, and they were a force to rival the order. Lastly was the royal garrison. Their duties mainly focused on the patrol of the city. The guards keeping watch in front of the office were also part of the garrison.

From what I'd seen, many members of the garrison were a fair bit older than the knights. I'd even seen a few who were about my age. This was definitely an occupation that retired knights could take up. After all, the body weakened with age, and it was difficult to continuously wield a sword on the front lines.

The royal garrison was an organization that focused on internal matters. They cracked down on minor offenses and also preserved the safety of the roads between towns. This meant that, unlike the knights, they didn't deal with external matters—they had almost no involvement in exterminating monsters or handling diplomatic affairs. They also outnumbered the order drastically, though the garrison wasn't so plentiful that they could cover the entire nation. We didn't have any out in Beaden. My home village was far enough out in the country that we didn't need to have a specialized security force stationed there.

At any rate, members of the lower-middle class like me were more indebted to the garrison than the likes of the order or the magic corps. The order did boast of high popularity and approval among the populace, but the members of the garrison were far closer to home on the streets. *I'm definitely closer and more involved with the knights, though.*

Oh, and adventurers didn't count. They weren't part of the nation's forces.

With Sphenedyrvania's delegation coming, it was easy to imagine that the garrison, order, and many others were going to get really busy. The order could easily manage to guard VIPs, however, there weren't enough knights to watch the entire city. Therefore, they were likely going to be coordinating with the royal garrison. I didn't know whether this delegation was going to lead to revelry in the streets or be a stately visit.

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

I went right to the office's training hall and saw many knights swinging

wooden swords. As I'd seen before, all of the knights were really enthusiastic about training. It felt great to see them focusing on their art so earnestly.

One of the knights called out to me, noticing my arrival.

"Oh? Mr. Beryl! Weren't you off today?"

"Yeah, I'm not here to teach today. I just thought I'd swing my sword a little."

The one approaching me with a refreshing smile was Henbrits Drout. He was the man who served as the lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order. His tan skin and almond eyes were his distinguishing features. To put it simply, he was very handsome. He'd reached the seat of lieutenant commander at such a young age, and he had great looks alongside a terrific personality.

He's probably very popular among women. But, now that I think about it, I've never heard any stories along those lines. Not that this kind of gossip is something I usually go out of my way to hear.

"I see," Henbrits said. "We could all learn from your devotion to the blade."

"Ha ha ha, it's not that big a deal."

His reaction to my words was overblown. It made me feel itchy to be so unconditionally idolized. As I'd said, all I was here to do was swing my sword a little.

"Oh, right. Henbrits."

"Yes?" he replied.

"I just happened to hear something earlier. Sphenedyardvania's delegation is going to be coming soon, right?"

Henbrits wasn't some fresh recruit—as the lieutenant commander, he had to know something about it.

"Now that you mention it, this is the season," Henbrits said.

"Sphenedyardvania sends a delegation every year around this time."

"Hmm."

It turned out that Selna's information was correct.

"Last year, they had an audience with the king and went sightseeing around

town,” Henbrits continued. “We played a role in escorting them that time too.”

“I see.”

So, it was pretty much guaranteed that the order would be on escort duty. Well, with foreign VIPs visiting, of course the greatest military force in the country couldn’t sit on its hands. Even if just to put on a show of power, the order had to play an active part.

Now, how exactly do I fit into this event?

“Does it seem like I’ll have to be a part of this escort too?” I asked. I was hoping not to, if possible.

“I wonder about that,” Henbrits said. “You’re our special instructor, but you haven’t been knighted...”

“Aah, you have a point there.”

I did have a title and position here, but when it came down to it, I was just hired help, not a knight. Maybe it was inconvenient for the nation to put any sort of focus on me. That was fine—it saved me from having to take part in any formal occasions.

“I believe it’ll be up to the commander,” Henbrits added.

“Up to Allusia? That means...”

That girl was liable to ignore all the diplomatic facets of this and push me to the fore. She already had a record of doing just that since she’d recommended the likes of me as a special instructor. *Frightening... I can’t let my guard down.*

“Speaking of, I don’t see Allusia,” I said.

I hadn’t noticed her absence in the training hall until she’d come up in conversation. I came here to teach all the time, so I didn’t see *her* teach very often, but she did serve as the order’s primary swordsmanship instructor. I figured she’d be here if I told her I was taking the day off.

“She’s away handling a minor matter,” Henbrits said. “I believe she’ll be back soon, so—”

“Henbrits, I’ve returned. Oh? You’re here too, Master?”

“Speak of the devil.”

Turning around to the source of the voice, I was greeted by the Liberion Order’s lovely knight commander, Allusia Sitrus. She sounded a little surprised to see me. Well, I hadn’t planned to be here today, so that was probably a natural reaction.

“Master, I do believe you put in a request to take the day off.”

I smiled. “I’m just here to do some exercise and swing my sword.”

Yup, the old man is just here to work out as part of his daily routine. I’ll slip out once I’m done. Sorry, I’m not really in the mood for teaching right now. I asked for the day off, so I can just work on myself today...right?

“Is that so?” Allusia considered me for a moment. “That works out perfectly. There’s something I must tell you.”

“Hm? Did something happen?” I asked.

Allusia’s expression and tone were serious—it seemed she had some business with me. I really, really hoped this had nothing to do with escorting the foreign delegation. I’d just been discussing it with Henbrits, so it was the first thing that came to mind.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware of this,” she started. “But a delegation from Sphenedyrvania will be visiting soon.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know. I only just heard about it today.”

Ugh. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

“Now that you’ve been appointed as the order’s special instructor, I believe it’s an appropriate occasion to introduce you.”

Thought so. Gimme a break.

“Well... Won’t I be really out of place?” I asked, hoping to refuse. I didn’t want to be a prominent part of this. Even if I had to play a role, I was better suited to slyly following along in the back to casually take part in the escort duty.

“So you say, but your appointment comes with the king’s seal.”

“Mrgh...”

Allusia seemed intent on seeing this through, and I couldn't really argue. I hadn't been knighted, but I'd been appointed by the king as an instructor. That had been made clear by the letter Allusia had shown me during her visit to Beaden. I had no intention of asking the king what his motives were, nor did I have any way to do so. Regardless, this was a formal appointment by my nation's leader—if I was told to go introduce myself to a foreign delegation, I couldn't really refuse.

“What a wonderful opportunity to spread your name beyond our borders,” Henbrits exclaimed.

“Cut that out, you’re making too big a deal out of this,” I said, waving my hand.

I took a look around the training hall. Pretty much all the knights had the same look in their eyes as Henbrits. *Whaaa? Seriously? You’re all thinking that?* I was thankful they didn’t see me in a poor light, but I was just an old country bumpkin. I found it hard to believe that *I* was worth introducing to foreign delegates.

“I know you don’t really enjoy being in the limelight,” said Allusia. “However, do understand that this is part of your duty as our special instructor.”

“Is that how it works...?”

It was a little late, but I was vaguely starting to realize that I wasn’t a simple citizen anymore. It was mostly Allusia’s fault for recommending me in the first place, but I was also partly to blame for accepting it (though refusing a royal appointment would’ve been rather challenging).

The Liberion Order had their dignity to maintain in front of foreign visitors. I wasn’t going to be able to refuse.

“Haah...” I sighed. “So, who am I being introduced to? The pope?”

I had no choice but to accept it now. It was best to get all the details sooner rather than later. There was no point in dawdling.

“No,” Allusia answered. “Last year, Sphenedyard’s royal family visited. You’ll be greeting them and members of the Holy Order.”

"Hmm... So, they're not higher-ups from the Church of Sphene?"

I figured that the church would be involved in a delegation from a religious state, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

"The pope leads the Church of Sphene, but the government is centered around the state parliament," Henbrits explained. "For generations, a member of the royal family has served as the head of parliament."

"I see."

So one person wasn't in total control of the nation. Liberis had a king on top, but we had a congress of nobles under him too. It was probably the same thing.

"In that case...will the head of parliament be visiting?" I asked.

"Last year, the first prince and third princess visited," Allusia said. "It's safe to assume that we'll be receiving guests of similar stature."

"A prince and princess, huh..."

I was at a loss for words. Things involving royalty and princes and princesses had been far beyond my imagination not too long ago. Being dragged onto such a stage in so short a time had me wondering whether this was some god's prank. Had I done something wrong? I'd just been living a relaxed life teaching swordsmanship out in the sticks. Maybe things had all taken a bad turn the day I'd chosen to take Allusia on as a pupil.

Sigh. That obviously wasn't the case, but getting forced into the center of this world like this had me wanting to complain a little.

Whatever. Introductions will probably end with, "Hi, I'm the special instructor." The delegation isn't here to see me or anything. I can get it over with quickly and just make sure I'm not rude or anything.

"In that case, I'll have to do something about my attire..." I mumbled.

"True," Henbrits agreed. "You won't be able to go in your regular clothes. And I doubt you have armor like we do."

Another problem—meeting with big shots meant having to put some care into my personal appearance. Naturally, I possessed no clothing that was suitable for such formal occasions. Even when I'd been introduced to all the

knights as a special instructor, I'd worn my regular clothes. When we trained, we all wore whatever was easy to move in. That wouldn't work for a formal occasion.

"Hmmm. I don't own any clothes like that. Guess I'll have to buy some—"

"I'll be your guide. That sounds good. I know several shops," Allusia blurted out rapidly. Her words were coming out so fast that she didn't have time to breathe, something I hadn't witnessed for a good while now.

"Uhhh..."

It wasn't a bad idea to have at least one formal set of clothes. Even without all this Sphenedyardvania stuff going on, I'd already decided that I should have something nice—I wanted to look presentable for meetings at the magic institute as Mui's guardian. However, I'd had nothing to do with such things before, so I had no idea what kind of clothes to get. Allusia's ever-growing excitement made me wary, but it was probably right to rely on her here. I wouldn't even know what shop to visit if I were on my own.

"Guess I'll take you up on that," I conceded.

"Understood. I'll adjust my schedule immediately," Allusia replied.

"Aah, well, there's no rush or anything, okay...?"

Huh. Ever since coming to Baltrain, I'd gone around town with Kewlny, Ficelle, Lucy, and the like, but I hadn't gone out with Allusia since coming to greet the knights. She was a very busy person, so I felt bad about having her go on a stroll with me, but judging by her reaction, maybe I had it wrong—maybe she *wanted* to tag along. Still, she was far too great a person to be hanging around an old man. Even though I had no ulterior motives, Allusia was of extremely high standing and an extraordinary beauty at that.

"By the way, when will that delegation arrive?" I asked.

I doubted it would be today or tomorrow. Significant preparations had to be made for such a visit. Even I had to open up my schedule around the visit now. However, on the off chance that this event somehow overlapped with anything involving Mui, I would prioritize her, which was a somewhat frightening thought.

I needed to find out the date ahead of time.

“It’ll be about a month from now,” Allusia answered.

“That’s good. I would’ve been stumped if you said they were coming tomorrow.”

Mui was starting school in a week, so a month was probably enough time for her to get accustomed to her new environment. That was also plenty of time to get some clothes. It seemed my schedule wasn’t going to be thrown into complete disarray.

“Anyway...” I sighed. “I doubt I’ll ever get used to this kinda thing.”

As I always reiterated, I was no more than a plain old man. I didn’t see myself as anything but a citizen of Liberis, even if my title no longer reflected that, and I was in no way enthusiastic about my part with this delegation. If I was a complete outsider, maybe I would’ve enjoyed the event as a spectator.

“Hee hee, you’ll have plenty more opportunities to familiarize yourself with events like these,” Allusia said with a smile.

“I’d rather not...” I replied bitterly.

I felt tired for some reason. Physically, I was still perfectly fine, but my mental fatigue was impressive. All I’d come here to do was swing my sword. Well, this was bound to happen sooner or later. It was best to view things optimistically. At least I’d been given plenty of time to prepare myself both in body and mind.

“Ha ha ha! It’s just a matter of getting used to it,” Henbrits said. “I was nervous at first too.”

“Henbrits is right,” Allusia agreed. “You’ll get used to it eventually.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

The knight commander and her lieutenant seemed very accustomed to such events. The two of them were far younger than me, but they had far more experience. Right now, they were even more dazzling than usual.

Henbrits flashed me a refreshing smile. “Then, Mr. Beryl, how about swinging a sword a little to relax?”

“Yeah, I’ll do just that.”

That smile was yet another reason he was such an attractive man. It would be awfully mysterious if he truly had no women in his life. Even from my perspective as a fellow man, he seemed like he would be very popular.

There wasn’t much point to pondering that, though. Just as he’d said, I did want to focus on my sword right now to elevate my spirits. I’d ventured to the training hall on my day off, so it was time to do what I’d come here to do in the first place.



“I’m back.”

After sweating a bit at the office, the sun was sinking toward the west. Soon, the bottom of the sun would be hiding behind the horizon in a red glow. I opened the door to my new house, something I wasn’t quite accustomed to yet.

“Mm. Welcome home.”

Someone was here to welcome me. This was something I wasn’t used to. Not that I disliked it. Back in the dojo, my parents had always been around, so it wasn’t actually a big deal. Still, having a younger girl in the house waiting for me felt out of place. *I’ll have to get used to it over time.*

After confirming it was me, Mui offered a greeting in an almost casual tone. It seemed she’d been in the living room sitting on a chair and leaning on the table with nothing to do. She looked at me for a few seconds, then sat up.

“Oh? Something smells good.”

I noticed a smell of food that hadn’t been here when I’d left this morning. *Hmm, this is probably boiled food. Something like a pot-au-feu or stew.* Mui likely wasn’t very familiar with cooking—her general education in housework seemed to be a boon from Lucy and Haley—but both were easy enough to get right. With this type of recipe, all she really had to do was throw ingredients into a pot and heat everything. It was the ideal dish to teach to amateurs who didn’t know the basics of cooking—anyone could make it, and nothing short of a disaster could mess it up.

“Hungry...” Mui muttered.

“Hm? Were you maybe waiting for me?”

An adorable rumble resounded through the house. The one responsible for the noise widened her eyes and then shyly averted them. She was so cute. I’d been completely under the impression that Mui would eat ahead of me, so it was unexpected that she’d waited. I was sure she didn’t hate me, but I hadn’t felt like she was *that* attached to me either, so this new development made me both happy and embarrassed.

“Food is better with company...” she mumbled.

“Ha ha ha! You have a point there!”

I couldn’t help but smile broadly at her remark. Mui was just so endlessly adorable. With my mind caught by the fragrant food, I knew it had been the right choice to get some exercise in. A pleasant hunger ran through every fiber of my being. I didn’t have to worry about it in my line of work, but just eating and sleeping every day would reduce me to a pig.

“Well then, let’s dig in,” I suggested.

“Mm.”

A pot filled with ingredients sat on the table. I looked inside and spied sausage and potatoes. The potatoes hadn’t been peeled properly and the chunks were uneven, but it didn’t change the fact that Mui had done her best. Being a little clumsy with a knife wasn’t going to change the taste.

Mui used a ladle to scoop the contents of the pot into plates.

“Thanks for the meal.”

“Mm.”

I started eating right away. *Delicious*. It was a little bitter because of the scum, but it was certainly more than edible. Having never really cooked before, Mui probably didn’t know about needing to continuously skim off the scum while things were boiling.

“Mm, it’s great,” I said.

“That so...?”

I couldn’t forget to thank the one who made my meal. It didn’t matter if that was someone at a restaurant, my mom, or Mui—I *had* to tell her it was delicious. This was also an essential step toward my goal of teaching Mui proper manners. *Did the corners of her mouth curve upward just a little? I doubt anyone in the world dislikes having their work complimented.* I wanted Mui to continue living a life where she could be praised more and more.

After having two or three spoonfuls of the pot-au-feu, Mui turned to me and muttered, “Ah... Oh yeah.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“There was some package addressed to you,” she said. “I put it away inside.”

“Mm, thanks. I wonder what it is.”

“Who knows?”

I didn’t recall ordering anything to be delivered to me. I’d taken everything from the inn already, and the only ones who knew I lived here were Allusia, Lucy, and Ibroy. I’d met Selna at noon, but I hadn’t told her where my house was.

As for any among them who would send me a package...

Ibroy. It was probably Ibroy. This had to be the reward he’d mentioned for capturing Reveos. I couldn’t think of anything else.

His request had been quite the nuisance, but I was fine with taking whatever he offered. I doubted he’d sent some kind of rubbish, though it would be nice to get anything as a gift, whether it be money or material goods. I decided to check on it after I finished eating.

“Oh right, I need to tell you something,” I said.

“What...?”

Mui looked up from her plate. To put it nicely, she ate like a child. To put it poorly, she had no manners. Cooking was a necessity for living alone, so Haley had taught her that first, but she hadn’t had enough time to begin on etiquette instruction. After all, not being able to eat with proper manners wasn’t going to

kill her. But that meant that I was now responsible for teaching her etiquette. She was sure to have opportunities to have meals with her school friends at the magic institute—I wanted her to know how to eat presentably so she never felt ashamed.

“Some big shots from the neighboring country are going to be visiting soon,” I said. “I’ve been rounded up as an escort.”

“Hmph.”

Mui’s reaction was curt as always. Guess it wasn’t that interesting to her. Still, I was probably going to be out of the house for a few days, so I needed to let her know.

“As you can see, I don’t have any nice clothes for the occasion,” I continued. “I’ll be going out shopping for some in the next few days. Allusia will be showing me around. Wanna come along?”

“No.”

Again, the same as always. *Aah, stop smashing that sausage with your fork.*

“I understand it’s boring for you, but don’t play with your food,” I told her.

“Hmph.”

Mui reluctantly put down her fork. She still seemed in ill humor. *Wonder why.* It was cute in its own way, but what was I to do?

“Is Allusia that knight lady?” she asked.

“Yeah. The one with silver hair you met at the office.”

“I see...”

I didn’t quite get it, but I supposed that from Mui’s perspective, Allusia was like a thorn in her side. She didn’t have a good impression of the knight commander. However, they weren’t enemies anymore either. While I wasn’t going to ask them to be friends, I wanted them to get along to an extent. Allusia was my...colleague? Was that right? Well, we did work in the same place.

“Thanks for the meal.”

“Mm...”

We chatted over our food, and before long, my stomach was nice and full. It wasn't good to overeat, so I stopped there. I took a glance at the pot. There was still more inside, so those could be leftovers for tomorrow.

Mui had finished eating just a little before me. *She's a rather quick eater. Guess that's simply how she's lived until now.* She didn't know how to take her time and always tore through her meals. I wanted her to realize that she didn't live in that world anymore, but that was difficult to explain in words.

She can just get used to her new life little by little.

After placing the dishes in the sink, I went farther into the house. *I'll wash them later.* I was very curious about Ibroy's package, so I went to open it right away. He'd told me it was a reward but hadn't informed me of what he'd sent over. I was fine with accepting anything, but if it was something beyond my control, it would be a little problematic.

"Oh, is that it?"

A wooden box had been placed sloppily in a corner of the room. *Thought it would be smaller.* It was fortunate that it hadn't been too big for Mui to carry. After staring at it for a while, I picked up the box. It didn't feel all that heavy. *The mystery deepens.* I really had no idea what was inside, and there was only one way to find out.

"Hup."

With faint hope and significant anxiety, I opened the box. The lid came off without resistance.

"So, it's come to this..."

Inside were bundles of cloth. To be specific, it was clothing...that clearly wasn't my size. The design and general fit of the garments were definitely meant for a woman—a small one. I saw everything from simple things that could be used as sleepwear to cute outfits she wasn't going to like.

Yup, these are for Mui.

Ibroy knew I'd received a house, but he wasn't supposed to know that I was living with Mui. I hadn't told him, at least. There could only be one culprit.

“Guess I’ll thank them the next time I see them.”

By “them,” I meant the man who’d sent this package and the little tyrant who’d plotted the whole thing, that is. Incidentally, there was also a sum of dalcis beneath all the clothes. I was glad, though I was a bit uncertain about how to react.

Well, whatever. Let’s use this to treat Mui to another delicious meal.



“Hwaaah...”

The morning sun had just finished peeking over the horizon. I stood in front of the order’s office, passing time absentmindedly and watching the waves of lively humans moving about.

Two days had passed since our talk of Sphenedyardvania’s delegation. I’d quickly worked out my schedule until then, but then Allusia had invited me out—I was currently waiting for her.

At any rate, it was awfully early in the morning. We’d planned on finding some clothes for me—a task that I thought shouldn’t take too long—but I had a premonition that it was going to eat up the whole day. I had no idea what shops to go to or what kind of clothes to buy, and Allusia was the only person I could rely on for help.

Marching around town with a top-class beauty like Allusia should have been a delightful event, but since I’d known her as a child, I didn’t really find much excitement in that. If anything, I was scared of the gazes we were going to attract and the pressure of walking alongside a big shot like the knight commander.

I’d been appointed the overblown position of special instructor, but at heart, I was still part of the lower middle class. I didn’t have an aversion to taking a walk with Allusia, but going out with Kewlny or Mui was far more relaxing.

As I idly ruminated over such thoughts, I spotted a familiar silver-haired woman walking down the road toward me.

“Master, sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Aah, it’s fine. I wasn’t waiting that long, I just woke up really early.”

The commander of the Liberion Order, Allusia Sitrus, had arrived. She wasn’t wearing her usual plate armor today. She had on a white shirt and a long blue skirt—her outfit gave off a rather calm aura. Wearing those clothes, no one would’ve suspected her of being the gallant knight commander. That was how perfectly beautiful she looked.

Still, seeing Allusia in a skirt was rather unexpected. Her usual clothing did emphasize her curves, but the styles she wore were more unisex. Now, her skirt swayed in the wind, giving a glimpse of her strong calves. And as always, her beauty was in staunch contrast to my utterly plain appearance. I definitely wasn’t someone who should be walking around with her—I felt sorry for subjecting her to it.

“I don’t know a whole lot about clothing...but I think that outfit suits you,” I remarked, complimenting her.

“Th-Thank you very much.”

I was pretty sure Allusia would look good in anything, though. Still, if a woman went out of her way to dress up, it was a man’s duty to praise her. That was always true, even if the object of my praise was a former pupil. *At least, I think so. I don’t know much about this stuff.*

“Th-Then let us depart,” Allusia said. “It’ll be a bit of a walk.”

“Sure, that’s fine. I’ll leave it up to you. Since we’re walking, can I assume that the shop is in the central district?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

I’d thought we might go to the western district for clothes, but we were apparently staying in the central district. Not only that, but the place she had in mind was within walking distance.

“So, the central district has stores like that too,” I said as we started walking away from the office. “There’s still a lot about the city I don’t know.”

“Well, Baltrain *is* vast.”

I’d been in the capital for a good while now, but I still didn’t know the route

we were going down or any of the famous stores along it. A part of me wondered whether that was all right now that I had a home here—but another part figured it was fine since not knowing wasn't a hindrance to my daily life. In all likelihood, Mui had a better understanding of the land than I did. Fortunately, I had many acquaintances to rely on, which saved me a ton of trouble.

"Not that I think I need to worry about it, but are you sure this isn't getting in the way of your official duties?" I asked.

"It's not a problem. There have been no pressing matters as of late."

"I see. That's good to hear."

If Allusia had been busy, then the rest of the order would have been bustling too—after all, they couldn't turn a blind eye to conflict. In a sense, Allusia having a reasonable amount of free time meant that public order in the capital was stable. Frankly, the nation's major military force being busy was a frightening thought.

The people of Baltrain seemed to understand this too—they were all gazing at Allusia warmly. On that note, the way they looked at me was something I still wasn't accustomed to. *Guess I have no choice but to get used to it.* I couldn't help the fact that my fame was spreading across the populace.

"By the way, Master, what kind of clothing do you prefer?" Allusia asked.

"Hmmm, what *do* I like?"

I'd never really thought about it before. I'd spent my life in the sticks, so I wasn't particular about my daily necessities. I hadn't lived a particularly impoverished life, but not a prosperous one either.

"If forced to choose, I guess something with flexibility," I said. "I'm not really into anything tight or heavy."

"Understood."

This wasn't really about my taste in clothing but about my preferences as a swordsman. Even if we were going to be sightseeing with foreign delegates, the job was still escort duty—if possible, I didn't want to wear anything restrictive. I

wasn't the type to wear rigid armor either, so I wanted clothes that were easy to move in. I wondered whether I would get my wish.

Allusia nodded, but in this case, there was the formality of the occasion to consider. After all, if I could've gotten by with my current clothes, I wouldn't have had to go out shopping.

"Let's start with this store," Allusia said.

"Sure. Please go easy on me."

How far had we walked? We'd arrived at a street lined with small stylish shops. Despite their petite sizes, these boutiques had a distinct presence. The stores looked distinctly upper class, which was to be expected of Baltrain's central district.

I'm clearly out of place here. Is this really going to be okay?

"Welcome..." a well-dressed clerk greeted us. "Ooh, if it isn't Lady Sitrus."

"Hello, I'd like to look at some clothes," Allusia responded.

I was already overwhelmed by the shop's appearance, but Allusia strode in without hesitation. I followed her, obviously flustered, and peered around the store. There were lines of fancy clothes, but I didn't know any of the brands or what they might cost. Judging only by looks, they all seemed very stiff and hard to move around in.

"There sure is a lot of variety," I mumbled casually.

"Indeed. Please let me know if anything catches your eye," the clerk said.

Anything that catches my eye, huh? My fashion sense is unreliable, so I feel like it'll be best to lean on Allusia here.

"Master, what do you think about this?" Allusia asked.

"Hm? Let's see... Uhhh..."

The first thing Allusia brought to me was a tight-looking shirt with a frilly collar and luxurious ornamentations. I guessed it was made of velvet—the fabric was both smooth and resplendent.



What the heck is that? Do I have to wear it? That'd be a bit of a problem.

“It’s a doublet. Do you like it?” Allusia asked.

“Well, ummm... Isn’t it a bit flashy?”

I take everything back. There’s no telling what I’ll end up wearing if I leave everything to Allusia. Not that she has any ill intent, but still, she can be a little more...well, you know. To match this plain old man, we want something nice but subdued.

“I think it suits you,” the clerk said with a friendly smile. It was his job to sell this stuff, so I doubted he would say anything else. I was pretty sure this didn’t suit me at all.

“Hmm... Maybe we should look at some others... Ha ha ha.” I found it hard to outright refuse, but I desperately wanted to avoid the doublet.

“Is that so?” Allusia murmured, somewhat disheartened.

Um, sorry, I guess? But that’s definitely way too flashy.

Anyway, were all clothes worn by nobles and big shots like this? They were clearly gaudy and tight—wearing them would be too heavy of a burden for this old man. I’d never had the chance to interact with unknighted nobility before, so I didn’t really know what the standards were. Allusia and Henbrits could just get away with armor as their formal attire.

“Hm...? Would something like this work?”

I looked around the shop, not sure what to do, and then a certain jacket caught my eye. It was mostly black, but the shade was somehow calming. It extended down to the waist, and it looked rather open at the chest—the white embroidery was a pleasant accent. A part of me felt like it might suit me...a little. It’d caught my eye at least, unlike all the other clothes in here. It wasn’t too flashy, and it was closer to my tastes than the doublet Allusia had chosen.

“Hmmm... I believe it’s a little plain...” Allusia muttered.

“I mean, that’s just about right for me.”

I wasn’t used to dressing up in the first place, so I figured it was best to

prioritize a prim and proper look while keeping the flashiness in moderation.

“Understood. Please put this aside for now,” Allusia said, turning to the clerk.

“As you wish,” he replied.

By “put this aside,” she meant we weren’t done. I was fine with just picking the jacket and calling it a day, but things weren’t going to be that easy with Allusia here.

“I’ll come again,” Allusia said. “Master, let’s take a look at some other shops too.”

“S-Sure.”

Perhaps she’d concluded she wasn’t going to find what she wanted here. I didn’t want to see anything else like that doublet, though.

“Hee hee hee... This is unmistakably a da—”

“Hm? You say something?” I asked.

“No, nothing at all.”

Allusia’s muttering vanished into the clear skies. We went to six other shops, only stopping to have lunch in the middle. I got sixteen recommendations overall, and in the end, we picked the jacket from the first shop. I felt a little sorry since Allusia had put in so much effort, but she seemed satisfied for some reason, so I decided to let it go.

Chapter 2: An Old Country Bumpkin Meets Royalty

Three days had passed since I'd gone shopping with Allusia and bought that black jacket. Today was Mui's first day attending the magic institute. This was just the right occasion for formal attire, but unfortunately, the jacket hadn't been tailored in time. It was currently being adjusted to fit my size, but that was going to take two weeks or so to finish. At least it would be completed in time for the arrival of Sphenedyrvania's delegation.

"Okay, shall we?"

"Why're you so giddy, old guy?"

After having breakfast, I left the house with Mui, who was a little more dressed up than usual. She chided me for being so excited, but how could I not be? My daughter— *Wait, is it right to call her that? Whatever.* My daughter was about to have her big moment.

"Ha ha ha. That's just how parental affection works."

"Hmph."

Mui wasn't wearing her usual outfit. Instead, I'd chosen something suitable from the clothes Ibroy had sent us. They'd been a gift, so I was going to make the best of them. She was wearing an unassuming white shirt and somewhat tightly cut black pants. Her usual outfit exposed a lot of her skin, so this was better suited for the occasion. It wasn't particularly flashy or cutesy, so Mui hadn't really objected either—her opinion had played a big role in my decision.

"The pants are really tight on my legs..."

"You'll have to get used to clothes like this."

She wasn't opposed to the color or style, but she apparently had resistance to pants that covered the entire length of her legs. She was just the tiniest bit dissatisfied, but she had no choice but to get used to them. I wasn't really one to talk though—I prioritized clothes that were easy to move in too.

According to Kinera, there were approximately six hundred students currently attending the magic institute. They varied greatly in age, ranging from kids who were even younger than Mui to those who'd enrolled at around Allusia and Selna's age. The male-to-female ratio was pretty even. This made sense since the factors that triggered magic ability in a person seemed to ignore one's age, gender, and lineage.

Was it selfish of me to hope that Mui might make friends with *girls* her age? I was pretty confident I would look cynically at any boy she brought over and introduced to me as a friend. I wasn't going to just hand over my daughter...though I didn't know when or if Mui would start to feel such things.

"Anyway, I heard the rumors, but the entrance fee is definitely fair," I said.

"It's not exactly cheap..."

"For you, it's a small price to pay."

"Hmph."

Even without my income as a special instructor, I had more than enough savings—paying the school's entrance fee wouldn't be a problem for me. If Mui had been more talented, the fee would've been waived entirely, but it would be unfair on her to hope for that.

The only thing Mui could use right now was fire magic. If she were truly a genius, she apparently would've been able to use all sorts of magic from the very beginning—Lucy was a prime example of such a talent. *She really is more than just a title. I should revise my somewhat rude perception of her.*

"Hup."

Gazing at the waves of people walking through Baltrain on this lively morning, I boarded a carriage. It was as packed as always. *Baltrain sure is a nice city.* Its prosperity was only natural, considering it was Liberis's capital, but the scale and convenience here was on a different level from Beaden. Carriages for traveling around town didn't even exist out in the sticks.

"You're just gonna leave once we get there," Mui said.

"Well, that's true, but this is a pretty big moment, isn't it?"

“Whatever...”

This was Mui’s first day, but there wasn’t going to be an entrance ceremony or anything. According to Kinera, the magic institute was always searching for budding wizards, so they took new applicants at any time of the year. It would be difficult to enroll new students every day, so they did so every month instead—Mui would enter with the other new students for the month. Without a ceremony to attend, I didn’t really have anything to do there as her guardian. I was just seeing her to the institute. Still, it was a parent’s nature to want to go with her. Maybe I was being overprotective, but there was a certain precarious nature to Mui’s circumstances that compelled me to feel that way...by my standards, at least.

We got off the carriage at a stop and walked for a while. As we approached the gate to the magnificent magic institute, we were greeted by the teacher who’d provided us with all manner of details the other day, Kinera Fyne.

“Mr. Beryl, Mui, we’ve been awaiting your arrival.”

“Hm? Mrs. Kinera, good morning.”

“Good morning,” she said, smiling. “Today is your first day, so I’ll be guiding you.”

“I see, that really helps.”

It was a relief that she would be Mui’s guide. Being led by an acquaintance instead of a stranger made the transition easier on my daughter...and on me.

“C’mon, Mui, make sure to greet her back,” I urged.

“Mm. G-Good morning...” Mui said awkwardly. She was still unsure of how to interact with people who weren’t close to her like Lucy and I were.

“Good morning,” Kinera replied cheerfully. “I’ll be taking Mui into my care.”

“Yes, please do,” I said.

Mui had been complaining about me coming along, but now that we were here, she was really nervous. *Adorable*.

Now that I’d dropped her off, my job was complete. I hadn’t taken the day off, so I had to get back to the carriage stop and head to the office. I could ask

Mui about how her enrollment went after she got home. Not that I believed she would honestly talk about her school life...but I had to get her used to such conversations little by little. I wasn't just giving her shelter—my goal was to make her capable of living independently.

"Okay, then..."

Now that my companion was gone, I was left wandering around the northern district on my own. The clear weather gave me the perfect view of the royal palace's spires. The palace itself was a short walk away, but I didn't really have any business there. Besides, I was probably going to visit it when escorting Sphenedyardvania's delegation, so I figured I could enjoy some sightseeing then.

Also, the chapel of the Church of Spene was here in the northern district. I didn't really have fond memories of the place. They'd completed the cleanup after the *incident*, so it was apparently back to normal, but I didn't really want to return there. In the end, I had no idea how many of the men I'd cut down were still alive. Since I wasn't being charged with any crimes, someone like Allusia or Lucy had probably pulled some strings.

Because of all this, I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about the northern district. I decided to hurry back to the office.

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

The corners of my mind were prickling with restlessness as I entered the order's training hall. Just as always, many knights were busy devoting themselves to their art.

Allusia greeted me the moment I entered.

"Master, good morning."

"Morning."

She wasn't wearing her usual armor but was instead dressed for training. She was the knights' primary instructor, so it wasn't strange to see her putting her skills on display. However, something about her today seemed...too cheerful? Why was she so happy to be here providing instruction?

“Master, I have a request,” she said.

“Hm? What is it?”

It was pretty rare for her to ask for anything. Back in her days at the dojo, she hadn’t been the selfish type, and here in Baltrain, she hadn’t really made any demands of me. Well, forcing me to become a special instructor had been extraordinarily selfish, but that was different.

“May I ask for a match?” She held her wooden sword at the ready, and her clear eyes stared right into mine.

“Hm... Hm? I don’t really mind, but what brought this on?”

Allusia was both the order’s commander and its instructor, but before all that, she was a knight. Of course she desired to not just teach and lead, but to train her own skills as well. Still, I wondered why she suddenly wanted to spar.

“I was just thinking—with the Sphenedyrvania delegation’s coming visit, I should also practice my swordplay.”

“I see.”

Her attitude remained unwavering—in a good way. She smiled gently. Her face was so beautiful that it looked like a famous statue had come to life. It was almost unfair that such a beauty was also the most skilled knight in Liberis. It made me feel like the heavens had granted a single person multiple gifts.

“Shall we get right to it?” I asked.

“Yes, as long as you’re fine with it.”

With that, she handed me a wooden sword. Now then, how many years had it been since I’d faced off against Allusia? The last time had been during her days at our dojo. She’d been talented and strong, but that had been a long time ago. Since then, she’d definitely polished her skills—a weak knight would’ve never been appointed commander of the Liberion Order.

“Henbrits. Take care of the starting signal.”

“M-Ma’am!”

We stood facing each other at the center of the training hall, our wooden

swords at the ready. Before I knew it, all the knights around us had stopped training and were staring. Well, their two instructors were having a match—I understood the desire to watch. I was half looking forward to this and half nervous. Though I was curious about Allusia’s growth, I was also scared of appearing inadequate as her opponent. How much had she improved since her dojo days? I’d never seen her fight, so I couldn’t make a judgment.

I’ll need to concentrate more than usual.

“Are both of you ready?” Henbrits asked.

“Ready,” Allusia replied.

“Yeah, anytime.”

We kept our eyes fixed on one another. Strangely enough, we both used the exact same middle stance—it was an orthodox stance that was suitable for offense and defense.

“Then...”

The activity in the training hall had been so noisy, but now the only sound in the room was Henbrits’s voice. I loved this unique sense of tension. Even if this was only sparring, it was rare to experience such a stinging chill. It would give me a glimpse of Allusia’s skill.

“Begin!”

Henbrits gave the signal. Allusia held her wooden sword in the same position and kept an eye on me, analyzing what I would do.



Before I knew it, her blade was right in front of my eyes.

“Whoa?!”

I repelled it in a panic. *Hang on, hang on, hang on a damn minute! How did she even move just now? Seriously?* An unpleasant sweat ran down my back. I’d barely seen a thing. She’d had her sword at the ready, and in the next instant, her sword had been about to hit me.

“As I would expect,” Allusia muttered. “I wanted to take a point with that...”

“Well, you know, I figured I wouldn’t give you one so easily!”

I somehow managed to reply to her, but my heart was pounding. She wasn’t so fast that I suspected her of using magic or a trick, but her speed had been incredibly unexpected. I had no idea where her sword had flown in from—all I’d done was repel the block of wood that had suddenly manifested before my eyes.

“Whoa?!”

Again, Allusia was standing at the ready, and in the blink of an eye, her sword came flying at me. I repelled the horizontal slash, then took a couple of steps back, flustered.

“Phew!”

This is weird. She doesn’t telegraph anything about her impending attack. If someone had told me her sword had grown out of thin air, I might’ve believed them—that was how crazy fast she was. How is this happening?

“Hee hee,” Allusia tittered. “That’s the first time someone’s blocked me twice.”

“What an honor...!”

Her speed was seriously no joke. I couldn’t let this drag on. Frankly, I wasn’t confident that I could continue dodging her ridiculous swordplay. Blocking twice had practically been a miracle.

“Shhh!”

“Hah!”

So, my only choice was to go on the offensive. From my middle stance, I slashed upward, then followed through with a downward slash. The dry sound of wood clacking against wood echoed through the training hall. Allusia had moved minimally—just enough to knock aside my attacks.

“Hmph!”

I followed those strikes up by spinning on the spot into a horizontal slash, then a thrust. The former was repelled and the latter dodged by taking two steps out of range. *Dammit. I feel like I've been forced to go on the attack a lot lately.*

“Hee hee... Master, are you aware of what the public calls me?”

“No... I'm not very well-informed.”

With some distance between us, Allusia struck up a conversation. Now that I thought about it, Selna was called the Twin Dragonblade. Did Allusia have a similar nickname?

“They refer to me as Godspeed,” she declared. “I find it to be somewhat of an exaggeration, though.”

“Well, it certainly seems like you live up to it... Hup!”

I was back on the defense as Allusia charged in with a chain of rapid attacks.

She'd come at me from a little farther away this time, so I'd somehow managed to repel her blows. In order to close the distance, she'd taken two steps forward—it was very impressive to get so close in the blink of an eye, and even more so when the movement looked as natural to her as breathing.

I get it now. Unlike our first exchange of blows, I'd had some time to observe her due to the distance. I'd figured out a little about how she worked. In terms of weight, her strikes were far lighter than Henbrits's. Also, in terms of pure speed, Selna was probably faster.

However, Allusia's attacks were different from theirs. She controlled every movement of her muscles beyond every extreme—her limbs accelerating her in an instant from a neutral state. Therefore, her ability to reach her peak speed in a short time surpassed all others.

What made that possible were her thoroughly trained legs, especially her knees—they were outstandingly flexible. Because she was capable of flexing the muscles around them so well, she was able to spring forward while showing nearly no signs of her intent. That was why it looked like she moved in an instant.

She also excelled at defense, making her difficult to manage. Her good eyes and agility allowed her to choose the best way to deal with any incoming attack. I was at a loss. I couldn't see an opening. My style was also very poorly matched against hers. In terms of pure swordsmanship, you could say she'd perfected her art.

If this had been a private match just between us, I would've been fine with losing to her. However, the other knights were watching. Also, from an outsider's perspective, I was the special instructor Allusia had personally brought in. If I was seen as weaker than her, then her position could become tenuous...along with my own. That was a result neither of us wanted.

Okay, let's go with that.

“Hoh!”

I suddenly stepped forward, unleashing a downward slash followed by a thrust. I held my hilt one-handed in a short grip, aiming for a close-up fight. Allusia handled my sword splendidly, blocking every stroke. The sound of wood clacking together echoed countless times around us. This much I'd expected—such half-hearted attacks weren't going to graze her, let alone hit her.

“Hup.”

“Huh?”

By textbook definitions, her swordplay was everywhere at once, practically omnipotent. That was only going by the textbook, though. This was a *fight*. I used my empty left hand to grab Allusia by her clothes. She stiffened for an instant—I took advantage of that and I pulled her in hard. Allusia stumbled due to the unexpected force yanking on her.

I tapped the hilt of my wooden sword against her head as I pulled her in.

“That's one.”

“Augh...” Allusia groaned. “You really got me...”

“This is another way of fighting,” I told her. “Keep that in mind.”

Allusia smiled bitterly, as if she found this to be unexpected, but it didn’t look like she considered my tactics to be unfair or crafty. As one who lived on the battlefield, she was well aware of the factors involved in a real fight. This was a good thing. Nobody in this training hall would look down on a fighter using their empty hand. In a formal match, it might have garnered some disdain, but the knights’ motto was to always conduct themselves as if they were on the battlefield. Selna wasn’t a knight, but she was very familiar with battle and had also made use of kicks during our bout.

“The commander...lost?”

“Seriously...? Mr. Beryl really is amazing...”

I could hear the knights murmuring. Well, their commander was the top of the whole order. Even if this was just a mock battle, it had to be shocking to see her lose...in a somewhat unfair manner. I had to admit that, even if I’d been the one to take her down.

“This is my first time witnessing anyone get a hit on the commander...” Henbrits remarked.

“Ha ha ha. You should also learn to use more than just your sword,” I told him. “It might not seem that stylish for a swordsman, though.”

“I’ll take that advice to heart.”

Naturally, people became better fighters when they could use their own bodies as weapons. Henbrits had good instincts, so I wanted him to absorb all kinds of techniques and get even stronger than he was now.

“Mrgh. Master... Since we’ve been apart, you’ve picked up some nasty habits,” Allusia complained childishly.

“What a mean way to put it,” I said. “Allusia, your swordplay is beautiful, but also a little *too* beautiful.”

There was no guarantee an opponent would fight fair and square. You never knew what kind of underhanded methods they could resort to. Against the

average opponent, Allusia could overwhelm them with her technique, but it was a big world.

Conversely, my prospects of victory had been so tiny that I'd had to make use of shortcomings in her technique. Beating her through pure swordplay would've been extremely difficult. Who was responsible for making her this strong? She hadn't been like this back at the dojo, so it wasn't me.

So, yes, perhaps she could best me in a contest of swordsmanship. However, taking all sorts of schemes into account, I could think of two or three other ways to beat her. And if I brought in some *really* dirty tricks, I could think of even more.

I couldn't blame her for her immaculate swordplay—it seemed inevitable that someone who'd enlisted in the order would develop their skills this way. But she was a bit *too* accustomed to clean one-on-one fights, so I hoped she could come to grips with the dirtier side of combat and grow her skills even more.

"I believe there are countless avenues to strength beyond just the sword," I said.

"Yes." She nodded. "You have a point."

This was my lesson for the day. I wanted the knights to expand their outlook beyond swordsmanship alone. If wielding a sword was all it took to get stronger, life would be so much easier.

"Please continue providing us with your guidance," Allusia said.

"Yeah, I'll do what I can."

Now then, my body was nice and warmed up, and my nerves had been properly cooled, so it was time to get back to teaching everyone. I hoped to make another two or three Allusias out of these knights. Well, then again, maybe we were fine with just one of her—having multiple would probably make things spiral beyond my control.

"Is Commander Allusia present?!"

"Hm?"

Just as I was getting ready to begin my instruction, flustered footsteps

approached from outside and the doors to the training hall were flung open.

“Evans, what is it?” Allusia asked.

It was one of the Liberion Order’s young knights, Evans Gene. He was around the same age as Kewlny. He was of average height and had a decent build. To put it plainly, he only had room to grow. His distinguishing features were his somewhat droopy eyes, his short hair, and his vigor. Like all the other knights, he had good instincts. Training such promising youths was something I hadn’t really gotten to experience much back at the dojo. We had enrolled a few like him, but for some reason, the majority of our pupils had been children. That was fun in its own way, though.

Anyway, Evans seemed to be flustered. I couldn’t help but wonder what was going on.

“Members of Sphenedyardvania’s Holy Order are here!” he exclaimed.

“Hmm. Do you know their ranks?” Allusia asked.

“A-Apparently, it’s the knight commander himself...”

“I see.”

Ooh, a big shot arrives out of nowhere.

“Where is he now?” Allusia asked, unperturbed by the news.

“W-Waiting at the gate.”

“Understood. Henbrits.”

“Ma’am!”

“Ah, hold up,” I interjected. “Isn’t it bad to make guests wait at the gate?”

I doubted the visitors were lying about their status—the people waiting at the gate definitely included the knight commander of the Holy Order. I questioned how Evans could leave someone with that rank just waiting in front of the office.

“True...” Allusia conceded after giving it some thought. “Evans, please guide them to the reception room.”

“A-At once!”

That sounded good to me too. Even if it were only for a short time, we couldn't have them waiting outside, and I doubted we could talk in front of the gate. To receive guests in such an inadequate manner would certainly be grounds for reprimand. Evans had probably panicked at their sudden appearance. Allusia and Henbrits understood this, so they didn't look like they were going to punish him or anything.

"We're sweating quite a bit. Perhaps we should towel off before meeting them," I suggested.

"Right... Forgive me, Master. I should know better."

We were dealing with a foreign knight commander. Even though he *had* shown up without an appointment, we weren't really presentable enough to engage with him—it would be rude to speak with guests while drenched in sweat.

So with that, Allusia, Henbrits, and I left the training hall. We quickly freshened up and then made our way to the reception room where the Holy Order's commander was waiting for us.

"Does this happen often?" I asked on the way there.

"No, not often," she answered. "The delegation will be coming soon, so I was under the impression that we would all meet up then."

"Hmmm."

It seemed that this sudden drop-in was out of the ordinary. That made sense. A knight commander was a real big shot. One showing up out of the blue—and a foreign one at that—would be problematic if it happened often.

"Oh yes, why did you ask to come along?" Allusia asked.

"Well, you know. I thought I should at least say hello."

I didn't really give her an answer, but this greeting was pretty much my goal.

Allusia had said that she was going to introduce me during the delegation's visit. If possible, I wanted to avoid that. So, if I managed to make a connection here, then the order wouldn't have to go out of its way to introduce me later. *There's nothing better than avoiding a stiff and formal introduction surrounded*

by VIPs. I would go through with that formality if making their acquaintance here wasn't enough...but I wanted to reduce that possibility as much as I could. However, if I told Allusia this, I doubted she would agree. If anything, she wanted to forcefully drag me out onto center stage.

"Are you acquainted with the Holy Order's commander?" I asked.

"Yes, we meet every year. As long as he hasn't been replaced, at least."

It wasn't strange for them to know each other—after all, they were both involved in international affairs. I wasn't supposed to have anything to do with this facet of the world, but here I was, suddenly thrown into the middle of it. I didn't begrudge my position, but I still found all of this hard to come to terms with.

With such thoughts in mind and a few more words exchanged, we made our way to the reception room.

When I opened the door, I saw one big and one medium silhouette inside. It seemed we had two guests. They stood up from their seats as we entered.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Allusia said.

"Hm...? Yo, Sitrus! Long time no see."

Attracted by the deep, loud, and cheerful voice, I adjusted my focus and spotted a huge man. That was pretty much the best way to describe him—he was even taller than Baldur, and a low estimate would put him at two meters or so. He wore somewhat familiar-looking plate armor, and his long, dark-brown hair was tied at his nape. His beard was nicely trimmed too. At a glance, he didn't seem like a bad guy.

"I'm glad to see you as healthy as ever, Razwon," Allusia said in greeting.

"Ha ha ha! Sorry for intruding so suddenly," the man named Razwon replied, smiling grandly as he shook Allusia's hand. "Been a while since I've seen you too, Drout."

"Sir. About a year, I believe," said Henbrits.

Due to Ibroy's request involving the Church of Sphene, I hadn't been quite sure how things would go here, but it seemed like the knight commanders got

along fairly well. On a side note, I'd only just remembered that Henbrits's family name was Drout. Nobody ever referred to him that way, so this was a fresh experience.

"And you..." the foreign commander turned to face me. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Gatoga Razwon. I've been entrusted with the command of Sphenedyrvania's Holy Order of the Church of Spheue."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," I replied. "I'm Beryl Gardinant. I serve as the Liberion Order's special instructor."

Introductions were important. This was especially true considering my objective here, so I went with the formal phrasing I'd prepared beforehand. He stared at me with sharp eyes. Coupled with his build, this demeanor was truly frightening. I couldn't falter here, though. It wasn't like we were going to fight or anything.

When the woman standing next to Gatoga heard my introduction, she seemed a bit startled.

"Hmm... A special instructor," Gatoga muttered.

"Yes. He's very strong," Allusia cut in.

"Ha ha ha ha! Splendid!"

Allusia, please stop trying to raise my stock every chance you get. It's hard on this old man.

"By the way, where's Hinnis?" Allusia asked. "I figured he would be accompanying you."

"Aah..." Gatoga paused awkwardly and averted his eyes. "A bunch of stuff happened with Hinnis." He turned to the woman next to him and slapped her on the back. "She's the lieutenant commander now. My protégée."

The woman protested for a moment but eventually gave up. She had blue hair so pale that it was practically transparent. Even as she sighed in exasperation, her features appeared gentle—she gave off a very ladylike impression. She was about the same height as Allusia and probably a little older. She didn't have wrinkles or anything, but her voluptuous nature couldn't be replicated by

younger girls.

Her one other distinguishing feature was her somewhat slow and peculiar way of talking. Much like Gatoga, she wore full plate armor, but she also carried a pure white kite shield on her left arm. It was pretty rare to see someone wielding a shield. Also, excluding that white shield, absolutely everything about her resembled my one and only acquaintance who was a follower of the Church of Sphene.

Crap, I've got a bad feeling about this.

"Let me introduce you," Gatoga continued. "This is our new lieutenant commander, Rose."

"Tee hee hee. It's nice to meet you. I'm Rose Mabelhart."



Rose cheerfully introduced herself, then shook hands with Allusia and Henbrits. When she held her hand out to me, her smile grew even brighter.

“L-Long time no see, Rose,” I stammered.

“Yup. It’s your *favorite* pupil, Rose Mabelhart.”

I wanna go home...

“Favorite...pupil?”

“Hm? Rose, you two are acquainted?”

Allusia and Gatoga each reacted in their own—very different—ways. The former was glaring at Rose as if looks could kill, while the latter was somewhat shocked. *Allusia, you’re really scary right now. Smile. Smile...*

“Umm... Well, we do know each other,” I said, trying not to dig this hole any deeper than it already was.

“Tee hee hee. He’s my esteemed master,” Rose added, trying to ruin all my efforts.

Cut that out, you idiot! Look how scary she is now! Allusia’s expression had turned even more grim.

“Is that so?!” Gatoga exclaimed, shock clearly plastered on his face. “I know you went out looking for a teacher and all, but *this* is the guy you found?!”

“Yup. Tee hee.”

In contrast to Allusia, Rose’s smile was unchanging. Incidentally, she still hadn’t let go of my hand. *Isn’t the handshake over already? Wait, she told Gatoga about me? I’m a little curious about what she said but now doesn’t seem like the time to ask.*

Allusia stared at our clasped hands. “Master...?”

“Ah, oh, yup, letting go. Letting go now.”

The pressure I felt from Allusia at my side was overwhelming. The fact that nobody was faltering showed the power of all those gathered in the room. *Though, this isn’t how I wanted to find out how skilled they were...*

“W-Well, how about taking a seat?” I suggested, unable to bear this atmosphere for much longer. Once seated, I would also have some physical distance from Rose.

“Right...”

On one sofa, there was me, Allusia, then Henbrits. Across the table sat Gatoga and Rose. A part of me had worried that Rose would casually take the seat next to me, but that’d ended up being needless anxiety. Though perhaps she’d been deterred because Allusia had taken that spot smoothly and with extreme alacrity.

“Okay then, ummm... Where to start?”

This meeting was supposed to be for some report or the like, but for some reason, *I* was now the center of attention. *Goddammit.*

Rose Mabelhart.

She’d referred to me as her “esteemed master.” Well, that wasn’t really wrong. In truth, she’d spent a period of time training at our dojo, but unlike Allusia and Selna, she’d come along relatively recently—she’d spent about a year and a half with us. At the time, it hadn’t been clear that she was a knight of the Holy Order, but according to her, she’d been traveling from place to place, expanding her outlook on the world.

I’d had no reason to refuse anyone who knocked on our doors, so I’d taught her a fair bit. Unlike many of my pupils, she hadn’t been an amateur. She’d shown up already possessing clear swordplay experience, so I’d given her lessons on the Gardinant style—the differences between the dojo’s style and her own—and had mainly focused on sparring. After a little over a year, she’d left fully satisfied.

I didn’t recall teaching her enough to be called her *esteemed* master, though. She’d already had her own style before coming to me. At the time, I’d known she was a follower of the Church of Sphene, but here she was, having climbed the ranks all the way to lieutenant commander of the Holy Order. I did recall her being awfully strong, so that made sense.

“That’s the gist of it,” I said after giving a brief explanation. “She spent some

time at our dojo.”

“I see...” Allusia nodded, her eyes focused on Rose.

The whole time, Rose had maintained her relaxed smile. This expression remained exactly as I recalled—aloof, yet somehow composed. She’d always been like this. I couldn’t recall ever seeing her expression crumble. In contrast, Allusia kept cool most of the time, but her expression changed every now and then in drastic ways, which was pretty entertaining.

There was nothing entertaining about her current stormy look, though.

“Mr. Beryl truly is an excellent instructor,” Henbrits said.

“No, not at all,” I said, warding off the praise. “Everyone is just talented.”

Even if I did have some aptitude for teaching, how far someone polished their skills depended on their own efforts and talent. All I gave any of my students was a firm push forward. It wasn’t like I was capable of raising just anyone into a first-class swordsman.

“Hmm. For such an expert, I’ve never heard your name before,” Gatoga said, cocking his head curiously.

“My dojo is tucked away in the countryside, Sir Razwon.”

“Ha ha ha, Gatoga is fine. After all, there’s nothing better than having talented acquaintances.”

As mentioned, I’d spent my whole life in Beaden up until recently. Several of my pupils had become enormously successful in life, but I myself had only a reasonable amount of skill. At any rate, contrary to his hardy exterior, Gatoga was very sociable and easy to get along with.

“Tee hee hee, I’m so happy,” Rose said, all smiles and good cheer. “Meeting you here must be the guidance of Sphene, Master.”

“Ha ha ha...”

The air in the room was tremendously awkward. Allusia understood now that I’d explained, but judging by her expression, something within her wasn’t totally convinced.

"A-Anyway, the fact that you've gone out of your way to come here means you must have some sort of business to attend to, right?" I asked Gatoga, desperate to change the topic.

There had to be a reason the two top members of Sphenedyrvania's Holy Order had come here today—it definitely wasn't to introduce me and Rose. They'd had no way of knowing I would be here to begin with.

"Oops, you're right," Gatoga said. "Although, you can also say that we just kinda dropped by here while we were in the area."

"Is that so?" Allusia asked.

That meant their main goal wasn't to greet the Liberion Order. So, why were they in Liberis?

"The delegation will be here soon, right?" Gatoga continued. "Rose doesn't really know Baltrain, so she's here to prepare."

"I see."

"Yup," Rose chimed in without a care in the world. "About all I know is that it's a big and wonderful city."

I didn't really care about deployments and security and whatnot on the day of the delegation's arrival, but Gatoga had a point—it would be somewhat concerning to have Rose perform her duty in a completely unfamiliar land. What was more, she had to protect some big shots. By coming early like this, they were probably trying to ease her into it, even if just a little.

"The plan is to stay for a few days and drill the rough geography into her head," Gatoga explained.

"In that case, would you like some knights to escort you?" Allusia offered.

"Aaah, no. That won't be necessary. We arranged for a local bishop to guide us."

Well, Baltrain had plenty of tourist attractions and restaurants, so it was the perfect place to kill time. Not that killing time was the purpose here. Still, it was nicer to wander around in a field of flowers than a barren wasteland. Now that I thought of it, the bishop for the Church of Sphe in Liberis was Reveos. Was he

still a bishop, even now? I doubted he'd been acquitted. This didn't feel like the right place to ask about that though, so I kept my silence. *If I ever get a chance, I'll ask Lucy or Ibroy about how that went down.*

"Given the opportunity, I'd rather have Master Beryl as my guide," Rose said, clearly looking at me.

"Ha ha ha..."

I laughed it off, but Allusia was once more exuding a terrifying aura. I figured it'd be fine to help with some sightseeing, but I didn't actually know Baltrain very well. I could identify some of the standout spots in the central district, but I was basically ignorant when it came to anywhere else. When it came to sightseeing, I could tell them that the palace was in the northern district, but that was practically all I knew, and I wouldn't be able to show them the way there.

"Oh, right. This year's visit will involve showing the city to His Highness the First Prince," Gatoga explained. "An official notice should be coming soon. We'll be in your care."

"Understood."

The first prince, huh? I've never really met a noble, let alone royalty. I wonder if he's all sparkly? I'm a commoner, so that's pretty much the only thought I've had about royals. Allusia, Henbrits, Gatoga, and Rose will probably be the ones showing them around anyway. It'd be best for me to just curl up in a corner somewhere where I won't offend anyone.

"Well then, sorry for bothering you," Gatoga said. "I'm glad to be able to see you two after all this time."

"Likewise," Allusia replied. "Until we meet again."

Gatoga and Rose stood up. Their purpose here wasn't to indulge in chatter, so they probably didn't want to overstay their welcome. Their visit also hadn't been expected by our side. We'd had to cut short the knights' training to attend to them.

"Tee hee. Master, until next time."

“Yeah. See you, Rose.”

She was the lieutenant commander of the Holy Order, so we’d see each other again when the delegation arrived. Thus, our greetings here ended in a very simple manner.

“Henbrits, see them off,” commanded Allusia.

“Ma’am.”

Gatoga gave a polite nod. “Sorry to take up your time.”

Henbrits saw Gatoga and Rose out of the room, leaving me and Allusia alone. Just as I was about to suggest going back to the training hall, Allusia spoke up.

“Master.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“What exactly did she mean by *favorite* pupil?”

You’re still hung up on that?

“Uhhh... R-Rose just decided that on her own,” I answered.

“Is that so?”

At the very least, I’d never called her that. She was, of course, one of the pupils who’d studied the sword under me, even if only for a year and a half, so I thought of her dearly. However, it would be difficult to decide if she was my favorite. I’d tried to express that implicitly, but Allusia seemed exquisitely displeased. Well, she’d had this aura around her for the last few minutes, so her attitude now wasn’t really any different.

Hmmm, what to do?

“There’s no picking favorites among pupils,” I stated. “You don’t do that with your knights, do you?”

“That’s...true.”

Those were my true feelings on the matter. Everyone was valuable to me—they were all my beloved students. If you told me to rank Allusia, Selna, Kewlny, and Ficelle in terms of who I liked best, I wouldn’t be able to do so. If forced to choose, I’d simply call them all my “favorites.”

“But I guess it’s worth mentioning. You’re among my precious pupils too, Allusia.”

“I see...”

This seemed to be enough for her. Unlike her fierce countenance from before, she faced me with a gentle smile. *Yup, a smile better suits a beauty. Everyone prefers to see a lady smiling.*

“Okay then, shall we go back to the training hall?” I suggested.

“Yes, let’s.”

Our guests had been unexpected, but we were instructors here. It was time to spend another day sweating it out with the knights.



With the day’s instruction over, all that was left to do was go home. I was in the middle of debating whether to go straight there or drop by a restaurant on the way when a woman called out to me at the office’s gate.

“Hello, Master.”

“Rose...? What’s up?”

It was the Holy Order’s lieutenant commander—she was supposed to have left after our short meeting earlier. She wasn’t wearing her armor anymore and was instead dressed in a thin cardigan and a long skirt.

“Tee hee hee, I was dying to see you, so I came over.”

“Aaah, right...”

It turned out *I* was her reason for being here. *Hmm, not that I have any plans or anything. As long as I’m not too late, Mui won’t complain.*

“So? What do you need?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing really.”

“Huh?”

I’d been ready to hear her out, but here she was, saying that she didn’t have any business with me. *So, why did you come here? This old man doesn’t have*

that much free time— Well, with training over, I guess I have a bunch of free time. All that's left is to go home, eat, and sleep.

"It's been a while, so why don't we have a chat?" Rose asked. "Also, I'd appreciate it if you could show me around town."

"Yeah, yeah, all right. Just for a little bit."

I had no problems with the former request, but I wasn't too confident about the latter. I wasn't familiar enough with the area to guide her around Baltrain. Well, I did probably know more than a foreign knight. There was no point in standing around, so I started walking. Without needing to say anything to her, Rose stuck right to my side.

It was awkward to walk in silence, so I got the conversation rolling.

"Anyway, it really *has* been a while," I said. "Are you doing well?"

"Yup. I've been pretty good."

Rose was definitely a beauty, but unlike Allusia and Selna, she was pretty much unknown in Liberis, so we didn't really attract attention as we walked down the street. That was nice. Either way, I was still an old man walking around with a beautiful woman, so the situation wasn't all that different. At least it was better than going around with Lucy, who looked like nothing more than a little girl—I didn't have to worry about the garrison coming after me in this case.

"It was a huge shock to see you," Rose said cheerfully. "I never thought you'd be here in Baltrain."

"Ha ha ha, a lot happened..."

Yup, a whole lot... It was a bit too complicated to go over quickly. Or maybe not. I could sum it up in a sentence if I really wanted. Allusia had inexplicably recommended me as a special instructor—that was pretty much all there was to it. However, I felt reluctant to tell the story that way. Maybe it was a tiny spark of this old man's vanity.

"Oh yeah, since when have you been a knight?" I asked.

"Since right after leaving your tutelage," Rose answered. "How about you use

your sword for your country already?’ That’s what I was told.”

“Ha ha ha, let me guess. Was it Gatoga?”

“You’ve got it. But all I wanted to do was take my time and continue my journey.”

Rose’s smile contained just the slightest hint of embarrassment. Unlike Allusia or Henbrits, she wasn’t the type to dedicate all she was to her nation. Of course, that was just my personal opinion—I didn’t mean to imply that she was irresponsible or anything. Rose was indeed earnest when it came to her sword and the Church of Sphene, however, because I saw Allusia as a model knight dedicated to Liberis, I couldn’t help but spot the differences.

“Well, this is also a valuable experience,” I told her.

“Jeez, you’re just saying that because this kind of thing has nothing to do with you.”

“I ended up taking a post with the order,” I countered. “It has plenty to do with me.”

I hadn’t been knighted, but as a special instructor for the Liberion Order, I wasn’t an ordinary civilian anymore. My appointment had come with a royal seal, so there were times when I could no longer claim to be a plain old man just to get out of things. Not that I’d ever believed I’d be stepping into such a new world at this age. Still, there was no stopping or turning back the hands of time, so all I could do was face forward and look to the future. I wasn’t as disgruntled as I let on, even though my situation still didn’t make much sense to me.

“Learning swordplay from you and offering prayers to Sphene... Those were the best times of my life,” Rose said.

“That’s good to hear.”

I’d had many pupils at the dojo. Despite being out in the sticks, we’d been relatively prosperous. But that didn’t mean everyone stuck with it all the way through. There’d been those who’d suddenly stopped showing up, and those who’d had to move and could no longer attend. I couldn’t say for certain that everyone was satisfied with the days they’d spent at our dojo. Having Rose

state so plainly that she'd enjoyed her time there felt like more than I ever deserved.

"But now you've climbed the ranks all the way to lieutenant commander, haven't you?" I asked.

"I'm just a replacement."

More and more of my pupils seemed to be becoming big shots. I'd never even considered one rising to such heights beyond Liberis's borders.

"It really was a huge shock..." Rose muttered with a fleeting smile.

"Rose?"

"Nothing."

Well, I'd been pretty surprised by my own circumstances—it was understandable that one of my pupils had been moved by the events of her own life.

"Oh yes, has Mordea been doing well?" Rose asked.

"Yeah, he's the same as ever. His lower back has been nagging him lately, though."

"Oh dear. I suppose his age is catching up to him?"

"Looks like. Despite his behavior, he's actually pretty old."

We continued strolling aimlessly through Baltrain's streets, chatting casually as we went. She wasn't as meticulous as Allusia or as bold as Selna. She wasn't innocent like Kewlny or quiet like Ficelle. There was an exquisite comfort to being around her because of her natural disposition. She always responded immediately to any conversation but wasn't grating in any way. It really was nice.

Our conversation soon came to a pause, and Rose took the opportunity to stare at the scenery around us.

"What a beautiful city..." she remarked.

"Hm? I guess so. I don't think it's bad."

Baltrain was a nice place. It was lively, and despite how many people there

were, public order was well maintained. Perhaps that was because of the Liberion Order's efforts. There were many conveniences here, and life was comfortable.

"Tee hee, it makes me want to immigrate," Rose said.

"Hey now, you've got a duty to uphold."

"Heh heh heh..."

Seeing her laugh it off, anyone would think she wasn't acting her age. However, having known her for a time at the dojo (albeit a short period), I knew that Rose's geniality came from such affable behavior. Like Kewlny, it was easy to get close to her, though the two women gave off altogether different impressions.

"Master."

"Hm? What's up?"

Our leisurely and aimless stroll had taken us a fair distance from the office. We were now in a somewhat empty street in Baltrain's central district. With the relatively small buildings and sparse traffic as a backdrop, Rose stooped over a little, then raised her head in front of me.

"If I ever move, please come get me."

"You're awfully big for a lost child."

In the unlikely event I ever ended up living with Rose, it felt like Mui would be tamed in an instant. *What a frightening thought.* Rose's disposition made her extremely effective against children. No matter how rebellious the child was, they would capitulate to her in no time. During her days at the dojo, my pupils had adored her.

"Hee hee, then I'll excuse myself here."

"Sure. I'm glad we got to catch up."

"Yup, same here."

I hadn't really shown her around Baltrain—we'd simply chatted while walking toward nowhere in particular. Had that been enough? Well, judging by her

expression, she didn't feel as though I'd wasted her time, so that was good at least.

"Until next time, Master. Thank you very much for today."

"Sure thing. See you later."

The next time we'd meet would probably be while escorting Sphenedyrvania's first prince on his sightseeing trip. This was going to be work for both of us, so we likely weren't going to be able to talk in private. In that sense, maybe it was a good thing we'd gotten to chat like this today.

"Okay, then... Guess I'll head home."

After parting ways with Rose, I gazed at the sun setting in the west. It was a little early to go home, but there also wasn't quite enough time to drop by somewhere else. It was best to just go home and help Mui prepare dinner or something. Wondering what to do for tonight's menu, I figured maybe I should drop by the western district to pick up some ingredients.

Once more, I walked along the streets of Baltrain.

After Gatoga and Rose's sudden visit, time passed peacefully, with nothing in particular happening. It wasn't like my life in Baltrain was filled with events to begin with. All I had to do was train the knights and continue my life with Mui, and I was just starting to get used to both of these things.

On that topic, for the first few days after Mui started attending the institute, she'd come home totally exhausted. It turned out there were just so many people there, and they'd all tried to talk to her and take her places. She'd mumbled, "I can't take it anymore..." every now and then. I'd told her that she was taking her first steps on the path to living a proper life, so she just had to give it her all.

Still, some things had put Mui at ease. It turned out that the magic institute divided its students into classes like any other school. Kinera, who we'd become acquaintances with, had ended up being Mui's homeroom teacher, and I was glad for that—she'd been the one to explain a whole lot about the institute to us. Mui had also looked relieved by this. Even now, I could clearly remember

her shy yet happy expression as she talked about it over dinner. That was a memory I'd keep for perpetuity.

So, as for what I was up to now...

"It suits you."

"D-Does it...? Ha ha ha."

I was in a store trying on the new outfit I'd bought with Allusia. I'd picked it myself, but I still felt really out of place wearing it. Unlike my usual clothes, it was pretty tight around the chest. This attire was to be worn while meeting with big shots, so I'd been told that a tighter, more formal fit was only natural. I couldn't really refute that, but it still felt constricting. Was this really tailored to my size?

I looked at myself in the mirror as the clerk complimented me. The black jacket was pretty much the exact opposite of what I normally wore. At least the white embroidery made for a nice accent. Still, to sum it up simply, I felt like the clothes made the man here. The jacket naturally gave me a more polished look than something baggy...but it felt more like the clothes were wearing me rather than the other way around.

Incidentally, I'd also bought a pair of matching pants—black slacks with no ornamentation. I would've looked ridiculous wearing a nice, tailored jacket with my usual pants. At any rate, it was hard for me to come to a conclusion based entirely on my own opinion. Allusia and the clerk seemed like they would give me unconditional praise too. Maybe it was best to ask—to put it rudely—the foulmouthed Mui for her opinion.

"That will be sixty-five thousand dalcs."

"Ah, right."

I paid the bill, including the cost of both the clothes and the custom fit. *Hmmm, I already knew what the price would be, but it's still a pretty tough pill to swallow.* I'd never spent over ten thousand dalcs on clothes before, so I couldn't help but pucker at the thought. Thanks to my salary as a special instructor and the sum I'd received from Ibroy, my wallet wasn't in bad shape. Still, such a large expense was bad for my heart. If it had been for Mui's sake, I

would've paid without a second thought, though. I just couldn't help but hesitate when it came to spending money on myself. Unfortunately, my outward appearance was important for this upcoming event, so there was no helping it.

"Thank you for your patronage."

Now then, I'm done shopping, so maybe it's time to go home. Since I was already wearing my new clothes, I figured I would try to get used to them by wearing them on the walk home. Maybe they stood out a bit too much for a stroll through town, but I was going to attract a crazy amount of attention on the day of the delegation, so I just had to put up with it.

My new clothes felt really tight, but perhaps thanks to the quality of the materials, they were unexpectedly easy to move in. It seemed I would be able to do just fine, even if an incident arose. I could only pray that nothing of the sort happened.

"It sure is crowded."

The central district was always lively, but it'd seemed even busier than usual lately. According to what I'd been told, Sphenedyrvania's annual delegation happened to line up with a small festival in Baltrain. To be precise, Baltrain held a festival at this time every year, and they'd arranged for a delegation from Sphenedyrvania to come at the same time as a means of improving relations.

Out in the countryside, I'd had nothing to do with festivals at all. However, the plan was to be an escort through this lively town, so I couldn't let myself relax too much—I certainly couldn't just sit back and enjoy the festival. *Last year's delegation escort went off without a hitch, so maybe there's nothing to be worried about.* After all, we had a huge gathering of skilled knights in Allusia, Henbrits, Gatoga, and Rose, so it would be difficult for anyone to start any kind of trouble.

On the topic of this sightseeing tour, Sphenedyrvania's first prince was scheduled to come from abroad—he was going to be accompanied by Liberis's third princess. I wasn't familiar with the protocol, but when a foreign delegate was visiting, it was apparently common to have someone of similar status accompanying them. That was where the princess came into play. Allusia,

Henbrits, and the knights of the Liberion order would be in charge of escorting the princess, whereas the Holy Order was to look after Sphenedydvania's prince.

My position hadn't really been decided yet. The higher-ups were probably split on how a special instructor slotted into all the arrangements. I wanted nothing more than to take it easy—perhaps handle street security or something. However, the fact that I'd had to buy these clothes meant that it was extremely unlikely I'd be sidelined.

As I approached the front door to my house, I prayed to be assigned to some discreet corner. I turned the knob and stepped inside.

"I'm back," I called out.

"Mm, welcome home," replied Mui. She seemed somewhat accustomed to this interaction now. She looked me up and down, and her expression contorted quite clearly. "What's with the getup?"

"A foreign delegation is coming soon, remember? I went to pick up the clothes for it. I just wore them on the way back."

"Hmmm..."

Mui's expression was now pretty hard to describe. It was kind of like she was thinking, "Wow..." in mental exasperation.

Did the outfit look *that* bad on me? The thought was a little depressing.

"Does it, perhaps...not suit me?" I asked hesitantly.

"Well, no. It's fine," she said after an awkward moment of silence. "It's not bad."

"I-I see."

Her response was ambiguous. *Why'd she pause like that?* It bugged me. I wasn't really thinking of saying, "Hey, doesn't this look great on me?" but her reception was worse than expected. Her bland response was a bit of a shock, especially after I'd spent so much on these clothes.

"More importantly, dinner's ready," Mui said.

“R-Right. Got it.”

So dinner's more important. How disheartening. At any rate, I couldn't go dirtying my new clothes, so I decided to change before eating. I'd chosen black, so it didn't matter if they got a *little* dirty, but it was best to keep them clean regardless.

“You really do look coolest in your usual outfit...” Mui muttered.

“Hm? You say something?”

“No, not really.”

I thought Mui mumbled something as I took off my jacket, but I couldn't really hear her. *Well, let's just be happy she didn't tell me flat out that it didn't suit me...or tell me to strip it off.* Allusia had called these clothes plain, but she hadn't said that they looked bad on me. Since I couldn't put any trust in my own fashion sense, I had no choice but to believe her.

“Thanks for waiting. Shall we eat?”

“Mm.”

Now dressed in my usual getup, we headed for the living room. This really was the most comfortable for me. Today's dinner was, once more, stewed food. This time, we were using some of the smoked sausage I'd splurged on in the western district. It looked chunky and delicious. Still, it was about time to expand Mui's cooking repertoire. Making stew was simple, but she wasn't going to learn anything if this was *all* she cooked. At least she was cutting the vegetables and meat far better. I was delighted to see this kind of progress.

“Thanks for the meal,” I said.

“Mm. Thanks for the food.”

I shared a table with Mui and had dinner. Such were the events two days before Sphenedyardvania's delegation arrived.



“Everyone, listen closely!”

Allusia's dignified voice resonated through the quiet central plaza of the

Liberion Order's office. Nobody here was uncouth enough to make even the slightest noise. They all understood the importance of their upcoming mission.

"As you are all aware, Sphenedyrvania's delegation will be entering the kingdom today."

It was finally time. The delegation was soon to arrive in Liberis. They were very likely on their way to the palace now, escorted by the Holy Order and the royal garrison.

"At ten o'clock this morning, they will be sightseeing through Baltrain with Her Highness the Third Princess."

After this, we were to head to the palace to escort Liberis's third princess and Sphenedyrvania's first prince. Naturally, we couldn't have the entire order clustered together around them. Only a select few knights were going all the way to the palace. The remaining majority were going to be coordinating with the royal garrison to police the streets.

That was far more than enough, in my opinion. Still, this job involved escorting people who were central to two nations, so things had to be right the first time—there would be no reviewing shortcomings after the fact. It was our job to set things up perfectly so that nothing bad happened.

At any rate, Allusia's public-speaking voice really was awe-inspiring. She usually spoke with a gentle tone, so hearing her now made me even more aware of the gap between her usual self and the persona she adopted as the knight commander. It really emphasized her power and position. Truly, she had grown splendidly.

"Just as previously discussed, we will be splitting into five squads. Each will be assigned to escort duty or patrolling the planned route. The first squad will consist of myself, Henbrits, and Mr. Beryl. We will be accompanying Her Highness."

Allusia went over the day's deployment once more. The higher-ups had apparently hesitated over where to deploy me until the last second, but in the end, I was assigned to princess escort duty. I had no idea how they'd come to that conclusion.

“Next, the second squad...”

Officers were appointed to each squad, and the defense plan was laid out. *Man, it sure sounds nice in those squads. Can I join them? I guess there's no escaping my fate. I have to have an audience with the big shots. Life is rough.*

After going over the squad composition, Allusia looked around the plaza at the knights.

“Are there any questions?”

None, apparently. Nobody raised their voice. Instead, everyone showed clear enthusiasm. This was ultimately no more than escort duty, but it was a rare opportunity to do so for royalty. The order's efforts had a direct connection to their reputation with the royal family and with another nation, so the knights were all fired up for it. By contrast, I was less excited and more ready to fight for my life, in the figurative sense. Having an old man straight out of the sticks suddenly guarding royalty was skipping far too many steps.

“Move out!”

“Yes ma’am!”

Allusia ended her speech with that hearty command, and everyone started to split into groups.

“Good work, Allusia,” I said among the hustle and bustle.

“Our work is only just beginning,” she replied in a gentle tone. The time for her public-speaking voice was over, it seemed.

“Anyway... Do I really have to be attached to the princess?” I asked, just in case I could get out of this.

“It was decided based on ability... Is there anything wrong with that?”

“No, um... It’s fine. Sorry for the weird question.”

Allusia’s expression made it seem like she had no idea what I was saying. She didn’t doubt my abilities whatsoever—I wanted her to doubt them just a little. I wanted to complain about her forcing an old man onto the grand stage, but doing so wouldn’t accomplish anything. Ultimately, everything had been decided the moment I’d accepted my post as a special instructor. Where had

my peaceful days as a teacher at a dojo gone?

“Well, what will be will be...” I muttered, my voice fading into the sky.

It was a cloudless day—the perfect weather for a royal sightseeing tour.

“Hello, Allusia. I’ll be in your care today.”

“Ma’am. By the pride of the Liberion Order, we shall ensure your safety.”

Sometime after the gathering at the office, I found myself facing a full array of royalty in front of the palace’s main gate. Allusia represented the three of us and spoke to our charge—the Liberis Kingdom’s third princess, Salacia Ashford el Liberis.

She looked to be in her midteens and was still very sweet. Her eyes were especially large and lovely, somewhat resembling Kewlny’s in a way. However, contrasting her cute appearance was a calm bearing and an aura that wasn’t in any way weakened by her youth. This was the power of royalty.

“Henbrits, I’ll be in your care too.”

“Ma’am! Please leave it to me!”

The princess addressed her escorts affectionately one by one. Henbrits probably hadn’t expected to be addressed at all. His reply was a little shrill. I understood his nervousness. My heart was pounding too.

“Ummm... And would you perhaps be the special instructor?”

Oops, figured I’d be next. Wait, hang on. Why do you know about me, Princess? Anyway, Allusia and Henbrits were wearing armor, so I was the only one who’d donned a jacket. It made me feel extremely out of place. Not that there was anything I could do about it at this point. I strengthened my resolve.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance. My name is Beryl Gardinant. I’ve been appointed as the special instructor for the Liberion Order. I’ve been charged today with accompanying the knight commander and lieutenant commander to guard you.”

“Right, I’ll be in your care.”

Was that all right? Did I say it properly? Strengthening my resolve didn't do anything about how tense I was. My first meeting with humanity's very upper stratum had my heart beating like a hammer.

"Princess Salacia."

And as such thoughts ran through my mind, I heard a gallant voice off to the side. I turned to see a young man who was also exuding an amazing aura. He looked like he was just on the cusp of being an adult. His prim blond hair caught the sun, appearing to sparkle under its brilliance. He had clear eyes like jades, giving me the impression of someone upright and honest. In all likelihood—no, without a doubt—this was Sphenedyardvania's first prince.

"Prince Glenn, I'm looking forward to today's tour."

"Likewise. Baltrain is a beautiful city. It seems this will be a delightful day."

The two royals shared a harmonious greeting and shook hands. This was the meeting between Sphenedyardvania's first prince and Liberis's third princess. It felt like flowers would suddenly start blooming around them or something. *You sure this old man isn't totally out of place here? Is this really okay?*

Gatoga and Rose were also by Prince Glenn's side. As to be expected, they'd been assigned as his personal escorts. The two of them noticed my gaze, and Rose smiled and gave me a discreet wave. *Concentrate on your duty, dammit.*

"Then shall we?" asked the princess. "There just happens to be a festival in Baltrain right now."

Prince Glenn smiled. "Yes, I've heard about it. This truly is a lively and wonderful country."

The two exchanged a few more words. It was good that they shared a solid rapport. Though...this delegation was supposed to be proof of the friendship between nations, so there was the public eye to consider. Even if they'd hated each other, they wouldn't be foolish enough to let it show.

"At any rate, I'm glad we're blessed with good weather today."

"Truly... I-It allows the perfect view of your beauty, Princess Salacia."

"Oh my...! Tee hee."

Uh, Prince? Is that some kinda pickup line? I was close enough to hear their conversation, and I couldn't help but notice the prince was making a very obvious move on her. He was embarrassed about it to boot. Don't say it if you're gonna blush about it. I wanted to toss out that quip, but that would've been extremely impolite. I didn't want to do anything so rude. Instead, I watched over them with a smile. The princess didn't seem displeased, so things were harmonious between them from beginning to end. I guess royalty goes with royalty? I don't know anything about the world of high society.

“Princess Salacia, your hand please.”

“Thank you very much.”

The prince and princess boarded a magnificent carriage that had been standing ready before the gate. There were other carriages too—these were meant for the guards, and they would act as decoys in case something happened. The two royals were accompanied by a chamberlain each. I hadn't spoken to them, but judging by their bearing, they weren't just attendants but were likely capable of fighting. I was completely under the impression the prince and princess would be riding in different carriages. Was there some kind of motive behind this arrangement?

Not that it really mattered to me. Today's plan was to go around the northern district, then the central district, take a break for lunch, and cap things off in the western district. According to the schedule, we would be back at the palace before evening, and if pushing it a little, right before sunset. I didn't know what the plan was after that, but if I had to be involved, Allusia was sure to tell me.

At times like these, not being knighted while having the title of special instructor was great. I didn't have to show up to knightly meetings or conferences or whatnot. Allusia loved to push me to the front for some reason, but my presence wouldn't be welcome on certain stages. That was fine—things like meeting royalty were already too heavy a burden for this old man as it was. I wanted to avoid being dragged into anything else. It was already insane that the third princess now knew my name and face.

“We're departing.”

As I boarded my carriage, the driver informed me that we were taking off.

With that, the first prince's sightseeing tour began without a hitch.

"Weather is awfully nice today."

I took it easy and stared out the window as the carriage shook me about. There were a total of four carriages. The prince and princess were in the main carriage, and the rest were occupied by select guards. Those who'd missed out on being picked were following along on foot or had been stationed at points along our route. Incidentally, I was the only one in my carriage, aside from the driver. So, even though I was on escort duty, I took a break, simply directing my attention to the lively cityscape.

"Hwaaah... There sure is nothing to do."

I stifled a yawn and muttered to myself. The prince and princess were mostly just rolling around town in their carriage. Naturally, they were going to get out for meals and when visiting specific shops, but looking at the trip as a whole, the majority of their time would be in the carriage. In other words, I got to spend surprisingly little time in the presence of royalty.

Allusia and Henbrits were walking outside to guard the carriages. For some reason, I'd ended up inside one to serve as a decoy. I had no idea what had led them to decide that. Still, it was far more relaxing to sit in a carriage than to be walking around out there. Maybe it had to do with me being the only guard who wasn't wearing armor. Not that it bothered me. Still, I couldn't look like I was bored in front of the public, so I planned to do my job properly when I had to.

Right now, I had nothing to do except ride in the carriage. *I should be forgiven for some grumbling out of earshot.*

The town was a lot livelier than usual. Just as Princess Salacia had mentioned, Baltrain was in the middle of a festival. I had no idea what the festival was for, but they apparently held it every year around this time, so it had to hold some level of historical significance. The northern district was mostly for the palace and affluent residences, so it had relatively fewer shops than the central and western districts. Nevertheless, the whole city was in a festive mood, so I could see all kinds of stalls lined up in front of the houses as we passed them.

Oh man, that meat over there looks delicious. With that thought in mind, I

wondered where we were going to eat. We were escorts, so it was probably going to be the same place where the prince and princess were going to dine.

“Hm...?”

The carriage came to a stop. I took a peek outside. The other carriages had stopped too. The chamberlains then got out of the main carriage and were followed by their charges. Something weird was going on—this wasn’t on the schedule. However, if our escort targets were outside, I had to get out too. I opened the door in a hurry and saw all the other guards—Allusia, Henbrits, Gatoga, and Rose—gathered together.

“Is something the matter?” Allusia asked the princess as our representative.

The princess maintained her beautiful smile, whereas the prince wore a somewhat awkward and bashful one.

“No, it’s nothing serious,” Prince Glenn answered. “A hairpin in this shop caught my eye...”

“Yes, even from afar, it was truly beautiful,” Princess Salacia agreed.

It seemed these two had been gazing at the scenery and had spotted an accessory shop. They were talking about hairpins, so it probably wasn’t for him. In all likelihood, he wanted to buy the princess a present.

“Understood. Please leave your safety to us,” Allusia told them after a moment’s hesitation.

“Yes, we’re in your hands.”

We couldn’t defy royalty, so we obediently tagged along. I stood in front of the shop with Henbrits. Gatoga and Rose were eavesdropping curiously, but upon hearing the conversation, Gatoga grinned wryly and Rose flashed her usual smile. Well, these royals weren’t really people we could be telling, “Don’t change the damn schedule on your own, you dumbasses.” Nobody could say a thing when faced with the highest of authorities.

Nonetheless, Allusia maintained her tone and expression, doing her best to give them a gentle warning.

“Still, please refrain from doing this again, if possible,” Allusia said. “If you

must, please tell your attendants beforehand and we'll do what we can to accommodate."

This was better than the royals being tyrants, but it still wasn't a good idea to add unscheduled stops to the route. It was only right to caution them about it. If they acted at their own discretion, those protecting them wouldn't be able to keep them safe.

Our surroundings weren't entirely devoid of danger, but we did have knights packed around the area. It would be impossible to breach the perimeter without a significant battle. I probably wouldn't have been able to force my way through either. In this one instance, we had no choice but to overlook their willful behavior.

"Oh my, it truly is pretty."

"Yes. I think it suits you greatly, Princess."

"Hee hee hee."

Ignoring our fretfulness, the two were getting along splendidly. I glanced at Allusia, and she shrugged back at me. In short, "Don't say anything—just protect them." It wasn't like there were any rumors of anyone being after the prince or princess. If there were, the whole sightseeing tour would've been canceled. So, while I couldn't be negligent, it wasn't necessary to exercise excessive caution either.

Taking a look around, I saw a crowd gathering and trying to catch a glimpse of the prince and princess. They were being held at a distance by the knights defending the perimeter. *Hmmm, the effect of royalty visiting the streets is pretty huge.* Baltrain was a large city and a tremendous gathering of Liberis's citizens. At a glance, it looked like the knights were keeping up the perimeter, but with so much commotion, it was frightening to contemplate the weak points or consider where an opening might form.

"It really does suit you," said the prince. "I'm glad we stopped the carriage here."

"Hee hee. Thank you."

It looked like they'd successfully acquired the accessory in question. Princess

Salacia had put it on, received a compliment from Prince Glenn, and was now smiling back at him. *Sure is getting hot over there.* Their exchange was heartwarming and not very royal. I wondered if either of them were already engaged or something. Or perhaps they *were* acquainted and the prince had a thing for the princess. Not that there was any point thinking about such things, but considering the way they were acting, I couldn't help it. *I'll just ask Allusia about it later.*

"Your Highness, please leave it at that," Gatoga requested rather candidly.

"Yes, forgive me. I'll be sure not to do it again."

Hmm. Prince Glenn seems a lot franker than I'd initially thought. It looked like the prince and the commander of the Holy Order were on friendly terms.

"Huh...?"

The crowd surged forward to catch a glimpse of royalty. Most of the gazes around us were filled with curiosity. However, for a single instant, I sensed a distorted emotion among them.

"Master? Is something the matter?" Allusia asked, noticing that my eyes were fixed on a single point.

I glanced her way. "Aaah, not really..." When I looked back at the crowd, the disturbing presence had vanished completely. "It's probably my imagination. Don't worry about it."

"Is that so?"

It was very likely a misunderstanding. Maybe I was just highly strung from having to serve as an escort for royalty. It would do no good to disturb the situation when nothing had actually happened.

Seeing that the prince and princess were back in their carriage, I returned to mine as well. I hoped it was just a misconception on my part. It was possible someone among the crowd simply hated the royal family—it wouldn't be weird for a caustic gaze to come from that sort. However, my experience told me that I'd felt something more extreme. Something like murderous intent.

"It must be my imagination," I muttered from within the carriage. That was

simply how fleeting the presence had been. We hadn't been attacked or anything, so I figured I could just inform the others after the sightseeing tour was over.

I refocused myself and got back to my duty—which was to sit in the carriage and do nothing. It was a little late to ask...like, *really* late to ask, but was it really all right to do nothing more than this? I couldn't say anything now and throw off the schedule, though. I just sat there obediently, letting the carriage shake me about as I stared at the scenery.

Our sightseeing tour had been thrown off a bit due to Prince Glenn's unplanned stop, but after that, it continued smoothly.

“Mm, this is delicious.”

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

The prince was relishing the dishes of Liberis’s chefs—they’d put all of their skills into preparing today’s meal. Incidentally, we guards had our lunch at the same restaurant. The meat was exquisite.

“Hmmm, this might be my first time seeing such a variety of magical equipment.”

“There has been recent progress made in the mining of magicite,” explained Princess Salacia.

At a store in the western district, the prince raised his voice in admiration at the magical equipment on display. At the same time, I stared at the stuff in a daze, wondering what kind of reaction Ficelle would have if she were here.

Just like that, we went through our planned stops for the day without any problems. The disturbing gaze I’d sensed early on hadn’t reared its head again, so I was able to devote myself to guard duty with peace of mind. It was highly likely that the incident had been no more than a misunderstanding. Maybe I’d just been a little nervous.

“Princess Salacia, thank you very much for today.”

“You’re welcome. I enjoyed it too.”

So, after finishing our tour of town, we returned to the palace gates. After parting ways with Princess Salacia here, Prince Glenn was going to be staying at a noble’s villa in the northern district. Once safely delivered there, the Liberion Order’s mission on the first day would be complete. I’d spent the majority of the time riding a carriage, so I was less tired than I’d expected. And though I was feeling a certain amount of mental exhaustion, I was still energetic enough to go to a training session if I wanted. If anything, my butt hurt from sitting around too much.

“All righty, time for one last spurt of work,” Gatoga muttered, loosening his burly shoulder.

We were pretty much done at this point, but that didn’t mean it was okay to slack off. What was more, the sightseeing tour wasn’t a one-day event—it was going to continue tomorrow.

Having said his farewells to the princess, the prince boarded the carriage again. The sun was drifting into the west. At this rate, we would all be able to get home before sunset.

I just had to hang in there a little longer...sitting around inside a carriage.

Not too long after, we successfully saw the prince to the noble’s villa. He offered Allusia his thanks.

“Everyone, I truly appreciate your hard work today.”

Allusia bowed. “Your gratitude is more than we deserve.”

“I’ll be in your care again tomorrow.”

“Yes, I swear by our nation’s dignity that we will keep you safe.”

After that, they touched a little on tomorrow’s plan, and then we parted ways. *Now I just need to get home.* Setting aside his willful display in the beginning, the prince was a really honest and polite man. I’d thought royalty would be more egotistical or tyrannical, but from what I’d seen for myself, both Princess Salacia and Prince Glenn were good people. If they were all like that,

would that make the country that much more prosperous? Or maybe a commoner like me couldn't see the villainous and crafty schemes brewing beneath the surface. The world of royalty was so foreign to me.

"Okay then, see you tomorrow."

"Yup. Have a good day, everyone."

This was also where we parted ways with Gatoga, Rose, and the other knights of the Holy Order. I wondered where they were staying for the night. It was probably somewhere in the area. I certainly didn't need to worry about it.

"Master, Henbrits, shall we head back as well?" asked Allusia.

"Ma'am."

"Yeah, let's."

With that, we decided to make our way back to the order's office. The plan was to quickly go over tomorrow's plan and then call it a day. It was still too early to go to sleep, so as we walked back, I considered getting something to drink on my way home.

"As for tomorrow's agenda..."

Back inside a room in the order's office, Allusia, Henbrits, and I stayed behind briefly to review our plans. In her hand, she held a simple report from all the squad leaders. As for the other knights, they had been dismissed after gathering at the office. They'd spent the whole day serving as a wall between us and the populace, so they were more exhausted than we three—Allusia and Henbrits had escorted from up close without having to deal with the crowds, and I'd just sat in a carriage the whole time. The sightseeing tour wasn't over yet, so they had to get some proper rest for tomorrow.

"We will start at ten o'clock again. The plan is to go around the central district with Princess Salacia, then attend a theater performance."

"Hmmm..."

Theater, huh? I've never been. I guess that's the kinda thing royalty enjoys? I know nothing about the arts, so I doubt I'll understand even if I watch one.

“Will we be watching too?” I asked.

“That’s the idea,” Allusia answered. “It’s a matter of convenience while we’re serving as their guards.”

“I see...”

Hmm, I’m scared I’ll fall asleep halfway through. Since royalty was going to be watching, we were probably going to be in some VIP seating area. Dozing off in there would be really, really bad. *Maybe I shouldn’t have that drink after this—I should go to sleep early instead.*

“Also, starting tomorrow, we’ll be restructuring some of the squads,” Allusia added.

“Hm? Why’s that?” I asked. I didn’t think anything had gone wrong with today’s security.

“His Highness’s visit to that accessory shop received a tremendous reaction from the populace. We’re partly to blame for that, so we’re making some changes to our security layout.”

“Aaah...”

That did make sense. We hadn’t planned to drop by that store. Royalty showing up without any plans was sure to attract a huge amount of attention. It was like a hurricane manifesting out of nowhere. The shopkeeper was probably screaming in joy.

“Oh yeah...”

Since we were all here, I decided to discuss the discomfort I’d felt earlier in the day. I hadn’t said anything at the time because it could’ve made things more chaotic, but now, I had two experts with me. It would be best to share my anxieties with them.

“I sensed a disturbing gaze while I was on duty today. It was possibly...murderous intent.”

The two of them gulped. Our relaxing little meeting was now somewhat tense.

“Is that the reason you stiffened up earlier today, Master?” Allusia asked.

"Yeah. It vanished right away, so it might just be my imagination. Still, I figured I should at least mention it."

There was no evident danger yet. It was very likely my misunderstanding. However, we had nothing to lose by being cautious. Our goal was to hypothesize every worst-case scenario and get through them safely.

"Understood," Allusia said. "We'll stay vigilant and keep that in mind for tomorrow."

"Yeah, I think that's for the best."

Not that it really mattered, but Allusia and Henbrits hadn't doubted me for a second. Their unconditional trust was a little embarrassing. Still, was a little bloodlust enough to break through both the Liberion Order and the Holy Order? If so, that was a problem. Among that gathering of select elites, this old man was ridiculously out of place. Maybe that was exactly why I'd been crammed into a carriage.

"I suppose those were the only worrying events of the day, yes?" Allusia asked.

"Let's see... I don't think there were any other problems," I said. "But I did spend pretty much the whole time in the carriage."

I hadn't seen any issues with today's security. Allusia and Henbrits were far more experienced on that front, so it'd be weird for me to spot any problems they couldn't.

"Then we'll call it a day here," Allusia said.

"Yeah, good job today."

So, having shared my knowledge of that disturbing gaze to cap things off, we parted ways. I prayed the delegation's schedule would continue without any problems. It was, of course, our job to see it to its safe conclusion, but there was nothing better than a smooth escort mission where we didn't really have to do anything.

"Okay, then..."

I pondered what to do next. I could go right back home and have dinner with

Mui or drop by a tavern and have a drink. I knew the area around the office pretty well now, so I generally knew where the nearby shops were. It didn't sound like a bad idea to go out and discover a new place, but it would be problematic if I got lost and ended up getting home late. If not for tomorrow's plan, this would be fine, but I decided to go somewhere familiar and take it easy.

I wanted to experience the festival's atmosphere for myself too, and having a drink after work was always terrific. So, to replenish my energy for tomorrow's activities, I decided to get some ale in my belly.



The next morning, we once more gathered early in the office's central plaza.

"That's the plan for today. Also, disturbing signs were detected yesterday. There's no telling what will happen. Be sure to pay extra attention."

"Yes ma'am!"

Allusia ended the meeting by touching upon what I'd sensed the other day, warning everyone to be on guard. Well, they were all sure to be cautious regardless, but saying so was enough to refocus their efforts. Nothing else in particular had happened yesterday, so this was the nudge they needed to help them concentrate.

"Move out!"

Following Allusia's command, everyone got going. It was time to get back to escorting the prince and princess, though all I was going to be doing was sitting in an empty carriage. Not that I could complain about that in front of everyone.

"I'll be in your care again today."

"Yes, Your Highness. Please leave it to us."

We were once more in front of the palace gates, greeting Princess Salacia and Prince Glenn—as I'd noticed yesterday, they both possessed amazingly beautiful auras. Yesterday, we'd gone through the northern, central, and western districts. Today, the plan was to focus entirely on the central district.

Also, unlike yesterday, we were planning to visit several shops, and after lunch, we were going to attend a theater performance.

Now that it was my second day doing this, I was getting used to it. I felt a lot more at ease. Naturally, I couldn't ignore the bloodlust I'd sensed yesterday, so this wasn't the time to be letting down my guard. Still, so long as nothing actually happened, there was no point in being overly cautious. *As always, what will be will be.*

"Alone again... Oh well."

Much like yesterday, I boarded an empty carriage that had been prepared just for me. I couldn't help but grumble about it as I got in.

"Tee hee. Master, want me to ride with you?" Rose asked with her usual smile.

"Rose, do your job properly," I scolded.

"Kaaay."

Allusia was looking scary again. Actually...how had she heard us? Maybe it was best to keep my mumbling to a minimum. Still, doing so helped me reduce my excess tension. Staying rigid the whole time would've made me slow to react in an emergency. I could only pray that nothing dire happened.

"We're departing."

The driver got our carriage moving. The city was just as lively as yesterday. There wasn't quite *revelry* on the streets, but as a whole, it was overflowing with enough energy that I could see it from inside my carriage. Even more people were out than yesterday. This was the second day, so information about the royal visit had likely gotten around. As to be expected, it wasn't enough to block the carriages' passage—people were still clamoring to see the prince and princess. The knights would handle the people before they got out of control, but it was still quite the crowd.

"I guess everyone is just curious..."

I didn't feel any particular way about royalty being on the streets, but maybe that was because I was from the backcountry. Our positions were just so

different that I didn't see it as a blessing. Well, after meeting them face-to-face, I now knew about the aura they gave off, so maybe that was something to be experienced.

As such thoughts went through my mind, the carriage came to a halt. It seemed we were at one of the day's stops. I quickly dismounted just as the chamberlains led the prince and princess out of their carriage.

"It truly is wonderful."

"Hee hee, isn't it?"

The two were currently looking at an ornaments shop. Much like the accessory shop from yesterday, Baltrain had many stores that handled such artistic goods. The country as a whole prospered on agriculture, but it had an abundance of artisan goods too. They weren't magical, but the glittering decorations caught the eye. We obviously didn't have any such shops in the countryside, so I was interested in checking them out too. The affable shopkeeper was very clearly nervous, which left quite the impression. I didn't blame them though—even with the prior knowledge that royalty was visiting, anyone would be reduced to that state.

"Hm...?!"

And as I watched the harmonious scene play out, my body stiffened for an instant. I sensed the same gaze as yesterday. It was far stronger this time too.

"Allusia..."

"Yes? Master...do you mean?"

"Yeah. Better stay on guard."

I passed the information to Allusia, who was standing watch at the front of the shop. I looked around. The crowd was the same as ever, and I couldn't see anyone who might be ready to suddenly launch themselves at us. I could only sense a sharp and sticky hostility drifting our way. However, much like yesterday, the presence vanished within seconds. It was disturbing. I could only hope nothing happened.

"There was more than one..."

“You can sense it too, Allusia?”

Yes. The presence had come from more sources than yesterday. It seemed it wasn’t just an individual.

“Let’s get moving,” Allusia said.

I wondered whether we should inform Gatoga and Rose about it. As I did, the prince and princess got back into their carriages. At any rate, it really wasn’t that strange for hostile gazes to be directed at our entourage. Plenty of people surely had poor opinions of royalty. It was perfectly valid to believe that some were letting their discontent be known while remaining anonymous within the crowd.

Something about it still bugged me, but I couldn’t bring the sightseeing tour to a halt because of my hunch. For now, I just got back into my carriage. This was something I couldn’t solve by brooding over it.

The sun was sinking toward the western sky when we arrived at the theater, which was to be our last stop of the day. Several hours had passed since I’d sensed the disturbing presence. We’d stopped several times since, including to have lunch. On that note, the meal had been just as delicious as yesterday. The dishes made by top-class chefs really were on a different level. It had truly been exquisite.

“Today, we will be viewing a performance at this theater,” said the princess.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Yes, please enjoy the show.”

Descending from the carriage, the prince and princess were chatting harmoniously, their smiles as beautiful as ever. Riding a carriage on my own was pretty rough, but doing so as a fixed pair seemed equally hard to me. Had they managed to maintain the conversation the whole time?

“Hm...?”

Just as I was about to get back to escort duty, I heard a commotion. We were currently permitted to wield real swords, so we were perfectly capable of

cutting people down. Naturally, we weren't going to raise a hand against regular citizens, but it would be a different matter if we sensed the slightest hint of danger. Assuming the ones behind that gaze were finally revealing themselves, I felt tension surge through my veins.

"You there! Stop!"

My prediction seemed to be on the mark. Shadowy figures were ignoring the knights' attempts to stop them.

They were closing in on us.

"Prince Glenn, please step back."

Gatoga and Rose quickly secured the prince. The situation was unfolding abruptly, but nobody was panicking. The prince had Gatoga and Rose by his side, while the princess had Allusia and Henbrits. I was a small distance away from them next to my carriage. Without anyone saying a word, we'd all drawn our swords.

The men in black—three of them, from the looks of it—were making their way toward us while skillfully warding off the knights. At a glance, they didn't appear to be armed with any dangerous weapons, but I figured they could've been wizards. For now, I decided to block their way with my body.

Still, something was weird. They'd gone out of their way to choose this exact time to launch an attack. It would be normal to sense clear bloodlust in the air, but I didn't detect anything of the sort. The murderous intent I'd felt both today and yesterday wasn't emanating from these figures in black. Indeed, the men closing in before my eyes gave off hardly any presence at all. The whiffs of them I sensed were so faint that I could almost mistake them for revelers who were charging our way in their excitement or average citizens who just so happened to be wearing black because of their personal tastes.

But if they're coming at us, I have to stop them regardless.

"Hm?!"

And then, just as I shifted my position a little to cover the prince and princess, I finally sensed the violent emotions that I'd expected to feel from the start of this incident.

“Allusia! Rose! Above!”

These guys are decoys! The moment I yelled out, a group of figures in black jumped down from the rooftops.

“Shhh!”

The assassins’ daggers came down on us. There were five of them. I repelled a descending dagger to the side with all my might. A normal person would’ve let go of their weapon, but the figure in black used the momentum of the impact to flip in mid-air and land a short distance away.

This guy’s strong! I could tell how capable he was from our short exchange. This meant the assassination attempt was serious. I didn’t know who he was, but he had significant skill.

“Hah!”

The other guards fended off the four other descending blades. Allusia and Henbrits had done as I had, repelling the daggers with their longswords. Gatoga warded the blow to the side, and Rose caught a strike head-on with her kite shield. *Good, looks like the prince and princess aren’t hurt. Still, we can’t take it easy.*

“Your Highness! Get inside the theater!” Gatoga yelled.

“Don’t!” I shouted. “We can’t guarantee their safety in there!”

We were facing opponents who were ready to attack us in the open like this. There was no telling if there were more assassins inside.

“Strike back at them here!” I shouted. “Form a circle around the prince and princess!”

“Tch! Goddammit!” Gatoga cursed, holding his estoc at the ready.

I didn’t know how strong the two chamberlains were. It was possible that they were stronger than the assassins, but it could go the other way too. Considering all the unknowns, it was a bad idea to split up what forces we had. No, it was best to eradicate all the threats before us with certainty.

All the escorts formed a circle around the prince and princess. Shock was clearly plastered on their faces. I questioned whether the royals would even be

able to run away. It looked like our only choice was to settle things with the attackers here and now.

“Hmph!”

After our brief reprieve, we started the work of repelling a rain of daggers. The guy facing me really was strong. It would’ve been nice to be able to knock his weapon out of his hand, but he knew very well how to turn with the blows. His swordplay was closer to that of an assassin than a swordsman. He was also very quick, in an altogether different way from Selna or Allusia. Unlike in training bouts, he mercilessly aimed for vital points, so a moment’s hesitation would lead to a lethal wound. Also, now that I saw his blade up close, I spotted a suspicious glimmer on the metal.

My opponent’s dagger was unnaturally wet. I hadn’t been hit yet, so it wasn’t blood. There were only a few reasons why a blade would be coated with liquid *before* an attack.

“Tch! It’s poison! Their blades are poisoned!” I yelled.

“Dammit!” Gatoga cursed. “What a pain in the ass!”

Man, this really sucks. I wasn’t wearing armor, so even the slightest scratch would be dangerous. The assassins were targeting royalty, so it was highly likely that the poison was a lethal one.

It’ll be pretty rough to defeat opponents of this level without getting hit at all. Well, it’s not like I have a choice. If we don’t strike them down, the prince and princess are going to die. I was appointed as a guard in this endeavor, so I have to go all out.

“You little!”

I unleashed a thrust into a gap between attacks, but my foe narrowly dodged it. I’d predicted this, but he’d evaded with even more agility than when he handled his blade. That was an assassin for you. It was going to be a lot of work to catch him. If possible, it would be nice to keep some of them alive for interrogation, but holding back could lead to death—especially considering the high likelihood that one graze was enough to kill. Winning without taking a single hit while also keeping my opponent alive... That was setting the hurdle a

little too high.

It might've been possible to spare his life with a wooden sword, but all I had on me was a blade with a terrific edge. Perhaps I could've sheathed it and used it like a blunt object, but I didn't have the time for that maneuver. *Oh well, I don't want to kill anyone, but you guys are gonna have to put up with some serious pain.* I doubted that any of these assassins expected to get out of this alive anyway, especially after launching such a daring attack.

“Hah!”

I repelled a dagger thrust and used the momentum to spin on the spot. I'd definitely hit a physical plateau—I knew instinctively that I didn't have much room left for growth. However, there was still plenty to learn about the sword. This revolving slash was one such example.

I put all my strength behind it. *If you can block, go ahead and show me.* As my arms swung around, I felt the clear sensation of my blade tearing through meat.

“Gyaaaaah?!”



The assassin had maintained his silence from the very beginning, but now he was screaming in pain. He'd tried to stop my sword, but I'd cut everything clean off from his wrist down. I'd used the terrific edge of the sword made from Zeno Grable's parts and had added the full centrifugal force of my spin behind it. A normal weapon wouldn't be able to block such a strike. I would've never resorted to this if I'd been trying to capture my opponent unharmed, but this situation didn't afford me such luxuries.

At any rate, I was done with my side of things. I looked over to see how the others were doing.

“Haaah!”

I turned as I heard a hearty roar—Henbrits was bringing down his sword with all his might. There were several scratches on his armor, but at a glance, he hadn't taken any hits to his flesh. He didn't have the leisure of taking prisoners either. His strike carved its way diagonally down from the enemy's shoulder to his waist. The assassin sank to the floor in a pool of blood without even letting out a scream.

“Hmph!”

Allusia thrust her sword with all the swiftness of the Godspeed, planting it into an assassin's shoulder. Taking a closer look, he already had stab wounds on his right thigh and left flank. Allusia was aiming precisely at nonvital points to try and take him alive. Her elegant swordplay was an exquisite technique that I couldn't really replicate.

“G-Grrr!”

“Whoa there, you're not getting away.”

Taking advantage of my brief distraction, the assassin I'd struck was holding down the stump of his arm and trying to escape. He was awfully lively for a man missing a hand—well, lively except for the tremendous amount of blood gushing from his body. I grabbed him as he turned on his heels. Since he was alive, I planned to stem his bleeding so that he could talk later.

“We're done here too,” said a cheerful and slow voice.

I turned toward it. Rose was putting away her estoc, her kite shield dyed with a spray of blood. The assassin who'd attacked her was already dead with a hole in the crown of his head.

Hmm... With Rose's skill and equipment, she should've been able to capture her opponent, even if not unharmed. A slightly inappropriate thought crossed my mind: perhaps she'd been nervous and that had thrown off her aim. Still, this was far better than her losing.

"Sorry, I didn't have the chance to capture him..." Rose murmured, hanging her head as she watched me stem the flow from the captured assassin's bleeding arm.

"It's fine—they were strong," I said. "There's no helping that fact."

These assassins were in no way small fry. It was perfectly reasonable to strike them dead to obtain victory. *Maybe it's best to praise her for winning a tough fight.*

Henbrits had also killed his opponent. "It took everything I had just to win too..." he said. "I'm ashamed of my shortcomings."

Hmm, we really should be pleased that we didn't lose to the assassins. We protected the prince and princess, so that's a win in itself.

"Princess Salacia, Prince Glenn, are you hurt?" Allusia asked.

"N-No. We're fine. Thank you very much..."

Allusia was holding the assassin—the one she'd riddled with holes—down with his arm behind his back. The prince and princess hadn't been able to react at all during the sudden attack, but they couldn't have done anything more. Royalty was meant to be protected. It was the knight's duty to shield them from an assassin's blade.

However, now wasn't the time to be enjoying a theater performance without a care in the world. We had to go over the whole schedule now. A failed assassination attempt was a solid reason to bring this whole sightseeing tour to a screeching halt.

We also couldn't spend too much time sitting around here. The commotion

from the citizens was getting out of hand. I'd been focusing on the assassins and hadn't paid the crowd any attention during the attack, but now, I could hear some crazy screams and yelling from outside the security perimeter.

"Commander... Commander?"

Rose was calling out to Gatoga. Now that I thought of it, I wondered whether Gatoga had successfully repelled his assassin. He was still standing, so he clearly hadn't lost, but I couldn't see the figure in black he'd been facing. Had he let the assassin get away?

Gatoga stood there in a daze, present in body but not in mind. Rose's words went in one ear and out the other. That was strange. I didn't know him very well, but he didn't seem like the kind of weakling who'd zone out because of something like this. His eyes were fixed on a single spot—an alley. The assassin had probably escaped that way.

Gatoga hadn't given chase nor had he been struck down. He just stood frozen, estoc in one hand, eyes fixed far into the distance.

"Hinnis...?" Gatoga murmured.

I remembered hearing that name rather recently.

"Gatoga?" I called out.

"Ah!" Gatoga finally came back to his senses. "O-Oh... Sorry. He got away."

The name he'd muttered bothered me, but now wasn't the time to ask. For now, with everyone alive and the assassins repelled, we had to restore order.

I turned to our knight commander. "Allusia."

"Yes, I know."

She was accustomed to handling emergencies, so she had a proper grasp of the situation. We couldn't just go ahead with our original schedule now. Securing the prince's and princess's safety was our top priority. Also, to restore order in the area, we had to get out of here as soon as possible. Allusia handed her captured assassin to another knight, then turned to the princess.

"Princess Salacia, given the situation, please return to the palace with Prince Glenn for now."

“Yes... I understand.”

Liberis’s royal palace was the safest place in Baltrain. The order’s office was another candidate, but it was somewhat inconvenient to bring a foreign prince there. For now, it was best to go back to the palace and discuss what to do next.

“Henbrits. Take command here and restore order.”

“Ma’am!”

It seemed Henbrits was going to be staying behind to take charge while the rest of us continued our escort duty. Well, it wouldn’t make any sense to leave me behind. They needed an experienced hand here.

“Sitrus. We’ll continue guarding the prince,” Gatoga said.

“That was the plan,” Allusia responded. “Please do, Razwon.”

Gatoga was back to his usual self and seemed fired up to do something. Rose smiled like she always did. She never let her discomposure show, no matter the situation.

“We’ll return by the shortest route,” Allusia said. “Master, forgive me, but can I ask you to accompany us outside?”

“Yeah, of course.”

I couldn’t possibly kick back inside a carriage in this situation. It was a small mercy that the drivers and other civilians hadn’t been harmed—the assassins had been completely focused on their targets. There was no point to a decoy now anyway. All the skilled guards, excluding Henbrits, surrounded the carriage containing the prince and princess.

The two chamberlains were also inside the carriage. Anxiety and shock were clear on their faces. They knew how to fight, but when push came to shove, experience spoke volumes. From that point of view, they weren’t very reliable.

I waited by Allusia’s side as the carriages got moving.

“So, what was that about? Any ideas?” I asked her.

I, of course, had no clue who’d attacked us. I was dense about these things. My decades out in the sticks had seen to that fact...though that wasn’t

something I was proud of.

“I can’t really say yet,” she answered.

“Yeah, guess not...”

Life would be so much easier if we were capable of making a prediction here. We really needed to secure somewhere safe where we could take our time and discuss things—hopefully as soon as possible.

Had this attack been after the prince or the princess? In other words, was this Liberis’s problem, or Sphenedyrvania’s? The assassins had been bold enough to attack our diplomatic retinue during broad daylight, so it had to have something to do with one of them. It was also possible that both royals had been targets, but that didn’t really sound right.

I didn’t know a lot in this regard, but Allusia, Gatoga, and Rose had to have some knowledge of the nations’ circumstances. If they didn’t come up with at least a conjecture, it could lead to diplomatic issues. Even I could tell that much, and I was ignorant when it came to international affairs.

Everyone was keeping an eye on their surroundings, but we all still seemed to be deep in thought. I wondered what kind of conversation the royals were having inside the carriage. Maybe the two of them were simply waiting in silence. It was possible the targets actually knew what was going on. Actually, after taking everything into consideration, that was the most likely possibility. That said, someone of my standing couldn’t just ask them, “Do you know who was trying to kill you?” Only the knight commanders would be allowed such a thing, and just barely. Not that we could discuss it out in the open like this. There was no telling who could be listening.

“I wonder what’s going to happen with the schedule...” Rose mumbled, her eyebrows drooping.

“It’ll probably all be canceled after an incident like that,” I said.

We had a few captured assassins, so the Liberion Order was going to be busy with the investigation. No one was really in a state to continue a sightseeing tour. It was a separate problem whether Prince Glenn would return to his country or stay here, but he was no longer in a situation where he could go

around town without a care in the world. Regardless, that decision wasn't going to be handled by the knights—it was up to the delegation. We were just going to be waiting for orders.

I felt a faint hope that I was going to be released from this stuffy job, but it was a bit imprudent to be thinking that. I wasn't a knight and didn't have tremendous loyalty to my nation, but as an upstanding citizen, I felt anxious with such trouble afoot.

After my brief conversation with Rose, we continued escorting the carriage in silence. I pondered over the attack on the way, but I didn't possess the knowledge to come up with any answers. At most, I figured it was more likely that the princess had been the target. It would've been easier to target Prince Glenn before he came under the protection of the Liberion Order. I didn't know what route the prince had taken from Sphenedyardvania to Liberis, but that time in transit would've been the best chance to attack. It couldn't have been a flat and open road the whole way, so there had surely been a chance for an ambush. From that perspective, it made more sense that they'd aimed for the princess when she was out of the palace.

As long as they weren't going out incognito, there were surprisingly few opportunities to spot any members of the royal family among the populace. As a villager in Beaden, I had obviously never seen royalty, but even after moving to Baltrain, I hadn't seen them before this job.

However, Gatoga muttering the name Hinnis earlier bothered me. If my memory served me right, that was the Holy Order's former lieutenant commander. If that was the case, the Holy Order, or Sphenedyardvania itself, was weathering some kind of *circumstances*. That much we could probably get out of the assassins we'd captured. Interrogation was going to be the fastest way to figure out what was going on.

A while passed as I walked and pondered such things. The sun was still high in the sky. It was far earlier than our original timeline for returning to the palace, but here we were, back in the northern district.

"Princess Salacia, Prince Glenn."

Once we were at the palace gates, Allusia kept an eye on her surroundings

and addressed the two in the carriage. After a short pause, the chamberlains came out cautiously—they were followed by the prince and princess. The latter was clearly frightened, while the former was doing his best to act resolute.

“Allusia, can you come with us?” asked the princess.

“Yes, of course.”

“Gatoga, I ask that you come too,” said the prince.

“Leave it to me.”

This was where we were supposed to part ways, but the prince and princess each appointed their knight commander to accompany them. I understood how they felt. After such an incident, it was only reasonable to want someone reliable by their side. The knight commanders were perfect for this role too. After all, they couldn’t allow regular citizens into the palace.

“Princess Salacia, please excuse me for a moment... Master.”

“Hm? What’s up?”

After getting permission from the princess, Allusia came over to me.

“In all likelihood, there will be a meeting shortly,” she said. “The escort mission is over, so please go back—don’t wait for me.”

“Aah, that. Got it.”

In other words, it was fine for me to go home. I considered waiting at the office, but there was no telling when Allusia or Henbrits were going to be back. I couldn’t exhaust myself for tomorrow either, so I decided to do as she said.

“Rose, you go back too. I’ll send out orders later.”

“Yup, understood.”

It seemed the Holy Order was of the same opinion. The two commanders ordered their knights to disperse and then vanished into the palace.

“Okay, then...”

I stretched under the sunlight. The day was half over, but after what’d happened, I was feeling tired. Allusia and Gatoga still had meetings to attend, but they were still young and wouldn’t tire that easily.

"I'll excuse myself here," said Rose.

"Yeah. Good work today."

Considering her personality, I figured she might say something like, "We have the time now, so please show me around town," but she wasn't that irresponsible. The Holy Order was going to have to stay alert for quite a while. The same went for me, but her post was far more important than mine. It wasn't really right to feel this way, but I was relieved that my title made things easy for me during times like these.

Now then, it looked like I was getting home earlier than usual. *I wonder how I'm going to explain this to Mui.*

With such thoughts in mind, I made my way back home.

Interlude

“Sorry for taking up your time.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind at all. I still don’t know the city.”

Two eye-catching beauties walked down the streets of Liberis’s greatest city—Baltrain. One was the Liberion Order’s commander, Allusia Sitrus. Despite her youth, she occupied the highest rank among the nation’s esteemed knights. None looked at her with scorn. She possessed a charm that could be described as a peerless combination of dignity and tranquility, which was only matched by her good nature and incredible skill with a blade. She was immensely popular among the populace. Many even looked at her with envy.

The other beauty was the Holy Order of the Church of Sphene’s lieutenant commander, Rose Mabelhart. She was a calming woman whose graceful manners took the fore. The pure white kite shield on her back drew people’s eyes, but her nearly transparent blue hair combined with her gentle and affable countenance stood out even more.

It was a few days before the royal sightseeing tour of Baltrain for Sphenedyrvania’s first prince. Rose was the lieutenant commander of the Holy Order, and there were anxieties about her not having a sufficient grasp of Baltrain’s geography. So, at Allusia’s recommendation, the two women were taking a walk through town.

Rose maintained an affable demeanor. After all, it wasn’t polite to show discontent when the Liberion Order’s commander had offered to show her around.

“It really is a nice city,” Rose commented. “I’m jealous.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to hear it.”

Despite being the one to invite Rose, Allusia’s mental state was somewhat complex. Naturally, she had no objections to forming a rapport with the Holy Order’s lieutenant commander. Considering the future benefits for diplomatic

relations, it was a good thing. However, the words “Beryl’s favorite pupil” stuck out in her mind far more prominently than any other thought. She did, of course, know that Beryl had taught many pupils. She also wasn’t conceited enough to claim to be his best one—she did have confidence that it would be faster to count her rank from the top down, though. At the same time, she couldn’t possibly declare herself as Beryl’s favorite pupil.

Faced with a woman who *could* make that declaration so boldly, Allusia harbored an interest in both positive and negative ways.

“So, ummm...Lady Mabelhart.” Allusia wasn’t sure how to refer to her, so she went with the formal option.

“Yes?”

“I hear you studied under Master Beryl.”

“That’s right. It wasn’t for all that long, though.” Rose put a finger to her chin as she reminisced. “At the time, I was traveling through many nations and their towns. I just so happened across...Beaden, was it? When I saw him, I thought, ‘Wow, his swordplay is amazing,’ and was charmed by it immediately.”

“I see...” Allusia couldn’t deny also being charmed by Beryl’s swordplay. Anyone who aspired to master the blade would acknowledge his skill. “When was this?” she asked.

“Hmmm... About five or six years ago, I think? By the time I met him, he already had that white patch of hair.”

In that case, Rose was technically Allusia’s junior pupil. A portion of Beryl’s bangs were white. Allusia had immediately recognized it as a sign of aging, and it had given her a sense of how long she’d been away from him. She hadn’t been able to witness the change for herself.

Five or six years ago was just around the time Allusia had enlisted in the Liberion Order. During that period, she’d wielded her blade while thinking only of making Beryl’s swordsmanship known across the world. She hadn’t given a single thought to her own prestige. Allusia wasn’t sure how much of her goal she’d achieved—she was still in the process of striving for it—but things weren’t looking bad. If Beryl could use this momentum to rise to the ranks of a peerless

master swordsman, it would be enough for her. But there was still a lot of work to do.

As Allusia thought over her plans once more, Rose's smile deepened.

"By the way..."

"What is it?" asked Allusia.

"I suppose you *must* have also studied under Master Beryl, yes?"

"That's right. Though it was quite a few years ago."

Rose had emphasized that Allusia *must* have studied under Beryl, and she'd done so with a neutral expression and tone. Allusia wondered why she'd asked like that. It wasn't clear how aware Allusia was of being observed, but her love for Beryl was easy to identify. Rose had met her for the first time at the Liberion Order's office, but that short interaction was all she'd needed to largely figure out Allusia's feelings.

"Tee hee hee. I sure would like to hear stories of Master Beryl's past," Rose said.

"Well...as long as you're fine with what I know."

Allusia wasn't opposed to reminiscing. Actually, though she was prone to being misunderstood because of her appearance and tone, Allusia wasn't bad at speaking with others, nor did she dislike it. On the contrary, she *enjoyed* a good bit of conversation. She usually chose her words carefully depending on the time and place but was rather talkative when allowed.

Allusia deemed this to be one such situation where she was indeed allowed. She started talking, barely pausing for a breath.

"Let's see... To go over one of my past blunders, there was a time I injured a pupil from another school during a bout. I fled the dojo, and Master Beryl came looking for me. He slowly went over my swordplay. He wasn't angry, nor was he exasperated... He explained things with sincerity. At the time, he told me, 'I'm sure you'll become a great swordswoman.' Even now, I treat that as one of my dearest memories."

"Tee hee. You sure do love Master Beryl."

Rose took this story in stride. Most people would be shocked by Allusia's sudden rapid-fire speech, but Rose wasn't perturbed at all. She even had the composure to keep up with Allusia. This was a part of her natural temperament, but the topic of their conversation also played a large role in her reaction.



"I suppose Master Beryl has always been like that, hasn't he?" Rose said.

"Yes. In the past and present, his gentle nature remains unchanged."

Rose was intrigued by this information about Beryl's younger days that she wouldn't have otherwise learned. She happily lent Allusia an ear, imagining what Beryl was like before he had white hair.

"I have several memories of Master Beryl at the dojo to share as well— Oh. Oh dear."

Just as Rose was about to open up with stories of her own, she suddenly cut herself off. Her eyes were fixed on the side of Baltrain's bustling street.

"Hm? Is something the matter?" asked Allusia.

Rose ran off without answering. She called out to a child who was anxiously glancing around the area.

"Is something wrong, little boy?"

"*Hic!* Who're you, miss?"

"Tee hee, nobody suspicious."

The boy was around five years old. As Allusia ran after Rose, she was reminded of the many children around that age who'd been at Beryl's dojo.

The child was anxiously looking at the crowd of passing strangers and somehow holding back his tears. "I can't find my mom..." he mumbled.

"Oh my, so you're lost."

It would be unbecoming of a knight to abandon a lost child. Anyone capable of ignoring a person in need wouldn't have the temperament to become a knight to begin with. So, Allusia offered the most guaranteed and realistic way of resolving this situation.

"Let's guide him to the nearby station."

"No." Rose shook her head. "By the looks of it, I doubt he's been separated from his mother for very long."

"Why do you think that?"

"His clothes aren't dirty and he doesn't look very tired. Above all else, he hasn't cried yet. I doubt his mother could have gone very far."

"Hmmm..."

That made sense to Allusia. A child separated from his parents in this hustle and bustle would eventually break down in tears. Allusia didn't have any children, but she had experience dealing with them back at the dojo. Although, thinking back on it now, a lot of those children had been the rowdy type. The dojo was a place to learn how to swing a sword, after all.

"I'm sure his mother is also looking for him," Rose continued. "She should be nearby."

"I see."

That meant it was wiser to look for her rather than take the child farther away to the station.

"What's your name, little boy?" Rose asked.

"Ritter..."

"Okay. Ritter, do you know what kind of clothes your mother is wearing?"

"Ummm... Something red and fluffy..."

"Then let's go looking for a lady in red. Is your mother's hair long?"

"Mm. It's long."

Allusia watched as Rose quickly got the child to open up to her. She comforted him while gathering the information necessary to find his mother. She also maintained a splendid smile the whole time and spoke in a gentle tone, getting Ritter to drop his guard considerably. Allusia secretly admired Rose's ability—she knew that she was incapable of replicating the feat.

"You seem accustomed to this," Allusia said, casting her gaze over the crowd.

"Yup. I enjoy the company of children," Rose said, now holding Ritter's hand. "Now then... Is Ritter's mom here?! Can you hear me?!"

Before Allusia could say anything in response, Rose raised her voice and started walking around slowly with the boy in tow. Behind Rose's smile, her

gaze was sharp. She was keeping a keen eye on her surroundings, making sure not to miss a woman in red with long hair.

“How impressive...”

Raising one’s voice in the middle of town was unexpectedly embarrassing. Naturally, Allusia had to do it every now and then. However, she couldn’t recall ever yelling in the middle of a crowd when there wasn’t an event or ceremony going on.

“C’mon, you too, Lady Allusia.”

“Huh? Oh, right... Umm... Is Ritter’s mother present?!”

Allusia raised her voice at Rose’s urging. Their calls started resonating through the crowd. One of those yelling was the Liberion Order’s respected commander, after all. Word spread rather quickly.

“Aaah! Ritter!”

It took about ten minutes for news of the lost child to propagate through the crowd. Since the *knight commander* was seeking a woman in red clothes and long hair, the citizens felt compelled to spread the word.

Suddenly, a woman came running toward them, gasping for breath.

“Mom!”

The boy’s expression brightened in an instant. The mother was a woman with homely features and freckles. She must’ve been searching desperately for him this whole time. Large beads of sweat trickled down her brow.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!” the mother repeated over and over, hugging her child tight.

“It’s fine, there’s no need to thank us,” Rose responded, smiling as always.

Despite being from a different nation and order, she acted exactly as a knight should. Allusia believed that none of Beryl’s pupils would be so impudent as to act in any other way, but she still saw Rose in a better light now.

“Thanks, miss! Bye-bye!” the child yelled, waving vigorously to Rose.

“Bye now,” Rose replied cheerfully. “Make sure not to get lost next time.”

She continued waving until the mother and child were completely out of sight, then sighed in relief.

"Hee hee... It truly is a wonderful city."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. The people here have such warm hearts. They all raised a huge fuss over a single lost child."

Allusia nearly commented that it was because Rose had shouted across the crowd to search for his mother, but she didn't. Allusia had visited other nations for diplomatic reasons because of her job, but she hadn't ever spent any time sightseeing or taking a good look around. She couldn't compare the people of Liberis, or Baltrain specifically, to those in other nations.

Was the Holy Order's lieutenant commander evaluating Baltrain by the right standards? Could she really take such a rosy view of the city after just one heartwarming incident? It was also hard to tell what kind of place she might be comparing Baltrain to.

"Shall we continue our tour?" Allusia asked.

"Yes, please do," Rose answered, clapping her hands and nodding.

These two had been born in completely different environments. Nevertheless, they both looked up to the same master and were in positions to make use of his teachings. Allusia could respect that in Rose.

"You really do like children, don't you?" Allusia asked.

"Yes. Just watching them heals the soul."

A part of her behavior could be attributed to her duty—which had to be the same for both the Liberion Order and the Holy Order of the Church of Sphene. However, Rose had gone a step above that. Normally, a knight would only go as far as delivering the child to the garrison's station, just as Allusia had initially suggested.

"My parents contributed to an orphanage," Rose explained, lowering her eyes a little. "Because of that, ever since I was little, I've had many opportunities to interact with children."

“I hear Sphenedyardvania treats orphans well.”

“Yes, they do,” Rose replied after a moment’s hesitation. “Children are a nation’s treasures. It is our duty as adults to protect them above all else.”

“Agreed.”

No matter the nation, adults were responsible for molding the present. However, *children* would shape the future. Allusia understood that too.

“And that’s why my body moves all on its own when I see a child in need,” Rose said.

“That’s a good thing. I wasn’t able to act so quickly in the spur of the moment.”

“Tee hee. Thank you.”

Ideally, no child would ever know hunger, and in a perfect world, everyone would be raised without issue and provided an equal education. Allusia understood that this was a dream of a *perfect world*, though. That girl Beryl was taking care of now was a prime example of how reality differed from the ideal. Despite being a budding wizard, scoundrels had manipulated her. No matter what measures were taken, some children always fell out of a nation’s protective bubble. It was only a question of how many and to what extent.

“Oh, one more thing,” Allusia said, changing the topic cheerfully.

“Yes?”

“Please tell me your stories of Master Beryl.”

“With pleasure.”

Allusia was still a little caught up on Rose’s claim of being his favorite pupil, but she hadn’t judged Rose to be a bad person. Besides, no one who’d studied the blade under Beryl could possibly turn out to be a bad person.

“This happened a little after I started attending his dojo...”

“Mm-hmm.”

Allusia set all her thoughts aside for now and listened intently to Rose’s story. These were precious tales of Beryl’s recent life that she couldn’t really get out

of him. Allusia was very excited to hear them.

And so, their bragging session about a certain master—which was masquerading as a walk through town—continued all the way into the evening.

Chapter 3: An Old Country Bumpkin Strikes Down the Hand of Evil

I was walking through the daytime streets of Baltrain. My excursion was a little unexpected, given the hour. The town was in the middle of a festival, but huge waves of commotion were still rippling through the crowd due to the recent assassination attempt. As I listened to the voices of passersby, I heard multiple people spreading mixtures of fact and fiction.

It was human nature to love rumors. Any gossip or sensational topics were sure to be hot on everyone's tongues. After such a public uproar, there was no point trying to hush things up. There'd been far too many eyewitnesses for that.

Among the conversations I heard, some were praising the Liberion Order and seeing our efforts in a positive light. The knights' usual behavior, which was viewed favorably by many in Baltrain, probably contributed to this rosy outlook. I also considered that the optimistic viewpoint might be the result of some grassroots movement. After all, there was no telling what would happen if you criticized the knights at a time like this.

Also, many of the conversations alluded to Allusia. That was the way it should be. She really was tremendously popular. It would be ridiculous for them to be focusing on an old man like me.

"Maybe I'll buy something on the way home... Or not. Maybe I shouldn't bring home a treat, given the circumstances..."

I had more free time than I'd expected, so I'd considered dropping by a shop on the way back, but the news I had to pass to Mui was pretty serious. I gave up on getting anything and decided to head straight back.

As I pondered over how to broach this topic, my feet took me home. Before I knew it, I was opening the front door. *Crap, I still haven't worked things out.*

"I'm back," I announced.

"Mm. Welcome home."

“Yo, pardon the intrusion.”

“Hm?”

I was greeted by one familiar voice and one that shouldn’t have been there. It was weird—the tone of the second voice gave me a bad feeling. Still, I hurried to the living room. Sitting on a chair and propping her chin up on both hands was someone even smaller than Mui.

“Oh, hey, Lucy.”

This was none other than the commander of Liberis’s magic corps, Lucy Diamond. She straightened herself up as I entered and waved to me.

“What’re you doing here?” I asked.

“Can’t you guess?” she said. “The word is all over the streets.”

“News travels fast.”

She apparently had something to discuss regarding this afternoon’s attack. I wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about the topic, but I couldn’t ignore it either. I sighed inwardly, then took a seat across from Lucy. Not that it really mattered, but I was glad we had enough chairs. Mui and I were normally the only ones here, so I hadn’t gotten things ready to receive guests yet.

“Hang on,” I said. “Well, it’s a little late to ask, but...”

Lucy tilted her head. “Hm? What is it?”

It wasn’t strange for the magic corps’s commander to know about the incident. However, a fundamental question about the delegation came to mind.

“Why weren’t you—or the magic corps as a whole—called in as escorts?” I asked her.

The magic corps was Liberis’s pride—a military force that rivaled the Liberion Order. There was no way they’d be overlooked during a big diplomatic affair like a delegation from Sphenedyrvania. Now wasn’t the time for the corps’s leader, Lucy, to be lounging around over here.

“Wizards aren’t suited for escort duty,” Lucy explained, scratching her head. “We specialize in extermination missions.”

“Aaah... I guess that makes sense.”

I barely managed to hold back the quip “I’m pretty sure you’re the only one who specializes in extermination.” Lucy was the only wizard I’d ever fought, but considering the nature of magic, it was likely unsuitable for the protection of others. Even during our bout, Lucy had restricted herself from using magic that covered a wider area. If she had let loose, she would’ve damaged the surrounding buildings and potentially harmed people. Wizards were liable to burn their escort targets while attempting to protect them. They were, without a doubt, strong, but their use had to be carefully considered.

“And even if you disregard that fact, the magic corps can’t really act publicly in this case,” Lucy added.

“Hm? Really? Why’s that?”

Lucy was a pure wizard, but practitioners of sword magic like Ficelle who were capable in close-quarters could definitely be used. It turned out things weren’t that simple, though.

“Why...?” Lucy asked in astonishment. “Have you already forgotten what that country believes in?”

“Oh...”

The Church of Sphene was Sphenedyardvania’s state religion. Their creed saw the miracles of Sphene—another name for magic that healed wounds and fatigue—as the greatest gift from their god. That was how Ibroy had explained it to me. In contrast, the magic corps didn’t make any distinction between miracles and magic. This meant the two didn’t really get along.

Sure sounds like a pain. Good thing his old man doesn’t have to associate with that stuff.

“Sounds like you have it rough,” I said.

“I’m used to it. We have our own ways of associating.”

“Is that how it works?”

“It is.”

It didn’t really make sense to me, but Lucy probably knew what she was

talking about. I decided not to delve any deeper. It really had nothing to do with me, after all.

“Sorry to suddenly change the subject, but didn’t you say you had some business with me?” I asked. Since I’d been the one to derail the conversation, I tried getting it back on track.

“Oh, right.” Lucy clapped her hands, then cut to the chase with a deadly serious expression. “There was an incident today, yes?”

“Yeah, there sure was.”

It hadn’t happened that long ago, but Lucy already knew about it. She’d gotten wind fast enough for me to question whether she’d observed the royal sightseeing tour on a pleasure jaunt. She couldn’t possibly have *that* much free time, though.

“What incident?” Mui asked.

I turned to her, brow furrowed. “Oh, you don’t know about it yet?”

There had been quite an uproar because of the attack, but because we were in the middle of a festival, the town was already abuzz. She wouldn’t have been able to find out about what was going on from inside the house.

“You know how I was tagging along as an escort for the princess? Well...we were attacked.”

“Huh? Is everything okay?” Mui asked, her eyes as wide as saucers. It was an understandable reaction. I’d been pretty shocked by it too.

“Yeah. The prince and princess are both safe, at least.”

“Well, you’re super strong and all.”

“Ha ha ha.” I grinned at her. “You honor me with your praise.”

How highly did I sit in Mui’s internal rankings? I was pretty sure the only time she’d seen me wield a sword was against those Twilight bandits.

“About that...” Lucy cut in. “I was thinking of sharing some information with you.”

“Hmmm...”

Since I'd been directly involved in this incident, I felt like I knew the most about it. If there was any other information on it, it'd have to be about the circumstances behind the attack rather than the attack itself.

Dammit. I really don't wanna hear this. Don't drag me into international problems. I know it's inevitable after getting as involved as I have, but still.

"The ones who launched the attack...were probably from Sphenedyardvania's side," Lucy said.

"Seriously?"

"I did say *probably*. But the information comes from a relatively reliable source."

This was *Lucy* talking, so I doubted she was totally off the mark, but I was curious as to how she'd come to this conclusion.

"Mind if I ask who the source is?"

"Ibroy."

"Aaah..."

So, that old man's involved? Goddammit, I've got a horrible feeling about this now.

"Now that I think about it... Did you see Ibroy during all this?" Lucy asked.

"Hmmm..." I thought back on the events of the day. "Nope, I didn't."

His attire and features made him recognizable at a glance, but he'd never shown up in my daily life apart from our meetings.

"At most, I'm just a bodyguard for the princess..." I said. "That title was pretty much forced on me too."

"I suppose that's how things go when you have nothing to do with the government," Lucy remarked.

"I wasn't allowed in the palace or anything either."

"That makes sense." Lucy sighed.

Without access to the palace, I obviously hadn't been present at the meeting

between all the higher-ups. Allusia or Henbrits might've met Ibroy, but I'd only accompanied the prince and princess outside the palace.

"So, what did Ibroy say?" I asked.

"Right, according to him—"

"H-Hey, hang on a sec," Mui said, cutting Lucy off in a panic.

I turned to her, confused. "What's wrong?"

"Um... Should I be listening to this?"

"Oh..."

She had a point. Ibroy had already told Lucy that the information didn't need to be fully concealed, but that didn't mean we could spread it around willy-nilly. My new life with Mui had become such a matter of course that I hadn't paid her presence any attention. Actually, she deserved praise for pointing it out herself. This was one of Mui's virtues.

"How about it, Lucy?" I asked.

"Hmm... True, we can't really allow this to spread," Lucy said, confirming my suspicions.

"Then I'll go outside and kill some time." Mui stood up without being prompted to and made for the door.

"Hmmm... Sorry, Mui," I told her. It was awkward to have such a young child be considerate of me.

"It's fine," Mui replied as if it was no big deal. "This is work, right?"

She really was a good girl. I mean, disregarding her pickpocketing past... But she truly had a pure heart.

"I'll go shopping while I'm out," Mui said.

"Sure thing."

"Sorry, Mui," Lucy apologized as the girl left.

Two people remained in the room: a middle-aged man and a girl who looked like a little child but was actually his senior.

“Right then, let’s cut to the chase,” Lucy said, getting us back on track.

“Mm-hmm.” I straightened my posture. This definitely wasn’t a topic I could listen to half-heartedly.

“Let’s start with a preamble,” Lucy continued. “Sphenedyrvania is currently in a bit of a civil war.”

“What?” I almost shouted in shock.

Isn’t this a little heavy right off the bat? Prince Glenn hadn’t hinted at this at all, but that made sense—it would be problematic if someone of his stature acted in a way that allowed foreigners to see his internal thoughts.

“That said, there’s no actual war going on,” Lucy corrected, stifling a yawn. “I suppose it’s more of a political power struggle.”

It really threw me off every time Lucy touched on a heavy subject in such a carefree manner. I had no idea how to react.

“A power struggle?” I asked. “Isn’t Sphenedyrvania a religious state?”

In Sphenedyrvania, the church’s top dog—probably the pope or something—sat above all others. If there was internal conflict, did that mean people had clashing interpretations of their scriptures or something?

“I don’t know the full details myself, but it seems to be a conflict between two factions: the papists and royalists,” Lucy explained. “It’s apparently been getting a lot worse lately.”

“Hmmm...”

Was this common for a nation? My world was so small that I had nothing I could compare this scenario to.

“Hang on a sec,” I interrupted. “Who’s got more power? The pope or the king?”

Lucy let out the biggest sigh of the day. “We have to start from *there*...?”

I was ignorant of the world—how was I supposed to know anything about politics, national affairs, and religion? It would be ridiculous for me to be able to make any predictions about those things. I didn’t even know how old

Sphenedyrvania was as a nation. I didn't *need* to know that stuff to live a life in Liberis.

"The pope has more authority," Lucy explained. "However, the king holds all actual political power. It's just that, by national creed, the king is a follower of the Church of Sphene, so he can't ignore the pope."

"I see..."

It was starting to feel like a history lesson. That much made sense to me. The king, or rather, the royalists, held real political power. However, as a religious state, the entire royal family had to be followers of the Church of Sphene, so the Pope had authority over them.

Hmmm, that's pretty complicated. I'm bad at this stuff. Still, I could at least tell who would be the most bothered by a power struggle—the populace. Crap from squabbling higher-ups was sure to fall down on those beneath them.

So, getting back to current events, the royalists and papists were in conflict, and someone had just tried to assassinate the prince. In that case, the culprit was evident.

"You mean the papists are trying to weaken the royalists?" I asked.

"In all likelihood," Lucy confirmed. "He's the first prince, after all. That makes him the obvious heir."

That made sense, but it still didn't feel like enough.

"Even if they'd succeeded, wouldn't the second prince just become the heir and leave them in the same situation?" I asked.

"The second prince... Well, His Highness Prince Falx is an especially devout follower of the Church of Sphene."

"Hmmm..."

I was starting to get the big picture. Prince Glenn was set to be the king in the near future. That would be inconvenient for the papists. In that case, it would be preferable to murder the first prince and have the particularly devout Prince Falx take his place. That would leave the papists in a stronger position. Their ultimate goal was probably to run a puppet government with the second prince

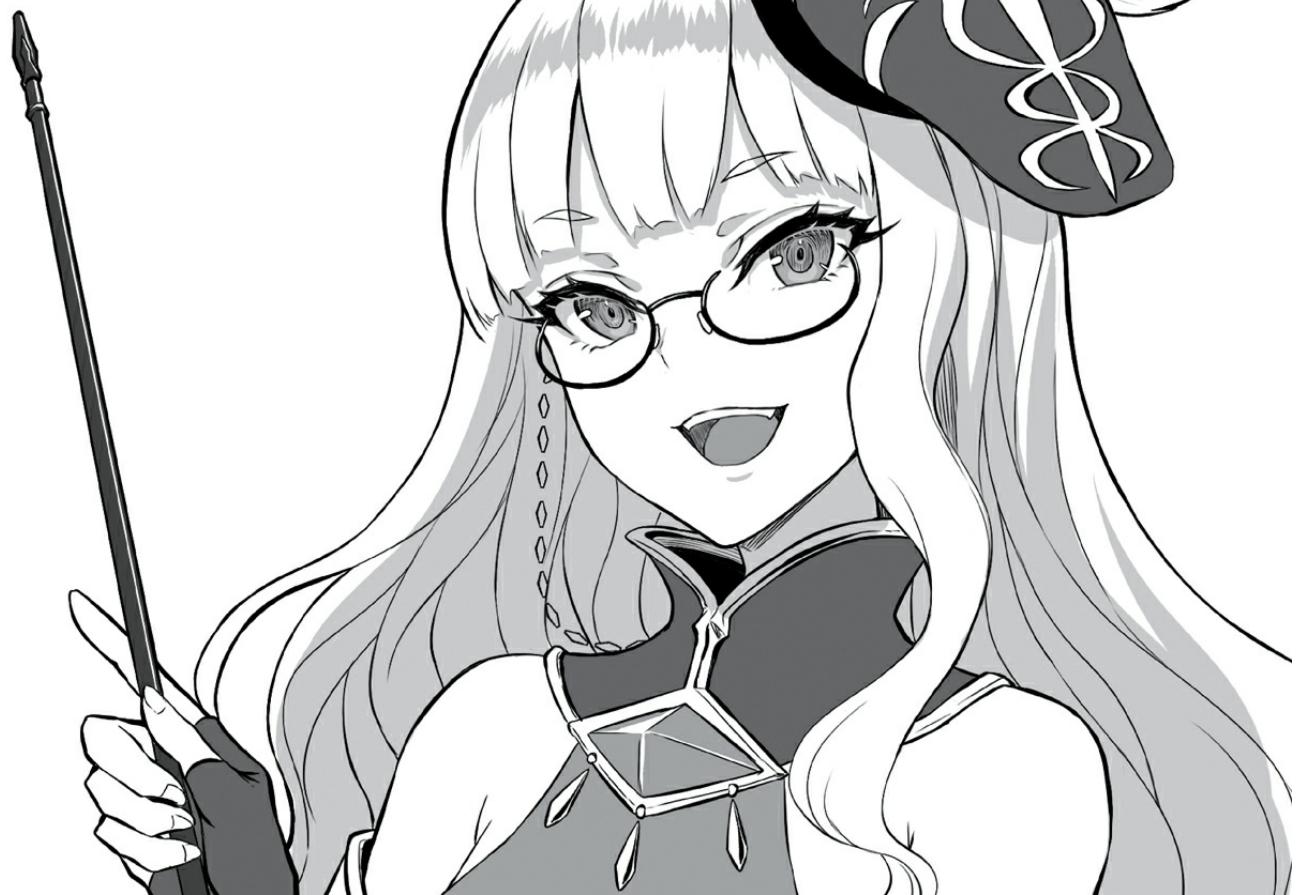
as their public figurehead.

Papists vs Royalists

Backing?



Assassination?



I had no idea what direction the big shots of Sphenedyrvania wanted to take their country in. I didn't even know about the internal affairs of Liberis. For all I knew, the citizens of Liberis could be moving toward a democracy.

Regardless, I couldn't shut my eyes to such nefarious plots, especially if I was in a position to stop them. Something still didn't make sense to me, though.

"But...why go out of the way to launch the attack in Liberis?"

If all they'd wanted to do was kill the prince, it would've been far easier to do so before he reached the Liberion Order. If they'd had to, they could've done it within Sphenedyrvania's borders before any other nation could get involved at all. That would've worked in their favor for future diplomatic relations too.

"I'm just guessing here..." Lucy said. "Perhaps having the royal sightseeing tour canceled partway through was one of their objectives."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the first prince is close to inheriting the crown."

"Hmmm..."

Sphenedyrvania's delegation was an annual event. This was my first time experiencing it, but I'd been told it was customary for a member of the royal family to accompany the delegation on their visit. Royalty basically never left their castles. No matter how many amazing assassins you hired, it would be difficult to get to them, and the core of any nation was obviously the most well-defended spot.

Considering all this, it was far simpler to cause an uproar during a major event and get it canceled than it was to murder royalty. If the assassins got lucky and pulled off the kill, then that was a bonus. If they didn't, they were okay with simply causing an incident. From that perspective, launching an attack in the middle of the tour made sense. But if that was the case...

"If this incident isn't enough to cancel it...there could be other attacks," I concluded.

"That's highly likely," Lucy agreed.

If the papists were willing to go so far, they weren't going to give up after one

attempt. They were sure to try again. And if Lucy and I were capable of coming to this conclusion, Prince Glenn and his delegation were surely aware.

“From what I’ve heard, canceling it would be for the best,” I said.

“We’re not the ones who get to decide that, though,” Lucy said, propping her chin on her hands and resting her elbows on the table.

She was right. My advice would never move a nation. My title put me in a position with little authority to make decisions, and now that I knew all these details, having no power whatsoever made me feel anxious.

Just then, Mui came back from her outing. She had perfect timing.

“I’m home.”

“W-Welcome back,” I said, shifting my gaze her way.

“Done?” she asked.

“Yeah, we just finished up.” I glanced down at her hands. “What’s that?”

“Kebabs. A stall outside was selling them.”

“You sure do love meat.”

“Shut up.”

She’d come back with enough kebabs for everyone. Despite her youth, she’d bought some for me and Lucy without anyone even asking. Perhaps her troubled past had fostered such sensibilities within her. I was just starting to get hungry anyway, and this made for the perfect snack.

Kids who eat well and sleep well grow well.



“Listen closely, everyone.”

The next day, Allusia’s dignified voice resounded through the order’s office. This was a familiar scene by now, but her voice seemed to be lacking some of the ambition or strength it usually had. I wondered why that was. By the looks of it, she wasn’t in poor health, so it was safe to assume that some kind of inevitable situation had arisen.

"I'll get straight to the point. Prince Glenn's royal sightseeing tour will continue as planned."

"Huh?"

Seriously? I unintentionally made a shocked sound. The knights were also astir. After yesterday's guard duty ended, Allusia and Gatoga were supposed to have attended a meeting. I'd gone home by then, so I had no idea what they'd actually discussed. However, we'd thought that the whole thing would most likely be canceled. How could they have possibly concluded that it was all right to continue?

"You all know what happened yesterday. Remain even more vigilant and carry out your duties."

"Yes ma'am!"

The knights replied with the same vigor they'd had on the first day of guard duty. If their escort targets were hurt or even killed in an attack, it would be because the Liberion Order wasn't up to the task. Their pride in the order fueled their determination—they couldn't afford to lose to some measly assassination attempt. These emotions were clearly evident in their reassuring response, and it was a good thing that everyone saw their job as worthwhile.

So, yes, morale was high, but I could tell from the mood in the room that the knights were itching to ask the question. Everyone here was strong in a fight, but simple strength alone wasn't enough if one wanted to be a knight. The knights of the order had good heads on their shoulders, and since they were all intelligent, it was only right for them to question why such a decision had been made.

"Move out!"

There was a slight murmuring, but Allusia's voice restored order. The knights immediately got to work like they always did.

"Allusia," I called out without really thinking about it.

A part of me simply wanted to know the details of the situation. Given how Lucy had explained Sphenedyardvania's circumstances yesterday, this decision didn't make sense.

"It was Prince Glenn's request," Allusia explained. "I can't say more than that."

"I see... Got it."

She has no intention of elaborating. So, it was Prince Glenn who requested that the sightseeing tour continue...

I gave some thought as to why he was being so obstinate. From an outsider's perspective, there was no reason to continue the tour after an attempt had been made on his life. Regardless of any political implications, anyone would cherish their own neck over the success of some event—especially a member of royalty.

In other words, Prince Glenn was being willfully stubborn. I wasn't sure how Princess Salacia might've felt about having to go along with Prince Glenn's request, but that didn't really matter—it was the order's duty to make sure that no harm came to her or any member of the royal family.

But still... Why would Prince Glenn insist on continuing the sightseeing tour? I couldn't come up with an answer with what little knowledge I possessed.

What Lucy had told me the other day bothered me. She'd predicted that Prince Glenn would soon inherit the crown. The royal sightseeing tour was set to take place over several days, but the Liberion Order was only scheduled to serve as escorts until the second to last day—we weren't required for the last one because the delegation wouldn't be spending any time outside. Apparently, all the events for the day would be within the palace, but I didn't know any details beyond that.

Knowing this, it was clear that they were going to be concluding the visit by attending to some kind of political matter. This was consistent with Lucy's prediction, and it also explained why Prince Glenn was forcing everyone to continue. I couldn't think of any other explanation. It couldn't possibly be because he wanted to look good in front of Princess Salacia—if that were the case, someone would've stopped him, and he didn't seem like that kind of imbecile to me. He was still young, but he looked like the kind of man who knew how to properly consider his surroundings.

So, if his motivation wasn't personal, then he'd made his choice with

international matters in mind. *Yup, I hate it.* I was going to accomplish the duty that I'd been entrusted with, but I still didn't understand what went through the higher-ups' heads. If I'd been from Sphenedyrvania's delegation, I would've run back to my own country with my tail between my legs. *Anyone* would prioritize their own life. There was no point in taking risks when you knew someone was after you.

Wait, hang on a sec. If Lucy and I were right, Prince Glenn would still be targeted in his own nation. Did that mean it was relatively safer to have the Liberion Order around to guard him? *Hmmm, that still doesn't sound right.* My train of thought was predicated on Prince Glenn being the target. It would be a different story if Princess Salacia was the target and the prince was still pushing for the sightseeing tour.

Nope. I just don't get it. I can't figure out what's what. I'm not smart enough for this. Let's just focus on carrying out the orders given to me.

"Master?" Allusia asked. Her voice brought me back from my random musings.

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

It was a bad habit of mine to lose myself in contemplation. *Nothing is really gonna change if this old man thinks things through. Time to get to work.*

"Now then, what'll happen today?" I muttered.

"It would be ideal if *nothing* happened," Allusia said. "Even if something does, we must put a stop to it."

"You're exactly right."

After an incident like that, it would be wonderful if we could see this royal sightseeing tour to its end without further trouble. We couldn't hope for more than that. But if something did happen, it would be up to us to deal with it. And according to our predictions, it was extremely likely that trouble *would* find us.



"I'd rather not get dragged into another headache," I murmured, my voice vanishing into the clear skies.

Completely ignoring the political turmoil, it was a nice day—the weather was as great as ever, and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. The sun was pouring down on us splendidly. It would’ve been perfect if nothing had been going on.

“I’ll be in your care again today,” said Princess Salacia.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

We were now in front of the palace. Like yesterday, we greeted Princess Salacia and Prince Glenn. However, in contrast to yesterday, their expressions were somewhat gloomier. They weren’t stupid enough to smile without a care in the world when they knew someone was after their lives. Frankly, I still thought they could’ve trashed the entire schedule if they were scared.

“Gardinant.”

“Hm? Aah, Gatoga.”

Starting today, I would be joining the others outside. This wasn’t the time to kick back and relax in a carriage. I’d been musing inappropriately about how walking was better for my health when Gatoga addressed me. His expression was considerably different today too—much worse than the prince’s and princess’s.

“I need your ear for a second,” he said.

“Hm?”

He lowered his voice, trying not to be overheard. *If that’s his intent, he could’ve picked a better place for this.* That said, we had nowhere else to talk.

“I’m just guessing,” he began hesitantly, “but yesterday’s assailant was probably my former buddy.”

“Hmm. You mean Hinnis?”

“That’s right. The man who served as my lieutenant before Rose.”

After overhearing his muttering yesterday, this conclusion was in line with my expectations. But what was going on with the world for the former lieutenant commander of the Holy Order to be under suspicion of an attempted assassination? There wasn’t much point in questioning Gatoga about it now, though. In a sense, knowing the culprit’s name didn’t really help with our

security detail.

"If he shows up, I'll accept responsibility and take him down," Gatoga said. "I just thought I should tell you."

"Understood."

His stance probably had to do with a knight's pride and public recognition. These things had nothing to do with me, but I could understand what he was getting at.

"Does Allusia know this too?" I asked.

"Yeah, she does. We talked yesterday."

Well, if she already knew, then it wasn't my place to interfere. The two knight commanders were in agreement, so I simply had to go along with their plan. And I *did* understand his desire to clean up his old subordinate's mess with his own hands.

As we finished talking, Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia boarded their carriage. We were now ready to depart. I wasn't quite sure of Gatoga's circumstances, but I couldn't let my guard down either. There was no way to tell where a potential attacker could come flying in from.

Time to get to work.



"Good work today, Allusia."

"You too, Master."

The sun had started to set. We'd been guarding the prince and princess for a few days now with no problems, and after today's uneventful conclusion, we were back in the order's office. After thanking everyone for their work, it was just about time for us to call it a day.

"Anyway... It was awfully quiet again today."

"Yes, eerily so," Allusia agreed.

Yet again, nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. That was a good thing, but considering the attack on the second day, it was also somewhat mysterious.

Absolutely nothing had happened—I hadn't even sensed any disturbing gazes. Despite the initial incident, the royal sightseeing was still a huge event, so there'd been a ton of curious onlookers. However, even among those crowds, I hadn't noticed even the slightest hint of malice like I'd encountered on that first day. This was a shock to me and all the knights. It was almost anticlimactic. We'd honestly been spending the last few days questioning what the purpose of the attack had even been.

"Well, I guess an uneventful day is the best outcome..." I said.

We all obviously preferred a calm day over one marked by an assassination attempt on royalty. However, after being attacked once, the likelihood of another incident was so high that we couldn't help but feel let down by the past few days of nothingness.

On a side note, everyone had been on their guard ever since that second day, but none as much as Gatoga. He'd spent the days glaring in every direction. That, combined with his looks, had been seriously intimidating. I could almost be convinced that nobody had attacked us because of Gatoga's fierce countenance. In contrast, Rose had acted like always—smiling and carefree. Well, that was who she was by nature, so I knew she wasn't slacking off or anything.

"To think we didn't get any worthwhile information..." I muttered.

Allusia's expression darkened a little. "I can't deny that we were somewhat negligent, but for us to get so little..."

Our conversation was in reference to our current captives—the men we'd taken in alive after the assassination attempt. Much like in Reveos's case, they'd been locked up in the order's basement. We'd expected to extract information about why they were targeting royalty, what their objectives were, and their backgrounds. However, every single captive had committed suicide at almost the same time.

This had been quite a shock for the order. From what I'd heard afterward, they hadn't got any information whatsoever, leaving the entire incident shrouded in darkness. So, without any clue as to what their objective was, we'd had no choice but to put even more effort into protecting the ongoing royal

sightseeing tour. We did consider the possibility that the attackers from the other day made up their entire force. But either way, Gatoga had let one go, so we couldn't be careless.

There was only one more day left of the royal sightseeing tour, so a part of me felt relieved that I was going to be released from all this tension soon.

"Tomorrow's the last day for us, huh?"

"Yes. There will be no guards on the final day of the delegation's visit," Allusia confirmed.

It was strange for nothing to have happened during these last few days—if anything was going to go down, it would have to be tomorrow. We would all prefer it if there was no conflict, but I sincerely doubted that they'd give up after launching themselves at us with such bloodlust and determination.

Well, there was no point brooding over things any more than I already had. Whether something happened or not, it wasn't my choice—I didn't really need to worry myself over all the details. I just had to deal with whatever came at us. A quiet day would be worth celebrating.

"Okay, guess I'll go home," I said.

"Very well. Thank you for your hard work."

The reports each squad had turned in for the day hadn't noted any problems, so there wasn't much else to talk about. At most, that accessory shop Prince Glenn had visited on the first day was still prospering, so security around it had to be maintained. All that was left now was to go home, have dinner, and sleep.

Well, there was one other thing—I had the important mission of asking Mui about her day. I had to find out whether anything about her school life was lacking or disappointing. Mui was still shy, so she wasn't the type to open up about that stuff, but I was patiently working at developing that line of communication. It was fun in its own way. I was used to handling children from my days at the dojo, so I was hoping to slowly close the distance between us.

I stepped out of the order's office and found that Baltrain's central district was as noisy as ever—in a good way. The festival was still ongoing, so it was lively from morning to night. Things had gotten boisterous on the day of the

attack, but that negative uproar had settled down over the last few peaceful days.

I prayed for an uneventful tomorrow and made my way back home.

“I’ll be in your care again today.”

“Your Highness.”

The following day, we were once again greeting Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia in front of the palace. It was nice to see their expressions looking somewhat brighter. The incident had been a shock at first, but it seemed the effects had faded little by little.

By contrast, the members of the Holy Order didn’t look great, especially Gatoga. One of their own was suspected of being the assassin, so they hadn’t had time to relax. The Holy Order’s knights had plenty of muscle and stamina, but their fatigue was apparent.

“Gatoga, you doing all right?” I asked.

“Hm...? Yeah, not a problem,” he replied reassuringly. “Just a few days left. I’ll weather it.”

His tone did nothing to assuage my concerns. Unlike the Liberion Order, the Holy Order’s mission wasn’t ending today. Even after the prince’s sightseeing tour was over, they still had to escort him back to Sphenedyrvania. If anything, the long road home posed far more of a risk than being in the city with the Liberion Order. Just maybe, the ones who’d attacked us the other day had given up on attacking Prince Glenn in Baltrain—perhaps they were waiting for his return trip. But if Princess Salacia were the target, the possibility of an attack on either of them would drop drastically after today.

“We’re departing.”

Now, could we get through the last day safely? As I pondered this question, the carriage’s driver informed us that we were moving. Today’s schedule would take us all the way to the southern district to get a look at Baltrain’s great agricultural lands. This wasn’t a flashy destination, but agriculture was what supported an entire nation. Liberis was particularly blessed in this regard, so it

was a significant thing for Sphenedyrvania to witness...probably. Countries differed in climate and landmass, and I wasn't sure how much Liberis's agricultural planning could be used as a reference.

Ah, there's no point in me picking at the royal sightseeing plan...

"Wow... It's so vast and beautiful," remarked Prince Glenn.

"Hee hee, isn't it?" The princess smiled. "This agricultural region is Liberis's pride and joy."

Now in Baltrain's southern district, everything was green, green, and green as far as the eye could see. Lines of fields stretched so far into the distance that I wondered if they continued over the horizon.

"What a view," the prince murmured.

This was my first time in the southern district too. Everything about it was different from Beaden. It would be absurd to compare the cozy fields we had at home to the enormous plots of developed land supporting the capital city. I agreed with Prince Glenn entirely. It was beautiful—pastoral enough for me to think it would be a great place for a picnic. Beaden had its own charms, but it felt more elegant to gaze at the vast fields of this huge city. If not for the current situation, I would've been thoroughly pleased.

However, I couldn't drop my guard. Unlike the central and western districts, there were no tall buildings around. And all the crops meant that there were a ton of blind spots. The fields sprawled out widely, so we had to keep an eye out in every direction. Even though we'd stationed knights to form an outer perimeter, there was no guessing where an assassin could be hiding.

I hadn't sensed anything suspicious yet. Still, if there was going to be an attack, it was going to happen when the prince and princess were outside of their carriage like this. Considering today's schedule, now was the only opportunity. Nothing else was planned except a return trip to the palace.

Just as I was shifting my attention from the scenery back to my immediate surroundings, I heard a shout.

"Who's there?!"

Gatoga had suddenly yelled out, tension clear in his voice. At the same time, a thicket in the fields rustled and swayed.

“Suddenly...

A tiny rabbit with fluffy white fur leaped out. Perhaps surprised by Gatoga’s voice, it bounced away and buried itself into the thicket again.

“It’s...a rabbit,” I said.

“Sorry...”

Gatoga’s awkward look left quite the impression. He’d been *so* wary of his surroundings—his response was only natural.

Princess Salacia giggled at the sight. “Hee hee hee.”

The tension in the air vanished, ushering in a lighter atmosphere. This feeling was transmitted to the knights too—quiet laughs came from guards all around us. *Well, this feels better than everyone being stiff with tension.* Loosening the shoulders a little meant that they could take swifter action in the event of an attack. Besides, as far as I could tell, there were no threats in the area. Most of the buildings here were small, so we didn’t have to pay much attention to the space above us.

“Shall we head back?” asked the princess.

Prince Glenn nodded. “Yes, I’ve enjoyed this sight greatly.”

Satisfied with their visit to the agricultural zone, the prince and princess turned on their heels to head back to their carriage. The carriage hadn’t been able to bring them all the way into the field, so they needed to walk a little way to get back.

“Wait! Stop right... Ugh?!”

Suddenly, as we were making our way to the carriage, one of the knights on the periphery roared. The prince and princess jolted. It seemed the other day’s incident had developed into a slight trauma for them.

“Haaah...”

So, it’s happening. It’s really happening. I figured it would, but still...

I sighed and turned to see several figures in black breaking through the knights' outer perimeter. They were dressed the same as last time, which ensured that they couldn't be identified at a glance. However, it wasn't an ambush this time. We were ready for it, and they couldn't descend on us from the rooftops.

If these assailants were of the same skill level as the ones from the other day, we could drive them back. I drew my sword—made out of the sturdy materials from Zeno Grable—and held it at the ready.

All right, time to do some work. Let's take it carefully and fulfill our role.

The assassins forced their way past the circle of knights. There were more of them than last time. Was this because there was nowhere for us to hide? Or were they trying to secure an overwhelming victory after their earlier defeat? It looked like more and more of them were pushing through.

Hang on! Do your damn jobs out there! Why are so many of them getting through?! This wasn't just a handful of assassins—enough were pouring in to surround us if we weren't careful.

“Hmph!”

“Gah!”

I cut down the first man in black to burst through the perimeter. Unfortunately for him, there were too many of them for me to hold anything back. A certain thought crossed my mind as I easily tore through his flesh.

These guys are way weaker than the last batch. They had the advantage of numbers, but the individual assailants were far less skilled compared to the previous attempt. Not all of them were necessarily small fry, but the men involved in the first attack had been considerably harder to take down. Perhaps our foes hadn't been able to secure quality this time and were instead relying on quantity. That would be a welcome miscalculation on their part...but I questioned whether that was the case.

“Prince Glenn! Princess Salacia! Keep your heads down!” I yelled.

“R-Right!”

It would be hard for us to evacuate, but there was also nowhere to hide. Thus, it was best for them to stay low and try not to catch a stray hit. In such an open space, even a single projectile could prove fatal. Last time there had been a melee in the middle of town, which had been troublesome in its own way, but relatively easygoing. It'd been nice not needing to worry about anything beyond my reach.

But this time, we were dealing with a huge open space. This, combined with cover, made it very difficult to protect our VIPs. *It won't be a problem if our opponents are armed only with blades, but any archers will be pretty hard to handle.* We had to keep an eye out for such possibilities, so we couldn't step away from the prince and princess.

Having come to the same conclusion, Allusia and Henbrits also hardened our defensive circle around the prince and princess. However, we couldn't quite form an airtight wall because in order to effectively tackle our assailants, we had to take the fight a small distance away from the royals.

This situation was looking pretty good for the attacking side, and it was a serious pain in the ass for us.

“Whoa there!” I yelled, reflexively knocking down a whistling projectile.

Goddammit! They actually brought archers! Fortunately, they weren't great shots, but it was pretty bad that they had a means of attacking from a distance. This made things exponentially more difficult.

“Ugh! They have archers! Be careful of arrows!” Gatoga yelled, coming to the same realization.

Knowing of this danger didn't make things much better. It was pretty unreasonable to physically knock every single arrow out of the air. If we didn't deal with the archers soon, it was entirely possible for an arrow to slip by our guard and pierce the prince or princess.

“Hinnis can use both a sword and bow!” bellowed Gatoga. “That bastard!”

Apparently, the former lieutenant commander also excelled with a bow. In that case, he was likely commanding the archers. He'd been forced to escape during his fight with Gatoga the other day, so perhaps he'd deemed himself at a

disadvantage in close combat.

“Gatoga!” I shouted.

“What?!”

At this rate, our situation was going to deteriorate. With assassins pouring down on us like an avalanche and archers added to the mix, we would soon reach our limit. Our guard detail was a gathering of elites, but we only had so much stamina and willpower.

“Go take down the archers!” I yelled. “We can take care of things here!”

“Fuck!”

One of the flying arrows plunged into the back of a black-clad figure, sending him tumbling to the ground. *These guys aren’t even bothering to distinguish friend from foe. They’re just saturating the area with arrows and hoping for a lucky hit.*

Things were looking bad for us. We were just barely holding back the tide of incoming assassins. We needed to either move somewhere else or take down the archers before they could correct their aim. If we didn’t, the prince and princess were going to get hit.

“Fine! I’ll leave this to you!” Gatoga shouted.

Judging that there was no time to wait, Gatoga roared and charged into the front line. This was for the better—he had Hinnis to deal with. Even if such personal reasons weren’t at play, this deadlock was never going to break without someone diving directly into the fray.

Now, we just had to believe in Gatoga’s skills—I could only trust in his title as knight commander of the Holy Order. We couldn’t split up our forces any more than this. If we did, the prince and princess would die. It was up to Allusia, Henbrits, and I to protect the royals. There was more than enough skill between the three of us, but we lacked numbers.

Not that we have any choice but to hang in there! Huh? Wait, where’s Rose? Where’d she go?

She’d been close by when Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia had been

enjoying the view, but without anyone noticing, she'd left the group. She was a serious person at heart, so I doubted she'd abandoned her duty at the eleventh hour.

"Ah."

Found her. She was stationed near the front of our group, facing the assassins as a vanguard. Well, there *was* a limit to what we could accomplish by simply surrounding the royals. Considering the space we needed to fight, now wasn't the time to drag things into a hectic melee. In that sense, her judgment wasn't wrong...as long as she could properly hold back the assassins, that is.

"Hah!"

"Ugh...!"

I gutted another assassin who'd gotten past Rose. She was one of the pupils who'd attended my dojo, even if only for a short time, so I knew her abilities very well. Her style focused on defense and counterattacking, so she was suited to exactly this type of defensive battle. Rose's techniques would never fall behind against these lowly assassins, even in a many-against-one situation. She'd even finished off the skilled assassin during the last attack.

So, how are such weak opponents—ones I can easily cut down—slipping by her?

"Take this!"

Another down. I repelled the incoming shortsword and slashed him from shoulder to waist on the return stroke. The man in black collapsed in a pool of blood without even a groan.

Yeah... It was *weird* for so many of these assassins to be getting past the knights' perimeter. I could understand the assailants from the other day doing so—even from the perspective of a trained swordsman, they'd possessed considerable skill. What was more, they'd jumped from the rooftops where no guards had been stationed and attacked us directly.

However, these guys were different. They were leagues below the skilled attackers from the other day. The only advantage they had was their numbers.

Only four people were protecting the royals up close—well, without Rose, *three*—but knights of both the Liberion Order and the Holy Order were supposed to be all around us. There was no way the Liberion Order would do such a shoddy job. It was preposterous for a knight to refuse to put their body on the line to hold back such insolent assassins. If any of the knights were like that, Allusia or Henbrits would've had their eyes on them long ago. Such members would've been expelled.

“Ugh... There’s so many of them!” Allusia muttered as she took down an incoming assassin with a single thrust.

Now really wasn’t the time to try to take anyone alive. If we spent the extra effort to capture one, the next assassin could be at our throats. We had to deal with them as quickly as possible.

“What’s the defensive perimeter doing?!” Henbrits roared.

His complaint was reasonable. A few assassins getting through would be one thing, but this was sheer negligence on the part of the perimeter—such an onslaught of poorly trained ruffians should’ve never been able to force their way through.

One idea came to mind: the Holy Order.

They were *letting* the assassins through. They were yielding the way.

There were so many assassins that it seemed natural to assume so. Against my will, I was reminded of the incident with Reveos and my conversation with Lucy. The royalist and papist factions were feuding in Sphenedyrvania. Naturally, that had to have trickled down into the Holy Order.

Say this series of events was the papists at work. Someone who’d obtained the title of lieutenant commander in the Holy Order had risen in revolt. It wouldn’t be strange for him to have troops hiding within the Holy Order to assist with Prince Glenn’s murder.

Also, if Rose is one among them...it all makes sense.

“Hup!”

I struck down a suspicious glimmer that caught the sunlight as it flew toward

me. A throwing dagger. Judging that close combat was going poorly, they were resorting to throwing weapons too. If I'd been a second late, that dagger would be sticking out of the prince or princess by now. Thanks to Gatoga, no arrows were flying in anymore, but we weren't going to get anywhere at this rate.

They couldn't have infinite personnel. Eventually, this offensive would slow down. However, it was somewhat dubious whether the three of us would be able to endure until then. I was pretty sure we would be ultimately victorious, but could Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia get out of this unharmed?

"Allusia!" I yelled as I repelled more incoming daggers.

"What is it?!"

This was a lousy bet, but it was better than getting surrounded here. Besides, even if we couldn't trust the Holy Order, we could trust our own knights. If my trust was unfounded, this whole mission was bound to fail no matter what we did.

"Take the prince and princess and run to the knights of the Liberion Order! I'll take over here!"

"What?! But—"

"Just do it! We'll get surrounded at this rate! We have to break out somewhere!"

If we got surrounded on all sides by assassins and flying daggers, I didn't see a future where things would take a turn for victory. It was better to gather the Liberion Order knights who were spread out along the perimeter, form a group we could trust, and take our VIPs all the way back to the palace.

"Prince Glenn! Princess Salacia! Please follow Allusia and Henbrits! Don't forget to keep your heads down!"

"U-Understood!"

This was do or die, but the two royals nodded back at me. It would be problematic if they lost their nerve here, so I needed them to muster their courage and get moving.

"Ugh... Henbrits, we're moving!" shouted Allusia.

“Ma’am!”

Accepting my proposal, Allusia and Henbrits started moving away from me. They didn’t have the time to get on the carriage. A carriage wasn’t a fast mode of transport anyway—someone could easily overtake one on foot. So, the only choice was to run while linking up with the knights of the Liberion Order. This was going to push the prince and princess, but they had to put up with it if they wanted to survive.

“Hah!”

“Guh...!”

Now that I had nobody to protect, I could finally move as I wanted. Nothing else was weighing down my mind, so I didn’t intend to be forced into a hard fight.

Sorry, I don’t have the time to consider sparing any villains today. I’ll be cutting you all down.

“Hmph!”

I couldn’t let any assassins get past me, so I was basically reduced to something akin to a mad swordsman who was testing his new blade by cutting down all passersby indiscriminately. It made me feel like the bad guy. *Well, they’re definitely the actual bad guys, but still...*

I continued swinging my sword all over the place. A short while later, the agricultural zone had transformed into a hell of blood and gore.

“Phew...”

The human tidal wave had finally come to a stop. I took a breath and wondered whether the prince and princess had gotten away. I couldn’t know—I’d just have to trust in Allusia and Henbrits’s skill. I had no idea how many people I’d killed, just that I’d faced a ridiculous number of assassins. I was astonished that my blade hadn’t lost its cutting edge after slashing so many people. A normal longsword would’ve probably broken.

“Now, we can finally talk.” I turned to the knight in full plate who stood before me.

She didn't move. Even after Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia had escaped, she'd kept up appearances. However, considering her abilities, I'd noticed the abnormality immediately. It was basically guaranteed now, but I didn't have enough information to understand her true motives.

"How 'bout you tell me your reasons for this, Rose?"

As expected, Rose smiled like she always did.

"You really are strong, Master."

She spoke with carefree ease—almost like she was out on a stroll. The scenery around us was far from tranquil, though. The new clothes I'd bought for this occasion were in a horrible state thanks to all the blood splatter. I wondered whether laundering them would even get it all out.

"Well, against opponents of this level, I suppose I am."

Even the likes of me had managed against such numbers without difficulty. Their skill was pitiful—they really *had* only focused on quantity. As I spoke, I flicked the blood off my sword. *I feel like my blade is a little too sharp to turn against a familiar face. It's not guaranteed that this will end in a fight...but I have a bad premonition.*

"Why did you let the assassins through?"

That was the first question out of my mouth. But what did I hope to gain by asking? Did I want Rose to deny it? Circumstantial evidence had already made the truth very clear.

"Tee hee, what are you talking about? I fought properly."

Rose's attitude remained unwavering. She maintained her usual smile. Still, I doubted that she truly believed her excuse would work. She had a carefree personality, but she wasn't stupid or anything. Rose's splendid armor was solemn and beautiful, befitting of her status as the lieutenant commander of the Holy Order—and there wasn't a single dent or drop of blood on it. This, above all else, was proof that she hadn't fought seriously.

"Even though your armor is untouched and perfectly clean?"

She blinked in confusion and then looked down. It was like she'd only realized

that fact after I'd pointed it out.

"Oh, I sent it all flying away with my shield," she replied childishly.

"I see."

I thought things over. To reiterate, Rose had a carefree personality, but she wasn't stupid. In fact, she was smarter than average, and she was also good at observing people. If she'd been deficient in any of these respects, she wouldn't have risen to the rank of lieutenant commander in the first place.

And yet here she was, making a string of poor excuses despite the obvious truth. Anyone would be able to tell that she hadn't been taking her guard duty seriously. Was she being withholding because she couldn't tell *anyone* her reasoning? Or was it because she didn't want to tell *me* specifically? Was it selfish to want to know her true motive?

"Well, despite using your shield, you let a whole lot of them past you," I said.

"I just happened to have a bad day. I'm sure you have them sometimes too."

Rose had her estoc drawn, but this too was perfectly clean—there wasn't a drop of blood on it. In other words, she hadn't seriously taken on any of the assassins.

I wasn't getting anywhere with this line of questioning, so I brought up the information Lucy had given me.

"Will it be *that* bad for you if Prince Glenn inherits the crown?"

Rose's smile vanished suddenly.

"I see that you're not only strong, but well-informed," she said.

"Well, I just so happened to learn that through hearsay."

I didn't know exactly what was going on in Sphenedyardvania, and I had no idea whether the royalists or papists were right. Frankly, I didn't even know what each side stood for. Maybe (just maybe) the papists had a great cause that I knew nothing about. However, even taking that into consideration, I couldn't shut my eyes to a brazen attempt on the prince's life.

"I figured they weren't going to be enough to get past you..." Rose

murmured. Her expression changed, perhaps because she'd decided that playing dumb wasn't going to get her anywhere.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

My opponents hadn't had anything going for them except numbers. Also, Allusia and Henbrits had been guarding the prince and princess, so I'd had nothing to worry about on that front. Given those factors, I wasn't senile enough to lose against ruffians like the ones who'd attacked us today. However, there was no telling what would've happened if we'd been ambushed by skilled assassins like we had been the first time.

"Master..."

"Hm?"

Rose's tone was a little different now.

"If your homeland found itself in a dilemma, what would you do?" she asked.

That was a difficult question for an old man from the sticks. I knew nothing about politics. Even if I was in a position to become a king or some kind of ruler, I had no confidence whatsoever that I'd be able to manage a nation.

"I'm just an old country bumpkin..." I answered. "Politics don't make sense to me."

This question was likely what had Rose at a loss. So, even if my opinion was completely offbeat, I had to present it as her instructor.

"First...shouldn't you ask the populace what's bothering them?" I asked.

That was just the first thing that came to mind. After learning about the problems that citizens were facing, leaders could think of solutions and clear the issues one by one. That was about all I could come up with.

"Yup, maybe that's what a good statesman would do." Rose's smile vanished once more. "However, what if the statesmen are ignoring the populace and fighting among themselves? What if the nation is impoverished by years of power struggles? If the country is continuously deteriorating? What if there is an imminent need to purify the heart of the state as soon as possible? If all the higher-ups are only thinking about who gets to sit on the throne and are

squabbling over it like rats...? What would *you* do, Master?"

Her expression was filled with anguish.

"I wonder... As you know, I'm not particularly clever," I told her.

In all likelihood, my words weren't going to be enough. I wouldn't get her to open her heart to me—not in her current state. A terrible resolve was hidden behind her smile, and that was what had led to this situation.

Just as Lucy had predicted, the papists were trying to solve things by murdering the prince. There was no guarantee that this would bring order to the country, but perhaps some people were claiming that it was better to have a sudden fall than to let things gradually deteriorate. Rose apparently agreed with that proposal. I had no way of knowing how much anguish and conflict she'd gone through to reach this conclusion, though I doubted that she'd made her decision lightly. Her tortured, conflicted expression spoke volumes.

Even if this was a conclusion she reached after worrying, and worrying, and worrying some more—

"All of that may be true...but you're still my former pupil, and I can't look away when you're marching off the proper path."

—there's no way I can just watch her pull off a coup d'état.

"I see... You really are a good person, Master."

Rose was smiling again, but if I wasn't imagining things, she looked like a child who was desperately keeping herself from crying.

"I think you're one of those 'good people' too," I said.

"Hee hee. I wonder about that."

Back at the dojo, Rose had looked after and worried about the smaller children all the time. She'd been very good at taking care of others in an entirely different way than Allusia. The dojo had taught a lot of children, so Rose had really been like a big sister to all of them. My pupils at the time had seemed to adore her.

"I was under the impression that I taught you how to use a sword to protect others," I chided.

This wasn't a matter of swordplay or a school style. This was a matter of spirit. A sword was a weapon—it existed to kill others. I'd just killed a ton of people myself, and I had no intention of claiming that my sword was free of blood. However, I was never going to misplace my reasons for wielding a sword. A certain level of strength had to be accompanied by an even higher level of responsibility. That was the kind of swordsmanship I taught.

"This, too, is a sword meant to protect a great many people," Rose insisted. It seemed the answer she'd derived from her time at my dojo was somewhat different from what I'd expected. "Blood will flow. Many people will surely die. But this is salvation."

"You've got it wrong, Rose."

As mentioned, I knew nothing about politics. I wasn't interested, frankly. As long as my sword, my pupils' swords, and all those in my narrow surroundings were happy, I was fine. But even as ignorant as I was, I did understand one thing.

"A true revolution can't be built on a mountain of blood."

An assassin's dagger would always leave a grudge. I endeavored to choose when and where to wield my sword to avoid such things. A master swordsman would be no more than a murderer otherwise.

"Something else is bothering me," I said.

"And what's that?"

Rose was trying to achieve some form of salvation, and she'd even gone as far as committing inhuman acts. The specifics of this—and the circumstances of her country that had led her to such a decision—worried me, but I had something even more concerning on my mind.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Like I said, I'm distressed over the current state of—"

I cut her off. "No, I mean *after* that."

I understood that she was upset over the state of her country. I could even understand that this assassination attempt on the heir to the throne was a

means to resolving things, though I didn't agree with her methods.

However, I didn't understand what came after. Say they succeeded in assassinating Prince Glenn, and the papists grasped full control over the nation. What next? Maybe Rose would be uplifted as the knight of salvation. Maybe she would obtain far more authority than she currently possessed. Or maybe she would be executed as the rebel who'd caused so much bloodshed.

"What encouraged you to take things this far?" I asked. "Do you want power as the knight who brought salvation? Or is it a simple matter of committing massacres? None of those reasons seem like they fit your motivation."

I couldn't imagine the future that would follow in the wake of her actions. It was admirable to have a great cause to fight for—I didn't really have anything of the sort. In some instances, it was wonderful to strive for one's own knightly ideals, even if it meant resorting to any means necessary. Even so...

"Rose, I believe it's splendid to have a cause as grand as salvation. But that's only a means—it's not the objective. What happiness are you trying to find by saving your country?"

What was *beyond* this great cause? Frankly, I couldn't see Rose being happy in that future. Perhaps she sought to die as a loyal knight in the line of duty—but she wasn't really that type of person. This was my opinion, but I strongly believed it to be true, and she'd reinforced this idea during our conversation the other day. Even joining the Holy Order had seemed like a choice she'd made only because Gatoga had told her to.

"Master... Will you hear me out?" she asked, hesitation clear in her voice.

"Of course."

"You see...I love children."

"Yeah, I know."

I'd learned of Rose's fondness for children during her days at the dojo. She was a mother hen who was good at looking after others. There had to be no small number of children who'd been saved by her devotion to taking care of people.

“Children are dying of starvation and cold every day in Sphenedyardvania,” she said.

“I see...”

To save all of its citizens—that was the ideal for any nation. But that ideal was no more than a pipe dream. Even I knew it wasn’t realistic. No matter what was done, there were those who fell out of the nation’s protective umbrella. Mui was one such example.

Rose held my gaze. “His Holiness told me that if control of the nation is turned over to him, he will establish order and people will be freed from suffering. He told me that no more children will die before my eyes.”

“And you believe that?”

It was simple to conclude that she was being used as a tool. However, pointing that out now wouldn’t be enough to stop Rose. It looked like she knew full well that this was the case.

“What else can I believe in?” Rose asked. “I’m faithful to the Church of Sphene.”

“There should be a way forward without bloodshed. You could’ve seized power to that end.”

What she was trying to accomplish was too rushed. Changing a nation wasn’t so simple—one needed a good amount of time to carry out a plan. Even if this civil war was stopped temporarily through force, true peace would still be far in the future.

And that peace will only be possible if the person who comes out on top after the war is virtuous. I doubt that anyone who could come up with this assassination plan will be able to form a fair and just government.

“Unless we do something drastic, we won’t make it in time...” Rose said with a smile. “We can’t sit back and take it easy. Even as we speak, the disparity of wealth in Sphenedyardvania is just getting worse. More and more people are dying.”

“So you’ll overthrow the royalists and force the entire system to change?”

“Yup.”

There were so many holes in her logic. Even I could see that, so Rose had to have noticed already. She’d probably worried and anguished over this before coming to her bitter conclusion.

“Even *I* can tell that your plan is nothing more than a dream,” I said. “How are you going to look after children with such bloody hands? I still believe you’re making a mistake.”

Despite her determination, I held my resolve. She was wrong, and she needed to know.

“But...” Rose started to speak, but she cut herself off. “No. I suppose there’s no point.”

“I’ll hear the rest in a more appropriate place,” I said, taking a step closer.

She faced me, not even trying to flee. She simply held her estoc and kite shield in a listless combat stance.

“Tee hee. And what if I say I don’t want to go anywhere with you?”

Her expression vanished for a moment but was back to normal in the next instant. She spoke in a cheerful voice with her usual smile.

“Sorry, but there’s no other way,” I said.

I held my sword at the ready. If she wasn’t going to stop after all this, it meant that talking was just a waste of time. Rose wasn’t going to change of her own volition. In that case, there was no choice but to stop her madness myself.

My sword made from Zeno Grable’s materials still retained its red brilliance under the sun, even after all the dull blood that had soaked it.

I’m going to cut down a former pupil. If I could avoid it, I didn’t want to resort to that. I honestly wasn’t sure whether I could do it. After all, Rose had attended my dojo, even if only for a short one and a half years. She’d always been a devout believer in the Church of Sphene, and whenever she’d found the time, she had prayed to her god. I couldn’t count the number of times I’d made a bitter face at her zealous preaching. Yet even if those times had been hectic, I had overall good memories of this always-smiling girl.

However, that was all in the past now.

“Hee hee... Then I’ll be resisting with all my might.”

I took in my opponent. She was armored in full plate, so at maximum speed, I was going to be faster. Rose understood that. She’d taken up a low stance, covering half her body with her kite shield and lowering the point of her estoc. Back at the dojo, she hadn’t used a shield. Still, recalling our training sessions, she’d excelled at defending and counterattacking. I was sure that she’d polished her skills even more since then. And with a shield by her side, her defense was definitely sturdier than before.

Now then, was my strength enough to get past her defenses? Was I even capable of wielding my sword properly against her? I’d had plenty of sparring matches with my pupils using a wooden sword but had never experienced swinging a real sword against one. I wanted to stop her, but when I thought of killing a pupil who was still so full of potential, my determination wavered.

“Hah!”

And with the answer still unclear to me, Rose stepped in, sparking off the beginning of the fight.

“Hup!”

I deflected her thrust to the side. Rose specialized at defending, but that didn’t mean she was bad on the offense. She had more than enough skill to take the initiative if she wanted to. In fact, her lunge was far sharper than what I’d expected, given her heavy armor.

“Hyoo!”

Rose didn’t resist the force repelling her estoc—instead, she used her wrist to skillfully chain her thrust into a horizontal slash. Her peculiar exhalations resounded in the air as her estoc struck again and again.

“Guh!”

I started the never-ending work of fending off her slender blade. *Goddammit! I already knew this, but she’s definitely strong!* Her blows were unimaginably fast and heavy coming from someone in full plate. I’d witnessed this kind of

strength in a recent battle too. Her swordplay was similar to Spur's—the man I'd fought before capturing Reveos. Without putting her full weight behind her attacks, she was cleverly using the rotation of her shoulders and hips to quickly unleash strikes. Though I was capable of defending myself, it was hard to repel her blade.

So, to overcome this situation, my only choice was to go on the offense.

Perhaps realizing that I hadn't mentally prepared myself for this battle yet, Rose raised her voice in exaltation. "Hee hee! What's the matter, Master?!" She continued swinging her estoc at me.

"Ugh!"

Both Rose and I specialized in defense. Strictly speaking, I was the type to ward off and return blows, while Rose had a tendency to completely block everything. Either way, neither of us was the type to proactively go on the offense.

However, the Rose I'd taught had concentrated too much on defending and hadn't spent enough time attacking. Her strikes had also been rather rough around the edges. That was why I'd primarily taught her things like how to go on the attack and how to move her lower body. She was making the best of my teachings right here and now—Rose's skills had improved enough for me to believe that.

"Are you not going to fight, Master?!"

I wasn't capable of attacking because of my wavering emotions. Rose had nothing left to lose, so she was going on the offensive. It was a strange situation. Our bouts at the dojo had been so much more peaceful and elegant.

"I've steeled my resolve to come to this point!" she declared.

I parried the broad swing of her estoc. This was the perfect chance for a counterattack. *If I swing now, I can deal her a blow that won't be fatal.*

However, my sword refused to make the move.

"Aren't you going to stop me?!"

Rose's attacks kept coming. Her swordplay was beautiful, but this offensive

was very different from the technique of the Rose I knew.

“If you can stop me, then do it! Show me what you’ve got, Master!”



She swung her estoc downward with a shout. I parried it to the side, stopping Rose's momentum. Taking that opportunity, I took two steps back.

"Rose, are you—"

"Tee hee... It seems I got a little too excited."

Rose, are you hesitating? I'd been about to ask her this, but Rose's cheerful response had cut me off. She wouldn't answer me honestly even if I asked. If I had been capable of convincing her to back down, this fight would've never started.

Battle excited the spirit. It wasn't that unusual for your true feelings to come out in such situations. Even during my bouts with Henbrits and Selna, they'd shouted their inner thoughts and admiration in the middle of combat.

Just maybe, Rose wants me to stop her. This could be a convenient hope on my part. Could be a misunderstanding too. However, the Rose I know would never raise her voice like that, no matter what kind of match she's in.

"Hee hee... You're awfully strong, Master. I don't feel like I can beat you."

Despite her intense offensive, her breathing was steady. She still had plenty of stamina. It was impossible to maintain such a level of endurance without constant training—this battle was proof that she hadn't slacked off in her daily devotion to her craft. I was happy to see that, but I didn't like to see her using that strength for such a purpose.

"Then will you surrender to me?" I asked, just in case she'd changed her mind.

It would've been great if my influence had been enough to get her to yield. Perhaps this would end with neither of us getting hurt—the other knights and I could take our time convincing her to change her ideology afterward.

"I can't do that," she answered clearly, dashing my hopes. "I simply can't, Master... I'm sure I can't beat you. Crossing blades with you has proved that to me."

"Then—"

"But I can't stop. I can't stop after coming this far." Rose smiled like she always did. "If I fail here, the children they're holding hostage will die."

“Wha...?”

“I bet His Holiness is hoping for a certain victory,” she added, her expression clear. “Not that I was going to hold back even if he hadn’t resorted to this...”

What scum. Those words crawled up my throat, but I held them down somehow. The situation wouldn’t change even if I voiced my disdain. I had a clear picture of the situation in my mind—she was acting this way because children had been taken hostage. I knew she truly wanted to save her country, but this was still too much. I didn’t give a damn what Sphenedyardvania’s internal situation was, but I couldn’t turn a blind eye when my cute former pupil had been forced down such an inhuman path. I finally understood why she refused to yield.

“Master.”

“What...?”

“Please stop me,” she said cheerfully. “Please scold your lousy pupil.”

With a tragic determination in her eyes, she readied her estoc once more.

“Haaaaah...”

I let out a long, long sigh. The situation wasn’t going to improve if I continued hesitating. I couldn’t let this fight drag on any longer than this. I steeled myself.

“Rose.”

“Yes?”

I held my sword straight forward and returned her gaze directly.

“I’m going to kill you.”

Rose didn’t say anything. She just smiled like she always did and held her shield up.

I had no idea what kind of life she’d led after leaving the dojo. Likewise, she had no idea how I’d lived these last few years. My strength had essentially plateaued—at my age, even if I spent years swinging my sword, I couldn’t expect any drastic growth. However, there was one thing I possessed now that I hadn’t back then.

“Hmph!”

I took two steps forward and held my sword up high. I wasn’t particularly good at an advancing strike. I was pretty confident in my reaction speed, but in terms of simple physical strength, I was far inferior to the likes of Allusia or Henbrits. At best, I was just a bit stronger than the average man my age.

Having spent time with me, Rose naturally knew this. So, she didn’t take evasive action and instead chose to defend with her shield. Rose excelled at defending. It was impossible to overcome her shield with my strength. I knew this better than anyone, and she was well aware of it too.

She was planning to block my attack, which would put her in the perfect position to launch a counterblow. That was the correct decision to make. Considering her skill, this would be a guaranteed win for her in any normal match. However, even though I was well within the skill level of a “normal” opponent, Rose knew nothing about the blade in my hands.

“Huh...?”

Rose’s smile, backed by her absolute confidence in her defense, suddenly vanished. My sword maintained its momentum, easily cutting through Rose’s kite shield. Her heavy, full-plate armor also gave in without resistance. I carved a straight line across her chest—one that would never fade away.

“Gah!”

Rose stumbled backward from the unexpected slash and fell to her knees. Fresh blood spilled down her chest. This time, her smile was completely gone, replaced by a look of shock and unease. She’d probably never imagined that her beloved shield and sturdy armor could break from a single slash. She wasn’t coughing up blood, so for better or worse, my sword hadn’t reached her lungs. Nonetheless, it was clear that her wound was severe—continuing this fight would be impossible for her. She was at risk of dying if she didn’t stop the bleeding soon.

“That’s my win...”

I hadn’t held back—I’d struck with no consideration for her survival. I’d needed to give it my all against a skilled opponent who was ready to kill royalty.

At this point, I understood how Gatoga felt, at least a little. Rose wasn't my subordinate, but as her former instructor, I held a clear responsibility.

I had to stop her misconduct.

"Guh...!"

Rose groaned and tried to get to her feet. I looked down at her. I wondered what kind of face I was making. Did I look sad? I couldn't tell.

"It's over, Rose."

I was shocked at how cold my voice sounded.

"Haah... Haaah...!"

Clutching her wounded chest, Rose continued to try and force herself to her feet.

"You better not move too much. If you disturb the wound any more, you won't be able to stop the bleeding."

Rose was barely maintaining consciousness. Anyone could see how severe her injury was. She was going to die unless she got specialized treatment immediately. I'd been the one to hurt her, so a part of me felt like it wasn't really my place to say anything. Still, even after striking with lethal intent, it wasn't like I'd cleanly settled my emotions regarding my former pupil. Was it selfish of me to want her to survive?

"Hee... Hee hee... I lost..."

She eventually gave up on standing and fell onto her back with a clang. She was smiling but pale. She'd clearly lost too much blood.

"What's with that sword...? It's unfair..."

"It's the ace up my sleeve."

Having felt it with her own body, she must've known how unsporting this sword's sharp edge was. Even I found it somewhat unexpected that it'd torn through both her shield and armor. *Well, I fired myself up to attempt that exact feat, but still.* What was more, even after basically abusing this sword, the blade wasn't chipped at all. It was a ridiculous masterwork.

"I probably won't get any stronger than I am, but this is another form of strength," I told her.

"It really is...unfair..."

"Ha ha ha."

This definitely wasn't a situation to laugh at, but I couldn't help myself. I wasn't sneering at Rose or anything. Just as I'd said, I'd practically plateaued. All that was left was for age to weaken me. However, strength as a whole wasn't all about skill. I was now being forced to realize this, albeit a little late in my life. Even though I'd just taught the knights how to use their bodies to gain the upper hand in a fight, I hadn't learned my own lesson. *I hope to be forgiven for my craftiness.* The sword was too good for me, but since a strange twist of fate had brought it to me, it would be a waste not to use it.

There was no further movement in Baltrain's southern district. Only the faint sound of the wind and Rose's labored breathing could be heard. Neither of us knew what to say anymore, so a strange silence dominated the area.

"Norad..." Rose suddenly muttered from the ground.

"Hm?"

"Eline, Sandra, Harvis, Gill, Kennedy, Chilcott, Mary, Horzon... They all died."

I didn't know any of these names. Allusia and Henbrits surely hadn't known them either, though Gatoga might've. These were probably people who'd shared Rose's motives. Regardless of whether they'd been right, they'd possessed the same passion.

Had I killed some of them? Or perhaps it'd been Allusia or Henbrits? They'd committed the heavy crime of attempted assassination on royalty, so I didn't feel much guilt. The hollowness I felt was simply the result of having stolen many lives.

"Hak! Gah..."

"Rose! You okay?"

Judging by her pale complexion, her lungs were indeed bleeding. It seemed my slash had damaged them. Maybe it was a little strange for me to be

worrying about her, considering I'd been the one to hurt her, but I still wondered what I should do. If left alone, she would surely die, but I knew nothing about medicine. It would've been a different matter if I'd had a potion on hand, but unfortunately, I hadn't brought any.

"M-Master..." Rose said feebly between wheezing breaths and coughs of blood. "Please...kill me. I want to die...by your hand."

I could see tears welling up in her eyes. I doubted this was from the pain.

"I can't do that," I told her.

"Master...?"

There was no need to debate the matter. She had committed a crime—a severe one. A simple apology wasn't going to cut it. She'd played a part in a genuine attempted coup d'état. I didn't know how she would ultimately be charged, but an acquittal was probably out of the question. She could even be sentenced to the death penalty.

However, when I recalled the words she'd let slip right before I'd cut her down, I decided not to wash my hands of this matter—I wouldn't pass judgment on Rose. And, even if she hadn't revealed her reasoning, I refused to kill my former pupil with one final blow. *Perhaps that's selfish...but I won't do it.*

"You should live and face your crimes," I told her. "Besides..."

I was physiologically opposed to the idea. Even my body was reluctant to cause her any more harm. Rose felt responsibility for her actions, but I didn't like the idea of settling it with her death. After all, her plan had failed. There were also the captured children to consider. Now that I knew about them, it would be a lousy choice to simply turn a blind eye to the real problem—both for me and for Rose.

"It seems there are still things I haven't taught you," I said.

"Tee hee... Is that so?"

Seriously, I'd meant to teach her to wield her sword to protect others. How had she become a person willing to participate in a bloody revolution? I could only lament my failure as a teacher. I would probably never be in a position to

provide her with guidance again. However, I was made keenly aware that being an instructor was about more than simply teaching a student how to swing a sword.

“Hak!”

“Whoa there... Now then, what to do about this?”

Rose coughed up blood again. Despite deciding not to deliver a coup de grâce, treating her was beyond my abilities.

The wound was far deeper than I’d first thought. Rose was going to die at this rate.

“Hey! Gardinant! Huh?! The heck happened here?”

“Gatoga...”

That was when the knight commander of the Holy Order came over to us with noisy footsteps. His full plate armor was covered in blood and scratches, but the man in question seemed perfectly healthy. It looked like he’d cleaned up all the archers. He also had a man slung over his shoulder.

“Where did Prince Glenn go?” Gatoga asked. “Actually, wait, did someone beat Rose? Who was it?”

“Well, about that...”

I wasn’t quite sure how to answer his rapid-fire questions. Thinking about it calmly, the special instructor of the Liberion Order had just cut down the lieutenant commander of the Holy Order of the Church of Sphene. This would probably work out if Rose confessed, but if she put in one last struggle and tried to pin the crime on me, it would be pretty hard to get out of this. I doubted that was going to happen, but regardless, I didn’t know how to explain things to Gatoga.

“Hak! Commander, I just screwed up a bit...”

“If you say so... Oh, just gimme a sec.”

Screwed up, huh? She wasn’t technically wrong. It wasn’t a lie. Gatoga haphazardly tossed the man he was carrying onto the ground, then rushed over to Rose. *Who is that guy, anyway?* Gatoga had chucked him down like a sack of

potatoes, but it seemed like he was just unconscious. He had short brown hair and was somewhat skinny. He also looked a bit younger than me. Judging by his black clothing, he'd likely been part of the attack on the prince. *Maybe this is Hinnis.*

"It's awfully deep..." Gatoga said as he put a hand to Rose's wound. "I can't do much, but here—this should ease the pain."

Shortly after, a pale light faintly enveloped Rose's body.

"Is that a miracle?" I asked.

"Yeah," Gatoga answered. "It's not really my specialty, though."

Now that I thought of it, the knights of the Holy Order could use miracles. I'd seen the knights who'd protected Reveos use magic to enhance their bodies.

"Rose, you can't use any?" I asked.

"I can't...use magic..."

"Don't talk," Gatoga cut in. "Your wound won't seal properly."

"Oh... Sorry, I made her talk."

I had never seen Rose use magic. When she'd casually dropped by my dojo, she'd introduced herself only as a swordswoman. It seemed not all knights of the Holy Order could use magic. Or maybe Rose was an exception.

Strangely, I'd found myself without anything to do, so I turned to Gatoga. "Hm? You don't need to chant?" The knights I'd fought had all chanted some kind of spell to enhance their bodies. Gatoga hadn't done anything more than place a hand on Rose.

"A chant is no more than a prayer. You can use miracles without saying anything. The zealots insist on chanting whenever the hell they can, though."

So, miracles could be used in silence. According to Lucy, miracles were just a type of magic, and she never chanted anything whenever she used magic. So, knowing this, Gatoga's silent miracle made perfect sense.

"Phew... I somehow managed to stop the bleeding..."

After putting pressure on the wound for a while, Gatoga sighed, lifted his

hands, and wiped his brow. Being somewhat ignorant of both magic and medicine, I didn't really know what state Rose was in now that she wasn't bleeding. I could tell her situation was bad, but I didn't know how much Gatoga's miracle had helped.

"So? What happened, Gardinant?"

It was probably safe to assume that Rose was stable—for now, at least. As proof of that, Gatoga turned his eyes away from her and threw me a pointed look.

"Allusia took the prince and princess away," I explained. "As for Rose... To get straight to the point, I cut her down."

"What...?"

The mood in the air was as sharp as a drawn blade to my throat.

"I strongly suspect Rose of being complicit in the attempted assassination."

Gatoga was silent for a long time.

"Is that true, Rose?"

He had known Rose far longer than he'd known me. However, his faith in the loyalty of the Holy Order had already been shaken by Hinnis's betrayal. He also had to know about the papists and royalists being in conflict, so he couldn't simply dismiss my words as nonsense.

Perhaps realizing that she couldn't escape, Rose answered honestly. "Tee hee... Yup, it's the truth."

"I see..." Gatoga once again sank into silence.

"But in the end...she wavered," I said.

"I'm well aware how patriotic she is..." Gatoga muttered.

With that, the conversation was apparently over. Gatoga hefted Rose up, and then, almost as an afterthought, he picked up the unconscious man too. He was handling her rather roughly, but he had no choice but to use both shoulders to carry two adults around.

"Um, Rose—"

“Normally, there’d be no escaping the death penalty,” Gatoga said, cutting off my explanation. “That’s the seriousness of the crime they’ve committed.”

That made sense. I wouldn’t expect her to be acquitted after an attempted assassination of royalty. Just as Gatoga had said, her actions would normally be a direct path to execution. The Holy Order had no reason to leave dangerous threats to national security at large—especially if the nation wasn’t particularly stable.

Still, even if their approach to the problem hadn’t been great, they truly lamented the state of their country. I would’ve liked for such extenuating circumstances to be taken into consideration, but reality was a harsh mistress. That said, it wasn’t like the whole ordeal would be over even if the perpetrators were all punished for treason.

“It seems Rose was forced into this by the pope,” I said. “Kids were apparently taken hostage.”

“What...?”

If she’d been forced to obey, things could go differently. I doubted Rose had lied at the eleventh hour. She wasn’t free of *all* guilt, of course, but if they were going to conduct a proper investigation, an immediate death sentence was probably avoidable.

“Rose, what’s going on?” Gatoga asked.

“No comment...” she murmured. “Well, that’s what I’d *like* to say, but I guess I lost, so... It’s the orphans.”

“Tch.”

How much did Gatoga know? He was very likely aware of Sphenedyrvania’s power struggles, but what about the movements of the papists and royalists? My information had come from Ibroy and Lucy, but it was hard to imagine that the commander of the Holy Order was *less* informed than those two on these matters.

“We’ll have to start with an investigation...” Gatoga mumbled. “As for Rose, well, I’ll do what I can.”

“That’s...”

I was personally grateful, but wasn’t that a poor move for the knight commander? If he tried to defend her, it could affect his public image. In the worst case, Gatoga could be suspected of treason and executed with the rest of them.

“I can’t make any guarantees, of course,” Gatoga added.

“I guess not...”

At any rate, I couldn’t intervene in anything that came after this. The investigation and ultimate verdict were all going to be handled in another country by people far higher up the chain. I wondered how it was all going to end. The crimes they’d committed weren’t light in any sense of the word. However, Rose was one of my former pupils, so I had mixed feelings about everything.

“Let’s head back,” Gatoga suggested. “Anyway, I’m surprised you beat Rose so handily. I guess that’s why she considered you to be her esteemed master.”

“Well, I had a trick up my sleeve.”

“Ain’t that a scary thought.”

Baltrain’s southern district had been transformed into a charnel house. A somewhat inappropriate thought crossed my mind. *Cleaning all of this up is going to be a huge pain.*

I started walking toward the central district.

“What exactly do you plan on doing?” I asked Gatoga on the way.

“Hm? Let’s see...”

Gatoga was already a huge man, so with both Rose and who I assumed was Hinnis on his shoulders, he had a ridiculously large silhouette. Just walking by his side was pretty intimidating. Any civilian would probably be rooted to the spot in fear if he threatened them.

“Commander. Please let me down,” Rose objected.

“No. The bleeding’s stopped, but you’re still seriously wounded.”

“Awww...”

I agreed with Gatoga. She didn’t exactly look dignified up there, but she was badly wounded. It was best for her just to accept it. Though, considering that I’d been the one to inflict the wound...well, I had no room to talk.

“Besides, if I let you down, you might run away.”

“I...wouldn’t do that.”

“Why the pause?”

A whole lot of people would probably be in trouble if Rose ran away now, so Gatoga couldn’t let her down. At this point, the main concern was how Rose was going to be punished.

Just as Gatoga had mentioned earlier, a death sentence would normally be inevitable. It was practically impossible to vouch for her too. I had at least a vague understanding of how serious treason against the crown was, and in the worst case, it was entirely possible for Rose’s entire family to be executed. But there were also the hostages to consider. If that issue was made public, it could affect the severity of her punishment.

Unfortunately, I thought that outcome was pretty unlikely. If information about the hostages was released to the public, it could shake the very foundation of Sphenedyardvania. Nobody wanted that to happen. After all, civilians always suffered the most in an unstable nation.

“First, we’ll have to find the children and secure their safety,” Gatoga said. “Nothing can start until then.”

“Sounds about right,” I agreed. “Not that I can be of any help...”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “This is the Holy Order’s problem. There’s no need for you to join in.”

If Rose was speaking the truth, then some very high-ranking people were a part of this, so there was nothing I could do as an individual. It would be pretty bad for a foreigner to get involved anyway—that could create a whole different set of problems.

“Rose, got any idea where the brats are?” Gatoga asked.

"I wasn't told the details... They've probably been moved under the pretense of being given shelter."

"Man, this is gonna be a lotta work," Gatoga grumbled.

I'd predicted this, but it seemed things weren't going to be straightforward. There was no telling whether the pope or one of his close associates was behind all this. I didn't know much about Sphenedyardvania, so I was an outsider when it came to this stuff. At most, I just wanted to do something to help Rose survive.

"So, about what we'll do with you," Gatoga said, shifting his focus to Rose.

The air froze for a moment. No matter the circumstances, that attempt on the prince's life wasn't going to be forgiven. The knight commander of the Holy Order couldn't ignore her confession either.

"For now...the ringleader was Hinnis. Rose, you got caught up in things, fought him, and lost. We'll go with that."

"Huh? But that's..." I muttered involuntarily.

In other words, he was planning to partially conceal the truth. *Is that really okay? I'm pretty sure it's not.*

"Commander?"

Even Rose had clear disapproval in her voice. She'd hesitated to reach this point, but she'd steeled herself for it. She understood the heavy consequences of her actions, and she'd surely known that her life would be forfeit if she failed.

So, even if Gatoga managed to conceal the truth, could Rose accept it? Considering her personality, I thought she might turn herself in or potentially commit suicide. After all, she felt enough responsibility that she'd asked me to kill her earlier. From the moment she'd decided to back this coup d'état, she'd been ready to throw her life away—all in exchange for the lives of the children who'd been taken hostage.

However, that wasn't really what bothered me.

"Why go that far?" I asked Gatoga.

Frankly, I didn't understand why he would cover for Rose. She was his current

lieutenant, but he was treating his former lieutenant with far less care. He'd said he would definitely take Hinnis down with his own hands, and there'd been no room for forgiveness in that statement. Even though Rose had the same title and had committed the same crime, he was trying to get her out of it. It didn't make any sense.

"She's my sister..." Gatoga murmured.

"Huh?"

"Rose is my little sister," he repeated. "Not by blood, mind you. But I've known her since we were little."

What, seriously? It's been nothing but surprises lately. Rose and Gatoga are siblings? I wouldn't have known. She never even mentioned it.

"I-Is that true, Rose?" I asked.

"Yup... Sure is..." she answered awkwardly.

Well, she had technically plotted against her older brother. I could understand her feeling bad about that. Things were beginning to make sense now. If Gatoga didn't pull Rose out of this maelstrom, his status could be in danger too—as I mentioned before, it was possible that Rose's entire family could be executed for her treason. In that case, Gatoga could get dragged into it too, even if he wasn't a blood relative.

"But I might do something like this again, you know?" Rose said.

"Hey, let your brother trust you, dammit," Gatoga grumbled.

In other words, Rose had gone as far as making an enemy of her own family to pull this off. Her determination was terrifying. I only knew what Lucy had told me regarding Sphenedyrvania's civil war, but it seemed things over there were pretty bad. They had to be—no one would attempt a coup d'état if things were relatively good.

"Rose," I said.

"Yes?"

However, even if Rose got out of this, the haze over her heart would remain. I didn't know whether my words would get through to her, but I wanted to

provide what guidance I could as an instructor.

“Even if it would’ve taken time, there had to have been other ways,” I said. “You should’ve focused your energy in a more positive direction. That’s the kind of swordsmanship I taught you.”

“Yup... If you say so, Master. You’re probably right.”

My words felt pretty empty, but I didn’t know anything about politics, so this was about all I could say. Still, I wanted her to know that the methods she’d resorted to were wrong.

“Before you mentioned those brats, I was moments away from killing you myself,” Gatoga cut in coldly.

“I was prepared for that too,” Rose said.

“H-Ha ha ha...”

I couldn’t help but let out a dry laugh. Well, I’d cut her down myself, so I wasn’t really one to talk.

“Anyway, isn’t it possible Hinnis there shares her circumstances?” I asked.

It was unlikely that the mastermind behind this plan—the one who’d taken children hostage—had only coerced Rose. There could be others in her situation.

“Rose?” Gatoga asked.

“Hinnis and I were allies, but we weren’t coordinating or anything,” she answered. “Those who were told the same things as me...are probably all dead.”

“I see...”

Rose had muttered several names after I had cut her down. Those were surely the people who’d worked directly with her—probably other knights. Though, I had no way of checking that information now. *Does that mean Hinnis supported the pope due to his own ideologies?* If so, he was probably going straight to the gallows. He was a complete stranger to me, so I felt no inclination to cover for him.

"We'll have to do a total scrub of the order too. What a pain..." Gatoga grumbled.

"I feel for you..." I said with a wry smile.

He had a lot of work ahead of him. It was now confirmed that he had many enemies both in and out of the Holy Order. It was only natural for me to feel some sympathy.

Suddenly, I realized something.

"Oh yeah..."

"Hm? What's up?" Gatoga asked.

Can I really ask this? Well, let's just do it. He won't answer me if he can't.

"Gatoga, do you support the pope or the king?"

"I'm neutral... Or, so I'd like to say. Personally, I'd like Prince Glenn to give it his best. I've known him since he was little."

So, he supports the king... One wrong step on his part could've meant crossing blades with Rose.

"Still, we're knights meant to protect the country," he continued. "Ideologies are secondary. People come first. That's my personal opinion."

"An admirable stance," I said.

Judging by Gatoga's personality, he really would've killed his little sister to achieve that. Was that also the path of a devoted knight? I couldn't see myself being able to do that.

"So, that means I gotta protect the brats too," Gatoga added. "They're our nation's treasures."

"Yup. Please do..." Rose said feebly.

Her wound was deep. Even with healing magic, she wasn't going to be fighting anytime soon and was likely going to require a long recuperation period. She couldn't be counted on to take part in exposing the papists' plot. Considering the failed assassination, there wasn't much time to act.

Gatoga has to hurry and gather trustworthy people if he wants to save the

kids. He's definitely in for a ton of work.

Part of me really wanted to help, but a foreigner couldn't participate in any of this. They had to move secretly and swiftly, meaning they had to know the lay of the land. There was nothing I could do to help—I could only pray for the children's safety. I didn't want to believe that the pope, one of the most influential people in their entire country, had personally come up with this idea, but there was no telling what the truth was until they peeled back the curtain.

"Well, there are plenty of idiots who'll come crawling out if you dangle political power in front of them," Gatoga said. "If I think of this as a chance to clean house, it ain't all that bad."

He had a point. This coup had been hastily and crudely planned, and the papists had to be in a panic. It would be easy to catch their tails. Though, considering the amount of blood that had already been spilled—and the blood that was yet to be spilled—I definitely couldn't view this strife as a positive thing.

Politics, huh? Political power... None of that had anything to do with me, so I'd never really given it any thought. It was, however, a pretty common story—good people suddenly changed once they had a taste of political power.

I thought about my own situation. I had recently settled into this inexplicable position of special instructor. Though I didn't feel the need to adjust any of my behaviors or take heed of others' mistakes, I wanted to be aware of the responsibility I carried—I didn't want to end up as just another power-hungry person.

"Still...I can't trust the current king," Rose mumbled. "Bishop Reveos was very recently unjustly punished by him..."

"Hmm?"

Hang on a sec. Did I really hear that name?

"By Reveos, do you mean Bishop Reveos Sarleon?" I asked.

"That's right," Rose confirmed. "You know about him, Master?"

"Hmmm...?"

It felt like I was starting to connect the dots. The unexpected mention of that name had my thoughts in turmoil.

“What’s up, Gardinant?” Gatoga asked.

“Well... That bishop was punished, right?”

I had to confirm this. Honestly, I had no idea what had happened to Reveos after Ficelle and I had captured him. Lucy, Allusia, and Ibroy had probably put in some work to conceal it, so who knew where he’d gone or what had happened to him.

“Well, yeah,” Gatoga said. “He was charged with making arbitrary interpretations of the scriptures, brainwashing the masses, and committing taboos. There was pretty big opposition to the whole affair too.”

How bad were those crimes by Sphenedyardvania’s standards? I didn’t really know. But if there’d been huge opposition to that decision, it meant that Reveos had many supporters. What was going on across the border?

“I believe it’s a plot by the royalists to bring down the Pope’s authority,” Rose asserted.

“No... Reveos was punished correctly,” I countered.

“Huh?”

How had this information gotten so twisted? The truth was exactly the opposite of what Rose was saying. The royalists hadn’t manipulated information to weaken the papists—they’d passed proper judgment in the face of the papists’ opposition.

“You’re talking like you know something about this,” Gatoga remarked.

“I do,” I confirmed. “I’m the one who arrested Reveos.”

“What...?”

Gatoga and Rose both stiffened at my confession. Well, to be exact, Ficelle had arrested him, but those details didn’t really matter now.

“Reveos was heading a human trafficking ring to try and recreate the miracle of resurrection,” I explained.

"That...can't be..."

Rose was speechless. The righteousness she'd believed in had been partially shattered, so her shock was understandable.

"The miracle of resurrection can't be recreated. I assume you see it this way too, Gatoga?" I asked.

"Yeah... Some guys out there believe in it, but it's no more than a legend. Normally, you'd just see it as a dramatization."

Gatoga clearly shared Ibroy's beliefs in this regard. Honestly, I still found it weird for the faithful to be calling their scriptures a dramatization. Maybe it made sense to come to that realization when you thought it over pragmatically. Speaking of Ibroy, he'd mentioned Reveos being from Sphenedyrvania. If Gatoga and Rose knew about him, that meant Reveos had originally been posted there.

"Still, human trafficking?" Gatoga mused. "I get it. That's why he came to Liberis."

"That's not all," I said. "He even made use of some half-assed resurrection spell. But all he really accomplished was manipulating some corpses like puppets."

"Ugh. The piece of shit..."

After I said that, I pondered whether it was all right for me to mention those details. *It's a little late for that now, though. I've already blabbed. Whatever. Let's just trust these two. Yup. Not my problem.*

"Then... What His Holiness said was..."

The important part right now wasn't Reveos's fate. Information should've been passed from Liberis to Sphenedyrvania, but there was an inconsistency. Had someone tampered with the intel?

I didn't even need to wonder. The answer was pretty clear at this point.

"I don't know what exactly the pope was told," I said. "But considering this whole plan and the fact that he took hostages, I think it's dangerous to take his words at face value."

I wasn't planning to pick a fight with Sphenedyardvania over this or anything. In that respect, I didn't really care. I was nothing more than an old man and a citizen of Liberis—I had no intention of sticking my neck out that far. However, the course of events had caused my former pupil to walk the wrong path, so things were now a little different.

"So he says. That really hits home, huh, Rose?" Gatoga said.

"Yup..."

With those last words, silence hung around us. We continued walking for a while. Baltrain's southern district had become quite the battleground, even beyond where I'd fought. We could see fallen figures in black scattered here and there, though not in huge numbers. Among them were a rare few in full plate armor. It was a saving grace that I didn't see any of the fallen wearing the armor of the Liberion Order.

I had no way of knowing how exactly these knights had been killed. Perhaps they'd raised their swords in desperation against Prince Glenn and had died by Allusia or Henbrits's blades. It was also possible there'd been a falling-out between papist and royalist knights. It wasn't my job to figure that out, though. It wasn't even Liberis's job.

This disastrous scene created by another country's problems stretched out around us for a while longer. After a long while of walking in silence, Rose muttered something. There was determination in her voice.

"I...can't die yet."

"Hm?"

"To be specific, I can't die *anymore*," she said. "Not until I see true justice with my own eyes."

"It sounds a lot less impressive when you say it while slung over someone's shoulder," Gatoga quipped.

It seemed as though Rose had recovered from her somewhat stupefied state. Her crimes weren't going to vanish, of course. Still, I felt like it was best if she tried to make amends, and one had to be alive to do so. Maybe it was Sphenedyardvania's creed to kill and be done with it, but personally, I believed

there was room to consider her extenuating circumstances. There were signs of underhanded factional strife at play too.

"Still, you're not gonna be able to do anything from inside our borders," Gatoga said.

"I know, but there is surely something I *can* do," Rose insisted.

It would be inconvenient for the papists if Rose was allowed to live. The royalists would also have a poor impression of her because of the attempted assassination. Furthermore, Liberis was likely going to investigate her for exposing Princess Salacia to danger. I could imagine only one surefire way of resolving this—abandon everything and flee the country. Was she seriously going to do that?

"That's the gist of it," Gatoga said, turning to me. "Seems like you're gonna hafta keep your mouth shut about Rose."

"Guess I'll have to."

It would be meaningless for me to spread word of what Rose had done. My only choice was to keep my silence. I definitely didn't want her to die...but by making this choice and going with the flow, I'd become an accomplice in a cover-up.

"So? What're your plans from here?" I asked.

It didn't seem like there was anything I could do to help, but I at least wanted to hear what they were planning to do next. It was also important for us to get our stories straight.

"For now, I'll say she was injured in the battle against the attackers and send her back home. Either way, she's not gonna be moving around with this wound. After that...well, I'll work things out one way or another."

Hmm, in that case, there really is nothing I can do. I just have to be careful not to let the truth slip.

"Sorry, I can't do much after that point," he said to Rose. "Figure it out yourself."

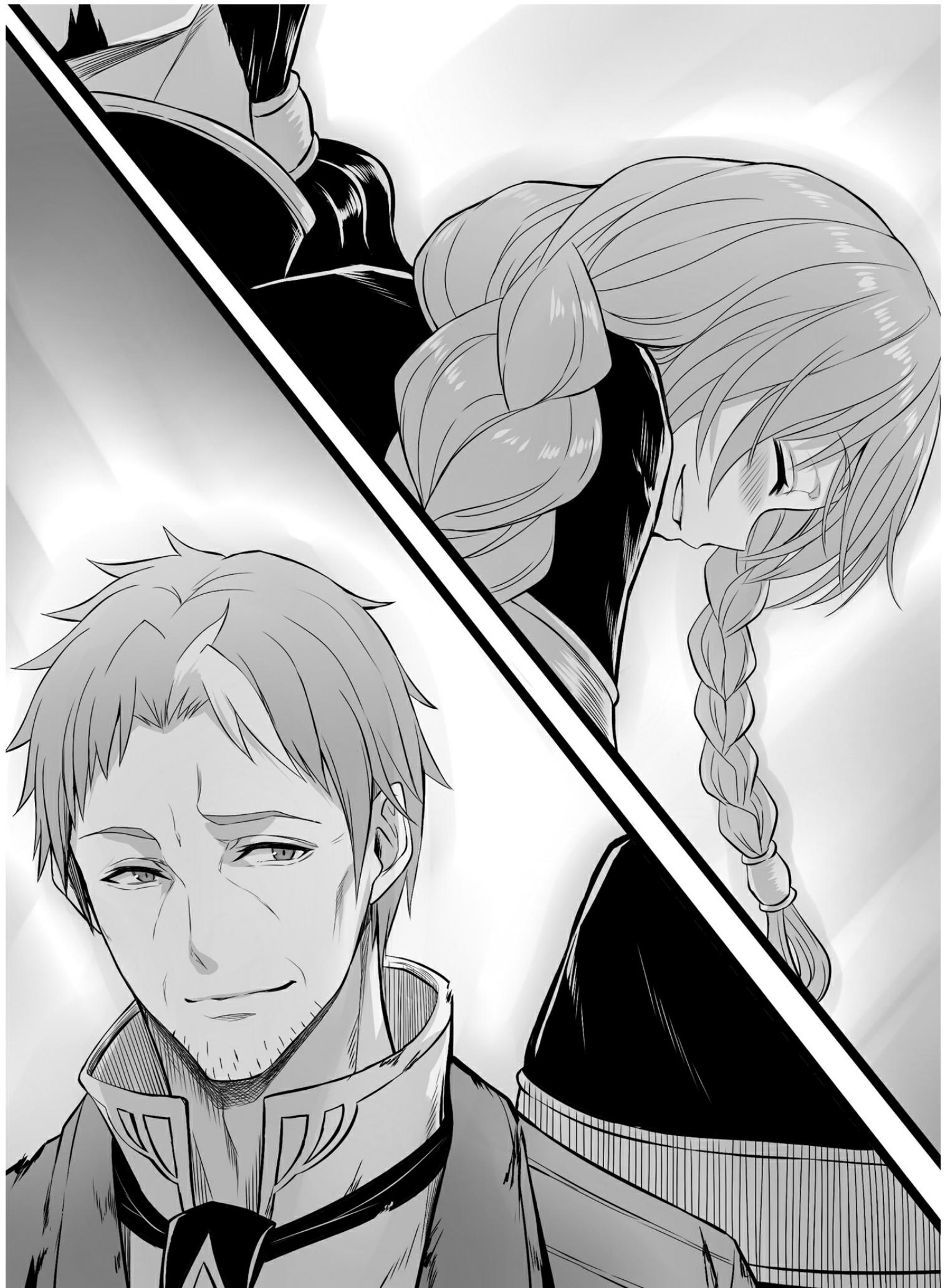
"Hee hee... Understood."

If Gatoga got too involved, then this could be traced back to him. It was best not to leave any tracks. Gatoga and Rose were very unlikely to meet again after this—perhaps this was their final farewell. Nonetheless, I didn't sense any sorrow from them. As far as relatives went, all I had were my mom and dad...oh, and Mui now too. If I was told I would never see them again, I doubted I could remain so calm. In that sense, these two were strong.

“Master...” Rose said as she was shaken about on Gatoga’s shoulder.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Thank you very much. I’ll definitely pay back this debt one day.”



Rose's words rode the wind, and her voice contained a torrent of emotions. She had brought a huge bother to my doorstep and had thrown me into an outrageous situation—nothing was resolved yet either. Still, I felt a faint satisfaction stirring in my heart. Part of me was convinced that I'd barely saved one of my pupils from the brink of destruction.

"Ha ha ha. You don't have to worry about that," I told her. "It's an instructor's duty to cover for a pupil's ineptitude."

That was all I had to say on the matter.

And just like that, accepting Rose's somewhat clumsy gratitude, I left the southern district behind.



"Things have really calmed down, huh?"

"They certainly have."

One afternoon, I found myself out on patrol around Baltrain with Allusia. The festival was over, so the city was now back to normal. You could still hear people talking about the failed assassination every now and then, but by and large, the atmosphere on the streets had settled. Incidentally, I'd spent the morning training with everyone as usual. Baltrain was back to normal, and so was our training schedule. This huge assassination kerfuffle really reinforced how wonderful peace was. *There's nothing better than being free from the strife of missions or incidents.*

"Has the southern district been cleaned up?" I asked.

"To an extent. Though it'll be a while longer before they can get back to farming safely."

Under the Liberion Order's initiative, they and the royal garrison had been cleaning up the ghastly scene of the southern district. I couldn't really comment since I'd killed a ridiculous number of people there, but it seemed they would need more time to get things up and running again. Rotting corpses were breeding grounds for disease, and they needed to ensure that an epidemic or the like wouldn't break out because of a hasty cleanup effort. That would be

seriously frightening—so many people lived close together in Baltrain (it was the capital city, after all), so an endemic disease could be fatal for the whole populace.

In that respect, the magic corps was taking a leading role. The garrison was physically removing the bodies, and magic was apparently best for disposing of the dead and preventing the spread of disease. I wondered how they were handling so many corpses. Baltrain surely had a cemetery, but I had no idea how big it was. Maybe they were simply burning the bodies with magic.

Now that I thought of it, Mui had mentioned that things seemed really busy at the magic institute. Maybe the teachers were being sent out to help too. Even just taking a stroll around town, I could see wizards every now and then. Most of them wore robes like Ficelle's, so they were easy to spot. I knew that Baltrain had a lot of wizards because of the institute, but it was curiously impressive to see so many of them around.

At any rate, the thought of Lucy complaining to me after all the work was done was a little scary. She basically went wherever she wanted whenever she wanted, so it was entirely possible that she would barge into my house again.

“Seems like our internal affairs will be settled,” I muttered.

“Yes,” Allusia agreed. “All that’s left is negotiating the incident with Sphenedyrvania.”

This situation was a little complicated. It had all happened within Liberis’s borders, but its principal offenders were from Sphenedyrvania. What’s more, their authorities were split into two groups, and while the papists were under suspicion, the government itself was run by the royalists.

Sphenedyrvania was, of course, liable for all this, but it was difficult to find a point of compromise. The royalists hadn’t known that the papists were concocting this entire plot, but they nonetheless had to bear the full brunt of the repercussions. I didn’t know how Liberis was planning to pursue the matter, but it had to be a huge pain to deal with.

Either way, Liberis itself had no fault in this incident. It was practically inevitable that Sphenedyrvania needed to pay some sort of reparations, especially since their dissidents had exposed Princess Salacia to danger. The

leaders across the border were probably agonizing over what to do. It was best to settle things as cleanly as possible, but there was no telling how the dice would fall. Someone like me would have no bearing on the outcome of international negotiations, so I had it relatively easy.

“I wonder if Lady Mabelhart is all right,” Allusia said.

“Yeah... I hope she’s okay.”

Our conversation naturally shifted to the core of the incident. In this respect, things *weren’t* easy for me. Rose was one of the key culprits behind the attempted assassination, though nobody aside from Gatoga and I knew this. I hadn’t even told Allusia. By the time Prince Glenn’s scheduled visit to the palace had concluded, Rose had already vanished. Gatoga had told everyone that she’d been sent back to Sphenedyardvania due to her injuries. Since she really was wounded, nobody had really questioned it.

“I suppose we just have to put our hopes in Sphenedyardvania’s medical system,” I remarked.

“Indeed. They have healing magic there too.”

Allusia was rather worried about her. Perhaps this was simply because they were acquainted now, or because Rose was a lieutenant commander, or even because she was a fellow former pupil of my dojo. I was happy to see that she cared, but it made it really hard to find the right words to say—I couldn’t let the truth slip. Gatoga had told me he’d work something out, but there were no guarantees, so I was worried too.

“Well...she’s strong,” I said. “Let’s pray she makes it.”

“Yes, let’s...”

I was speaking of more than just Rose recovering from her injuries, but I wasn’t stupid enough to make that implication clear. I felt like I was tricking everyone—actually, that was exactly what I was doing—but this was all for Rose’s sake. I had no choice but to keep my silence. *It’ll be a while before this painful churning in my stomach lets up.* I doubted that Rose would come up too much in conversation, but I still didn’t like keeping secrets.

“Shall we head back?” I asked.

“Yes... Don’t work yourself too hard, Master.”

“Ha ha ha, thanks for the consideration.”

Hmm, now Allusia is worried about me. She probably sees my anxiety as an instructor showing concern for a former pupil. She’s not wrong, but not exactly right either. Man, my stomach is really starting to hurt.

We turned and headed back to the office, and I decided to change the subject.

“Anyway, I’m glad Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia weren’t hurt.”

Allusia nodded. “You can say that again. It’s all thanks to you taking over back there.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

Allusia and Henbrits had successfully escorted Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia all the way back to the palace while I’d stayed back to fight. They’d gone on a forced march, gathering knights of the Liberion Order along the way. The two royals had shown more guts than I’d anticipated. Maybe that was to be expected of people who were one day going to bear the weight of entire nations on their shoulders. Once a decision was made, they steeled themselves for the worst far faster than normal civilians and showed more willpower too.

“I’m sure your stock has gone up,” Allusia added.

“Cut that out.”

I evaded Allusia’s attempts to hold me up on a pedestal every time she had the chance. *Seriously, I’m just an old country bumpkin. How did it end up like this?* I wasn’t unhappy with my current lifestyle, but I couldn’t come to grips with my name becoming known by society at large.

“Commander Allusia!”

“Evans? What’s the matter?”

After greeting the guards at the gate, we passed through and were immediately hailed by Evans, one of the knights of the order. He always seemed

to be in a hurry. He was young, but still a knight, so I felt like he could act with a little more composure. At least, that was the somewhat parental opinion I had when watching him.

“A letter was delivered from the palace,” he said. “It’s addressed to you.”

“Understood and received.” Allusia accepted the letter Evans had pulled out of his pocket. “You may stand down.”

“Ma’am!”

The wax seal was that of the royal family—it matched the one I’d seen on my appointment letter. Allusia glanced at the letter, then smoothly broke the seal.

“A summons?” I asked.

A sealed letter coming at such a time had to have something to do with the recent incident. Princess Salacia *had* been exposed to danger, even if she’d been escorted out of there safely. It would be a bit of a bummer if the letter was to criticize Allusia for that.

“Yes,” Allusia answered. “It contains words of praise for our recent work and an invitation to a banquet.”

“Hmm. Isn’t that nice? Just go ahead and accept.”

It seemed Princess Salacia had no intention of criticizing the Liberion Order. On the contrary, it was quite the honor to receive praise from royalty, even if only through a letter. Allusia’s expression softened as she read it.

Yup, good work deserves proper praise. I’m glad Liberis is an upstanding country. I was wondering what I would do if Allusia got punished. Well, I probably wouldn’t actually do anything about it.

A banquet with royalty had to involve delicious food, but I didn’t want any part of it. *Eating a meal with Mui suits someone of my standing far more than some stuffy banquet.* As such thoughts crossed my mind, Allusia continued reading the letter with a wonderful smile.

“Your name is written on the invitation too, Master.”

“Huh...?”

Why?



“Lady Allusia Sitrus and Master Beryl Gardinant, correct? We’ve been expecting you.”

Yup, and now I’m actually at the royal palace. Well, technically, I’d been here during escort duty, but we’d met Prince Glenn and Princess Salacia outside the gate. I hadn’t even been allowed through the gate into the garden, let alone escorted brazenly into the palace itself. I felt tremendously out of place.

“Yes. Have we kept you waiting?”

“Not at all. There is still some time before the appointed hour.”

Allusia spoke to what appeared to be a guide waiting for us at the entrance. I didn’t know what proper the procedure was, so I had no choice but to follow Allusia. I was left curling into myself, feeling restless inside my still unfamiliar clothes—wearing my casual clothes to the palace would’ve been insanity. I’d checked my appearance countless times, making sure I didn’t look or smell bad, so at the very least, I didn’t believe I was being rude. I’d also had Allusia and Henbrits double-check for me, so I was pretty sure my appearance was just fine.

“Master, shall we?”

“S-Sure.”

Following Allusia and the guide, I stepped foot inside the palace. I was nervous whenever I entered an unfamiliar building for the first time, but the palace was on a whole different level. Was it really fine to walk through here with my shoes on? Everything was polished to a shine. Now that I thought of it, I’d bought fancy clothes, but not fancy shoes. Was I being rude?

The order’s office and the adventurer’s guild were both fairly vast, but the palace was enormous. The ceiling was so high that reaching it would be a chore, and the corridors were so clean there wasn’t a speck of dust to be seen. This really was the domain of heaven’s chosen. It made me utterly restless to be walking its halls.

The guide let out a chuckle at my gawking. “So, how do you like the palace?”

“It really is splendid... Sorry for ogling at everything.”

I mean, can you blame me? I never thought I'd have the opportunity to come here.

After walking for a while, we reached a door that was solid and resplendent. *So...where is this? It doesn't look like the center of the palace, so I don't think it's a dining hall.*

“Over here,” the guide said, opening the door.

“Thank you for showing us the way.” Allusia nodded before following him inside.

Whoa, it's huge. It was over twice the size of the lobby in the adventurer's guild. Lights hanging on the wall illuminated the room, and in the center was an extremely long table flanked by luxurious seats.

This place was probably used when many nobles were invited over for a meal. I had no idea how many people would be gathering today, but I was already as nervous as possible at the thought of sharing a meal with royalty. *Actually, it's a little late to ask, but shouldn't Henbrits be here? I feel sorry for leaving out the lieutenant commander and having some random old man here. Can't he trade places with me?*

“Lady Allusia, over here, please. Master Beryl, please sit here.”

“R-Right.”

Huh. They actually have a seating chart... I carefully pulled back the expensive chair so that I didn't damage it, then sat down. The head of the table was probably for the king. Allusia and I were seated across from each other just two seats down from the head.

The warm glow of evening filled the room. The sun was about to set, but it was hard to get a grip on the passage of time inside such a glittery space. This feeling was amplified since we were waiting for some real big shots to show up.

“Announcing His Majesty King Gladio, His Highness Prince Fasmatio, and Her Highness Princess Salacia.”

After waiting idly for a short while, I heard the guide's voice resonate through

the room ceremoniously. I turned to look at the door. A king in the prime of his life, a prince who appeared to be in his late twenties, and a somewhat familiar princess entered.

Wait. Hang on. Do I remain seated? Crap! I don't know any of the etiquette...

Much like when I first met Princess Salacia, the aura coming from the royalty felt daunting—my brain was unable to function properly.

Soon, a voice called out to us like a deity descending from the heavens.

“Hmm, have we kept you waiting?”

“Not at all,” Allusia responded fluently. I was only capable of bowing my head. “I thank you for the honor of inviting us for such an occasion.”

“Ha ha, we’re here to thank *you* today. Please take it easy and enjoy yourselves.”

It seemed King Gladio was in a terrific mood. His deeply creased and austere face softened with a gentle expression as he broke into a smile.

“Allusia, Beryl, I’m glad you accepted our invitation,” Princess Salacia said. She seemed to be in an equally good mood, and she wore the same cheerful smile she’d shown us during our escort mission.

“P-Please... Your words are more than we deserve,” I responded.

Even if they told us to take it easy, all I felt was tension. *Am I even going to be able to taste the food? I’m pretty sure I won’t.*

“I’m Fasmatio Ashford el Liberis. Thank you very much for saving my little sister from her recent predicament.”

“Y-You honor us with your praise, sir.”

We got even more recognition from the first prince. He had a manly brow, which gave off a truly princely impression. However, there was a grace to him that was entirely different from Sphenedyrvania’s Prince Glenn. While Prince Glenn was gentle and serene, Prince Fasmatio was crisp and smart. I felt like the tension around me was destroying my vocabulary.

“Get things ready.”

“Sire.”

At the king’s quick command, the guide left the room. He was probably going to get the food.

“Now then, you’ve both done well,” the king said to us. “It’s precisely because of your efforts that Salacia was returned to us safely. I must thank you again.”

“You’re very welcome,” Allusia responded. “I simply fulfilled my duty as a knight. However, I am deeply remorseful for exposing her to danger in the first place.”

“Don’t be,” the king replied. “Though I can’t say it’s all in the past quite yet, let us celebrate her safety today.”

I wasn’t sure whether to join in or keep my silence. I decided to remain quiet unless they addressed me. I was scared of opening my mouth and letting something unnecessary out.

“Excuse me.”

A short time after the guide left, waiters entered the room one after the other. They placed a plate of food and a glass in front of each of us, and they filled the glasses with wine. I only ever drank ale, so this was a fresh experience in its own way. *That is, if I can appreciate the taste.*

On the topic of seating, King Gladio was at the head of the table, Prince Fasmatio was to his left, and Princess Salacia was to his right. Allusia was seated next to the prince, while I was next to the princess. Aren’t Allusia and I in the wrong places? Is this okay?

“The food we have here today is thanks to the hard work of the citizens of our nation,” the king said, holding up his glass of wine. “We must be grateful to them at all times.”

“I’m sure the people will be overjoyed simply to hear such words,” Allusia said.

I’d never had the opportunity to interact with royalty before all this, but judging by his behavior, the king seemed to be a good person. At the very least, he didn’t act like a tyrant or despot. Even back in Beaden, my life had been

good, so I was sure he was a good ruler who cared about Liberis.

“Then shall we?”

At the king’s urging, everyone raised their glasses. I did so in a fluster. I was truly ignorant of what manners to use in the presence of royalty, so for now, I decided to copy everything Allusia did. After waiting for everyone to take a sip, I tried the wine.

“Mm... This is great.”

It started with a slightly sour tang, but a sweetness seized my tongue shortly after. I didn’t know much about wine, but I could tell that it was delicious. It was an entirely different flavor from ale.

“Tee hee hee, I’m glad it suits your tastes,” Princess Salacia said. She put a hand to her mouth and giggled as she watched my reaction.

“Oh, um... Ha ha... How embarrassing.”

Oh man, that’s got me blushing. I’m stupid nervous here.

“Beryl, I received reports that you played an especially large role,” the king said. “It seems you put in some splendid work for us.”

“No, um... You honor me.”

I was happy, of course, but I had no idea how to react. *I’m lower middle class here—cut me some slack.*

“Father, Beryl was truly amazing,” Princess Salacia said, pouring on the praise. “He took on a wave of enemy soldiers one after the other. I felt fear...but also relief. I believed things would be fine with him there.”

“Ah, well, h-ha ha...”

Please stop. You’ll kill this old man. What’s with the mysterious push from the princess, anyway? I did work hard back there, but Allusia and Henbrits were the ones who saw her all the way back to the palace.

“I heard the story, but didn’t hear such details of your skill,” Prince Fasmatio said. “Perhaps I should request a training bout too.”

“Hee hee, I do believe you’ll be flattened on the ground in no time, brother.”

"How rude. You may not believe it, but I've actually trained a fair bit, my dear sister."

"H-Ha ha ha..."

Is this what's considered a royal joke? I don't know how to react. Even if I did provide Prince Fasmatio with training, I had no idea whether it was correct etiquette to beat him. *Save me, Allusia.*

"It seems we made the correct choice for a special instructor," the king said.

"Yes. I can't thank you enough for your decision, Your Majesty," Allusia responded.

Ah, right. My appointment letter had come with the royal seal. That meant the decision had passed through the king himself. *And that also explains why the princess knew about me when we first met.* I would've preferred to stay unknown. I was satisfied as long as I could teach swordsmanship in peace.

As I was in the middle of sipping my wine and quietly savoring the cooking before me, King Gladio raised his voice a little.

"This hasn't been made official yet, but it has been decided that Salacia will be married to Sphenedyrvania's Prince Glenn."

"Is that so?"

That would explain why they'd gotten along so well. Prince Glenn seemed to have a good opinion of Princess Salacia, so it probably wasn't a bad thing. *I suppose it could also just be a political marriage of convenience. Politics really make no sense to me.*

"However, I'm a little concerned about sending her away to another country."

That made sense too. This was especially true considering Sphenedyrvania's ongoing civil war. There was no telling when the conflict between royalists and papists was going to end. It was only proper to feel anxiety as a king, let alone as a father.

"And so, we've decided to establish Salacia's own royal guard."

"Jeez, you're such a worrywart, father."

The Liberion Order was dedicated to the protection of the nation, but a royal guard would be focused entirely on protecting Princess Salacia herself. That would make them a gathering of elites. Could they send her to Sphenedyardvania with her own private army, though? Was that even a thing? Well, as long as the other country accepted it, there was no problem.

“It’s being formed with select elites of the royal garrison at its core, but...” King Gladio paused, a clear glint in his eyes highlighting his gentle features. “Beryl—if you so desire, I don’t mind recommending you a place in her royal guard.”

“Huh...?”

My brain stopped completely. I forgot all about my nervousness and bewilderment. *What? Me? Princess Salacia? Royal guard? No! No way! Absolutely not! I can’t take such an important post!*

“Your Majesty, with all due respect, I so humbly believe that Mr. Gardinant’s continued support is essential to the Liberion Order’s future development, not to mention the prosperity of Liberis itself.”

During my brief brain freeze, Allusia did her best to suppress her usual rapid-fire talking habit—while still talking somewhat fast—and refused on my behalf. I was grateful, but for some reason, Allusia sure looked desperate. She didn’t have to worry. I couldn’t fulfill such a duty, and frankly, the title of special instructor already felt heavy. I didn’t want anything that placed an even heavier burden on my shoulders.

Also, what’s with the overexaggerated refusal? What do you mean by Liberis’s prosperity? Don’t put so much weight behind my tiny title, especially when I can’t interject and say something about it...

“Hmm. If the commander and instructor of our knights says so, then I suppose I must concede,” the king replied, backing down with unexpected ease.

Princess Salacia puffed out her cheeks. “Aww. How unfortunate.”

She was awfully cute like that, but having this old man working for her would be a bit of a bother. *Really dodged a close one there... I don’t want to go swinging my sword in another country surrounded by VIPs.*

"Then, Beryl, I expect even more from you for the sake of Liberis's future development."

"Yes, sire..."

Since Allusia had refused my recommendation to the royal guard, I needed to sincerely show my commitment to the king's words. *But...Liberis's future development, huh? I doubt I can play any role in that.*

The king smiled gently. "Now then, I see we've all stopped eating. Please, enjoy your meal."

"Thank you for your consideration."

Doing as King Gladio said, I took a bite of my meat.

"Say, Beryl, have you been wielding a sword for long?"

"Yes, well... I've been fooling around with a wooden sword since I was little."

An invitation to Liberis's palace to enjoy a luxurious meal was supposed to be something worth celebrating. However, with Princess Salacia constantly barraging me with questions, the anxiety and tension in my heart prevented me from tasting any of the food—even the meat.

"Ha ha ha! It seems Salacia has taken a liking to you." King Gladio's cheerful laughter resounded through the room.

"H-Ha ha... I'm honored..."

Haaah... I wanna go get a drink at my favorite tavern. Once this is over, I'll do just that. So, with thoughts of the snug little tavern in my mind, I endured the tremendously awkward luxury banquet.



Epilogue: An Old Country Bumpkin Gets Another Drink

“Ah! Welcome!”

As I opened the door, I heard the familiar sounds of the waitress and the clanging doorbell. This was a comfortable little tavern tucked into one of the back streets of Baltrain’s central district. I’d frequented this place during my stay at a nearby inn, though it had been a while since I’d last been. The stew they made was delicious.

The tavern was run by a couple and their daughter. Much like my previous visits, there were several customers already inside. *The place seems to be doing well. It’s good for restaurants to be lively.* If taverns were bustling, it was proof that goods and people—in other words, economics as a whole—were flowing in abundance. After all, if one or the other was lacking, restaurants couldn’t function.

“Whew.”

I found myself at the mysteriously empty seat at the end of the counter. This place was usually busy, but for some reason, this seat tended to be available. I rather liked its positioning, so it was convenient for me.

“Excuse me, an ale please.”

“Coming right up!”

Right as I sat down, there was only one thing to order—ale. I’d had wine at the palace, so I had some alcohol in my system already. While such expensive drinks were delicious, they didn’t seem to lift my mood. Knocking back an ale in a place like this suited a tried-and-true commoner like me much better. For a meal to be enjoyable, the food had to be good, but it was also pretty important to get intoxicated on the location and atmosphere.

In that sense, the food at the palace had been amazing, but I hadn’t been able to savor it. I’d been far too nervous about policing every single one of my

actions and trying to avoid being rude. I hadn't had the leisure of enjoying the food. I'd been so tense that even the meat had been flavorless on my tongue. Public consensus would agree that it was an honor for the king, prince, and princess to know my name and face. Allusia had been particularly proud for some reason. Thinking about it made me want to gripe about why she was getting so excited.

Anyway, a luxurious dinner at the palace was more than this boring old man deserved. I knew that the people around me had seen my reluctance, but it wasn't like I could just change my personality.

"Here's your ale!"

A wooden tankard filled to the brim with ale was brought to me from behind the counter, and I even got some nuts to snack on. *Yup, this is the stuff. It suits me way better.* Having an elegant drink at a chic restaurant wasn't so bad, but it wasn't really my style.

"Bottoms up."

I gulped the ale down. *Oh yeah. This refreshing feeling seeping into my bones really hits the spot.* I liked all alcohol, but ale was definitely my favorite. The exquisite bitterness and bubbly carbonation were all it took to calm my heart.

After quenching my thirst with ale, I went for the nuts. They were well salted and scrumptious. I tossed a couple into my mouth and crunched down on them.

"Whew... That's great..."

This tavern was fantastic. They'd set up shop in Baltrain's central district, so there was no way it could be bad, but still. The place was exactly to my tastes. The ambience was just right—it wasn't luxurious in any way, but it wasn't just a cheap tavern on the outskirts either. The barkeep and his daughter were both really generous too, so this was the most comfortable place for me to get drunk.

"Excuse me, another ale."

"Coming right up!"

For now, I decided to start with some more ale while I pondered over what to

put in my stomach. I'd already eaten at the palace, so I wasn't exactly starving. I was just a little peckish. I wanted to eat something, but I didn't feel like anything heavy.

"Hmmm..."

As I sipped my second ale, I gazed at the menu written on wooden placards on the wall. *Now then, what to order? All the food here is good, so I doubt anything will be a dud, but nothing is really standing out to me.* Settling for nothing more than ale and nuts was an option, but I would be hungry by the time I went to sleep. I could technically have food whenever I wanted at home, but I felt like that would set a bad example for Mui. I couldn't make light of maintaining my weight at this age either.

"A stew would work, but..."

I pictured the sausage stew I'd often had here. It wasn't as heavy as most meat dishes, but it was still filling, and it had a savory taste. However, I hadn't been here in a while. My new house was in the central district, but closer to the north, so I couldn't constantly come all the way here. That being the case, I wanted to try something new.

And as I continued pondering over what to have, the barkeep's daughter called out to me. "Um, excuse me!"

"Hm? Yes, what is it?"

If I remembered right, her name was Aida. She was a lively girl—her ponytail swayed behind her as she moved, and her large eyes reminded me of Kewlny. While I knew her name and face, we weren't really acquainted to the point where she would strike up a conversation with me. Did she need something from this old man?

"If you'd like, we have a new item on the menu! Um, you seem to be having trouble deciding what to order, so..."

"Hmm, something new, huh?"

Aida's shy words were irresistibly charming. A new menu item—a truly thrilling prospect. Baltrain had tons of restaurants and taverns, so it was natural for them to try and demonstrate some individuality in the scramble for

customers. Having a unique selling point or two could bring in many more patrons.

“I’ll give it a try,” I said.

“Certainly!”

And here they were explicitly recommending it to me. What kind of a food lover could refuse? Aida accepted my order and pattered off to the kitchen happily. *Oh man, I’m suddenly looking forward to this.* It would be somewhat problematic if some giant meat dish came out, but the individual portions here weren’t that big. If anything, they seemed to prioritize quality over quantity, which was very gentle on the stomach for a man in his forties.

I sipped my ale for a while longer and finished my nuts. Just as I was wondering when my food was coming, Aida came up to me cheerfully with a dish in her hands.

“Thank you for waiting!”

“Oooh...”

A golden glow glimmered beneath a cloud of steam as a rich scent wafted my way.

“Risotto, huh? It looks great.”

Judging by the smell and appearance, it was a *cheese* risotto. The soft and tender grains of rice truly stimulated the appetite. I could see mushrooms and chicken in there too. Herbs garnished the dish, giving it some color and making it seem even brighter.

“All right, let’s dig in.”

I scooped up some rice. The melted cheese coiled around the spoon and dripped back down slowly. *Oh man, I haven’t even had any and it already looks delicious.* The barkeep was a great cook and this dish suited my current appetite perfectly.

“Nom... Oh, that’s hot.”

I took a bite. The piping hot rice came apart gently on my tongue, and the umami from the rice, mushroom, chicken, and cheese flooded my palate,

instantly turning the inside of my mouth into a land of paradise. The flavors had melded exquisitely. It was smooth, but the rice still had the proper bite to it—the perfect al dente.

Mmm, this is terrific. The rich aroma of cheese stimulated the appetite but didn't leave an aftertaste. It was so refreshing. What was more, the scent of olive oil was hidden deep within the flavor profile. The quality of ingredients in Baltrain's restaurants was really high—in this dish, the cheese and olive oil didn't have a strange scent, showing just how fresh the ingredients were.

Yup, this is great. The flavor was rich but not heavy. The chicken had been cut into small pieces and was fall-apart tender, so it was easy to scoop some up and chow down.

“Mmm, fantastic.”

I blew on the risotto to cool it down and shoveled it into my mouth. This time, I tasted some of the garnishing herbs, which added a crisp saltiness and bitterness. The dish had been designed so that you wouldn't get tired of it.

“Mmgh... Pwah.”

Also, cheese went great with ale. Even washing away the taste of risotto lingering in my mouth brought me a wave of pleasure. I couldn't get enough of it.

“Whew, now *that* was a meal.”

There hadn't been much in the bowl, but the flavor was rich, so it was satisfying. On that point, this dish had been perfect for my current appetite. I doubted that anything else could've been so satisfying.

“Ah, how was it?” Aida asked as I finished.

“It was wonderful. This'll definitely sell. Thanks for recommending it.”

I hadn't been sure what to pick, but her choice had been right on the money. *I'll have to come out here again when I have the chance and sample more of the barkeep's skills.*

Content with my response, a brilliant smile highlighted Aida's idyllic features. “Heh heh heh, that's good!”

Yup, what a perfect smile. My senses were out of whack after constantly spending time around beauties like Allusia and Selna, but a homely girl like Aida was nice too. Not that I was planning to hit on her or anything...but if I was going to start a family, I felt like I would have good compatibility with a family-oriented woman like her.

I'd been on pins and needles ever since the escort mission had started, and my anxiety had only grown during the banquet at the palace. But now, all that was coming undone. Having a meal in a comfortable place really did soothe the soul, and eating something stupidly expensive wasn't always the best choice.

I savored the last of my ale, taking sips little by little. After a while, the barkeep spoke up from behind the counter.

"Hi there! Sure has been a while."

"Ah, hello," I replied. "Yeah, I moved recently."

It was nice that they remembered me, even though I was no longer a regular. Maybe that was one of the secret charms of this tavern.

"Aida was worried," he said. "She's been saying that she hasn't seen you around lately."

"Ha ha ha, thanks for the consideration."

I'd come here quite often during my stay at the inn. But after moving in with Mui, I'd stopped coming out here all that much. I felt a little guilty for causing them concern.

"Please continue to favor us with your patronage," he added.

"Of course. Today's risotto was exquisite." Maybe I could bring Mui here next time. I was sure the flavors would suit her too. "I'm off, then. Thanks for the meal."

With that, I left my seat. I didn't often have rice, but it was pretty delicious. *And it's a food you can stew... Maybe it would be fun to try making some with Mui.*

"Ah, thank you very much!" Aida called out as I reached the door.

"Mm. The risotto was great."

In general, the barkeep made all the food here—his wife helped out, and their daughter dealt with customers. I wondered whether Aida did any cooking. I was nothing more than a customer, so I didn't really want to ask, but if things went smoothly, she was probably going to inherit the place. A part of me wanted to try a meal made by Aida.

“An heir, huh...?”

That turned my thoughts in another direction. My dad and Randid were currently taking care of the dojo, but I was technically the dojo master. If my dad hadn't driven me out, I would probably still be running the place.

“Hmmm...”

An heir... An heir... It didn't feel quite right to just hand it off to Randid. I really want it to go to the next generation of my family. That meant my child would be inheriting, though it wasn't right to make Mui do it. Besides, she was sure to refuse and I didn't want to tie her down to a village in the middle of nowhere.

I'd met so many people since leaving the village. Nevertheless, I couldn't bring myself to touch the topic of marriage or heirs. I knew only that my child would inherit my sword. I was aware that I doted on Mui like crazy, so it was easy to predict how I would act around a child of my own making.

“This is rough...”

My former pupils like Allusia and Selna idolized me. However, I couldn't really see any of them as my future partner.

“Can't an encounter with a wonderful woman just fall into my lap?”

I knew this was wishful thinking, but after having lived for so many years, I had no idea how to go about this. *God only knows, so they say.* Besides, even if an encounter *did* just fall into my lap, it would be meaningless if I didn't notice it. I didn't feel particularly impatient about this, but now that I was living with Mui, the thought crossed my mind every now and then. Maybe I was at fault for only thinking and not doing anything about it.

“Well, it'll work out one way or another...”

I felt like I'd muttered those words before, but that was the simple truth. I didn't feel it necessary to seek out a partner, so I had no choice but to leave myself to the whims of fate. For better or worse, I was far closer to the center of the world in Baltrain than I'd been during my time in Beaden. *But do I even want that life? I'm not sure...*

"Right, time to head home."

I'd told Mui about having dinner at the palace, so she probably wasn't waiting for me with an empty stomach. Still, because of my stop at the tavern, it was getting pretty late. I didn't want to worry her too much, so I decided to hurry back.

Heading to my own home instead of to an inn lifted my spirits. I felt a warmth that I hadn't experienced during my early days in Baltrain. Still, it was only going to last until Mui graduated from the magic institute and set off on her own. I hadn't decided what to do after that. If I didn't find a spouse by then, would my solo lifestyle pick right back up?

So, I continued walking down the streets. Someone was waiting at home for me, and I felt both blossoming happiness and a bit of loneliness at the prospect.

My footsteps were a little lighter than they'd been during my early days in Baltrain.

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 Three. I'm honestly so happy that this story has continued—it's been published without any problems for three volumes. Hip, hip, hooray!

Much like with volume two, it's been five months since the last release. I wrote my last afterword in November, but it feels like time just flew by. I'll be talking about the story for a bit, so if you haven't read this volume yet, be careful of spoilers.

Now then, this volume's general framework is the appearance of another pupil followed by a battle with said pupil. Having a serious fight with a pupil was something I really wanted to write about, so I'm glad I got to.

Beryl's position means he should only have training matches with his pupils, so I really wanted to write about a serious clash. I hope that gets across in a satisfactory manner.

Rose is one of our new characters, and I personally like her quite a lot. Writing things in first person from Beryl's perspective limits the depth somewhat, but I hope her personality expresses itself well, even if only a little.

I'll keep it to myself whether Rose will show up again or not. I have designs for several bits of plot development, but whether they see the light of day will be something for you to look forward to, depending on how well volume three sells.

Mui, who moved in with Beryl during the last volume, shows up in this one pretty often. She's less of a heroine and more of a daughter, but that makes her a little closer to Beryl than the heroine candidates.

As always, she treats Beryl as "the old guy" and isn't honest with herself. Will the day come when she calls him something else? That may or may not come up in the future, so you'll have to look forward to that too.

That sums up volume three. To tell the truth, I went through a loop of checking it over with my editor quite a few times. I find it pretty easy to write things from scratch, but I have a lot of problems making adjustments to what I've already finished. In that sense, it was a rough road.

The loop of "All done! But this part's no good!" really wears down my spirit. During my days as a web novel author, I could just write whatever I wanted however I wanted, but that doesn't fly when doing this as part of a business.

Still, it really makes me feel like everything is that much more polished, and this process has emphasized how important a third-party perspective is. It's only obvious, but writing on my own and being content after one pass definitely limits quality.

Also, in the same month as this volume is being published, the first volume of the manga is going on sale. I wrote about it in volume two's afterword as well, but I believe Satou did an amazing job adapting my work, so please give it a look. Beryl is cool, Allusia is cute, Selna is also cute, and Kewlny and Ficelle are cute too. They're all so cute. Lucy stands out in both the novel and manga. She's a character with a ton of pros and cons, but I rather like her. I want her to constantly come in and disturb everything as the troublesome friend character.

Incidentally, the major strokes of the story are the same, but the manga has quite a few differences in the details of events and how things flow. Things related to Lucy are especially different. Going over the completed manuscript really gave me a sense of how things are expressed differently when portrayed in a different medium. I offered my opinion every now and then, but Satou is very good at respecting the source material, so even as the author, I can look at its development with relief in my heart. It's like having one meal and with twice the flavor, so please support the manga version's first volume too.

Now then, I've torn through a bunch of pages for the afterword as I always do. It ended up with me just rambling about a bunch of things. I pray that we meet again here in five months.

Until next time.



The human tidal wave had finally come to a stop. I took a breath and wondered whether the prince and princess had gotten away. I had no idea how many people I'd killed, just that I'd faced a ridiculous number of assassins.

"Phew..."



FROM OLD COUNTRY
BUMPKIN
TO **MASTER**
SWORDSMAN

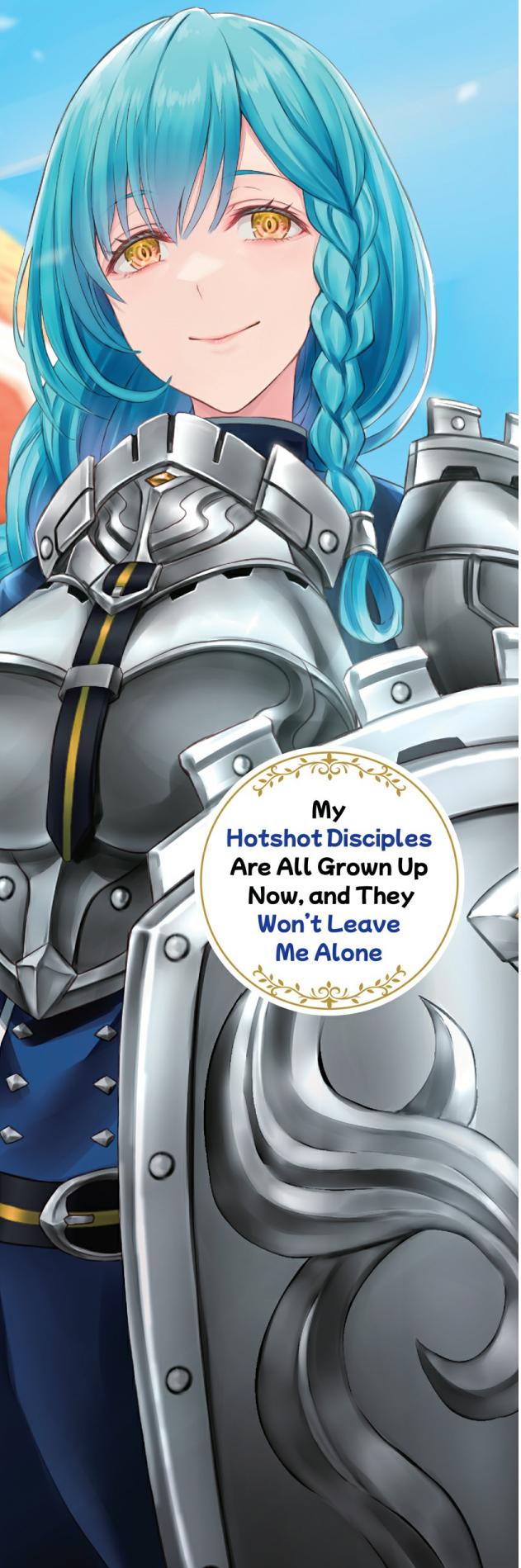


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Shigeru Sagazaki

Illustration

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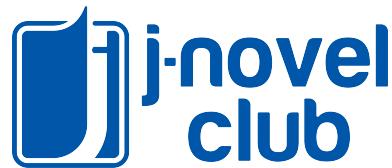
My
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From Old Country Bumpkin to Master Swordsman: My Hotshot Disciples Are All Grown Up Now, and They Won't Leave Me Alone Volume 3

by Shigeru Sagazaki

Translated by Hikoki Edited by C.D. Leeson

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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. 3

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