

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

Illustration

Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

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ALLUSIA
SITRUS

KEWLNY
CRUCIELLE

BERYL
GARDINANT

BALDUR
GASP

I grabbed the hand that had reached
for me in the darkness.
A pickpocket.
But too bad for them!
Eyesight was the one thing
this old man was particularly
confident about.

*“Can’t say I
approve of that.”*

“Crap! Let me go!”



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.



|| FICELLE HABELER



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

|| KEWLNY CRUCIELLE



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

|| 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.

|| MUI FREYA



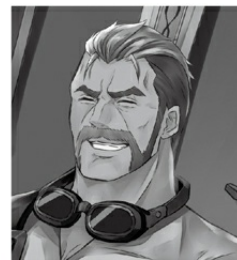
A juvenile delinquent who picks pockets at night. It seems that she has special circumstances...

|| 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.

|| BALDUR GASP



Beryl's former pupil. He has a hearty personality and works in the capital as a blacksmith. He has intense respect for Beryl.

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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. In his younger years, he dreamed of glory as a master swordsman, but those days are long behind him.

Guess I'll just continue quietly passing my days like this.

One day, as he idly ponders such thoughts, his former pupil Allusia—who's climbed the ranks to become the knight commander of the Liberion Order—visits him.

“I recommended you for a position as a special instructor to the order.”

Still bewildered by her statement, Beryl departs for the capital. There, he reunites with several of his accomplished former pupils one after the other: Selna, who has attained the highest rank of adventurer, and Ficelle, the young ace of the magic corps. What's more, he even becomes acquainted with Lucy, the commander of the magic corps.

“They definitely don't need me anymore...”

With such thoughts in mind, Beryl continues his unfamiliar new life in the capital. During this time, his well-trained swordsmanship earns him much trust, and he even defeats the named monster Zeno Grable.

And with that, Beryl's reputation as the Backwater Swordsman continues to grow day by day.

OLD BUMPKIN - MASTER SWORDSMAN

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Chapter 1: An Old Country Bumpkin Looks for a Sword

“Hmm. I’m feeling awfully restless...”

Several days had passed since the training excursion with the young adventurers and the battle against the named monster Zeno Grable. I finished my usual breakfast at the usual inn, and, upon heading outside, my fingers naturally reached for the empty space at my hip.

Now then, what do I do about this?

I was, of course, planning to continue instructing the knights. The guild’s request had been a diversion from this, but now that all the excitement was over, I figured I could return to my original...duties? Yet, even if Nidus wasn’t being exactly *open* about it, I could tell he was trying to keep me involved with the guild. Porta’s team weren’t the only newcomers, after all. And if what Selna had mentioned was true, they were short on staff capable of training youngsters. But still, dragging this old man out to supervise dungeon attacks? I’d been sweating buckets in the battle against Zeno Grable—I definitely would’ve failed had Selna not been there. Even if named monsters didn’t appear all that often, I wanted to be spared from seeing anything like that again. The lifestyle I desired was slightly more...peaceful. In that sense, being the special instructor for the order wasn’t all that bad.

“Oops, my thoughts are drifting.”

I shook my head, trying to clear my mind of all this entanglement with the adventurer’s guild. Right now, I wanted to get a replacement for my broken sword—as soon as possible. I could train with a wooden one, but a swordsman simply had to have a real blade at his hip. I’d spent so many years living that way, so being without a sword made me feel restless.

“Well... I guess a visit to a blacksmith is in order.”

I recalled the smith Allusia had introduced me to. He had some nice

longswords, which I favored. A longsword was an orthodox type of blade you could find anywhere, even at a smithy out in the sticks. I didn't travel around all over the world or anything like an adventurer, so I didn't need something super high quality. Still, given the opportunity, I wanted to upgrade from my last blade. It'd be great to buy something a little nicer...but my wallet wasn't exactly bursting.

Selna naturally knew that my sword was broken, and she'd brought up having the adventurer's guild pay for a new one. I'd refused her, though. Somehow or other, I didn't want to feel indebted to the guild. This wasn't because I had a bad impression of them—Nidus and Meigen were good people. No, I simply had scruples over being in their debt. Unlike the order, the adventurer's guild was clearly a business that saw things in terms of profit and loss. Honestly, I didn't want to get involved in that world.

"I wonder if blacksmiths are even open this early," I muttered as I walked the streets of Baltrain.

Lucy had picked a fight with me around this time of day, but nothing was accosting me at the moment. I strolled through the sparsely populated townscape while enjoying the calm atmosphere. After walking a while, I spotted a petite woman jogging toward me. When she got close enough to see who I was, she gave me a beaming smile and called out to me.

"Oh? Master Beryl!"

"Hm? Kewlny?"



“What’re you doing out so early in the morning?” I asked.

“Running! A good body is the foundation for a good knight!”

KewlNy was all smiles. Despite it being near dawn, she was already drenched in sweat. Maybe she’d jogged all the way here from her home in the eastern district. That was a good distance—most people would’ve used a carriage.

“Did you run here from the eastern district?” I asked.

“Hm? Yep! Sure did!”

“Ha ha ha... How energetic.”

Man, I definitely can’t pull that off. Youth sure is amazing.

“So, Master, what’re *you* doing out this early?” KewlNy asked, her large blue eyes staring up at me.

I found it hard to overwrite the mental image I had of her as a little girl, but as a young adult, she was very pretty in her own way. Considering how much older I was, I didn’t have any wicked thoughts, but her unguarded behavior had me a little worried. I kind of felt like a dad. *Not that I have any kids...*

“I’m also out for a morning walk,” I answered. “I was thinking of peeking into a smithy somewhere too.”

“A smithy...?”

“Yup. A *lot* happened.” I tapped my hip where the sheath for my longsword would usually be.

“Ah, now that you mention it...you’re not armed?”

“Nope—it broke. I need to find a new sword.”

“Hm! I see!”

KewlNy was getting excited for some reason. *Is there really a need for that? Well, picking a sword is a major event for a swordsman. I guess I can understand getting a little fired up.* It wasn’t a big deal to me, though.

“Hmmm, Master’s sword... I’m guessing you’ll get one, like, custom made, right?” KewlNy asked.

“No, no, not at all. I don’t give it that much thought.”

Perhaps having hit a good stopping point for her morning run, KewlNy walked at a casual pace next to me, and we continued chatting. A custom-made sword was exactly what it sounded like—everything from the length of the blade, the balance, the materials used for the hilt, and so on were made as ordered. People naturally had different arm lengths, hand sizes, and hip positions, which meant that the ideal weapon was unique to every individual. Taste played a large part too, of course. Altogether, it wasn’t all that rare for a swordsman to have a thoroughly personalized sword.

Ordering a custom blade obviously came with a ridiculous price tag, though. You had to meet with the blacksmith more than once, working out the details thoroughly as you went. For each custom order, you could expect a huge amount of time, effort, and money to vanish into thin air.

“Aww, what a waste,” KewlNy said.

“So you say, but I don’t have that much money.”

Having been kicked out of my home in Beaden, I was paying for board at the inn every day. Apparently, I’d gotten a good discount for being a long-term resident, but I couldn’t leisurely waste money. Not that buying a new sword was in any way a waste...but I couldn’t be excessive.

“For now, I plan on just taking a look around,” I said.

“That so? Well, I hope you find something you like! Ah...” KewlNy trailed off like she suddenly remembered something.

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, um, I need to get my sword sharpened. I totally forgot...”

“Ha ha ha, you’re the same as ever.”

During her time at the dojo, she’d been rather forgetful and had always been in a fluster. It made me feel warm inside that this part of her hadn’t changed over the years. As a knight, though, she probably needed to be a little more put together...

“Oh right! How ’bout you come along after training today?!” KewlNy asked

excitedly.

“Hm? You have some place in mind?” Allusia had already introduced me to the order’s recommended blacksmith, but there were likely others around here.

“Mr. Baldur’s place!” KewlNy exclaimed.

“By Baldur...you mean *that* Baldur?”

“Yeppers!”

Hmm. Haven’t heard that name in a while. Never thought he would really be running a smithy. My, how the years fly by. Now I’m starting to get excited.

“Sounds promising,” I said. “Let’s drop by after training, then.”

“Righto!”

Now then, that was enough chatting—both KewlNy and I had to devote ourselves to training. Swordsmen could only grow through constant effort. *Well, I guess that applies to pretty much any art.*



The Liberion Order’s training hall was rarely empty—at any given time, a good number of knights could be found practicing there. The order didn’t have a fixed schedule for when people trained, so each knight came by whenever they were available and motivated. Of course, there were fewer people around as it got later into the night. Knights preferred early mornings and early evenings. My schedule as an instructor wasn’t set in stone either, so I showed up sporadically when I had the time. At most, I made sure I was there throughout the morning until just past noon.

Allusia had mentioned that since I’d arrived, more knights had started dropping in for daily training. This brought me great joy as an instructor. Knights were serious and honest, and a person who dedicated themselves to swinging their sword was sure to improve over time. As for what I did specifically, well, I observed the knights’ swordplay, gave them advice, participated in mock battles, and other instructor-like things. This wasn’t the dojo, so we didn’t have everyone gather and go through basic forms or anything. Knights weren’t violent people by nature, but because they pursued further strength, many

tended toward asking for more practical guidance, like mock battles. It was a fresh experience. They also truly listened to any advice I gave, so there'd been hardly any problems to date.

"All righty! Let's go, Master!"

"Yeah, yeah, after we get changed."

Having finished her daily training regimen, Kewlmy once more struck up a conversation with me while drenched in sweat. She really did get sweaty a lot... Well, being energetic was a good thing. Just as we'd discussed this morning, I was planning to visit Kewlmy's blacksmith after training. I hadn't expected much from her suggestion at first, but once I learned that it was Baldur, my expectations had soared.

"Master, may I accompany you as well?"

"Allusia? Well, sure. I've got no reason to say no."

Allusia had also been instructing the knights and was glistening with exertion much like I was. *Another sweaty person joins the conversation...* I didn't really mind her tagging along, but was there a point? I couldn't think of one. Not that I was going to admit that.

"When it comes to selecting your sword," Allusia said, "it's only natural to check that the blacksmith has the skills to forge the highest quality blade possible."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Calm down, okay?"

Welp, here comes Allusia's hopeless side. Let's chill out a bit, okay? Allusia had been using the farewell sword I'd given her this entire time. There were countless swords out there that were better, but she obstinately refused to get a new one. She probably had an interest in weapons, and given her position as the knight commander, I would've preferred that she carry a better, nicer-looking blade. Perhaps this was just a form of parental meddling, but given the opportunity, I wanted Allusia to pick out a brand-new sword too...though that hope was very likely a waste of energy on my part.

"Okay, then. Let's meet up outside the office once we're all changed," I said.

“Understood.”

“Righto!”

So, we were now going to visit Kewlmy's blacksmith as a group of three. The visit was just to pick a sword for little old me, so this lineup made me as restless as ever. *I have got to get used to people staring at me. What a pain.*

“Thank you for waiting.”

“Thanks for waiting!”

As expected, a man like me was changed and ready before the two women. I waited a while in front of the office until Allusia and Kewlmy came outside. Kewlmy was, as usual, dressed in a casual outfit that was easy to move in. Allusia, while not quite dressed flashily, wore something that really highlighted her body's lines. Wasn't she embarrassed? Well, if she was fine with it, then it wasn't my place to say anything. Kewlmy carried a blade that was shorter than my old one or Allusia's. This was probably the shortsword that needed sharpening. The weapon suited her petite frame quite well.

“Shall we get going?” I asked. “I'll leave the navigation to you.”

“Okay! Mr. Baldur's place is in the central district.”

I didn't know the way, so Kewlmy took the lead. We walked for a while, and then Allusia turned to me.

“Master, I suppose you'll be choosing a longsword again?”

“Yeah, that's the plan.”

I was very familiar with the weight and length of a longsword, so I hadn't even thought about switching to something else after all these years. Frankly, it would be pretty hard to get used to a new weapon at this age. My lack of explosive strength had been made evident in the battle against Zeno Grable, but I wasn't in a position to fight against such monsters to begin with—that had been an entirely irregular event, and I prayed that I never got thrown into the powder keg like that again. *Well, as long as I remain the special instructor for the order, I shouldn't end up in situations like that.*

We continued walking through the central district, which was different from the tumult of the western district but still had a certain energy in the air. I definitely saw a lot more people in stiff-looking outfits. Many organizations that were pillars of the country had their headquarters in Baltrain, including the Liberion Order and the adventurer's guild, so these people were likely part of one such organization. Strictly speaking, the guild wasn't under any nation's jurisdiction, but they'd integrated themselves all over the world. Every country relied on the guild, especially when it came to maintaining public order, though the degree to which they did so differed.

Now that I thought about it, I wondered where the magic institute was. I didn't really have any business there, but I wanted to complain to Lucy's face. *If I have time later, I'll look into it and pay a visit.*

"Here we are! Right over there!"

"Hmm."

After walking for a while, we found ourselves in front of a typical house that'd been remodeled into a smithy. The large sign hanging over the door was emblazoned with the shop's name—Baldur's Smithy. Simple and right to the point. Kewlny opened the door energetically and the three of us went inside.

"Mr. Baldur!" Kewlny yelled.

"Ooh! Wel...come... Oh, Kewlny."

"Mrgh! What's with the rude greeting?! I'm totally a customer here!"

"Gah ha ha! Sorry! Sorry!"

A somewhat old man with firm muscles came out from the back to greet us. He had a dry and mature voice. His short silver hair and well-trimmed beard gave off a somewhat dapper impression. His burly biceps were visible beneath his short sleeves, and his pecs stood out clearly, even through his clothes. The man's large body certainly didn't match his age...in a good way, that is. He was older than me and younger than my dad.

"Oh, I see you're with Lady Citrus, and... Ooh?!"

After glancing at Kewlny and Allusia, his eyes stopped on me.

“Long time no see, Baldur.”

“If it ain’t Master Beryl! It’s been a while!” Shock and joy were clear in his voice and expression. “How many years has it been? How’ve you been doing?”

“I’ve been getting by,” I responded. “It’s good to see you in good health, Baldur.”

“Yeah. You can tell just by looking at this body!” he exclaimed, flexing his biceps.

He really was healthy. It felt like illness and injury were foreign concepts to him.

Allusia seemed somewhat taken aback by our exchange. “Master, are you acquainted?”

This was a perfectly reasonable question from her perspective. Allusia and Baldur’s time at the dojo hadn’t overlapped, so it made sense that she didn’t know.

“Yeah. It’s probably surprising, but he’s also one of my former pupils.”

Baldur Gasp—I remembered him very well. After all, among the many pupils I’d taught, he’d been the only one older than me. He’d attended our dojo at the same time as Kewlmy and Ficelle, which was why Kewlmy was so friendly with him. Allusia had come afterward, so she didn’t know him.

As an aside, in Beaden, the dojo was pretty well-known, so being a pupil there was a point of connection for people. However, in Baltrain, hardly anyone knew about the dojo, so talking to people about one’s training there was pretty meaningless.

Now, back to Baldur. He’d attended our dojo for just over a year. His goal hadn’t been to perfect his swordsmanship, so he hadn’t stayed for very long. He’d knocked at our doors, hoping to understand how it felt to swing a sword—this, he’d said, would enlighten him on his journey to become a blacksmith. He was older than me but still filled with such curiosity and an insatiable thirst for knowledge. It’d left me really astonished.

That was why he’d swung a sword—not to learn techniques, but to figure out

what made a swordsman choose a certain blade. Honestly, I'd spent more time giving him lectures about what factors made a weapon suitable for a swordsman. He'd paid the tuition fee, so I'd had nothing to complain about. Still, the sight of him staring from a corner of the dojo as the other pupils eagerly swung their swords over and over was still fresh in my mind. Baldur had been the only one like that. Though, of course, he'd participated in our training too.

"You really set up your own shop," I said. "Congratulations."

"Yeah, thanks. It was a pretty rough road."

Baldur proudly gazed around his shop. It was fairly small but still looked nice. I owed a lot to blacksmiths because of my profession, so I was capable of distinguishing whether the people working the smithy were properly doing their jobs. The cramped walls of Baldur's shop were lined with all sorts of weapons, and judging by appearance, each one was very well maintained. It was easy to imagine how sharp they were. This gave me a small glimpse at his skill.

"So?" Baldur turned to us. "I assume you came here 'cause you need something."

"Yup! Sharpening for me!" KewlNy answered immediately.

We could leave my sword for later. I was honestly just tagging along.

Baldur nodded. "Let's take a look-see."

"Here ya go."

KewlNy removed the shortsword from her waist and handed it to Baldur. He drew it from its sheath and stared at the blade for a while.

"KewlNy... You serious?" Baldur sighed. "Buy a new one."

"Waaaah?! Why?!"

Everything had a life span, even weapons and armor. Much like my longsword coming to a sudden end, the day would come when a blade became unusable (though it was pretty rare for swords to break as cleanly as mine had). My sword's demise had been an accident and nothing more—it would've been impossible for anyone to predict that. However, barring unusual circumstances,

a blacksmith could judge a weapon's life span.

"Is her blade busted or something?" I asked.

"Hmm, not exactly," Baldur answered. "Several chips along the cutting edge are too deep. Sharpening won't fill them in."

"Ah, I see."

This was less a problem of life span and more an issue with the wielder's technique. *Well, that's pretty common.* Weapons weren't all-purpose, and there was a proper way to use each one. To cite an extreme example, slamming the flat of the blade against your opponent could never cut through them, no matter how sharp the sword was—that technique prevented the blade from functioning at its full potential and rendered the weapon useless.

If used properly, tools—especially weapons—could be used for a surprisingly long time. Swords were meant for fighting, so they were made to be very durable. There were three main reasons a blade might get chipped like this: the sword was reaching the end of its life, the wielder tried to cut something not meant to be cut, or the swordsman's skills didn't match the weapon.

"Kewlny, did you try to cut something weird?" I asked.

"Why would you think that?!" she protested. "I've only ever used it for training and combat!"

Training and combat, huh? Neither option excluded the possibility of her trying to slice through something strange, but I decided to leave that topic alone for now.

"I've witnessed her swordplay," Allusia chimed in. "I don't believe she's been swinging it *that* recklessly."

"Hmm..."

Well, Kewlny *had* studied at our dojo—she wasn't likely to be careless as a member of the order. I'd also observed her training, and I hadn't seen her trying to force victory with brute strength. All in all, I concluded that there had to be a different reason for the damage to her sword.

"You say all that, but, Kewlny, you don't normally get chips like this," Baldur

insisted. “How’ve you been using this thing?”

“Normally! Totally! Normally!”

“Now, now.”

I tried to calm Kewlny as her discontent flared. We weren’t here to bully her, and we weren’t going to get anywhere by prodding her for faults. *Hmm. It’s hard to imagine, given her build, but maybe...*

“Kewlny, how does it feel when you use a shortsword?” I asked.

“Hwuh?” She froze for a moment, not quite sure how to react. “How does it feel...? It’s nice and light, I guess?”

“That’s it,” Baldur and I said in unison.

“Huuuh? Wh-What do you mean?” Kewlny asked.

“A simple conclusion,” I answered. “Swords don’t suit you.”

This made the most sense. To state the obvious, everyone had a different weapon they were good at wielding. There were, of course, many kinds of weapons aside from swords too. It sounded simple to find something that fit a person’s style, but it was actually pretty difficult. This was also a completely separate problem from getting a custom-made weapon. To put it plainly, getting something custom-made meant taking a specific weapon type and tailoring it for one’s body and technique. However, a person had to first identify the correct weapon—it was meaningless for someone who specialized in using spears to order a custom-made sword. Kewlny hadn’t been this strong during her days at our dojo, so she must’ve grown a lot upon joining the order.

“If you can’t even feel the weight of your weapon, there’s no way you can swing it around properly, yeah?” Baldur sighed, folding his arms. “That’s probably why you’ve been feeling sluggish lately.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m thinking the same thing.”

“Hrmm...”

It was no exaggeration to say that Baldur had attended my dojo precisely to give advice like this. In that sense, it looked like he hadn’t wasted his time. Anyway, Kewlny feeling sluggish was an entirely different matter, but judging by

her reaction, he wasn't entirely wrong about the reason. Weapons only functioned when you could feel some adequate weight, which offered feedback. Though, being too heavy was no good either. Every individual's ideal weight and balance was different. In my case, a longsword was perfect. In Kewlmy's, a shortsword obviously wasn't the answer.

"Baldur, can I take a look at your swords?" I asked.

"Sure, browse all you want."

I perused the weapons on the wall, searching for something that would suit Kewlmy. If a shortsword was too light, the same probably went for a longsword. Though they were named differently—"long" and "short"—these blades weren't actually all that different in length. In terms of pure weight, a spear or axe would be candidates, but Kewlmy's movements were optimized for swordplay. I couldn't deny the possibility of hidden potential within her, but it would be hard to dig those traits out at this point. I didn't personally know anything aside from swordsmanship anyway. Besides, swords were a staple for knights...probably.

I turned down candidates in my head one after the other. Then, my eyes fell upon a sword. I picked it up.

"Oh, how about this?"

"Huh? Like, seriously?" Kewlmy asked, taken aback by my choice.

"Just try holding it for now," I suggested.

"Uh... Sure."

It was large, very large, and the huge blade was highlighted by a blunt ricasso right above the hilt. This was a two-handed sword commonly referred to as a zweihander. Efficiency, taste, and compatibility couldn't be determined without actually trying new things, and Kewlmy had a lot of physical strength despite her small frame—it was possible this kind of weapon suited her.

"Hup... Like this?" Kewlmy asked anxiously, holding the zweihander in a fighting stance.

"Yeah. Doesn't seem all that bad," I remarked.

Our dojo pretty much only had one-handed wooden swords. KewlNy still used a shortsword, so her taste had likely been informed by her days training at the dojo. So, I understood her bewilderment at suddenly being recommended a two-handed sword.

“How does it feel?” I asked.

I wasn’t trying to force it on her or anything. At most, my goal was to find her a suitable weapon, so if this didn’t jive with her, we simply had to look for something else.

“Hmm... It’s not light, but not exactly heavy either,” she answered.

“Mm. Not bad, then.”

It was pretty impressive to hold a two-handed sword and claim it wasn’t heavy. *When did KewlNy turn into a muscly power type?* Honestly, forgetting about swords and going right for a halberd or poleaxe might suit her, which was a somewhat frightening thought. Seeing her like this, a shortsword probably hadn’t felt heavier than a twig to her, which explained why she hadn’t been using it properly.

“This, um, ricasso? I think? It really stands out.” KewlNy shifted her hands on the hilt, trying out different grips.

“Yeah. The way you use this is a little different from most two-handed swords.”

Unlike normal two-handed swords, a zweihander had a blunt section near the handle called a ricasso. By using it as a fulcrum, it was possible to wield this sword like a halberd. Altogether, a zweihander had a wider breadth of tactical applications than the typical sword.

“It suits you and all, but if you want it, you’ll have to pay up,” Baldur said, pointing out the obvious.

He couldn’t just go around handing out weapons for free. As a blacksmith, this was, without a doubt, his livelihood. I wondered how much the sword would cost. I’d recommended the zweihander casually, but given the current mood in the room, KewlNy’s choice had been made. Was that really okay? Maybe I should’ve given my suggestion more thought.

“Ah, right. How much?” KewlNy asked.

“Let’s see...” Baldur said, thinking it over. “I’ll give you a discount—eighty thousand dalcs. That’s as low as I can go.”

“Mrgh... I don’t have enough on me,” KewlNy responded, grimacing.

The dalc was the local currency in Liberis. It depended largely on where and how luxuriously you lived, but a hundred thousand dalcs a month was enough to live a comfortable lifestyle out in Beaden. *Eighty thousand dalcs...*

Considering the type of weapon and the quality, that was pretty cheap. But KewlNy had only come here to get her sword sharpened. She was likely being honest that she didn’t have enough money on her. All in all, it was a lot to spend at once. Still, it was a good price for a brand-new weapon. Definitely discounted.

Incidentally, I was paying three thousand dalcs a night for the inn I was staying at. I had it booked long-term, so this was apparently quite the discount too. *Maybe I should’ve just rented a house. I’ll have to give it some thought.*

“Oh well. Wait here a sec.”

The moment he heard KewlNy didn’t have enough, Baldur vanished into the back of his workshop. He came out a moment later holding a zweihander with a somewhat shorter blade.

“You can take this one for twenty thousand.”

“Huh?! Really?!”

“That sure is cheap,” I said, taking a good look at the zweihander. From what I could see, it didn’t have any defects. There weren’t any visible chips, and it looked nice and sharp. “Why sell it for so little?” No matter how I looked at it, this blade was worth more than twenty thousand.

“Ah, I made this thing a while ago just to test things out,” Baldur explained. “It’s something like a prototype. The blade is pretty short, yeah? But it’s just gathering dust in the back. If KewlNy is gonna use it, I’ll let it go for cheap.”

“I see.”

This was a pretty rare occurrence, but it did happen. All craftsmen strove to

hone their skills. Advertisement and such could draw in business, but a blacksmith's income largely revolved around their skill. So, after forging all sorts of things to hone their abilities, they would inevitably end up with odd items—things that were fairly good but that the smith was reluctant to sell because of emotional attachment. If the item in question was poor quality, a smith wouldn't hesitate to scrap it, but if it was well-made, then the item went into a sort of limbo. I'd received such swords from the blacksmith in Beaden too.

"The blade being shorter might actually work out better," I commented. "Kewlny *is* awfully short."

It was extremely cheap for a sword and of decent quality—this was a good combination of factors for one trying out a new type of weapon. What's more, the relatively short blade for a zweihander turned out to be a bonus. Kewlny was short, so it would be difficult to handle an excessively long blade.

"Gotcha! Then I'll take it!" Kewlny decided.

"Sure thing. Thanks for the business."

And just like that, without really questioning it at all, Kewlny quickly settled on a zweihander as her new weapon. I was the one who'd recommend it, but was that really all right? I was a little worried.

"Ah, by the way, Allusia?"

"Yes? What is it?"

Suddenly coming to a realization, I turned to Allusia. She'd been observing the swords on the wall. Apparently, she really did have an interest in blades. *If only she'd buy herself a replacement already...*

"Um, is it fine to use a zweihander in the order?" I asked. "Everyone usually uses a longsword, right?"

Allusia used a longsword, and judging by Henbrit's swordplay, that was also his forte. Pretty much all the other knights trained using standard wooden swords too. In short, they favored longswords. It would feel weird to have one person among them using a zweihander.

"There are no particular restrictions in that regard," Allusia explained. "A

longsword is bestowed to each knight upon joining the order, but it's ceremonial at most."

"I see..." It seemed it wasn't really a problem. That was a relief.

But...hang on, Allusia. If the order gave you a sword, then why not use that one instead of the old one from the dojo? Can I tell her that? No? Well, maybe the sword given by the order wasn't suited for combat, and more for ceremonies or festivities.

"Ah, Master, Master!" Kewlmy called out to me in delight, accepting the sheathed zweihander from Baldur.

"Hm? What's up?"

"This is my first time using a two-handed sword. Can you, like, teach me a bunch?"

"Oh, sure. I'll teach you the basics." Sending her off on her own with nothing more than a zweihander would leave her stumped, after all.

"Sorry, but we don't got room for that here," Baldur said.

Ah, so he didn't have a space for practicing. This *was* the central district, so land price was at a premium—having enough room to swing a zweihander would mean paying far more.

"All right, then let's use the order's training hall," I suggested.

"Sure! I'll be in your care!"

There were surprisingly few places in Baltrain where one could freely swing a sword around. The order's training hall and the one in the adventurer's guild were the only spots I knew of. You couldn't exactly brandish a sword on the street.

I'd been the one to recommend a two-handed sword, but I hadn't really mastered one myself. My knowledge of the longsword could be applied to its general use, but still...

"Please wait a moment, Master."

Kewlmy's business here was done, so I was ready to head off to the training

hall to teach her the basics, but Allusia suddenly called me to a halt.

“You still haven’t chosen a sword for yourself,” she said.

“Oh, right.”

I totally forgot. Thanks, Allusia.

“Hmm? A sword for Master Beryl?” Baldur asked. His ears pricked up, and I couldn’t overlook the suspicious glimmer in his eyes.

Cut that out! I just want a normal sword!

Baldur’s keen gaze fixed on the empty space at my hip. “Oh yeah. I see you don’t have one on you.”

“Aaah, things happened. Mine broke.” There was no point lying about it. It had, in fact, broken. Not that I’d expected it to.

“I doubt you misused it or anything,” said Baldur. “Had an accident?”

“Something like that.”

Baldur let out a hearty laugh.

Hey, it actually was an accident! How else would you describe jamming a sword in a named monster’s mouth only to have a black rank adventurer dice up the blade along with said monster’s head?

“Anyway, a longsword, right?” Baldur inquired. “We’ve got those, but won’t it make more sense for you to get something custom-made?”

You’re saying the same crap as Kewlny! I’m fine with a normal sword!

“Well, I don’t exactly have money to spare,” I said. “I’m fine with buying a blade off the shelf.”

This wasn’t a lie, though I had to admit—a custom-made sword was an enticing prospect. Any swordsman would want to own such a weapon at least once. However, I found it questionable whether I was skilled enough to be worthy of wielding one. I also didn’t have the money or time to spare on such an investment. *Well, actually, I probably do have the time.*

Baldur nodded. “If you say so, I won’t keep insisting. But still...”

Time for me to shift the conversation slightly. “Honestly, I feel like Allusia needs a custom-made sword more than I do.”

I was a bit pleased that she was still using my farewell sword, but it really was just a mediocre blade that’d been forged out in the sticks. One could hardly claim that it was suitable for the knight commander of the Liberion Order. I hadn’t given her something worthless, but considering her status and skill, her stubbornness on this point was hard to stomach.

“No, I already have *my* sword,” Allusia insisted.

Baldur stared at her flatly. “So she says.”

Aaand that was the problem. Allusia largely listened to whatever I had to say, but this was one instance when she obstinately refused to back down. What spurred her to act like that? I couldn’t understand.

Baldur shrugged. “Well, no point trying to convince someone when their mind’s made up. C’mon, I’ve got plenty of longswords. Pick any you want.”

“Sure, thanks.”

The reason I didn’t want a custom blade differed from why Allusia refused to use anything but my farewell sword, but there was one commonality between us: nobody else could force us to bend. Recognizing this, I simply had to give up on trying to convince her.

I shifted gears and began looking at the longswords decorating Baldur’s walls. There were plenty of them, but they all looked very similar. The blades were largely eighty to a hundred centimeters long. They all had about the same thickness—more slender than Selna’s broadswords—and they all weighed about the same, which was a heft I was very familiar with.

“Hmmm.”

I picked up and inspected one after another. None were bad. Every sword was sharp and well-balanced. When compared to the ideal of a typical longsword, I could find nothing to complain about, and my senses told me that these were in no way inferior to the swords I’d seen at the order’s official purveyor.

“They’re nice,” I mumbled. “Each one has a splendid edge.”

“Well, yeah. I do this for a living.”

Hmm. I kinda feel like any of these will do. They were all made with quality in mind and all very similar—in a good way. I did, of course, have an interest in weapons other than the longsword, but I wasn’t going to train myself to use something else after all these years.

“Do you have any recommendations?” I asked Baldur.

“Can’t really say... The longswords here are all pretty much the same.”

His answer was roughly what I’d expected. A longsword’s forte was versatility, and it was useful in all sorts of situations—this was the defining feature of shortswords too. Any weapon with a specialty would be given a different name. In other words, longswords were completely mediocre.

“If you’re having this much trouble picking one, shouldn’t you, like, go with a custom-made sword after all?” Kewlmy interjected.

Her new zweihander was a little too large to hang at her waist, so she was using a strap to carry it on her back. The juxtaposition between her petite stature and the huge sword was kinda cool. It was still unclear whether she could use it properly, but appearances were important to a knight too. Of course, I had no idea whether the order would accept her wielding it.

“I haven’t really thought about it...” I mumbled. “Hmm, maybe I’m still influenced by my old sword.”

My beloved broken sword hadn’t been a masterpiece, but it’d served me quite well, and I’d gotten used to it over the years. Maybe I was still unconsciously attached to it.

“You do become bonded to a weapon you use for years,” Allusia agreed.

That was exactly my point, but coming from her, the statement felt a lot heavier. It’d be nice if this was all just a case of my imagination working overtime, but I knew deep down that what she’d said was true. You could never have the same weapon twice. Even if you used identical materials and forged using identical methods, it would still be different. There were times when you could take one look at a weapon and spot the difference, but often you couldn’t tell until you started actually wielding it. My last blade, like Allusia’s farewell

sword, had been a plain old weapon forged in Beaden, but I'd used it for a really long time. Its peculiarities must've been ingrained within me, though I hadn't realized until now.

"Well, fate plays a part in the selection process too," Baldur said. "If it's not a huge inconvenience to go without a sword for a bit, you don't gotta buy one today."

Baldur was a blacksmith—a craftsman by nature, and a swordsman through training, but not quite a merchant. As such, he didn't press people for a sale. I was grateful for that.

"Yeah..."

I couldn't shrug off how restless I felt without a sword, but I wasn't sure whether I should buy one right now. Though I was picky, it wasn't to the point that I wanted something custom made. Baldur's swords weren't in any way inadequate—they just didn't resonate with me for some reason. I couldn't really give a logical explanation for it.

"Oh yeah." Baldur's eyes lit up. "If you ever go on a dungeon attack or something, bring me the materials. I'll buy them off you, and if you want, I can use them to forge you a sword."

"Ha ha ha. I will, if it ever happens."

Why did everyone assume I wanted to go on dungeon attacks? Baldur didn't know that I'd gone to the Azlaymia Forest. Allusia probably knew, but it wasn't really something to spread rumors about. Nonetheless, the topic had still come up. *Why? Why does everyone think it's logical for me to go on dungeon attacks? I'm just a plain old man who wants to live in peace.*

As I continued looking at swords, still unable to choose, the door to the shop opened.

"Excuse me," said a voice from the entrance. "Baldur, are you here? Oh, Master...and Citrus."

"What's with that look?" Allusia complained. "Well, I suppose we *have* been meeting a lot lately."

Baldur turned to the door. “Oh? If it ain’t Selna. What’s up? Pretty sure I just sharpened your broadswords the other day.”

It was the black rank adventurer, Selna. *Guess meeting up here was just a coincidence—she actually has business with Baldur.* Anyway, we really did bump into each other a lot. Even when adventurers had stayed in Beaden, I’d hardly ever seen any, but since coming to the capital, I’d been constantly bumping into them.

“Yeah you did. I’m not here to get my swords sharpened, though.” Selna nodded and dropped some items onto the counter with a *thud*. “These are materials from the named monster Zeno Grable. I’d like you to use them to forge a longsword.”

“A named monster? When did you bag such big game?” Baldur mumbled as he inspected the claws, hide, bones, and other parts.

“Just the other day,” Selna replied proudly. “The materials have finally been collected.”

Baldur picked up a piece, flicked it with his finger, and then, perhaps because that was inadequate, he pulled out a small hammer and started tapping it.

“Hmm... Sure is solid.”

Zeno Grable had been awfully sturdy. It’d taken me everything just to scratch its outer hide, so its claws and bones were surely tough as well.

Baldur finished inspecting the items and then asked the obvious question on everyone’s minds. “Selna, why do you want a longsword?”

I had a bad premonition. Well, phrasing it like that was somewhat rude. Regardless, I figured I was right, but I held my tongue and hoped I wasn’t.

“I was thinking of giving it to Master Beryl,” Selna answered. “And since he’s already here, it makes things simpler.”

This is exactly what I expected.

“Selna,” I said. “I’m pretty sure I already refused.”

Despite my protest, I was indeed grateful. I was missing a weapon right now, and I couldn’t even feign disinterest in a blade made from a named monster’s

materials. Honestly, it sounded pretty exciting.

However...

Selna had been the one to defeat Zeno Grable, and the whole expedition had been under the guild's jurisdiction—I didn't want to be the old man who barged in and ran off with the goods. Also, as previously mentioned, I didn't want to owe the adventurer's guild anything.

"But, Master, this stuff is really high quality," Baldur said, offering his unvarnished opinion. "The outcome'll depend on my skill, but I feel like I can make something pretty great. Since she's offering, shouldn't you just accept it?"

"Hm? 'Master'?" *Selna* tilted her head. "You studied there too, Baldur?"

Ah, right. We hadn't yet explained how I was acquainted with Baldur. Not many people knew. Though she and Baldur had both trained at the dojo, they'd been very different types of students. Strictly speaking, *Selna* hadn't acted much like the others. I'd taught her how to use a sword, but at the time, our relationship had been different from that of an instructor and a pupil. This was partly why I couldn't help but look at her with the eyes of a guardian.

"Yeah, Baldur also went to our dojo," I replied. "But he was only there for a little over a year."

"Is that so?" *Selna* asked. She seemed somewhat taken aback, but she quickly came to an understanding. "That explains why he has the senses of a swordsman despite being a blacksmith."

"Well, that's what I enrolled in the dojo to learn," said Baldur.

It was as he said—that had been his entire reason for coming to Beaden. *He's a pretty strange old man.* I was sure there were tons of dojos out there, so why had he chosen one in the backcountry? Well, so long as he didn't regret his choice, that detail didn't really matter.

"Master, allow me to correct you on one matter," *Selna* said. "The adventurer's guild is no longer related to this."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Selna knew I was reluctant to accept a custom sword. So, if she was still trying

to secure me a weapon made from Zeno Grable's materials, it meant she had some way to clear my apprehensions.

"These items are my personal possessions," she explained. "They were included in my reward for eliminating the target. What's more, you haven't accepted any money for defeating Zeno Grable."

"You're the one who killed it," I retorted. "I don't have any right to accept a reward."

"Not so. Even if a team was temporary, everyone on the expedition should receive compensation. Porta and the others have been rewarded for their part as well."

"Hmm..."

Knowing that made it harder to refuse. I'd heard that the elimination of a named monster came with a bounty. But since the world of adventuring was so distant from my own rural lifestyle, I'd never known any more than that. If those three newbies had accepted money, then there was no reason for me to refuse. I didn't truly understand it, but I did know one thing: I had no intention of taking money from the guild.

Selna seemed to anticipate my thoughts on the matter. "Even if you want to disregard the monetary reward...well, I broke your sword, and I'd like to make it up to you. That's all."

"When you put it like that..." I'd already said that she didn't need to worry about my sword, but the whole issue had definitely been bothering her.

"At this point," Baldur said, "it would be rude of you to *not* take her up on it."

"Yeah..."

He did have a point. If this had nothing to do with being rewarded by the guild and was instead a personal gift from Selna, then it shouldn't bother me, right? *But it does. There's no reason for Selna to use these precious materials on me.* Yet, objectively speaking, Selna *had* broken my sword. Would it be poor manners to consistently refuse her the chance to make it right? I didn't really understand the subtleties of the heart in this respect. Perhaps this was an adverse effect of having spent too much time holed up in a backwater village.

“Hmm, well...” I thought about it one last time. “If you insist, then I guess I can accept. I’m grateful.”

Selna nodded vigorously. “Yes! I insist! Please do!”

My primary concern had been to avoid getting involved with the adventurer’s guild more than necessary. If I didn’t have to worry about that, then accepting her offer didn’t seem so bad. *And I do need a new sword.*

“A sword for Master Beryl!” Baldur bellowed, staring at the materials. “I’m itching to get started!”



Well, the weapons in this shop were proof of his skill. I could only pray that my sword didn't come out as a one-of-a-kind oddity.

I leveled Baldur with a serious stare. "A normal sword—you got that?"

"Sure thing," he replied energetically. "I don't plan on forging anything weird, so relax."

"He seems to be a skilled blacksmith," said Allusia. "I can tell by looking at his swords."

During my conversation, she'd been browsing the weapons in the shop with Kewlny. *It's good that you have a discerning eye, Allusia. Now, this old man would love it if you would go with the flow and get yourself a new sword too. No? Guess not. Dammit.*

"Let's see... I've gotta process the materials too, so gimme a week," Baldur said. "You can come get it after that. Can I assume you're footing the bill, Selna?"

"Yeah, I don't mind," Selna answered. "I don't care about the price—give it everything you've got."

"Gah ha ha! Roger that!"

It was supposed to be *my* sword, but things were proceeding without my input. Was the blade really going to end up normal? And was the cost going to be reasonable? *I'm a little worried now.*

"Well, I guess I'll look forward to it," I said. "Be back in a week. You good with that?"

"Sounds great," Baldur replied. "Keep your hopes up, Master. I'll see you all later."

Baldur immediately took the materials off the counter and vanished into the back. He was probably excited about forging a weapon, regardless of whether it was for me or not. What's more, when the materials were first-rate, it was the perfect chance for a blacksmith to put their skills on display.

Kewlny and Selna seemed to be finished browsing, so it was probably time for us to leave.

“Okay, Master, let’s go back to the training hall!” KewlNy exclaimed, a huge grin on her face. She stood by my side, the zweihander strapped to her back.

“Oops, almost forgot,” I murmured.

One way or another, she was probably looking forward to trying out her new weapon. It was different from anything she’d used before, so I would focus on teaching her how to wield it. She had good instincts—once she understood the fundamentals, she would be able to grow on her own, at least to a certain extent.

“Master, I’ll excuse myself here,” Selna said.

“Ah, thanks, Selna. I’ll gratefully make use of the sword once it’s done.”

“It’s fine. Don’t mention it. Bye, everyone.”

Having dropped off the materials, Selna left the Baldur Smithy. She had an awfully refreshed expression, almost like she’d been relieved of a tremendous burden. Had breaking my longsword weighed *that* heavily on her mind? Considering her mental state, me refusing might’ve affected her pretty badly. *Well, now that I know, I’m going to get my hopes up for the finished weapon.*

I turned to KewlNy. “Shall we? We’ve already trained today, so let’s keep it light.”

“Yes, sir!”

“I’ll head back as well,” Allusia said. “I have a few duties to attend to.”

Wait. She had obligations, but she still decided to come along? I hope this didn’t mess up her schedule. Well, Allusia always seemed busy, so I hoped that browsing swords had served as a good break for her.

Now then, it’d been quite some time since I’d taught anyone how to use a two-handed sword. KewlNy had left our dojo in the middle of her training, so being given the chance to guide her once more was a blessing.

Hup! Time for this old man to put in some work!



“Okay, ready to start?”

“Yes, sir!”

I stood in front of KewlNy in the Liberion Order’s training hall. We’d already finished one round of practice for the day—she and I were back for round two. Oddly, nobody else was around. This was a rare sight, as normally there were several people here no matter what time it was. Dusk was just about to fall, so maybe it was simply too late. The silent training hall seemed all the more spacious, and our voices reverberated through the empty air.

“First, try holding your sword in a fighting stance,” I instructed.

“Gotcha!”

KewlNy held her new sword at the ready. We normally trained with wooden swords, but this was her first time wielding a zweihander. Therefore, I wanted her to get a feel for the real thing. We wouldn’t be exchanging blows or anything—my sword was wooden, after all.

“The basic mechanics will be similar to what you’re used to with a shortsword,” I explained. “However, there are two major differences.”

“Hm. Hm.”

A two-handed sword was far larger, but still a sword, so the fundamentals weren’t all that different. Still, there were several factors you had to be aware of.

“First, diagonal slashes. You should almost never hold a zweihander up high and swing it down.”

“Huh? Like, really?”

KewlNy seemed to be surprised by this, and I understood where she was coming from. Many might be attracted to the idea of hefting a huge sword and swinging it straight down. That move looked massively cool. However, very few idiots actually tried it.

“Yeah. There are several reasons for this, but it’s mostly about stamina. Heaving a zweihander above your head over and over will tire you out quickly. Try giving it a few test swings downward.”

“Yes, sir! Hup! Hyah!”

KewlNy did just as I said and swung her sword down a few times. *Obedience itself could be a great weapon...* It was fine to have doubts, but it was also extremely important to try something for yourself before throwing questions around.

“Ah, it’s unexpectedly tiring,” KewlNy remarked.

“Yup. The bigger the weapon, the more strength you’ll need. If you throw your blade around recklessly, you’ll exhaust yourself right away.”

Swinging a weapon straight down mainly drew on arm strength. It was hard to use other muscles to share that burden, so no matter how you sliced it, fatigue came quickly. You *could* make use of gravity and the mobility in your dorsal muscles and hips to swing downward—this resulted in an intense attack, and in terms of pure force, it was probably the best move you could make. But none of that mattered if your target happened to dodge, and this scenario also didn’t account for multiple opponents.

I explained all this to KewlNy. “Swinging downward naturally grants you the most force possible. However, this attack leaves you wide open, and it’s hard to hit your opponent.”

“Hm, is that so?”

“It is.”

This strike could devastate an opponent who was immobilized. But those weren’t the types of enemies a knight could expect to face. Humans and monsters alike could be counted on to move and dodge. *I say leave the massive downswings to miners. After all, ore veins and rocks don’t move. That’s why pickaxes have been designed for downward strikes—the force is enough to shatter stone. It makes perfect sense.* When used in combat, however, this type of swing was hardly ever the correct choice.

“The only time you should swing downward with a large sword is when you only have one opponent, *and* they’re in a state where you’ll definitely hit them. That’s why, when you’re using a two-handed weapon, you want to focus on broad strokes.”

“Broad strokes?”

“Horizontal slashes rather than vertical ones,” I explained. “Unlike a shortsword, a zweihander has reach and weight, so you can make use of centrifugal force. Don’t let the sword get away from you. Just like this.”

I gripped my wooden sword in two hands and swung it. I didn’t use my arms to swing—I slashed with my hips. My arms moved, of course, but the pivot point of this swing was actually in the core and pelvis. To understand this technique, you had to throw away the notion of using only your arms to strike. Truly mastering swordplay took more effort and technique than simply training arm strength.

“Oh, I get it!” KewlNy exclaimed.

“To state the obvious, a horizontal slash is much more likely to hit your opponent than a vertical one. Also, it takes less stamina than having to hold your weapon up high.”

“Hm. Hm.”

KewlNy swung her sword while listening to my explanation. Though she understood the general idea, she lacked finesse. *Guess an explanation alone isn’t enough.* She was already familiar with swordplay, so I’d figured I could just teach her the differences and the rest would be a cinch. Not so, it seemed.

“Also, when you want to thrust or increase the power behind your swings a little, brace one hand against the blade’s ricasso. That’s the second difference.”

The farther back the fulcrum was, the more centrifugal force could contribute to the swing—in other words, by gripping a sword at the base of the hilt and swinging around, you could enhance the power of the blow. However, controlling a swing like that required significant strength from the wielder. If one strike was all you needed, then that would be fine, but that wasn’t realistic for an actual battle. That was where the zweihander’s ricasso became convenient. The ricasso was located far closer to the sword’s center of gravity, so if you gripped it instead of the hilt alone, you could have better control over the swing. Also, when thrusting, this technique kept shaking to a minimum.

“Ooh... Oooh? Ah, I get it.”

KewlNy swung a few times from the grip, then tried some with a hand on the

ricasso, stabilizing the strike. She then performed several thrusts. *There she goes—she's starting to get a feel for it.* After a few trial-and-error runs, she'd established the proper technique for wielding this weapon.

"I mentioned this already, but don't swing with your arms. When you use a sword, you cut with the waist."

"Cut with the waist! How nostalgic!"

It seemed Kewlmy remembered my teachings. I was grateful to hear it. "Cut with the waist" was something I'd often taught at the dojo. Those who weren't familiar with swords often tried to use only their arms to swing. And with enough muscle, this *could* work (to an extent), so it was difficult to correct the habit. That was why I drilled this mantra into all my pupils from the very beginning of their training.

That same logic applied to diagonal slashes from longswords and shortwords: accumulate strength on one side when you raise the sword, then pivot to the opposite side when swinging. This knowledge of the body was essential—I couldn't expect much improvement from students unless I drilled this into them from the start. Swords, along with all other weapons, were meant to be wielded with the entire body.

Of course, there were exceptions. I was sure some unconventional swordsmen existed out there in the wide world. But such exceptions were only permitted to those who'd mastered the basics. Those who were self-taught and wielded a sword that way were just wasting effort. I didn't want my pupils to end up like that. So, I focused on teaching the fundamentals.

I wanted each of my students to master swordplay. And if they forged their own paths, full of unique possibilities, well, I wouldn't complain. In fact, I welcomed that outcome—it would mean that they had the potential to break the mold.

Unfortunately, Kewlmy hadn't reached that territory yet. She was still young, with plenty of room to grow, so training her up from the basics would get her on the right track. Our mentoring relationship had expanded beyond the confines of the dojo, but I was still her instructor through the order, and it was my job to lead her down the right path.

“Come on, you’re still using your arms. Focus more on your waist and legs.”

“Yes, sir!”

“You’re trying to move your arms independently. Think of all your limbs as a single connected part.”

“Th-This is tough!”

“It’s a problem of focus, and that problem won’t go away if you ignore it. Pay constant attention as you swing your sword.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“Yeah, that’s the spirit! Let’s see ten more swings. One. Two...”

“Hah! Hoh! Hyah!”

We were a man and woman alone in one room, but there was nothing sweet about the atmosphere. Kewlny and I devoted our whole selves—bodies and minds—to training.

“Oops. It’s already *this* late?”

The sun was already hiding below the western horizon. The shadow at my feet stretched all the way into the darkness.

“Haah...”

Kewlny was gasping for breath. *You can’t look down on learning the basics.* Holding a heavy two-handed sword at the ready and swinging it around exhausted a lot of stamina. This went double for an unfamiliar weapon.

“Mm. It’s your first day, so let’s call it here.”

“Y-Yes, sir...”

I’d spent a good amount of time observing her basic form and leading her through practice swings. The training hall was illuminated, but outside, it was pitch-black, and the sun had set completely. Hmm, maybe we’d gone a bit too long or had been a bit too keen. Kewlny was confident in her stamina, and even *she* was dead tired.

“Let’s focus on the basics for a while.”

“Yes, sir!”

The path to mastering the sword couldn't be traversed so quickly. If it was possible to improve in a single day (and just a few hours at that) nobody would have a hard time. Swordsmanship was built on repetition, repetition, and repetition—enough to send your blood pumping and your sanity fleeing. Well, that probably applied to pretty much any skill. If magic could be perfected in a day or two, the magic institute wouldn't exist.

Judging by what little I saw today, Kewlmy's movements were better than average. However, as expected, she had a bad habit of using brute strength to swing her sword. Maybe she wasn't conscious of it. That would take time to correct, but she had good instincts. Though, looking at it another way, she had enough base strength to rely on her arms alone to swing a sword, which was impressive.

It's best to proceed patiently.

Anyway, it was difficult to notice errors in habits and technique unless you were specifically looking for them. And to do that, you needed to anticipate potential issues. Kewlmy wasn't even aware that she was swinging her sword the wrong way, and it was extremely difficult to catch this when watching from a distance. That was exactly what an instructor was for, though. This reinforced my desire to oversee Kewlmy's growth until I could give her a farewell sword. Her weapon of choice was now a zweihander, though, so it was questionable whether I would actually give her one.

“My arms hurt a little, but my waist and thighs are totally throbbing,” Kewlmy complained.

“That's a good thing. It means you're actively working those muscles.”

Bracing your legs properly was even more important when using a large weapon like a zweihander, but it meant putting more of a burden on the lower body. It wasn't good to push anyone too hard, so I thought it best to finish up before her body started screaming at her. Also, it was fairly late.

On a side note, watching the petite knight swing a huge weapon around had been quite picturesque. This was probably a reflection of my personal preferences, but there was a real charm to it. *I use a totally plain weapon, so*

maybe that flashy style just sticks out even more in my eyes...

“Hmm, it’s awfully dark,” I remarked as I walked out of the office.

“The streets are totally empty,” said KewlNy. “But I guess that makes sense.”

There was nobody in sight aside from the few knights who were standing guard. Considering the time, that seemed obvious.

“KewlNy, want me to walk you home?”

“Ah, no, no, no. I’m fine! I’m still a knight, y’know!”

“That so? All right, then.”

Even if this was the capital, a relatively safe place, it was probably dangerous for a woman to walk alone at night. I was pretty sure even an old man like me could serve as a ward against ruffians, but KewlNy rejected my offer vigorously. Well, she was definitely a knight, so there was no point in forcing the issue.

“See you, KewlNy. Be careful.”

“Righto! Thanks for the hard work, Master!”

“Mm, good job today.”

I parted ways with KewlNy in front of the office and walked off on my own into the darkness. Luckily, there was some light bleeding from inside the buildings, and street lamps glowing overhead, so it wasn’t completely dark. Visibility was still poor, though.

It was only a short walk from the order’s office to the inn I was staying at, and on the way there, I reflected on the day’s events. *I’m getting old*. After living for so many years, I tended to forget things if I didn’t dig through my memories like this.

KewlNy seemed to have an aptitude for a two-handed sword. She was the type to rely on power anyway, so despite not yet being used to the new blade profile, she wasn’t letting the sword get away from her. Her lower body was stout too, so rooting down and swinging a large sword seemed like it suited her style. My one apprehension was that she might stand out as the only person in the order to wield a zweihander. Allusia had told me it wouldn’t be a problem,

so she was probably all right.

“Hm...”

As I contemplated today’s training at length, I noticed a figure walking toward me. It was late at night, so there was pretty much nobody except me using this street. Even though the darkness significantly reduced visibility, my eyes were drawn to the unexpected sight of another person. It was pretty rare to see people out and about after the sun had set.

The ambient moonlight helped me see just a little better. The person walking toward me was wearing a dark robe that made them blend into the darkness. A hood hanging low over their face obscured their features. Not that there was any point in seeing the face of some passerby. It seemed suspicious to walk around in the dark wearing a hooded robe, but I couldn’t say much—I also looked pretty odd walking alone through the night.

There’s no point in jumping to conclusions about some stranger. Maybe it’s best for me to hurry back to the inn before the local garrison sets their eyes on me.

“Oops.”

The street wasn’t all that narrow, but as we passed, the hooded figure bumped into me. It wasn’t nice to stare, and as much as I wanted to yield the way, forget all about this, and get a drink at the inn...

“Can’t say I approve of that.”

“Hgh?!”

I grabbed the hand that had reached for me in the darkness. I’d thought this person was kind of suspicious, and my instincts had been correct. *A pickpocket—a skilled one at that. One second they were walking normally, and the next, they were going right for my pocket. But too bad for them! My eyesight is the one thing this old man is particularly confident about.*

“Fuck! Let me go!”

“No can do.”

The pickpocket was a woman, and judging by her voice, she wasn’t very old.

She froze for a moment, but immediately regained her senses and began struggling. It pained my heart a little that such a young kid was out stealing, but I still had to hand her over to the local garrison.

“Tch!”

“Whoa?!”

Suddenly, above the girl’s captured arm, flames flared to life.

Magic?!



I reflexively defended myself from the heat. Naturally, this meant I had to let go of her arm.

“Ah...”

By the time I noticed, it was too late—the fiery diversion had worked, and the girl had vanished into an alley without sparing me another glance. For a moment, I thought of chasing her, but I hadn’t been in Baltrain for very long. I didn’t know the area well and was essentially ignorant of any alleys. Add the darkness to that, and there was no guarantee I’d be able to catch her.

Regrettable. Well, she hadn’t actually succeeded in picking my pocket, so I hadn’t come to any real harm.

“Hm...?”

While gazing in the direction of the alley, I noticed something on the ground glimmering in the moonlight. I approached it curiously.

“A pendant? Guess someone lost it.”

I picked it up. It looked awfully old but well taken care of. Small scratches marred the surface, though there wasn’t a speck of dust or dirt. I didn’t know whether knights handled lost item cases, but I decided to take the pendant to them the next day. Allusia or Henbrits would probably at least tell me where I could drop it off.

“Man, I’m starting to hate fire...”

First Lucy, then Zeno Grable, and now this—recently, I’d had nothing but bad experiences with fire. Anyway, for a wizard to fall so low that they’d pick pockets... She had to be in a bad place. Judging by her voice, she was just around Kewlmy’s age, or maybe even younger. Not that I could do anything about it. Something unfortunate had obviously happened to her, and I had no choice but to leave it at that. I wasn’t a hero or some chivalrous thief; I didn’t possess that kind of noble righteousness. Not that I was a villain either.

“Well, back to the inn, I suppose.”

Naturally, nobody responded to my muttering. On days like these, it was best to go home quickly, take a bath, and get some sleep. Walking down the empty

streets of Baltrain, I heard nothing but my own quiet footsteps.

Chapter 2: An Old Country Bumpkin Meets a Thief

“Sounds like it was quite the ordeal.”

“Yeah. Well, I didn’t really lose anything, but she did get away.”

It was the day after the incident, and I was instructing knights in the order’s training hall. While we swung our swords, I chatted about yesterday’s events with the lieutenant commander, Henbrits Drout. He came to the training hall pretty much every day to devote himself to his improvement, and by now, his muscles were essentially a full stage stronger than they’d been when I’d first met him. He participated in mock battles with the other knights, but he also spent time testing all sorts of attacks, including some that didn’t rely entirely on strength. It was good to see him making progress.

I’m not gonna lose, though! Even if he’s the Liberion Order’s lieutenant commander, I’ve beaten him once already—this old man has his own backbone and vanity to maintain!

“Anyway...” Henbrits turned to look at a petite knight who was swinging an enormous wooden sword. She’d positioned herself in a corner of the hall to avoid getting in anyone’s way. “Kewlny wielding a two-handed sword is a rather wild idea.”

“For now, I think it suits her,” I said.

Kewlny’s movements were plain and utilitarian—she still wasn’t at the stage where she could wield a zweihander brilliantly in battle. But she understood this, so she was repeatedly drilling the basic forms and standard swings. In her expression, I saw no traces of negative emotions like hesitation or anxiety. She probably saw the potential in her new zweihander, yet I still had a sneaking suspicion that the reason she was so energetic was because I’d recommended the blade.

I flicked my eyes back to Henbrits. “I think she has potential to improve drastically in the near future.”

“How promising.” Henbrits smiled affably. “A knight’s growth is always worth celebrating. I can’t go falling behind now.”

There was clear hope in his almond-shaped eyes. *He really is a good person.* Henbrits was honest when it came to his art, and while he had a strong competitive spirit, he was also upfront with those he acknowledged. He was very helpful too.

It was true that Allusia held tremendous popularity among the populace and the knights, but from what I could see, Henbrits was in no way inferior. Well, maybe that was overstating it a bit—he probably lost to her in terms of pure popularity. Still, in the sense of the knights idolizing him, he stood on equal ground with her. Allusia looked difficult to approach thoughtlessly, whereas Henbrits was candid toward anyone. Not that Allusia was antisocial or anything... It was merely a difference in leadership style.

From my personal perspective, Henbrits was also one of the rare male conversation partners I had. I didn’t dislike women or anything of the sort, but being completely surrounded by them all the time could sometimes feel suffocating. I’ll reiterate—this had nothing to do with hating their company. It was simply more comfortable for this geezer to have another man to talk to.

“So, back to that pickpocket...” Henbrits trailed off. “How did she manage to escape *your* grasp? Did she possess tremendous dexterity?”

“She used magic,” I answered. “I ended up letting go on reflex.”

For my part, I hadn’t *meant* to let her go, but with that kind of magical trick up her sleeve, I hadn’t been able to hide my shock.

“Magic, you say?”

That one word caused Henbrits to sink into silence.

“There a problem with that?” I asked.

“Ah, no, not with you, but...”

I thought he’d criticize me for letting someone like that get away, but it turned out he had no intention of scolding me. *What a relief.* Actually, on second thought, maybe it wasn’t so reassuring. Having a scoundrel with magical

abilities hiding away in the capital probably wasn't something Henbrits could ignore.

"Normally, all those capable of using magic within Liberis are enrolled in the magic institute," Henbrits elaborated. "They then go on to become adventurers, members of the magic corps, or other such specialists. Something doesn't feel quite right about this—a person strong enough to ward you off shouldn't have been reduced to a mere pickpocket."

"Hmm..."

Well, that made sense. I'd been thinking the same thing. Having magical capability automatically netted you a spot among those with talent. Wizards were rare, so the nation couldn't ignore them—overlooking a single one had a direct effect on a country's national influence and military strength. That was why the Liberis Kingdom had established the magic institute and the magic corps.

I didn't know how other countries handled wizards. Still, taking all factors into consideration, it was hard to imagine any magic users getting a cold reception from the state. Liberis often put out notices not to overlook any who had the talent, and I'd heard that tuition for the magic institute was very fair. If I remembered right, those with a certain level of skill even had the tuition fee waived. After all, Liberis couldn't let tremendous talent go to waste simply because people couldn't afford the education.

On a side note, it was apparently a complete mystery how or when magical talent bloomed. There'd been studies investigating specific factors: whether magic was related to bloodlines, or the environment you were raised in, or many other variables. But thus far, no clear cause for magical talent had been identified. Figuring this out would make processes for recruiting wizards more efficient—right now, the only way to find them was to search far and wide. Anyone with awareness of their magic could waltz into the magical institute and practically be set for life, and everyone in Liberis seemed to understand this. *Wizards really have it nice.*

Anyway, back to the pickpocket—if she was capable of magic, enrolling in the magic institute would be a far more productive career path than petty theft.

There was no reason not to do so, and a formal education would negate the need to sneak around in the darkness stealing from others. But yesterday's pickpocket had done exactly that, and it clearly hadn't been her first time. Her movements had been far too confident and direct. She'd likely been living off thieving for a while.

"If I had to guess..." Henbrits muttered. "I suppose it's possible she isn't a wizard."

"How so?" I asked. *How could someone use magic and not be a wizard?*

"Magical equipment. She might have been carrying something to facilitate an emergency escape."

"Aaah. I see."

As to be expected of the Liberion Order's lieutenant commander—he'd sorted through the possibilities in an instant. I hadn't even considered that she'd used magical equipment instead of raw magic. But it seemed awfully logical. *Of course* a habitual pickpocket would have some sort of item that allowed for escape from capture. This scenario made far more sense than that of a wizard picking pockets.

"So I guess she really was just a petty crook."

Henbrits nodded. "Most likely. There is no reason for one with magical talent to resort to theft."

I was more or less satisfied with that explanation. Still, what need would a pickpocket have for crazy strong offensive magical equipment? And why was she in possession of it in the first place? The logic was sound, but now I was feeling all the more vexed about letting her get away.

I suppose there's no point in dwelling on it. It has nothing to do with me.

I decided I'd had enough of talking about the thief, so I jumped to something else that had been on my mind.

"Man, the capital sure is different," I remarked.

"That doesn't sound like much of a compliment," Henbrits said. "Well, when so many people gather in one place, you tend to encounter all facets of

humanity.”

Sorry, Henbrits, I wasn't trying to be sarcastic or anything—I was just stating my honest opinion. I didn't mean anything bad by it.

“Oh, almost forgot. Speaking of pickpockets...” I pulled out the pendant I'd found on the ground yesterday and showed it to Henbrits. Though the pendant wasn't directly related to the thief, I'd found it right after she'd slipped away—the conversation with Henbrits had jogged my memory.

“That's...someone's accessory?”

“Yeah. I found it last night. Don't know where I can drop it off, though.”

Henbrits stared at the pendant in my hand. Judging by his reaction, he was pretty ignorant about such things. Well, he was the type to spend every day training, and I wasn't any better. I didn't have an eye for the finer things in life, so I had no clue whatsoever whether this pendant was really worth anything. Still, I could identify that the pendant had been handled very carefully—from that perspective, it was definitely important to someone. I wanted to see it returned to its owner's hands.

“The office has a place where you can entrust lost items,” Henbrits said. “I'll guide you there after training.”

“Thanks, that helps.”

Great, now I can put the pendant out of my mind. It would be impossible for me to find the owner on my own; I was far more likely to succeed by relying on the order.

“Mr. Beryl, may I ask you for a bout?”

“Yeah, sure thing. Let's do it.”

Our chat had reached a good stopping point, so Henbrits quickly challenged me to a match. *It's wonderful that he's so passionate about training.* I set aside all thoughts of pickpockets and pendants and went back to fulfilling my actual role.



“Very well, we'll take charge of this item.”

“Please do.”

After finishing the day’s training, I delivered the lost pendant to what looked like a guardroom next to the order’s office. This was a station where security for the office was located, and there was also a service window where people could make inquiries. Several knights were packed inside, looking relatively casual, but once I showed up, they all immediately straightened.

They don’t need to act so tense. I’m just here to drop off a lost item.

Training was going well for all the knights, including those in the station now. Everyone had some room to improve, and even a bumpkin like me had a lot to teach them. Of course, nobody was going to improve their technique drastically in such a short time, but I had already seen marked improvement—being an instructor was an altogether fulfilling experience. Henbrits was getting sharper and sharper too.

In contrast to the young knights, I had already reached my peak. I’d taken pride in how dedicated I’d been to swordplay training in my younger years—much more than the average person—but despite that, I hadn’t been able to become a hero or savior or anything of the like. Age certainly came with limits. My dad was healthy, but setting that aside, getting older meant deteriorating as a swordsman. At the very most, he would only be able to maintain the status quo—getting better as an old man was practically out of the question.

However, from the perspective of the general public, I was a huge success. After all, I’d transitioned from teaching swordplay at a backwater dojo to taking on the (overexaggerated) position of special instructor for the Liberion Order. I honestly couldn’t ask for more. Though frankly, I’d only acquired this status because of Allusia’s inexplicable assertiveness.

I really should cut it out. This line of thinking is pointless—no need to get all sentimental. I did what I could today, so it’s time to kick back and relax at the inn. Yup, that sounds great.

“Okay. Time to head out.”

I’d been staying at the same inn ever since arriving in Baltrain. It was fine for my current needs, but I figured I was about ready to find a proper home. So, whenever I had a little extra time on my hands, I browsed around for housing.

As to be expected of the central district, having many conveniences came with a ridiculous price tag. All the homes here were a little out of my price range.

I was receiving wages from the order, so there wasn't a need for me to move right away. It was probably best to save up for a while, but I also wanted to scout out places just to see what my options were. Since I wasn't in a hurry, I could simply stay on the lookout for anything nice.

Also, I was really getting along with the innkeeper these days. I did feel a bit indebted to him for taking me under his roof, but this *was* his business and I was paying him. It wasn't bad living at the inn, and I was slightly reluctant to leave. However, if Baltrain ended up becoming my permanent residence, having a home didn't seem like a bad idea.

Well, technically, if I find a wife, I can go back to my actual home in Beaden...but I'm making no progress on that front. It's foolish to have any hope.

"After all these years, what exactly does that geezer expect out of me?"

I couldn't help but mutter that part aloud. Seriously, why had he driven me out? I'd gone along with it, caught up in the flow of everything, but I hadn't actually done anything wrong. And now, I was starting to feel disgruntled about it.

That said, I wasn't really unhappy with my current lifestyle. One way or another, it was refreshing being in an environment outside the dojo—it didn't feel bad to teach here.

With such thoughts on my mind, I continued walking the streets of the central district. The sun was still high in the sky, so there were plenty of people out and about in Baltrain. Many shops were bustling too, drawing quite a lively scene around me.

Incidentally, the Liberis Kingdom was, just as its name implied, a monarchy. Tales of the kingdom's founding reported that the first king, Spokino Ashford Liberis, had set up his own country at the northern edge of the Galean continent. I wasn't well-versed in history, but I'd at least been taught the first king's name during my general education. Our kingdom had a lot of fertile land, so agriculture was booming. In fact, even the entire southern district of the capital was dedicated to agriculture. There were few forests and many

mountains and plains, leading to a great diversity of wildlife. We also bordered the sea and had access to the plentiful bounties of the ocean. To sum it all up, you could say our nation was blessed.

And that was why, even all the way out in Beaden, famine and crop failures were rarities. Discounting attacks from monsters and wild beasts, it was possible to have a relatively peaceful lifestyle in most parts of our kingdom. However, this didn't mean that all citizens were prosperous. (This was bound to be true of any country.) Plenty of people fell out of the safety net of national policy, even if there were none in a small village like Beaden. Basically, these people became ruffians like thieves and bandits.

They didn't really show themselves in public, but there were indeed a number of them in Baltrain. Yesterday's pickpocket was only one such example. Rumor had it that they gathered in large numbers in a specific district. I wanted to believe that these sorts of people weren't in the central district, but they seemed like the type who could pop up anywhere.

"Hm?"

As I ruminated over the country and walked the streets of the central district, I spotted a figure on their knees at the side of the road, staring at the ground and moving about restlessly. *I wonder what's going on. They don't appear to be a beggar or anything.* Passersby offered curious glances, but everyone just kept walking, and nobody engaged with the kneeling person.

As I drew closer, I heard a voice.

"Not here... Not here! Where did I drop it?!"

The figure continued creeping along the ground, not paying any attention to the odd looks of onlookers. A ragged robe covered their body, so I couldn't see their face. *That outfit is a pretty poor match for a street in the middle of Baltrain.*

Now, I could have easily ignored them. However, I'd noticed something interesting. This person—the voice, the outfit—was identical to yesterday's pickpocket.

"Looking for something?" I asked. Just in case, I kept my distance.

“Shut up! Leave me al...one?!”

That’s pretty much the reply I expected. In all likelihood, she’d driven off anyone else who’d tried to talk to her. But when she turned around and saw my face, her expression twisted, clearly communicating her thoughts: “Oh crap.”

Hmm. Looks like she recognizes my face. Our encounter had happened at night, but the area hadn’t been completely devoid of light. She’d likely been paying far more attention to me than I had to her. Her expression now was clearly strained, panic seeping from every pore of her face, and I could see dark blue hair peeking out of her hood. She looked to be somewhere in her teens. At the very least, she looked younger than Kewlny and Ficelle.

“What? You want something?”

Within a few blinks, she’d tempered her expression and bluntly forced the conversation along. She was likely gambling that I didn’t remember the details of yesterday’s incident. I decided to act like a kind old man who’d called out to help.

Not that it was ever going to turn out that way.

“Are you, maybe, looking for a pendant?” I asked.

“You son of a—!” Hearing my words, she narrowed her eyes in hatred. “Give it back! Give it back right now!”

“Whoa there.”

The moment I mentioned the pendant, she rose to her feet and tried to grab my collar. I wasn’t going to just stand there and let her, so I ended up dodging to the side. Judging by her movements, she had no experience with combat. At most, she had the specialized dexterity of a pickpocket.

“You little—!” she growled.

“Now, now, calm down. I never said anything about keeping it from you.”

After failing to grab me, she stumbled a couple steps forward from the momentum. She continued glaring, huffing and puffing out of her nose. *Oooh, how scary.* The bloodlust in her eyes was pretty trivial, but it wasn’t the kind of look a little girl should be able to conjure. It gave me a glimpse into the harsh

environments she'd likely been exposed to. Her potentially rough upbringing was far more frightening than the venomous look in her eyes. In a sense, it was inevitable that such social outcasts existed in the shadows of a prospering nation, but the thought still made me feel dispirited. *I can't do much about that, though.*

I held up my hands in a soothing gesture. "Look, I don't really like attracting attention. I'd like for you to settle down."

I wanted to emphasize that she shouldn't make a big fuss here, and my words seemed to get through to her. She maintained her intense glare but kept her mouth shut. It wasn't in her best interest to attract attention anyway—she was plenty guilty, after all.

"Let's cut to the chase," I said. "I don't have that pendant on me right now."

"What?" Her already severe expression grew even thornier.

"I left it with the Liberion Order. As a lost item."

"Tch!"

At this point, the girl surely understood the general details of what had gone on. I hadn't done anything wrong. I'd simply picked up a lost item, had noticed that it'd been treated with care, and had entrusted it to one of Baltrain's most distinguished organizations. The girl before me had to know it was wrong to criticize my choice of actions. All she could do about her helpless irritation was click her tongue.

"I'm not trying to be mean or anything," I said. "If I tell them I found the owner, they'll give it back. However, you have to come with me."

I was positive that she'd tried to steal my wallet last night, and I was also certain that she was a repeat offender. I had no evidence, though. Her hateful expression, what she was wearing—her whole appearance screamed that she was up to no good. And yet, I hadn't caught her while she was doing something illegal, so it wouldn't be realistic to just turn her over to the knights.

That said, I'd feel slightly guilty if I left an assumed criminal at large. She could absolutely try to pick someone's pocket while I went to get the pendant from the order's office. Thus, my point of compromise—have her come with me.

Maybe I can have Allusia or someone else high up give her a scolding. Though, it is a fairly petty affair for the commander of the Liberion Order to get involved with.

“Dammit... Fine.”

It turned out the girl couldn't come up with any other great ideas. After a couple seconds of hesitation, she decided to do as I said. I knew she didn't trust me at all, but the pendant must've been important enough to her that she would choose to come along obediently. *If that's the case, she shouldn't have dropped it in the first place...but there's no helping that after the fact.*

“Shall we?” I asked. “As long as you don't do anything, I won't either. Just putting that out there.”

“Tch.”

She clicked her tongue obstinately. *Her manners are really lousy.* I questioned her upbringing, but I also couldn't help but associate kids like this with the pupils I'd taught at the dojo. There'd been some utter brats who'd been tossed into our dojo, and the training had given them an outlet for their excessive energy. Being with another troubled child was pretty nostalgic.

“What's your name?” I asked the girl.

“Shut up. I ain't telling you nothing, old man.”

Try to strike up a conversation, and this is what I get, huh? Obviously, I was aware that I was an old man, but being called one to my face was a little depressing.

“I-I see. Well, I'm sure you have your own circumstances, and you already know this, but I can't really applaud doing the things you did last night.”

“Shut up,” she mumbled.

Even if she didn't want to engage with me, I figured I could at least give her a sermon. All I got, though, was an awkward, blunt reply. Judging by her reaction, she wasn't picking pockets because she liked doing it. I was curious about her circumstances, but I wasn't her father or guardian. There was no reason for me to stick my neck into this.

The girl walked a little behind me to the right. No matter how I looked at her, she was exactly as she appeared. She didn't give off that strange atmosphere Lucy did. Her dark blue hair was just about shoulder length, and her cheeks were somewhat gaunt, so she didn't appear very healthy. The corners of her eyes were angled sharply, and her irises flashed a mix of green and yellow as she kept a close eye on me. She looked even shorter than the petite Kewlmy. I couldn't tell because of her robe, but her physique was far from womanly. She seemed even thinner than the already slender Ficelle.

To sum it up, she was a scrawny little girl with a really aggressive attitude. If she had to resort to pickpocketing to make ends meet, she probably wasn't getting her daily nutrition. It made me feel like I'd picked up an abandoned cat by coincidence. But I wasn't going to raise her or anything—we weren't likely to get involved beyond this issue.

"We're here. Well, I'm pretty sure you know the place already."

She remained silent.

"I'm not thinking of turning you in or anything," I continued. "Not for now, at least."

Once we got closer to the order's office, the girl became far more alert than before. She'd been committing crimes worthy of arrest, so the knights were probably something like her natural enemy. However, as previously mentioned, I had no intention of turning her in. I did plan on getting someone important to scold her, though.

"Excuse me."

Bringing the girl—who wore such a stiff expression that she looked like she could bolt at any moment—I called out to the knights behind the station's window.

"Yes? Oh? If it isn't Mr. Gardinant. Have you brought a lost child this time?"

"No, no, not at all," I replied. "Turns out that she's the owner of the pendant I gave you."

The one who'd responded was the same knight I'd entrusted the pendant to earlier. After looking at the girl, he'd taken her for a lost child. *Does the order*

also look after lost children? The breadth of their activities sure is huge.

“Aaah, I see. I’ll go get it.”

Convinced by my explanation, the knight went to the back.

“Let me tell you this now,” I muttered. “Don’t think you can snatch it away the moment he hands it over.”

“Tch.”

She clicked her tongue at me once again, but that was of no consequence—I’d crushed the possibility of her bolting. Well, if I’d been in her shoes, I would’ve definitely taken off. Unfortunately for her, this old man understood a rowdy kid’s thought process *very* well.

“Thank you for waiting,” said the knight as he returned from the back. “Is this yours?”

“That’s it!” the girl yelled. “Give it back!”

I nodded. “Seems so. Okay, I’ll be taking it.”

The knight caught on to what I was implying and didn’t hand the pendant to her directly. I took charge of it.

“Hey!” the girl protested. “Ain’t that enough?! Give it back!”

“Umm...Mr. Gardinant?” the knight asked awkwardly. He shot the suddenly lively girl a sidelong glance.

“Ha ha. Sorry. She’s a bit of a rascal.”

I’ll give her the pendant back a little later. First, I have to get Allusia or Henbrits to give her a long sermon.

“What’s this ruckus— Oh, Master.”

I stretched my arm up, smiling wryly as I kept the pendant away from the girl trying to snatch it. “Allusia?” I said, turning toward her. “You came at just the right time.”

In all likelihood, Allusia was done with her duties for the day and was on her way home. She was wearing the same casual leather jacket she’d worn when she’d come to get me in Beaden. This really was perfect timing. It was likely fine

to bring this girl to the office, but I'd been wondering whether it was okay to bring her *inside* without asking.

"Umm... Master, who's that girl?"

Me, the knight, and the girl—Allusia's bewildered gaze raked over each of us, then fixed on the girl next to me.

"Ah, umm..." I floundered for a moment. "How do I put this?"

"It can't be... Your illegitimate child?!" Allusia exclaimed.



“Not at all!” I shouted back. I nearly choked on my words. “Well, to put it briefly, there was a *situation*. Allusia, could you spare some of your time?”

“I don’t really mind, but...”

For now, I redirected the conversation away from that incomprehensible path. It didn’t feel right to talk about this situation outside, so I wanted to move into the office before we started—that was why I’d asked Allusia for some of her time, and it looked like she had no problem with it. However, the girl didn’t seem like she was going to obediently tag along. Her expression had twisted even more upon seeing Allusia. The commander of the Liberion Order was probably the last person a pickpocket wanted to interact with. I also found it interesting that even these types of people recognized Allusia’s face. The fact that they were so wary of knights showed that the order was fulfilling its duties more than well enough.

At any rate, we weren’t going to get anywhere like this. I wanted to move inside if we could, but was the girl really going to follow us?

“It’s got nothing to do with arresting you,” I said. “And I’ll return this to you right after we talk.”

The girl hesitated for a few seconds, obviously reluctant, but then finally relented. “Tch. Fine. Keep it quick.”

At the very least, she now understood that I meant her no harm. Normally, a pickpocket would’ve taken this chance to run away—nobody had her restrained, and nobody was even wary of her. She looked like nothing more than a girl in ragged clothes accompanied by an old man. The fact that she *wasn’t* fleeing meant that she was highly incentivized by the pendant.

She had to know that if she handled this encounter poorly, she could get arrested. However, she wanted this pendant back badly enough to take that risk. It was possible it simply had that much monetary value, but somehow, I didn’t think that was quite right—she would’ve sold it already. A pickpocket wouldn’t be walking around with anything of value, not when they could trade it for actual currency. Ultimately, though, I didn’t know what the truth was, nor could I figure it out without more information.

“Very well.” Allusia nodded at both me and the girl. “Shall we use a reception room?”

“Sure.” I turned to the girl. “Come on, this way.”

“Shut up. Don’t treat me like a brat.”

She *was* very clearly a child—a bratty one—but I kept that retort to myself. I didn’t overlook how Allusia’s brow twitched a little at the girl’s reaction.

That’s good. At this rate, the commander will dish out an excellent scolding.

After walking through the office for a while, the three of us arrived at the reception room—the same place I’d come to when my dad had kicked me out.

Once we were all seated, Allusia turned to me. “So? Who exactly is this girl, Master?”

“I’ll get right to the truth of it—she’s a pickpocket who tried to snatch my wallet yesterday. Immediately after she fled, I found this pendant on the ground. It’s apparently hers, so she’s here to retrieve it.”

“Wha...?”

“I’m not thinking of turning her in or anything,” I added quickly. “Not for now, at least.”

Allusia was speechless for a while. *That’s quite a peculiar expression for her.* However, perhaps due to her pride as the knight commander, she soon schooled her features into neutrality. When she turned to the girl, her gaze was chilling.

“What?” the girl muttered, even tenser than before. Despite that tension, she was a lot meeker now. I could sympathize with that. She’d gotten dragged along by some unknown old man to a meeting behind closed doors with the Liberion Order’s commander. It would be unreasonable to ask her to relax.

Allusia sighed. “Haaah... If you say so, Master, then we won’t restrain her.”

Even if Allusia wanted to have her arrested, she couldn’t. The laws in this country were rather peaceful—with the exception of very serious crimes, an infraction of the law didn’t really apply unless either a formal complaint was submitted by the victim or the criminal was caught red-handed by the

authorities. For this girl to be arrested, her latest victim (me) would need to hand her over. Otherwise, the knights would have to catch her in the act of pickpocketing someone.

Honestly, she was no more than a petty thief. She posed no immediate threat to anyone's life, so the nation was relatively lax about such things. And frankly, I had a good reason for not turning her in.

"You know, she didn't actually get anything off me," I explained. "When I tried to catch her, she hit me with magic."

"Magic...you say?"

I was sure Allusia understood what I was getting at. During my conversation with Henbrits, he'd concluded that it was unlikely for a person with magical talent to resort to petty thievery. At the time, I'd let myself be convinced of his argument. But while magical equipment wasn't as versatile or valuable as the powers of a genuine wizard, it was still costly. I'd been forced to confront this fact during my shopping trip in the western district with Kewlmy and Ficelle.

In addition, it was extremely rare to find offensive magical equipment that could directly attack others. Not many pieces existed, and the ones that did were high-class items. After all, if such things were common, they would cause a spike in crime. So, knowing this, why would a mere pickpocket have something like that? Had she stolen one? Or maybe someone had given it to her? Something like that would be easier to trace than a more normal item, so it would probably be difficult to sell for money. Thus, it could make sense for her to use it instead.

Had those flames really come from some sort of equipment? My instincts were telling me this was a very important matter. *Not that my instincts are always right.*

"You can use magic?" Allusia asked the girl.

"I don't gotta tell you..."

"You do. As one of the kingdom's knights, I can't possibly overlook anyone who has the talent for magic. You should know this."

Oooh, you're digging into this more than I expected, Allusia. And the girl

wasn't refuting it—maybe she really did have the makings of a wizard. It was still possible she was hiding some equipment under her robes, but from what I could tell, that wasn't the case.

"If you can use magic, there is no need to hide," Allusia continued. "Above all else, we cannot shut our eyes to a girl like you living in such miserable circumstances. I don't know if we can be your ally, but at the very least, we're not your enemy."

"Shut up..."

Allusia was on the offensive. She personally had nothing to gain by endorsing this girl to the magic institute, but she was still pushing hard for it. Certainly, this was a display of her earnest personality.

I spoke up next, hoping to provide Allusia with support. "Just as I said from the very beginning, I'm not trying to have you arrested or anything. But we're connected now—our lives became entangled when you tried to pick my pockets."

I sensed anxiety and nervousness from the girl sitting beside me, though it seemed like a good amount of her wariness had faded. Anyway, this really *was* a peculiar connection. I didn't feel like turning this thief in—I wanted to do something for her. Unfortunately, I wasn't a hero or a saint, and it was impossible for me to save every child in need. There were, however, those who just happened to be within my reach. *It's human nature to want to help if you have the means to do so.*

The girl was silent for a few seconds, and then, with steely resolve, she said, "I don't got enough."

"Hm?"

Pain and determination were written clearly on the girl's face. "I don't got enough cash to resurrect my big sister."

Huh? What? That's the story? Magic makes no sense to this old man. My eyes widened, but I didn't react much beyond that—I held my tongue. *So this is about resurrection? That smells awfully fishy.*

Silence enveloped the reception room following the girl's confession. What

did she mean by resurrection? She probably meant it literally...but how did this girl's sister die? Did resurrection magic even exist? My mind was roiling with possibilities from just that one word. It was a little confusing.

"I don't got enough money or time, so..."

"You resorted to crime," Allusia finished.

The outlines of grief were growing clearer and clearer on the girl's face. She definitely understood that stealing was a crime she should be punished for. It seemed like she didn't enjoy a life of thievery. *Hmm. Personally, I feel like her words present more than enough of an extenuating circumstance, but it's not my place to interject. I'm just an old man, after all.*

"However... No, let's stop here." Allusia was about to say something else, but she cut herself off. Her eyes were now largely focused on me.

I knew what she wanted to say: there was no way resurrection magic existed. I'd been doing my best not to mention that too.

This old man was completely ignorant about magic. I didn't know a single detail about the mechanisms of spells. Even so, I could at least predict that resurrection magic didn't exist. If it did, the world would work very differently. But emphasizing that to the girl seemed pretty meaningless.

The silence in the room was stifling and awkward, and I couldn't stand it—I hated this heavy atmosphere. I also had no intention of poking fun at the girl's predicament. That was why I decided to shift the focus of the conversation a little.

"Out of curiosity," I said, "how much are you short?"

"I was told...five million dalcs," she answered quietly, keeping her eyes down.

"That's quite the sum," I murmured.

Five million dalcs was more money than most people could save through honest work. The words "I was told" implied that someone had given her that figure. I had a bad premonition—a sour inkling—that the one who'd told her this was manipulating her. *Ah, this old man really, really, really hates guys like that. How can you force someone to commit crimes when they're still too young*

to make proper judgments? What a disgrace to all adults.

Allusia suddenly stood. "Sorry, please excuse me for a moment."

"Aaah, hm, sure."

At that, Allusia withdrew from the reception room. Not that it was my place to mention this, but it was unusual for her to leave without telling me why. Perhaps she'd remembered some important business she needed to attend to. *And now here I am, completely silent next to this little girl. Hmm. This is rough. I want to summon Kewlmy here right away.*

"How did your sister pass away?"

This was the topic I'd chosen to break the awkward silence...and I regretted it immediately. *Definitely not the right question for lightening the mood.*

"I don't know. They just told me she died."

Unlike me, the girl wasn't further affected by my words. Maybe she didn't have the composure left to worry about it. I glanced to the side. Her head hung low, and her hands were clenched into fists on her knees. I didn't know why her sister had died or what kind of situation she was in, so I had no way of comforting her. And if I chose the wrong words, I could emotionally corner her even more.

"I see..."

Our conversation came to another stop. *My diversion hardly lasted a few seconds... I want Allusia back already.*

In the quiet of the room, I fished in my mind for more conversation and recalled something. "Oh yeah. This is the second time I'm asking, but..."

"What?"

Despite talking to her quite a bit now—though we weren't exactly on friendly terms—I knew fundamentally nothing about this girl.

"You can at least tell me your name now, right? Oh, I'm Beryl Gardinant."

"Mui... Mui Freya."

"So the little lady's name is Mui, huh? Got it."

“Cut that out. I’m not a damn brat.”

“Ha ha ha, sorry.”

Contrary to her attitude, her name had a cute ring to it. It seemed she hated being treated like a child, but I was at least going to continue doing that in my head. Unlike Lucy, she was exactly as she appeared. She looked to be somewhere in her mid to early teens. There was no need for me to ask her exact age—she appeared youthful, perhaps even childish, though she was clearly not a little kid. Her language and attitude were far beyond that of a typical teen, though. *Probably has something to do with her environment.* Unfortunately for her, I was accustomed to handling rascals. After all, kids who had a taste for swordplay also had a tendency to be mischievous.

I was pleased to have finally started a conversation. Mui suddenly took a deep breath, and without prompting, she spoke.

“Hey, old guy.”

“Hm? What is it?” I considered telling her not to refer to me as “old guy,” but I figured I’d let it go. *She’s right...*

“Ain’t that enough? Give it back already.”

“Ah, right, I still have your pendant. My bad, sorry.” I figured it was probably fine to return it now. “I’ll give it back. However...” I held up the pendant in front of her.

“What?”

“You’re gonna need to stick around just a little longer. I want to try and do something for you.”

“Tch...”

She clicked her tongue again, but it didn’t come off as a refusal. I could tell, somehow or other. Probably. Well, I knew her name now, so it was possible to investigate her if I wanted to. Though, I didn’t know how much effort Allusia was planning to put into this.

Mui took the pendant, and after gently brushing its surface, she tucked it carefully away in her pocket. Her face softened for just an instant before

twisting back into that constantly aggressive expression. *What a contrast...*

“Was that your sister’s?” I asked.

“Yeah...” Her voice was tinged with sorrow. “It’s the only thing I got back.”

Mui was still young. At her age, it was impossible to come to terms with a family member’s death so easily. And, judging by her behavior, she’d adored her sister. I wondered about her parents, but I decided to set that aside for now. There was a bigger issue—someone out there was manipulating Mui to steal five million dalcs. It would be a slightly different matter if resurrection magic really existed, but that was unlikely. *The next time I see Lucy or Ficelle, I’ll ask them about it.*

Right as my conversation with Mui reached a stopping point, Allusia stepped into the room.

“Forgive me, I’ve returned.”

“Ah, welcome back.”

She took a seat then turned to the girl. “Now then, um...about your circumstances.”

“Oh, her name is Mui,” I interjected.

Allusia nodded. “I see. Then, Mui...”

“What?”

Allusia’s eyes were fixed on Mui. There’d apparently been some kind of development during her absence. What had she done out there?

“Someone from the magic institute is here to confirm your disposition,” Allusia said. “We’ll discuss your future, including whether you’ll be punished or not, after the—”

“I’m here, Allusia!” A person with a lively voice barged into the room, slamming open the door. “I heard you discovered a budding wizard! Hm? You’re here too, Beryl? And would you be the girl in question?!”

The intruder went right for Mui. Her long, platinum-blond hair flowed behind her.

“Wh-Wh-Who the hell’re you?!”

Mui was clearly shocked by the sudden arrival. I understood her feelings *very* well. I’d had the exact same question during our first meeting. *But you know, Mui, that’s the top dog of the magic corps. Unfortunately.*

“Oopsie. Sorry for surprising you. I’m Lucy Diamond. I serve in the commander’s seat of the Liberis Kingdom’s magic corps.”

Lucy somehow managed to calm down a little. She was as tiny as always—a whole head shorter than even Mui. Anyone who didn’t know her would think it impossible for her to hold such a position of power.

“What?” Mui scoffed. “You’re just a brat.”

Lucy balked at her words. “Who’re you calling a brat?! You’re just a squirt yourself!”

“Who you calling a squirt?!”

“Now, now, calm down,” I said.

Obviously, it was going to end up like this. Mui had reacted just as expected, and so had Lucy. I’d had the same exchange with Lucy, so I felt a twinge of nostalgia as I tried to calm them down. It made me feel like their guardian.

“Mui, she’s actually the commander of the magic corps,” I said.

“Seriously?” Mui clearly still had doubts.

To convince *me*, Lucy had put her magic on display. To be specific, she’d conjured a huge fire without asking...but that would be inappropriate indoors. We weren’t going to get anywhere unless we got Mui to believe us. *What to do?*

“Here. Do you believe me now?”

“Ah!”

And as I pondered over such things, Lucy created a small fire in her palm. *Why didn’t you do that with me?! Why’d you have to start a huge blaze?! This isn’t fair!*

“Well... I believe you’re a wizard,” Mui mumbled, slightly revising her image of

Lucy.

At the very least, only a wizard could create a fire out of thin air. I was thankful this was enough to convince Mui, but I was still miffed that Lucy hadn't done the same thing for me. Now wasn't the time to be bringing that up, though, so I kept my mouth shut.

"So? I assume you're the one who possesses the foundations to use magic?" Lucy asked cheerfully, putting out the fire. "What wonderful news. No matter the age, there is always a shortage of wizards."

Allusia promptly cut in. "Before we get to that... Lucy, she has certain extenuating circumstances."

"Hmm?"

Judging by Lucy's happy-go-lucky attitude, she hadn't been informed of Mui's situation. I didn't know what Allusia had told her, but since Lucy had gotten here so quickly, things had likely been rather rushed. This conversation would've gone differently had Lucy been informed of Mui's background or the issue of the resurrection magic. Setting aside her habitual behavior, Lucy was thoroughly earnest when it came to magic, so she wasn't likely to ignore such a topic.

"Lucy, can I ask you something?"

"Hm? What is it?"

I wondered whether it was right to inquire about this in front of Mui, but I decided to go for it—we had to convey the truth to her sooner or later. If resurrection magic existed, that was one thing. However, if it didn't, Lucy wasn't going to forgive someone for extorting a child with a rare talent for magic and turning them into a petty thief. Also, if resurrection magic was a farce, I had to be ready to give Mui emotional support. I could only pray that the little girl didn't go on a rampage.

"Does resurrection magic exist?" I asked.

Lucy's raucous behavior and movements came to a sudden stop. Her answer was both extremely brief and cruel. "No."

“L-Lies!!!” Mui screamed. “Don’t lie to me!”

Lucy turned to her, face stern. “I’m not lying. Resurrection magic does not exist in this world. I’ll even stake my life on it.”



Lucy's expression was dead serious—this wasn't the look of someone telling a joke. *I suppose my impression of her has been totally wrong.* As the commander of the magic corps, it was only right to assume she was more knowledgeable about magic than anyone in the country. And here, that same woman was denying the possibility utterly and completely. Perhaps the mechanisms for resurrection just hadn't been discovered...but if that were the case, Lucy would've said so.

"I-It's gotta be a lie! That can't be... It just can't!!!"

"Beryl, Allusia, what exactly is this about?"

Seeing how Mui was in a complete fluster, anybody could tell that we hadn't brought up resurrection magic as some kind of drawn-out joke. Lucy stared at me, then at Allusia, then focused on me once more. *Oh come on, ask Allusia. When you compare an old man and the knight commander, you normally prioritize the latter, yeah? Why me?* Allusia noticed Lucy's gaze on me, but she didn't step in. *Guess she's gonna let me handle the explanation.*

"Aaah, about that..."

I had no choice, so I told Lucy about how I'd met Mui, about her magic, and about the money she believed she needed to resurrect her sister.

"I see..."

After listening to my whole story in silence, Lucy nodded. There was no scorn or pity in her expression. She'd simply listened, absolutely serious the entire time.

"Now then—Mui, was it?" Lucy said.

"Fuck... Why? Why?!"

Mui didn't respond. She hung her head, her eyes drifting about unsteadily as she continued mumbling to herself. I'd predicted this—the revelation had come as quite a shock to her. Still, she hadn't given in to despair—this offered us a glimpse of her emotional strength. She was still physically and mentally a child, so just barely hanging in there was more than anyone could ask for.

If someone brought up resurrection magic, it wouldn't be unreasonable to

laugh or refuse to give them the time of day. That was how unrealistic the notion seemed if you had the slightest bit of education. However, things were different for a child. That applied doubly so to one who hadn't been properly educated. By lying to them and drilling falsehoods into their heads, shady characters could drag immature children down inhuman paths.

I hadn't gone through such an experience myself, but I knew it was a fairly common story. Children of all types had attended our dojo. We'd had everything from intelligent kids with good upbringings to ignorant ones who seemed to know nothing. A child's world was surprisingly small—there was a limit to how much knowledge a young mind could acquire. It was only natural for them to believe the lies of an outwardly friendly and logical adult.

That was why I found this situation unforgivable. Swordsmanship wasn't entirely about learning how to swing a sword—it was a means of studying many things, using a sword as a medium. That was what I believed, at least. I didn't think everyone had to be a saint, but at the very least, all adults had a responsibility to provide what little guidance they could to children who knew nothing about the world. Sometimes this came from a parent, sometimes from an authority figure, and sometimes from a teacher.

At any rate, the criminal who'd tricked Mui couldn't be left among the ranks of functioning adults. The one who needed severe punishment wasn't Mui, but the mastermind who'd influenced her to steal. Not that I could do anything in particular about that myself. It felt like an indescribable gloominess and resentment was building up inside me with nowhere to go.

"Hey, Mui," Lucy said.

"That just can't... How can that be?"

"Mui!"

"Ah!"

Lucy practically screamed, her voice echoing in the room. Hearing this, Mui raised her eyes slightly.

"Who's the one who told you that?" Lucy asked.

"Why...do you wanna know?"

“I’ll beat them up,” Lucy answered, getting right to the point. “If someone is deceiving such a small child and forcing her to commit crimes, we can’t just leave them at large. Besides, it is a grave sin to insult the ways of magic.”

Lucy directed a sincere gaze at Mui. Though it was somewhat rude of me to think so, I found it a bit surprising that Lucy would get angry about such things. I already knew she was stupidly obsessed with magic...but it made sense that she wouldn’t be able to serve as the commander of the magic corps without possessing a proper sense of ethics. Whoever had filled Mui’s head with such lies couldn’t be forgiven. I sympathized greatly with this, even if I had to leave the beating to the order or the magic corps.

“Doing that...won’t bring my big sister back...”

However, Mui wasn’t jumping at the opportunity. She’d been committing crimes under the firm belief that she could resurrect her sister—Lucy’s words had suddenly shattered everything that had been supporting her, reducing her to a stupor. Still, it was good that we’d come to a mutual understanding. *Despite being so young, Mui has seriously terrifying mental fortitude.*

“Mui.” Lucy took a seat next to the little girl and placed a hand on her clenched fist. “What happened to your elder sister is unfortunate. However, if those who lied to you are left at large, then both you and your sister’s dignity will remain tarnished. Are you fine with that?”

Mui’s gaze remained fixed on the floor. It was difficult to choose the right words at times like these. Sometimes, attempts to comfort a child could have the opposite effect. On that point, Lucy had chosen pretty much the perfect words. Someone had tricked Mui. In the process of doing so, they had used the sister’s death to fabricate a lie, thus showing contempt for not only Mui but for her sister as well.

I wasn’t a hero, a chivalrous thief, or a man of justice. I felt indignation, but I wasn’t carefree enough to leap into action. I’d also only just come to know Mui. Things were different for Lucy, though. It didn’t matter to her—she would act for someone she’d just met, and even for a petty thief. She was spurred by far purer emotions than me. You could say this was the core of who she was. It was the same as our first meeting. She had gotten swept up by such intense

emotions, which had led her to test her powers against my skills. However, in this case, her emotions were driving her in a far more righteous direction.

“I’m not... I’m obviously not fine with it,” Mui barely squeezed out.

Lucy responded without hesitation. “That’s right. Your dignity, and that of your sister’s, must be protected. And you’re the only one who can do it.”

Allusia and I had become complete spectators. *It’s not really our place to interrupt—we should remain silent.* Despite meeting Mui after us, Lucy was definitely the closest to her heart.

The way she’d guided the conversation away from the existence of resurrection magic was also very well done. She’d skillfully shifted Mui’s mental agony to an external factor. *I guess that’s an old woman’s wisdom for you. Not that now’s the time and place to tease her about it. Okay, here’s hoping this solves everything.*

“I never heard...the name of the guy who told me about resurrection magic,” Mui mumbled. “He only called himself ‘Twilight.’”

“Twilight...”

The word meant nothing to me, naturally. I could guess it was some kind of alias, but that didn’t tell me anything about who he was as a person.

“Twilight,” Allusia muttered. “That’s probably the Dark Hand of Twilight.”

“You know who she’s talking about, Allusia?” This question was about all I could contribute as a spectator.

“Yes. They’re a band of thieves—the name has been coming up recently in the vicinity of the capital. If there’s someone calling himself Twilight, he’s likely the leader.”

“I’ve also heard about them,” Lucy added. “They’re probably nothing more than rats scurrying in the shadows.”

It seemed this Twilight guy wasn’t very noteworthy. Well, if he’d been on the level of the commanders of the Liberion Order and the magic corps, things would’ve probably been far more serious, perhaps even requiring a full subjugation force. But they hadn’t deployed troops like that, so was this

organization not actually a big deal? Perhaps they were, at most, *thieves* in the common sense.

“There is no greater scar to your dignity than being manipulated by such rats,” Lucy said. “Be at ease, child. I shall beat them to a pulp.”

“I believed him. I really believed him...”

Whoops. Lucy had put her foot in her mouth. Belittling this Twilight *too* much had only led to Mui becoming more depressed. After all, she had sincerely danced to his tune.

“Ah. Right. Sorry about that,” Lucy muttered awkwardly.

It was difficult to handle a young girl whose circumstances had driven her to pickpocketing. If she’d been just some rowdy brat, this would’ve been way easier, but things weren’t so simple.

“Oh yes. Do you not have any parents?” Lucy asked.

Huh? You’re seriously asking that? Now? She definitely has special circumstances. I would wager there are no parents around. If there were, she wouldn’t be a thief. I’m confused, Lucy. Do you know how to read the mood, or don’t you? Pick one!

“I don’t know my parents...” Mui answered. “I’ve had no one but my sister since forever.”

“Are you, perhaps, a resident of the southeastern district?” Lucy asked.

This piqued my curiosity. “The southeastern district?”

Baltrain was composed of a central district surrounded by four other districts to the north, west, east, and south. I’d never heard of a southeastern district. It was unlikely that this was simply a matter of my ignorance. Even discounting the local and foreign tourists, Baltrain saw a tremendous flow of goods and people in and out of the city. Such a major city needed clearly defined geography. Even Kewlmy hadn’t mentioned anything of the like during our tour of the western district.

“The land around the border of the eastern and southern districts is cheap and has poor public order,” Allusia explained with an unusually bitter look. “As

a matter of convenience, the locals have given it that name and—”

I nodded. “Ah, it’s all right, Allusia. I get it now.”

That was more than enough for me to go on. In short, it was the slums. It must’ve been difficult for the Liberion Order, champions of public order, to acknowledge such a district existing. This was the same as admitting to the public that they weren’t fulfilling their duties. Naturally, the order wasn’t entirely responsible for this—the existence of slums meant that there was an administration problem. When a settlement grew beyond a certain size, there were many more societal fetters to chain people down. Not that this had anything to do with a country bumpkin like me...

“Just so you know, there are wizards from the southeastern district too,” Lucy cut in. Perhaps she thought my exchange with Allusia had been a bit judgmental, so she’d added this (frankly unnecessary) bit of information.

“I didn’t say anything...” It wasn’t my intention to discriminate against people who lived there. Our dojo had taught tons of pupils with weird or unknown backgrounds. “It doesn’t matter where Mui was born or raised—she’s still Mui,” I said. “The only fact that matters is that she’s a girl with the potential to become a wizard, right?”

“That’s right,” Lucy confirmed.

Mui had still committed theft, so it was only appropriate for her to face punishment or take a scolding. If that redeemed her of her crimes, then she would have a clean record and could attend the magic institute without reservations. First, we had to rid her of her regrets and guilt.

“Forgive me, we’ve gone off track,” said Lucy. “Mui, do you know where this Twilight fellow is?”

“I don’t know if he’s there...but we have a base in the central district.”

“The central district?” I muttered.

I hadn’t inspected every corner of the central district, nor was I overly familiar with the area, but I hadn’t seen any signs of such a dangerous group gathering. Or perhaps it was precisely because they were hiding themselves that normal citizens wouldn’t notice them.

“Allusia. How will the order act?” I asked.

“Let’s see... If we intensify our patrols with the intent on gathering information and identify their whereabouts, then storming their base can be considered.”

Allusia’s voice was quiet, but I could sense a strong will fueling her words. As the one responsible for public order in the capital, she couldn’t treat this situation lightly. The organization given so much authority by the nation wasn’t one to sit still and watch when they knew a den of evil was nearby. This was especially the case with Allusia in charge.

On that point, I wasn’t opposed to helping out. I wasn’t sure how much my position as a special instructor could be leveraged, but I wasn’t unrelated to this situation. If my strength could be of use, I wanted to offer aid. I could definitely manage against thieves who didn’t specialize in fighting.

Lucy snapped her eyes to Allusia and sighed. “Why are you taking it so easy? I’ll crush them right now. Mui, lead the way.”

“Now?!” Allusia and I exclaimed in unison.

“Y-You’re seriously going right now?” I asked.

“Of course,” Lucy answered bluntly.

She had a point—it was best to act quickly. But even though she was probably right, it felt like she’d made her decision hastily. This wasn’t something that had to be solved immediately. Still, it also wasn’t the time to kick back and relax. Plucking out an evil sprout was best done early. Regardless, handling it here and now sounded like a rough prospect. This wasn’t going to be a picnic.

“I believe you’re being too impatient,” Allusia said. “We should take time to prepare and gather information.”

“You’re the same stickler as ever, Allusia,” Lucy objected, eyes serious. She had accepted my shock and Allusia’s insistence on making preparations, but her wisdom here was also valid—it made sense to launch a sneak attack and charge in right away.

“First, we need to consider this Twilight fellow’s background.” Lucy held up a

finger. “Honestly, I don’t know much about him. Both Allusia and I have heard his name, and yet we haven’t caught him. He must be relatively smart.”

“Then shouldn’t we prepare all the more?” Allusia protested.

I didn’t know what kind of stances the Liberion Order and the magic corps took regarding public order. At the very least, it wasn’t their policy to strike down an enemy at first sight. No matter how much authority was entrusted to them by the nation, that would be far too unhinged. Conversely, they couldn’t just leave villains at large either.

In that sense, the Dark Hand of Twilight was a problem—they were a known, named band of thieves who’d spread their fame but had yet to be caught. You could say they were good at running away. Therefore, Allusia had reasoned that it was best to make careful preparations that could cut off any means of escape.

“You’ve got it backward,” Lucy said. “This is largely the order’s domain, but if you take your time, they’ll get away again. The information Mui brought us will go to waste.”

“I see...”

Lucy definitely had a point—the thieves were sure to have their ears to the ground, so if knights went around asking questions, patrolling more, or taking action in any way, the thieves would pick up on it. They knew they were criminals, and if they sensed the law chasing them, they’d retreat quickly. In fact, they hadn’t been caught yet precisely because they were so quick to react.

So, Lucy’s plan was to round them all up at once without letting them know we were on to them. Normally, we would have to search for their base, but Mui was a hidden card we could play. Since she knew where it was, we could go right there.

“Besides, what are you going to do about Mui while you spend time preparing?” Lucy pointed out. “Even if you take her in for protection, won’t they be suspicious that she’s gone?”

“I can survive fine without the likes of you helping...” Mui protested.

“Without resorting to theft?” Lucy asked.

“Tch...”

Probably not. Perhaps she could get by if she continued stealing, but unfortunately for her, nobody in this room approved of that. The one other way around this problem would be to toss her into the magic institute, but there was a proper protocol to follow and arrangements to be made before that could happen.

Anyway, Mui had recovered far more quickly than expected. She was still a little dejected, but she was back to snapping at people like when I’d first met her. Her circumstances were probably still eating away at her on the inside. But despite her age, she’d probably realized there was nothing she could do about it.

Her dead sister was never coming back. Just maybe, she’d already known this. However, not wanting to accept that reality, she’d continued picking pockets. If we wanted to end this cycle, we had to rake this Twilight guy over the coals. Well, it wasn’t like I was going to be the one doing anything about it, though. Vigilantism was illegal.

“All right. Strike while the iron is hot, so they say,” Lucy said. “Let’s go, Mui, Beryl.”

“Huh? Me?”

Me too? I thought you were going to bring Allusia! I’m not even armed right now! My beloved sword was snapped in two... The only thing I’ve got is made of wood.

“Allusia stands out too much,” Lucy explained. “If the knight commander is seen loitering around an area, that’ll be enough to tip them off and make them scurry.”

I wanted to point out that Lucy stood out a fair bit too. Though, at a distance, she looked like nothing more than a little girl.

“I’m fine with going and all, but...I’m unarmed, you know?”

“Just take a wooden sword,” Lucy said. “Do you plan on killing a bunch of lowly thieves?”

“Waaah...”

Of course I didn’t want to kill anyone, but there was no telling what they were armed with. It sounded somewhat dangerous to go in without steel by my side.

“Don’t worry—you’ll have no problems at all with your strength,” Lucy insisted. “If worse comes to worst, I’ll protect you.”

“Haaah... Fine.”

I was still a little worried, but having someone as strong as Lucy around did make me feel a little better. If things got bad, I could just fall back and focus on protecting Mui. Lucy could take care of herself anyway—the fact that she’d mentioned protecting me meant that these thieves were nothing to a wizard of her level.

Before I’d even realized, Lucy had taken complete control of the situation. She turned to Mui. “Are you fine with that?” Lucy asked her.

“Yeah...” Mui trailed off and lingered in a few seconds of silence. “Fine. I’ll lead you there.”

“I’m sure it won’t be a problem for the two of you, but do be careful,” Allusia said in parting.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

With that, Lucy, Mui, and I left the order’s office.

The sun was setting, just about touching the horizon to the west. I wanted to get this rushed attack over with before complete darkness overtook us.

Mui guided us through the central district, and Lucy seemed bored at having nothing to do. “Oh, yes,” Lucy said, turning to Mui. “How much magic can you use?”

Mui hesitated a little but answered after a moment. “I can whip out some fire...but that’s all.”

“Hmm. Who taught you the basics of magic?”

“Dunno. I could just do it all of a sudden, so I’ve been using it.”

“I see. How talented.”

“Hmph.”

Their short exchanges continued. If you judged only by appearances, they weren't that different from two little girls having a pleasant chat. *Hm, the combination of two little ladies and one old man is truly unbalanced.* If someone called out to me and asked what I was doing, it would be rather hard to come up with an excuse. At least Lucy was here—it would probably be okay.

Anyway, Mui had been using magic simply because she could. I thought for a moment about the ways in which a wizard could manifest their talents—the whole process was even more baffling than I'd originally thought. Though, this sort of explained why the nation had to run around all over the place trying to secure magic users. Finding a wizard was like glancing at a roadside pebble, only for it to suddenly turn to gold. Liberis couldn't overlook a single opportunity.

While we're on the topic of finding magic users... “By the way, Lucy, how'd you find out about this whole situation?” I asked. I figured Allusia had told her when she'd left the reception room, but I had no idea how that information had gotten to Lucy so quickly.

“I used a magical communication device,” she answered. “They're installed in major establishments like the order's office and the magic institute. I have one in my home too, but it's far too large to carry around.”

“Hmm... How convenient.”

So that kind of thing actually existed. Magic sure had an extensive list of applications. It sounded really handy, but I didn't need to frequently contact anyone, and there wasn't anybody who needed to contact me either. Those who wanted to speak with me could generally find me by going to the order's office. And on the off chance that anything dire happened, I could go to Allusia and get it resolved.

I *was* curious about how things were going back home—I wondered how my dad and Randrid were doing in Beaden. Now that I thought about it, my social circle seemed awfully small. Well, I was just a country bumpkin. Regardless of how small or large my circle got, I couldn't imagine a situation where I would need a magical communication device. This was common sense to me, so not

having one wasn't particularly inconvenient.

"Hey, we're almost there," Mui said sharply, bringing our idle chatter to an end.

Regardless of the circumstances, she was currently betraying the home she'd been dependent on. *I'll bet she has a lot going through her mind. She's probably not even a hundred percent confident about this turn of events.*

Even if her lifestyle was viewed unfavorably by the public, being a thief had unmistakably become part of her identity. And considering her age, she might've been doing this sort of work for the majority of her life. However, for better or worse, she'd met me, Allusia, and Lucy. The connections she'd made through a strange twist of fate were trying to tear a hole in the fabric of her status quo. I could only pray that her new life didn't bring her misfortune. In my opinion, clearing herself completely of her crimes and attending the magic institute was a far better path than depending on a bunch of thieves. Lucy must've known this too, which was why she was lending a hand.

"Looks like they don't have anyone standing watch," I remarked.

"We're in the middle of the central district," Lucy said. "Having guards would actually be conspicuous."

We arrived at a place about two blocks off the central district's main street. It still wasn't quite evening, so a fair number of people were walking around. Our destination looked no different from any other house, so if Mui hadn't guided us here, we might've missed it.

"Mui, you're certain it's this house?" Lucy asked.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

Now then, how are we going to attack? I didn't know the interior layout of this house—I didn't even know how many people were inside. It probably wasn't packed, but you couldn't take these things for granted. After all, this hideout was an ideal spot for running their operations. There were many people and shops around, helping them to blend in and providing plenty of prey. It was unlikely a band of thieves would want to let this place go if they could manage it. So, even if they didn't have any lookouts, they likely had some personnel

they could mobilize at a moment's notice.

I just have to think about this like a dungeon attack: always assume the worst, prepare, and take action to overcome any obstacles.

As I was immersed in thought, Lucy marched toward the house.

"All right. Shall we?"

"Hm?"

She's not gonna let loose with magic, right? This is the middle of Baltrain's central district, smack-dab in the center of town. There are houses next to this place. Destroying the hideout from the outside would be ridiculous.

"Pardon meee!" Lucy shouted as she slammed the door open.

Aaah, that's her plan. Barge in through the front door. I feel like I wasted my time thinking about strategy. But I guess that's just how Lucy is...

"Wha?! Who's there?!"

The thieves reacted to their sudden visitor. As if mimicking her, a door farther within slammed open, and someone shouted angrily.

"Huh, it's just a brat. What's the matter, little lady? You lost?"

The moment the man saw Lucy, his attitude changed a little. Ultimately, all Lucy had done thus far was open the door in a flashy manner. These guys had set up their base in the central district, and plenty of people were walking around outside, so they probably didn't want to cause a ruckus and attract attention. It would be unwise for the thieves to do anything truly conspicuous.

But guys...you at least could have locked the door. You're awfully careless for a bunch of robbers.

Anyway, it seemed Lucy's face wasn't very well-known to the public. I'd figured someone like her—the commander of the magic corps—would stand out like crazy. However, the man facing her didn't seem to recognize her status.

"Hmm... Are you fellows the Dark Hand of Twilight?" Lucy asked.

The man flinched. "Wuh?!"

He instantly grabbed Lucy by the nape of the neck. I just barely heard her

mutter, “Oh dear...” before the man tossed her into the building and slammed the door shut.

“Dammit!” I shouted. “You’re such a pain in the ass!” *That’s what happens when you barge in without a care in the world!*

I quickly ran up to the door, but apparently, they’d locked it this time. No matter how much I pushed or pulled, it didn’t budge.

“Hmm... Should I kick it down? No...”

It wasn’t very respectable to suddenly break down the door. I strained my ears and heard some sounds from within, but the hustle and bustle of the streets drowned out most of it. My ears just weren’t that good.

“Gyaaaah!”

However, as if mocking me for hesitating, I heard a man screaming inside—it was loud enough that the quality of my hearing didn’t matter in the slightest.

“Aaah! Dammit all!”

I didn’t know what was going on inside. But that screaming voice hadn’t belonged to Lucy, so I doubted anything bad was happening to *her*. Still, *someone* was screaming, so I no longer had time for hesitation.

“Mui, stand back!”

“H-Hey?!”

I tensed my thighs and began kicking the door with all my might. If I’d had a real metal sword, I could’ve broken a wooden door easily, but the only weapon I had on me was also made of wood. I had no choice but to do things the primitive way. As I kicked, I grew more and more anxious about the perpetrator behind this whole situation.

It turned out the lock wasn’t all that sturdy. After a few kicks, it started warping a little and emitting jarring creaks.

“It’s open!”

To be precise, the lock broke. Right as I gave it one last hearty kick, I heard the lock snapping with a metallic *clang*. I flung the door open and rushed inside.

A man was on the floor, writhing in pain. He had both hands to his face and I could see a faint hint of smoke rising from between his fingers. *Yup, I bet Lucy did that.* She'd probably burned his face. Despite this stranger being a scoundrel, I found myself praying that she'd held back and that her spell wouldn't leave a major burn. I certainly wouldn't want that happening to me.

"Wh-Who the hell are you assholes?!"

I didn't have the full picture yet, but Lucy had definitely done *something*. Several more nasty-looking people were in the house, and they all seemed really angry. The entranceway opened up into a fairly wide living room. I spied an oval table in the center of the room, its chairs knocked to the floor. From what I could see, including the man writhing on the ground, there were five men and one woman. And since there was a staircase farther inside, I figured there could be more on the upper floor.

In the center of this entire commotion was Lucy.

"Oooh, Beryl. Good work. Anyway, what a rude fellow, throwing me inside all of a sudden!"

She wasn't panicking at all and didn't look even the slightest bit guilty. The man on the floor had stopped groaning by now, but he was still rolling about with his hands on his face.

Another man suddenly addressed me, voice raised.

"Aaah? You with this little brat?!"

Criticism and irritation were clear in the man's voice. However, faced with this sudden and inexplicable event, none of the thieves made a move. *Well, this is better than them lunging at us.*

"Two weird brats and an old fart..." one of the men muttered as his eyes drifted between us. Then, his gaze settled on Mui. "Hm? Hey, you—brat in the back. Where have I seen you before?" His tone had gradually shifted from bewilderment to conviction. Mui stiffened as he pointed at her.

"Just ignore him," I said, plopping my hand on her head. "You're doing the right thing."

There was no reason whatsoever for Mui to blame herself. Even if what we were doing was wrong, Lucy and I had been the ones to force this on her. It was now up to the adults to take responsibility for this. On a whim, I'd ended up placing my hand on her head, but perhaps the shoulder would've been better. I didn't want the little kid to hate me *too* much. Not that our relationship right now was particularly good.

"N-No way, you're—!"

The man's finger trembled a little. Mui was unable to endure his reproachful gaze, and she directed her eyes at the floor.

"You fucking brat!"

A hostile force had suddenly appeared at their hideout accompanied by a familiar thief—it wasn't hard to figure out what was going on. In response to this revelation, one of the enraged men threw himself at Mui. But how unfortunate for him. As he reached a hand out, I slammed my wooden sword down on his wrist.

"Guh?!"

"Sorry, but I'm gonna get involved in this."

"Very good, Beryl. Give them hell," Lucy said, still acting carefree as she watched our short exchange.

You do some work too, dammit! Isn't this your job? No, scratch that—maybe hold back a little. Man, I can't figure out when and where to make use of a wizard.

At any rate, it was difficult to swing a sword around in this cramped room. But judging by the ability of the man who'd lunged at us, this bunch wasn't particularly skilled at fighting, so it was probably going to work out one way or another.

Immediately after I repelled the attack, a strange silence dominated the area. That hush was only interrupted by the appearance of a large man peeking down from the staircase in the back.

"What's with all the noise?" he asked.

“B-Boss! Intruders!” the female thief reported in a shrill voice.

Boss, huh? This big man’s probably in charge. If he’s the “Twilight” guy we were after, maybe we can settle things quick.

“Twilight...”

And just as the thought crossed my mind, Mui muttered his name gloomily. *Oooh, so this is definitely him. I’d love to just beat him down and get out of here. But things will work out one way or another if we leave the cleanup to the knights.*

“Who the hell are you?” asked Twilight. “Quite the fancy greeting you’re giving us. We’re in the middle of the capital, ya know?”

The man descended the stairs, remaining far more calm and collected than I’d imagined, given his frame. He sure was big—taller than me. And despite his clothes, I could tell he had a fit body. I could also hear jangling metal with each step he took, and he seemed to be wearing all sorts of accessories like necklaces and bracelets. His long hair was tied back, and he wore a somewhat small and well-worn shortsword at his hip.

I wanna be sure he’s the right guy. “So you’re Twilight?” I asked.

“I don’t gotta answer that,” the man answered flippantly.

The fact that he didn’t deny it was all the answer I needed. I was positive this was the right guy. His underling had screamed about intruders, so this was a guaranteed den of thieves. And what’s more, she’d called him Boss, so he was obviously in charge here. Even if he wasn’t Twilight, we had more than enough cause to round them all up.

The worst-case scenario would’ve been if Mui had been lying to us, or if she’d misunderstood and had brought us to a normal civilian’s house. I was glad we’d avoided that outcome. It would be bad optics for the order and magic corps to go around treating normal people poorly. And Lucy was really acting up—if she’d hurt someone innocent, it would’ve made things even worse.

“Oh?” The man I assumed to be Twilight let his gaze fall to the girl at my side. “You’re... What was it again?” He ruffled his hair as if searching his memories. “Ah, right. Mui, isn’t it? Yeah, that’s the one. So, what’s up with you? Why’re

you bringing such violent people here? Didn't you want to revive your big sis with ma—"

The moment he spoke those words, the air in the building changed.

Lucy was exuding tremendous bloodlust.

"You dare to desecrate the good name of magic?" she hissed, her penetratingly cold voice resounding in the room.

"Ah? Who's the squirt? Hang on...you Lucy Diamond?"

The man's attitude also changed. He apparently recognized who Lucy was, or rather, what she represented. He didn't sound sure, though. I was honestly a little curious—what had he observed that had given away her identity?

"Hmph. To think that a measly thug would know my name."

"Ha ha ha! It's an honor to meet you," the man said. "So, are you the one who deceived our little Mui?"

"*You're* the one who deceived her," Lucy retorted.

"Oooh, how scary. Aren't you a cruel one."

They both remained verbally hostile. Twilight was slowly but surely approaching Lucy, and I could tell that he was testing us, checking to see if he could shoo us away with words alone. *Now then, what to do? Should I step forward?* I knew very well how strong Lucy was, so there was no need for me to protect her. But we were indoors and lacked the space for a large battle—she probably couldn't just fling magic all over the place, as that would have too much of an effect on our surroundings. When she'd attacked me under the pretense of a friendly bout, she'd chosen a large, open spot in the central district containing very few people or buildings.

Twilight's skills were still unknown. There was no telling what he might do. If he was, in fact, a warrior of some kind, then the closer he was, the more advantage he would have. It was a little too dangerous to let him approach.

Even as I pondered this, he'd gotten close to Lucy—close enough that if he took one more step, he'd be able to reach out and touch her.

"Anyway, for now..." Twilight's eyes glinted sharply. "How 'bout you die?"

He held up his right hand, and the sound of jangling metal resounded throughout the room. The other ruffians loosened up, their expressions a mixture of relief, scorn, and regained composure. *They must have significant faith in their boss's skills. Now then, what are Twilight and Lucy going to do next?* All eyes were on them, including mine.

The first to make a move was Lucy Diamond. She let out a small sigh and raised her right hand.

“Hrk...”

In the next instant, Twilight's eyes rolled back and he collapsed feebly to his knees.

“Haah... How foolish.”

Lucy looked exasperated. She showed no exaltation over winning a battle, nor did she show any of the satisfaction she'd displayed during our bout. All she did was look down at the fallen man coldly as if to express her disappointment.

Hang on. What did she do? Twilight raised his hand, then Lucy raised hers, and then he...toppled over?

“Wh-What was that?” I muttered without realizing it.

Watching from the sidelines, I hadn't seen anything beyond Twilight falling for no reason. If I hadn't known that Lucy was a wizard, I would've been under the impression that he'd suddenly self-destructed.

“Hm? Beryl, haven't you seen it before?”

“Huh? Aaaah.”

I racked my brain for a moment, then suddenly, it hit me. *That's what it was...*

During my first encounter with Lucy, when she'd forced me into a fight, she'd unleashed some strong magic at the very end—it was like an ace up her sleeve. I'd managed to dodge it only by coincidence. I didn't know what that magic was called. I only knew that it was difficult to dodge or block and that a direct hit would be fatal.

“Relax, I haven't killed him,” Lucy added.

“Oh, I see...” It sure didn’t look that way to me, but I had no choice but to trust her words. After all, there was nothing I could do about it.

“One, two, three...six? What a pain.” Lucy’s eyes shifted from the fallen Twilight to his underlings.

“Eek!”

The unimaginable violence in the little girl’s eyes had the thieves gulping. I could sympathize with them there. I never wanted to get hit by magic either.

“Beryl,” Lucy said. “Take care of the rest.”

“Waaah...”

After taking a look at the remaining thieves, Lucy handed everything to me and beckoned Mui over to her. She got two chairs ready, then plopped herself down in one. Mui looked like she had no idea what to do, but she was obviously overwhelmed by Lucy, so she awkwardly took a seat.

Mui’s extremely uneasy expression left quite the impression on me. *Take care of the rest, she says. What am I supposed to do about this? We’re not letting them get away, right? It’s physically impossible for me to capture them all. Do I just knock them out so they can’t run?*

“Shit... Godddammmiiiiit!”

One of the thieves steeled himself and roared, charging me. These people sure didn’t look like they were capable of fighting—they were far slower than the average knight, let alone Allusia or Henbrits. By the looks of it, I’d be fine, even if they all attacked me at once.

“Hup.”

“Ugh?!”

I easily dodged his well-telegraphed punch, raising my wooden sword as I did and slamming it up against his defenseless jaw. It wouldn’t kill him as long as he didn’t bite his tongue. I had mock battles with knights at the Liberion Order all the time, so the difference in skill between me and these thieves was vast.

That one strike was all it took to knock the man out. Even if his body had been trained for fighting, he wouldn’t have been able to stand upright after taking a

vicious strike to the jaw like that. I offered a short prayer in my mind. Though I felt sorry for him, I wasn't enough of a saint to show pity.

"You bastard!" one of the remaining men roared. "Everyone, charge together!" This lit a fire under the others who'd faltered at the sight of their collapsing friend, and they all turned to me at once.

Well, it wasn't a terrible idea. I couldn't move very well in this narrow space, so their best chance of eking out an unlikely victory involved dragging me into a chaotic and cramped melee. Mui wasn't a combatant, and Lucy was acting like a complete spectator, so I was essentially alone against all these assailants. In such situations, numbers were a better weapon than anything else. However, that only really applied to a well-trained team who could coordinate attacks under solid leadership...or maybe to wild beasts that could work together by instinct. I didn't consider myself weak enough to be taken down by a bunch of thieves who knew nothing about fighting.

"Hmph!"

"Gah?!"

Two of the men charged me almost simultaneously. I took half a step to the side to dodge one's grasp. The other came for me a beat later, and I slammed my hilt into his face. This second man toppled over, and I swung my sword against the back of the first man's neck. He fell to the ground silently, not even given the chance to scream.

"Ooooooh!"

"Here."

"Hrk?!"

Another man lunged, a dagger held high above him, and I thrust at his wide-open neck. I held back a fair bit, but he still passed out immediately. *My condolences.*

"Damn you!"

Yet another man tried to tackle me, and I brought my elbow down right on top of his skull. Sometimes, the body was better than any other weapon.

Specifically, it excelled when speed was of the utmost importance. Swordplay hadn't been the only thing I'd practiced all these years, though I was, of course, best at it.

"Ugh..."

After taking a hit to the back of his head, the man fell face-first to the floor. I gave him a kick to the neck for good measure. He made a sound like a crushed frog, then stopped moving.

"E-Eeeeeek!"

"Whoa there."

Having witnessed all the men collapse one after the other, the remaining woman took a step back in fear. *Hmm, I don't really like raising my hand against a woman, but she's a thief and all. Forgive me, but you're gonna have to go to sleep.*

"Sorry 'bout this."

"Agh!"

I took two steps toward her, then slammed my sword into her belly. I would've felt bad hitting her in the face. The impact of my wooden sword lifted her off the ground and she crashed into the wall. *Oh, sorry. I might not have held back enough.*

"Phew..."

With that last blow, all the thieves were down. What had been a noisy house was now dominated by a strange silence.

"Old guy...you're really strong..." Mui mumbled, staring at the aftermath.

"Hm? Well, against this lot, yeah."

If this display had made me appear strong to her, then she'd obviously never been in a fight, had training, or been involved with that world at all. *Figured as much.* If she'd been revealed as more than a thief—someone who'd gotten involved with violence or even murder—well, I wasn't sure what the right course of action would be. I didn't want to do anything to Mui.

“Hwaah... Good work,” Lucy said, stifling a yawn. “Including the ringleader, that’s seven people, right? More than enough for an investigation.”

“What investigation?” I asked, somewhat confused. Wasn’t it over now that we’d captured this Twilight guy and his cronies?

“Take a look at his adornments.”

“Hmm?” I did as Lucy said and looked at the unconscious Twilight, but I didn’t have an eye for finery. “Well, I guess they look flashy.”

“They’re all pieces of magical equipment.”

“Huh?”

Magical equipment? That stuff Ficelle likes? The items that can exhibit all kinds of magical effects? They were just like some of the things I’d seen when I’d visited the magical equipment shop during my tour of the western district with Kewlny and Ficelle.

“He’s doing awfully well for a pickpocket,” I remarked, revising my impressions of Twilight.

Magical equipment was expensive, and Twilight was wearing a ton of accessories. I’d only taken a glance at him, and I wasn’t familiar with these items, but from what I’d seen, his equipment had likely cost a fortune. If all of them were magical (even if their effects were unclear), then he’d definitely thrown a tremendous amount of money out the window to acquire everything.

“In all likelihood, someone has been providing these rats with magical equipment,” Lucy said. “I’m betting that’s the *true* mastermind.”

“I see...”

So someone was going out of their way to supply petty thieves with expensive magical equipment? That didn’t sound very appealing. What could they be planning? *It doesn’t really have much to do with me at this point...*

“Very well.” Lucy stood from her chair and looked around the room. “I suppose I’ll call the order to deal with this.”

“I sure can’t carry all the thieves out on my own,” I said.

Having the Liberion Order take over was the safest and most reliable course of action. Unfortunately, I didn't have the authority to mobilize anyone, so Lucy had to go inform Allusia.

I hadn't given it much thought, but what exactly was my status within the nation? I wasn't a knight or anything, but since I was the order's special instructor, I wasn't quite a civilian either. Did I actually have the authority to apprehend and pass judgment on criminals? This time around, it wouldn't be a big problem since the magic corps's commander was with me. *But what if something like this happens while I'm alone? What would be the right move?* I had no idea how much I was allowed to do. I'd have to ask Allusia about it. This wouldn't be much of a problem if all I did was teach swordsmanship at the office, but that clearly wasn't the case. There was no guarantee I wouldn't get wrapped up in something like this again, so I was better off asking about my limits.

"Beryl, watch the house for me."

"Ah, sure. Well, I guess that's the way it goes."

Lucy left us behind. Considering who we had available, it was more efficient for me to watch the thieves while Lucy went to deliver a report. Actually, there wasn't any other choice. I was now alone with Mui.

"What?" the girl asked, noticing my gaze.

"Nothing..."

We didn't need to talk about anything, but the awkward air in the room was hard for me to handle. We were in the middle of a thieves' den surrounded by six unconscious men and an unconscious woman. We hadn't done anything wrong, but I felt a little bad about it. Mui was gazing at Twilight with a complicated expression.

She had to be feeling anger and disappointment. However, without any doubt, he'd been one of those who'd been looking after her. You couldn't expect a young child to come to terms with those mixed feelings right away. It was probably best to provide her some emotional support. Randrid, who was currently in Beaden, was especially good at that, but I didn't really know what to do.

“Anyway, we should at least tie them up,” I muttered. It would be troublesome if the men started flailing about on the ground, or if they ran away. I could handle that scenario pretty easily, but if possible, I wanted to avoid getting an earful from Lucy.

“Got it. There should be some rope around.”

Mui started poking around the room. She had worked out of this base, so she seemed to have a basic grasp of where things were. I didn’t know what was going through her mind. I’d gotten involved with her by chance, but had it been selfish of me to want to give her a happier and more fulfilling life? Was I being too presumptuous? I’d lived for quite a few years, but the world was still full of mysteries.

“Found it. Hey, what’s up?” Mui asked, cutting off my gloomy thoughts.

“Hm? No, it’s nothing. Let’s tie them up quickly.”

I couldn’t have a child worrying about me—I’d lose face as an adult. There was no stopping the hands of time, nor was it possible to turn them back. Both Mui and I simply had to accept reality for what it was.

“There we go. Mui, can you bring that to me?”

“Tch. Fine.”

My first group project with Mui ended up being the unhappy task of arresting a bunch of thieves. Unconscious people were ridiculously heavy. *Nobody could possibly enjoy doing this. I sure don’t.*

After arranging all seven of the tied-up thieves on the ground, I sat down on a nearby chair. “I guess that about does it.”

“I’m beat...” Mui mumbled, plopping down in a chair with a tired look.

“Good job,” I told her. “Guess that kinda sounds weird given the situation.”

“Hmph.” Now then, we’d done everything we could. I couldn’t interrogate the thieves on my own or anything, so we just had to wait for Lucy to return.

Time passed idly for a while. We didn’t have anything to talk about. I didn’t hate talking to children, nor did I hate Mui. I’d taught plenty of pupils her age at the dojo, so I wasn’t particularly bad at handling children either. Nonetheless,

this situation was far too lousy. We'd barged into a thieves' den and knocked everyone out—what more was there to say? So we sat in silence, listening to the occasional groan from the fallen men. *Lucy, come back already.*

Suddenly, Mui's voice cut through my thoughts.

"What am I...?"

"Hm?" Lured by her words, I turned to face her. She had a stiff expression and moved only her lips ever so slightly.

"What am I supposed to do after this?"

I didn't have a proper answer for her, and I couldn't say anything irresponsible—Mui was still a child. In only a few short years, she'd accumulated experience and had fostered a sense of values. There had to be a choice that could neatly quell her anxieties about her feelings, her future, and her proximity to the public eye. I'd be lying if I said I had no ideas, but nonetheless, this wasn't a problem I could solve myself.

"Well, it'll work out one way or another," I said. "That's wholly the adults' responsibility." Conveying that to her emphatically was the one and only answer I could give.

"Ha ha... That so?"

Mui laughed feebly. Of course she wouldn't trust such words. We hadn't established a friendly relationship to begin with, nor had we gotten any time to develop one. Still, my feelings on the matter were exactly as I'd stated—now that a bunch of adults were involved, it was our duty to get her up and running again. It would be devastating to all our consciences if we just abandoned her after sticking our necks into this.

The conversation lapsed into silence. I wasn't sure how many minutes had passed by the time Lucy popped through the front door.

"I'm back!" Unlike Mui and me, her voice was as carefree as ever.

Behind her was the Liberion Order's commander as well as several other knights. They were all wearing plate armor and keeping a vigilant eye on their surroundings.

“Thank you for the hard work, Master.”

“You too, Allusia.” *Things here have pretty much settled down, though...*

“Are these the culprits?” Allusia asked, pointing a cold gaze at the men Mui and I had restrained. These were the eyes of the reliable knight commander, and nothing was more reassuring in the event of an emergency. I prayed that she never looked at me like that. *This old man wants to live an easy and peaceful life.*

“Yeah, I can pretty much guarantee that these are the people you want,” I answered.

“I presume these rats are guilty of other crimes too,” Lucy added. “I have business with them, so I’ll be participating in the interrogation.”

“Understood.”

With that, Lucy secured herself a spot in the order’s investigation. As the magic corps’s commander, she probably had a lot of leeway.

“Take them away,” ordered Allusia.

“Yes, ma’am!”

The knights behind her marched forward and started carrying the thieves away. Some had regained consciousness—they struggled, but even if they hadn’t been tied up, there was no way they could win against trained knights. So, they were all whisked away without any problems. I had no idea what the interrogation would be like, but this was Allusia we were talking about, so it probably wouldn’t involve torture. I couldn’t give the same grace to Lucy, though. *She’s liable to do something rather reckless.*

“By the way...” Even though I wanted to say that everything was settled, we still had one issue to resolve. I turned to Allusia and Lucy. “What do we do about Mui?”

She no longer had a home. We all knew she’d been using this place as her base. However, Lucy, the order, and I had just ransacked the house. Telling her to live here on her own and figure things out wasn’t an acceptable conclusion; however, kicking her out would be pretty irresponsible too. Now that we adults

had gotten involved, we had to see it through to the end. That was only natural.

“The office does have rooms to stay in, but...” Allusia glanced back at the knights hauling the thieves away.

I knew the office pretty well. It technically had places that could be used overnight, but it wasn’t really an appropriate building to live in. I would be uneasy leaving a little girl on her own in that environment. Besides, Mui only knew me, Allusia, and Lucy. Throwing her into the middle of a bunch of knights could cause unnecessary friction.

“I’m currently living out of an inn, so...”

That said, it would also be hard for me to take care of her. Back home in Beaden, I could manage a kid one way or another, but unfortunately, here in Baltrain, I was staying in a single room. Above all else, Mui surely wouldn’t want to live at an inn with an old man. If her staying with me was the only way, then it wasn’t the time to be stubborn...but there was still a limit to how long that situation could hold up. My wallet wasn’t exactly filled to the brim.

Lucy looked at us brightly. “She’s a budding wizard, remember? You may entrust her to me for a while. I have a housekeeper too.”

Things had been looking pretty grim until Lucy spoke up—she sounded as if none of that gloominess had anything to do with her. I hadn’t really thought about it before, but what kind of home did Lucy live in? She’d served as the commander of the magic corps for a long time, so it was probably an upper-class dwelling. She’d mentioned a housekeeper too. What salary do members of the magic corps even make?

To sum up, we couldn’t leave Mui here, the order’s office wasn’t optimal, and it would be difficult for Allusia or me to provide her a place to stay. Naturally, we had no choice but to go with Lucy’s suggestion.

“Hmph.”

Mui snorted as she watched us adults work things out. It was hard to interpret her reaction as welcoming, though it didn’t seem to be a refusal either. At the very least, she understood that the immediate problem could be solved by relying on Lucy. She didn’t seem opposed to it, but she didn’t look

happy either.

“I guess it’s time to head back then?”

We’d all fallen silent, and my words seemed to echo strangely around me. It didn’t feel right to call it a day here—I wanted to go someplace where we could all relax a little. The order’s office would be the natural choice.

“Indeed. We can’t stay here forever,” Allusia said.

She gave orders to another knight on standby. The thieves here had been arrested, but others could be using this hideout. Allusia commanded that the place be sealed off and placed under the order’s supervision until they had a better grasp of the situation.

“I put in a lot of work today,” said Lucy. “I should head back too.”

“You’re one to talk...” I retorted.

She was all smiles, but I felt like *I’d* put in the majority of the work. Even if they were all amateurs, I’d taken on five or six of them. Well, Twilight’s skills remained a mystery, so it was possible he could’ve handed me an embarrassing defeat.

“Tch.”

Perhaps hating this kind of harmonious mood, Mui clicked her tongue. Maybe hate was the wrong word—she simply wasn’t used to it. In a sense, she’d lived the opposite of a peaceful life. I still knew nothing about her circumstances, but if there was anything I could do for her, I wanted to. That was the responsibility of an adult who’d meddled in her affairs. Somehow or other, Mui seemed like the type I simply couldn’t leave alone.

I didn’t think she would go on a rampage or anything, but if someone didn’t keep an eye on her, she seemed liable to break down. That was mostly my intuition talking. I’d watched many children grow up, and even if my experience came from a backcountry dojo, I knew my intuition was reliable.

If I was wrong, that was fine. If I was right, I wanted to work with Allusia and Lucy however I could.

“Shall we?” I asked. Without thinking twice, I held out a hand. Mui acted

tough, but she was at an age where she still needed an adult's guidance. I knew she wasn't obedient enough to take my hand, but the gesture had practically been a reflex for me.

"Hmph."

Just as expected, Mui didn't take my hand. Holding hands with an old man and marching through the streets of Baltrain probably sounded like a horrible experience. Still, by the look on her face, she didn't seem displeased. Knowing that was enough for me.

Okay then, back to the office.



Allusia, Lucy, Mui, and I walked back to the entrance of the Liberion Order's office. In the end, some regular knights had been tasked with supervising the thieves' hideout. Mui and I couldn't remain there, and as leaders of their respective organizations, Allusia and Lucy couldn't be tied down either. Luckily, the house was in the middle of the central district, and there were plenty of standard residences around it, so it was unlikely that anything dangerous would happen. And if something did, the knights were used to conflict.

As soon as we stepped inside the office, Allusia called out to one of the knights who'd hauled the thieves in for questioning.

"Where are they?"

"Ma'am. They've been confined downstairs."

Huh. I didn't know the office had a basement. Guess I've never had a reason to venture down there.

The Liberion Order as an organization was more than just a formality, and the knights were used for more than just ceremony. In a city as huge as Baltrain, the knights maintained public order and had squads they could dispatch at a moment's notice—just as they had for this incident. I wasn't naive enough to believe that the Liberion Order's hands were squeaky clean in *all* dealings, both public and private, but I doubted they were doing anything blatantly illegal. They balanced good and evil, so there were likely facets of gray morality within the organization. Perhaps those facets even applied to this situation...but I

wouldn't worry about that since it had nothing to do with me.

"Very well. I'll be taking my leave now," said Lucy. "I'll come again tomorrow. There're lots of questions I want to ask."

"Aaah, mm-hmm." I nodded. "Thanks for...uh, for today."

Was it even proper to thank her? I wasn't really sure. It felt like Lucy had just dragged me around at her whim. But, well, she *had* immediately surged into action out of concern for Mui, so from that perspective, it was only right that I show my appreciation.

Lucy quickly turned to Mui and grabbed her arm. "Come on—you're with me."

"Tch. Fine. I get it already. Let me go."

I watched as Lucy tugged Mui away. *That sight makes me feel like a parent. I hope Lucy's brashness will help her get along with Mui.*

"See you later, Mui," I called out.

"Hmph."

My farewell garnered only a snort in return. Mui probably didn't hate me, but I was in a strange position—I didn't know how to act around her. Really, I was more than an acquaintance but less than a friend. I knew too much about her circumstances to remain uninvolved, but I was far too old to be called a peer of any kind. *The student-teacher relationships I cultivated with my pupils at the dojo were so clear-cut. If I had something like that with Mui, our interactions would probably go differently.*

"Okay, then."

I peered up at the sky. A dazzling red light shone from the horizon as if seeking to dye the entire Glean continent a crimson hue. In a final struggle for the light of day, my shadow stretched far out beneath me, and it would soon be engulfed in darkness.

Somehow, we'd managed to settle things before the day's end.

I wasn't physically tired, but because of everything that'd happened, I felt a little mentally worn out. That said, my part in this mess was over. Lucy had

mentioned that a mastermind was likely pulling the strings behind the scenes, but it wasn't my place to look for them. That task definitely exceeded my responsibilities as a special instructor, and frankly, I didn't want to poke my nose into things.

"I need to work out the frequency of our patrols and their routes," Allusia said, interrupting my rambling thoughts. "Will you be heading out, Master?"

"Yeah... Guess I'll go back to the inn for the day."

This change in patrol routes probably had to do with the thieves we'd apprehended today. Their hideout was located in an unexpected place right in the middle of the central district, and I doubted that we'd caught them all. The knights would need to tighten security.

"I'll see you tomorrow then, Master."

"Yeah. Don't work too hard, Allusia."

With that, I left the office. Allusia was a very serious person at her core, so I tried to encourage her not to overexert herself. *She probably doesn't need me to say anything—I'm sure she has a good grasp on managing her health. Still, just in case, I figure I can mention it.*

"Phew..."

I sighed. One way or another, it really had been an eventful day. I strode down the road back to the inn. All I wanted was to get there quickly, find a nearby tavern, and knock back a drink. *Nothing's better for relieving fatigue.* I was still unfamiliar with Baltrain's overall layout, but since I'd lived here for some time, I'd started to fill my head with local shops and landmarks. Among those, I knew of several nearby taverns—they were close to the inn, weren't particularly noisy, and they served good food and drinks. These were obviously prime destinations.

For some, breaking into a den of thieves would've been a major incident, but I felt awfully at ease. As a man in his late forties, this event hadn't exactly been a major turning point in my life. I didn't expect any major developments in the case, nor did I really wish for any.

"Well, I'll just do what I can."

There was no point thinking about all this. My idle mumbling vanished into Baltrain's sky. The Twilight thieves' interrogation was probably going to take a while. I didn't know if there was a true mastermind—if there was, the order needed guaranteed information before acting, and such investigations couldn't be conducted in only a day or two.

So, my daily work as a special instructor would remain as it had been. As always, I simply had to devote myself to training the knights.

Anyway, putting effort into my duties is a matter for tomorrow—I want to reward myself for working hard today.

"If I remember right, it's down this alley... Ah, there it is."

I found myself at a tavern one block away from the inn. Even though this place wasn't on the main street, it wasn't lagging behind the competition—there were always quite a few customers inside.

After a tiring day, there's nothing better than a good drink in a tavern like this. I opened the double door, and the sounds of modest hustle and bustle spilled out onto the street. *Business must be good. I'm kinda happy to see one of my favorite shops thriving.*

After glancing around the tavern, I stepped inside.

"Excuse me."

It was time for a good drink and a good sleep. After that, I just had to do my best and carry on as usual. Lucy and Allusia surely had a handle on things.

As the saying goes...tomorrow will take care of itself.

Mui Freya

I had no memories of my parents. They vanished after my birth, taking off to who knows where. Or maybe they were dead. It didn't bother me much—I didn't have the leisure of sitting and worrying over them. It was always far more important to figure out how I was going to survive another day.

My big sister raised me from a young age, and being with her was the only life I knew. When I was little, we lived in a really shabby house. Because I was so young, my sister prioritized giving food to me over herself. I never considered where the food came from, but simply lived day-to-day, eating the meals placed on the table before me.

But then years passed of watching my sister come home looking like a tattered mess, and I realized that she couldn't keep doing everything herself. I needed to help. How old was I at the time? I still remember speaking those words. My sister looked shocked for a moment, but then she admonished me in a gentle tone, saying that I didn't have to push myself. Uncharacteristically, I protested, denying that I was pushing myself at all. It wasn't quite a quarrel, but I was somewhat disgruntled that she wouldn't allow me to help her.

Eventually, I ended up tagging along with my sister and taking on all sorts of chores in back alleys. These days became a routine. Every day, I worked myself to the bone, earning what money I could, or else being paid in food that would last us maybe a day. The work was varied, and it consisted of everything from cleaning gutters to weeding gardens to watching pets. Rarely, some of my employers would add a little extra because I was a kid. The work wasn't satisfying, but wasn't hopeless, and we were managing to scrape by. At the very least, my sister was always there when I got home. As long as she was with me, I knew things would work out one way or another.

At first, my sister and I often worked together, but after a while, we ended up taking on separate jobs. With more jobs bringing in funds, the quality of our daily meals started improving little by little.

“Mui, you don’t need to worry about anything.”

She told me this frequently as a child, but as time went on, she started saying it more and more. Thinking back on it now, those words were probably meant to comfort me and to atone. I never figured out the truth of it, though.

“This the place? She’s been living in quite the shithole.”

One day after finishing work ahead of my sister, I was sitting at home, waiting for her to return. Instead, a man dropped by.

“Oh, there she is,” the man mumbled. He looked me in the eyes. “You Mui?”

I answered him curtly. He was awfully big, but I dealt with nasty-looking men about his size all the time.

“About your sister... Unfortunately, she’s passed away.”

His tone wasn’t at all contrite—he didn’t sound like he found it unfortunate at all. *Why? How? Where? When?* Questions flooded my mind, but I couldn’t even attempt to ask any of them.

“You remember this?”

As I remained lost in a silent daze, the man threw something at me. I caught it reflexively. This small object, glimmering in the light shining through the open door, was the pendant my sister had always worn. As soon as I laid eyes on it, I somehow vaguely knew that I would never see her again. Though I didn’t abandon all hope, I felt something like despair surging up within me.

“She asked me to look after you,” the man said. “That’s why I’m here.”

He kept talking, his expression brimming with annoyance. I couldn’t trust him. I couldn’t. But...now that my sister was gone, I honestly had no idea what else to do. My thoughts felt trapped, spinning endlessly around in my mind.

But then, an unexpected choice was thrown at my feet.

“You wanna resurrect your family?” asked the man. “Then come with me. It’ll be fine. I’m not gonna eat ya.”

My young mind was incapable of seeing through the lie, incapable of refusing

him. And so, I agreed. With this new arrangement, I no longer had to do filthy, low-paying jobs like cleaning gutters or weeding gardens. Though, in a way, the jobs I did were still filthy, just not for the same reasons. I hated it at first, of course. But once I got used to the life, crime simply became a habit. And though I experienced both successes and failures, stealing was far easier than doing menial work. I earned far more money too.

“Here, take this.”

One day, the man threw an accessory at me, just like he’d done with my sister’s pendant. According to him, this thing was magical—he said it was capable of temporarily creating fire. At that moment, it felt like the man was finally showing me the slightest hint of consideration, and the accessory actually came in handy quite often. I used it whenever it seemed like I was about to get caught. Surviving day-to-day was a desperate struggle, but I knew that if I was ever apprehended, my life would go down an even darker path.

Still, I wasn’t doing it for myself—every job I took was to resurrect my sister, and I was ready to do anything to achieve that goal. At first, when I inquired about the price of resurrection, the man simply told me that it would cost a *lot* of money. Over and over, I asked him how much it would be, and after a time, he begrudgingly muttered, “Five million dalcs.”

Five. Million. Dalcs. That was an enormous sum. Still, if it was for my sister, I would gather it. I was sure I could pull it off, and if anything, I was ready to cross even more dangerous bridges. By now, I was used to the work, and the magical equipment made it difficult for anyone to catch me.

However, one day, I stopped using it. As I was trying to drive someone away, fire erupted—not from the accessory, but from *me*. At first, I thought the magical equipment had gone haywire. But then, I realized that I could do it again. I could create fire. After a few tries, I figured out how to summon flames with my own two hands. Yet, this ability didn’t really bring me much joy. After all, I’d done the same thing with the magical equipment, so making my own fire didn’t seem all that special.

“Hmm. Well ain’t that amazing.”

I did tell the man about it. Not that his reaction was particularly great. Being

able to create fire didn't really mean anything to me, and I didn't think much about it. Fire wasn't going to bring my sister back. It was a somewhat convenient skill, but nothing more.

Regardless of anything else, my objective was clear: save up five million dalcs. I knew of only one way to achieve this goal. My work, this day and the next, would remain the same.

"Can't say I approve of that."

I was shocked—that was the only word I could use to describe it. Some of my targets had chased me, but only *after* I'd stolen something from them. Never once had someone guessed my intentions and stopped me *before* the theft.

"Tch!"

I focused my mind on my arm—the one my target was gripping. Fire sprouted from beneath his fingers, and he released me. I somehow got away, and frankly, I wanted to praise myself for not panicking. But then, after getting back to the base, I realized I'd lost something important.

"Are you, maybe, looking for a pendant?"

The next day, while searching around for the item I'd dropped, I bumped into the same old man. I tried playing dumb, but he remembered me too. Ultimately, it was useless to resist—I had no choice but to follow him. I cursed my luck.

We ended up at the office of the Liberion Order. They peppered me with pestering questions, with scrutiny—this was perhaps the most hectic day I'd ever experienced over the course of my short life. Then, without warning, an incomprehensible brat rushed into the room. Once the brat was settled, we all talked at length. I found out that my objective, the goal I'd been working on for so long, couldn't be accomplished. At first, I thought they were lying. If resurrection was impossible, then what had I been working so hard for? I deflated, feeling mentally exhausted. I no longer had any motivation, or energy, or any reason to defy these adults.

Still...

Even though I was tired, I...felt *warmth* for some reason. I couldn't understand the feeling.

"We cannot shut our eyes to a girl like you living in such miserable circumstances. I don't know if we can be your ally, but at the very least, we're not your enemy."

That voice—it was the knight commander, a person rumored to be so noble. A person who lived a life that was practically the polar opposite of mine.

The magic corps commander, a girl who looked to be even younger than I was, addressed me next.

"Your dignity, and that of your sister's, must be protected. And you're the only one who can do it."

Even that old guy, who'd seemed so unreliable at first, was actually super strong. These people were different from all the adults I'd ever known.

I still had my sister on my mind. How could I not? I hadn't seen her die, and I'd never seen a body—I'd simply believed what the man had told me. And what else could I have done at the time? I'd been weak. If I'd had another choice, an option aside from innocently believing an adult's words, then I challenge someone to tell me what it was.

After we discussed everything, there was only one question on my mind.

"What am I supposed to do after this?" I muttered.

"Well, it'll work out one way or another," answered the old man. "That's wholly the adults' responsibility."

Did I trust him? I felt like...maybe I could. At the very least, he seemed different from all the other nasty adults I'd known. I thought back to our brief encounters. *He really is a simple soul, huh?* We'd met because I'd tried to pick his pocket, yet he was still acting so considerate of me.

And I mean, I guess I was *kinda* happy about that. But I didn't know how to interact with him, and what little knowledge and life experience I possessed didn't provide me with an answer. I had no choice but to do as the adults said. *If*

that's the case, maybe it's fine to trust these people for now.

After our discussion, it was time for me to leave. We made our way back to the entrance of the order's office. As I turned to walk away, I heard a voice call out from behind me.

"See you later, Mui."

It was so gentle, so soft, and also a little unreliable.

"Hmph."

The man was a little too old to be a big brother. *If I had a father...maybe he would be like this.*

As I engrossed myself in that sudden fancy, I felt a tugging on my arm. My mind snapped back to reality.

"Come on—you're with me."

And this brat... She's my annoying, impertinent, and stupid little sister! Except I don't ever want to imagine being related to her by blood!

Regardless of the feelings I still had about my missing big sister, I felt like this day would help me face the future.

Interlude

“Mrgh...”

On a day like any other, a girl stood in the order’s training hall. She gripped a large weapon, one that was a complete mismatch for her petite stature, and she groaned as she quietly performed practice swings.

This was Kewlmy Crucielle, a knight of the Liberion Order.

It was almost time for the sun to set, so not many knights were left in the training hall. The commander, the lieutenant commander, and the recently appointed special instructor had already left. The only ones who remained were those who felt inadequate, those who were simply nocturnal by nature, or those who had more free time than they knew what to do with. In other words, they were mostly newer and younger knights. But by now, the hall was truly emptying out, and even these remaining knights were getting dressed and preparing to leave.

Kewlmy remained, holding up her zweihander and groaning.

“Like this? No, maybe...this?” Kewlmy muttered to herself as she launched a couple of strikes with her sword. Her expression, which was usually full of enthusiasm, seemed to lack energy.

The zweihander had been recommended to her by her instructor, Beryl. Buying it had marked a new beginning for Kewlmy and a farewell to the shortsword that had served her for so long. The zweihander was, of course, far larger than a shortsword and somewhat broader. There was no point in even comparing the weight. But because Kewlmy had raw strength to spare, the heft of the weapon was just about right for her. She knew this, despite her inexperience. Her weapon definitely didn’t feel too heavy. It felt pleasant in her hands, and the sensation of slicing through the air was satisfying.

Unfortunately, just because she was a trained knight didn’t mean she could automatically use the weapon properly. Knights were creatures of routine that

usually stuck to a single weapon, barring extreme circumstances. Switching to something else cost both time and money. What's more, knights would need to complete their training all over again just to achieve the same level of prowess they'd had with their old weapon. When you trained with two weapons in the same class—swords, for example—there were some commonalities. But a shortsword was still vastly different from a zweihander. KewlNy felt like she was slowly improving, but honestly, she didn't know when that progress might bloom into proper skill.

And that was why she was still here training, alone, even after the other knights were gone. Beryl had told her not to tire herself out too much, but she couldn't help it. She'd been in the middle of developing her skills with a shortsword, and now, she was having to take steps back and retrain herself on a new weapon. Despite her natural optimism, this situation made her feel like she had to rush to learn. She knew that the path to swordsmanship couldn't be completed in such a short time—from an instructor's perspective, swordplay was an accumulation of many years of diligent training. Yes, she knew this, but the thought wasn't enough to drown out the impatience that fluttered within her.

How long did she spend groaning to herself? She swung her sword for quite a while, worrying endlessly about something the entire time.

"KewlNy. Thought you'd be here."

A familiar voice echoed from the training hall's entrance, and KewlNy whipped around to face it. This wasn't a voice she'd expected to hear in the order's training hall.

"Fice...?" KewlNy asked. She'd been caught off guard by this unexpected visitor, and her own voice sounded rather shrill.

This was Ficelle Habeler—Fice for short—a talented woman who served as the magic corps's young ace. She was also KewlNy's old friend.

Ficelle stared at KewlNy, her eyes full of exasperation. "Dinner. We agreed to go today."

"Hm? Ah... Aaaaah!" KewlNy suddenly screamed hysterically. Ficelle was right—KewlNy *had* promised to join her for dinner since they hadn't been out in a

while. “S-Sorry! I totally forgot!”

“It’s fine. You’ve always been a scatterbrain.”

“Mrgh... I can’t even refute it this time.” KewlNy didn’t like to be teased, but she had, in fact, neglected a promise she’d made to her friend.

“That a greatsword?” Ficelle asked. She seemed to put the broken dinner promise on hold as she focused on the weapon in KewlNy’s hands.

“Ah, this? It’s a zweihander. I switched to it just the other day.” For some reason, KewlNy gave the weapon’s specific name. “Oh right! I want you to take a look at this. I can’t, like, get a feel for it.”

“Waah...” Ficelle’s expression darkened. Her emotions didn’t tend to show much on her face, but right now, she was clearly discontent. “I’m hungry.”

“Please! It’ll only take a sec!”

“Haah...”

KewlNy continued to insist, and Ficelle sighed in resignation. She knew this petite knight very well—KewlNy was an innocent tomboy, but once she suggested something, it was hard to get her to back down. For better or worse, KewlNy was very honest with herself, and she had a steadfast dedication to her sword too. Now that she’d set her sights on having Ficelle check out her swordplay, KewlNy wouldn’t back down, and there was no arguing with her. Ficelle quickly gave up. It seemed dinner would have to wait. Her stomach wasn’t rumbling quite yet, but she was worried that it wouldn’t hold out for long.

“I suppose,” said Ficelle. “I don’t know as much as Master Beryl, though.”

“That’s fine. A third person’s perspective is important! Probably!”

Ficelle had agreed to take a look at KewlNy’s swordplay, but actually providing pertinent advice was a whole different matter. Ficelle considered herself to be pretty strong, though she tried to be low-key about that fact. She probably wouldn’t lose a sword duel against the average knight, and she could also use high-level sword magic.

However, that was simply her self-assessment. Critiquing someone else’s

swordsmanship was an entirely different matter. She didn't have enough experience, and she couldn't guide people, not like her instructor could. Ficelle did try to inform Kewlly of this, but Kewlly didn't mind, so Ficelle resigned herself to the task. She sighed, shifting her focus to try and provide what advice she could.

"Haah! Haah! Hyah!"

"Hmm..."

Kewlly started swinging her zweihander, and her spirited shouts rang out in the hall. Ficelle didn't really enjoy staring at other people's swordplay—teaching wasn't really in her nature. Still, she continued watching Kewlly.

At first, Ficelle didn't observe anything useful. She couldn't really tell what technique was good or bad. So, she pivoted her thoughts and considered how she might swing that sword if she were Kewlly.

"Ah..."

Suddenly, Ficelle let out a quiet gasp. She'd realized something—Kewlly was doing something in a way that Ficelle wouldn't.

Ficelle cleared her throat. "Kewlly."

"Hoh!" The knight stopped swinging and turned around. "What is it?"



KewlNy didn't appear to be slacking off with her training. She was a serious girl who was around the same age as Ficelle. When Ficelle considered what was off about her swordplay, only one thing came to mind.

"You're not swinging with an opponent in mind," Ficelle said.

"A-An opponent?"

"Practice swings aren't just for throwing your sword around blindly," Ficelle elaborated. "Though, I suppose, in order to visualize striking an opponent, you first have to get used to the weapon."

"An opponent? Well, now that you mention it..."

KewlNy's issue was merely a difference in practical experience. Practice swings for learning a weapon's form were naturally conducted alone—that was a given. But weapons didn't exist to merely cut straw or air. No, a blade's purpose was to be used in combat, to oppress an opponent. That was the very nature of weapons. The tip of a blade needed to be pointed at an enemy.

KewlNy wasn't picturing that. Ficelle could tell that there was no imaginary opponent standing in front of KewlNy's zweihander. This made sense—if you never faced an actual opponent, it was hard for that visualization to take root.

There were countless sword styles in the world. Some focused on practical combat, while others focused on performative arts. The way you moved for each style was very different. Beryl was, of course, aware of this fact. But he was proceeding in a certain order with KewlNy's training, just like any instructor would. He'd started by teaching the basic forms and techniques for handling a zweihander—things KewlNy could practice alone without a problem.

Ficelle had observed all of this and seen straight through to the problem.

"As far as I can tell, you're not doing anything weird with your technique," Ficelle said. "It's a problem of focus."

"I see... Okay, I get it!"

KewlNy took a deep breath. It was like she'd received a divine revelation. Thinking back, it *had* felt like she'd been doing nothing except swinging her sword around, and she hadn't given any thought to the opponent on the other

end. How would they move? How should she deliver a solid strike against them? Everything was starting to click into place. She lacked awareness of her opponent—she lacked the fighting spirit that accompanied the thrill of being in battle. Kewlmy felt like something inside of her had burst open.

“Okay!” Kewlmy exclaimed, maintaining this new momentum. “Fice! Be my opponent!”

“Waaah...”

As expected, Ficelle sighed. Her expression made it obvious that she was starving. However, Kewlmy was a bit too young to pick up on that.

“Fine,” Ficelle conceded. “Just for a little while. If we go too late, we won’t get to have dinner.”

“I’m hungry too, so just a li’l more!”

Kewlmy wasn’t going to stop once she got started, and frankly, Ficelle couldn’t bring herself to make fun of her. So Ficelle just stood there in the training hall, sighing for the umpteenth time. The order and the magic corps did have friendly relations, though it was questionable whether a wizard should be using the order’s training hall without asking. Ultimately, there was no real point in worrying about that—Kewlmy and Ficelle were the only ones left, so nobody was going to see them anyway.

“Use that wooden sword,” said Ficelle. “Swinging a real blade is probably a bad idea.”

“Ah, righto.” Kewlmy nodded at Ficelle’s suggestion—it was best to treat this like proper training. If Kewlmy put all her strength behind her zweihander, the ensuing strike would be no laughing matter.

“Here I go!”

“Mm.”

Kewlmy held up a wooden weapon about the size of a greatsword and gave the start signal. She took Ficelle’s short response as an acknowledgment, then kicked off the ground. The sound of swords clattering echoed slightly through the training hall.

In the end, Ficelle and KewlNy didn't get around to dinner until it was completely dark out. Ficelle was extremely pouty about having been forced to accompany KewlNy for so long, so to cheer her up, KewlNy forced her wallet into its own difficult situation.

Chapter 3: An Old Country Bumpkin Cuts Apart the Dark Night

“Hiyaaaaaah!”

It was early in the morning, and in the Liberion Order’s training hall, plenty of people were devoting themselves to practice. I was well aware that I always arrived early, but even at this hour, the knights were still really enthusiastic. Such diligence toward the sword was worthy of praise.

“Yeah, that’s the spirit!”

I dodged a hearty slash and complimented my opponent. Currently, I was engaged in some practical training—taking on a knight in a sparring match. We were armed with wooden swords since accidents could happen if we used metal ones. Though, it wasn’t like I had a real sword to use at the moment anyway.

Still, a part of me wanted to try teaching lessons with real swords at least once. Perhaps this just showed how far I’d plummeted into the madness of swordsmanship. The stinging sensation of a real battle could not be emulated with wooden swords, and though I didn’t want to get involved in a real fight, I believed it was something that had to be experienced—especially for knights. Unlike adventurers, it didn’t seem like knights were blessed with many opportunities to engage in a real fight. If they found themselves incapable of swinging their swords at a critical moment, it could be problematic. So, I figured I could consult Allusia about it later. *There’s a good chance she might turn that proposition down, though.*

“Nrrrrrgh!”

“Whoa there.”

Oops. Silly me. I shouldn’t be thinking about other stuff while training. A wooden sword that was several times heavier than mine grazed the tip of my nose. I’d told her to swing it without holding anything back, but that thought

kinda chilled me to the core. At any rate, her long sweeping slash had plenty of power behind it, but it also left her guard open. She was still developing, but as an instructor, seeing her grow so noticeably gave me a glimpse of what I had to look forward to.

“There.”

“Gyah?!”

Once she’d followed through on her swing, I lightly brought down my wooden sword on her undefended head. Her cute yelp echoed throughout the training hall.

“Okay, let’s stop here for now. Looks like you’re gradually getting better.”

“Seriously?! Heh heh heh heh...”

I relaxed my stance, marking the end of our bout. Kewlmy patted her head and broke into a terrific smile. *Yup, a puppy. Kewlmy really is a salve for the soul.* Still, she was nowhere close to perfecting her art. To further improve her technique, I had to communicate her strengths and weaknesses.

“You’re getting used to handling the zweihander now—your strikes are plenty fast enough. However, if you always swing the same way, your opponent will get a read on your range. When that happens, you should close in and use the ricasso, or else resort to thrusts. Otherwise, you’ll leave an opening like you just did.”

“Erk... Understood...”

Kewlmy looked somewhat dispirited, but I was nowhere near as pessimistic. I hadn’t thought she’d be able to successfully wield such a peculiar weapon in so short a time. *A pleasant miscalculation.* She definitely had a lot of power in her small frame. From the very beginning, she hadn’t struggled much with the zweihander’s mass, and though she was using a wooden sword now, it had significant weight behind it. By the looks of it, she wouldn’t have a problem manifesting her power with the real thing.

Kewlmy also learned *fast*. She had an honest personality and obediently absorbed my teachings. She’d sparred with a shortsword plenty of times, but this was supposed to be her first time using a greatsword in a bout. *And unlike*

when she was doing practice swings, I can see that she's properly visualizing her opponent. I'm glad.

She still had a long way to go, of course, but she'd at least grown to the point where she could push back the average knight with the sheer violent mass and reach of her blade. Kewlny had developed a good foundation by training her body over time—she'd obviously stuck to her training after leaving our dojo, and her skills were proof. Considering all this, I felt it was time for her to do some practical training with me.

She was capable of unleashing a continuous string of long-reaching attacks. Her petite frame allowed her to make tight turns and rotate very quickly. Once she mastered the variable grip and the general push and pull of combat, she was sure to grow much, much stronger.

"No need to feel so down," I told her. "You're steadily getting stronger."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

I wasn't lying. At the very least, a zweihander suited her more than a shortsword. She'd accomplished much in a brief time, and I had high hopes for her progress in the future.

"Oh right! Master, isn't it about time?" Kewlny asked cheerfully.

"Hm? For what?"

I had no idea what she was talking about. Had I made any plans? I was pretty sure I didn't have anything scheduled beyond training.

"Your sword!" she exclaimed.

"Aah..."

I'd totally forgotten about it. But now that she mentioned it, quite a bit of time *had* passed—after training every day, thoughts of my new sword had just seemed to slip my mind. *No, I don't want to attribute this memory lapse to my age.*

"I guess it's been a week already," I said. "I'll have to go get it."

"That's right! Isn't it exciting?"

Baldur had told me he'd need a week to forge my sword. That deadline had passed not too long ago, so it was about time to go collect. Oddly, I'd gotten used to not having a sword on me. Perhaps that was simply because I'd carried a wooden sword instead. *Huh. That...might not be a great mindset for a swordsman to have.*

Regarding the matter with Mui, it had been a week without any new information. Allusia and Lucy had apparently interrogated the Twilight thieves, but I hadn't been told any specifics. I'd brought it up every now and then, but they'd just made sullen faces—it wasn't a topic I thought I should prod at, but judging by their expressions, I could guess that things weren't so simple. That said, there wasn't really anything I could do. Allusia and Lucy knew this, so they didn't share any information with me.

Well, it's not my place to get involved—best to leave this to the big shots. More importantly, I have to get my weapon.

"Okay, guess I'll drop by right after training today."

Strike while the iron is hot—that didn't quite apply here, but honestly, if the sword was ready, I wanted to try it as soon as possible.

"Ah, then I'll go with you!" Kewlny suggested.

"Mm, sure thing." Really, she didn't need to come along, but I didn't have a reason to refuse.

"Hee hee, I'm looking forward to it!" Kewlny said with a beaming smile. "Wonder what kinda sword you'll get?"

I wasn't quite sure why she was so excited about it—this didn't seem like a thrilling event to me. But her current enthusiasm was far better than her being depressed. Kewlny was the kind of girl who was at her best when she was smiling. Besides, I did at least understand her curiosity. What kind of sword had been forged from the lavish materials of the named monster Zeno Grable? Frankly, I had no idea what to expect, and this was both exciting and frightening.

I want something normal. Just plain and simple. Something just like me.

"Anyway, we'll go, but only after we're done training," I said.

“Yes, sir!”

That’s enough for our short break. Time to get back to it. I was naturally excited to meet my new blade, my new partner, but as a swordsman and an instructor, I had to fulfill my duty to the knights. Above all, I wanted to remain steadfast in the art of the sword.

“All right, come at me,” I said.

“Here I gooo!”

KewlNy readied her large wooden sword. Judging by the glimmer in her eyes, she was in even higher spirits than before. *Well, she’s always in high spirits, but still.* Even if this was training, I wanted to avoid getting hit by that huge block of wood. So, I fired myself up once more and focused on her attacks.



“Okay, let’s call it a day.”

“Yes, sir!”

I exchanged blows with KewlNy for a while, and around the time the sun was high in the sky and trending to the west, we brought the day’s training to an end. This was also around the time I’d usually finished my lessons back in Beaden. *Perhaps it’s a habit.* Wake up early, get some exercise, and relax in the afternoon—that rhythm had been deeply ingrained in me. This schedule obviously didn’t apply if irregularities came up, but I didn’t get dragged into such events very often. The matter with Mui really had been an exception.

“I’ll go get changed!” KewlNy announced.

“Yeah, yeah, take your time.”

KewlNy had maintained her high spirits all throughout training and she was still going strong. I didn’t understand the appeal of keeping an old man company on a shopping trip, but she seemed to enjoy it, so I decided to leave it at that. Having cheerful company was more enjoyable than going on my own anyway. I glanced at KewlNy as she vanished into the dressing room, then got myself ready. All I really had to do was wipe off my sweat. *It sure is easy being a man at times like these.*

“Now then...”

Normally, this would be around the time when Allusia would pop up out of nowhere...but she didn't seem to be around today. She hadn't participated in morning training, so she was probably busy in meetings with Lucy or the like. I was curious, but I didn't have anything to contribute to the topic. I'd find out more when the investigation reached a stage where they could make an official announcement.

So, I paid that topic no more mind and instead focused entirely on my finished sword. *Oh man, I'm starting to get excited.* I stood in front of the office for a short while, and Kewlmy soon came out in her usual casual outfit.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“It's fine—wasn't that long.”

Ever since coming to Baltrain, I've suddenly had far more opportunities to go on outings with women. Though, pretty much all of them are my former pupils... Come to think of it, I haven't had to listen to my dad's demands for a while now. Guess that perk comes with the distance.

Still, it was better to give such things at least *some* thought...even if I didn't think any woman would fall for an old man beyond his prime. Whatever. I had something more important to focus on. My love life was a trivial matter I could sweep under the rug for later.

If I remembered right, Baldur's smithy was in the central district. I'd gone there just over a week ago, but I wasn't sure I could find my way back. On that point, I was grateful Kewlmy was tagging along—I didn't end up getting lost.

“I wonder what kinda sword he forged,” Kewlmy mused.

“Who knows? It's a longsword, so I'm pretty sure it won't be *that* eccentric.”

We chatted as we walked. Selna had been the one to make the request to Baldur, but she'd asked only for a longsword. I was about seventy percent excited and thirty percent worried when I thought about what kind of weapon had been forged. I could guess that the blade wouldn't be *too* far off the beaten path, but the materials used were on another level. In all my life, I'd only ever used metal swords.

“I’m sure it’ll be super cool!” KewlNy exclaimed.

“Ha ha ha. I hope it’s something that suits me.” A *cool* longsword? I didn’t want to wield something covered in weird ornamentation. I was pretty sure Baldur understood that about me.

“Oh yeah, while we’re getting my sword, you should also give him a report,” I said.

“Hwuh? Me?”

“C’mon, about your zweihander.”

KewlNy had switched from a shortsword to a zweihander at Baldur’s smithy. That’d been just about a week ago, so she was still getting used to using it. Regardless, she seemed to be doing pretty well—it was important to be able to show growth.

“Right! I kinda feel like I’m getting the hang of it.”

“Glad to hear that.”

I’d recommended the zweihander to her, so I would feel pretty discouraged if she’d said it didn’t suit her. I hadn’t given KewlNy a farewell sword as a child, so I wanted to train her until she reached the point where I could do just that. *This feeling...it’s like parental affection, right? Not that I have any kids.*

“We’re here!”

As we walked and chatted, a familiar building came into view. The building was snugly packed between others, but the place had a certain charm to it.

“Coming in.”

“Excuse us!”

The two of us entered the shop together.

“Ooh, Master Beryl and KewlNy.”

Standing behind a counter practically covered in weapons was Baldur. He was having a staring contest with a certain sword. After seeing who we were, he leveled us with a grand smile, flashing his teeth.

“I figured the sword I requested should be done by now,” I said.

Actually, *Selna* had been the one to make the request. I was starting to feel slightly hesitant, even though it was a little late for that—the sword was complete, and it would be meaningless to not accept it.

“Oh yes! That one’s already done—and it turned out great! Hang on a sec, Master.”

“S-Sure.”

Before I could react, Baldur vanished behind the counter. He’d gotten really excited all of a sudden and looked to be in a rush. *Guess he really is confident about the sword.*

“Maybe we should’ve talked about your zweihander first...” I remarked.

“Ha ha ha, I don’t really mind,” said Kewlmy.

I could hear a bunch of banging and clanging coming from behind the counter. Baldur’d mentioned being really motivated, but I didn’t think he’d be *that* passionate about this project. It was just my sword, after all. I turned to Kewlmy, feeling a little sorry that she’d tagged along all this way.

Then, suddenly, the muscular blacksmith burst back out from behind the counter.

“Here ya go, Master! Take it!” Baldur shouted, thrusting a sheathed sword in front of me.

So this is it? My new sword? I’m getting nervous. I haven’t bought one in years—this is turning into a pretty major event.

“I’ll gladly accept it.”

I took the sword from Baldur and drew it from the sheath. It slipped out easily. Beneath the light pouring in from outside, the blade glimmered with a faint red glow. The length was, as I’d predicted, somewhere around a hundred centimeters, and its overall size wasn’t all that different from the beloved longsword I’d used for many years. However, the profile was more slender than convention, making for a blade that was just as effective for thrusting as it was for slashing. Frankly put, this weapon was cleverly made.

“It’s double-edged with Zeno Grable’s bone as its core,” Baldur explained. “I

coated the outside with elven steel. Carved a shallow fuller on it too. The metal is pretty pliable.”

“Hmm, elven steel, huh?”

I’d only *heard* about that ore before—never seen it. I didn’t know much except that it was a rare metal. A fuller was a groove that ran down the length of a sword. Apparently, it was supposed to increase pliability and slashing power, but as a swordsman, I’d never gotten a real feel for that effect.

“It was quite literally bone-breaking to shave down that named monster’s materials! I had a ton of fun!”

“I-I see. Good for you.”

Is it fun to shave down bone? I don’t get it. But I suppose that’s a matter for a blacksmith’s perspective. It’s a good thing that Baldur enjoys his work.

I could attribute the faint red glow coming off my blade to the elven steel. The word “steel” usually brought to mind a simple dull gray, so this color was a pretty fresh experience. The red wasn’t bright or anything, just the faintest glow, so it didn’t stand out that much. But that scored highly in my books. Coupled with the slender blade, my new sword was quite a chic weapon. Frankly, I kinda felt like it didn’t match an old man like me.

“I used Zeno Grable’s hide for the grip and sheath,” Baldur continued. “It’s pretty stiff for hide, though. The guard is also made of elven steel, and I embedded fangs in the middle of it.”

“Hmm...”

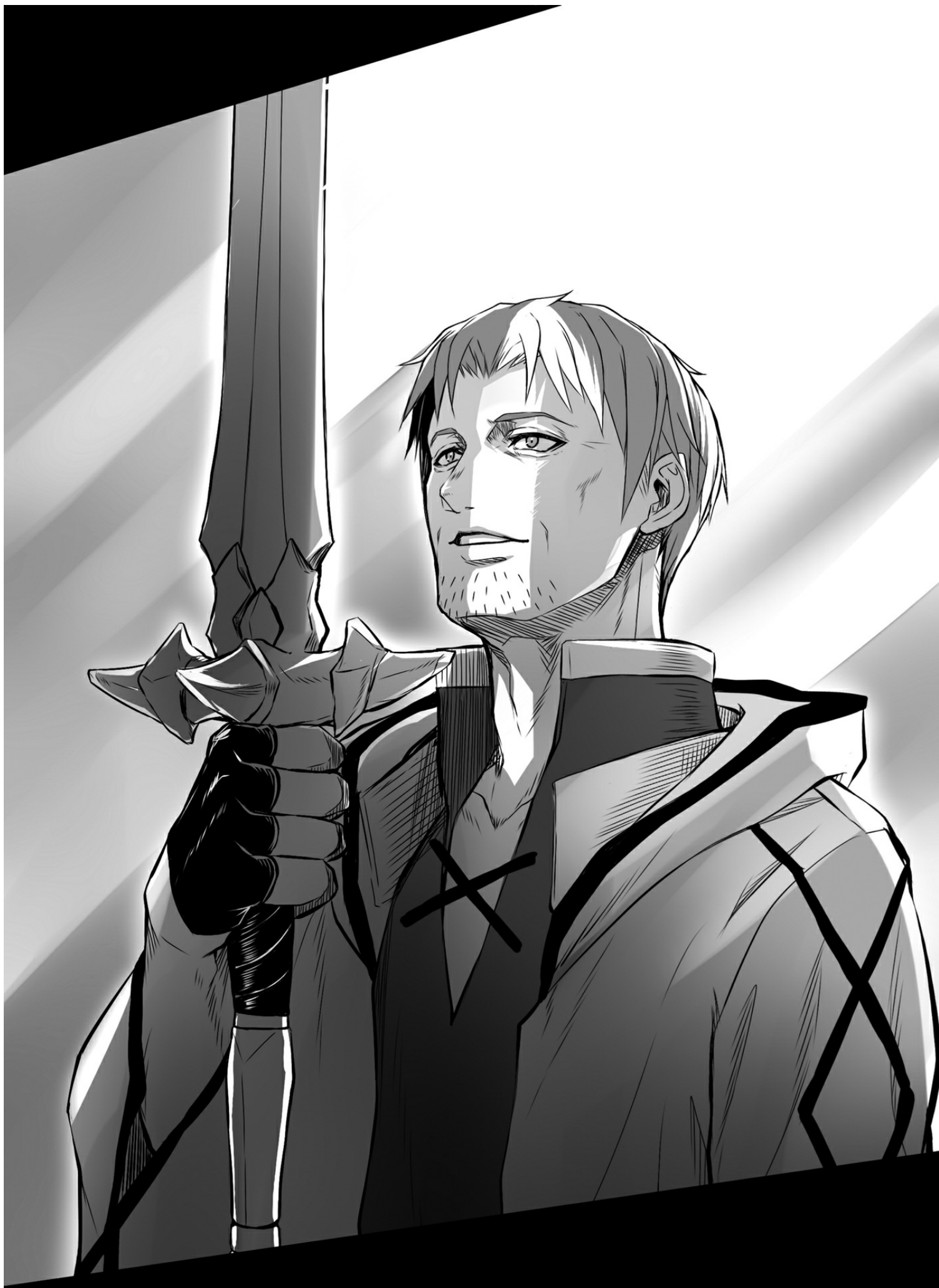
Because of Zeno Grable’s hide, the feel of the grip was somewhat peculiar. It was curious, but it didn’t feel bad. When I grasped it, the friction felt moderate, so I knew I would get in some good swings.

Much like the blade, the grip and sheath were red to match Zeno Grable’s main features. The guard was elven steel too, so it was quite sturdy. A cheap weapon would skimp on such details, but I doubted Baldur’s work was so crude.

“Mm. Looks like a good sword,” I said, swinging it lightly.

The blade slid through the air, audibly slicing the wind. I hardly felt any air

resistance, but there was still a definite weight in my hand. To put it simply, the blade was *really* sharp. I wasn't exactly a connoisseur, but even I could tell that this was quite the weapon. As expected, good materials plus a skilled smith made for a good sword. That should've been evident from the start...but when I held the weapon in my hand like this, I felt an indescribable mix of tension and excitement.



“It’s your sword, Master,” Baldur said. “Don’t worry about it—just take it.”

“Mm. I suppose I’ll do just that.”

Baldur’s words didn’t pressure me, but they dispelled my hesitation.

So this is my new sword? I’ll be in your care, partner.

“What a pretty blade!” KewlNy exclaimed.

“Ha ha ha. It might not suit an old man like me.” The reddish blade really was a novelty. A bit too dazzling for a plain guy. I turned back to Baldur. “Just checking... The bill—it’s already handled, right?”

“Damn straight,” Baldur replied cheerfully. “Selna covered it.”

How much had it cost to make this sword? I didn’t really want to know, and it was probably best to keep it that way. I decided to honestly accept the end product without worrying about the rest. *And I’ll try not to comment that I’m older than Selna.*

KewlNy’s sparkling eyes were fixed on my sword. “I’m curious about how sharp it is!”

Oh? So you’re curious? You really want to know? Right, I do too. I wanna swing this thing right away. Of course, going for a bout right outside on the street probably isn’t the best idea.

“Unfortunately, I don’t got a place for you to test it,” Baldur said. “Pretty sure I mentioned that before.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

Not only were we in Baltrain, but this was the central district. The land costs here were at a premium, and a practice space would need to be pretty large. Thus it would be costly to have such a space made. Places where you could freely swing a sword were fairly limited in the city. *It’ll be best to return to the order’s training hall and get a feel for it there.*

Since we were basically done talking about my sword, I decided to shift the conversation. “Oh right, about the zweihander—looks like it suits KewlNy well.”

“That’s good to hear,” Baldur said.

KewlNy wasn't perfectly accustomed to it yet, but she had the disposition for it—a large blade suited her better than a shortsword. She seemed to understand this instinctively, so things were progressing well.

“Well, y’know, put it to good use,” Baldur added.

“Righto!” KewlNy replied cheerfully.

Baldur turned back to me. “You too, Master. Take care of that sword.”

“Aah, sure. You got it.”

This was a sword I'd obtained through a strange twist of fate—I wasn't going to treat it crudely. As long as I didn't have to face an irregular opponent like Zeno Grable, this sword wasn't going to break so easily—after all, strong materials from that huge monster had been used to forge it. And even though my old sword had just been regular steel, it had still lasted for a long time. Indeed, the Zeno Grable fight really *had* been an irregularity... Now that I was thinking it over calmly, the flow of events didn't really make sense to me.

“Okay, then...”

My business was done, and I got my thoughts in motion. Though training was over for the day, any healthy swordsman would want to swing a newly acquired blade as soon as possible. I did feel a little tired, but it wouldn't be a problem to keep going a bit longer. I didn't have anything to do this evening anyway.

I'm ready to spend some time sweating in the training hall and getting a feel for my new partner.

“All right, I'm going back to the office,” I said. “What'll you do, KewlNy?”

“Ah! I'll go with you!”

It seemed KewlNy was going to follow me. I was grateful—though I could swing a sword on my own, having company would be nice.

“Come and let me know when you need it sharpened,” said Baldur.

“Mm-hmm. Thanks.”

From what I could see, the edge was splendid, so I didn't think it would need that much sharpening—Baldur probably understood what was best though, so I

would definitely take him up on that offer.

“Okay, shall we head back?” I asked Kewlmy. “Sorry for having you tag along with me.”

“No, no, I’m totally curious too!”

My plan was to do some warm-up exercises and get a feel for my new sword. This wouldn’t lead to Kewlmy’s growth in any way, so I felt somewhat guilty that she was accompanying me. But, if she wanted to come along, I didn’t have a reason to refuse.

With the red sheath at my waist—perhaps just a bit *too* conspicuous—I strode down the city streets. Baltrain’s central district saw a ton of pedestrian traffic at all times except during the dead of night. I thought the sheath might attract the eyes of these pedestrians, but plenty of adventurers had flashy getups, so my sword alone didn’t stand out all that much. *I’m glad I’m not garnering unnecessary attention.*

“Hmmm... There’s no place to test the edge in the training hall either, huh?” Kewlmy mumbled, stealing glances at my waist every now and then.

“Nope, there isn’t.”

She was right—training at the order was largely done with wooden swords. There wasn’t anything around I could cut with a real blade, aside from perhaps the order’s furniture... But how crazy would I have to be to dice up that stuff without asking? I didn’t want anyone to get angry with me. I considered leaving town to do some monster hunting or something like that, but security was pretty scrupulous in the vicinity of a large city, so chances were low that I’d just find a monster wandering around nearby.

I didn’t technically need to confirm the sharpness of the blade’s edge—after all, I didn’t have an obsession with battle or anything. But a part of me simply wanted to know how sharp my new toy was. Maybe I was just a bit excited, a mood unbecoming of this old man. Frankly, I didn’t want this demeanor to become my norm—this type of excitement could ruin my image. I hoped my feelings would calm down during the walk to the order’s headquarters.

“Hee hee, you’re like, totally restless, Master!” Kewlmy pointed out with a

huge grin.

“Well, you know, just a little.”

It seemed my spirits were soaring high enough that Kewlmy could notice at a glance. I’d spent a little over a week with no weapon at my waist—having a sword back should’ve relaxed me, but it had done the opposite.

Haah. Calm down. Calm down, me. Okay. I’m calm. Probably.

I soon decided how I would begin my sword practice. First, I’d go through the forms and drill the sword’s length and weight into my body. It wasn’t very different in size from my old sword, but every weapon had minute idiosyncrasies. I needed my body to learn them and get used to the new sword; otherwise, I could misread my range at a critical moment and mess up my slash. *I’m a plain old man, so I at least want to look cool when I wield my sword.*

“Here we are... Hm?”

The order’s office wasn’t very far from Baldur’s smithy. Chatting with Kewlmy and thinking about my new sword made the time pass quickly, and before long, we were there. Just as the building came into sight, I spotted a small silhouette standing next to the usual guards.

“Ooh, Beryl. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Lucy? What’re you doing here at this hour?” I asked.

“Miss Lucy! Hello!” Kewlmy exclaimed.

It was the commander of the magic corps, Lucy Diamond. Some light still lingered in the sky, but it was a little late for anyone to be visiting the office. And judging by what she’d said, she’d clearly been waiting for me. I wondered what she could want, but just for a second—lately, there’d been only one reason for Lucy to visit me.

“Beryl, I have to speak with you,” she said. “May I have some of your time?”

There was none of the pushiness she’d shown during our first meeting. However, her tone and expression indicated that this was not a request she made lightly.

“Sorry, Kewlmy,” I said. “Seems I have to go.”

“D-Don’t be!” KewlNy stammered, waving her hands about. “No need to worry about me!”

I just ended up dragging KewlNy around with me, didn’t I? Guess I’ll have to make it up to her later.

“Shall we?” I said to Lucy.

Lucy turned to KewlNy and gave her a light wave. “Sorry about that.”

Not that it was *that* bothersome...but why didn’t I get an apology for having this suddenly dropped on me? My plans of relaxing and doing practice swings for the rest of the day were dashed. I prayed this wasn’t about something weird, but since I was now pretty familiar with Lucy, I wasn’t optimistic on that front. The two of us walked the streets of Baltrain, basking in the setting sun. As always, we were a pretty unbalanced pair. Her, Allusia, Selna... I couldn’t get used to walking alongside celebrities.

Just as the silence between us was starting to get boring, Lucy spoke up. “That knight was quite the energetic girl. One of the order’s youngsters?”

“Aah, you mean KewlNy?”

KewlNy was, in fact, the Liberion Order’s symbol of cheerfulness. That had been her nature since her days at the dojo. It was great to see that her brilliance hadn’t lost any luster over the years.

“KewlNy’s a good girl,” I said. “She’s still young, but she has solid instincts.”

“Good to hear,” Lucy replied with a chuckle.

I wasn’t all that familiar with the relationship between the order and the magic corps—about all I’d witnessed was Ficelle selling potions wholesale to the order’s office—but it didn’t seem like there were any ill feelings between them. I had acquaintances in both organizations, so I was happy to see everyone getting along. Officially, I was affiliated with the order, but I certainly didn’t want to be in the middle of hostile relations. *Frightening... This old man just wants to live in peace.*

“By the way, where are we headed?” I asked.

I’d ended up going along with Lucy, but I had no idea what our destination

was. She'd only said that she had something to speak about—she hadn't mentioned what was going on or where we would be talking.

"Hm? My house," she answered. "It's near the northern district, so it's a bit of a walk."

"Ah. Well, I don't mind."

Lucy's house, huh? She probably lives in a huge mansion. That was just my imagination running amok, though. Being invited to a lady's house was quite the situation for a bachelor, but alas, the woman asking was Lucy, and I knew my heart would never throb for her. And now that I thought about it, Mui was being cared for at Lucy's house. I was curious about how she was doing, so this was a good opportunity to check in.

"Is it something we can't talk about in public?" I asked. If we were just going to chat, we could've done that while standing around or even at a shop somewhere. But since we were going out of our way to talk in her house, I figured the topic must be rather important and secretive.

"Well, something like that," Lucy answered with an awkward smile.

Considering her personality, this reaction was somewhat strange. She always acted like she didn't have a care in the world—a vague response must've meant that circumstances had to be quite complicated. It made me needlessly suspicious. I really hoped this wasn't going to be something troublesome.

"Oh, by the way, that's quite the interesting weapon you're carrying," Lucy muttered, looking at the sword at my waist.

It was indeed interesting at a glance. A sheath made of red hide wasn't exactly common. I knew Lucy was a magic specialist, but did she also have familiarity with weapons?

"I got it through a minor connection of mine," I replied. "Are you knowledgeable about swords too?"

"No, not at all."

Not at all, huh?

"I sense a faint trace of mana coming from it," Lucy added. "It's similar to the

mana that envelops magical equipment.”

“Hmm...”

So she could see stuff like that? I didn’t know the first thing about mana, but it seemed a wizard of her level was capable of perceiving it.

“Does that maybe mean I can shoot magic out of this thing?” I asked.

“I wonder about that. But it really is the faintest trace, so I somewhat doubt it.”

“I see...” Not that I’d really had any hope...but it was still a bit unfortunate. “Anyway, a wizard can tell whether something has mana?”

“It differs based on the individual. Those who can should be able to sense it.”

Was that how it worked? This field was completely foreign to me, so none of it made sense. Maybe Ficelle could give me answers the next time I spoke to her. Allusia, Selna, and Kewlmy had never mentioned anything about magic, and I’d never asked. Maybe the knowledge really was limited to those with the disposition for it.

“Wizards sure are amazing,” I muttered.

“What are you saying? You swordsmen can sense bloodlust, can you not?” Lucy retorted. “It’s the same thing. On the contrary, if you ask me, that’s far more amazing.”

“Aah, I get it...” That was a good parallel—it was unreasonable to ask the average person to sense bloodlust. I couldn’t really give a detailed explanation of how I sensed it myself. Detecting mana was like the magical version of that. *And, while we’re on the topic of magic...* “Lucy, I’m a little curious about something.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“You all use magic, right? Why are you called wizards instead of mages?”

The word “magic” was common across the world. Those who used magic were rare, but they were recognized everywhere. Thus, one could assume that magic users would be called “mages,” but for some reason, the world at large referred to them as wizards. It wasn’t a huge difference, but I was nonetheless

curious.

Lucy sighed. “You really don’t know anything about magic, do you?”

“Sorry. I’m awfully ignorant.” But what could I do about that? The world of magic really had nothing to do with me.

“Very well—allow me to teach you while we walk,” Lucy said. “Be grateful! My lectures usually cost money.”

“Ha ha ha, then I’ll listen respectfully with that in mind.”

Lucy’s house was near the northern district, so we still had a way to go. It was a little too far to walk all the way there in silence, and I was happy to build up some knowledge while chatting.

“To begin with, the word ‘magic’ covers an enormous range of events,” the great teacher Lucy started. “By definition, it refers to any phenomena that is generated with mana as an intermediary. In that sense, we are all mages.”

“Hmm.”

I gratefully lent her my ear. Any phenomena generated with mana as an intermediary—that was a ridiculously wide range. I didn’t have any knowledge of what exactly mana was capable of, but magical equipment existed, so the scope had to be huge.

“The concept of magic has existed for a *long* time, but it’s said that humanity has only become able to manipulate it relatively recently. During that time, people apparently started to refer to ‘phenomena that can be replicated by the hands of man’ as wizardry. This definition draws a clear distinction between what we do and all other magic in the world.”

“I see...”

“In short, wizardry is a category within the vast scope of magic. But by nature, they’re the same thing.”

Lucy was using words like “it’s said” and “apparently,” so this had all probably happened far before our time. Swords were also weapons that’d been employed by humanity since antiquity—the sword techniques I wielded had also been passed down continuously through the ages, and by no means were

they techniques you could just come up with on the spot. However, magic seemed to possess a history to match, or even surpass, swordplay.

“That’s why there isn’t a single wizard today who calls themselves a mage. By doing so, a mage implies that they’re capable of wielding *all* magic.”

Even a wizard of Lucy’s level hadn’t come close to standing at the edge of the abyss of magic...let alone gazing within it. It was quite an overwhelming field of study.

“Sure sounds tough being a wizard,” I remarked.

“Heh heh heh, of course. Every day is about research and studying.”

Swordsmanship was also an accumulation of daily studying, but it was probably nowhere near as much or as precise as what magic required. *Though, it’s not like learning the way of the sword is easy or anything. I just can’t help but compare.*

“Of all the magic in the world, humanity apparently cannot replicate even ten percent of it with our own hands,” Lucy explained. “Good grief, the road ahead certainly is long.”

Those last words came with a sigh of resignation, and with that, the great teacher’s generous lesson was over.

“I’m acutely aware that this is a domain I can’t even attempt to keep up with,” I said. “But thank you for explaining.”

“Ha ha ha, this much is nothing.”

To a wizard, all that info was probably day one stuff—the basics of the basics. I felt a little disappointed in myself for not knowing even these rudimentary concepts at my age...but the information that made it all the way out to the sticks of Beaden was pretty limited. Knowledge of magic wasn’t exactly necessary for village life, after all. Besides, it wasn’t bad to still be learning at my age. It was best to view things optimistically.

“Oh, here we are,” Lucy said.

A while had passed while we were talking, and soon, we’d arrived at Lucy’s house. It was now evening, a little before night would engulf the world.

Depending on how long this talk is gonna take, it might be completely dark before I make it back to the inn.

“Sure is big...”

I glanced up at the splendid mansion and gate before me. *She really does live in a nice place. I’m a little jealous.* Living in such an enormous house would be far more than I knew what to do with, though.

“Come on in,” Lucy said. “I have a guest today too.”

I stood frozen for a few seconds as Lucy opened the gate, revealing the garden that spread out before the mansion.

“A guest...?”

It seemed like I wasn’t the only one she’d invited here. Seriously, who could be waiting for me? I was curious, but not hopeful.

As I remained captivated by the size of the place, Lucy passed through the gate and then called out to me.

“Come now, what are you standing there in a daze for?”

The word “guest” bothered me, but that would answer itself in due time. There was no point in asking Lucy about it. I wasn’t lying about being surprised by the mansion’s appearance, so I decided to use my shocked reaction as a cover for my trepidation.

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking how big this place is.”

“Hee hee, isn’t it?” Lucy replied cheerfully. She then gave a wry smile. “Well, so I say, but I only use a fraction of the rooms.”

With a house this size, even Lucy, Mui, and the servants couldn’t fill it out.

“I’m looking for a house right now,” I said. “It’s pretty hard to find something with a convenient location and a reasonable place.”

“Well, the central district is awfully expensive,” she replied.

I got the standard response for my grumbling. *Lucy, you’re not one to talk, though—you own an enormous plot in the central district.* But she was the commander of the magic corps, so her wage was probably quite good.

Definitely on a different level from one of the little people like me.

Now that I was living in Baltrain, I wanted a proper residence, but that was a little beyond the reach of my current finances. That said, I didn't really want to be paid more than what I was receiving. Absolutely everything about my lifestyle was different from when I was an instructor at the dojo, so comparing my income would be pointless—I was sure I was being paid a relatively good wage.

However, considering my commute to the order's office, I wanted a place in the central district if possible. The residential area in the eastern district probably wasn't bad, but it was rather far from the order. I couldn't help but think twice about it when I considered the convenience of living in the central district.

Above all, there was one reason I hadn't gotten my own place yet: the inn was awfully comfy to live in. It was relatively cheap, close to the office, and had plenty of nearby taverns and such.

It was so comfortable that it made me hesitant to leave the nest. Living out of an inn forever probably wasn't a great look, but there also wasn't much point in this old man worrying about his public appearance. Either way, this wasn't something I had to figure out right here and now. I was better off shifting my thoughts to the topic Lucy wanted to discuss.

"Okay then, pardon the intrusion," I said.

Lucy smiled. "Mm-hmm. Make yourself at home."

I stepped through the door and was greeted by a vast, well-furnished entrance hall. The building was just as big on the inside as it appeared from the outside. Frankly, I was a little envious. Houses in Beaden weren't exactly cramped, but the capital really was on a whole different level.

As I continued gawking, a woman came out of a door farther inside.

"Mistress Lucy, welcome home."

"Ah, hello, Haley. I've returned."

Simply put, Haley was a gentle-looking maid. Despite her prominent wrinkles,

she gave off a sense of refinement, one that had likely been fostered over many years. Her dark, glossy hair was tied up in a chignon, and she wore black-rimmed glasses. Behind them, her clear, black eyes exuded a calmness that was befitting of her age.

“Beryl, this is Haley Shaddy,” Lucy said. “My maid.”

“Umm... Pardon the intrusion. I’m Beryl.”

Haley responded with graceful manners. “A pleasure to meet you. My name is Haley. I’ve heard much about you, Master Beryl.”

She appeared to be around my age or a little older. If not for her maid outfit, it would be no exaggeration to say that she looked like an elegant noble. Everything she’d heard about me had surely come from Lucy. I was a little curious about the details, but it wasn’t the time to delve into that topic.

I didn’t see Mui, though I was pretty sure she was somewhere in this house.

“Master Ibroy is waiting,” Haley said.

“Got it.” Lucy nodded. “We’ll be right there.”

Master Ibroy... Who could that be? I hadn’t heard the name before. Well, I was sure to find out soon.

“Beryl, this way,” Lucy said as she started walking. “Haley, we don’t need tea.”

“As you wish.”

Lucy moved through her house with confident strides. Was it fine to just follow her? I didn’t really know what constituted proper manners in this situation. She did say, “This way,” so it was probably correct to go along with her. As for Haley, she’d vanished behind a different door after receiving Lucy’s instructions.

I followed Lucy through the entrance hall. Simple wooden doors lined the hall around us, and she led me to stand in front of a specific room. It didn’t appear to be a bathroom or kitchen or anything—in all likelihood, it was a parlor.

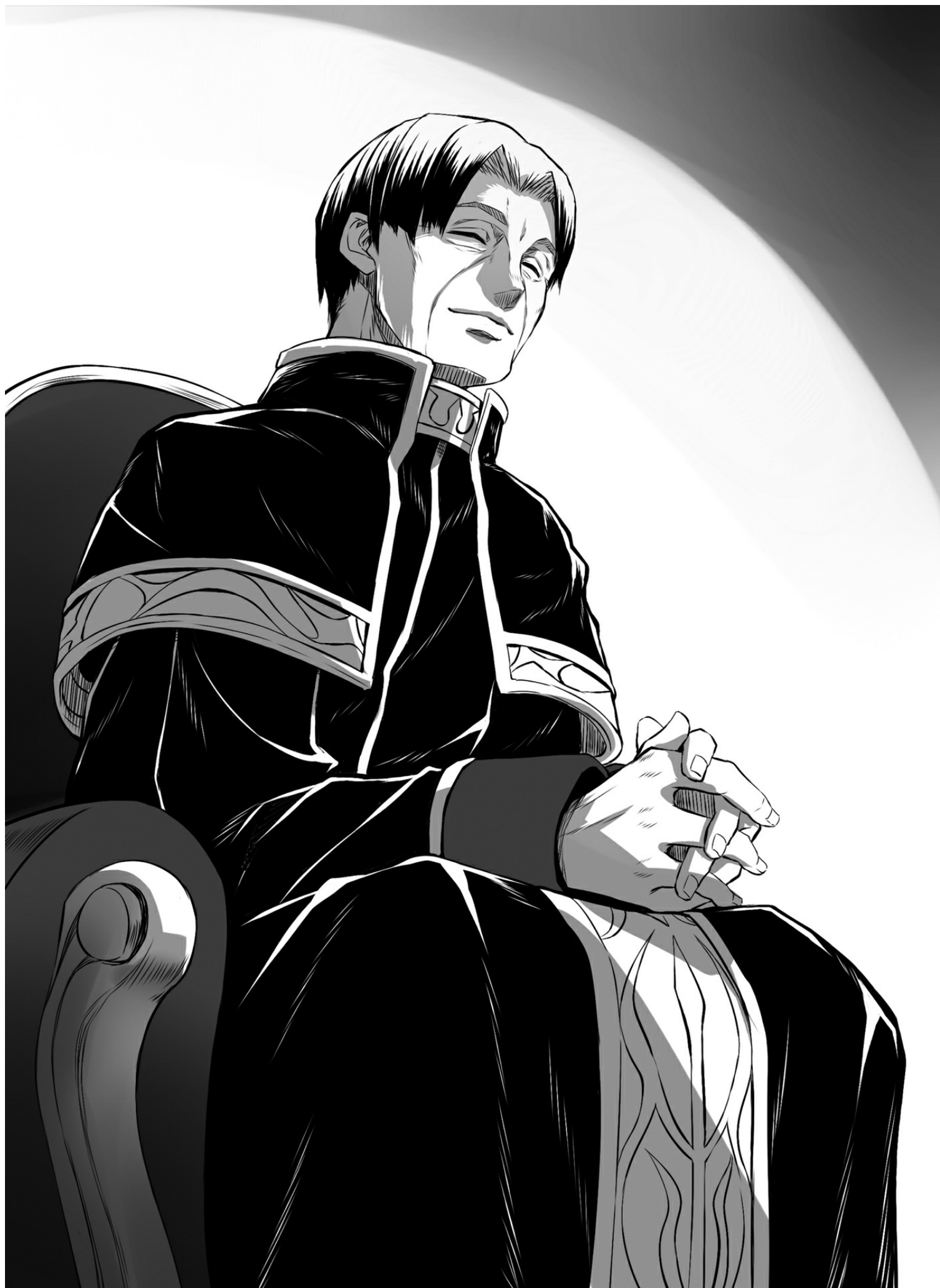
Lucy knocked and announced, “I’m coming in.” She then opened the door and entered the room. As expected, it was a parlor. At the center of the spacious

room was a table and four chairs. Three of the seats were vacant, but someone was already occupying one of the chairs on the left side.

“You’re late, Lucy,” said the man in the chair. His voice sounded old, yet somehow invigorated. “I got tired of waiting for you.”

“Sorry about that, Ibroy,” she replied.

The man named Ibroy was sitting casually in his chair. He wore a robe that fell past his knees. His black hair was graying, and despite its longer length, it was cleanly kept, making him look rather prim. He was probably older than me—the wrinkles on his brow and cheeks were pretty deep. They didn’t make him look intimidating though, and I could tell that he was a man of gentle demeanor.



At a glance, I got a good impression of him. But because of my quick assessment, I couldn't help but feel a little wary. It would be rude to call him fishy, but there was *something* behind the surface of that gentle smile. What's more, he was acting awfully casually with Lucy. Clearly, he wasn't just some old man.

"Is he the one?" Ibroy asked.

"Mm-hmm. This is Beryl," Lucy answered. "I guarantee his skill."

"Umm, a pleasure to meet you. I'm Beryl Gardinant."

My skill? I've got a bad feeling about this. Anyway, I got my greeting out of the way, then took the chair next to Lucy. Our seating arrangement had Lucy to my right, and Ibroy straight across the table from her. The chair next to him was empty.

Once we'd taken our seats, Ibroy spoke. "Now then, I'm sure you must be confused by the sudden meeting. First, allow me to introduce myself."

Hmm, he's taking charge? Not that I really care who's in control of the conversation. I don't have any say in the matter since I don't even know what's going on. Still, please, please, don't drop something troublesome in my lap.

I was about to find out who this man was, but I still felt like nothing good could come of it. After all, this whole thing involved *Lucy*.

"Ha ha ha, I'd rather you not feel so cautious," Ibroy said with a smile.

Perhaps he'd seen the doubtful thoughts written across my face. Could he blame me, though? I'd been dragged out here without an explanation to meet a mysterious man. It was only natural to be somewhat disgruntled and suspicious. I wasn't such an upstanding person that I could trust someone unconditionally on our first meeting. Either way, now that I was here, there was no point in complaining about it. I decided to at least hear him out.

Ibroy cleared his throat then straightened his posture a little. "I'm Ibroy Hallman, a priest of the Church of Sphene."

Ugh, a man of religion? This is definitely going to be a pain. Can I go home yet?

Ibroy chuckled. “Ha ha. Do you hate God?”

“Aah, no, not exactly...”

Crap, my feelings really do show on my face. I wasn’t totally sure how Ibroy had interpreted my expression, but I doubted he’d sensed a positive reaction to his words. I didn’t take part in any religion—I was secular. That said, I didn’t look down on the devout. Religion was a wonderful part of culture that offered much emotional support to the populace. But to me, the concept of gods was simply too nebulous. I placed my faith in the sword instead.

“Beryl, do you know about the Church of Sphene?” Lucy asked.

“Only the name.”

I knew of the major religions because students learned about them during general education. And since the Church of Sphene was an authority in religious circles, I’d heard a fair bit about them. I didn’t know all the details of the faith, but they were a monotheist religion that worshiped Sphene. This practice didn’t originate in Liberis, but a neighboring country called Sphenedyardvania.

Liberis occupied a vast portion of the northern Galean continent and bordered two other countries. One was a small country to the southeast, Sphenedyardvania. They were a religious state that spread the word of the Church of Sphene, though they didn’t have much territory and certainly not as much national influence as Liberis. Apparently, the majority of the citizens there were devout. I even had an acquaintance there who practiced, though I hadn’t met up with them in a while.

Liberis’s other neighbor was to the southwest—the Salura Zaruk Empire. Their territory was about as vast as Liberis, but about half the land was desert. Just as its name implied, the Salura Zaruk Empire was an imperial nation, and it had a history of going to war with Liberis. However, nowadays, things seemed relatively peaceful between the two countries...though I didn’t know any of the details.

There were, of course, more countries and lands to the south, but I didn’t know much about them. Since I probably wasn’t going to travel outside Liberis for the rest of my life, I didn’t *need* to know. *Adventurers like Selna probably have a lot more insight about the continent—maybe I can ask her about it later.*

As I mused over such things, Ibroy said, "Please, there's no need to be so wary. I'm not here to convert you."

"I hope not..."

Well, at least he'd made that clear—I didn't want anything to do with his faith. *Guess I'll believe him.* I didn't know if he was a good or bad person, but he was well acquainted with Lucy, so he probably wasn't terrible. Trusting him, however, was a different matter. He'd gone out of his way to arrange this meeting, so we weren't here to have a friendly chat. And I couldn't just sit around without a care in the world when I had no idea why he'd wanted to meet. I also couldn't throw a fit and storm out. Ultimately, I had no choice but to hear him out. Ibroy probably didn't mean me harm.

"Remember how we caught that Twilight fellow the other day?" Lucy asked. "It was a bit of work to get him to spill the beans, but we uncovered some worrying information."

Twilight was the scoundrel who'd deceived Mui—Lucy had brought down judgment upon him. I knew he was currently being held captive in the order's basement where they'd interrogated him. *What had they done to get him to confess? I kinda don't want to know, and there's no need to ask. I want to live in ignorance of that world.*

"Worrying information?" I repeated. "And this has to do with Mr. Ibroy here, I presume?"

"Yes, that's the gist of it," Lucy confirmed.

Got it. Still, I couldn't see the connection between a petty thief and the Church of Sphene. Even if Twilight was a devout believer, they wouldn't dispatch a priest to resolve the matter of his capture. I didn't get what was going on, but the stench of trouble hung in the air. *Please spare me that...*

Ibroy spoke next, apparently seeing this as a good opportunity to explain himself. "Let's start by telling you about us."

Well, there's not much point in telling me about the church, but I won't get anywhere by pointing that out. I decided to listen to him quietly.

"I don't know how much you know, Beryl, but we of the Church of Sphene

believe in the one god, Sphene. Our faith originates in the belief that Sphene performs miracles.”

“Miracles?” I asked curiously.

“Wizardry to treat wounds and restore lost limbs,” he elaborated.

“Ibroy, are you sure you can say that?” Lucy cut in. “Calling it ‘wizardry,’ I mean.”

Ibroy laughed. “Ha ha! Well, calling it that does make it easier to understand, yes? I won’t go as far as quoting the scriptures to a nonbeliever.”

It seemed that their deity was based on someone who’d used magic to heal people, though I didn’t know if Sphene was a mortal person or an actual god. *Anyway, miracles, huh?* There were a lot of words for magic in this world, and ‘miracle’ was just one of them. On that point, swordsmanship was the same—all of it was swordplay, but there were many different techniques and styles.

“So you’re saying that the Church of Sphene differentiates wizardry from miracles?” I asked.

“Exactly,” Ibroy confirmed. “I’m of the belief that they’re essentially the same thing. Though, don’t ask me to say that in front of any believers,” he added with a chuckle.

I was pretty sure that wasn’t something to laugh at. Scriptures were supposed to be of the utmost importance to those who served God. This man was quite a sly priest.

“There is one example of magic I would like to discuss—something considered by our faith to be Sphene’s greatest miracle.” Ibroy paused for a moment, and when he spoke again, his tone changed a little. “The ability to resurrect the dead.”

Things are getting shady... Mui and Twilight had also alluded to resurrection magic—perhaps this connected them to the priest.

A resurrection miracle had been passed down through the ages as a legend in the Church of Sphene. That in itself wasn’t strange. Legends were simply like that, and swordsmen had plenty of outlandish anecdotes too. However, trying

to accomplish something so unrealistic in the modern day was a problem. Legends were legends because they couldn't be replicated.

"Just to be sure, has that miracle ever—" I started to ask.

Ibroy cut me off. "There's no way it's ever been reproduced. Resurrection by magic is merely part of a legend. That is my view on the matter."

"Thought so."

Life would be easy if it was possible to bring back the dead. But because Ibroy was talking about this, it was definitely described within the Church of Sphene's scriptures. In other words, a good number of people within the faith believed in resurrection magic.

"Hmph, it's obviously a dramatization," Lucy grumbled.

"Lucy, I'm not telling you to have faith, but do choose when and where to say such things," said Ibroy.

These two seemed pretty friendly. In all likelihood, they'd known each other for a long time. But anyway, we still hadn't gotten to the main point.

"I understand that the Church of Sphene talks about such things in their scriptures," I said. "However, I don't see why you called for *me*."

There was no way Ibroy had come here just to chat about the scriptures. As a priest of the Church of Sphene, he couldn't have *that* much free time. He'd gone out of his way to come here and call for a meeting with *me*, of all people. There was no way he'd done all that just to proselytize.

"We've identified the one who's been supplying Twilight with magical equipment," Lucy explained, her tone far more serious than before. "Reveos Sarleon, a bishop of the Church of Sphene."

Another man of the cloth, and a bishop at that. Regardless, even if I took this information at face value, I didn't see how *I* factored into it.

"I'll get straight to the point," Ibroy said. "I'd like to hire you to capture him."

"H-Hold on a minute," I sputtered. "Why me?"

Absolutely nothing about this made sense. The culprit who'd supplied

Twilight's magical equipment was a bishop of the Church of Sphene—that much I could process. But why was I being hired to capture him? It felt like there were a bunch of gaps in this conversation. Wouldn't this be settled in an instant if Lucy went after him? Why bring this up to an old man like me?

"You're the only choice we have," Ibroy explained. "After all, we have to keep up appearances."

I suppose that makes sense. The Liberion Order also has to keep its image clean. Such organizations had to place an importance on public perception since they existed because of people's support. Still, why had I been selected for this task?

"Reason one—I can't make a move," Lucy said with a sigh. "The magic corps cannot stir up trouble with the Church of Sphene."

"Well, that I can understand."

The magic corps was one of the Liberis Kingdom's trump cards, matched only by the Liberion Order. If its commander picked a fight with the Church of Sphene, it was sure to develop into a major problem. The Church of Sphene was the state religion of Sphenedyardvania, so any friction might quickly turn into an international issue.

"Allusia can't make a move either," Lucy continued. "The order is in the middle of making preparations to summon Reveos as a key witness."

"Hmm... Wouldn't that resolve things?" I asked.

I could understand if evidence obtained by torturing Twilight was insufficient. That was why they were making moves to get a testimony from him instead of just arresting him. However, in its own way, summoning this Reveos guy would settle things.

"Bishop Reveos is a citizen of Sphenedyardvania," Ibroy said. "If he's guilty of anything, it'll be a simple matter for him to flee the country."

Ah, so Reveos wasn't from Liberis. He was probably here for missionary work as a bishop for the Church of Sphene.

"Mr. Ibroy," I said, "wouldn't your word help with that issue?"

I was essentially asking, “Can’t you do something about it yourself?” Even if the Twilight thieves were involved, this matter was fundamentally an internal squabble within the Church of Sphene. Couldn’t they resolve it themselves? Why did I need to be involved?

“I am but a priest,” Ibroy said bitterly. “It’ll be tremendously difficult to restrain a bishop without any material evidence. Besides, Sphenedyardvania’s Holy Order can’t be bolstered into action. Mobilizing them across the border requires significant pretense, and above all else, it’ll take too much time.”

“The Holy Order...”

I’d heard of the Holy Order before. They were much like the Liberion Order, except since Sphenedyardvania was a religious state, its military forces were naturally under the command of the church. The most preeminent of these organizations was the Holy Order, though I didn’t know much more than that.

Their skill was an unknown factor, but I doubted they were weak. A religious state still had a proper government. Sphenedyardvania controlled less territory than Liberis and didn’t have much national influence, but that didn’t mean we should underestimate them. Ruling a country involved managing a huge number of people and boundless expectations. So, as an operational military force, the Holy Order couldn’t be purely ceremonial. *I certainly have no intention of picking a fight with them.*

“Twilight and Reveos were working under a certain contract,” Lucy continued. “In exchange for diverting magical equipment from the church, Twilight was to provide the church with two things: people with the disposition for magic, and people who seemed like they could be used after death.”

I was at a loss for words. The deal between Twilight and Reveos was clearly illegal. This definitely couldn’t be made public. If it was, the Church of Sphene, or maybe Sphenedyardvania itself, would fall under heavy criticism.

“I can guess what their objective is,” Lucy added. “In all likelihood...they want to reproduce Sphene’s miracle.”

The greatest miracle recorded in Sphene’s legend was the resurrection of the dead. This bishop was probably an extremely devout believer—though, was it truly acceptable for him to incite this whole incident simply because of his

devotion?

“I-In that case, you can make a request of the adventurer’s guild or something,” I protested. “They’re not affiliated with any country.”

“Beryl, do you wish to expose Sphenedyard’s private affairs to an enormous organization that spans the world?” Ibroy countered. “That would become rather troublesome.”

So adventurers were out of the question. He did have a point. Making a request of the adventurer’s guild obviously meant providing them with the details. And guild members weren’t idiots—those details would be enough for them to figure out the truth, and it could mean exposing Sphenedyardvania’s shame to the entire world.

“I do not wish to overlook the evil happening within the church,” Ibroy said. “We don’t have definitive proof, but I doubt this Twilight fellow threw out Bishop Reveos’s name at random.”

True. It was weird for a petty thief to mention a bishop. Normally, no one would expect those two types of people to have any interaction. Twilight wouldn’t have mentioned Reveos’s name unless there was some kind of connection.

“Reveos isn’t currently a suspect,” said Lucy. “But he’s a potential one. There’s no solid evidence though, so the order can’t take a strong stance. At most, they can summon him. However, if he escapes while things are unclear, the truth will remain buried in darkness.”

There was a hint of uncharacteristic irritation in her voice. She was clearly angry. Lucy treated magic with more sincerity than anyone else I’d ever met. Even if there was a legend of resurrection, she couldn’t forgive someone for distorting the ways of magic, for making it inhuman. Personally, I agreed with her ideology, even if not quite unconditionally.

Though some of my hesitation had been pushed aside, there was still a problem we couldn’t overlook regarding Ibroy’s request.

“I’m...actually a special instructor for the Liberion Order,” I told him.

Yes—my title was the problem. For argument’s sake, say I was still nothing

more than a swordsmanship instructor at a dojo out in the sticks. In that case, I would have no conflict of interest regarding his request. But that didn't apply anymore—though I hadn't been instructing the knights for long, I now worked for the Liberion Order. I'd obtained the title due to Allusia's favor, but it'd come with an appointment letter from the king himself, so I could hardly claim to be a regular citizen. And if the order was making moves to call this bishop in as a key witness, it meant that they were acting through official channels. Having their special instructor disregard those channels without asking would definitely be bad.

"You haven't been knighted, right?" Lucy said. "An instructor is still just hired help. Besides, hardly anyone beyond the knights even recognizes you as the order's special instructor."

"Y-You're really pushing it..."

I felt like this was a lineup of extremely convenient wordplay. It was true, even if it *nearly* twisted the facts. I hadn't been knighted by the king, so I wasn't a member of the order nor had I taken an oath of allegiance. She'd drawn her conclusion by bending the truth to get the result she wanted.

In the end, I simply couldn't accept that this incident would involve me.

"Does Allusia know about this?" I asked.

"Of course she does," Lucy answered. "This plan was made in light of that."

My last ray of hope...was dashed. Twilight *was* being held captive inside the order's office, so it would be strange for Allusia to be ignorant of these details. They'd already cleared this request with her.

"We're not asking you to charge in there and capture him," Ibroy said. "If anything, it'd be more accurate to say that we want you to capture him if he tries to escape. Nothing would be better than Bishop Reveos obediently coming in to provide a testimony."

Uh...it sounds like things have proceeded on the assumption that I'll accept? But I haven't said a single thing about taking the job. Seriously, ever since coming to Baltrain, people keep throwing me into situations without asking whether I'd actually like to be involved.

Anyway, this request sounded better now that it didn't involve attacking a church. They just wanted me to stake the place out.

"Could you pitch in and help?" asked Lucy. "Think of doing it for Mui's sake."

"It's pretty unfair to bring up her name now," I complained.

We had saved a little girl, and now it was time for the adults to clear things up. And frankly, bringing up Mui was a rather convincing argument—I was reluctant to back out when my absence could harm her in some way. It was important to sever any anxieties she had about the future, including ones related to her sister, so that she could walk down the proper path going forward.

"Oh yeah, does Mui know about this?" I asked.

"She doesn't," Lucy answered. "There's no point telling her now."

"Guess not..."

There was nothing to gain by going up to her and saying, "Your sister was sold to an evil bishop."

"You'll be rewarded accordingly for your efforts," Ibroy said. "So, Beryl, can we entrust this matter to you?"

Hmm, what to do? I'm not really interested in a reward. If anything, I'm more worried about Mui's future. Even if we'd arrested Twilight and a few of his underlings, she'd still been part of that organization. If we didn't get to the root of things, that anxiety would linger over her forever.

"Haaah..."

No matter how I looked at it, this proposal was beyond my capabilities, but that didn't mean I could just sit back and do nothing about it. I couldn't think of anyone else they could go to either, especially since it would be detrimental to spread this information around.

Well, crap. I'm blocked off in every direction.

I was also a little worried about refusing a request from these two big shots. I knew they wouldn't harm me. However, if I was *really* the only one they could rely on, this problem wasn't going to get resolved. There was no way to solve

this cleanly. Something was sure to go wrong, or the truth was going to vanish into the darkness before anything could happen.

Yet despite all of this, the biggest thing bothering me was...

“I don’t think we can ignore the impact of me making a move on my own.”

Someone who didn’t know about this request could claim that an egotistic old man high on his string of victories had gone and captured the bishop on his own. That was sure to produce unnecessary casualties, so I wanted to avoid that outcome. Also, to act independently of the order, I needed some kind of just cause. I wasn’t prioritizing my self-preservation or anything, but I felt like I didn’t have enough of a motive to act.

“Ah, yes. The Liberion Order is going to summon Bishop Reveos to make a testimony, whereas you’ll have received an official request from the Church of Sphene,” Ibroy explained. “I believe that should settle everything.”

“I want to get solid evidence,” Lucy joined in. “To that end, we absolutely cannot allow Reveos to escape. I don’t want to give him time to postpone this.”

I was pretty sure that didn’t settle anything. My solid lack of imagination found this whole situation plenty unreasonable, and I didn’t think I was the appropriate choice of personnel to begin with. This was a tremendous gamble—they were placing all their chips on the wrong horse. I seriously wanted to go home and pretend I hadn’t heard any of this. However, this had all started because I’d decided to help Mui without thinking things through. Therefore, it was my responsibility as an adult to see this to the end.

“Haaah... Very well. I’ll do what I can,” I conceded.

“You will?!” Ibroy exclaimed. “You’re really saving our skin. Thank you.”

As he said, if Reveos quietly came in as a witness, everything would be settled and this whole request would end uneventfully. I had to place all my hopes on that outcome. But I also needed to remember that they’d brought this request to my doorstep because they weren’t very hopeful he would comply.

“You may treat this as a formal request from the Church of Sphene,” Ibroy added. “In the unlikely event that something happens, Lucy and I will vouch for you.”

“Indeed.” Lucy nodded. “I can’t personally contribute to this, but you may rest assured on that front.”

“Oh, I see...”

At least they were vouching for me and I wouldn’t get in trouble. Did that even bring me peace of mind?

“So? What exactly should I do?” I asked. Now that I’d agreed, there was no need to drag things out. I wanted them to quickly tell me what I’d be doing, then go back to the inn and sleep.

“The order is planning to summon him the day after tomorrow,” Lucy explained. “Considering the timing...you act tonight.”

“T-Tonight?!”

That’s a crazy lightning strike they’re planning.

“It’s in your hands, Beryl,” Ibroy said.

“R-Right...”

Goddammit. Whatever. It is what it is...

“Now then, I’ll excuse myself,” Ibroy said, standing from his seat.

So he didn’t need to brief me on the specifics? Or was he leaving that entirely to Lucy? I still hadn’t received any information.

“I suppose I don’t need to see you off,” Lucy replied. “Later, Ibroy.”

“Ha ha ha, you’re the same as ever,” Ibroy responded cheerfully. He then turned to me. “See you later, Beryl. It’s in your hands.”

“Yeah, sure...”

In my hands, huh? Well, now that I’ve accepted, I’m gonna do what I can...but I still haven’t been told what exactly I’m up against. Please tell me they’re not expecting me to raid the church on my own.

“Oh, Master Ibroy. Are you leaving?”

“Aah, Haley. Forgive me.”

Ibroy had bumped into Haley on his way out. Maybe Lucy had decided not to

see him to the door because she knew her maid was just outside. I still thought she should show some proper manners and escort him to the entrance, but we weren't quite finished with matters here.

"So? What do you want me to do?" I asked again, shifting my focus back into the room.

"Mmm. I'll go over that now." Lucy got up from her seat and took a thin book from the bookshelf by the wall. From what I could see as she flipped through the pages, it was a map of Baltrain. "Reveos is usually in the northern district's church," she explained, pointing at the map. "That's where we want you to keep watch."

"Hmm... So you say, but I don't really know the layout up there."

The northern district was where Liberis's royal palace was located. Ever since moving to Baltrain, I hadn't gone to the northern district at all—I'd only been to the central and western ones. Frankly, I'd never had the need to venture there. So, with my current knowledge of the city, having something pointed out on a map wasn't enough for me to go on.

"If you take a carriage to the northern district, the church will be right there," Lucy said. "It's also within walking distance of my house. Considering the time, either way will work, but..."

"I'm afraid I'll get lost, so I'll take the carriage."

The carriages that made the rounds of Baltrain ran relatively late into the night. Many residents worked in the central, western, and southern districts, but they lived in the eastern one. That was why the carriages were still busy well after the sun had set.

On that point, I was staying at an inn in the central district, and my primary commute was to the order's office, which was also in the central district. Despite living in the big city, my radius of activity was terribly small. I was getting used to Baltrain itself, but my last visit to the northern district had been long, long before I moved here.

"The Church of Sphene is located near the carriage stop," Lucy explained. "You should be able to see it once you get off."

“Here’s hoping.”

It would be ridiculous to accept this request only to get lost on the way there. Lucy had said that it stood out, so I had no choice but to pray that this was the case.

“I wouldn’t mind having someone to lead the way,” I added.

“I’d love to, but...”

Right. Neither the magic corps nor the order could make a move. I had to act alone.

Lucy sighed, then continued. “Judging by Reveos and Twilight’s contract, many people will be bothered by this coming to light. If they’re all going to be pulling out of the country, he likely won’t make a move alone.”

“Hmm...”

Reveos was suspected of trafficking and human experimentation. However, judging by what Lucy had just said, he wasn’t researching the miracle on his own. He probably couldn’t—not without anyone finding out. So, he must’ve had collaborators, or at least, a number of influential people who shared his ideology. I should’ve asked about it while Ibroy was still here. If this was going to end in a fight, I wanted to know the scale of what I was taking on.

“I guess...we can’t discount things coming to blows,” I said.

“If he attempts to run away in the night, or if he tries to use force to get his way, that’s entirely possible,” Lucy confirmed. “Well, with your strength, it won’t be a problem.”

“I wonder about that...”

This whole thing sounded like nothing *but* problems to me. I’d had no issues handling a bunch of pickpockets, but if I was going to be taking on people who were as strong as knights, it would be a different matter. And if their influence and forces remained a mystery, this could get pretty rough.

“What’ll happen if I let him get away?” I asked.

“I don’t really want to think about it...” Lucy murmured. “It’ll likely become a hot dispute between Liberis and Sphenedyardvania.”

The Liberis Kingdom couldn't overlook the chance that the Church of Sphene might back the bishop's evil deeds. After all, Sphenedyardvania couldn't allow themselves to be criticized because of the words of a petty thief—not without hard evidence. That was probably how things would turn out. I didn't know much about affairs in other countries, but if someone suddenly started censuring them, it was unlikely for them to nod along meekly. That was why it would be best to capture the bishop. However, our side had far too few pieces we could use to make a move.

“Don't worry, it's just a stakeout,” Lucy assured me. “If he quietly comes in for questioning, nothing will happen.”

“We can only hope...”

She was acting cheerful, but she and Ibroy had deemed that outcome unlikely. That was why they'd brought this request to me. I prayed I was being needlessly anxious, but the world was filled with bad people.

“This is just my conjecture, but the likes of resurrection magic doesn't exist,” Lucy said.

“Hm? You mentioned that earlier.”

“However, Reveos has been continuously researching it. Dealing with corpses takes time and labor, and they don't just vanish when used up. So, where exactly are the bodies that he's sacrificed to his cause?”

Please stop. I really don't want to hear that. If he was testing resurrection, he obviously needed corpses. That was why Twilight had been sending specific types of people to Reveos—ones who wouldn't be noticed if they disappeared. Were those people dead or alive at this point? It wasn't clear. The truth would likely come to light if his misdeeds were exposed, but currently, the truth remained shrouded in darkness.

“I have a bad premonition,” Lucy said. “So I'm hoping you can make sure he's captured.”

“Got it. I'll do what I can.”

Bad premonitions were usually dead-on. Not that I had anything to back up that notion. It would, however, be best if things settled down before I bumped

into Reveos—he and I would inevitably clash. I unconsciously reached for the sheath at my waist, though I prayed I wouldn't have to wield my sword against a human opponent. After all, I didn't want to kill anyone.

“Okay then, it's about time to get going,” I said.

“Mm. Be careful.”

I took a look out the window. It was already getting dark outside. If Reveos was going to make a move, it was going to be tonight. And if I arrived late and missed him fleeing into the night, then this whole thing would end up being meaningless. I wasn't enthusiastic about this job, but it was a formal request from Ibroy, so I couldn't slack off.

“Sorry about this,” Lucy muttered as I left the parlor.

“I understand why the magic corps can't make a move. But, well, I can also see that I've drawn the short end of the stick.”

Even if I'd never met Lucy, this probably would've fallen into someone else's lap and gotten resolved without me knowing. Or not. If Mui and I had never met, things would never have gotten this far. To trace it all the way back, this whole thing was Allusia's fault for recommending me as a special instructor. Without her intervention, I'd still be teaching children swordplay in Beaden without a care in the world. The more I thought about it, the stranger this twist of fate seemed.

This responsibility was far too heavy for an old man in his forties. However, I wasn't the kind of person who could simply ignore such promises after making them.

“Ibroy already mentioned this, but you'll be rewarded appropriately,” said Lucy. “I'm counting on you.”

“Ha ha. I won't keep my hopes up on that end.”

With those parting words, I left Lucy's house. First, I had to get to my destination. She'd mentioned it being within walking distance, but I didn't know the exact way and visibility was poor. I decided to obediently take a carriage.

“Ah, crap.”

Where's the nearest carriage stop, anyway? I can't believe I forgot to ask Lucy something so important.

In a panic, I hurried back to her.

Lucy answered the door with a look of bewilderment. "Hm? What's wrong, Beryl?"

"Um. I don't know where the carriage stop is..." I explained, somewhat embarrassed.

"Oh, that? It's..."

Apparently, it was straight down the road. Since I wasn't familiar with the area, I'd been worried about what I would do if I needed to take a winding path. Honestly, I didn't really have any time to waste on getting lost.

I nodded at her. "Thanks, that helps. Okay, for real this time—I'm off."

"Mm-hmm. It's in your hands."

Just as I said farewell to Lucy once more and started to leave...

"Ah."

I bumped into the guest of the house, Mui. A young maid was standing next to her wearing the same clothes as Haley.

"Mui," I said. "I didn't see you around. You were out?"

"Yeah..." she replied curtly. Still, her thorniness was mostly gone. I didn't sense revulsion or unease in her voice. That was great.

"Oh, Mui, welcome back," Lucy called from the door. "Did you buy everything?"

"Yeah..." she said again.

Mui held out the bag in her left hand. It seemed she'd gone out on a shopping trip. This scene made me feel like I truly had a child...though I didn't think Lucy could play the role of the mother. The maid accompanying Mui bowed and then vanished into the entrance hall. It turned out that Lucy had more servants here than just Haley. She sure did live an extravagant life.

It was already dark outside. Mui's expression was inscrutable. Combined with

how taciturn she was now, I wasn't able to ascertain what her state of mind was. So, I decided to start the conversation by praising her.

"Shopping, huh? Good job."

"Shut it..." she grumbled. "Anyone can do this."

Hmm, did I mess up? I'm pretty sure kids are supposed to be praised when they do their best at chores.

"The hell're you doing here, old guy?" she asked.

"Aaah, umm... I had a little something to discuss." I decided to feign ignorance. Lucy hadn't told Mui anything yet, so it was best for me to avoid the topic too.

"I see."

Mui didn't press the issue. A few moments of silence hung over us as we lingered in the doorway.

"Anyway, I'm glad to see you living a good life," I said after a while. "This is Lucy we're talking about. I figured she might use you as a gopher or something."

"Hey, what kind of image do you have of me in your head?" Lucy protested from behind me.

Quite frankly, Mui was looking a lot better than before. Her clothes weren't tattered, and though they weren't flashy, they were clearly clean. The darkness made it hard to be sure, but her skin and hair looked glossier too. This was proof that she was getting adequate nutrition and sleep, and it showed that Lucy was properly taking care of her. Even though I wasn't Mui's father, knowing this brought me relief. My lighthearted remarks came from a place of caring, but I tried not to let that show too much.

"Why?" Mui asked as she watched Lucy and me talk.

I glanced her way. "Hm?"

"Why are all of you...being so kind to me?" she muttered awkwardly. She didn't sound dissatisfied, but confused.

“Hmm...”

I didn't quite know how to answer that. I scratched my head and turned to look at Lucy. She also seemed a little unsure about how to answer.

“It's only natural for an adult to take care of a child,” Lucy replied eventually.

“Agreed,” I added. “A normal adult will hold out a helping hand...even if only to those who are within their reach.”

Lucy and I arrived at the same answer, and this was my honest opinion on the matter. True, Mui had dabbled in crime. Those acts couldn't be justified even if she'd done them for the sake of survival. If we went around rationalizing them, pretty much all criminals in the world would be innocent due to extenuating circumstances. However, for better or worse, Mui had escaped from that world, and her crimes weren't that grave to begin with. Taking her age into consideration, if she showed signs of remorse, it was only appropriate to end things with a stern warning.

“I... I didn't have any adults like that in my life!” Mui shouted, squeezing her voice out. “I just...! I just...kept stealing from others, only thinking about how to live another day! I only met you 'cause you looked like an easy mark! And then you gave me money! And did all this stuff! Why? Why...?”

Her bewilderment turned into screaming that echoed all around us. I was sure she was actually rather clever despite her lack of education. She'd given her crimes a lot of thought. It was also easy to imagine the worthless adults who'd surrounded her when that had been the only life she'd known. The scoundrels in the thieves' den had, in fact, matched that profile.

She was likely confused. I didn't know how exactly she was being treated now, but judging by what I could see, Lucy wasn't being cruel. That was something to delight over, but Mui couldn't seem to come to grips with it.

First, there was a need to properly face the problem inside her heart. However, Lucy seemed more appropriate to take on that responsibility. I shot Lucy a quick glance, but she was just standing back and watching.

Whaaaa? After all she's been putting me through, isn't this unfair? I feel like I'm being used at her convenience. I understand not telling Mui of their

suspicious about Twilight and Reveos, though. Oh well. Guess I was the one who started all this—the one who created the opportunity for us to pull Mui out of that bog.

“Mui, you’re a kid,” I said as gently as possible. I wanted to avoid overstimulating her.

Memories of admonishing unruly pupils came to mind. The dojo was a place for learning swordplay, so there were always mischievous rascals about. Mui’s circumstances were a little different from usual, though—I could hardly sum her up as a rascal.

“Kids don’t have to worry about the complicated stuff,” I continued. “It’s important not to stop thinking entirely...but you can start by stretching out and relaxing in the environment provided to you.”

“Those’re just...pretty words to trick children!”

“No. It’s the truth,” I asserted bluntly. Children were assets of the future that adults were meant to protect. None were valued higher or lower than others. “There are no adults here trying to trick or manipulate you. Didn’t I tell you before? It’s the adults’ responsibility to do something about this. That’s the proper way for a grown-up to act.”

“You’re telling me to just take advantage of my situation?”

“Hm? Yeah. Exactly. Got a problem with that?”

Despite her age, Mui was always looking to her future...or, perhaps, she was resigned to it. That was the impression I got from her. Considering the environment she’d been in until now, her mindset was understandable. We needed to remedy that.

Children were meant to rely on adults—taking care of them was our responsibility. And if we did our jobs right, the children would grow both in body and mind, learn to make proper judgments, and slowly figure out the workings of society through their own experiences. It was the duty of a parent—or an instructor, senior, or whatever other adult—to watch over them. Mui hadn’t been in a place to receive such guidance, though. Her sister had probably been the only one to fit that role.

Considering her age and her bad experience of being sheltered by thieves, the fact that she saw herself the way she did was possibly because of her sister's teachings. The girl had surely been a wonderful big sister—one so wonderful that she'd had no place in the gutters of society. But that was exactly why that world had swallowed her, leaving her unable to protect her little sister to the end.

"Is that... Is that really okay?" Mui asked.

"It's fine, Mui," I confirmed. "You have a future. You have a much longer and brighter life ahead of you than the likes of me."

In contrast to this withering old man, Mui was still capable of so much. There was plenty of time for her to make course corrections for her future. And that was precisely why I had to take responsibility for picking her up.

It was difficult to wipe clear all her suspicions right here and now. So, it was best for her to take some time to get used to her new environment.

"Well," I said, "if you still refuse to accept our help without giving something in return, then once you become a splendid adult, treat this old man to a delicious meal. At that point, we can call it even."

I patted her head. I didn't notice her body language at first, but since she wasn't brushing my hand away, she seemed to be accepting it.

"You're making fun of me, dammit," she protested weakly.

"I'm not. How hurtful."

"Ooh! When that time comes, treat me as well!" Lucy joined in. "I've been giving it my all too!"

"You've just been running wild," I retorted, recalling how she'd left all the thieves to me.

"What?!"

After that, though, she *had* taken Mui in.

"Hmph."

Mui snorted as she watched us. It seemed she now saw the futility in arguing

her point. And since Lucy hadn't interjected either, she must've been largely in agreement with me. It was up to the adults to handle our egos and see this through.

"C'mon, go inside," I urged, pulling back my hand.

"Fine..." Mui made a pouty face and started walking.

"Okay then, Beryl, it's in your hands," Lucy said encouragingly.

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

This conversation made me remember why I'd come here in the first place. Mui hadn't yet had enough time to truly get back on her feet. Absolutely everything in her life had taken too sharp a turn. I prayed that she would find peace in her second chance at life, and to that end, I needed to sever all sources of her anxiety.

I turned around to take one last look, and I saw Lucy hugging Mui from behind in front of the door. *Hmm. If Haley was the one hugging Mui, the scene would be picturesque. When Lucy does it, it just looks like two kids messing around. I mean, Lucy even looks younger than Mui.*

"Makes me feel like a father being seen off to work by his children..." I mumbled.

Seriously, this pretend family is awfully ridiculous. Still, it doesn't feel bad to have people tell me goodbye when I'm heading off to do a job. Guess I'll go and give it my all. It'd be best if I end up having to do nothing, though.



After parting ways with Lucy, I went to the carriage stop she'd told me about, waited for a carriage to arrive, and got a ride from a somewhat confused-looking driver.

There were very few people riding a carriage to the northern district at this hour—normally, at this time of night, people would be going in the opposite direction. The north was mostly a tourist area, with the royal palace being the main attraction. There was only one small residential area, so far fewer people lived there than any other district. Considering this, it wasn't all that surprising

that I was the only one in the carriage.

“Haah...” I sighed as I watched the townscape slowly scroll by.

If Reveos was going to make a move, he would do so in the dead of the night when the entire city was asleep. It would be fine if he didn't show up. But if he did...well, I would have no choice but to restrain him. That was what I was here for. *Considering that I'll be facing off against people, not monsters, maybe I should've brought a wooden sword.* Unfortunately, all I had was a very real blade with a terrific edge made out of Zeno Grable's remains. *It's not like I can go testing its sharpness on a human...* At any rate, I prayed that things were going to end peacefully. However, the fact that this request had been thrown into my lap meant that nobody was expecting it to end that way.

“Sir, we've arrived.”

“Aah, right. Thank you.”

While I'd been sinking into such half-hearted thoughts, the carriage had stopped in the northern district. I paid my fare and then stepped out—the gentle night wind brushed against my cheeks. Around me, it was completely silent, and I only spotted the occasional pedestrian off in the distance. That made sense, though. The royal palace was here, so unlike the western district, nobody would be making a ruckus this late at night. The place was so silent that even if there were any noisemakers, the garrison would arrest them right away.

It was hard to tell with so little light, but I could see the palace's shadow stretching into the sky not too far away. I would've preferred to see the castle while it was bright out. *I'm sure it looks brilliant under the blue sky.* My last memory of the palace was from a long time ago, so its luster would likely be unaffected by making that comparison. I wouldn't have minded spending one day living in such a grand place. But that was a pretty unrealistic dream for an old man from the sticks.

“Okay, then...”

I turned away from the palace's shadow and focused on the buildings at ground level. *According to Lucy, the church should be visible from the carriage stop.*

“Is that it?”

I peered around, focusing on the buildings that had light leaking from their windows. I soon spied the outline of a building in the opposite direction of the palace that stood somewhat higher than its surroundings. Maybe it was perched atop a small hill. I estimated it to be less than an hour’s walk away, and though it didn’t quite have the palace’s height, its steeple shot far into the sky. At a glance, I couldn’t spot any other buildings like it, so it was probably safe to assume that this was the church in question. And if I was wrong, I could have a huge laugh later.

“It really is quiet out...”

My muttering melted into the night sky. On the somewhat long road to the church, I crossed so few people that I could count them all on my hands. It really was too late—hardly anyone was walking around. There were probably soldiers patrolling around the palace, but I couldn’t see anything like that in this area. If I started a ruckus here, the sound would instantly carry, so even if the garrison was nowhere in sight, it would only be a matter of time before they came rushing from the palace. I wanted to avoid that, if possible. And if things did come to blows, I wanted to quickly deal with the situation.

“Hmm...”

The church was, in fact, perched atop a small hill. The path to the main temple went up a slight incline, and from where I was, I could see the closed front doors. I didn’t see anyone around, but a faint light was pouring out of the windows. Mounds that looked like cemetery plots were situated on either side of the building. Perhaps the people Twilight had handed over to the church were buried there. *What a repulsive thought.*

“The lamps are on... I guess they’re still here?”

I doubted any of the faithful were there to pray at this hour. In all likelihood, Reveos’s faction was inside. I couldn’t hear any sound from where I was, and I couldn’t tell what they were up to. It wasn’t like I could just barge in, so I took up a spot out of sight and waited. If anyone saw an old man sneaking around the church on his own, they would definitely find him suspicious. I was really glad there was nobody else here—it was entirely possible that someone might

report my shady behavior.

At any rate, how long was I supposed to stake out the place for? My stomach was feeling a little empty, and I doubted any shops in the northern district were still open. It would be unrealistic to stick around here forever, but I also couldn't predict when the folks inside would come out, so I couldn't step away. *Seems I have no choice but to endure my slight hunger.*

"Oh?"

I watched for a while, fighting a mental battle against my stomach, and finally, I saw some movement near the church. The quiet sound of a lock clicking resounded in the quiet air, and several figures stepped out of the main temple's front doors. At that moment, I realized that I hadn't asked what Reveos looked like, so there was no telling who was who.

There were quite a few people in the group, and several among them were wearing full plate armor. The men seemed like heavy armored knights—certainly not devout worshippers congregating at the church for prayer. It made more sense for them to be escorts for the bishop's escape attempt.

I slunk into hiding by the road approaching the church, and there, I got a better look at them. They were carrying a lot of luggage—I spied several large wooden boxes, each carried by groups of men, including the heavy knights. *This makes it even more likely that they're trying to flee. Otherwise, why would they be carrying so much stuff in the middle of the night?*

If our predictions were correct, I couldn't shut my eyes to this—I was here, and I had to do my job. I stood up, feeling a little stiff in my hips, and approached the group.

"Have a moment?" I asked casually, acting like I'd just passed by coincidentally.

I could see them react to my voice—agitation abruptly swelled among the huddle of people. At first, they seemed shocked, but their demeanors soon turned wary. Many eyes focused on me. They were very clearly nervous.

"And who are you?" a man in the center of the group asked. "I doubt you're here to offer a prayer."

He looked around the same age as Ibroy—a little older than me. His hair was pretty much pure white, which reminded me of the guildmaster, Nidus. But unlike that kind old man, this one had a thorny voice.

“It’s just as you say,” I answered. “I’m not here to worship.”

“So what business do you have?” the man asked. “We don’t have time to deal with a lost lamb.”

Now then, what to do? They were clearly wary of me. The heavy knights looked ready to draw their swords at a moment’s notice. Paradoxically, the fact that they were so cautious of a single passing old man reinforced Lucy and Ibroy’s theory that they were up to no good. But there was no need to tell them about that.

“May I assume you’re Bishop Reveos Sarleon?” I asked.

“Indeed I am.”

It turned out the old man I was talking to was my target. As he spoke, his abundant belly shook. He didn’t look much like the ideal image of a bishop. Not that people could be judged entirely by their physique.

At any rate, I wasn’t sure how to move this conversation forward. Right now, he wasn’t bolting off or attacking me, and the other members of his party must’ve also been confused about how to deal with a sudden intruder. Even if they were guilty of something, Reveos still held a position of influence as a bishop of the Church of Sphene. Thus, he was better off avoiding any unnecessary quarrels. *Well, whatever. No point letting this drag on. Let’s cut right to the chase.*

“I believe you’ve been called in as a witness by the Liberion Order,” I said.

“That has nothing to do with you,” Reveos replied.

The atmosphere changed a little. To be specific, the heavy knights stepped forward to stand protectively at Reveos’s sides. They reached for their swords. I could sense the faintest bloodlust seeping through their armor.

Haah... No avoiding a fight now. I don’t really want to use my sword here, but oh well. Not that I want to take on knights in full plate either. It’s hard to force a

sword through metal.

“Can I ask you to come with me, Bishop Reveos?” I asked, standing so that I could draw my sword at any moment.

“Spur.”

The bishop quietly cast his eyes down and called out to the heavy knight next to him. The man named Spur nodded silently, then drew his sword. Seeing this, the other knights unsheathed their weapons too.

Well, crap. So it's really come to this. I didn't want to fight, but there was no avoiding it. I drew my own sword from its red sheath. The time for settling things peacefully through conversation had passed. *That time limit was way too short, dammit!*

“This, too, is God's decree,” the bishop declared. “There is no problem whatsoever with having one more man offer himself to our miracle. Do it.”

Reveos's words were the signal. The knights came rushing toward me. There were three...no, four of them. The rest set down the baggage and formed a protective circle around the bishop. An armored opponent was already difficult to stab, so taking on multiple at a time was a little beyond what I'd expected. *Will I get out of this alive?* Not that there was any point in complaining when a sword was closing in on me. I simply had to do my job.

“Shhh!”

I parried the incoming sword strike and jumped back to put some distance between myself and my enemies. Getting surrounded in close-quarters combat would make things impossible. It seemed these knights weren't equipped with longswords—their weapons looked like estocs. That was a pretty rare weapon to see. Was this the standard equipment of the Church of Sphene's Holy Order? If so, the influence of Reveos's faction extended as far as their nation's knights. I wondered if Ibroy was going to be all right. I doubted we would put an end to this conspiracy by capturing a single bishop.

When I leaped back, the knights came to a sudden stop. To be precise, the knight who'd attacked me slowed down, and the others seemed influenced by his behavior—they all stopped moving around him.

“Tch...”

The knight clicked his tongue and threw aside his estoc. Then, he drew the dagger from his waist and prepared himself for battle once more. *Huh? What’s going on? Why’d he toss away his weapon?* The shrill sound of metal clanging against stone echoed across the quiet northern district. Drawn by the sound, I glanced at the discarded estoc. The place where my sword had struck the blade was clearly dented, and the estoc blade was badly chipped.

“Ha ha, now that’s a surprise.”

My eyes naturally fell to my hands. *You’re kidding me, right? This thing is insanely sharp. It completely destroyed my opponent’s blade after a single clash. How tough is it, exactly? Dammit Baldur, what kinda crazy weapon did you forge for me? I don’t know if I can tame such a wild beast.*

“That sword is dangerous. Be careful...” warned Spur. “On him!”

The knights were shocked, but unfortunately, that wasn’t enough to get them to back down. Spur, who was probably their leader, lit a fire under the others, and the knights charged once more.

“Not just gonna quietly turn yourself in, I see!”

“Gah!”

One down. I repelled the estoc that stabbed at me from the side and followed with an upward slash. I could feel my blade cutting through the full plate and carving at the meat inside. I’d already confirmed this in the last clash, but my new sword truly did have an edge sharp enough to easily slice through some simple armor. It no longer mattered whether my opponents were dressed up a little. On the contrary, I had to be more careful to keep my cuts shallow and avoid killing them. I wasn’t sure whether I should’ve been grateful or not.

“Hmph!”

“Guh!”

That’s two. I handled a diagonal slash by parrying the estoc as it sheared down from above. I then shifted my grip on my hilt and slashed horizontally, cutting a straight line through the full plate’s torso and sending fresh blood

gushing into the air. I felt my blade tearing through plenty of flesh, but I was pretty sure it hadn't been fatal. *Dammit, it's been too long since I last had a serious fight to the death. I hope my senses haven't dulled.*

"You little!"

"Shhh!"

Three. The knight whose estoc I'd broken came at me with his dagger in a reverse grip. I took half a step back to dodge the downward slash. Before he could bring it back up in another attack, I struck the knight's dagger with a horizontal sweep.

"Ugh! Be careful! He's strong!" one of the knights shouted.

Well, I'm not really that strong. They're clearly thinking that because of the weapon I'm using. Here's hoping that thought slows them down.

"Permission to use miracles. Don't be careless," Spur said, his calm voice resonating in the area.

Miracles, huh? As far as I know, that's a term for magic that heals wounds. So, what kind of miracles are you going to use? Please tell me you're not going to fling fireballs around like Lucy. And if you are, you shouldn't be calling them miracles.

"O great God in heaven, grant us your divine blessing. Bestow us with strength."

The knights chanted some kind of ritual prayer. Once they were done, a pale light poured out of their bodies, then converged back into them. *Uh... What did that do? I can't tell. Doesn't seem like offensive magic, at least.*

"Whoa!"

Once the pale light settled down, one of the knights charged again. I repelled a thrusting estoc to the side and jumped back to gain a bit of distance.

"I get it now!"

They were faster than before, and their strikes were heavier. In all likelihood, that magic had strengthened their bodies. No matter what you did with a sword, the attack itself was physical, so improving its wielder's power and

speed was a simple way of increasing the threat of the weapon.

“Charge in together! Don’t give him the space to counterattack!”

At Spur’s command, multiple knights charged at once. *One, two... Gah! Counting is a pain in the ass! Not that I have the time to sit back and count, anyway!*

“Hah!”

“Dammit!”

I blocked a downward swing from an estoc. It would’ve been nice to be able to break it like the one before, but I needed to build up some strength for that. And now that they were trying to surround me, putting all that force into one blow would leave me open to an attack from my flank or from behind, which would end this whole fight.

“Take this!” I cried.

“Guh! You son of a—!”

I diverted the estoc’s momentum to the side, then slashed at its wielder. I hit his full plate, but the slice was too shallow to reach any flesh. Even during this short exchange, two others had circled around me. *Crap, this is no good. I’m getting surrounded.*

Unlike the thieves, each of these knights was pretty skilled. They were also well coordinated. Add the fact that they all wore armor, and it meant that lackluster attacks wouldn’t reach them. I had to properly put my body behind my strikes. However, if I focused too much on one of them, I would get attacked from behind. I didn’t have eyes in the back of my head, so taking on multiple opponents was really bad. *Yup. This is just plain horrible. What should I do?*

“Hah!”

“Hrrk?!”

As I was in the middle of panicking, I somehow dodged the estocs coming at me from all sides. Then, *something* barely visible to the naked eye suddenly came flying in between our clashing weapons.

“Who’s there?!”

Immediately after this interruption, the knights and I backed away from each other and looked to where the projectile had come from. A girl was standing there with a sword at the ready, her black robe fluttering behind her.

“Ficelle?!”

It was the magic corps’s young ace, Ficelle Habeler. I hadn’t recognized my former pupil when we’d first reunited, but now I couldn’t mistake her for anyone else.

“Wh-Why...?”

Against my better judgment, I ignored my clash with the knights and immediately questioned her. No matter how much I racked my brain, I couldn’t see any reason for Ficelle to be here. The magic corps weren’t supposed to be able to take part in this matter with the Church of Sphene—Lucy specifically had said that she couldn’t be involved. It was strange... Why would an ace of the corps poke her head into this? It made Ibroy’s request for me to act independently seem totally meaningless.

“Just a coincidence,” answered Ficelle. “I just happened to pass by and see a ruckus. So I stopped it. That’s all.”

Ficelle kept her sword at the ready as she gave a concise explanation. She glared at the knights. *A coincidence, huh? I doubt that’s really true. This is probably Lucy’s doing.* No matter how they spun it, it would be impossible to make excuses if the commander took part in this mission personally. So, she’d sent Ficelle here to act like it was a “coincidence.” That was probably what was going on.

“Gwah?!”

“I’m here too! Just by coincidence!”

I heard some shouting from the opposite direction and whipped around to look. A petite woman was swinging a two-handed sword around and engaging with one of the knights.

“Kewlny!”

I yelled her name spontaneously—her arrival was far too unexpected.

Probably Allusia's doing... Still, this was a very dangerous hand to play. If I was on my own and the worst happened, this would end with just my sacrifice and nobody would lose any face. However, if anything happened to these two, it would have a direct effect on the order and magic corps's reputations.

Seriously, how goddamn reckless. I mean, if you guys were going to set everything up for this request, I would've appreciated a little more trust. You didn't have to toss two of my former pupils into the mix. I've got no idea why you sent me here on my own.

As a result of letting my thoughts run wild, some of the tension drained from my shoulders. I really had been nervous. But now, my stiffness was gone...in a good way.

"Tch! He's got reinforcements!"

I wasn't the only one confused by the sudden backup—the knights guarding Reveos were far more shaken than I was. They began reforming their ranks in a panic. Before this, they were content to just try and surround me, but now things were different. I had a wizard capable of flinging long-range magic and a knight swinging around a huge sword. Trying to decide how many knights to allocate to each threat gave birth to a moment's hesitation.

"Be careful, you two!" I shouted to Kewlny and Ficelle. "The knights have strengthened their bodies with magic!"

They could now attack with more power than their physiques suggested, but that was preferable to them hurling projectiles at us. Still, a strong melee assault posed a threat for a swordsman. Kewlny in particular was still a developing talent, and she wouldn't be able to hold her own against an active frontline knight. *Dammit, Allusia, didn't you mess up your personnel selection a bit here? It's a little late to complain, though.*

"Calm down and deal with it," Spur said. He was the only knight to maintain his composure among the chaos. "We still have the advantage."

Ficelle had only unleashed a long-range slash, while Kewlny was still busy fighting a single knight. That didn't really balance the scales. Even if Ficelle was still an unknown quantity, anyone with a discerning eye could see that Kewlny was still rough around the edges.

And yet, judging by her short exchange of blows, she was just barely good enough to win in a one-on-one fight. If Kewlmy and Ficelle could properly disperse their focus, it was entirely possible to gain control here. That, of course, was on the huge assumption that neither of them was going to lose.

I could consider that later. Overthinking wasn't going to improve the situation.

"An opening!"

"Guh?!"

I took the initiative and attacked the nearest knight, who was still confused by the chaos. I couldn't kill him, so I regulated the strength and depth of my slash. Thanks to my weapon's sharp edge, it was now far easier to cut through armor, but I wasn't used to holding back like this. I was armed with swordsmanship that was, at most, meant for self-defense—my techniques weren't for fighting to the death.

The knight I'd struck fell to the ground. Seeing this as a good opportunity, Ficelle fired magic to keep another knight in check, then instantly closed the distance. She had the right idea—this was a terrific chance. There were still many knights, so it was best to reduce their numbers before they rallied.

"Take this!"

One of the remaining knights who'd tried to encircle me earlier yelled as he came at me.

"Shhh!"

I blocked the horizontal sweep from his estoc. The shrill sound of metal clanging against metal echoed in the dark night. Resonating with it, I felt a slight numbness in my arms. *Hmm, looks like I can't let this drag out too long.* Their sword strikes were enhanced by magic now, so if I continued blocking them normally, my body wouldn't be able to hold out. My weapon would probably be fine...but I was an old man. There was a limit to my stamina, unfortunately.

I used my wrists to pivot my parry and struck back with a diagonal slash. I drew a straight line through the knight's full plate from his shoulder to his waist, sending a considerable amount of blood spewing into the night sky. The knight

groaned and collapsed limply to the ground. *Crap, that might've been too deep.*

It wasn't a bad thing that my blade could cut through metal armor like cheese—quite the contrary, actually—but it was a little difficult to judge how much to hold back. I could only pray that he was still alive. I felt quite guilty, but they'd been the ones to attack me. With that thought in mind, my only choice was to strike. If I held back more than necessary, *I'd* be the one dying.

“So, how are those two doing?!”

I was done dealing with the knights right in front of me, and I still had plenty of stamina. As to be expected, I was worried about Kewlmy and Ficelle. If they were at a disadvantage, I had to go help immediately. I didn't want to see my former pupils cut down in front of my eyes.

“Hmph!”

“Ugh... You little!”

I turned to see Ficelle fighting a single knight. It seemed she'd already silenced a few of them. *That's the magic corps's ace for you.* Despite her youth, her skill was the real deal. By the looks of it, she was finding the right times to back off and fire magic, and when given the opportunity, she charged in and slashed directly with her sword. It was a unique fighting style that was a variation on the classic hit-and-run. Even during her days at the dojo, Ficelle had excelled at mentally scanning the battlefield—she always had a wide grasp of what was going on around her. Her fighting style focused on that strength, and she looked like she was in total control. I probably didn't need to help her.

As for Kewlmy...

“Hiyaaaaah!”

“DDammit!”

She was fighting energetically. It was a little too early to relax, though—Kewlmy was still in a desperate struggle against the first knight she'd attacked. She was still far too rough around the edges. The extra reach of her zweihander and her powerful attacks should've been enough to overwhelm her opponent. However, she was still in the early stages of mastering two-handed swordplay, and her knowledge was shallow. She wasn't quite proficient enough to take on

an active knight. That was what I believed, at least.

“Oh?”

As I looked more closely, I noticed that Kewlny’s movements seemed a little different from what I knew. *That’s weird. She still moved in an untrained manner when we had our mock battle. It was to the point that I only deemed today as appropriate for our first session.* I hadn’t imagined Kewlny doing anything beyond flailing her zweihander around and relying entirely on strength, so I was a little taken aback. I wasn’t sure about what her training had been like with her shortsword, but this was supposed to be her first real battle using a zweihander. Despite that, she seemed awfully calm. She had a proper grasp of her opponent’s weapon, predicted his movements, and though her technique was somewhat sloppy, she was managing just fine.

“Guess I’m a failure as an instructor.”

Kewlny’s skills had improved in such a short time. She’d probably been swinging her sword quite a lot when I wasn’t looking. My normal training regimen for her hadn’t been lax in any way. How much had she forced upon herself beyond that? The knight she was facing was in no way weak, and an estoc had favorable compatibility against a zweihander. Even so, Kewlny was maintaining her advantage somewhat.

I took a short breath.

Between Kewlny and Ficelle, I’d been under the impression that the former would clearly require help, but it seemed that was unnecessary consideration. Seriously, it was always a delight to see my pupils’ growth. I recalled the words Henbrits had once said—seeing those under your umbrella grow gave birth to an indescribable sense of elation.

I couldn’t go losing to my students. Gathering strength in my legs, I sprang back into action.

“O great God in heaven, grant us Your divine blessing. By Your tranquil power, bestow these souls with the pulse of life.”

Suddenly, I heard someone chanting. It wasn’t Spur; it wasn’t any of the knights either. This chant, which was different from the last, resonated quietly

in the night sky that hung over the tumult of our battle.

Reveos.

He was kneeling in front of one of the wooden boxes the knights had put down. It looked like he was praying to it. A pale light enshrouded the box for a few seconds, and then, with a *bang*, the box shook and revealed its contents.

“What the... A person?”

A human figure stood up in the darkness. I wondered why a person had been sealed inside a box, but the fact that Reveos’s chant had brought them out was even more curious. I doubted he’d packed the wounded or sick inside that box.

“Wha...?!”

With another series of *bangs*, the other boxes around Reveos opened. People rose from each one. *Dammit, his magic goes beyond just one target?! Not that I know anything about magic, but come on, the way he was praying makes you think he was focused on one box.*

There were six of them. We now had more enemies to deal with. The situation was far too peculiar—we couldn’t assume they were regular people. It was probably best to assume they all had some kind of special ability.

“Until I see this miracle completed, I can’t allow anyone to get in my way.”

“Bishop. This way.”

It was hard to tell whether Reveos was speaking to me or to the six mysterious figures. After saying what he had to say, he turned on his heel. Spur pierced me with his gaze through his helmet, then went with him.

“W-Wait!”

That bastard is trying to run! Nothing is ever easy! I’d planned on supporting Kewlmy, but the situation was different now. Everything would be meaningless if Reveos got away. I didn’t have to go as far as wounding him, let alone killing him, but I had to at least subdue him.

“Ah?!”

As I tried to run after the bishop, the six mysterious figures stood in my way.

Their movements were sluggish—they didn't look like people who'd undergone any training. They would be easy to break through. With that in mind, I figured I would run right past them, but my feet came to a stop.

One of the people staggering toward me had dark blue hair, and her features very closely resembled...Mui.

"No way..."

I'd predicted this. Reveos had been taking in corpses and those who wouldn't be missed if they died. Add to that the miracle of resurrection written of in the Church of Sphene's scriptures, and I could guess that he was using magic indiscriminately to desecrate the dead.

This had gone too far.

"You scum!"

I cursed him without thinking twice. I couldn't sense the breath of life in any of the six people who were approaching me. They didn't look alive at all. They were no more than corpses being manipulated from a distance—this was obvious from the states of their bodies.

"Master, I'm done over— What?"

"Master! I won! Huh...? What's going on?"

Having finished their battles with the knights, Ficelle and Kewlmy ran over to me. It was great that both had safely triumphed. Kewlmy was sweating profusely—she'd been badly pressed. She was still developing her skills, so winning in a serious one-on-one fight was worth celebrating. However, even after their victories, these two were speechless at the blasphemy standing before us.

The best choice right now was to ignore the six and capture the bishop. The logical part of my brain understood that very well. To repeat myself, the six people who came out of those boxes were very sluggish, so anyone with some amount of athleticism would be able to shake them off easily. And with every second that passed, Reveos's footsteps got farther away. I had to make a quick decision—I wouldn't make it in time unless I acted immediately.

And yet...

“You two stand back. I’ll take care of them.”

Ficelle, Kewlmy, and myself... Taking these three options into consideration, I had to be the one to thrust my sword into the hearts of these six people. The men and women staggering toward me didn’t speak. They likely weren’t even conscious. They only obeyed Reveos’s command to get in our way.

“I’ll lay you back down to rest... I won’t ask for forgiveness.”

I readied my sword. Reveos was unmistakably at fault here. Ficelle, Kewlmy, and I had only gotten caught up in it. If I hadn’t listened to Lucy and Ibroy, I would’ve gotten by without even knowing about this desecration—my former pupils wouldn’t have been caught up in it either. However, things had already proceeded down a dark path.

This was likely incomplete resurrection magic. Reveos had cast a lousy miracle just so he could get away. No, even if this was a resurrection miracle in its complete form, it was still unforgivable. I didn’t have any religious faith, but as one who lived by the sword, the lives and deaths of others were part of who I was. What’s more, these people were completely unknown strangers who’d been picked up off the streets.

The deaths of these puppet corpses wouldn’t come from a proper crossing of blades. Thus, the burden of cutting them down was too heavy to place on the shoulders of the two young girls with me. This was different from slaying monsters.

“Shhh!”

I exhaled sharply and charged into the group of people.

That’s one.

I cut down a man with brown hair who still had an air of youth to him.

That’s two.

I cut down a well-built man who was approaching his senior years.

Three.

I cut down a young woman with innocent features.

Four.

I cut down a blossoming woman with fluttering long hair.

Five.

I cut down a young man who was clearly still a boy.

And six...

I cut down a young woman with dark-blue hair who was on the cusp of being an adult.



There were no death cries. They probably didn't even know they'd been killed. The remnants of their souls had simply been forced back to the faraway abyss. Regardless, this didn't change the fact that I'd cut down six innocent civilians—even if they were already dead.

"We're going after him," I said. "He can't have gotten far."

"Y-Yes, sir!" KewlNy yelped.

What kind of face was I making? What tone had I spoken with? This side of me probably wasn't something I should be showing my pupils. I was glad it was nighttime. Ficelle and KewlNy were both still young, and they weren't people to whom this boring old man should carelessly vent his discontent.

As mentioned, Reveos couldn't have gotten far. Given his *healthy* physique, even at full speed, he wouldn't be faster than me or my pupils.

Everything would go to waste if we let him escape. I felt sorry for the knights I'd cut down, but I was pretty sure I hadn't killed them, so they had no choice but to manage on their own.

Wait...KewlNy and Ficelle are here too.

"KewlNy, call the order to come right away," I said. "I want them to secure and maintain the area."

"Huh? G-Got it!"

"Ficelle, chase Bishop Reveos with me. I don't know this district, so you lead the way."

"Understood."

There was no need for all three of us to pursue Reveos together. On the contrary, it was important to clean up the aftermath of the battlefield in front of the quiet church. I could leave that to the Liberion Order. As for chasing the bishop, Ficelle and I would be enough.

After getting Ficelle and KewlNy's confirmation, I immediately broke into a run. I didn't know what was going through their minds; however, judging by their earlier reactions, they had to be considerably shaken. *I had to give them a clear goal to focus on so that their minds didn't have time to dwell on their*

bewilderment. They both have a task they need to do, after all.

As I sprinted away, I felt like the woman with dark-blue hair—the one I'd lain low with my sword—was watching me with vacant eyes.

"He ran off that way," Ficelle said. "Probably down this path."

"Yeah, lead on."

I ran alongside Ficelle, glaring in the direction that Reveos and Spur had vanished. That said, the northern district was unfamiliar to me. I had a general idea of which way to go, but I didn't know how exactly to get there. I had no choice but to rely on Ficelle's navigation.

"Ficelle, I'm guessing Lucy sent you?" I asked.

"No... Just a coincidence," she answered curtly.

"I see."

So she was planning to maintain the coincidence story to the very end. Well, that made sense if she was taking into consideration the worst-case scenario. And even if she was only talking to me, perhaps she deemed it best to restrict what information she released.

We continued running through the quiet northern district for a while.

"Found him," Ficelle said.

It was a dark night, so visibility was poor. However, when there were so few people walking around, someone running away in a panic stood out that much more. We saw a well-rounded figure alongside another man whose full plate armor was clanking noisily. It seemed our game of tag was coming to an end sooner than expected—Reveos and Spur were simply that slow. It was frankly unreasonable to ask someone with a heavy build and another wearing full plate to run quickly.

"Haah...! Haah...!"

"Halt right there, Bishop Reveos."

"Ugh...!"

After getting close enough to hear Reveos panting for breath, I called him to a

stop. I was in a *really* bad mood. An unintended thorniness laced my voice, and it was clear enough that even *I* could tell it was there. *This is no good. I have to calm down.* It was possible that this situation could degrade into another fight, and such a mental state would dull my strikes. I gave my mind a moment to rest, then took a deep breath to calm my spirit. I thought Reveos might try to run away again, but unexpectedly, he did as he was told and came to a stop. He could've simply been exhausted, though.

"I'm with the Liberion Order," I said. "We'll be asking you many questions in a more appropriate place, including questions regarding the magic you just used."

I didn't mention anything about Ibroy. I was glad he didn't ask why the Liberion Order was making a move or why they'd summoned him for a testimony—I wouldn't know how to respond. But regardless, he'd given me irrefutable evidence of his misdeeds with that half-assed resurrection miracle. It was probably fine to get things moving now.

Ficelle silently held her sword at the ready. She was emphasizing to our foes that she wouldn't allow them to escape again. Her sword magic was really convenient at times like these. Even if they tried to find an opening to run away, Ficelle could deal with them immediately using her long-range attacks.

"To think that you fail to understand the value of my research..." Reveos muttered in irritation.

"I have nothing to ask about your *research*," I retorted.

I didn't give a damn...no matter what he claimed to have made. I fully denied the miracle of resurrection—those were my personal feelings. The principles of life weren't meant to be tampered with by the hands of man. Doing so would naturally plunge some into despair...just like what had happened to Mui.

"You're coming with me, Bishop Reveos."

Reveos clearly wasn't the type who was capable of fighting. The only hand he had left to play was Spur, who he'd taken with him on this attempted escape. I didn't know how skilled Spur was, but thinking of it in simple terms, it was two of us against one of them. Victory was well within our grasp.

Now that I think about it, I ended up leaving things back there to Kewlny. Was

that really all right? Well, I guess she's a member of the order, so she should know what she has to do.

"Spur..."

"Sir."

As expected, Reveos resorted to relying on Spur. The knight silently nodded, then drew the estoc at his waist. He had an expert's stance. He was clearly on a different level from the other knights.

"Whoa?!"

In the next instant, Spur's estoc was right before my eyes. I repelled it in a fluster. I hadn't been properly prepared, so I failed to ruin his sword like I had with that first knight. *This guy's fast! How can he move like that in full plate?! I* felt a cold sweat run down my back.

"Hrm!"

"Hgh...!"

Yes, I'd parried his estoc, but Spur maintained his balance and continued slashing. *Oh, come on! Estocs are meant to be used more delicately, dammit!* The tip of his blade fell down on me with terrific power and speed—two, then three times.

I tried knocking him off-balance, but unlike with Henbrits and Selna, it was difficult to throw his strikes to the side because he didn't put all his weight behind his sword. He was properly regulating his strength from his hips, shoulders, and arms—trying to use as little power as he could to move as fast as possible.

The battle had started so suddenly, but Ficelle wasn't moving. Spur and I were too close together, so even if she'd tried using sword magic to support me, she might've hit me instead. *I didn't think he'd get this close so fast either!*

Spur was clearly two or three levels beyond the others. The speed of his sword was in an entirely different league. Also, it seemed his estoc was better made than that of the standard knight. Despite parrying it several times, I couldn't break it.

A second clash, and then a third. Our silent exchange continued. As it did, I sensed his focus shift faintly. I couldn't see his eyes because of his helmet, but Spur was definitely concentrating on something else.

"Gh! Ficelle!"

Judging that our battle would drag on, Spur suddenly shifted his target from me to Ficelle. She wasn't being careless. However, from her perspective, Spur's sword had been aimed completely at me. His redirection was a surprise attack. And to defend against it, she had to throw her body to the ground.

"Hmph!"

"No, you don't!"

The *clang* of Spur's estoc clashing with my longsword echoed shrilly in the air. We were locked blade to blade. *Dammit, it's been a while since I last experienced this.*

"Ficelle! You okay?!"

"I-I'm fine!"

That was close. If my judgment had been a millisecond late, Spur's estoc would've definitely slashed Ficelle. She was capable in combat as both a swordswoman and a wizard, so I wasn't going to complain about him aiming for her. After all, this wasn't a friendly match—we were engaged in a deadly battle. However, even though I understood the logic behind that, I wasn't the type of person who could remain calm and watch his former pupil be exposed to danger like that.

Don't think you'll get off lightly, Spur. The calmness of mind I'd achieved earlier was vanishing, flaring up into anger once more.

"You're strong," Spur said. "Hence, this is regrettable."

"Guh!"

Contrary to my expectations, Spur poured strength into his arms, grinding our blades together. *Goddammit, he's got me beat in terms of pure strength!* I wasn't the type to rely on brute force to begin with, so clashing head-on in a contest of strength wasn't my forte.

“O great God in heaven, grant us your divine blessing. Bestow me with strength.”

“Hgh?!”

Spur chanted as we continued our clash. *Crap! No! This is bad! Magic is bad!* I pushed as hard as I could, but I was gradually getting forced back. *Dammit, I was already at a disadvantage when he was just using his muscles, so adding magic to that is really not ideal! Shit, I’m gonna lose!*

Just as my arms were about to give...

“I won’t let you.”

“Guh!”

Ficelle interrupted our clash. Her longsword swept up as if to cut off Spur’s arm. The sound of her blade slamming against his gauntlet rang in the air. She didn’t manage to sever his arm, but the impact threw him back a little. Using that opening, I pushed hard with my longsword and jumped back.

“Ficelle...! Thanks! You really saved me!”

For the moment, I kept my distance. I’d really lost face there...needing to be saved right after saving her. Luckily, she wasn’t someone who was only here to be protected. She was a splendid swordswoman in her own right.

“Ah...”

Moving my eyes off my opponent for a second, I spotted Reveos trying to run away again. *Dammit, he’ll escape at this rate.*

“Ficelle! Go after Bishop Reveos!”

Everything we’d done would be for nothing if he got away. That said, it would be far too foolish to chase the bishop and ignore Spur. This would all be for nothing if we were cut down from behind. So, our only choice was for me to keep Spur busy while Ficelle chased Reveos.

Ficelle hesitated in silence for a moment, then said, “Got it. Be careful, Master.” She dashed off immediately.

“Tch...”

“Like hell I’ll let you!”

Spur shifted his focus away from me for an instant, and this time, I launched myself at him. I kept my arms folded and attacked with a compact sweep, but he quickly held his estoc up to fend off the blow.

“I’m not done yet!”

I followed up by stepping in close and swinging my longsword. He dodged it by a hair’s breadth. *Given his reflexes, I guess that’s to be expected... But come on! You’re wearing full plate! Can’t you be just a little more careless?!*

He was the type to overwhelm his opponent with a great number of attacks and a strength that didn’t match his appearance. I couldn’t let him have the initiative. Coupled with his magic, he clearly had more physical strength than me. It was dangerous to lock swords with him up close.

“Shhh!”

“Hrm...!”

After a sweep, I switched my grip and attacked again with a return slash. He matched my blade and successfully blocked the strike. *Gah! I’m not really good at staying on the offense! But considering his specialty, I’d rather not be reacting on the defense!*

I had to keep attacking and aim for an opening. Normally, wearing full plate made you a little negligent—you’d depend on the defensive properties of your armor. That had been my hope.

“Impudence!”

Perhaps annoyed by my continuous assault, he swept his estoc wide. It was slightly cruder than his previous precise attacks. Normally, I would’ve taken half a step back to dodge it...but I decided to believe in Baldur’s strength and the potential of my longsword. Besides, things were different now that I wasn’t surrounded by knights. This was a genuine one-on-one fight. Spur was my only opponent.

“Hmph!”

I exhaled and slashed, putting all my strength into intercepting the estoc. This

wasn't a strike that allowed me to dodge—I was entirely focused on breaking my opponent's weapon, though either of our swords could potentially be destroyed.

Using a striking weapon like a mace or hammer would be one thing, but a sword was meant for slashing, not meeting other weapons head-on. Swords were forged to be as long and narrow as possible to increase their slashing power, so they simply weren't suited for the task. However, I believed my longsword could withstand such abuse. This was half gambling, but if I didn't do something about this equilibrium between us, beating Spur would be difficult. Those were the feelings I placed behind my strike.

“Wha?!”

I won the gamble. With an ominous *clang*, Spur's estoc snapped in two. I couldn't see his expression through his helmet, but he was clearly shocked.

“Got you!”

With my longsword free and Spur frozen in a moment's hesitation, I spun my blade around for a slash from his shoulder to his torso. I could feel definite feedback through the hilt of my sword. At the same time, red blood gushed into the darkness.

“Guh! How could I fail...?!”

It seemed that even the magic enhancing his body didn't strengthen his resistance to physical attacks. After tearing open his full plate, my sword had definitely carved through his muscles. *Dammit, I didn't hold back enough because of the blood rushing to my head. Well, Spur wasn't the type I could beat by holding back to begin with.*

I looked down at Spur as he collapsed face-first to the ground. A pool of blood started forming beneath him.

“Gotta go after Ficelle now...”

I was worried about Spur's condition, but unfortunately for him, Ficelle and Reveos were a higher priority.

“I've still got a long way to go...”

Anger and discontent had dulled my blade, forcing me into an unexpectedly hard fight. Not only that, I'd needed my former pupil to bail me out. This was proof that I lacked concentration. *There's no point lamenting over that fact now, though.* To learn from that experience, I had to carve today's shameful behavior into my mind so that I would never forget.

"Okay..."

After taking a quick breather, I raised my head. *Looks like I'm not too far from the church.* I took a moment to pray that the Liberion Order would somehow find Spur, and then I broke into a run.

There was just one problem.

"Crap... I don't know the way."

Despite somehow defeating Spur, I'd lost sight of my primary target. I didn't know the layout of the northern district, and visibility was poor due to the darkness. *In the worst case, I could end up lost. I'd rather not go through that, but I can't just keep idling around here either. Hmm, guess I gotta move. I'll just start running in the direction Reveos went.*

"He couldn't have gotten that far..."

I'd overtaken him once before, so I knew that the bishop wasn't very fast on his feet. Besides, with his physique, he probably didn't have the stamina to keep running. On the other hand, Ficelle was a young, active swordswoman and wizard—in terms of simple athleticism, I couldn't imagine him giving her the slip. Also, she could use sword magic, so even if he maintained a certain distance, she could easily adjust the strength of her strike and hit him from afar. Magic sure was convenient.

"O-Over there?"

After running for a while, I spotted people who looked like Ficelle and Reveos. It seemed that any concerns I had were unfounded. As I got closer, Ficelle looked up anxiously.

"Master, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Good job, Ficelle."

That Spur guy really *had* been a tough opponent. With a regular longsword, I probably would've had a much harder time. Actually, it was questionable whether I could've beat him. *I gotta thank Baldur—this sword is too good for me.*

“So Spur...was beaten. Dammit all, what a worthless man.”

Reveos cursed, knowing that my arrival meant Spur's defeat. He sure had a lousy personality—it made me want to punch him. Why had Spur so faithfully aided this man? I wondered whether I would get the chance to ask him about it... That is, if Spur was still alive.

Incidentally, both of Bishop Reveos's hands were tied with rope. He looked completely like a criminal now. Ficelle had likely prepared the rope for this exact purpose—she wouldn't have had any rope on her unless she'd known the plan from the very beginning. *Dammit Lucy, you really did send Ficelle here with that in mind.* Not that there was any point in bringing that up now.

“Master, where do we take him?” Ficelle asked.

“Hm? Oh, right...”

I had been asked by Ibroy to capture Reveos, but I hadn't been told where to bring him. I couldn't exactly haul him back to the inn. Did taking him to the Liberion Order's office make the most sense? It was already late at night, but someone was probably still there.

“We'll take him to the order's office,” I decided. “Please lead the way.”

Ficelle nodded. “Understood. It'll be a bit of a walk. That okay?”

“I have an idea of how far it is. It's fine.”

And so, our destination was set. By all rights, I would've preferred a carriage for traveling this distance, but I questioned whether anyone would board one under such circumstances. So, I decided to walk. All that was left was to bring Reveos to the order and hand him over, and then my job would be done. I hoped to give him to someone who knew the circumstances, like Allusia, but I doubted she was still at the office at this hour. There was probably only a handful of personnel on the night shift.

“You fools don’t understand—” Reveos protested. “You don’t understand the nobility of pursuing the depth of miracles.”

“I don’t care,” I spat. “Nobility can’t heal the victims you created with your ideology.”

I didn’t give a damn what he had to say. Nobody would’ve cared if he’d simply been researching his scriptures’ miracles—he probably could’ve continued his research for years to come. However, not even Lucy immersed herself in research at the cost of troubling others. Well, maybe she had troubled *me* a little. This guy couldn’t be forgiven for using innocent people as his test subjects. No matter how noble the miracles of the Church of Sphene were, they weren’t worth sacrificing people for.

Reveos was dead wrong. That was simply all there was to it.

“You’ll come to regret getting in the way of our research,” Reveos continued barking.

“Is that so?”

This man really did talk too much, almost like he was drunk on his own righteousness. Even if he had agreed to testify as a witness, he probably would’ve spent the whole time talking about how “just” his cause was. Maybe that was why, instead of jumping and twirling through loopholes to avoid the invitation, he’d chosen to run.

There was still something bothering me, though—it had to do with the identity of those knights. Judging by their equipment, they obviously weren’t part of the Liberion Order. However, they’d been far too skilled and too well equipped to be run-of-the-mill bandits or thieves. In all likelihood, they were from the Holy Order of the Church of Sphene. I’d never met one of their knights before, so I couldn’t tell for sure.

Well, we would find out once the Liberion Order investigated the scene. My job was to capture Reveos and bring him to them. Everything after that was up to Allusia and Henbrits.

“What’s wrong with consecrating the worthless to God?” Reveos kept arguing. “You’re a moron if you can’t assign priorities based on—?!”

“Keep your mouth shut,” I said, cutting him off and grabbing him by the collar. His words had me feeling more high-strung than I’d expected. “That is, if you don’t want to get hurt.”

“Master, calm down,” Ficelle murmured, looking somewhat surprised by my behavior.

“Right, sorry.”

This guy was scum. There was no mistaking that. It wasn’t my place to pass judgment on him, though. That would be vigilantism. As one who guided others on the path of the sword, I couldn’t afford to do such a thing—that was what a country’s laws and justice system were for. I understood the logic behind that, but there were still repulsive pieces of trash like this guy who grated on my nerves. I slowly released my grip.

“Unhand me. The likes of you shouldn’t be touching a man of my stature.”

There’s no point in talking to him... Haaah, what do I do about my anger? It’s got nowhere to go. I guess it’d be a little bad for my reputation if I beat him to a pulp now. He’s still a bishop, even if he’s rotten to the core.

“Be quiet,” Ficelle snapped. Anger and irritation were clear in her voice too. “You’re in no position to talk. Also, your breath stinks.”

“Hmph. Stupid little girl.”

And what does that make you for getting caught by said stupid little girl? I barely managed to keep those words to myself. I didn’t want to wear down my mind and spirit by arguing with him. So, I decided to simply ignore him, drag him along in silence, and then hand him over.

We kept walking through the nighttime city, and, though the bishop argued with us, I somehow managed to maintain my self-restraint. Time stretched on as the three of us proceeded in silence. This would’ve been a good opportunity to take my time and enjoy the sights of Baltrain, especially the northern district, but unfortunately, the situation was a little too serious for that. *I’ll keep that idea in mind for later—it would be nice to try some sightseeing in the future.*

As I continued walking, I pondered one question that remained unsolved: had capturing Reveos truly fixed everything? There wasn’t much I could personally

do to repair the situation.

Oh well. Forget the complicated stuff. I can just throw it at Allusia, Lucy, Ibroy, or the like. First, let's hurry up and hand this guy over.



I wasn't sure how long we'd spent walking. It felt like we'd gone quite far over a long period of time. Ficelle and I were used to the exertion, but Reveos was gasping for breath. Well, he didn't look like the type who exercised much.

Upon reaching the Liberion Order's office, we weren't greeted by the folks on night duty. No, the commander herself was there.

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

"Allusia? You're still here?" I asked, my voice a little shrill at the unexpected sight.

Normally, she would've gone home a long time ago. And yet, her greeting suggested that she'd been waiting for me. Well, they *had* sent Kewlmy and Ficelle to help, so everything had likely been taken into consideration. Allusia had been aware of Lucy and Ibroy's plans too. Everything had gone well in hindsight, but what had they planned to do if I'd failed? Wouldn't that have ended with the order and magic corps running wildly into a fight before Reveos had the chance to testify? It made me question why they'd gone out of the way to have Ibroy make this request.

"Oh man... This kinda stuff chills my nerves," I complained.

"Hee hee. I knew things would be fine in your hands, Master."

As expected, Allusia had given me her unconditional trust. *Cut that out. I'm just an old man.*

"Commander, what shall we do with him?" one of the knights next to Allusia asked, gesturing to Reveos.

"Take him downstairs," she ordered. "We'll deal with him appropriately tomorrow."

"Ma'am!"

The knights took Reveos away. After walking so far, he didn't look like he had the energy to put up even a vain struggle. My job was now complete.

Still, that Spur fellow was a formidable foe. I might've been in trouble if not for my weapon.

"Well done today, Master," Allusia said. "And you too, Ficelle."

"Yeah. Thanks, Allusia."

"It was nothing... This is just work," Ficelle said, curling into herself a little. She was kind of cute. "I'll be leaving, then. Later, Master."

"Mm, take care."

After safely handing over Reveos to the order, Ficelle withdrew. She'd done really well in that fight. Learning magic must've been a relatively recent event for her, but even so, she'd successfully merged it with her swordplay.

Her sword magic looked considerably troublesome to face. Ficelle's swordsmanship was impressive on its own too, so having all kinds of magic flying out of her blade made it more than a pain to deal with. On that point, her style had a strength that differed from Lucy's—while Ficelle could battle on the front lines, the corps's commander was totally suited to fighting in the rear. In terms of simple magic output, Lucy was probably stronger, but taking into consideration everything that could happen in a real battle, it was possible that Ficelle could beat her. That was simply how flexible Ficelle was at handling all kinds of situations.

"Will you be calling it a day too, Master?" Allusia asked.

"Not yet. If you can lend me a little of your time, I have something I want to report."

"Of course. I don't mind."

Allusia's voice brought my idle thoughts to an end. Now wasn't the time to be wondering who would prevail between Ficelle and Lucy. It was getting pretty late, so I could technically leave this for the following day, but I decided to go ahead and do it now—better to ask her outright about what was bothering me. I would likely need time to digest the information anyway.

“Is the site being secured?” I asked.

“After receiving Kewlmy’s report, I had a squad dispatched there,” Allusia answered. “It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“That’s good.”

It seemed Kewlmy had gotten to the order ahead of us. She wasn’t *still* here though, so maybe she’d been dispatched with the other knights.

“You seem rather tired,” Allusia remarked.

“Yeah, well...I guess I am. I had a rough fight.”

Exhaustion was apparently showing on my face. I was, in fact, pretty tired. My enemy had been strong—it was pretty rare to witness that level of skill. I was just glad that Baldur’s longsword was so sturdy. The reason I’d won was thanks to bulldozing my way through—I’d relied entirely on my weapon’s durability.

“Huh...” Allusia looked a bit stunned. “A swordmaster strong enough to push you into a hard fight...?”

“Cut that out. You’re making it sound like a huge deal.”

In the big wide world, there were probably countless people who could give me a hard fight. There was no point in using me as a measuring stick. Frankly, it was pretty embarrassing when she did.

“Well, he *was* strong... The men accompanying Bishop Reveos looked like knights. They were armed with full plate and estocs.”

“Estocs...” Allusia muttered. As I’d thought, this was an unusual weapon here in the kingdom. She sank into thought for a while, then continued. “As far as I know, among the organizations active in this region, only the Holy Order of the Church of Sphene makes wide use of estocs.”

“Thought so...”

That fact was now pretty much guaranteed. Ibroy had mentioned that if he’d had the time, he would’ve gotten the Holy Order involved. However, it seemed Reveos’s faction had influence among those knights. In that case, this likely wasn’t going to end with Reveos’s capture...though it would help if his faction’s failure caused them to fall apart naturally.

Hmmm, whatever. Even if they're a neighbor, I don't have any obligation to stick my neck into another country's affairs. It's got nothing to do with me. Ibroy will just have to do his best.

"There are unconscious knights back at the church," I said. "You should be able to press them for information about what's going on behind the scenes."

"Right. We'll start by thoroughly interrogating them about the circumstances surrounding this situation."

If another country's knights were up to no good in Liberis, then this was already an international problem. That was why the investigation had to be handled that much more carefully. After all, the order couldn't pick a fight based entirely on false accusations. They had to quickly and carefully uncover what was going on behind the curtains, make sure they were positive about the truth of the matter, and then Liberis had to make an official declaration. That was how I assumed it worked.

"Also...I ended up cutting something I didn't really want to cut," I muttered.

"Hm?"

"No, it's nothing."

Allusia looked a little troubled by this. I wondered how I would explain it to Mui, and I almost felt like I shouldn't. It would probably be better for her mental stability if I took that secret to the grave. I found this conclusion to be somewhat pathetic, but since I wasn't capable of doing anything about it, it was probably better off being buried in darkness.

Telling the truth didn't always lead to a better result. By taking into account the circumstances, timing, and boundaries, it seemed better not to talk about it. Mui was already in an unstable position, so I couldn't place another unnecessary burden on her. I doubted that remaining silent would result in anything, good or bad. And time would eventually solve it—time was a salve that healed all wounds. Maybe that wasn't necessarily true for people of all ages, but for someone as young as Mui, it was the best solution.

"Now then," I said. "I suppose I'll entrust the aftermath to the order and head back to the inn."

“Very well. Good work today, Master,” Allusia replied. “Please leave the rest to us.”

Lucy and Ibroy probably wouldn’t mind waiting a day for their report. I had no idea where Ibroy was staying anyway, so I could probably just tell Lucy and the rest would figure itself out. And now that I’d gotten reassurance from Allusia, I felt safe leaving the rest to the knights. Ultimately, my title as special instructor served no purpose in an investigation.

So, no matter what the fine details were, this case was closed for me. That was all I could say about it. *Now, all that’s left is to wander back to the inn alone under Baltrain’s night sky.*

“Fwaaah...”

The moment I left the order’s office, I unwittingly let out a yawn. Today had been a tiring day. I wanted to get back to my bed and pass out. Staying up late at this age was harsh on the body, so I decided to go straight back to the inn and sleep.



“Yo, I’ve been waiting.”

“Hm? If it isn’t Lucy.”

The next morning, I rose and made my way to the order’s office to train the knights. Despite yesterday’s harrowing events, I couldn’t shirk my daily duties. At the entrance, I spotted a figure waiting with folded arms.

It was the magic corps’s commander, Lucy Diamond.

“You went out of your way to wait for me here?” I asked. “Sorry about that.”

“I don’t mind,” she said. “I’m the one who asked you to do something unreasonable.”

It seemed she was here for me. *She’s quite the hard worker, coming out first thing in the morning.* I’d wanted to give Lucy a report, but I’d been hesitant to barge into her home, so having her wait for me here had worked out perfectly. There was a lot we had to discuss.

“Do you mind if we head to my place again?” Lucy asked.

“That’s fine and all, but I technically have work to do.”

I was okay with her invitation, but I was a special instructor here, so I had to give lessons every day. The last time we’d met up had been after my work was over, but it was currently bright and early in the morning. I was supposed to be training. Though I *could* go to Lucy’s house, I would need to tell someone that I wasn’t going to be in the training hall. I didn’t want people to think I was slacking off.

“I already informed Allusia,” Lucy said. “It’s not a problem.”

“Oh, I see... You’re well prepared.”

It turned out my concerns were unnecessary. Lucy had already taken care of things. She really was the type to act immediately once her mind was set—the speed at which she shifted from idea to action was tremendous. I could learn a thing or two from her. Though, I was a bit unsure about what traits I should and shouldn’t imitate.

“Allow me to formally thank you,” said Lucy. “Good work yesterday. I heard most of the story from Allusia.”

“Thanks. Well, it was pretty rough.”

I never actually entered the order’s office, but instead walked toward Lucy’s house, chatting with her all the while. Now that I thought of it, the order’s office, the magic corps’s headquarters, and Lucy’s house were all equipped with magical communication devices. It was convenient that information could be shared so quickly.

“You can tell me the rest once we arrive,” Lucy said. “Ibroy is coming over again.”

“Ah, thought so.”

It turned out that we were gathering again, just as we had yesterday. That made perfect sense—Lucy had served as an intermediary, but the request had officially come from Ibroy. Technically, it was a request from the Church of Sphene made behind closed doors. It would be weird for him not to be there.

I was getting a little bored on our walk, so I decided to turn the topic to Lucy’s

house guest. “Oh yeah, how’s Mui been doing?” I asked.

“She’s doing well,” Lucy answered. “But I suppose she’s a little quiet. She probably has no clue what to do about her future.”

“I see.”

It was good to hear that she was okay, at least. And frankly, I understood Mui’s feelings. The world she’d been raised in had turned upside down—how was she supposed to know how to live her life beyond that gloomy world?

It’s like I was thinking yesterday. Time will eventually solve things.

It was true that her life had changed greatly, but unlike me or Lucy, she was still young, with many more years ahead of her. She still had plenty of time left to forge a brilliant future, so it was best to patiently wait for her to adapt to her new life.

It’s an adult’s privilege to wait for a child’s growth... Not that I have any children of my own.

“Well, I suppose there’s no choice but to wait for time to resolve the conflict,” I said.

“Agreed. Mui is still young.”

Lucy seemed to agree. On this topic at least, Lucy’s values and thought process were more similar to mine than Allusia’s or Selna’s. Perhaps it was a matter of age. Lucy looked younger than Mui, but she was older than me. *I don’t really want to think about that, though.*

We still had a ways to go before reaching Lucy’s house, so I decided to broach a topic that had been bothering me.

“Oh right.”

“Hm?”

“Did you instigate Ficelle into action?” I asked.

“Come now, Beryl, what are you talking about?”

Why you little... Playing dumb? Lucy had the slightest grin on her face—she really had sent Ficelle intentionally. However, the fact that she wasn’t saying it

meant she was technically drawing a line. She had to keep up the act, at least a little. *In that case, I have nothing more to say.* Ficelle and Kewlmy had shown up by coincidence, and it was right to just sweep those details under the rug.

After chatting some more about nothing in particular, we reached Lucy's house. A man greeted us when we arrived.

"Lucy, Beryl, good morning."

"Yo, Ibroy," Lucy responded. "Sorry, did we keep you waiting?"

"Not at all. Not like yesterday. I just arrived moments ago."

This time, Ibroy was waiting for us in front of the gate, so he probably *had* just arrived. I'd only just met the man a day ago and wasn't on particularly friendly terms or anything, but judging by what I'd seen of his personality, I figured he was the type to go inside without any hesitation.

"Hello," I said.

"Beryl, good to see you again," Ibroy replied. "Let's hear what you have to say once we're settled in."

It seemed that he hadn't been informed of the incident yet. Well, it'd only been a day.

"No point in standing around here," Lucy declared. "Come in."

"Don't mind if I do." Ibroy followed her with practiced manners.

When we opened the door to the entrance hall, we found Haley there waiting for us.

"Mistress Lucy, Master Ibroy, Master Beryl, good morning."

"Hi there, Haley," Ibroy said. "Pardon the intrusion."

I was pretty confident that I rose earlier in the morning than most, but I was starting to wonder how long all these people had been awake. Haley was a housekeeper, so it wasn't unnatural for her to be up early. Lucy, on the other hand, seemed like the type to have a messed up day-night cycle. That was just my impression of her.

Once we were all seated in the same parlor as yesterday, Ibroy spoke up.

“Now then, Beryl—let me start by thanking you for your hard work yesterday.”

He wasn't aware of the details, but he also knew that I hadn't neglected my duties or anything. I'd never had any intention of doing so.

“Thank you,” I said. “Well, it was a little rough.”

“Ha ha ha. Just as I said yesterday, you'll be properly compensated. So...how did things go?”

Okay, maybe calling it a little rough is an understatement. Still, there was no point in complaining to Ibroy about that. I'd accepted his request, after all.

“I'll start with how things ended,” I said. “I captured Bishop Reveos. He's currently confined in the Liberion Order's basement.”

“I see. That's good to hear.”

Ibroy's expression relaxed. He must've found it hard to shut his eyes to Reveos's evil deeds.

Lucy chimed in. “See? He did just as well as I said he would.”

“Indeed, he did. I'm glad we relied on Beryl.”

“Please, there's no need to go that far,” I said, sidestepping their praise.

It had, in fact, been hard work, but they didn't have to put me on a pedestal like that. The fight *had* been pretty rough, though. Either way, Reveos was sure to be punished properly for this—somewhere out of my sight.

“I have to give my proper thanks,” Ibroy insisted. “I'll probably even go up in the church's ranks.”

“H-Ha ha ha...”

Well, if a bishop was arrested, that meant his seat was empty. And as the person who had orchestrated Reveos's capture, Ibroy had become a major contender for it. This old man was shrewd, which matched the first impression I'd gotten of him. How many ulterior motives was he weaving deep inside his mind? Regardless, he was free to do whatever he wanted as long as it didn't directly bring harm to me.

“Also, when I went to capture him, he probably used a miracle,” I continued. “What he summoned forth was, um...something like manipulated corpses.”

“I see...” Ibroy murmured. “I suspected as much, but it seems it’s settled now.”

His research to resurrect the dead had been, unquestionably, a lousy failure. I didn’t deny the research of magic itself, but it was hard to stomach such inhumane acts.

“Hmph. Well, the nation will surely pass judgment on him,” Lucy said, her reaction as harsh as expected. She had pretty strong opinions about resurrecting the dead. “Oh, yes. Not to just tack this on, but I’ve also thought of a reward for you.”

“Hm?”

Did she simply hate the topic of resurrection? Or had an idea just come to her mind? Lucy’s expression was suddenly brighter as she shifted the conversation to my reward. I wasn’t reluctant to accept anything they offered, but I didn’t want to carry too much cash on me, and since I was living out of an inn, it was problematic to receive any material goods.

“Beryl, would you like a house?” Lucy asked.

“Huh?”

What? I don’t think I heard that right.

I froze at the unexpected word. “A house?” I repeated just to be sure.

Why a house? I mean, I want a house and I’m actively looking for one. I’ve even mentioned that to her before.

“That’s right,” Lucy said. “What? You don’t want one?”

“No, wait, hang on. You’re skipping too many steps. I’m confused.”

I mean, take a look. Even Ibroy is making a weird face like he has no clue what you’re saying. That’s how things go when you offer a house out of the blue.

Right now, I didn’t have nearly enough information to make a decision. It would be weirder to immediately say, “Yeah, sure, I’ll take it,” if someone

randomly offered you a house.

“I mean exactly what I said...” Lucy responded. She seemed somewhat downhearted and perhaps found my confusion unexpected.

Honestly, I was more than grateful for the offer—I just wasn’t sure how she thought I was just going to say yes after only a brief explanation.

“Oh, right,” Ibroy joined in as if suddenly remembering something. “Lucy, you had another house before buying this one.”

“Yup, *that* one,” Lucy confirmed.

It seemed Ibroy knew about the house she was offering. This reinforced my idea that Lucy and Ibroy had known each other for a long time. I didn’t know when exactly she’d bought this house, but the fact that he knew about her old place probably meant they were old acquaintances. Going off of what Ibroy said, Lucy owned another house before moving here...and she was now offering it to me as a reward.

Huh? Seriously? I feel like houses aren’t things you just hand out like that.

“I-I’m grateful for the offer...but is it really all right for me to accept something like that?” *I have to be sure...*

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Lucy answered casually. “I have it cleaned periodically, but nobody lives there. This actually works out just fine for me.”

It seemed Lucy still owned the house, but it was uninhabited. Wouldn’t it make more sense to sell it, then? Well, maybe some circumstances were preventing that.

“You’re still living out of an inn, right?” Lucy continued. “I figured this would be perfect for you.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but...”

If this had been an offer from a complete stranger, I would’ve absolutely suspected some kind of catch. But this was *Lucy* offering, and though my suspicions weren’t totally quelled, they weren’t ringing alarm bells. Still, this whole thing seemed outrageous.

“I suppose that would also be preferable for me,” Ibroy added. “I mean,

having your reward sent to an inn would be problematic.”

“Right...”

Objectively speaking, an old man at my age having no permanent address and living out of an inn was pretty bad. I understood that much. I wasn't the type to put that much emphasis on my reputation, but I *had* been appointed as a special instructor for the Liberion Order, so a part of me wanted to maintain the bare minimum of standards. That was why I'd been house-hunting during my free time. Still, this was all a bit sudden. I knew Lucy wasn't trying to trick me or anything, but...

A house just for lending a bit of a helping hand? That's obviously gonna be a shock to anyone. Can't you think things through a bit more?

“W-Well, I'll consider it...”

“Really?” asked Lucy. “I thought you'd take it immediately.”

Go find me someone who would say yes on the spot. I want to see that guy for myself.

“A-Anyway, Bishop Reveos is the important part here,” I said, getting us back on track.

Honestly, I wasn't that fixated on receiving rewards. It was only right to receive payment for a job—that was how this whole transaction worked. Still, an excessive reward was unnecessary. Such things generally led to other far worse requests that didn't make up for the initial payment. While this wasn't always the case, I felt like I had to remain cautious...no matter who the offer was coming from. It was simply my nature to be guarded about these things.

“You're right,” Ibroy said. “This might sound spiteful coming from a member of the Church of Sphene...but I'm sure the bishop will be stripped of his seat.”

“And you'll be the one to take that empty seat?” I asked.

“Ha ha ha, you're jumping to conclusions, Beryl.”

I couldn't really understand Ibroy's true intentions. Was it possible that he'd schemed this whole course of events? If he had, then this plan had been both too sloppy and too grand, all at the same time. Either way, he would remain a

shrewd old man in my mind until I could parse his true nature.

“Also, there were several men who appeared to be knights guarding Bishop Reveos,” I revealed. “They were armed with estocs.”

Allusia had stated that they were knights of the Holy Order, but we still weren’t sure if that was the case.

“They were...almost without a doubt, the Holy Order of the Church,” Ibroy murmured. “I see...”

Seems that he’s also of this opinion.

Ibroy sank into thought. After a while, his expression softened. “Well, simply discussing this among ourselves isn’t going to do anything. For now, let’s celebrate our success.”

He did have a point. Even if there was some conspiracy going on, the three of us weren’t capable of predicting what it was. Judging by what I knew of Reveos, an investigation probably wasn’t going to get much out of him—he’d just go on bloviating about how important his miracle was or what a noble purpose he had. I didn’t know what laws he’d broken or how exactly he’d be punished, but an acquittal was probably out of the question. At the very least, he was definitely guilty of conspiring with thieves to abduct innocent people. It was anyone’s guess what would happen next.

“You really did well to pull it off,” Lucy said, slapping my shoulder. “Good job.”

“Ha ha, thanks.”

Someone who looked like a little girl was sympathizing with an old man in his forties... It painted a pretty crazy picture.

“Now then, want to go take a look at this house I plan to give you?” she asked.

“Huh? Now?”

This flow of events still didn’t make sense to me, but Lucy was dead set on handing over this house.

“Just accept it,” Ibroy said. “Beryl, you’re troubled by the fact that you’ve stayed at an inn for so long, aren’t you?”

“Well, that’s true, but...”

I wasn’t exactly opposed to the house, but this was two-on-one. *Hmmm... This reward is totally unexpected, but I suppose it’s a happy turn of events. I don’t have to decide right away, so maybe it would be a good idea to see the interior and location first. I still can’t make heads or tails of how it’d come to this, though.*

“You may decide after seeing it,” Lucy said. “I’m not forcing you.”

“Well... In that case, I’ll take you up on it.”

“Good, good. Shall we?”

Lucy rose from her chair, her expression even more cheerful than before. This was only reinforcing my opinion that she was quick to act. It felt like she always made immediate decisions and took instant action.

Ibroy stood from his seat as well. “I suppose I’ll be leaving too. It seems the church will be busy for a while.”

Lucy nodded. “Mm. Go—exert yourself to the fullest.”

A bishop had just been arrested, so things were *definitely* going to be busy for him. Ibroy’s skills could potentially turn the tide and facilitate common ground among church leadership.

“Oh, is everyone leaving?” Haley asked as the three of us left the parlor.

“Mm-hmm. Something came up,” Lucy said. We’d only just decided to leave and tour the house, so there was no way Haley knew about our plans. “We’re going to see *that*.”

“Oh dear...” Haley smiled. “Hee hee, understood.”

Somehow, Haley always seemed perfectly in sync with Lucy’s temperament. It showed how much experience she’d accumulated over the many years. This was a woman who was very capable at her job, albeit in a very different way than, for example, Allusia.

“Have a safe trip,” Haley added with a bow.

And just like that, we left Lucy’s house. I still didn’t understand half of what

was going on, but there was no point in bringing that up now that things had gotten this far. So, I decided to just enjoy this private open house.



After leaving Lucy's house, I peered up at the sky. *A clear day...* It felt refreshing to walk under the blue sky.

"Nice weather today, huh?" I muttered casually. I much preferred a sunny day to rain or snow.

Lucy nodded. "Indeed, it is. If only the climate stayed like this all the time. Fwaaah..." She stretched her arms up high and let out a long yawn.

"So where exactly is this house?" I asked.

"Not too far from here."

If it was close to Lucy's home, it was probably in the central district. Since land was relatively expensive in this district, the property was likely prime real estate. *It'll be nice if the house is somewhat close to the guild and the order's office.*

"Oh, right. About what happened yesterday," I said.

"Hm? There's still more?" Lucy asked curiously.

The topic was a little dark for our relaxing stroll through town, but we continued nonetheless.

"One of the corpses I took out looked a lot like Mui's sister... I can't say for sure, though."

"I see..."

It could've just been a coincidental resemblance. There weren't infinite facial structures, and apparently, every person had three doppelgängers. Still, from what I'd seen personally, that exact shade of blue hair was pretty rare. It was only natural for me to assume a connection.

"You probably shouldn't tell Mui," said Lucy. "It won't accomplish anything."

"Ah, so you think so too?"

At least Lucy shared my opinion in this regard. It seemed my instincts hadn't

been wrong. There was no good way of telling a little girl, “Your sister was used by an evil bishop, and I cut her down while he was manipulating her dead body.”

“At any rate, please support her,” Lucy added. “She’s feeling awfully lonely.”

“Hm? I intend to.”

I had no plans to completely ignore her, but if anything, shouldn’t *Lucy* be the one supporting her since they were living together? At this point, my daily routine didn’t have much in common with Mui’s.

“Speaking of Mui, I’m thinking of enrolling her in the magic institute,” Lucy said. “We can’t allow such a talent for magic to be crushed, after all.”

“Is that so? I agree with you there.”

Well, Lucy was thinking of Mui in her own way too. Instead of letting her spend her days idly, it was necessary to give the girl some sort of objective. To put it crudely, she needed something to distract her. And, she *did* have a rare talent. Regardless of whether she would join the magic corps in the future, it wasn’t a bad idea to allow Mui to polish her skills at the magic institute. Problems that could be solved would remain in limbo if Mui just spent every day brooding.

“Oh, here we are,” Lucy announced.

“Hmmm... Not bad.”

We found ourselves just a little outside the middle of the central district in a somewhat quiet neighborhood. There were hardly any pedestrians. In all likelihood, the people who lived in these residences were just about to leave for work. I estimated this property to be about halfway between the order’s office and Lucy’s house, or perhaps just a bit nearer to Lucy. It wasn’t particularly close, but also not too far away for a daily commute. I could see myself walking that distance every day.

Overall, it wasn’t a bad spot.

“It isn’t all that big,” Lucy said. “Not that you really mind, I assume?”

“It’s more than enough,” I answered.

I stood before a one-story house that looked a little snug for a building in the central district. Despite its size, there was more than enough space for me to live alone. I had barely brought any luggage with me from Beaden to begin with—not much more than my sword, traveling expenses, and some extra clothes.

“Now then, is she here?” Lucy asked, banging on the door.

“Huh?”

Hang on, someone’s inside? I thought nobody lived here. My brain froze at the sudden development.

“Who the—? Oh, Ms. Lucy.”

“Mui?”

A girl with sharp eyes and dark blue hair stepped out. This was Mui Freya. I’d noticed that she hadn’t been at Lucy’s. It turned out this was where she’d gone off to.

“Old g— Mr. Beryl, you t— You’re here as well?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” I said. “Just act like you usually do.”

What’s with the weird self-corrections? Her eyes shifted around awkwardly as she tried speaking with unfamiliar and polite terms. It was cute in its own way. *Ah, I’ve turned into a total old man admiring a child’s growth.*

“Ha ha ha ha!” Lucy grinned. “Haley kept pestering her about her speech.”

“I see.”

Haley had no shortcomings as a servant. She was an excellent counterweight to Lucy’s wild side—she really had it together. And for that reason, Haley couldn’t allow such a little girl to speak coarsely, even if she was a guest. I could easily picture Mui’s disheartened look as Haley chided her.

“So, what have you been doing here, Mui?” I asked.

“Oh... Cleaning, cooking—stuff like that.”

Somehow, I felt really guilty about being given a house that a young girl had cleaned up for me—it made me look like a useless bum. *Okay, let’s not think about that part.* It seemed Mui was spending time here and preparing to

become independent instead of remaining in Lucy's care all the time. This was, of course, for her own sake. There was a difference between watching over someone and being overprotective.

"Since we're here, shall we take a look inside too?" Lucy suggested.

"Sure." If I was actually going to live here, I had to check the interior, so that worked out just fine for me.

"I haven't gotten to the small stuff yet, but most of the cleaning is done," Mui reported.

"Good work, Mui," I told her. "Very impressive."

"Hmph."

I tried giving her some honest praise, but I didn't get much in terms of a reaction. Still, just like I'd thought the other day, she was a lot less thorny than when I'd first met her. Living a peaceful life seemed to have mellowed her out. Mui was still young, so the change was especially pronounced.

The three of us spent a while going around the house. It looked somewhat old, but it was in good enough shape to live in, especially since Mui had cleaned the place up recently. Nothing here seemed like it would be an inconvenience.

"So, what do you think?" Lucy asked.

"Not bad at all," I answered. "It's a nice house."

"Ha ha, that's good to hear."

The place was even fully furnished, so I could technically move in right away. The thought of moving had my mind drifting to the inn I'd been staying at—and the few taverns in its vicinity. Well, setting aside the inn, I could visit those taverns whenever I wanted. Besides, I was excited to explore this area of the central district for more places to eat.

"Then it's decided," Lucy declared. "Don't worry—I'm not planning to ask for any money. You may also think of this as an apology for picking a fight when we first met."

"Aah, right, that *did* happen."

Yeah, our first meeting had indeed started with a sudden battle. She really had been a horrible nuisance. However, if the reward for that was a house in a prime location, then it certainly evened out.

Just as I was starting to feel deeply moved by my new home, Mui spoke up. “Well, um, I’ll be in your care.”

Her words hit me like a bolt from the blue, and I tilted my head in confusion. “Hm? How so?” I asked.

Lucy turned to me. “Beryl, what’re you asking? You’re going to be living with Mui.” She paused for a moment. “Hm? Wait... Didn’t I mention that?”

“Huh?” *What?! You didn’t say a single thing about it!* “Hang on, what do you mean?”

This is weird... Why are we talking about me living with Mui? Is that what Mui meant by being “in my care”? And Mui, don’t just go along with it! Where’d your attitude go?

“I can’t have her staying at my place forever, right?” Lucy explained.

“Mm, that much I understand.”

That part was fine with me. Lucy wasn’t going to be raising Mui for the rest of her life—the girl had stayed with her as a temporary measure. I knew that, but the rest didn’t make sense.

“Mui must become independent,” Lucy continued. “That said, we can’t suddenly throw her out on her own.”

“Mm, that’s right.”

Normally, Mui would be saying, “I can manage fine on my own,” or something, but she remained silent. Well, she’d never lived a life that didn’t involve pickpocketing, so maybe she had no idea what to do if that was prohibited.

“So, you’ve been selected for the job,” Lucy concluded.

“That’s the part I don’t get...”

This is weird. It’s definitely weird. The whole conversation is going over my

head.

“But Mui is fine with it,” Lucy added.

I paused for a moment and then turned to the girl. “You really okay with this?”

“Well, it don’t sound bad...” She then averted her eyes and said, “But it don’t sound good either...”

This attitude *was* better than outright refusal, but I questioned whether something had happened—why had she become attached to me? I was used to dealing with children because of my time at the dojo, but this was different from handling a pupil. Perhaps yesterday’s events had endeared her to me. It was true that I’d told her to relax and enjoy her current lifestyle. However, this old man still found these circumstances to be a bit...sudden.

I sighed. “Haah...”

I felt a certain responsibility for this girl. There was the matter of her sister too. I knew I couldn’t serve as her sister’s substitute, but as an adult who’d gotten involved with her life, I believed it was my duty to see that she became independent.

“Besides,” said Lucy, “I have a proper reason for choosing you.”

“Hmm. Mind if I ask?”

Just as I was coming to the conclusion that I had no other choice—not in a negative way, mind you—Lucy was presenting a reason for selecting me. I decided to hear her out. *Nothing to lose...*

“Mui has a talent for magic,” Lucy stated. “That’s why I believe it’s best for her to enroll in the magic institute. You agree with that, correct?”

“Yeah.”

She was exactly right. The magic institute was, without a doubt, the best place for magic users to learn about their powers. There, they could flourish. Anyone who had the innate ability to use magic received preferential treatment, and according to Lucy, the institute didn’t care about birthright or upbringing. Considering Mui’s situation, all of this was pretty much ideal.

“However, to enter the magic institute, a parent or guardian’s approval is required,” Lucy explained.

“Is that so?”

I was really ignorant when it came to magic, so I hadn’t even known of such a rule—this was my first time hearing it. Still, I now had an idea of why I’d been chosen.

Mui didn’t have any parents. Well, maybe they were still alive, but Mui had never known them, so any hopes of finding them were slim. What’s more, her one and only known blood relative had passed away. She now had no family whatsoever, and it would be very hard for her to enroll in the magic institute. It was only natural for someone to step up and fill that parental role.

“That’s why I thought *you* should become her guardian,” Lucy said.

“I see...”

I was finally starting to understand, though I wasn’t sure whether I agreed just yet. Becoming Mui’s guardian meant becoming responsible for her, at least until she graduated from the magic institute and could be independent. I doubted Mui was thinking of going back to a life of theft—it was best to trust her on that front.

“I won’t be a bother...probably,” Mui said apologetically. Perhaps she was thinking that my conversation with Lucy was going poorly.

“Yeah, I’m not worried about that,” I told her. This was all so sudden, but I wasn’t doubting Mui in any way. I had to make that clear to her.

“The institute has dorms,” Lucy added. “She’ll spend most of her time there, so I doubt this’ll become a major issue.”

“Is *that* the main problem here...?” I mumbled.

I felt like Lucy was evading the true nature of the matter at hand. Yes, living in a dorm would mean that Mui and I would spend little time under the same roof, so that would solve some things without either of us having to be overly considerate. However...

“Couldn’t *you* be her guardian, Lucy?” I asked.

“My position is somewhat inconvenient for that,” she answered. “Even if I’m fine with it, Mui would be singled out.”

“Hmmm...”

She did have a point. If the current commander of the magic corps were to take in an orphan and enroll her in the magic institute, all sorts of rumors would spread. It was easy to forget, but Lucy was a person of status. In terms of simple titles, maybe the same went for me, but the history, weight, and above all else, the fame and influence of her title were all on a different level. I wouldn’t want all of that attention to fall on Mui’s shoulders—better to avoid it.

“Allusia...would also be out of the question,” I muttered.

“Indeed,” Lucy agreed. “Her age would be a problem.”

The one other person who knew of Mui’s circumstances came to mind, but I immediately realized that the knight commander would be no good. She was quite young, and this wasn’t the type of thing the commander of the Liberion Order should be burdened with.

“I get it now...”

After thinking it through, I could see that the best option—or the only one left after the process of elimination—was me. I reached a hand to my head, and the sound of me quietly ruffling my hair filled the room. *I* was the one who’d said I would take responsibility for Mui, even if only to the extent that I was capable. I hadn’t lied about that, and a part of me wanted to do something for her.

“Well, you know, it might sound strange coming from me, but this is only for the purpose of documentation,” Lucy added. “I’m not telling you to act like father and daughter or anything.”

Should you really be saying that, even if it’s true? This old man thinks the magic corps’s commander and the role model of the entire magic institute shouldn’t be talking like that.

“Haah... Fine,” I said.

I couldn’t be a substitute for Mui’s big sister. However, I had a relatively large amount of experience with children. Being a parent was different from being an

instructor, of course, but I couldn't express such anxieties in front of Mui.

"R-Really...?" Mui asked.

"Yeah, well... Guess I'll be in your care too," I told her.

Being a child was so unfair. That look on Mui's face... Anybody would want to listen to what she had to say. Also, I felt guilty about having slain Mui's sister...even if she'd already been dead. I was unable to tell Mui that—if I did, it would even be fair for her to blame me. However, just as originally sworn, I'd already decided to keep that secret from her. Lucy and I would take it to the grave.

Perhaps being Mui's guardian was a form of atonement. I didn't really understand stuff like that, but I was going to look after this girl. *If doing so leads to her growth and a bright future, it's only right to resign myself and accept it.*

"Okay! Here are the documents for the institute," Lucy pulled some papers from her pocket. "I have a pen too."

"You're well prepared..."

These were probably enrollment papers and proof that I was Mui's guardian. We sat down in some of the chairs at the nearby table—Lucy had likely set this situation up to make it effortless for us to read over the documents. Everything was in place to get a few signatures immediately.

"Oh yeah—do you know how to write, Mui?" I asked.

"A little..."

It was easy to guess that she hadn't received a proper education. She would have to learn to read and write from this point onward.

"Oh, well, when you're here, I'll teach you," I said.

"Got it..."

Lucy burst into laughter. "Ha ha ha ha! Like a father already!"

Quiet, Lucy. Can I just punch her? I guess not. Well, I am getting a house from her, so I feel like I owe her more than she owes me. Things are getting complicated.

Anyway, I had to take responsibility for barging into Mui's world and pulling her out of it. The time had simply come to do so. It was no big deal—I had experience from my time raising Selna. Things were sure to go relatively well.

“Ummm... M-u-...j...?”

“Aah, you spell it like this...”

I took a seat and watched Mui struggle with her pen as she signed the document. *Ah, this reminds me—I should probably write a letter to Beaden.* A lot had happened since I'd come here, and I was curious about how Randrid was doing at the dojo. I wondered how I would even start such a letter, and only one thing came to mind. I smiled bitterly to myself.

Dear Dad,

I found a house and a child before finding a wife.

Epilogue: An Old Country Bumpkin's Treat

"Welcome. Table for two?"

"Yeah."

"Certainly. Come this way."

A bell rang overhead as I opened the door to a restaurant. It was a place not too far away from my new home. As I'd predicted, the house was located in a quiet neighborhood, and a short walk could bring me to several restaurants. This was a slightly more expensive-looking one. The moment I stepped inside, I noticed that things were clearly different from places I'd visited while staying at the inn—the clientele and atmosphere here were nothing like a cheap tavern. People were seated at the counter and at tables, savoring their food with good manners. It was lively but not noisy, which made for a relaxing meal.

"Shall we?" I asked Mui. She was hesitantly peeking inside from the doorway.

"S-Sure..."

We followed the waiter inside. I'd chosen this place in large part because of Mui. We were here to celebrate the house and us living together. That wasn't *quite* right, but this was the start of her new life, and such events were meant to be accompanied by good memories. So, I'd chosen a somewhat expensive but not unmanageable restaurant.

Mui was sure to have many bitter memories. There was no erasing those, but I wanted to give her plenty of good memories as well. Was it selfish of this old man to believe that it was possible? Incidentally, Lucy had told me about this place. *Glad she did—I know nothing about the area.*

"Ha ha ha, we're just here for dinner," I said. "No need to be so tense."

"B-But..."

We got seated at our table, and Mui was clearly restless. That made sense, seeing as she'd never had the chance to come to such an establishment. But

that was exactly why I'd brought her here. I didn't really want to tease her or anything, but her reaction was precious, and it soothed my heart.

"Now then, what to order?" I mumbled.

"I-I'm fine with anything..."

This restaurant specialized in deep-fried foods, largely centered around meat dishes. Such cooking used a ridiculous amount of oil. There weren't many places out there that used oil like it was water—the taverns I'd frequented near the inn had largely focused on boiled or roasted foods.

"It's a rare opportunity, so get something you normally wouldn't have," I suggested.

"Uhhh... Okay..."

During her stay at Lucy's house, Mui's quality of life must've increased significantly. I didn't plan on using this restaurant as a standard for what she should expect while living with me, but I still wanted to treat her a little. In a sense, choosing this restaurant was me putting on airs. *Having a treat like this once in a while isn't bad.*

"Excuse me. An ale and a grape juice."

"Of course, coming right up."

I started with drinks. Mui was obviously too young for alcohol, so I chose a juice for her. Such a simple item was probably something she hadn't been able to taste in her days as a pickpocket.

Soon after ordering, our drinks arrived. One was a wooden tankard filled to the brim with ale, and the other was a cup half as small filled with juice.

"Let's toast to the beginning of your new life," I said. "Cheers."

"Cheers..."

We picked up our cups and bumped them together. The foam in my tankard shook from the impact, and a little spilled out.

"Whoa there... Yup, delicious."

"Mm..."

I wouldn't say I was elegant, but I took a gulp of my ale in such a way that I didn't attract attention from those around us. *Man, that hits the spot. There's nothing like a good drink after work, but an ale to celebrate something special like this is on another level.* To put it simply, ale was always delicious.

Mui was drinking her juice in little sips. She was probably trying to savor it for as long as possible. I was fine with getting her refills, though.

Seeing her like that, I felt my expression softening again. I had, of course, taught pupils Mui's age at the dojo, but I'd never been at a dining table with one like this. She wasn't my real daughter, but now that I was her guardian, she was something like one. It was fine to show her a bit of affection. Probably.

"Anyway, let's start with something light," I suggested. "Are there any foods you don't like?"

"Nope..." she answered. "I'll eat anything. That's how it's always been."

"Right... It's good not to be picky."

"Hmph."

Guess that wasn't the right question to ask. Just as Mui'd said, she hadn't been given the leisure to be picky about her food—not for her entire life. No matter how bad or rotten the food was, she would've died had she not eaten it. That was what her childhood had been like. However, now that we were going to be living together, I wouldn't let her live in such discomfort. I wasn't exactly rich, but I at least had enough money to feed one child. That was mostly thanks to Allusia, though.

"Okay, then we'll have some fried vegetables and mushroom stew."

"Certainly."

I gave the waiter my order. Fried vegetables were sure to go well with ale, so that was my choice. I picked the stew because it likely suited Mui. *Man, that reminds me of the stew from my favorite tavern. The sausage was exquisite.* However, I'd already decided that today's main dish would be fried food. I normally never had any, and I doubted Mui had ever tried it. That was why I wanted her to have plenty of tasty food on this momentous day.

“Ooh, this looks great.”

“Mm...”

Our food was brought over shortly after. The vegetables were fried to the point of crispness—the steam rising up from them stimulated my appetite. I noted the salt, which had been set down next to our plates, but I decided to take an unseasoned bite first. With a delightful crunch, the flavors of nature filled my mouth.

Mm-mmm, I can't get enough of this. It goes perfectly with ale. Fried foods are just great. Next, I seasoned a piece with salt and took another bite. The saltiness mixed with the vegetable's abundant flavor and faint bitterness, pairing itself with my ale in yet another outstanding way. *Delicious.*

“C'mon. Eat up, Mui.”

“Ah, mm...”

It couldn't be interesting to just watch me throw food into my mouth. Mui sat stiffly in front of her stew for a while, then narrowed her eyes in determination. She scooped up some stew in her spoon and brought it to her mouth.

“Good...” she mumbled.

“Right?”

After one taste, she surrendered herself to the flavor. Mui devoured the stew greedily, her mannerisms in no way elegant. She didn't really know how to hold her spoon either—she just shoveled stew into her mouth, her spoon clattering against the bowl. If Haley had witnessed this, she would've probably said something...but even Mui's poor table manners looked adorable in my eyes.

Perhaps I felt like I owed this girl's sister a great deal. I felt a budding desire to support Mui, more than I'd originally expected. Our meeting had been somewhat crooked, and I hadn't gone through the normal channels to become her guardian. However, as an adult, I renewed my resolve to look after her until she reached adulthood.

Pretty much all children were cute, but the emotions I felt for my own child—even if she was only my daughter on paper—were on a different level. I was

starting to understand why my dad had hounded me for grandchildren. *I wonder if he felt this way when I was born.*

“There’s no need to rush,” I said. “The stew isn’t running away.”

“Sh-Shut up...”

Only when I mentioned it did Mui realize how greedily she was wolfing down her stew. She averted her eyes to hide her embarrassment, but still, her hands didn’t stop.

Ha ha ha! Nobody can fight their stomach.

“Okay then...”

I’d gone through most of my fried vegetables. Mui’s bowl was sure to be empty soon too. So, our next order had to be the long-awaited main dish: it was time for deep-fried food. Well, the vegetables had also been fried, but the star of a meal had to be meat. While I was at it, I needed more to drink. Mui’s cup was pretty much empty too.

“Excuse me,” I called out to the waiter. “Boar fritters please. Also, a refill of ale and grape juice.”

Boar was a medium-sized animal, and I’d eaten some while on my tour of the western district with Kewlmy and Ficelle. That time, I’d had a kebab; this time, I would have some fritters. I was planning to slowly savor how much potential a chef could draw out of the meat’s flavor.

“Thank you for waiting.”

“Oooh...”

Shortly after, the waiter brought over the boar meat, each piece wrapped in a golden, crispy brilliance. My mouth was watering—I even found myself gulping. Steam rose from the meat as if to emphasize how fresh they were, and I could hear little oil bubbles still popping on the breading. Just by looking at them, I knew they would be good, so my expectations soared even higher.

“Wow...” Mui muttered. Her awed expression was a sight to behold.

I was sure she’d never had anything like it. Her eyes sparkled before the golden-fried glow. *She actually looks her age...* Time would be responsible for

healing the wounds of her heart, but sometimes, food could serve that role too. That was my personal opinion at least—good food cleansed the soul.

“All right, let’s dig in while it’s hot,” I said.

“Y-Yeah!”

Faced with what had to be the greatest feast she’d ever known, Mui was fired up like never before. I wouldn’t burst her bubble by telling her that this was just a simple meal. Putting a damper on such emotions would be the work of a truly repulsive adult.

The boar pieces looked a little tough to bite through, so I sliced one open with a knife, parting its crispy shell and revealing the soft meat within. A further slice had juices trickling out, revealing how the meat had cooked all the way through. *Damn, that looks good. Now this is what I’m talking about.*

“Hom...”

I started with a bite. The moment my teeth sank in, an intense wave of meat, oil, and savory flavor dominated my mouth. I bit down on the substantial piece of meat, and even more juice flooded my palate. The bite was also raging hot—I thought it might even burn my tongue and the skin inside of my mouth. Just as with the fried vegetables, the stink of oil was pretty much nonexistent.

The ingredients used in the capital really were something else. I would’ve never been able to taste such a fine meal out in the sticks of Beaden. *Man, I didn’t think they’d be this great. I have to admit—I was looking down on the potential of fried foods. Never thought they’d be even better than expected. Deep-frying is nuts.*

“Mm...! Mmm...!”

Since even *I’d* been reduced to a state of bliss, it was probably easy to guess what reaction Mui had to tasting fried meat for the first time. At first, she timidly brought the boar meat to her mouth, but after one bite, then two, her expression rapidly brightened. She looked absolutely gobsmacked as she tore into the meat.

Yup, definitely cute. But it’s got nothing to do with her being my child now... Any child delighting in delicious food is a pure incarnation of cuteness. I won’t

accept any arguments.

“Hm? What’s up?” I asked.

Mui had been ripping through her meat with amazing vigor, but she suddenly came to a stop. Had she burned herself or something?

She stayed frozen for a few more seconds. “Here...” she said, awkwardly transferring some cut boar from her plate to mine.

“Huh? Full already?”

“No... Not that... It’s stupid good, but...”

After transferring the meat over, Mui mumbled something incoherently. I couldn’t quite understand. I thought we were just here enjoying a meal together.

“Um, I’ve never...had a meal with anyone like this... Anyone but my sister.”

“Mm.”

Little by little, a few words at a time, Mui explained herself.

“I don’t really know how to put it...but, um, it’s not bad eating with you either...so you can have it.”

“That so? Thanks.”

I didn’t know what had changed in her heart. Still, it was probably a good change. Having lost her sister, having survived in the underworld of society on her own... This *had* to be a priceless development. I had to treat her realization dearly—I couldn’t boorishly tell her that there was no need to go out of her way to share what she had.

“Mui, from here on, you’ll have far more delicious meals, you’ll meet plenty of kind people, and I know you’ll learn a whole lot. I’m sure you will become a charming adult. In fact, I guarantee it.”

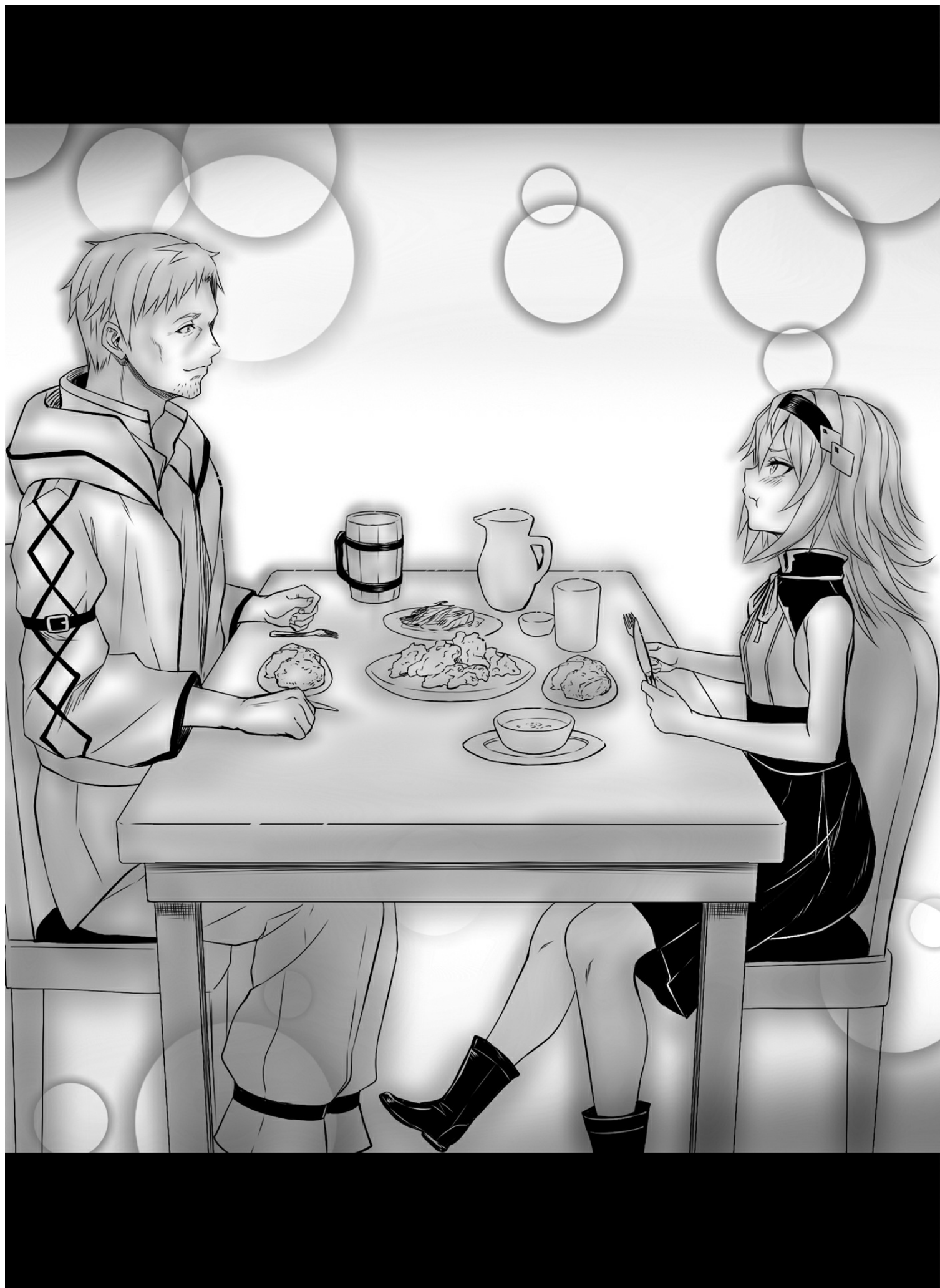
“What’re you on about...?”

“I mean, you shared your delicious food with me, right? That’s the act of a kind and charming person.”

“Shut it...”

“Ha ha ha ha.”

As always, she remained pouty. Nonetheless, the thorniness she'd had when I'd first met her was completely gone. I picked up the boar meat she'd cut up for me. The pieces had been sliced so crudely that the coating had half peeled off. If the waiter had done this, it would've been a complete failure of service. However, this chunk of boar, this clumsily cut fritter, was easily the most delicious meat of the day.



Afterword

It's been a while, everyone. I'm Shigeru Sagazaki. Thank you very much for purchasing *From Old Country Bumpkin to Master Swordsman* Volume 2. This publication keeps going thanks to all of your support, and I'm glad for your continued interest in this story after the first volume.

It's been about five months since volume one went on sale. That's an awfully long time for a reader, but it's hectic for a writer. Much like with the first volume, it feels as if time went by in a flash.

In the second volume, I focused on setting the framework for the world Beryl has been dragged into. I tried not to concentrate too much on *explaining* the world—I just wanted to casually expand upon it. Just to ask—do you remember the name of the continent where the Liberis Kingdom is situated? Also, do you recall the name of Liberis's founding king? Well, you don't really have to remember that stuff. It won't show up on a test or anything. If necessary, I'll just bring those details up again later. It's more than enough if you end up thinking, "Oh, I kinda remember hearing a name like that." At present, I don't plan on writing this book in a strict literary style. I've been working diligently to make it easy to read, so I hope that comes across.

Also, as I touched on in the last afterword, the manga version of this book has started in Akita Shoten's *Dokodemo Young Champion*. The manga artist Kazuki Satou has gone through the original volume thoroughly and done a great job of reworking the story into manga format, so please check that out too. I'm sure you'll enjoy it. Satou also sent me a drawing to use in the afterword, so please allow me to use this opportunity to give my thanks.

Well then, I believe it'll be next year before we meet again. I pray for all of my readers' good health. Until next time!

FROM OLD COUNTRY
BUMPKIN
TO MASTER
SWORDSMAN



Shigeru Sagazaki

Illustration

Tetsuhiro Nabeshima



ALLUSIA
SITRUS

KEWLNY
CRUCIELLE

BERYL
GARDINANT

BALDUR
GASP

I grabbed the hand that had reached
for me in the darkness.
A pickpocket.
But too bad for them!
Eyesight was the one thing
this old man was particularly
confident about.

*“Can’t say I
approve of that.”*

“Crap! Let me go!”





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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 2

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. 2

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