
Let This Grieving Soul Retire!
Woe is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party
7
Story
Tsukikage
Art
Chyko


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The Thousandfold Theurgics
Krahi Andrihee
The Thousand Tricks
Krai Andrey (?)
"Impossible," Krahi said from amid the smoke. "Dodging even one of those shouldn't be possible, but you managed to evade all of them. What are you, Krai Andrey?!"


"Don't panic! The Thousand Tricks is holding it back! He's giving us a chance to suppress it!"
Those who realized what Rosemary meant quickly got down and pressed their hands to the ground, resisting the destructive power that was rippling beneath them.

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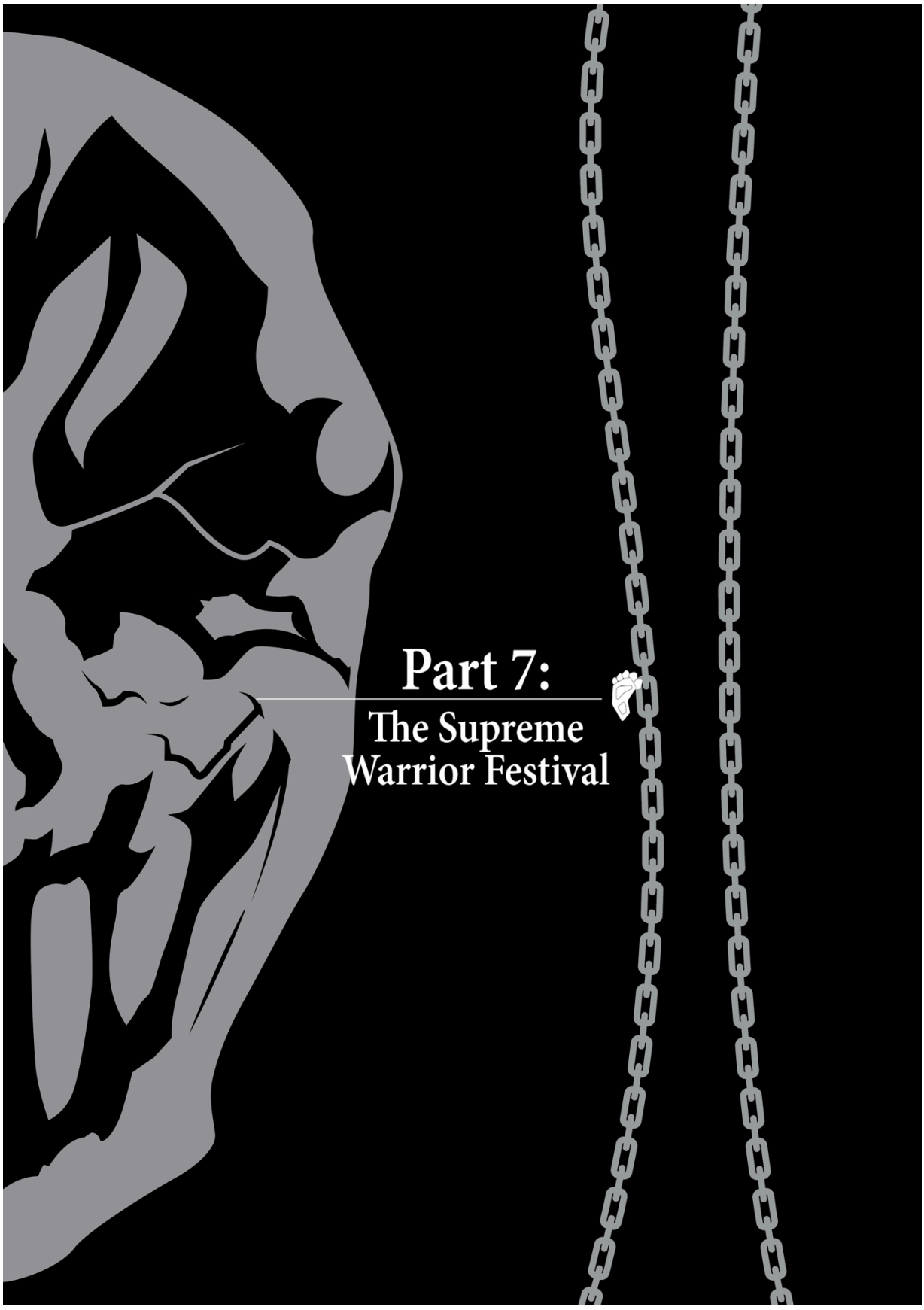
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Part 7:
The Supreme Warrior Festival

Prologue: A New Honor

I had safely made it back to the imperial capital! The streets were well-built, unlike those of Toweyezant. There were crowds and carriages. Despite not being born in the capital, all of it caused an odd swell of nostalgia within me, so I took this as a sign that I had gotten attached to this place. I took a deep breath, letting the air fill my lungs.

Unlike the bumpy outward trip, the return had been fairly uneventful. We still encountered the usual hordes of monsters, but that wasn't much compared to an airship crash.

"That was a lot easier than usual," I mumbled to myself.

Kris's cheek twitched. "Are you serious?! Sir?!"

Sir Killigan remained silent.

I always ran into some sort of trouble on escort jobs. This time was no exception, but all's well that ends well. As a bonus, I got a Flying Carpet, a Smartphone, and Telm's Relic out of it. I patted the Carpet, who was sitting next to me, and got a chop for my troubles. I had been hoping she might finally accept me as a passenger, but it seemed I had been getting ahead of myself.

When we reached the clan house, I parted ways with my savior Kris. She took the title of MVP for combat, emotional support, and Relic charging.

"Hmph, that was a complete mess. Sir," she said. "Don't call me again unless you have a good reason, human weakling."

"Wanna go out for drinks?" I offered.

"I need to report to Lapis. Sir. Besides, it'd just be you, me, and Sir Killigan! What the hell even is this guy? He barely even talked!"

Despite being talked about, Sir Killigan remained still as ever.

"Good question," I said. "But he helped you, didn't he?"

"Th-That's a bold interpretation. In that regard, I'm genuinely impressed. Sir."

"Well, at least I didn't bring on a third traitor."

Kris recoiled, utterly at a loss for words. Sir Killigan patted her on the shoulder. At first, I had been uncertain about him, but he had consistently exceeded my expectations. And by the end, Franz seemed to have developed a good opinion of him. It probably helped that Telm had turned out to be a traitor despite seeming like our sanest member.

Just then, Sir Killigan twitched. With almost mechanical movements, he slowly lifted his helmet. Kris watched with astonishment as what appeared wasn't a face, but a paper bag with two eyeholes.

"Kill, kill," he said, perhaps as a way of goodbye. He then walked into the clan house. Many battle-hardened hunters moved out of the way for him. He went up the stairs, most likely to the third floor, where Sitri's laboratory was.

"It was Killiam the whole time," I said.

I had trouble believing it until I remembered Sitri had already told me. Seeing him covered in armor renewed my appreciation for how overwhelming his presence normally was.

"I would've smacked you if I wasn't so nice. Sir," Kris said to me.

"I always knew you were a nice person!"

Kris jabbed me with her finger. "I know when I'm being made fun of. Sir."

And so, our escort mission came to an end.

I sat down in my office. For the first time in days, I wore my usual clothes instead of Perfect Vacation. I could finally get comfortable. Toweyezant hadn't been all bad, but lazing around here was what suited me best. Even perfect comfort isn't always perfect.

I still had some drudgery to deal with, but I put it off for later. And just as I made that decision, there was a knock at the door. I told whoever it was to enter, and in came Eva, composed as ever. She hadn't taken part in the escort mission, so this was my first time seeing her since my departure.

"Welcome back, Krai," she said. "How did your job go? I've heard a few rumors."

"It's good to be back. I'd give it about thirty points. Did anything happen here?"

"Thirty points? Hmm. We didn't have any noteworthy issues. The only odd thing was the Knights of the Torch returning from their expedition. However, they've already departed."

"Oh? That's some unfortunate timing."

"Well, that's the life of a mercenary. Touka seemed very disappointed though."

The Knights of the Torch boasted the largest membership of any party in First Steps. They were one of those rare parties that excelled at coordinated maneuvers, almost like a professional military. They regularly traveled the world in search of battles and rarely returned to the imperial capital. They probably didn't even think of the capital as their home base.

The Knights of the Torch had been with us since the founding of our clan. Though they had little reason to join up with us, they cooperated when Sitri presented them with expensive potions. In other words, they had been bought. Their leader, Kongoin Touka, lived by the mantra of "even lives can be bought."

Touka and Sitri got along fabulously, which meant she also got along with me. If they had been in the capital at the time, I could've just left the job of protecting the emperor to her party. What a shame that they had already left.

I yawned, slouched in my chair, and pulled out my new Smartphone.

"That's right," Eva said, "I hear Toweyezant has finally succeeded in its goal of establishing a forest."

"Yeah, there was a huge fuss about it. But it had nothing to do with me."

"That's not quite what I heard."

"It was all a product of their hard work."

According to Franz, the head of Toweyezant had been too giddy to focus on the conference at hand. Still, I maintained that I had nothing to do with the trees. Crowds of people had come to offer their thanks, but I sent them all away, saying I didn't know what they were talking about. Likewise, I turned down their gifts. Their

gratitude should have been directed at Little Sister Fox.

Who would've thought a phantom could be so helpful? There were rumors saying a forest had popped up in a day. Talk about expediency! In retrospect, shoving Little Sister Fox off onto those people was irresponsible of me. Getting in touch with her seemed like a good idea, and now that I had a Smartphone, I could talk to her even over long distances.

"But never mind that," I said. The future is what's important, and I had been waiting a while to bring this up. "Eva, there's something I want to talk to you about."

Avoiding eye contact, Eva said, "That reminds me, about the crimson dragon head Luke brought in. We had it taxidermied, per his request. Where should we put it?"

Looks like Eva has her fair share of headaches. But I've got bigger concerns than a stuffed dragon.

"Ah, just put it on any old wall. Now, I've got a request from the emperor..."

He had personally requested that I mentor Princess Murina. It was too big of a task for one person, all the more so if that person was me. Before I could continue my explanation, Eva sighed heavily.

***

Phrases like "the strongest" weren't used when speaking of the youngest man to reach Level 8. The Thousand Tricks had incredible foresight and charisma. Commanding his talented party members, he had quickly made Grieving Souls a name known throughout the empire. He hadn't built a reputation with might but instead through leadership.

Exceptional strength gave many high-level hunters an independent streak, but Grieving Souls hadn't lost a single member since its establishment. In some ways, that was more impressive than any measure of raw power.

After the Gathering of the White Blade, Princess Murina had talked with her friend Éclair Gladis about the Thousand Tricks.

"He's a fearsome man," Éclair had said. She spoke in a low voice,

as though she was sharing something confidential. “Don’t be fooled by his doltish behavior. Lots of hunters lack manners, but his problem isn’t a lack of education; he simply doesn’t have any respect for social status.”

Princess Murina had never seen her friend look so unnerved.

“He’s bold and conniving,” Éclair continued, “so much so that many people have tried to fight back, but none have succeeded. After the auction, I began looking into every incident he’s been involved in.”

House Gladis was considered a model for all Zebrudian nobles to follow. The daughter of the house, Éclair, had a certain grace that allowed her to stand tall in the face of any adversary, even if she was up against an adult. But none of that grace was present as she spoke to Murina in hushed tones. She could tell something had happened between Éclair and the Thousand Tricks, but had it really been that shocking of an incident?

“To that man, his ‘Thousand Trials’ are a game. He very well may not even realize the pain they inflict on people. If you find yourself meeting with him again, I’d suggest you be careful.”

Murina trembled as she recalled that conversation. Like a mother bird forcing its chicks to learn to fly, that man carried out his “Thousand Trials.” It was said he inflicted these trials as a means of helping hunters grow, but despite their name, they involved life-threatening battles that scared off even seasoned veterans. During their journey to Toweyezant, Princess Murina had glimpsed his aberrant talents at work.

“Thousand Tricks, you are not to tell anyone of this. The truth is, Murina is incredibly unlucky.”

When her father Rodrick Atolm Zebrudia requested that the Thousand Tricks protect and tutor Murina, it was most likely done in the hope that he might ameliorate her misfortune even a little bit.

Her duties as a member of the imperial family had compelled Murina to undergo a variety of training regiments. This naturally included academic learning, but also extended to lessons with blades and magic. She had even entered treasure vaults on a few

occasions. Despite all this, she remained easily defeated. It wasn't that she lacked talent—it was that she had been born under a star that brought her misfortune in all its forms.

The reason Murina stayed out of the public eye was that activity on her part seemed to enhance the disasters she invited. Franz Argmen the captain of the imperial guard wore Relic armor that allowed him to shoulder the damage of another. Normally, this would be used to protect the emperor, but instead, Franz bore the damage meant for Murina. Even for the elite Zero Order, this was what it took to protect her from freak accidents.

Very few people knew of Murina's poor luck. If knowledge like this got out, some evildoer or another would surely see this as an opportunity. Her father's decision to keep her nature a secret was no doubt the correct one, and while he didn't blame his daughter for her misfortune, he wasn't unaffected by it.

For a bit over a decade, the imperial capital had been assailed by an unnaturally high rate of trouble, from natural disasters to battles between criminal organizations. Murina had felt like her heart was going to stop when she heard the news of the treasure vault suddenly appearing. It would be unreasonable for Murina to blame herself for all this, but she did believe her bad luck influenced the course of events.

She had already given up on finding a remedy to the situation. Even the prognosticators at the Astral Divinarium couldn't come up with anything better than suggesting that Murina try not to make any waves.

"Her luck is bad?" the Thousand Tricks said, echoing Rodrick.

To an outsider, this would probably sound like a joke. The hunter seemed shocked by the news. He sank into a brief silence, eventually screwing up his face even further.

"Oh, give me a break," he eventually said.

"What?!" Captain Franz yelled, his face reddening further.

This young man, known for his "preterhuman artifice," chose to believe that Murina really was unlucky. He also indicated that guarding and training her was too large of a task even for him.

Murina couldn't stop herself as she gulped and tried to make

herself smaller. Hunters had the right to accept or deny any quests offered to them, but this man must've known what it meant to refuse a request from the imperial family. Even Murina's unshakable father was at a loss for words.

"That must be some extraordinarily bad luck if it's worth keeping classified," the Thousand Tricks said. "So Telm and Kechachakka making their way into my team, the attack by the dragon brood, the airship crashing, and the encounter with a treasure vault were all because Her Imperial Highness has bad luck?"

Murina couldn't help but be taken aback by how blunt he was about it.

"Y'know, I thought it was really odd that I wasn't getting reprimanded for all our mishaps," the Thousand Tricks muttered to himself. "I suspected that His Imperial Majesty was the unlucky one, but no, it was his daughter. This is why you need to be prepared for anything. If it's *that* bad, then could something happen again?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself!" Captain Franz shouted. "Her Imperial Highness might have bad luck, but this was the first time we've had this much trouble. You have no right to be dissatisfied when dealing with these problems was what we hired you for in the first place!"

"Huh?"

"C-Captain Franz is right!" Murina protested. It was the first time in a while that she had raised her voice (not that that was very high). "I've never before had such a string of ill encounters!"

These misfortunes couldn't be ascribed to simple misfortune. Encountering a treasure vault while traveling in an airship was beyond the pale, and including Telm and Kechachakka had been the Thousand Tricks's own decision. It was unfair to blame everything on the imperial princess.

"If this happened regularly, I would have died a long time ago," she added.

"Indeed," said her father. "I never would have brought her along to the conference if this was normal for her."

Even the Noble Spirit turned against him. "Stop playing dumb. Sir. There's no way that could have all been caused by bad luck!"

The Thousand Tricks took a determined step forward. Unsure how he might argue back, Murina took a step back.

"Yeah, uh-huh!" he said. "Luck isn't something you can gauge just by looking. This was all just a coincidence. The blame rests with Telm, Kechachakka, and that treasure vault. Not with me or Murina. I'd be delighted to accept this job!"

Murina didn't know what had caused that man to change his mind in such a short interval. Her father had offered to pay him with a ticket to the Supreme Warrior Festival, but she didn't think that had been what caused the turnaround in attitude. The Thousand Tricks was a hunter who built his career on his cunning; he had probably anticipated Franz and her father's arguments.

And that's what led her to believe that he was testing Murina's resolve. It was almost unheard of for a member of the imperial family to receive training from a hunter. She didn't know what sort of regimen she might undergo, but this was very likely a gamble for both the Thousand Tricks, as well as the empire.

"If something happens, please contact us immediately. We'll be at your side in an instant," Captain Franz said to her, ever the worrywart.

"I've heard nobody has ever died during one of his Thousand Trials," Murina said, trying to sound as confident as she could.

If this training offered even the slightest chance of improving Murina's situation, then she had no choice but to take it. She understood that she had been sheltered for most of her life. It was only natural that she would fear lessons from someone who instilled terror even in hunters, but she had her pride as the daughter of the emperor. She breathed in and out, soothing her tense nerves.

"Yes, Your Imperial Highness, but that doesn't preclude other tragedies."

"I-I'll be fine. Now, I have preparations to make, so if you'll excuse me," she said, trying to sound as strong as she could, before running off.

***

A treasure hunter's main job was delving into treasure vaults. However, that task required a variety of talents, which meant many hunters took on all sorts of work. Some examples included mercenary work, bounty hunting, and escort jobs, as I had just done. Magi and Alchemists received offers to help with research, and capable healers like Ansem were called upon to help treat the injured.

After I informed Eva about my conversation with the emperor and his daughter, she briefly thought it over. I gave her an encouraging glance, which caused her to say, "That is, um, quite incredible. You really do receive requests of all sorts."

"Well, the circumstances are what they are."

"Yes, very unique circumstances. I heard Princess Murina had her reasons for staying out of the public eye. Becoming her mentor requires significant skills and connections."

"Can't say I think they made a good choice. I didn't want to take this job, but I wasn't left with many other options."

At first I had wanted to act aggrieved and frame the imperial princess's bad luck as the source of all the mishaps. That would give me an excuse to turn down the mentoring job. But then I learned that her luck wasn't that bad; it just meant she couldn't go outside without risking abduction, and carriage wheels tended to break on her. Clearly, my bad luck was far greater (or far worse, if you will) than hers. In a panic, I tried to pivot to saying it wasn't anybody's fault, and I suppose nobody found that unnatural.

"But can you actually do anything about this?" Eva asked. "If it's bad enough to be kept a secret, it can't be any easy problem to solve."

"I'll sidestep it."

"Huh?"

I folded my arms and sighed. Bad luck that brought nothing more than bandits and bad carriages wasn't worth the theatrics they gave it. If that was bad luck, then what about a guy who ran into treasure vaults on outings, got abducted by Cave People, got beat out at auctions, encountered dragons at hot springs, and got hit by lightning while going for walks?

They said fortune tellers had certified her bad luck, but those bunch were anything but trustworthy. Had the imperial princess ever been called a bad luck bargain sale? I was certain they were just imagining things. Besides, wasn't her luck already pretty good if she had been born a princess of a major nation?

I closed my eyes and gave a hard-boiled shrug. "If it'll give them any peace of mind, I'll go along with it."

And by that, I meant Ark would. I had accepted the job, but nobody specified that I do the training. And what even was there that I could teach? The imperial princess probably wouldn't turn down lessons from someone like Ark. And if he couldn't do it, I could find someone else in my large clan. And with an army of guards already surrounding the princess, I didn't see any need for us to work too hard.

"Oh, I just remembered," I said, changing the subject. "Look, Eva. I got something nice for the escort job and as an advance payment for working with the princess."

I pulled out a ticket and set it on my desk. It was called a ticket, but it was made of metal and engraved with elaborate patterns. Even to the untrained eye, its fine craftsmanship was apparent.

I noticed Eva narrowing her eyes and explained, "It's a ticket to the Supreme Warrior Festival."

"Ah! I've heard rumors, but I've never seen one in person."

The Supreme Warrior Festival was a tournament held annually. From all over the world, warriors of all vocations gathered to compete to be recognized as the best—they competed for the title of Supreme Warrior. In an era that lionized the mighty, there were a number of combat tournaments, but this was one of the most famous.

Descriptions couldn't do it justice, but the fights were spectacles to behold and the tournament was popular even among normal people. The winner was granted fame, fortune, and joined a long list of renowned champions.

This was a platinum ticket, something that required very special connections to get. Most nobles, to say nothing of hunters, all yearned to have it. Franz had informed me that this wasn't just any

old ticket. Swords and staves were carved into its silvery surface, but nowhere did it list an assigned seat. With this single ticket, I could bring a number of companions with me.

When you worked for the emperor himself, you got paid lavishly. The emperor had mentioned that I should show Murina what true strength looked like and I had a number of friends who wanted to go to the Supreme Warrior Festival.

"Krai, don't you dislike this sort of thing?"

"No, not at all. I've always wanted to go at least once in my life. And it's almost hard to believe, but this ticket lets multiple people spectate."

"I see. It is a hallowed festival. I hear many warriors invite their friends and family." Eva spoke in a low voice and seemed unconvinced. But I wasn't going to dwell on it.

"Why don't you come?" I asked my helpful vice clan master.

"Huh? You're really going to the Supreme Warrior Festival?"

Eva looked like she didn't entirely believe me. Was it that surprising?

"I was told to show Murina what true strength looked like. Training isn't just about your own work; sometimes it helps to observe the experts."

Sure, I had lived my life avoiding combat as much as I could, but I was still fascinated by mighty warriors. Like many people, I had once aspired to become a champion.

I dusted off and redonned a hard-boiled demeanor. "It's an honored tournament. As a Level 8, I see no harm in making an appearance."

"Then I see no harm in going to offer my support."

Did Eva have someone she wanted to support? I didn't. I didn't even know who was going to be taking part.

"Why not bring the whole clan?" she suggested. Now there was a good idea. "This is a rare opportunity. I'm sure Tino and many of the other hunters would be delighted to attend."

"That sounds great. I think there's a limit on how many people can spectate but—oh, maybe some of our own will be combatants?"

Ark was the first to come to mind, but our clan had a number of

moniker-bearers. There would be nothing strange about one or two of them taking part.

"I haven't heard of any of our members participating, but it's possible considering the size of the Supreme Warrior Festival. Will that be a problem?"

"Not in the slightest. They'd have my full support. It would be a great honor if someone from our clan won the tournament."

"Hm? Y-Yes, it would. Krai, I feel like we aren't quite on the same page."

"You do?"

I didn't see how we could have ended up on different pages. All we had talked about was luck and bringing everyone to the Supreme Warrior Festival. If anything, I wanted to know just how misunderstandings could form from such a simple conversation. Eva looked oddly put off, but eventually, she nodded as though dispelling her concerns.

"If you say so, Krai," she said.

Chapter One: Level 8 Lessons in Leadership

Droplets of sweat fell between the plethora of spikes. Her fingers trembled as they gripped one of the protrusions. Mana material enhanced people per their desires, but the road to strength was still a long one.

Tino Shade had a small and nimble body, a must-have for Thieves, but standing upside down while supporting her body with just her index fingers and thumbs was no easy task. If she faltered for even a moment, she would lose her balance and fall onto a floor of spikes. The thought of becoming full of holes was enough to make anyone nervous.

The spike floor was a training implement thought up by her master. But while it was his idea, Siddy had been the one to bring it to life. The metal spikes had already wounded many and reeked with an unremovable scent of blood. As Tino moved from one spike to another, all while remaining upside down, she heard some grumbling voices nearby.

"You seriously don't have a clue? We know some of their members, so can't we just go from there?"

"Fox is a very unique organization. Until a few years ago, nobody even knew that was what they called themselves."

Lizzy sat down and grumbled to herself. "How the hell does a group like that get so big? Fucking hell, this would be so much easier if Krai Baby hadn't disposed of Telm!"

"Well, what's done is done! If it weren't for Krai, we never would've learned that Telm was a Fox in the first place," Siddy chided. Tino, however, still noticed her rueful tone.

They were in a gloomy training ground built underground beneath the clan house. In the center of the floor was a tube large

enough for a person to easily fit inside. The top half was made of dense glass sealed at the top. The bottom was some sort of machine with a spiral-shaped blade. Near the base were shiny metal handles. She didn't know what it was used for, but apparently, Anssy had brought it back from Night Palace.

Grieving Souls would do anything if it made them stronger. Lizzy, of course, underwent rigorous training, but the other members had also done things like making their own special tools or inventing spells from scratch. She had seen a plethora of things that all seemed like they would undoubtedly make someone stronger.

And it was probably in the name of avoiding these insane methods that nobody else was in the training room at the moment. Different approaches worked for different people, and anyone with a nose for danger had a natural aversion to the regimens of Grieving Souls.

And what purpose could traversing a floor of spikes serve? The same doubts had once crossed Tino's mind, but she quickly banished those thoughts from her mind. She had to, or else she wouldn't be able to concentrate on not falling onto the spikes.

"Maybe we should ask him, just to be sure?" Lizzy went on. "I don't like that they swung at us and still live to tell about it. We need to strike at their heart."

"Remember, Krai doesn't concern himself with small matters. Even a massive secret organization is still a grade lower than a treasure vault that's home to gods. Though, I must say I find the organization the more interesting of the two."

Tino's master and his party had all returned to the imperial capital a few days ago. She hadn't been part of the escort job so she didn't know exactly what had happened, but it sounded like they had fought another big bad guy. Listening to them, Tino had heard about the emperor, bad things about the knights that protected him, and various bits of information she probably wasn't supposed to know.

The only quests Tino's master took were ones that a Level 4 like her could never even attempt. As far as she knew, those quests almost never went as planned, which implied her master never took simple jobs. Thoughts like these made Tino wonder if the day she

joined Grieving Souls would ever come. She wanted to put it out of her mind and dedicate herself to her training, but that wasn't easy when a Thief was supposed to be constantly aware of their surroundings.

No matter how much time passed, Tino never got used to Lizzy's training, and reprieves only made it harder to come back.

"Mmm, agreed," Lizzy said, just as Tino was wondering when she'd be allowed to quit. "It sounds like he's snagged another fun quest. You think he'll let us handle it? T, catch."

A hastily made treasure box came her way. Still upside down, Tino reached out and caught it. The sudden movement caused her to wobble, but by clamping down with her fingers and moving her legs, she managed to keep her balance.

I-I caught it!

If she hadn't, severe punishments surely would've awaited her.

"T, open that. While in that position," Lizzy said, unconcerned by her apprentice's teary eyes and heavy breathing. "Now that you've gotten used to the spike floor, we'll call it there if you succeed."

"Like this?! How?!"

Tino looked at the small treasure box in her hand. It weighed a bit and was most likely locked. Lockpicking was a necessary skill for a Thief, and this would normally be easy after all Tino had undergone. But what was she supposed to do with both her hands occupied? She desperately tried to come up with something.

"What do you mean 'how'?! You've got your legs, don't you? What do you think they're there for?"

Not for opening treasure boxes! Lizzy's frigid glare stopped any protests Tino wanted to make. She fought back her tears, got her breath under control, and, making sure to keep her balance, removed her shoes and stockings. Her lockpicks were at her waist, so she couldn't reach them without using her hands. Instead, she contorted her body and used her toes to retrieve the needle she kept hidden in her hair.

Now she just had to somehow put the needle in her mouth and get it in the keyhole. She tried to keep herself as light as possible, but her fingers were beginning to hurt. She made efforts to stay

flexible, but her body ached as she tried to shift it around. She ignored the pain and carefully attempted to change her center of gravity.

"T sure has become durable," Siddy remarked.

"What did you expect? Krai Baby and I have been training her. She's not like those assholes who only rely on mana material."

Tino didn't see any problem with relying on mana material a bit more. Developing skills was important, but mana material was the most important thing in the world of treasure hunting. Regularly absorbing mana material within treasure vaults was what made hunters so powerful. It could make all the difference for someone's basic attributes. Though, technically, mana material couldn't get you anything you couldn't get through rigorous training.

"Have you ever had to open a treasure box above a floor of spikes?"

"Uh, well, no harm in learning, right? Besides, the spike floor was Krai Baby's idea."

Master is god. Master is god, Tino told herself as she somehow got the needle from her toes to her mouth. She heard a clunking noise. The weird glass thing was moving, and Siddy was crouched down next to it. She walked over to Tino and just as she was about to get the needle into the keyhole, Siddy held out a vial containing a dark brown liquid.

"Here, T, would you give this a try? It's an experimental experience potion."

"Mmm? Mmmmmmm?" Tino replied, thrown off by the unfamiliar phrase.

"Siddy, T isn't your test subject!" Lizzy barked. "If you want to test your stuff, then go find some criminals or something! What if you break T?!"

"Don't be like that. It should work. In theory. I believe. T, to put it simply, this is liquid mana material extracted from the corpses of phantoms from Night Palace. As a vapor, you lose some mana material to evaporation, but with this, you can directly absorb high concentrations. Efficient, don't you think?"

Tino was horrified. It was very possible Siddy was committing

experiments regarding the manipulation of mana material—one of Zebrudia's ten capital crimes. Noctus Cochlear, the fallen sage who had conducted experiments in White Wolf's Den, had supposedly been exiled for his thesis regarding this field. If just writing a paper could get you chased out, then making liquid mana surely warranted the death penalty. Of course, Lizzy's ideas always ran afoul of the law, but this was a different magnitude.

"If you absorb more mana material, your sense of balance and dexterity will improve. You'll easily gain the power you need," Siddy said. "How about it? Though I'll warn you, the concentration might be too high. That could prove deadly."

Tino rapidly shook her head. She could never tell when Siddy was being serious and when she was joking, which always troubled her.

"Is that a no?" Siddy sighed, a despondent look in her eyes. "Well, Krai's taken quite a liking to you. With any luck, I'll be able to find more test subjects elsewhere."

The door swung open. Whether this was good timing or not was debatable.

"Huh? Just you three? Damn Ark. That fop is never around when I need him most. Tino, what are you doing?"

Tino's concentration was destroyed. She quickly turned her head in the direction of the voice, throwing off her center of gravity. The needle fell from her mouth, she dropped the treasure box and tried to press her hand against the floor—and her screams rang throughout the room.

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"Nice! You really threw T off there!"

"You never know what might happen in a battle, so adaptability is indispensable!"

As the Smart sisters beamed at me, Tino rolled around in pain after having fallen onto a floor of spikes. Her wounds immediately healed thanks to a potion Sitri had sprinkled onto her. All I could do was stand there and smile.

"Uh, yeah. Uh-huh."

It wasn't my place since I didn't have talents like theirs, but I had been starting to find Tino's training a little dubious. Seeing her upside down over a floor of spikes might have given me a heart attack if it had happened at night.

"What's training like this even supposed to accomplish?" I asked.

After being pierced and now soaked with a healing potion, Tino looked at me spitefully.

"Right, do any of you know where Ark is?" I said, desperate to change the subject. "I've been asked to train the imperial princess, and once again I can't find him."

This was just like when I'd been asked to escort the emperor, and also like the investigation into White Wolf's Den. Ark's unwanted absence rate was skyrocketing.

"Huh?! The imperial princess? Like, of Zebrudia?" Liz said.

"Krai, you're going to be mentoring the imperial princess?!" Sitri said.

It occurred to me that while I had already talked to Lucia about it, this was news to these three.

"That's how it ended up," I said. "Not that it really matters. I don't plan to do any teaching."

Vexingly, I couldn't find Ark or Sven, or any notable parties. I might've been able to contact Starlight, but entrusting the imperial princess to Noble Spirits was way too risky. Not to mention Zebrudia was a nation that respected the sword more than the spell.

"And I got this as thanks, so I couldn't exactly say no." I pulled out the ticket and Sitri looked astounded.

"That's..."

I'd never seen a ticket until this one was in my hands, but I guess things were different for people in the know.

"Is that a ticket to the Supreme Warrior Festival?!" Liz cried, her excitement at maximum. "Are you gonna be part of it? No fair! I wanna give it a go!"

"N-No, I won't be participating. I'll just be watching."

Sitri looked at me questioningly. "You won't? But this is a participation ticket."

"What?"

"Oh, I get it! Indeed, watching from inside the ring would be better than from the audience!"

Hold on. That's some novel reasoning there.

I looked at my ticket again. The glimmering platinum wasn't engraved with any information. It didn't even say anywhere that this was for the Supreme Warrior Festival. The only thing readily apparent was that it was something special.

I closed my eyes and thought back to my conversation with the emperor. "And what to do for payment?" he had said in his dignified voice. "Not only are you training Murina, but I think your performance protecting me warrants more than just a Carpet. I can't let you go without paying you sufficiently. Tell me what it is you desire."

"No need, sire," I said, putting on a hard-boiled display. "There's very little I can do in regards to training the imperial princess. And I believe I've already been paid appropriately for protecting you."

With payment comes responsibility. Getting paid better would increase the expectations placed on me. Not to mention Kris had done all the heavy lifting during the trip to Toweyezant.

"Hmm. You're as humble as Lord Gladis said you are. But I must give you something."

The emperor looked perplexed, but Franz had an idea.

"I'll put aside my doubts about his claims of being able to do little for Her Imperial Highness. Your Imperial Majesty, why not give this man one of the tickets?"

"Ah, for the Supreme Warrior Festival? Indeed, we have some left, but it doesn't feel like enough."

"However, that ticket provides a chance for great honors. And as Princess Murina's tutor, providing the Thousand Tricks with one of these tickets will also indirectly benefit her."

Franz gave me a meaningful look. I just smiled and nodded without thinking. I didn't know exactly what he was talking about, but it sounded fine enough. My friends all wanted to go to the Supreme Warrior Festival. But more importantly, a lighter payment gave me room to make excuses if anything went wrong.

"That would be wonderful," I said, attempting to convince the

emperor. “I’ve always wanted to go to the Supreme Warrior Festival. I couldn’t ask for anything more than this.”

“Very well,” the emperor said, though he clearly wasn’t convinced. “I don’t feel this is truly enough, but I’ll respect your wishes. Now that you’ve made your choice, I assume feats of valor will be on display?”

Hmm. Feats of valor. Feats. Of valor? No way.

I shook my head. Our time on the road should have made it clear to the emperor how much I preferred to avoid combat. Besides, granting someone the right to participate in a vicious combat tournament featuring world-class fighters was a bizarre way to show gratitude. Sure, I should have taken the time to make sure I knew exactly what it was I was getting but he hadn’t said anything about —

Wait. Is this what Franz meant when he mentioned this being to the princess’s benefit?

“I better hurry up and get my hands on my ticket!” Liz said. “Later, Krai Baby!”

“L-Lizzy! Get one for me too!” Sitri cried. “Ahh, she’s already gone.”

I told myself to calm down, deciding to assume that this *wasn’t* a participation ticket. Even if I hadn’t been thinking straight, there’s no way I would do something like accidentally suggest I wanted to take part in the Supreme Warrior Festival. And giving a participation ticket to someone who avoided combat isn’t a reward—it’s harassment.

“As I recall, there are seats for the friends and relatives of participants,” Sitri continued. “However, those are separate from normal tickets. The Supreme Warrior Festival is known for prioritizing the wishes of its fighters.”

Unfortunately, there was no way the omnipotent Sitri would mistake a participation ticket for a spectator’s. So then what was the meaning of this? We had an empire where strength was lauded, an imperial princess worried over luck that wasn’t even that bad, and I had been tasked with training her. Then we had the words of Franz and the emperor. It seemed there was only one reasonable conclusion.

So, if I'm right, they want me to get the imperial princess to fight *in the tournament?*

"That emperor of ours comes up with some insane ideas," I said after a lengthy silence.

"What do you mean?" Sitri asked.

I knew the empire was a place that valued results above all else, but now the emperor was asking me to prepare his daughter for the Supreme Warrior Festival? Well, this was the same guy who had been unfazed after being attacked by a brood of frigid dragons. It seemed the rumors of his strength and mettle were true.

Many nobles of the time excelled in martial arts because their bloodlines were made up of people with natural talents for absorbing mana material. But in an event as large as the Supreme Warrior Festival, it took more than just raw talent to win, so most nobles stayed out of it. But there were still some who gave it a shot.

Could I have been wrong? Is this going to be a lot more trouble than I imagined?

"When's the tournament?" I asked.

"Umm, it's not for another month," Sitri said.

Having recovered, Tino pulled herself up and said, "Master? Is something wrong?"

Now wasn't the time for worrying.

"That might be enough. Just barely," I muttered to myself.

"What might?! Master?!"

Training the imperial princess would have been simple; all I had to do was hand her off to a hunter I could rely on. But getting her to a level where she could compete in the Supreme Warrior Festival would be much more challenging. That is to say, I was fairly certain it would be impossible.

This was a tournament that decided who was the strongest in the world. Sure, the imperial princess came from a long line of warriors, but she was still, well, the imperial princess. Meanwhile, her opponents would be killing machines who lived to fight because that was the one thing they found meaning in.

Some training might make her better equipped to handle her bad luck, but facing down a killing machine was out of the question.

Fighting just wasn't the role of the imperial princess. This was about five magnitudes greater than the sort of training I had originally imagined. This seemed like too much even for Ark. Did the emperor have nothing but muscles in his skull?

Still, I figured the emperor didn't expect his daughter to actually win the tournament. He was a smart man. If he wanted Princess Murina to place first, then using his influence to manipulate the tournament was a better method than trying to make her win fairly.

Whatever the case, I was now in a battle against time. I didn't know if I could live up to the emperor's expectations, but I had to do my best. It was a real shame that Ark wasn't anywhere to be found, but the strongest warriors aren't always the best trainers.

"Mentoring the imperial princess? To what level?" Sitri calmly asked. She was used to my inordinate requests.

"A high enough level that she can win the Supreme Warrior Festival, I suppose," I said.

"Is there a deadline?"

"Mmm, probably about a month."

"That quickly?!" Tino said. "That sounds impossible for you, and you're called a preterhuman artificer."

I agreed with her. Even if I were capable of preterhuman artifice, this would be a difficult job.

"Even after training under Lizzy for multiple years, the Supreme Warrior Festival might be, um, too much for me. Though that could change if I used that mask."

"That's it! We can have the imperial princess wear Evolve Greed! Brilliant idea, Tino!"

"Huh?! M-Master is god. Master is god."

But this raised new issues. That mask had no effect on me and the same might be true for the imperial princess. There was also the distant possibility that she might run rampant like Éclair had.

Sitri took a glance at the potion in her hand, then at Tino muttering on the floor, then at me. "Very well. Might you leave this to me? I have an idea," she said.

"Are you certain it'll work?" I asked.

"No, but there's something I'd like to try." She gave her usual grin

and a clap of her hands. “And I’d like to help, as I wasn’t able to do much during the Fox incident.”

Something you’d like to try? Well, I don’t see what choice I have!

I didn’t have any brilliant ideas and relying on Sitri was one hundred times better than just finding some hunter.

“Um, Master. It might not be my place, but Siddy’s—” Sitri gave Tino a cold glare. “Eep! N-Never mind!”

I was sure it would all work out. Sitri would let me know if something wasn’t feasible for her, and I was sure the emperor understood the unreasonable nature of his request. And since my party members were the reason I had become a Level 8, it was only natural that I rely on Grieving Souls. If that did lead to reputational damage for me, that was a good thing as far as I was concerned.

Justifications: established!

I was, once again, on fire.

“Then I’ll leave it to you. Oh, not that you need me to remind you, but just make sure she doesn’t die.”

“Everything will be fine. Working with T has made me an expert in that regard! Oh, the chance to study the blood of the imperial family. How wonderful!”

Will everything really be fine? I’m trusting you, Sitri.

“W-Well then, I’m a bit busy, so I’ll be going,” I said. “Start getting ready. I’ll call you once the imperial princess arrives.”

“Certainly! Leave everything to me, your dear Sitri! Oh, T, why don’t you join us? You two can compete and encourage each other. It’ll be two birds with one stone. And while we’re at it, we can drag Lucy along as well.”

“M-Master?!”

Everything will be fine. Just fine. I believe in Sitri, the Prodigy.

While Sitri muttered to herself as though in a trance and Tino looked at me like a puppy left out in the rain, I left the training room.

I was in my office, polishing my Relics, when the door swung open, and in came our resident sword maniac.

“Krai, is it true you’re gonna be in the Supreme Warrior Festival?”

"Huh? Where'd you hear that?"

"From Sitri. She asked me to help with some training or something. But how could you do this?! Why didn't you tell me?!"

Luke liked Swordsmen more than anything else in the world. He liked them so much that if he saw one who looked strong, he would suddenly start swinging at them. But that didn't mean his tastes were limited to Swordsmen. Luke Sykol was a man who appreciated anyone who could offer a good fight. As a Swordsman, he had a special affinity for other wielders of the blade, but he would try to cut any mighty person, whether they were a Thief, Magus, or something else.

In other words, he was a bloodthirsty maniac. Of course he was interested in the Supreme Warrior Festival.

It sounded like Sitri was serious about training the imperial princess if she had offered to let Luke help. He didn't seem like the type to hold back even for the daughter of the highest authority in the land, increasing my anxiety all the more. And I thought I had said I wasn't participating, so why did he think otherwise?

"No, I'm not gonna be fighting," I said. "I'm just gonna watch. I got a ticket from the emperor. You wanted to see it, didn't you? Are you free?"

I saw no harm in taking a break from fighting and just sitting on the sidelines once in a while.

Luke screwed up his face in contemplation, before eventually reaching his decision. "I appreciate the thought, Krai. But I'd rather join the fighting than spectate it!"

"Y-You would?"

"I've still got a long way to go." Flames glowed deep within his crimson eyes. "I can't even cut through dimensions. But I'm sure there's something to be gained by fighting strong opponents to the death. I'm sure of it!"

Yeah, that sure sounds like something you'd say.

He and Liz were both driven by homicidal urges. Though I was pretty sure the tournament fights weren't actually death matches.

"But I don't know how you might get in," I told him.

Tickets for spectators were for sale to the public, but the right to

participate wasn't on the market. Did this mean Liz wasn't going to find her way in either? I wasn't finding myself very motivated, but Luke apparently was.

"I know how," he said. "Invitations are sent to famous warriors and those who place well at regional tournaments."

"So there's nothing you can do."

The Supreme Warrior Festival wasn't far off, so I was fairly certain about this.

Luke nodded to himself. "So basically, I just need to cut down someone who does have a ticket, then they'll drop theirs."

"Wha?!"

Does—does that work? No. No, I can't see how that could possibly work.

I wasn't quite sure if this "kill and take what you want" mindset was a part of Hunter Brain or not.

How had he ended up this insane when we had both been raised in the same place? I wanted to complain to Luke's master, but that guy had far more right to complain to me than I did to him. He could tell me that I needed to do something about my childhood friend and he would be completely right.

I was wondering how to calm Luke down, when he shouted, "I gotta get moving. I've got an idea of where I can start cutting!"

By the time I said "Ah" he was already gone. Being a bad listener was one of Luke's faults. He was even more powerful than Liz in that regard, since she was good at using her head, even if she couldn't use it in any sensible way.

I told myself it would be fine. Luke's sword was wooden, and he was well-known among the right people. I just had to believe that whoever he attacked would be able to defend themself.

It then occurred to me that with the way things were going, I might be the only person not to join the tournament. Lucia could be surprisingly competitive, and if everyone else was going then Ansem would follow.

"Hmm. It looks like this is already out of my control."

No, don't think negatively. Look at it the other way.

Did I really need to take control? Their behavior left room for

improvement, but their strength was genuine. While I wasn't fit for my level, their levels weren't fit for them. I didn't necessarily think any of them could win first place in something like the Supreme Warrior Festival, but I believed they could do well.

I had planned to watch the tournament with them, but cheering them on sounded just fine. If they actually won something, that would be great for their future and nothing could make me happier as their friend. It wasn't what I had expected, but I was still too giddy to stay seated.

"I'll bring the whole clan to cheer them on!" I said, clenching my fist.

"Pardon me, Krai. The mounted crimson dragon is complete." Eva looked at me. "Is something the matter?"

"N-No, it's nothing," I said. I quickly returned to my seat, embarrassed that Eva had seen me like that.

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Just as Princess Murina had heard, the First Steps clan house was a very modern building that didn't exhibit any of the vulgarity associated with hunters. Rumor had it that their clan master the Thousand Tricks had it built to withstand any possible calamity. And sure enough, this clan house had been attacked by bandits multiple times but showed no signs of collapsing.

Having already overcome numerous attacks and being regularly occupied by upcoming young hunters like the Argent Thunderstorm Ark Rodin meant this was probably among the safest places in the imperial capital. And on the top floor was the Thousand Tricks, a man who had gotten the better of agents of Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox. It was possible this building was safer than the Imperial Castle.

Dressed inconspicuously, Princess Murina looked up at the building from beneath her hood.

"Your Imperial Highness, it's not too late to withdraw," said Karen, one of the two guards accompanying the imperial princess. "I'm sure His Imperial Majesty will respect your wishes."

"We'll do everything we can to protect you, but we're still dealing

with barbaric hunters," said Cindy, the other of the two. "Anything could happen."

Murina thought it over. Her lessons from the Thousand Tricks were top secret. She couldn't bring many guards, and Franz couldn't be there to protect her like he usually did. The guards with her were capable, but there were still only two of them.

The clan had been named "First Steps" in the hope that it would be the start of something great for its members. Even after becoming a first-rate clan, the allure offered by that name continued to draw in lines of new hunters hoping to join.

Surely, this plan was the first step towards something better for Princess Murina. The Thousand Trials were said to be conducted with the subjects' improvement in mind, and made so they were still possible, albeit just barely. Perhaps overcoming one of these trials would give her the power to conquer her bad luck.

Karen carefully opened the door—and Princess Murina came face-to-face with something that caused her to yell in spite of herself. Her guards moved to shield her. As though it was perfectly natural for it to be there, a dragon head with bulging eyes decorated the entrance.

Murina stood frozen in place for a few seconds before she realized there was no body attached to the head.
"It's...taxidermied?" she said.

"They decorated a place like this with a dragon head. That's, um, ostentatious," Karen remarked.

"You never see things like this for sale. Something as rare as a dragon is usually taken apart for materials," Cindy said.

The mounted head looked like it might start moving at any moment. Definitely not a fake. Not even the Imperial Castle was furnished with a taxidermied dragon (nor had anyone considered it, in all likelihood). Perhaps this was proof that these people really were among the strongest treasure hunters in the imperial capital.



Cindy nodded and said, "I imagine this is meant to be a display of First Steps's might. A clan of this size probably receives many direct requests. Such a decoration shows just what sort of things they can accomplish. Using a real dragon head feels rather excessive to me, but nonetheless, I think it's fair to say these hunters are as deft as their reputation would have us believe."

During her meetings with the Thousand Tricks, Murina had never gotten the impression that man was particularly impressive. It was his aura, you might say. Or lack thereof. Her father, Ark, all the first-rate mentors who she had trained under, they all had a certain aura.

Murina wasn't the best fighter, but she had developed an eye for gauging threats. At the Gathering of the White Blade, none of the guests lacked that aura more than the Thousand Tricks had. And that made Murina all the more afraid of him.

While the trio was inspecting the dragon head, the Thousand Tricks came hopping down the stairs. Behind him was the vice clan master, who Murina recognized from the Gathering. Looking at the clock, he was right on time. However, members of the imperial family were used to having someone already waiting for them when they arrived. Depending on the circumstances, this behavior could be considered disrespectful.

The Thousand Tricks became visibly panicked when he saw the looks of displeasure worn by Murina's guards. "Sorry I couldn't have someone waiting to greet you," he said. "We're a bit swamped over here."

"You have our thanks for accepting this request. I'm Karen, of the Zero Order. This is Cindy. For the duration of Her Imperial Highness's training, we'll be looking after her and ensuring her safety."

Just like their previous meetings, Murina couldn't sense any aura from this man. Even with full knowledge of his status, she still got the impression he was weaker than Karen and Cindy. And Murina was fairly certain her skills hadn't gotten rusty or anything like that.

The Thousand Tricks's eyebrows twitched, then an enormous smile formed on his face. "Oh, the pleasure is all mine. We're all ready to begin. Honestly, I'm not at all confident, but we'll do everything we can. I thought about who might be the best fit to

mentor Her Imperial Highness, but I had too many eager candidates. So I thought I might as well employ them all."

"What was that?!" Karen exclaimed.

The young man flinched, but then said, "Ah, I won't have any complaints. His Imperial Majesty said he would trust my methods. Besides, I'm not particularly good at mentoring people. Don't worry, I'm sure we can get Her Imperial Highness to a point where she can take part in the Supreme Warrior Festival. But I can't guarantee she'll win first place."

Murina was thrown for a loop. What in the world was this man saying?! He was known for his preterhuman artifice and his infamous trials. What did he mean he wasn't good at mentoring?

But more than that, why was he bringing up the Supreme Warrior Festival? That was a tournament for the best out there. As far as Murina could recall, you had to be at least Level 6 or so to get in. She knew she was in for intense training, but this beggared belief. In fact, it seemed downright impossible.

Unable to maintain their stalwart expressions, Karen and Cindy both looked befuddled. The Thousand Tricks had looked so diminutive, but his words were bold to an absurd degree.

"By the way," the Thousand Tricks said, his eyes falling on the dragon's head, "what's this dragon? Who put it here? It's in the way."

"Hm?! Sir, we discussed it yesterday," the vice clan master said.

Krai clapped his hands as though it was all coming back to him. "Aah. So this is where they put it? Hmm. I know I asked you guys to take care of it, but it's kind of a nuisance in a place like this. I know I see lots of dragons, but it's still a little dreary seeing one every time I enter the clan house."

"Very well. I'll see to it that it's taken care of."

After just coming to her own conclusions regarding the dragon, Cindy was speechless. Surely nobody of average ability could've been so nonchalant about moving a dragon head. It seemed Sir Franz had been right about his deceptive nature. This really was one of the most formidable people in the capital.

Having forgotten about the calm demeanor she had intended to maintain, Murina's entire body trembled. The Thousand Tricks

seemed to almost see into her heart and a vaguely sardonic smile formed on his lips.

"Well then, Your Imperial Highness, let's waste no time showing you around."

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"What? Everyone's going to help out?!" I blurted.

"Indeed," Sitri said with a casual nod. "We all talked it over and decided this would be best. After all, we don't know anything about Princess Murina's aptitudes."

I wasn't in any position to start complaining, but I hadn't thought my party had many people interested in things like mentoring. Where was all this zeal coming from?

"The imperial bloodline is full of Swordsmen, but there are also many great Magi. At this point, it's hard to say what might suit her best," Sitri explained.

Living in an era that placed so much value on strength, all sorts of places were researching how to most effectively hone abilities. It was known that genetics determined a hunter's aptitude, which was why so many nobles married renowned hunters. The imperial family of Zebrudia took in only the best blood.

But I still didn't see the need for everyone in the party to be involved.

"There's not much time. Wouldn't it be better to focus on one specialty?" I asked.

"Oh, there you go again, Krai. If we do that, she'll never be able to get ready for the Supreme Warrior Festival in such a short time frame."

"Yeah. Uh-huh?"

Huh? Really?

I knew we were working towards a difficult goal, but I didn't see any future for Zebrudia if the imperial princess suffered a humiliating defeat in the tournament.

"All the contestants of the Supreme Warrior Festival are specialized in some way," Sitri continued. "Even if she gets placed

against someone of the same specialty, Princess Murina wouldn't have any hope of victory. This leaves us with only one option—to train her in multiple fields and combine those skills."

"Uh, I see."

I felt like nothing more than a bystander as Sitri energetically told me about her theories.

"One can be both a Thief and Swordsman if they put in the effort, but to simultaneously master both magic and holy rites is impossible for the average person. Ark is as strong as he is because he's a Magus Swordsman, but even he can't use holy rites. If we can elevate Princess Murina to someone with such a varied skill set, then she should be able to take on just about any opponent. No, not *if*. We *will* elevate her. Your dear Sitri will!"

She was really burning with passion. Maybe she had some sort of empathy for the imperial princess? Long ago, Sitri worried that she lacked talent, sort of like how Princess Murina was now. Not that Sitri actually lacked talent, and I didn't think the imperial princess was worried, but they still resembled each other.

"And then, once we're done training her, we'll put the fruit of my research into action! I'm very grateful, Krai. I never expected to come across imperial blood! There's a number of things I want to test..."

Sitri looked enraptured, her gaze intense.

Huh? Testing? Are her bad habits at work again?

I was just fine with her getting passionate, but I hoped she wouldn't forget that we were dealing with the imperial princess.

"The fruit of your research?" I asked.

"That would of course be this potion! Ta-dah!" Making her own sound effects, Sitri presented me with a vial containing a gray liquid. "I suppose 'level-up potion' would be a fitting name. By drinking this nifty concoction, you can absorb mana material straight into your body!"

Were you always the type to get so excited like this? Okay. Maybe you are.

A method to gain mana material just by drinking a potion. Sitri's mysterious alchemical abilities were amazing. Nothing correlated to

strength more than mana material, so I could understand why Sitri was so confident if she had made something so miraculous. Though it seemed a little unfair, I still nodded along.

"I see. That's incredible," I said with a grin. "With enough mana material, even the imperial princess could rapidly gain strength. I knew I could count on my dear Sitri."

Even though I was praising her, Sitri twitched. She looked at me inquisitively. She put a finger to her lips and fell into a brief silence.

"I understand," she said. "Potions are off the table this time. I'll proceed without them."

"Huh?!"

I hadn't suggested anything of the sort.

Sitri clenched her fists and declared, "Indeed, I haven't conducted enough human trials yet. There still is that minute possibility that the imperial princess might not be able to withstand the mana material and explode. Rest assured, I'll think of something else!"

No matter how many times I turned that conversation over in my mind, I couldn't rest easy. Was this really a good idea? As I showed the imperial princess around, I put on a hard-boiled veneer to hide any evidence of the doubts nagging at me. All I could do was trust in my friends.

"The Supreme Warrior Festival is a tournament of beasts who have dedicated their lives to fighting," I said. "No matter what innate talents you may have, I don't think simple training will be enough to get you ready for something like that at such short notice. Besides, that's not the sort of strength you need to begin with. So we thought up a plan that would be perfect for you. We'll give you *multifaceted* strength."

"Multifaceted strength?" Princess Murina repeated in a small voice. "And what was that about being ready for the Supreme Warrior Festival?"

She really was a docile person. I had heard she was friends with Éclair, but their personalities were nothing alike.

"Of course, we'll do everything in our power, but luck can always

factor into a fight," I said in an attempt to reduce liability. Reducing liability was part of my job. "The Supreme Warrior Festival is an event for the very best. I can't guarantee your victory."

"What are you even talking about?" asked the knight who had introduced herself as Karen. "You were asked to train Her Imperial Majesty. However, there's no need for her to become *that* powerful when she has us, the Zero Order. All she needs is to be able to protect herself should the occasion arise."

"Huh? Did you not get the memo?"

"What?!"

Karen glared at me. She was like Franz if he were a woman. Maybe this was just the ideal personality for knights? I didn't want to insult the pride of a knight, but it seemed there was a misunderstanding here.

Was the emperor keeping it a secret that he wanted his daughter to take part in the Supreme Warrior Festival? It seemed feasible. This was a man who had picked me, the guy who caused a stir at the Gathering of the White Blade, to protect him (most likely in spite of protests from advisors). He also hadn't shown the slightest hint of trepidation when we ended up in Peregrine Lodge. This might make him seem charismatic and open-minded, but I was sure it was actually because he had a screw or two loose.

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say to win over the imperial princess's two guards, so I turned from the guards to the quiet princess and said, "Your Imperial Highness, resolve is necessary to become stronger. You'll never claim victory if you're satisfied with the bare minimum."

That was why I would never improve. I gave up too easily.

Princess Murina didn't respond to my pretentious remark, but she seemed to be deep in thought.

I just hope the emperor doesn't hear about this. Let's just try to avoid doing any harm and hope she doesn't buy too much into what I'm saying.

This job was likely being kept a secret. There were many people who wanted a figure like the imperial princess dead. On top of that, there were probably plenty of nobles who wouldn't have been

pleased to find that a young hunter like me was being asked to mentor her. And I had to wonder if she herself was in favor of this arrangement or not. Someone of her status had responsibilities that dwarfed anything I had to handle. She had been born into power, but that came with its own troubles.

We stood before the door of the deepest of the underground training facilities.

"Your training has been dispersed among my trustworthy allies," I said to what might be considered a pitiful princess. "But if you have any changes of heart about this, please say so. We'll do everything we can, but your guards are right. The imperial princess doesn't need to be *that* strong."

So please don't blame me if this doesn't work.

"I'll warn you, even if that displeases your guards, there will be no holding back." *From my friends.* "While lessons are being conducted, there will be no considerations of status." *By my friends.*

"I'm prepared for that," the imperial princess answered.

All right, I've got her word. Now I can hold her to it.

At times like these, I usually prayed that nothing would happen. But in this case, if Princess Murina received half-hearted lessons, that would be bad in its own way. All I could pray for was that my friends did a good job.

I did the bare minimum and offered a smile as I opened the door. Inside were my pals, standing solemnly. My childhood friends—all members of Grieving Souls—were dedicated to the pursuit of strength. They hadn't been accepted by great mentors because they had innate talent, but because they had proven themselves worthy.

I had a tendency to forget this, but Liz and her constant smiles, Lucia and her rebellious phase, Luke and his penchant for saying absurd things with a straight face, they were all treading a difficult path. Strength was something they didn't compromise on.

Tension hung over the chilly room like it did over a battlefield. For this occasion, I had used my privileges as clan master and reserved the whole room. This one was usually empty, but now it was lined with unsettling devices that I didn't recognize.

"We've been eagerly awaiting you, Krai, Your Imperial Highness."

Sitri was taking the lead as usual. She approached us with a smile, but that didn't make the room feel any more welcoming. I heard Princess Murina gulp. Her two guards were clearly taken aback.

Liz, as oblivious as ever, smiled viciously and made a fist. "Is this all? This is what we're supposed to beat into shape? Well don't worry, we'll be thorough."

She was more enthusiastic than I had anticipated. I had planned to stay and watch for a bit, but now I was second-guessing that idea. I reassured myself that as long as Lucia and Ansem were present, things probably wouldn't get out of hand.

"Okay then," I said. "I've got things to do, so you guys can take it from here. Luke, Liz, be sure not to kill her."

"Wha?!" Princess Murina wailed.

"I beg your pardon?!" one of the knights said. Both were scowling at me.

I felt really, really bad for doing this, but I was going to die if I stuck around in that room any longer.

"Roger! This is my second pupil, so you can count on me!" said Liz in a cheery voice.

"You don't need to worry like that, Krai. We've got Ansem here, so we're fine," Luke said with a grin.

Incredible. I'm not reassured in the slightest. Not even Ansem can bring back the dead.

I had my reservations about leaving like this, but I silenced my doubts and left with a wave before Karen or Cindy could say anything.

I dashed up the stairs and into my office, where the imperial princess and her guards couldn't reach me. Waiting for me was my brain, Eva, who seemed to be in a bad mood. Being the most conscientious member of our clan, she supported me officially and personally.

"Krai, are you certain about this?" she asked the moment I sat down in my usual spot. "Some of your friends, well, even the other hunters voice complaints about them. And now you've left them with

someone from the imperial family. The emperor and his kin might be known for their magnanimity, but they still have their pride as nobles."

She had a point. They were known for being a line of warriors, but that didn't change the fact they were of the nobility. They could use that against me at any time. It was just like how Éclair had used the power of her status to try and steal the mask from me during the auction.

No matter how superficially, I was still the clan master of First Steps, which meant my decisions could affect the management of this clan. It was only natural that Eva was concerned that I had chosen to leave this task to a party known for being violent.

"That's it," I said. I had hit upon an idea. "If something happens, I can just take responsibility and resign from treasure hunting."

"Huh?"

The job of clan master had been thrust upon me because making this clan had been my idea. But it had long ago swelled into something too large for me to handle.

I was the one who had accepted the emperor's request. *I* had been the one to entrust my friends with mentoring the imperial princess. Anything that went wrong rested on my shoulders. Therefore, if anything went wrong, I could take responsibility and resign from my post. After all this time wanting to quit but not being allowed to, I stood to gain whether this went good or bad.

"You're joking, right?" Eva said.

"Don't be so pessimistic. If I die, you'll become clan master."

"I don't want that. If that happens, I'll quit as well. Who do you think all this effort was for..."

Eva sounded serious. I guess it made sense. After all, I was the one who groveled for—I mean, scouted her.

"You really care for me," I remarked.

"Th-That's because..."

Hm. I've really become Eva-dependent.

I decided to hold off on retirement for the time being. I leaned back in my chair and decided to kill some time with the Relic I had received from Little Sister Fox—my Smartphone.

***

In the center of the capital stood the Imperial Castle. Repairs of the damage caused by the Abyssal Inferno were proceeding smoothly and security was being bolstered.

Franz Argman stood before the current Emperor Zebrudia, Rodrick Atolm Zebrudia. The two had been acquainted since before Rodrick had ascended to the throne. There was a gap in status between the imperial family and House Argman, but the imperial family had a history of picking their right hands based on loyalty and ability to speak up. Franz had been chosen for his straightforward attitude and because he didn't mince words.

"Her Imperial Highness is accompanied by capable guards, but entrusting her to that man is still too dangerous," Franz said.

On his imposing body, Franz wore a Relic set of armor that shouldered all damage intended for a specific person, regardless of distance. It was one of the Zero Order's most valuable assets and it had been passed down from one captain to the next.

"You still don't trust him, Franz?" the emperor said with a grimace. "That man has already saved us once."

"But we only needed saving because of his plans. All he did was put out a fire he had started. If nothing else, he shouldn't have exposed you to such a dangerous situation. That man pays heed to nobody but himself."

He had been given the opportunity to protect the emperor, the greatest honor a hunter could accept, yet he had shown up in that flippant shirt. He had the gall to bring agents of Fox within reach of His Imperial Majesty. Everything he said and did defied understanding.

Franz had a wealth of experience dealing with merchants, nobles; all sorts of people really. He had also received some warnings in advance from Lord Gladis regarding the nature of the Thousand Tricks. Even still, when Franz considered that irritating him had been a calculated move on the part of the Thousand Tricks, Franz began to abhor the idea of spending any more time with that hunter. At the very least, he wished that man wasn't so damn irreverent!

"That's exactly why I believe it's the right choice to entrust Murina with him," the emperor said. "That sort of freedom of spirit is necessary to effectively mentor a member of the imperial family. In retrospect, her previous mentors have all been soft on her. Don't they say that the Thousand Trials test even the best hunters?"

This was a bad habit of his. Emperor Rodrick had always had a tendency to prioritize martial skills over leadership. While that had led to the empire's friendly attitude to hunters, which ultimately brought the nation prosperity, there were limits to how far that should be taken.

"Ridiculous. Her Imperial Highness is no warrior."

"Nonetheless, she's too weak. She lacks the strength to forge her own fate. The Astral Divinarium's very own Eye of God confirmed that Murina naturally attracts disasters, yet the Thousand Tricks simply dismissed that as a flight of imagination. I expect great things from him."

Zebrudia's Astral Divinarium was a special division that handled all matters of mysticism not fully understood. As their name suggested, they specialized in the use of astrology to predict the future and had foreseen many incoming disasters. They couldn't detect every potential calamity, but when they did, they were never far off the mark.

"Eye of God" was a special accolade for astrologians who boasted exceptional accuracy. It was because of their word that Franz and the emperor were willing to believe in Murina's inherent bad luck, and also why they kept that fact confidential.

The imperial princess naturally attracted misfortune, but if they kept her interpersonal interactions to a minimum and kept her out of the public, then that misfortune could be held back somewhat. And that was how Murina lived.

She hadn't voiced a word of complaint despite her existence being so rarely acknowledged. Surely nothing could be more difficult for a member of the proud imperial line than to be relegated to the shadows. This, however, was deemed a necessary measure. Zebrudia was an absolute monarchy, which was all the more reason the emperor needed to put the nation above all else.

"I'm fine with this if there's even the slightest glimmer of hope for Murina," the emperor said with sorrow. "Under her current circumstances, she can't perform any of her duties."

"As you wish," Franz said through clenched teeth as he dipped his head.

It wasn't an easy subject for them. Maybe it was different for commoners or ordinary nobles, but for the imperial family, inability was a sin. If someone couldn't be of benefit to the empire, then they had to be erased before they could cause it harm. But even an emperor couldn't remain indifferent towards their very own child.

Franz found it humiliating that they were relying on a man who had put the emperor in danger, but he was helpless to do anything about Murina's situation. The imperial princess wasn't fit for fighting—she was too kind.

Rodrick's expression went from one of sorrow to severity.

"Are you making progress in your investigation of Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox?" he asked.

"We are. We've begun by looking into those two agents—the Counter Cascade and Kechachakka. Given the nature of our adversary, I've made the team as small as possible to reduce the likelihood of information being leaked."

Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox was an organization of astounding secrecy. The identities of its members and command structure were all shrouded in mystery. The only reason the name was known was that they had announced it themselves after they had already grown into a formidable force. If not for that, Zebrudia might have remained ignorant of their existence. Uncovering two of their operatives during the trip to Toweyezant had been a windfall for the empire.

Foxes excelled at covering their tracks. But if there was one thing Franz was certain of, it was that someone with the talents and status of Telm Apoclys wasn't an asset you could discard without good reason. Unfortunately for Franz, the Counter Cascade hadn't been captured, but he was sure Fox wasn't anticipating any of their members' identities to be compromised. This was a massive leap forward from their previous state of being entirely in the dark.

As for Kechachakka, according to the Explorers' Association, they had shown the Thousand Tricks a list of reliable hunters who might make good candidates for escorting the emperor. Apparently, they had been quite surprised when he chose Kechachakka. In other words, someone within the Association had inserted Kechachakka's name into that list. They had already begun turning every stone they could in order to find the traitor.

After a long standstill, things were finally beginning to move. Only a select few people had been informed that the Counter Cascade and Kechachakka had turned out to be traitors. They had to act on this before Fox realized two of their own had been uncovered.

"And we've finished narrowing down our list of suspects," Franz said.

"Apprehend them. Though I suppose I hardly need to tell you that. There must be a reason that an organization that's spent so long in the shadows made such a blatant provocation."

Quietly, a flame of determination burned within Rodrick Atolm Zebrudia. Using abnormal methods that knights like Franz would never employ, the Thousand Tricks had driven Telm and Kechachakka into a corner. But the empire had its own way of doing things, as did its nobles. They couldn't simply rely on that hunter.

Franz bowed deeply before taking his leave.

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Nothing can be gained without payment. Pain is the constant companion of growth.

People of all sorts gathered in Zebrudia, one of the largest nations in the world. Regardless of where they stood in the order of inheritance, all members of the imperial family received lessons from only the very best mentors. Murina followed in this tradition and had been under the tutelage of a number of different instructors. Unlike her siblings, however, she hadn't exhibited any particular talents. She wasn't incompetent, but neither did she stand out in any aspect. In particular, she lacked the bearing of a member of the imperial family.

So went the appraisal of Murina Atolm Zebrudia, and she knew it was true. All three of her siblings had the sort of talent befitting the imperial bloodline. Already, they were putting their skills to use for the benefit of the empire. It would be shameful for Murina to remain cloistered within the Imperial Castle on account of her innate bad luck.

And so she fortified her resolve, telling herself that *this time* she would improve herself. However, before training could even begin, she felt that resolve come close to breaking.

"You thought you could bring your goddamn babysitters? Did you forget what the hell you're here for?" the Stifled Shadow shouted like some sort of thug.

"Protecting Her Imperial Majesty is our duty. Be assured, we have no intentions of interfering, so long as she isn't placed in harm's way," Karen replied through a strained voice.

The Stifled Shadow was butting heads with Murina's guards. Karen might have seemed like she was keeping cool, but the imperial princess could tell just how agitated she was. Karen had never been a very well-tempered person to begin with, and now she was all the more fired up on account of having not been chosen to attend the conference.

"Yeah, and I bet she'll get real fucking strong by staying out of harm's way! Krai Baby asked me to do this and I'm not gonna let him down!"

"It depends on the degree of danger. I'm very well aware that safe training is an oxymoron! But let me just say that I don't appreciate the tone you're taking with Her Imperial Majesty!"

The tension in the air grew thicker. It felt like either one of them could explode at any given moment. Their words weren't even directed at her, but Murina could still feel her heart pounding.

"She's not gonna get anywhere on half-assed measures! And what do *you* know about strength? You're wasting your time if you're not putting your life on the line!"

"You're speaking out of turn!"

"Unlike you, we've got things to be doing! I don't care if she's a princess or if she doesn't want to be here! I'm busy at the best of

times, so if you've got nothing to show me, then at least stay out of my goddamn way!"

Karen took a step forward and Cindy got ready for a fight, but Liz Smart didn't retreat an inch. Murina didn't know what to do. Faced with having to either side with one of her new mentors or her guards, she found herself between a rock and a hard place. And what had Liz meant when she said it didn't matter if she didn't want to be here?

Clapping her hands, Sitri walked into the cross fire and said, "Now, now, please calm down. We don't have any desire to harm Her Imperial Highness. However, Liz is right in that we are short on time. With our deadline, getting her to a level where she can compete in the Supreme Warrior Festival simply isn't feasible using conventional methods."

"There it is again! What's this talk about competing in the Supreme Warrior Festival?! We never heard anything of the sort!"

"Indeed. Nonetheless, we've been asked by Krai to get Her Imperial Highness to such a level, and I've composed a plan to make that happen. In other words, we'll have to take some liberties that our client may not be entirely comfortable with."

Sitri's overpowering grin and mellow voice set Karen at ease, while Cindy shifted her gaze from Liz to the Alchemist.

"Yes, but—"

Before Karen could get any further, there was a rumbling. The next moment, Murina realized the knight was on the ground. Liz lifted her leg and didn't hold back as she let it drop on the back of Karen's head. Her head was embedded in the floor and her body twitched. The blood draining from her face, Cindy was about to shout, before Luke the Protean Sword grabbed her in a Nelson hold.

"Wh-What are you—"

"Brother, would you be so kind as to revive Karen before she dies?" Sitri said. "Don't worry, Your Imperial Highness, we're limited on time, so we're simply removing obstacles. If we have to constantly brook complaints, we'll never get anywhere. This is per Krai's decision, so please trust that all's well that ends well."

"Ahhh, there you go again with the violence," sighed the black-

haired Magus. This was Lucia, the Avatar of Creation.

Murina saw a man so large she was forced to crane her neck to see him entirely. This was Ansem, the Immutable. He let out a stern grunt, but it didn't seem like Liz was going to let up.

While Murina was doing her best to keep with the situation, Luke swiftly gagged Cindy, and then bound her in chains. Ansem lifted Karen out of the floor and directed a healing spell at her bloodied head. Something about his movements suggested he did this often.

Murina's legs gave out and she slid to the floor. Her earlier resolve had vanished entirely.

"Well then, Your Imperial Highness," Sitri the Ignoble said with a broad grin. "Now that we're free of hindrances, we can't waste a second between now and the Supreme Warrior Festival. So without further ado, let's begin the trials."

Now that it was time to begin her training, the first thing Murina was told to do was leave the training room. Murina wasn't very eye-catching and she hadn't made many appearances before the public. Wearing a hood, there was almost no chance of her being recognized.

The most conspicuous member of the group was the giant, Ansem. His footsteps thundered as he walked along, shouldering a bag that Karen and Cindy had been stuffed into. If the Immutable wasn't known for his kindness, everyone probably would have run from him in fear.

"U-Ummm, Lizzy, what is it we're doing? And who are—"

"Hm? You don't need to worry about that," Liz said to the black-haired hunter they had met up with on the way. "Training two isn't much different than training one, so I'm dragging you along as well."

Murina had heard that the Stifled Shadow had an apprentice and apparently, it was this timid, pitiful girl. The girl called Tino looked at Murina and seemed to realize something.

"By that, do you mean that this is Her—"

"T?" Sitri cut her off. "You don't need to say it. What if we invite unneeded interlopers?"

"Y-Yes, Siddy."

Sitri's voice has been perfectly calm, yet it still struck fear into Tino. Still, Tino kept glancing Murina's way. For some reason, she felt an odd sort of kinship with the hunter. It seemed it wasn't because she was an outsider that Grieving Souls was being rough on Murina.

Once they exited the building, they entered a carriage that they had arranged for. But after Murina got in, she didn't hear anyone follow her. She looked out and saw them preparing to run. They said hunters trained every day. Murina still wasn't sure about Grieving Souls's violent behavior back in the training ground, but it was clear they were dedicated to getting stronger. Murina found this relieving.

"Shouldn't I be running as well?" she asked Sitri, the only other person inside the carriage. Murina knew that improving your attributes was more important than learning techniques.

However, Sitri seemed surprised by this question. "Oh, no. At this point, a little bit of muscle won't make much of a difference. If you tire yourself out, you might not be able to endure what's to come, so sit tight for now."

"I-I see."

Karen and Cindy squirmed in their bag while the carriage slowly rolled off.

"Now then," Sitri said with a clap of her hands. She was looking Murina dead in the eyes. "Allow me to take a moment to tell you of our plans. That is to say, the plans we came up with to fulfill Krai's request. Now, it won't make any practical difference whether or not we tell you..."

"V-Very well."

It seemed Sitri was the party's coordinator of sorts. Perhaps Lucia was in the driver's seat and everyone else was outside so Sitri and Murina could talk in peace. But the imperial princess had questions in droves. What had Sitri meant by that bit about not making any practical difference? Wasn't Murina supposed to be receiving lessons? She didn't know where to begin.

"Your Imperial Highness," Sitri said, "the most important thing for a treasure hunter to become strong is to raise their attributes. But

this isn't a matter of bodybuilding. You see, muscles have a tendency to hinder the circulation of mana. For a Magus, a muscular body isn't just unnecessary, it's an inhibitor. This is merely one example, but I hope you now understand that thoughtless and unnecessary effort isn't really effort at all."

Her eyes were serious, her words spoken with certainty.

Unnecessary effort. Murina had received lessons of all sorts from many different mentors, all in the name of gaining strength and identifying her talents. She didn't think those had been meaningless experiences, but maybe this person before her would've considered them unnecessary.

Despite everything, Murina was still of the imperial family. She was easily granted lessons from master instructors that would be out of reach even for some nobles. Results not immediately manifesting was no reason to give up. And now an entirely novel idea was being brought before her—becoming strong quickly.

Correcting her posture, Murina made sure not to miss a single word.

"What we need to do isn't show you sword techniques or teach you magic," Sitri continued in a low voice. "One simple thing will suffice. Your Imperial Highness, you need to absorb mana material, then make effective use of it."

To Murina, this sounded incredibly obvious.

"Mana material? Why didn't you simply say—"

"You don't understand." Sitri's eyes were sparkling. "Your Imperial Highness, merely absorbing it won't do. Mana material bolsters a person in accordance with their desires. Someone who wants speed will move like lightning, someone who wants to excel in magic will achieve excellent mana flow, and someone sworn to protect will gain overwhelming resilience. You can even make your chest larger. However, strength only comes to those with strong wills. *That* is what separates a champion from the rest!"

Strong wills. Indeed, that very well could have been what Murina was lacking.

Nobles of the empire were encouraged to venture into treasure vaults in order to receive the benefits of mana material. Most of

them did exactly this, and Murina was no exception. However, she knew the effects had been limited. The one time she really felt a change had been apparent was after the encounter with Peregrine Lodge.

But that invited the question: how did you temper something as intangible as will? Still, Murina puffed out her chest, her expectations higher than they had been not long ago.

"And this is where Krai came up with an unprecedented idea!" Sitri said. "Our wills are at their strongest when our survival instincts activate! What this means, is that you can get the most out of mana material by entering treasure vaults beyond your level! The logic is simple, but nobody's yet tried it despite the many years we've lived with mana material. Princess Murina, *you* will be a living testament to Krai's suggestion! You have nothing to worry about. We'll first do a test run on T!"

"Wha?! Huh?!"

A treasure vault?! What is this?!

Murina was fairly sure this hadn't been done not because it hadn't occurred to anyone, but rather because it was beyond stupid. The vicious phantoms of high-level treasure vaults could butcher even an expert hunter with a single attack. This sort of training might be safe in a low-level vault, but those weren't as dense in mana material.

Then, as though passing down a death sentence, the Ignoble said, "There's nothing you need to do, just hang on with all your might. You may die otherwise."

After a few hours of travel, the carriage came to a stop. Murina got out and was taken aback by what she saw. There was a dense curtain of falling white petals, flowers of all sizes bloomed across the ground. As though held back by an invisible wall, the foliage all stopped at a set point. It was like something from another world.

"A barrier keeps it in place," Sitri explained. "It's too dangerous to let its influence extend any further. Even still, this treasure vault is quite large."

The blood drained from Tino's face and she sunk into a silence. Before them was a high-level treasure vault defined by its veritable

blizzards of petals. It had appeared a few years prior and temporarily became an obsession across the empire. It had since been conquered multiple times, but it was still recognized as one of the most dangerous vaults in Zebrudia. Even someone unfamiliar with these matters like Murina still knew of this place.

"This is Prism Garden," she mumbled. "Where Firmamental Blossoms come from."

"Let's take this opportunity to train our resilience together," Sitri said to her. "There really is no better place. Your field of view is low, requiring that you utilize all your senses. And the phantoms are powerful, so you have to fight to the best of your ability. There's also the pollen, which can temporarily hinder you. This is an easy place to die. Look, Your Imperial Highness, your trembling is proof of your instinctual fear!"

"What?"

Murina hadn't realized she was shaking. She hadn't even entered the treasure vault, but her head throbbed, her heart was pounding, her throat was dry, and her body felt weak. However, standing nearby, Tino seemed to be in a similar state. It appeared that an intermediate hunter was no better equipped to handle this vault than Murina was. The thought of that was oddly reassuring for her.

"Well then, how about we start with some Thief skills?" Liz said with a yawn. "If you don't improve your senses, you'll die and all that. Oh, right. Your growth might get skewed if you have anything unnecessary, so I'm confiscating your weapons."

And so began the longest week of Murina's life.

***

"Achoo!"

Is someone talking about me?

"I think this is going to go well," I said as I rubbed my nose.

With nothing else to do, I opened up a magazine. I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I wasn't entirely free of my burdens, but I had done everything I could.

"Krai, are you certain about this?" Eva asked. I wasn't even doing

anything, but she still looked at me anxiously. This didn't directly concern her, but she still seemed more uneasy than I was. Her worries were only natural. I was the clan master and that meant any harm to my reputation affected all of First Steps. But there was nothing either of us could do but go with the flow.

"Don't worry, I trust my friends," I told her. "They'll do a much better job than I could have."

I didn't know the specifics of their agenda, but they were hard workers. We might get some complaints that the imperial princess had been pushed too hard, but if they didn't like it then they shouldn't have asked for lessons from high-level hunters. Once again, my fortress of reasoning was sound. Though maybe that wasn't something to be proud of.

She looked at me and said, "That's not what I'm concerned about. I know how discerning you are in these matters, and I know you won't let our client's status stop you from doing what you think is best. It's the Supreme Warrior Festival that worries me. It's a renowned tournament, but poor results might negatively affect our clan."

I see, I see. Do I?

Whether or not I saw didn't actually have any bearing on my response.

"Ha ha ha, Eva, you worry too much."

"Just to be sure, Krai, you are confident about this, aren't you? Every year, this tournament draws in the very best."

"Huh? No, not at all."

How could I be? After all, this was Princess Murina we were talking about. There was only so much you could do in such a short time frame. I hadn't heard from her since our initial conversation, but it sounded like there was a possibility Liz might be taking part in the tournament. But I was fairly certain the emperor didn't expect his daughter to take home the championship or anything like that.

"Don't worry, worse comes to worst, I can always grovel. I've done everything I can, so I've got no regrets."

Eva looked at me incredulously.

"Everything?"

Hey, don't stare like that.

I thought after all this time that she'd be used to my vague statements, but I suppose she wouldn't really be Eva otherwise.

"Should I look into the other potential contestants?" Eva asked hesitantly.

In the Supreme Warrior Festival, all fights were one-on-one. Contestants were free to use whatever weapons and styles they preferred, which meant many fights were decided by the affinities of different methods. The contestants still hadn't been publicly announced, but maybe Eva had some connections.

"Mmm. You don't have to. I'm not that interested in who's gonna be there, and it's more fun if it's a surprise."

"Huh?!"

I would have felt bad making Eva go to all that effort, and I didn't think we had enough time to make counterstrategies, even if we knew who Murina might be up against. The matchups probably hadn't even been decided yet.

"Besides, that wouldn't really be fair. And the empire sure does love its chivalry."

Bending the rules might have made Franz like me even less. No point in testing our luck. But Eva didn't seem convinced.

"It's my understanding that looking into potential opponents is standard procedure," she said.

I beckoned her over with my hand and showed her the magazine I was reading. It was a sightseeing guide to Kreat, the town that hosted the Supreme Warrior Festival.

"My concern is that this is my first time going to Kreat. I figure I may as well take the opportunity to do some sightseeing. Do you know any good places?"

Eva sighed. It was a sigh so long I think her soul left with it.

"Krai, why are you like this?"

I didn't see why she didn't take the occasional break. But she didn't need to worry so much. If anything went wrong, I'd take responsibility. It was all I was capable of.

Then, the Relic I'd gotten from Little Sister Fox—my Smartphone—began to vibrate. I handed the magazine off to Eva and pulled it

out as fast as I possibly could.

"Sorry, Eva. I've got *a text*. I gotta reply quickly."

"I'm sorry?"

I was sure this was exactly how the people of the Era of Physical Arms used these things. "Texting" was a convenient means of communication and was used extensively. Somewhat accustomed to the movement, I tapped the icon and saw I had received droves of texts.

The majority of them were from unknown senders and a lot of it didn't make any sense. Among Smartphone researchers, these were known as "spam texts." Carelessly opening one of them could cause your device to explode, so you had to be careful.

The most recent text was from Little Sister Fox, who was supposed to be serving as a god in Toweyezant. In fact, she and Big Brother Fox were the only people I had in my contacts. All it said was "Grown" but it came with an attached image of a massive tree. It hadn't been many days since we had left Toweyezant, but if she was still in that town, it was probably surrounded by trees by now.

"Look. She's raised all these trees."

"Oh."

"I have to reply quickly. Texts need to be responded to in five minutes or less. If you can't, then you have to say that it was because your battery was dead. Those are the rules."

I replied with a speedy "That's nice." I had been constantly fiddling with this thing since I got it, so a simple action like this was an easy thing for me. The moment I sent the text, a strange melody played from my Smartphone.

"Ah, this time it's from the older brother. It's not easy being popular."

"I have something I need to look into, so I must excuse myself."

"What's this? 'These two are very lively. You could learn from them, Mr. Caution. *These* are humans!' Well of course Telm and Kecha are lively! Now I need to reply. 'More Relics please.'"

There was still a lot I didn't understand about it, but this Smartphone was a wonderful thing. I could dream of the possibilities. If I could get one for all my party members, we'd never

have trouble meeting up ever again. I wish I had been born in such a convenient era.

I began to imagine what those previous eras might have been like when I suddenly remembered I had been talking to Eva. I looked around, but she had disappeared at some point or another. I looked down at the small Relic in my hands and furrowed my brow.

"I see. So this is how civilizations fall. Convenience has its time and place."

Information gathering was an indispensable part of hunting. Treasure vaults were living dungeons and sometimes became drastically more or less hostile in short time spans. Treasure hunters always kept an ear to the ground, both in the name of profit and for the very thing that defined them—curiosity. For instance, this was how it quickly got around that I had been aiming for that mask in the Zebrudia auction.

When I entered the lounge, I saw that one of our best parties, Obsidian Cross, was occupying a table. Sven Anger got up and waved his arms as he approached me.

"Krai, I hear you're going to be part of the Supreme Warrior Festival. Is this true?!"

"Who told you that?"

"Who? Ah, Liz. She was running around shouting about it."

"Liz..."

What an uncontrollable ball of energy. And her information wasn't even right.

"No, I'm not going to be taking part. I'm just going to watch. Even I want to see what the best have to offer."

"That so? Well, I suppose that's surprising in its own way."

For most Level 8s, there was nothing strange about them wanting to be part of a grand combat tournament. These false rumors wouldn't have gained traction otherwise. But I wasn't a normal Level 8. In the right situation, even a Level 1 could best me.

"This is just between us," I said in a low voice, "but it's not me that'll be participating."

Sven looked at me like he didn't quite understand. "Oh, yeah, Liz

did mention that she and some of your other friends might be making an appearance."

That wasn't quite what I had been hinting at, but I couldn't just outright tell him that the imperial princess would be joining the fray. I sighed, resigned to the fact that everyone was going to believe what they wanted.

"Y'know, we have a lot of hunters with bad timing. Like you. And Ark. You're never around when I need you."

"Hm? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I could've saved myself a lot of stress if Ark Brave or Obsidian Cross had been available. Honestly, what a pain in the neck. I didn't *want* to take such dangerous measures, but here I am."

Sven undeniably deserved some of the blame for whatever awful experiences the imperial princess was probably having. If he and his party had been around, I wouldn't have had to entrust Princess Murina to a group that included Liz and Luke.

"Quit being so ominous!" Marietta cried. "And don't shift the blame onto us!"

"Out with it!" Sven yelled. "What did you do this time?!"

It was too late for yelling. The die had already been cast.

"Well, if you've learned your lesson," I said with a hard-boiled sigh, "then you'll be in the lounge next time I need you."

"Sven, don't you think it's time we taught our CM a lesson?" Henrik (I think) said. The Cleric and youngest member of Obsidian Cross looked awfully tired for someone making threats.

Good grief, I can't even tell if that was a joke.

"I'm joking, I'm joking," he said. "By the way, Sven, will we be at the Supreme Warrior Festival?"

"Hmm. Well, our schedule is clear for the time being. Why don't we go see what our cocky CM is capable of?"

I just said I wasn't going to be competing!

Eva, Sven, everyone saw something in me and I didn't know what. But I was in charge of the imperial princess's mentoring. Maybe her results could be considered a sign of what I was capable of? Maybe?

Then, a shrill cry rang throughout the lounge.

"Aah! Human weakling! Are you really going to be part of the Supreme Warrior Festival? Sir?"

"You never take a break, do you, Thousand Tricks? As your clan mates, it behooves us to offer our assistance."

Running in was my savior during the emperor escort job, Kris Argent, and her party leader, Lapis Fulgor. Being Noble Spirits, they were beautiful and their presence alone made the lounge feel a bit brighter. Unfortunately, they weren't very good candidates for training the imperial princess, as they were what we might call lacking in manners. I knew they were good deep down, but I needed people good on the surface as well.

"Ah, I wasn't looking for you two," I said.

"We haven't met since getting back to the capital and the first thing you do is pick a fight?! Sir?!"

It hadn't occurred to me that I had been that long. I had also totally forgotten about my offer to go out for drinks.

Kris darted right up to me and pressed her finger against my chest. "Why didn't you come to see me? Sir? I was bedridden!"

"You were? I would've come if you had called me."

"I'm not gonna do that. I shouldn't have to go out of my way! We were only party members for the duration of that job. Sir."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

I had entered my usual smile and grin mode, having abandoned any hope of understanding what was happening.

"During our job, when you sat on your ass and made me do all the fighting, don't tell me that was because you were preparing for the Supreme Warrior Festival!"

"Yeah, uh-huh?"

Kris was red in the face and her language was coarse as ever, but her melodic voice softened any impact.

"Are you really going to participate? Sir? I don't buy that a guy who acts like an ass around the emperor cares about glory!"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

She was right, I didn't have much interest in glory. That always came with privileges and obligations that I didn't have the skills to handle. But I didn't recall ever acting like an ass around the

emperor.

It seemed Kris didn't care for my response, as she was getting more and more heated. Lapis abandoned her job as Kris's muzzle and just gave me a shrug. Sven looked resigned. Being oblivious to their reactions made Kris look incredibly childish.

Oh, it's fine. We're all used to this.

"The Supreme Warrior Festival is famous even among Noble Spirits! A champion among our kind will be competing! A flaccid dope like you will just get hurt! Sir! Are you sure you won't just be spectat— Yah?! Wha? D-Don't touch me! I-I'll forgive you, so just stop petting me! Ah! Ahaah!"

Kris squirmed in an exaggerated manner. It seemed the thing I understood best was this feline Noble Spirit. Without thinking much about it, I reached out and began rubbing her head. Her silver hair felt like silk and was cold to the touch, making it pleasant to run my hand through.

Tears welled up in her eyes and her face flushed.

"O-Okay! Sir! I'll go and cheer you on! So just stop that! Stooop! At least be a little more gentle about it!"

Well then, I can't wait to see the look on her face when she realizes it won't be me but the imperial princess taking part.

***

Within a certain town was a building decades old. Dozens of shadows were seated around a large table. Despite the building's age, there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere in the room. This was evidence that while this room was used in secret, it was also used frequently. There wasn't a single window; the only light came from a single lantern on the table.

"Is it true the plan failed?" asked a low voice from a vaguely illuminated figure.

"The details are unclear, but the conference ended without incident and Rodrick is unharmed. There is one conclusion."

In height, gender, age, and more, the assembled figures varied widely. But there was one thing they all had in common—everyone

wore fox masks. The masks differed in shape, color, and other more subtle details. But these masks were proof of their shared membership of a certain group.

Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox. They were a secret organization that lurked in deep shadows and worked under the cover of darkness. Gathered in this room were some of its members, Foxes as they were called, who had come from all over the world. Now, they were daring to make an in-person gathering.

"To think that the Counter Cascade was one of our own. But I fail to understand how one of the imperial capital's most capable Magi could have failed. If he had managed to get so close, how did the assassination fail?"

Fox was an organization built on thorough secrecy. The members were divided into ranks referred to as "tails." The greater the number of their tail, the higher their rank was. This equated to greater access to information and increased authority.

As a general rule, lower-ranked members didn't know the identities of higher-ranked members. This time, however, information had trickled down because the operation had failed. The attempt on the emperor's life had been handled by a member of the seventh tail who had been a candidate for Fox's upper brass. Even in this packed room, only one person had known that the Counter Cascade was a Fox, as he was of the same tail.

"Mmm. The Counter Cascade really screwed up." Everyone's gaze fell on the perturbed speaker. It was a large man in a gold mask and the leader of the current operation. "We've got other people in high places. We've got other people who can get their hands dirty. But he was one of our best assassins. Even high-level hunters were an easy task for him. His skills with magic alone were enough to get him to the same rank as me! People like him aren't exactly common."

This was a major loss. Telm had the trust of some of the nobility and a unique spell that could produce clones. An assassin that could make anyone disappear was an asset of indescribable value. But they had an even bigger issue.

"It doesn't end there. Telm brought the Dragon Caller with him. We lost two irreplaceable hands! You probably don't need me to tell

you this, but this will affect our plans."

The Counter Cascade had definitely been top brass material, but his cohort the Dragon Caller had also been exceedingly useful to the organization. What better way to throw society into chaos than the power to summon dragons, the strongest of all mythical beasts? Dragons had a tendency to draw attention, which created openings that could be exploited for any number of purposes.

The current operation had been planned with the Dragon Caller in mind, but now that wouldn't be happening due to Telm's failure.

"The upper tails aren't happy," the man continued. "The Counter Cascade's operation was of the utmost importance. The death of the emperor would have hindered Zebrudia and their position would have been weakened if the conference had been canceled! But look what happened! The emperor still lives and the conference went on as scheduled! Our operatives probably had their identities compromised as well! It's the biggest failure in our history!"

The assassination of Emperor Rodrick was so important that Telm would have been welcomed into Fox's highest echelons if he had succeeded. Fox's influence and membership was as great as it was because of their accomplishments. A major failure would make their organization less alluring, weakening them overall.

"We'll continue as planned." The man slammed his hand on the table. His voice was low and intimidating, his eyes shining brightly. "This is a huge operation. Everything else we've done will pale in comparison. The Counter Cascade's failure was entirely unexpected. We can't suffer another screw-up."

"But Galf," one of the other members objected, "the Supreme Warrior Festival is a gathering of all kinds of deadly people. Isn't it dangerous to push this operation along when we've already been weakened? If there's a high chance of failure, we should consider a delay."

The thing they feared most was their identities being revealed. Telm's greatest error wasn't that he hadn't been able to carry out his duties, but that he had been revealed to be a Fox. Cautious planning, evading anything that might fail, and sticking to the shadows was how they operated.

And the leader, Galf Shenfelder, smiled at his subordinate's very reasonable objection.

"That won't be a problem. The loss of the Dragon Caller is a shame, but we can procure more pawns on the scene. The success of this operation will more than make up for the Counter Cascade's failure. This operation was ordered by our boss, and they've approved the dispatch of a Maiden. I can guarantee you, we will pull this off. The time for lurking has passed. Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox will make its move! Now, has *it* been secured?"

"Yes. Just as planned. And it doesn't seem they've noticed."

Galf's smile grew. "While we've been dragging our feet, there may have been leaks now that Telm's been compromised. Let's not waste another minute! The Relic is key to the boss's plans. If we don't get our hands on it, the whole operation will be in trouble."

***

Initially, Murina kept track of how many times she had passed out. But she soon realized that even that was drawing too much of her focus. She didn't even know how many days had gone by since she had entered this vault. She didn't feel thirst or hunger because even that was a distraction. She had disposed of everything superfluous, leaving only her will to live.

Flower petals that were such a pure shade of white they almost seemed artificial. Seemingly endless fields of flora that seemed too beautiful for this world. This was Prism Garden, a Level 7 treasure vault.

Within the deepest reaches of this vault bloomed a flower known as a Firmamental Blossom. Its petals were transparent; if taken outside its home, it would quickly fade like melting snow. And yet these flowers sold for a sum so high only the richest buyers could hope to afford one.

The otherworldly scenery of the treasure vault had inspired allure and fascination in much of the nobility for a brief time. Some of them floated the idea of hiring a band of capable mercenaries and exploring Prism Garden, but ultimately, none took the leap. Now

Murina knew why. This place was far too dangerous. Even if you were accompanied by guards, it wasn't a tourist destination.

The ceaseless barrage of petals interfered with all five of one's senses and the toxic pollen could render even a resilient hunter unconscious. The dazzling foliage was diverse in height and form, obstructing precise movements. But worst of all were the phantoms disguised as flowers. Quiet yet savage, they could make themselves almost indistinguishable from the scenery and knew how to take advantage of a back turned their way.

Environment-type vaults were almost nonexistent, but Prism Garden was the most lethal of them. Even the Zebrudian military would have trouble fighting their way through. And that was most likely the reason Grieving Souls had chosen it for Murina's crucible. She didn't have to do anything resembling training. All she was supposed to do was live. What were her previous bouts of misfortune compared to the expedition into hell that she was currently undergoing?

Her first trainer had been Liz Smart. Those lessons began with Murina feeling like she had been set on fire.

"Did I say you can take a nap?! Get up if you don't wanna die here!"

Being a high-level vault, ill effects such as sleep and paralysis were a constant threat. These were the bane of any hunter, and most nobles who absorbed mana material used it to gain resistance to these ailments.

As a member of the imperial family, even Murina had resilience on par with the average hunter. But it wasn't until a sharp pain had brought her back that she even realized she had passed out. Her vision wavered. Unable to even cry out, she felt woozy.

"Keep fighting until it stops being a problem! That's how this shit works! Now let the mana material in! T, you're making a fucking disgrace of yourself! Call yourself a hunter? How long have I been teaching you?!"

"U-Understood. Lizzy!" Tino yelled in a garbled voice. She was next to Murina and struggling to stay on her feet. Through the dense haze that plagued her mind, the imperial princess was deeply

impressed that Tino was still able to raise her voice.

Of course, it wasn't just the environment they were up against. Taking advantage of the ill effects caused by the petals and pollen, the camouflaged phantoms carried out merciless ambushes. Trees could surreptitiously bind you with vines, toxic flowers shot seeds like bullets, and unidentifiable beasts hid among the tall plants.

To Murina, this was a place of unadulterated malice. Supposedly these phantoms were a bit weaker than those found in most Level 7 vaults, but she didn't think she could defeat them even if she wasn't hindered by the pollen.

Resisting the effects of the pollen rendered Murina unable to do anything more. She unknowingly approached a phantom lying in wait. Her instincts told her to dodge, but her reflexes couldn't match her intuition. Meanwhile, her instructors did only the bare minimum to keep her alive.

When a vine grabbed Murina by the ankle and held her aloft, the Grievers stood and watched. When her guards broke free from their bag, they ran for cover. When she had to endure a horde of phantoms with nothing but her wits, her instructors remained idle spectators.

Being flung through the air by a vine had taught her what it meant to be helpless. The boundary between dreams and reality broke down. The stimuli of her five senses blended together into one. Even life and death no longer felt distinct from one another.

In the end, Murina successfully adapted to the environment. By the time she had managed to stay conscious for a reasonable period, she was drenched head-to-toe in potions.

After being healed by Ansem, Karen was just barely hanging on to life.

"D-Do you wretches always train like this—"

"Hah? No, we sure as hell don't. These guys are strong and nice enough to put up with a bullshit job like this. You think they'd be able to do that if they took the easy route?"

Murina listened indifferently to Karen and Liz's conversation. She felt feverish, but that was leagues better than her earlier state of

nigh unconsciousness. She had vomited repeatedly, but her stomach didn't feel empty. She couldn't feel anything, including despair. If nothing else, she was simply thankful that it hadn't been any worse, that she hadn't died. Seeing this bunch stay calm in a place like the Garden had taught her just how fearsome hunters really were.

"No time. We'll have to cut it here," Liz said with a click of her tongue.

"Hell yeah, now it's my turn," Luke said. "I'm gonna teach you about swords. Swords are important. Not a whole lot you can do without 'em."

These words filtered into Murina's ears, stimulating her dazed mind and bringing her back to life.

"Swords!" she said. "I like swords! I love them!"

"Oh, funny you should say that. I like swords too! C'mon!"

Swords! *Swords*! Murina had never taken much of a liking to swords or the art of swordsmanship, but things were different now. Liz's trials had been extreme beyond measure, but the worst part of them was that Murina had been forced to face phantoms while unarmed. Even if it wouldn't have made much of a difference, having to face a powerful phantom without even a knife was uniquely terrifying.

Despite feeling like she couldn't move even a finger, Murina leaped to her feet and caught the sword Luke had tossed to her. She was about to begin rubbing her cheek against it, when she realized something.

"Hm? This is a sword? It's wooden."

"That it is. I'm going to tell you a secret—the best Swordsmen aren't picky about their weapons. With this, you'll become a great Swordsman, Your Imperial Highness."

"What are you saying? This won't cut anything."

The question spilled out as it entered her mind. With innocent eyes, she gave Luke a blank stare.

"No, it can cut," said the most notorious Swordsman in the imperial capital. "You can do anything if you really try. That's what I'm here to teach you. And the best way to do that is by taking down powerful phantoms."

"Impossible."

"Don't worry, all that mana material will help you."

Impossible. Not even when being trained by the Sword Saint had Murina uttered that word. As she stood vacantly, a horde of phantoms rudely closed in on her.

Worrying about dying was a luxury only available to Murina in the early stages. After that, the alarms stopped going off. Her vague hope that her guards might help her, and her naive belief that she might survive this, both disappeared quickly.

The petals obstructed her vision. The unexpectedly swift phantoms weren't even scratched by her wooden sword. She hadn't been able to take hits like the Immutable could, nor had she been able to keep up with the magic lecture that had started abruptly in the middle of the vault.

It was all beyond her. This wasn't even a place an intermediate hunter could handle. She knew that she would be undergoing intense training. She knew that the Thousand Trials weren't to be taken lightly. But she never could have predicted this.

No sane man would have casually entrusted Murina to people like this. This wasn't a trial, this was suicide. Murina was pleased with herself just for surviving this long. Her guards had supposedly been chosen for their post after passing rigorous training, but they had long ago given up on trying to keep her safe.

She was battered in body and spirit. She didn't have time to check her condition. If not for Ansem's healing, she would have died a thousand times over. She no longer cared about learning to handle her bad luck. She just wanted to go home. Her misfortune had never brought her anything worse than this. Was this punishment for her inability? If it was, wasn't it far too harsh? What could this slice of hell possibly have to offer for Murina?

The constant nausea she felt was probably due to the mana material being far denser than what she could handle. The pain had caused her to cry, but her tear ducts had long since dried up. She wanted to go home, take a bath, and sleep in a clean bed. She yearned for the castle she had once grown tired of. She felt like she

had been away for years.

As she wondered how many more lessons she still had left, she reached the depths of despair, where she had a revelation.

To live...is to do just that!

"Mmm," Sitri muttered while watching the imperial princess dry heave. "She's not getting as strong as I had hoped."

Murina couldn't believe her ears. She fought back her nausea and looked up, where she saw Liz taking a break from haranguing Tino.

"Don't tell me this was a bust? Krai Baby finally gave us a job, I don't wanna screw it up."

"She couldn't cut anything with the wooden sword," Luke added. "It looks like there's no shortcuts to strength after all."

What in the world were they saying? All this had been for *nothing*? Once dulled by her waking nightmare, Murina's brain fired itself up again. She absolutely could not accept that nothing had come from her experiences in this hellscape.

"Are we out of time already?" Sitri said. "I suppose she did absorb a fair amount of mana material, and we did teach her the basics."

Ansem grunted in agreement.

Murina was wracked with queasiness, but she could no longer tell if that was from the mana material or the stress.

Sitri looked at her with a spiteful glare and said, "Well, we're busy. So let's move on to the final lesson."

Final lesson? There was still more? Sitri was the only one who hadn't given her any training. But she was an Alchemist, not someone who fought on the front lines. Murina had been convinced she simply managed the party.

Murina told herself to keep it together. Her heart would give in if she didn't. As she looked at Sitri, there was fear and indignation burning in the young princess's gaze. Sitri gave her a malicious smile and said something unexpected.

"To still be capable of such strong feelings under circumstances like these requires a spirit pliable, yet unbreakable. I wouldn't expect anything less from a member of the imperial family. But there's no need to fear. You can rest easy, because my lessons can hardly be called such. I'll just be doing a blood test. I need to make sure your

body is all right. If something happened to you because of our training, it would be quite a mess."

***

Generally speaking, phantoms were an enemy to mankind. They were life-forms (except they weren't technically *living*) made when mana material coalesced into recreations of the past. Even the ones that were intelligent enough to parse human language were still driven by territorial instincts and had no mercy for intruders. What's more, some phantoms had a resentment for humanity born from the past events that formed their foundation.

But I might have become the very first human to ever make peace with a phantom.

Relaxing in the sunlight, I fiddled with my Smartphone. I couldn't even begin to guess just how many features this Relic was loaded with. Despite sharing one name, these devices came in endless varieties, each with different capabilities. I was still getting the hang of it, but Little Sister Fox seemed to have plenty of free time, as she was constantly sending me texts.

According to the manuals that were often found with Smartphones, frequently exchanging texts meant two people were friends, or "phone phriends," as they were called. In other words, Little Sister Fox and I were friends. That, of course, went for her older brother as well. We were in each other's contacts.

Man, oh man, have I become an intermediate Smartphone user?

Grinning to myself, I looked at the picture sent to me by Little Sister Fox. It was of that day's fried tofu. The next moment, the door swung open without a single knock. I thrust my phone into my pocket and saw Sitri entering. Her cheeks were flushed and she had a vial so large she had to use both arms to carry it.

"Krai," she said before I could open my mouth, "about the imperial princess. I believe we've succeeded!"

"Ah, thanks. You guys were a huge help. Where's Princess Murina now?"

"I wanted to bring her with me, but she refused."

Should I be worried? What sort of training did you guys do?

A scowl briefly crossed my face, but then I noticed Sitri's smile. It was the pure and innocent smile of a young girl. This was also the smile she made when she wanted my praise. Upon reconsideration, I decided that if they had put Murina through hellish training, it was only natural that they might have earned her ire. I told myself not to worry. Everything was fine. The emperor knew what she had been signed up for.

"As for her training," Sitri said, "that was a failure. We simply didn't have enough time."

What?! What did you just say? Failure*? If you failed, then where's all this confidence coming from?*

I knew they hadn't exactly been set up for success, but I still found her attitude strange. I couldn't hand out the compliments she clearly wanted.

"Krai, look!"

Sitri gleefully placed the vial before me. It was filled with a dark red liquid. I couldn't smell it because the vial was sealed, but I still found the potion unsettling. It reminded me of blood. I sat in silence, awaiting an explanation.

Sitri puffed out her chest and said, "The training may not have gone well, but the results are before you."

I didn't think. I just let myself become a praise-dispenser.

"Great job, Sitri. You're incredible."

"This is Princess Murina's blood. Thanks to you, I was able to obtain such a large sample from my blood test!"

Excuse me?

My eyes darted back and forth between Sitri and the vial. *Blood test*? And who was to thank for this? And why was this vial so big? Princess Murina was a small girl; I was pretty sure this was more than her entire body could hold.

"This is imperial blood, perfectly preserved. This isn't easy to come by! The imperial princess herself isn't particularly remarkable, but I'm sure this blood is worth researching."

Then is it really a blood test? What did you do to the imperial princess?!

Sitri's eyes were shining. Though I knew she had a mad scientist streak in her, I had always considered that to be one of her strengths. But I had just one question on my mind. Just one.

"Is she alive?"

"I gave her a potent hematogenous potion and we healed her in the treasure vault, so I'm sure the mana material is doing its job! It placed a considerable burden on her, but I followed your orders and made sure her life remained intact!"

Sitri, just because something doesn't result in a fatality doesn't necessarily make it okay.

Hadn't I told her to train the imperial princess? Why was she acting like I had ordered all this? I was at a loss. I was always worried about her, but now it looked like she might be facing the death penalty.

I received a summons to the Imperial Castle sooner than I had expected. I normally would've taken one of my brains, Sitri or Eva, with me, but this time I went alone. Sitri was out of the question and I was reluctant to take Eva, given the circumstances.

When Franz saw me, he looked at me with a stiff expression. "Krai Andrey, don't tell me you always go around dressed like that."

When I received the summons, it felt like I had been given the date of my execution. So of course I had decided to throw on Perfect Vacation.

I was shown to a room that was robust, just like the empire itself. There weren't many elaborate furnishings, but it still felt like a place where I could relax. Seated further in was a man who clearly had no equal in the entire nation—the emperor himself.

Maybe I was just uninformed, but I didn't think the emperor normally showed up when people were summoned to his castle. I saw him a lot during the escort job, but that was inevitable. Being granted audiences with the emperor was usually reserved for special occasions like the Gathering of the White Blade. Which is all to say I couldn't understand what he was doing here. Did he have nothing better to do?

I tried to keep my mind busy with these inordinately rude

thoughts, but Franz brought me back to reality by clearing his throat.

"Oh forget it," he said. "The reason you were called here is—"

"It's quite all right, Franz," the emperor cut in. "We're not in an audience chamber, so there's no need for all the formalities. I'll talk with him directly."

It had been bothering me for a while, but wasn't this guy a bit too direct? He was always getting personally involved in things. Maybe he had nothing better to do.

Now, what could possibly cause him to summon me like this? Had he found out about what Sitri had done? I couldn't think of any other explanation. Talking to her, I had learned about the nightmarish training my friends had inflicted on the imperial princess. I know I had told them that they needed to be harsh, but I had assumed they would give Princess Murina the right to refuse.

If their lessons had produced good results, that would've been one thing, but that hadn't happened. And to really make things worse, Sitri had extracted the imperial princess's blood. Apparently, Sitri was deeply interested in imperial blood. She had told me herself that she had drawn as much as she could. That girl was bad at resisting her curiosity.

I tried to think of what sort of excuse I could offer, but even the excuse master himself was outmatched here. I was like a fish on a cutting board.

"Allow me to offer my deepest thanks for your protection en route to Toweyezant," the emperor said in his austere voice. "There were a number of vexing issues, but I doubt there are many assassins more capable than the Counter Cascade. I believe we can relax for the time being."

Hm? Hold on. This isn't what I thought he'd say.

If he was going to have me killed, I was fairly certain he wouldn't have started with words of gratitude. I looked at him and Franz with confusion.

"Furthermore, I would also like to thank you for training Murina."

He doesn't know?!

"You're too kind, Your Imperial Majesty," I quickly said before the

situation could take a turn for the worse. “With the brief time available to us, I’m afraid we were unable to produce ideal results.”

I’m really sorry about the blood extraction thing. Please forgive my friend. But didn’t Murina have guards? What the hell were they doing?

“Ever since my daughter returned home, she’s been so dedicated to learning sword and spell that she barely takes the time to rest. She’s always lamented her bad luck and let it keep a smile off her face. But it seems your lessons changed something about her way of thinking.”

“She almost seems frantic, Your Imperial Majesty,” Franz said while glowering at me. “I’m actually concerned. And we haven’t been able to learn anything from the two guards that accompanied her.”

Sitri had even silenced the witnesses. She didn’t cut corners.

Y’know, I think being forced to train for days on end, then having your veins milked for all they were worth would change anyone’s thinking at least a bit. I hadn’t borne witness to the training, but it sounded like even if Murina’s life was intact, not everything else was.

“By the sound of it, the training was quite something,” the emperor said. “Murina’s remained mum regarding it, but the change in her is remarkable.”

Sitri, you’re amazing! Nobody else has ever been thanked for wringing out someone’s blood!

Walking the border between life and death while inside a treasure vault inundated with mana material would make anyone stronger. Even still, it seemed the results had fallen short of Sitri’s expectations. It was hard, but I managed to keep a cool face in spite of the fact that this man didn’t know that his daughter had been exsanguinated.

“I’m sure no ordinary person could have endured it. I’m sure she has you to thank for that,” I said passionately. “I’ve brought out her talents. It’s my belief that she should be able to face any disaster that might come her way in the future.”

I took the opportunity to praise the imperial princess and keep things vague.

"You're too kind, Thousand Tricks," the emperor said with a nod. "It seems the rumors about the Thousand Trials were true."

Even this guy's heard about those? How far are those rumors flying?

"No, Your Imperial Majesty, this was not one of the Thousand Trials. I intended to bring Her Imperial Highness to a level where she could compete in the Supreme Warrior Festival, but that goal proved unattainable. I've failed you."

The emperor's eyes bulged.

"What are you talking about, Krai Andrey?" Franz groaned.

That's right. In the end, the lessons had been a failure. She might have gotten stronger, but that didn't mean anything if she hadn't reached the goal that had been set. To top it off, the training had been used as a cover to drain her blood. The emperor wasn't as mad as I had thought he would be, but I could tell he wasn't pleased with me.

The expressions of both Franz and the emperor darkened. Franz waved his arm, dismissing the guards in the room.

"The Supreme Warrior Festival," Franz said. "We called you out here to discuss Her Imperial Highness, but we'd like to discuss that as well."

"You would?"

"I had wondered why you wanted a ticket despite already having priority candidacy. It appears there's going to be a major *event* in Kreat, isn't there?"

"Yeah. You could say that."

I couldn't help but stare at Franz. The Supreme Warrior Festival was indeed a major event and I had been under the impression everyone knew that it was an annual thing.

"Just when and where did you hear about it?"

"I first heard about it around ten years ago."

"Ten years?! Ridiculous. Even the Astral Divinarium's Eye of God couldn't—"

"Franz, enough. We have bigger concerns than his veracity."

None of this made any sense to me. A tournament like the Supreme Warrior Festival was known to darn near everyone in the

imperial capital. Did they think I was stupid or something? I didn't think I was *that* lacking in common knowledge.

"So, Your Imperial Majesty, what shall we do regarding Princess Murina?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

The tournament wasn't far off, but Sitri was of the opinion that the imperial princess still had far too much room for improvement. If she were to enter the ring like this, a defeat was all but inevitable. That would reflect badly on her, and us, the people who had been tasked with mentoring her. I didn't want to say what I did, but I didn't think I had any other choice.

"Her Imperial Highness has shown herself to be diligent and talented, but we simply haven't had enough time. With your permission, perhaps we could give her further lessons during the journey to the Supreme Warrior Festival."

I didn't want to go out of my way to stick my head into danger, but I had no other choice. We were fine for the moment, but if Princess Murina got in a fatal accident in the tournament, it would be all over for Grieving Souls.

"You wretch!" Franz yelled. "After returning to us, Her Imperial Highness slept like a corpse for a full day. Yet you would have her continue to fight? And why do you keep bringing up the Supreme—"

"Well, you're right. It's up to Her Imperial Highness, not me, to decide whether or not she fights."

Quietly grinding his teeth, Franz looked demonic.

I was standing in silence, awaiting an answer, when the emperor looked at me with his piercing blue eyes.

"Hm? Of course I'll be participating. You aren't going to let the others do it but ask me to sit out, are you?"

Lucia scowled at me. It wasn't quite a glare, but it was still overpowering. We were in my room/Relic vault, and she was charging my Relics like she always did. Once it had been a lengthy process, but that had changed with time. Charging used to leave her gasping for breath, but now she could handle seventeen Safety Rings without batting an eye.

Lucia was a superb Magus. She not only knew a wide array of spells, she was also dedicated to developing new ones. She had even begun to gain recognition as one of the best Magi in the imperial capital. As her older brother, all the attention was a bit worrying.

"After asking my mentor, they agreed to let me participate on certain conditions," she told me. "I understand this won't be easy. The arena is wide, but still small enough that a Swordsman would have the advantage. Not to mention the rules against fatalities..."

The Supreme Warrior Festival allowed combatants of all fighting styles. But in practice, those built for close-range engagements were the overwhelming majority. The fights were held in a large space, but it was still a distance a skilled warrior could cover in a few bounds. Meanwhile, powerful spells required incantations or set movements. While an expert could cast quickly, that came with the trade-off of producing a weaker spell. Either way, Magi were at a disadvantage.

But Lucia still seemed eager to take part. She could, after all, be surprisingly stubborn. But I still didn't like the idea of her doing something so dangerous.

"There's also, well..." she said, rubbing the bracelets on her wrists. "You did give these to me."

She had really taken a liking to them. If they had been the Counter Cascade's trump card, then I had no doubts that Lucia could put them to good use.

"I see," I said. "If you're that determined, then I'll cheer you on."

"Huh? You say that as though this doesn't concern you."

Well, yeah. For one thing, the Supreme Warrior Festival only did single combat and I couldn't dictate how Lucia fought. I didn't even have the knowledge to do something like that.

"Um. Do you need some encouragement?" I offered.

"If you're able to worry, perhaps you should worry about yourself."

"That's true."

But I didn't think worrying would get me anywhere. It wouldn't make the imperial princess any stronger. Even though I had gotten

permission to give her more lessons, her chances of victory were still low.

"Do I need to remind you that these fights are one-on-one?" Lucia asked. "Isn't that your least favorite?"

"Hm? Not really. I like the tension that comes with one-on-one battles. Of course, you can't knock brawls and other spectacles. But it's not like there's any point in griping about the format."

I didn't like participating in any sort of fight, but I enjoyed watching all sorts. However, when I was going on hunts with Grieving Souls, I got to experience plenty of spectacle fights firsthand. After that, even sitting on the sidelines was something I was willing to live without.

Lucia blinked, then looked at me strangely. "Leader, you're acting awfully sure of yourself. Do you have another bizarre idea in your head?"

"I'm just hoping this tournament goes well."

I didn't want Lucia to put herself in danger, but it was too late to say that when she was already a treasure hunter.

"Oh right," I said. "Did everyone else manage to secure a spot in the tournament?"

"Yes, so it seems. Though I hear Luke got a thorough scolding from his mentor."

Nothing is more powerful than a meathead with a clear goal in mind. I wonder what he did.

"By the sound of it, Siddy and the others also had a tough time getting in at the last minute. Even I had to do some bargaining. The only one relaxing is you."

"Every move I make just seems to make things worse, so I try to move as little as I can."

I was incompetent, but I was at least aware of it.

"Goodness!" Lucia groaned.

Enduring an icy glare from my sister, I pulled a Relic from a shelf and began polishing it, when Eva stepped in.

She placed a thick stack of papers on my desk and said, "Krai, I know what you said, but I compiled all the information I could regarding the Supreme Warrior Festival. Thanks to preliminary

tournaments, I was able to gather information regarding who might be participating. Though I didn't make a section for Grieving Souls."

"What? I thought I said that wasn't necessary. Besides, nothing's official yet, is it?"

"Please, just look. There was something that caught my eye."

You sure worry a lot. I'll tell you right now, I won't be able to figure out anything just by looking at documents.

Eva was giving me a fierce look, so I went along with it and opened up a file. Inside were detailed profiles of the participants. It was a little scary just how quickly she managed to gather all this info in such a short time. We had only just talked about this the day before.

Flipping through the papers, I saw a number of names that even I recognized.

"Oh? Touka's going to be there," I commented.

"Yes, she considers it part of her job," Eva replied.

I see. Taking part in this might bring in new clients. That sounds like the sort of profit-driven thing she might do.

Kongoin Touka was the leader—or rather, captain—of the Knights of the Torch, one of First Steps's parties. I had heard that they had returned while I was out protecting the emperor. Did this tournament have something to do with that? I wasn't sure what to think about the fact that so many from our clan would be in this tournament, but at least we were mostly all friends in First Steps.

"I'll have to cheer her on," I said. "I hope she shows me a good fight."

"Krai, you really aren't concerned, are you?"

"My brot— Our leader's always been like this."

I was a coward, but even I didn't see any reason to be afraid if I was just a spectator.

As I browsed the list, a line grabbed my attention. My hands stopped, and my eyes opened wide. Eva gulped as she watched me. It was the name of a participant, the name of a hunter, that had caught me. I rubbed my eyes, but it became clear they weren't deceiving me. I couldn't stop a smile from forming on my face.

"Hmm? Leader of Bereaving Souls, Krahi Andrihee? Heh. What a

coincidence."

This must've been the bit that had caught Eva's eye. I could see why. Unfortunately, there was no picture included, but his name and party name were just like those of mine. What were the chances of that? If even our faces turned out to be similar, I'd assume he was the real one.

"Thanks, Eva," I said, handing the papers back to her. "That's incredible. I haven't seen anything this funny in a while."

"'Krahi Andrihee,'" Lucia grumbled. "We'll need to contact the tournament's management. How in the world do you get a participant's name wrong?"

I had to tell the rest of my friends about this. I was sure they would get a kick out of it. Though I didn't have any say in it, I thought it would be perfect if Luke or someone got matched up against Krahi. It would be even better if this Krahi guy turned out to be extremely powerful. We'd be laughing about it over drinks for years to come.

"That's right, Krai," Eva said, "Branch Manager Gark wishes to speak with you. He said he'll be waiting at the Hidden Curse clan house."

"Oh, yeah."

In all likelihood, he probably wanted to talk about Telm and Kechachakka. I had totally forgotten about them. I was still coming to grips with the fact they were both agents of Fox. But Telm had also belonged to Hidden Curse and I had found Kechachakka through the Explorer's Association. What they had done wasn't my fault, but I still had a responsibility to explain what had happened.

I'm sure the Association is being badgered about why they introduced me to a backstabber. Ahh. I really don't wanna go.

"He said that if you don't have time, he'll come to you instead," Eva told me. "What shall we do?"

He's resorting to intimidation?! Doesn't he have any pride as a hunter?!

I didn't see what other choice I had. I would just have to grovel and be ready to flee at any given moment.

The Hidden Curse clan house was in the central region of the imperial capital. It was a high-class area with extraordinary property values that hosted the residences of people like Lord Gladis. This district was near the Imperial Castle, though "near" was a relative term as it was still a few kilometers away.

The clan house was made of brick and conformed to an older style of architecture. Nearly everyone knew about this mansion and its clock tower. It stood tall over the neighboring mansions and rumor had it that you could see the whole capital from the top. It spoke to this clan's renown and history that they were able to get away with building something that dwarfed the mansions of the nobility.

I thought back to when I was still new to the imperial capital. I had gone on a little sightseeing trip to see this place. Hidden Curse was among the oldest clans in the capital and recruited Magi. Their headquarters was envied by all hunters, and for some reason, Lucia and I found ourselves being treated to tea at the top of the tower.

Before us was a witch with a sharp glare, a sardonic smile, and an age I couldn't even begin to guess. Next to her was a bald giant with a scowl on his partially tattooed face. This man was much more terrifying than any hunter I had ever come across. What could I possibly have done to deserve this?

"I've been waiting for you," the witch said with a chuckle. "Oh, the news of you has kept me entertained."

"You're always running this way and that to get away from me, but now I didn't have to twist your arm. Are you sick?" the giant asked.

Without twisting my arm?! Are you for real?!

What a joke. I would never willingly go to a place that had two members of the capital's Scariest Top Five Hunters.

I was trying to calm myself down with some escapism, when Arty said, "Gark, what sort of person do you think Krai is? The Thousand Tricks would never run away from someone!"

"H-He's right!" Mary added. She and Arty were serving the tea. "I'll remind you that Krai is Lucia's older brother."

At first, I didn't see what that had to do with it. But I guess it was

true that I wouldn't try and run away so long as Lucia was nearby.

Somewhat resigned, I folded my legs and said with as much sarcasm as I could, "Of course I'll show up if you threaten to come kicking down the doors of my place."

"Don't say it like that!" Gark protested. "I didn't threaten you!"

He had done something close enough. Gark might not have resorted to those sorts of methods, but the pyromaniac lady definitely would have. I wouldn't call her a pyromaniac if she wasn't one.

"Thing is, I've been meaning to meet with the Abyssal Inferno," I said. "And I think I know what you wanted to talk to me about."

"Oh, you honor me. But what's been stopping you from paying me a visit?"

That should be obvious. I didn't want to see you, so I was putting it off.

Ideally, I would have never had to meet with her.

The old witch sighed as though coming to terms with something. That alone made me nauseous.

"Never mind that. I've got my own matters to take care of, so let's not waste any time." The Abyssal Inferno snickered. "One of mine gave you a bit of trouble I hear."

She didn't look particularly apologetic.

"I don't mind," I said without thinking. "He was a great help on the road. I hear he was an excellent Magus."

Not only was he a skilled Magus, he had far more sense than the old lady before me.

"However, Gark," I said, "Kecha was unforgivable. That guy was beyond suspicious. I could understand how Telm got through, but Kecha shouldn't have made it onto that list."

That man was so suspicious that it actually made him inconspicuous. What was up with that guy? An assassin shouldn't be allowed to do that.

"S-Sorry about that," Gark muttered.

He was absolutely red in the face. Did he hate apologizing to me that much?

C'mon, I'm always groveling before you! Why don't you give it a

try?

Of course, hell would freeze over before I actually said something like that.

"But if you thought he was suspect, you should have said something at the time!" Gark argued. "You need to stop keeping stuff like this to yourself!"

I couldn't do that. Even now, I was struggling to keep up with the situation.

A few weeks prior, I had borrowed Telm from Hidden Curse so I could take him with me to protect the empire. That turned out to be a poor call, as he was actually a member of an infamous organization!

For some reason, he had loyally protected the emperor for the first stretch of the journey. For some reason, he suddenly revealed his identity. For some reason, he suddenly ran off. And now for some reason, he was Older Brother Fox's plaything. *Why?* No matter how many times I looked back on it, I couldn't figure it out. Why had he suddenly asked if I was one of his comrades?!

"You can't blame me for that," I said, nodding to myself. "Even I was surprised when Kecha turned out to be an assassin. I wasn't expecting to be betrayed by both the vice clan leader of Hidden Curse and a hunter bearing your recommendation, Gark."

It was easy to accept that Kecha had been a traitor, but I was still wrapping my head around the idea that Telm had been working for the other side. Utterly baffling that the scorched earth lady had a clean record, but Telm was a turncoat.

When I looked up, the Abyssal Inferno was inexplicably smiling at me, her eyes wide open. Gark's cheek was twitching, a gesture so scary that I would've started groveling in any other situation.

"Hmph. No, I suppose you weren't," said the witch.

"We've begun rooting out and taking care of those involved," said the giant.

Taking care of?! What does that mean? Am I going to be next?

"Ever since our days at the academy, Telm the Counter Cascade was diligent," the old lady said, her smile fading. "He never broke the rules, even the most trivial ones. He looked especially good

when compared to Noctus Cochlear and myself."

I didn't know what she was talking about, but I could tell I was supposed to keep quiet by the reactions of everyone else. The old lady glanced at the Relic worn on Lucia's wrists and continued.

"If he hadn't accepted my invitation to join Hidden Curse, there would probably be another powerful Magi clan in the capital. And that would've made things around here a bit more interesting. That man did everything properly and without error. If he got on the wrong track, it's not surprising to see how far he went on it. Heh heh, you see, boy, I've got a small regret. Telm the Counter Cascade shouldn't have walked by my side, he should have been my competitor! Maybe that way he wouldn't have gone down the wrong path."

Her voice was dry, but I could tell how much emotion was behind it. It seemed this lady was human after all.

I was wondering what to say when her mouth contorted into a deep, deep smile.

"Tell me, boy. Will Telm come back?"

"That's, um, up to Telm."

I couldn't exactly say no.

"Well, I'm glad he's not dead. I'll settle things with my own two hands. While my body can still move, before I make way for the next generation, I'll make sure Fox and their lackeys are reduced to nothing more than piles of ash."

She wasn't yelling, but her voice still shook the table. She may have been smiling, but burning deep in her eyes were tongues of hellfire.

"P-Please calm down, CM!" Arty called.

Without even beginning an incantation, flames began to form around her crimson hair. They said the best Magi could make phenomena occur through sheer will, but I was still pretty sure something about this lady was off.

She wanted to incinerate Telm. She hoped he was alive, so she could carry out the aforementioned incineration. That didn't sound like the reasoning of a fellow human being. This guy was a former ally of hers. I mean, if Lucia joined Fox, then I'd probably go with

her.

Thank goodness the Abyssal Inferno was on our side. It didn't seem like she was inclined to incinerate me, but I still wanted to get out of that suffocating tower.

"That's enough," Gark bravely cut in, causing the Abyssal Inferno to relax just a bit.

Just as I was breathing an internal sigh of relief, Gark made a smile just as vicious as the old lady's.

"Now for the reason I called you here," he said. "Thousand Tricks, we've got a big task ahead of us. Fox dared to screw with us. We're going to crush 'em."

Arty and Mary listened intently. So did Lucia, for some reason. As usual, the only person not being serious was me. I thought for a moment.

"Sorry," I said with a hard-boiled smile. "But can I use your bathroom?"

When I got to the bathroom, I found that iron bars had been installed over the window. I felt sick to my stomach.

We sped back to the clan house. During the trip, I stayed silent, as did Lucia. Was I crazy for thinking those people were lunatics? Why were they blatantly picking a fight with some maniacal secret organization? Why did they take for granted that I would lend them a hand? Compared to Telm the Counter Cascade's Fox, I much preferred the phantom fox that had given me a Smartphone in exchange for fried tofu. If Gark wanted help, he should've hit up Franz.

Moving of their own accord, my hands pulled out my Smartphone and sent a text reading "I'm screwed" to Big Brother Fox. He immediately replied, "That's nice." Nothing nice about it.

At the meeting, I had managed to shake Gark off by telling him I was busy and would have to talk again another time. I had dodged a bullet, but I felt as though my life had only been extended by a matter of seconds. How pathetic that I couldn't shake him off with the word "no."

I'm busy. I've got things to do, I told myself. I had to go to the Supreme Warrior Festival, and there was that request from the

emperor. I didn't have time for things like criminal organizations!

When we got back, I made a beeline to the vice clan master.

"Eva! Evaaa! We're leaving the imperial capital immediately!"

"Wh-What? Where's this coming from?"

I hadn't been in her office for some time. I made my way through the miscellaneous objects piled about and yelled, "We can't stick around here, we have to get to the town of the Supreme Warrior Festival! Which town was it again?!"

"B-But Krai, there's still time until the tournament. Has something happened?"

"Not yet, but we need to get going so it stays that way."

I was freaking out. When Gark said he was going to do something, he really did it. He had taken care of some of his employees, and I could very well be next.

And then there was the Abyssal Inferno. She had mentioned making way for the next generation, but I was pretty sure she would outlive them. I could tell she would be all too happy to immolate me if I said I didn't want to help exterminate Fox. Safety Rings weren't much use if you were in the middle of a blaze.

"Brother, in exchange for getting entry into the tournament, I have something I need—" Lucia stopped and looked the other way. "Oh, never mind."

"Very well. I'll begin preparing," Eva said and stood up. It seemed she realized that I was serious. "However, gathering the clan members on such short notice—"

"Forgot about them," I said frantically. "But make sure Grieving Souls come along."

I sure as hell can't go by myself! I need to call them over. Ah, but I also have to pick my Relics.

"Is it something that serious?" Eva asked.

"Huh? No, not that serious."

Not even Gark or that old lady would go after someone without good reason. The issue was that they always thought they had a good reason to go after me.

"But what if Princess Murina isn't ready—"

Before Eva could finish that statement, she abruptly turned

towards the window. I walked up next to her and followed her gaze to the ground below. I was dumbfounded. There was a small, nondescript carriage parked outside the entrance to the clan house.

"I see," Eva said with a small sigh. "What perfect timing. Well then, I'll make arrangements. Krai, if you would begin your own preparations."

Sorry for everything I put you through.

Chapter Two: The Authentic and the Inauthentic

"Tomorrow I was supposed to have my qualification exam for an advanced composite spirit staff," Lucia muttered from the seat in front of me.

The respect that came with being a high-level hunter allowed our carriage to pass inspections and get out on the road quickly. Only a few hours had elapsed since I had met with the Abyssal Inferno, and I didn't think even she would expect me to act this quickly.

Outside, I could hear the thunderous stomping of Ansem running alongside the carriage. He was good at reducing the sound of his footfalls, but there was only so much you could do when you were that heavy. With him at our side, most monsters would steer clear of us. Even supposedly fearless phantoms would run at the sight of us.

I finally let myself relax a bit. It felt like every recent trip I had taken had flown by so quickly. Eva's coordination skills weren't to be underestimated. It seemed like things worked out whenever I asked her to do something.

But was it really okay for us to just take the imperial princess with us? She had only come to the clan house to talk. Sure, I had already talked to the emperor about further training, but we hadn't settled on a date.

The imperial princess and her two companions had been oddly willing to endure running alongside the carriage. It seemed the emperor had been telling the truth when he said that Murina had become more enthusiastic about training.

"Why were you arranging things like that right before the tournament?" I asked.

"You're! The one! Who suddenly brought up the tournament! Augh!"

Maybe because it was just the two of us in the carriage, she acted without her usual restraint.

"And I've also missed the lecture I was supposed to attend in exchange for being allowed to participate. Oh, what's my mentor going to say? You really need to give me more advance notice! Like now, you just suddenly said we're—"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

"For heaven's sake, listen to me!"

Hmm. So my brushing-off methods don't work? I knew you wouldn't be that easy.

"Everyone has plans!" she continued. "Luke was supposed to kill a dragon tomorrow to pay for his entry ticket. Siddy and Liz also..."

Wait. Should he really be here then?

Luke and the other members of his school were regularly asked to exterminate dangerous creatures. The reason he got away with cutting so many people was that he had cut slightly more monsters than humans. If he had such an important commitment, he could've just met up with us later. That's what Eva and the other clan members planned to do.

"You guys give me too much priority," I told her. "I'll be fine as long as you're with me."

"For heaven's sake!"

Don't gripe. I need you. Someone has to charge my Relics.

"Likewise, I was forced to shove off, I mean entrust a scheduled experiment to Talia," Sitri said from the driver's seat. She was there because she had lost at rock paper scissors. "Though I suppose that's fine. My work there isn't the center of my focus right now. I'd hate it if my current project were to be interrupted, but I suppose I can continue it in Kreat."

It sounded like everyone was busy. They sure had their priorities mixed up. They should've been aware that my invitation was a spur-of-the-moment thing. So why had they been so willing to accept it? But I wasn't going to apologize, because I didn't think they wanted that. It was gratitude they were hoping for.

"Come to think of it, where's Eliza?" I asked.

"Mmm. Liz said she spotted her earlier today."

Eliza went where she pleased. At least it sounded like she was doing fine.

I yawned and enjoyed the tranquility. I was in the clear until I returned to the imperial capital after the Supreme Warrior Festival. Maybe I would just stay in another town until everything subsided. But then something occurred to me.

They might follow me. They would, wouldn't they? Arnold did it. Why wouldn't Gark and the Abyssal Inferno try the same thing?

I had been assuming I'd be safe once I got away from the imperial capital. Not only that, I had forgotten to make sure Eva kept her lips sealed. This was bad. And to make matters worse, I didn't like what I was hearing outside.

"Run faster!" Liz shouted. "Don't drag your feet, princess!"

"While we're at it, why not do some combat training?" Luke said with a roar.

The imperial princess didn't even cry out.

After a few hours of travel, right when I was starting to get used to the clamor outside, a familiar repugnant smell was carried in by the breeze. Lucia closed her book and stuck her head out the window.

I looked outside and saw it immediately. Far off in the direction we were heading, a town was burning. Pillars of black smoke rose from the ground.

"A jab! Give me a jab!" I heard Luke yelling.

"What nice scenery," I muttered.

"I gave up on a chance to fight a dragon to be here!"

You didn't give it up, you're shirking it!

"More than a dragon! Give something better than a dragon! C'mon! Give me a dragon that can use a sword!"

"C'mon, princess! It's time for a real battle!"

Liz sounded awfully happy to have a new plaything.

It's over. Please forgive me, god.

The footfalls began to fade. It seemed they were going on ahead. Without saying anything, Lucia grabbed her staff and exited the carriage. Very reliable, my little sister.

"So why's this place burning?" I wondered aloud.

"You're just always picking places that are on fire," she grumbled.

Preposterous.

"For now, let's start with putting that out," Lucia said as the bracelets on her wrists began to glow. Clouds gathered in the sky, and rain soon pounded against the land. The tempest, however, avoided her.

"These are incredible," she said, looking at her bracelets with astonishment. "With Hydrogod's Grace, maybe I have a shot at victory?"

I looked out at the town gates and saw the fire had been taken care of. Lucia had evidently improved. She returned to the carriage and put on our party's symbol, the smiling skull mask. Sitri poked her head and I saw that she had also put on her mask at some point.

"Krai, we're entering the town. Your mask."

"Mmm. Right."

They might have been used to wearing their masks regularly, but I wasn't, so it had slipped my mind. I didn't like being blinded, but if someone saw my face, the results could be even more troublesome.

Looking back on it, making our symbol something that hid our faces had been a great decision. It would've been downright brilliant if I hadn't forgotten about the eyeholes. With a sigh, I fished around in my luggage. My eyes flew open. I had forgotten my mask.

Well, this is no good. I'm only our party's leader.

For some reason, all I had was the mask that had been dropped by the phantom in Peregrine Lodge. Without any other options, I put it on.

"How's it look?" I asked Lucia.

"Why are you wearing *that* mask? It's incredibly odd!"

"But it looks nicer than the other mask."

"Aren't you the one who designed it?!"

She was quite right about that.

"Can you see out of that?" she asked.

"Of course not. There are no eyeholes."

Lucia let out a deep sigh. However, I had a special solution

prepared. I removed my mask and searched through my Relics. I found what I was looking for—a pendant. It was designed like an eye and attached to a silver chain. This was Third Vision, the latest in my collection. With this, I could see even if both my eyes were closed! Now I no longer needed to hold Sitri or Lucia's hand while walking with a mask on! (It had cost one hundred and fifty million gild.)

I put the pendant around my neck, then the mask over my face. Despite my eyes being blocked off, I could somehow still see. It was a strange sensation, but it was better than not being able to see at all. I hope nobody thinks I was incapable of improvement.

I turned around towards Lucia and saw her quickly retract her outstretched hand.

While filling out the paperwork to enter the town, Sitri also managed to gather some information.

"After asking around, it appears *people* were the cause," she informed me.

"People, huh?"

Maybe this was the influence of all my recent bad experiences, but I thought that was a lot better than phantoms or dragons.

"They said some bandits had hidden themselves among a group of travelers, then simultaneously sprang into action. Apparently, it was a coordinated operation, and had been carried out by a fair number of people. But it seems their plans weren't entirely thought through."

I couldn't tell how Sitri felt about it, but this town was a lot bigger than that hot spring town we had been to. If these guys had been able to carry an attack, maybe they were bigger than the bandit squad that had attacked Suls. I just hoped the rest of my friends would come back soon. Except I had no idea where they had gone off to.

"With so many treasure hunters around, they were certain to fail," Sitri continued. "If they had enough people to set the town afire, surely they could've put them to better use. What a waste."

"The way they set those fires suggests that harming people

wasn't the main purpose," Lucia added.

"Indeed. It seemed to be an organized effort, but their methods were so unrefined."

"Yeah, uh-huh," I chimed in.

Those two seemed quite used to exchanging opinions like this.

Rain was still falling, but Lucia's magic prevented us from getting wet. While keeping a low profile, I kept an eye out for my friends. Then I heard a loud crash from the street ahead of us. I shivered. Sitri stopped.

"Scram, rats!" a voice boomed like thunder. "No coward's gonna stop Hanneman the Iron Arm!"

Goodness.

With an earsplitting rumble, the ground shook. The paved stones broke apart and flipped over. At the center of it was a man about sixty percent of Ansem's size. He grasped a metal pole about two meters long and thicker than my arm. "Pillar" would probably be a more appropriate word to describe it. He was swinging it around like a stick, but it had to be too heavy for me to even lift it.

The large man was immediately surrounded by guards and hunters, but he blew them away with a single swing.

Ah. That must be one of the bandits.

"Iron Arm," Sitri repeated. "That must be self-proclaimed, nobody has that title."

"Like how Luke used to call himself the Testament Blade," Lucia said.

"I believe he still calls himself that."

I wondered what the self-proclaimed Iron Arm's problem was as he stopped a few meters in front of us and began demolishing a building with his pillar. It seemed like he had been running from something, but now he had come to a stop for no apparent reason.

He hadn't seen us, but it was only a matter of time before we would be spotted. And experience had taught me that nothing good would come from that. It was only natural. Who wouldn't attack people in suspicious masks like ours? The smiling skull design had invited a number of assailants over the years. Who even came up with that creepy design?

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon! Face me, you pip-squeaks! Nobody can stand up to Hanneman!"

So is it fair to blame the town guards for mistaking this guy *for a traveler? And why's he announcing his name while going on a rampage?*

Good grief. If Lucia and Sitri hadn't been with me, I would've just run away.

The guards decided that taking the Iron Arm head-on was a bad idea, so they began to slowly encircle him. Why were they so obvious about it? Why did Luke still call himself the Testament Blade? As these thoughts crossed my mind, a blinding light enveloped the man. With his pillar still in his hands, the Iron Arm flew through the air and landed not far from where we were hiding.

The guards' expressions were still. Lucia stepped out in front of me. I heard light footsteps amid the rain and turned in their direction. I saw a tall young man with a black mantle and an awe-inspiring staff. Unaffected by the rain, he stood with the calm bearing of a monarch. I couldn't help but gasp.

But what stood out the most was on his face.

"That mask..."

It was a skull mask. It looked like the ones used by Grieving Souls, but its tasteful design lent it a far different impression. Not to mention it actually had eyeholes. Honestly, I was pretty jealous when I saw it.

The man hit the ground with the bottom of his staff, and announced in a voice that carried even through the rain, "Is that all you've got, Iron Arm? I doubt you can still hear me, but I'll say it anyway. My name is Krahi Andrihee! The Thousandfold Theurgics and leader of Bereaving Souls!"

Everyone was stunned. He had the might to strike down that large man with a single blow. He had unshakable charisma born of his regal demeanor. The guards began to whisper to each other.

"Is that really him? The lead Soul that all those rumors are about?"

"They say he's the strongest man in the imperial capital and that he almost never leaves the shadows."

“What’s he doing here? Is that really him?!”

“They say the Protean something or other appeared earlier as well.”

I held my breath, unable to stop myself from being swept up in their fervor.

“That’s the real Thousandfold Theurgics?!” I cried before I could stop myself. “That’s a sweet mask!”



I heard an adorable scream from Lucia. That didn't happen very often.

"He's real?! Oh give me a break," she groaned.

"Thousandfold Theurgics," Sitri repeated in a placid voice, ignoring my excitement. "That title doesn't exist. Must be self-proclaimed."

Despite his violent rage, Hanneman the Iron Arm was now out cold. As though to show he had lost interest, the Thousandfold Theurgics turned with a billow of his mantle and walked away. He comported himself with pride and austerity, unconcerned with the many sets of eyes on him. He was no ordinary fellow. Even his most minute movements were refined. He was cool. He was *hard-boiled*.

And then it finally occurred to me—was this the Krahi Andrihee from Eva's list? There couldn't have been more than one real me, so there was no mistaking it. How exciting!

"The Thousandfold Theurgics. Krahi Andrihee," I said to myself. I felt like I was seeing a living legend. "Is he going to be in the Supreme Warrior Festival?"

"So it seems," Sitri replied in a monotone voice.

Suddenly, Krahi turned our way. Lucia began to tremble. Eyes the color of onyx peeked out from beneath his mask. His hair was the same color. He was dampened by the rain, but that only enhanced his presence. I noticed Sitri and Lucia had both removed their masks without me noticing it. I began to feel nervous.

"That's a nice mask, young man," he said to me.

The more I looked at him, the more certain I became that he was the real one. We shared many elements, but every bit of him was a hundred times cooler than me. I recalled hearing a saying about how everyone has three doppelgängers. It was much more likely that I was the copy. But even saying that I resembled him felt presumptuous.

"Hm. My apologies," he said, "but I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Are you three by any chance fans of mine?"

"That's right!" I told him. "Can I get your autograph?"

"Huuuh?" Lucia said.

"But of course!" Krahi answered.

I wasn't exactly a fan of his, but I had no choice but to become one. He looked just like me and was super strong.

In this situation, I would've smiled uncomfortably, but Krahi was simply nodding. That's the difference between a real one and a copy. He removed a pen and slip of paper from his pocket and wrote with a fluid motion. I was deeply impressed. At this point, I considered him so great that I could never hope to imitate him.

"Here you are," he said. "This is my first time coming to this town, which makes you my first fan from here."

"Thank you so much! You see, my name is Krai."

Both Sitri's and Lucia's eyes threatened to bulge from their sockets. Krai and Krahi. What a funny coincidence.

Krahi Andrihee gulped, then said, "Oh my. What a twist of fate that is!"

He seemed incredibly happy. So how would he react to find that our last names were also similar?

"And I couldn't help but be interested—"

"Incredible! What a lovely twist of fate! Now, I'd love to introduce you to the rest of Bereaving Souls, but I'm afraid I've yet to meet up with them. They arrived before me, you see."

"That's a shame. What sort of party are they?"

"Ah, indeed, their names aren't well known yet. But I see no reason to hide them from you." Krahi put a hand to his chin, a very hard-boiled pose. "First, a Swordsman of exceptional intelligence who calmly corners his foes—Kule Saicool, the Protean Sortie. He's the designer of this mask and the brains of our party," Krahi proudly declared.

I was caught off guard. Not only did Kule sound like an upgraded Luke, but he also sounded really *cool*.

Sitri's shoulders were shaking. I hadn't seen her like this in a good long while. She always wore a cool exterior, but she actually had a really good, but odd, sense of humor. Meanwhile, Lucia's expression was stiff as stone. The last time I had seen her like this...hadn't been that long ago actually.

"Next, a quick-witted Thief. She sometimes uses her cleverness for evil, but she's saved our party on a number of occasions—

Elizabeth Smyat, the Eyeful Shadow. Or Izabee, as we like to call her."

Smyat. Cute in a way. And Izabee. Hmm.

It seemed I wasn't the only one who had a doppelgänger. It was an incredible coincidence, but it wasn't much compared to running into a treasure vault in the sky. And how could a shadow be an eyeful?

I looked at the Smyat next to me, her head down and shoulders heaving, and asked Krahi, "Do you perhaps have an Alchemist?"

"That we do! Kutri Smyat, the Ignorable!"

This was something else. It didn't make a whole lot of sense, but Krahi sounded proud, so I was sure she was a good girl, just like our Sitri.

"Isn't that incredible?" I said, poking Sitri's quaking shoulder. "I bet she's not as smart as you though."

"Ignorable," my dear friend said in a quiet, strained voice. "Please. Try a bit harder." Then she hit me.

The very handsome Krahi approached Lucia—who was as loud and bombastic as a statue—and bent down a tad so he could look her in the eye.

"There's no need to be so tense, young lady," he said. "You three are my first fans. How about an autograph?"

Without saying a word, Lucia made a fist and in one smooth motion drove it right into Krahi's face.

When we met up with the rest of the group, they were all bewildered when we told them about our little experience.

"Huuh?! He's not *our* fan?!" Liz cried.

"Damn," Luke said with a tsk, "I was bored, so I thought I might cut him down, but Liz said they might be a subsidiary of ours."

Ansem grunted, and our not so easily ignored Smyat signaled her agreement with a groan.

Why the hell would we have subsidiaries?

After talking to them, it seemed that the bandits' objective had been a Relic placed under tight security at a local museum. The fires had been set to throw the town into chaos, but thanks to the help of

people like my friends (and Krahi) the issue had been resolved without any casualties and the Relic remained secure. I wanted to see what sort of Relic would warrant the cooperation of so many criminals, but I didn't have the time to spare.

Being forced to run all that way, only to then be shoved into an assault team had left the imperial princess and her guard beyond exhausted. Liz was completely unbothered by this; she was far more interested in her sister's complexion.

"By the way, Siddy," she said, "what's up with your face? You're all red."

"It seemed something tickled her funny bone," I said.

"Well of course. *Ignorable*," Sitri said. "It makes no sense. What a stupid name. How in the world do you end up with a title like that?!"

"Yeah, uh-huh. Anyway, it seems like we might have some trouble getting along with them. I've never seen Lucia deck a stranger like that before."

The way Krahi took down Hanneman with ease, but then got sent flying by a punch from Lucia had been positively absurd. But Krahi had forgiven her, a sign of his deep magnanimity.

"C-Can you blame me?" Lucia protested. "That was just too much."

"Ah, I forgot to ask if they had a Lucia look-alike."

"Krai," Sitri said, "Lucy loves her brother far too much to allow something like—"

Before Sitri could finish her joke, Lucia's full-power fist slammed into her. It was an excellent feat of pugilism. It seemed like she was improving with every swing. Soon she'd be able to take on the world.

I ignored my friends' clamoring and, attempting to initiate Krahi, said in a hard-boiled voice, "I look forward to seeing him at the Supreme Warrior Festival."

***

A man of average build, clad in a black coat and wearing a fox mask, stood opposite a fearsome hunter. The moment Galf

Shenfelder the Bandit King and Fox of the seventh tail saw that, he thought his heart might stop.

The plan had been proceeding smoothly. They had a diversion team and a team to steal the Relic. They even had people on the inside. Failure was all but impossible, and sure enough, they had succeeded in making off with the Relic. Hanneman's diversion had been a success and nobody had noticed that the item on display had been replaced with a fake.

So why had there been a man in a fox mask back there? Foxes were the symbol of Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox. Most of their members owned a vulpine mask and wore them during operations. But not many members were aware that a white fox mask was proof that someone belonged to the upper echelons. Galf Shenfelder was fairly high-ranked himself, and only once before had he ever seen one such mask.

Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox had been formed after its founder had acquired a mask from a treasure vault inhabited by a god. The mask was beautiful; just glancing at it sent a shiver down one's spine. And the mask worn by that young man was unmistakably the real thing.

Galf could hardly believe it. Fox's top members rarely strayed from the shadows, yet this man had been standing out in broad daylight. It was inconceivable. Normal members wore fox masks during missions in order to make their organization known, but this was entirely different.

Even while carrying out the plan, Galf had been without fear, but seeing that white mask sent a shiver down his spine. It was a novel sensation to him. The closest he had come to feeling like this was when Hanneman had been captured, but even that was a minor issue.

Galf stopped himself. He had realized something. The man in the white mask had been talking to that hunter. He had been talking to the Thousand Tricks. That was the man believed to be responsible for stopping the Counter Cascade and the Dragon Caller. Was the boss attempting to gauge the opposition with his own eyes?

The bosses of Fox were no stranger to combat. Some rumors suggested that those at the top were comparable to a Level 10

hunter. It was an extraordinary rumor, but not altogether unbelievable. To Galf, that man in the fox mask had seemed completely defenseless, but that could've just been a sign of his confidence.

Nothing seemed to have been settled during their conversation. The boss talked with the Thousand Tricks, and the Thousand Tricks didn't seem to realize who was in front of him.

Fortunately, Galf and his cohorts were about to begin a major operation. He had a way to welcome the boss, and to verify that he was who he appeared to be. Galf closed his eyes, adjusting his focus. He had to make sure. With that in mind, he ran off.

***

I really did feel safer with the rest of my party around. While batting away monsters and the other usual troublemakers, we made our way to our destination. I had already had one nice meeting, so maybe that luck would continue.

Maybe my negative luck and Murina's negative luck are combining to make positive luck. Wait. Didn't I say something like this once before?

"It really is different when you're around, Krai," Luke said after cutting down a wolflike creature with his wooden sword.

"How's it different?"

"These guys aren't much trouble, but they're good practice for the tournament."

Ansem grunted, signaling his agreement with our not-so-cool Luke.

Hey, tell me, what's different?

I always wondered what my friends did when I wasn't around, but they always offered to take me with them, so they didn't seem to think I was much of a burden.

"Don't think!" Liz scolded. "You don't need to use your worthless brain, just move forward! If you don't kill them, the others will beat you to it! Don't think, just kill any enemies that get in your way!"

Princess Murina let out a cry, much louder than before.

"Your Imperial Highness, be careful!" her guards shouted.

It sure is peaceful. In a way.

I was willing to bet our party was the only one that competed for kills. But maybe Bereaving Souls did?

This festival was known far and wide. We lived in an era dominated by the resources retrieved from treasure vaults. Anyone who could slay powerful monsters and phantoms was bound to draw attention.

The excitement surrounding the Supreme Warrior Festival easily exceeded that of the Zebrudia auction. We were traveling along a road that spanned multiple nations, and as we approached our destination we encountered more and more carriages headed in the same direction.

It wasn't just hunters gathering for the Supreme Warrior Festival. There were the obvious candidates like merchants and nobles, but there were also groups of people that made hunters look gentle, and carriages that clearly belonged to civilians yet were brazenly traveling without protection. It was a little glimpse into the varied chaos of the world.

"That's right. Are you going to be participating?" I asked Ansem, who was walking alongside the carriage.

Our stalwart, armor-clad Paladin nodded in response. Even though we were one of many carriages, he wasn't drawing many gazes. That was because he was using his Relic, Fluctuating Fortress, to make himself about two meters tall, less than half his natural size.

Though it required every inch of him to be covered in armor to be activated, it was an invaluable tool now that Ansem was all but unaffected by Lucia's magic. The armor seemed awfully uncomfortable, but I didn't want people harassing our sanest member. But two meters was still pretty big.

"Even if they're not all participating, there's gonna be plenty of talent everywhere you look," Luke said, his burning blood strongly contrasting with Ansem.

"And if you make a good showing in the tournament, you might

arouse their interest," Sitri chimed in, pouring oil onto the fire.

Were we headed into a period of decline? I know I was the one who had suggested going to the tournament, but it was only just dawning on me that I might be in danger. Ark was proof that not all high-level hunters had a thirst for blood, but this was a place where people were gathering to fight for supremacy.

I decided I better hide my face as much as I could. There would probably be other people wearing masks, albeit not many. I didn't like standing out, but having my face seen was even less appealing.

And so we finally reached Kreat, the host of the Supreme Warrior Festival, the town of blades and battles. There was still some time before the event, but a strange atmosphere already pervaded the town. We had already felt it in small amounts in the towns we had stopped at on the way, but it hadn't been anywhere near as intense as in Kreat itself.

The streets were packed with seasoned hunters, mercenaries, and other sorts who made their living through violence. You could occasionally spot treasure hunters in the imperial capital, but not like this.

However, the number of tournament participants was fairly limited, so most of these people were probably here for the same reason that I was. They had come to witness clashes between people who had absolute confidence in their strength, and to see the birth of a new Supreme Warrior. There weren't many opportunities to see so many famous names gathered in one spot.

Any man would get excited to see combatants vie to be the best. I'm so glad I came!

Surrounded by my friends, I wore my mask as I walked through the streets. Anyone could be hidden among the flood of people, so the imperial princess kept her hood up. She seemed frantic, as though this was her first time being in a crowd. But she didn't have to worry. Ansem was leading the way, which meant even misfortune would turn and run from us.

"Hey, who do you think the strongest challenger is?" Liz asked. "Ah, besides me."

"There's gotta be a dragon with a sword. There just has to," Luke said. "If Krai's here then I just know there's gonna be one. Come, blade-wielding dragon!"

"Mmm. Wear and tear has decided winners in the past," Sitri said contemplatively. "And not every participant has been the honorable sort, so there's been some underhanded methods. But I imagine all the champions have been beyond reproach."

She appeared to be calm, but I had to remind myself that she would be joining the fray despite the fact that she was an Alchemist.

"Underhanded methods, huh?" I said in a hard-boiled voice, clenching my fist. "I'm getting excited just thinking about it. Arrows, cannons, dragons, bring it all on!"

"Leader, what are you on about?" Lucia asked.

"Well, everyone's so excited, I thought I'd join in."

The town felt like it was in the middle of a festival. There were vendors with stalls, and delicious aromas floated about. I looked this way and that, until I found one that interested me. It was lined with dragons made of chocolate and ice cream. I had never seen anything like this before, but you can't go wrong with chocolate and ice cream.

"What's the matter?" Lucia looked at me skeptically when she saw I had come to a halt. Of the two of us, she was the more financially responsible one. Every time I wasted money, I'd get an earful from her.

Yeah, uh-huh. I know, my debt and everything.

"I-I'll be right back. Wait right here."

"Huh? Oh. All right."

I figured they'd forgive me, so off I went.

I was making my way to the stall while trying to avoid the mobs of people, when I felt a tug on my sleeve. I turned around and saw I had been stopped by a nice-looking young woman dressed in a robe like what a priest might wear. She had long silver hair and appeared to be a few years younger than me. But the way she comported herself and her wavering gaze gave her an aloof impression.

Needless to say, I didn't recognize her.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"Right this way," she said.

"Huh?"

Without saying anything more, the girl pulled my hand. It wasn't a strong pull, but it was still enough to drag me along. To my bewilderment, she took me through the crowds, past the stalls, and down a narrow alley. I managed to turn around just once and saw Lucia looking at me agape.

Usually, when I got abducted, she would gripe and groan but still come to my aid. Except it looked like she didn't think I was being abducted this time around.

Abduction. It's not exactly violent, but this is an abduction, right?! Okay, even if it's not an abduction per se—

"Um, I think you have the wrong—"

"No, I'm quite certain I have the right person. Right this way."

She definitely had the wrong person. My memory wasn't the best, but I absolutely would've remembered a weirdo like this. But my kidnapper didn't seem at all interested in my thoughts on the matter.

"I really wanted to try one of those dragons," I said.

"I'll have it arranged."

You'd do that for me?

She dragged me along through the narrow gaps between the buildings. Unlike the bustling streets, there wasn't a single person in these back alleys. I never would've gone somewhere like this alone, but the mysterious priestess moved without hesitation.

Then, halfway down an alley, a door opened beside us. I hadn't even noticed the battered thing. The girl entered the door without the slightest pause. And because she was still gripping my hand, I came in behind her.

I was beyond confused.

"Right this way," she said.

That didn't make me any less confused.

We proceeded through what appeared to be an abandoned building, then down a staircase that appeared out of nowhere. There wasn't much illumination, causing me to stumble a bit. It seemed someone had been keeping the place clean, as it didn't smell bad at all.

Underground was a sturdy metal door that was entirely at odds with the dilapidated scenery. The girl whispered something through the door, and the next moment there was a loud clunk as it unlocked.

"Right this way."

I followed along and was thrown for a loop by what I saw. The room was wide, with countless candles along the wall fending off the darkness. But what brought me to a halt were the figures in the center.

I couldn't discern anyone's age or gender. Despite their numbers, I couldn't hear so much as a breath from them. But what unnerved me the most was that they all wore fox masks. They appeared to have been purchased from a store and their designs were different from mine. There were plump foxes, red foxes, smiling foxes, honestly it was impressive. I was delighted and dazzled.

Just who were these people? I wasn't sure, but we were in an underground room and everyone had a fox mask on. I thought it over for a moment, then went with my best guess.

"It seems you really do have the wrong person," I said in a hard-boiled voice. "I might have a fox mask, but I'm not part of the Fox Mask Fan Club."

***

What the hell is this guy talking about?

Beneath his mask, Galf furrowed his brow. The other members seemed equally confused by the boss's mysterious remark. Wearing these masks was part of their organization. The masks they wore weren't *authentic*, but nobody had ever mocked them with a term like "Fox Mask Fan Club."

The boss shrugged. He looked entirely unremarkable, but his mask commanded a strong presence. Within Fox, higher-ranked members had to be obeyed no matter the circumstance. If this man said they were the Fox Mask Fan Club, then Galf had no choice but to dedicate himself to such a club.

"Ah. Can I take your photo?" the man asked while removing a

slab from his pocket.

Galf had heard rumors of these Relics. They were called *Smartphones*. This man seemed too flippant to be a leader of Fox, but it wasn't Galf's place to decide things like that. He looked at the Holy Fox Maiden he had called out for this plan.

The Holy Fox Maidens held a special place in the organization. They worshipped the gods that had inspired Fox's foundation. One of their roles was to verify the identities of bosses, something otherwise shrouded in layers of mystery.

The Maiden closed her eyes. Galf didn't know how she had done it, but he was glad she had brought the boss to them. He had met a number of Maidens before, but this one was on the younger side. Still, that didn't make her any less deserving of the respect and discretion offered to others of her kind.

The Maiden opened her eyes halfway, as though in a trance. Silently, she looked at the man. Galf felt a pang of uncertainty.

The Maiden's eyes flew open and she declared, "There is no doubt of his divinity. Kneel, for you are before the White Fox."

Galf was immediately on one knee, as were his cohorts. Derived from the masks they wore, "the White Fox" was a name given to bosses. If the Maiden deemed him to be genuine, then there was no doubt about it. Galf was fairly high in Fox's hierarchy, but this was the first time he had ever gotten so close to a boss. It didn't seem like anyone he had met before, but it was an open secret that there was more than one White Fox.

The boss seemed taken aback by everyone's sudden display of fealty.

"Wha? Why are you kneeling?!" he said.

"Please forgive my previous discourtesy, O White Fox."

"Are you referring to this mask? Is it really rare enough to warrant the kneeling?"

The air was tense. Though he sounded oddly genuine, he couldn't possibly be serious. He must've been angry. Galf couldn't think of any alternative. He probably had been upset by how long they had taken to catch on. They shouldn't have doubted the authenticity of his mask. But that man's attitude was bold enough to

invite Galf's suspicions, and he knew what an authentic mask looked like. Maidens were usually composed, but this one looked just slightly nervous.

"I mean, yeah, I guess you don't see one every day," the boss continued. "But still, I just don't understand. I'm not part of the Fox Mask Fan Club, I just came here to watch the Supreme Warrior Festival."

What he was really saying was that he had no use for people who couldn't even recognize their boss. Nobody dared so much as breathe after hearing his biting sarcasm.

As the highest-ranking member, it fell to Galf to speak up. He forced his tongue into motion and said, "Boss, we of the 'Fox Mask Fan Club' have already begun preparing for the Supreme Warrior Festival. Please, allow us to show you what we've done."

"'Boss'? Oh, I get it. I appreciate the sentiment, but I came here with my friends."

Galf hadn't been informed of this, but it sounded like there was another team. Perhaps some elites were on standby in case his team failed. Or maybe there was another plan also underway. Worst case, the boss was suggesting another team could be taking over. But if he were to be denied the opportunity to run his own plan, not even someone of the seventh tail would be able to quietly sit by and accept it.

"We wait in anticipation," Galf said. "If you need anything, please call upon us."

The boss seemed slightly troubled, but then shrugged with resignation.

***

Sora Zohlo the Holy Fox Maiden battled fiercely to hide just how nervous she was on her first job.

Born to a respected line of clerics, it was all but inevitable for her to begin training to be a Maiden at a very young age. The history of the Holy Fox Maidens predated the very organization they belonged to. They underwent special training and were blessed with the ability

to see who was and wasn't connected to the divine foxes.

However, the fact of the matter was that they had few actual opportunities to judge whether a fox mask was authentic or not. The fox gods refrained from stepping into the material world, and the bosses kept their whereabouts a secret. It was said that some Maidens had gone their entire careers without ever laying eyes on a boss.

It was a tremendous honor to stand before a boss of Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox, for they were blessed and bore masks granted by the gods themselves. But it was also a tremendous burden for Sora Zohlo, as she was still new to her position.

The weight of her judgment had caused momentary hesitation. A Fox would never doubt the words of a Maiden, therefore erroneous judgments were unforgivable. The mask of the young man beside her was undoubtedly authentic. She had been certain of it before she had even brought him to the foxhole.

Sora's eyes were blessed, making it inconceivable that she might mistake a fake white fox mask for the real thing. However, even if she didn't use her unique vision, she knew that no fabrication could replicate the overwhelming presence that a genuine white fox mask could. Though the man wearing the mask looked unimposing, that had no bearing on her judgment.

No matter how she looked at him, he struck her as one far weaker than what she'd come to expect from other Foxes. The organization's first boss was said to have received their mask after overcoming a trial imposed by the fox god. After that, everyone who inherited the position had been chosen for their strength. If this man was merely hiding his might, then he was extraordinarily good at it. But what purpose could deceiving a Maiden possibly serve? Their role was one of subservience.

Solidifying her refined poker face, Sora declared in an austere voice, "The White Fox demands a sacrificial dragon."

"A dragon?!" Galf whispered. He looked at Sora questioningly, but he didn't actually expect her to have an answer.

Dragons were the strongest of all mythical beasts, but he and his subordinates could take one down if they worked together. That is, if

any dragons were in the vicinity. Still, Galf raised no objections to this absurd demand.

He turned around and said, "Are there any dragons nearby?"

Everyone shook their heads.

Sora felt her heart freeze and her poker face dissolve. This was bad. While dragging the White Fox to the lair, she had said she would have a dragon arranged. At the time, she had been in a rush and hadn't even considered that she might be making a promise she couldn't keep. No matter what her exact crime was, she could very well be killed for this.

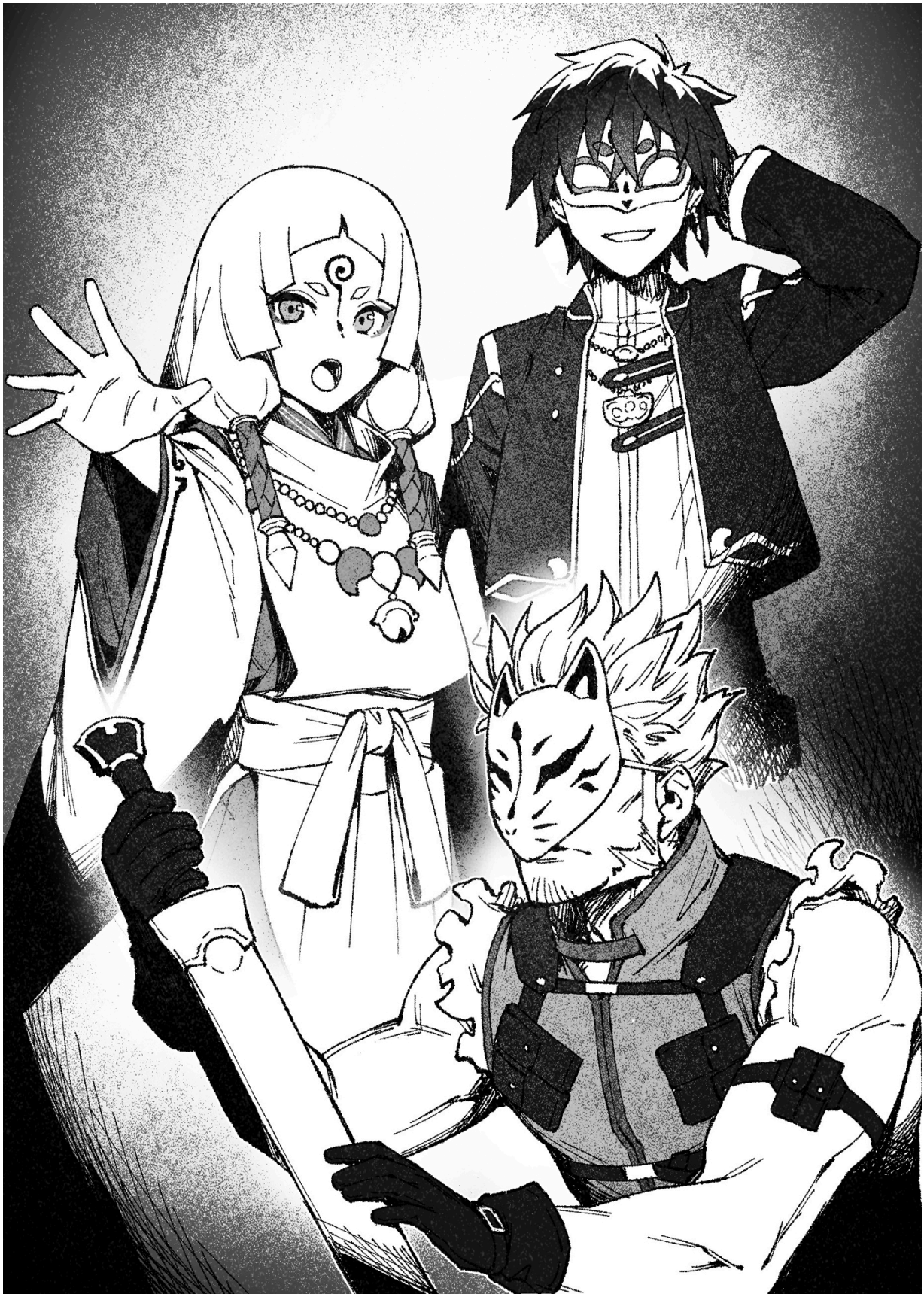
"Ah. Ahhh," the White Fox said, noticing Sora clench her fist. "If you can't get a dragon, then one of those ones made of ice cream and chocolate will do."

"Go buy some! As many as you can!" Galf ordered.

Some of his subordinates dashed off.

Was it safe to assume they were being toyed with? Sora was struggling to recover from her failure. Galf, meanwhile, removed a bag and handed its contents to the White Fox.

"That's right, boss," he said. "This is the Relic in question. Please accept it."



***

"I'm back," I said.

I had made my way out of that underground room and found my friends waiting for me, just like I had told them to. Thanks to Third Vision, the sudden change in lighting hadn't been at all disorientating. I didn't wear masks very much, so I hadn't had many opportunities to use this Relic, but it seemed worth the price it fetched.

Lucia looked agog at the package I had. She furrowed her brow and said, "Where did you go?"

"Hmm. I don't really know."

"Excuse me?"

She looked incredulous. Even if I told her about what had happened back there, I didn't think she'd believe me. There really were all sorts of fan clubs out there. And owning a rare fox mask apparently made me their boss. I still felt halfway like a spirit was tricking me. I had walked into another "interesting" experience.

Foxes sure had become a staple in my life. And I had somehow ended up with a Relic. I was no stranger to strange things, but a stranger giving me a free Relic was a first. Still, I was more than happy to be the boss of the Fox Mask Fan Club if this was how they wanted to pay me. What discerning eyes they had, impressed as they were by a mask from Peregrine Lodge.

Since I was going to be in Kreat for the time being, I figured this wouldn't be the last time I ran into them.

The lodge Sitri had secured for us appeared to prioritize security over luxury. The building itself was simple, but you could tell this wasn't an ordinary place due to the presence of multiple knights patrolling outside. The windows were made of thick glass and the walls had an unusual luster.

When I took my first timid steps inside, it seemed normal enough at first, but when I looked around, I saw guards positioned in inconspicuous places. The other guests were people like rich merchants and nobles traveling with a legion of servants. I didn't see

any other hunters besides us.

We were shown to the top floor, where there was a room big enough to host a group of our size. Liz let out a cheer before she began to dart around, checking under the beds and behind the picture frames. Lucia looked out through the large window. It reminded me of the steps we took when camping out in the wild.

"I secured the safest lodge I could," my dear friend Sitri proudly said while glancing my way. "Kreat can get hectic during the Supreme Warrior Festival."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't see the need since we were only here as tourists. Sure, I understood we had Princess Murina with us and all, but still.

"After all, you just recently antagonized Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox," Lucia said to me. "It won't hurt to tread carefully," she sighed.

"I can't wait to see how many they send. I'm ready for 'em," Luke said while swinging at the empty air.

Ansem nodded.

"Hmph. An inn employed even by nobles. A smart precaution," Karen said with an arrogant nod. "This was a good choice. I should hardly need to say it, but we'll have to divvy up the rooms. We can not allow men to sleep in the same space as Her Imperial Highness."

It seemed I was the only one who didn't understand what was going on. I would've felt bad about this if I wasn't already used to it. So I just put on a hard-boiled smile.

"Leader, we've ticked some people off and aren't short of enemies. Please, be careful, okay?" Lucia lectured me. "Word has already gotten out that we'll be in the tournament and remnants of a number of organizations are gathering here."

That was all news to me. Except for the part about ticking people off.

Having finished her inspection of the room, Liz brazenly sat down on a table and folded her legs.

"To hell with that! We can just crush 'em. Right, Anssy?"

She was as confident as ever.

"Hardly."

Ansem had a soft spot for his sisters, but even he couldn't abide

by that.

Luke nodded solemnly, an uncharacteristic gesture for him. "Liz, we have more important things to focus on."

He's right. We have more important things. And why's she assuming we'll be attacked? There's no guarantee!

Then Luke continued, still entirely serious. "What we should be worrying about is that we can't divide them up evenly unless their numbers are divisible by nine! Right, Krai?"

"Huh?! Uh, yeah, uh-huh," I said, caught up in Luke's flow.

"It is?!" Liz cried.

I could never go against Luke's enthusiasm. That's why I was still a hunter. And he sure was casual about including Murina and her guards.

While organizing the luggage from the carriage, Sitri put the matter to rest by saying, "Well, if they decide to attack us, they'll probably come in large numbers. As to whether or not there will be any Swordsmen, I can't say."

"Did we do something that bad?" I asked.

"Making a bloody mess of a Supreme Warrior Festival challenger is a good way to get your name out there," she said as though this was just the way the world worked. It still seemed terribly immoral to me.

"So driving them off will be good practice and improve our image! Two birds with one stone! Right, Krai?"

"You sure are smart, Luke."

I told myself I probably didn't have anything to worry about. After all, my friends were strong enough to handle it.

"Ah, don't make me wait any longer," Luke said, taking practice swings. "Come on, eight-armed dragon Swordsman."

"You still think that's gonna happen?" Liz sighed. "There's no way something like that exists. Right?"

"Yeah. Uh-huh," I said.

There was something magical about Luke's ability to make even Liz the Extinction Event look slightly well-adjusted.

An eight-armed dragon Swordsman, huh? Well, there are those Troglodytes. They had loads of arms.

Weary of talking about bloodshed, I pulled out the Relic I had received from Galf. Luke's crimson eyes lit up when he saw what I had.

"Ooh! It's a sword! Krai, give it here!"

"In a bit."

The Relic from the Fox Mask Fan Club was indeed a sword-type. The hilt was covered in a strange geometric pattern. It was kept in a wooden scabbard which was fairly bland by comparison.

"Interesting," Sitri said. She was staring at it with fascination. "It's too short to be a longsword, but too long to be a shortsword."

"It's definitely a Relic though," I replied. "It's awfully light. Maybe it's a ceremonial piece?"

I was ultimately just a collector, so I didn't mind having a sword that I couldn't swing. And since I got it for free, I wasn't expecting much.

I carefully removed the blade from its sheath. It was about half the width of a typical straightsword and didn't strike me as a very reliable weapon. It was double-edged and had a copper-like sheen. Tiny channels were engraved into its surface, forming a strange pattern.

Relics were manifestations of memories of the past, so their functions didn't always match their forms. But since they were based on things that had once existed, form was still a good indicator of what a Relic did.

Lucia's eyebrows shot up as she stared at the sword. "Wasn't that stolen from that town we passed through?"

That's absurd.

Lucia removed a newspaper from her luggage. "Here, there's a picture of it in this paper I bought before we left."

I took a look. The front page proudly explained how the bandits had been fended off and how there miraculously hadn't been any casualties. In the center of the page was a black-and-white photo of a sword that looked just like the Relic that I was holding.

No. Wait.

"The scabbards are different," I said.

"You're right."

The two swords were identical, but the sheath in the photo also had the same engravings as the blade. The two were total look-alikes, but they couldn't have been the same item. After all, the theft had been prevented and most of the criminals had been apprehended.

Then my eyes flew open and I snapped my fingers. "I've got it. The Relic at the museum manifested with a scabbard, but this one didn't."

Relics generally appeared as a set. Swords came with scabbards, shoes came with laces, and Smartphones came with boxes and instruction manuals. But sometimes only part of a set would appear. It was rare for swords to form without a sheath, but it had happened before. Sadly, the inverse sometimes happened where a scabbard appeared without a sword.

"Isn't that a little too much of a coincidence?" Lucia asked.

"But I'm certain that's what happened."

It wasn't uncommon for the same Relic to manifest more than once. It was widely believed that a Relic's drop rate correlated to how commonly found it once was. However, there had been instances of multiple Relics appearing even though only one of their baseline was believed to have ever existed. It was much more feasible than the idea that the Fox Mask Fan Club would set a town ablaze and steal a Relic.

What I held was the same as the item in the photo, but it wasn't the item in the photo. But Lucia still looked doubtful.

"Besides," I said, whacking the newspaper, "I think it's premature to say these are the same just by looking at—wait a moment."

"What is it?"

My eyes went wide as saucers as I read the paper. According to the article, the Relic was known as Key of the Land and it was a national treasure. Even if the one I had wasn't necessarily the same Relic, and even if it lacked a scabbard, finding an identical item was nonetheless a huge discovery, wasn't it?

Maybe if I brought it to the museum, they'd let me see their Relic up close. Maybe they'd let me touch it. The article didn't mention what powers the Relic had, but the people at the museum would tell

me. We would definitely have to stop there on the way home.

With that settled, I handed the sword to Luke, who had been looking at me like a pitiful dog for the past few minutes.

"Here. Don't go cutting people."

"WOOO! So I can cut them if they're not people?!"

Luke's love of swords extended to Relics as well. Most of the time, we forced him to use a wooden sword to make him less of a threat, but I had let him test out most of my sword-type Relics.

He examined the length of the blade, then gulped. "This blade, its length, weight, pattern. Krai, this thing is incredibly hard to use. It's like a toy."

"Uh-huh."

"And no matter how much mana I put into it, it doesn't fill up! It just has this odd feeling about it. I can't charge it! Is this really a sword?"

"Uh-huh?"

While he was a Swordsman, his mana still dwarfed mine and was enough to charge most sword-type Relics. If Luke couldn't fully charge it, this thing must've been a massive mana hog. Looking the way she did when I asked her to charge something, Lucia watched Luke's enthusiastic attempts.

"So if I can learn to successfully charge this," he said, "it'll mean I've become a better Swordsman. That's how it works, right, Krai?"

"Yeah. Uh-huh."

"Someone could learn from my example."

Now he was making Lucia look bad.

Through wide eyes, Princess Murina watched her mentor's childish behavior. Luke hadn't changed at all since we were kids.

"Krai, can I use this?"

"Sure. This sheath isn't a Relic, so you can just use your own."

Luke's scabbard was of a special design that could hold multiple swords. I had accidentally dropped a sword in the middle of a treasure vault before, so it was much safer in Luke's hands.

We may have been on a trip, but that didn't affect my daily routine much. All the more so since it was dangerous outside. I sat

out on the terrace, using my Smartphone to send Little Sister Fox a picture of the Fox Mask Fan Club and brag about my experience.

"Right, Krai Baby," Liz suddenly said, "what are we gonna do about training the princess?"

So she's just calling her "the princess."

Wasn't that sort of disrespectful? The timid gaze from the princess sitting between her guards on the couch seemed to suggest that she found it rude.

But what was Liz getting at?

"We're gonna train her, aren't we? We'll do it if you tell us to, but, like, I know you get this, but she won't get any stronger. There's no mana material out here, and making her stronger will take time. I don't know what you plan for her—"

"That so? I'm planning, of course, to send her to the Supreme Warrior Festival."

Princess Murina stared at me. "I beg your pardon?"

"What do you mean?!" Karen demanded.

"Brother, I seriously don't think—" Lucia began.

"You're serious about that?" Liz cut in "I think it's a bit much for her. She's a total amateur and I don't think there's a spot for her."

What a strong reaction. I thought I had made my plans clear a long time ago.

"In that case," Sitri said with a clap of her hands, "why not put her up against bandits? That'll also give her real combat experience."

"Siddy?!" Lucia cried. "It's because you're always indulging my brother that—"

"But Lizzy's right. Making Her Imperial Highness any stronger in such a short period will be difficult. So I thought we might approach this from another angle. This town currently abounds with scofflaws, so I believe this will be our best bet, given our deadline. As to how she'll get in the tournament, that's a separate matter!"

"In a way, I respect how you try to suck up to Krai Baby at every little chance you get," Liz told her.

But it wasn't a bad idea. Fighting phantoms was certainly different from fighting people. But could we really pit the imperial princess against bandits? The emperor had proven capable of

fending off frigid dragons, but I didn't think even he had ever fought a criminal before. There was honor in being a Dragon Slayer, but not so much in bringing down brigands.

"I thought it might come in handy," Sitri said while proudly removing a file, "so I consulted an information broker about which organizations are present."

"So that's where you were?" Liz said.

"Nice going!" Luke cheered. "Here, let me take a look!"

"No. I made this so I could give it to Krai!"

Well, as long as they're having fun. Really, I mean it.

Inside the file was a neat list of bandits and criminal organizations. It was more than I had anticipated. They weren't all famous, but you could make an army if you had a single fighter from each group.

"Many of them have the talents to be in the Supreme Warrior Festival. And whether it be big or small, many have a bounty on their head. There are also groups angry to see their rivals in the tournaments and groups forming alliances to strike at common enemies. All of that and so much more."

Am I in hell?

"They say every year there's a few participants who don't make it to the tournament," Sitri continued. "And sometimes people make an underhanded attempt at getting revenge on whoever they lost to. Those attempts, however, rarely succeed."

I had been given a glance of the glamorous tournament's dark side.

I despise violence, but I'll say it if I have to!

"This wouldn't happen if someone took care of these outlaws!" I said.

"There's also attempts at avenging fallen comrades. Zebrudia's protected by its excellent knights, but nothing of the sort is in this nation."

My own constant nightmares had made me blind to it, but Zebrudia was actually a special place.

"You're talking like it's all up to you, but do you understand you're talking about a member of the imperial family?" Karen said. "Her

Imperial Highness can not be fighting bandits!”

A very reasonable objection. If you asked one hundred people, they would all say she was right. The imperial guards sure were loyal if she was still willing to oppose my friends after enduring their brutal training.

“That’s for Krai to decide,” Sitri responded, wearing a mellow smile.

“Hmm. There’s a lot of them,” Liz said. “Hell, do we even know where any of them are?”

“That’s our biggest obstacle. I think we should be able to figure that out if we take the time to look.”

If fighting was the only thing on their agenda, I could probably trust the imperial princess with them, but it was still just not a risk worth taking. The list was a long one and things could get messy if they accidentally pissed off the wrong people.

I wormed my way out of making a decision and walked up to the large window. Being on the top floor of a fancy inn, I had an expansive view of the streets of Kreat. As I looked around, I spotted rising trails of smoke every here and there. A number of those were probably the remnants of fights. What an insane place I had come to.

“Hmm. Bandits. *Bandits*. What can we do?” I muttered.

The next moment, a man in a black fox mask was clinging to the other side of the window. A feral glow shone from the eyeholes. I was too surprised to even show it on my face.

“Boss, if you need us,” he said as though this was a perfectly normal place for him to be, “we, the Fox Mask Fan Club, await your orders.”

Is this supposed to be impressive? I’m just scared. What the hell sort of organization have I joined?!

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In a room deep underground, Galf of the seventh tail looked at a list and groaned.

“This is what the boss wants? This will be a big operation.”

Fox controlled a number of subsidiaries and even had members in top places of more than a few governments. No other secret organization matched them in scale. But the number of actual Foxes was limited to only the very best. This was the exact opposite of their defunct rival Serpent, who had owned vast legions of soldiers.

During major operations, Fox would draw personnel from subsidiaries and cooperators. The key roles would be handled by Foxes, while the ranks at their command would be supplemented with recruits from other organizations. By keeping them in the dark, very little information could be leaked.

This operation would be unlike anything in the past. Recruiting fighters had been left to Galf. He looked at the subordinate who had acquired the list. They were quite capable where stealth was concerned.

"He wants this many people?" Galf confirmed.

"Yeah. He wants us to figure out where they are. Though he told us not to work too hard."

Galf looked again at the list. This seemed like an operation too important for failure to be an option. But more personnel wasn't necessarily better. The length of the list struck him as absurdly long. It was almost as though they were supposed to search for every criminal organization currently in Kreat.

"I don't believe this is the sort of task that would normally be entrusted to us," said the other Fox. "Given that this was concocted by the boss, there's likely more to it than he's letting on. But he has his expectations."

That seemed very possible. Galf was of one of the higher tails, but this man was at the very top. The boss was keeping the most important parts a secret. There could very well be another, top secret team at work.

This was a good opportunity. Fox was always looking for capable individuals. If Galf could make a good impression on the boss, a promotion was certain to come his way. Nobody was stupid enough to not work hard just because they had been told it was okay.

I'm—no, we're *not like the Counter Cascade. He was a brilliant Magus, but he lacked leadership.*

Galf may have lacked Telm's combat prowess, but Galf had a legion of trustworthy underlings.

"We're to invite everyone on that list, and deploy every one of us to help make that happen," Galf said.

"But they're currently making preparations."

Galf's plan was perfectly laid out. He never neglected to prepare far in advance if it could ensure his success. He had allotted time to securing escape routes and managing security forces, but now it looked like he wouldn't have room for that.

"There's nothing we can do," he told the other Fox. "Even if we're not fully ready, the plan is moving forward. Don't miss the forest for the trees."

With a big smile, Galf began issuing his orders.

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"We're off in search of strong foes!"

"Woo!"

Luke and Liz's fervor was on par with the rest of Kreat. The rest of us Grievers went with them. Someone needed to stop those two from starting fights, and after coming all this way to Kreat, I wanted to do some sightseeing. Princess Murina had her own official matters to attend to, so for the first time in a while, it was just us Grievers together.

The Supreme Warrior Festival was still a few days off, but the town was already so packed we could barely walk through the streets.

"You're not wearing that fox mask?" Sitri asked.

"Nah," I said, rubbing my cheek.

I wanted to hide my face as much as I could, which meant I was tempted to wear the mask, but it seemed to attract the Fox Mask Fan Club. One of them had even come to my room, so there was no telling how many of them might appear if I wore the mask in the open.

Banking on the protection of my friends, I kept my ears open for gossip as I walked around. Unsurprisingly, everyone was interested

in who might win the tournament. The contestants hadn't been announced, but rumors must have been going around, as I heard Luke's and Ansem's names come up. As their friend, it was a funny feeling. But there was one name in particular that caught my interest.

"*The Thousandfold Theurgics*," I repeated to myself. "It sounds like he's famous. I'll have to show my full support for him."

According to Sitri, his title was self-proclaimed, but if these rumors were going around then it might be official soon enough.

"No, he said *the Thousand Tricks*. They're talking about you!" Lucia said.

"No, that's ridiculous."

Why would they talk about someone who wasn't taking part?

In the past, people would frequently try to start stuff with us if we entered a crowd, but not this time. Liz seemed to find this boring, but when an important showdown was coming up, nobody was going to pick a fight with someone who could clearly hold their own (especially if that person was Ansem).

After a bit of wandering, Luke clicked his tongue. "Hell with it, let's go to a pub."

"Agreed!" Liz said with needless excitement. She was definitely more interested in wasting people than getting wasted.

Lucia and Sitri were both exasperated, but I thought it was fine. Luke and Liz were impulsive. With a little drink in them, they'd forget all about fighting. And if they did start a melee, we could just intervene.

Together, we all entered a random pub. The town was already burning with passion, but when you added alcohol into the mix, it was enough to make my head spin. In the dark, cramped interior a number of gruff faces were gathered, quietly sipping drinks. Perhaps the danger that came with starting a fight in a place like this was why it was so much more quiet than any pub in the imperial capital.

The moment we stepped in, Luke's eyes began to glimmer as he scanned the room.

"Nooow, where to start?"

So he was bent on getting the festivities started. I was about to

try to calm him down, but he stopped on his own.

"Hang on. Isn't that Touka?" he said.

Settled in a corner of the pub was a group of people wearing distinctive reddish-brown armor. It was common for parties to wear uniform colors. For instance, in Sven's party Obsidian Cross, everyone's gear was black. But this party was far larger than average.

When you had upwards of ten rugged faces all in matching colors, "party" stopped feeling like the right word. Mercenary corps. Sellswords. They were the militants of First Steps, making most of their income from combat rather than searching treasure vaults. They were Knights of the Torch.

Eva had told me that Touka would be in the tournament, but I hadn't expected to run into her in a place like this. I spied her sitting in the center of the group. Even as the clan master, I hadn't seen her in a while. The black-haired captain's gaze instantly turned our way. Without a moment's hesitation, she slammed her glass on the table and stood up.

"On your feet, everyone!"

The way they quit socializing and got up in unison was an odd sight. Their gazes all rested on me. The other customers looked our way, curious as to what was up.

"Salute our master client!"

The knights all saluted in unison and held the position.

There were two main factors that determined a party's efficacy: individual strength and member coordination. Taking down powerful phantoms and exceptional monsters required a group of battle-forged individuals to multiply their capabilities by working together. Any first-rate party could claim to have both these things, but Grieving Souls leaned more towards individual strength, whereas Knights of the Torch was the inverse.

I don't think I'll ever forget the shock I felt when I first met them. Their refined movements were like those of a proper knight order. Even as the other guests stared, the knights didn't flinch.

Hey, did they get new members?

"H-Here, everyone's watching. You can relax," I said when I

realized I was also being stared at.

"At ease!" Touka announced.

I didn't know why I was being called their "master client" when it was Sitri who was hiring them. She was providing them with funds and equipment.

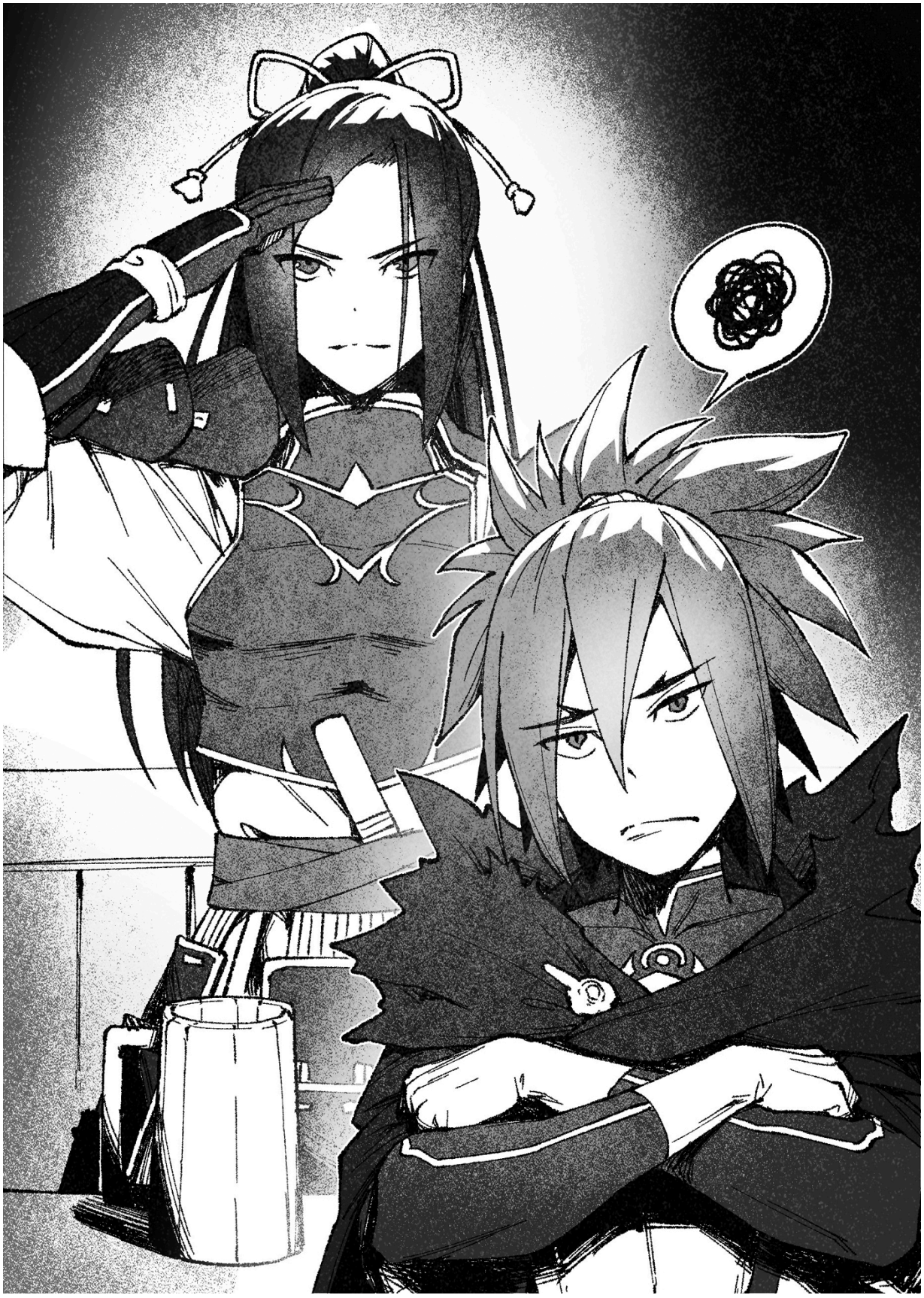
The only values Knights of the Torch had were the type that could be deposited in a bank account. They occupied an odd place in First Steps and they took an odd attitude towards me. They obeyed me because they knew I was Sitri's longtime friend, which made them in some ways easier to handle than the people who had strange levels of faith in me.

"Don't tell me you'll be in the tournament, Touka," Luke said. He was always excited by the idea of facing strong opponents.

"I'll be there," she confirmed. "I received an offer. Will you be there as well, Protean Sword?"

The Supreme Warrior Festival attracted all sorts of people. There were knight captains who maintained the security of the land while there were also famous mercenaries. Touka must have received her offer thanks to her fame among merchant companies and nobles.

Luke made a strange expression that words fail to describe. The reason Luke the Man Cutter never tried to cut Touka down was that she didn't engage in profitless fights (I mean that literally, she didn't fight if there wasn't money to be gained), so these two were incompatible, but in a good way. Luke didn't just want to swing at people, he wanted them to swing back.



Touka glanced at Sitri, then at Lucia, then at me, before saying, "Forgive me, CM, but I won't be holding back in the tournament. You don't pay us enough for that."

So she would if we offered up enough cash? But more importantly, she seemed to be under the false impression that I would be participating. She must have heard the rumors going around.

Just between you and me, Touka, I'm not the Thousandfold Theurgics. That's the real *me!*

Even someone as composed as Touka would be thrown for a loop if she met Krahi. I looked forward to seeing it happen.

"Likewise, my true self doesn't hold back," I said with a hard-boiled smile. "The real me is pretty strong. And has a billowing coat."

Though the fake one also liked to flap his coat when he could.

Touka looked at me in surprise, quickly ruining my fun. "A-Ah. I see. A coat? W-Well I hope some mercy isn't too much to ask for."

"W-Well, I'm here to spectate. You should really be watching out for these guys behind me."

I wanted to lower their expectations. They might get mad if they were expecting me to participate.

Just as I remembered them, Knights of the Torch gave one a unique impression. Their relationship with Grieving Souls couldn't be described as good or bad. But they were rarely in the imperial capital, so we didn't have many chances to interact with them. But they still seemed happy to see us. We sat around a table with them and Touka and the other prominent members began to pour me drinks.

"I don't think it's a coincidence that we ran into each other here," I said. "Drink up, we'll get you more."

Except this was all coming out of Sitri's wallet. She seemed to like Knights of the Torch. Probably because money could resolve any problems with them.

"You heard him," Touka said to her knights. "Our master client requests it. Don't squander their generosity. Drink up! Remember to be grateful to Sitri, as clients are rarely as kind as her. Salute!"

"Thank you!" the knights said, saluting in unison for the second

time.

Sitri looked mildly astonished. These guys seemed to think saluting was never a bad idea. And what was a "master client"?

While we drank, I learned about what they had been getting up to lately. They had been doing their usual bounty hunting and fighting while traveling the world and then returned for the Supreme Warrior Festival. They had hunted down a pack of orcs that had attacked a village, crushed a gang of beastmen robbers, and went to a treasure vault just for the hell of it. I was impressed, but then I realized we had been up to an even greater variety of escapades.

Liz was having a drinking contest with one of the knights, and Lucia was watching with exasperation. Luke had set his sights onto the customers and was looking around the room with the eyes of a raptor.

While a knight poured me a drink, I asked the question that had been on my mind.

"Did you guys expand?"

Touka gave me a sharp look. Had I said something strange?

Knights of the Torch was a nomadic party that picked up new members as they traveled around. It was generally frowned upon for a party to increase their membership without consulting their clan, but First Steps allowed it.

I couldn't recall the exact number of members they used to have, but it seemed to me like they had gained two or three people. Yet it appeared that I was wrong. I didn't remember their individual faces, so maybe I really was off the mark.

I tried to brush it off with a laugh and said, "I just thought you used to be a smaller party. Yeah, you've gained what? Ten, eleven members?"

This was a joke. They might have grown, but definitely not that much. I expected Touka to laugh and tell me that I was being silly. And maybe tell me I was a funny guy. Instead, she folded her arms.

"Hmph. Sharp as always. Indeed, we've gained eleven new members."

Huh? For real? No, no, no.

There was no way they had gained eleven members. Was she

playing along with the bit, inviting me to play the straight man? I might've done it if I was with Ark, but Touka was a different beast. Sitri, who had even more people than me pouring her drinks, looked around wildly.

"You don't *appear* to have gained any new faces," she said. "Are they somewhere else?"

"Indeed," Touka answered. "They're on a mission. We've become well-known, but that's brought us many enemies. Forgive me for not informing you earlier," she said with a bow.

So she wasn't joking? Not only that, the ones in the pub were all old members! I really didn't know what to do.

"Raise your head," I told her. "You're free to expand your party. That was one of your conditions for joining our clan, remember?"

"Krai's right," Sitri chimed in. "You help us all the time, and we're fine with it as long as it doesn't cause us any trouble."

"They're— Oh, yeah, exactly. You guys always do so much for us, getting new members is no big deal. Ha ha ha."

Their expansions didn't cause any trouble except, uh, for Eva. Managing clan members was her duty. I was totally neglecting my responsibilities, but Touka nodded like I had a point.

"I appreciate your leniency. The Supreme Warrior Festival is a profitable time of the year for us. You see, a number of contestants have bounties on their heads."

Violent words attracted our violent members.

"Hm? What's this? Bounties?" Luke cut in.

"Ohh? What are we gonna kill?" Liz followed.

So they were hunting down contestants. Even before the big tournament, Knights of the Torch was hard at work. Enduring Luke's and Liz's stares, Touka sighed.

"Right, CM," she said. "There's something unusual about the bandits' movements this year. They lack their usual boldness. This is just a gut feeling of mine, but it has me concerned. Do you know anything that might explain it?"

I was about to say that I didn't know, that we should just be glad they weren't being bold. But then something occurred to me, I snapped my fingers. Touka's eyes lit up like her party's namesake.

"Yeah," I said, "that was bothering me so I enlisted some help. They might know a thing or two, so would you like to meet them?"

"Oh?"

The Fox Mask Fan Club. They were stupidly capable and had a fervent love for fox masks. They did unhinged things like drag me to their lair just because I was wearing a fox mask and show up outside my window, but they didn't strike me as bad people and some of them seemed pretty strong.

I had given them Sitri's list of bandits and asked them to find the people on the list. It seemed like the sort of thing they might be knowledgeable about. It was a dangerous task, so I had told them not to work too hard at it, but I think they were the type of people to heed such a warning. In that regard, having Touka work with them was reassuring for me. Unlike the Fox Mask Fan Club, she was a seasoned professional.

This worked for everyone, inducing me; the Fox Mask Fan Club would get a powerful ally, and Knights of the Torch worked better in large groups than small ones. I could also make Grieving Souls tag along. And I could throw in Princess Murina while I was at it.

Man. I'm on fire today.

"Oh, that reminds me," I said as something popped into my head. "There's something you need first—fox masks! The rarer the better. Of course, it would be best if you could get ones that match your armor. Do you think you can do that?"

***

Plan X was underway. All they had to do was follow their boss's orders to the letter. Members of the organization didn't need to think, all they were allowed to do was faithfully carry out orders. Thinking was the job of those higher up on the chain.

Galf Shenfelder, formerly the Bandit King, excelled at composing plans and giving orders. Even among the seventh tail, he was probably without equal in this regard. The bandit squad he once ran wasn't some petty gang that went after towns and travelers. Instead, they would infiltrate towns and slowly but surely take

control.

It only made sense that someone who reinforced caution with yet more caution had been invited to join Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox. Years later, his skills hadn't rusted a bit. Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox had members across many nations, but Galf's web of subordinates extended even further.

Among criminals, Fox had friends and foes alike. Sometimes they borrowed help from outlaws, which was a favorite method of the Bandit King. But even for him, the request given to him was daunting.

His subordinates looked over the list once more, then let out a collective groan before voicing their doubts.

"There's so many on this list. And some of these guys are people we've been feuding with for years."

"Negotiations are gonna be a nightmare. We might have to make concessions."

"And gathering everyone on this list will put Plan A in jeopardy."

These were completely valid objections. The plan, which they were supposed to be in the middle of, was based on precise calculations. Galf had already submitted a report detailing which criminals they planned to employ, so the boss couldn't be unaware of the overlap. Despite this, many of said underworld figures were included on the list of organizations they were supposed to gather. Even Galf couldn't help but wonder what the boss was thinking.

"At times like this, I wish we didn't have to be so discreet about every little thing," one of the subordinates complained.

Galf shrugged. That dedication to secrecy was how Fox had grown to its current size. Nobody knew where the bosses could be found and exchanging information required jumping through certain hoops. This way, even if a lower member were arrested, the organization's core personnel wouldn't be compromised.

However, this same structure meant that acquiring confirmation in irregular circumstances couldn't be done quickly. There was nothing Galf feared more than an imposter. It was hard to think someone could impersonate a Fox even higher-ranked than Galf, but it wasn't impossible. Except there were code signs meant for these

situations. And in really dire cases, there were the Holy Fox Maidens.

"The boss," Galf muttered. "He wasn't like the one I remember." He cast a glance towards the Maiden, who was standing nearby.

"Are you doubting the White Fox? I'm quite certain of my judgment," she asserted.

"Having doubts is part of my job," he replied.

"We Maidens have been graced with special eyes for our service to the gods. Our vision tells us no lies. And if he weren't the White Fox, why would he have been wearing a mask like that outside?"

She was right. The fox masks weren't meant to be worn at all times, and that mask in particular wasn't something just anyone could get their hands on.

The protocol for determining a boss's authenticity was to enlist a Maiden. The Holy Fox Maidens were considered sacred and beyond reproach. Their eyes could see past any disguise and would never misidentify something as divine. Galf didn't believe in higher powers, but his career in Fox would soon be over if people knew that he had doubted a Maiden.

Regardless of his suspicions, the plan remained the same. Worst case, he could check during his regular contact with headquarters. He told himself to look at things simply. All that was really happening was that he and his crew were getting a bit more work. Besides, forming alliances with formerly antagonistic criminals would be useful later down the road. The only thing that couldn't be allowed was the failure of Plan X.

Then, the man assigned to keep close to the boss came dashing in. He was an extraordinarily talented man who wore a fox mask of pure black and was trained in the techniques of the shinobi. Outfitted with a perception-warping Relic, there was nobody more suited to running errands for the boss.

Galf would've preferred to have this man gathering information, but other people could do that, and keeping the boss happy was important.

The man approached Galf and said in a flat tone, "Galf Shenfelder. The boss is calling for you."

***

Oh. They really came.

Upon finding my stalker friend from the Fox Mask Fan Club outside my window, I gave him a request. I then put on my fox mask, struck a dignified pose, and soon found the leader-looking guy and the priestess girl brought before me.

The leader was tall, with a tight, muscular frame. I couldn't see his face due to his mask, but he certainly struck me as strong. Next to him was the priestess, aloof as the first time we met.

"You really came. You take this stuff seriously," I said.

"You honor me, boss," the leader said as he and the priestess knelt before me.

How valuable did this mask have to be to warrant this excessive loyalty? I had never once said I was their boss.

I saw their eyes shift from me to the people at my side—Touka and Princess Murina. Touka was outfitted in her usual reddish-brown armor and katana at her side, but she wore a crimson fox mask, just like I had suggested. Murina hadn't been able to obtain a fox mask, so she was making do with one modeled after a tanuki. I figured it was fine as long as her face was hidden.

"Um? What's the meaning of this, boss?" the leader asked as his bulging eyes darted between the two.

Sorry. Forgive me for complicating things.

"I thought they could help with the request I gave you," I told him. "I realize I asked a bit much of you. So I called these two. Uh, um, Tsuneko here is good in a fight and has lots of subordinates."

"Tsune...ko?" Touka repeated.

I'll make sure she has Grievers in her ranks.

Touka stepped forward and said in a clear, decisive tone, "You may call me Tsuneko! We fight per the boss's orders, and only he may claim the right to order us. Please, think of us as nothing more than collaborators!"

What insanity. We hadn't discussed what I would call her beforehand, yet she simply rolled with it. Awfully gutsy of her. I guess in her case she was just being professional.

"Is this the boss's primary team?" the leader said. "This armor, I've seen it before. Is this what I think it is?"

Through their zealous efforts, Knights of the Torch had apparently made a name for themselves. I figured it wasn't the worst thing in the world if Touka didn't remain incognito. Things could get dicey if Murina's identity was uncovered, but I didn't think that would happen, given how rarely she had gone out in public.

"And, over here," I said, "is, right, Ponta. She holds a unique position, so just bear that in mind."

"Ponta," she echoed.

Ah, don't tell me that was disrespectful.

Princess Ponta stood there vacantly. Just as I was wondering when her passive nature might improve, she stepped forward, and for some reason, bowed gracefully.

"P-Please call me Ponta," she said. "I hope you can forgive any mistakes I may make."

In Zebrudia's long history, I was probably the only person to introduce the imperial princess as "Ponta."

While the leader continued to look back and forth between Tsuneko and Ponta, I got over my bewilderment and said, "Are you perhaps not a fan?"

The Fox Mask Fan Club struck me as reliable, so much so that it was nonsensical, but Touka was a good bonus. Plus Sitri was the one paying for her.

After spending a moment in thought, the leader dipped his head and said, "Nothing of the sort. Thank you for your consideration."

Once the Fox Mask Fan Club took them off, I felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

"Thank goodness."

All my worries had been dealt with in one fell swoop and it was thanks to my dear friend Sitri for bankrolling Knights of the Torch. I'd have to thank her. And now Murina's training was taken care of. It was like the pieces had just fallen into place. I took the opportunity to sit back and relax.

"Excellent leadership, O White Fox," the priestess from the Fox

Mask Fan Club said in a dignified voice.

"What are you still doing here?" I asked.

"I have no other duties but to serve you."

They took this stuff real seriously. It seemed the Fox Mask Fan Club wasn't all fun and games. But what would my friends say if they saw this girl following me around?

And just how old is she?

I didn't know what place she held in the club, but she was the only one not wearing a mask. Looking at her expression, I could tell she was at least a bit on edge.

Hmmm.

"Uhhh..."

"My name is Sora Zohlo, a Holy Fox Maiden," she said after a pause, a bit of the tension dissipating as she spoke. "Please, call me Sora."

Holy Fox Maiden. I had never heard the term, but maybe she was famous among people who were into fox masks.

Could she have something to do with the fox gods of Peregrine Lodge? Ha ha ha, no way.

I was slightly embarrassed about it, but there was something I needed to make sure of. I cleared my throat and steeled my nerves.

"Sora, there's something that's been bothering me. Is this mask really that rare?"

It was a genuine question, but I received a rather dramatic reaction after a long pause.

"Wha?"

This mask dropped in Peregrine Lodge was undeniably a valuable piece. But as far as I could tell, it didn't have any special powers or anything.

When phantoms were killed, they usually dissipated entirely, not leaving behind so much as a scrap of cloth. Though it was extraordinarily rare, there were exceptions in which some item or another would remain. These drop rates were proportional to a phantom's power. However, the items were generally quite weak compared to Relics. You could say they were like a phantom's dregs.

So while the mask was undoubtedly rare, it didn't strike me as

something that would inspire the fealty that the Fox Mask Fan Club was showing me. It was a snazzy-looking thing, but modern technology could easily replicate it and the other fan club members all had pretty nice masks themselves.

Sora had lost her devout composure and appeared beyond confused. She looked behind her, making sure nobody else was around, then looked back at me.

"O White Fox, what do you mean? Is this some sort of joke?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"You see, I got this mask a while back when I defeated a phantom in a treasure vault."

"Huaaah?! Wha?!"

Sora's complexion went pale, then red, then back to pale. It was sort of amusing.

But what did she think this mask was? I took it off and examined it once more. It had an excellent design and gave a strange impression, but it was still just a mask. Personally, when it came to masks, I preferred something with powers, like Reversible Face.

Sora crossed her arms, a cold sweat pouring out across her.

"Huh? Ummm. Rrrrmmm."

"Hey, could I sell this for a tidy sum? Is it valuable?"

"Sell?!" she exclaimed, her cheek twitching. "N-N-No, you can't do that."

Now I understood. This was one of those things too valuable to put up for sale. But I still didn't get where that value came from. I had only worn it because I hadn't had any other means of hiding my face. If possible, I would've preferred something that had holes to see through, so I wouldn't have to rely on that Relic.

Sora moved up so she was only mere inches away. She looked at me closely, then said in a low conspiratorial voice, "P-Please correct me if I'm mistaken. You aren't the White Fox, and this mask is something you obtained from a treasure vault?"

Those desperate words finally made me realize something I should have picked up on long ago.

"Oh. Have you mistaken me for someone else?"

Sora let out a faint cry, then clutched her head and twisted her

body.

"This can't be," she slowly whispered.

I put the mask back on and tried consoling her.

"Now, now, these things happen."

"Why didn't you say anything when I grabbed your hand?!"

What was I supposed to say? *She* was the one who had suddenly grabbed my hand, said "Right this way," and taken me to the Fox Mask Fan Club meeting. I never intended to deceive or use anyone. I had been flummoxed from the first minute.

"S-So why did you call us the Fox Mask Fan Club?" Sora asked.

"Hm? Was I wrong? You all seemed to be wearing fox masks."

"*Who?* Who would do that? Is that normal? No. No, it's not. Nobody told me this might happen!"

And what was I supposed to say to that? What should I have said back there in that room? For once, I was entirely blameless. This was on Sora and the Fox Mask Fan Club (temp. name) that dispatched her. But pointing that out didn't seem like the mature thing to do. Instead, I put on a hard-boiled and composed demeanor.

"Now, now, if you do the honest thing and fess up, I'm sure they'll forgive you."

"*Forgiven*?! Is that what you said? I won't be forgiven! I gave them my word! I clearly gave them my word that you're the White Fox!"

"Uh. No, you should confess. You need to obey COCOA. COnsult, COnfide, Alert."

"Why do you have an authentic mask?! Only the divine White Fox and those recognized by our vulpine gods can own one! It's a boss's identifier!"

"What? I just got this from some trash mob in Peregrine Lodge."

Sora recoiled.

I was hardly the only person to have wandered into that vault, not to mention that phantom had been killed by a simple conversation. There were probably a few of these masks floating around out there.

"And you said this is a boss's identifier?" I pressed on. "Don't you

think that's a funny system? It can easily create misunderstandings. I think you should change it. Why not consult with your club?"

Sora covered her ears and sat down.

There must've been at least a handful of white fox masks going around. Making a fake one didn't seem impossible either.

"This time it was just a simple mistake, but a malicious person might use this system to get close to you."

"J-Just be quiet for a moment!"

"Ah. Okay."

I was trying to help the Fox Mask Fan Club (temp. name) but it seemed Sora wasn't interested at the moment. With nothing better to do, I folded my arms and waited for her to make a decision.

I hadn't done anything wrong. I had simply worn a fox mask I happened to have on hand in order to hide my face. Not a smidgen of blame rested on me. But this was looking like it could turn into something bothersome. I was willing to apologize if the need arose. I had ordered them around, after all.

I heard Sora sporadically muttering to herself, as though organizing her thoughts.

"So?"

"Was this a mistake?"

"But that mask is authentic?"

"But I was wrong to call him the White Fox."

"But that divine mask is authentic?"

"But he's not a boss?"

"Could this be the organization's fault?"

"Ahhh. All on my first assignment."

I didn't see what the big deal was. We all make mistakes. I did it all the time. What's important is the future. Nobody was going to die or anything because of Sora's mistake, so I thought she should take it a bit easier.

Eventually, Sora seemed to have her thoughts in order and stood up. She briefly wobbled from the vertigo, then stabilized herself. As she glared at me, I could see my mask reflected in her tears.

"You are, beyond all possible doubt, the White Fox," she said.

"What? You're wrong. I'm just some hunter who happened to

acquire a mask."

Had she listened to a word I had said?

"I'm not wrong," she said, pressing a finger into my chest. "You are the White Fox, recognized by the divine, bearer of a sacred artifact!"

"Huh?! That's wrong!"

"I was taught that if the mask is authentic, then so is its wearer! I'm a priestess, a devout Holy Fox Maiden. My eyes can not be fooled, this I swear!"

"I see. That's, um, incredible."

She's digging her feet in. What's a devout Holy Fox Maiden? Hell, what's the Fox Mask Fan Club (temp. name)? Is it fun? Maybe I should join? But then would I have to swear obedience to the White Fox or whoever?

"In summary, I've made no mistake," Sora insisted.

"No, you have," I told her.

"Nor do I have any intent to harm the organization. If anyone claims I've made a mistake, then *they're* the traitors."

Hold on. Is she just trying to gloss over her screwup? Could it be that she's just bad at her job?

I suddenly sympathized with her. Nobody had to make wild improvisations as I did.

"Wouldn't it be better to come clean?" I said. "If you do, I'll apologize alongside you."

I saw that Sora's eyes were spinning. It seemed she wasn't interested in listening to me. Sweating profusely, she raised a clenched fist.

"If it's come to this, we have no choice but to break old bonds! We'll forge a new organization, one led by our new blessed White Fox! We'll call it—Ten-Tailed Shadow Fox! By having one more tail, we'll be the superior organization!"

It sounded like she was panicking. Was she really okay with this?

"No. No, we can't do that," I said.

"Huh?!"

Ten-Tailed Shadow Fox. What an unfortunate name. After the incident with the emperor, foxes didn't have the best connotations

and we could be mistaken with those other guys. Names are important. I frequently regretted deeming our party "Grieving Souls." I had gotten used to the name and lost interest in changing it, but when we were first starting out, it had on occasion caused us to be mistaken for a ghost party.

I was a fool, but I never made the same mistake twice. Sora was looking at me with wide eyes. I made a proclamation of pure bullshit.

"That's a bad name. Here, let's go with this: Ten-Tailed Fried Tofu."

"Ten-Tailed. Fried tofu?!"

She sounded like she was losing it, but I was serious.

"Indeed, Ten-Tailed Fried Tofu. Fried tofu is a wonderful thing. It can even save lives. It's a delicious name."

Fried tofu had in fact saved me from having to go to battle once. And it's delicious. Tasty things are the world's redemption.

"You want to name a secret organization Ten-Tailed Fried Tofu? Are you entirely devoid of sense?" Sora protested.

Secret organization? Did she say "secret organization?"

"Secret?" I said. "No, we won't be a secret. We'll be making delicious inarizushi bentos, a dish packed with fried tofu. We'll spread across the nation, then take over the entire world."

"Are you serious?!"

We would produce fried tofu. Then make delicious inarizushi bentos marked with the White Fox seal. I, of course, wouldn't take part, but it seemed like a perfect fit since the phantoms of Peregrine Lodge loved fried tofu.

Man, I'm on fi— Okay, maybe I'm not on fire today. Well, let's just do what we can.

Sora looked as though she had attained some form of enlightenment when we entered the luxurious living room.

"Wh-What's this? Leader, who is she?" Lucia said, looking up from her book.

I didn't really know how to answer that question. Honestly, saying that I didn't really know who Sora was seemed like the best option,

but that would've been irresponsible. But I *didn't* know who she was.

"Let's just say the circumstances are complicated," I said. "This is tricky for me too."

Sora was expressionless. Her eyes were dead. It seemed she didn't want to go home. She probably feared the backlash that awaited her there. Instead, she stubbornly insisted that it was her job to accompany the White Fox, so I had no choice but to keep her with me. But I couldn't look after her forever.

I was always getting wrapped up in stuff that eluded my understanding and I had a feeling this was another one of those times. I still thought our best option was to give an honest apology to the Fox Mask Fan Club (temp. name).

"Goodness! More nonsense. Why are you always—"

"Right, Lucia. Charge these, would you?"

"Augh!"

I tossed her Third Vision, which I needed to see with the mask, and Owl's Eye, which I needed to see in the dark. Lucia deftly caught both Relics before giving me a look that could kill. Hiding behind me, Sora watched this exchange with wide eyes.

"Is this, could it be? O White Fox, are you part of Grieving Souls?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"Yeah, that's right. You know your stuff."

I kept my face hidden, but Lucia's was known by many. Apparently, her fame made her known even to the Fox Mask Fan Club (temp. name).

"It's fine. Fine. I'm not a traitor," Sora muttered while pouring sweat. "I'm a Maiden. I'm correct. Correct. Correct. I'm not the one mistaken. O divine fox, please watch over me. Right, this is an infiltration mission. No. No obfuscations. *I'm* correct!"

I don't think that's right. Really, honesty is the best approach.

She didn't have to worry so much. People are quick to forget pain. And in my experience, most things just sort of worked themselves out. Nonetheless, I could somewhat relate to the panic she was feeling.

"Sitri!" I called, unsure if she was actually around. "Sorry but

could I borrow you?"

"Certainly," she replied cheerily. "Has something happened?"

Ah, she had been in her bedroom.

I was going to show Sora how a Level 8 improvised.

"I was looking to make an organization that produces inarizushi bento," I said with a pathetic smile. "I thought we should start with securing a base to operate out of."

"Huh? Uh, inarizushi bento, you say?"

Sitri blinked. Lucia and Sora both looked at me like I was out of my freaking mind. I started to think that even Sitri, my usual savior, would find this a bit too much.

No. If anyone can do it, it's her!

"Do you think you can make something work?" I asked her.

"Ummm. Well. Forgive me, but might I ask for a reason?"

Reason? There's no goddamn reason. I'm just being swept along by circumstance.

"It's, of course, for *that*," I said with a stern expression. "That *that*."

What was *that*? It was, of course, *that*.

Sitri looked momentarily confused before a smile blossomed and she clapped her hands. "I see. *That*! Understood, I'll get to work! When do you need it?"

"Immediately."

"Immediately?!" Sitri's eyes flew wide open, allowing me to see the confusion she harbored. "The Supreme Warrior Festival is about to begin—"

"Yes, but this is *that*, which we're talking about," I asserted.

Sitri sank into a silence, then nodded. "Very well. Since it's *that*. I'm going out for a bit. I may be late getting back."

With a suspicious gaze, Lucia watched this entire exchange.

"Leader, what is *that*?" she asked me.

"Huh? I dunno."

"Brother, you really are going to end up being forced into a marriage with her!"

Sitri sure was reliable. I had always been on Team Sitri. She was agreeable and her personality was compatible with mine. But I

wasn't going to marry her.

See that, Sora? That's *how you improvise.*

I let out a yawn and sank into a comfy chair. Then I remembered I had some bragging to do. I had to tell Little Sister Fox all about how I was forming an organization for making inarizushi bento.

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Sora entirely failed to keep up with the changing situation. It made no sense. The only thing she understood was that she had been thrown into an unenviable position.

It was preposterous to think that she had mistakenly identified the White Fox. It threw the meaning of the Maidens' existence into question. They occupied a special spot within the organization, but by no means did that make Sora irreplaceable.

The white fox mask was authentic. Normally, that might've earned her some leeway, but not when that mask was worn by a member of Grieving Souls, the archenemies of Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox.

To put it succinctly, Sora had been tricked. She had been made the victim of an elaborate ploy on her very first assignment. And the man behind it all had mocked her, telling her just to come clean to her cohorts.

She could never admit to what she had done. To do that would certainly be inviting her own execution. Even if her life were to be spared, she would be imprisoned, and there was no guarantee that would be better than death. And she didn't expect her fellow Maidens would come to her aid.

Sora was aboard a sinking ship and getting off was no longer an option. She didn't want to die. She had been born into the life of a Maiden, and she refused to let that life end for something that was no fault of her own.

Perhaps it was unbecoming of a Maiden to think like this, but Sora was certain she had done no wrong. That mask was genuine. Those who held the divine masks became an object of worship, and that was the basis for the existence of the Holy Fox Maidens. At

some point, the tail had started wagging the dog and the Maidens had become servants of Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox, but that wasn't the way it should've been.

What Sora was now doing was a return to the old ways. It was her duty to make things right again. She wasn't doing anything wrong. She would return things to the way they were meant to be. She would devote herself to the White Fox and his new organization, Ten-Tailed Fried Tofu. They would spread inarizushi across the land! Sora was doing no wrong!

"Will this suffice, Krai?" the Alchemist asked. "It wasn't easy, but I managed to get this. For *that*."

Why is she willing to put so much effort into this idiotic plan?

"Good job getting this on such short notice," the Thousand Tricks replied.

Oblivious to Sora's thoughts, he had an infuriatingly doltish smile.

It was the next morning and they were in a small building not far from Kreat's center. It appeared to have once been a café or something of the sort, as there was an excellent kitchen that almost looked out of place. Living spaces furnished with basic furniture occupied the second floor.

Sora wasn't familiar with the ways of the world, but even she could tell that this wasn't something you obtained for the sake of a mere joke. There must have been something wrong with this Sitri person if she was willing to obey such an absurd order.

Sora began to consider going into hiding. Maybe she could throw Fox off the trail if she changed her clothes and hair.

The fake—no, the *new* White Fox was probably trying to stop the operation that the organization was carrying out in Kreat. As a mere Maiden, Sora hadn't been informed of the details, but she had heard it was a massive endeavor that would change the world. It was all being managed by a man of the seventh tail who had planned it out in meticulous detail. But Sora thought it had been doomed to failure the moment she had mistaken an imposter for the boss.

But she didn't see how an organization that made fried tofu could interfere with this. She had never even seen inarizushi in her life!

"I've also prepared fried tofu!" Sitri said. "It's not a common food

around here, so obtaining it was quite difficult."

"Huh? You really got some?" the Thousand Tricks responded.

Sora was bewildered, but she couldn't just sit still and do nothing. She no longer had a home in her old organization. She had to survive. No, it was her sacred duty to serve the new White Fox! Sora had done nothing wrong! Forcing herself to perk up, she clenched her fist and raised her head.

"I await your orders, O White Fox," she said, "I, Sora Zohlo the Maiden, will support you to my last breath. Please, watch over me! Also, I might add that I don't know how to cook! I've never done it before!"

Was conquering the world with food even possible? What in the world was this man thinking? Was this the same preterhuman artifice that had fooled Sora? It was all too confusing, it made her head spin. Even still, she was desperately trying to support the new White Fox. But he just furrowed his brow.

"Krai, I'll remind you there's nothing I hate more than being in the red," Sitri said.

"And what do you like most?" he said after a momentary pause.

"That would of course be...*that*. You should give me more of *that*."

"Ha ha ha, you're a funny one."

"Heh heh, I try to be. This is also in the name of *that*. Indeed—*that*."

The White Fox didn't look remotely like someone ready and motivated to interfere with one of Fox's plans. Did he even understand that Sora had quickly made her way to Kreat because a fake could ruin Galf's plan?

She decided to ignore Sitri's pouting for the time being and observed the White Fox. But she quickly gave up on trying to use her brain. There was nothing a mere Maiden could do in this situation.

***

It was an era of resplendence brought about by the bounty of

treasure vaults. The treasure hunters who retrieved Relics from these vaults were sometimes praised as champions. Hunting was considered the fastest path to wealth, glory, and power, thus making this the golden age of treasure hunting.

Exhibiting superb talents since a young age, Krahi Andrihee's foray into hunting was inexorable. As far back as he could recall, he had yearned for that life, and for just as long, even the adults around him were convinced he would be excellent at it.

Krahi didn't grow up to be particularly large, but his instincts were razor-sharp and his magical aptitude was on a level often thought impossible for men (generally, women were said to be more suited to being Magi). But most of all, he had what all hunters needed, which was the ability to efficiently absorb and retain mana material.

And so, as though guided by the hand of fate, Krahi Andrihee became a hunter. But even with his abilities that appeared to be a gift of the very heavens, the treasure vaults proved formidable.

The path that he had set out on was a thorny one, but he poured everything he could into moving along it. He conquered a number of vaults. He improved. He came close to losing his life, all the while being targeted by criminals. He didn't waste a moment. He even sacrificed sleep. To Krahi Andrihee, hardships were trials offered by the gods, and overcoming them was a joyful occasion.

Before he knew it, his name had spread far and wide. He still hadn't been granted a title, but many hunters had become familiar with his name. Proudly proffering it had paid off. Titles were generally granted by the Explorers' Association, but Krahi couldn't bear the thought of getting something unappealing.

Thousandfold Theurgics, the powers of the gods, tempered relentlessly. That was the ideal envisioned by Krahi. People got his title wrong on occasion, but that was nothing more than a trifle. Some people even had the false idea that he was a Level 8, but that must have been because he gave the impression of being just that powerful.

Krahi Andrihee, the Thousandfold Theurgics, (could be mistaken for a) Level 8. At long last, he obtained the right to participate in the greatest of all martial events—the Supreme Warrior Festival! He felt

a flood of different emotions.

At the time, there was an absurd number of rumors about him swirling around. Krahi wasn't Level 8, he had no title, he had never eliminated any major criminal organizations, nor had he made any flower fields into treasure vaults. Surely, such gossip was simply a product of the high expectations people had of him.

By taking the championship at the Supreme Warrior Festival, he would be able to overcome those rumors. He would find himself up against immense foes. Many of them had probably been walking the path of a warrior for far longer than him. But Krahi was in top condition. He could pull this off. His might was on par with that of a Level 8.

Not to mention, he had allies. At first, Krahi had been a solo hunter, but his ideals had attracted valuable comrades to his side. In the Supreme Warrior Festival, you couldn't fight alongside your friends, but just knowing they were there was enough to give Krahi a boost.

They were all part of a party. He had been surprised when his friends suggested calling themselves "Bereaving Souls" and making a mask their signature item. Krahi, however, wasn't the type to dismiss his friends without at least hearing them out first.

In the living room of the suite rented by Bereaving Souls, Elizabeth Smyat the Eyeful Shadow and Kule Saicool the Protean Sortie were having a grave discussion.

"So are we just screwed? What do we do, Kule? No way I can win against the real one."

"Hmm. This is indeed bad. I hadn't anticipated the authentic counterparts making an appearance."

Elizabeth Smyat was a Thief. She had fluorescent pink hair that burned the eyes and wore gear that left very little to the imagination. But what drew more attention than that was her large chest. That was the source of her title, "Eyeful Shadow." She thought her appellation was a stupid one and she had a bad habit of making snide remarks, but she wasn't a bad Thief.

Kule Saicool was the brains of the party. He could be easily identified by his glasses and polite register. Inexplicably, he claimed

to be a Swordsman despite having never swung a sword. He was of next to no help in combat, but since Krahi had no leadership experience, the Protean Sortie kept things running smoothly.

The other members also had their odd points, but for someone like Krahi, who had been a solo hunter until this point, they were irreplaceable.

"Besides Krahi, our party is nothing noteworthy," Kule sighed.

"Well yeah. If I was anything noteworthy, you think I'd let people call me 'Izabee'?" Izabee said.

"That's not true!" Krahi cut in, unable to bear hearing his friends talk like this. However they had met up, it didn't change the fact that they were a party. Though he tried to talk them out of it, low self-esteem was something that plagued their party.

"Kule, Izabee. If it weren't for you two and the rest of the party, I wouldn't have made it to such a prestigious tournament. You have my thanks."

Izabee's face went taut. Kule looked uncomfortable.

"Why's this guy so goddamn strong?" Izabee muttered. "I wasn't expecting he'd get to the Supreme Warrior Festival."

"Well, that's what happens if you make it on your own for so long. He's the only one not faking it."

That was right. Krahi wasn't going to lose, no matter who he was up against. He was ready for anything!

I'll change things. I'll do more than make myself known, I'll make all of Bereaving Souls known across the land.

That was Krahi's other dream. He reaffirmed his determination and looked out the window. With eyes burning with passion, he looked upon the streets of Kreat. With the Supreme Warrior Festival approaching, they were becoming livelier with each passing day. Suddenly, he recalled that young man who resembled him. Would he come to cheer Krahi on at the tournament?

Chapter Three: The Thousand Tricks's Artifice

Despite the fact that it was like this every year as the Supreme Warrior Festival approached, Gark was still taken aback by the festive mood in Kreat. Streets large and small were absolutely mobbed. The town gates were jammed with late arrivals. The influx of hunters, merchants, and tourists from all over made this the busiest time of year for the town. It was also the town's most unstable period, causing some locals to head elsewhere for its duration.

"Busy as ever," the old Magus in the carriage snorted. "When I see crowds of trash like this, I get the urge to incinerate them all."

Sitting across from Gark was the woman fearfully known as the Abyssal Inferno. She had gaunt cheeks and bony fingers, but her crimson irises flickered like the flames of hell. As far as simple wide-range extermination went, nobody in Zebrudia could hold a candle to this witch. She was also banned from participating in the Supreme Warrior Festival, as she had once destroyed the barrier meant to protect the audience.

"You've got a harsh sense of humor, Rosemary," Gark said to her.

"I'll admit," she said with a chuckle, "this prebattle atmosphere isn't bad. All warriors are compelled by instinct to strive to be the strongest. Don't you think the participants have only gotten better? I hear the amount of mana material in circulation has been going up."

"But aren't most Magi researchers?"

"That's a common misconception, Mr. Branch Manager. Stepping out into the battlefield is a very good way to progress your research. If I hadn't been banned, I'd be going out there. Perhaps the Explorers' Association should protest that ban just a bit more?"

Think of your age, you old hag, Gark thought as he let out a sigh.

Of course, he didn't actually say it out loud.

The greatest prize offered by the Supreme Warrior Festival was glory. Someone who had reached Level 8 shouldn't have any further need for that. Gark might've empathized with her if she had never given the tournament a try, but not only had she participated before, she had made herself something of a legend.

Gark was beyond exasperated. The modern Magi were rather mellow compared to those of the past. But it was only by comparison that the current generation could be considered calm to any degree.

"You don't have to worry, Rosemary. Whether you like it or not, there will most likely come a time when we need your power."

"Heh heh heh. And here we are at the Supreme Warrior Festival. Those kits must've gotten serious if they're aiming for such a large prize. They'll make worthwhile kindling. It's just a shame Telm won't be among them."

Only a few days prior, the careful investigations of the Explorers' Association had given them a grasp on one of Fox's tails. After searching Telm's and Kechachakka's living quarters, they had determined which Association employee had put Kechachakka on that list. By employing a priceless Relic, they had decoded an encrypted document.

This current operation appeared to be of an unprecedented scope for Fox, which was also what allowed the Association to catch wind of it. The empire and the Association didn't have much to go off of, but they didn't need much to justify going after an organization that had already tried to assassinate the emperor.

Their investigation had given them two key phrases: "Supreme Warrior Festival" and "Key of the Land." The former was quite famous, but the latter was unfamiliar to Gark. However, that didn't hold true for the agents of the empire. When Gark gave them his report, they got to work immediately and even requested the Association's assistance. However, Kreat wasn't imperial territory, meaning their options were limited.

Rosemary smiled as she read the newspaper.

"Look, Gark my boy. This says the crime rate in Kreat has gone

down. Suspicious, isn't it? A change in trends isn't a good thing—this is the silence before the storm." Her smile grew and she gave Gark a sharp look. "Very bold of that boy to break his promise. Ever since he came to the imperial capital, people have been saying I've cooled down. I'm not expecting him to hand over information for free, but I'll have to ask just what inspired his sudden departure."

The timing could hardly be a coincidence. To offer up a battered Fox, then simply head off to the site of their next plan was an act of discourtesy. But Gark could understand why the Thousand Tricks had done it. The branch manager didn't know how Krai had gotten his information, but he knew that a tactician's methods were at odds with a witch who solved all her problems with hellfire. Not to mention her one restraint, the Counter Cascade, was no longer with her.

"That man has his own way of thinking," he said.

"Hmph. I won't scorch him. Not immediately, not when he has that brother-complex sister. Nothing good would come from a battle between Hidden Curse and Lucia Rogier the Grand Magus. We've still got people we're trying to recruit into our clan."

Lucia, someone just gravely insulted you, Gark thought.

Rosemary briefly stared at him with her lambent eyes before shrugging and saying, "I guess I owe him for Telm. I don't like it, but I'll play along with him just this once."

"Rosemary, are you cooling off?"

"Heh heh heh. Well said, Gark my boy." There was a commotion from outside the carriage. Rosemary looked in its direction. "Hunters all have their specialties. That boy's scheming isn't what I'd call normal. It's not just that he has excellent comrades, nor can he see the future. It's strange, but some freakish talents just defy understanding."

She almost sounded like she was talking to herself.

It was yet to make itself apparent, but a storm was brewing at the Supreme Warrior Festival.

***

Now that she had been around them, I asked Touka for her thoughts on the Fox Mask Fan Club (temp. name). She looked at me uncertainly and said, "I'll grant that they're pros, albeit slightly odd ones. Where did you find them?"

It was a dispassionate evaluation. Touka was one of my few friends who didn't take me at my word just because I was a Level 8. I wasn't too shocked to hear that the Fox Mask Fan Club knew what they were doing. I had a pretty good eye for people.

"It's a bit of a story," I told her. "If you're getting along, then I'm satisfied."

"Today's enemies are tomorrow's friends. But the opposite is equally true. Knights of the Torch have worked with legally dubious people before, but I would appreciate being informed of such details in advance."

Sure, those guys were pretty darn suspicious, but that level of skepticism struck me as pretty darn rude. Though I had to admit, their rough exteriors were probably the reason Sora felt she couldn't admit her mistake to them. I could relate to her desire to look away from unpleasant truths, but as the older of us, I felt I had to do something for the priestess.

"Now, now, Touka," Sitri said. "I've already discussed this with you. Krai has no qualms about manipulating criminals for his benefit. The possibility that you might have to work with outlaws was outlined in your contract."

Touka sank into a sullen silence. Just how much capital was Sitri sending her way? And which Krai was going around manipulating criminals? I was always on the receiving end.

"Very well," Touka said. "If it pays, I'll do it. Using what's available to us is one of our tenets. Though no offer is great enough to make me spar with the Protean Sword."

Luke, you must've really pissed her off.

The stronger the opponent, the more fired up he would get, which would in turn reduce his ability to hold back. He didn't suddenly snap or anything, but it was telling that he was just as feared as Liz was. At the moment, he had gotten sick of sticking around the lodge like I was and went out with Liz and some others.

He was probably looking for someone to wallop.

Next time, don't bring the damn princess with you!

"This was just a meeting between myself and some of their core members," Touka continued. "Next time, I'll bring my party and talk with them in further detail. I understand we're supposed to adjust ourselves to match them, but what is it you're hoping to accomplish?"

"Right, uh, could you take Luke and Liz with you?"

Touka didn't look at all pleased. "Is this perhaps one of your Thousand Trials?" Had everyone heard about those? "And who's Ponta?"

"Uhhh. The imperial princess of Zebrudia?"

"Was that supposed to be a joke?"

Touka's frigid glare caused my heart to skip a beat. That definitely wasn't the sort of face you're supposed to show a client.

Well, on the odd chance something does happen to her, we'll be in the hottest water imaginable. Take good care of her!

Sitri clapped her hands to signal a change in subject and said, "Now, Touka, did you get the information I requested?"

"Information?" I asked.

"I commissioned her to look into the other participants in the Supreme Warrior Festival. If I want to win, I'll have to do everything I feasibly can."

She was aiming high. Her potential opponents included people like Luke and Lucia, and I was under the impression a typically noncombat class like an Alchemist was at a disadvantage in this tournament, but she wasn't letting that deter her. Sitri's disarming smile elicited a rare but still awkward smile from Touka.

"Goodness," she said, "you ask this of me when I'm also going to __"

"That has no bearing on this transaction," Sitri interrupted.

"Very true. And there's nothing more precious than a generous client."

They sure got along. If only the other Grievers had even half of Sitri's social skills. I don't need to explain Luke and Liz, but despite appearances, Lucia was actually quite shy.

Touka straightened her posture and had one of her people fetch a file. She spread it out on the table and spoke like she was letting us in on a secret. “Hmm, well, let’s begin with the most interesting one. Boss, the fake you will be participating.”

“No, that’s the real me.”

Just as I expected, Touka looked at me agog before turning to her party members.

Our inn left me wanting for little. The room was spacious and had good airflow, and the food was delicious. The bathroom was large and the living room was gorgeous. I sank into the couch, reading a newspaper that had been delivered directly to our room, and let out a big yawn. It was peaceful, more than usual even.

When I heard that things got hectic around the time of the tournament I was certain that I would get engulfed somehow, but luck was evidently on my side. However, this had left our man-cutter with extra time on his hands.

“Raaah!!! This is my new technique: Bisected Blade! DIE!”

“Watch out! Luke, you’re going to break your sword! I told you, that’s impossible with a wooden blade!”

Luke and Liz were taking advantage of the big living room to have some mock battles. I heard the extraordinary sound of a sword cleaving the air, but I didn’t hear any footfalls. When they started out, I told them their clashing and smashing was going to bother the neighbors and destroy the room. So they just started fighting in a way that wouldn’t cause a ruckus and wouldn’t demolish the furniture. They even started calling it stealth training.

I appreciated their ability to find fun in everything, but I still felt they were missing the point. It doesn’t matter how big it is, sparring isn’t meant to be done in inn rooms. Why didn’t they go outside?

Dragged into their nonsense, the imperial princess let out a shriek as she dodged one attack after another. If appearances were anything to go off of, I’d say she was getting better at dealing with those two. She was still timid, but her movements were entirely unlike when I had first met her.

Meanwhile, her guards had given up on doing anything about the

wild duo. They must have finally realized human languages didn't get through to beasts. The fact that Princess Murina hadn't suffered any critical injuries probably had something to do with it as well. Of course, that's speaking with the benefit of hindsight!

Liz let out a brief, shrill yelp. A broken sword went through and shattered the window. Completely baffled, all I could do was smile. I couldn't even tell what trajectory the sword had taken. I could barely follow Liz's movements, all the more so with Luke.

If it weren't for my Safety Rings, I definitely would've died there. Or would I? None of my rings actually went off. I was between Luke and the window. Could he have done something as clever as breaking the window without hurting me?

Sitting on another sofa, Lucia looked up from her book and yelled, "Hey! Idle hands are no excuse for doing stupid stuff indoors!"

"Was it you who deflected my bisected blade?!" Luke cried. "Well done, Lucia!"

"Try that again and it'll be more than your blade getting bisected!"

Ohhh, Lucia's magic deflected it.

I hadn't noticed any spell being used, but that must've been the result of the high-speed casting she had developed after being around the other Grievers. This must be what happens when you have good friends who encourage you to strive to improve.

"And you, leader!" she said to me. "Why were you spacing out when a sword was hurling towards you?!"

"Because I was spacing out?"

"Augh!"

A smile formed on my face as it struck me that maybe Lucia actually had a good shot at winning the Supreme Warrior Festival.

"Sir Krai," Karen called to me, "we've received a summons from His Imperial Majesty. I take it there would be no problem if we take Her Imperial Highness away for a bit?"

"Yeah, of course. Her training is, uh, progressing according to plan."

Not that I had any particular plans. From here it was just building

up experience. That, and praying that it would all work out! I took it as a good sign that she was playing with Luke and Liz. Not even Tino could do that without screaming.

"Hmm. If I may be honest, I still fail to see the meaning behind your methods, even after all this time. But I'll relay your message to His Imperial Majesty."

She's become much more agreeable than when I first met her.

"Maaan, being an instructor isn't easy," Luke said as we made our way back after dropping off Princess Murina. "And she's still got a ways to go before we can call her strong."

"Yeah, and she keeps running from you," Liz chimed in. "I'm used to it, though, after dealing with T."

She was used to it, but it didn't seem like she was doing anything about it.

"But I prefer not having to hold back, and I can't do that when I'm teaching."

"Luke, you barely taught her anything!" Lucia chided.

"You'll be able to fight unchecked soon enough, so think of it as a warm-up," I told him.

Wait, hold on, so you're still cutting the imperial princess during her training? Don't cut the emperor's daughter!

"And to top it off," Lucia groaned, "Siddy's been using some weird item, and Krai's once again been keeping quiet and doing whatever he wants, so Ansem and I have to pick up the slack just like we always do."

Sitri's doing that? First I've heard this. And I don't abide by being grouped with the maniacs.

As the four of us walked through the streets, I caught sight of a familiar face among the crowds. He was dressed in black and wasn't exceptionally tall as far as treasure hunters went, but his distinct staff and handsome features drew gazes his way.

It was the real me. Krahi Andrihee, the Thousandfold Theurgics. Without giving it much thought, I started waving. How lucky I was to run into him again amid so many other people. I wondered if he remembered me.

"Hey, Krahi! It's good to see you again!"

He turned around. Just as you'd expect from the real one, the motion was so hard-boiled I was enamored. The look in his eyes suggested he considered our meeting a very pleasant surprise.

"You really came!" he said.

"Ahh, that's the guy Siddy told us about," Liz muttered.

I had already told them not to say anything untoward to Krahi. Accusing him of being a fake just because our names were similar was uncalled for. And in my opinion, he was clearly the stronger of the two of us!

The crowd naturally parted on his behalf. *This* was the charisma of the real. How hard-boiled.

"What a coincidence!" Krahi said as he approached me with an affable smile. "I was just wondering if we might meet again!"

If you didn't know any better, you'd think he was talking to a friend he had known for decades. This must've been a result of his extraordinary people skills. This man was immaculate.

But who's that girl clinging to his arm?

Pressed against Krahi was a girl in her mid-teens. She had black hair tied up into pigtails, wore a black pointed hat, and had a short staff at her hip. The hat and staff suggested she was a Magus, but that was at odds with the frills on her skirt and overall stylish outfit.

Looking slightly troubled, Krahi introduced her. "Oh, this is Lusha Andrihee. She's a Magus and my...adopted sister? She's also my apprentice. She doesn't yet have a title, but is fairly talented."

Now that I knew her name, she looked like Lucia, in a way. The distinguishing traits were identical at any rate. My sister stood silently, her cheek twitching and her gaze cold as ice. This sure was an incredible coincidence. Not sure how else to describe it. I wanted to get away, but leaving without at least saying hello to her would've been rude.

I pulled myself together and said to Lusha, "So you're his sister? It's nice to meet you. I'm a fan of your older brother."

Lusha smiled like a blossom and spoke in a voice like nectar. "Ahhh, so *you're* my big brother's copycat! Call me Lusha! I'm Krahi's love-love-lover and future bride!"

I bit my tongue, preventing a funny sound from escaping my mouth. I turned around and saw Lucia's eyebrows twitching. She had lost all sense of reason, and that would no doubt mean catastrophe. Liz was also twitching, but that was because she was struggling to contain her laughter.

Lusha hugged Krahi's arm, pressing her chest against it, and said cheerily, "My brother will never ever ever lose to someone like you! He's cool, strong, smart, and really, really nice. He said that once I'm super-duper strong and a first-rate Magus, he'll marry me!"

She's one hell of a character.

Personally, I didn't have anything against her, but Lucia's expression had shifted from anger to nil. That wasn't good.

"H-Hey, cut that out." Looking perplexed and deeply exasperated, Krahi chided Lusha. He didn't seem embarrassed, however. "Sorry about that. Lusha's always like this, claiming to be my sister and whatnot. B-But she's not a bad person, no matter how odd she may be. Now, Lusha, apologize. That was very rude."

Why's she calling herself his sister if she's not his sister?

My little sister—who had stopped being my little sister, despite once being my little sister—was about to snap. When Liz snapped, her speech changed dramatically, but Lucia was entirely mute when she was angry. Lusha was a candle flame faced with an incoming blizzard.

Lusha was briefly baffled by Krahi, but then tears began to well up. "I-I'm sorry. I just love my brother so much and I lost control..."

While she spoke, she glanced repeatedly at Krahi. There wasn't a cell in her body capable of shame.

I pulled Lucia aside and tried to calm her down.

"Relax, it was just a coincidence," I told her.

"Coincidence?!" she cried, her face red and body trembling. "How could that be a coincidence?!"

"Lucy, this is hilarious!" Liz said.

"Not in the slightest!"

She stomped her feet and for some reason glared at me. The girl who used to follow me around had become much more

confrontational thanks to Liz and Sitri's influence.

"Sure, Lusha is a really strange person," I said, "but she doesn't have any bad intentions. I'm sure of it."

"She doesn't?! She one hundred percent does! If she doesn't that'll be an even bigger problem! I don't say things like that!"

Of course she didn't. I understand that. Their resemblance only went as far as their names. While Krahi was stronger than me, if Lusha didn't have a title, it didn't seem likely that she was stronger than Lucia.

"Yeah, uh-huh. You weren't that clingy, even when we were younger. It might be okay for a kid to act like that, but not an adult."

"Huh? She wasn't? That right, Lucy? Well, you never wore cute clothes like that."

Groaning, Lucia's face flushed as she clutched her head.

Unfortunately, the two shared a lot of distinguishing traits. It didn't sound like Lusha was very well-known, but if that changed, then she and Lucia would receive lots of comparisons.

"Hey, Krai," Luke said while watching Lusha intently. "Meeting Lusha was nice and all, but where's my fake? Am I part of this?"

"I told you, they're not—"

I stopped when I saw Krahi, Lusha still clinging to him, weaving his way through the crowd towards us.

"Are you all right?" he asked Lucia. "You don't look well. I have potions if you need them."

For people with power and charisma, consideration for others naturally followed. The real me sure was impressive. I'd have to take notes.

"No, she's fine," I answered. "It's just the crowd getting to her."

"Are you sure she hasn't been wounded by the sight of us, lovey-dovey as doves?" Lusha asked with a trace of pride.

"HM?!"

Oh no. Lucia's giving her the "I'm going to brutally murder you" glare.

I wanted to chat a bit more, but Lucia and Lusha were a dangerous combination. And consider the prospect of asking a grumpy Lucia to charge some Relics.

"Sorry, we're in a bit of a hurry," I said.

"Oh, what a shame," Krahi replied. "I wanted to introduce you to my party."

I *really* wanted that. I had to meet the Smyat sisters.

Dragging Lusha behind him, Krahi looked at the crowds and sighed. "Well, be careful. I hear Kreat is rather dangerous during the Supreme Warrior Festival. The participants themselves are especially at risk."

"Careful?" Liz said. "The hell are you talking about? No bandit is gonna take down Krai Baby. He's already taken steps against them!"

"Steps?"

Actually, I had just made it some other people's job to take the steps. Krahi looked at my meaningless meaningful smile and eventually nodded.

"I see. It seems there's more going on than meets the eye. This must be fate. If you don't mind, perhaps I could help?"

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Following his underling's report, Galf found himself in a building at the edge of Kreat. Upon entering, he found Sora Zohlo the Holy Fox Maiden cooking in a white apron.

"Sora, what's the meaning of this? What's the boss thinking?"

"This is all in accordance with the wishes of the White Fox."

Sora now lacked the usual air of mysticism that encompassed her when she was in her usual robe. A delightful smell encompassed the kitchen and wooden boxes were stacked up in the corner.

"Per the orders of the White Fox," she said, "I'm making fried tofu."

"What are you talking about? Fried tofu? What does that have to do with anything?!"

"Only the White Fox is privy to the entire plan."

There was no light in the eyes of the Maiden. What in the world could have happened? Galf couldn't understand it. Secrecy was fundamental to Fox. Nobody ever had a complete understanding of the purpose of the orders given to them. When Galf had been of a

lower tail, he, too, had been given many orders without any sort of explanation. But working as a saboteur, he had never had any reason to harbor doubts.

And now they were making fried tofu?

"Are you going to put poison in it?" he tried.

"We are not. I've been ordered to make delicious fried tofu."

"What's the boss planning?"

Sora pointed at him. "Try thinking for yourself, Galf Shenfelder! Or are you opposing the White Fox?!" This was the first time Galf had seen her like this. Her once unflinching face was now streaked with cold sweat and she sounded agitated. "F-Forget that. This is all in accordance with the wishes of the White Fox."

Galf didn't see any choice but to keep his objections to himself. He had never known that a base like this was in Kreat, but the kitchen seemed fairly new. He didn't think a Maiden would have her own source of income, meaning this must have been funded by the organization.

"By the way, Galf," she said with trepidation, "I ask purely out of curiosity, but how did you find this place?"

"Hmph? Is that a joke? The organization has eyes everywhere."

"If you're so sharp-eyed then how—never mind." Sora shook her head as she tossed a cut of tofu into a frying pan. "This is all per the will of the White Fox. Look, Galf, this is how fried tofu is made. For now, we're using store-bought tofu, but we'll slowly learn to make our own. The White Fox has ordered this all, so—*ouch*. I've never cooked before."

Why didn't they hire someone? Why was a sacred and unique member of Fox being ordered to make fried tofu? It was unbearably strange, but Galf gave up on any further consideration. If the boss had ordered this, it must be for some noble purpose.

As he watched Sora struggle with her unfamiliar task, there was a sudden knock at the door. This was one of the organization's safe houses; there would never be random visitors to a place like this. Galf braced himself as the door opened.

"Soraaa, I've got something I want to ask you."

Galf's mind froze. The sudden arrival was a young man with black

hair. But that wasn't what had brought him to a halt. It was his voice—it was the same as the boss's.

"Boss?"

The man turned towards Galf. Sora didn't move a muscle, her hand still gripping the frying pan.

The boss blinked, then casually said, "Hm? Ah, great timing. I've got something I need you to do."

"Boss, your mask! What happened to your mask?!"

This was absurd. Fox was a secret organization and the bosses hid their identities as a matter of course. Galf's own experiences meeting the higher-ups confirmed this. With so many enemies, the bosses kept their faces hidden, even from other members of the organization.

The boss looked briefly surprised, then smiled awkwardly. "Y-Yeah, the mask. It's kinda hot today and it just gets in the way. I'm really sorry, but I can't wear it all the time."

"Wha..."

The man was entirely at ease, not even remotely afraid of being betrayed. The higher-ups that Galf had met all struck him as being immensely powerful. But this man before him was different.

Galf still didn't know anything about Ponta, but Tsuneko was definitely the leader of the famous Knights of the Torch. They were an elite group that traveled the world chasing large bounties and could be identified by their reddish-brown armor. Their leader, Kongoin Touka, was a veritable nemesis of Fox, as she had annihilated many of their subsidiary organizations. She had been wearing a fox mask, but that wasn't enough to fool Galf.

This was proof of the unfathomable nature of the boss. Knights of the Torch were mercenaries who fought for pay, but they were smart enough to know when a job wasn't worth taking. Even a pool of gold wasn't enough to make them join a criminal organization. Yet Galf had seen her wearing a fox mask and following the boss. Fox even had a bounty on her head, but that was most likely nothing more than a bluff.

The boss was undoubtedly capable, but forgoing the mask was pushing his luck. The young man walked past Galf, leaving his back

open all the while, and peered into Sora's frying pan.

"Smells great," he said, "you're doing good."

Sora straightened her back. "Y-You honor me, O White Fox!" she cried, breaking out in a sweat. "It's in accordance with your, the White Fox's, wishes!"

The boss looked scrutinizingly at the pan, scrunching his brow. "But Sora," he said with a chuckle, "this won't be enough if we want to rule the world."

Galf barely managed to stop himself from crying out at this sudden revelation.

He really plans to take over the world with fried tofu?! How?!

"M-My apologies! I'll start over!"

"No need. Take your time. Everybody struggles when trying something new."

"As you w-wish!"

Galf wanted to ask what the boss was up to, but that wasn't really an option. The identities of its bosses were the organization's most important secrets. There must have been a reason the boss's face had been kept a secret until now. Even though he knew the boss's countenance, Galf couldn't let it affect him. A change in attitude could easily result in him being silenced.

The boss removed a Smartphone from his pocket and snapped a photo of the fried tofu, before turning to Galf. "Right, this is great timing. It's about the task I gave you guys. I've got more reinforcements for you. We were originally planning on having Tou—Tsuneko introduce you guys, but is now a good time?"

"As you wish."

Galf got down on one knee. The boss's orders were absolute, and Galf had no intentions of betraying the organization.

"No need for all the formalities," the boss said to him, then turned to the door. "Hey, you guys can come in now."

In came a small group, none of them wearing masks. There was a sleek dark-haired young man, a female Magus, a pink-haired Thief, and a red-haired Swordsman. All of them had that aura that came with a high amount of mana material. Instinctively, Galf searched his mental database and the results made him gasp.

The red-haired Swordsman looked around searchingly, his eyes glinting like a polished blade. “So who do I get to cut? That woman over there?”

“Grieving Souls?” Galf mumbled.

There was no doubt about it. He had looked into every capable warrior out there. He recognized the Stifled Shadow, the Protean Sword, and the Avatar of Creation. And that young man, he had talked with the boss back in that town Fox had stolen Key of the Land from. This must’ve been the Thousand Tricks, the subject of so many rumors.

“Oh. Do you know these guys?!” the boss said.

“Yeah. Of course I do,” Galf responded.

It was impossible, unbelievable. He blinked repeatedly, but the scene before him didn’t change. There was no party Fox was more wary of than Grieving Souls. They were believed to have crushed a number of minor subsidiaries as well as Serpent, Fox’s now-defunct rival. Recently, the Thousand Tricks had interfered with the Relic theft operation. This bunch was in no way an ally of Fox’s, but they were treading ground where common sense had no sway.

If you want to fool your enemies, start with your friends. How far did the bluff go? Had they been acting on Fox’s orders when they brought Serpent down? And what about the incident with Telm? Could it be that was a traitor that Grieving Souls had put down? And did the same go for Kechachakka?

A cyclone of suppositions spun through Galf’s mind, but he couldn’t say anything for certain. Everything was perfectly shrouded. But he knew that if this party was on his side, then anything was possible. Not even the Explorers’ Association would suspect Grieving Souls of betrayal. But what was the boss planning by gathering so many formidable figures together? Galf couldn’t stop shaking.

The boss grinned, then said the most incredulous thing yet. “Well then, I think I can leave this to you. Oh, that’s right. If this goes well, I’ll give you the mask.”

***

As he listened to me, Galf looked baffled from start to finish. I dunno, I guess he really wanted the ultra-rare mask. He wobbled out of the room as though he was sleepwalking and Liz, Luke, and Krahi followed after him. I stayed behind with Lucia, who I kept as protection.

As though trying to avoid thinking about something else, Sora had been focusing every ounce of her will on her frying pan. Once the fried tofu was ready, she turned off the burner and approached us. Looking at her up close, I could see that the blood had drained from her face.

"Wh-What are you thinking?!" she said. "You would give away that sacred mask?!"

"Well, I don't particularly need it."

"Are you—are you planning to betray me after all this?!"

That wasn't a fair way to put it. That mask was nothing more than a bit of memorabilia to me. It belonged with someone who understood its value. Would handing it over make the real "White Fox" angry? That wasn't my problem.

Besides, I only got caught up in all of this because of the Fox Mask Fan Club (temp. name) and their system. It wasn't fair to blame me for coincidentally owning the same mask as another one of their members. And when I said we should apologize, it was Sora who shot that idea down. But maybe that was because apologizing wouldn't have gotten us anywhere.

Folding her arms and looking irked (as she always did) Lucia stared at Sora. "Leader, what did you do this time?"

"I still haven't done—"

"Not yet, is it? So you plan to do something?!" Sora interjected. "O White Fox, you are a god! A GOD!"

"Reminds me of T," Lucia remarked, entirely unaffected by Sora's childish ravings. She was used to being thrown into the center of trouble. Not to brag, but I was ranked number one when it came to being in situations that made no sense and Lucia could attest to that.

"I've decided!" Sora pointed a finger at me. "If there is more to come, then I must bring the other Maidens to our side!"

"Y-Yeah. Uh-huh."

"Everyone will walk our path! And the mask will *not* be transferred! I won't allow it! No matter what anyone says, *you* are the true White Fox! I've only followed my teachings! If anything is at fault, it's the world itself!"

"Faith's a scary thing."

What an insane way to free yourself from blame.

Is this girl really a priestess? She's not like any that I've ever seen. Is she okay? Listen, you're to blame, I'm not. How can I keep this from becoming a complete mess?

"Watch me, O White Fox! I, Sora Zohlo, will expand our ranks! Should you order it, we'll all make fried tofu!"

Something told me I was past the point of no return. Maybe that mask was cursed. The next moment, the door silently opened.

"Wha?! Huh?!"

Sora was still as stone. Lucia was agog. My brain was frozen. Entering without a sound was someone I thought I had left back in Toweyezant—Little Sister Fox. She strolled in, examining the room, then looking at me, then Sora, then Lucia. Without saying anything, she continued past us and peered into the frying pan. Without the slightest hesitation, she reached in and removed a half-burned cut of tofu.

She quietly ate it, then said, "Too burnt. Eighty points."

Ah. She came after seeing the picture I sent her. For a phantom, she sure is mobile.

***

After spending a nearly sleepless night tortured by uncertainty, Sora ultimately followed her pride as a Maiden. The Holy Fox Maidens' original purpose was to serve the fox gods and anyone chosen by said gods. Thus far, those chosen ones had all served as bosses of the organization, but it made far more sense to support someone who had directly obtained a mask than someone who had merely inherited one.

Just as Sora was beginning to think she had been lied to, the new

White Fox suddenly changed course and told her that he would have a talk with the boss. The new White Fox was a terrifying man, capable of throwing even Sora off despite her years of rigorous mental training. Even still, she didn't think he could win against the boss.

She didn't know what the new White Fox planned to say. She did know that the organization didn't allow information to get out. They would never leave the Thousand Tricks alone now that he had tried to impersonate one of the bosses. The Thousand Tricks was underestimating Fox.

Sora felt that now was the time to strike, before the situation became clear to the boss. She was a Maiden, a priestess who occupied a special place in the organization. She would lose her position if it became known that she had misidentified someone as a boss, but until then, she had some authority. She still had options available to her.

Reviled for their worship of aberrant gods, Sora's ancestors had joined forces with the first boss when they saw the boss possessed a fox mask. Ever since, the White Fox had been a guiding light for the Holy Fox Maidens.

It was said that multiple people within the organization owned white fox masks. But now someone had appeared with a mask obtained directly from the gods themselves. This was very likely a turning point for the organization.

Sora told herself to not mistake who it was that she should be supporting. No matter how terrifying a fate it might bring her, even if they're all wiped out, she would follow the will of the gods.

But the moment she laid eyes on the real thing, all that faith and determination crumbled in an instant.

Her brain refused to process what she was seeing. That mask was definitely authentic. She felt her heart stop for a split second. Her breath was caught in her throat, her body numb. She couldn't pull her gaze away from the girl.

The girl's mask was authentic, the same as the one worn by the new White Fox. But this girl had a powerful presence, one that was

entirely unlike that of the new White Fox. Sora's limbs refused to budge. She was looking at a god—no, a fiend. The boss took the form of a young girl in a white robe. Her frame was smaller than Sora's, but that didn't make her any less imposing.

Sora realized she had been a fool. She had been ignorant. *This* was the real boss. This preternatural bearing was the true mark of a White Fox, meaning Sora's earlier misidentification proved she was nothing short of incompetent. She now understood what it meant to be chosen by the fox gods. The new White Fox was an imposter, a wolf in fox's clothing.

The real boss looked at Sora. These two shared the same outline, but it was hard to believe they were the same species. The alarm bells in Sora's head were telling her to run before she got killed. The boss silently looked at the three of them. She walked towards Sora, and then continued right past her. She stepped into the kitchen and plucked the fried tofu from the pan, then put it in her mouth.

"Too burnt. Eighty points," was all she said.

A storm of confusion raged in Sora's mind, far surpassing her previous bewilderment. She couldn't comprehend what was happening before her. She could on some level accept the boss's sudden arrival. That was because the boss was supposed to come at some point or another. But *this* defied understanding.

The boss turned towards Sora and said in a voice that chilled her soul, "It's not good. If you don't give me better fried tofu, I'll attack."

What was she saying? She was acting just like the fake White Fox. Sora had to respond, but she was too nervous to move a muscle. And yet the fake White Fox, the man who was supposed to be panicking more than anyone here, didn't share a hint of Sora's trepidation.

"What are you doing here?" he sighed. "And how did you even get here? What happened to Toweyezant?"

"I got tired of it. I granted their wishes. And their fried tofu was, hmm, eighty-five points."

"You're not a harsh judge, are you? You must really like fried tofu."

Huh? What? Whaaat? They're friends? The real and the fake are

friends? How?

These two weren't acting like enemies. The fake White Fox didn't have his mask on, but their conversation suggested they knew each other. Sora was ready to be done. She didn't know what to believe anymore. She wondered what she was supposed to do. What these two wanted her to do.

The boss looked up at the fake White Fox. "That wasn't at all delicious," she declared in a flat tone. "You told me it would be delicious. If you don't give me something better, I'll attack."

"Are you sure about that?" the fake White Fox said with a grin. "We're forming a company that produces inarizushi bento under a fox label. We plan to conquer the world. Attacking would hinder the future of fried tofu! Sora's in charge of this operation!"

The boss froze.

Huh? Huuuh? This plan had a purpose after all?

Sora had been certain the fake White Fox had just been making things up as he went along. Sora only went along with it because as a Maiden, it wasn't her place to question him. She was pulled back to reality by a coughing sound. The boss had suddenly coughed up blood. Sora then felt herself collapsing.

***

"Intense" would be a good way to describe the days that followed after Murina had been entrusted to the Thousand Tricks. The training in the treasure vault had been hell. Even after being brought to Kreat, her days could hardly be considered tranquil.

Under the pretext of mock battles, she had been hit by the Stifled Shadow and cut by the Protean Sword. Her blood had been drained and she had been forced to go up against monsters. They had verbally abused her, asking if she was even trying, and had shown no respect for her status and forced her to do menial chores. She had been tossed out windows, told she had no talent, and doused with water when she lost consciousness.

Everyone in the imperial family was required to take lessons so that they might one day guide the people of Zebrudia, but none of

them had undergone training as brutal as this before. Her two companions, who served as her guards and servants, had both tried to protest, but gave up when they realized the futility of it. Murina didn't resent them for this, as she, too, had abandoned the idea of resisting.

Grieving Souls were entirely indifferent to the glory of the imperial family. To them, Murina was just another job. She was still breathing because they had been asked to temper her abilities. If they had been asked to assassinate her, things would be much different.

And at some point, Murina realized she had indeed become stronger. The mana material and her infernal lessons had made a noticeable difference in her. Her strength and stamina had improved, but those weren't as important as the knowledge of what it meant to do something or die trying. She no longer had the nightmares that came with her days of misfortune. She had no time for dreams, nor for feeling down.

Murina could now use both offensive spells and holy rites. That was considered extraordinarily difficult, but her desperate attempts in the treasure vault had paid off. She knew that mana material enhanced you as you wished, but now she knew that if you wanted every parameter so much you could die, you would get every parameter. It was logical, in its own way.

Could she perhaps use mana material to erase her bad luck? The thought occurred to her, but she shut it out! Fate is something you carve yourself. Simply wishing for safety and stability would only bring her death. What she needed was focus. As long as she was alive, she wasn't dead. Power of will could move a body otherwise weighted down by pain and fatigue. But once she came to a stop, she couldn't get back up.

Now, Murina was back in a dress and talking with her father.

"It pleases me to see you again, Murina. You look hale and hearty."

"Indeed, father."

Previously, Murina had struggled with talking to adults and

looking people in the eye. But now things had changed. Interacting with adults was nothing compared to being tossed around by the vines of a floral phantom.

"And you, Karen, Cindy, thank you for looking after my daughter. I saw it after her training in the treasure vault, but she really appears to have grown. I can see it in her face."

"We're honored to hear that, Your Imperial Majesty. However, we made no contributions. This is all the result of the hard work of Her Imperial Highness. That man's lessons were in an entirely different league than the training of the Zero Order. His methods are rather rough-and-tumble."

Karen was using a figure of speech, but Murina's training had literally involved lots of rough tumbling.

"Be grateful to Sir Franz," emperor Rodrick said. "He wanted to use his armor to shoulder Murina's damage, just as he did during the trip to Toweyezant. But I didn't think Murina would improve if he did that, so I stopped him."

"There's no telling what that man might do. Though it appears my concerns were unwarranted," Franz said. "When Her Imperial Highness first returned to the capital, she was quite worn down, but now I detect considerable improvement in her."

"Why thank you, Sir Franz," Murina replied.

The difference was only natural. During the first training session, Murina hadn't been permitted rest or sleep. But this time, she had at least been allowed that much. The Grievers had dragged her around town and called it training, but seeing the sights had been good for her spirits.

"Have you conquered your misfortune?" her father asked her.

"I have. I've realized that bandits and freak accidents are nothing compared to being assailed by phantoms and Grieving Souls!"

"What?! What did that man do to Her Imperial Highness?!" Franz shouted.

Why had Murina allowed herself to be downtrodden by a little bit of misfortune? Now, she knew from experience how tenacious human beings are. If you live your life with your head hung, you won't be able to dodge incoming attacks. But there was one thing

that had been at the back of her mind.

"Father, there's just one thing I'd like to ask you. The Thousand Tricks said I was going to compete in the Supreme Warrior Festival. Is this true?"

"What are you talking about?" he said. "I gave him a challenger's ticket as payment for mentoring you, but nothing more."

"Th-That man did say he would train Her Imperial Highness to a degree fit for the tournament," Franz added. "But the Supreme Warrior Festival is no place for Murina. There's little in the way of sportsmanship and there are fatalities on occasion."

"R-Right, I should've known!"

Such a casual remark earned Murina funny looks from her father and Franz. But with this weight off her chest, she felt like she could dance. She had improved so much that she was barely the same person, but the Supreme Warrior Festival was still out of the question. She had heard the Thousand Trials were harsh, but you could overcome them if you gave it your all. For her, joining the tournament would've outright ended it all.

"Now, Murina, has Krai Andrey been acting strangely?" her father suddenly asked.

Murina straightened her back and said resolutely, "Yes, father, he has! The Thousand Tricks has *only* acted strangely!"

"I-I see."

From Murina's perspective, the Thousand Tricks was incomprehensible. He occasionally disappeared for reasons unknown to her. He made her wear a tanuki mask and introduced her as "Ponta." She was sure her father never would have been able to imagine any of this. Murina was going to tell Éclair all about it next time they chatted.

"It's as we thought. He must be making a move against Fox," Franz said. "Or he has been, ever since he asked for a ticket to the tournament. Strange behavior was part of his plan for taking down the Counter Cascade. I don't care for the claims of his 'preterhuman artifice' but there is a hint of truth in them."

"Hm. I don't know how he got his information before we did, but he's on the right track."

Fox. Fox mask. Fox Mask Fan Club.

Murina felt a sharp pain in her head, causing her to rub her temples. What was this bad feeling she had? She wanted to vomit but fought back the urge.

"What's the matter, Murina?"

"It's nothing, father."

Just a bit longer. Murina had to endure just a bit more training, then she could return to the castle. When she got back, she would take lessons from proper mentors. She would actually go outside.

"Is your training complete?" her father asked. "The Supreme Warrior Festival is about to begin after all."

Murina looked him in the eye and shook her head. "No, father. My lessons aren't yet complete."

"Is that so? I take it you wish to see them through to the end?"

Murina's small shred of pride wouldn't allow her to quit after coming this far. She didn't know how intense her live combat lessons were supposed to be, but she felt they would be a graduation ceremony of sorts. Once that was over, she could return home with her head held high.

Emperor Rodrick smiled earnestly, something Murina hadn't seen him do in some time, and said, "This experience seems to have made you stronger. What sort of lessons does he have in store for you?"

"It has, father!" Murina said with a big smile. "We're going to search for bandits and ki—cut them!"

***

You never know when your past might catch up with you. After my sudden encounter (and negotiations) with Little Sister Fox, I returned to the inn. I found my pair of pursuers waiting for me in a meeting room on the first floor, their expressions normal enough. However, when your guests are the Abyssal Inferno and the former War Demon, they could still make themselves plenty intimidating.

"You finally came, boy," the pyromaniac lady said while glaring at me.

"Y-Yoo-hoo," I replied. "You didn't wait too long, did you?"

"We waited five hours," Gark answered.

"Really? Not a whole lot on your plate right now?"

"Can you please stop saying things better left unsaid?" Lucia asked me.

Gark looked at me like I was some sort of criminal, while the old lady seemed to be taking things in stride. But I knew she was liable to cause a blaze on a whim. She believed everything was fine as long as there were no fatalities. If there were, then the evidence just needed to be erased.

I wonder if Lucia could handle both of them. They wouldn't start something in an inn, right?

My stomach, head, and heart all hurt, and my body felt sluggish. I was gonna barf.

"What's it take to change you, Krai?" the old lady said with a chuckle. "You pretend our conversation didn't happen and come out here without saying anything to us."

"I thought you'd figure it out without my help," I told her in a desperate attempt at an excuse.

"How the hell were we supposed to do that?!" Gark roared. "Not everyone can do what you do!"

Kaina. Where's Kaina?

The Abyssal Inferno took a sip of her tea and said in a raspy voice, "Never mind that. We don't plan on interfering with the Supreme Warrior Festival. I, too, once reveled in that frenzy of flesh and blood."

"So I've heard, Abyssal Inferno," Lucia said in a placid voice. "You were banned from the tournament after you used a wide-range obliteration spell that took the barriers with it."

Did the Abyssal Inferno just not have any limiters? Honestly, Luke and Liz were better than her. At least they could only hit one target at a time.

The Abyssal Inferno gave my sister a sharp look before returning her gaze my way. She was always soft on Lucia, perhaps because they were both Magi. Then again, since childhood, Lucia had a history of being pretty universally liked.

"Well, I won't force the issue," the pyromaniac said. "We'll forgive you for leaving us behind. We're not here to get in your way, we've got our things to take care of. Oho ho ho, not to mention we owe you."

I appreciate the clemency, but how come I never have the right to turn down these little meetings?

But they'd just follow me anyway. I should've been thankful I had Lucia at my side.

I put on my hard-boiled demeanor, ready to settle things. "Well, I've had my own share of troubles. Now, you wanted to talk about Fox?"

"Don't say their name out here, you moron!" Gark yelled. "There's no telling where they might have ears."

Oh c'mon. And what even is "Fox"?

I still didn't understand a key part of all this. I kept meaning to ask what they meant, but I was afraid to, so I repeatedly put it off. All I knew was that they were a crazy organization that had tried to assassinate the emperor and that Telm and Kechachakka had worked for them. But throughout my life, I had been accosted by dozens of secretive criminal organizations and I didn't even know how dangerous this one was.

There was this group, that one treasure vault, and then the Fox Mask Fan Club. Foxes seemed to be in style. I didn't know how many more there were, but I really wished they picked more distinctive names.

If they wanted to search for this Fox thingy, they didn't need my permission. But I knew what they wanted—they wanted my help, even if they didn't like it. They didn't have much support out here.

Maybe I'll lend 'em Ansem, if they promise to return him immediately.

"Sorry, but all I've got are the Fox Mask Fan Club and some gluttons," I said.

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"Truly, leader, what are you saying?"

Lucia, whose side are you on?

"We didn't come here for your dumb jokes," the Abyssal Inferno

said with a sigh. “This time you were the first to get on the trail. I understand how these things go and I’m willing to let you have this one. Thinking was never my strong suit anyway.”

“I don’t know how you got your information before the empire or the Association did, but we’ve got a reputation to maintain. Do you follow me, Krai Andrey?”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

What were these geezers talking about? Which one was “this one”? I turned around towards Lucia, but my ice-cold sister just shrugged at me. If Sitri had been there, I bet she would’ve explained it.

I didn’t know what they were talking about, I didn’t know about appearances, nor did I think I had moved first. I wanted to tell them to do what they wanted as long as they didn’t cause any trouble for me.

“Do as you please,” I said, giving a vague, obfuscating response. “I’ve done everything I’m supposed to.”

Gark scowled and leaned forward. “So you’re saying you know what weapon they’ve got and what they plan to do with it?”

He just doesn’t quit.

“Yeah. Uh-huh,” I said. Nothing more I could say by that point. “Hm?”

I suddenly realized Gark had said something significant. Before I could figure it out, he clicked his tongue and returned to his original posture.

“Hell, Krai, where do you get your info? After years of nothing, we only just got a meager scrap.”

“Huh?! Oh...from Eva?”

Sorry, Eva. My mouth moved on its own. But I don’t want to keep answering questions. I’m sorry.

“Huh? I don’t care how good your network is, I don’t believe that you could easily get something we’ve busted our asses for years—”

“Sorry, I’ve actually got something I need to take care of. Can we call it here? I’ve got a lot to do.”

“Ah! Damn it, Krai!”

Sorry, but I’ve got to run before I’m exposed for being a fraud.

I had recently learned that if I said I had things to do, these people wouldn't make much of an effort to pursue me. I had just told them I had done everything I was supposed to, then immediately contradicted myself, but they didn't seem to be bothered by it. Was *this* preterhuman artifice?

I stood up, only to hear a sudden *pshhh* noise, like rising steam. The Abyssal Inferno was pointing a bony finger at me, a flickering flame at the end of it. A few more times, lights flew at me, then turned to steam a few centimeters before my eyes. None of my Safety Rings had gone off, so this must have been Lucia protecting me.

The Abyssal Inferno blew out her smoking finger, then got up from her seat. She had good posture that was at odds with her old age. She was a bit taller than me and I had heard that in her younger days, she was sometimes mistaken for a Noble Spirit. We made eye contact, her small burning irises bearing down on me.

Her dry lips twisted into a demonic smile and she said in a husky voice, "I'll follow your lead for now. But this is a festival. When the time comes, I expect there to be a signal, Thousand Tricks. I whipped these old bones into coming all the way out here and I still have a score to settle because of Telm. Are we clear?"

"Oh, yes."

Her voice was intense, telling me she would brook no argument. Her eyes glimmered the way Liz's would. I didn't see why someone her age didn't just retire.

She left the room, and before following her out, Gark said to me, "Right, Krai. Don't neglect the tournament. If one of our own wins that thing, it'll make me look pretty good."

Seeing the storm of a woman head out, Gark clicked his tongue and went after her. What a heedless person she was. Even Gark had to follow her lead. And what sort of hunter talked about scores to settle? I just prayed that Lucia wouldn't turn out that way.

There was a brief silence, before Lucia asked me in a chilly voice, "What is it you had to take care of?"

That would be that *of course.*

Just then, a crowd of hunters bearing First Steps's crest entered

the lobby. At the front, I saw Tino and Sven.

"Master, Lucy, we've come to cheer you on!"

"Hey, Krai. We're finally here."

With the tournament starting soon, they must've decided now was a good time to arrive. Blinking and wrinkling her brow, Lucia was giving me a very funny look.

"I'm glad you all could make it," I said. "Great timing!"

Of course, I hadn't planned on their timely arrival, but I was more than glad to see them.

"So how do things look?" Sven asked. "We're not in our element, being away from Zebrudia like this."

"Don't worry," I answered with a shrug. "You think people like Liz and Luke would let some unfamiliar ground bother them? They're so excited I don't know what to do with them."

Sven seemed to be his usual chipper self. He always made a face whenever I asked anything of him, but he must've felt some connection to us if he came all this way.

"No, I meant you," he said.

"Sven, Master would never give in to mere nervousness," Tino said on my behalf. She took another good look around the lobby, then at me and my sister-slash-bodyguard. "Master, I withdrew my entire savings and bet it all on you!"

That's right. There was betting going on.

"Thanks," I said as I laughed at her joke. "Knowing that, I'll try a bit harder!"

I didn't think she could actually have bet on me when I wasn't participating.

Tino's eyes sparkled. "Yes, try your very best! I'll study every move!"

Very admirable of you. There's a lot to learn from Grieving Souls.

"Ah, what's with all these people?! I've seen enough people to last a year! I went to the trouble of coming out here, so don't even think about losing! Sir!"

Business as usual for Kris, it seemed.

"You won't settle for anything less than first?" I asked her.

I hadn't been surrounded by friends like this in a while. The last

person to arrive was Eva, who had probably directed the whole trip. Behind those thin frames, her sharp eyes didn't let anything get past.

"What's the status of Princess Murina?" she asked.

"Oh, that. No problems whatsoever. Probably. I've done what I can."

"I see. Is there any way I can be of assistance?"

"I appreciate it. I'll take you up on that if anything comes up."

Even when making a similar offer, she and the Abyssal Inferno felt completely different.

While I was letting myself bask in the comfort of friends, Sven glanced around and said, "Just Lucia with you? What about the others?"

"They're seeing to another matter," Lucia replied. "I'm looking after our leader."

"Yeah, y'know, someone might ambush me here," I added.

"Because you're always making enemies," Sven said.

What slander. I turned to Tino, but she refused to look me in the eye.

"No," I said. "I'm confident I've done nothing. That's what an ambush is, attacking someone doing nothing."

Lucia just sighed. I was pretty sure she was aware of how harmless I was, so I was sure that sigh was an expression of resignation at my terrible misfortune. But for once, I was confident I'd be fine. I had the Fox Mask Fan Club and Touka's party lending me a hand. Little Sister Fox had returned from the desert, but remained fixated on fried tofu.

That said, I wanted to change the subject and had the perfect means to do it.

"Hey, just so you know, Sven, the real me is here, in this very town."

"Huh?"

"They say everyone has three doppelgängers, right? I was a fan the moment I met him. And what's more, even his allies are doppelgängers of mine."

"Brother?! I never talk like that girl!"

"Yeah, in your case, you're probably the superior of the two. You might be losing on the lovey-dovey front, but you're much stronger. Not to mention you have a title, while she doesn't. And you're much prettier. You might not be lovey-dovey as a dove, but you can throw a good punch."

Lucia clenched her fists, quaking as though struggling to keep herself under control.

"Ahhh, Lucy's all red," Tino gasped.

As Lucia's brother, I was obviously biased, but I was sure mine was the superior younger sister.

"Nevertheless, you should totally meet him, Sven," I said. "If I ask, I'm sure you can even get an autograph! I hope you can meet the others as well."

"Master, why are you so giddy about this?"

Tino looked exasperated, but I was sure she'd feel the same way if she randomly met someone identical to her. Come to think of it, there wasn't a Tino-like in Krahi's group.

Now, everyone's here. Nothing to worry about. All I have to do is wait for the tournament to start.

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"Ba ha ha ha! Yeah, no doubt about it, I'm looking at the real ones!"

"Sven, you're being terribly rude."

What to do? Kule Saicool the self-proclaimed Protean Sortie couldn't hide his bewilderment. Next to him, Izabee the self-proclaimed Eyeful Shadow was in a similar state of shock.

On top of reaching Level 8 at a young age, the Thousand Tricks was also the clan master of First Steps, one of the largest clans out there. And all these people that had shown up with him were members.

As the brains of his party, Kule Saicool had thoroughly researched Grieving Souls when forming Bereaving Souls. This tall man decked out in black and gold gear was none other than Sven Anger the Stormstrike.

Treasure hunters took great pride in how they were referred to. Giving yourself a self-proclaimed title nearly identical to someone else's was considered shady and could get you killed if you were copying someone short-tempered enough.

So what was with this reaction? Despite seeing someone with a title so close to his clan master's (for the record, though, Krahi wasn't deliberately trying to deceive anyone), Sven wasn't indignant. In fact, he was clapping his hands and laughing.

"Real? What are you talking about? I am unambiguously real," Krahi declared. He said this with a courageous dignity that you couldn't have without being genuine (-ly stupid).

"Incredible, brother! You're the best! More real than the real thing!" Lusha squealed adoringly and clung to his arm, knowing full well that Krahi was a fake.

Next to Sven was a Thief with red ribbons in her hair. She averted her gaze and muttered, "Oh, Lucy, my deepest condolences."

"Hm? Did I hear my name?" said Lusha, who had already once risked life and limb ticking off her real counterpart.

"Not at all!" the Thief said while hiding behind Sven.

Holding his staff in one hand, Krahi surveyed the group. "So tell me, who are you people? My eyes don't lie to me. I can tell you're no ordinary civilians!"

One of Krahi's faults was unfamiliarity with the treasure-hunting world. He had worked solo for so long that he knew next to nothing about other hunters. Kule had been quite surprised to learn that he knew of neither the Thousand Tricks nor First Steps. But the name Krahi Andrihee was his real name and he had the documents to prove it. The similarity to another certain hunter was a complete coincidence.

Kule couldn't wrap his head around what the real one was thinking. When he heard that Krahi had met the real one, he had been certain they were done for. But the real one didn't just refrain from getting angry, he let Krahi off the hook.

The Thousand Tricks was known for his preterhuman artifice. It was possible he had discerned Krahi wasn't trying to impersonate him and therefore let him go in a show of mercy. Perhaps every

powerful hunter was as much of an oddball as Krahi.

"We're members of the clan you formed," Sven answered, looking entirely serious.

"A clan, you say?"

What are you doing, dolt? You never formed a clan! Kule thought.

Talented hunters attracted rumors. Reputations could grow of their own accord, appellations could develop, fan clubs could pop up. But you could *not* become the master of a clan without being involved in it. Yet there Krahi was, looking down at his own hands.

"When did I ever form a clan?" he whispered.

"Huh? You did?! Way to go!"

Even Lusha's confused!

On several occasions, Krahi had been mistaken for the real Krai Andrey. This had made Krahi accustomed to being praised for things he hadn't done and even being misidentified by the Explorers' Association. His sheer talent had done a lot to dissuade suspicions that he might be an impersonator, and, much to Kule's anxiety, he didn't see himself as an impersonator.

"Right, let's get a photo! We need to commemorate this!" Sven said. "Marietta, fetch the camera!"

"Sven, for goodness' sake, please calm down," said Obsidian Cross's Magus.

It seemed the real ones were under the impression that Bereaving Souls was just a joke or some sort of fan club. Not an unreasonable assumption.

Surrounded by members of a clan he didn't recall forming, Krahi smiled pleasantly. He was a star. Sven then looked at Kule, the Archer's raptor-like gaze causing him to gulp.

"Hey, you're Luke, aren't you?" Sven said. "Where's Sitri?"

"If you're looking for Kutri, she's out right now. She's an Alchemist after all."

She was probably guiling someone into buying a bogus potion. The Ignorable was best ignored.

"And Ansem?"

This was bad. The jig was nearly up. Sven might be onto the fact that Kule had smooth-talked Krahi into forming a party.

"We're currently accepting applications," Kule answered, feeling like a brigand in an interrogation room.

***

Within one of Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox's bases, Galf listened to a report from one of his subordinates.

"Well done," he said with a nod of satisfaction. "I'm sure the boss will be pleased."

The recent series of upsets was taking a visible toll on Galf's rugged complexion, but there was still a glimmer in his eyes.

The boss had mandated that they befriend a number of previously antagonistic groups. From the moment he received these orders, Galf had thought this would be a pain, but it had turned out to be even more trouble than he had imagined. For starters, gathering large groups of people was antithetical to Fox's dedication to secrecy. Using no more personnel than necessary was key to keeping things under wraps.

Fox's name had already spread throughout the underworld and their reticent nature rubbed more than a few groups the wrong way. The underworld had its own rules. To refuse to proffer any information about yourself essentially demonstrated a lack of trust and made it harder to deal with larger organizations.

But Galf did what he had to. Using every means available to him, he contacted the groups listed by the boss. He used money, made shows of force, and sat down at negotiating tables. In contacting so many organizations, some people began to suspect that Fox was up to something big, which drew some bodies out of hiding. For this move, Galf was rather proud of himself.

By thoroughly going through the list and forming alliances with just about every name on the list, Kreat saw almost none of the bloody incidents that usually characterized this time of the year. It could be said that every underworld organization in Kreat was currently under Fox's influence. No matter how grand the boss's plans might be, he wouldn't be wanting for manpower.

Then there were the boss's personal units. Galf hadn't asked for

their identities, but they weren't going to any lengths to hide who they were. Grieving Souls and Knights of the Torch. These high-level hunters were the boss's secret weapon. They would operate above the surface, while Galf's alliance worked below. This sort of bifurcation was never a bad idea.

The boss had said he would cede his mask to Galf if this operation were to be a success. Galf chose to believe him. He would carry out this one-in-a-lifetime operation, then rise to the organization's top!

Wearing fox masks without any enthusiasm for them, the boss's personal troops chatted to each other as they entered the room.

"This is one dreary place."

"I think I smell blood. Nice. So, who do I cut?"

"I think it's quite lovely. I rather like it. You could do whatever you wanted and nobody would find out."

They sounded casual enough, but they practically radiated mana material. At the back of the group were the Thousand Tricks (in a demon mask for whatever reason) and Ponta. The door shut behind them.

"Hmm. I never knew such a place existed here in Kreat. Fascinating. I look forward to this. Perhaps this will be a proper battlefield for the Thousandfold Theurgics."

Why didn't this man keep his title a secret? Could someone this stupid really have made it to Level 8?

"I apologize for any claustrophobia. We don't usually have so many people here," Galf said.

"Oh not at all," said a robed woman in a mask modeled after a sad fox. "By the way, may I inquire as to your relationship with *them*?" Her voice was mellow, but there was nothing friendly about the look in her eyes.

Damn it, hadn't the boss told them anything? Galf had been vaguely aware of it, but now it was obvious what a finicky person the boss was.

He cleared his throat and said, "I'm Galf Shenfelder of the seventh tail. The boss has entrusted this operation to me. Though commanding his personal units is of course beyond my purview. I

have no objections if you wish to prioritize your own duties."

"Seventh tail? I see," the robed woman said. "I understand. I'm the boss's wife, Yuttri."

"What?!"

"You can't say shit like that just cause he isn't here!" the Stifled Shadow said, smacking Yuttri on the back of the head.

Ponta was shaking. Galf thought his heart was going to stop, but it turned out that the woman had just been joking around. He took a deep breath as he waited for Yuttri to lift her head again.

"There's a large space underground," he told them. "Given the size of this operation, I didn't invite everyone, but all the key players were invited. They've agreed to follow our orders, but they'll be more eager to cooperate if they've had a chance to meet us in person."

***

Accidents were a part of treasure hunting. Treasure vaults were manifestations of distant memories and anything could happen in these abnormal realms. Risking life and limb in these places caused hunters to develop unshakable dispositions.

Grieving Souls were exceptionally acclimated to sudden developments. The same could be said of their leader's incomprehensible preterhuman artifice. Having no information in advance was par for the course. Their love of the unknown was one of the secrets behind their party's success.

They followed Galf Shenfelder down a long staircase. There were six of them: Sitri, Luke, Liz, Murina, Touka, and Krahi. They didn't talk, the only sound was that of their steady footsteps.

But as they walked, something slowly dawned on Sitri—nobody here understood what was going on. Naturally, the Grievers didn't understand the task Krai had abruptly given them, and it seemed likely that Touka and Princess Murina were equally ignorant.

Given the circumstances, any thinking would have to be done by Sitri. Liz and Luke were more the intuitive type, and neither Lucia nor Ansem were present this time around. While making sure not to

let it show on her face, Sitri began to sift through the information in her head.

This is an awfully long staircase, she thought. *What could something this deep underground be doing in Kreat?*

Krai had said he acquired help in finding the whereabouts of the organizations on the list Sitri had procured. So when he had dispatched them, she had been certain it was because Krai's helper needed assistance. But that clearly wasn't what was going on; a civilian would never be able to locate a criminal organization.

This man before her, Galf Shenfelder, was clearly nobody ordinary. He had the distinct air of someone with high amounts of mana material and he carried himself like someone with extensive combat experience. And then there was the mask covering his face. The man who seemed to be one of Galf's subordinates had also been wearing a fox mask, one with a generally different design.

Krai had been calling them the "Fox Mask Fan Club," but Sitri was well-acquainted with her childhood friend's sense of humor. It was enough to earn him the title "Thousand Tricks." She also knew that he was a rascal who enjoyed messing with her and teasing her. She couldn't count how many times he had pulled the rug out from under her.

The fox masks brought to mind two things for her: the phantoms of Peregrine Lodge and the clones produced by the Counter Cascade. Those clones had worn fox masks, but that knowledge alone wasn't enough to draw any conclusions.

Despite her years working with Akashic Tower, Sitri knew next to nothing about Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox. They were elusive enough that she couldn't have reached out to them, even if she were to try. She had never so much as suspected that the Counter Cascade had been one of their members and she had barely believed it when she learned that Krai had played him like a fiddle.

Though she seemed calm, there were two Sitris fighting inside her. There was the pro-Krai Sitri telling her to believe in him, and then there was the pro-Krai Sitri saying that she was being teased again and she should just accept it. Generally speaking, the latter one was winning. It seemed impossible, but given that Krai had sent

her over, it was possible the Fox Mask Fan Club really was just that.

I'm a shell. I'm a stone. Joy and despair are concepts with no bearing on me.

As she repeated this mantra to control her heartbeat, Galf came to a stop. They had reached the bottom.

"Just to be clear, we're only going to make introductions," he said.

Galf opened the iron door. A cold, moldy air washed over them. Sitri's heart began to pound when she saw what was inside. A wave of whispers billowed onto them, countless eyes turning their way. Luke the sword fiend looked at them wide-eyed, and Touka clenched her fist for just a moment.

Inside the room were dozens of people, none of them ordinary. Nearest to the door was a large man who glared at them intensely.

"Oh, look who finally decided to join us. I was getting sick of waiting," he said.

"Listen, Fox, we'll only take so much of this," said another.

Bathed in looks of curiosity, animosity, and allegiance, Galf shrugged and said, "Sorry, but as you all know, secrecy is our motto."

These are the people from my list! Sitri thought.

Figuring out what was going on, her sister blinked and groaned, "Oh, for real? I thought something was up. How did he do this?"

"Hm? What's that?" Luke said. "Can I cut these guys?"

It was too much to be a coincidence. Overwhelmed with emotions, her strength left her. He hadn't been teasing her. The pro-Krai Sitri was right! Her heart kicked into high gear.

I was right to believe in you, Krai!

Krahi looked at the crowd inquisitively. "There's so many of them. What group is this?"

"This is unexpected," Touka said. "What shall I do? This wasn't in the contract."

She could be a problem. Knights of the Torch always sided with justice and only served clean and righteous purposes. Before Touka could get angry, Sitri quietly made sure the knight had a change of heart.

"Touka. I'll pay double the usual."

Touka gave Sitri a reproachful glare. She fought for a paycheck, but she was also very principled. Her silence was an act of kindness, consideration for the moment. Sitri greatly appreciated it.

"Triple the usual."

Silence.

"The boss can be a joker, but he wouldn't ask that we do something immoral. You know that, don't you? Are conspiracies not to your liking?"

Touka groaned at these carefully chosen words.

"You win this time," she said. "Allow me to compliment you on that, Yuttri."

"Oh?"

Sitri hardly needed any compliments when she was the one who should be thankful. She wanted to learn about Fox more than any other organization out there. She had been disappointed when she learned that Telm had been locked away in that treasure vault, but now she felt her patience had paid off. She wanted to hug Krai and tell him how grateful she was.

"We've secured the cooperation of everyone on the list," Galf said to Sitri. "Tell the boss that our preparations are fully complete and we're ready to move at any time. Has he told you anything regarding the chain of command?"

His languid, nonchalant movements showed just how confident he was. Allying with so many different groups couldn't have been easy.

"You've exceeded our expectations, Galf," Sitri replied. "I'll be sure to inform the boss."

Now, she could tell. Sitri knew exactly what Krai was thinking. There was purpose to everything Krai did. Deciphering his intentions was Sitri's specialty. It made her indispensable. There were still some points not yet clear to her, but she knew what she was supposed to do.

Ponta had been shaking ever since they entered the room. Sitri gripped her shoulder and brought her forward, then said to Galf, "Our commander will be Ponta. Her true identity is someone in a very high position."

"Huh?!" Ponta cried, her voice echoing throughout the room.

Sitri offered her some silent encouragement.

Your final lessons will be in leadership skills! Give it your all!

***

With the meeting over and the outsiders gone, Galf closed his eyes. The only people left were him and his underlings. These were the people loyal to him. They'd choose him over the organization if they had to.

"The meeting was a success," he said. "We can move the moment orders come in. But something's bothering me."

The organization had an unyielding hierarchy. The commands from the top had to be obeyed no matter the circumstances, and even a higher-ranked member could be silenced if they defied their orders. The organization was built on this rigid structure, but it had its own unspoken rules.

"I formed this alliance. Handing off the reins is like letting someone else take credit for it. This isn't how we usually do things."

When Galf had asked about the chain of command, he had been doing it for the sake of protocol. Typically, the right to command would be his, as he had brought all these forces together. If that right was going to be taken from him, he should have at least been told why. But what bothered him most was that this operation was supposed to be his shot to become one of the bosses. To now be stripped of control made little sense.

"Does anyone know who Ponta is? We can contact headquarters if we have to. She doesn't look like she's part of Grieving Souls."

He swept his gaze over his subordinates, but they all shook their heads. She didn't have the aura of a high-level hunter and her mana material was distinctly lower than the other hunters. At first, Galf had thought she was a new addition to their party, but if Yuttri was to be believed, there was some specific reason she had been chosen.

"I just remembered," one of Galf's underlings said, "we received word from headquarters earlier. They said the Thousand Tricks had

been asked to mentor the imperial princess of Zebrudia."

"That's preposterous. She was a secondary target of Telm's operation."

Murina Atolm Zebrudia, the imperial princess of Zebrudia was an important person, yet she had almost no presence within the empire. She was also one of the targets of Telm the Counter Cascade's failed assassination attempt.

"Visually, they're similar," the subordinate said. "Their hair color and height are a match. She may not have any authority, but she does occupy a high position."

"Meaning there's still something they're not telling us."

If you're going to fool your enemies, start with your friends. Fox was currently one of the biggest threats to the great Zebrudian Empire. But even the largest entities were still vulnerable to attacks from the inside. Galf felt a chill down his spine, like he had just gotten a glimpse into a vast conspiracy.

"Is it possible they could have brought the imperial princess over to their side? Does this mean the Counter Cascade's failure really was intentional? Having the imperial princess under Fox's influence would shake even Zebrudia, but I can barely believe it."

It didn't take a genius to realize that Fox stood to gain a lot by luring a member of the imperial family over to their side. And what better way to broadcast her new allegiance than putting her in charge of an operation?

Galf had heard that the operation in Kreat would be a key step in Fox's declaration of war on the world. To simultaneously receive news of that and the imperial princess's betrayal would be a shock felt far and wide. It could isolate the empire. And leading that effort would be Fox's new boss, Galf Shenfelder.

"Interesting. We're looking at a turning point in history."

They had a big job in front of them. Galf still hadn't been shown the full scale of the boss's plan. But perhaps the boss felt that if he couldn't figure that much out on his own, he wasn't worthy of the mask. Similarly, Ponta's true identity was obvious enough from her outward appearance. "Incompetent" would be a perfectly fair description of anyone who couldn't put the pieces together.

Galf almost felt himself trembling. To think that even someone of his rank hadn't been made aware that Grieving Souls and Knights of the Torch were allies of Fox. Nor had he known that the imperial princess was on their side. This was a trump card, one that wouldn't work if their allegiances were revealed. Played at the wrong time, years of hard work could vanish in an instant.

"No need to contact headquarters," Galf decided. "We'll follow our orders and trust in Ponta. Be ready to move at any moment! We'll continue with Plan A."

The time was near. The world would change. A shadowy smile was forming on Galf's lips when the underling tasked with communicating information came dashing in.

"Galf, we just received word from headquarters. They want to know the status of the package from Plan A."

Surprised, Galf furrowed his brow. There was only one item they could be referring to. It had been under tight security at a museum in the empire, and securing it had been Phase One of Plan A.

"We followed the plan and handed Key of the Land to the boss. Their info must be old," Galf said.

Having formed from the remains of an intelligence agency, Fox specialized in information. A delay of a few hours was normal, but for HQ to be multiple days behind was rare. Surely, the boss couldn't have forgotten to inform them...

Chapter Four: The Real Boss

"Mmm. Not what I was expecting," Luke said while idly fiddling with Key of the Land. "The princess might be fine with it, but what good is a criminal if I can't cut 'em?"

"Yeah. I'm like, looking forward to it, but I don't think it's gonna put us to the test or anything."

"Wh-What do you plan to make me do?"

Luke was bored, Liz was dyspeptic, and Princess Murina was her usual self. They were all showing unique reactions, but none of them seemed particularly happy.

"Oh. Yeah, uh-huh," I added.

Looking at the newspaper, it seemed that crime in Kreat had started to decline. I believed that all's well that ends well, but I still wondered why there were fewer incidents if my friends hadn't done anything. My plan had been for this to be both stress relief and a preemptive attack to discourage any outlaws. Was there some strange force at work?

Those thoughts were cut off by Sitri, entering with a tray loaded with a tea set.

"Krai, I got some lovely cake!"

Unlike the other three, Sitri was unusually cheerful. It was normal for her to be grinning, but the light in her eyes was different. As her childhood friend, I could tell that she was feeling something too strong for her to contain.

"Something good happen?" I asked her.

"Oh, hardly at—here, let me pour you some tea."

My dear friend eagerly poured me a cup. I was sure something was going on. She was always doing kind things for me, but it wasn't often that she brought me cake. In fact, this was a measure she only resorted to when there was something up. It was like a signal she gave off.

She swiftly set out the tea set, forgot to open the cake box, and circled around behind me. Her cold hands brushed against the base of my neck and I realized she wasn't wearing her usual robe.

"Let me rub your shoulders," she said.

And then instead of doing that, she wrapped her arms around me and leaned against me. Pressed against my back, I could feel the beat of her heart.

"Krai, shall I lend you some money?" she whispered into my ear.

I froze.

"Instead," she continued, getting to the point, "I'd like *that*. You'll give it to me, won't you? I'm trusting you."

I was willing to give her whatever she wanted, but I was scared. Scared because I didn't have a clue what she was getting at. Sitri gently caressed my body and pressed her lips to the back of my ear. I felt a shiver of pleasure and terror.

"When did you get it?" she asked. "How did you get it? You got it for me, right?"

"What are you talking about?"

"*That*. I'll be sure to take good care of it. So, if you would. C'mon, Krai," she said and made a coughing noise.

Deep down, Sitri was a bashful person, so I was taken aback by her willingness to go this far. And I was horrified because I had no clue what she was referring to. What had I recently obtained? What could I have that Sitri couldn't get even with her deep pockets?

"Paws off, Yuttri! Time out!" a shrill voice cried.

Liz then hurled a flower vase, hitting her sister square in the head. As she recoiled, Ansem, who had walked up behind her, lifted her by the scruff of her neck.

By the way, who's Yuttri? Any relation to the si tree and ku tree?

"Noooo, let me go!" she wailed while flailing her limbs. "I'm gonna marry Krai!"

She's regressing to a child. I'll give it to you. Whatever you want, just calm down.

"We could turn her into stone if only Lucy were here," Liz sighed.

Ansem grunted in agreement.

"Anssy, toss her. Like you're throwing something away. She'll go

insane if she doesn't cool off."

Grunting, Ansem opened the window and flung his younger sister out, her screams growing distant as she fell.

Do they realize we're on the fourth floor? I guess that's not much for a hunter. But what's gotten into Sitri?

"It's no good. Krai, I keep trying, but I can't charge it!" Luke yelled in frustration.

The sun had set long ago. Sitri had regained a degree of sanity (though she still gave me longing glances). I had finally gotten a moment of peace, but I couldn't help but dwell on how rowdy my friends were.

Luke was holding before me Key of the Land, the Relic I had lent to him. Luke was a pure Swordsman, but that didn't mean he was entirely without mana. He had tested out just about every sword-type Relic in my collection. Unlike me, he didn't rely on Lucia to do his charging, so he had enough mana to at least fill up most swords. And if he didn't have enough, he would train until he did. That's the sort of man Luke Sykol was.

It wasn't often this sword fanatic gave up like this. The Relic must've required a fair bit if it still hadn't shown any signs of reaching max. I took the sword from him and pulled it partway out of its scabbard.

"Key of the Land. Key of the Land?" I muttered.

The enigmatic blade's edge was straight as a ruler and covered in patterns. What powers could it have if it required enough mana to cause even Luke to throw in the towel? The newspaper hadn't mentioned anything about its abilities, but names could say a lot.

With a grunt, Luke clenched his fist and loudly proclaimed, "If I can't use the sword properly, then I need more training! But I don't have anyone to cut!"

There he goes, saying more nonsense.

"You can't use it because it's not a sword," I said in an attempt to sound cool. "It's a key."

I straightened my posture and looked Luke in the eye. I made myself look serious and made up some bullshit.

"Luke, do you know what every key requires? The answer is simpler than you might think."

As a super first-rate Swordsman, Luke surpassed me in nearly every aspect except common sense. But one area I did have the upper hand in was knowledge of Relics.

Luke thought it over for a moment, then said uncertainly, "So we need a keyhole?"

I was hoping he would let me say it. Trying not to let it show, I sighed and said, "Indeed. In other words, this is a key. A key to the future! Bad things will happen if the claws of evil get it."

"Wh-What?! Claws of evil?! What are the claws of evil?!"

"That's, uh, y'know? Right, they're the enemies of the world."

"The enemies of the world?! Where are they? Can I cut 'em?!"

Why are you so excited? I'm just making stuff up. Stuff I think you'd enjoy.

Lucia turned from her book and looked absolutely fed up.

I had gone too far with the stories and Luke was buying it all. I didn't know how to answer his question.

"It's like, y'know," I said after a moment's hesitation, "natural disasters and stuff."

"Natural. Disasters." Luke said, questioning.

"But even those can be cut by the best Swordsmen!" I exclaimed.

Fluctuating between shock and disappointment kept Luke awfully busy.

I had obtained the Relic due to a misunderstanding, so it would only be right to give it back before going home. But since I had gotten it, it would be a waste to not test it out once before returning it. I didn't have anything else to do until the Supreme Warrior Festival began. I let out a yawn and set Key of the Land down in front of Lucia.

***

The White Foxes. The bosses. As far back as Sora could remember, she had been taught all about these hellacious personages. During her lessons, her daily prayers, even in the

lullabies sung to her when she was a child, she had been taught of the White Foxes' wisdom, luck, charisma, and prudence. Aside from these noble traits, it was also impressed upon her that the White Foxes had a capacity for cruelty that rivaled that of the gods.

After being born from the intelligence agency of a bygone nation, the organization had grown with each generation thanks to the bosses' diverse skill sets. They fought, conquered, forged alliances, and slowly but surely sunk their fangs into every nation they could.

The fox masks were mere symbols. The Maidens, who worshiped the fox gods, were in awe of that first mask claimed by the boss. A unifying symbol was needed to cement the organization's foundations and now that they had one, Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox was fully formed.

A white mask was proof of a boss's stature. The inheritor of the mask was determined through strength, not lineage, ensuring fierce and constant competition. Thus, whoever stood at the top was undoubtedly the organization's strongest. With the backing of Fox's funds, influence, and technology, not even a high-level hunter could oppose the boss.

That selfsame fiend was now ordering Sora to make fried tofu.

"Hurry. Make more."

"Y-Yes, boss."

Sora didn't understand why she was doing this. Words like "bafflement" were no longer sufficient to describe her state of mind. It was one surprise after another. If she had been surprised to learn that the real and fake boss were acquainted, she had also been surprised to learn that they wanted the same thing from her.

Who was a friend? Who was a foe? What was right? What was Sora supposed to do?

The boss took the form of a young girl. By what must have been providence, she exuded a warm aura as she watched Sora work the frying pan. Sora focused on her work, adding a new slice of tofu to the oil. Her heart was beating so rapidly that she thought it might explode. She was certain that if she stopped moving her hands, she would be killed. It didn't make any sense, but that was what the intense gaze of the boss told her.

In retrospect, the False Fox was fairly soft. He had given her orders but hadn't forced her or threatened her. The true fox was quite different. One after another, the finished blocks of fried tofu disappeared into the maw of the true boss. Sora couldn't bear it.

The White Fox politely licked her plate before glaring at Sora and saying, "We won't be able to take over the world like this. Again."

O False Fox, please come back!

The two foxes were giving her the exact same order, but this White Fox was undeniably the true one.

"P-Pardon me, but how will fried tofu allow us to—"

"Mr. Caution should have told you. We'll make inarizushi bento."

"Y-You two are joking, correct?"

"Hurry. More tofu. If you don't, *you* could be fried."

Her voice made it clear that she was serious.

This was impossible. Sora couldn't keep going like this. She didn't know who to blame. Besides, taking over the world with boxed lunches was impossible! And those lunches were never going to be completed if this girl kept eating every finished piece!

From seemingly nowhere, the White Fox conjured a sofa and sat down, swinging her legs as she fiddled with her Smartphone. She didn't look motivated in the slightest.

"Hurry," the White Fox said. "Don't watch. Work."

"Um. Boss, did you not come to Kreat in order to aid the operation?"

Sora didn't know much about the current operation, but there must've been something exceptional about it if someone so busy was taking the time to visit. She shouldn't have time for selling, or rather, making fried tofu.

"That doesn't matter," the boss answered. "Now, cook."

"The outcome of this operation could change the very direction of our organization!" Sora protested.

"*Mmm.* That block. Eighty-three points."

Sora was done for. This one was more obtuse than the False Fox. Sora was willing to admit that the White Fox was an awe-inspiring person. But how had she led Fox to such great heights? What was the purpose behind the fried tofu? Why was a priestess being forced

to do the cooking? Was this a form of punishment? Was she going to spend the rest of her life at the frying pan because she had been tricked into making fried tofu?

Hell was a real place and Sora was in it. If they planned to execute her, she wished they would just hurry up and get it over with. As these thoughts crossed her mind, the door flung open, and in came the source of her troubles. He wasn't wearing his mask, so he couldn't even be called a fox, but that no longer mattered.

"O False Fox, I've awaited your return!"

"You have?! What's up?"

She no longer cared. She was just fine with the False Fox. She wanted nothing to do with this fried tofu fiend. What Maiden could be proud of herself if she smelled of oil? She dashed up to the False Fox and he watched her doltishly.

For the first time, Sora felt a shred of respect for the False Fox. In a verbal duel between the soul-chilling True Fox and the empty-headed False Fox, the True Fox was defeated with a single riposte.

"Mr. Caution, you must have no sense of caution if you dare oppose me," the True Fox said.

"Don't you feel bad for working Sora so hard?!" the False Fox argued. "If you want fried tofu so badly, make it yourself!"

YOU'RE the one who had me making fried tofu in the first place!

The White Fox recoiled. She then clapped her hands and shoved Sora out of the way so she could reach the ingredients. She grabbed a cut of tofu and began frying.



Sora hadn't noticed it before, but there was a slender tail sprouting from the White Fox's lower back. She didn't recall it being there earlier; could it be further proof that this was the real White Fox? As she watched that tail wag back and forth, she felt incredibly tired.

The False Fox entered the kitchen, wiped his brow, and said with that hapless smile of his, "Well, that solves one problem. Very good."

"Just who are you?" Sora asked.

"You see, she just kept sending me her thoughts on the tofu like she's some sort of food critic."

So when the White Fox kept pulling out her Smartphone, it was because she was contacting the False Fox?

So they really are friends?! How did that happen?!

"So, when are you gonna go home?" the False Fox asked her.

"When I get bored," she replied.

Not when the operation is finished?!

Sora had no idea how she was going to explain this to Galf. The next moment, the Sounding Stone in her pocket began to vibrate. These were an emergency hotline for the Holy Fox Maidens, and their usage was one of the things she had learned at the main temple. Someone must have become worried about Sora.

She had entirely forgotten that she even had a Sounding Stone. Nothing in her training had prepared her for a mess like this. But she wasn't going to fail again, she would put her skills to use. She glanced at the White Fox. The real and the false were standing shoulder to shoulder, making fried tofu.

"So when did you become their boss?" the False Fox asked with a shrug.

"This doesn't taste good," was all the White Fox said while cleaning her plate.

Sora faded into a corner and activated her Sounding Stone. She was going to report the situation to the main temple. Normally, sharing information like this would be a breach of protocol, but Maidens were allowed to speak freely to each other.

"Hm? Once more? Again, the false boss, who I was certain was a real boss because their mask is genuine, appears to be friends with

the real boss, who I had thought might be a false boss, and to make things worse, they plan to sell inarizushi bento across the land! Does something about that not make sense? Well, don't ask me, ask the boss! Goodness!"

Sora sounded like she was about to cry, so her former instructors tried calming her.

"*Sora, get a hold of yourself. The White Fox should currently be en route to your position.*"

"I told you, they're already here! They showed up and suddenly started telling me to make fried—"

"*The will of the White Fox might at times prove beyond comprehension to the minds of ordinary people, but I can't imagine they would ever say anything so stupid. The White Foxes' objective is destruction! To destroy the world so it can be reborn anew! That hasn't changed since our founding!*"

Sora agreed. No, she would have agreed. But not anymore. Things had changed. She turned around and looked at the White Fox, who was staring intently at her frying pan.

"O White Fox, which holds greater importance to you, fried tofu or the rebirth of the world?" Sora asked.

Her answer was brief. She looked at the young priestess and said, "Huh?"

"D-Did you hear that?!" Sora said into her Sounding Stone. "As I expected, fried tofu takes precedence. Because of you, the White Fox's mood has been fouled!"

"*Calm down, Sora. Take deep breaths. The White Fox would never act like that!*"

"I can't do that. This is the will of the gods. The White Fox has ordained that we unify the world through fried tofu!"

Sora's voice was breaking. Why couldn't her former instructor understand?

"*Calm yourself, Sora*," they insisted. "*Here, let me speak with the White Fox. I'm acquainted with them.*"

"I can't..."

Sora couldn't ask that terrifying figure to speak on her Sounding Stone. The White Fox looked at the Maiden as though she were

looking at garbage. Sora truly believed that if she let her guard down, she would end up being fried.

"What's wrong?" the False Fox asked her when he noticed her fretting.

It seemed the fake one was more amicable than the real one. Sora reaffirmed her commitment to the False Fox. The real one was too much for her.

"My superior wishes to speak with the boss," she said.

"Oh, that's a Sounding Stone. Those are nifty things. But I've got something better—a Smartphone!"

The False Fox was all too happy to accept the Sounding Stone from Sora. And then he walked up to the White Fox and tugged on her ear. Sora thought her heart was going to stop when she saw the White Fox being treated so roughly.

"What?" the White Fox said, scowling at the False Fox. For a moment, she was surrounded by a murderous aura so overwhelming it nearly caused Sora to black out. But the False Fox just kept grinning at her. Sora had been somewhat aware of it, but now she was certain this man was just about incapable of feeling fear.

"One of your people wants to talk to you," he said to the White Fox.

She didn't respond.

"C'mon, I'll watch the frying pan for you."

Looking not at all happy about it, the White Fox accepted the Sounding Stone.

The instructor got straight to the point.

"*O White Fox, I haven't had the privilege to speak with you in some time*," Sora's former instructor said. "*I understand my foolish pupil has been less than cordial. She's also been saying some strange things, something about redeeming the world with fried tofu.*"

The White Fox sat down on the counter and folded her legs. Her tail glimmered faintly. She cleared her throat and said, "How long has it been, you old fox? You heard correctly. Through fried tofu, we intend to bring about the death and rebirth of the world. This is the will of the fox gods."

Her voice wasn't anything like the complacent one she had previously spoken in. This voice sounded like that of a young man. It was quiet but powerful, and strangely charismatic. The False Fox looked at her, wide-eyed. His gaze wasn't anywhere near the frying pan.

"*I beg your pardon?! O White Fox, this is quite unlike the course we've main—*"

"Not another word. We're going to realign our organization into one optimal for producing fried tofu. Anyone who objects will be erased."

"*But the other White Foxes—oh, never mind. S-So what would you have us do?!*"

The White Fox looked at the frying pan, then hopped off the counter. "Fry tofu," she answered. This was said in her normal voice, but Sora couldn't tell if her flummoxed instructor had even noticed that.

The White Fox tossed the Sounding Stone back to Sora, then sorrowfully removed an overdone slab of fried tofu from the frying pan.

This was it. The organization was done for. Perhaps at least now her instructor understood that Sora wasn't to blame.

In the end, the White Fox didn't stop making fried tofu until the ingredients prepared by the False Fox ran out. It should be mentioned that the White Fox ate every morsel the moment it was cooked, so nothing remained.

While Sora hoped to never smell oil again for as long as she lived, the White Fox seemed disappointed. She had eaten enough for a dozen or more adults, but she still wasn't satisfied. She had gone on about conquering the world through fried tofu, but she clearly just wanted to eat some.

Unable to endure the silence, Sora commented, "O White Fox, you seem quite fond of fried tofu."

"Not really," she bristled.

Yet she had gorged on all that fried tofu. That must've had more mass than her entire body, but her stomach was flat as it had been

earlier. The White Fox didn't say anything more. Sora wasn't sure what to say, but then she didn't have to.

"If you don't make me more fried tofu in ten seconds, I'll—"

"If I may," Sora said, cutting her off. "How do you and the False Fox—I mean, the Thousand Tricks know each other?"

The White Fox didn't immediately answer.

Sora felt like she had just dodged a bullet. She had heard the bosses were people you had to be careful around, but this one considered restraint a foreign concept. As Sora calmed her beating heart, the White Fox slowly opened her mouth, a faint glow emitting from her tail.

"Mr. Caution," she said, "is a consultant. We hired him so our organization can transition into a producer of fried tofu."

That was preposterous. For one thing, there was no reason a secret organization would need to produce fried tofu. Did the other White Foxes know about this? And who was Mr. Caution?

"Of course, the other mask-bearers are aware of this. 'Mr. Caution' is a nickname for the Thousand Tricks. It's how we refer to him."

Sora was taken aback. It was almost as though the White Fox had been reading her mind.

The thought that the other bosses knew of this plan was terrifying to her. What in the world was going on in this organization? What had happened to it? The boss kept talking about taking over the world with fried tofu, but that wasn't something groups like theirs did. Even in a command structure that demanded absolute loyalty to one's superiors, Sora couldn't imagine the other members would show any enthusiasm for this.

Those at the top decided the rules, but maybe the boss was trying to say Fox would never take off if it remained an underground society? Sora didn't necessarily have the right to know, but what was the death and rebirth of the world via fried tofu even supposed to be? These and more questions without answers circled through her head.

"I decide the rules," the White Fox said while swishing her luminescent tail. "Nowadays, underground societies don't really take

off. You aren't permitted to know about the death and rebirth."

"I-I see."

Sora didn't feel like she could argue with that. Was this apparent ability to read her mind another sign of the boss's greatness? Sora began to tremble, which made the White Fox seem oddly pleased.

"But, I must say, O White Fox, we might be planning to remake the world with fried tofu, but headquarters is yet to put out any official orders. Won't this cause confusion among our ranks?"

It was one thing that Sora hadn't known, but even someone as high in the ranks as Galf hadn't been aware of this change of course. Even with their dedication to secrecy, this must have been unprecedented.

Then, for the first time, the White Fox asked Sora a question.

"What do you think, Sora?"

Well, she thought they should first use their communication networks to make sure everyone was aware of this plan. While the change may have been a sudden one, the current state of affairs was far outside the norm for Fox.

Coordination was one of their strengths. If orders to make fried tofu were to come down through the normal chain of command, the other members would find them odd, but still be willing to go along with it. But there was no way the White Fox could be ignorant of that.

The White Fox's tail came to a halt. She said in a quiet voice, "Might I ask, just to be sure, Sora, are you familiar with this chain of command?"

"N-No, I'm not. That's not something a mere priestess would know."

What was the White Fox getting at? There was no reason Sora would know about the bosses' chain of command!

"I see..."

The White Fox sank into a contemplative silence. Then came a knock at the door.

"Boss, are you present?"

That was Galf's voice.

"J-Just a moment, if you would!" Sora cried.

This would be Galf's first meeting with *this* White Fox, not to mention he hadn't yet realized the False Fox was an imposter. The matter of Sora's misidentification had been resolved, except that Galf hadn't learned of it yet.

"O White Fox, that's the man in charge of the current operation. What shall I do?"

"Let him in."

With that, Sora had no choice but to unlock the door. Then she turned around and gasped. Standing there was someone who had left earlier—the False Fox. There wasn't a trace of the White Fox, who had been conversing with Sora just moments ago. The False Fox's height and visage were unchanged, but his demeanor was more dignified, his bearing more imposing.

Galf paled when he saw this new figure. "O-Oh. I've returned," he announced.

With a regal nod, the False Fox sat on the counter and crossed his legs. "Welcome back, Galf. You don't need to tell me anything. I can see it on your face. You've done what I ordered you to."

"Ah," Galf stammered and lowered to one knee. "You honor me __"

"You think I've changed, don't you?" The boss smiled. "That was all nothing more than an act. By portraying myself as such a disgrace, I was testing you. You've done a fine job proving your loyalty."

Galf was in awe of the complete change. And that was when Sora noticed it. Sprouting from the False Fox's backside was a tail. She had a very bad feeling about this.

"Now, there's no need to grovel. I keep my promises. I'll entrust this mask, and our current objective, to you."

"Objective?"

Then the false False Fox that was actually the White Fox spoke with a confidence that the real False Fox could never manage. "The currently underway Plan A—the annihilation plan intended to be carried out at the Supreme Warrior Festival—is canceled. Dedicate all available resources to the production of fried tofu. With your command structure, convey this to your subordinates."

***

Phantoms were the recreations of past memories. They weren't living creatures and therefore were driven by different instincts. Their behavior was derived from the histories that created them. The unimaginably powerful spectral foxes of Peregrine Lodge were no exception.

Little Sister Fox couldn't ignore the drive. She had no need to eat, nor did she consider herself an ally of Mr. Caution. But the impulses carved into her spirit gave her a burning desire for that thing known as fried tofu.

And for Little Sister Fox, engaging in tests of wits with and playing pranks on humans was her reason for being.

"O-O White Fox, are you sure about this?" asked the young woman in the white robe.

"It's fine," Little Sister Fox answered coolly. She didn't know how many times she had answered this question. "It's all been laid out in precise calculations. It's all figured out."

"U-Understood. I'm following your orders. Your orders..."

Little Sister Fox had no interest in the affairs of humans. She was a phantom born from a god. In other words, she herself was a god. The divine could be wrathful. Mere mortals meant nothing to them. She only obeyed Mr. Caution because they had made a deal.

Thousands of people could die, organizations could be brought to ruin, but Little Sister Fox was still just a fox. If anyone was at fault, it was those who let the wool get pulled over their eyes after being subjected to a few tricks or a little mind reading. Those people should've followed Mr. Caution's example. That human was so bereft of productive thoughts it was almost baffling. It was as though he was intentionally letting the foxes influence him. She understood how her mother had lost.

It sounded strange, but people like him were the trickiest opponents of all when it came to battles of wits. Not even Little Sister Fox knew what to do. Still, back when she had been secluded in the treasure vault, opportunities to deceive humans had been all too rare. Her tail began to wag rapidly.

Then the Sounding Stone the priestess had given her began to vibrate. She received the call, but didn't hear anything. She tilted her head and studied it for a moment when a voice suddenly emerged.

"*Identify yourself.*"

She didn't say anything. She had been prepared to potentially accept failure. Even her powers had limits. She couldn't do everything, and she did some things better than others. Fooling people far away was something she had difficulties with. This person would be especially tricky as they seemed to have a well-fortified mind. She could get glimpses of their thoughts. Their voice was powerful, enough to even unsettle a grand phantom.

Now, whose form would she take? Sora's? Galf's? Sora's former instructor? Little Sister Fox was unconcerned with their affairs, but she wasn't ignorant of them. She rubbed her tail and thought. Then she had a great idea.

I'm on fire today.

She changed her voice to match that of Mr. Caution and said, "It's nice to meet you, boss. Though maybe that's a strange thing to say. After all, I've been watching you for a long time. Some people call me the Thousand Tricks. I know nothing of caution and I'd say I'm your adversary."

***

I spent the day taking it easy in the inn. I didn't really know why, but everything was going my way this time. After being attacked by Troglodytes during my vacation and running into Peregrine Lodge during the escort job, things were finally looking up.

While I plucked another piece of chocolate, Sitri quietly approached me and whispered, "Sooo, Krai, how much longer?"

"Until what?"

She had cooled off a bit after being tossed out the window, but she was still in fine spirits. What was going on with her?

Cheeks flushed, she took my hand and said, "Oh, you and your jokes, Krai. I'm talking about Fox. *Fox*. You see, if you give them to me, there's *quite* a lot I'd like to do."

"Oh, yeah. That."

That wasn't ringing any bells, but I nodded along anyway. Foxes had been popping up all over lately, but it sounded like she was talking about the mask enthusiasts.

Come to think of it, I don't know their official name. Eh, I guess it doesn't matter.

I popped a chocolate into my mouth and said, "I won't give them to you."

"Huh?! Um, you're joking, right?"

"They're not mine to give in the first place."

She gasped. "That was a lie? Krai, you lied to me?!"

I didn't recall ever saying I would give her Fox.

"Well, I've already done so much of *that*..."

I counted on my fingers. I had shoved the imperial princess onto the other Grievers, Galf and Touka onto the other Grievers, Little Sister Fox onto Sora, and made Sora cook fried tofu. I was just going with the flow, but maybe I should have put a bit more thought into it. I was hoping giving away the mask would be enough for them to forgive me.

But how did I even get here? Strange.

"Yes, and I, too, wanted to do *that*!"

Sitri pressed herself against me and shook my shoulders. I brought a piece of chocolate to her lips, but she shook her head. More regressive behavior from her.

I, too, wanted to do that*. But I didn't plan on doing* that*. And what is* that*?*

"I can't believe you, Krai! Even after all the money I've lent you! After I bought you a kitchen for making fried tofu!"

"Ha ha ha. You're very kind, Sitri."

"What's so amusing about making me cry?!"

"You've always had a knack for crocodile tears."

I was serious. Ever since we were kids, she had repeatedly given me fake tears. Maybe because she was the youngest of three siblings, Sitri was good at getting her way and letting people indulge her.

She was leaning up against me, but she didn't weigh much, had a

nice figure, and wasn't pressing too hard, so I wasn't bothered. If anything, I thought she could charge for this.

As we goofed around, a shadow fell over us. Before I could even wonder why, a shortsword was thrust in front of my eyes. The shadow was Lucia's. Something must've happened; her pallor was white as a ghost's.

"Brother!" she heaved. "I did it, in spite of what it cost me!"

"Wh-What's the matter?" I asked. "You look terrible."

"Lucy! I'm in the middle of negotiations with Krai, so go away!" Sitri said with tears in her eyes.

I had no idea we were negotiating.

Lucia ignored her and said in a weary voice, "Somehow. I've somehow managed to successfully charge Key of the Land. This is the most mana I've ever put into a Relic. Even ten years wouldn't be enough time for Luke to charge it. What sort of Relic is this?"

"Oh. Oh! Thanks! This is great."

I finally realized the sword thrust in front of me was a Relic. Honestly, I had thought I was about to be killed. I broke free from Sitri's embrace and took the Relic. Years of charging Relics had given her a mana pool that exceeded even Noble Spirits. I hadn't expected this sword to be such a tribulation for someone who could top off all of my Safety Rings with ease.

"Hmmm. Well, if its power is proportional to the charge it requires," she said, a scowl on her face and a tremble entering her voice, "it's probably comparable to the Floating Fortress."

"You must be kidding. This is a sword-type Relic!"

The Relic mentioned by Lucia required more mana than any other in the world. She must have really pushed herself to charge this sword. I had trouble recalling the last time I had seen her so pale. The Supreme Warrior Festival was around the corner, yet she forced herself to do something so excessive.

For the time being, I slid the sword into my belt and said, "You should get some rest. Here, I'll take you."

I reached out and wrapped her arms around my shoulder. I wasn't any stronger than the average person, but that didn't matter when Lucia's tiny frame was so lightweight.

"Yah!" she cried. "Th-There's no need. I can get there by myself!"

She stopped yelping at me when she realized I wasn't going to bend on this. Half-cocked moves were my default approach to life, but even I wasn't okay with overworking my little sister. She didn't say anything when I put her into bed, probably because she was ashamed to be aided by her useless older brother.

"You can borrow a page from Lusha's book and depend on your brother," I told her. "Unlike those two, we're actually siblings."

"Are you asking to get hit?!"

Okay, I'm not asking for that *much contact.*

Lucia crawled under the covers, then said in a rapid-fire voice, "Don't you have better things to be doing than telling me nonsense? I'm fine. If anything, mana depletion helps me grow. Thank you. Now, don't you have stuff to take care of?"

"No, I'm pretty free right now."

There was a moment of protracted silence before she said, "I need to change, so get out!"

I thought I had finally gotten a chance to act like a good brother, but I guess it wasn't that simple.

So how do I get Sitri to change her mind?

Unfortunately, Liz and Ansem were both out. Actually, that lack of natural predators was probably exactly why Sitri had chosen that moment to strike. She knew how to work things to her advantage.

I returned to the living room to find Sitri no longer fake-crying, but instead wearing a suspicious smile.

"Is Lucy all right?" she asked.

"Yeah. It was *that*, as usual. She'll be fine after a bit of rest, it was just mana depletion after all."

I had my reservations about it, but if I had to, I could always ask Sitri for a mana potion.

"Oh, wonderful!" she said. "Nooow, I just remembered, I have something very special I'd like to show you!"

"Hm?"

"I'd say it's comparable to Key of the Land! If this doesn't convince you to hand Fox over to me, nothing will!"

Covering her mouth with her hand and giggling, Sitri seemed

awfully confident. Only, it didn't matter what she showed me, the Fox Mask Fan Club wasn't mine to give.

I kept my expectations low as I watched Sitri clap her hands twice. The door swung open and Sitri's partner, Killiam, came jogging in. He was emaciated after being starved during the escort quest and wore his usual banana hammock and paper bag. But on his back, he was carrying a bag large enough to fit a child. The gray macho was short of breath, something I didn't think I had ever seen before.

I guess he is a living creature, after all.

"I told him to come as quickly as he could," Sitri explained. "But it wasn't exactly a short distance he had to cover."

"Don't force him. So wait, you brought him? He wasn't with the carriage, so I thought he had been left behind to hold down the fort."

"I had to bring Drink and Akasha as I planned to use them in the Supreme Warrior Festival, so I had to make sacrifices. I had asked Talia for help, but it turned out to be too much for her."

She's going to bring Drink and that golem with her? What the hell is this tournament?

"Now, behold! This is the result of my latest research and will perfectly meet your demands! After seeing this, will you still insist you can't cede Fox to me?"

Killiam turned the bag upside down, and its contents were dumped onto the carpet. My brain froze when I saw what had been in the bag. It was a child. She had sky-blue hair and was completely naked. She didn't make a single noise, despite being carelessly tossed to the ground. She slowly looked up at me.

When I saw her face, my heart nearly stopped—it was Princess Murina's face. There was no mistaking it. She had neat silken hair, intelligent eyes, and a general air of frailty. This wasn't a look-alike, this could very well be the imperial princess herself.

My first thought was that this might somehow be part of her training, but then I stopped myself. There was no reason to let the imperial princess go around disrobed! We could on some insane level justify putting her through hellish training and even letting her be

carried around in a bag by an emaciated macho in a banana hammock, but letting her be naked was not going to fly. Franz was going to kill me.

And why wasn't she saying anything? Was she okay with this? Was she supposed to be a present? What would I do if someone saw this?

I hope I'm a stone in my next life.

"So, what do you think of my tour de force, Killiam Mk.2?" Sitri asked.

Did you make this so I could get Killiam'd?

"Do you like it? She looks just like Her Imperial Highness!"

"N-No. That *is* Princess Murina, isn't it?"

"Indeed! I made her from the blood I collected. Though I was in the middle of research, I gave it my all. With my lack of time and duties training the real one, I even sacrificed sleep. I even invested some of my funds into this project! But you said that Her Imperial Highness needed to be at a level where she could compete in the Supreme Warrior Festival, so I didn't see what else—"

"You *made* this?!"

I accidentally spit out my chocolate. My heart was pounding with fear.

The more I looked, the more I could see just how deep the resemblance between Killiam Mk.2 and Princess Murina was. However, the former was a bit taller, and, more importantly, I didn't think the real imperial princess would remain so docile under these circumstances. But what bothered me the most was Sitri was acting like this was my fault.

Maybe the Si tree isn't actually the smartest in the forest?

Was this really better than if it was the real imperial princess before me? I couldn't tell.

"Preparing Her Highness for the Supreme Warrior Festival proved beyond our capabilities," Sitri told me. "But I anticipated that possibility. There should be no problems if we use Killiam Mk.2! What do you think?! Your dear Sitri has created a new magical creature in order to perfectly meet the inordinate requests of her beloved Krai! And yet, will you still insist on keeping Fox from me?!"

"Sitri, are you threatening me?!"

Sitri looked at me with wide eyes. "Huh?"

I did the same to her. "Huh?"

Killiam Mk.2 blinked a few times and looked at me. She opened her delicate lips and said in a voice gentle as a bell, "Kill, kill..."

There was no way sending an impersonator into the tournament could possibly end well. Besides, there were definitely at least a few people who would object to imperial blood being used to produce a clone. Did Sitri live off curiosity or something? When I first saw that blood vial, I just groaned and looked the other way. How could I have imagined she'd do something like this?! Where did she get the technology?!

While one objection after another popped up in my head, the imperial princess walked up to me and stood as though awaiting orders. Just like Killiam Mk.1, she had a strong sense of loyalty. The room fell silent. Neither Killiam nor Princess Killina moved.

Think, Krai Andrey the preterhuman artificer! You can do it! How are you gonna get out of this? This might be too much for—no, even if I was *capable of preterhuman artifice, there wouldn't be any solving this. Not even Krahi could handle this!*

My brain wasn't working. I forced my mouth open and said, "Did you decide to get another after winning the lottery or something?"

"Krai, um, my experiment was a success. Please, compliment me."

"You're incredible, Sitri."

She put her head in front of me and I praised her as though I was automated to do so. She had a nice head. I ran my hand through her soft hair, then realized now wasn't the time for this and instead bopped her on the head. Sitri let out a small shriek of delight.

I'm the one who should be shrieking, you stupid tree!

"By the way, there were three failed attempts before I had a successful one," she added.

I pretended I hadn't heard anything and kept thinking.

Wait. A body double. Can we use her as a body double? But Killiam Mk.2—no, Killiamina, only says "kill, kill." Can we say this is

part of her training? No!

"I made it in time for the tournament," Sitri said. "Oh, I can't wait to show her off!"

No, no you can't show her off! Is your heart made of steel?

I couldn't rely on the usually reliable Sitri. I had to think on my own. I had to come up with a way out of this.

***

After reading the newspaper and learning the latest from her friends in the mercantile business, Eva let out a very deep sigh.

"It seems they're up to something."

All was peaceful in Kreat, which was unusual for this time of the year. However, the cause of this calm eluded her. Attacks on participants were practically a given when the Supreme Warrior Festival drew near. The local authorities had tried to stop the pot of aggression from boiling over, but hadn't yet figured out an effective measure. And yet this year, peace seemed to have arrived of its own accord.

Some people were just grateful for the tranquility, while others were convinced this was the calm before the storm. Eva didn't know for sure if this was Krai's work, and if it was, how he could have possibly held back the attacks when their perpetrators and underlying motives were so diverse? Nonetheless, she had the impression that once again, there wouldn't be much she could do to help.

Given Krai's complete disinterest in glory, she had been suspicious when he said he would partake in the Supreme Warrior Festival. Could it be that he really had just taken an interest in the tournament? Even after consulting her past experiences, she really couldn't be sure one way or another. No matter how many years she had been around him, he was still the Thousand Tricks.

She told herself to calm down and stop worrying. If he needed her help, he would come to her. She set the newspaper down and took a deep breath when there was a sudden knock on the door.

"Eva, help me!"

“W-Well I did tell myself this might happen! Though not this quickly!”

She thought something might happen, but she hadn’t had nearly enough time to mentally prepare herself. She unlocked the door, and in came the clan master, wearing his usual languid expression. Shouldering a large bag, Sitri followed him in. Krai looked around to make sure nobody else was in the room, then heaved a sigh.

“So what’s the matter?” Eva asked. “I can’t do anything with information.”

This wasn’t the first time Krai had gone to Eva for assistance. Most of the time, he just needed her to negotiate or take care of some mess, which wasn’t difficult, but it was tiresome. This man could resolve all sorts of crises, but there were some things even he struggled with. Eva braced herself for more of the same.

“You’ll help me?” he asked, as though to be sure. Contrary to his vast capabilities, he always looked uncertain of himself.

“Sure, if there’s something I can—”

Once more, he sighed, this time with relief. He pointed at the bag, then said in a low voice, “First, I want you to see this.”

Sitri opened the bag and emptied its contents onto the floor. Eva’s brain came to a halt. On the floor was the imperial princess, Murina Atolm Zebrudia, wearing a coat a few sizes too big for her. She had a stoic expression, but it was unmistakably her. Last Eva had heard, Krai was supposed to be mentoring her.

“Wha?! Why was she in that bag? And why is she dressed like that?”

“You see, this is actually a fake. The real imperial princess is currently at her lessons. Earlier, she wasn’t wearing anything, so I lent her some of my clothes.”

Eva was baffled. The imperial princess, however, just looked at her unfalteringly, not making any movements beyond some slow blinking. Eva’s brain slowly began to move again. In every way, this girl before her looked like the imperial princess. Her ability to formulate a response to this absurd situation was informed by her previous experience with absurd situations.

Fearing hyperpnea, she calmed herself and spoke in an equally

hushed voice. "Could you elaborate?"

"She's a fabricated being. It's messed up."

"*Fabricated. Being.*"

Eva slowly let those words sink in. That *was* messed up. The clan master often panicked over trivial things, but this really was bad.

She took another look at the fake imperial princess. Her hair and eye color, her build—it was identical to Princess Murina. The only discrepancy was in her facial expression. The imperial princess that Eva knew always looked uneasy or like she might be about to cry. But this one was so placid it was impossible to tell what she might be thinking.

This couldn't be a body double or someone in disguise. This couldn't even be a twin sister. Eva took pride in her ability to remember faces and see through facades, but even she couldn't tell this one apart from the real imperial princess.

Slowly, her brain began to move again. *Think, think, think*, she told herself. What purpose could this serve? Why was this done? Could it be a body double? No, this was too inhumane. And if it was, Krai wouldn't be panicking. And who had even made this being? The empire, much less the emperor himself, would never have given permission to do something like this. Technologically and ethically speaking, this couldn't be the work of an outside laboratory.

Eva felt a chill and caught the scent of a conspiracy afoot. If anyone could produce a copy of the imperial princess, it would have to be some major criminal organization. Could it be Akashic Tower, who had caused so much havoc not long ago?

Or could it be the people Krai fought while protecting the emperor? That did it. The dots connected. Krai was a Level 8 known for his constant composure; there couldn't be many entities capable of causing him to fret.

"Could it be Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox?" she asked with immense trepidation. "Is this the work of Fox?"

Krai's eyes bulged. Was he surprised that Eva had made a correct guess with so little to go off? Eva's years of experience as his right hand hadn't been for nothing. But now wasn't the time for self-congratulations.

“I believe I understand now,” she said. “You rescued her from Fox, didn’t you?”

There was a long silence between them.

“Yeah,” he said at last.

So Eva was right. She had heard that Fox had plotted and failed to assassinate the emperor. But they were a large organization with a reputation to maintain. After failing to kill the emperor, it wasn’t odd that they might try again, but instead go after this daughter. Krai must have figured out that Fox had made a fake imperial princess and rescued her. Could it be that this was why he had accepted the request to mentor Princess Murina?

There was sweat running down his cheeks. Clearly, even he was having trouble staying calm under these circumstances. Eva wanted to cover her ears, but a vice clan master had to stay calm when the clan master was in danger.

“Stay calm,” she said. “Is there just one copy?”

“Th-There were three failures.” Krai wavered. He must have witnessed a true travesty. “She was the only success. Right, Sitri?”

“Oh. Yes, that’s correct,” she said. “Curse you, Fox.”

Eva found her determination renewed by the sight of her faltering boss. She looked him in the eye and said, “His Imperial Majesty is to be among the spectators at the Supreme Warrior Festival. We should contact him.”

“Huh?!”

I knew he’d try to solve this all on his own.

“Krai, this isn’t something we can resolve without help,” she said. “And even if we can, the existence of this fake suggests that Her Imperial Highness is in danger. I understand your capabilities, but I still think we should contact them.”

“Hmm. You’re right. This is all Fox’s fault. I can always count on you, Eva.”

There was no time to lose. A fake imperial princess was an asset with tremendous potential. Every second counted, as Fox would no doubt come to take back what they had made. Having the fake princess so close to one of Fox’s greatest adversaries was too risky. However, this lodge was filled with the hunters of First Steps, making

it relatively secure.

"I'll contact the empire," Eva said. "For now, leave her with me. Sven is here, so I can ask him for protection. Krai, your fight with Fox—"

"Ah. Right."

Eva didn't know how this fight was being played out, but she had to do everything she could to help.

"I have to fight Fox," he muttered. "The bad Fox."

"Oh? Is there a good Fox?"

Were there collaborators within Fox of all organizations?

Krai gave her that uncertain look he always wore. "Just a few," he said.

***

By consulting with Eva, Sitri's work had somehow ended up being blamed on an underworld organization. This was messed up. Eva took the fake imperial princess and made a swift departure from our room. The grave look on her face wasn't something a mere clan master like me could dare to defy.

The door clicked shut and Sitri pouted at me. "All that work, my big reveal, all gone to waste. I planned to use her to bargain with the empire."

God. She isn't sorry in the slightest. And what was she hoping to bargain for?

I recalled something Liz had once told me: Sitri could do everything, but every now and again, she had to screw something up. She used Sitri's suspected involvement in the mass prison break as an example. At the time, this struck me as an exaggeration, but now I was thinking Liz might've been right.

So what do I do now?

Sitri had been looking at me reproachfully, but then she seemed to have a change of heart. "Well, this might not be such a bad development. Fox is in no position to protest overtly!"

I appreciated her positive attitude, but I also thought she was a bit too quick to change her position. Sure, a bunch of criminals

weren't likely to protest the accusations, but if the truth got out, it'd be all over for us. All this made me ask what happened to the clever, cute, and reliable Sitri I had once known.

My usual savior had a twinkle in her eyes as she clapped her hands like she always did. "Right! Let's make a few more demands of them. And if they fail to meet them, they can die!"

"Hey! Do I have to remind you whose fault this is?!"

I grabbed Sitri by the shoulders, which must have caught her off guard, as she wobbled and fell.

"Eee!" she yelped.

By coincidence, she landed beneath me. A vial of brightly colored liquid rolled across my peripheral vision.

"Ah..."

I heard the sound of breaking glass. The next moment, everything was thrown out of order, like we had been tossed into a storm. From behind me, there was a boom accompanied by a sweltering impact, all of which were deflected by my Safety Rings. I fell to the ground and wrapped my arms around her, my world turning upside down the next moment. We fell, another ring activating as we hit the ground. Whether we hit our heads or feet, it was all the same to a Safety Ring.

We quickly got back on our feet and saw a large hole in the ceiling. Had we been attacked? Or had it been some natural disaster? The sensation had suggested some sort of explosive, but I didn't see any scorch marks.

Sitri let out a small groan.

"What?! What in the world was that?! Huh?!" I cried.

"Calm down, Krai. An enhanced explosive potion slipped out. That's all."

That was a potion?! O-Oh...

Fortunately, the room below us was unoccupied. But the room above had been partly destroyed. That wasn't good. If not for my Safety Rings, I definitely would've been killed in that explosion. What a dangerous thing to just carry around with you.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Of course. I had you to protect me. I'm unharmed!"

If I hadn't been here, the room wouldn't have been blown to smithereens in the first place. My heart was still threatening to burst from my chest. The Safety Rings had kept me safe, but it was still hard to not be shaken by something like that. I was ready to vomit.

I guess I can't be mad at her for making princesses when I'm causing explosions.

I heard footsteps upstairs, then the sound of a door opening. Eva looked down at us through the hole in the ceiling.

"Oh! What in the world happened?!"

"Umm."

Having just pushed a big responsibility off onto Eva, I didn't really know what to say to her.

I felt Sitri's lips brush the back of my neck before she stood up and said, "Don't worry, we're quite fine, Eva. We were simply attacked. By Fox."

Could it be? Am I *Fox?!*

Eva gulped, the blood draining from her face. Sitri grabbed my hand and helped me up. I wobbled a bit, but quickly regained my strength. For better or for worse, I was used to accidents.

"There's no further problems," Sitri continued. "They struck from a distance. The lackey behind the attack has already fled out of fear of Krai. Hmm. This calls for a plan of operations. Contact His Imperial Majesty immediately!"

What insane mental fortitude she had. It was like she was used to this.

Sven poked his head through the hole. He must have heard the noise as well. "Ooh. They really got you."

I pulled my fraying heart back together and did my best to appear hard-boiled. "We're unharmed. But I can't say the same for the flooring and furniture."

In a mansion situated near the center of Kreat, I met with Franz for the first time in a while. The opportunity to talk with the emperor and his people came surprisingly easily, all thanks to Eva's exceptional talents. She had even explained the situation to them, so I didn't have to. It would've been even better if that report hadn't

been filled to the brim with our false intel.

"Hmmm. This is the last thing I wanted to see," he said. Franz was pale as a ghost; even he couldn't stay cool at a time like this. "I figured there was more than our investigations had brought to light, but I hadn't imagined Fox might be capable of something like this. When you suddenly said you were bringing Her Imperial Highness away from the imperial capital, I wanted to rip you limb from limb..."

"I hadn't expected this either. It took me by surprise."

Why's Franz using such aggressive words? He doesn't sound at all like one of Zebrudia's storied nobles.

Why did Sitri have to keep doing dangerous experiments? She had already done so much, I thought she could slow down a bit. Unless she was first-rate precisely because she didn't slow down?

Standing before Franz, the fake Murina didn't move a muscle. Something about the way she stood there reminded me of Killiam. However that was the only similarity between the Mk.1 and the Mk.2.

Sitri crossed her arms. "Goodness, what a horrifying organization Fox is," she said like this wasn't her work.

I wasn't sure I'd ever trust her again. Dealing with the crafty Alchemists and merchants of the imperial capital had made her tough, but had she also lost her conscience?

"This couldn't be a mere disguise," Franz said. "We need to report to His Imperial Majesty—"

"It's not just this," Sitri interrupted. "They're conducting experiments that involve placing phantoms in blenders and extracting their mana material! I saw it with my own eyes! The phantoms howled with rage as they were viciously chopped up and their liquid mana material withdrawn!"

"Wh-What did she say?!" Eva said, looking at me. For some reason, it wasn't just her and Franz, Sitri was also looking my way. But if anyone was thrown for a loop, it was me.

Tears in her eyes, Sitri clenched her fists and continued, her voice shriller than before. "Not only that, they tried to make a magic creature by stitching together the best parts of different criminals! Curse you, Fox!"

Quit it! You're scaring me, and I don't even know what you're talking about!

I put my hand on Sitri's head, stopping her there. "Well, that's not worth worrying about."

"Not worth worrying about?!" Franz exclaimed. "Extracting mana material and creating dangerous magical creatures are both strictly forbidden! You're awfully calm for someone who just survived an attempt at revenge! Someone weaker would've died!"

Oh. Yeah. That's right. That potion was concocted to kill high-level phantoms.

This would've been so much easier if I hadn't known more than I did.

"Yeah, but I'm used to being assaulted," I said.

Needless to say, I was also used to screwing up. My urges to start groveling were kicking up.

Franz crossed his arms and scrutinized the fake imperial princess. After a few moments of that, he stepped in front of me, his eyes looking down into mine. His face was grave, wrinkles etched into his forehead.

"The laboratory was destroyed," Sitri told him. "I don't believe we'll see them produce any further imposters."

"Hmph. So you're telling me we've avoided the worst-case scenario? Even if they manage to make another one, we can come up with a counter method, now that we're aware of their plot. Now tell me, can this imposter not speak?"

"I imagine they were afraid she might say the wrong thing."

"No faith in their own creation. Bah, those wretched scum."

Sitri just grinned.

Stop, Franz, you're insulting Sitri! She's a little odd, but she's not a bad girl!

"She probably hasn't been programmed yet," she explained. "In her current state, I'd say she's harmless."

Franz looked at her. "You're very well informed."

Sitri looked back at him. "I'm an Alchemist. I have a passing familiarity with magical creatures like this."

I was astounded by her ability to lie with such ease.

"Oh, very well," Franz sighed. "We'll take the fake imperial princess. Later, I expect you to tell me about this laboratory you destroyed. I want to investigate it as soon as I can, but we don't have the hands to spare right now. Though I don't like to admit it, we don't have the resources for anything more than our current operation in Kreat. We can't bring too many knights into a foreign land without risking an incident."

It sounded like Franz had his hands full. I could see how tired he was just by looking at his face. He already was in charge of the emperor's safety, now he had to deal with this. Couldn't have been easy.

"Oh, an operation in Kreat? Is something going on?" I asked.

"Hm?" Franz furrowed his brow as he looked at me suspiciously. "Didn't the Association talk to you about it? It's the matter regarding Key of the Land."

They had said Fox was planning something, but I hadn't heard any details.

Wait. Key of the Land?

"Come to think of it, you're a Relic collector, aren't you? Do you know anything?"

In response, I drew Key of the Land from its scabbard. I let the light reflect off the patterned blade. It might not have been meant for combat, but I found it very pleasing to the eye.

"Mmm, not even I know much about it. There's one at a museum, so maybe you could ask them?"

Franz looked at me in stunned silence. I was glad he acknowledged that I was a collector, but the world of Relics was a deep one. Even with it in my hands, I couldn't tell much more than that it was something special.

It was then that I realized Franz's eyes were close to bursting from their sockets. I moved the Relic, and his gaze followed it.

I put the sword away and smiled at him. I thought I'd mention the museum again. "This one is beyond even my knowledge. There's one at a museum—"

"WH-WHY DO YOU HAVE THAT?!" he bellowed.

***

An organization that had slowly grown in the shadows was, for the first time since its founding, thrown into disarray.

Their dedication to secrecy meant their members were largely kept in the dark. Fox operated on a system in which agents from all around would report to headquarters, headquarters would investigate thoroughly, then disperse information as necessary. Most communication was done over Sounding Stones and agents weren't made aware of where headquarters was located.

This thorough confidentiality was one of the reasons Fox had managed to remain so elusive. But now, that same trait was working against them.

Fox's task forces were allowed a level of autonomy because contacting headquarters was a complicated process and the organization liked to keep chatter to a minimum unless there was an emergency.

"Producing fried tofu? What operation is that?"

"We received a report from Galf that it's proceeding apace."

"We've learned that they're in contact with other organizations, even previous adversaries."

"That must be part of his plan. That man is a cautious one. Though I think he's taking it a step too far."

At the operational headquarters that managed the imperial capital and the surrounding areas, specialists were struggling to organize the information flowing in from their collaborators.

"We've received word that there was a bombing at the lodge housing First Steps. Which team did this?!"

"A fake imperial princess appeared?"

Any significant degree of information required some time to process, but this was too much. As long as no reports were coming from the team on the ground, it was fair to assume they weren't running into any problems. But this was Fox's grandest plot yet. If it were to end in failure, their other operations would all be affected.

The lodge bombing was one thing, but the false imperial princess? Fried tofu? That couldn't be overlooked.

"Send a team," said a voice brimming with tension. "There might be something happening. And figure out which idiot researcher made a copy of the imperial princess! We were already blindsided by the leaks during the Counter Cascade's failure, we can't have any more!"

Someone stood up and said, "Emergency communication from the boss. The Kreat team is believed to have been infiltrated!"

Everyone paled when they heard these dreaded words. For a second, nobody wanted to believe it.

"What was that?"

Fox was extraordinarily particular about its members. Galf was experienced, strong, charismatic, and a good leader. It was hard to ask for more. Though he was a bit too ambitious, he was meticulous and known for rarely having to deviate from his plans, which was why had been chosen to lead such an important mission. He had even been permitted to have a Holy Fox Maiden on his team.

"He's not the backstabbing type. Is it possible someone deceived him and wormed their way to his side?"

That was impossible. Galf never trusted outsiders. He only trusted other organization members. However, thinking back on it, there was something off about the case with the Counter Cascade. That man had been far too skilled of an assassin to be stopped by anyone not already aware of his plans, not to mention he had hidden his true powers even from his fellow clan members. This left just one conclusion.

"Could it be? Could someone from inside our organization have betrayed us?!"

The room instantly fell silent.

One result of Fox's secrecy was that very few members were aware that there wasn't just one boss. There were multiple commanders bearing those special masks. Each one of them oversaw a large turf, and they regularly communicated with each other to determine the direction of the organization.

Galf was prudent as could be, and Telm had been a Level 7 hunter, but they had both been outmaneuvered. Just one instance could be written off, but there had to be a reason if this had

happened twice. Those two were wary of outsiders; if they had been defeated, it could only have been at the hands of a traitor. What's more, there were very few members of Fox who could have issued commands to high-ranking members without raising suspicions.

This operation could decide the fate of the organization and could greatly expand the influence of the boss in the imperial region. Internal conflicts came with all organizations, no matter when or where they were from. So far, Fox had managed to avoid them.

"What do we do?"

"This is beyond our capabilities. The boss should have figured it out."

If the operator was right, this wasn't Galf's fault. The identities of the bosses were kept secret and their authority was absolute and unquestionable. It was how they had gotten as far as they had.

"The boss says we need to retake Key of the Land at all costs."

"Hm?! Damn it. Contact Galf immediately. But don't let him know the truth, we can't risk letting the traitor realize we're on to them. This can still be salvaged!"

Without Key of the Land, this operation couldn't possibly go forward. If it couldn't be regained, the operation was doomed. If an internal conflict broke out, the organization would be paralyzed and the casualties would be numerous. But it was too late to stop it.

The operators recovered from their stupor and got to work. The air in the room had changed. A savage conflict was before them, and closing in.

***

For the first time in a while, I had a date with the great potentate.

"Key of the Land has been secured, has it?" he said after hearing the report from Franz. I noticed his eyebrows twitching when he turned to me. "The rumors don't do you justice. But with this and the copy of Murina, I fail to see how it all fits together."

"I'd consider it a coincidence, Your Imperial Majesty," I replied.

Franz gave me a glare that told me to keep those thoughts to

myself, but I was being honest.

"You have my thanks, for this and for mentoring my daughter. I'll be sure to prepare another token of my gratitude, though it'll have to wait until the situation has subsided."

"I-I've done nothing of note."

I really hadn't. The only thing of note here was Sitri's evildoing.

Sitri, you're amazing! Nobody else has ever been thanked for wringing out the imperial princess's blood and making a copy of her!

While I was battling my guilt, Sitri stepped forward and said with complete confidence, "It was in Zebrudia where we became hunters. It's only natural that we do what we can for the empire that helped make us."

I wanted to rip out her tongue. This Sitri was a Sitri I couldn't trust to do anything.

After listening to her platitudes, the emperor said, "I see. You're Sitri Smart, are you not? I hear you're quite the Alchemist."

"You honor me greatly, Your Imperial Majesty. But when placed next to Krai's, my abilities come off as meager and diminutive."

Stop that.

She might have been doing it for my sake, but I was fed up with the meaningless exaltations.

"Hmm. By the way, may I ask what your relationship to the Thousand Tricks is?"

"I'm his wife."

Without even thinking, I whacked her on the back of the head. Franz and the emperor both looked stunned.

Ah, now I've done it. But hold on. Everything she's said has been a lie!

I made myself look as impressive as I possibly could, then tried to push it all under the rug. "That's enough for jokes for now. Now, let's get to our true business."

"Ah. Indeed. Franz."

Franz stepped forward. Sitri looked serious, like I hadn't just bopped her on the head.

"Let's start from the beginning," Franz said. "Among certain circles, Key of the Land is designated a class-one weapon. When it

was first discovered, its capabilities were uncertain and it was donated to a museum. However, the true nature of the Relic became known when literature regarding it was discovered."

A class-one weapon. I was pretty sure that was really bad. An immense number of Relics existed, but class-one weapons were almost nonexistent. This meant Key of the Land was in the same bracket as Floating Fortress. Things like this were why I found Relics so fascinating. Because of their dangerous nature, information regarding Relics like this was kept confidential. Except Floating Fortress was so big, you couldn't really hide it anywhere.

What the hell is that Relic doing in a museum?

"The reason Key of the Land was allowed to remain in the museum was because of the immense mana it requires," Franz said. "Nobody is capable of charging it. In case another instance appears, it's common practice to treat Relics like this as if they were something benign. Which invites the question of where those bastards got their information."

"Huh? Nobody can charge it?"

"Correct. According to the discovered literature, in the era of the original Key of the Land, there was a tool meant specifically for storing power, and it stored more power than a human being could muster."

This was starting to sound like one of those cases where a Relic required multiple parts to attain its true potential, but only one had manifested. It happened from time to time, but honestly, I wasn't sure what purpose storing so much power could serve.

Relics weren't necessarily identical to the historic tools that they were based on. I had heard many of these original tools didn't require mana. And if the charging tool required as much power as Key of the Land, that would be the cart before the horse. These considerations were probably why the Relic was allowed to remain in the museum.

"I see," I said with a nod. Now I understood why Luke had been unable to charge the sword.

Oh. No. Lucia charged it.

"Lucy used the tail and my potions," Sitri excitedly whispered to

me. “She was determined to charge it.”

Now wasn’t the time to tell me that.

“D-Don’t tell me,” Franz said in a voice that could have emerged from the deepest pits of hell. He must have caught on. “Did you charge it?”

“I never said that!”

“You’re sweating like a goddamn river! Do you think I was born yesterday?! Do you?!”

His booming voice rattled my eardrums, but I just didn’t know what to tell him. In his rage, he tried to grab me but was stopped by a small pale hand. Franz’s eyes bulged. The hand was that of the fake imperial princess. Sitri’s creations were always imbued with loyalty, but now was a bad time to show it!

“Calm down,” I told him. “Sure, I charged it, but what’s done is done.”

“S-So you did charge it?! How?!”

“If you have a Relic, it’s perfectly normal to charge it. Arnold, Ark, the Abyssal Inferno, everyone would do the same thing! Yeah, any treasure hunter would do the same!”

Franz had become red in the face. “Don’t try and pivot!”

I didn’t do anything wrong. If anything is wrong it’s, uh, the nature of treasure hunters!

“There’s nothing illegal about charging a Relic,” I said, desperate to prove my innocence.

“Are you trying to get us all killed?!”

“I didn’t know it was that dangerous.”

“Don’t lie to me! The Thousand Tricks, preterhuman artificer! Foresight that borders on precognition and an information network that spans the entire empire! There’s no way you couldn’t know! You should’ve noticed when you saw how much mana it required! If you don’t quit this act, I’ll put you behind bars!”

I couldn’t help but say what was on my mind. “Wow, you have a high opinion of me.”

“Augh!” he screamed.

Nothing good could come from imperial nobles believing those absurd rumors. I was a man with worse luck than the imperial

princess.

Unsure what to do with Franz in his current state, the emperor instead looked at me dubiously. “You say you charged it, but it’s to my understanding that not even one hundred Noble Spirit Magi could manage that. How did—oh, did you perhaps obtain the Relic used to charge it?”

“Hm?”

Seeing my look of surprise, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Are you telling me a human charged it? Is that possible? Heavens above...”

“Th-This man is special, Your Imperial Majesty!” Franz was quick to add.

Hmm. I see.

The emperor was a renowned warrior, but even he was at a loss. It seemed this Relic was no joke. Honestly, how did the Fox Mask Fan Club (temp. name) even get something this dangerous? I’d have to ask Galf the next time I saw him.

I loved Relics. I liked using them, I liked collecting them, and I was even willing to be indebted to Sitri if it was in the name of Relics. But I liked to think even I was capable of caution.

Keeping it in its generic scabbard, I removed the sword from my belt and offered it to Franz. “I understand now. Take it. I’ll leave it in your care.”

“Hm?!”

The moment they saw Key of the Land, the emperor recoiled and Franz stepped in front of him. Sitri looked at it aghast, and I’m fairly certain I heard the fake imperial princess say “Kill, kill.” I was the odd one out.

“Y-You’re standing before His Imperial Majesty, don’t just...”

“I told you, I’m giving it to you.”

“Don’t point it at me, you cretin! Please, Your Imperial Majesty, leave the room just to be safe!”

Did you call me a cretin?!

During this brief exchange, knights came pouring into the room.

“Don’t touch the key! If it activates, this land will be decimated! Apprehend him!”

Ahh, what the hell was I supposed to do?

***

Truly, there was nothing better than the human world. She had never before left the treasure vault, but she knew her instincts were right. To Little Sister Fox and the other phantoms of Peregrine Lodge, humans were inferior beings, but also lovable fools. Naturally, that view only extended to the humans they could deceive, but individuals formidable (or stupid) enough to not fall for the ploys of Little Sister Fox were few and far between. Back in Toweyezant, and now in this kitchen, she was surrounded by opportunities.

Ordered by Galf—another one of the phantom's victims—a number of burly adults all worked at frying pans, their eyes devoid of life. The girl in the white robe looked at Little Sister Fox uncertainly. This girl was apparently a human who worshipped Mother Fox as a god.

The small phantom hadn't previously known of these worshippers, but what these fools did was of no concern to her. These humans were supposedly members of some secret organization and had some big job to do, but none of that mattered to Little Sister Fox. Eating fried tofu she obtained through deception satisfied her taste buds and instincts. It was supreme bliss.

There was a knock and the door opened. Little Sister Fox was currently donning the form of Mr. Caution, the man worshipped by Galf. The spectral foxes had more than a few skills, but taking the form of someone else was her specialty. And she didn't become just any ordinary Mr. Caution. She became the all-powerful man Galf believed him to be.

She twiddled with a cut of fried tofu that she had morphed into a fox mask and looked down at Galf with total complacency. "Is something the matter?"

"Our work is proceeding smoothly, boss," he said. "But we received a strange message from headquarters..."

As an offspring of a god, Little Sister Fox had an IQ far beyond that of any human. She had no trouble understanding these lower

beings and could use their languages with ease. With intelligence like this, tricking humans was a simple matter.

"It doesn't matter," she said defiantly. "Your boss is Mr. Caution. Your orders don't come from headquarters, they come from *me*."

"Mr. Caution?"

"But I know what they want. And if they want it, they can have it. You see, this thing was just a spare."

Little Sister Fox reached behind her and grabbed a cut of piping hot fried tofu off a plate. In the blink of an eye, she turned the tofu into what Galf wanted—a piping hot Key of the Land. He took it and fumbled with it a bit while letting out a small cry.

"It's hot! What happened—"

"It was heated up a bit too much, that's all. Now take it. That should satisfy headquarters."

Galf looked doubtful for a moment, but he said his thanks and left the room. Humans were indeed fools. Galf seemed to be pretty capable as far as humans went, but he couldn't tell fried tofu from a Relic.

Little Sister Fox's disguises were enough to fool the world if used right, but at the same time, they could be seen through by anyone with a bit of skill. With time, they would notice that something was unusual, but a deception wasn't complete until the target noticed they were being fooled.

Satisfied by the folly of the lower races and the level of her own disguise, Little Sister Fox laughed to herself. Floating on her back, she pulled out her Smartphone, when something occurred to her. Mr. Caution had been using a bit of fried tofu masquerading as a Smartphone normally, as though it actually were a Smartphone. How much longer would it be until he noticed the ruse?

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What the hell do these people want from me?

I dragged my weary body down the streets of Kreat. I wasn't at all happy with the results of my audience with the emperor—they had forced Key of the Land onto me. I couldn't see what purpose

there could be in making me hold on to something so deadly. Nothing good came from having a high level.

Though I might've been scowling, Sitri was in high spirits.

"I think giving the Relic to you was a very astute decision!" she said. "I'm so glad they were willing to take Experiments No. 1, 2, and 3 off my hands. I just hope my research helps you."

Which thoughtless moron told her to become an Alchemist?

There wasn't a hint of malice in her eyes and something about her expression made her look a few years younger than usual. It was a face that could fool just about anyone. I wanted to hit her, but her cheery mood made that hard.

"Yeah," was all I could say.

"If there's something worrying you, I can lend an ear."

I had so many worries I could have a worry bargain sale, and one of those worries was right in front of me. But my biggest worry was Key of the Land, which some secret organization was after. Apparently, the attack on the museum had something to do with that. Fortunately, the museum was fine; few people knew I had a second key. But even if it was just for while I was in Kreat, I wasn't sure I could keep this thing safe.

Sitri put a contemplative finger to her lips and said, "You know, a sword that invites calamities sounds like it could have many applications."

The newspaper hadn't listed what Key of the Land was capable of, but Franz and his people had found out. To put it in concise terms, it was an energy-discharging Relic. While Ark's sword Historia could gather energy and release it with terrifying force, Key of the Land was more about area of effect.

This wasn't a rare ability for sword-type Relics, but according to old writings, Key of the Land could rip through the ground, rend the sky, and submerge islands. It almost beggared belief.

"Would you like me to take it?" she offered with a grin.

Sitri's stewardship was out of the question, as were the rest of my comrades. If I gave it to Liz or someone, they'd swing it around and say something like "Oh, it's that dangerous? How do I use it? Like this?"

I let out a sigh, then amid the crowd, I spotted a familiar man. It was Galf. He must not have been in a mask mood, as he wasn't wearing one this time. I was certain we made eye contact, but he quickly looked away.

"Heeey, Galf!" I said, waving my hand. "Over here!"

Galf twitched, but I kept waving. Eventually, he walked over to us, a pained look on his face.

"Boss," he whispered, "We shouldn't—"

"Just the man I wanted to see. I've got this key, you see..."

"Why do you have that?! I thought you returned it!"

How does he know I had tried to return it? Oh well.

"I don't quite get it, but it ended up back in my hands. I was told to keep it safe, but can I leave it with you?"

Galf was thrown for a loop, then looked at me dubiously. "It ended up back with you?! W-Well, I guess. Of course, I can take it..."

Then, I pressed my fist into my palm. I pulled out the fox mask. "That's right. This is great timing. Here, just like I promised."

Galf's face froze. Clearly he hadn't expected this. The mask was ultimately just a drop from a dungeon. It was probably something special, but whatever value it had was lost on me. I was sure it would be happier in Galf's possession. However, the man was pale as a sheet. He looked like a tough guy, but maybe he was a bit soft on the inside?

"Th-That mask. But I still haven't finished the job. I'm not yet worthy..."

His speech was disjointed, as though he was confused.

"No, you're more than worthy!" I said, in my hard-boiled voice, even though I was just making stuff up. "You've shown me you have what it takes to own this mask!"

Galf stood, mouth agape. It occurred to me that this mask was the whole reason I had met these guys. I should have never gotten involved with the Fox Mask Fan Club. If I hadn't, I never would have obtained Key of the Land and Sitri wouldn't have made a fake imperial princess. And Luke wouldn't have developed a penchant for cutting random people, I wouldn't have become a hunter in spite of

my lack of talent, and Tino wouldn't have suffered at the hands of Liz. I'm sure of it.

"I want you to continue doing what you do for the Fox Mask Fan Club!" I told him. "It's better if that mask belongs to someone who can appreciate it. I might have just gotten it through a coincidence, but as your predecessor, I hope you'll put it to good use!"

"B-But our goals and the initiation—"

"Goals? Initiation? From now on, you're setting the goals!"

Galf's eyes opened as wide as they could go.

I was ready to be done with this. I wanted one less nuisance, even if it was a small one.

What did I even do? Huh? My mistake was not doing anything? Ha ha ha...

"Now, if you run into trouble, why not talk with Sora about it?"

I felt she should take some responsibility for saying I was the real boss when she knew I wasn't. While I wasn't totally sure about this, I was pretty sure Galf deserved the position more than a guy who had only a feeble understanding of the group.

In the end, I never did learn what the Fox Mask Fan Club really does.

Galf looked at me silently but eventually nodded. "It would be an honor, boss."

So it was settled. Now I just had to ask my friends to help protect Key of the Land, then return it once the empire was ready for it. I was sure the pyromaniac lady would incinerate the bad foxes.

"What are you going to do now, boss?"

"Hmm. I still have one job left, but I guess I'll take it easy and watch the battles."

I didn't know how strong the imperial princess had ultimately become, but we had done everything we could for her. I was looking forward to seeing how Luke, Krahi, Touka, and everyone else would fare in the tournament. I could sit back with some popcorn and enjoy the fights with Tino.

Galf nodded, then looked at Sitri, who was next to me.

"By the way, if you don't mind my asking, what's your relationship with the lady next to you?"

I realized that while she had helped him look for the bandits, these two hadn't been properly introduced. I wasn't sure what to say, but Sitri did.

Grinning, she clapped her hands and said, "I'm his wife."

At this point, she was just asking to get whacked.

***

A voice both exasperated and scornful filled the faintly lit room. "I didn't take Galf for a fool. First the Counter Cascade, now this. I never accounted for possibilities like this."

Somewhere in Kreat was a safe house known only by a select few members of Fox. Gathered within it were a handful of shadowy figures, all of them wearing fox masks. Sitting in the center was a young man in a white fox mask and a robe that blended into the darkness. His bearing was relaxed but without openings. His physique wasn't exceptional, but he had a natural charisma that could stop fights before they began. As his spot in the center suggested, he was one of Fox's top members.

"Boss, that man might be capable, but he was still nothing more than a bandit leader. He could have a weakness that someone is exploiting. I don't think he's foolish enough to betray you without good reason."

"What a disgrace. This operation will decide the fate of our organization, and now it might fail. Or could it be that the enemy outplayed us?"

The other Fox had no response to these icy words. Tricking someone as cautious as Galf and interfering with reports required information kept from outsiders, and a rarified silver tongue. Something was clearly wrong.

Someone of Galf's rank wouldn't trust a stranger without being given a very convincing sign. They didn't yet know what that was, but they would have to thoroughly question him once this was all over.

"They've deviated from the plan at multiple points and Galf's subordinates are all making fried tofu on what appear to be

someone's orders. Headquarters is in disarray and some people are even suspecting interference from one of the other White Foxes. What an utter mess."

The boss's words suggested he trusted his allies, but his tone was frigid.

"The only silver lining I see is that Key of the Land has been returned to Galf," he continued. "Hmph. It's the least they could do, I suppose."

"I guess we can't expect backup from Galf's team," one of the Foxes added.

"We're changing the plan. We can't simply withdraw now that we've been played like fools."

Making fried tofu. Who came up with such a thing? There was mockery, and then there was this. The boss didn't know how Galf had been convinced to accept those orders, but that didn't matter—he was no longer necessary.

"Our foe has grown complacent. We're going on the offensive. Gather all teams in the area and apprehend Galf and his team. If they resist, kill them. I have no need for imbeciles in my ranks."

Fox limited its membership to the very best. To get rid of an entire team was akin to casting off a limb. This was an order without precedent, but none of the other Foxes so much as blinked at it. The boss's orders were absolute. The others were entitled to their opinions, but they would never defy orders.

Staring at the box containing Key of the Land, the boss said in a quiet voice, "I'll handle the Supreme Warrior Festival. I won't need any support. Everyone else can be dedicated to our revenge on Zebrudia. I don't know what the Thousand Tricks is after, but we'll teach him what it means to stand in our way."

How had he tricked Galf? Was that irreverent man on the Sounding Stone really the infamous hunter he claimed to be? Both questions were yet to be answered. But they were confident that the Thousand Tricks was the reason the Counter Cascade and the Dragon Caller had failed.

The Thousand Tricks, Level 8. If he wasn't stopped now, he would most likely continue to hinder the organization. The boss

would crush him with his own hands where there would be plenty of witnesses. Once he had his revenge, the reputation of the empire would be damaged, and their influence reduced.

"At long last, our dreams will be realized. The name Fox will be engraved into the souls of everyone who has resisted us, and everyone who's yet to know of us. Go, my trusted accomplices! Our mark will be left on the Supreme Warrior Festival."

***

The first thing I noticed when I entered the room was an atmosphere sticky and oily yet also fragrant. The kitchen Sitri had acquired was now fully converted into a fried tofu factory. To think it had come to this. I know I had asked for a kitchen, but this was still not quite what I had expected.

Wooden boxes were piled up throughout the room. Sitri had prepared the initial ingredients, but they had clearly procured more. I glanced at her, and she shook her head. In this short time, Sora and her gang must have found a supplier.

Noticing our arrival, Sora looked up from her frying pan. There wasn't a hint of life in her eyes. "Per Galf's instructions, we've expanded our operation. His subordinates are in the second and third kitchens."

W-We've passed the point of no return. This all started on a whim. What happened? Don't you people have brakes?

There was also a person who looked exactly like me, but wearing a mask and floating off the ground. I wasn't sure what to say about that. A smile was affixed to Sitri's face. Sora followed my gaze and her eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

The other me noticed me and took off his mask, revealing a nihilistic smile far cooler than any the actual me could ever manage. "Oh my, oh my. I won't ask who you are, fake me. You've been having some fun, wearing my face."

What?

My eyes fell to my open palms. "I'm...the fake?"

"This one's the real one!" Sitri squealed while wrapping her arms

around me.

The cool me briefly watched us with mild bemusement, then hugged his knees petulantly. I didn't understand it.

It all seemed like more trouble than it was worth, so I turned to Sora and cut to the chase. "Sora, I gave the mask to Galf."

"Huh?! Wha? Eh. Why?!"

Sora was befuddled. The way she looked back and forth between me and the me clutching his knees suggested she couldn't comprehend what she was seeing. That was fine; I couldn't either.

"He looked like he wanted it, and I didn't need it," I said. "I just thought you should know that. I hope you can take over from here."

"Huh?!"

I figured they'd continue to get along with Touka and her party, so I didn't worry about that. So I was done here!

I-I'm just kidding. I'll keep an eye on Luke and Liz, so stop looking at me through those teary eyes.

"I'm going home," said the real me, still hugging his knees.

In the blink of an eye, the real me changed into Little Sister Fox.

"Huh?!" Sora yelped.

Ohh, I get it.

Being aberrant foxes, I wasn't surprised to see they were capable of taking other forms. Though why she took my form was a complete mystery.

"What? J-Just one moment!" Sora wailed, her cheeks twitching. "Wh-Why?!"

"I'm bored."

"Bored? You're *bored*?! Wh-What am I supposed to do going forward?"

Little Sister Fox just sighed, unaffected by Sora's pleading. "Don't be so obtuse. This no longer excites me. I'm done. I'm going sightseeing, then home. Thanks for the fried tofu."

What an irresponsible girl. But while it was easy to forget, she was just a phantom.

While Sora stood vacantly, Little Sister Fox vanished. I made a mental note to have a word with her brother.

"What in the world just happened?!" Sora cried.

"She's a selfish one," I said. "But she is a phantom, so what can you do?"

"Hm?"

***

Why me?

Sora was at her wit's end. It just didn't add up. She needed more time to grasp the situation.

Umm, so if he's right, that was a phantom? Hm? Does that mean that *White Fox was* also *a fake?* A bad feeling kicked her heart into overdrive and goose bumps formed on the back of her neck. *No, no, no, no, no.*

How many authentic white masks were there?! Nobody had told her this might happen. Where had it all gone wrong? When the Thousand Tricks had obtained a mask? When she had identified him as a boss just by looking at said mask? Or was it because she hadn't admitted to her mistake?

There was one answer. In a now-empty room, she shouted it aloud in a trembling voice, all for nobody's benefit but her own.

"I-I made no mistake! I can say it with confidence! Our boss, the White Fox, issued a command to make fried tofu, so I did! If the boss says we'll conquer the world with boxed lunches, then it's the priestess's duty to follow suit! The boss is not to be defied! Second-guessing is prohibited! I did what I was able to, therefore I did nothing wrong!"

The False Fox had said that girl was a phantom. That could only mean one thing—that girl hadn't merely obtained a mask, she was a spawn of the holy fox. If she was the real deal, that would explain the tail and the inhuman aura. Normally, meeting the offspring of the divine would be a joyful occasion, but not in this case.

Now what was Sora to do? Having inherited a mask from an imposter, was Galf now one of the bosses? Or was he not? Conventional thinking said he wasn't. If that girl had been one of the organization's bosses, there would be a case for Galf to now hold that title, but she was just a phantom.

Trying not to overreact, Sora came to the conclusion that things could hardly get any worse. She was especially angry that the phantom fox had contacted the organization over the Sounding Stone! This was far beyond the point of being salvageable.

She could feel that the organization was going through a major change, and she was nothing more than another victim caught up in the current. But the die was cast, and she had a duty to be a figure both mystical and unerring. There was no need for a Maiden that made misidentifications, so Sora would own no mistakes and make no apologies.

Running wasn't an option. She had no money, knew nothing of the world, and there was no escaping the organization. All she could do now was do as the god wished. With earnest dedication, she continued to make fried tofu. The god had said to conquer the world this way. What came after didn't matter to her. She was a loyal priestess, not a leader.

She heard footsteps outside the door. They sounded like those of someone walking with confidence. Sora snorted. It was probably Galf. How pitiful that he had received an authentic mask from a fake boss. In some ways, he was an even bigger victim than Sora was, as he didn't know that young man was an imposter. As far as she was aware, Galf was as ignorant as she was, if not more.

But now that he had an authentic mask, he was one of the bosses and had all the responsibilities that came with the station. That was the way this organization worked. There was no room for doubt.

The door opened and Galf came in, wearing his mask. Sora took a deep breath and did her original duty, something she hadn't done much recently.

"O White Fox," she said with austerity, "as ordered, we're transitioning into a producer of fried tofu. Do you wish us to maintain this course?"

Sora kept her head lowered. Before the object of her worship, she couldn't raise her head without permission. The White Fox who had once been a king among bandits stayed silent for a few seconds.

“Well done,” he said eventually. “Are you aware of plans for the future?”

“It’s carved into my essence. We are to make inarizushi bento, then conquer the world.”

“What?! Oh, uh, never mind. Do you understand the intentions of this plan?”

“A mere Maiden could never dare to gauge the thoughts of a White Fox.”

“Gotta be kidding me.”

It seemed this White Fox was being strung along, just like Sora was. But she pretended not to notice. Now that Galf had a mask, he was a boss.

“Let me ask this,” he said after a moment of hesitation, “a plan can’t be stopped once it’s started, can it?”

“Everything is done in accordance with your will.”

“I’m the White Fox. Everything is mine to command.”

“You speak the truth.” Sora was hesitant to say this, but Galf sounded as bewildered as she was. They were likely in the same boat. “There is no ambiguity; that mask proves you act on behalf of the holy fox. Previously, the White Fox ordered the creation of a new organization—Ten-Tailed Fried Tofu.”

***

The Holy Fox Maiden knelt before Galf. But her words had taken him entirely by surprise.

“O-Oh, yes,” he stammered.

He had finally ascended to a grand position in the organization, but he had never felt so uncertain of what was going on. The boss had told him to ask Sora for the details, but she didn’t seem to be any better informed than him.

It was an open secret among the higher ranks that there were multiple White Foxes. This meant that even after attaining the title of “boss” one couldn’t rest on their laurels. If Galf didn’t quickly secure territory for himself, the other White Foxes might start meddling in his affairs. He had been surprised to be handed the

mask without any sort of initiation, but maybe if he couldn't handle that, then he wasn't worthy of his new title.

Sora's gaze was fixed on him. Galf assumed that as a Maiden, she had grown up cloistered, but in her own way, she was resolved to do her duty. In which case, Galf should do the same.

Let's start by evaluating the—

Before he could finish that thought, the emergency Sounding Stone in his pocket began to vibrate. Could this be the initiation? Clinging to that last thread of hope, he put the stone to his ear.

"*Galf Shenfelder of the Seventh Tail. You are suspected of falling for an enemy plot and putting the organization at a disadvantage. Starting now, you and your subordinates are relieved of your duties. A messenger is headed your way. You would do well to obey them.*"

This was a bolt from the blue. Before Galf could even reply, the connection was severed. He looked at Sora. Visibly tense, she avoided making eye contact.

"That mask is undeniably authentic!" she insisted. "A maiden's eyes cannot be fooled. You are a White Fox!"

What's she talking about?! This can't be happening! "Enemy plot," they said?!

Galf was a loyal member of Fox, which was exactly what had compelled him to obey orders, no matter how strange. He didn't have the same sense of reverence that the Maidens did, but being a Fox was far more profitable than leading a bandit squad and he knew well just how terrifying the bosses could be. Not once had he ever made a significant mistake during an assignment.

He broke out in a cold sweat. He wanted to explain what had happened, but he didn't think that would work. If he was to believe what that person on the Sounding Stone had said, what he had done went beyond a simple mistake. Fox wasn't a forgiving organization. Even if Galf hadn't had treasonous intentions or made any mistakes, he could be silenced for this. This made Telm's failure look trivial by comparison and was made all the worse because it came on the heels of the botched assassination.

Galf forced his mind to work through the intense confusion, to find the best path forward. He considered the position of the boss,

the organization, Sora, and himself. He looked over the cards he had been dealt to see how they could give him a way out. Galf wasn't going to go down without a fight.

There was only one option and he committed himself to it. The organization could get moving at any moment, so he needed to act.

"Headquarters must be confused if they're harboring suspicions towards someone who owns a mask," he said to Sora.

"I believe that is correct," she said after a pause.

"It seems one of our own has turned against us. I don't know who it is, but we'll have to cut them out at the source."

"I believe that is correct," Sora said again after an even longer pause.

So she was already more or less aware of it. Damn it.

Galf's intuition told him that the contact from headquarters was genuine and that it was the boss who was fake. This explained why something had seemed off. He should have had Sora replaced with a more experienced Maiden.

But it was too late for regrets. One thing Galf had going for him was that the mask was genuine. If word of the situation hadn't yet gotten out, Galf should still have some sway in the town in which he had spent so long establishing himself. He would make sure everyone was aboard his ship before they could realize it was a sinking one. His chances of victory were slim, but this was the only option he had left.

"I determine our course! Gather as many nearby members as you can and prepare for combat!"

Sora looked at him open-eyed. "As you wish!"

Galf wanted to hit her, but knew he couldn't do that. As long as she retained her status as a Maiden, Galf and Sora were destined for the same fate, for better or for worse. They had a number of criminal organizations on their side, among many other advantages. He would get what he could out of them before they caught on to what had happened!

"Anyone who protests, joins the other side, or disobeys orders will be silenced!" he declared. "Bring all operations to a stop and prepare for combat! This battle will be of immense importance, failure will

mean our end! I determine our course and I won't accept any interference! There will be no retreating! We will fight onward! Worry not, for we have the fox god's blessing!"

Headquarters had been thrown into chaos, which was to Galf's advantage. He would use his righteousness and loyalty to draw a compromise out of them. If they used Murina, he might be able to get Zebrudia on his side. Nothing said his defeat was for certain.

To move forward or to die. Those were his only options now.

***

It was the last day before the Supreme Warrior Festival and the town was more fervent than ever. I stifled a yawn and continued my daily routine of checking the newspaper, then suddenly my drowsiness was blown away in an instant.

"Hrmm? Huh. Today might be a hectic one."

The article briefly described an incident in Kreat last night. Much to my relief, the town had been perfectly tranquil since my arrival, but now I was starting to see that it really could get wild during this time of the year. I didn't think there was any need to make up for the lost chaos, but it almost felt like they had been waiting for the start of the festival.

"Princess Murina was part of that. Or so I believe," Lucia said. She was now fully recovered and was charging my Relics. "Luke and the others were thrilled."

"What? Why?"

The article said the incident was likely a conflict between two criminal organizations. Luke loved a good battle and had been starved for violence lately, so I could see him sticking his neck into a conflict in which he had no stake. But Princess Murina? Could my friends have been a bad influence on her? Maybe she had a thirst for blood that exceeded even Princess Killina's?

"They're really keeping busy, even though the tournament is tomorrow," I said. "I wonder if they're all ready."

It sounded awfully intense for a warm-up exercise.

Lucia let out an exasperated sigh and handed me an ornately

decorated pamphlet. “That’s what I’d like to say to you. You’re aware you’re going to be up first, right?”

I looked down at the pamphlet and saw a tournament bracket. Blinking, I read aloud the part Lucia was pointing at. “Krahi Andrihee versus Krai Andrey?”

How many guys are running around with the same name as me?

***

“Krahi, you really should be careful out there,” Kule Saicool, the brains and worrywart of the party said.

Krahi nodded. “Yes, I know.”

The other members looked at him with concern.

Kutri Smyat the Ignorable, the party’s foulmouthed Alchemist, leaned back in a chair, her legs crossed and a cigarette in her mouth. “Nothing wrong with running, y’know?” She sounded sympathetic, which wasn’t common for her. “Just qualifying for the Supreme Warrior Festival is a big deal. I don’t see you getting your ass kicked or anything, but I don’t want you getting battered. If you’re gonna join, then I’m putting my bets on the other guy.”



“Huh?! My brother would never lose!” Lusha cried. “And I thought there were rules against party members betting on anyone but their leader—”

“There are always alternatives, and you wouldn’t need me to tell you that if you weren’t so naive. Now, what if Krahi does win? He might just be kicking a hornet’s nest! Krahi might turn out to be stronger than his opponent, but Lusha, you sure as hell won’t.”

Lusha was taken aback by Kutri’s blunt remark. “That’s not true! Besides, you’re no better than Sitri!”

“Nothing wrong with that. Knowledge is what makes a good Alchemist,” Kutri flashed a dark smile, “and I’m ignorable.”

Krahi didn’t quite understand what they were talking about, but he had come to realize his party members had a unique sense of camaraderie he didn’t entirely fathom. He didn’t say anything about this, as he was just glad they got along. But there was one thing he had to make abundantly clear.

“Kutri, I’m not running. I don’t think advancing through the tournament will be simple, but treasure hunting isn’t about taking the easy route. I wouldn’t be able to call myself a hunter if I ran in the face of the unknown.”

Krahi had his pride; he would never consider running or match-fixing. Even if he died, he wouldn’t regret this decision.

Kutri clicked her tongue. “Figured you’d say that. Do what you want. But if you lose, then I want permission to step down.”

“He’s still as serious as ever,” Izabee said in a beleaguered voice. “Meanwhile, we’re over here calling ourselves ‘Smyat.’”

“Heh. Too late to start saying that when we’re looking for a brother, dear sister of mine.”

“That’s because your facsimile is a shallow one.”

Krahi would be the only one taking the stage, but it seemed everyone was on edge. Advancing in the Supreme Warrior Festival would earn them recognition, but an ignominious defeat would make them a laughingstock. Krahi took their unease as a sign that he still hadn’t fully earned their trust.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Yesterday’s battle was the best warm-up I could ask for. I’m the strongest I’ve ever been.”

What was that battle all about? Krahi hadn't the faintest idea. He had never before been suddenly called up only to then be thrown into a bloody maelstrom. He had had plenty of allies fighting with him, but the same could be said of the guys on the other side. It had been his first time in such a large-scale fight, and there had been a number of close calls, but he was stronger now that he had come out of it alive.

Krahi's confidence faltered when he looked at the tournament bracket. "I never would have expected to see you in the tournament, Krai. To think you kept this to yourself. The duplicity."

The first bout would be between two men with nearly identical names. Krahi couldn't help but feel like fate had played a hand in this. Entrants were determined by the tournament managers. Accepting that Krai got into the tournament, what was the likelihood that he would get put against Krahi in the first round?

What a mysterious man. Despite seeming so weak, he had a plethora of connections and the friendship of many capable people. You might say he was the exact opposite of Krahi. According to Kule and the others, Krai had a title, and not only that, it was one quite similar to his.

"'Andrey.' What a funny name," he chuckled. "Is 'the Thousand Tricks' an allusion to me?"

"Hey, Kule, is this guy okay?"

"Krahi's a warrior, and he rarely takes an interest in others."

Krahi could barely recall the last time somebody had fascinated him so much. With Krai's total lack of mana material, Krahi couldn't even guess how powerful that man might be. However, even if they were acquaintances, even if Krai was a fan of his, Krahi wouldn't go easy on him. He believed that giving it his best would be the courteous thing to do.

And as this crossed his mind, Krahi realized he had begun to smile. It was a smile that stretched ear to ear.

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For goodness' sake, human settlements were such clamorous

places. That desert village and the treasure vault she grew up in had been noisy, but they were nowhere near as much as this town, now that its festival was approaching.

The streets were packed, but nobody was looking at a certain silhouette. She was verifiably there, but she simply escaped everyone's notice. The phantom foxes of Peregrine Lodge practically defined themselves by their ability to trick humans. But now Little Sister Fox was done toying with this town. She had tricked some people into making fried tofu and strung along some strange organization. She would miss the large servings of fried tofu, but she could use the same scheme again if she found herself wanting more.

This divine offspring was fickle; she only involved herself with humans when she felt like it.

Now, what would she do next? Should she return to Peregrine Lodge? Or perhaps to that desert village? She was humming a tune to herself as she strolled down the street when she suddenly came across a scrap of paper on the ground. It was the Supreme Warrior Festival's tournament bracket.

Little Sister Fox didn't know much about the human world, but she had gleaned the gist of this fabled tournament through overhead conversations. It was a fighting competition. It struck her as foolish for these lower beings to compete to be considered the strongest when obviously, none of them could hope to match Mother Fox.

Browsing the bracket, Little Sister Fox spotted a familiar name. "Krai Andrey versus Krahi Andrihee?"

Krai Andrey. Human names meant nothing to her, but this was one she would never forget. It was more than that, he was Peregrine Lodge's nemesis. He had defeated one of the vault's phantoms in a battle of wits and made off with some of its most valuable parts—two of the tails. Even Little Sister Fox had been affected when he maneuvered her into an armistice.

That man had no respect for her. Her divine lineage wouldn't let her simply accept defeat, but he was too dangerous for her to oppose alone.

"Interesting," she whispered after a few moments of staring at the chart. Her quick mind was already formulating a plan. Though

she had planned to head home, she now saw her chance to get back at Mr. Caution.

She couldn't attack him directly, but there were more than a few ways she could get a human to dance to her tune. This time, he would know hell, know what it was to be deceived. She would make him grovel, then have him brush her tail. His renown as a hunter would be tarnished.

Chapter Five: The Supreme Warrior Festival

The day of destiny was upon us, and I had a stomachache the moment I woke up.

Lucia dragged me out of bed, yelling, "Get a hold of yourself! Do you think you can fight like this? That's no ordinary hunter you're going to be pitted against!"

"I can't go. My Relics aren't charged."

"I charged them."

I hadn't gotten nearly enough sleep. It was all because of that accursed tournament bracket. I wasn't going out there. From start to finish, I had said I wouldn't participate, and I never once expressed a desire to. But I knew that even for me, it was unlikely that there was some guy running around with the same first and last name as mine.

So what's the most likely cause of this? Maybe some screwup by the empire? I wanna go home.

"You don't look so good," Liz commented. She had been sparring with Luke all morning. "You're usually calm, no matter what."

I never feel good! I thought as I forced my body up.

"Now, now, Krai," Sitri said with a grin and clap of her hands, "If the Krai on the bracket is a different Krai than our Krai Krai Krai..."

She was broken. Maybe I had whacked her on the head too many times? Maybe she enjoyed seeing my reactions as she started lining up potions before me.

"Here we have a recovery potion, an explosive, a poison, a paralyzer, a sleep inducer, a mana recovery..."

She was broken, but some functions remained intact.

I shook my head, telling myself not to jump to conclusions. It was possible that the me on the bracket was a different me. If a look-

alike existed, it could mean a real one existed (no, I don't know what that means). I was nervous and panicking, so much that I was ready to throw up.

Lucia sighed and said, "Why did you accept the ticket if you didn't want to participate?"

"Because I wanted to spectate."

"And haven't I been telling you that that's a participant's ticket?!"

I wanted to hit my past self for being so happy-go-lucky. And if I were going to participate, what did this mean for the princess? In fact, I didn't see her around. Had she made a break for it?

"If you're looking for Princess Murina, she'll be watching from the VIP seats. She is of the imperial family, as you're aware."

I told myself not to worry, that I absolutely would not participate and therefore had nothing to fear.

"Just to be sure, can you surrender in the Supreme Warrior Festival?" Sitri asked, a few of her screws still loose.

"Uh, I'm pretty sure it's possible. Officially, at least," Lucia answered.

"What?!" Luke cried. "No way am I gonna let anyone spoil the fun like that! They'll taste steel before they can get away with it!"

"Luke, your blade is wooden," Liz reminded him.

It probably didn't taste good either way. Listening to their exchange, Lucia sighed deeply. Unlike me, everyone else was in high spirits. Even Lucia and Ansem were both raring to go.

"With yesterday's exercise, I've never been better!" Luke said. "You'll give me a good show, right, Krai?!"

"The princess started crying when she got bombarded with orders," Liz recalled. "I had fun though."

I could barely believe I was the same species as these two.

I told myself that I would be okay, that it was someone else on the tournament bracket. And if the unlikely—and I mean *very* unlikely—came true and I did end up in the tournament, I'd be safe so long as my opponent wasn't Luke.

I took a deep breath and smiled. Smiling is the only thing humans can do when they're helpless. I turned around and looked at my friends. "Now," I said, trying to be as hard-boiled as possible, "are

you guys ready to make history*?”

(*For a certain definition of history.)

They roared in the affirmative.

The site of the tournament, Kreat’s famous arena, wasn’t even open yet, but it was already the center of a storm of zealous cheers and bellows. It gave me goose bumps. Close to the arena were dozens of people, a plethora of different weapons among them.

It almost felt like there was a war going on, but then again, the Supreme Warrior Festival was in its own way just that. This was a place to determine who was the strongest, but every year it also resulted in more than a few fatalities. Sometimes hunters put their pride above their own lives.

“Oh, what’s the matter, Krai? You look like you’re gonna die,” Sven said.

“I always look like this,” I replied.

“Are you for real? Sir? You’re up first, aren’t you?” Kris prodded me.

We had met up with Obsidian Cross, Starlight, and the other members of First Steps that had come to cheer us on. Apparently, I looked bad enough that Kris and Sven could tell at just a glance that something was up. Everyone was under the impression that I would be fighting, but I didn’t feel like trying to clear up that misunderstanding.

Say something! If you think I’m involved in something, then tell me earlier!

Except they had told me.

“This is my prebattle complexion,” I said, trying to sound cool and resisting my urge to flee.

“What? Sir?”

It wasn’t just Sitri, I was broken as well.

“Last night, I had too much to think about and couldn’t sleep,” I said.

That hadn’t happened in a while. Being able to sleep well was supposed to be one of my strengths.

“I get you, Krai!” Luke yelled, undeterred by the large crowd.

"Last night, I was so excited I got up and did some practice swings!"

Don't put us in the same boat.

"You made me worry for nothing!" Kris said. "Hmph. Just don't make an idiot of yourself. Sir!"

"You had too much on your mind to sleep," Sven smirked. "So you are taking this seriously? Don't see that every day."

"Do your best, Master!" Tino said. "I'm all ready. I've bet all my money on you!"

It's fine. It's all fine. Sitri will compensate Tino for her losses, so it's all fine.

It wasn't going to be me entering. Deliverance comes to believers, and I believed I wouldn't be in the tournament. I absolutely would not be fighting!

The worker at the gate looked at my ticket with wide eyes. "'Mr. Krai Andrey.' Hm. Didn't I let you in earlier?"

This took me by surprise. "Hm?!"

"Are you sure that wasn't Krahi Andrihee?" Sitri checked.

The gate-worker looked at me suspiciously. "I'm certain I've made no mistake. I already let this man in."

Wait. Could it be? COULD IT REALLY BE?

Of course. I never said I would be fighting, and I didn't see how anyone could confuse being in the ring with being out of it. What a confusing mess. Who was this Krai Andrey fellow? I considered betting on him.

Maybe it was crass of me, but I instantly felt leagues better. A smile formed on my face, which Lucia found suspect.

"What are you so happy about?" she asked.

"By the way," I said to the gate-worker, "is there a challenger named Murina Atolm Zebrudia?"

I figured I may as well check.

"No, there isn't. Wait. Zebrudia?"

I hadn't seen her name on the bracket or anything, but hearing this was a relief.

"Anyways, could he be allowed to reenter?" Sitri asked.

"You also lost your warrior's bracelet? I told you I couldn't issue

another one. Here, don't lose it this time. Now, good luck out there."

Thanks to Sitri's unrequested meddling, a bracelet was snapped onto my wrist.

Warrior's bracelet. Ha ha. I don't need this. I'm not a warrior.

"Krai Andrey, you'll be in the first bout, so right this way."

"Give 'em hell, Krai Baby!"

Ha ha ha, don't worry. That's a different Krai Andrey they're talking about.

"Here's the standby room."

Ha ha ha. "Standby room." What's a spectator going to be on standby for? The only fight I'm waiting for is the fight to hold my drink.

The door slammed shut. I returned to my senses.

The standby room was simple. The only furniture was a chair, table, and a mini fridge. I looked up and saw that the ceiling wasn't far above me. No good hiding spots.

What am I doing here? Tell them no, Krai!

My relative safety had hollowed out my brain.

I looked around but didn't see anyone who could explain what was going on. But worse than that, the Krai, the real Krai, who was supposed to be on standby wasn't here. Nowhere he could hide, for that matter.

Clinging to my last thread of hope, I opened the mini fridge. "Kraiii, are you here?"

Inside was nothing more than a few bottles of water. Crap. I hadn't really thought he would be in the fridge, but this sealed the deal—he wasn't in the room.

No. I still didn't know that for sure. It was possible that Krai Andrey was a liquid life-form. I didn't recall there being any limits on what races could enter.

Still in denial, I removed the bottles one by one. "Kraiii, is this you?" I droned lifelessly. "Or is this you? Or could this be you?"

"Eeep!" the water bottle yelped.

Once again, I returned to my senses.

"I need to go to the bathroom," I said.

This wasn’t the time for being in denial and it wasn’t the time for auditory hallucinations.

Real Krai, where are you?

***

In the empty standby room, the mini fridge silently opened. Without anyone touching it, one of the water bottles rolled onto the ground. And then Little Sister Fox returned to her original form.

The first thing she did was breathe deeply. She needed to calm down. She was so startled, her pointed ears had popped out. She twitched them as she listened for the presence of anyone else. Once she was sure nobody was around, she let out a sigh of relief.

What a terrifying human. That had been her first time taking the form of an inanimate object, but she was so confident in her transformation skills that she could barely believe how quickly he had cornered her. But in the end, she won. Her guise had managed to fool Mr. Caution. She thought it might have been over when she accidentally cried out, but he hadn’t caught on.

But this was where the real fight began. She was up against someone who had given both her mother and older brother a run for their money. She was certain her plan was sound, but there was no telling what might blow her cover.

Just now, she hadn’t expected that man to enter this room. Still, she had managed to make it work by turning into a bottle of water. When she really thought about it, he was slated to appear in this tournament, so it was natural that he had ended up in this room.

“Interesting,” she murmured.

Peregrine Lodge had a rule that if you lost a battle of wits, you couldn’t seek revenge. But she refused to simply accept defeat. Because of her previous defeat, Little Sister Fox had been labeled a glutton by her counterparts. It was a humiliating memory.

She couldn’t seek revenge, but she could prepare another duel. This time, she would be on the attack. Would a dullard who had never noticed the true nature of his Smartphone really be able to see through her schemes?

She wasn’t going to spare any means at her disposal. She closed her eyes and held up her index finger, preparing a spell. With this, Mr. Caution would be momentarily lost in the bathroom, unable to leave. While he was stumbling around in the lavatory, faith in him would crumble. And when he was found, he would be jeered and mocked.

Satisfied with her work, she did an agile flip and took the form of Krai Andrey.

***

Beneath a cloudless sky, a fervent buzz overtook a stadium large enough to seat tens of thousands of people. At long last, the Supreme Warrior Festival was set to begin. The majority of the seats were filled and everyone was waiting to witness the making of a champion.

Tino and the hunters of First Steps were given special seats for friends of the participants. These special seats were the closest to the fighting. In a tournament that attracted the best of all races and vocations, attacks could sometimes impact a wide area. These acquaintances were meant to serve as a sort of breakwater, should it be necessary.

Looking around, Tino saw nothing but seasoned warriors. She naturally tensed up, which she tried to alleviate with deep breaths. This caught the attention of two fellow spectators, Sven Anger of Obsidian Cross, and Kris of Starlight.

“Don’t tell me something’s bothering you. The show hasn’t even started!”

“He’s right. We’re here on the human weakling’s invitation, we should act like we deserved it!”

However, Kris seemed about as nervous as Tino. Sven, though, was totally at ease.

“I’ve got a lotta money riding on this, so there’s gonna be hell to pay if he bungles this!” Kris grumbled.

Her master was god, therefore, Tino hadn’t hesitated to bet all her capital on him. Following her suggestion, Kris had done the

same.

"Kris, you're not, well, *y'know*?" Sven said, looking at her with pity.

"What? No, I don't know! If you have something to say, then say it! Sir!"

"Master is god. Master will definitely win. Everything will be fine."

Kris was quick to agree with Tino. "R-Right! He'll win, so it's no problem! He invited me here, so it was only natural that I bet on him!" But her eyes still showed uncertainty.

She was probably harboring a similar unease to Tino's. Either way, whether his chances were good or bad, Tino had no choice but to bet on her beloved master. To not bet would demonstrate a lack of faith.

"But what's with this card?!" Kris said, smacking the tournament bracket. "It's ridiculous!"

Tino was of the same mind. Her master's first opponent would be Krahi Andrihee—the fake master. She had known of the fake master (except her master called him the real one), but never had she imagined the two would meet on this lauded stage.

That someone would impersonate a hunter known far and wide like the Thousand Tricks was preposterous. But it had made Tino all the more confident in her wager. After all, no matter what, a fake couldn't possibly surpass the real thing.

Sven roared with laughter. "But this guy's something special. He's a skilled Magus with plenty of mana material."

"Right, you said you met him," Kris replied. "But if he really is talented, that just makes it all the weirder that he would use a fake name! This is a tournament that even Noble Spirits know well! Sir!"



"I hear it's his real name."

"And you believe him?! I don't buy that this is a coincidence! Think about it, similar names can happen, but that *and* similar titles? What are the chances?"

Tino was troubled. Her master was god, but this was a tricky situation. He seemed quite fond of the fake him. Her master's magnanimity was one of his strengths, but it could work against him from time to time. Listening in on the nearby chatter, it seemed the other spectators didn't know which of the two was the real one. Krai Andrey and Krahi Andrihee. The Thousand Tricks and the Thousandfold Theurgics.

Tino's master preferred to keep his face a secret, and though his title might have been known by many, his name and appearance were much more obscure. Of course, this was intentional on his part, but now it was acting as a detriment. If Krahi emerged victorious, it would be Krai who would be treated as the copycat.

But that didn't change much for Tino; all she could do was give her master all the support she could muster. She slapped her cheeks. She couldn't let herself fall into a rut when nothing had even happened to her. Seeing her master fight up close would be a good opportunity for her. She couldn't just cheer him on, she had to make sure to learn from this.

And shortly after, the time came. The air in the arena changed. The fiery enthusiasm was amplified by the uncanny silence that now pervaded. A large man appeared in the spacious fighting ring. He was almost as large as Ansem the Immutable. He was also the man who had used overwhelming force to dominate the previous Supreme Warrior Festival.

Under his right arm, he carried a metal rod that was even bigger than he was. It was made of adamantium, the heaviest and most durable material in the world—barring that of some Relics. Tino had learned what a capable warrior he was when last year, he used nothing but his muscles and a large rod to smash through any spell or technique that came his way.

Just looking at his exposed muscles caused Tino to shiver. She could barely believe this man was the same species as her. Was it

another miracle of mana material that had allowed him to become stronger than a monster or a mythical beast? In all likelihood, how one might overcome this man was a conundrum pondered by all participants.

The previous Supreme Warrior took a quiet breath, then let loose a voice that boomed like thunder. The sound rattled Tino and she covered her ears immediately. She suspected someone might faint if they stood close enough to him. When you stood at the top of the world, you could do things like this.

"A year's gone by! Overcoming all odds, more challengers have gathered to compete for the right to the Supreme Warrior! Let the tournament begin!"

What simple words they were. But Tino could see it—the man's eyes glinted like those of a predator before its prey, his voice yearning for bloodshed. He was waiting for whoever might challenge him.

Tino had a hunch that this man would be the biggest obstacle on her master's path to becoming the next Supreme Warrior. She would support him until the end, but even she couldn't have much confidence that her genial master could beat this freak.

At last, it was time for the first fight to begin.

***

Finally. He had been waiting for this. The passion of the crowd carried on the air that brushed his skin. Every bit of him was brimming with anticipation. Krahi Andrihee the Thousandfold Theurgics closed his eyes, flipping an internal switch. He was in peak condition.

Until he had been invited to join Kule's party, Krahi had been a solo hunter. When you don't have anyone to potentially come to your rescue, being able to instantly prepare for battle is a necessary skill. Though he was a Magus, Krahi was used to fighting on his own, which was a valuable trait in this tournament.

Generally speaking, those suited to close ranges had the upper hand in the Supreme Warrior Festival. Sure enough, the previous

Supreme Warrior himself was an aberrant mass of muscle. Krahi might tremble at the sight of him, but that didn't mean he was going to accept defeat. He would claim yet another victory, just as he had many times before. You couldn't be a hunter without the drive to come out on top.

But this time, Krahi wasn't fighting just for his own sake. He wanted to become the next Supreme Warrior so the name Bereaving Souls would become legend. This was for his friends, who always stuck with him despite looking so uncertain of themselves.

"Give me your all, Krai Andrey. Once you've done that, I'll shoulder your aspirations as well," he muttered, then stepped out into the ring.

***

"Heh. They thought they could oppose the new boss. What dunces. Wait 'til they see what's in store for them."

"Indeed. Though that was a very close call."

From a corner of the stands in the arena, Galf and Sora affixed their gazes on the ring. Both were in a rough state. Galf had a broken arm in a cast and was supporting himself with crutches. Sora, meanwhile, had no wounds to speak of, but her hair was disheveled and she looked absolutely exhausted.

It had been old-Fox versus new-Fox, and it had been a savage engagement. Just like Galf had predicted, the organization had tried to crush them with everything they had. They had been vastly outnumbered, but a series of coincidences had allowed them to escape.

There was the fact that all of Galf's best members had already been gathered to his side for the operation in Kreat. There was the fact that the organization's dedication to secrecy meant gathering information on Galf had taken time. There was the fact that they had the cooperation of Grieving Souls, Knights of the Torch, and other organizations Galf had formed an alliance with.

Also, the opposing side was inclined to try and keep their losses to a minimum. When they pulled back, it must have been because

they realized that containment was impossible when they saw the fierce resistance put up by Galf's forces.

The organization was in the midst of a huge operation. Rather than risk losing personnel and reducing their chances of success, they instead opted to leave Galf for later. Thus, what he had obtained wasn't victory, just a temporary reprieve.

This would be his last chance to go into hiding. His helpers had already been relieved of their duties. Many of the bandits who had allied with him and his subordinates had been killed or wounded, leaving his forces at less than half their original count. There would be no winning the next engagement.

But Galf had to see his mission through to the end. This should let him understand why he had been deceived.

"I was never suited to be someone else's underling," he said. "This is refreshing."

"Boss, are you sure you aren't coping?"

It turned out this Maiden wasn't so bad after all.

***

Dozens of meters directly above Kreat's arena, a silhouette floated in the air. He wore a robe of pure black, a white fox mask covering his face. He stepped across nothingness while looking down at a black object—a Sounding Stone. This was Caelum Tail, a member of the top brass of Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox.

He bit his lip, vexed by his lack of progress. He had expected Galf's forces to be smaller. Not only were his ranks vast, he had commanded them with all the ingenuity that had placed him in the seventh tail. Even with all the support he had mustered, Caelum Tail had been forced to withdraw.

The enemy was conspiring to drive Fox apart, though Caelum hadn't realized it soon enough. Galf had lost some of his numbers, as had Caelum. In the end, it was his enemies who stood to gain the most from this internal conflict.

Disrupting an organization long mired in secrecy in such a short time couldn't have been done without considerable preparation. This

wasn’t the work of the Explorers’ Association or the empire, as Fox would’ve learned if such a large entity was planning something against them.

The Level 8 hunter, the Thousand Tricks, was the man who had crushed Serpent, an organization that had once rivaled Fox. With his track record of vanquishing foes through unparalleled information gathering and cunning, he could be considered Fox’s biggest obstacle. Caelum Tail wasn’t yet convinced that the man he had heard on the Sound Stone really was the Thousand Tricks, but it was possible, knowing that man’s abilities.

But he was young and naive. It would take much more than this to scare off Fox.

After this, the Thousand Tricks would no longer stand in his way. There was no end of powerful hunters out there, but none of them had the tactical skills to outmaneuver Fox. They might need some time to regroup after this, but that was a small price to pay for disposing of a threat early in the game.

Today, Rodrick Atolm Zebrudia would witness the death of the man who had saved his life, and Fox’s status would be cemented.

The boss looked down at the tournament bracket. “What a ridiculous move...”

The first fight on the bracket was Krai Andrey versus Krahi Andrihee. A card that felt like a joke, one people were referring to as the fake versus the real. Caelum didn’t know how the Thousand Tricks had managed to interfere with the fight lineup, but it was too half-baked to fool Fox.

Caelum had never met the Thousand Tricks face-to-face before, but even if he didn’t know which one was the real one, that could be resolved easily—he would just kill both of them.

Two dark-haired men stood in a large coliseum. The match would begin soon. Caelum would strike the moment one of them fell. The barriers around the ring were only meant to block outgoing attacks, not incoming ones.

Caelum narrowed his eyes and watched. The two figures appeared no bigger than beans from this vantage point, but he could tell they were talking. He just had to wait. The battle between the

fake and the real, the no name and great name, wouldn't last long.

He withdrew the focal Relic, Key of the Land. It was time for despair to make its appearance. This time, Fox would show its might to the world.

But then, something happened down below. Caelum couldn't hear it, but he could tell a sense of confusion had abruptly taken hold.

What could have happened?

He squinted and saw that one of the men was holding up a hand. Then with a fierce rumble and a flash of light, Caelum was slammed by an immense force.

***

"What did you just say?" the black-haired young man asked incredulously.

His name was Krahi Andrihee, also called the Thousandfold Theurgics. He was Mr. Caution's opponent, and an imposter.

Little Sister Fox smiled fearlessly, the way Mr. Caution would. Once more, she looked around the arena and said so everyone could hear her, "I said, I'm honored to meet the real one. But that changes today. I'll defeat you, and *I'll* become the true Thousand Tricks!"

It was a perfect plan. Internally, she patted herself on the back. Her ability to devise this plan the moment she saw the tournament bracket must be a sign of terrifying genius.

She didn't understand how it had happened, but Mr. Caution had a lauded name among his fellow humans, and this man's name was nearly identical. This plan hinged on both of those facts. Little Sister Fox's plot would establish Mr. Caution as the fake one. He could deny it later, but that wouldn't mean much when thousands of people had seen him say otherwise. His reputation wouldn't recover easily.

All she had to do now was lose this bout before Mr. Caution recovered from the spell that had sent him wandering. He would lose without even getting the chance to step in the ring! Little Sister Fox pictured his shocked face.

Krahi Andrihee took a step back and whispered, "What? What are you talking about?"

“Surprised? Never expected there to be a fake? Did you think it was a coincidence that we became acquainted?!”

She just had to read his heart and connect the dots. With her powers, it wasn’t hard at all. But this man, Krahi Andrihee—he was a strange one. His eyes were clear, his heart was devoid of ill intent, and his soul had a glimmering sheen to match. And he wielded a Relic staff. His name came so close to Mr. Caution’s, but everything about the two was different. Even though he was magnitudes stronger than Mr. Caution, Krahi apparently occupied a lower station in life.

But what mystified Little Sister Fox the most was that this young man didn’t know of the Thousand Tricks, despite Mr. Caution’s supposed fame. What a strange world these humans occupied. However, this was to her advantage. If Krahi was intentionally mimicking the Thousand Tricks, that might’ve made this hard, but that wasn’t the case here.

The heavens had told Little Sister Fox to deceive, and so she would. Krahi, the audience, Mr. Caution, all of them.

She spread her arms in a show of complacency. She felt the countless sets of eyes bearing down on her. They were looks of curiosity, puzzlement, disdain. She enjoyed the disorder. Chaos was what the spectral foxes of Peregrine Lodge yearned for.

Krahi stepped forward. “There’s no need to say that, Krai. There’s no such thing as real and fake.” His voice was soft and trembling, yet carried oddly well. His black eyes, the same color as Mr. Caution’s, shone. “Nobody can become another person. I can’t become you, and you can’t become me! But we don’t need to! You’re just fine being you—Krai Andrey!”

What was this human talking about? Little Sister Fox wasn’t sure what to think of this man, who showed no signs of catching on to her ploy. The audience, meanwhile, was entranced by his commanding voice.

“It doesn’t bother me if you look up to me. It doesn’t bother me if our titles are similar. But please, don’t do something so disheartening as casting yourself aside in an effort to become me. You’ve already proven your greatness just by earning the right to be

here. That wouldn't have happened if you were nothing more than a facsimile. You're Krai Andrey, and you look up to me! Don't begrudge that fact. Accept yourself for who you are! And once you've done that, I'll be more than glad to face you! We'll meet again, in this same arena!"

The audience erupted with cheers. They must have assumed this was a performance. Now nobody was expecting anything of Mr. Caution. This was sort of what Little Sister Fox had wanted, but not quite.

After some brief considerations, she raised her hand, causing the arena to grow quiet. She had planned for Mr. Caution to become an object of mockery, but all she was getting was pity.

"What nonsense, my authentic counterpart," she said. "I'll defeat you here and now. This is the Supreme Warrior Festival, we're supposed to fight before we begin any overblown speeches. Or do you think you can't win?"

For a brief moment, Krahi looked sad, but he quickly mustered a roaring response. The wind blew, fluttering his black coat. Little Sister Fox's eyes fell on his staff. It was metal, with a golden crystal at the top. And that was when it occurred to her.

"I won't lose to a false you!" Krahi proclaimed. "You should pursue your own goals and ideals until you can identify your true self! This is for your benefit more than anyone else's, Krai Andrey!"

Krahi Andrihee was talented, he had experience, and he had a stalwart spirit. But his most powerful asset was that staff he held. Lightning crackled within that crystal affixed atop it. It was a Relic, one specialized for enhancing one specific element. It could gather up the mana in its user's body and amplify it with tremendous results.

Little Sister Fox took a step back. This man. He was a Lightning Magus, and not only that, he was so hyperfocused, he disregarded the other elements.

The sky and air both rumbled.

"In your own interests, I won't hold back!" yelled Krahi Andrihee, the Thousandfold Theurgics. "The power of the gods, tempered relentlessly! Stand and face me, the Supreme Voltaic, Krahi

Andrihee!”

Little Sister Fox couldn’t stop herself from looking up, where she saw a single bolt of lightning flashing from the heavens.

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Leaning back with her legs crossed, Kutri Smyat clicked her tongue when she saw the bolt of lightning. “He’s still stupidly powerful. In fact, he’s gone and gotten better.”

“His power’s the real thing. He doesn’t need us,” Elizabeth Smyat agreed with a sigh.

The members of Bereaving Souls tried to keep a low profile as they watched the fight. Krahi was strong. Though his name sounded like he was some sort of knockoff, his power was genuine, if absurd.

Krahi was a simple man. Simple and easily fooled, which was why Izabee and the others had successfully tricked him. It was also why he couldn’t use a wide variety of spells.

But he was indeed powerful. Krahi Andrihee commanded lightning, which some regarded as the most difficult of the many forms of magic. These blinding, thunderous spells were sometimes called the magic of champions, and Krahi was immensely fond of them.

Krahi had once operated by himself. He had been a solo hunter. Even if he hadn’t been given a name eerily similar to that of the Thousands Tricks, he would have found success. Just about all of his talents were dedicated to the use of lightning magic. The Thousandfold Theurgics was a title Bereaving Souls had come up with, but neither they nor Krahi had coined the sobriquet “Supreme Voltaic.” If Krahi were to end up with a title, it would most likely be the latter one.

Countless bolts of lightning flashed throughout the ring. The resilient barrier warped with each fierce blow it intercepted. This clearly wasn’t the sort of magic one would normally use against a human opponent, but Krahi wasn’t going to let that stop him.

“This isn’t good,” Kule Saicool muttered. His pallor had been bad all day, and now he was clutching his stomach. “He still doesn’t

know what the other guy is planning."

"You can do it! Obliterate that faker!" Lusha cheered even while twitching from the lightning.

Krahi was no doubt capable, but Kule didn't think he could win against a Level 8. Joining up with Bereaving Souls had forced Krahi to stick to lower-level vaults than he was used to, meaning he now never ventured past Level 5. If they hadn't formed this party, Krahi would definitely have continued to work solo and become an even more powerful Magus. For this reason, it was hard for Kule to not feel a pang of regret.

"Nobody can become another person."

Funny how those words had landed a critical hit on Kule and the other Bereavers. What would Krahi think if he knew the truth? Their use of names similar to those of Grieving Souls couldn't fool anyone smarter than a child. One day, Krahi would catch on to what they were doing. But now that they had come this far, there wasn't anything they could do.

The Supreme Voltaic waved his staff, increasing the rate of strikes and the impacts and blinding lights that came with them. This was Heaven's Thunder, the highest-level lightning spell in existence, more advanced than Calamitous Thunderstorm. This cataclysmic spell was something that many hunters went their whole lives without seeing. It definitely wasn't something you'd cast at a person.

The lightning showed no signs of abating. The ceaseless bolts made it impossible to spot Krahi, but he was sensible enough to stop attacking if his opponent was down. If the storm hadn't subsided, then it meant his foe was still standing.

Kule didn't know why the real one might proclaim himself to be an imposter, but the Thousand Tricks was a strategist. He was no doubt intending for some nefarious result. Not even Kule could just cast Krahi aside after coming this far with him, and he knew the other Bereavers felt the same way.

It was possible that the Thousand Tricks would forgive them if they proved they meant no harm. If he weren't interested in showing leniency, then he never would have done something like proclaim himself to be the imposter, and would have immediately

called them out.

Kule shook as the bolts continued incessantly. He casually glanced in the direction of the real one's supporters. They were all from Grieving Souls and were cheering loudly, completely unaffected by the lightning.

"Go! Get 'em! Give 'em hell!" some of them hollered. At first, Kule thought they were cheering on the real one, but now he was second-guessing that assumption. One of them, Sven Anger the Stormstrike, was particularly energized. It seemed the allies of the Thousand Tricks didn't care much for the weird speech their clan leader had given.

Kule gave up on trying to make sense of it. After all, "Protean Sortie" was just a half-baked attempt at aping "Protean Sword." He couldn't live up to the title he had given himself.

Suddenly, the lightning stopped.

"Impossible," Krahi said from amid the smoke. "Dodging even one of those shouldn't be possible, but you managed to evade all of them. What are you, Krai Andrey?!"

***

Whoops. She hadn't meant to dodge them all.

The large-scale spell had instantly seared the ground. Surrounded by clouds of dust floating through the air, Little Sister Fox wasn't sure what to do. She hadn't expected Krahi to be capable of such force. Human magic wasn't something she was terribly familiar with, but she was starting to understand how he had mustered a spell that so greatly exceeded normal human abilities.

The mana in his body was inclined to be used for lightning, and the staff in his hands was made for amplifying those exact spells, letting him summon bolts capable of rending the welkin. His accuracy suffered to the point of being nonexistent, but that was the price of casting low-cost high-damage spells in rapid succession.

Krahi was probably incapable of any variety of magic besides lightning. He was ultimately just a Lightning Magus, nothing more or less.

He opened and closed his hands, baffled by the lack of results from his onslaught. "Could my control be lacking? No, perhaps my body is hesitant to strike you? But lighting spells will find their own way to a target, so long as they're close enough. Though I guess there's no use thinking about it."

Normally, that should have been enough. Anyone could tell that Krahi's attacks had been more than sufficiently destructive.

Little Sister Fox had evaded the spells entirely on reflex. She didn't handle lightning well. It was an instinct from when she had existed as a living being. And these weren't ideal circumstances for her—the mana material in the outside world was too sparse. If she had gotten hit, she would've really felt it.

Krahi twirled his staff, then faced Little Sister Fox. "If you evade ten, then I'll call one hundred. If you evade one hundred, I'll call one thousand! Don't be shy! Try and manage one thousand strikes from the heavens!"

As though answering his beckons, the skies above flashed and rumbled. This man wasn't aiming for his foe, he was planning to scorch the entire ring. What a surprise to learn that a human could be so formidable. He was enough to be a threat to Mother Fox, an actual god.

Weren't humans supposed to be rational creatures?

Despite all this, Little Sister Fox couldn't just counterattack. For one thing, she was here for the purpose of playing her tricks, but there was another issue—she had very few means by which to attack. The phantoms of Peregrine Lodge were driven by the desire to beguile, not to kill. If they were to take a life, they weren't to do it directly or without provocation.

She had to lose this fight. She had to find a way. She had to hurry before the spell cast on Mr. Caution wore off. Gazing into the excessive thunderstorm blinding her, she took a desperate step forward.

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The puzzling and almost farcical exchange between the two

challengers ended, instantly giving way to a breathtaking battle. The first bolt was a sight to behold, but when it turned to a volley, the scene resembled divine retribution rather than the casting of a single Magus.

At first, Tino had been confused by the fake master's confidence, and the real master declaring himself a fake, but the spectacle of their fight pushed out any unnecessary thoughts from her mind. This man, Krahi Andrihee, had a name like her master's, and extraordinary skills to match. The strength and swiftness of his attacks were both first-rate. In terms of lightning power, she was certain Krahi surpassed even Arnold.

And yet, her master's response was nothing short of incredible—he *advanced*.

"H-He," she stammered, "he dodged the bolts?"

It sounded absurd. Lighting strikes might not have been faster than light, but they still were too fast for human reflexes. Yet her master had calmly woven between the bolts. From her perspective, it almost looked as if they had been avoiding him. This wasn't something that could be explained by any preterhuman artifice. This was the power of a Level 8.

Krahi's magic was more than she had expected, but Tino still believed her master had the advantage.

"Hmm," Siddy groaned from the seat next to Tino's. "That's not really Krai. So this is why he made that copy I saw in the kitchen..."

"Wha?!" Tino cried.

"Yeah, you're right," Lizzy added. "Krai Baby wouldn't run like that. He doesn't like moving his body too much."

"Did he interfere with the spells? Did he deflect them?" Lucy muttered to herself. "How did he do that? It didn't look like magic—"

"It's the result of training, what else?!" Luke exclaimed. "I'm sure I could take the hits, but dodging them? I gotta try it for myself!"

Ansem grunted in agreement.

So it wasn't just the Smart sisters that doubted the Krai below's identity. Tino looked towards the ring again. It was far away, but as far as she could tell, that was her master, godlike capabilities and all. But if his friends didn't think it was him, then that must be someone

else in the ring.

Her mind went blank for a moment. “Ahh,” she said, her voice embodying resignation. “So this is the current Trial...”

Master, it’s against the rules to have someone take your place. And where did you even find this look-alike?

But now that she thought about it, her master had indeed said he wouldn’t be participating. So he had really meant what he said.

When he saw his opponent dodging bolts while closing the gap, Krahi’s reaction was to smile, of all things. “That’s it! Come at me with everything you’ve got! Can you dodge this?!”

Without a millisecond’s delay, a quiver’s worth of electric arrows flew at the fake Krai, who dodged them by leaping into the air. This was decidedly a bad move; no amount of skill would let him dodge follow-up attacks while he remained airborne. Seeming to have anticipated this move, Krahi pointed his staff at Krai.

“Just what I was waiting for, Krai! Now, face the might of the heavens! Theovoltaic Lance!”

“No such spell exists,” Lucia sighed. “It must be an original he created.”

There was a crackling sound, followed by a lance forming at the tip of Krahi’s staff. It was encompassed by a web of violet, but this galvanic weapon wasn’t made of energy—it glimmered as though it was metallic. It was wrought from condensed mana. He had conjured a weapon in a similar manner to the way Relics were produced by mana material!

On their own, lightning spells were already freakishly destructive. What would happen should that mana be condensed?

Not hesitating for a moment, Krahi flung the projectile of certain death at the fake master, who blocked the attack—with an identical spear of his own. Tino could hardly contain her surprise. The two shining spears collided, sending out waves of destructive force. Tino was certain she heard the faint sound of a portion of the protective barrier breaking.

The audience began to cry out, but they were soon silenced by the waves of energy, the blinding lights, the intense heat. Anssy, the others in the front row, and the Magi hired by the tournament

management all used their skills to compensate for the hole in the barrier.

Dust floated everywhere. The lightning had stopped, but a swirl of clouds remained overhead. Tino turned her eyes back to the ring.

"Never would I have expected you to use the same spell as me, at the exact same time, and without a staff at that."

A battered Krahi Andrihee stood in the center of the charred ring. The fake master was crumpled against the wall.

"Did you replicate my own spell in that fraction of a second?" Krahi asked while inspecting his staff. "If not for this, I would've been defeated there. It's as though you're a reflection of me. Ah, apologies, that was poor word choice."

Ah, so I'm going to lose all my money after all. The blood drained from Tino's face. Next to her, thinking the same thing, Kris had the same reaction.

The match was settled. Not even the fake master could get back up after an attack like that. Unlike the real master, this fake one hadn't yet learned how to transcend lightning. She had been certain she couldn't go wrong betting on her master. Though she was frustrated, she couldn't reveal that it was an impersonator in the ring. That would bring Krai greater dishonor than if he had gone in himself and lost.

"Ref, this man won't be getting back up," Krahi announced in a voice that carried throughout the arena. Then he turned to Krai. "It appears you tried to cancel my attack with one of your own. That you're still in one piece is proof of your skills. You fought well, Krai. Let me call a doctor for you."

The referee began to move, as though they had finally remembered their job. Clerics hurried to the fake master so they could heal him.

Tino noticed something. Something she wished she hadn't. Near the entrance, her master was poking his head out from behind a pillar. The other one was on his back, surrounded by Clerics. It didn't take a genius to guess which one was the genuine Krai Andrey.

Her master was looking around, like he was doing something he shouldn't. This wasn't common behavior for him. Was he panicking?

Or could it be that he was searching for something? Maybe he hadn't expected his copy to lose?

"Oh, it's Krai Baby," Lizzy said as though it was nothing. She had been looking forward to seeing him fight, but she didn't sound at all bothered. Tino didn't share the sentiment.

Master, just this once, I'd like you to think about what you've done. Lizzy might pummel her for it, but Tino felt she had to say something. She had really been eager to see him in action.

Now that she could easily compare the two, the difference between the real and the imposter was clear as day. The fake one had shown an audacity that the real one never would. She hadn't disliked that bravado, but she felt like an idiot for not catching on earlier.

How did he plan to get through this? If he was showing himself, then presumably there was still more to this stratagem of his. He wouldn't appear without reason, but what could that be? It probably wasn't to request a rematch.

And just as this thought crossed her mind, *it* fell from the sky. It landed in the ring, attracting the attention of everyone in the audience. Drifting like a leaf, it set down behind Krahi without making a sound. Bafflement rippled through the audience, who were still recovering from the intense bout they had just witnessed.

It was a person. A man clad in a robe of pure black, his face hidden by a white fox mask. Krahi turned around, and though he was taken aback by this sudden arrival, he approached the man anyway.

"Who are you? Where did you fall from? My apologies, but the next match is to begin—"

"Let's spare the diatribes," the man answered between pained breaths. "There's no need for words. Prepare to die, Thousand Tricks."

The man in the robe then raised his arm.

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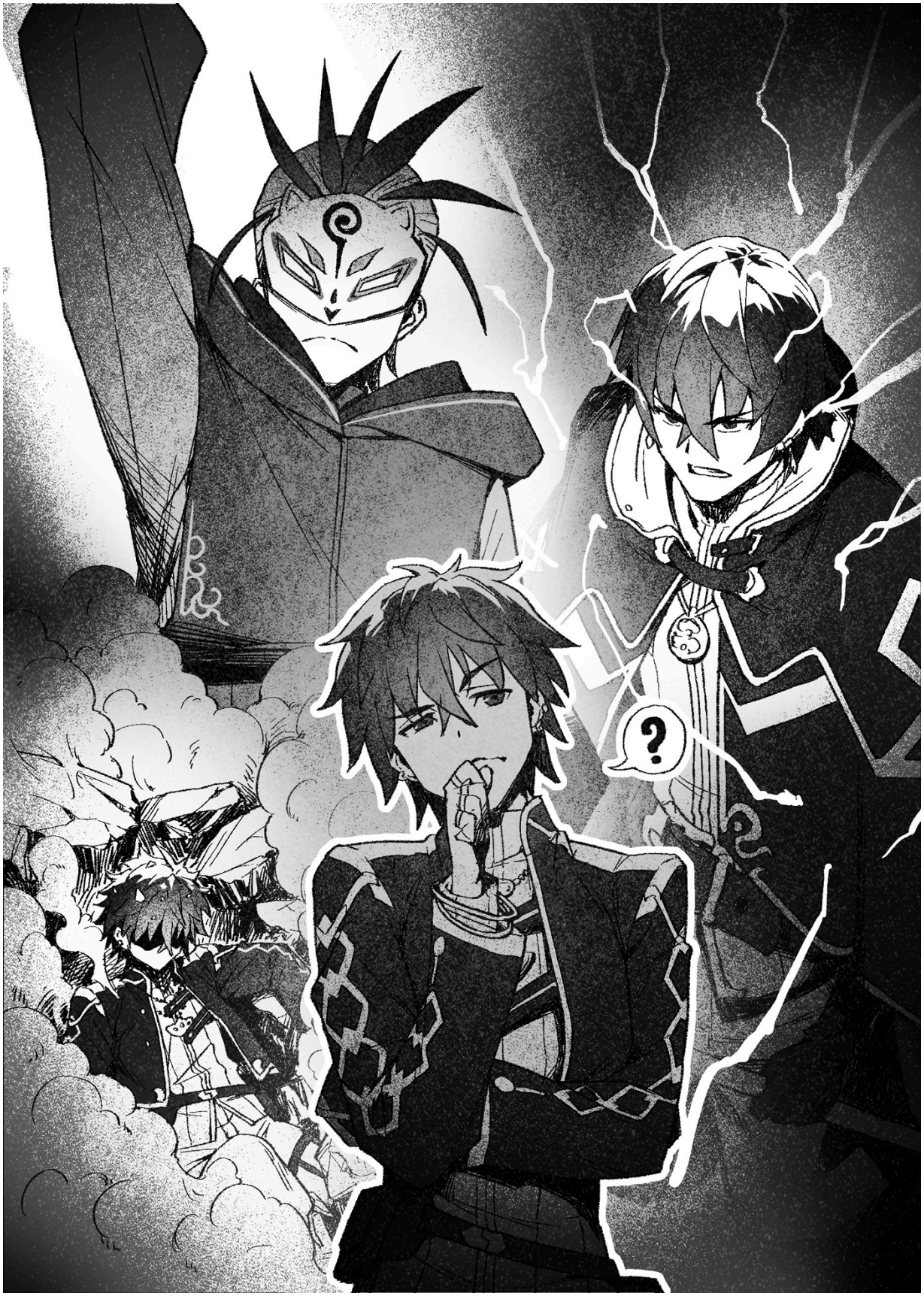
It felt like I had been in a strange dream, one where I spent a

few dozen minutes in the bathroom, pretending I was somewhere else. Eventually I braved the outside, only to find Krahi and a man wearing a fox mask in the ring. To top off all this nonsense, I was on the ground off to the side.

"I see. So this is...uhhhh. Simply put, it's..."

Basically what? I couldn't even manage a theory. It was an affront to my brain.

The man in the black robe and white mask raised his right hand. The mask was the same design as mine, but I could tell by the outline that this man wasn't Galf. He lowered his hand, and at the exact same moment, there was a loud boom.



It was like an invisible bomb had gone off. Naturally, I was helpless to do anything about it. My Safety Rings protected me from the shock wave and the deafening sound, but I could hear the slight sound of cracks forming in the arena's barrier. The other me and the Clerics surrounding him were thrown into the air. I couldn't see much through the clouds of dust everywhere, but I could hear Krahi's voice.

"Wh-What are you doing?! Your match hasn't begun! And what power is this?"

I could only stumble around in the dust. Though you could say that about me at any point in time, past, present, and future. I kept on hearing explosions. A few times, I saw a barrier flash before me, suggesting that the shock waves were enough to trigger a Safety Ring. It looked like I was going to die in a state of confusion, and unfortunately, I didn't know what I could do about it. That was a frequent problem for me.

I started by hiding behind a pillar and taking deep breaths. I told myself to stay calm, that this was supposed to be my battle. I just had to resolve one thing at a time, then maybe it would all clear up.

I've got it! I'll grovel!

"Urk! Get a hold of yourself," I heard Krahi say. "Firmamental Maw!"

A massive bolt fell from the heavens. Ansem wasn't close enough, so it naturally was drawn to me. Though my Safety Rings protected me, the archway above my head began to fall apart.

"That wasn't— Augh!" Krahi cried amid the screams of the audience.

"I wanted to know what you might be capable of," the masked man said, shoulders heaving. "But that's it? Laughable!"

The blasts continued, though all I could see was swirling dust. I heard the heavens' cry and Krahi's strained voice. "I won't let you win!"

He was planning to use a big lightning spell.

"Krahi! Be sure to watch where you're aiming!" I called before I could stop myself.

"AHHH! HEAVEN'S THUNDER!"

Light filled the sky, and the arena shook violently. What a terrifying spell. When I told Krahi to watch where he was aiming, it wasn't that I wanted him to hit the bad guy, so much as I just didn't want him to hit me. My Safety Rings ensured I didn't get zapped, though if not for my chain Relics, the bolts probably wouldn't have been drawn to me in the first place. The only other defense I had against lightning was Ansem the lightning rod, but he wasn't close enough.

Man, who in the world is this guy in the mask?

One last blast hit me to no effect, and then they stopped.

"I don't believe it," Krahi gasped. "I was sure my spells found their mark. How do you still stand after being struck so many times?!"

"It's futile," the masked man said. "If it's the heavens you manipulate, then it's the firmament that my hands guide! Now learn what it means to incur my wrath!"

My eyes flew open. I felt like the puzzle pieces had finally fallen into place. I had a moment of doubt, but I became certain—this masked man was some bigwig from the Fox Mask Fan Club. I hadn't meant to impersonate him and issue a bunch of orders in his name, but I could see why he might be angry about it.

I didn't know exactly why he was going after Krahi, but given the similarity of our titles, it was pretty likely the masked man had gotten some bad info. I knew what that was like; I dealt with miscommunications all the time.

Darn it, Sora, this is why I told you to apologize and clear up any misunderstandings right away.

To be fair, this guy must've been a little off if he thought showing up in the middle of the tournament was a good idea. Was the Fox Mask Fan Club nothing but weirdos? That was fine, but they should've learned not to cause trouble for others.

Now that it had come to this, I didn't see any solutions but to give an honest-to-goodness apology. The issue was that doing that in the middle of a battle was easier said than done. There were shouts and screams, blasts and bolts, the ground trembled. The shock waves alone were enough to send someone like me flying

back, and I didn't think there were many people with Safety Rings, meaning that nobody was going to get between these two, even if their fight wasn't ordained by the tournament.

But I knew I'd feel bad if I made Krahi take care of everything. I knew what it was like to get told off even when you hadn't done anything.

Now's the time to use that*.*

In other words, I didn't know what to do.

"There's nothing you can do now," said a voice.

I felt something prod my leg, where I looked down and saw Little Sister Fox staring up at me. Her white robe was stained with dirt and tattered at places, but she didn't appear to be hurt. I was too baffled for words.

Squirming, she said in a low voice, "I made myself look like you."

Ah! So the collapsed me had been this girl, transformed to look like me. I had personally witnessed that power once before, so I should have realized it sooner. Though this didn't explain *why*.

Seeing that I still didn't entirely follow, she quickly added, "I turned into you. Then lost. To damage your reputation."

"You what?"

In part due to her mask, I couldn't read her expression, but her tail told me everything I needed to know.

So she's a good kid after all?

"Th-Thanks? I appreciate it."

Little Sister Fox recoiled, her ears sprouting from her head reflexively. She had intuited that I didn't want to be part of the tournament, went in my place, and even damaged my reputation by losing. I wasn't sure what I could say to her. I had taken her for a fried tofu fiend, but she turned out to be an awfully smart cookie. Good thing we (and by "we," I mean Sora) made all that tofu.

"Y-You're kidding," she said, taking a step back.

"No, I mean it," I said exuberantly. "I was losing my mind over the Supreme Warrior Festival. I didn't know what I was gonna do. But now that I've lost, I can just walk away. I can't tell you what a relief that is."

That's to say nothing of the reputational damage. Now all that

was left was for me to get that masked man to forgive me. Unless this little fox was willing to take care of that as well? Without thinking, I reached to touch her ears, but she batted my hand away.

She trembled with anger, but when she spoke, her voice was like ice. "I hate you, Mr. Caution."

"Huh?"

"Mr. Caution has no sense of caution."

Is that a catchphrase or something? Well, you can stop it. Even I can tell when I'm in danger.

"I'm just used to this," I told her.

"Remember this," she said and turned around, her tail brushing against my leg.

The next moment, everything shifted. My legs wobbled and I only just barely managed to stay on my feet. I felt the hit of another cacophonous blast of lighting and another Safety Ring activating. If my count was correct, I had just one left.

I looked up and saw the masked man standing within arm's reach of me. I thought my heart was going to stop, but it seemed I wasn't the only one taken by surprise. He fell back, moving as though he could slide across the ground.

I looked around, trying to figure out what had happened as quickly as I could. From what I could tell, Little Sister Fox had sent me right into the middle of the chaos. Those talents were wasted on her.

I thought putting on a hard-boiled smile would be a good first step. "Would you look at that. She is a good kid after all."

If only she had given me a moment to prepare myself.

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This unexpected development in an already shocking match caused a commotion among the crowd. Almost nobody seemed to understand what was going on. In the Supreme Warrior Festival, upsets occurred from time to time, as did attacks on a challenger, but nobody had ever broken into the ring.

From a luxury box placed far from and high above the ring,

Rodrick Atolm Zebrudia watched the incoherent fight. “So you’ve come, Fox,” he groaned. “Awfully bold to show yourself in front of so many people.”

“I never thought they might interrupt the tournament,” Franz said. He was grimacing now, but earlier he had been just a bit pleased to see the Thousand Tricks on the back foot.

However, Murina had something very different on her mind.

Hm? That mask. That’s the one the Thousand Tricks was wearing earlier.

She wasn’t experiencing something like the brutal training she had endured recently, nor was she in a violent battle like she had been the day before yesterday, but she was nonetheless breaking out in a cold sweat.

She knew her father had been struggling with a conflict involving some organization known as “Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox,” but she didn’t know anything more than that. Actually, she had made an effort not to know. She thought that if she knew anything, her bad luck might invite a turn for the worse. So she kept to herself and watched the bout.

“That man, his mask is just like what that phantom in the treasure vault wore,” Rodrick remarked.

“So it seems there’s some truth to the rumors that they bear some connection to that treasure vault,” Franz said.

Murina thought back on recent events. There had been the harsh training, then after leaving the imperial capital, the Thousand Tricks suddenly donned the mask he had obtained from the vault. Some strange group had been dispatched to fight alongside Grieving Souls and Knights of the Torch, and they all wore fox masks while they worked. It hadn’t just been them, their enemies had also donned various vulpine masks.

Now that she had been relieved of her duties, questions began to pop up. What were those people? What in the world had she been fighting? She hadn’t paid it any mind until now. Being abruptly forced to command a hundred or so people hadn’t left her with the luxury to consider what any of it was all for. Just to overcome the new Trial had monopolized her brain.

She had heard Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox was a capable and elusive organization; surely, so many of them wouldn't come out at once like that. Still, Murina was wracked with uncertainty.

"Look how he's remained unharmed even after being hit with so many bolts of lightning. What skill," Rodrick said with a grave look.

"I'd assume it's the result of some machination of his," Franz replied.

The onslaught of lighting was truly something to behold. Lightning magic was considered the magic of champions. It wasn't easy to learn, but the might it commanded was enough to make up for its difficulties.

This Krahi fellow's name sounded like a bad joke, but his power was authentic. Even after her training, Murina wouldn't have lasted a minute in the face of such a thunderstorm. If the Supreme Warrior Festival was an event for people like this, Murina was all the more certain that the Thousand Tricks was insane if he had wanted her to participate.

Likewise, this man in the fox mask must be something of a freak if he was so unconcerned by the deadly bolts. His clothes were burned here and there, but the man himself showed no signs of damage. How could he have so easily taken a hit that had even knocked back the Thousand Tricks, who was known for his Absolute Barrier?

No. Wait a minute, Murina thought, her cheek twitching. Didn't the Thousand Trials have a reputation for pushing people to their very limits? And the Thousand Tricks had initially wanted her in this tournament. But according to Sitri, Murina's development had failed to meet expectations. Could it be that commanding those people wasn't the original Trial? Was it supposed to be this gauntlet?! But had they changed course partway? Changed course to *this*?

"But the Thousand Tricks is unharmed as well..." Franz argued.

He was right. After being knocked down by that breathtaking golden lance, the Thousand Tricks was now unhurt and standing before the masked man. He had put Murina through the ringer, but this was her first time seeing him in action.

For a moment, it almost seemed as if Krai had lost to Krahi. Had

her training been changed because he realized Murina could never beat the Lightning Magus? How much of this was according to plan? She couldn't begin to guess what was supposed to happen and what was improvised.

Without realizing it, Murina had gotten out of her seat, entranced by the battle below.

"Your Imperial Highness, you might fall if you lean too far," Franz warned her.

Murina answered without a moment's hesitation. "There's no need to worry, Sir Franz. Now, I must see how this ends."

Franz was briefly taken aback but corrected himself. "As you wish. I'll ensure nothing happens to you."

Down there, two figures of unfathomable superhuman capabilities were facing off. After quickly knocking down Krahi, the masked man was now keeping a wary eye on Krai.

"You might call it Absolute Defense versus Hyper Recovery," Franz commented.

The masked man's attacks were invisible. He didn't strike with lightning or fire. They had been able to watch the flow of air and discern what sort of powers he had. But that was only thanks to the clouds of dust. Had the air been clean, they would've been left without a clue.

Krahi lay collapsed behind Krai. He still gripped his staff, but his limbs were twisted in ways they shouldn't be. Krahi and Murina had been comrades in arms, so she hoped he might come out of this alive.

Just then, Franz relayed a message he had received from a guard. "Your Imperial Majesty, we've requested permission to mobilize our forces. Though forming up on such short notice won't be easy."

"Blast these Kreatians. They balked at our request for more guards even after we warned them something might happen!"

"The guards with us have been placed throughout the arena. The Fox won't get away."

"Very well. However, if they choose to fly, then there's nothing we can do about it," Franz said, though he didn't look happy to admit it.

The people Murina had fought last night were most likely just grunts, but they had shown her the might of Fox. Zebrudia's soldiers were the best out there, but Fox had among many things a numerical advantage. She believed this duel was happening because the Thousand Tricks had made it play out this way.

"We've also requested the aid of the other challengers," Franz added. "Though I don't know how many will be willing to cooperate."

"Don't worry. This is likely how the Thousand Tricks planned it to go."

"What do you mean, Your Imperial Highness?!"

"You just have to watch closely. If I'm right, he tends to be a bit...excessive."

She still thought this was overboard if this really was supposed to have been her Trial.

"I see. I had a feeling something was off," the masked man said in a booming voice. "That one wasn't quite how I pictured the man who decided to go to war with us. But you're the real one, aren't you? It doesn't matter. You're simply one more obstacle I have to rid myself of."

The Thousand Tricks didn't say anything, he only grinned. Unconcerned, he brazenly looked the masked man straight in the eye, creating a striking contrast between the two. After a brief moment, he said, "First, let me start by apologizing. I never thought something like this might happen."

He was looking at the man in the mask, but the nature of those words led Murina to believe that they were directed at Krahi.

The man took a cautious step back. He spoke in a quiet, spiteful voice. "One or two of you won't make a difference. Regret your folly and die."

"Don't get so angry. I did something wrong. I shouldn't have been so silly. But hear me out, the way you run your organization is also part of the problem here."

"What?!"

The heavens flashed. A brilliant crackle that outshone any previous bolts struck not the man in the mask, but the Thousand Tricks. Murina gasped. Franz stared in shock. The masked man

retreated a step. However, Krai remained unperturbed even after receiving what approached divine retribution. Raised in the air, Krahi's arm fell limply.

"I'll apologize, so could you forgive me?" the Thousand Tricks continued like absolutely nothing had happened.

"Hm. I see." The masked man's breath was ragged. "You're quite different from the fake one. But can you stay calm after seeing this?" he said and drew his sword.

"How could he have Key of the Land?!" Franz said in a trembling voice. "The Thousand Tricks was supposed to be keeping it safe!"

"Franz, order the Magi to take defensive measures!" Rodrick ordered.

Wasn't the Protean Sword swinging that around like a toy? Murina thought, but couldn't under any circumstances say it out loud.

It must have been something fairly dangerous, or her father wouldn't have risen from his chair and begun issuing orders. "If what we've read is true, evacuating now won't save us! Stop that man or this land could be destroyed!"

Murina was powerless. In spite of all her training, there was nothing she could do. Just as she began to clench her fist with frustration, one of the imperial guards dashed into their box.

"Captain, we're under attack!" he said while regaining his breath. "Assailants in fox masks. And Princess Murina!"

Franz immediately looked at Murina, who just blinked in surprise. Once the guard was breathing steadily, he gave a proper report.

"The, uh, fake Princess Murina is engaging the assailants!"

***

Zebrudia was a grand nation and the imperial family that ran it had produced extraordinary individuals for generations. The prosperity they brought made the imperials immensely popular among their subjects, who took pride in their great leaders. But if there was one weak link in the imperial family, it was Princess Murina.

There were other children in the imperial family, but Murina was

clearly the odd one out. She was frail, rarely made public appearances, and kept contact with other people to a minimum. She lacked the martial prowess necessary to members of her family and was the only one of her siblings to not exhibit any particular talents.

To top it all off, she received special treatment from the emperor. He always assigned the best of the imperial guard to her and took her with him to conferences. In Zebrudia, weakness was a sin, but the emperor made an exception for her.

So it was only natural that Fox chose to target her.

It was hard to dislodge a mighty country that built its prosperity on the golden age of treasure hunting. Emperor Rodrick was an unshakable figure. He had some of the best guards available and he himself was no slouch; assassinating him wouldn't come without a high price. Even should those efforts succeed, a formidable heir would be ready to take his place. The new emperor could rally their subjects, angered by the loss of their leader, and obliterate the weakened Fox.

Hence the imperial princess falling into the crosshairs. If she were to be killed, the people would direct their focus to her father, who had been protecting her. This would show the strength of Fox and form cracks in the foundation of Zebrudia. They chose to attack when her protection would be at its thinnest—while the boss was carrying out the other plan.

The security at the Supreme Warrior Festival was sparse, and the imperial family didn't have many of their guards with them. The spectators would normally hinder an attack like this, but they were all fixated on the boss. They would achieve maximum effect for minimal effort.

Or so they had intended.

"You're kidding me..."

"Kill, kill?"

The Fox had instantly closed the gap and swung at her with a shortsword, but she had deflected it, an odd look on her face. In her pale hand was a sword she had retrieved from one of her collapsed guards.

Looking back, this had seemed fishy. The number and quality of

the guards weren't what you would expect to see around a VIP like the imperial princess.

"No one told us she could swing a sword."

"I heard the Thousand Tricks had given her lessons. Is this why they didn't give her more protection?"

The guards were down. All they had to do was kill the imperial princess, and there were three of them and one of her. Yet she still stood.

The assassin had only deflected a single blow, yet his arm was numb. The imperial princess being capable of so much force despite having such slender arms could only have been the result of mana material.

The assassins had mistaken their priorities. When they had the element of surprise, they should have used it to kill her, not her guards. They shouldn't have given her room to act. But it was too late for regrets. They should have been able to avoid this, but without Galf, their information network was lacking.

"We can't tell the boss we couldn't even kill the imperial princess," the assassin said to his comrades. At the same moment, two of them simultaneously went in for a pincer attack. The princess twirled. A novice might trip over their feet if they tried such a maneuver, but she moved almost like she was dancing.

The assassins swung with all their might, but she deflected both strikes. Twirling would normally do nothing but leave one exposed, yet what looked like a half-cocked move had fended off both attacks.

"Kill, kill, kill."

Nothing about her visual tracking skills, strength, or trained movements suggested she was someone used to being protected. Besides that, her attacks had none of the hesitation that marked those of an amateur and her clear eyes showed no fear. If they gave her an opportunity, she would take it and end them. What was all that talk of her being timid and lacking talent?

The princess lowered her stance, then dashed forward, a glint of murderous intent in her eyes. "Kill, kill?"

The assassin met her blade with his and managed to fend her off. A series of metallic clashes echoed about, each exchange a burden

to bear. To make it all worse, each swing was stronger than the last. Was she still not giving this her all? Even when attacked from her blind spots, she evaded as though she had eyes in the back of her head or some other hidden talent. This couldn't be a human they were fighting.

Then, they heard someone snap their fingers. That was the signal. The assassin deflected a blow, then moved back. He briefly saw the princess's eyes widen before she was engulfed by black flames. Without so much as a scream, she was lit like a torch, the result of a spell cast by another assassin.

"If even a mere princess of the imperial family can do this..." one of them said while breathing heavily.

"But we've done our job. Let's fall back—"

Before the assassin could finish his sentence, the blazing princess staggered forward and tackled one of them.

"KILL!"

"What?! That was an advanced spell!"

"Killkillkillkillkill..."

The princess sat atop the collapsed assassin and hit him over and over again before hopping off. It was like something out of a nightmare. The scent of burning flesh was powerful. Still ablaze, but no longer holding a blade, the princess attacked another one of the assassins. Her eyes shone through the umbral flames.

"That can't be human," one of them said.

Were the rumors of her mediocrity all a bluff? Was the empire keeping this a secret?

"Retreat! We're retreating!"

There was no hope for the one on the ground. They couldn't carry him and save themselves. The assassins ran as fast as they could.

"Kill. K-Ki-ll. Gill. Gillgillgill. Ki. Ill."

How could she still move? The mass of black flames roared as it chased after them.

***

I was starting to think that maybe this time we really were screwed. I stood in the increasingly dangerous arena, determined to fulfill my obligation to apologize. I was out of Safety Rings. Krahi, the source of the bolt that drained my last ring, was passed out behind me. Had I done something to make him hate me?

I might've been out of Safety Rings, but I couldn't fall back—I hadn't yet said I was sorry. I wasn't here to fight, I was here to grovel! I was here to offer a genuine apology straight from the heart! Being able to attack even after seeing my pathetic groveling was something very few people—actually, no, lots of people managed to do. Still, running wasn't an option, because I was second to none when it came to getting stabbed in the back.

I hadn't yet groveled, but my apologetic aura caused the Fox Mask Fan Club President (temp. name)'s voice to tremble. "Hm. I see. You're quite different from the fake one. But can you stay calm after seeing this?"

The club president drew his sword. That alone summoned a whirlwind in a mere second. I covered my eyes to protect them from the dust and biting gales. Holding it in a reverse grip, the club president raised it with the flat edge facing me, showing me a geometric pattern that I recognized. The Relic that struck fear into the empire—Key of the Land.

"This land will be brought to ruin. What an inane assumption, the notion that nobody could harness this Relic's power."

I realized the sword had summoned a cyclone, and it was just the two of us inside it. The howling wind, rattling sand, and sheer force of it cordoned us off in a world of our own. Though after playing around with so many Relics, swords among them, I could tell he wasn't using even the tiniest smidgen of its power.

"I see you're not without a bit of knowledge. You'd be right if you guessed that I haven't even activated Key of the Land." What happened to all that talk of the Relic being unchargeable? And why didn't anyone come to help me? "This Relic has brought more than a few past civilizations to their knees. Just a fraction of its devastating power is more than sufficient to obliterate this meager town!"

Yeah, but what did this town ever do to you?

Sure, Sora had messed up by mistaking me for her boss and all that, and sure I shared some responsibility for confusing things further, but Kreat had nothing to do with all that.

"Quit it! There's no point to this!" I said. "This was my bad. I admit I was wrong, so let's move on. I didn't mean anything! I'm sorry! No, I'm incredibly sorry!"

"Why do you insist..."

I looked up and saw the club president was the same as ever. It looked like apologizing wasn't going to work, so I had to change my approach. I didn't know how the club president had obtained his Key of the Land, but I had one of my own. I didn't think I could intimidate him, but if his destructive impulses were rooted in his powerful Relic, then seeing another instance might affect him.

I drew my Key of the Land, and thrust it out before him, causing him to freeze.

"What a coincidence," I said, "I've got one too. Needless to say, mine is charged."

The club president's reaction was clear as day. Every bit of him was trembling. "What? Impossible," he hissed. "How?"

Nothing impossible about it. I had one and that was the reality. It wasn't rare for multiple instances of the same Relic to exist. Though the likelihood was lower when it came to super-powerful Relics, it wasn't zero.

For once, it seemed I had made the right choice, but I couldn't take much solace in that. Perhaps it was my lack of Safety Rings, but if he was going to forgive me, I was hoping he would hurry up and relax. None of this whirlwind stuff was necessary. I just wanted him to see that we shared a common bond in Relic ownership, then forgive me. I wasn't here to fight.

The club president looked between my sword and his, eliminating any room for doubt. Same name, same Relic. It occurred to me that when you counted the one in the museum, there were three of these things. You didn't see something like that every day.

Just as these thoughts crossed my mind, the club president whispered in a seething voice. "Wh-What?"

The Relic he was supposed to be holding was no longer there. I

can say with confidence that I never took my eyes off it. The next moment, I caught a whiff of something pleasant, something I had smelled quite a bit lately.

The club president opened his hand and a small, square, golden-brown object fell to the ground. He looked at it vacantly. I made sure I wasn't crazy. I furrowed my brow, questioned my eyes, doubted my own brain. It was a cut of fried tofu. A square of beautifully made, delicious-looking, fried tofu.

The heck is going on? What do I do? How do you react to something like this?

"H-Hey, you dropped something tasty-looking," I said.

He didn't say anything.

"I-I'm sure that's just how the Relic works. You didn't do anything wrong," I tried. "I'm certain Key of the Land is just an item that turns into fried tofu! I'll bet mine does the same thing!"

With a short grunt, the club president slowly lifted his head. Though partially hidden by a mask, his face was the scariest I had ever seen. The back of my neck tingled and I unconsciously got ready to grovel. I had no powers and had made up for many mistakes by kowtowing. I couldn't think on my feet and apologizing was the only skill I had really refined.

I began to bend my knees, holding my hands out before me, lowering my waist, and lowering my head. I had done this tens—maybe hundreds of times—and had even practiced on occasion. This was looking to be the most splendid groveling I had ever done—if my knees hadn't buckled partway.

"Ah."

"Hm?!"

I fell forward. I closed my eyes when I saw the ground approaching fast, and held out my hands. Except I was holding Key of the Land in my right hand. The blade was devoured by the ground and a shock wave followed in the wake of its disappearance.



***

The Fire Magus, Rosemary Purapos the Abyssal Inferno was certain she felt the land crying out. Magi dealt with forces hidden from the naked eye. Detecting this sudden surge didn't take someone of her caliber; anyone with the slightest magical aptitude would've noticed it. It was something far too vast for a human to fully control, even if they happened to be a Level 8 Magus.

"So this is the Relic they said could invite calamities?" Rosemary said with a click of her tongue. "What a mess."

She got up from the seat she had been quite comfortable in and grabbed her staff. The man in the mask hadn't been joking, that Relic really was capable of decimating the world. But it just so happened she wasn't the only skilled Magus here who could see the truth of his words.

The unseen force dug into the earth, causing the ground to tremble. People screamed as the arena began to shake. This wasn't an earthquake, just as a sign of what was to come.

Rosemary couldn't see through the clouds of dirt surrounding the ring, but she could tell what had happened. The boy had gone and botched it. He could formulate tactics, but maybe he couldn't be trusted to do more than that. It seemed he was still just a young man.

Informed by her wealth of experience, Rosemary could discern that the energy coursing through the arena was pure and transparent. It was the same sort of energy that the masked man had channeled when attacking Krahi. It was more than fair to assume that this similarity was why the masked man had chosen this particular Relic. Just like Krahi was enhanced by his staff, the masked man had chosen a tool that he was compatible with.

"The barrier won't last," she said. "It wasn't made with this in mind."

Gark leaned forward, trying to get a better look. "I can't see with all this dust. What the hell's going on in there?!"

Then, another shock wave cleared the floating debris, revealing

two silhouettes grabbing the hilt of a sword plunged into the ground. One was undoubtedly the Thousand Tricks, and the other was the man in the mask.

Another wave rocked the arena—small cracks formed in the floor and pillars. Still, Rosemary was confident that the waves were getting weaker. This could only mean one thing—this was her signal.

"Don't panic!" she shouted at the spectators, who were about to descend into chaos. "The Thousand Tricks is holding it back! He's giving us a chance to suppress it!"

If unleashed, the terrible might of Key of the Land would no doubt destroy not only Kreat, but perhaps the very empire itself. This wouldn't be a disaster, it would be an apocalypse. But there was still time. That Relic was too much for a Level 8 to contain for long, but this was the Supreme Warrior Festival; there were hundreds of capable Magi in the vicinity. They couldn't keep the damage to zero, but they could mitigate it. In fact, that was exactly what the Thousand Tricks was doing.

Those who realized what Rosemary meant quickly got down and pressed their hands to the ground, resisting the destructive power that was rippling beneath them. The Relic probably couldn't maintain this sort of output for long.

"I'll start evacuating the others," Gark said.

"By all means. This is a job for Magi. The gall of that boy, working his elders to the bone."

Rosemary watched Gark dash off. Protecting people wasn't something he excelled at, but now wasn't the time to be particular. The Abyssal Inferno heaved a sigh, then did something she hadn't done in some time and mustered every bit of mana she could.

***

"Follow the Abyssal Inferno's example!" Rodrick yelled at his guards. "Do whatever you can to keep the damage to a minimum! There's no need to protect me, now go!"

It was hard to imagine how things could get much worse. Key of the Land was an energy weapon that, when activated, absorbed

energy from nearby ley lines and then unleashed it as a destructive force. Until now, they hadn't known just how the Relic was used. It appeared that while charging the sword was difficult, activating it was a simple matter.

Rodrick rose from his seat and gripped the railing, leaning over it as he stared intensely at the scene below. The sword shone as the Thousand Tricks and the Fox gripped it. As the emperor of a major nation, Rodrick was never allowed to lose his composure. Thus far, he had never let his emotions get the better of him, even in the most trying moments. But now, for the first time in his life, he felt an unfamiliar burning sensation within his head.

"Curse you. Wretched foxes," he growled. "Have you no conscience?"

His last bit of rationality unveiled the identity of this feeling—it was rage. Throughout the many clandestine dealings he had gone through, the attempt on his life, even when he learned of the copy of his daughter, he had suppressed this emotion. But this was too much.

Due to the organization's secretive nature, the empire had never been able to dedicate too many resources to countering Fox. They needed proper justification to make a move like that. Zebrudia may have been an absolute monarchy, but if a group hadn't caused any *apparent* damage, then even the emperor couldn't use his authority to crush them without receiving some backlash.

This, however, was beyond the bounds of forgiveness.

The key glimmered. According to the writings, this meant it was at full power. A Key of the Land running at maximum would use the ley lines to alter the landscape around it. It would crush mountains, drown continents, and more.

The literature from the age of the original item claimed that it had never once been used to its full capacity. However, according to the Vault Investigation Bureau, that era had been swiftly brought to an end by a full-power use of Key of the Land. This implied that nobody had lived to write about the earth-shattering event.

Rodrick hadn't thought Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox would go this far. They weren't just willing to bring down a nation, they showed no

qualms over altering the face of the planet. They were an enemy to everyone alive. It was just one strike they were trying to make, but it was one that couldn't be allowed under any circumstances. It took a horrific degree of antipathy to be willing to destroy the world, yourself included.

If he had known they were planning something like this, Rodrick wouldn't have taken such a reticent approach. Even if it had meant flattening Kreat and being censured by the other nations, he would have used any means to eliminate Fox.

He took a deep breath, quelling the anger ablaze in his mind. Such techniques didn't aim to erase his rage, rather to transform it into a cold hatred. He narrowed his eyes and looked at the man in the mask, who was holding the handle of the blade. Rodrick clenched his fists, his nails drawing blood. However, the pain, the shaking, the screams, none of it reached him.

"I'll crush you. I'll slaughter you, Fox. I'll check every blade of grass until I'm sure you're all dead."

Fox wasn't the only player willing to be ruthless.

***

In an instant, Caelum Tail's anger was replaced with bafflement. He barely managed to overcome the initial shock wave, then grabbed the key and channeled mana into it simultaneously. He used his powers to counteract the destructive forces of the Relic in the hope of suppressing it even a little bit.

He was slammed by a vicious shock unlike any other he had experienced. The Thousand Tricks, also gripping the handle, looked up at him, but didn't appear to be trying to stop the Relic. It must have been a miracle that had allowed him to take that first hit. If he had been knocked back, the land could have been destroyed in the few extra seconds needed to regain lost ground. Such was the speed at which Key of the Land could unleash widespread devastation.

Caelum couldn't be bothered paying attention to anything else. All he could do was try to suppress the Relic, and glare at the man before him.

“Y-You!” Caelum roared. “What have you—”

“Huh? Have I what?” he replied, wide-eyed, but otherwise calm despite the destructive currents. This was a privilege allowed to whoever used Key of the Land. This man was standing in the eye of the storm.

So *this* was the Thousand Tricks! A man divorced from all sanity! Caelum wanted to strangle him, but he wasn’t afforded the luxury. If his focus slipped for a moment, he would be knocked away.

The Relic began to shimmer, indicating it was at full power.

“Damn! You!” he said through clenched teeth. Gripping the sword, the energy flowed through his hands into the rest of his body. He felt as though he might be torn into pieces. With his power and mana, sensations like this had once felt like a thing of the past. There was a stabbing pain in his head and his hands burned, but he dedicated his body and spirit to maintaining a hold on the Relic.

This wouldn’t have happened if things had gone according to plan. Fox’s ultimate goal was the destruction of civilization, but that death was built on the premise of rebirth. The calamity threatening them was far greater than what Fox wanted. They had meant to use it as a trump card, one that they couldn’t actually play. Just showing it would have been sufficient to intimidate their foes.

This man couldn’t have been sane if he was willing to use such a weapon. Was he trying to bring about the end of the world?

“I just—I just tried to grovel, that’s all,” he said.

Caelum would be helpless to any attacks, but the Thousand Tricks made no attempts to do so. But it would be silly to assume that this man had activated the Relic simply so he could kill Caelum.

“Grovel?! What are you babbling about?!”

What was he talking about? How could he be so calm after inviting the end of the world? Caelum couldn’t comprehend him. Krahi was strong, but he was nothing more than a man of valor. This man, however, was different.

“B-But I think you share some of the blame,” the Thousand Tricks said. “Look, I don’t have anything against you guys, so come on...”

Why?! Why didn’t he stop the Relic then?! The world very well could have been at stake. If not that, then at least all the nations in

the region. The ley lines had altered considerably over time, so it was unclear just how far the damage might extend, but there could potentially be millions of victims, if not more.

Grieving Souls were known for their intensity, but that couldn't explain this lunacy. This man was a lord among demons, willing to wipe out Fox, his allies, and all of civilization. His simple, empty-headed expression now terrified Caelum.

The Thousand Tricks looked at the sword, his hands, then at Caelum. He looked mildly shocked.

"Sorry about all this," he said.

***

Grieving Souls had overcome a diverse array of dire situations. Sometimes it was monsters they were up against, other times it was phantoms, sometimes humans, sometimes it was just the very circumstances they found themselves in. Their most important asset through it all was their good judgment.

Once the dust had cleared, Sitri assessed the situation and leaped to her feet. "The Thousand Tricks is keeping the Relic at bay!" she called. "Please, lend him your aid. We're in great danger! GREAT! DANGER!"

"So get moving!" Liz added in a blaring voice. "We're not gonna make Krai Baby handle this all by his goddamn self!"

Jolted back to their senses, the Magi of First Steps got to work.

"For heaven's sake, brother!" a certain Magus grumbled.

A grinding sound emitted from the supposedly sturdy arena. The destructive shock waves pulsed like a heartbeat, as though a great beast was about to awaken. Anyone could tell things weren't looking good. With the Abyssal Inferno leading the charge, the Magi began to act, but they would have to use every second available to them.

"The Thousand Tricks is holding back Fox!" Sitri yelled, emphasizing each word. Her pink eyes scanned the ring, then settled on the man in the mask and her leader, both of them gripping the sword.

Right before the dust clouds appeared, the one in the mask had

been holding the Relic, making it appear he was the one who had activated it. But Sitri could tell that wasn't the case. Activating such a powerful Relic in front of so many witnesses was too risky, and Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox had no reason to use it here. Furthermore, though it was hard to tell from this distance, Krai seemed to have the better grip on the sword.

Sitri removed every mana potion she had and set them on a chair. Lucia's hair floated slightly as a result of the immense power she was summoning. Pressing her hands to the ground, a deluge of mana flowed into the ground and fought against the waves of destruction.

This was a race against time and neither side seemed to fully grasp what was happening. The winner would be whoever could dictate which way the current flowed, and Fox couldn't be allowed to get away with their plans!

"I'm going to distribute these!" Sitri announced.

"Go for it," the sister replied.

"Oh! I'm coming too!" Luke roared.

"Yeah, Luke, you stay here and stop the destruction," Liz said, grabbing a hold of Luke. This was a simple matter of allocating roles. Luke could break through near any defense, but he wasn't of much use in a situation like this (Sitri didn't think his sword would do much in the face of the pulsing energy).

Lucia, Ansem, and the other Magi in the clan were all doing their best to keep the destruction at bay. If anyone was reaching their limit, Liz would probably just force a mana potion down their throat.

As the ground shook, Sitri turned and ran through the stands, shouting all the while. "This is an emergency, everyone! The Thousand Tricks is keeping Fox at bay! Please assist him or we'll be in great danger!"

***

On my knees, I listened to the rumbles and screams. I gripped Key of the Land, which was still glowing and exuded a greater power than any weapon Relic I had ever used. Its might was apparent even

to my dull senses and was probably obvious to anyone nearby.

I had failed. This was hardly my first mistake, but I had never before activated a Relic this dangerous. Before me, the club president was also gripping the hilt. His mask prevented me from seeing his eyes, but his gritted teeth told me that he was being pushed to his limits.

I took a deep breath and said, "Now, now, let's calm down. That's what you do at times like this. First, let's evaluate the situation."

I looked up and saw that the whole coliseum was shaking violently. I couldn't feel it, but I could tell just by looking that it was bad. To top it off, the energy pulsing from Key of the Land didn't seem to be abating.

What do I do? What would be best? At this rate, something terrible might happen to Kreat. Gosh. This is why I said they shouldn't give me the Relic.

"Maybe this one will also turn into fried tofu," I suggested.

The club president groaned and growled.

"Hey, I'm serious here," I said, clinging to my last bit of hope. "How did you turn that one into fried tofu?"

The club president made a noise that could have come from the depths of hell. I guess he didn't have it in him to speak.

Hmm.

If they were the same Relic, then this one should've also been able to turn into fried tofu. I wanted to remove my hands and try a few things out, but they were being pressed against the Relic. With the club president's hands over mine, I couldn't even stand up. Nothing was going my way.

You see this, Your Imperial Majesty? This is what bad luck looks like.

I resisted the urge to cry and made a hesitant suggestion. "I'm really sorry about all this, but could you move? I want to try a few things."

"What?!"

I had no idea why I was just fine when the club president appeared to be in so much pain. But it didn't seem like he would get out of the way. However, despite everything, I was a Level 8, which

meant I had to do something.

My experience handling Relics was vast. It was the one thing I had over my childhood friends. I was confident there was something I could do to subdue this thing. I chose to believe in myself and have faith in the hours I had spent around Relics. I closed my eyes and concentrated, focusing entirely on the sword.

Then, I felt something warm on my face. My eyes flew open and I saw the club president coughing up blood. There was a smell like rust. Even I could handle an unpleasant scent, but then the spurt became a torrent as blood erupted from his mouth. Still stuck to the Relic, there was nothing I could do to avoid it.

"Ack! Augh!"

"Hm?"

The club president slowly raised his left hand, which hadn't been gripping the sword, and placed it atop the hilt. It was then that I noticed the glowing lights had a red tint to them and the flow of energy into the ground had grown from earlier.

Hm? No. Wait. I'm trying to restrain *it...*

I tried subduing the Relic, and the light grew a deeper shade, the vibrations getting stronger. People were tossed around, screams and shouts echoed everywhere.

Oh? Maybe I can't *restrain it...*

It was looking like this thing really was unlike any other item I had ever handled before. The club president seemed as though he was about to pass out. He didn't have it in him to be angry at me, yet he still kept a grip on the Relic. Did he want the sword that badly?

Wait. Maybe it's his fault I can't control it?

From the start, he had intended to use Key of the Land. His copy had inexplicably turned into fried tofu, but that was no reason he might not want to use mine. That would certainly explain why I couldn't stop the flow of energy.

Fortunately, the club president seemed to be approaching his limit. He wanted the sword to be used, I wanted to stop it, and neither of us was likely to get any outside help. I braced myself.

"A competition of raw force, is it? Show me what you've got," I

said.

The club president looked bewildered as I began to roar. I gripped the sword with all my might and tried to bring the deluge to a halt. The Relic shone like the sun, the tremors intensified, cracks formed in the ground, the club president coughed up more blood. It was a mural of hell.

The blinding light forced me to clamp my eyes shut. I was out of Safety Rings and was therefore unprotected. All I had was my determination to not lose. If running wasn't an option, then all I could do was press forward.

The arena was full of my fellow clan members. After learning so much from Matthis and making Tino accompany me on shopping trips, I wouldn't be able to show my face in front of either of them if I failed to keep this thing under control.

"Quit. It," I groaned.

"Such force," he said in a pained voice.

The flow of energy hadn't abated in the slightest. I had thought it might have hit its crest, but it continued to intensify. I could barely believe one little sword was capable of this. I never would have imagined the Fox Mask Fan Club might contain someone better at controlling Relics than I was. They were truly a group to be reckoned with. I thought I was number one when it came to playing with—I mean, handling Relics—but the world's a big place, with greater and greater heights.

Again, the club president hacked up blood. I seriously thought he should give up on this and get some help. If I had lost so much blood, I probably would've died.

You're that determined to use it?! Who the heck are you?!

I summoned as much strength as I could. Then there was a noise from where my hands were. I opened my eyes. A brief moment of silence passed, then Key of the Land crumbled into tiny pieces.

***

The end arrived rather abruptly. The world-shattering tremors stopped almost instantly. The arena was in ruins. Cracks ran through

the floor and walls. Parts of the ceiling had collapsed. There were piles of rubble everywhere. But Rodrick ignored all that.

"The key shattered! Apprehend that man!" he shouted.

His guards did as they were told and sprinted into the ring. Rodrick hadn't expected the sword to fall to pieces. Relic weapons had a tendency to be sturdy, and Key of the Land wasn't supposed to be any exception. It was said that the Relic could deflect blows from greatswords and remain unscratched. If it shattered, then that must have been the trade-off for the relentless power it had just brought forth. Still, this was good news for the empire, for the entire world.

Due to Key of the Land's abilities to act as a deterrent, the empire hadn't been in a position to destroy the Relic. But if Fox wanted it, and was even mad enough to use it, then destroying the Relic was imperative. Given the circumstances, the emperor would have to accept the loss of Key of the Land.

The man in the mask staggered to his feet. The blood pouring from his mouth made it clear he was gravely injured. It wasn't clear what had hurt him, but there must have been a struggle over the Relic.

A moment later, the Thousand Tricks tried to stand up. He wobbled and fell to his knees. He must've been at his limit. Clutching his chest, the man in the mask looked down at him. Fox's plan had failed. The destruction had come to a stop and Key of the Land was no more. He must've understood the unenviable spot he was in. That combined with his injuries just made his persistence all the more unnerving.

However, the Thousand Tricks wasn't alone. In a stroke of immense fortune, the stands were filled with talented individuals. They were the reason the destruction hadn't been any worse than it was. Fox's best were said to be on par with high-level hunters, but this one was exhausted and his plan had failed. Rodrick wasn't going to lose a champion; he would ensure the brave hunter was saved.

Rodrick inhaled deeply, then once more, boomed with all the intensity he could muster, "Catch that Fox, no matter what it takes! I'll grant the wish of whoever brings him to me!"

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By the time Caelum Tail realized what a bad spot he was in, it was too late. Key of the Land had somehow been subdued, but that was the only silver lining for him. He was woozy from all the blood he had lost, but he could still accurately assess the situation.

He felt sluggish. His wounds were deep. Such pain and humiliation were sensations he had grown distant from. Everything sounded distant, as though he were hearing all the screams and commotion through a filter. He knew he should be on guard, but he didn't have that sort of energy left in him.

Shortly after Caelum got up, the Thousand Tricks also rose to his feet. At last, Caelum was beginning to understand the greater scope of this man's plans. The Thousand Tricks got up, then stumbled and fell to his knees. It was such an earnest, natural movement, Caelum couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"Heh heh heh. HA HA HA!"

This young man was terrifying. Truly, someone to be feared. Preterhuman artifice and other stale phrases didn't do him justice. This man had been playing with hellfire. His chances of success hadn't been high, and the slightest slipup could have resulted in him being accused of treason. It could have even brought about the end of the world.

It was the sort of plan that should be rejected regardless of its mastermind. That went even for an organization like Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox, and any normal person would never imagine such a ploy in the first place. Chances were, Caelum's cohorts wouldn't believe him if he told them about this. This man was no mere tactician—he was a lunatic.

Caelum was cornered. Key of the Land had shattered and no replacement existed. The operation had failed and Fox was believed to be behind the Relic's activation. They had planned to display just a fragment of its power and use that as a bargaining chip to hold over the world's nations.

What just happened, however, was no simple act of intimidation. If this man had no trepidations about using a tool of apocalyptic

capabilities, he must have been more than willing to die if it meant bringing his enemies down with him.

No doubt, this would change how the allies of the Thousand Tricks thought of him. They wouldn't be able to look at him the same way ever again. He had even gone and thrown away their means of deterrence!

But there was one thing Caelum couldn't wrap his head around—where the Thousand Tricks had gotten his information.

"How?! How in the world did you figure it out?!" he cried.

"Urgk. I might be sick," the hunter mumbled. It was unclear if this was supposed to be some sort of joke or not.

The writings that had told Fox of Key of the Land hadn't mentioned anything about it self-destructing when overloaded. There were no records of the Relic being used at full capacity in the first place. For what it was worth, the records found by Fox suggested it had never been used, which implied there was no way of knowing the Relic's max capacity.

The timing had been similarly perfect. Caelum was down to a fraction of his power when the Relic shattered. Where had this man acquired information that not even the network of Fox could obtain?

Unfortunately, Caelum didn't have time to speculate; he was in enemy territory and heavily wounded, neither of which were part of the plan. He had to get out of here by any means necessary, but there was one thing he wanted to take care of first.

Just as he was about to step towards the Thousand Tricks, a shadow fell over him.

"YOU'LL HAVE TO GET THROUGH ME FIRST, CHALLENGER!"

"Hm?!"

The voice was gravelly yet audacious. Caelum took a step back to avoid the incoming force. Inches before him, a crater was formed by a massive fist wrapped in a golden glove. The ground shook, cracks formed.

Caelum clicked his tongue when he saw who the interloper was—the previous Supreme Warrior. He was a man who had dedicated every ounce of his mana material to bolstering his muscles. When drawing up his original plan, this was the man Caelum had been the

most concerned about. He was the perfect example of what happened when talent was paired with idiocy.

"Supreme Brawn..." Caelum muttered.

The previous Supreme Warrior gave his response in the form of a resolute step forward. Wounded creatures are known for sometimes summoning unexpected strength, but that didn't deter this man at all. He likely followed his instincts, which led him down a violent, rampaging path in which neither defeat nor death itself could calm him.

The Thousand Tricks would have to withdraw. No matter his abilities, he couldn't fight this hulking mass in his current state. A number of hunters jumped into the ring. Seeing Caelum fall back, the Supreme Warrior gave a demonic smile and swung his fist. He didn't have his usual weapon, but a punch from him was enough to knock out any high-level hunter.

"Think you can run?!" he shouted.

Mustering what mana he could and moving no more than necessary, Caelum dodged a fist driven by pure instinct. Normally, even a flurry of punches would pose no threat to him, but he couldn't protect himself when his mana was so depleted. Another indicator of his shortage was the sharp pain in his head. He couldn't even spare the mana to maintain his footing.

The Supreme Warrior switched to smaller swings, perhaps to whittle Caelum's energy down. The Fox stepped forward, then hopped in the air, letting himself take a "light" hit. Through his magic defenses, he felt a shock that threatened to rip him apart. However, this was what he wanted. The Supreme Warrior's lack of thought was his strength, but that could also be his weakness.

Caelum landed on his hands and feet. The brute's eyes widened when he saw what had happened. Caelum had been sent hurtling through the air, and he had landed right by the entrance meant for contestants. This would be his escape route. He ran as fast as he could. His head throbbed, blood spilled from his lips, and, behind him, he heard the thunderous footsteps of the brute and the cries of the audience.

Then the air around him changed and the sounds from behind all

faded away. A girl in a mask similar to his stood before him, almost like she had always been there. She wore a robe of pure, unblemished white and a tail of the same color extended from her lower back. Her small index finger was pointed at Caelum.

"You're Mr. Caution's enemy," she said, to his complete confusion. "I'll help you escape. Next time, victory will be mine!"

Epilogue: Let This Grieving Soul Retire, Part Seven

What in the world had I gotten myself into?

When my eyes opened, I was in a world of dull gray. Galf was holding a bunch of Fox masks and dancing with Sora, Little Sister Fox, and Krahi. It didn't make much sense, but I got the distinct impression they were enjoying themselves.

I hit myself on the head in an attempt to recall why I was there, but I came up empty. Was I in heaven? Or hell? The sky glimmered with lightning bolts that made no noise and had no force. Another look at the group dancing beneath the silent heavens told me I should just give up and accept it.

I slowly blinked, when I felt someone grab my arm from behind.

"Why do you look so glum, my former CM?"

It was Touka, leader of Knights of the Torch. Behind her were her party members, all in their color-coordinated armor, holding hands while dancing in a circle. They weren't doing any complex maneuvers, but the sheer number of them made it a sight to behold.

Suddenly, I realized there was something off about what Touka had said. "Hm? Former CM?"

"Are you still drowsy? Some time ago, you retired from hunting and your post as clan master, did you not?"

Retired. I rubbed my eyes. So I had retired? I didn't remember that happening, but Touka wasn't known for telling jokes.

"Now, we must finish today's quest. We're dancing," she proclaimed with a broad grin, a rare expression for her.

The knights let go of each other's hands and they shifted to a dance of small, rapid steps. The circle expanded as more people were incorporated into it. I saw Franz, Arnold, Greg, the emperor, Murina, Kecha, and Telm join, while the Abyssal Inferno was filling

the sky with multicolored flames. Suddenly, I was lifted off my feet and onto someone's shoulders. "Congrats, Krai Baby!" they said.

And then I awoke. I found myself in a bed.

"What a crazy dream."

My pajamas were soaked with sweat. I rubbed my eyes, clutched my head, and checked my surroundings. I was still getting my bearings, but I could hear Liz's voice, energetic as ever.

"Mornin', Krai Baby! What's that? A crazy dream?"

Her eyes shone with blinding vigor, just like they often did.

Slowly, I began to recall what had happened before I lost consciousness. The day had started with me suddenly being forced to join the Supreme Warrior Festival. There was the talking water bottle, the falling lightning, Little Sister Fox fighting in my stead, then the club president suddenly appearing and going on a rampage. It was beyond insane, even compared to the dream I had just had. Maybe it hadn't been a dream?

"You see," Liz said, noticing my obvious confusion, "you fainted when it all ended. You okay? The doctor said there wasn't anything wrong with you."

I see. I think?

I moved my arms and touched my hands and feet. Nothing hurt.

"Good morning, Krai," Sitri said with a grin. "I made sure everything was fine. The doctor says you passed out from exhaustion."

I had about as much stamina as the average person. Yesterday had been a string of stressful events and circumstances changing faster than I could follow, and then it all ended with the ground shaking violently; it wasn't at all odd that a weakling like me had fainted.

Hm? Yesterday?

I looked at the window, bright sunlight was filtering through it. "I'm fine. By the way, how long have I been sleeping?" I asked Sitri.

She seemed to think for a moment, then held up her index finger. One day? One night? That wasn't as long as I thought it had been. Just as I was sighing with relief, Sitri held up a second finger, then a

third, and a fourth. While I was still trying to wrap my head around it, she began to lower her fingers until there were only two raised. Sitri grinned when she saw my look of shock.

There she goes again with her weird jokes.

"Two days? I slept two days?" I asked. "I know I was tired, but that sounds like a bit much."

"No, I'm making a peace sign," she answered.

"He doesn't need your confusing bullshit!" Liz said and whacked Sitri on my behalf.

Sitri was really off. Had she eaten something strange? Just as I was about to say something, Luke charged in with his usual gusto.

"Hey, Krai, you're up! Listen, Branch Manager Gark says he doesn't want to have to chase you again..."

"Oh, you're finally awake, brother. Goodness, do you have any idea how worried I was?"

"Mmm."

I never actually learned how many days had passed, but it seemed like the situation had mellowed out.

I was still lingering in the realm of dreams when I heard Sitri clear her throat. She stepped forward, fulfilling her usual role as the speaker of the group. "Now, where should I begin? Here, I'm sure you're curious about the extent of the damage and how the enemy escaped when we had a considerable advantage."

"Ohhh. This is terrible."

I couldn't help but gulp. The arena had been wrecked. The coliseum sat in the center of Kreat and symbolized the large town, but now it was in ruins. A structure that once forced me to crane my neck to see the top was now a pile of rubble. The only vestige of what had been here was the stone sign that stood out front. Cracks filled the paved road, showing just how intense the rumblings had been. I didn't think many people would be able to believe that this had all been caused by one Relic.

I felt really bad when I saw how many people were working to clean up the debris. When Sitri told me what had happened, all I could manage was a "Huh?"

Apparently, that man in the ring was the bad Fox that Gark and everyone had been pursuing, and he had tried to use Key of the Land to decimate the world. It sounded like a joke, but I didn't have much choice but to believe it when the damage was this severe.

This explained why this whole thing seemed a bit brutal for a mere gathering of fox mask fans. But did this mean I had been standing in front of a dangerous guy, all without any Safety Rings to protect myself? Thank goodness the immediate danger had passed. I would've begun to vomit otherwise.

It wasn't just bad luck that had caused this chaos; it was everyone using vulpine imagery. It just made everything that much more confusing. There was, of course, Little Sister Fox the phantom, but there were also the good and bad Foxes in Kreat, giving us a total of three similar parties. It didn't take someone like me, anyone would've gotten the wrong idea in some way or another.

"It's a miracle the destruction didn't extend any further," Lucia remarked. She had reportedly fainted due to mana depletion. "There were certainly moments I feared we might be doomed."

Ansem nodded solemnly. "Mmm."

I was told about how Lucia and the other Magi had pushed themselves to their limits to reduce the damage. If not for them, the devastation would have extended far beyond just the arena. In other words, it was the usual pattern where I screw up and everyone else cleans up the mess. Except this time, the stakes had been monumental.

A small convoy of carts stopped outside the wreckage, where they were loaded with debris.

"Well, there were no fatalities, so I think we can consider these results favorable," Sitri said as she watched the carts go.

"Hm? Nobody died?" I said.

"Yeah, a lotta hunters were around and so was Mr. Branch Manager," Liz chimed in. "Makes sense that nobody bit the dust."

"Similarly, I lent out—I mean, I *handed out* potions. And asked for nothing in return," Sitri said. "Ansem, likewise, did a spectacular job."

"And I got to do lots of cutting!" Luke declared with inexplicable

pride.

I wished he would do something besides cutting.

I was reminded how incredible hunters were if they could keep a death toll to zero all while a massive structure was coming down. If there had been any mistakes, it wasn't hard to imagine myself being the lone casualty.

"Now that Fox has tried to use Key of the Land, the empire is taking a more aggressive approach in pursuing them," Sitri told me. For reasons beyond me, she was gleefully poking me with her elbow all the while. "It's a complete reversal from their previous approach. It seems the empire isn't at all happy over what happened today."

I was glad she managed to find joy in everything, but I didn't think she'd be so happy if she learned that I was the one who had activated the Relic. Even if it had been stopped partway, the potential damage I nearly caused was more than enough to warrant the death penalty. I could tell them I did it because I had tripped, but I didn't think that would buy me much sympathy. Ultimately, Fox had wanted to activate Key of the Land, so all that changed was the journey, not the destination.

"It was Fox," Sitri said when she noticed me furrowing my brow.

"Yeah, but I share some of the—"

"You share none of the blame. This was all the work of Fox."

"Yeah, but—"

"It was Fox."

She was oddly insistent on this point. Luke, Lucia, and Liz all followed up with their support.

"I don't get it, but it's Fox's fault!"

"Yes. It was all Fox."

"Of course it's their fault. You did great, it's Fox we should be pissed at. Oh, and the tournament managers because they canceled the tournament over one little setback!"

By the sound of it, Fox was to blame and there was no room for arguing. I still thought I had at least been a part of the problem. If nothing else, I didn't think the tournament managers had done anything wrong. I felt bad for everyone who had been looking forward to the Supreme Warrior Festival, but events tend to get

canceled when their venues are turned into rubble.

I sighed and looked at Sitri, who was clearly unwilling to brook any arguments from me. "But Fox isn't the only villain here. You've done plenty of bad things too," I said.

"Huh?!"

Ansem nodded in agreement. "Mmm."

Well, what was done was done. I was more worried about what people might expect from me, given my high level. I had just recently had that wild encounter with Peregrine Lodge, and now I had another bout of bad luck. A retirement like the one I had just seen in my dreams was still a ways off.

I took a deep breath and stretched my limbs, then followed my friends as we left the ruins of the arena behind.

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"Find that man in the fox mask, by any means necessary!" Franz barked. "With his wounds, he should still be nearby! Do whatever it takes, the dignity of the empire depends on it! Was that man trying to make fools of us when he let a wounded target go?! Get the local government to cooperate! They're the ones who brushed us off when we warned them! They even let Princess Murina come under attack!"

The soldiers and civil servants dashed off. A full day had passed since the incident at the Supreme Warrior Festival, but the emperor and his entourage were still buzzing like an angry beehive. Assisting her father, Murina received one report after another.

"Our quarry was gravely wounded," Rodrick said. "I refuse to accept that they could up and disappear without a trace. He wouldn't have deliberately taken that hit from the Supreme Warrior unless he had been low on mana."

"We've already surrounded the coliseum," Murina replied, "and we've cut off any potential routes of escape. Still, there have been no reported sightings."

Rodrick didn't say anything but his expression was more severe than ever. His eyes glinted fiercely, like a brandished sword. Murina

and Franz quickly exchanged words, but stopped when an underling came to report.

"Captain Franz, we've finished collecting the blood left in the arena. It's enough to send to the Divinarium."

"I don't like resorting to such uncertain measures, but I guess we have to," Rodrick commented. "Once we've ascertained their general position, we turn every stone in the area. Now, I suppose there's no need to remain in this land any further. We also need to request the cooperation of the other nations."

Rodrick was determined to use every means he could to crush Fox. As for Murina, her vague familiarity with the lesser-known side of the story made her feel conflicted. She understood that any organization willing to unleash such a terrible weapon had to be punished, but she also knew that a certain someone had infiltrated their ranks and toyed with them.

"Also," the subordinate said, looking distinctly uncomfortable, "the Alchemist of Grieving Souls has requested that we share some of the Fox's blood with her..."

Franz stiffened when he heard this, but before he could say anything, Rodrick spoke up. "After all that party's done, we can hardly refuse them. Give the Alchemist some, but make sure there's still enough that the Divinarium can do its job. I don't care for his reticence, but we owe a debt to the Thousand Tricks, for this, and for Murina."

"I suppose we'll have to formally request their cooperation once matters have settled down," Franz said. "We must not let ourselves depend on them too much, but he does have...inexplicable access to information."

Murina agreed with him. She recalled the Thousand Tricks coming off as haphazard, but oddly rational. There were still some things she didn't yet understand, but that was probably just because she lacked the pertinent information. She understood now why he had a reputation for discernment. Though she had received personal training from Grieving Souls, she still wasn't capable of any sort of preterhuman artifice.

"Father," she said, "I'm of the opinion that the Thousand Tricks's

current plan is still underway."

"Do you have a reason to believe this, Murina?"

"Nothing concrete. However, I've noticed that there are layers to everything that man does. I don't think he found himself on that stage by accident."

Murina was only offering speculation, but she was confident in it. She knew something her father didn't—the Thousand Tricks had successfully infiltrated an organization that had remained elusive to everyone else. She was certain he had figured out Fox's plans for the tournament, which led to her belief that he had a reason for letting the man in the mask get away. Still, she thought it would be best not to inform Franz and her father that he had been in contact with Fox.

Both the men looked at her, slightly surprised. Murina took a deep breath and braced herself. Franz and her father were in for another shock. "Father, would you entrust this matter to me? I may not seem like it, but I have proven myself capable of overcoming that man's Thousand Trials. I'm sure I can be of use."



"You may have tempered her too much, Thousand Tricks," Rodrick muttered. "What in the world did you do to my daughter?"

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Caelum Tail had reigned as one of Fox's bosses for a long time, but never had he come so close to death. His mana had been nearly depleted and he had been severely wounded. What's more, Galf's betrayal had left him deprived of the escape routes he had prepared. With their dedication to secrecy, there was nothing Foxes feared more than getting captured.

When the Supreme Warrior had begun to chase after Caelum, he had been helpless. If that mysterious girl hadn't appeared, escaping would've proven very difficult. Something about her had been mystical, supernatural even. But what stood out the most to Caelum was that she wore a mask identical to his.

He had assumed her to be yet another obstacle bent on stopping him, but she said she would help him escape. He struggled to recall exactly what happened after that. All he could say for certain was that the girl had allowed him to escape Kreat without encountering the Supreme Warrior or any of the soldiers who were on the lookout for him.

Caelum sighed with relief. He had reached an emergency safe house in a nearby town. However, while he had escaped the imminent danger, it was too early to relax. Fox assumed they would one day find themselves in an all-out war with the empire, but that was supposed to be a matter of the distant future. They had a grueling conflict ahead of them now that one of their most valuable assets, Key of the Land, had been lost.

And what of the troop dispatched to assassinate the imperial princess? If they had succeeded, they should have returned to headquarters by now. If the unthinkable had happened and they had failed, then they were most likely dead.

Caelum closed his eyes and let his body relax while keeping his other perceptions open to the world around him. He thought back

on the girl that had saved him. He bearing, abnormal powers, the mask she wore. If she wasn't part of the organization, then there was only one possibility—she came from Peregrine Lodge, the vault that had given form to Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox. She must've been the progeny of the god that inhabited the vault.

Long ago, the founder of Fox encountered that treasure vault and received a mask from the god that inhabited it. In the eyes of the organization, anyone who obtained a mask from the vault was someone considered worthy by the gods.

At the same time, however, the vulpine worship was nothing more than a name for their cause. Anyone who encountered the vault and had enough of fate's goodwill to obtain a mask from one of the phantoms was promoted to Fox's upper echelons. That was all. Similarly, there was no deep reason for the special privileges afforded to the priests. At its core, Fox was something that had grown from the corpse of a defunct intelligence agency.

Needless to say, Peregrine Lodge was not one of their collaborators. Fox had been in danger plenty of times and not once had the god's progenies come to the organization's aid. After all, it defied reason that a phantom would wander far from their treasure vault.

That girl had said, "You're Mr. Caution's enemy. I'll help you escape. Next time, victory will be mine!" What did that mean? Who was Mr. Caution? Was that their real name? Or an alias? How did someone get an alias like that? What did Caelum's escape have to do with her victory?

No matter how much he thought about it, he didn't arrive at any answers. Given the context, it was possible that "Mr. Caution" was the Thousand Tricks, as he had been facing off with Caelum.

Quit it, he told himself, *you need to get some rest.*

The foundation of the organization had been rattled. In their current position, fighting the Thousand Tricks was far too risky. Whatever that girl's identity was, it would be best to assume she was an ally they could use.

Caelum then heard a voice from behind. It was a woman's voice, and a frigid one at that. "Heh heh heh. You don't look well at all,

Caelum."

The sudden interruption caused his eyes to fly open and a heavy sigh to escape his mouth. He realized a tall shadow had appeared in the room. She wore a robe and carried a sword on her hip. On her face was a mask similar to Caelum's. Fox had many tails, more than just Caelum.

"Have you no manners? This is my domain, Blade Tail."

"Funny that you of all people should say that. Or do you think I'm ignorant? The rumors reached my ears. Your little pet betrayed you and everyone you mobilized has been injured. Our organization is falling apart and headquarters has been thrown into disarray."

Caelum furrowed his brow. She had hit him where it hurt. Indeed, his recent operations had far from ideal outcomes. Not only had they suffered a great loss in the disappearances of both the Counter Cascade and the Dragon Caller, but now a plan long in the making had gone awry. Normally, for one boss to intrude upon another's turf was a breach of protocol, but Caelum was in no position to protest.

"It's nothing we can't recover from," he said. "We now know how our adversary operates and I'm sure the chaos at HQ will resolve itself soon enough."

Caelum began to think that perhaps it was a stroke of fortune that Blade Tail was here. Even the Thousand Tricks probably would need to take a moment to get his bearings. Within the scheming ranks of Fox, Blade Tail stood out as a zealous militant and her talents were nothing short of Caelum's. While he would rather do it himself, everything would work out if he sent this woman after the Thousand Tricks. The death of that hunter would be a significant blow to the empire.

"I've been told the gist of what occurred," Blade Tail said in a quiet voice. "So tell me, Caelum, how did you slip away? Making an escape can't be easy when you've exhausted your powers."

So she had underlings keeping tabs on the situation? That was another breach of protocol, but this time, Caelum was thankful.

He took a deep breath and made an effort to maintain his composure. "You might not believe it, but I was saved by a progeny of the fox god. They've given us their blessing."

There was a long silence before Blade Tail gave her answer. "I see."

Caelum hadn't expected such a blunt response. Blade Tail didn't ask further questions; she simply drew her sword. It was a curved blade, just over a meter long, and marked by a distinct pattern. It was a Relic with a strange surface that appeared almost as though it was wet. Its abyssal impression was captivating; it seemed more like a work of art than a weapon. The metallic surface glimmered mutedly. Blade Tail appeared to be simply standing, but Caelum couldn't spot a single opening.

"What are you planning to do?" he asked. Casting a spell would be no trouble now that he had regained most of his strength.

Blade Tail snorted. "I was curious what excuse you might offer, but a *god*? Caelum Tail the strategist has fallen very far. You're under suspicion of endangering the organization because you unleashed our strategic weapon, Key of the Land. You're also suspected of secretly giving a mask to a subordinate in order to disorient headquarters. I'm going to erase you here and now."

Caelum flew to his feet. "What?!"

He glared at her, but couldn't gauge her expression due to her mask. Her voice, though, contained notes of both disdain and pity. She pointed her blade at him.

"Don't worry, Foxes don't die, they just get new tails. We'll have to show our appreciation to the Thousand Tricks for stopping the destruction. As for command of the Zebrudia region, we'll have no trouble finding someone new to take over."

The Thousand Tricks. Those words sent a shock through Caelum's body. Alarms blared in his mind. In retrospect, the Thousand Tricks's recent moves came off as precise and surgical. It was almost as though he had been aware of every step of Caelum's operation. No strategist, no matter their caliber, could have managed this without being entirely aware of Fox's plans and methods.

On that note, Galf's fierce resistance was similarly odd. Would some deception *really* be enough to motivate him to muster such a large resistance? Wouldn't it make more sense if there was something more going on in the background?

Then, there was the divine progeny coming to his rescue with impeccable timing. If there was anyone capable of manipulating a fox god's offspring to even the slightest degree, it would have to be one of the priestesses.

Could it be that this had all been a plot to ruin Caelum? To do that while escaping his notice would require considerable authority. It would require the cooperation of someone from Fox's highest echelons. Indeed, Caelum had been struggling to understand how someone as prudent as Galf had been so thoroughly duped.

He let his mana begin to circulate. He had been told Blade Tail wasn't particularly good at scheming, but perhaps that was all a bluff?

"Don't tell me," he said. "Did you use the Thousand Tricks to sow this confusion?"

"Hm? I see there's no point discussing this further," Blade Tail—the traitor—said with a snort before readying her blade.

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The members of First Steps were gathered in a building near the Kreat branch of the Explorers' Association.

"Maaaster! You're awake!" Tino sprinted up to me, only to be cut off by Sitri.

Sven raised an eyebrow, looking deeply exasperated. "You pulled some more insane shit again," he sighed.

By the sound of it, while I had been unconscious, the hunters in the audience had all done some splendid work. Directed by Gark and the Abyssal Inferno, the Magi had kept Key of the Land at bay, while anyone who couldn't help with that had been busy protecting the civilians and directing evacuations.

It might not have been intentional, but as the person who had activated the Relic, I felt deeply ashamed. I scratched my head, and said apologetically, "Man that was really something we got pulled into."

"Pulled into?" Eva, who had worked hard organizing everyone, adjusted her glasses and looked at me with intense doubt. Had she

pieced together the fact that I had tripped?

Touka, however, just shrugged. "I have no complaints. The Supreme Warrior Festival may have been canceled, but this was a fine opportunity to make our name known."

Touka had quickly gotten over her missed chance for glory. I thought that was very mature of her. Or perhaps she had never been bothered in the first place, seeing how she valued coin over glory.

Tino approached me, slowly so as not to trigger the Sitri Barrier. "Master, are you all healed?"

"I'm fine. I'm just tired."

"Just tired?" Kris echoed. "Like hell we're gonna believe you're 'just tired' after holding back something that powerful! We were all worried! Sir!"

Her brazen tone was the same as always. As far as I could tell, nobody seemed too worried.

"'Holding back'? Huh? Did I hold it back?"

"What do you mean? Sir? I know what I saw! A Noble Spirit would never misread mana. I'd say you held back thirty—no, thirty-five percent!"

Thirty percent. Thirty percent?

Unfortunately, all I had been able to tell was that the mana gushing forth from Key of the Land was something immense. I had no idea if thirty percent was really a lot.

After watching me in despondent silence, the leader of Starlight, Lapis, let out a sigh. She uncrossed her legs and got up from her seat. She walked right up to me and looked down at me through clear, unreadable eyes.

"Hmph. Hardly something I'd expect from a human. Just where in your body does all that mana reside? Even up close, I can't detect a trace of it. In your sister Lucia, I see a grand river, but nothing in you."

Lucia clutched her head and let out a *very* long sigh.

It was true that I had tried to suppress Key of the Land. I thought I had failed, but it seemed I had succeeded without realizing it. Maybe I really could accomplish things if I put my mind to it?

"Hmm, I did manage to hold it back," I said. "I tried to bring it to

a complete halt, but that proved too much for me. Just like everyone else, I've got some growing to do."

"Sounds like you've still got your fighting spirit. Sir. Honestly, what's going on in your body? Our understanding of mana says it shouldn't be possible for you to use so much and still be chipper. Sir."

Without much thought, Kris extended a hand towards me but was surprised when Sitri batted it away.

"No touching," Sitri said with a smile.

"Just a bit won't hurt. Madam."

"I said no. I gave you permission to negotiate for Lucy's transfer, but I never gave you permission to touch Krai."

Kris didn't say anything but stubbornly tried again. Sitri immediately fended her off. I hadn't known these two got along so well.

The next moment, Sven made a face like he had just remembered something. "Right, Krai. Your doppelgänger was here not too long ago. He said he wants to see you before you leave town."

Krahi and his party were staying in a more average lodge, one a few grades below ours. With his party members behind him, all of them looking rather pale, the first words he offered were ones of awe.

"So... You're a famous hunter."

The incident at the tournament had been terrible in many different ways, but if asked who suffered the most, I think it would be fair to say it was Krahi. I had my fair share of misfortune, being forced into the tournament and then pummeled by lightning bolts and all that, but Krahi had been mistaken for me and attacked by the guy in the fox mask.

However, Krahi was calm as ever. It seemed he wasn't bothered that I had hidden my level from him. To be fair, while the same didn't go for my real name, the Thousand Tricks was a title known by many. I wasn't sure what to think if he was unfamiliar with it. Perhaps this magnanimity of his was the mark of someone fit to be a Level 8.

If Sitri were here, she would've kindly continued the conversation on my behalf, but sadly, the only companion I had was Luke. With nobody I could rely on, I stayed silent, unsure what to say.

"I wanted to see you sooner, but I only just recently recovered," Krahi continued. "That last bolt of mine was somewhat excessive."

"Oh, the one that hit me."

I remembered that bolt. It was the one that used up my final Safety Ring. Looking back, the man in the mask never attacked me, but I took all sorts of hits from this guy.

Lightning magic was called the magic of champions not only because it was powerful, but because it was among the trickiest varieties. Specifically, it was hard to manage. Simply put, lightning spells were good for searing wide areas but weren't ideal for hitting specific targets. Even if someone had impeccable control, a bolt would still very likely veer off course if Ansem or someone incredibly unlucky happened to be nearby.

How did I know all this? Because Lucia told me! She didn't use lightning magic, but I'm sure I don't have to spell out why. I don't think I'll ever forget the look on her face when she first tried a lightning spell and blasted me by accident.

Krahi nodded and ran a hand through his hair. Something about that motion irked me, but I also thought it suited him.

"I heard what happened. I'm not sure what to say. It sounds like you held back so as to lure out the Fox."

"Hm?"

How did the story get so distorted he arrived at a conclusion like that? There wasn't a smidgen of truth in his suggestion. The rumors must have taken on a life of their own. However, telling him the truth would be complicated. In particular, the part about how the me that Krahi had fought wasn't actually me would be a tough one to explain.

I turned around and saw Luke nodding knowingly. He definitely didn't know anything. He was a passionate man but could be completely indifferent to things that didn't interest him.

Our eyes met for a movement. He then nodded and stepped forward, sighing with exasperation. "You don't get it all," he said to

Krahi. "You said he held back? No, that was all part of Krai's plan. Even I don't really get it."

If you "don't really get it," then please be quiet.

I wasn't sure what I should do to ensure a peaceful resolution. Though I couldn't tell the truth, I still wanted to clear up some of Krahi's misunderstandings.

"Krai, just tell me one thing," he said gravely. "When you were knocked down by my lightning, were you simply acting?"

This was it! This was my chance to make myself look a little bit less impressive! I don't know why that had to be so hard when I was never impressive in the first place!

"No, I could never manage a performance that good," I said. "I can't go into details, but it was a terrifying spell that did that to me. When it comes to harnessing lightning, I can only think of one person more capable than you."

No ordinary champion could have done something like that. With my dull eyesight, I wasn't any good at estimating people's strengths, but I was sure even Arnold, who was a Level 7 and called the Crashing Lightning, couldn't have managed that.

So who was that other person? It was of course none other than Ark Rodin. I was a loyal Ark devotee, and unlike Krahi, I had known Ark for a long time and asked him for many favors.

Without saying anything, Krahi closed his eyes. Eventually, he nodded. "I see. Just as I thought, as much as it beggars belief. Until now, I thought I was without equal when it came to wielding lightning. I must accept that that's not the case."

He looked me dead in the eye. Perhaps out of frustration, his clenched fist was trembling. There wasn't a hunter in the world that enjoyed losing. But I couldn't possibly say I thought Krahi was better than Ark Rodin the Argent Thunderstorm. It didn't help that I was biased towards Ark. I gave him ninety-nine points, and I'd give the full one hundred if he wasn't constantly absent when I needed him.

"I'll admit it, Krai Andrey," he declared, "I can't best you when it comes to lightning magic."

"Huh?" I didn't know what else to say. What was he talking about? Did getting zapped do something to his head? Was this a

joke? Some Thousandfold Theatrics?

Krahi continued with an odd degree of vigor. “There’s no need to try and hide it. I can tell. You intentionally let yourself get hit so you could absorb the bolts’ powers!”

I didn’t know what Krahi was talking about, but Luke immediately latched on.

“He absorbed the bolt?! Holy shit, that sounds awesome! I wanna try! Give me a bolt!”

Somebody interject with a quip. Anybody.

“I felt the powers of that man in the mask and some from Key of the Land before I passed out. No human being could possibly hold back both of those forces! That is, unless they borrowed the powers of nature itself! Now before you say anything, I have further proof. You also took the bolt meant for the man in the mask.”

Took the bolt? You *hit* me*! Well, I respect the level of imagination.*

“You redirected spells from the other casters so you could make their powers your own,” Krahi continued. “This is unfamiliar territory for me. You’re the true Supreme Voltaic. No, you’re beyond that. You’re the Divine Voltaic!”

Perhaps this guy isn’t so well-adjusted after all?

I focused on the more important matter—clearing up misunderstandings.

“Th-That bolt hit me because you couldn’t control—”

I stopped and took a step back. Krahi’s hair was crackling with electricity. When feeling intense emotions, phenomena like this were common among powerful Magi.

“I’ve made my decision, Divine Voltaic,” he proclaimed while pointing a finger at me, “I will surpass you! I’ll learn the secret to absorbing lightning into myself, then I’ll strive to go beyond! I may be sad that the Supreme Warrior Festival was canceled, but I’m glad I came all this way! My eyes have been opened! I’ll become stronger! With our similar titles, I have no doubts it was fate that brought us together.”

No, I was referring to Ark. If I thought I was better than you, I wouldn’t have put it like that! As much as I wanted to tell him that, I

couldn’t say anything in the face of Krahi’s exuberant crackling.

His eyes glimmered as his excitement approached its zenith. “We’ll fight again some day. I won’t forget that someone bested me in the ways of the levin. I’ll make sure everyone knows that the Supreme Voltaic has a superior in the form of the Divine Voltaic! Our next battle will be one worthy of the name. Until I can defeat you, I’ll cede the title to you!”

For some reason, I had gained the title of “Divine Voltaic.” The rumors didn’t just have a life of their own, they had ascended to godhood. High-level hunters were nothing but weirdos.

In a motion both elegant and exaggerated, Krahi turned around. He was planning to have the final word.

I have to stop him. Damn it, I can’t think with all this obnoxious crackling.

I managed to open my mouth and shout, “Wait, Krahi! You’ve already surpassed me!”

Krahi froze. “What did you say?” He turned around, the electric crackling intensifying. At this point, I wasn’t sure he had any real control over his abilities. “For the record, in what manner have I surpassed you?” he asked suspiciously.

Every way possible, really. In fact, I couldn’t think of a single thing I excelled at. However, he probably wouldn’t buy it unless I gave specifics. I just wasn’t sure what exactly I should say.

Sanding quietly behind Krahi were his fellow party members. Lusha was the only one I had previously met, but they all matched the descriptions I had heard. There was a young man with red hair and glasses (probably Kule), a Thief with gaudy clothes and a massive chest (probably Izabee), and a woman who looked like a shady magician (probably Kutri).

They could barely even be called cheap knockoffs; everything but their gender was off the mark. If I didn’t have more pressing issues, I would’ve had a long talk with them.

“In what ways have I surpassed you?” Krahi asked again in a low voice while taking a step closer to me.

If he got any closer, I’d get zapped, so I quickly said, “Th-The diversity of your party! You’ve got wonderful comrades!”

No! That's not what I wanted to say. That's not at all what I wanted to say!

I was concerned he might interpret that as sarcasm, but he simply looked at me wide-eyed, then took a deep breath.

"Indeed," he said after a pause. "You are quite right."

He was convinced by that?

It was entirely possible this was the first time I had successfully convinced anyone of anything. Startled by my success, I, too, went wide-eyed.

"Permit me to correct myself," he said in a calmer voice than before. "*We* will defeat you."

No! No! Turn around! Kule and Izabee—your sanest members—are both bowing apologetically!

I was starting to get the impression Bereaving Souls really was the polar opposite of my party. And was I just going to have to give up on persuading Krahi? Had I really ended up as the Divine Voltaic? Well, knowing when to give up was one thing I could claim to be good at.

Luke then stepped forward. This was it! Nobody was worse at listening than him! Surely he would set things straight! I prayed to the gods.

"You don't get it at all, Supreme Voltaic," he boldly asserted. "The reason you can't compete with the Divine Voltaic is because you don't understand how to truly get stronger!"

It took me a moment to process this. I couldn't keep up. *This* was Luke Sykol. Not Kule, *Luke*. But when had he decided to call me the Divine Voltaic? We had spent years adventuring together and not once had I used lightning. Was he just going along with whatever Krahi said? Did he have swords for brains?

The Supreme Voltaic probably hadn't expected those words either, as he just looked at Luke in shock.

"Listen," Luke continued in a lecturing tone, "the reason you got beat by the Divine Voltaic is because you rely on a Relic. That staff is holding you back! Just like the best Swordsmen can't be picky about their swords, a true Lightning Magus shouldn't need a Relic to zap his foes. Krai's living proof of this. He's never once relied on a Relic!

If you want to be the best, then leave that staff here!”

There was no salvaging this. From start to finish, the Supreme Warrior Festival had been a complete and utter mess! I decided to let the current take me where it would and simply smiled. Krahi looked back at me very seriously.

And so came an end to our helter-skelter Supreme Warrior Festival. We gained some things, we lost some things; we said hello, we said goodbye; and just like always, I was unable to do anything but go with the flow from start to finish.

There was a lot of murmuring about how the incident at the arena had incited the empire to form an anti-Fox coalition, but that was none of my business. I suppose if there was one thing we had in common, it was that we both wanted criminals to die. If the thugs of the world all disappeared, my days would be that much more peaceful.

“Y’know, Krai, I think you got far more than your fair share this time around,” Luke said. We were getting ready to leave Kreat, and he was polishing his wooden sword.

“Huh?” I replied. “What did you see that I didn’t?”

I hadn’t gained anything from this. It started out fine enough, but by the end, all I had was a headache. Luke, meanwhile, just got to do whatever he wanted!

Catching wind of my disbelief, he sat up and elaborated. “Listen, you weren’t the only one looking forward to the tournament. I came here to cut through some tough guys, yet not only were you the only one who got to be part of the tournament, you also got to fight that guy in the fox mask. I didn’t get anything near that. I wanted to fight. I wanted to get struck by lightning. You even became the Divine Voltaic.”

BECAUSE PEOPLE LIKE YOU STARTED CALLING ME THAT.

I had my issues with the first half of his rant, but the second half didn’t even make sense. I hadn’t even realized some people wanted to get struck by lightning.

“Sure, cutting guys at the behest of the princess was fun and all,” he continued, “but that was just like the appetizer. I’m trying to be a cool Swordsman of few words, but even I have to say something

when my main dish gets snatched away. You hear me, Krai? I want to cut and kill some strong baddies!”

What the heck were you doing when I wasn’t looking? Never mind, I don’t want to know.

“Even Lucia and Ansem had it better than I did. They had to stop that crazy swell of mana! I don’t know what happened with Sitri, but I saw her making that peace sign! But where were my foes?! There’s no fun in slicing through falling debris! Krai, my enemies! Enemies that I can cut! E-NE-MIES. This is discrimination!”

Luke began stomping the ground like a child. I hadn’t realized he had built up so much frustration.

“You see, Luke here tried to cut the previous Supreme Warrior,” Liz interjected with a groan.

“That man’s a coward! He said he wouldn’t fight me because buildings might come down if we fought outside the arena! I wasn’t gonna let that stop me!”

Statements like that were why he would never become the next Sword Saint, no matter how much he improved his skills.

“That’s enough, Luke,” Liz chided him and grabbed him from behind. “We’re bothering Krai Baby, so let’s go somewhere else.”

“Huh?! Aren’t you in the same boat as me?!”

Liz looked incredibly dissatisfied. “Hmm. Yeah, if you weren’t, then I’d be the one stomping my feet, but I can’t out-stomp you.”

I guess she still had a sense of shame after all. Honestly, I had no idea how Luke expected me to satisfy his demand for enemies.

As she dragged Luke away, Liz turned and pointed a finger at me. “Don’t think I’m any happier about this than Luke is! I’ll make sure you find me a chance to make this up!”

It seemed I owed her something. I didn’t know what to do about that.

“Let me be clear,” Lucia said, “despite how Luke made it sound, I’m not any more pleased than he is! I missed an exam for this, then I was forced to put a stop to *that* Relic!”

“I expect compensation as well!” Sitri wailed, joining in. “I lost Killiamina and didn’t even get my hands on the organization I was expecting— Augh!”

Lucia knocked her off her feet with a wind spell. "I saw how happy you were! You made that peace sign!"

What a harsh way to cut someone off, even if they were your childhood friend.

If you ask me, those guys with their fox masks were to blame for all this. If anything, I wanted compensation as much as everyone else, but I decided I better keep that to myself.

"Are you my only ally, Ansem?" I asked. "Though I don't suppose you'll rein in Sitri and Liz for me, will you?"

"Mmm."

Was that an affirmative mmm*?*

As we left the town, I made a point of ignoring whatever conversation Luke and Sitri were having.

"Y'know, Luke, when you think about it, things are just getting started. Remember, Krai just picked a fight with the world's largest criminal organization!"

"So we're gonna have lots of enemies?"

"I'm certain of it!"

There were far too many people willing to accept a fight I wasn't offering in the first place. At this point, one or two new nemeses were a drop in the bucket for us, but I still thought it might be better to not go outside for the foreseeable future. Just when things had been slowing down too.

I wasn't remotely good at detecting presences, so keeping an eye out for foes that might or might not be around the corner was draining, even when a certain Relic kept me perfectly comfortable. If there was one silver lining, it was that even I could detect something as immense as one of the phantom foxes.

Just as I began to search my memory to ensure there wasn't anything more I needed to do in Kreat, two familiar faces poked out from the carriage next to ours. My hand went to my forehead. It was Galf and Sora from the Fox Mask Fan Club (temp. name). Sora, however, wasn't in her usual pure white robes, but instead something you might see any of the townsfolk wearing. She had also cut her hair and now had glasses. Galf had crutches, making me

think he had been hurt or something.

Of all the people I had been in contact with, these two might have been the only ones I had personally inconvenienced.

"Sora," I called. "How are you?"

Sora nearly jumped out of her skin. She quickly turned towards me and said, "Shhh. Bo—I mean, Krai, I'm no longer Sora."

"Huh?! Did something happen?"

"Quite a number of things. I'm making an escape. I've got an opportunity that probably won't come twice."

What in the world happened?

"You gave us this chance when you fought off the boss," Sora explained in a hasty voice. "The organization is in chaos, and I hear our boss is in a fight with another boss, meaning they have no time to spare for us. Heh heh, I imagine this is what you envisioned when you let the boss escape?"

"Y-Yeah?"

Wait, I'm behind. What's this about me fighting some boss? What's going on?

"We've decided to cut our losses and break from the organization," she continued. "Galf is an exceptional person. Even after the truth got out, many of his subordinates were willing to stand by him. Our prospects of making a complete getaway are looking very good."

"Hey, Sora, who you talking to?"

A large man appeared from the other side of the carriage. He was about six-tenths of an Ansem, and I felt like I had seen his face before.

"Hanneman, this is Krai. Our boss. I won't let him abandon us."

"What's that? Is he here to help us? Either way, I only take orders from Galf."

Hm?

Wasn't this the guy who had attacked the museum? The one Krahi took out? It was delayed, but the gears in my head started turning. I fought off some boss? I'm also some boss? *Boss?* I had a very bad feeling about this, so I decided to stop the gears from turning any further.

"Of course he'll help us. He is, after all, the Thousand Tricks. Everything dances in the palm of his hand. He would never just use us, then disappear."

Sora sounded both deferential and spiteful, like she wasn't the one who had insisted on pushing forward with the lie.

I didn't answer immediately, but I let out a resigned sigh when I saw Sora's attitude persist. "I don't quite get it, but why not come to the imperial capital? It's safe there, and I really think you should try selling inarizushi. It would be a lot better than being part of an organization like that. Probably."

"Galf, the imperial capital!" Sora said with shining eyes. "Let's make for the imperial capital! Krai will assist us. What a strange idea. Usually, you would hide someone in the forest! I've never been to the imperial capital!"

This wasn't at all like the Sora I recalled. And I was pretty sure you should only hide someone in the forest if you thought they could survive out there. Getting involved with Sora any further seemed like a pain, albeit for different reasons than before. Behind me, Sitri was waiting silently, but anxiously. I grabbed her arm and offered her as a sacrifice.

Hmm. Before I go, I should give them some advice.

I looked back at Sora, withstood my urge to vomit, and said, "Right, you probably shouldn't put the word 'Fox' anywhere in your restaurant's name. Nothing good will come of that."

Interlude: Curse

A few dozen kilometers outside the imperial capital, an observation outpost sat silently on a hill. It was built to observe the stars and rested along a ley line. Though it was hidden among the flora, it was a sturdy institution that had supported Zebrudia for many years.

It was the Astral Divinarium, also referred to as simply "the Divinarium."

Within a building defined by its unique domed roof, a young man and an older woman, both clad in blue robes, were having a discussion.

"I hear that with the help of some hunters, the trouble with Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox was resolved smoothly enough," the man said. "However, now some knights want us to explain why we couldn't foresee a disaster capable of devastating entire nations."

"They think an Eye of God could detect something like that? Nothing man-made could possibly make a splash large enough," the woman scoffed.

In the center of the room was a crystal ball a few meters in diameter. It was a Relic that drew upon the power of the sky and all beneath it in order to reflect phenomena in its many forms.

The woman nodded to the ball and scowled. "Those lot could learn a thing or two about patience. This place handles any and all mysterious occurrences and even we have to take extreme caution when handling prophecies."

The Divinarium's prophetic abilities could hardly be called infallible. When talented astrologians harnessed the forces of nature, accurate predictions could be made, but not at will. On numerous occasions, the Divinarium had accurately predicted a disaster and thus allowed the military to move in advance so that they might mitigate the damage.

On the other hand, there were also many disasters they had failed to foresee. This gave the Divinarium a reputation as the oddball among the empire's public institutions.

"Prognostication isn't possible through sheer determination," the woman said.

"You're quite right. That's what we told them, but then they asked why we couldn't foresee it if the Thousand Tricks could."

The old woman sighed when she heard the name of the free-spirited man who had been entangled in every recent major incident in Zebrudia. "Him again? I'd hazard that his predictions come from somewhere quite different from ours. That's the man who gladly subjected himself to Tears of Truth, isn't he? If I had my wish granted, he'd become one of us."

She raised her head and looked towards the crystal ball—then jolted. "This reaction!"

"I see it too!"

A black dot, almost like a stain, had appeared on the otherwise transparent ball. Like a cloud of fog, it expanded until it covered the entire surface. The crystal had many different ways of conveying the future, but this was leagues more foreboding than anything in recent memory. The younger astrologian's eyes were as wide as they could go.

The older member steadied her breathing and said, "It's a strong prophecy if you can see it too. This is much worse than the Fox incident. Just what the knights were hoping for. Report this to the capital! Tell them it's a shadow big enough to blanket the entire city!"

Side Story: Let This Bereaving Soul Throw in the Towel!

The village chief went wide-eyed when he heard the name given to him. “My word! I’ve heard that name before. Your mask and appearance, it all rings a bell. You’re that famous hunter, aren’t you?!”

They were in a remote village far from any major cities. Its population was less than one thousand, its only defenses consisted of a wooden fence, and there wasn’t even an Explorers’ Association branch.

When the town found itself with an emergency too big for it to handle, the normal response was to head to the Association branch in the next town over. Once again, they had shamefully put in a request with the Association after being unable to handle some monster trouble.

However, this time, they were met with a tall, magnanimous young man. He had finely shaped eyes and hair as black as the night. In his hand was a staff unlike anything most ordinary hunters could get their hands on. There was a gold gem at the top of it, and it had a peculiar glint.

Hearing the shock and bewilderment in the chief’s voice, the young man simply gave him a thin smile. That alone took away the breath of the prominent villagers gathered in the chief’s house. There was no doubt about it, this was the preterhuman artificer, the Thousand Tricks, the man causing such a stir in the great empire of Zebrudia that the echoes could be heard even in a remote village like this one.

“That couldn’t be me,” the young man answered. “I’m still yet to make a name for myself.”

“S-Such modesty. There’s just one problem. I understand you

graciously came all this way for us, but we don't have the money to pay a high-level hunter such as yourself, especially if you've brought your party with you."

A treasure hunter's bread and butter was raiding treasure vaults. How often they chose to take on other quests was a matter of personal preference, and not many villages had the sort of coin that could entice a high-level hunter.

That, however, wasn't the only reason the chief was confused. Behind the young man were a few more young men and women, all of whom looked a few grades less impressive (it wasn't the kindest way to put it, but it was true) than their leader. Still, they matched the description of the party led by the Thousand Tricks.

It would take considerable optimism to think a town like this might have the money to hire a single high-level hunter, to say nothing of an entire party. This quest wasn't even a particularly dangerous one in the first place; a party of moniker-bearers was complete overkill. Besides, when putting in a request at the Association, the villagers had said payment was open to negotiations. Who could have expected their request would be answered by such a famous party?

One of the hunters, a man with red hair, adjusted his glasses and put on a vaguely fishy smile. "You said payment is negotiable. I understand you're not at liberty to reward us lavishly. However, our name is one known by many. If we work for too little, the Association will be none too—"

"Hmph. There's no need to pay us," the young man interjected. "We strive for nothing more than to be treasure hunters."

"Wh-What?!" the chief stammered.

He knew that there were all sorts of hunters out there, but he never thought there were ones who would work for free after coming all the way out to the middle of nowhere. What in the world were these people doing here?

The Thousand Tricks appeared to be brimming with confidence, but his comrades were all clutching their heads.

"What the hell, Kule?!" Kutri the Alchemist shouted. "I thought we

were supposed to be living the easy life!”

“Well, what do you want me to do?!” Kule retorted, then let out a sigh. “Krahi’s *pure*.”

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. When they had found an extraordinary young man with a name strikingly similar to the famous leader of Grieving Souls, their intent was to manipulate that resemblance to their benefit and reap the profits.

There was a constant rumbling outside. This was their leader practicing his lightning magic, a part of Krahi Andrihee’s daily routine.

“There’s something wrong with that guy,” Kutri said. “I wouldn’t have signed up for this if I had known how many screws he has bouncing around in his skull.”

“Sure, but Izabee and I are in his debt.” Kule shrugged.

He and Izabee had met Krahi during a hunt. A few turns of bad luck had left them surrounded by monsters and with little hope of survival. That was when Krahi, the solo hunter, gracefully came to their rescue.

At first, Kule had genuinely thought he was the real Thousand Tricks, but that misunderstanding was quickly cleared up. The real Thousand Tricks of preterhuman artifice couldn’t possibly be so stup — naive.

This was when Kule came up with the idea for Bereaving Souls. Krahi had powers on par with the real Thousand Tricks, whereas Kule was very short on strength. However, Krahi lacked basic knowledge regarding the world of treasure hunting, meaning Kule could be of use to him. He just hadn’t imagined that Krahi was the sort to charge headlong into danger.

Krahi was strong. He was courageous, able to fight, fairly intelligent, and most of all, he had an all too intense passion for heroism. By the time the other Bereavers had realized this, it was too late to back down. So came about the strongest party, Bereaving Souls, led by the Thousandfold Theurgics.

Kule and the others did their best to plan their travels so as to reduce their chances of running into the real party. Krahi, however, wasn’t easy to control. If people were suddenly attacked by

monsters to the east, he would head there posthaste and start shooting bolts. If there were rumors of bandits to the west, he would head there and start shooting bolts. To top it all off, he refused to accept payment. Not only that, he frequently made charitable donations. It would be stranger if rumors *didn't* start circulating.

This affected the others as well, bringing them excess attention and constricting their behavior. Only Kutri continued to get up to shenanigans on her own, but even she exercised restraint. The real Grieving Souls didn't have the best reputation, so some bad attention only made it all the harder to tell which party was the real one.

All hunters had the right to be remunerated for their work, so turning down payment wasn't necessarily a benevolent thing to do. If Krahi flouted tradition, some people might expect other hunters to do the same. If they continued to work for nothing, it could lead to the Association wanting to have a word with them, and it could even result in Bereaving Souls being exposed for the frauds they were.

"I guess the line between morons and champions really is paper thin." Izabee let out a tired sigh. "But we gotta do something about this or we're gonna be screwed."

"Well, if we run into the real ones, Krahi will probably be forgiven. He's not trying to fool anyone after all," Kutri remarked. "Maybe we should just go ahead and disband?"

"But Krahi's so thrilled to have comrades," Kule argued. "I don't want to imagine what he might say if we tried to disband."

These three weren't nearly talented enough to fight alongside someone like Krahi. Their party existed only because Krahi wanted it to, which under more normal circumstances would be a stroke of good luck for them.

"Exactly," Izabee chimed in. "If we tried to split up, he'd take it super hard."

"And that means we have to dumpster the idea?" Kutri replied. "God damn, I walk among saints."

"No, it's just that looking at him tugs at my conscience. Like, we're definitely going to hell if we betray him."

"Sure, but where does that leave us? We can try to keep our distance from the real ones, but we're right to fear them. They're much bigger freaks than Krahi!"

"Yeaaah. We gotta find some way to reign Krahi in."

That was the issue. Krahi was fairly powerful, but the real one was far more accomplished than Kule had initially realized. He had never met the real Thousand Tricks in person, but he had heard the rumors. It wasn't just that the real one was formidable; he had a whole party of renowned hunters. Bereaving Souls could never win against them, it would hardly even be a fight. Kule's chest ached when he imagined what might happen if Krahi found out about their fraud.

He stood up and sighed. "We've got no better options. We'll continue with Operation Sister Enlistment!"

Kutri grimaced. "We're gonna find him an adoring little sister so we can cancel one evil with another? You were serious about that?"

"It's better than doing nothing, right? Though I don't think it'll really work," Izabee said and seemed to really mean it.

"How can you call yourself the 'Protean Sortie' when nothing's gone according to plan? And what're we gonna do for our dearest big brother?"

"Even among Grieving Souls, Ansem Smart is quite famous and has a distinct appearance. He won't be easy to copy."

"If we have to, maybe we can just find a small guy?"

"And get exposed immediately? Kutri, we're not doing this as a joke."

"Excuse me if I forgot! Are you even trying to look like the other guy? The real one's a Swordsman, so you could at least carry a blade around with you! You're screwing up as much as any of us!"

Kule ignored her provocations and clenched his fist. "We might not find an Ansem, but I'm sure things will go fine on the Lucia front! I hear the real one is quite fond of his sister, and with Krahi's good looks, we shouldn't have any trouble finding someone willing to play the part! I'm sure he'll start to take it easy if he has a top-tier sister!"

Kutri and Izabee looked at each other and sighed.

"*Top-tier sister*. We're just digging ourselves into a deeper hole," the former said.

"After we dyed our hair to match, I'm not sure we're in any position to talk," replied the latter.

Interests, upbringings, birthplaces, appearances—everything about them was different, but in this one moment, they looked like they might actually be siblings.

Kule endured their looks of exasperation and adjusted his glasses. "Your petty villainy isn't going to work either! Vice won't work on Krahi! We're searching for a purehearted sister! One he can take anywhere and will keep him under control!"

"We're supposed to be the villains?!" Kutri yelled back. "Kule Saicool is trying to call me a scoundrel?! Why can't you at least try and resemble the real Swordsman!"

"Enough about me!"

While the members of Bereaving Souls argued, an exceptionally powerful bolt struck nearby. Their adventures had only just begun.

Side Story: The Relic Collection of the Thousand Tricks (cont.)

Relics. Gifts from the past made from mana material. In that era of rich magical energy, Relics were constantly being brought back from treasure vaults. Some hunters would enter vaults with the intention of training the minds and bodies, but it's Relics that enabled the golden age of treasure hunting.

These vestiges of past civilizations had powers unobtainable through modern technology, making them valued by many. There were countries that had been able to expand thanks to the power of a single Relic. In fact, the Zebrudian Empire's prosperity was in part thanks to the national treasure known as Tears of Truth.

Chance played a very large role in determining which Relic you might obtain. The possibility of obtaining a powerful item made treasure hunting a profession for dreamers.

But were all Relics useful? The answer would be no.

The vast majority of them had useless capabilities and were referred to as things like "trash" or "junk." Some of these had powers without even the most situational utility, some were just simple tools without any powers at all, and then there were those with negative effects.

However, because Relics were generally quite sturdy, swords and shields without any other distinguishing traits still fetched high prices. Similarly, items with negative traits, "cursed items" as they were called, were sometimes bought for eye-bulging sums (don't ask what for). That a Relic's value wasn't necessarily tied to its utility was just another point that made the trade an interesting one.

Now, previously, I showed some sword-type Relics; this time I'll show something of a different nature. They were certain to puzzle whoever discovered them and caused hunters more trouble than any

other type out there. I'll be introducing entertainment-variety Relics.

***

Though there was no concrete definition for "entertainment-variety," any Relic that was fun but had no practical purpose could probably fall under this category. A treasure hunter's ideal Relic was something that aided their adventures, but nonhunters were different, all the more so when it came to rich merchants and nobles.

A good weapon-type Relic could make a trip across town much safer and something that enabled long-distance communication like a Sounding Stone was imperative for doing business or managing land. While it baffled many treasure hunters, entertainment-variety Relics could sometimes sell for a higher price than something with more utility. For those that have everything, the only thing they can want for is entertainment.

The wealthy were fascinated by any Relics that were rare, all the more so if they offered a glance into the life of a previous civilization. They were always on the hunt for an item that caught their fancy, and used their vast pockets to buy up what they wanted.

The first Relic I'd like to introduce is a picture-type that was known as Moving Image. I'm sure the name says it all. They appeared to be framed paintings, but its depictions moved about freely. That's it and nothing more.

There were some picture-types that could do things like suck people inside them, but Moving Images didn't do anything that special. A little animation might sound trivial, but they were actually valuable cultural artifacts, making them one of the most popular entertainment-types out there, loved by aficionados all over the world.

Prices could fluctuate wildly depending on the size and contents, making it hard for hunters to estimate how much their find might be worth. Amazingly, there were tales of Moving Images going for billions of gild. Perhaps it would be better if hunters had thought of

them as works of art and not as Relics.

I should mention that the "Moving" part isn't limited to the boundaries of the painting. Most elements were content to stay within their frames, but there were times when things accidentally slipped out. These lost "elements" couldn't be touched and even researchers were split on how exactly to classify them.

You had to be careful, because if an element ran out of mana while beyond the confines of their painting, they'd never be able to return. There was a popular tale of one of the most famous Moving Images, "Dance at Daybreak." It was a dreamlike depiction of a crowd of nobles dancing in faint darkness, and as the story went, every time its charge reached zero, the number of party goers decreased a bit. Eventually, it became a sad event with very few attendees remaining.

Should an element leave their frame, your best option was to make sure the Relic's charge never fully depleted and wait patiently for the wanderer to return. Residents of the paintings didn't go far and usually went home at some point or another.

If you wanted to avoid losing any of the people in your Moving Images, you would be best to refrain from charging them at all. Even if nobody left the frame, once you activated a Moving Image, the picture would never be the same again. I heard some fanatics would keep their Moving Images charged until they got a scene to their liking.

The world of Moving Images was one of many possibilities. For instance, if you activated multiple Images in close proximity, the residents would mix and mingle in very interesting manners. Similarly, there were the derivative Moving Puzzles.

Though they might not have had any meaning, there was no denying the fun to be had with them. They were definitely worth taking the opportunity to experiment with.

I, too, once owned a Moving Image. However, I tried turning it face down while active, and the contents all fell out, leaving me with a blank canvas.

Now then, as I'm sure you've guessed, the trade of

entertainment-variety Relics was largely supported by powerful devotees. However, what I've got next was a rare example of something adored not just by connoisseurs, but by hunters and common people alike.

I'm talking about Animal Affinity. It was a headband-type Relic, one with animal ears attached to it. There were many varieties of this Relic, and wearing it gave you ears and a tail similar to the relevant animal. If it had cat ears, you would get cat ears and a cat tail; if it had dog ears, then you would get dog ears and a matching tail, and so on and so on.

Unfortunately, the added appendages were purely cosmetic. You couldn't touch them, nor would you gain their abilities or be able to understand what a real animal was thinking. Hence the designation as an entertainment-type.

If I had to note one interesting thing about this Relic, that would be its charm. The tails and ears couldn't be moved at will, but they would move on their own in accordance with their wearer's feelings. This adorable feature earned Animal Affinity many fans, even among hunters, and made the number of them on the market comparatively small relative to the number found.

I once learned of a popular café in which all the staff wore an Animal Affinity. The Animal Affinity Café was a splendid example of this Relic's potential, but I feel the need to add that it was opened by a hunter extremely fond of Animal Affinity, and the establishment was the fruit of their obsession.

The price of this Relic, by the way, could vary depending on the animal in question. The most popular forms were cats and dogs, but some varieties could be bought for very little. If you were just interested in it for the novelty, you were best off going with a cheaper variant.

Personally, I was the owner of a black cat Affinity. I tried to donate it to the aforementioned Animal Affinity Café, but they refused the offer. The world of entertainment-variety Relics really was a tricky one.

By the way, out of personal interest, I once tried putting one of these headbands on a matching animal and— Ah, I'm digressing.

Though there's still a mountain's worth of entertainment-variety Relics I could introduce, I'll make this the final one so I don't risk boring anyone. This last one was my favorite of all. It was a doll-type Relic called "Archaic Dancer." It's an item that was known to anyone with an interest in this field.

It's hard to give a concise explanation of what it did, but if I had to try, I'd describe it as a clay doll that could sing and dance. That might make it sound like something trite, and sure enough, my little sister whacked me when she learned how much I had shelled out for mine. However, from its endearing form to its humorous dances, to its voice evocative of the chaos of the past, this doll was sure to offer a healing presence for anyone exhausted by our modern society.

Like the previous two Relics, Archaic Dancers came in myriad varieties. It was said that no two were completely alike. Some danced, some sang, some did both, and generally, the greater a doll's repertoire, the higher it would sell for. However, since voices and routines varied, it was hard to appraise value on the breadth of abilities alone.

Archaic Dancers were generally found in treasure vaults Level 6 or higher, which means they were among powerful phantoms and appeared alongside much more practical Relics. Sadly, this meant these dolls were often left behind.

Now, I've mentioned that they could sing and dance, but there was actually another feature—a *hidden* one. If you put multiple dolls together, they would sing in a chorus. Just watching one was already enjoyable, but when you activated multiple, they would synchronize and put on a splendid, unified performance.

Once, in a sight too great for words, a collector of Archaic Dancers gathered about a few dozen together and made a little orchestra. That orchestra included Dancers from my very own collection.

The only downside of these Relics was their price. As they often got left in vaults and came in a large variety, a truly fine doll could cost enough to make your eyes leap from their sockets. If you

wanted to collect a large number, you had to be prepared to spend your life working towards that goal.

***

Now that I've had the opportunity to introduce three of the best entertainment-variety Relics, what do you think? With "entertainment-variety" having no solid definition, items of all powers and forms fit under this tent.

Some Relics just needed a little work before you could find a use for them. As we've seen, items with abilities like those of Animal Affinity's weren't anything extraordinary, but people managed to sell them by marketing their fun value. At that point, it was hard to really write them off as useless.

Currently, Relics are mostly appraised on their practical value. Treasure hunters could only bring back so many items from a treasure vault, so anything that couldn't be considered useful was left behind. Meanwhile, the vast majority of parties prioritized even unknown Relics over entertainment varieties.

However, I found this to be a bit of a shame. It's true that these items weren't of any use during a hunt, but I didn't think that was necessarily such a bad thing. Because they required mana, were expensive, and had powers on the extravagant side, Relics were something far removed from the lives of ordinary people. One survey organization found that ninety percent of people not involved in hunting or related businesses had never used a Relic before.

Their lack of practical uses made entertainment-variety Relics a good choice as a present, an asset which could turn them into a bridge connecting hunters and civilians. Even the most daring hunters had to retire eventually. Weapons and armor were often passed down to children or apprentices, but I felt that an entertaining Relic was a perfect keepsake to remind one of their own career.

Relaxation is another important part of life. As a collector, it brought me great joy anytime I could inspire someone out there to take an interest in entertainment-variety Relics, or at least become a

little less likely to cast them aside.

Afterword

It's finally here. *Let This Grieving Soul Retire: Volume 7*! Yaaay! Thank you for picking it up. Tsukikage here, it's wonderful to see you all again.

It's been three short years since volume 1. Looking back, I've been working on this series for a while. Misunderstanding-based comedy is a genre I've long been a fan of, but this is my first time having a go at it. It's all thanks to the support I've kindly received that I've been able to make it this far.

This volume's misunderstandings may have been a bit complicated compared to the previous. However, there's an even greater emphasis on comedy, so I hope you enjoyed it all the same!

This time, we had a very...bad Krai. He's gotten dragged into all sorts of different disasters, but, well, if you've finished the book, then I hope you'll know what I mean. We had new characters as well as old characters blended in, all bustling with life thanks to Chyko's illustrations.

The cover is, uh, way too good. I can't keep myself from smiling. This is a series with a cast on the larger side, but nothing would make me happier if you found yourself a favorite. I wanted to put them up to even more shenanigans, but there just aren't enough pages to go around (as the classic excuse goes).

Once again, we've had a volume build off the story of the previous volume and more! We've also produced various merchandise. Personally, my favorites are the acrylic stands that come with the special edition of volume 7. ~~I probably shouldn't put that here.~~ I really like the design, so look it up if that catches your interest!

***

Now then, as usual, I'd like to wrap things up by giving my thanks.

Thank you very much, Chyko, for once again providing excellent illustrations. That the covers skillfully avoid matching the content of the books is simply too good. Here's to more!

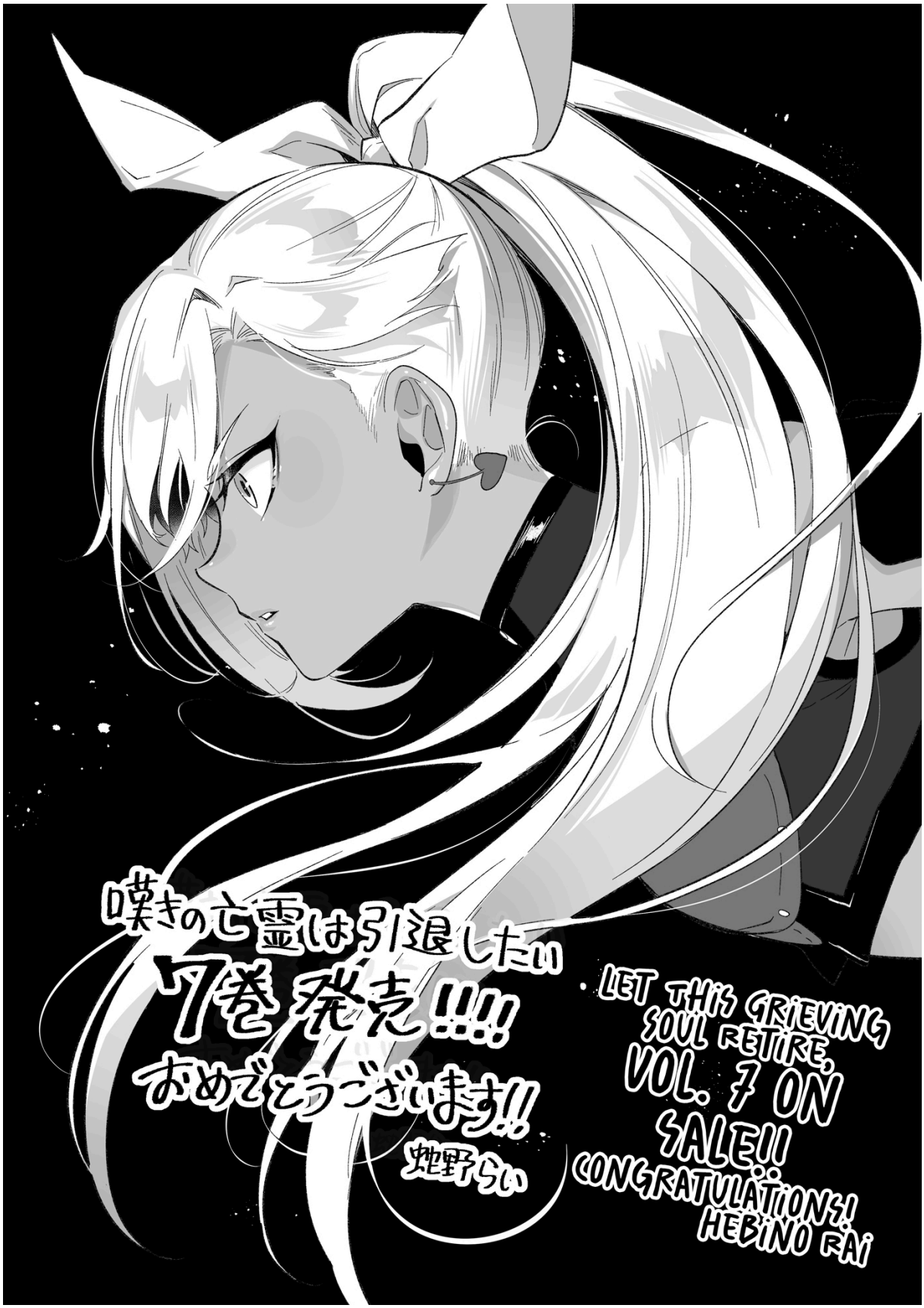
My supervisor Kawaguchi, and everyone at the GC Novels editing department and related companies, thank you so much as always. It's all thanks to you that my humble work has come this far! I love the merchandise! I'll write lots of short stories, so please make a mosquito trap that looks like Drink! I hope we can continue working together!

And most of all, I'd like to offer my deepest gratitude to you readers who have stayed with me all this time. Thank you very much! (On the acknowledgments page, there's a QR code to a survey that offers a short story upon completion. Please give it a look!)

Note: QR Code not available in the English edition.

Tsukikage, July 2021


いつか猫の幻影のシッポが手に入れば…こんなこともある…？
PERHAPS THIS COULD HAPPEN IF YOU GOT A PHANTOM CAT'S TAIL?
Chyko
2021-7


嘆きの亡霊は引退したい
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おめでとうございます!!
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LET THIS GRIEVING SOUL RETIRE, VOL. 7 ON SALE!!
CONGRATULATIONS! HEBINO RAI

Bonus Short Story

The Thousand Tricks's Advice Column Part.2

"Huh? We're doing the advice thing again?"

"It's my impression that everyone is struggling with some concern or another," Eva replied. "And the previous attempt was received warmly, so I thought we might experiment this time."

I crossed my legs. Treasure hunting was a tricky occupation. The job entailed a broad swath of work, and many hunters had troubles they preferred to keep to themselves. Counseling wasn't part of a clan master's regular duties. Still, I was one of the more accomplished Level 8s and had many acts of preterhuman artifice misattributed to me, so I often found myself listening to the worries of my clan members.

Not too long ago, I had offered advice through the clan bulletin. I had given pretty half-baked answers, so I hadn't been expecting good reception.

"This time, I thought we'd try an in-person approach. Follow me, please."

"In person?"

Eva led me to a room in the clan house. There was a desk with two sets of chairs, like what you'd see in job interviews. However, there was a partition placed in the middle of the desk, preventing me from seeing who was sitting at the other end of the table. It reminded me of a confessional.

"But they'll know it's me on the other side, won't they?" I asked.

"Please ignore such minor details."

Why was Eva so enthusiastic about this? Was it because I was always pushing my work onto her? I did as she told me and sat down in the seat hidden from the door. A few moments later, I heard it open.

"Let's go, I'm up first!" said an energetic voice.

I realized that this system had a fatal flaw. Even with the partition, I could immediately tell who was on the other side by their voice. The crazy cutting man wasted no time taking a seat.

"Let me get to the point, Krai," he said in a grave voice. "Lately, nobody's been willing to spar with me. What should I do? At the dojo, anytime I swing at someone, they just throw down their sword. I can't get in any practice like this."

He had called me by name, and, contrary to his serious voice, his problem was patently absurd. I took a deep breath and decided I'd just say whatever.

"Make a clone. Make a clone, then fight it. Your ultimate enemy is yourself."

After receiving my undercooked advice, Luke dashed off. I felt a little bad, but there was no getting through to him sometimes, and he seemed to be satisfied, so I let it go. I took a lazy sip of tea, then the door opened again. I heard two familiar voices.

"Ryuu-ryu-ryuu-ryuu!"

"And your dear friend Sitri, serving as her interpreter!"

This was completely unexpected, but it would take more than this to faze me now that I was set to halfass everything.

These two sure are good friends. That reminds me: did these Troglodytes get citizenship?

I saw them around the capital from time to time, leaving me wondering how they were being treated.

The two sat down, and the Troglodyte immediately started saying incomprehensible things.

"Ryun-ryun-ryuu-ryuu-ryuu."

"'My king, we're making our skills known throughout the imperial capital. We request your guidance in planning our next steps. Also, Sitri here is an excellent woman fit to be your partner,' she said! Did you hear that?!"

"Ryun?! Ryu-ryu-ryuu-ryuu! Sitryu!"

I heard some harsh noises and Sitri yelping. "Wha— Ow! Ryuulan, don't hit me!"

Why did you two come here? Well, at least you're passionate about something.

It seemed Sitri could talk with the Troglodytes now, but I really hoped she wasn't teaching monsters (or were they Sapiens?) our language.

I cleared my throat and just said whatever. "Ryu-ryu-ryuu-ryuu-ryuryu-ryu."

"Ryuuuun!"

"Wh-What a terrible thing to say, Krai!"

Just offering a few random "ryus" was best whilst dealing with these people.

Sitri and the Troglodyte Queen left while bickering loudly. I didn't know if she was satisfied with my answer or not, but she probably hadn't been looking for a proper one in the first place.

Through the window, I could see the setting sun casting a beautiful evening sky. Just as I was starting to wonder how much longer I had to do this, the door slowly opened, and a silhouette sat across from me.

"Umm, Master, can I ask you something?"

So my last customer would be Tino. Though I didn't actually think I could be of any help to her. At first, she didn't say anything, but after a few moments of waiting, she spoke up.

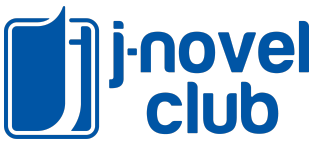
"Don't you think that lately, I've lacked presence? I've just sort of blended in. Maybe I should give myself a new coat of paint, so to speak..."

That's not something we can talk about here.









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Let This Grieving Soul Retire! Woe Is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party Volume 7
by Tsukikage

Translated by Grant U
Edited by Aldia Elwood

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