


Tsukikage 

Story  
Art  
Chyko

3



Let This  
Grieving Soul  
Retire!



Woe is the Weaking Who Leads the Strongest Party



Tsukikage<sup>Story</sup>



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Let This  
**Grieving Soul  
Retire!**



Woe is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party



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Let This  
**Grieving Soul  
Retire!**



Woe is the Weaking Who Leads the Strongest Party





Tino Shade

Krai Andrey

Liz Smart

Sitri Smart

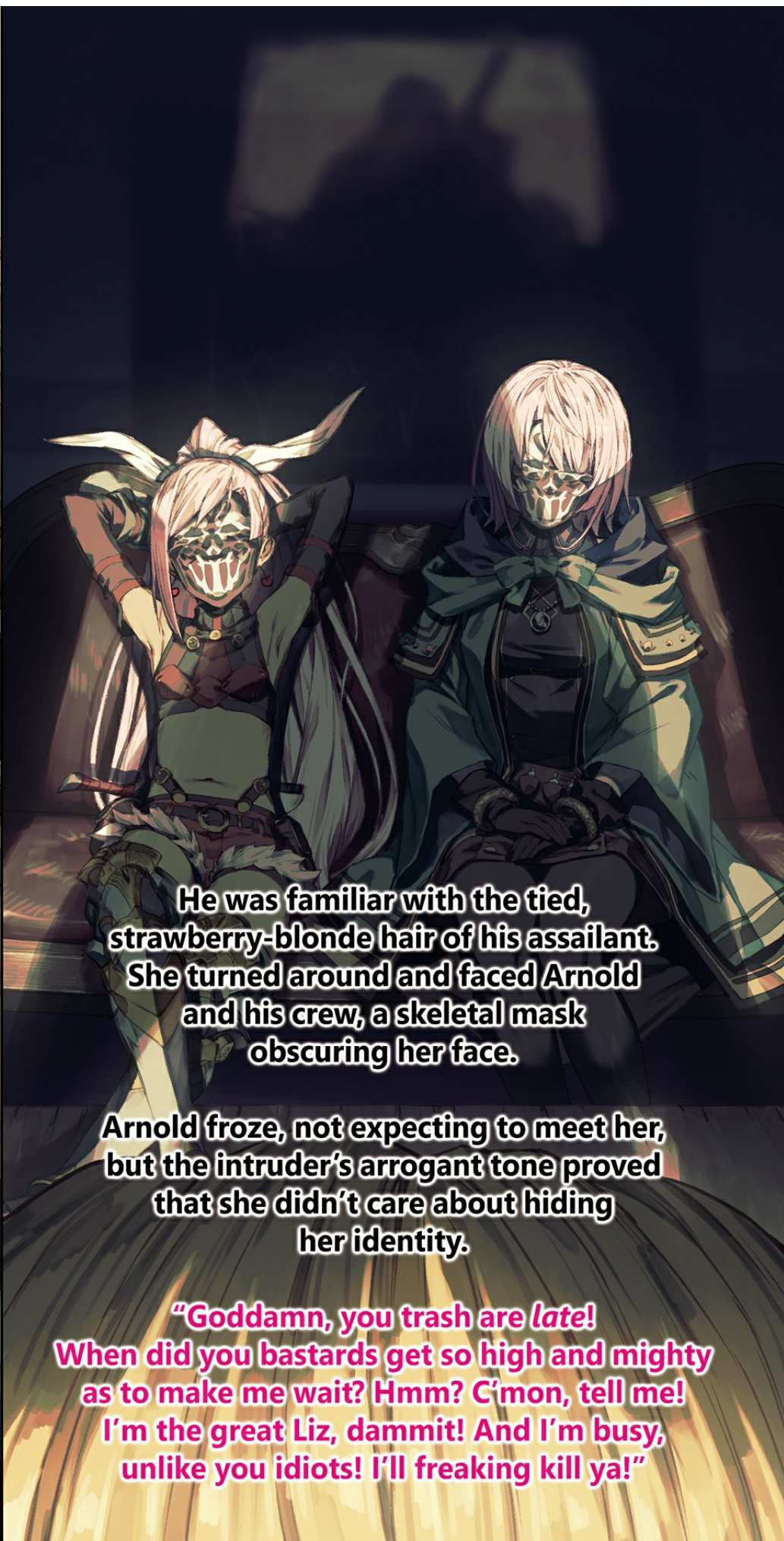
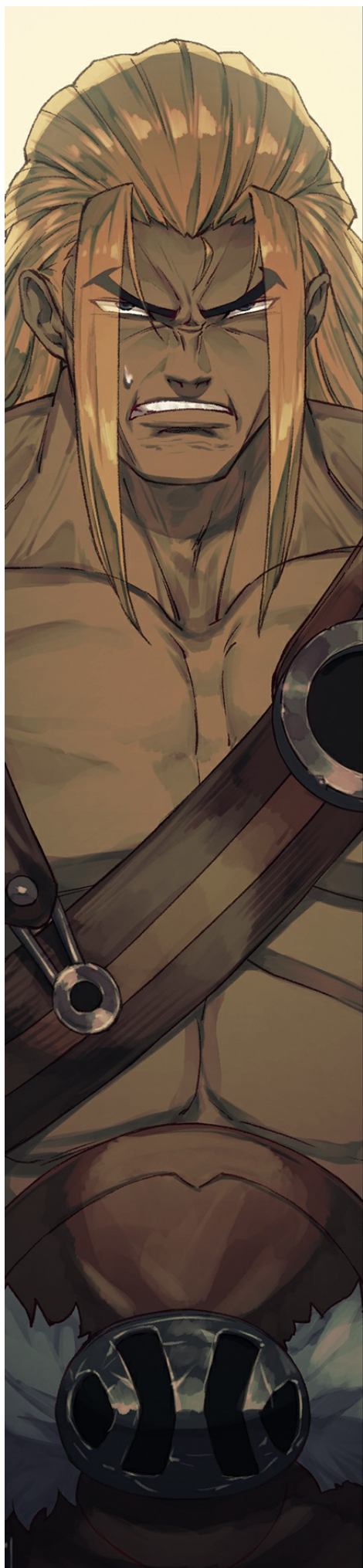
"Master...  
thank you!"

"Oh, maybe  
I should get  
some ice cream—  
Tino, you want  
some too?"

"I drank mine;  
now, drink up,  
you piece of shit.  
Drink up! Drink up!  
Drink up!!!"

"...What?"





He was familiar with the tied, strawberry-blonde hair of his assailant. She turned around and faced Arnold and his crew, a skeletal mask obscuring her face.

Arnold froze, not expecting to meet her, but the intruder's arrogant tone proved that she didn't care about hiding her identity.

**"Goddamn, you trash are *late*! When did you bastards get so high and mighty as to make me wait? Hmm? C'mon, tell me! I'm the great Liz, dammit! And I'm busy, unlike you idiots! I'll freaking kill ya!"**



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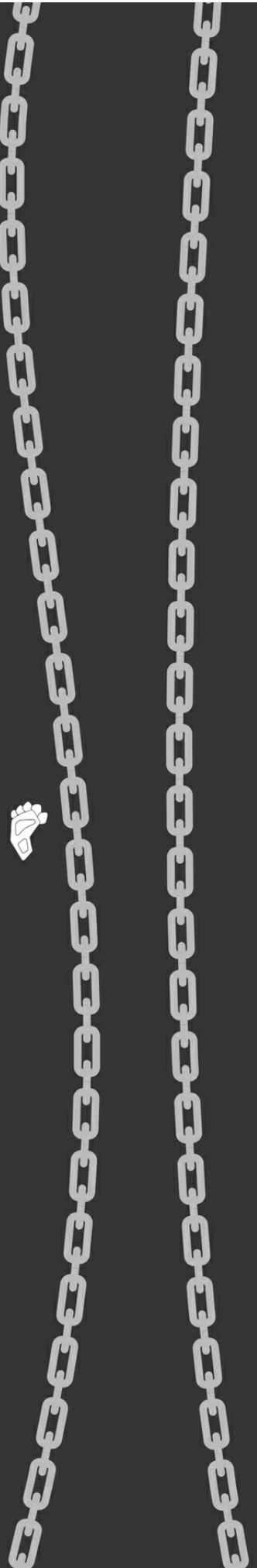




# Part 3:

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## The Dragon Slayer





## Prologue: The Braniac

Amid the tension, I absentmindedly stifled a yawn. A heated argument had erupted in one of the rooms at the Explorers' Association in the capital of Zebrudia. The topic of the meeting revolved around the compensation and cleanup procedures following Noctus Cochlear's recent illegal experiment.

Seated at the large table was the Explorers' Association's Zebrudia branch manager Gark, accompanied by his trusted aide Kaina, as well as a few of his staff members. Joining them were officers from the Vault Investigation Bureau, the governmental organization tasked with researching and handling incidents related to treasure vaults. Alongside them were knights from the Third Order, entrusted with upholding public order in the capital, as well as the hunters, the linchpins in resolving this recent incident. The conference room, normally spacious enough to accommodate dozens of people, was now packed with the gathered members. Notably, the leaders of the nearly twenty hunter parties who'd assisted in resolving the case commanded attention in the room with their presence.

Although the case had already been closed, these stakeholders were all brought together because the magnitude of the situation had far exceeded the initial expectations when the quest was first issued. Typically, the Association would've reviewed their quests to ensure that the rewards were commensurate with the task. But exceptions existed: for instance, the quest's objective could've far exceeded the Association's initially expected scale, unexpected treasures might've been discovered, or—like this time—the quest could've deviated significantly from what had been expected, with hunters going beyond their duties and unearthing a major conspiracy capable of destabilizing the empire. In such cases, the compensations would be renegotiated during a meeting involving all stakeholders. In cases where the client was an individual, the negotiations could get messy, but for cases like this where the client was the empire itself, and therefore implicitly trustworthy, one could expect a satisfactory amount to be disbursed.



I hadn't been involved much in this quest, so I wasn't familiar with the details. However, it looked as though this incident had been so significant that a large payment alone wouldn't suffice as compensation. In fact, the monetary bounties had already been agreed upon and distributed to the members in a prior meeting. This meeting seemed to have really been convened to tie up the final remaining loose ends. Despite my total ignorance, I was made to attend merely due to their expectations of me as the kingpin of First Steps—I was essentially a mere decoration.

“After verifying the authenticity of the information on the seized documents, the government has decided to securely seal them away. In accordance with the contract—”

Occasionally, Gark interjected with such dreadfully dull topics. The more enlightened hunters among us would raise their opinions, but I was just struggling to not doze off to the uninteresting conversation.

Beside me, Sitri observed the meeting with serene eyes, reminiscent of a lake's placid surface.

By the way, her sister, Liz, had refused to attend the meeting and had gone training instead. I'd also have preferred to go watch her train rather than sit through such an agonizing deliberation, but my position within the clan hadn't allowed me to do so.

Since I'd declined the compensation, because I'd done nothing, I couldn't help but wonder why I was still burdened with such responsibilities.

“Lastly, let's turn our attention back to the confiscated items: essentially, in accordance with imperial law, those items, excluding the documents, will be liquidated after proper examination, and the resulting proceeds will then be distributed accordingly. You can refer to the note provided earlier for a detailed inventory of the confiscated items.”

I examined the list given to me. Most of the items, inscribed in fine print, were things I hadn't even heard of, let alone seen; even if I recognized a few, I had no idea of their actual worth. Nevertheless, I couldn't care less about the proceeds. I hadn't contributed anything, so why not just split it among everyone else?



Just as I was thinking, *Can't wait for this meeting to end...* Sitri unexpectedly poked me in the knee.

“Krai, um...I want this and this...if possible,” she whispered, her lips by my ear, as she pointed to a section of the list.

It seemed that Noctus Cochlear's area of research aligned with the scope of Alchemists' activities. Perhaps something had struck a chord with her, sharing the same professional background with him?

Saying that I hadn't hoped Sitri would ask for them herself would be a lie, but I was indeed in a better position than her to do so. And without much thought, I raised my hand as I stifled another yawn.

Immediately, tension flared up in the room. The Vault Investigation Bureau agent hosting the meeting cast a strange gaze at me as if I were some peculiar spectacle.

“Let's see, on this list of confiscated items, we have...a 'Malice Eater' and an 'Akasha golem'? I'd like to buy them out,” I said.

“What...are they for?” asked the agent.

I was met with a strong reaction from the agent because of my repeated history of being dragged into troublesome affairs. But even so, I had no idea as to the answer either. Besides, these items shouldn't be illegal anyway.

“I understand the golem. Although I have no idea how to make it work, I assume your interest must've been piqued by such a powerful article. But what about the Malice Eater?”

He seemed to be genuinely wondering. Unfortunately, I had zero idea what a Malice Eater even was.

I turned to Sitri, but for some reason, she simply smiled back at me without uttering a word.

I furrowed my brow and tilted my head.

Well, I'd never seen the thing in person, but that name should speak for itself. I could make an educated guess, I suppose: an “eater” of “malice” it was.

The convict was a Magus who'd conducted research rivaling that of



Alchemists, and when it comes to Alchemists, potions were the obvious image that came to mind—there was only one answer to what it was.

With that thought, I nodded my head in agreement.

It was probably a specialized tranquilizer or something. It had an ominous name, but in the world of magical potions, it wasn't uncommon to come across such intimidatingly named substances, so I could understand why Sitri would want it. And, perhaps, it was something I needed right now too.

"That's, of course...for ingestion."

"What? 'For ingestion'?! Th-That's... Is that a metaphor for something?"

"Huh? No. It's...not a metaphor."

"..."

The meeting hosts and the hunters looked at me as if they were looking at something unfathomable.

Apparently, it seemed like I'd gotten my assumption wrong; I must have answered too randomly. Well, I thought I was on the right track though...

Covering for the hosting agent, who couldn't hide his confusion over my off-the-mark response, Gark said, "As juvenile as the specimen we found is, it's still a dangerous animal. Perhaps it might be wise to have Krai take it in."

"Yeah, you're right," I said. "To be honest, even I don't have a clear idea of what to do with it, but, having said that, simply destroying the research findings surrounding the Akasha would be such a waste. Rather than dealing with the trouble that may ensue if we sell it to enthusiasts, wouldn't you think it's better to put it under my care—under the care of a Level 8 hunter? I'm sure I'll have no problem looking after it."

*Animal? Did he say "a dangerous animal" just now?*

I looked around the room, but no one looked surprised at all; maybe it had been explained while I hadn't been paying attention.

*Who would've thought! I see... So "Malice Eaters" are animals—how on earth am I to "ingest" one...?*



Without commenting on my absurd remark, the hosting agent placidly nodded. Evidently, he was quite accustomed to such outbursts.

“Very well, Thousand Tricks; I will allow it to be turned over to you under a few conditions. As for the golem, unfortunately, another agency has already requested it too, so that isn’t a decision I can make.”

*What should I say? That I didn’t know it was an animal or something?*

Yet it was Sitri who wanted it, not me. And so I nodded in a yeah-uh-huh manner.

“I don’t mean to brag, but I once raised a cat that was perfectly trained,” I said.

“I-I see... A cat... That’s good to know!” said the hosting agent in a strong tone as if trying to convince himself.

Meanwhile, Gark’s and the other attendees’ expressions were twitching.

It was going to be all right: while I was an irresponsible person, it was Sitri who wanted it, and so it’d be her who was going to take care of it.

As for the training...I suppose Lucia, my younger sister, will take care of that somehow. Our cat back home had been well-known as a smart cat in the neighborhood, and it had all been thanks to Lucia’s efforts. I was sure that brilliant younger sister of mine would somehow take care of the training for me.

Throughout the rest of the meeting, an uncomfortable atmosphere lingered on thanks to my interjection. And with that, the treasure hunters left the room as they cast a variety of glances filled with what looked like dread and exasperation (probably ninety percent exasperation) at me.

It seemed that they were going to hand over the Malice Eater right away. And so Sitri left alongside the likes of Vault Investigation Bureau agents and knights from the Order after thanking me in a low voice.

And as I was about to leave the room while I stifled a yawn, a deep voice stopped me in my tracks.

It was Gark.

Perhaps because I was too used to being told off by him, by just hearing his



voice, my body tried to get down into a kowtowing position on its own accord, but I suppressed it just in time—I hadn't done anything bad today yet.

Letting out a small sigh, I turned around, and there was Gark with his eyebrows lifted like an ogre. It was really disturbing to face such an expression from a stern giant of a man, but this was his ordinary expression.

"Hey, Krai, I agreed to have it handed over to you just now because I think it was reasonable too. But what plans do you have for Noctus Cochlear's assets?" asked Gark.

"Uh... None, really?"

I didn't have any plans for it; it was Sitri who did.

Sitri's curiosity was second to none even among Grieving Souls. Her voracious greed for knowledge manifested itself unwaveringly even at perilous moments, and it had even put our party in danger in the past. It was no surprise that she took interest in an animal kept by Akashic Tower, and it was only natural that I, as the leader of our party, would take action for my childhood friend.

"Don't worry; there's no need to put on such a scary face. I'll make sure it gets properly trained."

"Branch Manager, let's put some faith in Krai. It's all right. As you may know, Krai is...at least not the kind of person who would do evil."

"Tsk. Fine."

With a dismissive chuckle, Kaina followed up, and Gark clicked his tongue and finally relaxed his eyebrows slightly. And that was exactly why his moniker of "War Demon" wouldn't fade away, even though he'd retired from treasure hunting so long ago.

How I wished Kaina would quit being Gark's right hand and come help run our clan... But that wouldn't work. If Kaina left, there would be zero people who could stop Gark.

With a change of tone in his voice, Gark asked, "Krai, speaking of which, have you ever heard of the Crashing Lightning?"

"No, I haven't. Is something the matter?"



The Crashing Lightning? From the sound of it, it should be a nickname. But unfortunately, I didn't recall ever hearing about it.

As I widened my eyes, Gark frowned at me and continued, "Arnold Hail, the Crashing Lightning. He's a hunter from another country and a holder of the title 'Dragon Slayer.' Apparently, he recently arrived in the capital after conquering most of the treasure vaults of the Land of Fogs."

His words struck a chord with me. High-level hunters, on the whole, were conceited, especially those who'd moved their base of operations from other countries. They repeatedly clashed with other hunters who considered the place of their new base home. On the other hand, having high-level hunters come in from other countries was surely a blessing for the empire, but I guess they would be seeds of trouble for Gark, who was in charge of the Explorers' Association branch in the capital. Well, I guess that was just until they got used to this place—either way, it was none of my business.

"Hmm. To be honest, I'm not really interested in him."

Clashes happened between hunters because both sides were violent—that had nothing to do with me, the shut-in hunter.

"Oh? Quite confident, aren't you? He's a holder of the 'Dragon Slayer' title, you know?"

"I *am* a 'Dragon Slayer' too if you put it that way..."

The title "Dragon Slayer" was an appellation granted differently from a hunter's moniker. As the title suggested, it was conferred upon those who had conquered the most powerful and renowned mythical beast of it all—the dragon. As much as holding the title was something to be proud of, dragons came in all shapes and sizes; therefore there were quite a few holders of the title. To begin with, there wasn't a definite requirement to meet for getting the title either. Most of the members in the top parties of First Steps were holders of the "Dragon Slayer" title, and even I, back when I still adventured with Grieving Souls, had (witnessed my party mates) defeated a few dragons too, hence why I was qualified for the title. All in all, it was a very crude system of awarding such an accolade.

Gark momentarily widened his eyes upon hearing my words before quickly



slapping my back merrily. He slapped so powerfully that my Safety Ring was mistakenly activated to form a barrier.

“Ha ha ha, you were right. That was an unnecessary piece of advice for the Thousand Tricks. Well, if he causes any trouble, handle it well as their senior, okay?”

*Ugh... Can I not?*

Seeing off the cheery Gark and the apologetic Kaina, I let out a brief sigh.

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There weren't a lot of people at the Explorers' Association lobby.

Sitri should be back soon after the Malice Eater was handed over to her. So in the meantime, I killed some time by wandering around and looking at the quest file on the quest board.

Since I became clan master, I rarely had the chance to visit the Explorers' Association. And when I did do an occasional drop-by, it was usually to apologize to Gark, so it had been a while since I took the time to look around. The atmosphere was filled with an exhilarating heat and a tingling sense of tension. My impression of the interior of the building hadn't changed since I'd first registered as a treasure hunter here.

As I was complacently browsing the bulletin board, trying not to get tangled up with the ruffian hunters, a phrase on the quest board caught my attention: “Coming Soon: Zebrudia Auction”—it was an event to take place in the capital.

“Ah! So it's that time of the year again.”

“Zebrudia Auction” was the name of a large-scale auction held once a year in the empire. This was an event I usually looked forward to every year, but perhaps because of the recent mess I'd been in, I'd totally forgotten about it.

The auction was a major national event taking place over a week. During the week, Zebrudia attracted a great number of merchants, hunters, tourists, and the like from home and abroad, and the city would be bustling with festivities day after day and night after night.

There was one thing that separated the Zebrudia Auction from other

auctions: the majority of the items for sale were Relics. Even without the auction, Zebrudia was already known as the “holy land” of treasure hunters, and numerous Relics were being brought in regularly. In fact, the quality and quantity of Relics brought in during this time of the year were beyond comparison to their normal levels. It was no exaggeration to say that hunters of the capital saved their money or dived into treasure vaults in search of Relics to be put on auction exactly for this occasion. And of course, as a collector of Relic, I couldn’t quite miss this event.

*Do I have the money...?*

Auctions were fun just to watch but even more fun when you got your hands on your desired Relics. I regretted a little that I’d declined the reward for the quest earlier, but what had been done had been done.

Just as I was seriously working out my budget, I suddenly felt a tickling sensation on my back.

“Krai, Krai.”

I turn around. An unexpected face came into view, and I widened my eyes.

Gently poking my back with her index finger was a receptionist girl who always sat behind the counter at the Association—the most popular receptionist at the capital branch of the Explorers’ Association. Bright and cheerful, she was friendly to everyone, and behind her back glamorously tied a lock of long black hair. Despite appearing younger than me, she wore the Association’s uniform from top to bottom with elegance.





She'd started as a receptionist after I'd established First Steps, and I hardly ever visited the Explorers' Association back then. But I still freshly remember when Lyle and his party mates had taken me to visit the Association just to see this famous receptionist.

She had a nice body and a cute face.

She was a well-mannered young lady who never showed a displeased expression, even towards poorly dressed hunters or me, a pathetic person who'd come to apologize. It went without saying that she boasted great popularity among all hunters of all gender in the capital currently.

And yet, recently, I'd learned from Kaina of that receptionist's only weakness: she was—yes, she was—Gark's niece, and genetics surely wasn't doing its job properly here.

This receptionist's name was...Gark's niece. I believed that Kaina had told me her name before, but the fact that she was Gark's niece was too shocking for me that I couldn't remember it at all.

*What's the matter, I wonder.*

So far, the only conversations I'd had with the receptionist had been strictly clerical, and being the semi-shut-in person I was, these conversations had been few and far between. In fact, this was the first time I'd seen her outside of the counter. Being not quite fond of Gark, I considered her as someone whom I didn't want to associate with at length.

*Could it be that something has happened concerning Gark?*

In an instant, negative thoughts crossed my mind and lowered my mood, and in my state of agitation, I uttered something unintelligible.

"Oh, really?" I said. "So you actually *can* come out of the counter?"

"What? Anyway, Krai, I was wondering if you can tell me what's going on. My uncle, the branch manager, seems rather overjoyed," said Ms. Niece, widening her eyes for a second but quickly regaining her composure.

As expected of her, who certainly had what it took to deal with street-smart treasure hunters. Perhaps she was even stronger than me.



Feeling just a tad apologetic, I confirmed her name with her, “I’m sorry... What’s your name again?”

“Really...?! Chloe! The name is Chloe Welter! Right here! It’s written right here too!”

*Ah, yes, that was right; that was the name.*

Ms. Chloe assertively pointed to the name tag on her chest, and sure enough, there was her name clearly written—it seemed like my eyes weren’t so bright.

“So, so what happened? The branch manager seemed to be in such a good mood. I heard it has something to do with the aftermath of that quest recently.”

“What? You came out from behind the counter just to ask something as trivial as that?”

“Trivial...?!” replied Ms. Chloe, her eyes widened and expression shocked.

I didn’t mean to tell her not to come out, but her doing so was such a surprise. Perhaps it was because there seemed not to be many people around today; she might be bored. Though considering that she was Gark’s niece, I couldn’t help but be on guard.

But since I was also free, I pretended to be tough and put on a stern face, even though it was quite late for that.

“Hmm, I don’t recall a hint,” I said. “The meeting was nothing new in particular—oh, right, and there was talk of me picking up some drinks—”

“Drinks...?”

*Ain’t I tough?*

“Well...and then there was talk of a ‘Dragon Slayer’ coming from another country... His name is, um...? I just heard it a little while ago, but I wasn’t interested in him enough to remember.”

*Oh no.*

Normally I can remember a little better, but I guess the information about the auction overwrote it or I’d seriously forgotten.

“It’s the Crashing Lightning! Arnold the Crashing Lightning! The Dragon Slayer from the Land of Fogs!” said Chloe.

“Oh, yeah! That’s the name. Crashing Lightning. Crashing Lightning. All right, I got it!”

I felt like I’d never heard of the place where he was from. But I see, he was from the Land of Fogs. Quite a long way the journey must have been. My respects for his efforts.

Glancing discreetly at my tough expression, Ms. Chloe nodded in agreement.

“I see... Now I understand why the branch manager was so delighted. I’m convinced. Krai is one of his favorites, after all!”

“Huh?! I guess I am!” I said.

Chloe looked at me with wide eyes, surprised by my enthusiastic response. I was hoping for a bit more reaction, but...oh well.

Anyway, Ms. Chloe’s idea of “favorite” was probably her misunderstanding. Branch Manager Gark favored hunters who embodied the essence of being a hunter, so he was probably fonder of my childhood friends, like Luke and Liz, than me.

And I was beginning to notice some stares directed at me now. Even though there were fewer people around, it didn’t mean we were alone in the lobby. Perhaps it was because I was talking to the lovely signature receptionist; a considerable number of hunters were glaring at me intensely.

“Krai, sorry to keep you waiting!”

Fortunately, Sitri had just returned. Held in both her hands was a cage, possibly bearing my drink.

“Sorry, but I have to go now that my party mate has arrived,” I said. “I have a few things to take care of, and I’m a bit busy...”

“Yes, understood. I apologize for approaching you out of the blue.”

I needed to return to the clan house and take an afternoon nap.

After she heard my perfunctory response, Ms. Chloe’s shoulders drooped



slightly.

*This isn't good. I can't afford to leave a bad impression on Gark's niece.*

"But thanks for telling me all that; it was really helpful. Let's talk again sometime when we have the chance."

*And please tell me something about Uncle Gark or any weakness he might have.*

"No, it's my pleasure! I've always wanted to have a nice little chat with you, but you seem to always be busy! Like my uncle says, the Thousand Tricks is the braniac of his generation!" To my social pleasantries, Ms. Chloe reacted beyond my expectations.

Her clear black eyes sparkled, and she looked at me as if she were looking at a hunter she admired. I felt like I understood why she was adored by the other hunters. If I hadn't been aware of my own incompetence, I might have fallen for her on the spot.

And what exactly had Gark been instilling in his niece? If I was considered a "braniac," what would that make the likes of the strongest ones like Ark and Liz? The only thing I excelled at was my skill in kowtowing in apology.

Sitri blinked as she observed Ms. Chloe's back. "What's wrong? Oh, she is—"

"Oh, it's nothing," I said.

As Ms. Chloe happily returned to the counter with an elated gait, I let out another big yawn.

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Chloe Welter was diligently carrying out her duties in high spirits at the counter, a rarity these days.

The staff of the Explorers' Association, tasked with providing all-around support for numerous hunters, had a lot of work to do. Their jobs involved gathering information on treasure vaults, mediating requests and disputes, as well as facilitating the buying and selling of treasures brought in by hunters.

And among the staff, Chloe and her fellow receptionists were considered elite. To be able to sit behind an Explorers' Association's counter, one must be

of a certain capability: courage, competence, and charm were indispensable for receptionists to smoothly carry out their duties dealing with seasoned hunters who were accustomed to rugged situations. The receptionists at Zebrudia's Explorers' Association were all seasoned veterans who could rival even the battle-hardened treasure hunters—it was definitely not only the patronage of her father's brother, Gark, that had allowed Chloe to take her seat at such a young age.

Chloe had once aspired to become a hunter.

Having an uncle with a prestigious moniker from the golden age of treasure hunters, Chloe had naturally admired his accomplishments and aspired to follow in his footsteps. She'd dedicated herself to rigorous training in order to become a hunter.

Among hunters, there were those daredevils who recklessly stepped on the path of hunting without any preparation, and there were those who meticulously equipped themselves with knowledge and combat skills before registering as one. Chloe, with hunters in her family, belonged to the latter group.

Chloe was privileged in many ways: her family was affluent, and she had relatives who held prestigious monikers. She was talented as well: she excelled in her studies and was particularly praised for her natural ability in swordsmanship by her mentor. She also had an above-average ability to absorb mana material.

Perhaps she could've thrived as a treasure hunter and achieved more than that. However, Chloe had given up on becoming a treasure hunter. She'd already resigned herself to that fate before it even became a possibility. Upon reaching adulthood, Chloe had immediately joined the ranks of the Explorers' Association and undertaken the internal examination to become a receptionist, a feat arguably even more challenging than becoming a treasure hunter, which only required registration. Her decision had been questioned by both her father and her uncle, both seeking confirmation if it'd truly been what she'd wanted.

She'd had moments of lingering remorse. However, being able to assist hunters in their achievements up close like this was a rewarding job for her.



Although she occasionally found herself frustrated by the persistent suitors, the enjoyable aspects of the job outweighed the negatives. Perhaps this was her calling after all.

For Chloe, the only bummer was the Thousand Tricks.

Grieving Souls's members were among the top-tier young hunters currently active in the capital. In particular, their hunter registration had been overseen by Branch Manager Gark, which meant that Chloe had always been hearing about the achievements of the Grievers, who were only a few years apart in age from her. Back when Chloe had still aspired to become a hunter, she'd even regarded them as rivals for a while. When Chloe became a receptionist, she'd anticipated being able to assist that very party as well. Yet, their leader, the Thousand Tricks, had seemed to have deliberately withdrawn from the front lines just as Chloe had taken on her role as a receptionist.

Level 8 hunters were super busy. Being the clan master of the now gigantic clan First Steps must've kept the Thousand Tricks occupied, far beyond what Chloe could imagine. Sure enough, it was said that the Thousand Tricks had been totally holed up in the clan house lately and was hardly accessible even to his clan members. Even when he visited the Explorers' Association, he was immediately summoned by the branch manager, leaving barely any time for chats.

There was one thing Chloe had been wanting to confirm with him for a long while, but she could never find the time. This time, however, she was finally able to talk to him properly, albeit only for a little while.

He was a young hunter who was feared by Gark Welter, the War Demon whose rampages had made his name resound far and wide. And Gark considered him a "monster."

*I'd love to hear more about him at length,* Chloe had thought.

From the few conversations she'd had with Krai in the past, Chloe hadn't sensed anything that came close to immensity in him. But this time, however, when he'd heard that a monikered Level 7 hunter was coming to visit, his disinterested attitude revealed an overwhelming self-conceit in him.

Uncle Gark had always been fond of strong warriors. Having witnessed Krai's

growth since his registration, Gark was understandably in a good mood when he'd seen Krai taking such a bold stand upon hearing of the arrival of a foreign high-level hunter, natural adversaries to accomplished and skilled young hunters like Krai. For the first time, Chloe saw Uncle Gark humming a tune.

In all likelihood, conflicts would ensue. High-level hunters were like strong and cunning beasts: put two strong individuals together, and they'd compete to establish dominance. With both their prides at stake, conflicts would be unavoidable.

While this would pose a headache for the Explorers' Association, Chloe realized that she couldn't help but feel a bit excited, contrary to her usual self. Who knows? Perhaps Branch Manager Gark felt the same way as well. No, her uncle was probably even more exhilarated than Chloe and her fellows: the Thousand Tricks was, in a sense, Gark Welter's "pride."

Suddenly, there was a commotion by the entrance. The crowd split and in came a group of hunters.

As Chloe set her eyes on the conspicuously large man leading the group, she realized that the moment had arrived.

Dark golden hair and eyes brimming with a strong will, an ash brown coat that was stained and faded, bearing the marks of battles fought, but most striking of all was the enormous sword with a blade of strongly gleaming gold resting on his back—a sight once seen, never to be forgotten.

Information on powerful hunters was shared among the branches of the Explorers' Association.

In a faraway land, where a perpetual rainy season and a thin mist prevailed, lay the Land of Fogs—Nebulanubes. There, a man had emerged as a hero, having led the country's hunters in slaying their archenemy, the Thunder Dragon.

He—Arnold Hail, the Crashing Lightning—was a Level 7 hunter. Leading his party, Falling Fog, he'd achieved this feat.

Arnold stared down at Chloe without a flicker of emotion, his gaze honed like sharpened blades.

*A powerful man.*

Chloe's eyes widened, and she held her breath.

Without a doubt, the aura of a hero, markedly distinct from the Thousand Tricks's, exuded from him. This party of hunters he led must undoubtedly be a band of dragon slayers.

Slowly, the Crashing Lightning began to speak, and Chloe stood before him with a smile on her face as always.

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It'd already been over five years since I'd become a treasure hunter, and in that time I'd learned a few things.

One was that this world was teeming with troubles, more so than one could imagine, and unless you trod the line carefully, you could easily get into a crash course for one. And the second was that one's responsibility or status was directly proportional to the number of troubles there'd be; one trouble would often lead to another, and from there a chain of new troubles.

For me, the latter was particularly a problem. The number eight in my level and my status as the clan master had dragged me into hellish situations over and over. The fact that I'd been assigned to "carcass collect" in the White Wolf's Den and made to investigate it further were all thanks to the responsibility and obligations forced onto me as a clan master and a high-level hunter respectively.

Of course, I was a person utterly incapable of doing anything myself. I just delegated anything assigned to me to someone else. But this time, *two* such assignments came my way in a row within a short period—and moreover—during the absence of my party.

I had to be careful.

As I was lounging in the clan master's office after the meeting, trying to unwind from the exhaustion of the conference, Vice Clan Master Eva Renfied came in. Unlike me, she was dressed in First Steps's uniform, and there was no room for slack in her stride as she walked with a straight back.



“Welcome back. How was the meeting?” she said.

“Ah, thank you. It went without a hitch. I was a mere decoration there though...”

Eva exhaled a relieved sigh as I rolled my shoulders to release the stress in my muscles.

I’d usually ask Eva to help me with handling the aftermath of incidents. This time, though, the fallout was really only trivial. Since there were also other clan members there who could help, I’d told Eva, who was *much* busier than I was, that she didn’t have to come. But perhaps that concern of mine might have ended up unnecessarily adding to Eva’s mental burden.

In any case, we should be able to consider today’s meeting as an end to the recent string of events.

It felt like a weight had finally been lifted off my shoulders after a long time. While I hadn’t personally exerted much effort myself, the members of the parties under my command could’ve suffered serious injuries because I’d picked them for this quest.

“A decoration? Of course you weren’t; I don’t know what would I’ve done without you there, Krai.” With that, in came Sitri, who’d done a herculean job this time around, carrying a large metal case with her.

With her pinkish blonde hair slightly hanging around her eyes, revealing glimpses of their color between its gaps, Sitri and her older sister, Liz, were like two peas in a pod. Though Sitri’s gentle gaze and ever-present friendly smile gave her a rather distinct impression.

She was graceful and lovable, thoughtful and devoted to knowledge. She valued diplomacy over brutality. Sitri, as an Alchemist, had an excellence that set her apart from her sister, a Thief, both in terms of magnitude and direction. Flawlessly able to handle any and all situations, Sitri could be considered almighty, even among the members of Grieving Souls.

Occasionally, I’d be concerned about her displaying a peculiar tendency to create odd things and exhibiting a hint of the same ferocity that reminded me of her sister. But I wouldn’t go as far as labeling them as her flaws.

In truth, Sitri had been able to swiftly resolve the various problems that had burdened me—if anything should happen to me again, there was no ally as reliable as her.

The case rattled in her hands, and Eva twisted her eyebrows quizzically.

“What...is that?” asked Eva.

“Krai’s drink,” answered Sitri suspiciously without hesitation.

“Enough with that already,” I said.

It was my fault for mistaking a Malice Eater’s true identity, but in my defense, no one would’ve understood what a Malice Eater was without any explanation...

The case was of the side-opening type and had a large lock on it. When Sitri placed it on the floor, a sound reverberated as if something inside was ramming against its walls. To be honest, I still had no idea what was inside.

Delightedly stroking the top of the case, Sitri continued, “The Malice Eaters... They’re one part of Noctus Cochlear’s estate. All the mature ones have been exterminated by the hunters with their own hands, but it seems there were some juvenile specimens kept in the base—and Krai has managed to obtain one for me.”

“Though I couldn’t get you the golem as well,” I added.

“That...witnessing that alone was more than worthwhile. Regrettable as it is, there’s nothing we can do about that,” said Sitri.

A shade of darkness flashed across Sitri’s expression.

*Maybe, was the golem the more valuable option...?*

But at this point, there was nothing I could do about it; I wished she’d at least mentioned that during the meeting.

Taking a step back from the case, Eva cautiously asked, “Is that...something dangerous?”

Sitri was a natural-born Alchemist through and through, and her sensibilities, as evidenced by the Sitri Slime incident, were somewhat detached from the

norm. Though, since it'd been Sitri who'd wanted the Malice Eater, I'm sure she'd make sure it was all taken care of somehow.

"Right. The definition of 'dangerous' varies from person to person," said Sitri, "and I believe that this is worth the risk. I'm sure Krai will manage to handle it."

*Huh...? Me?*

Sitri unlocked the case, which was making a clattering sound, and the lid flew outwards with tremendous force as a gray mass burst out from within.

*Gulp.*

The gray mass spun around vigorously and then locked its gaze on Eva, growling softly.

A creature about the size of a midsize dog slipped from the case. Its entire body was deep gray in color, and on its back were a set of large wings and three short, swordlike tails. Its head featured rounded ears swaying side to side in sync with its growls. Though its head lacked a mane, it somehow reminded me of a lion.

This wasn't my first time seeing a chimera; I'd fought them before when I'd been with my party. Yet the image in my mind didn't quite match up with what I was seeing right now. Perhaps because this one was small, it seemed slightly adorable.

Eva, being stared down as she was, seemed unsure of how to react, and a troubled expression showed on her face.

"In principle, I'll be the one taking care of it," said Sitri, "though I'll need Krai to lend me a hand when I'm out exploring."

"Uh...yeah...of course."

I thought something worse would come out of the case, but if it was just this, I should be able to take care of it myself if needed.

Gleefully clasping her hands together, Sitri said, "Oh, Krai, and it's been programmed to not harm you or me, so don't worry."

*I wonder when she managed to program the chimera—and does that mean it will harm anyone other than Sitri and me?*



In front of my puzzled eyes, the Malice Eater—or whatever it was—started scratching the floor with its small forelegs.

My expression stiffened in an instant.

The floor, which should've been made of sturdy stone, showed a large scratch mark. Or to be precise, wherever the Malice Eater endearingly swung its claws to scratch the floor, new scratch marks would appear—in real-time. As small as those claws on its feet were, they were apparently incredibly sharp. Being able to rip through the stone floor without a sound, it must be able to tear through things like my flesh and bones with similar ease—juvenile as it might be, it was undoubtedly a real monster.

Eva's face contorted upon noticing the condition of the floor.

I'd made a reckless promise.

While Sitri or other hunters might've been able to handle it, taking care of such a monster was beyond my capabilities.

Putting up a serious expression, I crossed my arms and nodded solemnly, deciding to just wing it.

"Quite an interesting specimen this is... I've decided: the entire clan will be taking care of it together."

If anyone could handle this mischievous chimera in my place, it'd certainly be the broad-minded Ark.

The Malice Eater purred and playfully jumped towards me. In an instant, something intercepted it midair, and a Safety Ring of mine activated. The Safety Ring had shielded me from the physical impact and the blow from the claws.

"..."

The Malice Eater was completely free of ill will, and its gaze, softer than when it stared at Eva, was now directed up at me. Perhaps Sitri's words were true, but my weakness gave me pause.

One of its sharp tails hit my thigh, triggering another Safety Ring. It was attacking me continuously, and I clearly couldn't handle this well.

"Hey, Krai's busy, so stop playing around!"

At Sitri's words, the Malice Eater purred once disappointedly and landed on the floor gracefully, but even its feline landing caused new scratches to appear on the floor. Even though it seemed like a pet, it was a fearsome creature.

Sitri began to lower her head apologetically and said, "I'm sorry. It's still not properly trained yet..."

"Ha ha ha... It's all right. It's all right... You've only just received it..."

Since it'd listened to Sitri and moved out of the way accordingly, it must be fairly intelligent. After all, high-level monsters possessed both strength and intelligence. However, I did wonder if my life would last long enough until it was properly trained...

I had merely nine Safety Rings left to protect my life. Ideally, I'd like to have my used Safety Rings as well as my other Relics that had run out of mana recharged if possible.

"That said, when are Lucia and the others returning?" I asked.

"So after my sister left, a powerful Swordsman phantom appeared in the boss room..."

"Oh...in that case..."

In one sentence, she'd convinced me as to why they'd yet to return.

One of my childhood friends, Luke Sykol the Protean Sword, the Swordsman of Grieving Souls, was a man with a passion, or rather an obsession, for mastering the way of the sword. At his current level, Luke was profusely strong, and yet he had a troublesome temper that compelled him to swing his blade at any exceptional Swordsman he encountered, regardless of whether they were human or phantom.

This time around, he'd encountered a phantom that had appeared in the boss room of a Level 8 treasure vault; it must've ignited his fighting spirit. And once Luke became fired up, there was no stopping him. No one would even attempt to stop him.

"Luke's bad habits kicked in, and so Lucia and the others decided to stay a bit longer."

“So...did he win?”

“No; it was a complete pushover. But he said he’d keep at it until he can win one-on-one. He’ll probably come back once new bosses no longer pop up. Though that’ll possibly take some time since it is a treasure vault with a considerably high concentration of mana material,” said Sitri, wearing a seemingly pensive expression.

What kind of opponent could’ve so utterly vanquished Luke, who was nearly undefeated even within the capital?

“Oh, by the way,” said Sitri, as if remembering something, as she fished out a small ring from her pocket.

“So you brought back a Relic.”

Sitri carefully picked up the ring on the desk and observed it.

It was a dull silver ring with a transparent crystal attached to it. The intricately cut crystal had a unique aura of a Relic.

My hobby was collecting Relics. Therefore all Relics we obtained during hunts went through me at least once, and I also frequently visited Relic shops. If there was only one thing I excelled at compared to my party mates, it had to be my profound knowledge of Relics.

This time, I could immediately identify in one glance the true identity of the Relic Sitri had acquired.

“It’s an Aspiration Manifest, a ring Relic,” I said. “Where did you find it?”

Aspiration Manifest was a Relic that stored only a single magic spell. I also carried around a pendant version of it with me. Aspiration Manifests weren’t particularly rare.

Its crystal that boasted a unique transparency was the root of its functionality, hence it came in various forms: rings, bracelets, pendants, circlets, and even attached to staffs. It was the size of the crystal that determined the upper limit of the magic that it could be imbued with.

Given that Aspiration Manifests consumed approximately a hundred times the usual mana required by casting the spell to store the magic within, they



weren't quite popular as Relics. However, for someone like me who had a companion in Lucia, a talented Magus, the more of these Relics, the better it was.

As I closely scrutinized the ring with a probing gaze, Sitri blushed and said, "This is a souvenir for you, Krai, since I've caused you trouble with the Noctus Cochlear incident..."

"Trouble...?"

"If you may...put it on here for me, will you?" she said as she pointed to the ring finger on my left hand.

Eva was *also* dumbfounded.

Funny joke. But unfortunately all the fingers on both my hands were already occupied with ring Relics. Regardless, this wasn't the first time something like this had happened, so I gratefully accepted Sitri's kind gesture.

"It's not like you've caused me any trouble, but if you say it's a souvenir, I guess I'll accept it. Thank you; this will be useful."

"Oh no, it's nothing. We're partners, aren't we?"

I couldn't quite say anything more as Sitri smiled serenely—after all, I owed her a tremendous monetary debt...

# Chapter One: The Mighty and the Mighty

In a corner of the capital, Arnold Hail and his party mates gathered in a room of an inn catering to hunters.

Five to six members was generally considered the right size for a typical party, but Falling Fog was a party of eight men, with five vanguards and three in the rear. Most of them had been attracted by Arnold's reputation.

Their homeland, Nebulanubes, the Land of Fogs, had an environment far more treacherous than Zebrudia's. The rainy season dominated most of the year there, and there were only a handful of clear days throughout. In the thick, ever-present fog, evil abounded, and even within the city, one couldn't feel completely safe due to the lurking monsters that sneaked in under the cover of fog. Compared to their homeland, the capital of Zebrudia was like paradise.

"Dammit. That girl treated Arnold as if he was some country bumpkin. The Dragon Slayer *and* moniker-bearer has arrived, but she showed not a shred of respect!" said one of the members as he agitatedly slammed the table.

What came to their minds was likely the girl who'd sat behind the reception desk of the Explorers' Association. As one would expect from the famous capital, indeed, she was a bright lady with a remarkably well-featured face. Based on that alone, the Land of Fogs simply just couldn't compare up to the capital.

Yet, as much as she'd worn an affable expression, her words had lacked the respect and reverence one would expect towards high-level hunters. Had she been unaware of Arnold's achievements, that could still have been understandable, but she'd known Arnold's name even before they'd mentioned it. It'd been clear that she'd just taken them lightly.

"Well, that's how it goes; we're strangers after all," said Eigh, Arnold's henchman and vice leader of Falling Fog, calmly. "What. We'll just shut her up with our skills soon enough. Seeing her face distort in astonishment will be satisfying."

In this era, considered the heyday of treasure hunters, word about high-level hunters spread swiftly. While the arrival of high-level hunters was seen as an opportunity for cities to strengthen their forces, it'd mean the turf of existing hunters would be disturbed. By now, the sensible hunters must've learned of Arnold's arrival and were on the lookout.

Arnold's party had two choices before them: they could recognize their status as newcomers and submit to those weaker than them, or they could silence them with their own strength. But in reality, there might as well be no choice. To know their places and bow down to the inferior would be an act of the weak, and that was *not* something a hero like Arnold the Dragon Slayer would do. Therefore, there was only one path—to muzzle the competition by force and demonstrate their valor through their prowess. After all, this was the simplest and most favored option to the hunters, who were largely hot-blooded and meritocratic. And indeed, that had been Arnold's purpose in coming into this capital city—to acquire even greater power and to win even greater renown.

Arnold was a Level 7 hunter with a moniker, and some hunters might've lacked the resolve to face him based on that alone. But that was fine. Arnold had no interest in the weak. The adversaries he sought to devour were the strong of the capital. He had to make it known to the hunters of the capital, as soon as possible, that the hero of Nebulanubes was worthy to be known as a hero—no mere country bumpkin—also in Zebrudia.

“But, Arnold, this capital truly lives up to its reputation as the holy land of treasure hunters. There is an abundance of both treasure vaults and hunters with monikers here, unlike in the Land of Fogs,” said Eigh with a somewhat sly smile, placing the list of treasure vaults and the list of high-level hunters with monikers residing in this city they'd received at the Explorers' Association on the table.

Although the Land of Fogs's environment was cruel, and the monsters appearing there were troublesome, the number of treasure vaults in the vicinity was scarce. The quality of hunters in a region was directly proportional to the number of treasure vaults it held.

“The Abyssal Inferno, the Argent Thunderstorm... This is the all-star lineup of famous moniker-bearers. And there also are names I haven't heard. This is



better than what I've imagined." With that, a deep smile crept onto Arnold's face.

Among these hunters may be warriors who could rival Arnold, who'd reigned supreme in the Land of Fogs. Engaging in life-or-death duels with formidable opponents was exactly what stirred Arnold's soul.

"Looks like we're gonna have some fun."

"Where should we start? I mean, we might need to gather some information about this capital first," said the dependable henchman, sporting a toothy grin reminiscent of a wild beast.

"We stand as newcomers on this land, and we shall unleash our wild spirits and make a resounding entrance. *Such* is the way of the hunters, for it is through flaunting our valor that we etch our names in their memories. Let us show the hunters of this land our true might. Oh, what sweet anticipation I hold for witnessing the expression on that receptionist girl's face when our paths converge once more!"

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Things hadn't been going my way lately.

One's fortune ebbed and flowed. When they rode the wave, everything they did seemed to sail smoothly, but when the tide turned, even the smallest turns led to dire consequences.

The pressing matter at hand right now was the recharging of my Relics. The truth was I'd originally planned to wait for Lucia, who'd always recharged them for me, to return. However, if Luke had started training deep within the treasure vault, it'd be a while before she'd come back.

Most of my Relics were now out of mana, and even half of my protective Safety Rings were depleted. My barely remaining trump card was the one Relic Lucia had infused with magic. But unlike the Safety Rings, it couldn't be used for self-defense.

I couldn't afford to keep idling around, waiting to be toyed to death by the Malice Eater—such a fate would be too pathetic even for me. But the problem remained: how should I go about having over five hundred Relics recharged for

me?

The task of recharging Relics, in fact, would pose a significant burden for hunters. These powerful artifacts demanded immense amounts of mana, commensurate with their level of power. An average hunter could typically handle charging only one or two Relics, while even the most proficient Magi with deep mana reservoirs would find themselves reaching their limit after charging just five or six.

People who depleted their mana would be struck with an overwhelming exhaustion so intense that could even render them unable to stand. Worse yet, if they weren't used to the process, they may even lose consciousness on the spot—as a consequence, mana depletion within treasure vaults was one of the most crucial things hunters must be wary of.

Thus, hunters didn't generally possess a lot of Relics. After all, there were limits to how many Relics one could recharge even if they enlisted their Magi comrades' help. Moreover, Magi themselves required mana to cast spells, leaving them with little to spare.

Although mana was naturally replenished by nourishing oneself and getting sufficient rest, mana was a *very* precious resource for hunters, and this was often misunderstood.

Nevertheless, my clan members were all good people, and I was sure they'd help me if I asked.

But there was a problem: the quantity.

I wouldn't have thought twice if there were only one or two Relics—but there were over five hundred. This was such a great number that it was questionable as to whether even most of the clan's Magi amassed could come close to covering the amount of mana needed. In this sense, my younger sister, Lucia, who'd always handled the task of recharging my Relics, was an *exceptional* Magus.

Especially demanding in terms of mana were Safety Rings. Their ability was simple: to block any attack, albeit only once. It was the very simplicity of their ability that made them so powerful as Relics, and that was why Safety Rings were Relics that everyone considered owning for additional layers of

precaution. However, recharging Safety Rings demanded five to ten times the mana required for the average Relic. That was a ginormous quantity that posed a significant challenge even for an ordinary hunter to charge just once.

But I couldn't afford not to recharge them—in fact, they were my highest priority.

Safety Rings were my lifeline.

Without them, I would've died multiple times already in the past few weeks.

Feeling a comforting pressure on my shoulders, I let out a weak sigh without much thought. Then I turned around and asked, "Oh... Ah... Uh, Sitri, what should I do?"

"Huh...? About. What?!" responded a somewhat wistful and feverish voice.

It was Sitri imploring, despite the fact that she should still be fatigued from her recent exploration. And for some reason, she was massaging my shoulders.

Eva was at work. In the clan master's office, there were only Sitri, wearing slightly more casual attire than usual, and me, sitting deep in my usual seat at the work desk.

Sitri had many hobbies, and one of them was massages; in particular, she enjoyed giving them but not receiving. And due to her busy schedule, it wasn't often that we had the time together. After she returned from journeys, it'd become customary for us to chat while she gave me a massage like this.

She not only solved my troubles but also massaged my shoulders, and I even owed her money... What did that make me? I must've seemed like a total loser from an outsider's perspective.

"Hmm...? So how. Was it? Did it. Feel good?" said Sitri in a somewhat honeyed voice.

Her slender fingertips crawled in a rubbing motion along my nape and traced a path all the way to my shoulders, firmly pressing down on my not-so-stiff muscles in turning motions. She seemed to be well-versed on the locations of pressure points. With each firm touch, a tingling titillation surged up my spine, providing an overwhelmingly pleasurable experience that almost took my

breath away.

Sitri was highly knowledgeable about the human body. An Alchemist was not only an excellent scientist but also a magician and a physician. Perhaps this massage had also been a subject of her research.

The members of Grieving Souls were all on good terms, but Sitri and I were particularly close. This was due to the fact that Sitri had been slower in her growth compared to the other members during our training days before we'd become hunters. Ultimately, it'd just been that the mastery of the Alchemist profession required extensive knowledge and facilities, making it a late-bloomer path. However, at that time, Sitri had been plagued by feelings of inferiority, and I, talentless and idle, had encouraged her. It seemed the grateful and loyal Sitri still remembered.

Since then, Sitri had frequently shown concern for me, even though she'd long repaid that kind of favor with interest.

And to be honest, it was questionable if those had even been favors in the first place. After all, I couldn't really refuse when she'd pensively said, "I'll stop if you don't like it..."

*Sure, go ahead. If that is what you want, I'll be your experimental subject as much as you want.*

Firmly pressing, she applied pressure along my spine in turning motions, gradually kneading and loosening the muscles. Despite her slender appearance, Sitri was strong.

Her breath brushed against the back of my head by my earlobe, sending shivers down my spine, and my body heated up as if on fire.

A feverish saccharine voice tinged with excitement struck my ear. "Mmm...! You're so! Hard! Krai. You're. Amazing—mmm! Aaah...!"

It wasn't really a big deal, but since it was starting to get weird, I'd prefer if she could refrain from making strange noises.

How on earth was a masseuse producing such a seductive voice?! My shoulders weren't even that stiff.



I suppressed the weird sounds I was about to make in response to the tremendous pleasure I was experiencing and tried my best to maintain my composure. Taking a deep breath to soothe my throbbing heart, I addressed the brains of our party, who seemed to be running on a high voltage for some reason.

“Ah... About my Relics, they’ll be...running dangerously low if I don’t get them recharged soon.”

“Mmm...!” came Sitri’s seemingly poignant voice.

*Where did that come from...?*

Unfortunately, this was not a job for Sitri. While Alchemists were a subclass of Magus, their mana pool was only about as deep as an average hunter’s; their reputation was so low that Alchemists were generally considered to be a class for Magi who lacked talent. Although her mana capacity was higher than that of an average Alchemist, it was still on par with the ordinary hunter—and her mana was priceless.

“Only if I...! Can properly! Modify! Noctus Cochlear...! Aaah...!” the seductive voice, panting for breath, continued.

I decided to ignore whatever dangerous thing she was talking about. I couldn’t afford to react to every little thing like this if I wanted to keep up with Sitri.

Lifting her fingertips off my shoulders, Sitri smoothly glided her arms forward from the sides of my head in a stretching motion.

Her breasts firmly snugged the back of my head, breasts that were far bigger than her older sister’s, and her heartbeat was palpable.

She’d got to be too unsuspecting no matter how close we were. Though she didn’t usually show it, Sitri had a penchant for physical intimacy much like her sister, Liz, and according to Sitri, intimate contact helped her recharge her energy.

This wasn’t even a massage anymore. Her arms, curled in front of me, now moved to tightly hug my body as if plundering warmth from me, her slim fingertips trembling as if they were enduring something.

I couldn't discern the exact scent, but there was a faintly sweet and highly pleasant fragrance in the air.

Sitri's teases were just as mischievous as her sister's. Honestly, it made my heart race, but I endured it with an iron will.

"Hmm, worst-case scenario, I might have to ask Starlight for help."

Starlight was the biggest party of Magi in First Steps, consisting of six members who were all eminent Magi even within the capital. Their members were not ordinary humans: they were Noble Spirits, known for their exceptional aptitude for the Magus class, far beyond that of pure humans. They were a party of girls who had unique sensibilities and, well, to put it bluntly, naturally looked down upon humans.

And of course, they also looked down upon me, so it was highly doubtful whether they'd help me with such a private matter, in fact.

*But wait a second, are they in the capital?*

Sitri let out a faint scream and pressed her flushed cheeks against mine.

"Ooh, come on...! Krai...please don't...mention other women...when we're...doing the thing...!!!"

I was glad she was enjoying herself, but please know that if anything, it'd be me who'd be misunderstood by others, okay?

Sitri's whisper tickled my ears. "My sister isn't here... This is our only chance now. Come...feel me...more..."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

Liz would come flying over if she were here, I was sure; others walking in on us might as well misunderstand the scene too. Sitri's voice alone was already inappropriate enough.

And just as I spoke, the door to the clan master's office fiercely swung open at that inopportune moment.

Eva placed a finger on her forehead, her brows furrowed and her cheeks slightly flushed.

There were very few people who could evoke such an expression from Eva, who remained unruffled by most things.

*I'm really sorry!*

"If you don't mind me asking...*what* were you two doing?"

"As you can see, I'm getting a shoulder massage."

We were properly dressed, and nothing inappropriate had been happening between us.

"J-Just so you know...this floor is off-limits for hunters..." said Eva with a trembling voice as she pointed out the obvious rule. She hadn't raised her voice too much, probably because this wasn't the first time.

*I'm really sorry!*



“Y-You don’t know anything! Please don’t butt in between Krai and me!”

“Easy, easy. You don’t have to pour fuel on the fire.”

If she angered Eva, it was me who’d suffer. It was fine for Sitri to have fun, but I hope she didn’t forget that.

I tapped the intertwined arms lightly, and Sitri, understanding my intention, released her grip reluctantly.

I stood up, and I felt unbelievably light. It was as if all my remaining fatigue had been washed away—that was exactly why I couldn’t refuse her massages.

As I rotated my arms lightly to check their conditions, Sitri, with a smile so innocent that one wouldn’t believe she’d just been speaking lewdly, said, “How about a full-body massage next time, not just the shoulders? What do you think?”

*Hmm... That’s hard to resist.*

“I have a potion just for that. I’m sure...it’ll be an experience so pleasant that you’ve never felt anything like it before.”

“I feel that will probably do more harm than good, so maybe I’ll pass.”

Perhaps it was second nature for Alchemists, her impulse to use things like potions and needles at every possible opportunity seemed to be one of Sitri’s only flaws.

“All right, as much as I don’t feel like it, it’s time to get my Relics charged up for me. Preparation is important, right?”

“Allow me to help too...since it’s also partly my fault that your Relics are out of mana,” said Sitri. “I have a good idea.”

Having Sitri on my side was like having the power of the multitudes. Unlike me, she possessed real power.

Apologizing with a smile to the still-blushing Eva, I decided to bring Sitri with me to check out the lounge.

“Speaking of which, Sitri, you seemed to be quite busy lately. Was everything sorted out already?”



Outstanding treasure hunters often had multiple roles, and so did my party mates: Lucia, excellent as a Magus, Anthem, masterful in healing magic to regenerate lost limbs, and Sitri, well-versed in all kinds of knowledge as an Alchemist, had all received numerous offers from various organizations and were particularly busy.

Facing false accusations had not changed Sitri's busy schedule; therefore she rarely appeared in the clan lounge. One of her laboratories was located on the third floor of the clan house, so she occasionally visited me. However, it was unsurprising that some of the recently joined clan members were unfamiliar with Sitri's face.

"Oh...actually, I've recently lost my position at the lab I'd been frequenting..." said Sitri.

"What?"

My eyes widened upon hearing her words.

Sitri was brilliant—so brilliant that her skills had once earned her the moniker of "The Prodigy" in the capital.

I couldn't believe that she'd be dismissed from a lab unless it had something to do with the false accusations tarnishing her reputation.

*Should I offer her at least some comforting words as a friend?*

"Well...rather than having lost my position...it's more like the lab...ceased to exist, I should say," she said. "It's just—for crying out loud!—as you know, Krai, I wasn't good enough... I'm ashamed!"

As she struggled to find the right words, Sitri's cheeks blushed faintly, and she dropped her head in embarrassment.

*I see... So the lab she belonged to went out of business, I thought, coming to my own conclusion.*

Sitri was a prodigy, but she was *not* a god; she was an Alchemist, but she was *not* a merchant. Which was to say she couldn't possibly handle everything perfectly. I didn't know the exact predicament, but her lab seemed to have been in a situation that couldn't be salvaged with just one talented member.

As for what “I know,” I wasn’t quite sure what she meant by that; perhaps the lab Sitri belonged to had been a prominent one that I should’ve known about.

“Well, these things do happen sometimes. You just have to learn from your mistakes. You’ll do better next time for sure,” I said.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“I may not know of the specifics of alchemy or which lab goes out of business, but I know you well, Sitri.”

She was an intelligent, skilled, curious, and hardworking—if a little quirky young—woman of talent and charm. It might seem like she overthought things at times, but it was probably just that I tended to underthink.

“Right...you don’t know anything. You don’t,” she said.

“If you want, you can continue your research at the lab at the clan house...”

“Yeah?!”

At my casual comment, Sitri lifted her head and stared at me intently.

*Did I say something strange? Her studies were utterly foreign to me.*

I knew nothing about her research, and I probably wouldn’t understand even if she explained it to me. However, in the spacious lab at the clan house, Sitri herself had all the state-of-the-art equipment assembled, so there shouldn’t be any shortcomings in that regard. Well, unless there were other issues beyond just the facilities.

Sitri seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then a sweet smile emerged on her face as she said, “Thank you very much for the offer. But I’m afraid that it does look like the experiments might get you into trouble, so allow me to turn it down.”

*There is no need to worry though...* was what I was about to say, but I stopped myself just in time.

Sitri and I were not the kind of friends who held back secrets from one another. If she said they might get me into trouble, then those must be genuinely risky experiments that could indeed get me into trouble—it wasn’t my place as an amateur to unnecessarily say otherwise.

Clasping her hands together, Sitri spoke in a cheerful voice, “Besides, I’ll be fine; I’ll find another lab soon enough. This time I’ll do better.”

“Yeah, uh-huh,” I said. “Well, take your time. Getting enough rest is also important for your body.”

I was sure Sitri would easily find her next gig right away. There didn’t seem to be much I could do for her.

In the end, what I offered was nothing but a half-hearted attempt at consolation, but for some reason, Sitri nodded happily regardless.

Though it was daytime, the lounge was filled with familiar faces. It wasn’t like every hunter visited treasure vaults every day. Preparation was essential for exploring treasure vaults, and hunters must also tune up their physical condition before they venture into one.

The lounge served as a place of respite for such hunters; it was a place where clan members could exchange information, a place without outsiders. With complimentary meals and drinks, it was an ideal place to kill time.

Narrowing her eyes, Sitri looked around the lounge as if appraising the space.

“Feels like it’s been a while since I’ve come here...”

Though we, Grieving Souls, occasionally went out for meals together, we generally never used the lounge since some of us tended to start arguments with other parties. Of course, we’d stop them—it was better to have our meals somewhere else outside than to stir up a stormy air among my friends, which was especially true with Luke being sword-happy as he was. This was such a sad decision to make.

One by one, people in the lounge began to notice my presence. Some wore puzzled expressions, while others furrowed their brows. A few widened their eyes, and some waved their hands at us.

Amid them, a tall man standing at the center of multiple parties exclaimed upon seeing us, “Oh, hey, it’s Krai and Sitri—what a rare sight to see you both in the lounge. What brings you?”

It was Sven Anger, leader of Obsidian Cross, a top party of First Steps. He was

the one who'd gathered the numerous parties for the investigation into the abnormalities at White Wolf's Den—he was a man far more reliable than someone like me. He was quite caring for a hunter, and he was rather approachable, second only to Ark if we were only considering people beyond my party.

“Ah. Well, something came up... Looks like there's quite a buzz going on here. What's up?”

It appeared that they'd parked multiple tables against each other, and a bustling atmosphere transcending party boundaries had developed. Though my arrival seemed to have dampened their spirits a bit. Given that the lounge didn't provide alcohol, it was rare to see such a boisterous atmosphere here.

With a surprised look, Sven responded to my question, “Um... Ah, it might not concern you, Krai, but there have been rumors lately. It seems that while we've been busy looking into the incident, a high-level hunter has arrived in town.”

“Ah, that... Everyone seems to be so concerned about it.”

“So you've already heard? Of course we're concerned, aren't we? Especially considering that this newcomer is certified for a level rather similar to yours and mine. Rumor has it that he isn't exactly the tamest guy out there.”

“I'm...not entirely uninterested, but honestly I don't really care.”

“That's the textbook definition of being 'uninterested.' But seriously, you consider a Level 7 someone you 'don't really care'? CM, you sure have nerves of steel to keep up that same unbothered look on your face as always. But that being said, we don't plan to stand idly by if he ever picks a fight with us,” said Sven, expressing a profound sentiment as he made a misguided remark.

I shrugged my shoulders and faked a half-hearted smile.

It wasn't that I had nerves of steel; on the contrary, I had nerves of jelly. That was why I rarely left the clan house: as long as I didn't go outside, I wouldn't get caught up in trouble no matter how unlucky I was.

Honestly, I was more concerned about the auctions than a hunter.

“My only concern is whether Liz will pick a fight or not...”

“Heh heh heh. There’s no mistaking that.”

She was the quickest to pick a fight... Perhaps I should warn her in advance.

“So, what brings you here, CM, if you’re not interested in the newcomer?”

“Oh, right. I was thinking if I could ask someone to recharge my Relics. I do have quite a number of them though.”

“Recharging Relics...?” said Sven as he widened his eyes and placed his hand on his chin.

The others around, too, exchanged glances.

“I usually ask Lucia for that, but she hasn’t returned yet...”

As I explained, I realized I might be asking the impossible. Mana was as crucial a resource for hunters as money. I’d requested recharges for a few Relics here and there before, but this time it was a different level of quantity.

Sven peered at the nearby Marietta, the Magus from Obsidian Cross.

“I don’t really mind,” said Sven, “but are you sure you want to expose your trump cards?”

*That* was an unnecessary concern. Regardless of whether I exposed my secrets or not, I was weak.

Then, Sitri, who’d been standing there silently, snapped her hands together and said with an uncontainable grin, “Sven, technically, I’m afraid you’re slightly mistaken. What Krai has said is that he’s willing to risk the exposure of his vulnerabilities to provide you all with a training opportunity.”

The members in the lounge gathered in front of Sitri.

That was such a smooth play from Sitri even though some of these members probably didn’t know her before. The fact that Sven hadn’t objected may have played a big part in her success.

Amid the bustling mood, completely different from a moment ago, Sitri continued in a penetrating voice with a mesmerizing smile, “Everyone here in the lounge today, consider yourself incredibly lucky. Krai has promised you all highly efficient training.”



While everyone in the room was marooned in this quagmire, I found myself the most marooned of them all. I didn't remember saying anything pompous like that, and moreover, *I* was the one asking for help.

Regardless, no one voiced a word; even Sven seemed to be looking at Sitri with a somewhat curious gaze. One member, as if enthralled by Sitri's serenely dazzling eyes, cravingly swallowed as they heard Sitri's words.

Sitri raised her index finger and leaned in as if sharing a secret.

"What's fantastic about this training," she said, "is that, unlike his usual trials, there is no risk of dying!"

"What...did you say?!"

The moment Sitri had proclaimed those words, everyone, who'd been rather indifferent up to that point, became agitated. Even Sven opened his eyes wide.

I seemed to be the *only one* unable to keep up with the situation.

*Guys...you all are so hyped up, aren't you?*

"Um...I'd prefer if we could stop calling everything a trial..."

"Currently on hiatus? No worries: no preparations required! Not only would it not take long, but you're also going to see the benefits rather immediately! This is the training that will elevate you to a level on par with Lucia as Magi! I'll let you all in on a little secret: this is actually our party's exclusive secret training recipe, Krai's special secret training recipe. But today, we're making it available for everyone's sake!"

Skepticism shone in everyone's eyes upon hearing those words.

Lucia Rogier was universally recognized as the preeminent Magus in the capital. Her presence was exactly the reason Starlight, the party of ever-supercilious, human-despising Noble Spirits, had joined First Steps.

However, the idea that anyone could become Lucia's equal as Magi seemed like nothing more than a joke. It sounded like a joke to me at least. Or rather, I had absolutely no recollection whatsoever of such a training method—this was just too groundbreaking a training method.

"This training is designed specifically for Magi, so unfortunately, not everyone

will be able to participate—*but*, once you undergo this training, your power as Magi—*and* as hunters—is going to grow dramatically without a doubt. Of course, participation is *not* mandatory—anyone here would like to withdraw from the training?”

Befuddled by Sitri’s brusque request, the gathered party members exchanged glances.

*Did she seriously just ask “if anyone would like to withdraw,” instead of “if anyone would like to take part”?*

Marietta, who was listening to the conversation next to Sven, timidly raised her hand. Though she wasn’t wearing her robes and such, probably due to her being on her day off, a small staff could be seen hanging at her waist.

“Are you sure...that this is really safe? Krai has also said the recent investigation quest wouldn’t be dangerous too...”

*Marietta’s piercing gaze is killing me...*

“I assure you. I’m not as strict as Krai.”

“Training that convenient? I’ve never heard of anything like that. What’s the catch?” asked a hunter with a doubtful look.

As expected from a hunter, they seemed to be on board even though they were mostly wheedled to take part—what a motivated bunch.

In response to the skeptical question, Sitri placed a finger on her lips and tilted her head in a cute pose.

“Well, let me see... Mana depletion will be part of the training, so it might be tough for those who are not accustomed to it. Though I’m sure everyone in First Steps should have a fair amount of experience with that, so you’ll all be fine... But if there’s any Magus who can’t handle that kind of thing, you might be better off not taking part.”

“There’s no such Magi here. Every Magus would’ve experienced something as normal as mana depletion at some point,” said Marietta in an exasperated tone.

Several voices of agreement echoed around her.

“Mana depletion will heal quickly, so rest assured. I’ll cover the mana restoration potions for that purpose. By the way...uh...I don’t mean to make fun of anyone or anything...but is there anyone here who can’t stand the bitterness of mana restoration potions?”

The Magi in the room exchanged glances in response to her hesitant question. Their discontent was evident in their expressions.

Mana restoration potions were useful for hunting, but they had a well-known downside—they tasted extremely horrible. Their pungency and bitterness, which seemed to correlate with their effectiveness, were said to be a taste incomparable to anything in this world. Even seasoned Magi hesitated to drink them in life-threatening situations because of that.

I’d had one sip of what Lucia had been drinking before, and the moment it’d touched my tongue, I’d lost consciousness and woken up only several hours later. Since then, Magi had been people of my admiration. Drinking mana restoration potions without hesitation seemed to be a mark of top-notch Magi.

One of the Magi exchanging glances spoke up in a seemingly dissatisfied tone, “Don’t be ridiculous. We may not be at the same level as you lot, but we *are* still practicing Magi. We’ve had our fair share of mana restoration potions, and we’re not faltering now.”

“I apologize. In that case...I believe there won’t be any issues,” said Sitri.

She bowed her head slightly in apology, and she once again looked at the faces of the gathered individuals.

With a serious expression, she opened her lips and said, “Now, let me go over this one final time: This...is our secret training recipe. If anyone turns down this offer now, I’m afraid you’re most likely not going to have another chance at it. That being said, it’s also true that this is not something you do immediately after a major quest. I won’t force anyone to join, but once you’re on board, I expect you to see it through to the end. So, is there anyone here who doesn’t want to participate in this training?”

...I should’ve mentioned earlier, but Sitri was quite the guileful person. Her apparent innocence belied a deep cunning that bordered on duplicitous. Sitri always acted with caution; she didn’t lie, but she had a proclivity for

circumlocution. Among my childhood friends, she was one of those whose choice of words demanded the most discernment. For instance, if Sitri said something wouldn't be deadly, she may have skipped the fact that it could be excruciatingly painful—often, there was crucial information hidden in what she didn't say.

I'd rather not recall much of it, but there was an instance when she and Liz had gotten into an infinitesimally near-murderous sisterly quarrel because of her "intentional miscommunication."

Tension filled the air. And I was afraid it was probably due to my presence in the room. It was understandable that I was deemed untrustworthy after the Noctus Cochlear incident—sure enough, no clan master had ever been as unpopular as I was.

Just as Marrietta was about to speak, a clear and frigid voice interjected suddenly.

"Isn't that an *entertaining* speech, *Sitri Smart?*"

Instantly, Sitri narrowed her eyes before returning to her previous serene smile.

She turned towards the direction of the voice and greeted, "Well, well... What a coincidence."

Entering the room was a statuesque woman, her fine features embodying the epitome of beauty in this world. Her sleek visage was adorned with jewellike eyes reminiscent of amethysts; her cascading golden tresses shimmered glamorously like silk threads in the sunlight. She seemed almost unreal in her mesmerizing beauty.

What's more, by her side was a silver-haired woman who was no less enchanting.

Their beauty was alienesque. In fact, they were not human: they were known as "Noble Spirits," a name that signified their noble lineage. They surpassed humans in longevity and possessed a striking beauty far exceeding that of humans. And because of that, they looked down upon humans.

Among Sapiens, Noble Spirits were particularly rare, and consequently, they

seldom descended upon human settlements, making them an unaccustomed sight even in the capital. And thus, the exclusively Noble Spirit party Starlight, led by such a Noble Spirit woman, Lapis Fulgor, was a remarkably rare occurrence even throughout the entire world—a phenomenon of its own.

On the other hand, their unconscious contempt towards humans made them a problematic party, second only to Grieving Souls.

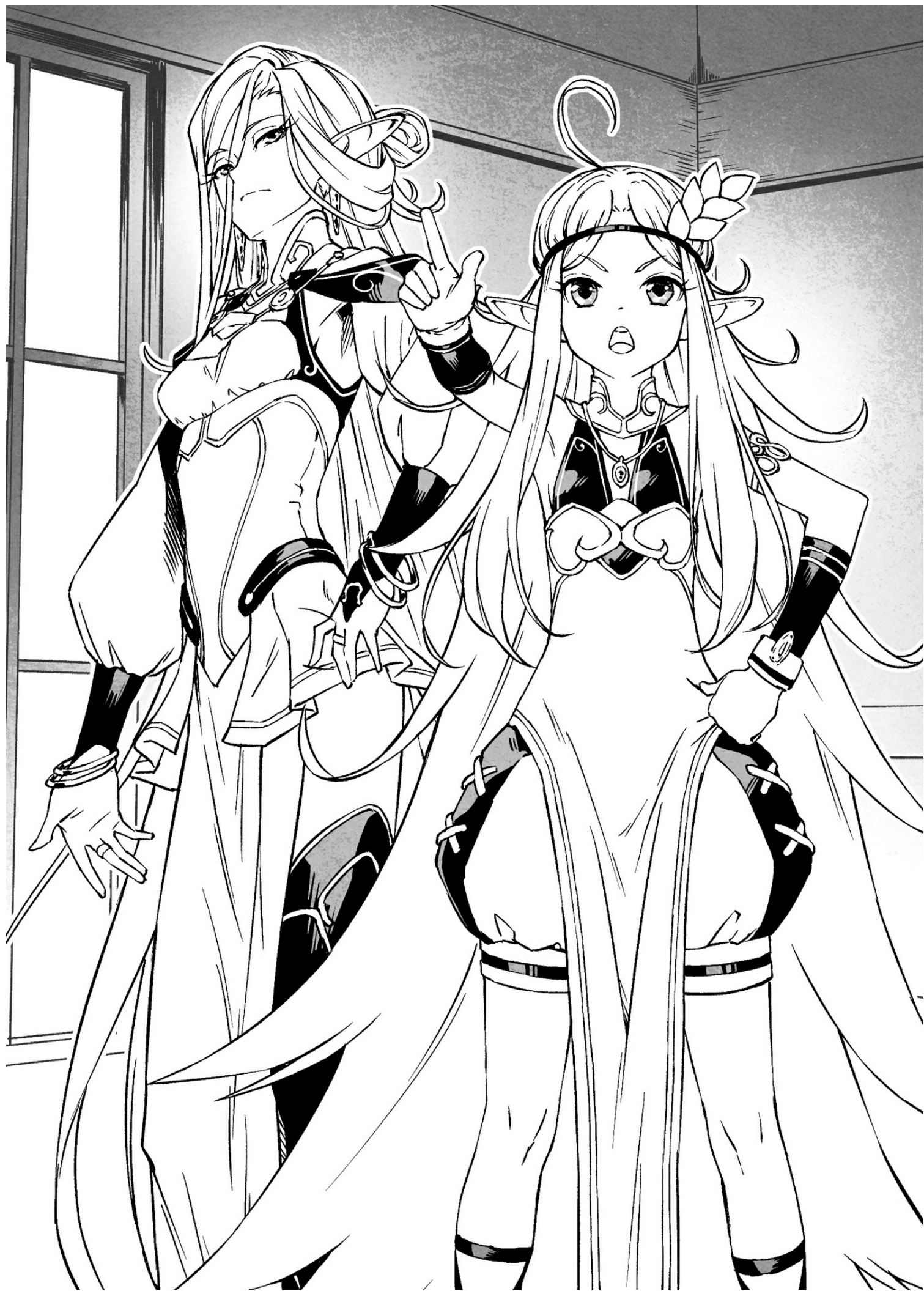
“Lapis, Kris...what a surprise to have you both pay the lounge a visit,” I said in a friendly tone.

At my words, Kris Argent, the silver-haired girl standing next to Lapis, glared at me with a steely glint in her eyes.

“*Human weakling*. How many times do I have to tell you to stop speaking casually to Lapis for you to comprehend?”

Kris’s voice was elegant, but her word choice was slightly graceless.





Reprimanding Kris, Lapis said, “Kris, enough. Imbecile as he is, he is undoubtedly the clan master. This is a human settlement, and we shall adhere to human customs here... And your honorific language is slipping.”

“*Human weakling*. We shall yield merely inasmuch as Lapis graciously indulges. I will have you stay put. Sir.”

Furrowing her eyebrows, Kris turned away in a huff.

She was an interesting girl, as always. But as much of a kid she was, she was a first-rate Magus. As she was a Noble Spirit, her aptitude for the Magus class was said to be hundreds, if not thousands, of times greater than that of humans. Perhaps it was no wonder her self-esteem was inflated.

“To think that such a feeble *human* is in fact *that* Lucia’s older brother is truly unbelievable.”

While the Noble Spirits generally looked down upon humans, there was a single exception: Magi. All in all, for master Magi, aptitude in magic was apparently a criterion that surpassed racial boundaries. In fact, the more handicapped and disadvantaged the race, the more respect they held for their Magi. Indeed, it’d been my younger stepsister, Lucia, an exceptional Magus, who’d prompted Starlight to join First Steps in the first place.

Seemingly agreeing with Kris’s words, Lapis showed a somewhat bitter smile.

“To possess such power in a human vessel... If only she were a Noble Spirit! She could have reached the pinnacle of magical arts.”

“It is not too late yet. You shall hand over Ms. Lucia already! She is such a waste for a *human weakling* who does not even know the first thing about magic! Sir!”

“Like I’ve said many times: you’re free to recruit as you wish; I’m not going to stop you from doing so. But it’ll be all up to Lucia to accept or not. I’m not going to dictate what she chooses. In fact, as her brother, I can’t force her to make either decision even if I wanted to.”

When we’d established the clan, it’d been Sitri who’d convinced Starlight to join. Sitri had offered the right to scout Lucia, who’d already been established

as an exceptional Magus back then, as a bargaining chip. But to be honest, it hadn't really been about the right to scout or anything: our party operated with an open-door policy. And since then, the absolutely inconceivable for Noble Spirits had come about—Starlight had come under the umbrella of our clan, a clan created by humans. Three years later, they still remained members of the clan. Their fixation on Lucia spoke volumes.

With pouting lips, Kris fell into silence. Lapis, placing a hand on Kris's head, glared contemptuously at Sitri.

"So...a secret training recipe?" said Lapis. "*Anyone* can become a Magus on par with Lucia, you say? Nonsense...! Such training does not exist even among Noble Spirits."

"Say as you may, but the truth remains that Lucia achieved her moniker through the power of this Krai-devised training. Well, I suppose it's understandable that this is hard to believe for *you* Noble Spirits, who were born as an overwhelmingly privileged race, and yet have still fallen short against Lucia."

"Tch... Pathetic. A worthless provocation, Ignoble," retorted Kris, her face bright red with anger at the words of the opponent she despised.

Lapis also seemed displeased.

It was genuinely terrifying when such beauties got truly angry.

Nonetheless, Sitri remained unfazed as she surveyed the surroundings.

"So, would anyone like to be the first to undertake the training and show the skeptical Lapis and Kris here their results?"

*So she's really confident in this "training" of hers, huh... We've only come here today to ask for help with recharging the Relics though—how did we come to such a conversation?*

After a brief silence, Marietta from Obsidian Cross was the first to raise her hand.

"All right. I guess...I'll do it. Everyone else seems to be scared."

"Are you sure, Mari?"

“Yeah. I’ve come to realize that intensive training is due after that recent quest.”

As expected from a Cross. Despite her probably knowing Sitri well, her desire for improvement had convinced her otherwise.

Satisfied, Sitri nodded at Marietta, who’d stepped forward.

“Well then, we shall begin. Though I must say, the substance of the training itself isn’t that challenging.”

Amid skeptical gazes, Sitri stole a quick glance at a silver pocket watch she’d withdrawn from her pocket to check the time, and she stuck up her index finger in a decisive pose.

Cheerfully, she said, “To begin with, we’ll be charging mana into Relics. Conveniently enough, Krai happens to have plenty of depleted Relics.”

“Yes?”

Marietta’s eyes widened in puzzlement.

As Sitri had directed, I handed over a depleted Safety Ring.

With a quizzical look on her face, Marietta began to charge mana. Time passed in silence, and Marietta’s expression shifted from puzzled to grim.

“Hold on?!” she said after a long pause. “What *is* this Relic? It’s not charging up at all!”

“Just keep charging.”

“...”

Blood drained from Marietta’s otherwise pale skin; on her forehead, beads of cold sweat formed. Despite her being a rather high-level Magus even within Steps, it seemed recharging a Safety Ring was still quite a burden for her.

Speaking of which, the feeling of exhausting your mana, according to Lucia, seemed to be extremely similar to that of being so drunk that you couldn’t stand upright. Nevertheless, Marietta continued to charge as she propped herself up with one hand on the table.

A few minutes passed, and the Relic was successfully recharged. At that point,

Marietta's lips had turned blue, and her fingertips trembled. She pressed her hand against her forehead and frowned, probably suffering from a headache.

Sitri lifted the Safety Ring on the table and nodded with apparent satisfaction.

As she handed it back to me, she said, "Now, we're done with the first charge. Next up—again, we're charging the next Relic."

"Wait?! What?!"

"Hold on. Mari is already at her limit!"

"Don't worry; I'll stop her when she reaches her limit. This won't kill—that's been proved."

Despite objections from Sven's party mates, Sitri paid them no attention and handed Marietta the next Relic.

With trembling hands, Marietta accepted the Relic and resumed charging.

Soon, her breath became erratic—a clear symptom of mana depletion. If she continued charging like this, her mana would surely be completely exhausted soon enough.

With everyone anxiously watching, Sitri began to explain to them.

"Let me offer a brief explanation here," she said. "The strength of a Magus is proportional to their overall mana capacity. The prevailing notion that women are better suited to become Magi is backed by the tendency for their overall mana capacity to grow more easily. Meanwhile, the ceilings on our mana reservoirs typically grow throughout our childhood and stabilize around our midteens. And this is why Noble Spirits excel as Magi: it is believed that they not only—of course—possess an aptitude for magic but also age differently from humans, giving them an extended period of mana growth."

Finally unable to remain standing, Marietta knelt down on the spot. Her hand, crash-landed on the table, fell open spontaneously, and the Safety Ring spilled out of her grasp. The charging was yet incomplete, but it seemed her mana had run out.

Sitri picked up the Safety Ring and continued her lecture.

"And so, although the growth of our mana capacity comes to a complete halt

around our midteens, there exists a known exception under a specific circumstance. Under this condition, our capacity can expand for approximately another five to ten percent after the growth has stopped. This is a phenomenon that we usually refer to by names such as ‘über recovery.’ Do any one of you know the circumstance that can bring on such an increase?”

One of the Magi in the room dreadfully answered the question, “Mana...depletion...?”

“Correct! When our mana is depleted and then recovered, the upper limit rises significantly!”

It was at this moment everyone knew: this was *not* going to end well. Magi, who’d been eagerly interested in Sitri’s honeyed words just a while ago, turned pale; even Lapis put up a stern face—surely they understood the significance behind what Sitri had just said.

An easy method? Efficient? Absolutely not.

Admittedly, the phenomenon of mana über recovery was somewhat well-known, but no one willingly practiced it—the burden on the Magus was simply too great. The expansion of mana capacity occurred because the body was bracing itself for death and trying to adapt to the situation with all its might.

“I’ve heard that the mana capacity expands during recovery, madam. But even we would require a considerable amount of time—”

“And here’s where my specialty mana restoration potion makes its debut.”

In response to Kris’s question, Sitri rather proudly pulled a potion out from her pocket. It was a murkily dark potion as if black ink had dissolved in it.

*I thought mana restoration potions were supposed to be...of a more vibrant color?*

Gripping the dropper, Sitri said confidently, “*This* is the special concoction formulated for Lucia. With Marietta, I suspect even only a few drops would suffice for recovery.”

“Hold on a sec—”

But Sven’s attempt to intervene came a moment too late.



Sitri injected the dropper holding her specialty mana restoration potion into the mouth of Marietta, who had been helplessly unconscious from mana depletion. Then, Marietta's slender body, which had been motionless like a stranded fish up till then, jolted upwards sharply.

Witnessing her hardly humanlike motion, the surrounding clan members let out shrieks and swiftly retreated backwards.

Sitri, on the other hand, leaned in upon the poor Magus who was lying on the floor right there without as much as a twitch.

"Impressive, Marietta. I thought you'd at least vomit, despite your firm resolve," muttered Sitri in front of the stunned crowd.

With that, she peeled back Marietta's eyelids and examined her pupils. Then, after giving Marietta's cheek a light tap and tipping her head up, Sitri checked her pocket watch and nodded broadly.

"In just three minutes and twenty seconds, her mana has increased by about ten percent. *This* is the power of the secret Magus training recipe devised by Krai, he who *had* nurtured Lucia. Grind this process continuously, and you'll witness a dramatic growth in your power. With an increased mana capacity, you'll have greater endurance in combat and more mana to spare for learning new spells. The growth of a Magus—the centerpiece of any party—significantly enhances the party's overall survival rate. What an efficient training method this is! *This is marvelous!*"

What a ruthless and diabolic training method. Obviously, I had no recollection of devising anything like that. Lapis frowned and checked up on Marietta.

And she said, "But Marietta hasn't regained consciousness—"

"It's all right; she'll get used to it. Also, I'll be relaying you the Relics and supplying you the potions, so you all can focus solely on charging mana. Don't worry about me being not quick enough to service everyone; I'll summon up some golems to cover anyone I can't reach if necessary. And rest assured—there will be no use trying to escape. You just have to get used to it."

"Completely bonkers... This can't be true, calling that training," said one of the clan members, wide-eyed, looking at Sitri as if she were a demon.

The reason über recovery of mana hadn't been incorporated into normal training routines so far was partly due to the prohibitive cost of mana restoration potions, but probably more likely because that mana depletion was "excruciatingly painful." What's more, in Sitri's training, one would have to repeatedly consume mana restoration potions that were even more painful to drink. Any experienced Magi should be able to tell how torturous this would be.

Sitri remained unfazed. She blinked and said, as if stating the obvious, "But Lucia really did grow stronger with this training. She went through mana depletion and recovered using my potions repeatedly. Considering the efficiency, I think these slight discomforts are really just negligible risks... It's not like you expect to outgrow Noble Spirits in strength without any sacrifices or effort...right?"

She gaslighted the crowd with her sound argument. Perplexed by her statement, everyone, including Lapis, fell silent under Sitri's enigmatic expression.

To succeed, one must put forth worthy efforts. Having witnessed the growth of Grieving Souls, I was well aware of that.

"As your mana pool expands, completely depleting it becomes harder and harder. Spell-casting requires intense focus, so it takes a solid will to deplete your mana with just that. When charging Relics, you can, however, easily exhaust your mana without all that fuss. Luckily, there's no shortage of Relics to charge. Right, Krai?"

"There are still...a few hu—um, at least dozens of them."

The majority of my collection decorating my private room was currently unusable.

Sven stared at me with an appalled look.

"Dozens...?! Seriously, Krai?"

"Thanks to Krai's thoughtfulness, all our Magi here can receive training."

*I see... So this is the "idea" Sitri was talking about earlier.*

Given that Sitri could brew the expensive mana restoration potions herself,

this was indeed a mutually beneficial deal, though it felt like a half scam. The task was just too demanding, and I doubted if anyone would be that easily gaslighted.

All the Magi who were listening to the conversation exchanged glances with each other silently.

Marietta, meanwhile, remained unconscious.

Lapis, with her arms crossed and face twisted in a troubled expression, asked, “Ignoble, did Lucia, Krai’s younger sister, really undergo that training?”

“Of course. I prepared the potions myself. What’s more, she has absolutely never shown one sign of struggle during her mana enhancement training.”

*Yeah, uh-huh. I didn’t even realize.*

It was true that she’d nag me every time I’d gained a Relic that required charging, but my sister, capable as she was, had never once refused to charge them.

Taking a breath, Sitri glanced around the room, then raised her index finger to her lips.

She said, “It’s not about talent or whatnot; it’s not limited to Lucia. The reason my older brother—Ansem—Krai, and the other Grievors have a slightly higher level than everyone here is because of the trials we’ve gone through—we’ve shed a little more sweat, a little more blood, and a little more tears than all of you. Don’t tell me you are gonna whine about a trial that hunters far younger than you have surmounted.”

*...Eloquent as ever. Well, not that I’ve shed a single drop of blood, sweat, nor tear though...*

Having heard her speech, Lapis remained silent for a while before finally speaking with profound sentiment, “Hmmmmmm? And I thought humans would require an extraordinary talent to just come close to the power of a Noble Spirit. But seems like Lucia was the result of overly harsh training. Impressive! Now I want her even more, Krai Andrey.”

*Of course...she’s my proud younger sister. But maybe I should reduce the*

*number of Relics in my arsenal...?*

Lucia's talent for magic had sprouted from the beginning. Perhaps, among us, the six founding members of Grieving Souls, she'd been the most gifted one. And that was why I'd never really thought about it, but after I saw this sorry situation in front of me, maybe Lucia had also been struggling quite a bit without my realizing.

When we'd first arrived in the capital, I had only one Relic—an inconsequential one that only ever so slightly increased my stamina when equipped. It'd required only a small amount of mana to charge. Charging my Relics had always been Lucia's responsibility, from the beginning until now. But as my collection kept steadily growing, Lucia had not once made a displeased face—or any face, for that matter.

When I recalled Lucia's blunt voice, a cold sweat suddenly broke out on my forehead.

*She'd been acting rather distant lately. I thought maybe she's just been going through a belated teenage rebellious phase, but could this be the reason? I should try to get her in a good mood when she comes back.*

"But, Sitri Smart," interjected Lapis abruptly as I was mulling over such thoughts, "you mentioned earlier about 'outgrowing Noble Spirits in strength,' right?"

"Yes? I did. What about it?"

Staring at Sitri, who'd put up a curious look, Lapis's pale purple eyes lit up in a flash.

"That's. Not. True! Absolutely not true! Aye, maybe Lucia Rogier is undeniably an outstanding Magus, perhaps the one who wields the most diverse array of magic that I know—she is truly deserving of her aliases—*but* no matter how much I approve of her, I have never once considered her superior to us! Never!"

It was an outpour of fiery emotions; her voice exuded overwhelming confidence and a clear condescension towards humans.

Sitri glanced at me and let out a small sigh in annoyance.

“Ugh. Confidence is all well and good, but there’s nothing more unsightly than baseless arrogance—no, I don’t mean to scorn Starlight. But really, your Kris is certified only for a level even lower than Lucia’s Level 6. Besides...you’re resting on your laurels being born into a superior race. I might be biased, but could that be the reason Lucia declined Starlight’s invitation?”

“!!!”

Lapis bit her vibrant lips firmly in frustration upon hearing her extremely disrespectful superficial words, but nothing came out of her lips.

Such was an insult that would’ve warranted retaliation in the form of offensive magic spells from a typical Noble Spirit.

But Lapis shouted loudly in reply, “Kris. We won’t stand idly by enduring such insults!”

“Yes! Madam!”

Kris’s face was no less reddened with shame than Lapis’s.

I was concerned that their murderous gaze, for some reason, seemed directed at me instead of Sitri, but I guessed I couldn’t say much about it since I was like Sitri’s supervisor or something.

“I’m sorry that Sitri made some inappropriate remarks; allow me to apologize. I’ll even perform a kowtow if you so desire.”

“No need! Sir! You, *human weakling*, kowtow way too often. Sir! Think twice before you open your damn mouth! Sir!”

*That’s my one and only forte though—speaking of which, that reminds me of the time I kowtowed at Kris so hard that I cried...*

Ignoring the troubled me, Lapis grew furious as she slammed the table forcefully.

“I don’t need your apologies, Thousand Tricks! Let’s prove it. Only at the sight of you human fools gaping in astonishment with your stupid faces would our wounded pride be soothed. We’re ‘resting on our laurels’? After all, there’s nothing humans can do that we, Noble Spirits, cannot accomplish! Kris!”

Puffing up her slender chest, characteristic of Noble Spirits, Kris spat at me

and demanded, “Hey, give me the Relics already! Sir! And bring me everything you have! Sir! With my mana capacity over dozens of times larger than any human, there’s no way I shall be outmatched, even by Lucia. Sir!”

“Oh, sure. If that’s what you want...” said Sitri in a worried tone as she lowered her gaze.

*Not that it matters, but Noble Spirits surely don’t handle provocations well, do they?*

“Uh, please refrain from pushing yourselves too hard. While Lucia can charge them all without any problem, no other human being would likely be able to achieve such a feat. This would be quite challenging even for Noble Spirits, I believe.”

“You’re such a pest! I said I can do it, so mark my words. Madam! I *will* prove to you that I’m not like those spineless human Magi who falter just at your words. Madam! Now shut up and bring me the Relics. Madam!”

Kris’s ears had long been deaf to Sitri’s advice. Sitri was clever, and she’d most certainly worded it that way intentionally.

With her gaze lowered, Sitri put up a faint smile.

“If you say so... Lapis, Kris, please go ahead and fully unleash the power of Noble Spirits.”

Stone golems controlled by Sitri placed the Relics one by one in front of Kris as she rolled up her sleeves.

At the steadily accumulating pile of Relics and the determined Noble Spirit girl with twitching eyebrows, Sitri spoke in a soft voice, “*This...is the ‘Thousand Trials.’*”

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In the midst of the fading day, Eva ran into the sunset-hued lounge. Greeted by the devastation in the room, she pressed her hand to her forehead and looked at me as I sat idly at the table.

“What...happened?” she asked.

“So there was this clash between hunters’ prides, and—”



“Pretend I didn’t ask.”

*Oh. Okay.*

The scene in the spacious lounge was unbearable to behold: Some people were convulsing and twitching, their upper bodies slumped on tables, while others sprawled motionless on the ground. Still, some remained conscious but were only murmuring incomprehensible noises to themselves. Some had even vomited at first, but Sitri’s golems had already cleaned up the vomit so that there was nothing left—fortunately, people couldn’t vomit more than what was already in their stomachs. Fellow hunters clutched fallen members, shaking them by their shoulders as if they were clutching the fresh corpses of their comrades en route exploring a treasure vault, in utter disbelief.

Though I watched in silence, my heart ached terribly. Ironically, I felt like I was about to barf.

Kris, still conscious at one of the tables, lifted her head. The color had drained from her face, and her sweat-matted bangs clung to her forehead—but her beauty remained, truly befitting a proud Noble Spirit I should say.

With disoriented eyes, she looked up at the table and groaned, “Argh, argh... How many...left? Sir.”

“The ones with the highest capacity are done. There are only 152 left!”

“Hundred?! You *human weakling*. Don’t you dare forget what you said initially, sir...”

*Actually, I think she did pretty well.*

She did have to replenish her mana a few times, but Kris did manage to recharge all the Safety Rings—a feat that spoke volumes about her superior mana capacity.

By the way, the other Magi all collapsed after throwing themselves into the “charging battle” halfway. They, not wanting to lose, had been inspired by Kris, who’d been charging mana all while wheezing heavily. When I’d said that this was a “clash between hunters’ prides,” I’d really meant it.

Observing Kris with her long legs crossed, Lapis furrowed her brows.

“I see, this is indeed overly harsh,” she said. “But Kris, you’ll not give up. I must say this has piqued my interest. This could indeed prove useful to us as well. Kris, you’re not going to whine about this, are you?”

“Nooo...of course not. Madam Lapis! Ugh...*human liar*! Now bring...the remaining...Relics. Sir!”

What a remarkable determination. Perhaps she was already past the point of no return.

I couldn’t help but offer a helping hand; I had no particular interest in pushing a girl to the verge of crying just to charge my Relics.

“No, don’t worry. I already have the absolutely necessary Relics charged. The rest isn’t that important. You don’t have to push yourself to your limit.”

“What?! Bullshit! Sir! I-I’m...still...good! Sir! Now, hurry up...and bring them on. Sir!”

Eva, apparently realizing the situation, was dumbfounded. Sitri, on the other hand, widened her eyes.

*Well, I guess this is indeed training for her. Maybe I’ll let her go on until she’s satisfied.*

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Bring it on.”

The golem cleared away the charged Relics and brought in new ones.

The remaining Relics were of the lowest priority—the weapon Relics. Unlike the accessory Relics that appeared to be mere ornaments, these weapon Relics had a distinct radiance that distinguished them from ordinary weapons: a sword with a transparent blade, a katana with a hamon flickering like flames, a jet-black lance that absorbed all light, a circular shield that shone like gemstones, *etc.*

At the brilliance of the weapon Relics, the members caring for their fallen comrades gasped in awe.

Weapon and armor Relics held far greater value than the others. In the hands of seasoned warriors, they could unleash unparalleled power, but for someone

like me, with skills in all martial arts below that of an amateur, they were useless, merely decorative collection items. Perhaps only I and Matthis, who ran a Relic store, would possess such a massive collection of Relics.

*“H-Human weakling, are you serious...?”* asked Kris, astonished.

*What do you mean by “Are you serious”? You were the one who said you’d charge it.*

These weapon and armor Relics tended to have weaker capabilities in retaining mana compared to other Relics. This was one of the reasons why treasure hunters limited their Relic collection to what they could charge themselves. Sadly, even with all the effort Kris would put into charging them, these Relics would probably only last not even a few days, and that was why I’d kept them until the very end.

Kris groaned and picked up a short dagger, about twenty centimeters in length, with embedded gems.

*So she’s really going to do it.*

Perhaps she was doing this out of pride? Perhaps stubbornness? Or perhaps she was willing to go that far to increase her mana capacity?

And that was when I came up with a great idea. While my hobby was collecting Relics, I also loved using them—not just keeping them in storage. Though lately, I hadn’t been able to use my Relics since Lucia had been absent.

*“You know what? What if I use the Relics immediately after Kris charges them —”*

Kris, about to infuse mana into the dagger, froze in a shocked expression. Meanwhile, Sitri’s eyes gleamed.

*“Oh, it’s the endurance training that Lucia often griped about. Indeed, this might be doable for someone as formidable as Kris, unlike Lucia,”* said Sitri.

*...Maybe I owe Lucia an apology?*

Kris, having regained her composure, shouted in a trembling voice, *“Y-Y-You human weeaaaakling!”*

*“All right, all right, let’s call it quits here. It is one thing to train, but we, the*

staff, will be the ones cleaning the lounge, you know?! I'm sure you understand, Krai, right?" interjected Eva as she clapped her hands as if changing the topic.

The downed Magi leaned on their comrades' shoulders and staggered back up.

Seemed like Sitri was right: there were no serious injuries.

"All right. I'll take care of the rest here, so Krai, why don't you go somewhere else with your Relics? Yes, training is over! If you want more, do it another day—in a different place! This is not a training ground to begin with—this is a place to relax, okay? Chill out! There are a few outsiders in the lounge too! What will you do if they start spreading weird rumors about us because of this?"

*That was a valid point.*

With a slap on the back from Eva, I was ushered out of the lounge along with Sitri.

Peeking in from just outside the door, I realized there probably wouldn't be any problem. Eva, who single-handedly managed the clan, seemed to have Lapis, Kris, and the hunters wrapped around her little finger—as well as me, of course.

"How did I do, Krai? I suppose you've managed to get most of your Relics charged. I hope I've been of help," said Sitri, grinning without a hint of remorse.

I was too fed up to think, so I just gave Sitri a pat on her shoulder as she huddled closer to me.

\*\*\*

The Rodin family was a long-standing prestigious lineage of treasure hunters in Zebrudia, the sacred land of hunters. Its origins traced back to Solis Rodin, he who'd challenged and vanquished the Celestial God who'd appeared in the Level 10 treasure vault, Shrine of the Celestial God, then located near the current capital, after the Celestial God had reduced the surrounding thousands of miles to ashes.

In recognition of this feat, which had eluded the entirety of Zebrudia's forces, the then emperor had asked Solis about the prospect of offering him a nobility

title. But Solis had declined the offer, claiming himself to be just a mere hunter. The emperor, lauding his modest demeanor as the role model of hunters, had bestowed upon Rodin the title of “Hero.” Since then, only the Rodin family had been allowed to claim the title of “Hero” within the empire.

Ark Rodin was a descendant of this esteemed family and had received education from a young age to become a first-rate hunter. Solis Rodin had been an almighty hunter with an all-encompassing range of skills. His bloodline, the Rodin family, had been highly skilled in every field for generations, and Ark was no exception. Easily conquering high-level treasure vaults that would pose a challenge to ordinary hunters, Ark had earned himself a moniker. While still a young hunter, he was now considered a candidate for the strongest hunter in the empire, and before he knew it, Ark had come to be known by the same title his ancestor had been granted—“Hero.”

The name “Rodin” held special significance in the capital city. From the moment Ark had become a hunter, his name had attracted attention.

This wasn’t the first time he’d received an invitation from a noble. While the Rodin family adhered to the precept of keeping their distance from the authorities, at the same time, it wasn’t entirely feasible to completely disconnect from them if one were to navigate the world of hunters smoothly.

Ark and his party, Ark Brave, celebrated for their achievements in conquering Prism Garden, arrived at a party in the territories of Marquess Sandrine, a long distance away from the capital. After a bustling banquet attended by many nobles, Ark found himself summoned to the office, where only one other man was present.

“So this is the renowned ‘Firmamental Blossom’? Impressive...”

A middle-aged man clothed in a composed deep-red coat emitted a sigh of admiration as he gazed at a peculiar bouquet with transparent petals arranged in a vase.

The party host who’d invited Ark and his party to this banquet was none other than Nahum Sandrine, head of the Sandrine family. He was a senior noble granted vast territories in the western region of the Zebrudia Empire and was known as the authoritative leader of a political faction despite being just a

marquess. Due to a past connection when Ark had received a request to investigate a treasure vault in his territory, Sandrine was a house that Ark was particularly fond of.

These flowers were a product of the treasure vault. They appeared entirely translucent like glasswork but had the texture of ordinary flowers. Their delicate details were so beautiful that no craftsman could replicate them.

“It’s a creation made of mana material, not even a Relic. It likely won’t last long in the outside world,” said Ark.

This was a flower that naturally grew rampantly in the deepest part of Prism Garden. Despite its mystical appearance, the flower held no special powers and was of little interest to high-level hunters like Ark. He’d picked a few on the way back this time as a memento of reaching the furthest depths of a highly challenging treasure vault, not for any particular reason. However, one thing was certain—Prism Garden could never be conquered by just ordinary hunters. The Firmamental Blossom, capable of maintaining its form for only a brief moment before its mana material dissipated and it dissolved into the air, served as a symbol for nobles to demonstrate their connections to excellent treasure hunters.

Recalling a time when flowers from Prism Garden were brought back by Grieving Souls and lavishly displayed in the clan house’s lounge, Ark couldn’t help but smile inwardly.

The marquess, on the other hand, simply touched his chin and narrowed his eyes upon hearing Ark’s words.

“Evanescent, isn’t it? But that was precisely its source of beauty. Oh, a garden where such flowers bloom extravagantly... I’d love to see it once with my own eyes before I pass,” mused the marquess.

*That’d be rather difficult,* thought Ark without saying out loud.

Prism Garden was an inhospitable place for anyone other than hunters: its thick fog of pollen would corrode the bodies of intruders, while phantoms that had adapted to the environment lurked among the countless rampantly blooming flowers, eagerly seeking to harvest the souls of trespassers with an eagle eye. Traversing the vault would be quite impossible for him even with an



escort of a few hundred knights from a knights' order.

The vault was simply a different world.

“What if—let’s just say what if—Ark, you, the strongest and most celebrated person in the capital, were to escort me—”

“Your Excellency, that place is not meant for someone of your noble standing to venture into. While I can certainly defeat the phantoms, it’s not an environment that the living flesh can accommodate. We had our fair share of struggles there this time as well.”

Upon hearing Ark’s immediate response, Marquess Sandrine let out a chagrined groan, but he didn’t say anything more.

Occasionally, thoughtless nobles in Zebrudia would bring their private army and venture into treasure vaults, only to encounter tragedy.

Exploring with a burden in tow was much more challenging than just the deal itself, and it was even more so when the burden was a person to be convoyed. For hunters, it might be a great opportunity to establish connections with nobles, but more often than not, the convoyed individual would end up dead.

And so, in an attempt to change the subject entirely, Sandrine shook his head vigorously. He put on a deep and somewhat affable smile, but the glint in the depths of his eyes alone was unbelievably sharp.

“Now, Ark, I wonder, have you given some thought to our previous discussion?”

Ark remained silent.

Marquess Sandrine had approached Ark multiple times to scout him as his reserved hunter.

Hunters were considered the most powerful assets a noble could possess in Zebrudia. No matter how many high-level treasure vaults existed in their territories, they’d be meaningless to the nobles without hunters capable of retrieving the treasures from within. And so nobles were eager to acquire exceptional hunters, and Ark and his companions were particularly in the spotlight.

Being a reserved hunter meant prioritizing the noble's requests in exchange for certain rewards. While it reduced their freedom, it was by no means a bad deal for hunters. Such an arrangement symbolized status and could come with various material benefits; it could even allow one to acquire outstanding new partners through connections and obtain access to otherwise restricted treasure vaults. Above all, this appointment served as the closest thing a hunter can receive as an ultimate testament to their trustworthiness, a quality highly valued by the Explorers' Association. It was akin to receiving the official seal of approval from the ruling class of Zebrudia, a world power. Just becoming a reserved hunter could be a cause for elevating one's level.

But Ark shook his head with a gentle smile.

"It's an honor, but my apologies, sir."

"Hmmmm, the Rodins don't serve nobles, huh? The first Rodin has surely left behind quite a bothersome family precept."

"We still have things we must do. Please kindly pardon us."

Solis had been a figure befitting the name of a hero, but it'd seemed that he'd encountered quite a few difficult disputes with people in power. And as a result, Solis had established a family precept, a precept that had no doubt played a role in the Rodins' prosperity.

However, that wasn't the sole reason Ark didn't serve nobles—he hadn't yet achieved what he sought to achieve as a hunter.

Like Marquess Sandrine, a not-at-all-insignificant portion of the nobles claimed that Ark was the strongest in the capital. While some may have been biased, their claim wasn't necessarily mistaken. Even hunters grew weak as they aged, and even the strongest hunter couldn't remain in their prime forever. Ark, still in his midtwenties, had great potential for his future.

However, opinions on who'd be the next strongest in the capital split hunters into two camps.

With a disgruntled expression, Lord Sandrine said, "The Thousand Tricks, huh?"—a name that had spread rapidly in recent years.

Again, Ark remained silent.

“I’ve heard the name often,” continued the marquess. “His name carries both fame and infamy. Certainly have I not imagined that the day would come when another hunter would threaten the position of the Rodins...”

It was a bolt from the blue.

He’d had no rival. Of course, considering strength alone, there were a few individuals who outmatched Ark. Though, they were all people who’d trodden the path of hunting for a much longer period—they were people whom Ark was destined to surpass in the near future. Ark used to only look up to those above him, and it’d been enough. Who could’ve imagined that someone of the same generation would emerge as a rival to Ark Rodin, he who possessed the strongest lineage and exerted the greatest effort in the best environment?

Lord Sandrine’s words, claiming that Ark Rodin’s position was threatened, were mistaken. The word “threaten” didn’t exist in Rodin’s dictionary. If a talent capable of rivaling him appeared, he’d only confront them head-on fair and square. In fact, *this* was what he desired: he’d rather not continue going on on his own.

There, Ark recalled the face of that young man and spoke with a sour expression, “But, Your Excellency, he—the Thousand Tricks— isn’t actually motivated at all...”

“Mmwuh...?! ”

Ark’s unusually listless voice caught Marquess Sandrine speechless.

The Thousand Tricks’s achievements were undeniable. However, at the same time, the man remained an enigma to Ark. Krai Andrey was a mysterious man, perpetually at ease with a relaxed demeanor. Not to mention his *modus operandi*, his daily activities weren’t even apparent. Lately, with him not even venturing into the treasure vaults with his party, there was no longer even a way to compete with him—he was *beyond* elusive.

Noticing Ark’s deferential demeanor, the marquess decided to change the topic and said, “Well, anyways. But, Ark, remember this: we, the nobility of the empire, are on your side. We owe the House Rodin a debt of gratitude no matter how your family feels about it.”

“Thank you. I’m honored.”

“Oh, by the way, a party guest, Lord Gladis, mentioned that they would like to talk to you. It’d be great if you could pay them a visit before returning to the capital. They mentioned something about you teaching them the sword? My goodness, you Rodin folks are nothing less than valiant and admirable.”

Ark chuckled and nodded in response as Marquess Sandrine jokingly shrugged his shoulders.

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Before First Steps’s clan house stretched the main street, where people and carriages streamed past incessantly. A roughly ten-minute walk down the street led to a narrow path, and there, at the end, stood a red-roofed detached house—the home of Liz’s apprentice, Tino Shade. It was an adorable house, complete with a miniature garden planted with tiny flowers, a residence one wouldn’t typically associate with a hunter at first sight. It was a spacious residence for a single occupant; perhaps she’d been considering the prospect of having a romantic partner move in someday.

Visiting my junior’s house for the first time in a long while, I was searching for Liz. Not having a place to call home, she often stayed at either the clan’s training grounds, her master the former Stifled Shadow’s place, or her disciple Tino’s house, acting as if those were her own places. She truly was a free spirit.

After my knocking and a brief silence, a low voice replied. It wasn’t the familiar voice Tino used when talking to me; it was her formal voice.

“It’s me, it’s me. I came looking for Liz.”

On a side note, Sitri was here with me too.

“Oh?! Master?! O-One moment please!”

Scrambling noises came from inside the house, followed by a moment of silence, and then the door slowly opened.

Peering through the gap, she broke into a wide smile upon confirming my face. After the restlessness that the events in the lounge had stirred in my heart the other day, I felt at peace now.

“Master! To think you’d come to my place! Please, come inside. I’m sorry, but Lizzy is in the shower—!!!”

That was as much as Tino had said. Upon seeing me, Tino blushed and fell silent with her eyes wide open.

It wasn’t my first time visiting Tino’s house, and she’d always welcomed me warmly. I must say, she was such a good junior.

“Sorry for the unannounced visit... I’ll be on my way as soon as I collect Liz...”

“No, no, no. Not at all! *If*, um, it’s all right with you, Master, you’re always welcome to visit, even if just to hang out without any specific reason...”

*She’s so sweet that I almost can’t believe she’s really Liz’s apprentice. But well, I rarely leave the clan house, so I won’t actually come here “just to hang out.” Her thoughtfulness is truly heartwarming though. I should take her out for some cake next time.*

“That’s right! I’ve actually bought some delicious tea and cookies in preparation for Master coming at any time. Lizzy will take a while in the shower, so please help yourself to some treats!”

Seeing her in such a gleeful mood somehow made me feel kind of sorry.

As I was about to step inside following Tino with her blooming smile, Sitri, who’d been silent behind us all the while, spoke in a quiet voice, “I’m here too, you know, T?”

“Huh...? Uh...S-Si...ddy?!”

Her smile vanished in an instant.

Tino called Liz “Lizzy” out of their sisterly bond, and so she referred to her younger sister, Sitri, as “Siddy.” And although only Liz was mentoring Tino, Tino also addressed Lucia as “Lucy.” For Tino, an only child, this was probably a reflection of the chosen sisterhood she shared with the girls, almost as if they really were her own older sisters.

Sitri gently nudged my back and entered the house with me, closing the door behind us.

“Since we couldn’t properly greet each other last time—long time no see, T.”

“Y-Yes, it’s been a while, Siddy. I apologize for not being able to greet you properly.”

In a moment of panic, Tino kept bowing her head apologetically in a flurry, a reaction completely different from when she was speaking with me.

While she was usually utterly beaten up by Liz during training, if you asked Tino, she seemed to find dealing with Liz’s younger sister, Sitri, more challenging. On the other hand, though, Sitri seemed to have taken a liking to Tino. Well, there probably had been various reasons behind that.

“Hmm, it’s okay... Don’t worry about it? We were all busy then, including Krai. I’m glad to see you now since we haven’t had a chance to meet recently.”

“Eek?!” shrieked Tino, stiffening like a frog caught in a snake’s watchful stare as Sitri’s pink eyes with their translucent radiance pierced her with their gaze.

Unconcerned by Tino’s exaggerated reaction, Sitri casually entered the room and looked around.

Tino’s house was neatly organized. The place hardly had any belongings apart from the bare minimum of furniture, and it clearly lacked a sense of liveliness. There weren’t hints of anything hobbies-related either, but it could be said that Tino’s personality was well reflected by that.

“T, you seemed really enthusiastic to see Krai finally come, but how come you didn’t say anything like ‘you’re always welcome to visit’ to me?”

“O-Of course, it’s my bad! It’s just...that I was a bit surprised... You’re also *always* welcome to visit...Siddy.”

Sitri’s eyes sparkled as she closed in with the obviously fretting Tino, so close that one would mistake her for going in for a kiss with Tino or something. Licking her lips, Sitri placed her hand on Tino’s cheek.

“T, how are you? Have you grown stronger again? Has my sister been harsh on you?”

“Y-Yes. I-I’m fine.”

“If Lizzy ever goes harsh on you, let me know, okay?”

“I-I’m fine. R-really, I’m fine.”

At the sound of Sitri's unusually excited coaxing voice, Tino shivered with a sudden chill. She looked at me with a teary expression.

*...Yeah...uh-huh.*

As if conducting an examination, Sitri peered into Tino's dark pupils.

"If things get tough, let me know anytime, okay? You can rely on me—and I'll make you way stronger with way less work than apprenticing for my sister."

"!"

"You won't have to go through tough training thinking you're about to die. I'm sure you'll be able to do that easily with your talents. I can even recommend you for Grieving Souls membership right away if that sounds good."

"Siddy...! Y-You're too close!"

Sitri's fingers slid down from Tino's cheek, traced the contours of her neck, and brushed against her collarbone. Her left arm wrapped around Tino's back, effectively blocking her retreat. Sitri, an Alchemist, and Tino, a Thief, should have different levels of physical abilities, but Tino's slender body simply trembled and showed no signs of retreating.

Sitri's nose moved slightly, sniffing her scent.

Her fingers caressed the red-faced Tino's shoulder, tracing it as if to confirm its shape, moved across her upper arm, and continued down. With each inch of skin Sitri's fingers slid past, Tino's body trembled slightly.

"Top-quality muscles honed through combat and a slender body frame accompanied by sharpened senses—this is such a healthy body of a specialized Thief-hunter. Your blood, your flesh, and your bones are all well polished and overflowing with talent. Oh, Krai, why? I wish you'd given her to me instead of Lizzy... I could've made her perfect!"

"?! Please, Master, save me...!"

"Seems like Sitri won't be getting an apprentice anytime soon."

*Is she looking at a person like how she'd look at a lab rat?*

Her hand toyed with Tino's body as it moved mercilessly over her: it kneaded



her breasts, caressed her belly, and touched her thighs, exposed from her shorts—it looked just like a snake slowly devouring and digesting a frog. With each touch, Tino trembled and squealed for help in a feeble voice.

“It’s radiating. Oh, so adorable,” continued Sitri. “Only if you were a boy! Then it’d be as simple as just mating with you. But since you’re a girl...I’ll need to properly pick a mate to avoid any mistakes...”

*Okay, this is getting out of hand.*

There, I finally intervened.

“All right, that’s enough. Remember, Tino is Liz’s apprentice after all.”

“Haaaaahh... Yeah...she is.”

With a deep sigh, Sitri pulled herself away, and Tino, seemingly having reached her limit, staggered back to lean against a wall.

She must’ve been truly terrifying, as Tino, who wouldn’t back down even a single step when facing fearsome phantoms daily, looked like she was about to cry.

“Sorry; I was just *kidding*. You seemed so happy that I couldn’t help teasing you a bit,” said Sitri, making an excuse, though her actions just now didn’t appear to be “just kidding” at all.

Tino seemed to be thinking the same, and she covered her chest with her arms in a pale face.

“But hear me out. T seems to like Krai a great deal but not me, and she reacted as if her lover showed up to hang out all of a sudden. I like T a great deal too—it’s just reasonable for me to feel a little jealous, don’t you think?”

*No, I don’t.*

Tino was probably attached to me because I was about the only person who could stop Liz.

Then, Sitri directed her attention towards me and poked my shoulder like she was sulking.

“And besides, Krai never comes to my place to hang out... Shouldn’t you also

be hanging out at my place if you ever hang out at T's?"

"Time flies whenever I'm at your place. Besides, you're always busy."

"I'll clear up my schedule for you as much as you want."

Unlike Liz and I, who treated the clan house like my own home, Sitri owned property in the capital. I'd hung out at her place a few times and she'd welcomed me with hospitality.

It was a fantastic house, but it also had the downside of being too comfortable. Sitri knew me too well and tickled me exactly in all the right spots. The first time I'd gone to her place, even I'd been speechless to find that two weeks had passed without me realizing. I could be a complete mess sometimes.

With Tino still showing signs of fear, I followed her into her room. There was nothing in the living room either, and the tables and chairs were polished to perfection; I couldn't imagine at all what Liz and Tino had been doing here at all.

"So, T," said Sitri, "you tidied up the place in a rush, thinking, 'Oh no! Krai came to my place.' Didn't you? This place is way too clean."

"Huh?! N-No, th-th-th-that's not th-the case at all?!"

*I see... So she must've been tidying in a rush just now when I heard the scrambling noises from within.*

I didn't really mind if her room was messy, but well, I decided not to press it.

Tino seemed a little bashful, but she sat down and prepared some tea for us helter-skelter without mentioning a word. Alongside the tea, she also brought out some cookies from a famous confectionery store where I'd also bought souvenirs from.

"So, what brings you to Lizzy?" asked Tino.

"Oh, it's not anything important. Well, since Liz and Sitri have returned safely from their expedition in the treasure vault, I thought we could all go to the tavern together."

Hunters who risked their lives exploring treasure vaults often celebrated their safe return with a grand feast. This was their way to commemorate their success, to praise one another's accomplishments, and to strengthen their

bonds; it also served as a source of motivation for their next adventure.

In our party's case, since I, as the leader, didn't accompany them on their quests, it was customary that, every time the party returned, we held a festive banquet to listen to their adventure tales. And every story of the harshness and cruelty of their adventures made me appreciate the tranquility that came with my role as the clan master more, and yet, it also made me feel a little more guilty.

"I see... That sounds wonderful. I'd love to do that too someday."

"I'd recommend you to the party in a heartbeat if you'll leave it up to me," I replied.

"N-No, that's not necessary. I *am* Lizzy's apprentice, and I shall wait until both she and you, Master, approve."

Tino blushed and smiled shyly. In her eyes, I saw a glimmer of longing.

*Right...going to the tavern with just the three of us might be a bit lonesome; maybe I should take Tino along too.*

As we continued our chatting pleasantly while enjoying the delicious cookies, Tino's eyes widened upon hearing about the events at the lounge.

"—recharges, you say? I feel...uneasy around those people. Maybe it's the racial differences, but at any rate, their gazes towards their own clan master are far from appropriate!"

"Easy, T. People come in all sorts, you know," said Sitri calmly to unusually resentment-stricken Tino.

"And on top of that, Noble Spirits are a race which almost no research exists on, so having them nearby is quite the fortunate thing, you know? Now that they've descended upon our human society, so long as we pay attention to avoid upsetting them, everything will be all fine. Plus, those bodies with an exceptionally high magical aptitude of theirs are biological parts...of particular usefulness, I think."

"?! Master...!"

"It's just a Sitriesque joke."

“Just let them say what they have to say. After all, these Noble Spirits who rely on their innate physical qualities are no match for Krai. With their simple and straightforward thinking, they’re easier to handle than humans with all sorts of different principles and ideologies.”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

I didn’t really mind, but I wished she’d stop dragging me into all her statements.

Then, suddenly, a muffled voice came from the back of the room. It was a familiar voice.

“T! T?! I’m missing a towel in here?!”

“Roger!!! I’ll bring one right away.”

“Didn’t I tell you last time to make sure to have one ready beforehand? Jeez...”

Tino began rising from her seat, but before she could do so, out came the sound of a door opening with a clang.

From the bathroom, a body of well-tanned skin emerged. Entering the living room exuding an air of confidence as if saying there was nothing to hide, she widened her eyes upon spotting Sitri and me.

The only thing adorning her body was a platinum ring around her ankles—her Apex Roots. Her damp long hair clung to her collarbone, and droplets on her unblemished skin glistened with a radiant shimmer as they dribbled all the way down to her ankles.

Beside me, Tino let out a piercing shriek.

“Lizz—?! Master is—”

“Yo, sup? Isn’t this Krai Baby here? Heh heh, caught you looking for me, didn’t I? Coming while I’m in the shower, you naughty Krai Baby!”

“Liz! Go get yourself properly dressed before you come in! How many times do I have to tell you?!” said Sitri.

Liz had burst into the room with an innocent smile on her face. Without a

moment's delay, Sitri moved behind me and covered my eyes.

In the darkness, some toasty, moist, and supple skin came into contact with my hand.



“Siddy?! Why are you covering his eyes?”

“Show some restraint! Can’t you see that Krai’s feeling uneasy?”

“Oh, come on, there’s nothing I need to hide from Krai Baby—you aren’t feeling uneasy, right?”

“I am.”

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Zebrudia boasted a great selection of stores catering to treasure hunters: For instance, there were training facilities, weapon and armor shops, Relics specialty stores, and even information brokers dealing specifically with phantom and monster news. One could even find shops offering hunter-for-hire services, providing skilled hunters as temporary party members.

Among them, *taverns* were one of the most common types of establishments in Zebrudia. Treasure hunters loved their alcohol, and most parties celebrated their achievements and survival at their favorite taverns with feasts after successfully conquering perilous treasure vaults. They toasted each other’s achievements and savored their fortune of living through another day without mishaps, and they ate and drank almost as if to flush away their elation, their excitement, and their fear.

Hunters consumed food and drink in quantities exceeding that of ordinary people by magnitudes, and since hunters were known for being rough around the edges, there were a number of taverns in the capital exclusively dedicated to them. These were places that prioritized quantity over quality, places where patrons could almost drown themselves in alcohol. The mere notion of being able to order alcohol by the barrel there should offer a glimpse of the vast quantity available at these establishments.

Along with Sitri and the properly dressed Liz, I arrived at our usual tavern, Golden Rooster Pavilion.

Golden Pavilion was a large-scale umbrella brand of hunter-serving taverns in the capital, and each branch was famous for different signature dishes. Liz preferred quantity over taste, and Sitri would always go for what I suggested, so it was always my job to pick a tavern.



Tino had looked up at me with a somewhat apologetic expression and asked, “Master, are you sure I can come along too?”

“Of course!” I’d said. “Four is merrier than three anyways.”

And so, I had been emotionally struck by the visible shock on Tino’s face when Liz told her, “You will be staying behind.”

As we opened the large double doors, tailored for hulking hunters, a rush of the suffocating smell of alcohol engulfed us. The tavern was filled with the hustle and bustle of hunters who had concluded their explorations in the treasure vaults a little early and were now celebrating their wrap parties of the day.

A robust female hunter kicked a heavily intoxicated man passed out on the floor to the corner. Oblivious to being flung against the wall, the man started snoring in a rumble. The weapons leaning against each table stood as testaments to this place being a hunters’ tavern. Those quarrelsome, drunk, rageful voices and laughter, which used to terrify me when I’d first become a hunter, were now nothing more than a familiar backdrop.

*This* was a feast of heroes.

The scene I’d once imagined back in the day when I’d admired hunters now unfolded right before my eyes: a place where only the diligent and the strong were celebrated and the weak were eliminated—*this* was a place where I’d never be able to enter without Liz, Sitri, or the others.

“Yeah! I got the spot right next to Krai Baby! Siddy, you can sit next to me. I don’t need *you* to sit next to Krai Baby.”

The server had guided us to the round table in the far back, and Liz had immediately grabbed the seat next to the aisle to my right and blustered in an apparently good mood. The tables in the tavern were designed to comfortably accommodate parties, but Liz was sitting a bit too close, as always. Usually, I wouldn’t mind since Anthem, Luke, and maybe others would be around, but with me alone and three (visually) cute girls in tow, I couldn’t help but attract attention.

“Well, that’s fine; I don’t really mind, but...shouldn’t you be sitting next to T?”

said Sitri. “She’s your apprentice after all, and also I have something I want to discuss with Krai.”

Grinning widely and unfazed by Liz’s intimidating demeanor, her younger sister took hold of Tino’s arm. Tino, startled, trembled in response, perhaps still traumatized by what had happened at the front door of her place earlier.

The mentor looked at her anxious apprentice and decided not to mention anything about it.

“Uh... Oh... It’s all right,” said Liz. “T will be serving, so she won’t need a seat or anything. Bring me the dishes and drinks I order! For now, go get some golden ale—ten tall mugs of it, and make it quick please.”

*Poor thing! Even I’d speak up in this situation. Ease up on our mascot here, will you? Being right next to Sitri will keep her on the edge for sure.*

“Tino, the seat to my left is free, so why don’t you come sit next to me?”

“Huh?! M-May I?!”

After a brief moment in a daze, Tino broke into a blossoming smile.

And then, I just realized—

*Could this be...could this be what people mean by “a ‘flower’ on each arm”? Until now, I’ve always had my thoughts about this Ark who’s always not only accompanied by beauties but in harem mode, but wow—this...this is incredible. This doesn’t feel superior at all, surprisingly.*

*I should apologize next time I see him.*

Surrounding me, the thorny and poisonous flowers—Liz and Sitri—stared at the poor little flower—Tino.

“Tsk... If Krai Baby says so. But T, I’ll kill you if you embarrass me.”

“T, Krai isn’t the best at keeping his hands to himself sometimes. So, you know, he might try on you something similar to what I did, and, T, you wouldn’t be able to refuse him if he did, would you? It’s probably better to leave a seat or two empty between you, just so you know.”

As Liz continued to bluster, Sitri attempted to spread a nasty rumor of mine

all while maintaining her smile.

*I wonder how Sitri actually sees me.*

Tino approached my left side gingerly and sat down with an absolutely straight back and perfect manners. Perhaps because of Sitri's words, her neck had turned red—she was quite adorable like that. I couldn't help but feel extravagantly soothed and at ease when interacting with my clan members (of course, Sitri and Liz have plenty of good about them too).

Then, the drinks were served. Liz, Sitri, and Tino each got an extra tall mug of the tavern's renowned golden ale, and in my mug was an amber liquid, a specialty tea with a whiskey-like hue. Hunters' liquor had a high alcohol content; if I'd gone with what they'd gotten, my liver wouldn't survive the night.

Once we raised our glasses, Sitri and Liz toasted with big smiles while Tino fearfully followed suit.

"Well, this might be a bit early, but here's to Liz and Sitri returning safe from Night Palace!" *Cheers!*

With that, our glasses collided and neatly clinked.

The feast had begun.

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"Huh? A Swordsman stronger than Luke appeared? Why... That's not fair!" said Liz as she slammed her empty mug on the table, her eyes gleaming with perilous sparkles.

In response to her sister's behavior, Sitri chuckled softly and traced the center part of her left arm with her finger.

"That's your fault for coming back all too soon... Luke was overjoyed. He charged in alone the moment he saw the opponent had a sword, and he ended up getting bashed up by a single strike. He should've known better when the opponent wasn't human—what a thoughtless guy."

They sure had eye-opening stories for listeners, as usual.

High-level hunters were freaks, but the phantoms residing in the treasure vaults they aimed to conquer were usually even more resilient than they were.

Even if Luke was a man who had devoted his life to the way of the sword and was hailed as one of the top Swordsmen in the capital, he was still no match for those outlandish monsters inhabiting high-level treasure vaults.

This was especially true when Grieving Souls always pushed its limits by challenging treasure vaults barely within its league. The treasure vault they'd conquered this time, Night Palace, was a Level 8 vault. Since the average level of our members was slightly below seven, they still hadn't reached the recommended level for tackling it. And from what I'd just heard, this was just an adventure as grueling as always.

But when I saw them return with smiles like this, it was probably best for me not to say anything about it. At first, I'd been filled with trepidation thinking about my close friends' reckless actions, but I trusted them now. Though Luke and the others usually acted without consideration for others, my words still held sway over them—after all, I was their party leader. Therefore, I must keep my words to only what was absolutely necessary.

On the table, large plates filled with food, which Tino had ordered, occupied every available space. Piled atop the large plates were mountains of rather large karaage, fries, crispy bone-in grilled meat, fish and chips, and even meat sauce pasta. This was an amount that would've lasted me alone for a whole week; just looking at it made me feel full.

*And...fries and chips are the same thing! There's also no salad—we're not having enough vegetables...*

Sitri, after emptying her mug in one gulp, softly let loose a somewhat erotic sigh, yet there was no sign of intoxication in her gaze. Despite the word "ale" in its name, golden ale was a drink with an alcoholic content exceeding thirty percent, making it strong enough to get even hunters drunk.

*I wonder what's going on inside her body.*

Even Tino, who was meekly sipping from her mug, had somehow also consumed a similar amount of alcohol.

Liz, meanwhile, fiercely gripped a browned bone-in piece of unknown meat, lifted it up, and chomped down in a hearty bite.

Sitri, somewhat elegantly, cut apart her steak with a knife and a fork, performing movements that would be noble-like if it weren't for the size of the steak, which could be better described as a massive chunk.

All three of them were voracious eaters, with appetites surpassing the level of healthy.

*I wonder where all the food they ate disappears to.*

Noticing my gaze on her sun-kissed belly, which never seemed to swell no matter how much she ate, Liz leaned in and smoothly wrapped her arm around mine.

Smiling radiantly like a flower in full blossom, she said, "Hmm? What's the matter, Krai Baby? Why do you seem to be not eating?"

It wasn't that I wasn't eating; it was just that Liz and the others had eaten too much. I always thought the serving sizes here were way too big: one piece of karaage and I was already full—I ate slow.

Looking at me, the light eater, Sitri put up a wry smile.

"You won't have enough strength if you don't eat up. Even my older brother's healing magic won't be as effective if he doesn't eat properly."

"Yeah, it also makes me really hungry when I get an arm and leg to regrow with that... Krai Baby, you'll be in a pickle when emergencies come, too, if you don't eat well. Let me feed you. Here, open your mouth. Aaah—"

*I really hope that such an emergency will never ever come...*

Liz licked her lips and held out some fries right in front of my eyes. Although being treated like this in public was embarrassing even for me, Liz, who possessed a heart of steel, wouldn't accept any excuses of that sort. Perhaps there was still some remaining kindness in her that the fries she offered me were at least easy to eat in this position.

"Liz, you're pushing it too fast. As much as we're hunters, we have our limits. You're getting drunk at this pace, okay? What if you collapse again like the other day?"

"I'm perfectly fine. And this is nothing; this might as well be just *worter*! Come

on, Krai Baby, say ‘aaah’ for me?” responded Liz with a slightly blushed cheek and a honeyed voice, ignoring Sitri’s advice.

My arm was squeezed tightly against her chest. With this much insistence from her, I couldn’t possibly refuse. Reluctantly, I was about to open my mouth when I noticed that Tino, sitting next to me, had widened her eyes. However, her gaze wasn’t directed at me, neither was it directed at Liz, with some fries drooping in one hand.

“Come on, come ooon, Krai Baby. Say ‘aaah.’”

“Aahum.”

As I accepted the offered fries, I followed Tino’s gaze: her eyes were fixed on Sitri. With a grin on her face, Sitri was stirring a mug of golden ale with a swizzle stick.

*...Hmm? But that’s not a cocktail—that’s golden ale.*

With me thoughtlessly chewing the heavily salted fries, Liz, seemingly satisfied, finally released my arm.

By then, Sitri had already removed the swizzle stick.

Reprimanding Liz, who’d returned to her original position, Sitri said, “Gosh! Liz, you’re bothering Krai again...”

“It’s not a bother at all, right, Krai Baby?” asked Liz with a smile.

I couldn’t possibly shake my head in disagreement.

“Krai, you’re too indulgent with Liz... I’ll stop her if she gets dead drunk, okay?”

“I’m not getting dead drunk. Siddy, what have you been seeing in me all that time? I’ve long surpassed mere alcohol—”

As if to demonstrate, Liz downed the mug of ale in front of her.

Tino let out a small cry.

The golden liquor in the cup, which had been filled to the brim, vanished in a blink of an eye.

Slamming the empty mug onto the table, Liz said, “By the way, Siddy, are you

Akasha's—?!"

But as Liz was about to continue, her eyes lost focus, and her body swayed wildly. The piled-up empty plates clattered as Liz almost lost her balance and barely managed to right herself by grasping the edge of the table at the last moment. Her breathing was heavy, and her eyes wandered aimlessly as if she were shaken.

"See, Liz? That's what I've told you..." said Sitri with a sigh. She chuckled as the corners of her eyes lowered.

Liz shook her head vigorously and raised her still-out-of-focus eyes at Sitri, aiming an accusatory glare at her.

"Si...ddy... You spiked it?!"

"Hey! Don't blame that on me! Besides, Liz, I thought you'd 'long surpassed mere drugs.' Right, T?"

"I-I...didn't see anything. I didn't see anything at all."

Tino, with tears in her eyes, clutched her own mug and shook her head fiercely.

Within our short stay at the tavern, Liz had emptied seven mugs. Perhaps because it'd been a while since she'd visited a tavern, I felt like she was drinking at a rather fast pace. Despite everything, Liz was still human; so with that amount of alcohol, she was surely going to get at least a little tipsy.

Notwithstanding the sinister tenor of Sitri's moniker, she wasn't someone so sinister that she'd spike her sister's drink—above all, she didn't have a motive.

Meanwhile, I tried to calm Liz down as she looked like she was about to pounce.

"Easy there, Liz. Sitri didn't do anything. You probably just drank a bit too much."

"Huh?! You serious, Krai Baby? Are you not going to be on myyy side?"

In a rare display, Liz appeared to be shocked.

*Even if you say so...you're going to start a fight at this rate, aren't you? No*



*matter how you put it, I can't help but feel sorry for Sitri.*

"I'm serious. Dead serious. And it's not about sides. So, you want some tea? I might have accidentally taken a sip though."

"Sureee."

Looking dejected, Liz grabbed the mug of tea offered to her with both her hands and chugged it down.

Drinking was fine, but she should also consider her pace. If the high-level Liz got into a drunken frenzy and went on a rampage, there would likely be almost no one who could stop her. If things went wrong, she might even get banned from this place. That would *not* be a first, and that'd be a pain in the neck.

Sitri placed down two mugs of golden ale in front of Liz, the latter finally calmed down. The translucent golden liquid shimmered inside the mugs. Apparently, additional drinks had been served.

Plates and glasses were continuously being brought to the table as soon as we emptied the last serving; it was probably because Liz had nonchalantly started us off with food for ten people. She'd brought this upon herself.

"You see, Liz? The ones you ordered earlier are now here. How about a drinking contest? We haven't done that in a while. We can even put tonight's entire tab at stake—"

"Yeaaaaaaaah?! You're going to spike it with something again, riiight?! Don't get daaamn cocky! Even if Krai Baby forgives you, it doesn't mean I will! Okaaay?!" said Liz in a voice reminiscent of a drunken thug.

Not only was Liz still insisting that Sitri spiked her drink, but Sitri was also trying to get the already-drunk Liz to take part in a drinking contest. What's more, she'd put the tab at stake without asking.

*I said I'll cover the tab, so let me do that at least...*

I thought of checking the contents of my wallet behind their backs, but then I realized I'd left it in my room when I reached into my pocket.

Liz grabbed Sitri by her collar and lifted her off the ground, even though she was still wobbly. Her eyes were now entirely fixed on Sitri.

Yet, Sitri still didn't stop smiling.

"Don't you forget," said Liz. "I lent you a hand with making that golem despite everythiiiiing! You, brat, are clearly building countermeasures against eeeach of us!"

"Krai, help me, please. My older sister here is making baseless accusations against me..."

"Mark my words: that damn piece of trash is nothing without its hardnesssss! It's only duuurable, nothing else! If Luke were here, he would've split that piece of junk apart riiight in the middle!"

"That's just because we haven't done any combat training yet! And with a few more improvements, even someone like you—"

"You heard that?! Krai Baby, did you hear that?! It's all Siddy's fault! Count Akasha in as one of her victims tooooo!"

*This is new—she is this drunk already after only seven mugs.*

Liz let go of Sitri and leaped towards me as she spouted nonsense. I caught her body and patted her head.

"There, there. You're being too paranoid. It's thanks to Sitri that we were able to solve the case this time; we all know that."

"Krai Baby?! You know it all, don't you?! Whyyy are you taking Siddy's side?"

*Well, I'm not really.*

It wasn't that I was siding with Sitri just because she was Sitri, but rather because what Liz said was more like she was trying to pick a fight, and Sitri did have a point. Well, Liz probably didn't genuinely believe Sitri was responsible for that anyway.

Sitri looked at me with a somewhat trancelike expression.

I admitted that I adore Liz, but I didn't plan to make biased judgments because of that—fairness was one of my few virtues, after all.

Sitri pushed one of the mugs in front of Liz.

"Liz...come on. Let's do a drinking contest, all right? Don't worry, even if you

get wasted, I'll take care of you and make sure you're put to bed. You can always run away with your tail between your legs if you feel sick... Or maybe if you're feeling *that* bad, perhaps you should lie down? Hey, T, you'll take care of Liz, won't you?"

"I saw nothing, and I heard nothing..."

Tino was completely useless in between her so-called sisters' quarrel. Seemed like today was an unlucky day for her.

Liz was obviously provoked, her eyes sparkling, and she swayed as she stood up. Trying to wake herself up, she slapped her own cheeks hard with both her hands.

Clenching the mug in front of her, she roared, "Yeaaah?! As...as you wish, Siiiddy! Who do yooou think you are? You little shit of a little sister. Don't think you can beat me just by spiking my drink with some poison!"

"Of course that's what you'd say, Liz. Though I haven't poisoned anything... Your spirit is remarkable despite being almost wasted. Please, be gentle on me..."

Letting slip a single chuckle, Sitri took the gigantic mug before her just like Liz did. Despite it being just a drinking contest, the atmosphere was akin to a duel.

Tino looked at Liz rather worriedly.

*But why does Liz still have to insist that Sitri has spiked her drink with poison...*

That was when I came up with a brilliant idea. Not to boast, but I was quite confident when it came to mediating quarrels.

Snapping my fingers, I addressed the two participants about to start their drinking contest and said, "Before you start the drinking contest, why don't you swap your mugs? You know, Sitri is surely feeling uneasy with all the suspicion, and, Liz, that's acceptable, right?"

"What?"

This way nobody would end up unhappy. Surely Sitri's feelings wouldn't be hurt over such a trivial thing too. I was confident in the resolution I proposed, but for some reason, Sitri's smile froze just like that.

Liz grabbed the mug from the frozen Sitri's hands and pushed the mug she'd been holding towards her. She emptied it in one go and wiped the corners of her mouth. A triumphant smile appeared on her face.

"Hmph. Karma is a biiiiiitch! Did you reeeally think Krai Baby would take yooour side? In your dreeeams! You should've dropped it earlier; this is what you get for trying something funny! If it's a new drug that can penetrate my tolerance, you're not getting away unscathed with it, Sidddy! I drank mine; now, drink up, you piece of shit. Drink up! Drink up! Drink up!!!"

With Liz pressing towards her, Sitri's eyes darted around. Her hand was about to reach for the potion bag hanging on her waist, but she stopped abruptly under Liz's stare.

*They fight each other so affectionately. For real...they look like they are having so much fun...*

With my mouth full of newly arrived cold tea, I scanned the tavern. Every table was just as lively as ours, the noise almost deafening but oddly enjoyable. It was nice to experience something like this, occasionally.

With a sentimental mood, I returned my gaze to Liz, and I saw that she and Sitri were still in an argument. Despite their numerous differences in things like the looks in their eyes, height, and breast size, seeing them side by side like this made it evident that they were indeed sisters.

Stifling a yawn, I casually said, "You two are really close, huh? Oh, maybe I should get some ice cream—Tino, you want some too?"

"Master..." she said, withering herself and shifting her chair away from the two as if trying to distance himself from them, "thank you."

*But didn't Sitri seem more composed just a while ago? I wonder why the tables had turned.*

Mana material enhanced all aspects of a hunter's abilities, not only their raw physical capabilities but also their senses like vision, hearing, and touch—even their resistance to toxins was heightened. And that was why drinks served at bars for hunters had an absurdly high alcohol content: they didn't get drunk on normal alcohol. High-level hunters were wholly different on the inside.

The Grievors were no exception to this phenomenon: I'd almost never seen Liz, Sitri, or the others get drunk in the past few years. Yet, something was off here. Liz's face was flushed red as she downed a newly arrived silver ale (which boasted twice the alcohol content of golden ale, famous for being flammable). Sitri was grinning on the surface like she always did, but her gaze was clearly unfocused.

The only sober ones were me, who hadn't touched a drop of alcohol, and Tino, who'd been shrinking herself to try to avoid drawing attention from her two "sisters" as she quietly emptied her cups.

Letting out an unusually sluggish and inarticulate noise, Sitri came wrapping herself around me. She was completely drunk.

"Kraaai, weren't you treating me as just some magical wallet that spews cash on its ooown?"

"Yeah, uh-huh..."

"Sob, sob... Liz, you heaaard him? Krai treats meee just as a convenient wooman."

"Red copper ale, in a barrel. And bring me everything from this part of the menu. Sidy, wallet!"

"Sob, sob..."

With one hand fending off Sitri, who was pretending to cry, from rushing at me, Liz shouted out a terribly vague add-on order.

Our table had transformed into a cauldron of chaos. Wafting in the air was a palpable smell of alcohol that could make one tipsy just by being nearby, and piling up on the table were empty plate after empty plate. The customers who were sending jealous glances at me just a while ago were now wide-eyed, astonished by Liz's and Sitri's dining manners.

A cart carried over a barrel with a tap, the barrel wider than one could wrap their arms around.

Liz crunched down fiercely on the bone of meat and then downed the poured-out reddish brown liquid in one go.

Red copper ale was a drink even stronger than silver ale; it was a drink said to be ethanol with added scent and color and nothing else. Understanding what was inside the barrel, people from other tables began to buzz.

This was beyond the realm of mere heavy drinkers.

Liz wiped her mouth with her sleeve and vacantly placed her hand on her cheek like she was spellbound. With her cheeks flushed from the alcohol, she appeared much more erotic in profile than usual.

“Aah... I feel so good... It’s been a while since I got druunk... Good job, Sidy. Get me another round!”

“Ugh... Liiiz, your tolerance develops waaay too fast... This was meant to be my trump card. Your tolerance just builds up in no time no matter how strong I make it... Maybe I should just give up on making them...”

“What? But isn’t that your job, Sidy? Who’s going to build our resistances if you’re not doing it?”

“Sob, sob... Kraaai, Liz is treating me like a convenient wooman!”

“Hey!!! Sidy! Back off! I said no touching Krai Baby! No touchy... N-O, *no*! T, you guard that side for me!”

“Yes, madam.”

“I lent you over a biillion gild! I’ll have you repay me with your boody!”

With Sitri attempting to get around her, Liz extended her arms wide to block her from getting through. Seemed like she was still doing fine.

I would’ve broken them apart if this was a real sisterly fight, but Sitri looked fairly delighted despite her squeals. Gentleness was one of Sitri’s many virtues.

“It’s great that you two look like you’re having fun—by the way, Sitri, I think...I forgot my wallet...”

“Master...you’re such a fiend...”

“Sob, sob...”

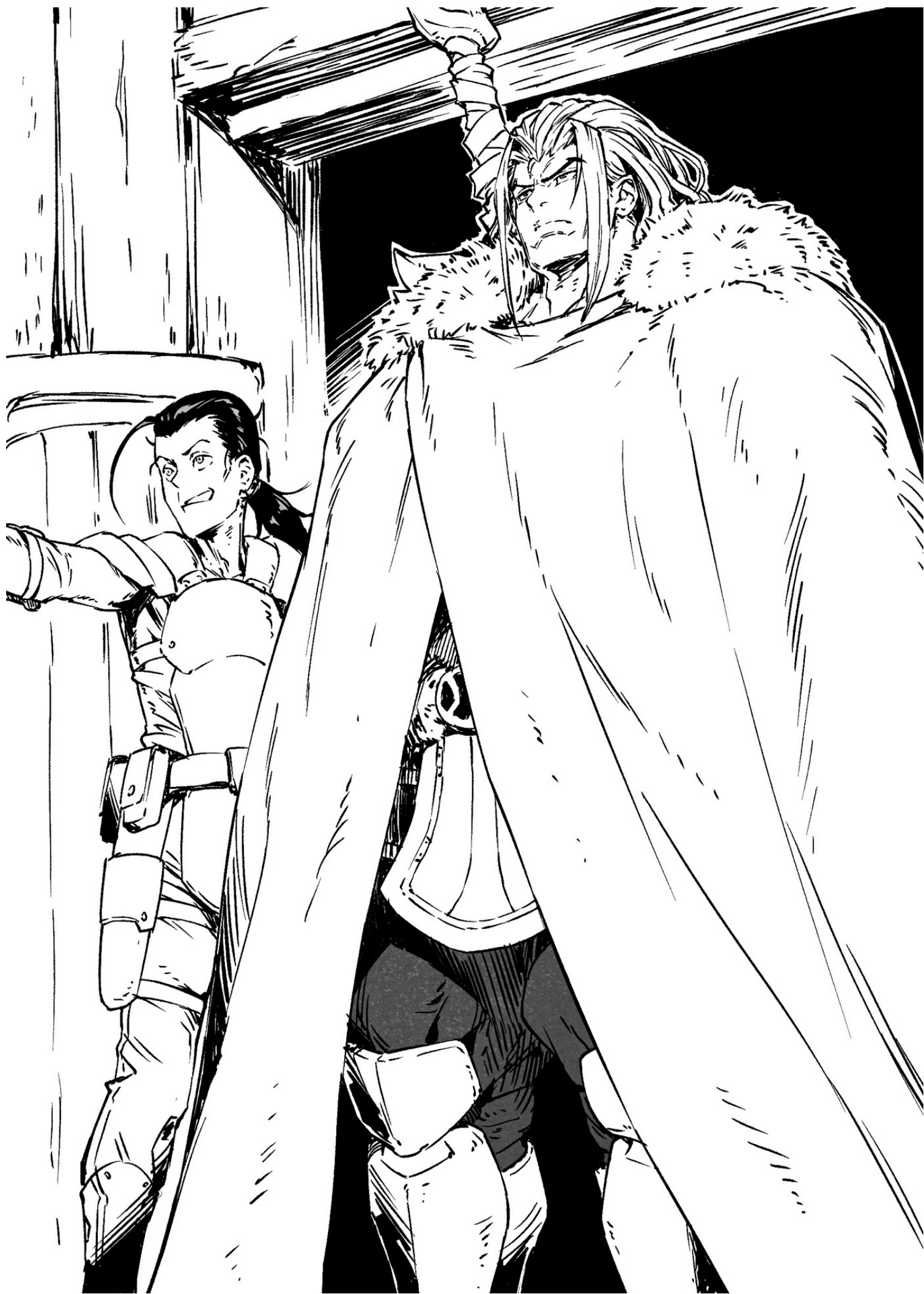
If Ansem were around, he would’ve covered for me—I did pay him back afterwards every time.

Grieving Souls had been operating on a give-and-take basis. While I rarely “give,” I might have “taken” from Sitri the most; I often couldn’t help but rely on her.

As I was mentally kowtowing, the entrance door swung open with a loud noise.

The uproar hushed slightly as a boorish group kicked open the door and barged in, probably a group of hunters. They were a rather large party for a tavern with eight men, all fully armed. The eight of them all had robust and intimidating physiques that were typical for hunters, but their commanding presence as they scanned the tavern exuded a strong sense of menace.





Tino frowned and whispered, “That’s the newcomers...”

Exceptional hunters, regardless of domestic or foreign, gathered in the capital of Zebrudia. And since hunters couldn’t tolerate being looked down upon, newly arrived hunters were often on edge. A lot of them ended up clashing with the established hunters based in the capital. This was almost like a rite of passage. There were even some ridiculous hunters who’d purposefully go and provoke other hunters in order to establish hierarchy—and this was the atmosphere I sensed gushing from the group that had just entered.

As for me, the most troublesome thing was that many of these newcomers had never heard of the name “Thousand Tricks.” The moniker was only so well-known that hunters based in the capital would know it, but outside the capital, not only was the world so vast, but even if people knew the name, they wouldn’t have recognized my face to begin with. In other words, what I meant to say was that I was often an easy target to pick on with my weak appearance.

The man in the center was a large person. On him was a set of lightly tarnished yet tremendously sturdy-looking gray leg guards. He also wore a set of minimalistic, feral armor covering only essential parts, along with a chestnut brown overcoat. Under his sweep of naturally flowing dark-blond hair was a seemingly displeased expression. He was carrying a massive sword on his back like the young man Gilbert, but with his much different physique, he was exuding an intimidating aura orders of magnitude stronger than the young man.

Standing at close to two meters tall, his body breadth was also much thicker proportionately. This was a body comparable even to Gark’s. The most physically imposing hunter I knew was undoubtedly Ansem, but this man could easily rank among the top ten.

At the very least, this man was no novice. I supposed he’d be more befittingly described as a renowned hunter from abroad.

Shrinking my body, I quietly hoped this wouldn’t develop into anything troublesome.

Meanwhile, Sitri carefully examined from head to toe the man who seemed to be the leader and let out a fervent sigh.

“That’s a splendidly well-trained body; even his demeanor is refined. The mana material in him is top-notch too. He must be a high-level hunter. Aaah... How wonderful!”

“What? Sitri, you’re into *thaaat* kind of guy? *Ew.*”

Liz crossed her legs boldly and chuckled while Tino also looked at Sitri surprisedly.

Unfazed by their gazes, Sitri continued to stare at the man with her ardent eyes.

“Liz, you won’t understand. In the end, base physical strength is crucial for a male type... High-level hunters with high mana material absorption rates and limits are just perfect. What do you think, Krai?”

And I was suddenly put on the spot.

*Hmm... Sitri seems to really like machos.*

She was the quiet type, so I assumed her taste in men would lean towards the quieter side too. But it seemed there were things about her that even I didn’t know.

With a hint of indescribable loneliness, I answered, “Yeah, uh-huh, muscles are important indeed.”

“I know right... You’re the man, Krai! You get it *unlike Liz*! Killiam was made with patchwork, and its integrity is a bit...you know, worn down. And its appearance is just a little unsettling, so bringing it around causes a commotion sometimes—I was thinking there might be a need for me to get maybe another one as my bodyguard. Man, this looks so good; I wonder what level he is... I wish I’d brought Killiam along with me. I’d like to see how they compare...”

I feel like the conversation somehow wasn’t quite connecting.

With her eyes like an infatuated maiden’s, Sitri gazed at the hunter. Sitri was essential to our party, but if she ever desired to leave, I intended to support her decision. Everyone had their own path, and I had no right to stop her, or anyone for that matter. I was sure that the day would come when all members of Grieving Souls would each go on to walk their own unique paths.

“You, get out of my way.”

*I hope he'll stop acting like that.*

The newcomers wasted no time in provoking other hunters. Approaching one of the tables, one of them slammed the head of a dead-drunk male hunter onto the table without a word.

The sound of dishes shattering reverberated. The atmosphere chilled instantly, and the bustle in the tavern ceased.

The lackey who'd slammed the hunter's head was a man with long tied-back hair. Wearing a smirk of intimidation, he looked down on the rest of the hunters at the table, who were caught off guard by the sudden assault.

“Dude! What the fuck, bro? There are other seats availab—!”

Ignoring them, the newcomers forcefully expelled the rest of the hunters from the table.

The hunters were at a disadvantage in numbers, and some of them were intoxicated too. But above all, the newcomers seemed well accustomed to such an action. While those at the table had their weapons nearby, they were kicked flat onto the ground, ganged up on, and beaten up but before they could reach for their weapons.

It was nonsensical that they hadn't been arrested yet. Wasn't this already a criminal offense? And yet, curiously, this level of violence wasn't considered a crime for hunters, granted that their opponents were also hunters. Since this was a somewhat rough profession, and they also had their reputation to consider, the victims wouldn't press charges that easily. Besides, if they'd get arrested for this level of violence, Liz and Luke would be in rather serious trouble, so I couldn't really object either. The world we were living in was crazy.

The enjoyable mood has been ruined, but Liz, for some reason, had a gleam in her eyes.

Moistening my throat with tea, I observed the situation.

There, one of the lackeys announced themselves in a shrill voice.

All eyes in the room turned towards them.

“Listen up! We’re Falling Fog from Nebulanubes, the Land of Fogs. And remember this well: this person here is known as the mightiest hunter in the Land of Fogs—Dragon Slayer Arnold Hail, the Crashing Lightning!”

Remaining silent at Lackey A’s introduction, a man, whom I assumed to be Arnold, arrogantly leaned back on the chair and crossed his arms.

The servers, noticing the obvious brewing trouble, discreetly backed away.

*Arnold... An Arnold from Nebulanubes, huh? I feel like I’ve heard that name somewhere recently... Where was it again?*

I furrowed my brow and tilted my head, but my memory was clouded under the influence of the pungent alcohol smell.

Meanwhile, the entranced Sitri was staring at the lackey and their foolish display of intimidation.

Giving up on recalling that memory, I let out a deep breath and repositioned myself straight in my chair.

Seriously, if I’d been by myself, I’d be on my way to settling the bill and getting out of this place.

Then, a lackey took a deep breath and, with a solemn tone, said the unbelievable, “Listen closely, you dumbass hunters of the capital—Arnold here...is a Level 7!”

*What...?! Did he say “Level 7”? You mean that man in the company of those absolute small-fry lackeys is on the same level as Ark? Man, this world has truly gone crazy.*

In reality, the criteria for level certification by the Explorers’ Association wasn’t standardized. While some branches focused solely on combat abilities, others valued personality more. But no matter how you put it, a man who unhesitatingly pummeled other hunters being recognized as Level 7 was a grave testament to the decline in hunters’ honor.

*I’m gonna add this to my list of material to tease Gark with the next time I see him.*

Upon hearing his words, Liz widened her eyes slightly and tilted her head.

“I see... The Land of Fogs, huh... We’ve never been there before, right, Krai Baby? Wouldn’t you be a Level 10 if you’re from there too?”

“No way, no way... I believe a Level 9 or 10 would require branches from around the world to gather and evaluate the circumstances—” *And I don’t even want to level up in the first place.*

“Well...if I crush that, I can probably become Level 7 too?”

“Hmm... Killiam with a Level 7 base... I’d love to get to know him better. Hey, Krai, can I go? They probably don’t know anyone here since they’re new—maybe this is *a chance?*”

Liz let out a deep sigh, while Sitri became seemingly restless.

No one was worried about the beaten hunters.

*Well, I guess I’ll be the one who’ll worry about them.*

Level 7—even if it was an evaluation from a small country, it was still a level impressive enough to make an opponent think twice.

There were eight of them. And even if the Crashing Lightning didn’t live up to his level, they were still fully armed.

I must say that being drunk put us at a disadvantage.

Confirming that not a person had voiced a word of resistance, Arnold mocked the hunters with a smirk.

“Heh. Nothing but cowards... I guess even the capital is nothing much. You, bring me some booze and women.”

“Roger that.”

Lackey A started scanning the bar, but unfortunately, there were few hunter-centric taverns with cute waitresses.

With his squinted eyes, he searched the area until he caught me monopolizing three girls at the back of the tavern. His lips twisted into a sneer.

*Whoa, hold up. Is he seriously thinking of making a move on the female hunters of other parties? Is such a thing allowed in the Land of Fogs? Is that some country of shambles?*

*It'll be bad if they start scorning me—even I'm more than ready to put up a fight. You sure? I'll fight at least. Tino will fight too, and Liz even more so. You really sure? Sitri? I'm...not quite sure about her actually...*

Tino appeared rather displeased.

Lackey A approached our table and grinned. But just as he was about to address us, Liz beside me stood up.

Looking at the surprised Lackey A, who'd widened his eyes at this unexpected turn, Liz blushed and said with a radiant smile, "Oh? You want me to pour you drinks? Well, I guess I can't refuse, can I?"

"L-Lizzy?! I can go inst—"

"Forget it. You sit down. I'll show you—how—it's—done."

Alluringly placing her finger on her lips, Liz threw a wink at the flustering Tino.

*That's the look when she's about to pull mischief.*

She'd been dressed rather revealingly, and though she didn't have many curves, she had a bit of a chest if you looked close enough, and her sun-kissed skin exuded a healthy allure. Her face was attractive, and if one didn't know her true nature, she'd probably look quite captivating.

"Wait, Liz, that's not fair!"

"Early bird catches the worm!"

Lackey A looked at me as if he was looking at a coward.

*What am I supposed to do?*

Liz poured some red copper ale in the barrel into a mug.

With a dubious look on his face, Lackey A's nose twitched for an instant. He must've realized from the odor that the contents were a highly potent liquor.

But before he could voice his concerns, Liz began to walk with the mug in hand. Approaching Arnold's table, she raised the mug while maintaining her smile.

The lackeys' gazes trailed along Liz's skin, checking out her belly, thighs, and cleavage, finally lingering on the rather bulky-looking Apex Roots covering half

her legs. They frowned. Yet, for the most part, they were grinning with lewd expressions.

Probably knowing Liz, some of the surrounding hunters stiffened up, but Liz seemed oblivious to it.

Arnold, on the other hand, was the only one wearing a dissatisfied expression.

*Maybe...he prefers big breasts?*

With a disgruntled look, Arnold said, “Sit. What’s your name?”

“You wanted some booze, didn’t you? Since I’m in a good mood, I’m going to specially treat you to some booze. Oh no, Liz, you’re so generous!” responded Liz, not answering his question—then she proceeded to tip the mug she held upside down above Arnold’s head.

“Wha—?!”

“I’ll treat you to the mug as well. Oh my! This doubles as disinfection too! Isn’t this two birds with one stone? Is this a new invention perhaps?”

And right as she’d said that, she smacked the mug into Arnold’s drenched head.

She beamed with joy, and she didn’t hesitate one bit.

Arnold’s companions were stupefied at her actions.

*Oh well... She did it.*

Arnold and his gang might be used to fights, but for Liz, hitting people was just part of her daily routine. The word “warning” didn’t exist in her dictionary. *She* was the Stifled Shadow, a girl who delivered blows at a godlike speed, leaving behind not a shadow.

Arnold clutched his head and staggered. Perhaps she struck him in a critical spot.

Yet, Liz showed no mercy at all.

Still maintaining her smile, Liz lifted her leg up high and, with roundhouse kicks, sent Lackeys B, C, D, and E, who were still trying to grasp the situation, flying. Taking her kicks head-on, the four fully armed large men, along with the



surrounding tables caught in the way, were sent rolling on the floor. Her movements were agile, yet her strength was astonishing as always.

The first man who'd come to get Liz regained his composure and assumed a defensive stance, but it was already too late. He took another of Liz's lightning-fast kicks and was magnificently sent flying along with food and drinks that got caught in the way. He raised his arm reflexively in defense, but Liz, equipped with her boots Relic, delivered kicks like artillery fire. These were kicks beyond what an average hunter could endure.

The surrounding hunters were dumbfounded. The ones who'd initiated violence were now subjected to even greater violence, so their expressions were understandable. I, too, wore the same expression. Anyone would probably react similarly if it was their first time witnessing this.

Having dealt with them, Liz delightfully tossed the handleless mug aside and grabbed still-somewhat-conscious Arnold by his hair. And just like that, she slammed his head against the table over and over. She was totally intending to finish him off.

*Well, they started the fight, so in a way, you can say they've brought this upon themselves...*

Sitri stood up and, with a whine, lunged towards me as if she was collapsing.

"L-Liz, that's just mean! I said I wanted him. You always take everything I want... Krai, can you please tell her off?"

"That probably wouldn't work."

Shrieks and angry roars reverberated in the tavern.

I patted poor Sitri's head as she clung to me, her arms wrapped around my neck.

Meanwhile, Tino stared at Sitri as if she'd seen a demon.

I surveyed the tavern. It wasn't in complete ruins, but the damage was severe.

Starting to grasp the situation, the surrounding hunters began to cheer on the raging storm that was Liz.

This was now unstoppable.

*Who's going to be blamed for all this afterwards? I bet it'll be me.*

I quietly rose to my feet.

*Guess I should settle the bill as soon as possible...*

## Chapter Two: The Challenger and the Transcender

His swordsmanship had been almost magical.

Facing her had been a young man by all accounts, slightly older than Chloe yet still too young to be called a seasoned hunter. His frame had been small compared to other hunters, who were mostly blessed with notable stoutness; perhaps Chloe might even outgrow him in the future.

He wore a jet-black hooded coat despite being indoors, and behind that hood, a keen and silent gaze peered out like blades.

Yet his skill was eccentric to Chloe, who boasted swordsmanship rivaling that of adults. She couldn't even land a blow.

Her opponent wielded a wooden sword, the kind a child might use for practice—weightless and bladeless, but Chloe, on the other hand, wielded a genuine sword, a sharp blade of exceptional quality. It should've sliced through any wooden sword effortlessly on the first strike with the inherent sharpness it boasted.

This was a test. Her opponent was a member of the infamous Grieving Souls, a party active on the front lines. Chloe didn't harbor any illusions of winning in the first place, but still, his overwhelming strength shattered her sliver of confidence with a single strike.

His was a swordsmanship she'd never seen before. Or, more precisely, his every movement was reminiscent of a diverse array of familiar styles: his bodily balance, footwork, sword grip, and stance—a sense of déjà vu threaded through all of them. It encapsulated every school of swordsmanship Chloe had ever witnessed, including those she'd mastered. After exchanging a few strikes, Chloe realized: this was a chimera of swordsmanship, a fusion of various originally incompatible theories, so convoluted that its original school was nearly indistinguishable.

It was absurd; it was inefficient.

As if mocking all that common sense, the man poised his wooden sword at her eyes and shouted, “You’ve mastered but one school of swordsmanship. It’s only logical that I, who’ve pursued the path of twenty-three and am seeking more, should be stronger than you who have pursued one. The greatest Swordsman is one who learns and integrates various schools of swordsmanship from all ages and cultures... Right, Krai?!”

“Yeah, uh-huh...”

That was an absurd argument. Schools of swordsmanship were honed over long years. Every move and technique held meaning, and good swordsmanship wasn’t a matter of simply blending together techniques from various schools. Anyone attempting such a thing must surely be an exceptional fool. But in reality, when Chloe’s sword clashed against the wooden sword, it failed to cut through the wooden sword and lost the clash.

Chloe’s task was to demonstrate her strength. However, with each clash, her confidence faded. It was frightening. She was prepared to lose, but the fear of having all her efforts up until now denied was something entirely new.

The young man observed the trembling tip of her blade, yet he didn’t laugh.

“The strength of a Swordsman doesn’t lie in their sword; a truly exceptional Swordsman doesn’t choose their weapon. No matter the circumstance, a defeat always reveals your lack of training. Hence, it’s only *logical* that I, who hone my skills with a wooden sword through continuous and repetitive practice, am stronger than you who rely on such a sword. Right, Krai?!”

“Uh...yeah, yeah, uh-huh.”

Everyone would say there was no way his absurd theories were true. However, this man was dead serious, so dead serious and insistent that, before long, he’d come to be known as one of the capital’s top Swordsmen.

And Chloe thought to herself, *We’re too different*. The man before her was exceptional in every sense. It was only a matter of time before he wouldn’t just be referred to as one of the capital’s top Swordsmen but, rather, as the pinnacle of the art form. He’d undoubtedly earn a moniker. But then, what would the moniker he’d earn be?

“And strength is built through accumulation. Perhaps you think you’ve been defeated by me in every aspect, but that’s absolutely not the case! Let’s be grateful for the opportunity to clash swords today. I’ll learn from your sword today and become stronger than the me from yesterday! Gratitude empowers people, right, Krai?!”

“Well, those are nice words... But hey, Luke, have you forgotten that this was just a test?”

She was shocked. The next thing Chloe felt was an overwhelming sense of defeat. The man before her, who clearly outclassed her in strength, was not only refraining from finishing her in a single blow but was also seeking to learn from the match. She now understood: this wasn’t merely a task for Chloe, but to her opponent, this was a serious bout.

Without paying any attention to the words of his seemingly dumbfounded clan master, Luke Sykol focused solely on Chloe at that moment, his bladelike gaze flickering with flames of conviction.

“Don’t worry,” he shouted, “you’re strong. But I’m stronger than you, that’s all. Remember this well: my name is Luke—also known as Luke Sykol the Testament Blade!!!”

*That* had been Chloe’s first encounter with Luke Sykol of Grieving Souls.

And that had been how Chloe failed the entrance test for First Steps—a clan that was rumored to be especially keen on spotting talent—and, after much agonizing contemplation, made the decision to give up on the path of the hunter to become a receptionist overseeing the activities of Grieving Souls instead.

From that point onward, her interest had been piqued not only by the Swordsman with peculiar swordsmanship but also by the person whom he’d trusted so much that he’d turn to for confirmation with every sentence—the Thousand Tricks who’d failed Chloe Welter, whose talent had been widely recognized.

Later, when it’d been the time to pick a moniker for Luke, she’d suggested “Protean Sword” instead of “Testament Blade” like he’d hoped (by the way, no one else called him that other than himself) in a small act of revenge.

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It was the day after the hellish feast, and I was in the clan master's office listening to Eva's report.

Usually, clans formed by treasure hunters were quite loose organizations; their origins were said to stem from hunters banding together for mutual assistance. Due to the minimal procedures and requirements needed to establish a clan, many existed in name only without any particular function. However, that didn't mean clans were meaningless. For hunters involved in dangerous activities, the fact that they belonged to an organization itself had its meaning. After all, obstinate hunters weren't likely to come together and form a proper organization.

On the other hand, First Steps was different. When I'd formed the clan, I'd hired professionals like Eva from various fields and left it all up to them.

While I was still filled with a desire to retire even now, back then, I'd been desperate to quit hunting. This had been around the time when we'd begun surpassing Level 5 treasure vaults and my own impediment had become unbearable.

Honestly, I'd never thought the clan would grow this large. To this day, I still couldn't fully grasp what had made it work so well actually. Perhaps it'd been for the best that my incompetent self hadn't done much.

While I'd perfunctorily nodded in agreement, the capable members of our staff had transformed First Steps into a top-class clan (if not top in scale) in the capital. We had a fresh and conspicuous clan house and provided amenities like food in the lounge, we also had services like item replenishing and agenting for Relic sales, and we even had our own dedicated training grounds. But among the things we had, one in particular stood out: our highly reliable information network.

I didn't remember giving specific instructions for that nor know the details behind its operations, but First Steps had become a hub for freshly up-to-date information.

"He seems to be the real deal, this Level 7 Arnold Hail. It appears he earned his promotion by conquering the Thunder Dragon. His level certification was

granted by the Explorers' Association of Nebulanubes, the Land of Fogs. Though it's a minor branch, so there might be some bias in that..."

Having a capable vice clan master is essential. I no longer knew who was leading whom, but I was totally fine with Eva taking charge. She could fatten her pockets with the membership fees as much as she wanted.

*Please, just don't leave before my ever-pending retirement.*

"The real deal, huh... I'm in trouble."

Eva's words drew a deep sigh from me.

I'd considered the possibility of him faking a high level, but it seemed he wasn't just for show.

*Actually, thinking back now that my mind is clear, isn't this Arnold the one Gark warned me about? I could've strategized better had I known that... My memory is just too unreliable.*

"Oh, I forgot that Gark did warn me about him."

"A warning, you say...?"

"Well, you see... I'm completely oblivious when it comes to things I'm not interested in..."

"...He's a *Level 7*, you know?" chided Eva with her eyes wide open.

But whether he was a Level 7 or 8, my interest wasn't piqued, and my attention tended to drift. Though, this might turn out to be more troublesome than I'd anticipated. Liz did make her move very promptly. Though it was pointless to assign blame, so I'd leave that aside for now.

The issue was that it'd been a complete surprise attack. It was hard to believe that an apparently Level 7 hunter would just take it without a problem. Arnold was probably boiling with anger right now. Had it been a defeat fair and square, it might've been easier for him to stomach, but this would likely just make him bitter.

I was a bit worried. Liz was undeniably strong, but as she was a Thief, her defensive capabilities were lacking. Despite the fact that she was combat-ready at all times, she probably wasn't impervious. The possibility of her losing when

caught off guard was very real.

Then, having considered all that, I let out a big yawn and rubbed my eyes. While my concerns were genuine, Liz was thousands of times stronger than me, and she was no stranger to picking fights with other powerful individuals either, so my nervousness just didn't hold up.

"Thunder Dragons are incredibly powerful... If he's earned his moniker by defeating one, he's by no means weak."

Dragons were synonymous with absolute strength among monsters. There were various different kinds of dragons, but be they Flying Dragons, Land Dragons, Sea Dragons, or Fire Dragons, they were all equally formidable foes.

And among them, Thunder Dragons were known to be especially troublesome for their ability to wield lightning at will. In fact, lightning was generally profusely overpowered across all aspects. Its speed made it extremely difficult to evade, its sound and shock could easily reap the consciousness of even physically enhanced hunters, and conductivity rendered it indefensible against using metallic armor. In fact, even among Magi, only those of exceptional talent possessed the skill to manipulate lightning. If it could control lightning, even a rabbit would become a formidable foe. Thus, a dragon that could control thunder would be a disaster.

I'd die from it.

As I crossed my arms and furrowed my brow, Eva asked with a hint of concern, "Have you ever fought one?"

I nodded gravely at Eva's question and delved deep into my memories.

"All I can say is...that, yeah, Thunder Dragon teriyaki is really delicious when grilled with a sweet and savory sauce. That's about it."

"I see..."

"I'm starting to get hungry, actually..."

While I'd encountered one before, I'd only been hiding in the shadows as Liz and the rest of the party had fought. It'd definitely been stronger than me, for sure, but I didn't know how the experience had been for Liz and the others.



They shouldn't have sustained any serious injuries from that though.

The only thing I remembered vividly was Sitri cooking the meat into a juicy and incredibly delicious dish after the dragon was defeated; perhaps that was also the power of Sitri's special marinade. Sitri was truly a versatile all-rounder.

"Man, I'd love to have it again sometime..."

"W-Well...there's no place that serves Thunder Dragon meat even in the capital. After all, all parts of a dragon are considered rare and valuable material, so using their meat for food is unheard of..."

"I know. Hmm..."

*What should I do...?*

For the time being, complaining to Gark was a given, but unless there was a significant reason not to, clashes between hunters were usually tolerated. I could already hear him saying "I warned you." I'd kowtow as much as I could if that would solve the problem, but the other party probably wouldn't just accept it.

I thought for a while, but, perhaps due to my empty stomach, I couldn't concentrate. And after several minutes of contemplation, I decided to give up entirely. I was sure Liz would be fine even if she were to be caught off guard. She was used to that, and she had plenty of experience dealing with grudges and being targeted.

*I could contact Gark and warn him to be cautious about it... But is that all I can do?*

Suddenly, I noticed Eva there still silently waiting for my words, her keen lavender eyes peering at me.

She was meticulous, unlike me. I truly appreciate her unending dedication to supporting my incompetent self, though it wouldn't hurt if she could relax a bit more.

I shrugged my shoulders and let out a long sigh.

"Ugh... It's your fault that you brought up the topic of teriyaki; now I'm hungry, and I can't concentrate."

“?! No, I did *not*?!”

*I’m just kidding. No need to raise your voice like that...*

“It’d be best if it could end peacefully, but...well, let’s talk to Gark about it just in case. All right, maybe I should go get some teriyaki.”

“I’ll contact him on my end. And teriyaki...Thunder Dragon?” asked Eva cautiously.

I couldn’t help but smile a little at her reaction.

“Nah, let’s save that for another time. Thunder Dragon might be delicious, but chicken isn’t bad either.”

Didn’t she just say there wasn’t any place that served Thunder Dragon meat? Competent people certainly had an impeccable sense of humor too—that was something I should learn from her.

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It’d been a long time since he’d suffered such a severe blow.

In Nebulanubes, the Land of Fogs, where they were based, there’d been no one who dared to oppose them for a long time.

Nebulanubes was a country with a limited population of treasure hunters, and particularly, it only had a handful of high-level hunters. Among them, Falling Fog, comprised Arnold Hail and his comrades who’d defeated the calamity of Thunder Dragon that had befallen the nation after a mortal fight, was recognized as the most powerful party of the land. Even the upper echelons of the Land of Fogs held great respect for his party, which was unrivaled both on paper and in practice.

The reason Arnold and his companions had chosen to leave this comfortable country behind was to pursue higher aspirations. With merely five treasure vaults in the vicinity of the Land of Fogs, the potential for advancement as a hunter there was limited. Conquering high-level treasure vaults required one to gradually increase the level of vaults they conquered and absorb mana material to foster strength. Yet, unfortunately, Nebulanubes had an overwhelming lack of battlegrounds.

But they were confident. There were only a handful of hunters certified as Level 7 in such a small nation. Arnold, specializing in combat, was surrounded by his other members who were also confident in their fighting skills. Moreover, with a larger team than the average party, they were unlikely to lose even in fights between hunters.

They were aware that Zebrudia was a large nation of hunters, far beyond the scope of comparison with Nebulanubes. Nonetheless, they had absolutely no intention of losing.

“Dammit, that bitch... She made me let my guard down for a surprise attack like that... I can’t let this slide.”

Eigh Lalia, the party’s vice leader and Arnold’s right-hand man, had managed to heal himself to a functional extent using expensive potions they’d stockpiled. His frustration brought forth a procession of heavy growls, the incident still lingering in his mind. He’d changed out of the armor he’d been equipping into simple cloth garments since the armor had sustained damage during the brawl at the tavern.

At his words, the rest of the party, part angry and part fearful, expressed their agreement.

Unlike the irate Eigh, Arnold’s state of mind was very much composed.

*A surprise attack. Yes, that was a complete ambush. But you can’t be a Level 7 or higher if you’re easily overcome by surprise attacks—there’s no such thing as a “dirty trick” on the battlefield.*

To begin with, while the attack on Arnold was a surprise one, Eigh had been defeated in an almost fair situation. That female hunter undoubtedly possessed the exceptional skill and combat abilities to easily defeat Eigh, who was just a step away from passing the Level 6 certification test.

Eigh, who certainly understood that, didn’t suppress his anger like Arnold did so he could purposefully show it to the other members. Having their leader taken down head-on affected the entire party’s morale, so it was his role as their vice leader to hold the party together in place of Arnold, their leader and icon.

Arnold hadn't even taken a sip of alcohol yet, but that unhesitant, heavy blow had precisely delivered a concussion to his brain—a part of the body that was hard to train even for a hunter. And while his consciousness was hazy from that, it had all ended.

It'd been humiliating. But his will to fight was even stronger. For hunters, the strong was something to respect. And, to surpass the strong and demonstrate their best, Arnold and his party had come to this land.

The day after the tavern brawl, Falling Fog, stifling their anger and fighting spirit, visited the Explorers' Association once again.

The sincere smile of the woman who'd attacked them out of the blue was etched into their minds. It was exactly because of their confidence in their own abilities that they understood their opponent wasn't any ordinary person.

Fighting illusions and monsters was different from fighting with other humans. Yet, that woman was clearly accustomed to beating up people: her surprise attack had come flawlessly without hesitation, and the heavy blow had landed in the brief moment their consciousness had gone blank after being drenched in alcohol. No matter how deep the pool of hunters in the capital was, they found it hard to believe that hunters who could easily knock out an Arnold enhanced with mana material would be all over the city. This hunter was likely well-known within the capital.

They couldn't let this slide. That scene in the tavern had been witnessed by too many hunters. If they were to back down from being handed a one-sided defeat in a surprise attack, the name "Falling Fog" would be tarnished. Arnold intended to make a name for himself in this holy land of hunters from now on. He couldn't afford to be looked down upon.

"In a one-on-one fight...there's no way Arnold would lose!"

It was one of their party members: Jaster, the youngest of them, had said forcefully with a flushed face. Though, a hint of fear could be discerned in his voice. Apparently, the hunter who'd beaten down Arnold hadn't stopped even after he'd lost consciousness but instead had continued to strike while she'd laughed roaringly.

Jaster had joined the party after Arnold and his team had become a

household name in Nebulanubes. Seeing his party overwhelmed by a single hunter was probably an experience enough to shatter all the confidence this young hunter, who'd always been a member of the top party, had built so far.

Arnold had always been adored for his physical prowess. While losing once wouldn't severely dent the trust of the other members, these small cracks could potentially lead to fatal consequences someday.

They couldn't afford to make archenemies.

They couldn't afford to become helpless losers.

"Whoever she may be, we'll settle it with her personally."

The other members swallowed their breaths nervously at Arnold's declaration.

The weight of his golden sword, borne on his back, was keenly felt. Forged from materials from the Thunder Dragon that had struck the Land of Fogs, the sword bore the power of lightning. It was also the root of Arnold's moniker, "Crashing Lightning."

He licked his lips. The wound on his head that should've been fully healed by the potions was dully throbbing in pain. The pain was but an illusion. Arnold knew this well. The phantom ache had but one desire: to rematch with the hunter who'd inflicted the wound; and it was at the moment of victory that this pain should subside.

"This is an opportunity. This woman—likely a renowned hunter in the capital—if we can defeat her head-on, it will earn us glory. This is a convenient stage for us to hone our dulled senses once again," said Arnold.

"I see. If you put it that way, we might've been lucky," said Eigh.

Eigh, who'd been wearing an irate expression until then, shivered and then broke into a deep smile.

What Arnold was seeking wasn't a mere increase in level or superficial glory. It was strength that he sought. And to attain that, formidable foes were necessary. The tavern incident had been unexpected, perhaps even unfortunate, but it'd revealed the presence of powerful individuals in the

capital, just as the rumors had suggested. With this knowledge in hand, all that remained for him to do was to dominate over and surpass them all.

As the party, led by the imposing Arnold, entered, the other hunters gathering around the counter eagerly moved out of the way. A space opened up before Chloe, the receptionist who'd previously attended to their party, and Arnold moved forward without a word.

While she'd worn her hair down in the past, Chloe had pigtails today for some reason. Seeing Arnold shrouded in a heavy atmosphere, she bore a naturally blossoming smile.

"Ah, I was waiting for you, Arnold. It was a disaster, wasn't it?"

"What do you mean...?"

"I've received word from the tavern. Seems like it isn't that serious?"

He was taken aback, and he stared in astonishment. The news of the incident at the tavern last night was already publicized—words traveled astonishingly fast.

And even more unexpectedly, Chloe joined her hands and said ruefully, "I understand your situation. We handle complaints here as well. After all, she was quite the ruffian—"

"?! What the...? Complaints?!"

"Well...yes. Aren't you here to file a complaint against her for knocking you unconscious?"

Arnold was about to explode in fury, yet Chloe showed no hint of fear and regarded him with a curious expression.

To complain about being hit? He'd never even considered such a thing. It wasn't the conduct of a hunter who valued their reputation to run complaining after losing a fight. More importantly, Arnold was a *Level 7* hunter with a recognized moniker.

He felt his face contorting. He was being looked down on.

Altercating with the Explorers' Association was a foolish act. But could he really remain silent when he'd been ridiculed to such an extent?

Before his anger could reach its peak, Eigh swiftly intervened and said, “Miss, it might be wise to refrain from mocking him any further. Arnold is forgiving, but there *are* limits. Miss, you seem to have dipped into martial arts before, but there’s surely no way you can win against a Level 7.”

In response to his low, menacing voice, Chloe lowered her eyes slightly and responded apologetically, “No... I’m just a mere employee. Besides, I’m not trying to belittle anyone. If you feel that way, I apologize for what I’ve said. But, you see, the truth is that the hunter your party clashed with is well-known in this capital. She’s a usual subject of complaints, you know.”

“We’ve come to ask for her name.”

A usual subject of complaints? Given her well-practiced ambush and the concussion-dealing blow, that wasn’t surprising.

She was certainly powerful. However, for Arnold, to be labeled a loser after just one battle was unacceptable to him.

A discomfited expression crossed Chloe’s face. She seemed to be debating whether or not to spill the name. But then, a low and sonorous voice sounded behind her.

“Her godlike speed leaves behind not even a shadow. She’s the Stifled Shadow, Liz Smart.”

“Uncl—Branch Manager!!!”

She turned around. The voice behind her belonged to a gigantic figure who was in no way inferior to Arnold in stature.

Fascination and a lingering trace of fear entered Eigh’s gaze, and Jaster stepped back as if overawed.

The man’s muscles bulged visibly even through his uniform, and countless deep scars crisscrossed his arms and legs. His face bore prominent tattoos, and his sharp eyes looked down on Arnold and his companions. He might be a bit older than Arnold, but his aura was palpably radiating an immense energy.

“*That’s* the name of that tomboy. You’re the Crashing Lightning, the Level 7 who came from Nebulanubes, right?”

The capital branch manager seemed to have been a top-tier hunter in the past. Arnold had heard rumors of him, but he seemed even more remarkable in person.

A smile spontaneously appeared on Arnold's face. The Land of Fogs's Explorers' Association branch manager had been a rotund man resembling a pig. He'd been efficient as a leader but worthless as a warrior. Every time he'd met Arnold, he'd had a hint of awe in his eyes.

But what about this man standing before him? Arnold gripped the proffered hand and exerted a bit of pressure as a test, only to feel an even firmer grip in return. This man was strong, despite the fact that he should've already retired from the front lines.

*This grip...!*

"Oh, so you're the branch manager? I'm Arnold Hail, a Level 7. I'll be around for a while."

"You've come a long way. Heard you've taken down a Thunder Dragon before? We welcome high-level hunters here," said Gark, his words easing the tension among Arnold's party members. Then, he added as if he had just remembered, "Though, that only applies to those who won't cause too much trouble." It was an insinuating remark. Twisting his thick lips into a wicked smile at the frowning Eigh, he continued, "Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about you. We have quite a few troublemakers in the capital, you see."

"Troublemakers?"

Treasure hunters squabbled regularly, and neither was it rare for some of them to even dabble in criminal activities. Arnold wondered how atrocious these individuals were that even the branch manager, who was well aware of these facts, referred to them as "troublemakers."

Gark scratched his cheek and clicked his tongue loudly.

"Yeah, right. I've warned them, the gang who'd beaten you guys up in the tavern."

I was startled by his comment.



“Sorry. They caught you off guard, right? Liz...is a Level 6, but she’s quite the nutcase who’d even bite at me, the branch manager. There’ve been plenty of victims of hers.”

Gark let out a wry laugh and shrugged before the wide-eyed Arnold.

Apologies were on his lips, but not a hint of it was reflected in his expression. No, it was even worse than that—Arnold felt a hint of condescension from him.

He was the bumpkin who’d caused the ruckus and ended up being beaten senseless in a one-sided fight by a woman of a lower level.

Could this man be biased against branches from smaller countries? Did Arnold really have the capabilities to get by in the capital?

While the staff of the Association should strive to maintain impartiality, their gazes remained unforgivingly stern. If you included Chloe’s reaction, having his strength doubted was immensely humiliating to Arnold.

Arnold and his party gritted their teeth and scowled, but Gark didn’t pay them any particular attention.

He continued, “My apologies. In fact, I’ve informed her ‘handler’ that the Crashing Lightning would be coming to town for the first time. But it looks like—um, how should I put it—he seems to have forgotten about it.”

“What?!”

“Yeah, well...what was it? He’s always been a bit absent-minded. Somehow or other, it seems like he can’t quite remember things he’s not interested in. Anyway, well, um, though you guys seem to have gotten beaten up pretty one-sidedly, it looks like you guys made quite a commotion too, didn’t you? Let’s just call it even this time.”

His words didn’t fully register in Arnold’s mind. First, the fact that the beast-like woman had a handler was shocking. But more importantly—this guy wasn’t interested in a Level 7 hunter?! Before his anger could hit him, Arnold felt a wave of disbelief wash over him. Not showing any interest in information about a powerful potential enemy was more than foolish.

*What the heck was going through this guy’s mind?*

As Arnold struggled to make sense of this mysterious mindset, Gark continued, “Oh, right. I just received a word of apology from her handler. You ready for this? He said, ‘She got a little bit excited hearing about a Level 7. I won’t let her strike again, so please forgive her.’ Well, I’d say you can take his word for it. He’s not the kind of guy to condone the ‘bullying of the weak.’ She’ll be a good girl, and I think she won’t try anything strange again.”

His voice was almost consoling.

For a moment, Arnold didn’t understand what Gark had said, and then a surge of blood rushed to his head. Arnold gnashed his teeth and barely managed to contain the nearly overflowing torrent of anger. A few drops of blood trickled down his overly tightly clenched fist; his nails had pierced through his skin. But even that dull pain wasn’t enough to quell Arnold’s anger. He couldn’t voice his frustration, because if he did, a string of insults would surely pour out. Anger wasn’t something to be let loose recklessly.

Eigh looked up at Gark in silence, but in his pupils, a fiery glint sparkled just like Arnold’s did.

The woman was said to be a Level 6, but she was undoubtedly a formidable presence. Her intense temperament, supported by her potent strength, had her unhesitatingly attack a hunter above her level.

That didn’t paint her in the light of the kind of person who’d bow down to someone else. What would it take to control such a beast like her? If she indeed was under another hunter’s command, the only answer was obvious: strength. More importantly, it must’ve been an overwhelming strength that could subdue such an unreasonable beast that would even defy the branch manager.

The root of his mysterious mindset, from what had been conveyed through Gark’s words, was none other than “arrogance.” He had an overwhelming confidence in his own strength; his arrogance was akin to a god looking down upon humans.

The target of their explosive anger shouldn’t be the Stifled Shadow; it ought to be her “handler.” They would make him pay the price for looking down on Nebulanubes’s warriors. An overwhelmingly Goliath he might be, but there was no way they could let this slide without a confrontation.

Whether he'd realized the thought going through their minds or not, Gark clapped his hands loudly and said, "Oh, that's right. Apparently, that handler, the Thousand Tricks, has a favor to ask of you guys. He's among the top five hunters in the capital, so it wouldn't hurt to establish a connection with him."

"A favor, you say?"

The Thousand Tricks—Arnold etched the name deeply into his consciousness.

With a laugh, Gark said to him, "He wants you guys to bring him a Thunder Dragon. Hearing about your victory over a Thunder Dragon has apparently made him crave its meat again. It seems like he hasn't had any in a long while. Well, there's no deadline for that, so just keep that in the back of your mind. Good luck, you Dragon Slayers."

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Arnold and his party left the hall with their shoulders squared.

Chloe waited until their figures had completely disappeared, and she asked her uncle, who was standing behind her in a daunting pose, "Um...Branch Manager, are you sure it's okay to say that?"

"Huh? What do you mean? I was just passing along a message from Eva," said Gark as he crossed his arms and twisted his lips into a smile.

Arnold might not have raised his voice, but the emotions in his heart were obvious. The intimidating aura he exuded was fitting for a high-level hunter like him.

Even someone like the Thousand Tricks might find it challenging to go up against a high-level hunter specialized in combat.

"Oh, no need to worry about that. If he hadn't intended to start a fight, he wouldn't possibly have said, 'My bad for beating you up in a fight' to a haughty high-level hunter in apology, right?"

"You do have a point..."

Apologizing to a hunter who was set on retaliating was just like adding fuel to the fire. It was also hard to imagine that this young man who'd resolved numerous incidents with his exceptional foresight would simply misjudge the

character of his opponent. After all, this wasn't the first time that the Thousand Tricks had picked a fight or found fault with hunters from abroad.

"Keeping hotheaded hunters in line is no doubt the job of a fellow hunter. It might not be a very commendable action, but it's certainly appreciated. Krai probably enjoys doing that too, so help out when you can."

"Roger."

Gark waved his hand and left the hall.

Having watched him go, Chloe once again turned her black pupils towards the direction where Falling Fog had exited.

Being a treasure hunter...truly had its complexities.

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On the third floor of First Steps's clan house was a laboratory designated for Alchemists. It was a spacious laboratory that occupied about seventy percent of the floor. Spanning several rooms and equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and rare materials, it was likely the most expensive facility in the clan house.

Originally, Sitri was the only Alchemist in Footsteps. While there was one more of them now, the fact that almost an entire floor was dedicated to the relatively rare Alchemist class had been due to Sitri's significant investment from her pocket money when the building had been constructed. It'd been an amount substantial enough to silence the ex-merchant Eva, who was known for her tightfistedness. Eva's astonished expression then was still vividly etched into my memory.

While the name "Alchemist" might evoke a somewhat mysterious image, Sitri's laboratory was as neat as her scrupulous personality: the room was decorated with white wallpaper and sparkling polished floors. The glass shelves were lined with intricate and bizarre instruments, and the bookshelves were filled with books written in languages I couldn't even recognize. Nonetheless, every item of this Alchemistish collection in the room was well organized, and the lab wasn't giving off any suspicious vibes.

At the sound of the door opening, one of the two figures standing in front of the central table—Sitri, dressed in a plain gray robe—turned towards me. Upon

seeing my face, she clasped her hands together and beamed a smile.

“Welcome, Krai.”

“Were you busy?”

“No. I was just preparing some potions for sale. But I’m done with the preparations, so I’m free for now.”

On the table was a large, peculiar contraption resembling an hourglass. Unlike an hourglass, the upper half contained a paste-like substance instead of sand, and a pool of liquid accumulated in the lower compartment. It was likely a device for extracting components, but the purpose of most of Sitri’s instruments escaped my comprehension.

Sitri usually bought out the materials from the monsters defeated by Grieving Souls at a rate slightly higher than the market price, transformed them into even more expensive potions, and wholesaled them to various trade companies. Through this process, she’d amassed an immense fortune. While rewards from our adventures were generally shared equally, Sitri was the wealthiest thanks to that. According to Eva, who’d assisted in some of the transactions, the amount she earned was quite exceptional as individual earnings went.

“Talia, I’m sorry, but please put the rest of the potions in bottles and store them in the wooden crate.”

“Okay,” replied the other Alchemist of First Steps, Talia, who was pouring a pale green powderlike substance from a large glass container as she wiped the sweat from her forehead.

They seemed unusually busy. While potion-making was Sitri’s side business, producing too many of a potion could apparently lead to a collapse in its value. This was the first time I’d seen her making too many potions that she had to enlist help from others.

Talia removed a glass container from the lower part of an apparatus and carried it to another room.

Seeming to have sensed curiosity from my expression, Sitri explained to me, “I’ve been approached by those who’ve helped charge your Relics recently.

They said they wanted to do some training on their own during their free time as well, so they were asking if I could spare them some potions.”

*Seriously...? It's not like that's even training or anything. They were even literally foaming at their mouths and losing their consciousness. How are they not only not traumatized, but also looking forward to taking more of that potion of their own accord? Are they masochists or something?*

“Of course, I’m charging them the minimal cost for the materials—this is splendid. Your zeal is coming through to them. I’m also glad that going out of my way to encourage them has been worthwhile.”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

That had really looked more like provocation than encouragement, but I didn’t feel like pointing that out to Sitri with her sparkling eyes.

While I nodded half-mindfully, Sitri continued in an increasingly passionate tone, “So, I thought I’d make some slight improvements to the potions. It’s quite the rare opportunity to have hunters who’ve absorbed a large amount of mana material willing to become test subjects themselves. Until now, human subject research has been mostly on orphans in the decaying district. While it’s good that there are no repercussions, the health condition isn’t exactly great—”

“Yeah, uh-huh?”

“It would be a revolutionary breakthrough if we can establish a means for the über growth of mana through observing such a sizable sample group. We have Lucia, but her mentality is too robust, so she isn’t useful as data. If we can prove this method works with Magi who aren’t quite talented, it will surely change how Magi will go about training. This can benefit them greatly! Providing potions to everyone at a low cost now will bring tremendous benefits! What do you think, Krai?”

“Just don’t go overboard.”

*Don't go overboard, okay?*

“I was thinking I could just give them the potions Lucia uses as is, but it turned out to be more complicated than that. It was too costly, and the impact on the mental state—”

“I came to return the money I owe you.”

“Huh?”

A dazed look appeared on Sitri’s face.

While I didn’t dislike seeing a jolly Sitri, explaining all this to Talia, her fellow Alchemist, would be more constructive.

I was here to return the money I got from her to cover the reconstruction of the tavern.

I usually covered the costs for celebrations. Since I was getting a share of their pay without working, it was only right for me to do so.

“No, it’s okay. It’s not our first time anyway. Just put it on your credit.”

“You’ve lent me so much; I don’t even remember how much I’ve borrowed...”

Although I’d been keeping track of every dime I borrowed, I hadn’t done the calculations, so I didn’t know the total amount. I’d been borrowing way too much. Relics were very expensive, and I didn’t have other sources of income since running the clan was all that I did. Sitri probably knew about my situation, but she never urged me.

*She mentioned something along the lines of “owing her over a billion gild” at the tavern. Did I get her right...? That’s one with nine zeros after it, right?*

Sitri placed her hand against her cheek and said with a somewhat bashful smile, “I’ve also borrowed a lot too, so just feel free to return it when you can.”

“I can only pay it off bit by bit.”

“Even if you pay me a million or two, it would just be a drop in the bucket. I’ll have you pay me back with your body eventually.”

“I’m quite spoiled, ain’t I?”

Normally, I should’ve been expelled from the party, but instead, I was being treated well. To be honest, I feel very ashamed.

*I wonder what Eva would say if she learned of the amount of debt I owed...*

Not knowing my inner thoughts, Sitri blushed.

“I’ll spoil you a lot. So in return, you spoil me a lot when the time is ripe, okay?”

*Hmm? Does this make me a sugar baby? Does this mean I’ll be all set even if I retire?*

As inept as I knew I was, I did have some common sense in me, I hope.

“I’ll pay you back.”

“How?”

“I’ll...borrow it from Lucia?”

“That isn’t going to change the fact that you’re in debt...”

“Actually, I’m thinking maybe I should open a confectionery café after I retire.”

“Ooh, that’s one roaring business. How many years do you intend to take to pay back the rest of the billion gild?” said Sitri with a grin.

I was sure she hadn’t meant to be sarcastic, but I’d heard a sardonic twist there nevertheless.

*But the rest of it, hmm... I should probably brace myself for an upbraiding and consult Eva on this later.*

By the way, I had no plan on liquidating my collection of Relics. Encounters with Relics were once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Among the Relics I’d collected over the years, there were even some that were nearly unobtainable. Though, I planned to donate them all to my party as shared assets when I retired. This would be my way of making amends for irresponsibly leaving the party.

Anyway, I was here to pay Sitri back the tab from the tavern last time.

She quietly accepted my payment and, without counting it, stored it in a pocket on her loose-fitting robe.

Then, as if suddenly realizing something, she said, “Oh, right. If it happens so that you absolutely can’t pay off your debt, I have three ways to help you clear it off.”

“I guess I should listen to the advice you have to offer. We’re ruling out you



waiving all of it though.”

Despite everything, I was still mindful of my monetary ties.

Then, with a flushed face, Sitri said, “First option: take me as your wife. If you become my spouse, our assets will merge, and your debt will be canceled. I’ll even try my best to develop a liking for sweets. I’ll find a way to somehow silence my sister, and I won’t let her lay a finger on you.”

An amusing joke, indeed. Don’t get me wrong; it wasn’t like I absolutely hated the idea, but that wouldn’t work as a method for repaying debts.

“And the second option?”

“The second option is that you’ll become my husband. I’ll take in all your debt alongside you. I know everything about you, Krai. I’ll take care of everything from cooking to laundry, I’ll cover all the chores, and I’ll even tolerate your indulgence in the confectionery café. I’ll do my best to silence my sister.”

...Sitri’s sense of humor rivaled Eva’s, it seemed.

*I’m not entirely sure, but I wonder, “How is the first option different from the second?”*

Hiding my slightly peevish feelings, I nodded with feigned interest and asked, “That’s...quite the tempting proposition. And what about the third option?”

Without a moment’s delay, Sitri replied, “Snitch on me and turn me in to the authorities. Though I’d be rather lonely in prison then, so I’d be glad if you could also send my sister in to keep me company.”

*Don’t say that with such a bright smile on your face. Looks like I’ll have to be more cautious to not borrow any more... But anyway, why would I even send her to prison? It’s not like she’s committed anything terrible.*

I let out a sigh and decided to gloss over the conversation.

“By the way, do you remember the teriyaki Thunder Dragon you made for us quite a while ago? That was incredibly delicious.”

“Oh, that was made with some homemade seasoning. I think mixing that with chicken instead would probably suit your taste better. After all, dragon meat just doesn’t match up in flavor compared to that of livestock raised for meat. I

remember the recipe; shall we make it tonight?” said Sitri, going along with the obvious change of topic.

*Now, how should I come up with the money...? Speaking of which, the auction is approaching...*

I felt like I’d taken advantage of Sitri’s kindness last year and gone on a buying spree for Relics. There wasn’t much time left until the auction this year.

I let out a heavy sigh and decided to go consult Eva, my go-to person when things got tough.

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They were at the heart of the capital, within a room in a high-class inn tailored for treasure hunters.

Arnold cast a sweeping glance over his party members, and in a voice carrying an undertone of veiled intimidation, he confirmed with them, “So, you guys have gathered the rumors?”

“Yeah. It seems he’s a famous hunter around these parts—his name is even on the list we received when we first came.”

Eigh surveyed the faces of his party mates and began his explanation.

The Thousand Tricks—that was the moniker of the hunter who, according to Branch Manager Gark, was the owner of the Stifled Shadow. Whether in jest or earnest, he’d also commissioned them to slay a Thunder Dragon for the outrageous reason that “he wants to eat its meat.”

He’d been mocking them. While it was already enough for Arnold to antagonize him simply based on the fact that he was the leader of the party of the woman who’d assaulted them one-sidedly, it was too risky to engage without intelligence on him.

Among the achievements Arnold has accumulated, slaying a Thunder Dragon was the greatest of them all. The dragon that had once rampaged in the Land of Fogs truly possessed the power to level an entire nation to the ground. It’d stood as an absolute powerhouse, driving back group after group of high-level hunters, who’d attempted to challenge it. Every challenger failed—until Arnold

and his party. It had been this great feat that had earned him both the Level 7 certification and his moniker.

The Thunder Dragon, colossal in size, had been armored with firm scales. With its lightning breath that'd been almost impossible to dodge, its long bladelike tail with edges sharper than most swords as its weapon, and its ability to soar through the sky, it had been considered a superior existence even among dragons.

Although it'd been Falling Fog who'd directly faced and slain the Thunder Dragon, the conquest drew upon the collaboration of countless hunters: It'd been these hunters who'd prepared the battlefield, searched for the opportune moment, ensured that the equipment and strategies were perfect, and set up the traps. It'd been a battle where the survival of the nation had been at stake. But even with all the meticulous preparation, the mortal combat had extended for several hours.

While the recommended level designated by the Explorers' Association had been Level 7, Arnold, having faced the dragon, had considered the designation an underestimation of their opponent's power. They had been fortunate enough to have succeeded in defeating it, but had there been *one* false move, his entire party would've been dead. Even now, equipped with powerful weapons crafted from materials from the dragon and having stared death in the face numerous times, that was still not a fight they could engage in casually. No matter what dire straits they found themselves in when exploring treasure vaults, recalling how much worse their encounter with the Thunder Dragon had been would give them strength to push through their troubles at hand.

After the battle, they'd dissected the remaining corpse for materials. The Land of Fogs had profited enormously from it, and a fitting amount of money had been awarded to all hunters who'd participated.

A dragon's body was a treasure in its entirety. Its bones, scales, and the gemstones within its body—not to mention its blood and flesh—were all in high demand as potion ingredients.

The idea of consuming even a portion of these hard-earned materials for food was nothing short of madness. If a hunter were to go around and spread such

nonsense, they would be met with barrages of derisive laughter, as was appropriate. However, if it was said by a high-level hunter, it would be a different story.

“When it comes to Zebrudia’s hunters, Rodin is the name people usually think of... But dammit, this one is a Level 8...!”

A Level 8 would be a super high-level hunter surpassing even Arnold, the Dragon Slayer. Such high-level hunters didn’t even exist in Nebulanubes—he was truly a mysterious adversary.

For treasure hunters, who enhance their abilities with the help of mana material, gaps between individuals’ power could grow very vast. The power of Arnold and an average hunter was as different as night and day, yet the same could be said of that of an even higher-level hunter and him.

There were only five treasure vaults in Nebulanubes. Although that was still better than the other neighboring countries, it paled in comparison to the Zebrudia capital, where treasure vaults of all levels were abundant in its vicinity. Numerous high-level treasure vaults that were capable of further enhancing Arnold and his party, who’d reached their growth limits in Nebulanubes, existed around these parts.

Arnold confidently knew that he was the strongest. The problem lay in the anxiety swirling within his party: they wondered if the name “Crashing Lightning” was good enough for this capital.

The strength of their party was as good as the strength of their solidarity. He was a strong leader whom everyone followed, and he needed to prove his strength and pride as a leader.

Gark’s seemingly ridiculing gaze was etched into his mind. Those eyes had clearly spoken of Gark’s conviction in the Thousand Tricks’s supremacy over the Crashing Lightning.

Originally, their plan had been to make their presence known to the hunters of the capital, sell items they’d obtained in Nebulanubes for high prices, and then leisurely crush the treasure vaults of this land one by one.

Yet, he couldn’t afford leisure like this.

The intelligence on the Thousand Tricks that Eigh and the rest of his party had gathered was unexpectedly ridiculous.

They said he was a man who could foresee the future.

They said he'd reached Level 8 without having made a single blunder.

They said he led an entire party of hunters with monikers, and that he'd defeated the legendary Rodin.

Everyone knew his name, but his true strength remained veiled in multiple layers of mystery. There were even members in his clan who'd said "Master is a god."

With just a few casual inquiries, they'd already heard so much of his reputation—it was no wonder that he'd acted with such arrogance.

However, the more Arnold delved into the reports, the more he twisted his stern expression into a seemingly quizzical one.

Among the gathered intelligence, there was one particular aspect that felt off.

"So there are no rumors regarding his combat abilities, huh?"

"Yeah. Though there have been rumors of him sending a colossal golem flying with only his aura..."

"That's some stupid bullshit."

While hunters each had their own fields of expertise, "combat prowess" was the most emphasized field of all. Even hunters of classes less suited for direct combat could fight better than an ordinary person; that was what being a hunter meant. So if this Thousand Tricks was a Level 8, his power must be beyond human capabilities. Clearly, something was off with this gap in information.

People would normally be skeptical of such a lack of intelligence. But given the Thousand Tricks's reputation, they'd surely overlook such a minor anomaly. But Arnold was different—the Crashing Lightning hadn't reached Level 7 through sheer physical strength. His ability to render proper judgments was contingent on him having gathered relevant information, and his intuition as a hunter was telling him that there was more than meets the eye.

He frowned as he mentally pieced together the data. Having arrived at a conclusion, he smirked with a crooked grin—without a doubt, the Thousand Tricks was weak. Or rather, to be more precise, while he wasn't exactly weak, he probably didn't possess the combat abilities befitting a Level 8. In terms of profession, he was likely a Thief or Cleric, both noncombat classes. In either case, he was no match for Arnold, who specialized in combat. The absolute lack of intelligence on his combat abilities was probably the work of the Thousand Tricks actively concealing it.

“The ability to foresee the future, huh? Interesting...”

The claim of being able to foresee the future was either a charlatan's trick or something attributed to legendary heroes.

Perhaps his absurd request to deliver a Thunder Dragon was a ploy to make Arnold hesitate. The more Arnold considered it, the more he saw through this shallow tactic. Perhaps even the words of the branch manager and the receptionist were all part of a bluff.

*What nonsense. So this is how they'll be ensnared in their own plotting.*

Though they might deceive the hunters of the capital, they couldn't deceive the Crashing Lightning.

“Rumors have it that the Stifled Shadow is a childhood friend of the Thousand Tricks.”

Eigh's words dispelled Arnold's remaining small doubt.

Normally, it was hard to imagine a warrior of her caliber yielding to a weakling, but it'd be a different story if they'd known each other for a long time.

Perhaps that, too, was another layer of deception.

Arnold glared at the imagined shadow of his would-be rival.

His opponent most likely wasn't weak—but the Crashing Thunder would triumph.

Arnold was still relatively unknown in this capital, unlike the Thousand Tricks. Fame came with both advantages and disadvantages. In this capital, Arnold was

a challenger now.

Though they'd suffered an early setback, there would be nothing better to cement his reputation in the capital than crushing the Thousand Tricks underfoot. Of course, this would surely be a bitter fight—the Stifled Shadow would stand in his way too—but defeating them would prove his absolute superiority.

Arnold's shoulders shuddered with excitement as he broke into a deep smile. He'd made his decision.

"It has been a while since we've been the challengers. We shall have these old-timers educate us all about the levels of the capital."

A party composed solely of moniker holders was indeed powerful, but their individual members might not necessarily be strong if isolated. Arnold wasn't a knight who played fair and square; he was a hunter—he targeted any weaknesses available.

With fervor in his voice, one of the party mates shivered with fervor.

"So, what about their request for a Thunder Dragon?" he asked.

"We'll let him bark all he wants. It's not like we've officially accepted the commission. I'll make anyone regret underestimating me."

His golden eyes dimly gleamed in the face of his greatest foe since the Thunder Dragon.

An air of anticipation swept through their spacious room.

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"How on earth did you come to *this*?"

Eva, flipping through my debt memos as she checked their content, let out a trembling voice quite out of character for her usually composed self.

Even I didn't feel like reclining in my chair lazily like I usually did. Instead, I crossed my arms and feigned a thoughtful look.

Grieving Souls split its income evenly among its members. In the event that any of the party members desired certain items, like Relics or monster

materials, we'd obtained during our adventures, we also had a rule that allowed the member to buy those items out at a price slightly below their market value. Well, given that we were all good buddies and not particularly materialistic, we'd been handling our earnings rather casually.

The reason that my debt had grown like this had mainly been due to the fact that I'd ended up buying out most of the Relics. With no money at all, each purchase had ended up adding to the debt I'd owed everyone. However, around the time Eliza had joined us as a new member, Sitri, who'd always seemed to be financially afloat, started taking over all my debt.

Now I was totally dependent on her. I'd been avoiding the problem until now, but the situation had become very awkward—perhaps.

“Well...there are just too many Relics I wanted...”

“This...is an amount that exceeds even what a top-notch hunter could easily earn, you know? I'd been wondering how you kept bringing in new Relics one after another; now I know...”

“Yeah, uh-huh... As they tackled progressively higher-level treasure vaults, the Relics they brought back also became more and more valuable. That's how the debt kept growing and growing...”

It was almost strange that nobody had pointed this out to me until now. The amount was so immense that I could hardly get a real sense of it. This was mind-boggling.

Eva brushed her bangs up and pressed her hand against her forehead. Her expression appeared to be much more serious than the one on me, the culprit.

“I knew you've occasionally taken out some of the clan's operational funds to buy Relics, but since it was always returned immediately, I didn't think much about it...”

*Yeah, right...Sitri covered those for me. Perhaps I don't have any choice left but to marry her? I do like her, but I really can't see myself getting married for such a motive.*

“J-Just to confirm...you haven't borrowed from other external entities, right?”



“Yeah, only from Sitri.”

Or rather, I’d borrowed from others in the past, but Sitri had taken care of all that for me.

Relics were my lifelines, and that was exactly why I’d not budged an inch on that—but maybe I should’ve thought a bit more before I’d acted.

*Perhaps I don’t have any choice left but to marry her?*

Eva’s seemingly contemplative expression lasted only a moment, and she immediately let out a deep sigh.

“Ugh... Well, I’m sure, with Grieving Souls, you’ll be able to do something about that in a year or two—as long as there isn’t any interest...”

*I’m already swamped with the status quo; can I really continue being a hunter for another year or two?*

“Can we somehow manage it with a confectionery café?”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Okay, I’ve decided! Until the debt is paid...let’s consider not purchasing more Relics.”

Though I’d made the statement with firm resolution, a hint of skepticism escaped Eva’s eyes. Up until now, I’d been buying new Relics left and right and boasting about them; it was no wonder that she wasn’t taking my word for it. I’d have to prove it with my actions.

*While I’m at it, I might as well display some enthusiasm.*

“Also, yeah, maybe I should take up a side gig—well, maybe not going *that* far—or, yeah, maybe a part-time job?”

“Please don’t.”

“Well...how about something like fortune-telling? Don’t you think I can somehow make it work with just shots in the dark?”

“P-Please don’t!”

I was half joking, but Eva’s voice was desperate. She was even paler now than when she’d heard about my debt.

Well, to be fair, if the master of my clan tried to become a sham fortune teller, I supposed I'd desperately try to stop him too. Besides, there were genuine fortune tellers in the capital who boasted higher accuracy rates; I'd most likely end up having my fraud unmasked immediately.

"Or...maybe I can be a salesclerk somewhere in a store?"

"Please don't."

"How about a janitor or something along those lines? Like scouring the sewers? You know, those quests that the Association always posts? They seem to need more hands to work on that."

The rewards for those quests were low, and since they could be completed by even nonhunters, apparently almost no one was willing to take up those quests.

"...Please don't. Seriously, I'm begging you... Do you understand your position, Krai?"

"Hunters are free beings, and all work is noble. Even a Level 8 could clean sewers, don't you think so?"

"I don't. Liz, for instance, will most likely go ham if you do, so please don't."

*That actually sounds like it could happen.*

*But that puts me in an awkward position... What should I do then? I have no special skills but only average abilities and a disproportionately high level. I'm stuck; there's nothing I can do. Am I not more of a burden than just an ordinary incompetent?*

*I feel like I'm about to barf.*

*Do I have no choice but to leech off Liz, Sitri, Tino, Luke, and the others from my clan? Am I just a piece of trash?*

"Instead of taking up a side gig, how about going on some solo explorations in treasure vaults? You're a hunter after all."

Seemed like Eva was telling me to "go die" too with that.

As I relaxed and put on a pathetic smile, Eva let out a long, defeated sigh.

"Come on, quit making that pathetic look! Fortunately, we do have some

capital, and we should be able to grow that to a certain extent given time. Don't do anything, okay? Just don't put yourself in more debt than you already have. The number one killer of parties is financial trouble, you know?"

*I mean...I haven't really done anything, have I? Do I have no choice but to leech off Eva? There's nothing wrong with borrowing from Sitri, right?*

While I really appreciated her help, Eva had her own work to do too. Besides, I felt sorry for asking her to clean up after my financial mess—that'd make me too much of a failure.

By the way, while the number one killer of parties was indeed financial trouble, number two was romantic drama.

"Please carry yourself with confidence. You pulling yourself together makes things easier for me to handle."

"Your standard for 'pulling myself together' is pretty low, yeah? Basically, you just mean 'shut up and sit down,' right?"

"..."

She turned her gaze away from me.

With all things considered, what did it mean to be a clan master?

A clan master's morning started early, right before the sun rose directly overhead.

After waking up in my private room within the clan house, I would first take a light shower in the facilities that came with the building to squash my sleepiness.

Then, I got dressed. While my appearance remained consistent over the days thanks to the multiples of the same outfit that I owned, I equipped different sets and numbers of Relics each day. The Relics I equipped depended mostly on my mood. While I wore at least a Safety Ring every day, the majority of the rest were accessory Relics: rings, necklaces, and such were very handy as they didn't hinder my movements and offered a wide range of effects.

Among hunters, accessory Relics were also popular, second only to weapon- and armor-type Relics, which directly contributed to combat strength. Although

a lot of them also existed in my collection, I lacked the combat abilities to wield them effectively, and so I didn't carry them around unless I had a good reason for it.

Instead, I carried chain-type Relics with me. They were handy for immobilizing foes, and they didn't hinder my movements either. The best part was that I could use them too. Since they weren't obvious weapons, they often allowed me to catch opponents off guard. They'd saved my ass more than a handful of times.

I took a quick glance around the room, and I noticed that several of my Relics were missing. I didn't think much about it since Sitri had said she might use them in the development of a new mana restoration potion—it wasn't like anyone would go out of their way to infiltrate into and steal from the headquarters of a major clan anyway.

With my outfit ready, I headed to the clan house's lounge for breakfast. The lounge was open twenty-four hours, but since most people were busy during the day, it wasn't crowded. I had a light breakfast of a sandwich and a cup of coffee, then I ascended the stairs exultantly back to my clan master's office.

And there, as usual, I sat down on the unnecessarily grand clan master's chair, and I let out a deep sigh.

There was *nothing* to do.

The spacious office desk before me was polished to a shine, and there was absolutely nothing on it.

To begin with, there wasn't much work for me as the clan master. I had given almost all authority to Eva regarding the operations of Steps. Very rarely did anything have to come back to me. So when Eva had told me to just "shut up and sit down," she really did mean it.

And since there was nothing to do for me, I took out a piece of downy cloth and began carefully polishing the Relics one by one as usual. Since Relic polishing was like a daily routine for me, they weren't really anywhere near dirty, so I had them all cleaned in a flash.

Feeling a bit restless, I tried wandering aimlessly around the desk, flipping

through a picture book about old Relics on the bookshelf, and even doing some exercises on the spot. Perhaps because now I knew the total amount of my debt, I felt oddly irritated.

Though, while doing all those things, I tried to come up with ways to repay the debt on my own, I couldn't come up with anything. Most importantly, I didn't really have anything I was good at. I had no knowledge, nor could I fight—I didn't even know why I was still a hunter. The more I thought about it, the more I found it depressing, and so I promptly gave up on thinking.

In any case, even with a good level of abilities, repaying a debt in the billions was impossible.

For a change of mood, I went and opened the window behind my seat wide. It was a nice day out there.

Sunrays poured into the room, and I subconsciously smiled against the backdrop of gentle breezes.

In front of the clan house was the main street. Looking down, I could see a lot of people bustling around today as well. There was a shimmering sea of human activity out there.

And in that mood, I began to ponder, *Compared to the vastness of this world, what is a debt in the billions?*

I was a complete failure, and I just wanted to dissolve into thin air like that.

And now that I'd finished my brief escape from reality, I closed the window and sat back down on the chair. Just as I let out a deep sigh, a rather loud knock unexpectedly sounded. Before I could reply, the door swung open.

"Master! Did you have something you need from me?!"

Entering the door was *not* Eva nor Sitri, but—counter to my expectations—Tino.

She was dressed in predominantly black attire as always, and her bare white legs peering out of her dress were dazzling. Perhaps she'd run here; her cheeks were slightly flushed.

It was rare for Tino to come to the off-limits clan master's office without

being summoned.

*No... I don't remember having summoned her, but did I really not? Could I really have called her?*

My memory lapses were overly severe.

I put on a half-hearted smile as I frantically searched my memory and tried to muddle my way through this.

"Y-Yeah, uh-huh—"

"See! That's what I thought! Master, um, it was a rare sight to see you smiling at me from the window, so I thought you might've something you needed from me!"

"Yeah? ...Y-Yeah, uh-huh..."

Tino looked down and fidgeted with her fingers as she spoke. Her expression was soft and lovestruck.

Somehow she'd spotted me in the clan master's office from the streets.

*I haven't noticed at all...*

That smile had been more of a smile at myself. Our gazes shouldn't have met either. Wasn't her loyalty a little bit too strong?

I rested my chin on my hand and didn't even try to hide my lack of enthusiasm, but Tino's expression remained unclouded.

"Siddy asked me to bring food for 'Drink,' and so I did—what perfect timing."

"Huh? 'Drink'? Like something for me to drink?"

"Huh? Siddy was so happy that you took it in..."

"Oh...yeah..."

*She meant that chimera. "Drink" is such a terrible name... Let's not bring that up again.*

*So now Tino runs erra—helps out with not only Liz's but also Sitri's requests? Tino seems to be much more hardworking than I am.*

It felt embarrassing to discuss my debts with a junior, but maybe she might

have some good ideas.

“Speaking of the thing I need from you, I need your advice on something. To be honest, I’ve been racking up an enormous amount of debt...”

I turned towards Tino, who seemed to somehow be in high spirits, and smiled at her genuinely this time.

“You tricked me again... Master, what do you think I am?”

“I’m not tricking you. Really.”

We continued our conversation as we descended the stairs in the clan house.

Tino’s voice was clearly sulky, and she said, “You raised my hopes only to dash them. As a matter of fact, I was hoping that, Master, you’d give me some chocolate or something.”

“I didn’t raise your hopes, nor did I dash them.”

On her face was an expression resembling that of a puppy whose treat had been taken away from it right in front of its eyes.

Somehow I felt like we’d had a similar conversation not too long ago. I couldn’t help but wonder what exactly Tino thought of me—perhaps I’d been giving her too many treats?

“Tino, you go through tough situations all the time, and yet you never seem to learn.”

“Th-That... I’m aware of that. It’s all because, Master, you’ve been thinking of me, right?”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

I was taken aback momentarily, but then I nodded thoughtlessly at Tino’s words that had come as if clinging for an answer.

Surely I’d been thinking of Tino: I always wished from the bottom of my heart that she’d find happiness someday—but that just wasn’t yielding any results...

*Liz and Sitri are always causing trouble for her; I should be kinder to her.*

“You’re not with Liz today, huh?”

“Lizzy...said she’ll prove it next time that she can break through the golem’s armor she didn’t break last time, and so she grabbed Siddy along with her for a special training session. I think they should be at her master’s place now.”

*I see... No wonder I don’t see both Liz and Sitri around. That leaves Tino here all alone.*

Including the incident at the tavern, Liz’s treatment of Tino seemed a bit rough. Liz didn’t necessarily hate Tino, but she tended to be apathetic in her interactions given her personality.

*Should I caution her about that?*

“Do you want me to talk to them about that? They should treat you more kindly.”

“Wha—?”

Perhaps taken aback, Tino widened her eyes fully—she was too used to being bullied.

Upon hearing my words, she began darting glances all around with her cheeks slightly flushed, and she said bashfully, “Oh...thank you, Master. But it’s fine. It’s also Lizzy’s command that I’m here to assist you when she’s not around.”

*Loyalty to the extreme, huh? I wonder what directives Liz has been feeding her. Well, she doesn’t seem to dislike it. I guess as long as she’s fine with it...*

“A-Also, I personally really enjoy very much being with you too, Master...”

“Aw, thanks. Anyway, going back to the topic of the debt—”

She paled.

Honestly, if she were to say something like “Actually, I hated being with you,” I’d start losing faith in humanity.

Tino was shocked, and her eyes were teary.

I laid my hands on her head and gave her a headpat. This wasn’t something I’d do to a full-fledged hunter, but Tino was almost like another little sister to me.

She took a deep breath as if trying to calm herself, and then she said in a



weak voice, “Master, I need money for replenishing supplies and maintaining my equipment too. Lizzy is already bleeding me dry as it is, and I’m already offering you all my Relics. Squeeze more out of me, and this well will run dry.”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

I wasn’t planning on borrowing from Tino anyway.

“Ugh... I d-did say I’m here to assist you, but there’s a limit to that... H-How much do you need?”

“I’m not looking to borrow. After all, it’s up in the billions. That’s way too much for you.”

“B-Bil...lions...?”

Stunned, Tino began counting on her fingers, trying to visualize the number. Her expression was much like Eva’s when she’d heard of the amount.

I knew... Apparently, even for a spendthrift hunter like myself, billions in debt wasn’t a small amount.

With a dry chuckle, Tino said with a trembling voice, “O-Of course, I should’ve known. Master, that’s really impressive of you to have borrowed such a considerable amount. As expected of a *Level 8* who’s feared by all.”

This was the first time I’d ever been praised for just borrowing money.

*Is she complimenting me? Is she making fun of me? ...Uh-huh, she has to be making fun of me.*

There was no room for excuses. When it came to money, one should really only borrow as much as one could repay.

“Ha ha... It’s okay, it’s okay. After all, it’s Sitri who’s lending me all the money. Apparently, if things go south, she can just waive all that debt for me if we get married.”

“What?”

Tino leaked a startled noise that sounded more bewildered than that from when she’d heard of the debt amount just earlier.

*I’m just kidding, just kidding.*

Around the lounge, hunters who apparently owed Sitri money twisted their faces into stricken expressions as they fed “Drink.” Our eyes met, but I closed the door and pretended not to notice. Down the stairs, we continued to descend.

Though Drink had taken a liking to me (despite almost killing me), it seemed to be quite ferocious towards the other hunters. They had to hold it down with multiple people in order to feed it. To be honest, that looked more like they were training it than feeding it.

Remarkably, that stubborn Vault Investigation Bureau had let go of it without much resistance.

“Um...Master, are you sure that’s all right?”

“It’s fine. It’s not like anyone has died from it, right?”

Though the casualty rate might increase if I were to feed it. Needless to say, that’d be concerning for me. While I’d gotten my Relics charged, my Safety Rings weren’t unlimited.

I felt bad for the hunters tasked with feeding it, but that was the final compromise from my negotiations with Sitri, so there was nothing we could do about it other than bear with it.

Bringing Tino with me, I fled the clan house.

I didn’t really have plans to be outside, but I’d most likely be made to feed the chimera if I’d gone back—allow me to pass on that.

Fortunately, I had an entourage by the name of Tino with me now. Having her as my convoy was reassuring, and, more importantly, we shared a love for sweets.

*Let’s make this a date to treat ourselves for the first time in a long while.*

Seeing that Tino was still wary of the clan house, I proposed, “Since we’re out here, how about we go grab something sweet once in a while? My treat.”

Tino had never turned down an invitation like this before. And so I thought she’d be beaming this time too, but her response was unexpected.

“W-Well, that’s... I’m really, really glad you asked, but...um, Master...don’t

you have debts to pay?”

That...was a very valid point, and I had absolutely no counterargument for it.

Tino’s expression was clouded with worry, appearing much graver than that of me, the one actually with the debt.

“Um...it pains me to say this, but...maybe you should cut back your expenses a bit...? Of course, I’ll do everything I can to assist with that too. Though that’s quite the amount you owe...”

“D-Don’t worry. You see, after all, it’s Sitri whom I’ve borrowed from...”

If it’d been just a random moneylender, I surely wouldn’t be as calm as I was now.

But, at my half-baked words, Tino responded in a blunt tone that was unusual for her, “That won’t do, Master! Marrying Siddy is the worst thing you can do to repay your debts.”

*I...can’t really argue with that.*

I remained speechless.

The tone in Tino’s voice shifted abruptly, and she said as her large black eyes welled up with tears, “A-Also, if Siddy and Master were to marry... I’m sure we wouldn’t be able to walk together like this again.”

“I’m sure that won’t be the case—”

“It will! Even if she might lend you to me for a bit, Siddy will definitely try to monopolize you!”

Her voice was frantic.

*What exactly does she foresee? And what’s the point of monopolizing me?*

Though, to begin with, I had never intended to marry for just the purpose of repaying debt.

Besides, before Tino would despise me for that, Lucia would never allow that to happen either way. My younger sister seemed to have set her sights on making her brother a true man.

Seeming much more motivated than I was, Tino mumbled with a more serious

expression than ever, “I shall keep only the bare minimum, sell off the rest of the assets, and empty the savings. I’m sure if I work with Lizzy, I’ll surely be able to clear off the billions—huh?! D-Does that...does that mean if I clear the debt, half of Master would be m-mine...?”

“Tino?”

Unsettling words reached my ears, but unfortunately, I was the kind of person who could borrow from my family without so much as flinching. I meant, even now, despite shouldering a ten-digit debt, I was still brazenly walking under the sun as if nothing was wrong. See?

Meanwhile, Tino shook her head vigorously as if trying to shake off impure thoughts.

“N-No, no, that’s not going to happen. After all, everything of mine is Master’s, and I’m Master’s...”

*You’re Master’s what?*

*I should scold Liz the next time I see her so that she doesn’t put ideas even weirder than this into Tino’s head.*

“You don’t have to sell your belongings. There has to be a better solution...”

*I can’t come up with anything right now, but there has to be something. Well, Eva will figure something out if worse comes to worst...*

*No, no, no, no, no, this won’t do. I need to stop relying on others as my first resort.*

Then, Tino suddenly clapped her hands together.

“Th-That’s it! Master, we’re hunters. How about we go to a treasure vault and retrieve some Relics? Luckily the auction is coming soon, and I’m sure they will fetch high prices!”

She’d proposed *the* orthodox approach... That was Tino for you, so very unlike me. But of course, this was the first option I’d considered—and then rejected. If anything, I was almost baffled that she hadn’t brought that proposal up in the beginning.

Tino looked at me with sparkling eyes.

“Though it might seem like cheating and a bit unfair for other hunters, with your foresight, you surely know which treasure vault will give valuable Relics, right?”

What kind of superhuman was that? Relics appeared in treasure vaults randomly. While there existed clans who attempted to predict that statistically, I’d never heard of that working out properly. Naturally, this was beyond my capabilities, but for some reason, Tino seemed convinced that I could do it.

“Hmm, unfortunately, I’m busy and I can’t afford to go searching for Relics...”

And even though the auction was an event where one could make a fortune at a single stroke, making high billions was still challenging.

Though I’d been obliquely expressing my reluctance, Tino didn’t back down. I could see shades of her mentor in the way she pressed on with great optimism.

“Um...w-well then, Master, what about you give me instructions, and I can go and fetch them. Well...if the vault isn’t too dangerous, that is...”

“...”

Tino’s kindness was overwhelming, and unlike Liz’s and the others’, hers didn’t come with thorns. This pained my heart, and I felt a prick of conscience.

*Fine, I get it; I know you’re a good girl already, so just let me be. Let me go to hell alone. That’s the only good I can do.*

“All right, if you put it that way...I’ll go pick some up later just in case.”

“Great! I’m counting on you then!”

“Just that, even for me...um...yeah, at best, I’d put my accuracy at predicting Relics at around fifty percent—”

“Fifty percent?! W-Wow, as expected of Master...”

*Sorry, that’s not going to happen.*

What I’d meant to say was that any prediction could either hit, or it could miss. And this time, I didn’t intend to get it right.

I could just randomly send her to a low-level treasure vault, and she’d be satisfied when she found out that there weren’t any Relics in there. Or at least,

she'd be understanding of the situation. After all, exploiting this junior of mine to repay my debt was a bad idea.

It might have been a bit late to realize, but karma had piled up against me.

I let out a small sigh and made a new suggestion to Tino.

"Well, let's go grab something sweet as a precelebration. The accuracy of my Relic prediction might be fifty-fifty, but this will be absolutely perfect."

It was the other party who'd noticed us first.

We were on a narrow path away from the main street, a shortcut to my favorite café lately. It was a path not wide enough for carriages and with very little foot traffic.

A familiar slender long-haired man—Lackey A—saw me and was startled.

"Huh? You're—"

"Ah! Oh no... I've completely forgotten who you are..."

He was a man I absolutely didn't want to encounter right now.

They were Arnold Hail and his party; they were invaders from the Nebulanubes, Land of Fogs.

I'd been shutting myself in until just now because I'd been thinking "No, let me stay in so I don't have to cross paths with these guys," and yet, here they were. This had completely slipped my mind.

And worse, even if I didn't remember them, they seemed to know my face. They'd probably traced me from Liz.

It seemed like even the strong warning from Gark I'd requested through Eva, in anticipation of their retaliation, hadn't made any difference either.

*Why can't anything go exactly as I wish? What a shame. I was about to enjoy a fun teatime with Tino...*

"You forgot?!"

"You damn bastard...looking down on me just because you're *one* level higher!"

*No, that isn't it... I'm just completely blanking out.*

Arnold's lackeys were clamoring, and, at their center, Arnold took a step forward. No matter how I put it, he was clearly not here for a friendly chat.

His body was no less buffed than Gark's. On his back was his massive sword, and the gaze in his gold eyes, glinting with an almost inhuman light, were sharp. Even if compared to the rest of his party, his aura was overwhelmingly imposing. An average hunter who wasn't used to this kind of thing would surely have frozen in his presence.

The reason I could still move without a hitch was thanks to my strong resistance to intimidation. I'd been thoroughly threatened by humans and demons alike, and my companions were also freaks. Because of that, I'd come to understand instinctively that even a deadly strike would be deflected by my Safety Rings.

Arnold spoke in a low, menacing voice, "Thousand Tricks...you sure have guts to come looking for us."

Seemed like my worst prediction had come true: they were here for me, apparently. It went without saying that they were here for revenge; I'd expected it. And that'd been exactly why I'd asked Eva to get Gark to send them a warning to pin them in place. It'd been a common theme where people had chalked it up to me instead of Liz.

With the fierce hunter exuding his intimidating aura, the few people on the already sparsely populated street disappeared. As expected of the capital's inhabitants. Their sense for disaster was top-notch.

But this was bad—very bad.

Even Tino wouldn't have stood a chance against a Level 7 opponent. Even now, she'd been analyzing the enemy's strength, and a grim expression was showing on her face.

"Don't tell me you want to do it in a place like this..."

"Bring out your weapons, Thousand Tricks—no, actually, I won't have you thinking that you could see the depth of our strength just like that."

Arnold had been making a beeline for a fight without any negotiation or explanation. He was overly hotheaded. He wasn't even wielding his sword.

It'd take time for guards to arrive in this narrow alley, and to begin with, it was uncertain whether the guards would even come at all.

"I've heard, Thousand Tricks. Apparently you've sent a golem flying with just your aura, haven't you? Ha ha ha, if that's true, why don't you show us?"

He must've meant the Akasha golem. I'd already thoroughly explained that so many times to everyone around me.

"It was a misunderstanding! I didn't send the golem flying; it flew off on its own!"

"Huh...?! Keep that bullshit to yourself! Where in the world would a golem just fly off on its own?!" shouted a lackey angrily as his face turned red.

*Who would've thought? But it actually exists.*

The opponent was a Level 7. They should be able to understand if I explained. I wasn't good at persuasion, but I had no choice.

As I took a deep breath, Arnold and his party fell silent. Then, I said in a calm voice, trying my best not to provoke them, "Well, let's calm down. I understand your anger. I *do*. Being beaten up in public out of nowhere is infuriating, and I get it. I can't say I don't understand why you'd all come for revenge against me like this. No matter whose fault it was, Liz has definitely gone too far. Yeah, I do think so too. Despite that, I'll ask that you don't hit me with all your might if you may..."

"..."

"But trying to gang up on me on such a narrow road like this doesn't sound very smart to me. Can't we settle this with an apology? I'll bow my head in apology, and if needed, I'll even kowtow to you if necessary. How about that?"

"..."

Despite my best efforts to concede, Arnold's expression remained unfazed. I could tell from his expression that he'd never seen a Level 8 kowtow before. My kowtow cut right to people's hearts.



I continued appealing to Arnold and his companions desperately.

“Look, you can tell, can’t you? I’m about to go on a date with Tino here. Any guy would understand what that means, right? I’m looking forward to it.”

“Aw, Master... Please don’t lower your head for my sake! You can wipe these guys out in a single blow if you want to!”

Tino’s voice trembled as she stared at Arnold with a stern look.

*Please teach me how I can “want” them out of existence.*

“Come on. Oh, yeah, unfortunately, I don’t have my weapons on me today. If we’re really going to do this, how about we pick another time? Mr. Arnold, it wouldn’t mean much to you either if you defeat me when I’m not giving it my all, right?”

“Master is god. Master is worried that he’d shatter your confidence if he beats you up while he’s not giving it his all. Seriously, I should’ve taught you more about this god—you come without realizing your place, you fools. At this rate, you won’t be defeating that pseudo-handsome dude, let alone Master here.”

“What...?!”

Somehow, even though I was trying to handle things peacefully, Tino was pouring fuel on the fire. And it seemed that the flames of provocation from Tino were spreading faster than I could put out.

I reached out my arm towards the slender limbs of Tino, who was standing in front of me. I restrained her as if hugging her and covered her mouth with my hand.

As her face blushed bright red and her body stiffened, I persuaded her in her ear in a soft voice, “Calm down, Tino. I want to settle this peacefully. Well, it’s true that I might be weaker than that ‘pseudo-handsome dude,’ but that doesn’t matter. He isn’t free right now.”

After all, that “pseudo-handsome dude”—Ark Rodin—was one of the top hunters in the capital. He was so strong that no one would come to mind immediately if you asked for a stronger hunter. Also, he wasn’t “pseudo”; he

was genuinely handsome.

I waited for Tino to nod in agreement before releasing her.

Then I checked on Arnold and his party. Their expressions were completely twisted, and their anger was visibly unrestrained.

With upturned eyes that Tino often wore, I gingerly confirmed, “W-Well...so, would you please...?”

“Heh... In your dreams—”

It was no use. It was a complete failure. At this rate, there was no stopping this. Just as I’d thought, I was terrible at negotiations.

Before Arnold could rage, I said in a loud voice, “All right, I get it, I get it! But this place is way too narrow. If we’re going to do this, let’s do it on a bigger street!”

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*Dammit, what is this man thinking?* pondered Arnold as he effortfully suppressed his boiling anger and watched the unsuspecting young man’s back.

This encounter had been unexpected. According to the intelligence they’d gathered, the Thousand Tricks almost never left his clan house, and so Arnold had thought he’d need to come up with a plan to encounter him. He had intended this trip as a reconnaissance only and wasn’t expecting to actually meet him in person.

Of course, if they actually crossed paths, that wouldn’t be a problem for Arnold. He was a hunter, and hunters never neglected their equipment.

On the contrary, it’d been the Thousand Tricks’s appearance that had seemed suspicious: not only had his casual attire appeared far from suitable for combat, but he also had no visible weapons on him. Of course, he could’ve concealed his weapons in various ways, so caution was warranted, but his every single move just seemed overly vulnerable.

*Is he aiming to counter my attack? Is that why he’s intentionally showing his vulnerabilities? But his actions seem so blatant...*

Even worse, this encounter probably didn’t happen by chance. Arnold

would've thought otherwise had they met on the main street, but considering that this was a secluded byway where they'd met, it was more natural to consider this as the result of the Thousand Tricks's foresight, as rumored.

Arnold didn't know what to make of this. The Thousand Tricks had come taunting them in an ostentatious outfit, then begun claiming to not want a fight. And now, brushing that aside, he was recklessly suggesting that they continue at a more crowded main street. His intentions were alarmingly impossible to fathom—truly befitting the name “Thousand Tricks.”

*We have the benefit of numbers.*

Although the young lady accompanying the Thousand Tricks was fairly capable (or rather, she looked stronger than the Thousand Tricks himself no matter how he sliced it), she still couldn't compare to Arnold or Eigh. A wider street would be more beneficial to Arnold's side with their superiority in numbers.

*Is this meant to be a handicap on himself? But why...?*

Arnold was already almost certain of his victory.

The Thousand Tricks was such a weakling that had Eigh not learned of his appearances beforehand, they would surely have passed him by without noticing. His movements were the very definition of “amateur.” Since he was a Level 8, it was hard to imagine that what they could see on the surface was all there was to his strength, yet Arnold couldn't envision losing to him.

This was a first for Arnold. He would've understood if his strength was so inconceivable that he couldn't see the end of it—but there was simply too little to his strength.

“Arnold, let's not let our guards down. That dude is trusted by the Association branch manager.”

“Yeah, I know.”

He clenched his teeth and glared fiercely at the back of his opponent's head, but the Thousand Tricks's behavior remained unchanged.

This was a strange situation indeed.

According to Arnold's estimation, the Thousand Tricks's strength was only comparable to a random person they could pull from the crowd, yet it was hard to believe that such a weakling could brush off intimidation calmly—this was all too incongruous.

*Will I learn the essence of this discrepancy if I fight him?*

The Thousand Tricks moved confidently, showing not a sign of fleeing, and true to his words, he came to a halt right in the middle of a bustling main street.

Street stalls lined the sides of the avenue, and an unusually large crowd, something rarely seen in the Land of Fogs, dotted the thoroughfare.

*He must be mad.*

Making a commotion in such a place would surely attract the attention of the guards. Not to mention, being defeated in such a place with all those witnesses would tarnish the name "Thousand Tricks."

Krai Andrey turned around slowly. His every gesture didn't seem motivated, but his gaze seemed to subtly whisper, "We can stop this if you're scared."

"Humph. Nonsense."

There was no truth to this. Arnold had never once felt fear since becoming a hunter.

He wielded the great sword on his back, a unique weapon made from the materials of the Thunder Dragon they'd hunted. His party mates followed suit, assuming their stances with practiced movements.

Eigh inched closer and, with a taunting voice, said, "I'd like to see which of you two is stronger—you or Arnold. You've surely made us swallow the bitter pill this time. You'll take us all on simultaneously as a Level 8, right?"

"Ugh...can I not? I don't really want to..."

Krai's attitude showed no sign of changing even now. Their frustration gradually grew as he restlessly looked around, seemingly distressed.

The man before their eyes was a Level 8, a hunter with a level higher than that of Arnold the Dragon Slayer. If he didn't exhibit a suitable gravitas, their party's civility—and consequently, Arnold's—would be tarnished.

“I see... So you’re a fool who’s climbed up the ranks by leeching on your luck and the strength of your comrades. That tells me a lot about the manners of Grieving Souls.”

Upon hearing Arnold’s words, Krai raised his eyebrows, not in anger, but in surprise.

Their opponent was full of flaws, and he was looking down on them. This was going to be easier than child’s play.

Though, the moment Arnold stepped forward, the young lady next to the Thousand Tricks echoed his move and stood in his way.

“What? Get lost,” snapped Arnold.

The young lady wore black attire designed for mobility and a set of brown gloves for protecting her fists. The air around her was so tense that one could almost hear it crackle. Her pair of black eyes were sharp, and her pellucid pupils burned with flames of fighting spirit.

She was a Thief. Thieves generally weren’t specialized in combat, and they didn’t match up well one-on-one against heavyweight Swordsmen like Arnold. So unless her skills were significantly higher, she probably wouldn’t stand a chance. Although she was considerably strong for her age, she wasn’t strong enough to take on Arnold and his group as they were now.

*She’s probably a Level 4 or 5 at best.*

Yet, despite Arnold’s intimidation, the girl that the Thousand Tricks had called “Tino” earlier remained unfazed.

“I’m not. Grown up enough. To stand idly by. When I hear. People. Insulting. Master!”

Her chest rose and fell slowly with each of her breath, and her eyes burned with cold anger, but she wasn’t enraged. There was no tension in her stance, and she was in an ideal condition for combat.

*Does she not understand the difference between our levels...? No, that isn’t the case...*

She understood the difference and was still willing to challenge them.

The young lady before them was still quite young, but, without a doubt, she was an exceptional talent with the potential to become a top-tier hunter one day.

The disparity in their strengths was evident. But hunters who dared to stand up against the challenge—like her—were strong. Even though she might not be able to defeat Arnold, she at least had a slight chance of taking down Eigh or the other party members right now—however, that only applied in a one-on-one matchup.

His gaze slightly widening, Eigh warned her, “Hey, missy, you don’t stand a chance at winning. Your determination is admirable, but get your ass out of the way. We’re only aiming to defeat that man over there.”

It wasn’t like she’d insulted them before. They weren’t interested in extinguishing a young spark prematurely.

Tino didn’t respond to those words. Instead, she turned to the man behind her and inquired, “Master, please let me handle this! I’ll make sure they regret insulting you!”

Perhaps sensing the imminent fight, passersby emptied the area around them, and an empty space was formed.

The young lady’s words were incredibly dauntless and foolhardy in the face of a Level 7 opponent. Considering their classes’ compatibility, she wouldn’t stand a chance even if Arnold didn’t have a weapon. This was only going to be a one-sided battle.

Naturally, there was no way that the Thousand Tricks was oblivious to that fact. Surely he wouldn’t allow her to take up the challenge. After all, restraining reckless youngsters was the job of high-level hunters.

That was what Arnold and his party mates had believed.

Krai Andrey, smiling with his eyes wide open, said:

“Okay, yeah, go ahead. Take care though.”

“?!”

“What?”

The members of Falling Fog, even Arnold himself, were left speechless. Perhaps since this also came as a surprise to this Tino in front of them, a hint of confusion flashed across her pupils.

*Unbelievable. This is absurd... What is he thinking?*

Arnold had insulted not Tino but Krai. Her loyalty to Krai had driven her to stand in the way of Arnold. Her loyalty was genuine, but Tino lacked the capability to carry it out.

*I would've stopped her. This isn't even up for discussion; I'd just stop her.*

Arnold would've stopped her. He would've intervened, thanked her for her kind words, and stepped forward himself. That was what a hero does. But what about this man before him?

The Thousand Tricks scuttled backwards and, of all things, crossed his arms and switched to audience mode.

*...Unbelievable.*

Looking around at his companions' expressions, Arnold saw faces that all appeared to be dumbfounded by his actions.

Tino, her anger from a moment ago half dispersed, hesitatingly raised her voice and said, "Um...Master?"

"Right. I didn't get a proper chance at White Wolf's Den last time. Why don't you show me the results of your training?"

"Y-Yes, Master. Please witness my valor," replied Tino, unable to mask the shakiness in her voice.

She lifted her face and stared sternly at Arnold. Her pupils glistened slightly—probably not from anger.

"D-Don't mock my Masterrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" bellowed Tino in desperation. Clenching her fist, she closed the distance between her and Arnold.

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I didn't really understand the situation, but this might be a dire one.

As I observed Tino battle Arnold's party, I periodically shifted my gaze around

to search for companions.

First Steps, as a clan, exhibited several peculiarities, including having numerous talented young members and being led by a beautiful vice clan master.

Noteworthy among these peculiarities was the sheer size of the clan. To put it simply, our clan vastly outnumbered any other.

Bringing Arnold to a more crowded area was a deliberate act to allow me to find such companions. While their party was large with eight people, First Steps had over a hundred. The quality of our hunters wasn't low either; if I could get half of them to come, even a Level 7 opponent wouldn't stand a chance against us.

Pathetically, when it came to the skill of seeking help from allies, no one in our clan could surpass me. The members of our clan were also accustomed to me seeking help from them.

"Hey, yo, Thousand Tricks! What're you looking at?! Keep your eyes focused on the fight right here! This missy here is fighting for you, you know?!"

As I looked around, for some reason, the enemies started jeering at me.

It was Lackey A. He'd been standing next to Arnold just now.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, sorry. My bad, A. You see, I'm busy too..."

I hastily shifted my gaze back to the battle. But honestly—how should I put it—the fight was so impressive that I couldn't quite wrap my mind around it.

Tino and Arnold appeared to be evenly matched in battle. Tino fought barehanded, and Arnold had also discarded his sword to fight barehanded. It was simply a pure brawl.

While Arnold's companions behind him were refraining from joining in, our overwhelming disadvantage remained unchanged. Though, it seemed they had no intention of reinforcing him.

Then, suddenly, Lackey A took a few steps backwards in shock.

"H-How do you know my name?!"



“Hmm...? Huh? ...Oh, so your name is really ‘A’? That’s a surprise...”

*I wish I could get to meet the parent who’d named him.*

Though I’d only spoken my honest thought, A’s face turned redder by the second.

“Master?! Master! Please watch me closely!!!” shouted Tino.

Tino and Arnold had different breadths and heights. Her bold defiance against the large Arnold reminded me of her master, Liz.

Meanwhile, Arnold wore a fierce expression.

Arnold retreated slightly to evade Tino’s roundhouse kick that came in a sharp turn. And as he did, with the palm of his hand, he caught an irregular, swift jab that struck with an audible sharp whirring gush of wind.

I wasn’t well-versed in martial arts, so I understood not a thing—but this was amazing.

*I wonder, since when had Tino become strong enough to go head-to-head with a Level 7 opponent?*

Then, at that moment, I spotted a familiar figure in the distance at the far end of the road.

It was Sven, a true warrior who also held the title of “Dragon Slayer.”

*Luck is on my side!*

Without much thought, I waved at him and smiled.

“What the fuck are you doing?!”

“Oh, sorry, I just saw a friend of mine over there—”

Arnold rolled his eyes. *Enjoy life while you can, because you only have minutes left.*

Arnold seemed already fully occupied with only Tino; if Sven joined us, we wouldn’t lose.

*Yeah. Go for it, Sven.*

Sven noticed me from afar with his specialized Archer’s vision. He exchanged

glances with his companions around him, looked at my waving hand once again, nodded like he understood my gesture, and gave me a thumbs-up.

With that, he left with his companions and left me there jumping up and down, desperately trying to catch his attention.

*Seriously?*

“Haaa... Haaa... Mas...ter...please...be...more...serious!” said Tino, almost out of breath, without stopping her movements.

*What do you mean? I’m very serious. I’m very seriously trying to do what I can... Dammit, Sven. I guess I can only rely on the pseudo-handsome dude, huh? ...But he still hasn’t come back from running errands for that nobleman.*

Feeling somewhat tired, I sat down on a wooden crate nearby.

They seemed to be evenly matched. Maybe—just maybe—she’d somehow manage even without help. There was a chance that the guards might come *here* after all.

Tino’s attacks were swift. Her kicks and jabs comboed continuously like a flow, giving just a glimpse of the talent that Liz was recognized for. While not quite on par with Liz, she surged almost like the wind.

*I guess I’ll focus on cheering then.*

“Go, Tino, go with pride! You’re the world’s mightiest tide! In Tino we all confide!”

“Master! Please stop with the weir—”

“You can defeat him! With just a little bit more you can defeat Arnold! Come on, give it your all!”

“Huh?!”

At that moment, Arnold froze, and Tino’s kick and jab connected with his exposed body.

Somehow, my cheering seemed to have distracted him. She’d hit him squarely in a critical spot. But Arnold didn’t fall over. His body just swayed slightly, and, without showing any signs of pain nor discomfort, he glared back

—not at Tino but at me.

“‘With just a little bit more...and she can defeat *me*’?!”

*Huh? Wait a second... Could it be...that he’s been holding back?*

Along with his stifled voice, he launched his beefy right arm in a thrust.

It was an incredibly powerful strike that could only be correctly described as dreadful. It was as though Tino’s jabs were a gentle breeze and Arnold’s were a fierce maelstrom.

Tino scurried backwards in a panic to avoid the strike from above, but she didn’t make it in time.

Immediately, she overlapped her hands to try to intercept the hit, but Arnold’s fist easily deflected her hands and greatly disrupted Tino’s stance.

Of course, Arnold wouldn’t miss such a window of opportunity.

“Maste—”

His golden eyes gleamed.

Arnold grabbed Tino’s shirt collar by hand and lifted her entire body up high.

Tino struggled to break free, but she was helplessly flung around, and, just like that, she was slammed onto the ground.

A thunderous crash.

Tino, having landed on her back, let out a small groan of pain.

Despite that, Arnold’s grip remained clenched on Tino’s neck.

He was strong—too strong. The situation had easily turned drastically in his favor in an instant.

It seemed I’d been the only one who’d thought they’d been evenly matched.

“Cut it out. With your. Disrespect. Thousand Tricks!” roared Arnold as he continued to pin Tino down on the ground.

At his thunderous bellow, even I furrowed my brows in reflex.

“How dared you perch up on your high horse like you’re a king!”

*This is bad.*

Arnold's party was almost unscathed with eight of them, and we only had me alone, now that Tino was knocked out.

It could've been a different story if Sven had joined us; we might have been able to salvage the situation. This situation was very bad.

I had my Safety Rings with me, though I wondered if they could actually withstand Arnold's fierce assault.

Either way, I wasn't acting like I was a king or anything, but saying that Arnold—with veins bulging in his face—was mad would be an understatement.

My heart thumped heavily, but, feigning serenity, I stood up from the wooden crate.

*I've made up my mind. They're not going to forgive me now no matter how artful my kowtows are going to be anyway...*

I didn't want to use this if possible, but there was no other choice.

"I'm not acting like I'm a king or anything...but I guess I don't have a choice."

The silence was all-encompassing.

Perhaps not knowing what to expect from me, Arnold and his party mates didn't seem to be approaching me.

I was the weakest hunter in this capital, but as the saying went, a cornered rat would bite even a cat. Most of my Relic collection was useless in combat, but I had something special reserved for moments like these.

I fished a pendant-type Relic around my neck out from under my shirt. On it was a five-pointed star made of gold with a crystal embedded in it. Inside the pellucid crystal, swirling like the night sky, was a deep blackness.

It was an Aspiration Manifest. This, alongside the Safety Rings, was my lifeline. Even during the dire situations at White Wolf's Den, I hadn't used this Relic.

It was a Relic that had originated as a tool once created by a technician who admired magic deeply. It was a Relic with a ludicrous ability that allowed me to

stock release at will one spell with a colossal price of about a hundred times its usual mana cost. All my power stemmed from the riches amassed by Grieving Souls, and this could be considered the pinnacle of them all.

It contained a gravity magic spell, a spell that rivaled lightning magic in difficulty.

It'd been Lucia—the great sorcerer of Grieving Souls who boasted the strongest offensive capabilities, and who always recharged my Relics while grumbling about it—who had imbued it with the spell.

She was the manipulator of all phenomena, the poster child of sorcery. She was Lucia Rogier, the Avatar of Creation—my younger sister.

Perhaps because of its nature as a spell stock, this Relic had an extremely slow natural mana drain rate. And so, it'd become my trump card for times when Lucia was away from me for extended periods for whatever reasons.

I was told that I should only use it in life-threatening situations. Whether this was one or not, I couldn't say for sure. But Tino was in trouble now, and if I didn't use it now, when else should I? She'd been fighting for my sake, after all. Even if we somehow managed to get out of this situation unscathed without my help, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself for not doing something for her.

Seemingly having sensed something uncanny in the change in my attitude, the lackeys dispersed and steadily surrounded me.

Yet I wasn't worried.

Arnold, still pinning Tino flat to the ground, had somehow wielded his greatsword in one hand.

*This* was a magic my younger sister—my pride—had imbued.

I puffed up my chest and tried to look as cool as possible.

“Don't worry. I won't take your lives,” I assured.

Arnold's lackeys readied their weapons, and Arnold abandoned Tino and boldly pressed closer.

Then, I quietly unleashed the magic sealed in the Relic.

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Lucia had expended monumental effort to give me the ace up my sleeve.

“What?! Leader, what do you mean?”

“You want me to imbue it with a spell that ‘is nonlethal,’ ‘can subdue high-level hunters,’ ‘has a wide area of effect,’ and ‘doesn’t cause collateral damage’ all at the same time? You’re asking for too much.”

“As you know, Leader, gravity magic is already advanced enough on its own, and to make things worse, it’s an obscure magic. Do you understand? Its mana consumption increases drastically with the range, and on top of that, you’re not just trying to increase the firepower, you’re also trying to make it fit all the constraints. And particularly, constructing delicate spells like that will require an immense amount of mana—basically, magic as you’ve described is impossible, you know? Wait, no. I’ll have to look first into...”

“Sorry, but can you please get me some mana restoration potions from Siddy? Get *all* you can.”

“Here. Take this with you; it’s what you’ve requested—what? Of course not; what did you expect? Such a perfect spell doesn’t exist, of course! I invented it! I’ve examined all kinds of gravity magic and dissected their mechanisms—it would’ve been much simpler if you just needed it to kill your opponents, but since you insisted on all that... This is a totally pointless magic spell with a casting time of thirty minutes. And I’m completely out of mana—I don’t want to see your face for a while. Now, get out! I just pulled an all-nighter! ...What? You want me to recharge your other Relics?!”

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The effort (of Lucia) had borne fruit. The battle quietly ended in an instant.

The lackeys who’d been surrounding me until just now were stuck to the ground without a chance to resist. The sound of armor colliding with the ground echoed, and weapons fell from their hands.

“Wh-What...was that...? Was that...magic?! This...magic...!”

Arnold was barely supporting himself on the greatsword he’d planted into the

ground. He was on his knees, enduring the weight. His body trembled, and his head violently shook. Perhaps because he was exerting all his strength, his skin was tainted bright red.

I shuddered slightly at the scene, but it seemed he was too overwhelmed to take any offensive action.

I sat back down on the wooden crate and crossed my legs. Having released the magic contained within the pendant, I stored away the Relic that had lost its light.

And I said, “*That* was Tyrant’s Order, an original spell. I feel the strength is toned down a bit, but this was quite something, won’t you say?”

My sister, Lucia, had developed the spell over a sleepless night. Of course it had to be “quite something.”

Arnold’s eyes wandered over his party mates, and then, seeing the intact houses and perplexed citizens in the distance, his voice trembled.

“What...is this insanity...? I-Is this...gravity magic? No way! But...?”

“It’s a revolutionary spell. It doesn’t harm houses or other people at all. I might not be the best person to say this, but this is quite the spell, don’t you think?”

This was a spell created by my little sister, Lucia, through trial and error. Of course it had to be “quite the spell.”

Not a single crack marred the pavement.

The brilliance of this magic lay in its high power and precise targeting. Tyrant’s Order harmed not even a fly beyond its targets and, on top of that, boasted the power to completely immobilize a Level 7 hunter. This was *the* flawless nonlethal magic!

Of course, it wasn’t like I could use it or anything, so I couldn’t really boast myself...

“*You*...! You’re a Magus...?! Damn it!” roared Arnold.

Even with his roaring, he wasn’t scary or anything while still being on his knees.

As I stood there with a smug expression, a voice filled with anguish suddenly reached my ears.

“Mas...ter... Help...”

I looked to the side.

Tino lay flat on the ground. It seemed a considerable gravitational force was acting on her. Her voice was stuttering, and her limbs were flat against the ground, twitching spasmodically.

This was completely out of my expectations.

One of Arnold’s lackeys, subdued by the gravity, croaked in accusation, “E-Even...your...teammate...?! You...devil... Ugh...”

“Wait, wait! I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

I hurriedly reached out to Tino, who was crying on the ground.

Actually, Tyrant’s Order determined its target based on the strength of the mana material absorbed. Both me, the user, and anything I touched were exempt from its targeting, but otherwise, it was indiscriminate as long as the target was a reasonably capable hunter. It also had quite an extensive range, so although there wasn’t anyone within eyeshot, there were probably several hunters out there who were being crushed by gravity right now.

*I’m sorry. It doesn’t kill, so please forgive me.*

Tino, freed from the gravity, staggered as she stood up. And as a small compensation, I offered my shoulder for her support.

Tino was in tatters, and she looked disheveled, but she didn’t have any noticeable injuries on her. Her intense coughing was probably due to the damage inflicted by Arnold. It might have been too late for her to recover from this; I should treat her to something sweet later.

Finally, I looked at Arnold, who was still somehow enduring on his knees. I offered a smile in response to his piercing gaze.





“Well, Arnold, have you calmed down?”

“D-Dammit. This...is ridiculous. Why is a Magus of your caliber—”

“I’m not a Magus though. Well, anyway.”

“Huh?!”

Now, here was the real conundrum: I’d merely restrained Arnold’s movements, and that was all.

As impressive as it was in terms of power, accuracy, and range, unfortunately, the gravity magic Lucia had imbued didn’t last very long. During that short window of time, I needed to somehow crush Arnold and his party’s fighting spirit.

Arnold, Eigh, and the rest of their party, despite being down on their hands and knees, hadn’t lost their fighting spirit at all. Every one of them looked up at me with eyes gleaming like ravenous beasts.

“Looks like they aren’t giving up yet.”

“They don’t know when to give up.” She coughed shakily. “They don’t understand the difference between your power and theirs—Master... Uh, thanks for the massage. My shoulders are fine now.”

“Well, well, you really did your best just now, so let me keep up with the massage for a bit longer.”

Without physical contact with me, gravity was going to take its toll on her. All I could do was operate the Relic and unleash the spell exactly as it was. Lucia might have been able to customize the spell on the spot to exclude individuals, but that was beyond me.

Perhaps because she’d decided to fawn on me, Tino lightly apologized and thanked me and came leaning on me.

Her dainty body was surprisingly light, so light that it was hard to imagine that she could’ve scuffled with Arnold. This might have come a bit late, but I started to feel a little queasy now—slamming a girl like her onto the ground didn’t seem like an appropriate course of action for a Level 7.

Despite my having forced various tasks onto Tino, it seemed like she hadn't given up on me yet.

I sighed and, feeling fed up from the bottom of my heart, looked down at Arnold.

*I'm not using honorifics with him anymore.*

"Sorry, Arnold, but I have preparations to make for the auction and other stuff. I'm rather busy, and honestly, I don't have time to deal with you guys. I'm sorry. Okay?"

"!"

Arnold growled with a demonic expression. Perhaps he'd bitten his tongue; a drop of blood dripped from his chin.

I didn't have time to deal with them, and besides, I'd run out of Tyrant's Orders, which I needed in order to deal with them. Even Lucia, who'd imbued it with the spell, wasn't around either.

*Dammit. If only Sven or Ark or even anyone else were here...*

There, I came up with a great idea.

"Well, hmm...but, if you still insist on fighting me after suffering all this, then let's set some prerequisites."

"Prerequisites?!" repeated Arnold.

I wasn't really in a position to set conditions, but it seemed like this could work somehow.

Putting on a very serious face, I looked at the members of Falling Fog, who were down on their limbs.

Boldly, I said, "I'm the master of First Steps. It'd be nonsensical to fight the boss right out of the gate. So if you would like to fight me, there should be stages you have to clear first. Got it? If you want to exchange blows with me, then I shall have you first defeat the key parties that form our clan: Obsidian Cross, Starlight, Ark Brave, and Knights of the Torch! Once you've accomplished that, then, sure, I shall consider fighting you fair and square too."

And before Arnold and his crew, who were still stuck to the ground, could revive, I took Tino's hand and fled the scene.

I was weak. But weak as I was, I was a Level 8. I'd been a hunter for *five* years now, and I'd come to understand hooligans' personalities to some extent: they were strong and valiant, they cared naught about the inconvenience they caused to their surroundings, and most importantly, they loved challenging hardship.

We returned to the alley, and when Arnold and his lackeys were finally out of sight, Tino timidly asked me, "Um, M-Master... Are you sure *that* was a good idea?"

"It was. More importantly, are you all right?"

"Y-Yes, I'm fine, Master. B-But...I'm sorry that I didn't live up to your expectations."

"Oh, don't stress yourself about it. It was just me misjudging the situation."

*You know, I can't really tell the difference when people get stronger than a certain level...*

I could still tell the difference in strength between Liz and Tino, but I couldn't really tell when it came to opponents like we had this time, especially since they were of different classes.

*It was so cunning of him to hold back like that to appear like he was losing!*

Tino hesitated for a moment, then tightly pressed her lips together as if holding back tears.

*Is she upset at her foolish Master?*

All things considered, while Arnold might be the root of the evil, I was disappointed in Sven for abandoning his comrades. Well, he didn't have an obligation to stick around, but I'd appreciate it if he'd not torment our Tino here.

"Don't worry. Sven will be happy to fight."

No matter how one sliced it, he'd left me, his clan master, there helpless on my own. I was sure he'd be fine with getting the short end of the stick,

probably.

Our clan was super talented. Even if Arnold was a Level 7, there was no way he could reach me.

“Everyone in Ark Brave and Starlight is strong and bloodthirsty. If anything, they’d be glad for the opportunity to prove their strengths...probably.”

As I remarked thoughtlessly, Tino blinked her eyes repeatedly and said with a somewhat dejected expression, “But, Master... Isn’t the party you mentioned last, Knights of the Torch, on a long-term expedition? Aren’t they not in the capital...”

“Oh, was that so? I totally forgot about that!”

“Master...”

Tino gave me a bewildered look as I spoke monotonously.

*An expedition? I had no idea. Well, if they want to fight me, good luck finding Knights of the Torch!*

Knights of the Torch was a particularly peculiar party even among hunters. Emphasizing discipline, they were structured more like a military unit than a hunter party. They traveled the world and took on requests in various countries like mercenaries. They returned to the capital only a few times a year.

*And that’ll be none of my concern. After all, I’ve only said I’ll “consider fighting them fair and square” even if they really do defeat all four of the parties! I didn’t say I’ll fight them! I just said I’ll consider it!*

*And if they really do defeat all four, they can just go and call themselves the strongest as they like.*

We’d covered quite a distance now, and so I let go of the hand I’d been holding.

With animated gestures, I said, “I mean, I’m busy, and I don’t have time for them. Not to mention the auction is about to begin too!”

“Y-Yes...of course, Master. Is there something special about this auction?”

“Anyway. We were on the way to grab something sweet before we were

interrupted, so why don't we go grab some now?"

"?! Master..."

Tino seemed to be fine too, and indulging in something sweet was the way to go when it came to dealing with troubles like this.

Upon hearing my earnest words, Tino closed her eyes in silence and then looked at me as if she'd made up her mind.

"Master, I still can't get over having exposed such an unsightly side of myself—I can't go with you to get something sweet!"

Her expression twisted in anguish, her exposed shoulders and slender limbs all trembling.

I was dumbfounded as I looked at Tino as she radiated an aura of a damsel in distress. Seeing her like that, I couldn't help but feel ashamed to have sent my junior out against a Level 7 hunter and, on top of that, not felt particularly guilty.

"You don't have to feel bad about th—"

"No, Master! I—I— If I keep on relying on your kindness, I'll become a useless person!"

*Hi. Speaking to you right here is the "Master" who excessively relies on everyone's kindness and is currently falling into uselessness in the present continuous tense.*

"Master, please! Give me a chance! Give me a chance to redeem myself!"

Although we were already far away from the main street, there were still a good number of passersby. Their attention was now all focused on Tino's loud voice.

"Hey, hey, hey, please keep your voice down..."

"Tell me the treasure vaults you desire, Master! Just watch, and I'll bring back the Relics no matter what and repay your debt!" shouted Tino.

Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes, and her cheeks were flushed with excitement. Clearly, she wasn't calm at all.

*Is losing to Arnold right in front of me really this frustrating for her?*

“All right, all right, I get it. Calm down!”

Her shout had made it sound as if I were burdened with a huge debt... Well, I was.

In response to my words, Tino’s fervor waned slightly.

Tino took a step closer, grabbed both of my hands, and with a deep blush on his face, she hesitantly said, “And, Master...if—by any chance—I manage to bring back the Relics as you expect...could you...um...r-reward me...?”

*A reward...? Is there something in particular she wants?*

Perhaps due to nervousness, Tino’s face had blushed red all the way up to the tip of her ears. I could feel her inner energy transmitted through our clasped hands.

Come to think of it, I had asked for her help on numerous occasions, but this was the first time she’d requested a reward. Considering her past contributions, I’d say there was nothing wrong with giving her a reward or two even if she hadn’t asked; though I had a feeling that Tino probably wouldn’t accept that.

After contemplating slightly while I looked at Tino’s face, I nodded gently.

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She felt a fiery sensation within her body. A tremendous heat surged from her heart through her entire body and propagated explosive strength to her limbs.

“Stifled Shadow” was the name of a fighting technique invented long ago. It’d been a desperate last resort, first employed by a weak Thief whose offensive abilities had only been suitable for a supportive role in combat against phantoms.

It was an intense training of the body. The combination of mental focus and a unique breathing technique granted Thieves who mastered the technique a “speed” as though their very life was ablaze.

Speed was power, and the essence of this power transcended mere increases in evasion: fists propelled by a superior balance and an acceleration that outpaced even sound itself easily shattered phantoms and monsters—like a

black tempest.

Within the expansive underground training grounds of the clan house, there was silence, save for the incessant echoes of limbs booming through the air and hard objects clanging on metal.

One of them was the Stifled Shadow.

On her was an outfit that hindered not an iota of her body's movements and a pair of robust silvery boots covering half of her legs.

Opposite her across the arena was a black metal puppet designed to move only at its joints.

Enveloped in a fiery heat, Liz launched consecutive attacks in silence. She swept at her opponent's feet, tripped it, and stomped on it. She lifted her opponent up and slammed it onto the ground with the heel of her palm. Smoke born from friction rose from the floor, but she didn't stop.

Her relentless, flowing barrage of strikes would have long extinguished her opponent's life had it been a living creature.

The metal puppet was unmistakably nothing but a mere puppet. It couldn't be manipulated like a golem, nor was it sentient by any means—it was merely a lump of metal.

It wasn't just a papier-mâché; it was filled with metal all the way to its core, and its exterior was coated with a special alloy, making it exceptionally heavy and unquestionably robust. Thanks to this coating, it boasted extremely high resistance to both magical and physical attacks, much like the golem once known as Akasha. While it lacked the mechanisms to move like Akasha, it was on par with it at least in terms of durability.

Her every strike carried an aura of lethality. She'd punched and kicked the puppet, repeatedly slamming it onto the floor and against the walls.

Slightly distanced from the battlefield, Sitri was observing her sister's frenzy with a notebook in one hand.

"Liz, I told you this isn't going to happen! Give up, will you? Its durability has been adjusted to be able to withstand your attacks."



“Shut it. Sidddy! I’m. Training. So shut up! And prepare the next one!”

“Oh, come on! I’m not free either!”

Sitri pouted, but Liz didn’t spare her a glance.

Akasha’s design philosophy was simple: it had been designed to surpass Grieving Souls and Grieving Souls alone.

After she had leveraged the magic syndicate Akashic Tower’s technological prowess, financial resources, and connections to the fullest extent, the colossal golem had been the brainchild of years of relentless research drawing upon extensive data. It had long surpassed the realm of ordinary golems.

It’d all began with mere curiosity, but over time, Sitri became deeply engrossed in the creation and refinement of Akasha.

It’d been a lovely time. Even now, Sitri still felt the thrill in her pounding heart back then when recalling the days of tireless research through trial and error.

Having been born from an obsession bordering on delusion, Akasha had far surpassed the state-of-the-art golem technology.

Matching the power of the one-trick ponies of Grieving Souls had been no easy feat. There’d been no shortcuts; Akasha had been the fruit accumulated from repetitive testing and continuous improvements.

As it’d been born for such a singular purpose, Akasha had been made with such high capability that it could be considered *the* natural enemy of Grieving Souls: it featured a shield strong enough to withstand Luke’s slashes, the ability to sustain combat like Ansem, known for his exceptional muscle strength and stamina, and a sophisticated information analysis capability when operated by a human operator. Additionally, it was equipped with a custom-made sword for long-range attacks.

What Sitri had invested in most had been the development of the golem’s body. For Akasha to qualify as a “foe” to Grieving Souls, it had to be made of metal that could at least withstand Lucia’s magic, which boasted an attack range that was almost impossible to evade, and Liz’s strikes, which were so fast that blocking with a shield would be futile. And that had been where Sitri had invested most of the resources, a decision she hadn’t compromised on despite

exhortation from her mentor and those of even higher rank.

Her sister, Liz, possessed a genuine talent. She'd mastered a technique that was said to take years to learn, and now she was allowed to bear that name as her moniker. Her strikes were free from hesitation and fear and therefore exhibited a power exceeding what she was physically capable of.

Despite that, Liz remained undeniably human—her fists weren't made to pummel metal lumps. As her training persisted, her clenched fists became bloodied, likely with a few broken bones beneath her battered skin.

With every gust of wind, blood dripped and stained the floor, yet her vigor and determination showed no signs of waning. She should've been in pain, but it was impossible to tell from her piercing gaze.

It was clear that her older sister was a first-rate warrior and hunter. To top it off, her prime years were yet to come. In fact, Liz's physical abilities had greatly improved since Sitri had started developing Akasha's body. Of course, Sitri had taken her sister's growth into account. Regardless, Sitri wasn't going to let her smash Akasha's body, which had taken years to develop, simply because of that. Sitri had no intention of relinquishing her supremacy over Liz anytime soon.

Her former connections with Akashic Tower, which had been quite useful in many ways, were now no more.

"It's so hard! This is just nasty! Dammit! I can punch through this piece of armor! I'm not even using my secret technique!"

"Thieves don't really have such powerful techniques..."

And to begin with, there was something inherently amiss with trying to win against this golem in a one-on-one, unarmed combat.

Furrowing her brows in frustration, Sitri continued jotting down notes in her memo rapidly.

Liz's intensive training had been an opportunity for Sitri to gather valuable data.

The Grievors had grown together through mutual rivalry. Considering the

eventuality of Akasha's armor being breached, Sitri couldn't afford to be always complacent. She had to come up with the next plan—the strength of an Alchemist lay in “improvements.”

Then, Liz, who'd shown no sign of slowing down her movements, stopped abruptly. The puppet, which Liz had been tossing about, suddenly collapsed to the floor.

Breathing heavily, Liz looked at Sitri. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face burning red. She was still sweating, but her gait was still firm.

“Siddy, it's broken. Get me the next one!”

Sighing deeply, Sitri turned towards the abandoned puppet.

There was no noticeable damage on the puppet. While Sitri's prized alloy was stained with Liz's blood, it'd remained largely intact. Though, upon closer inspection, cracks were visible in its right elbow joint. To facilitate mobility, its joints were inevitably more fragile than the areas around them.

The final product, Akasha, had mitigated this by adding multiple layers of protective armor that didn't hinder movement, but there was only so much that could be done with this plaything.

“Can't you somehow make it a bit better?”

“Stop complaining! It's already incredibly difficult just to make enough of this metal.”

It'd been some time since the golem research at Akashic Tower had been dissolved. Hardly any materials remained, and it'd only been with Akashic Tower's resources that she'd been able to pour so much effort into creating a golem.

Sitri took out a metal-repairing potion from her bag and carefully trickled it into the crack. Tendrils of smoke rose, and the crack that had existed just moments before vanished. The golem's strength had decreased somewhat, but there was nothing she could've done about it.

*Even if a joint is broken, it's just a mere puppet after all. This shouldn't have affected the training...*

Not knowing Sitri's inner thoughts, Liz shouted, "This won't do for my training. Hey, fetch me that big pesky one! Right now!"

"I can't do anything about that... You know how the Vault Investigation Bureau is full of rigid people..."

Sitri found the situation highly regrettable. The golem had been her masterpiece, a testament to their mutual rivalry. More important than its high specs, it bore memories.

Originally, she'd planned to take over it when she parted ways with Akashic Tower on good terms. However, given how everything had turned out, there wasn't much she could do about the situation. She couldn't stand the thought of her masterpiece being tampered with by incompetent Alchemists, but her moniker, "Ignoble," was a hindrance when it came to dealing with government-affiliated organizations.

"If even Krai couldn't do anything about it, there's nothing I can do to change that, right?"

Precisely when Sitri spoke those resigned words with a sigh, Liz's fury subsided.

"So, setting aside the futile topic, how much would it cost if you were to make another one? I can spare a bit too."

Liz's temper, which rose and fell dramatically, was one of her characteristics. She could be egotistical and quick to anger, but she wasn't foolish.

Brushing her sweat-drenched bangs aside seemingly irritably, she exhaled a steamy breath.

"If I go on like this, won't Krai Baby think I'm creating a tender point for him? You understand what I mean? This is a matter of *pride*! I can't just let this slide!"

"I have the blueprints in my head—but I'm a bit short on cash right now, plus I've been providing potions at cost for another matter, so it might take some time..."

Sitri wasn't a merchant. Most of her assets were tied up in valuable equipment and materials. Her stock of potions was plentiful, but they weren't

the kind that could be sold in large quantities all at once. Cashing them out would surely take time.

Recreating Akasha wasn't out of the question for Sitri. With Noctus and the rest of the team gone, if Sitri didn't resume the research, development on that golem would never start again. And that'd be deeply disappointing for Sitri, as its creator.

But at the same time, Sitri also felt that she'd reached her limits. While she'd reported to her mentor that Akasha had been created for security, it had really been made to be Grieving Souls's training target; and yet, that goal was still to be fulfilled.

While Akasha was a remarkable creation considering modern golem technology, it was but a plaything when placed next to her current party members. It could hold its ground against someone with low attack power like her older sister, but even so, it wouldn't be able to land the finishing blow. And if pitted against the attackers of the party, Luke and Lucia, they could've possibly pierced through its armor, which had already been designed with their future growth in mind.

Most importantly, Akasha had a fatal weakness: as an inorganic construct, it couldn't grow by absorbing mana material like humans and monsters. It could only hope to become the strongest through constant upgrades informed by an accumulation of superb knowledge and technology. But there were limits to what an individual could achieve—after all, Sitri was a treasure hunter before a researcher.

Perhaps the golem should've been created using living material. Killiam was the pinnacle of her creations so far, though she, in her current state, should be able to create even more powerful magical creatures.

To keep up with the rapidly advancing Grieving Souls as their Alchemist, she had to constantly aim for greater heights. She refused to become a burden to her party because of her own inadequacies.

With that line of thought, her attention naturally turned towards the appealing materials that came from abroad. And there, Sitri recalled something that the Steps hunters had mentioned earlier.

“By the way, I heard Arnold tried assaulting Krai, and that T stood up against him.”

“Hmm? What’s this about? Krai Baby’s so exacting! Wouldn’t that be too much for Tino to win?”

Liz’s eyes widened at first, but then her voice took on a subtle shade of excitement.

That man was considerably powerful as a hunter, and absolutely any hunter should be able to identify that at a glance: he wasn’t just a country bumpkin.

Nevertheless, Liz was probably pleased mostly because she’d heard that her mentee, Tino, had earnestly stood up against this formidable opponent by her own will. Grieving Souls had always been facing daunting foes; it was delightful for Liz to see a glimpse of that spirit in her cute protégée little sister. Even if she ended up being defeated—being defeated was fine—despair was what made people grow.

“So, how did it go?”

“In the end, Tino got beaten up really bad, and Krai finished them up with gravity magic.”

“Oh, you mean that ‘Tyrant’s Order’ that Lucia has been complaining about? That spell was ridiculously wasteful but ridiculously powerful,” said Liz with admiration, immediately understanding his intentions.

Lucia Rogier was a diligent person. Not only had she shouldered the responsibility of charging the Relics, but she’d been mastering all sorts of magic to meet the often unreasonable demands placed on her since Krai had acquired the Aspiration Manifest. She’d delved into a wide array of spells, ranging from well-recognized ones to those that had faded into obscurity because they were practically useless. Her knowledge encompassed many spells that surpassed even the expertise of specialized researchers.

Moreover, when it came to original spells, the opponents would surely find themselves at a loss to grasp what had struck them. This was compounded by the fact that unleashing these spells through the Aspiration Manifest didn’t even require incantations.

The atmosphere for training had shifted.

Instructing Killiam, which stood nearby, to tidy up the golem doll, Sitri asked, “So what’ll you do, Liz? Maybe it’s better to crush Arnold and his party?”

The Crashing Lightning’s strength was the real deal. Had Grieving Souls assembled its entire party, the Crashing Lightning wouldn’t be a match, but as things currently were, there was a slim chance that this could be a variable that made the outcome unpredictable.

Sitri Smart was a worrier by nature.

However, in response to her younger sister’s words, Liz answered without much thought, “Hmm, can’t we just leave them be? I’m gonna kill them all if Krai Baby says so though. They’re the ones who’ve beaten T, right? Killing them before T gets her revenge won’t do her good, will it?”

“Jeez, Liz, don’t play the mentor card just because T did well in the fight!”

If Tino had hesitated and backed down instead of standing up against them, Liz would’ve killed Arnold *and* spanked her on the spot.

In response to the exasperated Sitri’s words, Liz smiled complacently and said, “Points for me! I’ll make sure to get praised this time.”

“It’s T who’s put in the effort, isn’t it...?! If anything, we should be praising T...”

“T’s achievements are *my* achievements! If you have a problem with that, why don’t you tell Krai Baby, who made T my apprentice?”

At her older sister’s teasing words that carried a touch of mockery, Sitri retorted with a huffy expression.

Krai’s Tyrant’s Order was a single-use trump card. He wouldn’t be able to use it the next time he got attacked.

Sitri knew this, but she wasn’t worried. Liz didn’t seem concerned either. If asked of them, they would give him their strengths, their bodies, and their souls. They would be a sympathetic ear for any worries he had; they would provide as much money as he needed. However, to offer without being requested would be an affront to his pride.

*This* was trust.

Sure, Arnold might be strong, and Krai might not be as powerful, but regardless of all that, Krai Andrey did *not* lose. Sitri, a childhood friend of his, knew this well.

*This* was Zebrudia, the capital, Krai Andrey's playground.

The Crashing Lightning was surely about to learn of the quintessence of the Thousand Tricks.



## Chapter Three: The Convergence and the Pandemonium

*How did it end up like this?* I contemplated as I cast a half-hearted smile in Gark's niece's direction; on the contrary, she, dressed casually, wore a radiant smile on her face.

The coffee shop, rather close to the clan house, was bustling with quite the crowd even on a weekday afternoon.

I didn't attract much attention normally, but today, I could feel an unusual number of eyes on me—it was Chloe's fault.

Ms. Niece, being the Association's poster girl, was obviously a cheerful beauty. Her appearance fitted in perfectly even among the multitude of handsome and beautiful people around me. And so, such a girl would surely draw attention when seen with a man like me. Yet Chloe seemed completely unfazed by it. Perhaps nervous, she blushed slightly, but she didn't seem to be bothered by it at all.

"Sorry to bother you out of the blue when you're busy."

I'd just been diligently polishing my Relics when Chloe Welter had arrived at the clan house. Apparently, she'd taken my pleasantries from our previous encounter seriously and decided to come to visit on her day off.

I wasn't bragging; however, I was a very easily swayed person. I avoided obvious troubles, but otherwise, I was rather open to everything. And when it came to an invitation from Gark's niece, considering the implications that lay ahead, I had no choice but to accept. Though I would've declined if Gark himself had come. I was a bit on guard, but Chloe appeared to have really come for just a chat.

Looks could be deceiving, but apparently, Chloe was a fan of Grieving Souls. There were quite a few parties among hunters who were idol-like, but it was rare for our party, trouble-prone in many ways, to have our own fans. Personal

fans (not that I had any) aside, this was the first time I had encountered a fan of an entire party.

“Hmm? ‘What’s so good about you all’? Well, of course, you’re...very strong, sir.”

“Hmm, I see. Is that so? Thank you.”

As expected of Gark’s niece—she was quite the brawn enthusiast.

I nodded in appreciation, albeit at a peculiar point.

Chloe was a genial girl with an aura that brightened up her surroundings. It was easy to see why she was popular.

I wasn’t particularly eloquent, and I felt like I might blurt out something unnecessary. I’d love for her to leave the Association and join our clan as our receptionist, but I’d probably get roughed up by Gark if he found out about that.

As we exchanged words placidly, the topic of our conversation shifted towards Arnold.

“By the way, I heard you’ve successfully repelled the Crashing Lightning, haven’t you?”

“Oh, that...”

That was the most troublesome issue I was currently facing.

I let out a deep sigh.

“Man, this is annoying. It may sound weird for me to bring this up with you, you know, but didn’t I ask Gark to give Arnold a strong warning? I don’t know what happened, but he seemed super furious. I was surprised.”

“Hmm? I think anyone would be furious if they were told *that*. You said something about forgetting them and something about wanting them to deliver you some Thunder Dragon meat—wasn’t that meant to be a provocation?”

Chloe widened her eyes and covered her mouth with her hands.

This was *news* to me.

To deliver me some Thunder Dragon meat? Had Eva been trying to do me a

favor by requesting that? Requesting Thunder Dragon meat from hunters who'd received their "Dragon Slayer" title by slaying a Thunder Dragon was too mean.

But even so, that wasn't even close to a "strong warning."

*Man, Gark! How long have you known me for?*

"My apologies, but I think Uncle Gark is quite fond of you, so his attention is inevitably drawn to you."

*Is he a sadist? A sadist he is.*

*He's indeed a musclebrain; I have absolutely no idea what he's thinking. In what world do people sic such a monstrous dude on a person they're fond of?*

I wanted to complain a bit more, but I decided to let it slide since I didn't want Chloe to dislike me for whining too much.

If anything, I considered myself lucky to have met her here: I could communicate my intentions to her directly.

With a serious face, I said, "Anyway, I'm really busy right now, so I want to resolve this smoothly."

"Smoothly...?"

"First, let's retract the part about 'forgetting them'—maybe I can't really retract that, but I've already taken note of them. I think I won't forget them for now...probably."

"I see... 'Won't forget them for now,' you say..."

*My memory is quite bad, you see.*

Chloe, off duty, took out a notepad from her pocket and carefully made notes of my seemingly uncertain words.

"Also, speaking of the request for slaying a Thunder Dragon, you may rescind that too."

"Yeah? *Rescind* that? There will be a cancellation fee though."

"Ah, don't worry, don't worry. Besides, I gave it a try, and I realized chicken tasted better."

“Okay, all right. You’re rescinding because ‘chicken tasted better’ ... Uh, so does this mean you’re taunting them?”

“Huh? Where’s the taunt in that?”

I wasn’t taunting anyone. I was just eliminating causes one by one.

“Oh, and apologize to them too just in case. I don’t intend to belittle their feat of slaying the Thunder Dragon. That was really amazing!”

“Okay, noted.”

“I’ll say this as much as I need to: we don’t mean to be hostile against them; we’re busy.”

“‘You’re busy, so you don’t mean to be hostile’ ... So you’re taunting them?”

“No, I said that’s not a taunt! Oh, and can you tell them that I’m sorry for using gravity on them and that although I’ve withheld from killing them, I can cover their medical expenses if any one of them were injured?”

At my utmost earnest words, Chloe flatly said with a brief but very troubled expression, “Krai, that’s taunting.”

*Oh boy... Now that I think about it, the sensibilities of that musclebrain Arnold and my delicate self are obviously nowhere near the same.*

“Well, I don’t think a once-infuriated hunter would give up so easily though—so what do you think of Arnold?”

*What do I think?*

Hearing her question, I began recalling my encounters with Arnold up until now and seriously pondered her question.

*He’s...violent and short-tempered? Though that’s common among hunters. Going after the strong without considering the troubles he causes for others? Luke does that often too; that’s probably like a common trait among hunters.*

I crossed my arms and closed my eyes, and Arnold’s reaction when he first saw Liz at the tavern surfaced in my memory.

“He’s...into big breasts?” I blurted.

“Yes?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing...”

No matter how I put it, “He’s into big breasts” was in no way a proper answer to the question “What do you think of Arnold?”

A weird comment had slipped my tongue.

Maybe he just disliked small breasts, or maybe he was more of a butt guy.

Fortunately, Chloe appeared perplexed. It seemed like she hadn’t heard what I’d just said.

Though somehow, I was getting annoyed. I felt a wave of drowsiness welling up, and I let out a big yawn.

*Why do I have to think so much about Arnold? Our encounter was over already anyway.*

Suddenly, Chloe, who’d been staring at my silly face, burst out a giggle.

“Heh...heh heh...”

“Oh, sorry, sorry. I’m a bit drowsy.”

“N-No, I’m sorry. It’s just that you reacted exactly like how Uncle Gark described.”

*Really, what is Gark telling Chloe?*

I had mixed feelings about whether I wanted to know or not, but considering her reaction, it might not be bad comments.

As I tried to dodge the subject with a half-hearted smile, Chloe suddenly changed her expression.

She hesitated for a while, peered into the teacup in front of her, then looked at me as if she’d made up her mind. Her black pupils stared as if attempting to pierce through me with their gazes, seeking to discern my true nature.

“Um...speaking of which, there’s something I’ve always wanted to ask you...”

“Hmm? Go ahead.”

“Krai, do you remember the time when I came and took the entrance test for First Steps?”

I couldn't help but gape at Chloe.

*Do I remember? No, I don't—on second thought, I didn't, but now I do.*

First Steps had an entrance test only for a very brief period, specifically when we were first established. With promising parties as our founders, First Steps, as it were, had been a fanfare that had attracted applications from various parties that had been a mixture of wheat and chaff.

Back then, I'd been a bit serious, and I'd actually paid attention to the tests. Unfortunately, there'd been quite a number of applicants, so I didn't remember every single person's details. But considering Chloe's current age, she should've been underage at the time, and if that was the case—yes, I did remember. There had almost been no female applicants who'd been as young as she would've been, so her test had been stuck in the corner of my memory.

I nodded solemnly.

"A-Ah, yes, of course. It was the one Luke presided over, right?"

"Y-Yes! That's the one!"

*So I was right?*

While I'd been surprised that a tiny little girl had come to take the entrance test, I'd been even more surprised by Luke's childish test content—*don't go about beating up underage girls!*

*I see. That takes me back.*

Squinting my eyes, I reminisced about those things I'd forgotten until now and lost myself in nostalgia.

Chloe snapped at me, "Y-Yeah, so I've been wondering: back then, I, um, was utterly defeated by Luke if I remember correctly..."

*I'm sorry to hear that, but...no one won against Luke in that test.*

Luke was an idiot (or rather, should I say, naive), but he was absolutely frank, and because of that, he was very strong. He'd been such an idiot that he'd taken my irresponsible combat theories literally and trained himself according to them.

*GRATITUDE EMPOWERS PEOPLE, OKAY?*

“S-So, Luke told me back then that I have talent!”

Chloe’s somewhat feverish voice made the other customers in the shop turn their heads at us in curiosity.

*Oh yeah, he did say that. Indeed he did.*

He was an idiot, but apart from that, he was perfect (I suppose one could consider naivety a virtue).

I didn’t doubt what he’d said, and I, too, was silently surprised.

“But, even then, Krai, you judged that I had narrowly failed! It’s not that I’m mad about failing the test. I gave up on being a hunter after that, and I’ve since become a staff member at the Association. My days as an Association staff member are very fulfilling and enjoyable—but I want to know! Please, Krai, tell me! With the exceptional foresight that you’ve been known for since then, what had you seen lacking in me back then?” asserted Chloe as she spoke on and on, charged with strong emotions.

*Things that were lacking in her?*

I’d love to say that I didn’t remember, but I did. I was sloppy in general, but I’d been slightly better back then. But even then, I was still the same me.

I squinted my eyes, and, with cold sweat trickling down my back, I said, “Chloe, you, as your present self, should know the answer without me telling you.”

“What...?”

Chloe’s watery eyes widened, and her lips trembled.

I stood up on the spot and smiled as I gently grabbed the bill.

“At the very least, if current Chloe had come for the entrance test back then, I would’ve passed her without a doubt.”

“?! Y-You mean...”

“But yeah, I get it; you won’t come again. You’re content being an Association staff member, right? You should cherish the life you’re living. A great deal of

hunters look forward to meeting you.”

“You’re right,” answered Chloe in a weak voice as she nodded.

It looked like I could get away without having to make an enemy of Gark.

*Phew.*

“Well, I should get going. Keep up your good work, Chloe.”

“Thank you... I will.”

“And take care of the matters regarding Arnold for me, will you? I’m counting on you.”

She said not a word in response, but I sensed her nod.

Without turning back, I settled the bill and left the shop.

My heart pounded like church bells.

Right now, it was me who conducted the entrance interviews for our prospective recruits. Therefore, I was used to evading the reason for rejection. I somehow managed to pull through this time, but I wondered what Chloe would think if she found out.

It’d gone without saying that past Chloe wouldn’t make the cut. At the time of her test, she’d just been on the cusp of adulthood, not even fifteen yet. There wasn’t any specific rule that required hunters to be adults, but truth be told, I hadn’t wanted to admit underage solos, with whom personal accountability didn’t apply, into the clan, no matter how promising they’d been. Honestly, I’d never imagined that someone would give up being a hunter over something like this.

*I’m sorry, Chloe; I truly am. But it seems you’re living a happy life now. Please, forgive me.*

Apologizing earnestly in my mind, I sprinted up the stairs in the clan house.

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Chloe remained seated for a while, contemplating the meaning of Krai’s words, after he’d left.

She’d always wondered. She’d always thought of asking him for the truth one



day despite her fulfilling days as an Association staff member.

But, perhaps, just as Krai Andrey's lingering words had suggested, Chloe might've known the answer all along. Even if she couldn't put it into words, she might've felt something.

Chloe's days as a staff member of the Explorers' Association had certainly changed her. Present Chloe knew a little bit more about treasure hunters than she had back then: she'd learned more about the dangers involved in the job, the astonishing courage and diligence of those involved, and how beneficial their presence was to this country—Chloe had witnessed all of that up close over the past two years. There were hunters who'd given up on being hunters, discouraged by their lack of talent, and on the other hand, there were those who'd been kicked out of their parties for being cocky about their abilities. There were hunters who'd used to line up in front of Chloe and suddenly disappeared one day, and there were those whom Chloe had thought were dead but had come back out of nowhere.

Looking back, she knew she'd been naive back then. Having been praised by everyone, she'd gotten a bit conceited and lived in her own bubble. She'd been a rookie, and naturally, like everyone else, she'd been clueless. But then, she had a few questions. Could that young man, the Thousand Tricks, really have rejected her application just for that reason?

For a moment, she pondered, but nothing came. Krai Andrey hadn't given an answer. Maybe this, too, was part of the famous Thousand Trials.

"There is no meaning in answers one didn't arrive at themselves or in answers that are spoon-fed." This was surely what the young man would've said.

Chloe took a deep breath and stood up. For now, there was one thing she knew: she was glad that she'd mustered the courage to come talk to him. She hadn't gotten a clear answer, but for some reason, she felt relieved.

Krai Andrey had said that she'd changed. He'd acknowledged her growth.

She'd just have to keep contemplating what the real answer might be, and surely someday, she'd come to truly understand what he'd meant.

Present Chloe had her duties as a receptionist at the Explorers' Association.

She hadn't been able to join their hunts as a clan member, but she could still support them from a different position.

“‘Gratitude empowers people,’ huh...”

She reflected on the words Luke had once said.

If he had spoken truly, then she most likely had become a little more powerful today than the Chloe from yesterday.

With a slightly elevated mood, Chloe Welter headed back to where she now belonged.

*But, Krai, I still seriously think that message is a taunt, she thought.*

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“I must have misheard you.”

Arnold's demeanor shifted notably after he'd been delivered the message. His already-sour expression contorted, and countless veins bulged on his forehead.

In the face of his intimidating aspect, Chloe, who'd dealt with all sorts of menacing-looking hunters before, felt slightly paralyzed. Meanwhile, the once-lively hall fell silent under the presence of the brewing violence. Neither had Arnold gone into a rampage, nor had he shouted at Chloe; however, the way a Level 7 hunter silently suppressed his anger was simply terrifying.

Behind him, the party's vice leader, his face twitching slightly, suggested in a whisper, “Arnold, remember that this guy is a slippery person.”

“Yeah, I know. He's trying to get a rise out of me. Dammit, that's such a senseless provocation.”

Breathing diaphragmatically, Arnold focused his energy on his abdomen. His twitching veins receded, and the violent aura oozing from his whole body subsided.

Instinctively, Chloe widened her eyes in response to what she'd just seen.

He was strong—not only physically, but also mentally. Not many hunters could maintain their composure while also suppressing their boiling anger. *This* was truly the mien of a hero. Even if viewed through biased lenses, his

overwhelming presence was leagues beyond Krai's.

"Hey, tell the Thousand Tricks, 'Stop mocking us. And brace yourself; we're coming for you.'"

"O—huh? What?"

With that, Arnold and his party left with their shoulders squared.

Chloe thought, *And this is precisely what I thought would happen if I told them exactly what Krai said.*

But Krai Andrey was *the* Thousand Tricks, a man with such exceptional foresight that he was said to be able to read the future. Knowing that there could be hidden intention behind his words, she couldn't just change them arbitrarily. Was she missing something? Or perhaps, did he mean to provoke them despite insisting that it wasn't a taunt?

Watching the party walk away, Chloe contemplated the missing link.

Then, recalling that she'd forgotten to convey one certain message, Chloe sprang up before she realized.

"Wait, Arnold, I forgot to tell you one thing!"

"Tsk. What?"

Arnold turned back. Although he'd suppressed his menacing aura, his contained anger was showing.

Having mulled over Krai's words in her mind, Chloe realized what she'd missed. Her mind went blank, not knowing what she should do next. In hindsight, he hadn't told her to convey this message.

"Um...well...uh, Krai has a word for you, or rather...it's his impression of you..."

She shouldn't have stopped him just for this, she thought. The message she'd forgotten was going to pour gasoline on the raging fire, needless to say.

Even now that she remembered his words, she still questioned whether she'd misheard him or not.

"I-I'm sorry. Pretend I didn't say anything."

She apologized. But unfortunately, she'd piqued Arnold's interest already.

His piercing gaze pinned Chloe down, and she instinctively trembled in fear like a prey before a predator.

"The Thousand Tricks's impression of me, you say? Speak up."

"..."

"I said, 'Speak up.'"

"It's slightly, uh—how do I put it?—not exactly, uh, the most suitable words for describing a battle-hardened hunter—"

"Just spew it! It's not the first time he's made a fool of me."

She'd chosen her words carefully, with a sliver of hope that Arnold wouldn't pursue the matter, but he remained absolutely unyielding.

There was no way out of this situation. She couldn't lie either.

She summoned her courage, and slowly, she said, "He said you're i-into b-big breasts."

Arnold's raging expression vanished in an instant and was quickly replaced with a perplexed one.

"Huh? I've misheard you, haven't I? You'll repeat that again."

*How on earth did I get myself into this?* thought Chloe.

Her face flushing red with embarrassment, Chloe, true to the emotions displayed on her face, slammed her fist on the counter and shouted loudly, "He said you're into big breasts!"

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The humiliation was so intense that Arnold felt like the blood vessels in his brain might burst—this was the first time he'd been ridiculed so badly since he'd become a hunter.

Somehow, he managed to rein himself in without letting rage get the better of him as they returned to their accommodation. Back in their lodge, he sank himself deeply into a chair.

Maintaining a composed tone, Eigh spoke to Arnold, who was nauseated by his own extreme anger, “Calm down, calm down. All this is just one of his ploys!”

“Yeah, I know.”

Anger occasionally enabled people to fight with vigor beyond their actual strength, but succumbing to such rage right now would be unwise.

Through their single encounter, Arnold had understood the abnormality surrounding Krai Andrey: he’d appeared to be an ordinary citizen at first glance, and yet, the “attack” he’d unleashed then had been nothing short of extraordinary.

First things first, a single magic spell that only restrained Arnold, a Level 7, without defeating him should barely exist. Moreover, what was even more puzzling was that Arnold had barely detected any mana from the Thousand Tricks.

Even after thoroughly contemplating for several days, Arnold still couldn’t decipher the mechanism of the attack. Not to mention that casting magic of that caliber without any incantation was supposed to be impossible.

When the Thousand Tricks had attacked, he’d produced a pendant from under his clothes. The most plausible explanation Arnold had was that the pendant had been a Relic and that there’d been a high chance that it’d been used to aid his spell cast. Though, this was as far as Arnold could figure out.

Having fought him, Arnold could now understand why the rumors reported that he’d sent a golem flying with just his aura. He was exceedingly bizarre and overwhelmingly powerful. Arnold agreed that his Level 8 certification was justified.

He was an opponent too perilous for them to face head-on. As the Thousand Tricks himself had mentioned then, he’d already held back on his attack. Had the original effect of the spell been fully unleashed, his party could’ve been annihilated in an instant. As the party leader, Arnold couldn’t afford to make decisions that could potentially destroy the party.

Arnold suppressed his own anger with reason, stifling his resentment with all

his might. Responding to such an obvious provocation would be no different from proclaiming himself a fool. However, even though he understood this, Arnold couldn't completely contain his rage.

Putting his initial taunt aside, what had he meant by saying that his impression of a Dragon Slayer had been that he was fond of big breasts?

"Go gather some information; just anything will do. Figure out the mechanics behind his attack."

"But we've already confirmed the rumors surrounding the man. What's left for us to investigate would be to ask the members of Steps for more information."

The Thousand Tricks's somewhat serene expression surfaced in his memory.

On that wide avenue, they'd been overwhelmed with no recourse. Word of their defeat was probably now widely spread, and, of course, so should be the words the Thousand Tricks had uttered.

"So we'll have to defeat the four parties first if we want to challenge him, huh?" said Arnold with a bitter expression.

Now that they'd been defeated once, and that his words had been heard by many, ignoring what he'd said wasn't an option. In fact, if they challenged the Thousand Tricks right away and lost once again, they might invite scathing criticisms for being presumptuous. Honor mattered significantly for hunters; any discourtesy would most likely negatively affect their future activities within the capital.

What's more, all the parties the Thousand Tricks had referred to were the very ones they'd circled out when researching for strong parties initially.

"But Arnold, consider this: *this* might be an opportunity for us. I dare say he intends to anger you and make you lose your composure by provoking you. His prerequisites are quite the chores, but if you think about it the other way around, we stand to gain by just clearing them."

"..."

"If we defeat these renowned parties, Arnold, you'll be resoundingly famous

for your vigor. And while we're at it, we could also learn some intel about the modus operandi of the Thousand Tricks too."

What Eigh had said was spot-on. After all, Arnold and his party had very few options left: going straight for him would be dishonorable, but if they backed off, they would surely be labeled as cowards.

Having processed Eigh's words, Arnold calmed down slightly. In a single gulp, he vigorously swallowed the water offered to him, and he slammed the mug onto the table.

At that moment, Arnold had mostly returned to his usual self.

"But I don't understand his purpose. What does he want?"

Eigh squinted and fell into silence. Neither did the other party members feel like offering their opinions.

Reflecting on it objectively, they found the actions of the Thousand Tricks incomprehensible: he didn't stand to gain anything from angering Arnold. He could've just crushed them and taught them a lesson in the superiority of his power when they'd challenged him. But back then, the Thousand Tricks had only fully restrained Arnold and his party members' movements. Had he not stopped there and gone on to dominate them with his overwhelming power to render them completely incapacitated, Arnold probably wouldn't have thought of challenging him again so quickly. But that was *not* what Krai had done. After making sport of them, he'd imposed some new prerequisites.

The Thousand Tricks had gone yet another step further by sending a message to anger Arnold through the receptionist at Explorers' Association. Surely, his purpose wasn't simply to taunt them—their opponent was a hunter known for his inscrutable stratagems. He undoubtedly had something planned in mind, but his thoughts were utterly unfathomable. This was uncanny.

As a hunter, Arnold specialized in combat capabilities. While he wasn't weak at subterfuge, it wasn't his forte either.

Eigh, the brains of the party, had been contemplating for a while, but in the end, just like Arnold, he couldn't see through the Thousand Tricks's intent.

With a sharp gaze, he advised Arnold, "Maybe it's better for us to hold off on

engaging him for now and gauge the situation a little bit more.”

“Either way, we need to gather information.”

The Thousand Tricks had to have some plans in his mind.

It wasn't Arnold's style to stand idly by without action as time flew. After closing his eyes and contemplating for a short while, Arnold made up his mind.

“Though it's frustrating to dance to his tune, let's start with Obsidian Cross.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

That name belonged to a party well-known for its outstanding stability. It was a good fit for Falling Fog, a party that boasted overwhelming firepower.

The party members gulped audibly in anxiety. While cutting their way through his uncanny schemes was highly risky, they suspected that new paths might open up for them when they defeated that party.

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Obsidian Cross was at the tavern.

The Level 6 party, unlike the Thousand Tricks, carried a heroic aura. This was especially true for their leader, Sven Anger the Stormstrike, a Level 6 moniker holder. His honed physique, along with his level of mana material, made him appear to be a formidable opponent to the Level 7 Arnold.

Yet, when he heard Arnold's words, bafflement showed in his expression instead of an eagerness to fight.

“Say it again? Krai said *that*? Why the heck would we want to get involved?”

“Pardon? But that dude's your clan master.”

“Yeah, he's the clan master indeed. But so what? We'd be all in if he had us fight some phantoms or monsters. But a brawl? No, thank you.”

Sven left no room for a rebuttal. For some reason, his party members looked at Arnold's party with pity in their eyes.

This came unexpectedly to Arnold. From what Krai had said, Arnold thought that Obsidian Cross was like a subordinate party. However, in reality, they didn't even seem to care.



Indeed, clans were cooperatives. Arnold could understand why they didn't feel obligated to obey other clan members—but this was their clan master they were talking of, and respect was nowhere to be found from their complete disregard for their clan master's words.

Sven, seemingly grasping the situation, let out a deep sigh at the perplexed Arnold.

“Ah, I see how this is. Krai fooled you. He's always like that. We fell for it real bad just a while ago too. Look at the paleness on Marietta's face here.”

“It's true that my mana capacity increased though...” said a female Magus sitting nearby in response to Sven's words, letting out a deep sigh. “But that potion is really disgustingly awful. Indeed, it's effective, but it'll definitely create an opening for the enemy if you use it on the battlefield. I don't know how Lucia lives with that by just complaining.”

Marietta gave the impression of a shrewd beauty, but clear signs of pronounced fatigue seeped from her expression.

“Anyway, I'm not interested in a brawl for a purpose like that. I've heard of your name, Crashing Lightning, and you better step away from your clash with Krai before it's too late. The more serious you are, the more he messes with you.”

Arnold listened intently, watching their features for any sign of deception.

“Oh, right. Our clan master must've caused you a lot of trouble. Since you've come all this way looking for us, let me treat you to something. Just leave us out of this.”

And before Arnold could respond, Sven raised his voice and placed an order.

Eigh, baffled, displayed a stiffened and resigned expression.

Arnold and his party bore no grudge against Obsidian Cross. Had their opponent accepted the challenge, it would be a different story, but there was nothing they could do now that their opponent had rejected it. Most importantly, with their opponent treating them to alcohol, there was no point for them to clash either.

“Arnold, I guess they have a point. Let’s just leave it here,” said one of Arnold’s party mates.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

With a disgruntled expression, Arnold lowered the weapon he had been carrying on his back.

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“Whaaaaaaat?! Why do we have to fight you for the *human weakling’s* sake? Sir!”

“...”

“I’m curious. Sir! On what *crazy* grounds do you think that we, the honorable Noble Spirits, would accept such a request? Say something, sir, you macho gorilla!”

*What on earth is going on?*

With a red face, the Noble Spirit girl of chilling beauty pounded her long staff on the table as she berated Arnold.

Her somewhat childish behavior disconcerted Eigh and the other party members. Even Arnold, the one on the receiving end, couldn’t summon any anger. The only thing he understood was that Starlight also had no intention of accepting Arnold’s challenge.

The leader of Starlight, Lapis Fulgor, a blonde Noble Spirit, pressed her hand against her forehead in exasperation. She sighed as she stared at her fulminating companion.

“So, Crashing Lightning, we seem to have a peculiar misunderstanding between us. There’s a reason why we’re in Krai Andrey’s clan, and that’s definitely not to be submissive to him. I don’t know what that man has put into your head, but we’ll *not* be treated as mere stepping stones.”

*That is a valid argument.*

There was no way that any Noble Spirit, who naturally looked down on humans, would simply accept what Arnold had said and nod in agreement. Arnold had held a sliver of hope, but it seemed like they agreed with Obsidian

Cross.

Kris picked up one of the scattered Relics in front of her, and, squeezing it tightly, she shouted, “To begin with, I’m currently busy taking up the *human weakling’s* challenge and charging Relics. Sir! I can’t afford to lose this for the sake of my pride! Sir! Lapis!”

“Yeah, that’s right, Kris; we can’t back down once we’ve accepted a challenge. It’s a matter of our pride as Noble Spirits.”

*I see... So they’re being used.*

He looked at Eigh, who furrowed his brows and slowly shook his head.

It seemed like they didn’t have a choice but to retreat. They couldn’t make themselves force a fight when they’d witnessed someone more pathetic than them. Arnold felt the inferno of anger that had burned within him gradually subsiding.

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First Steps’s clan house was a massive building. Having steeled themselves, they stood before its entrance.

Both their challenge against Obsidian Cross and Starlight had been no go, and the remaining two parties were, of all things, absent from the capital. They’d gotten considerably tired of it, and now the best thing they could do was to march straight into the Thousand Tricks’s base and confront him directly.

The tension in his companions’ expressions had slightly eased due to the letdowns they’d repeatedly suffered.

“At this rate, I won’t be surprised if he’s absent too.”

“Yeah... That sounds plausible.”

From their encounter with the two parties, Arnold had gleaned an image of Krai that was different from what he’d expected. He’d thought Krai was a tremendously charismatic person, but instead, all he’d heard was complaints against the man.

If this had been a strategy to dampen Arnold and his party’s motivation, it surely had been remarkably effective. However, retreating at this stage was not

an option for them.

Having psyched himself up, Arnold looked at the companions surrounding him.

“Brace yourselves. Here is where the real deal begins.”

“Roger!”

Their leader’s pep talk reignited a bit of strength in their eyes.

Though they weren’t here to fight today, this was akin to charging into enemy territory. They couldn’t afford to go without a battle spirit.

Confirming everyone’s condition, Arnold took the lead and barged through the clan house’s entrance.

On the other side of the door, pandemonium unfolded.

“Aaaaaaargh! Someone bring Sitri! Drink is rampaging!”

“You wanna poop? Or you’re hungry? Or you wanna go for a stroll?”

“It’s growing too fast! I didn’t sign up for this! I can’t do this anymore! What happened to the cage?! And the collar?!”

“Dammit, the chain was torn into pieces! Dammit, that bastard Krai. What was he thinking when he took this thing in?!”

“Don’t drag us into thiiiiiiis!”

Running rampant in the expansive entrance hall was a peculiar creature about two meters in size, a stone gray chimera with a lion head and dragon wings. Its three tails were sharp as swords, leaving marks on walls and floors in all orientations. A great number of hunters surrounded the growling chimera, but the creature didn’t seem to be on alert at all.

Pretending to not have seen that, Arnold closed the door in a natural movement.

From beyond the thick door, intermittent shrieks continued to rise.

“...”

“Arnold, they seem to be occupied. Shall we forget about the Thousand Tricks

for now and focus on gathering information and composing ourselves? Seems like there's a huge auction happening. It sounds like a good opportunity to earn some money, and it'll be a perfect chance for us to upgrade our equipment. We might even be able to get rid of the *thing* here too."

It seemed the scene they'd witnessed just now had completely splintered their momentum; all the companions expressed agreement at Eigh's words.

Indeed, Arnold's party had only recently arrived in the capital. Their posture was far from perfect.

Normally, leaving things like this would absolutely not be an option for them, but there was a chance that the other two parties might return while they waited.

"Dammit. I guess we don't have other options. Just for now! We'll let it slide just for now."

Due to all the deplorable stories they'd heard, their motivation had dwindled, and one's combat ability was directly linked to one's mental state.

Arnold clicked his tongue. He turned his back to the clan house, where shrieks continued to echo for unknown reasons, and returned to the inn with his party.

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The gentle sunlight streamed in through the window.

Yawning, I flipped through a magazine. It was an employment magazine for part-time job listings that was distributed in the neighborhood.

For the first time in a while, I was motivated to repay my debt. After all, it'd be scandalous for me to laze around while I sent Tino to the treasure vaults.

Turning the pages one by one, I searched for jobs that I might be able to do. I couldn't use magic, and my physical abilities were lacking; therefore, I could only look for jobs that anyone could do. I was looking at the listed hourly wages and mentally calculating the hours I needed to work to pay off my debt in the high billions when, suddenly, the window behind me made a creaking sound as it flew open.

Wind blew, and before I could turn around, a set of arms wrapped around me

from behind, and a cheerful voice greeted me by my ear.

“Good morning, Krai Baby! What are you reading?”

“Good morning, though it’s already afternoon. I was thinking maybe I should get some part-time gigs going.”

The voice had come from Liz.

I mean, I’d be agitated if I had more friends who entered through the window because it was “bothersome” to do otherwise.

I closed the magazine and was about to respond to her when she squeezed me tightly with her forceful arms and pressed her cheek right against mine. I could smell a pleasant, sunshine-like fragrance from her feverish skin touching mine.

Despite the fact that I had a tough time thanks to Arnold, with whom Liz had clashed, she seemed as energetic as ever today—this was all that I asked for.

“Hey, Krai Baby, don’t you have something to say to me?”

“Uh... Do you want to do some part-times together with me?”

“Hmm? Sure, sure! But no, that’s not what I meant! Come on, you do have something to tell me, right? Something involving my apprentice...”

*Oh, that.*

It looked like sending Tino against Arnold had been indeed the wrong move. After all, Liz probably had a training plan for Tino. I’d done something wrong.

I was about to apologize, but before I could, Liz released my body and moved in front of me. With a smile like a big blooming flower, she sat down on my lap without hesitation.

Liz seemed to be in a very good mood today... She didn’t seem to be here to complain about her apprentice’s treatment.

Aggressively pushing her body against mine in this position, Liz said as if fawning on me, “Hey. She did an excellent job being your shield, didn’t she? That’s the result of my training, right?”

*Oh. She came to be complimented...*

I silently wrapped my arms around Liz's back, hugged her tightly, and then combed her hair with my fingers from under her head as my compliment for her.

She blushed, and her body quivered with obvious pleasure. Even I could feel my heart pound when she behaved like this. As much as I was used to physical contact, I was a man too.

I'd like to at least give my fellow Grievors a hug if they asked me for one since I was of no use to them normally. It was a tricky balance to strike.

"Mmm... This is the *best*! Now, Krai Baby, did T do well?"

"Yeah, her will to fight was splendid. She's truly worthy of being your disciple. That was a ten out of ten."

"Is that so? I'm glad you approved, but didn't she lose?"

"Defeats empower people."

And that was why I, who always foisted my battles on others instead of losing them myself, remained so weak.

Perhaps taking in my words docilely, Liz wore a very contented expression.

She asked, "By the way, do you know where T is? I wanted to praise her myself."

"Oh, sorry. I sent her to fetch some Relics from a treasure vault. She's at Alleyne Pillars Ruins."

"Alleyne Pillars Ruins? Isn't that a Level 1 treasure vault? There are Relics there?"

Alleyne Pillars Ruins was a Level 1 treasure vault near the capital that consistently ranked at the bottom in the annual treasure vault rankings published by Explorer's Association. Its difficulty was low, and Relics rarely appeared in it. Despite its proximity to the capital, few hunters frequented it. From the outside, it merely looked like a few thick stone pillars standing in the middle of a plain. It was, in a sense, a place steeped in mystery that even rookie hunters would avoid.

Yet, it was a safe place, and one could return from it within a few hours. This

seemed to be the perfect vault to satisfy Tino.

“There’s only a fifty-fifty chance of finding something there, so let’s not blame Tino even if she doesn’t find anything, okay?”

“Heh... Understood! By the way, Krai Baby, is there nothing I can do for you?”

*No... Please just stay put and don’t cause any trouble to people around you.*

Without saying a word, Liz doubled down on her embrace and held me even tighter. She buried her face into my neck as she let out a voluptuous noise.

I remembered how I’d used to cheer her up in the past after tough training sessions by hugging her when she’d felt dejected. Hunters who engaged in combat repeatedly were easily exhausted, both physically and mentally, so physical contact like this was considered effective as personal care.

My slightly racing heartbeat calmed down gradually, and I began to feel drowsy. Liz, with her warm body, made for an excellent body pillow.

I was about to doze off, feeling Liz’s weight press against me, when, suddenly, the door swung open forcefully.

“Master! Master! I’m ba—ck?!”

“Huh...? Oh! Welcome back, T!”

Liz turned her head slightly and smiled radiantly at her apprentice.

Entering the room, Tino froze as he saw Liz sitting on my lap. The black bracelet she’d been tightly clutching slipped out of her right hand and made a soft sound as it rolled across the floor.

“Why...? I’ve been working hard, and, Lizzy, she—”

“What? You can work hard because I worked hard, right?! What are you going to do, T? To get stronger all by yourself?!”

“Now, now. Tino, I’ll come up with something for you, so calm down.”

\*\*\*

Accompanied by the dejected Tino and the conversely exuberant Liz, I walked down the main street.



Our destination was my usual Relics specialty shop. This time of year, they'd be busy with the auction, but my relationship with the shop owner, Matthis, could be described as more than "best buddies." With Tino in tow, he was surely going to welcome us.

"Still, I can't believe you actually found a Relic..."

As we walked, Tino held up the black bracelet she'd brought back against the light and examined it.

This Relic was unlike any other Relic I'd ever seen. It was made of metal, its weight and size were average, and it was entirely black. While there were patterns etched along its circumference, there were no gemstones embedded in it. As an accessory, it was a modest piece of craftsmanship, lacking all mystique. One could mistake it for a cheap bracelet based on its appearance alone.

"Hmm? Master, did you send me to retrieve this?"

"Like I said, 'any prediction could either hit, or it could miss,' didn't I?"

"What?! No, you didn't!"

"I'm just kidding, just kidding. With the auction coming up soon, I had plans to visit Matthis anyway."

Matthis wasn't only the owner of a well-established Relics specialty shop but also a pro in Relic appraisal boasting fifty years of experience in this business. He might seem straitlaced and had an artisan's temperament, but his skills were likely to be among the top three in the capital. While I was a Relic enthusiast myself too, there was a stark difference between us.

Now that the auction was approaching, Matthis would be swamped with the appraisals of Relics that would be put up for sale. All sorts of Relics would be brought in, so it was my tradition to go watch him appraise Relics around this time every year. In that sense, it was good timing for Tino to bring back a Relic now.

Most regrettably, I wouldn't be able to pursue any great Relics this time even if I did find any. Eva had admonished me to refrain myself, and considering the debt I currently owed, I wasn't so foolish as to incur any more.

I'd be satisfied by just watching.

\*\*\*

Thanks to Liz acting as my bodyguard, I felt somewhat at ease today.

I carefully navigate the town, determined to not run into Arnold this time. Taking detours through numerous backstreets, going way out of my usual path, I arrived at the shop safely without any fuss.

Nestled modestly on a street a few intersections away from the capital's main street was a well-established Relics specialty shop that was renowned among those who were initiated. Accompanying its modest exterior that was grounded in simplicity was a small signboard that would easily go unnoticed if not observed closely.

This was Relics specialty shop, Magi's Tale, a shop run by an elderly man to whom I was indebted, only after the likes of Gark, Ark, and Eva.

It was an appraiser's job to evaluate the Relics that treasure hunters find. The majority of the Relics found in treasure vaults were unknown items. While educated guesses could sometimes be made based on their shape since they were artifacts from a past civilization, in no way did they come with instruction manuals. Because of that, identifying a Relic's functions requires knowledge and experience.

Magi's Tale was the Relics specialty shop where we'd had our first Relic finds appraised when we'd visited the capital initially. Even among the well-established Relics specialty shops in the capital, it stood as one of the oldest ones. Yet its surroundings didn't do justice to its rich history: barely any hunter frequented the area. Magi's Tale was a store that was reputable only among those in the know—a renowned establishment without many visitors.

I opened the timeworn door, and we wandered in.

As we entered, a security guard with a stern face greeted us. Their sharp gaze, akin to that of a hunter who'd encountered a phantom, scrutinized us from head to toe.

His entire body was adorned in Relics. Everything, from his boots, the breastplate protecting his torso, and the longsword hanging from his gauntlet

to his waist, emitted the brilliance of a Relic. Besides me, he was most probably the man with the most Relics equipped in the capital.

We'd been acquainted for almost five years at this point, but his intense gaze showed no sign of softening. Passing by him sparked the memory of our first meeting: that look had intimidated me at the time.

Despite its plain exterior, the inside of the store was very typical with numerous Relics neatly arranged. The lack of uniformity was probably a characteristic of Relic stores. Relics resembling jewelry were lined up in glass display cases, while weapon Relics were categorized and displayed on the walls accordingly. Since even low-end Relics came with a considerable price tag, the total value of the merchandise here likely rivaled that of a jewelry store.

There were no other customers apart from us. I'd always thought they'd attract more customers had they built the shop along the main street. Though, the decision to set up this shop here in the middle of nowhere likely stemmed from the store owner's disposition.

"What a shabby place. Looks like some things never change."

"L-Lizzy!"

Tino hastily reprimanded Liz, who showed no interest in the Relics.

For me, whose hobby was collecting Relics, this shop was like a museum and a toy store combined. Back in my early days as a hunter, whenever I'd had a day off, I'd almost glue myself to the merchandise and diligently memorize all their names and effects.

The counter was vacant. Notwithstanding the presence of the security guard, the shop remained as incautious as ever.

Liz boldly pounded the counter without reservation. She probably wanted to end this quickly and go out to play.

"Matty, you here? Krai Baby, looks like he's out. Let's go home. Let's go back and continue where we've left off, okay?"

"Lizzy?! It's the white crow, the white crow!"

*I remember hearing this before, but what could a white crow be? Crows are*

*black.*

Then, the door behind the counter flew open.

Tino swiftly moved and hid behind me.

Out from the door came Matthis, owner of Magi's Tale. Despite his completely white hair and a face etched with wrinkles, his sharp gaze, stretched back, and hale and hearty demeanor made him appear younger than his years. And as his stony expression suggested, Matthis was an obstinate man.

Seeing Liz, Matthis furrowed his brows and clicked his tongue ostentatiously.

"Tsk. Kiddo," he said, "so you're hanging out with this young lass today."

"Hey, Matty, long time no see!" said Liz.

"Quit calling me 'Matty'! You idiot!" retorted Matthis.

Matthis was just as harsh with Liz as ever, probably because of the rampage she'd caused in his shop back then. Sitri received much the same treatment, by the way.

"Humph. What do you need? I'm busy today, and I don't have any Relics you may find interesting for sale."

Matthis snorted irritably and glared at me. It wasn't that he disliked me, but rather, he treated everyone this way.

*And that's why people rather go to the Relic store on the main street where a certain cute young girl works.*

But this was also the reason this shop remained perpetually deserted.

"Gramps, it's exactly because of that attitude of yours that you don't get customers."

"That's none of your business. I'm doing just fine, and you brats come scoop up Relics that cost an arm and a leg all the time too."

*Brats? He doesn't mean me, does he? As always, he's quite the shop owner with his rather preposterous approach to customers, calling them "brats."*

But despite that, he was truly skillful, and he wasn't a bad person either. He might not give special favors to regular patrons, but he was an honest man.

Also, while I had no idea where he procured his stock of Relics from, there often were many great finds among them. On top of all that, he accepted deferred payments. In other words, I had no reason to pass over him and his shop.

Unlike Liz and the others, I hadn't found myself a mentor since coming to the capital. In some sense, maybe Matthis could be considered kind of a mentor to me.

"Matty, you know what? T found a Relic today. Can you appraise it in a flash? *I'm* busy."

"You wish! Wait for your turn. I've got a multitude of orders piled up here."

"She said she found it at Alleyne Pillars Ruins. It's T who found it. Just get it appraised, can you?"

"Alleyne...? So, the Level 1 treasure vault, huh? Oh, isn't that Li'l Tino over there too?"

Matthis's eyes captured Tino, who'd been hiding behind me, and his gaze softened slightly.

While he was harsh on me and Liz, he had a soft spot: Tino. Apparently, she was about the same age as Matthis's granddaughter, and they somewhat resembled each other. The stubborn old-timer was still human, after all. Even the ever-honest and impartial old man mellowed out around Tino.

Since then, I'd decided to always bring Tino along, if possible, whenever I came to this shop.

The aloof appraiser had a tender spot for innocent little girls.

"Tsk. Well, all right, I'll do it just for her. Just a quick one, okay?"

And so, this time, without much fuss, Matthis gave in to Tino's gaze and, while grumbling, donned his black leather gloves. Carefully lifting up the Relic, he produced a magnifying glass and started extensively scrutinizing the intricate patterns etched on it.

Experience and knowledge were indispensable in Relic appraisal. For the past fifty years, he'd been appraising Relics in the capital; the wealth of knowledge he'd amassed far surpassed mine as a newly emerged greenhorn in the Relic

collector scene in recent years.

After turning the bracelet around and scrutinizing every detail of it, Matthis said with a serious expression, “Alleyne Pillars Ruins is a Level 1 treasure vault, and Relics rarely appear there, to begin with. *This* is likely, what we call, an ‘extraneous Relic.’”

Relics appeared randomly, but they were all created through the same mechanism: when mana material accumulated, Relics were generated within treasure vaults, with certain types of treasure vaults tending to yield certain types of Relics more frequently.

Relics of the Era of Physical Arms would appear more easily in treasure vaults that mimicked buildings from the same time period, Similarly, if one sought Relics of the Era of Lesser Magical Arms, they would explore treasure vaults that mimicked the spectacles of said era, so on and so forth. All that contributed to the difference in popularity among the treasure vaults.

“Extraneous Relics” referred to Relics that didn’t match the theme of the treasure vaults. They weren’t necessarily extremely rare, but I was just slightly glad that the Relic Tino had found in an unpopular vault would be identified as one—the chances that it was a rare one had just increased by a lot.

I became slightly excited.

And, in an unusually fervent tone, Matthis continued, “Based on its tendency to generate certain phantoms, that treasure vault was believed to be a product from an era when soulless beings proliferated over the entire world. Its Relics were also mostly ones related to the manipulation of naturally occurring magical creatures. But *this*, by what I can tell from its design, is obviously different. If I had to guess, this one is probably a product of the Era of Magical Arms—that era was pretty long, and there’s a lot of Relics from that era too, after all.”

The Era of Magical Arms had flourished for thousands of years, and it’d been one of the longer epochs in the world’s known history. It was renowned for its significant advancements in magical artifacts, tools that harnessed mana as energy to manifest magic, and the integration of these artifacts into all aspects of daily life. Magical artifacts still existed in the modern era, but their

technology paled in comparison to those of the Era of Magical Arms. Undeniably, Relics from that era were incredibly diverse.

But, that being said, if even Matthis hadn't ever seen this before, this was an exceedingly rare Relic. This could be the jackpot—though I wasn't going to sell such a rare Relic, no matter how big a jackpot I'd hit.

Liz, not bothering to hide her boredom at all, said, "Yeah, whatever. So, what's its effect?"

"I...have no idea."

*You don't?*

"You...got rusty?" I said with a sigh.

"Nonsense! Appraisers would be out of business if you could just tell what the effects of a Relic are without activating it!" yelled Matthis upon hearing my comment, his face contorted.

*Fair enough.*

If even Matthis hadn't seen it before, there was even a chance that this could be an undiscovered Relic.

*...I should treat Tino to some ice cream later.*

Matthis took out a box and carefully stored the bracelet inside.

"The appraisal is going to take time since I have some other jobs piled up as well. This is going to cost you an appraisal fee, and I'm not taking deferred payments for this one."

"Of course. We have the money. I'd appreciate it if you can do it as quickly as possible."

*Not my money though.*

"All right, we're done!" Sensing that the conversation had ended, Liz clapped her hands and said, "Krai Baby, let's go back, okay? Let's go back! Time to continue!"

*Seems like she still wants more physical contact...but I'm not done yet. The real deal is what's next.*

Soothing the clamoring Liz, I grabbed Tino, who was still hiding behind, by her shoulders and shoved her forward.

Then, straight down to business, I asked Matthis, who was tidying up, “Matthis, setting that aside, you do have appraisal commissions for Relics to be auctioned, right? Let me in and show them to me.”

Matthis’s expression froze in place, and Liz furrowed her brows in displeasure.

*I brought the entry pass (Tino) with me, so let me in, dude.*

The capital had always been the holy land of treasure hunting, and the auction was a great opportunity for hunters. The high circulation of Relics here attracted many hunters seeking them, and, especially during the auction, a vast number of hunters and merchants flocked to the capital from all over the country and beyond. Perhaps due to the characteristic festive atmosphere, the auctioned Relics commonly fetched prices higher than their original value, and the cash flow involved during this period was enormous. The auction was a golden opportunity for hunters to make good money.

However, even during an auction, nobody bought Relics with unknown effects. Thus, right before the auction, Relic appraisers residing in the capital were often inundated with appraisals for Relics brought in from all over the place.

Since Relics’ effects were naturally prone to be misjudged, appraisal results were often vouched for by the appraisers’ good name. And since the appraiser of the Relic was also one of the deciding factors of a bid, it was only natural that this brusque but highly skilled gramps’s service was in great demand.

A door stood behind the counter. Beyond it was Matthis’s workspace. Inside, wooden boxes were stacked, a large metallic workbench stood, and bizarre tools for appraisal lined the walls. It felt a great deal less tidy than the storefront, but the narrow space illuminated by dim lights carried a certain charm.

Instinctively, I let out a sigh. It wasn’t my first time here, and to a timid person, cramped spaces like this one were my favorite.

Tino gingerly followed me in, and Liz looked around as she let out a big yawn.



Back when Matthis first let me in here, the space had been so cluttered that I'd had no place to step on, but at some point, the place had become tidy enough to navigate without tripping—it was almost certainly because of Tino rather than me.

Looking over his shoulder at me, who'd been creeping behind him, Matthis snorted, "You'll take one look and scram, understand? I'm busy."

"But I brought Tino with me! Do you not care what happens to her?"

"K-Kiddo, how long do you plan to stay here?"

Matthis's workshop was a very intriguing place where all sorts of Relics, both before and after appraisal, lay scattered around.

In reality, the majority of the Relics found in treasure vaults were impractical. It wouldn't have been much of a problem if they were merely defective like Night Hiker. Absurd Relics—bracelets that numbed the taste, earrings that made it impossible to distinguish sounds, and boots that made you skip instead of walking normally—were all over the place. We treasure hunters respectfully called them "scrap Relics," and naturally, they hardly ever lined store shelves.

Although I'd come for a different purpose today, scavenging for marginally useful items from the mountain of prank gadgets made a great way to kill time. (By the way, finding anything useful was extremely rare, needless to say.)

"Here. This is the catalog of Relics I've been commissioned for. Just read it and get going."

Matthis offered Tino a chair and roughly tossed me a bundle of files bound together with paper clips.

*The disparity in his treatment towards me and Tino is so obvious. Is it too much to ask for some tea here?*

But there was no point in complaining, so I began reviewing the list as I stood there.

There were many appraisers in the capital besides Matthis. Seemed like I'd have to visit them later too.

Liz was waiting for me there like a dog instructed to wait.

*Maybe I should hurry.*

“Hmm...I don't have any money though...”

On the document was a list of temporary names and features of the Relics. The clients' names were probably omitted for privacy.

Auctioned Relics often sold for more than the market price. Useful Relics were hard to come by even if one had the money, so considering that, while the auction was a big opportunity, it might be out of my reach this time. But as I scanned through the catalog, my excitement steadily escalated.

*I wonder... If I start kowtowing, would that work?*

“Missy, how have you been? How were the hunts going?”

“I'm doing fine, thank you. The hunts were going well.”

“That's good to know. Treasure hunting is a dangerous job, and after all these years of doing business with hunters, I can't help but deeply understand the risks involved, no matter how much I don't want to. Make sure to take good care of yourself.”

“Your appraisals are taking forever, gramps. Are there no useful ones at all?”

Knowing only the features and temporary names of the Relics wasn't of much use. A few I could guess, but nothing struck a chord within me.

*At least include some pictures in the list...*

“You're annoying! They're in that box over there; check them out as you wish. And make sure not to stain them!”

*He must be really stressed out.*

I, broad-minded as I was, remained unruffled as I opened the box he indicated and checked its contents.

It seemed like the Relics hadn't been charged with mana yet, and it was regrettable that I couldn't see the Relics in their perfect state.

I plopped myself down on the floor and began to take out the to-be-appraised Relics one by one as if checking them against the catalog.

What an exhilarating moment.

The ever so popular accessory-type Relics were the most common among the batch, but there were also ones that I had high expectations for, such as the bag-type Relics, and ones with truly rare shapes, like the glove-type Relics.

I might be broke, but this year's auction seemed promising.

"Hey, Krai Baby, let's get it done now, okay? How many Relics are there?"

"Liz, you should look for something promising too."

Liz pouted and began peeking into the wooden box unenthusiastically.

"Has the Stifled Shadow been picking on you? Has Krai been burdening you with unreasonable demands? Those brats' entire party, they really don't know what moderation means."

"I-I'm fine. They're treating me well."

"Make sure to depend on your comrades if anything happens, though some of them may have messed-up personalities. But Steps is a huge clan, so I'm sure you'll have plenty of people to ask for help from when you need it. Krai...well, depending on the situation, might probably be useful too. After all, somehow or other, he's the hunter who's gained the most levels in the past few years," said Matthis unto Tino with a worried tone.

"U-Understood."

Surprisingly, Tino, who was usually indifferent to outsiders, was faltering.

*And what does he mean by "depending on the situation"? The only time I'm probably useful to Tino is when she's being pestered by her sisterly companions.*

"I understand that. Master is a wonderful person. He might have a lot of debt, but he's still a wonderful person. Compared to Master, I'm...just some trash—"

"Hey, you, Krai! What nonsense have you been filling Li'l Tino's head with?!"

Matthis grabbed me by my shoulder as I silently sat there rummaging through the box. And just as he was smearing me with the baseless rumor, a Relic that Liz had picked up suddenly caught my eye.

The Relic appeared to be a mask of a peculiar texture. Its expressionless surface was accompanied by holes at the position of the eyes and mouth.

“Ugh. Disgusting. What *is* this? Hey, Krai Baby, isn’t this the one you had before—”

“Let me have a look!”

I received the mask from Liz.

With a raw fleshlike texture, it felt soft and moist on my fingertips. As I lifted it up, a disturbing weight settled in my hand. It was cold to the touch, but if filled with mana and activated, it’d most likely emanate a warmth like human body heat.

This was a mask made of flesh. I had firsthand experience with a similar Relic.

My hand holding the mask was shaking. It might not look exactly the same, but I was sure there weren’t many Relics as disgusting as this—a Reversible Face. While it was an extremely useful Relic, it’d also been extremely disliked among my companions. Presumably, it’d been destroyed by Liz eventually, and now, here it was in front of my eyes.

“Huh? Hey, Krai, what’s the matter?”

Matthis looked into what I was holding in my hands, and his face scrunched up.

*...I want it. I want it so badly.*

A Reversible Face was an expandable flesh mask that allowed one to alter their appearance at will. With it, one could alter at will not just facial features but even everything from hair to—with enough practice—body shape. With this, I could be free from the hunters and criminals who tried to make a name for themselves by hunting high-level hunters and walk the streets without fear.

My previous encounter with one had been a pure coincidence, and I’d thought I’d lost it forever when it’d been destroyed. I’d been sure that there were very few who’d take such a disgusting Relic back even if they found one in a treasure vault.

“That’s a Relic brought in from overseas. I’ve yet to appraise it, but it’s no good,” said Matthis with a stern expression.

Tino widened her eyes as she stared at the mask.

*...I want it. I want it so badly.*

Indeed, this Relic was no-good—a Relic that could alter not only one's face but even things like their body and fingerprints would also be useful for crimes and other no-good purposes if mastered. Zebrudia's law had banned the use of such an item, but possession alone wasn't deemed illegal. In other words, as long as one wasn't caught using it, the Relic itself wasn't considered illegal.

*How much is it? How much do I need for it?*

The one I'd acquired last time had come from a large bandit gang that Grieving Souls had crushed, and it'd been among the spoils we'd received. It wasn't something I'd bought, so I couldn't pin down its price, but considering its rarity and capabilities, it likely would easily sell over ten million gild.

*...I want it. I want it so badly. If I don't get it now, I definitely won't be able to get it again.*

Desperate, I turned my head.

*How much is it? How much money will I have to put together? I'll kowtow to Eva, I'll kowtow to Sitri, and while I'm at it, I'll kowtow to Liz and Tino too.*

*Am I ready for this? Yes, I am.*

*Please marry me.*

At this point, the appraisal of Tino's Relic had completely slipped my mind.

I'd trade for it with my treasured Relics in my collection—that was how valuable a Reversible Face was.

I looked up and saw Matthis. He'd always maintained a stern demeanor, but now cold sweat was dripping down his skin as he took a step backwards.

Right now, my immediate task was to negotiate for its sale before it went up for auction.

"What, Krai Baby? Could it be that you want that?"

If it went up for auction, I'd be in an awkward situation where I'd have to compete with numerous other hunters and nobles for it. If that happened, whether I acquired it or not in the end would be a question of luck, and its cost

would likely rise significantly.

I needed to negotiate and have it sold to me before it was put up for bidding. It wasn't something to be proud of, but it was a common tactic in auctions.

I had prestige, and—despite it being not something I'd earned myself—people had trust in me. This wasn't the time to be selective about means.

*I'll absolutely get my hands on it.*

I slowly took a deep breath to calm my pounding heart and asked Matthis, "I want this Relic really badly. I'd like to negotiate with the client of this item. Can you contact them for me?"

"Wh-What?! Are you in your right mind? The Relic hasn't been appraised yet!"

*I'm in my right mind.*

Indeed, it was a disgusting Relic, disgusting even at the moment of activation. The sensation upon its activation was as if a piece of raw meat that was adhered to your face ate your entire body away; it was a feeling that only those who'd experienced it before could truly understand, I was sure.

*But I want it. I want it as cheap as possible. With this, I can finally do a confectionery café crawl on my own without an escort!*

"Tsk. Seems like you're serious, you Relic freak. Well, at least it's good for business... All right, I get it. I'll talk to the client for you. But Li'l Tino, I hope you don't end up like him."

Matthis clicked his tongue with a displeased look. As always, he had a foul mouth, but he was a kind, caring old man.

As I exited the Relic store and briskly headed back to the clan house, Tino asked me in a reserved voice, "Master...uh...aren't you short on money?"

"I've finally found it...! No way I'm letting that Relic slip through my fingers."

It was true that I was in debt, but if I missed this chance, I was sure that I would never encounter that Relic ever again.

The reason why possessing a Reversible Face, a Relic highly compatible with

criminals, wasn't deemed illegal was that making Relic possession itself illegal would hinder hunters from bringing back Relics into the capital. Zebrudia as a nation had grown thanks to the strength of treasure hunters. Since the effects of Relics found in treasure vaults couldn't be judged without appraisers, if hunters were to be captured for bringing back a Relic that was later found to be illegal, no one would dare bring any back to the capital. Hence, the empire recognized the possession of all Relics—not only the Reversible Face—by law. But on the flip side, highly illegal Relics weren't allowed on store shelves despite the possession of them being legal.

Anyone with a sound mind wouldn't consider selling a Relic whose usage would be considered a crime, and the means to acquire Relics not displayed in stores were limited. What's more, there was a good chance that such a Relic would never appear again in my lifetime.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I'd get it even if that meant pawning my parents.

"Hey, Tino...um...yeah, how much savings do you have?"

"Huh?!"

"Oh, just for my reference, just for reference. I'm borrowing from Sitri, so take it easy; yeah, take it easy."

This was awful timing given that we'd just talked about my debt very recently. This was making me feel queasy.

"Master...d-do you really want that Relic so badly that—" Tino backed away as a shocked expression formed on her face. Then, she started muttering, "Is that Relic really as good as Master said it is? It does slightly resemble that disgusting mask Master once had..."

*I wonder what she'll think of me if I told her that I need it so that I could go on a confectionery café crawl alone...*

*I'll borrow from Sitri and have this all sorted out. I don't think the Relic will be that expensive no matter how convenient or how illicit it might be.*

*It'll be fine.*

*Sitri is an Alchemist, and just as the name implies, she can alchemize things into gold! I don't know how she earns all that money, but she's the kind of person who can casually generate hundreds of millions, so everything will be fine!*

*Though I'm getting really scared that I actually might become Krai Smart someday.*

Then, Liz, who was walking beside me, frowned.

"Hmm, Sidy did mention being short on money recently with all those things happening, so that might be a problem... How much do you need?"

"Seriously?"

*So Sitri's wallet can actually get thin, huh? And I thought it was an endless spring of wealth...*

Though it was too early to give up. The odds of that disgusting mask fetching a high price were slim.

Deep in thought, I arrived at the clan house.

In front of the clan house parked a large carriage, a polished black carriage that clearly hinted opulence. It was pulled by two black horses of impressive builds, their gazes scanning the surroundings as if to intimidate. Engraved on the body of the carriage was a coat of arms depicting three intersecting swords.

Seeing the coat of arms, Tino looked perplexed.

"The House of Gladis's family crest...? But that house is known for despising hunters..."

Even I, as ignorant as I was, knew about Earl Gladis: they were one of the powerful nobles of Zebrudia. Known as the "Sword of Zebrudia," the House of Gladis was a military family that had protected the empire for a long period of time.

Although their dominion wasn't quite vast, they possessed many treasure vaults within their territory. By regularly sending their knights' order into these vaults, the House of Gladis also commanded a considerable number of powerful soldiers who rivaled even hunters. In Zebrudia, where treasure vaults were



abundant, all knights had mana material absorbed into their bodies to some degree. Nonetheless, the knights under the command of the House of Gladis seemed to be of a different caliber.

We, the Grievors, were careful not to get involved with nobles much, so I didn't know too much about them, but as Tino had said, the name "Gladis" might as well be considered synonymous with "disdain for hunters."

I'd met the head of the house at a party somewhere before, but all I remembered was being stared at with a murderous gaze.

*Is this going to be something troublesome again?*

While I didn't think they were here to harass us or anything, if they were here to commission quests, the appropriate protocol would be to contact the Association first.

*I'm busy right now. This is such a bother. I wonder if they'll leave if I kowtow.*

As those disrespectful thoughts crossed my mind, the entrance to the clan house opened.

"Thank you for accompanying us all the way, Lady Éclair. Please convey my regards to Lord Gladis."

"Mhmm. Don't trouble yourself with such groveling. Hunters rarely capture my interest, but you're an exception. Eagerly do I await the day when I shall meet your sword again, Ark."

Emerging from the door were Ark and a blonde girl in a white dress, brimming with eager anticipation.

"H—" I caught the sound that had escaped my mouth when I realized that the little girl who'd appeared next to Ark was obviously a noble.

Unlike my childhood friends, I wasn't so quarrelsome that I'd defy nobles. Since I was uneducated and wasn't well-bred either, I'd decided that I'd try my best to shut up in the presence of nobles—keeping quiet was the best way to avoid trouble.

The young girl stared intently at me, who'd raised my voice suddenly. She was guaranteed to grow up to be a beauty in the future with her flawless white skin

and clear blue eyes, but her gaze was haughty.

*I wonder if she's even ten years old yet.*

My friends and I'd been dreaming of becoming hunters at that age. Nobles' education must have been really strict for her to have such sharp eyes at this age.

The pure white dress seemed to be her everyday wear. The majestic air exuded from the way she dressed up naturally was indeed typical of someone in a position of authority. Her sparsely decorated dress and the overly ornate short sword belted at her waist indicated the young girl's origin.

In a high-pitched voice, the girl ordered, "What is this wretch? Get out of my way."

"Wh-What did you say to Maste—umph!"

I hugged Tino from behind and put my right hand over her mouth as she reflexively took a step forward and was about to snap at the girl.

*Why are you jumping headfirst into such obvious trouble? Are you Liz? Wait...no, Liz should be fine. She's trained to not snap at nobles in particular.*

Frowning, Liz looked at the girl with a grim expression. She couldn't hide her irritation, but she kept silent.

*I must praise her generously later if she can hold back.*

Smiling gently, I was about to clear the way when Ark said, unnecessarily, with an invigorating smile, "Oh hey, Krai. I'm back. We're grateful that Lord Gladis lent us this carriage to send us back. This here is Lady Éclair, Lord Gladis's daughter."



*Another new member of the Ark harem? But no matter how you put it, she has to be too young for this. I never thought Ark had lolicon vibes.*

I forcibly suppressed the frivolous remark that was about to escape my lips.

No, I mustn't say it yet. My head would go flying if I said that in front of Lord Gladis's daughter. Even though Ark and I got along quite well and exchanged lighthearted banters, I'd just met Lady Gladis after all.

But it'd been Marquess Sandrine, a noble with a moderate stance towards hunters, who'd summoned Ark. How did he end up bringing back Lord Gladis's daughter? ...Though I suppose this was still better than him bringing back the head of the House of Gladis.

Hearing Ark's words, Lady Éclair widened her eyes and began sizing me up from head to toe.

"You...are the Thousand Tricks? My father has spoken of you at length."

Her words and attitude were grandiose, but her high-pitched voice was that of a child.

Even I wasn't scared of a child and her words. Though I was more concerned about Liz.

As the expressions on the guardian knights around her stiffened, Lady Éclair continued in a brisk tone, "As my father reckoned, you're surprisingly weak, contrary to expectations. It strains credulity that you're a hunter surpassing Ark Rodin here."

"..."

"The Explorers' Association has fallen so low. Did you buy your rank with coins? You vile hunter, you ought to feel ashamed."

"..."

"Are you not to say a word in response to all my assertions? Have you not an inkling of pride?"

For some reason, the young lady took a step back and looked at me with an expression as if she'd seen something uncanny.

Tino flinched in my arms, but I ignored her.

I resumed the breath that I'd been holding and, trying not to sound disrespectful, said in a calm voice, "I was raised poorly, and my manners are lacking. I try to be discreet in my speech as much as I can."

"Wha—?! Um...uh..." stuttered Lady Éclair as she looked around as if the wind was taken out of her sails. Then, clearing her throat lightly but firmly, she continued, "M-Mhmm. Th-That's a good policy to have when presumptuously associating with your betters."

I had nothing to gain from offending nobles: I wasn't in a position to reap benefits behind the shield of authority. And, as the young lady had said, since I had no pride, I'd go down in a kowtow if it could get me out of this.

*...I wonder if she'll lend me money if I kowtow.*

"My lady, it's about time," whispered a genteel senior man standing by at the entrance to Lady Éclair.

The man was dressed in a butler's outfit that was black from head to toe. He was most likely her chaperone.

"Y-Yes, quite right!"

Probably relieved by the excuse to depart, Lady Éclair looked up at Ark enthusiastically.

"Very well, Ark, we shall meet again. Should your path lead you to Gladis's domain, just send word to our estate. Train me in the ways of the sword again next time!"

It seemed Ark must have had his work cut out for him to have a young noble lady ask him for sword training.

In the end, after giving me a stern look, Lady Éclair rode away in the carriage with her chaperones.

She swept into our past like a tempest—I wonder if she'd grow up to become like Liz...or maybe not.

My breath finally resumed.

Rubbernecks peering our way with curious eyes began to disperse.

Ark approached me and gently apologized, “My bad for arriving in a carriage without prior notice. I couldn’t refuse—she was very insistent.”

This was Ark for you; this was Ark. If we were playing cards, he’d be the Joker: all troubles could be resolved with him, so much so that I would’ve preferred that he stay close to the clan house more.

“What perfect timing,” I said. “Ark, can you lend me some money?”

“What?”

Ark, the strongest “pseudo-handsome dude” of First Steps, gaped at me.

We entered the clan house together as we continued negotiating.

Ark, without a trace of flinching, said with a bright smile, “I don’t know what’s going on, but there’s no way I’m lending you money.”

Monetary loans and debts were the prime cause of conflicts within a party of hunters. Stories abounded where parties had dissolved due to financial disputes among their members.

Hunters made good money, but they spent it just as fast.

Though not as much as the Grievors, Ark should be making decent money. Coming from a prestigious family, he might have one of the best financial standings in our clan too.

*How should I convince him...? I need to piece together some money quickly and start negotiating, or some other hunter might snatch it away.*

*I’ll definitely pay it back later!*

Ark shrugged. The same gesture looked so much better when done by a handsome man instead of me.

“I’m sure you’ve just found a new Relic or something, right? Speaking of which, isn’t the auction about to start soon?”

Of course, he knew everything.

By the way, this wasn’t the first time I’d pestered him for money.

Ark and I certainly had no bad blood between us, but he was quite the responsible person when it came to things like this.

Liz, letting out the anger she'd pent up from earlier, stepped forward to confront him.

"Say that again? Did you hear what Krai just sai—"

*Zip it.*

I held her back.

"Hush, Liz—no, it's different this time. It's a crazy Relic. I absolutely need to get my hands on it."

"That's nothing different... How much did you want me to lend you, by the way?"

That would depend on how the negotiation went. The market for Relics was a tricky one, and I had no idea how much I needed.

Putting on an earnest expression, I replied, "As much as I can."

"And...what's the effect of and your reason to go after this Relic thingy?"

By changing my face, I'd gain my freedom—I'd be able to go to the confectionery cafés on my own.

And so, with sincerity, I firmly said, "That I can't tell!"

Of course, I couldn't. I couldn't say it was illegal.

*...Does that mean I have no shot?*

"Ugh... I know you're secretive, but this conversation isn't going anywhere."

*That* was an entirely valid response. And so, I gave up on Ark and turned my gaze to his party members, standing against the wall.

Ark's party, Ark Brave, was a Level 7 party certified by Explorers' Association, its members averaged Level 6. They had a well-balanced class composition, were all highly competent, and displayed excellent teamwork. What truly made them stand out compared to other parties, however, was surely the fact that Ark's party members were all women—all beautiful women. This was why his party was teased as a "harem party," all the while being recognized for its

superiority.

Standing at the back, Ewe, the party's Saint, shrank back and nervously said, "I-I'm not lending you money."

The other members of Ark Brave, Isabella the Magus and Armelle the Swordsman, also glared at me with scowling expressions.

"If you're a Level 8 hunter as you claim, please cover your own finances diligently without relying on Ark!" Isabella shouted.

"Oh boy... You're such a wimp, as usual, trying to mooch off your rivals. I fail to comprehend how a man like you leads *that* party." Armelle seemed more disappointed than outraged.

Not only were they from various classes, but their personalities also varied greatly: they were timid, aloof, and warrior-like.

*Roarrior!*

Perhaps it was his ability to lead a harem that had made Ark the most approachable person.

While I didn't really harbor a sense of rivalry towards Ark Brave, the Braves seemed to see us, the Grievors, as their rivals. Thanks to that, they were often critical of us.

Liz looked like she was about to pounce at them even now. It looked like I'd have to give her a rub under her chin later.

Isabella, the most eloquent speaker among them, closed in on me.

She, too, was well-groomed, much like Ark. Her lavender-colored hair and eyes as well as her snow-white skin indicated her northern origins. However, her intimidating gaze ruined her allure. She was also a pitiful girl who often challenged Lucia despite ending up being ignored.

"T-To begin with, as much as Lady Éclair is a child, why would you talk to her with such disrespectful sarcasm? Are you not afraid of making an enemy of the House of Gladis?!"

"Huh...? Sarcasm? I was just stating facts..."



I had no idea what she was talking about. How was my statement about being oblivious to the rules of etiquette sarcasm?

“I-It might not matter much to you people after all you’ve been through, but we’re in the same clan now. Do you understand what that means? What if you tarnish Rodin’s name?!”

As headstrong as ever. She should be younger than me, yet she was difficult—in a different dimension from Liz and the others.

Though, unfortunately for her, I remained unhurt no matter how much she berated me. That was because I understood the fact that I was incompetent better than anyone else, and I’d gotten used to being berated. And, really, what could I do even if Rodin’s name was tarnished? I didn’t have an answer to the question, so I wouldn’t be doing anything in particular. Besides, I doubted Rodin’s name would be tarnished that easily...

“You insolent! How dare you make such false accusations against Maste—  
eewph! Umph! Umph!”

Tino suddenly stepped in between me and Isabella and attempted to bite her.

I muffled her.

“All right, all right. I’m sorry, but I need to go borrow money from someone else, so are we all done here?”

I kowtowed, deftly shrugging off their criticism. I had a *knack* for muffling mouths.

I might be weak against enemies, but I was strong against allies—I was what people called “a lion at home and a mouse abroad.” Ark’s party members all had distinctive personalities, but they weren’t indiscriminate like mine.

Isabella was taken aback when I suddenly covered Tino’s mouth, and Tino protested with teary eyes as she continued to shout in a muffled voice.

*Yeah, uh-huh.*

“Well then, see you later, Ark!”

Time was running short. I gave a brief goodbye, and Ark waved as usual with a smile that revealed nothing about his mind.

For now, maybe I should check with the clan members in the lounge and see if I could borrow some money.

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News that the Thousand Tricks was scrambling for money unabashedly spread throughout the entire capital quickly.

The exchange had taken place at the entrance of the clan house while many clan members, as well as outsiders, were present. It was simply impossible for that conversation between the clan's top two members, both in name and substance, to go unnoticed.

It was an open secret that the Thousand Tricks had a huge collection of Relics. While hunters typically kept their secret weapons under wraps, the Thousand Tricks's Relic collection was beyond the realm of mere secrets. Almost no one had ever actually seen the collection, but it was rumored to contain rare, expensive, and apparently even cursed Relics too dangerous for an average hunter to handle. There were even rumors that the Griever's Relics were all inferior Relics from his collection.

Debts were something that hunters should avoid. Borrowing from another party could potentially damage a hunter's most valuable asset: trust.

This was a Relic for which a Relic collector, a Level 8 hunter, was willing to incur such a debt to obtain. What kind of power could it possibly possess? Its effects were unknown, but it was apparently a "crazy" Relic. Anyhow, it was undoubtedly a Relic that rarely appeared. Perhaps, there was even a possibility that it would become the Level 8 hunter's trump card.

By nature, the many merchants, hunters, and even nobles in the capital were all interested in rumors surrounding the upcoming Zebrudia Auction, and rumors only bred more rumors.

Everyone desired powerful Relics, hands down. Treasure hunters pursued them for their hunts, nobles for prestige, and merchants for trump cards to utilize in business.

What kind of power did this Relic actually hold? Those without the money dreamed of its power, and those with it schemed to acquire it by any means.

The merchants thought, *He may be Level 8, but he's ultimately just a hunter. There should be a limit to the funds he can possibly gather.*

The hunters thought, *Perhaps we could obtain power rivaling that of a Level 8 with this Relic.*

And the nobles thought, *Wouldn't we be even more gilded as long as we get our hands on this Relic?*

It was just a rumor in the end; however, it was just too tantalizing a rumor to dismiss as mere hearsay.

"Hey, Arnold, apparently there's a crazy Relic up for auction," said Eigh to Arnold excitedly.

They were in a corner of a tavern abuzz with the aroma of alcohol and the fervor of the crowd. The place was teeming with numerous hunters, and even Falling Fog, a group of outsiders, seemed to have blended in thoroughly.

It'd been a few days since they'd put aside their grudge with the Thousand Tricks, and unlike the past week, everything had been going smoothly for them. They'd tried exploring a few treasure vaults and confirmed that their abilities were more than adequate even in the capital. Falling Fog had wandered around the Zebrudia capital, learned more about the state of the city, researched the hunters of the capital in more detail, and fixed up their equipment anew—the only remaining issue was the Thousand Tricks.

Slamming the ale mug he'd just emptied onto the table, Arnold asked, "Oh yeah? What kind of Relic is it?"

"Well, uh, I don't have the details...but they say it's a Relic that would make even a Level 8 hunter pester people all around the place for money."

"A Level 8... Hmm..."

Arnold scowled at the news, and Eigh's expression wasn't any better either.

Arnold's current target was the Thousand Tricks. Now that his body had healed, he didn't care much about the wounds Liz had inflicted on him. Yet, the humiliation he'd suffered remained etched in his soul.

The problem was that he still had no clue about the tactics the Thousand

Tricks had employed. Whether it was subterfuge or an incomprehensible level of ability was beyond conjecture, even members of Obsidian Cross and Starlight, parties within the Thousand Tricks's clan, knew nothing about his power.

Ark knew there were only three Level 8s in the capital, and he suspected that they were all big guns on par with that man. To say he wasn't interested in a Relic that high-level hunters like them were frantically pursuing would be a lie.

But unfortunately, the members of Falling Fog, who'd just recently arrived at the capital after their long journey, didn't have the funds for it: they'd expended a large proportion of it on their equipment in the past few days. Besides, there was probably no way that they'd afford a Relic that even high-level hunters had to borrow money to purchase. Well, even if they had the money, shelling out a substantial amount for such an unknown Relic, all based on the premise that a high-level hunter desired it, was out of the question. Eigh, treasurer of the party, surely echoed the opinion.

"Tsk, what an intriguing story. By the way, Eigh, how did the appraisal we've commissioned for that Relic go?"

"Yeah. Seems like the appraiser is swamped because of the auction, so it might take a little longer."

"Okay."

Recalling the disgusting Relic they'd found in a treasure vault near Nebulanubes, Arnold furrowed his brow.

It'd been a repulsive mask as if made by kneading raw meat. Not only had it looked like real bloody flesh, but it also felt like it to the touch. Even Arnold's party, hunters accustomed to the texture of blood and organs, were horrified by it. The Relic had been so repulsive that he'd regretted bringing it back the moment they'd returned to town. It was a Relic that even the appraiser in Nebulanubes had refused to appraise. It was probably nothing worthy; judging from its appearance, it might even be one of those Relics that imposed handicaps on its user.

They had it appraised anyway, and if it proved to be of no value, they'd planned to ask the appraiser to dispose of it for them.

“I hope its price could at least cover our drinks. Y’know, bringing it back wasn’t all that easy.”

In response to Eigh’s heartfelt words, Arnold let out a groan of agreement.

## Chapter Four: The Auction and the Relic

“I really feel bad about doing this, Sitri, even though we’ve just talked about repaying my debt not long ago.”

“Oh, please don’t feel bad about it. That’s how we roll, isn’t it?”

Sitri cracked a wide grin as her close friend displayed an apologetic expression.

Indeed, Sitri was a bit low on cash at the moment. She’d been making a massive quantity of potions to be used when charging Relics and selling them off at a giveaway price. Additionally, she’d spent a considerable amount making the metal puppets for her older sister to train on.

Initially, Sitri had started accumulating money to increase her options and broaden her available choices. She usually diversified her assets so that she could flee any time if she needed to. But because of that, she couldn’t just summon a large sum of liquid cash on a whim upon request.

Eva had approached her to ask her to stop giving him loans anymore and to discuss repayment plans, but Sitri wasn’t particularly concerned about loaning money. Though, in actuality, these “loans” didn’t come with interests or deadlines—she didn’t even care if they were repaid. As for marrying him...well, she didn’t have to debate that to come up with a conclusion.

Nevertheless, Sitri had made it her policy to support Krai with loans as much as she could. Of course, her fondness for Krai played a role, but it was hard for her to imagine that a “close friend” of hers, who earned quite a bit as a hunter, would borrow money just to squander it.

Regarding his hobby of stocking up on Relics, considering that these Relics proved to be useful in Grieving Souls’s expeditions occasionally, she had no reason to stop him. However, even if his hobby had been a pure extravagance instead of collecting Relics, she probably wouldn’t have stopped him either.

Sitri was on Krai’s side through and through. Just like Krai, who had always,

still was, and would always stand by her side through thick and thin, she was ready to go through hell and high water for her close friend.

*Love was blind.*

\*\*\*

Having received news from Matthis that he'd made contact with the owner of the Reversible Face, I headed for the negotiation venue.

By my side, I had Sitri as my escort. She'd shown not a sign of reluctance when I'd requested a loan from her despite what I'd just promised not long ago.

Sitri smoothly and swiftly linked her arm with mine and explained with a smile, "Don't worry. We'll be able to finance this to a decent level if I liquidate some of my materials and potions in reserve. Though the research might have to be delayed slightly."

"I'm so sorry. Don't be mad at me, okay?"

"You don't have to worry about a thing. If worse comes to worst, we could borrow from the bank, though I'd prefer not to. We Alchemists have an immense advantage when it comes to getting a loan..."

"..."

"My sister is going to help too, so don't worry. It's an absolutely necessary Relic, right? I'll acquire it for you by any means necessary."

"Yeah...uh-huh..."

"We'll...put ourselves second. To be honest, I don't really feel like it, but we'll put ourselves second," said Sitri with a grim resolve, as she clenched her fist.

I felt really guilty.

Liz had said it might be tricky for Sitri, and indeed, Sitri's financial situation appeared to be much worse than I'd imagined. Naturally, I couldn't just put Sitri through hardship for my sake. I'd tried withdrawing my request, but it'd already been too late.

Sitri had the bad habit of prioritizing me over herself, not only today. It was probably for the same reason that Liz didn't strongly oppose my borrowing

money. It was wholly my charisma that was to be blamed for having my clan members reject all my loan requests.

“But, we must first determine the amount we need... Let’s *take care* of the hunter who owns the Relic when it comes down to it. Negotiation is my strong suit after all,” continued Sitri as she smiled seemingly cheerily.

*That* was a terrifying smile.

Never had I resented more my inability to see through the emotions she was concealing within.

*Though, I wonder what she means by “taking care” of them... I’d prefer to resolve this peacefully if possible.*

Liz had ventured into a treasure vault to assist me in fundraising, and it seemed she’d be vault-hopping later. I’d never heard of anyone going vault-hopping, but I didn’t get the chance to stop her.

*I’ve accumulated a large debt. Am I a sugar baby? Am I?*

Regardless, there was still hope. Depending on the negotiation, I might be able to get by without overburdening Sitri.

Direct negotiation was a double-edged sword: It offered the advantage of securing a desired Relic before others, but the opponent could also exploit the situation and inflate the price. Though, on the other hand, there’d been a few cases where the negotiation had broken down due to a high price offered by the opponent, and yet there actually were no other bidders at the auction. In those cases, one could end up winning the Relic at a price far cheaper than originally proposed in the negotiation.

The Relic I was targeting this time looked awful, so awful that an ordinary hunter might even consider not bringing it back—in other words, the other party should be looking to dispose of it as soon as possible. If things went well, I should be able to obtain it at a rather low price.

The negotiation would be easier if I were an acquaintance of the seller, but given that this Relic had apparently been obtained from a distant treasure vault by a foreign hunter, my chances were slim.



“Though, if the owner was amiable, we won’t have to resort to rough measures.”

Every single one of Sitri’s statements was disturbing—she was an *Alchemist*, weak in hand-to-hand combat. Her statements were probably just a joke, but even her jokes carried a certain menace that couldn’t just be dismissed.

The sky was clear with not a cloud in sight, but my heart was filled with uneasiness.

A tavern adjacent to Explorers’ Association’s capital branch, The Challengers’ Classroom, was chosen as the venue for negotiation. It was the most famous tavern in the capital, always bustling with hunters returning from treasure vaults. The drinks and food there were affordable, regardless of their quality. All hunters from novices—who tended to be poor—to veterans gathered here, making it the perfect place to learn about the freshest news in the capital. Even I used to frequent this place a lot during my early days as a hunter. Though since Liz and Luke had been banned from the establishment after an incident, it’d been a while since I’d visited.

Pushing my way through the hunters, who were dead drunk despite it still being daytime, I headed towards the table arranged for the meeting.

From a distance, I spotted the table, and as my mind registered the figure of the surrounding hunters, I stopped in my tracks reflexively.

Sitri also seemed surprised, placing a finger on her lips.

“Oh...uh...”

This was *bad*.

I checked around, holding on a glimmer of hope I’d come to the wrong table, but it was indeed the right one. There, by the table, sat Arnold and his comrades, with whom I recently had an intractable strife.

*There should be more hunters than one can possibly imagine coming into the capital at this time of year—why am I so unlucky...?*

Sitri was our only muscle here. Dealing with a Level 7 vanguard would be impossible if things went south.

*Maybe I should just leave.*

For a moment, that thought crossed my mind. But then I remembered that it'd been Matthis who'd set up this negotiation. As much as the old man, fawning on Tino, was a suspected lolicon, I couldn't just disgrace him by bailing on this meeting he'd taken the trouble to arrange amid his busy schedule.

At least we'd resolved our strife(?) in an encounter, and I'd apologized through Chloe. They wouldn't just pounce on me the moment I show my face...I thought.

As I remained standing frozen, attempting to gather my thoughts somehow, Sitri approached the table with a bright smile. Her courage was commendable, considering her altercation with them in the tavern not long ago.

I hadn't fully steeled myself yet, but I couldn't possibly let Sitri go alone either. Hastily, I followed her petite figure.

As the approaching figure drew near, Arnold looked up, his expression perpetually sour as always.

*Please forget about us.*

Despite my desperate wish, his expression contorted fiercely.

*Of course it would.*

Next to him, A widened his eyes upon seeing us and raised his trembling voice, "Wh-What are you—"

"We extend our sincere gratitude for your willingness to engage in the negotiations today. Mr. Arnold."

Without flinching, Sitri struck preemptively with a cheerful voice. Her eyes were twinkling—genuinely.

*Come to think of it, doesn't she have a thing for men like Arnold? Huh...*

A was left speechless at her radiant smile.

Arnold clicked his tongue and gestured towards the seat across from him with his chin.

Suppressing the sharp nervous cramps in my stomach, I sat down.

And so, the negotiation began.

\*\*\*

*What the heck is this man thinking?*

Arnold hadn't expected to face him in a negotiation, and now he was unsure of how to proceed. He still felt the anger smoldering within him, but a deeper disquiet overwhelmed that burning rage.

This flow of events was clearly unnatural, and his experiences as a hunter so far told him now was the time to stay calm.

With their leader maintaining a stoic silence, the other members who were about to raise their voices held their tongues. They were probably echoing Arnold's sentiments inside their minds.

The man before them was—how should they put it—too enigmatic.

As he sat in front of Arnold, his expression was tranquil, almost lethargic, to put it bluntly. His body was slender for a hunter, lacking in both muscles and strength. With him, he carried no weapon.

Was this a gesture indicating a lack of intent to fight, or was it more akin to what he'd demonstrated last time—that he didn't need weapons? Either way, his audacity to show up so calmly after such provocation was anything but ordinary.

In contrast, the woman tagging along beside him was brimming with a serene aura. Her hair color, eye color, and facial features were all reminiscent of the Stifled Shadow who'd once overpowered their party. If the Stifled Shadow represented "vitality," then this one represented "serenity." Her appearance was refined, and her fair skin was unblemished. Every move she made was graceful but, at the same time, without vulnerability.

She must've camouflaged it, but upon closer inspection, the aura she concealed within her wasn't significantly different from that of the Stifled Shadow. Her physique indicated she was a rear guard, but they couldn't afford to let their guard down. Arnold had likely only seen through her disguise because hers was inferior to the Thousand Tricks's.

She was a Griever, undoubtedly a mighty individual.

Arnold licked his lips. Despite everything, he should be in the superior position in this situation.

They'd been informed that someone had expressed interest in negotiating the purchase of the Relic they'd sent in for appraisal. When he'd heard the news, Arnold had thought this person had quite the strange tastes, yet he hadn't expected it to turn out to be the Thousand Tricks. Could this mean that this man was the Level 8 hunter rumored to be seeking out Relics? It would be too great a coincidence otherwise.

Initially, he'd be glad even if that Relic could fetch a price to cover a round of drinks at the tavern, but now, knowing that there was someone who desired the Relic, this was a different story. Relics were expensive; there were even some that were traded for hundreds of millions.

After they'd concluded their self-introductions, the woman who'd identified herself as Sitri spoke with a smile as if their earlier altercation hadn't happened at all, "Krai has a penchant for collecting peculiar Relics. He was intrigued when we learned about this particular Relic—"

"It's a curious item that we've taken the trouble to bring all the way here from Nebulanubes," said Eigh, having fully switched gears, meeting Sitri's words with a broad smile. "To be honest, that took quite some effort, and selling it at a low price won't cut it. This is an item that could sell well to not just hunters, but also dilettante collectors; am I right, Arnold?"

He glanced at Arnold's expression.

That was a bluff. At least, there were no takers for that mask at Nebulanubes. Even nobles who fancied rare items were picky about their acquisitions: surely no one would want a flesh mask that appeared nothing but cursed.

Upon hearing Eigh's words, Sitri pressed her hand against her mouth, her expression troubled.

She said, "I see where you're coming from. But unfortunately, I don't believe anyone in this capital would desire that eerie mask. Krai, here, isn't insisting on acquiring it either."

The negotiation was still in the probing stage.

Just as she'd said that, the Thousand Tricks's eyebrows moved slightly, and his expression contorted momentarily.

The change in his expression was all too evident. It was hard to tell if it was meant to be a poker face or not. With such a blatant display, there was no telling whether he was genuinely agitated or simply putting up a show.

Eigh was bewildered, but he kept it from showing on his face. Arnold, who'd known him for long, understood what he felt.

*Wait. Is this really a coincidence to begin with?*

The Thousand Tricks, who'd been in conflict with them and hellbent on provoking them, had offered to negotiate for the Relic Arnold had brought in.

Could such a thing really happen by mere coincidence? It would've been understandable if the Relic had been a well-known item, but it'd been a flesh mask that had failed to sell back in their hometown.

If anything, they should've been at war with one another; there was no reason for the negotiation to succeed. Despite that, this was obviously an unnatural situation, and as the leader of the party, Arnold ought to make his decisions cautiously.

"It's not like we're insisting on not selling it."

"I'm afraid it'd probably fetch a lower price at the auction than if sold to us right here. I doubt anyone would vie for that Relic and bid on it. Can I presume that Mr. Arnold shares the same perspective with your experience as a high-level?"

She'd hit the nail on the head. That was what Arnold and his party had been told before they'd taken the Relic in for appraisal.

Hunters and nobles were cautious when it came to purchasing Relics because there existed ones that posed risks to their owners. Such Relics usually looked like that—just like...that mask.

"That's not fair," said Arnold as he crossed his arms and reclined in his chair.

Staring at the Thousand Tricks instead of Sitri, he continued emphatically, “That was a Relic we’ve gone to great lengths to find. We still don’t know its effects, and it’s disheartening to see a potent Relic being bargained for a dirt cheap price. I’d rather just discard it in that case.”

He’d even been told there was a chance that the mask couldn’t be appraised.

There were two major ways of appraising a Relic: researching the accumulated literature for information or activating it and trying it on. If the former method failed to determine its functions, appraisers would resort to the latter. But appraisers were humans too. Manifestly dangerous Relics were sometimes rejected by appraisers as impossible to appraise—in fact, that mask had been rejected back in Nebulanubes.

The appraiser Arnold and his party had commissioned was a man with decades of experience, well-known for his competence even within the capital. If even he refused to appraise the Relic, there was probably no one in this city who could appraise it. In that case, the mask would likely only sell for collection purposes.

“You seem to have an idea of its effects. We can’t put a price on it as it stands. How about you tell us what kind of power the Relic holds?”

He meant to unsettle them. Information was gold, and no one would divulge it straightaway just because they’d been asked to do so.

Sitri frowned as if exasperated at Eigh’s words.

Sitting by her side, the Thousand Tricks spoke up with a serious look on his face, “That...I can’t tell.”

“Humph.”

That was as expected.

Arnold was about to raise his voice and retort, but the Thousand Tricks, with a troubled smile, said unexpectedly, “But if I have to say one thing about it—if my speculation is correct—it’s a slightly dangerous Relic. Even the law of this land would prohibit its use. I’d let it go as soon as possible if I were you.”

Arnold had been a hunter for a long time, and to survive as a hunter required

more than just physical strength. To excel as a hunter, one needed good bargaining skills to negotiate appropriate prices for the transaction of Relics and monster materials acquired from treasure vaults, as well as communication skills for things like making connections with influential people. While these were primarily handled by Eigh, Falling Fog's vice leader, based on his experiences thus far, Arnold had come to understand its importance to some extent. And now, his intuition was telling him that this aloof man in front of his eyes—the Thousand Tricks—was lying.

The Thousand Tricks looked at Arnold with a serious expression.

“‘Slightly dangerous,’ you say?” said Arnold, as he tilted his brow and glared at the Thousand Tricks, the latter leaning back slightly.

Arnold mentally cataloged every thought and action: his expression, his demeanor, his words.

Arnold retreated into his own thoughts.

*“The law prohibits its use,” “It’s slightly dangerous”—these aren’t words people use in negotiations.*

*If so, I can easily imagine why you’d want this Relic.*

*But this would surely just make us all the more wary.*

*The Thousand Tricks is an excellent tactician. Apparently, he can see through absolutely everything. Why is this Thousand Tricks negotiating so crudely?*

Facing the silent Arnold, the man before him seemed to be assessing his capabilities with his gaze.

“The Thousand Tricks, you lied just now, didn’t you?”

He flinched.

“‘Slightly dangerous’ and that ‘you’d let it go if you were me’? Funny. You trying to trick me?”

Cold sweat streamed down the Thousand Tricks’s cheek as he became unsettled.

What a splendid disguise. Even in Arnold’s eyes, he appeared to be nothing

but genuinely in a panic.

*Right. Don't be deceived by his words. Read between the gaps between the lines.*

*"Dangerous."*

*"He'd let it go if he were me."*

Yes. Didn't the Thousand Tricks sound almost as if he didn't want Arnold to part ways with the Relic?

At that moment, a revelation descended upon Arnold. He felt like all the pieces of the puzzle had come together.

*Could it be that he thinks that I—a Level 7—am an idiot?*

Sitri was smiling next to him, but a cold light gleamed in her eyes as though she were looking at pathetic worms. Though she'd disguised her outward expression, she couldn't conceal the light in her eyes from Arnold.

"Arnold?" said Eigh beside him, casting a sidelong glance at his leader.

Arnold had made his decision.

"All right, I'll sell it to you. Yeah, let's see... Eight million gild—no, ten million gild. I'm not cutting it down any lower, and I'll have you pay me in full, all at once."

While it was a high price for a hideous mask like that, this was an amount that a high-level hunter could easily pay.

The Thousand Tricks's eyes grew as wide as dinner plates.

Sitri looked at Arnold with eyes as if questioning his intent.

Perhaps because Arnold's reaction had been unexpected, his companions rustled. Despite that, all decision-making authority in Falling Fog lay with the leader, Arnold. Though, if that flesh mask sold for ten million gild, they'd surely be more than happy.

Eigh, next to him, looked at Arnold as if questioning his true intention.

"Arnold, are you sure?"



“Yeah. ’Cuz it seems to be a ‘slightly dangerous’ Relic.”

Twisting his lips, Arnold smiled as if intimidating his opponent. In front of him, the Thousand Tricks shuddered.

“You didn’t think I’d not sell it to you because of your provocation, did you? Humph... Indeed, we have our strife, but that’s a different matter. For now, I’ll pretend that has never happened.”

“Huh? Ah, that...I’m terribly sorry.”

Seemingly confused, the Thousand Tricks scratched his cheek.

To begin with, it’d been quite unnatural for a *Level 8* hunter to directly engage in negotiations to acquire a Relic that was considered slightly dangerous. If he’d truly wanted it, he probably wouldn’t have involved himself explicitly like this.

The changes in the Thousand Tricks’s expressions were also “too natural,” making it look all the more unnatural. It all seemed just like an ostentatious information drop.

His words were laced with lies.

Arnold contemplated the dynamics between them.

Recalling the grotesque flesh mask—which instilled a visceral sense of awful revulsion—that he’d sent in for appraisal, Arnold felt a chill down his spine for the first time in a while.

Taking a deep breath, he looked into the “eyes” of the seemingly distressed Krai Andrey.

It was said that eyes speak louder than mouths, but all that he could sense from the Thousand Tricks’s darkness-evoking irises was bafflement. The emotions hidden within remained inscrutable to him.

*But why did this dude put up such an obviously unnatural negotiation?*

The situation was complicated, but as he put himself in his opponent’s shoes and contemplated the situation, Arnold unraveled his intent: the flesh mask was probably not just “slightly” dangerous but perilous enough that the Level 8 hunter hastened to retrieve it. Appallingly, the Thousand Tricks seemed to intend to make Arnold and his party hold on to that Relic—or rather he’d most

likely made this his plan sometime after they'd met. Though, Arnold couldn't detect any hint of a lie in his claim that the Relic was illegal.

Considering all that, and judging from the character of the Thousand Tricks they'd conjectured based on the intelligence they'd collected thus far, Arnold came to a conclusion: the Thousand Tricks had learned that an extremely dangerous Relic had been brought into the capital and had decided to take action. His goal was most likely to prevent the Relic from falling into the hands of the nobles, merchants, and hunters in the capital.

According to Eigh's investigation, the Thousand Tricks had been solving incident after incident in this city. It might sound too flattering to be true, but there were always people who didn't act to benefit themselves—especially among the high-level hunters.

Looking back on it now, Arnold found it abnormal that in the tavern they'd randomly chosen when they were new here was a Level 8 hunter, a rarity even within the capital. The tavern they'd chosen was a cheap saloon; given the Thousand Tricks and his companions' level, they surely could've opted for a slightly better place. The Thousand Tricks had likely already been observing them at that time.

But there, trouble arose for him: his party had gone on a collision course with Arnold's. The Stifled Shadow's actions, he dare say, had come unexpected even for the Thousand Tricks.

Having one's reputation tarnished was a critical blow for treasure hunters that would invite scorn from other hunters and affect their future endeavors. Arnold boiled with anger whenever he recalled that incident.

Then, the Thousand Tricks, realizing that his chances at a successful negotiation had been lost almost entirely, had shifted gears on the spot. Abandoning his attempt to negotiate through gentle persuasion, he'd begun provoking them repeatedly with questionable attitude and words instead. He'd tried to infuriate Arnold so that he'd withdraw from the auction altogether.

The Thousand Tricks's objective probably was to prevent that dangerous Relic from falling into the hands of and being used by curious nobles, wealthy merchants, and hunters of the capital—at all costs. In other words, his best

course of action would be to acquire and safeguard the Relic himself, but for now, keeping Arnold and his companions out of the auction would also achieve his objective.

It was just natural for people to be unwilling to part with such a thing even if they were told that it was a “dangerous Relic” and that he’d “let it go if I were you,” let alone if it was said by their archenemy.

Yet, Arnold wasn’t going to be deceived.

“You think I’m an idiot? You think I’d be so stubborn over an extremely shady Relic like that? Your purpose is to ensure that the Relic doesn’t fall into others’ hands. Am I right?”

“Huh...?”

His bluff was obvious.

Indeed, if Arnold were a low-level hunter, immature and unable to control his emotions, he might have gone on to stubbornly withdraw from the auction out of spite; he might have believed that the Level 8 had coveted the Relic so much that he’d lie to get his hands on it. But now that he’d thought about it rationally, what would Arnold’s party stand to gain if he withdrew from the auction?

That Relic looked ominous at a glance; any hunter who was even slightly cautious wouldn’t think of using it. Arnold never considered trying on that mask himself, and he would vehemently oppose it if any of his party mates had attempted to.

Now that he knew it was a dangerous Relic, he’d have no choice but to keep it under strict lock and key—a responsibility that was a meaningless burden for them.

Or perhaps, was it his plan to buy time by making them withdraw from the auction temporarily? There was even the possibility that he planned to discredit Arnold and his party by accusing them of possessing a dangerous item. In fact, he couldn’t deny the possibility of criminal organizations targeting the Relic and assassins attacking them for it either. In the worst-case scenario, could the Thousand Tricks have been provoking Arnold into using the mask so that he

could consign the mask into oblivion alongside Arnold? According to the information they'd gathered beforehand, the Thousand Tricks didn't seem to be wicked, but being indulgent alone wouldn't have gotten him to Level 8.

Arnold and his party mates were aliens here; anything they could've done to them would be fair game.

Numerous possibilities flashed through Arnold's mind in an instant. Arnold knew not of the power of the mask, and because of that, his predictions were inevitably all just possible outcomes. But regardless of which possibility it turned out to be, it was certain that things wouldn't turn out well for them.

As he pondered the myriad of possibilities, the somewhat vacant face in front of him began to feel like a terrifying visage concealing a fierce resolve.

He carefully examined the Thousand Tricks, who'd been silent for a while now.

He was most likely testing Arnold, testing to see if he was indeed brilliant enough to see through the Thousand Tricks's ostensible performances and blatant lies and uncover his true intentions.

*What if I'd been imbecile whose mind became clouded by my own anger and thus unable to grasp the Thousand Tricks's intentions—what would have ensued?*

And assuming Arnold's assessment was accurate, what could he do to make the man who'd attempted to manipulate them feel the sorriest? What course of action would provide Arnold and his party with the greatest benefit?

Should he deliberately go against the Thousand Tricks's wishes and sell it to some noble or merchant? Should he have done so even though they'd yet to establish any connections in the capital?

After all, palming off a Relic to influential individuals despite knowing that it was dangerous would be a thoughtless act of an idiot.

Whose words would people trust more: the Thousand Tricks, who'd performed numerous distinguished services for this land, or the newcomer, Arnold? It wasn't hard to imagine who'd win this fight—going against the Thousand Tricks was too risky for him.

Or should he use the Relic himself? Should he try on such a glaringly dangerous item that even appraisers hesitated to appraise? Arnold might be intrepid, but he didn't have a death wish.

Or rather, should he decline the negotiation and just proceed to put the Relic up for auction? That was an option, but he was quite sure that the chances of the Relic fetching a high price were slim. Furthermore, this Thousand Tricks in front of him would most likely just win the bid in that case. Unfortunately, he couldn't set restrictions on who could bid on the item.

Should he just securely keep it with his party? But that wasn't going to benefit anyone, and they'd be dancing to the Thousand Tricks's tune completely.

At the end of his labyrinth of thoughts, a simple solution awaited: get to the negotiating table and sell the Relic off—and use his plans against him to demand a reasonably high price that was hard to turn down. *This* was the course of action that would bring the most benefit to Arnold's party without any risk; in exchange, it inflicted no substantial damage on the Thousand Tricks. It was the optimal compromise.

"Now, what's your call?"

Was he overthinking it? There certainly was such a possibility.

The Thousand Tricks might have said it was a dangerous Relic, but there was a possibility that he might have been mistaken about that. Or even—though almost impossible—there was a nonzero chance that the flesh mask could indeed be a useful Relic despite its appearance. Either way, if it did happen to prove useful, he could then accuse him of lying during negotiations. Besides, regardless of the authenticity of his claims, Falling Fog had no use for that Relic. Even if it was useful, he had no intention of donning that. Disposing of it right here was his best option.

He couldn't afford to make a wrong decision. He'd repay humiliation with humiliation—this was Arnold's way.

Setting the price at decently high was, at the very least, his small act of retaliation against the Thousand Tricks for probing them. Ten million gild was *not* a reasonable price tag for an unappraised conspicuously dangerous flesh mask.

As Arnold curved his lips into a smile, the Level 8 hunter, of which only three existed in the capital, put on a somewhat pathetic expression.

In all likelihood, the Thousand Tricks had discerned that Arnold had seen through all his plans. Even the Thousand Tricks probably hadn't anticipated his opponent, whom he'd tried to ensnare, to handle the situation so calmly. But then, the Thousand Tricks couldn't really refuse those terms.

*This is our victory.*

Sitri shot a quick glance at the Thousand Tricks next to her and, just as Arnold had anticipated, nodded with determination.

"Very well. We'll take it for ten million gil—"

"Wait a second!!!"

Before she could finish her sentence, a hunter sitting at an adjacent table suddenly interrupted. It was a middle-aged man, an unfamiliar face. Being stared at, the man raised both his hands in an exaggerated pose and forced a wry smile.

The man said, "I'm not here to start a fight or anything. That Relic—I'll buy it for double the price."

"What?! What did you just say?!"

Eigh shot an astonished gaze at the absurd intruder. Even the Thousand Tricks seemed bewildered.

The appearance of a hunter willing to purchase that flesh mask for twenty million gild had been unexpected. Equally unexpected was another unrelated man at another adjacent table suddenly raising his voice.

To Arnold, it didn't really matter whom he sold the Relic to. After all, he didn't owe this town or the Thousand Tricks anything. While it'd only be all the better for them if the Relic sold for higher.

So what on earth was happening here? This person here should've just heard the Thousand Tricks said the Relic was dangerous.

Sitri put on a loathsome expression.

As if this unfamiliar man had opened a can of worms, hunters throughout the tavern began raising their voices after him.

“Wait, I’ll pay twenty-five million!”

“Hold on. I’ve had my eye on it all along! I shall offer thirty million!”

“That’s the Relic the Thousand Tricks has been going after by any means necessary. I’ll offer forty million!”

“You’re just planning to resell it! Get lost!”

“Wh-What’s going on?! Who are these people?!” said Eigh as he stood up and anxiously scanned the tavern.

Before he knew it, the tavern erupted with clamor. The patrons’ gazes were laced with a palpable aggression, and some even began wrestling one another. They were all fervently shouting their respective bids.

With their mouths agape, drunkards watched the spontaneous auction unfold.

Drunks looked on with vacant eyes at the sudden auction.

“Forty-two million!”

“Forty-three million!”

“Dammit, I’ll offer forty-five million!”

“You don’t have that kind of money with you! You’re in debt, so what are you even saying?!”

“Shut up! I’ll sell my equipment to finance it if I have to!”

*What? Is this a joke? Do these guys really want that flesh mask this much? ...Is there some intel I’m missing?*

Arnold groaned at the incomprehensible sight.

If this was the case, then Arnold’s conjecture about the Thousand Tricks’s plan became increasingly questionable.

*Why do these people want such a grotesque Relic? What’s happening?*

Sitri scanned the surroundings and let out a small sigh. Then she said, “This is

all because, Krai, you've been trying to borrow money from all over the place—you should've just asked me from the very beginning."

"Heh..."

Despite his deflated sigh, the price of the flesh mask kept shooting upwards.

One of the drunkards staggered to his feet and, in a cheery voice, began to host the impromptu auction.

It was all beyond control now. These people raising their voices were all deadly serious.

"One hundred million."

And that was when an incongruously delicate voice cut through the storm of boisterous bellows.

The hunters, who'd been inflating the price gradually, all turned towards the source of the voice.

Standing on a table dotted with fallen bottles, a figure in a luxurious white dress came into view. At her waist, a sword that seemed out of place for her childish limbs hung.

"I, Éclair Gladis, shall acquire that strongest Relic, or whatever, for a hundred million! Understand?!"

"Ugh. This is why I don't like nobles and merchants... Krai, can we just withdraw from this negotiation?"

Sitri let out a frail sigh and tugged at Krai's sleeve.

With a smile brimming with confidence, the girl who'd claimed to be Éclair looked down at the Thousand Tricks.

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"What on earth...was all that about? Did I do something bad?"

Holding a hunter gossip magazine in hand, I clicked my tongue for the first time in a long time in frustration with the current situation.

The magazine was opened to a colorized page with an article detailing the deeds of the leader of a certain clan, a high-level hunter, bustling about to



acquire a certain Relic that was set to be auctioned at the upcoming Zebrudia Auction. Though the name of the hunter had been withheld, given the rarity of Relic maniac hunters who were also clan masters, anyone reading it would surely immediately recognize that it'd been referring to me.

The negotiation had been going quite well until someone from the crowd had suddenly interrupted and caused chaos. But it'd been the intrusion of Lord Gladis's daughter that had completely derailed it.

I was hoping to somehow purchase the Reversible Face within ten million gild, but Arnold decided that he'd put it up for auction once again.

Arnold appeared to be bewildered by the sudden turn of events, but the one most bewildered was me.

I hadn't expected that so many people would be interested in that strikingly creepy mask, and neither could I fathom what the earl's daughter meant by "strongest Relic." I did try to tell Lady Éclair that it wasn't the strongest Relic but rather a dangerous one, but she hadn't seemed willing to hear me out.

The Reversible Face was far from being the strongest Relic. It was merely a Relic that changed one's appearance without boosting one's combat abilities or anything. While it could do things like making one appear more muscular, it didn't actually give them more strength. And since their body would just be wrapped in a layer of muscles, this actually had the demerit of making one's movements more difficult if they just changed their body shape haphazardly.

Well, to be fair, it was illegal but not dangerous, so I might have been lying about that, but even so, snatching it away from me just because I wanted it was just too mean. While it wasn't against the rules, it was definitely a breach of etiquette.

*Do these people have no ethics? "Don't expect ethics from nobles and hunters"? Ha ha.*

But true enough, nobles were surely wealthy, weren't they?

Eva looked at me with a gaze a few magnitudes chillier than usual and asked, "So, what're you going to do?"

All while I was still asking for help to repay some unrelated debts, I was

already planning to purchase the next Relic. Now that I thought about it (or even without thinking about it), I realized I was completely hopeless. What's worse, I was reporting it only after the fact.

*Someone, please do something about me.*

But allow me to offer an excuse: there was a chance that the Reversible Face would only be available in this auction! It wouldn't be an overexaggeration to say that this could possibly change my entire life.

*Now that I already have a ten-digit debt, what's another eight-digit one? It'll only be merely a few percent more. Won't you agree?*

"Krai? Please answer me."

*Oh, right... You don't think so, do you...? Do I have no choice but to give up, after everything?*

Ten million gild was an enormous sum of money that an average person couldn't even earn in a year. But for Grieving Souls, it was an amount we could easily cover with a single hunt.

That said, a hundred million was a different story. To put it simply, it'd be ten times more. Grieving Souls was a party of seven including Eliza, so for each person to earn a hundred million, by simple calculations, we'd need to bring back at least seven hundred million gild worth in Relics and rare materials.

There were only very few Relics that could fetch for a high price. Relics valued at over a hundred million gild were known as "centimillioners" and acquiring one was one of the dreams for hunters.

Since we also had to set aside some money as a reserve fund, earning seven hundred million gild in one go was challenging even for us. Well, as challenging as it might be, it wasn't impossible.

That said, it took courage even for me to just casually pay out a hundred million with all that debt I had. Liz, who was on the hunt for Relics too, probably wouldn't be able to do much either...

But above anything else, the biggest issue was that it seemed a hundred million might not be enough, after all.

“There are rumors that the daughter of House Gladis is frantically buying up all the Relics,” Eva said.

I remained silent.

“I’ve also heard that a few large trading companies are working to obtain these items as well. I presume prices are soaring because of it.”

“Ugh.”

“Don’t you ‘ugh’ me! Good grief!”

Nobles were sparing no expense as they scrambled to buy up the vast assortment of Relics. No normal hunter could stand a chance against these nobles—the difference in wealth was much too great. The prominent House Gladis had been supporting the empire for generations. Trading companies lacked ties to nobles, and they were dying to change that.

Relics were a product of nature, and they were infamously rare. Globally and historically, they were used as offerings. The worthiness of the hunk of meat on offer aside, the fact that Lady Éclair had thrown her hat in the ring would undoubtedly reach the ears of the restless trading companies involved in the auction.

Hunters made good money, but the ones who held the most wealth within this nation were trading companies and nobles. I was sure that none of them were willing to hurl their entire fortune to obtain a Relic, but as a person with debt, I couldn’t take the risk and fight against such a powerful foe. I was sure that trading companies had their own reasons, but why would Lady Éclair have a need for an unlawful Relic? Did she want to obtain the strongest Relic and become a hunter? She couldn’t do it. It didn’t matter just how powerful of a Relic she had; without cultivating her own strength independently, she would forever remain a small fry. I was a prime example.

“So, what will you do?” Eva asked.

I couldn’t offer a reply.

“Please think carefully, Krai. Do you really require that Relic?” she asked kindly, trying to dissuade me. “You already have plenty.”

But I wanted it. I wanted that Relic so badly. If I could have it, I'd take it in a heartbeat. Did I really not *need* it? I scratched my head furiously. While it might have been possible for me to scrounge around and gather a hundred million, a battle of wealth against nobles and trading companies was an impossible one. And the auction was drawing near. I was a trueborn consumer, and I didn't stand a chance from the get-go.

Eva sighed. "If you were going to make that face, why did you go out of your way to get yourself in debt and hand out information?"

"I-I don't remember doing that..." I replied. "Hmm... I wonder how much money Lucia has saved—I-I'm kidding! I'm just joking!"

Eva, who would usually support me no matter how pathetic I was, gave me a sidelong glance of revulsion as though she was looking at a piece of trash. But if I were allowed an excuse, Lucia had said that if I was truly in dying need of money, I had permission to take her savings of my own accord. As reliable as a younger sister could be, she'd stated that if I were to be in debt, it would've been best if I was indebted to her.

*Still, well...I guess it can't be helped. I'll do my best. If it's not enough, I'll just give up on the Relic.* My savings weren't nearly enough to outbid nobles or trading companies. I also had Sitri to worry about, and this couldn't have come at a worse time. I felt bad for doing this, but if we were to go to confectionery stores in the future, I would need Tino to humor us as well. Just as I made my decision, Sitri burst into the room, slightly out of breath.

"This is why I don't like nobles and merchants..." she said with a huff. "They always, *always* try to solve matters with money or by wielding their power. They use cheap and dirty tricks to steal what you want, Krai..."

Instead of the usual bag that she had slung over her back, she was clutching a large suitcase that could've easily fit a person inside. She wore a serene expression, but her eyes were brimming with determination. This might be a sudden side note, but Sitri hated to lose. Her grace belied the fact that she was just as strong-willed as Liz. My spirit was already half broken, but it seemed like the intrepid Sitri was determined to fight back.

"Krai, if it's money you need...I've got it," she elucidated. "We can still fight. I

went out of my way to create secret potions for them, but the moment I got a criminal offense tacked on, those nobles changed their attitude in the blink of an eye. And I want to get back at those merchants for selling my potions at exorbitant prices, stuffing their wallets more than necessary. I'll be killing two birds with one stone."

*She seems more fired up about this than me...and I feel like our initial motives have shifted here.* Sitri placed the suitcase out in front of me and undid the lock, revealing a mountain of wealth that no normal person would usually see. Glimmering silver coins, exponentially more precious than gold coins and worth a hundred thousand gild each, were piled high. There was clearly more than a hundred or two of this precious currency, and the suitcase was stuffed with them as some rolled onto the floor by my feet. Eva looked taken aback. If there was any business transaction that required a suitcase full of silver coins, it would be done with a check.

"Where'd you get this?" I asked.

*Didn't she say that she was flat broke?* The pile of beautiful silver coins in front of me was easily worth more than a hundred million gild. Sitri's porcelain skin turned a touch pink.

"These are my marriage funds that I've been secretly saving and hiding from my sister," she said. "There's about eight hundred million."

I couldn't hide my shock, and Eva followed suit.

"Marriage funds?!" she cried, her eyes wide with shock.

*I see... Marriage funds...* A flurry of questions filled my mind. *Didn't you save a bit too much for just marriage? Since when did you start saving up? Do you have a partner in mind?* But first and foremost, there was no way that I could accept such precious money. *Sitri, you're going too far... This is a bit much. This isn't some secret stash you've been hiding away—it's a whole fortune.*

"I'm sorry, but I can't take the money you've been saving up—" I started.

"I planned on using this on you, so we're just using it a bit ahead of schedule, I suppose..." Sitri replied, her ears red.

I was confused now. "Huh? By marriage funds, did you mean you saved this

money for my marriage?”

We were longtime friends, but I couldn't believe that she saved money for me, whom she had no blood relation with. *That can't be it.*

“Hmm?” she replied quizzically. “No, this money is for my marriage. You can think of it as an early dowry.”

“I think men are supposed to pay when taking a woman's hand in marriage.”

If I were to add on, this payment could only be given to one's marriage partner. Sitri stared at me with befuddlement before she pounded her fist on top of her palm.

“I suppose you're right...” she said. “But hey, in marriage, I think both the man and the woman should work together to build a relationship. And I'm the type who commits to her man.”

She let out an airy giggle.

“Yeah, uh-huh. Ha ha ha ha...” I replied.

*Sitri's unexpectedly a bit of an airhead, I guess.* As I spoke cheerfully, Eva, who'd been silent this entire time, grabbed my shoulders and started shaking me violently.

“What are you laughing about, Krai?” she demanded. “You'll be forced to marry her at this rate!”

“Huh?” I replied. “Nah, that can't be...”

I assumed it was Sitri's usual marriage jokes. *Marriage? Me?* I'd never even thought about it. This was a once-in-a-lifetime commitment, and I thought it was best to think about it carefully once I retired from being a hunter and took on a steady job to settle down.

“Once we get our hands on that Relic, it'll be in lieu of your engagement ring,” Sitri said.

*Huh? No way.* I didn't think a grotesque mask of flesh could be seen as a ring at all. I grew calm upon hearing her outlandish suggestion, but Sitri continued passionately.

“As for me, if you don’t mind, I’d like a ring from your collection.”

That, I didn’t mind one iota. My collection was important, sure, but Sitri and the others were much more precious to me. I was more than willing to offer her a ring Relic, but I still felt like I was taking advantage of her. Even a Safety Ring wasn’t worth eight hundred million. *How could I ever repay Sitri?* I crossed my arms and mulled over my choices while Eva stepped forward and slammed the table loudly, a smile plastered on her face as she gazed down at Sitri.

“Sitri, I believe I’ve said that Krai’s debts would be repaid in full,” Eva said.

“Huh? Ah, don’t mind us,” Sitri answered. “Our bonds aren’t so shallow that our marriage would crumble just because of debt.”

“The number one reason that causes hunter parties to collapse is money troubles! Because you’re so lax with him, he’s become lousy with money—”

“Huh? Ah, don’t mind us. I’m willing to accept Krai, lousy with money and all.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!”

Eva remained dauntless even in the face of a high-level hunter. I’d told her to never lay a finger on Liz and the others, but I felt like her words were filled with emotion.

“Please! Don’t! Make! Weird! Promises! With! Our! Clan master! What’ll you do if odd rumors start circulating?!” Eva shouted, taking a few moments to catch her breath. “I’ll definitely pay back all his debts in full. You have my word. This includes the marriage funds that you’ll loan Krai. Is that clear?”

Sitri sighed. “This is why I don’t like merchants.”

She slumped her shoulders in surrender, causing Eva’s cheek to twitch. I had nothing to offer in this fight as I crouched down and was ready to flee. *I’m raising the white flag. Sitri’s marriage is more important than a Reversible Face. I just wanted it if I could get it for relatively cheap. I’m so sorry that I’m out of touch with money. I feel sick... Urp...*

“Just you watch and see, Krai,” Sitri said, determined. “I’ll buy that Relic without fail.”

“Uh, nah, I think I’m good,” I replied. “I’m pretty sure it’ll be expensive, and

there's a chance that eight hundred million won't be enough..."

I tried to give a reason to stop her, but even I knew that her money was more than enough. That Relic's abilities weren't worth that much. But Sitri only balled her hands into fists and leaned forward fearlessly.

"Oh, don't act so reserved!" she said. "I can gather more money if you wish. I'll use whatever means possible to get that Relic. Why don't we spread bad rumors about that item? It's much easier to lower its price than to gather more funds."

"Uh sure..." I said before I stopped myself. "Uh, no, no, no. T-Take it easy, okay?"

When I saw the twinkle in her eyes, I was determined to stop her from running wild.

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Perhaps due to the Zebrudia Auction being just around the corner, the Explorers' Association was busier than ever before. For hunters who used the imperial capital as their base, the auction was a golden opportunity to gain a fortune, and it was a perfect chance to bid for powerful weapons and boost their power.

There was a larger crowd than usual gathered in front of the quest brief. Preparing for the day of the fated auction, some were searching for information regarding the treasure vault, hoping to gather more Relics. Others were reading up on quests from outsiders, trying to gather a few more gild for bidding. Tino was in the crowd too, standing on her tiptoes and craning her neck to read the quests among the throng of tall hunters.

With the auction nearing, almost all the good quests were taken. Quests to defeat nearby monsters were all gone, and only those that required ample time and wouldn't make it for the auction remained. The crowd of hunters all let out a murderous air, frantically glancing around with bloodshot eyes, hoping to grab a lone Association employee who might have new quests to offer.

*Everyone gathered here is third-rate,* Tino thought. The date of the auction had already been decided long in advance, and first-rate hunters had already



gathered the necessary funds and Relics for the event. They were likely snickering at the third-rates who were panicking while making last-minute preparations. Tino wasn't interested in the auction. She wasn't very materialistic, and she was reluctant to waste her money. So, why did she have to be treated with scorn like the crowd of ill-prepared hunters? Unable to be affected by the excitement buzzing in the air, she suddenly heard a voice call out to her.

“Hey, Tino. You all right?”

Tino silently turned around and saw a Thief that she'd been in a party with in the past, during her journey in the White Wolf's Den, Rhuda Runebeck. As always, she had a headful of silky brown locks and a full chest that would catch anyone's eye. She'd recently ranked up to Level 4, and the two ladies were close enough to engage in casual conversation whenever they bumped into each other.

As a fellow Thief, Tino got along quite well with Rhuda, even dragging the latter along to her master's training. Tino rarely visited the Association and thus didn't meet Rhuda often, but they were friendly enough to be called friends. As Tino stared silently, Rhuda gave a strained smile.

“You seem to be doing well, as usual,” she said. “Are you done with your training?”

“My sister said that she would go on a treasure vault tour,” Tino replied. “I was left behind because she said that I was dense.”

“Th-That seems par for the course for her...”

A gossip magazine filled with information related to treasure hunters was thrust in front of Tino. The opened page had a summary of the Relics that would be offered during the auction. She took the magazine and scanned through the pages. A certain famous hunter was scurrying around and trying to gather money to purchase the most powerful Relic. The other hunters were aiming for it as well, of course, but even nobles were going for the item with bloodshot eyes. The precious Relic was gathered by a Level 7 hunter from a foreign nation, who barely made it out with their life. The noble in question were even on friendly terms with *the* Ark Rodin, and several trading companies were

scrambling about, trying to get their hands on this item. Everyone knew that this Relic would be the highlight of this auction.

“This magazine’s talking about Krai, I take it?” Rhuda asked.

How true was this article? It even had predictions on the powers of the Relic along with its estimated price at the auction. It contained a bold statement that claimed that any hunter who could get their hands on this Relic would be guaranteed a boost in their level. Gossip magazines couldn’t be trusted to begin with, but Tino furrowed her brows when she read just how baseless these claims seemed to be.

“They’re wrong...” Tino mumbled.

“Huh?”

“Master...wasn’t lent money in the first place.”

Rhuda gave a look of astonishment.

Tino had only seen a snippet of the exchange, but as far as she knew, no one was willing to loan Master a single gild. She was left speechless when she saw him die an honorable death, crumbling away into tiny pieces. The magazine stated that Krai was gathering money by the hundreds of millions, but where could this number have come from? Tino cocked her head to one side in confusion while Rhuda’s eyes twinkled with glee.

“Hmm, so you’re saying that this isn’t about Krai?” Rhuda asked.

Tino fell silent, but she was sure that they were referring to Krai. There weren’t many high-level hunters out there who were clan masters and had a penchant for collecting Relics. Once she finished reading, she gave a deep sigh and handed the magazine back to Rhuda. It ended with a few words that poked fun at that certain high-level hunter, claiming that anyone who aimed to collect Relics without giving a second thought towards expense was truly laudable and a perfect image of what a hunter ought to be. The hunter was able to use their powers and influence as a clan master to their fullest and even had a woman in the same party give up all her money for the cause. These roundabout chiding remarks and derisive comments could only be written by a fearless author. They were all lies. Tino gave up on trying to stare at the quest brief among the crowd

and sat at a table located within the meeting space. Rhuda sat across from her.

*How shall I explain this?* Tino thought. Rhuda was a Thief recruited by Krai for Tino. Though it was a temporary party, she had gotten acquainted with the clan master and had reached out, worried about him. *I don't want to put her good intentions to waste.* Compassionate Tino also pitied the woman for being in a tizzy because of these baseless rumors. After a few seconds of hesitation, she opened her mouth.

"Master has already found a way to obtain the Relic," Tino said firmly and concisely. "His debts...can be taken care of, and you have nothing to worry about."

"Huh?" Rhuda asked, her eyes wide. "Are you sure?"

As far as Tino knew, no one in the imperial capital could compete with Master's fondness for collecting. In fact, she had once followed Liz into his room and saw that it was decorated with a countless number of Relics. There were easily over a hundred on display. From common ones to those that didn't have any rumors whatsoever, his collection could likely trump any Relic store in the capital. The prices of Relics varied on demand, but if he were to change all of it to money, it would easily be over ten billion gild. The term treasure hunters, always on the hunt for treasure, couldn't have encapsulated Tino's master better. *And...I'm sure debt isn't an issue either.*

Sitri's face flashed across Tino's mind, causing her to shudder. Siddy likely admired Master even more than Lizzy—they were truly siblings to the core. In fact, not only would Siddy allow her master to be in debt, she would happily lend as much money as she had. This was clear as day to even Tino, who tried to avoid her sister as much as she could. Should Siddy not have enough money, she would most certainly employ any means she could to prepare the required gild. Tino shook her head, trying to rid herself of Siddy's glare whenever the former had stepped close to Master.

"Master will always obtain any Relic he desires," Tino said. "I think this silly information was spread on purpose by him."

"Huh? Really?"

"I think."

How could this not be calculated? There was no reason for him to grovel to Ark Rodin and ask for money in front of a huge crowd, and he didn't have to look so absorbed with his money in the lounge. Tino didn't have a single clue about Master's ingenious schemes, but she knew that he would always plot something amazing. *The outcomes would always be amazing. I don't quite get it myself, but I know that they are.*

Rhuda shot a dubious look before she regained her composure and leaned forward. She glanced around, worried about her surroundings, and whispered into Tino's ear.

"So, Tino, what exactly is Krai aiming for?"

"A weird mask," Tino whispered back. "It resembles an old Relic that Master had, but I think it's a completely different item. I don't know what power it holds."

"Awww... I was kinda curious about that."

A Reversible Face was Master's favorite Relic until recently. The current one must surely be different. *I heard that the Relic was so ill-reputed that Lizzy crushed it into pieces.* Admittedly, Tino wasn't a fan of the item either as it often changed faces. "This must be the true Thousand Tricks!" Master had said, causing his surroundings to grimace and wince. Even Siddy hadn't been able to let out a hearty laugh. And who could blame her? Though it was the inside that counted, no one would be happy to hear that a person they admired was ecstatically gazing upon a shifting face while calling it a Thousand Tricks. *Master is an amazing person, but he's just so far ahead of me that I can't understand him.*

"W-Well, if you're sure..." Rhuda said. "Everyone's been whispering rumors and I knew he'd be fine, but..."

It was likely true that both nobles and trading companies were getting involved. Other hunters were gossiping about that too, after all. It was almost guaranteed that this Relic would soar in price—there had been such instances occurring before for the auction.

What would soon begin was the fight for the limit. Only super first-rate hunters could stand a chance against merchants and nobles. *But why is*

*everyone so worried about Master? He might seem a little unreliable, but that's nothing more than his image. His high level surely attests to his skills.* For Tino, who felt like a speck of dust in comparison, she found it hard to understand this train of thought.

“Oh, and by the way, what’re you here for, Tino? It seems like everyone’s scrambling to get quests.”

“S-Since I can’t train, I wanted to make as much money as possible and assist Master...” Tino spoke with downcast eyes, her voice fading away into the air.

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In the clan master’s office, a raucous debate between Sitri and Eva had begun. To them, I was treated as a complete bystander, and I was tempted to sneak out and buy myself a sweet treat or two.

“As I just said, if I stop selling my potions and Steps refuses to provide materials, I’m sure that a vast majority of trading companies would cooperate with us,” Sitri explained.

“Potions aside, are you planning on picking a fight with trading companies?!” Eva shouted. “We’d also be troubled if trade dealings crumbled!”

“Well, that’s something that *you* have to deal with, so it’s not really my concern... But if it’s for Krai, I’m willing to change the location of my base, so I really couldn’t care less about the merchants of this nation. I think everyone would agree with me.”

*She’s so extreme.* In contrast to the stern Eva, Sitri had a smile dancing on her lips.

“I thought that my store was becoming a bit too large for my liking anyway,” Sitri added. “First and foremost, Krai is our leader. He’s not just the clan master.”

It sounded like she had no concerns about the well-being of a clan that we built. I couldn’t blame her; I was the one who wanted a clan and she cared little about its members. Recently, I had stopped exploring treasure vaults completely, much to her dismay. Eva’s shoulders were trembling from rage at Sitri’s biting remarks, and I quickly jumped in to try to soften the blow before

sparks flew my way.

“Don’t, Sitri,” I said. “You can’t pressure the trading companies. I know negotiations can include talks like that, but we can’t be inhumane against people that we’re indebted to.”

*What’ll happen to the clan if Eva leaves? I’m even having her handle foreign affairs.*

“I understand,” Sitri reluctantly said. “But if we can’t circulate rumors or negotiate with the merchants...”

“I’m just letting you know that both of those options are against imperial law,” Eva chimed in.

*Yeah, I know. They were illegal methods. My bad, okay? I don’t need that mask anymore.* Sitri looked up at me with a bright smile.

“Then why don’t we negotiate with the seller once more?” she suggested. “If we’re not too picky about the method, we might be able to obtain the item for cheap. We can state that the seller got intimidated by the fuss that was being made and left the empire with his tail between his legs. That’s a likely scenario, isn’t it?”

“Hmm? I don’t think so,” I replied. “No one’ll agree to that reasoning, I think.”

I didn’t quite understand where she was coming from, but there was no way that Arnold would nod his head in agreement just because we tacked on a small additional fee.

Sitri continued pensively, “Hmm, this might cause a bit of a fuss, but it’s best if Lady Éclair is gone. What do you think?”

“Huh? I don’t think she’ll just...vanish. She doesn’t seem to like me much either.”

While her reasons were unknown, it might’ve been because she liked Ark. He and I weren’t on bad terms, but the newbie hunters of Zebrudia were apparently divided into two factions: mine or his. As a side note, I was definitely part of Ark’s faction—it was a no-brainer for me.

“But there are quite a few boorish hunters out there, and it’s clear that she’s

wealthy,” Sitri surmised. “Plus, she’s infamous for disliking hunters. It wouldn’t be odd if she was abducted, and there are many hunters out there willing to do anything for money. What do you think?”

“Huh? I’m sure she has guards around her. She’s probably fine.”

She was the daughter of a noble. Zebrudia was prominently known for its hunters, and nobles made sure to hire guards who were just as powerful. Sitri folded her arms in front of her and groaned loudly.

“But I don’t think any of them are resistant to my original blend,” she said. “You require mana material which you would then need to direct away from mana growth.”

In the past, Sitri had made an original poison potion that was effective against phantoms. Since it worked against phantoms and monsters, it would certainly work against humans, but apparently, only she could make it, and there was little chance that her item was leaked elsewhere.

“Mhm, uh-huh,” I said, “But since only you can make it, there’s no way it’s out on the market.”

It was then that she clapped her hands together as though I was exactly right. “Don’t worry, I made sure that Talia knows how to make it. Perfect for times like these!”

*Uh, what? Don’t worry?* I didn’t think there was even a ghost of a chance that Talia would betray Sitri.

“Just because Talia knows, doesn’t mean that she’d leak your recipe,” I said. “That seems highly unlikely.”

“Huh, I guess you’ve got a point.”

Sitri once again seemed lost in her thoughts. Eva, who’d been listening quietly with her eyes open, finally decided to say a few words.

“W-Wait a sec. You guys aren’t serious...are you?”

“Huh?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

*Did I say something? I feel like I’m losing track of this conversation.* Eva was staring at Sitri, who tilted her head to one side in befuddlement.

“Huh? Er, well...” Eva stammered. “I-I know you aren’t like that, Krai. I believe in you. I do.”

Sitri began mumbling to herself. “Well, if we can’t go to the seller and we can’t auction it, the only thing we can do for the Relic is... Well, maybe beforehand, but this risk is too great...”

From her serious expression, it was clear that she was trying to get that Relic for me no matter what. But I had no intention of using grayish methods to obtain it. I’d just tackle the auction straight on; if I couldn’t get it, I couldn’t get it. *In fact, it might be better if I don’t get it at this rate. Please use your marriage funds for yourself.*

“I’m grateful for your ideas, but you don’t have to do anything,” I said. “I’ll just bid at the auction fair and square, and if I fail, I fail. I don’t want it that desperately anyway.”

“If you say so, Krai,” Sitri said. “Then I’ll do my best to gather more funds.”

*Honestly, you don’t need to do that either. Eight hundred million sounds more than enough.* For the first time since I came to the imperial capital, I was eager for the auction to end. As I saw a fired-up Sitri and a frowning Eva, I prayed that this entire affair would end without a fuss.



## Chapter Five: An Ingenious Scheme and a Silent Battle

It was as though a battle had occurred in front of Magi's Tale. A large crack ran through the street, and the metal gates that surrounded the store were blown wide open. The storefront sign was lying on the ground, and the house across the street was riddled with numerous bullet marks. Dried blood painted the nearby buildings. The Third Order had been dispatched to maintain peace, controlling the curious crowd that was gawking at the scene.

Someone had broken into Magi's Tale. I was notified of this just as Sitri and I were discussing our future plans. The burglar had broken in the previous night. The perpetrators were identified as the Shadow Lynx, a party of criminals who had received a request to steal certain items. They were basically a group of failed hunters. Every now and then, there'd be a hunter who'd give up on conquering a vault and use the mana material they absorbed and cultivated to live a life of crime. A lot of them had found that it was much easier and more efficient to attack humans than phantoms and monsters. Such parties of former hunters, willing to conduct illegal and dangerous activities, were dubbed "ghosts" by the Explorers' Association and had a bounty for hunting them down. This was vastly different from Sitri, who simply had a level taken away as a penalty. She was seen as a good, law-abiding hunter, while these parties that did illegal acts were regarded as criminals.

"I knew they'd take the bait sooner or later, but I didn't think we'd catch an idiot so soon..." Sitri said wearily.

I, on the other hand, couldn't remain so calm. If I looked at myself in the mirror, I was sure that the face staring back would be distressingly pale. All I'd done was find a Relic that I was interested in and beg the other hunters to borrow their money for the auction. But as the days went by, this matter escalated, and a Relic store that I'd been indebted to had fallen victim. I'd say this now, but I swore that I didn't expect this outcome. Sure, I couldn't deny

that I was careless at times, and I was a Level 8, but I was a mere hunter.

The Relic in question seemed to have a few catches, and it wasn't as though it boasted a long history. How could I have possibly predicted this situation? I clutched my aching stomach while Sitri maintained her composure.

"I know that the dead of night is the perfect opportunity, but I didn't expect anyone powerful enough to break into a Relic store," Sitri said. "I was being careless. Had I spent more time looking into this, I might have been able to point out a different route..."

Our one saving grace was that this ended as an attempted robbery. The knights had gathered at the scene and chased away the general public, but I decided to use my influence as a high-level hunter to get a closer look. The cozy, rustic door was snapped in half and a burning aroma filled my nose.

"I've got work to do, dammit!" a voice roared angrily from the back of the store. "You think I've got time to pay attention to a burglar or two?! I won't make it in time for the auction! Shit, you lot are all being manipulated by that kiddo's words! Guards? Like hell! I don't need a guard! I've got a trusty one of my own, thank you very much! An excellent bodyguard indeed! I'd rather you help me clean up my store than provide me with guards!"

It was crystal clear that he was in a bad mood. *I'm not sure if he'll forgive me if I apologize here. I should've brought Tino with me.* I was reluctant to step inside, but I had to do it. I glanced around as I took a deep breath and set foot inside of the battered store.

"Hm? Ah, kiddo!" Matthis bellowed, his face looking like a rage-filled demon. "You've done it now!"

I visibly shrank at the sight. "Um... I'm terribly sorry..."

The inside of the store was just as trashed as the outside. Gates were torn to shreds and the counter was sliced in two. And yet, the glass cases that housed the Relics didn't have a crack to be seen. *I should've expected as much.* While the store was undoubtedly in a state of disarray, no one was injured. As always, a bodyguard stood, enveloped in several Relics. He was generally an unsociable man, but he seemed to be in a particularly good mood today.

Relic stores dealt with expensive items, and they had higher security than other shops. This was especially true for Magi's Tale, located on the outskirts of the city, where knights rarely made their rounds. Despite appearances, Matthis's store boasted one of the highest levels of defense that was like an iron wall. He'd opened his store in the imperial capital a couple of decades ago, but Magi's Tale had never been successfully broken into.

"Tch, if you're gonna rob me, do it in the afternoon! During the day!" Matthias shouted irritably. "I'm always sleep-deprived when you do this at night!"

I noticed dark circles under his eyes. With the auction being just around the corner coupled with this botched burglary, even Matthis, who generally looked much livelier than me, looked ready to throw in the towel. Still, I was glad that he was unharmed. If he'd fallen victim to the blade of a criminal, I wouldn't have been able to sleep at night. As I internally gave a sigh of relief, he glanced around his store.

"Hey, Krai!" he demanded. "Where's missy? If you're gonna come to wish me well, you better bring her along with me! I don't need *you*! You're in the way of my work!"

*...Seems like I really didn't need to come here.* The knights winced as they checked out the sorry state of the store. I heard someone mutter in a low voice, "We've already caught our suspects, so I think we can go." It sounded like they'd had enough of the old man's grumpy yelling.

I clasped Sitri's shoulders and presented her forward. "I brought Sitri instead. Could you please let me off the hook with her?"

"No way in hell! There's no replacement for her!" Matthis said. "Hmm? Sitri, the burglary last night wasn't your doing was it?!"

"What?!" Sitri gasped. "Krai stopped me from doing so. Even if there was a one-in-a-million—no, a one-in-a-billion chance that I *did* do something like that, I'd at least choose better people."

"Fine! If you've got time on your hands, help me out, will you? Business is horrible! My employee can only stand around and do nothing!"

*Man, he's really energetic. He's more suited to being a hunter than me.* The bodyguard who stood outside was easily in earshot of Matthis's voice, but he didn't seem at all annoyed by the comment and stood tall, gazing into the air. *Is he a scarecrow or what?* Sitri also didn't seem displeased as she helped clean up. I sat at the counter and gave a sweeping glance at the store.

"It's rare for you to be done in so badly," I observed. "Any injuries?"

"None!" Matthis shouted back. "I was up against three failures of hunters—Thieves. The one who destroyed my store was my bodyguard! He said that he hadn't used Relics for a while, so he couldn't hold back! Shit! I didn't loan him Relics to screw up my store!"

*Oh... So, it wasn't the burglars.* Yet, the bodyguard in question stood tall and didn't even flinch. *I guess birds of a feather flock together—weird people tend to attract other weird people.* The fact that he was able to chase away the burglars solely with the assistance of Relics only proved how powerful he was; he was likely stronger than me. Once Matthis aired his grievances, he gave a look of satisfaction and took a sip of water.

"So, what're you here for?" he asked with a sigh. "I don't need compensation from you. The ghosts' bounty is more than enough to put me back in the black. My grandkids came to visit me too."

"Sure, but even so—" I started.

"I don't need your apologies regarding the rumors. People are so easily manipulated by others' words. There's no such thing as the strongest Relic in the world! If something like that exists, I'd like to see it!"

I wasn't even allowed a rebuttal as Matthis spoke rapidly and pounded his fist on the counter. "The most dangerous Relic may exist, but the most powerful doesn't" was this old man's favorite saying. His views were the result of being in this industry for a couple of decades. It was apparent that he didn't even hold a shred of trust towards the rumors. I wasn't sure if this was due to trust towards me or against me, but either way, his stubborn words made me feel a lot better. I smiled and decided to put a happy end to this conversation.

"The most dangerous Relic, huh?" I said pensively. "The most dangerous might not be a Relic, but a human's heart."

“Shut the *hell* up!” Matthis roared with a scowl. “What’s dangerous is how you can become the center of attention just by trying to buy a Relic, kiddo!”

He wasn’t wrong, but I tried again. “Indeed, the folly of humans is limitless.”

“I said shut up! Your words are so vacuous and vapid!”

*Compared to all this, how devastating is a ten-digit debt?* I saw Sitri scurrying around, cleaning up the place. I wasn’t sure how she negotiated, but she was using the knights that had come to check on the scene and ordering them around, cleaning up the debris. I was sure that they’d make short work of this.

“Speaking of, were you able to appraise it?” I asked.

Details no longer mattered—that Relic was now the center of attention in the empire. I wasn’t sure why Lady Éclair had mistakenly assumed that it was the strongest, but once the item’s abilities came to light, we could put all this fuss to an end. A transforming Relic was strictly limited by the empire, and nobles had appearances to uphold. I thought I had a sliver of hope, but Matthis shook his head.

“Ah, well...” he said. “I did use a few references and tried to confirm its powers, but I’m going with ‘unable to be determined.’”

I’d expected as much, but I couldn’t help my shoulders fall slightly. Matthis held great pride in his work, meaning that he wouldn’t conceal any potential risks, and he certainly wasn’t going to risk his life to appraise his item.

“It’s an S-Rank item when it comes to risks upon using it,” he continued. “Masks and the like are always troublesome. Facial expressions allow one to display their true nature—Relic masks that conceal such a core part of one’s being usually change the user’s body and mind. I tried using a golem to activate the item, but nada. Judging from the shape of the mask, it might require a living being to know what it does.”

“I see...”

“Nine times out of ten, the result ain’t worth it. If you’re gonna bid on it despite knowing these risks, that’s on you.”

I was once again impressed. It was difficult enough to activate a Relic’s

effects, but to try to make a golem do it was something only Matthis could do. I didn't know anyone else who could do the same within the imperial capital.

In the past, when I got my hands on a Reversible Face from bandits, one of them had spilled the beans and told me about the effects. If Matthis couldn't analyze the item despite his best efforts, it would've been difficult to shed light on the Relic without a human sacrifice.

The Relic auction would reveal each item's analyzed abilities as well as the opinions of an expert. If Matthis were to publicize what he'd just said, many hunters that desperately tried to buy that Relic would snap out of it. The only hurdle that remained was Lady Éclair. While her reasons were unknown, she was enamored with the concept of the strongest Relic. A lady like her, ignorant of the ways of the world, wouldn't listen to Matthis's words.

"Your party symbol looks pretty odd too, but that mask of meat isn't just for show," the old man grumbled. "I don't get why so many of you seem desperate to get your hands on it."

"I'm the most troubled by this, you know," I said. "This whole affair is made out to be entirely my fault, and quite honestly, I just want this auction to end soon. Besides, it doesn't really matter how strong of a Relic you have if you yourself are weak."

He nodded. "Exactly. Everyone's dreaming too much about these Relics."

Strong people were powerful with or without Relics, and the converse was true as well. Hence, hunters had to perpetually learn and better themselves. I organized the situation in my head, coming up with the best and worst possible scenarios. The best case was if the lady, the trading companies, and the other hunters all unanimously decided to give up on the Relic, allowing me to obtain it for dirt cheap. At worst, the noblewoman and the trading companies would get their hands on the Relic, use it without caring about the potential risks, find out its true effects, and try to crush me in a furious rage upon finding that the effects weren't what they expected.

This sounded horribly unreasonable, but I was up against a daughter of a noble—who knew what she'd do. In terms of rank and power, I was at an abundantly clear disadvantage, so it was best to be prepared for any scenario. I

no longer wanted that Relic. I'd take it if it was handed to me, but I wasn't willing to use my best friend's marriage funds to obtain it. However, since I was at the center of this mess, it was best to take preventive measures. It was a huge pain to do so, and I was reluctant to act, but if I were to leave this be, I knew that I'd only make my future self suffer even more.

"I think I'll have a talk with Lady Éclair and tell her Matthis's words," I said to Sitri, who was cleaning up. "Could you come with me?"

"Of course," she replied. "Let's get more acquainted with that young lady who favors Ark." She stopped cleaning and put a hand on her cheek, spilling a bright smile.

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Éclair Gladis first met the strongest hunter a year ago. House Gladis was a prominent household, producing numerous soldiers that protected the empire. Their knights were renowned for their combat prowess, and for generations, they'd shielded the Zebrudian Empire from enemy nations, monsters, and phantoms. The empire had decided to use treasure hunters as well, eventually elevating them to become one of the greatest global powers. However, just because they enjoyed this status, it didn't mean that they could let their guard down. It was imperative to remain vigilant and be prepared for any situation coming their way. That was House Gladis's family motto.

Within the empire, the strongest force wasn't the knights, but hunters. Absorbing mana material allowed one to strengthen their core power. No matter how tough the training was, there was a clear and vast difference in power between knights who had to protect the land and hunters who were constantly challenging new treasure vaults.

Gladis, holding great pride in being the sword of the empire, found high-level hunters, who couldn't be overpowered by a mobilized platoon of knights, to be treacherous threats—they couldn't be trusted. Gladis was known to dislike hunters because it viewed them with a sterner eye than other nobles. It wasn't rare to see nobles whispering about how hunters were basically graverobbers, but it seemed like Gladis's sharp gaze was harsher still.

Éclair had also taken up the sword from as young as she could remember, and

received lessons from famous swordsmen, ensuring that she wouldn't lose to hunters. Though she had a guard by her side, she would periodically visit treasure vaults herself. She might have still been a child, but no one doubted her remarkable talent.

Among the hunters, Gladis had approved of only one—House Rodin. Gladis had heard stories about House Rodin on numerous occasions: in the past, Lord Rodin had achieved an amazing feat, allowing this household of treasure hunters to call themselves a Hero. It'd been several centuries since the empire was built, and though the nation was now seen as a sacred place for a countless number of treasure hunters, House Rodin, the empire's hero, still stayed on top.

Though they were hunters, like House Gladis, they protected the Zebrudian Empire for generations, and worked their way up, even attaining a noble rank at one point. Ultimately, Rodin had politely declined to receive a rank, but Gladis knew that House Rodin was a compatriot. Whenever House Gladis mentioned hunters, House Rodin would be mentioned without fail.

The lords of House Rodin were all known to be excellent, but the upcoming successor was rumored to be especially so. He was still young, but he was given an honorable moniker and had conquered high-level treasure vaults in succession. People were sure that he'd etch his name into history as a Hero.

Whenever Éclair heard his name, her heart pounded with excitement as she imagined who this man exactly was. When she finally met Ark Rodin in person, he was a man who far exceeded her expectations. In stark contrast to the uncouth image that hunters evoked, Ark exuded an air of elegance. He had a slender yet well-built body, and his azure eyes were deep like the calm sea, making him seem different from the rest. Above all, she was blown away by his might.

At the long-awaited battle that Éclair had badgered to be present for, Ark had overpowered the esteemed knights of House Gladis all by himself. She received swordsmanship advice from him. She tagged along with his party and helped explore a treasure vault. The more time she spent with him, the more her adoration for him grew.

This man was called the Argent Thunderstorm. He'd mastered both the blade



and magic, a seemingly impossible feat, and had fused the two for his moves. Truly, he was a hunter that was worthy to be called a “Hero.” Éclair yearned to stand by his side one day. Her body trembled with euphoria. After they parted ways, she continued to passionately read up on tales of adventurers and had started to hear about a certain hunter, known to be that Hero’s rival.

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Lord Gladis’s base was in the center of the imperial capital—a nobles’ district where many nobles’ houses stood. The area was different from the bustles of the main street, giving off a refined atmosphere. Beautifully paved stone tiles lined the road, and luxurious carriages adorned with lavish ornaments ran along. Knights wearing their well-polished helmets stood equidistantly along the street, ensuring the safety of the citizens.

There were barely any signs of commoners or hunters. There wasn’t even a speck of trash lying on the ground, and I felt like even the scent of the air was different from where I usually resided.

*Earl Gladis...* The title of earl might not have seemed too impressive at first, but within the Zebrudian Empire, he was quite highly ranked. Sure, I was a Level 8 hunter, but I was nothing more than a commoner. This nation might have been forgiving to hunters, but if I wasn’t careful, I’d be squashed like an insect on the road.

In addition, I was headed for a noble infamous for his disdain towards hunters. *And a military house, to boot.* I wouldn’t be surprised if a blade swung down at me at our first meeting and only now did my stomach start to hurt. I *was* the master of a clan that Ark was in, but I wasn’t sure just how useful this would be towards the young lady.

“Damn, I guess in any age, commoners are subjected to the whims of nobles...” I muttered.

As I continued to walk along the road, I felt the penetrating gazes of the patrolling knights follow me. Traveling on foot, I was clearly out of place and attracting a lot of attention. Sitri squeezed my hand tightly, her slightly cold fingertips interlocking with mine.

“Don’t worry,” she assured me. “We’re just going to talk with her a bit.

There's nothing to fear."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

Attacking a defenseless person was a crime even for nobles, but the problem was that they had the means to conceal the evidence and prevent a scandal. Sitri smiled. I was feeling sick to my stomach, but for whatever reason, my childhood friend looked to be in a good mood.

"Worst case, I'll step in and crush them," she said. "I was just in the midst of researching noble blood. Do they hold any value other than the history that flows through their veins? Even Akashic Tower won't let you do such research."

"Y-Yeah...uh-huh."

*I don't quite get what she's saying, but is she invincible? Does Sitri not fear anything?*

The massive Gladis manor was surrounded by gates. The Gladis house emblem was raised loud and proud, and several knights stood near the front gates. I guess that they belonged to the house's private army, and they furrowed their brows while clicking their tongues at me. It felt like they'd unsheathe their swords at any moment. If Eva didn't make the preparations beforehand, I was certain that they'd restrain us immediately. I was almost never involved in Lord Gladis's affairs, but his rumored contempt towards hunters was apparently true. A tanned man with an intimidating face narrowed his eyes at me—I presumed that he was the leader.

"I'll take your weapons. Hand them over," he ordered.

"Huh?" I asked. "I...don't have anything on me."

The knight fell silent. *I mean, can't you tell by looking?* The leader scowled as he patted me down and confirmed that I was truly unarmed. He ended his inspection by fitting me with an armband—an item that jammed my flow of mana and restricted me from using spells and sealing my abilities. I couldn't use magic, so of course, this band did little to me. As I maintained my composure, I noticed the leader grunting with flared nostrils. Upon closer inspection, I found that even his eyes were twitching.

"You remain calm in this situation..." he growled. "Don't underestimate us. If

a mere hunter like you does anything suspicious, I won't hesitate to cut you down."

*What is he, a brigand? I just wanted to talk and offer a word of good-natured advice.* I was a little fed up with it all. I was used to being threatened, but it wasn't as though I liked to be in that situation. I sighed and pointed to Sitri, who stood beside me with a serene smile painted on her face.

"Oh, and since Sitri's a lady, I'd prefer it if a woman inspected her," I said.

We were treated like criminals as we were finally escorted into the manor. As expected of a noble's manor, the interior was filled with the finest furniture. A glittering chandelier hung from above, and a crimson carpet lined the floors. I'd heard that they were a military household, but it was clear that they enjoyed their wealth as well. Sitri and I pressed on, surrounded by pompous knights, and the maids who were taking care of the housework hastily stepped out of our way. We were led to a vast room that had a grand sofa and a sturdy table. Portraits and silver armor decorated the walls. A young lady was seated on the sofa waiting for us, and upon noticing our presence, she crossed her legs and smiled.

"I didn't think you'd march into this house from the front gates, Thousand Tricks," she said. "You've got guts."

*Uh, I'm not here to make enemies. I don't even want nobles to become my enemy.* She acted haughty, but she looked exactly her age, and I couldn't bring myself to be intimidated by the small girl. I wasn't afraid of her, but her knights that lined up behind her terrified me. I was equally frightened by the knights who stood behind us.

Left with no other choice, I copied Sitri and forced a smile to form on my lips. I saw Lady Éclair freeze.

"Y-You're completely surrounded, yet you act so calm..." she muttered. "I see. I suppose your courage is on par with Ark."

*Hmm? I don't get what's going on, but is she perhaps...praising me?* I'd already told her my reason for my visit beforehand. I was eager to hurry up and get it over with so that I could head home, but I couldn't understand a noble's

train of thought.

“Nah, the only thing I’d best Ark in is my level,” I said.

Lady Éclair took a sharp breath. Ark Rodin was a popular guy, well regarded by men and women of all ages. He was especially popular with the nobles. His power, personality, and handsome face combined with his honorable household that supported the empire since old times gave little room for doubt towards his popularity.

Every now and then, people would look at me, who only had a high level, and call me Ark’s rival, but I was nowhere near his greatness. *Does Lady Éclair believe such a baseless rumor? Is that why she seemed stern when we first met? That can’t be it. I’m just catching strays.* The young lady glared at me dangerously, and I thought that I should set the record straight.

“Lady Éclair, have you perhaps heard a ridiculous rumor that made me seem like Ark’s rival?” I asked.

“Oh?” she replied.

“Those rumors are absolutely wrong. Ark and I differ in so many ways regarding rank and achievements. It’s completely baseless. At the very least, I don’t see Ark as a rival, but a friend. Just a friend.”

“What...did you say?”

Lady Éclair’s fists and lips were trembling, her cheeks turning bright red like she was enduring her anger. *Have I said something wrong?* There were numerous amazing hunters who experienced great success in this empire since ancient times, but I was sure that Ark was one of the strongest in the empire. He was a guy who would eventually be called the strongest.

“So, Ark...isn’t your rival?” Lady Éclair asked.

I simply couldn’t understand why she seemed to be glaring at me more intensely than before. The guards behind us were also gritting their teeth while gazing down at us. *Do they think I’m lying or something? Oh, wait, I think I get it now.*

I placed a fist over my palm and said, “Ah, to be precise, he’s not *my* rival, but

he's a rival of one of my party members. I fear this might count as self-praise, but she's a very capable person and I'm sure even Ark could attest to that. Isn't that right, Sitri?"

"Quite so," she agreed with a sheepish smile. "Ark is my rival. If we look at the bigger picture, I've got the upper hand for now, but Ark's been growing at an astonishing rate. I think I'd lose to him one day."

*Hey, don't provoke her like that.* Sitri sounded a tad condescending (though not at all sarcastic), and Lady Éclair's ears started to turn bright red.

"Er, I think Ark's above us, to be honest," I hastily chimed in. "We've just conquered a lot more treasure vaults, is all."

"Aw..." Sitri whined. "Krai, whose side are you on? Ark's or mine?"

"Uh, yours, of course, but there's a time and place for everything."

The usually composed Sitri, known for her impeccable ability to read the room, had spouted something completely uncharacteristic for her. I felt like middle management, stuck between my superior and my subordinates. It was difficult to rank hunters in the first place, but I felt like Ark was the strongest. He was a head above all the rookies, and there wasn't a single person who could win against him in a one-on-one battle. However, if this was a clash between two parties, Ark Brave and Grieving Souls, I was certain that we would win. This wasn't the fault of Ark, but his party members. Aside from the leader of Grieving Souls, everyone else was insanely powerful, but regarding Ark Brave, everyone except the leader lacked combat prowess. It wasn't like they were weak—they certainly had first-rate skills—but to be frank, none of them were particularly impressive.

Even if the party gathered excellent people, they would all pale in comparison to the leader and would quit out of a sense of inferiority. Men in particular were quick to jump ship. There was a joke in there, but I didn't want to touch on a sore subject and couldn't find the right timing to say it. *I wonder if this young lady would laugh if I said it? Eh, probably not...* I continued to smile when the young noble suddenly unsheathed her blade and slammed on the table, burying half of her sword into the furniture. Wood shavings flew in the air, and I froze in shock at her sudden action. In an unladylike fashion, she raised her right leg

onto the table, her face bright red with tears brimming in her well-shaped eyes.

“I-I understand very well what you lot are implying!” she yelled in a trembling voice. “I can see that you’re mocking both Ark and my household!”

“Wait, what?” I said. “We’re not mocking—”

“If I had the power, I would’ve lopped off both of your heads by now!”

*Sorry, what?! Did this child just talk about decapitation? Come on now, what did I do?* All of Lady Éclair’s guards had their hands on their swords. The moment she gave her order, they would pounce on us. I was here with good intentions, but I didn’t expect her to try to kill me. While my face twitched in panic, Sitri still had a smile dancing on her lips. It was nice to see that she maintained her cool no matter what, but I didn’t think her attitude was fitting for this situation. *I guess it’s not much when compared to the treasure vaults...*

Lady Éclair pointed her index finger at us. *This might be unnecessary information, but since her leg’s still raised, I can almost see her underwear.*

“But your insolence ends here!” she shouted. “I’ll make you regret ever looking down on House Gladis! I’ll definitely, absolutely, without fail get my hands on that strongest Relic!”

“No, that’s a dangerous one,” I quickly replied. “The appraiser said so too. I think it’s best if you don’t bid on it.”

I was still confused, but I decided to get back to my initial goal and try to negotiate with her. *Besides, you’ve got power and money already. What use is there to go out of your way to do something unnecessary? If I was the daughter of a count, I’d just laze around every day and do nothing.*

“According to *my* investigation, you’re scurrying around and gathering Relics!” Lady Éclair yelled. “You probably used those items to become a Level 8, didn’t you?! Your strength simply comes from borrowed power!”

“Hmm? Uhhh, yeah, uh-huh. I guess so?”

She was half right. Indeed, my strength came from my Relics, one hundred percent, but even using my entire collection of a few hundred Relics couldn’t possibly make me into a Level 8. *Why’s she getting so heated?*

“I’ll give Ark the strongest Relic!” she roared with fury. “And that’ll be the end of you! No longer will you be able to stand on top!”

*I...don’t think he’d be happy to receive that.* Ark was already set to become the successor of House Rodin, and thus had access to powerful Relics. Having more of these items didn’t necessarily make him stronger. As I’d said before, he was a strong guy; he didn’t need the power of Relics to prove himself. Just like how Luke could easily kill me with his bare hands, powerful people were powerful with or without Relics. And no matter how much I struggled and tried to turn the tables, I was weak. This was also just as true.

“That’s meaningless,” I said. “The strong will be strong even without Relics, and the converse rings true as well. The weak will be weak despite having Relics.”

“What?” Lady Éclair asked.

“This is simply the truth of things. Just because he obtains that Relic, it will never equate to Ark’s strength. As his friend, I’d just like to say that he won’t be happy even if he *does* become stronger with a terrible item like that.”

*So please, give me that Relic. C’mon, Ark’s got it good. He’s handsome, so he doesn’t need to change his face, does he? He can fight back even if someone’s after him, so there’s no need for him to hide his face.* Lady Éclair looked stunned for a moment before her body started trembling. Tears spilled from her eyes.

“Urgh...” she sniffed before she shouted, “Sh-Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up! You’re so stupid! You idiot! I’m definitely, absolutely not handing that item to you! Leave! Leave this place at once!”

It was then that a butler flew into the room from outside. “What are you—m-my lady?! Please calm down!”

He tried his best to pacify Lady Éclair, but she shook her head rapidly and continued her wailing. *U-Uh, doesn’t this look like I made her cry? Is this bad? Would I be tried for contempt of a noble or something?*

Sitri, who’d been watching this scene unfold, stood up. “Lady Éclair, we’re here today because we wanted you to give up on that Relic.”

Lady Éclair sniffled. “Wh-What?” She rubbed her eyes and gazed at Sitri.

*I mean, she's not wrong, but did we need to mention that now? Didn't I say the same thing earlier anyway?*

"That Relic is something that neither you nor Ark can handle," Sitri continued. "I believe the wise decision is to give up on it."

Perhaps she was furious once more, because I saw the young noble's face turn red as she bit her lips so hard that she started to bleed.

The room focused on Sitri, and she placed a hand over her cheek and smiled. "You mentioned earlier that you have a hundred million gild prepared. We've got two hundred million."

"Two...hundred million?" Lady Éclair murmured.

Sitri gave a firm nod and declared, "And this is our absolute limit. You may be the daughter of Lord Gladis, but you must have a spending limit. In addition, that Relic is meaningless to you. If you still truly wish to have that item, why don't you gather more than two hundred million gild? If you're willing to go that far, it pains me to say this, but we have little choice but to admit our defeat."

*Sitri...*

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It was hard to extinguish a fire that had already spread. I prayed that the rumors would die down by the time the auction rolled around, but my hopes were dashed and people were still clamoring about a Reversible Face. Sitri's words must've lit a fire within Lady Éclair as well—I'd heard that she begged her father to pull a few strings and was gathering all the money that she could. *She seemed mature for her age, but I guess she's still a child who needs her parents' help.*

Every year, just before the auctions, rumors would start swirling about a few choice pieces, but this year, the entirety of the imperial capital was gunning for a Reversible Face. Even in the lounge, that item was all anyone would talk about. Only Eva and I, the center of this mess, were tired of hearing about it. While I was lazing around in the clan master's office, Sitri entered with an eager expression on her face. She placed a suitcase much larger than what she'd brought in the past, in front of us. Her pale pink eyes were quietly flickering



with her fighting spirit. Unlike Liz, Sitri managed to contain her glimmering determination and keep silent.

“Combined with the marriage funds, I managed to gather 910 million gild,” she said. “We’ll take her down. Siddy and T chipped in too.”

She’d even given Lady Éclair a falsified limit to keep the noble in check. I burst out laughing when I realized just how immature Sitri’s tactics were. It felt like I’d fallen into a pit of bottomless quicksand. At this point, I had to keep my initial reasoning for wanting a Reversible Face at all to my grave.

Eva, who’d been hard at work in an attempt to quell the fuss, couldn’t hide just how taken aback she was. “Krai, we’re closing in on an eleven-digit debt.”

“I know,” I replied.

The only winner in this auction would be Arnold, who brought in this Relic in the first place. The auction would take a handling fee, and their cut would increase the more expensive an item would become, but it was still practically guaranteed that he’d be walking away with a stuffed wallet. The die had been cast. I could no longer back out of this auction, and even if I did, this excitement wouldn’t die down. I didn’t know where I’d land. *I feel like I’d come out as a loser no matter the outcome.*

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Quite honestly, at this point, we’re at a disadvantage,” Eva replied. “There are plenty of trading companies more than willing to lend House Gladis money, and though it depends heavily on just how much Lord Gladis would bend to his daughter’s whims, he’s known to be pretty extreme at times.”

Eva remained grim ever since the auction news started heating up. It was difficult for commoners like us to fight head-on against nobles, who wielded power, money, and military influence. I knew that very well which was why I went to House Gladis to convince the young noble otherwise, but it ended in spectacular failure.

The astute Sitri nodded in agreement to Eva’s words while glancing up at me.

“Well, if we wanted to be in tip-top shape, perhaps I should negotiate with the trading companies and borrow some money...” Sitri started.

“That won’t be necessary,” I replied firmly.

“But...”

“It’s not necessary.”

As she was one of the brightest Alchemists of her time and studious as ever, Sitri’s potions could easily earn her millions. Had we looked, we certainly could find trading companies that were willing to loan her money. But of course, the lender would be well aware of why we’d need the quick cash—the timing of the auction would give it away. This might’ve been too late for me to say after I had her sell off some of her extra equipment and stored potions, but if she were to be in debt now, there was a good chance that it’d bite her back in the future. That was an outcome that I couldn’t accept. Sitri puffed out her cheeks in disagreement, but when I smiled at her, she gave up and smiled back.

“I understand,” she finally relented. “If you say so, then I suppose it’s not necessary. I don’t quite understand why though.”

Whatever the outcome, I’d troubled everyone greatly this time around. Sitri, Liz, Eva, Tino, and Matthis were all victims of my whims. I was sure that some of my clan members also felt awkward about this entire affair. This auction wasn’t a war—it was an annual festival. It was supposed to be a fun event, but this was anything but. *I’ll never ask others for money to buy Relics. Never, ever again.*

I rubbed between my eyebrows, hoping to relax my facial muscles. *Right. I should enjoy the auction. This isn’t a war. It’s not like I’d die without that Relic. Who cares if Lady Éclair gets her hands on it and is disappointed by its effects? That’s not my problem.*

“At this point, all we can do is pray to Lady Luck,” I said. “Once the auction’s over, why don’t we all have a party and celebrate?”

“That sounds wonderful!” Sitri said with a beaming smile. “We should also invite Lady Éclair to the party.”

It was clear that she was fully intent on winning and snapping the young noble’s spirit in half. *Now that I think about it, isn’t it Ark’s fault for causing this entire debacle? He brought that lady with him. All right then, the party’ll be on his tab.* I maintained a calm demeanor as I kept that thought etched within my

heart. There was only a day left until the auction—a raging battle was just about to begin.

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The prideful nobles of Zebrudia had times when they must never back away. House Gladis was nowhere near poor. They didn't have much land when compared to the other houses, but they commanded an army of superb knights whose skill surpassed that of hunters. They managed peace and order within the empire, and they enjoyed more wealth than the hunters who were drawn to treasure vaults. However, even for influential nobles, two hundred million gild was no price to sneeze at. At the very least, it was certainly not an amount that Éclair, who wasn't even the current lord of the house, could use freely. Earl Gladis had stated as much when his daughter gave her report and notified him that she required at least two hundred million gild.

Donned in a crimson coat, Earl Gladis had a large blade that hung by his waist, and his dark brown hair was neatly arranged. His gaze was far too sharp for a noble, and his burly physique was evident of his might. Éclair's father, Van Gladis, was a nobleman and a military soldier. There were times when he would personally stand at the helm of his knights and take command. His piercing gaze, which seemed much too harsh to point at a child, quelled Éclair's anger in an instant.

"Very well," he finally said. "Win, Éclair. I find this to be foolish. We're not at war, and I'd like to avoid fighting against Steps for a Relic that we won't even use, but surrendering after clashing against them would sully our name. You may be a child, but should word spread that you were overwhelmed by hunters, I won't be able to face my ancestors."

His tone was quiet, but Éclair felt his voice emanating pressure like never before, causing her to snap back to her senses. Éclair was to blame for starting this all. She'd uncovered information about a man who was called Ark's rival and was gathering Relics with reckless abandon. Before she knew it, she'd pieced two and two together and had barged into a tavern to declare her intent. Reckless, impulsive actions were something that her father disliked the most. Before she was able to express her gratitude, Van furrowed his brows.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” he said. “We don’t have any money that you can simply squander for your desires. I’m only lending you this money, Éclair. I’ll have you repay me one day. You may still be but a child, but as a person with House Gladis’s blood flowing through your veins, your actions come with great responsibility. Since you were my first daughter, perhaps I’ve given you a bit too much freedom. But this will be an excellent opportunity.”

He paused for a moment before he continued, “This is an order from the lord of House Gladis. Win at any cost, Éclair. Failure is not an option, and our household has no need for the weak. And finally, I will have you learn the results of your actions. I’ll have Montaure give you his full cooperation. He’s a thoughtful man, so use him well.”

This was a transparent condemnation of her rash behavior. It was imperative for her to win. She was the one who instigated this battle—as a noble of the empire, she had a duty to see this until the end.

“My lady, I’ve just contacted Welz Trading Company, and they have given me their word to loan us some money should we need it,” an elderly man said, approaching Éclair.

She was in her private room of the manor, sitting expressionlessly. Though the young noble was obviously in a bad mood, the elderly Montaure didn’t even flinch as his intelligent eyes and calm voice called out to her. He was Gladis’s right-hand man, serving the house for a long time and assisting the earl in areas other than combat.

“How much will they give us?” she asked.

“Calculating the savings of our household, you can use up to five hundred million gild without a problem. Welz can finance us with an additional five hundred million. It’s not impossible to borrow more money from them, but I believe it’d be quite difficult to repay a larger debt.”

“An additional...five hundred million?”

Éclair widened her eyes in shock at the man whom she’d been familiar with since she was a baby. *That infuriating woman had stated that their limit was two hundred million*, the young lady thought. She thought that she could easily

win the auction since she had over twice as much money prepared, but Montaure had apparently negotiated with Welz to borrow even more money. He furrowed his usually gentle face.

“My lady,” Montaure said. “No one will honestly state their limit to an opponent during an auction. This advice should especially be heeded against the Thousand Tricks, a man renowned for his ingenuity. Above all, the woman he was with, Sitri Smart, is an excellent Alchemist. She can easily prepare more than two hundred million gild.”

“What?!” Éclair gasped.

Her mind went blank, stunned by this astonishing revelation. Sitri had so proudly declared war on Éclair and had even asserted her defeat if the young noble could gather more than two hundred million. The composed visage of the Alchemist beside the Thousand Tricks flashed across Éclair’s mind. Was there anyone who dared to misinform a noble? She couldn’t—no, she didn’t want to believe it.

“That’s...impossible,” the young girl muttered. “Sh-She firmly told us that she’d admit defeat if we gathered more than two hundred million! If we have more than that, she should surrender.”

“My lord wished for a certain victory from you, my lady,” Montaure countered. “I think it’s better if we were prepared. Surprise attacks are expected during battle. For auctions, it’s not an understatement to claim that the information we gather beforehand is the heart of the battle.”

She was losing heart. She had to achieve certain victory and make preparations. Montaure’s words rang true—it was vital for her to answer to her father’s expectations. Her shoulders slumped for a while, Éclair trembled, but managed to squeeze out her last words.

“Ah yes, thank you. You’re right. It’s better for us to be prepared.”

The extra money would only be used during the worst-case scenario. If she could win with two hundred million gild, that would be great. If, for whatever reason, that wasn’t enough, she’d dip into the extra funds and use everything she had to pound her opponents into the ground. The auction was nearing, and the truth of this outcome would come to light all too soon. With clenched fists,

Éclair continued to reassure herself while Montaure gazed at her calmly.

## Chapter Six: True Victory

“I can’t believe it!” Liz wailed. “I went to six different places and couldn’t find a single one! Zip! Zero!”

“Yeah, well, it’s busy this time of year,” I said.

“I was torn on whether to go out on an expedition or search for a bounty. But it takes time to search for a bounty and convert the reward into money, and if I go out on an expedition, I might not make it in time for the auction. So, I thought that the best course of action was to sell the drops that I earned from phantoms and monsters to gain even a bit more for our funds!”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

I was walking around the imperial capital with a smiling Liz and Sitri in tow. The auction had begun, and the city was teeming with people. For a while, the capital would be noisy like a festival. Stalls lined the main road, and a few were hosting smaller auctions, copying the official auction that would be hosted. The Explorers’ Association was buried with requests, and this was the time for both merchants and hunters to make some cash.

My mind had been occupied by a Reversible Face for the past few days, but as I calmed myself down, I realized that several other useful Relics would be put up for auction too. My current situation didn’t allow me to reach for those, but it felt a little lonely, like I couldn’t participate in a party. Liz was all smiles, but Sitri sighed deeply.

“You’re so useless, Liz,” Sitri grumbled. “If only you found an expensive Relic. That would’ve put my mind more at ease.”

“Huh?!” Liz demanded. “It’s *your* fault that you’re in this mess in the first place! Why does everyone know about the Relic that Krai Baby’s after?!”

*Uh, sorry, that’d be my fault...* I gazed at the two sisters bantering and felt a sense of guilt, causing me to look away quietly.

“Hmm... Even if we gathered all of our savings, we didn’t quite reach a billion

gild,” Sitri said.

“Well, we *did* go all out to conquer that palace, and our rewards from that are in Luke’s hands,” Liz said with a pout.

Our party had a rule that if one had to leave the party for whatever reason, barring extenuating circumstances, they wouldn’t take home the rewards from these expeditions. Had Liz or Sitri been able to grab even a bit of this money, the outcome of the auction might’ve changed.

Sitri sighed. “Agreed. This was all just poor timing. Usually, I’d be able to make this situation work more in our favor.”

*She’s done so much and she’s still not satisfied?* I thought as she looked up at me.

“We probably have about a seventy percent chance of winning,” she said. “If you didn’t say no, I think we could still hatch a few plans...”

“No,” I replied firmly. “You’ve done more than enough, Sitri. Thank you.”

“Aw...”

The corners of her lips tugged upwards. Sitri was brighter than Liz, but she had an unfortunate tendency to take things too far. I guessed that this was simply the fate of a competent person.

“I know! Krai Baby, if you still can’t get that Relic...” Liz said with a confident smile, squeezing my right arm and pushing her body to my side, “I’ll steal it from that shitty brat!”

“You’re up against a noble, you know,” I warned.

*I mean, it’s not like she should steal regardless if the person in question was a noble or not. That’s not what a Thief does. Stealing is a crime.*

“Huh? Is that an issue?” she asked. “Don’t worry, those complacent knights can’t lay a finger on me! I won’t lose to them!”

“Liz, if you do that, Krai will become the prime suspect!” Sitri said. “If you’re gonna do it...you better make it look like a burglary or something.”

“Stop that,” I said.



*Seriously. Do you guys not know when to pull the brakes?* I assumed that they were joking, but some jokes were in poor taste.

The Zebrudia Auction was hosted in a chalky white theater in the center of the imperial capital. This arena was normally used for concerts and plays; the polished marble building was gathering a crowd of men and women of all ages. *How many of them are planning on bidding on an item? How many of them will try to outbid us?* The only thing I could do now was pray for a fun, clean auction.

The entrance was divided into three: one for nobles, one for hunters, and one for everyone else. It went without saying that nobles were separated from the rest, but hunters were also differentiated because there would certainly be problems if they were grouped together with the general public.

The entrance fee to the auction was a hundred thousand gild. The most crowded entrance that stood out among the rest was the one for hunters. Firstly, their appearances were very conspicuous. *Why did that person come in a full suit of armor for the auction?* Some looked severely intimidating, and for whatever reason, some had even brought their weapons along with them.

I noticed a familiar group within the crowd. There was a young boy with flaming red hair that seemed to burn even the heavens, a frightening, elderly man with dark brown hair, a female Thief with brown hair, and the apprentice of the lady who was currently glued to my right arm.

It'd been a while since the melting pot of members that were hurled into the White Wolf's Den had gathered. There were a few unfamiliar faces surrounding them, but even I wouldn't mistake Tino's face. I considered talking to Gilbert first, changed my mind to Greg, considered Rhuda, and eventually settled on Tino.

"Hey, Tino!" I said. "Are you guys here to buy something too?"

"Master! Good morning!" she said.

The other members noticed me and gave an awkward smile. *Did Tino start tagging along with them ever since they formed a party with us? In any case, I'm glad that she made a few new friends.*

"I'm here to see your valiance with my own eyes!" Tino said. "I saw them

trying to visit the auction, so I thought I'd go with them, is all."

"Tino, you turn into a completely different person in front of the Thousand Tricks," Gilbert muttered.

Tino shot him a scornful glare. Though completely by accident, I was in the center of this maelstrom of an auction. The man beside Gilbert looked at me with interest before he started whispering. *Yeah, this is uncomfortable for me.*

"Valiance aside, if you were going to the auction, you should've gone with us," I said.

"Er, well, you didn't...invite me," Tino replied.

*Sorry. Oh my gosh, I'm so, so sorry. I heard that you even lent us some of your money. I'm truly sorry. That totally slipped my mind. But if I were allowed to give an excuse, er...right! It's probably better if you went with Rhuda and the others to avoid attracting attention. Honestly, if I could, I'd love to switch places with you.*

I noticed Rhuda shooting daggers at me. *Maybe she knows that Tino's loaning me money.*

"Ah, erm... That is to say..." I stammered.

Tino stared up at me as I struggled to find my words. *What am I supposed to say? I can invite her now, but she's with them now, and she won't feel at ease with Liz and co by her side.* Just then, I thought of a great idea.

"Tino, if you don't mind, why don't you enter the auction in my stead?" I suggested.

"Huh? In your stead?" she repeated.

The Zebrudia Auction allowed the usage of a substitute. This was pretty self-explanatory, but this was a policy that allowed one to join the auction in lieu of another. We'd attend the auction, but instead of vocalizing our intentions, we'd send a unique hand signal to Tino to communicate with her and have her bid instead.

Substitution was used mostly by those who wanted to hide their identities. Since people knew that I was aiming for a Reversible Face, this would do little to

conceal my identity, but it would help me enjoy the auction a bit more. Tino widened her eyes in shock while Sitri nodded while narrowing hers.

“I see...” the Alchemist muttered. “That’s not a bad idea. While I’m not sure how the young noble would react to this, we might be able to confuse her. It might only alleviate our anxiety, but are you sure about this? Wouldn’t you like to bid on the item you want?”

Indeed, I loved auctions. The act of joining a passionate bidding war and successfully buying an item that I wanted was wonderfully cathartic. But I thought that I should concede that privilege this time around.

“I participated in the auction last year and the year before that too,” I said. “It’s a bit messy this time. Come on, Liz, don’t look so wistful.”

Liz looked restless, perhaps eager to be my substitute. But I felt like she was acting a bit too immature.

“All right...” Liz said sluggishly before she glared at her sister. “Tsk, you better win, T.”

“R-Right!” Tino replied. “Leave it to me, Master, Lizzy! I’ll win that auction and get that item! You can count on me!”

She balled her hands into fists with gusto. *There seems to be pressure on her to win, but our funds are limited, so if we’re over our budget and lose, that won’t necessarily be her fault.*

A carriage arrived at the nobles’ entrance, sporting the familiar emblem of House Gladis. Enveloped in a pure white dress, Lady Éclair stepped out and glanced around. When she finally spotted me, she glared at me with such intensity that I could hardly believe that she was a young girl. The look of astonishment that she’d shown when we arrived to negotiate with her was nowhere to be seen—an unmistakable sign that she’d gathered more than two hundred million.

Sitri remained composed, but she squeezed my hand. When I glanced at her, a smile was plastered on her face, but I could tell that she was desperately burying her anxiety beneath her cheery expression. *Did we...lose this one?*

The auction venue was filled with the heat of the bidders. The seats which surrounded the large center stage were divided into three. Most of them were for the general public, including those from trading companies and the wealthy. The treasure hunters were guided towards seats that were a bit isolated from the rest, and the nobles and other VIPs were given special chairs.

The hunters' seats were the noisiest. Anyone could join in on the Zebrudia Auction, so long as they paid the admission fee, but no commoner would cough up a hundred thousand gild just to be a mere spectator. Naturally, this meant that many bidders were refined and composed, part of the upper class, but this rule didn't apply to the treasure hunters.

The admission fee wasn't too costly for hunters. Most of them lived day-to-day with little thought to the future, and their atmosphere was completely different from the rest. Food and drinks weren't allowed within the venue, but boisterous laughter and vulgar roaring could be heard throughout the room.

There was staggered seating, allowing patrons to view the stage clearly. We were guided to an area that was higher elevated than the rest of the hunters, allowing us a bird's-eye view of the hunters' seats.

"Huh?!" Liz growled, immediately threatening a nearby hunter. "'Ey, you bastard! You were looking at me, weren't ya? Where're you from? I'll give you five seconds. Spill it!"

"Wh-What?!" a poor hunter replied.

"Hey, could you stop her for me?" I whispered to the calmer Smart as I poked her.

Liz had clenched the arm of a burly man, who was much larger than her, and glared at him with rage burning in her eyes. She was a small woman, and the man she was threatening was much beefier, but he quickly turned pale, his gripped arm creaking at his joints. In stark contrast to her fragile appearance, she was actually very strong. She could easily snap an arm or two without an ounce of hesitation. The man looked to be in distress as he tried to twist his body and step back, but possibly due to the difference in strength, he realized that he couldn't budge. Sitri, who initially acted like she was an innocent bystander, stood up to quell her older sister the troublemaker.

“Liz, Krai said that we should let him go.”

“Huh? Again?” Liz grunted. “This is boring.”

“It’s not like the people here are worth fighting against anyway. Come on, sit down.”

“Tch,” Liz said with an annoyed click of her tongue, releasing her poor victim from her grasp. “Get lost, you hear me? Next time you show up with that shitty face of yours, I’ll pound your ass to hell.”

The hunter quickly fled with his tail between his legs. *That was peak survival of the fittest.* The crowd fell silent for a moment upon watching Liz roar at the hunter, but they immediately became rowdy once more. Exchanges like these were a daily occurrence. *I wanna quit being a hunter. I just wanna go to a faraway city, open up a confectionary store, and quietly live the remainder of my life in peace.*

“I’m sorry, Krai,” Sitri apologized. “Liz is small but noisy.”

Liz heard her sister’s words. “Siddy, stop using me to win points with Krai Baby! Because *you* were ill prepared, we’ve got weird guys close to us. Besides, what the hell? Who allowed you to sit next to him? Don’t touch Krai Baby! You better stay a meter away from him at all times!”

“You’re at fault because you were late! You should lead the way and open a path for us! Do your job. I’m the one funding this, you know... Right, Krai?”

“Huh?! So what? That doesn’t matter, right, Krai Baby?”

“Mhm, uh-huh,” I replied. “I’m sure there are a lot more Relics up for auction... Look, Lion’s Chains. Urgh, but large chains take up space and they’re not even that strong.”

I crossed my legs while scanning the catalog that I received upon entering the venue. The name, characteristics, effects, seller, and appraiser were all neatly listed for each Relic. There was even a danger rating and location of discovery. Each item up for auction was appraised by an expert, but that didn’t mean that the auctioned items were definitively legit. While these occasions were rare, if you were unlucky, you’d purchase a fake that would cost you a pretty penny.

The auction was also a place to judge items and network. Rare books, items, works of art, and jewelry were also up for grabs, but I was only interested in Relics. This annual auction lived up to its name and had plenty of interesting Relics to offer. *I'll save up money so that I can join in on the fun next year. I swear it. I was too thoughtless this time around.*

Far below me was Tino, nervously talking with Greg and the others. Farther away, in the nobles' seating by the ceiling was Lady Éclair sitting and looking just as anxious.

The Relic we were aiming for, which had become big news within the capital, would come out in the latter half of the auction, being treated as a highlight of the event. Their battle over, Sitri took my left while Liz sat on my right. Things were finally starting to grow quiet. The Zebrudia Auction, which had been troubling me for the past several days, had finally opened its curtains.

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The Zebrudia Auction was a simple affair. Each auctioned item started off with its lowest price, and bidders would reveal what they were willing to pay. While each item would have a minimum increment when raising the price, it was generally by a hundred thousand gild, a million gild, or ten million gild. Once someone offered the highest bid, the auctioneer would wait two minutes. If there weren't any other offers, the item would be sold to the final bidder.

Once an item was sold, it was impossible to cancel the transaction. If, for whatever reason, the buyer couldn't purchase the item at the price that they'd promised, they'd be punished severely for their crimes.

There were numerous possible methods to place a bid. You could write a price on a board and raise it in the air, or shout out your price. You could even use predetermined hand signals.

"All right! Sold, for fifteen million gild! Mirror Shield will go to Number 413!" the auctioneer shouted.

A thunderous applause echoed throughout the room. As the name had suggested, a mysterious shield that resembled a mirror was carried off stage. The more the auction progressed, the brighter the flames grew. The bidders grew more restless and antsy.

“Next up, is Entry Number 15!” the auctioneer shouted. “Hailing from the Era of Magical Arms, an item that was said to be handled by a clan of chains and known to be the strongest chain-type Relic for attacks...”

I couldn't help but lean forward eagerly. I was so excited. There was only one item I could bid on today, so the Relics that were auctioned now were nothing more than appetizers, but I was affected by the fiery bidding war that ensued. My heart pounded with delight. *Why is that Reversible Face in the latter half of the auction?! If it was up first, I could've used any remaining money to bid for other Relics!*

“Krai, your face seems red,” Sitri noted.

“I think you're imagining things,” I replied.

“Don't worry. I will use any means possible and get that item without fail. I swear it on my name. Please be at ease. If our current funds aren't enough, I don't mind selling our house.”

Sitri clenched her fist, ignorant of my thoughts. I didn't think I was in any position to ask her to allow me to use some of our funds to bid on another Relic. A wave of regret swept over me. *Dammit! If only I saved up some money! No, if only Luke and the others returned quickly... No, wait... That's right! I've got Lucia's savings! I almost forgot! Uh...is it all right for an older brother to use his younger sister's money?*

I tapped my foot restlessly as one item after another was auctioned off in front of my eyes. I wasn't sure if this was perfect or terrible timing, but all of the items were Relics. There was a chain and a ring with a mysterious power, a cape that allowed one to breathe underwater, and a pair of boots that allowed the user to float a centimeter in the air. I saw a crystal ball that could predict the weather with seventy percent accuracy and a sword that could shrink as small as thirty centimeters or grow as long as three meters. *I want that. I want that so badly.* It was unusual for my materialistic desires to be on full display, but I couldn't help these feelings that welled up within me.

I wasn't a Relic user; I was just a collector. Even if the items were weak or useless, I wanted it for collection's sake. These precious items were sold dirt cheap. The highlight of the auction would appear later, but if I had the money

right now, I would've placed a bid on these Relics without hesitation. *Damn! If I could've bought that Reversible Face for cheap, I could've bought all the other ones too! You guys didn't buy that item as an investment, did you? You guys are gonna use them, right?! I'd use them! I'd use them precious, so please give them to me. Who cares about Reversible Face, right? Maybe we should give up, yeah? Quantity over quality?*

Watching random merchants and hunters buy Relics in front of me was akin to the pain of seeing your crush being stolen away as you found yourself unable to do anything. *But if I were to bid on something here and lose the Reversible Face auction, I wouldn't be able to face the people who did their best to get me this far.* I clenched my fists so hard that my knuckles turned white. I had to endure this. If I grew too relaxed, I'd cry out. *Why am I not filthy rich?! Dammit! Is this as high as I can go?*

Tino was glancing up at me, eagerly waiting for my signal. I'd already told her the item that I was shooting for, but she would always carefully confirm with me, attesting to her honest nature. Unfortunately, this positive trait of hers was currently working against her. I could tell that she was encouraging me with her eyes. "Master, are you sure you don't need that? If you don't buy it right now, you'll never get your hands on it ever again," was written all over her face—I was certain that I heard Tino's thoughts.

Was this an auditory hallucination, or was this reality? I'd never been so flustered before. I was much calmer when I was surrounded by wolf knights in the White Wolf's Den or when Sitri Slime was gone. My palms weren't just clammy—I felt like they were absolutely soaked in my sweat. My trembling fingertips grew numb as I kept my fist clenched. My heart was thudding as though I'd just finished running a marathon at full speed. My throat was parched and I yearned to take a sip of water. *I want a Relic that's in the shape of a water canteen and provides unlimited water! I wanted a ring that'll never make me thirsty when I wear it! Someone, please stop me! Take the wheel! Damn!*

*T-Tino's telling me to buy these Relics. I can hear her thoughts! "Master, I'm disappointed in you for being unable to buy items of this caliber. You're a failure of a collector." I can hear her say it! Are you sure? Can I really? Is it worth letting*



*down an apprentice?* I pushed back my hair which was matted with sweat while staring at the stage. My time to make a decision had come. Reversible Face was still waiting for its turn. This auction's objective might have been to outbid others, but without a doubt, my greatest opponent was myself. I didn't mean to brag, but both my body *and* mental strength were quite frail. I tried to endure my impulses and gulped. I was tempted to close my eyes and cover my ears, but I felt like doing so would imply that I was admitting defeat.

"What's wrong? Are you all right?" Liz peered at me with worry.

"Y-Yeah, I am," I replied.

I closed my eyes and chided myself. *I'm useless in battle, but I didn't think I'd be so hopeless during times like these too. Wait. I'm a weakling, a small fry. That's true. But precisely because I am so weak, I can't disappoint those who expect something from me.* If I were to give in to my desires and join the auction right now, how would Matthis and Eva feel? I'd troubled them more than enough. How would my clan members, who saw me riddled with debt, feel? They'd likely see me as someone who lacked self-control, a failure of a person. *And, uh, they're not wrong, to be honest...* Above all, how would Sitri and Liz feel? If I were to use the money that they desperately gathered towards another Relic, would they say something?

After mulling it over for a brief while, I finally opened my eyes. *Yeah, I think the Smarts would forgive me without saying a word.* We'd gathered far over two hundred million, the amount that we'd told Lady Éclair. *I think we'd be fine even if we used just a little. Enduring all this is even more stressful anyway.*

Before I knew it, my body had stopped trembling. I took a deep breath and raised my head, finally making my resolve. My wavering determination was only solidified when I vocalized it. The husky voice that I managed to squeeze out made it clear just how dry my throat was.

"The time...has come."

*Very well. Your recklessness ends here. I'll show you what true fear is. I'm the Thousand Tricks, the man who borrowed all the money that he could from his childhood friend to buy Relics. Burn my pathetic self into your minds.*

A large piece of black armor was being carried onstage. It stood solemnly and

with dignity as though someone was inside, silencing the rowdy crowd. It was around four meters tall. A massive shield and an impressive sword that were a perfect fit for the suit of armor created the full set. This was clearly not meant for humans to use. *Maybe Ansem can wear it.* The crowd quietly waited for the auctioneer's words.

"Entry Number 44! An item from the empire's pride and joy, the Vault Investigation Bureau! This is a metallic golem created by a certain magic organization!"

*I see. So, it's not a weapon, but a golem... Wait, huh?* When I glanced beside me, I saw Sitri staring in astonishment, her eyes wide.

"Huh?" she murmured. "A...kasha?"

I was very familiar with this word. I once again turned towards the doll that was carried onstage. *Vault Investigation Bureau, a certain magic organization, a metallic golem... There's no mistaking it.* That was the golem that was on the list of the spoils of war that we discussed splitting just the other day. *What's it doing in this auction?* Government institutions would indeed auction off some items from time to time, but I had no idea how this specific golem was put up for the event.

Was there someone with peculiar tastes? Was someone planning on using it as a subject of research? The item, which had a starting price of thirty million gild, erupted in the fiercest bidding war of the day. As its price started to soar in the blink of an eye, I simply couldn't understand its value. If I had that much money to spend on a mere golem, I would've spent it on Relics.

"Siddy..." Liz mumbled.

"Y-Yeah..." Sitri replied.

Of course, my train of thought was in the minority. I noticed Sitri sitting beside me, wide-eyed while her shoulders were trembling. Her usually calm demeanor was gone, and she was gazing down at the black golem, squeezing her hands tightly on her lap. The fiery bidding war continued, and two people, desperate to get their hands on this golem, were pushing up the price. Finally, a bid of over a hundred million gild was called out, and even the auctioneer couldn't hide the excitement in their voice.

“Didn’t you want that, Sitri?” I asked, poking her shoulder.

“N-No...” Sitri replied, slowly shaking her head after a beat of silence.

However, I could see that her eyes were damp. Sitri was an introvert and rarely stated her own opinions. She especially always took a step back when it came to me. Noticing my dubious gaze, she quickly tried to think of an excuse.

“B-But it’s, er...an item that has been created after many years of research and numerous failed attempts. The cost to build it is no doubt great, but that’s not the most important bit...” Sitri said in a small voice, her voice trembling as her words were filled with her emotions.

I couldn’t quite understand, but once I heard Sitri’s explanation, it was clear that this was an amazing item. Others likely knew the value of that golem as the price continued to soar. Even the auctioneer didn’t seem to expect that an item with a starting value of thirty million gild would jump up to over two hundred million. And the bidding war showed no signs of slowing down. There were now three people engaged in their fierce battle. *I guess there are a lot of wealthy people here.*

“Er, I’m not sure how other people view this golem, but to me, it’s more like a keepsake of my friend,” Sitri said.

“It has sentimental value to you, then?” I asked.

I looked to her for confirmation, but I thought that was impossible. There was no way that she’d hold any sentimental feelings for the golems collected in Akashic Tower. Sitri visibly shrank and put her head down, trying to hide her facial expressions.

“Uh, not really... There’s...nothing for you to worry about,” Sitri whispered.

I sighed and reached out, grabbing her hand atop her lap. “You’re lying, aren’t you, Sitri?”

I might have been dense, but I knew my childhood friend very well. Even if I hadn’t known her for so long, as I saw her with tears in her eyes, there was no way that I’d take her words at face value.

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The price continued to skyrocket and had jumped to over three hundred million. A bidder had given up, and only two were remaining.

One of them...was me.

Our entire funds were Sitri's savings. There wasn't a Relic in the world that I wanted over my childhood friend's tear-filled desires. It was my fault that I couldn't get her this item when we were splitting the spoils of war.

I licked my lips and tried to energize myself as I boasted, "Money should be used during times like these."

There was likely more beneath the surface than a friend's memento. Chances were low that Sitri's friend was associated with a dangerous magic organization. However, her expression was anything but composed. She was used to enduring most desires, and it was unusual for her to wear her emotions on her sleeve. I presumed that Sitri's Alchemist friend's technology had been used to create that golem. The Tower was an illegal magic syndicate and they weren't above stealing other people's ideas. There was a chance that her friend had her technology stolen and was killed in the clash. Magic syndicates were never up to any good.

Hence, Sitri had requested the golem when splitting the loot and was currently torn between her loyalty to me and her desire for the item. *I might be biased, but I think I've got the right idea. Wait...am I having a brainsmart moment right now?*

To be honest, I didn't understand Sitri's feelings. Even if she told me, I likely would still be confused. But I wasn't one to make the wrong decision. I was the leader of Grieving Souls and Sitri's best friend first, and the Thousand Tricks second.

T looked at me with suspicion as though to ask, "Huh? Really? Are you sure? You want that weird doll instead of a Relic?" But I was sure. *This is Sitri's money anyway.*

"Huh?" Sitri muttered in shock.

Did she think that I would prioritize my own desires over her tears? *You don't trust me enough. You should be more open about your wants.* Liz, who always

voiced her desires and lived a stress-free life, stared on in surprise.

“Huh?” she said. “Krai Baby, did you...? You go!”

“In any case, magic syndicates are always up to no good,” I said.

Sitri clenched her trembling fingertips as she stared intently at the stage. It reminded me of the time when she was still a child and had lacked confidence in whatever she did. Liz rearranged her legs and glanced at me.

“But are you sure about this, Krai Baby? What about the mask? If I were her, I would’ve held myself back.”

“It’s fine,” I replied. “I don’t need it. It’s worthless in comparison.”

She chuckled. “Are you trying to act strong?”

*Ugh, this is why childhood friends have an advantage...* Just like how I knew Sitri well, Liz also knew me quite well. She continued to giggle and poke my shoulder.

I furrowed my brows. “I’m not. Sure, I might’ve wanted that Relic, but this golem is much more important right now.”

“Th-Thank you so much,” Sitri stammered. “I-I didn’t think it would make an appearance... Krai, I’ll definitely make it up to you one day.”

*Make it up to me? This is your money.*

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied. “And the bidding isn’t over just yet. It might be a bit too early to celebrate.”

There was a moment of silence before she let out an emotional reply. “Right.”

I wasn’t sure if it was due to her excitement, but her usually pale skin was flushed red—even her ears took on a pink tinge. She likely wouldn’t have been this emotional had I successfully bought the mask. I hadn’t given up on the Relic just yet either as I gestured to Tino to keep raising the price by the lowest increment. Sitri had prepared 950 million gild in total. If her plan was successful and I was able to buy the mask with a little over 200 million gild, we’d have 750 million left over.

I knew nothing about alchemy, but I didn’t think that the newest golem would

cost 750 million gild. I sank into my seat, relaxed, as I heard the price start to rise little by little. Two hundred million had already become three hundred million, and then it turned into four hundred million. *Wait, four hundred million?! I'm sorry, what?! Who has that much money?! With four hundred million, I could buy four centimillioner Relics!* The auction arena fell silent at the unexpected price. Sitri clenched her fist in front of chest as she watched on anxiously. I had little choice but to maintain my composure and fold my arms.

*Sitri, do you really need it? Do you really want it? No, sorry. This is fine. It's your money, so I don't mind.* But the price quietly kept soaring. I was only up against one person. A single other bidder. No one had their sights on this golem and expected the price to jump up so quickly. The mask had commanded the most attention; who would've expected the golem to turn into such a heated bidding war?

"Who could've expected this?!" the auctioneer shouted. "Five hundred million gild! The golem is now priced at five hundred million! From here on, the smallest increment will be twenty million gild! Ah, and we've got it! We've got a bid for a big five-two-oh gild!"

*Five hundred twenty million? What kind of wealthy person are we up against?!* Still, that was far below the debt that I dug myself into. Was this all because of the heat of the auction? I doubted that my opponent expected to cough up over five hundred million gild for this item. The bidding continued as the price slowly started to climb. The excitement and unique sense of power were the biggest draws when enjoying an auction, but this time around, I could only pray that my opponent would quickly surrender. The price was now 660 million gild.

"Krai..." Sitri said with tears in her eyes. "It's fine. At this rate, you won't be able to..."

I didn't expect this outcome. Had we not been well prepared for the mask, I would've never tried to bid on the golem. *But Sitri, this money is all yours. You, Liz, and Tino all pooled together your money, but I'm broke and didn't provide a single gild for this. I'm sorry.*

"There's nothing to worry about," I said, trying to dispel her worries. "Right, I

had actually been pooling this money to buy the golem.”

“What?!” Sitri gasped. “I...didn’t notice that at all. I just thought that your...usual tendencies came out again.”

*Usual? Excuse me?* I didn’t say anything and gazed back at the stage. *Come on, give up already. We’ve got 750 million gild at our disposal. Just surrender and walk away. Please. I’m begging you. Do I need to go down on my knees and grovel? I’ll do it. Of course I will. Easy peasy.* But my prayers weren’t answered as the auctioneer shouted with excitement.

“The price has been raised by a hundred million gild! It’s now at 760 million gild! Number 25 has placed their bid!”

*Who the hell is Number 25?!* Tino turned to me, clearly expressing her shock as she knew our funds and what I was here for in the first place. I silently gave her a thumbs-up signal, implying that we would continue the battle. My stomach started to hurt. Unless that young noblewoman surrendered of her own accord, there was no chance that I’d get my hands on that mask.

But if that were the case, I’d go all out on this golem. I’d get it without fail. I was required to pump myself up for this. Maybe we were up against someone who was far wealthier than us. Maybe we wouldn’t be able to get this golem no matter how hard we tried. If we gave it all we got and couldn’t get it, Sitri would give up as well.

Still, I guessed that our opponent wasn’t having it easy either. This item was initially placed at thirty million gild and we probably had a good shot at winning this bid. The extra hundred million might have their final attempt—their absolute limit. Even if it wasn’t, they were likely nearing their max. I took a deep breath and gave Tino a new order. *Take this!*

“What?!” the auctioneer cried. “The price has just risen by another hundred million! We’ve got a bid for 860 million gild, folks! Number 66 has placed an offer for 860 million!”

I felt sick. It’d been a while since I spent this much money to obtain a single item. I felt nauseous. Though I had a ten-digit debt to take care of, that was a result of matters piling up for years—as a poor person to the core, I felt that bidding this much money was pure stress.

I shuddered with trepidation as the auction continued. Possibly shocked by my increase in price, no one said another word. While there was no literal clash of swords, a battle was surely raging on.

“Any takers? Eight hundred sixty million gild! Eight-six-oh! We’ve only got thirty seconds left! Number 66 just might take this item home!”

*Die! Die and give up on this golem!* I took a deep breath, continuously praying to a deity that I didn’t even believe in. Sitri curled herself into a ball and froze in place as though she was shielding herself from a storm. We were nearing our limit.

Eight hundred sixty million gild was more than enough to spend the rest of your life playing around while doing nothing. *What was Sitri planning on doing with such a massive marriage fund anyway?* Useless thoughts swirled in my head as I tried to escape reality. *Is it not thirty seconds yet?!* Time ticked on; every second felt like several minutes. I felt like everything came to a halt as the black golem gave off a dull luster under the light of the chandelier. Just then, the auctioneer gave a look of pure shock.

“N-Nine hundred...sixty million.”

We were stunned by this bid.

“Nine hundred sixty million gild! Number 25 has placed their bid for 960 million gild!” the auctioneer shouted.

I felt my blood freeze. *Just who are we up against? A trading company? A noble? This is impossible. Who would offer that much money for a golem?* Sitri’s eyes were round with shock as a single tear slid down her cheek.

“Ah, well, we were unlucky,” Liz sighed. “It’s rare to see you lose, Krai Baby. We shoulda sold off our weapons and anything else that we had. Hindsight’s twenty-twenty.”

While I had my collection, auctions didn’t allow us to pay our bids with items. We required either a check or cash. Sitri looked down and Tino gazed at me with astonishment. I thought I saw her cheeks twitch, but she gave a small nod. Amid the noisy crowd, the auctioneer’s voice rang out loud and clear.

“A billion?! Number 66 has offered a billion sixty million gild!”



“Huh?” Sitri murmured as tears streamed down her face.

She turned to me with confusion. Her entire savings was 950 million gild. If the buyer couldn't pay the money after successfully bidding on an item, they would be subjected to a strict punishment. This meant that we couldn't go over budget. However, I felt at peace. The anxiety that had gripped my body just mere moments ago had dissipated into the air. I was serene like the surface of a still lake. I had already broken through the barrier and was completely zen. A calm smile formed on my lips as I clutched Sitri's hands.

“I told you, didn't I? Don't worry about it. Well, I'd like for you to worry a little...” I said.

*To be precise, please come with me when I kowtow to Lucia. Crap, I just used over half of Lucia's savings without her permission. But I don't regret my choices. I don't. I-I... I don't regret my choices! Ahhh!*

“Going one, going twice, sold! To Number 66, treasure hunter Greg Zangief! This massive metallic golem has been sold for one billion sixty million gild! Please give a round of applause to this bold hunter who won this fiery auction!” the auctioneer shouted.

Amid the thunderous applause, Greg, who was sitting beside Tino, looked up at me pale-faced.



The arena was still affected by the passion of the heated auction. There was a brief intermission, but practically no one left. We gave a sidelong glance as we left the arena and Tino jogged after us. She approached Liz, Sitri, and I, put her hands in front, and bowed deeply.

“I’m so sorry, Master. I didn’t think this would happen,” Tino said.

“Huh?” I replied. “Ah, it’s fine. I don’t mind.”

I’d asked Tino to be my replacement. I was a little surprised to hear Greg’s name called instead, but that was nothing to be angry about. It’d been a while since the bidding war for the golem had ended, but Greg was behind her, looking pale as a ghost. He was sweating buckets. He was glancing around anxiously like a small animal, and I couldn’t relate more to him.

He was the hero who bid for the most expensive item yet—he should’ve been proud like one. He’d already removed the number that he wore for the auction and no one knew his face, so he wasn’t surrounded by a crowd yet, but it was only a matter of time before his name would be spread throughout the capital.

To keep things fair, Zebrudia Auction allowed the buyers to be searched easily. Hence, there was a substitute system in play, but to a mid-grade hunter, it might’ve been a bit too heavy of a cross to bear. Tino was nervously giving her excuses to Liz, who was smiling silently.

“Um, I really was planning on taking over, but I couldn’t make the preparations, and when I tried to confirm your hand signals, Master, I realized that I had no idea what the auction’s hand signals meant,” she said.

*Tino can be a bit of an airhead sometimes...* But there were numerous signals used during an auction. It was impossible to have a newcomer learn all of those on the fly. Of course, if that was the case, it was possible to just shout out the price or raise a board with a price written on it, but almost everyone who participated in the auction chose to employ hand signals.

“And since Greg said that he knew them, I left it to him,” she said. “We divvied up the roles—I would look for your signals while Greg would participate in the auction. I didn’t think that it would turn out like this. I thought that he would handle the first round of auctioning as I learned from him, and then I’d

take over for the real prize!”

“Yeah, uh-huh, I hear you...” I replied.

The result was that I’d spent all of our money on that golem instead of the Relic that I was initially aiming for. In my defense, I didn’t expect this outcome either, so it wasn’t like I could’ve prevented it. Liz tapped my shoulder, made a gesture as though I should lop off a head, and finished it by tilting her head to one side, imitating death. *I’m not gonna do that...*

“You don’t have to look so frightened,” I said. “You did more than enough. Much better than what I could’ve asked for. It’s all according to plan.”

“Krai,” Greg said, revealing why he looked so pale. “Er, you’re over budget, but are you okay with that?”

The bid that he placed had vastly surpassed the budget that I told him before the auction. Failure to pay would result in Greg also being severely punished, so I understood his fear. Of course, I didn’t plan on troubling him.

“Ah, don’t worry about that. I’ve got money,” I replied.

*It’s not really my money, though.* I was internally prostrating to Lucia as I wrote a check for 110 million gild and handed it to Sitri. While I’d be taking money from Lucia’s account, it had already been set so that I could sign off in her stead. Sitri took the check and carefully placed it in her bag, making her total a billion sixty million gild.

“Master...” Tino murmured apologetically. “Er, um... So, the Relic...”

“Oh, I don’t need that anymore,” I replied. “We achieved our goal, didn’t we? I’m tired, so I think I’ll head home.”

“Huh?”

The auction had just begun and the arena was still filled with people. I guessed that rare Relics would be put on display—I was curious, but it was tough for me to look at them while knowing that I didn’t have the funds or means to bid on them. There was even a chance that I’d give in to my urges and try to use the rest of Lucia’s money. It was better if I just wasn’t present for it at all.

Above all, I could no longer buy that mask. My auction was over. I suspected that Lady Éclair must've lit a fire in her fighting spirit by now, but I could no longer entertain her. *You win. Of course you do. I'm just gonna head home and sulk in bed.*

"Krai, I'll head over with Greg and collect the item that we just bid on," Sitri said with a smile that reached up to her ears. She held up her suitcase stuffed with silver coins.

*Well, I'm glad that I was able to protect her smile, at least.*

"Liz, could you go do some research on our opponent, Number 25?" Sitri asked. "They might be gone already, but I'm sure that the auctioneer has that info."

"H-Hey, now. Isn't it against the rules to look into our..." Liz started before she quickly changed her tune. "N-No, never mind."

*It might be against the rules, but it's not difficult to look into.* I couldn't blame Sitri for wanting to know the identity of our opponent, who had desperately tried to outbid us. I didn't expect for us to be shown the documents with the bidder's details though, since y'know, against the rules and all.

"Greg, thanks for helping me out today. I hope we can meet again," I said before I turned towards the smiling Smart. "Sitri, I'll leave the rest to you."

"Of course!" she energetically replied. "Thank you, Krai! I'll visit you later!"

*Will Eva get angry at me? I'm sure she will...but that's that.* I opened my mouth wide and yawned while I headed out of the arena, a sense of satisfaction filling my heart.

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"And sold!" the auctioneer shouted. "The enigmatic mask of flesh has been purchased by the daughter of the renowned House Gladis, Éclair Gladis, for a whopping two hundred million gild!"

The seats below offered her a thunderous applause. Éclair, who was sitting on the edge of her seat, let out a loud sigh. Her eyes were damp and her usually knitted brows seemed to loosen for now. There was no feeling of joy or elation

from the victory that she had just attained—only deep relief. The battle had been far less intense than what she'd expected. Montaure's advice before the auction was nothing short of groundless fear to her, and she had successfully purchased the item for two hundred million.

Despite the rumors that'd been swirling around before the auction, it was quite the one-sided battle. Whispers of House Gladis seriously gunning for the item had worked in her favor. Nobles held power within the empire, and neither trading companies nor hunters planned on going against such authority outright. Such a fearless person couldn't have possibly existed.

Éclair, who had seemingly reaffirmed those beliefs, gazed up proudly at her father, Van Gladis. Her father, however, had only provided one-word answers to the praises that he'd received from the other nobles, and was staring at the stage. He wasn't rejoicing at his daughter's victory—no, he was looking on dubiously as though he was watching something suspicious. He noticed Éclair's gaze and furrowed his brows before he uttered words that his daughter didn't expect.

"He ceded this victory to us, I see..."

"What?" Éclair asked.

Montaure, who stood behind Van, echoed his agreement in a low voice. "That seems to be the case. The Thousand Tricks has already left the auction. There's no one left at this arena who is under his influence."

"Hmph, that Level 8 hunter..." Van said. "I thought he was just a guileless boor, but it seems the rumors of his ingenious strategies aren't at all baseless. We interfered with the Relic that he tried to obtain, but he easily stepped down. It's quite a coolheaded decision for a hunter who values honor and reputation above all. As Ark says, he's an interesting fellow."

"Wh-What are you saying, father?!" Éclair exclaimed. "As you can see, I won this match fair and square!"

There might have been a few unexpected occurrences, but the result was that she'd gathered enough funds and earned her victory.

"Éclair," Van started. "It's true that you successfully purchased that Relic.

Unfortunately, this isn't a commendable victory. I planned on sitting back and quietly watching over this battle, believing this to be a valuable experience for you whether you were victorious or not, but to think that you weren't even standing on the same stage as him. I suppose I was a bit too naive. And you're unable to notice this, I see."

She stared at her father in shock.

"My lady," Montaure said. "It's a fact that the Thousand Tricks had gathered far more than two hundred million gild. I've received word that Sitri had sold off her equipment and potions. Though the person I had near them to surveil their actions had been chased off, the Thousand Tricks had indeed left the arena before the bidding war for the Relic had even started."

Éclair heard those words in stunned silence as a myriad of emotions gripped her body. Confusion, relief, bewilderment, and anger filled her mind as she managed to eke out a few words.

"I told him that this was a fair and square match."

"I'd already negotiated with a few trading companies, our potential rivals in this bidding war, beforehand," Montaure revealed. "My lady, as a person born in House Gladis, you have a duty to be victorious. Hunters and nobles have a few similarities. At the very least, stumbling here would cause one to be underestimated in the future. And you have indeed won against a Level 8 hunter today."

"But any person with more than half a brain can clearly see that this victory was handed to us," Van added. "How incorrigible. The only thing we gained from spending two hundred million gild is insight into the Thousand Tricks's generosity."

Seeing her father's face frown with displeasure, Éclair spoke in a trembling voice. "Was I... Did he perhaps take pity on me? Did he treat me with contempt?"

"Precisely because you *weren't* treated with contempt that you successfully bid on this item," Montaure answered. "Whether you can call this a victory or not depends solely on you, my lady."

No. This wasn't a victory. It wasn't one at all. Did she win by default, then? *No, that can't offer even an iota of satisfaction.* She would've rather fought him head-on and lost. Éclair gritted her teeth, letting out a dull sound. She'd lost. It was plain as day—she'd won the battle but lost the war. There was no chance that she could proudly present this Relic to Ark, the subject of her admiration.

"I guess we've got a debt to pay to him," Van muttered.

"One could see this as the man giving my lady his silent approval for gathering two hundred million gild as promised. That was the initial deal set at our house, after all," Montaure said. "I find it hard to believe that the infamous Grieving Souls would surrender simply because they were up against a notable noble household."

"Whatever the case, a debt is a debt. No matter how our surroundings see it, as a noble of the Zebrudian Empire, a debt must be repaid. I hope this isn't the true goal of that man who desires this enigmatic Relic."

As Earl Gladis looked on sternly, even the normally expressionless Montaure turned grim. "There were no signs of the Thousand Tricks personally meddling with the rumors that had spread. My lady had tagged along with Sir Ark to visit the clan house, but that was all of her own accord. I can only think that this is all a huge coincidence."

The earl, however, remained displeased despite hearing his right-hand man's opinions. His daughter was still frozen in her seat, trying to process the situation.

"Éclair," Van ordered. "You may do as you wish with the Relic that you've purchased. But I will not permit you to get involved with that man any further. He's certainly not one that you can handle."

She remained silent. She was frustrated. She thought that she was the one who started this battle, but it felt as though she was dancing within the palm of his hand. It was much too miserable for her. *But what else can I do? What am I supposed to do?* Éclair had always taken extra care to act fitting for an aristocrat, always dauntless no matter what she faced. Her heart was now filled with inexplicable anxiety.

"Do you understand?" Van yelled. "Answer me!"



“Yes, father...” Éclair managed to reply as she bit her lips and tried to stifle her sobs.

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I was a bona fide no-good guy. Nothing went well when I truly needed it to. For example, when I first started to make a party, because I named us Grieving Souls, people mistook us for a ghost party, causing us to be constantly targeted by other criminal syndicates and hunters. When I created a clan and tried to go flower viewing with them, there was a tectonic shift that made high-leveled treasure vaults appear. When I sent Tino into the White Wolf’s Den, there were a number of unexpected occurrences. Whenever I made decisions, it almost never went well.

I was generally an unlucky person, but when I became a hunter, I felt like my luck was reaching a new level of low. I’d overcome all of this thanks to the help of those around me and by groveling. But that didn’t mean that I was fine with unfortunate circumstances or was used to them.

It’d been a few days since the depressing auction, and I was still unable to regain my energy as I lazed around and sulked on the sofa of the clan master’s office. I never had much energy to begin with, but as I felt like my hard work over the past few days had turned to dust, it was like I’d received a massive blow.

When Eva had told me that Lady Éclair had successfully purchased Reversible Face, I did my best to act nonchalant, but as time passed, I realized that I was unable to let it go. I didn’t regret bidding on an item that Sitri wanted. Most of our funds were her money, and I would rather be Relic-less than see her cry. Still, that didn’t mean that I could disconnect from my feelings completely, and I knew that I’d be down for a while. I didn’t want to do anything. I couldn’t even find the motivation to step outside, and I didn’t want to eat anything sweet.

Everyone knew that I was aiming for that mask. Of course, they also knew that I didn’t even bid on the item and had fled like a sore loser. Under the curious gazes of others, I must’ve taken a course of action unbecoming for a first-rate clan master. That was the one thing that I wanted to avoid. The fourth story and above of the clan house was occasionally off-limits so that no hunter

could see me periodically look lifeless.

As I twisted my body and continued to lounge about on the sofa, I accidentally rolled onto the floor. I let out a gasp as I hit the ground with a light thud. *I look so wretched, fitting for a sore loser*, I thought. I found this to be humorous and almost let out a laugh. I was certain that Lady Éclair was mocking me for being a pathetic man who fled before the battle had even begun. *I might've contributed to Lord Gladis's increasing disdain for hunters*. The final blow was that the mask that I desperately wanted would be sent to Ark, who didn't even desire it.

*Ugh, life never goes how I want it to*. I lacked a sense of embarrassment. I instinctually followed my impulses and rolled on the floor of the clan master's office. Eva had taken great care to lay out a high-quality rug, and it didn't hurt at all. I wanted to live the rest of my life crawling on the ground like a caterpillar. If there was a hole, I would've wanted to bury myself in it. Again, I wasn't embarrassed—I just thought that living underground would be calming.

As I was absorbed in my meaningless action, I heard a knock on the door. I splayed out my limbs like a starfish, allowing my body to touch the floor as much as possible to decrease the effect that gravity had on me, and managed to croak out a reply.

"Yeaaah?"

"Pardon me, Krai—huh?! Wh-What are you doing?!" Eva said in shock as she saw me lying on the ground like a corpse.

She knew just how weak I was, so I hid nothing from her. For the past few days, when I'd been holed up in either the clan master's office or my private room, the one who brought me my meals was none other than Eva.

"Can you tell by looking?" I asked.

"N-Not really," she replied.

"C'mon. I was rolling on the sofa, but I fell onto the ground."

"Argh! Goodness! Come on, stop rolling on the floor! It's dirty! You're a Level 8, aren't you?!"

Eva grabbed my arms and shoulders, raised me up, and sat my lifeless body up straight on the sofa. Unlike me, Eva's attire was neat and tidy, and I couldn't believe that she'd been working exponentially harder than I was. *Well, zero times anything is still zero, but still... Crap, how could I compare her to me? I'm so rude.*

"What's wrong?" she demanded. "Why have you been looking so lifeless for the past few days?"

"This is the usual me," I replied.

"E-Er, well..." She looked a little troubled.

When my reliable vice clan master had heard that I used a billion gild to make an unexpected purchase and the mask had slipped through my fingers, she only let out a single sigh. She was so generous that I was tempted to see just how far I could push her.

"If you're comfortable with me and you've got something bothering you, I can hear you out," Eva offered.

I only had worries. *Dude, if I could convert the number of stuff bothering me into gild, I'd be debt-free by now.*

"It's just time for me to back off, you know?" I said. "I'm not worthy. My life never goes how I want it to. I wanna retire."

When Eva heard my usual grumblings, she widened her eyes in shock and took a step back. I'd even made my reliable vice clan master recoil due to my antics—I was simply just that awful of a human being. *That's right. That's me. I suck. I just wanna become a clam and live at the bottom of the ocean. And then an octopus tries to eat me and I can't do anything, so I just get devoured whole.*

"Y-You're saying that things *aren't* going well?" Eva asked, baffled.

"If I were to grade myself out of a hundred, if I was being generous, I'd give this fifteen points," I replied. "I didn't even get that mask."

"Fifteen?!"

Eva sounded like she was being toyed with when she heard my lifeless reply. *I'm really sorry for always troubling you. I'd like to repay you one day, but*

*knowing me, it'd probably just backfire.*

"Um, I heard that letting go of that mask was all according to your plan..." she said.

*Who said that?* I glanced at her, but she looked as serious as ever. I'd only said that to put on a tough front. I doubted that anyone present during that time took my words at face value. *All according to plan? I wanted that mask, and people think I just planned on letting it go? Like hell.*

From Akasha to the price I bid on it, everything was outside of my calculations. I was just going with the flow from start to finish, like kelp in the sea. I looked away and sighed deeply. *Since I'd get eaten as a shellfish, I'd rather be a rock or something. I dunno.*

"Well, sort of, not really..." I said. "I could've played my hand better, but my life really is outside of my control."

"Should I pour a cup of tea?" Eva offered. "I've got an herbal blend that can help soothe your mind."

I remained silent, but she prepared the tea for me. Her kindness and proficiency made me want to die. Everyone around me was just too excellent and kind. I regained a bit of my will to live and curled up into a ball on the sofa, hugging my knees.

"Well, it's nothing to worry about," I said. "I'm just waiting for myself to calm down."

"Of course," Eva replied.

"I think I'll be over it soon."

Because I was such a spineless coward, I had the bad habit of acting spoiled towards others. People around me were all independent. Sitri and Ansem were, of course, but Liz and Tino were also splendid in their own right. Luke, who was a bit thoughtless, was a head above others in terms of strength, and a person I could respect. I was the only one who would probably die immediately the moment I was set free by myself.

Thinking back, Grieving Souls might have become exceptionally powerful to

cover for me, who was nothing but dead weight. Maybe I was helping them stand out. As proof, the leader of Ark Brave was too strong, making the rest of his party pale in comparison.

A fashionable teacup was placed in front of me. The lime-colored tea let off a faintly sweet aroma.

“But you must step outside for a little,” Eva urged. “Everyone’s worried, and it’s not good for your health. I admit that I haven’t the faintest clue what you’re thinking.”

*What I’m thinking? I hate to say this, but I’m not thinking about anything. Don’t worry. I become down pretty quickly and I can easily get swept up in things, but I don’t really think too deeply about matters either.* I felt guilty for making others worry about me, but I wasn’t lying when I said that I’d get over it soon.

I knew about myself best. I took the cup of tea and slowly put it to my lips, letting the faintly sour yet sweet aroma fill my body. As Eva had said, I felt like it soothed my mind and soul. *Not that my mind needs any soothing, honestly.* Once I regained my composure a little, I continued to admonish myself. *Why did I not save a bit of money? I only needed two hundred million. That was all I needed to buy what Sitri wanted and get that mask too.* I would likely never get the chance to obtain a Reversible Face again. Since Lady Éclair hated me, it was probably impossible to negotiate. Even if a loser like me, who holed himself up due to shock, went on my knees begging for the item, I didn’t expect her to sell it to me. She was giving it to Ark anyway.

That was when a revelation hit me. I felt like I’d just been struck by lightning as I widened my eyes and fixed my posture while turning to Eva. *Why didn’t I think of such a simple solution earlier?!* Trying to act cool, I snapped my fingers.

“Wh-What happened?” Eva asked. “You surprised me.”

“Where’s Ark right now?” I asked.

*That’s it! Duh! If I can’t buy it from the young noble, I can just buy it from Ark.* Ark Rodin was a powerful Magus Swordsman. He was already in possession of a Holy Sword, and as I’d told Lady Éclair before, he had no need for a partially illegal mask. There was a chance that I could purchase it from him. While the

general public considered Ark and me rivals, we were actually anything but. We were part of the same clan and I felt like I'd built a good relationship with him. If I begged him from the bottom of my heart, there was no way that his handsome face would decline. In fact, I was willing to put part of my collection on the table. *Heh heh heh, it's your loss, Lady Éclair!*

I might have been a weakling, but I was still a clan master. *You didn't lose to me; you lost to my network! Whew, am I glad I'm a clan master!*

Eva looked troubled as she replied, "Huh? Let's see... There was a matter of House Rodin that he needed to tend to, so I think he's been traveling across the capital for the past few days."

"Ark's a busy guy," I replied.

I thought that he'd just returned, but I was impressed by how hard he worked. Eva knitted her brows at my heartfelt words and quietly stared at me.

"I'd juuust like to point out that since you're the master of a large clan, there is no end to people wanting to talk to you, but I've taken care of every single one of them," she said.

"R-Really?"

"Everyone's used to you not visiting them, but I think it's fine to show yourself at least once, don't you think? It'd help me out a lot."

"You've always been a huge help, Vice Clan Master. I've made it so that you'll eventually become the clan master."

"No, thank you."

I looked away. It wasn't just hunters who had overwhelming aura—merchants and nobles could also exert terrifying pressure. There were probably many who were intelligent as well; I would only be easily manipulated by them. *But if Ark's been busy for the past few days, it seems like the Relic that Lady Éclair bought hadn't been handed to him yet.* I had to act while I was still excited about it all. *Reversible Face might look grotesque, but she might grow fond of it over time, just like I did.* It was important to quickly have Lady Éclair hand the Relic over to Ark before it was too late.

“Can you call for Ark?” I asked.

“It’s not impossible, but House Rodin is a bit difficult to deal with,” Eva said, looking unusually troubled by the request.

*That house is full of weirdos.* But I couldn’t give up here. This might have truly been my final chance. I unfurled my body and faced my vice clan master with a serious expression.

“This is a rush request. You can use my authority as the Thousand Tricks. Call Ark here immediately.”

My fateful battle was about to begin.

“I feel great, Krai!” Sitri said, grinning from ear to ear. It’d been a few days since she visited the office, and it was rare to see her in such a good mood. “There aren’t any particular problems with the golem either!”

“Nice. That’s great to hear,” I replied.

She was wearing a loose khaki robe that hid her frame as usual, but she looked brighter than usual.

“Because we quickly left the auction, I was able to get my item without any problems,” she continued. “You may know this already, but apparently there were signs of someone sneaking into the auction warehouse. I don’t think it’s been publicized.”

“Sneaking in?” I asked. “It’s not Liz?”

The Zebrudia Auction was hosted by the empire. It was surely well guarded and the honor of the nation was at stake. Only insane people would try to break into a place like that. I was only half joking, but Sitri’s eyes were sparkling.

“It wasn’t Liz,” she said. “We might’ve crushed Noctus Cochlear, but he’s just the head of the research department. The foundation he built upon is still infesting the empire. Each research department of Akashic Tower is divided and completely isolated, so even if one falls, it doesn’t really affect the rest. Even I haven’t heard a thing about the other labs. But Noctus Cochlear was an excellent Magus, and when his lab was destroyed, there were people fighting

for the remnants of his work! The golem likely made it into the auction after being pressured by someone!”

Sitri looked excited, but I only gave her a half-baked response as I headed to the lounge for a meeting. I was happy to see her look so delighted, but my head was filled with a method to attain that mask. Eva had carried out my orders and relayed my summons to Ark. From here on out, it depended on my skill. Sitri walked beside me, did a little twirl, and clung onto my right arm. I couldn’t quite grasp why she seemed so excited. *I’m here to negotiate, you know. This is a bit of a distraction.*

“It’s all thanks to you, Krai,” she purred. “Not only were we able to obtain the money-guzzling Akasha for a mere billion gild, but we also opened a new path! Ah, should I try sneaking in again, or should I crush them and steal their work? But we’re up against a major organization, they’re wary about you, and the empire has their eyes peeled. I’ve got my job to think about too, so I’m just so torn!”

It sounded like Sitri was fired up to go against a secret syndicate that was on the wanted list. She was chasing after Akashic Tower anyway, but I wondered if all hunters were reckless like her. She noticed that I was having difficulty walking with her so close to my side, and she peeled herself away from me. Personally, I didn’t want her to rush into something so dangerous.

“Calm down a little, hm, Sitri?” I said. “You got what you wanted, so why don’t you take some time off for now?”

We were against a major organization, but we were also a large clan. I didn’t think that they’d try to fight us. *And if possible, I want them to just completely forget about Akasha.*

“I see... So we bide our time and make them anxious,” Sitri replied. “I feel like we can take them down if we charge in ahead, but when we attack, there’s a good chance that our defenses may become lax. I feel like we’re being a bit too careful, but we’ve got you on our side, don’t we?”

She looked up at me. I felt like our conversation wasn’t quite clicking, but I just nodded.

“I think hunters should be more careful than not,” I said. “In any case, can you



help me out? Well, to be frank, all I need is monetary help.”

Presuming that Lady Éclair gave the mask to Ark, I didn’t think that he’d just hand it over to me for free. Hunters always expected some form of compensation or equivalent exchange. If he were to give it to me for free, it would imply that I had a huge debt towards him. I knew that my debt-ridden self wasn’t one to talk, but I wanted to avoid that scenario as much as I could. Sitri didn’t seem at all upset by my lackadaisical tone.

“I will happily be of service,” she said. “Regarding money, I planned on making my move even if you hadn’t asked me at all.”

*Right... I mean, I did use your marriage funds, after all. I’ll repay it all one day, so please forgive me.* Sitri extended her arm and grabbed my hand, touching me so gently as though I was a work of art. She sighed and looked up at me with blushing cheeks.

“So, Krai... I was thinking about a way to thank you, and well...why don’t you come stay at my house? I’ve got time, and I’d like to show you my hospitality.”

“Hmm, maybe next time,” I said.

“Ah, that’s a pity.”

Her downcast eyes showed just how disappointed she was. Her invitation and gentle smile made it hard to decline, but if I accepted her offer, I would truly turn into a no-good human and spiral downwards.

I’d been invited to her house several times in the past, but Sitri’s way of showing hospitality could easily turn anyone into a useless member of society. Everything was handled for me. All of my duties and responsibilities were stripped away, and she took care of everything that I needed. She’d even wash my back and give me a massage, fulfilling all my desires, and I didn’t have a single complaint left in the world. All of my senses were numbed, and I stopped feeling the need to think or endure something.

When I first experienced this indulgence, had Liz not noticed this unusual situation, I would’ve surely been drowning in that hellish Heaven to this day. It was like falling into a bottomless pit. *Yeah, I’m making it sound like Sitri’s at fault, but the fault is all mine. She obviously has no ill will.* I treated her

hospitality invitations like a mental trial. I'd already been wasting away doing nothing for the past few days, and if I indulged myself even further, I would truly turn into a hopeless case.

Ark and his friends were already waiting for me in the lounge. There was the Level 5 Saint, Ewe Shiragi, a person who carried an air of mystery but also a strong heart; Isabella Merness, a Level 6 Magus from the north who seemed a little rude to me; Armelle Hellstrom, a Level 6 Swordsman; and Benetta Raim, a Level 6 Thief that was always teased by Liz and didn't seem to have a positive impression of us.

The leader of this lovely party, Ark Brave, was the only man of the group and one of the strongest people in the capital, the Level 7 Argent Thunderstorm, Ark Rodin. He had it all—a handsome face, a sunny disposition, and overwhelming might. He was a man who had been born to become the Hero.

He wasn't in his usual adventurer-style uniform of Steps today; he was in his personal clothes. His posture was straight and vigilant, and he didn't have any openings. He was clearly smiling at me, but he exerted a certain aura that implied that there was more to him than meets the eye. Beside him was Liz, confidently getting comfortable and relaxing. *I don't remember calling for her.* When she noticed me, she sat up and waved at me wildly, grinning from ear to ear.

"Krai Baby!" she called. "Over here! You're horrible! Why didn't you call me? This looks like so much fun!"

Ark aside, the rest of his party were shooting daggers at me. I couldn't blame them—they probably had plans of their own, but they were forcibly called out by me, only to come face-to-face with Liz, who was difficult to communicate with.

"This...might get a little hairy," I mumbled. "I'm not here to have fun, honestly."

"Leave it to me," Sitri assured.

"I can negotiate by myself. I'm against Ark, so I think I can handle him."

I came early to not make him wait, but it seemed like Ark's diligence had

worked against me. For our party, if half of our members came on time, that was really good, but the Braves were vastly different. I tried my best to at least greet him with a smile, and he, in turn, smiled brightly as usual.

“I’m sorry to call you out so suddenly, Ark. Please forgive me,” I started. “It was an emergency, and I don’t think this will be a bad deal for you either.”

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An interesting guy. If Ark Rodin were to describe the Thousand Tricks in just a few words, this would be his go-to phrase. Every year, treasure hunters and aspiring hunters from afar would flock to the capital of Zebrudia, the sacred land. Most of them would retire from their profession without achieving great success. Some would die while trying to clear a treasure vault, some would sustain a grave injury that would cut their career short, and others would be so psychologically damaged that they vowed to never leave the city again. Even if one were lucky enough to avoid these common pitfalls, most of them would be unable to maintain their life within the capital due to a lack of their own abilities, forcing them to build their base elsewhere.

Krai Andrey was also one such hunter who hailed from the countryside. To top it all off, he had no experience as a hunter and was only aspiring to become one. Needless to say, the hunters who remained within the capital were highly skilled and had raised the bar for others. Only a small handful of talented people would be very successful within the capital. An abundance of treasure vaults awaited those who dared to rise to the challenge. There were numerous excellent rivals who struggled against these vaults, and eagle-eyed ruffians wandered the streets, hoping to take advantage of broken-spirited hunters. Places that were saturated with items and people also attracted a fair number of evildoers. Only powerful hunters who could repel attacks from others could call the capital a comfortable home to live in.

This was a baptism of sorts to hunters who were attracted by the wealth that seemed practically promised to them and viewed the profession with rose-colored glasses.

Grieving Souls, however, went against all odds and brute-forced their way through any obstacles that barred their path. They conquered treasure vaults,

paid no heed to immature hunters above them who saw talented rookies as a threat, and even destroyed ghost parties that often preyed on newcomers. They became a famed party at an astonishing rate. It was almost inevitable that they caught Ark's attention.

Grievors were always soaked with blood. Their light was so bright that they would cast dark shadows in their wake. Each and every one of them was brimming with blinding talent, and it came as no surprise that they earned the ire and envy of others. They were walking down a thorny path that was filled with hardships: their lives were targeted more than once, and nasty rumors about them were circulated. But perhaps these obstacles had only created an even more powerful monster.

Before anyone would react, the prey had become the predator. The country bumpkin who had dreams unsuited for his caliber had gained terrifying talents, and the party had transformed into one that others feared—no enemy of theirs would escape unscathed.

Ark Rodin had also turned into a hunter within the capital, but he came from a completely different situation. House Rodin already had the required foundation and knowledge. They enjoyed an excellent reputation. Since his youth, he'd undergone strict training to become a hunter, and he'd even cleared a few treasure vaults before he officially became a hunter. He received the support of nobles, and it was a cinch for him to gather party members. His basis was the complete opposite of the Thousand Tricks. Ark Rodin, at the very least, believed that Ark Brave and Grieving Souls were polar opposites and this difference extended to the leaders as well.

The dark-haired man who sat across remained exactly the same as their first meeting a few years back. He was the weakest. Ark was aware that this man was called an ingenious strategist, and knew that this nickname was so accurate that they were simply predicting the inevitable future.

Even so, with all that included, this man didn't seem to possess anything special. Ark was familiar with several hunters who were a higher level than him. Some of them were similar to the Thousand Tricks, and some might have even been below him in terms of combat prowess. But each of these hunters was definitively powerful. They held undeniable power and just had a certain

*something* to them that made them different from others. When Ark had met these hunters in person, he found that there was little room for doubt in regard to their strength. Unfortunately, the man in front of him, despite being so highly leveled and having results to prove it, lacked this overwhelming aura.

An interesting guy. The leader of a party with absurdly powerful members was absurdly weak.

Ark's curiosity was piqued. This was the main reason behind Ark Brave, which had been scouted by long-established and powerful clans, joining First Steps. And even after a few years, Ark was still unable to grasp the true nature of the man. In the past, he'd been compared to the Thousand Tricks on numerous occasions, but it seemed like an act of folly to do so. There was little sense in doing a simple comparison of numbers, and the Argent Thunderstorm and Thousand Tricks couldn't be analyzed so easily. For example, if one were to add or subtract power from both sides, that didn't equate the two. This wasn't just a matter of status—the two men had walked through vastly different paths of life. They weren't even in the same dimension.

People around the Thousand Tricks were jealous. Some aspired to be like him while others viewed him as a threat. Ark Rodin was born a winner—it was his destiny. He was born to walk his path by himself and thus didn't feel envious of others. All he possessed was an inquisitive mind that had been passed down through the ages since the first lord of House Rodin.

And so, “rival” or “powerful enemies” weren't suitable words to describe the relationship between Ark Rodin and Krai Andrey. “Friend” was the most fitting descriptor. Ark, who had been busily going to and fro because of his household's affairs, was suddenly called out by the Thousand Tricks, who didn't look at all apologetic by this summons. In fact, the man was haughtily folding his arms in front of him, unbothered by the sharp gaze that Isabella had shot at him.

“I'll be frank,” Krai said. “I need you to go to Lady Éclair's house as soon as possible. You'll understand everything once you get there. You're aware that she and I were engaged in a bidding war over a Relic and that I lost, aren't you?”

“I am,” Ark replied. “I was busy for the past few days, but I’ve heard word of it. I don’t want to cause misunderstandings, so I’ll let you know that I’ve got nothing to do with her. She’s not a bad person, but she’s got a tendency to run wild.”

Ark was a busy man. As a member of House Rodin, aside from his hunts, he had a mountain of work to take care of. While the capital was excited about the auction, he didn’t have any time to participate in the festivities and had been bustling around, called out by others. He had laughed when he heard that the price of a Relic soared simply because people found out that the Thousand Tricks was after it, and was surprised to learn that Lady Éclair was involved for some reason, but that was all. Liz, who sat next to Krai with her back straight and legs crossed, gave a shrill wail of protest.

“Whaaat?! I was planning on going, but now you’re having Ark go there?” she asked.

“Huh?!” Isabella roared furiously. “Are you planning on using Ark as your lackey again?! He’s a busy man! Go by yourself!”

Ark sighed. She was an excellent Magus, but her one fatal flaw was that she couldn’t hold back whenever Ark was underestimated or taken lightly.

“Huh?! What the *hell* did you just say?!” Liz bellowed back. “You’re just walking in Ark’s shadow! Don’t you dare talk so insolently to Krai Baby here! I’ll kill you! When we ask you to go somewhere, you reply with ‘when and where,’ you damn fool!”

“Shadow?! I’ll show you...”

“Now, now. Why don’t we both calm down?” Sitri interjected with a smile and a clap as the two other ladies were about to stand up. “You’re troubling both Ark and Krai.”

“Tch.”

A few members of Grieving Souls and Ark Brave absolutely despised each other. That was nothing new. Krai looked more serious than ever before, causing Ark to fix his posture.

“I tried, but she wouldn’t listen to me,” Krai confessed. “Ark, that Relic...is

dangerous, you see. I'm sure that you can do something about it. If you go right now, I think you can still make it in time."

As usual, Krai's words were vague and perplexing, but he always hit his target. Ark knew that all too well. This wasn't the first time the latter was called out, and he set all his questions aside for now to ask only one.

"Do I need my weapon?"

"Huh? No, I don't think so," Krai replied. "In fact, it might be better if you had nothing on you."

*I don't need weapons?* Ark thought. *That's unusual. So this isn't some kind of battle? But he said that it was dangerous. What dangerous situation doesn't require weapons?*

"And what if I don't make it in time?" Ark asked with knitted brows.

Krai tilted his head to one side and gave a troubled look. "Then I'll be sad."

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Ark quelled his party, each of whom glaring at me with disdain, and swiftly left the lounge. As I'd expected, Ark accepted my request. I couldn't get into details due to the nature of this plea, but he likely grasped an inkling of my intentions from my actions and words. I expected no less from Ark Rodin. The strongest hunter in the empire was equally generous. *I love that guy. Great all-rounder. Did you know that he can even use healing magic? Can you believe it?* He was indeed the polar opposite of me, who couldn't do anything.

It was common for high-level hunters to have powerful party members, but those who went above that who went solo. This was exactly what Xerxes Zequenz, the person who caused us Grievors to become hunters and one of the only three Level 10 hunters out there, had done. Hunters who were a head above the rest simply couldn't have their surroundings keep up.

Ark tackled treasure vaults that matched the levels of his party members. Had he worked alone or joined a more powerful party, he might've leveled up much quicker. His party was practically his harem, but he still managed to maintain it, which might have been unusual for a first-rate hunter like him.

“This is so unfair!” Liz whined. “You’re always relying on Ark! What about me? Rely on me more! C’mon! Luke’s gone and I can’t practice with Siddy and T’s too weak! I’ll get rusty! Please? I’ll do anything!”

She begged while rubbing her body against me. *Is she acting like my pet or something? You said you’d do anything, right? Then please be quiet.* I had no complaints about Liz’s skills, but she was a bit too short-tempered.

I sighed. “Liz, do you understand what I just requested?”

“Of course!” she replied with a proud smile. “You want me to go to that shitty brat’s house and steal that Relic, right? Leave it to me!”

*You really lack logic and common sense.*

“C’mon, it’s easy peasy when compared to treasure vaults,” she continued. “The knights that guard that area are all amateurs. Barriers and stuff might be a bit tough for me since I’m alone, but I just need to steal it before they find me, yeah? Oh, I know! Maybe I’ll drag T along!”

*Please don’t do that to her.* Liz used to be more sensible, but she must’ve gotten too used to rowdy affairs. The mask was handled—I was sure that Ark would bring it back. Sitri, the voice of reason, admonished her older sister wearily.

“Liz, you’re troubling Krai again! He probably has a reason for thinking that Ark’s the right man for the job, and we have our roles that we need to fulfill.”

“Roles?” Liz asked.

“Raising money.”

Liz uncrossed her legs, surprised by Sitri’s immediate reply. The older sister then nodded in agreement while glancing at me.

“Ah, I see,” Liz said. “I guess that’s true. We can’t ask Ark to do it anyway.”

“We have to repay Lucia before she returns too,” Sitri said. “It’s perfect timing, don’t you think?”

*Wait, what’s perfect?* The two sisters continued to converse, completely leaving me behind. *I guess sisters really do share some kind of telepathic bond that outsiders can’t understand.* Liz stood up, now grinning broadly in stark



contrast to her grumbling attitude mere moments ago.

“I see...” she mulled. “As always, Krai Baby’s plans are perfectly thought out. All right, I’ll do it. The sooner the better, yeah? It’s been a while, but they might have more of a bite to them. You better be prepared, Siddy.”

“I know, I know,” Sitri replied.

“Mkay, then I guess I’ll loosen myself up a bit. I’ll see ya later, Krai Baby! I’ll work hard so that I can report back some good news! Wait here!”

With a wave, she gracefully leaped out of the lounge. It didn’t sound like she’d be chasing after Ark, but I had no idea what she was about to do. *Since Sitri’s with her, I’m sure she’ll be fine.*

“Krai, I must go with her too,” Sitri said. “I’ll be sure to keep her in check.”

“Sure, uh-huh,” I replied. “Don’t cause too much of a fuss.”

I wanted to offer my assistance too, but I would’ve probably just been in the way. Sitri balled her hand into a fist and smiled at my empty encouragement.

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Ark returned to his base and hastily made his preparations. As a hunter, though he wasn’t planning on visiting any treasure vaults, he made sure that he always had the bare minimum of supplies with him. His dimensional pouch allowed him to store far more items than what one would initially expect. In stark contrast to its compact appearance, the pouch not only boasted a large storage, but also stopped time from ticking inside, preventing items from rotting or spoiling. It was a priceless item passed down through the generations of House Rodin; Ark used it to store potions, food, and items required for camping. He was prepared for any situation that he was thrown into.

“Are we really going?” Saint Ewe asked, her gray eyes pointed at her party leader with worry.

Ark smiled. “Are you anxious?”

The rest of his party weren’t too vocal with their concerns out of respect for the leader, but they were all making their preparations with a frown. Worthy of their title of first-rate hunters, they all packed swiftly and efficiently, but the

looks on their faces seemed as though they were about to tackle an extremely difficult treasure vault.

If one were to describe a unique characteristic of First Steps, it wasn't about their welfare program for their members or the power that each member held —no, the one that held this special honor was the Thousand Trials that the clan master would occasionally issue. This Trial was given to everyone equally, and Ark's party was no exception.

In fact, Ark's party served as the right-hand man of the clan, opening them up to more opportunities to be relied on by the clan master. Barring Ark, the rest of his party claimed that no dangerous and difficult treasure vault could compare to the sudden, awful requests of the clan master, who barely gave them time to prepare.

Ewe's beautiful face was riddled with worry. "I am," she confessed. "Krai, um, tends to drag you into many things."

"Since he's a Level 8, he should handle this stuff by himself," Isabella said, sighing deeply as she enveloped herself in a pure white robe that she wore for vault exploring. "I think you're spoiling him too much, Ark."

It was true that Ark almost never declined Krai's requests. A person who feared sudden occurrences could never become a hunter, and all of the clan master's requests indeed required someone to move to prevent the situation from escalating and turning disastrous.

"Don't you think he should act by himself too?" Isabella asked, looking for validation. "He has Liz and Sitri by his side."

Ark gave an exasperated smile. "Are you saying that those two ladies should meet Lady Éclair? I don't think I could do something that terrifying."

"Well...you've got a point. I feel like Liz would seriously get into a fight with a ten-year-old. She probably doesn't care about rank or honor either."

"It's scary to think about, but it's a possibility," Armelle agreed with a stern grimace.

The Grievors were well-known for their power and insolence. Ark, who was a fellow clan member and had known them for a while, knew that these rumors

toned down the Grievors' actions. Indeed, "insolent" didn't even begin to describe some of them, making them more akin to hot-blooded members of the mafia.

"It might've been a different story if Lucia and Ansem were there, but they're still gone..." Isabella said before she quickly shook her head. She tried to remain defiant, but it was clear that she no longer sounded as forceful. "N-No, even so, they should've gone by themselves! Krai can easily convince those nobles, can't he?!"

Logically, she must've realized that the clan master's decision was wise, but emotionally, she still couldn't bring herself to accept the request with a smile. Éclair might have been a child, but she was a noble. She was a proud young lady, and clearly held disdain towards Krai. The clan master still might have been able to handle her, but it was clear that his friend Ark was a far more suitable candidate for this negotiation.

"Just admit it, Isabella," Ark said. "My house has ties with House Gladis. If there really is anything going on with them, then all the more reason for me to go. It's not right to file a complaint towards Krai."

Though Ark had known Krai for a while, the former still couldn't quite grasp the latter. However, the other party members aside, none of the trials that Ark had received thus far earned his ire. He had a motive and the power to save others.

Once he finished making his preparations, Ark gripped the dull golden hilt of his blade and drew it from its white scabbard. The sword didn't have any intricate ornamentation, but when it was sheathed, its empyreal aura enchanted anyone who viewed it. This was a blade-type Relic that the first lord of House Rodin had supposedly used—the holy sword, Historia. Together with the Rodins, Historia had saved many from disasters and carved a path for history. Among the numerous blade-type Relics, Historia was famed to be the strongest of them all; a peerless blade that still hadn't met an item that it couldn't cut with a single blow.

Normally, people weren't allowed to bring weapons inside of a noble's manor, but Ark was a notable exception. Of course, Ark Rodin wasn't a man

who would fall victim to a guard or a knight simply because he had a blade or two taken from him, and Lord Gladis knew that all too well. Though Krai had stated that a weapon wasn't necessary, Ark had carried the holy blade by his side at all times. As long as he kept it sheathed, he didn't think that it'd pose an issue. While Ark trusted Krai, he was also aware that the clan master had the nasty habit of hiding information when ordering a Trial.

Ark was all set. All that was left was to visit Éclair.

Isabella, who had also just finished getting ready, furrowed her well-shaped brows. "Ark, what do you think he meant by 'I'll be sad'? I feel like he's just fooling around with us."

"You're an earnest person, aren't you?" Ark replied. "Now then, why don't we hurry? Lady Éclair should still be at her manor right now."

"Huh? What? Was I in the wrong there?"

As Isabella panicked and the rest of her party members gave her a pointed look, Ark headed for the manor, where trouble was surely brewing.

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The mask worth over two hundred million gild was more grotesque than imagined. Éclair had known this beforehand, but if she had seen the actual item in front of her, she might not have bid on it at all. This was a cursed Relic with unknown effects—a mask of flesh that even a seasoned appraiser had deemed dangerous.

The Relic, which looked like kneaded raw meat, writhed and pulsed as though it were alive. House Gladis's steward, who'd received this item in Éclair's stead, grimaced upon catching sight of it. When the maids and butlers had initially heard of the young lady's victory at the auction, they all showered her with praise, but as the Relic was revealed, they all clearly seemed taken aback.

Even since the auction, Éclair was holed up in her bedroom at the manor. Inside of the dark bedroom with closed curtains was the young lady, all alone. The day the auction was over, she was so humiliated and angry that she sobbed in isolation, barely able to muffle her cries. On the second day, she threw a tantrum, taking her fury out on objects as deep regret gripped her body. She

called for servants on numerous occasions only to roar at them and chase them away. Her attitude was unbefitting for the proud daughter of House Gladis and it was difficult to see her continue like this.

She had been taken pity on. That by itself was already a tough pill to swallow, but the Relic she obtained looked so dreadfully atrocious that one could only question the seller's sanity. Even if this was an item honorably won from a vicious battle, it looked so horrid that she was reluctant to give it to Ark, whom she admired so greatly. Had someone's skin been peeled off their face and had a few features shaved away just right, they would look just like this mask. Indeed, "a mask of flesh" was the perfect descriptor for this awful Relic. The item, which had been so desperately sought after just a few days prior, was now nonchalantly tossed on top of her bedside desk.

Éclair had nothing left. Her head was throbbing, and though her meals were placed in front of her room, she hardly touched the food. She'd calmed down considerably over the past few days, but as she lay on her bed lifelessly, she had no desire to do anything at all. She'd been so worn and her mental state was now so fragile that she no longer harbored any anger towards the Thousand Tricks.

*What...do I do now?* Éclair thought in a daze. Her impulsive, emotional actions made her two hundred million gild in debt. This money might have belonged to her family but she had promised to return the gild that she'd borrowed.

What could she do now? *Should I sell the mask that I just bought?* She doubted that any company would be willing to buy it from her. The price of that Relic only soared because she'd thrown her hat into the ring; she couldn't expect anyone to pay a higher price. *Then should I just give it to Ark like initially planned?* That was out of the question. Éclair couldn't call this auction a victory, and presenting a Relic with unknown effects would only trouble the receiver. *Should I just discard it?* Simply throwing away an item that she worked so hard to obtain seemed absurd.

*Then...should I sell it to the Thousand Tricks?* This sounded like absolute buffoonery. Despite her interference in this auction, the man had given her this victory. How could she possibly sell it back to him? The mere thought had made her want to die, and she gagged a little as she imagined that scenario.

Her mind was filled with thoughts and ideas, but none provided her with an answer. She shifted her position on her bed and gazed at the mask of flesh. Éclair, who wasn't quite used to viewing grotesque items, felt nauseous simply by looking at it. When the expert had initially come out with a "could not be determined" analysis, she had laughed and scoffed at the fainthearted man, but upon seeing the mask with her own eyes, she understood why the appraiser had come to his conclusion. She couldn't even bear to touch it—she would've surely questioned the sanity of a person who dared to wear it.

Only then did Éclair realize her confusion. *Why did the Thousand Tricks want this mask?* She'd heard that he'd wanted this Relic in the first place, so much so that he even went to negotiate with the seller before the auction. Éclair, the trading companies, and other hunters had decided to steal this item away from him upon hearing this bit of information.

The mask was rumored to be the strongest Relic, but she now found it hard to believe.

*"Do you want power?"*

"Huh?" Éclair audibly gasped as a voice suddenly echoed in her mind.

She quickly got up, noticing cold air filling the room. Where did it come from? She instinctively reached out for her sword by her pillow. The blade that she usually gracefully wielded was heavy in her hands. She could only barely drag it to her side.

*"I've been watching you. I have been for a while now. Your grief, sorrow, anger, and most importantly...despair. I've seen it. You're a clump of glimmering, exceptional talent. Your physical body may be frail, but that is my compromise. You are a fitting candidate to bestow my power onto."*

Éclair noticed where the voice was coming from. "I-Is the mask talking?!"

That was impossible. As horrid as it might have appeared, the item was a Relic, and nothing more. *It shouldn't be able to speak!* Éclair kept frantically telling herself. All the while, she found herself unable to tear her eyes off from the mask of flesh atop her desk. She hastily unsheathed her sword and raised it in the air. She used her left hand to inch back. She'd faced numerous monsters and phantoms before, but her blade started to tremble as she faced a fearful,

mysterious force.

*“I can do more than just talk, fragile being. I am one who advances humankind. I provide hope to the weak. It’s quite convenient that you’re alone. I shall do what I must—there was a reason I was created...my master.”*

Éclair gasped as the mask floated in the dark room. The item wasn’t quite floating; several tentacle-like appendages sprouted from it, raising it in the air.

*Impossible! No one activated the Relic! It can’t act on its own! It can’t be!* Éclair thought.

The words of a weary-faced man who had tried to negotiate with her before the auction flashed across her mind. *“It’s a dangerous Relic.”*

The flesh mask grinned broadly as it pounced on Éclair.

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Ark’s party was invited into the meeting room of House Gladis’s manor. The lord and father of the household, Van Gladis, had told Ark the events that had occurred, causing the hunter to regret not providing a better explanation. When Lady Éclair and Krai had met at the clan house, Ark should’ve cleared up any misunderstandings about the clan master right then and there.

Éclair was mature for her age, but she was still a child. Thinking back, there were times when she’d expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that Ark wasn’t a clan master, but a second-in-command (though to be precise, while those around him viewed him that way, he wasn’t that either).

Isabella, who sat beside Ark, narrowed her eyes and whispered, “I thought this earlier when I expressed my sarcasm, but he’s so immature...”

“I feel like he believes this to be a Trial...” Ewe murmured scornfully.

The scheme of the Thousand Tricks that the party had heard was so clever and cunning that it wasn’t one to use against a girl who had just turned ten. Had Éclair been simply stirred up about this all, this entire event could’ve been laughed away, but since she’d apparently been in bed for the past few days, it was clear that the man had gone too far. Ark had found himself in a difficult position. He’d learned that Éclair was trying to obtain the Relic for his sake; she

wanted to present him with the strongest Relic so that he would be pushed up from second-in-command and rise above the clan master. Ark didn't remember ever asking her to do this, of course, but he was certain that this was Éclair's goal—she was just as immature as Krai at times.

"I'm honored to receive Lady Éclair's favor," Ark started. "However..."

"She flew a little too close to the sun," Van said with a frown, his voice commanding less might than usual. "She'd taken on a difficult opponent. I can only hope that this would lead to Éclair's growth somehow."

A usually strict and stern man he might have been, but Van Gladis was also a father. He was quite worried about his daughter's sudden reclusion. It was true that this recent loss had greatly damaged poor Éclair's pride.

However, the real issue was that her actions were truly meaningless. If Éclair had indeed gracefully attained a victory against the Thousand Tricks, crushing him spectacularly and obtaining the Relic, then what? That item would then be passed onto Ark, where he had to happily receive the mask. Even if the Relic truly allowed him to unleash his full potential and gain even greater power, this didn't mean that Ark was better than Krai. The former had far more combat prowess than the latter in the first place. The difference between the two wasn't one of raw power. Hence, even if Ark had received a powerful Relic, it would do little to fill this gap.

But the little swordswoman was already currently mentally fragile. How would the noblewoman feel if she heard the truth right now? If words were all that was needed to cheer her up again, Ark would do it in a heartbeat, but the girl wasn't so simple as to have her heart lightened by empty praise. He mentally filed a complaint to the Thousand Tricks, who threw the man of House Rodin into this mess. Krai was up against a child. While hunters had a reputation to uphold, there was no doubt a better and more peaceful way to tackle this situation. This cunning plan that had analyzed a person's network and personality quite accurately was so elaborate that Ark refused to believe that the usual Krai would ever do something like this.

The most terrifying bit was that Ark *still* had no idea what Krai was planning. The Thousand Tricks wasn't one to completely hypothesize a noble's position,



and an honest Relic collector like him wouldn't forfeit an auction with zero reason. As Ark pensively thought over his options, Earl Gladis gave an apologetic look, unusual for a man of his caliber.

"In any case, though Éclair has been a recluse ever since her defeat at the auction, I'm sure she'll leave her room now that you're here. She's taken a liking towards you, after all," Van said. "I'm sorry, but could you talk to her for a short while? I thought that it wasn't right to call for you without telling Éclair, but I was lucky that you came."

"Then I shall gladly go to her," Ark replied after a brief silence.

He was unable to tell the earl that he'd been sent by Krai. Isabella and the rest of the party also shifted around awkwardly. *Why did Krai dispatch us?* Ark wondered. Was it to comfort Éclair? Did Krai think that he went too far this time around? Ark thought back to Krai's expression back at the lounge, but the Thousand Tricks was a difficult man to read. His nickname wasn't just for show, and he'd worn a perfect poker face. *I wish he displayed his abilities in a different manner.* Krai was just so vastly divergent from Ark that this was a bit too big of a burden for the man of House Rodin to bear.

"Child-rearing is more difficult than I expected. I didn't think she'd shut herself in with a single defeat," Van admitted, letting a sigh escape from him as he leaned forward.

"She's a strong lady. I assure you that she can bounce right back," Montaure consoled from behind.

What could Ark possibly say? Was there a way for him to decline the Relic? *Instead of just offering her words, giving her a swordsmanship lesson might take her mind off things,* he thought. Just as he was trying to find the best possible method, he heard a small scream pierce through the air.

Montaure immediately turned vigilant and gazed around sharply. "What was that?!"

"Ark! On your left!" Benetta said, pointing at the entrance. Since she was a Thief, her instincts were sharper than most.

The manor of the noble was heavily guarded, and the security that Lord Gladis

had hired were more powerful than hunters. The scream that was just heard belonged to a man, but it was crystal clear that he was in extreme distress. This was no small matter.

“I’ll go on ahead!” Ark shouted, rushing forward before Montaure could provide any instructions.

He slammed open the door and dashed across the wide corridor and plush carpet with his party members. When compared with the treasure vaults that he’d conquered, the manor was much easier to navigate. The maids who also heard the cries froze in place as Ark and his party rushed forward. The screams didn’t stop. There was another, and then another, and then the sound of shattering glass echoed throughout the manor. Isabella and the rest of the party voiced their concerns while they ran ahead.

“Why are we hearing screams within the manor of Lord Gladis?!”

“Maybe Liz tried to rob the place.”

“If Liz was here, we wouldn’t hear any screams!”

*I knew it! This wasn’t a simple matter of consoling Lady Éclair!* Ark thought. He tried to confirm the situation. Since the earl was in the meeting room, it was likely better to ensure Éclair’s safety first. Since nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, Ark had let his guard down, assuming that he’d made it in time. *No, the real fight starts now. I’ve got my weapon, my magical energy, and my potions.* He came prepared, and he was confident that he could repel even a dragon.

Benetta, who’d been leading the way, suddenly stopped in her tracks. From around the corner, a guard wearing the armor with the crest of House Gladis, flew past them at an astonishing speed, ramming into a wall. They approached the fallen knight. The armor that had been protecting his vital areas was crushed, and he lifelessly rolled onto the ground without moving a muscle. In an instant, Ark analyzed his opponent’s attacks. The guard was knocked out, but he had no visible injuries, implying that he’d been blown back by force. Though these guards were usually large men donned in armor, any veteran hunter (including Ark) could do the same thing if they tried. However, this wasn’t a preferred method to fight—it was incredibly inefficient. Even if an opponent

only had a club in one hand, it was far better to hit them from above and kill them in one blow instead of throwing them back. *And if he doesn't have any gashes or slices in him...*

"He's fine. He's still alive."

"Yeah," Ark agreed.

Judging from the size of the manor, their target wasn't too large, and there wasn't the presence of anything large. Was this a revolt? An assassination attempt? Did a certain Thief try to infiltrate the house and steal Éclair's Relic? A myriad of possibilities flashed across Ark's mind, but one thing was clear: it was unusual to start anything at the earl's manor.

Isabella removed her wand while Armelle unsheathed her sword. The Braves, who'd conquered numerous mysterious treasure vaults, were always wary of their surroundings. They were in a noble's manor. As time progressed, more soldiers would gather in this area. But if the enemy was aiming for Éclair, there wasn't a moment to lose.

Ark muttered a short chant, allowing lightning to envelop his left arm. The purple electricity that coursed through his arm was small, but it was powerful enough to topple a large man—it was Ark Rodin's signature move. A small shadow slowly emerged from around the corner, causing the wary Braves to freeze in horror.

"Gh... D-Don't look down on me... Don't look at me like that! Don't fear. Don't envy... You're weak. I *know* you're weaker than me! Raaaaah!"

Her pure white dress was tattered. The sword slung by her waist was a small blade that her father had bought for her on her birthday. Her neat golden hair was in a mess, and she staggered on her bare feet.

Isabella turned pale-faced and took a step back. Ewe placed a hand over her mouth, and even Benetta's cheeks twitched while she changed her stance. In front of them was the girl that Ark had been requested to meet, but she'd undergone a horrific transformation. A mass of pink flesh enveloped and hid her face. Holes were poked out for her blue, bloodshot eyes to peek through, and her wide gaze captured Ark. The meat that clung to her cheeks writhed grotesquely, and a close inspection was all that was needed to see that they

were up against a terrifying entity. Terror only grew as it was obvious that this was Éclair.



Her small body emanated an awful power that seemed to distort the air. This was completely different from the Éclair that everyone was familiar with; she was surrounded by a chilling aura. Ark chose to neither scold nor call out to her.

“I-I see,” he spat. “You wore the mask. There’s no need for a sword. I...certainly didn’t expect this.”

“Ugh...” Éclair groaned as though she was in the midst of a nightmare. “A... A... Ark?”

*What exactly was Krai trying to collect here?!* Ark had faced numerous odd monsters and phantoms in the past. There were plants that preyed on roaming humans, and colossal spiders that were more than ten meters tall. He’d faced small dragons that formed a flight of over a few hundred and attacked from above; he’d battled a suit of armor with no one inside as it expertly maneuvered itself like a skilled swordsman. But Ark had never faced anything like this before. Even a seasoned hunter like him had never seen a mask that took over a person’s body.

Éclair had maintained most of her physique. Based on the silhouette alone, she didn’t look too different, and that was precisely why the mask that covered her pretty face was all the more atrocious.

“Urgh... My head... My head is...” Éclair groaned, staggering and placing her small hand on the wall to regain her balance.

The walls creaked, and small cracks formed where she’d placed her hand. The strength that she possessed was far above any normal human. Sure, Ark could’ve done something similar, but the little girl in front of him wasn’t a hunter. Éclair might have been brimming with talent, but that meant that she was above kids her age—she shouldn’t have had enough technique, power, or mana material to down a hired guard. *Or so I thought...* Ark internally muttered.

Then what was this scene in front of him? There was a guard rolling on the ground, a large dent in his armor. If Éclair had done this with a single punch or kick, she at least had enough power as a mid-range hunter. While there were some Relics that enhanced the user’s capabilities, Ark hadn’t heard of an item that made a young girl gain explosive might.

There were no visible wounds on her body. Only her face had transformed, and there were no signs of the mask of meat swallowing the rest of her body. Ark clenched his left fist, dissipating the purple lightning that wrapped around his arm. He could hold himself back, but he wasn't willing to use a spell that could completely paralyze a monster or a phantom on Éclair. He couldn't go all out as he usually did within treasure vaults and decimate the area with his lightning.

"She called my name..." he murmured. "Does she still retain...consciousness?"

He didn't want to get rough. It seemed like her body wasn't completely taken over, and he knew that he had to tread carefully. *Could I peel the mask off her? If possible, how do I go about it?* Éclair had a sword around her waist, but she hadn't unsheathed it yet; that was the only reason the battered guards were still alive. There was still a way to undo this mess.

"Ark... Ah... Thank you for...coming. I'm..." Éclair said in a daze.

"Lady Éclair, can you hear me?" Ark asked.

Her small body stumbled a few steps towards him. Ark's party members slowly spread out, holding their breaths to avoid provoking the child, and kept a watchful eye on her.

"Ark..." Benetta whispered.

"I know." Ark nodded.

The situation that they had to absolutely prevent was the mask switching masters. If it had the ability to turn an inexperienced Éclair into a mid-range hunter, then if it decided to latch onto Ark or the Braves, it would make them exponentially more powerful. If Benetta or Isabella were possessed, there was still a chance to stop them, but if Ark were to fall victim, all would be over. There were probably only a few people within the capital who could stop him.

A Relic possessing a human sounded illogical, but the impossible had already occurred in front of their eyes. Éclair didn't respond to Ark's words.

"I'm...strong. I became strong. I won't lose to anyone...anymore. I won't lose to hunters, knights, or even my father. I'll never..." she muttered, clearly unhinged.

Her passionate ramblings were more akin to dark obsession. Éclair had always been an ambitious child, but she didn't yearn so strongly for greater power. At the very least, she wasn't one who was so desperate that she'd wear a mask of her own accord. For better or for worse, she was an honest and earnest girl.

"My lady?!" the guards gasped in horror as they gathered towards the fuss. "Why do you..."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Don't look at me with those eyes!" Éclair roared, fury and sadness filling her voice.

She leaned over, hunching her back as she took a step forward and propelled herself in a flash. Her power, speed, agility, and instinct far surpassed anything the young girl could've done just a few days ago. Her almost exaggerated forward position she used to pounce was similar to a fighting style that aggressive Swordsmen preferred. Her hands, however, never reached for her blade. The guards froze in panic, seeing that a lady they were hired to protect was attacking them, and Éclair used this opportunity to close the gap in the blink of an eye. Her small fist landed blows in their solar plexuses.

Each punch held terrifying power. The metallic clangs of crushed armor rang through the air as the guards were all blown back, sharp pain gripping their bodies. Éclair possessed a sword that was practical, which was quite unusual for a noble. It could be used to protect herself, and the blade was sharp enough to cut down opponents. If her fists alone were enough to destroy armor, her sword would undoubtedly have sliced these guards in half, armor and all.

"Hypnosis Cage," Isabella chanted.

She took the opportunity when Éclair's back was turned, and surrounded the girl in blue light. This spell manipulated the victim's mental state and forced them to sleep. Though this wasn't effective against powerful monsters and phantoms, it certainly was more than sufficient for a normal person who had barely absorbed any mana material. The young girl's body wavered as she was open to a full frontal attack of the light. But she soon planted her feet firmly on the ground—she'd endured the spell.

Isabella was stunned. She was certain that her spell would stop the rampaging girl, but Éclair turned around without sustaining any notable damage.



“I-I’m sure that I caught her off guard!” Isabella said.

Psychoactive spells were more likely to succeed if the target was least expecting it. Éclair should’ve had no resistance towards attacks like these, but the fact that she wasn’t affected implied that the mask had enhanced her mental state and made her impervious. Guards appeared from behind the young girl and by Ark’s side, showering the girl with countless gazes. She took a step forward. The mask hid much of her face, but her tone had expressed her mental state.

“No! Why?! Why?! Don’t...look at me!” she bellowed. “Ugh... I’ll...kill you! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you all!”

Her shrill screech was familiar, but her words were unbecoming her usual self. The guards that surrounded her all glanced around in confusion. The guards hired and raised by House Gladis were all genuine soldiers. They were all indeed strong, but they all knew Éclair very well. Some had even trained her daily. She was still yet to reach her full potential, but she never skipped her daily training, and her honesty was something that the others admired. She was never one to look down or mock her guards.

“Those who mocked and humiliated me...” Éclair growled.

She violently clawed the mask of flesh that surrounded her face, but no blood dripped down the pulsating hunk of meat and it showed no signs of peeling itself away from the young girl. This wasn’t good. Éclair looked clearly more agitated than several moments ago, and the guards that arrived were all inching away from the monstrous girl with the mask. Confusion and fear quickly spread through the area.

“Step away, everyone!” Ark yelled, marching forward. “I’ll negotiate with her.”

Armelle, who was by his side and ready to fight back, raised her voice. “Got it. You heard him! Everyone, step back!”

Ark’s frequent visits to the manor had worked in his favor. The guards that surrounded Éclair all looked visibly relieved as they stepped away. The small hands that were violently scratching the mask stopped, and Ark took his chance to slowly close his gap.

He wasn't sure what the mask's effects were, but he was almost certain that it was a psychoactive type and messed with the user's mind. Still, Éclair had still held on to a shred of her sanity, and judging by her earlier reactions to the change in situations, the Relic seemed to lend her power in exchange for heightening certain emotions. She was still unstable, but if she had even a bit of reason within her, there was still room for negotiation. If she calmed down, there might be another way to de-escalate the situation.

If there was a clash between the current Éclair and the guards, there would certainly be deaths. That was something that Ark absolutely wanted to avoid. He outstretched his arms wide, showing that he was harmless, and spoke to her.

"Lady Éclair, please calm down."

"Hrgh... Ugh... Ark..." Éclair groaned.

He took a deep breath and smiled, hoping it'd soothe her mind. The young lady took a step, then another towards Ark, her movements showing no hostility. To him, she looked like a young, lost child.

"I got it. I won it..." Éclair muttered.

"You did," Ark agreed.

"And now...as long as you have this item, you can become the strongest, Ark. That's what this was for. I fought solely for that reason. So, why..." Her words were thrown at him, but it sounded like she was reminding herself why she was doing any of this in the first place. Her sorrowful tone was filled with regret.

"Thank you very much, Lady Éclair."

He carefully expressed his gratitude. Éclair's methods were wrong. Power and victory couldn't simply be handed by another party—they had to be won with one's own hands. Lord Gladis likely held the same opinions, and Éclair would've normally understood the importance of doing so. She was swept up by her emotions and swayed by the rumors that surrounded the item, causing her to act impulsively. However, her voice clearly contained a tone of regret. She didn't want the power of the mask. When she had fought against the guards, she hadn't unsheathed her sword, likely because she subconsciously avoided

doing so.

If this were the case, there must still be a way to remove the mask. The item on her face was a Relic, and it required mana to activate. Even if it couldn't be removed now, there was a good chance that it'd deactivate of its own accord as time progressed. Ark could also consult the Thousand Tricks, who had sent him into this mess. It went without saying that Krai should've been raked over the coals for his actions, but even so, this was simply too much. How could anyone do this to a noblewoman? If Ark couldn't resolve this problem by himself, he was determined to forcibly pry the solution out of the Thousand Tricks.

Ark slowly lowered his raised right arm and offered it to Éclair. "May I have your hand?"

A long silence followed. The widened eyes from behind the mask of flesh stared at Ark for a while before she quietly raised her tiny, trembling hand.

"A... A..." the girl started.

The Braves looked on with bated breath, the quivering fingertips brushing her cheeks. At a glance, it seemed as though the mask had fused with Éclair's face, but on closer inspection, there was a clear boundary between them. Had Ark not made it in time and had Éclair worn the mask for moments longer, would it have fused completely with her face? Logically speaking, this didn't seem possible, but as he thought back to his interaction at the clan house, he couldn't suppress a shudder. If Ark, for some reason, hadn't believed the clan master's words and thus hadn't visited the manor, numerous people might have died. A soldier like Earl Gladis might have chosen to kill his daughter to protect everyone else. Just how far did Krai's predictions go? Did he truly foresee this situation?

As far as Ark knew, Krai wasn't an evil man. However, this situation made the man of House Rodin reevaluate his thoughts. Perhaps he'd been too naive. The moment Éclair touched the mask, she froze in place.

"Whatever is the matter, Lady Éclair?" Ark asked.

The air grew tense for a moment as the girl remained silent. She wasn't looking at Ark—her wide, azure gaze was fixed at his waist, where he carried his white sword. Historia was a weapon that symbolized House Rodin; a holy sword

that crushed evil. It was such a powerful blade that Éclair had begged to see it with her own eyes every time Ark visited the manor. Historia held the power to slice a mountain in two with a single swing and was considered to be one of the best blade-type Relics. Ark had no intention of using his sword against Éclair, and he'd even forgotten that it was by his waist until now. The young girl's eyes completely changed, and the words of the Thousand Tricks filled Ark's mind.

*"In fact, it might be better if you had nothing on you."*

"A... Agh... Ahhh... Why?!" Éclair shouted, her voice filled with despair.

There was a flash of cold steel. Ark managed to step back and dodge the furious slash in the nick of time. Éclair swiftly leaped back, gripping her sword that she'd kept sheathed against the guards. Tears of blood dripped from the mask's eyes as screams reverberated through the room.

"Why?! Ark, why do you have that sword on you?!" Éclair shouted.

Ark's smile had faded, and he stared grimly at the young girl as she readied herself for battle.

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"Wow, I didn't think that dangerous piece of trash became a centimillioner!" Eigh crowed.

"The folks of Zebrudia are more than generous," a Swordsman laughed loudly in reply.

Arnold and the rest of his party were in a tavern, an annex of an expensive inn within the capital. In front of a leather bag stuffed with two hundred million gild, they were celebrating their newfound wealth. This money was nothing to scoff at for even a Level 7 hunter like Arnold. To make this kind of money, they had to find a high-level vault, or focus on profitable monsters and slay quite a few of them. Even then, there would be necessary expenses, and it was rare for them to make two hundred million gild in pure profit.

They could buy excellent weapons and armor. They could purchase valuable Relics that could save them from predicaments. Lavish feasts and delicious liquor would help raise morale, and they could even get a house to use as their base. Falling Fog had just finished a long journey and was out of money—the

expensive price placed on the mask of meat was a bolt from the blue, but it was a welcome one.

“I was shocked when I heard that the Thousand Tricks was getting involved. He’s a messenger of luck.”

“And you’re a lucky guy yourself, Arnold.”

“Don’t let it get to your heads,” Arnold said, gently admonishing his subordinates. “We don’t know this capital well yet.”

The subordinates might have been gloating a bit too much, but who could blame them? Nobody in Nebulanubes had wanted to touch this mask, and so, Arnold had put it up for auction on a whim. Ever since, things had gone smoothly. He was surprised when the Thousand Tricks offered to buy the item off his hands, but the price had inflated so much that he thought that he was dreaming. Arnold had initially planned on selling the item for dirt cheap; he didn’t imagine that it would become worth two hundred million gild.

“Since it had been the talk of the town, I thought it’d go for a bit more,” one confessed. “I guess a noble getting involved worked against us.”

“We would’ve practically paid someone to get the Relic off our hands, but we gained two hundred million instead,” Arnold replied. “That’s more than enough.”

“Well, you’ve got a point...”

Indeed, it was a bit of a letdown that the price had stopped at two hundred million, but it wasn’t wise to get too greedy.

Arnold grinned and joked, “Heh heh. Besides, if we make *too* much money, we’d have to buy a pint for the Thousand Tricks, don’t you think?”

“Ha ha ha! I don’t doubt it!”

It’d been a while since Arnold was in such a good mood. The Thousand Tricks must’ve been gritting his teeth at this unexpected conclusion. That had satisfied Arnold for now. He didn’t get to exact his revenge completely, but he could set it aside for now. Once their hunger and thirst were sated, they checked their funds and saw that they’d hardly made a dent in their wealth of silver coins.

They could play around and do nothing for a while, but Arnold didn't visit the capital to laze around.

"This two hundred million gild is just gonna help us out," Arnold growled. "We'll make preparations for our next treasure vault."

"What?! Seriously?!"

His party booed the leader. Two hundred million gild was a lot, but it'd be gone in a flash if they needed to gather the necessary equipment. That was well worth the price if it saved their lives, but vast amounts of wealth were fleeting for treasure hunters. Arnold saw the critical looks on his party's faces, and his lips curled up to form a wide grin.

"Of course, we're gonna rest for a *while*," he said.

His members gave a thunderous cheer. It was imperative for everyone to be in high spirits to progress through the vaults. With his future prospects within the capital in mind, Arnold nodded in satisfaction.

As the night wore on, Arnold dragged his wasted party members as they cheerfully returned to the door of their room.

"Tch, you guys drank too much," Arnold complained.

"I guess it can't be helped. We've been pretty unlucky for a while now..." a party member replied.

While it was important for them to maintain their morale, it was rare for them to be so drunk that they could barely stand straight. Arnold wearily opened the door to the room when a large object pounced on him. He gasped and reflexively clenched his fists as he fought back against his assailant. His fist made contact with something hard. Arnold immediately switched gears, gripped his weapon on his back, and stepped inside.

Since they'd just made a lot of cash, he'd been vigilant. Anyone could easily look up the list of sellers and find Arnold's name next to the mask. But he thought that his fears were baseless; he didn't expect anyone to be so idiotic as to try to rob a Level 7 hunter.

The rooms were all lit, illuminating the entrance, living room, meeting area,

paintings, and ornamental plants. By the table where Arnold and his party had gathered before they set out to explore was his assailant, seated deeply where he usually sat. The intruder crossed their legs smugly, and Arnold realized that the vase decorating the living room had been thrown at him upon his initial entrance. He was familiar with the tied strawberry-blond hair of his assailant, as she turned around and faced Arnold and his crew, a skeletal mask obscuring her face. Arnold froze, not expecting to meet her, but the intruder didn't care about hiding her identity as she spoke arrogantly.

"Goddamn, you trash are *late*! When did you bastards get so high and mighty as to make me wait? Hmm? C'mon, tell me! I'm the great Liz, dammit! And I'm busy, unlike you idiots! I'll freaking kill ya!"

"What's...the meaning of this?" Arnold said, instinctively pointing his greatsword at her while suppressing his rage. Her voice only reminded him of detestable memories.

The other members, though drunk and staggering, managed to grip their weapons as well. Arnold had locked the room. Another person with a skull mask sat beside Liz with her hands in front and scolded him.

"Please calm down, Arnold," she said. "We're not here to fight. Please don't misunderstand. We're just here to talk about our cut of the money."

Arnold and his party were prepared to pounce at any time as they analyzed the two ladies wearing creepy masks. Though there was a skull motif on them, the mostly black mask had obscured their expressions completely, even hiding their gazes. No normal person would dare wear this mask, and it seemed more fitting for a magic syndicate or a cult member. Did they really plan on hiding their identities?

The seated pair showed no signs of fear. The Stifled Shadow had arrogantly thrown her legs on top of the table like she owned the place. The Ignoble sounded polite, but there wasn't an iota of anxiety within her. They were supposed to be in enemy territory, but their actions were nothing short of audacious.

"A-Are you guys a ghost party?!" Eigh roared, his voice rising an octave.

"What do you mean by 'your cut'?" Arnold asked.

There were currently no rumors about Grieving Souls being a ghost party, but the infiltrating pair seemed far too used to this. This clearly wasn't their first rodeo. Did they get rid of any witnesses? Or did the Grievors have a reputation that allowed others to turn a blind eye to some of their antics? Either way, this was a nasty way of doing things.

If Arnold were up against some ruffians, he would make short work of them, but he was up against hunters who'd absorbed mana material just like him. And his entire party was quite drunk. They could still fight, but they weren't in top shape.

Sitri spoke calmly as though she'd read his thoughts and tried to assure him. "Please don't be so on guard. Our leader wishes to settle matters peacefully. And this won't be a bad deal for Falling Fog."

"Siddy, you're being too nice," Liz said. "Because they're so late, they're causing *us* trouble. We gotta do stuff like this properly."

She slammed one of her legs onto the table and stared at Arnold through her mask. Her aura was similar to a phantom as she let out her murderous intent. Arnold and his party had defeated ghost parties in the past, but her sharp gaze was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Her combat prowess was likely on par with Arnold's, a certified Level 7 hunter. His equipment was geared towards wielding his greatsword, as he prioritized power over agility. He was a poor match for Liz. Tino had shown specks of talent, but the lady in front of him was the perfected form of that.

As the air remained tense, ready to turn explosive at any moment, Sitri gave a troubled look and poked Liz's shoulder. The Stifled Shadow clicked her tongue and removed her legs from the table. They weren't here to fight.

While Falling Fog remained standing, Sitri slumped her shoulders ever so slightly and said, "We're talking about the auction. Arnold, the price of your Relic soared because of Krai's plans. We have the right to claim a cut of your profits."

"That's out of the question. While it's true that I didn't expect the price to skyrocket, you guys don't deserve the credit. *We're* the ones who took home the Relic. This is just the result brought upon by your thoughtless leader,"



Arnold refuted.

“Krai didn’t bid on that mask at all. You can look that up and check for yourself.”

“What?” Eigh asked, baffled.

Her mask hid her expression, but Sitri sounded like she was chuckling. “The merchants, nobles, and hunters were all being played by the rumors that Krai had circulated. You didn’t notice that, did you?”

Arnold hadn’t at all. That part was true. When Krai had arrived to negotiate, he hadn’t seemed to be lying one bit. His expressions, voice, and minute movements, coupled with the surprise he expressed when the noble had arrived all seemed genuine. Arnold could hardly believe his ears as he stared at the masked duo in front of him. Had Krai been bluffing the entire time? Was the Thousand Tricks far more cunning than initially anticipated?

“How idiotic,” Arnold managed to eke out. “Why would he—”

“That’s a secret,” Sitri interrupted. “But I’m sure that you’ve thought something along the lines of ‘I can’t believe this Relic that no one wanted became worth well over a hundred million gild. I must be dreaming.’ Am I wrong?”

Arnold thought back to his conversation back at the tavern. He couldn’t deny that he had those beliefs. That Relic looked dreadful, and it was unable to be appraised. Common sense told him that such an item would usually never be sold for two hundred million gild. Had this been a result of manipulation, he couldn’t help but find himself agreeing.

“Thanks to you, we’ve fulfilled our goals as well. You have our gratitude,” Sitri said, lowering her head slightly before continuing. “However, even if you weren’t aware of this, you’ve obtained a profit far more than you originally anticipated. As hunters, we can’t have you thinking that we’ve lost to you. That’s what we mean by our cut.”

Her voice was calm, but the pressure she exuded was overwhelming. She spoke with confidence as though she was telling nothing but the truth, but Arnold couldn’t agree with this deal. Even if she was telling the truth about the

Thousand Tricks's plan, there was little reason for Arnold to pay them. But it was risky to decline this negotiation outright. For a moment, he weighed his odds, calculating the merits and demerits of each situation. The losers of this auction were the nobles. If they ever caught wind that Arnold had been colluding with others to raise the price of the item, things would turn troublesome real fast.

Even if Arnold insisted that he was in the dark about all this, making an enemy out of a noble would affect his future plans. This was clearly an illegal deal, but he couldn't deal with skilled hunters who managed to manipulate information and turn trash into a centimillioner. He had friends back at the Land of Fogs, but there weren't many on his side within the capital.

"Are you planning on blackmailing me?" Arnold asked.

"Jeez, we said that this was just a negotiation," Liz said. "Besides, this capital's our turf, yeah? Hmm? C'mon, think about it. You asked us to pour you alcohol, had us wait forever, and we're only asking for two hundred million gild in return. It's your lucky day, really! Or else, I'd kill ya."

*Two hundred million? Is that what she just said?* Arnold thought. That wasn't a "cut" of the profits; it was everything they had. Since there was a processing charge when submitting items to the auction, Falling Fog would be in the red. They couldn't have possibly tolerated such an unfair deal. His pale-faced party members started to glare at the two intruders. There was zero chance that they'd accept this negotiation. Arnold was a Level 7 hunter who took charge of a party of eight. They were being vastly underestimated.

If he were to obediently pay up, it would be the end of the road for him as a hunter. His party would collapse. Negotiations were a failure; Arnold and the rest of the Falling Fog prepared for combat. The moment he clenched his sword, Sitri piped up.

"Be quiet, Liz!" she scolded wearily. "There's no way we can take all of their profits! That's not a cut at all! Besides, the processing charge would put Arnold at a loss. We must negotiate properly!"

"Huh? Then we can just kill 'em all and take their money," Liz replied. "Since we're up against hunters, anything goes. We aren't infringing on any rules."

A verbal argument ensued in front of eight hunters who were ready to fight. Were the two out of their minds? Or were they simply that confident in their abilities? Once Sitri had admonished Liz, she placed a small bottle on the table. A translucent golden-yellow liquid splashed inside.

“We’re asking for 110 million gild,” Sitri said. “That is the cut that we want, and so does our leader.”

This meant that ninety million gild would remain in Arnold’s hand. This was still an expensive deal, but far preferred to the initial offer than Liz had demanded. The Fallen Fogs exchanged a glance.

“I bet you guys weren’t expecting your item to go over a hundred million, were you?” Sitri asked. “And you’re exactly right. You’ll get ninety million, and we’ll take 110 million gild. We can uphold our reputation, and you will still walk away with a profit that you didn’t initially anticipate. What do you say?”

This was a brilliant compromise. Ninety million gild was less than half of their total profit, but it was still vastly more money than what Arnold had initially anticipated when he tried to auction the Relic. A hundred ten million gild was the lion’s share and was still an impressive amount of wealth, but it wasn’t so much that Falling Fog had to desperately cling to. In fact, if this would allow them to avoid a dispute with a Level 8 party, it was a dirt cheap price to pay. And Sitri and Liz’s request seemed logical; Arnold had little room to doubt that there had been a cunning scheme in play.

He didn’t mind accepting this offer, but he was irked by how casual and relaxed his opponents seemed to be. Arnold was a Level 7 hunter, and it was obvious that he was being underestimated. His party members were all ready to flee, but that only further implied that he had to stay strong as the leader. Sitri’s logic had one fatal flaw that he was dying to point out.

“If we transfer over our money to you, that would only open the doors for suspicions and further questioning,” Arnold said, scoffing with his nose and gazing down at the Alchemist. “What are you gonna do about that?”

He had no idea just how much power the Grievors held within the capital, but they surely weren’t in complete control of Zebrudia. The Thousand Tricks would be just as troubled if rumors of a collusion circulated. While Arnold and his

party could simply up and leave the capital if necessary, this wasn't so for the Grievors—this city was their hometown. Sitri raised the small bottle she'd brought and shook it proudly as she chuckled.

“Which is why I'm selling this potion to you for 110 million,” she said. “This is an antidote. It's potent, so it should be enough for your entire party. I don't quite mind waiting for a long while, you see. In fact, it was rather convenient that you all drank quite a bit. Was the alcohol good? I'm not too knowledgeable on the subject, but as an Alchemist, it looks to me like your party lacks resistance. Certainly, *you* may be fine, Arnold, but can you say the same for the rest of your party?”

*Did she poison the liquor?* Arnold thought. He could practically hear the blood drain from his face. The usually calm Eigh looked pale. He didn't feel any pain, but thinking back, his entire party had indeed seemed to become drunk at an astonishing pace. As the party stayed in an expensive lodging, it wasn't likely that the employees were bribed, but the pair in front of him were able to break into their room. Sitri, who seemed to be the levelheaded one of the pair, suddenly looked a lot more terrifying than Liz.

The Ignoble smiled and pressured Arnold to make a decision. “Which will you choose? Your friends or money?”

## Epilogue: Let This Grieving Soul Retire, Part Three

The desk was scattered with white fragments, causing me to cock my head to one side.

The hands of the clock notified me that quite some time had passed since I started, and my vision grew blurry with fatigue. I rubbed my eyes and rolled my aching shoulders when I heard a knock on the door. Eva entered and she looked surprised as she found the usual clean desk in a rather messy state of affairs.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“An all-white jigsaw puzzle,” I replied.

I remembered that I’d made this purchase a while ago. Unlike a normal jigsaw puzzle, this one had a thousand pieces that were all white. This was a trial to complete, and it wasn’t like my hobby was to finish jigsaw puzzles. It only showed just how much time I had on my hands.

I managed to piece the borders together, but progress after that was going at a snail’s pace. I felt like I was going crazy.

Eva wearily gazed down at the desk. “And why have you started doing this suddenly?”

*Because I’m bored,* I thought. But of course, it wasn’t like I could vocalize my actual thoughts here.

I shot her a wicked yet lifeless grin and held up the puzzle pieces. “Because I’ve done all that I could.”

*I sound like a hard-boiled guy, right? I guess one could say that I simply can’t do much.*

“Really?” Eva asked.

“Ah, speaking of, when Ark returns, I’d like to prepare some tea and snacks for him,” I replied.

It was vital that I remained on his good side and decreased my debts (both

monetary and otherwise) as much as possible. The Reversible Face would soon be mine. I stood up to get some treats for Ark and his party when Eva stopped me.

“That’s not the role of a clan master,” she said. “I’ll prepare them, so you can remain seated. You don’t have to do anything.”

“Could you get them the best ones there? As for the tea... I think they’d be fine, but could you provide something that would calm and soothe their exhausted mind? They might be a little tired from talking with the young noble.”

“All right, all right.”

This world was filled with things that I could do nothing about. I was able to make it to a Level 8 hunter in huge part due to my friends. My abilities didn’t match my rank, and it was difficult to even meet expectations. I would surely be relying on Liz, Sitri, or even Ark and the rest of my friends in the future. The only thing I could do was to soothe their tired and aching bodies upon their return.

I had herbal tea and chocolate prepared. I’d even purchased a cake from a famous confectionery store, decorated the room with a few candles, and had champagne cooling. We’d apparently received this alcohol as a gift. I excitedly decorated the clan master’s office as Eva looked on wearily.

“What would you think if I had a banner here that says, ‘Welcome back, Ark’?” I asked.

“I think you should stop goading him,” she replied. “Even Ark has a limit to his generosity.”

“Does he? I thought it was limitless.”

*Also, what? I’m not goading him. I’m expressing my goodwill and gratitude. I wanted to let him know just how passionate I was about that mask. If possible, I wanted him to sell it to me for a rock-bottom price. An ideal bargain would’ve been for a million gild. I feel like I could borrow that much from the clan’s business expenses. Or am I asking for too much?*

“I know,” I said. “Aside from the tea, we should have a few potions that could stabilize their mental states.”

“Was your request that tall?” Eva asked.

It'd been a while, but Ark showed no signs of returning. Lady Éclair favored Ark, and I didn't think that my request was too troublesome, but he could've been warmly received by House Gladis. If he didn't come back today, all my preparations would be for naught. The champagne and chocolate were fine, but the cake didn't last long, and I'd even lit up candles to welcome his return. I acted without much thought for the future.

“They're late,” Eva said. “I expected Ark to have taken care of most matters already...”

“I guess that just happens from time to time,” I replied.

Eva's expression was slowly darkening, and I couldn't fault her for that. She was busy, and yet I'd had her run a number of silly errands. *I'm sorry for always troubling you so much.* As I finished decorating, feeling bored, I once again reached out to finish the puzzle. *Why did I buy a puzzle with only white pieces? I never think much about the future. Am I really a hard-boiled guy?* I started to grow irritated as I had to confirm each piece at a sluggish pace. *Are all the pieces really here?*

“Er, shall I help you?” Eva offered.

“No, I'm fine,” I replied.

I could at least finish a puzzle myself. It wasn't something I could ask the busy Eva to do. I continued to face the puzzle, using it as an excuse to escape reality, when Liz and Sitri returned from gathering funds. They opened the door without a second thought for the rules, and their eyes glimmered when they saw the transformed room.

“We're back, Krai Baby! Hmm? What's this? Are we having a party?”

“That was quick,” I noted. “I'm waiting for Ark's return.”

“We're back,” Sitri said. “Ah, the usual, I see.”

*The usual?* She placed a large sack that she'd been carrying on the floor. I heard the soft clinks of metal hitting metal. Since they claimed that they were gathering funds, I thought that they headed out to a treasure vault, but that

didn't seem to be the case.

"We've gathered 110 million gild!" Sitri said. "We can replenish Lucia's funds!"

"Wait, what?" I asked. "How?"

My sense of money was becoming skewed, but I was still aware that 110 million gild was a lot of money. You couldn't go out on a walk and pick it up on the side of the road. Sitri and Liz immediately talked over each other in response as though each were trying to take the credit for themselves.

"Don't worry, we didn't break any rules. No one was unhappy with this deal."

"We just showed those country bumpkins their place! We did good! It took more time than I thought, but we showed 'em! Jeez, if they come to the capital, they're supposed to visit you, Krai Baby!"

"Sure, uh-huh," I replied.

*They sound so excited.* I could've handled one, but I couldn't calm both of them at once. I waited for them to settle down.

"So, what really happened?" I asked.

"I had a potion to instantly sober those who drank my intoxication brew," Sitri said. "That sold for 110 million gild! It seems like he doesn't have much resistance despite being a Level 7 hunter."

"He might be high-leveled, but he's still a guy from the boonies," Liz added. "I wanna be Level 7 too, but in the countryside? Ugh, forget about it! C'mon, Krai Baby. Don't you have anything for me?"

*A hundred ten million gild for a potion that makes you sober? Is that...legal?* I knew nothing about Alchemy, so I wasn't sure if it was a fair price. I only knew that effective potions were expensive. *Maybe I should become an Alchemist and sell sobering potions too...*

"Oh, also, I took down the Thunder Dragon request," Sitri said. "It didn't seem like they were willing to accept it anyway, and that monster costs a lot. It's not a problem, is it?"

"Ah, right. I totally forgot about that," I said. "Well, chicken tastes better to



me, so I don't mind."

I thought I'd used Chloe to take it down, but I didn't tell anyone. I didn't expect Eva to place that request anyway, and as Sitri had mentioned in the past, chicken tasted a lot better. I had no problems with her taking the request down. *Memory's a scary thing.* I'd likely thought it was delicious when I ate it in the treasure vault. Sitri placed her hands together with delight as though she was waiting to hear my words.

"I knew you'd say that!" she exclaimed. "So instead, I put up a request for a Colossal Chicken! Once we receive one, I'll prepare a feast out of it!"

"Those chickens should just go hunt a chicken, y'know?" Liz quipped.

*Wait, aren't Colossal Chickens sold at butcher shops?* I had a few thoughts in mind, but I found it all to be troublesome and didn't vocalize any of it. I just smiled and nodded. *Besides, Liz has always shown animosity towards others. That's nothing new.*

"Ah, but it was so much fun!" Liz said with satisfaction, stretching out her back. "It was a bit of a pity that I couldn't see just how strong a Level 7 hunter from the Land of Fogs was, but I don't mind doing something like this every now and then. I can punch someone anytime I wish."

Her supple skin stretched in tandem with her movements, and she reminded me of a cat. I couldn't fully grasp the situation, but I preferred to help people grow by praising them, so I decided to do just that.

"It's good that you didn't punch anyone. I'm proud of you."

"If Siddy hadn't jumped in, I definitely would've," Liz confessed.

"I see..." I muttered. "Then I'm proud of you too, Sitri."

Sitri looked ecstatic at my half-hearted praise. I was worried about letting Liz run off on her own, but I never had anything to worry about if Sitri tagged along. *I didn't do anything, but my debt to Lucia's been resolved. This is way too convenient for me. Are they goddesses?*

"Well, since I'm in the mood, I think I'll stay at your place, Krai Baby," Liz said with a grin, clearly in high spirits.

“You’ll only trouble him!” Sitri scolded. “Let’s go home, Liz. You can stay at my place.”

The Alchemist dragged her older sister out and left. *They get along so well. I’m envious of that. If there’s any sort of trick to it, I’d love to hear it.*

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Ark returned late in the evening. Eva, who’d finished her tasks for the day, and I were working together on the puzzle when I heard footsteps come up from below. When I raised my head, the door opened wide in front of Eva and me. My eyes widened in shock at their appearances.

The man was in tatters. His usually neat hair was mussed, and the edges of his clothes were frayed as though he’d just returned from the battlefield. Blood stained his outfit. He clearly looked tense, and when he gazed sharply around the clan master’s office, he looked visibly shocked by the decorations.

I snapped back to my senses and swiftly popped a festive cracker. Eva hastily followed suit, and Ark stood there in stunned silence. His party members behind him were also beat-up, and they looked just as astonished.

I wasn’t sure what had occurred at House Gladis, but it was clear that they’d been faced with an unexpected situation. Truth was stranger than fiction. I was stupid and unlucky, so I was used to accidents. I’d never seen Ark look so injured before, but I also knew how to deal with it.

I slowly stood up and unleashed my ultimate move—sliding while groveling on the ground. The plush carpet made it difficult for me to slide, so I did a small somersault before prostrating on the ground. If I were to grade myself, I’d give myself 120 points out of a hundred.

“I’m sooooo sorry!” I cried.

“Krai?!” Eva gasped.

Satisfied with how well I kowtowed, I proceeded to bow my head several times. I wasn’t sure if I was to blame for their unexpected situation, but it was best to apologize first. Only Eva was with me. Ark didn’t say a word. I felt his gaze above me and tried to use my brain to its full capacity. The man was famous for being the strongest in the capital—just what was he up against that

made him look so ragged?

His fighting capabilities were a head above the other hunters. To provide further insight, my genius childhood friend might not have been able to beat him in a one-on-one battle. You might think that he didn't sound too strong, but our party had been conquering higher-leveled vaults and had absorbed plenty of mana material. Despite this overwhelming difference, Ark had so much talent and might that he could've closed this gap.

And yet, he was all beat up. Had he gone all out and returned in tatters, he must've fought a monster that would've surely been big news within the capital, so that wasn't the case. This meant that he was up against a foe which he couldn't exert his full power against. There was only one conclusion I could reach from there.

Ark spoke in such a displeased tone that I could hardly believe that he just uttered several words. "What are you suddenly lowering your head for?"

"Lady Éclair must've thrown a tantrum, no?" I replied.

"A...tantrum, you say?"

*Bingo.* I guessed that Lady Éclair, who'd tried to proudly present Ark with a mask, made it difficult for him to act in a mature fashion. He must've said something along the lines of "I don't need it" or "Krai would like this better." Upon hearing these statements, the young lady would've surely exploded with fury. Ark was in tatters because he had struggled to calm down the angry lady, and the small monster must've put up a good fight against him. I lowered my head, trying to push through with my apology as I noticed Ark trembling.

"Please don't misunderstand, Ark. I thought that you'd be able to resolve matters peacefully! I totally didn't think that you'd struggle so much, and I probably didn't explain the situation enough!"

It was my fault that I couldn't predict the young noble's anger. I should've offered a word of warning. But as I cooled my head, I had truly believed that Ark could solve this problem without issue. I was completely at fault since I'd filed this request to him, but he surely wasn't devoid of fault either.

"But I thought that I didn't need to tell you that you shouldn't anger the lady,"

I said.

“That’s—” Ark started.

“You’ve got a powerful Magus in your party. If the lady threw a tantrum, shouldn’t you have used Hypnosis Cage or something? I would’ve ordered that to Lucia.”

Just like our party, Ark also had an excellent Magus that could cast a wide variety of spells. Isabella Merness, with her lavender-colored hair that was unique to the northern region, raised her eyebrows.

“Huh?!” she demanded. “Are you saying that my spells are inferior to Lucia’s?! I used it, of course! I used my spell and it didn’t work!”

“Huh? Oh, I see...” I said awkwardly. “Uh, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize!”

“Uh, hey, don’t worry about it. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. Me? I’m full of weaknesses. But debuff spells like those are really useful, so it might be best if you practiced. I can ask Lucia to teach you a few tricks.”

“D-Don’t you dare mock me!”

Isabella stomped the ground, her cheeks turning crimson. *I didn’t think she’d fail to put a total normie to sleep. I thought she was a superb Magus, but maybe that wasn’t the case.* I sighed and extended my arm towards the clan master’s office.

“In any case, I thought you’d be back soon,” I said. “I was waiting for you. I’ve got cake and champagne prepared.”

Saint Ewe, who saw glittering strands hanging from the ceiling, wearily muttered, “Y-You really went all out with the decorations.”

“I hung them myself. I even started to have fun midway. Here, I’ve got candles too.”

Ark remained silent.

“Listen, I’m sorry,” I said. “I really am. I truly believed that you’d be able to handle the situation better.”

I wasn't overestimating Ark. Not one bit. He had a high reputation, and unlike me, he boasted the skills to live up to it. How could I have expected him to struggle against a single young lady?

Ark remained expressionless for a while before he finally sighed deeply. "Krai, you never explain things enough. I'm not omniscient."

"I'm sorry."

"I heard that Lady Éclair was rude to you, and I was told that you warned her about the dangers of the Relic. Even so, I expected *you* to handle the situation a lot better."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't mind if you drag me into your messes, but you can't involve innocent normies too. Aren't you the one who came up with that rule, Clan Master?"

I didn't explain things enough. I could've handled things better. His words were nothing short of the truth. I didn't mean any ill intent, but that didn't excuse me from my actions. My regrets ran higher than the mountains and deeper than the ocean.

"I didn't think things would escalate as much as it did," I admitted. "You're absolutely right. Next time, I'll be sure to only drag you into my messes."

"You're not repenting at all, are you?" Isabella said, her cheeks twitching.

*I am. I really am!* But above all, I was glad that Ark didn't talk about leaving our clan. Among my childhood friends, Ark was one of the precious few whom I fought with. This didn't mean that we were constantly bickering; it was simply that our friendship was so strong that a few arguments couldn't break our bond. Violent tendencies had to be discharged somewhere lest I explode, and Ark was the perfect man to spar with.

"Um, er... So, did you get the item?" I asked.

My timing might not have been ideal, but I had to ask. Ark reluctantly threw a leather bag towards me, and I hastily caught it.

"We went through quite a lot," Ark said. "We really did. It was a nightmare, trying to restrain Lady Éclair as she swung her blade around. Her swings were

much faster than what I'd expected, and she exerted far greater force than her body should've been capable of. I managed to pry it off her, but what exactly *is* that thing? She claimed that she didn't wear the mask of her own accord, and it pounced on her."

I wasn't listening to Ark's words. It was as though I'd received a birthday present—I eagerly undid the string on the bag and stuffed my hand into the bag. Ark and his party all looked at me in shock. *This feels nostalgic. It feels gross, like I'm touching a slab of moist, lukewarm meat.*

"Krai, that thing's dangerous! Don't act so rash!" Ark warned.

I took out the mask and raised it in the air. I'd lost this mask recently, and it felt like it'd been ages. Veins ran down its pink flesh. *Ugh, it's just so gross! It's wonderful! It's excellent!* As I froze in delight, its open mouth suddenly moved of its own accord.

"What power... I thought I'd gotten a superb subject, but I didn't think there was a warrior that could easily suppress the human that I'd enhanced. Hmm, it seems like the people of this generation are far tougher than I remember. I must change my standards."

"It talks?!" I gasped, my hands trembling.

The Reversible Face that I'd held just several days ago was a simple mask and didn't have the power to speak. I didn't possess a single Relic that could talk and move of its own free will.

"Th-Thousand Tricks... I-I was wrong. I'm grateful that you dispatched Ark for me," said a voice. A familiar figure emerged from behind the door.

But I chose that moment to press the mask against my face. Ark and the rest of the room gasped in surprise. I felt something creepy crawl behind my head, and it seemed like the mask was tightening its grip on me so that it wouldn't fall off. *It can talk and latch onto me?! That's amazing! It's like a high-tech Relic!*

"Raaaaaaah!" the mask howled.

"Wh-What is this?! Strength E-, Agility E-, Stamina E-, Mana E-, Growth Curve E-! Subject has no will or determination! Total points: 3! Subject doesn't meet the standards to activate Evolve Greed. Initiating emergency eject sequence," a

voice echoed in my head.

The mask trembled as though it was desperately trying to pry itself away from my face. The holes for its eyes drooped pathetically, and the appendages that latched on to the back of my head slipped off lifelessly.

I remained quiet as my will to live was now at an all-time low. After a deep sigh, I removed my hand from the Relic and it fell onto the ground. *This isn't a Reversible Face! It looks similar, but it's nothing like it! I've been scammed! Shit! I didn't think there were several types of disgusting masks out there! I didn't expect that.* I was tempted to file a complaint to whoever made the base of this Relic, but I knew that I couldn't do that. *Well, I did gain a rare Relic, so I guess I'll make do with that.*

"Tch, is this a degraded item?" I grumbled. "Eva, can you prepare a glass case for—huh? What? What's wrong?"

Eva always looked a little repulsed by me, but Ark, who normally maintained his cool, looked taken aback by my actions. His other party members hid behind him, and only Lady Éclair managed to stand by Ark's side, albeit with trembling legs. Her face was pale, her eyes were brimming with tears.





“N-Nothing. Nothing at all,” Lady Éclair said.

“Oh, I forgot to ask,” I said. “Can I have this?”

“Y-Yeah, sure. I don’t need that thing. I’ll give it to you! I was wrong for trying to steal your Relic from you! I-I’ll never do it again! I swear it! Please forgive me!”

Her teary voice echoed throughout the room. *Well, I can’t blame her for wanting to get rid of something like this. But I worked so hard and I didn’t expect this outcome. I didn’t think I misjudged a Relic. I’m a failure of a Relic collector.* I decided to bury this mistake deep inside my soul and take it to my grave.

I pulled myself together and formed a smile as I gazed at everyone in the room. “Well, this was a bit of a letdown, but I’ve even got cake prepared for you guys. Let’s all eat. I’ve got a few candles too.”

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“Are you sure the toughest one will do?” Eva asked.

“Yep, thanks. You’re a huge help,” I replied.

She brought in a large glass box using a few casters. My private room was hidden. The trap was so simple that any hunter could easily make their way inside, but I couldn’t let any outsiders in so easily. My room used to be large, but as my Relic collection grew, it started to feel a little cramped. My Relics were not only my collection, but also my weapons. If they weren’t easy to access, there was little meaning in having them. *Not like I’m any stronger with these Relics, but I do feel stronger, at least.*

I decided to have Luke and the others help me place the item once they returned and positioned the glass case in the corner. The case was made from a special kind of glass and was much tougher than others. They were used to display items in museums, and they could even repel the attacks of hunters.

With a bit of trouble, I managed to open the heavy lid and placed the gloomy-looking, fake Reversible Face instead. Its glum visage that appeared when I put it on my face hadn’t changed, and its droopy eyes didn’t make it seem as

terrifying.

Ark had told me that the mask had possessed the noble lady and created a huge fuss. The Relic had greatly enhanced Lady Éclair's abilities and had given her power on par with a mid-range hunter. If this was true, this was a Relic that I'd been seeking for a long while. My collection had several Relics that couldn't activate unless the user possessed some sort of physical capabilities. If I could easily boost my strength with this mask, I might not have had to live with fear. I decided to confirm one last time with the droopy mask inside of the case.

"Are you sure that I can't use you?" I asked.

Normally, it was silly to talk to a Relic, but the mask's mouth slowly moved to answer my question. "It's impossible. My powers cannot unleash your hidden potential. It's best if you find a higher-class mask, though finding one higher than me will limit the number of users. I presume it can only be used for military affairs—"

The talkative mask stopped itself, sensing my gaze. I sighed. This mask apparently had the power to bring out a person's potential, but my stats were just so weak and garbage that it couldn't draw out anything from me. This implied that my hidden potential was far lower than a little girl's. *Isn't this world a bit too harsh on me?* I sighed and quietly tried to cheer myself up. The item's effects might have been useless for me, but its rarity was guaranteed. I'd never even heard of a mask that could talk of its own volition.

It might stop moving if it ran out of mana, but it was the perfect talking partner. Every Relic was built upon something. The mask looked hideous, but it was created from someone's desires. While it had the power to enhance someone's abilities, it also heightened the wearer's emotions. I wasn't sure if it was worth two hundred million gild, but as I'd just received it for free, I had no right to complain. *I wanted a Reversible Face though...*

Eva, who was watching the two of us converse, sheepishly said, "Um, Krai, about that mask..."

"Hmm? Do you want to wear it, Eva?" I asked. "I don't think that's a good idea."

If Eva wore the mask and became even stronger, my fragile heart would

shatter into a million pieces.

“I don’t,” she replied, looking at me like I was some sort of freak. With an exasperated tone, she added, “Is it perhaps a Library? I’ve never seen one before.”

There was a beat of silence. *Huh?* The moment I heard her words, I furrowed my brows with concern and turned back at the mask.

“My name is Evolve Greed,” the mask said with annoyance. “I am one who advances humankind. It’s quite unpleasant to be grouped into some unknown category.”

*I’m an idiot.* I’d been collecting Relics more than anyone, and yet I never realized it. This mask spoke as though it possessed its own will—it certainly seemed like a Library. I was embarrassed to admit my mistake and nodded in understanding.

“So you’ve noticed. Very good,” I said.

“I’ve been doing some research on Relics myself,” Eva answered. “And I’ve been allowed to view that item for a while now. The odds of one appearing are astronomically low, and I never expected to see one with my own eyes.”

Despite her words, Eva couldn’t hide her grimace. I should’ve been more excited about this too, but I lost the opportunity to do so. *I always screw up at the most important part.* The term “Library” didn’t refer to a specific Relic, rather it was a name for a group of Relics that had a unique characteristic. Eva took a deep breath as her body trembled; it seemed like she was unusually excited about this.

Her usually composed tone carried a hint of elation. “While it depends on the details, your debts might disappear, Krai. I thought you just went on one of your crazy tendencies...”

*Sitri mentioned something like that too, but you guys are all treating me like I’m insane. That hurts.* Now then, here’s a pop quiz for everyone. What is the most expensive Relic thus far? Is it a treasured sword that can slice a mountain in one blow and part the ocean? Or perhaps it’s a bracelet that could allow the user to fly as they pleased. Is it a dimensional pouch that could house an entire

castle?

The answer is a book-type Relic. It was the most expensive item ever recorded, and likely the most famous too. The Book of Sands. This Relic received its name from the color of its cover and was an encyclopedia that listed every Relic that existed since the Era of Magical Arms. It was probably created during the golden age of civilization, and while the book had no special abilities, it contained information that could completely turn common sense on its head.

A majority of Relics found within treasure vaults were developed by one of the great ancient civilizations, the Era of Magical Arms, and allowed civilization to flourish. It was a product of advancement. The knowledge documented in the Book of Sands elucidated more than half of the abilities of items that were excavated and deemed a complete mystery.

Some even claim that the discovery of the Book of Sands had started the age of treasure hunters. The whereabouts of this book were currently unknown, but the initial discoverer of the Relic had sold it off and used that money to found a nation of their own. This was the start of Mier Kingdom—now, a thousand years later, it was one of the largest kingdoms in the world. This was a fairy tale that any treasure hunter knew about.

Items that could provide insight into their creation and, by extension, about the past civilization, were known as Libraries. They came in all sorts of shapes—from books to posters to monuments—but I'd never seen a mask-type before.

Relics of this type were rarely revealed, but scientifically speaking, this item was extremely useful and went for absurdly high prices. While I wasn't sure just how knowledgeable this mask was, it exhibited enough intelligence to hold a conversation. I didn't even want to imagine just how high of a price this mask *could've* been—I never expected it.

"Two hundred million was cheap," I said.

"It might still be cheap even if you offer ten times the price," Eva agreed.

And I didn't pay a single gild. It'd been a thousand years since the Book of Sands was discovered, and the information it contained had been widely rumored about. Since I hadn't heard about a mask before, there was a good

probability that this item wasn't a product of the Era of Magical Arms. Effects aside, if I were to sell this to the empire, it would be sold for an astronomical price. Eva wasn't lying when she said that I could probably pay off all of my debts.

I would also gain an honorable reputation. The Zebrudian emperor was known to prioritize practical gain, and he could raise my official level or even provide me with a noble rank. But the one who won this at an auction was Lady Éclair. Should I return it to her? I thought long and hard, remembering her face of shock when she ate the wonderfully delicious cake that I, Thousand Tricks, had carefully selected from a shop that I favored. Whatever the reason, she'd given it to me. I had no reason to return it to her, but if she knew that she'd gifted me with a Library for free, I wasn't sure how that prideful noble lady would react.

"We should negotiate carefully," Eva said with a serious expression. "Should we go to a trading company, a noble, or perhaps even a different nation? Mier Kingdom has spent years desperately trying to collect these Libraries."

"I'm not selling this," I replied.

"Huh?! Didn't you construct this elaborate plan to obtain this item and sell it?"

"Have I ever collected a Relic for resale?"

I'd purchased expensive items from resellers before, but I'd never sold a thing. It was awkward for me to say this since I didn't realize that I had a Library until now, but I was a Relic collector. I couldn't use this myself and I could sell it for a high price, but if I were to sell my Relics because of these flimsy reasons, I was a failure of a collector.

Eva widened her eyes and hastily rebuked, "This item cannot be handled by a single person. It's indeed valuable, but I feel like it's for the best if we pry all the information it has and then quickly sell it off..."

"So this'll be a secret just between the two of us, Eva," I said.

"I'm sure Ark and those surrounding Lord Gladis will be aware of this."

I couldn't deny that. Even Lady Éclair knew that the mask could talk and

possessed high intelligence. If you weren't blind like me, it wasn't difficult to put two and two together and realize that this mask was a Library. I could probably stop Ark from blabbing about this to others—he didn't lust after items and fame. He was the epitome of what treasure hunters should be. I wasn't plotting anything nefarious, so I knew I could handle him.

“Well, I think we'll be fine,” I said. “Could you deliver a cake to Lady Éclair's house to get on her good side? We'll go with the carrot and the stick plan. Oh, and don't forget the candles.”

“I understand,” Eva said reluctantly, her voice carrying a tone of regret. “I feel like this was the perfect opportunity to repay our debt...”

*I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble.*

## Interlude: Named Quest

The auction became a thing of the past. As the buzz around it was dying down, the Explorers' Association was as quiet as ever. The crowd of hunters that swarmed around the quest board had dissipated, and there were only a few remaining. This scene had become an annual event of sorts. The employees of the Association gave an air of lenience. Upon finishing what she needed to write, Chloe saw the lack of hunters and used that opportunity to stretch out her arms.

"By the way, did you hear, Chloe? The eldest daughter of Earl Gladis had apparently gone berserk at the manor," her senior at work said. The receptionist seemed bored as well.

Chloe gave a lackadaisical response and mulled over her thoughts. *What happened to Arnold and his party? He seemed to be in a furious frenzy*, she wondered. At the very least, she hadn't seen the man since then. There wasn't any information discussing the defeat of the Thousand Tricks, but she was a little curious to hear the outcome of the match. *Should I ask around if a hunter visits us later?* Just then, she heard a voice call out to her behind her back.

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"A named quest..." Chloe murmured with a look of surprise at Branch Manager Gark's words.

On the desk was an envelope with the seal of a noble.

"Yeah," he said. "And it's from Gladis, to boot. Looks like *he's* done something."

"Earl Gladis... The one who hates hunters, correct?"

"He doesn't hate them, per se. He's just got his land to think about."

A named quest was a request that designated a specific hunter. Trading companies and nobles issued one whenever they wanted a hunter they trusted to do their bidding, but Earl Gladis had never used this policy before.

“Gladis probably wants to test Krai,” Gark said. “You know that Gladis’s fief currently has a few troublesome matters on their hands, don’t you?”

Chloe indeed was aware of this. The land was being targeted by some irksome people—Bandit Squad Barrel. They were a fearless group that terrorized the lands. This band of Thieves couldn’t be expelled from the lands protected by the strongest knights that House Gladis boasted. The earl was called the sword of the empire and his dignity was at stake. She wasn’t sure if requesting the help of a hunter here was a good or bad thing.

“But I’m sure Krai can do something about it,” Chloe said. “He has always pulled through somehow.”

“Right,” Gark agreed. “But he has a nasty habit of unconsciously provoking others. And he’s up against *the* Gladis.”

*Why was I called for this?* Chloe wondered with a dubious expression. Gark grinned and provided an unexpected response.

“Chloe, you’re free right now, aren’t you?” he asked. “Tag along with Krai and support him as an employee of this Association. Don’t worry; Krai’s used to this. You don’t have to act tough. Think of this as a learning experience.”

To be continued in Part Four...



## Side Story: Liz Loves Being Touchy-Feely

“My Krai Babyyyyy!” Liz called.

“You’re always so cheerful,” I said.

She threw herself towards me, and as always, I caught her in my arms. Our cheeks touched, and she rubbed her warm, soft skin against me. She emanated a faintly sweet, pleasant scent. I could probably tell Liz from her scent alone.

There wasn’t any excess fat on Liz’s limbs, and she seemed supple like a wild beast, but when she was so close to me that I could hear her heartbeats, her body was soft to the touch. I reached out and patted her head. She let out an ecstatic cry while burying her face in my neck.

Liz Smart loved to be touchy-feely. Sitri didn’t seem to hate it either, but Liz would jump on me every chance she got. She would sometimes try to hug me even if there wasn’t an occasion. The other members were usually gone and busy with their training, so since old times, it was my role to catch her embraces. She rubbed her nose against me and brushed her lips against my neck. As though to answer her passionate affection, I wrapped my arms around her back and squeezed tightly. Liz’s touching had grown more extreme by the day, and though I was nervous about it at first, I’d gotten used to it. Now, I only got a *little* nervous. Though it rarely happened, I made sure to tell her that she shouldn’t cling to me when she was naked. She lacked modesty.

“C’mon, Krai Baby. Let’s continue,” she whined. “We can, can’t we? Please?”

Tino, who was left behind, placed a hand over her mouth, her cheeks beet red as she watched her master nuzzle against me.

“L-Lizzy, you can’t be so sh-shameless...” Tino said.

“Mmm...” Liz murmured sweetly. Her apprentice’s words fell on deaf ears, it seemed.

“She must’ve been tired recently,” I said. “This isn’t shameless or anything, but just an effective way to provide care for her mental health.”

“Huh?” Tino asked.

Liz’s actions weren’t sexual, of course. We were so close that we could feel each other’s body temperatures, and outsiders might have thought that we were lovers, but Liz and I didn’t have that sort of relationship. I could feel her warm breath tickling my neck. Her ears red, Liz entrusted her entire body to me as I rubbed her back in a circular motion.

I explained myself to a shocked Tino. “Being a hunter is a tough job. You’re always out there risking your life, and that does a number on your mental health. I’m doing this to calm people down so that they won’t snap.”

“I-Is that so?” Tino asked. “I’ve never heard anything about it before.”

“But it’s the truth. It’s written in books too, you know. I’m sure that she can do stuff like this with her lover when she gets one, but until then, I’ll be hugging Liz instead.”

“I-I don’t think she ever will...”

*Liz, your apprentice is being pretty rude.* While it was true that Liz was violent and short-tempered, she also had plenty of good points. Feeling sorry for her, I undid the ribbon that tied her hair and ran my hands through her beautiful strawberry-blonde locks. Though she was always in combat, her hair was silky smooth, and my fingertips didn’t get stuck in any tangles. Liz loved it when someone brushed her hair. Just touching her head was enough to make her tremble as she squeezed me even tighter. I would’ve been able to brush her hair properly if I had the tools to do so, but she had to make do with my fingers for now.

Liz first started clinging to me when she was ten. She’d decided to become a hunter and just started her training. Back then, our physical capabilities were practically the same, and there wasn’t a noticeable gap in talent either. We each found our own masters to study under and began training. Among our group, Liz’s master was the strictest when it came to training.

Our hometown was a small city, and the person she apprenticed under wasn’t of high level, but her master had given her absurdly difficult and harsh training. One couldn’t have imagined a mere child going through it all. The worst bit was that this merciless method wasn’t done out of love—no, Liz’s training was just

unnecessarily rough. Liz wasn't even taught the techniques required to become a Thief. From sunup to sundown, she ran around, trained her muscles, and was forced to do mock battles. When she came home after her day was done, I couldn't bear to see her look so worn.

Compared to the ridiculous regimen that she had to go through, the training that she gave to Tino displayed affection. I tried to stop Liz on numerous occasions. Her daily regimen was absurd no matter how you sliced it. No child should be forced to suffer like this. However, the strong-minded Liz didn't lend an ear to my words and pressed on.

It was then that I noticed that everyone was only looking towards the future. The only person with time on their hands was me—I had been chased away at the front gates by every person that I went to and had been told that I lacked talent. I was the only one with meaningless spare time. And so, I quickly searched for what I could do.

I found a single book. It listed methods to soothe and calm one's mind and soul; it looked easy enough that I felt like I could follow these steps. I still remembered the first time I hugged Liz's tattered body. She cried. She was so tired that she could hardly move another step, and tears spilled from her eyes as she answered my embrace.

Since then, Liz loved to rub against others. She didn't give up. She continued to undergo severe training, and it'd become a daily routine to hug her exhausted body. Her no-good master only knew how to tire people out and didn't teach Liz a single technique, but she quickly surpassed her awful master within a year. In fact, she half killed her master in a mock battle and had quickly been switched to a new one. The only thing she learned from her former master was to be merciless, and that was precisely what had beaten them half to death. I could only find irony in this situation.

It was rare for her to become extremely fatigued these days, but she still liked to be touchy-feely. This led to a talentless person like me to misread the situation and cling to the false belief that even I could do something worthwhile. This was why I'd worked hard immediately after Luke made me the leader. *I should've just gone by the book and not had any funny ideas. The world's a tough place...* But since this ultimately worked in Liz's favor, I had little

room to complain.

Liz didn't seem at all angry when I played with her hair. Her cheeks were tinged pink and she gave me a broad smile. To me, she was a lady with superhuman strength, but she wasn't squeezing me to death. There were numerous cases of a powerful hunter accidentally exerting too much strength and injuring their normie partners, but our embrace was also a way for Liz to control her might. *Or so the book told me.*

"Krai Baby... Go on, keep 'em coming..."

"There's more to this?!" Tino cried.

"The trick is to pet her head with plenty of love," I replied. "Do this to her when I'm not here, okay, Tino?"

"There's no way I can do that! Uh... Master?"

I lifted Liz, her arms still around me, and lay on the sofa while facing the ceiling. Liz's damp eyes stared up at me. I brushed aside her bangs, and she took my palms nuzzling her cheek against my hands.

"Because she's proud and has self-control, you have to praise her well," I explained to a stunned Tino who silently watched on. "Look, when she shows me her tummy like this, it means she's showing her affection."

I pointed to Liz's soft, exposed belly. She had a nice tan going on, and it made her seem alluring.

"Master... Um, what book did you read?" Tino asked gingerly.

"Hmm? I think it was volume 2 of *The One Who Traverses Paradise*," I replied.

"M-Master, that's just a novel. And why did you only read volume 2?"

"That was the only volume that was being sold. And besides, there's plenty to learn from novels."

It was a novel about adventure where the main character was a hunter. I knew that it was a work of fiction, but it was jam-packed with tribulations and growth, and I learned plenty from the book. I loved reading it, but as I started to grow busy, I'd only managed to read the second volume. Some of the faux strategies that I told Luke were actually based on that book.

“I especially thought that the bond of trust between the main character and his partner was ideal,” I said. “I can lend the book to you next time, though I only have volume 2.”

“N-No, thank you,” Tino replied. “I actually have the books and read the entire series. Um, by partner...”

I looked at her in astonishment. It felt like a huge coincidence that Tino knew about the series; it was written over a decade ago. I glanced at Liz’s exposed stomach and rubbed her soft, supple skin. She let out a shrill cry and squirmed, but it was evident that she liked it. The novel depicted that their partner’s signals needed not to be overlooked. Liz was in a good mood today, and I gave a firm nod of satisfaction before I moved to the next step. I took out a boomerang made from bone from my desk drawer.

“Er, Master...” Tino said delicately. “The main character’s partner in *The One Who Traverses Paradise* is Reanne. And if my memory serves me correctly, and I could be wrong, mind you...wasn’t Reanne a wolf?”

“What?” I asked.

I was shocked to hear those words and the boomerang slipped from my grasp. Liz panted happily as she jumped forward and caught the toy, displaying her superb reaction skills.

“Krai Baby, I don’t get this training at all,” she pouted, twirling the boomerang around her finger. “I don’t like it. Maybe it would’ve been useful back in the day, but my agility is already really good, isn’t it? I feel like this won’t do anything for me at all. I’d rather you pet me more.”

Unlike the novels, Liz, as per usual, didn’t like playing fetch. *Wait, a wolf? Seriously? That can’t be...*

“But that wolf talked,” I insisted.

“Er, I’m pretty sure that the main character had the special ability to understand the wolf’s words...” Tino answered with downcast eyes.

I looked away and turned to Liz, who was gazing up at me with damp eyes. *Seriously? I mean, yeah, there were mentions of a wagging tail, but I just thought that the wolf was a human, like a half-beast girl or something. I’m*

*pretty sure volume 2 didn't clearly state that she was a wolf, and she was stronger than her partner and pretty intelligent.*

"It's a tale of adventure between a very intelligent, large female wolf and a boy who can understand the wolf's words, isn't it?" Tino asked.

*Now that she mentioned it...there was some weird stuff going on.* Reanne would often lick the main character's face whenever they hugged, and there were times when she was carried around. During the bathing scene, her entire body was scrubbed meticulously, and she was used as a pillow when they slept. I did think that they might've been a bit *too* close to each other, but I just assumed that hunters were like that. I'd tricked myself. I guessed that the main character didn't seem at all nervous or embarrassed to be with his partner because he was a profound guy.

*Wait, seriously? A wolf? So my displays of affection towards Liz for the past five years were something shown to a wolf?! Really?! Whoa, I'm freaking stupid!* Liz got up and rubbed her body against me. I hugged her and gave her headpats. *The sheen on your fur is splendid!*

"I-I knew that, of course," I stammered. "I was just testing you, Tino."

"R-Right, of course!" Tino replied. "You surprised me for a moment! But I didn't think you read my favorite series. Reanne is such a good girl and absolutely adorable! I can see why she's the ideal partner! And the main character sees Reanne like a person even though she's a wolf."

"Mhm, uh-huh. Reanne really is so cute...even though she's a wolf."

*I always thought that Liz was a naughtier kid than Reanne. Oh god, what do I do?* To hide my panic, I copied what I read from the book and started scratching behind Liz's ears.

"Krai Baby," she whispered in my ear. "Let's continue this in the bathtub, hmm? It's been a while, so could you please wash my back? Please?"

"You can do that by yourself, can't you?" I replied. "You should be more modest. It's not like you're a wolf, after all."

## Afterword

Thank you for picking up another volume of my humble story! I'm so happy that we can meet again in the third volume. Tsukikage the author here.

Just like in volume 2, I've packed this one with everything I've wanted to write about. I didn't pull back any punches. Once again, with all that wonderful content, there's not too much left for me to discuss in the afterword. You can tell by the thickness of the past two volumes, can't you?

Unlike the previous volumes, I decided to portray a bit more of the characters' daily lifestyles in this one. In addition to the returning characters from the previous volumes like the Grievers Liz and Sitri, I've introduced a whole host of new characters.

If I can make you laugh even a little, I would be delighted to hear it. Krai's no-good personality is escalating, and I had so much fun writing this volume! I *love* writing about a no-good character!

The cover illustration for this volume was fantastic! I'm certain that the readers are satisfied with the drawings. Ark looks so handsome, fitting for his Hero nickname, and the mysterious noble lady (name revealed in this volume) looks like a damsel in distress! Sitri is a perfect match for her evil role, but what I'd like everyone to focus on is Krai's eyes! He looks so angry! So displeased! A perfect fit! Of course, the illustrations within this book are equally splendid, so if any of the readers are starting off by reading the afterword, please look forward to them!

Also, I'd like to mention the manga version that I noted in the previous volume as well. It's now been serialized! Thank you to Rai Hebino who is in charge of the manga version! It's up on ComicWalker.

Tino is adorable. Krai looks cool too, but when he wants to be pathetic, there really is no saving him. I think the manga-style has its own unique portrayal, is well paced, and is simply sublime. As the original author, I'm more than satisfied with the work and I think the manga is absolutely perfect. Please give it

a read! Honestly, it's more interesting than the light novel version.

I'd like to make another announcement. It's already up on <https://gcnovels.jp/nageki/> and Twitter (now X), but from July 16th to September 15th, there's a campaign going on! All you have to do is send in the band around the book for the first two volumes of *Grieving Soul* and everyone will be presented with a special summer booklet! It's very generous. There are some bonus side stories and even a special illustration by Chyko. If you have any interest, please check out [http://micromagazine.net/gcn/blog/nageki\\_sp/](http://micromagazine.net/gcn/blog/nageki_sp/). And if the campaign is over by the time you read this, I'm so sorry.

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Finally, I'd like to wrap this up with a few words of thanks.

Thank you to Chyko who once again provided illustrations for this volume. I cannot thank you enough. I especially love the image of the tavern; it was just how I'd imagined, and I honestly prefer it to what I was expecting. You even drew new characters like Lady Éclair, Arnold, and the mask of flesh. I cannot thank you enough for the wide variety of characters you can portray. I think a lot of new characters will appear in the future, and I'll be in your care when that time arrives.

And thanks to Kawaguchi, my editor, as well as everyone involved with the publishing at GC Novels and other corporations involved. I've been greatly indebted to everyone again. They hosted a popularity poll as well as other campaigns, and every week, they provided me with the topic for the *Grieving Soul Communication* corner. I truly cannot thank everyone enough. Please continue to look after me and I hope everyone takes care of their health.

And most of all, thanks to all of the readers who have followed this story from its web debut all the way until now. Thank you for picking up the volume.

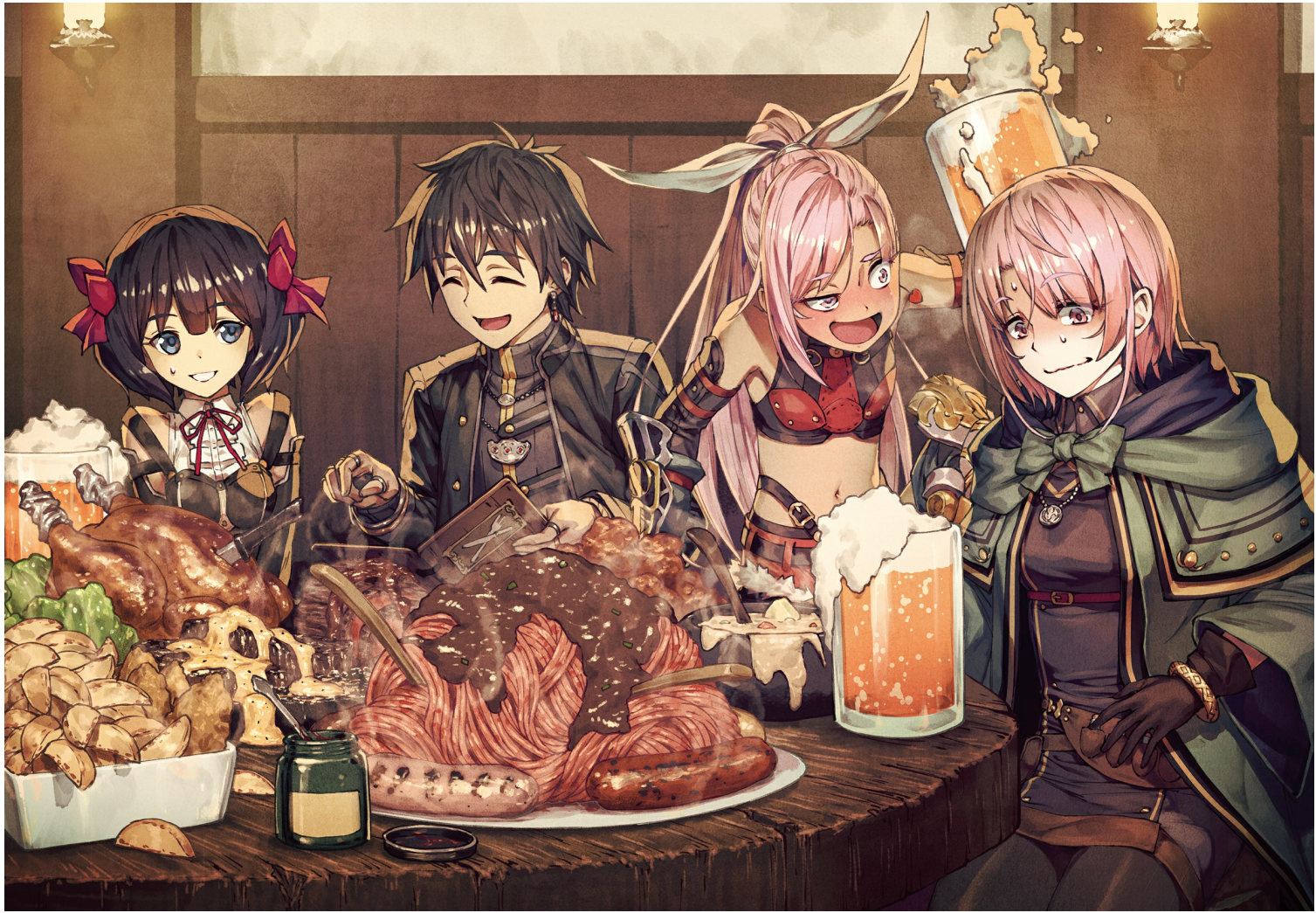
P.S. Like the previous volume, you can find a QR code and answer a survey to view a special side story! Please do so if you wish!

Tsukikage, July 2019

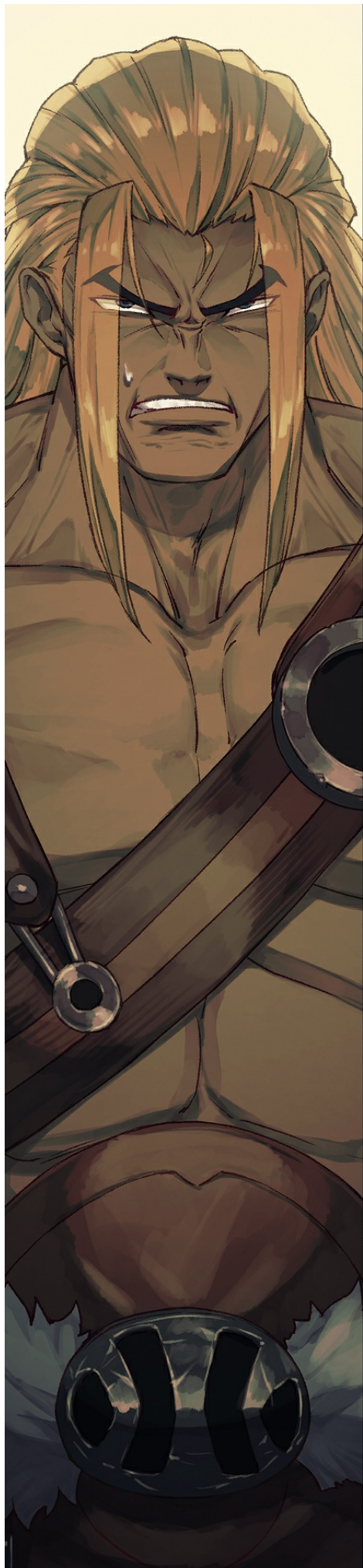














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Let This Grieving Soul Retire! Woe Is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party Volume 3

by Tsukikage

Translated by N@TSUKI & piyo Edited by Aldia Elwood

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