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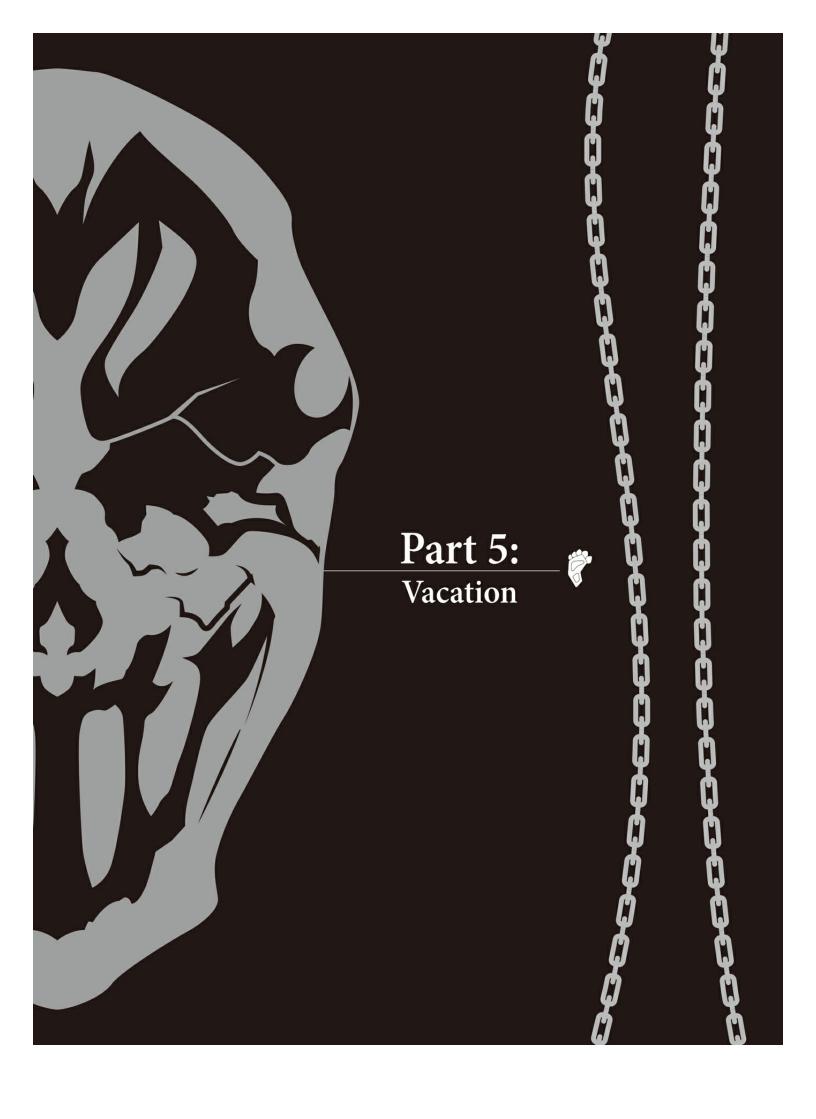
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Prologue: Turning Point

The sky was such a perfect shade of blue I almost couldn't believe it. A refreshing breeze blew through the wide-open carriage window. I smiled as I watched the mellow scenery roll by.

"Too bad we couldn't meet up with the others," Liz said.

I let out a yawn before replying to her.

"Yeah. These things happen."

Rumors didn't do justice to the imposing sight of the Level 8 treasure vault Night Palace. In my experience, treasure vaults designated with a high level had an unmistakable aura of danger. Night Palace was no exception.

Its towering figure rested atop a cliff. Billowing thunderclouds coiled about the castle's numerous spires. Solemn, gigantic walls surrounded the outer perimeter making it look unlike anything produced by nature. But what struck me as the most hellish of all was the constant downpour. The skies were clear just a short distance away from the vault, meaning the rain was most likely a product of mana material.

In spite of the treasure vault's gloomy atmosphere, not a single monster prowled around outside. This was a sign of just how dangerous Night Palace was. As they were sources of mana material, most treasure vaults would attract powerful monsters to their premises. A Level 8 treasure vault would normally have plenty of monsters skulking around both inside and out. If there weren't any then it could only be that the vault's phantoms had killed them.

Simply put, this was no place for a fraudster with an inflated level like me. This was a genuine living nightmare; even with Liz, Sitri, and Tino at my side, I couldn't be sure I could enter such a vault and come back alive.

Having not seen many high-level treasure vaults, Tino stuck her head out the window and looked like she had the wind knocked out of her. Her fight with Arnold had already left her exhausted, but Night Palace's aura alone was

enough to make her nauseous.

Being accustomed to these sights made a difference, but that wasn't the true cause of her nausea, nor my lack thereof. The real reason was that people with sharper senses were more vulnerable to external influences. Tino's reaction was the same as Sitri's tenured trio of Black, White, and Gray, meaning her reaction was normal for hunters.

"If they're not here, then we can probably assume they got out just fine," I said.

"Well, we had already explored the vault in its entirety and thinned the phantom population," Sitri recalled.

That was right. I didn't think much of Liz leaving the vault by herself, but Sitri was a thorough girl. She probably wouldn't have departed from the vault early if she hadn't deemed it safe to leave the others behind.

Staring avariciously at Night Palace like some sort of maniac, Liz asked me a question.

"By the way, Krai Baby, does this mean we've fulfilled our objectives?"

"Hmm, only about half of them," I said.

"Huh?! Only ha— Uurgh."

Before Tino managed to finish her sentence, her nausea got the better of her. Perhaps she needed to rest?

Our vacation had three broad objectives. The first was to meet up with Luke and the others, but we had already missed our chance to do this. I knew this one was a long shot, so I didn't fret when we realized we had missed them.

The second was to go to a hot spring and relax. This was what I planned to do next.

The third was to *not* be home in time for the Gathering of the White Blade. Needless to say, this was the most important of the three.

In summary, our vacation had no real objectives. No matter what, I wasn't going to be attending the Gathering of the White Blade! We had been gone for a week and it would take about that long to return the capital. We had to wait

yet another week before turning around.

Even if I managed to meet up with the others, go to a hot spring, rest, and thank everyone for all their hard work, I still wouldn't head back to the capital if there was time remaining. Dancing around a bonfire with Arnold and his party sounded more appealing than going to that gathering of freaks. If I hadn't had a party and a clan to look after, I would have simply fled abroad by myself.

"It's your vacation and all, so you can do what you want, but I think Night Palace is still more than T can handle," Liz said.

"Well, I never planned to enter in the first place."

If the other members were still inside, I would've just waited for them outside. I'd be inviting my own death if I entered a Level 8 treasure vault. I liked to believe even I had that much common sense. I looked at Tino and saw she was pale as a ghost and on the verge of tears.

"We won't do anything dangerous," I told her. "I mean, from the start, I never planned on us doing anything dangerous. Ha ha ha."

"Master, I don't see what's so funny," she protested in a small voice.

I didn't think it was funny either. But looking back, I felt Arnold was responsible for everything that had happened. We had many close calls on the road, but we only came in direct contact with danger when we crossed the mountains. But if Arnold hadn't been chasing us, we never would have been forced to brave the mountains in the first place.

"It's all Arnold's fault," I said.

"Shall we dispose of him?" Sitri suggested.

"No."

All I wanted to do was soak in a hot spring and forget about it all. About a week spent like that seemed like it would be enough. Arnold's pursuit had me on edge, but I didn't think I'd be seeing him again. I couldn't imagine the same coincidence happening again and told Liz not to give him more hints.

I figured if I were to run into him at a hot spring, then I would just have to accept my fate. There weren't too many Relics I could bring with me into a

bathing area.

"Our next destination is a hot spring. We just need to make sure we don't set foot in the Gladis Earldom," I said.

We were pretty close to his domain. We had to be careful.

"Hey, Krai Baby, do you have something against Earl Gladis?"

Liz had a funny look on her face. She had probably figured out as much as she could glean off intuition alone. I trusted her and Sitri. I liked to believe I could trust Tino.

"Tell you the truth, I received a named quest from Earl Gladis," I said.

"Really? From that hunter-hating earl? Wow! What kind of quest is it?"

I didn't know. I never accepted the quest brief. I never even decided to accept the quest—actually, I decided to do the opposite. I wasn't going to accept the quest, no matter what. I felt bad for Chloe, but I wanted her to just turn around and go home. Nothing good could come from a named quest issued by a family of warriors.

Unlike Liz, who had a twinkle in her eyes, Sitri solemnly accepted my reasoning.

"Very well. We'll avoid the Gladis Earldom. Near his territory, there should be a small town famous for its hot springs. However, going there would place us dangerously close to the earl's domain."

Sitri unfolded a map and pointed. Just like she had said, the town wasn't necessarily in the Gladis Earldom, but it came awfully close.

No point in worrying about every little possibility. I guess this is fine since we aren't actually stepping over the border. Even if they find us, I can just make it clear to them that I don't want to accept their quest.

"So has this place got mixed bathing?"

"Goodness, Lizzy! There's nowhere with mixed bathing in this day and age!"

"Ah, whatever. I guess that's fine."

I feel bad that Luke and the others can't join us, but if it turns out to be a good

spot then we can just bring them along with us another time. Oh, I should release Black, White, and Gray once they've had a chance to relax at the hot spring.

I rubbed my eyes and let out another yawn as I hyped myself up for a long overdue visit to a hot spring.

Éclair Gladis sprinted down a carpeted hallway. She narrowly avoided colliding with a maid and received a scowl from a young knight, but she didn't stop. She reached the furthest room in the mansion and practically slammed into its heavy door as she pushed it open.

The head of the House of Gladis, Van Gladis, furrowed his brow at his daughter's brazen discourtesy.

"Tell me, Father, is it true you've issued a named quest to the Thousand Tricks?!" Éclair shouted.

"Éclair, as a daughter of the House of Gladis, you must show some grace."

"Please, answer me! Why the Thousand Tricks?"

"I don't see any need to explain myself," the earl said. "But, as a man of the nobility, I can not permit myself to remain indebted to a hunter."

His sharp glare reminded Éclair of her role in creating that debt. She bit her lip.

A named quest from a noble was proof that a hunter was among the best out there. A Zebrudian noble establishing relations with a hunter was a significant thing, all the more so when that noble was famous for despising hunters.

Renown. It was among the most valuable rewards a hunter could ask for and it was what nobles paid out. A quest offered by a large trading house could pay in gold, but clear renown wasn't so easy to come by.

In the incident with the auction, Éclair became indebted to the Thousand Tricks. In the complicated world of the nobility, it would reflect badly on the House of Gladis if their means of repayment was insufficient. However, a high-level hunter would already have plenty of wealth, power, and renown.

Lord Gladis sunk into a brief silence before continuing.

"But, I can not pretend I have no interest in that man. He became a Level 8 hunter before Ark Rodin. This is a good chance to see just what sort of feats he's capable of."

The House of Gladis was well-known for its distaste for hunters, but this wasn't some blind hatred. They simply had absolute confidence in their strength and that of the knights at their command.

Even hunters would be shown respect by the House of Gladis if they were considered worthy, and, true to form, the house did maintain relations with the House of Rodin. But there was no denying the fact that earning the respect of nobles was very difficult.

"And so you asked that man to exterminate Bandit Squad Barrel?"

"Who did you hear that from?"

"Montaure told me."

"If there's one thing I'd change about that man, it's his weakness towards you."

Lord Gladis sighed at the thought of his right-hand man. Montaure was most likely just trying to make sure Éclair understood the consequences of her mistakes. Or perhaps he just thought Éclair might find the subject interesting.

Bandit Squad Barrel. They were cruel and bold, strong and cunning, a band of a hundred-some men. Criminals of all sorts chose to avoid the domain of Earl Gladis, but Bandit Squad Barrel ran rampant, attacking towns and villages.

Knights had been dispatched many times to stop the bandits, but each attempt was in vain. If a large number of knights attacked, the bandits would flee. If a small number of knights attacked, the bandits would fight them off. Nothing could be more humiliating for an earl known for his strength on the battlefield. The bandits chose underhanded tactics, but that didn't mean they were weak. They had even managed to fight off groups of high-level hunters.

Normally, this was no time for a noble to be attending an auction, but Lord Gladis's status had obliged him to show up. However, at this rate, the

reputation of his knights was going to erode.

Previously, the plan was to enlist the aid of Ark Rodin and send him along with the earl's knights to crush the bandits.

A joint operation with knights would be a good opportunity. It would be a test of both strength and character for the Thousand Tricks. If his strength was genuine, then even the knights who looked down on hunters would be forced to recognize his talents.

For better or for worse, the name Rodan was well-known and carried its own baggage. The Thousand Tricks, however, was a newcomer. A show of his strength just might affect even some like Lord Gladis, who had a deep-seated disdain for hunters.

"Father, when will he arrive?" Éclair asked with some hesitation.

"I received word that he's left the capital. He should be here shortly," Lord Gladis said with a smile. "Cast aside your previous animosity towards that man and prepare to offer him a cordial welcome."

"Yes, father."

Éclair's animosity had already faded. What she harbored towards the Thousand Tricks was fear.

As his daughter lowered her head as though trying to make herself smaller, Lord Gladis began to show the first signs of apprehension.

We spent a day traveling while making sure to avoid the Gladis Earldom and reached our destination, a town named Suls, without incident. Suls was a small town nestled among some mountains. The distinct scent floating from the town suggested that Sitri wasn't lying when she said the place had famous hot springs.

We got out of the carriage. Because Arnold was chasing after us, this was the first time in a few days that we stepped inside a town.



For hunters, there was nothing unusual about spending a few days trudging through monster territory. It was a good way to polish survival skills and our Sitri could take every little detail, leaving us wanting for very little. Even still, I was a semiretired hunter and our trek left me fatigued, which was a little pathetic, considering I just sat around in the carriage doing nothing.

I loved taking baths, so much that I had a tub installed in my office at the clan house. Liz and Tino had played in the lake, but I was too afraid of alligators to hop in. All I could do was wipe myself down with a wet towel. When we arrived in Suls, I was ready to get in the water as soon as possible.

I want a manju. Even chocolate would be fine. Just something sweet.

Being a popular tourist destination gave Suls a different atmosphere than the imperial capital. The streets were lined with trees, rocks, and other natural objects that hadn't been removed. It was sort of exotic. There weren't many other travelers, which made me think it must've been the offseason.

I don't think anybody here will recognize me. This is a perfect hiding spot. A quiet place like this might not be to Liz's liking, but we've had too much commotion since leaving the capital. Let's take it easy here for a bit. That way Tino and Black, White, and Gray can all heal.

I walked back to Sitri, who was finishing up the paperwork necessary for our entry.

"Well, what do you think? This town—"

"It's good. I like it," I said, cutting Sitri off. "It's perfect for a short stay and it looks like it's not too crowded."

Festivals and other bustling events were nice, but I also enjoyed a quiet town. Really, I was fine as long as fire wasn't raining down on my head.

We had lost Arnold and company back in the Galest mountains, so I figured there was zero chance of us running into them again.

I watched Liz, that old wild child, drag Tino behind her as she went to see the town. Just a few days prior, she was still bedridden from her battle with Arnold, yet she had already recovered. I decided to expect a souvenir from them.

"I've heard the hot springs here are very rejuvenating. Sometimes wounded hunters come here," Sitri said with a grin.

Next to her, Killiam and Drink were both exuding excitement. They elicited some odd looks from others, but they were far more mellow than Liz. They also did what they were told.

"Rejuvenation. That sounds nice."

I had never once been critically injured and Ansem would heal the wounds of the other party members. It only made sense that I wouldn't care about the idea of a rejuvenating hot spring, but something about those words had an appealing ring to them.

Being able to travel on a whim was a privilege enjoyed almost exclusively by hunters. It would be a waste not to take advantage of that privilege.

Sitri and I began to stroll around the town together. Seeing all the different springs made me wonder just how big a water supply the town was blessed with. Just wandering the town was enjoyable. The rising puffs of steam kept the whole place warm and walking around the town felt like enough to heal my fatigue.

It seemed like the sort of land where you could start digging just about anywhere and quickly hit upon a spring. I considered moving to Suls once I quit hunting and was no longer bound to the capital.

Just one thing bothered me: the town was a little too quiet. It wasn't a large locale, but it still seemed a tad lonely. We might have just come at a bad time, but I felt such a fine hot springs town could do to be a bit more lively.

It would've been too much to expect Sitri to have a safe house in Suls, but she did manage to find us lodgings for the week despite our sudden arrival. It was an inn reputed to have fine springs and good food and catered not to hunters but to wealthy tourists.

Unlike the utilitarian inns meant for hunters, there was some effort put into making the building's exterior look nice. I was angry with myself for not bringing a camera.

"At the front desk, they asked if we're newlyweds," Sitri said with flushed

cheeks.

I'm pretty sure that was just flattery. I think. Why would newlyweds want a room big enough to host eight people?

I elected to not tell Sitri about the look I received from the desk clerk. The look that said: *How'd* this guy *end up with her?* We were just some hunters and some extras.

The inn's interior lived up to the expectations set by the exterior. Our room was spacious, floored with tatami, and smelled quite nicely—all of which were things you couldn't say about rooms made for hunters.

Hunters were habitually covered in blood, oil, and dust, so their rooms were meant to be entered with footwear on. They were also designed under the assumption that their tenants would be performing maintenance on their gear.

Even in the capital, tatami rooms were a rare thing. Before I became a hunter, staying in such a room was a dream of mine. After starting my career as a treasure hunter, I stayed in many tatami rooms and it never got old.

What's so great about tatami flooring? Being able to roll around wherever you want. That's what's so great. I once considered having tatami flooring in my room at the clan house, but Eva put a stop to that. She wasn't in the wrong, it would get dirty in a heartbeat.

I might mention that tatami wasn't cheap in the empire. Assuming that those mats cost the same in Suls as they did in the capital, our room probably cost ten times what a normal one would have cost. I'm sure Eva would've been angry if she learned we rented something so luxurious.

"I'm so glad the room's to your liking. What luck that it was vacant. Normally something like this would be much pricier and require a reservation," Sitri said as she watched me give in to my desire to roll around on the floor.

"Hmmm, that is lucky. Is it because it's the offseason?"

"Indeed. I imagine all the tourists fled because of this town's proximity to the Gladis Earldom."

Oh, because of the proxim— Wait, then it's not the offseason? Does the earl's

territory get closer or farther depending on the season? Ha ha.

"Apparently the earl's having a fair bit of trouble with a rampaging group of bandits. It appears that caused the reduced number of visitors."

"Oh, that sounds like a lot of trouble."

It wasn't a rare story in the empire. Just as Zebrudia was home to legions of powerful hunters, many of its criminals were also quite fearsome. The knights did a fine job maintaining order, but they couldn't keep up with the criminals, who popped up like bamboo shoots. Lord Gladis had a capable bunch of knights at his command, so I figured their bandit troubles wouldn't last long.

"I don't think we need to worry about those bandits. Really, I think it's good luck; it allowed us to get such a nice room."

"Being a tourist destination, this town doesn't have much in the way of defenses. I bet that made most travelers feel uncertain."

When Sitri mentioned that, I noticed that the outer walls of Suls were made of wood and very simple compared to those of Elan and Gula. A town like this probably wanted to prioritize scenery, even if that left them vulnerable to dangerous monsters and scoundrels.

Still, those tourists were worrying too much. Bandit squads only really targeted travelers and foolish merchants who forgot to hire guards. Even if it was a small one, a town was still a town and that gave it a layer of defense. If that wasn't enough, Zebrudia was a powerful empire, you couldn't attack one of its towns and expect to get away with it. Not to mention there was the possibility of powerful hunters passing by. Attacking a town just wasn't worth the risk.

"Yeah, but bandits don't attack towns anymore."

"Indeed. If you want to wipe out a town, smart application of a poison will do just fine."

Sitri, that's just plain and simple terrorism.

It seemed she wasn't too concerned about the bandits either. I rolled around some more, stopping close to where Sitri was sitting.

I feel like I'm rolling around all the time. Maybe I should add that to my resume. The tatami, it saps my power. My body grows heavy. I can't do anything. Before I know it, I'll be one with the floor.

My eyes met Sitri's and she smiled bashfully while patting her knees.

"Go right ahead," she said.

I gratefully placed my head in her lap. Sitri's legs were wrapped in thin stockings and unbelievably soft even though they were thinner than Liz's. I kept meaning to reward Sitri for all her work, yet here I was the one being rewarded. I yawned and she placed a hand on my head.

"I think we have time. Let's rest and wait for the right opportunity," she said in a mellow voice.

"Yeah, uh-huh."

I was unable to resist my sleepiness, my consciousness drifting away. The last thing I saw was Sitri's mellow smile.

"Y-You've gotta be kidding me..."

Dazed, Eigh squinted and looked at the castle resting atop the cliff. Arnold felt the same as his right-hand man. Everyone in Scorching Whirlwind was pale in the face. Gilbert had never let himself be intimidated by Arnold, but even he was wide-eyed with shock. Chloe looked quite grim.

A bizarre, ominous chill had crept over them once they got within a few kilometers of it. Once it entered their vision, their anticipation gave way to certainty. Night Palace. This was a Level 8 treasure vault not found in Nebulanubes and it was beyond anything Arnold could have expected.

"I don't buy it. You mean that man went in there with such a small party?!"

Night Palace was the result of an immense supply of mana material packed into a comparatively small area. It affected the local climate, causing rain to pummel the ground like a constant waterfall. Blinding bolts of lightning constantly struck the many spires and unidentifiable shadows could be spotted between the gaps in the clouds. They couldn't spot any monsters nearby, but

that wasn't strange in such apocalyptic scenery.

The treasure vault before them was clearly beyond the scope of what Falling Fog could handle. A member of Scorching Whirlwind was unable to endure the eerie atmosphere and began to vomit as they fell to their knees. No one scorned them for it. Even for the highest-level hunter present, Arnold, this was too much. For a Level 3, looking at Night Palace must have been like getting a glimpse of hell.

"Wh-What should we do?" Eigh asked with a graveness uncharacteristic of him.

The treasure vault before them was something barely manageable to a party of six hunters of Arnold's level. With their current lineup, they were certain to die. Some of them might even be crushed by the pressure before they even reached any monsters.

The problem was that the same should have been true of the Thousand Tricks. His party also had its share of deadweight. Even at a distance, it was clear Night Palace wasn't a vault you could get through just because you had a Level 8 with you. If the Thousand Tricks was going through the vault, it meant the levels of those deadweight members were much lower than they should have been.

Arnold recalled how the Thousand Tricks received his attacks without any armor or other defenses, as he let that junior hunter fight for him. Arnold made up his mind.

"Damn," he said in a strained voice. "We'll fall back, think up a plan, and prepare ourselves. I don't believe it. I don't goddamn believe it!"

Chapter One: Hot Spring Capriccio

There really isn't anything better than a vacation. With all my assailants behind me, I rolled around on the floor and appreciated what a great thing tranquility was. At heart I was both a pacifist and a lazy bum who didn't want to move any more than I had to, I just frequently found myself at the center of trouble.

The sun had set and I continued to space out, but then Liz spoke up.

"Hey, um, do you wanna go slay a hot spring dragon together? I heard about it while walking around the town. Apparently, there's a nest nearby."

"Hm? I think I'll stay here."

And just like that, my relaxation was brought to a halt. We were at a hot spring, why did she have to go exterminating monsters? And what kind of half-assed name was "hot spring dragon"?

Our inn was a high-class one that catered to merchants and it showed in every detail. Our room was large, our bedding was soft, and our food was made with the best ingredients from both the land and sea.

The spring water was straight from the source and never recycled. There was a large tub and then each room had its own open-air bath. If you wanted to, you could comfortably spend a whole day without leaving your room. Why should I go fight a hot spring dragon on the very first day?

Sitri's lap pillow had let me recover all my lost energy, but I planned to save that energy for the hot spring! That energy wasn't something I could use on just anything!

"C'mooon. How often do you get to fight a big monster? What did we even come here for?"

Really? I think we've been running into way too many big monsters lately.

Even though she spent the day walking around Suls, my tiny childhood friend

was full of energy. Liz pursed her lips, grabbed my arm, and shook me. Without Luke and the others, I was her only playmate and I wasn't up for that role. If she wanted something to play around with, Tino wasn't doing anything.

"Let me say it right now: I don't plan on doing a single meaningful thing while I'm here! For the next two weeks, I'm going to eat, bathe, sleep, and wait!"

"In other words, you've already made your move?" Sitri asked.

"Huh? Uh, yeah, uh-huh. Exactly. It's all according to plan."

Leave it to Sitri to back me up even after saying something so pathetic. I guess you could say I had made my move. We had our bumps on the road, but my vacation was more or less going as planned.

We were at a hot spring. Warm, luxurious baths were an arm's length away. What could be more important than that? I was going to forget Arnold, the Gathering of the White Blade, the named quest, all of it. I would leave it in the hands of future Krai.

At some point, Sitri had changed from her Alchemist robes to a blue yukata with a floral pattern. It didn't show any more skin than her usual outfit but something about it was refreshing and a bit alluring compared to her usual bulky gear. She had good posture and the yukata almost seemed tailor-made for her.

No doubt, Sitri had worked harder than anyone else during our vacation. I hoped she would at least rest her wings for the last stretch.

There were also male yukatas available but I couldn't wear one of those and keep all my Relics equipped. Keeping myself alive was my top priority. I even kept my rings on when I got in the bath.

Killiam, however, had chosen to don a yukata and began striking poses. The yukata didn't really match its ripped figure. I wondered if maybe it was a more playful fellow than I had realized.

"Siddy, when did you change? And where's mine? Don't tell me you think you can use this as a chance to seduce my Krai Baby?"

"The only one here who would do that is you! Besides, how many times do I

have to remind you that he isn't yours? You can get a yukata from the inn employees, so why don't you go do that?"

"Liz, if you put on a yukata then you can't really go around kicking things," I pointed out.

Liz looked conflicted. Setting aside whether she might even need to kick anything at a hot spring, she had always hated wearing clothes that were hard to move in. However, her disciple was glancing about like she was eager to try one on.

"It appears there aren't many customers, so I'm sure we'll have the place all to ourselves," Sitri said.

"That's good to hear."

I didn't mind if there were other customers, but if I was alone then I could swim around in the tub!

But more importantly, this meant Liz was less likely to get into any altercations. Liz and Sitri both looked like endearing girls and so they often received various solicitations at inns. Then Liz would beat said solicitors to a pulp. Sure, they had it coming, but I still wanted to avoid those incidents if I could.

Then I remembered I had something to ask Sitri.

"What happened to Black, White, and Gray? I didn't see them when we were eating."

"Per your instructions, I secured them a room, and they should be receiving meals. Anything more than that isn't my concern."

What a dry response. But if we're in the same inn then I suppose I'll run into them. Then I can remove their collars and set them free.

"Um, Master, how do I look?" Tino asked.

She steeled her resolve and twirled around. She was in a navy blue yukata and wasn't wearing her usual ribbons. The dark blue fabric beautifully contrasted with her pale skin. It suited her quite nicely; Sitri must have given her a hand in

choosing the outfit.

Tino had been ten years old when we'd first met her shortly after arriving in the capital. Years later, I still couldn't help but see her as a child, but seeing her like this caused me to reconsider. With minor exceptions, her body was more developed than Liz's. I almost forgot there were only four or five years between us.

Unlike Sitri, Tino wasn't showing any more or less skin than she usually did, so why did she seem so much more alluring? I observed her with close scrutiny, but that made her cheeks flush.

"Yeah, you look nice. Very cute," I said. "So much, it's a shame only I can see you like this."

After all, I'm the one always causing so much trouble for you.

My overblown compliment caused Tino to grow an even deeper shade of red and she averted her gaze. Her lips were pressed tightly; she was clearly pleased. Liz wasn't really the type to dole out praise, so I wondered if maybe I should pick up the slack.

"Oh, Master..."

Tino's vocabulary seemed to be failing her.

"Krai, Tino may be cute, but that hardly excuses your ogling," Sitri said as she held out a protective hand between me and Tino.



Was that what I was doing? Eh, maybe Sitri has a point. She's a girl, she's in a better position to understand how Tino feels. She's a junior hunter to Sitri as well and those two are closer in age. Maybe they think of each other as sisters?

"Ah, Siddy, I don't really—"

"Are you all right, T? Krai doesn't mean to be so discomforting. But I'll protect you. Besides, Krai, before you go complimenting T, don't you have anything to say to me?"

Just gonna say it outright?

She was only joking, but her point still stood. Just because we were friends was no reason for me to throw courtesy out the window.

I gave Sitri another look. Rows of white flowers lined blue fabric. It was a good match for a mellow person like her. Her appearance was pure and gentle, yet also somewhat seductive. Perfect.

Treasure hunters would become more charming as their levels increased. Mana material did more than just strengthen their bodies and mana pools. It didn't outright alter their faces, but something about them would change. There were a few tales of hunters who strongly valued beauty and developed devilish charms that brought countries to ruin.

The inn employee had been right to look at me funny. There was a strong mismatch between Sitri and someone like me with no mana material. If I hadn't gotten used to the sight of her after growing up around her, then I might have completely fallen for her. Not that I was good enough for her.

Still, our clan sure has a lot of beautiful faces.

"Sorry, sorry. You look very pretty, Sitri. You look good in your usual robe, but this is nice too," I said, trying to make the most of my small vocabulary.

She was easy on the eyes and she had a nice pristine aura to her. I'm sure her doting older brother would've been thrilled to get a picture of her. The difference between her and myself was night and day.

Sitri gave me a hostile look. She stepped forward so she was right in front of me and, before I could say anything, wrapped her arms around me. Her body

was pressed right against mine.

"Siddy?!"

"Is that your honest opinion? I can tell when you're lying, Krai."

I felt something soft against my chest. I thought I could feel Sitri's heart beating through the fabric of her robe. If I had the senses of a treasure hunter then I would've been able to tell for certain, but as I was I couldn't tell if it was her heartbeat or mine. Something smelled sweet, my head felt hot and I became dizzy. She looked up at me through pink translucent eyes that threatened to pull me in.

I was used to skinship with Liz, but with Sitri it was unfamiliar and unsettling. If this was a joke, it was a bad one. I was, technically, a man after all.

With nowhere to go, my hands dangled uselessly. I couldn't just push her away.

Tino returned to her senses and let out a cry. She grabbed Sitri by the arm and attempted to pull her off of me. She moved without hesitation. I guess that's what happens when you've trained to fight people.

Tino easily pulled Sitri off and looked at me with puffed cheeks, an unusual expression for her.

"Siddy, you can't just do something like that! I'll tell Lizzy what you did! And you, Master! To think you were just saying how nice I looked!"

"Y-Yeah, uh-huh."

That was disgraceful, considering I had just complimented you. I'm really sorry. I'll take you out for cake later, so forgive me.

Sitri let out a bewitching sigh and nodded with satisfaction.

"Your heart was pounding, as it should have been, so I'll forgive you for leering at Tino."

"Yeah, of course it was pounding. And I wasn't leering at Tino."

Any man would do the same. Well, I guess Luke wouldn't have. But he dedicated his soul to the path of the blade and gave up on worldly desires, so

we can consider him an exception.

As I took a deep breath and calmed myself down, Sitri nonchalantly grabbed my left arm.

"Shall we head to the hot spring?" she said. "We don't know when we might find ourselves in a battle once more. Nor do I think we'll get much peace and quiet once Lizzy gets back from her search for the hot spring dragon."

Tino angrily puffed up her cheeks and jumped at my right arm.

"Master, don't let yourself be done in by Sitri's jokes! Be your usual proper self!"

When have I ever been proper?

Tino and Sitri were both pretty enough that I could get a big ego by having them at my side. I should have felt blessed twofold under these circumstances, but, for some reason, I just felt incredibly uncomfortable.

I was pretty sure Ark was always in situations like this. Hell only knows how he managed to keep a smile on at all times. Maybe that was also a matter of character.

Hmm. That joke of Sitri's was unusual for her. Maybe being at a hot spring is causing her to loosen up? It happens. It's not a bad thing. I'll just go along and enjoy it.

Sitri was in a good mood, Tino was in a foul mood, and both were holding one of my arms. As we went off to the hot spring I felt like a criminal escorted by two guards.

They were in a room at a high-end inn, the sort of place normally out of reach for the average hunter. A tough-looking man and woman put their heads together and talked in hushed tones.

"Are we really gonna do this?" the man said, his voice trembling.

This man was once feared as a criminal, now he was breaking out in cold sweat.

Black thought it pretty likely that she was making a similar expression as him. But despite their fear, they couldn't afford to delay any longer.

"If we don't do anything, our lives will be over. It's do or die!" she said to White.

"B-But the Thousand Tricks said he was going to let us go."

"Don't be stupid! Do you really believe that? He said he'd let us go, but then where did he take us?! Night Palace, that's where. A treasure vault avoided even by the craziest hunters! Goddammit."

Even from a distance, Night Palace was more horrifying than rumors could do justice. Black thought she felt her heart stop just by looking at it. If she had been ordered to enter that treasure vault she would've sooner jumped from the carriage and fled. She probably would have been killed for it, but it was a worthy risk. Black, White, and Gray were all fairly competent hunters but there was nothing they could do against a place like Night Palace.

It was a tough journey that they had been forced to go on. They had been forced to drive the carriage and look out for monsters. In towns, they hadn't been allowed to rest and had to watch Drink and the carriage. In the forest, they had been forced to fight off all sorts of monsters. They had even been chased by a Level 7 hunter.

Many times they had thought it would be better to just die than go on like this, but that treasure vault was something else entirely. Even after traveling with the Thousand Tricks, they didn't have a clue of what sort of powers he had. But Black, White, and Gray could all agree on that one point: the man was insane.

This was a vacation, but it was a Level 8's idea of a vacation. It wasn't something they could keep up with.

They were at what appeared to be a hot spring town, but the Thousand Tricks said they had only accomplished half of their objectives. It was hard to believe, however, it was very possible that Black, White, and Gray might get swept up into something even worse than anything they had yet been through. After all, back in the forest one of those maniacs had mentioned something about them still being useful alive.

It was then that Gray entered the room. His face looked completely drained of energy. He never had a healthy complexion to begin with, but now he looked almost like a corpse. His face twisted when he heard Black's proposal.

"I...want out," he said.

"What?! If you stay, it's a slow but certain death!"

"I don't think I can stand against those guys. Don't worry, I won't say a word about what you're doing."

"When did you become such a coward?!"

Gray shrugged his shoulders and left the room. This was unexpected.

Black, White, and Gray were all more or less equally skilled, but put to it, Gray was probably the smartest of them all. Yet the man Black and White just saw displayed not a hint of courage or will to resist. Perhaps he wouldn't return to a life of crime even if he made it home alive.

"What do we do?" White asked.

"We'll play the cards we've been dealt. It's our only choice. Maybe they'll let their guard down if one of us stays behind," Black answered.

They didn't have to worry about being snitched on; their captors weren't so kind as to reward Gray for doing so.

Gray bailing on them was an unforeseen turn, but they had already formulated a plan. They didn't intend to fight the Thousand Tricks. Even if they caught him by surprise, he could annihilate them with just his pinky finger.

The only thing still standing in their way was their collars. Destroying them would be difficult and they could still get shocked no matter how far they ran. It was truly an invisible shackle.

At first, the Ignoble held the key, but now it was in the hands of the Thousand Tricks.

"They said we'll be here for a week, maybe two. I think we should act early. We'll succeed. We've gotta. They're not keeping a close eye on us right now. This is our chance."

"Got it."

They didn't know much about the Thousand Tricks. They knew he looked like a benign guy, he seldom worked, he said pathetic things all the time, he constantly had his guard down, and he wasn't remotely imposing. And yet everyone was desperate to stay out of his way. It was possible he was just putting on an act, but there was one thing only Black, White, and Gray knew.

"The Thousand Tricks is getting complacent. He's not keeping an eye on us and stealing is part of our way of life. When it comes to that key, it's better that he has it rather than the Ignoble."

Sitri, that terrifying woman, knew what an overwhelmingly advantageous position she had been in, but she had never shown them the key. They never had the faintest idea where she kept it. But that was the right thing to do when controlling slaves.

However, the Thousand Tricks was different. He was overbearing, but also showed the sort of "generosity" you could offer when you had the upper hand. He brought out the key right in front of Black, White, and Gray. Maybe he just wanted to nip their escape plans in the bud. Maybe he really planned to release them.

Either way, they had a good idea as to where he kept the key—he carried it around with him. If that was the case, they were certain they could steal it. After all, he didn't pay any attention to them, no more than someone might mind a bug on the ground.

The Thousand Tricks was overwhelmingly powerful. Even if they didn't have the collars, they wouldn't be able to take him down. But that man was still a human, not some infallible god. This meant there was still hope for them. Fortunately, they were at a hot spring. There were changing rooms.

"I've checked the locks on the lockers," White whispered. "They're a bit complex. I can get 'em open, I'll just need a minute. They don't worry about clothing theft in these fancy places."

"Right. Let's do it."

They were up against a fiend, but that didn't mean Black and White were just

going to sit quietly and wait to be crushed. As they stood up, the two of them tried to hide their fear through twisted smiles.

I was all alone in the main bathing area's changing room. It seemed like there really weren't any other guests at the inn. It all felt very luxurious.

I hummed a tune to myself as I walked up to the lockers. Seasoned hunters never neglected thorough preparations. I knew that, even if I wasn't among their ranks. I was weak, to put it nicely. Without my Relics, I was just a normal guy and so I rarely removed them unless I was in my own room. That didn't change just because I was on vacation.

It didn't feel good entering a hot spring with a bunch of jingling Relics but I didn't have any other choice. Luke and Ansem would protect me if they were present and that would let me keep the number of Relics to a minimum. But I was by myself, so I couldn't make any compromises.

"There might be thieves," I said to myself in self-justification.

I removed the Relics I wore over my clothes and then removed my clothes. Having my Hounding Chain around my waist would be uncomfortable, so I activated it. It arranged itself into a doglike sitting position. I only had so much room on my fingers, so I kept my excess rings in a bag. I took those rings out and hung them on the Hounding Chain. Semiautomatic Relics were really convenient at times like these.

Bracelets, necklaces, pendants, circlets—they all went to the Hounding Chain in that order. Then went the key ring I kept at my waist. All those keys were also Relics. Key-type Relics were pretty popular.

As I searched my pockets, I found a golden key. It took me a moment to remember that it was for the collars on Black, White, and Gray. I considered taking it with me, but the key wasn't made of mana material. Relics didn't rust and were rarely affected by their surroundings. But a metal key might rust and I didn't see any reason to bring it with me.

I put the key in the locker, grabbed a towel, and headed to the bathing area with my Hounding Chain. Most hot springs didn't allow pets in the baths, but

the Hounding Chain was more chain than hound so I figured it was fine. Then again, I wasn't actually sure bringing a chain with me was okay.

I opened a frosted glass door and felt a rush of dense steam and the particular smell of hot springs. I took a good look around as I walked across the marble floor. My Hounding Chain wiggled its Relic-covered tail as it followed me.

The main bathing area was a work of art. It wasn't exceptionally large but you could tell that attention was paid to every detail from the floor to the ceiling. The variety of facilities and their quality left no room for complaint, even from a hot spring maniac like myself. There was no space for washing off blood, but this wasn't an inn for hunters so I guessed that was normal.

Even in the bathing area, I didn't see any other guests. Not at the showers, nor at the tub itself. It was a Krai Andrey solo performance. If no one else, Black, White, and Gray should have been at the inn. Perhaps they were just resting in their room?

I lightly waved my hand as I aimlessly walked around the edge of the bath. Just the feeling of relinquishing the added weight from my shoulders revitalized me.

In the bath, hot water poured from the mouth of a statue shaped like a dragon. The walls were engraved with a relief which was entirely incomprehensible for someone like me who had no interest in art. Unfortunately, the bath wasn't big enough to swim in but I didn't mind. I was old enough that swimming around just because no one else was around felt childish.

"This is perfect. There's even an open-air bath."

I made up my mind. I would move to Suls once I retired. I walked up to a glass wall and aimlessly glanced into the open-air bath.

Soaking in the rock-carved open-air bath was a bright sky-blue dragon.



"Huh?"

I rubbed my eyes and looked again, but the dragon was still there.

Overall, it had a fancy, round outline. It had big, doe eyes. It was about three meters tall, but that was on the small side for a dragon. Hot water overflowed from the tub. Large droplets splashed against the glass wall as the dragon shook its wings and wagged its tail with pleasure.

My Hounding Chain ran in wild circles around me. It probably would've been barking if it was capable of it. I stood in a daze for a moment before I decided to pretend I hadn't seen anything.

I went off to the showers and took my sweet time rinsing my body from head to toe. My heart was still pounding. It was a different sort of pounding than when Sitri pressed herself up against me.

Putting a dragon in a bath. There's no understanding the tastes of the rich.

Once my body was squeaky clean, I fearfully glanced at the open-air bath from a safe distance. I saw the vague shape of something blue. Of course, it was still there.

I thought about what to do as I slowly sank into the water. It was fairly hot, but that was all the better. My body began to relax, like my fatigue was dissolving in the water. Covered in Relics, my Hounding Chain loyally sat nearby.

But all I could think about was the dragon. I had come all this way to a hot spring and I couldn't even enjoy it. I had seen all kinds of dragons, but that one was new to me. It didn't even make sense. No one would believe me if I told them about it. Even I wasn't certain of my sanity.

I continued to soak in the warm water while giving occasional glances towards the open-air bath, but the dragon wasn't going anywhere. It was frustrating. With the dragon in there, I couldn't enjoy the open-air bath. Maybe I should've brought Killiam with me. But that would've been discomforting in its own way.

Then a thought occurred to me. Maybe I could join the dragon? When I really thought about it, it seemed like there was no way a dangerous creature could enter the open-air baths of a high-class inn. Hot water poured from the mouth

of a dragon statue inside. Maybe dragons were a sort of signature of this place?

Dragon baths, is it? I think I prefer normal baths.

I saw the dragon's neck sticking out of the water. It looked quite pleasant. I didn't know anything about the facial expressions of dragons, but it looked relaxed. The dragon was a tad large, but there was still plenty of room; I could easily fit in if I wanted to. I had been through all sorts of experiences, but bathing with a dragon would be a first. Not that I had ever felt the desire to.

Maybe I should just give up on the open-air bath.

This was a dragon we were talking about and I had no mana material and couldn't hurt a fly. Even if the dragon didn't mean to hurt me, I could still get tossed across the room if it bumped into me by accident.

After sitting with warm water up to my neck, I began to feel dizzy. I had completely forgotten about my plans to give the sauna a visit. Now I didn't have enough time for that.

Should I join the dragon or not? Can I? Is it safe? Is it dangerous? No. Let's put ourselves in their shoes. I am a dragon. I'm relaxing in a hot spring and a human comes along to bathe. The human is weak. Unlike those monstrous hunters, this one has no particular powers. I am a dragon. There is next to no chance that I might be hurt.

Would I really bother to attack under those circumstances? No.

With my mind resolved, I stood up. Surely the dragon was a signature part of the inn. Like a pet. I had nothing to fear. Showing fear might only make things worse.

I opened the door to the open-air bath and stood before the dragon with my arms crossed in a bold, assertive pose. Then for no particular reason, the dragon hit me and sent me soaring. I crashed through the glass wall and stumbled into the main bath. My Safety Rings prevented me from taking any damage from the blow or from the broken shards of glass.

The sky-blue dragon glared at me, its doe-eyes glinting in a way that shouldn't have been possible. My Hounding Chain stood in front of me, as though trying to protect me.

I was confused, but I still managed to let out a shrill cry.

"SITRIII! THERE'S A DRAGON! THERE'S A DRAGOOON!"

I was wrong. It seemed so content that I figured the dragon must be special, but it was just a wild beast.

She couldn't help herself. With sparkling eyes, she gasped at the scenery before her. Tino Shade had only left the imperial capital a few times. She was always busy training and most quests she undertook didn't require her to go beyond the capital's walls.

Hunters spent more money on equipment than on lodgings and she had never stayed at an inn that catered to anyone but hunters. It was also her first time seeing such a large hot spring. She had been through a lot since leaving the capital, but what lay before her made her glad she came along on the vacation.

Even the warmly lit changing room made her feel a bit uncomfortable with it all. She turned towards Siddy and, with some hesitation, asked the question that had been on her mind.

"Um, Siddy, regarding the cost..."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that, T. Don't be shy, we earn much more than you do. In fact, it would show a lack of faith in us if you felt the need to hold back on our part."

Siddy's words were nonchalant but projected a certain confidence that wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Th-Thank you very much," Tino said.

Siddy had a point. Tino was an intermediate hunter, but a famous party like Grieving Souls could easily have had an income hundreds of times greater than hers.

Lizzy had gone off to look for the hot spring dragon so it was just Siddy and Tino in the changing room. Tino was a bit hesitant. In some ways, she found Siddy to be even scarier than Lizzy. But Siddy seemed unconcerned as she undid the sash on her robe.

"I'm sure you're quite tired, T. Be sure to rest well," she said in a gentle voice. "You never know when something might happen."

"O-Okay," Tino said as she glanced at Siddy.

She undid her robe. Tino had undressed around Lizzy many times, but never around Siddy. A bit flustered, she undressed hastily, but Siddy showed no signs of trepidation. What she saw caused Tino's eyes to widen, and she held her breath.

Siddy was very pretty.

Tino had seen Lizzy in the altogether before. Lizzy had a boisterous personality and a devil-may-care approach to life and would often bathe in mountain streams in her underwear. She had an excellent figure that carried not an ounce of excess fat. Her tanned skin had an untamed beauty.

But Siddy was different. Tino didn't know quite what to expect because Siddy always wore a thick robe. But her figure still caught Tino by surprise. Her skin was white as snow and without a single wrinkle. She was slender but still had very feminine curves. One thing Tino had over Lizzy was bust size but Siddy surpassed them both in that regard. It was strange to think those two were sisters.

The work of a Thief required different talents than that of an Alchemist; it was only natural that the two would paint a different silhouette. Still, the small sense of superiority Tino held over Lizzy was crushed by Siddy's figure.

"What's the matter, T?"

"N-Nothing. Your gear really hides your figure, doesn't it?"

Siddy suppressed a giggle and looked at Tino with a perceptive glance. Embarrassed, Tino wanted to dig a hole and hide in it. She was still growing, but she felt she could give up on ever getting ahead of Siddy. If only there was something she could do about that...

Briefly, the image of Evolve Greed, the mask she got from her master, flitted past her mind's eye. She batted it away. Covering as much of herself as she could with a towel, she shut her locker. But then she noticed Siddy up to something.

"Um, is that for..."

She blinked as her voice trailed off.

Siddy was fastening belts carrying potions to her arms. Those vials secured to her contained multicolored liquids unlike those that Tino used in treasure vaults. She looked at Siddy's odd pre-bath preparations with wide eyes.

"I don't need to remind you how Lizzy always keeps Apex Roots on at all times," Siddy said with a mellow smile. "Hunters need to be prepared for combat at all times."

"Then, um, is something going to happen?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Part of preparation is accepting both possibilities."

"I-I see..."

Not sure if she actually understood or not, Tino forced herself to accept Siddy's words as truth. Tino had never seen someone make such thorough preparations. But Siddy was leagues smarter than her, so surely she couldn't be mistaken. This was probably normal among top-tier parties. Not to mention, Siddy was an Alchemist and Alchemists fought with items. So maybe she simply had to stay armed at all times?

Siddy pulled out one last item, a pink squirt gun.

"Thank you for waiting," she said with a captivating smile. "Shall we go? I'd very much like to chat with you, T."

Following Siddy, Tino timidly stepped through the door. A pleasant billow of steam fell over her. Just like the inn itself, the baths were unlike anything she had ever seen. The floor was made of smooth stones and felt nice to walk on with bare feet. A subdued yet intricate engraving adorned the walls and a tub large enough for multiple people was filled with transparent water.

Tino and Siddy were the only two present; the only noise in the area was the sound of flowing water echoing off the high ceiling. It gave Tino an odd sense of freedom. With Siddy's words still on her mind, she strained her eyes and checked the open-air bath, but that was empty too.

Sanitation was a constant source of trouble for hunters on the move.

Generally, their only options were to wipe oneself down with a wet towel or to bathe in a spring if there was one available. Mana material prevented hunters from getting too dirty, but that mana material didn't prevent stress from accumulating. For someone who was still on edge after just recently crossing a mountain range, this hot spring was like a slice of heaven.

This is what luxury looks like, Tino thought. But I can't let myself get accustomed to being indulged by Master.

She headed to the showers, where she found a wide selection of fine-smelling soaps. These were probably normal for noble girls and the daughters of rich merchants. With just a little bit of anticipation, she picked each one up and gave it a sniff. Her usual soap was the sort meant to mask a body's scent, which was only a matter of course for a Thief. But she saw no harm in trying something fragrant once in a while.

She sat down, but just as she was about to start lathering she heard a voice from behind her. A slender arm was thrust out right before her eyes. Held by fingers thin and silver like tiny fish was a glass vial filled with something light-purple.

"Here, T, this soap will be far more...appealing to Krai than any regular variety."

"Huh?"

Tino turned around. Siddy grinned as she looked down at her.

It was obvious that Siddy cared deeply for Krai. Maybe not like a lover would, but those two no doubt shared a deep bond. What could motivate her to lend a helping hand to a mere disciple?

"Care to give it a try? I'm always synthesizing more. But if you're not interested, then I suppose that's fine."

What a devious temptation. Tino didn't know why Siddy made something like that, but she didn't go around lying without reason. And her potions were of a quality that anyone in First Steps could vouch for. But if she was always synthesizing more, didn't that mean she was always using it?

Tino's cheeks flushed and she shrunk back a bit. When it came down to it, she

wanted it. She wanted to give the soap a try. She wanted the praise of her master more than that of anyone else. He might not spare much thought for her, but now a means to draw his attention was right in front of her eyes.

But she couldn't get the words out of her mouth. With a burning sense of agitation, she cast her eyes downward. Siddy grinned and sat down behind Tino. It wasn't like she was exposing her back to an enemy, but she still felt an odd shiver run down her spine.

"That's right. You're tired, aren't you? Here, I'll wash you," Siddy said in a kind and soothing voice. "You can just relax and let your worries fade away. Rest assured, I'm quite good at massages. Just don't take your mind off me."

This was bad. Very bad. Alarm bells were blaring inside Tino's head. She couldn't help but let out a small yelp when Siddy's fingertips brushed against her shoulder. Her heart was beating like a drum. She had to run, but her legs wouldn't respond. Even if she did run, what good would it do her?

This was a danger unlike any she had ever dealt with. She realized she had made the wrong decision in coming here. Reflected in the mirror before her, Tino could see a smile on Siddy's lips, but her eyes were cold like a surgeon's.

Tino should have refused. She should have said she didn't need any soap (soap that Siddy most likely made for her own purposes) and flatly refused while looking at Siddy like she was deranged.

Siddy's clever maneuverings were far scarier than Lizzy's bouts of violence. Tino tried to stand up, but a hand pressed down and kept her still. Using just her right hand, Siddy removed the lid on the glass vial. A thick purple liquid rocked back and forth. Siddy poured a dollop onto her hand and reached for Tino's shaking back. Just as her fingers were about to make contact, they heard a screaming voice.

"SITRIII! THERE'S A DRAGOON! THERE'S A DRAGOOON!"

"A dra...gon?"

Faced with certain peril, Tino's anxiety was reaching extraordinary heights when she heard those words of rescue. They didn't make any sense to her, but Siddy's hands stopped and her smile disappeared as she let out a brief sigh. She

quickly rinsed off her hands.

"My, what could be going on over there?" she said to a very relieved Tino.

"That's the men's bath, but our aid's been requested and that means we must go. As I recall, the quickest way is through the open-air baths."

"Huh? Oh, okay. Huuuh?"

How could there possibly be a dragon? They were rumored to be the most powerful mythical beasts out there. Their strength varied, but even the weakest dragons could butcher a human with ease. There should have been a panic the moment a dragon even got close to the town.

Tino was still in a state of bewilderment, but just about anything seemed better than letting Siddy wash her, so she got up and followed after the Alchemist. The open-air baths were in the same direction as the men's baths and cordoned off by a tall and sturdy wall.

Then something occurred to Tino.

"Siddy! We're both naked!"

"And what of it? Does that hinder your strikes?"

"That's—"

Tino paused at this unexpected yet perfectly sound objection. Siddy wasted no time removing a potion from a belt on her arm and hurled it against the wall.

It didn't make any sense. Being attacked by a dragon in a hot spring definitely ranked among my life's top ten most bizarre experiences. And it happened in a populated town. Just what was the inn's security doing if a dragon managed to sneak in?

I wasn't entirely surprised to see it wasn't satisfied with just batting me away. The dragon rose out of the bath and came towards me, menacingly spreading its wings. I was reminded that a dragon was still a dragon, even if it was a small one. The sight of its spread wings was pretty intimidating.

When you really think about it, it was silly of me to imagine that a hot spring might adopt a dragon. I should've realized that before I tried to enter the open-

air bath. I guess the allure of the hot spring did me in.

Walking on two legs, the dragon's feet crunched the shards of broken glass on the floor and stepped into the indoor bath. It must've been a really extravagant dragon if it wanted to eat and bathe at the same time. I decided that if the inn staff asked me about my stay then I'd tell them they need sturdier glass panes in the bathing areas. If I got out alive, that is.

I forced my weary body to get up and just barely managed to put some distance between the dragon and myself. My Safety Rings, still close at hand, were useless unless someone came and fought off the monster. My Hounding Chain bravely stood in front of me, but unfortunately, it had next to no attack power.

The rational part of my brain was telling me to hurry up and run inside the inn. But then the hungry hungry dragon would follow after me. I didn't want to see such a nice building get destroyed and as a hunter (even if in the most basic sense of the word) I wanted to prevent any civilians from getting hurt. Besides, a dragon wasn't something you could easily escape no matter how much you tried.

I had called for Sitri and was certain she would come running. As the dragon slowly closed in on me, I held out the palms of my hands. I calmed myself and tried to buy some time.

"Relax, can't you see? Look at all these Relics I'm wearing! If you eat me, they'll definitely get stuck in your throat and you don't want that."

What a pathetic bargaining attempt it was. Definitely entered into my career's "Top Ten Most Pathetic Negotiations." While I began to lose my grip on reality, the dragon opened its jaw as though to let out a sort of "roar." Its maw was lined with fangs sharp as daggers. This monster had been enjoying a nice soak in the hot spring yet it still had all the usual features of a dragon. What a cruel joke.

I looked around. We were in a hot spring so of course there wasn't anything that could be used as a weapon. Even if there was, I wouldn't have been able to do much with it. All I saw were warm baths that I hadn't even been able to enjoy yet.

Without any better options, I got in the water. The dragon cocked its head as though it were looking at something very befuddling. The strangely humanlike gesture caused me to laugh out loud.

I was completely desperate. The dragon slowly stepped into the bath and began to corner me. It paid no mind to my Hounding Chain as it coiled around one of its wings. Scores and scores of people made their living as hunters, but I was fairly certain I was the only one who'd ever bathed with a dragon. I was definitely going to brag about it once I got back to the capital.

Then, my goofy train of thought was cut off by a sudden flash outside. For a moment, all I could see was white light. The remaining shards of glass were blown away and a noise shook me to my core. A wave formed in the bath and came crashing down on my head.

I wiped the water off my face and opened my eyes. The dragon twitched and turned around. The open-air bath was barely recognizable. Stepping over a destroyed wall were Sitri and Tino, both wearing towels. Sitri spotted me and gave me her usual grin. I nodded back like this was all perfectly normal.

Oh, come on. What kind of vacation is this?

After breaking into the men's bath with Siddy, Tino failed to comprehend what she saw before her. Her master was bathing with a sky-blue dragon. She forgot that she was supposed to be on edge and simply rubbed her eyes while making sure not to drop her towel. It seemed she really wasn't hallucinating.

Half submerged in the hot water, her master looked perfectly calm. He wore the smile of someone content with the world. The unfamiliar dragon growled when it saw Siddy and Tino.

He called us, but not because he wanted to be rescued? What's he doing? Tino wondered.

When she really thought about it, it didn't make any sense for the strong to ask for help from the weak. She also recalled her master's words; he had cried out, but he hadn't actually mentioned anything about rescuing. She had assumed that shouting about the presence of a dragon must be a call for help,

but the Thousand Tricks was a Dragon Slayer.

She brushed aside her bashfulness and took a step back as she prepared for a potential dragon attack. Tino was almost completely unclothed, only a small towel was wrapped around her. She didn't have her usual knives nor was she wearing shoes. A hot spring wasn't a place you normally expected to find a dragon.

Even though she was largely defenseless, Tino was relatively calm. That was because Siddy was at her side. At first, Tino struggled to understand why Siddy had brought potions with her into the hot spring, but she shouldn't have doubted a seasoned hunter.

The potion used to destroy the wall was far more deadly than any ordinary concoction. Alchemists were supposed to be ill-suited for combat, but apparently, that didn't apply to the best of the lot. However, even such a seasoned hunter couldn't have predicted this situation. Siddy blinked and asked the exact question that was on Tino's mind.

"What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Krai said.

No, Master, it's not, Tino thought.

Dragons tended to have strength proportional to their size. The sky-blue dragon was small for its kin, which meant it wasn't one of the stronger varieties. Maybe this was one of those hot spring dragons that Lizzy had gone to look for.

But it was still a dragon. A weak dragon was still a dragon, a monster among monsters, king of the mythical beasts. In all lands and ages, the accolade of Dragon Slayer was a sign of might. But in the whole wide world, Tino's master was probably the only person to casually bathe with a dragon. How do you even find yourself in such a position in the first place?

The dragon seemed to recognize Tino and Siddy as potential threats and spread its wings as it rose from the bath. Piping hot water splashed against the floor, blue wings shimmered, and scales sparkled. The Hounding Chain wrapped around the dragon's body appeared to give up and stop fighting.

After some brief deliberations, Siddy clapped her hands.

"I've got it," she said. "Well then, take it from here, T."

"Huh?!"

The dragon lumbered forward on two legs. Siddy gripped Tino's shoulders and hid behind the panicking Thief. In an instant, the dragon turned and swung its long, sleek tail like a whip.

"A dragon this big shouldn't be too much for you, right, T?" Siddy whispered into Tino's ear.

"Huh? Huh?"

Tino instinctively took a few steps back. Siddy was supposed to be using her as a shield, but the two didn't collide. She must've anticipated Tino's movements and dashed to the side. Tino caught a glimpse of Siddy in her peripheral vision. The Alchemist took advantage of the opening left by the dragon's attack to dash past the creature and hop into the bath.

"Siddy?!" Tino yelled in protest.

"Good luck, T! I'm rooting for you!"

It seemed Tino's protests fell on deaf ears. Siddy wrapped her arms around those of Tino's master and grinned. Tino had been betrayed, but it was too late for her to do anything about it.

The dragon had been able to swing its tail with terrifying swiftness. Tino didn't know if it could fly but she saw it had all the usual trademarks of a dragon such as wings, fangs, and claws. It moved slowly but it wasn't going to be easy to fight while keeping her towel from slipping off. Kicking was off the table, but maybe that wasn't a good way to attack a dragon in the first place.

Perhaps she could defeat the dragon if she had all her equipment and was in perfect condition. But her lack of gear gave her a serious handicap and this was her first time fighting a dragon.

"Master, wasn't this supposed to be a vacation?!" she yelled while watching for an opening in the dragon.

"What do you mean, T? You got to bathe in the hot spring, didn't you?" Sitri asked.

"No! Not yet!"

As Tino was being overwhelmed with tension, confusion, and a bit of embarrassment, the dragon swung its head upwards—a sign that it was about to attack with its breath. Tino swiftly rolled out of the way.

And then she saw the attack, she saw the dragon shoot hot water from its mouth. With immense power, the jet of water erupted and smashed into the spot where Tino had just been standing. Droplets splashed in every direction and a small gash was made in the floor. Carrying the momentum from her roll, Tino stood back up.

"What is this thing?!" she screamed despite herself. "Is this some kind of joke?!"

"Perhaps you should quit shrieking and hurry up? It's just a hot spring dragon!"

Tino was shocked by Siddy's cruelty, but she couldn't let that hold her up.

The farcical dragon puffed out its chest as though trying to display its majesty. Even if this earned her the title Dragon Slayer, she'd be too embarrassed to use it.

Tino's only lifeline was her master, but was still as a stone and looked as content as the Buddha. She accepted the reality: this was a Trial, just as Siddy had said. Probably. Most likely. Her master was doing this for her.

It's too much, Master.

Tino fought back her tears and took a desperate step towards the farcical dragon.

The sky-blue dragon slid across the floor and rolled onto its back. Nearby, Tino was kneeling and covering herself with her hands.

"I can't believe you, Master," she moaned between ragged breaths.

Woooah, Tino, were you always this strong?

She wasn't wearing the mask like she had during her fight with Arnold, but

her movements had been perfect. The sight of someone small like Tino kicking about a stubby dragon was like something out of a comedy routine.

Tino's shredded towel was discarded nearby. I couldn't blame her for deciding it wasn't worth the trouble. I didn't know if that was related to the fact that her movements then became fast as lighting.

I intended to step in and say something if things got serious, but the battle ended without that being necessary. Don't worry, I made sure to look away. I was a pro when it came to not seeing things.

Sitri, the war criminal of the hour, returned from the changing room with a towel. Tino blamed me for what had happened, but I had assumed Sitri would do something. I bore no fault. Well, maybe I shared some of the responsibility.

"Oh, you fought really well, Tino. Good job, good job," I said consolingly.

"Hm?! Damn you, Master," Tino said with a sniffle.

She wrapped her arms around herself but to little effect. Sitri draped the towel over Tino.

"Have you learned the importance of preparation?" Sitri asked.

With tears in her eyes, Tino didn't say anything and simply nodded vigorously. Sitri stroked Tino's hair, but was she really in any position to do that? I looked over the ruined bathing area and the twitching dragon on the floor before letting out a sigh.

"But most people don't anticipate dragon encounters in a hot spring," I said.

Tino looked at me incredulously. There was no need for that. I loved hot springs but even I wouldn't enter one if I thought I might get attacked by a dragon.

Looks like my only option is the open-air bath in our room.

"Let's get started," Arnold said.

His party roared in response. Only faint traces of fear could be found in their determined expressions. Chloe watched them with uncertainty. After resting in

a nearby village, Arnold made his decision: they would press forward.

This was no longer a matter of simple revenge. The hunters of Falling Fog all had a glint in their eyes. Standing next to them, Rhuda and the hunters of Scorching Whirlwind all wore stony expressions. This was hunters doing what they were born to do.

They knew there were smarter ways to go about this. However, the pride and mutual trust among the members of Falling Fog simply wouldn't permit them to turn tail before a treasure vault that the Thousand Tricks had been able to fight his way into. For similar reasons, the much lower-level hunters of Scorching Whirlwind chose to come along.

All that was left for them was to put their might and mettle to the test. And if that was their decision, Chloe couldn't turn around either. Not an iota of animus remained in Arnold's eyes. Night Palace wasn't so easy that it could be challenged by a mind weighed down by negative emotions.

The towering castle before them was just as imposing as it had been a few days prior. The churning thunderclouds, the eerie calm that pervaded the eye of the storm, it was all still there. That meant this gloomy state was normal for a Level 8 treasure vault.

Arnold gulped and simply said: "This will settle it."

The meaning of this wasn't lost on Chloe. These hunters had come to terms with the difficulty of the vault before them. They would gain firsthand experience of a treasure vault that the Thousand Tricks had likely delved into with only a small handful of allies. By doing so, they would both regain their respect for the hunter and allow them to move on from their dispute with him.

Eigh abruptly furrowed his brow as a doubtful look formed on his face.

"I don't see a carriage," he said. "Are they really in there?"

Everyone looked around. They had an unobstructed view of the surrounding plains and couldn't spy a single monster, to say nothing of a carriage.

"They should be there," Arnold said. "There were no signs they were bluffing. Not that it matters any longer."

Eigh forced a smile to his lips and laughed.

"No need to tell me. We'll follow you wherever you go."

The massive gates opened, almost as though to welcome Arnold. A cold breeze rushed over the hunters.

And so the Crashing Lightning and Falling Fog began their endeavor.

Rhuda endured the pressure weighing down on her and desperately assessed her surroundings. Naturally, she listened closely, but she utilized all five of her senses.

Night Palace was a Level 8 treasure vault. A vault's level was generally proportional to its accumulation of mana material. Higher reserves of mana material also meant stronger phantoms and more of them. A Level 8 would likely have many times more phantoms than in White Wolf's Den, a vault she had recently gone through.

But Rhuda couldn't detect any signs of life. Falling Fog was at the front of their formation and that party included Eigh Lalia, a Thief of a higher level than Rhuda. But he looked just as apprehensive as she did.

There were no traps and no enemies. Rhuda had never before entered a castle-type treasure vault because they were rare and tended to have levels on the higher side. She had heard the phantoms in these could be very well coordinated. But to not encounter any phantoms was almost unbelievable.

Maybe she had made a mistake in coming here. The moment she saw the treasure vault, her instincts strongly urged her to turn around. She somewhat wished she had listened to those instincts, but she knew it was too late for regrets now.

From the start, she had a feeling that Falling Fog's objectives hadn't quite matched up with everyone else's. But she and Scorching Whirlwind were hired to escort Chloe and they felt they should try and stop the Crashing Lighting and the Thousand Tricks from coming to blows.

Rhuda couldn't begin to imagine what might happen if a Level 7 and a Level 8

hunter clashed. She sensed more raw power in the former but knew the cunning tactics the latter could have in store.

No, be honest, she told herself. She didn't know about a one-on-one fight, but she believed Grieving Souls would beat Falling Fog. She wasn't certain just how powerful Krai was, but she could see who had the stronger allies. The hunters of Falling Fog were certainly nothing to scoff at, but none of them could match what Rhuda saw when she first encountered the Stifled Shadow.

Falling Fog had just recently been held off on that lakeshore with just two members of Grieving Souls. If the whole party assembled then Falling Fog wouldn't stand a chance. Ultimately, Rhuda's job would most likely be to step in after Falling Fog had lost.

Falling Fog were a rowdy bunch and behaved how civilians imagined all hunters did, but they weren't bad people. On their journey, they never cast Rhuda and Scorching Whirlwind aside, no matter how dire the situation. She felt she should return the favor.

Krai also had Tino at his side. Rhuda alone might not be enough, but if she and Tino begged and pleaded, the Thousand Tricks might at least spare the lives of Falling Fog. So went her original line of thinking. Now she thought those ideas were hopelessly naive.

She was confident Krai would acquiesce to her pleas for mercy. And not even the Stifled Shadow would defy him. But first, they would have to actually confront Krai, and they might die before that even happened.

Night Palace was more daunting than she had even imagined. She hadn't yet encountered any phantoms, but she could still tell that even White Wolf's Den was heaven compared to this place.

Pale as a ghost, Rhuda desperately tried to concentrate. Behind her, the members of Scorching Whirlwind all looked even worse off. Their group was far bigger than any of them were used to, but that didn't make them feel any better. For the Likes of Rhuda and Gilbert, the phantoms of this infernal space were beyond what they might have any chance of damaging.

Their only hope was the Thousand Tricks. That docile yet manipulative man surely knew that Rhuda and the others would follow after him. After coming

this far, they sure hoped that was the case.

After looking around, Eigh had said he didn't plan on dying in a place like this. The density of mana material was more than Rhuda had ever felt before. Slowly but surely, she could feel herself becoming more powerful. It was a good experience for her. If only she could think of it as that and nothing more.

After entering the treasure vault, she saw Night Palace had an unexpected majestic aura. The outer walls and gate looked brand-new and were built from stone in a way that let them harmonize with the surrounding scenery.

The doors that automatically opened for them seemed to be made of metal and had a bizarre texture. They took this as proof that every part of the castle was constructed from mana material. The doors and gate seemed unimaginably durable, yet perhaps not invincible.

Under the pounding rain, Eigh carefully scanned their surroundings. A room that would normally be packed with soldiers was unoccupied. The unused chairs and table, the still burning lamp, it was incredibly unsettling. After peeking into the room, Eigh posed a question to Chloe.

"Miss, do you know anything about this place?"

"I'm afraid there are very few records of expeditions into Night Palace. The Explorers' Association was greatly looking forward to whatever information Grieving Souls might bring back."

This caused Arnold to scowl. Hunters preferred to avoid treasure vaults that were still poorly understood. A lack of solid information probably contributed to the lack of expeditions into Night Palace. Anyone who calmly entered such a place was either a champion or an idiot.

Beyond the gates stretched multiple paths laid with smooth stones. Narrow paths branched off to the left and right and a wide one went straight forward. There was something unnerving about the equally spaced, well-maintained trees that surrounded them, and the rare shimmers of light managed to make it through the dense clouds. Arnold gripped his sword and prepared to be attacked at any moment.

"There's no signs of battle," he said.

"It's possible they were covered up," Eigh replied.

The downpour might wash away footprints, but traces of combat didn't fade so easily.

They had only just passed through the front gate. It was strange that they hadn't yet encountered any foes, but it stood to reason that the main attraction started once they got inside the castle. Arnold looked grim, but his pace didn't falter. He looked up and saw black spires cloaked in storm clouds.

"Just how far did he go?" Rhuda wondered aloud.

They hoped he hadn't entered the castle, but there was no telling what the Thousand Tricks might do. Krai, the two sisters, the chimera, and that weird monster should be fine, but she worried about Tino as she was probably being dragged along against her will.

Tino was strong and Rhuda had been amazed when she fought Arnold oneon-one, but the small Thief clearly wasn't ready for a Level 8 treasure vault. Maybe she was at this very moment sobbing and enduring some terrible ordeal. Rhuda really should have been more concerned about herself, but she thought her nerves might get the better of her if she didn't keep her mind busy.

If there were going to be any phantom encounters then she hoped they happened as close to the gate as possible. Preferably, outside the castle. And if only one appeared at a time, all the better. The best-case scenario would be for them to run into Krai before running into any phantoms, but she just somehow couldn't see that happening.

"Hey," Eigh said. "Are you guys all right?"

"Y-Yeah, just a little tired," Carmine, the leader of Scorching Whirlwind, said.

"We haven't even seen any phantoms after all," Gilbert replied.

So they said, but they looked completely exhausted. Eigh wondered if he looked the same way.

"Are you okay, miss?"

"Yes. But I'd like to get out of here as quickly as possible," Chloe responded.

Rhuda would do whatever was necessary to come home alive. She realized

that this assignment wasn't much more than an errand and who wanted to die on an errand? As she pulled herself together and took a deep breath, the head of the group, Arnold, stopped in his tracks. Suddenly, they heard a sort of noise. The members of Falling Fog swiftly spread out and got into formation.

Shadows writhed in front of them, roughly ten meters out. Chloe drew her sword. The noise intensified. The faint spots of darkness coalesced into one and took shape and color. Standing behind Falling Fog, Carmine's eyes bulged and he took a step back.

"Are those phantoms forming?!" he cried. "I thought they weren't supposed to form in front of us like that!"

"Heh, I guess the mana material here is just that strong," Eigh said. He was breaking out in a cold sweat, but still managed a strained smile.

Phantoms were generally believed to form when a set amount of mana material accumulated. If hunters entered a treasure vault then they would absorb the mana material and thus preclude any phantoms from forming nearby. It wasn't unheard of for a phantom to form right in front of a hunter but it was an extremely rare phenomenon unique to high-level treasure vaults.

Falling Fog's Magus began to mutter an incantation and Scorching Whirlwind's Magus quickly followed their example. Seeing her allies prepared for combat, Rhuda calmed her nerves.

It was unexpected, but when she thought about it, a phantom forming right before them was actually a stroke of luck. This way, they could attack before their opponent was ready. They might even slay the phantom before it could manage a counterattack.

The darkness converged and then a knight appeared. It was about the same height as Arnold. A black helmet covered its head, armor hid every inch of its body, a black sword hung at its waist. And then she realized there wasn't just one—there were two black knights.

This didn't look good. Arnold was the only member of their group who could be considered a sufficient level for Night Palace. Everyone else, including those from Falling Fog, was well below that. They didn't know how strong the phantoms were, but running into two at the first encounter was rotten luck.

But maybe encountering two was just fine. Arnold could take on one and everyone else would handle the other. It was do or die and they all understood that. This wasn't the first time these hunters had put their lives at risk.

"Get 'em!" Eigh shouted the moment the phantoms finished taking shape.

Two parties. In the spur of the moment, the two Magi had both chosen fire spells. Just as the black knights started to move, they were struck by blades of blue flames and a storm of projectiles made of compressed fire. The black knights didn't even attempt to evade. There was a long cacophony and a blinding light.

"Did that kill 'em?!" Gilbert shouted.

"Not a chance in hell!" Eigh shouted back.

Before verifying the results of the attack, Arnold began to move. He was a massive man with a massive sword, but he still charged with incredible speed. With crackling bolts around him, he had the magnificence of a lightning deity.

The light faded. With a roar, Arnold swung his greatsword. The black knight blocked the attack with its own blade, a shrill sound reverberating upon impact. There was no time to stand around in shock. Eigh slipped behind the other knight and kicked it in the back of its knee.

The direct hits from the spells hadn't even caused the black knights to flinch. Their armor didn't even show any scorch marks, much less actual damage. To Rhuda, those spells looked like they would be sufficiently powerful. If she had been hit by such an attack she would at least be seriously wounded, if she survived at all. What impervious armor it must be if it went unscathed. She had learned back in White Wolf's Den that phantoms had sturdy armor, but this was on a whole other level.

"Don't just stand there!"

The black knight made a swipe with its sword. It was so fast that Rhuda's eyes struggled to track it. Arnold angled his sword, blocking the high-speed strike with only the slightest of movements. The resulting sounds overlapped and sounded like one. Arnold's face was red and strained, but the black knight didn't waver in the slightest.

However, the real issue was the black knight that Eigh had attacked. Theirs was a completely one-sided fight. The black knight would attack and Eigh would dodge. The knight's full-body armor deflected any of Eigh's blows. Even his first surprise attack had almost no effect.

Even still, you could argue Eigh's efforts were successful. The Thief didn't let up because even Arnold would have a difficult time taking on both black knights at once. One of the knights focused on chasing down Eigh and didn't make any effort to support the other.

The black knight could swing so fast that its blade appeared as a mere blur, but its lumbering body allowed Eigh to somehow avoid getting hit. Every time he got behind the knight, the phantom had to turn around. If he stepped back, the knight would have to come after him.

Unlike the Stifled Shadow, most Thieves relied primarily on skillful positioning and never took a foe head-on. Three Swordsmen from Falling Fog backed Eigh up by taking advantage of the openings he created. Surrounded by three burly warriors, the black knight paused as though analyzing the situation.

The movements of Falling Fog were fluid and carried out with explicit communication. The hunters of Scorching Whirlwind, including Gilbert, couldn't keep up.

"Shit. This goddamn thing's one of the weaker ones?" one of the Swordsmen said between heavy breaths. He took a swing at the black knight.

Eigh smiled. Sweat covered his brow, but he gave a spirited reply.

"Yeah, they're really something. But we can beat it like we can any other phantom!"

The Swordsman let out a resounding yell of approval.

While Eigh and the others were locked in a stalemate with their black knight, Arnold's fight was growing increasingly more intense. With its blinding attacks and magic-resilient armor, the knight had the upper hand.

A greatsword was a weapon that emphasized the power of an individual blow. Limited to wide swings, which were still easily mitigated, Rhuda and Gilbert both thought that Arnold appeared to be locked in a brutal struggle. They hadn't expected the battle to unfold like this.

After Eigh received his backup, the Magus needed a new task to focus on, so they directed their staff at Arnold.

"Here you go, Arnold!" they shouted. "Greater Acceleration!"

A white beam of light pierced through Arnold. This was a spell that enhanced physical capabilities. Spells of this variety were a double-edged sword. The sudden change in senses, particularly among spells that affected muscles and reflexes, made them undesirable to most hunters. Rhuda herself had tried one of these enhancements and found it quite startling. She figured Arnold's body must feel incredibly light—so light he would struggle to control his sword.

She gasped. She saw no changes in Arnold's stance. With as brief a movement as possible, he blocked a lightning-fast swing. At first, Rhuda thought the Magus must have failed their spellcast. Then she realized she was mistaken.

Arnold was used to it. He was used to abrupt changes to his senses.

Acclimating to such a discomforting change required backbreaking effort. He had probably practiced countless times. Over and over, letting himself be enhanced by magic so he could manage the change when he really needed to.

Following the speed enhancer, he received spells for strength, stamina, and defense. Arnold looked like someone fighting back a fiery rage as he simultaneously blocked an attack and received enhancement spells.

The black knight being held back by Eigh and company seemed to realize what was happening and changed its behavior. It went purely offensive and struck with such speed that the receiving Swordsman couldn't hope to block it. The hunters' formation fell apart, but the Crashing Lightning didn't budge.

Gilbert moved to put himself between the black knight and Arnold, but Eigh immediately put a stop to that.

"Don't get any closer!" he shouted. "Stay back and don't come until we need you to! We've still got this!"

Gilbert stopped and bit his lip with frustration as he stomped on the ground. Rhuda could empathize; it didn't feel good to know your strength wasn't enough. Carmine and the others probably felt the same way.

The movements of Falling Fog were well practiced. Eigh was right; it was evident that outsiders wouldn't do much more than create more openings.

"Damn it, isn't there anything we can do?" Gilbert said. "What's Arnold doing? He's got all those enhancements."

"Hold on, isn't that—"

The black knight facing off with Arnold stopped for a brief moment. Arnold used that moment to press up on the knight, pushing it back. Phantoms generally had far more stamina than humans so it wasn't possible that the black knight could be tired.

Rhuda thought she might be imagining things, but that wasn't the case. The black knight's movements were gradually becoming less precise. It paused, its center of gravity became unstable, and its knees seemed to spasm.

The advantage had suddenly shifted to Arnold. The knight's attacks were losing their edge. Arnold's attacks hadn't changed, but now he was able to keep a steady stance, blocking any incoming attacks.

"Ah, so it's his sword?"

Gilbert looked at Arnold's electrified greatsword. Rhuda also managed to piece it all together.

It was the electricity. It would pass from the greatsword to the black knight's blade, damaging the phantom in the process. The knight was fully armored, but even that wasn't enough to protect against electric shocks. This was generally considered a merit of lightning magic.

Arnold must have been waiting for this. He was biding his time as the electric damage piled up until the black knight eventually made a fatal mistake. It was quite clever. It was an almost underhanded method, something entirely unimaginable for a man of his size and choice of weapon. But to Rhuda it was a show of a seasoned hunter's pragmatic strength.

This was a Level 7. These were skills obtained through experience and refinement.

At last, the black knight wavered and fell to its knees. With the opening he

had been anticipating, Arnold let out a roar. The air shook. The other black knight paused. Arnold raised his sword, which shimmered and sparkled with golden light. Being in close proximity caused his body to grow numb.

This was lightning. It wasn't like the natural kind, it was golden, like what some dragons might blast from their mouth. He hadn't even resorted to this during his battle with Tino. This must have been his trump card.

"Crashing Lightning."



It was just like watching a striking thunderbolt. The black knight tried to raise its sword but was enveloped in golden light. The blade not only cleaved through the knight's armor but also demolished a few meters of the stone floor as its energy dispersed.

The black knight exploded. Arnold's victory was undeniable. After being fixated solely on the sight of the Crashing Lightning, Gilbert inhaled as though he had been forgetting to breathe.

"A-Amazing!"

"This is what a Level 7 looks like!"

Thus far, they had only witnessed Arnold being toyed with by the Thousand Tricks, but only a champion was capable of what he had just done. Lightning still crackled around him, giving him a faint yellow glow. He didn't relish in his victory, his narrowed golden eyes just searched for their next prey.

Eigh and his allies began to give their black knight a wide berth. Then the thunderous champion flew at the phantom. The fight was over in a matter of seconds. Arnold swung with a speed and force far beyond his previous attacks and he split the black knight in two.

The rest of the group almost found it hard to believe they had just been fighting for their lives. Arnold finally lowered his sword once he was sure neither of the phantoms was getting back up. Eigh let out a sigh of relief after checking on the Swordsman who had been blown away.

"No major injuries over here. We did it, didn't we, Arnold? I figured a vault like this wouldn't be easy but—"

"Mm. But this isn't what we came here for."

The glow around Arnold faded. He didn't show even a hint of joy. Rhuda could understand why. Anything that appeared in such a barren arena probably wasn't the boss. Arnold's constant vigilance was a sign of vast experience. But they had just toppled phantoms in a Level 8 treasure vault, she didn't see anything wrong with celebrating just a little bit.

Then something occurred to her.

"Way to go, old man! How'd you do that move? You think I could learn it?" Gilbert said, completely serious.

"Now's not the time for idiocy," Arnold said with exasperation.

With scrutiny, Eigh looked down at the remains of the phantoms. They weren't letting their guard down, but they did have the sort of slackened tension unique to soldiers after a battle.

Rhuda felt a sense of shock just as intense as Arnold's attack. Her eyes widened. It was déjà vu. She had been in this situation before. They escaped certain doom, healed their wounds, took a breath, and—

She looked at Gilbert, who had also been there. The red-haired young man looked back at her with a blank expression.

"Gilbert, do you remember White Wolf's Den?" she asked.

"Hm? What's this about... Wait. Hold on?!"

The color instantly drained from Gilbert's face. He must have figured out what Rhuda was getting at. The experience had left a distinct impression. The strength of the phantoms, the events prior to the battle, that was all different, but the situation was still eerily similar. This included the fact that they had reached this point after getting involved with Krai Andrey.

This was one of his Trials.

"We're in deep shit, old man! More! More are gonna come! That's what happened last time!" Gilbert frantically shouted.

"What are you on about? Have you lost it?" Arnold replied.

Gilbert's thought process probably didn't go any deeper than his babbling, but Rhuda still appreciated his energy at times like this. He was right, more would come. That's how it went the previous time.

After just barely managing to overcome a tough foe, four more attackers, all with different weapons, had appeared. If Krai hadn't come to the rescue, they would've died in that treasure vault. And with a Level 7 at their side, there was no guarantee any help would come this time around.

Maybe it was their imaginations. Maybe they were just worrying too much.

But the possibility was too dangerous to ignore. Eigh was taken aback by Gilbert's sudden panicking so Rhuda also offered a suggestion.

"Eigh, Gilbert's right, we should start moving," she said. "Last time we were in this situation, reinforcements came."

"Hmmm. What do you think, Arnold?" Eigh asked.

Arnold looked at his companions and growled.

"So we can either leave or press forward, huh?"

Arnold was an undeniable champion. He was a proud man and inflexible on certain matters, but he could make the right call when it mattered.

They had battled phantoms, survived, and gauged the strength of what they were up against. This time they had only encountered a few, but if they continued on, it was all but certain that someone would suffer a critical injury. It was inconceivable that he hadn't already figured this out; Arnold was much smarter than he looked.

Rhuda stepped forward and looked up, straight into Arnold's eyes. She was following her instincts and couldn't offer veritable proof for what she was about to say. She felt she knew a thing or two about the Thousand Tricks, even if it was all secondhand knowledge passed down from Tino.

"I think we should press forward," she said.

"What?"

Arnold's eyes bulged. Eigh, Gilbert, Carmine, everyone looked at her with disbelief. But she knew that the Thousand Trials weren't something you could run from no matter how hard you tried. You could bet that the Thousand Tricks fully understood what sort of person Arnold was.

This all drove Rhuda to make the unconventional choice. It was all based on her own intuition, but sometimes you just had to follow that instead of reason. Indeed, if the Thousand Tricks was involved then there would most likely be enemies lying in wait on the path behind them. But she didn't know how that information might be received by someone who hated the Thousand Tricks as much as Arnold did.

Rhuda steeled herself and said, "My intuition is telling me that there are powerful enemies behind us and we should move forward. If we're going to turn back, I think we should first press onwards and then take a long loop back. We only need to press on for a bit so please believe me!"

"It's absurd, but that sort of intuition has saved parties before."

Staying alert to their surroundings, the group moved forward as if something were hot on their heels. Arnold felt there was truth to Rhuda's words and chose to believe in her.

If it was possible for phantoms to approach from off the path then it was also possible for them to attack the group as they made their retreat. Rhuda had been a solo hunter, and solo hunters had senses fine-tuned for detecting danger. Hunters couldn't do their job if they sidestepped every danger, but at the same time, they couldn't just blindly charge headlong into peril.

Arnold saw enough value in Rhuda's words that he was willing to bet their lives on their veracity.

"Hell yeah, nothing's coming! We made the right choice!" Gilbert said with a sigh of relief. He had been frantically checking the group's six. Just how traumatic had White Wolf's Den been if his concern was based on the same experience as Rhuda's?

Following the path took them on a straight route to the castle. As they got closer to the pitch-black structure they became steadily more unsettled by it. Not even Arnold had any idea what might be residing inside.

The castle doors came into view and the surrounding scenery shifted as the trees flanking the path began to thin out. Rhuda let out a small scream when she saw their new surroundings. Gilbert grew pale and Arnold couldn't help but gulp.

They were in a circular forecourt, one paved with stones. With almost nothing to obstruct their view, they could see far and wide. Just beyond the open area was the castle. But the source of their shock was the black mountains piled outside the edges of the forecourt.

Gilbert quietly stepped up to one of the piles and began to tremble after giving them a close examination.

"What...happened?" he said.

The piles consisted of corpses created in all varieties of manners. What shocked Gilbert was that black armor and weapons made up the vast majority of the piles. Even at a cursory glance, it was clear that there was no unifying cause of death. Some were burned, others had been crushed. Some had been frozen or ripped apart along with their armor.

From the shape of the remains, they managed to discern that they were from something human-shaped. But it wasn't just that. The armor was that of the phantoms they had just fought.

"H-Holy shit, what happened here?" Eigh said with a grimace as he searched the mountains. He extracted a severed octopus-shaped head impaled on a sword. It was black and covered in mucus, its two green eyes muddled and without a flicker of life.

The knights they battled earlier had been scorched by Arnold so they had been unable to check inside the armor. Apparently, the knights weren't human. Rhuda tepidly inspected a pile of cadavers and every one of them had a face or body not quite human.

The color drained from Chloe's face, but she maintained a veneer of composure.

"It seems there was a whole army of these aberrant soldiers," she said.

Looking around at the mountain range of corpses, Gilbert whispered, "Did the Thousand Tricks do all this?"

The forecourt was expansive. There must have been at least a couple hundred piles lining the perimeter. Phantoms would immediately dissolve once their life was brought to an end and the strength of their mana material directly affected how long it took them to fully disappear. If this many had been killed, it made sense that they had only run into two phantoms so far.

It hardly seemed possible for a human to kill so many phantoms when it took so much effort from Arnold to defeat two. It was unbelievable, but what other explanation could there have been? Who else could have created such a scene? The moniker "Thousand Tricks" made a lot more sense when looking at the many different ways the phantoms had met their end.

"A-Arnold, look, in the center," Eigh said. "Those are the remains of a bonfire. What sort of lunatic would do that out here..."

Arnold's heart pounded and he felt something cold run down his spine. He realized what that feeling was, but kept his surprise from showing on his face. This emotion he hadn't felt in so long—it was terror. Absolute terror at the unfathomable, at absolute power.

I'm afraid to even challenge him, Arnold thought.

He had considered defeat to be a possibility, but only in a battle between parties. He had been confident he could win a one-on-one against the Thousand Tricks. Arnold had been confident in his supremacy, even after the Stifled Shadow had ambushed him and even the time the Thousand Tricks had forced him to the ground.

For reasons uncertain, the Thousand Tricks didn't give the slightest impression that he had even an ounce of strength. But such a direct display of might made it crystal clear that Arnold's evaluation of him was mistaken.

Arnold felt his heart beat. He exhaled and once again glared at the mountain of corpses. This was what a Level 8 could accomplish. The road to catch up was a long one. The Thousand Tricks hadn't been alone when he did this, but even still, Arnold couldn't picture himself triumphing over that man.

"Damn it. Damn it."

He clenched his teeth and gripped his sword. It was no use. He was lacking. In his current state, he was far too lacking. He didn't even know what it was he was lacking.

Eigh looked at Arnold with concern etched upon his features. A leader needed to stand at the forefront and look strong. Chloe also turned her eyes towards Arnold. A leader needed to be able to push through adversity by sheer tenacity, to be able to maintain a dauntless facade.

Eigh wiped the unease from his face. Arnold's performance didn't fool him. In

all likelihood, Eigh could tell how his party leader felt and knew he was doing his best to not let it show. So he forced himself to relax a bit and be the same vice party leader he always was.

This was no time to be distracted by their discord with the Thousand Tricks. What they needed to focus on was a way to make sure everyone got out of this hellish treasure vault in one piece. Even if he was losing his will to fight, Arnold had a duty to lead the party no matter the circumstances. Only death could relinquish him from this responsibility.

Would he decide to wait for the Thousand Tricks and lower his head, or would he decide to loop around and look for the exit?

Then Eigh widened his eyes. He was startled, but managed to take a deep breath and speak in a low voice so only Arnold could hear.

"Bad news. They're coming. A whole damn swarm of 'em. It's way too much for us!"

"What?"

Eigh was looking in the direction they had just come from. Something black was writhing on the horizon. It was still in the distance, but it was headed for them like an encroaching tidal wave.

No, it wasn't *something*. Those were knights, a legion of those grotesque knights in black armor. Arnold and Eigh couldn't tell exactly how many there were but it was undeniably more than they could manage. It was about as large as the orc pack they had fought not too long ago, but orcs paled in comparison to the phantoms. Arnold probably couldn't slay half of them even if he fought until his very last breath.

Rhuda's eyes bulged when she noticed the incoming swarm.

"Thousand Trials," she whispered in a tone that sounded like she could both laugh or cry at any moment.

This was a Trial?!

"Goddamn insanity," Arnold muttered.

He looked around the forecourt. It was too late to run, but they had no shot

at victory if they chose to stay and fight. In this wide-open space, they would be surrounded and crushed. Everyone began to lose hope, but you should never give in. Arnold calmed himself and looked for a way out of this perilous situation. If they stayed in the forecourt, not a single one of them would make it out alive.

Suddenly, he looked at the obsidian castle that lay beyond the forecourt. This was where the treasure vault got its name. It was likely to be much more dangerous than the outer sections. But perhaps it would be better than being swallowed up by a wave of phantoms.

The grotesque army was steadily closing in. There was no time to waste. The group had recovered from their shock and were awaiting Arnold's orders.

And so he made his decision.

"Please, accept our sincere apologies!"

"Ha ha, it's totally fine. Stuff like this happens to me all the time."

It seemed it wasn't just me, the inn employees had also never heard of a dragon trespassing in a hot spring. When I left the baths to report the situation, I found inn staff all kowtowing before me.

It turned out the sky-blue dragon was one of those hot spring dragons that Liz had been going on about. They were indigenous to the mountains near Suls and their name was derived from their affinity for hot springs, but they usually hid out in the mountains and rarely approached human settlements. Of course they didn't. You couldn't run an inn if you had dragons dropping by for the occasional visit.

The inn staff knew of the dragons, but most of them hadn't even seen one before. They all looked at the unconscious dragon with trepidation.

"This hot spring dragon is still young," said a woman in her forties. She was the inn's oldest staff member and its proprietress. "The young ones are very inquisitive. Maybe it saw that visitors weren't coming because of those bandits and its curiosity got the better of it." "I see. Well, it happens sometimes."

Accidents were normal for hunters. Run-ins with roving dragons, roving ogres, roving cyclopes, and roving treasure vaults had left me prepared for any mishap. My luck was just that awful. Sometimes I became outright delusional and began to think they were attracted to me or something.

It could've been worse, it could've been an adult dragon. If any non-hunters had been present, someone might have been killed. But there were no fatalities, so the inn just needed to focus on making sure something like this didn't happen again.

What I was concerned about was Tino's mental health. Even after putting on some clothes, she still had that exhausted look in her eyes. I repeatedly tried speaking to her, but she never responded with her usual smile.

The battle happened spontaneously so I thought it was unavoidable that she had to fight the dragon while naked. Not to mention, I had done my best to look away. I guess it was still a shocking experience for a girl her age. It seemed my senses had grown dull due to Liz's nonchalance.

"Oh, that's right," Sitri said with an inspired clap of her hands. "Let's have boiled dragon tonight!"

This pulled Tino from her sullen silence.

"Huh? You're going to eat it?!" she cried.

Dragon wasn't a common dish. The creatures were rare and their blood, flesh, and bones all sold for high prices. But our party wasn't one to worry too much over profits. If we caught a dragon, eating a portion of it was the norm. I couldn't remember what started that habit, but our feral children—Luke and Liz—would eat anything, including centipedes and spiders, so they might as well eat dragons too.

"You like dragon too, don't you, Krai? This is Tino's first slain dragon!" Sitri said to me in a cheery voice.

Tino looked bewildered. It seemed Sitri was trying to turn this into a positive experience so Tino might forget the bad parts. Or maybe she just wanted to eat dragon. I still eagerly went along with her.

"Yeah, dragon's delicious. I can't wait."

Anything Sitri prepared was delicious and we didn't need to eat like we were camping out, but I kept those thoughts to myself. I also thought it was silly for her to do any cooking when we were at an inn, but, again, I held my peace.

"You're incredible, Tino. Great job back there," I said.

"Y-You flatter me," she said in a small voice.

She was looking at the ground and seemed both embarrassed but also pleased. It seemed like she might agree with just a bit more praise and Sitri smoothly backed me up.

"You fought that dragon without weapons or armor. T, you were adorable."

"Yeah, uh-huh...huh?"

Tino had finally gotten back on her feet but now she was quaking again. Red to her ears, she hung her head and backed away from us.

No, I didn't look. Not at all. I swear.

How could I kick back and enjoy the scenery when a dragon was rampaging about? I didn't do anything or let it show on my face, but I was pretty frantic back there.

Sitri winked at me like we had just accomplished something. I wanted to tell her off, but Tino was right there so I just sighed.

"Huh? A hot spring dragon was here?"

After returning from her search for a hot spring dragon, Liz listened to our tale with shock. She had gone to the mountains but her hunt turned up nothing, whereas we found one without even trying. What a funny thing life was.

With her legs folded beneath her, Tino sat on the tatami floor. She shrunk back and looked at her mentor with upturned eyes. She seemed to think that Liz would be angry because her prey had been caught by someone else. But Liz wouldn't do that.

Liz had a stern expression as I told her about the dragon. But when she heard

that Tino fought the dragon while naked and still emerged victorious, she smiled and jumped at her apprentice. Tino let out a small yelp as Liz embraced her and rubbed her head.

"Woo! Congrats on your first dragon, T! Now you're also a Dragon Slayer."

"Huh? What?"

"We've gotta eat the dragon and celebrate! Right, Krai Baby?"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

"Huuuh? You think so?" Tino said.

She seemed entirely taken off guard by her mentor's reaction and looked at me. This "first dragon" business was new to me, but if Liz said it was cause for celebration then it probably was. She was happier than I had seen her in some time. She must have been truly proud to see her apprentice grow. It was also a sign that she was growing as a mentor.

"But if you were gonna kill a dragon, I wish you'd done it while I was around," Liz said as she patted Tino on the back. "It's such a big occasion—"

"Lizzy, if you were there then you would have slain the dragon yourself, wouldn't you?" Sitri interjected. "We've already killed enough that one more hardly matters."

Well, someone had to defeat the dragon if we wanted to get home alive.

Tino was surprised to see them talking like the cute apprentice had been ceded the chance to fight a dragon. Sitri probably wasn't serious about having slain that many dragons. She was organized and ready for anything, but that didn't mean she was enthusiastic about direct conflict. She usually made sure to have Luke, Liz, or Ansem in front while she stayed in the back.

"C'mooon. How about we go back to the baths, Krai Baby? I wanna fight a dragooon!"

"Yeah, not happening."

They said they'd be enhancing the town's security and I didn't think there would be a second dragon. The main bath wasn't even open due to the damage, so we would be making do with the open-air in our room. If a dragon

appeared in that small bath then I would just give up.

No one had ever said they wanted to fight a dragon and I never told anyone to go ahead and do that, but Liz still looked at me with pursed lips.

"Huh? Tino alwaaays gets special treatment. Aren't you playing favorites with her?"

"Indeed! Be clear: who's more important to you, me or T?!"

Liz could only think about the dragon, Sitri was taking advantage of the situation, and Tino was completely thrown for a loop. I was sure she was thinking something like "Huh, I'm being favored?" Once you got wrapped up in the Smart sisters' lines of thinking, there was no coming back, but fortunately, they stopped before that happened to Tino.

Liz suddenly began to look at her apprentice with suspicion.

"T, since when were you strong enough to fight a dragon bare-handed? Have you been holding out on me during our training?"

"N-No, Lizzy! That was, um..."

I had been wondering the same thing. Tino was talented and had been enduring Liz's torturous regiments, but she was still a Level 4 and this was her first dragon. "Dragon Slayer" was given out as an accolade because all dragons surpassed a certain degree of strength. Even if that one in the hot spring was weak for a dragon, it still shouldn't have been something you could defeat sans clothing.

Tino's lips quivered for a moment before she looked at me and spoke in a small voice.

"Um, you see, Master, after wearing that mask of yours, my body has felt lighter. Or maybe it'd be better to say I've learned to control it better."

For real? I know that mask draws out latent powers but does it also have lasting effects?

Super Tino had been a sight to behold. She had grown taller and become strong enough to be a match for Arnold, a Level 7. She was conscious when she wore the mask so it wasn't strange that she remembered those moves even

after she removed the mask. Maybe that was Evolve Greed's main use?

What the hell. You can't be serious, draw out my latent powers too!

"Hmmm, so it has lasting effects," Liz said through pursed lips. "That's kinda unfair."

She had given the mask a try back in the capital, but apparently, it rejected her for "security reasons." Sitri sat quietly and smiled. I didn't know what the mask had said to her but she had also been turned down when she tried wearing Evolve Greed.

"By the sound of it, there are restrictions to the latent powers Evolve Greed can act upon," I said.

It was still an excellent Relic. Its compatibility varied...I just wished it was compatible with me.

"Th-That's right, it didn't work for you, Master."

"I guess it's a Tino exclusive."

Granted, my case was a bit different. Unlike Liz and Sitri, I couldn't use the mask because my latent abilities were too low. And I didn't think it could necessarily draw upon all of one's latent powers. Liz had recognized Tino's talents; I didn't think there could be much of a gap between the powers they had in store.

Sitri then clapped her hands as though to move us onto a different subject.

"For now, let's set aside the matter of the mask and focus on celebrations," she said with a wide grin. "Today we'll be feasting on boiled dragon. Boiled dragon made with hot spring dragon!"

Those weren't words I was used to hearing. It almost sounded like the meat was boiled in a hot spring. But I wasn't going to object, overwriting misfortune with fun was the way of the hunter.

We took Liz to the courtyard so she could see the dragon and her reaction was quite something.

"HA HA HA HA WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!"

"Lizzy, don't laugh so hard."

"Huh? You're gonna become a Dragon Slayer after defeating this? Holy shit!"

Liz was right. It seemed scary when it was rampaging around, but now that it was knocked out and lying on its side, its round body and bright colors made it seem almost like a plushie.

"Sure, it's an abnormal dragon, but it's a dragon nonetheless," Sitri said as Liz clapped her hands.

It was a tougher dragon than its looks might lead you to believe. After all, it demolished the inn's prized main bath. Its hot-water breath didn't look like much but it could have killed me in an instant if I hadn't been wearing any Safety Rings.

Having had her fun, Liz wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Heh, heh. But I heard hot spring dragons are much fiercer than this thing."

No, Liz, it doesn't look like much because it's unconscious. It's plenty fierce.

"Still, according to the proprietress, these dragons rarely approach human populations, even ones situated around a hot spring," Sitri said as she picked up a large billhook borrowed from somewhere. The dully glimmering blade was simple but unnerving. "Mmm, I hope this blade can cut through. Too bad I can't call for Luke."

Some monsters and mythical beings had skin more durable than metal. Sitri raised the billhook with ease and swung it at the dragon's neck. At the same moment, the sky-blue dragon opened its eyes.

It made a squawking noise.

"Ah, it dodged it."

The dragon dodged the incoming blade with unbelievable swiftness. The shining cutlery dug into the earth. Tino let out a brief screech and was about to hide behind me, but stopped when she realized Liz was watching.

The hot spring dragon stood up on wobbling feet. It saw Sitri wearing a faint smile, Liz grinning, Tino frantically preparing for another fight, Killiam standing with its arms folded, and me standing still as a board. It let out something

resembling a scream.

I might mention that Tino didn't finish off the dragon earlier because Sitri said dragon tastes best when killed right before you cook it.

Tears welled up in the doe-like eye of the hot spring dragon as it started at Liz.

"Look, Krai Baby! Our dinner's crying! So even some dragons cry."

"No need to cry now. I'll end it with one swing, it'll only hurt for a moment," Sitri murmured.

"I-I won't let you hurt Master!"

"Kill kill."

"Rawr..." the hot spring dragon cried pitifully.

The dragon was strong but we had the complete advantage with Tino backed up by Liz, Sitri, and even Killiam. Its fate was sealed. It seemed to understand the predicament it was in and frantically looked around. Unfortunately, there was nowhere for it to run. But then its gaze fell on me.

Yeah, uh-huh. There is a weak link in our group. But I have my Safety Rings. The moment you attack, Liz will slug you and then it'll all be over. It won't do you any good, so don't try attacking me.

The dragon flung itself at me. Even I could dodge that if I tried, but it would just make more trouble even if I successfully evaded it. Without any better options, I just decided to let it hit me. Resigned to my fate, I held my arms wide open, but the dragon rolled over.

"Wha?!"

The hot spring dragon cooed as it rolled on its back and showed me its belly. It looked at me with teary eyes. I was at a loss for words. Tino looked at me like I was something more than human.

"U-Uh, the dragon's showing you its tummy. So it's surrendering?! Y-You never fail, Master."

No, there was clearly something off about this dragon. Besides, I was pretty sure the dragon was trying to appeal to my weakness, not submit to my

strength. Still, on its back, the dragon wiggled its way towards me. It didn't show a speck of the pride that marked an apex predator. Then it made a mewing noise.

No way that's a normal dragon sound.

It had been trying to kill me not too long ago but now I had it in the palm of my hand. I experimentally placed my foot on its stomach, but it didn't react. It seemed to think this was better than being eaten. I suddenly felt a strong affinity for the dragon.

"Krai, what shall we do?" Sitri asked.

"Mmm, good question."

It seemed Liz and Tino were also ready to follow my lead. Even if it was acting docile, a dragon was still a dragon. Maybe it would be best just to kill it? There was no point in waiting until after it caused an incident.

I steeled my soul and touched the surface of the dragon. It was smooth and warm like a hot spring. It was a really pleasant sensation.

"W-Well, I don't see anything wrong with forgiving it. Nobody died or anything."

I was certain I'd sleep well if I used this guy as a pillow.

The dragon let out a cry of excitement.

This thing can definitely understand what we're saying.

Even as he looked back, he struggled to understand where he went wrong. Work was work. He knew what he did was dangerous. He *thought* he knew what he did was dangerous. Sitting by himself absentmindedly in the corner of a luxurious room, Gray thought himself a fool.

When he turned down his chance to get in on Black and White's escape plan, they looked at him with disdain, but he didn't care.

He was a bad person. After being too unruly even for treasure hunting, he became a criminal and committed a number of heinous acts. He had seen all

sorts of things in the imperial capital's underbelly. There was the terrifying, the ugly, the pitiful, and that which no human should witness. He came across some people who had no regard for human life.

But the Thousand Tricks, he was something else entirely. He was no mere hunter. Something unnerved Gray when he first saw the Thousand Tricks. Even among the criminal world, Gray was an exceptionally perceptive one. It was how he had lasted so long despite his lack of other notable strengths.

That man didn't have the distinct bearing of those who had overcome gauntlets. He didn't have the distinct shadow of those who had seen the darkness. Most of all, unlike the Stifled Shadow and the Ignoble, he didn't have the trace of blood.

Even if they weren't especially bloodthirsty like the Stifled Shadow was, all treasure hunters got the smell of blood on them to some degree or another. That "trace," as Gray referred to it, wasn't something that could be washed out with any sort of soap, no matter how hard you tried.

Until meeting that man, Gray had never met a hunter who didn't have that trace. That caused Gray to misread the situation and show the wrong attitude. Looking back, that was a stupid thing to do.

It seemed unthinkable that a man could reach Level 8, all while leading a party of butchers, and not be involved in any bloodshed. That completely unfathomable side of that languid young man was exactly what made him someone Gray didn't want to mess with.

Gray saw multiple examples of that man's strange behavior during their trip. He never did anything of note, but that's what made him so strange. Gray knew he couldn't afford to let his guard down.

Before they departed on their trip, Krai hadn't shown a hint of malice when he was about to have Black, White, and Gray done away with. This meant that he saw their lives as things just as insignificant as rocks on the side of the road.

It was the Stifled Shadow who had captured them, but that was likely because that task was simply beneath the Thousand Tricks. Black and White had their suspicions, but to Gray, it looked like they would be let go as long as they didn't do anything.

Gray shrunk down and sat in silence like someone waiting for a storm to pass. He kept his mouth sealed like a clam and pretended he was a rock. This was his surest means of survival for someone in his position. They hadn't done anything wrong to that man—anything he would consider wrong. They hadn't done anything worth his intervention or his interest.

Gray found himself concentrating, but he didn't hear the screams of Black and White. Of course not, even if something happened they would be dead before they could make any noise.

Then, with perfect timing, came a knock at the door.

"Black, White, are you there?"

"Huh?!"

Gray thought his heart might burst from his chest. For an instant, he wondered if it was a despair-induced hallucination, but the sounds and voices didn't go away. Gray frantically stood up. His knees threatened to give out on him, but he managed to pull through and unlock the door. The locks on doors in an inn like this one would have meant nothing to a Level 8 and not opening the door wasn't an option in the first place.

Black and White had gone off to steal the collar key from the Thousand Tricks. Gray didn't know how their attempt fared but he didn't think it was a coincidence that the Thousand Tricks was calling their names. And if he was only calling for Black and White, that meant he was actually calling out to Gray.

The door opened. The young man gave Gray a peculiar look. His stance was as defenseless as ever, his body seemingly incapable of violence. Behind him was his opposite, Sitri Smart, a woman who exuded a savage aura. She looked at Gray with her usual bone-chilling smile.

But what bothered Gray the most was clinging to the young man's feet—a sky-blue dragon. It was small and its bright color seemed like some sort of joke, but something clearly dragon-shaped was rubbing its head against the man's feet as though in an attempt to curry favor. Gray couldn't help but stand stockstill.

"Don't worry about it," the Thousand Tricks said with a sigh. "It's become

domesticated. I guess it really doesn't want to be eaten."

Gray struggled to believe that nonchalant utterance. It was unimaginable that a mythical beast would submit to a human. The Thousand Tricks just shrugged his shoulders with resignation.

"By the way, is it just you, Gray? Where are Black and White?"

Gray came to his senses and instinctively pressed his lips together.

The Thousand Tricks could see right through him. Nothing in his voice or expression was unnatural, but that wasn't going to fool Gray. Normally, he would start yelling, but all that escaped Gray's lips was a weak trembling voice. His heart was pounding like a drum. He was certain the Thousand Tricks had no interest in him, but it was only natural to be afraid of scary things. Obedience was the only recourse for the weak.

Gray had no idea what this man might say or do and that's what made him so terrifying.

"I-I told them not to. Black and White, they went to steal the k-key..."

He had said he would keep quiet, but he no longer cared. The more he thought about it, the more flaws he saw in their plan. Black and White had been overly optimistic and were banking on good luck. Under normal circumstances, it was a laughable plan not even worth considering. Only bad impulses could have driven them to carry it out. No, their nerves had probably snapped from the fear pervading them.

Hearing what Gray said, the black-haired young man made a strange face and blinked a few times before casually lifting up the chain at his hip. Dozens of pieces of jewelry were on the chain, including two collars just like the one on Gray's neck.

Krai Andrey clapped his hands as though something had just dawned on him. It was comically obvious, but, surprisingly, nothing about it seemed like an act. If Gray didn't know any better, he might have immediately judged this man to be an utter moron.

With a strained smile, the Thousand Tricks turned around. Unlike him, Sitri had an icy look in her eyes.

"Sitri, it looks like they ran off. Is that gonna be a problem?"

"No, not particularly. I can't imagine they've gone far yet. If they need to be stopped, I can put Lizzy to the—"

"No, it's fine. That's not what I meant. This isn't worth bothering Lizzy while she's on vacation. Yeah, we'll just make a small change in plans. By the way, just out of curiosity..."

Krai scratched his cheek, furrowed his brow, and looked at Gray. Gray could see his haggard face reflected in those eyes of pure black. The man's incomprehensible expression sent a shiver down his spine. This was an unbeatable man who had conquered a dragon, made people fend off vicious monsters, and showed no concern for human life.

"How come you didn't run?" he asked Gray.

I screwed up.

I was completely caught off guard by the news that those two ran away. It seemed unimaginable considering that I had already told them I would give them the key and set them free. Sure, it was stupid of me to not realize they had fled even after I found their collars in the locker, but I think my stupidity has been well-established by this point. It was all because of that hot spring dragon.

But this wasn't a fatal mistake, their release just got expedited a tad. Sitri didn't think it was a problem either so there really was no need to go after those two. If they had stolen a Relic then I might have sent Liz after them, but fortunately I had brought all my Relics into the hot spring with me. I just prayed that stealing that key was the last crime they would ever commit.

But I still didn't understand why Gray alone stayed behind. When I blurted out that question, he looked at me with surprise. Maybe because he had been on lookout duty the entire trip, he looked emaciated around the eyes and cheeks. From the start, he didn't seem to be a vigorous person, but now he looked like a dead tree.

When I voiced my question, he stumbled and fell on his rear. It was just a

simple query but for some reason, he went pale and his teeth began to chatter. Maybe I shouldn't have asked. I didn't think anything of it as the words left my mouth, but when you think about it, stealing and fleeing aren't exactly good deeds. Anyone would be put in an uncomfortable spot if asked why they didn't do it.

Gray looked up at me with wide eyes, his lips trembling.

"|-|-|..."

"Ah, sorry, you don't have to answer that. I was just a bit curious," I said in a reassuring voice.

I wasn't going to be bothered one way or another. This was just a vacation for me. I dropped the key right in front of Gray and let out a big yawn. This was just one less chore to have on my mind so I considered it a stroke of good luck.

"Here's the key. You can head off whenever you feel like it, but since we're here why not stay a bit and rest? Sitri's paying for all this after all."

"Indeed, and it's only costing me a trifling sum," Sitri said with a twitching smile.

Even if they were a criminal, working someone to death was still a crime. Under Zebrudian law, you could kill a criminal during an attempt to catch them, but once arrested you couldn't just off them on a whim.

As I placatingly tapped a dissatisfied Sitri on the shoulder, I felt obligated to give Gray a warning.

"Oh, right. Don't go committing any more crimes, okay?"

Lady Luck must have been in a fine mood because Black and White's plan went off without a hitch. They had managed to remove their collars, left the inn without being spotted by the staff, and even made it out of town with the items they had stashed away. They were free to go abroad or return to the capital and lay low. But they couldn't breathe easy just yet.

Taking off with the carriage with them would've been a bit much. That would've been too daring and given their captors one more reason to come

after them. They had been running separately from the road for a while. Once the town faded from view, Black and White stopped.

Their escape had gone perfectly, but they still had ghastly complexions. Breathing heavily, they took swigs from their canteens and looked in the direction of the town. They were both recalling the last thing the Thousand Tricks had said to them.

"Why? What drove that man to let us go?" White said.

"Hmph. Don't ask me. How should I know what goes on in the head of a Level 8?" Black replied.

"There might be thieves," he had said back at the main bath. That was clearly aimed at Black and White. Black couldn't tell whether that was meant to discourage them from stealing the key or to tell them he knew what they were up to. If they had made it this far, did that mean he was permitting them to get away?

"Where should we go?" White asked, his face drained of color. "Do we leave the country? Should we go back to the capital?"

They were both natives of the imperial capital. Back there, they still had hideaways with items and they could easily keep a low profile. But the capital was also the home base of the Thousand Tricks. Who knew what might happen if they returned? He might have let them go, but the Ignoble and the Stifled Shadow might not be so forgiving.

"We'll go abroad," Black declared. "Zebrudia's too dangerous as long as we've got their ire."

"Oh, yeah, I was thinking the same thing," White replied as his eyes busily scanned their surroundings.

If they left the empire, even the Stifled Shadow probably wouldn't come after them. There was no reason for her to be *that* fixated on them. From the bag, White retrieved a map of the empire and unfolded it. It was a simple map but they could at least use it to figure out the shortest route out of the empire.

Black and White were both skillful hunters. Looking back on that brutal expedition, they felt they could now overcome any gauntlet that came their

way. White's eyes glimmered with vitality, he looked ready to do whatever it took to take advantage of this opportunity to escape with his life. Black felt the same way.

"Which way?" White asked.

Suls was surrounded by mountains on three sides. Their best option was to leave via the road they came in on, but that was also an obvious choice. As she mulled over what might be the most feasible route, Black suddenly recalled a conversation the Thousand Tricks and his cohorts had in the carriage.

She checked the map. She looked intently at a wide region that was near Suls, just a stone's throw away. It was near the border and belonged to a blade of the empire which warded off monsters, phantoms, and invaders. It was home to an elite order of knights, almost devoid of corruption, a bad place for anyone up to no good. It was also a place the Thousand Tricks had been determined to avoid.

"The Gladis Earldom. We'll pass through here. We're crossing the mountains," Black declared in a dry voice.

There's nothing better than being on vacation. My time in Suls simply flew by. The food was delicious and the hot spring was incredible. I think it was because of the incident with the hot spring dragon, but the inn staff all had a sort of reverence for me. But I got some stuff on the house and I just ignored their idolizing eyes.

At the end of every day, I would look back and regret all the time I wasted and even that was pleasant. The main bath had been destroyed, leaving me with just our room's open-air bath. But I could enjoy that without worrying about any other guests, so that wasn't so bad. If I really wanted to go to a big bath I could go to the hot springs outside. I had been a bit on edge, but there hadn't been any more dragon sightings after the first day.

The only downside was that Luke and the others weren't there to join us. We hadn't gone anywhere as a party in a long time, but trips were something we usually did together. Perhaps they would gripe at me once we got back to the capital.

But we can just all come together another time. When I see them, I'll boast as much as I please.

I had heard from Sitri that these hot spring waters had healing properties and it seemed she was right. Not that I had any old wounds, but I still felt like I could soak in there forever. The water was a bit hot, but I solved that problem with a Relic that enhanced heat resistance.

I was idling about another day, my lower half submerged in warm water, and, as usual, I could hear Liz and Tino arguing. Liz had no sense of restraint. Once, when our whole party found a hot spring deep in some mountains, she unabashedly tried to join me, even after I told her no. She thought of me less as a man and more as a childhood friend.

You'd often hear it said that among hunters the barriers between men and women were fairly low. Equipment getting destroyed and similar occurrences meant you couldn't be too bothered by nudity. But I thought there was something wrong with not showing any shame at all.

I was indeed a man and unlike Luke, I wasn't apathetic to everything unrelated to swords, so I couldn't just ignore it. Even though I was used to Liz's skinship, I was comfortable seeing all that skin and I was even less comfortable with her wrapping her arms around me. Usually, Lucia would do some fancy magic and keep Liz at bay, but with her nemesis absent, Liz was in high spirits. Even though I knew this might happen if we went here, I couldn't resist the call of the spring.

I heard a scream from Tino and the next moment the door rattled open.

"Maaaster, run! And aren't you in there too much?! How many times have you hopped in the bath today?!"

"Krai Baby, I brought some booze! Wanna have a drink together?" Liz said with excitement.

"Oh, fine, go ahead, Liz," I said while stifling an enormous yawn. "Just be sure to wash yourself before getting in."

Accompanied by Liz and Tino, both in yukatas, I strolled through the town

feeling like a man doubly blessed. It seems the appearance of the hot spring dragon had caused a shock for the townsfolk and they treated us like celebrities for defeating it.

We already stood out plenty as we were just about the only tourists in town. The hot spring dragon seemed to be one of the weaker varieties, but it was still a dragon which meant it was a mythical beast that no average citizen could handle. Watching it laze about in our room's open-air bath, it was easy to forget that thing was dangerous.

It was natural that we would be lauded for vanquishing it (even if we didn't kill it in the end), but Tino didn't seem accustomed to the attention and wore a very stiff expression.

"You should smile at times like these, be proud. The minor fame will wear off soon enough," I told her.

"Y-Yes, Master."

I munched on a complimentary hot spring dragon manju as I strolled around. Being a hot spring town, Suls had a very relaxed atmosphere, which was to my liking. Our inn wasn't the only place with baths, there were a number of smaller springs located throughout the town. The quality probably didn't vary, but I still thought it might be fun to try out a few of the other baths.

There was also something refreshing about seeing Tino and Liz in different outfits. The yukatas showed less skin than their usual gear but they looked very nice on their slim figures. Perhaps due to the steam from the springs, their skin was redder than normal, giving them a vaguely erotic allure.

Which reminded me of something Sitri once told me. She said that yukatas are folded with the left side on top so one's right hand can reach in and fondle the chest. What a blatant lie. No way someone would make such a blatantly lecherous outfit!

Near the edges of the town, Sitri was talking business with a group of men all wearing fine clothes.

"Between scenery and safety, safety should take priority. A barrier can ward off monsters, but not the strongest of them, or humans for that matter. With

that in mind, why not purchase a cutting-edge golem?"

Grinning and wearing a yukata, she spoke while pointing at the outer wall, which was only as high as her neck.

"They may run a high price, but they can be used not only for combat but also manual labor. Surely, they're a bargain compared to human workers. Fortune won't place a Level 8 hunter in your baths a second time."

She always hid it under her robe, but, compared to Liz, Sitri had a fine figure. She was a bit taller, but her chest left no room for competition.

"Krai has taken a liking to this town, and these golems are still in their test phase, so if you buy now, I'll slash the price by half. With weapons included, a set of thirty golems will come to one billion gild, plus tax!"

The old men who seemed to be in charge of the town talked among one another while presumably being taken in by Sitri's luscious figure. One billion gild seemed a pretty hefty sum for a town of this size. Could golems even win against a dragon? Why was Sitri conducting business while we were on vacation? It all made zero sense to me.

"Siddy...never misses a beat," Tino remarked.

"Nobody's better than her at finding weak spots," said Liz.

With exasperation, both of them watched Siddy, who simply did as she pleased. They had the right of it, but then again, Liz was the girl who went off in search of a dragon on our first day here.

Sitri saw me and came running over even though she was in the middle of negotiations. I couldn't help but look and notice that her robe was folded with the left side on top.

"You're working hard," I said.

"It would be a shame if another dragon appeared, an and I could test the powers of my new weapons. I see this as two birds with one stone," she replied.

Is she a merchant of death?

But Sitri had a point, this town's defenses did come across as insufficient. It might only seem relevant to them as long as that bandit squad was around, but

it mattered a whole lot to a temporary visitor like me.

But still, one billion gild was a lot of money. It wasn't a price you'd agree to without some consideration. Just how much did those golems cost to produce? The town's bigwigs seemed to be giving up on the golems. Most anyone wouldn't immediately agree to buying golems if they hadn't even seen them in action.

"Sitri, why not drop the price just a bit?" I suggested after some brief hesitation.

"Huh," Sitri looked at me with wide eyes. "How much should I set the price at?"

How much? This is new. Are you really gonna sell it at whatever I say?

I wasn't an Alchemist nor did I know the value of golems. This wasn't even something I would normally stick my nose in.

"This is for the town's safety. Here, how about you don't charge money but let them pay with goods or something?"

"An exchange of goods, you say? But the only notable product in this town is its hot springs... Oh, I've got it! How about their sovereignty?!"

"A-Also, I think if you want someone to buy something, you should let them see it first."

"Hm, that's right," she said while looking contemplative.

What did she mean by sovereignty?

I wasn't going to say "Give the golems away for free," and she wouldn't do that even if I told her to. She greatly valued my opinion, but she wouldn't just do as I said. It was a bond of friendship that existed between us.

Sitri seemed to have gathered her thoughts as she clapped her hands and grinned. She went back to the townsfolk, who were having a serious discussion.

"I've reached a decision," Sitri said in a cheery voice. "If you're undecided, then I'll lend you all the golems completely free of charge for the duration of our stay. Consider it a gift from Krai. If another dragon appeared during our vacation it would be quite a hassle. Remember, you can wait until after you've

seen the golems at work and it won't be too late to make a purchase."

Once her pseudo-volunteer sales pitch was over, I collected Sitri and the four of us walked around town together. She hadn't brought any golems or whatever with her, but it seemed she could manufacture them out here. What a hard worker she was.

"Are you okay with the way that went?" I asked, my umpteenth question that hour.

"I am. It's for your sake after all," she said with a cheerful nod.

I was an amateur when it came to commerce but it seemed Sitri was getting a bad deal here. We had already encountered a hot spring dragon. I doubted any other threats would pop up during our stay and those golems wouldn't sell if they didn't get a chance to show their power.

And isn't this for the sake of the townsfolk, not mine?

Sitri didn't answer my question, but just took a half step, closing the distance between us. A faint sweet aroma drifted from her hair. Probably her shampoo? I didn't comment on it, but I found myself wanting to bring my face closer. I began to feel woozy.

"Krai Baby, don't be fooled by her blatant attempts to score points with you!" Liz said as she jutted between us. "She's totally using her wiles so she can put you in her debt!"

"I'm doing nothing of the sort. Lizzy, you're absolutely paranoid! Right, Krai?" "Yeah, uh-huh."

She's going to try the usual trap, the one where they say, "Oh yeah, I lent you money a while ago. Why not come over to my place sometime soon?" Well, I have nobody to blame but myself and I'll probably get by without paying her back.

I took in the tranquility as the Smart sisters bickered. Tino seemed to have become a bit more chipper again. All I had to do was buy time until the Gathering of the White Blade was over. Our trip had its troubles, but all's well

that ends well.

I idly considered taking Liz and Sitri somewhere so Tino could briefly be free from getting caught in their cross fire. But suddenly, I spotted an unadorned sign that looked out of place in a hot spring town. I read what it said and furrowed my brow.

"Construction?"

"It appears they were digging up a spring, but the project was paused due to the rumors of bandits," Sitri added.

A wide lot was surrounded with barbed wire and a large hole was dug in the center. I didn't know the specifics of unearthing springs, but apparently, even this was affected by the bandits.

"In all likelihood, they were probably borrowing a Magus for this project," Sitri continued. "Said Magus was probably evacuated, just to be on the safe side."

"I hope this bandit situation gets resolved soon."

The construction site was huge; they were probably planning to build a fairly large inn. Construction equipment was piled up around the hole.

Well, even without the interruption, it probably wouldn't have finished before our arrival. But if this continues, it might not be done when we come back with the rest of the party.

"That reminds me," Sitri said with a grin and a clap of her hands. "Earlier, I heard that there are legends of more than just dragons in this area!"

"Legends?"

Legends. Nothing about this sounds good.

I thought my attitude made it clear I didn't want to hear it, but Sitri continued on.

"I hear they sometimes come out nearby."

"C'mon, let's talk about something else."

I wasn't proud to say it, but I couldn't handle ghosts. I had been chased around by all sorts of them, you see.

"No! They're not ghosts, the legends mention a strange Sapien—"

"C'mon, let's talk about something else."

I wasn't proud to say it, but I couldn't handle Sapiens. I had been chased around by all sorts of them, you see.

Sitri sighed and smiled faintly when she saw my complete lack of passion.

"Well, it is just a legend and I hear there haven't been any recent sightings."

Right. Damn right. We've already run into enough trouble. If we run into anything more, we can pronounce my luck dead.

For the time being, our concern was the bandit squad.

"I wonder if there are any nearby hunters who can deal with the bandits," I wondered aloud.

Liz looked at me wide-eyed and smiled as she waved her hands. Of course, I meant any hunters besides her. If she went to battle then Tino and I would be dragged along and I wanted to be spared that.

Then a loud noise boomed all of a sudden. At the front gate, which could hardly be called a gate, a large, beat-up carriage was being pulled by lanky horses. The few barkers in the streets looked with curiosity at the abnormal sight.

Are those new visitors?

I watched absentmindedly as the carriage door opened and a deathly pale man disembarked. I couldn't contain my surprise. It was Arnold getting out of the carriage. He had changed so much, I didn't realize it was him at first, but there was no mistaking it.

Arnold Hail. He was a Level 7 hunter with the moniker the Crashing Lightning. He was also a man out for my head for some reason. He was covered in bandages, his hair was a mess, his cheeks sunken, but he was unmistakably the man who had recently caused me so many headaches. Following him were his party members and even Gilbert.

They had a different aura about them. Some of them were in different gear. They didn't seem to be critically wounded, but their steps were uneasy and they seemed to be covered in cuts and scratches. The only one who seemed even somewhat all right was Chloe, who got out last.

They must have really been hurt if they didn't notice me even though I had noticed them. In their normal condition, it was unthinkable that I would spot them first.

Could they be stalking me?

But if that was their plan, they wouldn't appear before me in such a terrible state. They looked like they had just escaped mortal danger. I once came close to dying in the desert, so I knew exactly what that looked like.

What a terrible thing to happen, and while we're on vacation to boot. God must have it out for me.

Tino's eyes were bulging. A smile took form on Liz's face when she caught sight of Arnold. Sitri's eyes went wide, but then she clasped her hands as if it all made sense to her now. I didn't like this development.

We needed to get out of dodge before we were noticed. Arnold and company didn't seem like they were watching their surroundings.

I grabbed Liz's hand and pulled her back, but Sitri stepped forward as though she were taking her place. I wasn't able to stop her before she gave a welcoming round of applause to Arnold. She didn't look surprised. She wore a wide grin as if she had seen this all coming.

"Well, well, well. I bid you welcome to the town of Suls. Should I say it took you long enough? Or perhaps your timing is perfect, as usual? I grew tired of waiting. You took so long, T had to fight the dragon."

"Hm?!"

Sitri, you knew this was going to happen?!

I didn't understand how she could've predicted all this, but if she had I wished she had said something to me. Then we could've gone to a different hot spring.

Arnold looked at Sitri, then at me, and then his eyes opened as wide as they possibly could. His large body wobbled and, without saying a word, he fainted on the spot.

Chapter Two: Fearsome Interlopers

I didn't have the slightest clue what was happening. Sitri, however, didn't seem to notice and, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, walked up and took care of the new arrivals. She took control of the battered carriage and found a random inn to toss the group into.

We were used to treacherous situations. We had faced peril in forests, mountains, deserts, and even at sea. Yet at the same time, we regularly met people just as accustomed to danger as we were. To tell you the truth, Grieving Souls' sole new member at the time, Eliza Beck, was a fellow peril-pal—who nearly died in a desert with us.

From his lack of wounds, it seemed Arnold had passed out from exhaustion. Honestly, I didn't want any part in it, but Sitri had seamlessly involved herself so I saw no choice but to follow along.

We've got Liz and Tino here and Killiam's back at the inn. I'm sure Arnold won't be a problem.

We sat down to talk with them at a dining hall attached to their inn. The contrast between Sitri clad in a yukata and the beaten hunters was something incredible. The story told by Rhuda, Li'l Gilbert, and Chloe was an extraordinary one.

Apparently, they had been following us and even went all the way to Night Palace. We did a one-eighty when we saw there wasn't a single carriage outside but I guess Arnold and his entourage went in. That treasure vault was beyond the recommended level for Grieving Souls, a party full of moniker-holders, but they entered it with a party that included Level 3s and 4s. Did they have a death wish or something?

"...And then we managed to wait out the swarm by hiding under the mountains of corpses."

"We were looking at certain death. We all would've died if not for Arnold's

orders."

Li'l Gilbert's friends all nodded vehemently. Something told me they might not have entered those mountains if Arnold hadn't ordered them to, but I kept that to myself.

After listening to their tale with disinterest, Liz began to blink.

"Huh. So what? Did you have a bonfire on top of the remains of ours?" she said.

"W-We did not!"

"After all, in high-level treasure vaults, the mana material of phantoms is too strong and remains for long stretches," Sitri said. "Perhaps in the future, we should make sure to do a proper job wiping out remaining phantoms. What do you think, Krai?"

She looked contemplative, but all I could feel was the shock of learning that my friends had a bonfire without me. Sure we used to have bonfires all the time, but one in a vault they were underleveled for? Well, they enjoyed themselves and that's what's important.

From beginning to end, I failed to comprehend the story of Rhuda and the other hunters. I understood the words they were saying and I nodded along and gave the occasional "yeah, uh-huh," but my brain failed to process it all.

After managing to evade a horde of phantoms by hiding under piles of corpses, they all escaped Night Palace by the skin of their teeth and retreated to a nearby town. During their retreat, they encountered numerous phantoms and suffered more wounds.

Heavily fatigued, they headed for Suls, a town famous for its healing waters. Apparently, the Gladis Earldom being along the way also factored into that decision. It seemed they had been under the impression that's where I was headed.

You can issue me a named quest, but no way am I gonna take it. I don't think these guys understand what type of person I am.

"Please forgive him, Krai. He might have been rude to you, but he saved our

lives on multiple occasions!" Rhuda said in a shaky voice.

She was leaning forward in a pleading manner. A Thief's gear was supposed to be durable, but hers was tattered in multiple spots and her complexion was awful. The dark rings beneath her large blue eyes told me she was exhausted, though maybe not as much as Arnold.

"She's right," Chloe said, breaking her silence. "It may be the policy of the Explorers' Association not to get involved in infighting among hunters, but I'd suggest burying the hatchet, Krai. I believe Arnold's...learned his lesson."

What are you talking about?

I couldn't help but stare at Chloe. I didn't have any resentment towards Arnold and I didn't plan on doing anything to him. Honestly, as far as I was concerned, I was running away from him.

Animosity? I wouldn't say so. He burned through a bunch of my Safety Rings and bullied Tino, but we were fine in the end. I had learned from experience that you couldn't get by as a hunter if you let small things anger you, it would just stress you out. I figured you were better off just forgetting about it. Dissipating stress was what the hot spring did best.

I blinked and put on a reassuring smile.

"Huh? I haven't even done anything to him and I don't plan to."

I gave my honest opinion and it caused Gilbert to take a few steps back. The blood drained from Rhuda's face and the other hunters (I didn't know any of their names) all looked at me like some sort of freak. Even Chloe seemed taken aback.

"D-D-Does this mean that all we've done so far..."

"Is this one of the famous..."

"I don't really know what you're all talking about," I said. "This is mostly just a vacation."

"The matter of Arnold and his party is just something on the side," Sitri added, quite unnecessarily.

I thought about saying something, but when I really thought about it, Falling

Fog wasn't even a side matter. Except saying that would only be adding oil to the fire. The vice leader of Falling Fog looked at me with a strained expression, but he didn't offer any objections so I was certain that they also wanted to resolve this befuddling situation.

Sitri looked up at me. Liz wasn't saying anything, meaning she was leaving things in my hands. Multiple nervous faces were turned towards me. This wasn't some scheme to make us drop our guard; they wanted a peaceful resolution. Without thinking, I grinned ear to ear and gave them my answer.

"S-Sure, I don't really understand what's going on, but I see nothing wrong with burying the hatchet. Since you've come all the way to Suls, why not take a good, long rest? The hot springs here aren't half bad."

I couldn't figure out how Sitri had anticipated their movements, but I didn't really care. There was no use fighting in a hot spring area. The vice leader placed both hands on the table and lowered his head.

"You've got my gratitude. We were wrong to look down on a Level 8. Forgive us," he said.

"Yeah, uh-huh. But I haven't done anything."

I've had to apologize any number of times, but being apologized to for no reason wasn't common. I smiled and clapped my hands.

Now this dispute should be settled for good.

Rhuda had no idea what that man was thinking. Krai's smile of relief made her feel like she was in a different reality. To her, Night Palace had been a death trap. If she had been by herself, she wouldn't have been able to bring herself to hide in one of those grotesque piles. She might have chosen to escape into the castle and who knows what that might have resulted in?

But nothing in Krai's demeanor suggested that he might be sparing the slightest consideration for them. This made it clear how accustomed he was to giving out his Trials. It seemed incredibly devious to Rhuda that Krai might have anticipated Arnold losing his resolve and choosing to leave the treasure vault. If this was what it took to reach Level 8, she didn't see herself ever making it

there. To think there were levels even beyond that.

Whatever the case, they overcame the Trial. Perhaps they should just be satisfied with that.

After barely escaping Night Palace with their lives intact, they had traveled in fear of an encounter with Krai. The members of Falling Fog were covered in wounds. By comparison, Krai and his companions all looked to be in perfect health. Even Rhuda's one concern, Tino, was wearing a yukata and seemed better off than the last time they had met.

The original duty of Rhuda and Scorching Whirlwind was to make sure Chloe successfully reached Krai. Their initial plan was to part ways with Falling Fog in Suls and head to the Gladis Earldom. You might say coming across Krai here was bad luck for Arnold's company but good luck for Rhuda's.

Exhausted from her multiday trek, the hot springs of Suls were like heaven to Rhuda. The blood and flesh stuck to her had faded after leaving Night Palace, but her fatigue remained. She had heard the spring water in Suls had healing properties and she was all too ready to put that to the test. She took Krai up on his suggestion and they saved the quest talk for another time. Rhuda was ready to enjoy her first dip in a hot spring in some time.

Tino decided to join her. Rhuda had heard of a yukata, but this was her first time seeing one. She knew she was being unreasonable, but it still irked her to see Tino so clean while she was so disheveled.

Their inn had been picked haphazardly, but the baths were quite spacious. Just the pleasant sensation of steam brushing against her skin made Rhuda sleepy. She resisted the urge to take a nap as she gave herself an overdue cleansing. She knew that having few chances to wash off was just another part of being on the road, but, as a girl, she had trouble accepting it.

"Ah, I'm sooo tired. I thought I might die back there. Haven't felt that way in a while."

White Wolf's Den had been brutal, but she couldn't say if it had been worse than Night Palace. This time had involved stronger phantoms, but Falling Fog had been a reassuring presence.

"I never doubted Master's judgment, but I'm still glad to see you're all right," Tino said in a small voice as she sat down and gently rubbed her skin.

"Honestly, it was worse than I had expected. I guess that's what happens when you enter a vault nobody else has been to in years," Chloe said with a sigh as she let down her long black hair.

It had been a trying experience for Rhuda and the other hunters, but it must have been even worse for an employee of the Explorers' Association, even if she had some talent with a blade. Perhaps making it this far without complaining was just par for the course for a relative of the War Demon.

Tino must have bathed a few times already because her pale skin was clean and sparkly. But something about her seemed a bit dissatisfied.

"How have you been faring?" Rhuda asked her.

Tino paused.

"I fought a dragon in a hot spring," she said.

"Huuuh?"

They heard the story while taking a leisurely soak. Rhuda couldn't even be shocked, she just sighed. It seemed Tino had experienced her own fair share of troubles. She was probably the only hunter in the whole wide world who had been forced to fight a dragon in the nude. The lack of aid from Krai, Sitri, and other nearby hunters was telling of how spartan Tino's training was. Chloe looked baffled.

Even as another woman, Rhuda found Tino incredibly endearing as she bashfully told her story. If Rhuda found herself in the same situation, she would be too preoccupied with the dragon to be feeling embarrassment. Even if someone were to comment on it out to her after the fight, she thought it would be best to stand proud (despite her embarrassment) and say the situation called for it. The girl in front of Rhuda was an experienced hunter but she still had a sense of shame at odd times.

But then an old memory of Rhuda's resurfaced.

"Wait. Didn't you once say something to Krai about positions?" she asked

Tino.

"What of it?" Tino replied with a quaint expression.

It was when she battled Gilbert at the training grounds. At the time, Rhuda just guessed that was just the sort of person Tino was, but that wasn't a line you might casually hear from a girl who got embarrassed over a bit of exposed skin. Rhuda furrowed her brow.

"That was just something Lizzy taught me," Tino said. Her voice had a slight chill that wasn't there when she spoke to her "master." "Flexibility is important, sometimes you have to fit into small spaces. It's standard practice for a Thief and I was just showing my skills to Master. What of it?"

"I don't think that's what your mentor was getting at..."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

It would appear Tino had just been mimicking her mentor. Lizzy did come across as the kind of person who might be completely fine saying that sort of thing. Most people wouldn't describe flexible joints in terms like "You can put me in any position you like."

"Well, for now, just don't talk like that in front of too many people," Rhuda said in an attempt to be roundabout. She tried to hide her expression by sinking down until the water was up to her neck.

The long overdue dip in the hot spring was invigorating. It was like all her fatigue was just being drained away. She had completed her job when she safely delivered Chloe to her destination, but maybe staying in Suls a bit longer might not be such a bad idea?

"It was a good experience, I think. But I don't wanna undergo another Trial ever again," Rhuda said drowsily. "Hey, Tino, do you think you could tell that to Krai?" she joked.

Tino briefly sat in silence before saying something quite unexpected.

"I don't think this Trial is over quite yet."

"Huh?"

"Hey! Thousand Tricks! Is this really a training method?"

"Yeah. Hundred percent. Luke did the same thing and he became really strong. It's my recommended training method."

"F-For real? It seems a little weird, but if you recommend it then it must be good! Who would've thought you could train in a hot spring? Is this what it means to reach Level 8? Aah, here I go—gurgle gurgle."

Li'l Gilbert boldly stood beneath the waterfall pouring into the hot spring. His party members watched from the side with odd looks of amazement. I suppressed a grin and looked the other way. It seemed he had the same sort of one-track mind as Luke.

After getting out of the bath, Chloe, also just out of the water and wearing a yukata, approached me and handed me an envelope bearing the insignia of the Explorers' Association. Apparently, this was the reason they came all this way.

That's right. Gark said he'd send along an employee of the Association. So that was Chloe. It couldn't have been easy, coming all this way and whatnot.

I accepted the envelope and handed it right off to Sitri.

"Wh-Why won't you look at it?!" Chloe said as she looked at me wide-eyed.

"Because I don't need to. I don't plan to accept the quest."

"Huh?!"

She was absolutely bewildered, but this was all Gark's fault. I clearly said I didn't know whether or not I would accept it. Even if it was a named quest issued by a noble, a hunter still had the right to decline. It was truly mind-boggling that Gark thought a semiretired coward like myself might accept a named quest.

With a grin, Sitri removed a letter opener from her pocket and broke the seal on the envelope. I guess she figured she might as well take a look. Just as I had Eva to help me carry out my duties as clan master, I had Sitri help me be a hunter.

"D-Do I need to remind you that's a named quest from *the* Lord Gladis?!" Chloe said frantically after overcoming her astonishment. She looked like she

was trying to figure out my true intentions. "It'll improve your reputation and your success might make Lord Gladis more amiable towards other hunters!"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

It was wrong of me to only give her tepid responses and then chase her off, but that wasn't what this was about. I couldn't do a named quest by myself and even if I did that would just increase my chances of getting dragged into noble nuisances. There was nothing to gain for a man aspiring to retire. But Chloe had a job to do, she couldn't simply accept that sort of excuse.

Oh, man. Can't you tell? I'm not the hunter you all seem to think I am.

"Wh-What are you looking at us like that for?" Rhuda said with a strained look.

Sitri placed the quest brief on the table and nodded at me knowingly.

"I understand now. There's no need for us to pursue this," she said.

"Wha?"

I had the same reaction as Chloe, but I didn't say it aloud. A hard-boiled man is a man of few words.

"The quest is a joint-effort extermination of Bandit Squad Barrel," Sitri explained with a grin as she put away her knife. "They're a troublesome bandit squad. They're large, powerful, and clever. They came from the east, consist of about one hundred members, and are coordinated enough to trouble even professional militaries."

"All of their members are capable but their top brass are exceptional. They only recently came to Zebrudia, but due to their ransacking in other countries, the Explorer's Association has a bounty placed on them. I think they're pretty high on the list."

That sounds really bad.

Hunters typically formed parties of six. No matter how powerful they were, six hunters weren't enough to take on nearly one hundred bad guys. If these bandits were enough to rout even professional militaries, then it was safe to assume they were formidable. If they were near the top of the Explorers'

Association bounty list then they must be a fair bit stronger than the average hunter.

No need to pursue. You've got that right, Sitri. Eliminating bandit squads is the state's responsibility. To hell with the named quest. What are they doing trying to shove that off on me?

If it was a joint effort then it was probably with Lord Gladis's knights. But they weren't fond of hunters so why go throwing out named quests now of all times? I swore to myself I'd have a word with Gark later on.

I pay my taxes, go ahead and turn these scary requests down.

"And why's there no need to pursue it?" Li'l Gilbert asked with a suspicious look.

"It's simple. They've gotten away with terrorizing a number of different countries because they have more than simple strength. They're quite intelligent and won't fight an opponent they can't win against," Sitri explained.

The name of this bandit squad wasn't ringing any bells for me, but Sitri recognized the name and even knew their history. Grieving Souls mainly focused on clearing treasure vaults but they had considerable experience with bounty hunting. They would usually come to us, leaving us (and by "us," I meant my friends) no choice but to take them out. All the while, Sitri built up a considerable database regarding bounty targets.

"These bandits have terrorized many regions. They've lasted as long as they have by retreating every time a stronger force is sent after them. They aren't dumb enough to stick around if a Level 8 hunter's been dispatched."

"I-I see," Gilbert said.

Sitri spoke fluently; her confident tone made it easy to believe her words.

"They know how to sense out strong opponents and would have begun preparing to pull out the moment they learned who was being enlisted to hunt them down. I don't believe they're still within the Gladis Earldom."

Her explanation had a certain logic to it and was easy to understand. The leader of Li'l Gilbert's party let out a groan. Similarly, it seemed like such a

possibility had never occurred to Chloe.

I let out a silent cheer. My inflated level was coming in handy for once. Not that I ever planned to accept the named quest, but I couldn't be liable for any sort of blame if the enemy had already run off. There was no way Lord Gladis was going to tell me to chase the bandits even after they had left his domain.

I gotta thank Sitri for this later.

Brimming with confidence, I crossed my arms.

"That's the jist of it. We can go after them, but I don't really see any need to. I have my own way of doing things," I said to Chloe like I had any idea what I was on about.

"Eh, oh, of course."

"It was inevitable that Bandit Squad Whatever-it-was would run when Lord Gladis issued the named quest. It happens. I'm sure Lord Gladis will be satisfied by this. Oh, and thank you for the explanation, Sitri."

"Oh, you flatter me, Krai."

Sitri's explanation probably contained a bit of conjecture on her part, but she was rarely wrong. And it didn't matter even if she somehow happened to be wrong because I wasn't obligated to accept the named quest.

Now I could cast aside my worries and kill time until the Gathering of the White Blade was over. I could bathe in the hot springs, I could snack on the famous hot spring dragon manju and hot spring dragon eggs, and I could browse the souvenir shops.

I've got it! I can peruse the sweet shops with Tino! She can be my guard and even I don't know much about the confectioneries out here. I began to grin.

"Master," Tino said in a hasty voice. "Is the Trial really over?"

"Yeah, absolutely. Finito."

"Master..."

There was something poignant about her voice.

No Trials or anything. All that's left is paradise.

I hid it with my hand, but I couldn't keep a grin off my face. As I stifled my voice, Gilbert and his party all looked at me as though I were doing something creepy.

Damn it. What a miserable display for a Level 7.

Arnold was in the depths of despair. He no longer knew what to do. He was in terrible condition and his body felt like a sack of bricks, but his spirit was suffering most of all. When he regained consciousness, a deep sense of disappointment overcame him when he realized he had fainted upon seeing the face of the Thousand Tricks. That disappointment was directed at no one but himself.

It might have been the face of a Level 8, the face of someone who had caused him all sorts of suffering, but to pass out from merely seeing it was inexcusable. One month prior, talk of something like this would have elicited scornful laughter from Arnold.

What gave him the greatest shock was what he heard from Eigh.

"You're a bit exhausted, Arnold. You've been through a lot and all while we were weighing you down. I think the burden got the better of you. Take some time to rest in the hot springs here."

He had shown consideration for Arnold. That wasn't too extraordinary. Arnold was the party leader and his party members had shown concern for him many times before. But never had he heard them speak to him with words tinged with sympathy or make attempts to protect his feelings. He had considered this proof that he was a strong leader.

To faint just because he saw the face of his nemesis. It was a sorry display, yet none of his party members showed any hints of wanting to abandon him. Even Jaster, a hunter who had managed to tag along with Arnold despite being the party's youngest member, didn't show a hint of disapproval. This was no doubt a product of the confidence Arnold had instilled in his members. He understood this, but he still couldn't forgive himself for being frail enough to faint after seeing his enemy.

His capabilities shouldn't have changed. He was extremely fatigued, but his powers were still intact and his sword was in fine condition. In fact, his mana material had increased after visiting Night Palace. And yet, Arnold now felt weak.

Total confidence was one of the necessary pillars of strength. Should that pillar wobble, even someone of superb fortitude could lose strength. Arnold needed to regain his confidence, but he didn't know how.

Remembering what Eigh had said, he went by himself to the main bath so he could both rejuvenate and reflect. But when he saw the wide bath, warm and steaming, he felt nothing.

This is a wound, Arnold thought. A fatal wound for a man of supreme might. A crack had formed in his hunter's spirit. An early retirement might await him if he failed to regain his confidence.

Over and over he told himself he should use this humiliation as a chance to spring back better than ever, but he just couldn't muster his spirit. He felt like he had become someone else the moment he fainted.

He didn't understand how he had once been able to fight or be angry. He understood the principles, but his heart wasn't in it. He clicked his tongue, just like he used to. He walked with his chest puffed out, just like he used to. But it was a hollow performance. He was still managing to look strong, but, like metal plating peeling away, Arnold would eventually become a weakling.

There was no one else in the main bath. It occurred to Arnold that he hadn't walked alone in some time. After forming his party, there had almost always been a party member nearby. Something about it was lonesome. That, too, was another feeling his previous self never would have felt.

Everything he did felt uncharacteristic. Everything felt disjointed. He was afraid to swing his sword again. He was afraid his party's concern would morph into disappointment. Most of all, he was afraid to run into the Thousand Tricks again because he didn't know how he might react. Once this thought crossed his mind, he realized how far he had fallen.

Eigh had apologized to the Thousand Tricks while Arnold was unconscious. Arnold had thanked Eigh for doing that, but was the Crashing Lightning really

the type to approve of such behavior? No. The answer was a flat no.

Arnold always took Eigh's words into consideration, but the final say always fell to him. Arnold was the one who shouldered responsibility for the party. Even if Eigh had already apologized, Arnold still would have gone and done it himself. That was how he envisioned a powerful leader. That was the man that was the Crashing Lightning. So what did it mean if it took him so long to realize something so simple?

Another wave of despair assailed Arnold. Despite his realization, his body wouldn't move and that created a sense of self-loathing. He heaved a sigh, a sigh that felt like it was taking all his strength with it.

He couldn't do it. It wasn't even worth considering. In his current state, Arnold was unfit to be responsible for the lives of his party members. Falling Fog had no option but to disband. He would have to talk to Eigh once he was out of the bath. He had an obligation to those who had once followed the Crashing Lightning.

Dragging his weary body, he made for the tub at a slow pace, almost as though trying to buy time. Then, as he was about to lower himself into the wide bath, something strange flitted across his field of view. His mind went blank. He slowly rubbed his eyes and took a good look. Contrary to what he expected, he felt no fear. He didn't faint or even tremble.

The Thousand Tricks—he was doing the breaststroke across the hot spring. With graceful movements, he cut through the warm water and barely made a sound as his body moved across the surface. The shock of it all wiped away his earlier unease and he managed to speak in a strained voice.

"Wh-Wh-What are you doing?!"

This was no hallucination. The Thousand Tricks hastily tried to get on his feet but stumbled spectacularly. Water splashed high into the air and a dopey face looked up at Arnold.

I was enjoying myself, gracefully doing the breaststroke in the otherwise unoccupied main bath, when Arnold suddenly appeared. I was taking it easy so I

had completely failed to notice him coming in. For a second, I thought I was having a bad dream.

The open-air bath in my room was too small and the main bath of the inn I was staying at was undergoing repairs so I went to the trouble of going to the baths of another inn. And yet I ran into Arnold of all people. Unbelievable. Unlucky beyond belief. Was he stalking me?

After stumbling in the tub, I quickly looked up and saw Arnold staring at me with a tense look on his face. Panicking, I tried to show him I meant no harm by smiling and waving my hand.

Looking at it under proper lighting, I could see that Arnold had a body tempered for combat. What sort of power a hunter desired would affect how mana material changed their body. Simply put, if you desired muscular strength then your muscles would develop, if you desired speed then your body would become more nimble.

In cases such as Liz's, many female hunters developed their muscles without it becoming visibly apparent. This was thought to happen because they desired both strength and beauty.

I didn't have much of an eye for these sorts of things, but even I could tell the Crashing Lightning had a body stronger than mine in every possible way. His limbs must have been at least twice as thick as mine. His armor-like muscles probably wouldn't have even flinched if they took a hit from someone like me. Humans were generally considered to have weaker bodies than monsters, but it was hard to believe that while looking at the man before me.

My fingers instinctively brushed against my Safety Rings. How unfair it was that Arnold was still at such an advantage even when I was the only one of us wearing any equipment. Habitual misfortune had made me accustomed to these kinds of mishaps. Not to mention, I didn't think he would attack me after our dispute had more or less been resolved after chatting with Falling Fog's vice leader.

I figured that showing fear here might actually provoke Arnold. For reasons unclear to me, he stood there shaking.

"Heh. What a coincidence," I said, doing my best to look tough.

"Ca-Ca-Ca..."

"Cock-a-doodle-doo?"

Oops. Accidentally saying things that I wanted to was a bad habit of mine.

"CALL THIS A COINCIDENCE?! What are you after, you bastard?!"

Red in the face, Arnold stomped the ground. That alone created cracks in the stone flooring and caused rock fragments to fall from the ceiling. Arnold began to scratch wildly at his head. The water droplets on his skin were warmed and went up in steam. I had seen Liz do this as well, it wasn't a rare phenomenon with the sort of inhuman powers hunters had.

"Calm down, Arnold. I was here first, you arrived after me!" I shouted with a resolute demeanor befitting of a Level 8 hunter.

"Hah?! You call this a coincidence?! I entered a hot spring, and by coincidence, there was a Level 8 hunter swimming laps?!"

Arnold was broken. I had always thought of him as someone stalwart, but it looked like his experience in Night Palace had changed him significantly. But when said out loud, it was strange. Which was more shocking, this or running into a dragon in an open-air bath? The thought made me grimace.

"What, have you come to laugh at me?!" Arnold shouted in a roaring voice. "To belittle me?! To mock me?!"

"Calm down! Here, deep breaths! Okay? I wouldn't have started swimming if I knew someone else might be coming. I know it's bad etiquette to swim in a hot spring but I made sure nobody else was around and I'm not getting the water dirty! I was just having a nice swim!"

"A Level 8 doesn't swim in a hot spring!"

Arnold's shouting echoed throughout the baths. He was quite right. I would definitely get an earful from Eva if she heard about this.

It's a tough life. We're paying for this, so can't you cut me some slack?

"Arnold, this is all a misunderstanding! I wasn't just swimming!"

Bent forward slightly and slowly backing away, I tried to placate Arnold. He

looked like he might attack me if I said the wrong thing.

"Huh?! If you've got a reason then let me hear it!"

"I was, uh, training?"

"Ah. Aah. AAAH!"

As he let out a bellowing roar, he smashed his head against a dragon statue from which water was flowing. The horns bent, cracks formed, and hot water began to spew out. It appeared that a Level 7 hunter's head was sturdier than stone. How terrifying. Talk about being emotionally unstable.

But this wasn't a new sight for me and I quickly returned to my senses. Arnold must have cut his head because a crimson liquid flowed into the water. Yet he still didn't stop hitting it against the statue.

"I understand, I really do! You've just lost your temper a bit. I'm sure you're tired. It's pretty reasonable considering you went to Night Palace with Chloe and an underleveled party. If something's bothering you then I'll lend an ear."

Hearing my benevolent words, Arnold stopped bashing his head and with both hands ripped the statue out of the floor.

"Aah! There's nothing for us to talk about!"

My eyes bulged. I heard something cracking and a geyser of hot water sprung up. Caught off guard, I instinctively took a step back. It was a sight to behold. Standing boldly with a stone statue held above his head, Arnold looked like something out of a nightmare. But I had witnessed sights like this before so my sanity managed to stay with me.

Maybe I should start carrying a camera around with me. I can make photo albums of all the crazy stuff I've seen and sell those so I can pay off a portion of my debt.

"Hah, hah. I won't accept it. I can't accept it! Thousand Tricks! I haven't lost and I won't bear the shame of an early retirement!"

"Huh. Y-Yeah, uh-huh."

"I'll try again! Count on it! I'll try as many times as it takes! How long can you stay complacent? I'll make you regret making fools of us!"

Why's he talking like I made a fool of him?

I wasn't interested in Arnold and his party and they didn't seem like the type you wanted to make an enemy of. I tried to smile at Arnold, show him that I didn't want to fight him, but even I could only manage a strained smile under these circumstances.

"H-Hold on. Let me say, I wasn't making a fool of you guys. Don't get the wrong idea. I see a lot of potential in you guys! I'm your ally!"

For a response, I didn't receive words but a stone statue. Flying with incredible speed, the statue bounced off the barrier created by one of my Safety Rings and sunk into the bath. Water splashed on my face and caused my bangs to cling to my face, which wasn't a very pleasant feeling.

If he chose to throw something else then even I might have been able to make a run for it. However, when my vision cleared up I saw Arnold had his back to me as he stomped out of the baths. It was scary. I was used to stuff like this happening, but it didn't get any less scary. This was why I kept Relics on me at all times.

I pissed him off. This is my last chance. Something. I have to say something.

"Arnold! Don't you want to get in the baths?!"

No response.

"It's a vacation after all! Take some time to rest!"

In the end, I failed to say anything useful.

Ah, it's no good.

Not saying anything, Arnold closed the door with a deafening slam.

Silence returned. Sitting in the half-destroyed bath, I hugged my knees and sighed.

Arnold felt like his head was on fire. He strove to keep a placid mind, but this was too much even for him.

He was so strong it interfered with everyday activities. He made sure to

always keep his power in check, but today he was unable to hold back. As he walked with footsteps that threatened to break the floor, Eigh poked his head out from his door. His eyes widened when he saw his party leader's face. This was most likely because Arnold wore an expression quite unlike the one he had before leaving his room.

"Eigh! We'll remake ourselves!" he said, grinding his teeth so hard they threatened to break. "We can't let that clown continue to get the better of us! We'll show him what a true high-level hunter looks like. 'Training,' he called it! 'Cock-a-doodle-doo,' he said! He dares treat me like a chicken?!"

"Huh. R-Roger! We were caught off guard at Night Palace, but you put up a fight. If we go through all necessary treasure vaults and if everyone gets stronger, I'm sure we'll eventually clear Night Palace," Eigh said frantically.

The other party members lounging in the room looked frightful but vaguely cheerful at the same time.

Arnold slammed his fist against the wall and forgot all about his earlier ideas of quitting hunting.

"Of course we can!" he shouted. "We can't let a man like that stand above us! He says he's our ally! This anger won't subside until we've surpassed him! We can't rest in a place like this! We're leaving tomorrow, get ready!"

"Tomorrow? Another brief rest, I see," Eigh said, baffled.

Following Eigh, the other hunters began to pipe up with complaints.

"Yeah, I didn't think we'd be here long, but one day?"

"Man, I haven't even gotten in the hot spring."

"Aaah, there's really nothing better than a hot spring. Maybe I'll spend the rest of my life here."

"Whaaat? Places like this are fine once in a while, but I'd die of boredom if I lived here! I'd grow soft," Liz sulked.

She and Luke were both the type that couldn't be happy if they weren't constantly moving their bodies. I liked to pass the time in leisure, but she had a

point: living in a place like this would turn you into a layabout. Not that I minded becoming a layabout.

"This is a nice place. I like it here," I said. "It's got everything I look for."

"Hm? Everything you look for?" Tino said.

I could delight my taste buds with the bounties of the land and sea, I could soak away in a hot spring. Arnold's appearance might have been unexpected, but this place had the sort of serenity I dreamed of.

Something about Suls made it feel warm and cozy even outdoors. Even a hermit like me couldn't help but go out on an occasional stroll and the streets were lined with stalls selling delicious things. It was so good, I decided I had to buy some souvenirs. The best were the hot spring dragon eggs (actually a chicken egg) and hot spring dragon manju.

Seeing them in different outfits than usual gave Liz, Sitri, and Tino a seductive allure.

"I'd be nice if there were more guests besides us," I said as I rolled around on the tatami.

"It seems like there's usually many more," Sitri replied.

Well, the circumstances are what they are.

Being near Bandit Squad Barrel or whoever it was would be terrifying for anyone who couldn't fight. I would know. I didn't know what I'd be doing if I didn't have strong friends at my side.

Lying on my side, I looked at the open-air bath.

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"Rawr."
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"Meow."

"Kill kill?"

The nonhumans of our group, Killiam, Drink, and the hot spring dragon, were having a get-together in the open-air bath. An interspecies get-together. Perhaps because it was the newcomer to the group, the hot spring dragon seemed a bit reserved, but they all got along better than I had expected.

It's anyone's guess why we haven't been stopped by the authorities. And hold, why are they doing this in my room?

The sun set and night followed. Everyone left my room reluctantly and silence reigned. Normally we would share, but Tino was with us and Sitri had kindly arranged for us to have separate rooms. No matter how close we were, alone time was still important.

Silver light filtered through a large glass window. A beautiful full moon was shining in the sky. I got out of the bath, I had lost count of how many times I had gotten in that day, and dived into a fluffy futon. Most rooms in Zebrudia were furnished with beds so it was rare to sleep directly on the floor. I was fond of both arrangements.

The hot spring had put me at ease. Of course, I still wore a number of Relics, but that was inevitable; I couldn't bear the thought of sleeping by myself at an inn in a region with bandits.

A pleasant drowsiness overtook me as I got under the covers and wondered about what to do tomorrow. I held off the urge to sleep and enjoyed the moment of bliss. Suddenly, I heard a door opening. Something swiftly lifted up the blankets and slipped in.

"Pardon me!"

I made a dumb-sounding groan. The low voice belonged to Liz. I couldn't see well in the darkness, but the arms and legs pressed against me had the same warmth they always did.

Why is Liz here?

"Not now, Liz. They'll get mad at us," I managed to say amid sleepiness and confusion.

Hadn't I locked the door?!

For most road-bound hunters, there was nothing unusual about men and women sleeping in close proximity, but sneaking into the same bed was a different matter altogether. We weren't a bunch of kids having a sleepover. And when Liz pulled stuff like this, I was the one who got yelled at. Standing my

ground, I forced my weary body into action and rolled over.

"C'mon, it's just us. What's the matter? Let's play!"

"It's already so late."

Do you have any idea what time it is?

It wasn't the middle of the night or anything, but I was all washed out. I tried to show my refusal by turning my back to her, but then I felt a warm, soft sensation pressing against me. Smooth, warm skin rubbed against my back. I heard an electrifyingly sweet voice just below my ear.

"Fine, you can stay like that. I'll just do as I please."

Liz's feral behavior was very characteristic of her. It appeared she was in the mood to be indulged. She was always dancing to her own tune, doing things like going out in search of dragons. I wondered how she ended up like this when her older brother and younger sister were both so well-behaved.

While I was thinking it over, two arms stretched out and wrapped around me from behind. I began to feel a bit too hot because of her high body temperature. I felt her arms against the palms of my hands. They were smooth, slender arms.

Liz's hands tapped against my chest and she trembled as she let out a shrill cry. It felt nice just to brush against her warm skin. My hands drowsily followed her arms and my fingertips eventually brushed against her dainty shoulders.

Is she not wearing any pajamas?

"Ah! How naughty!"

No, it's fine. She's wearing underwear. Wait, nothing about that is fine.

Her arms intertwined, her fingertips brushed against my body. Her cheek rubbed against the back of my neck and I could distinctly feel her heartbeat against my back. Her fingers slid down the collar of the yukata I was sleeping in. It was almost unimaginable that those same fingers could pierce through armor.

Stop that. It tickles. And hold on. Aren't our positions mixed up?

I felt like I was having a strange dream. If it was Tino behind me then it

certainly could be just that, but with Liz, it was safe to assume this was actually happening.

In my drowsy state, I tried to hold her hand down, but she giggled and patted my chest. As with her arms, she began to wrap her legs around and rub against me. She was acting like we were total lovers or something. Lucia, with her tendencies of temperance, probably would've blown a fuse if she had seen us.

I couldn't let it go on like this. At first, I thought I could just fall asleep, but she was getting carried away.

"Hey, Krai Baby, touch me more."

I'm not touching you at all. You're the one doing all the touching!

I turned around and was about to fend off Liz and her devious whispers, but then the door flew open. The light was mercilessly switched on and the blankets ripped off us. It was Sitri. She thrust out her pink water gun and looked down at us with a tense expression, something I only rarely saw on her face in those days. Behind her and ready for combat were Killiam and a red-faced Tino.

"Liiizzy! You never, never, never show any self-control! You said you forgot something and I believed you!" Sitri said.

"Huh?! I can do what I want! Now quit interrupting, things were getting good!"

"H-How salacious," Tino added. Her lips trembled as she looked at the unbelievable state of Liz. It turned out that Liz had indeed snuck into my futon in just her underwear. She wasn't even wearing her usual Relic.

It's all the same to me. Can you all just get out and let me sleep?

"T! Siddy! He's mine. Scram!"

Liz grabbed a pillow and flung it at light speed. It hit Tino square in the stomach and she made a funny sound as it sent her flying backwards. I could remember having pillow fights as children, but something about this seemed a bit different.

"Oh, how could you do such a thing to T?" Sitri said in an exaggerated tone, a hand over her mouth. "Krai, did you see that? Lizzy! She murdered the lovely

darling T!"

Sitri didn't spare a single glance in Tino's direction when she said this.

Killiam retrieved a number of pillows from somewhere and handed them to Sitri. She punched the pillow experimentally and slowly raised it over her head.

You guys sure look like you're having a good time.

"Today will be the day I make my message clear to you, my indiscreet, immoral, imbecile of a sister!"

"You're calling me immoral?! Which one of us used the dragon as a pretense for mixed bathing?! I know all about what you did! T told me!"

The pot was calling the kettle black and I didn't know what to say. My precious childhood friends were destroying my precious tranquility.

Yeah, yeah, I like pillow fights too. But could you not do it in my room?

"Behold, Krai, I'll drive my sister from this room and then I'll give you a massage."

"Wait for me, Krai Baby. I only need a minute to send this one packing!"

I longed for Ansem and Lucia, the usual peace brokers in these situations. Luke was no good at times like this; he would just become another participant. Eliza, by the way, lived life at her own pace and would usually sit still and become part of the scenery.

After getting knocked back a distance that shouldn't have been possible with a pillow, Tino wobbled back onto her feet.

"I-I'll protect you, Mast— Augh!"

A pillow slammed into her face. I couldn't even tell who threw it—so commenced the hostilities.

"Damn it! Why do you have to always get in my way?! Can't even go on a simple date!"

"Press a hand to your flat chest and I'm sure it'll be apparent! Besides, Krai has a financial debt to me!"

"Kill kill!"

The two sisters seemed very childlike as they shouted and hurled pillows at each other. I figured this was their true form. It might have been an endearing sight if the pillows were being thrown at just a slightly lower velocity. Pillow fights weren't supposed to sound like shoot-outs.

In terms of physical strength, Liz had the upper hand, but Sitri had the mighty monstrosity Killiam at her side. I couldn't guess who might win. And what did my debt have to do with anything?

Not even I could manage to sleep in a situation like this. I got up, let out a big yawn, and put on the Relics I kept near my pillow. I thought I'd step out and wait for them to cool off. I evaded the flying pillows by crawling on my hands and knees. This wasn't my first gauntlet of this sort.

"I'm going to the baths, take care, everyone," I said in a small voice.

The Smart sisters continued their attempts at exterminating each other as I snuck out of the room. In front of me, I saw the hot spring dragon cowering in the open-air bath.

What kind of girls strike fear into a dragon?

The night wind brushed against me as I stepped outside. I was only wearing my yukata, but I had my Relics, this was a hot spring town, and security had been increased after the incident with the hot spring dragon. I figured I'd probably be fine.

A perfect sphere in the sky, I gazed up at the full moon as I stumbled along. Perhaps because of the geothermal energy, even the wind was fairly warm and felt pleasant as it blew against me. It was like I was in a dream. My Level 10 Sleepiness had receded during the pillow fight, but now it was coming back at me.

Which hot spring should I go to? It's night, so maybe the place I went to earlier today? That's where Arnold's staying, but he probably won't attack me. Not after we had our naked conversation.

I yawned as I strolled down the moonlit street. It wasn't even midnight, but there were very few people out and about. The solitude was nice, but it felt like a waste for such a nice town. As I wobbled along, I reached the construction site we'd come across earlier in the day.

Illuminated by moonlight, there was something otherworldly about the hole in the ground. I hadn't noticed it earlier, but there was a white mist rising from the hole. I had been told the construction was being put on hold, but maybe they had already hit hot water?

Then all of a sudden, during my aimless pondering, something extended up from the hole. I stopped dead in my tracks. I rubbed my eyes. It looked like a gray rope. Bathed in moonlight, it shone with a strange luster. I couldn't tell how long it was.

What could it be?

Maybe it was because of my drowsiness, but it hardly felt real. I watched with an absent mind as something silently gripped the edge of the hole and pulled itself out. I had no trouble seeing it in the ample moonlight.

I wrinkled my brow. My brain failed to keep up with the developing situation. The thing that appeared from the hole—it was human. That is, if you could still call someone human if they had gray skin and their hair was long, gray, tipped black, and writhed like tentacles. But they had a very humanlike silhouette. They were even wearing clothes, though they were just rags.

Could this be one of those golems Sitri was trying to sell? Was it modeled after Killiam? The skin's the same color.

The mysterious creature pulled themselves out of the hole and briefly looked up at the full moon before abruptly turning towards me. Their finely shaped eyes widened. But I was just as surprised as they were.

The gray person slowly approached. They stepped under the barbed wire and stopped only a few inches away. They were considerably shorter than me. Their skin was smooth as porcelain and their features were attractive, but not quite human. The inexplicable life-form walked right up to me and looked at me with eyes like glass.

A pattern reminiscent of a circlet was drawn on their forehead, but that wasn't nearly as striking as their wriggling hair. I had never seen something like

the creature before me, but I was used to dealing with things that weren't human. I just thought they seemed a lot less freakish than Drink, the hot spring dragon, or Killiam.

That's right. Sitri said something about a legend about some Sapien species in this area. Supposedly there haven't been any recent sightings, but maybe this is one of them? This sucks. Why is my timing this bad?

Blinking, the creature hesitantly outstretched their hand and patted my arm. They didn't seem hostile. They appeared to be intelligent. I let myself relax just a bit.

I've been running into nonhumans a lot lately. Shame I'm not really into them.

With a strange expression on their face, the humanoid opened their mouth and spoke with a melodic voice.

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"Ryu-ryu-ryuu-ryuu?"
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"Uh, sorry, I'm on my way to a hot spring."

If this isn't one of Sitri's golems then doesn't that mean Suls is surrounded by just a few too many weird creatures?

I tried to turn around, but the creature let out a bizarre cry.

"Ryaa!"

"Huh?!"

Their tentacle-like hair spread out and wrapped around my body. I was wearing Safety Rings, but they weren't always effective against binding attacks.



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H-Hold on?! What?!

"Aren't we friends?!"

"Uryuu!"
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With just their hair, the creature lifted me up and triumphantly swung me about. I was instantly shaken from my drowsy state. The hair bound me with incredible force, but it didn't feel like the creature was trying to crush me to death. I tried to move my arms, but it seemed resistance was futile.

Still holding on to me, the creature began to run. It was at this point that I began to regret walking alone at night. My captor bounded over the barbed wire with ease. Knowing what was on the other side, I began to scream.

"Hey, wait! Bathroom! I gotta go to the bathroom!"

"Ryuu!"

Without hesitating, the bizarre life-form jumped right into the hole, taking me with them.

What in the world...

"Lizzy, Master still hasn't come back," Tino cried.

Lizzy was curled up, sleeping on the pillow-strewn tatami floor. The pillow fight was unlike anything Tino had ever seen. Being high-level hunters, even sisterly bickering turned into an ordeal.

Flying like comets, the pillows had enough force behind them to send Tino flying if they landed a direct hit. By the time morning arrived, the room was a complete mess. She thought Lizzy was wrong to sneak into her master's futon, but she hadn't expected Siddy to lose her usual cool and turn quite so violent.

Hearing Tino's voice, Lizzy sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Mm, wha? Morning already?"

"Never mind that! Master said he went to a hot spring, but he hasn't come back yet!"

"What about it?" Siddy said with a yawn. She yawned in a very similar manner as Lizzy did.

Tino was quite taken aback by her indifference.

"Hm? T, could it be that you're concerned that something happened to Krai if he hasn't come back yet?"

"Huh?"

That was exactly right. She was quite concerned. But when she thought about it, it wasn't her place to be worrying about someone as powerful as her master.

"Ah, I had the whole night ahead of me and Siddy went and ruined it all. Maybe I'll go hop in a hot spring," Lizzy griped as she let out a yawn.

"Y-You too, Lizzy? Aren't you worried about Master just a bit?!"

This was unimaginable for someone always clinging to Krai. Lizzy, however, let out a small sigh.

"I believe in Krai Baby. I'm sure he has a good reason if he hasn't come back yet. You're a weakling, T. If you have time to worry, then worry about yourself."

In the empty inn, Tino walked alongside Lizzy and Siddy. Unlike the buildings of the imperial capital, this one was made of wood and its interior had a foreign feeling to it. There was even a courtyard with a waterfall fed by a hot spring. But where had her master gone? Tino found herself looking for him, but no results.

She had been dazed after taking a pillow to the face, but Tino was certain he had said he was going to a hot spring. At the time, she thought he was leaving because he wasn't thrilled by the pillow fight, but could he have had other intentions? The Thousand Tricks was a hunter who calculated all his actions and masked their significance.

Suddenly, Lizzy stood still. She looked around and blinked a few times.

"Hmmm, that's weird," she whispered.

"What's the matter?" Tino asked fearfully.

There shouldn't have been anything strange happening. But then Siddy made a peculiar face, an expression troubled and exasperated.

"Goodness, Krai's always so abrupt," she said. "And I had made it clear I wasn't at all finished preparing."

What were these two sisters on about? Seeing their stern looks, Tino couldn't help but raise her guard. Then one of the inn employees walked towards them. It was a woman in the gray kimono worn by all the inn staff. She had thick makeup and close-cropped hair. Tino was caught off guard; she didn't recognize this woman. The employee smiled when she saw them, moved to the side, and bowed with one smooth movement.

It had taken Tino a minute to notice, but something felt off. The inn—it was eerily quiet. It was still early in the morning, but there should have been activity. It seemed unlikely that the staff of a high-class inn for merchants and nobles would be absent at a time so many guests normally departed.

Is something happening? Tino wondered.

As she struggled to understand what might be causing the silence, Lizzy nonchalantly approached the staff member. With a smile on her face, the staff member tilted her head curiously. Lizzy grinned—and then instantly drove a fist towards the woman's solar plexus. It was a merciless strike. Tino was shaken by a boom that reverberated like a cannon blast.

There was a rule among Grieving Souls (in fact, this went for all members of First Steps) forbidding the harming of civilians. Rules established by Krai were one of the few things that could bind the free-willed Lizzy.

But what shocked Tino wasn't Lizzy's sudden attack, it was the staff member, a supposed civilian, who had blocked the attack. A look of agony briefly passed across her face, but no civilian should have been able to survive blocking an attack that could puncture armor.

Lizzy followed up with a kick. It was a kick even Tino struggled to track, but the woman dodged it with the ease of a drifting leaf. Not only that, she managed a counterattack. In an instant, a plethora of metal rods flew at Liz from multiple angles. They were fast as bullets, but Lizzy knocked them all out of the air. With her leg still raised, she smiled.

"I get it now. You're a shinobi, aren't you? One of those scouts from the east?"

On the ground were short metal stakes. They lacked any distinctive features besides their sharpened points. It must have required intense training to learn how to utilize them with ease and strike at a target in the blink of an eye.

The woman shrugged. "Where's the Thousand Tricks?" she asked, ignoring Lizzy's question.

Lizzy smiled. She returned the favor and didn't answer.

"And how can I tell you're a shinobi?"

The air around Lizzy began to warp, the energy of her body was being turned to heat. She disappeared. In the same instant, the mysterious woman flew into the air.

"You see, I've always wanted to fight a shinobi!"

"Hm?!"

Cracks formed in the wooden floor. Even though she was in a yukata, not an easy garment to move around in, each punch and kick from Lizzy made it clear why she had the moniker "Stifled Shadow." The woman in the kimono was completely on the back foot. In a flash, she drew a shortblade while narrowly avoiding Lizzy's attacks.

Lizzy was clearly the stronger of the two, but it took a formidable opponent to even dodge her attacks. If nothing else, the woman must have been regularly absorbing mana material if she was capable of something like this. With specialized techniques, she moved silently, with the same momentum as a falling leaf. Lizzy tried, but she couldn't get a hit in.

Then, without making a sound, multiple silhouettes appeared behind the woman.

"Wha?!"

Tino couldn't help but gulp. The silhouettes all looked like civilians; none of them carried anything that looked like a weapon and they had the faces of mellow people unaccustomed to violence. But that was a disguise. No normal human could keep a calm face while watching Lizzy fight.

The new arrivals all drew weapons. They had jet-black kodachi—the same weapon as the woman in the kimono. Their movements were synchronized, so much so that it was unnerving. From all directions, black rods cut through the air. At the same time, a few of the new attackers struck at both Lizzy and Siddy.

Tino frantically threw herself into the fray. She didn't have a weapon, but she couldn't just sit around and watch. The woman in the kimono had shown extraordinary talent, but the others weren't quite so strong. However, even Lizzy wouldn't be able to easily manage multiple attackers at once. Tino dodged a blade and closed the distance. Fighting armed foes meant she would have to get up close.

More and more silhouettes came dashing in. They weren't allies of Tino's, they were reinforcements for the intruders. Just how many were there? As the thought crossed Tino's mind, one of Siddy's assailants and three of Lizzy's all collapsed like cut string.

"Oh my, to think I only hit four. No shortage of talent among this lot," Siddy said, somewhat flabbergasted. She had at some point drawn her pink water gun. This was a Relic of hers. It was a terrifying weapon capable of automatically loading any potion she was carrying. Apparently, she had managed to get in a counterattack while evading her assailants.

"Have you gotten rusty?!" Lizzy said. She fought almost like she wasn't the one at a disadvantage. "It's 'cause you're messing around too much!"

"And what would you have me do? Our recent treasure vaults have been filled with enemies unaffected by potions—"

"Take out the Ignoble first!" the woman in the kimono ordered.

A handful of the reinforcements closed in on Siddy, but she didn't panic in the slightest.

"A shame. You're just a tad late."

There was a sound like dripping water. Tino's gaze was drawn to the source and what she saw caused her eyes to bulge.

The serene waterfall in the courtyard was taking the shape of a human. A spherical object was inside its transparent body. A thin mist rose from the stout figure as it approached the assailants.

"This is my new golem!" Sitri announced. "It's easily transported and can be activated in seconds as long as you have water! You simply need to toss it in!"

Apparently, she had thrown golem cores in the waterfall at some point. She had only been planning on visiting the baths, yet she kept golem cores on her person. Siddy was always prepared for everything.

Following the first, more golems began to rise up. The formerly calm and collected shinobi began to step back. The freshly formed hot spring golems came at them at once.

"You're really heading out already, old man? You came all this way to a hot spring town, why not stay and enjoy it a bit more?" Gilbert said, showing poor etiquette until the very end.

"Shaddup! Arnold's busy," Eigh cut in, as he usually did. "We only arrived in Zebrudia not too long ago, we don't have time to fool around."

After resting for a night, the members of Falling Fog were all completely refreshed. Ready to depart, they had gathered by the sole gate in Suls. At the checkpoint near the almost-defenseless gate, a group of people who looked like hunters were being processed. Perhaps they were here as tourists?

The appearance of Falling Fog had changed drastically during the trip. Their equipment and carriage had been replaced multiple times after their grueling battles. They looked shabby, not at all like a party led by a Level 7. Their faces, however, weren't so gloomy.

As long as their leader Arnold was still going, Falling Fog would never die. That no one had left the party even after witnessing the might of the Thousand Tricks was proof of this. Chloe looked with admiration at the Crashing Lightning now that he was back on his feet.

Treasure hunting was a harsh job. Experiencing battle after battle wore down the heart. Sometimes hunters without any physical injuries would never again

pick up a sword due to ailments of the spirit. No small number of hunters retired after seeing the brilliant shine of a genius and losing confidence in themselves.

Chloe hadn't worked for the Explorers' Association for very long, but she had seen many such cases. The sight of Arnold fainting when he saw Krai's face had made her all but certain he would be retiring.

Noticing the gaze of Rhuda and some of the others, Arnold scowled. There was a shine in his narrowed, golden eyes.

"I made a sorry sight of myself back there," he said. "But now I understand how that man operates."

"So you're not giving up?" Chloe asked, her voice filled with admiration.

Was he being obstinate? No, perhaps this was just a hunter as they were meant to be.

Eigh answered in Arnold's place.

"Of course we're not giving up," he snorted. "Arnold's not gonna accept defeat just like that. After all, our goal is to be the best hunters out there and I think we can do it. The Thousand Tricks showed mercy to Arnold Hail for no reason and he's gonna regret it!"

There was conviction in Eigh's voice. Chloe thought she understood why, if only just a bit. The Thousand Tricks was lauded for being ingenious, but he had a defect that was obvious even to an amateur—complacency.

During their trip, he had never once discarded his complacent attitude. He had lured Arnold along by leaving blatant tracks, and later he had waited for Falling Fog in Suls, almost as though to mock them. Before this trip, Chloe hadn't even been aware of this defect of Krai's.

Krai was looking down his nose at Arnold. He might have an overwhelming advantage at the moment, but any gap in Krai's defenses was an opportunity for Arnold to catch up. The Crashing Lightning was yet to clear more than a few of Zebrudia's treasure vaults; he had plenty of room to grow. Without exception, the Thousand Trials made people stronger. Unless Arnold's renewed vigor and determination were all part of Krai's calculations?

"Gonna have to think of a good provocation, right, Arnold?" a member of Falling Fog said with a grin.

"Fool!" Arnold shouted. "I'm not like that man."

"M-My bad!"

By the sound of it, the Thousand Tricks had said something that really got under Arnold's skin. Control over one's emotions was practically necessary for high-level hunters and as a result, it wasn't easy to piss off a competent one like Arnold.

Eigh looked at Rhuda and then all the hunters of Scorching Whirlwind. They had formed something of a bond after their travels together and now they had come to see Falling Fog off. Eigh shook hands with each one of them and offered some parting words.

"Well then, we'll see you all in the imperial capital," he said. "If you plan to stay here a while, keep an eye on that man."

"It's fine, even Krai won't..." one of the hunters said before trailing off. "Are you suggesting he might pull something out here?"

"Hell if I know," Eigh said with a chuckle. "But it can't hurt to be cautious. Isn't that right, miss?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Chloe said.

Even she couldn't say for certain that nothing would happen. Insofar, Krai had done as he pleased, almost as though he was simply playing around. She had watched over many hunters, but after witnessing the Thousand Tricks in person she found him completely inscrutable. She got a headache just thinking about what she might say to Gark when he asked for her report.

With not a single cloud in the sky, it was an ideal time to hit the road. Eigh yawned and turned towards the gate. Going by carriage, the imperial capital would take a few days to reach. Now that they were free of the Thousand Tricks's machinations, they surely had a leisurely journey ahead of them.

With Arnold leading the way, Falling Fog began to walk to the gate. Being a tourist destination, the gate didn't seem like a very sturdy one. There were only

a few guards stationed nearby and they couldn't hold a candle to the knights who guarded the imperial capital. They had heard that the number of sightseers had fallen on account of the bandits, but they saw a few tourists so perhaps the situation had changed.

Their journey had a profound impact not just on Arnold, but on everyone in Falling Fog. They had changed out all their gear and items. They had the benefit of experiencing a high-level treasure vault.

Their coffers were almost entirely empty (in part because of the fines for the hot spring Arnold destroyed), meaning they probably wouldn't have much time to rest for the foreseeable future. But once they overcame this setback, Arnold Hail and Falling Fog would be better than ever.

There were still hints of fatigue in Arnold's movements, but he seemed at ease, which was the exact opposite of how he had been when he arrived at Suls. Likewise, his party members all wore looks of determination. Eigh had a flippant expression and Arnold responded sternly, just like they always did. Chloe watched them go with a smile.

Then a party of hunters, men and women, five in all, appeared at the other side of the gate. They were dressed awfully lightly, like they had come to rejuvenate in the hot springs. They were all on foot as well. They at least had swords at their hips, but not armor. They wore coats, preventing Chloe from making any certain judgments, but they seemed formidable enough, which made it all the more mysterious that they didn't have a carriage.

With a bow, the easygoing man at the front of the group cleared the path for Arnold. Eigh thanked him and their nearly bottom-tier carriage rumbled along the path.

Then, as Arnold was about halfway down the path, it happened. Before Chloe's very eyes, the man spun around. It was a fluid, beautiful movement. Eigh's eyes widened. Gilbert and Rhuda were speechless. The man, however, had a relaxed smile, just like when he had made way for Arnold.

His hand darted out from his coat, a sword in his grip. The drawn blade cut an arc through the air. All Chloe could do was gasp. The polished blade was headed straight for Arnold's neck.

One specialty among Alchemists was the creation of golems. Sitri's hot spring golems were a weapon without precedent.

Obeying her orders, they attacked the shinobi. The assailants were strong enough to somehow hold their own against Liz. The woman who made the first strike was their best, but that didn't mean the rest were easy foes. Whether it be technique, strength, or experience, the golems were inferior in every way.

Their selling point was the convenience of only needing water to take form and their ability to persist as long as their core remained intact. Sitri had hawked the hot spring golems as guards, but they were nothing more than walls. That, however, changed when you had enough gathered in one place.

The golems shot projectiles formed from the hot water that composed their bodies. Each individual shot wasn't particularly powerful, but a torrent of them was enough to restrict a target's movements. There wasn't any real chance Liz would get hit, and if she did, well, they could worry about that when the time came.

The number of assailants continued to increase, but it wasn't too much for Liz and Sitri to handle. The Stifled Shadow excelled at breaking through crowds. If she could just get rid of that slippery leader then Sitri and her golems could take care of the rest.

Taking note of her surroundings, Sitri held her fingers in her mouth and let out a whistle. While she did this, she tried to identify her attackers. She had very little to go off of, but she got a hint from their ability to keep the Stifled Shadow busy. They seemed to have high levels of mana material, but they weren't hunters. Shinobi, or Ninjas, as the class was called, were extraordinarily rare in this part of the world. And if they had this many gathered under one banner...

The still-increasing swarm of attackers began to ignore Tino and focused on overwhelming Sitri. The golems formed a protective wall in front of her and swung their large, powerful arms. But their opponents knew the apt countermeasure: they aimed their jet-black kodachi straight at the golems' cores. There should have been at least some resistance, but the shinobi pierced

the cores with ease and the golems dissipated. It seemed there was still room for improvement.

"I've got it. You're from Barrel, aren't you?" Sitri said with a beaming grin and a clap of her hands.

The woman attacking Liz maintained an unshakable facade, but the attackers right before Sitri briefly tensed up. She took this as a sign her supposition was correct. Sitri had learned through years of experience that her party leader's actions could have any number of results. If there was a named quest for the extermination of Bandit Squad Barrel, then it was a given that they would appear.

"Your reputation precedes you," Sitri said. "I can see how you caused so much trouble for the knights of Lord Gladis."

"Quiet!"

They had already taken down multiple assailants, but they kept coming like an unrelenting forest fire. The quest brief had estimated a high number of combatants; their losses so far were probably still within an acceptable range. That was no surprise, they were known for being a large band after all.

Tino was fighting with everything she had. Liz had a threatening glint in her eyes. A few attackers broke through Sitri's wall of golems and came for her. One raised their blade—but they were crushed by a gray brute.

"Kill kill kill."

"Meooow."

Sitri's pawns had responded to her whistle and now stood around her protectively. Unlike the still-developing hot spring golems, these were her masterpieces.

"My apologies, I'm quite weak," she said. "Would you allow me to rely on these darlings?"

"What the hell are these?!"

Killiam roared and Drink's eyes bulged. The Ninjas all began to back away warily. Ninjas excelled at fighting humans, but they weren't so strong against

stalwart monstrosities.

Kicking aside the Ninja it had crushed beneath its feet, Killiam followed Sitri's orders and swung at the other attackers. With its sharp, three-pronged tail, Drink kept their kodachi at bay.

Meanwhile, the leader was still locked in combat with Liz. She puffed her cheeks slightly, then opened her lips slightly and a pillar of fire shot out. The flames instantly engulfed Liz. The underlings all stepped back.

Katon. A veil of fire. Ninjas were scouts who utilized specialized spells. Katon was mainly a technique used for making an escape, but it looked like it could also be used to attack. Fighting off two attackers, Tino's face twisted when she saw what was happening to her mentor.

The leader of the Ninjas turned her gaze towards Sitri. But then a flameencompassed leg came right for her. There was a heavy sound, unlike any other so far. The woman was knocked off her feet, flew through the air, and bounced across the floor before coming to a halt. The other Ninjas began to waver.

A dark silhouette engulfed in flames simply shook her body and out went the flames. Her robe had been burned to a crisp, but her skin and hair weren't even singed.

"Huh? Attacking with an escape move? Do you take me for some sort of shitfor-brains?! I finally get a chance to move my body and I'm left bored outta my goddamn mind!"

The Stifled Shadow's finely shaped eyebrows twitched as she stepped forward.

"Hell's gonna freeze over before anyone gets one up on me with a magic trick!" she screamed, baring her teeth.

"Are you genuinely attempting to fight Grieving Souls with nothing more than this?" Sitri asked tauntingly. In her hands was a pink water gun, an item gifted to her long ago.

They came from a party that had no shortage of hard-earned power. The flames created by the Ninja were a party trick compared to the offensive spells used by the Avatar of Creation.

Sitri wondered what state the rest of the town was in. Fortunately, she had already handed out a set of golem cores. If they were put to good use, the town should be able to hold out for a bit. The town's guard was lax, but it had been strengthened after the incident with the hot spring dragon. With any luck Arnold and his band would still be around.

But there was one thing puzzling her: why would the famously prudent Bandit Squad Barrel challenge Grieving Souls? While she thought it over, yet more reinforcements arrived. Liz stopped her relentless onslaught.

The new arrivals were more shinobi, dressed like the others, but these ones were restraining a familiar face. It was one of the inn employees and a blade was being held to their throat. Pallid and dripping in sweat, their eyes begged Sitri for help.

"Stifled Shadow. Ignoble. Don't move a muscle. Every staff member we've captured is still unharmed, but that can change. If you resist, we'll kill them one by one."

Arnold's body moved of its own accord. Luckily for him, his wariness of the Thousand Tricks meant he was still alert. But it wasn't lost on him that it was largely a coincidence that he avoided being struck fatally. A stinging pain erupted across his neck muscles.

The man smiled. He seemed impressed that Arnold had managed to rapidly contort his body and evade an attack from his blind spot.

"Oh, come on. You managed to dodge even in that stance?" he said. "It was a perfect surprise attack, but I suppose I'm dealing with a hunter, a freak, after all. Good thing I went for the strongest one first."

"Urgh. Who are you?"

The man was of medium height and build. He didn't carry much on him and didn't look like a hunter, but his bearing wasn't that of anyone ordinary. Arnold was a Level 7 and strengthened with a high amount of mana material, yet his overwhelming presence didn't seem to have any effect on the man.

The man's comrades immediately spread out and surrounded the carriage.

Their faces bore tacked-on smiles, but their movements were refined. They drew their swords and stood at the ready, not letting anything distract them.

It was simple luck that had allowed Arnold to dodge that attack. But thanks to that luck, he had gotten by with receiving only a shallow wound. Even without medical attention, the cut would heal with time. This, naturally, wasn't enough to hinder Arnold's ability to fight.

The man was clearly quick on his feet, but he wasn't a match for a Level 7 hunter. Eigh and the other hunters had drawn their weapons and were ready to fight, yet the man kept his cool. Arnold didn't know who he was. He didn't recall earning the ire of anyone in Zebrudia.

"You're not the Thousand Tricks, are you? I heard he was a powerful man—ah, this is some shit luck. Never expected there to be other high-level hunters out here. Hate to tell you this, but it's our policy to not let anyone slip away when we attack towns."

The Thousand Tricks?! Could this be another one of his schemes? The dull pain Arnold felt was drowned out by anger. But even amid his rage, he still had a strong feeling that something was off.

It was strange. Not only was it strange that they were attacking in the middle of the day, it was stupid of them to attack Arnold and his party in the first place. The man and his lackeys seemed formidable enough, but still inferior to the Crashing Lightning. Not to mention Rhuda and Scorching Whirlwind were also present; even though they were inexperienced, they could still put up a fight. These attackers weren't mere bandits, surely they knew what they were up against...

Arnold's train of thought was interrupted by a shaking sensation. For a moment he thought it might be an earthquake, but this was different. He angled his sword downward and thrust it into the ground, stabilizing himself. The unidentifiable tremors battered every part of him, sapping his strength.

"Arnold?!"

"Gee, it really took this long to kick in? You're a tough one. That was potent stuff, the type meant for mythical beasts."

Poison. A poison strong enough to work on a Level 7. With mana material, it became easier for hunters to improve their strength and speed, but at the same time, one tended to more readily neglect resiliences. Even still, Arnold could shake off most ordinary poisons, but the one afflicting him wasn't your everyday concoction.

The heat left his body. He didn't feel any pain, but that itself was fairly discomforting.

What could it have been? Was the man acting so sure of himself because he was just waiting for the poison to take effect? Arnold wondered.

He clenched his teeth and summoned the strength to look up. The man was peering at him as though he were a rare creature. The other nearby tourists had all gathered around Falling Fog's carriage at some point. There were upwards of a dozen of them, most of them not carrying any notable weapons, some even dressed like merchants. Every one of them was looking at Arnold and his party with deep interest. For a moment, Arnold wondered why none of them were saying anything, but he quickly pieced it together.

They have no reason to say anything. They're all—

Rhuda and Scorching Whirlwind had realized something was wrong and drew their weapons while getting into a circular formation. The man twisted his lips into an unnerving smile.

"Allow me to offer some introductions, not that there's any point to it. We live in the shadows, but every now and then I get the urge to spread our name, just like you hunters do."

Everyone in the crowd drew weapons that had been hidden under their clothes. There was no sign of the town guards coming to help.

"We're Barrel. We flit about like shadows. People, objects, we take everything with the avarice of an inferno. We're the strongest bandit squad out there and we're here to bag the biggest prey. Remember that, not that it'll do you much good," the man said with an arrogant smile.

Tino felt like time had come to a stop. The declaration delivered by the newly

arrived Ninjas sent a chill down her spine. The Smart sisters both seemed unaffected, but they did come to a halt and looked at the man through glaring eyes. They were sizing him up.

This isn't good.

Tino wasn't concerned about what the attackers might do, it was Lizzy and Siddy who had her worried. "Bandit Squad Barrel," Siddy had said. If she was right, then before them were members of a large bandit organization that had bounties in a number of countries. They were calculating, prudent, and barbarous. With an estimated one hundred members, they were less a bandit squad and more an army. And now they were even creating trouble for the renowned knights of Lord Gladis.

Considering the strength of every individual, it was clear they weren't your average gang. It was true Tino had never fought a Ninja before, but even their weakest members weren't far behind her. This wasn't like any of the bandit squads she had taken down in the past.

If they had this many members with strengths comparable to a Level 4 hunter, then attacking a whole town didn't seem beyond their capabilities. And if some of them were a match for Lizzy, then the lax guards at the inn wouldn't have even slowed them down.

All in all, they didn't seem like the type to make empty threats. However, the issue was that the Smart sisters weren't the type to cave to threats. Grieving Souls were a fearsome party. They were not bringers of justice.

These tactics might work on Krai or Ansem, but it took more than a hostage to restrain Lizzy and Siddy. Siddy would write them off as a tragic sacrifice, Lizzy would say it was their fault for not being strong enough. Sure enough, they looked completely unperturbed.

The black kodachi was pressed against the hostage's throat, causing them to let out a short scream. Lizzy was fast as lightning, but they weren't dealing with amateurs; solving this without bloodshed wouldn't be easy. For all they knew, there could be even more hostages.

Tino wracked her brain, trying to think of a way to resolve the situation without anyone dying. She came up empty-handed. The attackers weren't

paying much attention to her, but she didn't see herself turning things around, even if she had her master's mask.

Lizzy made her move. She dropped the Ninja she had been precariously holding in the air.

"I surrender."

"Huuuh?!"

Tino hadn't expected this. The attackers seemed equally surprised. Siddy ignored Tino's bewildered cry and let out a small sigh as she set down Perfect Frolic.

"If they've got hostages, then I guess that's that," Lizzy said. "Don't wanna piss off Krai Baby."

"Awfully noble of you," said one of the Ninjas. "Be sure to restrain them well."

Tino never would have expected those two to do something so conscionable. She felt like she had just witnessed something unbelievable. The assailants restrained Lizzy and Siddy, then placed handcuffs on Tino. She hadn't expected this to happen, but Tino sure wasn't going to keep fighting if her mentor was standing down.

As she felt the surface of the cuffs, she wondered if this might be some sort of training. She guessed they were made of steel. Lizzy might have been able to break through handcuffs like these, but it would be impossible for Tino.

The situation was dire. It frustrated her that she wasn't in something easier to move around in. She did what she could to grasp the situation and look for opportunities, but even she, the weakest link, had plenty of guards keeping an eye on her.

"Don't worry. We won't kill you immediately. You'll be useful when negotiations begin," the toughest-looking member of the reinforcements said. His arms were crossed and he carried himself with absolute confidence. Restraining high-level hunters with mere handcuffs was the height of carelessness. Just what gave this man his confidence?

Despite their restraints, Lizzy and Siddy both seemed completely

unconcerned. With narrowed eyes, Siddy watched as Drink and Killiam were thoroughly restrained with chains and collars.

Then the man said something unbelievable.

"We'll put you with your friends soon enough. We've already got two of your party. Even among bandits, Grieving Souls have created waves. But your end is approaching."

Tino was taken aback. Even the Smart sisters looked surprised. The man smiled cruelly when he saw their reactions.

Two of your party. It was almost hard to believe. Tino was familiar with everyone in Grieving Souls. Lizzy and Siddy were both powerful treasure hunters and the rest were just as capable. Not one of them seemed like the type that a bandit squad could capture. Even if they were captured, it would only be after a grueling battle. It didn't make any sense that this man had such a self-assured smile.

"When we had your allies surrounded, before we even captured them, they began to beg for their lives," the man said with a chuckle.

"Did they?" Sitri asked. She blinked a few times, clearly confused. There were things not even she could comprehend.

Tino was of the same mind. There weren't any Grievers who seemed like they would be captured without a fight and there certainly weren't any who would beg for their life.

A large group appeared from further within the inn. They weren't in kimonos, but instead wore black outfits that seemed easy to move in. The bandits must have split into two: a diversionary unit that would disguise themselves as the inn staff and an attacking unit.

"We had fierce resistance, but we succeeded in apprehending the Thousand Tricks, just as planned," said the man at the front.

"Huh?!" Lizzy cried out. Even she couldn't hear that phrase without reacting.

Impossible. Krai was a Level 8. As far as Tino knew, he surpassed his party members both in level and talent. He might not come out on top if judged

solely on combat prowess, but in terms of overall talent, he was sure among the top five hunters even in the treasure-hunting holy land. But he had gone off to bathe in a hot spring and hadn't come back. How could they have found him in the inn?

The numerous possibilities swirling through her mind vanished in an instant. As Tino stood about vacantly, a man with his mouth gagged was brought before her. She looked at him with wide eyes.

The man was bound much more thoroughly than Tino or the Smart sisters had been. His hands were bound behind his back with metal locks that had a bizarre sheen to them. His entire body was wrapped in chains. He was blindfolded and had a gag in his mouth. Cold sweat dripped off his pallid cheeks. The surrounding bandits marched him forward by lightly kicking him as he stumbled along.

The shinobi who had ambushed Tino and the Smart sisters gave him a scrutinizing look.

"That didn't take long. The target's a Level 8, are you sure you got the right guy?"

"Don't be fooled. He might look scrawny, but he's powerful. Besides, there wasn't anyone else in the inn. Remember what the second-in-command said? All the rumors about the Thousand Tricks mentioned his ingenious plotting, there's nothing about his strength. He might be more than just a brilliant mind. We'll check later."

Bewildered, Tino desperately tried to grasp the situation. He was gagged, blindfolded, and wrapped in chains, but there was no mistaking it. The person brought forward was one she had been working with recently—the man called Gray.

It seemed the bandit squad didn't know the face of the Thousand Tricks. That wasn't unreasonable. The symbol of Grieving Souls was a mask and Krai did everything he could to avoid showing his face. Photos of him never got out, not even in magazines and newspapers.

But even if he was a bit strong, how could this man possibly be mistaken for the Thousand Tricks? Tino was fifty percent dismayed and fifty percent irritated but that didn't mean she could just go and tell the bandits the truth, no matter how frustrated she was.

Meanwhile, Siddy's pink eyes began to fill with tears.

"Oh, how could this happen! Leader, please, save us!" she shouted at Gray. "I told you you didn't look well, but I never thought you might be captured by a bunch like this!"

"Mm?! Mmf, mmmf!"

Siddy. Not only is she calm, she plans to go along with this?

Even Lizzy must have been caught off guard as she was looking at Siddy as though she had lost her mind.

"Surely this is a ploy so the hostages might be rescued while we're being captured! But what good is that if you've been captured?! You dunce! Moron! Idiot! Philanderer!"

Siddy was expositing, but her acting was impeccable. One after another, she said a number of things she'd never say to Krai. The two leaders of the bandits exchanged glances.

"Who are you going to choose?!" Siddy screamed while twisting her body about. "Don't avoid the question, is it me or one of those other two?! I've given you plenty of massages and lent you so much money! You got in the hot spring with me and didn't even brush against me! The nerve! You said we'd get married! How many years are you going to make me wait?!"

"Huh?! Siddy, that was fifteen years ago! You promised you wouldn't bring it up because it didn't count!"

The faces of the bandits twitched as they listened to Siddy's and Lizzy's very convincing shouting.

"A lovers' quarrel? Nothing ingenious about pissing off a woman as scary as her."

"And is this why that other lot was desperate to get away? Let's hurry up and bring them to the second-in-command."

The apprehension had faded from their faces.

Siddy, that was an incredible performance, Tino thought. I could never hope to match such a—that was a performance, right?

Tino harbored a shred of doubt as she watched as Siddy expertly stomped her feet on the ground.

Until recently, Suls had the cheery bustle of any hot spring town. Now it was enveloped in a strange atmosphere. It was quiet, like the whole town was holding its breath. Noise from anyone or anything was sparse. The only sounds came from the birds, the occasional voice, and the hot water in the canals.

There was just one source of activity. A sizable camp was set up not far beyond the town's rudimentary gates. A massive barrel was placed in front of the gates, almost as though to block the way. Sitting atop that barrel was a large, burly man. His armor was leather made from a high-tier monster. He had a set of sharp black eyes and a deep scar ran across his cheek.

This man was the founder of Bandit Squad Barrel. Geffroy Barrel. A man who had run rampant across numerous countries and had a number of bounties placed on his head. He smiled with satisfaction when he saw his forces were ready to move in.



The subordinates he had sent to infiltrate the town returned with their report. Being thoroughly trained Ninjas, they didn't say anything more than they needed to.

"Kardon, we've secured and sealed off Suls," they reported to the man next to Geffroy.

Kardon Barrel. He was one of the founders of Bandit Squad Barrel. With Kardon as the brains and Geffroy as the brawn, they were the pillars that supported the growth of their bandit squad. Technically, Geffroy was higher up on the chain of command, but that didn't mean Kardon was any less vital.

What had started as just two people had become a bandit squad capable of challenging even large countries. Their strength came from accomplishments like absorbing an eastern organization that employed a number of Ninjas and contacting a magic syndicate to order poisons that worked even on high-level hunters. Strong leadership kept their greed from getting out of hand and they had developed a level of pride and coordination that surpassed any professional army.

It wasn't long before the name Barrel, adopted from the first good they stole, was reverberating all across the land. They had become something that couldn't be stopped, not even by the empire's strongest.

"Hmm. Any resistance?" Kardon asked in a cold voice. He had an angular face and blond hair.

"There were four high-level hunters, including those from Grieving Souls, one lower top-tier party, and one intermediate party. One high-level hunter was captured after being poisoned, two surrendered on account of the hostages, and we captured the man who appears to be the Thousand Tricks."

An ideal outcome. A single high-level hunter with enough mana material was capable of defeating an entire army. The subordinates trained as shinobi were strong, but most of them were clearly not enough for the best of the best. On the other hand, this meant that as long as they sealed off the high-level hunters, they could even slaughter the whole town.

"It appears you were right, Kardon. The Thousand Tricks is a man who relies

on his mind," the subordinate continued. Unlike most bandits, their eyes weren't brimming with greed. "He wasn't as strong as the rumors suggested, so, just to be safe, I've come to request that you verify his identity."

"Rumors often take on a life of their own. I'll confirm it later. Don't let your guard down, no matter what."

Everything was going smoothly, but Kardon's face didn't show a hint of complacency. Bandit Squad Barrel was making the gamble of a lifetime; eyes that were cold and calculating were a reassuring sight.

"Have you finished questioning the Thousand Tricks's allies?" Geffroy cut in.

"No, everything they say is incomprehensible. We've gotten nothing from his closest allies, but is that really necessary at this point? As you ordered, we've bound the Thousand Tricks with Soul Sealer."

Soul Sealer was a chain Relic that bound one's soul. Even a Level 8 hunter couldn't break free from it.

"Continue your questioning. We can't fail here," Geffroy said.

Nearly everyone in Bandit Squad Barrel had been mobilized for the attack on Suls. In order to conduct a quiet but brutal attack, they were drawing on every resource they had, including poisons acquired from magic syndicates and flying mythical beasts.

Everything had gone well so far, but should they fail then the squad they had spent the last twenty years building would come to ruin.

At the start, Geffroy's eyes hadn't been set on the throat of the Thousand Tricks. When the bandits infiltrating the knights of Lord Gladis informed Geffroy that a named quest had been issued to the Thousand Tricks, the bandit leader made plans to pull out and move on to a different country.

A Level 8 was a freak. Geffroy wasn't lacking in confidence and his subordinates weren't neglecting their training, but a Level 8 had the might of a thousand men. He didn't think his forces would lose, but he didn't need to consult with Kardon to know that a direct confrontation wasn't how they operated.

It was during their retreat from the Gladis Earldom that their plans began to change. They were crossing the mountains and trying to be as discreet as possible when they came across two travelers. Geffroy saw this as a stroke of luck and easily captured the pair, who then said they were members of Grieving Souls.

He considered that the two might be bluffing, but that didn't seem likely. After all, Geffroy had decided to retreat when he heard about the named quest. The timing was too convenient for a bluff and there was no reason for them to tell such a lie. Very few people were aware that the Thousand Tricks was headed for the Gladis Earldom.

The two travelers were fairly strong, at least a bit more so than an intermediate hunter, but nothing Geffroy couldn't handle by himself. And that caused ambition to take root in Geffroy and Kardon—they would claim the head of the Thousand Tricks.

They had their misgivings. The Thousand Tricks was accomplished and known for his foresight, but there was almost nothing known about his combat prowess. For Geffroy, who had traveled many lands and learned of many hunters, that sort of ambiguity was the definition of unnerving. There was no silencing people and strength wasn't something that could be entirely hidden, no matter how hard you tried.

After catching the two Grievers, Geffroy's suspicions turned to certainty. The Thousand Tricks was likely a hunter whose strength rested in his thorough preparations. And if he had captured a portion of his party, then now was the time to strike.

Be prudent, but sometimes bold. Accomplishments were necessary to spread one's name and all high-level hunters had enemies. If he took the head of a Level 8, the bandit squad would expand even further. Geffroy could even see himself taking over a country and making himself a king. It was truly fortunate that they had managed to take the high-level hunters prisoner.

If Geffroy's forces hadn't had any major losses so far it must have been because their targets had their guard down. Just the head of the Thousand Tricks would have been a major prize, but having him alive was even better. The

name Bandit Squad Barrel was going to carry even greater weight.

They had surrounded the town and occupied it without any major commotion. The Thousand Tricks had fallen into their hands, they had plenty of hostages, and no one stood to oppose them. No doubt, the knights of Lord Gladis would lose heart once they heard that their reinforcements had been taken out while they were still en route.

But the subordinate had more to report.

"Also, one woman got away. We're currently pursuing her," they said.

"What was that?!"

"It appears she was being escorted by the high-level hunter who was headed towards the gate. She doesn't seem to be a hunter, but we're pursuing her nonetheless."

Kardon narrowed his eyes. This was unanticipated, but mistakes were bound to happen no matter how careful you were. Had the hunter been determined to protect his client, even at the cost of his own life?

Surely it wouldn't prove an issue. They were camped out by the only gates in and out of Suls. If the escapee wasn't a hunter then she shouldn't have a chance of getting away. However, the walls encompassing Suls were relatively low.

Geffroy clicked his tongue. "Not much else we can do. Deploy the barricade," he said bitterly.

"We don't have many uses left," the subordinate said with a look of doubt.

"It doesn't matter," Kardon said, answering on Geffroy's behalf. "Geffroy ordered it. Deploy the barricade immediately."

They didn't plan on sticking around Suls for very long, but things would get complicated if someone somehow managed to call for help.

A squad of Magi stepped forward. They had sticks of silver chalk which they held to the ground as they ran off. A large wall appeared where their chalk passed over. It took only an instant for it to grow into something much taller and sturdier than the original bulwarks around Suls.

Bandit Squad Barrel was always thorough. Chalks were valuable Relics and these ones were already halfway used up. They would be little more than stubs by the time the town was completely surrounded, but it would be worth it if their plan succeeded. Even if reinforcements arrived, they had the whole town as their hostage.

Geffroy stood up and gripped the enormous battle-axe brought before him.

"We're going in. Use your usual disguises and don't let a soul into the town! If anything happens, report it immediately to me or Kardon!" he ordered. "Glory to Bandit Squad Barrel!"

Silently, burning determination ignited within his comrades. There had been no large, unexpected twists. The enemy wouldn't be getting reinforcements. On the off chance they did, it would have to be something more powerful than a professional army if they wanted to win against Bandit Squad Barrel. But if all went well, Geffroy and his comrades would be celebrating with drinks in another country before reinforcements could even arrive.

What in the world...

Confused and breathing heavily, Chloe desperately darted down a narrow road. She was an adept runner, but too nervous to keep her breath steady. Moving silently and trying to remain inconspicuous, she picked a small alley and dashed through it.

The town had changed, albeit subtly. There should have been people in the streets and buildings, but the place was almost deserted. Anyone she caught sight of was an armed member of Bandit Squad Barrel.

The bandits had completely locked down Suls. Chloe was awestruck by the speed and discretion of their work. They were unlike any bandits she had ever heard of; at this point they were closer to a disciplined military than a bunch of criminals. Fortunately, she couldn't smell any blood or see any signs of destruction.

The townsfolk weren't being killed. Most likely, they were being rounded up in one spot so they could be held hostage. But even if she found their location,

there wasn't much she could do to help. She still had her sword, but was out of practice and would be up against far too many bandits. She had been counting the bandits as she spotted them and it was clear they were more numerous than suggested by the named quest issued by Lord Gladis.

Arnold had been immobilized by a poison and surrounded by bandits. Chloe had only been able to escape because Falling Fog, Arnold included, and Scorching Whirlwind had been willing to put their lives on the line to protect her.

Chloe desperately tried to think of a way to turn the situation around. At first, she had considered going to the town guard for help, but there wasn't much they could do. To make things worse, the vanguard of Bandit Squad Barrel was patrolling the streets in search of her. Luckily, they didn't appear to be familiar with the layout of Suls, but this wasn't a large town. It was a matter of time before she was found. But at least she was free; Arnold and the others had all been captured. There was no time to waste.

She looked up at the sky. Squinting, she could make out high in the sky winged mythical beasts unlike any she had ever seen. Barrel was keeping watch from above.

"I never expected these bandits to be this dangerous."

Even across the whole Zebrudian Empire, very few people were capable of riding flying beasts. For one thing, they were rare, but even harder than finding them was befriending them.

Bandit Squad Barrel had moved with purpose. They entered the town disguised as tourists and other civilians, locked down the town quietly and without permitting any opposition, and took Arnold out with a single hit, even if that was a surprise attack. Their strength was terrifying and she could see it even in the bearing of the bandits walking the streets.

It must have required immense power and charisma to lead such a bandit squad. The names of the two men at the top were Geffroy Barrel and Kardon Barrel. Only a scant number of people had ever encountered them and come back alive, but Chloe knew a bit about them.

Kardon would come up with plans and Geffroy would do the stomping. Their

might was no doubt on par with that of high-level hunters. More than a few treasure hunters had been sent to take them out and all had failed.

Geffroy in particular seemed to be of consummate strength. If anyone here could defeat him it was probably only Arnold, Liz, or the Thousand Tricks. The leaders of Bandit Squad Barrel were already plenty powerful, but if even their lower ranks were this formidable then they were in all likelihood a match for the knights of Lord Gladis.

The man who attacked Arnold had said he was out to "bag the biggest prey." That undoubtedly referred to the Thousand Tricks. Krai Andrey was the strong hunter of the Zebrudia branch of the Explorers' Association. His combat prowess was unknown, but he had completed a number of challenging quests. Chloe didn't think he would be easily defeated, but she worried when she saw what Bandit Squad Barrel was capable of.

Normally, bandits followed a typical pattern when attacking a town: loot and destroy. But that wasn't happening this time. Not one bandit was giving in to greed and breaking formation.

Agh. No dice. They've got eyes everywhere.

The bandits were prepared for everything. The inn Krai was supposed to be staying in was being watched from every angle. Even looking at it from a distance, Chloe could tell there was nothing she could do on her own. The guards were in groups of no fewer than three, meaning she couldn't ambush or slip by any of them.

She took deep breaths as she tried to calm her pounding heart. Now that it had come to this, her only choice was to seek help from the outside. Even in Zebrudia there was a limited number of powerful hunters. She didn't imagine there were any hunters nearby who might be able to resolve the situation, but it was better than trying to do something like cause a diversion.

If Chloe were a hunter, then she might have risked taking them on. But she wasn't a hunter, she was an employee of the Explorers' Association. The situation was dire and that was all the more reason to be cautious, even if it didn't make her happy to acknowledge it.

Keeping to the shadows cast by the stalls and buildings, she pressed onward.

Bandit Squad Barrel was well trained, but it seemed they didn't have enough manpower to lock down every nook and cranny.

Beads of sweat flowed down her cheeks. She was nervous, her mouth felt dry. Keeping a low profile, she somehow managed to get to a spot where she could see the town walls. What she saw caused her to gulp.

Just beyond the meter-and-a-half-tall wall that encompassed Suls was another wall, one that towered above the first. The new wall must have been close to four meters tall and wrapped around the town's entire perimeter.

Chloe did some calculations. It might be easy for a high-level hunter, but getting over the wall would be fairly difficult for her. If she failed, she would be apprehended by the bandits.

This was a wall meant to seal off escape. Bandit Squad Barrel didn't want even a single person getting away. And if it had come up in such a short time frame, then the bandits must have some excellent Magi working for them.

The hopelessness of the situation caused Chloe's head to spin. It didn't seem possible, but if this turned out to be one of his Thousand Trials she would never be able to look at Krai the same way again.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps behind her. She turned around on instinct. Sprinting towards her was a member of Barrel. There was no time to hesitate, she had to act. She took off.

"I found her! Over here! Don't let her get away!"

Chloe was certain her legs had never in her life moved as fast as they were moving at that moment. Other patrolling bandits began to close in on her from both sides. A black metal rod, a bo shuriken, was flung at her and she dodged it miraculously. Right in front of Suls's original wall, she jumped with all her strength.

Chloe had aspired to become a Swordsman; she couldn't move like a Thief. Nonetheless, she leaped wildly and flew through the air. She made it over the first wall with ease and then a smooth wall devoid of any handholds filled her vision. Each second felt like ten, a full minute even. She felt gravity pull at her. In front of her was a wall.

It won't work. I'm not going to make it.

Chloe extended her right arm as far as she could. Her fingertips latched on to the top of the wall. She let out a gasp. She was probably more surprised than the bandits chasing her. But once she had her other hand on the wall, escape became just a short hop away.

She pulled herself up and over the wall. She felt a bo shuriken pass over her head, but she landed on the other side unharmed. There were no guards on the other side of the wall. She was right—they were short on manpower.

She might not be able to move like a Thief, but she was confident in her physical strength. Chloe steadied her breath and dashed off before her pursuers could catch her.

A battle-axe with an unusual glimmer was thrust into the ground and a loud roar pierced the silence. A tense atmosphere permeated the square by the town gates. The man was feared not only by the hostages but by his own comrades as well.

"Huh? What about this looks like the Thousand Tricks?" Geffroy said in a low voice as he looked at the man on the ground before him. "This one's completely unremarkable. I send you louts off to capture the Thousand Tricks and you get the wrong guy? Tell me how that happens. This is worse than if you had simply lost to him."

The man lying before Geffroy was nothing like how he had pictured the Thousand Tricks. There were dark bags under his eyes and he had a tired complexion. And that was to say nothing of his lanky body. But most of all, he was unremarkable. He had mana material, but his glow was all wrong. Geffroy entrusted most of the organizational management to Kardon, but the brute still believed he had an eye for people.

"This is a grunt at best! The Serpent wouldn't fall to a man like this!"

Geffroy knew the accomplishments of the Thousand Tricks. The hunter had crushed entire criminal organizations and was now both feared and loathed by a number of criminals. Serpent was once one of the biggest criminal

organizations around; they even rivaled Fox.

They had been a force of over three hundred, which was massive even compared to Bandit Squad Barrel. And yet they had been defeated. The boss and their top brass were taken down and the whole organization fell with them. An organization of the same name was still going, but their influence had become a shadow of what it once was.

"Calm down, Geffroy. The discipline can wait," Kardon said. His voice was quiet, but his eyes showed the same murderous wrath that was in Geffroy's. This was a major shock after everything had proceeded so smoothly.

"S-Sorry, boss, Mr. Kardon. But he was the only one in the—"

Kardon narrowed his eyes, his face intense as an inferno. Had their plans been found out ahead of time? Impossible. If they had been discovered, they wouldn't have been able to take control of Suls so easily. They had already gathered all the hostages in one spot. Kardon wanted to avoid wasting both people and valuables, but he would destroy them all if Geffroy gave the order.

The Thousand Tricks was an ally of justice. If he were to ignore the hostages and resist, Geffroy and his allies could just slaughter their captives and make their escape. That alone would destroy the reputation of the Thousand Tricks. Geffroy tried to imagine how they might be pushed from their advantageous position, but he didn't see it happening. The look of confidence on Kardon's face suggested he had reached the same conclusion.

"The Stifled Shadow and the Ignoble are both genuine," Kardon said. "It's not over yet."

He was right. Their mistake wasn't a fatal one. They could draw out the Thousand Tricks by holding his party members hostage. No matter how ingenious he might be, Bandit Squad Barrel consisted of over three hundred individuals stronger than intermediate hunters.

"Go back and conduct another search," Kardon ordered in place of Geffroy. His voice was surprisingly calm. "Take whoever you need, we can't stick around here long. Seeing as he hasn't shown himself yet, I think it's clear the Thousand Tricks isn't as powerful as the rumors say he is. Taking down the Thousand Tricks will be a major boon for us. Increase security on the hostages, but also

get ready to abandon the town, just in case."

Having received their orders, the subordinates all quickly dispersed. Geffroy closely observed their coordinated movements.

"We're up against a Level 8. You might have to get personally involved," Kardon said to his longtime accomplice.

His voice contained traces of fear. This was something that had almost never happened once their bandit squad had grown to a considerable size. Geffroy snorted. Fighting was his job and he hadn't once neglected his training.

"I don't care what level he is, I'm not gonna lose. Nobody's stronger than Bandit Squad Barrel."

When I came to, I was lying on the ground in total darkness. The first thing I felt was heat and humidity, it was like a jungle I had once explored. I sat up and yawned. After rubbing my eyes, I began to feel like I had returned to reality.

"That's right. I was captured. Gimme a break, what's even going on?"

The situation was pretty bad, but everything that happened was just too strange, I couldn't find it in myself to feel a sense of danger. It seemed my Relics hadn't been confiscated. I activated the ring on my finger, Owl's Eye, and the room slowly came into view. I was in a cell. I was surrounded by dirt walls and flooring, except for the wall of metal bars in front of me.

I thought back to the previous day. A strange creature had suddenly appeared, captured me, and dragged me down the hole at the construction site. There had been a long floating sensation, almost like I had been falling for an eternity. After falling for a while, something came into view—a massive underground city.

"Why's something like that underneath Suls?"

I was ready to barf. I couldn't see very well, but the life-forms living in the gigantic cavern clearly weren't human. But they weren't just monsters, they had clearly developed a form of civilization. They had built a prison after all.

"Cave People?"

No, no. That's absurd. I came to Suls for a vacation, not so I could be abducted by Cave People.

I sighed heavily as I shook the metal bars. They rattled a bit and didn't seem too strong. Liz might have been able to break them, but I sure couldn't.

I wonder if Liz is gonna come and save me.

I had said I was headed off to a hot spring. She knew how weak I was, surely she would come searching for me once she realized I hadn't returned. She was a Thief, which meant she could find me so long as the slightest trail remained. Not to mention Sitri was with her.

I don't even know how long I was out. They may already be searching for me.

This shred of hope began to reinvigorate me. I thought about what I could do under my current circumstances. I could keep myself alive. I would use every means I could to buy myself time.

I checked my Relics. Since I had slipped out for a dip, I didn't have much on me besides my Safety Rings. I didn't have any weapons. I had a few Shooting Rings and my night vision Relic, Owl's Eye. I also had Red Alert, which informed me of dangers, and Mirage Form, the bracelet that created mirages.

Last, I had the two Aspiration Manifests. One was the pendant Kris had restocked with a spell after I had unleashed Lucia's spell. The other was the mysterious ring Sitri had given me as a souvenir. The former seemed like the more solid option of the two, but Kris was a Level 3. Noble Spirits struggled to raise their levels due to their personalities. Regardless, she wasn't much compared to Lucia. Not that I was even considering trying to fight my way out.

Suddenly, I heard an odd voice.

"Ryuu..."

It sounded an awful lot like the voice of the Cave Person (if that's the right word) that had caught me, but it was much deeper. And then I heard more voices. This was bad news. I had no idea what I was dealing with, but that one had pounced on me the moment we came face-to-face.

I had to do something. But I couldn't destroy the iron bars. If I released Kris's

spell then I might take down a few Cave People, but that was something I could only do once.

Calm down, Krai Andrey. Look at it the other way around, they've locked you up, but they haven't killed you or even taken your equipment. It's possible that among Cave People culture, this isn't a form of imprisonment. It could be a way of welcoming a guest.

I calmed myself down as I stuck my neck through the metal bars and looked in the direction of the voices. Coming towards me were large Cave People. In some ways, they looked like the vaguely charming one that captured me, in other ways they were totally different. Like the one I met in Suls, they had thick hair. The difference between her and them was sort of like the difference between Liz and Gark.

Large claws protruded from their hands. I was certain they were going to kill me. My chest hurt. I wondered what I had done in a past life to deserve this. I had a bad feeling about this. I desperately looked around the room and tried not to think about the situation. I was searching for a way to resolve the situation without having to fight.

There's gotta be something—I've got it!

I had a revelation. Without even needing to think about it, I activated one of my Relics.

The sun was shining brightly on the land below. Perhaps because the town was dotted with hot springs, every bit of Suls was warm and toasty. But now the comforts of that warmth were notably absent.

Bound with chains and forced to walk, Rhuda and the other hunters were brought to a large inn situated in the center of Suls. The elegant buildings had a much more unsettling atmosphere now that they were being occupied by armed bandits.

Arnold was approaching his limit. Falling Fog, Scorching Whirlwind, and of course Rhuda herself had all fought valiantly, but they had been outnumbered. They had been completely surrounded. It was a miracle that Chloe had

managed to get away.

Rhuda was fine, but some of the other hunters had been wounded. However, the fact that no one had been killed was a good indication of the strength of their captors. They were strong enough to warrant a named quest being issued to a Level 8 treasure hunter. It was no surprise that they were trouble, but this was more than Rhuda or anyone else had expected. Would Krai really be able to do something about this?

If Rhuda and the other hunters were being kept alive, then it must mean the bandits had some use for them. Maybe they planned to hold them hostage and negotiate with the Explorer's Association? Or maybe it was Krai they planned to negotiate with? Or maybe the bandits planned to turn them into playthings as a show of strength? Nothing good awaited hunters who were captured by bandits. Rhuda hoped that Chloe had at least made it out alive.

Bandit Squad Barrel was really something to be reckoned with. As captives, they had no hope of changing the tide of battle. Their only threads of hope were Chloe and the Thousand Tricks.

The reason Rhuda and the hunters were still calm was because Krai was out there. The skill he had displayed in White Wolf's Den and the foresight he had used to manipulate Arnold both made him scary, just in a different sense than Bandit Squad Barrel. His foresight was so superb that Rhuda couldn't stop herself from wondering if perhaps even this was all according to plan.

By the looks of it, the townsfolk had been gathered in a different spot. This was just a place for those who could fight. This was most likely done to prevent any sort of uprising. These bandits really weren't taking any chances. The few town guards of Suls had been blindfolded, tied up, and knocked on their side. Even if they had weapons, any of the stronger bandits could have easily dispatched them. Still, the bandits chose to be as thorough as possible.

It was then that Rhuda noticed someone in the center of the room. Someone who shouldn't have been there.

"Huh?! Wh-Why are you..." she said with astonishment.

"What? They got you guys too? That's what happens when you don't train enough."

"Huh. Huuuh?"

It was the Stifled Shadow. With an astounded look in her eyes, she sat, all tied up. Sitting quietly next to her was another member of Grieving Souls, Sitri. Behind her was a familiar chimera and that gray monstrosity, both bound in chains.

Rhuda almost couldn't believe her eyes. The Stifled Shadow wasn't even the type to just sit still even if she had been defeated. Gilbert, who had met her at White Wolf's Den and was now battered and bruised, and Eigh, who she had caused all sorts of trouble, both looked at the Stifled Shadow with amazement. Tino's complicated expression was particularly notable.

"Just sit still and don't even think about trying to escape. We've got hostages," said one of their captors.

They were violently forced to the ground. Having already lost consciousness, Arnold collapsed and Eigh ran to his side.

A number of guards were watching Rhuda and the other hunters. It seemed only natural that they were wary of the Stifled Shadow, but it seemed Barrel didn't plan on messing with Rhuda or her comrades.

However, Liz and Sitri looked like their usual selves. Unlike Scorching Whirlwind and Falling Fog, they didn't seem at all nervous in spite of their certain peril.

"Poison? And it took down a Level 7?" Sitri said, blinking a few times as she looked at Arnold.

Normally, high-level hunters were resilient to poisons and paralysis attacks. Rhuda had a fair amount of resistance, but someone of Arnold's level should have resilience far surpassing her and therefore be unaffected by most poisons.

"Give us the antidote! Arnold's gonna die at this rate!" Eigh screamed.

It was probably thanks to Arnold's large body that he had made it this far. One of the guards sneered at Eigh's pleas.

"There's no antidote. That's the latest product of Akashic Tower."

Among the numerous criminal magic syndicates, Akashic Tower was the most

prominent. Recently they had caused a stir when it became known that the man formerly lauded as the Master of Magi had been conducting experiments in White Wolf's Den. It made sense that a poison capable of incapacitating the Crashing Lightning was made by an organization that sought out even forbidden knowledge.

With her hands and feet still bound, Sitri managed to scoot over to Arnold and a very pallid Eigh. She pressed her hands against the ground, pushed her body off the floor and spun around, her feet driving into Arnold's waist.

"Yah!"

Arnold's body made a dull noise that no human body should make and he was briefly knocked into the air. Still unconscious, Arnold let out a groan and coughed up a profuse amount of blood. Sitri deftly evaded the red liquid.

"The hell are you doing?!" Eigh shouted at her, the blood returning to his face.

"I used acupressure to stimulate his immune system. Unfortunately, I can't cure him under our current circumstances, but this should buy him some time."

Eigh's eyes bulged at this unexpected response. What Sitri had done seemed a bit violent to simply be called acupressure, but Arnold was twitching, an improvement compared to his earlier state.

"You can cure him?!"

"Mmm, I'm sure I can manage. Antidotes are my specialty."

Sitri had a strained smile, but there was a palpable confidence in her voice. The guard from earlier was staring at her with wide eyes. The seemingly mellow Alchemist must have been another freak if she was so certain she could cure an unknown poison meant for killing high-level hunters.

"However, I can't do anything as long as civilians are being held hostage. I can't let there be a single civilian casualty," Sitri said.

"Krai Baby wouldn't be too happy if that happened," Liz added.

"I suppose they hesitated to deploy the golems, even though I lent them out for free. Personally, I don't have any qualms about abandoning them to their fate."

Sitri's bitter expression was quite telling.

I see. So that's how they were caught, Rhuda thought.

They let themselves be captured not because of the hostages but because they didn't want to anger Krai. The Stifled Shadow was disheveled and handcuffed, but the Relic on her legs had been left alone. Rhuda was puzzled over why she hadn't been disarmed when Tino told her in a whispering voice.

"When a guard tried to touch her, Lizzy kicked them back. Her yukata had been set on fire, but she ripped it off..."

"And she's supposed to be a hostage?"

Rhuda felt she had the full picture now. Under the right circumstances, the Stifled Shadow was willing to resist even if it meant getting the hostages killed. And that was why Barrel had dedicated so much manpower to keeping an eye on the hunters. Nothing was as scary as a high-level devoid of any regard for human life.

"By the way, where's Krai?" Rhuda asked.

"I don't know," Tino replied.

"Is this another one of his Thousand Trials?"

Tino averted her eyes and didn't say anything. Rhuda thought this was all far too much to be a Trial, but if Tino looked away like that then it must still be in the realm of possibility.

"Aaah, I haven't been captured for so long, but I'm already bored. Hey, you there, do something funny," Liz ordered one of the guards.

"Lizzy, control yourself," Sitri chided her.

The guards had their hands full. You couldn't even tell who were supposed to be the ruffians. And Liz had said, *for so long*. Had this happened before?

"It's a dragon!" A voice suddenly cried out. "There's a dragon! In the hot spring! Why?!"

"Rawr?!"

"It's an uncertain element! Don't let it get away!"

Wobbling on its hind legs, a sky-blue dragon stumbled down a hallway. A number of bandits chased after it. An odd silence settled over the room.

Ah. So that was the dragon Tino was talking about, Rhuda thought.

Sitri and Liz exchanged looks of astonishment.

"It's a dragon and yet it can't even help us out. Even after Krai Baby spared its life, all it's doing is screeching and running around. Can't it try just a bit harder?"

"It would appear luck isn't on our side this time."

The guards smiled viciously, pleased that even a rampant dragon hadn't distracted them.

"Give it up, there's nothing you can do," one of them said. "Relax, once we have the head of the Thousand Tricks, we won't have any need for you. The boss is a merciful man. I'm sure he'll let all the hostages go."

An obvious lie. There was nothing merciful about a savage bandit squad that had pillaged a number of towns. They would never do something so genial. Still, Rhuda wasn't in any position to protest.

Could there really be some way to turn this situation around? Their assailants were numerous and all spread out. In all likelihood, there were plenty of guards watching the other group of hostages. Even if Chloe managed to quickly call for assistance, Barrel would no doubt take their hostages and escape.

Rhuda couldn't turn the tide in this situation, even if she were ten times stronger than she currently was. Even if she somehow were to defeat Barrel, it would come at the cost of a number of innocent lives.

It was said there was a large wall between Level 7 and Level 8. No one knew how it might be done, but if Krai could manage a way out of this situation then surely that would be a sign of the difference between Level 7 and 8.

"Krai Baby, huuurry up! That's it! I'm going to the hot spring. Call me when he gets here!"

Huh? Huuuh?

The guards became uneasy. Liz stood up and groaned before casually breaking the chains linking her handcuffs together. Rhuda couldn't believe she and Liz were the same class.

"Lizzy?!" Tino cried.

"Lizzy, calm down!" Sitri said.

"It's fine. I'm sure Krai Baby will forgive me, he knows how I am. And I'm not the one killing the hostages. These Barrel guys are the ones in the wrong here. Maybe I'm not even breaking our rule about not hurting civilians," Liz said, offering some rather contrived reasoning.

The guards all simultaneously drew their blades and pointed them at her. One of them dashed off, most likely in order to alert someone of the situation.

"You're being stupid. Hostages are going to die because of you."

"Huh? Weren't you listening? You're the ones doing the killing, not me."

"That's fine, we've got the whole town held hostage. We can kill one or two and still have plenty to spare."

Things weren't looking good. A look of dissatisfaction formed on the Stifled Shadow's face and her hands balled into fists. Her younger sister was pressing her hands to her temples as though enduring a headache.

The guards all charged at Liz, but at that exact moment, a shriek came from the inn's entrance. There was a crashing sound and the guard who had darted off earlier was flung down the hall. Having been unable to even hold up their arms to block the impact, the guard lay completely still when they came to a stop.

What had happened? The faces of the guards contorted, they took a few steps back from the hallway. And then Rhuda saw it. First, she saw a long gray vine. It wriggled like a living creature, and then the ground shook as the main body appeared. It wasn't just Rhuda and the other captives, all the guards froze when they saw it.

It wasn't Krai. It wasn't even human.

"A monster?" Rhuda said.

Those things that resembled vines were something else entirely. Not arms—they were hair. Tentacle-like hair that extended from the head of a large bouldery body. It was no golem, for golems had a more inorganic quality to them. This creature had a body that almost seemed to be made of stone, but it was clearly alive.

Its face was oddly human, its golden eyes showed hints of intelligence, and it was wrapped in ragged fur. The monster spread its arms wide open and let out a roar.

"Ryu-ryu, RYUUH!"

With a deep grunt, the mysterious giant attacked a nearby guard. The bandit swiftly raised the blade to block the attack, but the giant's hair effortlessly knocked it to the side.

"Wh-What is this thing?! Is it with you guys?" one of the bandits yelled.

How could it be a friend of the hunters? The monster was using its long hair to attack hunters and bandits alike. A tendril was headed straight for Arnold, but Eigh used his body to knock it off course. It swung again, but this time the Stifled Shadow blocked it with a kick. The tentacle flailed wildly in the air.

"What is this? Siddy, explain," she muttered, sounding quite bewildered.

"It looks like a Troglodyte, a Sapien species that lives deep underground. But why is it out here?"

It seemed Grieving Souls weren't the cause of this mess, but knowing that didn't do anything to improve the situation. The giant, the Troglodyte, that is, stopped attacking and looked around, almost as though it were sizing up its prey. But even as it stood still, the thunderous footfalls didn't stop.

"It's not just one! Get ready, there's more!" screamed a member of Barrel. They were panicking, a complete reversal from their earlier attitude.

It appeared without warning. The first person to notice it was a subordinate who was expectational even within Bandit Squad Barrel. They were patrolling from the skies while atop one of the chimeras obtained from a magic syndicate.

Even though they were a warrior who had a number of experiences under their belt and done much for Bandit Squad Barrel, they were still slow to react when faced with the unknown. Not that a faster reaction would have made much difference.

The next to notice it was the shinobis patrolling the ground. When they saw that strange sight, they immediately dashed off to report it to Geffroy. Just like with the patrols in the sky, their response to the situation made little difference.

Even the fast calculations of Kardon, sitting in the command tower, didn't matter in the end. What was happening wasn't part of some scheme. Unlike the planned movements made by Bandit Squad Barrel as they invaded Suls, this was a simple invasion.

"What are those things?" Kardon mumbled, his eyes bulging.

"Ryuuu!"

Gray humanoid monsters had appeared, a whole horde of them. A monster roughly the size of Geffroy made clear just how powerful it was as it lunged at a bandit. Its wriggling hair slammed into the ground, leaving cracks in its wake. The attack was powerful, but slow enough for a shinobi to easily dodge. There was just one issue: there were far too many of the monsters.

The bandits quickly found themselves surrounded by a swathe of gray fiends. They stared at Geffroy and his allies through golden eyes. It defied understanding. There was only one gate, the one near Barrel's camp. Such a large number of monsters couldn't have possibly slipped past the patrols in the sky.

"How are there so many?! Where'd they come from?"

"Ryu-ryu-ryuu!"

The fiends came in two varieties, the small, fast, humanlike ones, and the powerful ones the size of Geffroy. The main thing they had in common was their tentacle-like hair. Without delay, they set upon the bandits.

"Try and hit a few of them at once! Let's go, boss!" Kardon shouted.

"Damn it. Just what are these?" Geffroy growled as he swung his battle-axe.

For a moment, they wondered if this was part of some plan by the Thousand Tricks, but the fiends seemed to be attacking indiscriminately. Their deep golden eyes were like those of an insect, devoid of emotion and only showing pure murderous intent. If the hostages had been present, the fiends most likely wouldn't have hesitated to attack them as well.

Some of them seemed to be smart enough to discern that Geffroy was the leader. They charged at him, but he annihilated them with a swing of his axe. Bisected by the heavy swing, they collapsed and lay still. But the rest of the fiends weren't deterred in the slightest.

Their thought process must have been entirely different from a human's. More fiends charged at Geffroy, almost like they had no fear of death. The corpses piled up, meaning these weren't phantoms. But that was a fact that provided little solace.

Besides their moving hair, the fiends all had two arms. They didn't seem that dexterous, but they moved in ways unlike that of any human. Whether you dodged or parried, every single attack from the fiends was obnoxiously followed up by another attack the very next moment.

For Geffroy, they were no big deal. Even their stony flesh was no match for his axe, a Relic that enhanced its own impact. But his subordinates weren't having such an easy time. They struggled to fend off a foe that fought with sheer might and numbers.

Even if the fiends found their bouldery skin pierced, they wouldn't slow down if it was anything less than a major wound. Perhaps because they weren't human, the poison on the bandits' blades had no effect. If anything, the fiends became more ferocious when poisoned.

Geffroy blocked a strike from the hair of one fiend, and then another. He and his bandits were managing to hold out, but they were outnumbered heavily. Geffroy swung his axe and cut down a group of fiends, but it seemed like a drop in the bucket.

"Geffroy, we're falling back! Gather as many of our squad as you can and retreat!"

"Urk. Damn it!"

They had come so close to success. They hadn't made any mistakes. Just a bit further and they would have taken the head of the Thousand Tricks. As if trying to vent his anger, Geffroy drove his axe into the ground. The hefty blade dug deep into the dirt and sent projectiles in every direction.

"It's time to retreat, boss! Remember, we can start over! Nobody's stronger than Barrel!" Kardon shouted.

"Ah, I haven't forgotten!" Geffroy shouted back.

His roars had shaken knights, hunters, and bodyguards, but it had no effect on the fiends.

"We're retreating! Gather up whoever you can and fall back! Stick close to me, I'll clear our path!" Geffroy yelled. His voice was sharp so as to help his subordinates keep their composure.

Bandit Squad Barrel had deep coffers. Weapons could be replaced, but well-trained subordinates weren't so easily reacquired. The decision to regroup the scattered bandits was made not out of compassion but practicality.

But then, the fiends simultaneously stopped their attack. All of them froze, even the ones mid-attack, blocking an attack, and those about to perish by Geffroy's axe.

"Wh-What are they doing?!"

All the fiends turned their gaze in a single direction. Their onslaught came to a halt and was replaced by an unnerving silence. There was a momentary lull and then the fiends all opened their mouths.

"Ryuuu!"

Unlike their earlier roaring, their voices were now melodic, almost as though they were singing. Stepping like dancers, they began to spin around like they were performing a ritual. They showed no hesitation in spite of the enemies right before them.

"Boss! Over there!" one of the shinobis cried.

Following their gaze, Geffroy found himself looking at one of the largest inns

in Suls. Atop a tiled roof stood a fiend, a giant who was overwhelming even compared to its kin. But that wasn't what caught the bandit's attention. Geffroy squinted. Standing on the fiend's head was a single human silhouette.

It had a human's outline and was slimmer than the large fiends, but taller than the small ones. It wore a yukata similar to the ones Geffroy's subordinates were wearing. Their skin was gray like the fiends, but they otherwise appeared human. Their hair was making a paltry attempt at wriggling about, but it was clearly much shorter and weaker than those of the gray creatures.



The person wore a crown on their head and looked benign and uncertain as they opened their mouth. The fiends had stopped and seemed to be awaiting whatever this person might have to say. Then the person screamed, their voice sounding quite like a human's.

"Ryun-ryun-ryuu-ryu!"

Chapter Three: King of the Hot Spring

There are some pitfalls you can't avoid no matter how hard you try. My luck leaned on the bad side, so I was often getting wrapped up in trouble. That said, going to a hot spring and being abducted by some weirdo was definitely among my worst strokes of luck. For a simpleton like me, most misfortunes I encountered weren't something I could do anything about, no matter how much I wanted to.

A Level 8 hunter had been captured and taken underground. This was another one of the Thousand Tricks's ingenious ploys, Operation "All of Humanity Is Your Friend: If You Can't Escape Them, Befriend Them."

The Relic Tino had given me, Mirage Form, was a black bracelet capable of creating mirages. Thanks to the time I had spent playing around with it, I had become all right at producing images.

Somewhat desperately, I activated the bracelet and projected mirages to slightly obscure my skin and hair. This would only change my outward appearance, not my scent or powers, but my only hope was to try and fool them.

The Cave People stopped in front of my cell. They made threatening noises as they looked at me—but then they began to blink. One of the boulder-like Cave People (some of them were so big I wasn't sure if the people in front of me were all the same species) made a doubtful noise.

"Ryu?!"

I wondered what they said. I opened and closed my eyes a few times. Then the Cave Person who had abducted me and had the patterns on their forehead appeared from between the larger folk.

"Ryun-ryuu-ryu," they said to the Cave People multiple times their size.

Yep. I don't recognize this language.

The small Cave Person pointed their tentacle-hair at me and continued to

speak, almost like they were making excuses for themselves.

"Ryuu-ryuu," they said.

"Ryuuu," said another Cave Person as they raised their arms up and down. I got the impression they were having a disagreement.

Even with my mirages, I didn't think I looked that much like a Cave Person. But maybe, just maybe, they were a culture that valued what was on the inside, not the outside?

I'm one of you. I'm a friend. Holding tight to these thoughts, I spoke up.

"Ryu-ryunga-ryuu."

They looked taken aback. Now, I hardly need to say it, but I didn't speak the language of the Cave People. But nothing ventured, nothing gained, is how the saying goes. I was confident my sentiments got across to them.

"Ryuu-ryuu-ryuu-un," I continued.

"Ryuu?" the patterned Cave Person asked with a tilt of their head.

I wasn't sure, but it seemed like even the intonation of their language was different from ours. I didn't have any idea how they communicated with such a small number of sounds. I didn't even have any idea what I was saying. But we were conversing and that was better than nothing.

Sitri, hurry up and get here...

I nodded my head and tried to convey my thoughts, yeah, uh-huh.

"Ryun-ryun-ryu-ryu!" I said.

Looks like I got through to them.

The Cave People were abuzz as they let me out of my cell. I seemed to get yelled at a lot, even when I tried to be as genuine as possible. Maybe just saying whatever sounds nice was a better way of negotiating. But what did that say about me?

As we walked through their town, the small Cave Person (probably a girl) would ryuu-ryuu at me frequently, the bulky Cave Person (probably a boy)

would ryuu-ryuu at me in a deep voice, and I would do my best to respond.

Outside the cell, it was far more spacious than I had expected. I didn't think anyone would have ever imagined that such a big cavern existed down there. It was so big you could fit the entirety of Suls beneath it. It was also hot. Caves were generally thought of as being cool, but that clearly wasn't the case here.

We walked down a narrow path furnished with handrails. I could peer downward and see a bright river of magma flowing beneath us. The cave people were more advanced than I had anticipated. I could see steaming aqueducts and a number of stone houses, from which a number of Cave People were curiously glancing at me.

The cave ceiling was incredibly high up. I didn't know how far underground I was, but I could tell I wouldn't escape without help. I could see Cave People climbing the cave walls with their tentacle-hair, but I wasn't dexterous enough to do something like that.

Wow. The world really is full of mysterious things. But where am I being taken? I was hoping they'd show me the way out...

Surrounded by large Cave People, I found myself descending further underground. We came to a stop before a circular area ringed by magma. I was trying to remember what the place reminded me of, and then it hit me—it was like a fighting ring! I couldn't help but come to a halt before the ominous scenery.

"Ryuu-ryu-ryuu?" I asked.

"Ryuu-ryuu!"

I had no clue what we were saying. A length of hair pushed me from behind, forcing me forward. Because of the magma, it was incredibly hot down there, like I had been thrown in a sauna. There was a single path and it led me to the center of the ring. The surrounding Cave People began to cheer.

"Ryuu-ryuu-ryu-ryuu!"

It seemed I was popular. Not sure what else I could do, I raised my hand in response.

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"Ryu-ryunga-ryu-u!"
"Ryuu-ryuu-ryuw-ryu-ryuu!"
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I'm gonna tell Sitri all about this if I make it back alive.

The crowd's cheers became deafening. Swarms of Cave People had climbed onto the walls and were watching me intently.

Then, from the same path I had entered from, came a Cave Person. He was noticeably larger than the other male Cave People who had brought me here. His flesh didn't look at all human. And, in all likelihood, he wasn't human.

He stood opposite me, raised a lock (if that's what you want to call it) of hair, and swung down a few inches from me. I couldn't even react, by the time I realized I was being attacked, the hair had already left a crater in the ground. The ground shook and my legs wobbled. The spectators' cheering became thunderous. The male Cave Person let out a boastful roar.

And then something occurred to me.

Wait. Am I supposed to be fighting this guy?

"Ryu, ryu-ryu. Ryu-u..."

"Ryuuuuu!!!"

My request for an end to the fighting was answered with a bellowing roar. My opponent's hair extended outward and simultaneously came at me from multiple angles. There was, of course, no way I could dodge that. A Safety Ring activated and blocked the powerful strike. The attacks stuck in a short enough window that I got away with only using one of my rings.

The Cave People looked at me incredulously when they realized I had blocked the attack without even moving. I didn't waste any time and activated the pendant Aspiration Manifest. A spell name floated into my head. I could release the spell without incanting the words, but I did so out of habit.

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"Ryu-ryuu-ryu, ryu-ryuu-ryu!" (Frigid Breath.)
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I felt a cold wind pass over me. Aspiration Manifest was a tricky Relic.

Stocking it required roughly one hundred times a spell's normal mana cost and stocking resulted in a degree of lost efficacy.

Blasted by cold wind, the towering Cave Person let out a small cry.

"Ryu?!"

Then he stopped. His wide-open eyes, his extended hair, all still as though frozen in time. The spectating Cave People all fell silent for a brief moment before once again erupting into cheers.

I was more surprised than anyone by what had just happened. The Cave People must have been weak to the cold if such a big individual was toppled by a small breeze. Among monsters, there were some species weak to certain elements. It made sense that a race that settled next to flowing magma would have such a vulnerability. I, on the other hand, was ready to pass out from the heat.

I reached out and touched the frozen body of the Cave Person. The moment I came in contact with his icy surface, his eyes twitched and he made a deep, slow groan.

"Huh?!"

It's not dead? Well, why would it be?

I hated myself for being so dumb. There was no way a spell reluctantly stocked by Kris would compare with the ones Lucia was always preparing for me.

The Cave Person's tentacles began to writhe again and came at me from a low angle. I was defenseless save for my Safety Rings, but I didn't have any more spells prepared by Kris. The Cave Person seemed angry. There was a rumble as he raised not his hair, but his arms. Claws long and sharp as blades jutted from his hands.

But then there was a sharp cry from outside the ring.

"Ryu-ryu-ryuuuuu!"

The giant stopped immediately, his arms still in the air. The source of the voice was the small Cave Person. She was standing just beyond the path that

led into the ring.

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"Ryu-u-ryu-u! Ryu-ryu-ryu-ryu!"
"Ryu-u?"
"Ryuun!"
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I didn't have the faintest idea what they were saying. But the girl Cave Person was pointing at me and shouting and in response the large Cave Person decided not to rip me to shreds and instead lowered their arms. They said a few brief "ryu-ryus" to me then turned around and left the arena.

Hm. I see. I still don't understand it all, but it looks like I've been judged the victor. I'll have to buy Kris a souvenir.

I stood around, wobbling from the intense heat, when something unbelievable happened. Five Cave People entered the ring and quickly surrounded me. Each one of them was just as big if not bigger than the one I had just fought. Whatever purpose this served was beyond me.

Huh? Round two?

One of these guys was already too much for me, but now I was completely outnumbered. I thought I might barf. I glanced at the girl Cave Person who had protested for me, but she looked at me with a vague expression and nodded. Left with no other options, I heaved a sigh and began to plead for mercy.

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"Ryu, Ryu-ryu...ryu-u...ryu!"
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The Cave People roared at me and began to charge.

"Ryuuuuuuu!"

They seemed angry.

My attempt had failed. I didn't even know what I was saying, so I had no way of knowing where I went wrong.

Five towering Cave People came at me. They swung with all their might at a shrimp like me. Not a shred of warrior's honor among them. They weren't even approaching me head-on, they were all attacking in tandem. I was helpless either way, but no amount of Safety Rings could protect me if I was getting hit

from all angles.

I had nothing to lose, so I activated Sitri's souvenir, the mysterious Aspiration Manifest. A spell name completely new to me entered my head.

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"Ryuu-ryun-ryu-ryu." (Silent Demise.)
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The spell was released. Contrary to its ostentatious name, it had no obvious effects. I didn't feel any cold air like with Kris's spell, yet the Cave People surrounding me all stopped dead still, their eyes opened wide.

What happened?

I was more confused than anyone.

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"Ryu-ryu?!"
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The bodies of the Cave People began to swell. The spectators shrieked with surprise. The fit, boulder-like bodies of my attackers began to expand. They were already plenty sturdy, but now their muscles had grown even larger and they were tall as houses. At the start, they were about the size of Gark, but the changes from the spell brought them to just under Ansem's height. No, "change" wasn't the right word. They were *evolving*.

The spectators were astounded, but the most dumbfounded person there was me. Bloodshot, golden eyes, five full sets of them, looked down on me.

Huh? Don't tell me, the spell in that Relic was an enhancement spell? How often does that even happen?

Things couldn't get any worse. I didn't stand a chance from the start, but now I really didn't stand a chance.

What the hell am I supposed to do here?! It's hopeless!

"Ryu-u," I accidentally said.

I was getting woozy from the excessive heat. It was too hot, I stumbled and clutched my head. It looked like the end of the line. I was going to die in that arena. I wished I could have met Luka, Lucia, and Ansem one more time. If I was just going to die anyway then I should have married Sitri. I should have played

with Liz.

This was why I wanted to retire!

Except, I wasn't even in a dangerous region, so this could have happened even if I had retired.

I was out of options, there was nothing I could do. I began to avert my eyes and ears from reality, but then I heard a trembling voice.

"Ryuuuuuuu!"

Since the Cave People looked fairly human, I couldn't fathom why they talked so differently than we did. I kept my eyes pressed shut and waited for the end, but no attacks came my way. I slowly opened my eyes and only just managed to keep myself from yelling.

What?

For some reason, the enhanced Cave People were all lying before me. They hadn't been incapacitated. Instead, they had their heads lowered like they were bowing to me, their hair resting limply on the ground.

I didn't understand what was happening, but the crowd gave their loudest cheers yet. The flowing magma shook violently. I was surrounded by a ring of magma and received a thunderous ovation of ryu-ryus. I was probably the only person in the whole world to ever have an experience like this. Unfortunately, I was about to collapse due to the heat. A Safety Ring didn't protect against high temperatures. That required an altogether different Relic.

"Ryu..." I answered and fell to my knees.

In an instant, I found myself being supported by tentacles. They came from the source of all this, the Cave Person who had grabbed me and brought me down here. I opened my eyes and saw her ryu-ryuing at me. Losing consciousness, I ryu-ryued in response. I was kinda getting used to it. I could just respond to everything with ryu-ryu.

When they heard my response, the Cave People threw up their arms and shouted.

"Ryuuuuuuuun!"

The next thing I knew, I was atop the back of an enhanced Cave Person and looking down at the townscape of Suls.

From atop one of the taller buildings, I could see smoke rising up from the usually mellow town. I could tell something bad was happening, but I had no idea what.

All I had said was "ryu-u-ryu-u." I'll admit I had been having a bit of fun with it, but that was all. Yet I somehow found a crown-like thing had been placed on my head and I was being carried about like a sacred object.

A shocking number of Cave People had come up with us from the caves. Looking at the route we had taken to the surface, it seemed the hole dug by the construction workers had crossed paths with the byway of an underground civilization. Talk about bad luck.

The Cave People's tentacle-like hair and claws seemed well suited for digging and climbing up vertical surfaces. The byway was a narrow one so not everyone could come out at once, but even as we stood atop the building, more and more of them crawled out of the hole.

I wondered if maybe the Cave People were actually monsters. Maybe this was really bad? But I didn't know what to do about it.

Nearby, my abductor from earlier was now kneeling and looking up at me. I wasn't all that confident, but if my eyes were right, then she was showing her respect. I couldn't really be certain, but it looked like she was waiting for me to say something.

What was I supposed to say? I figured something like "Thanks for bringing me back up here, now go back underground," or maybe "Don't hurt any humans."

I took a deep breath and filled my mind with one sentiment: go back underground.

"Ryu-ryuu-ryu-ryu-ryu-ryu," I said.

The (probably) female Cave Person conveyed my words to the Cave People below us.

"Ryu-ru-ru-ru-ru-ru-ru!"

When they heard what she said, they all simultaneously raised their hair upwards, let out shrill cries, and dashed off in every direction.

Panic reigned within the inn. When the guards realized something was afoot they briefly tried to still keep an eye on Tino and the other hunters. However, they quickly lost the luxury of looking out for anyone but themselves.

It was the sheer number of them. The bizarre creatures were numerous enough to trample over the mass of well-trained fighters that was Bandit Squad Barrel. In a funny twist of fate, the brigands who relied on numbers to overwhelm Suls were now being crushed by an even larger force.

Naturally, Tino and company weren't going to be spared.

"This is where Thieves shine! Got that, T?!"

Lizzy pulled out a bit of wire she had kept hidden on her and undid Tino's handcuffs almost like magic. She handed the wire off to Tino and then sent the approaching creatures flying back with an expert kick.

"T, get everyone's handcuffs! You've got five minutes or you're fighting with cuffs on."

"Huh?! O-Okay, Lizzy!"

It seemed Lizzy could be her usual self even in situations like this. Something about that was oddly relieving to Tino. She frantically undid Siddy's handcuffs.

It would have been a fine stroke of luck if the intruders were only targeting members of Barrel, but that wasn't the case. The intruders were focused on the bandits due to their sheer numbers, but they would be coming for the hunters and town guards. If Tino didn't hurry, someone might be killed.

As she desperately fiddled with the wire, Tino listened to Lizzy and Siddy. Both of them sounded perfectly calm.

"It's been a minute since we've been in a situation like this. What do we do?"

"Mmm, well, I suppose rescuing the hostages should be our top priority. If

these creatures are attacking the entire town, then the guards are probably in a state of panic."

Hm? They're thinking about the hostages at a time like this?!

The Stifled Shadow wasn't someone constrained by the morals of society. Even some with a strong sense of justice would struggle to make hostages their number one priority under circumstances like this. Yet Lizzy seemed perfectly satisfied with Siddy's proposal.

Distracted, Tino's hand slipped and the handcuffs unlocked with a loud click. Siddy shook her hands and turned a stern gaze towards the rampaging, ryuryuing assailants.

"It seems their words match up with those used by most Troglodytes. Well, actually, it's not words but sounds that they use to communicate—"

"Huh?! Siddy, you can understand what they're saying?!"

"I can't speak their tongue, but I can listen and understand the gist of what they're saying."

She could listen. That alone was plenty impressive. Concentrating, Tino could make out different sounds and intonations, but she still briefly struggled to believe that Siddy could parse their language.

"What are they saying?" Tino asked.

"Um, 'The king has made his decree. Show your might and we shall prove victorious for our king and princess. Fear not the elder devils. Now is our chance to achieve our long-held ambitions and rule the surface."

Those chirps made such a long sentence?! Not to mention the contents themselves. Tino couldn't keep up.

Lizzy grinned as she dodged an incoming tentacle and swept a Troglodyte's leg. With the gray fiend on the ground, she crushed their skull beneath her foot.

"Hmph. Their king can't be that strong," she said. "I'm curious about those devils, but for now we just need to take down their king and princess, right?"

Whereas Tino was quite bewildered, Lizzy took a very simple approach.

I see. If that's the case, then we can still win this. We've got the strength for it. However, Siddy shook her head with dismay.

"Mmm, considering Troglodyte culture, if we were to kill their king and princess, then we might just inspire them to fight to their last breath. They believe their king to be absolute."

Tino managed to finish undoing everybody's handcuffs and all the while received a lesson in the value of lockpicking skills. Fortunately, none of the captive hunters or town guards had been injured. This was because the Smart sisters had drawn the attention of the majority of the Troglodytes.

"It would appear the warriors are worth more points to them," Siddy said, using her sister as a shield.

"Huh? So they all think like Luke? I can respect that," Lizzy replied.

With their handcuffs removed, the hunters of Scorching Whirlwind and Falling Fog all returned to the front lines. The town guards had also been unshackled, but they seemed unaccustomed to unexpected circumstances and didn't seem like they would be much help.

The better half of the bandits had already fled from the inn. Using her Relic, Siddy shot a potion into the Crashing Lightning as he convulsed on the ground. His agonized expression softened just a bit.

"Thanks for doing that," Eigh said.

"Oh, not at all," Sitri replied. "Mutual cooperation makes the world go around. Let's focus on the future."

"R-Right. I don't really know what's going on, but it's clearly nothing good."

The hunters were outnumbered, but each individual was stronger than a single Troglodyte. Tino and the Smart sisters couldn't use magic, but Falling Fog had a Magus. Siddy thought the situation over for a few seconds and made her judgment call.

"Let's split up. We'll eliminate the source. May I ask that you and your company search for the hostages?" she proposed.

"What?!"

"The Troglodytes appear to be prioritizing the warriors. With their lack of mana material, noncombatants should be a low priority for them. This means there's a high chance the hostages are still alive."

It was at that moment that Arnold propped himself up with his elbows. His complexion still wasn't very good, but even that much meant that Siddy must have given him an extraordinary potion. He steadied his ragged breathing and glared at her.

"The source. Take care of it. Our group's bigger. We'll get hostages," he said.

It appeared he could move. He stood up and drove a fist straight into a Troglodyte who was diving at him. The creature collided with a few of their comrades and formed a crater in a wall. He had chased after her master and fought her personally, but Tino was glad to have him on her side.

Arnold swiped a sword from a collapsed bandit and raised it in the air.

"Follow me, we're clearing a path!" he roared. "This is our chance to show what the warriors of Nebulanubes are capable of!"

He dashed forward. Even though he was recovering from the poison and deprived of his usual weapon, the Crashing Lightning was a hunter of immense might. With an armament he wasn't even used to, he cut down swathes of Troglodytes.

"I'd recommend against using poisons. Their bodies are different from ours and a poison might do the opposite of its intended effect!" Siddy said.

With her and the Drink and Killiam tag team, they took next to no injuries as they fought their way out of the inn. Outside, things were just as bad as they had been inside. Burly Troglodytes clamored through the streets, the ground was covered with bandits and the Troglodytes they had presumably taken down with them. The creatures let out a resounding victory cry.

"Ryu-uuu!"

A plethora of golden eyes greedy for prey all turned towards Tino and the other hunters. Tino wished she had that mask her master had given her. She

took a few deep breaths and tore a slit in the side of her robe so it wouldn't hinder her kicks. This was a battlefield and they were up against monsters. Even if she had help, a momentary mistake could still cost her her life.

Arnold was looking at the Troglodytes like he had once looked at Krai.

"Get to the top of that roof. We'll look for the hostages," he said in a strained voice.

Scorching Whirlwind and the town guards steeled themselves. Eigh seemed his usual flippant self, but his smile made it clear he was ready for what might come.

"We can't run when there are so many of these guys. We'll have to fight. Good thing all we have to do is hold out until you defeat the source of our problems," he said.

It was the worst day of his life. Marcos, the head of Suls, was a man who had for a long time overseen the development of the peaceful hot spring town.

Astonished and confused, he stared at the square.

The mind-boggling changes were far too much for him to process. Marcos had been able to lead Suls for so long because the town had a history of tranquility. The hot spring dragon appearing in a high-class inn after ten years of going unseen was already pushing him to his limits.

Next thing he knew, he had been captured by bandits and dragged off to the town square. With many tourists scared off by rumors of Bandit Squad Barrel, most people in town were familiar faces. It was only then that he finally learned that bandits had taken over Suls.

The townsfolk hadn't been treated roughly or even restrained, but that was likely because the bandits didn't think it was worth the effort. Not one person in the town square had even the slightest experience in combat. And who could blame them for their complacency? All it took was a threatening glare for Marcos to lose the will to resist.

The townsfolk had one option: the instant golems they'd received the other day from the Alchemist of the famed Grieving Souls. They had been lent out for

free for the time being and putting the core in water was all that was necessary to form a mighty golem. But Marcos hadn't used them.

He felt resisting was just going to invite his demise, so he was better off just waiting for help to arrive. But more than that, he was flat-out afraid of the bandits. They hadn't tried to disarm the townsfolk and that was something he could exploit. But he didn't. The bandits were skillful fighters and he wasn't sure the golems would be enough to resist them. These were the sort of excuses he gave, but he wasn't fooling himself.

And so as he sat in fear with the other townsfolk, the situation once again saw an abrupt development. The guards keeping an eye on the townsfolk disappeared. This included the man who had told them they'd be killed if they resisted and the woman who looked down on them for not resisting. They had been attacked by a sudden swarm of monsters and fled when they realized they were at a disadvantage.

All that remained in the square were the townsfolk and the gray monsters surrounding them. Marcos had never seen these creatures before. They were powerful, intelligent, and had scared off a well-coordinated bandit squad. This wasn't a situation that could be salvaged by a simple mayor like Marcos.

The monsters had swarmed the bandits, but left the townsfolk alone for some reason. However, their mineral-like eyes were bereft of mercy and they stood around the townsfolk as they chattered in their odd language. It was clear they didn't plan to let the hostages go free.

The hostages grew pale, and some of them were trembling. It was no surprise that they had lost the will to flee after seeing the monsters work together to assail the bandits. Some of the townsfolk had collapsed from the shock of it.

Marcos tried to distract himself by wondering which was worse: bandits or monsters? But suddenly, one of the monsters began to walk forward. Marcos felt his mind go blank from fear and tension, but it walked right past him.

When the monster stopped, it wasn't in front of Marcos, but rather a local merchant. The man was blessed with a good physique and often bragged that he was the strongest man in Suls. Of course, he wasn't used to rough-and-tumble situations and paled in comparison to treasure hunters.

The monster's tentacles extended forward and wrapped around the anxious merchant's torso. Though he was nearly two meters tall, the man was easily lifted off the ground. He screamed and thrashed about, but he had no effect on the large, inhuman monster.

"Ryuu-ryuu."

Marcos didn't know what the monster was saying, but their intent was clear enough. Their voice was calm, no longer containing the violence they had when they attacked the bandits. They almost sounded bored, like a human might.

The merchant was lifted high into the air. What was the monster going to do? The moment Marcos figured it out, his hand instinctively reached into his pocket for the golem cores.

He let out a loud cry as he scattered all ten of them. He panicked and threw them aimlessly, but one of the cores rolled across the ground and fell into a drainage ditch. Just like that Alchemist had said in her pitch, the change took effect after only a few seconds. The core sucked up the hot water and there appeared a translucent figure.

The surrounding monsters, even the one about to slam the merchant into ground, all looked straight at the golem.

"Ryuu?!"

The three billion gild golem began to move of its own accord. The first thing it did was knock the other cores into the ditch. Marcos watched with shock as golems sprung up like trees right before his eyes.

The merchant being held aloft was tossed aside like a piece of garbage. The monsters chattered with excitement, just like they had when fighting the bandits. The monsters attacked the golems, and the golems retaliated without fear. Perhaps because they were formed from hot spring water, the golems remained steadfast even when being struck by tentacles.

Ooh. If we get out of this alive, I think I'll buy as many hot spring golem cores as I can, Marcos thought as he watched a fierce battle between monster and golem unfold right before him.

Jumping from rooftop to rooftop, they made their way across Suls. Tino's footing was uncertain, but she had been trained by Lizzy on the rooftops of the imperial capital. Compared to the capital, which had buildings of wildly varying heights, Suls was quite easy to traverse.

The Troglodytes were sticking to the ground. Some of them caught sight of Tino and the Smart sisters, but none of them climbed atop any buildings. As a race of underground people, they probably weren't accustomed to high places. Even if they were to attempt pursuit, Tino and her allies could outrun them.

"Still, I can't help but wonder where they came from," Siddy wondered aloud as she looked down at the town. Even though she was an Alchemist, she seemed perfectly fine running across the rooftops.

"Good question," Liz responded. "Troglodytes normally live underground, so..."

These were probably the Sapiens mentioned in the local legends. Looking at them again, Tino was amazed at how many there were. They might have even outnumbered the entire population of Suls. How could such a large army have remained unknown for so long?

Such a number of Troglodytes would make for a grueling battle, even if Barrel hadn't already been wreaking havoc. If anything, it was a good thing the bandits were present because they diverted some of the creatures' attention.

No, don't get ahead of yourself, Tino told herself as she banished the thought from her head. Her master and Bandit Squad Barrel had never met before and he would never let bandits into a town. No matter how ingenious someone might be, it was impossible to have total control over the actions of bandits. Her master was god, but not a malevolent one. Probably.

Their objective was to search for the origin point of the countless Troglodytes and it didn't take long for them to find it. At the construction site they had passed earlier, they could see a constant flow of the creatures climbing out of the hole in the ground.

"Aah, that hole must be connected to their home," Siddy said with raised eyebrows. "But I've never seen anything like this happen."

"Hmm, so do we fill it in?" Lizzy asked.

Siddy blinked and looked around at the nonstop flow of invaders.

"If we do that, they'll simply undo our work," she said. "Troglodytes are very good at digging. It seems their settlement must be a fairly large one. They don't usually form packs quite this big."

Then Tino noticed something: after emerging from the hole, every Troglodyte would first turn in a specific direction and make a sound. The two sisters seemed to notice it as well and turned their heads in the same direction.

Two sets of pink eyes grew wide at the same time.

The Troglodytes were looking at a tall building in the center of the town, where an exceptionally large Troglodyte appeared to be kneeling atop the building. Specifically, the creatures were looking at a thin shadow atop the brute. Tino was at a loss for words.

"I hear that among Troglodyte culture, reverence is paid to small, slender individuals," Siddy said in an attempt at explaining.

"B-But, Siddy, Master isn't a Troglodyte."

Tino would never mistake someone else for her beloved master. Honestly, she didn't see how you could possibly mistake the man atop the Troglodyte throne for anyone else. His skin color and face were a tad different from usual but that hardly constituted a disguise. He was even still in a yukata.

"Ryuu-ryuu!" the Troglodytes sang in unison. There was something dreamlike about it all.

Siddy, helpful as ever, offered a translation.

"'O King, your loyal servants await your guidance," she said with apparent confusion. Even she couldn't have anticipated this.

"That Krai Baby. When did he go and become a king?" Liz remarked.

Krai then raised his right hand and responded to the Troglodytes in a melodic voice.

[&]quot;Ryuu-ryuu-ryu-ryu," he said.

The recently arrived Troglodytes all cried out with excitement and scattered like a bunch of beasts. Siddy stood frozen with fear.

"Wh-What did he say?" Tino asked hesitantly.

Siddy could only grasp the gist of what the creatures were saying, but it seemed Krai was fluent in their tongue. Tino wasn't sure whether to be impressed or bewildered. She didn't know what her master had said, but she didn't think he was just ryu-ryuing haphazardly. He wasn't that sort of person.

Siddy blinked a few times and furrowed her brow.

"'Kill them all. With all possible haste, bring before me the blood of mighty warriors. The surface is to be ours," she said.

"Master would never say such a thing!"

Those were undeniably the words of a villain. Besides, if Siddy's translation was right, it was her master's fault that Suls had descended into chaos.

"Oh? Maybe he's still mad about the pillow fight?" Lizzy suggested.

"Setting aside our pillow fight, perhaps he's trying to efficiently eliminate both the Troglodytes and Barrel? However, this is a bit more violent than usual," Siddy said.

Master, maybe you shouldn't be trying to do that?!

It sure was incredible that Siddy could describe this as a bit more violent than usual. The whole town was being wrecked.

"If that hole is connected to the Troglodytes' home, then it was only a matter of time before they showed up," Siddy surmised while tilting her head. "If they had chosen to make their appearance when we weren't around then Suls would no doubt have been destroyed."

Tino struggled to believe her ears.

"Shouldn't he have said something?!"

Her master had often embroiled clan members and other hunters in his Thousand Trials, but he had never gotten civilians involved on such a large scale. Even if he just wanted to divert the attention of Barrel, the best hunter in Zebrudia surely had other options available to him. And yet he seemed to be instigating the chaos (provided Siddy's translation was correct).

"One problem remains, however," Siddy said. "With the Troglodytes so riled up, just how does Krai intend to keep them under control once this is all over?"

Tino was taken aback. "Won't he just order them?" she asked.

"Even if he did, it's not easy to undo so much momentum," Siddy said, looking truly perplexed.

Deep down, Tino was horrified by the idea that this scheme was unreadable to someone who was both Krai's childhood friend and once regarded as one of the greatest Alchemists.

She briefly worried that perhaps this was his way of saying he was leaving matters in their hands. That was too much for Tino. It was possible this was a Trial made with the Smart sisters in mind, but it was a threat to her life.

"C'mon, if we've got time to spitball like this, we may as well just ask him directly. Hey, Krai Baby!" Liz said while waving her hand in wide arcs.

Krai's gaze settled on Tino and the Smart sisters, and he began to smile. But then the small Troglodyte at his side leaped towards them. She flew through the air and landed on their rooftop with the deft movements of a Thief.

It seemed male and female Troglodytes varied in size. Tino had seen ones of all shapes and sizes in the streets of Suls, but the one before her had something different—a circlet-like pattern drawn on her forehead.

"That pattern, it means she's their princess."

Siddy, you sure know a lot, Tino thought as she looked at the Troglodyte with bewilderment.

"Ryu-ryu-ryuu-ryun," the princess said with a sharp glare.

Siddy translated.

"She's saying, 'Wretched surface dwellers, what business do you have with our glorious new king?'"

That one had the bearing of a king. Their meeting was a fateful one.

For the rulers of the underground, those known to humans as Troglodytes, the world above was to be their final conquest. It was a land they yearned for, but could never reach.

The Troglodytes had claws optimized for digging through dirt, but they struggled to break through layers of rock and had further difficulties digging upwards. Thus, the surface world was a land of fable for the denizens of the kingdom beneath Suls.

But their dreams became reality once someone noticed that one of their tunnels connected to another tunnel—one that no one could recall digging. The tunnel was long and went straight upwards. The Troglodytes immediately set to work to determine where it led and found that it connected to a land unknown. The legendary surface world. They also learned that it led to a settlement of the surface dwellers.

Troglodyte society was ruled by an absolute monarchy centered around a single princess. The princess's authority was absolute and she was responsible for her people. She would choose an exceptional individual to be the king and that person would lead the Troglodytes.

Because she hadn't yet chosen a king, the task of exploring the hole fell to the princess, Ryuulan. And it was there that she met him, the one who would become king of the Sulsian Empire. At first, she had thought he was a surface dweller. She captured him because she thought observing one of their kind would aid in the invasion.

But her assumption was quickly overturned.

She thought his hair and skin were just like how the surface dwellers were described in legends. But after bringing him underground, she looked closer at him and saw he had an appearance similar to the Troglodytes. His sleek outline was no issue. Among Troglodyte males, a slender figure implied tight muscles.

Ryuulan knew that this man was more suited than anyone to be their king.

"I shall be your king and guide you henceforth. Bow down, I care naught for weaklings," he declared after taking only a glance at her and her guards.

Naturally, Ryuulan's cohorts were indignant. But it was the right of every single Troglodyte to show their qualifications to be king. This was customary even among other Troglodyte kingdoms.

So began the battle for him to prove his worthiness and he made it abundantly clear he was fit to be king. First, he used a power unlike anything Ryuulan had ever seen to overpower, but not kill, a warrior. Not only that, he said that they were too weak to even be considered an opponent and then suggested that they send five at once. And when they sent five brave warriors at the man, he dared to enhance them.

That was sufficient. That power and magnanimity were enough for Ryuulan and everyone in the kingdom to recognize him as king. The princess offered him her hand in marriage, but he had other ideas.

"Now is the time for which we shall strike at the surface world. You need not fear those malevolent gods. Kill them all," he said as if it were nothing.

Tales of the malevolent gods had long been told throughout the kingdom. They were the ones who prevented their invasion of the surface world. Ryuulan's ancestors had once aimed for the surface and briefly bathed in the sun's light, only to be forced underground by those demons.

For a long time, those demons had destroyed any hope of invading the surface. But the new king showed no fear towards them and spoke confidently about a foe once feared by each and every Troglodyte. They harbored uncertainties, but Ryuulan and her people still jumped at the chance to follow him. That's how they regarded their king. If it was for his sake, there was no need to fear even death itself.

There sure was some crazy stuff going on. I knew the underground kingdom was expansive, but what I visited must have been only a small part of it. The number of Cave People rising to the surface far exceeded my expectations. And no matter how much I tried, I couldn't get them to turn around and go home.

I had been vaguely aware of it from the start, but it seemed I really wasn't getting through to those guys. Of course I couldn't, I was a total bystander. I was spacing out and got captured, then I spaced out and got thrown atop the

back of a Cave Person. Watching them run around the town, they didn't exactly come across as friendly visitors. But there wasn't anything I could do about that.

I looked down on the townscape and tried to look for a way to resolve the current crisis, but then I noticed some of my companions looking at me from another rooftop.

Have they come to rescue me? No, I guess not.

I was just desperate for help in any form. Someone as smart as Sitri would probably know a way out of this. I was about to wave at them, but the Cave Person next to me said a few ryu-ryus and jumped through the air. She did a nice pirouette and landed a few dozen meters away, just in front of Liz and the others.

I couldn't just leave them be, so, begrudgingly, I decided to get off the rooftop. Just as I crouched down, I stopped myself.

What do I do? It's too high for me to get down. Somebody, help me.

While I was at this impasse, my abductor was waving her arms and yelling at my friends. It seemed she held a special place among the Cave People (it was here that I remembered that only she had those markings on her head) because there were Cave People gathering at the bases of the buildings she and my friends stood atop.

The situation looked like it could escalate at any moment. That Cave Person had abducted me, but she had also protected me on multiple occasions, so I felt a bit of attachment to her. My goal was peace. Looking at the civilization established by the Cave People, I figured they must be almost as smart as human beings. I saw no reason we couldn't resolve this with words.

I gave up on climbing off the rooftop and instead just shouted. Stop the fighting!

"Ryuu-ryu-ryuu!"

The Cave Person with the markings heard my voice and turned towards me. But before she could say anything, Sitri beat her to the punch.

"Krai, whose side are you on?!" she cried.

"Ryuu?"

I was on her side. What other side could I be on?

"I understand we were squabbling, but that was just a bit of fun! How could you be so quick to replace us with Troglodytes?! You dunce!"

"Ryu-u..."

After saying nothing but "ryu-ryu" for a while, I had gotten in the habit of responding to everything that way.

Dunce. Haven't heard that word in a while.

"Are you satisfied with that Troglodyte princess?! Will just any girl do? Then aren't I enough? You womanizer! Fiend! Debt-holder!"

I don't see how my debt is relevant.

Not only was Sitri out of sorts, but even Liz seemed taken aback. Besides, I didn't think just any girl would do, I had no idea these Cave People were called "Troglodytes," and while I suspected she was female, I had no idea this one was a princess.

"So you're their king?! You wanted to become a king?! You just want to form a country?! You moron!"

King?! I never thought anything like that and I certainly didn't recall ever becoming one.

The Troglodyte, who was apparently a princess, jumped up and returned to my side. She smiled and hugged me while ryu-ryuing. I really didn't understand the situation. As always, I had no idea what she was saying. I thought it went without saying that I didn't see the Troglodyte as a member of the opposite sex, but I guess Siddy saw things differently. She was multilingual, so perhaps she understood the Troglodyte language? But I sure didn't!

As I tried to figure out a way to clear up any misunderstandings, the princess let out a bizarre cry.

"Ryaa?!"

I was pushed aside and stumbled before falling on my bottom. She was

looking down at me with a look of complete shock. I began to look around as I tried to figure out what caused her sudden reaction and then I finally noticed it —my skin was returning to its original color.

"Ryu-ryu-ryu?! Ryu?!" she said.

Aah, the Relic ran out of mana.

Mirage Form was capable of maintaining mirages on its own, but how long that lasted depended on the sort of image being shown. I had fiddled with it for a bit and figured out how long different mirages could go before draining the charge, but that had all completely slipped my mind. I tried rubbing the black bracelet, but my mana wasn't enough to effectively charge a Relic.

But even though I had been disguising myself with mirages, all I had really done was adjust my hair and skin a tad. I hadn't changed that much.

"Ryuu," I said furtively to the princess.

"Ryu, Ryu-u-u-u!"

Nope. Guess not.

With tears streaming down her cheeks, the princess sent me flying backwards with a wave of her hair. I stumbled back helplessly and came to a halt at Sitri's feet.

"I'm back," I said.

"Welcome back!" she replied.

Boy, that sure was something.

Even though she had been berating me not too long ago, Sitri's attitude had turned around and she grabbed my hand and helped me up. This made me realize something quite obvious: humans really were the best company.

"Krai Baby, what were you even doing?" Liz asked with exasperation.

"Couldn't you tell?"

"Nope."

Funny you should say that. Neither could I.

"It seems magic and Relics are foreign to Troglodyte culture," Sitri said.

It then occurred to me that I hadn't seen them use magic. I hadn't thought much of it because their very existence seemed like magic to me.

"Ryu-ru-ru-ru-ru-ru!" the princess screamed with trembling shoulders.

All the nearby Troglodytes stood still. The town went quiet and they all looked up at their princess. It was an eerie sight, almost like, well, the calm before the storm.

"She's saying, 'The king is dead. Kill them, the warriors, the civilians, bring destruction to them all. Let not a single treacherous surface dweller remain ignorant of our might!"

"They won't run even though their king is dead?!" Tino cried.

"Well, considering the circumstances..." Sitri said while glancing in my direction.

Was it strange that what scared me the most wasn't the current situation or the angry gazes, but the fact that Sitri had been so calm while giving her translation?

The Troglodytes began to roar. They had been calmly marching throughout the town, but now their voices were filled with emotion, a palpable anger. The princess raised an arm and pointed at me. Legions of gold eyes were all directed straight at me.

"Were you looking to fight a bunch of Troglodytes?" Liz asked me. "Is that why you decided to piss them off?"

She was looking at me with wide eyes, but I had never wanted to fight anything. I couldn't understand why this was happening when all I had wanted was to go on a vacation. But the real victims here were the townsfolk of Suls and for some reason, they were nowhere to be seen.

"No easy way of dealing with such a high number of them. And poison won't work on them either. Hmm, if only Lucia were here."

Sitri looked utterly perplexed. Tino stood at the ready, looking noticeably tense. The number of Troglodytes was overwhelming. Among Grieving Souls,

wide-area attacks were the domain of Lucia. Liz was powerful, but she attacked with punches and kicks; she wasn't suited to taking large groups.

I made up my mind. I stepped forward so I was standing a few feet away from everyone else and smiled. I had long ago given up on thinking up a plan. After all, I had never once thought of a sound solution to one of our crises. I had only stepped forward because there was no point in hanging back.

Tino gulped. The Troglodytes were all focused on me; their ire hadn't dissipated in the slightest. I hadn't meant to trick them, but I didn't think they'd forgive me no matter how much I apologized.

Sitri called me. "Krai."

"It's fine," I said.

It wasn't really fine. I had Safety Rings, but those weren't going to make much of a difference. I wondered if there wasn't some way to resolve this with minimal bloodshed.

One after another, the Troglodytes began to leap up and dive at me. Likewise, the princess deftly leaped into the air, heading straight towards me.

I opened my mouth and yelled at the top of my lungs.

"Ryuu-ryuu-ryu-ryu!"

And then, as though on cue, the world began to fall apart.

The machinations of the Thousand Tricks were beyond any one's comprehension. In spite of her fairly long association with him, Tino was no exception to this rule. She had absolutely no idea what had led them to reach their current circumstances. But the Smart sisters both seemed just as confused, so maybe her incomprehension was only natural.

Her master stood before them protectively. The fearsome Troglodytes were jumping at him from all angles. He didn't make a single move, he took no action.

The rooftop he stood on, the incoming Troglodytes, they were all blown away in an instant. Tino just barely managed to withstand the burning wind that blew

over her. Her hair and robe were all thrown into disarray.

She frantically tried to evaluate the situation. The surrounding section of the town had been destroyed. The only thing unaffected was her master, standing amid it all. His expression was calm and unconcerned.

Then the world was shaken by a mighty roar.

"RAAAWR!"

A large shadow fell over the ground as a massive figure blocked out the sun. Lizzy's eyes opened wide. The troglodytes and the princess, who was just missed by the blast, all looked up. Tino felt her cheek twitch.

Red eyes brimming with anger looked down at them. Obstructing the sun's rays and dominating the skies was a single winged beast, the strongest mythical best in the world—a dragon.

Dwarfing even the rampaging Troglodytes, the dragon up was larger and exerted a far greater presence than the dragon Tino had defeated. Steam billowed out from its slightly opened jaws.

Siddy blinked. "Aah, that's a mature one. A mature hot spring dragon."

"It's huuuge. It might compare to some of the biggest dragons we've bagged," Lizzy said.

"Huh? Huuuh? A hot spring dragon?! A mature one?"

Tino couldn't believe her ears. Everything about this dragon was different from the one she had brawled with in the hot spring. Even from a distance, she could tell its dark blue skin was rugged and only somewhat similar to that round, ornery dragon from earlier. Not to mention the matter of size and that this dragon was flying through the sky. She knew some mythical beasts changed during the transition into adulthood, but this seemed like a bit much.

The Troglodytes cried out in wavering voices. Even their princess was frozen in place.

"Ryu, ryuu-ryuu-ryuu!"

Tino couldn't understand what they were saying, but it was clear they were scared. The next moment, the center of the crowd was pummeled by an

immense force.

"Dragon's Breath," as it was known, was the strongest attack among dragons of all varieties. Destructive energy was formed in the body and expelled from the mouth. Potential force varied depending on the variety of dragon, but all were immensely powerful. There were even legends of entire countries being brought to ruin by a single breath.

The temperature climbed rapidly. Tino recognized the cause. It was steam. It was strange, but perhaps only natural that the breath of a hot spring dragon wouldn't be fire or ice, but steam. The dragon she dueled had spewed hot water from its mouth, but the dragon up there was an adult.

The Troglodytes looked up at the dragon and broke into a chorus.

"Ryun-ryu-ryuu!"

"It appears that dragon is one of those malevolent gods they were referring to earlier," Siddy observed.

No matter how large their numbers, Troglodytes couldn't hope to take down such a powerful sovereign of the skies. The dragon seemed quite upset and it cast a vicious glare across the ground, which caused the Troglodyte princess to dash for cover and hide in Krai's shadow of all places.

After inhaling deeply, another volley of breath was released. It was aimed straight at Krai. The steam dug into the ground and reduced what remained of the houses to rubble. Tino held back a scream.

Krai didn't flinch in the face of an attack from one of the world's strongest creatures. Even after being hit by a potentially lethal attack, he showed no reaction. The hot spring dragon's sharp eyes bulged when it realized a tiny human being had shrugged off its attack. Krai slowly blinked and looked around.

"Ryu-Ryu-Ryu-Ryu-Ryu-Ryu-Ryu?" he said to the Troglodyte hiding behind him.

What could he be saying? Tino didn't have a clue, but it clearly startled the princess. The Troglodyte blinked rapidly and glanced at Tino's master, then the dragon, then the other Troglodytes, and finally at Krai once again. She seemed to be ryu-ryuing defensively, but then she frantically began to scream when she

saw the dragon readying its breath again.

"Ryun-ryu-ryu, ryuuu!"

Her melodic voice echoed about and the Troglodytes reacted intensely to it. They were pulled from their stupor and fled like scattering spiderlings. They were all headed in the same direction, towards the hole they had come out of.

In a scene reminiscent of a rolling wave, the horde of Troglodytes returned home. They took even their dead comrades with them, leaving not a body behind. Perhaps they planned to memorialize their fallen.

Finally, only the princess remained. With tears in her eyes, she walked up and wrapped her arms around Tino's dumbfounded master.

"Ryu!" she said, most likely as a farewell, and then went back down the hole from which she came.

Siddy clapped her hands together as though it all made sense now.

"I see. Use the Troglodytes to chase out Barrel, then force the Troglodytes to give up on their conquest by showing them the might of their archenemy. Excellent use of manipulation!"

But this was no time to be so relaxed. They were left with a destroyed town and—

"RAWR!"

A hot spring dragon dissatisfied with its shortage of prey. Now that the Troglodytes were gone, its eyes were settled squarely on Tino and her companions.

H-Hold on, what are we supposed to do about this?!

The dragon had done an excellent job of clearing out the Troglodytes, but no one in their group could fight back against an enemy that could attack from high in the sky. Siddy of course couldn't do anything to it and the same went for Lizzy too. Humans were creatures that fought with their feet on the ground. Their only hope was Krai.

For the first time, Tino's master looked upwards at the dragon in the sky. He watched it closely for a brief period, then clapped his hands as though reaching

a decision.

The dragon roared again. Glimmering energy gathered in its mouth. The dragon might have routed the Troglodytes, but it would decimate Suls as well if they didn't do something.

Something. There has to be something we can do, Tino thought as the dragon's mouth glowed brighter. It seemed this time the winged beast planned to go all out. Tino had absorbed a degree of mana material, but she was no god. She lacked the defense to endure such a powerful attack, even if she had the power of the mask.

Witnessing for the first time the terrifying sight of Dragon's Breath head-on, Tino's breathing stopped, her body trembled. Just as the energy was about to be released, a round figure darted out in front of Krai.

"Raaawr."

It was the hot spring dragon Tino had fought. The one they would have eaten if her master hadn't shown mercy to it at the last minute. The last time she had spotted it, it was being chased around by members of Barrel. Apparently, it had managed to survive.

With its doe eyes, it looked upwards. The dragon in the sky let out a groan and the energy in its mouth dissipated.

"Raaawr!"

"Their cry. It doesn't change. Even after reaching adulthood," Tino mumbled.

Though she wasn't proud of it, this empty-headed remark was the only thing that came to mind. Through tension and nervousness, she had been sweating constantly and now her robe stuck to her body.

Everyone watched as the sky-blue dragon let out a weak roar. The dragon in the sky made a wide turn and headed back to the mountains. The round dragon looked at Krai, made a small noise, and walked off on its hind legs.

A silence fell over them all.

Tino couldn't move. Her body ached after her nerves had put her on high alert. She couldn't believe it. Not too long ago their situation had seemed

helpless. It had all developed too quickly and her mind was struggling to catch up. She tried taking a few deep breaths, but her pounding heart wouldn't calm down.

Lizzy hopped off the roof and ran to Krai. Tino and Siddy followed after.

"Well, that was a blast. You were incredible!" Liz said. She sounded deeply impressed, but Tino found it hard to be so casual.

Just the Troglodyte invasion or the dragon attack alone could have been enough to destroy the town. Yet her master had resolved both crises alone and done it in only ten minutes. Not to mention he did it without using a single sword or spell. He had manipulated two enemies of humanity and then drove them both off. It was as though he had pulled the strings of fate itself. Just what did he see through those beautiful black eyes?

But, Master, if you could, I wish you had caused a little less destruction in the process.

"Ah. Aaah. That really surprised me," Krai said with feigned ignorance.

"Wonderful work, Krai. It was just what our vacation needed," Siddy said, with a clap of her hands. It seemed her mood had made a full recovery. Tino had always thought the Smart sisters were incredible for being unshakable, but maybe that was simply necessary for the lives they led.

At last, her heart had calmed itself and she was able to take a moment to look around. The once elegant streets of Suls were now an absolute mess. It was bad enough that bandits had occupied parts of the town, but then Troglodytes had clamored about, and finally, a dragon showed up. A number of buildings had been destroyed and a number of holes dotted the stone-paved streets. It would take some time to rebuild.

It was then that something important occurred to Tino.

"Barrel! I forgot all about them. Master, what about Barrel?"

"Hm? Barrel? What's that?" Krai asked with a peculiar expression.

Tino didn't know what to say.

Barrel meant Barrel. The fearsome bandit squad that Lord Gladis had hired a

Level 8 hunter to deal with despite his fine knights and distaste for hunters. Perhaps they weren't as dangerous as Troglodytes and dragons, but they were fearsome in their own right.

She was also concerned about Arnold and the others. Arnold had been treated for the poison and he had a number of allies, including Drink and Killiam, but she still imagined protecting the hostages would have been difficult. And yet Krai seemed completely unconcerned.

And then it hit her.

"Have you perhaps already taken steps to deal with it?" she asked.

"Huh? Yeah, uh-huh."

Tino's master wasn't like Lizzy, he wouldn't give up on someone because they were weak. She had been through all sorts of ordeals because of his Thousand Trials, but she had no doubts about him on that front. Probably.

"What?! You've already made your move? But I wanted to wallop those scumbags myself!" Liz said, sounding genuinely resentful.

When had he made his move? And what sort of move was it? Tino couldn't even begin to imagine. She anxiously awaited her master's answer, but he simply yawned.

"I'm kinda tired," he said. "I didn't think it would be that hot underground."

Tino didn't have the faintest idea what he had been up to, but apparently his only thoughts on this tumult were regarding the temperature. Siddy, who had been lambasting Krai not too long ago, clapped her hands and grinned.

"Good work, Krai," she said. "Oh, I've got an idea! You can leave the rest to me, so why not bathe in a hot spring? I'm certain you'll be able to have a place all to yourself!"

Chapter Four: A Fun Vacation

"Just what were you thinking?"

Lucia used to always say that to me. She was competent and had a quick mind so I'm sure she struggled to understand the behavior of her older brother. Unlike the rest of Grieving Souls, she was family and I'm sure that made it hard for her to just sit by and watch me bumble around.

Even though that line would discourage most people, I didn't mind because I really wasn't thinking anything. To give a frank description of my involvement in this incident, I'd say: I got wrapped up in some weird stuff that I couldn't figure out and it all got resolved before I could figure anything out. I wasn't lying or worried that it would be hard to explain, I just simply didn't understand what had happened.

Maybe it was just inevitable for high-level hunters, but this was hardly the first time I got dragged into some sort of mess. I also had experience with conspiracies and being stranded in the wilderness. Of course, all I ever did was run around without a clue what was happening while my reliable comrades took care of things.

This was undeniably another one of those instances, but this time all I did was say ryu-ryu. Even I was exasperated by my incompetence this time around. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but, to my shame, that seemed to only make things worse.

We were walking through Suls. The town was quiet but the damage wasn't as extensive as I had imagined it would be. The townsfolk who milled about the streets just the other day were nowhere to be seen.

I had seen an enormous number of Cave People beneath Suls. I was certain they outnumbered the town's population. I had ryu-ryued my desire to go home, but they instead initiated a military expedition. They hadn't seemed too fond of humans and I wouldn't have been surprised if they had leveled the whole town, but the damage was actually pretty minor.

"There were so many of those guys, but there's like no damage. Isn't that weird?" Liz said, apparently thinking the same thing as me.

"That's because, in a civilization built underground, the destruction of buildings is taboo," Sitri explained. "Imagine, destroying a building could lead to the whole civilization being wiped out. Right, Krai?"

"Uh, yeah, uh-huh."

I get it now.

But I still didn't understand why there weren't any people. There weren't even corpses on the streets. I couldn't recall seeing the Troglodytes carrying off any human bodies.

"Before getting in the baths, I'd like to know how many people have been hurt," I said.

"The townsfolk were gathered in one spot and Arnold had led the rescue attempt. They should be fine, provided he made it in time."

"Hmm, I see."

I still had a number of questions, but it sounded like they were fine. If Sitri said so, then it must be true. I wanted to ask why the townsfolk had all been gathered in one spot and how they had all been evacuated in time when the Troglodytes had attacked so quickly. But I decided to let it go.

"Way to go, Arnold," I said. "I thought he was just some violent guy, but I guess it takes more than that to get to Level 7."

From the capital to the forest, he had been the instigator, but I guess I was in the wrong this time. I repented and offered a silent apology for all the trouble I had caused him. But then I felt Liz tapping my shoulder.

"Y'know, Krai Baby, I didn't attack when I learned there were hostages! Isn't that great? Tell me I'm great!" she boasted.

"I saved Arnold when he was on the brink of death from a poison developed by Akashic Tower!" Sitri chimed in. "Another hour and he certainly would have perished. He owes me his life!"

"I-I, um, I undid everybody's handcuffs," Tino added.

"Oh. Yeah. You're all great."

Holy crap, Troglodytes are something else. They look like monsters, but they took hostages, used poison from Akashic Tower, and handcuffed the hostages? Didn't expect that.

It was then that we came upon a man collapsed on the road.

Uh-oh. First casualty.

We sprinted up to him. He was in a kimono and of average height and build. His legs were bent in ways they shouldn't and his body was covered in bruises. But as luck would have it, he was still alive.

We got closer, but then the man looked at us vaguely and his body twitched. He groaned and his hand went for a black short blade that was nearby. He must have been confused.

"Are you all right?! Sitri, get a potion!" I cried.

He was going to be fine, Sitri's potions were very effective. As long as he stayed conscious, he probably wouldn't die. But for some reason, Liz knitted her brow.

"That's an enemy!" she said.

"Huh?"

Flabbergasted, I took another look at the man. He was in a kimono. Average height and build. He didn't have the rough face of a hunter. As far as I could tell he looked like a local. Sitri seemed confused as well. Liz might have been a questionable human being, but she was a first-rate Thief. What could this mean?

"Um. So what you're saying is, he looks human, but he's actually a Troglodyte."

I couldn't quite believe that, but I trusted Liz's judgment more than my own. We were dealing with largely unknown underground life-forms. It wasn't that hard to believe that they had advanced camouflage powers. Right?

"Ah, now that you mention it, his hair looks sort of like those tentacles upon closer examination?" I said, pretending like this all made sense as I pointed a

timid finger at the man. "And he does indeed look like he might live underground? Honestly, if they're gonna head back, they should've done a proper job and taken every one of them."

Confusion ensued.

"Ah, sorry, I didn't realize you meant it like that," I continued. "Yeah, so then, maybe he's not an enemy?"

More confusion. I was doing serious mental gymnastics, only to suddenly have the mat pulled away.

Sitri crouched next to me and looked at the man.

"Well, a normal human isn't much compared to a horde of Troglodytes or a dragon. By the way, Krai, would you rather I heal or torture him?" she asked.

What sort of choice was that? Did she mean it like, torture that felt like treatment or treatment that felt like torture? Was this alchemic humor?

"Either one," I answered. "For now, take care of his injuries. I want to hurry up and make sure everyone's all right so I can relax in a hot spring."

From a quick glance around, it seemed like the damage was surprisingly light. I didn't know whether we were lucky or unlucky.

Liz, Sitri, and Tino followed me around town with looks of dissatisfaction. I was worn out physically and mentally, but I didn't want to leave matters to Liz, and neglecting to do this would make me a bad person.

The damage to the town was sparse, but it was there. They weren't critically injured, but we did find wounded people lying on the ground. We still hadn't found any corpses, which was a blessing. However, some people were knocked out and in need of immediate care.

This would have been a perfect time to have Ansem around, but Sitri wasn't a bad substitute. She pulled out her water gun, the Relic I'd given to her so long ago, and applied potions to each and every injured person.

"It's a potion that can even resurrect the dead," she explained. "It's still in development, however."

"Why do you carry an incomplete potion on you?" Tino asked fearfully.

Walking around with incomplete potions was an old habit of Sitri's. Healing magic was difficult and a field in of itself, separate from standard magic. Ansem developed skills lauded throughout the imperial capital, but even he couldn't heal much when we were first starting out.

That was why Sitri began to assist with healing through homemade potions. However, the publicly available recipes didn't make medicine that could keep up with the pace at which Grieving Souls went on adventures—and got injured.

But the powerful medicines sold in stores were all expensive. We couldn't get by if we constantly used those so Sitri at some point started using her cheaper test-potions during battles. That continued until Ansem was capable of fully regenerating body parts. I had heard that recently she had very few opportunities to use her potions, but she still kept up that useful habit of hers.

"I would have brought a wider range of potions if I had known I was going to find such wonderful test fodder," she jovially whispered. I pretended not to hear anything. Sitri just took things too seriously. Deep down, she was a good girl. Her mad scientist tendencies were part of her charm.

"How are these guys not completely dead? How did you do it, Krai Baby?" Liz said, managing to look both impressed and disinterested.

For starters, could you stop pinning everything on me?

"Sure, there's more glory in capturing 'em alive, but I think it's fine if one or two die."

Glory among who? Barbarians?

Sitri finished with her potions and stood up.

"You may not know this, Lizzy, but what Krai did was only natural, considering the disposition of Troglodytes. Among their kind, might is everything and they like to go for the strongest foes first!"

Sitri spoke with passion. Did she have a particular fascination with Troglodytes?

"And this time, they were working under their king's orders, which means

these results were no coincidence!" she said gleefully. "Do you follow, T?"

"I-I think so?" Tino spluttered.

I see. I don't get it either.

"Even an idiot can use their strength to cut down foes!" Sitri continued. "But to concoct a plan, anticipate the motives of another culture, and manipulate them, do you have any idea how incredible that is? Anything but perfect timing could result in a catastrophe! Right, Krai?"

"Ryuu-ryuu," I answered.

So where did that leave me if I was an idiot and also incapable of cutting down my enemies?

Liz folded her arms. "But that doesn't explain why they were left alive?" she said, her sympathy likely sprouting from her own bloodthirst. And didn't they find it strange that the Troglodytes considered normal townsfolk to be strong?

Sitri did her usual clap of the hands and smiled like she was waiting for Liz's question.

"Lizzy, weren't you looking? They were all unconscious or had broken legs or were immobilized in some other manner. By taking prisoners, they could demoralize their foes and ambush anyone who attempted a rescue. Two birds with one stone. After all, Troglodytes have intellects almost identical to those of humans."

Holy shit.

And I was being worshiped by those guys? By those bloodthirsty maniacs?

"They aren't afraid to die in combat," Sitri continued. "If Krai hadn't chased them off with a dragon, they wouldn't have stopped until they were all dead. They could have even harmed other towns in the vicinity. Right, Krai?"

"W-Well, I guess that was a possibility."

I didn't like this. I didn't like the nature of the Troglodytes. I didn't like the assumption that I summoned the dragon. But what I disliked most of all was the fact that Sitri generally didn't tell lies. Tino gave me a look she usually reserved for Liz.

Don't worry. Don't worry.

Putting aside the course we took to get here, the result was that the Troglodytes were gone. All we had left was to do something about that hole, like filling it in or something. Anything after that should be handled by the empire.

Guided by Liz, we came to the town square in the center of Suls. It was a wide-open space surrounded by canals carrying spring water. When we first visited during our sightseeing outing, the square was empty, but now it was jostling with locals. Despite the modest size of Suls, seeing so many gathered in one place made for an impressive sight.

Had the townsfolk really all assembled? They must have been really on top of things if they had managed to respond so well to the sudden appearance of the Troglodytes. But it seemed like they were still shaken from the whole thing because they were grouped together defensively.

Then I noticed a familiar hunter standing outside the group.

"Oh, it's Rhuda. Good, I'm glad to see you're all right," I said to her.

"Krai?!" she yelped when she noticed me.

Hearing her voice, Li'l Gilbert and his party members came over. It seemed they had all made it out alive.

"You do this, Thousand Tricks?! What was that dragon?" Gilbert asked. He was propping himself up on a sword coated in green blood.

"If I had to say one way or another...well, it's fine. The Troglodytes have gone back underground," I answered.

"Huh?!"

Yeah, that's a fair reaction. It's how I would've reacted if I could.

Then Arnold began to head our way. His complexion was bad, but his eyes glowed with unwavering power. He gave some brief orders to his party members and then looked at me.

"Did you stop the cause?" he asked me.

The cause is right in front of you.

"Did you have any deaths over here?" Sitri jutted in.

"None. They managed to hold out with their golems until we arrived. I hear you lent those out, Ignoble."

"I did. It pleases me to hear they were useful. They wouldn't have been captured at all if they had used them from the start, but I suppose there's no use grumbling about it."

No one had died. I let out a sigh of relief. The Troglodyte attack was a major blow to the town and its effects would certainly be felt for a while, but at least no one had been killed. The dead were the one thing that couldn't be brought back.

Ansem's magic could heal wounds of any sort, but even he couldn't bring someone back from the dead. Potions and medical technology were no better in this regard. If there was anything in our world that could resurrect someone, it would be a Relic, but even on that front, I had heard nothing more than dubious rumors.

The lack of deaths was my only hope. I got a headache just thinking about what lay in my future. All I could say for myself was that I had said ryu-ryu and then the Troglodytes suddenly started their attack.

Now that we had ensured everyone was all right, a wave of exhaustion washed over me.

"Is this all according to plan?" Sitri whispered in my ear.

What about this looked planned?

"Well, I'm just glad everybody's fine. The danger's passed, let's disperse for now," I said.

I looked around and saw the unsettled townsfolk, Li'l Gilbert and his companions, Falling Fog, who were still on alert, and, finally, my own companions. All that was left to do was take a dip in the baths (provided I even had enough energy to do so) and then get some rest. That seemed like enough time to come up with a good excuse for everything that had happened.

But just as I was ready to throw in the towel, Arnold had a question for me.

"Just one minute. What happened to Barrel?"

Barrel? What's he talking about?

I remembered Tino mentioning something about that earlier, but I hadn't had the mental space for it so I had just let it slide.

"Barrel?" Liz jeered. A vicious smile was on her face. "You think just some normal people are enough for him? He dealt with those guys long ago. The Thousand Tricks isn't like you rustics, right, Krai Baby?"

Liz, you're not helping me at all here.

Even with my empty head, I could still remember Chloe mentioning that name earlier. I was pretty certain it was the name of the group Lord Gladis wanted me to take out. I had heard they were a powerful bandit squad, but I didn't see what they had to do with our current situation.

I'm not planning on accepting the named quest and if I recall correctly then according to Sitri—

"Aren't they merely a band of cowards? Didn't they already turn tail and run off?"

Couldn't she have found a nicer way to put it? Even if she was right.

Arnold was at a loss for words. Gilbert and his companions made strained expressions. Had she said something strange?

"Sorry, sorry, I guess that was a strange thing to say," I said. "It's just, y'know, I was preoccupied by the Troglodytes. I didn't really have the time to worry about a bunch of bandits."

Besides, we had already exterminated tons of bandits (and by "we," I meant the rest of Grieving Souls did). A bunch of just-above-average guys probably weren't enough for Liz and the others. It sounded like Gladis hadn't been able to exterminate them simply because they ran away.

"How big was their group? One hundred? Two? I guess it's a trivial difference."

Just how many Troglodytes were there? Let me just say, it's not that I didn't want to work. It's not that I didn't want to work.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying Barrel isn't scary. I, too, would have my hands full if attacked by them. But I don't see any reason to chase after a fleeing opponent. That'd be like, I dunno, bullying the weak."

If anything, I was the one being bullied! How's that for hard-boiled?

I felt a plethora of eyes on me.

"Are you saying you know how powerful Barrel is?" Arnold asked in a tense voice.

"I don't. I'm not interested and I don't see any need to know. I became a hunter so I could explore treasure vaults, not take down bandits."

Not that I ever got to do much vault clearing...

I wasn't going to ask for their understanding. I just wanted to make it clear that I didn't plan on doing anything more, no matter what anyone said.

"If you're dead set on fighting them, then I'm not gonna stop you. I'll even hand over the named quest, but you probably need to hurry."

I didn't have a clue where these bandits might be. Troglodytes and that dragon had already created a mess. Even with my luck, it was safe to say bandits wouldn't be appearing on top of everything else.

A number of eyes were all staring at me. But I had said my piece, so I turned to Sitri.

"That's all I have to say," I told her. "I hate to do this, but can I leave the rest to you?"

"Of course! I still have business to discuss here anyway," she replied.

That was some impressive dedication to commerce. I wished her the best.

All right, it's done! I don't care what anyone says, we're done here! Finished! Time to bathe and then get some sleep.

I let out a big yawn and only managed to take a single step forward before someone called out to me.

"Hold it, Thousand Tricks!"

"Mmm?"

I turned around and was startled by what I saw.

"Hold still. Move even a finger and we'll kill these guys."

Some of the townsfolk were pressing black short blades against the throats of some of the other townsfolk. Five men and women of varying ages all had blades pointed at their necks. It was so strange it hardly felt real.

Huh? What are these bunch up to?

I couldn't follow it at all. The ones holding the black short blades were unambiguously normal townsfolk. The hostages themselves looked briefly shocked before the blood drained from their faces. I decided it was safe to assume this wasn't some practical joke.

"You let your guard down. At this distance, we've got the advantage," said a plain-faced man gripping a shortblade.

Arnold glared at the man like a demon straight out of hell. "You hid among them?!"

I didn't have a single clue what was going on. But at least it seemed like I wasn't alone in that. Had some of the townsfolk been driven insane by the Troglodytes and turned against their own neighbors?

I glanced at Liz, but it seemed she couldn't find an opening. Even being fast as lightning wasn't enough to resolve this situation. Not to mention there were five hostages.

"W-Wait a minute. Calm down," I said. "Those blades aren't something you should use without proper training!"

The man's face contorted with anger, as did the other hostage takers. "Don't mock us!"

I'm not mocking you. It's just, did I do something to cause a hostage situation?

"What are you trying to do?" I asked.

"Sh-Shut up!"

Hostage situations were always stressful, but this time I was just too baffled for words. I desperately wracked my brains and soon enough came to a conclusion.

Could they be...Troglodytes in disguise?

I took a tepid step forward and tried to placate them with another tongue.

"Ryuu-ryuu?"

There was a change on the faces of the hostage takers—their anger dissipated in an instant. No, that wasn't right. Overwhelmed with emotion, their expressions turned flat. This was proof of their resolve. These were the expressions of soldiers ready to die.

"Glory to Barrel!" they cried in unison.

Those were unexpected words. The blades in their hands began to waver. There wasn't time to do or even say anything. Liz, Tino, and Arnold all began to move, but they clearly weren't going to make it in time.

But just as the hostages were about to have their throats slit, the blades fell to the ground.

I swear on my honor, I didn't look away for even an instant. It had happened abruptly. The five blade-wielders disappeared without a trace just before they could shed any blood.

The freed hostages stumbled and sank to the ground. I felt like I was dreaming, but Arnold was also looking around frantically, Liz's eyes were opened wide, and Tino...

"Hm? Where's Tino?" I said.

"Eigh and the others are also gone. What's going on?!" Arnold yelled.

It wasn't just the five assailants who had disappeared. Liz, Sitri, Arnold, and Killiam were still with us, but Tino, who had been there just a moment ago, was gone and so were Falling Fog, Rhuda, Li'l Gilbert, and the rest of his party. Yet the hostages and I were fine. It made no sense.

What in the world just happened?

I watched Sitri crouch down and pick up something at her feet. She let out a small sigh and placed it in the palm of her hand.	



"Krai, we have a problem," she lamented. "Lucy's irate. Look what happened to T..."

"Wha?!"

"Aah, so this was how you planned to take care of Barrel. I thought it was unlike you to just heal the wounded members of Barrel and let 'em go," Liz said. She sounded astonished and that wasn't like her.

In the palm of Sitri's hand was an endearing little black frog that was frantically looking this way and that.

Everything had gone according to plan. From their infiltration of the town to their handling of the threat posed by the high-level hunters, they had pulled off a perfect invasion. If Geffroy and his cohorts had made one mistake it was who they chose to take on.

They shouldn't have challenged a Level 8 hunter. Even if they had spotted a choice opportunity, they should have kept their distance. They should have run. But now it was too late for regrets.

"I've never heard of someone manipulating creatures like that," Geffroy said through ragged breaths as he carefully checked his surroundings.

They had done a good job regrouping. A number of their wounded ended up being left behind, but it was a foe of seemingly endless numbers that they had been up against. Their losses would have been greater had Barrel not boasted such excellent coordination.

The gray fiends from earlier had all disappeared. The moment the dragon appeared in the sky, they beat a quick escape. They hadn't even left the corpses of their fallen comrades. Geffroy found that incredibly unsettling.

The bandits put on brave faces, but their will to fight had been shattered. For only a moment, they had been able to spot that man atop that roof, giving orders in some bizarre tongue. That had instilled more fear than the immediate threat before their eyes. Even Kardon's calm and collected demeanor had been broken.

"I haven't either, but it's the reality before us."

"Why did he command those fiends? What was he trying to do?"

Geffroy's question went unanswered.

Those gray fiends had undoubtedly been the work of the Thousand Tricks. If they had simply attacked, then it was possible to chalk their appearance up to a coincidence. But they had also retreated. A coincidence was too far-fetched.

They had already gathered up most of the bandits left in charge of the hostages. Just in case, a few of their members were hidden among the hostages, but they weren't enough to accomplish much.

To manipulate those fiends was a terrifying power. But the most horrifying part of it all was that Geffroy and Kardon hadn't realized they were being manipulated until they began to retreat. If the bandit leaders had realized that earlier, could they have ordered those five bandits to stay with the hostages? Probably not.

Those fiends had a clear animosity for humanity. A hatred that let Geffroy be certain that his options were kill or be killed. To show your back to creatures with bearing hatred required either nerves of steel or exceptional stupidity.

They had gathered the majority of their scattered members, meaning Bandit Squad Barrel was still at roughly eighty percent capacity. That was plenty. Those uncanny fiends were nowhere to be seen.

But Geffroy stayed the course.

"We're leaving," he said.

"Are you certain? These losses won't be recouped easily."

"Let's hurry. He wouldn't have expelled those fiends without good reason."

They hadn't finished their plundering, they had lost personnel, and they had expended valuable Relics. They were in a bad spot. If word of this got around then the name Bandit Squad Barrel would lose the respect it once had in the underworld.

But they had gotten as big as they were by knowing when to retreat. Kardon's question had been a rhetorical one. After leading Barrel for so long, he and

Geffroy could all but read each other's minds. They were always on the same page.

"You can come back from any defeat, but that's only if you're still breathing," Geffroy said.

Kardon began issuing orders.

"You heard the man! Get ready to retreat! We don't have time to make our way to the exit, we're going over the walls!"

Not breaking formation and staying wary of their surroundings, the bandits began to move swiftly, just as their training had taught them to. Barrel's invasion had happened quietly and their withdrawal would create even less noise.

Suddenly a bandit called out.

"Boss, there's one of our own!"

Geffroy looked in the direction his subordinate was pointing. Naturally, he knew the face of every individual under his command. Squinting, he confirmed that the approaching man was indeed a member of Barrel. His limbs had been broken and Geffroy had been forced to abandon him for the sake of the squad as a whole. Geffroy could tell the man was no imposter.

"What happened to your wounds?" he asked.

"One of the comrades of the Thousand Tricks healed them with a potion. He said we weren't his enemies."

Geffroy gave no response. He didn't understand, but the man himself seemed even more confused. This was too absurd to write off as the product of a victor's complacency. Bandit Squad Barrel weren't so soft as to be swayed because someone healed their allies and that's to say nothing of the bounty on their head. What could drive the Thousand Tricks to risk letting them go?

"To leave witnesses?" Kardon said.

"Absurd."

Kardon probably wasn't serious about his suggestion. It was too unlikely, too pointless. But this wasn't the time to sit around thinking about it. Having a

comrade come back was good, no matter the reason. If the Thousand Tricks was trying to insult Barrel, they would just have to make sure he would regret that choice one day.

While Geffroy had been contemplating the situation, more comrades returned. They had all been wounded gravely enough that it should have taken more than minor treatment to get them back on their feet. Yet they must have received powerful potions or something to that effect because they were all walking just fine.

It was an unexpected turn of events. Was accepting it the best response? They had routed famous hunters, veteran knights, and many other powerful adversaries. To be granted mercy was nothing short of humiliating. But Geffroy and Kardon weren't fools; they wouldn't let their emotions get the better of them. Though they hadn't tasted humiliation in some time, they were used to being shoved to the dirt.

To aid the other bandits, the shinobi quickly drove stakes into the wall. They were on alert, but there were no signs of attackers. Geffroy gave one last glare towards where he had seen the king of the fiends. He hefted his bloodstained battle-axe and whispered a silent declaration of war.

"Just wait, this isn't over. We'll get stronger and then we'll come for you with every means we can. I swear on the name Barrel."

Let's retreat.

He gave his orders and then turned around—but then froze. His subordinates, the elites he had spent so long training, the ones preparing for their escape, they had all vanished. Not even a single weapon or garment remained.

"Impossible," Kardon said in a hoarse voice. He and Geffroy were the only ones left. The color had drained from his face, something that had never happened during the number of gauntlets he had overcome.

"Kardon, what happened?"

Geffroy had been looking the other way, but Kardon should have been facing their comrades. But Kardon, who always offered a quick response, said nothing.

Geffroy tried again, in a more forceful tone.

"Answer me! Where'd they go?!"

At last, Kardon opened his mouth, but his response was fragmented.

"Frogs. They turned. Into frogs. What. What is this?"

Frogs? Frogs?

Geffroy finally noticed the dozens of little frogs on the ground. He felt a chill run down his back. His hair stood on end. The frogs didn't croak, they just looked up at Geffroy. There was something oddly human about it.

Suddenly, he felt someone watching him. His instincts turned him towards the source of the staring and he felt his heart skip a beat. He dropped his axe, the heavy blade making a loud noise as it carved a small wound in the ground. But he was too preoccupied to pick it back up.

That stone wall jutted over three meters into the air. From far above it, a gray helmet silently looked down on Geffroy.

Magic was admired by those who couldn't use it. Before becoming disheartened by my complete lack of talent, I, too, once aspired to be a Magus. After the local Magus in our hometown told me I wasn't suited for the craft, I began to follow Lucia around. She both had the aptitude and was willing to make the effort to become a spellcaster.

Back then, before I knew anything about it, I thought of spells as miracles that could make any reality possible. I would later learn that was preposterous, but at the time I was just a kid. I made a list of ultimate spells and, much to her inconvenience, gleefully shoved it onto my younger sister. I made a magic staff, gave it to her as a present, then sulked when she didn't use it. I just did whatever I wanted.

Lucia was diligent and never neglected her studies, so even though she wasn't thrilled about it, she did her damnedest to patch together existing spells and recreate the spells from "My Ultimate Spellbook." I would clap with joy and tell her how amazing she was, then get punched when I pointed out her minor errors. Looking back, I felt really bad about what I'd done.

I don't think our childish games were directly related, but Lucia went on to become a powerful and knowledgeable Magus. She mastered a number of original spells and became one of the foremost Magi in Zebrudia.

Meanwhile, I gave up on magic and became absorbed in what I could use—Relics.

Sitri gingerly lifted Tino up and placed her in an empty potion vial. From inside the transparent chamber, the black frog looked at me with teary eyes.

"Now she should be fine," Sitri said.

I'm not sure anything about this can be considered fine.

I lifted the vial up and wrinkled my brow as I looked at one very small and unsettled Tino.

"So she completed it? Witch's Miracle, Frog Variant."

A long time ago, I saw a spell in a fairy tale and yearned to see it in real life, but Lucia said it was impossible. Yet as far as I could tell, this was said spell. It was from volume three or four of the spellbook I had written up. It had earned me all sorts of objections like "That sort of spell doesn't exist," "Be logical. What about the change in mass?" and "Even if I can make the transformation, what about changing people back?"

To actually see the spell after so many years...well, I wasn't sure how to react.

"Do you think the change can be undone?" I asked.

"RIBBIT?!"

"This is fine for the time being, isn't it?" Sitri responded. "I think she's quite adorable in this state."

Sitri was saying some alarming things. Frogs were a common ingredient used by Alchemists. Frog Tino was desperately beating against the glass.

"Ribbit?! Ribbit, ribbit!"

"G-Give me a break! What happened?!" Arnold yelled.

"Be careful, if they get mixed up, we won't be able to tell who's a friend and who's a foe," I advised him.

"Are you joking?!"

In spite of my warning, Arnold stomped the ground. Near his feet were the frogs that had once been Rhuda, Li'l Gilbert, and some of the townsfolk.

Hell, I already can't tell who's who.

I took another look at the tree frog that was the same color as Tino's hair.

"Mmm. Do you think a high elixir could turn her back into a human?"

I didn't even know why Lucia was irate and why that resulted in Tino becoming a frog. Lucia and Tino got along really well, almost like they were sisters. She wasn't as bullish as the Smart sisters were, which made it easy for her to get along with Tino.

Liz offered an answer.

"They probably returned to the capital and heard about our vacation. Anyone would be pissed if they suddenly found themselves involved in this mess."

It made sense that she and the other grievers would try and catch up if they heard we left on a trip. And then who could blame them if their mood soured when they saw something bad was happening in Suls?

"They're too late. If only they had arrived a bit earlier," I grumbled.

"Now I can brag to Luke about the cool stuff I saw," Liz said. As usual, she had her unique priorities.

Lucia was powerful. She was Level 6 Magus and close to Level 7, placing her just below Ansem. She excelled at targeting multiple foes at once (but that was almost a given for Magi) and had the highest kill count of anyone in our party.

It didn't really matter since the problem was resolved anyway, but if she had been with us then we might have been able to fight the Troglodyte army. She could have done something about the dragon. But again, it didn't really matter, did it?!

Sitri then clapped her hands and smiled.

"Oh, I've got it! Let's go give Lucy a warm welcome. That might cheer her up!" Frog Tino slapped the glass, imploring me to let her out.

On the verge of collapse after having pushed her body to its limits, Chloe found help. The man who had once decimated her confidence during a mock battle looked serious, his crimson eyes narrowed.

"Understood," he said. "Now, about that bandit squad. Do they have any powerful Swordsmen in their ranks?"

Grieving Souls. Once, there was a group of individuals who became hunters and gave their party a name you'd expect to hear attached to a gang of criminals.

Every year in the Zebrudian imperial capital, countless young aspiring hunters would undergo registration. There was no shortage of parties consisting of six young adults fresh from the countryside and such an irritating name should have brought a quick end to their careers.

However, that party overcame each hardship they were faced with. They did it through talent and hard work. Courage and luck. Rare knowledge and iron determination strong enough to instill fear even in other hunters.

Could it really be a coincidence that while en route to the nearest town, Chloe had run into a carriage containing three of their members?

Grieving Souls consisted solely of moniker-bearers and were one of the top parties in the imperial capital. They were too young to be considered seasoned, but their eyes still bore the same shine that all champions had.

Chloe had been an employee of the Explorers' Association for some time, but members of Grieving Souls rarely stopped by, so she wasn't well acquainted with any of them. Strangely enough, she didn't feel particularly nervous in their carriage.

When Luke asked about the Swordsmen, the Magus with the long black hair broke her silence with a sigh. Only nineteen years old, she had mastered a wide variety of magic and was one of the top Magi in the capital. Her name was Lucia Rogier, she was Level 6, bore the moniker Avatar of Creation, and had her arms wrapped around a staff.

"That's not the issue!" she scolded. "Our plans to visit a hot spring have led us straight to a bunch of bandits! And we just got out of a treasure vault!"

"They're just bandits?"

"And why do we have to clean up our leader's messes, when he just sat around while we went on that long expedition?!"

The two looked quite their age during this exchange, not at all like top hunters.

"No, this always happens!" Lucia continued. "Besides, if my brother's involved, then there's no way these are just some ordinary bandits."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

"Don't mimic him! Don't sound so pleased!"

"Right, mm-hmm?"

"Don't make your own arrangement! Ansem, please say something to him!"

There was a rumbling as Ansem gave a brief response from outside the driverless carriage.

It appeared the rumors were true. Grieving Souls were all childhood friends, as was made clear by the way they talked with a lack of reservation as only close acquaintances could. But they sounded just a bit too casual. Would they really be able to save Suls?

Chloe could once again see the town she had been desperate to escape. Just outside the new wall were a number of opened carriages.

"There's so many," Lucia mumbled.

They were probably left there as a means of a quick escape, just in case. They didn't seem like they would be enough for all the bandits Chloe had seen in the town, but this was still a step most bandit squads didn't even bother with. She hadn't spotted any locals while making her escape, and, considering how well trained the bandits were, they had most likely been taken hostage. She was thankful she hadn't smelled any blood, but a hostage situation was still a nightmare.

Suls wasn't a terribly large town, but it was spread out over a somewhat wide area and Chloe had no idea where the hostages might be. Even the proud knights of the imperial capital would consider this a tricky situation. Being an employee of the Explorers' Association, she had learned methods of dealing with bandits, but those rudimentary lessons wouldn't be enough for Bandit Squad Barrel.

Even though it was with a surprise attack, Barrel had managed to get the jump on the Crashing Lightning. The bandits had overwhelming numbers. Chloe had little in the way of intel and only three allies.

What could they possibly do in the face of such immense odds?

"How should we proceed?" she asked hesitantly.

Luke and Lucia exchanged looks.

Ansem, the Immutable, raised a fist.



The world groaned, the earth and air trembled. With one hit, the dense wall had been blown apart. There hadn't been a moment of doubt. What a straightforward plan it was.

"We'll proceed as usual. Lucia will go wild with spells, and Ansem will go wild breaking stuff. I'll focus on persuasion," Luke said.

Chloe was fairly certain she told them what they were up against, yet they had just charged in. But it was too late for her to stop them.

Their approach was quite unlike that of any other hunters Chloe knew or the measured steps taken by the bandits. Barrel numbered in the hundreds and they most likely had hostages. What could just three people do? Shouldn't they have gone to another town for help? However, Chloe immediately found her apprehensions dispelled.

Luke Sykol. The Protean Sword and one of the top Swordsmen in the imperial capital.

Lucia Rogier. The Avatar of Creation and master of magics from all regions and eras.

And then there was that Paladin whose fame might even compare to that of Rodin. He towered over even branch manager Gark, a man once fearfully referred to as the War Demon. With every inch of his skin concealed by armor, he barely looked human.

The armored giant didn't say a word as he punched through the wall. He stepped into the cramped town and scanned his surroundings. What overwhelming might. The Immutable was known for his kindness, but looked more monstrous than any actual monster.

The Protean Sword's red coat flapped as he followed Ansem through the hole.

"Hooow many times do I have to tell you, Krai? A man with an axe is not a Swordsman!" Luke said with a click of his tongue.

In front of the broken wall was a burly man gripping an axe that had dug into the ground.

"Who are you?!" he yelled.

Chloe recognized this man. He was on the quest brief that had been issued by Lord Gladis. The bandit leader who had managed to survive for so long in spite of being wanted in so many countries. Geffroy Barrel.

This was no body double. It was the man himself. Even from afar, he had the same powerful bearing of a veteran hunter. It seemed fair to assume the rumors were true when they said he was a force on par with high-level hunters.

But even his imposing figure was diminished by the fiery energy given off by Luke. The Protean Sword's lips twisted into a grin when he heard the man's question.

"To think you don't know my name. Tell me, old man, you aren't some sort of fraud, are you?"

His voice was a bit high-pitched for a man.

After him, Ansem stepped forward, and then came Lucia, who had cast a wide-area spell before entering the town. At some point, they had put on masks resembling grinning skulls—the symbol of Grieving Souls. Luke pulled out a similar mask of his own and put it on.

Behind the bandit leader was a man with an unshakable gaze.

"Grieving Souls," he murmured as his cheek twitched.

"Oh, so you do know who we are? Introductions aren't one of my strong suits."

"Im...possible."

Beads of cold sweat broke out on Kardon's face. The smiling skull, that mask that sent fear into criminals across the empire, was staring down at him and Geffroy.

There was a gargantuan figure clad in armor, the short red-haired Swordsman, and the black-haired Magus with the large staff. Geffroy and Kardon had heard rumors about the smiling skull masks, but there was something almost surreal about seeing them in person.

But one thing was clear—they were strong, on a whole other level than the

two that Barrel had found in the mountains. It wasn't just the giant, the other two also had an aura that marked them as being among the most powerful hunters Barrel had ever come across.

"The two from earlier. Were they a trap?"

Geffroy was from outside the empire. He had looked into Grieving Souls, a party mostly active in Zebrudia, but there was still a lot he didn't know. However, he did at least glean some knowledge of their structure and membership. They were a party of seven. If the three before him were this powerful, it was inconceivable that two of their comrades, who presumably cleared treasure vaults with them, could be so weak.

The man before them was a Swordsman, which meant he was most likely the Protean Sword.

"What's going on? So those two really were... Goddamnit."

Geffroy had thought those two were weak. He knew that people sometimes hid behind the names of famous hunters. But the circumstances had lined up so perfectly. The fear and panic on their faces had been genuine. Not to mention this was the sort of ruse you would usually only expect from a ghost party.

Geffroy set the matter to the side. Three people would never be enough for the nearly three hundred members of Barrel. But now it was just Geffroy and Kardon. Picking his axe back up, Geffroy felt himself eager for his first real fight in some time. Then he noticed the red-haired hunter staring at him.

"Wait, Lucia. There's still two left," he said, mystified.

"There's *only* two left! You might not know this, Luke, but casting spells over wide areas is incredibly taxing."

Observe. Evaluate the situation. Listen. Strength and a cool head had allowed Geffroy to survive everything life had thrown at him. He could still win this. That Magus had said "wide area." Just how wide was she talking about? This wasn't a spell he had ever seen before. Could she have meant the whole town? Impossible.

No, he told himself. That's not what's important right now.

She was a Magus and she was fatigued. She had used a spell to instantaneously incapacitate hundreds of men, but she wouldn't be able to do it a second time. If the Magus was out of the equation, Geffroy had a shot at survival. Bandit Squad Barrel wasn't on the side of justice. Cowards had their own way of doing things.

"Was it you who turned our subordinates into these, shall we say, charming little fellows?" Kardon asked with astonishment. He was holding a shortblade in his hand. "I was truly surprised. I've never seen such a spell. But, I'm afraid it came too late."

His icy voice was placid and lower than usual. Geffroy figured his partner had reached the same conclusion as he had. He stifled his worries and was now searching for a thread of hope. The three hunters watched Kardon's impressive performance. A cruel smile formed on his lips.

"This town has already fallen under our control. If you capture us, we'll take everyone down with us. Your friends, the townsfolk, and the town itself will all be targeted by Barrel."

That's right. They were going to bluff. These three had just arrived, they shouldn't have any idea what state Suls was in. They could be swayed. No matter how strong they might be, a human was still a human; a battle-axe to the skull would still kill them.

"What are you talking about?" asked the red-haired Swordsman.

His name was Luke Sykol and his skills with a blade ranked among the best in the empire. He studied the blade voraciously, absorbing techniques new and old, from all over. His title, the Protean Sword, was one that had been held by a number of renowned Swordsmen.

In spite of the circumstances, he was at ease. He didn't seem affected by Kardon's threats. But he wasn't on guard. He hadn't even drawn his blade, it was still at his side. Seemingly unconcerned by the possibility of a surprise attack, Luke calmly stepped forward and stopped inches away from Kardon.

An opportunity was presenting itself! Geffroy was confident. He might not have had the same skills with a blade, but this wasn't a duel. When it came to simply swinging, he was faster. He suppressed his violent impulses and watched

the hunter closely. He was going to step forward and then cut down this runt.

Just as he was about to make his move, Luke slowly removed his mask and held up his hands.

"My bad. I was supposed to talk things through with you," he said.

"What?"

Geffroy didn't even breathe. Kardon's eyes were wide with shock. The Magus pressed her hands to her temples. The giant stood perfectly still.

"Calm down and hear me out," the Protean Sword said, sounding completely serious. "Krai's always telling me about how important communication is. Stuff like 'Talk to people before you go cutting them down.' It's a royal pain, but apparently, that's the cool thing to do and I'm aiming to be both cool and the greatest Swordsman alive."

"What are you talking about?"

Geffroy didn't understand. If nothing else, this wasn't the sort of thing you normally heard before a battle. Was he trying to trick them into relaxing?

The Protean Sword was open, his guard was down. There was no need to listen to him. Geffroy would move his hands and end his life.

But no matter how much he tried, Geffroy couldn't move his hands. His eyes bulged and he began to sweat.

Are my nerves getting the better of me?

Then the Protean Sword said something quite unexpected.

"And you see, I planned to talk things over with you before cutting you down. But, uh, I just couldn't help myself."

"Huh?!"

A very long second passed. Something hit the ground with a thump. Geffroy's right side felt lighter and an intense pain erupted in his shoulder. But he didn't have the luxury of turning his head.

He wasn't afraid of the pain, he just hadn't noticed. He never saw himself get cut, he never even saw that man draw his blade. The blood drained from

Kardon's face; he likely hadn't seen it either.

"But, I guess it's all the same in the end," Luke said. "I'll be more mindful next time and that's what's important, right?"

"You idiot, we've got hostages—"

"You guys could also be a bit more mindful in the future, if there is one. But you guys just won't do."

Then, very casually, the Protean Sword drew his blade. This time, Geffroy clearly saw the blade flash. But evading it was another matter. They should have been able to see the attack. Kardon fell to the ground just as Geffroy's arm had.

"It's not a matter of likes or dislikes, but, whenever possible, I'd rather fight a Swordsman. Axe-wielders and guys with short blades don't count, but Krai just doesn't learn. Ah, I'm not trying to slander you or anything, but I just had way too much fun with that six-arm Swordsman back in Night Palace."

Geffroy didn't understand a single thing this man was saying. It seemed Luke was talking to them, but it didn't make any sense.

"Luke, the hostages!" Lucia scolded.

"Yeah, I know. That's why I held back. I didn't cut him down, see?"

Geffroy's knees gave out. His mind went blank when he saw the blade used by Luke.

"No, I'm telling you not to attack at all! For goodness' sake!"

The Magus sounded frantic. The frogs croaked in a loud chorus. The last thing Geffroy saw was Luke's unadorned wooden sword.

We strolled through the empty town. Actually, only Liz, Sitri, and I were strolling. Arnold was pale as a ghost. I was relying on Liz to make a proper check, but I didn't see any other frogs in the vicinity. Apparently, the whole town really had been gathered in the square.

When I stopped to think about it, that was one terrifying spell. Even I could

win a fight against someone if they had been turned into a frog. What could you do against magic like that?

"So what determines whether or not you become a frog?" I wondered aloud.

I could understand why Arnold, Liz, and Sitri hadn't been affected. Hunters with large amounts of mana material were resilient to all sorts of things that normal people weren't. I could accept that Tino and Rhuda were transformed. For the same reason, the town guards were turned into frogs.

But the townsfolk and I, all people with little to no mana material, had remained human. I couldn't figure out why.

Sitri looked at me quizzically. "Aren't you the one who thought up this spell?" "Well, that is true."

I had only come up with the end result, not the process behind it. I was pretty certain all I had written in that spellbook I foisted onto Lucia was "A spell that turns people into frogs." It was one of the many reasons she was always grumbling at me.

Sitri pondered for a moment.

"I imagine it's designed to exclude noncombatants," she said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Once, I heard Lucia griping about how you gave her the absurd task of making a spell that had no effect on civilians."

Oh, yeah. That was me. I did indeed do that. It was so I could stock said spell in an Aspiration Manifest.

Aspiration Manifest would simply release spells in the same state they had been stocked, so you couldn't adjust the effect radius like you could during a normal cast. That led me to request a spell that wouldn't work on noncombatants. The result of that request was Tyrant's Order, the spell I unleashed on Arnold and his party.

Ah, I guess they work on the same principle.

"Maybe it goes off your levels of mana material?" I suggested.

"Arnold probably remained unaffected because resilience to transforming spells bolsters much easier than poison resilience. I knew you wouldn't let me down, Arnold!"

"Mmm," was Arnold's only response to Sitri's compliment.

I'll try and cheer him up, next time I get the chance.

Inside the vial, Tino ribbited as she listened to our conversation.

I figured resilience could also explain why Liz and Sitri hadn't been affected. And for me, well, it's because my mana material was on par with your average civilian.

I didn't think there was anything to worry about, after all it was Lucia's spell. But it would really suck if we couldn't return everyone to their original forms. Worst-case scenario, I could find myself the target of a named quest. Even if we did turn everyone back, I knew Gark would want to have a chat with me once we got back to the imperial capital. Just thinking about it made me want to barf.

After walking for a bit, Liz's eyes began to sparkle.

"There you are! Luuuke!"

The first one I caught sight of was Ansem. He was over four meters tall and still growing. Even though he was the most mellow member of our party, his large, armor-clad figure caused him to stand out.

Standing near a damaged wall were Luke and Lucia, both wearing masks, which they removed upon hearing Liz's voice. I hadn't seen them since they went to Night Palace and that was some time ago.

"Took you long enough! The dragon and the Cave People have already headed home! Sucks to be you!" Liz yelled.

It seemed Luke hadn't been expecting to hear that.

"What?! Krai, tell me where they went!"

"Too bad for you! Krai Baby already took care of it!"

Was that really the first thing you have to say to me, Luke? And I didn't take care of them. If you want Cave People, there's a whole kingdom of them.

Words failed to capture the look on Lucia's already miffed expression when she heard Liz's voice.

Then I noticed two humans on the ground. One was face down in the dirt, the other in a pool of blood.

Luke, you only just got back from a treasure vault!

I ran up to them. One had no notable wounds, but the stronger-looking one had lost his right arm.

"Luke! What are you doing, cutting down civilians?! I told you to at least hold back and use a wooden sword!"

"I did use a wooden sword."

That's even worse!

I made sure not to step on any of the frogs as I got closer. I knelt next to the larger man and turned his head towards me. I didn't think I'd be able to turn his entire body over. He had a real rugged face, but that didn't mean he couldn't be one of the townsfolk. Maybe he was a guard? Fortunately, he seemed to still be conscious in spite of his blood loss and he looked up at me with vacant eyes.

At this point, all I could do was apologize.

"I'm so sorry. I'm always telling Luke not to draw his sword unless he has a good reason to. Ansem, could you heal him?"

For some reason, Ansem was just watching silently. Cutting civilians was a very, very bad thing to do. We hadn't had any recent incidents, so I had gotten complacent.

"I get it," Luke said with a groan. "If you can heal them, you can just keep having fun! I thought it was a shame that I hadn't gotten to see that axe in action. You're a genius, Krai."

Did you forget your humanity back in that treasure vault?

I had confiscated his real sword, but he still hadn't learned his lesson.

"Aren't I always telling you to try and communicate first?! Did you?"

Luke averted his eyes. "Of course I did," he said in a small voice.

Epilogue: Let This Grieving Soul Retire, Part Five

The town of Suls was encircled by a legion of knights clad in black armor and mounted atop horses. Flapping wildly in the wind was a flag with three crossed blades—the seal of Lord Gladis. A man in resplendent armor dismounted from the lead horse and looked up at the wall encompassing the town.

"What am I looking at?" he muttered.

"You sure are making a late arrival," said a voice.

"Who are you?!" the knight yelled.

A shadow appeared under the town gate, to which the knights all drew their blades.

"Is that any way to greet someone? Terribly rude, considering we did your work for you. Well, it was just done *on the side* during our vacation."

Sitri patted Killiam's shoulders as it heaved with anticipation. With a grin, she drew out the quest brief and tossed it on the ground. The knight captain was shocked when he saw the seal of his lord on the document.

"This is hardly the sort of matter that requires us to cooperate with others. Since you dallied, we went ahead and crushed Barrel."

"Cooperate? Are you saying you're from Grieving Souls?!"

"Indeed. My name is Sitri Smart, I'm in charge of negotiating on behalf of our party. I've heard all about your heroic exploits."

She had a mellow demeanor that didn't suggest she was accustomed to violent work. Her short pink hair fluttered lightly in the wind. The captain of the knights was taken aback by her placid, endearing smile.

His subordinates also began to waver. They had heard that a named quest had been issued to treasure hunters. They weren't enthused by the idea of cooperating with the types who preferred plundering treasure vaults to maintaining public safety, but they didn't let their personal feelings interfere

with their duty.

They were completely baffled. As far as they knew, the hunters hadn't even arrived in the Gladis Earldom yet. It was only yesterday that they received word that a group matching the description of Bandit Squad Barrel was leaving the domain. Not wanting to wait on the hunters and seeking to repair their pride, the knights set out on horseback.

When they finally arrived at their destination and saw the hunters already there, they felt like they had stepped into another reality. But the quest brief was legitimate. The captain picked it up after it had been so rudely tossed on the ground.

Uncertain what to ask first, he eventually said: "Why are you here? We were waiting for you."

"We were lying in wait. Perhaps it would be better to say we were luring them, but don't worry on our behalf. Our main objective was dragon hunting, but we cast a wide net and caught Bandit Squad Barrel as well. Every last one of them."

The esteemed captain couldn't believe what he was hearing. Bandit Squad Barrel was prudent yet bold. They had repeatedly humiliated the elite knights of Lord Gladis by fighting them off. The bandits' extreme caution had been a particular thorn in their side.

When attacking a town, Barrel always sent in scouts to determine what sort of resistance they might face. If it was more than they could handle, they didn't even think about trying to attack. They were a roving band, so they had no headquarters, and none of their temporary bases had even been discovered.

They would simply slip away when large forces were assembled to exterminate them. They had some means of erecting major walls. They wreaked havoc in the Gladis Earldom, a place most criminals feared to tread, tarnishing the name of one of the blades that protected the empire. Barrel was truly devious.

Yet there were no signs the town had been pillaged, though it was clear something had happened. The knights were touching the stone wall and exchanging glances. It resembled the walls that appeared on numerous

occasions when they were chasing the bandits.

"What's this? I don't remember this town having such a large wall around it," the captain said.

Suls was a famous tourist destination. It was supposed to have next to nothing in the way of defenses.

Sitri pressed a finger to her lip. "This town was lacking in defenses, so we had Barrel put that up for us. I'll admit it could use some reinforcement, but it should suffice for the time being. Are you acquainted with the foresight of the Thousand Tricks?"

The captain was, of course. But he still couldn't believe it, even after seeing evidence before his very eyes. He could buy the story about lying in wait, but could any human being really manipulate events to such a degree? And how did the Thousand Tricks understand the movements of Barrel when so little was known about them? And what was this about a dragon?

The other knights looked like they could hardly believe what they were hearing.

"You needn't thank us. Something like Bandit Squad Barrel is a mere trifle for the Thousand Tricks. Ultimately, our focus was enjoying a vacation."

The captain knew he was being made a fool of, but he struggled to protest when it was so blatant. It frustrated him, but his priority was grasping the situation. He offered Sitri a preliminary thanks and began to survey the town.

I left the various details in Sitri's hands, as I always did, and returned to the inn with Luke and everyone else.

This time around, trouble had erupted on a pretty large scale. There was, of course, the Troglodytes stalking the town, but the dragon had also destroyed a number of buildings. We also created a fair amount of trouble for Arnold and his companions. I knew that as the leader of Grieving Souls, it was my responsibility to apologize, but that only ever seemed to make things worse. I was left with no choice but to leave it to Sitri.

It had been far too long since I had seen the faces of Luke, Ansem, and Lucia. We had been friends since childhood and had seen one another almost every day, so going more than a month without meeting them was really unusual.

When we reached my room, Luke's fittingly crimson eyes began to sparkle.

"So, Krai, where's my share of the dragons and Cave People?"

"Nowhere."

"What? Are you playing favorites?! Those Barrel guys weren't enough, Lucia got rid of most of them!"

My friends hadn't changed in the slightest since when they left for Night Palace. I didn't see any of the wounds Sitri had mentioned and Luke's coat was spotless. It seemed they had made it through the treasure vault just fine.

But what an absurd thing to say. Did he see the Troglodytes and the dragon as part of a welcome party? And what did he mean with Barrel? Did he take them out during the trip to Suls? What a free spirit.

"We waited for you," I said. "And besides, this was a vacation."

"So it wasn't a Trial. I see. Well, it still would've been a good warmup. And I really wanted to see the Cave People. Didn't you, Lucia?"

"I'm not an idiot, Leader. I came because I heard you were at a hot spring, only to have this mess thrown at me."

I guess the frogifying spell must have really worn her out. Breathing raggedly, Lucia had collapsed on the floor the moment we arrived in my room. She turned only her head towards me when she spoke.

"Did you clean up a mess for me?" I asked.

"Huh?!"

Don't get me wrong, I knew that Lucia was always pulling me out of the fire. She was too good of a sister for a guy like me. But she hadn't done anything for me this time around. Sure, she cast the frogifying spell with perfect timing, but it's not like she did that to save me or anyone else in our party. I wondered what else she could be talking about.

"If only you had been there when the Troglodytes were walking about the town," I said.

"Aaah! Damn you, damn—" She then broke into a fit of coughing.

I handed her a glass of water.

"You all right?"

She took a big sip, coughed a few more times, and took a deep breath.

"Thank you. Very much. I pushed myself a bit too hard," she replied.

Her voice was hoarse and her complexion was bad, but she seemed fine overall. She didn't have any noteworthy wounds on her.

Like me, Lucia's hair and eyes were black, but hers had a luster that mine lacked. Her slender frame made her seem fragile, not at all like a hunter. She was a bit prone to collapsing and it wasn't due to illness or a poor constitution. Even though she had a large reserve of mana, she always needed to rest after casting a large spell.

She sat up, took another drink, and looked at me with cold eyes.

"'Did you clean up a mess for me?' he says. Can you stop gradually raising the bar?"

"I'm fine with the bar. It's good training," Luke said.

"Mmm," Ansem said with a deep nod. He lay on his side, unable to stand up even in my high-ceilinged room. At four meters tall, he couldn't even fit in most rooms.

I couldn't help but sigh. Lucia objected, Luke counter-objected, and Ansem nodded. The familiar scenery was reassuring. We had just gotten out of a terrible ordeal, but I felt like I was finally on a proper vacation.

"Since you guys came all this way, let's find a hot spring that Ansem can fit in and have a good long rest."

Even a room in a luxury inn was claustrophobic for Ansem, but I'd feel bad making him camp outside. Good thing we were in an area brimming with hot springs. I was certain we'd find a spot for him.

Worst case, I can just make Lucia dig one up.

"You've been resting this whole time, haven't you?" Lucia asked.

"Oh, I just remembered. Tino's been turned into a frog and all, but I assume you have a spell to undo that?"

"How could I? Just making the transforming spell was pushing the envelope. Tell me, was there an undo spell in that book you gave me?"

Panicking, Frog Tino began to ribbit while hopping about the vial. I looked at her pitifully, then snapped myself out of it. Lucia had a point, but this was no time for jokes. Liz was holding up the jar and snickering, but I guess sympathy wasn't in her repertoire.

Weren't Tino and Lucia supposed to be friends? I wondered, frozen still with a smile plastered on my face.

"It's fine," Lucia said with a small sigh. "Even though there's no spell to make her human again, she'll revert if she's killed."

That doesn't sound fine at all.

Tino let out an agonized shriek.

I was at a loss. Was I going to have to tell her parents that my younger sister turned their daughter into a frog?

No way I could do that.

"D-Don't worry, Tino. I'll take responsibility and care for you," I told her.

"Would you quit saying dumb things? Watch!"

Lucia raised a slender arm and snapped her fingers. The vial in Liz's hands suddenly burst into flames.

It was the exact sort of thing I always imagined Magi being capable of. Setting something ablaze just by snapping your fingers was in my first volume of cool spells. Lucia, still in training at the time, spent a laborious month making that spell. I had bitter memories of getting walloped for laughing when I learned it took that long.

I was left speechless by the sudden immolation. But the moment Tino's

screams disappeared amid the flames, Human Tino appeared. Liz caught her in her arms. Tino was just as she was before she had been turned into a frog. A blue yukata with a tightly knotted obi. Eyes flanked by tear streaks.

So that's what Lucia meant. I didn't pay much attention until now, but her clothes disappeared with her when she became a frog. How does that even work?

Tino looked at me, then Lucia, Luke, and finally at Liz. Finally processing what had happened, she wrapped her arms around Liz.

"L-Lizzy! I thought I was gonna be a frog for the rest of my life!" she said as tears flooded down her cheeks.

"There there, T," Liz said, holding Tino. "We'll do special frog-training so you never become a frog ever again."

"Maaaster, save me! Lucy!"

"T hasn't changed a bit," Luke observed. "Right, Krai, let's go to a hot spring! You can't swim, right? Look, I brought a swim ring!"

Sure. Why not?

I resigned myself to the clamor and breathed a sigh of relief knowing that normalcy had finally returned to me. We had had our ups and downs, but I was glad we went on a vacation. And everyone was together, so I decided it was a win in my book.

Noticing my mellow smile, Lucia seemed to remember something and she looked at me through narrowed eyes.

"I just remembered something, Leader. You might already know this, but the battle between Hidden Curse and Akashic Tower has been wreaking havoc on the imperial capital. We turned around quickly because of our vacation, but, well, everyone back there is calling for you. Is it true you instigated that battle?"

"Not true at all. Now, c'mon, Lucia, you must be tired too. Let's take it easy in a hot spring!"

They were out of their minds. The Protean Sword had drawn his blade despite

the hostages and his ignorance of the situation. While Geffroy had lain in the dirt, the Thousand Tricks had made light of him with simple jokes. The leaders of Barrel were outmatched, both in terms of strength and pragmatism.

Geffroy was lying near the town's exit, bound in chains. The armored knight, the Immutable, had regenerated his right arm. His weapons had been confiscated, but he was allowed to move his body.

Patrolling nearby were the knights of Lord Gladis, those knights he had gotten the best of so many times previously. A number of them were keeping a close eye on Geffroy and Kardon, scrutinizing every tiny movement they made.

Bandit Squad Barrel had bounties all across the land. They were still alive only because they hadn't resisted after being captured by the Thousand Tricks and his party. Normally, they would have been executed the moment they had been apprehended. And even though they were alive, they were still most likely fated for the gallows.

They had to escape their shackles by any means necessary. But this wasn't the time to attempt anything.

Magic had been the deciding factor in their loss. Nothing was more troubling than a Magus capable of nullifying a numerical advantage. They had taken antimagic countermeasures, but those hadn't been enough.

Geffroy was confident he could hold his own against any number of Lord Gladis's knights. But there was that man who wrote Geffroy off as a *civilian*. As long as he was around, escape seemed impossible.

That man was terrifying. Even when his victory had been assured, he continued to play the part of a weakling. It was prudence beyond even that of Barrel. Cold and calculating, he used humans as bait and manipulated monsters, tactics no upstanding hunter would easily consider. Something was wrong when a man like that was allowed to walk free.

Geffroy and Kardon had chosen the wrong path. They should have gone a similar route to the Thousand Tricks and worn the veneer of an ally of justice. Kardon was lying motionless on the ground, but he was most likely making plans for the future.

However, it was too late to change course. Geffroy, Kardon, and Bandit Squad Barrel were far too well-known. They would have to overcome Grieving Souls by being the bandits they had always been.

Grieving Souls was a party of seven, but Geffroy knew that Barrel alone wouldn't be enough to beat them. Cooperation was going to be necessary. They would join forces with Akashic Tower and many other magic syndicates and criminal organizations. Until now, their interactions had been purely transactional, but that would have to change.

From a distance he could hear the knights, all clad in matching armor, talking among themselves.

"What are we going to do about these frogs?"

"We weren't expecting to take all the bandits alive. We'll have to leave them as frogs when we transport them."

"There's so many. The captain's worried that there might be civilians and wandering hunters mixed in..."

"We'll have to make sure no one slips away..."

"I've never seen or even heard of magic like this. It's like something out of a fairy tale."

It seemed Barrel weren't the only ones puzzled by what had happened.

Grieving Souls was keeping some things secret. And that was to say nothing of the attack by the fiends, which probably complicated matters further. It was safe to assume there was mistrust towards the Thousand Tricks. And if that was the case, there was an opening that could be exploited.

Then, a man in ornate armor approached them. It was the captain of Lord Gladis's knights, a man who might make an equal match for Geffroy in a direct engagement. Geffroy wasn't going to resist, that would only give the knight justification to kill him. The captain seemed to guess as much and clicked his tongue.

"You, Geffroy Barrel," he said. "How many were there in your group? Our investigations told us you had just over one hundred, but maybe it was closer to

three hundred plus one?"

Kardon's eyes widened, just slightly. Masking your strength was a fundamental part of battle. During their battles with the knights of Lord Gladis, Barrel had kept most of their members hidden. They certainly never brought them all out at once.

"Don't try to fool us. We can look into it ourselves and know if you're lying."

The knight cast a sharp gaze at Geffroy. It seemed he wasn't going to rest easy even after Barrel had fallen so far. But never mind that, the knight's count was a bit high.

"Counting each frog one by one will take time. Grieving Souls sure put us in a lousy position."

These knights were slow and cautious, but that was why they had been outmaneuvered by Barrel so many times. It seemed unlikely that their count was wrong, but, unless Geffroy was mistaken, they were off by three.

"That number's correct," Kardon answered in a low voice, looking at the ground.

Then Geffroy remembered. They had captured three fake Grieving Souls and kept them in a space separate from the other captives. They must have been turned into frogs.

They had been the ones who had started all this. They hadn't been the most competent accomplices. Geffroy didn't know what their relationship with the Thousand Tricks was, but...

"Yeah. That's right," Geffroy agreed.

"I see."

He was going to at least take those three down with him. The faintest hint of a smile formed on Kardon's lips. It seemed he was thinking the same thing. Barrel had taken a major blow, but its leaders were still able to read one another's thoughts.

Geffroy was shoved into a carriage brought by the knights and Kardon was thrown into another. The frogs were packed into sacks.

They had lost members, weapons, funds, and more, but Bandit Squad Barrel still lingered on. They had lost this time, but Geffroy and Kardon weren't dead yet. They rekindled their determination: one day, they would make those hunters regret not finishing them off.

With the bandits loaded in, the carriage slowly rolled out of Suls.

"Hmm? What was that? Already fatigued from the treasure vault, I return to the imperial capital only to find you've gone to a hot spring. Then I make my way to the hot spring and find myself cleaning up a mess. And after all that, this is what you have to say? Did I mishear you? I really hope so."

Lucia's eyebrows twitched, she looked at me with a sharp glare most people didn't direct at their siblings. Her complexion had improved significantly, suggesting that a night's rest had done her a lot of good. That's what's important.

Lucia got right up in my face, to which I smiled awkwardly and took a step back. Cold sweat ran down my back. I hadn't meant anything by it. I just said what was on my mind, but doing so incurred my sister's wrath.

"Y-Yeah. Um... You did really well back there? Mm-hmm. I can always count on my little sister."

I tried complimenting her, but her expression didn't change. Though we were adoptive siblings, we had been around each other a long time and she knew very well what sort of person I was.

Luke and Liz never came to my aid at times like these, they just watched with amusement. Even Tino was watching while taking cover behind Liz's back. I had no allies.

Lucy intertwined her slender fingers and smiled.

"Please, say it again, Leader. It's possible my ears were deceiving me."

I remained silent.

"Oh, dear brother?"

"Th-The frogs you turned them into," I said. "They were the wrong variety."

Lucia clenched her teeth.

"You turned them into tree frogs. It's usually bullfrogs..."

"I've never heard that! Look at this book, it's the one you made! Look! Look! Look!" she yelled as she shoved the spellbook before my face. It was the one I had made so long ago. On an old worn page was the line "Spell that transforms the target into a frog." There were no further details, the margins were filled with Lucia's notes.

"Where does it specify bullfrogs?! Tell me! Where? Where?"

"S-Sure, but the spell is *Witch's* Miracle, and that implies bullfrogs. There's nothing witchlike about tree frogs."

The spellbook I wrote only described spell effects because it was just a child's list of fantasies. I hadn't even remotely considered things like convenience and just filled the pages with my dreams. But that's exactly why I was willing to fuss over details.

"D-Don't worry. If you can turn people into tree frogs then you should be able to turn people into bullfrogs."

"No, I can't! It's not that easy! Tell me these things before I make the spell! The current spell was enough trouble as it is! Try to be impressed! You're not going to tell me to remake it, are you?"

My sister's lips trembled. She always did this when she got upset.

From an amateur's perspective, it didn't seem that difficult, but apparently, there was a world of difference separating tree frog spells and bullfrog spells. Of course, I wasn't going to tell her to make the spell all over again.

I held out my hands placatingly.

"I would never do that. The tree frog spell is plenty amazing. I guess it may not be very witchlike, but I'm not gonna tell you to redo it! By the way, I was hoping you could use your magic to dig up a hot spring. One that Ansem can fit in."

"There's no such spell."

"Can you make it? I'm sure if anyone can do it, you can."

Lucia glared at me and tears welled up in her eyes. In one snazzy movement, she snapped her fingers. Something large fell in front of me. Tino looked at it with wide eyes.

It was a plushie. A fairly large one, clearly modeled after me.

Without saying a word, Lucia gripped the neck of the plushie with her left hand, and with her right, she slammed her fist into the plushie's solar plexus. The room vibrated from the impact. It seemed she had a lot of pent-up resentment. It happens when you're in a rebellious phase.



"Oooh, Lucy's losing it. Even though she's always so calm when Krai Baby's not around," Liz commented.

"It's all good, Lucia. If we need a hot spring, then I can dig it up," Luke offered. "Someone get me a shovel."

"I want a plushie like that..." Tino mumbled.

I just looked the other way.

And then Sitri returned from her negotiations. In her hands was a mop with a meter-long handle. She looked briefly taken aback by the sight of Lucia punching the plushie, but she quickly recovered.

"Unfortunately, it appears there are no hot springs large enough to accommodate my brother. I did, however, receive permission to dig up a spring. Does that sound suitable?"

Sounds perfect.

"I sold so many golem cores!" Sitri said as we followed her out of the room.

We linked up with Ansem, who was waiting in the inn's dining hall on account of his size. Sitri then guided us to the site designated for her hot spring. Seeing everyone but myself and Ansem in yukatas added a bit of novelty to the experience.

Tino furtively glanced my way. She was the only one present who wasn't part of Grieving Souls, but this was hardly the first time we had included her. She was among friends.

"B-By the way, Master, how are you going to dig up the spring?" she asked. It was a perfectly reasonable question.

"What are you saying, T? With a shovel, how else?" Luke answered without the slightest hesitation.

"Huh? But, Luke, there's no guarantee you'll hit a spring, and you might have to dig meters deep..."

"We'll dig as deep as we have to. That's what training's all about! The path of

the sword crosses all corners of existence. In other words, hole digging is also a form of training! Right, Krai?"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

Luke, do you really get stronger, no matter what you do? I don't get it.

If confiscating his sword wasn't enough to stop him, then he would continue to grow no matter what I did. Lately, he hadn't had many moments in the spotlight, but Luke Sykol wasn't the sort of man to be discouraged by that.

Having vented her anger on the Krai plushie, Lucia cleared her throat and said, "Still, I'm relieved you chose a hot spring and not the ocean."

"Hm? Why's that?"

The ocean. That didn't sound too bad. This time I was in a hot spring mood, but I enjoyed playing in the sea. I couldn't swim, but just enjoying the sun and sea breeze was enough for me to relax.

Next trip, we're going to the ocean.

Lucia furrowed her brow and rubbed her temples.

"You never know what might come out of the ocean," she said. "A hot spring is far safer."

"But, Lucy, out here we had dragons and Troglodytes," Tino pointed out.

"I wish I had gotten here sooner. Krai, now I'm looking for an eight-armed Swordsman! I'm counting on you!" Luke told me.

Our world was full of dangers. I guess visiting cafes in the imperial capital really was the safest thing to do. And now I had Luke counting on me for something.

"Why not fight four Swordsmen at once?" I suggested haphazardly.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Four guys make a total of eight arms."

I wanted to point out that anything with eight arms would just be a monster, but then I remembered the Troglodytes. They didn't carry swords, but they probably could have, with their hair and all.

Luke thought it over for a moment, then clapped his hands.

"You're a genius! I'll do that. To be honest, I was worried about what I'd do after conquering an eight-armed foe, but this way I can go as high as I want!"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

Sitting atop Ansem's shoulder, Liz watched us with exasperation. Personally, I was looking forward to seeing how far Luke could go.

Following Sitri, we arrived at an empty lot roughly one hundred square meters wide. It was completely empty except for the occasional rock and patch of grass.

"I received this lot as a part of the payment for my golems!" she said with her usual grin and clap of the hands. "I don't have a hideaway in Suls, so I thought this was a perfect opportunity."

Baffled, Lucia looked at the lot. "A hideaway? What are you going to do with such an open plot of land?" she asked.

It was a spot at the edge of town and in an inconvenient location. We didn't live here, we spent most of our time in the imperial capital. Not to mention the absurd cost of building a house. But we had the whole party (except Eliza) together; the sky was the limit for us.

I snapped my fingers. "All right, Lucia! Give us a hot spring!"

"Excuse me?"

"Don't forget the waterfall!" Luke added.

Lucia was an outstanding Magus. Sitri could also do just about anything, but Lucia's spells didn't require any preparation beforehand. She would usually tell us our requests were impossible, but all we had to do was give her a bit of time and she would eventually figure something out. Such was Lucia Rogier.

I looked at her expectantly. She looked back with irritation.

"Oh and after that could you make an inn that we can stay in? Make it big enough for Ansem," I added.

"And add rapids and a whirlpool!" Luke said. "You can just put it off to the

side—"

"I want a sauna! A reeeally hot one!" Liz said, cutting Luke off. "That way I can train my heat resistance at the same time!"

"Don't worry, Lucy, I've prepared a potion for you," Sitri reassured her.

"Um, can I get a plushie of Master?" Tino asked.

"Do you think Magi can do just anything?" Lucia sighed.

We were certain that she could do it. I decided that next time I wrote a spellbook, it would be for everyday things like this. She probably wouldn't be thrilled by that.

Then Ansem spoke up for the first time during our get-together. His deep voice echoed throughout his Relic armor.

"My apologies. I have no objections to camping out and I can live without getting in a hot spring. I'm accustomed to it."

Unlike his younger sisters, Ansem Smart was a person of few words. He was the oldest of our group and had always been there for us. If I hadn't been forced to be our leader, he probably would have taken the role. He was our most humane member, popular in the imperial capital, and his church rebuilt itself so it could accommodate him.

But Ansem had a tendency to place the needs of others before his own. I suppose if you added his selfishness with Liz's and divided it by two, you'd come out even. It was in order to protect us that he became a giant.

Even though he said it was fine, I couldn't abide by that.

Luke shrugged with resignation and rapped his fist against Ansem's armor.

"Hey, Ansem, take a look at this land. You're just four meters, there's plenty of space for you! Think about it, if it's one hundred square meters, then there's room for, uh, twenty-five of you."

I didn't really get what Luke was on about, but I agreed with him wholeheartedly.

"He's right," I said, supporting Luke. "Don't sweat it. If there's not enough

space then we can just have Lucia warp space. Easy peasy."

"Hold on! Can you think before saying things like that?" Lucia said. Then she thought about it. "Well, I can't make an inn appear out of nowhere, but digging a hole shouldn't be beyond me. You don't need to fret, Ansem. I'll put our lazy leader to work."

"I'll do what I can to help!" Tino offered.

"You have my gratitude," Ansem said as he dipped his head.

I had caused far more trouble for him than he ever had for me. Digging a hot spring was no big deal.

C'mon, get to digging! Now's the time to make use of your stupidly powerful bodies! This is way easier than fighting monsters!

Liz nimbly hopped off Ansem's shoulder and Luke rolled up his sleeves.

"Leader, there's more to this than just digging. We have to do something to pump the water," Lucia said.

"Ah. Why not use that spell? Y'know, the one you showed me all those years ago. The one that creates fountains."

It was a spell that caused water to shoot up from the ground. I had asked Lucia to make the spell because I wanted to test the possibilities of magic. I might add that I recall her grumbling about it. Some things never change.

Lucia seemed displeased by the memory.

"We later used that spell to blow apart a castle," she said.

"Then why not adjust the strength? I'm sure it'll work out. It has so far."

"That's because I've made it work."

"Well, I don't see anyone better to leave in charge of the large-scale construction," Sitri said. "We'll handle the details. This shouldn't take more than a few days. After that, we can hire some workers to fix our errors while we take it easy."

As always, she did a good job directing things. I felt like it had been some time since I had seen us working together like this. I would always just sit around and

watch because I couldn't do anything useful, but today I was in a working mood.

I dashed across Sitri's lot and stood near the center.

"Okay, Lucia. For now, start digging right here!"

"There you go again, saying whatever..."

"Don't worry, Lucy. You can hit hot water by digging just about anywhere in this region. And if this doesn't work, we can just try again until we succeed."

Lucia accepted Sitri's reasoning and began to walk over to me, albeit reluctantly. It was just part of her rebellious phase.

According to Sitri's research, this incident was the only case of construction workers bumping into Troglodyte tunnels, so we could rest easy on that front. Between that and the hot spring dragon, I wasn't sure my luck could even get any worse.

Lucia took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and began an incantation. There was no wind, but her long hair began to float idly. Even though I had next to no ability to sense mana, I could tell she was mustering a large sum and cohering it into a spell.

I gulped and watched for any hot water that might come up. But, no matter how long I waited, nothing sprang up.

"Huh? Where's the hot spring?" I asked.

"I bored down about two thousand meters, but didn't come across a spring," Lucia explained. "A swing and a miss, just as I expected."

What do you mean "just as I expected"?

This was supposed to be an area where you could find a spring just about anywhere. What a letdown. Sure, all we had to do was dig somewhere else, but god was my luck terrible. Even Sitri wore a chagrined grin. I peeked into the hole. Seeing as this one was a miss, I began to wonder if maybe this whole lot was no good.

But then, a familiar tentacle poked up from the hole and gripped the ground. I found myself being greeted by a creature I was very tired of seeing.

"Ryuu," said the Troglodyte.

"Ryu-u," I replied automatically.

Without a moment's hesitation, Lucia kicked the tentacle away. The soft, yet sturdy appendage silently disappeared down the hole.

I gave Sitri a glance that said: *I thought we didn't have to worry about this.* She simply grinned, almost like she thought this was my fault or something.

"Why does this always happen with you?" Lucia snapped. "I'm closing the hole. I take it there are no objections?"

Luke and Liz both tossed their shovel aside and rushed to the hole.

"Hold it, Lucia! That was a Cave Person, right? Wasn't it?! I'm going down there!"

"Wait, Lucy! I wanna see the underground kingdom Krai Baby was talking about. C'mon, T, we're going!"

I decided not to worry about it and instead turned my thoughts to how much I wanted to enjoy a hot spring with everyone.

Liz and Luke, not needing to do their usual patrol duty, played around while Sitri and Lucia labored away. Ansem used his magic to recover their energy and Tino blew up the swim ring Luke had brought for me. It was very kind of him to remember that I like swim rings.

Lucia's second attempt had proven successful and a pool of water was forming. Sitri cheerfully hummed a tune as she used potions to harden the ground. The ground around Sitri's plot jutted up, forming a wall that even Ansem could be hidden by. It was taller than the wall around Suls.

"Master, um, what sort of magic is Lucy using?" Tino asked as she continued to blow up the swim ring.

"Hm? I dunno."

Tino seemed alarmed by this.

I wasn't an expert on magic. All I knew was that Lucia was incredible and just

about anything was possible when she and Sitri worked together. Well, I did know she was combining preexisting spells.

"This happens all the time. She once constructed a palace in the desert."

I was sure some people could build better structures, but I didn't think anyone could have beaten Lucia when it came to speed.

Sitri planted seeds which grew into trees, which the golems cut down. With magic, the lumber was trimmed and dried, then put together atop a large foundation. I had fun just watching the whole process.

Enough hot water to almost fill a pond had been collected. I didn't need to get in to know it was clearly too hot for human beings. Luke's robes swelled with hot air as he jumped in. Droplets of water splashed Tino, causing her to let out a small yelp.

"Augh! Krai, it's hot!" Luke cried. "Oh, I get it. This is more training! Oh, that burns. Makes me think of that treasure vault in the volcanic crater. Ah, Lucia, don't lower the temperature!"

"This is training of my own," Lucia replied.

"Hm? That so? Damn, I can't argue with that. I'll yield to you, just this once. But I won't be so kind next time!"

Energetic as ever.

I yawned as I floated about on my swim ring. The distinct smell of a hot spring drifted across my nose. Just as I began to doze off, I heard something I really didn't want to. I pulled myself up and looked in the direction of the entrance, the one gap in the wall. Luke got very excited.

Standing there was the Troglodyte princess and her entourage.

The princess stared intently at me.

Luke watched them restlessly.

Unable to bear the atmosphere, I turned to Sitri. "I thought you sealed that hole?" I asked her.

"They must have dug another hole," she said.

They can do that? Sounds claustrophobic.

The princess clasped her small hands and made a simple sound.

"Ryu-u," she said.

Sitri translated. "She said, 'Thanks to these subjects enhanced by our king, we can now dig through bedrock."

On multiple levels, I struggled to believe that. How could the princess convey so much with just a few sounds? And then there was the shocking nature of the words themselves. Had I really given the Troglodytes a new weapon by accident? And what were we going to do now that they could just come up to the surface whenever they pleased?

The Troglodytes weren't that strong, but they were much stronger than the average human. They were smart enough that they could wreak serious havoc if they really tried.

I told Sitri to tell them that there was no need to thank me and that they should just go home.

"Forgive me," she said, "my vocal cords aren't adequate for their language."

So what the hell have I been saying all this time?

Lucia gave me an icy glare. That wasn't good. Her opinion of me was already low enough as it was.

The princess, however, was quite calm. She made another brief sound, which was translated by the ever-convenient Sitri.

"She said, 'You saved us from that malevolent god. You may not be one of us, but you are no doubt our king.'"

"Way to go, Krai Baby!" Liz yelled. "You're probably the first human to be a king of Cave People."

I appreciated her positivity, but I was fairly certain it was only the sheer stupidity of the situation that had allowed me to be first.

I want to tell them to go home.

"'We await your orders, Your Majesty. If it's for your benefit, we'll wage a campaign of decimation, even in the malevolent god's homeland."

I want to tell them to go home.

I noticed the princess's guards seemed like they were wary of something. Maybe they never would have returned to the surface if not for me. Unlike her guards, the princess looked about curiously.

"She says, 'Your Majesty, am I mistaken or are you constructing a palace?'"
No. What are you talking about? This is a hot spring.

It occurred to me that underground there had been flowing hot water and magma. Perhaps Troglodytes and hot springs were closely intertwined? Not that it mattered.

"She says, 'We await your orders, Your Majesty. We'll construct a palace far superior to anything these foolish humans might make."

There's no need to do that. And Sitri really knows her way around their language.

The princess pressed her hands together and ryu-ryued imploringly at me.

"She said, 'Why do you ignore me?'"

What could I say? Look what happened last time I just said whatever came to mind. I didn't want to agitate the Troglodytes a second time.

I turned towards my friends. Luke and Liz looked at me eagerly. Lucia glared at me with silent disapproval. Sitri grinned. Ansem simply sat there, like he usually did.

I took a deep breath. I was determined to tell the princess to go home.

"Ryuu-ryuu-ryu-ryu," I said.

The princess's eyes bulged. Sitri's eyebrows twitched and she looked at me uncomfortably. I affixed a smile on my face, wondering what I had just said.

"Krai," Sitri said, sounding quite terrified. "Why did you order them to commit a massacre?"

Why did it have to be so specific?! Wait, hold on.

Making a very humanlike expression, the princess blinked with confusion. She then tilted her head slightly and then ryu-ryued with a smile on her face.

"She said, 'Understood. You request our assistance."

Despite my floundering, they somehow understood me. I found that awfully scary.

"Wh-Wh-What is this?!" someone cried.

Chloe and some of the hunters had arrived and were staring in disbelief at our hot spring. Construction on Sitri's lot was proceeding at a rapid pace. I didn't understand it any better than they did.

"These Cave People are incredible," Luke said.

"This is my first time encountering Troglodytes. They're even more coordinated than Barrel," Sitri said, also quite impressed.

She wasn't wrong; the Troglodytes moved as though they were one. The princess had called up an immense horde of her kin and a single order was all it took to get them to work. They dug through the dirt, packed it in, broke stones they got somewhere, and stacked them all up. It was like magic, except it wasn't magic.

"Troglodytes can't use magic," Sitri reminded me.

"They hardly need it," I said.

"You don't suppose they might like swords, do you?" Luke wondered. He sounded truly disappointed.

That's when I realized the Troglodytes didn't use weapons. But I didn't want them getting any stronger, so I silently begged Luke to stop.

Thanks to their hair-appendages, they were able to build at an extraordinary pace. Even though a crowd of townsfolk had gathered to watch, the Troglodytes maintained complete focus, not getting distracted for even an instant.

What in the world are these creatures? And there's so many. How many did the princess summon? And there are probably still more who couldn't make it up here and stayed underground.

"Good thing they didn't live aboveground," I said.

"We could make friends with them, but then they would dominate us through civil means," Tino mumbled.

That didn't sound very fun.

The building being erected before my eyes was magnificent, even if it was a bit different from most human architecture. We had planned to use wood, but the Troglodytes had brought lustrous stones from somewhere, making our building needlessly austere and imposing.

Come to think of it, didn't they say this was going to be a palace or something?

Watching the construction, the princess nodded knowingly before she seemed to remember something and came over to me.

"Ryu-u?" she said.

"Ryuu," I replied.

"Again, Krai, why are you ordering massacres?" Sitri asked me.

I'm not! And that was clearly different from what I said earlier!

The princess tilted her head and gave some directions, to which half the Troglodytes suddenly dashed off. Watching from outside the construction site, Chloe let out a small scream as a male Troglodyte darted past her.

"Should we be worried about this?"

"It seems they're going to fix the houses destroyed by the hot spring dragon."

So we didn't need to worry. The most worrisome element was me—the guy accidentally ordering massacres.

"She's a lot like you, Siddy," Liz said with exasperation. "Always desperate to earn Krai Baby's favor."

What a terrible thing to say.

As the sun began to set, construction of Suls's most extravagant hot spring inn, no, hot spring palace was completed.

"Ryuuu!" the princess yelled triumphantly.

Her underlings yelled in response. A tentacle was held out before me and I high-fived it on instinct.

A building white as chalk stood in what had been an empty lot only a day prior. It was a peculiar-looking building, with its combination of lumber and shiny, white stonework. The Troglodytes had filled the ceiling with sparkling rocks, which served as a light source.

Both the width and height of the building were more than enough to accommodate Ansem. In a testament to the power of overwhelming numbers, this was more than just Sitri and Lucia could have accomplished, even if they had gone all out.

Just like the exterior, the interior was gorgeous. It appeared the Troglodytes had a knack for architecture. Pipes extending from someplace transported hot water from who knows where and filled a large bath. Sitri had directed the construction of the drainage system, but it was still impressive.

Wait, why are there rooms with tatami flooring? And isn't it strange that they used wood? Don't these guys live underground? And these rooms are way nicer than what I saw in their kingdom.

"It would seem they took notes from the buildings in Suls," Sitri explained.

At this point, I was more scared than impressed.

"Krai, would you teach me how to properly enunciate in Troglodytian?" she asked in a low voice. "They make for far cheaper labor than golems..."

I'd teach you if I knew how, but I don't.

The princess yelled something and the majority of the Troglodytes rushed off. Off to the lower levels of the palace, that is. At some point, they had built a spiral staircase under the palace. I looked down and couldn't even see the bottom.

Does this go all the way down to their—

"It seems they also took notes about staircases," Sitri said.

I stopped thinking about it. After all, no one could stop the Troglodytes now

that they were capable of breaking through bedrock. There was no point in thinking about it, so I didn't. I was going to enjoy the new hot spring.

A lot had happened, but a vacation like this had its own merits. Yawning, I looked down from my perch at the newly constructed large bath. The building was less an inn and more of a hotel, and the thing before me was less of a bath and more like a pool, but I wasn't going to be nitpicky. An opening in the roof served as a vent which dispersed all the hot air. What a pleasant space it was.

For Grieving Souls, causing a commotion had become part of our lives. I adored festivals. Luke and Liz both loved to have fun. Sitri didn't hate it and Ansem was a kind brother who put his younger sisters first. And Lucia would always tell us off.

We used to celebrate on a smaller scale, but things increased as our wealth and power did. Generally speaking, hunters enjoyed fleeting pleasures, but none of them made merry on the same scale as us. I thought that was just fine.

A good while had passed since I stopped going on treasure hunts. Because our time together was so brief, we had to make up for that with quality.

Tino was quite taken aback. She probably had never seen such a large-scale banquet before. I waved to her and she rushed over like a puppy and sat down next to me.

"Good work out there, Tino. Take a well-deserved rest."

"Y-Yes, Master! This is really something else."

Perhaps due to the steam, her cheeks flushed slightly.

From an elevated veranda, I could watch over the entire hot spring palace. The Troglodytes had built massive facilities, all to the personal tastes of everyone in Grieving Souls. In terms of area and number of baths, this place far exceeded even the high-class inns we had been staying at.

I wondered if hot springs were perhaps a core part of life as a Troglodyte. There were a number of different baths including one big enough for Ansem, a shallow one, one you could lay down in, as well as baths set to varying temperatures.

The work had been split up with the Troglodytes handling most of the labor, Sitri directing the drainage system, and Lucia using her magic to adjust the temperatures. So as to fill the room with steam, there were canals of hot water running here and there. This seemed like something the Troglodytes would have come up with.

Tino's gaze fell on the center of the main bath.

"M-Master, what is that? That waterfall?"

"It's a waterfall."

Luke was standing beneath a waterfall in the middle of the main bath. What a loon. The source of the falling deluge was a spring pumped high up via magic. This was possible because of the elemental Lucia had formed a contract with. Luke seemed quite pleased by this, not that I could actually see his face amid all the water.

"Typically, a human can only form a contract with one elemental, and vice versa," Lucia said, tired from her constant spell-casting. "So I'm always asking myself, has anyone else ever entered into a contract with a water spirit, all in the name of waterfall training?"

"It's not my fault that happened," I said.

"It's because you're always putting funny ideas in Luke's head! Honestly, what does he mean training and waterfalls go hand in hand?"

It's proving useful, so I don't see the problem. Water's nice. I like water. I wanna form a contract.

Unfortunately, forming a contract with an elemental was about as great of a challenge as any Magus could overcome. I didn't know the specifics, but while borrowing the power of an elemental wasn't too difficult, commanding one was apparently much more challenging.

"M-Master, what's that bath at the edge? The one with the whirlpool."

"It's a whirlpool bath."

Maintaining a whirlpool burned through mana, but Lucia's reserves were up to the task. Just what you'd expect from my little sister.

"Krai Baby, we've got the food and booze!"

Liz joyfully rolled three large barrels into the room. They were full of alcohol and big enough to fit a person inside. It seemed she was in a drinking mood. Behind her, Ansem carried two tables stacked with food and some of our new gray friends were carrying tables with their tentacles.

Hmm. I thought this was a pretty large area, but maybe not?

It was enough for our party and there was a second and third floor, but there was lots of food and the Troglodytes were joining us.

Eh, if we run out of space, we can just figure something out.

I was getting in a festive mood when Sitri came in with an armful of fireworks.

"Krai, I bought fireworks."

"Ooh, good idea."

Perfect. *This* was the vacation I had been hoping for. I was with my friends at a hot spring with food, booze, and even fireworks. It would have been even better if Eliza were here, but there was no point in trying to rein in our number one free spirit.

Everyone was assembled and the food had been set out. I couldn't see the scenery beyond the large walls, but the moon was shining in the sky. It was time for my vacation to begin. With a serious look on my face, I stood up, swim ring in hand.

"Um, Master, is there only a men's bath?" Tino asked as though it had just occurred to her.

"Oh, we just do mixed bathing. You can't bathe in the wild if you let things like that bother you, y'know? We're behind walls, so don't let it get to you."

Tino froze. "Huh?"

We used to separate, but one time Liz jumped over the wall, which incited Sitri and Lucia to break it down. Splitting up made less space for Ansem and we were all more or less family, so it didn't really matter. Instead, we just minded our manners. The Troglodytes also seemed just fine with this arrangement.

"All right, Tino, time for training! By tempering your will, you can cut through that of your enemies!" Luke said as he casually emerged from the waterfall.

Tino was quite shocked by what she saw.

Luke was completely naked. A cloud of steam concealed his waist, but he still should've shown some delicacy instead of just standing there with his arms crossed. He didn't even look cool due to his damp hair clinging to his head.

Tino's face turned a deep red and she let out a strange shriek and hid behind me. It seemed she still had a ways to go before she could live as Grieving Souls did.

And so began our vacation.

Steam permeated the Troglodytes' masterpiece palace and tables of food and drink were just a short distance from the baths.

"Krai, find a dragon for me too!" Luke said. He then jumped into the baths, all the while yelling in a voice loud enough to wake the neighbors. He splashed water everywhere, but no one here was going to criticize him for something like that.

Liz pursed her lips and undid the sash on her robe, letting it slip to the ground. Her tanned skin shined in the light given off by the fires and glowing stones. Apparently, she hadn't been wearing any underwear.

She hadn't hesitated in the slightest, even though she had been so bashful back in the Galest mountains. Because they were usually hidden, the sight of her legs was a bit alluring. Apex Roots made for a nice accessory when it was on standby.

"Luke, I wanted to get in first!" Liz yelled as she jumped in.

"Lizzy?! Y-You shouldn't do that when Krai's right there!" Tino cried. If anyone was embarrassed by the situation, it was her.

"Shaddup, T! No use being bashful after all these years! A little skin doesn't matter among us. If you don't want to get in, then just do something else."

"Liz," I interjected.

"Master!" Tino smiled, relieved that someone seemed to have come to her aid.

I tossed a soft sponge to Liz.

"You need to wash off before getting in," I said.

Liz's eyes sparkled. "Okaaay! I knew you'd see it my way!"

"Master?!" Tino wailed.

Liz was right. Unfortunately, it was too late to be worrying about showing skin. We went way back and she wasn't the bashful type. In the past, she had burst into the men's baths. She didn't do it all the time, but if she felt like it, she didn't hesitate to do so. And with her lightning speed, she would fling out any unwanted outsiders.

Her normal outfit already left a fair amount of her exposed and this was hardly the first time she had gotten in a hot spring with us. To put it simply, nudity was something she was, well, accustomed to. And that was fine as long as she didn't go clinging to people.

Liz might not have been the type to have reservations about skin contact, but that was no problem as long as Lucia was around. Our Magus would just blast Liz back with a spell and even put up visual filters. For the moment, she just sighed, but didn't do anything more.

Tino seemed to be experiencing culture shock, but this was bound to happen when we built a hot spring.

"We're all equals at the hot spring. Eat, drink, and be merry," I told her.

"T, I'm stating the obvious, but you don't need to get naked," Sitri pointed out.

"You can wear a towel or a swimsuit. You can even get in the bath with your clothes on."

I sympathized with Tino's plight. There were two beasts without a swimsuit or towel and completely unbothered by it, but those two could be ignored. They were like wild animals. Tino could just ignore them. Even the enhanced Troglodytes, who had stayed behind after the construction was finished, were swimming about.

"Look, Krai! I can stand under a pounding waterfall just fine! This is the result of my training! My legs and hips are stronger than ever!" Luke shouted while proudly treading water beneath the waterfall.

Just watching him put me in a good mood and helped me relax. The room was sweltering, so I unbuttoned my clothes. For the time being, I just took off my shirt, jacket, and all my Relics, leaving just one Safety Ring on. With all my friends nearby, I was fine removing even the Relics that I slept with.

"M-Master, you too?!"

You're still fretting about this?

I cared less than anyone here. No one was going to be bothered because I took off my shirt. Besides, Tino was the one who destroyed a wall to enter the men's bath earlier. But I wasn't going to revive those memories.

Still in her yukata, Lucia snapped her fingers and a glass filled itself as she brought it over to me. The drink was sweet and had a low alcohol content, so even I could enjoy it. I accepted the drink and raised it gratefully with a smile on my face.

"Getting in the bath straight after a drink isn't good for you," I told her.

"Then why did you order it?"

I didn't. Liz brought it in without asking me. Well, it's fine. I'm not gonna stand on ceremony on a day like today.

I brought the glass to my lips and drank it down in one gulp.

"M-Master," Tino said with renewed determination, "I'm going to get changed."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

Tino then jogged off and grabbed a towel.

I smiled and watched my friends frolicking about.

"Luciaaa, there are no rapids! I can't train without rapids!" Luke moaned.

"Lucy, I want a sauna!" Liz demanded.

"Shut up! Shut up already! I can only use so many spells at once!" the Magus cried out.

A large barrel floated up and doused Luke and Liz with its contents, barraging them with golden ale stronger than what we had been drinking so far. Lucia was a deft Magus; not a bit of it got in the hot spring or on the food.

"What the hell was that for?!" Liz shouted as she ran a hand through her alcohol-drenched hair.

"Is this so I can train drunken boxing?" Luke asked.

Soaked with ale, their skin glimmered and yet they didn't seem affected in the slightest.

"Master, is this what they call a 'symposium'?"

Tino, they stopped calling them that a long time ago.

"Why not have something to eat?" I offered.

"I can't relax like this," she replied.

She looked down at herself and her shoulders trembled. A long towel was wrapped around her, quite tightly so as to not fall off. It wasn't that much more revealing than the usual gear she wore, but she still seemed embarrassed. Perhaps because of the steam, her shoulders were a deep red.

Not far from us, Sitri wore a towel in the same manner as Tino and was wielding a mop. She moved like was cleaning a large wall, but it was Ansem's back she was washing.

"Thank you for all your hard work out there. Did you bring it back with you?" she asked.

"Mmm. It's in the imperial capital," he replied.

Sitri was grinning pleasantly. She cared deeply for her older brother, as shown by her use of a stepping stool so she could wash every inch of his enormous, muscular back.

Ansem's back was covered in scars, the result of his dedication to taking the lead and receiving incoming attacks. He was both our healer and the main pillar of our defense. His healing magic was powerful enough to earn him requests from some of the most powerful people in the empire. But healing magic was a tricky thing and didn't work on its caster.

He didn't seem to be in any pain, but I still felt guilty knowing that it was thanks to him that I had never been wounded once. I got up, carrying my swim ring with me, and walked over to Ansem, Tino following after like a duckling.

"Good work today, Ansem. Here, I'll wash you back, since it's been so long," I said.

"Mmm."

"Are you certain?" Sitri asked. "Well then, in place of that, I'll wash Krai's back! Is that fine with you, Ansem?"

"Mmm."

I didn't know what was in place of what, but I accepted the mop from Sitri and gave Ansem's back a thorough scrub. I couldn't be of any use during hunts, but I could wash a wall as well as anyone else could. The ridges of his muscles proved difficult, but I put my back into it and scrubbed away. It was tiring, but I had a hot spring waiting for me when I finished. And I never did any work, so it was sort of fun.

"Master, um, could you let me do that?" Tino asked. "Is that fine, Anssy?" "Mmm."

Even after all these years, Ansem was still a reticent man. But I could tell from his voice that he was glad to have so many friends around.

Luke and Liz both came rushing over when they noticed me handing the proverbial baton (the mop) off to Tino.

"No fair! Is this some sort of training? It is, isn't it?! Let me have a go!" Luke yelled.

"If it's now T's turn then it's only natural that I come next! You can be happy with just a drink, so here! This is another type of training!" Liz said and shoved a

half-drunk mug off onto Luke.

"You think I'm gonna believe there's training that just involves drinking?! You think I'm an idiot?"

"So you'll listen to Krai Baby, but not me?"

"Well, yeah, I don't trust a word you say!"

Luke, it's not like you listen to me either. I think trusting me is an even worse idea than trusting Liz.

As Ansem sat perfectly still, those two continued to argue, just as they always did. Those fights were proof of how deep their bond was.

"Never mind them, Krai. Now, allow me to wash your back. I've never done this before," Sitri said, sounding particularly excited.

"Siddy! You're too—"

Just as Sitri's chest was about to press against me, she was sent flying. Her body corkscrewed and she plunged into the hot spring headfirst, splashing water everywhere.

Tino stood there, stunned.

"That's a red card, Siddy," Lucia said, idly holding a mug in one hand. "Honestly, I can't even look away for a moment."

"Lucy, was that — Did you use an attack spell?"

"It's because of you guys I got this strong! Do you have any idea how much I hate getting asked how I got so powerful?!" she said while munching on a drumstick.

Lucia didn't hold her alcohol well (though she was still better than me) and what Liz could take just fine would cause her to black out. Taking mana potions seemed to make it even worse. And yet, even while intoxicated, my younger sister could still use magic just fine. Wasn't that incredible? Amazing?

"Master, I would have died if that spell had been meant for me!" Tino wailed.

"Don't worry, she's holding back."

Besides, you won't get hit as long as you don't do anything dumb. I've never

been hit because I'm a careful man.

Trembling, Sitri gripped the edge of the bath and pulled herself up. Her towel had been knocked off and nothing was left to cover her slightly flushed skin.

"For heaven's sake! All that work and not even a reward! Why do I even need your permission to wash Krai's back?!"

The situation intensified when Lucia crossed her arms and stood in Sitri's way.

"If you want to cling to him, I can turn you into a towel," Lucia offered. "I can't guarantee I'll be able to turn you back."

"Eek!"

"Ah! Sitri, become a towel!" Lucia incanted.

"Auugh!"

"Become a towel! Become a towel! Aah, there's no such spell!"

The blood drained from Sitri's face and she began to swim away desperately. Lucia finished the meat she was snacking on and reduced the remaining bone to ashes. She removed her yukata and went after Sitri. All the while, lightning bolts shot from the cloud she used to generate the waterfall. Tino watched with terror.

"I-I've never heard Siddy scream. And Lucia..."

Lucia and Sitri were very good friends, you see.

"Ansem, is that enough?" I asked.

"Mmm."

Ignoring Liz and Luke, who were still squawking over the mop, Ansem slowly lowered himself into the hot water. Gripping my swim ring, I followed after him.

Resting on my swim ring, I gently floated across the water. Tino used a cord to tie my swim ring to a pillar so I didn't get pulled too far out. I didn't know if it would do me any good.

Listening to my friends goof around and looking at the moon was blissful. Next to me, Tino sat sullenly, the water up to her mouth.

"I've never been to something so lively," she mumbled.

Luke and Liz were having swim races. Sitri and Lucia were soaking in the water and seemed to be having a drinking contest. Ansem had his eyes closed and was sitting quietly in the deepest part of the bath. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, but he seemed content.

Despite it being a vacation, all sorts of things had happened. There had been the storm, Arnold's pursuit, and the appearance of the dragon and the Troglodytes. We had our troubles, but looking back on them, they were good memories. I had put Tino through a number of ordeals, but I hoped she could at least enjoy this one trip.

Treasure hunting was dangerous work, but it wasn't without its fun times. My talents were nonexistent, so I had given up on going anywhere with my friends, but I was certain a talented girl like Tino had plenty of fun experiences in her future.

"Tino, did you enjoy yourself?"

"Huh?!" she yelped, caught off guard by my sudden question.

A number of emotions flitted across her eyes, as though she were looking back on everything that had happened. I quietly waited for her reply. Eventually, her cheeks flushed and she sank down into the water and nodded a few times.

I guess they were good memories. That's a relief.

All's well that ends well. All that was left was to buy souvenirs for everyone back at the capital. Then I could brag all about the trip. It sounded like all sorts of things had happened back home, but I invited them to come along, they just didn't want to go.

I thought about getting out of the bath after a little bit. Then I would drink, enjoy the fireworks, then get back in. My hope was that by then Liz and everyone else would have calmed down.

The princess and some of her entourage swam up to me. It seemed Troglodytes were also fans of hot springs because they all seemed happy as clams.

"Ryuu-ryuu," she said.

They had scared me when I first met them, but now I saw them in a more endearing light. Put to it, I'd say our other gray friend, Killiam, was much scarier. Most likely mimicking Sitri and Lucia, the princess used a tray floating on the water to pour out a drink.

Speaking of gray things, whatever happened to Gray?

"Master, let me pour you a drink!"

"Ryuu-ryu!"

I smiled and watched as Tino and the princess began to fight over the bottle. It seemed I was awfully popular. Suddenly, a sky-blue dragon cut in, pulling me from my moment of peace.

What are you doing here?! Didn't you go back home? Back to the mountains? What's this town's security doing?

But I didn't want to put a damper on our vacation, not after all that had happened. With Lucia around, I figured it would be fine.

The dragon then looked at me and let out a cry, as if it were saying hello. Everyone's eyes instantly locked onto the dragon. The fastest was Luke, whose eyes glimmered like he had found a new toy. Lucia, however, looked deadpan. But the strongest reaction of all came from the Troglodytes. The princess jumped up, knocking over the floating tray.

"Ryu-u-u-u! Ryu-u-ryu-u!" she screeched, eyes bulging with panic.

The other Troglodytes screamed in response. The hot spring dragon looked around wildly. This wasn't good. It seemed the Troglodytes were afraid even of the young dragons. If I didn't do something, the whole vacation would be ruined.

"Ryu-u-u-u-u!" I said in an effort to calm them down.

Lucia was completely stunned as she watched the princess wrap her hair around me and leap up. The other Troglodytes followed after.

"Krai, what do you mean you plan to spend the rest of your life underground?!" Sitri cried.

"I never said anything of the sort-ryu!"

The princess and her cohorts dashed off, with Luke and the other following after. The young hot spring dragon let out a surprised squeal and the adult dragon hovered overhead.

Helpless to do anything, I was once again dragged downward, to the underground kingdom.

Interlude: Fox

All the darkness of the imperial capital coalesced in the decaying district. It was an apt gathering spot for the two men.

One was small with an unkempt beard and dark eyes. His worn, drab coat might have earned him some looks of scorn in other parts of the imperial capital, but it was a fine piece of clothing to the residents of the decaying district.

His complexion was poor, but deep within his eyes were signs of a feral vitality. He was a veteran information broker who had survived many years in the shadows of the imperial capital. He made his living by illegally selling information to treasure hunters and bandits.

The other man was tall and slender. He was in a tattered, hooded robe and high-cuffed pants. His shoes had holes, his thin gloves didn't hide how bony his hands were, and his face wasn't visible, for beneath his low hood was an eerie fox mask.

"So Barrel was done in," he said. Strange noises mixed with his voice, his age and gender were unclear. "They were a cautious bunch, but it was the Thousand Tricks they took on. Akashic Tower hasn't fared any better. Then again, their main target is Hidden Curse, hee hee hee."

The small man suppressed his laughter.

That title belonged to a treasure hunter who had appeared out of nowhere. A shadow nestled in the imperial capital. Someone who had crushed ghost parties, secret societies, bandits, and bounty targets. Yet the masked man hadn't budged in the slightest when he said the name.

"What a shame. They would have made a great pawn," the masked man said.

"Oh? Not many people catch the eye of the Fox."

"We're always looking for capable members. Still, what a pain those hunters are."

Contrary to the masked man's spiteful words, his voice was cold, entirely devoid of emotion. The information broker gulped. He felt a shiver run down his spine even though none of the masked man's animosity was directed at him.

The information broker couldn't help but ask, "What are you planning to do now?"

There was no response. Before his eyes, the masked man dissolved. Along with all his personal effects, he dissipated as though he had been nothing more than an illusion. The information broker briefly stood there dumbfounded, but he pulled himself out of it and made himself scarce.

Strong light casts deep shadows. In the prosperous treasure-hunting holy land of Zebrudia, no one had yet noticed a certain shade slowly creeping its way in.

Side Story: Tino's Hot Spring Nightmare

"No, Lizzy, you can't go in!"

"Yeah? Who are you to boss me around?"

Lizzy was in a pink yukata and glaring at Tino. It was an intimidating glare, but Tino somehow clenched her fists and pulled herself together. Behind Tino was the door that led to the open-air bath. That catastrophe with the dragon had resulted in the destruction of the main bath, but as this was a luxury inn, each room was furnished with its own private open-air bath.

Tino had tried the bath in her room. It was pleasant and wide enough that multiple people could get in and still have plenty of room. It wasn't as large as the main bath, but it wasn't lacking any features and there weren't going to be any more dragon appearances. It was enough to make Tino feel sumptuous.

If Lizzy wanted to bathe in a hot spring, that was just fine. What Tino didn't understand was why she was insistent on this one. Tino could just barely hear a tune being hummed somewhere behind her. She spread her arms out wide and barred Lizzy's path.

"Master is currently in the bath! Please, use the bath in your room!" she yelled.

Why did Lizzy want to come all the way over here when she had a bath in her own room? Tino didn't understand it at all. No, she did understand. Lizzy was quite fond of Krai and she wasn't the type to resist her impulses. But that didn't mean Tino was going to give in.

Tino was here for a reason. She had changed out of the yukata Krai had complimented and was now back in her usual gear. Standing before the door, she took a deep breath.

"Lizzy, I must inform you that Master told me to stand guard!" she said.

There was burning energy in Lizzy's eyes. "Hmm? Then do so. Now get out of my way."

"I told him you wouldn't do something so brazen!"

To Tino's sensibilities, barging in on the bath of a member of the opposite sex was inconceivable. Even when the dragon emergency had forced her hand, she had been so embarrassed she thought she might die.

But it wasn't hard to imagine Lizzy doing something like that; she was always clinging to Krai. And yet Tino had believed in her mentor. She had *believed*. She didn't think she would be betrayed on her first day on the job.

Exasperated, Lizzy put her hands on her hips and smiled. Her robe complimented her slim figure very nicely and Apex Roots seemed to be on standby. Yukatas weren't easy to move around in. After all, they weren't made for combat. She probably just preferred being bare-legged, even in an emergency.

"Shameless? Are you really gonna tell me you can't handle a naked man? What if you're attacked by a guy in his birthday suit? Would you be too scared to fight?"

"Don't try and change the subject! Master asked me to stand here and protect him!"

If such a man attacked, Tino could fight him. She could even ambush a man in the bath if she had to. But the man in question wasn't an attacker.

Lizzy seemed unconvinced. In fact, she was looking at Tino as though she had lost her mind.

"Hmm. Well, whatever. Now, I'll say it again. Will you get out of the way? I'm gonna wash Krai Baby's back."

"No! Lizzy, please understand my position."

"Krai Baby and I are part of the same party, you know. We've been around each other since we were tiny and we've bathed together before. Don't worry, I'll let him know you did your job."

Tino silently took her stance.

"Don't worry," Liz continued. "He'll just say something like, 'Well, there's no stopping you, Liz.'"

Tino placed her right foot forward, lowered her back, and steadied her breathing. She was aware that her eyes were begging for mercy, but even still, she looked her mentor in the eye. Even if Lizzy was restricted by the yukata, she was still too much for Tino to hold back. Lizzy was superior in speed, stamina, and just about every other aspect.

Lizzy tilted her head. "Hmm. Tino, have you gotten stronger?" she asked as she rolled up her sleeves and clasped her hands. "I didn't think I'd see the day you stood up to me."

"I-It's thanks to your training."

To Tino, Krai's orders were her number one priority. They were also her number two priority. And number three and four.

She examined her surroundings. Unsurprisingly, there wasn't anything she could use as a weapon and she didn't want to make a mess of Krai's room. All she had to fight with was her own body.

Tino thought back to the time she had worn the mask. Her emotions had been intensified, but her body could still remember how it had moved back then. If she fought with every bit of her strength, she just might be able to restrain Lizzy. Looking her in the eye, Tino could tell her mentor wasn't messing around.

Lizzy furrowed her brow, but then let out a small sigh and said something quite unexpected.

"Are you an idiot? If you want to obey his orders to the letter, you can still at least let me wash his back."

"Huh?"

"You can still keep watch from inside the bath, can't you? You gotta think harder about these things. Ah. I've got it. T, come with me. It's two birds with one stone. We can build your resilience to naked men and I can show you how to wash someone's back."

Go with her? Where? Wash someone's back? Whose?

It took Tino a moment to realize what Lizzy was getting at, but her mind went

blank the moment she did. Her heart pounded and she became restless. She pressed her lips together, aware that her face was probably burning red.

Master's back? No. Not in a million years.

Even if he ordered her to, she probably couldn't bring herself to do it. She'd die of embarrassment. She had wavered for a mere moment, but that was all Lizzy needed to close the gap.

She grabbed Tino's wrist and casually strolled through the door, apprentice in tow.

"Krai Baby, I bet it's lonely all by yourself! I'll wash your back!"

"No, Lizzy! Master, run for it!"

Steam brushed Tino's cheek. With her free hand, Lizzy undid the sash on her robe. All Tino could do was close her eyes and wrap her arms around Lizzy in an attempt to restrain her.

"Wh-Why are you here, Siddy?! This is Master's room!"

Siddy looked at Tino curiously. They were, needless to say, in front of the door leading to Krai's open-air bath.

"That's what I'd like to ask you. What are you doing, T?"

Siddy wore a cool blue yukata that suited her quite nicely and held a white cloth in her right hand. Her eyes didn't bear the flames that Lizzy's had, but they instead offered glimpses of her intellect. She thought for a moment, before placing a finger to her lips.

"Were you perhaps trying to peek?" she asked in a placid tone.

"N-No! Master told me to stand guard out here!"

"Oh, that's a relief. If you were doing something bad, then I'd have to punish you."

Tino felt a shiver run down her spine. Siddy's tone was jocular, but her eyes were dead serious. Tino had never even considered peeking, but who knows what might have happened to her if she had tried?

She was once again reminded of how intimidating Siddy could be, though in a different way than Lizzy. Lizzy was violent, but never harbored suspicions towards Tino. Siddy, on the other hand, was mellow, yet kept a sharp eye out for anyone, friend or foe, who might be trying to get close to Krai.

"Well, I wish you the best of luck."

With an entrancing smile, Siddy began to walk past Tino. It was such a natural movement Tino's reaction was delayed. Still, she managed to catch Siddy's arm. If it had been Lizzy, Tino probably wouldn't have made it in time.

"W-Wait! What are you doing? Master's in the bath right now!"

"Of course he is. And I'm going to go wash his ba—"

"Huh?!"

She was doing the same as Lizzy and without a hint of remorse. By tightening her grip and twisting her body, Tino managed to pull Siddy away from the door. She couldn't let her guard down, not even for a second. After what happened with Lizzy, it seemed to her perfectly natural that Krai would entrust her to watch the door.

"No, you can't! Siddy, that's indecent! Master told me to not let anyone through this door!"

Fortunately, Siddy wasn't the type who fought on the front lines; Tino was the stronger of the two. As long as she didn't space out a second time, she would be fine.

Siddy blinked and cocked her head. "Indecent? T, I think you've got the wrong idea."

"Wha?"

Wrong idea?

As Tino began to relax, Siddy laughed, her cheeks flushed slightly.

"T, did you think I was going to aid him in the nude? Naughty, naughty," Siddy teased.

All the way to her ears, Tino's face felt like it was on fire. Tino had indeed

been thinking that. Siddy was a gentle person, but she had the same lack of respect for personal space as her sister. She might do anything if Krai asked her to.

"Huh? You're not?"

"I'm not. I don't share your lecherous nature, T. Look, I brought a swimdress."

Grinning, Siddy spread out the white cloth she was holding. What Tino had assumed to be a towel was actually a swimdress. The loose, thin fabric vaguely reminded her of a yukata.

"See? I can wear this and wash his back without showing any skin," Siddy said.

"I-I see."

Siddy chuckled. "I'm not like Lizzy, I don't show skin that easily."

"I'm sorry. I jumped to the wrong conclusion."

Tino had never realized that was an option. Leave it to Siddy to have such a smart idea. Tino had only ever known hot springs as being places where you bathed naked and that had clouded her judgment.

As Tino hung her head, Siddy walked past her. The door silently shut behind her. Tino took a deep breath and collected her thoughts.

"Hm?"

Immediately, she got the feeling she was forgetting something. She blinked a few times. Then once more. She turned towards the door and stared at it for a moment. Then began to pound on it frantically.

"Siddy?! It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter that you're wearing a swimdress! You can't go in there, Siddy!"

Such a thin garment, and a white one no less, would become transparent if it got wet. Hell, it might not even need to get wet. Surely, Siddy was aware of this. This was a premeditated crime. She had said she doesn't show skin that easily, but that was a dubious statement when she was already going to wash Krai's back.

"Maaaster! Run for it!"

Tino hesitated, but she quickly overcame her doubts. This was all her fault and she had to live up to Krai's expectations. She had to protect her master from Sitri!

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and burst through the door.

Her master's orders were absolute, but Tino felt her will beginning to break. First Lizzy, then Siddy. Just how contested was this door to the open-air bath? Besides, wouldn't it normally be the man doing the peeking? Not that Krai was actually that sort of person.

Tino's eyes opened wide. A new, and quite unexpected, person had appeared.

She was in a yukata, as opposed to her usual black robe. The contrast of her porcelain skin and lustrous black hair was breathtaking. Her frail, fleeting impression was quite unlike Lizzy and even Siddy.

"L-Lucy? You too?!" Tino cried.

"What are you talking about?" Lucy asked.

"Never mind. But, um, this is Master's room. And he's in the bath right now..."

Tino was acquainted with everyone in Grieving Souls, and that naturally included Lucy, but her ethereal aura made her a bit unapproachable to Tino.

After a moment of confusion, Lucy sat down next to Tino, folding her legs beneath her. Her black hair flowed over her white robe.

She cleared her throat and said: "I know. That's why I came here. Standing watch during these situations is usually my job. So why are you here, T?"

"Master asked me to stand guard."

"There he goes again, working you like a dog."

"N-Not at all. I'm doing this because I want to!"

Lucy furrowed her brow, but didn't say anything and instead snapped her fingers. Two cushions came flying in from somewhere and landed next to Tino and Lucy. Next came a teapot, which automatically filled the two teacups that flew in with it. When she first saw it, Tino had been surprised by Lucy's magic,

but now she was accustomed to her irregular spells.

"Th-Thank you very much."

"Think nothing of it. Now that I'm here, you can go and enjoy yourself," Lucia said while opening a book up on her lap. She was ready to be in it for the long haul. But Tino was a loyal hunter; she couldn't just leave Lucy alone.

"No, this is something Master ordered me to do," Tino said, clenching her fist.

"Is it now? Well then, we can keep watch together."

"Sounds perfect!"

Tino's spirited answer briefly caught Lucy off guard, but then a chuckle escaped her lips.

Tino found something pleasant about the faint warmth against her back and the comb flowing through her hair. She had undone her ribbons and was letting Lucy brush her hair. She handled the comb very tenderly, putting Tino at ease.

"Even with mana material, hunters still need to maintain their hair," Lucy said in a soft voice.

"I know. I want to grow my hair out like you, but it's been difficult," Tino replied.

Lucy's long shiny hair was something any girl would be envious of. But long hair could be an impediment for most hunters.

"For Magi, hair makes for a convenient mana catalyst. But for a Thief, unless you can have confidence in your movements like Liz does, you might want to give up on long hair."

"Okay."

"And while you can get your limbs back, even Ansem can't help you if your head gets cut off."

"Mmm. And it gets in the way during close-range combat. But once I get stronger, I'll definitely grow it out like yours."

"And taking care of it is a lot of work..." Lucy said in a small voice. She

grabbed a lock of her own hair and brushed it against Tino's cheek. They both had black hair, but Lucy's had a certain weight to it. "Matching hair. That might be fun."

"You think so?!" Tino said with glimmering eyes.

Lucy giggled and tied Tino's ribbons. What a kind soul. Tino knew that once the ribbons were in place, she was supposed to stop leaning against Lucy, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

"One's coming," Lucy murmured. "They never ever learn."

Her eyes were sharp, almost unrecognizable from the gentle eyes that had been looking at Tino. Before Tino could say anything, the door swung open, and in came one of the Smart sisters—the energetic one.

Lizzy hadn't been expecting to run into someone besides Tino. Before Tino could recover from her confusion, Lizzy darted forward, and, almost like magic, began to run along the ceiling, her robe fluttering wildly.

"Krai Baby! I'm gonna wash your back!"

"Lizzy?! Master's currently—"

Lizzy ignored Tino completely.

Before Tino could even get to her feet, Lizzy was pulled off the ceiling and came crashing into the ground. Her yukata began to change color. It was turning gray.

"Turn to stone," Lucy said in a chilly voice.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Lizzy cried.

Tino had never seen that spell before. It terrified her.

Her clothes now entirely transformed into stone, Lizzy lay on the ground, glaring at Lucy.

"That's what I'd like to ask you," Lucy said. "I can't wrap my head around how you manage to be so stubborn."

"It's none of your damn business! Now get the hell out of my way!"

"Solidify."

Lizzy tried to break through the petrified garment. But to Tino's shock, those fists that could break through some metals had no effect on the stone.

"Ah! Okay, I get it! Lucy, you can come along! You too, Tino," Lizzy screamed. Lucy's eyebrows twitched.

"Begone."

"What can I do for you, Luke?" Lucy asked.

The tension was palpable.

"Ah, the thing is, Lucia, it's about this hot spring. There's no waterfall," the red-haired Swordsman responded, completely serious.

What were they to do in such a strange situation?

"I can't train like this, so I thought I'd ask Krai for alternative training methods. Is he in there?" Luke asked. Neither his crimson eyes nor his tone of voice suggested he was joking around.

In some ways, Tino found Luke to be the hardest visitor to deal with. She had been entrusted with the task of making sure no one got in the open-air bath. However, Luke and Krai were of the same sex. Some might argue that meant it was okay for him to go in. After all, the main bath was divided by sex and Luke probably wouldn't stick around once he was done talking to Krai.

Uncertain what to do, she looked up at Lucy, who didn't seem quite so lost.

"Very well," she said with a small sigh. "I'll make you a waterfall, so please leave us."

"Make it a hot one."

"Yeah, as you wish."

An avalanche of sky-blue dragons came bursting through the door.

"Raaawr!"

"Wha?!"

The herd of excited dragons was barreling straight at Tino.

"Lucy, why's a herd of dragons here?! Why?!" she screamed, completely at a loss over what to do.

Lucy remained unshaken and simply said an incantation.

"Begone, every one of you."

With thundering footsteps, a gray giant entered through the ruined doorway. It was Killiam and the other Smart sister was atop its back. Through holes in a paper bag, two eyes peered down at Lucy.

"He he, I imagine you must be tired after casting so many spells, Lucy."

"Siddy?! Were those dragons your doing?!" Tino cried.

Siddy made a smug grin. Tino had seen her fair share of villains, but this still sent a shiver down her spine.

Killiam looked around through bloodshot eyes. It was a powerful magic creature, more than Tino could handle on her own. Now that it had come to this, all she could do was depend on Lucy.

"Begone," Lucy said.

"Hehe, your spells will do you no good. You see, I've taken a number of anti-Lucy countermeasures. Don't think you can get rid of me so easily."

Siddy held up an empty vial. Tino didn't know for certain what had been in it, but it seemed safe to assume it had been something that enhanced magic resistance. Tino thought Siddy's behavior was awfully childish compared to her usual demeanor.

Lucy scowled as Killiam began to slowly approach.

"Worry not, I'm not going to kill him, just wash his back. Oh, Lucy, feel free to call me Mistress Sitri."

Lucy stood up and glared at Siddy. Mana emanated from her body. Her expression caused Tino to take a few steps back.

"Very well. You really want to do this, then? I'll beat you down, just as I

"Ryuu-ryuu."

Today's guest was sweet-sounding and quite fine-looking. It was also a Troglodyte.

"Master, does it matter if they're human or not?" Tino wondered aloud.

"Ryu-u?"

A circlet-like pattern adorned the top of her head. In other words, provided Siddy was correct, this Troglodyte was the princess. She blinked a few times, a very humanlike expression. Apparently, these creatures had intellects on par with human beings.

"Master's not a Troglodyte! Shoo! Shoo!"

"Ryuu-u-ryu-u!"

It didn't seem like words would work, so Tino made a scattering gesture. The princess nodded and began to walk onward to the door—only for Tino to jump on her.

"You can't go in! I was told not to let anyone enter!"

"Ryuu!!!"

With her arms wrapped around the princess, Tino was surprised to find that her gray skin was actually soft like a human's. The Troglodyte wriggled her hair in an attempt to shove Tino off, but she held tight.

It no longer mattered to Tino whether or not it was a human. This was a gauntlet for her to overcome and she wasn't going to let anyone pass.

"Ryu-u-ryu-u!"

The door opened and five more Troglodytes came barreling in. They must have sensed their princess was in danger. It wasn't as big as the swarm Krai had commanded, but it was more than Tino could fight off.

"No! Nooo! Master, run!"

The Troglodytes tackled Tino and the princess, slamming into the door. Without a loud crash, it slowly fell over.

It wasn't working. Tino alone wasn't enough to ensure her master's ability to enjoy a bath. Her mind resolved, she pulled out her last resort—the Relic she had received from her master.

Evolve Greed would draw out her latent powers. Super Tino, as her master called her in that state, should be able to fight off any potential intruders. She had never thought she would need to use it outside of a battle.

No, this was a battle. This was war.

"Has my time come at long last? How I've waited," said the mask.

Tino always carried the mask with her, but not with the intent of using it. There was no meaning in power granted easily. But now wasn't the time to be picky.

"There's no denying the strength I bring out in you. No doubt, you could protect your beloved."

"Beloved?!"

"Do not forget, I am but a tool. Your true adversary resides within yourself."

What was this mask talking about? It didn't matter, Tino had made up her mind. She would protect her master, even if it meant wearing this mask. She wouldn't have brought it out otherwise.

Once again, Tino surrendered herself to the mask and became Super Tino.

Power flowed through her. Feelings of intoxication and elation overwhelmed her. Her blood burned, her breath was fire. Her clothes felt tighter. The mask did more than just draw out her latent powers. She grew taller, her chest grew bigger, and her figure improved overall.

It was a feeling of omnipotence. It was strength. Lizzy, Siddy, not even the princess could stand against her. Tino squeezed her chest. She was already slightly larger than Lizzy, but now the difference was undeniable. A thrill of

pleasure ran down the back of her neck.

She turned to the door she had been protecting thus far. She could win. In this state, she could seduce Krai. Lizzy's chest was small. Siddy was a malicious person. But she had been loyal, had a nice figure, and was young. She couldn't lose.

No, no, no. I can't think like that. It's an illusion of the mask.

Tino wasn't going to be fooled. She was strong. Even if it seemed like a good idea right now, she knew she would regret it later. The surest path to victory was through steadily establishing trust. She took a deep breath and praised herself for not getting swept away by temporary impulses.

Then she noticed her hands were moving on their own, removing her clothes. She undid her shoulder straps and slowly took off her camisole-like top. She burned with feelings of both freedom and guilt. No matter how hard she tried, her hands wouldn't stop.

She stopped lying to herself. She knew she was doing this of her own volition.

It's all right, whispered another Tino—Evil Tino. She had watched over Krai all this time. He was kind enough to even stay friends with Lizzy. He would forgive her, just this once. Then it hit her. She could wash his back. She had to say thanks for everything he had done for her. Just this once and never again. She was going to make memories and this was the only chance she would ever get.

She burned with anguish. Her voice was desperate, just like it had been with every other incident so far.

"Master, run for it. I-I'm coming in," she said in a small voice and quietly entered through the door.

In front of the door to the open-air bath, Tino stood with arms outstretched to block any intruders. But the intruders paid her no mind and simply stepped over her. Tino cried out in frustration.

"Ribbit. Ribbit," she croaked.

Then Tino woke up. What a terrible dream that had been. She had dreamed about protecting her master's safety, but being too powerless to carry out her duty. She lost to Lizzy, Siddy, even herself. But then the dream came to an end.

Now that she was awake, *this time* she would protect her master. With renewed determination, she pulled herself up. She was in Krai's room, the one she had seen so many times in her dream.

In front of her, Lizzy and Siddy were fighting. Pillows were being thrown and legs swung. Potions were used. Killiam was present. It was chaos.

Tino finally remembered. She had fainted. And she hadn't been entrusted to protect Krai. When she really thought about it, it didn't make any sense that he would rely on her to stand guard. He wasn't the sort of person to lose his head just because Lizzy or Siddy broke into his bath. Naturally, Tino wouldn't faze him either.

With a sense of enlightenment, she knocked on the door and then went in, making sure the fighting sisters didn't notice her.

"Master, those two are running rampant. Please do something about..."

"Rawr?"

In the form of a sky-blue dragon, her master cocked his head and looked at her with doe eyes.

Afterword

Allow me to offer my deepest thanks for picking up this book! Tsukikage here, I'm glad to be meeting you all again in volume five. Roughly two and a half years have passed since volume one of *Let This Grieving Soul Retire* went on sale. Time really does fly by.

Some of the childhood friends have been hinted at since volume one and have appeared only in bonus stories, but now they've appeared in the main books. It almost feels like the end of a veeery long prologue!

In fact, the themes of this series are misunderstandings and friendship! Friendship! Krai's already a troublemaker on his own, but when all his friends are around, he becomes even more leisurely. With his increased sense of safety, the rate of "Yeah, uh-huh," goes up even further. Please look forward to his upcoming escapades.

Let's talk about the volume itself. This volume was the latter half of the vacation arc. We had hot springs, dragons, and Cave People. The cast got to bathe, but Krai, Tino, Liz, and Sitri also got to run amok. We also had bandits and the rest of the childhood friends. What a packed volume. Honestly, who came up with this plot? I sure can't recall.

And with the presence of hot springs, this volume's illustrations are full of skin. Skin, dragons, and Killiam. What an ample volume. To tell you the truth, illustrations were one of the reasons I wanted to have a hot spring volume.

I want to go to a hot spring.

Surely, drawing all these naked bodies will help Chyko forgive me for making them draw that macho and chimera.

I want to go to a hot spring.

What a nice cover we had this time. It's very final volume-y. This is the power

of a united Grieving Souls. It feels like they put the logo in the center because there wasn't anywhere else to put it.

But despite the cover's vibe, this is not the final volume. I WILL WRITE AROUND ONE HUNDRED VOLUMES (NO, I WON'T). But thanks to everyone, volumes one through four have received an additional printing. WITH MY CURRENT MOMENTUM, I'LL WRITE AROUND ONE HUNDRED VOLUMES. A HOT SPRING VOLUME ONCE EVERY FOUR YEARS (NO, I WON'T)!

Also, the manga adaptation is still ongoing. Volume three of that should be coming out around the same time as this book. It covers the final parts of the first novel. Comparing it with this volume, I found it funny when I realized Krai was a bit more serious(?) back when he didn't have his childhood friends around.

Tino was both pitiful and dignified. Liz was both cute and terrifying. And then there's dopey Krai. With all of that, the manga is wildly expressive. Please give it a read if you haven't already! Hebino Rai's depictions of Krai are overall awesome, but Krai only gets worse from that volume on, so I can't wait to watch that unfold! Make him say ryuu-ryuu! C'mon, ryuu-ryuu!

Now then, I'd like to wrap this up by offering some thanks.

Thank you very much, Chyko, for once again handling the illustrations. I love the yukata, the dragon, and Lucia on the cover is just perfect. It's your illustrations that make writing this series so fun! I hope we continue on like this.

Thanks to the editor and water-lover, Kawaguchi, as well as everyone in the editorial and related departments at CG Novels. Once again, you've all done so much for me. You've arranged so much more than just the editing of this series and I can say with confidence that it's thanks to your effort that *Grieving Soul* has gone on this long. Thank you so much! Please continue to save me! You can even edit from a riverbank, I don't mind!

And last, I'd like to offer my deepest gratitude to the readers who have stuck around this long. Thank you and I hope to meet you all again in volume 6!

PS: As with volume 4, there's a QR code that leads to a survey. Answering it leads to a side story. Please check it out.

(Note: This does not apply to the English edition.)





Bonus Short Story

Let This Grieving Soul Train!

"Oooh! Hot spring training!" Luke roared as he stood before the completed main bath. All I could do was let out a sigh. As usual, he had a strange way of seeing things.

Daily workouts were indispensable for treasure hunters, not even the prodigious Grieving Souls could get away with slacking. In fact, it was often said that a hunter's level was directly proportionate to the amount of training they had done. And my childhood friends all had a manic obsession with training.

Their renown wasn't for nothing; the only member not training regularly was me. You could even say it was part of their lifestyle. I learned this when I saw how Liz, Sitri, and Tino all wanted to train even during our vacation.

Energetic as ever, Luke's eyes sparkled as he swung the wooden sword Lucia had recently made for him. Nothing about him suggested that he thought of it as a chore. I had considered stopping him but dismissed the idea when I saw how much he was enjoying himself. Instead, I just let out a yawn.

"What training did you have in mind?" I asked.

"Well, if I'm gonna train then there's gotta be a waterfall," he answered.

This man really liked his waterfalls. He was always making them part of his training, but I had my doubts if it worked. I had never stood beneath a waterfall so I couldn't say for certain, but I had trouble imagining what use it could be for a man who could cross blades with mirages.

Noticing my look of confusion, Luke smiled boldly. "By standing beneath a waterfall and becoming one with nature, you can cut the world!" he said.

"Y-You can? That's nice," I said, not sure what else to say.

In spite of it all, he was one of the foremost Swordsmen in the imperial capital. There's nothing passion can't triumph over.

"Today, hmm, I think I'll go for one hundred degrees Celsius," Luke declared. "Huh?!"

"And the water's gotta be faster than your average waterfall. Put it as high as you can! I'm training endurance, so make it something that could leave a crater in the ground!"

Is it still a waterfall at that point? And wouldn't that be boiling water?

"Maintaining that for a long stretch will be my own form of training," Lucia said, clutching her head.

"G-Good work out there," I said.

"Leader, while you were idling away in the bath, washing Ansem's back, and dozing, I did nothing but control the water!"

"Yeah, uh-huh. Good job, Grand Magus! Lucia number one!"

"Oh, for crying out loud!"

Magi were often the most versatile members in a party and Lucia wasn't called an Archmagus for nothing.

"Hey, Krai Baby," Liz said, nudging me. "T and I, we're gonna train by running across the water!"

"Huh, me too? O-Okay then," Tino said.

"The water's gonna be scalding, so you better bring your A-game."

"Wha?!"

Much to Tino's horror, Liz clearly wasn't taking no for an answer.

It's not a competition, you guys...

Would there really be a day when that sort of training proved useful? And how do you even run across boiling water in the first place? I had a lot of questions, but I mostly wanted to know why Liz seemed so giddy at the idea.

With a grin, Sitri casually shuffled up to me. "I'm going to work on my hot spring golems," she said.

"What for?" I asked.

"After that, hmm. I can't think of any training I can do that's particular to a hot spring. I suppose I'll try holding my breath."

Why? You don't need to. You don't need to push yourself so much. Just relax and have fun. I've never heard someone say "I suppose I'll try holding my breath."

"Oh, sounds good. I'll hold my breath too!" Luke said.

"Good idea, Siddy. C'mon, T, we're gonna hold our breath!" Liz added.

Tino let out a shriek.

"You too, Killiam," Sitri called.

"Kill, kill," said the loyal monster.

It looked like the breath-holding idea really resonated. I just felt bad for Tino.

"What sort of training are you going to do?" I asked Ansem.

He had been silent up until now. Unlike his sisters, Ansem was a quiet man. But something about him prevented those silences from becoming uncomfortable ones. He was worthy of the title Immutable, but as his longtime friend, I knew that he didn't disdain having conversations.

He grunted in response to my question. It wasn't on his face, but I could tell that something was bothering him. Good thing Sitri always knew what to say in these situations.

"In a place like this, there's not much my brother can really do in the way of training," she explained.

"If we tried to injure Anssy, we'd just break the hot spring," Liz added.

"And Ansem's already fine without breathing much," Luke pointed out.

"Mmm."

I had trouble wrapping my head around the fact that our most reliable member was also our most freakish member. And "already fine without breathing much." That's another string of words I had never heard before.

Still, Ansem seemed a bit lonely. Did he really want to train that badly?

"Why don't we intensify our training? That way Ansem can heal someone if they collapse," Lucia suggested with a shrug of her shoulders.

"That's it!" everyone said at once.

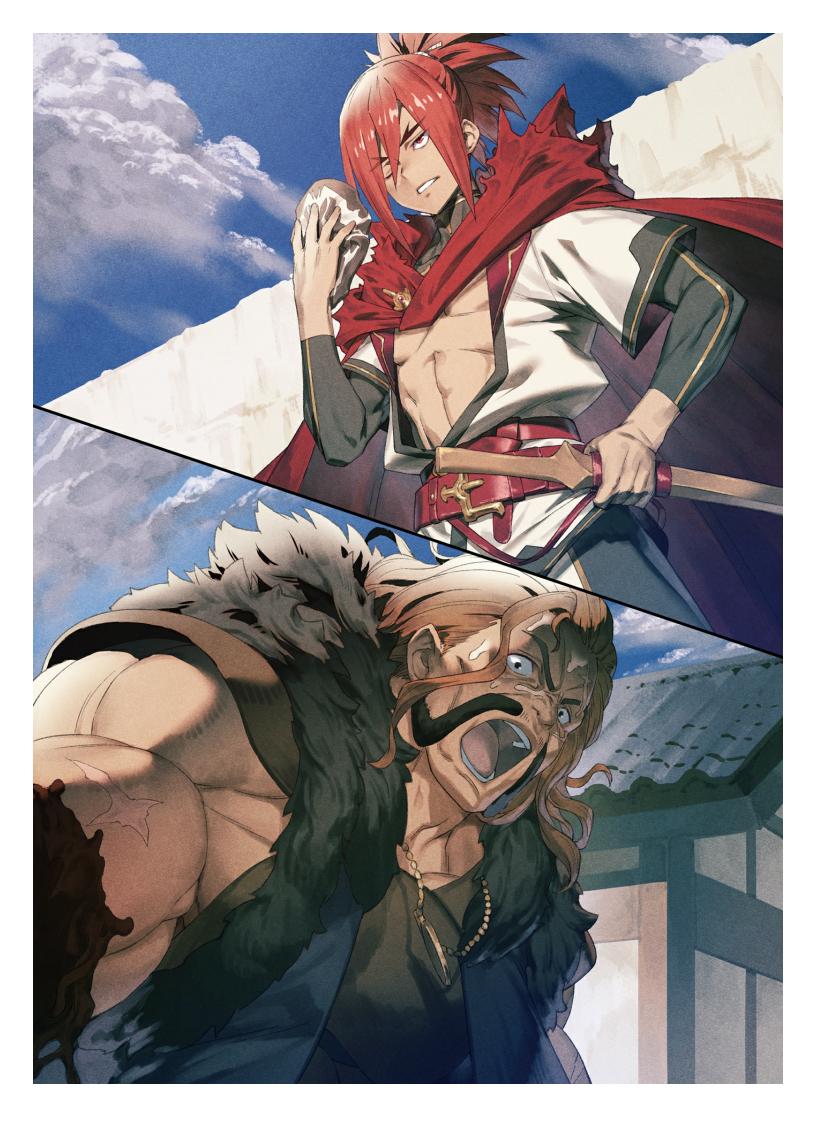
These people are too much for me. And if anyone here is going to collapse, it's going to be Tino, isn't it?

"Mmm!" Ansem said with a nod.

I heard Tino let out a small shriek as she hid behind my back.









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Let This Grieving Soul Retire! Woe Is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party Volume 5

by Tsukikage

Translated by Grant U

Edited by Aldia Elwood

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