
Let This Grieving Soul Retire!
Woe is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party
Story:
Tsukikage
Illustration:
Chyko
1


Greg Zangif
Rhuda Runebeck
Tino Shade
Krai Andrey
Gilbert Bush
"You mean you're... the Thousand Tricks?"
"If you understand how incredible my master is, you should kneel."
Rhuda just watched in confusion, totally clueless. Tino continued to cling to me as she glared coldly at the Great Greg.
Yeah, time to stop intimidating people, I thought, feeling the overwhelming urge to vomit.
"Wait. Did she just say 'Master,' as in, the master of First Steps?"
"Heh. If I may be so forward... Yes, O Great Greg."
I honestly felt kind of bad. It pained me to see him looking so apologetic.


"Just DO it! Dodge, they can't hit you! Hit them, they can't dodge you! Get into your groove! Kill 'em like you're dyin' tomorrow! Get it, T?"
???
"Don't neglect your talent, you lazy shit! Hurry! Live fast and hard! You're running out of time, T! Remember, you gotta work a hundred times harder than me, or else I'm gonna keep getting better than you! Damn slowpoke!"
I couldn't follow what she was saying anymore. Subjected to this storm of abuses, Tino started crying as she clung to my back.
Poor baby.


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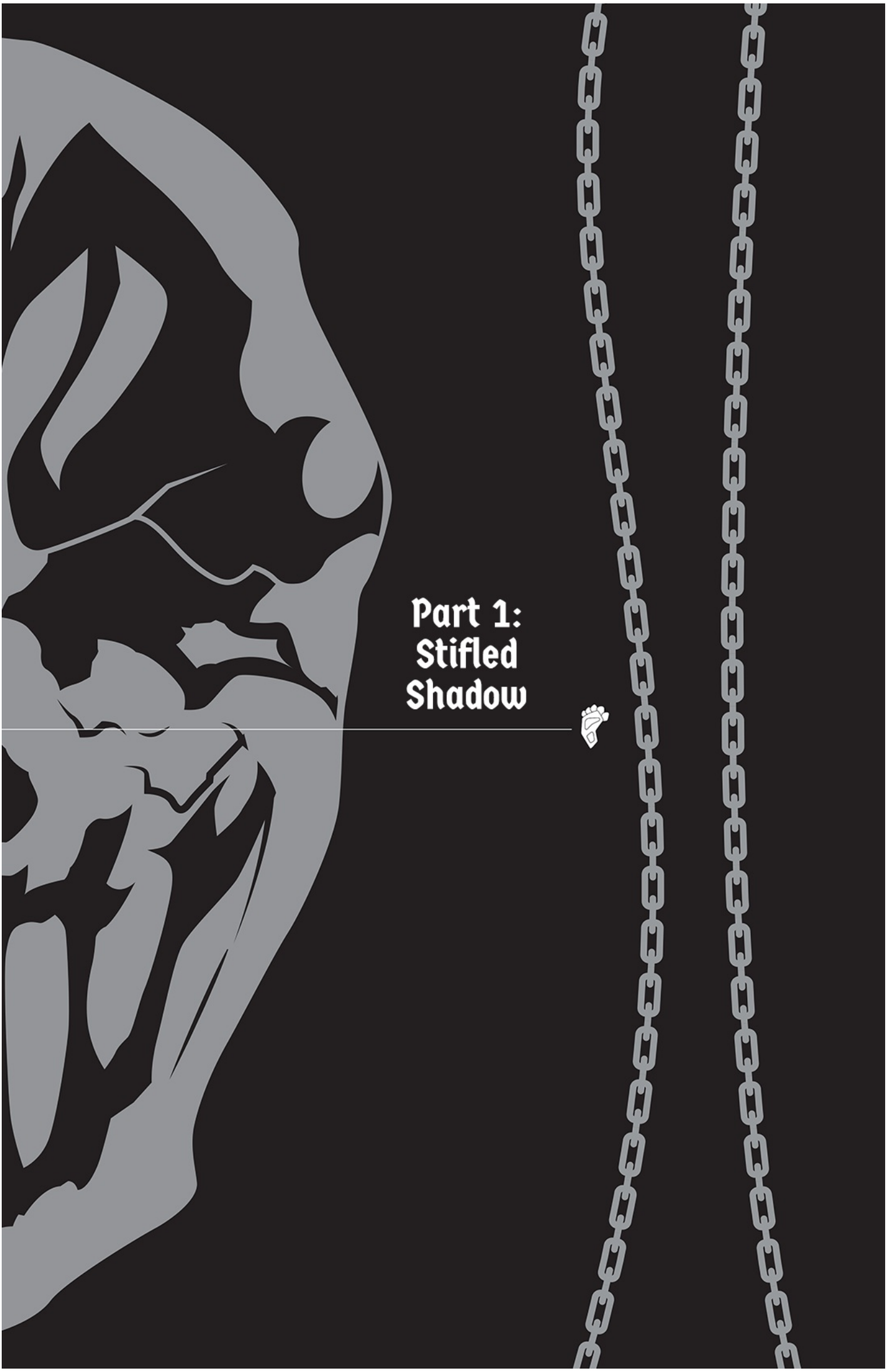
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Prologue: A Short-Lived Dream

It all started with one unforgettable proposal:

Let's be treasure hunters.

The story began when I was a child not even ten years of age. The one who'd suggested it was a member of my group of childhood friends.

"Let's be treasure hunters. We'll find all the treasure vaults out there and claim the wealth and glory for ourselves."

Our goal was to be the strongest heroes in the world. If anyone could do it, the six of us could.

The guy who'd brought up the idea was reckless and had more brawn than brains, but he was also full of courage.

First to agree to this baseless yet attractive proposal was our particularly dexterous friend, who was quick in more ways than one.

Our resident bookworm nervously agreed in turn, and our quiet but reliable friend nodded deeply.

My little sister, who always tagged along behind me, glanced my way. Naturally, I agreed to the idea as well.

Treasure hunters, who trekked through ruins all over the world in search of treasure, had been stars all throughout history.

Wealth, fame, power.

There was no faster way to gain access to your heart's desire and become a hero. Of course, there was also a great deal of risk involved.

We had all heard countless stories of hunters who'd fallen victim to devious traps, terrifying monsters, and ethereal phantoms. Even the hunters' tales of adventure that had inspired my friend's proposal were full of such gruesome anecdotes.

But the risks could not hope to extinguish the flames of adventure in our hearts. The very day we embraced that dream, our journey had already begun.

To prepare ourselves for this occupation, we began by identifying and honing our individual strengths. Once we had decided on our roles, we devoted ourselves wholeheartedly to improving on the relevant skills.

The bravest one among us became a peerless Swordsman while our nimble friend became a Thief, one who disarmed traps and led the party through peril. Note that there was no actual stealing involved; people just tended to call them Thieves.

For better or for worse, every other one of my friends had an all-important talent required to become hunters.

Something had already become clear, however, at the point where we were training at our respective roles:

I was the only one who had no talent. The only one who, no matter how hard I tried, couldn’t even be considered average.

Out of the six of us—my four friends, my sister, and myself—I alone was incapable of doing anything useful.

I alone had lost sight of the path to heroism. That was five years ago.



I woke up in the worst of moods.

The sky was filled with thick, black clouds. If you closed your eyes, you would hear only the sound of raindrops smacking against the ground.

A fetid bouquet of mud and water filled the air. After three consecutive days of stormy weather, the ground was complete muck. Although it was noon, the world was dark.

Before a sturdy, stone building stood men and women of all ages. Some stood there with lifeless eyes, while others were screaming in rage. Some weren’t even pureblooded humans, instead displaying physical traits of other species.

Their garb came in all varieties: dirty armor made from some unknown sort of leather, long overcoats that hid their whole bodies, and even full suits of armor

like knights would wear. Many of them wielded weapons such as swords and firearms.

The one commonality they shared was that they were imposing.

The street was nearly empty due to the poor weather, but one corner was caught up in unusual enthusiasm. Everyone had gathered there in search of the most meager of chances: the opportunity to display their strength to famous treasure hunters and to be accepted into their parties.

Throughout time, treasure hunters had always had the most coveted of occupations. They traveled across the world in search of ruins—treasure vaults modeled after ancient civilizations—to obtain the riches within.

Despite the major risks, those with talent could have wealth, fame, and power in the palm of their hand. They could also have glory the likes of which famous merchants and even royalty could never hope to attain.

Hunters often formed groups of several people, called parties, to act together. If a newbie could find their way into a party of multiple experienced hunters, the risk was far lower than working alone. On the other hand, established hunters were always looking for skilled allies. The event being held here today was intended for just that.

I assumed not many people would come today due to the rain, but come they did. After letting out a sigh, I stood at the far back of the line. Because of the lack of shelter, every single person in line was soaked.

I flipped the hood of my overcoat up and shrank down, waiting. There was nobody here I knew, and standing in line alone was disheartening to say the least.

“Aaargh! What’s with all the damn people?! You can’t even get inside!” There was an annoyed yell from up ahead, prompting me to shrink down even more.

Not only was the wait long, but it was cold and rainy. It was unfair, yes, and I understood why he would be angry. But everyone else had to deal with it, too. There were many hunters out there who were strong but short-tempered. I really didn’t want to get caught up in any fights.

Among a hunter’s attributes and abilities was something called physique. I

had an average physique, but all of the men around me were at least a head taller. These beasts in human clothing had the power and courage to coolly fight monsters whose strength far surpassed those of normal humans.

All I could do was to pray that this would go peacefully. Fortunately, it seemed that one of my prayers had actually worked this time, as there was no further commotion after that.

The line moved forward a little. As I crouched low and did my best to avoid eye contact, the person in front of me abruptly turned around. I saw myself reflected in her beautiful blue eyes.

“Hey there! You looking for a party, too?”

“Oh? Um, yeah.”

Her voice was cheerful, a poor match for the gloomy weather. Ignoring her seemed like trouble, though, so I looked vaguely in her direction.

The one who had accosted me was a female hunter who looked to be in her mid-twenties. Well-kempt brown hair and big, blue eyes. Long coat, big pouch attached to her stout belt. Her outfit was standard hunter fare, but her pristine hair and affable features didn’t seem like they belonged to someone who trawled dangerous treasure vaults. Heck, her gear was hardly even soiled.

In the era where treasure hunters were celebrated, female hunters weren’t especially rare. But in my experience, hunters like her could be divided into one of two groups. The first group included people who were just about to become or had just become hunters, their hearts still filled with hope.

The other group consisted of those who had experienced countless adventures but never lost that sparkle in their eye. These hunters had such outstanding talent that they could be heroes—true beasts, like my friends from so long ago.

Nine times out of ten, they were the former, but you could never be too careful. In this field, there really were plenty of beasts disguised as humans.

As I eyed her dubiously, the hunter smiled wryly for just an instant before returning to her cheerful expression and offering me her hand. At the very least, she didn’t seem like she’d just hit me out of nowhere.

In the depths of my mind, I set this hunter to a danger level of E, a level I conferred to hunters who, at least on the surface, seemed mentally stable enough.

“The name’s Rhuda Runebeck. I’m a level three hunter, though I only just ranked up a few days back.”

Level 3? So she’s around middle-class. Much better than her appearance would suggest. Wordlessly, I adjusted her danger level to D. At the very least, she wasn’t a newbie.

Treasure hunters were given levels by the Explorers’ Association (the Association, for short) based on their exploits. These levels were known by the general public as indicators of hunters’ abilities. Groups of hunters typically introduced themselves along with their job and level.

There were up to ten levels in existence, but level 3 was considered average in terms of strength and exploits. Statistically, 70% of all hunters stopped at level 3. Seeing as Rhuda had gotten there so young, one could say that she was hopeful for greater things. I had nothing to lose from being wary of her; middle-class hunters were still beasts compared to common folk.

My lips parted to speak. Probably because I had run here without drinking anything this morning, the voice that came from my mouth was painfully hoarse.

“I’m... Krai Andrey. Nice to meet you, Rhuda.”

I did not grasp her hand, which was outstretched as a mark of goodwill. In my five years as a hunter in the imperial capital, the most important thing I had acquired was a sense of danger.

She could toss me the moment I took her hand. Or she might crush mine. Heck, it was likely enough that the moment I offered my own hand, she would say, “Don’t underestimate me, you little shit!” and kill me where I stood. Of course, it was also possible that she would see me as an enemy because I refused a handshake.

Rhuda’s brow furrowed for a moment before she went cheery again. “You solo, too? Everyone here is so on edge, y’know? I hate it.”

I didn't reply.

"I've been a solo hunter all this time, but lately, I'm kinda hitting a wall. Then I happened to hear that they were just about to hold this big hunter-recruiting event. So here I am now." She patted the dagger stored within its sheath on her belt.

In treasure vaults, there were various gimmicks like traps and hidden corridors. The fact that she was carrying a weapon with such low killing power meant that Rhuda was specialized more in dealing with these gimmicks than fighting monsters.

And she's going solo*? This girl's something else.* I quietly raised her danger level up to C.

Myriad abilities were necessary in raids on treasure vaults, and it was nigh impossible to cover all of those by yourself, so the Association recommended forming parties. Sure, going solo came with its own merits, but risking one's life to go to a vault alone was just crazy in my opinion. There were plenty of lunatic hunters out there, and in my experience, the solo ones were almost all of that variety.

She might have looked calm and sweet, but either she had such a poor personality that nobody would be in a party with her, or she had some other really annoying circumstances. *Either way, I'd rather she left me alone.*

Not knowing what to say, I forced a smile. Another one of the many things I'd learned in my years here was that smiling could get you through most difficult situations.

"Your whole career? That's pretty rough."

"Yeah, for real! I tried going to the White Wolf's Den, and it was just too much for me." There was a glint in Rhuda's eyes, like she was dying to talk to *anyone*. "So I came here looking for a party, right? I figure five or so level three hunters could get through it together."

"Pssh, the White Wolf's Den? Kid, do you even know where we are?"

The derisive tone of this sudden interruption caused Rhuda's expression to harden. It had come from a mountain of man ahead of us.

He wore leather armor with metal accents and a bloodstained overcoat. If Rhuda was a sparkly-eyed freshman, this guy was an experienced alumnus who'd long since graduated. The sheath hanging from his belt was soiled from use.

I grimaced. The majority of hunters were hot-blooded and typically grew much more so in proportion to their skill level. Even the Association often said that hot-bloodedness was part of the hunter's basic skillset.

Unsurprisingly, despite the fact that this man was two heads bigger than her, Rhuda fearlessly yelled, "What's your deal? Got a problem with me, bub?!"

"Level three? The White Wolf's Den? This ain't no place for amateurs who just became hunters yesterday!"

The goliath pulled his lips into a sneer. Other people in line turned to watch the two, some out of irritation and some out of excitement for a fight, and yet they showed no signs of stopping.



I surreptitiously took a step back. One had to be careful not to get involved in fights. Yep, that was another thing I had learned as a hunter.

It was strictly forbidden for hunters to hurt common folk because the difference in strength was simply too vast. If you were seen by the knights who kept the peace, it would go on your criminal record. It was also a problem of pride, so even the most violent hunters were careful to avoid doing so.

On the other hand, fights between hunters were often ignored. I was weak enough to put even common folk to shame, but as I was officially a hunter, nobody would care if I got caught up in a hunter fight and was injured as a result.

In fact, people would look down on me if I didn't fight back. They would blame me, the victim. *Oh, what a world!*

"You only come here if you're confident in your strength. The people recruiting are from *the* Steps. A little snot-nosed newbie like you ain't gettin' in with the biggest new clan in the capital. You're just wastin' our time!"

Clans were one form of hunter groups. When a few hunters gathered and moved as one unit, they were a party. When multiple parties consolidated, they were a clan.

There were various reasons to consolidate: sharing information, lending out items, borrowing party members when vital roles were unfilled, even challenging high-difficulty treasure vaults together. Having such connections made being a hunter way smoother. To that end, the Association recommended forming clans.

The party recruitment meet here today was sponsored by a clan called the Steps, one of the many renowned clans in the imperial capital of Zebrudia. Their formal title was First Steps, and they consisted of many young but well-known parties. Though they hadn't been around for long, the Steps were extending their influence all over the capital. Just about every hunter working in Zebrudia knew that name.

Recruitment was typically done on an as-needed basis, but the Steps held a regular, large-scale event once a year. Hopeful hunters, regardless of

background, age, or level, could undergo a test from a Steps party. If you fit their tastes, you would be welcomed as a new party member.

Of course, members of Steps parties were pretty high-leveled, which reflected in their tests. As such, very few people passed them, but for those who were skilled but lacked connections, they were seen as the chance of a lifetime.

This enthusiasm would be misplaced, though, as hunters of the Steps were at the very upper crust of the capital's hunters. Like my old friends, their talent encroached beyond genius level and into "ungodly" territory. Nearly everyone who took the test had all their confidence smashed to smithereens before them.

"Excuse me? The flyer said your level and history doesn't matter. Besides, level three is nothing to sneeze at!"

"Hah! Level three is average at best! Do you know how many level three hunters the Steps are stuck with?!" The goliath hurled abuse at Rhuda the moment she dared to bare her fangs.

In a way, he was right. Level 3 was nothing more than average. To a famous party, a level 3 designation was worthless. All of the Steps members were at *least* level 3.

Still, Rhuda's level only reflected her current status. I had mentioned that 70% of hunters stopped at level 3, but as long as you had the aptitude, you could keep going up. If she had made it to level 3 going solo, then joining a party and gaining experience would make it easy for her to keep climbing.

That was exactly why this clan's member recruitments didn't include a level restriction. No matter how much of a genius you were, you still started at level 1.

I thought it was an awful thing for him to say, but I kept my lips sealed. *Best not to say anything unnecessary.* Even as I watched in silence, the confrontation between them continued to heat up. I was far removed from the action at this point.

While the goliath talked smack at Rhuda, he made a show of touching the sword at his hip. It was a broadsword about a yard long. Unlike Rhuda's self-

defense dagger, it was made to slay monsters and phantoms that lurked within treasure vaults.

Overall, Rhuda was out of her league. *No way this goliath is lower than level 3.*

“Heh. Wanna settle this once and for all? If it’s a fight you want, then let’s do it.”

Even so, she was showing no signs of backing down. Her clean-cut features warped into a wild smirk.

Like the goliath, she brushed a hand against her dagger before pulling it out and showing it off fondly.

Treasure hunters were, put simply, inhuman. If they got into fights with common folk, they were always the ones in the wrong. But in the case of a fight between hunters, the first one to draw their weapon was the aggressor. That was the reason he hadn’t unsheathed his sword first despite how incensed he was. The man was clearly used to picking fights.

Now, even if Rhuda was beaten senseless by this goliath whose name she didn’t even know, she had no room for mitigation. A court of law wouldn’t care if he was a higher level than her.

How did I end up having to deal with this? I’m literally just standing in line.

While I stood there, fed up with both the weather and this argument, a man exited the building, wearing a white uniform like some sort of imperial officer. His collar was adorned with a silver mark modeled after a pair of footprints. This was proof that he was a member of First Steps. The callous expression on his face, which was marred with deep scars, mirrored that of the goliath in front of me.

He glared at both the goliath and Rhuda with equal scorn, then bellowed, “Quit your damn fighting, or take it somewhere else! I’ll kick you idiots out without even testing you!”

The goliath clicked his tongue and returned his sword to its sheath. Likewise, Rhuda’s eye twitched in irritation as she put away her dagger.

Finally, the line shuffled forward, and we made it inside.

The enthusiasm within the building was even more overwhelming than outside. I caught a few lingering whiffs of alcohol. Was this a bar? All of the tables were pushed to one side, leaving a wide space for hopefuls to line up. The air was thick with excitement. When Rhuda and I were ushered in, her eyes opened wide.

Apparently having forgotten about the commotion outside, she exclaimed, “Wow! Is everyone here a hunter?”

Several white-uniformed members of First Steps occupied the tables. When it came to the parties of First Steps, there were all sorts. For every party composed of several famous hunters, there was a party in which only the leader had any renown. For every party that sought brute strength, there was another party that searched for specific skills. Those who hoped to join one of them were to head to the table of their chosen party and take the test.

The tests themselves differed from party to party. There were plenty who gave basic tests like interviews and formal skill examinations, but some seemed to value inspiration more.

We looked around for a while, but Rhuda was still rooted to the spot, unable to hide her astonishment.

I could have ignored her, but I felt bad. I decided to ask, “First time?”

“It’s not yours?”

“I think it’s my... fifth?”

“This is your *fifth* time?! Oh, um, sorry.” For some strange reason, Rhuda apologized.

“It’s not a big deal. I imagine most people here have tried out more than once.”

Hunters were essentially in a meritocracy. The talented ones were scooped up quickly. But that didn’t mean the talentless had no chance.

Surely there were more people like me, who knew they had no talent but had come to the capital for the meager chance regardless. That tenacity could be considered a skill of its own. At least we could find out for certain.

I kept my distance from the lines forming at each table, staying in the corner as I observed the situation. It seemed there were more parties out looking for members than usual.

Though it was a recruitment event for the Steps, that didn't mean every single party of theirs came here every time. But today, in a rare turn of events, every famous party was present. That explained why the line extended outside.

Rhuda addressed me over-familiarly, "Hey, Krai, can you fill me in a little? I don't know a thing about all this."

"Fine. I guess it can't hurt to curry favor with a strong hunter."

After all, she wasn't going to be a level 3 forever. Assuming she didn't die, anyway. Rhuda loosened up a little after my answer.

"You might not know it, but I've been in this city a long time. I know most of the famous hunters, so this should be a good opportunity."

First off, even though getting into a party was the objective here, you couldn't just go with a party at random. Each party was recruiting for different roles and had different methods. The idea that getting into one of the best parties secured your future certainly wasn't *wrong*, but it was not unheard of for people to butt heads with their new parties once recruited.

If the difference in talent between you and the rest of your party was too great, it would lead to trouble down the line. Rhuda was on the right track, I'd say, but there were capable hunters from all over the world here in the capital. Some appeared to be human, but concealed some other life-form entirely. My friends were like that.

"I don't know what you can do or even *want* to do, but since you're carrying that dagger, you're probably suited for things other than combat."

I scrutinized her gear once more. Aside from the dagger, she also had a leather pouch hanging on her hip, small enough to not hinder movement. She probably had lockpicking tools and the like in there, too.

Hunters all had their own talents and niches. Typically, when a lifelong solo hunter joined a party, they picked the easiest one to enter and joined as an attacker. Before, they would have to have fought off monsters and phantoms

on their own, so they tended to have high offensive capabilities. However, when it came to things like trap-disarming, scouting, and lockpicking, they were usually inferior to someone who had specialized in those activities as a member of a party.

Without a ton of experience, Rhuda would have a rough time trying to join a party as a Thief, someone who specialized in those activities. She likely knew as much herself, so there was no reason to point that out and make her mad.

She waited for me to speak with a serious look on her face, so I pointed toward the back of the room and continued, “First off, there’s one major rule in here: the farther back the party is, the higher their level.”

Much like the levels assigned to hunters, clans and parties also had levels designated by the Explorers’ Association. Parties in the same clan could be separated by wide chasms of skill.

I pointed at the big table all the way in the back, where the largest crowd had gathered. “That’s the strongest party recruiting right now: Ark Brave. Ever heard of them? The average member is only twenty-one years old, but they’re the best of the best. They cleared a level seven treasure vault with only six people.”

The Braves were the most prominent beasts in the stampede that was the imperial capital. They had such power that you’d think they were blessed by gods. Their leader was known on the streets as a full-on hero.

By the way, the White Wolf’s Den was a level 3 treasure vault. The Association’s designations were pretty vague at times, but a level 3 vault was normally recommended for parties of multiple level 3 hunters. A treasure vault only one level higher was nearly ten times harder, so for Ark Brave to have cleared a level 7 vault, there was a world of difference between them and her.

“If you can get into that party, your success is all but guaranteed. If not... Well, even just receiving a bit of praise from one of their members is enough to get other parties fighting over you.”

Solo or not, experienced or not, she must have known their names by now.

Even Rhuda, in all her bravado, was getting intimidated by this. She

whispered, “Just asking, but... do you think I have a chance?”

“Depends on you. I mean, as far as I know, Ark Brave has never actually recruited anybody during this kind of event.”

They were a top-class name even in the capital. Young hunters would try to get in time and time again. Their party composition was already solidified, so the people crowding around their table probably didn’t actually expect to get in. They just wanted to see the faces of the party members or maybe make tentative connections with them.

Rhuda stared at the crowd and sighed deeply, without even bothering to complain. The moment she’d heard “level seven,” she’d likely assumed it was out of her reach.

I continued to introduce her to the other parties. All of them had names that you would’ve heard after being in the capital for a few months. Rhuda didn’t know them because she had worked solo all this time, but if she’d cared to search for this information, she would’ve found it easily. Rather, the fact that she didn’t know just proved she was a newbie.

I pointed at each one and gave an explanation. Not that I knew every single party myself, but there were rare parties here who had never shown up in previous years. Almost all of the Steps seemed to be participating in this recruitment event. Once I was finished, I let out a sigh.

After my long lecture, Rhuda said somewhat exasperatedly, “You sure know a lot. I’m getting tired just listening.”

“All of this is common knowledge.”

“I dunno if it’s okay to ask, but who are you looking to join?”

“Join? Hm... None, I guess? I can’t really do anything.”

I didn’t have a field of expertise. One couldn’t even call me an all-rounder; I truly had no skills whatsoever. A master of none, except worse—no courage, and no power to boot. The little passion I’d had back when I thought I was worth something had long since been extinguished.

Needless to say, being a hunter was dangerous work. Some estimates claimed

that 70% of hunters died in treasure vaults. I just didn't have it in me to take that risk. I had used my lack of talent as an excuse, but maybe that was my biggest problem. It made me want to vomit.

"I see. Well, if you want, maybe we could form a party?" she suggested cheerfully.

Rhuda was probably serious. My heart tightened, and it became difficult to breathe. Among bad guys, she was a good person. She couldn't possibly have been joking. But the thought of me dragging her down was unbearably painful.

"Thanks for the offer, but I don't need pity. You should find a party suited to your strengths and make your future as bright as it can be."

"Oh, okay."

I gripped the silver chains hanging beneath my belt. The cool sensation helped calm my pounding heart a little.

Suddenly, Rhuda changed the subject. "Huh? Hey, what about that empty table over there? Why didn't they put that one away?" She pointed over and over at the large, empty table behind Arc Brave's recruitment zone.

"Wow. You two really didn't do your homework, huh?"

"Whoa!"

The goliath she'd argued with earlier was now approaching. His face was red, as if the heat was getting to him. His developed biceps and riveted, rough-looking armor seemed even more dangerous in the light. Apparently, he'd found success, as he was in a much better mood than before.

Her parade thoroughly rained on, Rhuda frowned and glared at him. "What do you want from us? Don't think I won't get mad again."

"Don't be so mean, kid. Allow the Great Greg, a *real* hunter, to show ya the ropes."

The Great Greg? Never heard of him. But I only knew the names of the real best of the best, the highest-up hunters who anyone savvy to the industry would know. There were plenty of tough guys I *didn't* know. It was entirely possible that he was just about to get famous.

“That table’s for the party that founded First Steps along with Ark Brave. Looks like they ain’t comin’ today, though.”

“The party that... founded them?” Rhuda blinked.

The Great Greg lowered his voice, as if he was telling us a carefully guarded secret. “First Steps is always lookin’ for members, but today, they’re out in full force. They’ve even got the Braves here after they wrecked that level seven vault. The Crosses and Starlights are here, too, and they *never* go recruitin’. And look... they’ve even got guys with the Steps mark crawlin’ around, and they ain’t in any parties.”

He glanced furtively at an unpleasant-looking man who was standing by the wall with his arms crossed. The man wasn’t wearing the same uniform as the hunters who were recruiting. But on closer inspection, his collar, sleeves, and other inconspicuous spots had buttons and other accoutrements bearing the First Steps emblem. As a general rule, the clan members had to wear the symbol somewhere that stood out.

“Ain’t much point in all these Steps comin’ if they’re not recruitin’, yeah? There’s gotta be a reason.”

I had to interject to his conspiracy-laden talk. The Great Greg had clearly done his homework, but I knew a little more.

“Those are solo members who belong to First Steps.”

“Huh?! Can you join a clan going solo?”

“The minimum party size is one. You need a party to apply to the clan, but if you fill out the application as a one-man party, you can get in. Though you need to be really strong.”

If I had to say, Rhuda had either pushed herself to her limits or just had a bit of talent and luck on her side.

Turning my attention away from the man, I pointed at a bored-looking girl who was wandering around near the empty table.

She wore tight, black leather fighting gear. Along with her black bob and the dagger hanging from her belt, her ensemble emphasized ease of movement

from top to bottom. The girl was probably younger than Rhuda.

“That’s Tino Shade. She’s a level four, and she works solo for First Steps. I’d say she’s one of the more famous ones.”

“That little girl? Really?”

“Careful what you say. Her age and appearance belie a very short temper.”

Tino was a Thief, like Rhuda, but more advanced. I figured she could probably make it through the White Wolf’s Den alone. She was just one beast among the Steps.

The Great Greg finally turned his attention to me, his eyes alight with interest. “You don’t look like much of a hunter, but you sure know your stuff.”

“Information-gathering is important. Besides, she happens to be the... pupil of someone I know.” I tugged on my hood to cover even more of my face.

To be more specific, she was the pupil of a *friend.* In other words, my friends were apex beasts. Crazy, right?

“Someone you know?” Rhuda echoed, curious.

“I dunno why she’s here when she flies solo, though.”

Maybe she got tired of working alone and came here to find a new party. People inside the clan can be recruited too, after all. Though I imagine she could just join a party without bothering to come here.

Seeing my quizzical look, the Great Greg crossed his arms haughtily. “That’s it. Now we’re gettin’ to the meat of things. See, there’s this rumor goin’ around about why they’re here. Today, one of the two parties that founded First Steps is here. A party who ain’t scouted anybody in who knows how long.”

He paused, his eyes betraying dark excitement. The tone of his voice made it sound like he was telling a spooky story. Then, he leaned in and said, “For the first time in years, the Grievers are lookin’ for members.”

Shock ran through my body when I heard the name. It felt as if this place alone had been cut off from the rest of the world.

Not noticing my current state, the Great Greg’s lips warped into a grin. “The

Grievers are the cream of the crop. Without this once-in-a-lifetime chance, none of us would ever even see ’em, let alone get picked up by ’em. Bet they’re tryna make an appearance if all goes well.”

His excitement was palpable. The sheer passion radiating from his speech had shocked Rhuda into wide-eyed silence.

The Grievers. My stomach churned. That was the nickname of the party I had formed with my friends when we left the countryside and came here to the capital. Commanding a team of five beasts, the party had risen to prominence in no time. At this point, they and Ark Brave made up the two strongest young parties in the capital.

Its formal name? Grieving Souls.

I realized my throat was dry. The nerves caused me to sweat all over. *Don’t say that name,* I wanted to beg, but it would be too strange to say that now. I retreated even deeper into my hood, trying to hide myself as much as possible.

“What’s wrong? Are you sick?” Rhuda asked, concerned, as I shrank down and quivered.

I wanted to vomit.

“Guess it’s all fake, though. Here I was, gettin’ all excited since it sounded so juicy.” The Great Greg shrugged.

Every member of First Steps was high-leveled, not just Ark Brave and Grieving Souls. Even the Great Greg, in all his short-temperedness, wouldn’t complain just because he failed to get into one party.

However, there was one person who *did* complain. “Hey, what’s the damn holdup?! Where’re the Grievers?!”

All eyes gathered on him at once.

It was a boy with flaming-red hair. On his back was a greatsword so massive that no normal human could have swung it. Though he was short, one could tell that his body was toned and muscular even through his clothes.

To reiterate, a hunter’s strength was often linked to his short-temperedness. He had the nerve to say what everyone else, including the Great Greg, would

not. His eyes were certain of victory against all others present, and that conviction was likely backed up by real strength. He was clearly younger than me, but it would be dangerous to just call him uppity and leave it at that.

Furthermore, the greatsword slung across his back gleamed in a way that no man-made object did. It was something found in a treasure vault—a special item called a Relic.

“I don’t want the small fry. You guys said the best of the best were gonna be here, so I came all this way!” He continued his potty-mouthed tirade, not looking for anyone to agree with him.

“Kid’s got a temper. He ain’t tryna make an enemy of everyone here, is he?” the Great Greg muttered as he watched with curiosity. He had the air of a ruffian, but it seemed he had gained some good sense in his years.

To treasure hunters, connections were vital. Rumors could spread in the blink of an eye if someone caused trouble. No matter how strong you were, that could spell the end of your career. This guy probably hadn’t cared up until now, but everyone here liked the Steps, and everyone here was strong. Many even had Relics like him.

There were no signs of anyone trying to stop him, however. He probably wasn’t the only one who was feeling fed up. Others looked on calmly, as though they were watching a farce.

The boy shot threatening glares at the Steps at every table, his eyes smoldering with rage. Most of them decided to ignore him, though. Nobody was more used to being treated rudely than top-tier hunters.

Apparently even more incensed, the boy screamed louder, like an angry beast. “I’m gonna be the strongest hunter out there, and I’m already level four! I thought I was gonna get to meet the best of the best in the capital, but I don’t see shit! Man, I’m so over this!”

Wow, he actually said it. This guy’s either going to be a big deal or big dead.

He looked to be in his teens. Level 4 was good for his age, to be sure. His boundless confidence and outright arrogance weren’t so praiseworthy, but you know what they say: winners write the history books. That was just how this

industry worked.

Rhuda twitched ever so slightly, apparently shocked that this idiot's level was higher than hers. It was okay, though; there was still a possibility that he had leveled up in a party.

As he continued to stamp his feet and kick up a fuss, a Steps member finally approached him. It was one of the people he had glared at, someone who wasn't part of the recruiting parties: Tino Shade, the girl who had been hanging around in the corner.

She stepped over to him casually, looking at him with a glare that would send shivers down any man's spine.

"What do *you* want?"

"You're too uppity. We don't want you here."

This is getting bad, I thought to myself.

Her tone was flat and icy. She was clearly enraged. This was pretty typical of her; Grieving Souls was the party Tino's mentor belonged to, after all.

The members of First Steps who had stayed calm despite the boy's glares now nervously hurried to break them up.

"Wait, Tino! We're here to recruit people, not get into fights!"

"One strike, and he'll be down. That's what my dear Lizzy would do. *I'm* the one who's getting into Grieving Souls. She promised me I could join when I got stronger."

She was boldly facing him at point-blank range despite his intimidating greatsword. Her short temper was much the same as the boy's.

While Tino seemed ready to pounce on him at any time, the other Steps tried to soothe her. I wondered who would become the guilty party in the next few moments.

"Just let the idiot be! We're wasting time. Remember, we were told to do this as peacefully as possible! You're gonna get us in trouble, too!"

"Who're you calling an idiot? I'll kill you, bro!"

“You, idiot! Go off and die somewhere so we can do our jobs, a’ight?!”

Now even the Steps were stooping to this kid’s level. Top-tier clan or not, the same brand of people were in it. These beasts were all salivating over the opportunity to show off their strength.

The commotion grew as everyone continued to pour fuel on the fire. At least there wasn’t anything breakable around; people could start pulling out weapons any moment now. Once that happened, there was no stopping it until someone died or everyone’s bloodlust was sated.

A fight between treasure hunters was a calamity.

Thankfully, no common folk would get caught up in it, but if Relics started coming out—which at least a few hunters were sure to have—this building and the neighboring ones could easily be obliterated.

“Yeah, get ’em! Show us what the Steps are made of!” the Great Greg egged them on.

Following his lead, several others did the same. Incredibly, some of them were even Steps themselves. This was clearly getting out of hand.

As Rhuda watched, dumbfounded, I tugged on her sleeve and whispered, “Rhuda, we should give up and get out of here. Once the fight starts, it’s not going to stop. And if we get caught up in it, we’re dead.”

Hunters couldn’t stand being insulted. When attacked, they would always fight back. When counterattacked, they would fight even harder. It was a negative feedback loop. Even if it was just an accident, they wouldn’t let the attacker get away. It would never end until there was only one man standing.

Tino shrugged and tapped the tips of her feet. I knew this move; she was about to kick his head off.

A well-trained hunter’s kick could easily cave the ground in or destroy walls. Phantoms—guardians of treasure vaults that even heavy weapon fire couldn’t hurt—would be crushed by just one of her kicks.

“Huh? Wait!”

“If nothing else, I know when things are getting dangerous. Now let’s go

before the fight starts."

"But I still wanna find a party!"

It was hopeless. Even her brain had become pure muscle. *Your life's more important than a party!* That was how I'd survived these past five years. Rhuda had clearly never seen an argument between high-level hunters.

I really shouldn't have come here. Intense regret clawed at my brain.

Teary-eyed, I started to plead. "I know, but I'll help you search! I'll help you out, really! But your life is more important."

"Huh? Um, okay, I get it."

The heat of passion in the room continued to grow. In fact, the teen's sword was now *literally* on fire.

Crimson flames enveloped the sword without spreading, lighting up Tino's cold expression. Many Relics had incredible powers like this.

We crept along the walls toward the exit, hoping to stay out of sight. It felt pitiful, but it was the safest option. I heard the exchange intensifying behind me.

"Think *after* killing. Lizzy taught me that."

"Tch. All right, princess. Bring it on. But I ain't gonna take it easy on you!"

"Are you underestimating me? Hm? If you wanna fight, let's take it outside!"

If they clashed outside, the empire's knights would be sure to come, especially considering society was becoming more sensitive to treasure hunters and their behavior. If they hurt any common folk, they were done for.

The third-party jeering continued. I didn't want to think about it, but those were the voices of Steps. It was all too chaotic.

"Yeah, do it! Ready, set, fight!"

"Hey, stop egging them on!"

Screaming voices, coarse jeering and whistles, uproar. Behind us as we exited, someone gave a signal for them to fight. I dropped to my knees, crawling out like a maggot.

Just before I could make it out and finally escape this danger zone, a gust tore across the room. The gale, rich with hot air from the hunters, blew me off balance and knocked me onto my behind, throwing my hood off.

Rhuda yelped as a shadow loomed over me. My heart pounded like a drum as I slowly looked up.

Then, Rhuda muttered weakly, “When did you...?”

Eyes like translucent black diamonds looked down at me. They belonged to Tino, who was supposed to be fighting that teenager.

Her cleanly divided bangs swayed after a moment. Her bare, supple legs were right before my eyes. The rage on her face was now replaced with a vacant look.

Rhuda gulped. “Um, what’s happening?”

Tino didn’t bother to answer her, instead asking me in a quivering voice, “M-Master, what are you doing? How long have you been here?”

Ugh. I think I’m gonna vomit.



Let’s talk about how the dream began.

Having entered adulthood at age fifteen, the six of us, including me, had tested our skills in a few treasure vaults appraised at level 1.

Treasure vaults were given ranks based on their location, the difficulty of their gimmicks, and the threats and treasure within. Level 1 vaults were easy ones for newbie hunters to try out. They had proved to be no match for us, hunters who’d undergone intense training for years with boundless passion.

We’d cleared them faster than all the other newbie groups, feeling that we had a great future ahead of us as treasure hunters. But at the same time, I had been fully aware that I was one or two leagues below the rest.

Honestly, I’d always had a vague understanding of it while we were training, but having the fact so thoroughly shoved in my face had felt like being dragged down to hell.

The difference in our strength hadn’t seemed too bad at the time, but in a

few years, I wouldn't even be able to join their hunts. They were geniuses, whereas I wasn't even average if you were being generous.

I had been—and still was—just an extreme hindrance.

One day in particular, I had finally and truly understood that we were not equals. We were the same age and had grown up in the same environment, but I was nothing compared to them. Some of them had tons of mana, and others were impeccably strong.

Even my sister had an aptitude for magic, while I had nothing. Can you imagine how frustrating that was for me? Though she wasn't my blood sister, I suppose; we just considered each other as such.

As childhood friends, we were like family. Even before we had decided to become hunters, our group had always stuck together. We occasionally disagreed and even fought, but we had made it this far. My hometown was small, so we had all practically been raised together.

Anyway, the difference in power was palpable even to me, the weakest of the bunch. Everyone else probably figured I was just a late bloomer. Yet the fact that nobody ever mentioned it only showed how kind they were.

On the night of our first-ever treasure vault raid, during my first-ever stay in lodging away from home, I cried and cried and cried into my pillow. The next day, I decided to give up on it all.

Treasure vaults begat both riches and danger. Mana material, the building blocks of treasure vaults, gathered together to create the vault and treasure within, simultaneously birthing the phantoms that would oppose any hunters who dared enter.

I had felt that if I continued being a hunter, I would surely one day drag my party down to the point of endangering them. There wouldn't be any problem with them abandoning me to die the moment I messed everything up—beyond the obvious, of course—but my friends wouldn't choose that. And I didn't want to die, anyway.

It had been sad to give up on my dream, but it was better than endangering my friends. My adventure came to an end at a treasure vault meant for

newbies, but that also became the seed that would sprout into new stories. After all, once my friends became first-rate hunters, I could boast that I had once been part of their group.

The following day, I had gathered everyone in my room at the inn and explained to them the gist of why I was giving up. I'd already shed all of my tears the night before, so I had been dry-eyed during this speech.

Once I had told them everything, the first to speak had been Luke Sykol, the one who'd initially pitched the idea of us being treasure hunters. Eventually, he would apprentice with the Sword Saint and later be known as the Protean Sword. He was just as serious as I was.

"I did a lot of thinking last night too, actually. You don't have a role, do you, Krai? You should be our leader."

"Uh, were you even listening?"

That had been the beginning and the end of it all.

Their genius had far exceeded my expectations. The levels of treasure vaults we raided had grown higher and higher. In under a year, it had become clear that I'd never be able to catch up to them. Still, they had called me their leader —because, simply put, they were stupid.

Stupid, yes, but the strongest out there. My passion had quickly been engulfed and replaced by a fear of death, to the point where I alone couldn't handle it. From then on, I had just wanted to quit being a hunter right away. Even so, I had been their leader.

And now, after many years of going with the flow, I continued to lead these beasts as they grew and grew.



"That guy's a member of *the* Grievers?! He looks weak as heck. He was just shakin' in his boots!"

"Where was he all this time? People were about to fight."

"Ain't that the guy who was standing behind me in line?"

The crowd erupted in murmurs.

I brought this upon myself, really. If I were them, I would do the same, I thought miserably.

I slumped over on the Grieving Souls' table and vacantly looked around. My friends didn't come to events like this, so I had this big table all to myself. In fact, the other members of Grieving Souls were all out of town, taking treasure vaults left and right. Even if they *had* been in town, I couldn't have dragged them here.

All eyes in the room were on me, but nobody dared approach. They just gawked at me like I had two heads. *What did I do wrong? All I did was oversleep a little and get here late! Then I felt bad, so I tried to go home! Nobody would care if I wasn't here, dammit!*

"So, this is solitude," I joked with a self-deprecating smile.

Sharp pain ran through my stomach. No doubt I was the weakest person in this building full of hunters. Trying to escape that fight hadn't been a joke or anything, either. *I was seriously scared!*

How would all of these people, now looking at me dubiously, react if they knew that I wasn't just a member of the Grievers, but their *leader*?

After pulling me over to the table, Tino puffed out her cheeks in irritation and tried to stop their gossip. She had a dangerous look in her eye.

"Don't worry, Master. I know your greatness best of all."

"You're the reason I'm stuck here, languishing in dismay."

Tino Shade was studying under one of my childhood friends, Liz Smart—the Stifled Shadow and genocidal beast whose hands could reach her mark faster than words. Back when we had first arrived in the capital, Liz had taken a liking to Tino and picked her up as an apprentice. Years later, I had gathered Ark Brave and some other parties to create the clan First Step. Even then, Tino had been with me.

She loved Liz like a sister, and likewise, she revered me as a leader. Though she wasn't a member of our party, she was sort of like the mascot of Grieving Souls. Though she was enough of a beast that it felt strange to call her that.

Incidentally, the reason she called me “Master” was because I was both the leader of Grieving Souls and the clan master of First Steps. In a way, I had a throne at the top of a heap of beasts. At the clan formation meeting, I had just gone with the flow and somehow ended up as the leader of that, too. Just remembering it made me want to vomit.

“Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be on the hunt?”

Tino clutched her arms to her chest and shrank down, looking up at me with pleading eyes. Her flattery and short temper were but two symptoms of her mentor’s bad influence.

“But you said that Grieving Souls was... looking for party members today.”

“I didn’t say that. I just said I’d stop by.”

And that was just because my second-in-command had gotten all mad at me and made me come because “blah, blah, it’s your own event” and all that. Every other year, I came in disguise, though.

Leaving that aside, I thought it was strange that people got this worked up over a vague rumor. Hunters were truly incomprehensible.

But if it had caused so many people to gather, maybe we ought to spread the rumor ourselves next time. There were plenty of parties here other than Grieving Souls who were looking for promising new members, too.

I’m never coming again. Not next time, and not the time after that. Everyone, stop fighting and just be nice, please?

Everyone was so shaken by my dramatic entrance that they couldn’t bring themselves to come forth. Thus, I took the opportunity to chat with Tino instead. Meanwhile, however, a handsome man approached from the next table over. The people surrounding him at a distance cleared a path for him as he came.

It was the man I’d made this clan with, the one who looked best in this white uniform, which we’d made as an homage to the imperial army. He had messy blond hair and affable blue eyes. Born and raised in the empire and no doubt one of the strongest hunters in it, he was a brave hero and the leader of Ark Brave.

As one of only five level 7 hunters in the capital, he had earned his own title: the Argent Thunderclap. Ark Rodin was his real name.

He was a bit of a creep, in my opinion. He'd formed a party with a bunch of cute girls, acting as a rival to me and my group of friends. The thing that really got on my nerves, though, was that he was stupid strong without being haughty. In fact, he was a pretty good guy. The fact that this got on my nerves made my mean-spiritedness all too clear, pissing me off even more. Another negative feedback loop.

"Krai, you're late. What happened?"

"Nothing much. Just slept in a little."

"Ahahaha! You and your jokes."

I wasn't kidding, but he laughed nonetheless.

"Stay away from him. You'll infect him with your frivolity."

"Ahahaha!"



Tino tried threatening him, but it must have really hit his funny bone because he started laughing even harder, banging the table as he did so. It was kind of terrifying. While it didn't matter much this time because it was between friends, Tino really had to stop snapping at everyone. Someone messed up teaching her manners.

I ought to at least try to play it up for the crowd. "Well, you know me. I was so excited for today that I couldn't get to sleep."

I was so very uneasy that I hadn't been able to sleep until dawn. That was why I'd overslept. If my second-in-command weren't so afraid to show her face in front of all of these short-tempered beasties, I would never have come. Despite being clan master, I was at the bottom of the ladder here.

"Hmm. So you watched from the shadows to see how things developed. Well, that's just unfair. The rules say you have to wear the uniform too, you know."

"Listen to me, will you? I said I overslept."

I hadn't had any time to get ready.

Ark narrowed his eyes and looked me up and down. Handsome genius or not, he was a hunter. Occasionally, he didn't listen carefully enough. Hunters, as a rule, didn't listen.

I wasn't "seeing how things developed." Other parties' recruits were none of my business, and I didn't need new party members. I was only here for show, and nothing more.

"This man is just rude. Let's kick him out of the clan."

"Ahahahaha! Tino, you're always such a riot!"

"I wish everyone were as tolerant as you, Ark."

If Ark had been like the Great Greg, or that guy who was arguing with Tino before, we'd have had three fights on our hands by now. He extended his hand to ruffle Tino's hair, but she evaded him. This was a bold move against a little beast like her. He could try to pet her, but she wouldn't hesitate to bite.

I rarely went out since I didn't want to associate with people. When I did, I made sure to wear a disguise. Ark was probably the most easily recognizable

out of the three of us.

The crowd of hunters watched, but they were afraid of getting on Ark's bad side, so none of them seemed ready to interject. I would have been delighted if he sat here and talked until the recruiting meet was over.

"So, find any potential members?"

My question prompted all eyes to gather on Ark. Even now, the Braves were continuing to scout for hopefuls who would join their party. If he dropped any names now, they'd become part of his party in seconds, provided they said yes. Even if they said no, a recommendation from someone as famous as him would've been enough to get them into any party they wanted.

Ark knitted his brow in thought. After some hemming and hawing, he shook his head. "Honestly, I'm undecided. There are some promising candidates, but I'm unsure if they'll be able to keep up at the treasure vaults we raid."

I opened my eyes in surprise. *But of course. Beasts are born in the midst of beasts.*

A hunter's strength was proportional to the amount of vaults they had successfully raided. It wasn't easy to find people who could immediately be useful in the raids the Braves went on, as they continuously challenged more and more difficult vaults. Anyone that strong would already be participating with their own clan. This was a place for finding people with promising *futures*.

I felt bad for all of the people who had been thrown before this impossibly high hurdle.

Ark's eyes shone brightly as he asked, in his calm voice, "And you? Any potential members?"

I wouldn't know. I haven't been looking. I picked my head up and scanned the room. All the hunters in my line of sight seemed tense and wary.

I made eye contact with Rhuda, who looked very uncomfortable as she stood next to the wall. The Great Greg was in wide-eyed shock as well. The redheaded boy who'd picked a fight with everyone here bared his fangs at me as a Steps member pinioned his arms behind his back. When I looked at Tino, her shoulders jumped just a bit. All this attention made me want to vomit.

“Pfft. We’ve got enough people. But if I said I saw some, would you take them in?”

I’d said it jokingly, but Ark closed his eyes for a while and thought about it. “Sure. I think I can trust you.”

His words sent the crowd into an uproar. Even if they were in the same clan, what hunter would let another party leader choose their own party’s members? Especially not such a young, super-promising party that could vie for first in all the capital.

One of his party members, a female Magus, addressed him in a panic. “What the heck, Ark?!”

I sat up straight, crossed my arms, and reclined with one leg crossed over the other. A grin crawled onto my face. “Heh, interesting. And you’ll take anyone I choose?”

“Just one, yes. We don’t have the resources to train too many at once.” Ark gulped. He really was a tolerant guy.

But I get to recommend someone, eh? Interesting. Ark comes up with some really fun ideas.

This was a good chance. It was sure to stir up conversation, then the next recruiting meet would draw in even more hunters. We’d have to rent a bigger venue.

The problem, though, was that I didn’t have a good eye for this stuff. All I saw was trash that might have talent, trash that just happened to have hunting experience, and trash that was strong but way too uppity. I couldn’t exactly recommend anyone from this lineup for the Braves, and I was no good at drawing out people’s hidden potential.

He said he’d take anyone, but if I just picked someone at random, this could cause conflict between us. The quickest way to do this would be to recommend a solo hunter from our own clan. Their accomplishments would speak for themselves.

I happened to make eye contact with Tino. She fidgeted and blushed as she told me, “Um, it’s a wonderful gesture and an honor that you would choose me,

but I've already resolved to follow you. I won't join this fake pretty boy's party. Please, choose someone else."

"Man, I'd better make sure Liz isn't doing more harm than good," I muttered.

My friends and Ark Brave were long-standing rivals. We were very uncompromising, unlike the tolerant Ark himself. He wasn't fake, either; he was a real-deal pretty boy.

I looked around again to see if I could find anyone good, but no one really stood out. Maybe the best course of action would be to smirk like a badass and say "nobody here."

Still, the way these beasts were looking at me so seriously was kind of funny, so I decided to play along. Though my motivation as a hunter had left me long ago, my current goal was to appear like a really cool, tough guy.

Plastering on a thoughtful expression, I spoke. "Hmm, let's see. I guess there is someone, but the thing is, I kinda want them when the time comes."

"Dude!" came a voice full of rage. The boy restrained by the Steps had forced himself out of their grasp and jabbed his finger in my direction. Indeed, as a level 4, he certainly had strength to match. "If you wanna apologize, then I guess I could join your stupid little party!" he shouted, out of breath. This guy was bold.

To Ark, even level 4 hunters probably looked to be little more than common folk, but I was a different story.

"Don't you have a party?" I asked.

"That doesn't mean nothin'!"

It does, though.

I put a hand on my chin and scrutinized the boy. He was daring enough, and he likely had talent. With some discipline, Ark could fix his attitude. Instead of being a jack-of-all-trades, he seemed more specialized, which would take him even further.

If I let him into Grieving Souls, the existing members would rip him to shreds before long. But this was for the Braves, and I didn't really care how much effort

Ark needed to put in for him.

I clapped my hands once and smiled at the boy. “What’s your name, son?”

“Tch... Gilbert Bush. Gilbert of the Purgatorial Sword!” Li’l Gilbert yelled, just barely containing his rage.

Presumably, “the Purgatorial Sword” referred to his greatsword Relic. It probably wasn’t a proper title; only a handful of hunters in the capital had real ones.

Ark looked at Li’l Gilbert, his face serious. Whether Ark had a good eye or not, this kid probably just looked like a brat.

I clapped my hands again before looking up at him. “Very well, Gilbert. I’ll recommend you to Ark, on one condition.”

“What? What condition?!”

I wasn’t much of a judge. Rhuda just looked like slightly talented trash to me, while the Great Greg was just funny trash, and Gilbert appeared to be haughty trash. But that wasn’t much of an appraisal. If I couldn’t judge them, then no matter what I picked, the result was down to luck.

“My condition is... that you don’t fail. After all, wouldn’t you say victory is the most important part of being a hunter?”

He listened to me, one eyebrow raised. Actually, everyone in the clan was listening to me attentively. *Don’t worry, guys, I’m outright bullshitting. Urp, I can feel my last meal coming back up.*

“Without that power, one day, you’ll endanger your allies. So show us that you have the power to prevail. Oh, and by the way? Ever since I became a hunter, I haven’t lost even once.”

“What?!”

That was because I’d never fought, though. Yes, not even once.

I used any means at my disposal to escape all combat. Sometimes, I used my allies as a shield. Other times, I used authority or even wealth.

So in this battle, too, I would do just that.

I removed the gold ring encircling my left pinkie and tossed it at Li'l Gilbert.

It was a Shooting Ring. A very common piece of equipment, but it was an item from a treasure vault. Though it didn't contain much power, it fetched quite a hefty price. He caught it in his right hand and scowled at it.

I grinned at him and called out for all to hear, "Now, I declare to all those who are present! I plan to recommend this man as a candidate for Ark Brave. But if any of you can defeat him and steal this ring away, then *you* will be the one whose name I put forth. By the way, that ring isn't much, but is still a Relic. Whether you want the recommendation or not, whoever steals that ring gets to keep it. Good luck!"

Ark whistled, wide-eyed.

Tino, having caught on to the situation quickly, closed in on Li'l Gilbert and kicked him right in the face.

My grin stiffening, I quietly stood up in hopes of going unnoticed. *Time to run.*



This is a tale of heroes.

It takes place during the golden age of heroes, when people all over the world searched for wealth, fame, power, and most of all, glory.

This is the tale of my friends, who aimed for the top with all their legendary talent, the clans who pursued the same goal, and one solitary man, a true grieving soul himself, who watched it all from the sidelines.

Chapter 1: Coping With Community Service

“It’s not happening. I’m not strong enough.”

My voice was laced with pain as I spoke to my friends, the Grieving Souls.

Only one year had passed since we’d started acting as hunters. But in just that one year, there had been so much upheaval in my life.

Treasure vaults were collections of mana material. The dangers within were numerous: phantoms and evil monsters, traps waiting to ensnare you, and even your own fellow treasure hunters. We’d heard about it all. I had read countless tales of past adventures, so I had thought I knew everything there was to know.

However, the trials that had presented themselves when we truly became hunters had broken my naïve, fragile spirit. I couldn’t begin to count the amount of times I’d nearly vomited. The life-threatening adventures had taken an immense toll on my body and mind.

“I can’t keep up with you guys. You ought to know this by now, but I always, *always* slow our raids down.”

In treasure hunter parties, each member was assigned a role. There were offensive roles that fought off monsters, like Swordsmen and Magi. There were supporting roles that dealt with scouting and traps, like Thieves and Alchemists. Additionally, there were healing roles that helped protect party members and heal their wounds, like Paladins and Clerics. As I had none of those abilities, I was nothing but a burden.

I had tried so hard, visiting one mentor after another, groping desperately for some aptitude within me. But it had become clear to me that if someone without talent put in the same effort as someone with talent, the latter would always come out on top.

Luke and the rest of my childhood friends were surprisingly hard workers. Anyone would be surprised by their grit. As long as there were only twenty-four hours in a day, I would never catch up to them.

Parties typically consisted of five or six people. Without me, or if I was replaced by one or two others of appropriate level, Luke and the others would have been able to go even further.

When he heard my pleading, Luke Sykol nodded gravely. “Yeah, you’re right. We’re not strong enough.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

Liz Smart, who was sitting next to him, piped up, “Sorry, Krai Baby. If we were stronger, you wouldn’t have to worry.”

“No, seriously, that’s not what I mean.”

They were already strong. Too strong, even. Though they carried around a burden by the name of Krai Andrey, they were strong enough to challenge vaults at increasingly higher levels. It should’ve been so much easier for them to raid without me, as a group of five.

My pleading fell on deaf ears as Luke looked into the distance and said, “This isn’t gonna work. Haha... If we’re gonna be stuck here, then being the best is only a dream within a dream. Thanks for opening my eyes, Krai. I’m gonna go train under that Sword Saint or whatever, and rebuild my skills from the ground up.”

As if he were merely going on a stroll, Luke waltzed off to become an apprentice to the famous Sword Saint of the imperial capital. Following his example, the other members of our party also decided to venture out and improve their skills.

I realized one thing: I could never get through to them. They thought that just getting stronger would solve any problem. But no matter how strong they were, I would remain weak.

Thus, I searched desperately for any way to avoid adventuring. Eventually, I hit upon a brilliant idea.

Let’s start a clan.

As I was, I was just going to die. And if I didn’t die, I might meet a fate worse than death. To avoid either one, I determined we would start a clan with other

hopeful parties in service of finding new, strong hunters to join Grieving Souls.

We needed a new wind for that first new step.

I created First Steps and successfully used my management duties as a pretext to get away from searching treasure vaults. That was three years ago.



I've mentioned mana material a couple of times now. While I didn't know everything about it, it was one of the elements that composed our world. It couldn't be seen, but it was apparently all over the place, like an invisible fog.

Because this element pervaded the entire world, it could gather at fixed points, depending on the influence of ley lines and the land itself. When it did, this invisible power reflected the area's history in order to create an extremely limited pocket dimension. This was what we called a treasure vault.

Ever since ancient times, where there were treasure vaults, there were treasure hunters.

Vaults came in various forms, as information absorbed by the mana material could include anything from ruined civilizations to rare, natural phenomena. Though the treasure vaults were based on set rules, they had nearly infinite variety. They could take the shape of towers, castles, forests, deserts, underground labyrinths, and in strange cases, even ships, the sky, or waterfalls.

The reason treasure hunters traversed these structures—and why they were called *treasure* vaults to begin with—was because of the Relics within, which were created during the inception of these pocket dimensions. Relics had myriad forms, such as a canteen that never ran out of water, a ring that could protect its bearer from a fatal blow, or an overcoat that allowed the wearer to fly.

From time to time, items appeared with powers so outlandish that modern civilization could never hope to replicate them.

Were they human dreams given form, or perhaps artifacts from ancient civilizations that had been lost to time? Depending on its powers, a Relic could be a bona fide treasure fetching such a high price that one could live out the rest of their days on the profits.

Of course, there was no small risk involved.

There were tough life-forms that preferred to live in places with high concentrations of mana material; we called them monsters. Then there were living apparitions which materialized in the same way as the treasure vaults, known as phantoms. Not only were there countless traps to hinder intruders, but even the topography itself could be an obstacle. Worst of all, the vault could also inspire hunters to turn against and murder one another.

Despite all this life-threatening danger, hunters continued to seek treasure vaults. The allure of wealth, fame, and—depending on the concentration of mana material—power was simply too great to give up.

The imperial capital, Zebrudia, was the number one gathering place in the world for treasure hunters. It boasted convenient travel, a safe and well-developed metropolitan area, and unrivaled national strength. All this combined with the countless overlapping ley lines—the passages through which mana material traveled around the world—made Zebrudia something of a holy land for treasure hunters who wanted to challenge vaults of any and all skill levels.

An abundance of treasures and monster materials from vaults brought merchants from all over, attracting even more hunters. The more famous hunters gathered here, the more the city's safety was prioritized. This cycle led to the Zebrudian Empire becoming the strongest of all of the great powers.

When we, a group of kids from a small town on the border, had decided to become treasure hunters, we'd had to take multiple carriages and force our way into the capital. I'd say that forging ourselves in that kind of environment was our shortcut to glory. In fact, we might have ended up a bit too refined.

Still, I thought that we'd done the right thing. After all, the Zebrudian Empire was a land built on the backs of hunters. The laws of the empire prioritized hunters first and foremost, making things easier for us through taxes, facilities, and other means.

My clan, First Steps, had its headquarters established in the heart of the imperial capital, on a plot that overlooked the main street. People called a clan's headquarters the "clan house," but ours was a huge, five-story building,

constructed using vast funds squeezed from our members.

I happened to be dozing in the sunlit clan master's room on the top floor when my second-in-command came dashing up like she was going to break the door down.

Now, managing a clan was far from easy business. It demanded skills entirely different from the skills required for treasure hunts. Other clan masters managed their clans themselves, but here in First Steps I had hirelings to help me out.

My second-in-command, Eva Renfied, had ten non-hunter personnel working under her. Unlike our muscly beasts, she had a more delicate and slender build. Behind her red-rimmed glasses were eyes that shone like amethysts. Her brunette hair was well-maintained. In contrast to our sloppy hunters, she had the appearance of someone who could actually get a job done. Honestly, without her, this clan would probably go up in flames.

She was one of the many people I had hired to work behind the scenes for when it was time for me to throw in the towel. Another very important but unspoken reason for her hire was that she couldn't kill me in one punch like a hunter would.

Eva made sure that I was awake and heaved a deep sigh. "Krai, you're on the front page of the papers."

"Oh. Really?"

Annoyed, Eva pulled the newspaper from under her arm and slapped it on my desk. It was the biggest newspaper in the capital city, *Zebrudia Daily*. Plastered on the front page was a large image of the venue we had used for yesterday's recruitment meet. However, the sign above the door had fallen, there was a massive hole in the wall, and portions of it were on fire. Through the hole, you could see a bunch of hunters engaged in a messy brawl.

The title of the article was "Breakout Battle at Ark Brave Recruitment Party."

They, uh, seem to have misunderstood a few things. Either way, I wanted to vomit. With a big yawn, I skimmed the article. There was one vital thing I had to confirm first.

“Any injured common folk?”

“Fortunately, there have been no reports.”

“All good, then. That would’ve been a real problem, if so.”

Good thing I had the bar’s owner leave beforehand. By the time things got bad, only hunters were there.

First-rate hunters could kill with a single finger. Our clan’s motto was “Don’t hurt the common folk.” Destroyed buildings could be rebuilt, but even the best Clerics couldn’t save a dead guy.

I gave the contents a proper read this time. Fortunately, the name Grieving Souls didn’t appear anywhere. Our party was a bunch of complete idiots, so *Zebrudia Daily* was really covering our behinds. In a way, they were pretty lenient when it came to us.

But geez, those beasts really didn’t know how to hold back. I couldn’t believe they’d gotten into a brawl over such a low-level Relic. They’d destroyed a building for it!

Not knowing the details, Eva glared at me through her glasses. “Seems to me like you only made it worse.”

“Nah, I don’t think I did. It was already pretty bad without my help.”

Ultimately, the recruitment meet had never reached a proper conclusion. I had already escaped by the time tables started getting thrown, so I wasn’t aware of the eventual outcome. Apparently, things had gotten very heated.

Li’l Gilbert had been taken down by Tino pretty early on. *That’s muscleheads for you.* Everyone there had flammable dispositions; introduce one little spark, and it would start a wildfire.

Man. I really gotta move somewhere faaar away.

“Has Ark said anything?”

“I saw him in the lounge, but he just laughed while he read the paper. I don’t think he is concerned.”

Never had I met a more tolerant guy. He didn’t even care about this blatant

exposé. Truly, a hero's repertoire had to include more than raw strength. I was glad that his party, Ark Brave, was our number two. He'd saved my hide more than once. With that, we ought to be able to make it through this mess.

As I threw the newspaper aside, propped my feet up on the table, and started polishing my many rings, Eva pressed a hand to her forehead in frustration.

"And the settlement for the ruined bar?" she asked over the sound of my rattling chains.

"Make Ark handle the claim. Calculate the opportunity loss and have him repay that, too. That was our deal when we rented the place."

"The Association has grievances as well."

"Handle it however you want."

I was used to grievances. At first, I had wanted to vomit whenever they came. But grievances were almost an everyday thing, and you couldn't vomit *every* day.

As I disinterestedly continued my polishing, Eva said, "They want an explanation in person. 'Without the sass,' they added."

"Oh great, a summons. Now I wanna vomit." There was a stinging pain in my stomach.

The capital was a city of treasure hunters. As such, the biggest hunter-managing organization, the Explorers' Association, held great influence. On paper, First Steps was under the Association's command, so I couldn't refuse a summons.

In response to my grimace and brutal honesty, Eva snapped, "You should be used to it. How many times has it been now?"

"No matter how many times it happens, I'll never get used to being summoned. Their branch manager is scary as hell. Guarantee he's killed at least a few people."

"Not this again..."

The Explorers' Association had branches in every city, but the guy managing the imperial capital's branch, Gark, was a former hunter. Once he'd retired, this

ex-beast had started working for the Association. It had been some time since then, but he was still hale and hearty. The man was a real warrior who wouldn't hesitate to step in to stop a hunter fight. And boy, was he terrifying.

Even worse, he had been helping us since we'd arrived here at the capital, so I couldn't talk back to him. Truly, I was screwed.

"Ugh, for real? If I ignored him, that guy would ride all the way over here himself."

I accidentally ignored him once, and it turned into this whole big thing. Ever since then, Gark had been nailed to the tippy-top of my "do not fuck with" list.

Most of all, Gark's assistant manager was a good person who tended to hold him back, so it was a much safer idea for me to just go to the branch where I could be with both of them. I would've loved to send someone else in my stead, but the person who actually did all the clan management, Eva, wasn't a hunter. I just didn't have the heart to send her into hunter territory.

"What if we sent Ark?"

"Don't you think you're relying on him too much?"

What other options do I have? Just because people here are strong doesn't mean they're good people. I racked my brain for a while, but no good ideas came to mind.

"Ah, whatever. I really don't wanna go, but I will. Seriously, I hate to do it, especially without a guard. Plus my disguise Relic broke a while back."

If the other Grieving Souls members were here, one of them would come with me for protection. But as they were always out on high-difficulty vault raids, there was no telling when they'd be back.

"You'll be just fine. We're in the capital, remember?"

"You can say that because you've never been attacked in the street. Well, I guess that hasn't happened since we 'took care' of the offenders."

I put my best, shiniest ring on my pointer finger and placed the rest in my bag. After fastening the chains on my belt, I stood up. *Might as well rip the bandage off now.*

Perhaps it was time to show off my legendary “get on the floor and beg” skill.

The Association’s Zebrudia branch was about a fifteen-minute walk from clan HQ, between a big shop and a pub. It was pretty small compared to the other nearby buildings, but in terms of prosperity, it easily beat both combined. Their flag, a treasure box drawn on a red background, flapped in the breeze.

I glanced around just to be sure, and finally entered while suppressing the urge to vomit. Hot, stuffy air washed over me, causing me to wince. This building was a stronghold of beasts.

There was a clear line between treasure hunters and common folk. It couldn’t be identified by age, or sex, or clothing, but one could tell the difference at a glance. If pressed to explain, I would call it a difference in class between living beings.

Though the capital was a holy land for hunters, the total hunter population wasn’t that high. Walking around outside, you wouldn’t typically encounter one. But this Association branch was like a den for them, the most densely populated beasts’ den in the whole city.

The open lobby was full of unceasing roars, laughter, and cheerful singing. It brought to mind a battlefield. My nostrils were assailed by a mix of blood, alcohol, sweat, and metal. It was the stench of adventures. A hunter twice my size glanced down as he passed by, but he didn’t say a word. It was hard to believe we were the same species.

The Explorers’ Association’s job was to support hunters. Trading Relics and monster materials, providing information, helping people find parties—this one-stop shop for hunters was a massive organization with a history as long as treasure hunting itself. It was also in charge of assigning levels to hunters, parties, clans, and treasure vaults, along with assigning jobs to hunters.

Getting into a vault could be done by non-hunters, but people who did that typically died. It made much more sense to join the Association if you wanted to be a hunter. Membership wasn’t free, of course. Each year, a hunter had to pay a tax that scaled with their earnings. There were other duties, too. Occasionally, for example, they would force crappy jobs on you.

When a clan got to the sheer scale of the Steps, they could take care of

themselves without the Association's help. In fact, some clans were doing just that. But I didn't want them watching us like a hawk, and the fees weren't that bad anyway, so I accepted the role of Association dog.

Also, the girl at their reception desk was so cute that she could've been a celebrity. *See, the Association* was *useful for something.*

I pushed my way through the crowd of hunters, enduring the odors of blood and excitement as I moved forward. It was really scary to go through the guys brandishing bandages and scars on their faces, but I knew from experience that just looking down and keeping to yourself was the best way to get them to bother you. The strong ate the weak. Why did this place run on survival of the fittest, anyway?

I caught sight of a hunter reading an open newspaper. The half-destroyed bar was right on the front page. It wasn't *Zebrudia Daily*, but another newspaper that had clearly jumped on the bandwagon.

Not my fault. Not. My. Fault. Damn you, mass media! Report the real news instead!

"Fame really is a sad thing, huh?" I wanted to vomit, but a nihilistic grin spread across my face as I lined up at reception.

My prayers for my turn to never come seemed to fall on deaf ears as I quickly moved to the front of the line.

"Thank you for coming to the Explorers' Association today!" The black-haired receptionist gave me a heartwarming smile.

She wasn't a hunter, as it turned out. Part of the reason I'd staffed my own clan with non-hunters was because I'd been jealous of the Association's setup here.

Trying to look cool, I slapped my hands down on the counter and spoke in a low tone of voice. My objective? To sound like a tough guy.

"I'm here to talk to your branch manager, Gark. He already knows about it; I just need you to take me to him."

The receptionist didn't shrink back at my aggressive act, instead just keeping

up her big ol' smile. "Yes, sir. This is about the demolished bar, right? I've been given the details. Oh, and Mr. Andrey? Just as a reminder, you don't need to stand in line when you're summoned."

Actually, sweetie, it was only half demolished, I thought as she guided me to Gark's office.

I acted big up front, but that was just for appearances. Now that I was with Gark, I threw away my pride with zero hesitation. He had already seen me at my most shameful of times anyway. I prostrated myself at full power the moment we made eye contact. Sincerity was the key to an apology, after all.

"I'm deeply sorry for all the trouble I've caused!"



The battle-tested veteran recoiled in shock. “What the—?!”

Gark was human, despite his monstrous appearance. His full name was apparently Gark Welter. He stood over six and a half feet tall. Old wounds and tattoos ran across his cheeks. Veins bulged from his bald head, and his muscles were so healthy and supple that you never would’ve guessed that he was retired. Between that and the weapon glued to his side, he looked like a stereotypical bad guy. Still, he was human—and a great human at that.

Next to him sat his competent and attractive assistant manager, Kaina. She was the beauty beside the beast, though I secretly thought a real beast would be tamer than this guy. Still, he always saved my ass.

“Hey, uh, Krai?”

“It wasn’t on purpose, I swear. I didn’t mean to do anything bad! I just wanted to make sure no common folk got hurt, and I got permission in advance to destroy it! The owner himself said it was okaaay!”

You had to show the receiver that your bases were covered before they could get a word in, so I breathlessly prattled on and on.

Purely because I had no talent, I knew hunters well. It let me see things from the commoners’ perspective. I had paid close attention beforehand to make sure this event wouldn’t bother anyone, even in the case of a brawl.

Ever since I had become a hunter, the skills I’d improved on the most were apologizing, laying groundwork, and bluffing. *Not the best skillset, I’d say!*

Hoping to come off as pitiful as possible, and with all the drama I could muster, I said, “Those guys really messed things up for me, okay? I tried and tried to stop them, and if you’re gonna do it, you might as well go all-in, right? Tell me, how am I supposed to stop them?! I wish I could, I really do! You go out there and try it, dammiiit!”

I hadn’t been able to stop them, so I’d had no choice but to let them all vent in the wildest way possible, somewhere people wouldn’t get hurt.

Really, I would’ve been better off not making excuses. But I went for it anyway in hopes of getting sympathy. Gark wasn’t *actually* mad, after all. No

common folk got hurt. Also, no common folk got hurt. And most of all, no common folk got hurt.

The Association was strict on hunter impropriety, but they didn't punish everything. That would be impossible. If they fined people every time there was a fight, the headquarters would be a damn castle right now.

I jumped up and continued to apologize as I closed in on Gark.

Seeming overwhelmed, he backed away. "Kid, you can't just steamroll me with apologies that easily."

"All we did was destroy a building! All we did was come up on the front page! Nobody got hurt; nobody sent in any claims! What's wrong with a building or two?! It's better than killing people! I'll repay the owner! I know the guy; he's really cool, and we're all good! He's gonna forgive me with a smile! Damn, do I want ice cream!"

The half-destroyed building was a bar, but they also served delicious ice cream. It was one of my top three favorite ice cream spots in the capital.

After my begging—and wanting to vomit all the while—Kaina finally spoke up, her face distorted with revulsion. "Now, now. Calm down, Krai. Gark doesn't have to reprimand you too much, as nobody was hurt."

Each time something like this happened, Kaina calmed Gark's rage with her "now, now" spiel. It was probably part of her job. Getting pissed and threatening people was Gark's job, while bringing peace and coming to a compromise was Kaina's.

Just as expected, Gark sighed. "I haven't even gotten to that part yet. But all right, sit down."

Nice! Forgiveness obtained. I wasn't heaving my apologies all over the place for nothing.

I obediently sat on the big, fluffy couch. My desire to vomit eased somewhat. But just as I let my guard down, Gark slammed his hands on the table. I shuddered at the unexpected act.

He bared his fangs as he glared at me. "Listen, Krai. I didn't summon you here

because I wanted to."

If you didn't want to summon me, then just... don't?

His tone admonishing, Gark continued, "Yeah, nobody got hurt. But not getting any claims doesn't erase the fact that it was big enough to get on the front page. First Steps is a *big* clan, and we can't have the role models for hunter behavior doing silly shit like that."

What? Huh? Come again?

That was the part where he was supposed to forgive me. The Association I knew would always forgive me there. Again: no common folk hurt! Yeah, we could be tried in an imperial court for the property damage, but we were going to settle it out of court anyway. If there were no claims, then the empire had no reason to act.

Sure, we were in the paper, but these short-tempered hunters were always up to something. Partially destroying a bar was on the tame side. In all his years of being a yes-man and an ass-kisser, Gark should've known as much.

If our party hadn't been on tour right now, things would've gotten even worse. People who read the papers probably wouldn't think any more than "Wow, again?" He said we were the "model" of hunter behavior, but hell nah. All I could do was feign laughter.

I looked to Kaina, and she flashed a wry grin at me. That really got to me. *Fine, whatever. Might as well make Ark deal with this.*

"Let me guess. Community service?"

Gark just scowled at me.

The Association's main role was to assist hunters in their vault-raiding exploits, but at the same time, they acted as a middleman for third-party requests. Hunters were stronger than any human could hope to be, so merchants and governments often made requests in hopes of borrowing our strength.

Guard duty, monster extermination, obtaining specific Relics. The difficulty levels and types of missions were myriad, but they were mostly taken by

newbie hunters who couldn't just raid for a living and hunters who wanted to make connections with outsiders. Many of these requests gave few rewards, took up a lot of time, were too difficult, or were assigned by some toolbag. Thus, many of them went ignored altogether.

As far as I cared, it was their own problem that nobody else should have to care about. But the Association had their own annoying circumstances, so they took those requests and pushed them on hunters who showed weakness or caused scandals.

In all of our infinite respect, we called those requests "community service" and avoided them at all costs. Gark was clearly annoyed by the phrase, as his eyelid twitched when he heard it.

"Don't talk like that in front of me."

"You used to be a hunter, and you know that stuff's a pain. Besides, I gotta think about the lives of my members."

Our clan had its own circumstances, but we were a democracy. I'd only been elected as clan master because of a majority vote, so my authority wasn't exactly great. As I made my position clear and leaned back with my legs crossed, Gark looked at me in bewilderment. Then, he let out a defeated sigh.

This time, I was the one taking on a reproachful tone. "Now, I'm not saying I won't take the job. You've saved my behind a few times now, so I know where we stand. Yes, I'll take the job, but only *one*. Just can't do multiple. I mean, I didn't even do anything that bad."

"Krai, you get better at pissing me off every time you come here."

Sometimes you had to be obsequious, and sometimes you had to put the pressure on. If you were just scared all the time, you'd be dead meat. That was my secret to success. Of course, I could only do this here because I was confident that Gark wouldn't kill me where I sat.

He ground his teeth at my uppity attitude and said in a low, menacing voice, "Bring me the thing."

Kaina retrieved a leather folder and placed it in front of me.

Requests from the Association were practically compulsory, though I had heard of some hunters refusing them outright. Many hunters had a strong ego and hated being tied down. This was especially true for the veteran hunters who could complete these annoying requests.

The folder was *really* thick. As expected, it had a veritable lineup of community service jobs. I had to sympathize with how many annoying requests they had, but we were a business, too, so we couldn't take on more than one.

Gark turned his eyes on me, emanating ferocity. "Choose."

"Yeah, yeah."

I started skimming through the files. There was plenty of variety, at least. Time involved, the job itself, and the rewards were all different. There were times where the context of the job sucked, too. The best option was to pick an easy-looking one and foist it off on Ark.

I flipped through the pages, but just *thinking* about most of these jobs gave me a headache.

Ark was one of the top hunters in the capital. His party could clear just about any request, but a hunter's specialty was raiding treasure vaults. I filtered out requests not related to that and started looking specifically at the levels of each vault involved.

Level 5, level 6, level 5, level 5, level 4, level 6, level 4, level 3, level 7, level 6...

Oh, I saw a level 3 in there! I turned back through the pages and checked the job itself. *Yep, this one ought to be easy.* Seeing as community service jobs were often awfully hard, it was a stroke of luck to find a level 3.

Incidentally, a hunter's recognized level usually correlated with the level of treasure vault they could clear. Level 7 hunters were judged by the Association to have the power to clear level 7 or lower vaults.

The Argent Thunderclap himself, Ark Rodin, was level 7 and the highest-ranked hunter in the capital. Understandably, only the most elite hunters were bestowed with these kinds of titles; there were just a handful of them even in the densely populated capital. Although every hunter was different, I figured Ark ought to be able to solo-clear a level 3 with ease.

Between the poor rewards and the long duration, this job was essentially volunteer work, but he wouldn't have issues completing it. The real problem was that it was a waste of time.

I pulled out the request sheet and waved it in front of Gark's face. "Picked one. I'll take this easy-looking carcass-collecting gig."

"Hey, that's bad luck! It's called emergency rescue, not 'carcass-collecting.'"

Err, what? They're definitely not alive.



His coming and going was like a passing storm.

Once Krai had left, Kaina sighed. Holding the urgent request folder under her arms, she smirked at Gark. "That boy's just as sweet as ever. Did you get what you wanted?"

"Yeah, I guess. Actually, him getting carried away is exactly what I wanted," Gark said curtly, rubbing his temples. The threatening look on his face from before had vanished.

There were a lot of weird hunters out there, but Krai Andrey was the weirdest.

It had been five years since Krai became a hunter. In fact, the capital's branch was the one that had received his application. One could say that Gark had overseen Krai's entire hunting career.

Krai had come to the capital along with five friends from his hometown. Stories of kids and their friends becoming hunters because of all the exciting adventures they'd heard about were a dime a dozen. Not many of them could endure being a hunter for many years.

In spite of the harshness of the occupation, Krai hadn't changed a bit from the day he'd signed up. From his soft, almost-feminine features to his frivolous attitude, and even his underhanded methods, nothing about him had changed as he'd progressed along the path to glory. Gark supposed that was the one extraordinary thing about Krai.

First Steps was one of the most influential clans in the capital now. There

were some senior clans that were larger in scale, but they had completed their growth, while First Steps was still growing. The average age of hunters in the clan was low, so what they lacked in experience, they more than made up for with the vigor of their youth. The fact that they were in the news just showed how much attention they got.

Even though he had founded a large clan and was allegedly among top-class hunters, there wasn't even a hint of arrogance in Krai's attitude. For someone in Gark's position, it was much appreciated. Normally, his clan would've been liable to leave the Association by now. For a clan that had gained sufficient connections and power, there wasn't much to be gained from staying in.

In reality, the fully grown clans had more than a few people who wanted to leave the Association. It led to plenty of headaches for Gark, but he couldn't stop them. Skilled hunters were treasured by the Association. Though he acted flippant and seemed to look down on Gark, it was clear that Krai was being considerate of the Association.

"I mean, he said it'd be easy, but he took the most annoying-looking request out of the bunch."

"Well, that's not particularly surprising." Kaina narrowed her eyes as she recalled the sight of him flipping through some twenty-odd requests and picking one without hesitation.

The treasure vault involved may have been the lowest out of all of them, but that didn't necessarily mean it was the easiest. Leaders needed an eye for danger, and there had been plenty of warning signs written on the request.

As the head of both a huge clan and the party known as Grieving Souls, Krai couldn't have possibly mistaken the difficulty level of that request. In fact, Krai had picked the most difficult request on multiple occasions. Was he trying to repay his debt to the Association?

"God only knows what'll happen. But it's in Krai's hands now, so I doubt we have to worry. Attitude aside, he's got a good eye."

"We owe him one."

After I returned to the clan house with a fresh job in hand, I was faced with some surprising circumstances.

“Huh? Why isn’t Ark here?”

Eva answered me without looking up from her paperwork. “A noble summoned him due to the recent Prism Garden raid, I’m told. He won’t be back for some time.”

“Oh, really? Talk about bad timing.”

Ark Brave was one of the most attention-grabbing parties in the capital. It was only natural, considering their leader was a smooth-talking pretty boy with tolerance unbefitting of a hunter. Not to mention his ridiculous strength.

With all that in mind, it wasn’t especially surprising that imperial nobles would want to rub elbows with him. Additionally, he had just cleared a high-difficulty treasure vault. I was lucky to have had him all the way until this morning.

Still, this was poor timing. I had been planning on pushing Gark’s request off on Ark in the first place, so I’d pretty much made my choice on a whim. He was a gold-star employee, but it was pretty annoying that he was such a busy guy.

“Well, that sucks. What am I supposed to do about this community service job?”

“Have you considered going yourself?”

Did she just tell me to go kill myself?

Eva’s eyes told me she was serious. There were some who didn’t think much of treasure vaults, especially among non-hunters. But as I had seen high-level treasure vaults in person, I could say with confidence that they were naïve.

Vaults were, as a rule, infested with all sorts of nightmares. On top of that, at higher levels, the vaults themselves were hostile to outsiders. In the situation that a hunter was lucky enough to evade the monsters and phantoms within, they were still in grave danger.

The request I’d brought back was a level 3, so it wasn’t that dangerous. But common folk could only enter level 1 vaults without issue. Anything after that,

and their fate was sealed. Besides, I had pretty much given up on being on the front lines.

“I haven’t been in one in a good while, so I’m probably pretty weak by now.”

“You slack too much for my taste.”

The strength of a hunter was on another level. One major reason for this was the accumulation of mana material. Treasure vaults were full to the brim with thick mana material, and as hunters raided them in search of Relics, they were constantly bathed in the stuff. As a result, hunters boasted power that far surpassed that of normal human beings.

In the act of absorbing mana material, hunters saw an incredible increase in all of their abilities, including physical strength. Sometimes, they even developed special abilities as a result. With that, hunters who continued to challenge higher-difficulty vaults continued to gain strength. But the mana material within them didn’t stay there forever.

The effects varied from person to person, but spending too much time in an area with low concentrations of mana material, like the city, would cause all of the power in your body to disappear. That was why hunters, who spent lots of time in treasure vaults, were many times stronger than regular military.

I was both talentless *and* weak. Now that I had been away from the front lines for some time, I was even weaker than before. A level 3 treasure vault wouldn’t be that difficult for the members of our clan, but as I was little more than a glorified commoner, it was a hard no for me.

Of course, I also just didn’t feel like it. If I’d known I would’ve had to do it, I would’ve just rejected the offer by any means necessary. *Don’t underestimate the weakest of the Steps.*

Still, I had a way to weasel out of it. I turned around, humming as I went. Even without Ark, I had Steps. I had *authority*.

“Well, whatever. I’ll just find some random person in the lounge.”

“It’s not proper to force urgent business on others.” Eva frowned at me reproachfully, but I believed in giving the right people the right jobs.

On the second floor of the First Steps' clan house, we had a lounge. Sunlight blazed through the large windows that stretched up to the ceiling in this wide-open space. There were several big tables, one for each party we had in the clan. Aside from being a useful space for meetings, less active members used the space to relax. Bars along the walls served simple meals and drinks for free.

The funds came from our membership fees. Since we were taking money from everyone, we couldn't just line our own pockets with it. I'd directed Eva to use it all up however we could. It was actually a sort of selling point for our clan. You never knew what might bring you unexpected success.

I looked around our beloved lounge and frowned. "That's weird. No one's here."

"Oh, good morning, Master! You're as handsome as ever. What happened to your mask?"

"It broke."

It was lunchtime, but only Tino was here. Where had everyone else gone? I walked up to Tino; the poor girl was sitting down reading a book all alone. Despite the fact that I was the instigator of yesterday's incident, she didn't seem to care at all.

"I think you look better without that strange mask."

"I don't think I'd be able to live with myself if you had said I looked better with it on."

Until just recently, I had always used a special Relic to hide my face. It was the Reversible Face, a flesh mask that allowed the user to change their face at will.

Most hunters desperately wanted their faces known, but I was quite the opposite. That Relic, which could even change my voice, was the only thing that let me keep my cool. Unfortunately, I didn't have it any longer, as it had been broken. It was an irreplaceable item, too. Relics were made by nature, so the rarer ones were hard to find and incredibly expensive if you did.

Furthermore, Relics that hid one's identity from people beyond a certain level of perception were against several imperial laws, so they weren't circulated in town. Unless you were lucky enough to find one in a vault, you weren't going to

get your hands on one. Now my only option was to shut myself inside as much as possible. I wanted to vomit.

Tino looked around restlessly before fawning all over me like a loving puppy. “Where’s my sister?”

“Oh, nobody told you? Liz and the others are off raiding. It’s that level eight castle again. They said that this time, they’re gonna go all the way in until they bring something back. Might be a while before they return, I’d say.”

If anyone *had* been left, I could’ve given them the community service gig. Again, what awful timing. There were time limits on these, though, so I couldn’t just wait for them to get back.

Tino blinked a few times and looked at me oddly, but her smile quickly returned as she held out her hand in delight. “By the way, Master, look what I’ve got!”

In it was a certain familiar ring Relic, prompting me to make a weird noise. “Ulp.”

I was surprised. Tino Shade was definitely exhibiting great growth, but she was still in development. There had certainly been stronger beasts than her at the bar. I had seen her take care of Li’l Gilbert with her ambush and take the ring for herself, but she couldn’t have been strong enough to hold onto it for that long.

Still, there it was. My adorable, adopted little sister had grown up into such a beast without me even knowing. Maybe everyone else there had realized it and just left her alone.

“I don’t care about that fake pretty boy’s party, but I couldn’t let any of those scoundrels lay a hand on your ring. Master, I have accepted your will.”

“It’s just a Shooting Ring.”

The Shooting Ring was a Relic that could shoot mana as bullets. Relics came in many forms and abilities, but ring-type Relics were very common. The Shooting Ring was the most common among them, too, so it was even more worthless. Li’l Gilbert’s big freakin’ sword, on the other hand, was probably super expensive.

Still, the fact that Tino got the ring means no weirdo's going to get into Ark's party, I guess? Lucky us.

Tino was so excited to have it that I almost felt bad for her. "Value can be found in unseen places. Even the fake pretty boy said it was a fun event."

"His name's Ark."

"Anyway, can I really have this?"

"I wouldn't lie. All yours, though I feel bad that it's so crappy."

"Yaaay!"

Few hunters used Shooting Rings. Tino wouldn't use it either, but she still cheered and spun around, clearly not caring. She was so easy to please, I thought I might cry.

Tino was my only option now. But she was fine. The treasure vault was level 3, and Tino was level 4. It ought to work.

"You free, Tino?"

"Huh?" She froze and opened her eyes a little wider.

Tino was a solo hunter already, so she had a flexible schedule, but that didn't mean she had tons of free time. To always perform at her best, she had to keep on training and training. Plus, to raid a vault in comparative safety, one needed to gather information beforehand.

The clan could support her to an extent, but laziness led to death, so hunters were always busy. With all the elaborate preparation that came with being a solo hunter, this was even more true.

To my surprise, my question was met with an unusually broad smile for Tino. "Yes, I'm free! This is, like, the freest I've been in my whole life! That's why I was waiting for you, Master!"

If Liz hears that, she's gonna make her training way more difficult. Does she really have that much free time? I wondered. Regardless, I decided to take the community service I'd gotten from Gark and foist it off on Tino.

"Perfect. I've got a job from the Association. Maybe you could handle it?"

“Huh?” Tino was absolutely dumbfounded. “Master, I’ve never been this shocked. My innocent heart has been broken. Never did I think you were the kind of person to be so cruel. Have I been fooled all along?”

“Nah, no way.”

“You picked me up just to let me down.”

“Neither of those happened.”

Tino hadn’t even done anything yet, but she was already losing the will to go on. Her eyes were half dead.

She laid her cheek on the table and glared reproachfully at me. Then, making no attempt to hide her low morale, she said outright, “To be honest, I wanted to go eat ice cream with you.”

Tino loved sweets... and so did I, although she didn’t know it. *I knew this was going to come back to bite me in some way.*

“Liz keeps telling you not to eat stuff like that.”

“That was all a ruse. She just doesn’t like me going on dates with you when she’s not around.”

She even called them “dates.” The apple wasn’t falling far from the tree here. Maybe it was my fault for taking her around instead of a proper guard for a while.

I had known this girl ever since I’d first become a hunter. When it came to dealing with her, I would say she was as easy to use as Ark or my childhood friends. Her cuteness was definitely a plus because it was hard on my nerves to assign jobs to people who looked beastly.

I pushed the file toward Tino. “C’maaan, Tino. There’s a big, fun job here just for you! Isn’t that great? Woohoo, lucky you!”

“Do you think I’m some girl you can just use up and toss aside?”

“Looks like someone out there soiled our pure, beloved Tino.”

Who put these ideas into her mind?!

“It was you, Master.”

With zero enthusiasm, Tino started reading the request. After a moment of silence, she finally muttered, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a crappy request, Master.”

“Yeah, totally.”

“The rewards, the duration, the job contents, the difficulty of the vault—I don’t even know where to begin. I can’t imagine who would accept this garbage.”

“Yeah, totally.”

“This must be community service.”

“Yeah, totally.”

Tino glared at me.

Damn that Gark, using me as a trash can.

Had I known that I couldn’t get any of my subordinates to do this, I would’ve outright refused. Things like this were normally given to those at the bottom of the totem pole. Unfortunately, there was no other hunter here for me to use.

Tino fidgeted nervously before coming up with an excuse. “I’m still level four. Merely a newbie. You know I would love to be of assistance, but I’d like to pass on this one. Saving five people alone is just impossible.”

“Uh...”

“I just remembered I have stuff to do.” Tino jumped out of her seat. In the blink of an eye, she was running away at top speed.

That’s a Thief for you. Very nimble.

By the time I processed what had transpired, Tino had already escaped the lounge and left the request sitting fruitlessly on the table. Still, her running away was somehow charming.

Hey, wait a second. I bet she won that ring by just running away after she took it!

Maybe it was Liz’s harsh training that had instilled her habit of fleeing. For some reason, that made me feel a strong affinity for her.

I removed the six-foot chain hanging from my belt and placed it on the table. The item was a Relic, a piece of my collection from when I was an active hunter. This thin, silver chain moved like a snake even without me touching it, clattering against itself.

It was a monster. A chain, but a faithful beast. A fangless dog that swore its loyalty to the owner. As such, it was called the Hounding Chain.

Apparently, in ancient times, there was a clan who used chains. Theirs were magic-infused and squirmed without being touched. They all had their own bizarre powers, with which they supported their clan. They were only history now, but the reason these chain-type Relics were so popular when they occasionally appeared was probably because they were a reminder of that lost culture.

The chain rose and took the shape of a small dog. When I nodded at it, it then returned to its original shape and slithered out of the lounge like a snake. After a couple of *thuds*, I followed.

“I just want to say that I could have escaped it.”

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

“Your chain is persistent and rather annoying, but I could easily break it.” Tino said this with a 100% serious look on her face despite the fact that she was now wrapped up in chains that could subdue even the strongest man. “The reason I didn’t is that I don’t want you to hate me for breaking your beloved chain. As such, I believe there’s room for extenuating circumstances here. Your thoughts?”

Tino looked up at me with pleading eyes, an intentional act she’d learned from her mentor. Liz really was a bad influence.

The Hounding Chain was silver in color, but it wasn’t *made* of silver. Items made of mana material were incredibly sturdy. If Tino was certain that she could break it... well, I was surrounded by similar beasts, but she was definitely pushing herself more than the others. Such a feat couldn’t be performed without spending a *lot* of time in vaults.

“Don’t push yourself too much. Your life is extremely important.”

“You’re the one pushing me.”

“No, it’s obviously Liz. I’m just pushing an *easy job* on you.”

As I answered, the Hounding Chain around Tino loosened up and fell to the floor. Relics were convenient, but they didn’t come with unlimited uses. Tino ran away more than expected, so it must have run out of the mana that powered its motion. It was incredible that she could keep fleeing from such a speedy pursuer.

Tino rubbed her skin where she had been bound and sighed, steeling her resolve. “I understand. I’m well aware that you’re only nearly killing us because you want us to grow as much as possible, but I would like you to limit the Spartan methods.”

“Um...”

That wasn’t what I was doing at all. It was level 3. A level 3 treasure vault. It couldn’t be that hard for Tino. I wouldn’t give her a mission that endangered her that much. The request itself was just a carcass-collecting gig.

There was plenty of danger inherent in vault-raiding. Hunters took them on at their own risk. Typically, we wouldn’t get emergency requests for people who had just died in a ditch or whatever. But in extremely rare cases, there would be requests to save hunters who had run into some mishap at a vault. We hunters called those carcass-collecting.

After all, the people out there were pros. If they didn’t come back, chances were they were dead. When they were alive, we rescued them. When they were dead, we confirmed the death and that was it. It was rare that they were still alive, but we at least had to go check.

Tino was a level 4 hunter. If she was that against it, then she might have had pretty good reason. At a loss, I looked over the request form again.

It was a level 3 treasure vault, the White Wolf’s Den. It was one of the most average vaults near the capital, but the Relic appearance rate was pretty low. Not the most worthwhile vault to raid. Typically, not many people went there.

A total of five people had gone missing three days ago. It was pretty recent. If it had been from over a week ago, they’d have a very low chance of survival.

Three days out, I'd call it a fifty-fifty.

The time limit was one week max, and the reward was 300,000 Gild. This was enough for a commoner family to live on for a month, but to hunters, it was nothing. In that regard, it was essentially volunteer work. But as it was community service, there was nothing we could do about it. I scanned the whole thing from top to bottom with my eyes peeled, but I didn't see what was so bad about it.

Nevertheless, as I lifted my face from it, I nodded self-importantly. "Ohhh, yeah. I see what the problem is here."

"Really?!"

"You just don't want to go alone, right?"

I totally understood that. No matter the difficulty, treasure vaults were a danger zone. You never knew what might happen. Tino always went solo, so I'd just assumed she would be fine this time. But that was my short-sightedness.

I mean, I was running on the assumption that they were all dead. But if I thought about it, it seemed kind of impossible for one person to save five. She only had two arms. How would one person carry five people?

"Huh? Well... Yes."

Tino glanced around the empty lounge before looking at me expectantly. True, everyone else was busy today. But I had a better idea.

The White Wolf's Den... Didn't I hear that name somewhere recently?

Tino was level 4, so as long as she had a few level 3 or higher hunters with her, they ought to have enough power. Today, my genius was reaching new heights.

Tino timidly proposed, "Maybe you could come with me?"

"Y'know what, at the member recruitment thing, there was someone who wanted to go to the White Wolf's Den. Take her with you. Uh, I think her name's Rhuda."

"Huh?"

What about the rest of the party? Maybe the Great Greg and Li'l Gilbert?

Tino wasn't used to parties, so this would be a good learning experience for her—one might call it the perfect opportunity. She watched on with a frown as I congratulated myself on my amazing leadership skills.

Chapter 2: The Hodgepodge

Everyone dreamed of becoming a treasure hunter at some point in their lives, but grown adults respected hunters the most because of the risks they had to take.

The imperial capital, Zebrudia, was overflowing with hunters and facilities that catered to them. While the timid and athletic Tino Shade had been born and raised in Zebrudia, it wasn't being brought up in a hunter-oriented culture that had inspired her to become one herself.

Every person had their own way of life. The wealth, fame, and power others craved weren't especially attractive to Tino. Furthermore, she was *afraid* of hunters. If ever she had admired those tales of adventure, it had been a long, long time ago.

The thing that had changed Tino's life and motivated her to take on such a dangerous occupation was a party that had landed in the capital one day like a shooting star. This party had seemed foreign among the countless gaudy, attention-seeking parties of the time, and its hunters had been more relentless than all the rest.

Other hunters had avoided the party because of its ominous name, and it had even antagonized the empire itself on occasion. However, it managed to overcome all these obstacles and in only a few years, it had become known to all in the capital.

It was mere coincidence that Tino, who had purposely lived a life far removed from hunters, had ended up getting to know that party. But that had been enough.

They had shone so brightly that the moment she'd laid eyes on them, she hadn't been able to peel her gaze away. This glaring, dazzling light had attracted a girl who'd never had any interest whatsoever in being a hunter. Like a flash of lightning, or a shooting star.

The times had welcomed their appearance. Only three treasure hunters had ever reached level 10, the absolute highest level. Together, these treasure hunters made up the strongest party in the world: Elite Vanguard.

Ark Rodin, the young hero at the helm of Ark Brave, was said to be their second coming. Then there was Krai Andrey, the ingenious schemer who held the reins of Grieving Souls, the party that had founded First Steps. Krais' and Ark's parties had shot up to the very top in Zebrudia.

Young hunters had come flooding into the capital, following the starlight emitted by those two hunters. The Explorers' Association had thus declared this epoch the "golden age of treasure hunters."

Certain that this period would go down in history, Tino had chosen to become a hunter in order to achieve legendary status alongside her trusted mentor and her master. But now, Tino—one of the freshest and most promising new faces—was being used as a gofer by the master she trusted so much.

In the capital's branch of the Explorers' Association, she quickly found her mark. With a melancholy expression, she approached a hunter viewing the job request board. By the time Tino was about three feet behind her, the brown-haired, blue-eyed girl turned to face her. Upon seeing Tino, she stiffened and opened her eyes wide in surprise.

She was the hunter who had been with Tino's master at the recruitment event. Krai had given Tino a description of her, but the girl's appearance had already been burned into her mind the moment she had seen her with him.

Her name was Rhuda Runebeck. She was a level 3 hunter who had gone to the event in the hopes of finding a party to raid the White Wolf's Den.

The way she positioned herself to hide the sound of her footsteps showed that she was probably a Thief—a hunter who specialized in disarming traps, scouting for enemies, and picking locks. Their jobs overlapped, and although Tino was more brawn than brains, she had been properly trained by Liz. Rhuda shouldn't have been able to notice Tino's footsteps until she was at point-blank range.

Her sudden appearance caused Rhuda to ask in a quivering voice, "Wh-What? What is it? Oh, you're that girl who was with Krai."

Regardless of Tino's personal feelings, this was a request from the master of her beloved mentor-slash-sister, and his word was absolute.

Suppressing the gloom swirling in her heart, Tino bluntly explained her business. "My master... erm, Krai Andrey asked me to find you. Come with me; we have much to discuss."

Rhuda looked even more shocked, but Tino simply turned her back on Rhuda in order to search for the other people whose names she'd been given.

The Great Greg was at a bar for treasure hunters next to the Explorers' Association named "The Golden Key."

She interrupted him while he drank with his peers, curtly informing him of her business. To be frank, Tino wasn't the least bit enthusiastic about this job. The request itself wasn't the problem; as it was just a level 3 vault, she most likely could've handled it on her own.

Simply put, she didn't like the party members she had to work with.

It was recommended that treasure hunters form parties, as it was just too dangerous to enter a treasure vault alone. Additionally, one person had much less adaptability than multiple people. There were very few individuals who excelled in all areas. Why, then, did solo hunters exist at all?

The answer was that it was extremely difficult to form an adequate party. Differences in specialty, personality, motives, values, and ability levels all made it difficult to secure a stable party, especially among people with overgrown egos like hunters. According to statistics gathered by the Explorers' Association, less than 10% would last even five years.

Raiding treasure vaults involved putting one's life on the line, so it was immensely stressful to make things work if the party members didn't mesh well. Stress could be managed, but depending on the circumstances, it was entirely possible to get stabbed in the back.

One had to be *exceedingly* prudent in choosing a party. That was a steadfast rule. If you were going to form a party with hunters you didn't work well with, you were better off going solo. At least, that was Tino's point of view.

The names given to her by her master were all those of people she knew she

wouldn't click with. Her own attributes, personality, motive, and everything else were discordant with theirs. She trusted her master in general, but this was a different story. Tino wanted to raid this treasure vault with *him*, not these absolute strangers.

The Great Greg looked thoughtfully at Tino for a moment as she was overwhelmed with regret. All he had to do was refuse. Then, her excuse to her master would hold water.

He had been interrupted while he was drinking with friends. It would've been entirely understandable if he'd just laughed her off. Tino clung to that strand of hope, but the Great Greg's face warped into a grin as he heartlessly agreed.

"Yeah, sure. Sorry, buds, but I gotta go."

With that, Tino was two for two.

The lounge in the First Steps clan house was famous among hunters. Unlike the bars in the area, this space was much cleaner, with more stylish counters. Each of the white tables placed around the room had multiple chairs for party members. It wasn't somewhere you could get drunk and rowdy, but parties belonging to the Steps often used this lounge to celebrate successful raids.

In one corner of the lounge, Rhuda uncomfortably looked around the room. Greg was knitting his brows attentively. He was noticeably quieter than usual. Meanwhile, Tino's eyes glazed over even more.

"So, um, what are we here for?"

"This is the famous First Steps lounge, eh? I feel lucky just bein' in here."

In the corner of Tino's eye was a boy slightly shorter than her. He wore a blank expression and carried a greatsword Relic on his back, the Purgatorial Sword, which glimmered in the sunlight.

Not sure why he chose these *guys, but here they are,* Tino thought to herself. *I don't think I can take this, Master.*

Gilbert Bush forcefully addressed the issue, overpowering the screams inside Tino's heart. "What the hell is it, then? I'm a busy guy, y'know."

He was the one whom Tino had kicked in the face at the recruitment meet. Of

the three people she'd had to collect, he was the one she least wanted to be partied up with.

Based on his personality, she'd expected him to turn down the request. Heck, Tino had hardly wanted to bother searching for him at all. If she hadn't bumped into him by chance outside of the bar Greg was in, she probably would've reported that she'd failed to find him.

In fact, Tino would've been just thrilled if she hadn't found any of the three. She had been tasked to do it, however, so she'd at least had to put in a *little* effort in order to keep up appearances. Although she'd been trying to do just that, she had ended up finding all three of them with ridiculous ease in such a vast city.

But she still had a chance. There was a possibility that they would refuse to be in the party. Tino wasn't the only one for whom it was a touchy subject.

Aside from the fact that this was a temporary party, the mission they had received yielded paltry rewards. It was just community service. Better yet, these weren't Tino's good friends or anything. They were far more likely to refuse.

She sighed once and steeled her resolve, betting it all on that thread. *I'm sorry, Master. I promise I won't complain about doing it alone; just please, save me.* All the while, three pairs of eyes bore into her.

Tino winced, and with dead eyes, she began, "Let me start by saying if you don't want to do this, you're free to refuse. My master has entrusted me with a community service job. He gave me your names and suggested I form a party with you to get it done, so that's why you're here. Again, if you don't want to do it, go ahead and say so."



In the office at the top floor of the clan house, where entry was prohibited to normal members, Eva stared at me in silence.

"Sounds like a lazy hodgepodge to me."

"How rude."

Sometimes, her brutal honesty was a bad thing.

“Don’t you think it’s premature to have Tino lead a party when she’s spent her whole career working solo?”

“It’ll be good for her, don’t worry.”

Eva sighed for the umpteenth time and fell silent once more. She was right on the mark, though. I was both a clan master and a party leader, but I was making some flippant decisions.

When I first started off as a party leader, I would deliberate over decisions for multiple nights in a row. But I grew tired of that before long. Ever since I’d become the leader of a normal party, I had made decisions on the party’s behalf.

Once I’d started the clan, that increased tenfold. As we’d gained notoriety, even outside parties and clans had wanted decisions from me. The Association itself had started demanding my opinion, for crying out loud!

I simply couldn’t take every little choice seriously. It wasn’t like I could take responsibility for all of them, and that wasn’t what I had made the clan for anyway. To this day, the decisions that still plagued me the most were the ones relating to my own party, Grieving Souls.

It’s okay. Tino’s strong. Her mentor especially guaranteed her speed.

Even if something ridiculous happened, she could just run away and deal with it after. If she couldn’t deal with it, then that was just her fault for being incapable.

For hunters, death was a risk that had to be faced on one’s own. Accidents happened, of course, so hunters were always preparing to secure their safety. If any of those handpicked party members met a terrible fate, that was Tino’s responsibility for not protesting further. Nobody else was going to take the blame, so she got the short end of the stick.

Sometimes you needed to reject others’ opinions, just like how I’d quickly decided to give up on raiding treasure vaults. I wanted Tino to have a bad experience and learn to not just do what I say, but to be a little more aggressive. My hodgepodge strategy was a form of tough love, in a way. End of discussion.

I lounged in my soft chair and took a big stretch. “Ugh. Wish I could shove off all this annoying work and relax in a hot spring.”

“Perhaps the entire clan could take a trip together.”

“That sounds nice. Let’s round everyone up and go on a field trip.”

Eva had been a busy bee over at some commercial firm before I had scouted her and hired her as my second-in-command. Her flexible mindset probably came from her experience there.

A trip, huh?

Naturally, the capital was a major city. Public security and roads were well maintained, but monsters could appear, bandits could attack, and—very rarely—phantoms could wander out of their treasure vaults.

It wasn’t easy to just pick up and haul off on a trip somewhere. But in our case, at least, we didn’t need guards because most of our members already hunted monsters on a daily basis. One could call it a special perk for hunters.

I didn’t have any authority to force them to go, but if I said I wanted everyone to forge bonds or whatever, they ought to be into it. The problem was that if all of our clan members left the capital city, the Association or the imperial nobility would be sure to complain.

Also, a bunch of meatheads on vacation were liable to cause trouble. Maybe a small trip for Grieving Souls alone was the most I could arrange for. *Eh, nah. Our party members are the* most *likely to cause trouble.*

I was between a rock and a hard place, and I wanted to vomit. While I moaned and complained, Eva flipped through her documents, which contained all the minute details about the Great Greg and the other party members.

First Steps kept all sorts of records regarding hunters and vaults, including newbies and even notable hunters from outside the clan.

Rhuda was incredible. She only had half a year of experience, but she was already level 3. That was meteoric momentum, especially for a soloer. Living that long without taking much damage meant she was either talented or lucky.

The Great Greg, on the other hand, was a venerable veteran. There weren’t

many people who could keep a stable, long-term career as a hunter.

Li'l Gilbert, meanwhile, was... a problem child, but he had the skills to back up his big mouth. Apparently, he had been working with a party he'd formed in the sticks but had since left due to some infighting. That was a common thing for hunters, though. If we made one misstep, us Grievers would end up the same way. In fact, I *wanted* that to happen.

Altogether, they were mediocre. Talented, but not especially outstanding.

At the very least, anyone who came to this hunters' holy land had confidence in their strength. They just weren't *real* monsters, like my friends, who threw away any regard for their own safety as they used their beastly bodies and brains to tear through high-difficulty dungeons.

After reading through the hunters' files, I deemed them satisfactory. None of them were particularly powerful, but they'd be good enough for community service. If Tino could handle the vault herself, then it would surely be a piece of cake with all four. While I certainly didn't have any confidence in my judgment, I *did* believe in my clan members.

"Will Tino and her party be okay, though? Even if it's just a level 3 treasure vault, there must be *something* to it considering the Association put it up for grabs."

"It's cool, it's cool. If things do go south, I'll find my party members and send them in to help. Tino's all grown up now, anyway."

Tino was one of the founding members of First Steps. As someone who had watched over her ever since the clan had been established, Eva probably had some motherly feelings toward Tino unbefitting of our occupation.

I shrugged. Tino might've looked young, but she knew what she was doing. When the going got rough, she had the sense of danger of a lone-wolf hunter. There was no need to worry about her.

At that moment, the door was thrown open without so much as a knock.

"Master, heeeeelp! I really can't do thiiis!"

"You may be giving up too quickly, Tino."

Upon seeing Eva and I standing together, Tino came running up to me, almost pushing me down as she grabbed on to me. She then buried her face in my stomach. I immediately knew it was an act. The hope in her voice and what she was saying just didn't match up. *Yeah, this girl doesn't play fair.*

Based on how long it had been since I gave the order, they definitely hadn't gone to the treasure vault yet. Also, regular hunters weren't allowed in here.

Eva looked down at Tino in irritation. *Didn't I tell Eva she wouldn't have to worry?* I grew more terrified of Liz's influence on Tino every day.

"What's the issue?"

"Everything. This is far too much for my little shoulders to bear."

"Everything," she says. Well, that's a problem.

Tino dragged me over to the lounge, where the other three were waiting. I didn't know what she had said to get them to come, but damn if she hadn't done a good job. *You go, Tino.*

Standing before me were Rhuda Runeback, the Great Greg, and Li'l Gilbert. I had essentially picked them all on a whim. I'd chosen Rhuda because she had said she wanted to go to the White Wolf's Den, but the other two were totally the result of me asking myself, "Why not?"

Personalities aside, they were all pretty average in terms of ability. I hadn't given much thought to roles or synergy here; I'd pretty much just thrown a few people together to make the raid easier. The objective was a rescue mission, so they didn't need to make it to the very end. If the party didn't mesh well, all they really needed to do was survive. I kinda felt bad, but what's done is done.

Rhuda restlessly surveyed the room. Even the boys seemed uncharacteristically nervous. They were in the HQ of a clan they weren't part of —essentially enemy territory. As Tino pulled me closer to the group, Rhuda seemed relieved to have finally found me. Come to think of it, in the midst of all the ruckus, I hadn't actually gotten to say goodbye to her. It had been out of my control, but I still felt a little guilty.

"Oh, hey, Kra—"

“Damn, you’re late. We’ve been waiting here forever!” Li’l Gilbert rudely interrupted Rhuda, causing her to glare daggers at him.

He was still arrogant, but now that he was in my domain, his rage was a little more subdued than last time. *Pretty incredible that he actually came here after Tino kicked him right in the face.*

I turned my attention to the Great Greg, who grinned at me in response. It was clearly forced, though.

I was getting pretty tired of this, so I just set their general danger level to an E altogether. Tino was here, and this was my home field, so I could be a bit more aggressive.

“Gahaha. You’re in the Steps’ HQ... So, uh, ya really were from the Souls, eh?”

“I was so surprised yesterday. He said he had been to five recruitment meets by now, too.” Rhuda directed a little scowl my way.

I hadn’t meant to deceive her. Getting in line was a no-brainer, though. I mean, I couldn’t have just cut through such a long line, even if I *had* overslept.

Emboldened by the fact that the Great Greg and Rhuda were speaking to me so openly, Li’l Gilbert sneered at me. “A weak-looking guy like you was in Grieving Souls all along? I heard they were the strongest party in the capital, but maybe that was a lie.”

“We’re definitely not the strongest. I don’t know who’s feeding you those rumors.”

There wasn’t any point in asking; it was my friends. They were all sure of their skills.

We were young and top-class, yeah. But there was Ark’s party, along with the myriad other experienced parties in the capital. Even in a favorable light, we weren’t the strongest.

As I grimaced, Tino squeezed my arm hard. Her figure was rather modest, but something soft was definitely pressing against my upper arm. Probably another trick she’d learned from her mentor. Maybe Liz’s bad influence was getting out of hand.

Tino pleaded with tears in her eyes, “These people are just so rude. I can’t raid a treasure vault with anyone who disrespects you this way. You’re our master, after all.”

“Uh, sure. I don’t really know what you’re getting at, but okay.” I nodded with a smile, but I didn’t really care. Whether I was clan master or a normal member, I was still just Krai.

Apparently, that came as a shock to the Great Greg, though. As if his nerves of steel had been melted, his face pulled back in a full-on wince as his thick lips quivered.

Ooh, he’s getting pale!

“Wait. Did she just say ‘Master,’ as in, the master of First Steps?”

“Heh. If I may be so forward... Yes, O Great Greg.”

I honestly felt kind of bad. It pained me to see him looking so apologetic.

“You mean you’re... *the* Thousand Tricks?”

“If you understand how incredible my master is, you should kneel.”

Rhuda just watched in confusion, totally clueless.

Tino continued to cling to me as she glared coldly at the Great Greg. *Yeah, time to stop intimidating people,* I thought, feeling the overwhelming urge to vomit.

Thousand Tricks, known for ingenious strategies inscrutable to the observer. That was the title so kindly given to me, the leader of Grieving Souls—in name only, that is.

In the hunter industry, the most prominent and successful hunters received titles from the Association. That was how they created what were essentially idols among hunters. You didn’t gain anything tangible from it, but a hunter could never hope to receive a greater honor.

Incidentally, Grieving Souls really stood out. Our party’s spooky name would have been enough, but each member was also exceptionally talented. Nobody neglected their studies, and most of all, none of my friends were afraid to risk their lives in treasure vaults.

We were a group of model hunters, clearing vaults with incredible speed. It was almost natural that we would be awarded titles before long. That was just how special each member of Grieving Souls was.

Everyone except me was adept at their role, so they each had been given titles in accordance with their specialties. It was a pretty incredible achievement that everyone in the party had been granted one.

But there had been one problem there: I was the leader. I didn't have a single real role. All I did was throw away my pride and bow down to people all over the place while soothing my party members to make sure they didn't hurt anyone. There were no visible achievements here.

A normal human in the midst of beasts. Surely someone in the Association had thought, *What's this guy even doing with them? He's always there.* But the party's achievements as a whole were tremendous, and giving the party members titles without giving the leader one would have been strange. People would doubt the Explorers' Association's judgment.

And so they had decided, *I dunno what this guy does, but he leads that party. Might as well give him a title.*

Nobody knew Grieving Souls that well, but they knew it was an incredible party led by Thousand Tricks. As Grieving Souls continued to grow stronger, that title—which had likely stemmed from sarcasm—had become larger and more imposing, even though nobody had ever seen me fight a single time. Thus, I was satisfied living in my house of cards. Pretty tough guy, right?

I almost wanted to refute the rumors, but when people looked down on you, you tended to get attacked just walking down the street. Couldn't let that happen. But hey, it was useful to have a reputation for winning.

The Great Greg looked upon me, dumbfounded and pale-faced, before he finally spoke. Some people were bold enough to scorn me even after they knew my nickname, but this guy clearly knew better.

"I can't believe it. I heard you were young, but damn... you're *really* young."

"Well, that doesn't really matter. Err..."

A sudden realization came over me. I had no idea what I was supposed to be

doing here. How much had Tino even told them? She said everything was wrong, which was just the same as telling me nothing.

I turned to her, and she looked up at me with puppy dog eyes. Those eyes told me everything. I was pretty good at reading the room, if I did say so myself. *I get it. You want a rallying cry, something that'll bring you all into alignment.*

I was talentless, but thanks to my position, my words carried a lot of weight. Once I nodded at Tino, she gazed at me as if I were a ray of hope.

Okay, okay. I got this. "Ahem. You're gathered here today so that we may ask for your help with the job I've given Tino."

For some reason, she winced. Seriously, she didn't have to worry. It was a sudden request, but if they had come this far, it wasn't like things were hopeless. As long as I said this much, they ought to fall in line.

Rhuda had already been planning to go to the White Wolf's Den anyway, and the Great Greg seemed to know his stuff about hunters. His willingness to listen to authority meant he would work well with me. Maybe we could even go out drinking sometime.

My only remaining opposition bared his teeth in my direction. "You, Thousand Tricks? *You're* the capital's strongest hunter?! Is this a freakin' joke?! Your muscles aren't even toned!"

"The thing about me being the strongest is just a rumor."

Seriously, who is saying this crap? Every single time, I was the one who suffered for it.

But as I started to speak, Tino stepped out in front of me. "You don't know his full strength? How pitiful. It's like you've wasted ninety percent of your life so far."

"Yeah, I have no idea what you're talking about. But how about you just be quiet?"

"Master, we really mustn't engage with this sort of riffraff. I hate people who talk big with nothing to back it up."

That describes me perfectly, though.

Li’l Gilbert was right to say that I wasn’t muscular because... I wasn’t. Most likely, if we fought with equal equipment on an equal playing field, I’d suffer a hilarious defeat.

The Great Greg continued to hold Li’l Gilbert back from attacking me. “Choose your battles, dumbass! This is the youngest level eight out there, above even that guy Ark Rodin!”

“Let me go, old man! Dammit, I don’t believe it!”

Li’l Gilbert looked ready to bite me if I put a hand near him. He had real pluck. If I were in his position, I’d be on the ground begging. First-class hunters had both a great fighting spirit and a short temper.

I turned to Rhuda. “Wanna help out?”

“Yeah, so much so that I would’ve asked myself. But are you really level eight?” She eyed me dubiously, so I quickly spilled the beans.

Level wasn’t necessarily directly correlated with one’s own strength. The Association used multiple facets to determine your level.

“It’s all just numbers. When you’re a party leader or clan master, part of your members’ achievements get added to your own value. The Steps is a big clan, so I get the ridiculous amount of points necessary to advance in level pretty quickly.”

“Master, you can have my points any day of the week!”

Rhuda looked only half convinced. I wasn’t trying to trick her or anything. All of the high-level hunters were party leaders, clan masters, or teachers, thanks to the Association promoting the growth of future hunters. Otherwise, it would’ve been outright impossible for me to be a higher level than Ark, who was always out on the front lines.

Hearing my explanation, Li’l Gilbert shouted further abuses. “See, look! He’s just a faker! You thought I’d fall for your bullshit?! Bah!”

I acknowledged his guts, but damn if it wasn’t getting annoying. With a sigh, I spoke to Li’l Gilbert, who was now red with rage. “Level eight isn’t the highest level, anyway. Besides, I don’t care whether you believe it or not.”

I was used to being looked down on. I knew I didn't look strong, and compared to the beasts belonging to the Steps, I wasn't. Being in this position wasn't what I wanted, anyway. The only reason I was the leader was because nobody else would do it. I was prepared to resign any time I wanted. I mean, I'd feel bad for Tino, but they'd be just fine without me.

"Okay, forget Li'l Gilbert then. O Great Greg, you wanna help?"

"Wha?!"

Li'l Gilbert gaped at me in wide-eyed shock. In the corner of my eye, I saw Tino pump her fist into the air.

"Huh? Uhm... I, uh, I don't mind, sir, but..." The Great Greg was being oddly respectful.

I was the one who'd called them here, but I wasn't going to force Li'l Gilbert if he didn't want to do it. I certainly wasn't going to bow my head and beg right now.

It wasn't even a problem of pride; this was the clan's lounge. Nobody would be okay with their clan master bowing their head to some outsider. *Why should I have to lose my members' trust just to bring in one piece of trash?*

Things might've been different if Li'l Gilbert were as skilled as Ark, but he was just a level 4 front-liner. I couldn't take one step out of the clan house without bumping into at least five other guys who were stronger than him.

"Hey, you sure about this?! You, uh, ain't getting my help!"

"Yeah, that's a shame. But I can't make you. Tino, if three people won't cut it, just grab whoever you want from our clan."

It was still early, but if she went to the bar next door to HQ, she ought to find a few.

Tino looked up at me imploringly, as if she'd just had a brilliant idea. "Come with me."

"Nope."

What good would I do? Level 3 vaults were easy, but my life was still at risk. I knew Tino's strength well, but when it came to whether she could guard me or

not, I'd have to say no.

Despite my clear refusal, she kept looking at me all teary-eyed. She wheedled me like this often. As the cool big bro, I would occasionally give in. But this time, she was just going too far.

As I grabbed her head and tried to push her away, Li'l Gilbert got tired of being ignored. "I challenge you!"

"Hm?"

What was he going on about now? Tino blinked in confusion as well.

Unable to bear the weight of our confused looks, he jabbed his finger directly toward me and screamed, "I challenge you, Thousand Tricks! If I lose... then I'll join you!"

"Uh, what?"

I had to bite my lip to keep from asking, "What's this ass doing?" Even I was shocked by how much he was looking down on me. To borrow Tino's word from a while back, he was "uppity."

I was still a recognized level 8 hunter. Maybe I looked like a total small fry, but level 8 was faaar beyond level 4. Even Ark, who was a level below me, would have seen the guy as nothing but refuse.

Most of all, Thousand Tricks—the guy who'd spent his whole life running away from every other battle—wouldn't accept a challenge he wasn't certain he would win just for the sake of putting trash in a party. If he wanted to fight me so bad, maybe he should start off by taking down every other member of First Steps.

The Great Greg couldn't even egg him on because he was agape at the sheer recklessness of it all.

Li'l Gilbert didn't stop there, though. He reached for the handle of his greatsword, which seemed like a habit of his. Like a declaration of war, he hoisted the giant thing in one hand.

"I'll never obey someone weaker than me!"

"Sounds like you wanna fight Tino, then. Not me."

“Huh?”

She was the one who was going to lead the party.

Tino removed herself from me and glared daggers at Li’l Gilbert. She was radiating a potent mix of exasperation and readiness to fight. “You really are good at pushing things off on other people. But, very well. In place of my dear sister, I, Tino Shade, will bring divine justice upon those who would be rude to my master.”

She twirled to face me once more, then did a full 180-degree split, pressing her stomach flat against the floor. Her short black hair spilled out around her.

“Look, Master. I got this flexibility from my dear sister. I can bend into any position.”

“Okay, cool. Don’t know why you’re telling me, but awesome.”

A hunter needed flexible muscles, especially if they were a Thief. Liz was like an invertebrate, able to curl up so much that she could fit in a suitcase.

Though she was about to have a mock battle, Tino didn’t seem the slightest bit fired up. Maybe her apprenticeship was going really well. Even though she’d only been training for a few short years, Tino already displayed above average power for a hunter.

Much of Liz’s training was self-taught. Some people improved by learning; others improved by doing. Liz, who fit into the latter category, had taken all of the training she herself had experienced, dialed the cruelty up to eleven, and then passed it on to Tino.

Having made it through Liz’s sadistic regimen, Tino was always calm. It made for a stark contrast to me, the guy who always wanted to vomit. My adorable underling was another brand of beast.

In the underground below the clan house, there were several levels of training facilities. We went down to the first basement level to test Li’l Gilbert’s skills. It was a square space, a little over a hundred yards in diameter. The Steps had facilities for all sorts of specialized techniques, but this floor was the mock battle area.

The ceiling was almost twenty feet above us, allowing for significant airtime for the more mobile fighters. The floor was hard, just like the ground would be in a real battle, so unless a hunter could break their fall, even the toughest ones would sustain some damage.

Li'l Gilbert glared at Tino and me with fire in his eyes. Her upper body flat against the ground, her bare thighs, and the nape of her neck just visible through her hair made for a sensual sight, but Li'l Gilbert only saw her as an enemy. He was sure he would win.

Ah, youth. He reminded me of Luke when he was young.

"Don't underestimate me."

"By the way, she's a level four, man."

"What?!"

"Master, please refrain from telling the enemy about me."

Li'l Gilbert's jaw dropped. It appeared he couldn't believe she was the same level as him. When Tino was quiet, she came off as quite an ice queen. But her physique was slim, making her even smaller than the already-small-for-a-guy Li'l Gilbert.

Still, he couldn't be careless. Li'l Gilbert was a Swordsman. To Swordsmen, being small and weak was a major demerit. Thieves were quite the opposite. For a shadowy vanguard like the Thief, their lithe bodies were a weapon.

After her stretching, Tino got up and faced Li'l Gilbert. "I'm nothing but dirt compared to him," she said, pointing at me.

"What exactly do you think I am, Tino?" It was outright bizarre how she put me on a pedestal.

Tino undid the clasp on her belt and tossed it aside along with the dagger and item pouches hanging from it. It seemed she wasn't planning to use items here.

Li'l Gilbert was doubly shocked, but Tino just shrugged. "I'll hold back so I don't kill you."

"Say what?!" Veins bulged out of Li'l Gilbert's forehead; Tino was too good at pissing people off.

Rhuda jogged over and whispered in a worried tone, “Is that girl okay?”

“I dunno. Maybe?”

They had the same recognized level, but Tino Shade was extraordinary. She was still level 4 because she normally hunted solo, but if she were running with a party, she would probably be level 5 by now. After all, she was training under the watchful eye of a childhood friend of mine, a beast among beasts.

The only problem was that Swordsmen were peerless when it came to close combat. The Association’s level-granting was close to foolproof. Li’l Gilbert was a li’l shit, but one couldn’t be too careful around him, as he had the power of a level 4.

On top of that, his greatsword was a Relic. Relics came with an endless variety of abilities. Depending on which one it was, it could serve as a trump card that easily overcame a difference in level. Based on the recruitment meet, however, his Relic didn’t seem to have any crazy powers. Either way, the difference between having one and not having one was major.

Tino didn’t have a Relic—except for my Shooting Ring, but it was far from useful enough—so that was a big handicap. She was used to one-on-one combat, though, so she ought to know by now to be wary.

From my point of view, they were both beasts.

While I pondered over the matter, Li’l Gilbert angrily tossed his greatsword to the side. He clenched his fists and cracked his knuckles.

“Tch! I don’t need a weapon against a defenseless girl!”

What kind of Swordsman throws away his sword? Is he stupid? Now he’s just a man!

By the way, Tino had made a show of throwing her knife to the side like it was a handicap, but she was very much the type to decide things with her fists. Well, the one thing she *really* excelled at was kicking.

The battle had started before it had officially begun. The word “cowardice” didn’t exist here. Even against weaker opponents, Tino wasn’t careless; she was always ready to pound the enemy into dust. Right now, the distance between

them was about five yards.

“Master, we’re going for ice cream after this,” Tino said in a singsong voice, even dancing a little as she walked.

“I don’t remember agreeing to that.”

Li’l Gilbert gritted his teeth. Tino’s attitude right now would probably annoy anyone. I hadn’t agreed to the whole ice cream thing, but I *was* making a lot of one-sided demands here. Might as well play along sometimes. She could even act as my bodyguard on the way.

“Yeah, sure, why not? Once the request is done, though.”

“Yaaay!”

When I gave her the green light, her movements changed in an instant. Her slow, easygoing dance quickened, becoming something new. With graceful steps, she went from an unsteady spin into a high-speed dash. Her innocent eyes abruptly switched to those of a hunter. Even observing from afar, it was incredible.

Swordsmen prioritized strength, while Thieves prized alacrity. A Thief’s role in a vault may have been to undo locks and scout for enemies, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t fight. They were adaptable, speedy fighters who approached enemies without a sound and performed quick assassinations.

The moment Li’l Gilbert’s eyes beheld her very first step, Tino’s spear-hand strike was already shooting straight for his neck. A cowardly act indeed; I hadn’t even given the signal to start the match.

“Gah?!”

But, level 4 as he was, Li’l Gilbert was perfectly focused and took a step back to evade it. Tino followed with fluid motions, raising her knee to aim for his stomach this time. She floated like a butterfly, but stung like a bee. With no way to escape now, Gilbert was blown away. Tino had pretty much overrun him.

Compared to a Swordsman’s attacks, Tino’s were weak. But as Gilbert wore no armor or other equipment, her slender arms and legs were threatening enough. The instantaneous beatdown left Rhuda and the Great Greg

speechless.

Tino didn’t even look toward Li’l Gilbert once he’d been dominated, and instead smiled faintly at me. “Did you see that, Master? It was divine justice.”

“Ngh... I’m not done yet.”

After sliding several yards back, Gilbert lifted himself off the ground. He coughed and swayed for a moment, but it wasn’t enough to put him down.

Li’l Gilbert was tough. A human who had constantly absorbed mana material could withstand an attack from a wild beast without any armor. His bones, muscles, and even the blood flowing through him were different. It was proof that he was an excellent warrior.

Tino resumed her murderous glare at Li’l Gilbert, chuckling to herself as she swept back her hair. “I think you already know, but I was holding back. I could’ve broken your neck. You should learn your lesson and fix your attitude toward Master. Worship him as a god. Face this clan’s headquarters and pray three times a day. Bring me regular offerings, and I will deliver them to him.”

“Grr!”

Upon hearing her ridiculous demands, Li’l Gilbert gritted his teeth and charged at Tino. Despite his smaller-than-average stature, he moved at an appropriate speed for a level 4. Still, he was being way too reckless. This boy didn’t seem to have much experience in combat with other hunters, so it might have been his first time fighting a Thief. I quietly took a step backward.

Tino twirled once to evade his charge. As he tried to take her by surprise and grab her, she easily swatted him away as if she’d expected the act. Then, she palm-heeled him right in the temple.

The impact made a hollow thud. Strong though he was, Li’l Gilbert teetered for a moment and collapsed to the floor. He tried desperately to stand, but he couldn’t even focus his eyes.

Did that attack jostle his brain? I’m actually kind of impressed he can still move. If I were him, I’d be vomiting all over the place.

Tino dusted her hands off and said proudly, “Look at how much I’ve

improved! It's only thanks to you that I made it so far."

She should have said that to Liz instead of me. I hadn't done anything.

The Great Greg's lips were quivering. Clearly, he was appalled that the battle had ended the moment it had begun.

"She's real strong. Gilbert was empty-handed, sure, but Swordsmen are no strangers to close combat. Yeah, she definitely knows how to fight. And she's still in her teens! It's terrifying... Are all the Steps at this level?"

Rhuda was muttering to herself, too. "I'm not experienced in close combat. I wonder if she'd teach me?"

A Swordsman without a sword wasn't a Swordsman, anyway. Again, he was just a man.

"I can... ngh! I can still fight." Li'l Gilbert stood back up, wavering on his feet.

He didn't have any injuries, but his balance hadn't returned quite yet. His eyes were still swimming, too. The second he'd been goaded into tossing aside his sword against Tino was the moment he'd lost his chance at victory. Miracles didn't exist, so I figured he was only able to stand because of his pride as a hunter.

When I was still passionate about hunting, did I have that amount of pluck? I guess being able to stand defiantly before someone who'd just thoroughly knocked you down a peg is kind of a talent in itself.

I had never really put much thought into the whole "recommend him to Ark" thing, but this guy really did have what it took to be a hunter. Recklessness could be a valuable trait. Prudence was important to hunters, too, but you couldn't make progress if you were always cowering.

Tino looked very annoyed, but I clapped my hands to encourage her. "Just play along, Tino. I didn't decide on any win condition, so just beat the impertinence out of him. It'll be a good lesson."

Beating the shit out of each other might turn them into good friends, anyway.



Gilbert Bush was extremely talented. From the moment he could hold a stick,

Gilbert had been given a sword because he “needed strength.” From that day on, he had always been applauded for his skill. Effort told no lies.

Occasionally taught, occasionally thinking on his own, Gilbert became stronger and stronger with every year. By the time he was ten, he had become strong enough that nobody in his village—not even the adults—could touch him.

People had many kinds of aptitudes, but among those were the rate and capacity of mana material absorption. The faster one’s rate of absorption, the stronger they could become in a short time. The greater their capacity, the more strength they could hope for.

In Gilbert’s case, both of those were far beyond the average. Even living in a village where the amount of mana material permeating the air was low, he had been able to obtain great strength. Anyone could’ve seen that it had been Gilbert Bush’s natural course to end up as a treasure hunter.

Every moment of every day, he had continued to raid treasure vaults, slicing down phantoms and monsters while he’d made a name for himself. That was the quickest way to get your hands on everything this world had to offer. And as he had explored these treasure vaults replete with mana material, he had obtained power he could never have hoped to obtain in his village.

When Gilbert was acknowledged as an adult at age fifteen, he had shrugged off all of the resistance around him and departed for the holy land of hunters alone. Upon reaching the imperial capital, he had been satisfied to find that it was far wealthier and more vast than his village. There were exotic delicacies and humongous buildings that he could never have found in his self-sufficient little hometown.

The streets, so large that multiple carriages could travel side by side, were filled with enough pedestrians that one would’ve thought there was a festival going on. There were also tons of people who looked to be treasure hunters, far more than he would have seen at home.

Gilbert had registered with the Explorers’ Association right away. Once he had begun officially exploring treasure vaults, his development couldn’t be stopped. He had undergone plenty of training before he registered, which was rare for

newbies. He had talent, too. Most of all, he was bold enough that the Association had warned him against rashness. Bold, and lucky.

He had formed a party with five other newbies. Before long, his talent had blossomed and he had increased the level of treasure vaults they raided.

The greatsword he'd found through sheer luck in his first treasure vault had allowed him to cut through phantoms with ease when other newbies were unable to fight them off. Monsters teeming in vaults couldn't even hope to scratch Gilbert.

It was the golden age. In the past few years, newbies and talented hunters had been swarming to the capital. Gilbert and his peers were like the second wave of this age. He resented being second best, but many hunters exceeded human understanding.

When you spent so much time conquering countless treasure vaults and became an old-timer, you would grow to be unbelievably strong. Even Gilbert knew that there were many monsters he couldn't stand up to, but he wasn't bothered. With time, he would catch up. He was certain of that. Gilbert's future was bright, and the path to glory was all but clear to him. The first time clouds began to gather had been a few weeks ago.

"Our engine is finally up and running, so this job should be nice and easy now. Your decision-making is as enchanting as ever, Master," came a calm voice from overhead.

Gilbert did all he could to force his body to move, though it was nearly screaming from the contusions he was suffering all over. He glanced up at Tino as she calmly looked down on him. Her cold eyes glared at Gilbert like he was nothing but an insect.

Despite the fact that she'd looked to be his equal, this girl was *strong*. Insanely strong. Every strike was fast and heavy. Her kick had been very off-the-cuff, but it had smashed into Gilbert with enough power to even damage phantoms. Compared to the phantoms and common thugs Gilbert had fought thus far, she was on a different level.

Additionally, Tino's attacks were clearly intended for use against an actual person. Against phantoms, who had much tougher constitutions than humans,

one would never use a palm strike intended to rattle the human brain. Most of all, she was still so composed, so calm.

Gilbert had heard the Steps had plenty of promising young hunters, but he'd never expected this. The first strike had been unexpected, but he'd tried to be more cautious after that. Put simply, her strength far exceeded his, to the point that it was hard to believe they were the same level. To Gilbert, who had never lost to someone his age, this came as a shock.

He couldn't make excuses like "I didn't have my sword" because he was the one who had tossed it aside of his own volition. His opponent hadn't had a weapon, either. But Gilbert didn't want to make excuses; he needed to face his own weaknesses and do better.

"Are you still awake?" Tino asked.

He tried to stand, but he couldn't find the strength. There was no feeling in his fingertips, and his limbs had too much give. If he could stand, would he even be able to move the way he wanted?

Thanks to all the mana material within Gilbert, he could take gunfire and still be fine. He had sustained many injuries in battle and had even gone through near-death experiences. But this was the first time he had ever been hurt so badly without a weapon.

"Dammit..."

"You can use the sword if you want," she offered, irritated. Gilbert's favored weapon, the Purgatorial Sword, was lying on the ground some distance away.

The Purgatorial Sword.

He had obtained the Relic in a level 1 treasure vault called the Veteran's Parade Ground. It was a massive blade which had supported all of Gilbert's endeavors as a hunter thus far.

This rare, weapon-type Relic had a simple ability: engulfing itself in flame. Up until this point, he had slaughtered countless monsters and phantoms with it. For Gilbert, someone rather artless in his fighting style, a greatsword was a good fit.

The fact that he had obtained it was the one fortune that the penniless Gilbert had to his name. It had been by his side through the good and the bad. Just using it was likely reassuring for him.

Nevertheless, Gilbert suppressed his feelings. Eyeing the vaguely reddened blade, he screamed on all fours, “Why should I?!”

It was a pity. The Purgatorial Sword *was* a powerful weapon. When it had been examined by the Association, the staff members had been shocked. The weapon far surpassed any Relics you could hope to find in a level 1 treasure vault.

However, that was exactly why Gilbert didn’t dare reach for his weapon now. In a fight against an empty-handed peer, the moment he took up his sword would be the moment he proved that the weapon was the true reason for his success up to this point.

Tino didn’t attack again. Having recovered a little, Gilbert got to his feet.

She knitted her well-maintained brows and spat, “Your pride is disappointing.”

There were no clear openings as she stood and watched Gilbert. No visible fatigue, not a single drop of sweat, and yet none of the carelessness that would come with facing someone clearly weaker than her. Gilbert knew that if she had fought seriously, he would’ve been dead by now. While he had confidence in his muscular strength, she also had enough to outdo him with ease.

He squatted low, breathing heavily as the dull pain coursed through his body. Roaring would be a waste of strength, so he just glared at her with beastly eyes. What was her weakness? What should he do? Tino’s body looked fragile, so he probably had better endurance. A single strike would be enough. If only he could get one solid hit in... But he wouldn’t hit her. After all, she had completely seen through his earlier attacks.

As Gilbert groped frantically for some path to victory, Thousand Tricks’ voice reached his ears. It was the same relaxed voice from the start of the match. The three spectators who to this point had been outside of his mind now entered his field of vision.

“How about we leave it at that? We’re here to measure his strength, and I think we’ve done that.” He then addressed Gilbert. “You left your last party of your own volition, yeah?”

Gilbert gasped and reflexively turned toward Thousand Tricks. There were traces of a grin on his face. The man wasn’t very intimidating with his black eyes, black hair, and ordinary features. He showed no traces of the power unique to hunters.

Nowhere on him were the symbols of First Steps or Grieving Souls that members were supposed to wear. Despite his high level, the fact that he didn’t look like a hunter at all made him all the more unsettling.

Yes, Gilbert had left the party he’d formed when he came to the capital almost half a year ago. It was because his comrades hadn’t been able to keep up with his talent.

Gilbert got goosebumps as Thousand Tricks spoke with an enigmatic grin. This was the strongest of the treasure hunters who used Zebrudia as their home base, the man whose name Gilbert Bush had heard over and over in his short time in the capital. The leader of Grieving Souls, a party made up solely of people with titles—symbols of their status as top-tier hunters.

“Why?”

“I think I remember that myself. You were just way stronger than they were; I get it. But in my party, we didn’t give up on the weak.”

The true meaning behind the statement was lost on Gilbert for a moment, but when he realized it, his face stiffened.

Only a very small handful of hunters received titles. They were conferred only to those who had outstanding talent *and* had conquered countless treasure vaults. They were on a level that Gilbert couldn’t hope to reach as he was now. The one who led those gems, whose strength was extolled all over the world, was this man before him.

“I think this party will be good experience for you. You might have some objections, but how about you kids play nice for now?”

He seemed so open to attack. His muscles were clearly many times weaker

than Tino's. The first time they'd met, he seemed nothing more than overwhelmingly *weak*. But the truth was much more frightening. Even knowing his identity and just how exceptional Krai was, he still looked weak to Gilbert.

Before Gilbert realized it, his arms and legs were shaking. His teeth were clenched, his breathing stifled. The inside of his mouth was dry. Yet he couldn't tear his eyes away from the man.

There were many mysterious beings in treasure vaults. Rumors told of man-eating phantoms and even man-impersonating phantoms. For each one with exceptional intelligence, abilities, or brute strength, there was another who could perplex you with words alone.

And yet, the man he faced was even more unpredictable than phantoms themselves: Thousand Tricks. He heard the name often, but nobody knew exactly what kind of hunter he was.

With slow footsteps, Thousand Tricks approached the Purgatorial Sword and tapped it with his foot. Instantly, a whirl of flames erupted from the enormous greatsword. The blaze whipped and roared like wind as it traced the shape of a helix.

Gilbert didn't know what was happening anymore. His eyes saw it all, but his brain refused to make sense of it. Greg and Rhuda only watched in astonishment.



Standing in the conflagration but not burning at all, Thousand Tricks said, “Fire affinity and range-boosting, eh? Simple, but it’s a good sword. Treat it well.” Fire wrapped around his arms like gauntlets, and his eyes shone red.

“No way... You can’t use that! The Purgatorial Sword is a Relic! A *Relic*!”

Relics were powerful items, but they demanded careful operation. The stronger the Relic, the more training it required to draw out even an ounce of its power. With a greater roar, the flames materialized as wings on Thousand Tricks’ back.

Tino’s cruel treatment, his suffering, his regrets, his stubbornness—Gilbert forgot all of that and screamed, “You’re not even holding it?! How is that even possible?!”

As the Purgatorial Sword’s owner, Gilbert had only recently started using it as more than a sharp, strong weapon. Even then, all he could do was set the sword on fire. It wasn’t that operating it was difficult; he just didn’t know what to do with it in the first place. After all, it wasn’t like Relics came with on-and-off switches or instruction manuals. This wasn’t a problem that talent could solve.

This was Gilbert’s own Relic, so he was painfully aware of just how unthinkable it was that Thousand Tricks could do this.

As the flames engulfed him, the man laughed. His black hair glimmered as it reflected the firelight.

It couldn’t be.

He was so different from Tino, who had trained hard to get to her level. Thousand Tricks was nowhere to be seen on Gilbert’s future path. He was simply an unknown. The unimaginable sight caused one word to trickle out of Gilbert’s mouth. His voice trembled so much that he couldn’t believe it was his own.

“Beast...”

Tino showed no signs of surprise as she looked down at him. The shadow of Thousand Tricks cast by the flames looked like a screaming, grieving spirit, much like the name of his party.

Chapter 3: White Wolf's Den

In the vast, monster-infested forest northwest of Zebrudia, at the end of a small game trail that wound between the densely packed trees, their destination stood.

The White Wolf's Den.

A horde of wolves with fur as silvery white as the moon—aptly named Silver Moons—was endemic to this area. They prowled the woodland in one great pack, defending their territory.

Their four powerful legs allowed them to navigate the forest at high speeds despite the uneven terrain, and their fur deflected all kinds of magic attacks. With fangs that could pierce through hunters' sinewy muscle and enough intelligence to use minor magic, this pack of wolves banded together as one amalgamate reaper, felling creatures far stronger than themselves.

As difficult as they were to fend off, Silver Moons had two major weaknesses. First, the adults were small, rarely reaching even a yard in length. Second, their fur bewitched all who beheld it, making them attractive targets.

Their bones, fangs, and skin yielded some of the highest prices among all monster materials—so much so that they rivaled the rewards found in life-threatening treasure vaults. As a result, visiting hunters often preyed on Silver Moons. The wolves had smarts, strength, and numbers, but to hunters who had all those and more, they were a delicacy.

Monsters were living things. No matter how much power they possessed, they couldn't just propagate like the phantoms that lurked in vaults. Thus, before long, they would be hunted to extinction.

The Silver Moons' numbers were inversely proportional to the development of the capital. As it grew, they went down in population, raising the sale price of their pelts. A species that had once inspired fear in those entering the forest was now so scarce that encountering even one would be a stroke of luck.

Around the time the imperial capital gained a reputation as the holy land for hunters, the Silver Moons disappeared, leaving behind a large, hollow den as the sole reminder of their existence.

The White Wolf's Den should have been uninhabited, but ten years ago, rumors spread that blood-soaked wolves were appearing there.



"Ooh, scary! This one reeks of a grudge. Ugh, I can't stand stuff like this."

I trembled as I lobbed away the documents I'd been given. Just thinking about the White Wolf's Den made me want to vomit. I was just a small fry, but in those haunted treasure vaults, I was even *smaller* fry. There were people out there who couldn't do tests of courage, mainly because there was no courage to test.

Eva smirked to herself as she watched me turn pale. "You don't have to be so disgusted."

"It's one of those vaults that dwells on the past. That thing's seen a *lot* of sin."

Treasure vaults appeared in locations where mana material was abundant, but there were several known subtypes. Some appeared wholly unaffected by location, whereas others strongly reflected the characteristics of where they appeared. Others still, like this one, reflected the history of their locations.

Every nation on the planet was conducting research regarding the rules of how this worked. We didn't know the details yet, but the White Wolf's Den itself was probably some overlap between the second and third examples.

After the near-extinction of its forebears, a massive red wolf had appeared out of nowhere, making the den its home. I didn't particularly sympathize with the Silver Moons or anything; it was just a really gross thought.

"According to testimonials by hunters who fought the Silver Moons in the past, this one is much stronger than the originals."

I faked a laugh. "And you can't even harvest the pelt. What a waste of time."

The living apparitions known as phantoms appeared based on the same phenomenon that created treasure vaults. Setting strength aside, there were

some clear differences between phantoms and monsters.

One of those was the fact that they didn't leave corpses. When phantoms were defeated, they returned to their component, mana material, and dispersed into the air like the apparitions they were. Very rarely, when they were very well materialized, they could leave behind singular body parts, but we wouldn't be peeling off any complete pelts.

As for the hunters who went into these monster-filled vaults and never made it back, I could only say it was their own fault.

Eva looked thoughtfully at the documents I'd requested, which described the vault in greater detail. She didn't seem afraid in the slightest. Most likely, all of this was just another world to her.

"According to this, it seems the level three designation isn't because of the geography or gimmicks, but rather due to the strength of the phantoms within."

"Hmm. Well, I think it'll be all right. Tino can probably handle it."

A treasure vault's level was decided based on its difficulty, the amount of hunters who made it back alive, and more. In cases where the gimmicks and environment were easy to handle, the monsters and phantoms within were typically stronger. Whichever a hunter wanted to specialize in was up to them.

Li'l Gilbert and Tino were muscleheads, so even if strong phantoms appeared, they would probably be just fine. Heck, it had been so long since I last saw Tino fight. She had just about transcended humanity somewhere along the line. I imagined as much already, but damn, that had been too much.

"You did quite a good job convincing Gilbert."

"Heh. Maybe getting wrecked by Tino like that got him thinking. I dunno, maybe using the dirt you dug up to trick him would've been a better idea."

Eva Renfied was an incredible person. She didn't have experience as a hunter, but her skill at managing this organization was top-notch.

Apparently still on friendly terms with her previous workplace, she could handle the purchasing of clan materials, using her wide connections to gather information, and she occasionally even dealt with audits from the imperial

brass. Any job you could think of, Eva handled it with *savoir faire*. It was she who had gotten dirt on the three party candidates, and in no time at all.

I really couldn't compare to her. She was up there with Ark, I'd say. If a level 5 designation wasn't required for someone to be a clan master, I probably would've handed her the reins and retired long ago.

Suddenly, the image of Gilbert's face from our last conversation popped up in my head. I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Heh, you should've seen his face. Let me tell you, talent messes people up."

He had cleared vault after vault unopposed, to the point that his buddies were no longer able to keep up. That was a common story in the industry. It happened so often because, in battle, differences in talent became very clear. Same deal with my party. I knew plenty of other examples, too.

The way the Grievers differed from them was that Gilbert had been the only person in his party with talent. The kid didn't have any way to vent his frustrations, so he'd just decided to leave the party. Our case, meanwhile, was the exact opposite.

Part of it might have been stubbornness. There was clear desperation in the way he acted. Young prodigies turned into braggarts, and that caused problems in parties. Seriously, that was cliché at this point. I'd say our situation was a lot rarer.

Still, the real victim here was Gilbert's party. They'd gotten dragged around by a foolhardy boy through treasure vaults above their skill level, and all they had to show for it was a big fight and the loss of that very party member.

"Did you inspire him to turn over a new leaf?"

"Nah, I just said whatever came to mind at the time. I may have left him speechless, but I'm in no position to go around *inspiring* people."

Tino had some weird admiration for me, and Liz was probably the one who had put that in her head. But there was so much wrong with Li'l Gilbert, I didn't even know where to begin. Besides, I was nothing but a guy running a big clan willy-nilly. I occasionally gave clan members advice on personal matters, but this was just too much.

Just do what you want. I can't take responsibility for you.

As usual, Eva stood straight up with her immaculate posture and offered only a small nod. "Very well. We can just leave it at that."

Eva was the best, but it felt like she had a weird understanding of things. Not that I minded, as long as she did her job. I wasn't going to complain, seeing as she was such a big help.

Things were getting annoying, so I changed the subject. "By the way, Li'l Gilbert's Relic is actually one heck of a good one."

"The Purgatorial Sword, you mean?"

Thinking back on the greatsword, its flames given form as steel, was relaxing. Relics were the one thing that soothed me. They were great. Wonderful, even. I could see why hunters all over the world risked their lives daily for them.

What made them so wonderful? Well, the fact that anyone could use them. With a Relic, any human being could wield miraculous powers. It didn't require any special talent whatsoever. What could be more marvelous? While I didn't have to put them to use all that often, I could still appreciate them.

"Lucky guy. I wonder if he'd sell it to me. It grants fire affinity, gives you a wider attack range, and might even reveal some more uses with further testing."

He probably wouldn't be willing to sell it. It took some time to really get used to using a Relic, and once you were used to it, it wasn't easy to let go of it.

While I prattled on about how wonderful it felt from just one touch, I noticed that Eva was looking at me in deep exasperation. *I must've gotten a little too enthusiastic,* I thought, flipping my smile back upside-down.

"You shouldn't waste money."

"It's not a waste, though."

"Fire and attack range? Krai, you already have at least five of those."

At least five of those? Good lord, Eva, they're all different. Each Relic made its own special miracle, with its own scale and quirks. I tried to stand up for my love, but I realized Eva was getting irritated.

Clearly I was in the losing position, so I quietly said, “Yeah, I guess weapon-type Relics with those properties *are* kinda common.”

There were several shops that sold Relics in the capital. While there were tons of similar Relics on the market out there, it was tough to find ones that were so powerful and easy to use.

The Purgatorial Sword was more docile and far easier to handle than the seven similar Relics in my possession. I could see how Li’l Gilbert had figured out how to use it in so little time. But Eva wouldn’t be too happy with me if I explained all that to her.

Maybe she’d figured out that I was embezzling clan funds to buy Relics for myself. Don’t worry, though, I was reimbursing it after the fact. I stared right back at her, but her pale, amethyst eyes betrayed none of her thoughts. With no other option left to me, I half-assed a smile in hopes of winning her over.

“Anyway, uh, if you’d like... how about we go get something sweet to eat?”

Put a little sugar on, and people soften up. Eva’s eye twitched just a fraction at my proposal.

“You’re just asking because you want some yourself, aren’t you?”

“Nope. No way.”

Looks like Eva figured out I’m a sweets lover, too. It was kind of a bad look, so I tried to hide it. I really couldn’t be too careful around her.



The temporary party members were sitting together in Tino’s usual spot in the clan lounge. Each of them watched her to figure out what was going through her mind. She would have liked to take this mission solo, but now her only option was to put up with the group.

There had been a moment when she thought Krai had really given up on Gilbert, but it had all just been a game that had played out the way he’d wanted.

This mission was an urgent rescue, so they needed to head out as soon as possible. There was no time for careful preparation.

Tino looked gravely upon each member of her party and gave her first order. “First, write your last will and testament.”

Rhuda slammed her hands and the table and stood up, flustered. “Wha?! Hey, what the heck?!”



Oh, right. My one Relic needs to be charged.

While I lazed around wondering if Tino and the others had reached the treasure vault yet, idly polishing my Hounding Chain, I suddenly remembered that the chain was out of mana.

Relics found in vaults were powerful, but they couldn’t be used limitlessly without some kind of condition. Their energy source was mana—the same kind used by Magi to cast spells. The stronger the Relic, the more mana that was needed in advance. That was one reason you didn’t tend to see hunters walking around decked out in Relics.

It was easy enough to load one up with mana. As mana could be found in all living creatures, everyone had it, though how much you had depended on who you were. Even Magi, with their large quantities of mana, would run out after charging a few Relics.

In my case, unfortunately, I had less mana than the average person, so I had to get friends or clan members to charge my Relics. It was recommended to only carry an amount you could charge on your own, but this was pretty much my only choice. That was another of the many reasons I had given up on being a hunter. *C’mon, at least give me one advantage!*

Mana charges were far from free, too. Normally, I would have my party member Lucia do it. But when our resident Magus wasn’t here, I had to shell out. I collected my chains and headed for the lounge.

The lounge’s walls were all covered with wide-open windows, allowing the evening sun to paint the room orange. Familiar faces populated several of the tables. They were all relaxing and chatting casually.

Maybe they just got back from today’s work.

Without bothering to read the room, I barged right in on one of the groups.

When one used large amounts of mana, it came with intense fatigue. Once mana was depleted, it was hard to even move. Whenever I needed multiple Relics charged, I would ask a party with a really good Magus. This time, I just needed one chain done, so anybody would do.

The leader, with his needle-like black hair and unshaven face, noticed me and smiled. He seemed to be in a good mood.

“Hey, Master. Rough time yesterday, eh?”

“Yeah, it happens. Could I get you to charge a Relic?”

“Mm, sure. How many ya need?”

“Just my one chain here.”

“No prob, then.”

Pleasantly agreeing to my one-sided demand, he passed the Hounding Chain over to his Magus friend. The female Magus didn’t seem to mind, either.

A Relic’s mana depleted passively over time, eventually emptying whether you used it or not. Everyone was surprisingly okay with me asking them to recharge them frequently. Sometimes they refused if they were about to head out to a vault and wanted to be completely ready, but my position as clan master was helping out a ton here. It was all thanks to Eva, really. Her stellar management of the clan made it so that any dissatisfaction was swiftly taken care of.

As mana flowed into the Hounding Chain, it glowed faintly. Meanwhile, the leader struck up some small talk with me.

“By the way, Master, have ya heard? A stray showed up on the road up north. It was a small one, but it wiped out a buncha merchants.”

Zebrudia was a huge city. All of the roads around it were very well cared for compared to those of other cities, which involved the regular culling of any nearby monsters. Despite attempts to keep the surrounding area clear, people were still occasionally attacked.

Monsters and phantoms only rarely approached the roads, so those that did were called “strays” and considered fearsome. It was darn hard to predict their

appearance in advance. Worse yet, they were sometimes much stronger than usual.

These areas were well developed, but to go out in perfect safety, one still needed a bodyguard. I personally never walked around outside without one, but it was much tougher for merchants.

“That’s annoying. What is it, a monster or a phantom? I guess if it’s on the road, it must be a phantom.”

To the north of the capital was a forest abundant with resources. The likelihood of monsters adapted to living there coming out and messing with merchants was low.

Their leader looked up at me and nodded slightly. “Yeah. The Third Order of Knights put out an alert and started gathering a group of people to deal with it. Must be a big one, I guess. The merchants even had a trio of level three guards with them.”

“They took hunters along and still died? That’s just bad luck.”

Anti-monster measures on the road didn’t work on phantoms, but the latter were composed of mana material and thus typically didn’t leave the treasure vaults they’d manifested in. However, there were so many vaults around the capital, it was bound to happen once every few months or so.

But hey, it wasn’t anything to worry about. Indeed, if it took down three level 3 hunters, that meant it was probably pretty strong. However, as they weren’t made of flesh and bones like us, phantoms wouldn’t survive long in a place without much mana material. It would take some time for it to naturally dissipate, but after a while, it would be weakened. At that point, the Third Order could probably move in to destroy it.

Didn’t matter to me, though. Powerful phantom or not, the capital was safe. Powerful knights, thick walls, and hordes of hunters stood between the phantom and me.

While I waited with perfect composure, the leader continued, “Some hunters passing through said it was the phantom of a wolf. Those bodyguards must have been pretty careless for them to go down on an open road like that.”

A wolf, huh? I furrowed my brow. That was a word I'd heard a lot recently.

I opened my mental map, searching for the road north. That was the same forest I'd sent Tino and the others off to, where the White Wolf's Den was. Phantom forms and types were, for the most part, set for each vault. When I heard it was a wolf, it was natural to make the connection.

Not noticing my shock, the leader kept on blabbing, still in a good mood. "Bet it evolved because people weren't culling the vault enough. Hey, you gotta consider there are a *lotta* vaults these days. That's good for us hunters."

"Well, erm, there are plenty of vaults north of the capital. Even in the forest, there are several, so if the phantom is a wolf, then maybe—"

"Gotta be the White Wolf's Den, right?" the leader interjected.

That was a Steps hunter for you; he knew a great deal about the surrounding vaults.

I kept my smile plastered on, but I was starting to feel queasy. "Yeah, yeah. It's possible it could be the White Wolf's Den, but also—"

"Huh, are there any other places a wolf phantom would come from? Relics don't show up there much, so it ain't popular. Sounds like the place to me."

Seriously? I could feel my face contorting into a grimace. The Magus charging my Hounding Chain cocked an eyebrow at my sudden change in expression.

"If it went outside, that must mean the White Wolf's Den has been overflowing with phantoms lately. There ought to be an alert at the Association. Heck, the empire might even send an extermination request. Good time to make a profit."

Typically, phantoms didn't bring in money because they didn't leave corpses. But once they started going out and causing trouble elsewhere, things changed. It depended somewhat on the scale, but the empire often made requests to the Association to exterminate them for a hefty sum.

Then again, maybe this was all a big misunderstanding. Even if they *were* right, Tino had a party of four, and Li'l Gilbert had a Relic, so they ought to be fine.

“Hey, that wolf is strong. Don’t underestimate it and die for nothing,” one party member joked to the straight-faced leader.

Every last word they said stabbed right into my heart.

Strong, you say? Really? I’ve never been there. How strong, exactly...? Oh, “pretty strong.” Well, it’s a level 3, so yeah, pretty strong. Pret-ty strong. That’s okay; Tino’s pretty strong, too.

Just in case, I decided I should check out the request again. No ulterior motives here, trust me. Smiling, I pulled the twice-folded request sheet out of my pocket and spread it out on the table. The leader checked it and opened his eyes wide in surprise. I read the request from top to bottom and nodded emphatically, as if I understood. Then, I smiled even wider.

“Wow, Master, that’s just bad. You acted all innocent, but you already did know somethin’ about it.”

“Err, yep, that I did. I had Tino go.”

“Wha?! Tino’s level four, right? Uh... Dang, okay. Rigorous as ever, huh?”

The leader had been frank and upfront before, but for a moment, his expression clearly shifted. I could see the others wincing through their smiles. That was how it always was. I had bad luck and bad timing.

It wasn’t on purpose. It wasn’t, I swear! When did those merchants even get attacked? How was I supposed to know about it?!

I wasn’t *that* evil. If I had known, I wouldn’t have made Tino do it. Well, if I had known, I would’ve grabbed a totally different request.

A Thief-looking man who was staring at the request form spoke up. “The vault might be level three, but it was a level five hunter and his party who went missing. Yet you sent a level four soloer there?”

“Well, err, gotta learn somehow. Wait, did you say ‘level five’?”

“Um, yeah? Look right here.” The Magus finished charging up my Hounding Chain, placed it on the table, and pointed to a part of the request form.

It was the place where the missing hunters’ names were listed, the part that I’d skimmed the fastest without especially caring. It seemed she had seen

something I hadn't.

"Rudolph Davout here is a level five. He's a pretty popular guy. I see him a lot around the Association, carrying his pike. Did you not know—"

"Shut up, idiot. Our Master knows everything about the hunters and vaults around this city. You don't have to freakin' fill him in on basic info like that! Ahahaha, sorry. Ena here didn't mean to be so rude." The leader apologized with a forced smile.

The Magus he'd called Ena hurriedly bowed her head in apology. With an empty smile, I waved as though it was of no consequence.

They think I know everything, when I could never match a name to a face for every single clan member. Who's spreading all of these rumors about me? There are so many suspects that I can't even begin to narrow them down.

I knew no one outside the clan. It was so bad that people often got mad at me when I went to the Association.

And what, you guys think I know every hunter out there? Do you even know how many there are?! Okay, Krai, calm down. It's cool, it's cool. Tino is reliable. Yes, I wouldn't have given her that request if I'd known it was a level 5 who went missing, but it's not time to panic just yet. Come to think of it, Tino did complain when I showed it to her. Something about how she was still only a level 4.

Damn that Gark, pushing these ridiculous requests on me. What if my poor, adorable underlings die?!

I took deep breaths, waiting for my heart rate to go back down. First things first, I needed to maintain my image of authority as the clan master. If the only consequence was me being booted from the clan, it wouldn't have been a problem. In fact, I welcomed the idea. But that wasn't what I was worried about.

"Sh-She's gotta learn somehow. It's okay; I sent three outsider hunters along with her."

Even Li'l Gilbert seemed ready to obey Tino. Plus, she would be better off with Rhuda and the Great Greg than without.

But the leader didn't react the way I expected him to. His cheeks, lifted just barely in a token grin, started to twitch. "Uh, I see."

"You sent her on that hard a job... with *shackles*?"

"This must be the infamous method that brought the Grievers to the top."

They looked upon me with a mixture of awe and trepidation, a look that you would've never expected from these beasts.

What infamous method?! The heck are you talking about?!

No longer able to keep up appearances, I let my smile slide away, leaving me with a blank expression. The leader, who had been a ray of sunshine until now, stood up unsteadily. He was now as serious as if he was facing a real-deal monster.

I picked up my recharged Hounding Chain from the table and returned it to its home on my belt.

After clearing my throat, I went for the tough, hard-boiled exterior again. "Sorry, but I've got some minor business to attend to. I'll take my leave. Thanks for the charge-up."

"O-Oh, it was nothing, sir. We should apologize for boring you with our talk." He was suddenly a lot more formal.

That was when I realized that everyone in the room was watching me.

Oh, damn. At this rate, I'm going to be that awful piece of crap who gave Tino an impossible request. But I swear, it wasn't on purpose!

I turned around. I didn't know where to go for the moment, so I just rushed back to the clan master's office. Now, of all times, I had neither Ark or Grieving Souls to rely on.

Requests were typically carried out after careful preparation, but as this was a rescue mission, it was rushed. Tino and the others were probably already at the vault by now. There was no time. I tried to console my panicking self.

"It's okay, it's okay. They've got... They've got the Purgatorial Sword!"

Ah, the Purgatorial Sword. I had used up the mana in it during that test of

strength. *Surely Li'l Gilbert recharged it before he went to the vault, right?*



Among Tino Shade's many memories was one of her and her mentor finally simulating real, hand-to-hand combat after months of learning the basics.

"You okay, T?" her mentor asked with a smile.

Unlike Tino, who was nearly hyperventilating as she lay exhausted on the ground, Liz wasn't sporting a single bead of sweat.

Liz's light-pink irises matched her pink hair, which was presently tied back in a ponytail. Her skin was tan but free of any injury or blemish; it was perfectly smooth. Anyone who laid eyes on her would agree that she was cute.

From her ears hung metal earrings tipped with a red heart. Her slender arms and legs had not an ounce of superfluous weight, and her chest was even more modest than Tino's. She was also shorter than Tino, despite the latter still going through her growth spurt. From the day their master-pupil relationship began, people often mistook Tino for the older one. But now, nobody would be so foolish.

"See, if Krai Baby says a raven is white, it's white. You picking up what I'm putting down here?" Her sugary voice sounded like that of an adult teaching a child right from wrong.

The power Tino felt emanating from this shorty just from the fingertip pointed in her direction was far greater than anything she had ever known. It was hard to believe they were only a few years apart in age.

This was someone who had rushed up the staircase to glory faster than anyone else. A beast who easily conquered treasure vaults that had repelled countless hunters before her. The second generation, made up of Tino and many other excellent hunters, was just riding the coattails of hunters like Liz. Thus, Tino never prided herself on her talent.

Liz Smart was also known as the Stifled Shadow. Like the wind, like a shadow, she covered the land and soared through the air with overwhelming speed. Tino both admired and feared her.

Though she was smiling, Liz's eyes shone with the overflowing power

concealed within her tiny frame. “Now, I’m not looking for loyalty, or love, or whatever. See, Tino, what I want from you is absolute submission.”

To short-tempered hunters, that would be an outrage to hear. But her mentor’s tone of voice was serious. Impatience burned within her.

“Submission to our Krai Baby, that is.”

She couldn’t peel her eyes away from Liz’s gaze. After a breath, the next sentence escaped Liz’s lips.

“However small it might be, don’t give your opinion. No matter what stupid joke he tells, no matter what ridiculous order he gives, even if it means risking your life, you just do it, okay? Don’t even think about it.

“If anyone tries to oppose our Krai Baby, you crush every last one of ’em. Whether they’re a strong hunter or the damn emperor, no matter how much power they hold here in Zebrudia, that doesn’t matter.

“I’m not willing to let a single one of us have the fire of rebellion in them. That’s why I made you my apprentice. I can kill whoever I want when I’m around, but what about when I’m not? You’re a smart girl, T. You feel me, right?”

Panting, Tino answered, “Yes... Lizzy.”

Occasionally, the most talented of hunters were labeled beasts. Tino wouldn’t have said that *all* hunters were like that, by any means, but her mentor was a beast to be feared even by other hunters.

Despite Liz’s almost playful tone, there was a fervor in her words that would not permit resistance. She was dead serious. Liz was so hostile toward her surroundings that she wouldn’t allow anything to slip past her. If Tino showed any ill will toward Krai right now, Liz might kill her with as much care in the world as someone picking a flower.

She was shorter than Tino, her limbs more delicate. At a glance, she seemed like a normal human. In truth, the sole human thing about her was her appearance. Tino only came to realize this after her skill as a hunter improved.



The party walked warily along the narrow forest path that led to the White Wolf's Den. Tino was at the vanguard with Gilbert behind her, then Greg, and finally Rhuda, who was watching their backs.

Normally, parties were formed with a balance between roles in mind. They typically required a front line, a back line, a scout, and a healer. But in the case of this impromptu party, they had neither the wide-range, death-dealer Magus nor the ever-useful Cleric, who would normally be required when traversing high-difficulty vaults.

Greg and Gilbert were front-liners. Greg was a Warrior, experienced in the use of multiple kinds of weapons, while Gilbert was a Swordsman who specialized in one-on-one combat with his greatsword.

It was a very standard front line; they were strong enough to take down phantoms more powerful than humans, but they were unable to withstand magical attacks or large amounts of phantoms at once.

On the other hand, Rhuda and Tino were both Thieves. They were somewhat inferior in terms of outright fighting ability, but they excelled at scouting for enemies. It was clear that this party was out of balance, but having two Thieves to scout for foes was the silver lining to this cloud.

Rhuda's sense of danger was well developed, as was necessary for a solo hunter to survive. Tino was also confident in herself in that regard. Even if visibility was poor within the White Wolf's Den, it would be nigh impossible for them to miss a phantom coming to attack.

In an unfamiliar treasure vault, the thing one most had to watch out for was ambushes. Unreliable as the party composition was, they would still be able to focus their energy on what was happening inside the vault.

Even before they reached the vault, the air within the forest was mysterious. Every member of the party was tense. They all understood this particular atmosphere only because they had fought monsters and phantoms before.

Suddenly, a howl rang out in the distance.

Greg spun around to check their surroundings. With a groan, he muttered, "Weird. I smell danger already, and we ain't even at the treasure vault yet. Is

this for real?”

“That’s why you wrote your wills,” Tino replied, narrowing her eyes at the thick trees lining the path.

“More like you *made* us write ’em.”

Hunters’ gut feelings were often warranted. Their senses were sharpened by the intake of mana material to the point that their brains could hardly process all the input. Thus, when they felt alarm bells going off, it felt like their own intuition.

If one valued their life, they would immediately turn back at the first whiff of true danger. That was one ironclad rule hunters had to follow. Everyone here knew that. In fact, they had all inferred by now that something sinister was going on in this forest. Yet there was no unease on the face of their leader, Tino. There was only resolve.

Normally, she ought to preserve the lives of her party when she realized something was off—even more so if it was bad enough that the others could feel it. This time, however, she wasn’t even considering it. Tino had anticipated this and had long since accepted it. She’d told her party members as much, too, though it wasn’t clear whether they had believed her or not.

“He pushed this on me, but it isn’t a simple request. I don’t plan to die, but we’d best write these just in case,” she had added.

Remembering Tino’s grave expression, Rhuda blinked as she carefully followed at the back of the line. At the time, she had thought it was some joke. Yet now that she could feel that something was wrong, there was no room for doubt.

“I can’t believe it. Are you saying Krai sent us here knowing that something’s going on?”

“If I had to say, this party composition probably isn’t a coincidence.”

“Wha? No way...”

They had a four-man party with a physical focus and two scouts. Though her master had pretended it was a random party, it was all but clear to Tino that he

had been bluffing.

Tino was one of the original members of the Steps. Even before the clan had been formed, she had encountered Grieving Souls, her mentor's party, multiple times. Her life as a hunter could be called a trial, preceded by hellish training.

This wasn't the first time she had set out to complete a task Krai had given her. At first, she had found it incomprehensible... but now she understood. Grieving Souls' rapid rise to fame had not been because of its talented lineup; it had been because of its leader.

"Master is already aware of the treasure vault's abnormality and everything else that's happening. He chose exactly who he needed for the job, and now here we are. Gilbert, the results of your test were not unexpected, either."

Gilbert's jaw dropped. Ever since the mock battle, he had been silent and obedient.

Rhuda interrupted, flustered. "W-Wait! 'Exactly who he needed'? It was just a coincidence that I was there at the Steps' recruitment meet. I-If he wanted someone good, he could just pick a good hunter from your clan, right?!"

"Y-Yeah. That was my first time meeting Thousand Tricks, too."

They couldn't believe it. No, they didn't *want* to believe it. Tino sighed quietly at her party members.

While they weren't at the vault yet, phantoms would likely come and attack them if they made too much of a commotion. Maybe that was all part of the plan, too, but Tino just wanted to get it over with and go home. Alive, of course. Not as a corpse. In order to do that, she had to make them understand that this was no accident.

Tino didn't know what might happen next. She couldn't even imagine. But there was a mountain of difference between being resolved and not.

"Master has information on every hunter and treasure vault in and around the capital. Whether you've met or not, it would not be difficult for him to understand you and your actions."

It wasn't just Tino; all members of Steps knew that much. All of her master's

actions had some plan behind them.

After all, what recognized level 8 hunter would be late to his own member recruitment party, cause a huge ruckus and a fight, nearly destroy the bar it was held in, and then make Gilbert mad just so Tino would be his opponent in the ensuing test of strength? Only an idiot would do that without a good reason.

It was all an act. Though it may not have seemed like it, Krai had pulled off a skilled bluff that even Tino hadn't been able to see through. Everything was going according to his plan.

Tino's slightly irritated claim prompted Gilbert to hold his tongue. Had the man really accomplished all that so easily? At the very least, Thousand Tricks *had* seemed mysterious enough back at the training ground. The weight of the Purgatorial Sword on Gilbert's back was unusually distracting.

Magi could enchant weapons with elements like water or fire to increase their power and reach. The affinity-granting ability of his sword, common among weapon-type Relics, had the same effect without needing a spell.

One of the Purgatorial Sword's innate characteristics, the fire affinity, could envelop the sword in flames and burn enemies as it cut them down. This greatly increased its offensive potential. In the vaults Gilbert had challenged up to this point, there hadn't been a single foe that could resist it. But what would happen this time?

Thousand Tricks' grasp of the flames was beyond the scope of what Gilbert had heretofore accomplished. If that was the true extent of the sword's power, then Gilbert was only using a tiny fraction of its potential. He had succeeded in numerous raids, but he had a much worse feeling about this one than any he had experienced before. It probably wasn't just his imagination.

Seeing how uneasy the three were, Tino spoke in a lighthearted tone, "Worry not. Master knows all; he wouldn't give us an impossible request. As long as we're prepared to put our lives on the line, we can do this. No matter what happens, we don't turn back. Remember: you wrote your wills."

The Great Greg gulped. "Uh, yeah. Sure."

It was common knowledge that hunters ought to prioritize their own safety.

How much were they planning to risk their lives on this carcass-collecting mission? Internally, Greg felt as though he'd gotten himself into some deep trouble. But the stubbornness born of his age and experience made him plaster a strained smile on his face instead.

In that instant, a shadow was cast over them, blocking the sun.

Tino was the first to notice something falling from the sky, so she shoved Greg out of the way. A dull, gray shine passed through the space where his neck had been mere moments ago. The next moment, Gilbert and Rhuda moved away and prepared for battle. Greg, knocked off balance from the shove, reflexively moved to break his fall.

They caught sight of their target: a shadow that had crept in with neither a scent nor a sound.

Rhuda's eyes opened wide as the crimson beast, crouched and unmoving, let out a hoarse cry. "Huh? The phantoms here aren't just wolves?!"

Gilbert glared back at its glowing, golden eyes and pointed the unsheathed Purgatorial Sword toward it.

Having missed its first attack, the crimson beast stood up somewhat sluggishly on two legs. Its deep-red fur was like wire, and it had the pointy ears unique to canines. A thick tail extended from its hindquarters, and its nose twitched as if gauging the situation.

Animalistic though it was, the beast was clad in red armor like that of a samurai. It slowly waved the weapon in its gauntlet-clad hands, as if to feint an attack.

Shocked by the creature before him, Gilbert screamed, "The thing's wearing armor! This ain't what we were told!"

"It's holding a sword. Oh, Master... you surpass my expectations every day."

The phantoms of the White Wolf's Den should have been large wolves, but the opponent they faced now, apart from its face and color, was something else entirely.

Overpowering Tino's downtrodden tone, the crimson wolf knight roared.

“Ugh, I wanna vomit. And I *really* wanna retire.”

It had been ten minutes since I’d learned that this simple-sounding community service was a lot more dangerous than I thought. I paced around the clan master’s office, muttering to myself.

If Eva were here, she’d probably be glaring at me. I seriously wish Tino had just refused and explained what the problem was. One unproductive complaint after another passed through my brain.

My friend’s apprentice was far more important than a potentially unfruitful rescue mission. As she was a level 4, Tino must have known basic hunter theory. If things got too dangerous, she would leave. But from what I’d seen so far, all Steps members were reckless, ignoring basic hunter theory. No matter how strong an enemy appeared, they wouldn’t retreat that easily.

Tino must have been influenced by them. Seeing as the most reckless of all were the members of Grieving Souls, she had actually probably gotten that from her mentor. Either way, *shit*. If Tino died on my orders, who knew what would happen to Liz? Her fuse was already way too short.

“Ugh. In the worst case, at least use Li’l Gilbert or the Great Greg as a shield so you can live.”

They’ll probably be okay with being sacrificed so Tino can live, right? Dammit, I was too flippant with my party selection. I should’ve at least chosen seasoned members of First Steps who I knew I could trust.

Gark should have warned me... You know what, no. No matter how you slice it, I was in the wrong. I shouldn’t make excuses. I’m so sorry, Tinooo!

Surely they’ll be fine. Tino knows that there’s a huge wolf there, so she ought to be ready to fight it. Their enemy is just a glorified beast, so it shouldn’t be too hard for them to devise a plan. It’s not like I’m worried they’ll lose... right? I tried to convince myself, but it just didn’t sit right.

It was already dark outside. There were street lamps in the city, but none outside of it.

Should I go check the lounge and see if anyone can go help them? No, I

shouldn't. People avoided night marches due to the monsters and beasts prowling around at night. Besides, if I sent someone out now, they wouldn't catch up to Tino's party in time. I really was useless without Ark.

Partly as a form of escapism, I made up my mind and headed over to the bookshelf built into the wall of the office. It was a hefty one, full of books related to clan management and imperial history. I grabbed the conspicuously placed handle and pulled hard. The bookshelf moved, opening a path behind it without a sound. Beyond it was a secret descending staircase.

After rushing down the stairs, I felt around for a switch. When I found it and flicked it on, soft lamplight filled a Western-style room, which was even larger than the office. This was my own personal haven.

The room had no windows, a bed large enough to fit several people, a bookshelf, a table, a desk, and a sofa. On the walls were paintings I had been gifted but never really understood, along with a poster that outlined the three guiding policies of our clan.

But the most eye-catching thing in the room was the enormous collection of Relics crammed into every corner. Swords, lances, armor, overcoats, helmets, and rings in all different shapes and sizes. Some I had bought, some I had been given, and of course, some we had received while raiding treasure vaults.

One might call it the comprehensive works of the treasure-hunting party Grieving Souls. If I just sold all of this off for whatever price, I could probably coast for at least ten years without working. However, we still hadn't achieved our goal.

While I clutched my churning stomach, I searched for Relics that could help fix this situation.

Once I was finished, I headed back upstairs and into the office. As I stepped inside, I came face-to-face with Eva. She looked at the open bookshelf-door and then at me, blinking. Now that I was fortified with carefully yet quickly handpicked Relics, I looked to be a living treasure vault.

I had donned a deep-blue overcoat, with a crossbow slung over my shoulder, and I was equipped with a rather short sword. My fingers each bore their own ring-type Relics, but I still needed more. I had several more rings threaded

through the chain-type Relic that previously hung from my waist, but it *still* wasn't enough. I even had some stuffed in item pouches attached to my belt.

There were a lot of ring-type Relics out there. *Come on, a man's only got ten fingers!*

My clothes and underwear weren't Relics, just the typical lightweight yet sturdy stuff hunters wore. Everything else was, though.

Even after taking all of these measures, the thought that I didn't know what might happen made me want to vomit. In my experience, there wasn't much point in a commoner loading himself up with Relics, but that didn't mean I wouldn't try it. This was my responsibility.

My second-in-command was in her usual white uniform. It was already nighttime, but she was still alert and composed. *Is she still working? What a diligent employee.*

By the way, just about everyone already knew about my room, so she wasn't surprised.

"What's the matter? You're so... well equipped."

"Hahahaha... I'm gonna take a walk."

"If you were that worried about it, you shouldn't have pushed it on them!"

Shit. Didn't take long for me to get found out.

"Hahahahaha... No idea what you're talking about."

Driven into a corner, all I could offer was a stupid-sounding laugh. Eva looked me up and down, annoyed. Not because I was covered in Relics, though; I was always decked out from head to toe in the things. We had known each other for so long that she probably knew my whole personality by now.

"Perhaps you'd like to take another party with you as reinforcements?"

Eva's proposal was attractive, but even if we were in the same clan, they were different from my party members. There weren't any parties who would go with me at night to a dangerous treasure vault, and I couldn't force them to do the ridiculous.

I calmed my breathing and tried to look cool. “No prob. This is all according to plan.”

“Hold it right there.”

Eva didn’t care one bit about my bluff and closed right in on me. She had her eyes on the pendant hanging from my neck. It was a simple one, with a metallic capsule at the end. While it wasn’t a Relic, it was far more dangerous than any normal Relic.



“Is that Sitri’s slime?”

I kept my mouth shut.

“Didn’t she say not to use it because it could destroy the entire capital if you’re not careful?” Eva stared at me but didn’t reach out to take it. She was managing the risk well.

Who told her about it? I wondered. A few candidates came to mind, but I decided to leave it for now.

The capsule was normally kept in a safe-type Relic in the center of my room. There was apparently a specially bred slime within, but I had never seen it firsthand.

Slimes were a type of monster with viscous forms, boasting the status of “weakest creatures in existence.” Their almost-liquid bodies were organs in themselves. The poor things were so soft that you could hit them, slice them, cook them, boil them, or whatever else and kill them with ease. There were many different types, but most of them were trifles.

Even in a world where I existed, slimes were the weakest of the weak. But the one in this capsule was of a different sort, it seemed. I didn’t know what set it apart from the rest, but that was what the creator had said, so I figured it must’ve been true.

Relics were powerful, but their power and length of use depended on the amount of mana in them. I was always careful not to burn them out, but the last time they had been charged was before Grieving Souls had left on their trip—so over two weeks ago. The ones I held now were almost out of mana, so I couldn’t expect much power from them. The capsule was essentially a replacement.

Tino was incredible, so I figured she would be fine. I was going to avoid combat as much as possible, too, but it was natural as a hunter to take whatever means necessary when times called for it. I was a cautious, tough, and cynical guy.

Honestly, I *really* didn’t wanna do this. It would’ve been nice to avoid it entirely, but I wasn’t big and strong enough to carry any other non-Relic

weapons, so this was the best I could do. I also wasn't altogether sure how to use it, but we were gonna be in a treasure vault, anyway. Might as well just throw it and run. My adorable subordinate's life was irreplaceable.

"Pssh, no way. I would never walk around with something that broke imperial law."

While I was a guy who respected law and order, my childhood friends had a penchant for ignoring the rules. I didn't want her prying any deeper, so I immediately grabbed the handle on the wide window behind my desk and opened it. The wind blowing in was unexpectedly fierce and cold. These windows were made to open and shut with ease because there were *some* people who would just break in otherwise. It was helpful when they came around.

Eva looked at me, unusually fretful. Her eyes were locked on Sitri's slime.

She must be afraid that I'm going to do something crazy and make clan management that much harder.

"Erm, will things really be okay?" she asked.

I maintained a full-on smile to quell her fears.

Yeah, no, this totally sucks. I would've liked to take someone with me, but this Night Hiker can only be used by one person at a time.



After losing an intense battle, the wolf knight disappeared without a trace.

"Um, maybe we should just back out?" Rhuda suggested to Tino, who was glaring at the spot where the wolf knight had been.

Greg lowered his trusty broadsword and said, "Yeah, agreed. I knew this was gonna be bad news, but I didn't see that comin' at all. We oughta get out. Besides, it's not like the people we're here to rescue are alive, anyway. No point in goin'."

The wolf knight was strong. Its armor had repelled nearly all of their attacks, while its slashes, backed up by powerful muscles, could have killed them in one hit.

Wolf-type phantoms were typically smart and powerful, but this one had been armored to boot. It shouldn't have shown up around a level 3 treasure vault. Even Greg, a veteran with a recognized level of 4, would've had trouble fighting it one-on-one.

The only reason they had been able to defeat it without sustaining any wounds was because their opponent had been a loner, giving them an advantage in numbers. Tino had also drawn attention to it before it could hurt anyone. If a single one of them had been injured and slowed down as a result, they still would have won, but the fight would have dragged on for some time.

But as they looked to their leader, she answered without hesitation, "My decision is final. Besides, we haven't even entered the vault yet."

Greg balked. "Seriously, little lady? Why are you so stubborn? Our lives are on the line here! That thing obviously came from the White Wolf's Den. It might be rare for a phantom to leave its vault, but I bet you that place is crawlin' with the damn things."

Rhuda looked in the direction of the treasure vault and quivered. "When I came here last time, they were just normal wolves."

The wolves that normally appeared here were called Red Moons, owing to the fact that they resembled the Silver Moons. Until now, however, there had never been wolf-men with swords or armor.

When Rhuda had visited to test the waters several weeks ago, the phantoms had been normal. In terms of strength, she had more or less been able to defeat one on her own. Back then, however, she had been surrounded by several and had quickly realized that she couldn't handle it, so she'd retreated.

The wolf knight, on the other hand, had been leagues stronger than them. Rhuda's dagger had hardly managed to pierce its hide. To deal any sort of damage, she'd needed to aim for its uncovered head or any weak spots in its armor.

At her current skill level, she wouldn't be able to fend off *more* wolf knights and their fleet-footed movements while continuing to evade their attacks. Perhaps she could if she were to practice, but she didn't want to put her life in danger just to get better.

“They’ll provide excellent training.”

“Are you for real?” Rhuda blurted.

Her and Greg’s pleading had fallen on deaf ears. Tino shrugged her shoulders, as if to say, *That’s just how it is*.

Rhuda sensed a major rift between her and Tino; the tiny girl was strangely composed despite all the unknowns being thrown their way. Her attitude seemed to say that she had been through countless hellish trials far worse than this one. This was the essence of First Steps.

“Either way, the Great Greg is mistaken.”

“Just Greg is fine.”

“Greg is mistaken.”

Tino cast a glance at Gilbert, who looked dubiously down at his sword. His Relic was an extremely powerful weapon. Personality aside, he would probably be their best offense. Her master wouldn’t have just randomly tossed an uppity brat like him into the party for no reason.

During the battle, she had also observed Greg’s attacks and Rhuda’s maneuvers. The party members she’d been given were hardly lacking in skills. At the very least, they weren’t poor enough to make her choose retreat. Tino had what she needed. Her master was right, as always.

With a nod, she turned toward the treasure vault where the howls continued. “If Master sent us here, then our targets still live.”

Greg was astonished at Tino’s certainty. He couldn’t understand. Rather, nobody would normally understand it.

Treasure vaults were a danger zone. If someone went missing inside one, they were almost definitely dead, especially in an unpopular vault like this where there were no passing hunters to help out. The only way to see if they were still alive was to go and check in person.

Could anyone have predicted that they were still alive from all the way over in the capital? Anyone who was asked would say no. They would say you can only calculate the chance of their survival based on how long they’d been missing.

But one man *had* managed to do that. He defied all common sense; he made the impossible possible. That was why Krai Andrey was a level 8 hunter.

“Our ingenious master giving us an order means that there’s clear meaning behind it. Greg, do you dare make light of one of the only three level eight hunters in the capital?”

Her cold glare sent a cold bead of sweat down Greg’s cheek.

Trying to brush off the unpleasant mood, Rhuda forced herself to sound cheerful. “Y-Yeah, I agree. If our targets are still alive, we’ve gotta keep going. Right, Gilbert?”

Gilbert replied, ashen, without addressing the actual question. “The Purgatorial Sword’s out of mana, and I can’t charge it myself. Just had the thing charged, too.”

“Say what?”

Any hunters who used Relics knew to charge their mana in advance. The Purgatorial Sword was powerful, but it required a large amount of mana and consumed it quickly. It was too much for Gilbert to handle alone, and he knew it. Thus, he regularly paid Magi who specialized in charging Relics to do the work for him.

The last time he’d had it charged was a few days ago, immediately before First Steps’ recruitment meet. He hadn’t used the weapon once since then, so he’d thought he had mana to spare. But now, there was clearly no mana in it. If there had been a Magus in the party, they would have been able to charge it. Alas, there was not.

Tino was the first to discern the truth from Gilbert’s perplexed complaint. “Oh, Master, do you hate me so?”

They hadn’t even entered the treasure vault yet.

The White Wolf’s Den was a cavern-type vault. Silver Moons had been both intelligent and social, so they had gathered together in droves to dig an enormous den and live as one big pack.

In their final days, the pack contained over a thousand wolves. The den, large

enough to house a small village, had always buzzed like a busy beehive. Thus, even after the Silver Moons had been annihilated and the den had become a treasure vault, it had retained its structure.

Tino sighed as she looked at the huge entrance from her hiding place in the brush.

Before the Silver Moons had been hunted to the brink of extinction, several of the wolves had patrolled the entrance at all times, keeping guard. In their place were now the crimson wolf knights, their bodies covered in armor.

Their beastly nature was clear even from over fifty yards away. The wolves' fiery eyes were like bright lights in the darkness. Their unsheathed swords reflected the moonlight, giving off a dull gleam.

"Whoa. It's not just swords—they've even got bows and guns," Gilbert said in a hushed voice.

Greg squinted at the phantoms. "Damn. Looks like they didn't just have a single extra-strong one, then. Were they fed too much mana material? What happened here?"

When the mana material flowing through the world collected and became dense enough, it created treasure vaults and phantoms. Yet in situations where it became even denser for one reason or another, the phantoms and treasure vault absorbed more mana material, transforming into more advanced forms. This irregular phenomenon, feared by hunters, was called evolution.

Evolution was not a common event. Mana material normally moved freely along ley lines, revolving around the world. As a result, there existed a sort of limit to the amount of mana material that could accumulate in one spot. For the most part, evolution only happened when there were changes in the ley lines or their environments, or some external cause increasing the density of mana material for a time.

The Zebrudian Empire, a land that reaped great profit from the treasure vaults around it, was sensitive to shifts in the ley lines. Hunters were meant to be told when signs of it had been found, but they had been given no such notice. As the party beheld several phantoms of higher rank than they expected, however, it was not the time for balking at their reality.

Tino calmed her breathing and coolly analyzed the situation. Normally, she would've been able to clear the White Wolf's Den alone, but things had undoubtedly changed. The wolf knights wandering around the entrance to the den were much larger than the Red Moons they had been expecting; they were probably twice as tall. These wolf-men were also bipedal, as opposed to the Red Moons, which walked on all fours.

She knew from their earlier battle that these creatures were stronger and more durable. In that regard, they were fortunate to know what they were up against before they plunged into the den. No doubt this had all been part of her master's plan.

"The tunnels were made to accommodate the size of normal Silver Moons. With how large these phantoms are, their movements will probably be restricted inside. They won't be able to jump or leap... I assume, anyway."

"So you're saying we're better off going inside instead of fighting out here? I don't have any long-ranged attacks, though," Gilbert muttered.

Five wolf-men stood guard outside of the den. Though the armor they wore was all the same, they wielded different weapons. Three had swords, one had a bow, and one had a long, unfamiliar-looking firearm. Based on their numbers and positions, it would be impossible to slip into the den unnoticed. Taking into account the possibility of a pincer attack, ignoring them to jump into the vault was a poor idea.

"We're lookin' for a person in there? Someone saw this and seriously decided to go in?"

"It's possible that they didn't notice anything was wrong. It's not necessarily a bad thing, either; when a treasure vault evolves, the treasure within does as well."

Vaults, phantoms, and Relics all materialized in the same way. The denser the mana material, the stronger the Relics within. The fact that this place was unpopular was equally important. After all, the first to grab a Relic was the one who would rightfully own it.

"Does *anyone* here have long-ranged attacks?"

Greg and Rhuda exchanged glances.

In this situation, Tino was looking for any long-distance attacks they could use to damage the wolf knights through their armor. For example, Rhuda could use techniques that involved throwing her dagger, but between the wolves' armor and their thick pelts, that wouldn't translate into a meaningful attack.

As Tino looked upon her silent party members, she once again became fully aware of the poor balance in this composition. To any normal party, it was common sense to include at least one member who specialized in long-distance attacks for situations like this.

Gilbert grabbed his Purgatorial Sword in both hands and took a fighting stance.

"A'ight, fine. I'll just cut my way through 'em. If we can get rid of the bow and the gun, the rest shouldn't be too tough to handle."

"Excuse me? Are you an idiot?"

"It might not have any mana left, but the Purgatorial Sword is still stronger than a regular blade. It's cool; I'm used to stuff like this."

Gilbert's leather armor, fitted with light metal, was commonly used among hunters who favored mobility. It was *not* the kind of protection a front-line aggressor would usually wear. He would be better bait than Tino or Rhuda, who had geared and trained to be light as a feather, but he had no shield. A two-handed greatsword was a wholly offensive weapon, and it wasn't exactly easy to handle.

Neither his evasion nor his defense was well-developed, but his calm tone of voice proved that this boy truly was used to these kinds of situations.

"Come to think of it, you were a one-man carry before, weren't you?" Greg said almost admiringly.

Gilbert snorted in response. A one-man carry was a particularly standout member of a party who served as their backbone.

Hunters' individual talents varied wildly. It was only natural that people in the same party would differ in strength. Hunters who were used to fighting

alongside weak allies had a tendency to take the lead. That was how they had always prevailed, so it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. However, that could cause discord when one entered a new party.

As Gilbert stood ready to charge in, Tino glared at him. "You'll do no such thing. I don't care if you want to die, but as temporary as it may be, I have a duty as party leader to make sure you all live through this."

"Huh?"

Considering the circumstances and personalities involved, it was strange for the leader to actually care about Gilbert's safety. It would make sense if they had lived through years of hunts together, but this was just a hodgepodge of random people.

Tino was the most nimble member of the party, so it would be easy for her to escape even if the wolf-men all converged on them. In fact, Gilbert wouldn't have been surprised if she used him as a sacrifice. That wasn't altogether rare in temporary parties, as being a hunter meant putting your life on the line.

Guessing the meaning behind Gilbert's confused gaze, Tino frowned. "Nobody gets left behind. Master is expecting great things from me as party leader, and making it home with everyone intact is the *minimum* expected of me."

Tino knew that being a hunter wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. Sometimes, members had to be sacrificed so that the party itself could go on living. But she was certain that this wasn't what her master would want.

"Don't lump *me* in with hunters who would abandon others."

Her master wouldn't even think of giving her a request that required her to sacrifice an ally. That wasn't Krai Andrey's style as the clan master of First Steps. Even if she was thrown into a temporary party with people she didn't know—no, *because* she was under these conditions, Tino Shade's ability to lead was being tested.

Breathing in the cool night air, she did her best to suppress her rising heartbeat in the face of the coming battle.

Then, after one look at all of her party members, she spoke with confidence befitting a leader. "As Rhuda and I are the most agile, we'll go out in front and

bait them. I've undergone training to evade long-ranged weapon fire. When they're distracted, Greg and Gilbert will ambush the back line from behind. Once you're close, you won't have to fear their attacks."



Oh, please, just let Tino live. Sacrifice your whole party if you have to!

I gritted my teeth as I soared through the moonlit sky. The wind battered me as I sped along. I was flying using the propulsion provided by my overcoat Relic, looking almost like I had been launched from a catapult. And much like a catapult's payload, once I'd been launched, I couldn't return. All I could do was move forward, making adjustments to my direction as I went.

I passed instantly over the high walls and gates surrounding the city. Now, the only things visible below me were vast plains and unlit roads.

It was a beautiful sight, but as for me, I just wanted to vomit.

The Night Hiker was an overcoat-type Relic. The fabulous, navy-blue fabric was like the night itself given form, starred with a white gem on the collar. This Relic gave the user the incredibly powerful ability to fly.

Even among the numerous Relics out there, the ability to fly was very rare. Rather than vessels with multiple seats, the most popular and expensive ones were those which allowed only a single person to fly. This was the only Relic in my collection that had this ability, but it didn't come without its fair share of flaws.

The Human Missile Crisis, a truly sad affair involving the previous owner of this Relic, had shown the world both the usefulness and danger inherent in it. The hunter had slammed his head into the ceiling with such incredible force that he had died on the spot. Before the Relic could be disposed of for killing a high-ranking hunter, I had taken it in. A real-deal defective product. But make no mistake; it let you "fly."

It didn't allow for fine adjustments, and it put too much emphasis on propulsion instead of gravity control, so it wasn't able to hover like other flight Relics could. Heck, it didn't even have brakes! The thing was nothing but trouble, but allow me to repeat myself—*it let you fly*. Fast, too. So fast that

safety was clearly out of the picture.

The fact that it had appeared as a Relic meant that some item like this had existed in the past. I sure would've liked to give the guy who'd thought this up a nice, hour-long tongue-lashing.

I covered the distance to the forest—over an hour of walking for even superhuman hunters—in the blink of an eye. The party's vision had likely been obstructed by the thick trees, their movement impeded by rocks and detritus, their stamina depleted as they went. But I was flying, so not me!

As I shot through the air like a speeding bullet, I heard the cries of birds and critters in the woods. They didn't even know that I was the one who wanted to cry here.

In my extremely blurry field of vision, I managed to spot my destination: the White Wolf's Den. It was a treeless, open spot with a gaping hole in the earth. There weren't any other cavern-type vaults around here, so this was definitely the one.

I'd made it here fast. So fast that it charmed even me.

Tino ought to still be alive.

The only problem now was the lack of brakes. I gritted my teeth and adjusted my forward momentum down, diving right into the hole.



Phantoms were far from the chaotic, invincible monsters they were made out to be. Just as Relics were objects based on the world's recollection of items that had once existed, phantoms were living things based on *creatures* that had once existed. So too had these towering giants, along with the blades they swung, existed at some point in history.

Gilbert blocked the swing from overhead with his greatsword. The incredible force behind the attack caused his arms to shudder and his knees to buckle, but he just barely held out.

The wolf knights—named as such for convenience's sake because they were wolf-men clad in armor—may have had different weapons, but their fearsome strength, durability, and unbelievable agility for their size were uniform.

The party had only fought a few so far, but their strength was beyond even Gilbert's, and their speed and agility rivaled Rhuda's. Meanwhile, their durability far surpassed any member of the party.

One blow from the beasts would be a heavy or perhaps even fatal wound. Tino aside, these hunters usually followed the standard of going to treasure vaults where they could fight with some leeway. Right now, her party was out of their element.

Their opponents were truly powerful, but fortunately, Tino and the others had one thing on their side: teamwork. While Gilbert held back an enemy's blade, Greg stepped in with his broadsword and swung directly at the weak point in its arm—the opening between its gauntlet and armplate. As soon as the beast let up, Gilbert used all his might to push its sword off to the left.

The large, dull blade dropped next to him, and the wolf knight howled with rage. It glared down at Gilbert and Greg with murder in its eyes, then collapsed on the spot. Tino leapt up near the ceiling, landed just behind the wolf knight, then stabbed it in the nape of its neck.

The dark-red shortsword she currently held in both hands had been dropped by one of the first wolf knights they'd slain upon entering the den. This blade, when swung with all of one's might, could cut through a wolf's pelt, flesh, and bone to sink deep within its throat.

It was a fatal wound; the phantom didn't even cry out before dissipating. Tino landed without a sound.

Gilbert looked down upon the scene for some time before finally sighing in relief. Fatigue was visible on his face.

"Haah, haah. Did we get 'im?"

"What a ridiculous freakin' request."

Greg frowned, still feeling the sensation of the pelt in his hands. It was more penetrable than metal armor, but the wolf knights' fur was still surprisingly tough. If they didn't put their all into each attack, it would be difficult to get the kill.

The inside of the den, as Tino expected, wasn't large enough to comfortably

accommodate the wolf knights. Width aside, the ceiling was only *just* high enough for the wolf knights to fit. As a result, there wasn't much chance of them getting decapitated, which had nearly happened when they'd been ambushed. Nevertheless, the tension from fighting such big enemies in such a dim, tight space wore at their nerves.

Sliding her shortsword out of the wolf knight's throat, Tino said flatly, "Defeating them is simple with four of us. No matter how strong they are, our enemies have no concept of cooperation."

That was the knights' greatest weakness. They may have been strong individually, but they never bothered to join forces. Even when their allies were dying, they did nothing but prioritize the enemy before them. When multiple wolf knights appeared at once, Tino could easily lead all but one of them away while her three party members whaled on the remaining knight. It was dangerous in its own way, of course, but it was an effective strategy when surrounded by powerful enemies.

"I've obtained a weapon, too."

Tino specialized in bare-handed combat, but it just wasn't enough to take down these wolf knights. She normally walked around with a short dagger so as not to impede her mobility, but it was a sub-weapon at best, as it came with only minimal power and reach. It was a great boon that she'd acquired a weapon which could defeat wolf knights in one well-aimed blow.

"It'd be nice to get another one, though," Greg commented.

Rhuda sighed, having only gotten the chance to stay on guard and watch for openings in the end.

Leaving aside the tension and fatigue, the treasure vault raid was going well. The Thief duo gave them extra breathing room in the scouting department, so one could conclude that there was zero chance of them being ambushed.

The wolf knights seemed to act solo most of the time, so it wasn't especially difficult for the party to move through the teeming den while evading them. When they did end up in a skirmish, they could use their impromptu warrior combo.

Gilbert's big talk at the member recruitment meet was backed by real strength. Greg, meanwhile, was experienced enough that he was able to work alongside him well. They locked down enemies together, and Tino finished them off. Conversely, if Tino drew their attention, Gilbert and Greg would jump in and attack.

Rhuda didn't have any standout achievements, but that wasn't because she was weak. If Tino hadn't been a Thief, then Rhuda's presence would have been vital; if Rhuda hadn't been there, then Tino wouldn't have been able to focus on battle.

Their situation was precarious at the moment. It would all fall apart if anyone was badly injured. But for now, they were surviving.

Every bit of it was surely calculated. Perhaps her master even predicted that the phantom would drop a weapon? After this thought crossed Tino's mind, she uttered, "Master is always right. Master is God."

Greg cringed at her words. "Uh, yeah, I guess."

Treasure hunters all had a level of confidence in their own strength. Clan masters and party leaders collected groups of such people, so they required some amount of charisma. But Tino's trust in her master might have gone too far.

More than that, as far as Greg could tell, Krai didn't have an ounce of charisma. Greg's long history as a hunter gave him confidence in his well-trained eye, and Krai just didn't have the mysterious draw of other powerful hunters.

When Krai's identity had been revealed at the recruitment meet, Greg had thought it was some kind of crappy joke. Though he knew now that the man was actually Thousand Tricks, it was still impossible to believe. Despite being told it had all been calculated, he could only imagine it was one big mistake.

Greg would've understood if the level 8 status was all because of his connections, but the way Tino spoke showed that she had nothing but pure trust in Krai. Still, he wasn't going to cause discord in the middle of a hunt, so he'd wait until later before he spoke out of turn. As long as he made it back alive, he would have a chance to figure it out. For now, all they needed to do

was live through this abnormal treasure vault.

As Greg slid his broadsword into the sheath on his hip, Tino shuddered. “There are likely to be more up ahead. Master’s usual training isn’t like this.”

“Ah, hell. What are you getting at?!” Gilbert demanded to know, clearly irritated.

Any normal hunter would definitely have chosen to flee by this point. Things might have been different if this were an unknown vault, but as they had thought they knew what phantoms were supposed to appear, it was clear that something unusual was going on. Rhuda, Greg, and Gilbert couldn’t imagine a greater trial than this.

“Regardless, let’s proceed with caution. There were no signs of life, combat, or corpses near the entrance. They should be deeper within.”

Contrary to the fatigue that weighed heavily on him, Gilbert Bush’s senses were perfectly keen. The tingling battlefield air, the stagnant stench, the never-before-seen phantoms that attacked them. Rather than fear, Gilbert felt exaltation.

“I can’t do this anymore. It’s impossible to keep up with you. I’m out of this party.” A man three years Gilbert’s senior had said these words to him the day before he’d left his party.

Gilbert had been in a party with this man ever since he’d come to the capital. Though he had been older and more experienced than Gilbert, the man’s skills had been rather lackluster. The man had tried and tried. He’d thought endlessly about what he could do, even asking for advice on maneuvering in battle. However, the gap between them had only continued to widen. After all, Gilbert hadn’t just been lazing around throughout all this.

At the time, he’d hated those words, said to him over and over by different party members. But now that he was fighting in a treasure vault beyond his abilities, he could understand how they felt. They had been struggling, too. Gilbert acknowledged that he should’ve considered their feelings more.

More than that, though, Gilbert was exhilarated to fight alongside party members of his skill level and above. Before, his former party members had

tended to come and go, and he had far surpassed each and every one of them.

The people he was with now were different. They were his equals. Though Greg's sword swings were weaker than Gilbert's, the man had the technique and speed to strike enemies' weak points. Tino's leaps and backstabs were nothing short of incredible.

Rhuda's weapon was meager, so she wasn't able to kill wolf knights like Tino could. But she was able to do just about everything else, from scouting to diversions. Gilbert couldn't hold a candle to her in that regard.

These wolf knights were too much for a single person to handle, but the party fought them as a combined force. This long-forgotten feeling got Gilbert's blood boiling, as if he'd just been refueled. Though his sword should have felt heavy from the fatigue, he swung it like it was nothing.

Several hours after they entered the treasure vault, Greg noticed that Gilbert was still hale and hearty. "Whoa, someone's in good shape."

"Heh. That's 'cause I finally get my chance to shine."

Although he had started off just barely able to parry the wolf knights' blades, he had gradually begun to overpower them. It wasn't that he had been holding back at the start. Leaving aside the question of whether it was mental or physical, his growth here was evident.

As the next wolf knight collapsed, Gilbert started panting. He only had one real complaint. "Man, if only the Purgatorial Sword had some mana." He looked down at the sword in his hands and sighed.

At this point in time, the sword had lost its power as a Relic. He didn't have the mana required to charge it himself, nor did the other members of his party. If he could wield the power of the Relic, he would be able to defeat more wolf knights with ease. He might not be able to do what Thousand Tricks could do, but he could cut down the wolves with his flaming weapon. The search would go more smoothly as well.

"You're not ready for the Relic," Tino replied matter-of-factly. "Rely on Relics too much, and your skills grow dull. That's why I don't use them."

"You seriously don't have a Relic?" Gilbert was used to such haughty talk from

his tiny leader, but he was still somewhat surprised.

Indeed, Tino didn't seem to be using any Relics. Regardless of what they might be, a recognized level 4 hunter was sure to have found at least one or two Relics in their searches. This was especially true considering she was in a clan; a friend might have even given her one.

Gilbert looked at Tino in confusion, but she just tapped her arm and continued, "Relics are but a crutch. They shouldn't be used in normal battle, and you shouldn't fight someone if you need a Relic to defeat them. I imagine part of Master's plan was for me to teach you that. No doubt, in fact. I mean, he wouldn't use up your sword's mana for nothing, would he?"

"Calm down, nosy."

He was skeptical, but the fact that Tino wasn't using a Relic here lent credibility to her claims. To be fair, he hadn't even been able to touch her in the test of strength, during which he hadn't used his Relic. Gilbert frowned and looked down at the Purgatorial Sword again.

"When I find Relics in treasure vaults, I give them to my dear sister... that is, my mentor, so she can give them to my master. If he decides the Relic is worthy enough, he takes me out for ice cream. In short, Master is God."

"Sounds more like he's exploitin' ya to me." Greg's eyebrows twitched as he listened in.

"Perish the thought. Master comes with me despite his dislike for sweets. I repeat, Master is God."

Gilbert was inclined to agree with Greg, but he wasn't about to interrupt Tino when she was this serious about it.

After just under an hour of walking, the perimeter suddenly opened up. The path became wider and the ceiling higher. Rhuda wiped sweat off her brow with the back of her hand and gave a careful look around. The path was now wide enough to accommodate multiple wolf knights standing side by side.

Tino's breathing was calm. Her expression remained unchanged from when they had entered the vault, and her clothes were still pristine.

“We’ll be in the alpha’s lair soon. Before this became a treasure vault, the alpha Silver Moon resided there.”

Greg’s face stiffened. “The boss chamber, huh? How ’bout a quick breather?”

“Boss chamber” was hunter slang. It referred to the deepest depths of a treasure vault, where an extraordinarily powerful phantom was likely to appear. The phantoms in vaults, after all, did not spawn randomly.

Typically, phantoms grew stronger as one progressed deeper into treasure vaults. In the case of vaults that reflected the past, however, the most powerful phantoms appeared in set locations.

In a castle, it would be the throne room. In a tower, it would be the top floor. In a ship, it would be the captain’s quarters. In this case, it would be wherever the alpha of the pack had lived. Of course, there didn’t necessarily *have* to be a boss, but there was reason to be wary.

Greg’s words prompted Tino to check her party’s current status. Rhuda was a recognized level 3, while the others were level 4. By the time a hunter was level 3, their stamina was well-bolstered by mana material, but they were all still middling hunters.

They couldn’t afford to be careless. Upon infiltrating a treasure vault, the ensuing battles put one’s life at risk. Yet Gilbert and Rhuda still seemed perfectly composed. They were a little tired, but not enough to require a break.

Gilbert understood what Tino was thinking and balled his hands into fists. “I’ve still got plenty of fight in me.”

“Me too. I mean, a few more battles won’t be a big deal,” Rhuda said.

There was no safe place in a treasure vault. They could create a safe haven of sorts if they had a member with barrier magic, but no one like that existed in this group. Staying in one place meant the wolf knights lurking around the den would find them before long. Taking a break in this danger zone would do nothing to soothe the mind.

They needed to survive this deadly situation. Though a hunter should rest whenever necessary, the party wasn’t in poor condition. It was best to check the boss chamber while they still had their momentum.

“We’ll decide after checking the alpha’s lair. Our targets should be nearby. Best we save them and return immediately.”

“Sounds good, boss. Let’s go get ’em.” Greg took a deep breath and looked toward the boss chamber.

The group headed toward the room at the end of the path, careful to not make any noises. Visibility wasn’t great, but a trail of luminous stones placed several yards apart gave them some dim light to go by. They had likely been placed by a hunter who had come here before.

Just over ten yards away from the boss chamber, Tino stopped. She closed her eyes and put her palms against the wall. Focusing on the smells and sounds of the den, she searched for any traces of life in the distance.

She perceived the cool air brushing past her face, her comrades’ stifled breathing, and the sound of her heartbeat. After searching as such for a while, she finally heaved a sigh.

“Something’s here.”

“Eugh. Think it’s the rescue targets?”

“The boss, I’d say. Typically, Master’s requests involve some big game.”

“Seriously?” There was a bizarre look on Greg’s face. Even *he* didn’t know if he was just incredibly shocked or if that claim was so lacking in credibility that he was lost for how to respond.

Phantoms in the boss chamber could be significantly stronger than the small fry outside. Based on the wolf knights they’d fought along the way, the boss wouldn’t be impossible for them to defeat if they fought tooth and nail. From what they knew as hunters, however, charging in to fight it would be reckless.

Normally, this vault would have housed a monster fractionally larger than the Red Moons, but they were not dealing with normal circumstances. Additionally, they hadn’t found any Relics so far. Typically, a vault with powerful phantoms and no Relics to be found was somewhere you didn’t want to go.

“Maybe we oughta leave?” Greg proposed.

Tino lowered her shapely eyebrows in irritation. “You said that already. We’ve

made it this far nearly untouched. We can handle the boss."

Greg scowled, gritting his teeth. She had a point, but it was hard to agree with her. Compared to the treasure vaults he usually raided, the phantoms here were on another level.

To hunters, safety came first. When choosing a treasure vault to raid, one of the standards for decision-making was whether a single party member could defeat a phantom alone. If he had known what was happening at the White Wolf's Den in advance, Greg probably wouldn't have joined this party. After all, with the paltry reward and the low chance of finding a Relic, this really was volunteer work.

He'd joined out of curiosity because this was a request from the huge clan First Steps. If it had been any other clan, he almost definitely would've laughed in their faces. Plus, if he'd known that the phantoms were stronger than the ones he normally fought, he would've stopped listening altogether.

Greg patted the hilt of the sword on his hip. It wasn't the fanciest sword out there, but it had been his favorite in the past few years. He took good care of the thing.

"You're much more cautious than your appearance would suggest, Greg."

Greg was astounded by her audacity, as were Rhuda and Gilbert.

In the face of all this, Tino quietly continued, "Safe jobs don't present opportunities for growth. Greg, your years as a hunter have given you ample skill. Caution is enough if all you want is to stay alive, but sometimes, you need to push yourself."

"But, I mean... y'know." Greg hesitated to speak, even to this girl who was over a decade younger than him, because he realized that nothing she'd said was wrong.

Casualty rates among treasure hunters were generally quite high, but the highest death rates were among people who had just become hunters. In a sense, the longer one remained a hunter, the lower their chance of dying.

It was partly because they grew stronger, but most all, seasoned hunters developed a sense of danger and caution. They stopped pushing forward with

brute force and instead began avoiding battles where there was any chance of defeat. These trends were all too common among hunters who were forced to watch as more and more of their friends and comrades died.

Therefore, for every older, more experienced level 3 hunter, there was a young hunter like Gilbert who shot up to level 4 in the blink of an eye. For all the growth that resulted from mana material absorption, however, a hunter's nerve wasn't steeled along with it.

Most hunters were at the middling level of 3 or below. Achievement points were necessary to raise one's recognized level. It was hard to accumulate these points only by raiding treasure vaults suitable for one's level. Thus, while level 3 hunters could challenge vaults around or below their level if they just wanted to live comfortably, that also meant stagnating in the long term.

Greg was a level 4. Though he was beyond the average rank of level 3, his level hadn't risen in a long time. That fact definitely weighed on his mind.

Tino gazed upon Greg, her eyes clear. "Greg, I believe a hunter with a long history like you would only come to First Steps if you wanted to do something about that."

"Well..."

Tino's words struck deep. Greg floundered, not knowing what to say. The passion he had had for being a hunter had long since been extinguished. How long had it been since he'd last raided a treasure vault with phantoms this strong? He furrowed his brow, trying to remember, but he could not.

Seeing Greg's silence, Tino said something unbelievable. "I imagine that's why Master brought you into this party."

"What?!"

"This request is the ideal opportunity to break you out of your rut. Otherwise, Master wouldn't have any reason to pick you, someone he just met at the member recruitment meet. He's trying to save us all. In short, Master is God."

Again, she wasn't wrong. Greg gulped. It was weird as hell, to be sure. Why would *he* stand out to Thousand Tricks? He had exchanged few words with Krai at the recruitment meet, and they hadn't exactly been positive ones. He still

hadn't the slightest inkling as to why Rhuda had been brought in, but his own recruitment was equally bizarre. So much so that when Tino had summoned him, he'd thought she had the wrong guy.

All three of the recruits looked flabbergasted.

Tino sighed. "What, you think my master just picked all of you at random? He would never put together such a hodgepodge of people for no reason. It's all the result of his ingenious plan, the labors of his elaborate cunning. In short, Master is God."

Greg looked over at Gilbert, unable to believe what he was hearing. Declarations of godliness aside, though, her explanation *was* rather persuasive. The only problem was that the man he met back there didn't match up whatsoever with the idyllic master she spoke of.

Everyone knew Thousand Tricks' name, but nobody knew the true nature of the mysterious level 8 hunter. Greg couldn't help but shudder.

Rhuda timidly raised her hand. "Umm, so why was I summoned, then?"

Tino thought for a moment, looking the uncomfortable Rhuda up and down. Her eyes stopped at Rhuda's plump chest, which was much larger than her own. Though they wore similar leather jackets, their silhouettes were entirely different. Tino looked even more intense now than when she was fighting phantoms.

When her master had listed off the people he wanted, he had claimed that Rhuda was a good candidate because she wanted to go to the White Wolf's Den. Clearly, that had just been a bluff. He wouldn't have such a flippant motive for assembling a party that would toe the line between life and death. And if he *did*, then his especially flippant "Maybe just the Great Greg and Li'l Gilbert?" would have to be taken at face value. To Tino, it wasn't even worth considering.

Still waiting for a response, Rhuda looked puzzled.

Tino remained silent for a time, then concluded, "I don't know, but I think it's because your boobs are big. Mine will get bigger, too; unlike you, I'm still growing."

"Wha?! Huh? Hey, hold on! What was that?!"

“Now, let’s stop wasting time, defeat the boss, and complete the request. I’ll take the vanguard.”

“Wait! Explain, please!”

Tino took her mind off of her confused party member and approached the boss chamber.

Wolf knights were large, strong, sturdy, and fast. They were aggressive, fearsome allies, but they were far inferior to Tino in one regard: agility.

Tino’s mentor, Liz Smart, was a Thief like her. They had fought in real, hand-to-hand combat countless times during her training. Having been thoroughly trounced by someone much faster than her over and over again, Tino’s sharp eyes didn’t miss a single motion the wolf knights made. Compared to the agile Liz, their movements were sluggish. Even if her enemies became progressively quicker, she could easily keep up with them.

Now, the only question was whether she could damage them through their tough pelts. Typically, a Thief’s job wasn’t to defeat phantoms. Tino’s training in particular was meant to bolster her agility.

“I think there’s only one. Let’s deal with it before other phantoms come.”

Everyone assumed their fighting stances. Greg unsheathed his blade, and Gilbert readied the Purgatorial Sword.

Rhuda pulled out her dagger and took a step back. Her role was to watch out for and divert intruders. If any phantoms tried to get in on their fight, she would drag them away from the battle. She wasn’t particularly strong on her own, however, so she had to avoid pincer attacks. It was a vital role.

“We dunno what kind of monster’s gonna be back there. How ’bout I do it?” Gilbert suggested to Tino.

She took a long, deep breath before smirking at him. “That won’t be a problem. My dear sister told me that the first attack is key. I’ll take it.”

“I mean, this is dangerous. It’s not like getting the first blow in is gonna get us anything.”

Tino stretched her arms and legs, loosening up her muscles. Once she was

sure she was in good form, she nodded to herself and said, “I... am a hunter.” Then, she dashed toward the boss chamber.

It was a wide room, more than thirty yards in diameter. Apart from the path Tino had taken, there were smaller paths along the perimeter. The ceiling here was much higher than the rest of the cavern—about twice as tall as the ridiculously large wolf knights.

When did we get this deep underground? Tino wondered.

Yet despite the spaciousness of this chamber, the giant figure standing in the very center made it look cramped. It was a wolf knight wielding a crimson axe as large as Tino herself. This one was two sizes taller than the wolf knights they had fought thus far, and it was clad to the neck in obsidian plate armor.

The armored wolf knights along the way had been annoying, but the party had at least been able to spot their weaknesses. By contrast, this one had no visible openings; all of its joints were perfectly protected. Its figure, a beefed-up version of the already-powerful wolf knights, towered over the surroundings.

Most of all, unlike the red wolves they’d encountered on their way here, this one was the color of the moon. It had a glimmering, snow-white pelt. The left half of its fierce face was covered with human bones. The creature’s baleful form emanated enmity toward all mankind.

At that moment, two ears on its head twitched. Noticing the intruders, this wolf, reminiscent of the lost Silver Moons, turned toward Tino with no ounce of fear or fluster. It had the presence of a king. Its bloodlust washed over her as it opened its maw and let out a howl. Almost simultaneously, Tino sprinted over to its side. Compared to the giant knight, she was like a mouse. The knight’s hellish gaze followed the intruder as she scampered around it.

A beastly stench and the sound of scraping metal filled the room. Watching as her enemy moved its weapon, Tino stilled her breath. This fully armored wolf had not been unexpected, but it was the worst possible outcome.

Tino’s specialty was kicks. The metal fitted in the soles of her boots allowed her to outright kick the heads off smaller monsters. However, she wasn’t strong enough to crush this metal armor; in fact, it was likely that she would just hurt herself in the process. Injuring her legs and slowing herself down would spell

death. As the beast was so large, it was unlikely she would be able to catch it off guard, either.

Nervousness and elation coiled around her heart.

Just then, the axe came flying at her. Battle-axes were typically difficult weapons to control. Though they came with great power, they moved the user's center of gravity toward the blade itself. Someone with subpar strength would have trouble keeping their balance after a swing. But this wolf swung it with ease, like it was only a stick.

The blade was probably an entire yard in width. Tino stepped back to evade the blow that came at her with terrifying speed. Right before her eyes, it passed by like a pendulum. Its blade severed the air, sending a powerful gust of wind her way. It was truly awe-inspiring. Even a light scrape from the blade would likely send Tino flying. Blood-red eyes pursued her, their grudge palpable.

Her enemy turned its giant body. One step, merely for the sake of changing directions, was enough to shake the cave. Despite its massive size, the beast's motions were perfectly fluid. It was *strong*.

Tino gulped, faced with the brutal blow. She desperately groped for a path to victory. Just running away would be easy; actually taking down the phantom was the hard part. Even Gilbert would have trouble taking that battle-axe head-on. Likewise, the Purgatorial Sword itself would probably not be able to tear through its armor.

She passed under the beast's arm as it rose in the air, slicing at its armored leg along the way. There was a shrill sound of metal scraping against metal as the impact made her hand go numb. Her weapon left a visible graze on its armor, but the beast didn't move in the slightest, like it was rooted to the spot.

Worse yet, this wolf was intelligent. Its eyes, wet with tears of resentment, stayed locked on Tino. This one was different from the other wolf knights they fought. Smoke and mirrors wouldn't work here.

The other party members ran up behind the boss, but stopped the moment they laid eyes on it. Typically, they would use Tino as bait to attack from behind. But Gilbert and the others knew from a glance that this wolf was already quite wary of any ambushes. Having evaluated the situation, Gilbert and Greg readied

their swords and swiftly dispersed left and right.

Gilbert was horrified as he watched the battle-axe move up and down. “What is that thing?!”

“Dammit! I’ve never seen somethin’ like this!” Greg searched for a weak point, visibly disturbed.

As planned, Rhuda stood at somewhat of a distance, scanning the foe while keeping an eye out for reinforcements. The silver wolf knight was surrounded by the four of them, but it remained regal and composed.

We’ve got to go for the head, Tino concluded. This boss was many times stronger than the wolf knights, but the one thing they all shared was their absence of a helmet. Thus, its weakness was likely the same.

The remaining problem, then, was its height. Tino wouldn’t be able to reach its head without kicking off the ground hard, and she would be defenseless in that moment. Leaping up to it from behind probably wouldn’t work this time, as she would just get swatted away.

Though the creature’s eyes beheld the entire party, it was primarily focused on Tino. Evidently, its intelligence was on par with that of a human.

“What do we do?”

“Should we retreat?”

Fortunately, Gilbert, Greg, and Rhuda were standing their ground rather than fleeing in terror. Tino had thought them insignificant at first, but during this raid, she had come to know their courage. If they didn’t have the necessary pluck, they would have turned tail long before entering the vault. Any chance of victory lay in that fact.

It was nigh impossible for Tino to defeat this boss alone. Thankfully, she had allies now—party members who had come with her all this way. This was a trial, she knew, as she watched the wolf in all of its seething fighting spirit.

Krai Andrey gave promising members trials that put their lives on the line. A long, long time ago, they had been given a name by a member of Grieving Souls.

The Thousand Trials. These were the First Steps to glory, and it was up to Tino to take them.

“Block one blow. I’ll figure out the rest.”

Gilbert unleashed a roar. “Graaah!”

With that as their signal, the battle began. It would be the most intense spectacle Rhuda Runebeck had ever witnessed. The battle-axe was like a storm as it was swung freely in all directions. Gilbert opened his eyes as wide as they would go, blocking blows from above or from the side with his Purgatorial Sword. Each time their blades met, Gilbert had to clench his fists tightly around the handle.

While the Purgatorial Sword was massive, the bone-masked knight’s battle-axe was even larger. Its wide swings were artless and left it open to attack, but each strike had such abnormal power behind it that Gilbert, who hadn’t been forced to take a step back once so far, was now being pushed back as he repelled the axe over and over.

He couldn’t take these attacks head-on. Reckless as Gilbert could be, he was a hunter who had undertaken many years of training. He had plenty of experience against enemies stronger than himself. Beads of sweat formed on his brow. His breathing was ragged, but he still managed to block each and every one of these life-threatening swings just in time.

“Damn, his armor’s tough. My sword’s not gonna break it!”

As Gilbert continued to block and parry, Greg slashed and thrust at any tiny opening he could find. But despite his acute strikes at the beast’s hands and arms—and even the handle of the battle-axe—he accomplished nothing beyond delaying the boss’s assault by a fraction of a second.

The wolf’s fighting technique wasn’t that great; at least, it was nowhere near as proficient as Tino’s party. However, it was harder, bigger, stronger, and faster. That was all it took for this boss to overpower the four of them.

Though the boss faced Gilbert and Greg head-on, its raging blows kept Tino in check as she watched from its blind spot. This wolf had clearly analyzed each individual’s fighting power. Its priority target was neither the greatsword-

wielding Gilbert nor the bulky Greg, but their delicate leader.

For the first time, Rhuda had learned that phantoms' intelligence could be truly dreadful... but she had also learned of the greatness of the hunters who fought them. Tino evaded the battle-axe with optimal motions. Her glossy black hair, grazed by the blade, scattered through the air. Sweating, she watched it sweep past with keen eyes. There was no trace of fear on her face.

Rhuda watched her in awe. How could she move like that? How, when faced with attacks that could kill her if she lagged behind even a second, could she remain so calm and cool? It wasn't that Tino had almighty speed. No matter how fast she moved, it was impossible for her to move faster than the swinging axe. It was her courage that was so impressive.

Despite their grave predicament, Rhuda was amazed by Tino's elegant evasion. It was as though she were merely dancing. Having gone solo until this point, Rhuda had never seen the motions of a superior Thief except at the Association's training grounds. Their maneuvers and techniques had been excellent, for sure, but they hadn't moved Rhuda's heart. And yet, upon entering this party and seeing Tino today, she knew that there was something altogether different about the way Tino danced without falling back.

A Thief's territory wasn't in battle. As someone who carried the same role, Rhuda knew that fighting at close range was usually a mistake in itself. But as she watched this girl even younger than herself nimbly flip through the air in the face of grave danger, Rhuda trembled with admiration.

"Damn, what is this thing's deal?! It won't even slow down!" Gilbert groaned.

How many blows had he been forced to withstand, each so powerful that it threatened to tear the world asunder? Phantoms were meant to have limited stamina as well, but the creature's battle-axe never let up its momentum. He wasn't taking the attacks directly, but each parry put unimaginable strain on his arms. If his sword had been a normal weapon instead of a Relic, it would've broken long ago.

The clashing of metal echoed throughout the dim den. Gilbert and Greg continued to hang on desperately as the beast rained blows down upon them. They did their best to resist, but it was clear to Rhuda even from afar that the

boss had the advantage. The fact that nobody was hurt yet was a miracle.

But miracles never lasted long.

“Bwuh?!”

There was a dull noise, accompanied by half of a sword flying through the air.

Gilbert and Tino watched it, wide-eyed, but Greg was by leagues the most astonished. The broadsword he held in his right hand was now half the length it was before. Its broken tip fell to the earth and made a hollow clatter. The first ones to notice this were Rhuda, as she watched from the distance, and the gargantuan wolf knight fighting them.

Time slowed to a crawl.

In that instant, that magnified split second, Rhuda saw its jaw warp into an abominable smirk. Its eyes looked down not at Tino or Gilbert, but at the flabbergasted Greg. It hoisted its battle-axe aloft and swung it down toward him.

Before she even realized it, Rhuda found herself throwing her dagger. It spun through the air, flying directly at the boss’s face as if it were being sucked in. Even if the dagger landed a direct hit, it wouldn’t injure the boss at all through its thick pelt.

As the dagger flew at it, the wolf twisted its battle-axe and used the edge to deflect her dagger. For just a moment, there was an opening. Gilbert took that opportunity to right himself and meet the falling axe. If he deflected it, it would hit Greg. Thus, instead of his usual parries, he blocked the attack head-on. The Swordsman used all of his strength against this inhuman power. The contention lasted only a second, however, before Gilbert fell to his knees and deflected it behind him.

During that very second, however, Rhuda had sprinted over to Greg and shoved his large body out of the way. She had been waiting on the outskirts of the fight for something just like this, in case she would need to jump in as support.

The axe fell right behind Rhuda, slamming into the ground where Greg had been. Its blade, guided by intense malice, made a heavy *thunk* as it carved a

deep gash in the earth. Greg and Rhuda fell over in a heap, turning their heads to face the boss. They were in a vulnerable position, but Tino had already stepped in.

Using the enormous axe as a stepping stone, Tino leapt into the air. The boss's face was colored with shock, for once, instead of pure hatred. It made a split-second decision, dropping the axe and reaching toward Tino.



As she soared over the creature's head, the claws extending from its gauntlet scraped her leg. Her normally deadpan face warped in pain as fresh blood dripped down from her thigh. Still, she completed her leap and landed perfectly on its back. In her right hand gleamed the crimson shortsword.

As the boss thrashed about, Tino quickly and quietly stabbed it in the neck. The beast writhed in pain. Its bloodshot eyes rolled back, and its hand groped about in a feeble attempt to grab her. In the end, however, the creature fell without reaching her. Tino landed softly on the ground, and the phantom giant dissipated.

"Did we beat it?" Gilbert muttered between breaths. The Purgatorial Sword fell from his hand with a loud *clang*. His voice sounded younger somehow; it was a stark contrast to his warlike bellows during combat.

Holding her wounded thigh, Tino declared, "Yes. We've won."

She sat down on the spot and quickly examined the injury. A deep tear ran down her pale skin. It looked as though she'd been cut by a fine sword rather than claws. Fortunately, it hadn't hit any arteries, so her life wasn't at risk. However, it wasn't something she could just leave alone. If she hadn't finished the fight with that one blow, she would've been unable to flee.

Tino gritted her teeth through the sharp pain that accompanied the endless trickle of blood. "That was close," she said with a sigh.

She grabbed a small bottle of pink liquid from the potion holster on her belt, which could fit up to five. This one was a magical medicine that healed wounds. Created by an Alchemist, it was more chemistry than magic and not nearly as potent as a Cleric's spells, but it could quickly fix up external injuries. One could say it was an essential item in a party with no Cleric.

Tino removed the cap from the bottle, bared her upper thigh, and applied the potion to the wound. Pain flared through her leg, causing her to groan. The wound—which stretched from her groin to her kneecap—sealed in a flash. Though it still ached, that too would diminish with time.

Greg finally stood up, gazing at the broken sword still in his grasp. He was pale, as if his brain had only just caught up with the situation. "Phew. I thought I

was dead meat. Why'd my weapon have to break at a time like this?"

"Better than breaking your spine, old man."

"Ahaha! Fair enough." He laughed, but his voice lacked its usual vigor. He looked over at Rhuda with a forced smile. "You saved my life."

"Heh. I'm just glad I made it in time. Tino, are you okay?"

"This is nothing. I can walk, at least. I should be back to normal soon enough."

The potions Tino carried were of superior quality. While they required some time to work, they could heal just about anything short of a fatal wound. After wiping up the blood, she slowly stood up.

Gilbert breathed a sigh of relief. He had never before encountered such a ferocious enemy. With his previous party, their chance of victory would've been low even if his sword had been fully charged. The fact that they had won without any casualties was practically a miracle. If they had lost any party members here, their chance of victory would be even lower. They had been skating on thin ice.

The Swordsman tried to calm his heart, as it was still beating wildly from his dance with death. In a shaky voice, he said, "So, uh... boss didn't drop anything, huh?"

"That's pretty unlucky," Greg muttered, making a face. "They're supposed to be more likely to drop stuff than normal phantoms." He picked up the blade of his cherished sword and put it carefully into its sheath.

In its current state, the sword would be difficult to mend. At best, he could melt it down into raw materials. In terms of profit, they were well in the red already.

Rhuda forced a smile and offered some consolation. "Better than losing your life, right? C'mon, you can buy a new sword."

"Eh, I guess."

Tino turned to him. "Here, take this. It's smaller than the one you used before, but it's better than nothing."

Greg accepted the crimson shortsword and swung it a couple of times,

checking it out. “Thanks.”

They had defeated the boss, but their mission wasn’t complete. After that, they would have to make it home alive, too. Unlike monsters, phantoms materialized spontaneously. The party couldn’t be at ease even when they returned the way they came in.

Greg and Gilbert sat down, exhausted, and downed the water in their canteens.

After thinking back on their battle, Rhuda piped up, “If they had to deal with that thing, those poor hunters might not have made it.”

“Aah, yeah. Their leader was level five, too, wasn’t he? Think they all got done in by that monster?”

“Level five?” Tino frowned.

The boss had been much stronger than Tino had anticipated. Their victory had been narrow with three level 4 hunters in their midst, partially thanks to the surprisingly strong Gilbert-Greg powerhouse duo. Tino wasn’t so sure that she would’ve been able to defeat it if she had ventured in here alone. It wouldn’t have been strange if the level 5 hunter and his party had lost to it.

Levels were, in the end, simply labels bestowed by the Association. A level 5 hunter wasn’t necessarily stronger than a level 4. Things were different when you got to level 7 or 8, where you needed an enormous amount of exploits under your belt, but level 5 was attainable even if you weren’t all that strong.

Tino surveyed the boss chamber once more. The space was wide, with high ceilings and glowing stones lighting the walls. Some dim light reached the floor, but there were no visible pools of blood. She couldn’t see the telltale signs of fallen hunters, either. If hunters had indeed met with disaster here, then there should have been some evidence left behind.

The White Wolf’s Den wasn’t that large of a treasure vault, so it was hard to imagine the group getting lost and not being able to find their way out. In that case, the hunters’ main challenge would’ve undoubtedly been the strength of the phantoms. Even then, it would’ve made sense for them to leave some kind of trace in case of a rescue party. Tino found it strange that she had seen

neither hide nor hair of them.

This was a trial, one that Master had deemed fitting for Tino. In that case, it ought to be something comprehensible to even an inexperienced hunter like her.

“Master, I don’t understand!” Tino complained, her voice tinged with loneliness.

Just then, she heard something nearby. When she glanced around at her resting party members, they looked back at her quizzically.

“What’s wrong, boss?” Greg asked her.

“Stand up. Something’s coming.”

“More phantoms?!”

The three of them willed strength into their weary muscles and forced themselves back on their feet.

Immediately after, Tino squatted down to evade something whizzing through the air. It was a single red arrow. The arrowhead stabbed into the wall with a dull thud. She stared at it, her face pale.

Gilbert blinked. “What?”

In the middle path leading out of the boss chamber—the one Tino’s party had entered through—stood a silver wolf knight wearing black plate armor. The very same one they had just barely managed to conquer. Except there wasn’t just one.

Four pairs of eyes, as red as blood, lined up at the entrance and glared at Tino’s party.

Was the boss merely waiting for its allies?! The possibility occurred to Tino far too late. Thinking back, the boss had been almost too cautious, as though it’d been buying time.

The beasts’ footsteps shook the earth.

Greg’s bottom lip quivered, like he was enduring an awful nightmare. “No freakin’ way...”

Although these wolf knights looked the same as the boss, each one carried its own unique weapon: a two-handed greatsword, an enormous club that almost reached the ceiling, a bow so huge it clearly wasn't meant to be used indoors, and finally an obsidian gun—likely a rapid-fire type—with an ammo belt so long that it dragged across the ground.

They entered the room with perfect composure, perhaps aiming to intimidate their targets. Yet the hatred for humanity in their eyes was as powerful as that of the knight that this party had toppled moments ago.

Terrified, Rhuda asked, "Huh? What's going on? We just defeated that thing..."

"Was that not the boss?"

They knew that bosses didn't necessarily operate alone, but this was still completely unexpected.

"Master, I can't possibly take any more of this."

Tino was baffled. Her trial may have gone unusually smoothly, but throwing this at her was just unbearable. She absentmindedly traced a finger over her right thigh. Some pain still remained; she wouldn't be able to move as nimbly as before. If the wound opened up during the fight, she really would have no chance of victory.

The wolf knights moved into formation in front of Tino's party, absolutely dwarfing them. The wielders of the broadsword and club stood on the front line, while the gunman and bowman were behind them. They looked more like the imperial army's well-trained battalions than the other, more disorganized wolf knights they had fought until now.

Greg hurried to ready his crimson shortsword, but he doubted it would be very useful against the four giant beasts. "What do we do?" he asked anxiously.

Gilbert lifted his Purgatorial Sword. His expression had long since been drained of its ferocity. "Tch... What *can* we do?"

The party looked to Tino. She masked her fear as she spoke. Making decisions in tough situations like this was part of the leader's job. If the leader bent, the party broke. Tino had nobody she could rely on now.

“Our only option is to fight.”

Her leg wound wasn’t deep, but it would be impossible for her to escape. Their enemies had long-range weapons. If any of the party turned their backs, they’d be shot; even Tino wasn’t faster than a bullet. Swiftly defeating those two, who were just as heavily armored as the one with the battle-axe, would be impossible without some sort of miracle. But she couldn’t give up—not on living *or* fighting. The party’s lives were in Tino’s hands.

She braced herself, yanking her spirits back from the brink of despair. Assailed by the tension of their grave predicament, Tino’s heart pounded hard and fast. It would be impossible to defeat the enemy, so she searched for a path to survival. All that supported Tino now was faith toward her master. He wouldn’t give her an impossible request. Her faith in Krai, akin to worship, was the only thing that kept her sane.

While keeping her attention on the four enemies ahead, she looked at the path to the right. The silver wolf knights were much larger than regular wolf knights. In a narrow pathway with low ceilings, their movements would be greatly limited.

She stilled her breathing and began barking out orders, quelling some of the fear in her allies. “The boss chamber is too wide to fight them in! Run to the path on the right, and we can force them into a bottleneck. The sword and club are too big to be used in there. I’ll take the rear.”

Thus, their desperate struggle began.

A collective roar shook the room like thunder. One was enough to make the cave quake, but when all four howled at once, it had actual physical force. The hunters leaned forward, bracing themselves against the impact that ran through their whole bodies.

The creatures’ movements were both calm and assured. They seemed to understand that their comrade had fallen. The four of them solidified their formation, as if to show that they wouldn’t let a single party member get out alive.

Moving to block the right path was the club-wielding knight. Gilbert was the first to approach. It was clear as day that they couldn’t win. If their escape

routes were blocked, then death was inevitable.

He brushed off his desperation as he yelled and swung the Purgatorial Sword. Despite his exhaustion, his swing was not lacking at all; in fact, it was even stronger than before. The large, red blade moved like flickering flames. Gilbert had somehow channeled a little mana into it, setting it faintly alight.

Faced with this flaming blade, the beast swung its giant club. There wasn't the slightest bit of competition between them; its pure destructive force repelled Gilbert's quick strike with ease, sending Gilbert flying. As he landed, his body rolled across the ground. Rhuda opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

Fortunately, he was still conscious. He scrambled back to his feet, his face contorted in despair. "It's over. I can't push that thing back."

The wolf knight was far too massive. He could neither repel nor block its attacks. Things might have been different if the Purgatorial Sword were fully charged, but as things were, he couldn't destroy the phantom's weapon.

As the wolf knight hoisted up its club once more, Greg readied his shortsword and leapt in to attack. The creature brought its weapon back down on the puny human at its feet. An overpowering gust assailed Greg, and he sprang back just before the thorny pillar crashed down on that very spot.

The axe from before had been powerful, but clubs were of a different nature. Even without putting much strength behind it, a single blow was enough to easily bypass leather armor and inflict massive damage on a hunter's taut muscles. In fact, things would probably have been the same if he were wearing metal armor.

Rhuda pulled out her dagger and tossed it. Now wasn't the time to just wait and watch. The greatsword-wielding wolf howled and stepped forward. Tino, ready to fight or die, jumped in front of it.

When its blade swung down, she sidestepped to evade. When it swung in an upward arc, she hopped back. The greatsword was faster than the battle-axe, but not so fast that it couldn't be dodged. And yet, if she got hit once, she would be in for a world of pain. At the very least, any hopes they had of victory would disappear.

They locked eyes. A cold sweat ran down Tino's brow. Considering she had given her shortsword to Greg, the only offensive weapon she had was her dagger. Still, she wasn't altogether certain that even a full-power stab would pierce the beasts' pelts.

Desperately, she racked her brain. Her master had given her this trial. There had to be *some* way to seize victory. Could she trick the bowman and gunman into accidentally firing at their allies? No; neither of the back-liners showed signs of attacking. Either they knew what she was thinking, or they assumed the two front-liners would be enough to kill the party. But she didn't have to defeat them; she just had to get out of the chamber.

Tino evaded another wild swing. Her thigh throbbed with pain. The knight who was blocking the path to the right had a wide range. Its metallic club was heavy enough that even the most powerful of phantoms couldn't handle it with ease.

Perhaps Tino and Rhuda, who both had light builds, could squeeze through. The thought crossed Tino's mind for a moment, but she quickly rejected it. They didn't have that much room to act. If the swordsman following Tino was free, then it could kill Greg or Gilbert. They wouldn't have time to kill the club-wielder from behind, as their offensive capabilities were too low.

Greg and Gilbert were still being restrained by the club-wielding knight. Gilbert tried to attack it over and over, but the beast calmly blocked his blows, not bothering to counterattack. But why? Was it just trying to keep anyone from slipping past it? Or was it waiting for Tino's stamina to deplete? The knights had such a ridiculous advantage, it was downright chilling.

Tino's body felt like it was on fire. She continued to dodge attacks, putting in only the minimum effort necessary, but she knew she couldn't keep this up for long. Time was on the enemy's side. *What to do, what to do?*

"Tino, run! We'll stop them!" Gilbert cried, readying the Purgatorial Sword as he faced the giants. His voice was full of resolve.

With a bitter expression, Greg said, "Tch, so that's all we can do. Damn, I've got some crappy luck."

At times, extreme decisions were thrust upon hunters. Occasionally, one had

to abandon their party and live on.

“Tino and Rhuda—you’ve gotta live, no matter what it takes. Go tell the Association about this.”

Rhuda tried to say, “But—”

Still facing the enemy, Greg cut her off. “Look, we’re goners either way. It’s better if you two live than none of us. Ain’t nothin’ to worry about; happens all the time. It’s just our turn now. Like I said, seriously crappy luck.”

If I’d known this was gonna happen, I would’ve trained more, he thought to himself. He bore no ill will toward Tino.

Though they likely had no idea what was being discussed, the wolf knights’ attacks intensified. The bow and gun were both trained on the party now. If taken head-on, a single attack could end any one of their lives.

Was that really the only way Tino could get through this? Had her master neglected to account for these wolves? Thoughts, worries, and regrets swirled in her mind, making all other sounds distant.

Grieving Souls, the party Tino admired most, hadn’t lost a member since the day of its inception. Would its leader really force Tino to make such a harsh decision? No. She knew that hunters were often required to make such choices, but at the least, now wasn’t one of those times.

Sound returned to the world, and the enemy’s swing slammed against the ground. Angry red eyes bore into her.

“All yours, though I feel bad that it’s so crappy.”

Suddenly, Tino heard her beloved master’s voice deep within her mind. It was from when she had proudly shown him the ring that she’d stolen from Gilbert at the member recruitment meet.

This spontaneous memory sparked a revelation. She immediately understood as she looked down at her hand. The eyes. Even these wolves, covered in their thick pelts and armor, had eyes.

Attacking the eyes was a basic technique for defeating powerful monsters and phantoms. The attack itself might not fell the beast, but blinding it would make

it much weaker and create openings for more potent attacks.

The reason they hadn't attempted it so far was because they couldn't land a hit on the enemies' eyes. These knights were more than twice Tino's height, and she had no way of attacking from afar. Or so she thought.

As it turned out, she *did* have a way.

On the ring finger of her left hand shone a single ring. It was the Shooting Ring Krai had given her a few days ago. It was one of the most generic Relics out there: a ring with the power to shoot projectiles of magic.

Though she didn't use Relics herself, they came up often in conversations with her master, so she had some knowledge of them. The Shooting Ring wasn't exactly popular, though, due to the weakness of its shots. It certainly didn't have the power to kill these phantoms. Tino reflexively jumped back to dodge a sweeping strike, moving the Shooting Ring to her right index finger. It seemed to be fully charged.

Activating Relics was difficult. To use them well took loads of grueling practice. Even the Shooting Ring wasn't so simple to use that a newbie could do it right away. But Tino had undertaken some training on an outing per her master's recommendation while she was acting as his bodyguard. It was like this situation had been tailor-made for her. She would have to pray to him after all this was over.

"Hey, Tino!" Greg shouted.

"We aim for the eyes," Tino said curtly.

Unlike bows and guns, the Shooting Ring didn't require much movement. Of course, it wouldn't be as easily managed as a dagger throw. Even if it didn't take them down, all she had to do was hit their eyes. Then, they might just be able to get out alive. Of course, the enemies wouldn't lie down and take her attacks. Moreover, her target wasn't the sword-wielder; it was the one with the club. Her party's aid would be essential.

"I'll blind them. Back me up."

There was no response, but her command clearly got through to her allies, as Gilbert and Greg dashed to the left and right respectively. Caught off-guard by

their sudden shift, the club-wielding wolf was wary. This time, their strategy really was treading on thin ice. If they made one slip-up, they might not get another chance.

Tino turned her attention to the club-wielder outside of her field of vision. With the catlike reflexes she'd cultivated during her hellish training, she evaded the successive fire aimed at her. She regulated her breathing and focused. She could not miss.

Gilbert lifted his blade and swung it with a loud roar. As the wolf brought its club down to meet his attack, Greg went in as well. Rhuda exhaled and threw her dagger. It whizzed through the air, spinning. Like Tino, she was aiming for the eyeballs.

The wolf didn't bother to deflect the meager thing flying its way, and instead closed its eyes. Rhuda's dagger bounced off the wolf's thick eyelids and fell to the ground. She gulped as the wolf seemed to sneer at her.

Just as the wolf's lids lifted once more, a blue light—the magic bullet shot by Tino—hit it square in the eye. Even this wolf couldn't react to the delayed, inaudible bullet. The creature groaned and dropped its heavy club, which shook the earth when it fell.

The entire party started to run. Tino deftly dodged the one wolf's greatsword and ran alongside Rhuda and Greg. But then, Tino noticed a mistake made by her party member.

"Gilbert, no!"

Was it instinctual? Did he believe this was his chance to shine? Or had Tino's brusque direction not been clear enough? Whatever the case, Gilbert didn't flee with them. Instead, he forcefully swung his sword at the wolf knight as it rubbed its eye in pain.

The color drained from his face, but he couldn't stop mid-swing. His blade moved to cut the knight down slantwise, but it was deflected by the beast's thick forearm. Then, the sound of metal scraping against metal echoed through the chamber as a chunk was carved out of the armor. His sword didn't reach flesh.

Rage overpowered the shock the beast had suffered. As Greg tried to slip past it, he was struck and blown away by its frantic arm movements. Now there was no opening for them to escape.

The knight stood once more and glared at Tino, the one who had devised this underhanded strategy, with its fiery eyes. Her bullets were apparently even weaker than she thought, as the eye pierced by the bullet looked to be unaffected now.

It was over. The same tactic wouldn't work again.

Awash with misery, Tino moved with unsteady steps. On sheer reflex, she was able to jump to the side to avoid a downward slash that would've cut her in two. Her stamina was at its limit. She could recover if she rested a little, but the wolf knights here were unlikely to give her the time she needed.

"Tch. My bad," Gilbert muttered.

She couldn't blame him. Things would've gotten much easier if he could've killed the beast with that swing. Her orders had been incomplete as well. The result was far from ideal, but hindsight was 20/20.

Gilbert swung furiously at the wolf as it moved to retrieve its club, trying to make up for his mistake. It was as if he was trying to tell them, *Use this opportunity to escape.*

Greg stood up and lunged forward to attack with his shortsword. His target howled, its enraged voice conveying its desire to seal their fates.

Evidently, the wolves knew what Tino's party was aiming for, as the bow and gun were now trained on the path where they had been hoping to escape. Even if they made it, it was unlikely that they would last long.

There was nothing Tino could do. She had no plan, and all of her mental and physical energy had been expended. What was the likelihood of escaping intact? And what was the likelihood of defeating all four of these phantoms? There wasn't much point in thinking about it; both were hopelessly low. Which one should she choose?

Just then, she and Rhuda locked eyes. Rhuda, once bright and cheery, was now so haggard that she looked ready to collapse. The entire party, including

her, was covered in wounds. They were up against the most powerful foes they had ever faced in their lives, and escape was futile.

What was she to do now? Tino was confronted with her mentor's most basic lesson, which had been so thoroughly drilled into her that she didn't even have to try to recall it. Her heart drummed in her chest.

Tino's mentor, her dear sister, would only say one thing: *"Kill 'em like hell."*

"No, dear sister," she protested weakly. "I can't do it."

Just as she was about to give up, something came hurtling into the room at an unbelievable speed and mowed down two wolf knights.

Chapter 4: Thousand Tricks

“I just had this great idea. If we find you some strong Relics, you should be fine, yeah?”

“Luke, please. No matter how good the weapon, an incompetent user is still gonna die when it’s time to die.”

Past conversations with my friends bloomed in my memory. As I flew at speeds that could kill even the most hardened hunters, I had completely thrown the idea of survival out the window.

I’m gonna die! I’m seriously gonna die!

The White Wolf’s Den was surprisingly large for a den built by monsters. But the width and height of its passages were far too small to traverse with the Night Hiker and its lack of brakes.

It was dark inside the den, but there were luminous rocks here and there that lit the way. On my right index finger was one of my many Relics that allowed the user to see in the dark: the Owl’s Eye. Between that and the stones, I could see pretty well. A silver lining, maybe, but the dark cloud was far too large for my tastes.

A wall entered my line of sight. Frantically, I steered around the corner. The inside of the cave was so dismal that I would have never normally stepped inside. Now, however, the only thought in my mind was the question of how I was gonna stop this crazy thing. I had brought a map, but at this point, who knew how far in I was?

The Relic wasn’t exactly good at graceful turns, so I was being tossed against walls, ceilings, and the ground over and over. With each impact, my field of vision rocked intensely. I felt like a rubber ball at this point. Heck, I hardly knew what was going on anymore.

My face was fixed in a grimace. Looking back, I should’ve found a way to stop before I came into the vault. I was nauseous and ready to vomit from the

ungodly speed, but it was my own fault. I whizzed right over a phantom that was blocking the path.

No matter how much stronger a phantom was than a human, it couldn't follow an unpredictable bullet like me. Especially since even *I* didn't know where I was going. By the time it had noticed me and turned my way, I had already passed overhead. I decided to ignore the fact that I had just seen a wolf standing on two legs and holding a sword.

Where's Tino?!

Unlike phantoms, hunters stuck around for quite some time after they died. Even if their corpses were eaten by the phantoms, it was unheard of for them to leave no trace at all. At least, I thought so.

My eyesight was shabby at best, but at the very least, the blurry scenery didn't seem to contain the corpses of Tino and her merry band. It was unlikely that they were dead.

Unlike me, Tino had a strong sense of duty, so she wouldn't just give up on it. Additionally, if they had come this far, ignored the request, and headed back to the imperial city to idle around, they would've been be a complete laughingstock. *Then again, being Liz's apprentice means she has a crafty side, so maybe—*

My train of thought was derailed as I slammed against the ceiling once more. It didn't hurt, but I was seeing stars. I had ended up in a long, straight passageway. Ahead of me, phantoms gaped in shock at this intrusive human missile. I shot right past them.

My shoulder smashed into a wolf's head, sending me careening toward a wall. The impact shook me, but I somehow managed to navigate a sharp curve afterward, dragging myself along the wall. It was a miracle that I hadn't slammed flat against one yet.

I was using a different Relic to adjust my trajectory, which was helping out a little. *Thank you, O Great Relic.*

Even so, I was just barely hanging on. I had to do something about this fast, or I was dead meat. Then, I'd go down in history as the victim of the Second

Human Missile Crisis, or just “That Idiot Who Crashed in a Vault.” I hated the thought; it was just too pathetic.

No more. I need to stop, no matter what it takes.

Suddenly, I saw the path open up ahead. Right in front of me was a ginormous phantom. Sensing that my life was in danger, I exercised my excellent decision-making abilities and came up with a perfect solution: I would use this phantom’s body as my landing pad.

All that was left now was to brace myself. I held my head, shut my eyes, and prayed desperately. Seconds later, my entire body sustained an impact greater than anything I’d ever experienced. I blacked out.

When I finally regained consciousness, I warily opened my eyes.

Looks like my stop was safe...ish.

I released my head and tried to stand, but to my surprise, I was already on my feet. Despite the incredible force, I had survived just fine. Something must’ve been up with my inner ears, though, because I felt pretty dizzy. The unsteadiness brought me awfully close to vomiting, but I held it down. I shook my head violently in an attempt to keep my wits about me. Despite my long hiatus, I knew that losing consciousness in a treasure vault all but guaranteed death.

After patting the dust off my shoulders, I heaved a great sigh. My heart was still pounding like a drum. If I didn’t calm down soon, it might explode. My face was still taut, too. After seeing my life flash before my eyes like that, I supposed it was a good thing that I’d gotten off so easily.

Yeah, the Night Hiker was definitely a defective product. Whoever came up with this thing had been even crazier than my childhood friends. *The brakes ought to be the first thing you consider!*

The unfortunate phantom that had acted as my cushion had been thrown headfirst into a wall. Well, more accurately, the *phantoms*—there were two of them. I hadn’t seen them both at first, but now they were piled on top of each other, unmoving.

Phantoms from a level 3 vault wouldn’t fare well against a human missile

blow from behind. Their thick, black armor was badly dented and broken. On the ground along the wall were a massive bow and greatsword—presumably their weapons.

For some reason, these phantoms were nothing like the ones I had heard about. They were different in form, color, and... just about everything, actually. The phantoms in this vault were meant to be wolves, but the fallen phantoms before me were adorned in thick armor that even high-class imperial knights didn't have access to. They weren't what I had expected, and that was a bad thing.

When I used to get dragged into level 3 dungeons, the phantoms had been a little... well, a *lot* weaker. To be fair, it had been quite a while since then. Had they always been this strong? On the other hand, maybe they were all bark and no bite. Either way, I was *so* ready to vomit.

By now, the dizzy haze had lifted, and I felt normal again. I took a good look at my surroundings. As it turned out, this wasn't a passage at all; it was a wide-open chamber. The ceilings were high enough to make you second-guess whether you were really underground. The walls and floor were so smooth, it was hard to believe wolves had dug them out. *If there were some windows and we did away with the phantoms, it would make for a pretty sick room.*

Then, I noticed a familiar figure. With disheveled hair and ghostly white cheeks, she looked much wilder than she had back at the clan house. Thankfully, she didn't seem to be hurt. She was the one and only Tino Shade. Li'l Gilbert and the Great Greg were there, too. They were all panting and staring at me in astonishment, but hey, they were alive.

"M-Master?!"

"Oh, hey. Found ya."

Lucky me. Wait, hold on, you idiot! Don't just say "Found ya"!

I had greeted her cheerfully in my confusion, but I seriously needed to apologize here. Safe or not, Tino was white as a sheet. She was also clearly fatigued, which I found pretty unusual. It was obvious that this level 3 treasure vault had somehow put an immense burden on her. Was this the time for a mere underling to bear witness to my illustrious "get on the floor and beg"

technique? Whatever came next, I had to keep smiling.

As I stood there grinning like an idiot, Gilbert croaked, “Hey, geezer, look behind you!”

“Huh?”

Hey, I’m not that old. “Dude” would’ve been fine. “Bro,” even! That was the first thought that came to mind. Regardless, I was perfectly blank-faced and dumb-looking, no doubt and carelessness in a treasure vault was a disgrace to hunters.

When I slowly turned my head, the first thing to enter my line of sight was a phantom much like the two I had used as brakes only moments before. This one, too, was clad in black armor. Its imposing presence caused me, a coward, to instinctively sidle over to the wall. Upon closer inspection, there was one near Li’l Gilbert as well, holding a laughably huge club. Adding in the fallen ones, that made a total of four.

I hadn’t noticed when I came crashing in, but they didn’t have human heads; they were more canine in nature. The right sides of their faces covered in human bones, the beasts’ blood-red eyes shone down on me, the oblivious intruder. Their shoulders shook; their breathing was ragged. Saliva dripped from their mouths.

Normally, I would’ve been petrified with terror, vomiting at the mere sight of their eyes. But I was so appalled, my senses so dulled with shock, that my thoughts took on a life of their own.

Huh. Do level 3 phantoms get this big? They’re really advancing. If this is level 3, imagine what happens in a level 8 vault. Good thing I quit. Past me really knew what was up. Am I a god, or what?

The wolf with the crazy gun looked at me, with my dumb grin, and growled as it backed away. Meanwhile, the one with the ceiling-high club gave up its post near Gilbert and stood in front of the gunman, protecting it. Nostrils flared, it narrowed its eyes to slits, surveying me cautiously.

At last, it dawned on me what was happening. My smile slid right off my face. *Are we in danger? Am I about to die?* They weren’t moving to attack me, but I

had no hope of beating an enemy that had put Tino at her wit's end. What to do here?

As I desperately tried to think of a plan, the Great Greg spoke in a quavering voice. "No freakin' way. The bosses are... scared of him?!"

Come again?

"Of me?" I blurted.

That wasn't possible. If they were wolves, I was a sheep. My mana material fortification was just about gone, so I was just a sheep with a high recognized level. While I was still trying to wrap my head around the situation, the wolf knights took another step back. Their snouts bobbed up and down. They had forgotten about Tino entirely and were now focused only on me. Their eyes definitely had "caution" written all over them.

What's so scary about me? The Great Greg is way more terrifying.

I followed their lines of sight and realized what they were looking at. Their crimson eyes weren't focused on my face, but rather my chest, where the metallic capsule containing Sitri's slime lay.

I stepped forward, and the wolves stepped back. Their eyes were fixed in my direction, but they weren't looking at *me*.

This is what these huge phantoms are so afraid of? What the hell's in this capsule, anyway? What did I bring in here with me?

I moved another step closer, and the knights retreated two steps back this time. Guess they realized I was a poisonous sheep. Luck was on my side. Indeed, today did not seem to be the day I would die.

Without taking my eyes off the wolves, I called out to the group of hunters behind me. "Tino, can you run?" I acted calm, but my heart was still throbbing painfully.

"Um, yes, of course!" Tino, vacant as she was, gave an energetic response.

There were three tunnels leading out of this room. The forward path was blocked by wolves. Frightened or not, I couldn't discount the possibility of them saying "Forget the poison, let's eat." Nor could I take these two giants down.

The best option was to retreat, let Tino's party rest, and get out of here together.

"Over there." I pointed to the closest path, the one on the right.

It was the one that the knight with the metal club was blocking. Since that one had moved for us, I figured we might as well take him up on it.

"I'm sorry, Master, but wouldn't it be best to defeat them?" Tino asked, sounding apologetic.

Okay, yeah, true. If we could defeat them, that would be ideal. But I can't beat them, dammit, so what do you want me to do?!

Chancing it all on throwing Sitri's slime and hoping all our enemies died was one option, but there was too much risk inherent in gambling my fate on a slime I knew nothing about. If it was useful while it was still in the capsule, that was the much more prudent option.

I sighed and said to my cute subordinate, "Tino, you mustn't lose sight of what's important."

"Oh! That would be..."

...the most important thing of all, which didn't even bear asking. That was her life.

From my point of view, any fight that risked your life was dumb as hell. Sure, people had their own rights, so if they wanted to fight these things on their own time, I didn't care. But I wasn't gonna do it myself.

Suddenly, there was a loud clanging noise. Tino gasped weakly as a shadow loomed over me. The wolves pummeled by my crash landing had recovered and closed the distance between us in one step.

I guess neither of the phantoms I rammed into ended up dying.

As soon as I realized it, there was a blade as long as I was tall being swung down at me from above. The wolf knight's roar, full of overwhelming rage, shook me from head to toe. Every muscle in my body contracted at once. I couldn't even move, let alone react, as the blade came down on me like a guillotine.

Then, this attack—which should've sliced me right in two—was deflected without wounding me in the slightest.

"Bwuh?!" came the Great Greg's dumbfounded voice.

The attacking wolf's eyes opened wide in shock; clearly, it hadn't expected this. It took a few steps back and forgot its resentment for a moment as it looked down at the greatsword in its hands. Following that, a giant arrow was loosed directly toward my forehead. Like the sword, it simply glanced off.

They were pissed. I could see why; if someone had hit me from behind out of nowhere so hard that I'd slammed into a wall, I'd be pretty angry, too. The bowman, the swordsman, and the other two knights glared at me. All I did was curl my lips into a wry grin. That was all I *could* do.

I'm dead. I really am gonna die here.

With that, I realized I should be counterattacking. I thrust out my index finger, pointing it like a gun at the wolves. Then, I activated the Relic on my left pinkie: a Shooting Ring that shot shock waves instead of bullets, aptly called the Shock-Shooting Ring. A blue light burned at my fingertip, forming a magic bullet.



Just before the shot fired, a super-cool line emerged from my lips. “Too bad for you; I’ve got seventeen lives.”

Treasure hunters were submerged in a world of talent. Human beings themselves were weak. Their physical abilities, especially, were among the worst of the many life-forms out there. They weren’t made to traverse these cruel treasure vaults or fight monsters and phantoms.

To bend this law of nature, a hunter needed certain vital aptitudes, such as a high mana material absorption rate. Thus, even in this age where hunters were lauded to the heavens, there was never an overabundance of them. In my case, misfortune lay in the fact that I only realized this *after* I became a hunter.

Fortunately, I was the only one in my group of friends who lacked aptitude. Grieving Souls could easily raid treasure vaults, even when I was excluded. Each time they brought home wealth and fame, it would lift me up alongside them. So even with no aptitude, courage, motivation, dreams, hope, or luck, I was still alive.

Much like the Shooting Ring, Safety Rings was a popular ring-type Relic. If I were attacked, they would surround me with a somewhat dense barrier for a set amount of time. Perhaps that explanation was too obscure; basically, these Relics would only protect me from a single attack.

Though all Safety Rings shared the same name, they varied in barrier density and effective time. Some were more expensive and rarer than others as well. However, I didn’t want to die, so I had just bought as many as I could find. At the moment, I had a total of seventeen. Together, they were worth enough to buy two or three more clan headquarters.

Typically, super-high-class hunters kept one or two of these on hand just in case. In this vast empire, I don’t think any other man wore as many of these bad boys on the daily as I did. Naturally, a man only had ten fingers, so I had to keep the rest in my bag. Still, the effects were going strong. Incidentally, I never would’ve used that terrifying Night Hiker if I hadn’t had these on hand.

They weren’t infallible, though. Safety Rings’ barriers lasted, at best, a second. Typically, only a fraction of a second. Once activated, all of the mana within them was consumed and it became just a normal ring. I had activated a ton of

them hitting walls on the way here, so who knew how many attacks I could take before these guys flattened me instead? We had to get out of dodge before then; saying I had seventeen lives had been a teensy bit of an exaggeration.

The greatsword-wielding wolf quickly reacted to my blue bullet, crouching down just slightly to evade. I frowned; it was like the wolf knight had known it was coming.

“He dodged it!” Rhuda cried.

The blue bullet sailed over the wolf’s head and, not long after, there was a dull *thud* as a powerful impact sent the wolf crashing into the floor. The cave trembled as it landed. Although it had dodged, the bullet had boomeranged in midair and smacked him in the back of the head. The wolves were shaken by this development.

Without turning away from them, I shouted, “Tino, run!”

“Hm? Oh, yes, sir!”

On my order, Tino and the rest of her party bounded off. The wolves looked only at me, not bothering to pursue them.

“Shooting Ring” was a generic term for Relics that shot magic bullets. Shock-Shooting Rings’ bullets came with a powerful shock wave on impact. At maximum charge, they could shoot up to seven bullets. Flashy as it was, though, it just wasn’t that powerful. The wolf who’d fallen down after getting hit in the head was probably just surprised.

Shooting Rings came in a multitude of types, but none of them were strong enough to defeat phantoms. At best, they could be used as a diversion. The wolf on the floor pushed himself up with his hands and slowly rose. As expected, he had no stand-out injuries.

All four of them fanned out around me: two front-liners, two back-liners. They were pretty balanced. I watched them carefully, and when my eyes fell back on the one with the gun, I grimaced. *That thing’s dangerous! I’m* really *bad against rapid-fire weapons.*

Here I thought I had scared them with Sitri’s slime, but they were probably too pissed by my counterattack to care. Their eyes showed about 10% fear, 30%

rage, 30% enmity, and 30% caution. Note that I pulled these numbers right out of my ass.

The first thing to consider was making time for Tino to escape before me. As long as I was alone, I could just take flight again in the worst-case scenario. With a weapon, I could at least distract the enemy for a little while.

Laughing like an idiot, I pulled the sword Relic from its sheath on my back... or I tried to, at least, but my hand grasped only air.

I tried a few times to grab it, but all I made contact with was a crossbow Relic. It had the ability to guide missiles, which I had used to guide both myself and the magic bullets from my Shooting Rings—despite the crossbow itself shooting neither of them. I called it the “Always Hitty Boy” (although it didn’t necessarily always hit).

No way. Did I drop it?!

The sheath was there, but no sword. I retraced my journey here. The whole way, I had been desperately trying to avoid hitting things, so who knew where I’d dropped it? *What a shame. That thing was really expensive. Meh, I guess it wouldn’t really have helped me get out of this anyway.*

The wolves warily watched my weird flailing.

“Master? What are you doing?!” Tino asked me from the entrance.

Weren’t you supposed to be running?! It wasn’t just her, either; the others were hanging around there as well. *I told you to run, dammit! Besides, “What are you doing?!” is what I should be asking myself! What the hell am I even trying to do? I literally dropped a freaking Relic in a treasure vault. That can’t be chalked up to bad luck. Am I stupid?*

You know what, yeah. I’m just stupid.

Apparently trying to overcome his fear, the club-wielding phantom roared and took a step toward me. The ring on my right pinkie, Red Alert, emitted heat when danger was near. It was warming up my finger, but I couldn’t evade the attack. The club came down, ready to crush me, but it was repelled by a barrier.

Wow, this sucks. I’m even worse off than I thought. I couldn’t move, so even

though I knew I was fine, I was still terrified. The phantoms shuddered, incredulous at how I was still standing after that club swing. *It's okay, dudes. I can't believe it, either.*

The Hounding Chain hanging at my waist rattled, trembling at its owner's precarious situation. It was a real valuable item, so I'd hate for it to be broken, but it wasn't worth more than my life. It ought to be a good way to stop them.

I removed the chain from my belt. All charged up and ready to serve, the chain flew into the air and sprang at the club-wielding wolf like a snake. Again, it wasn't strong enough to defeat the enemy, but this was the most annoying thing a huge phantom could deal with. It wrapped around the wolf's legs and knocked it off balance.

Having no experience with such a thing, the other three knights were on guard. *Yep, it's pretty scary. I felt that way when I first saw it, too.*

One Hounding Chain alone wouldn't stop them all, though. Besides, those ranged weapons looked deadly. The world was full of terrifying stuff. If I just ran away, would they follow me?

The wolves were scared of... well, not me, but Sitri's slime. But there was unsuppressed rage in their eyes, too.

I just wanted to run. Forget the rescue mission; it was time to go home. Thus, I spread out my hands and activated my Shooting Rings.

There were a lot of famous ring-type Relics out there, but not many people knew that they could be divided into two groups: the kind that you had to wear in order to use, and the kind that you could just have on your person. The Shooting Ring was the latter.

Li'l Gilbert's jaw dropped as countless lights appeared in my hands. I had activated every single one of the Shooting Rings stuffed in my hip pouch. One positive of ring-type Relics was that they were lighter than most other Relics—and cheap to boot. With a little bit of money and effort, you could get a whole stash like mine.

The color of each Shooting Ring's bullets depended on the type. The countless colored lights in my hands may have been eye-catching, but practically

speaking, they were very weak. Still, the wolf knights were shaken. The appearance of these bullets alone made them look like normal magic attacks, so they were wary. Unfortunately for them, this would be impossible to evade. Typical magic bullets flew in a straight line, but I had my Always Hitty Boy with me.

As I let the bullets loose, they started tracing crazy arcs all over the place as they flew toward the knights. The wolves dispersed in an attempt to outrun them, but I controlled the arcs so that the projectiles would follow. I didn't even give them a chance to swing their weapons.

Either deciding they had no escape or assuming they were homing missiles, the knights all dropped down to the floor. They turned their backs up like turtles, so I mercilessly rained bullets upon them.

"Holy shit," Li'l Gilbert blurted, mesmerized by my street performance.

"So that's what a level 8 can do?" Rhuda murmured.

The Great Greg watched in awe. Even Tino's eyes sparkled with joy. I appreciated their approval. It would've been even better if they'd tipped, but whatever. More than that, I wished they'd just run.

The bullets were all direct hits on the wolves' heads, arms, shoulders, eyes, and masks. They made plenty of crazy sounds as they struck, some burning, some freezing, some numbing, some repelling. Every single Shooting Ring I carried was unique. Low growls rumbled in the phantoms' throats, making them sound like the beasts they were.

When the magical light faded, darkness returned to the chamber. Though my "magic" was flashy and looked powerful, it had one fatal flaw: it was really, *really* weak.

As everyone watched with bated breath, the wolf knights rolled onto their feet and stood up like nothing had happened. There wasn't a single scratch on them.

"But he hit them with so many attacks!" Rhuda protested hoarsely, sounding like she was about to cry.

All four phantoms made similarly confused noises. It wasn't my fault, though.

The vast majority of Relics weren't made to inflict killing blows. Weapon Relics were a different story, but their effectiveness was based on the user's abilities for the most part. A talentless street performer like myself couldn't use them very well.

Once they'd confirmed that they were safe, the wolves glared at me, enraged by my tickling session. *Didn't work, huh?*

I had even fired off numbing and sleep-inducing bullets. Though I'd thought they might work, it seemed they'd been nullified. To be fair, they had been made for use on people, not inhuman apparitions.

My bag of tricks was nearly empty now. The situation was getting worse and worse.

"Aah, fine. Good grief. I really didn't wanna have to use this."

In desperation, I ripped the metallic capsule off of my neck. It was a little larger than my pointer finger. The wolves jumped back, apparently just now remembering that I had it. They really had been scared of the capsule instead of me. But hey, I had already guessed as much. If we were all gonna die here, we might as well die swallowed up by a slime (I think? I didn't want to know the details, so I had never asked).

With shaking fingers, I unscrewed the cap and peeked inside the capsule before prepping to throw it. I rubbed my eyes and checked again. Frowning, I fearfully poked my finger inside. Tino and the others watched me, worried.

With a nod, I screwed the cap back on. Then, I swung my arm hard. Simultaneously as I lobbed the capsule at them, I fired the Shock-Shooting Ring in their direction. The wolves panicked and scrambled away from the landing zone. While confirming that the controlled bullet's path would land where I wanted it to, I ran over to Tino.

"Hurry!"

As they saw me approach, the party finally turned and started to run. The metallic capsule bounced off the floor. I heard a snarl from behind us, but now wasn't the time to worry about that. After all, we needed to hurry out before they realized it was empty.

What was up with that? Where'd the contents go? Whew, spooky.

I ran, squeezing out every last bit of my strength. I just moved my legs, trying to regulate my breathing along the way. How long had it been since I last ran? Along the way, I didn't have it in me to look back. I just ran and ran through the dim corridor, feeling the cold air caressing my cheeks.

The Great Greg, Li'l Gilbert, Rhuda, and Tino were just ahead of me. Despite running as fast as I could, the distance between us wasn't closing. *Wait. Are they going slower out of consideration for me?*

In front of me, Gilbert was running just fine, even with that giant greatsword in his hands. He turned to me and frowned. Despite being in big trouble before I arrived, he looked perfectly composed now. *No way. Did he recover while running?*

"They're gonna catch up at this rate," Gilbert said. "We'd better hurry—"

"Shut up, stupid! Krai's being considerate of Tino because she's hurt!" Rhuda snapped.

"Oh, dang, my bad. Sorry."

Uh, did she get hurt? Wait, so my top speed is only as fast as an injured Tino's? Come on, I'm not slow. Tino's just fast. Or am I actually being considerate like Rhuda said, and I didn't even notice?

My feelings were hurt, but the petty grievance calmed me down. After listening for any suspicious noises behind us, I stopped. I didn't have a Thief's skills, but Tino would've said something if we were still being chased. We must have shaken them off, then.

Seeing that I had stopped, the party also came to a halt. They were surprisingly obedient; guess they'd gotten along well during the raid.

"Uh, are we good?" Li'l Gilbert asked.

"Looks like we shook 'em off. Damn, that was close. You saved our hides." The Great Greg thanked me, but honestly, I should've apologized.

For now, though, I had to get myself together. Resisting the urge to vomit, I relaxed my rapid breathing and looked at Tino.

Under the weight of my gaze, she clutched her shoulders as if afraid. “Master, I...”

“Hey, Krai? Tino really, um, did her best. Without her, we would’ve gone down long before you arrived.” For some reason, Rhuda spoke like she was defending her.

“It’s okay. Hey, I’m sorry. I just wish ‘sorry’ was enough to make up for all this.”

They didn’t have to tell me; I knew from one look at her that she’d done everything she could. Tino had clearly been an active participant, as her usually well-kempt hair was a mess, and her face was extremely pale. Her black shorts were torn along the right thigh, leaving her white skin visible. The contrast was really attention-grabbing and... kind of sexy.

Having noticed my leering, Tino suddenly pulled up her shorts, revealing her thighs. *Girl, are you seriously doing that here? They’re already short shorts. I can see your damn underwear now.*

Tino looked away, embarrassed.

Watching Tino purse her lips, Li’l Gilbert mused, “Thousand Tricks, you can even heal people?”

Oh, this is about her wound! At least tell me that, c’mon! Obviously I didn’t notice! I thought this was one of her usual weird tricks.

The whole reason we’d stopped was so I could recover, anyway.

She showed me her toned thighs. Her veins were just barely visible, but no wounds. Even if it wasn’t visible on the surface, she could still be hurt. After all, despite her being much faster than me, she and I had been running at the same speed.

Of course, I’d brought a healing Relic. I wouldn’t dare step outside without one. I removed the silver cross necklace, Healing Faith, from my neck and placed it against Tino’s thigh. Blue light emanated from it and flowed into her body. Her expression relaxed.

Really sorry for not realizing!

“Thank you, Master. It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

I mean, I still needed Tino to keep doing her best for me.

After watching the scene, Li’l Gilbert said with relief in his voice, “Oh, it’s just a healing Relic.”

What’s wrong with it all being Relics? Huh, you little shit? Got a problem?! If we hadn’t been deep inside a treasure vault, I would’ve been so pissed that I’d hightail it back to clan HQ.

“Krai, did you take down those wolf knights?” the Great Greg asked, glancing nervously toward the chamber.

If pressed to say, no. There’s no way I took them down.

Wolves had good noses, so they had probably been terrified of the slime smell on the capsule. Well, I didn’t know if slimes smelled like anything, but that was my best guess. By now, they were probably going mad with rage. They’d been fooled by an empty capsule, and their prey escaped. Thus, the only option for us now was to keep fleeing. Things were pretty gross back there, but once we escaped the treasure vault, those phantoms shouldn’t follow us out.

I was convinced that the rescue targets were dead by now. No point in trying to save them if it ended with us dead, too.

I sighed and stretched. It felt bad to lose my poor sword, but at least I had my life. I wasn’t sure whether the Hounding Chain would return to me, though. Once I got back to the clan house, I’d have someone go and fetch it for me.

“Nah, but that was the ideal action for the time being. We shouldn’t worry about it. For now, let’s get moving.”

“Uh, sure.”

Now, where were we, and where was the exit? I walked silently at the front. Nobody said a word, probably because of the fatigue.

According to the map I had checked beforehand, the White Wolf’s Den was full of thin, branching passageways, like an ant nest. To put it simply, you could go on forever seeing the same scenery and have no idea where it would take you. It wasn’t a big treasure vault by any means, but it was entirely possible

that we were just going through the same passageways twice.

Actually, why am I at the front? I'm not a Thief. Isn't this a Thief's job? Why am I doing this when this party has two Thieves?

I tried stopping to let them go ahead of me, but when I stopped, they stopped as well. Thus, I was stuck at the front the entire way.

What happened to your usual initiative, Tino?

I looked back at her, but whenever we made eye contact, she looked away. It was like she was rejecting me, like she was saying, *I don't want to talk to you, Master. Please go die.* How could my poor, beloved Tino look at me like that? Maybe I should've gotten on the ground and begged after all, despite being in this dangerous vault?

I couldn't do anything about it now, so I continued my blind march forward. Sometimes, if I felt like it, I randomly picked a side path. The one saving grace here was that, amazingly, we didn't run into any enemies along the way. Maybe Tino was casually guiding me in directions that were free of phantoms? We occasionally heard roars and howls from within, but they were still distant.

At least, I think they're distant. Maybe they're not? Gee, sure hope they are.

Even after walking for some time, we didn't reach the exit. I figured the direction itself was probably correct, at least. This was why I hated cavern-type vaults. Maybe it was time to get on the floor for Tino.

As I fretted, Li'l Gilbert started to sound irritated. "Uh, hey. I dunno if you're not telling us on purpose, so sorry in advance, but... where are we going? We gettin' outta here or what?"

The guy was awfully meek about it. Unfortunately, I had no idea! Although our destination was obviously the exit.

Before I could say as much, Tino quickly intervened. "Gilbert, learning to read Master's thoughts is a part of your training. Also, we're not going toward the exit. The rightmost path isn't connected to the exit, no matter how far you go. To leave this place, we'll need to go through the chamber again."

"Oh, uh... Is this really the time to be training?"

“Oh, uh...” Same, Li’l Gilbert. Same.

If nothing else, I *had* been trying to take us to the exit.

Okay, so the path we took doesn’t lead to the exit. And wait, that was the boss chamber? No wonder those phantoms seemed weirdly strong. So, what, does that mean we have to turn around and go back?

Also, what the hell, Tino? You were using this situation to “train”? If we weren’t going for the exit, where else would we be going? What else is worth seeing here?

This was why I had so much trouble with “disciplined” people.

“But um, Krai? Do you think maybe you could tell us where we’re going soon?” Rhuda asked timidly. She was starting to sound pitiful.

That’s a deep goddamn question there, Rhuda. All my life, I’ve never known where I was headed. No milestones, no guides, nothing. If anything, I’m becoming a guide of what not *to do.*

Anyway, might as well make a casual U-turn. We’ve been walking for a while now, so maybe those wolves are gone.

Oh, how I wished I could U-turn my whole life around. I wanted to cry, but I managed to keep a straight face.

At the next fork, I took a turn. If I turned the same way at the next juncture, surely it would be an actual U-turn.

Are we really gonna be okay?

After a few more minutes of walking, I decided it was about time to take the second turn. Suddenly, I heard the Great Greg let out a muffled gasp. I turned around to find that he was looking at me like some sort of monster.

“No freakin’ way. There weren’t any traces at all. He didn’t even check, so... how?”

“I keep telling you, everything Master does is intentional.”

“Now’s not the time for that! We need to help them!” Rhuda cried as she darted ahead of us.

That was when I finally noticed multiple people lying down at the very far end of the path. Based on their size, they weren't phantoms. I squinted to see that they were all still moving somewhat.

Huh, what? Did the Great Greg notice that? Gee, you all have good eyes. On a bad day, I would've just walked on by without noticing them. *Wait. Are those the rescue targets we're here for? How are they still alive? That is some ungodly luck. Wish I was that lucky.*

Tino gazed at me with bizarre and undue reverence, puffing her chest out with pride. "See? All this has been according to his plan."

I shook my head. "No, no, no. This is clearly a coincidence." Even a Relic couldn't have foretold this future.

"You're the one who brought us here, dude," Li'l Gilbert said, annoyed.

Our primary rescue target was a man even larger than the Great Greg. He wore a full suit of gray armor and had a green-painted shield. Next to him was a conical lance, one you'd never use against other people, positioned in such a way that he could grab it at any time. Based on its mystical shine, it was probably a Relic.

No doubt, this was Rudolph Davout. I had never heard his name before receiving the request. He was looking pretty lazy right now, but this giant was imposing enough that I could see why he was a recognized level 5 hunter.

Apparently, Tino and the Great Greg did know of him. *Why'd you guys take the request when you knew it was a level 5 hunter in trouble? Weirdos.*

His bones seemed to be broken. Tino and the others ran up to him and smoothly removed his helmet in order to feed him a potion. As for me, I had no idea how to find his face under all that armor.

Nearby, many of his fallen party members were roughed up all over. Some of them had really bad injuries, but at the very least, they were alive. It was nigh miraculous that this party had made it this far without being killed.

"How's the pain?" Tino asked.

Rudolph's face was haggard, but the fire of life still burned deep within his

eyes. Through labored breaths, he croaked, “All good... Thanks. You really saved us.”

“You should thank him instead,” Tino replied, gesturing to me.

“I really didn’t do anything.”

Seriously, I didn’t help at all. All I did was send Tino into this hellhole. Wait, am I in a position to be thanked?

Rudolph looked up at me, his eyes hazy. He had been in here for three days. Whether the pain had faded or not, he must have been deeply exhausted. I felt bad for him, so I handed over one of the chocolate bars I had kept on hand as a treat. Rudolph dug into it with voracious hunger.

I waited for him to finish eating before asking, “Where’s your food?”

“Ngh... Outside.”

“Master, ours is outside as well. We were planning to set up camp out there.”

“Oh, huh. My party always just camped inside the vault.”

My childhood friends had considered treasure vaults a handy place to get some training in.

Now that things had calmed down, I went over the situation again. There were multiple unconscious folks, but we’d given them potions, so they weren’t in danger of dying. With all of them alive, though, we were facing a new kind of obstacle. The Association would call their survival good news, but for the people rescuing them, it was a massive pain.

First, it took a hell of a lot of work to carry five injured people. Even more so because of those terrifying phantoms. Secondly, we didn’t have much fight left in us. As a level 5, Rudolph could’ve lent us a hand, but he was beyond malnourished. No way he’d be able to fight those phantoms after three days of this. Besides, he was in this mess because he’d lost to begin with.

Could he even move while wearing that huge armor? We sure as hell wouldn’t be able to carry him. I doubted he’d even be able to lift his lance. Now, if it had been the sword I’d lost along the way, that would be a different story. Worst-case scenario, I figured we might have to ask him to strip and leave it all behind.

Staying collapsed here for so long, you'd never know when a phantom might come around to snack on you. Rudolph might have been lucky, but I was painfully unlucky.

As Rudolph was still only half conscious, Tino looked him up and down and then got straight to the point. "What happened? You're level 5, so you should have been able to fight through this vault just fine."

Level 5 hunters were seen as first-rate, and he probably wasn't a loser like me who had upped his level without improving his abilities. Plus, it wasn't as though Rudolph was here alone.

Rudolph's green eyes were as wide as saucers, which told us just how terrified he had been. He pursed his lips for a moment, then said in a quivering voice, "There's some real bad stuff in here. This isn't a level 3 vault. I'm telling you, there's bad stuff going on. I wasn't careless, but... our attacks didn't work. Not my lance, and not my buddy's, either."

"Yeah, we know. Those wolf knight things with the stupid bone half-masks, yeah? We fought 'em, too." Li'l Gilbert just shrugged. Clearly, he didn't know how to read the room.

Rudolph was shocked and shook his head vigorously. "Half? No, that's not right. The thing that got us... had its face fully covered. It's a phantom. We gotta get out of here!" He was pale, and his eyes opened even wider, like he was envisioning the enemy and suffering the horrors anew.

Tino looked over to me, her expression grim. *Don't look at me. It's not my fault!*

Were there even stronger phantoms here? I was about ready to sue someone.

What is the deal with this vault? Bad luck or not, we're not gonna run into that monster... right?

I wanted to laugh it off, but somehow, I just wasn't in the mood.



That's my Master. He's God, through and through! Tino thought, elated.

“Where the hell did you get all this?” Greg asked.

“Not telling,” Krai replied playfully.

Tino’s heart overflowed with emotions as she watched the hunter she worshipped remove chocolate bars from his leather pouch, handing them off to one person after another. Though the capital she hailed from was vast, and there were plenty of excellent hunters, Krai Andrey would always be her number one. He was so approachable, yet it was his heroism that drew Tino to him.

“Do you have anything that *isn’t* chocolate?” Gilbert huffed.

“Nope, but I’ve got plenty of it.”

Neither that nor Rhuda’s fed-up expression seemed to bother Krai in the slightest. Chocolate bars flowed from his little pouch like magic, easing the tension hanging over them.

Tino’s mentor—her “dear sister Lizzy”—was strong. As strong as a real-deal beast, but her master wasn’t *just* strong. He also had the incredible kindness to save her life at the eleventh hour, despite her failing to overcome the trial he’d given her.

Despite being in the heat of battle, he hadn’t bothered to defeat the phantoms. He would’ve been able to crush them in a moment, but he had instead dedicated that moment to reminding Tino of what was important: the mission she had entirely forgotten.

After that, he had wasted no time in tracking down the missing people with skills that would put Thieves to shame. The fact that they’d encountered no phantoms so far may have meant that he was aware of the path of least resistance, or perhaps the phantoms even feared him, like the ones in the boss chamber.

One also mustn’t forget that he knew just when to throw away his pride and play the fool to soften the mood. When people talked about the strongest young hunter, Ark’s name was typically the first to come up. But could Ark do *this*?

Krai excelled in every area. In Tino’s eyes, he was a level 10.

His habit of giving people trials based on his own aptitude was somewhat of a problem, but that was what they called tough love. When people truly couldn't handle it, he would help them. It was hard to call it a flaw.

Greg turned toward her master. "What do we do now?"

"We get out of here, of course. We've accomplished our objective."

To hunters, fighting and overcoming a powerful enemy was the greatest honor. But his response was unfaltering. Most likely, he was trying to be considerate of the rescue targets. Chocolate bars were nutritious indeed, but they couldn't immediately heal the five who had met disaster.

Alternatively... perhaps the phantom that had defeated them wasn't even strong enough for her master to consider it worth conquering?

Just watching him brought life back into her exhausted body. Tino didn't want her idol to see her being so pathetic anymore, not after she had failed his trial already. She had been beyond overjoyed when he had come to save her, but she still wanted Krai to accept her. Even if she seemed like nothing more than dirt to a level 8 like him.

Just then, he happened to look her way. Her heart rate skyrocketed.

Her idol offered her a warm smile and said, "Well, Tino's the one in charge today. So we follow her orders."

"Huh? Oh, but compared to you, I..." Her true feelings leaked out.

Anyone other than Tino would surely pale in comparison to him. With his bountiful experience as a level 8, the peerless Thousand Tricks was able to discern problems in treasure vaults even from his perch in the capital. Not a single hunter in this vast empire could hope to best him.

As Tino shrank back, her master continued with the most serious look on his face, "This is valuable experience. When you need it, I'll help you out."

With that said, she couldn't saddle him with all the hard work.

Occasionally sneaking glances at him, Tino thought to herself for a moment. Then, she said, "I agree with you, Master. We should prioritize exiting the treasure vault with the least amount of effort."

“And you’ll guide us, right?”

She reflexively nodded.

As any decent hunter should, she had already memorized the map of this treasure vault. She knew their current location; there was no need to worry about getting lost. Krai may have been kind enough to help her find the rescue targets, but she couldn’t count on his kindness forever.

“Of course. I may not be able to evade all of the phantoms like you did, however.”

“Huh? Uh, yeah, totally. Let’s try to avoid as many as we can, though. It’s really important.”

“Yes, absolutely. I’m completely healed, so I should be able to run just fine now.”

“Wha—?! Oh, cool. Yeah, we were going pretty slow before, haha. But remember, we’ve got wounded people with us.”

Tino blushed in embarrassment. She was so self-conscious with his eyes on her, it had completely slipped her mind. Truly, she should be ashamed of herself.

The injured hunters all boasted pretty high levels, so they should have been able to run at least as fast as the rest of them had earlier. But now wasn’t the time to mention that, as that wasn’t what her master meant.

Tino just wanted to hide in a hole, but she took a deep breath and collected herself. Now wasn’t the time to fret over her own shame. She was never going to measure up to her master in many ways, so all she could do now was her best.

Fighting the desire to shrink back from his stern gaze, Tino declared, “Also... this may be an unnecessary concern with you present, Master, but I believe it would be best to ask Rudolph more about the wolf knight that attacked his party.”



The silver wolf knight raised its head slowly at the silent shadow that

approached it.

There was a small vessel at its feet. Its smell was unfamiliar, but the wolf knight instinctively knew at first sniff that it was something to be wary of. However, as the being had been born with greater intelligence than the Silver Moons, it quickly realized that the item posed no danger and that it had been deceived. It resolved to crush the puny offender the next time they met.

The mysterious chain that had coiled around the wolf knight's feet had since lost its tension and fallen to the floor. If such a tactic was used against it again, the wolf knight knew how to fight back. It wouldn't pose a threat.

Hoisting its greatsword, which was as tall as its own body, it turned toward the intrusive shadow in a slow, seemingly perturbed manner. The crimson eye peeking out from behind its half-mask shone with greater enmity than before.

Two other wolves that had been lying in ambush—one with a bow and one with a club—looked over as well. At the end of their line of sight was a small figure, its entire face covered by a bone mask with a wide grin. Unlike their full-body plate armor, the figure wore light armor that seemed to emphasize its lithe build. Its knee-high boots glimmered with silver light.

While it wasn't even one-third of the height of these wolf knights, its terrifying aura far surpassed theirs. In its hands was a mid-sized sword, drawn and held at the ready. Unlike the weapons held by the silver wolf knights, this sword was translucent.

Silent Air was its name. This Relic, with a shine that clearly differed from normal weapons, was swung casually by the figure. The wolf knights had no way of knowing that it had once been carried by a level 8 hunter, ejected on his wild journey through the den.

The White Wolf's Den was the result of a curse by the Silver Moons, which had been trampled until the very end. Their grudge, their feeling of enmity, had a strong influence on the mana material collecting in the den. It was a mix of animosity and... admiration. Admiration for strength, for form, for intelligence. Animosity and admiration were two sides of the same coin.

The fact that the wolf knights stood on two legs and used tools was a direct result of that. This was likewise true for the human bones which covered the

sides of their faces. Who, then, was this figure whose face was fully covered with bones?

Although it had failed to materialize the grudge to its full extent until now due to a lack of mana material, this treasure vault had finally grown to the point that it could fight off level 5 hunters.

As their bodies overflowed with hostility, the wolf knights howled. The figure, with its laughing skull mask, walked away with lackadaisical steps.

Chapter 5: Grieving Souls

Rudolph Davout had absolute confidence in his strength. He had learned lance techniques from rigorous training during his time as an imperial knight. Once he changed occupations and started raiding treasure vaults, he only refined them further. His power, bolstered by mana material, had far outgrown that of his former self back when he was known as a top-class Lancer among the knights.

His lance-type Relic, strong enough to bend steel clubs, was called the Wind Dragon's Fang. It was able to pierce through the thickest of shields, and anyone who was caught up in the resulting gusts would be blown away in the process.

He didn't only excel in offense, however. As an ex-knight, one could say that Rudolph's true specialty was defense. His armor wasn't a Relic, but normal phantom attacks could hardly scratch it. Combined with the shield in his left hand, he was an iron wall. Rudolph was confident that his defensive abilities could stack up against Grieving Souls' legendary Immutable.

Though he had little experience, he was still a level 5. As long as he continued to accumulate experience over time, gaining a title of his own was no distant dream. Rudolph's party members weren't quite so powerful, but together, they made a fine party.

He had accepted this request primarily because of his profound confidence. The target had been a level 3 treasure vault, two levels below the vaults Rudolph's party typically raided. There hadn't been any logical reason to be concerned, but it being a lower-level vault didn't mean that they could neglect proper preparation.

At first, things had gone well. They had easily swatted away various phantoms as they progressed deeper and deeper. It had taken three days for them to notice that something was off, when the phantoms had abruptly spiked in power. It had been a minor difference at first, but it had grown and grown until the White Wolf's Den had begun spitting out bizarrely powerful phantoms.

If anything, Rudolph's party may have been *too* strong. In terms of the request they had come to fulfill, they had been one man short. Yet Rudolph Davout and his party members had still managed to overpower these abnormally-strong phantoms.

They had been wary at first, but that had quickly faded. After all, it may have been strange for the phantoms to suddenly grow stronger, but the party was still stronger than them, so there hadn't been an issue.

The appearance of the silver, bone-wearing wolf knights had been cause for raised eyebrows, but with Rudolph's power, his Relic, and his capable party, they still hadn't posed all that much of a challenge.

At that point, they had realized that something was very wrong. However, the raid was only supposed to last another day after that, so they'd figured they had energy to spare. Rudolph had deliberated for a few moments, but he had then quickly decided to push forward.

Then, on the final day of their raid, Rudolph and his crew had met a smaller wolf knight covered entirely in human bones. That being was the incarnation of the Silver Moons' grudge against humanity.



Once everyone had regained consciousness and recovered some of their stamina, we began the fateful trek home. In war and raids alike, retreat was the time when most casualties arose. Especially considering half of us were injured, escaping from a vault this crazy was a far-fetched prayer.

The Great Greg was hauling two big guys, Li'l Gilbert was carrying one, and Rhuda took charge of the lightest girl. Rudolph's party members could walk if they pushed themselves, but it was best that they preserve their energy in case they needed it.

Mercifully, Rudolph used up the rest of the mana in Healing Faith, so he was now able to walk on his own. He wasn't in top shape, but if he used his lance as a cane, he could walk in his suit of armor, albeit slowly.

Tino cautiously led the way. With my lack of both strength and resistance, I was just dead weight. But I was still the highest level!

Rudolph looked ready to collapse at any second, but he said, “If the boss appears, I’ll be your shield. I can at least buy you some time.”

“Nobody gets left behind,” Tino responded promptly. She was becoming a fine hunter.

Ignoring her reply, he let out a groan. “I entrust my comrades’ lives... to you. Get them to Zebrudia; that’s all I ask.” There was deep regret in his voice.

Hunters needed luck just as much as, if not more than, skill. It was all too common to hear about high-level prodigies disappearing at random. I didn’t know what they had come here for, but it looked like they were acting safely enough to me. If nothing else, they probably just had shit luck.

This was a rough job. With or without that boney-faced boss he’d mentioned, it would be difficult to bring everyone home alive if those wolf knights showed up. And if *I* knew that, then Rudolph was sure to be painfully aware of it. He would also know that should the need arise, the first ones we would abandon would be our emaciated rescue targets. His level 5 recognition wasn’t just for show. Surely he had seen countless friends and comrades lost along the way.

In spite of his bravery, Tino answered curtly, “Worry not. As long as Master is here, we have nothing to fear.”

Girl, you’ve got way too much trust in me. All I can do is run away.

The Night Hiker was a one-man Relic, though perhaps you could carry one more person if you tried really hard. Fortunately for me, Tino was small. In the worst case, I could abandon Li’l Gilbert, Greg, and the rest in order to escape together with Tino.

But of course, now that we’d come this far, we had to get everyone home in one piece. I’d do my best, but I wasn’t going to forget my priorities.

Rudolph turned to me and bowed his head deeply. *I’m not God or whatever, so there’s not much point in bowing to me!*

He talked at length while we walked along the narrow path. “I’d say we’re only alive because it was toying with us.”

“Toying with you how?”

“It wielded a sword with incredible strength. Even my most powerful thrusts were easily parried. It cut through our shields and our armor, digging into our flesh and bones. If it’d been serious, it could’ve killed us all with ease. But it only injured us and left us alone. I imagine it wanted to weaken us and torture us to death. Or maybe we were just supposed to starve. It’s intelligent enough to be cruel, and it’s abnormally strong.”

These unbelievable scraps of information made even Li’l Gilbert look grave.

The denser the mana material surrounding a vault, the more powerful the phantoms within. Their intelligence, strength, and equipment could all be affected. Low-level vaults contained phantoms that were little more than glorified monsters, but as you got into the higher levels, it wasn’t too rare to find ones smart enough to understand human language. Still, such advanced phantoms had no business showing up in a vault like this.

Rudolph continued, “Just once, I tried entering a level six vault. Before long, I hit the ground running, but I swear that the phantom we ran into here was even stronger than the ones back there.”

I had a hard time buying it. This was a level 3 vault; a little change in the environment shouldn’t have been enough to make them *that* much stronger. Unusually powerful phantoms showed up once in a while when there were sudden shifts in the surrounding area, but I’d never heard of it being that extreme.

“I understand it’s hard to believe, but I *saw* it. The difference in power was awe-inspiring. I’ve never seen such incomprehensible, fear-inducing technique.” Rudolph’s clear-cut features warped into a terrified grimace as he shuddered. “With those skills, the thing might even be on par with the Protean Sword.”

“The Protean Sword?!” blurted the Great Greg, his eyes nearly popping out of his sockets.

It was a name that any Swordsman would know. Li’l Gilbert’s gaze hardened; he seemed equally familiar with it.

Tino glanced at me, watching my reaction. *It’s okay, kid. Don’t worry about me.*

The man behind the nickname was rumored to be the strongest Swordsman in the capital. He'd learned orthodox swordsmanship from the Sword Saint and used that as a foothold to learn any and all other styles. A real, dyed-in-the-wool sword maniac.

His real name was Luke Sykol. Like it or not, he was a member of my party. Funny. While everyone was sitting there astonished, I was the only one who didn't especially react.

Unlike mine, Luke's title wasn't an exaggeration. He was top-tier when it came to swords and swords only. Even Ark couldn't hold a candle to him; the guy was just leagues ahead. If there was a phantom that strong out there, Luke would've gone to kill it long ago.

Still, Rudolph was looking pretty ghastly. Being defeated came with some fear, of course, but he was saying all of this to the people who'd come to save him. No doubt they were strong; I certainly didn't want to run into them.

It was becoming clear that Tino wouldn't be able to win alone. *Damn, I really should've brought Ark.*

I'd been hearing the howling of wolves for some time now. Each time, my heart leapt into my throat. As the eerie sounds echoed through the narrow tunnel, it was hard to determine the distance between us and them. Not that I had the ability to tell anyway. It would've been nice if Red Alert told me about it, but this piece of junk often just didn't react.

"It was small. Not even half as big as the knights with half-bone masks; maybe the size of a person. But it was much, much stronger."

"Not my lucky day, huh?" the Great Greg said with a heavy sigh.

I totally empathized with the guy. *Bet Greg would make a good drinking buddy, assuming we both make it back alive.*

Rudolph had taken down a fair few phantoms on his way here, it seemed. Though the unexpected wolf-men had caught them off guard, they hadn't faltered. After defeating several of these half-masked phantoms, they decided they were about done, and then were attacked just before they could leave. Considering how unpopular the request was, they probably would've died of

exhaustion without our intervention.

The man supported by Li'l Gilbert piped up deliriously, "It's all my fault that we—"

"Don't say it, Helian."

It seemed like Rudolph and his buddies had their own fair share of troubles. But seeing as we were in such a sorry situation, I didn't want to hear a word of it.

With a shrug, I said, "You guys can talk about that on your own time once we're back in the capital."

"Uh, okay."

"Goodness, Master. You really are God."

If I were God, I'd call down lightning and burn this goddamn vault to smithereens.

We walked slowly to match the pace of Rudolph and his crew.

About halfway back, the Great Greg frowned at us and spoke for everyone when he said, "So are we screwed, or what?"

"What's going on?" Li'l Gilbert looked uncomfortable alongside him.

The wolves' howls had grown more frequent now. At first, they would echo a few times and then stop. Now, it was rare to have a moment of silence. I didn't know what, but it was clear that *something* was going on.

I was already down to five of my seventeen Safety Rings. Six hits, and I was a dead man. Furthermore, I had almost no usable Relics. My Hounding Chain hadn't returned, and though my Shooting Rings were still available, I'd already used my trump card. In other words, they likely wouldn't be useful in stopping the enemy.

I did have one Relic on hand that had some charge, but it was magic that obliterated the entire area—courtesy of my little sister—so that would have to be a last resort. I could only use it once, after all, and wide-area magic was inferior to single-target magic when it came to power. It was dubious whether or not I had anything that would work well on a level 7 or so phantom.

Huh. Are we actually screwed? Did I bring the wrong Relics?

Nothing had gone according to plan. The rescue targets were still alive, and Tino couldn't handle the phantoms in here alone. I appreciated that Li'l Gilbert and the rest actually put in an unexpected amount of effort, but everything else sucked. Plus, I had lost a Relic! Was this karma?

While I groaned and cursed under my breath, Tino stopped ahead of me. "Um, Master, something big is coming our way."

She turned around, and I could see anxiety and hopelessness written all over her face. It really stirred up my desire to protect her.

Her claim prompted the group to prepare for battle immediately. The guys let the rescue targets down from their shoulders and huddled against the wall. Rudolph's chiseled face was covered in a cold sweat as he lifted his lance.

Everyone was ready to fight. In the midst of the nerves and seriousness in the air, I gave a half-hearted shrug. With no other option, I pulled Tino behind me and stood in front. Even I had some measure of pride.

"What are you doing?!"

"It's dangerous. Stay back."

Gotta do what you gotta do. It was time for me to show off my strongest human missile yet. I wasn't sure how much mana the Night Hiker had left in it, but I ought to at least be able to get one clean hit in. *The enemy shouldn't expect a high-speed missile to come rocketing through, so the first one should hit... I hope.*

I'd slammed into armor before, but if I could create a miracle here, I might be able to knock its head off. Of course, that hit would mean losing one of my lives, but it was unavoidable.

The incredible nervousness slowed my heartbeat, like the thing had given up on panicking. Was that even possible? Though if I was really up against something as strong as Luke, well, I'd just die. I strained my eyes, looking ahead. From a dimly lit corner, it emerged.

Rudolph gasped as all the color drained from his face. It was the phantom he

had told us about, the one whose entire face was covered by a skull. About half the size of the silver wolf knights, it was around as big as me. But the overwhelming pressure emanating from it was beyond comparison to the wolf knights we'd fought.

This phantom was much more human in appearance than the others. From the side, it appeared to have canine ears, but the shape of its head and its hair were humanoid. An obsidian sword hung from its hand, dragging behind it.

"What *is* that thing?" Li'l Gilbert croaked. He was shaking like a leaf.

Oh, it's strong as hell. Red Alert had finally started to heat up. *Why'd I even bring you, dammit?*

The phantom was on such a clearly different level that even I could understand it. Surely Li'l Gilbert was even more aware. Then, as if chasing the phantom, yet another humanoid figure appeared. It looked almost comical next to the first, as this one was tiny and wore a bone mask with a big grin on it. Instead of armor, it donned light clothes, but it had metal boots so long that they reached its knees.

This new figure, approaching with light steps, held in its hands two familiar-looking Relics: the Silent Air sword I'd dropped somewhere along the way, and my Hounding Chain. I rubbed my eyes and surveyed them carefully.

"There're two of 'em?!"

"Oh, no. Krai, what do we do?"

The Great Greg and Rhuda were on the verge of losing all hope. Our strongest member, Rudolph, froze at the sudden development.

Tino was the one who reacted the loudest. With a pathetic, tearful "Eep!", she clung to my arms. She wasn't wheedling like usual, either; she was just terrified.

"Oh, Master! Please, it's all over. You have to save us! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'll do my best, I'll do *anything*, but please, forgive me and save us!"

Seeing our cool-as-a-cucumber Tino in a panic, Li'l Gilbert and the rest of our temporary party, alongside Rudolph, were all stunned.

The laughing bonehead slowly turned toward me. Unlike the wolf knights, its eye holes revealed only darkness. Its lips warped to form a grin, as if it laughed upon all the world. I didn't know what was going on anymore. I couldn't believe my eyes.

Patting Tino on the head to reassure her and ignoring the rest of our disconsolate group, I kicked things off by saying the first thing that came to mind.

"Shit. Liz, is that you?"



The vast quantity of mana material spawned something befitting the White Wolf's Den. Cue the awakening of consciousness. The initiation of thought within the brain. The establishment of the ego. Its first emotion wasn't resentment; it was exhilaration.

Eyes that pierced the dark. Ears that could pinpoint echoes in the distance. All five senses began to work, feeding enormous amounts of information to the brain. Palpable strength filled the body, along with knowledge of how to use the sword at its waist.

It could be likened to the king of the Silver Moons, a being that existed at the logical endpoint of their endless grudges and ideals. Its form was like the humans it imitated, but its way of life was vastly different. The human bones that covered its face were proof of its wolfhood. But in truth, it was closer to human than beast.

The mana material collecting in the White Wolf's Den had reformed the existing phantoms within into stronger beings than the Red Moons. Knights of silver fur, intelligent and able to freely wield weapons, were born. They were retainers, excellent knights that served the alpha.

Now, over ten years after the Silver Moons had disappeared and left their curse behind, the wolves in the den had achieved their true form. If they had had this much strength to begin with, the creatures known as Silver Moons would not have been driven from their home.

The five hunters who had infiltrated the den were stronger than the ones who

had hunted the Silver Moons to near-extinction, but they were no match for the new and improved canines. Even the strongest among the humans, the giant with his lance, couldn't stand up to the leader and its pack. A single strike of the lance boasted enough strength to pierce thick armor, but it meant nothing if the hunter couldn't hit his mark.

The boss had the strength, swiftness, technique, and intelligence to surpass the hunters in every way. Unlike the other wolves, it bore no hatred—only exhilaration.

Foolish hunters groveled before the boss's power, writhing as they realized they weren't strong enough. It relished the looks on their faces as their hopes were crushed in one fell swoop. So much so that, occasionally, it might overlook the hunters as they fled unknowingly away from the exit.

The White Wolf's Den was a hunting ground. Poor souls who found their way into the den would find only death. No man could escape the boss's blade. It brought death to the intruders who sullied its home—cornering them, giving them hope, then crushing that hope before them. The hunters' despair soothed the ennui felt by the boss and its brethren. In the end, they would have to expand their den, but that could wait until they had more allies.

The boss waited some distance from its chamber, which the hunters would surely return to. Once it heard its comrades' screeching howls, it prepared to greet the wounded hunters as an agent of death. But just as it thought to do so, it finally met one grieving soul wearing a delighted smile.



One could liken it to wind. Or perhaps a shadow, lightning, flames, or even a storm.

"Huh?" came Li'l Gilbert's voice.

I didn't even blink.

Without any sort of forewarning, the boss's body had been blasted away. As it bounced off the ground with a *thud*, the laughing bonehead now stood before me.

"What the—?!"

Rudolph, standing next to me, opened his eyes as wide as they would go. The base of his long lance quivered and fell to the ground with a clatter. Rather than gawking, his gaze was more akin to the vacant look of someone who couldn't get a grasp on the situation. He couldn't see it. Nobody could have even perceived it.

So fast that even the battle-hardened hunters couldn't lift a finger, the bonehead brought its face right up to mine. Hot-pink hair peeked out from behind the mask. The voice that came from within was somewhat muffled, but adorably high-pitched.

"I just wanna make sure of something real quick, Krai Baby."

Still clinging to my arms, Tino tried to hide behind me.

The laughing bonehead paid her no mind, jabbing her thumb backward and asking, "Is that thing our new member, or what?" There wasn't a trace of tension or fear in her tone. Seeing that she was just the same as ever was strangely relaxing.

The boss, knocked all the way over to the wall, fell to its knees before rising again. It scrutinized the laughing bonehead, whose back was currently turned to it. The only human aspect they shared were the bones covering their faces.

I didn't know of anyone else this dangerous. Well, actually, I knew some people who were even *more* dangerous. Everyone but Tino was afraid of the bonehead as she spoke. Tino herself was downright terrified of her.

I sculpted my tense facial muscles into a smile. "Pfft, no. Hey, how about you lose the mask?"

"Really? Whew! I didn't think so either, y'know, but I thought the mask was kinda like ours. Oh, by the way, here. I think you dropped these, *Krai*."

Oh, she was pissed right off. Liz's voice was almost saccharine as she handed over the Silent Air and my beloved Hounding Chain. She only called me "Krai" without the "Baby" when she was livid. With a pompous air, she put a hand to the mask that covered her features and yanked it off of her face.

Nobody moved. The Great Greg, Li'l Gilbert, and even the boss behind her stood motionless as they watched.

Her hot-pink hair fluttered, unbound. Revealed for all to see were her tan skin, thin lips, chiseled nose, and most strikingly of all, shining pink irises. She was beautiful, but she gave off the aura of a dormant volcano ready to erupt at any time.

Rhuda gulped. “What? It was a human?”

“No freakin’ way.” The Great Greg took a step back, unable to cope with this turn of events. Did he know? Was he one of those people who followed the crowd?

Liz finally looked over, as if she had only just noticed the people other than me here. “What? Do they, like, not know about us?” She smiled, but the blazing light in her eyes proved it was fake. “Are you hunters? I mean, Krai’s right here. What are you, fakers? I can’t believe people from the capital wouldn’t know.”

Her mask—the laughing bonehead, party symbol of Grieving Souls—fell to the ground.

Liz then laughed, arrogantly and derisively, both at the phantom and all of the hunters present. “Wow. People still don’t know Grieving Souls, huh?”

Everyone was aghast.

Again, one could liken her to wind. Or perhaps a shadow, lightning, flames, or even a storm. Her little figure was chock-full of energy, like the sun. All of these described the Stifled Shadow, Liz Smart, well. Her face, her appearance—it was the real Liz, all right. But why was she here?

Seeing that I was just full of questions, Liz whispered, “Sorry, Krai.”

I didn’t buy it. Her little mouth was trembling, like she was holding back a sob or stifling some intense emotion. Although she *looked* ready to cry, Liz wouldn’t do that.

“You don’t know how sad I am. I beat that castle, ran back home as fast as I could, and you weren’t there! Then, I heard you went to a treasure vault, of all places.”

Her voice faltered. Her skin flushed, and her eyes glowed like cinders. The air around her warped like a mirage. Liz was *hot*. The heat rising from her warmed

the cool cavern.

She is really, uh, fired up. Maybe she's all excited from beating that treasure vault?

It was all too common for hunters to go wild when they had too high a dosage of mana material. Also, the Night Palace, the vault she'd been to, wasn't exactly close enough to run back from. *How in the hell...?*

"Sad. Just sad! Do you even know..." Liz paused, collected herself, then spat, "how embarrassed I am?!"

Her eyebrows warped, her eyes narrowed, and her cheeks and lips grew taut.

"I trusted you, really. I thought it was all a mistake; maybe Krai here was just too much of a worrywart, right? But look. My little apprentice..." She glared at Tino. "Can't even take out the trash. Hot damn."

Everyone aside from Tino was shaken. Tino, meanwhile, had long surpassed that and was now practically dying. Before, I just heard her teeth chattering. Now I even *felt* it through her hands as she squeezed my shoulders.

It's okay, kid. She's not gonna kill you, or whatever.

Li'l Gilbert tried to interject. "Hey, what the hell's—"

"Say what? Go die, kid. Can't you see I'm busy apologizing here?!"



He was quickly thrown against the wall. A moment later, we all heard the dull sound of armor being pierced. The cave shook. The laws of physics were going haywire.

His eyes rolled back in his head, his armor caved in, and his hands were twitching nonstop. *What a noble sacrifice.*

The Great Greg rushed over to him, helped him up, and gave him a potion. Li'l Gilbert had guts, but he should've sized up the enemy first. Liz was faster and more volatile than anyone else here, by far.

Not even bothering to look at the guy she'd just wrecked, Liz looked behind me at a shrinking Tino. "T, what the heck am I supposed to do? Am I incompetent? Did I mess up your training? Are you not talented, were you not paying attention, or did you not want power badly enough?

"Hey, answer me already, you little shit! You freakin' trash heap! I didn't raise you to be garbage! Krai's gonna hate me now because of you! You made me look terrible! Die! Just die if you're not up to the task! Die in a ditch! Choke on your tongue and die!"

"I'm sorry, my dear sister! I'm sorry! It's all my fault. I'm sorry for being such a problem. It's all because I'm so weak! I'm sorry!"

Liz spat abuses at Tino, while Tino apologized like a broken record.

"Don't apologize to *me*! There's someone else you should say sorry to!"

Everyone was cringing hard. Even the boss!

Tino had been giving it a hundred—no, a hundred and ten percent. It wasn't Liz's fault, either. The real problem was me, the guy who'd pushed this stupid request on her. But if I said it was my fault, no doubt Liz would still blame Tino. That was just her nature.

Instead, I placed my hands on Liz's shoulders before she could get a hold of her. "Liz, Tino really gave it her all. She took down phantoms, and she found the rescue targets we're here for. Yep, I'd say she did a good job."

Big words, coming from me of all people. No doubt everyone here was thinking the same thing.

But as she didn't know the circumstances, Liz was shocked. Her attitude did a complete one-eighty as she looked up at me and asked, "Huh? She really did a good job?"

"Yep. They all worked together and took down this one big, white wolf. That's pretty great work, if I do say so myself."

"One? Only one? Is it really worth letting her live after all?"

What in the world was pulling at her heartstrings right now? While I sang Tino's praises, Liz cocked her head in confusion. It felt like I was consoling a terrifying monster. *Oh, wait. That's exactly what I'm doing.*

"Yeah, totally! I want her to keep living. And good job to you, Liz, for learning to hold back a little."

"Oh, you noticed! Cool, right? I remembered to stop just before hitting people! Only because you made me do it, though." Liz lit right up. Her rage from seconds ago was gone with the wind.

That was a normal hit, wasn't it? She didn't stop, did she? But Li'l Gilbert was still alive, so I figured that was progress. Past Liz would've squashed him flat. *Look at me, teaching the genocidal beast restraint. Am I a genius, or what?*

Not that I had actually done anything.

"Sorry for being such a problem, Master." Tino's faltering, fragile voice came just in time.

She wasn't Liz's long-time apprentice for nothing. She knew what we needed here.

"Look, T, you've got talent. You just lack motivation, effort, and the readiness to die for what you want. Since you're a hundred times weaker than me, you gotta work a hundred times harder."

"Uh, yeeeah. Totally." I didn't know what she was talking about, but they must've had some master-pupil telepathy going on.

She was still stomping on the ground like she was mad, but for the most part, Liz's anger had subsided. Liz was a moody one, so there was no telling what might set her off into a blind rage, but at the very least, it never lasted too long.

While we bickered, the bone-masked boss didn't move an inch. It just held its sword at the ready, watching Liz's every move with utmost caution. Despite having taken a blow from her, the phantom's body showed no signs of damage. Unlike Li'l Gilbert, its armor wasn't even cracked.

Just then, we heard footsteps approaching. From the direction Liz had come, another creature appeared. It was a giant, almost as tall as the ceiling. I remembered that figure, the one stooping over in the cramped space: it was one of the silver-pelted wolves from the boss chamber.

The gun it carried was probably used for rapid fire. Most firearms phantoms carried were based on those of civilizations that had flourished in the field of physics for a time. Many of them couldn't be replicated by modern tech and came with enough power to pierce muscles hardened by mana material. They were tough for hunters to deal with.

The boss looked up at the wolf knight, much larger than itself, and gestured our way. It silently turned toward us.

So the reason he didn't attack us wasn't because he was waiting for an opening, or because he was scared of Liz... but because he was waiting for his buddy?

Well, Liz was really the only person the boss had to worry about. The rest of us were six half-dead hunters, a few healthy-but-weak hunters, and me, the guy who just had a high level. The influence of a high level might work on hunters, but monsters and phantoms didn't care one bit.

Liz didn't even turn to look. When she spoke, she sounded completely uninterested. "Huh. Still more, eh? T, d'you want one?"

"Oh, Lizzy, I—"

"Don't disappoint me, 'kay?"

She was around thirty feet away from the enemy, with its oppressively large weapon. It was too far. The boss was next to it, too. If any one of us took a step out, we'd be full of holes in an instant. In this tiny tunnel, the enemy didn't even have to aim. Even Tino couldn't hope to evade it. I mean, no normal hunter could do that.

The sound of armor scraping together interrupted their conversation.

“I’ll guard. No matter what, I’ll try to make an opening for you.” Rudolph, previously frozen in fear, now gripped his shield and stood next to Liz.

His raised shield, its green paint fading and covered in small scratches here and there, was as thick as a mini-brick wall. It wasn’t enough to cover him fully, but at the very least, we could rely on it to block the bulk of the gunfire. He was a pretty good guy.

Liz shot a quick glance at him, and the pleasant look on her face slid right off. “Ugh, no thanks. You spoiled it.”

“What?”

“I was gonna have T do it for me, see, ’cause I’m pooped. Gotta have time to cool down, right? But now people are gonna talk shit about me and it’s all T’s fault. Ugh, I’m pissed. I can’t take it anymore!”

Liz’s slender fingertips picked up her mask and pressed it onto her face, hiding her contorted expression. At almost the exact same time, loud gunfire rang out as countless bullets erupted from the wolf knight’s massive gun. Each flash at the end of the barrel lit the darkness.

In the face of the bullets raining upon us, there was an unidentifiable scream. Then, the darkness returned. It had aimed for Liz and those of us around her. However, nobody fell.

Liz opened her outstretched hand, dropping metal fragments on the ground. They were the bullets that should have rained upon us. The wolf knight lifted his gun again in fear. Unsatisfied, Liz let out an ungodly howl.

Aw hell, she’s pissed again.

“You think normal bullets are gonna work on meee?! Stupid-ass dog, with your stupid-ass, outdated physical weapon! I’m better than that! Don’t assume I’m all the way down at your level! You’re just tryna make a fool outta me! AAAAARGH!”

Another hail of bullets came, shaking the narrow cavern. Liz didn’t move a single step, yet all the bullets disappeared. The bullets, having lost their

momentum, fell comically to the ground.

She continued to yell, her breath not labored in the slightest. “I don’t need a goddamn shield! T, you really had trouble with these weak, slow-ass attacks?! Were you even learning from me, kid?! What, you tryna shame me with your incompetence?! This is what you should be doing!”

Truthfully, it was a bit too much to ask.

Rhuda was full-on pale. Could she see Liz’s movements? Rudolph was at a loss as well.

With a smile plastered on my face, I watched Liz have her fun. I couldn’t keep track, of course, but I knew what she was up to. After all, one of the reasons I had so thoroughly given up on my dream of being a hunter was because I had seen all this.

What Liz was doing was simple: she was stopping these bullets with her bare hands and tossing them aside. That was all. Though I understood the basics, it was something beyond simple speed. When she’d first shown me that she could do it, like she was showing off a new toy, her smile was downright traumatizing. In treasure vaults that would require these sorts of beastly abilities, an average guy like me would never be able to keep up.

After one final spray, the wolf knight was out of bullets. I was a little curious as to how he would fight now that he had no ammo, but I’d never get the opportunity to find out.

Liz Smart had plenty of weaknesses: she couldn’t use magic, she acted on impulse, she was rough on her students, and she hated sweets. She *really* sucked at reading the room, too. But she excelled so much in one area that no one else could hope to measure up: Liz was *fast*. Faster than anyone else in the world. She was so fast that she hardly left a shadow in her wake. Funny, then, that they called her the Stifled Shadow.

After clapping her hands together a couple of times, Liz looked at the two phantoms. I couldn’t see her expression through the mask, but I could more or less imagine it. Then, the massacre began.

I couldn’t see a moment of it, as if the whole process was omitted and I was

just being shown the result.

“When you’re up against armored phantoms, see, you just gotta smash ’em! Armor can only be so hard! Hit ’em from the top, too! Really knock their damn heads off! Kill, kill to your heart’s content! What could be more fun than this?!”

After a single step forward, she kicked the wolf knight without even giving it a chance to brace itself. The impact crumpled its thick, black armor like it was a sheet of paper. The wolf, a giant compared to Liz, was hurled into the wall. It vanished on impact, leaving only an indent behind. In mere seconds, one threat had already been eliminated.

Without bothering to look back, the laughing bonehead turned toward the boss. It was hard to tell which one was the real monstrosity. The boss readied its sword, wary of Liz. From the masterful way it carried itself, it was clear that Rudolph had not been exaggerating. Straying too close to the beast would have you cut down with ease. Its intense fighting spirit was palpable even from afar; out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rudolph stiffen. And yet, Liz walked up to it like she was on a nice stroll.

Liz seemed unaffected as she entered death’s domain. The sword flickered and vanished, like a flash of lightning, but no scream followed. Rudolph’s eyes bulged in their sockets.

Just hearing about it, you would think this was all a joke. The slashes were invisible to the naked eye, but the wild blade continually struck nothing but air. It was as if Liz were dancing with the sword. She was a Thief, so she didn’t have much resistance to damage. She’d be in trouble if she misstepped even once, but the blade couldn’t even graze her.

“Swords are easy! Grab ’em, parry ’em, dodge ’em, do whatever the hell you want! How the hell could you have a problem with this?!”

Far from it, Liz easily stopped the sword—so fast that you couldn’t even see the afterimages—between her fingertips. The boss tried to fall back, but its sword wouldn’t move.

What’d that guy say? This thing is supposed to match up to the Protean Sword?

Liz had dueled the Protean Sword countless times. It was just one element of Grieving Souls' intense training. I didn't know what exactly they were doing now that they were at this high a level, but in Liz's case, at least, the boss wasn't even worthy of caution.

Good thing nobody made that Protean Sword comparison near Liz. She didn't take kindly to people who underestimated her friends.

While she hollered, Liz started lazily toying with the boss. A single bare-handed strike broke through the phantom's guard and crushed its armor.

"Just DO it! Dodge, they can't hit you! Hit them, they can't dodge you! Get into your groove! Kill 'em like you're dyin' tomorrow! Get it, T? Don't neglect your talent, you lazy shit! Hurry! Live fast and hard! You're running out of time, T! Remember, you gotta work a hundred times harder than me, or else I'm gonna keep getting better than you! Damn slowpoke!"

I couldn't follow what she was saying anymore. Subjected to this storm of abuses, Tino started crying as she clung to my back. *Poor baby. Liz definitely wasn't born to teach.*

"I was in such a good mood, too! Shit!"

As a finisher, Liz lifted her leg—covered by a boot-type Relic called Apex Roots—and sent a powerful kick right into the boss's side. A dull thud shook the cave, and Rhuda gasped. Liz's leg had pierced right through the armor and penetrated the boss's torso.

The phantom spasmed, and an unearthly scream echoed throughout the cavern. Blood gushed out of the wound, splattering onto Liz's mask. *I really should've picked a different symbol...*

"You calm down yet, Liz?"

"Yeah, a little."

Her voice was different from when she had been screaming at Tino. Tino stifled her tears, careful not to put Liz back in that bad mood.

She yanked her leg out of the boss's body with a disgusting *schlop*. The boss then collapsed to the ground. Seeing as it wasn't disappearing, it was likely still

alive. But that was definitely a fatal wound, so it didn't have long.

Having lost interest, Liz turned away from the fallen boss and coolly walked over to me. Her boot was soaked in blood. Splotches of it had gotten on her clothes and skin, too.

Overpowering strength. Thorough, unrestrained violence. The result of enormous talent that was lacking somewhat in the humanity department. That was Liz Smart, the genocidal beast who I still couldn't believe was living within normal human society.

Rhuda and the others sank weakly to the floor. They couldn't believe it, but that was our Thief. But more than a Thief, I always thought she seemed more like a Brigand.

Liz removed the mask once more. She put a bloody finger in her mouth, stared right at me, and smiled in embarrassment. "Oh, I forgot to say: I'm home, Krai Baby."

"Welcome back, Liz." I reached out and pulled her into a big hug.

She was hot, like a fire had been lit inside her.

Epilogue: Let This Grieving Soul Retire!

Having donned their new laughing bonehead masks, they spoke in amazement.

“Wow, cool! Did you design this, Krai Baby?”

“Won’t people be really scared of us if we wear these?”

“Aah, who cares? They’ll be quaking in their boots with or without the masks.”

When they all wore the masks, regardless of stature or personality, they all looked like beasts.

Once upon a time, in a small town, there were six children who admired treasure hunters.

One boy, bravest of all and lover of the sword, aimed to be a peerless Swordsman.

One girl, most curious of all and willing to take the lead, aimed to be the fastest Thief.

One boy, kindest of all and wishing only to protect his friends, aimed to be the greatest Paladin.

One girl, most clever of all and demanding yet more power with her wisdom, aimed to be the apex Magus.

One girl, frailest of all but with a wish to help others, aimed to be an excellent Alchemist.

The whole way, those boneheads laughed. They demanded strength, and their natural talent and effort did not forsake them. Luke was right; the laughing bonehead would become a symbol of equal parts awe and terror.

As for me...



“I had it all wrong.”

In the lounge of First Steps’ clan house, Gilbert looked around at his temporary party members. A full day had already passed since the raid on the White Wolf’s Den, where the group had been mercifully saved from that hellish request.

Gilbert didn’t know about all this until he was told later, as he was carried out of the vault while unconscious, but the injured rescue targets were safely delivered back to the city. One could say that the Association’s request was cleared with flying colors.

The unusual state of the White Wolf’s Den was placed under the supervision of the Association and the empire. They’d likely dispatch some higher-level hunters to check it out later.

“All this time, I thought I was strong. I really thought I was at the top, but I’m obviously not there yet.”

He looked at the Purgatorial Sword leaning next to him. Up to this point, he had had no equals. He had occasionally struggled in battle, but he’d always pushed through with his own power.

Gilbert had confidence. With time, he felt that he could reach the top. Although he had a glimpse of the top before, he had realized during this raid that it was much further away than he’d realized.

It wasn’t that he hated that he had been so thoroughly trounced; after all, Gilbert didn’t even remember it. He hadn’t been inattentive. In fact, he had been straining his nerves the whole time.

And yet, he still couldn’t remember what happened to him. That proved that someone out there was still much, much greater than him.

At first, he had been all alone. As he went on hunts with allies weaker than him, he had grown impudent. But after being alone again, joining a new party with talented allies, and finding new phantoms they had to work together to defeat, he had met someone who could crush him with one hand—a true beast.

The person who led her, Thousand Tricks, was likely even more powerful than her. Despite seeing them in person, Gilbert couldn’t quite comprehend them.

Probably because they were on such different levels.

It had all happened in a short time, but the experience had been enough to change Gilbert Bush's mind and then some. Though it had been a dangerous job with crappy rewards, it still had at least that much value.

Despite knowing them for one short day, Gilbert had a feeling that he understood his comrades to an extent. He looked upon them and said, "The top is still way out of sight for me. As I am now, I don't think I'll make it there. So I'm gonna go and, uh, apologize to my last party and start training from the bottom again."

Tino's expression didn't change. "Good."

Hunters had to grow. They needed to experience battle, to endure failure, and to see the distant peaks. It wasn't rare for people to fail along the way. Despite the frustration and despair he had experienced, the willpower burning in Gilbert's eyes was stronger now because of it. He didn't have much left to say to Tino.

Gilbert stood with a relieved look on his face. He slung his luggage over his shoulder, looked at his comrades' faces again, and finally spoke to the party leader.

"Sorry. I gotta go thank Thousand Tricks and apologize for what a pain in the ass I was. I'm gonna tell him, 'Just watch. One day, I'll be catching bullets, too.'"

"I don't think you will," Tino said quietly.

The look on her face clearly showed that she didn't believe him. Still, he vigorously thrust a finger toward her and yelled, like some sort of public declaration.

"Don't get it twisted; I haven't given up on being the strongest! I just gotta change my methods a bit. I'll catch up to you soon! Later!"

All of the Steps in the lounge looked over at Tino's table, curious about what was going on.

As Gilbert hurriedly stood up and moved to leave, Rhuda stopped him. "Oh! Gilbert, you forgot something!" She pointed at the Purgatorial Sword leaning

against the table.

For a treasure hunter to leave their weapon—their life—behind meant they weren't thinking clearly. But Gilbert didn't turn back. His breath quickened, and his eyes grew wider.

"I don't need it anymore. That weapon's way beyond my level! It may be powerful, but a man won't grow stronger by relying on Relics! I'm gonna learn to catch bullets with my bare hands like the Stifled Shadow can!"



“Uhh...”

“Just give it to Thousand Tricks! No, maybe just lend it to him. Have him keep it until I get strong enough! Just you wait; I’ll be back to reclaim it before long!”

“Handin’ it over already? You haven’t even changed yet!” Greg called after him with a bemused expression.

Even leaving aside its power as a Relic, the Purgatorial Sword was a powerful weapon. Without that weapon, which Gilbert had been using ever since he started hunting, battles would likely be much harder.

The man in question was sure to be aware of that. Even so, he had chosen to abandon his weapon. That showed resolve, incomprehensible to any but him. He wasn’t about to let anyone sully it.

Tino deliberated for a few moments, her brow furrowed, before addressing him. “Gilbert.”

“What? Don’t try to stop me.”

“I’m not.”

Gilbert would likely grow much stronger, although Tino couldn’t divine people’s futures. She hadn’t seen anything in him after the party was formed, but her genius master had summoned him for a reason. Thus, she took a deep breath, praying that he would have a bright future.

“Lizzy’s mask was made without any holes for the eyes. When she caught those bullets, she couldn’t see a single one of them. So if you’re aiming for that, err... that’s probably something to keep in mind.”

“Bwuh?!”



It had been a hard day, both physically and mentally.

My Safety Rings were a last-resort self-defense tool. The fact that I had gone through more than half of them meant I’d been in serious freakin’ danger of dying.

“Good work out there, Krai. I hear the Association’s in uproar.”

“Mhm.” I rocked on the chair in my office, letting my body sink into it as I listened to Eva.

What happened at White Wolf’s Den was a very rare case. Everyone had made it home alive this time, but normally, this kind of disturbance wasn’t noticed until multiple hunters died. Only luck had saved us from having any casualties.

If not for Liz leaving her party behind to come home at an absolutely bonkers speed, *and* for her ignoring her fatigue to dive into the White Wolf’s Den, we would’ve had ten hunter deaths—including mine—on our hands.

I looked over at Liz, curled up asleep on the couch. She was out like a light, not tossing or turning in the slightest. If she hadn’t been wearing that creepy mask, it would’ve been pretty cute.

Yes, I was the one who had designed it. Yes, I messed up and forgot to put holes for eyes. But it wasn’t my fault that Liz and the others kept on using them. They couldn’t see anything with them on, but they moved the same as usual.

Our party’s ridiculous rate of growth had shown no sign of slowing ever since we came to the capital. It may have been due in part to my not going to treasure vaults anymore, but I figured they weren’t *just* one or two hundred times stronger than me now.

I hadn’t given it much thought since I was always lounging up at the top of the clan house, but after going to a treasure vault for once and having it hammered into my dumb head, it was all too clear.

We wanted to be heroes. That was our aim from the moment we set our minds on hunter-dom. But maybe Liz had known all along that I already saw her as a real hero. There was quite a bit of room for improvement, of course, but Liz was at least capable of living in modern society.

I took a deep breath, steeled my resolve, and said, “I quit being a hunter.”

Eva looked at me in annoyance, as if to say, *This again?* Since I said it so often, she didn’t believe me. But this time, I meant it.

“After putting Tino and her party in danger, I see now that I can’t stand on the front lines anymore. Especially considering my hiatus, I couldn’t even help

them.”

“But Tino told me that her master is God.”

“I didn’t mean any harm, but I still did something terrible to her. I don’t think quitting is the same as taking responsibility, but boy, am I fed up with this. Hahaha... Maybe I’m just getting old.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the best *young* hunter?”

“If I keep doing this, I’m really going to make a mistake that kills everyone. That thought terrifies me. I’ve got some money, so I ought to be able to go back to the country and live in the woods.”

I didn’t need to live in luxury. Just enough for a modest life was fine with me. I dreamed of farming when the weather was nice, and staying inside to read when it rained. A world where my life wasn’t in danger. It was beyond me to fight phantoms; just remembering it made me tremble in fear. *I never want to be a human missile ever again.*

Even little guys like Li’l Gilbert and the Great Greg had tons of power. At this point, there was really nothing for me to do. Times had changed; the golden age of hunters was a bit too golden for me.

Eva adjusted her glasses and stared at me. “Just as a warning, I don’t think you’ll ever get to live a safe and normal life. Not without a face transplant, at least.”

“It hurts because it’s true.”

If only Liz hadn’t broken my Reversible Face...

“Well, I’m planning to go so far away that nobody even knows who I am. I’ve got a boring face, and hey, we can tell everyone I died.”

“Heheheh. If you quit, Krai Baby, then I’m gonna quit too.”

Liz, having slipped right behind me without my realizing, gave me a squeeze. The chair creaked under the weight of two people. I checked the sofa to find that only the mask remained.

Huh? She was dead asleep just a minute ago. Is this a ghost or what?

“Nuh-uh. You’ve still got dreams, Liz.”

In fact, all of Grieving Souls had a shared objective: level 10, the peak of treasure hunting. That was why we all became hunters in the first place. I had quickly given up on it, but with the talent that Liz and the others possessed, they had a chance of reaching the prize that the vast majority of hunters couldn’t even dream of.

Liz’s recognized level was still only 6, but that was just because she had allocated some of her achievement points to me, the leader. Without me, she’d be a level 7 at minimum.

With a smile, Liz leaned her face against mine. I could feel her body temperature, much higher than my own. As hunters were chock-full of energy, they were also much hotter than normal people. This difference in heat reminded me of the vast chasm between us.



“Yeah. But if you quit, I don’t think I’d care anymore. You’d be bored all alone, y’know? And I’m already the strongest, anyway.”

Her voice was bubbly and sweet, but we both knew that a dream like that couldn’t be abandoned for such a simple reason. Being a hunter required talent, but talent didn’t shine until effort was applied. My childhood friends put in so much more intense effort, so much more bloodshed, than any of our peers.

However, her claim didn’t feel like a joke. If I quit, Liz likely wouldn’t hesitate to choose to retire alongside me.

To quit, or not to quit? I probably won’t, I started to think to myself. *Am I trapped here forever?*

“The party’s gonna collapse without you, Liz.”

“That’s not a problem. Everyone else would quit, too.”

Liz made the ridiculous claim like it was nothing. I felt a chill run down my spine.

I didn’t have any fetters, but my friends were different. Their ability was known throughout the empire and their influence felt nearly everywhere.

Though most hunters worked officially under the empire, some were given special invitations by nobility or the army to work for them.No doubt I would be pursued if I quit. Likely by high-level hunters, no less. If they knew the real reason for my retirement, they would *hate* me. It was entirely likely that I’d get assassinated.

I didn’t have to think about it long. It was a hard no.

I mean, even without that possibility, I couldn’t just erase all of my friends’ effort for my own selfish purposes.

After spending some time deliberating about it, my poor, stupid brain failed to come up with any bright ideas.

“Guess I’ll keep at it for a while.”

“Yeah. Let’s do it! I’ll keep at it, too!” Liz pushed her cheek against mine, dangling her legs in the air. Her voice was oddly vacant.

That's right. I don't actually have *to go to treasure vaults. Damn you, Gark, for shoving that weird request on me.*

As I turned my back on reality, I swore to myself that if Ark wasn't around, I would never accept another request again.

Interlude: The Unfettered

There was one being that differed from any life-form that had ever existed. A revolutionary living weapon.

Researchers dreamed of creating such a creature, but they wouldn't dare risk causing the untold devastation it could bring upon the world.

Upon its inception, the first thing it felt was intense, unbearable hunger. And yet, the intelligence it had been given eclipsed such primal instincts.

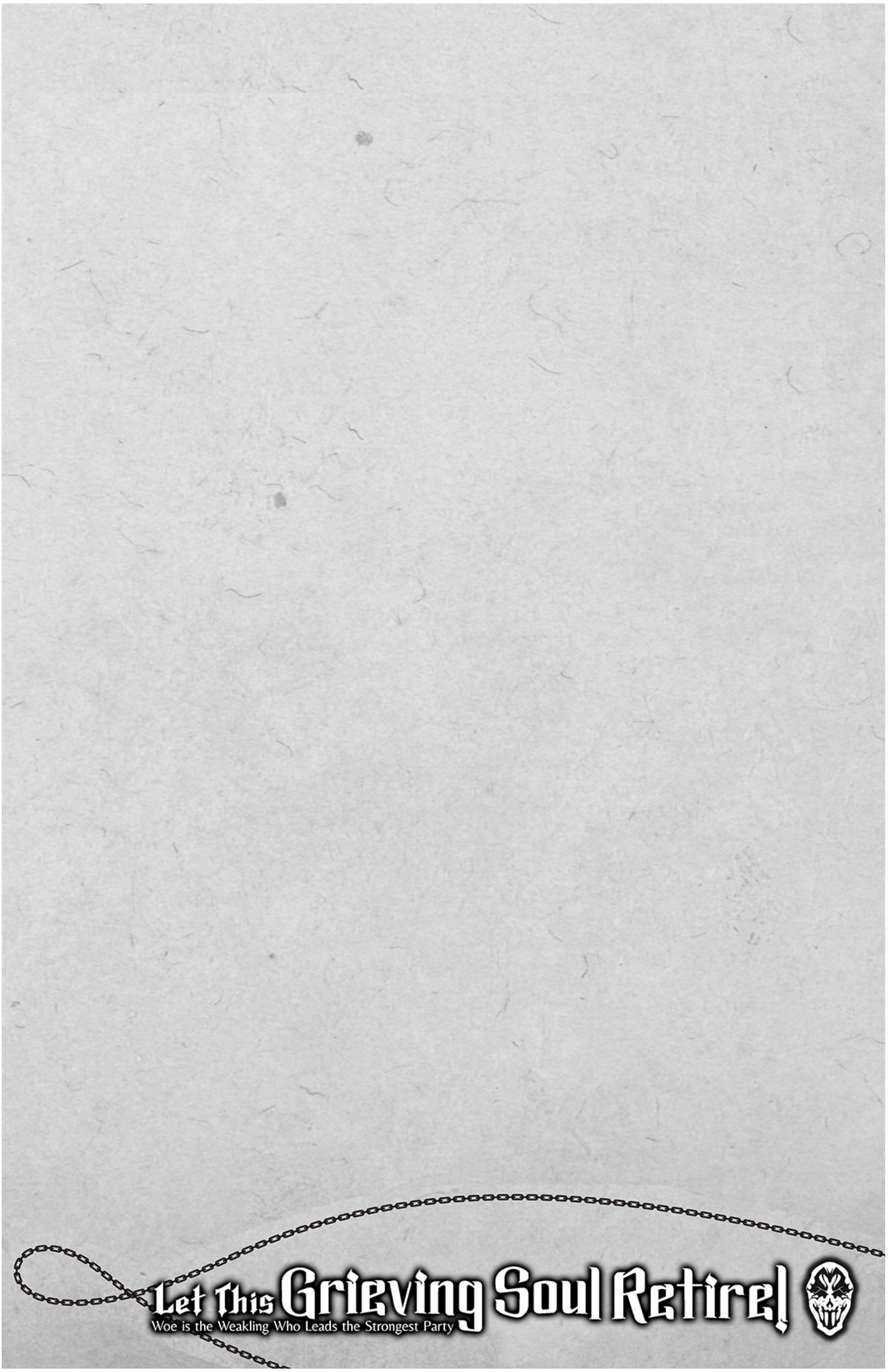
In the impenetrable darkness of a tiny metallic capsule, it forced itself to change. This was self-induced evolution, brought about as it adapted to the environment.

It took a long, long time, but eventually, its slimy, sticky body passed right through the sealed capsule. But it was blocked. There was a new barrier, made of something it could not penetrate, the worst kind it could've encountered.

So, it waited.

With its incredible intelligence, beyond that of any other magical creature—unthinkable for a being in liquid form—it knew that one day, that door would open.

It wasn't long before that day finally came. The darkest creation of the Unfettered Alchemist, Erebus herself, was free.


Let This Grieving Soul Retire!
Woe is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party

Side Story: A Day With Tino

“Oh? Your bodyguard?”

Tino opened her eyes wide at the sudden request. She had just been in the middle of preparing to raid a treasure vault, as directed by her mentor.

The one smiling apologetically to Tino now was her beloved master, a hunter with the highest level in the capital, Krai Andrey.

Likely because it was noon, nobody was in the clan’s lounge. Hunters typically worked during the day, so this wasn’t unusual.

As always, he wasn’t wearing armor. His clothing was more casual, unlike a typical hunter’s. If one paid close attention, however, they would notice that he was wielding an incomprehensible amount of Relics.

It was no real secret that everything he wore—including the chain at his hip, his silver necklace, and even the buttons on his sleeve—was a Relic. This was apparently why he had gained the title “Thousand Tricks.”

In the face of Tino’s stupefied gaze, Krai looked off in some random direction. “Yeah! See, I just suddenly wanted to go Relic shopping. Normally, I’d ask Liz or someone else, but I just couldn’t find her. Ahahaha.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know it’s a pain. But I think it’ll help you learn about Relics, too. You ought to have one soon enough, so this’ll be good—wait, what? Really?”

“Yes.”

Krai was startled by her prompt response. She put away her papers and stood up. Preparing for a life-endangering trip to a treasure vault was important, yes, but a request from her master was far more important.

The only reason Tino had faltered was because the peculiar word “bodyguard” had come up. Tino may have been recognized as an able fighter, but she was *still* just a level 4 hunter.

Timidly, she looked up to Krai for confirmation. “I’m nothing but dirt compared to you, though. How could I help as your bodyguard?”

“You really like that word, don’t you? I don’t think anyone else calls themselves dirt as much as you do.”

How could a bodyguard weaker than the person they were protecting possibly be of any use? She could have understood if it had been Liz, the person he had originally been searching for. The Stifled Shadow was a Thief like Tino, but her skills were leagues ahead. Liz’s ability to sense danger and her combat prowess were far superior.

Most of all, why would he need a bodyguard in such a well-guarded capital? Tino’s questions were answered with Krai’s usual smile.

“Oh, hey, don’t worry. Nobody’s gonna attack us, I think. It’s just, like... I mean, I kinda wanted to go on a date, and I wanted to ask casually.”

“A date?!” Tino jumped in surprise.

Krai was one of her most admired hunters. She had known and venerated him for quite some time. Respect wasn’t the only emotion at play here; there was also some of that warm, sweet feeling that could crop up between two eligible, single people.

The problem, however, was that her mentor was infatuated with him. Tino couldn’t imagine fighting over her master; in her eyes, he was a prize well beyond her reach. Sometimes, he might indulge her, but it was a rare thing.

As for whether Relic shopping was a good date idea, well, it wasn’t important. The fact that looking at Relics was his hobby, and that he’d dragged plenty of other people around to do so, was also not important. And the fact that she was just standing in for her mentor... she couldn’t do anything about that.

Tino looked down at herself. She wore a leather jacket that prioritized defense over fashion. Below that was a pair of shorts specialized for mobility, and farther down were her black boots with metal fitted into the soles. On her belt hung a large knife and potions. Indeed, it was a very hunter-esque getup.

It wasn’t unflattering by any means, but it was plain. Not the best outfit for a date. Tino was dressed more for the battlefield. Some might have said “love is

war,” but to Tino, they were very different things.

As Liz Smart’s only pupil, she couldn’t go around sullying her mentor’s good name. She had to be just as good as Liz.

With a serious expression, Tino said, “I’m going to change clothes.”

“Huh?! No, it’s cool. Wait, Tino!”

As Tino stood up, Krai grabbed her arm to stop her.

“At least let me do that much. Please, I can’t go like this! I may never be as beautiful as you, Master, but this is a problem of feminine pride!”

“Who cares?! I’m starting to feel really bad, so let’s just go!”

Tino tried to twist her body to escape, but Krai mercilessly unleashed his Hounding Chain.

Irritated, Tino made her feelings clear. “Master, you are an awful bully.”

In the end, she was not allowed to change clothes. If it was so important that he had to use a Relic, she didn’t want to press the matter too much. When he used the word “bodyguard,” she was even less able to protest.

The streets of the capital were as lively as ever. Tino walked, somewhat cautiously, alongside her smiling master. To passersby, did they look as though they were on a date?

Most likely not. At most, they probably looked to be two friends. If Tino had changed clothes, they’d be more eye-catching. More so than now, at least.

Krai patted the openly displeased Tino on her arm. “You don’t have to pout, girl. Right now, you’re perfectly...”

“Perfectly what?”

Krai grinned at Tino’s expectant words. “Imposing.”

“You should learn how to talk to women, Master,” Tino grumbled. No one would want to be called “imposing” on a date.

“Kidding, kidding. C’mon, let’s hold hands. Then we’ll really look like we’re on a date, right?”

He chuckled and took the frowning Tino's hand. Tino decided to forgive his attitude and improve her own.

"I like how easy you are to please, Tino. There, there. Good girl."

He rustled her hair, messing up her look in the process. She knew she was being toyed with, but maybe this *was* somewhat suitable date behavior.

"Butter me up all you want, but all I have is about a hundred thousand Gild." That was Tino's current worth. Having a mentor was expensive.

"That won't buy a Relic. Dang, Tino, you're useless."

"I know you don't mean that." Tino admonished Krai for telling mean-spirited jokes with such a straight face.

They left the main street, a popular date spot with all of its various shops, and walked to the back streets. After passing through several cramped roads, they arrived at a rather plain-looking Relic shop.

Tino had been hoping for more of a normal date, but she said nothing as she looked up at the shop's sign. This specific one aside, it wasn't the first time Tino had been dragged to a Relic shop by Krai.

The shop, Magi's Tale, was one he frequented. It was an old shop, over a hundred years old. Anyone in the know should've heard of it.

While she looked at the shop's symbol, a bell, she unconsciously furrowed her brow.

"Master, am I... just your ticket inside?"

"Yep, you know it."

"You have no idea how disappointed I am."

"Yep, you know it."

Krai wasn't looking at Tino anymore. She clung to his arm in shock, but he just went through the door without another word.

The air, cooled by Relics, chilled her hot cheeks. Despite the shop's dingy appearance, the multitude of Relics within were sorted by form and neatly arranged in rows.

Relics were more valuable than the average jewel. The fully equipped security guard at the door frowned as he watched Krai and his orbiter enter, but he quickly realized who they were and returned to his normal, serious expression.

Krai was a valued customer here. Tino herself knew that he had bought at least ten Relics at this location. Yet no matter how many times he came, Krai's eyes shone. It seemed he'd already forgotten that this was supposed to be a date.

"Nothing stands out. No surprise, I guess, since I come all the time. No Safety Rings in stock, either."

"Perhaps they're low on funds."

Relics were naturally occurring items. Anything lined up in here was purchased from hunters. The stock wouldn't change that quickly.

Master, I want ice cream. If you come that often, you can just skip today, can't you? I'll pay. Let's just go.

Though she thought it, Tino kept her lips zipped. She was interested in the date, not the Relics. Her mentor had told her she wasn't ready for Relics, so she donated just about every Relic she found. That was why she was poor.

There was another reason Tino hadn't wanted to come, too.

After taking a look around the store, Krai sighed and banged his hands on the unmanned counter.

"Get out here, Matthis! I brought Tino! Tino's heeere!"

An elderly man came from within. His hair was just starting to get the smatterings of gray that came with age. He had been appraising Relics for fifty years. According to Krai, he was a master of his craft. Matthis, the owner of Magi's Tale, looked obstinately at Krai and clicked his tongue.

"Tch. What, you again?"

"That's a hell of a way to greet your best customer."

His attitude was not one that should be directed at God. Tino was annoyed at first, but she knew that this was a daily occurrence by now, so she didn't pay it too much mind.

Then, Tino's beloved master grabbed the sullen girl by the shoulders and shoved her in front of the old man.

Matthis was skilled, and he had connections. Though he had plenty of stock, he was stubborn enough that he didn't sell to anyone he didn't care for. As a result, many hunters in the capital disliked him.

But when he saw the grouchy Tino, he *just barely* loosened up. Tino didn't know why, but apparently, this stubborn man had taken a liking to her.

Krai, having thrust Tino in front of him with great confidence, said, "Look, I brought Tino. Let me in there, or I'm not bringing her again!"

"Master, did we really come here to sell my body?"

As usual, Krai laughed off Tino's half-joke with a "Yep, totally."

Whenever Tino was here, she was nothing more than an entry ticket.

Inside the shop was an atelier, chock-full of not-yet-appraised Relics. The first time Krai had brought Tino with him, Matthis had allowed them into the back "just this once." Having gotten a taste for it, Krai had brought Tino with him every time since then.

She wasn't being subjected to anything, at least, and it wasn't like she despised this unpleasant owner. And yet, she thought this was rather cruel. This wasn't a date, and it certainly wasn't bodyguard duty.

Matthis made a sour face. His workshop was back there. Letting people in was probably against store policy.

"There's nothing in there that you'll want."

"Well, y'know, I just really wanted to show Tino those Relics." Krai lied brazenly, badly enough that even Tino saw through it.

He pushed Tino at the still-sour Matthis. Given no other choice, she would have to carry out her role as entry ticket. It was unfair to Matthis, but this was what she had to do.

She at least resisted by maintaining her miserable expression and an unemotional voice.

“Show me... everything you’ve got, big boy.”

“Gack! Hrk, hack!”

Krai ruffled Tino’s hair as he watched the man choke.

The atelier behind the counter was much larger than the retail area. However, as everything was scattered all over the place, it looked cramped in comparison. The walls were lined with bookcases stuffed full of fine books, though their bindings were decaying. As if they weren’t enough, more were piled up here and there. Mysterious tools were scattered on top of the big, metal table. Perhaps they were used to appraise Relics?

Wooden chests were lined up all across the floor, stuffed full of Relics Tino had never seen. Most likely, they were all garbage.

Relics were manifestations of the vestiges of past glory, made possible by mana material. They came in endless varieties, so they were often misunderstood. But most of the Relics found in treasure vaults were useless.

It would’ve been nice if they had even the slightest effect, but some would take mana charges without having any useful abilities. Hunters called those sorts of items “garbage.”

Still, it was hard even for hunters to determine whether a Relic was garbage or not. They could when the item was popular or made its effects clear, but any others required profound knowledge of past civilizations.

It was possible that something that looked to be garbage could have real applications. A powerful Relic could sell for enough to build a mansion, so hunters always took all Relic-like items home to take to appraisers.

Tino didn’t understand it, but many hunters made it their life’s work to take unidentified Relics home for appraisal. Maybe it was a sort of gambling addiction?

She sat in one of the chairs, kicking her legs back and forth as she watched Krai and Matthis talk. Krai, pointing at Relics on the table with a dark glint in his eye, had completely forgotten about Tino.

Weren’t we on a date, Master?

Tino had known this was coming when he mentioned Relic shopping, but the neglect cut deep. At times like this, she often wondered what her mentor would do. But it was a pointless “what if,” so she quickly blocked it out of her mind. Beggars couldn’t be choosers, after all.

Though Tino stared daggers at him, Krai showed no signs of noticing her. “A blessing pendant, strength-boosting earrings... Hrm. Matthis, when’d you get so bad at your job?”

“Damn, you’re rude. I just don’t have anything good right now, all right?!”

Tino didn’t understand their conversation. To her, it was better to just knock the enemy out directly, instead of worrying about Relics and all that. She decided that she ought to study them before their next trip. Tino felt this way every time she came, but between her training and raiding treasure vaults, she never found the time.

Krai finally finished inspecting the articles on the table. He looked unhappy. *So, nothing caught his eye today, then.*

Now they could leave. If she asked along the way home, maybe Krai would take her somewhere actually worthy of calling this a date. As Tino’s face was lit up by this glimmer of hope, Krai started rummaging around the junk-filled wooden chests.

Even Tino had to interject. “Excuse me.”

“Oh, sorry. Wait just a sec, okay? Damn, it’s all garbage... For shame. Shaaame!”

“How long is ‘a sec’? How many hours?!” Tino cried.

There was an annoying amount of wooden boxes. Between the ones on the floor and all the things piled up along the walls, there might have been close to a hundred. Inside each one was trash, clear to even the untrained eye. Relics not in a practical form had a high probability of being garbage.

Upon seeing Tino’s pitiful state, Matthis cut in, “Hey, don’t neglect your honey here. Poor gal! Man, you Relic freaks never cease to amaze.”

“Mm, yeah, I bet.”

Uninterested, Krai pulled something out of one of the treasure chests and tossed it toward Tino. She caught it in both hands and fearfully looked down at it. The item he'd tossed to her was a silver ring. Clearly, it was a cheap, worthless item.

Matthis frowned. "That's a shitty variant of the Shooting Ring. The bullets are as weak as they come, but it still uses the same amount of mana as a normal one. The light's weak, too, so it's worthless as bait."

"Master, what's the meaning of this?" she asked, puzzled. The old man's explanation told her it was pure trash.

Her beloved master didn't look up from the chests as he answered, "I'm kinda busy, so go practice using that or something. Have Matthis teach you."

"Huh?"

Being given the cold shoulder caused Tino to gasp and stand up. Matthis was clearly annoyed at his rudeness, too. But Krai continued to ignore them, looking at a weird, wooden-donut-looking trash Relic.

"Oh, yeah. If you learn how to use it, I'll give you a real Shooting Ring as a gift. Uh, as long as I've got cash left over. Cool?"

"I'll do it! Please, teach me!"

"Uh, sure. I've got a target out back. You positive, though, girly?" Matthis gave the now-motivated Tino a sympathetic look.

She didn't mind. Regardless of the details, it would be a fact that he had bought her a ring on a date, and that was all that mattered.

Tino hadn't expected a surprise like this. *A Shooting Ring!* She'd never used one before, but it was known for being one of the easiest Relics to use. She absolutely had to succeed.

All of her dissatisfaction to this point faded and was replaced with fighting spirit. Tino tightened her fist as she looked upon her master, who had resumed his junk hunt.

Using the Shooting Ring was difficult. She didn't have an intuition for it. Tino often heard that Relics were difficult to operate, but this was unexpected. It

wouldn’t just work as soon as one put it on their finger. Tino had no idea where to begin, but the Relic specialist, Matthis, gave a kind and thorough explanation.

After struggling for an hour and following Matthis’ advice to a T, she finally succeeded in activating the Shooting Ring. A dim light, like a haze, was released from her finger. It hit the ceiling dead-on and faded without a sound.

Matthis applauded while Tino stood there, blinking.

“That’s great, kid. It’s just a Shooting Ring, but learning to use a Relic in under an hour shows you’ve got talent. Maybe you’re compatible with it, eh?”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

It was her first time activating a Relic. She had obtained many over time, but she’d never tried to use one.

Her mentor had told her she wasn’t ready. When the time came for her to use Relics, she would have to train both her body and mind.

She remembered Liz’s words: “I can’t stand Relics, y’know. Might as well just punch ’em dead first. Just using one is annoying; imagine carrying a ton of ’em.”

At the time, the sentiment hadn’t exactly resonated with her. But after experiencing Relics firsthand, she understood what Liz meant. It was... difficult. Rather than learning all this in advance, it was easier to land a direct hit on the enemy.

Not to mention the fact that she had only used a Shooting Ring. She could tell that it would take a long period of studying to get used to Relics. It was clear why so few hunters could control multiple Relics. She felt that she’d had enough Relic training for a while.

Seeing Tino so fatigued after one hour of training, Matthis narrowed his eyes and smirked. “Next, you’ll wanna actually hit the target. But now that you can get the bullets out, it won’t be long; they go in a straight line, after all. Wanna take a break?”

“No. I’ll keep going.”

Tino *wanted* to be done with Relics, but that was a separate matter. Remembering her master, she brushed aside her mental fatigue. The object of

her admiration was watching her now.

Tino closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She wasn't nervous. As Matthis said, hitting the target wasn't hard. Tino had plenty of knife-throwing skill, anyway. Her visual acuity and spatial awareness were high.

Whether the weapon was a knife or a rock, hitting a target at this distance was simple. She was out of her element with magic bullets, but they flew straight, so it should have been even easier than a knife or rock. Nobody told her she had to have perfect aim, but she wanted to show off at least once.

Tino focused her mind and opened her eyes. She then extended her arm, directed her pointer finger at the target, and fired. The magic bullet, dim enough that it almost looked like it would dissolve into the air, went straight into the target and faded.

As Tino sighed in relief, Krai applauded her. "Good job, Tino. You actually did it."

Not the most eloquent words of praise, and it wasn't an especially large amount of effort, but her heart began fluttering in her chest all the same.

Suppressing the exhaustion that threatened to show on her face, Tino said, "Oh, no. I couldn't have done it without Matthis."

Internally, she cheered, *Look, Master! I've done it! I've mastered the Shooting Ring!*

Having watched over her training all this time, Matthis scowled in an attempt to hide his embarrassment. "Aw, I didn't do nothin'. I just taught you the basics. This is all your effort, girly."

He acted humble, but Tino wouldn't have been able to use the Shooting Ring without his assistance. She owed him one. Perhaps one day she should bring him a token of gratitude.

Tino looked up at her master expectantly. Regardless of the circumstances, she'd done it. She had really done it.

Not only had she activated it, but she had also hit the target. What problem could he have with that result? If he felt that the distance to the target was too

short, Tino could just shoot one farther away.

There were countless kinds of Shooting Rings. Some came in different colors, like silver and gold, and some came with small gem inserts. Depending on their abilities, they fetched a wide range of prices.

Tino didn't care for Relic abilities; she just wanted something pretty to wear. That said, she wasn't going to be picky about a present.

She waited with bated breath, but Krai just turned to Matthis. In his hand was a small, brown leather pouch.

Um? The ring, Master? Where's the ring?

"By the way, Matthis, I found this in a box."

"Always findin' weird things, ain'tcha." Matthis looked exasperated.

Tino wanted to pick a ring right away, but she decided to wait. At present, she had it in her to play along with her master's addiction.

The wooden chests were all full of garbage. Matthis had a spectacular eye for Relics, so it wasn't likely that Krai would find anything that good.

"That's a crappy Magic Bag. I can't think of any reason you'd want it."

Tino twitched at the name of the famous Relic. Magic Bags were pouches with the ability to expand the space within. Put simply, they were a lot bigger on the inside. The same effect could be achieved with modern magic, but the Magic Bags found in vaults commonly had other convenient functions.

Depending on storage capacity and special functions, some could pull incredible sums of cash. Their rarity and the possibility of misuse meant they weren't circulated around the capital much. What could possibly make this one trashy?

Tino watched them restlessly.

With a grimace, Matthis said, "You can only put chocolate in it."

What in the world?! For a moment, Tino forgot all about the ring.

"It fits as much chocolate as you want and doesn't weigh a pound, but you can't put anything else in it, big or small. You can't empty it all at once, either.

So yeah, it's garbo. Probably made to replicate some kid's bag of candy from a magically advanced civilization."

It was real-deal trash. Whoever found it must have been awfully disappointed. They thought it was a Magic Bag, but it was just a bag for candy. It was certainly an interesting Relic, but surely Tino's master wouldn't look twice at it.

His expression was unchanged by the awful news. With a serious look on his face, he confirmed, "Is it really just chocolate?"

"Just chocolate."

"You can't put cookies or ice cream or anything in it?"

"Nope. I spent a good while checking, and it's only chocolate."

It really *was* useless. Matthis looked immensely disappointed.

Master, forget about that garbage. The ring, please!

Krai crossed his arms and hummed thoughtfully for a moment while Tino waited impatiently.

At last, he declared, "This is good stuff."

"What?!"

No, Master. It isn't.



"Krai, you're going to hell one day."

"You think? How come?"

Man, today's shopping trip was great. Who knew I'd find a good Relic sleeping in a pile of garbage? This is why I can't stop Relic hunting.

After receiving the usual cold-yet-friendly goodbye from Matthis, we left Magi's Tale behind. Tino followed behind me, looking overcast as she rained on my parade.

"Uh, sorry I had to borrow money from you. I'll pay you back, trust me."

"It's okay, Master. It's... okay."

Crappy or not, it *was* a Magic Bag. I had a few of them, but you could always have more. I was just short of the price, so I had to have Tino cover the rest. But hey, I'd say things turned out all right.

I spent all my money, so now, I needed to hurry back to the clan house and start the back-breaking labor of stuffing it full of chocolate. Chocolate bars ought to do, right? I was so excited to get started!

Unlike me, who was on the verge of skipping, Tino trudged along.

Guess she's tired from all that Shooting Ring training. I praised her once already, but maybe she needs some more. Unlike Liz, I was the kind of guy to really heap on the love.

"I know you were working hard, Tino. Now you can use a Shooting Ring whenever you want."

"Ugh... Yes. It's just a shame that I don't *have* one, isn't it?"

"Wow, you're really down. Yeah, maybe there's no point in you having a Shooting Ring. It's not really strong to begin with; hunters without much firepower mainly just use them for support."

"Master, you're so mean!"

Tino's words were from the heart. She stopped walking, screamed at me tearfully, and ran off. I didn't have the chance to stop her, as she disappeared before I could recover from my bewilderment.

Dang, she's fast. That's a Thief for you.

I was left by myself, dazed and confused. People around me watched with pity in their eyes, as I had just been abandoned by my date.

I strained to look in the direction where Tino had gone, but I could never catch up with her. And I couldn't use my Relic now.

What could've made her break down like that? She's normally so calm. I thought back on what I'd done. *All I did was have her come with me as a bodyguard, like usual.*

Oh, right. Maybe I neglected her too much. It was noon when we went in, but the sun's already setting now. Borrowing cash from her might have been kinda

rude, too.

She was my pride and joy, but I might've been relying on her too much. I resolved to be more careful now on. Next time I saw her, I'd be sure to apologize. Maybe I could do something to make up for it, too.

I made a mental note of it and walked back to the clan house alone under the setting sun.



The next day, Tino would be flung into the White Wolf's Den, where her Shooting Ring training would come in handy. But that would be a story for another day...

Afterword

To new readers, it's nice to meet you. To all others, it's an honor to see you again. It's me, Tsukikage. Thank you so much for reading my book.

I found the world in *Monster Hunter: World* so beautiful that it made me want to write a sort of adventure-fantasy story. A pretty silly whim, but that's what led to me creating this work.

I want to write stories of real-deal heroes traveling through a beautiful world to find the treasures lying dormant within. But I also like relaxed, slice-of-life works, along with comedies. Little segments where friends have fun together are nice, too. And I do love a good comedy of errors.

That was when it occurred to me: who has the time to write all that? So hey, might as well mix 'em up!

For those who might've skipped to the Afterword, here's a quick explanation of the book. This work is a heroic comedy set in a fantasy world. Krai Andrey, our protagonist, is a man whose dreams have been crushed.

After Krai and his five friends choose to be treasure hunters together, events along the way make him realize that he has no talent whatsoever. In the end, he chokes back his tears and gives up.

However, the world won't abandon him that easily. All of his childhood friends had the necessary abilities and qualities to be heroes. They won't let the protagonist go just like that.

In this work, our protagonist—made the party's leader just because he didn't have a role, dragged around on adventures, and rumored to be the strongest hunter—stars in a comedy of errors where he somehow meets everyone's expectations while suppressing the urge to vomit.

Just reading this summary might make it seem like he goes through some awful struggles, but mainly, the people around him are the ones who suffer.

The protagonist is weak, but he has two special skills: escapism and

prostrating himself. Have you ever seen a main character like this?

I was aiming to make this a work you could laugh at while you read. It's an eccentric story about the weakest hunter. I would be overjoyed as an author if my readers laugh along the way.

Finally, I think I'd like to close this off with some thanks:

First, my illustrator, Chyko. My silly, whimsical decisions (like "long hair" and "normal chest") bloomed into art more incredible than I had envisioned. Thank you so much, Chyko. I especially love Tino, Krai, and Liz, though of course I adore them all. I hope you'll forgive all of my whimsical ideas to come.

To my editor, Kawaguchi, the GC Novels editorial department, and everyone else who helped with publication, you have been an immense help, as all I can do is write. It's thanks to you all that my work can be released to the public as a real, complete book. Thank you very much, and I hope to continue working with you. I'll do my best to keep up with deadlines!

And most of all, my deepest gratitude to those of you who have been reading this ever since the web novel began, yet still continue to support me by buying the book.

—Tsukikage, July 2018


I couldn't fit this in the BOOK, But here's Liz napping!
2018.07


Let This Grieving Soul Retire!
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