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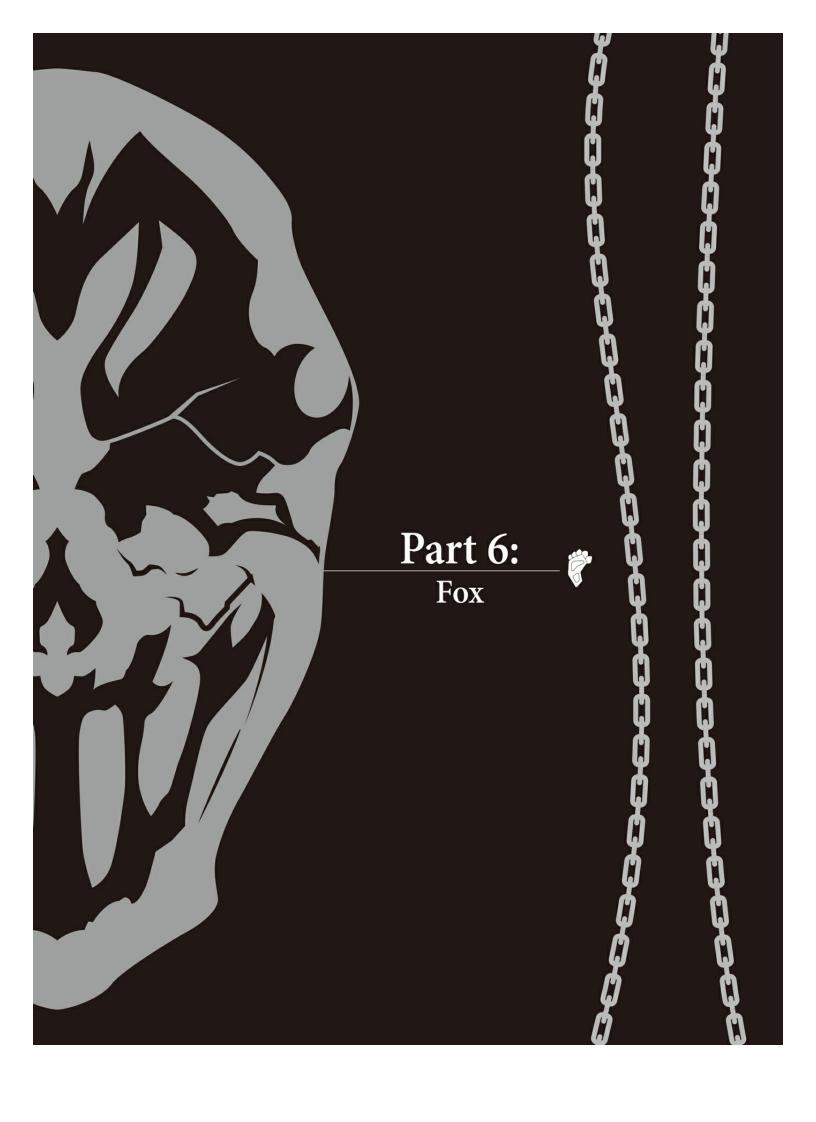
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Prologue: Returning Home

It was a beautiful day. Our vacation in Suls was over and we had spent the past few days uneventfully rumbling along in the carriage. A refreshing breeze passed through. Then for the first time in a month, I was at the gates of the Zebrudian imperial capital.

Overall, I'd say it was a wonderful vacation. There was the matter of Arnold chasing us and the attack by the Cave People, but that was all just a memory now. Turning all of my memories into good ones might have been my only way of responding to all the trouble I kept finding myself at the center of.

At the very end of it all, I was reunited with Luke, Ansem, and Lucia. Asking for anything more would just be greedy.

The carriage was filled to the brim with souvenirs I had bought in Suls. All purchases were made to aid me when I bragged to Eva and the rest of the clan about what a great time I had. It was mostly hot spring dragon manju, hot spring dragon eggs, and hot spring dragon bath products.

There was also a souvenir from the princess of the Cave People (according to Sitri, her name was Ryuulan). It was a pendant inlaid with a strange stone. I didn't know if it was worth anything, but there was still so much unknown about Cave People, maybe someone could tell me if it was a rare item or something.

Even though our party used carriages, most of us never rode in them. It was usually only Sitri, Lucia, and myself riding, and even then those two sometimes would choose to run along outside. I had been reminded of the old days when I watched Luke, Liz, and Ansem (and Tino) run along the carriage as a way of getting some training in.

The gates of the imperial capital were damaged and being repaired. An imposing line of knights was outside the gates, quite unlike how it was back in Suls. Lucia had mentioned that there had been a commotion going on in the imperial capital and it seemed it hadn't entirely settled down just yet.

There's danger here, danger there. What a dangerous place this is. Well, as far as I can tell, it doesn't seem like there's any chaos at the moment.

"I'm gonna take it easy and nap once I get home," I said with a yawn as I stretched my back.

"I haven't seen you do anything besides taking it easy," Lucia commented.

Of course I had been taking it easy, we had been on vacation. However, no matter how much you try to relax, when you're on a trip, you can't help but be a little bit on edge. Taking it easy on a trip is a different species(?) than that done in one's own home.

Lucia pressed her temples and sighed. "After my absence, I'll have to charge all those Relics..."

"Hm? Ah, I had most of them charged, so I don't think it should be that bad."

"It shouldn't?"

Lucia looked at me like I had gone crazy. I'm sure what I said had come as a shock to her; I usually relied on her for all my charging needs. But I could manage when I needed to.

"Per...Sitri's request, Kris and the others charged my Relics."

"They did?!"

Lucia let out an enormous sigh. Judging by the look in her eyes, it seemed she wasn't too thrilled by this.

"What were you thinking having other people charge so many Relics?! You shouldn't place that burden on others!"

"Th-They were all happy to do it. They thought of it as practice."

I was pretty sure I understood what a burden it was. I hadn't planned to get all those Relics charged, but Sitri was a fearsome dealmaker.

The glare in my sister's eyes wasn't going anywhere.

"A-And it's fine," I said, making another attempt to placate her. "There's still plenty of Relics left for you to charge."

"I'm going to hit you."

It wasn't just the front gate. Most of the imperial capital wasn't as I remembered it. It was almost like the city had been bombed. Roofs were half destroyed, streets had been ripped apart, and knights were desperately controlling traffic. Even the trees in the streets and a favorite café of mine hadn't gotten out unscathed. Anyone who didn't know better might have thought we were at war.

I had heard a bit about Akashic Tower and Hidden Curse butting heads, but it seemed the Hidden Curse clan master, the pyromaniac lady, had gone on a rampage. Akashic Tower was a fearsome magic syndicate, but Hidden Curse was a force to match. If that clan of Magi had been using wide-area magic spells throughout town, then I was hard-pressed to say which one was supposed to be the criminal organization.

But, looking around, I didn't see any corpses. It was possible they had just been turned to ash, but I knew the citizens of the imperial capital were all used to handling these situations. Not to mention the war did seem to be over.

This is something no hunter should say, but I couldn't handle the sight of dead bodies. All the more reason to be glad I had been out of the imperial capital at the time. Not that I could have done anything even if I had been present.

I left Sitri to take care of the carriage, as I always did, and bounded up the stairs to the clan house, a box of manju in my hands. I had tried a few on the road and found that hot spring dragon manju weren't half bad.

They weren't actually made with dragon, but their blend of sweet and sour flavors did mean that they could be enjoyed even by people who didn't usually care for sweets. I never did learn what they had to do with hot spring dragons, but I did recall seeing the hot spring dragon gleefully partaking in them.

"I'm baaack!" I yelled as I entered the lounge. "Huh?"

I stood frozen, smile and all. The usually tidy lounge looked like a tornado had passed through. A number of tables had dead-eyed hunters resting their heads against the surface and beer bottles were scattered across the floor.

I felt like I had seen something like this just recently. Lucia looked at the

lounge with wide eyes and Luke scowled, (probably) thinking nothing good. To make things worse, at one table was Obsidian Cross, undeniably one of our foremost parties. Their leader, Sven, froze when he saw me, his eyes like those of a zombie.

Oh yeah, I think I heard something about our clan members getting dragged into the commotion.

Smiling, I approached their table and placed a box of souvenir hot spring dragon manju in front of Sven. Sven's shoulders shook and his cheek twitched when he looked at the box and the cutesified dragon drawn on it. I patted him on the shoulder, turned on my heel, and made a break for it. Behind me, I heard a clatter as he stood up.

"Ah! Hold it! Stop, damnit..."

"Luke, I'm busy, you can take care of the rest!" I told my friend.

"All right, let's go! The training hall awaits, Sven. I'll show you my new techniques!" Luke said, eyes shining brightly.

We just got back and he's got that much energy. My apologies, Sven. I don't have time for your grumblings, I've gotta give a souvenir to Eva.

"Shit! Hey, you bums, don't let Krai get away!"

Sven's screams almost made me feel sorry for him. Like corpses rising from their graves, the other hunters all looked up with predatory glints in their eyes. I patted Lucia on the shoulder as I passed by her, eliciting a series of curses from her.

I heard a scream from the lounge as I eagerly dashed up the staircase.

While the blood drained from Sven's face when he saw me, the vice clan master, Eva Renfied, greeted me as she always did.

"Welcome back, Krai. How did you enjoy your vacation? I've heard...rumors."

"We had our ups and downs, but it was fun. Here, a souvenir," I said with a grin.

Eva accepted the manju with a look of exasperation. This was what I was

looking for. I felt my wounds being healed. What was Sven's deal anyway? The man had looked at me like I had killed his parents or something. He'd had his opportunity to come on a vacation and he'd turned it down! Well, if he had come, that would've created trouble in its own right.

"I understand you had your hands full with Bandit Squad Barrel, but with you gone, we've had our fair share of troubles here. A few words of thanks to the clan members would be greatly appreciated."

I already gave them a box of manju.

"Now that you mention it, you do seem a bit worn down."

She didn't have bedhead or anything, there wasn't a thread out of place on her uniform, and her glasses were spotless. Yet something about Eva was different than how I remembered her. She wasn't a hunter, but Eva was the effective top dog of our clan. If the other members were that exhausted, then it wasn't strange she would also feel the strain.

I was just an ornament, so it didn't really matter whether I was or wasn't around, but I supposed it was stressful not having someone to take responsibility if something went wrong.

"I'm sure my absence created plenty of headaches for you," I said. "If there's anything that needs to be done, I'll take care of it. Go get some rest."

Managing a clan was a big job and I didn't have a clue how to do any of it, but I was sure I'd be fine as long as Lucia and Sitri were around to help out. The two of them had respect among Eva's subordinates; Sitri, because she could do anything, and Lucia, because she was always helping out. She probably just couldn't stand to see her brother make a fool of himself.

Eva eased up a bit and sighed as she shook her head.

"It's quite all right. The trouble here has already settled down. There's a report on your desk, but a battle between Hidden Curse and the remnants of Akashic Tower wreaked havoc throughout the capital. I called them remnants, but it seemed Akashic Tower still had quite a number still in hiding. As such, emergency assistance was requested from First Steps and we had to mobilize quite a number of members."

"That, uh, that sounds like quite the ordeal."

Now I was really glad I had gone on that vacation. The leader of Hidden Curse, the Abyssal Inferno, was a terrifying Magus. How terrifying? So terrifying that the mere mention of her name would bring a look of displeasure to Lucia's face. In my head, I referred to her as the pyromaniac lady because she burned everything in sight. If anyone could be described as a witch, it was her.

Not to mention she had a bone to pick with me. The matter had already been solved at this point, but when Grieving Souls was first founded, we reached out to a party that Hidden Curse already had their sights set on. Then, for some reason, said party chose to join up with us. That party ended up being our second most troublesome one—Starlight. After that, I was never again able to walk confidently through the streets of the imperial capital.

If that scary old hag was involved, then it was perfectly natural that Sven Anger came out looking like a corpse. There was no way I could handle a person who treated even Ark like a mere child and took joy in immolating people. It was a genuine mystery how she was still allowed to walk the streets as a free woman.

"To make matters worse, the other Magus was a real monster," Eva said, layers of fatigue coloring her voice. "Can you believe it? I hear they tried to summon a lightning elemental. A lightning elemental in a crowded space!"

Sounds like hell.

Elemental summoning was one of the most challenging feats of magic possible. We just made Lucia summon a water elemental so she could create waterfalls, but some were powerful enough to be classified as a strategic offensive arm. Even I knew that those weren't something you should use in a place packed with bystanders. That's a magic syndicate for you.

What a disaster. I remembered that Arnold had apparently defeated a lightning elemental, but an elemental following the directions of a skilled Magus was magnitudes stronger than a wild one.

"And what do you think the Abyssal Inferno did when she heard about it?!" Eva asked. "She summoned the fire elemental she's contracted with! She responded to force with more force! In the middle of the imperial capital!

Completely unbelievable. This is the issue with Level 8s..."

I feel like I should apologize.

"Good thing the imperial capital's still standing," I offered.

Eva looked quite aggrieved.

When I first saw the damage to the imperial capital, I wondered if a war had broken out or something. But that all changed when I heard that the Abyssal Inferno summoned an elemental. Instead, I thought it was a miracle that the damage was this limited. There were rumors that that old lady had torched entire treasure vaults and it wasn't too hard to believe.

"I'm not up to date on the specifics, but I heard that summoning elementals was quite taxing for both sides," Eva said.

"Hmm, that's fortunate."

"They say the lightning elemental was especially draining on its summoner and the duel was resolved quite swiftly. I suppose we should consider ourselves lucky."

Elemental summoning involved summoning an existing elemental and then commanding it. The resulting force was dependent on both the capabilities of the caster as well as the condition of the elemental.

Naturally, the elemental was free to do as it pleased when it wasn't being commanded by its Magus. Plus there was a delay between when it was summoned and when it actually showed up, making it a very finicky sort of magic. There were even tales of elementals being wiped out and not showing up when their Magus summoned them.

Lucia, by the way, used hers for making waterfalls, so she kept her elemental in a bottle that she carried on her. That was no easy accomplishment, but she had always had a knack for training animals. She was the one who'd taught my Hounding Chain how to shake.

But now that it was all over, this conflict was none of my business. I brushed aside the report on my desk and opened up my personal box of hot spring dragon manju (it was a twenty-piece box). I had purchased as many boxes as I

could so I still had around thirteen left.

As I stuffed my cheeks with a strawberry-flavored manju, Eva said something quite strange to me.

"Oh, Krai, about the Gathering of the White Blade..."

"Hm? Mmgh. Ack, ack. Ah, that. Sorry that I missed it. But it's not like I was playing arou—"

Eva looked at me and blinked, puzzled.

"Hm? Oh, no, it was put on hold. It's in three days. I was worried about whether or not to notify them of your absence, but now I don't have to worry about that. I can't tell you how relieved I am."

Chapter One: The Gathering of the White Blade

"Huh?! Master's going to the Gathering of the White Blade?!"

For Tino Shade, this came as quite a shock.

"Hm? You didn't know? Apparently, he got an invitation and the VCM's been running around with her hair on fire."

"B-But, Master was just with me, working on a quest..."

Tino hadn't heard a word about this. Even during the Trial-disguised-as-a-vacation, he never showed the slightest hint that he had been invited to the Gathering of the White Blade.

Invitations to said event were one of the top honors a hunter could receive and proof of their contributions to the empire. Outside of exceptions like Ark Rodin, whose family had served the empire as hunters for generations, it was unheard of for someone as young as Krai to be invited.

But the Gathering of the White Blade should have already passed. Looking back on his escapades-slash-hot spring trip, Tino never would have imagined he had been bestowed such an honor.

"The VCM was certain he would return, but I don't think she anticipated the event being put on hold," the other hunter said casually.

Tino, however, was trembling. She had been by her master's side and seen it all. She knew it was no coincidence that they made it home just in time for the delayed gathering. Even while being so far away, while causing all that mayhem, he had managed to fit the Gathering of the White Blade into his schedule. If he couldn't have, would he really have chosen to stop at a hot spring?

After witnessing such a display of temerity and foresight, Tino gave up on even trying to read her master's intentions. If Tino had been in his position, stopping at a hot spring before such an esteemed event would have been unthinkable, even if she had been aware that it was being put on hold. Her head began to spin as she struggled to figure out what possible meaning there could

be behind his actions.

"Still, I wonder who the CM is gonna bring. I'm pretty sure they're permitted a companion..." the other hunter said as though it was perfectly natural.

Oh, that's right!

The other hunter was remembering correctly. Attendees of the Gathering of the White Blade were indeed allowed to have someone accompany them. Most hunters did as the nobility did and brought their most trusted acquaintance from the opposite sex. Naturally, that excluded Tino from being a candidate. She didn't think she was so conceited as to let herself believe otherwise.

And yet...

Grieving Souls was a tight-knit party. At the very least, Lizzy, Siddy, and Lucy were all potential companions. It wasn't at all hard for Tino to imagine the Smart sisters fighting for that position. But did that mean she had a chance?

If Lizzy and Siddy got into a spat, Krai most likely wouldn't choose either of them. That would leave Lucy, but she was such a kind person. Surely she would cede the position to Tino. She was, after all, Krai's younger sister. Tino gulped. It was shallow thinking on her part, but she wouldn't succeed if she didn't try.

The future is something you take with your own hands. Her master had taught her that during their vacation. Expediency was key. She would claim her victory before the others even realized what was at stake!

There was a dress code for the Gathering of the White Blade. If she approached Krai in a stunningly beautiful dress, the meaning would be plenty apparent and he would extend the invitation to her. And once he said yes, Lizzy and the others couldn't argue with him. Such audacious thinking had set Tino's heart pounding like a drum.

But I know. Today, I'm on fire.

"Don't tell anyone else about that," she told the other hunter in a low, threatening voice.

"O-Okay?"

Tino dashed off. She needed to get a dress ready.

The Gathering of the White Blade was the most famous and most esteemed meeting among hunters of the empire. It was sponsored by the emperor himself and meant for a small number of hunters who had made contributions to Zebrudia. This was my first time, so I didn't know much about it, but apparently, there would also be lots of the empire's bigwigs and only the most accomplished hunters had even been allowed to attend.

According to rumors, this had all started after Ark's ancestor fought a grueling battle and cleared the Level 10 treasure vault that once rested on what would later become the site of the imperial capital. After that, the emperor wanted to meet with said hunter and began this tradition. Apparently the "Blade" in "Gathering of the White Blade" referred to the holy blade passed down through House Rodin.

Attending the Gathering was an undeniable honor, but I was looking to retire ASAP. I wasn't excited at the idea of attending an event where the emperor would be present and I lost all reason to go when I remembered that there would be droves of hunters there as well. Compared to those storied veterans, I was practically a bug. Not to mention, I didn't know anything about etiquette, so I always ended up doing something rude whenever I went to these sorts of events.

With the event right in front of my eyes, I couldn't even revel in the afterglow of my vacation and spent the whole day trying to think up a plan of action. However, my empty head availed me nothing.

Three days. That's way too soon. No, wait, a day's passed, so it's two days.

I was determined not to go. My stomach hurt.

"I don't wanna go. My stomach hurts," I moaned as I planted my face on my desk.

Eva sighed. "You must go," she insisted.

I go on a vacation so I can avoid this event and then it just gets delayed. Is that fair? No, it's not.

It was all because Hidden Curse and Akashic Tower had gotten carried away

during their little schism. What terrifying things Level 8s were if they could cause the Gathering of the White Blade to be delayed for the first time in history.

Going on another vacation seemed out of the question. Eva was already exasperated by my first blatant attempt to flee; if I tried that again then she'd be the one heading for the hills.

I snapped my fingers.

"I've got it. I'll make Ark go."

"As I'm sure you're aware, Ark received an invitation of his own."

Of course he did. He was a Rodin and a regular attendee. I had already heard something about him attending a number of times prior.

"I don't have anything to wear."

"I don't believe there's a dress code for hunters, but we do have something prepared for you. It's tailor-made."

Classic Eva, always prepared for anything. She brought out a finely made tuxedo.

A tuxedo. I'm going in a tuxedo? No way. Impossible.

"I don't recall getting my measurements taken."

"Sitri had them on record. Some hunters attend in their armor, but, well, you don't typically wear armor."

That seemed like it would attract no small amount of attention.

Let's think about this calmly. First and foremost, I don't want to attend. Under no circumstances do I want to find myself there.

"Well, I'm fine with going, but something's bound to go wrong if I bring one of my party members," I warned Eva.

"You're the only one invited. You're to go as the representative of Grieving Souls."

"There's something wrong with that."

I didn't wanna step into that circle of hell. The pyromaniac lady was going to be there and that alone was too much. I desperately began to think of solutions, like maybe making Ansem go in my stead.

Eva adjusted her glasses and looked at me. "You are permitted to have one person accompany you," she said.

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"Right. I'll bring Ark."

"You can't."

"I'll bring Ansem."

"He...won't fit into the venue."
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Eva's tone was incredibly serious, I felt she was chastising me. I wasn't so sure she was right about Ansem, but bringing him along could cause trouble. He was a man with an overwhelming presence and that might needlessly agitate the nobles and muscles-for-brains hunters.

If running wasn't an option, then I could just lower my head and hide in a corner where nobody would look my way. I was second to none when it came to letting time pass by. If I had to, I wouldn't even discount groveling. Which meant I needed a partner who wouldn't discount me for not discounting groveling (I don't know what this means).

My options are looking slim. I guess I'll have to go with Ark after all. I'll have him decline his invitation and then he can—

"I understand Ark is planning to bring one of his party members. They say it's incited a fierce battle," Eva said.

"Oh yeah, something like that's bound to bring out the murderous rage."

Strong, handsome, and a party free of troublemakers. What an overachiever. Some people are just born with all the luck.

After working my brain so hard, I let out a yawn. I was tired of thinking about it. With so little time left until the Gathering, I decided I'd just bring whoever happened to be free that day. I had nobody I wanted to butter up and no greater ambitions. I'd just read the room and spend it quietly like the country bumpkin I was. That way, it'd all be over in an instant.

That's it. I've got Mirage Form. I can hide my face and hide among the nobles. If I'm in a tuxedo, nobody will guess that it's me. Man, I'm on fire today.

I grinned, pleased with such a good idea, when the door suddenly opened. It was Liz. I was glad to see her so upbeat even though we had just gotten back from a trip, but I was caught off guard by her outfit. Eva, likewise, stood frozen.

Liz was wearing a red dress, one with a slit that ran up to her thigh. The tight collar and formfitting dress perfectly matched her slender figure. The sight of her suntanned leg peeking out from the slight was undeniably stunning. But any allure she had was nullified by Apex Roots still covering her legs.

She did an enthusiastic twirl. "Does it fit me?" she asked bashfully.

"It does. But what's it for?" I said.

"Hee hee hee, you can take someone with you to the Gathering of the White Blades, right? I thought I had to pick an outfit that wouldn't embarrass you and so I had this prepared."

Huh? No, no, no, no, no. I can't bring you. The dress is nice, but you're the last person I'm bringing to that event.

It was such a flashy dress, we'd be picking fights without even meaning to. We'd be picking a fight with the emperor. She sure was, uh, well prepared. Did she realize this wasn't a game? And how was I supposed to respond when she acted like her invitation was already set in stone? I was more than happy to bring her to an event, so long as it was one of no real consequence.

Eva looked similarly taken aback. Sure, there was no dress code, but a deep red dress was still out of the question.

Don't worry, you don't have to look at me like that, Eva. I won't bring her.

And then, through the door Liz had left open, entered Sitri. She was in a long black gown. In a sight quite different than her usual robe, the porcelain skin around her shoulders and collarbone was left exposed. It was refreshing on the eyes (never mind that we had just been at a hot spring). I couldn't help but notice the tasteful accessory in her usually unadorned hair.

Sitri scowled when she saw who had arrived before her, but she smiled after

looking at her own reserved appearance. She turned towards me and grinned from ear to ear.

"What do you think, Krai?" she asked. "I had this prepared for the Gathering of the White Blade. Surely, you won't have any reason to be embarrassed by an outfit like this!"

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean, Siddy?" Liz asked.

"Naturally, I'm also prepared for potential combat scenarios. I may not be able to hide my arms, but..."

Cheeks flushed, Sitri rolled her skirt up to the top of her legs. At the top of her white, veiny thighs was a belt carrying a number of small potion vials. Liz was quick to respond to the obvious provocation.



"Siddy, can you even do anything if a fight breaks out suddenly? Step aside, I'm going with Krai Baby!"

"Lizzy, you don't know the first thing about etiquette."

"What the hell would I need that for?"

A lot of things, I'd imagine.

If I had to pick one of those two, I was going to go with Sitri. Her dress wasn't too gaudy and looked really good on her. Sure, she wasn't going to be useful if we found ourselves in close-quarters combat, but I could count on her to back me up if I made any faux pas.

Tino tepidly poked her head in.

"Ah, um, Master, if you have a mome—never mind!"

Seeing the bickering Smart sisters, she quickly ran off before even entering the room. Perhaps she, too, had heard that I was attending the Gathering of the White Blade? Except I wasn't going.

Luke then dashed in, eyes aglitter.

"Ah, Krai! Is it true you're off to fight some tough guys?! Take me along!"

He didn't even have the right info. Besides, Luke cut down anything and everything, so he was a no-go for the same reasons Liz was.

If I was going to take someone, it would be Sitri or Lucia, or maybe Eliza as the dark horse option. But taking Sitri along would incur Liz's wrath, Lucia was in her rebellious phase, and I didn't even know where Eliza was. As the number one free spirit in the party, she was always going missing. The first time we'd met her, she had collapsed in the desert. Her moniker was, after all, Vagabond.

"You'll take me, won't you, Krai Baby? I promise I'll behave."

"Pshh. Krai, make it clear to her that this isn't her place!"

Liz and Sitri both spoke with total confidence.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. Regardless of what I did, Ark would still be at the Gathering and I could just rely on him should anything happen. "I hate to ask this of you, Eva, but could you make preparations for the Gathering? I want you to come with me."

"Excuse me?" Eva said, eyes wide with disbelief.

The day of the Gathering of the White Blade had arrived. I prayed and prayed that a lightning bolt might demolish the imperial capital, but, much to my dismay, I saw nothing but clear skies outside my window.

Something about me attracted rain clouds. Any time I went to the beach or hiking or some other outdoor activity, there was a good chance I'd get rained on. But, almost like god had it out for me, rain never came to cancel unwanted events.

Surrounded by hunters and nobles, it would only take a few hours before I would begin to wither away and dissolve. I knew Ark would save me, but as time went on I became more and more queasy.

"What's the matter, Krai?" Eva asked with exasperation. She was still in her usual uniform as the event didn't start until later in the evening.

"I can't do it. I don't wanna go," I said, as I collapsed on my desk.

"I'm not even one of your party members and I'm being forced to come along. How do you think I feel?"

She was quite right to feel that way, but bringing her was my only option.

"You agreed to this, didn't you?"

"Have I ever turned down a request of yours?"

"I still don't wanna go," I said, pressing my cheek against my desk.

"You must," Eva said, turning towards me. "And that wasn't a request!"

"Well, let's be serious about this. Who knows what might happen if I bring Liz along with me?"

"That's true," Eva said, looking surprised. "I didn't know you considered those sorts of things."

Just what type of person did she think I was? I wasn't proud of it, but gauging

people's expressions was how I got by in life.

"This is no minor get-together. If I brought Liz then the results might not be pretty," I said, trying to at least seem hard-boiled.

"Not pretty..." Eva repeated with a look of exasperation.

Then I remembered something I needed to ask her.

"Right, Eva. Before we go, could you teach me about etiquette? I've never studied it, you know."

Being a Level 8 brought in all sorts of invitations, but I almost never chose to accept. Being the clan master of a large clan also brought in invitations from nobles and merchants, but I foisted those onto Eva for her to deal with. Outside of hunters, the most esteemed person I even occasionally met with was branch manager Gark.

I didn't want to cause any trouble! I could've done worse and brought Liz or someone from my party, but the sad reality was that living harmlessly wasn't allowed when politics became involved.

"Well, as long as you don't get too casual, I don't think hunters are required to be versed in etiquette," Eva said, slightly put off by my request.

I knew that, but, in spite of how I seemed, I still wanted to come off as someone with their act together. I spoke formally, I was as humble as I could be, yet I still kept making people angry. Surely this was because everyone preferred big macho guys and didn't care for skinny people like me. What's that you say? Ark's plenty popular? Yeah, uh-huh!

"But, now that you mention it," Eva said, "if you want to get on a noble's good side, perhaps you could give them a present?"

"A present?"

So bribery? I hadn't thought of that.

I wasn't too keen on developing any relationships with nobles, but it might just work. It would be better than pissing people off. As I thought it over, it began to seem like this would be Sitri's domain (very prejudiced of me).

"It doesn't have to be something expensive," Eva explained. "Trinkets that can

only be found in high-level treasure vaults have become status symbols among the nobility. Remember, Ark recently grabbed everyone's attention when he gave someone a Firmamental Blossom."

"Ah, that useless flower. Hmm, what should I go with?"

It was a flower with transparent petals made of mana material. Some of my friends had picked them before, so I remembered it well. It certainly was pretty and otherworldly, but it didn't have any powers and wasn't stable so the poor things couldn't survive long outside their treasure vault.

In that regard, it was similar to the portraits found in castle-type treasure vaults. It wasn't an item, but rather a part of the treasure vault itself, so if you brought it out, it would dissipate in the same way a dead phantom would.

Liz and Sitri had once given me a bouquet of them as a present, but I never figured out a good use for it. In the end, I put it in a vase in the clan house lounge and they faded away at some point or another.

I didn't get it in the slightest, but I guess I could see how their rarity made them a status symbol.

"It'll get people talking, so if you have something..."

"Good grief, I'll never understand what goes on in the minds of those rich folk. Hmm, what could there be? I'll give it a look."

Conveniently for me, our party had just come back from Night Palace, a high-level treasure vault. They typically only brought back Relics and drops from phantoms, but the Grievers were prone to doing as they pleased; it was possible they had brought back something like a Firmamental Blossom.

It was a pain in the neck, but it was in the name of staying out of trouble. And so I began to look around for something that might aid me during my upcoming social call.

As the sky began to turn crimson, a carriage pulled up in front of the clan house. I put on my tuxedo and sat in my office, clutching my aching stomach all the while. The fingers of both my hands had Relic rings, a Relic pendant was around my neck, a Relic chain around my belt, and I wore Relic earrings just for

good measure. On my arm, I had the bracelet Mirage Form, and in my breast pocket, I carried the rings that I didn't have room for on my fingers.

I was ready for any form of attack, whether it be poison, magic, or physical, yet that didn't make me feel better in the slightest. Only super high-level hunters were invited to the Gathering of the White Blade. Before such freaks, a normal person wasn't going to be any less helpless just because they had a few Relics. The only option left to me was simply praying to the heavens.

Don't worry, Krai. You'll have allies. Ark will be there and so will Eva. You'll be perfectly safe.

Not to mention, I had a trump card. I looked at the present atop my desk and told myself that everything would be all right, that I needed to be calm, and that the event would go just fine. Even hunters knew to behave themselves when they were around the bigwigs of the empire. Then, while I was mumbling to myself, the door opened.

"Thank you for waiting. That's quite a face you're making, Krai."

What I saw momentarily caused me to forget the pain in my abdomen. Eva was in a long navy blue dress. I saw her just about every day, and even though she still wore her usual glasses and hairstyle, simply donning something besides her usual uniform made her look like a completely different person.

It wasn't flashy in the slightest, but it looked quite nice on her. Unlike her usual neat uniform, the gown left much of her shoulders exposed and her pale skin contrasted blindingly with the dark fabric. She also wore some subtle accessories and I couldn't help but look her up and down a few times.

With my childhood friends like Liz, I still continued to look at them with the same eyes as I had when we were young. But Eva was different. We were separated by only a year, yet at that moment she had an air of serene dignity.

Uh-oh. This might draw some attention if I'm next to Eva. I just need to focus, and not let her distract me.

"You look really nice, Eva. I'm already glad I invited you."

My heartfelt compliment didn't elicit any blushes from Eva, just a glare.

"You're always leaving your duties in my hands and you never accompany me to any events. You could've seen me like this any number of times if you just came along."

"Ah. Aha ha ha."

"Hold on, your necktie is crooked. Honestly..."

Eva quickly stepped forward and adjusted my tie. It couldn't have been any more obvious that I wasn't used to wearing one. I noticed Eva had a very nice scent, like she had put on perfume. Once my necktie was straightened out, she took a graceful step back. At that moment, I felt extremely lucky. I wanted to take a commemorative photograph.

"Now, let's get going. The carriage has already arrived. You'll escort me, won't you?"

"You bet I will."

It might have been shallow of me, but I was feeling a lot better after being treated to such a nice sight. With my present in hand, we exited the clan house. Outside, a carriage with the crest of the Zebrudian empire was waiting for us. It looked nothing like the sort of carriages used by hunters.

I felt a number of gazes on us. I took Eva's hand, not completely certain if this was the right way to escort her. Once we were seated, the carriage departed. Its bouncing and rumbling were almost imperceptible. I was nervous, but because I was technically the clan master, I didn't want to do anything pathetic in front of Eva.

The carriage moved along, almost as though it were flying. We approached the majestic building that symbolized the empire itself—the emperor's castle. The emperor was hosting the event, so it was being held in his abode. Naturally, I had never entered the castle before now. I took a deep breath, calming my nerves. Eva, meanwhile, was relaxed as could be.

"Krai, may I ask what that box is?"

"Oh, this? I did as you told me and brought a bribe. I thought I might as well try and leave a good impression. Our party doesn't have the best reputation, as I'm sure you know..."

Eva looked quite surprised, like she hadn't actually expected me to bring anything.

"A bribe? Be sure not to use the phrase at the Gathering, all right? Is that something from Night Palace? If you have no objections, could you tell me what it is?"

I smiled and stroked the box. I had zero objections.

"No, it's a souvenir I bought during my vacation. I couldn't find any potential gifts from treasure vaults..."

It wasn't anything rare, but it was still better than one of those Firmamental Blossoms. It was delicious and undoubtedly better than giving away nothing at all.

Eva was stunned for a moment, then she looked me straight in the eye.

Stop that, you're embarrassing me.

"Did I hear you correctly? That's a souvenir from your trip? Are you serious? It wouldn't be a box of manju, would it?"

"No, it's a box with a hot spring egg. They're a local delicacy of Suls and they're really good."

Not to mention the hot spring dragon eggs were worth more than the hot spring dragon manju.

Eva's cheek twitched and she looked at me in disbelief. "Krai, aren't you nervous in the slightest?"

Huh?

It wasn't long before we arrived at the castle. It had been some years since I first arrived in the imperial capital, but I had never seen the castle up close. Zebrudia boasted greater strength than any of the neighboring countries and the towering castle in the center of the imperial capital symbolized its strength with its grandeur. I had seen the castle from a distance plenty of times, but I couldn't help but gulp when I found myself looking at it up close.

The surrounding moat was almost as big as a lake. As we crossed the massive

bridge spanning the moat, the castle in its entirety came into view. The surrounding walls were low, or rather, they *looked* low. According to rumors, the castle was at all times protected by barriers emplaced via Relics and magic spells. It made sense; a wall a few meters high couldn't keep a hunter out.

There were soldiers in polished black armor on both ends of the bridge. Even as a carriage bearing the crest of the empire passed by them, they didn't even bat an eye. The Zebrudian Empire placed great value on strength and fortitude.

I let out a small sigh and turned my attention away from the window.

Well, it looks like I won't get a chance to throw this souvenir away.

During our carriage ride, Eva had convinced me that the hot spring egg wasn't a great gift idea.

"This is a time-honored event! Please think these things through a bit more," she said in a low voice, so the carriage driver wouldn't hear us.

"You're the one who suggested I bring a present..."

"Krai, what would you think if *you* were suddenly handed a hot spring egg during a party?"

I paused. Honestly, I'd be pretty stoked. But it didn't seem like that was the right answer.

These eggs had a pretty cool name to boot. But they weren't actually dragon eggs or anything, just chicken eggs. So maybe there was some false advertising going on?

Whatever the case, I had brought it with me and I had lost my chance to get rid of it. I had no choice but to give it to someone.

"Who, by the way, were you planning to give it to?" Eva asked.

"I thought I'd give it to the emperor."

If you're gonna curry favor, then of course you might as well go for the top dog. Wouldn't it be rude to start with someone lower?

The remaining blood drained from Eva's already pale face.

"You have to stop this, Krai. Are you taking this seriously? What you're doing

is completely unheard of!"

"I hear the emperor's a pretty lenient guy."

"There are limits."

Okay, I get it. I realize what I'm doing is abnormal. Good thing I brought you along, Eva.

But then I had an idea! I could give it to Lord Gladis if he was at the Gathering. I had a tentative acquaintanceship with him through the Suls incident and I seriously doubted his knights had brought back any souvenirs for him.

I took a deep breath. I was so nervous I actually felt like things might work out somehow.

"Should we be worried about the expiration date of that egg?" Eva asked.

"I've got that covered. I had Lucia place a preservation spell on them."

"Aah, I can't tell if you do or don't know what you're doing."

I don't know what I'm doing, so help me out here. If we combine your competency with mine and divide it by two, we'll be just fine.

Countless soldiers watched our carriage as it passed through the gate. Security was just as thorough as you might expect from a place like the Imperial Castle. The driver told us this was where we were to get out, and we did so, even if it made me nervous. From there, we were guided through the castle on foot.

Contrary to the tales I had heard about how tight security was, we weren't patted down. I asked Eva about this as she strode through the corridor.

"It's tradition," she said with a furrowed brow. "At the first Gathering of the White Blade, the emperor at the time trusted the hunters and permitted them to keep their weapons. To this day, that exception is made only for the Gathering. Didn't I tell you? Some hunters come in their combat gear."

I see. What a bold man that emperor must have been. Then again, isn't the current emperor also a famous warrior?

The castle had a spacious interior and a red carpet was rolled out across the

corridor. Even the air felt different from the rest of the city. I wanted to look around, but I resisted the urge and did as Eva did. We weren't tourists.

Eventually, I began to see nobles and hunters. The former looked haughty and the latter looked powerful and they were, in fact, haughty and powerful. I was ready to go home.

Unlike the black-clad soldiers outside, the guards inside wore white armor. They were probably the elites. I stood around and absentmindedly let my eyes wander, when I suddenly heard a very familiar voice.

"All right! Here I am in the most esteemed castle in the empire! Not half bad!" they said.

"S-Stop that! Be quiet! Do you understand what you're here for?" a guard replied.

"Sure do. I'm here to cut down bad guys. So, where are they? Is it that bunch? Or those guys? Is it everyone here?"

"Quit pointing! The only bad guy here is you! Damn it, why did they decide to let outsiders help guard an event like this?"

"What can we do? Our orders came from the top," said another guard.

"Apparently the Sword Saint pulled some strings. Even if he's got a good arm, even if it's only temporary, I can't believe they'd let the Man Cutter wear the esteemed white armor..."

"I've got no need for armor. I can just cut my foes before they cut me! The very thought is exhilarating."

"Do you really understand what you're doing here? Listen, your job is indeed to cut down bad guys. But we haven't had any bad guys here in decades. Hey, quit taking off your armor!"

Eva turned to me with a wild look in her eyes. I pretend not to see anything. I decided it was fine if he had gotten in through the proper channels.

By the way, that Sword Saint was Luke's mentor. He was considered the strongest Swordsman in the imperial capital, but he couldn't manage someone as uncontrollable as Luke. I heard many grievances from the man.

Luke enjoyed cutting, but he also enjoyed being cut, so I could only imagine how much stress he caused for his mentor. Mostly, I was just worried that my friend might find himself on the lam once the Gathering was over.

From the entrance, I peeked into the massive hall where the event was being held. I found myself wondering what the place was normally used for. There were tables lined up and a chandelier hung from the ceiling. Yet for such a large hall, there weren't very many people.

Eva came up next to me and whispered an explanation, "It's tradition."

I see. Tradition, huh? What a convenient word. I'll have to use it myself.

I looked over the hall. Even for me, it was obvious who was a hunter and who was a noble. I had next to no knowledge of or interest in the empire's nobles, but I could tell who was a hunter by the atmosphere of those who had absorbed mana material.

Any hunter who got invited to an event like this had to be among the best, even in the hunting holy land. This made it easy to tell who to avoid. With that in mind, a quick glance around told me that I was far safer than I had expected. Nobody was turning violent.

Watchful knights lined the walls and maids in fine white apron dresses stood near the entrance alongside butlers in refined black suits. Working in the Imperial Castle was a dream job for many ordinary people. Most who served here were well-educated relatives of nobles.

Then I saw something that threw me for a loop.

"Not a bad place. I know, I know. Can't forget to say hi."

A hunter went over to the servants by the entrance and began saying hello. He was a powerful-looking man with tan skin, most likely the sort of hunter who fought with their bare fists. His hair was dark brown and he had rugged features. I didn't know his name, but he was clearly someone exceptional.

As I watched, I saw that nobles were also heading straight for the servants to give their regards. Some of them were even happily chatting away with the servants. So nobles of the empire even enjoyed chatting with servants. I had assumed most of them to be arrogant, but it seemed they were only true ladies

and gentlemen when you got to the top.

And it seemed the hunters were all decent people as well. When I stopped to think about it, it made sense. All the hunters invited to the Gathering (except me) were people comparable to Ark. I very well might have been the only one to enter without offering a greeting. My poor education was showing. Good thing I had chosen to sit back and watch.

"Krai."

"Mmm, I know."

I could mold myself to match the situation better than anybody I knew. I slipped in behind a noble and nonchalantly waited for my turn to say hello. I took a good look at the servants and noticed they were all quite attractive. I was in the tuxedo Eva had prepared for me, so I wasn't dressed any worse than them, but they still had the advantage when it came to looks. On top of that, some of them were clearly younger than me.

The most striking of them was a girl with light blue hair. She seemed younger than Tino, but the pleasant girl wore the apron dress as well as any of the other servants. I thought about how a girl her age was doing such a good job, while I was, well, me. I stood up straight and put on a smile.

I had nothing to be nervous about. Eva seemed unusually tense, but I told myself to keep calm. This wasn't like dealing with hunters or nobles; these servants were supposedly aware that I didn't know a lick of manners. As Eva had said, hunters weren't expected to know much about etiquette.

The servants had mellow expressions, but their eyes were serious. I noticed that for some reason the knights on guard were also looking at me strangely.

I cleared my throat and tried to look as confident as I could.

"Um, thank you for having me?" I said.

"Krai, it's the emperor who's hosting us," Eva whispered to me.

Then what am I supposed to say?

"Oh, that's right. How silly of me. Forgive me for my poor education. Good evening, it's an honor to meet you."

I received a number of cold glares. I knew that glare, the one that said "Who's this bumpkin?" I cleared my throat and snapped my fingers. This was a good time to ditch my souvenir. My chance to show my humility.

"Right, here's a gift for the hardworking young lady."

I handed the box with the hot spring dragon egg over to the maid with the light blue hair.

"Ah..." she said. She sounded completely bewildered, but she had nothing to worry about—I could personally vouch for the taste.

Eva stood stock-still. It seemed the other servants were also taken aback by my display of humility, because they all looked at me in disbelief.

Don't worry, I'm uneducated, but I'm also harmless.

"Don't worry, it's nothing special," I said, showing just how friendly I was.

"That's a hot spring dragon egg. They're really tasty, so you can share them with

__"

"A dragon egg?!" the girl shrieked before I could say "your friends." The next moment, I was surrounded by knights. It was so fast, it was almost like they had been keeping tabs on me. Still smiling, I froze as blades were pointed at me from every angle.

The maid handed the box with the hot spring dragon egg to a knight, who fearfully held the box up and put his ear to it. There wasn't anything dangerous in that box, it wasn't the egg of a dragon. Hot spring dragon egg was just a product name, the contents themselves were just a chicken egg.

Everyone in the hall looked at us. Eva was pale as a sheet.

"You there!" screamed a large man in exceptionally ornate armor. "What are you doing?! Are you aware of who that is?"

No. Who is she?

I didn't understand what was going on, but everyone else stared at me in disbelief. Eva's complexion only grew worse, but I was managing to maintain a smile.

"Before you is the imperial princess, Murina Atolm Zebrudia, daughter of His

Imperial Majesty Rodrick Atolm Zebrudia," the man said in a booming voice.

"Yeah, uh-huh."

I see. So that's how it is. That's a good degree more exalted than I had expected when those swords were pointed at me.

This was real bad. I kept a smile affixed to my face and kicked my brain into high gear. I had thought she was awfully young and something about her had set her apart from the rest of the group. I knew the imperial princess would be present, but I didn't know her face. But it looked like everyone else knew. It explained why even the hunters were being so polite to her.

The young lady herself was looking at me, completely stunned. I wished someone had told me about this earlier, but it was probably common knowledge. Still, wasn't she the imperial princess super important? Who would expect her to be mixed in among the servants?

Tradition? Is this also tradition? My stomach hurts.

"And you brought a dragon egg?! To bring such dangerous objects before Her Highness... You may be here per invitation of His Imperial Majesty, but that is no reason for you to do as you please!"

"Y-You don't have to get so worked up, it's all fine. Those aren't anything special and they aren't dangerous."

It wasn't a dragon egg; it was just called a hot spring dragon egg. The modifier for "egg" was "hot spring" not "dragon."

I took a deep breath and half-raised my hand. "Sorry, may I go to the bathroom?"

"Krai, aren't you afraid of anything?" Eva asked.

There were blades pointed at my throat, preventing me from taking a step. Luckily, it didn't seem like the knights would kill me without provocation. But they still had a pretty low opinion of me.

Getting kicked out seemed a very real possibility, except I would be all too happy if they were to do that. But it seemed just as likely that I might get arrested for defamation of the imperial princess (provided that was an actual

crime). If that happened, I'd spend the rest of my life being hunted for being the guy who tarnished the reputation of Zebrudian hunters.

"W-Wait," said a sharp-voiced woman, just as I was trying to look away from reality.

Some of the blades quivered slightly and a break formed in the ring of knights. The owner of the voice was someone I had encountered about a month prior—Éclair Gladis. Unlike our last meeting, she wasn't armed and wore a frilly evening gown. Her voice carried the impact of an adult, but there was panic in her eyes.

"Th-That's the man whose endeavors saved the imperial capital from Akashic Tower," Éclair continued. "I'm well aware of your duties as knights, but the Gathering of the White Blade is an event for hunters, and going into a frenzy over a souvenir is...unwarranted."

"Y-Yes, but..."

"Not only that, but dragons' eggs are extraordinarily valuable. It's worth much more than the average accessory and they're a gift befitting of a hunter. I will admit that directly handing it to Her Highness is, well, rude beyond belief, but, as that man says, it's not dangerous. First, we should take a moment to confirm the contents of the box. Unless you plan to ruin this storied gathering before it even starts?"

The knights had looked at me with such threatening eyes, but now they were being forced to doubt themselves by a girl in her teens. Some of the other nobles began to voice their agreement, suggesting that Éclair was well-liked among them.

I had been saved, but I wasn't quite sure why. I sure hoped she didn't want me to return Evolve Greed. That, unfortunately, was now Tino's. But whatever the case, I was out of the fire. I cast Éclair a look of gratitude and her shoulders trembled.

While trying not to draw too much attention, Eva leaned close to the clan master.

"Krai, wh-what are you thinking?" she asked in a rapid voice.

Smiling, he held up his hands as though admitting defeat.

"Huh? Oh, I'm so relieved Éclair saved me back there," he said.

Eva gave him a look of protest, but his face suggested he didn't think he had made a single mistake. Recently, he had been causing (relatively) little trouble, but creating headaches for Eva was what the Thousand Tricks did best.

It was probably true that he hadn't made any mistakes. How could that have been a mistake? Anyone would recognize the face of the imperial princess. It would explain why he was so calm, even when he had been surrounded.

But it was too much to bear for his companion and vice clan master, Eva. There was nothing she could have done back there; he had moved before she could stop him. They could have been thrown out if Éclair hadn't stepped in. Getting tossed out before the event even began was unprecedented. Similarly, Eva had never heard of anyone giving a souvenir to the imperial princess.

From the very first Gathering of the White Blade, it had been tradition for the emperor's daughter to disguise herself as one of the maids. At the first Gathering, the emperor decided to test the hunters by disguising his daughter as a maid and hiding her among the servants. One attendee, the hunter Solis Rodin, immediately saw through the disguise and paid his respects to the young lady. The emperor was said to have been deeply impressed by this.

This was a story famous throughout the empire and spawned a tradition. That tradition, however, had become somewhat superficial over the years as the imperial princess's disguise devolved into a simple change of clothes.

But there was still a tacit understanding. She would be a servant for the duration of the Gathering, but that didn't make her any less the daughter of the emperor. Handing her a souvenir was one thing, but saying "Here's a gift for the hardworking young lady" was simply disrespectful.

Eva tried to guess what Krai was thinking, but she couldn't discern anything from his gaze, which was sweeping over the banquet table. He seemed to be appreciating how delicious the meal looked, but surely he didn't have something so benign on his mind.

Many of the nobles looked at Krai with contempt. They clearly weren't fond of how he had brazenly approached the imperial princess and tried to curry favor (even though that probably wasn't his intention, that was how it looked to everyone else) in front of everyone. And Eva knew that that souvenir wasn't actually the egg of a dragon, but was just called a hot spring dragon egg! Not that she could tell what the purpose of handing them over was.

"I know it's far too late to say this, Krai, but I think I'm out of my depth here," she whispered in spite of herself.

"Don't say that," the clan master replied, furrowing his brow. "Look, I'm pretty sure most of the people approaching us are only interested in you."

As if!

Even a rapidly growing clan like First Steps couldn't get away with causing trouble at an event like this. So many times, Eva had attended functions as part of her job and wished the clan master was with her. But now that it had actually happened, she thought that maybe it was for the best that she had been alone all those times. Krai saw and understood things in a manner entirely different than she did. Thinking back, even when he had first invited Eva to join First Steps, this man's behavior was beyond audacious.

Krai walked up to his savior Éclair and began chatting with her like he was bumping into an old friend.

"Thanks for that back there. I don't really know anything about etiquette, you see. Was it my choice of words?"

Éclair let out a small shriek. "Th-Think nothing of it. I've had a debt to you since the auction and from the matter with Barrel."

"Huh? Oh, I didn't do anything during the thing with Barrel. Just like during the auction."

"Indeed..."

Éclair was proud and known for her disdain of hunters, but now she was cowering. It seemed the auction had left a considerable impression on her. There was something remarkable about the contrast between her face and Krai's grin. That man had a tendency to think everything would all work out so

long as he smiled.

"I'd like to offer some form of thanks," he said apologetically "but I already gave that mask to someone else—"

"I-I have no need for that thing!" Éclair said as the blood drained from her face in an instant. "Do what you like with it. Now, I'm rather busy, so don't bring me any more trouble!"

With that very reasonable request, the young lady quickly made her escape.

"Ah," said the man who had managed to incite fear into the famed Éclair Gladis using mere words. He blinked, an absentminded look on his face. He turned to Eva and said, "And yet it's not like I want to cause an uproar."

"It happens."

It's a little late for that, Krai. You struck fear into the heart of Éclair Gladis!

The nobles, the special guests, the merchants, all were thinking about how to handle the startling newcomer that was the Thousand Tricks. Sensing the multitude of eyes on them, Eva felt a renewed sense of responsibility and stood up straight.

I have to do something. I need to smooth things over before Krai makes an enemy of every single person here.

With perfect timing, a bell rang. The Gathering was beginning. The hall quieted down and everyone directed their eyes towards the entrance. Krai's eyes were darting about every which way, but Eva bumped him on the arm and indicated the direction he was supposed to be looking.

Through a wide open door entered a man in a flowing dark outfit. He had blond hair and blue eyes. He looked to be about fifty, but his gaze was sharp and his robust figure didn't suggest someone middle-aged. His clothes were simple, but not seedy, just lacking in ornaments. Most notable was his lack of a crown. Yet his impressive bearing gave him a strong presence that would shine through no matter what he wore.

This man was the fifteenth emperor of the Zebrudian Empire, Rodrick Atolm Zebrudia. The first man to recognize the arrival of the golden age of treasure

hunting and bring even greater prosperity to Zebrudia.

His simple attire, and his lack of crown and bodyguards were also part of a tradition that went back many years. The only thing proving he was indeed the emperor was the sword at his side.

Emperor Rodrick looked out at the crowd. Everyone (except Krai) was kneeling before him.

"There is no need for that. Be at ease," he declared. "I thank you all for coming here at my behest. Each and every one of you is a boon to the prosperity of the Zebrudian Empire. Tonight, we shall enjoy ourselves, free from the restraints of stiff formalities."

The crowd erupted with applause, an applause that masked the quiet voice of the clan master.

"I dunno, he's a lot more ordinary than I imagined."

Hearing such an absurd statement, Eva couldn't stop herself from lightly elbowing him. So began a battle, one which was *supposed* to be fought without swords or spells.

"Okay, Krai. I don't know how serious you are or aren't, but if you're at all uncertain or lost, please confide in me. If you really have to, you can rely on me entirely. Am I clear?"

So Eva had said. I knew I could count on her. What a good choice I had made in bringing her along.

The Gathering's food and drink were of the quality you might expect from an event hosted by the emperor. That alone made me glad I chose to show up. With a wine glass in one hand, I engaged with the old men who milled about like a swarm of flies. With so many people blabbering at me, I couldn't get to Ark even when I finally found him adorned in his white tuxedo.

I recognized next to none of the people who came up to me. It was clear they were big powerful people of the empire and this was a choice opportunity for networking, but I wasn't interested in that in the slightest.

Talking to someone even as they blatantly avoided making eye contact was a level of boldness I would never reach. I could barely understand them when every single word they used was something lofty. I didn't know much about the state of the empire, so I was just as lost when they tried to bring up current events. And they never said anything in clear terms, preventing me from even having a proper discussion with anyone.

But I had my escapism skills and I had Eva, who knew everything about me. Whether it was a noble or merchant or whoever, I'd put on a big smile and say "Yeah, uh-huh." It worked on these sorts of folk.

"Including clan relations, I leave these sorts of matters entirely to my right hand, Eva," I said to one old man. "To tell you the truth, I had to bow before the Welz Trading Company to get them to let her go. I'm hardly unbiased, but she's an exceptional person."

"What? The Thousand Tricks bowed before someone?!"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

I must have talked to about ten people and each time I could change the subject by bringing up Eva. Everyone seemed quite interested in the pretty lady at my side.

The Welz Trading Company was one of the biggest in the empire. It was a name everyone recognized and I was certain at least a few of their associates were at the Gathering. Now to be precise, it's not that I got them to hand over Eva. I got on my hands and knees and got a receptionist, who happened to be Eva. But I guess that meant I had an eye for people. I remembered it clearly. What I said was, "It can even be the receptionist, just give me someone."

The old men (I didn't know any of their names) all looked at Eva with wide eyes. Her eyes darted about as the blood drained from her face.

"Indeed. N-Now, Krai, please, that's enough."

"I'm not exaggerating when I say my current success is thanks to her talents," I continued. "It's why I had her accompany me to such a significant event. She's done so much for our clan and for me as a person. And don't even think that I might part ways with her."

The delicious wine had loosened my tongue. I was so busy chatting, I never had the chance to grab some food, and that made it all the easier for the wine to flow through me.

"Please, don't jump to conclusions; she's not my lover or anything. If anyone's in love it's me—"

I felt my foot being stepped on, causing me to gasp. The bigwigs all looked slightly taken aback.

"Please forgive us, it appears the CM has had a bit too much to drink," Eva said in a strained voice.

I knew this voice. It was the voice she made when she was angry. All I was trying to do was secure Eva's future.

"My apologies, that was just a joke. Oh, Eva, only you've ever inflicted damage on me. Even in treasure vaults, I've never been harmed."

"Is that another joke?"

"No, I'm serious."

I knitted my brow and rubbed the useless Safety Rings on my fingers. The old men finally lost their cajoling smiles and looked at us in confusion.

Just then, Sitri flitted past me. She was in the same dress she had shown me the day before.

"Huh?! Why's Sitri here?" Eva asked.

"I dunno."

No doubt, it was indeed Sitri. I would never mistake someone else for her. Crossing my arms and trying to seem composed, I began to think it over.

Is everyone here? I thought security was supposed to be pretty tight, how could they have—

A tan arm reached out from under a nearby table. It poked me in the leg, so I handed it my wine glass and the arm receded. It seemed the tablecloth made for good cover.

"Master, this isn't a crime, is it?" said a trembling voice from under the table.

Eva looked completely bewildered. I smiled and did my damnedest to pretend I hadn't seen anything.

Tino and Liz are here without permission. I'm one hundred percent certain of it.

"Krai, what do you intend to do about them?" Eva asked me.

"Eh, they've always followed me no matter where I go."

"I think this is a bit more serious than some tag-along friends."

She was right, but it was a little late for me to do anything. I just prayed that they wouldn't stir up any trouble. Tino was there (probably against her will) and that counted for something. Just in case, I checked for the other members.

With his size, Ansem would be easy to spot. While he did have the means to make himself smaller, he didn't seem like the type to misuse that power. As far as I could tell, Lucia wasn't there either. But Gark was there. As usual, a tuxedo didn't suit him in the slightest.

The emperor was extraordinarily popular. Surrounded by hunters and nobles alike, the man didn't even glance my way. Eva didn't seem too happy, but I was starting to relax a bit. That battle she was so worried about must have been just a rumor.

"When are you going to give your regards to the emperor?" Eva asked me, noticing that I was looking at him.

"Hm? I wasn't planning on it?"

"Y-You have to! What are you thinking?"

I was thinking that I didn't want to talk to the emperor. I wasn't planning on trying to make friends in high places or anything. If I really had to get in line, then fine, but if paying my respects was optional then I was ready to sneak out and head home. The emperor was preoccupied; I had a feeling I could get away with my escape so long as I didn't make any noise.

"Never mind that, Eva. Look at all the magnificent food they have here."

"Hm? Yes, it's quite an arrangement."

I hadn't had much of a chance to get any food because of all those old men who had been talking to me for some reason.

"I think I'm gonna sample a bit of everything," I told Eva.

"What for?!"

"Because... Because I want to. It all looks pretty tasty."

"You're not nervous in the slightest, are you?"

Of course I was. It's why I was eating. How many people were going to approach someone while they were in the middle of a meal?

My gaze happened to meet Sitri's, so I gave her a little wave. She seemed briefly caught off guard, but quickly smiled and waved back. Next to her was a large old man.

"That's the head of Sitri's old haunt, the Primus Institute," Eva said.

The Primus Institute was one of Zebrudia's foremost research facilities. Becoming the head of them also meant joining the nobility. With that in mind, something about the bearded old man made him look very dignified. As with most Alchemists, he was well-connected.

Being my naturally unnatural self, I grabbed some food, took a drink, and wandered off to look for a place where nobody would look at me. Eva followed along diligently.

"You don't need to stay by my side, Eva. Why not go and make some connections? I'm a dangerous person to be with."

"Because of a certain someone, I've already made more than enough connections. And what do you mean by dangerous?"

I mean I'm a magnet for bad luck.

"Go and give my regards to the emperor," I told her.

"You're coming with me!"

"Fine, fine. We'll go later."

The emperor was still at the center of a crowd. I could see Ark smiling brightly and talking to him. If I were to get in there, I'd just look like I had been placed

there as a form of punishment. There really was something different about men with confidence. Ark was the very image of a champion. I wished some of that would rub off on me.

I brushed off Eva's grumblings and sampled all the fancy alcohols that I didn't recognize. But one of the glasses took me by surprise when I picked it up. I didn't know what kind it was, just that it was a red wine. I glanced around before approaching a nearby table. Sensing my presence, a tan arm jutted out from under the tablecloth. I handed it the glass of red wine and received an empty glass.

How in the world is she moving around?

"What's the matter?" Eva asked me.

"There was something mixed in with that wine."

"What?"

"It's probably a test for the hunters. I've heard stuff like this is common at the Gathering."

"If you say so..."

What a pickle. I didn't know what was mixed into that wine, but it was probably nothing good. Poison resistance was a necessary trait for plunging into dangerous places. Phantoms and monsters could both use it and sometimes even the air was filled with poison. Poison resistance became especially important for high-level treasure vaults. Some hunters would deliberately swallow poison so their mana material would bolster their bodies against toxins.

I had zero resistance, but I made up for it with Relics. The ring on my right index finger, Silver Breath, was a Relic that detected any drugs that might affect the wearer. If the wearer came near poison, the ring would turn black and grow warm. Safety Rings couldn't nullify poisons hidden in food and drink, so Silver Breath was another one of my lifelines.

Good grief. I thought I was just going to a party, but now I've got a sudden challenge on my hands. Can't relax for a moment, can I?

"I can't believe this," Eva said. "Should we report it?"

"No, think about it. There's no way the food could be easily poisoned at an event attended by the emperor. And this gathering is known for having especially tight security."

"Well, you have a point."

Eva seemed to have been thrown for a loop. Perhaps she had never had her food poisoned before. I had. It was in a dish Sitri had made for me.

"There's tons of high-level hunters here," I went on. "Only an idiot would make a move at a place and the hosts would have to be a bunch of morons to not see it happen. Something like that would never happen at such an important function. I'm a pro when it comes to these situations, so you can just leave it to me. Oh, another spiked drink. My bad luck continues."

I approached the table and the arm once again stuck out. I gave it the wine glass. Liz had resilience against just about every poison out there, so it was safe to give the glasses to her.

I figured this must be another tradition. One where everyone would watch and say stuff like, "Ooh, look. They're fine even though there was poison in their drinks. Hunters sure are something."

I looked around, but nobody else seemed to be showing any wariness towards the food and drink. Maybe they were just hiding their wariness, maybe they all had poison resistance, or maybe the hosts were paying close attention to ensure that only hunters drank the poisoned refreshments. Either way, causing a fuss would draw attention and be crass. I brushed my finger against Eva's glass, but it didn't seem to be poisoned.

If the current sample size was anything to go off, it seemed like Liz would be drinking a pond's worth. As fortune had it, there didn't seem to be any poison in the food. While handing wine glasses off to Liz, I would occasionally enjoy a bite for myself. My favorite dishes were the impeccable chocolate desserts. I wanted to take some home to share with everyone in the clan.

I finished my conquest of the banquet and handed another glass of poisoned wine to Liz, a motion I had gotten very used to. But then I noticed a guard

approaching me with an intimidating glare.

"You there, what have you been doing with those glasses?"

Uh-oh. UH-OH.

After passing so many glasses off without getting noticed, I had begun to let my guard down. Apparently, I had been seen. What was I to do?

"N-Nothing. Now, why don't you get back to doing your job?"

Panicking, I said something quite useless, causing the guard's already grave expression to turn downright terrifying.

"Quiet!" he yelled at me. "Hey, there's someone under this table!"

Eva became pale as a ghost. Before I could get a chance to flee, the knights surrounded the table. The hunters, special guests, the emperor himself, everyone looked to see what was going on. I was gonna barf.

Now that it had come to this, I did what I had to and tried to cause a diversion so Liz could escape. Making a split-second judgment call, I pointed in a random direction and yelled, "Ah! What's that?!"

My bluff couldn't have been more obvious, but everyone simultaneously looked where I was pointing. Following their example, I, too, looked in that direction. And what I saw surprised me. Right where my finger was indicating, near the ceiling directly above the emperor, was an upside-down top half of a person. Their face was hidden by a deep blue mask modeled after a fox.

The fox-mask person looked at me and paused, but dropped down when they realized they had been seen. As they lowered to the ground, their bottom half eerily materialized. They were headed straight for the emperor. People began to yell, and one noble lady let out an earsplitting shriek.

Huh?! What even is this event? Is this another tradition?!

I was pretty sure I was the only one who was entirely out of the loop.

Then, a crimson breeze brushed past me. It was Liz. Even in her red dress, she wore her Relic boots. She ran up (maybe trampled is a better word) the back of the knight who had been questioning me a moment ago, then leapt into the air.

Apex Roots was a Relic that let its wearer take one step on thin air. It wasn't a particularly powerful Relic, but Liz was more fleet-footed than anyone and she knew how to make the best possible use of that one step.

Kicking off of thin air, her boot connected directly with the Fox-Mask's torso. The impact created a sound as though she had hit something metal, not the body of a human. Fox-Mask's body bent at a ninety-degree angle and flew back.

At the same time, one of the knights shouted, "Intruder!"

An intruder?! A real one?!

Nobody was prepared for an attacker, but nonetheless, the hunters began to move. Luke kicked open the massive door of the dining hall and hurled his sword with all his might straight into Fox-Mask's torso, yelling all the while. "THERE IT IS! THERE'S MY INTRUDER!"

"Rock Coffin!" someone yelled.

That sounded a lot like Lucia just now!

Flying boulders stuck to Fox-Mask's body, entrapping them in a tower of stone. Then I noticed Ansem, tall enough to force me to crane my neck. With a loud grunt, he swung his fist in a wide arc, bringing it down on the rocks. The hall shook and the screams were drowned out by his large fist as it pulverized the tower of stone.

Ark and the other hunters were ready for combat, but Grieving Souls was just too quick on the draw. I turned around and saw Lucia, disguised as a maid and sighing as she pressed her temples.

Oh, so that's where she was.

Ansem made a questioning grunt. Safely behind the knights, the emperor looked on with wide eyes. Standing right next to Ansem's fist was Fox-Mask—the person he should have just crushed. Their mask and onyx black robe appeared completely unharmed. It was uncanny; I thought I had seen Luke's sword pierce their torso.

An imposing man standing before the emperor raised his arm. "Apprehend that person!"

"Quit making such a commotion. This wouldn't have happened if you had done anything but take half-measures!" said a voice.

I let out a simple "Ah."

A crowd of ultra-high-level hunters stood ready to attack, evaluating the best way to approach. From their ranks emerged an old woman with a robe red as a pillar of flame. She was already tall for a woman, but she also stood up perfectly straight. A plethora of deep wrinkles were carved into her skin and set deep in her face was a set of crimson eyes that flickered like a candle.

She was an exceptional spell caster. She was the Solace of Vermillion, designated Level 8 for reasons quite unlike my own, and one of the most capable Magi in the imperial capital. She was the Abyssal Inferno.

It was awfully bold of her to attend the Gathering when she had halfdecimated the imperial capital just a few days prior. She was known for reducing her foes to ashes and I considered her the poster child for the "cast first, ask questions later" mindset.

It was beyond me why such a dangerous individual was allowed to attend the Gathering year after year. My first assumption was that it was because she would burn the Imperial Castle to the ground if she didn't get an invitation.

As though stirring the air, she moved her arm, causing a crimson glow to encompass it.

"Everyone get down!" Ark yelled.

Eva, the nobles, and the emperor all heeded his warning and immediately ducked for cover. The only one who didn't get down was me. I didn't see the point if my danger-detection Relic wasn't going off.

"Immolation Coil!"

And then everything was masked by a burning light.

When I opened my eyes, nothing was left.

"Hm?"

To be a bit more precise, everything near the floor remained—it was

everything higher than my chest that had been incinerated. The granite ceiling and the chandelier adoring it had been turned to dust.

A hole had been bored into the ceiling just above where Fox-Mask had been. I could barely believe it when I looked through it and saw the sky. That hole would probably require lots of time and money to repair. Times like these called for the cheap labor of the Troglodytes.

It goes without saying, but nothing remained where Fox-Mask had been standing. The flames had risen to the sky like a pillar and the surrounding destruction was collateral damage. The capital's strongest Magus, the Abyssal Inferno, hadn't lost her touch just yet.

I also had a strong desire to look away and disconnect from reality. "Aah, such good chocolate, gone to waste," was all I could say.

"Krai?" Eva called.

It was then that I returned to my senses.

What are you doing, you pyromaniac hag?! I coulda died back there!

I finally noticed how loud the hall was. I noticed all the nobles crouched on the ground. It was a little late, but my heart began to pound and I took a deep breath.

"Hmph. Still the same foolish boy you were the last time we met," the crazy old lady grumbled.

I looked to my side, unable to bear the sight of her.

"Ah, chocolate."

A fan-shaped area behind me was unburned. My body had served as a well to protect the chocolate. That spell must have been a directional attack. If it had been an area-of-effect attack, it would have scorched everything (it also would've meant there was no point in ducking).

Fully aware that I had no respect for the occasion, I began to munch on my undamaged chocolate. Everyone looked at me with disbelief. I felt like I had to say something. *Something*.

Gotta say something. Uhh, something that'll calm down this ill-tempered old

lady.

"You missed a spot," I said. "Wouldn't have happened with just a bit more firepower."

While still covering Kaina with his body, Gark looked at me with an extraordinary expression. Sitri was looking at me incredulously. Just as an uncomfortable silence took over, the emperor clapped his hands.

"We've had a petty interloper. Unfortunately, I'm afraid tonight's Gathering will have to end here! Sir Franz, tighten security and make sure that nobody has been harmed!"

Ah, it's over? What a relief. Well, it'd be weird if it wasn't over after all that.

That was too much for one evening. I was ready to head back to the clan house and hit the hay, but a glance from the emperor (the first time he looked at me that evening) cut me off.

"Thousand Tricks, no, all of Grieving Souls, I'd like to have a word with you and the Abyssal Inferno."

I couldn't say the feeling was mutual. I slumped my shoulders and the pyromaniac old lady snorted.

We left the hall that the evildoer—I mean, the Abyssal Inferno—had rendered useless. Everyone relevant to the situation had been assembled. There was the emperor and his people, along with Gark, Eva, Lucia, Luke, Liz, Ansem, and the exceptionally destructive Abyssal Inferno. Somehow, our dear friend Sitri had slipped out. Sure, she hadn't been involved, but it seemed unlike her to not come along with us.

Normally, I'd be ready to barf, but this time I was pretty relaxed and managed a calm smile. That was because the Abyssal Inferno was with us. Compared to her disregard for the safety of nobles and the damage she did to the castle, I was free of blame.

A man next to the emperor looked at me. He had an ornate coat that was unlike what the other knights had worn. His dark blond hair and blue eyes gave him a sort of masculine beauty. The emperor had called him Sir Franz, but I

wondered if he might be a noble.

"Now then, first let's get the facts straight," Franz said. "Thousand Tricks, just what was that back there?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't answer. I was just as much in the dark as everyone else was. At first, I had assumed it to be part of the festivities. I looked at Eva, then my party members, but nobody came to help me out.

"Tradition?" I suggested.

Franz looked at me with wide eyes and a vein on his forehead bulged. I was the master of getting told off, so I could tell he was moments away from getting angry. I had to be careful what I said.

"Hmph. It appears that wasn't the right way to put it. Allow me to rephrase the question. Why were your party members there?"

That was another question on my mind. I felt a pain in my gut, but I couldn't give answers I didn't have.

"I came here because I heard I could cut people!" Luke said.

"Hah?! If you mugs hadn't half-assed your security, Krai Baby wouldn't have needed to take action!" Liz yelled. "Who do you think you are?! You almost let the host get offed! Get on your knees! On your knees!"

They really should have kept their mouths shut.

"Wh-What was that?!" Franz yelled back.

Ah, stop that. Here, I'll get on my knees, okay? And hold on. Liz made it sound like you guys showed up because I "took action." I did no such thing. Hm? Or did I?

I began to feel uncertain about my own behavior. Eva's eyebrow twitched when she noticed this.

Agitated, Liz's face was more flushed than usual. Our resident maniac in a red dress took an audacious step forward, almost like she hadn't just been trespassing.

"Not only did that mask guy get in, there was some shit mixed in the drinks.

How do you explain that?" she asked like she was some sort of thug.

The knights looked at her with wide eyes and Franz became red in the face.

"Wh-What are you babbling about?!"

"Now, now, that's enough, Liz," I said in an attempt to cool things down. "You shouldn't complain about the refreshments when you weren't even invited!"

"Really? Still..." she said, in a much calmer voice.

I continued to try to minimize the damage.

"Sure, something was mixed in, but it was hardly anything a high-level hunter should worry about."

"Well, I guess you're right."

"And that was an awfully rude way to put it. You made the guards sound like a bunch of apes!"

Sure, maybe they would have been apes if Fox-Mask really hadn't been part of the festivities, but the drinks were another matter entirely. At a banquet, and one hosted by the emperor no less, ensuring food is safe should be a top priority.

"Impossible. Our security was flawless. Someone, go check the drinks!" Franz ordered while looking like he might explode at any moment.

I took the opportunity to do some blame-shifting. Liz wasn't free of fault or anything, but the worst trouble was caused by the old lady who incinerated the castle.

"Ah, but the Abyssal Inferno destroyed all the evidence," I pointed out. "She also burned up the intruder. Even if she hadn't blown apart the whole ceiling, I'd still say she went a bit overboard."

"Hee hee hee, nice try. I didn't burn the intruder."

Could you repeat that?

The high-powered, castle-wrecking pyromaniac snorted with dissatisfaction.

"Cut the act already, boy. You noticed it, didn't you? I couldn't detect the scent of a scorched body. That intruder was really something."

"The scent of a scorched body." Holy shit.

"You're right, striking that intruder felt strange," Luke said, looking unusually pensive.

Considering he had thrown his sword, I'm not sure what he possibly could've felt.

Everyone else began to chime in with agreement.

"Mmm."

"Yeah, they were sorta weird."

"My spells did indeed feel less effective."

"Yeah, uh-huh!" I said.

If Ansem and Lucia were nodding along, then I figured it was safe for me to do the same. Not that I could at all understand the instincts of talented people like them.

"They had no presence," the Abyssal Inferno continued. "I don't know what sort of tricks they were using, but things would've turned ugly if the boy hadn't been there. If I wasn't mistaken, I caught some hints of recognition."

"Me? I've never seen that guy before."

"I wasn't talking about you, boy."

Oops.

The emperor and his knights all gave me frigid glares. I was so used to everyone assuming I knew something, I just refused without thinking. But did I remember anything?

A fox mask. A fox mask. W-Well, there was a treasure vault with phantoms like that.

In the meantime, I gave a half raise and offered my opinion, "I'd just like to say, I think the blame rests with the Abyssal Inferno for scorching the castle. It's all her fault."

She glared at me with wild eyes. I wasn't too keen on making an enemy of a high-level hunter, but I wanted to draw attention from my friends' trespassing.

My hands were tied.

After working up the courage to offer my opinion, Franz ignored it entirely.

"Setting aside the matter of the intruder, it's unthinkable that the refreshments were poisoned. Our security was without lapse."

Yeah, I thought the same thing until—wait a minute.

A wild idea had entered my head. Silver Breath was a Relic that detected any drugs that might affect the wearer. However, the wearer's own resistances affected which substances were detected. And my resistances were below even that of a normal civilian, they were subzero. In other words, perhaps the Relic had alerted me to something that wasn't hazardous to a normal person.

It was possible. If nothing else, it seemed more likely than poisoned alcohol slipping past the tight security. Only drinks had been poisoned, so perhaps the ring had identified strong booze as something dangerous? It lined up with the fact that everyone else had been drinking away just fine.

But if I voiced any of this, there would be no taking it back. My heart began to pound when I saw the grave expressions of Franz and the other knights.

"Well, it's possible all the poisoned drinks were destroyed by the fire," I suggested. The only remaining table was behind me. Even if those surviving drinks turned up clean, I had an excuse that I was confident in. "It's also possible that it was a poison meant only for me—"

"You've done nothing but make hollow jests!" Franz barked. "Do you understand what it means if nothing's detected in those drinks?"

"That'll be pretty good in its own right."

"Quiet! It means you'll have sullied the reputation of the Gathering of the White Blade!"

Possibly because of a calcium deficiency, possibly because of his loyalty to the emperor, Franz had a really overwhelming presence.

But then, I remembered something—Liz had also said the drinks were poisoned. Was I right after all? Maybe not. She was all too willing to go along with anything I said.

After a painful wait, a knight returned. He was pale as a ghost.

"After investigating a sample of the refreshments, we have confirmed the presence of a poisonous substance," the knight reported. "A fairly powerful one, at that."

"What was that?!"

"Woo, I was right!"

I couldn't help but strike a victory pose.

"Krai?!" Eva yelled.

Perfect, my name had been cleared. I had only found poison in the drinks, but it seemed the food had been poisoned as well. The Gathering of the White Blade had been truly terrifying, even if it was in ways I hadn't expected.

"Well, that settles it," the emperor said with a bitter expression. "Franz, make this part of your investigation of the intruder."

"Your Imperial Majesty, allow us to assist in any way we can," Gark said. I still thought he looked odd in a tuxedo.

The emperor glanced at both me and the Abyssal Inferno. Sure, I was technically a member of the Explorers' Association, but I didn't plan on doing anything.

All I could do was sigh. Something told me I was about to get dragged into something strange again.

By the time our interrogation-like conversation was over, it was the middle of the night. Because I truly and genuinely knew absolutely nothing, I had hated every moment of it. Even if my bad luck had made me used to those sorts of situations, I wasn't immune to them.

"It seems the empire has an idea of what might have happened," Eva said. She didn't let exhaustion show, even after having to deal with me.

"To hell with them," Liz grumbled. "They're turning their incompetency into our problem."

"Now, now, just think of this as a chance to put the empire in our debt," Lucia said placatingly.

Luke and Ansem hadn't joined us and were instead helping the night watch. Patrolling the half-wrecked castle was being entrusted to high-level hunters for the night. Franz hadn't wanted my help, so I hadn't been invited. He may have shouted at me a lot, but I had a feeling I would grow to like the man. I prayed that he would continue to not offer me work.

"Oh yeah, Liz. How did you get into the Gathering? Weren't there lots of guards?" I asked.

"Hmm?"

Liz blinked and glanced at Lucia, who remained silent. I looked at my sister, and she avoided making eye contact.

So you had magic support. I see. I see. And why were you so determined to get in?!

They had done this while I had been looking for any reason not to go. If only we could've traded places.

But then something occurred to me.

"Come to think of it, where's Tino?"

"Hm? I dunno."

Liz had been the one to drag Tino along and now she was casting aside any responsibility for the girl. So I turned to Lucia.

"How about you, Lucy? Do you know anything?"

"Uh. Uhh... Uhhhh."

Lucia seemed to be panicking, a very rare sight. Poor Tino, even dear Lucy had abandoned her.

"Siddy probably took care of it," she said, her eyes darting about. "After all, she's not with us right now."

Sitri was always on top of those sorts of things. She had probably refrained from attacking Fox-Mask so she could support someone if necessary. We could

always count on the Prodigy.

I felt better after that. It hadn't been without incident, but I had gotten through the day and I was glad to know that event was finally behind me.

At the clan house, we parted ways with Eva. I practically had to drag my tired body up the staircase. I opened the door to my office and froze as Sitri, still in her dress, popped out. Her cheeks were flushed and she seemed to be in an awfully good mood.

"Welcome back, Krai! T and I planted that poison for you. Did it help?" "What?"

I looked and noticed Tino lying on the couch. She was in an evening gown and looked like she was about to die at any moment.

"Aah, I thought something was up back there," Liz said, clapping her hands as though it all made sense now. "Cause all that wine Krai Baby handed me, that had been drugged, not poisoned."

"Aaaah," Lucia groaned and rubbed her temples.

Wha? Huh? Wait. So in other words...what happened?

"There wasn't anything in the remaining food and I thought that didn't bode well. Then I saw an opportunity," Sitri explained.

"I'm a criminal. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Master, my hands, they're dirty," Tino mumbled.

I couldn't do it. I didn't have a clue what was happening. I tried to keep calm and grinned as I ruffled Sitri's hair. Then I decided to head to bed so I could sleep away my worries.

What a fearsome engagement. Seeing the Gathering thrown into chaos by the Abyssal Inferno's attack, *it* silently expressed its shock.

The Thousand Tricks had brought many organizations to ruin, but his most terrifying skill of all was his ability to obtain information. He knew things he shouldn't know and showed up in places he should have no reason to be. He

was illusive and capable of preterhuman artifice, his poker face flawless. Even for a high-level treasure hunter, he was exceptional. And he was much harder to handle than someone who possessed simple strength.

How had he detected the intruder? Even though *it* had personally witnessed the Gathering, the questions far outnumbered the answers. The intruder had no presence. They made no sound, had no body heat. None of the castle's sensors had detected them. Yet, the moment they appeared, they were given away. The Thousand Tricks hadn't shown the slightest sign that he knew something might happen.

Well, there was the matter with the drug. It had been randomly distributed, yet the Thousand Tricks had found each and every spiked drink. He hadn't used magic, yet he still seemed to have known exactly where to look. Those drinks were meant to cause the Gathering to devolve into mayhem, but the allies of the Thousand Tricks downed them all.

How fascinating. It was all incoherent and defied comprehension, but the results were clear enough. To challenge a preterhuman artificer with intrigue would be foolish, which meant their only remaining course of action was to simply continue attacking. To gain the advantage through force that no amount of genius could contend with—that was what villains were best suited for.

What a convenient twist that the Thousand Tricks had given them such a choice opportunity to strike. He had given the imperial princess a *dragon egg*, a gift both valuable, but also very dangerous.

Dragons ranked as one of the strongest beings in the land. The riches they hoarded and the eggs they laid were worth a fortune, but to obtain them was to incur a dragon's wrath. Dragons offered no forgiveness to pilferers. Some legends even described countries being decimated because they harbored a dragon egg.

Of course, the Thousand Tricks had surely already slain the dragon from which he had stolen that egg. But just how might the nobility feel if their empire was attacked by a dragon?

Thousand Tricks, that generous gift of yours will be the undoing of those you protect.

Chapter Two: The Preterhuman Artificer's Wall Spaghetti

I was feeling trapped. At times, I may have acted rashly or flippantly, but I had never acted maliciously. Yet here I was. One night had passed since the Gathering. I was in my usual spot in the clan master's office, slumped over on my desk. Sitri had planted poison and the Abyssal Inferno had nearly destroyed the banquet hall.

My friends' trespassing somehow got overlooked, but the poison was going too far. Just bringing something like that into the Gathering was asking for trouble. There was no excuse I could possibly give and groveling wouldn't be enough to make this go away. Sitri hadn't been found out just yet, but Zebrudia had access to excellent investigators. They would find out the truth eventually. After all, the empire owned a Relic that could detect lies.

"Here's the newspaper, Krai," Eva said as she handed it to me.

I usually just glanced over it, but this time I read it carefully. It seemed a gag order had been issued because I didn't see a single word concerning an intruder at the Gathering. Instead, something else dominated the front page.

"A dragon attack in Zebrudia?" I said.

"I'm sure you're already aware, but it was shortly after we left."

Eva had dark rings under her eyes and had a weary expression on her face. And no, I didn't already know about the dragon attack.

"Eh? No such thing as too much bad luck, huh?" I muttered.

"Hm? Luck?"

Dragons were considered to be the strongest of all the mythical beasts. Their forms varied from one variety to the next, but they all had generally powerful bodies and vast pools of mana. Entire countries were said to have been annihilated by lone dragons. The accolade Dragon Slayer had long been

considered proof of a champion.

However, dragons didn't typically attack human settlements. It might sound hard to believe, considering my encounter with the hot spring dragon in Suls, but in my hunting career, I had only ever seen dragons attack towns on three occasions.

"Fortunately, there were a number of high-level hunters present, so the dragon was exterminated," Eva said.

"Hmm."

I checked the newspaper. Apparently, Ark and everyone else there had saved the imperial capital. House Rodin had strong ties to the nobility, so it was usually his job to deal with threats like this. But Luke and many of the hunters at the Gathering had also stayed to guard the castle for the night. That was one silver lining of the gung-ho nature of hunters—it gave them the strength to fight off dragons.

An elemental had just recently attacked a town, then there were the Cave People, then the hot spring dragon. Zebrudia was having a rough couple of months. Was Sitri's poisoning related to this?

And then it hit me. I crossed my arms, folded my legs, and looked up at the ceiling.

Hold on. Liz said those drinks weren't spiked with poison but instead with a drug. So there are two culprits? There was an intruder at the event after all...

"This is one complex case," I said. "I wonder if the empire's investigators will be able to handle it."

"Hm?"

Left alone, it wouldn't be that bad, but Sitri had complicated things. And because the pyromaniac lady had burned nearly everything to ash, there was a good chance they wouldn't even be able to figure out how the intruder had gotten in. Even the brilliant investigators of the empire were unlikely to suspect that the initial drug and the poison were placed by different people.

There wasn't even any proof that a drug had been placed in the drinks. It was

possible there were some that I hadn't given to Liz, but those, too, had been destroyed by the pyromaniac lady. I groaned as I closed my eyes and thought it over.

"Have you figured something out?" Eva asked hesitantly.

"If I'm on the right track, there's two culprits at work here."

"Huh?! How can you tell?!"

There was Sitri and there was whoever had placed the drug. It was only natural to assume that whoever had planted the drug was connected with the intruder. But I wasn't going to go telling anyone my ideas. If I did that, Sitri could be branded a criminal.

Committing crimes was no good, but, as a general principle, I was always on Sitri's side. I'd sooner flee the empire than report her to the authorities. I'm speaking with the benefit of hindsight, but nobody had gotten hurt by her poison and I considered that to be the most important thing of all.

We could just pin her poisoning on the real criminal. After all, they were already destined for the gallows since they had broken into the Gathering. *Huh?* What's that? Tino and most of my party also trespassed? Ha ha ha.

"Still, that old lady really messed things up for us..."

If the Abyssal Inferno hadn't incinerated everything, we might have found some evidence and caught the culprit by now. And when I really thought about it, the emperor himself could've gotten burned back there. Why the hell hadn't that old lady been arrested yet? Was it because she'd set everything ablaze if they tried?

Either way, all I could do was pray that the real culprit be arrested and do my best to cover for Sitri in the off chance that she became a suspect. There wasn't much I could do about the former, but for the latter, I was ready to do whatever I could.

I hadn't been able to do enough for her when she was suspected of being involved in the prison break, but I had grown in the years that had passed since then. It was mostly just my Level that had grown, but that directly translated into trust. If a Level 8 said something, they were likely to be taken at their word.

The only issue was that this time, Sitri wasn't actually innocent.

"Do you know who the culprit is?" Eva asked.

"The culprit is the intruder."

"Um, but their identity? And you said there were two, so they had an accomplice?!"

"Now, now, calm down, Eva. It's not that simple."

Eva's eyes briefly widened, before she glanced downward.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help it," she said.

Maybe it would be fine if Eva knew the truth.

I had relied on her a number of times already and I had complete faith in her. But most of all, she was much more competent than me and she might actually be able to figure out a solution to all this.

"By the way," I said to her, "Sitri and Tino were the ones who planted the poison detected after the attack."

Eva's eyes opened as wide as they possibly could. "Wha?!" she said, her voice weary and tired. A pretty reasonable reaction, all things considered. She blinked a few times, then looked at me with disbelief. "Huh? Huh?"

"Relax. That's not what I'm concerned about."

"H-H-How am I supposed to relax?!"

Eva seemed to be panicking, which was something she didn't do very often. I was starting to think I might have said too much, but I couldn't undo what I had done.

It's fine, it's fine. Everything will work out. Nobody's died yet, so we can still come back from this!

Then the door swung open. Eva's entire body trembled.

"Hey, Krai! Let me show you something!"

It was Luke, my friend who was supposed to be guarding the Imperial Castle. He noticed Eva's look of terror but didn't show any particular reaction.

The issue lay in what he was carrying. It was about as big as him and reeked of blood. That was a smell most treasure hunters were used to, but I still really wished he'd take that thing elsewhere.

"I jumped in the air and cut it down," Luke boasted after setting it down with a thump. "Ark nearly got it before me, but I emerged the victor!"

Are you a cat, bringing in your catches? Hey, don't open it.

"Those guys from the imperial government took half. I guess it's fine, this wouldn't fit through the door otherwise."

Walking around with something that smelled so repulsive was tantamount to terrorism. It'd definitely be leaking blood everywhere if someone hadn't wrapped it up to prevent that. In some ways, Luke was the most determined of us to live on his own wavelength. Compared to him, Liz looked pretty sane.

"Oh, right, Krai. Those guys from the imperial government want to talk to you. They're waiting at the Explorers' Association."

"I don't wanna talk to them."

"That so? Should I cut them down?"

"Suddenly, I really want to talk to them."

But I couldn't bring myself to go alone. As I reluctantly stood up, I noticed Eva was looking at me, tears in her eyes. That was something that rarely happened. I guess the past few minutes had been pretty shocking for her.

"Eva, come with me. Luke, you don't have to come. That would just complicate things."

If a civilian was present, even those from the imperial government would show some restraint. They might have been scary, but they weren't like the feral children of our party.

"Wait, Krai. What do I do with this?" Luke said with a strange look as he pointed at his blood-scented bundle.

I didn't have a clue what to do with it.

"Do what you want, just don't get anything dirty," I said with a deep sigh.

Honestly, why did they keep coming to me for help? There were plenty of other competent hunters in the imperial capital. I couldn't wrap my head around it. My body whined that it didn't want to go, but I pulled myself together and headed to the Association's meeting room.

Together, Eva and I entered to find a room already filled with notable faces. There was branch manager Gark and Kaina; Franz, the knight who had brilliantly exempted me from patrol duty along with a few of his cohorts; and the Abyssal Inferno, acting like she owned the place. I couldn't help but scowl when I saw her.

"Hmph. Have something to say?" she asked. She looked at me with a powerful glare that shouldn't have been possible for someone her age.

"No. Not really..." I said, avoiding eye contact.

I looked around but wasn't surprised to see that the emperor wasn't present. I took a seat and Franz said a brief greeting before getting underway.

"I'm glad you could all come," he began. "I've summoned you all here so we can confirm matters regarding last night's dragon attack. I trust you've already heard what happened?"

"Before that, can I ask a question?" I said.

"What is it?"

Gark's cheek twitched and Eva looked concerned. They were worrying over nothing, I wasn't going to say anything weird.

"Has the culprit of last night's poisoning been identified?" I asked.

"Not yet."

Safe, I thought and let out a sigh of relief before I could stop myself. I heard Franz's teeth grinding.

"Is there something you'd like to say, Krai Andrey?"

"No, nothing at all. You can continue."

That they hadn't found the culprit was actually a good thing. If they hadn't yet

identified someone, then this would probably end up a cold case. Sitri must have done a fine job.

Franz took multiple deep breaths and spoke in a strained voice. "Last night, a crimson dragon attacked the Imperial Castle. It happened in the midst of the night, around three in the morning. That's right after you went home, Krai Andrey. Fortunately, the castle had the stalwart protection of a number of high-level hunters."

"Oh yeah, one of our own, Ark, was there. I read about it in the newspaper. Poor dragon," I commented.

Dragons certainly were powerful beings, but just about every hunter with a high level was also a Dragon Slayer. If my memory was correct, Ansem had also been there. Even a dragon would find themselves out of their depth against opponents like him and Ark. A dragon attack was unfortunate, but at least it had been easily dealt with.

But why was I being called about this? I didn't see what it had to do with me.

"The dragon came straight for the Imperial Castle," Franz said, glaring sharply at me. "I checked the records to be sure, and this was the first time this has happened since the capital was transferred out here."

"Well, there's a first time for everything. I have first-time experiences all the time."

"Krai, quit beating around the bush!" Gark yelled, even though I wasn't beating around the bush. That was very unreasonable of him. Ever since I had come to the imperial capital, every major incident here had been a first for the place. Maybe I was cursed.

"Dragons do not attack human settlements without reason. We're all of the opinion that the dragon was after something within the Imperial Castle."

"I see. That's a real mess," I said. "Wait, hold on. If the dragon was after something in the castle, then wouldn't they have attacked a long time ago?"

Some dragons had a habit of hoarding treasures. It was said if someone stole their treasure, they would go insane with rage and chase someone as far as necessary to retake what they felt was theirs. The mythical beasts boasted

extraordinary strength and intelligence, but they were by no means lenient. They thought of humans as nothing more than an unsatisfying snack.

So whatever the dragon was after was most likely something that had recently been brought into the Imperial Castle. Pretty brilliant deductions on my part.

"Quit feigning ignorance!" Franz yelled as he slammed his hand on the table. "As we see it, that dragon was lured here by the dragon egg you gave to Her Highness!"

"Huh?"

That wasn't something I had expected to hear. Dragons generally did lay eggs, but only one at a time. Stealing one would enrage the dragon and they would come to retrieve their egg as soon as possible.

However, that souvenir wasn't a dragon's egg. As I had told Eva, "hot spring dragon egg" was just a product name. It was a chicken egg, one of the many being sold in Suls. What was this guy on about?

"I'm sorry to say this, but that was just a hot spring egg," I hesitantly explained.

"Exactly! That's exactly it!" Franz yelled, slamming the table again. "And so we made haste and inspected the present. And like some sort of joke, we found that it was a plain and simple hot spring egg! Nothing more! We even confirmed that they were sold in Suls! Do you know what this means?"

Franz leaned towards me, red in the face and breathing heavily. I gave it some serious thought.

"Crimson dragons have a fondness for hot spring eggs?"

Franz stood up, his lips trembling.

"It means that someone is trying to set up Krai, or rather, the Thousand Tricks," Eva said. I could always count on her.

Franz clenched his fist and took deep breaths. "Indeed. That's quite right. If your present had been a genuine dragon egg, even if it wasn't the egg of a crimson dragon, you would be a prime suspect and have little chance of proving

your innocence."

Ah, so that was the trick. Now I know.

"But you avoided that," Franz continued. "And you narrowed the list of suspects. The perpetrator has to be someone who knows you handed that egg to Her Highness."

What a miraculous dodge that was. What had I done to deserve such good luck? It probably helped that I wasn't living a life that involved stealing dragon eggs.

After listening quietly for once in her life, the Abyssal Inferno snorted and offered her opinion. "Laid a trap, did you, boy? How very like you."

"Hm?"

Trap? What was she on about? I had walked into traps, but I was never the one setting them. Besides, this whole talk of laying a trap with a dragon egg just sounded insane. I couldn't help but laugh a little.

"Anyways," Franz said after clearing his throat, "there are very few people capable of manipulating dragons. Everything from here on is to be kept a secret."

He raised his hands and the knights standing behind him left the room and some of the employees of the Explorers' Association followed after. The only people left were myself, Eva, Gark, Kaina, Franz, and the Abyssal Inferno. I wanted to leave as well, but that seemed just a bit obtuse.

Franz took a deep breath and placed a large object wrapped in cloth atop the table. Signs of tension crept across his face.

"We find ourselves in dire circumstances. I will be permitting myself to take the steps I've deemed necessary," he said.

"That's the— You can't be serious!" the Abyssal Inferno said in a trembling voice.

Gark, Kaina, and Eva were all taken aback.

Franz undid the cloth and from it appeared a completely transparent Relic.

You could see through it just as you could through calm seas and it sparkled in a

manner unmatched by any gemstone. It was Tears of Truth, a crystal ball Relic that could expose any lies. It was one of the empire's most treasured possessions and had played a role in the founding of Zebrudia. It was a national treasure and not something that was used without good reason.

"I don't believe it!" Gark shouted, red in the face. "Use of that Relic is heavily restricted! There's no way permission was granted for a case like this."

He was quite right. Tears of Truth exposed any lies said by whoever placed their hand on it. It bypassed brainwashing, memory erasure, and any other form of neural alterations. Nobody had yet found a way to deceive it.

However, Tears of Truth wasn't some mere convenience. A Relic that could discern the truth was capable of starting wars. Therefore, a number of applications, approvals, and, most of all, evidence were required before it could be put to use. Even the emperor, the highest authority in the land, couldn't use it at will.

Tears of Truth was just too powerful. Nobody can lead a life of perfect innocence; we all have a secret or two. Nobody would want to live in an empire where something like Tears of Truth was being used regularly. And if everybody left, Zebrudia itself would cease to be.

Tears of Truth was generally only permitted to be used on those who had been found guilty of one of the ten capital crimes (the most severe crimes in the empire). No matter how suspicious someone might be, suspicion alone didn't make the cut. The empire couldn't continue any other way.

But it had been used on me a number of times. I was probably the only person in the world who had been judged by Tears of Truth multiple times and not gotten arrested.

The tension in the room was palpable, so I spoke up on behalf of everyone.

"Did you get the emperor's permission?" I asked.

"Of course not! His Imperial Majesty holds himself to the highest standards!"

"Hm. So you brought it here on your own."

Even if Franz was a powerful noble—no, because he was someone with the

authority to walk away with a national treasure, that was impermissible. Misuse of Tears of Truth was a grave crime; some terrible punishment surely awaited him if word of this got out.

"Prove your innocence, if you can!" Franz said to me, and only me.

"Sure. That suits me just fine."

"Hm?!"

I had no crimes to be found guilty of. In fact, I was glad I got another chance to look at Tears of Truth up close. No matter how many times I saw the Relic, its beauty never wore off. I saw myself reflected in its crystalline surface. With a yawn, I placed my hand on the crystal ball.

"I, Krai Andrey, have never once acted as an enemy to Zebrudia," I said.

My conscience was pulled into the Relic and my mind went blank for a moment. Then the crystal ball emitted a blue light—proof that I had said the truth. Franz's mouth hung open. Honestly, there really wasn't a single person as harmless and incompetent as me.

Gark's eyes bulged. Back when I first had Tears of Truth used on me, he got seriously angry when he heard about it. He said that it was the job of the Explorers' Association to protect the honor of hunters.

"Now, now, relax, Franz. No need to be so wary. I don't have a problem with it, but I wouldn't recommend suddenly using Tears of Truth on a hunter. You might find yourself getting burned."

Especially when there's a famously short-tempered old lady nearby, I thought, glancing at the Abyssal Inferno.

"Tsk. If I must," she said with a twisted smile. "Here, 'I have never acted as an enemy to Zebrudia."

The Relic glowed light blue and the Abyssal Inferno scowled. She probably wasn't used to using Tears of Truth.

"Huh? You haven't? Ah—" I stopped myself too late.

"Not a shred of respect in you, boy."

The Abyssal Inferno—Rosemary Purapos glared at me like I was kindling.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Franz said, bowing deeply. "Now then, let us move to the main subject at hand."

Was he not going to test Gark and everyone else? I guess it was just me and the Abyssal Inferno that he didn't trust.

Franz wrapped the Relic back in its cloth and cleared his throat.

"Thousand Tricks, Abyssal Inferno, I take it you both know of Fox?"

Fox? Come to think of it, that guy clinging to the ceiling was wearing a fox mask.

"I see!" said the old lady, a knowing glint in her eyes. "So that's what that mask meant. Very straightforward of them."

Can you please stop assuming I know all this stuff?

I thought about it for a moment, then clapped my hands.

"Fox? Of course I know. But just to be sure, you're not talking about the animal, right?"

"Indeed. What I'm talking about is neither animal nor monster."

So I was right. If he wasn't referring to an animal or monster, there was only one thing he could be talking about.

I'm really not trying to brag when I say this, but one of my encounters with misfortune brought me to a thirteen-tailed fox.

A profusion of mana material had turned a moving location into a treasure vault. In it was an extraordinary fox phantom. It was intelligent, experienced, and powerful. It was like a god; even laying a scratch on it was beyond our means. That phantom was most likely worthy of a Level 10 designation, the highest there was.

The encounter was a product of pure coincidence. It was a treasure vault that typically remained elusive even if you wanted to find it. After a number of twists and turns, we managed to make it out alive, but I was sure that that aberrant fox and its treasure vault were still wandering the world.

Another thing about that treasure vault: the trash mobs were humans wearing fox masks (but they weren't actually humans). So the fox mask should have been familiar to me. The design of the mask was pretty different from what I remembered. Maybe they had done a makeover of the treasure vault or something.

"Last night, our country was attacked. A number of those attacks are believed to be the work of Fox," Franz said.

"I see... I see?"

The fox I knew had strength approaching that of a god, but it wasn't an enemy of humanity. If anything, it was entirely disinterested in humans. The phantom fox had power that far surpassed its peers. Even the typical rule that phantoms couldn't exist beyond their treasure vaults meant nothing to this phantom. What could Zebrudia possibly do to piss off such a creature?

"Zebrudia's gotten too big," Franz said with irritation. "We've expanded by valuing our treasure hunters, but not everyone thinks that's a good thing. This was most likely an attempt to sour relations between the empire and hunters. Though I must say, the poisoning was a very sorry attempt at it."

"Ah, that was definitely the work of 'Fox.' What a mad bunch they must be if they want to frame me!" I ignored the questions that were crossing my mind and took the opportunity I saw in front of me. I was already planning on pinning the poisoning on the intruder, all the better if they were a phantom.

"It's because of Fox that Luke cuts people," I went on. "It's because of Fox that Liz broke into the Gathering. It's also because of Fox that Sitri and Tino planted that poison! What an unscrupulous bunch!"

"Huh? Fox can hardly be to blame for— What did you just say?!"

"So that Fox bastard's just another beast, huh? I've always had a mind to put them down!"

They came back, even after I groveled and gave them fried tofu. I hadn't heard a peep of them since our encounter, so I had let my guard down. Not that it would have any difference even if my guard had been up.

The old lady gave me a sideways glance and shrugged. "Let's quit wasting the

day and get to the main topic at hand. I imagine you have a good reason for illegally using Tears of Truth?"

I had always thought of her as being the type to look before leaping, but she was fairly mellow that day.

Franz cleared his throat and took on a serious expression. "What I want to say is that Zebrudia cannot afford to show any sign of being intimidated by these scoundrels. I trust you are all aware that His Imperial Majesty plans to travel abroad soon?"

"I see. So that's it."

I didn't see, but, apparently, that was it. The Abyssal Inferno nodded, Gark leaned forward, and Eva had a serious look in her eyes. It seemed I was the only one who didn't understand. But I was used to being left out of the loop, so I just put on my hard-boiled smile.

"And so, we have a quest for you, Thousand Tricks."

"Sorry, but I don't take just any old quest."

I didn't even wait to hear what it entailed, I just refused, mostly on instinct. It wasn't just the near-impossible ones, I had passed on just about every quest that looked remotely difficult. I couldn't let people think I'd take any request. Best I could do was lend them Ark. And why me? In the very same room, there was an old lady who was ten million times more powerful than I was.

"Fox tried to frame you. They're afraid of you. And with Tears of Truth, we know you're innocent," Franz said.

"Maybe the Relic's broken."

"The Tears are a pillar of the empire. And Relics don't break down!"

Gark looked at me like he was suppressing the urge to strangle me. I began to devise another feat of preterhuman artifice; such as maybe shoving this off onto Ark or someone?

Franz then placed a large trunk in front of me. Was this my payment? There was no such thing as being too prepared, but did he really think money was enough to sway me? I didn't appreciate the idea that I could easily be bought. I

was a guy who went shopping for Relics, even when he was knee-deep in debt.

"You're a Relic collector, right? His Imperial Majesty has permitted me to draw your payment from the castle vault."

I braced myself, determined to make my refusal clear. Then Franz opened the trunk. Packed inside it was a cloth of mellow shades of red, green, and gold. It wasn't an article of clothing. It was fairly thick and fairly ornate. My eyes bulged. I reached out with a trembling hand and touched its smooth surface.

It's smaller than I expected, but could this be it? A famed Relic that appears in fairy tales, but rarely on the markets. Is this a Flying Carpet?

I looked up, my expression strained. For the first time that evening, Franz smiled at me.

All good treasure hunters made training a part of their daily routine.

Sven was on the fifth level of the First Steps clan house basement. He had just come down to get some exercise and was surprised to see a crowd of hunters gathered around the door to the largest of the underground training grounds.

"What's got you all gathered in a place like this?" he asked.

"Ah. It seems the fifth layer has been reserved for the entire day," someone answered.

Sven scowled. "Reserved for the entire day? That shouldn't be possible. Is Liz acting like she runs the clan again?"

"No," the other hunter said with a slight tremble. "The CM's training."

What could that man possibly be doing? Wordlessly, Sven looked at the door. From the other side, he repeatedly heard a heavy thumping sound. The Thousand Tricks trained only rarely, so rarely that it made his high level all the more unbelievable. But sometimes he made exceptions and used the training grounds he had made.

The Thousand Tricks was also known for being a collector of Relics. When he got a new one, he would take it to a training ground to test it out. Not only that, he never hesitated to activate a Relic, even when it was one most normal

hunters would have trepidations about.

He most likely knew what a Relic would do (after all, people generally didn't activate Relics they weren't familiar with). Still, his tests were a nuisance to everyone else in the clan, who had absolutely no idea what might happen.

"It sounds especially bad in there today. Guess that's that. I'm gonna go drinking," the other hunter said.

The other training grounds were still available for use, but the Thousand Tricks had no sense of restraint. It was entirely possible he might blast a hole in the ceiling and damage the other floors. Today he seemed especially into whatever he was doing and nobody wanted to be anywhere near that.

With a collective shrug, Sven and the other hunters turned around. They were used to this.

My world accelerated in an instant. I was overwhelmed with indescribable sensations of elation and omnipotence.

Incredible! I can't believe this! It's like I'm the wind itself!

And then, with a dull thud echoing about, both the Carpet and I crashed headfirst into the wall and my body slumped to the ground. Good thing a Safety Ring prevented me from taking any damage.

Lucia the Relic Charger was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed.

"Leader, have you perchance been conned?" she asked, her brow knit.

"No, it can fly just fine," I told her.

"Yes, but it hardly seems like it wants any passengers."

Once Lucia was done charging it, the Carpet stood up on his corners. Just as Lucia had suggested, he stood a short distance away, almost as though he were wary of me.

Relics that could move on their own, such as this and the Hounding Chain, were called "self-propelled." Activating these Relics was simple enough, but they were finicky to control. For instance, animal-based chains were numerous

and came in myriad varieties; even chains of the same variety had differing personalities. All of this made it difficult to put them to practical use.

This new Carpet of mine had a very touchy personality.

"You're no Flying Carpet," I said with a grin, "you're a Delinquent Carpe—AUGH!"

In the blink of an eye, the Carpet had slammed into my body. Being a carpet, it was a light blow, but that featherweight prevented my Safety Rings from automatically activating. I coughed and rubbed my sleeve against my mouth.

Not half bad. I guess this is why you were sleeping in the Imperial Castle's vault.



"I'll consider you my rival," I said between panting breaths.

"The Carpet?" Lucia asked.

Its attack power was just as low as mine, but it surpassed me when it came to defenses. I jumped at the shadowboxing Carpet and grabbed its body. All of a sudden, I felt myself being lifted off the ground. It was all I could do to merely hang on while my world spun and the Carpet zigzagged through the air.

Despite the weight I added to it, the Carpet flew at an incredible speed. Even among Relics, some were more capable than others. This Carpet had extraordinary acceleration and a high max speed, meaning it could be an excellent means of transport. It also had tremendous maneuverability and could even perform a loop the loop. It would've been worth a fortune if it had been capable of showing any consideration for its passengers.

Once again, I collided spectacularly with the wall. The Carpet was made of cloth, so it was unharmed, but I expended another Safety Ring.

Flying Carpets were famous Relics that were sold for enormous sums. The only other flying Relic I owned was Night Hiker, which wasn't nearly as well-known as Flying Carpets. This Carpet was about the size of a welcome mat, but most were large enough to seat multiple people and even carry luggage. With that and their ease of use, it was only natural that they were popular.

I had never heard of a Flying Carpet that didn't want to be ridden, but that probably had something to do with why the emperor was willing to part with this bucking bronco.

Lucia sighed for the umpteenth time as she watched me approach the Carpet.

"Perhaps you ought to return it?" she said.

"Flying through the sky is the dream of all humanity. Don't you get that?"

"Yes, I can already fly on my own. Besides, don't you have Night Hiker?"

"That's defective and I can only use it at night."

And a Flying Carpet was something I had wanted for a long time. I couldn't let this one go, even if it had an unruly personality.

The Flying Carpet slipped behind me with ease and pulled my leg. I fell on my bottom, and before I could gather my wits, the Carpet leaned one of its corners forward and patted me on the head. It was making fun of me.

"Huh, you're a real darling," I said with a hard-boiled smile. "Guess I gotta give you a name. Hmm. I'll call you, Carpy!"

The Carpet slid up to my feet, put me atop it, and gently lifted me five meters up, just under the ceiling. I was beginning to think I had finally been recognized as its master, but then it flipped upside down and dumped me on the ground. With a tremendous crash, I hit the metal floor headfirst. Yet another Safety Ring was expended. I didn't think anyone else had ever exhausted so many Safety Rings in one day.

"I'm not convinced Hiker isn't the more practical option," Lucia said.

"No, I crash just as often with Hiker, and I've had more practice with that one."

Lucia let out a long sigh, almost as though her very soul was escaping, and charged my Safety Rings.

"Please try and see this from my perspective," she said.

"Don't worry, I'll give you a ride once I've mastered this."

"Forget it. How many times must I remind you that I can fly on my own?"

Lucia could fly on a broom. Not a Relic broom, a normal broom. That was just the sort of magic she was capable of. It was one of the spells I had thought of. When I first came up with the spell, I hadn't realized that there was also a famous flying Relic known as Witch's Broom. My sister was probably the only person to soar through the air atop a normal store-bought broom.

Lucia, by the way, said it was easier for her to fly without the broom. Yeah, uh-huh.

So far, I had been dumped off the Carpet, thrown into walls, and more, but I wasn't going to fold so easily. I was stronger than that. I was getting out of shape, so I actually welcomed this chance to exercise. The Delinquent Carpet had thrown me off repeatedly, but it hadn't flown out of my reach. In other

words, his instincts were telling him to let me on.

The Carpet drifted down and bumped into me. He was just cloth, so his strength was limited, but at high enough speeds he was still capable of serious impact. I bounced across the ground a few times before coming to a stop, my limbs splayed apart. The Carpet gently floated above me.

Maybe he just has a bad personality.

But that was just fine. I was an adult; I wasn't going to let some taunts from a Flying Carpet get to me.

"I just remembered, Leader," Lucia said to me as I got up, "shouldn't you be preparing for the quest?"

"Huh? Quest?" I asked, wide-eyed. I hadn't been thinking about that at all.

Lucia made a dour face. The Carpet stood still, almost as if he could read the room.

"I heard about it from Eva. That Carpet's an advance payment, is it not?" I didn't say anything.

Oops. The quest had completely slipped my mind. I had turned into a nodding machine when the Carpet was placed before me. Nothing else mattered to me when I saw something I had yearned for for so long. I had a feeling I had been commissioned to do something, but what was that something? I wasn't enthused by the idea of working, but I didn't want to return the Carpet either.

"Do you have the quest brief?" I fearfully asked my little sister.

She glared at me, red in the face. "I do. Eva gave it to me. I can't tell you how embarrassing that was."

I'm really sorry for everything I put you through.

She handed me an envelope with the seal of Zebrudia, which I opened with shaking hands. The Carpet peeked over my shoulder. I quickly read the contents of the brief. Then I died.

"It's a quest to protect the emperor. I see."

This is, uh, a big responsibility. They must be crazy if they're asking me to do

I was, in many ways, not suited for the tasks of a hunter, but the tasks I was the least suited for were escort jobs. The reason for this was very simple: I had atrocious luck. From the very beginning of my career, I couldn't remember a single escort job that had gone well.

Hiring a hunter to escort you was essentially a form of insurance. Nobody hires protection if they don't plan on going somewhere dangerous, but most jobs ended without any notable incidents. Or so I was told.

I had run into some sort of trouble during just about every escort quest I had undertaken. Sometimes it was phantoms, other times it was monsters. I had even run into bandits, criminal organizations, and natural disasters. To be fair, I also ran into trouble while on vacation and whatnot, but the rate of incidents spiked during escort quests.

I knew my weaknesses, and that's why I had no desire to accept escort quests and made sure that I never did. Sure, I was used to near-death encounters, but most people couldn't say the same. So let me be clear: It was for the client's sake that I declined those sorts of quests.

This time, however, I was being held hostage by the Flying Carpet. My only potential escape route had been cut off and I had an escort quest in front of me. After giving it some serious thought, I decided to gather my friends. We had always discussed things with each other as we moved forward. I hadn't been able to talk to them while they were at that treasure vault, so this was the first time in a while that I was able to consult them.

So we gathered in the clan house meeting room. We all sat in chairs surrounding a table in the center of the room.

We had a man who was one of the foremost Swordsmen in the imperial capital and an apprentice to the Sword Saint—Luke Sykol, the Protean Sword.

The Thief who could move faster than her shadow—Liz Smart, the Stifled Shadow.

Our prodigious Alchemist who was both the brains of our party and managed

our resources—Sitri Smart.

The party's lifeline, the renowned Paladin who both protected and healed us —Ansem Smart.

The girl who could use any variety of magic and charged my Relics for me. That was Lucia.

And our guests (who we had, for some reason), Tino and Eva.

I clapped my hands and said, "Now then, it's time to begin the thirty-fifth Grieving Souls Conference!"

Luke and Liz both erupted into excessive cheers.

"WOOO! YEAAAH!"

"WOO WOO! KRAI BABY'S THE BEST!"

"Uh, Master is god!" Tino frantically added.

"Eliza's once again nowhere to be found," Luke remarked.

"Mmm, I saw her yesterday, but Ellie's a free spirit," Liz said, tilting her head and folding her legs.

Nothing strange about that. One of Eliza's conditions for joining Grieving Souls was that we respect her freedom. I had already given away the souvenirs I had bought for her and it seemed she was fine, so I wasn't worried.

Sitri then took over as host, just like she always did.

"Today's meeting is being held in order to discuss the quest, 'Defense of His Imperial Majesty,' which was issued after the recent Gathering of the White Blade. As you are all aware, once a year, the emperor of the Zebrudian Empire meets with the leaders of other nearby countries. This duty has previously been entrusted to the Zero Order, but this year they have requested the aid of the Thousand Tricks."

Tino raised a timid hand. There were dark rings under eyes, almost like she hadn't gotten much sleep last night.

"Huh? Um, why was he chosen? After all, the poison—"

I didn't understand what was going on, but Eva cleared her throat and offered

an explanation.

"That matter is to be set aside. It is most likely going to be interpreted as being part of Krai's trap."

Tino looked shocked, then began to mutter like a broken toy, "Master is god, Master is god..."

When did the poisoning become connected to me?

Taking a deep breath, I calmed myself. "The point is, this quest is something we must undertake."

"Ooh, Krai's ready to go!" Luke said. "Protecting the emperor, huh? I can hardly wait! I hear he's a Swordsman!"

"Well, we're dealing with that Fox, after all," Lucia replied.

"Huh?! That's big," Liz said. "Hm, it makes sense. That guy at the Gathering did have a fox mask on. That makes it much simpler. I've always wanted to have a go at them."

Ansem grunted in agreement.

"Master's ready to go..." Tino mumbled.

Judging by reactions, they (not including Tino) weren't too worried about dealing with the worst phantom out there. It was reassuring, but I just hoped they weren't forcing it. I wasn't very enthusiastic about the escort quest, but I trusted my friends. If they were around, the emperor would be just fine. And if I managed to get myself out of the picture, it would go perfectly.

But could I get out of it?

"Ah," Sitri said, looking at the quest brief. "There's a limit on how many of us can go. We can't form a team larger than five people."

Liz fell silent. Luke began to count.

"Hmm, I see," I said with a nod. "So they want everyone but Eliza and myself.

A smart move."

"Krai, please quit joking around!" Eva said.

But I wasn't joking.

"Hmm, so someone's gotta get left behind." Liz re-crossed her legs and looked at me. "Krai Baby, why don't you decide who comes along?"

"I agree. I'll respect your call, no matter what!" Luke said.

An oddly mature response from those two.

"That seems like the best way to ensure this goes smoothly," Sitri calmly agreed. "After all, my job is material procurement."

Hmm, who to pick?

For starters, Luke and Liz were too dangerous, so they were out. If Liz was out, then I couldn't bring Sitri without creating a mess. What a conundrum. I thought it over for a minute before nodding to myself.

"All right. It'll be Ark, Eva, Lucia, and myself."

Eva looked at me with bulging eyes. "Huh?! Krai, I'm not a hunter!"

She had nothing to worry about; as long as we had Ark, we would be fine. Lucia would just be there to charge my Relics.

"Krai Baby, there's still one more spot," Liz said in a sweet voice.

"Uh, well then I guess Tino will do."

"Huh?!" Tino sounded utterly bewildered.

"I can't accept this, Krai!" Luke shouted as he stood up. "The escorts should be picked on their merits!"

"I agree!" Liz said. "Krai Baby's trying to be nice by picking the weaklings!"

"Well then perhaps we should hold a tournament, no, a battle royale to decide!" Sitri declared.

Ansem grunted in agreement. Everyone was just raring to go.

Lucia sighed heavily and cut in. "Calm down, everyone. This is our leader's decision to make. You shouldn't kick up a fuss because you weren't—"

"You're only okay with this because you got picked, Ms. Brother-Complex!" Sitri objected. "Krai, I'll have you know Lucia was twirling around in front of the mirror in her apron dress! I heard her wonder aloud whether you might

compliment her on it!"

"H-Haaah?! I did no such thing!"

Luke drew his sword and began to swing, Liz kicked the table over, Sitri began throwing potions, and Lucia made a grab for Sitri. The blood drained from Eva's face and I heard Tino scream. Taking cover behind Ansem, I took those two with me and fled from the room.

I should have known that was a bad idea. In retrospect, I should have realized it before deciding to hold a conference. Everyone in our party got along well, but at the same time, they were very competitive. Something like that was inevitable. I could probably get away with not picking any of them, but if I picked one then they all had to come, almost like they were children or something.

Either way, while that member limit was a pain, bringing our less cooperative members along would just be playing with fire. The others might be fine, but I didn't think I could keep our resident barbarians Liz and Luke under control. Eliza, meanwhile, was too much of a free spirit. She'd probably catch a lizard or something and offer it to the emperor.

"I would assume the member limit is to keep a proper ratio of hunters, nobles, and the imperial guard," Eva said. "The empire and the imperial guard have their own appearances to keep up. In fact, you and your party are probably going to be secondary to the imperial guard."

"Master, this is, um, too much for me to handle. You were joking, right?"

Don't worry, that was a joke. A prank even. If I brought you and left Liz behind, your days would be numbered.

But Eva had a point. We were going to be secondary to the imperial guards, nothing more. It made perfect sense. I started to think that I had been letting my nerves get the better of me. And then I had a revelation. A smile formed on my face before I even realized it.

First Steps was a massive clan and had plenty of connections. I may have been a wimp, but I was the highest level of anyone my age and the leader of a

famous party. I was especially well-connected among hunters; I could just gather up five who were strong, high-level, and reliable. Hunters were generally too proud to decline a quest from the emperor. And in the unlikely—the *extremely* unlikely—event the emperor did get assassinated, the blame would be dispersed among all of us.

I would make the dream team; I'd call it "Operation Five-Star Wall Spaghetti." Naturally, Ark would be included.

Man, I'm on fire today, I thought as I began to actually enjoy myself.

"Wh-What are you smiling for?" Eva asked.

I'd also make Gark part of the team. He had once been a hunter and I was sure he was still strong and reliable. He was always foisting quests onto me, but now I had a chance to give him a taste of his own medicine. If I couldn't get out of this mess, then I'd bring him and Ark down with me. I'd show them the preterhuman artifice everyone loved to spread rumors about.

Gark's shoulders shook and he made his scariest face yet as he slammed his hand on his desk.

"Krai, you're escorting the emperor! Put some actual thought into who you're gonna take with you! Listen, failure isn't an option here. The work you do here will affect the very future of treasure hunting in Zebrudia."

"Yes, sir."

"I've already retired from hunting and I don't have any mana material! Maybe you're just trying to be nice, but think about this seriously. Do you really think I'm cut out for this job?"

I wasn't trying to be nice, I just wanted to make this his problem as well as mine. But he wasn't going for it. But, if he wasn't cut out for this job, then how could I be?

I folded my arms and pretended to think, but I couldn't calm down when Gark was breathing so heavily. My only salvation was Kaina's healing smile.

"That's it." I snapped my fingers. "Kaina, you're up! Please help us protect the

emperor!"

"Huh?!"

What a brilliant idea. A healer was necessary for an escort quest and I had always thought Kaina was extraordinary at that job.

"Quit playing around!" Gark shouted in a rumbling voice. "This is a matter concerning the emperor! Don't you have any sense of restraint?!"

He then chased me out of his office, if you can believe it. He was always forcing jobs off onto me (not that I was always the one to do them) yet he flat-out refused me when I asked for his help. It seemed I had been completely wrong about that man.

Kaina, wearing an apologetic smile, followed me out of the office and handed me a list.

"I'm sorry, Krai, he doesn't have anything against you. This is a list of all the high-level hunters registered with the imperial capital branch of the Explorers' Association. Perhaps this will be of use to you."

"Ah, thanks a ton. Honestly, I was being serious when I invited him."

I felt a bit better and admitted to myself that maybe bringing Kaina wasn't the smartest idea. But now Gark's slot on the team was open and I had to fill it in. I looked over the list and saw a bunch of familiar names, including everyone in Grieving Souls.

There sure are a lot of high-level hunters in the imperial capital...

Then, one name caught my eye. It was a Level 6 hunter and their name was very unique. It wasn't an acquaintance of mine and I didn't recognize their name. With four slots still open, I figured this mug could fill the first. At times like these, it was momentum that mattered.

"Kaina, could you contact this Kechachakka person?"

"Oh, certainly."

Kaina looked surprised. I suppose she hadn't expected me to make such a fast decision.

During escort quests, it was important that your team have the wide-area firepower necessary to handle large groups of foes. The possibility of being swarmed by monsters made Magi indispensable for these jobs. I wasn't thrilled about where I was headed, but there weren't many other places I could go to for a powerful Magus that wasn't Lucia.

My next stop was the headquarters of the Magi clan, Hidden Curse. After all, the Abyssal Inferno was an accomplice to this mess. Not giving her an invite could lead to problems later on.

Quite unlike the clan house of First Steps, Hidden Curse was based out of an old mansion. The storied building had housed them since their clan was first founded. It had been renovated many times over the years and excelled in both form and function.

I was about to take my first brave step inside when a familiar cold-eyed young man stepped out.

"Ah, Krai. What brings you here?" he asked.

"Hey there, Arty! How have you been?" I replied.

I was trying to be affable, but he just shrank back with embarrassment.

"Er, that's a nickname only Mary uses. Could you just call me Art?"

I thought Arty was a pretty good name. If I had an extra spot, I would've made him part of the wall spaghetti.

"I'm here to see the Abyssal Inferno," I said. "Is she around? If not, I'd like to leave a message for her..."

That woman was usually pretty busy. God did I hope she was out somewhere. If I at least made an attempt to contact her, she wouldn't immolate me for being so rude as to not ask in person. But my prayers were done in vain—Arty was all too happy to open the door for me.

"Perfect timing," he said. "I was just talking with her. Head on in."

The office of the Hidden Curse clan master was like a drawing room you might find in a noble's mansion. There was a thick rug and an antique lamp. The walls

were covered by packed bookcases and portraits of the previous clan masters. The current clan master, meanwhile, still looked like a witch out of a fairy tale. An evil witch, at that. She might have been lanky, but her height made her intimidating.

I extended my invitation to Rosemary Purapos, the Abyssal Inferno, and she grinned at me.

"Hee hee hee. I'm honored you think I'm worth the kindness, Thousand Tricks."

I wasn't sure what to say.

"But, as I'm sure you know," she continued, "the empire's put a shackle around my ankle; I'm not allowed outside the imperial capital. I've also got to sweep up the aftermath of our battle with Akashic Tower, and they tell me I'm needed to protect the capital."

"I-I see. I had no idea."

But it made sense. There was no covering up the damage she had done to the Imperial Castle, and, even if it had been an emergency, there was no way that would go unpunished. This probably explained why the escort quest hadn't been given to her.

"That reminds me. I never had the opportunity to say thank you," she said. "I wanted to say it at the Gathering, but the opportunity eluded me."

"Thanks for what?" I asked.

"Don't act like you don't know. You were the one who exhausted my fire elemental, weren't you? And their lightning elemental as well?"

I really didn't understand what she was getting at.

"I don't know how you knew where to find them," she continued with lambent eyes, "but the capital would've been hit much harder if not for your meddling."

"Ah, right."

I had heard that during our vacation, a lightning and a fire elemental had fought in the imperial capital, but how did that lead to me being thanked? I had

never even encountered the lightning elemental.

I noticed the old lady was looking at me like she could singe me at any moment, so I rubbed my Safety Rings and took a deep breath. The rings would protect me against magic attacks, but fire spells had plenty of side effects. If the room ran out of oxygen, I could die, and so I had an Oxygen Ring. I could also die from the heat, so I wore a Cooling Ring. That said, the barriers of my Safety Rings wouldn't extinguish flames, so if any blazes outlasted my Safety Rings I could still get roasted.

But more importantly, I now had another open space in my party.

"If I may, CM," Arty said, "Hidden Curse is a clan with more than a few Magi suitable for this venerable duty."

"Hmph, well that's for the Thousand Tricks to decide. Hmm, well why don't you go, Artbaran? Since you brought it up. If Mary comes along, I'm sure you'll be fine."

Mary. Mary, huh?

That was the girl who had been with Arty at the café. Both of them seemed pretty young, but I wasn't going to doubt the opinions of the Abyssal Inferno.

Arty was entirely caught off guard by this suggestion. "I'm confident that together Mary and I could handle most any situation. However, if the invitation was to you, then doesn't that mean there's only one available position?"

"That so?" the Abyssal Inferno asked, looking at me.

I had come here with the intention of filling one slot, but I wasn't going to balk at the idea of filling two. I nodded and decided I could try and put them in my debt.

"Ah, I'll make it work out," I said. "If those two are a good team, I'll fit Arty and Mary into one slot. How does that sound?"

The Abyssal Inferno sank into a silence. Arty looked at me with wide eyes. Could I make it work? Maybe not? Either way, it didn't really matter since all the slots hadn't yet been filled.

The Abyssal Inferno suddenly began to bawl with laughter. The furniture in

the room shook and so did I.

"Well said, Thousand Tricks! So you think our Mary and Artbaran are each worth half a person?"

"No, that's not—"

"But you have a point and there's no denying it. Let's forget about sending Artbaran."

The conversation was moving along without my control. Arty seemed like a nice fellow and I had no problem bringing him, but there was no getting through to people like the Abyssal Inferno.

"We've got our hands full here," she boomed and hit her staff against the ground. "I'll send the vice clan master, Telm Apoclys. You know him, don't you? He's a Level 7 Magus. No objections?"

I knew the name, but I had never met him. I couldn't even pick him out of a crowd. But I certainly wasn't in any position to be arguing, so I simply nodded like a puppet.

After my harrowing experiences with Gark and the Abyssal Inferno, I returned to the clan house. All that was left was to recruit Ark. I entered the lounge and started talking to the first familiar face I saw.

"Huh? Ark isn't here?" I asked.

"You didn't know?" Lyle replied. "He has some major quest to take care of and won't be back for a while."

That useless fop. It's like he tries to be gone when I need him the most.

If I was going to be surrounded by unfamiliar faces like Telm and Kechachakka, then I was going to need a strong ally like Ark to avoid the quest being a total nightmare. But if he was unreachable, then there was nothing I could do. Nobody could replace Ark. Many could match his strength, but nobody was as reassuring a presence as he was.

I slumped in a nearby chair and crossed my arms, tapping my fingers as I racked my brains. I had found two people, leaving me with three open that still

needed to be filled. Three. What a nice number.

"Maybe get the old wall spaghetti party together?" I wondered aloud. "But that means Tino would be left out."

"Wh-What's on your mind, CM?" Lyle asked.

I was tired. Visiting those two places had exhausted me. I began to grow apathetic. After all, we were just insurance and it was possible we might have a miraculously easy trip. Even if something did happen, the imperial guard would probably be enough to handle it.

"Why don't you come, Lyle? We're protecting the emperor."

Lyle nearly choked on his drink. "H-Hell no! And don't just ask that like it's a casual outing!"

Maybe protecting the emperor wasn't that prestigious after all? I looked around the lounge and everyone shook their heads at me. Did these clan members not have any faith in their CM or something?

What a pickle. I'd be in serious trouble if I couldn't pull together a team. I no longer cared who, I just needed those slots filled. But then my thoughts were interrupted by a high-pitched voice.

"Ah, human weakling!"

First Steps had two problem-child parties. One was mine—Grieving Souls. The other was Starlight, a party composed solely of Noble Spirits, a race predisposed to looking down on humans. They caused us trouble at every possible opportunity.

The source of the voice was one of their members, Kris Argent. Behind her was the party's leader, Lapis Fulgor.

"The rumors passed my ears. Hmph. You seem to be doing well for yourself," Lapis said.

"You kicked another hornet's nest! Sir! Life sure isn't fair if someone like you is still drawing breath!" Kris said.

With only a few exceptions, Noble Spirits were generally exceptional Magi. Starlight was one of the top Magi parties in the imperial capital. Their

personalities were what they were, but they weren't bad folk, and, since I had no pride, they were easy to interact with. Not to mention, Noble Spirits did respect humans who excelled at magic, and by virtue of being Lucia's brother, they were soft on me.

Now, I didn't really think a Noble Spirit would behave around the emperor, but maybe it would be fine. Maybe the emperor would just shrug and say "Well, that's just how they are." What's more, Noble Spirits stood out; if I brought one along, they would draw all the aggro.

Seeing as those two rarely came to the lounge, my only option was to assume this was a sign from god.

The choice ingredients of this plate of wall spagnetti were coming together. I returned to my room, forcing myself to get excited about it.

First up, the one recommended by the Explorers' Association and whose odd name I liked—Kechachakka Munk! Class: unknown!

Next, we had the vice clan master of Hidden Curse, the assassin sent by the Abyssal Inferno—Telm Apoclys!

Third was Starlight leader Lapis Fulgor...'s favorite party member—Kris Argent! Lapis was always telling her to not use coarse language! And she was only here on Lapis's orders!

I needed a party of five, so two slots remained. I gave this grave responsibility of mine some serious thought. Kechachakka was "bitterness," Telm was "spiciness," and Kris was "sweetness." Once I had my "sourness" and "saltiness" (don't ask), I'd have the five basic flavors and I'd be all set. Maybe Kris could be sourness and make someone else sweetness. What I needed most was someone who could do a good job leading the party.

The obvious choice among the parties of First Steps was Obsidian Cross, but Sven was a busy man. If I couldn't find him training or in the lounge, there was a good chance I wouldn't be able to find him at all.

This is a tricky one. I need two more people. Maybe I can fill a slot with Carpet?

As I thought hard about the issue, Sitri strode the lounge, a jovial air about her.

"Krai, how goes the selection?" she asked.

"I've got three people. I'm thinking and thinking, but I can't come up with any more options. Are you all right after that meeting?"

"Oh, yes. After you left, we had a discussion and decided none of us would participate in this quest! It wasn't fair for just one of us to have all the fun!"

"All the fun?"

We were raised in the same town and had similar upbringings, so why had we turned out so differently?

Sitri walked around and embraced me from behind. "How-ev-er, I thought you might need some help. So I brought a potential team member for you."

"Hm?"

Sitri cheerfully called out in the direction of the door. It swung open and in came a figure two meters tall and clad entirely in armor. Vertically and horizontally, they had the outline of a Heavy Warrior. Their face was hidden by their helmet's visor and their armor was an uncommon charred brown.

They marched up to me and stood up straight, their arms at their side. I really didn't know what I was supposed to say.

"This is Sir Killigan Version Alpha, my new friend," Sitri said, her arms still wrapped around me.

"Is that their real name?"

I'd like to meet their parents.

Sitri just giggled and said, "Here's the controller."

She handed me a box with a joystick, four large buttons, and one small button. I moved the joystick forward, and Sir Killigan moved forward. They continued moving their legs even after bumping into the table.

Should I be worried?

Sitri noticed my uncertainty and explained what all the buttons did. "This

button orders him to fight, this one to defend, this one is to run, and this one to dance. The joystick controls movement."

I recognized the expression she was making, that one that made her look like she had a new toy. Every time Sitri learned something new or obtained a new item, she would always come to me to show it off.

I had a lot I wanted to say, but I settled with asking about the controls. "Shouldn't there be more buttons?"

"I thought there were too many. Hence why there's one assigned to dancing. Oh, right, this small button is for Autonomous Action Mode."

If that was there, then why did I need the controller?

"Sir Killigan won't let you down, so please, include him in your team! I won't mind even if you sacrifice him!" Sitri's voice was full of both passion and confidence.

So this definitely isn't a human. It's a golem, right? Extraordinary as ever, our local Alchemist.

If Sitri was so confident, then it would probably be a useful asset. I wasn't sure if a golem really counted as a team member, but I decided to say this was another slot filled. My five-star wall spaghetti was one step closer to competition.

"All right," I said. "Thanks, this is a huge help. Now, just one more slot..."

"Um, wouldn't that be your slot?"

"Hm?!"

My eyes bulged as I counted on my fingers. Kechachakka, Telm, Kris, and Sir Killigan made four. If you included me, you'd get five. I had totally forgotten about my own existence. But now I had a brilliant idea: I could pretend to accidentally pick five people, then get left behind. I furrowed my brow and gave it some serious thought.

Number five can be...I guess we just go with Tino. No, hold on, she's been dragged into way too much lately.

Not one of my original picks had ended up on the team. If Ark was in, then I

could've brought Tino, but alas. What other acquaintances did we have? Maybe I could try paying Arnold a visit. Sure, we still weren't on great terms, but a prestigious job like protecting the emperor should be irresistible to a high-level hunter. Maybe this wouldn't just settle our differences, it would put him in my debt?

Hee hee hee. Not only will I have one less problem, he'll owe me a favor. Maybe I really am a preterhuman artificer?

While I was busy counting my unhatched eggs, Sitri let go of me and clapped her hands.

"Ah, that's right. Sir Killigan is an omnivore, so any food will do. It can go a while without eating, but I'd appreciate it if you could feed it raw meat. Bear in mind, it's trained to eat in places where nobody will see it."

"Huh?"

And so the day of destiny was upon us.

I was sitting in a room at the Explorers' Association. Franz came in, offered a cursory greeting, and checked my list of team members.

"What's this?" he asked, furrowing his brow. "I don't see anyone from your party."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

"Telm the Counter Cascade and the Magus from Starlight are familiar enough, but I've never heard the name Kechachakka Munk. And who's this Sir Killigan Version Alpha?"

More like a what. Wish I could tell you.

But look at this wonderful wall spaghetti. The average level is much higher than that of the White Wolf's Den crew, so we can safely call this five-star wall spaghetti. I begged the heavens for someone to save me. At some point, I had become strangely excited about the whole thing (Arnold, by the way, declined the invitation).

"Calm down," I said, holding up my palms and making a wry smile. "These

people are the best of the best."

"You have three Magi, that's terribly imbalanced. You should have at least brought the Immutable! I understand personnel selection was left to your discretion, but I hadn't expected such a mess of a..."

My ears were hurting. Franz was right about our balance, but I hadn't known that Kechachakka was a Magus. Sure, maybe I shouldn't have invited a total stranger to help guard the emperor, but I didn't have any better options!

"If you've chosen them, then may I assume they aren't Foxes?"

"No doubts on that front. They're safe."

The phantom I knew was far too extraordinary to be overlooked, even by someone as blind as myself. I would never misidentify them.

"Save the yapping! Sir!" Kris, my personal protection, yelled in a cool voice. "As long as I'm here, there's nothing that can go wrong! Consider your job good as done!"

Being captain of the imperial guard, Franz was no doubt a high-ranking noble, but Kris spoke to him without a hint of restraint. Noble Spirits were born with natural magic proficiency, good looks, and had once been emissaries of the gods. Maybe it was only natural they had no regard for the hierarchies of us humans.

Kris banged her hand on the desk like a child, but her good looks made the action strangely adorable. *The beautiful sure have it easy*, I mused as I watched in silence. Even Franz didn't seem like he could bring himself to tell her off. Yeah, uh-huh.

"Make no mistake! Sir! This man might be the emperor, but that means nothing to Noble Spirits! I'm helping because I can't turn down a request from Lapis! Sir!"

In case you're wondering, Kris's weird speech was because she wasn't used to speaking politely. Even when we had first met, she wasn't afraid to tell me what was on her mind, and that was usually a storm of vitriol. Since I was technically the clan master, Lapis was always yelling at her to speak politely and that led to her current speech pattern. It seemed she thought adding "Sir" here and there

was enough to make her speech seem courteous.

"She's the Carpet-charger," I said with a smile.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, human weakling! I'm only here because Lucia asked me! Sir!"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

"We're only even in your clan because you said you'd hand Lucia over to us! Sir! Quit making us wait! How long do you think you can keep this up?!"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

Lively as ever. It was anyone's guess how she yelled so much without her voice going hoarse.

Of course, we never promised to hand over Lucia. When we were negotiating with Starlight, Sitri ceded them the right to recruit Lucia. However, members of Grieving Souls are allowed to join and leave entirely at their own discretion. So to put it bluntly: Starlight had been duped. Except they would never face up to that fact.

"I'm lending my aid and that's more than enough! Sir! Your weakness never fails to astound me, so just stay out of my way!"

"I don't have to go? Really? It's my lucky day!" I said, pleasantly surprised.

"Don't kid me! Sir!" Kris slammed her hand on the table, stood up, and pointed a finger at me. "You intend to make me work while you sit back and relax? Give me a break! At least pretend you deserve your Level 8! Sir!"

"Now, now, calm down. Your throat must be dry. Here, you can have my tea."

I held out my tea cup and she swiped it from my hand, fuming all the while.

Kris was a Level 3. She wasn't lacking for talent, but her habit of arguing with quest-givers held her back. To get along with Noble Spirits required either a big heart (like Ark) or a complete lack of pride (like me). However, when I really took a moment to think about it, choosing Kris might have been a bit too adventurous.

I noticed Franz was at a complete loss for words. "She's a perfect choice," I

told him in a desperate attempt to seem in control. "I'm sure His Imperial Majesty will find no room for complaint. And if anyone in my team isn't to your liking, you can find someone else to do this job."

And so I managed to get away with my team selection.

What sort of job did they think this was? Yeah, uh-huh. Yet this was all somehow my fault. The only thing I could do now was make the best of what I had.

"Krai, here's the file you requested," Eva said. "With the time I had, I could throw together the information we already had on file."

"Ah, thanks. I owe you one."

While I had been resisting the urge to vomit, Eva was working hard as ever. What she had made was a list of all the noteworthy bandits between here and our destination. The conference was being held in the country of Toweyezant—a nation resting at the center of a large desert. Compared to Zebrudia, it was incredibly rustic; much of our journey wouldn't even be on proper roads.

Every year, the role of hosting the conference rotated among the participating countries. This year's location provided an excellent opportunity for those with designs on the emperor. I didn't really think the defenses of the empire would mean anything in the face of that fox, but who knew what went on in the mind of phantoms?

My eyes went wide as saucers—the list was much shorter than I had anticipated. But I wasn't going to allow myself any complacency.

"I don't think you have much to worry about," Eva said. "Considering your schedule and the fact that it's the emperor you'll be traveling with, you'll probably proceed by air part of the way. The emperor and his entourage have used airships during previous long journeys."

"There might be sky pirates."

"No. There. Won't! What are you even talking about? 'Sky pirates'?"

It was pretty sensible that the emperor wouldn't want to cross the desert on

foot, but flying in a vehicle? Did the man have a death wish? The land and sea were brimming with dangers and the sky was no exception. Humans couldn't fly on their own, but plenty of monsters could.

My Safety Rings would protect me if we crashed, but I still thought it might be smart to try and befriend the Delinquent Carpet (as I liked to call him). Maybe the emperor gave me the Carpet for that exact reason? Could the Zero Order fight in the sky? And what about me? I couldn't fight on land, sea, or sky.

Just to be safe, I paced around, clutching my head and groaning. "No. There might be bandits, there might be monsters, a treasure vault might spring up, there could be a natural disaster. Eva, I could be in serious danger."

"Where's this coming from?! You're always so relaxed."

"I just thought that if I say it now, it might not actually happen."

"Did you now?"

I'm not proud of it, but I had never made a correct prediction in my life. These ominous predictions were my way of praying for good luck. This way, even if we were to run into *something*, it wouldn't be bandits, monsters, or a treasure vault. I could accept that.

I had left most of the preparations to Sitri. The only thing I had left to do was carefully pick which Relics to bring so that I could be ready for anything. Combat could be left to the knights and my hunters. My job was just to keep an eye on the companions I had brought along, but they were all high-level veterans, so I wasn't particularly worried.

"Let's begin the thirty-fifth-and-a-half Grieving Souls Conference! Our next field of operations will be the sky and the desert!"

Every member of Grieving Souls was gathered in one of the clan house's meeting rooms, except Krai and Eliza. Standing before a blackboard plastered with documents was the usual facilitator, Sitri.

"Bring it! The sky! The desert! Sand dragons!" Luke yelled, his eyes shimmering.

"Krai Baby is a real busybody," Liz said as she threw her feet up on the desk. "He needs to take a break. He's not giving himself any time to train. I wanna go on a date, even if it is in the sky or the desert or whatever!"

Ansem grunted.

"Our objective is to support Krai during his upcoming duty of protecting the emperor!" Sitri continued. "If all goes well, his level might increase. Let's not make any mistakes!"

"Honestly," Lucia grumbled, "just because you weren't chosen—"

"Lucy, we're all a team! Nobody gets left behind!" Sitri shut her down with a smile. "Toweyezant gets extremely hot during the day, but that's no issue. That volcano provided plenty of opportunities to bolster heat resistance. The night temperature won't prove any trouble either, so our primary concern is the sky. You see, there typically aren't any airships headed for Toweyezant. To put it bluntly, it's not the sort of place to have regular airship traffic."

"The sky! Even I've never cut down a monster of the sky!"

"Calm down, Luke," Liz told him. "Lucy should be able to handle the sky. Are we gonna sneak onto the airship?"

"Unlike the Gathering of the White Blade, sneaking onto the airship won't be possible. No doubt, they won't let anyone on without proper identification," Lucia said contemplatively. Lucia was a powerful Magus, but magic wasn't omnipotent, and all Magi had strengths and weaknesses.

She pulled out a battered book and flipped through its pages. "Making multiple people fly through the air is difficult, to say the least, all the more so if we also have to keep pace with an airship," she said. "I might have to create a new spell..." She flipped a few more pages. "Ah. Here we are. Shinobi's Miracle Number Five. Ninpo: Kuuton."

"Is that from that old manga?" Luke asked. "That's the one that you fly on a massive kite?"

"Quite right. Not even a paltry attempt at originality."

Luke's excitement permeated his voice. "Riding a kite sounds absolutely wild.

Imagine Krai looking out a window and he just sees us there atop a kite."

Lucia didn't seem at all pleased by the mental image.

"Now then!" Sitri cut in with a clap of her hands. "Per clan rules, we'll decide via a majority vote. Eliza's adrift on the sea of life, so she has no vote. We have three options: have Lucy do her best with a kite, do our best to sneak onto the airship, or do our best to cling on to the outside of the airship! First, those who want to fly via Lucy!"

"Are you sure this is a fair vote?" Lucia objected.

Ansem grunted.

After that, as they always did, they decided on how to proceed. Grieving Souls were often thought of as a reckless party, but nothing could have been further from the truth. Advance preparation was necessary for overcoming difficulties and, if their record was anything to go by, they were no strangers to overcoming challenges.

"Krai picked four individuals, the famed Water Magus, Telm Apoclys, the Counter Cascade; Kechachakka Munk, a Hex Magus and Level 6 hunter new to the capital; the simpleminded and easily teased, Kris; and last, my special invention, Sir Killigan Version Alpha.

"Unfortunately, I did not have enough time to look into the backgrounds of Kechachakka or any of the other recruits. None of them are suited for direct combat, so Sir Killigan might be enough to protect Krai, but, if necessary, perhaps Lucia could rile Kris up to our benefit?"

"There you go agaaain!" Liz groaned. "Siddy, your blatant attempts at scoring points with Krai Baby are nothing more than a pain in his ass!"

"What, they don't have a Swordsman?" Luke said. "Now what am I supposed to cut?"

"Kechachakka. Hmm. I don't know why our leader picked him, but everything should be fine if the Counter Cascade is in their group," Lucia offered.

Sitri smiled and casually ignored the two brick walls as she turned to Lucia, the one still very capable of conversation.

"As always, I'll look into what sort of monsters we can expect. However, we may be dealing with an enemy unlike anything else we've faced. Proceed under the assumption that we have no information of any kind."

The air in the room changed. Lucia looked very grim. Ansem corrected his posture.

Luke furrowed his brow. "So this fox everyone is talking about is the Thirteen-Tailed Fox we encountered long ago? Back then, we could barely even touch it, and after all this time, I still don't know if I could cut it. If only they were a Swordsman."

For someone normally so gung-ho, this was a very levelheaded evaluation.

"Yes, but you're thinking of something else entirely," Liz said with a sigh. "That phantom has no interest in human affairs, remember? The empire is worried about Fox, the criminal organization."

"Huh? There's another Fox?" Luke asked with surprise.

"Indeed. While they're a preferable adversary to the one you're talking about, they're enough to pose a potential threat to the empire," Sitri kindly explained. She was well aware of how Luke could be so astoundingly ignorant of anything he wasn't interested in. "There isn't much known about them, but their danger and secrecy is comparable to that of Serpent."

Luke's eyes were wide yet glimmering as he leaned forward. "What?! Comparable to Serpent? Oh man, I can't wait for this."

His hands shook with anticipation and he smiled nervously.

"'Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox,' they're called. Or just 'Fox,'" Sitri informed him. "Their aim is the total destruction of civilization. They're a secret society of which nearly nothing is known about."

Information about their command structure, members, leaders, and the like was nonexistent, but it was said they had once served as the intelligence agency of a country that was now long gone. Even that fact was still shrouded in mystery. Most countries had only just recently become aware of the existence of Fox, and that was probably because the organization wanted it that way.

And now Fox was trying to harm one of the largest nations in the world. The intruder at the Gathering had been a show of force. And also a declaration of hostilities.

"I see. I guess they don't have enough tails," Luke said.

Sitri giggled. "According to rumors, their name is derived from the phantom fox which you mentioned a moment ago. The might and wisdom of that aberrant fox have supposedly generated them a devout following."

Hunters were powerful, but not suited for fighting in large groups. This made Fox a troublesome enemy. They were secretive enough to evade the grabbing hands of a number of nations, but they likely were also rich in both funds and personnel. They were rumored to have high-level hunters in their ranks and to be completely ruthless.

"The empire's caution is entirely warranted," Sitri continued. "This upcoming conference is an excellent chance for someone to strike. Whether the emperor lives or dies isn't of much concern to us, but we have to fight if our opponent is trying to set Krai up."

Liz removed her legs from the table and stood up. "Sooo basically we just need to do what we always do? As usual, we've got bad guys, we don't know what's gonna happen, and Krai Baby's up to something. And as usual, we can just do as he directs us."

Hunters very rarely fought criminal organizations. Unless they were the type who preferred hunting bounties, most hunters had no reason to make enemies out of criminals. But Grieving Souls was different. They had been attacked. They had counterattacked. They had gotten revenge. They had done whatever they could to climb the ladder. Now they were at ease, without any reason to have fear.

"Indeed," Sitri said with a smile. "Caution is necessary, but we can, as per usual, follow Krai's directions. He's our compass, and this is our chance to show him what we can do."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty. However, his behavior defies comprehension. I can't help but wonder if requesting his aid was truly necessary."

Deep within the Imperial Castle, which rested at the heart of the prosperous Zebrudian Empire, was the throne room. There, Rodrick Atolm Zebrudia was speaking with Franz, the captain of the imperial guard. The topic of their conversation was the escalating steps being taken by both Fox and the Thousand Tricks.

The situation was confounding to the extreme. Franz had more than just the attack by Fox to blame for the haggard look on his face. He didn't care for anything the Thousand Tricks had done. Not for the rude way he had interacted with the imperial princess, his flippant attitude when the emperor had been attacked, or his complete lack of respect for the prestigious job of protecting the emperor.

"Even if it was part of his plans, planting poison at the Gathering of the White Blade was an excessive move," he said.

Franz hadn't pursued the matter any further because of the judgment passed down by True Tears. He had watched Krai Andrey place his hand on the orb and there was no mistaking the words that had come out of his mouth. The results were indisputable.

"However, it is quite clear that he is no ally of Fox. Franz, what you did was unquestionably foolish, but I appreciate your loyalty. Thanks to you, we have one less person we have to harbor suspicions about."

Rodrick was a realist. Using whatever means necessary to head straight for an objective made him a failure of an emperor in some regards, but he managed to overcome that with pure charisma. Someone could blast a hole in the Imperial Castle or plant poison at the Gathering; what he cared about was just that the benefits outweighed the costs. And the Thousand Tricks had made the benefits of what he had done very clear.

"We can't delay the conference in Toweyezant. That would tell Fox that their intimidation worked."

Even after their attack, this secret society had still managed to evade the grasp of the empire. But if the empire let themselves be discouraged, that

would lower their reputation among the other nations.

"It's just that the Thousand Tricks is the most suspicious figure out of them all," Franz groaned.

"How ironic that the most suspicious figure should be proven innocent," the emperor said with a chuckle. "Unless that's exactly why you used the Tears?"

Franz held his tongue.

Tears of Truth were a pillar of the empire. They had never made an erroneous judgment and harboring doubts of its reliability could not be permitted—that would invite reexamining every case they had been used in. Franz was calm, sharp-witted, and his use of the Relic had proven his loyalty.

However, he was also a straightforward individual. If the Thousand Tricks was capable of the preterhuman artifice he was said to be, then manipulating Franz should be a simple task for him. If that was the case, then gladly accepting judgment from Tears of Truth, the nemesis of all schemers, was extraordinarily bold.

What Franz had done would normally be considered a capital offense. If word of this got out, he would, at the very least, be stripped of his position—a fate worse than death for an Argman, a family that had devoted themselves to serving the imperial family since the founding of the empire.

But the Thousand Tricks hadn't ratted Franz out. And by personally encouraging use of the Relic, he had both saved Franz and encouraged the Abyssal Inferno to follow suit. It seemed he was just as, no, he was *smarter* than the rumors had suggested.

"So I'm to trust him then? Just how much has that man already figured out?" Franz wondered.

He still couldn't place total trust in the Thousand Tricks, but it was clear that man had figured out something about what Fox was up to.

Zebrudia was a large nation. They needed to maintain a proper front of strength if they wanted to be considered a formidable power. The age of direct confrontation between countries was over. Now it all came down to how well one could utilize the resources of treasure vaults.

Could that man be used? Was he safe to use? Earl Gladis had vouched for his intelligence. But if he was going to be working for the emperor, Franz wanted to confirm it firsthand.

Chapter Three: Protecting the Emperor

Then the day arrived. Sitri, in oddly fine spirits, handed me my traveling gear. With the controller in one hand, Sir Killigan Version Alpha and the Carpet followed me as I dragged myself out the door of the clan house.

We headed towards the Explorers' Association, where we would meet up with the other hunters. The sun was just rising over the horizon and the imperial capital was still chilly. Walking through those streets, I felt like I was headed down a staircase to hell.

The first face I saw at the Association was Kechachakka Munk. He was a small man and seemed to have a hunched back. Every part of him but his face was obscured by a black robe. At his side was what I guessed to be his weapon: a staff with a skull at the end of it.

I stopped dead in my tracks, unable to process what I was seeing. Hunters were an individualistic lot, but this man was definitely suspicious.

"Hee hee hee, is that you, Thousand Tricks?" he said when he saw me. "I don't know where you learned about me, but...hee hee hee."

His laugh unsettled me.

No no no. This won't work. We're protecting the emperor. Does this guy even realize that?

They told me I could pick who I wanted, but this was really pushing it. How could I explain this? Why was this guy on that list Kaina had given me?

I pointed to this weapon. "Where'd you buy that staff?" I asked, for lack of any better ideas.

"Hee hee hee."

"Nice outfit. Perfect for an escort mission."

"Hee hee hee. Hee hee."

Much to my terror, my attempts at communication had failed. I couldn't at all

see myself becoming friends with this guy. And what a bold outfit to wear to an escort mission. I regretted not meeting this guy beforehand. This guy was no doubt the bitter black pepper of our wall spaghetti. Maybe he was so suspicious that nobody would actually find him suspicious at all?

Whatever the case, I had no choice but to lay in the bed I had made for myself. Just as I heaved a sigh, the door of the Association building burst open.

"The nerve of you to pick me for this job and then make me come all this way! Sir! If you're going to ask a favor of me, at least pick me up..."

I was grateful for the crystal clear voice that shattered the awkward tension. Kris was a Magus, like Kechachakka, but her outfit couldn't have been more different than his. The appearances of Noble Spirits differed greatly from those of humans. Her staff was made from twisted wood, her shorts were made for life in the forest, and she had eye-catching silver hair that almost reached the floor.

Not paying any mind to Kechachakka, Kris looked at me and her cheek began to twitch. "What's the meaning behind that getup?! Sir! This is a serious job, it's no place for a patterned shirt! If you're dragging me along, you should at least dress the part. By association, you're making me look bad. It's humiliating!"

"Huh? No, you see, this is a powerful Relic..."

Kris groaned with embarrassment. I looked down at my shirt-type Relic with its gaudy pattern and compared it to Kechachakka. Maybe I looked even more out of place than he did? But it wasn't like there was a dress code or anything. It would be fine.

I took my teammates to the arranged meeting spot. Waiting near the gates of the imperial capital was a large carriage bearing the seal of the empire. It didn't seem like the emperor had arrived yet.

"It's built with mithril and adamantium. No sword, firearm, or spell will work on it," Franz informed me in a stern voice. It seemed he would be in charge of ensuring the emperor's safety.

Both materials he had mentioned were used in weapons and armor. Mithril was effective against magic and adamantium was impervious to all physical

attacks. The trade-off for adamantium's strength was its extreme weight. Only melee classes could make good use of it, and I certainly never expected someone to use it in a carriage.

A carriage like that wasn't something normal horses could pull, and when I checked up front I saw four platinum mustangs, just like the ones Eva had tried to send me off with on my vacation. If the carriage was being pulled by these violent, stalwart beasts then no monster was likely to approach us. It was exactly the sort of unbreakable defenses needed to keep the emperor safe.

"But, y'know, we'll die if a volcano erupts directly beneath us," I pointed out. I got no response.

"We'll also die if we get struck by lightning," I continued.

"Stop the forewarning!" Franz yelled. "Should the worst happen, His Imperial Majesty is equipped with Safety Rings!"

Just what you'd expect from the ruler of a major empire, perfect defenses.

I nodded, then spoke in a hard-boiled voice. "That's good to know. Might I ask how many Safety Rings?"

No response.

"But, y'know, he could die if he runs out of oxygen."

I heard a slight seething sound.

"He could also die if he drowns."

"Quiet. This isn't one of your treasure vaults! We've already ensured the safety of the path ahead of us. We've even thinned out the bandits!"

I didn't actually go to those sorts of treasure vaults, but anything was possible considering what we were dealing with. I had escaped that phantom's clutches once before, but I didn't think I'd get lucky twice in a row.

The Carpet bumped against me. I turned his way and saw him making a shrugging motion. It seemed he shared my exasperation.

Hey, don't make so many exaggerated movements. You'll burn through your charge.

"And would you explain that garb to me?!" Franz pointed at me, red in the face. "This isn't a leisure trip!"

"This is part of my fighting style—"

"You expect me to believe that?! What sort of fighting style could that be?!"

The Relic I had on was Perfect Vacation. As its name suggested, it made any vacation perfect. There were plenty of defensive Relics, but I had never seen one as useful as this incredibly adaptable shirt. It offered virtually no protection, but its wearer could be perfectly comfortable even if they were in the sky, on the ocean, on a mountain, or on the ocean floor.

Besides its flashy colors and the fact that you couldn't wear anything over it, it was perfectly comfortable. With this and enough Safety Rings, I was just fine. I wondered what sort of harsh era must have spawned an item like this. According to rumors, it was part of a series that also included sandals and sunglasses, but I, unfortunately, didn't have those. I had wanted to take this Relic with me on my vacation, but at the time it had been drained of its mana.

"Fine," Franz said begrudgingly. "It's not like decorum is expected from hunters. You're simply insurance against a worst-case scenario. I don't need to remind you that if something happens to His Imperial Majesty, the effects will be felt far beyond even the borders of Zebrudia."

"Of course I understand," I told him. "But if I were the emperor, I wouldn't have picked someone with as many enemies as Krai Andrey to be my escort."

I had atrocious luck and was the leader of a party that struck fear into plenty of criminal organizations—it was very possible I had more enemies than the emperor himself. And I wasn't surrounded by guards, so I was a much easier target. However, this job wasn't all bad. I had the Flying Carpet which I couldn't wait to play around with some more.

When I thought about it the other way around, I realized that attacking me during this job was equivalent to treason against the empire. This might not mean much to phantoms, but it was enough to deter criminal organizations. Even if they tried, I had the empire's finest knights and the number two of Hidden Curse at my side.

Taking the knight's esteemed reputation into account, I crafted a high-level excuse. "Let me just say, I have complete faith in you and your knights," I said to Franz. "If we tried to help fight, we would just hold you guys back. I don't plan on getting involved any more than necessary."

Franz scowled. "Very well," he said in an arrogant voice. "We'll keep close to His Imperial Majesty. As well as knights, we have Magi and Clerics among our ranks. You can all stay out of His Imperial Majesty's sight, and be sure to tell that to your weird comrades."

That sure was a rude way to put it, but what could I say? There was clearly something up with Kechachakka.

"Okay, leaving it up to you."

"We've prepared horses," Franz said and pointed towards five tough and wild black horses. "Your group can fan out and protect our outer perimeter. And remember, I told you to stay out of our sight, but that doesn't mean you can shirk your duties. I take no joy in saying it, but His Imperial Majesty expects a lot from you all."

The mounts were iron mustangs, an excellent choice for warhorses. No expense was being spared if even the escorting hunters were being given such high-grade steeds. It's just that they weren't something that could be ridden without practice and they had a bad habit of not letting weaklings ride them. And I didn't know how to ride a horse.

Just as I was wondering what to do, the Carpet walked up to me, as though telling me to leave it all to him. What a dependable fellow.

"I don't need a horse, I have my Carpet," I told Franz.

"Do as you see fit, just don't get in our way." He shrugged and ended the conversation there.

The moment I returned to my group, I became terribly worried over what lay ahead of us.

"Hee hee hee. Hee hee hee..."

"Human weakling! Don't leave me alone among this lot! Sir!"

"Kill, kill."

The one proper-looking member of the group smiled and his shoulders shook with mirth. "Hmm. This eclectic selection suggests your moniker isn't just for show. I'm glad I've got the chance to witness the work of the youngest Level 8."

He was tall, with gray hair slicked back. He had a mellow bearing, but a glint still shone in his eyes. He didn't carry a staff, but on both wrists, he wore bracelets affixed with deep blue gemstones.



Unlike bodies, mana didn't deteriorate with time, so Magi tended to only get stronger as their age increased. Even at his age, Telm Apoclys, the Counter Cascade, lived up to his rank as a Level 7. The most famous member of the storied Magi clan Hidden Curse was none other than the Abyssal Inferno, but Telm was still known for his status as the second-in-command.

According to rumors, he had once been a rival to the Abyssal Inferno, and they had fought over the position of clan master. But the man before me looked far too placid for that. If the choice had been mine, I would've picked Telm over the old lady. But I guess I would've picked the old lady if I was going off to war.

"I'm sorry for calling you on such short notice, but I needed your aid..." I said in an attempt to butter him up.

Telm simply held up a hand. "I don't mind it all. I'm here per Rose's orders. No need to offer me your apologies when you're the leader here."

"Hee hee hee."

"Kill? Ki-ll? KILL?"

I didn't think it mattered who was in charge; this group was like something thrown together to test anyone crazy enough to try.

"Stand up straight! Sir!" Kris yelled. "You're making a fool of me, your subordinate. Should I take over for you?!"

"You would do that for me?"

Red in the face, Kris began to shout something at me, but I paid her no mind and began telling everyone about the job at hand. Even when I mentioned the iron mustangs, nobody batted an eye. It seemed I was the only one lacking confidence in horsemanship. But that was fine, I had something much better. The Carpet was a wild fellow, but good at heart.

More people had gathered in the vicinity. I had been told we would be going with the bare minimum of personnel, but moving the emperor required more than a carriage or two. Our caravan even included the people in charge of the emperor's appearance and the nobles accompanying him at the conference.

Eventually, the emperor himself appeared, surrounded by guards. He briefly

glanced my way, then silently climbed into the impregnable carriage. His personal guard alone consisted of twelve knights. Not that they would do him any good if there was a volcanic eruption.

Unperturbed by the scary visage of the iron mustang, Kris stroked its neck and easily slid atop its back. "Not a bad steed, for something used by humans," she said, somewhat cheerfully. "This could compete with our horses back home! Sir!"

"So you can ride a horse?"

"Do you think I'm stupid?! Sir! There's not a Noble Spirit who can't. Back home, I would ride about on a beautiful unicorn..."

With a creepy laugh, Kechachakka got atop a horse. Without me needing to use the remote control, Sir Killigan also mounted a horse with ease. The iron mustang didn't flinch even when a large, armored man (probably) got atop its back. Telm was a Level 7, so any concern from someone like me would've just been an insult.

The carriages began to roll out. I took a deep breath and said to the Carpet, "Looks like it's time for us to get moving."

The Carpet lay against the ground and I eagerly got on. He blasted off. The sense of weightlessness was incredible. Just like when using Night Hiker, the passing scenery became a blur. If not for Perfect Vacation, I would've found it hard to breathe.

Getting ahead of himself, the Carpet did a loop, and, strangely enough, I didn't fall off. It seemed the Carpet was made to prevent the rider from falling off in most circumstances. I just wished it had more safety features. Was there some rule that aviatorial Relics had to be a threat to their user's life?

"Ah, human weak—"

In the blink of an eye, I overtook my group, and then the carriages, leaving a trail of shouts and screams in my wake. The sensation of speed was the greatest thing in the world. I'm sure it would've been even better if I could control it.

Then, as I hurled along, I hit the gates of the imperial capital, head first. Before our journey had even begun, I had already died once. "You must be kidding me! Sir!" Kris yelled. "Why do you have to ride on my horse? You brought this on yourself!"

My flyboy stunt had earned me a lot of ire. I suppose that was only natural; the knights had to confirm that I was all right, which delayed us by two hours. Honestly, it was a miracle it didn't take longer than that. It seemed the emperor was really determined to keep me as part of his entourage.

"Don't grab me there! Don't step on my hair! Show some respect. No human should be permitted to touch a Noble Spirit! Keep as much distance as you can!"

After that, I was banned from riding on my Flying Carpet. What a shame. I was so excited to soar through the sky. Darn that troublemaking Carpet.

"D-Don't fall off! What Level 8 falls off a horse?! What do you even have legs for? Unbelievable. Could you be doing this on purpose? We can't afford to delay anymore. Here, you have permission to touch me just this once. Hold on tight! Aah!"

After falling off the horse twice, I had expended two more Safety Rings. Still, I continued to ride with Kris. I had already caused enough chaos in our ranks, so I didn't want to mess things up even more.

An iron mustang could easily carry two slender people like us. I felt pathetic having a girl in command of the steed, but I wasn't brave enough to ride with a stranger like Telm or Kechachakka. Riding with Autonomous Action Mode Sir Killigan was out of the question. Not far behind, the Flying Carpet cheerfully floated along.

As far as I knew, just about all Noble Spirits had long hair so they could use it as a mana catalyst. Kris's hair was well-cared for and was cold to the touch. Noble Spirits maintained a lower body temperature than humans did and, even through her robe, I could feel the chill radiating from her. But with the power of Perfect Vacation, I was perfectly comfortable. I was even growing sleepy.

"Once this is over, you better tell Lucia how useful I was! How kind I was! A

normal Noble Spirit would've killed you by now!"

"I know. You're a huge help. Far better than the Carpet."

"You continue to treat me like an idiot!"

I was praising you. Also, I hope you can charge my Safety Rings later.

I held on tight and yawned, which just made her angrier.

Upward of one hundred men were gathered near a freeway that cut through the grassy plains west of the imperial capital. They concealed themselves in the shadows of tall trees and their equipment bore camouflage patterns. Anyone casually glancing their way would have no idea there were so many men hidden among the flora.

They were a mercenary company and an infamous one at that. They were willing to do dirty work for the criminal underworld and not much distinguished them from simple bandits. This job was no exception to their norm; there was nothing proper about assaulting carriages bearing the seal of the Zerbrudian Empire.

It was a big job. They didn't know who was paying them, but whoever it was had been willing to offer a generous sum upfront. It was also a simple job. The targets' route and timing had already been pieced together; all they had to do was carry out the attack.

Whoever they were attacking were all apparently rather important and would be surrounded by guards, but that was no problem for the mercenaries. They were well-informed and well-prepared. And on this wide-open plain, there would be nowhere for the target to run.

And yet, the leader of the company didn't look happy. A scowl formed on a face smeared with scent-masking herbs.

"The designated time has already passed," he said to the man next to him. "Something might've happened."

These men were veterans of their trade. Even under the hot sun, they could wait hours hidden in the foliage, but staying focused wasn't as easy. Just as

concerning, their scout hadn't yet returned.

They had already been paid for this job. If there had been a change in plans, there was supposed to be a signal. But nobody had seen anything of the sort.

A sudden breeze rustled the grass.

"We'll wait an hour, no longer. If they don't show, we'll pack up and get out."

Tired of waiting, a nearby mercenary let out a yawn. This sort of foolishness should never happen during a job.

The man noticed he had been seen. "Sorry, boss. I was getting sleepy," he said awkwardly.

"One more hour. Hold tight."

"Yessir."

In the merc boss's experience, if the target didn't show up after this much of a delay, they rarely showed up at all. Their employer had seemed like a sharp one, but it was always possible something unanticipated had happened. Maybe the target had had a change of heart. The mercenaries had received word of their route only a few hours prior, but there were any number of reasons why someone's plans might change.

Then he noticed a distant shadow heading their way. It wasn't the target, but neither was it their scout. The mercenaries' hiding spot was just off the highway, so if someone was headed straight for them, it was possibly a messenger sent by their client.

The figure appeared to be a woman. She had suntanned skin and sharp boots. Her light outfit suggested she was a Thief. With a raise of his hand, the merc boss signaled for his men to stand by, while he drew his weapon and stood up.

The woman came to a stop a bit more than ten meters away from them. With wide eyes, she stared at the man.

"Are you a messenger? Show me the sign," the merc boss demanded.

There were just over a hundred mercenaries hidden in the foliage. If someone had come to attack them, it was hard to think they would send only one person.

However, the woman with the pink hair and eyes simply turned around and shouted, "Siddy! Your sleeping potion wasn't enough! Did you try to cut costs or something? You were the one telling me to be quick! We gotta hurry, Krai Baby and his bunch will get here soon!"

"Hm?! Hey!"

At the boss's signal, everyone stood up. It was like a grove of trees had suddenly popped up on the flat plains. Yet the mysterious woman wasn't affected in the slightest. She gingerly pulled out a mask and placed it on her face. The merc boss took a step back. He knew that the smiling skull mask symbolized a fearsome party of hunters.

For a time, they had antagonized any criminal organizations they could. They were a party of lunatics. Just six of them had taken on dozens of organizations. They could be sure this woman before them was genuine, for nobody was willing to impersonate a party so notorious.

"Grieving Souls?! You can't be serious. I thought they were laying low," the merc boss said in a trembling voice.

"Sorry, but I'm doing a time trial," the woman said casually. "I'm not interested in your names and I don't know how many other assholes like you I still have to clean up."

There was a sudden roaring noise behind the mercenaries. Screams erupted from the usually dauntless company. Standing there was a towering knight clad head-to-toe in gray armor. He was several times larger than even the bulky merc boss. Another pink-haired woman poked her head over his right shoulder.

"Lizzy!" she shouted. "We don't have time to deal with disposing of corpses, so no killing! We need to leave no trace!"

This was madness. The mercenaries were being treated like fools. If the rumors were worth anything, then Grieving Souls had just added a new member, for a grand total of seven. Attacking a mercenary brigade with just seven people was absurd. And yet the merc boss was deeply afraid. These hunters showed no trepidations in the slightest.

A red-haired man climbed up on the knight's left shoulder. "Liz! The strongest

one's mine, so you can have everyone else!" he shouted.

The woman called Liz ignored him and yelled instead at the other pink-haired individual. "None of these bastards are sleeping! You said you used a sleeping potion, didn't you?! So what the hell happened?! We don't have all day! Lucy, frogs!"

They weren't even acting like they were about to do battle.

"Lucy, frogs, if you would!" said the one on the right shoulder. "I'll capture them all and raise them free range in a labyrinth!"

"Uhh, Lucia, frogs!" said the one on the left shoulder.

The knight grunted.

None of them sounded remotely nervous.

"Don't default to frogs!" said a loud voice from above. "I keep telling you, that leaves me exhausted!"

The mercenaries looked up. There, almost like some sort of prank, they saw a kite.

After a bit more than half a day of peaceful travel, we reached our first stopping point. This wasn't an adventure, so there would be no camping in the wild. Safety was the number one priority, which was a relief for us on guard duty. Thanks to Perfect Vacation, even the horse ride had been a perfectly comfortable affair. But that wasn't what I was the most relieved by.

"Awesome. Nothing happened," I cheered and clenched my fist.

"Did I hear that right?!" Kris yelled. "Because of you, our departure got bungled! Sir! You have to buy a horse in this town."

"I don't have any money."

"What? What?!"

In spite of her yelling, I was perfectly comfortable, which was all due to Perfect Vacation. I just needed to remember to get it charged.

"What I meant was that no bandits, or monsters, or treasure vaults, or

phantoms appeared," I said while holding on to Kris, as directed. "There were no natural disasters either. This is unprecedented."

"Huh? This is just an escort job. Of course there hasn't been anything like that. Sir."

"Well, I guess that's how some people might see it."

Nothing's better than nothing happening. What a happy life she must be living.

"Don't try to act thoughtful! Sir!" she said, noticing my warm gaze. "Know your place!"

Unsurprisingly, the inn prepared for us was a fancy one that catered to nobles. The emperor and the imperial guard had an entire floor to themselves. The other guards, including my crew and I, locked down the lower floors.

Once our preparations were finished, Franz came up to me, a scowl on his face. "We've made it through the first day without incident. Perhaps we scared Fox off."

"No, no, it's still too early to relax," I said. "Who knows what might happen?"

"So far, the only source of trouble has been you! Don't act serious in those ridiculous clothes!" The Carpet patted him on the shoulders. "Don't do that! I'll cut you down!" he roared at the Carpet.

He would never learn to get along with the Carpet if he let small things like that get to him so much.

"Quiet down. Sir," Kris said. She was sitting nearby, back straight and gracefully sipping her tea. "There's no use getting so red in the face. As long as I'm here, our success is practically assured. Even if something too much for your knights to handle comes along, you can leave it to me! Sir!"

"We also have Kechachakka, as well as the Counter Cascade," I added.

Hell, we even have Sir Killigan.

Kechachakka, still in his suspicious robes, laughed his usual suspicious laugh. I deeply envied Telm's ability to stay calm among this bunch.

"You're supposed to list your own name first! Sir! You human weakling!" Kris yelled at me.

"Hmph. To hell with it. Thousand Tricks, why not share your assessment of the situation with me? I hear you have a reputation for precognition."

Huh?

My eyes bulged. Kris, Kechachakka, Telm, all of them looked my way, almost like they expected something from me. I didn't really have an assessment to offer. I had never made a single correct prediction in my life. In some senses, I could be right, but at the worst possible times. But I was here to do a job, so I couldn't just say no. Offering an assessment was the least I could do.

I folded my legs and made myself look hard-boiled. For my opener, I tried to free myself from liability. "This is tough. I can't see the future, y'know? I can't tell you anything for certain, but I've learned a few things over the years."

I glanced at Telm. I hoped that the second highest level hunter here might help me out if I needed it. Telm knitted his brow, but I continued on.

"You're at your most vulnerable when you let your guard down. We're fairly safe in this town, but we still need to stay alert."

"What?" Franz said. "We had no plans of relaxing, even without your warning—are you trying to say something might come for us?"

"Umm. Dragons?"

"What?!"

Oh no. I didn't mean to say that.

It's been said before, but dragons rarely attacked towns. However, that wasn't accounting for the emperor-escort factor.

"There also might be, um, elementals or something."

Fran's eyes were bloodshot. "Impossible. Total nonsense. This isn't the wilderness, we're still within the borders of the empire!"

He didn't need to get so angry. This was just my assessment, after all. I didn't even believe any of it myself.

"Well, there was that incident at the Imperial Castle, and elementals have attacked towns before," I said with a placating smile.

"Damnit," Franz seethed.

"There's no need to worry. Even if there are any dragons, Telm will take care of them."

A slight widening of the eyes was the only reaction Telm showed to my absurd relegation. He must've been used to it, being the right hand of that crazy old lady.

There were very few people in the capital as skilled with water magic as he was. His title, "Counter Cascade," came from his ability to perform feats like stopping rivers, parting oceans, and bringing waterfalls to a halt.

Water spells frequently lacked power, but that changed when you could manipulate them to a degree that lets you bring currents to a dead stop. Water makes up sixty percent of the human body and is necessary for all forms of life, even dragons and illusory beings. You might say he was capable of killing with extreme efficiency. According to Lucia, anyway.

Telm held his chin in contemplation. Then he nodded. "Very well. If any dragons should appear, I shall be their opponent. However, I have but one question: why choose me? We have Kechachakka here. Kris as well. That Sir Killigan fellow also seems quite capable."

Just as you might expect of a Level 7, Telm was unfazed by the idea of fighting dragons. It probably helped that in all likelihood he didn't believe he would actually encounter any. As for why I picked Telm, it was simple—I trusted Telm the moniker-bearer more than anyone else in our group. Kechachakka's strength was unknown to me, and Sir Killigan was a mystery in many senses of the word. And Kris was my personal protection. But I didn't want to say any of this in front of them.

I glanced at Kechachakka when I heard his creepy cackling, then turned to Telm.

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"Can't you tell?" I asked.
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[&]quot;Hmm."

Had I gotten through to him? He didn't seem put off by my question.

"Very well," he said with a serious expression. "I've not yet had the opportunity to show you my skill. Perhaps you will get to bear witness to the splendor of my magic."

"Excuse me? Charging? What do you think I am? Do that yourself! Sir!"

Kris Argent was a good girl. She had a rude way of speaking, but after just over three years, I had learned how to get along with her. I simply bowed my head.

"H-Hey, stay out of my room! Sir! Were you raised in a barn? Ah, don't grovel. Don't you have any pride? You're only making this worse for both of us! Sir!"

I had nobody to blame but myself, so I had no room to argue back. Using my special technique, I got lower and lower to the ground. I noticed Kris's bewilderment and remembered something Eliza had once told me: proud creatures like Noble Spirits considered my behavior beyond bizarre.

"F-Fine, hurry up and show me the Relics! Sir! Once we get back, you completely entirely have to tell Lucia how much help I was. Huh? When did you even use so many Relics?! At least try and pretend you're sorry! Sir! This is the issue with you, human weakling..."

Noble Spirits had a high affinity for magic. It was said their mana reserves were often tens of times larger than those of humans. It's like they were made to charge Relics. If only I had been born a Noble Spirit.

Brimming with anger, Kris charged the Safety Rings I handed her. Charging multiple Safety Rings should have been tough even for a Noble Spirit, but her pride didn't allow her any complaints. The inflammatory remarks made by Sitri that one time might also have had something to do with it.

The rooms assigned to us hunters were a level, or rather a grade below that being used by the emperor. They were made to be optimal spaces for guards to stay in, but with this inn being what it was, even the cheaper rooms were still luxurious. I sat down on a super fluffy couch and heaved a sigh.

"Stay off my sofa! Sir! Don't sigh! Sir!"

"I can't believe nothing really happened today," I said.

"Nothing weird about that. Sir. Was something supposed to happen?"

Well, it was too early to start jumping to conclusions. It's when you get comfy that misfortune likes to strike. But having Telm around was incredibly reassuring. If he was a Level 7, that meant the Explorers' Association considered him to be about as powerful as someone like Ark. And Kechachakka, he didn't seem quite as crazy as he looked.

I carefully opened the box I had brought with me.

"Human weakling, what is that?" Kris asked, trying to obfuscate her obvious fatigue.

"I dunno, but it was left in front of my room," I said. "It has my name on it, so it must be meant for me."

Kris found this very alarming.

Inside were a bunch of neatly arranged chocolates and a card with a heart drawn on it. The sender's name wasn't written anywhere, but the way the heart was drawn told me it must be from Sitri. Somehow she knew what inn we would be at and what room I would be in. Isn't that strange?

The chocolates were some fancy variety. Using one of my Relics, I made sure they weren't poisoned, then bit into one.

"Is the word 'caution' not in your dictionary?!" Kris asked me.

"They're perfectly safe," I replied.

After all, if someone wanted to kill me, there was no need to resort to poison. Punching me would probably be enough. Punching me until my Safety Rings depleted, that is. And I did know the word "caution." It was why I insisted on staying near Kris.

The chocolates were incredible. Leave it to Sitri to know my tastes so perfectly.

I can feel my fatigue fading away. Oh, this one's got honey in it. That's good for you, isn't it?

Kris watched me with exasperation as a smile crept onto my face and I sunk into the sofa.

Just then, the door rattled and we heard voices outside.

"Dragons! There's a brood of frigid dragons!"

"Protect His Imperial Majesty!"

That's ridiculous. We're in a town. Dragons would never come to a town in Zebrudia.

When I said dragons might come, I had just been giving an example. Besides, my predictions were never correct. This shouldn't be possible. My luck was bad, but not this kind of bad. And what was with all the dragons? Two encounters in rapid succession was obviously strange.

I absentmindedly reached for another chocolate, but Kris grabbed my wrist. In her right hand, she already held her staff.

"We're going! Sir!"

"I don't think I'm really needed here."

"Get a hold of yourself! Sir! You call yourself Lucia's brother?!"

Damn, I should've stayed with Sir Killigan.

I'm not proud to say it, but I had never genuinely engaged in a fight. But I told myself not to worry. My lie might have come true, but I could just let Telm take care of everything. Buuut, I was technically part of the guard team, so I figured I should at least make it seem like I was helping.

Kris dragged me from her room by my arm. Before we left, I made a split-second decision and grabbed my charged Safety Rings. I steeled myself. I didn't know if there was really anything I could do to help, but since I got that wonderful Flying Carpet, it made sense that I at least try to do what I could.

Running alongside Kris, I headed in the direction of the screams.

"Tell me, human weakling, have you ever fought a frigid dragon?" Kris asked. "I haven't!"

"Uh, yeah. 'Course I have."

She looked at me, astounded. I just shrugged and gave a half-hearted smile.

My bad luck had brought me into contact with all sorts of different monsters. Lately, I hadn't been going out much, but I had already encountered just about every mythical beast there was. Strangely enough, the rarer they were, the more likely I was to encounter them. "Rare" didn't even feel like an appropriate word.

Needless to say, even though I had encountered plenty of beasts, I had never actually *fought* one. My role was always just to act like a nihilist and burn through Safety Rings.

Without stopping, I activated one of my bracelets, Mirage Form, and summoned up an image of a frigid dragon. How's that for good use of a Relic?

Dragons were already a rare breed of mythical beast, but frigid dragons were especially so. They certainly weren't the type to attack a town. I would know, I remembered them very well after my first encounter with them.

Kris pressed her lips together when she saw the image of a light blue dragon appear before her. It was about the size of a large dog, making it about half the size of the hot spring dragon back in Suls's hot springs. It had large wings, a long tail, and all the features that made it clear it was a dragon.

"Frigid dragons are a variety of ultra-small dragons and form broods. They're expert fliers, exude cold air, and can breathe ice. By dragon standards, a single frigid dragon isn't much, but you still need to be careful around them."

Frigid dragons. When was the last time I encountered these?

As far as dragons went, they weren't especially resilient or strong. However, their airborne mobility, icy breath, and ability to work as a group meant they were still very dangerous. In the right circumstances, they could be far more formidable than the average dragon.

"And?" Kris asked, surprised to see me being useful.

"And what?"

Kris stopped and got right up in my face. "Don't you have any other

information?! Sir! Do you think I'm an idiot?! You don't need to tell me something I already know!"

Looks like another day will pass without me being of any use. I don't have any other information.

"They're weak to fire," I offered. "Also, uh, you can make a refrigerator by stuffing one in a box."

"Say something more Thousand Tricks-eque! Sir! Why are they attacking a human settlement? Where did they come from? How many are there? What's the best defense against them? You are, technically, our leader! Sir!"

Sorry, but I really don't know anything more. If you wanna know why the dragons are here, you'll have to ask them—

Then it hit me. Sitri's present floated through the back of my mind. I had a very bad feeling about this. To repeat myself, dragons didn't just attack human settlements out of the blue. They usually lived in wildlands rich in mana material. If they were attacking a human habitation, it couldn't be without reason.

Dragons were like a form of natural disaster. No matter how bad my luck was, I couldn't believe that dragons had simply happened to attack the exact inn I was staying in. After the incident with the hot spring dragon, it was hard to say this sort of thing was impossible, but I didn't think it could happen twice in a row. If something like this became normal, my days would've been numbered. Thus, this incident was most likely no coincidence, but a product of human interference.

In that case, the most likely culprit is...

"Oh, that?" I said. "Yeah, I've got an idea or two."

Now Kris looked *really* surprised. "You do?!" she said, a full octave higher than usual.

"But I can't get into details," I said, furrowing my brow. "I shouldn't say anything when I've got nothing more than speculation to offer."

The most likely culprit was none other than my dear friend Sitri. It was

possible Liz or Lucia were accomplices. Either way, capturing something like frigid dragons and siccing them on a town clearly wasn't the work of an average person. At the very least, it had to be someone with superhuman levels of mana, and the Sitri theory was more believable than it being some mysterious attacker.

I considered the possibility that that heart mark meant "I'm sending you frigid dragons!" Something about that made me *really* want to go home. Common sense said that the idea was absurd, but common sense couldn't be applied here. If I had indeed asked Sitri to send frigid dragons, she would damn well do it. Except I hadn't asked her to do that.

Basically, what I'm getting at is that I was pretty sure Sitri was to blame for this. Shortly after I had said dragons might appear, they had. I was fairly certain she had been nearby from the beginning, which meant it was possible she had heard my conversation with Franz. As we had just learned at the Gathering of the White Blade, her eye for details sometimes caused her to go overboard.

I had to hurry. If the emperor got hurt, Sitri would be arrested.

If we say she didn't mean anything by it, she might get spared the death sentence. Or maybe it's too late for that, after the poisoning and everything.

"C'mon, Kris. Let's hurry," I said. "We have to protect His Imperial Majesty!"

"Wh-Where's that motivation coming from?! You don't need to tell me that! Sir!"

The emperor was staying on the highest level, the third floor. Without even breaking a sweat, Kris ran through the inn, while I panted as I followed behind her. I desperately wanted a ring that would let me run without getting tired.

When we got to the staircase, nobody was there. There should have been a guard, but they had probably gone off to aid in the fight. Kris began to shiver, most likely because of the cold from the frigid dragons. That was another thing that made them a nuisance to deal with. I, however, had the Perfect Vacation, so I was perfectly comfortable.

"Kris, you take point," I said as we sprinted up the stairs. "I'll support you from the back."

"Are you stupid?!"

"This is how I run things! Don't worry, Telm will handle the bulk of it!"

The third floor was in a state of chaos. The first thing I noticed was a broken window and the thick fragments of glass that were scattered across the carpet. There hadn't been any dragons on the first or second floor, but now I could surmise they had entered through the third-floor window. Glass, no matter how thick, couldn't prevent a dragon from making their way in.

A knight I recognized from earlier let out a thundering yell as he attacked three hovering dragons. His blade tore through the air at an intense speed, but failed to even scratch any of the dragons. His attack hadn't been slow by any means, the dragons were simply too agile.

Even I could tell that the knight was someone of deft swordsmanship, but it seemed he didn't have much experience fighting nimble creatures. That wasn't uncommon because most monsters and mythical beasts were massive beings.

I erased the mirage I had conjured earlier and muttered, "They're smaller than I expected."

The dragons engaged with the knight were much smaller than the ones I had met long ago. My mirage had been about the size of a large dog, but the ones I could see now were no larger than cats.

I saw a dragon dodge a blade, then begin to glow faintly. This was a sign that it was about to use a breath attack.

"Their size doesn't matter! Sir!" Kris yelled, then pressed the end of her staff against the floor. "Fire, it's fire right? Swallowflare!"

In an instant, the sparks in front of me swelled and took the shape of a bird. This was part of the spell Kris had cast. Without needing any direction, the lambent bird silently flew towards one of the dragons. The icy beast halted its breath attacks and dodged the swallow with ease.

It turned its head in our direction, but the moment it did so, its blue body was enveloped in flames. After missing its first attack, the swallow had looped around and made another attack. These sorts of spells were called "tracking spells." I didn't know much about magic, but casting a spell like this in an instant

couldn't have been done by any ordinary Magus.

"Way to go! I knew I could count on you!" I cheered.

"Shut up! Spare me your mockery! Sir!" Kris yelled then cast again without even stopping to catch her breath. "Swallowflare Flight!"



The frigid dragon had survived the flaming birds. Their wings had been scorched, but they were still strong enough to keep themself aloft. The other two frigid dragons turned our way, ready to attack.

A flurry of sparks appeared and formed into birds smaller than the first one. They dive-bombed the frigid dragons, creating a cloud of steam.

Kris leaned against her staff for support. "My mana..." she heaved.

"Huh? You're out already?!" I accidentally said aloud.

I thought Noble Spirits had massive mana pools?

Kris gave me a sharp glare. "And you're to blame! Sir! I was never good with fire spells to begin with!"

"But I'm sure Lucia could've—"

"I'm gonna smack you! Sir!" Kris screamed, the blood drained from her face. "Now protect me! You over there in the armor! Get out of the way so I can use a wide-area spell!"

The knight quickly darted to the wall.

The firebirds outnumbered the dragons, but the frigid dragons were frightfully resilient. Even after getting hit multiple times, none of them had anything worse than minor burns. They remained as nimble as ever and showed no signs of falling to the ground.

It's a bit late for this, but is it possible fire isn't their weakness?

"They're durable as hell. Sir. Is fire really their weakness?"

"Y-You can do it! You've got this!"

"Be quiet! Shut up! Sir! Burning Gale!" Kris said with flagging breath.

A bright red wind blew through the hallway. The dragons turned red and let out small cries. They plummeted to the ground, but it took only a moment for them to recover and get back in the air.

"Unbelievable! I keep using spells they're weak to. Why are they still so agile?!"

Beads of sweat flowed off Kris's forehead and she glared defiantly at the dragons. Her slender arms and legs, however, were trembling, and her breath was ragged. She was close to exhausting her mana, no doubt because she had just been charging my Relics.

Then the knight dashed from his spot on the wall. He charged through the sweltering air and brought his sword down on a wobbly dragon. The white blade was swung straight into the beast's body. It wasn't cut in two, but it hit the ground hard and let out a screech of agony.

The knight didn't spare it another glance. He immediately moved on and, in one fluid movement, swung at another one of the dragons. His blade scathed the body of one dragon, while the other dodged to the side.

"G-Go on!" he shouted while making another attack. "I can take it from here! His Imperial Majesty needs—"

"Right, let's get going, Kris."

The knight swung again. Unless I was imagining things, it seemed like his next attack had a lot more force behind it.

With the frigid dragons wounded, I didn't think he was likely to lose. It probably doesn't mean anything coming from me, but it seemed to me that it would be best for everyone if Kris and I prioritized the emperor.

"Huh?! Are you serious? Sir?" Kris asked in astonishment.

I simply undid the chain around my waist, activated it, and hurled it in the direction of the dragons. The Hounding Chain landed on all four of its legs, then leapt at one of the mythical beasts. I closed my eyes and said a prayer.

Please, don't get yourself destroyed.

"That should do it," I said. "Now let's go."

If we didn't hurry, someone could get killed. Once that happened, it would be hard to write this dragon incident off as just a bad joke.

I'll have to give Sitri a thorough lecture later.

In a small inn room, the man looked up at the ceiling. A small smile formed on his lips as he listened to the screams and shouts above. The curse had been applied successfully. He carefully wrapped the onyx black gem in a hex cloth and put it away.

The gem was a Relic known as "Dragon's Reprisal." It was based on a gem that had once been a dragon king's most prized possession. The gem was proof of the larceny committed against the dragon, thus giving the Relic the power to lure in nearby dragons. Once they were drawn in, the dragons wouldn't stop until they had destroyed everything in the area.

The sight of a dragon would surely teach the imperial guard just how powerless they were. Now that he had the dragons he had asked for, the Thousand Tricks was no doubt panicking. That boy was nothing like the personage of all the rumors. Each movement of his seemed bereft of purpose. It was thanks to him that the emperor's departure had been delayed. He hardly seemed like anyone worth being cautious of.

But the man wasn't going to let his guard down. The drugs slipped into the drinks had been rendered useless. The matter of the dragon egg had been sidestepped. Then on the road, those costly mercenaries hadn't even appeared.

Much to his bewilderment, poison had been found where there shouldn't have been any, and that hadn't even been the only unanticipated development. But no matter how well you planned in advance, defending someone was still a difficult job. All the more so when the number of available personnel was limited. They couldn't protect him from everything.

And so the man's best option was all too clear—if he had missed once, he could just swing again and again. He had his misgivings, but he furrowed his brow and brushed the thoughts aside. His job wasn't to make judgments, it was to loyally carry out his orders.

Frigid dragons were a species known for forming broods and it was rare to see one by itself. Grieving Souls had once fought an intense battle with a large brood. And yet even to someone used to dangerous beasts as Liz Smart, the sight of a sky filled with frigid dragons was nothing short of apocalyptic.

She watched the beasts from the second floor of an inn. The frigid dragons completely ignored the houses and fleeing civilians, and made straight for the inn that was hosting the emperor and his retinue. This was clearly unnatural.

"Siddy, this is way too many!" she yelled. "Are you trying to get the old son of a bitch killed? Don't try and tell me this isn't your fault!"

"But it's not my fault!" Sitri lamented. "My lure should have only brought eleven dragons, and at first there were only that many. You saw them, didn't you, Lizzy? Besides, I didn't have the supplies to plant this many."

They had found a frigid dragon nest in some nearby mountains and drugged the dragons they had found. Krai had said there would be dragons, and, as his best friends, they had to make that happen.

Liz looked from her sister to Luke, who was doing practice swings.

"So then it's Luke's fault?" she suggested.

"Sure! Just tell me how many to cut!" he replied.

"That's not what I meant. Where'd these ones come from? Maybe we didn't need to catch those dragons in the nest?" Liz turned back around and rested her elbows on the windowsill while she watched the madness outside.

Next to her, Lucia looked upward and knit her brow. "Maybe they're here to get revenge for stealing part of their brood?"

"I thought we destroyed the entire nest," Sitri said, "and I was under the impression that taking retribution like that isn't in frigid dragons' nature. But I can't really be sure."

She was quite confused. There was a large brood of frigid dragons right before them and they were headed straight for Krai's location. Normally in these situations, monsters and the like would target someone like Liz. Seeing them pass right by was incredibly bizarre.

"I wonder if Krai Baby's all right. Should we take a few of the dragons out?" Liz proposed.

Sitri shook her head. "I imagine he'll be fine if Telm and Sir Killigan are with him. Not to mention our brother went to lend a hand."

Holy shit, what was Sitri thinking?

We ran down a spacious hallway. The guards must have been earning their keep because we passed a number of dragon corpses on the way. They were considered the elites for a reason, but that didn't change the fact that they were vastly outnumbered.

In the furthest reaches of the third floor, a fierce battle was being fought in front of the emperor's room. A number of knights guarded the door, but there were at least fourteen of the frigid dragons. The knights swung their swords and lunged with their spears, but the dragons were far too nimble. The knights' movements were hindered by the chilling air emanating from the dragons' bodies. Even though the knights could use their shields to block their icy breath, they still found their energy sapped by the plummeting temperature.

I stopped and groaned. "It looks like the emperor's luck is just as bad as mine."

"It hardly matters!" Kris yelled at me.

While Perfect Vacation didn't offer any protection against attacks, it made me nearly impervious to changes in the environment. Sure, I would still die if I got walloped by a chunk of ice, but cool air was no big deal. What a smart choice I had made.

I never would have imagined there was another dragon-magnet besides myself. The frigid dragons I had met long ago had been larger and more numerous, but I still felt a sort of affinity for the emperor.

"You took far too long!" one of the knights hollered. "We'll handle these ones! There are some in the room!"

Unfortunately, I didn't feel like there was much we could do. Kris was weary and I wasn't much use in an engagement. These guys seemed to be doing all right, why couldn't they do a bit more?

Breathing heavily, Kris pointed with her twisted staff. Then a red shadow passed by us like a rushing zephyr.

"Kill, kill, kill!"

I wasn't even using the controller, yet Sir Killigan Version Alpha still closed in on the attackers. The frigid dragons began to panic as the sudden interloper swung at them with a greatsword.

"Look at it go, no commands necessary," I said to myself.

The sudden berserker took the knights by surprise, but I was unfazed. There was nothing surprising about a friend of Sitri's being able to mow down dragons. And I didn't think she would have sent frigid dragons if she thought they were too much for Sir Killigan Version Alpha.

Sitri's friend was outfitted like a knight in heavy armor, but it fought more like a wild beast. I watched it barrel through a barrage of icy breath and body slam a frigid dragon. Even for a versatile Heavy Warrior, that wasn't something just anyone could do.

Kris and the knights were all dumbfounded and I was willing to bet that so were the frigid dragons. The dragons shifted their focus from the door to Sir Killigan. Chunks of ice hit its armor and a layer of ice formed around its feet, yet Sir Killigan didn't slow down for even a moment. Just because it was armored didn't mean it was safe from biting chills, but Sitri's friend acted as though it was numb to the pain.

"Wh-Where did you find that one?" Kris asked me.

"Huh? Uh, through a connection, you could say," I told her.

I made a mental note to give it a feast of raw meat later.

The knights came back to their senses and provided backup for Sir Killigan. One after another, they exterminated the dragons with extreme prudence. Before long, the dragons were all gone.

One of the knights came up to me, the only person not covered in cuts and bruises. I trembled, worried that he might be angry with me.

"They're coming in through the windows. Keep the inside of the room safe," he said in a strained voice. "We'll defend this hall with our lives."

"Huh, but I thought we were only here to support—"

"Is now the time for that?!" Kris shouted over me.

She grabbed my arm and we went in. The emperor's suite was many times the size of the rooms given to us hunters. It was elegantly furnished and a bright chandelier hung from the ceiling. It looked like something from a noble's mansion, except for the fact that it was in a state of total disarray.

The emperor was in the bedchamber, surrounded by Franz, about a dozen more knights, and a field of dragon corpses. The terrace window had been broken. A king-sized bed was being used to barricade it, but that wasn't enough to cover the entire gap.

"Here at last," Franz called when he saw us. "What's going on?!"

"Sorry, sorry. There were a lot outside the room, you see. I don't know what's going on, but next time we should use an inn with a barrier spell on it."

The emperor seemed fine, just covered in green blood. Behind him was a girl I had seen before. It was the young lady who had fooled me at the Gathering of the White Blade.

The emperor noticed my gaze and grimaced. "I cut down three," he said, indicating his blood-drenched blade. "I haven't had many chances to swing a sword recently, but it seems I haven't lost my edge just yet."

Cut down three? The emperor did? Three dragons? He's stronger than me. He's a Dragon Slayer. Really, what am I even here for?

The Magi from the imperial guard unleashed spell after spell on the dragons that slipped past the barricade. Their skills lived up to their prestigious rank. I watched as a frigid dragon fell to the ground after being seared by a lightning spell. Again, I had to wonder what was the point of me coming along.

"When are they going to let up?!" Franz asked me. "They're finally slowing down, does that mean they're done? I find it hard to believe a brood of dragons would attack a town like this!"

"Uh. Maybe there's a curse or something at work?"

"Like hell! What sort of curse would that be?"

This incident was Sitri's fault, but the incident with the crimson dragon had

nothing to do with her. Two successive dragon incursions couldn't be explained by anything but a curse. Maybe I was the curse. Either way, I decided to pin it on Fox.

"This is also the work of Fox. I'm certain of it."

"What could they use to manipulate dragons?" Franz demanded. "Magic? And what happened to the Counter Cascade?"

"Calm down. You said they're slowing down? That should mean the end isn't far."

Even Sitri would have trouble gathering so many frigid dragons on short notice. But just as I finished my confident declaration, there was a scream from outside the room.

"Oh no! C-Captain, a whole bunch of them are coming!"

"What?!"

I rushed to the window and saw a black dot expanding like encroaching fog. It didn't descend on the town, it just made straight for us. It was a brood of frigid dragons that easily contained more than three hundred. Though they weren't strong individually, a group that big could demolish this building in an instant.

Sitri, this is way too much.

"W-Weren't we supposed to be approaching the end?" Franz asked me.

"Y-You missed the mark again!" Kris said. "Lying human weakling!"

"Now, now, let's all calm down," I said.

I had no way of knowing when the dragons might let up! Should I have told them the end was still far off?!

Franz didn't ask any more questions and instead began to issue orders. "Prepare to evacuate His Imperial Majesty! There should be a basement."

"B-But sir!" one of the knights said. "There are still frigid dragons—"

"And this is safer than engaging them!" Franz argued. "Thousand Tricks, I'm going to ask you to handle this!"

"Of course," I said.

I didn't want to take on the dragons; my chances of survival were far higher if I stayed with everyone else. After all, there wasn't anything I could really do to help here. Not even Sir Killigan could handle a brood that large. Likewise, Kris was tired and didn't have much to say.

What to do? What to do?

The frigid dragons honed in on us like ants towards a snack. They were close enough that I could make out the individual dragons. Even if I tried, I probably couldn't escape on the Flying Carpet. He was uncooperative like that. I began to use my brain for the first time in a while.

"I take it you can handle that?" Franz asked me.

"Huh?"

"We'll hide His Imperial Majesty in the basement. You try to draw as many of them off us as you can. Is that clear?!"

Uhh.

Not "Can you handle that?" but rather "I take it you can handle that?" Looking at my level, that might seem like a reasonable assumption. But it was so audacious I couldn't help but smile, time, place, and occasion all be damned. Of course I couldn't handle it. Sure, I couldn't hide the emperor either, but I didn't stand a chance against that many dragons.

"What are you smiling about?" Franz asked me with a severe look.

I didn't have any means of escape, so I resigned myself to my fate. Even now, I was perfectly comfortable thanks to my shirt. Too comfortable—I couldn't even feel nervous. I moved a knight to the side and looked out the window at the dragons. There sure were a lot of them, but I couldn't help but think back.

"Is this all?" I muttered.

"What are you saying?! Sir?!" Kris yelled.

My memory was hazy, but I remembered there being a bit more during my first encounter with these creatures.

But I had a trick up my sleeve—Aspiration Manifest. With that, I'd give them one good hit. I rested a knee against the window sill and reached out with one

hand. The frigid dragons all changed course when they saw the enticing bait. I waited and waited, drawing them in so I could kill as many as I could in one go.

Then I realized something.

I had forgotten Aspiration Manifest.

Frigid dragons were hurling towards us like arrows of ice. Growing pale, Kris stepped back and held out her staff. She began an incantation, but it was too late for that. I didn't have nearly enough Safety Rings for this. Death, in the form of frigid dragons, was right in front of me, but I remained perfectly comfortable.

But just as my mind was about to go blank—a wall of light shot up and deflected the dragons. It was like a miracle. Everyone, including me, was dumbfounded. A volley of icy breath was blocked entirely. Even among barrier spells, it took one of immense power to stop a dragon's attack.

"This is the sort of barrier used by devout classes," someone said.

"Y-You're a Saint?!" Kris cried.

"No. I'm not," I said.

The wall of light held off the dragons' attacks. For similar reasons that a Safety Ring could only project a barrier for a moment, barrier spells usually only excelled at duration or strength, not both. Of course, this wasn't my doing; Saint abilities were slightly different than magic and therefore couldn't be stocked in a Relic.

There were only so many people who could project such a strong barrier for so long. I looked around and finally found Mini-Ansem on the window sill. He was in his usual armor but stood only five centimeters tall.

The Relic Ansem wore, Fluctuating Fortress, was capable of altering its size. It could change to adapt to any wearer, regardless of their age, gender, or build. It was the perfect Relic for someone who had used mana material to make himself a giant and could no longer fit in most gear. I'm sure that was why the church had given it to him.

And when Ansem had first shown me this Relic, I had a thought: what would

happen if he shrunk the armor while he was wearing it? The natural assumption was that he would be crushed and die. However, Relics were objects that defied common sense.

The results of our playing around—I mean, our research—showed that Fluctuating Fortress had a hidden ability. Its power was the ability to adjust its size, so anyone of any age, gender, or build could equip it. Should the armor be made too large or small, the person inside would shrink or grow to fit. Utilizing this feature was how he had been able to appear out of nowhere at the Gathering of the White Blade.

But regardless of how he had done it, I was just relieved that Ansem had saved us. Without turning back, Ansem held up his arms and gave me the thumbs up. I returned the gesture.

Then the windowsill crumbled and I silently watched him fall to the ground. One drawback of Fluctuating Fortress was that while it changed someone's size, their weight remained unchanged. Oh, Ansem.



Placing the barrier had been a smart move, but there were plenty of frigid dragons left, so the danger hadn't passed just yet. But if Ansem had come to our aid, then I figured so would the other Grieving Souls. I grew even more comfortable knowing my friends were nearby; then I heard a sudden sound.

"What happened?!" Franz shouted.

I looked up. The frigid dragons who had been waiting for a chance to strike were now eerily still. Their open jaws, their large wings, their glowing eyes, they were all still, as though frozen in time. Everyone held their breath.

Then the dragons fell. But they didn't hit the ground, they were caught by a large membrane of water.

"Someone's casting a large-scale offensive spell!" Kris said, trembling.

Hmm. I don't think this is Lucia's work.

The wider the area, the harder an offensive spell was to cast. Something this large and capable of killing frigid dragons could only have been the work of a certain one of my recruits.

"What am I looking at?" Franz said. He grew pale and mumbled, "Was this the Counter Cascade?"

It was. This was the work of our Level 7 Magus, Telm Apoclys, the Counter Cascade. I patted myself on the back for making Telm part of our wall spaghetti. He had pulled us from the jaws of death.

"Took him long enough," I said, letting out a sigh of relief. "Honestly, what held him up?"

"You had him on standby?" Franz asked. "You took steps in advance? Did you anticipate this?"

I wanted to act cool and tell him this was all as I had predicted, but, unfortunately, I hadn't expected any of this.

"No, nothing like that," I said. "I just believed in Telm. No, I believed in everyone."

It had been a close call. I had been certain this crisis would be my last. But

saying I believed in everyone was pretty hard-boiled, right?

"Would you stop doing that?!" Kris shouted, tears in her eyes. "Say something earlier! Sir!"

"Ah, aha ha."

The water membrane shifted, forming a ball that encompassed all the dragons. Slowly, the ball condensed. The dragons writhed and screamed, but the pressure continued to build. Green blood mixed with the clear water and I heard the awful sounds of flesh being crushed and bones being shattered. It was a grotesque move for someone with a title like Counter Cascade.

"Wh-What's that?!" cried one of the knights who had been watching the dragons.

"Hm?!"

I looked where the knight was pointing. Far below us, in a street that had been emptied out when the dragons arrived, were Telm and Kechachakka. Standing opposite them was a figure in a fox mask, just like what we had seen at the Gathering.

"That's a Fox! We need to help those two!" Kris yelled as she leaned out the window.

I grabbed her before she could jump out the window. "Calm down, Kris!" "Myaugh?! What are you doing?!"

"Think about it! I want to help too, but we have people we need to protect!"

What a shame. No, really, I want to help fight. But they'll be fine if Telm is there.

Fox-Mask waved his hand and a large naginata appeared in his grip. But Telm didn't panic. He moved his hands with bold movements, just like a Level 7 would. It was as though he was making the world itself his ally.

The water bubble filled with crushed dragons moved like a living organism and headed for Fox-Mask. He evaded the deluge, but it just chased after him. The ground shook and houses were crushed as if they had been made from nothing more than paper. Telm truly was of the same class as the Abyssal

Inferno.

But something else was on my mind—Fox-Mask wasn't a phantom. His presence was nothing like that of the phantom I had met.

"It's fake?" I muttered, causing confusion among the knights.

My ability to detect presences was on par with the average civilian, which is to say, I had almost no ability to discern a presence. But that phantom had been extraordinary enough that even I could detect it. What could this mean? Was it my imagination? I was, to be fair, looking at Fox-Mask from a distance.

The rumbling faded and silence returned. Fox-Mask was nowhere to be seen. The Magus who had just wrought so much destruction turned to me and shrugged.

I went down and reconvened with the two Magi.

"I know you had mentioned the possibility of dragons," Telm said, "but I must say, Level 8s sure can be slave drivers."

Kechachakka laughed.

Though he had called me a slave driver, Telm looked like he hadn't even broken a sweat. Anyone of a lower level couldn't have stayed so calm after using a major spell like he had. Even his movements were brisk, making it all the harder to believe he was multiple times my age.

"Good job, Counter Cascade," Franz said. "Did you slay the Fox?"

"I merely did my duty," Telm replied with a shrug. "As for the Fox, I felt I hit something, but found no corpse. That foe was just as elusive as their name would suggest."

That was very hard-boiled of him. Of course it was. Anyone with a brain could tell that he should be in charge of our group.

What a terrible opponent we had if that hadn't been enough to kill them. It was looking more and more like I would have to grovel, just like last time. How exciting.

"Were there any fatalities?" Telm asked.

"No. Some people have been critically injured, but no deaths." Franz glared at me. "If the Thousand Tricks had deployed that barrier earlier, we might not have had any injuries."

Did he really think I made that wall of light?

"That, uh," I began. "No, it's nothing."

"What was that? Quit it with the half-sentences!"

"No, it's just, I didn't think the imperial guard would lose to dragons."

"Wh-What was that?!"

Sorry. I'm really sorry.

As bad as I felt, I couldn't tell him that the rest of my party was following us. After all, there was a member limit. I was clearly breaking the rules.

"So what did you mean when you said 'fake,' Sir?" Kris interjected.

"What's this?" Franz said.

"While looking at that fellow in the fox mask, he said it was fake! Sir!"

"Did I say that?" I asked.

Telm, Kechachakka, Franz, the emperor, they all looked at me appraisingly. Kris wasn't mistaken, but I had just been imagining things when I said that. I can say with confidence that I had terrible eyesight!

Kris grabbed me by my clothes and shook me. "Quit. Bullshitting. Us. Sir! I'll have you know that my hearing is very good!"

But that didn't change the fact that I had just been imagining things.

Telm glanced around at the members of our group. "Well, it's no matter. Our current objective is protecting His Imperial Majesty. Those frigid dragons were clearly being manipulated, seeing as they headed straight for us. Let's just consider ourselves lucky nobody was killed, because somebody surely will be if this continues. No matter how capable the Thousand Tricks is, we can't watch every angle."

"Nor can we afford to miss the conference," Franz said while looking at the emperor. "However, Your Imperial Majesty, I'm of the same opinion as the

Counter Cascade. And that's to say nothing of the fact that the criminal got away. With Your Imperial Majesty's safety at stake, we must change our approach."

"H-Hold on!" I cut in.

The emperor looked at me with shock. Franz and Telm also turned my way. Telm's suggestion was very reasonable, and Franz's proposal made perfect sense for someone in his position. But I knew something they didn't, and that was that Sitri had been behind this incident. I even had an idea as to how she had brought the dragons in—the same monster-luring potion she had used during our vacation.

Putting aside the matter of Fox-Mask, if the emperor ended up missing the conference, that would make Sitri a terrorist. She was a good girl. She had just missed the mark a bit this time. Normally, she would never make something like this happen. I was sure she would never do it again if I had a talk with her.

I held a hand to my aching stomach. "We should continue," I said in a hard-boiled voice. "To retreat here would be admitting defeat. Those frigid dragons were nothing more than a light jab. As you saw, nobody was killed and I'm sure we have enough muscle on our side."

"Are you serious?" Franz asked me. "Let me remind you, Fox is capable of manipulating dragons."

"Erm, if my supposition is correct, there won't be any more dragons. I'm certain of it. Not a single one," I said. I didn't know where Sitri was listening from, but those words were directed at her.

Franz's eyes bulged. "What?!"

"As for those Foxes, there's a secret to dealing with them. Next time they show themselves, it'll be their last."

I'd bring them down with my groveling techniques that now had multiple years of evolution behind them. Not to mention, I would have Telm with me this time. With a knowing look in my eyes, I gave him a smile that was hard-boiled and dauntless. He looked back at me with suspicion.

Just what was happening? The black-clad man stood alone in the room, a shadow falling over his face. He reflected on the attack that had just been carried out. The summoned dragon brood had been annihilated by the might of the Counter Cascade, but the man had anticipated that.

The Relic couldn't summon specific varieties of dragons, which left room for a wide range of creatures that might appear. If you had a group containing a Level 7 and 8, they would be capable of taking on any sort of dragon, not just frigid dragons.

And so this outcome was just fine. The man had been surprised to see such a rare variety and so many at once, and he hadn't expected the knights to not have a single fatality among their ranks. However, this was fine as well. In fact, the man was glad to have gotten a glimpse of the mysterious powers of the Thousand Tricks.

But the man hadn't anticipated what came after that. To think that the Thousand Tricks would advocate for the journey to continue. It made no sense at all. They were defending the emperor of a large nation; anyone would cancel a journey after an incident like this. That, of course, had been the opinion of Franz and the Counter Cascade, and the man agreed with them.

It was hard to imagine that someone who had attained the rank of Level 8 couldn't understand their way of thinking. And yet the Thousand Tricks had argued against their proposal. His stance hadn't been affected in the slightest by a dragon attack. Could that be the product of overconfidence? Or perhaps something else?

The man thought back to the way the Thousand Tricks had behaved when he fended off the dragons. It had been for only a moment, a small gesture that nobody else had noticed. He had seen the dragons, held them off, then gave a thumbs up to the man as he watched from a distance. It had almost been like he had been commending a job well done.

To see through the ruse all the while fighting off the dragons was impressive, but it didn't explain the gesture. And then he advocated not changing the plan. If anything, this worked in the man's favor. Within the imperial capital, the emperor was untouchable. Even if you managed to reach him within that

stalwart castle, Rodrick himself was formidable with a blade.

But if he was outside, where his defenses were thinned, then things were different. For the man, who had the abnormal power to lure in dragons, killing the emperor was within the realm of possibility. Thus, he had no need to worry. He would be just fine if he slowly ground down the Zebrudians. But the man was unnerved by just how much things were going his way. It was like he was being told to just go right for the emperor's throat.

What are you thinking, Thousand Tricks?

The man had carried out many difficult tasks before. He had also failed at times and even escaped death by the narrowest margins. But he had never been this shaken. The Thousand Tricks had said there wouldn't be any more dragons, but he was wrong.

It was true that Dragon's Reprisal required large amounts of mana and the man didn't know how many successive uses he could withstand. But that was no reason to refrain from using the Relic. The man clutched his head and whispered to himself in a soothing voice.

He just needed to proceed as always. He just needed to think only of his objective and loyally carry out his duties.

"What are you thinking?! Sir!" Kris exclaimed. "We're members of the same clan! We should talk about these things!"

"Now, now, calm down," I said.

"And not only that," she groaned, "why are you on my horse again?! Get off! Sir!"

"Now, now," I repeated.

The morning after the dragon attack, we departed the town. Sharing a horse with Kris, I clung to her back. We were serving as the caravan's rearguard. They must have been on high alert because the carriages were moving at a slower pace than they had yesterday.

The weather was so nice, it was almost hard to believe we had been assaulted

by dragons the previous night. Even the horses seemed to be trotting along with good spirits. I was perfectly comfortable.

Sitri, things are just fine as they are.

Thinking about her reminded me of something Tino had previously said about white crows. Maybe she was right? Next time I saw her, I'd give Sitri a thorough lecture.

I had put Telm in the front of the caravan for today. I had known he was strong, but he had far exceeded my expectations with the extraordinary magic he had displayed. He might even have been stronger than Lucia. If Telm was with us, this quest was in safe hands no matter what came our way. I'd have to give my thanks to the Abyssal Inferno.

"And you weren't even right about the frigid dragons! Sir!" Kris went on. "Their weakness wasn't fire! Was that some sort of joke?!"

"Now, now," I said again.

"Where's your motivation?! Why can't you be serious, like when you put up that barrier?! Sir?! If you were, then..."

Yeah, uh-huh.

I let out a big yawn, set to the background track of Kris's scolding. The day before had been a real whirlwind, but I didn't let that get to me. There's nothing as easy as an escort job when you're surrounded by powerful companions. I felt a little bad about receiving the Flying Carpet when I wasn't really doing anything.

Just like yesterday, the Carpet was floating along behind us. He was a real chill fellow when nobody was riding him. Holding tight onto Kris, I turned around—and froze. My Carpet. He wasn't there. I looked around but saw no sign of him.

"K-Kris!" I said, squeezing her midriff. "Stop! Stop the horse!"

"Wha? What happened?!"

We came to a halt. With some trouble, I dismounted and squinted. My precious Carpet was gone! Nowhere to be seen! I hadn't even taken him for a proper ride! The Flying Carpet was still a Relic. Even unruly ones like him didn't

just disappear on their own.

The carriages continued to move, leaving us behind. It seemed they hadn't noticed that we had stopped. I didn't have any firepower to offer and our strongest member, Telm, was still with the carriages, so I figured it would be fine if I stepped away for a bit. Just a bit.

I wasted no time making a decision.

"Kris, we're going back."

"Did I hear that right?! What about our job?! Sir?!"

We're searching for my Carpet! My precious Carpet! It shouldn't be that far behind. I'm sure we can find it. Don't worry, I'm sure it won't take long. And the carriages are moving slowly, so we should be able to catch up. If we lose the Carpet, then I'll have accepted this job for nothing!

"Hmm. I'm not too sure what's going on, but it's not a bad way to train," said Luke Sykol. A grin formed on the face of the red-haired Swordsman. In a very natural movement, he drew the blade at his side. "This is what adventuring's all about."

"Having fun, Luke?" Liz asked.

Luke's sword was a well-balanced straightsword. It was about one meter long, had a wide blade, and weighed very little. However, the most distinguishing aspect of this weapon was that every part of it was made from wood. Naturally, this meant it had no sharpened edge.

But that didn't stop Luke from proudly pointing his sword to the cloudless heavens above. The tip was aimed straight at a small silhouette in the sky. That silhouette belonged to a green dragon—a common variety named for their verdant scales. But a common variety of dragon was still a dragon and therefore wasn't a recommended target for anyone below Level 6.

The dragon showed no interest in the humans below and flew almost as though something were urging it along.

Lucia watched the dragon with dissatisfaction and let out a sigh. "With all the

dragons we've seen, I'm more than willing to bet some other force is at work here."

"Unless I'm mistaken, green dragons don't live around here," Sitri added. "I suppose they must have flown here from somewhere far away."

Outside of a handful of varieties, dragons were all exceptionally skilled fliers. It was one of the reasons they dominated the other creatures of the land. Sometimes they could even exceed the speed of sound—something no mere human could hope to keep up with.

Resting on her brother's shoulder and swinging her legs, Liz shrugged her shoulders. She always enjoyed a bit of bloodshed, but even she was getting tired.

"How many does this make?" she asked. "Should there really be so many dragons out here? What's drawing them in?"

"Who knows?" Sitri replied. "Monster lures don't have much effect on dragons. I can't think of anything that might do this besides some sort of Relic."

They had just spotted a dragon in the sky, but nobody was at all nervous about it. Just like the previous day, they were clearing the road for the caravan. In just a few hours, they had encountered five dragons.

"Foxes maybe?" Liz whispered.

Sitri didn't dwell on it and instead turned towards Luke. "Krai said there won't be any more dragons, so you know what that means."

Luke nodded. "TASTE MY BLADE," he roared. "School of Luke, throwing technique—Fleeting Glint!"

The dragon sped up, almost as if challenging him, and Luke hurled his blade. Liz made a comment about the oddity of a Swordsman throwing this weapon, but that didn't change the fact that his blade flew true and straight like a comet. Without losing any of its initial velocity, the blade was about to catch up to the green dragon, when it burned up just before impact.

"Damn it! Burned again!" Luke said as he fell to his knees. "What am I lacking?! Lucia, another sword!"

"Hmm. Maybe you lack motivation?" Liz told him.

Ansem grunted in agreement.

"Don't just say what comes to mind," Lucia scolded and in her hand she formed a small whirlwind carrying bits of glimmering ice. "Hailstorm!"

In an instant, the whirlwind expanded into a tornado that could reach the sky. Most spells involving nature had large-scale effects, and Lucia specialized in ice magic. The ice storm expanded faster than the dragon could fly, flattening the surrounding area in the process. Shortly after, there was a large thump that shook the ground. The dragon had crashed to the ground after being lacerated by the storm.

"No backbreaking effort today, I guess." Liz shrugged.

"It seems like whatever is calling these dragons can't call very powerful ones," Sitri observed.

"What of the materials?" Lucia asked.

"Hmm. Let's leave them. It's a waste, but this is too much for us to carry."

"I'm still enjoying myself, but it's hard to be grateful for excess prey, even if they're dragons," Luke said. "I lost my sword, and it'd be easier if they all just came at once, instead of one at a time."

Ansem grunted.

Sitri gazed regretfully at the mythical beast. Every part of a dragon was a valuable material, but they had no means to carry all that.

"Siddy," Liz called from atop Ansem's shoulder, "there's a bigass horde of monsters headed our way. What do we do?"

"A horde? Are they dragons?"

Liz squinted. She saw mythical beasts and sapien monsters running like it was the end of the world. "Mmmm. I think I see some terra dragons? As for the horde of monsters, I see orcs, goblins, and a bunch of other stuff!"

Terra dragons were one of the few dragons that couldn't fly. Their wings had devolved, but they made up for it with their large bodies and powerful attacks.

They were at the heels of what seemed to be a bunch of terrestrial monsters.

Coexistence between dragons and monsters was impossible. Standing at the top of every ecosystem they existed in, dragons were the nemeses of every creature besides humans.

"Let's go, I'm sure my sword will connect now. It's time. Time for me to cut!" Luke declared. Holding a sword freshly minted by Lucia, he rolled up his sleeves.

Without stopping for a moment, the horde of monsters headed straight for the Grievers. However, it would be more accurate to say they were headed for what was far behind them—the emperor and his retinue.

Sitri pondered the situation for a moment before clapping her hands together. "Luke, please cut only the dragons. I'd like you to leave the monsters unharmed."

"Hm? What's that? What for?"

"Krai said he has no use for *dragons*," Sitri said with a grin. "He said nothing about monsters."

He had specifically said dragons. This most likely meant that he wanted anything but dragons. Sitri had known him a long time, so she knew how to understand what he was thinking, even when he didn't say it aloud.

Luke nodded, entirely convinced. "I see now. Okay, cutting with discretion, is that it? Just the dragons. Got it. I can do this. Just the dragons. I cut only the dragons. Hmm. I think this'll be fine training, I can hardly wait."

How confounding. The curse should have been successfully cast, yet no dragons were appearing. Riding in a carriage with some other guards, the man furrowed his brow as he considered the bizarre situation.

The journey had been as easy as one could possibly want. The sky was without a single cloud or sign of incoming dragons. Last night's events had been outside the norm, but no dragons appearing at all was a first for the man. The Relic simply called dragons to its position, so you couldn't expect immediate results. This, however, was far too much of a delay to ignore.

The man made sure not to let his concern show on his face. The caravan was already on edge after the previous night's incident and they likely suspected a traitor was among their ranks. And there was no point in fretting when the man had no way of even confirming if the curse had worked or not.

The Thousand Tricks wasn't anywhere close. He had volunteered to be the rearguard, which put him far from the emperor's carriage. It made no sense. If he was going to guard the emperor, it was only natural that the Thousand Tricks stay close by his side. He wouldn't be able to get too close so long as the emperor was surrounded by knights, but that was no reason to volunteer to stay in the back.

In this current state, the emperor was defenseless. Those incompetent knights had yet to realize that the man was their enemy. Even without Relics, the man could fight. He wasn't about to do anything impulsive, but he believed he could potentially kill the emperor so long as he was willing to throw his own life away in the process.

Among the guards, he was only outmatched by the Thousand Tricks and the Counter Cascade. All he had to fear was the preterhuman artifices of the Thousand Tricks, whose behavior the man found incredibly suspicious.

"Monsters!" shouted a soldier who had been out on reconnaissance. "A horde of monsters is coming! It's massive! All units, prepare to protect the carriage!"

What was that?!

Impossible. The curse was only meant to draw in dragons. This wasn't his work. He turned around. The hunter assigned to the rearguard was nowhere to be seen.

"Honestly! Words fail me!" Kris exclaimed. "What were you thinking?! Quit making more work for Lucia!"

"Sorry, sorry," I said, clutching my precious. Now that it was out of mana, it was nothing more than a normal carpet.

I was entirely to blame for this mishap. Keeping tabs on a self-propelled Relic's mana charge should be second nature for all Relic users. If Matthis found

out about this, I was sure to get a loud and angry lecture.

"I accompanied you because I saw how worried you were! Sir! But this was all because you lost your Carpet! I feel like an idiot! Sir!"

"Forgive me."

"Only once you've lost that grin! Sir! What if something had happened to the caravan while we were away?!"

How could she blame me for grinning? It was a perfectly normal reaction to reclaiming my Carpet. I don't feel good saying it, but I'd probably do the same thing if it happened again. It's not like the emperor was safer with me around or anything. I had told Sitri not to send any more dragons, and it was unlikely any would come of their own accord. If they did continue to come, then the only reasonable conclusion would be that the emperor was cursed.

"Don't worry," I told Kris. "I've said it before, but nothing's gonna happen."

We traveled at a brisk pace and caught up with the caravan in only ten minutes. And when we did, we found the carriages surrounded by monster corpses.

Upon noticing us, Franz glared at us like a demon. It appeared that something had indeed happened. Depending on how you looked at it, you could say I made the right, or wrong, decision to go get my Carpet.

I might have been an expert at apologies, but I had still committed the worst sin a hired guard possibly could. Without saying anything, I had separated from my client, and they had been attacked in my absence. This could harm my reputation enough to result in my level being lowered.

Even Kris was frozen still. I hadn't taken my entire group with me, but, as the leader, it wasn't going to be easy coming up with an excuse for my actions. I'd probably be killed if I told the truth and explained to them that I had gone back to fetch my Carpet.

Telm knit his brow. Unless I was mistaken, Kechachakka wore a cloudy expression.

Calm down, Krai Andrey. Now's not the time for panicking. Be calm. Calm.

You've survived plenty of trials so far, you can survive this one too.

I lightly patted Kris's stiff back and got off the horse. Even now, I was perfectly comfortable.

"Was anyone wounded?" I asked.

The blood rushed to Franz's head. "What. Gives. You. The. Right. To ask that?!" Then after a few ragged breaths. "No wounded," he answered.

He was awfully levelheaded for a noble. The average one would've absolutely bellowed at me. But more important was the news that there were no wounded. Looking around, the signs of battle suggested it had been a one-sided one. Nothing shocking about that when we had a Magus who could wipe out a brood of frigid dragons in an instant. No horde of monsters was going to be a threat while he was around.

This was no time for relief, but I was relieved. If nobody had been hurt, maybe it was still possible I might be forgiven? Maybe. Or maybe I was being delusional.

I won't do it again, so please forgive me.

Franz stomped over to me, stopping right in front of my eyes. Everyone looked at me with critical gazes.

"As much as I'd like to settle this right now," he said as though each word was meant to instill fear, "we are, unfortunately, stopped in the middle of the road! When we get to town, I expect a thorough explanation from you!"

So what am I gonna do about this?

"What will you do, human weakling?" Kris asked me in a small voice. Once again, I was riding her horse. "I have no special attachment to this job or your hierarchies, but my pride demands we don't get sacked."

"Hmm."

Honestly, I didn't think there was anything we could do. Bringing Telm had been my decision, and he had eliminated the frigid dragons. I was confident that decision would keep me from being thrown in jail, but this would be a blow

to my honor. However, I didn't really care about honor (nor did anyone in Grieving Souls, for that matter), and a level demotion would actually be welcome.

But there was just one issue—the Carpet. Would they want it back? Would they let me buy it off them?

"Aah, and Lucia even told me to look after you," Kris wailed. Tears welled up in the corner of her exquisitely shaped eyes.

"D-Don't worry," I told her. "You're only here because I dragged you along. I'll do what I can to support you."

"Just shut up! Sir!"

"Okay."

A few knights had been diverted from the imperial guard and were keeping an eye on us. I didn't plan on going anywhere, but I had lost any faith they had in me. I'm sure it didn't help that Perfect Vacation didn't look like the useful Relic it was. In retrospect, I think they had a lot of reasons for not trusting me.

It's not like I had wanted to pull away from the caravan, but that wouldn't mean much to them. Surrender seemed like the best option at this point. As we rode along, I felt more and more like a man awaiting his execution. But then the caravan came to an abrupt halt.

Was it *another* attack?! Maybe the emperor really was cursed if he was getting attacked so much.

I knew I should have no to this—no. No. I need the Flying Carpet.

"G-Get off! Hurry! Sir!" Kris barked.

I didn't hear any sounds of combat, so it must not have been an attack. Franz left the emperor's side and came over to us. His face was grave but lacked the rage it contained earlier.

"It's a dragon corpse," he said. "There are clear marks showing it didn't die of natural causes."

"What's with all the dragons?" I asked. "Has the empire become dragon territory? Maybe we should relocate the capital."

"His Imperial Majesty requests your assessment of the situation."

"I'm not an expert or anything."

"Just come already!"

I was a little disturbed by the amount of faith placed in me for my level. Did every Level 8 get this sort of deference?

Franz dragged me to the front of the caravan, where a corpse was resting in the middle of the road. The color of its hide informed me that it was a green dragon. The first dragon Grieving Souls had ever killed was a green dragon, but that was a long time ago.

It was a fair bit larger than one of our specially built carriages, but its body was battered and its wings had been shredded. Telm felt the surface of the dragon and frowned.

"If hunters did this, then I have to question why they abandoned the corpse," Franz said. "Could this be the work of another mythical beast?"

"It was killed quite recently," Telm told us in a calm voice. "I believe it was likely killed by ice magic, and while flying at that."

"There's no ice magic that could bring down a dragon so easily," Kris said, equally dispassionate, "or so I'd like to say. There are traces in the air of a large-scale spell being used recently. This is most likely the work of a human. Sir."

Kechachakka laughed to himself.

I was amazed. So this was what hunters looked like. What were those traces in the air that Kris mentioned? Could she see them? All I could tell was the thing before us was a dead dragon. I folded my arms and nodded, impressed by their work.

Franz glared at me. "Care to offer your own assessment?" he asked me.

"Mmm. I'm not quite sure how to put it, but I don't think we need to dwell on this."

"What?!"

They had no way of knowing this, but once again I was aware of something

that they weren't—Lucia had done this. My younger sister, Lucia Rogier, was an expert when it came to wide-area offensive spells.

Even in Grieving Souls, each member had their own role to play. There were occasions when we found ourselves surrounded by dozens of monsters. The task of intercepting those monsters fell on the shoulders of Lucia, the Avatar of Creation.

As her skills developed, so did the potential radius of her spells. She already reached incredible heights, as we had seen back when she turned a whole town into frogs. Lucia was particularly fond of ice magic, so I was certain this was her doing (I had heard that lately, Grieving Souls' favorite tactic was for Lucia to slow a target with ice and then let the other members move in).

Wallowing in my uselessness, I put on a hard-boiled front (don't ask).

Hmm. So they went on ahead. Looks like someone can't help but worry about her brother.

Franz approached me. "Could this be your doing?!"

Of course it wasn't. What sort of person did he take me for? How could I have gone ahead and offed a dragon when I was with the caravan for most of the trip? Telm looked at me with suspicion.

But then I had a divine revelation.

Could I use this as an excuse for my absence?

It'd be a lie, but I was technically the leader of Grieving Souls, so maybe I could get away with saying their power was my power?

"Well," I said, "I won't say you're wrong."

"That's not an answer!"

"The human walking was with me the entire time," Kris cut in. Her speech was rough, but she was still showing diligence by answering Franz. "He didn't do a thing. Sir."

You're right. Totally right. But even still!

Kris sure was an honest person. I just gave a pathetic smile and shrugged my

shoulders.

"Whatever the case," I said, "there's no need to dwell on something as minor as this cadaver. Whatever happened, the fact is that it's dead. Let's hurry up and get to the next town."

However, the road was littered with dead dragons. It was like a gallery of corpses. All I could do was give a chagrined smile as the abnormal scenery rolled by.

There were shredded monsters and a dragon cut clean in two (this was probably the work of Luke).

There was a red dragon that was clearly dead, but showed no external wounds (this was probably the work of Sitri).

There was a wyvern whose head had been twisted off (this was probably the work of Liz and Ansem).

Even Franz and his proud knights looked sickened by the horrific sights. Telm was unperturbed, but he clearly had something he wanted to say. It was possible he had figured out that allies of mine had done this. He had nothing to worry about because those allies were my childhood friends.

Look at all these dead dragons. Maybe it really is time to get out of Zebrudia.

Franz Argman froze when he heard what the emperor had to say.

"You want the hunters. By your side?" he stammered.

This had been the most abnormal escort job he had ever experienced. There had been the attack by Fox, the dragon brood, the monster horde, and now the inexplicably slaughtered dragons. They had made it through another day, but the knights were getting tired.

Rodrick looked as unshakable as ever, not a hint of fatigue on his face. But that was just because he kept it hidden. The exhaustion felt by a man bearing the weight of a major empire no doubt dwarfed that felt by Franz.

This was humiliating. The Zero Order had long been in charge of protecting

the emperor, and had never ceded that duty to anyone else. But the emperor's reasoning wasn't beyond Franz. The imperial guard were some of the best out there, but there was still a clear gap between them and the Counter Cascade. That Level 6 Kechachakka and Kris were both very likely better Magi than those in the imperial guard. Without them, everyone might have died to the frigid dragons.

"You speak true, Your Imperial Majesty," Franz said. "The Counter Cascade is powerful and accomplished in his field. However, the actions of that man, the Thousand Tricks, are clearly unnatural. I worry that placing him at your side may be a premature decision."

Franz was put off by the Thousand Tricks. The Level 8. It wasn't hard to believe that his powers were exceptional, but his behavior defied comprehension. Franz had come across plenty of arrogant hunters, but something about this one was different. Frankly, Franz considered him the sort of hunter that normally nobody would want anything to do with. Not to mention there were the rumors of the Trials he liked to inflict on his clan members.

"You're quite right," the emperor agreed. "But that man's innocence has already been proven by Tears of Truth."

If these attacks had all been the work of Fox, then it meant they knew the route the caravan was taking. The most likely explanation was that the caravan had a traitor in its midst. If that were true, then the only two people whose innocence could be guaranteed was Franz and the Thousand Tricks. How ironic that that inscrutable hunter was the man Franz could trust the most.

When they discovered the dragon corpse, the Thousand Tricks had been calm and collected, whereas even the Counter Cascade had been grimacing. Something about that was strangely reassuring to Franz. The means by which he might've done so were unclear, and he never even claimed to do it, but if that unfathomable man had indeed somehow slain those dragons, then Franz couldn't remove him from the guard, no matter how much he wanted to.

Franz was the leader of the Zero Order, the emperor's personal guard. He would never prioritize his pride over the safety of the emperor. And if the

Thousand Tricks were to be kept nearby, Franz could personally keep an eye on him. Going by that reasoning, his subordinates were also likely to accept this decision.

The eyes of Rodrick Atolm Zebrudia were clear, Franz almost thought he could see straight to his heart. The safety of the emperor took priority above all else. Franz couldn't keep his stress from showing on his face, but he could keep his emotions from controlling him.

"As you wish, Your Imperial Majesty," he said.

Telm Apoclys sat in his inn room. He thought deeply about the situation thus far, and reached a bitter conclusion. He had had his suspicions, but the recent developments gave him the evidence he needed.

He was all but certain that the Thousand Tricks was a member of Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox. Not only that, Telm suspected him to be a member of the upper echelons. The Counter Cascade didn't know how that man had deceived Tears of Truth, but he had to confirm his suspicions.

Chapter Four: The Abyssal Spaghetti and the Sheetwraith Swarm

After meeting with Franz, I dragged my body back to my room. When I opened the door, I was ambushed by the Carpet. He had been charged and rapidly patted me as I passed under him like he was a curtain. Kris had been charging my Relics for me while I was gone. She wasn't enthusiastic about it, but, apparently, Lucia had entrusted her with Relic-duty before we left. Whatever the reason, I was extremely grateful.

She asked me what Franz had wanted to tell me, so I explained it to her.

"Huh?" Her eyes were wide and she sounded utterly confused. "How the hell did this come about? Sir?"

"That's what I want to know."

"What did you do, you human weakling?"

"If I had to say, I don't think I did anything."

"When are you going to take this seriously?! Sir?!"

I had briefly pulled away from the caravan to rescue the Carpet, and this resulted in my team being placed at the emperor's side. I know how it sounds coming from me, but I was one hundred percent mystified. In fact, when Franz gave me the news, I accidentally said "Huh? What are you talking about?" He got really angry.

But I had done things that would cause any normal person to lose faith and fire me. I think it was okay for me to question their sanity. Maybe this was so any mistakes I made would be done in clear view of the emperor. That way Franz could easily justify beheading me. But that would be using the emperor's position for one's own benefit. And that was no good. No good at all. Disrespectful. I sure hoped Franz wasn't doing that.

I just wanna go home already.

I could barely believe that only two days had passed so far. I had agreed to this job on the condition that the emperor's defense would primarily be handled by the knights. This wasn't what we had agreed on, but I also wasn't in any position to argue. So I was at my wit's end. Who knows what might happen if you stuck someone as unlucky as me with that cursed emperor?

"Right, your Relics are all charged. Sir. Got any more?" Kris said.

"Oh, this too, if you would," I said and handed her three expended Safety Rings.

Kris made a face when she saw them. "Ugh. Sir. M-More of those mana guzzlers? When did you even use those?!"

I just let out a hollow laugh. After Franz was done talking to me, I accidentally bumped into my head as I left his room. I hit it three times, so I used three Safety Rings! Sir!

"Now, it's time for us to get serious," I told her. "We need to bring our best to this. I'll be counting on you out there, Kris."

"Hmph! Of goddamn course you will! Sir! But let me be clear, that I won't be working for your sake! I'm here because I can't disobey an order from Lapis! Sir!"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

When I thought about it, Telm was here on the orders of the Abyssal Inferno and Sitri had entrusted me with Sir Killigan. I realized that the only person really here of their own will was Kechachakka. Now I felt bad for picking him because he had a weird name. He seemed fairly powerful and struck me as someone I could rely on.

That's right. I need to inform Telm and the others that we're being relegated to the emperor's side.

I was sure the compounding effects of my bad luck and the emperor's curse would make the next day a terrible one. But my hands were tied. Resigned to my fate, I let out a yawn even though I wasn't sleepy. The hellish escort job had begun for real.

The man had accepted a number of jobs in his life, but none had ever played out like this one had. Whatever was happening, it felt far beyond his comprehension. There had been the monster horde. There had been the corpses of the dragons, most likely dragons that had been summoned by the man's Relic. Normally, either of those occurrences would have been far enough off course to warrant the operation being canceled.

However, these developments were working in the man's favor, far more than he ever could have hoped for. Up until now, the imperial guard had formed a tight ring around the emperor. Under no circumstances had the man believed that such an important job would be entrusted to anyone else. And yet, somehow, they would be trading places with the imperial guard.

The man had just been informed that he would be helping guard the emperor. Even he couldn't stay calm under such bewildering circumstances. When he first heard the news, he struggled to believe his own ears. The Thousand Tricks's behavior was puzzling. He had abandoned his duty, gone off somewhere, and didn't even try to offer an excuse for himself. These were all things no hunter should do.

The man had been certain they would be relieved of their duties. After all, they were outsiders, and now their leader had done something that would normally destroy their credibility. It wasn't like him, but the man had been just a bit relieved when that happened. He thought he'd be able to withdraw from this job. But the results had been the exact opposite of what he expected.

Beneath his hood, the man furrowed his brow. Was the Thousand Tricks some sort of idiot? After watching him, the man never would've considered him a threat if not for the rumors of supposed preterhuman artifices.

If they were going to be at the emperor's side, then the man wouldn't even need any Relics to assassinate the emperor. Even if the ring around him was solid as stone, they couldn't defend against an attack from inside their ranks. Taking the emperor's life and then fleeing wasn't beyond the man's capabilities. He was, after all, an expert with spells made for assassinations.

The Thousand Tricks hadn't figured out the man's identity. As long as it stayed

that way, he had a chance at killing the emperor and making his escape before anyone realized what had happened. There was just one problem: Sir Killigan. That fellow was the only member of the team that was capable of melee combat and was shrouded in mystery.

The man knew the names of just about every famous hunter, but he had never heard of a "Sir Killigan Version Alpha." But that name was most likely just a pseudonym. The bigger problem was that they were strong enough to mow down frigid dragons with ease.

After casting, there was a moment's delay before another spell could be cast. Even in that small gap, a skilled warrior could strike multiple times. The man knew the emperor was wearing a Safety Ring, which meant it would take two strikes to kill him. One attack was doable, but getting off a second attack would be next to impossible so long as Sir Killigan was nearby.

As the man considered the situation, there came a small knock at the door. It opened before the man could say anything. In came an old Magus with perfect posture. His gray hair was slicked back and in place of a magic staff he wore magic bracelets on each wrist. It was Telm Apoclys, the Counter Cascade.

Water magic was often derided as being mundane, but he had mastered it to the highest degree. His skills with water magic were unmatched, even in the imperial capital. Some said he was even as powerful as the Abyssal Inferno. But he looked different than usual. He looked grave.

Telm checked their environs before speaking in a low voice. "Kecha, this is urgent. There's a possibility that the Thousand Tricks is a member of Fox."

The man, Kechachakka Munk, was entirely caught off guard by this statement. His eyes bulged, he felt like he had been struck by lightning.

"Hee hee?" he said in a small voice.

"You find it surprising? I'm aware that what I'm saying sounds ridiculous. But I can find no other explanation for his odd behavior and the current circumstances."

The look in Telm's eyes made it clear that he was completely serious.

"That fellow he brought, Sir Killigan, is most likely a Fox as well," the water

mage continued. "We should have noticed it earlier. It was so obvious we let it slip under our noses. There's nothing natural about someone who can charge into a horde of monsters while saying 'Kill, kill!'"

Kechachakka didn't know what to say.

"Remember, Grieving Souls decimated Serpent, the *archrival* of Fox. You understand what this means?"

That we need to change plans.

There were a number of dangers that had become something like urban legends.

There was the elusive feline phantom that managed to seem like it was everywhere and nowhere; the Tyrant of the Stars, who attacked from beyond the edges of the sky, a realm where no creature could be ferried by wings; the secret society that struck at unsuspecting walkers; the man who spread bad luck just by existing.

Another one of those legends was a roving treasure vault. It had no designated level because it was always on the move, rarely encountered, and those who did find it rarely came back alive. It was called Peregrine Lodge. Not only did it have powers akin to a god, it defied all common logic.

If I seemed unfamiliar with the concept of vigilance, then it was because of my encounter with this treasure vault. Clearing this vault had been beyond our powers. Its master boasted tremendous might and we were still new to hunting at the time. No, that doesn't matter. Even if we faced that vault with our current power, it would still be hopeless.

That phantom—that amalgamation of mana material that manifested the roving vault—took the shape of a fox.

Just as the sun was sinking beneath the horizon, we reached our stopping point for the day. Our first day at the emperor's side had gone smoothly. There were no monsters, bandits, or dragons. Even Franz seemed relieved.

"We were graced with a day of nothingness. Sir."

"Did we get a positive after adding two negatives?" I wondered, perfectly at ease.

"N-No, it's just that we had two abnormal days!" Kris said in a trembling voice. "Yesterday we had ten times more monsters than guards! Sir!"

"Are Starlight allowed to accept escort quests?"

"I'm going to hit you."

On the one hand, they're always belittling humans. On the other, they're all beautiful. Maybe there are people who hire them.

Franz dispatched a gopher on some minor duty, then turned towards us.

"Hmm. Nothing happened today," he said, glaring at me. "And nothing was incited."

"We're not even halfway done," I said with a hard-boiled look. "Complacency kills. It's when you feel safest that you're the most vulnerable."

"I already knew that," he grumbled.

I sighed and looked around the town. It was small but developed. Even in Zebrudia, not every locale was necessarily a prosperous one. I wondered if someone deliberately chose a route that passed through the better-off areas. Then I began to wonder if someone could have used that pattern to deduce our route. Someone could figure out the caravan's path without even needing to use a spy. It was unusual for me, but I thought hard about this.

But then I noticed something. I saw a sign with the town's name on it. The name seemed familiar, and eventually I realized where I knew it from. It belonged to a town famous among connoisseurs for its production of amiuz nuts.

Amiuz were a unique variety of nuts. A certain trait of theirs made them unpopular with hunters, but I absolutely loved amiuz cake. They were hard to find in the imperial capital, so I hadn't had any amiuz nuts in a while. Now that I was in a town famous for them, I wanted to take the opportunity to indulge a bit.

We had already reached the town and the Counter Cascade and Sir Killigan could protect the emperor. So could Kechachakka. Kris...well, I decided to take her with me as *my* protection.

"Franz, is it okay if I step out for a bit?" I asked in a cheerful voice.

"Hm? Is there something you need to do?"

"Call it a little errand. I won't be gone long. Besides, Telm and Kechachakka are here, and you can rely on them."

I had plenty of spending money. Eva and Sitri had made sure of that. Franz grimaced at me, but eventually he let out a sigh.

"Oh, fine. But be quick about it."

"I will. And thanks."

"And do something about that flippant outfit!"

There's nothing I can do. Forgive me.

Perfectly comfortable, I took Kris and stepped out into town.

Kechachakka watched him closely. With that very dour Noble Spirit, Kris was her name, at his side, the Thousand Tricks headed off somewhere, still wearing that flippant outfit of his. Kechachakka wanted to follow him, but tailing a Level 8 hunter was beyond the abilities of most Magi.

Today, Kechachakka had elected to not arrange any attacks. He felt it necessary to stop and observe the situation. The notion that the Thousand Tricks was a Fox seemed absurd at first, but this was no laughing matter. In fact, if he was a Fox, then it would help explain his otherwise baffling behavior.

"Hee hee," he laughed in a quiet voice, a grin on his face.

Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox, also known as "Fox," was an organization built upon absolute secrecy. Kechachakka was a hunter, but he also butchered the adversaries of Fox. However, even a member like him knew very little about the organization he served. He didn't know where they were based, how big they were, what the other members got up to, and he certainly didn't know the

faces of his superiors.

The rank of a Fox was symbolized by their tails. Kechachakka was of the fifth tail. The rules of the organization stated that Foxes could know of those of a lower rank, but not of those of a higher rank. For instance, Kechachakka knew about members of the first through fifth tails, but knew nothing of those of the sixth through ninth tails.

During this job, Kechachakka had been contacted by a higher-ranked member. Naturally, Kechachakka reported to them, but that member would pass those reports on to an even higher-ranked Fox.

The Thousand Tricks had evaded every trap laid by Kechachakka so far. At the beginning, the mercenaries he hired hadn't even shown up. But if the Thousand Tricks knew about the mercs, then stopping them would have been easy for him. Perhaps that farce at the capital gates had been in order to buy time so he could call them off.

This would also explain why everything was defying Kechachakka's expectations yet still working in his favor. It was all being directed by the Thousand Tricks. The horde of monsters and dragons had all been killed (most likely by the man himself). It was possible that it was all part of a preterhuman artifice to earn the emperor's trust. And it was much easier to believe that it had been a plot by the Thousand Tricks, not mere coincidence, that resulted in Kechachakka being part of this job.

But if this was the case, then what a horrifyingly clever man he was. The idea had never even occurred to Kechachakka until Telm brought it up. After all, the behavior of the Thousand Tricks was nothing short of clownish.

He dressed in that ridiculous getup that did nothing to suggest he was an escort of the emperor. He had crashed his Flying Carpet and caused their departure to be delayed. He had disappeared without notifying anyone. That man showed no regard for his own mortality. His methods were unthinkable for a cautious assassin like Kechachakka. He wondered, were all the members of Fox's higher ranks like this?

But Kechachakka was still wracked with uncertainty. The Thousand Tricks was just so natural, so irreverent. There was a good chance he was a Fox, and if that

were true then the emperor was as good as dead. Their job would be over soon enough.

What if Telm's supposition was wrong? Who was really a friend and who was a foe? Telm suspected Sir Killigan was one of their own, but what about Kris? And the Thousand Tricks was an esteemed hunter; that was a valuable asset for a Fox, if he really was one. Was throwing that reputation away by assassinating the emperor really a smart idea? Kechachakka stopped in his tracks, drawing the attention of the knights.

Whatever the case, Telm said he would confirm the matter with the Thousand Tricks. They could wait until after that before they made their move.

"Heh. He he," Kechachakka laughed as he entered the inn.

"So you just wanted to go shopping?!" Kris cried, arms folded. "No words can match my disappointment! Sir!"

I, however, was pretty happy; I had what I wanted. "C'mon, Kris, you'll just tire yourself out if you don't relax a bit."

"I regret my wariness! Sir! Take this job seriously!"

Even after returning to the inn, Kris's anger remained in full force. Something about that put me at ease. I was older than her, but her Lucia-esque scolding made me feel like I was the younger one.

"Really, you shouldn't be on edge so much," I told her. "The best hunters know when to relax, so they can fight with all their energy when they need to."

"And this is from someone who only relaxes!"

I bet she was so angry because she never ate anything sweet. I pulled out the large bag of amiuz nuts that I had just bought and tossed a few in my mouth. They were addictive. They had a faint but distinct sweetness, and even though they weren't roasted, they still had a strong aroma. They even had a nice crunchy texture.

Enjoying the nuts, I was about to offer some to Kris, but then I stopped myself. Amiuz nuts had a side effect: they hindered control of mana. Eating

them would temporarily prevent someone from casting spells and charging Relics. They didn't quite make it impossible; they just made it painful. It's why hunters never ate amiuz nuts.

But that didn't matter to me, so I munched away.

Irritated, Kris reached into the bag. "At least share them. Sir." Before I could stop her, she stuffed her cheeks. Her eyes went wide. "Mmm. You humans make decent snacks. Sir."

Well, maybe it's fine. I don't have any Relics that need to be charged tonight.

I gave in and handed the nuts to Kris. I was just worried she wouldn't leave any room for dinner.

"Not bad at all. Sir," she said. "I think I recognize this taste. But where—URK?!"

Kris clutched her chest and bent down. Sweat flowed from her forehead and tears from her eyes.

"Urgh. Wh-What did you feed me? My mana circulation, it's..."

"Th-Those were amiuz nuts."

"What?! Ack!"

Kris squeezed her eyes shut and trembled. I guess she didn't even have the strength to argue. Her left arm limply whacked my knees. But I didn't think she'd die or anything. If those were poisonous to her kind, then she probably would've made a bigger deal of it.

Looks like these aren't good for Noble Spirits. Come to think of it, Lucia had a similar reaction when she ate amiuz long ago. Also, I didn't feed them to you. You snatched them from my bag.

Then I heard a knock and Telm's voice.

"Thousand Tricks, I'd like to talk."

In some ways, this was bad timing, but I thought maybe he would use his magic to produce some water that Kris could drink. I opened the door, and in came Telm and our dubious ally, Kechachakka. Both of them looked very

serious.

Telm and Kechachakka made a strange duo. They were both Magi, but an orthodox Magus like Telm seemed like the polar opposite of someone like Kechachakka. But even though I had picked them for the team without any deep consideration, they had turned out to be excellent allies.

But I still needed to curry favor with them. After all, there could yet be more dragons on the horizon.

Telm's eyes bulged when he saw Kris. "What happened to her?"

"Hm? Oh, her? Just a little accident. Nothing to worry about."

She was a proud Noble Spirit. She would never allow it to be known that she ate amiuz nuts of her own volition and gave herself a stomachache.

"It's as the human weakling says," she groaned while giving me a nasty look. "Don't worry about it."

She was still able to act tough, which I took as a sign that she'd probably be fine. But what sad lives Magi must have led if they couldn't eat amiuz nuts.

I put on a hard-boiled smile. "Is this about the escort shifts?" I asked before they could ask more about Kris. "I was hoping we could continue as planned, with you two teamed up. The imperial guard are doing good work, but I'm not so sure we can leave it all in their hands."

Pairing Telm and Kechachakka was the result of my very levelheaded judgment. First, I didn't think I'd be able to learn to communicate with Kechachakka during this job. I also didn't want to pair him with Sir Killigan, who I still didn't trust. And Kris was even worse at communication than me. By process of elimination, Kechachakka was put with Telm. An unfortunate side effect of the wall spaghetti method.

"Right, do you want some?"

Telm grimaced when he read the letters printed on the bag I held before him.

"Amiuz nuts hinder the manipulation of mana," he said in a dour voice. "They're not something a Magus on an escort job should be eating."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

Still clutching her chest, Kris gave me a spiteful glare. But I wasn't a Magus, so I helped myself to some more amiuz nuts. A Relic-user had no need for mana.

Something Sitri once said was that, "If you really try, you can overcome the mana hindrance inflicted by amiuz nuts. In that regard, you can use amiuz nuts for training your mettle." Lucia supported this idea. I just liked amiuz nuts because I enjoyed gorging on them.

"So if this isn't about the shifts, then what is it?" I asked.

Had they come to say they refused to obey a leader like me? If so, I was totally willing to hand the hat off to one of them.

Telm made a grave expression, then whispered to me, almost like he was discussing some secret matter. "Thousand Tricks? You have a tail, don't you?"

I looked at him with shock. "Huh?" I sputtered.

Telm, however, was dead serious.

Ridiculous. Impossible. Nobody should know about that. Where did they hear about it?

The only people who knew about my tail were the other members of Grieving Souls, and I didn't think they would leak that. But Telm seemed certain of himself. He probably hadn't misspoken.

Normally, a human would never have a tail, and there was no way I could convince them they were mistaken. The proverbial cat couldn't stay in the bag forever. It was possible I had gotten plastered and then blabbed about it at some point or another. But whatever the case, this was troubling. I had wanted to keep the tail a secret.

"Sorry, Kris, but could you step out for a bit? We need to discuss something important."

Kris seemed confused. I felt bad kicking her out when she was in so much pain, but I didn't want her to know about this. In a perfect world, Telm or Kechachakka wouldn't have known about it either.

"Huh?" she said. "What is—urgh."

"Sorry, but this is a very delicate matter. Remember, I'm in charge for the

time being. And I won't be long."

"Ugh. I'll be sure to tell Lucia about this."

Kris crawled out like a caterpillar.

I'll have to treat her to something besides amiuz nuts.

I took a deep breath and looked at the two Magi before me.

The *tail*. To be precise, it wasn't actually a tail, it was a lunk of living mana material. My encounter with the Peregrine Lodge had ended with my total surrender, but that didn't mean I left empty-handed. I took one thing away with me. Actually, I didn't take it, it was shoved off on me.

It was a tail. The thirteenth and final of the aberrant fox's tails. It was proof that I had entered and survived the Peregrine Lodge. Even though it had been years since it had been severed from that beast, it was no closer to dissipating than when I first obtained it.

We referred to that tail as the "Fox God's Final Tail."

Kechachakka had no doubts—the Thousand Tricks was a Fox. They had asked him about the presence of his tail, the sign used to recognize fellow members. It was rarely utilized, but if a Fox believed they had met a higher-ranking member, they could use the sign to confirm their suspicions. Foxes, of course, already knew who was beneath them.

After chasing Kris out, the Thousand Tricks held his hands up in surrender.

"I don't know where you learned that, but, for my sake, I hope you won't go telling everyone about it," he said with a smile.

"Did you think it would escape our notice?" Telm asked. "You were far too conspicuous."

Telm Apoclys was a fearsome man. Through might and prudence, he had earned his level without a doubt. His magic was easily among some of the most impressive spellcasting Kechachakka had ever witnessed. Even a first-rate Shaman like him couldn't hope to match the Counter Cascade.

Telm focused the mana circulating through his body. He was preparing to strike. On the surface, he looked casual, but as a fellow Magus, Kechachakka could sense his shifting mana and growing wrath.

However, even though he was in danger, the Thousand Tricks appeared even more relaxed than Telm. He almost looked like he didn't even understand what was happening.

"Aah. Darn. Did I do something conspicuous?" he asked.

"You admit to being a fox?" Telm said.

"Huh? Fox? No, as you can see, I'm human."

The Thousand Tricks had given the correct response to the signal. What a feat of theatrics it was. Even with all the proof laid out before him, Kechachakka still struggled to see this man as anything more than a benign civilian. He watched as a troubled smile formed on the man's lips.

In a low voice, Telm continued his questioning. "Which tail is yours?"

"Huh? Oh, the thirteenth, I guess."

Kechachakka's eyes threatened to bulge from their sockets. At last, Telm failed to keep his expression neutral. The highest rank in Fox was the ninth tail. There was no thirteenth. Kechachakka was stricken with confusion, but Telm pressed on.

"That's absurd. There are only nine tails," he said in a rumbling voice.

"Huh? Oh. More were grown, you see. They're a product of culminated power and all. Ah, I hadn't realized you didn't know that."

If he was telling the truth, then they were astronomically outranked by this twenty-year-old young man before them. He didn't seem to be lying, and they hadn't heard any news of the signal being leaked.

Kechachakka had had his suspicions, but having them confirmed left him terrified. What sort of talent and genius was necessary to reach the top of Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox at such a young age? Climbing so high in the ranks of such a secretive organization must have been far more difficult than reaching Level 8.

"Is Kris involved in this?"

"No, it's got nothing to do with her."

"Hmm. Well then, would you care to show us your *tail*?" Telm asked. The Counter Cascade was of the seventh tail, lower than the Thousand Tricks, but he said this without even flinching.

The Thousand Tricks blinked, then gave a dopey laugh. "Sorry, I can't show you right now." This was the correct answer. "My little sister's holding on to it for me."

His little sister?

What a strange and incomprehensible exchange this has been.

"Tell us of your plan," Telm demanded.

I guess he was ready to move on from the tail. I was wondering if it had something to do with the "Fox" Telm had attacked the other day. Whatever his reasons, I had learned that Telm also owned a tail. The seventh, apparently. I decided not to pursue it though. If I had been given a tail, then there was nothing strange about someone else having one. And supposedly these tails were pretty useful for Magi like him.

But if Telm said there were only nine tails, then he must have gotten his before we did. But that raised the question: just how old was this guy? I was pretty sure that that aberrant fox said they had grown their thirteenth tail around one hundred years ago.

"It hasn't changed from earlier," I said. "The divisions will stay the same, and we'll follow Franz's orders."

"Can Sir Killigan be trusted?"

Telm looked serious. He hadn't been letting it show, but I guess Sir Killigan had been bothering him.

"That one? Sir Killigan's a suspicious one all right, but it's fine. I'm in control."

Now where did that controller go?

Well, I didn't need it. I figured Killigan would be fine on Autonomous Action

Mode if Sitri trusted me with it.

"There's no need to worry," I continued. "I don't think anything will be happening soon."

I heard Kechachakka chuckling.

"If we have any problems, it'll be after we take to the sky."

"Hm." Telm nodded. "Very well."

Now that I knew that a tail had been thrust onto him as well, I think I felt a bit closer to the old Magus. I began to think that maybe if I became friends with him, he might quell the grudge that pyromaniac lady had with me. But maybe that was wishful thinking.

"You showed me some extraordinary magic back there. I'll leave the fighting to you," I said to Telm. "You're probably even stronger than the Abyssal Inferno."

"Rose lacks subtlety, but we simply excel in different respects."

"And you're not half bad either, Kechachakka," I said while trying to be as hard-boiled as I could. "I'll be counting on you out there. Those are hexes, right? Really let loose with those."

Kechachakka nodded vigorously. It seemed he was a better fellow than his appearance suggested. I wished Liz and some of my other friends could be as cooperative as him.

"Don't worry," I said. "We're the best there is. A job like this should be no problem for us. Let's give 'em hell."

I nodded then, getting carried away, threw my arms in the air.

It had been nearly five years since I had taken up the perilous trade of treasure hunting. Overcoming a wide range of ordeals taught me that what a hunter needed the most were comrades, ones that you could rely on and put your faith in.

After developing a deeper bond with Telm and Kechachakka, the next few days went so smoothly I had to wonder if someone somewhere was making a

mistake. Maybe my negative luck really had added with the negative luck of the emperor and resulted in a positive.

Following our bonding, Abyssal Spaghetti (as I called us) operated flawlessly. If any monsters approached us, they were taken care of in an instant. From my perspective, our team was beyond reproach. I stuck near the carriage and pretended to be the last line of defense, and Abyssal Spaghetti was so efficient that we actually got away with it.

Most deserving of praise was the magic of Kechacha—no, it was Telm, the Counter Cascade. Perhaps it was only normal for someone of his stature, but watching him up close made it clear to me just how exceptional he was. I could tell after having watched Lucia's varied and diverse spellcasting.

It wasn't his strength that floored me, it was that—compared to Lucia—he was *quiet*. Telm could cast spells almost instantly. I got the impression his bracelets helped with this, but it was still astounding. This was undeniably a useful talent and something to be lauded but the more I witnessed it, the more it scared me.

Not that he struck me as the sort to do such a thing, but he could've easily murdered the emperor if he wanted to. Was there no sane person in all of Hidden Curse?! He was overpowered, but, unlike the pyromaniac lady, he wasn't overwrought.

We hadn't had any trouble keeping our schedule, and tomorrow we would reach the town where we would transfer to an airship. I headed to my inn room. The day had passed without me doing anything in particular, but I was still worn out. With nice accommodations and delicious food, I halfway felt like I was on vacation. But no matter how comfortable I was, I couldn't avoid fatigue, which was a basic fact of life.

The worst was that because I didn't have the ever-reliable Sitri with me, I had to personally answer any summons. I wanted to put Telm in charge of everything, but if I overworked him, then there was no telling what the Abyssal Inferno might have to say about it.

I sighed, unlocked the door, and entered my room. I was one of those people who liked to give their inn room an inspection before doing anything else. I

didn't do it for security reasons or anything, it was just a habit of mine. I casually opened the closet and Liz grinned and waved at me from inside it. Compelled by instinct, I closed the door. Then I took a deep breath.

Inns these days sometimes come with really tasteless decor.

The next moment, the door burst open and a girl with pink hair and tan skin flew out. Laughing all the while, Liz knocked me onto the bed while I unsuccessfully tried to grasp the situation. I felt my body sinking into the soft mattress.

"Wh-Why are you here?" I managed to ask her.

"I thought you might be lonely! So here I am!" she said while rubbing her head against my chest.

In other words, she had no reason. Still, I wasn't going to complain.

"I'm glad to see you, but you shouldn't be here," I said as I gently ran a hand through her hair.

I hadn't made up for all my other failures so far, and Franz still didn't trust me. That situation probably would only get worse if someone found me with a friend that I had supposedly left behind. Don't get me wrong, I really was glad to see her. If she had come later in the night, I could've been available to her, but I still had things to do and having Liz would only make things worse.

Liz, however, didn't listen to me and just snuggled against me like a wolf who hadn't played with her master in a long time. Her hair smelled nice, making me think she had showered before I had arrived.

Then, with the worst timing possible, there was a knock at the door.

"Human weakling! Come on out. I'd like to get your charging out of the way! Sir! And then if I could have some of those amiuz nuts. Sir."

The Carpet twirled around, almost like he was exasperated. At that moment, I became very grateful he couldn't talk. But that didn't change the fact that Kris might see us. She wasn't the type to try, or want to try, reading between the lines. I pushed Liz off me and got up, then grabbed a bedsheet and threw it over her.

At almost the exact same moment, the door flung open before I could say anything. Looking displeased, Kris took a step in, then saw me and the writhing bundle of bedsheets next to me. Her eyes bulged and she sputtered with confusion.

"G-Got it. I'll leave it to you," I said to Bedsheet Liz. "Now, return to where you belong."

Luckily, it seemed our brief contact had been enough to satisfy her to a degree. She nodded, and while still writhing in a manner, she headed to the window and unlocked it with her sheet-covered hands. Without saying anything to Kris, she jumped out the window and floated down. We were on the inn's third floor, but that wasn't enough to hurt Liz.

I closed the window and made sure to lock it tight. Taking a deep breath, I faced Kris again and saw her standing still as a statue.

"Sorry, sorry. You mentioned charging?" I said, smiling like absolutely nothing had happened.

"Wh-What was that? Sir."

"Today was an easy day, so it's just the Carpet and my shirt that need charging. Oh, and you mentioned the amiuz nuts, right? But are you sure about those? They seem to hit you real hard."

Perhaps I shouldn't have told her about how they could be used for training. All hunters had a competitive streak somewhere in them. I grabbed the bag and helped myself to a few handfuls. Perhaps because I was panicking internally, I couldn't taste a thing.

Kris strode right up to me and grabbed my collar. She furrowed her brow and shook me back and forth. "Excuse me? Is this a joke at my expense? Do you really expect me to be fooled?! Sir?! I'm asking you what that was, so out with it! Sir!"

"Aah. Ha ha ha. It was one of *those*. You don't know them? That was a, uh, a sheetwraith."

"D-Damn you! Would you try that excuse on the emperor?! Sir?!"

You're not wrong. You're perfectly—urk—right. I'm not trying to fool you, honestly. It's just that there's nothing I can say.

As I let myself be rattled about, Telm and Kechachakka dashed into the room.

"Has something happened?!" he yelled. When he saw Kris, his expression instantly darkened and he raised an arm.

"Telm, this human weakling was talking with some stranger! Sir!" Kris cried in a shrill voice. "He's definitely up to some shenanigans that he's not telling us about!"

Telm didn't respond.

"We're his party members for the time being, so he owes us an explanation! Sir!" Kris continued. "If nothing else, he shouldn't be acting on his own during an escort job!"

Her words stung, because she was completely right. If it was just her, I might've considered offering an explanation, but I didn't want Telm and Kechachakka knowing about Liz.

Oh, what do I do?

Red with anger, Kris let me go and told Telm and Kechachakka what she had seen. All the while, the Counter Cascade looked at me dubiously. It could've been my imagination, but Kechachakka seemed exasperated. There really wasn't anything I could say in my defense. But, hey, Kris was a fellow clan member. Why didn't she back me up?

"Hm. I understand now," Telm said once Kris had finished. "That was indeed a, erm, sheetwraith."

I hadn't expected covering fire from Telm. The look on his face was one I had never seen from him. If I had to describe it, "uncomfortable" is the word I'd use.

Kris looked briefly taken aback before going at Telm. "What?! Are you out of your waterlogged mind?! Sir?! How do you even end up at a conclusion like that?!"

"C-Calm yourself, Kris. They are *truly rare*, but there are tales of such specters. I will not deny the plausibility. I take it you are in agreement, Kecha? Kecha?"

"Hee. Hee hee hee. Hee hee."

Kechachakka slowly nodded his head up and down, going along with Telm's nonsense. He was definitely my favorite of all the suspicious yet cooperative people I knew.

"What's up with you three?!" Kris stomped on the ground and tears formed at the edges of her finely shaped eyes. "Am I being mocked?! Do you really think a rare sheetwraith would appear in a luxury inn?! If you do, then try telling Franz about it! Sir!"

"W-We're not lying to you. Isn't that so, Thousand Tricks?" "Er, not quite."

"Huh?!"

I felt bad throwing Telm and Kechachakka under the bus like that, but I couldn't keep this story up. If I tried to convince Franz that that was a sheetwraith, then he'd probably wallop me. So I folded my arms and nodded while I thought up a new excuse.

"The truth is," I said, "that was an elemental at my command. As a precaution, I ordered it to look around the town."

"An elemental?!" Kris looked at me with partial disbelief. "You can use magic despite your lack of mana, sir?"

My priority was just moving away from the sheetwraith, so I just said whatever came to mind. "Sorry for not being honest about it, but I like to keep it a secret. I'm no Magus, but I do have a few oddball spells at my disposal."

This should at least be more believable than the sheetwraith. Kris was—according to Sitri—very gullible.

"If that's true, then what sort of elemental was it?" she asked, her voice much calmer than before.

"Uhh, a bedsheet elemental?"

I could tell this wasn't going to work. Of course it wouldn't, there was no such thing as a bedsheet elemental. I knew my status as a Level 8 wouldn't work on a Noble Spirit, so I just accepted defeat.

"I don't believe for a se—"

Kris's shrill voice was cut off by a call from outside the room. That voice belonged to Franz. Kris shut her mouth, showing that she still had the sense to not argue in front of our employer. I was relieved, I felt like I had been saved by divine intervention.

Franz looked to be in a very bad mood when he entered my room. So bad that he might cut me down if I started talking about sheetwraiths or elementals.

"His Imperial Majesty requests your presence," he brusquely informed me. "It appears he wants to talk to you. I take it you have no problems with that?"

Rodrick Atolm Zebrudia hardly needs any introduction. He stood at the zenith of the Zebrudian empire and was the genius behind its prosperity. Zebrudia was ruled by an absolute monarchy, making any singular hunter nothing more than a leaf in the wind before the might of the emperor.

As a treasure hunter's level increased, they often found themselves interacting with the nobility. There were even some families, like the Rodins, who had long supported the emperor and were granted audiences with the emperor. I, however, was a coward who tried to avoid dealing with the nobility at all costs.

When Franz called me, I felt a pain deep in my gut. I had experiences interacting with bigwigs, such as at the Gathering of the White Blade, but I was by no means used to it. I tried to humbly and indirectly turn down Franz's orders, but he glared at me like I was scum.

"Just come already," he said.

What did I even do? Oh, maybe he's mad because I haven't done anything. Man, these amiuz nuts sure are tasty.

"Fine," I said. "But I'm taking my team with me. Is that okay?"

"No. His Imperial Majesty only summoned you."

I was supposed to do this alone? Did they want me to die? I didn't plan on screwing up or anything, but I didn't like the idea of having nobody to back me

up if I made a faux pas.

I stood my ground. "No. I won't go without my team."

"You don't need to protect our feelings or anything," Kris said. "Now, go. Sir." No, that's not it.

Kris was getting the wrong idea. I wasn't protecting their feelings, I wanted to make them miserable with me. And if anything related to our job came up, Telm was far more qualified to be making decisions.

"They can be trusted," I assured Franz. "Check if His Imperial Majesty is okay with this."

"Demands from a mere hunter?" Franz grumbled as he stomped off.

Any breaches of etiquette that I made would surely be overlooked if I was with Kechachakka and Kris. There was clearly something up with the former, and the latter had no respect for the title of emperor.

"Why can't you just cooperate?" Kris asked in an exasperated voice. "The only thing Level 8 about you is your audaciousness. Sir."

She was the last person who should be lecturing me about cooperation. And my audaciousness was entirely average.

I nodded and shrugged. Words were cheap, so I just said, "I believe in saying what I think is right, regardless of who I'm talking to, and that's all I did back there. A clan master needs to stick to what they believe in."

Franz's irritation was clear as day. He was leading me—and my team, of course—to the emperor's suite.

"Hmm. Even among human nations, it takes someone magnanimous to lead an empire as large as Zebrudia," Kris said.

"But let me be clear," Franz warned, "if you say anything untoward, you'll pay the price."

"Hmph. Shouldn't you say that to the weakling, not me?"

"That was directed at both of you!"

I heard Kechachakka chuckling.

I'm the only one who seems at all nervous. Do these guys realize it's the emperor we're going to see? Did that somehow slip by them?

I had my whole team, except Sir Killigan, at my side, but I still felt incredibly isolated. Maybe competent people like them weren't as easily intimidated.

We bowed to the knights outside the door, then entered once we had permission. The emperor was seated, looking solemn and proud, surrounded by stony-faced knights. He looked at us with a piercing gaze. His austere demeanor made him look as much a sovereign as any human could. I was sure that if I were to use my lauded groveling skills before him, it would make for a fine image. Next to the emperor was someone with a strikingly different appearance. It was the imperial princess, who looked incredibly nervous.

The emperor looked at Franz, then at me, before nodding. "Thank you, Franz," he said in a clear voice. "And welcome, valiant hunters. I thank you for accepting my quest."

This was a kinder treatment than I had expected. It seemed we hadn't been called to receive a scolding. I corrected my posture, moving out of my pregroveling position.

"I would like to take this chance to talk to you all," the emperor continued. "I wanted to talk on the first day of our trip, but the circumstances never permitted it."

"We hardly deserve such kindness, Your Imperial Majesty," I replied.

But it's not like I particularly wanted to talk to you.

I was trying to keep my words to a minimum, so Franz cleared his throat and spoke up. "The situation may have subsided for the time being, but it's nonetheless hard to believe the number of monsters we've encountered on the highway. Today we encountered as many as five large hordes of monsters. We haven't spotted any Foxes since the frigid dragon incident, but His Imperial Majesty is concerned that might be a sign of something greater on the horizon."

Franz, what are you talking about?

Sure, dragons were abnormal, but five attacks in a day was on the small side. And none of those hordes had more than one hundred monsters, so they were medium or small hordes, not large.

None of those monsters had been exceptionally strong, and the hordes had proven no trouble, so it was almost no different than encountering nothing at all. Of course, if I had been alone, I would've been dead in an instant. But Franz was a noble, so maybe he didn't know much of the real world?

I was an adult, so I just smiled and said, "I don't think this warrants concern. I wouldn't call this a sign of anything. Everything so far can be attributed to bad luck, and even if we see ten times as many monsters tomorrow, I think we're equipped to deal with the threat."

All the knights twitched when I said "ten times as many." That might have sounded like a lot, but it really wasn't. For a first-rate Magus like Telm, one hundred monsters was hardly any different than one monster. But I'd die in an instant if I had to fight that many.

"You're every bit as confident as the rumors suggested," the emperor said.

"I have my excellent party to thank for that," I replied.

I glanced at those members. Telm was composed, Kecha was his usual self, and Kris was silent, but just a bit exasperated. Needless to say, my party was the only thing about me that could be described as excellent.

"Surely it's more than that," the emperor said as a small smile crept up on his lips. "Not much has reached my ears, but I have heard rumors. I understand your fight against the frigid dragons was hardly your first contribution to the empire."

"Those really are rumors and nothing more. I haven't done a thing."

Even though I was trying to refute his suggestions, there was a dull glimmer in the emperor's eyes. It seemed he didn't believe me. To be fair, the truth was that on the official records, a portion of my friends' accomplishments appeared to be my own.

"For instance, I heard you recently turned all of Bandit Squad Barrel into frogs. Is that true?"

"Er, well, it's not a lie."

I was useless during that. I hadn't even known why they were attacking until the whole affair was settled.

"That's hardly an enthusiastic response. Do you object to the rumors?"

Oh, how am I supposed to answer that?

"No," I mumbled after some deliberation. "It's just that the spell also affected some hunters. That caused us a bit of trouble."

"What? Even hunters were affected?"

At some point, everyone had become engrossed in our conversation. Even the emperor's daughter looked amazed.

"Uh, that's correct." I shrunk back a bit. "Of course, we made sure they were returned to their original forms. That spell was crafted to be non-lethal."

I was told Rhuda and whoever else had been taken care of and nobody had been overlooked. If there had been, Earl Gladis probably would have heard about it. If nobody was complaining, then there probably wasn't anything wrong.

The emperor, meanwhile, roared with laughter like this tale was amusing or something. "Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful, Thousand Tricks. You're as fascinating as the rumors led me to believe."

I groaned. What are people saying about me now? What a pain. Once the exaggerations start, they're hard to stop.

The emperor nodded, then threw me a curveball. "I must admit, I've always wanted to witness those famous powers of yours. Show me how you manipulate magic to transform someone into a frog."

Huh? No, hold on. That was Lucia's doing. Wait, do people think I did that?

Kris was quite amused by my panicking.

"Hmph, it's an absurd story and I've never heard of a spell like that," she said. "But I'm sure that if you can command a bedsheet elemental, turning someone into a frog should be no problem. Sir."

"Fascinating. Please, offer me a glimpse of the powers of a Level 8."

I heard Kechachakka laughing. The Delinquent Carpet was clapping encouragingly. I was a man without allies. Why were they so certain I could cast that spell? I refused to believe they couldn't tell how low my mana material was. I had next to nothing. It had been some time since I had picked up anything heavier than a fork. Were they bullying me?

Look at them. It's too late for me to tell them I can't do it. But I have to say it. I'm the master of excuses, and it's time to prove it!

"Turning people into frogs is inhumane," I said. "The previous situation didn't leave any alternat—"

"I care not," the emperor cut in. "Now do it. The spell can be undone, can it not?"

I needed a moment to think up something new. "My control over the spell is still lacking. The fact that those hunters were also affected is proof—"

"I care not. Do it."

Rodrick looked dead serious. Did he genuinely believe I could turn people into frogs? What a joke. But I felt numerous sets of eyes fixated on me, so I braced myself and did what I could.

"W-Well, if you insist," I said. "The spell only works under ideal circumstances, and even then its success rate is maybe ten percent. My stomach doesn't feel so great, so I'm not sure I'll have any success. Really, I'd say there's a ninetynine percent chance of failure—"

"If your stomach hurts, it's probably because of those amiuz nuts you've been inhaling," Kris interjected. "Now hurry up and do it. Sir."

I don't see what else I can do. With this many excuses laid down, nobody can accuse me of being a fraud, so let's just give it a go.

My lips twisted into a partial smile and I snapped my fingers, just like Lucia would. "Kris, become a frog!"

Not that that's going to do anything.

I couldn't use magic. I was generally untalented, but magic was an area in

which I was exceptionally untalented. Both my lack of mana and the Magus in my hometown could testify to this.

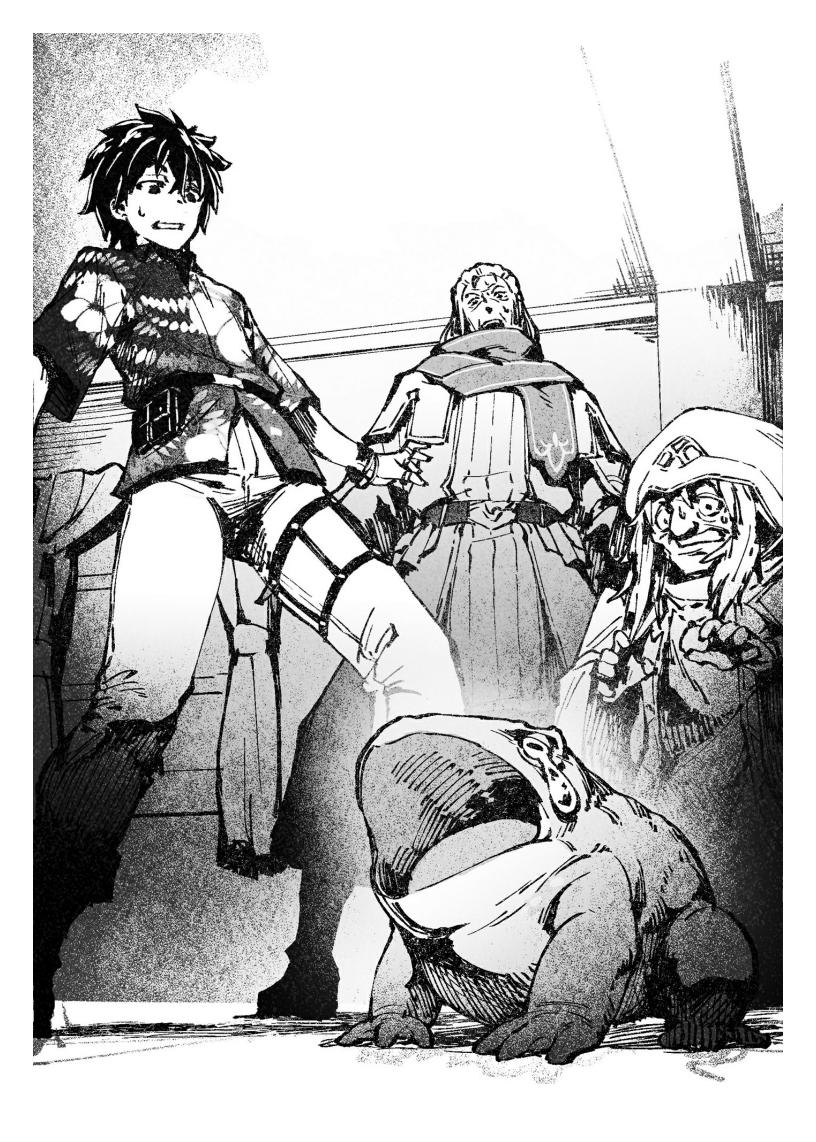
Nobody said anything. Not Franz, not the emperor, not Kris.

"Preposterous," Telm whispered. His eyes were opened as wide as they could go. "Thousand Tricks, what have you done?"

That was the question on *my* mind. I felt like I was in a nightmare. There was a frog where the emperor had been sitting. There was a frog where Franz had been standing. There was a chorus of croaking frogs where the imperial guard had been standing. The only one unaffected was a screaming woman who I believed to be the imperial guard's top Magus. I turned around and saw a silver frog where Kris had been standing. She was quivering, but once our eyes met, the small frog hopped onto my leg.

I was so confused I went full circle and became calm again.

These frogs. They're not the tree frogs from last time. They're bullfrogs.



"At least Telm and Kechachakka are fine," I said.

"Hee hee?! Hee hee?!"

"I thought you had just eaten amiuz nuts! This shouldn't be possible! And what of your mana?"

My throat was dry. I tried taking a few deep breaths, and doing so helped me grasp the situation.

Huh? Could it be? Did my magic talents bloom overnight?

Kris would often tell me that because Lucia was my sister, I could develop some skills if I just applied myself (Lucia, as a reminder, is not related to me by blood). Had things finally started to change for the better?

I heard the imperial frog princess ribbiting. If my talents had bloomed, it was too early to be celebrating. Frog Franz and the imperial frog guard let out a symphony of protests. Only the frog emperor maintained his solemn dignity. His frog form had golden skin, a remnant of his human visage.

So these are my true powers, I told myself as I wore a nihilistic smile, all in an attempt to avoid the reality before me.

"Looks like I'm the better of the two siblings," I said. "Mana means nothing to a true Magus."

(Total bullshit, by the way.)

"Is now the time for that?!" the Magus from the imperial guard stammered. She seemed to be panicking, which was a perfectly normal reaction to seeing all your comrades turned into frogs.

But hadn't the emperor been wearing a Safety Ring? Had I bypassed it? Many a true word is spoken in jest, as they say.

"Didn't I tell you?" I said. "My control over the spell is still lacking."

"Revert them!" the Magus cried. "Revert them this instant!"

What a great idea that was. The only issue was that I had no idea how.

"Uh, reverse!" I screamed, but nothing happened. I must have been really fretting, because then I had an auditory hallucination.

"That's impossible!"

It sounded like Lucia.

The situation was bleak. At this rate, I was going to be charged with the unprecedented crime of regicide via frog spell. I desperately tried to remember how we undid the spell last time.

"Oh, that's right," I said, pressing my fist against my palm. "Now I remember. We just squash them."

With much ruckus, the frogs were all turned back to humans. Fortunately, it appeared the spell I had cast was the same as Lucia's. Perhaps one glance had been all my instincts needed to process and learn the spell. If my magic talents had finally awakened, it was happening a bit too fast.

After squashing a number of frogs, Franz pointed an angry finger at me. His face was red with rage. "Your Imperial Majesty, I cannot bear this man's insolence any longer! He needs to be removed at once! Even without him, the imperial guard and the Counter Cascade are more than enough to protect you!"

"Oh, good idea," I said.

"B-be quiet! What are you trying to do?!"

"I understand your anger, Franz, but please calm yourself," the emperor placated.

No, it's fine. Get rid of me, I don't want to be here anyways. Look, even Princess Murina is afraid of me.

"This man turned you and the imperial princess into frogs!" Franz protested.

"He insisted that it would be disrespectful if he were to crush you two, and forced the task onto me, saying it would be fine if I did it. But I couldn't disagree more!"

"You did what needed to be done, and it was I who told the Thousand Tricks to cast the spell."

"I refuse to believe that that was the only way! This man is making a mockery of the empire!"

"N-No, I'm not," I argued.

"Silence! You're not even dressed appropriately for this job!"

Franz was losing his mind. But I don't see why he had to bring up my shirt again. He stood directly in front of me, looking down at my face. I looked up and saw a vein bulging on his forehead.

"Once this is over and we've returned to the capital, I'll make sure you pay for this!" he roared.

"I-I'm really sorry that this happened. And I did warn you that I can't control the spell very well."

"Quiet! You shouldn't have been able to use magic at all after eating something that hinders mana manipulation!"

If they understood that, yet still made me use the spell, then all I could do was shrug. In a mocking gesture, the Carpet did the same. What a cute fellow.

"You've also upset Her Imperial Highness!"

"N-No, she was always like—never mind."

Kris was also completely pissed off. The blood had drained from her face, and she was trembling like she was struggling to contain her anger. I said I was sorry. Even I hadn't expected I would actually cast a spell.

"Nonetheless," the emperor said, clearing his throat and glancing at his daughter, "this is no time to be fighting among ourselves. The Tears have already certified the Thousand Tricks's innocence. I think Murina is much safer with him around."

"Wow," I said. "You'll forgive just about— Ah! Didn't mean to say that."

Franz let out a voiceless scream. Murina hung her head. But it looked like I hadn't been fired just yet. What a lenient fellow the emperor was.

The moment we returned to my room, Kris gave me an earful. I guess not everyone could be as forgiving as the emperor.

"I can't believe you! Do you have it out for me?! Sir?!"

"Now, now. I'm just glad the spell was undone."

"Was there a possibility that it wouldn't be undone?!"

"Oh, maybe a five percent chance," I said, throwing out a wild guess.

Kris visibly recoiled.

As I thought about it, I realized my blossoming talents meant I might be able to go on adventures with the rest of Grieving Souls. The thought of that made me very happy.

I noticed a pitcher on the desk. "Here, calm down and have a sip of water. Oh, why don't I turn this water into wine? It shouldn't be too hard if I can turn people into frogs."

"That's impossible!"

The Lucia in my head refuted the idea. I cleared my throat and heeded her warning. I could never go against my sister.

"Just kidding," I told Kris. "Of course I can't turn water into wine. Orange juice, however—"

"Impossible!"

"I'm only joking. Magic's got its limits."

"After all my help, you just make fun of me," Kris bristled, tears in her eyes. "That's it, I'm going to bed! Do as you please! Sir!"

And with that, she stomped out of my room.

"I'm retiring as well!" said the Lucia in my head. "Turning water into wine is impossible. Just do what you like. Good night!"

I wasn't trying to make them angry or anything. Darn. I'll apologize to her tomorrow. And what's with these auditory hallucinations?!

Once Kris was gone, Telm and Kechachakka arrived. My room was a real hot spot. However, I was ready to go to bed after such a hectic evening. Having turned the emperor into a frog and all, I could hardly say it had been an easy day for me. But experience had taught me how to keep my weariness from showing on my face.

"What happened back there?!" Telm said immediately. His face was graver than I had ever seen it.

I guess he wasn't a fan of seeing the emperor turned into a frog. Okay, I'm not sure anybody would be. Sorry.

"It just sort of happened," I said. "I didn't mean to turn him into a frog."

"What are you trying to do? Please, explain your plan to us."

"Plan? The plan is to follow the emperor's orders. We're just his hired guards."

Something about this was off. Our job was to secure the emperor's path; I didn't plan on having involvement in the planning.

Telm calmed himself. "But that was a perfect opportunity," he said in a small voice. "You turned the emperor and his retinue into *frogs*."

I had no clue what he was getting at. He had said "a perfect opportunity," so maybe he was trying to say that we could've traveled faster if we carried the frogs? He may have seemed sane, but he was still the right hand of the Abyssal Inferno. In my head, I changed his danger rating from a D to an A.

"You have a point," I told him, "but I didn't think it good to keep him like that. As I've said before, that was a mere coincidence. Besides, one of them remained unaffected by the spell, remember?"

"Yes, but still..." Telm trailed off.

He seemed dissatisfied, but I wasn't going to budge. You can't forget that people are still people. If we transported the emperor as a frog, word of it might slip out. Once that happened, it didn't matter if we had succeeded as escorts, there would be no place left for us in the empire.

"You have to consider what will follow this job," I explained. "For now, we'll follow Franz's plans. I don't think anything will happen on the ground, but the air might prove to be a problem. Prepare as thoroughly as you can."

"I see now," Telm said with a nod. It sounded like he had regained his sanity. "You're right, it would be unnatural if it was finished here. But what sort of preparations are we to make?"

"Hm? I'll leave that to you. I trust both of you, and I have my own preparation to make."

"Understood."

I heard Kechachakka chuckling. I felt I had gotten through to him. I was sure that "Hee hee" was one of agreement.

When those two left, my room was quiet once again. So far the journey had been a smooth one, but this was where things would get tricky. Airborne travel was dangerous. Up there, fleeing wasn't an option, and you could crash. Even if you survived a crash, there was still a good chance you would be stranded somewhere remote.

But now I had a countermeasure. I looked up at my Flying Carpet; it was hovering nearby, needlessly expending mana. Night Hiker, the Relic I had used in White Wolf's Den, had the drawback of only working at night. But this fellow was different.

"Let's get along," I said with a smile. "We can fly through the sky together!"

The Carpet abruptly shifted from his lazy hovering to an intense charge. He slammed into me, causing me to roll across the floor and hit my head on the wall. There went another Safety Ring. Did the Carpet have a grudge against me? At this point, he had done more damage to me than Arnold had.

I needed time to practice. Three days at least. I rolled over onto the thick, not violent carpet on the floor and thought about it. I was fairly certain we were ahead of schedule, so I considered asking Franz for a brief delay.

The next day, we arrived in one of the largest cities in the empire, Vettant. It was a metropolitan area, comparable to the imperial capital. The ramparts were sturdy, the town was clean, and, unless I was mistaken, even the people were finely outfitted. To top it all off, this city had the only airship port in Zebrudia.

As their name suggested, airships were ships that could fly. I didn't know how they flew without using Relics, but apparently it was some combination of applied science and magic. I found it incredibly interesting.

But before we could take off, we had to make sure everything was safe and

secure. Franz seemed to be relieved that we hadn't been attacked all day, so I bowed and asked for some extra time. My goal was to be able to at least rescue the emperor, should we begin to crash. My team could take care of themselves; they were Magi, after all. So would Franz; he was of the imperial guard, after all.

I insisted that this delay was for the sake of the journey but didn't offer any specifics. Franz didn't seem at all interested in granting my wish, but then the emperor intervened.

"I see no harm in it, Franz. We have time, and Murina's tired from the long journey."

"But, You Imperial Majesty, it's dangerous to stay too long in one place. Fox could strike at any—"

"It's better than getting attacked in the air," I interrupted without meaning to.

"Who?! Who would attack us in the sky?! And why aren't you already prepared?"

Oh, there's plenty of possibilities.

I didn't buy the idea that our enemies could manipulate dragons, but if our enemies really could do that, then an airship would be a floating coffin. It was hard to imagine that that fox phantom could fly, but being what it was, I wouldn't have been surprised if it proved me wrong. Simply being on the ground made the city the safer of the two options.

The emperor groaned. "We've already fended them off once," he said chidingly. "We can deal with them as long as we put our minds to it. I'm much more concerned about what might happen if we take off without adequate preparations."

I didn't quite get why, but it looked like the emperor was on my side. Praise be the power of Level 8. Franz glared at me spitefully. Being a noble must've been tough.

"Be grateful for His Imperial Majesty's magnanimity. I'll give you three days, nothing more. Now go, don't waste a single moment!"

Everyone was gathered in a luxury inn that catered to hunters.

"It's been some time since this has happened, but Krai is making a multi-day adjustment," Sitri said with a serious look on her face. "He plans to make his move soon. Everyone, prepare as thoroughly as you can."

A roar of excitement reverberated through the room.

After I bowed before her, Kris agreed to charge my Relics. She got angry and told me not to dip my head so easily. She was the one who labeled me a "human weakling" but I guess she didn't want me acting *too* weak.

I left Telm in charge of the emperor and went off in search of a training ground. I found the largest one I could and rented the entire thing for myself. I didn't want to share because of the hazards involved when flying the Carpet, more for my weight than my nonexistent strength. If the Carpet sent me flying and I collided with someone, my Safety Rings would keep me unharmed, but the other party could get injured. Hunters had in fact been killed by Night Hiker, which flew at similar speeds.

There was something overwhelming about the empty training ground. Hitting the dirt floor headfirst could easily be fatal. The sturdy metal walls had no cushioning to soften any collisions. Like a hunter preparing for a decisive battle, I glared at the Carpet, who was casually sauntering around.

"Perhaps I should leave?" Kris suggested.

"Hm? What for?"

"Well, er, you can learn a lot by watching someone train. I'm sure even you have some techniques you don't want anyone else knowing about. Sir."

What a good girl she was. But she was worrying over nothing. I had no problems being watched! And if Kris left, then who would charge my Carpet, shirt, and Safety Rings?

Kris tilted her head towards a man who was clad entirely in black and laughing suspiciously. "I don't know why he came along, but maybe I should also take Kecha with me?"

"No, I don't mind if you two are here," I told her. "Though I don't really think there will be anything worth seeing. It'll be dangerous, so just stand back a bit. Today"—I put emphasis on this part—"I'm going to go all out!"

Kris was taken aback.

Even I could succeed when I put my mind to it. I took deep breaths and stretched my arms and legs. The Delinquent Carpet's expression was calm (not that he actually had a face), but I was about to change that, for I was a man who had managed to tame the deadly Night Hiker. Of course, if not for my Safety Rings, I would've been another one of its victims.

The Delinquent Carpet waved his right hand as though telling me to bring it on. I clenched my fists.

Maybe these violent tendencies make him more valuable than a normal Flying Carpet?

As I rushed at the Carpet, I let out a yell that even I'll admit was pathetic. My right hand grabbed one of his corners. He rocketed into the air and I hit the ceiling, dying upon impact.

"What's the point of this, human weakling? That Carpet is clearly defective. Sir."

"You won't get anywhere no matter how much time you spend on this. Sir. What do you even plan to use this Carpet for?"

"Remember, I'm the one who has to keep charging your Relics! Just give up! Or at least do your own charging! Sir!"

"J-Just give up! Sir! Why do you look like you're having fun?!"

"Hah. Please. Put yourself in my shoes. Sir. Haven't you had enough?! I'm sure everyone nearby is sick of hearing you banging and clanging around!"

"G-Give up. Quit already. Aah. Let's save it for tomorrow. I'm going to rest. Sir."

"Hah. Aaah. Aaaugh."

The Carpet was formidable. He was so formidable, that by the end of the day,

Kris was flat on the floor. I was able to get a grip on the Carpet, but most of the time I was thrown off, or instead flung against the floor or a wall. And then I would die.

Kris looked like she was approaching her limit. She was already curled up on the ground like she was about to draw her final breaths. But she was fine, nobody ever died from expending too much mana. And Noble Spirits regenerated mana very quickly. I moved Kris somewhere out of the way, then looked at the Carpet.

"Damn. You think I'm gonna give up that easily?" I said.

As though asking for a hug, the Carpet spread his arms (I guess you can call them that) out wide. I dove at him and was immediately thrown to the ground. He was made of cloth, so his attacks were inevitably weak, but maybe he was even weaker than me.

Lying on the ground, I looked up at his ornate patterns. "I know all about it," I said. "I know that you want to let people ride you!"

The Carpet didn't respond and just placed his legs on my forehead. I must've been the only Level 8 to have that happen to them. But this reaction wasn't far from what I had expected. Since he was a Flying Carpet, I wouldn't have been able to grab his corners or even touch him if he really didn't want me to. But I was managing to do both those things. The only reasonable conclusion was that deep down, the Carpet desired a passenger.

But now I was in a tough spot. I couldn't practice if Kris was out of commission. My supposedly awakened magic powers hadn't resurfaced once since the frog incident. This left me with one option. I turned towards Kechachakka, who was quietly standing silently in the corner. Unlike Kris, he had just been observing and keeping his opinions to himself.

I still found the man just as suspicious as the day I had met him, but now I also knew what an accommodating person he was.

"Excuse me," I said. I put on a smile as I approached him. "I've got a favor to ask of you."

"Hee hee. Hee?"

"If you don't mind, could you perhaps charge my Relics for me?"

"Hee hee. Hee hee hee."

So I still can't get through to him. Didn't this guy use the occasional word when we first met?

What a funny thing it was that this man who only laughed suspiciously was serving as a guard of the emperor. Was he speaking some special jargon? Or maybe he was from a foreign land?

I wished I had brought my translation staff. As the name suggested, that was a staff that translated words. The Relic's proper name was Round World. If I had brought that staff on my vacation, I could've easily communicated with the Cave People.

It was an extremely convenient Relic, but I hadn't brought it on this job because it was heavy and the people at our destination spoke the same language as us. If it was a ring, then I would've worn it everywhere, but the world isn't that convenient of a place.

"Ehe hee hee?" Kechachakka said.

"Eheh. Ehee hee," I said back, not having any idea what I was saying.

"Heh?!" Kechachakka recoiled for some reason.

It had worked with the Cave People, but random words apparently weren't enough this time around. And yet it seemed this guy had managed to befriend Kris of all people. Maybe she was more open-minded than I thought.

I began to worry about my training prospects as I was all too aware of the time limit I was working with. Then I heard the door opening, even though I was fairly certain there was a sign saying this training ground had been rented out. I looked at the door and was caught off guard by what I saw.

In came a bizarre group of figures covered in white bedsheets. Kechachakka froze in place. Deciding to be friendly only when it suited his convenience, the Carpet hid behind me. Five sheetwraiths ambled up to me and stood in a line. Still lying on the ground, Kris looked like she was having a nightmare.

But I knew who these sheet-clad people were. I couldn't let Kris and

Kechachakka in on the secret, but these were the people I trusted more than anyone in the world.

"Have you come to help me?" I asked. My fists clenched when I realized things might work out now.

The Thief-wraith tried to jump on me, but her skin (the bedsheet, that is) was caught by an Alchemy-wraith with a large backpack. One of the sheetwraiths had struggled to fit through the door even after crouching down and towered above the others.

"Ans—Giant-wraith," I said to him, "I'm amazed you found such a large bedsheet."

He grunted in agreement.

Watching the exchange before him, Kechachakka was bewildered for the umpteenth time. Fox was an immense organization, so it wasn't surprising that one of its top members would have far more people at their disposal than the average operative of the underground. Therefore, there was nothing strange about a group appearing abruptly and receiving orders from the Thousand Tricks.

However, when everyone in that gang was clad in white bedsheets, it would be enough to shake even the Counter Cascade, if he had been present. Kechachakka, of all people, had little right to feel this way, but he found the bedsheet elementals extraordinarily suspicious.

The guards might apprehend them just for walking around like that. The most striking member of their ranks was the one tall enough that Kechachakka was forced to crane his neck to see entirely. Sir Killigan was tall, but that one was nothing compared to this fellow the Thousand Tricks had called "Giant-wraith." He couldn't tell what was beneath that sheet, but its garbled voice made it clear it was something intelligent.

Kechachakka was already confused by the sight of the Thousand Tricks's training, but this was a shock magnitudes greater. He had been curious how someone of the thirteenth tail tempered themself, but the results left him

wishing he had never come along in the first place. He should have assisted Telm with guard duty or prepared for their airborne journey.

One of the bedsheet elementals was calmly staring at Kechachakka. He could tell by the presence that the elemental was powerful, but he couldn't figure out anything beyond that. Whatever reason the elemental had for carrying a wooden sword was beyond the Magus. But even more confounding was the joyous manner in which the Thousand Tricks was issuing orders to the elementals. Kechachakka couldn't even tell whether or not this was some elaborate farce. He wondered how Franz would react if he were here.

The elemental with the backpack large enough to fit a child in set their bag down and pounced on Kris. The Noble Spirit was unable to resist as she was dragged inside. Her state of mana depletion should have prevented her from even raising her voice, but she still managed a mangled scream. That, however, died down immediately as the sheets writhed slightly.

"That should do it," the Thousand Tricks said with a nod. He noticed Kechachakka's stare and smiled at him. "The Alchemy-wraith is an expert healer."

"Hee hee?"

Healing? That was healing? Even the most generous appraisal would still describe that as an attack. Kechachakka was completely baffled, but the man of the thirteenth tail proudly rattled on.

"The Thief-wraith is incredibly fast. She can go from here to the capital and back in less than three days. Now go on, I'm counting on you."

The smallest of the wraiths became a momentary blur before disappearing. She had run off. Kechachakka had a fair amount of confidence in his visual tracking abilities, but even the Thief-wraith had been too fast for him. The Thousand Tricks hadn't been kidding about her speed. That sort of instantaneous acceleration was a Magus's worst nightmare. Even Telm, who could cast spells almost instantly, would likely struggle with such a fast target.

Her getup might have been ridiculous but she clearly surpassed the average lackey. If people like this were on their side, the assassination was going to be very easy. Kechachakka began to wonder if maybe these elementals were also

the reason the mercenaries had never appeared.

"The Magic-wraith specializes in magic," the man of the thirteenth tail continued, "and the Sword-wraith is, uh, very fond of swords. Uh, and there's the Giant-wraith. He's very large."

Kechachakka made no response.

"If I explain that they're elementals at my command, do you think they'll let me take them on the airship?"

"He he," was the only reply Kechachakka could manage.

Kechachakka gave up. He just couldn't discern the purpose of any of this. He couldn't even tell if this was a joke or not. But there was no use thinking too deeply about it. There wasn't a chance in hell that these things would be allowed on the airship. That was simply too absurd.

Kechachakka made a small noise, then darted from the training ground.

"Krai! What do you want the sword-loving Sword-wraith to do?"

"Your appearance won't be for a bit longer. Why not do some practice swings?"

"Oh. Ooh! Practice swings!" Gripping the sword through the bedsheet, the Sword-wraith began to swing with fervor. "It's tricky! Very tricky! I still have much to learn!"

Nobody was as good at cutting as the sword-loving Sword-wraith, but unfortunately, that was all the flawed wraith could do. That he was content with those circumstances made him a troublesome wraith.

I guess I can't convince anyone that these are my elementals. Even Kechachakka left due to sheer disillusionment.

The Alchemy-wraith slowly separated from Kris. The Noble Spirit was still on the ground, still as a stone. She had probably fainted after being forced to drink a super bitter mana potion.

"Thanks," I said to the wraith. "About those sheets. Did Liz mention it?"

The Alchemy-wraith made no response. Instead, she raised her sheet up high and tried to drag me under, but the Magic-wraith tripped her, sending her sprawling across the floor. Then she was flung away. The Magic-wraith had no distinguishing features; I just knew she was the magic one by process of elimination.

"Leader," she said in a cold voice, not even bothering to confirm the effects of her spellcasting, "please quit screwing around during your escort quest. It's behavior such as this that earns you so many enemies."

I had no recollection of screwing around. But now that she was here, I removed my spent Safety Rings and handed them to the Magic-wraith. I noticed her quaking.

We moved from the training grounds to the inn where my friends were staying. Sitri took off her bedsheet, class-changing from Alchemy-wraith to Alchemist.

"We're at the limits of comstone range," she said.

"Comstone?"

"It's a recently developed magic tool that employs communications magic. They're based on Sounding Stone Relics. They're not nearly as effective, but they can be mass-produced. There's one installed in Sir Killigan."

"Hmm. That's convenient."

"Though perhaps, 'based on' wasn't the right word. Sounding Stones are Relics, so the only thing borrowed here is the outer design."

Sitri pulled out a cubic stone roughly the size of her fist. So this was how they had been keeping tabs on me.

I took a seat and Sitri went off to put on some tea. I felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I had been so perfectly comfortable I hadn't realized how on edge I really was. But having my friends around was a different sort of relief. With the Magic-wraith, I was sure I'd be able to finish practicing with the Flying Carpet in time.

Sitri grinned when she noticed me relaxing. "This job is approaching its climax," she said. "Once you take to the skies, the options available to us will be limited considerably. So I was wondering if there was anything we should be doing in the meantime."

"Thanks. Let me think about it."

Turning it over in my head, I felt a little pathetic relying on them so much, but I figured there was no harm if it resulted in making me look good before Franz and the emperor. Not to mention you could never be too careful when traveling via airship.

"Let me be clear," Lucia said with a grimace, "I still can't turn water into wine or orange juice or whatever other liquids you might want."

"Mmm. Where am I?"

"Oh, you're finally up. Sorry about all that, Kris."

"Human weakling?! That's right, I..."

Kris sat up, her eyes darting in every direction. Clutching her head, she looked outside and saw that the sun had set. Next, she examined herself. A few hours had passed since she had collapsed. It seemed that Alchemy-wraith hadn't just fed her a mana potion, but also something to erase her memories.

I couldn't deny that erasing her memories made things easier for us, but I also felt that Sitri should be a bit more hesitant about using those potions. What about Kechachakka? All he did was laugh, so we probably didn't have to worry about him.

"You're in my room," I told her. I smiled, suppressing my sense of guilt. "You collapsed due to mana depletion, so I carried you here. Are you all right?"

Perhaps due to the potion, Kris was still a bit out of it. Those purple eyes of hers were briefly fixated on me as she thought things over.

"Just what were those wraiths? Sir?" she asked with a knit brow.

"Are you sure that wasn't a dream?"

"It's coming back to me. That one wraith forced me to drink something."

Her memories haven't disappeared at all.

Sitri was smart, but she always made little mistakes like this.

The confusion slowly faded from Kris's face. "I-I remember. Sir. That's right. I recognized the person under the bedsheet. She's one of your party members. She was there when we negotiated Starlight's entry into First Steps. Sir."

It looks like her memories are fairly clear. And she even got a look at Sitri's face.

"That was just a dream," I assured her.

Kris wobbled as she stood up. I took a step towards her, but an unspoken force told me I should step back. Before I knew it, I had retreated all the way to the wall.

"D-Do you really expect me to believe that?!" Her eyes were narrowed and her voice low. "I want you to tell me everything you're planning! Sir!"

I tried once more. "It was a dream."

"Huh? Look me dead in the eye and say that again. Sir. Swear to your teammate!"

"Hey, you're too close! Get back!"

I could see her pointed ears twitch. I could tell just how clear her eyes were and discern the shape of her lips. Despite what the name "Noble Spirit" might suggest, they didn't actually look very different from humans.

Wouldn't our roles usually be reversed in this sort of scenario? I'm still a man, after all. And Kris might look dainty, but she's still a hunter.

I considered telling her the truth. I would still have to keep Telm and Kechachakka in the dark, but Kris was a fellow clan member. I thought there was a chance she might understand if I explained the situation to her. Sure, maybe it was a *small* chance. I really didn't know what to do.

Kris smiled when she noticed me wavering. It was a cocky smile uncharacteristic of her.

"Go ahead. Say it. Sir," she said in a hushed voice. "I might forgive you if you tell me the truth. Sir."

Then the door opened suddenly.

"Thousand Tricks, there's something I'd like to talk abou— Hm?!"

It was Telm. His eyes shot wide open when he saw me against the wall and Kris wearing a confident smile. He froze for a second, before nodding as though it all made sense now.

"So that's it. I wondered why you brought her, but if this is the sort of relationship you two have, then ah—forgive my sudden intrusion. If you're inclined to listen to your elders, I'd suggest you lock the door at such times. My apologies for barging in. My conversation can wait, so I'll return later."

The door shut with a loud creak. Kris blinked, then looked alternatingly between me and the door. Once she processed what Telm had said, her face turned a deep scarlet.

"Hah?! Haaah?! That human's clearly mistaken. T-To suggest that you and I would—it'll be a cold day in hell when that happens! Sir! Where did he hit his head to get that thought in his skull?! A magically and physically superior Noble Spirit would never pair with some brittle human! Sir!"

"I hear we're not that different, biologically speaking. They're rare, but there are Half-Noble Spirits."

"Sh-Shut up! The blame entirely rests— Urgh! Just don't think this is over! Sir! Teeelm, wait!"

With tears in her eyes, Kris dashed from the room. I guess the misunderstanding was more humiliating than being done in by the Alchemywraith.

Wait, hold on.

Could Telm have done that on purpose? It was entirely possible, considering the earlier sheetwraith discussion. What a good team we made.

"I'll have to offer my thanks to the Abyssal Inferno," I muttered to myself.

I had done what I could, so I could rest easy. Tomorrow, I would show them

Just what is His Imperial Majesty thinking? Franz wondered. He suppressed the vague unease taking control of him and prepared the escort arrangements. He knew that Emperor Rodrick was a free spirit. Franz had always assumed this to be natural for those fit for the throne, but now Franz felt that man was taking far too many risks.

Franz could understand why Emperor Rodrick was willing to rely on the Thousand Tricks. His innocence had been verified by one of Zebrudia's national treasures, and the rank of Level 8 was an extraordinary honor. Though there was no sign of its presence, his absorbed mana material must have vastly exceeded even that of Franz, who never shirked his training. The brief glimpse Franz got of that man's power defied understanding.

But it was his personality that made him difficult to trust. Franz was confident in his ability to evaluate people, and he had never seen anyone as flippant as the Thousand Tricks. His unwillingness to share information, his unimpressive bearing, his ridiculous outfit, none of it was befitting of someone trusted to protect the emperor.

Compared to him, even the overly suspicious Kechachakka, or that misanthropic Noble Spirit were more fit to protect Emperor Rodrick. Telm, meanwhile, was an exemplary hunter. Why couldn't their leader be someone who had their act together? Franz decided to write a letter of protest to the Explorers' Association once this was all over.

Franz wanted to crush that hunter, even if it meant employing the backing of House Argman. But Franz couldn't possibly get away with that if Emperor Rodrick had been willing to forgive even the frog incident. But he couldn't ignore the possibility that the Thousand Tricks had acted under the assumption that he would be shown clemency.

Franz felt only fury when he reflected on that incident. What enraged him the most was that he had been forced to stomp on the emperor and imperial princess. Just remembering it made him want to kill the Thousand Tricks.

Something like that would not happen again. If the Thousand Tricks seemed

like he might bring the slightest harm to the emperor, Franz would lock him up. If that man was the preterhuman artificer they claimed he was, then he should be able to stop trouble before it happened.

But Franz had more important things to be doing than worrying about the Thousand Tricks. The job of the Zero Order was to protect the emperor. The rest of their journey would be on an airship. Their airship had never crashed before, and it was a much safer means of travel than the roads.

However, if a Fox found their way aboard, there would be nowhere for the emperor to flee. That was something that needed to be avoided at all costs. With that in mind, perhaps taking three days to prepare wasn't such a bad idea after all. But should some scoundrel use this time to sneak in, it would be the end of Franz's life.

As Franz issued one order after another without end, a knight dashed into his room. "Sir, the Thousand Tricks has requested permission to bring cargo aboard."

"Oh? What sort of cargo?"

"Potions, sir."

"He has permission to bring personal belongings aboard if they're relevant to the job!" he shouted. His emotions got the better of him. "Don't come to me with such trivial details!"

"That's what I told him, sir." The knight began to look befuddled. "It's just that he's brought such an extraordinary amount."

For treasure hunters, preparations were an indispensable part of the hunt. Having the right information, being stocked up on supplies, and many other small adjustments could all determine the success of a quest. For Grieving Souls, preparations were all handled by the Alchemy-wraith. Maybe it was just her personality, but she was absolutely thorough.

I nodded with satisfaction when I saw the neatly arranged boxes. Then Franz ran up to me. He looked momentarily taken aback by the boxes before giving me a vicious look. I struggled to recall a recent memory in which he wasn't

angry.

"What's the meaning of this?!" he asked. "We've already arranged for basic provisions!"

"You know what they say, 'You can never be too prepared.""

"You certainly can! Are you planning to set up a shop in Toweyezant!"

I couldn't deny that the Alchemy-wraith had delivered more than I had expected. I wondered what she was anticipating. There must have been at least one hundred boxes of supplies, easily enough to last a treasure hunter an entire year. I hadn't asked for this much, and I had no idea where she got it or how much it cost. But it would be wrong to get angry when she had gone out of her way to prepare extra provisions for us.

"Calm down, Franz," I said. "These are in case your potions get used up. Besides, look, there's not just potions. There's also food."

"We've already prepared food supplies! We don't need your help with that!"

"And we'll have these supplies if yours run out. The desert is a big place. If the airship crashes, your supplies won't be enough. Oh, we also prepared water."

Danger came hand in hand with traveling the desert. I was fine, perfectly comfortable in fact, but the emperor's Safety Ring wouldn't protect him from the sun's rays.

I was pretty confident in my explanation, but Franz gave no response. I looked up at him and when I saw his face, I gulped and froze in fear. His complexion was no longer red, in fact his face was devoid of any emotion. He just stared at me like a statue. Had I said something strange?

"What's going to happen?" he asked in a voice that sounded like a rumble from the depths of hell.

"Huh?"

My eyes bulged. What was he on about?

"I'm asking you what's going to happen! Are you playing around?! If you know something, then tell us! Report it!"

"Wha?!"

Franz grabbed me by the collar and violently shook me. Grappling attacks were one of the few attacks that Safety Rings didn't protect against.

"I-I don't know! I don't know anything!" I weakly protested.

Demon-eyed Franz didn't believe me at all.

"Quit lying! I'll end you right here!"

I'm no god. How could he expect me to know the future? What I had done was only natural for a hunter.

"C-Calm down! They're just emergency supplies! They're for emergencies!"

"Who in the world would possibly consider these just *emergency supplies*?! It's enough to open a shop! Do you really expect me to permit this? Do you think I'm a fool?"

"I think it's fair to call them emergency supplies!"

Eventually, Franz calmed down a bit. He stopped shaking me and let go of me. Nobles sure could be brutish. Sure, there might've been some excess, but preparing for emergencies was our job as guards. What a letdown it was to be treated this way after finally helping out.

"The airship. It won't fall," Franz said between heavy breaths. "It's never happened before."

"Y-Yeah, uh-huh. You're right. I'd give it a ninety percent chance that it won't fall. These really are just emergency supplies. Ha ha ha, I'm such a scaredy-cat."

I hoped he might forgive me if I made this something to laugh about, but Franz was as tense as ever.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," he said, "but you're telling me that Zebrudia's cutting-edge airship, one that has withstood monster attacks and every variety of weather, has a ten percent chance of crashing?"

It appeared there had been a misunderstanding. Why did people have to pick at every little thing I said? I spoke pretty haphazardly, so much so that Sitri sometimes made cue cards for me.

"Don't worry, Franz," I said reassuringly. I truly didn't believe the airship would crash. "Even if we start to fall, I'll grab His Imperial Majesty."

"Check the airship one more time!" he barked at some of his subordinates. "And reevaluate everyone who'll be onboard. Make sure there's no possibility of a crash! You've got two days." Franz turned back to me with a spiteful look in his eyes. "It won't crash. I guarantee it. Damn it, I won't let you have your way!"

It's not like I want it to crash. Well, no point in arguing. If this job is a success, we can reconcile when it's all over.

Now that this was over, I had one last preparation to make. I had to practice riding on the Flying Carpet. He had killed me a number of times, but I had thought up a way to get on his good side. I didn't know if it would work, but I was going to give it a try.

The next couple of days flew by and the day of destiny was upon us. We had been getting clear skies lately, but now nothing but dense clouds hung over us. It didn't look like ideal flying weather.

We were just about ready to go. Telm, Kechachakka, Kris, everyone was ready as they could possibly be. Franz stood before me imposingly. A vein on his forehead throbbed and his eyebrow twitched.

"Did I hear that correctly?" he asked.

"I'm terribly sorry."

The only issue was that the Thief-wraith hadn't returned from her errand. I had asked her to run back to the imperial capital and fetch something for me. I figured she could make it in time, but now I was starting to think I had miscalculated. Or rather, I hadn't anticipated the airship departing so early in the morning.

The emperor was getting ready for takeoff and nobody was helping me argue my case. After all the trouble I had caused her, Kris was fairly upset with me. When I looked her way, she simply turned her head. Sir Killigan Version Alpha just stood still, as per usual.

"We've done more than enough to satisfy your requests," Franz said. "We've

delayed our departure three days. We inspected the entire airship once more. We loaded all of your cargo! And on top of all that, you want us to delay our takeoff even further?!"

I thought he might cut me down at any moment. I didn't want to make this request and I knew it would upset him, but I'd feel bad if Liz did all that running for me and I wasn't there when she got back.

"I hadn't expected this either," I said. "Here, how about you take off, and I'll catch up later?"

My Delinquent Carpet was in a very good mood, proof that my plan had worked. He really hit it off with the blue carpet I had purchased for him. I had always assumed he was a male Carpet, but now I was starting to think I had been wrong about that. I was sure that in her current state, she would take me as a passenger and let me catch up to the airship.

"No! As much as I hate to acknowledge it, His Imperial Majesty picked you to stay at his side. You can't simply do as you please. We leave in one hour. If three days weren't enough to complete your preparations, that's nobody's fault but your own!"

No arguing with that logic. Franz got up to clear me out of the room and put an end to our conversation, but just as he was about to open the door, it burst open from the other side.

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"Wha?!"
"Oh."
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In came a Thief-wraith in a tattered bedsheet. I could tell it was the Thief because she was carrying the item I'd requested.

"Wh-What?" Franz stammered. Overtaken with bewilderment, he stood frozen in place. The Thief-wraith passed him by, ignoring my baffled teammates as well, then stopped right in front of me. She handed the item to me, and I accepted it.

The item in question was a staff that was about as long as I was tall. Whereas Kris's staff was wooden, this one was metal. At the top, the staff twisted into a spiral that coiled around a large, round gem. The staff's glimmer might suggest

that it was made of gold, but it was made of something very different. This staff was a Relic.

Even for the Thief-wraith, the imperial capital was a long run. But she had made it just in time. I wrapped my arms around the wobbling wraith and gratefully patted her back. For a moment, she leaned into me, then silently departed, just as a wraith should. I could count on her when I needed it.

The door closed. I had everything I needed. The Carpet applauded me.

"That's everything," I said in my hard-boiled voice. "Shall we go?"

"Do you expect me not to say anything?!" Franz looked like he was ready to explode. "What was that?!"

"A bedsheet elemental that I command."

"You think I'll believe that?!"

Kris looked at me smugly.

But I wasn't going to budge on my story. I wasn't going to budge an inch. That was a bedsheet elemental. Nothing more, nothing less. And she wasn't getting in the way of the job, so what was the problem?! I gripped the hefty staff my friend had gone to lengths to retrieve for me. I smiled at Franz, making it clear I had no further objections.

At last. I can finally talk to Kechachakka!

As its name "Black Star" suggested, Zebrudia's state-of-the-art airship was an immense vessel black as the night sky. The first thing that caught my eye was its large balloon-like upper hull, but the passenger section was also enormous.

Lucia had taken me for rides on her broom, and I once held on to a dragon as it tore through the air, but I had never ridden a vehicle like this. The Black Star was larger than any dragon and was surely meant to be a testament to the empire's might.

"What terrible weather," I said.

"This isn't enough to hinder the Black Star. It's endured worse," Franz told me. "Our ship won't crash. I guarantee it."

The emperor knit his brow and boarded the airship.

"That's not what I'm worried about."

Once the emperor was aboard, Franz came up to me.

"This ship has a weight limit," he said, glaring at me. "Because of your cargo, we had to reduce our personnel. For your own sake, you better hope those supplies prove useful."

"What? They're just emergency supplies. What a brittle-looking ship this is. It's like a balloon."

"Your concern is unnecessary. Even if the hull is damaged, we have Magi whose sole job is to repair the ship. The design is based on a Relic. Supposedly, the genuine article could fly without the aid of a Magus, but that's nothing more than a rumor."

Interesting. You often heard of items made by trial and error efforts to replicate a Relic. But I still wasn't fully reassured. And was reducing personnel really a good idea? Maybe I should've been more precise when I gave Sitri her orders.

"I don't think we'd last a second if a dragon came for us," I mumbled.

"Keep your worries to yourself. Dealing with attackers will be your job. With three Magi, that should be no problem."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

My immediate response caused Franz to look at me dubiously.

Selecting three Magi turned out to be the right choice after all. Except I hadn't really selected them, I had just ended up with them. But that didn't change the fact that I was fairly sure Telm could kill a dragon without even leaving the interior.

So this is it. A fine vessel indeed.

Looking up at the Black Star, Telm Apoclys grunted with appreciation. A cutting-edge vessel like this normally didn't accept commoners and hunters as

passengers. This was a ship exclusively for the nobility.

Flight was just one of the many things Magi were capable of bringing about. Telm had flown before, but never in anything remotely like this airship. He wasn't a specialist, so he wasn't familiar with the underlying principles, but he could tell the magical engravings carved into the hull had been made by a master. Some expert had taken a long time and pushed their skills to their limits making these arcane mechanisms.

There were complex enchantments to strengthen the hull, reduce its weight, even repair the hull as the situation required. Steps had been taken to prevent damage from natural disasters, including protection against fire, ice, and lightning.

If Relics were manifestations of ancient technology, then this was the exact opposite; this was a ship made with the best of modern technology. Telm had no trouble believing that this ship had never crashed once during its numerous voyages.

Even for a Level 7 hunter like Telm, taking this down from the outside would be a considerable challenge. A brood of dragons might have a fifty percent chance of success, but he could only make rough estimates because Kechachakka couldn't summon specific varieties of dragons. But that was if they were attacking from the outside. There were strong barriers protecting against external blows, but working from the inside was a different matter altogether.

At long last, Telm understood the strange behavior of the Thousand Tricks. The empire considered this vessel to be infallible, and that had proven true thus far. In that sense, the Black Star could be considered a symbol of the empire. And that made it worth destroying.

There could be no better way to demonstrate the power of Fox. And if this airship crashed and the emperor died with it, the blame wouldn't be placed on the guards. The reputation of the Thousand Tricks might be damaged slightly, but with the capabilities of Fox, they could ensure that the prevailing theories didn't hold him accountable.

So this was how someone of the thirteenth tail saw things. Even now Telm believed his plan had been flawless, and it would have been much quicker. But

there was much more to gain from this plot composed by the man of the thirteenth tail.

The Thousand Tricks was looking much further down the road than Telm had been. The Magus couldn't even find it in himself to be jealous of someone so vastly superior. There were still some points that mystified Telm, but he was sure they had their significance.

But this was no time to sit around and watch. Preparations for the attack had been left in Telm's hands. He assumed this was done as a favor, a chance for him to prove his worth. While Telm was far stronger than any knight in the imperial guard, the knights outnumbered him. Caution would be essential.

Telm took a deep breath and boarded the Black Star.

Chapter Five: The Peregrine Lodge and the Lost Children

"Oooh. We're flying! We're really flying!"

"Of course we are! Sir! This is an airship."

Kris, a being whose natural home was deep in the forest, looked at me like I was some sort of hick. I guess life in the imperial capital had thoroughly urbanized her.

Our takeoff had been smooth, and our flight was the quietest airborne experience I had ever had. I found it absolutely incredible that this was something made by human hands. I leaned on my stupidly big staff and looked out the window.

"By the way, what's that staff? Sir?" Kris asked dubiously.

"It's a Relic," I answered proudly. "Pretty neat, isn't it?"

Not to mention, it was stylish. I noticed Kris eyeing her own staff. Because their designs came from eras long gone, many Relics had odd appearances. That included Round World. Most staves used by Magi were wooden, but this one was made of metal. It was unclear how the gem at the top floated, or why it was floating in the first place. It was mysterious and defied explanation, both of which were very Relic-esque qualities.

Staves were one of the rarer types of weapon Relics, making them uncommon even among high-level hunters. Round World didn't fulfill a staff's usual role of amplifying mana, which meant it was more or less useless as a weapon. Nonetheless, its main function meant it still fetched a high price.

This is a good opportunity to explain that Telm's bracelets were Relics. Bracelet-type staves, a variety of Relic far more expensive than a pure staff-type Relic. He was in charge of the best Magi clan in the imperial capital, so it only made sense that his equipment was a cut above the rest. "Why didn't you have that earlier? Sir?"

"Because I didn't need it."

Kris raised a finely shaped eyebrow as though she had more to say.

It was my first time holding the staff in some time, and I had almost forgotten how heavy it was. Sure, it looked cool, which was nice, but carrying it all the time would've been exhausting. I should've asked Liz to also bring a weight-reducing Relic while she was at it. You see, for people like her, even a big metal staff was as good as weightless, so she wouldn't think to bring a weight-reducer unless I asked for it.

"I had no idea you had a staff Relic. Sir."

"I also have sword Relics and axe Relics. This is just another part of my collection."

"I see. It would be a waste for a Relic like that to sit around in a collection. But what a peculiar item that is. Is it true that staff Relics have incredible mana conversion? Sir?"

"Yeah, uh-huh."

It seemed Magi couldn't help but be fascinated by staves. Kris's eyes darted between Round World and her own staff. The sad truth was that mine was more like a big translation device, and hers was actually the superior weapon.

Still conscious of Kris's gaze, I looked around and spotted Kechachakka contemplatively gazing out the window. The whole reason I had sent Liz back to the imperial capital was so I could talk to this man. With a hard-boiled grip on my staff, I sauntered over to him. The low-hooded, suspicious Shaman turned towards me.

"Hey, Kechachakka, something caught your eye?"

"Hee hee."

"He? He who?"

"Hee hee hee."

As always, I couldn't communicate with him. But that was about to change. I

activated Round World and put on a smile.

"Sorry, could you say that one more time?" I asked.

"Uhe hee. Hee hee."

His utterances were shady, but his eyes were surprisingly calm.

"Hee hee hee," I answered with a nod.

"Uhee?!"

"Hee hee hee hee. Hee hee."

"Hee hee! Hee hee hee!"

"Hm. I see. Interesting."

Doing my best to keep my face from twitching, I gave him my thanks and walked away. I returned to Kris, who had intently watched the entire exchange.

"Kecha's our teammate, so you shouldn't mess with him! Sir!"

"Yeah, uh-huh. But I wasn't messing with him."

Man, what a strange world it is.

Noticing Kris's obvious confusion, I held out the staff.

"For the duration of this job, I'll lend you this," I told her.

"Huh?"

"You looked like you wanted to try it. Am I right? Just be sure not to lose it."

"Wha?! Do you plan to do this job without a weapon?! Sir?!"

Her eyes were wide, directed not at me but at the mystical staff.

I put on a hard-boiled demeanor. "It's fine. My weapon," I tapped the side of my head, "is this. If anything, a staff would get in my way."

It's really heavy, so please carry it for me.

Baffled, Kris took the staff. She didn't say anything, despite its considerable weight. Even with her tiny frame, she was stronger than me. How depressing.

"Hmph. Even if we are clanmates, I still can't believe that a hunter would lend out their own weapon. But I'll take it if you insist."

"Yeah, thanks a ton. Oh, right. That staff is fairly powerful, so don't test it out inside the airship."

"I know that. Sir."

Grinning, I glanced over at Kechachakka. I hadn't been able to parse a single thing he had said. Apparently, he really was just saying "Hee hee hee." Round World didn't work by deciphering the rules of a language, but by understanding intentions, and it was a Relic, which meant its powers were absolute. It worked on a similar principle that Tears of Truth used to discern fabrications.

Hunters really were nothing but weirdos.

Aside from the occasional turbulence, the airship journey was pretty easy. Perfect Vacation probably had something to do with that, but mostly it was because of the lengths Franz had gone to. During those three days, he had made sure everything was in order. The passengers had all been checked and the airship got another inspection. A look at his haggard face was all I needed to know how much work that must have been.

"Not a single rat aboard," he said. "So, Thousand Tricks, do you still think the airship will crash?!"

"I think it'll be fine. But if it crashes, then it crashes. Where was the emergency exit again?"

"Head out and it'll be on your left. Damn it, didn't you receive a map of the ship? Are you trying to get under my skin?!"

Oh, that's right. I got a map.

Franz was really high-strung. It's not like being on edge would help, and there was no use overthinking matters.

"I'm sure everything will be fine," I said reassuringly. "Safety Rings protect you from falls. I know this from experience."

"Is this a joke to you?!" Franz slammed the table. I guess he didn't appreciate my comment. I took a step back, and he stepped forward. "Your job is to prevent that from happening!" he roared as he thrust a finger at me. "How can

you be so nonchalant?! Act like you care about this job!"

"Th-That's, uh, simply a matter of experience."

"What was that?!"

I had been through all sorts of ordeals. Protecting the emperor was a first for me, but I had experience with dragon attacks, and also with being yelled at. I also had experience when it came to crashing, and that wasn't even the worst of it. I had a history of misfortune and knew when to not fight fate. At least this had made me the world's foremost expert in the use of Safety Rings. But that didn't involve much more than just activating them.

"I'm sure it'll work out," I said.

"This ship is a fortress. It's equipped with monster repellents. Nothing will approach us on land or in the sky!"

Franz almost sounded like he was talking to himself. The next moment, a frantic knight burst into the cabin.

"S-Sir, we've received word from the surface. There's signs of a storm forming
__"

"Damn. This wouldn't have happened if we hadn't delayed our departure!" Franz yelled at me, before turning back to the knight. "Tell everyone to stay alert. Neither wind nor rain, not even lightning, will bring us down!"

It seemed silly to get angry at me when storms were just a part of traveling. Just recently, I had been hit by a storm during my vacation. Knitting my brow, I thought back on my previous experiences.

"I hope it really is just a storm," I said with a small smile.

The airship shook violently. Kechachakka looked out a window and clenched his teeth when he saw the black clouds. His head and stomach were both suffering stress-induced aches. He had never experienced anything like this since joining Fox. He knew what was causing this. It was the man claiming to be of the thirteenth tail, Krai Andrey.

Nothing about him struck Kechachakka as impressive. Before and after his

identity had been revealed, he came off as flippant and even the gentlest descriptions couldn't disguise the fact that he was a goof.

He simply did what he wanted. Kechachakka had never seen someone "Hee hee" at him, not to mention that man turned the emperor into a frog and summoned bedsheet elementals. It was impressive that Franz hadn't yet kicked the Thousand Tricks from the guard. Kechachakka was willing to believe this was all calculated. He had assumed the imperial guard to be morons, but now he was reevaluating.

Deep down, Kechachakka wasn't sure if he wanted to stay in Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox if this was what their top brass were like. But was that man really one of the top? From the moment the Thousand Tricks claimed to be of the top brass, doubts had swirled in the back of Kechachakka's mind.

He was certain that Telm was a fellow Fox, but he couldn't be sure about the Thousand Tricks. Hexes were a variety of magic that were given form by enmity and other strong emotions. As a user of hexes, Kechachakka was very keen at discerning the nature of people. As far as he could tell, the Thousand Tricks was simply, or rather, extremely laid-back. He wasn't driven by any ill will, but more than that, he didn't have the scent of death that clung to all hunters. But just how could that be?

As he watched the large drops of rain rap against the window, Kechachakka let out a pitiful "Hee hee." His evaluation told him that the Thousand Tricks wasn't a member of Fox. But that same evaluation also insisted that he couldn't possibly be a Level 8 hunter! It said he was just a normal person and a weak one at that!

Setting aside the matter of whether or not he was a Fox, there was no denying that that man was a Level 8 hunter. He had wondered if this man was actually a body double, but surely if the Thousand Tricks wanted to do that, he would have picked someone else. Besides, a normal citizen couldn't possibly have known the code signs used by Fox, nor could that have been a coincidence.

Nothing fit together. Kechachakka had no clue what was true and what was false. Though it was a mind-numbing process, there was an emergency system

that Foxes could use to confirm a person's membership. Not for his duty but for his own sake, he planned to make use of it once he got back to the imperial capital.

The storm raged outside the airship. This wasn't enough to bring down a vessel like the Black Star, but even still, the interior was abuzz like a beehive. Neither Kechachakka nor Telm could control storms. This storm was just a coincidence. While it was an incredibly convenient coincidence for them, it was still just that.

"I've heard that the Thousand Tricks can summon storms," his superior, Telm Apoclys whispered to him. "Has the time come? Now wouldn't be an odd time to crash."

Kechachakka refused to believe someone had summoned this storm. Those sorts of spells existed, but they always had distinct forewarnings. Kechachakka hadn't seen any such omen, and that man didn't have any mana to begin with. Normally, the Shaman would've been able to confidently say this wasn't the result of magic, but they were talking about the Thousand Tricks, someone who was capable of instantly turning the emperor into a frog.

Kechachakka let out a weak laugh.

"I see you're uncertain, Kecha." Telm rubbed his bracelets. "Worry not, this vessel's magic defenses will do little against attacks from the inside."

With a Magus this powerful at his side, their goal was within reach. In terms of both discretion and power, Telm Apoclys was the strongest Magus Kechachakka had ever seen. When it came to antipersonnel combat, he probably even surpassed the Abyssal Inferno.

And there was the water clone. By borrowing the power of his Relics, Telm had the unique ability of creating a clone that he could control at will. It didn't matter how many guards the emperor had, killing him was well within the realm of possibility for Telm.

One month prior, Telm's words of reassurance might have put Kechachakka at ease. But not anymore. There *shouldn't* be any problems. Their chances of failure were practically nil, and they could call for dragons if they really needed to.

Just then, the Thousand Tricks entered their cabin. When he saw Telm, he gave that slightly dopey smile of his. Telm began to stand up, but he held out his hands.

"Ah, no need," he said.

"Hm. So you're saying it's not time yet?" Telm asked.

"Huh? Oh, Franz said he and his knights will move."

"What? He's one of ours?!"

"Hm? Well, yeah," the Thousand Tricks said with surprise. "Anyhoo, it's not time for us to move just yet."

Kechachakka wanted to yell that that was absurd, but bit his tongue. It was his impression that Franz Argman was clean, completely entirely clean. He had of his own volition proven his innocence with Tears of Truth. There was no way such a man was a Fox. On the other hand, the same Relic had shown the Thousand Tricks to be innocent as well.

If this job goes well, I'm going to take a break from all this, Kechachakka told himself.

"Hm. So be it," Telm said as he sat back down. He began to stroke his chin. Unlike Kechachakka, he was maintaining composure. Just how did the Thousand Tricks appear from his perspective? "That reminds me, there's something I'd like to confirm with you. What do you plan to do about Kris?"

"Hm? What do you mean by that?"

"You two seem quite close. Do you mind if she's eliminated?"

"What?!"

The Thousand Tricks looked and sounded absolutely taken aback. But they had to do everything they could to reduce the risk of failure, and that Noble Spirit was an obstruction.

"We're not particularly close," he continued, "but we're not going to eliminate her. Do you two have something against her?"

A pro knew to keep their personal feelings from interfering with their work. If

he said they weren't particularly close, then did that mean his friendly banter with her had been an act? And if so, then to what end?

"I wouldn't say that," Telm replied. "But am I correct in assuming that we should leave her to you?"

The man of the thirteenth tail briefly tilted his head side to side, before nodding to himself. "Yeah, I guess I should do something leader-like every now and again. I'll give Kris a verbal warning."

"Verbal?" Neither Telm nor Kechachakka knew how to respond. "V-Very well."

They found this immensely concerning. Was this man serious? Did he really think a verbal warning would silence her? It couldn't possibly work. But being Foxes meant that they had to obey their superiors.

They heard noises outside. It sounded like they were checking for damage from the storm. There was no way this fortress of an airship could be affected by a bit of inclement weather. But if the airship were to go down now, the crash would be attributed to the storm. This was an ideal opportunity for sabotage, and how could they possibly hope for anything better?

As though reading Kechachakka's mind, the Thousand Tricks suddenly turned his way. Kechachakka's heart pounded and he felt a shiver down his spine. With a stern expression, the Thousand Tricks got up and walked towards Kechachakka. Then he walked right past him. He gazed out the window, so Kechachakka did the same.

Outside, flying in the middle of the brutal storm, was a massive kite. Kechachakka rubbed his eyes, but when he looked again the kite was still there. Clinging to the kite were those ridiculous bedsheet elementals.

"Not half bad," the Thousand Tricks said, looking a bit bewildered.

Then, as if it had been waiting for the perfect moment, a bolt of lightning struck the kite. There was a loud boom and down it went. With a look of mild surprise, the Thousand Tricks watched it go.

Kechachakka let out a low groan as he made his way to his room, where he threw himself onto his bed.

"Hey, Kris, did you do something rude to Telm?"

Kris folded her arms and gave me an unhappy look. "Huh? If anyone's been rude to him, it'd be you. Sir."

Not the nicest way to put it, but I couldn't argue with her.

The weather was still stormy. I was used to storms and lightning, but only on a few occasions had I dealt with them while in the air. There were flashing lights, loud noises, and the airship was rocking from side-to-side. Without Perfect Vacation, I would've been very uncomfortable.

The Carpet, however, was jovial as ever and was dancing around with the carpet I had purchased back in town. That carpet had set me back a bit. While it was a normal carpet that couldn't move or anything, the Relic Carpet didn't seem to mind at all. I was actually worried those two might elope.

What mysterious things Relics can be. And those two sure have a serious height gap.

"Why are you always having me come to your room?" Kris griped at me while I watched the carpets dance. "I get why you might want to rely on me, but calling me over every single day is too much! Sir! Could it be that you like me? Sir? Well, give up on that. I'm here on Lapis's orders, not because I like you. Sir."

I hadn't even confessed, yet she rejected me.

I'm sorry for calling you over every evening. But don't get the wrong idea just because I'm always relying on you.

It's not that I disliked Kris. I was fond of everyone who charged my Relics for me, and Kris's attitude wasn't as bad as some that I had dealt with. With her, Telm, and Kechachakka, I had really won the teammate lottery this time. You might even say I was on a winning streak.

"Oh right," I said, "I think Telm still has the wrong impression about us."

"Ugh. This is the problem with you humans and your year-round mating sea

[&]quot;Don't say that in front of the emperor."

"You don't need to tell me. Do you think I'm an idiot? Unlike some people, I can watch my mouth. Sir."

Once this was over, I would have to show my gratitude to her. I considered sending her a big bag of amiuz nuts. She seemed to like those, and they didn't hurt her so long as she didn't use her mana.

We seemed to have gotten through the worst of the storm because the ship stopped shaking. By the sound of it, we had gotten by without any serious damage. My precious bedsheet elementals had been hit by lightning, but it took more than that or a plummet to the ground to kill them, so I didn't worry.

Then I heard rapid footsteps, and then the door flung open.

"HA HA HA HA!"

It was Franz, drenched in sweat.

I could see that he was tired, likely from directing everyone around, but there was a shine in his eyes. He didn't seem to notice Kris's shock as he pointed a finger at me.

"See that, Thousand Tricks?!" he roared madly. "We did it. We made it through the worst of the storm! Bad weather is nothing to this ship. Your predictions were wrong. This ship is unstoppable!"

"Um, yeah, uh-huh."

Wasn't he a bit too ecstatic? After all, I had said we had a ninety-percent chance of not crashing. He looked like he might start dancing. If he wanted a partner, I would've been willing to lend him my Carpet.

"You really like to pick fights wherever you can. Sir."

Strange. I had no recollection of picking this fight Kris was talking about. But after seeing Franz so certain, some part of me felt compelled to argue back.

"We're not out of the storm just yet. We need to be cautious," I said.

"Ha ha ha! Say what you want, sore loser! I'm done playing your games, so just stay out of the way! Now, I must report to His Imperial Majesty."

With that confident declaration, Franz puffed up his chest and strode out. His

demeanor reminded me an awful lot of a noble. Then I remembered that he was a noble. Even Kris seemed like she had been blown over by a storm.

"He has a lot of pent-up stress," she mumbled at length. "When that happens, you should drink some herbal tea. You humans should take after us Noble Spirits and not get so worked up. Sir."

"Herbal tea, huh?" I nodded. "Sitri loves to make those sorts of teas."

Kris looked dismayed for some reason. "I don't think that's what you need. Sir. You're already more stress-free than most Noble Spirits."

The airship continued smoothly on, which wasn't something that happened very often when I was around. The ship didn't shake much, and while my Relic kept me perfectly comfortable, I could tell this was a first-rate vessel if Kris wasn't complaining.

Being made to transport the empire's elites, our cabins were just as nice as the inn rooms we had stayed at. The furnishings and furniture were superb and the beds were nice and fluffy. Liz was adventurous, so I was sure she would've wanted to explore the entire ship if she were aboard. What a shame she'd gotten hit by that lightning bolt.

I kept looking out my window, but all I saw were dense black clouds. No sign of a kite or any sheetwraiths. My childhood friends were totally reckless enough to make another attempt at flying through the storm, but maybe they had accepted that it was impossible. But if they had such a solid grip on reality then they wouldn't have tried to challenge the storm atop a kite in the first place.

Sir Killigan was standing contentedly (I suppose) in the corner, more docile than the Carpet. Lying on my bed, I watched the Carpet and the carpet twirl around.

"I wonder if we'll crash," I wondered aloud.

Given my terrible luck, it seemed possible. But if Franz was to be believed, this airship was tough. He said we would be fine even if dragons came for us, and I guess he could say that with confidence because he had previous experience with dragons. Of course, I was hoping for no crashing at all.

When we landed, it would be in the capital of the desert country of Toweyezant. It was a small country, but a stable one, so we would be safe there.

"So the next few days will be decisive."

But if we hadn't seen any signs of Fox recently, it was possible they had given up on pursuing us.

My muttering was interrupted by a knock on the door. I heard Telm's voice on the other side, so I hopped out of bed and tried to look like I was working. Telm stuck his head in, looking perfectly awake despite the late hour.

"Forgive me for suddenly intruding in the middle of the night," he said. "However, I felt there were some things we should confirm. Kecha is of the same mind."

I wavered, then put on a hard-boiled front. I couldn't help it when Telm was so hard-boiled. "I figured you'd come sooner or later."

He wanted to confirm things! What a diligent hunter. This sense of responsibility, this was Level 7, this was what a battle-hardened veteran was like. I wished Luke and my other uncontrollable friends would learn a thing or two from him. I could barely believe someone this collected was a friend of that old lady.

"I'll have to pay the Abyssal Inferno back," I whispered.

Telm's eyes widened when he heard me. "Very confident of you, but Rose is second to none when it comes to destruction, and you won't be able to catch her off guard. She's destruction incarnate, and I'm not sure you truly realize that."

Huh? She'll incinerate me if I say thanks? What for? God, what a fiend.

If anything was going to get me scorched, not saying anything seemed the more likely cause. Yet it didn't seem like Telm was joking. So I made a mental note to make sure my Safety Rings were all charged up before I went to her.

"So you wanted to confirm some things, right? I don't think that's necessary, I'll just follow you as I always have."

"What?!"

Perhaps I was shoving too much off on him. But I had no fighting or command skills. If we needed someone to take charge, then that should be left to someone with a wealth of experience, like Telm. If I were to start issuing orders, then I'd likely be blamed if anything went wrong. I mean, I'd probably be blamed even if I didn't issue any orders, but I'd still feel better with somebody else in charge.

"Sorry, but this is my way of doing things," I told him. "Oh, and about Kris. I've talked with her, so you don't need to worry about her."

"Hm. So you're leaving the execution to us?" Telm asked.

"Is there a problem with that? If something happens, I'll support you."

I hadn't shown much in the way of leadership, but I saw nothing wrong with leaving this in their hands.

"No objections. If this is your way of doing things, we'll adjust accordingly. With the stage set so perfectly for us, this will be an easy task."

He looked awfully solemn for a man saying he expected an easy job, but I guess a proper sense of responsibility does that to you. And he mentioned the stage being set, but I hadn't done anything of the sort. Even his lip service was top-notch. What a fearsome fellow. I only hoped I could age as gracefully as Telm had.

Then I remembered something: Telm had a tail. Those were hunks of mana, so they immensely expanded a Magus's abilities. Without thinking, I grinned and said, "Right. Now, show me the power of the seventh tail."

After that, the airship proceeded uneventfully. Once we had passed through the worst of it, our voyage had been surprisingly uneventful. At our briefing, I noticed Franz's complexion had improved. And just as I was wondering if we might complete our journey without any more trouble, it came. I was in my room hanging around with Kris, when Franz dashed in. He didn't look afraid or panicked, just confused.

"Thousand Tricks, His Imperial Majesty requests your presence."

"Has something happened?"

I was surprised. I hadn't heard any commotion.

"Look outside," Franz said with consternation. "I'm sure you've noticed, but even after all this time, we still haven't left the storm."

I turned towards the window. Outside, the sky was dark as ever.

Telm Apoclys looked out the window and sighed. A full day passed, yet they still hadn't escaped the storm.

"To think the gap between our skills is this wide..."

This storm was undoubtedly abnormal. The wind was slow and the rain was thin, but the darkness wouldn't dissipate. Maintaining a spell over a long period was difficult. Telm specialized in water magic; he'd earned his title Counter Cascade when he brought a massive waterfall to a halt. But even the expertise he had spent his whole life developing didn't help him identify the nature of this storm.

This was the third time Telm had been forced to recognize someone's superior abilities. And this time, those abilities belonged to a man much younger than him. Reminiscing, Telm rubbed the bracelets on his wrists. They were called Hydrogod's Grace, and he had obtained them through a stroke of good luck in the Level 6 treasure vault Hydrogod's Hermitage.

The bracelets applied a strong water-based blessing to their wearer, which greatly enhanced Telm's powers. Selling them at the right place could ensure that the next three generations of his family wouldn't have to work.

Telm was far more powerful than he had been when he stopped that waterfall twenty years ago. Yet he couldn't discern how this storm was being created. And it wasn't just the storm, that spell that turned people into frogs had also been incomprehensible to him.

This was no doubt beyond his realm of expertise, but what he found so scary was that that man could cast suddenly, without warning. Telm had been confident in his ability to cast swiftly, but that young man's abilities likely far

outclassed his own.

"Rose, then the Master of Magi, and now him."

The imperial capital's strongest Water Magus had two previous rivals. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say two had been considered his rivals. To a mediocre Magus, Telm might have seemed comparable to them. But Telm's middling abilities allowed him to understand just how vastly those two surpassed him.

One became a hunter like Telm, specialized in fire spells, and became the Abyssal Inferno. The other remained in academia, where he continued his research and was eventually kicked out for daring to gaze into the abyss. Telm wasn't saddened by that. For those who pursue power, the confines of the law were far too constricting. But there was an undeniable irony to the fact that a woman like Rosemary Purapos, who was feared for her fury, was still a free member of society.

Telm had become as powerful as he was by using every means possible, including joining Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox. If the Thousand Tricks had accumulated so much power, he must have also crossed the confines of the law. Yet Telm didn't find himself envious. Perhaps this was a sign he was getting old. The thought brought a bitter smile to his lips and he pulled himself together.

Failure was only a remote possibility, but that was no reason to get complacent. The imperial guard were well trained, but Telm's rapid spell-casting meant they were no obstacle. He could sneak up and kill his target before anyone realized what was happening. He had obtained Hydrogod's Grace decades ago. He could use the Relics as though they were an extension of his body.

Telm created a pool of water before him, which began to change color and shape. After a few seconds, it took the form of a humanoid wearing a fox mask. This was a supreme display of water magic made possible by mastery of his Relics. It was an original spell and the only way in which he surpassed the Abyssal Inferno.

At first glance, the humanoid was indistinguishable from a real person. But it

wasn't a living being, so it had no presence. Nobody had yet seen through this spell, except the Thousand Tricks. He had called it a "fake," but he was an outlier.

If one of Fox's top members had directly asked for Telm's help on this job, that implied they had high expectations of him. At the same time, that showed just how important this duty was. Failure was not an option. The man of the thirteenth tail had chosen to let Telm choose when to strike. The time was right and there wasn't going to be anything better.

"Kecha, let's go. Have you prepared?"

"Hee hee hee."

Kechachakka reached into his pocket and showed Telm the gem wrapped in black fabric. As always, Telm couldn't tell what was going through Kechachakka's mind, but there was a certain glint in his eyes. He seemed a bit tired after being teased by the Thousand Tricks, but that wouldn't prove an issue for them.

Dragon's Reprisal was even rarer than Telm's bracelets. The gem's power was unlike any other and was very useful for their current situation. It would take more than dragons to bring the Black Star down, but if the ship were to go down under such circumstances, everyone would jump to the same conclusion.

It was then that Telm noticed another object Kechachakka was holding. "What's that?" he asked.

"Uheh. Uhe hee hee hee."

It was a box with a lever and multiple buttons. It appeared to be some sort of controller. Kechachakka gingerly put the item in his pocket and let out another shrill, inscrutable laugh. Telm couldn't stop the sigh that escaped his mouth. Magi tended to be strange people. Shamans, who converted emotions into magical power, were especially odd. But Telm wasn't going to complain about someone competent, loyal, and who got results.

Telm gave up on understanding the odd fellow and pointed with his chin. "First, engineering. Let's be quick. This is supposed to be our job, so we can't make any extra work for the Thousand Tricks."

Rain was falling. With an ample supply of usable water, the Counter Cascade was unmatched. He would show the world, the Abyssal Inferno, and the man of the thirteenth tail what he was capable of.

I entered a large room where the emperor, the imperial princess, and the imperial guard were already waiting. There was a large window meant to let sunlight flood the room, but all I could see through it were black clouds. The storm was scary even from the small window in my cabin, but seeing it like this made it seem like the world was coming to an end.

"We're keeping in touch with the surface via comstone, and it appears they're receiving no rainfall down there," Franz informed me.

"Hmm. I see," I said with a nod.

For some reason, everyone's eyes were on me. That included the emperor and the fretful gaze of the imperial princess. However, there wasn't a single worthwhile thought going through my mind. So we weren't able to escape the storm. There was nothing I could do about it. If there were any solutions obvious enough to occur to me, they would have long ago occurred to Franz or someone else. All that was left for me to do was try to ease everyone's fears.

"This is some, uh, some terrible luck," I said.

"Bad luck?!" Franz exclaimed. "Is that all you have to say for yourself?"

"C-Calm down. It's just a storm. They happen all the time."

"Where is *this* normal?!" Franz was red in the face, and spittle flew when he shouted.

What was I supposed to say? I didn't know what I didn't know, and things that happened all the time happened all the time. Hell, even my Carpet was baffled.

If they were going to call someone over, they should have at least called Telm, the Water Magus. Maybe he could've used his magic to make the storm disappear or something. Why did people like Franz and Gark always call on me when something happened? Their judgment of character was awful. Making me the leader proved their eye for people was on par with the rest of Grieving

Souls.

"I couldn't make it as a hunter if I started squealing every time an odd storm came along," I said. "This ship won't fall."

Franz clenched his teeth and sunk into a brief silence. I stood there, quietly waiting, when he began to speak in a strained voice. "I apologize, Krai Andrey, for not heeding your warnings. But right now, our top priority is the safety of His Imperial Majesty! What is going to happen? What should we do?"

The imperial guard were all caught off guard by Franz's statement. Naturally, so was I. While Franz's expression didn't look at all apologetic, his willingness to say he was sorry was still significant. But unfortunately, I didn't know the cause of this storm, nor what we were supposed to do about it. Even if he bowed, even if he groveled, I still couldn't offer information I didn't have. Also, I'm not sure he had done anything to necessitate an apology.

At a total loss as to what to do, I scratched my cheek and said, "Really sorry, but I don't know."

"You wretch!" Franz lifted me by the collar and shook me back and forth. "Even after I apologized!"

A scream escaped my lips. "Calm down!" I said as the world shook before me. "If you want to know why the storm is here then you should ask it!"

I was helpless to stop Franz's shaking, but then a slender arm came between us. My world stabilized, and I saw the arm belonged to Kris, who had been silently watching up until that point.

"That's enough. Sir." She seemed to be in a fouler mood than usual.

"What?!" Franz growled.

"Now isn't the time for this. Sir. You're stressed, but we need our leaders to be calm more than ever. Sir."

With a grunt, Franz shoved me away. I stumbled, but somehow managed to stay on my feet. Kris then casually moved in between us.

"For starters," she said, "I feel bad watching this sap get blamed for a storm that isn't his fault."

"Y-Yeah," I nodded, "she's right. She's completely right!"

I was out of the fire at least. The knights all seemed relieved to see their captain's rage subsiding. Franz was way too high-strung. I could understand that he was bearing a heavy responsibility by being in charge of the emperor's safety, but nothing good could come from getting agitated by a slightly drawn-out storm.

"But that man obviously knows something!" Franz cried, pointing a finger at me. "He understands what's going on and he's mocking us. You heard him, didn't you? He told us not to let our guard down until we got out of the storm and that he hoped it really was just a storm! How could he think that a cuttingedge airship could crash? How do you explain that?"

Kris turned on me instantly, looking at me with a suspicious glare. "Human weakling, are you really as ignorant as you claim? Sir?"

I didn't know what I didn't know. While trying to think of an excuse to buy time, I looked around—and my mind went blank. Behind the emperor, near the window, was a figure in a robe and a fox mask. Before I could say anything, Franz, Kris, and the emperor all noticed what I was looking at and began to move.

"Where did he come from?!" the emperor yelled. He covered his daughter and moved away.

The knights drew their weapons, Kris raised her staff, and Sir Killigan moved in on the foe. It was incredible synchronization; the only one not moving was me.

"Sir Killigan?!" I cried.

"Kiiill."

However, even an amateur could tell that Sir Killigan's attacks lacked finesse.

He's already getting hit? That's one of Sitri's creations!

Sir Killigan withstood the incoming blows and swung its sword down with a wretched shriek. Fox-Mask dodged it with ease. Despite being surrounded by knights and at a severe disadvantage, he didn't look concerned in the slightest. Then the door flung open. What great timing! In came the world's greatest

allies, Telm and Kechachakka.

"Good timing," I told them. "I was waiting for you two."

"Telm, it's a Fox!" Franz hollered. "Where did it come from?! Just don't let it get away!"

The emperor was behind me. Franz, Kris, the imperial guard, and the emperor were all looking at Fox-Mask—which meant the only person who saw Telm's expression was me. His eyes widened just slightly, but then he smiled.

"Forgive us for the delay," he said. "This ship is quite large."

The next moment, I heard a series of loud thumps.

"What?!"

I had no idea how it had happened, but the knights and servants surrounding Fox-Mask had all collapsed. Only Franz was still conscious, but he was kneeling and his head was swaying. Fox-Mask didn't flinch. Kris hadn't been affected for some reason and was frantically looking left and right. The only people unharmed were her, the emperor, the imperial princess, Sir Killigan, Telm, Kechachakka, and Fox-Mask.

What's going on?! Why did they collapse?!

I hadn't heard or seen anything that sounded like it could cause this. And I was unharmed, and I hadn't sensed any of my Safety Rings activating. I just stood there, still wearing the smile I had made when Telm entered.

"Goodness, I hadn't expected the conclusion to be so easy," he said with a sigh. "You're a series of surprises, Thousand Tricks."

"Huh? Why do I have to cooperate with the human weakling?! Madam?!" Kris protested. "He didn't even bring me a souvenir from his vacation!"

Noble Spirits were long-lived beings. Not only did they live much longer than humans, they also aged at a slower rate. Their lives were peaceful, almost like those of plants. Humans, however, were born, reproduced, and reached their ends three times as fast, which was downright dizzying to Noble Spirits.

In part, most Noble Spirits didn't leave their forests because they looked down on the incompetent humans, but it was also because they found the whirlwind lives of humans to be nauseating. With that in mind, Noble Spirits like Kris, who lived among humans of their own accord, could be considered quite lively and curious.

"Kris, this is a wonderful opportunity," Lapis insisted, a smile on her lips. She was Kris's party leader and someone the young Noble Spirit respected. "There aren't many opportunities to work with the Thousand Tricks, as he rarely gets personally involved in matters. This is a chance to gain insight into how Lucia Rogier, the Avatar of Creation, got so powerful. This is an important task. You might say it concerns our future."

"But, Lapis, I'm not accustomed to protecting people. I might get in the way."

Kris understood Lapis's reasoning. She was much more curious and ambitious than the average Noble Spirit. Not to mention she was willing to cooperate with humans, though maybe not as much as the enigmatic Eliza Beck, the Vagabond. But Kris was still a Noble Spirit at heart, which left her uncertain. She was aware of it, but she had a tendency to make people angry no matter what she did. Speaking in polite terms required deliberate effort on her part.

She could get by if she was dealing with a mere merchant, but there was no telling what might happen if she were to interact with a noble, or even the emperor. The consequences of her actions could extend beyond just her party and affect her entire clan. Kris couldn't begin to guess what drove that idiot human weakling to approach Lapis for this job.

Lapis nodded. "I don't know what drove that man to ask for our help, but going along with the Thousand Tricks is never a mistake. And we need to learn the source of his power and his methods. Kris, this is something only you can do."

Kris couldn't refuse the job after hearing that. This was an important task. Learning the secret of the Thousand Tricks would make her party stronger, and satisfy her personal curiosity. Kris gathered her courage and clenched her fists, but then something occurred to her.

"But, Lapis," Kris said with a look of skepticism. "Why me? There are definitely

better options in our party."

"Oh, that? It appears you get along with the Thousand Tricks better than any of us," Lapis said and shrugged.

Lapis was entirely off the mark. By no means did Kris get along with the Thousand Tricks. He would ask for her help, and her pride as a Noble Spirit and her powers obliged her to comply. And Kris only entertained his requests because he was Lucia's older brother. And while the human weakling was a moron who didn't take anything seriously, for a human, he wasn't a bad guy. Or so she had believed.

Thus the scenery before her left her shocked out of her wits, something that didn't often happen to Noble Spirits. Bodies covered the floor. Every knight surrounding the Fox-Mask was on the ground, not even twitching. The one member of the imperial guard who was still conscious was Franz, and he was kneeling. Outside, the world was dark and gloomy.

"Wh-What the hell?" she mumbled.

"Hmm. So the emperor wasn't affected because of his Safety Ring?" she heard Telm say. "But did this one shoulder the damage meant for the imperial princess? Did his armor do that? Wasn't he one of ours?" His voice was devoid of emotion, almost artificial. "Whatever the case, I'd advise you not to move. You'll die soon enough, but moving will just drain your already meager life force."

Fox-Mask then dissipated with only the faintest sound. Telm looked unconcerned, and next to him, the Thousand Tricks had a smile plastered to his face. Kris couldn't comprehend what she was seeing. No, it was that she didn't want to comprehend.

The imperial guard had been knocked out by a spell. An extremely quiet and powerful spell meant to wring the life out of someone. It was a contemptible form of magic, the sort that Noble Spirits didn't employ.

The imperial guards were still alive. They had been knocked out, but Kris could sense a faint pulse. That pulse, however, was gradually weakening. If they weren't treated quickly, they would soon die. It was only a hunch, but Kris had a

strong suspicion as to what this spell prioritized—efficiency. It was in the name of efficiency, not mercy, that this spell didn't kill instantaneously. Since the targets would die anyway, it would be a waste for the spell to also cut off their breathing.

When Kris had watched Telm defeat the brood of frigid dragons, something about his magic had caused her to shudder. She had thought it was just her imagination, but her intuition had proven correct. Humans were terrifying. Their short lives meant they developed rapidly. They lived like there might not be a tomorrow, a mindset that invited acts of homicide.

And now she understood Fox-Mask. If he was a simple clone, that would explain his lack of presence and ability to appear without warning. It was a sort of magic she had never seen before, but she could understand its purpose, which was to catch people unaware. Just like with physical attacks, magical attacks also became more effective when they caught their target off guard.

Kris felt a chill down her spine. This man wielded overwhelming strength and was prepared for anything. She felt the metal staff in her right hand, a different sensation from her usual wooden one. She opened her mouth, but what came out wasn't an incantation but a scream.

"Wh-What's the meaning of this?! Sir?! Do you understand what you've done? Kechachakka, why didn't you stop Telm?"

"Weren't you going to explain everything to her, Thousand Tricks?" Telm said. "Well, it doesn't matter. Your methods aren't mine to question, and she's no threat to us. If you don't want to see her hurt, pull her back."

Kechachakka let out a brief chuckle.

Now Kris understood the situation. As much as she didn't want to, she had figured it out.

"I knew we had a traitor in our midst," the emperor said. He was calm, but a hand rested on the sword at his hip. "But it was you? Telm Apoclys, you're a Fox?!"

Telm was unfazed. "Indeed. But now we must say farewell. Soon, this ship will crash."

Kris couldn't win here. Even if she managed a sneak attack, she wouldn't be able to bring down Telm. The Counter Cascade's abilities were practically inhuman. He was a Grand Magus and he likely surpassed Lucia Rogier when it came to water magic. Even with his back turned to her, Kris couldn't see any openings. Any hope of victory for her rested in the staff she had been entrusted with.

The Thousand Tricks's expression had remained static since Telm's entrance. For the first time, Kris found his hapless smile chilling. Telm's earlier words suggested that the human weakling was also a Fox. Quickly, Kris moved back and raised her staff. Propping himself up on his sword, Franz managed to get on his feet, but his eyes were cloudy and he had a sickly pallor. In that condition, even Kris was more fit for close-quarters combat.

"Krai Andrey," Franz said between ragged breaths. He had no severe wounds, but he looked close to death. "You're a Fox?" Despite his condition, he weakly drew his weapon. The well-polished blade glimmered as it shook in his hands. "I'll stop you. I was certain you couldn't be trusted. Damn it!"

"You underestimated us, and it is that on which you can blame your defeat," Telm said. "Fox is omnipresent. Up here, you won't receive reinforcements. Would you care to show the four of us what the honored captain of Zebrudia's Zero Order is capable of?"

They had been outmaneuvered. The emperor was also skilled with a blade, but certainly not enough to make him a match for Telm. That went for everyone there. Even if Franz was all right, the imperial guards on their feet, and Kris aided them, they didn't stand a chance when they were up against the Counter Cascade and the Thousand Tricks.

"I-I never should have believed you, you human weakling!" Kris yelled.

Only Sir Killigan remained still. He, too, was likely a Fox. When she took a moment to think about it, there was no way someone with a name like Sir Killigan was an upstanding individual. The fate of this mission had been sealed from the beginning when the Thousand Tricks had picked his teammates.

Kris suppressed her anger and calmly evaluated the situation. She had no hope of victory. Her survival depended on the Thousand Tricks. Had he been

planning on turning her to his side? If so, he had miscalculated. Kris would never betray the client she was supposed to protect. A Noble Spirit would sooner choose to die with their head held high than to live on their knees. Kris had chosen to cooperate with the human weakling because she had been certain he was a good person.

The only option available to her was to run. She would have to blast a hole in the airship and escape through that. She could use magic to survive the fall, but that would be for nothing if they chose to pursue her. And she couldn't take everyone with her. Her first priority would have to be the emperor, her second the imperial princess.

Her mind settled, Kris prepared to cast a major spell. She steadied her breathing and began to concentrate. Hostility and Telm's immense concentration of mana hung over the room.

Then the Thousand Tricks broke his silence. With a grave look on his face, he muttered, "I'm a fox? What are they talking about?"

"Huh?!" Kris cried.

I couldn't make heads or tails of what was going on. I understood that I didn't have exactly the fastest brain in the world, but the events playing out before me were just too much for my mental capacity. It didn't even feel real. I couldn't even change my expression.

The moment Telm had entered the room, the imperial guard had collapsed, Fox-Mask disappeared, and accusations came my way. But even after figuring that much out, my brain was still mired in the confusion. I wasn't useful in most situations, but I was especially useless when there were unanticipated developments.

I didn't know what was what. I was surprised to find that Telm and Kechachakka were our enemies, but I was even more surprised to see that everyone thought I was on their side. What a shock that was.

I felt a number of gazes poking at me. Not too long ago, Franz had been about to end me, now he was leveling a sharp gaze my way. I felt a glare from Kris.

Telm wore a mellow smile, and Kechachakka was his usual self. Even the emperor and the imperial princess were fixated on me. Time came to a halt, but I was probably the most confused person present.

"What a trite joke, Thousand Tricks," Telm said, smiling at me. "There's no longer any need to act."

"Huh?"

I was about to explain that I wasn't acting, but then my brain finally began to work. Normally, I would be breaking out in a cold sweat, but I wasn't sweating at all because I was perfectly comfortable. Hell, the only reason I wasn't panicking was because of Perfect Vacation. It was a powerful Relic, but its ability to halfway force its wearer into being perfectly comfortable had its drawbacks.

I couldn't stop and worry. Having Telm and Kechachakka for enemies was, well, terrible. They were my main firepower. Now all I had at my side was Kris, Sir Killigan, and Franz, and he was down on one knee for some reason.

I took a deep breath and decided to set things straight. I took a step back and yelled, "Telm, Kecha, you two are traitors?! I believed in you!"

"What are you saying?!" Telm exclaimed. "Y-You're a Fox, aren't you?!"

What's he talking about? I wondered, when the pieces finally clicked. They sure took their time doing so. Maybe, the "Fox" Franz had been talking about wasn't the phantom? I thought something had been off. The elusive Peregrine Lodge wasn't well known, and it was impossible to believe that its denizens would take an interest and get involved in human affairs. Besides, if they were our enemies, no amount of guards could have kept the emperor safe!

So if it wasn't the phantom, then what were they talking about? Judging from their behavior, my best guess was that they were wary of some bandit squad or terrorist group. Unfortunately for Telm and Kechachakka, I was a coward but I would never stoop to working with criminals.

"Fox?" I said. "No, I'm human. A hunter. I don't understand where you're getting these ideas."

"Wh-What?! Then why do you know the code signs?!" Telm cried.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"This isn't funny! Didn't you say you were of the thirteenth tail?!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!"

Telm recoiled. But I was being honest. Code signs? Thirteenth tail? The only thing that came to mind was the tail I had received from that aberrant fox, but that couldn't possibly have anything to do with this.

Telm began to look increasingly uncertain. Even though I wasn't doing anything, he retreated a step. "I-I don't believe it. Damn it, was all this a trap?! Is that why this storm is here?"

"Huh? Trap?"

What was this old guy on about? I didn't know anything about the storm. But his talk of traps was making it sound like I was in some way responsible for this, which didn't sit well with me.

Telm raised his right hand, but I cut him off. "Don't move, either of you," I said in a sharp tone unlike any I had used recently. "If you move, I'll turn you into bullfrogs. You've seen what I'm capable of, haven't you? I've just been holding back on this trip."

Telm froze in place. A cold sweat formed on his cheeks. Even after making multiple attempts, my blossoming magical talents hadn't yet resurfaced. But if they weren't going to manifest at this moment, then when would they? I held out my arm, making myself more convincing.

"W-Would you make it clear just whose side you're on?! Sir?!" Kris shouted.

"I think my innocence has already been proven by Tears of Truth."

I didn't get how there were any misunderstandings about my allegiance when a national treasure had declared me innocent. Franz, who had doubted me constantly, looked shocked. His lack of faith was pretty unreasonable if you ask me. He had seen me screw up over and over, but I didn't recall doing anything illegal.

"You don't know?!" Telm howled. "Then why did you select me for this job?! Was it to observe us?!"

"I don't have a single clue what you are talking about!" I insisted.

"But this airship's propulsion systems have already been destroyed. It's going to crash!"

What?! Well, good thing I got on the Carpet's good side.

So I was right. We would crash after all. Luckily, it didn't yet feel like we were falling. My guess was that the balloon part of the airship was ensuring our descent wasn't too rapid. But I was just spitballing, I didn't know anything about how the ship worked.

I smiled with resignation. I no longer cared. This escort job was clearly a lost cause. But the emperor was still alive, and there was still a chance the knights could be saved.

"Anything put together can fall apart," I said. "Franz—right, he's indisposed—Sir Killigan, apprehend those two."

However, Sitri's friend didn't move an inch. I was trying to understand why it wouldn't move, but then I heard a dubious laugh.

"Hee hee. Uhe hee hee. I knew it. Hee hee. I knew you weren't one of us. Hee hee hee!"

"Kecha can talk?!" Kris cried.

"Hee hee?! Mock me if you will, but, hee hee."

"And you sound so pleased?!"

She was right; Kechachakka was glowing.

So both my allies and enemies thought I was working for the other side? That sucks.

Kechachakka pulled out a small controller. It was the one that my dear friend Sitri had given me to control Sir Killigan. I thought I had lost it, but how did it end up with him?

"I don't believe it..." I muttered.

It was absurd. I couldn't recall ever using the controller in front of Kechachakka, but it seemed he had somehow inferred the connection between

it and Sir Killigan. Sitri's friend was supposed to be in auto-mode, but it didn't budge.

"Hee hee. I knew from the start that this was a golem. Hee hee. Never underestimate Fox, Thousand Tricks. Now die!"

Kechachakka pushed the joystick and pressed a large button. Sir Killigan twitched briefly, then moved its arms and legs in a stilted manner, doing a strange sort of dance.

"Hm?!"

The dance feature was a bit half-baked. Kechachakka watched in silence, looking like he was in a nightmare. Once its routine was over, Sir Killigan stood still, then collapsed. Then I remembered that I hadn't once fed it anything. I felt like it had never been around during meal times. What was I supposed to feed it? Raw meat?

Well, it looks like we won't have to fight Sir Killigan.

I looked at Kechachakka, who was dumbfounded, and gave a hard-boiled shrug. "Aaah. And here I was, planning to use that one later. Now what were you saying?"

"Heh?! Hee heee? Eeee!"

Kechachakka broke down. Telm held his hands out towards me, which made me think he was surrendering. Desperately pleading in my mind that they would get turned into bullfrogs, I stood protectively in front of Kris and the others.

Then a spell was cast. Countless spears of water formed in an instant. The cast time was unbelievable, I hadn't seen any warning signs! The spears flew straight at me and I had nowhere to run. They carried immense force and traveled at an extraordinary speed, but it was their complete silence that made them unsettling. But I was perfectly comfortable, thanks to Perfect Vacation.

Each one of the spears was blocked without even forcing me back. I had my Safety Rings to thank for this.

"He's unharmed?!" Telm bellowed. "Is this his famous Absolute Barrier?!"

"Incredible spell-casting there, Telm. You're definitely one of the strongest Magi I've ever met."

To all appearances, I looked perfectly comfortable, but on the inside, I wasn't as calm as I might have seemed. What a fearsome Magus he was. Not only was he quick and powerful, his control was phenomenal. I could tell because the spears had all been blocked by a single Safety Ring. The barriers deployed by Safety Rings lasted for only a brief instant. If those spears hadn't all landed at the same moment, one of them might have gotten through. I doubt even Lucia could have managed a similar level of precision.

I grinned and prepared to let loose a spell. "But playtime's over!" I yelled. "Aaaah! Become orange juice!"

Telm and Kechachakka both took wary steps backwards. My spell was cast. It probably, most likely, possibly, was cast. But Telm and Kechachakka showed no signs of becoming a citrusy beverage. I gave a small cough.

Maybe, I can't use magic after all?

"Looks like today's just one of those days," I said. "But if you run, I won't come after you."

"Even now, you continue to mock us?! Turn to ice!"

Telm's bracelets both began to glow faintly. I heard a small crackling noise which got closer and closer until it enveloped me. None of my Safety Rings activated, a result of Perfect Vacation. This shirt Relic offered next to nothing in the way of defense, but it made changes in temperature a non-issue. It kept me perfectly comfortable. Though she was behind me, Kris was unaffected, likely because Telm had narrowed the spell's area of effect in exchange for more power.

"Impossible! How could this be?!" Telm cried. "The cold air wasn't just blocked, it was erased?!"

"Heat and humidity have no effect on me," I said without thinking.

"Is now the time for jokes? Sir?!" Kris cut in.

The blood rushed to Telm's face. "We'll bring this whole ship down," he

growled.

With a high-pitched laugh, Kechachakka began stomping on the ground. I didn't know what he was doing, but I could tell my Safety Rings were being gradually depleted. Sure, it seemed inauspicious, but I wasn't sure this was actually a hex. Whatever it was, it seemed harder to fight than Telm's attacks.

We couldn't let the ship crash, but my mysteriously vanished powers left me no means of fighting back. Kris, however, picked up on this and began an incantation.

"Agh, I keep telling you I'm no good with fire spells. Firestorm!"

I apologetically activated a Shooting Ring. The weak projectile charged at Telm as he continued with another incantation, but disappeared before it could hit him. Placing a rudimentary barrier was common practice among Magi, so that must have been it. I heard these barriers couldn't protect against spells of any real power, which said a whole lot about the utility of Shooting Rings.

After my projectile disappeared, Kris's Firestorm connected with Telm. A shower of sparks poured down on him, but to no effect. It didn't make any sense that a spell from Kris would be so weak. Was she holding back? I couldn't help but look at her and see that she was more baffled than I was.

She looked at Round World (the staff I had lent her) and screamed, "Hah?! What's the matter with this staff?! Sir?!"

"Y-You shouldn't blame the staff," I told her.

It's hopeless. Nothing's working out like it was supposed to.

Meanwhile, a mystic light emanated from both of Telm's bracelets. I didn't own many staff Relics, so my knowledge was limited, but I was sure that blue light was a sign of something extraordinary.

We're screwed!

The air rippled and the ship shook violently.

"ACCEPT YOUR DEMISE," Telm roared. "GLACIAL BEYOND!"

"Faster, Lucy! Higher!" Liz commanded.

"Urgh. Shut up! This isn't an ordinary storm!"

Red in the face, Lucia desperately tried to maintain control of the kite spell. The party had already ditched their bedsheets. They had more important things to be concerned about. The kite was massive, and carrying five people (Ansem one of them) and their luggage made it monstrously heavy.

Yet Lucia's attempts to keep it under control had little effect. She felt like she was gripping the reins of a bucking horse. For someone who had trained herself to be able to cast spells even under dire circumstances, this was unbelievable. The sensation was like trying to use a spell while inside an anti-magic barrier. Obviously, this wasn't a typical storm.

Even still, she managed to ride the intense winds and the kite ascended. Apocalyptic clouds blacked out the sky, and they could sense something large inside. Clinging to the top end of the kite, Sitri cocked her head.

"There couldn't be a barrier at this altitude," she said. "And the movements of the clouds are less than natural."

"Oh! Look how high we are!" Luke cheered. "Lucia, hit the storm dead-on! I'm getting the first swing! Just watch, last time it caught me off guard, but *this* time I'll cut a lightning bolt! What sort of man would I be otherwise?!"

Ansem grunted in agreement.

And so the white kite and its oddball passengers barreled straight into the inky clouds.

One thing about magic that terrified me was that it was nothing more than an extension of the ordinary world that I lived in. I could understand how swinging a sword allowed you to cut through something, but I couldn't even begin to understand how a Magus could create a fire just by snapping their fingers.

Apparently, magic operated on its own set of rules, but only Magi could wrap their minds around said rules. A strong understanding of them was how Lucia obtained the august title "Avatar of Creation."

Even as magic words echoed from Telm's mouth, I had no idea what he was about to do. I reassured myself, telling myself that the Safety Rings would protect me. I shut my eyes and held out my right hand. Running was pointless. The only thing I could do now was act as a wall.

The ship suddenly stopped shaking. I expected to sense another Safety Ring going off, but that didn't happen. When I opened my eyes, I saw Telm looking bewildered.

"R-Ridiculous. Impossible," he said. "I have plenty of mana, so why can't I cast?!"

Huh? He failed? He invoked those magic words so confidently, but then he failed?

Telm was clearly vulnerable, but our knights were all incapacitated and I couldn't even beat a Magus in a brawl, so we couldn't capitalize on the opening. I guess my hope that the emperor would go on the offensive was wishful thinking.

Kechachakka hadn't even done anything, but he took a step back. "Uhe hee. What did you do?"

"Is this the doing of the storm?! Is it interfering with our magic?!" Telm said as he frantically tried to use his bracelets.

I couldn't use magic, so I was perfectly comfortable, as per usual. I didn't understand what was happening, but it looked like we had been saved. But I had been under the impression this storm was Telm's doing. Either way, I did the only thing I could do, which was put on the hard-boiled smile I had spent so much time practicing in front of the mirror.

"Looks like the tables have turned," I said. "Without your magic, you're just an old man."

"Damn it!" Telm began to sprint. Lines of light glowed on his body like veins. It seemed there were still some spells he could use, as those were the product of strengthening spells. Those were a Magus's last resort if their other spells weren't working. They placed a heavy burden on the body of the caster and they still didn't necessarily make a Magus as powerful as a dedicated melee

fighter, so strengthening spells were considered a desperate measure.

"Huh?! I can't use magic either! Sir," Kris said.

"Neither can I," I replied.

Telm moved like someone of far fewer years. His low posture was like that of a Thief. His wealth of experiences and hardships far exceeded my own. I quickly began wildly firing off with my Shooting Rings. A bright but weak flurry of projectiles flew towards Telm, but he evaded them. Without stopping, he grabbed a discarded sword off the ground and hurled it at me. It flew straight as an arrow, but once again, a Safety Ring deployed a barrier. I only had five left.

Telm gulped. Earlier, he hadn't even bothered to dodge the projectile from my Shooting Ring, but just now he had gone out of his way to avoid them. I had a feeling I knew what this meant.

"It looks like you can't even put up a barrier," I said. Despite my dwindling number of Safety Rings, I was perfectly comfortable and feeling bold.

My brilliant deduction spurred him to fall back. "You freak," he snarled through heavy breaths.

Was that a joke? He was far more freakish than I was.

"Don't get complacent! Hurry up and finish him off! Sir!" Kris told me while hiding behind my back.

I didn't see why she couldn't use that staff I'd lent her to pummel Telm. Even without her magic, I was pretty sure Kris was still less useless than I was. I didn't know what to do. Restraining a Magus required tools that could stifle magic, and even those didn't always work on well-trained Magi. Because of this, most fights between powerful Magi didn't end until someone was dead.

"Telm, I have no desire to kill the right hand of the Abyssal Inferno," I said, flashing him a nihilistic smile. "Throw down those bracelets and surrender."

It wasn't like I was interested in his Relics or anything. However, those bracelets obviously contributed to his power. For Magi, a staff both amplified and controlled mana. Just like Kris struggled to cast with a staff she wasn't accustomed to, Telm would lose a large portion of his power without his staff.

Hearing my request, Telm's handsome features contorted, his antipathy clear as day. But just as he was about to say something, Kechachakka cut him off.

"Telm," he said in a placid tone unlike any I had heard from him, "the dragons aren't coming. We should retreat."

"Damn."

Why do my allies get stronger when they become my enemies, and enemies get weaker when they become my allies? Not too long ago, all you could do was laugh suspiciously.

Quietly, Telm turned around. Moving fast as any warrior, he kicked down the door and fled from the room. Kechachakka followed after him. All I could do was watch them go. Even if I caught up to them, I couldn't beat them in a fight. I could've released the Hounding Chain, but that wouldn't have been able to catch a Level 7.

"Let's go after them! Sir!" Kris yelled as she pushed me from behind.

"Calm down, Kris. We can forget about them for now," I said, evading her demand almost on instinct. "Our first priority should be saving lives. Franz and all these other people need healing!"

In a stroke of good luck, our supplies, due to their abundance, had been divided up and stored throughout the ship. While I wasn't used to healing people, Kris was able to quickly prepare potions and administer them to the collapsed knights.

Even the first to fall were still alive. After receiving Sitri's special potions, their complexions quickly improved and their breathing stabilized.

"It looks like that wasn't a simple destruction spell. Sir," Kris said as she let out a sigh of relief.

"But I couldn't move. My strength had left me," Franz heaved. He was panting and drenched in sweat.

"He just made minor alterations to the water in their bodies. That takes an unbelievable level of skill. Even with the advantage of surprise provided by the

decoy, not even Lapis could have done something like this. Sir."

Kris sounded grave. Since it was a basic aspect of magic, even I knew that it was incredibly difficult to directly affect someone else's internals with a spell. To some degree or another, all human bodies were resilient to magic. That meant that Telm's powers were among the best out there if he could knock out so many people in the span of a second. An automatic barrier from a Safety Ring could keep you safe, but no spell could protect you from a sneak attack like that.

Franz wobbled as he rose to his feet, but it seemed like the other knights still couldn't even do that. Their lives were no longer in danger, but they wouldn't be able to fight Telm and Kechachakka.

Even now, the emperor was unfazed. He sat down in his chair and asked me, "What now? Do we have any chance of victory?"

"Not in the slightest. Sir," Kris answered. "Don't you agree, human weakling?"

Her sharp gaze implored me to agree with her, but I was still perfectly comfortable. If I had to say one way or the other, I'd guess we didn't have a shot at victory. But since the ship was going down, escape should've been our priority anyway.

"Kris, uh, do you know how to fly?" I asked her.

"I can, but not with this shitty staff! Sir!"

"That's because that's not a staff, that's a translation device."

"Excuse me?!"

I gently looked away as Kris began bashing Round World on the ground. I hadn't expected things to turn out like this.

What to do? I've got no clue. I barely even understand what's going on. What a bad spot to be in.

At a total loss, I retrieved some smoked meat from the supplies and set it before Sir Killigan, who was on the ground twitching due to—what I assumed to be—starvation. I figured I might as well do that.

I told myself to be calm. That's what you do when panicking won't help. I

folded my arms and closed my eyes. I was perfectly comfortable.

I've got it! Maybe if we buy enough time, my beloved sheetwraiths will save us.

In a shrill voice, Kris interrupted my daydreaming.

"Behind you!"

I spun around and looked down. Crouched down next to Sir Killigan was a small figure. It was a child, a human child. Liz was small, but not this small. They wore a loose-fitting white robe. Their small arms reached out, grabbed the smoked meat, brought it to their mouth, and slowly munched on it.

I didn't recall there being any children about the airship. It was an eerie sight, but I wasn't unnerved. I was perfectly comfortable. But that isn't to say I wasn't surprised. The child didn't say a thing. Everyone else was pale as a ghost. The emperor was stunned. Even the Carpet seemed uneasy.

The child's white hair was long, but I couldn't tell their gender. That was because a strange mask covered the top half of their face. My mind froze again, letting my mouth move on its own.

"Ah, a real one."

It was a little late, but I finally noticed the odd air that permeated the ship. Two smooth white ears sprung from their head. The words mysterious and supernatural both came to mind. There were stark differences between their fox mask and the one worn by Telm's friend. The one before me was a *real* one.

The child tilted their head up at me. There were no eye-holes in the mask, but I could tell they were looking at me. Before me was something that no human could win against. I should have shivered. I should have feared them as naturally as we humans fear death. But I was perfectly comfortable. I considered not wearing Perfect Vacation the next time I had an escort job.

An old memory resurfaced—the last time I encountered one of these had also been during a strange storm. It seemed inclement weather was a companion of theirs. I hadn't heard of any sightings since our first encounter, but if they had been in the sky all this time, then that would certainly explain why.

Why did this happen? Is this Telm's doing? No, it couldn't be.

This was nothing more than a stroke of bad luck. They weren't something that could be steered by the hands of man. It was supposed to be impossible to meet them twice in one lifetime, but I guess I was just that unlucky. I thought my days had been fairly accident-free lately, but it turned out I had just been storing up a reservoir of bad luck.

Glancing outside, I momentarily thought the storm had let up, but then I realized that was because it was no longer our world beyond the glass panes. Outside the window, it was pure white. Treasure vaults were alternate worlds recreated from mana material. Low-level vaults were based on the real world, but high-level vaults were different. These were spaces that operated on laws far removed from those of our world. Technically, they were separate worlds. This explained why our magic had stopped working.

But my understanding of the situation wasn't going to improve it. I couldn't help but smile. The strange child with the fox mask—the phantom—also smiled. At some point, the scenery beyond the door kicked down by Telm had changed. We had collided. We had been swallowed up.

"Welcome. Don't be afraid," the fox child said. The inside of their mouth was red as fire. Their voice was faint and their intonation stilted, but they spoke our language.

It was a treasure vault of immense power. An unfathomable realm that traversed the world. A living nightmare. It was a land of the divine. One that was nigh impossible to find and home to a phantom that nobody had ever vanquished. It was designated a Level 10. Its denizens studied, traveled, and partook in games. The name of this uncanny treasure vault was "Peregrine Lodge."

"We're happy to have you," said the phantom.

They were gods. Memories of almighty gods that reigned over our world. I had survived one encounter with them, but I didn't expect that to happen a second time. They couldn't be slain. The one sliver of hope for meager humans lay in negotiation. That's just the sort of beings gods were.

"You liar," I said.

This abrupt accusation elicited a smile from the fox.

"I wasn't lying."

Kris felt like she was going to vomit, as though something was directly touching her innards. There was a pressure, almost like she had slipped into some other realm. It was only her pride as a Noble Spirit and a hunter on duty that kept her standing.

For hunters with low levels of mana material, entering treasure vaults rife with mana material could, on rare occasions, induce discomfort. This was one of the most basic facts of hunting. However, it wasn't actually a common occurrence, so long as there was no significant gap between a hunter's level and the vault's.

Kris looked out the window and saw a different world than the one she had been in. She wanted to scream with fear and confusion, but just barely kept a hold on her sanity. She was in an interworld treasure vault and feeling mana material-induced nausea. Putting these two facts together, she could tell this vault was more than a level or two above her.

Moreover, she was certain the child with the fox mask was one of this vault's phantoms. What a terrifying thing they were. They were unlike any phantom she had ever seen. Compared to the fox child, dragons looked like mere lizards. They had the form of a child, but were clearly anything but. They spoke something resembling human language, but it didn't feel right to call those words. The instincts Kris had developed to protect her forest were blaring like alarm bells.

Opposing this phantom would be even more hopeless than opposing Telm. That, of course, went for both her and the imperial guard. However, Kris didn't give in to despair, because her leader, the Thousand Tricks, hadn't lost his composure. Even a Level 8 was still human, yet his demeanor hadn't been changed in the slightest by the appearance of the phantom.

Kris didn't sense any strength from him. The human weakling was still just

that. But if he had been able to stay calm and even casually call the phantom a liar, then he must have been just as much of a fiend as the thing before him. She had to help him, to make sure they survived, but she was still struggling to grasp the situation.

"Human weakling—"

"Not now, Kris," he said as he put a finger to her lips. "You sometimes say the wrong things, and we don't want to agitate these guys."

She wanted to object that she would never do such a thing. *Sir*. But the tension in the air caused her to hold her tongue.

"I don't mind," the fox child said in a light tone.

"Really?" Krai asked. "We're allowed to say rude things?"

"Yes, yes. You can pet me."

Kris couldn't figure it out. It made no sense. The child's words were affable, but they emanated an aura of bloodthirst. This was an exchange between predator and prey. The phantom's words were hollow, divorced from their original meaning. It was eerie, like when a wind chime's ringing happened to sound similar to a person. Kris was astounded to see the human weakling talking so easily with the phantom. All she could do was rely on him, as he seemed to better grasp the situation.

"I'm hungry. I want ice cream."

"Ice cream? Will you let us go if we give you some?"

"Of course. I'm gonna barf."

"You're a funny one."

"I want to retire."

The human weakling chuckled when he heard this, almost like he was relaxed. But a phantom would never say things like "I want ice cream" and "I'm gonna barf." It defied reason, and the human weakling should have been well aware of that.

Unnerved, Kris took a step back, when she noticed the staff in her hands—

Round World. Despite its impressive appearance, it was a defective tool that couldn't amplify mana. But what had the human weakling said about it? Right, that it wasn't a staff, it was a *translation device*. Kris didn't know how to use it, but she tried channeling mana into it.

The gem at the top began to spin. The phantom opened their mouth and as they spoke, the meaning of their words filtered into Kris's mind. She recoiled at the sheer anger of the phantom.

"Ha ha ha, I like you," Krai said.

As she had vaguely suspected, their exchange was only friendly on the surface. Their words had no relation to their intentions.

"Yeah, uh-huh. I'd like some chocolate too."

"Human weakling?! If you—"

—if you don't understand it, then use this! Sir! But before Kris could say that, Krai cut her off again.

"Kris, didn't I tell you to be quiet? Leave this to me. We're just chatting right now, but if this goes well, we'll be able to negotiate our release. What's important is that we don't antagonize them. We have no hope of defeating them."

Was there a reason he was playing dumb? Grinning, the child extended a slender arm towards the human weakling. At the same time, the room was filled with a sense of palpable enmity. Many of the imperial guards had lost consciousness. Everyone besides Krai was holding their breath, as though waiting for a storm to pass.

"What's that? You're a fan of mine?" he said. "Gee, I don't know what to say. What an honor this is."

Even if he couldn't understand what the fox child was saying, the air of hostility should have been apparent to him. Yet he didn't show the slightest hesitation as he gripped the fox child's hand, leaving Kris no chance to stop him.

Seeing the grinning fox child gave me a bit of breathing room. There were two types of phantoms within Peregrine Lodge: the immense aberrant fox that was the vault's core, and its numerous servants. The aberrant fox never left the vault's center, so the child in front of me must've been a servant.

Even the weakest phantoms in this vault didn't go down without considerable effort. During my previous visit, I had been told that only a few servants had been slain since the vault's formation. In terms of power, I'd say they were comparable to the bosses of many high-level vaults. Even if Telm was on our side, our chances of victory would have been slim. His magic was horrifying because humans were fragile things. However, there was no guarantee it would be as effective against phantoms.

I felt our best option was to do whatever we could to appease the phantoms and then escape. Pride be damned. Luckily for us, these phantoms were powerful, but they weren't bloodthirsty in the same way most typically were.

Last time, I had earned their forgiveness after bowing and offering up a gift. But this time, the phantom didn't request either of those things. They just spoke fragmented words without making any particular demands. They were so genial, I thought they might be willing to let us go for free. I had to wonder if this Peregrine Lodge was a different lodge than the one I had been to before. Maybe they hadn't been lying when they said they were happy to have us. But I didn't want to be greeted, I wanted to be let free.

"I'm actually a fan of yours," the fox child said. "Please, shake my hand."

What cultural shift made me known among phantoms?

But the child held out their hand, so I took it. And that's when it happened. I heard Kris let out a shriek. I had no idea what the fox child had done. There was no sound or color or anything. All I could tell was that my oh-so-expensive Safety Ring had activated.

I frantically looked around. Kris's eyes were wide as saucers. I still didn't get it. I blinked a few times, then, still holding the phantom's hand, I said, "What did you do?"

[&]quot;That was fun."





The phantom began to disappear. Starting at their feet, they turned to dust as though rotting away. My hand gripped nothing but the air. I heard a clatter and saw that the only thing remaining was the child's fox mask.

The next moment, I was caught off guard by a loud retching. Franz was on his hands and knees, vomiting profusely. The emperor wasn't at that point, but the blood had left his complexion.

"S-So that's how the phantoms of this vault are defeated, Sir," Kris said while holding a hand over her mouth. "How strange."

"Hm?"

Kris took a step back. I noticed she was looking at the mask on the ground. "Was that a condition? They can't lie? They died because their *next attack* didn't kill? U-Urrrgh. How can you stand this dense mana material? Sir?"

"That? Oh, I'm perfectly comfortable."

The vault's mana material seemed like the cause of everyone's poor condition. I had never experienced it because I had almost no ability to absorb or retain mana material, but hunters with strong absorption powers sometimes became sick if they took on too much. It was akin to muscle fatigue. Come to think of it, everyone in my party had the same nausea the last time we entered this vault.

I picked up the mask. Had the phantom forgotten it? Or was it a drop? How come they had died when all I did was grip their hand? Was that their weakness? That seemed hard to believe, considering they requested a handshake of their own accord.

Well, if they left the mask behind, I'll take it as a memento. I'll return it if they say they want it back.

However, the ship was enveloped in white. Beyond the door Telm and Kechachakka had fled through, the scenery was the same as my last encounter with Peregrine Lodge. There was no point in sticking around the airship. This was no ordinary treasure vault, and I *really* didn't want to go out there, but I didn't know any way to escape that didn't involve earning the boss's forgiveness.

"No other way about it," I muttered. "I better get going."

I didn't bring anyone with me. Being strong by human standards didn't change anything when up against these phantoms. Because I knew a bit about this place, I was actually our best shot at survival. Previously, one of the phantoms here told me that this vault had a rule: nothing can restrain a god but the god themself.

As I approached the airship's exit (or was it the entrance?) Kris called out to me. "Human weakling, take this staff—"

"Huh? I don't need that."

"What? Then why did you go out of your way to bring it? Sir?"

"I thought you might want to use it."

I didn't need it when the phantoms could already speak. What I needed was love. Yes, *love*. Opposing the phantom wouldn't get me anywhere. To them, humans were beyond insignificant. But the moment I stepped out the door, I heard a voice near my feet.

"I want fried tofu. Give me fried tofu, or I'll attack."

I was sure nothing had been there a moment ago. Looking down, I saw a child, similar to the previous one, sitting on the vermilion floorboards. She was wearing a fox mask, but she wasn't quite the same and her speech wasn't fragmented. This one was a girl, her hair a light gold. She wore a short white kimono and was pointing a thin finger at me.

Fried tofu? Sorry, all I've got are the preserves Sitri prepared for me.

Kris Argent was certain this was the most dire situation she had ever found herself in. She was in a treasure vault that far exceeded her capabilities, and the density of mana material was enough to make her queasy. She didn't have a staff she was used to (carrying two would've been difficult, and she hadn't expected things to get this bad). The unique laws of the vault didn't let her manipulate mana. Certain doom seemed like an apt description.

At this point, her only choice was to rely on the human weakling, who seemed

to know something about the treasure vault. But she still had her pride; she wouldn't let him take care of everything. Well, maybe she would, but she wasn't going to be a hindrance. She clenched her trembling fists, uncertain as to what to do. There was nothing she could do if she was deprived of her magic. She didn't even have a weapon. She could think, but that was one thing that preterhuman artificer could do better than her.

Then she recalled what Telm had done earlier. When his offensive spells had failed, he immediately switched over to a strengthening spell. Kris wasted no time giving it a try. Strengthening spells were a basic form of magic that involved converting mana into power. The magical energy coursed through her body, and she felt a warmth deep inside her. As the spell took effect, she felt her trembling subside.

So that was it. The laws of the treasure vault didn't extend inside bodies. No smart Magus ever ventured into a treasure vault where they couldn't use magic, but after giving it some thought, Kris recalled hearing about this phenomenon before. Just as a treasure vault's laws were altered by mana material, a body could be altered by its own mana material.

Now, Kris could fight. Using mana in a manner she was unaccustomed to caused some slight pain, but that was nothing compared to her experience with the amiuz nuts. Her recent training was proving useful. Noble Spirits had an incredible aptitude for magic, and their mana pools far exceeded those of humans. It wouldn't last long, but at the moment, Kris could fight as well as any dedicated warrior. Of course, she still didn't think she could beat the phantoms of this vault.

The human weakling had ignored Kris's uncertainty and his departure had been so casual it was infuriating. He had gone out into that space warped by the treasure vault. To go alone was suicide. He had won against that first phantom, but it was clear to Kris that they were far outmatched. She knew that conflicts were decided by more than just power, but not when the gap was this wide.

If they were going to survive this emergency, they would need to cooperate. It certainly wasn't that she was scared or anything. Just as Kris was about to follow after the human weakling, her eyes shot open. She had noticed *her*.

Near Krai's feet was a gold-haired phantom wearing one of those fox masks. This phantom was far more powerful than the previous one and had a presence more overwhelming than any that Kris had ever fought. This meant that the previous phantom—the one whose dissipated mana had been enough to cause Franz to vomit—wasn't the boss or a lieutenant, just a basic mob.

Leaning against the Relic, Kris commanded her legs to carry her forward. She felt that if she stopped, she would never be able to start moving again. She'd rather press forward than do something so shameful. She couldn't spare any thoughts for the emperor's safety. Her presence wouldn't do him any good in this vault, so the better option was to work with the human weakling.

"I want fried tofu," the phantom said. "Give me fried tofu, or I'll attack."

It sounded like a joke, but the Relic in Kris's hands told her that, unlike the previous phantom, this one meant what she was saying. She didn't know why this phantom wanted fried tofu, but she naturally didn't have any. *However*, she thought, it wouldn't be strange if the human weakling had some. After all, he had packed the ship with food and remained undaunted by the vault.

Krai had been silent, but he broke into a smile when the phantom made its request. "Sorry," he said, "I don't have any."

"Are you shitting me?!"

Before Kris could add on a "Sir?!" it was all over. A gale blew over her. She felt a rush of pain throughout her body and let out a groan. She realized she had been slammed up against the wall. She ached, but her magic strengthening had prevented the damage from being too severe.

What Kris had felt was just a shock wave. The phantom had swung its small arm at Krai. No magic had been used, it had been nothing more than a simple movement of a limb. But the phantoms of high-level treasure vaults commanded enough might to obliterate an experienced hunter just by scratching them. Kris coughed violently as she stood up. She saw the human weakling was completely unchanged and the phantom was on the ground.

"Wha?!"

She couldn't believe her eyes. The last thing she had seen before the rush of

wind was the phantom attacking. She could accept the attack not having any effect, but she couldn't see how the masked girl had been knocked over. A trickle of blood ran from the phantom's lips and a patch of red spread across her white kimono. Her body of mana material convulsed, her arms spread out and her fingers shook.

"What did you do?! Sir?!"

"I didn't do anything," he said, confused.

There wasn't a drop of blood on his hands. The abilities of the Thousand Tricks were unknown even to his fellow clan members and veiled in mystery, but this went beyond that. He had done something right before Kris's eyes and she failed to comprehend it.

"D-Don't hide it from me. Sir."

"What? No, I'm not hiding anything."

He sounded serious. He didn't look like he was lying. And so it dawned on Kris Argent—he wasn't hiding anything. He kept nothing under wraps, but his abilities defied understanding, just like the work of an advanced Magus could boggle the mind of a novice.

"There's a lot I want to ask you, but for now I just want you to be clear about one thing. Sir. Can you defeat this vault's boss?"

He knelt down and touched the twitching phantom. "No, that's impossible," he said in his usual weak voice.

I had given up on making sense of this. Any hope of comprehension was so far out of sight that I was actually starting to enjoy myself. Kris seemed concerned, but my ignorance left me in no position to address those concerns.

The phantom had just gone and coughed up blood on its own. That's how I'd explain it anyway. None of my Safety Rings had activated at any rate. These phantoms were so tough, my friends had been helpless against them during my last visit to this vault. Even if I caught one unaware, I probably wouldn't have been able to leave so much as a scratch on what was essentially a higher being.

I knelt down next to the twitching phantom. She appeared to be incapacitated. She wasn't dead, but clearly unable to move. Her face was angled up at me, her mask slightly misaligned. Looking at her, I realized I had seen this phantom before. We met them during my previous visit here.

Back then, she had been a bit smaller and had simply demanded something delicious, instead of fried tofu specifically. But there was no mistaking the style and color of her hair. Back then, I had handed her some fried tofu (actually, it was an inari bento) that I happened to have on me. It was just something I had picked up in a town we had been staying in not too long prior, but the phantom took quite a liking to it.

She had asked for multiple helpings, so I'm not surprised it asked for it again— Oh, I get it now.

"You forgot our promise, didn't you?" I asked her.

Right, our promise. Last time, I had made her promise that if I gave it fried tofu, it would never attack me or my friends ever again. She had agreed to the terms, and then assured me in concrete terms that the phantoms of Peregrine Lodge never lied. The gold-haired phantom's fingers twitched slightly, as though in response to my question.

"Does this happen a lot?" I wondered aloud.

They would collapse if they told a lie. What a tricky bunch of phantoms. Still, they lived up to their promises. The phantom seemed to still be alive. We didn't have any means of killing it, but doing so would probably just invite the wrath of the others.

Gods were full of wrath and contempt. Their exchanges were violent. During my previous visit, a phantom had told me that this place was a mirror. It would grant you what you wanted, but it would demand something of equal value in return. It was this facet of Peregrine Lodge that had allowed me to escape once before.

"You leave me no choice then," I said with a perfectly comfortable smile. "I'll show you what I'm capable of."

I had grown since our last encounter. My groveling skills back then were a

shadow of what they had become. I was second to none at begging for forgiveness.

"H-Human weakling!" Kris shrieked.

Her voice brought me back to my senses. I looked around and saw that a swarm of masked phantoms had surrounded me. Not only were they on the floor, they were on the ceiling as well. There were easily more than one hundred of them. Our door was cut off, leaving us no way to escape. When I stood up, Kris wavered and leaned against me, our backs pressed together. I let out a small sigh. Being perfectly comfortable, I was afforded the ability to let out a wry grin.

We're trapped. Were there always this many?

The vulpine sea parted, revealing a tall phantom in a jet-black fox mask. He seemed more powerful than the others, but I couldn't be sure of the extent of that power because I was second to everyone when it came to gauging strength. The phantom with the black mask approached us silently, as though he were sliding across the floor.

"Welcome," he said in a level voice. His words were fluid, indistinguishable from a human's. "It's been some time since our lodge last saw visitors. Oh, you have nothing to fear from them. They're just struggling to contain their curiosity because they haven't seen a human for so long. I can assure you, you're safe." Then a sardonic smile formed on the phantom's lips. "But in exchange, I'll be taking that which you value most."

That which I value most?

I couldn't stop my brow from furrowing when I heard this mandate. I noted the phantom's thin smile. They hadn't made any demands like this last time. It seemed the phantoms had evolved. I felt Kris's heart pounding, but my Relic kept me perfectly comfortable. As for what I valued most, that was the lives of my childhood friends. No contest. However, they weren't here with us.

The phantom smiled, it seemed he knew what I was thinking. "Ah, what I meant was whatever you value most from what you can currently offer. Oh, and that doesn't include your own life. This is, you see, a *fair* trade."

When I first came here many years ago, I had never heard of a vault called "Peregrine Lodge" and naturally didn't know anything of the phantoms that inhabited it. Without meaning to, we had wandered into this vault and a fox of uncanny strength appeared before us.

"Errant humans, ye tread upon a domain not your own," the fox had said.

"How many years hath come and gone since we last received your kind?

Whatever circumstances ushered your arrival, you are nevertheless unwelcome.

However, bow and apologize, and free ye shall be."

I was the only one who could move. Mana material absorption rates, max capacity, and dissipation rates varied from person to person. Better rates could be considered necessary to being a powerful hunter, but those same qualities made someone easily affected by mana material. Because I was subpar in these areas, Peregrine Lodge only caused me some slight discomfort. Mana material went through me like water through a colander.

Back then, I hadn't been perfectly comfortable, but I had done as the phantom said and immediately showed them some exemplary apologizing. And so we were forgiven. That was the moment I learned the utility of the groveling skill. Ever since then, lowering my head became sort of fun (and that shameful behavior earned me punches from Lucia).

Our encounter with Peregrine Lodge left a major impression on me. It was this treasure vault that partially numbed me to fear. Not that it made any difference this time, now that I was perfectly comfortable.

I'll have to comply. No use fighting. I wonder what this phantom plans to take.

The phantom had said he wouldn't take my life, which meant he would go for whatever came after that. And I had no idea what that was. If I said it was my pride and ego, would he forgive me if I groveled? My kowtowing skills had evolved far past what they used to be. I had transformed it into an art. You could make a frontispiece out of it.

The phantom came within arm's reach. He lifted an arm, and I unconsciously stepped back. Just as his fingers were about to touch me, they stopped. Then the phantom recoiled. His mouth hung open.

"Wh-What's this?" he said in a trembling voice. "Are you that incautious

young man?"

"No. I'm not."

That didn't sound like me. Well, now I was perfectly comfortable and all, but I knew when I was in danger. For some reason, the phantom became frazzled. He looked left, then right. Then he leaned in, as though examining me through his holeless mask. Kris squeezed my back.

"No, no, no. Huh? Why are you here? We're in the *sky*. It hasn't even been one hundred years."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

"How did you get here? We're flying at incredible speeds! I-I don't understand."

That's what I wanted to know. I clenched my fists. I had the same thought last time, but I didn't think I had done anything wrong. I figured it was their fault, like a carriage hitting a stone on the road. But I couldn't complain to a transcendental being. All I could do was grovel if the situation called for it. It seemed the phantom remembered me. Perhaps it would forgive us if I apologized.

"Honestly, how did you slip in here?" the phantom wailed. He seemed to be at a loss. "I thought mother said we would never see you again as long as we lived! And we even moved to the sky, just to be sure this didn't happen."

Huh?

Gods are omnipotent and therefore bound to their word. The gods of this treasure vault were manifestations of mana material, but maybe that's all any god ever was. It reminds me of something I once heard. A Level 10 treasure vault known as the Shrine of the Celestial God had formed on the site of the old capital. I don't know if it's true or not, but supposedly the Celestial God themself was defeated by Ark's ancestor because the god said something that resulted in the restraint of their own powers.

The cautious fox phantom led us further into the vault. Throughout the hallway, masked phantoms watched us in silence. Perhaps they didn't attack

because of our guide. The interior of Peregrine Lodge still resembled an inn, just like it had during my first visit. The floor was made of wood, and grand wooden pillars reached to the ceiling. Shades of red and white dominated the interior, reminding me of the shrines of some eastern city. Maybe that's where these foxes were originally from.

"I know I'm repeating myself, but everyone here is positively fascinated by the sight of humans," our guide kindly explained to us. He seemed to be high on the vault's hierarchy. "You see, we don't get many visitors here, and you, Mr. Caution, are the only one to come twice. It's because of you that my younger sister is so obsessed with fried tofu. I've given up on demanding an apology."

Following behind him was the fried tofu-lover in question. But she showed no reaction. Perhaps she was in a rebellious phase.

"We're fair and proper," our guide continued. "You won't die unless you request it. We won't attack without warning. That greenhorn you killed didn't yet understand our ways. I imagine they didn't understand human speech?"

I was beginning to feel like I didn't understand human speech.

Hold on. They died? Could this be the first time I've ever killed a phantom?

I felt a bit bad about it, but since the phantom brought in on themselves, I hope you'll forgive me.

We reached a large vermilion door. The lodge's layout appeared to have remained unchanged. Kris let out a wail and sat down. She had the complexion of someone about to die.

"This is normal," the wary phantom said with exasperation. "What's going on in that head of yours, Mr. Caution?"

"Hey, I at least realize something's up."

I was perfectly comfortable, but Perfect Vacation didn't hinder my brain functions or anything. I was ready to grovel at any moment. Also, I really wanted him to stop calling me "Mr. Caution" but I wasn't in any position to protest.

"Kris, you wait out here," I told her. "I'll settle this."

Powerful phantoms were composed of incredible amounts of mana material. If standing in front of the door was this hard on her, I was afraid of what might happen if she actually met the phantom face-to-face. Kris looked up at me. She was breathing short rapid breaths, and tears were pooling in her eyes like she might vomit at any moment.

"Don't worry. We're just going to have a little talk. It'll be fine. And look, I'm perfectly comfortable."

At this point, I was close to giving up. These phantoms could blow me away with a mere breath, so I just had to do what I could. If I was lacking a sense of caution, it was because they had stolen it from me.

I just wanna lay down. In fact, if I make it home alive, that's exactly what I'm going to do.

The phantom opened the door. I took a deep breath and began to approach the aberrant god.

At that moment, Kris awaited—no, experienced her death. The mana material that flooded from the door was overwhelming, like nothing she'd ever experienced. They were up against a god, the very realm they had entered. Her body refused to move, her instincts accepted defeat.

And yet the human weakling was unfazed. Kris was certain he was as feeble as he seemed. Over time, you could learn to glean someone's levels of mana material, and she could at the very least tell that his levels were lower than hers. But while she was failing to even stay on her feet, he was strolling up to the door. Kris couldn't begin to imagine what sort of resilience was required to make that possible. But she was sure that she had now seen what a Level 8 hunter was. It was something inhuman.

And yet his high level didn't reassure Kris. Beyond that door was a fiend of unbelievable might. But she was still somehow oddly confident that Krai would return.

As she lay on the ground, unable to move an inch, the tall fox phantom let out a small laugh and said to her, "There's no need to worry. That cautionless man

obeys the rules so well it's frustrating. In this situation, a Noble Spirit such as you should be far more concerned about yourself."

My flesh trembled, my soul screamed. Gods are nothing like humans. Putting aside whether authentic gods existed, even if it was just a phantom, this being had the presence of a higher being.

Previously, when I wasn't perfectly comfortable, when I was just some noname, I had kept a grip on my sanity simply because I was already accustomed to feeling the fear of death. Gods or demigods, dragons or demidragons, it made little difference to someone at the very bottom of the hierarchy. All treasure vaults, not just Peregrine Lodge, terrified me. As luck would have it, that was what allowed me to stand in the face of a god. But now I was different. Now I could stand before a god because I was perfectly comfortable.

She appeared as a fox with glimmering white fur. Her presence outsized her actual figure, which was much more modest by comparison. Yet that still gave her an outline comparable to that of a dragon. She almost didn't look real.

In all likelihood, this fox's body is without a single bit of excess. Just like quality crab.

Extending behind her was a number of tails, all of them puffy and shimmering. She was a beast, but a god nonetheless. Even if I had my friends with me, defeating her simply wasn't an option. This wasn't anything a human could vanquish.

"Oooh. The insatiate human. Hast thou come to challenge me once more?"

I wondered if Safety Rings worked even against higher beings. I had never had the opportunity to test it, but there was no point in thinking about it. If this phantom wanted me dead, there would be nothing I could do about it.

Not to brag, but I had more experience stepping on land mines than anyone I knew. For fear of losing my sanity, I avoided making eye contact with the phantom. However, that seemed rude, so I began to boldly grovel. The fox god slapped the ground with her tails, causing the air to tremble.

"I didn't mean to come again," I said.

"Nonsense."

Nonsense indeed. Who had ever heard of someone happening to run into a treasure vault in the sky? But that's what had happened. What type of person would willingly return to a place so inherently dangerous? But I couldn't win an argument with a transcendent being. Her response would make Gark's rage look petty and benign by comparison.

Oh, somebody save me, I thought as I lay there prostrate.

"Dost thou remember what I said?"

Her voice weighed down on me. I had totally forgotten what she had said, but the tall fox phantom had mentioned it. I searched my memories and answered as honestly as I could.

"You said we'd never meet again."

"I said we shall never meet again, so long as we live."

I wanted to protest and point out that those were the same damn thing. What's the difference? But I was in no position to be voicing contradictions.

"This...is no coincidence."

Something about the fox's voice was incredibly affecting. But how was this not a coincidence? I couldn't see what else it could be.

What's this fox talking— Wait. Ah. I've got it.

The phantoms of Peregrine Lodge couldn't lie. But bad fortune had turned this one before me into a liar, so she was trying to twist the situation back to her favor. So if I wanted to get on their good side, I just had to go along with them.

Man, I'm on fire today.

I put on a friendly smile and told them bluntly, "You've got that right. This isn't a coincidence. I came here to see you!"

Perfect, right? No better way to show I had no animosity or intent to harm. Yet I received a very dramatic reaction.

"BAH! DO NOT INSULT ME. I NEED NO PITY FROM A LOWLY HUMAN!"

My body was rocked by a roar that nearly uprooted my soul from my body. My hair stood on end and my heart pounded. It was a miracle that I had survived it at all. I probably wouldn't have if I hadn't been perfectly comfortable.

As I stood there, too shocked to move, the fox continued, "Never has a human insulted me as much as thee! Not once do I ever wish to see thy visage again! To compare me to 'quality crab.' The temerity!"

So she had been reading my mind. She seemed pretty mad, but I could hardly blame her for that.

But hear me out—good crab is delicious. It would be even better if it was easier to eat. Of course, my friends always remove the shells for me, which I feel a bit bad about.

"Silence! Silence! Never hath I laid eyes on so hopeless a human as thee! Thou art a testament to the idiocy of man!"

The fox slammed her fluffy tails on the ground as she screamed. It sort of reminded me of a child throwing a tantrum. *Adorable*.

"Aaaaaaugh! I grow stupider with each passing moment spent in thy presence! Take that and begone!"

"Ah. You're back. Sir."

Once my audience with the fox was over, I left through the door. We hadn't been separated for very long, but I still felt like I was hearing Kris's voice for the first time in a long while. Humans really were the best. Gods make for bad socialization, even if you're perfectly comfortable.

Kris supported me when she noticed me wobbling. Then her eyes went wide when she noticed what I had in my hand.

"Wh-What's that? Sir?"

"Oh. Want it?"

In my hands was a bright white tail. It was the real thing, grown by the boss herself. Just like last time, it had been foisted onto me even though I said I

didn't need it. The last one I had stuck to a rod like a broom and then gave to Lucia, but I didn't know what to do with this one. I wanted to toss it somewhere.

"N-No, I don't! Quit that! Get away! Sir!" Kris yelped.

I guess she didn't see it as just a tail. But really, who was supposed to be glad to receive a tail for a present? The tall fox—I'll call him Big Brother Fox—pressed his lips for a moment.

"So mother lost?" he said dispiritedly.

"No, not at all," I replied. "Not that I really know what goes on in the head of a god or anything."

I just really pissed her off for some reason. It's, well, sort of hard to interact with someone who can read your mind. And even if she was a god, being despised so thoroughly still left me feeling down.

"That tail is her lifeblood. Regardless of how it played out, you won, Mr. Caution."

Lifeblood? This tail was her lifeblood?

That boss had twelve tails. Now I had one, leaving her with eleven.

"So if I do this eleven more times, I can defeat her?" I asked.

"Care to give it a try?" Big Brother Fox asked with a grin. Kris hid behind my back when he did that.

That just sort of slipped out. Sorry.

"No, I don't intend to ever come back here," I answered. "Now tell me, what'll happen to the airship?"

Last time we had simply been released from the vault, but this time we had an airship with us.

"The rules say we must release you unharmed," Big Brother Fox sighed. "Your airship or whatever it is will be undamaged. If I had my way, I'd destroy something that could reach us all the way up here, but I can't just do what I want."

Oh? Are we actually going to make it out of here?

These phantoms couldn't lie. Sure there had been some rough spots, but getting away from Peregrine Lodge so easily had proven that even I could be lucky at the oddest times. But just as I let out a sigh of relief, Big Brother Fox smiled cruelly.

"However," he said, "the only one I'm releasing is you. I have no intention of letting the others go free."

What? That's...not good.

I valued the lives of my friends and I above all else, but that didn't mean I was okay with everyone else dying. I wondered if they'd let us all go in exchange for the tail.

"These are the rules, and if I don't receive anything from our guests, mother will scold me. Now, it's your turn, Kris Argent."

Kris poked her head out from behind my back, but her hands still trembled.

"If you want to go free, you'll have to give me whatever it is you value most," the phantom said in a hushed voice. His tone was gentle, but that made him all the more intimidating.

And what did Kris value most? We were up in the sky, far from her party or any other Noble Spirits. Big Brother Fox was asking for something much more significant than simple groveling, but he was fair in his own way. After all, he didn't ask for our lives or anything we couldn't offer at the moment.

If I was in Kris's position, I'd be ready to offer up just about anything. Even if the phantom wanted a Safety Ring, I'd just have to hand it over. But that made me remember something: we had the emperor with us. What if Kris was asked to hand him over? That'd be bad. If we failed to protect the emperor, we'd be chased from Zebrudia.

Maybe the emperor was exempt because he wasn't in the immediate vicinity? No, that wouldn't happen. Big Brother Fox followed his rules; he wouldn't make that sort of exception. He wouldn't take your own life, but he could still be harsh. If a couple wandered in here, someone would end up separated from their lover.

Kris didn't say anything. She just gripped my shirt and glared at the phantom. He stayed quiet for a bit, until a frown formed on his lips.

"That won't do, Kris Argent. I can't take Mr. Caution because I've already agreed to let him go."

"Huh?" I said.

What was this fox talking about?

"H-Huuuh?!" Kris stammered before I could say anything more. "What are you talking about?! Sir?!"

So she was thinking the same thing I was. Funny how we were on the exact same page.



"I'm explaining to you that I can't take what you value most," the phantom said. "He's protected by the rules."

"H-H-He's what I value most?! Not a goddamn chance! Sir!"

"Oh no, I'm quite certain. There's no use trying to deceive me as I can read the hearts of people. It doesn't matter whether or not you're aware of it, you value Mr. Caution and Mr. Caution has no sense of caution."

Kris quickly stepped away from me. Her face was red to her ears and her hands turned white as they gripped her staff.

Well, this is a little embarrassing. I never would have thought Kris valued me.

"D-Don't look so happy! Sir! This is just because nobody I know is here! Sir!"

"I see," I said. "So I'm more important to you than the emperor."

Kris began to tremble, her face flushed as she hit the ground with her staff.

This was all the more refreshing after being told off by a god. Kris was always calling me a human weakling. I had no clue where I could have possibly scored any points with her. Maybe being in the same clan helped pad the numbers?

Big Brother Fox seemed to think things over for a moment before sighing. "I suppose I have no choice. Mr. Caution, I'll take what you value most. However, to make up for my serious violation of the rules, I'll let you and all your companions go."

So that's it, huh?

I didn't know if I should or shouldn't consider these to be favorable terms, but I had one thing I wanted to confirm. "And what would happen if what I valued most was Kris or the emperor or someone?"

Still red in the face, Kris gasped.

"Then there would be nothing I could do. It would be my loss," the phantom said with a shrug. "I would let you and your company go. This is a fair exchange after all."

Now I knew I had won. At first, I hadn't any idea what was important to me, but Kris had changed that.

It's her. Kris is what I value most. Sorry, but the emperor comes second. I know, I'm failing my quest.

But maybe this was all part of Big Brother Fox's plans? I was sure he wanted the tail. That might have been why he began to negotiate with Kris. He knew that he wouldn't be able to take from her, which would give him an excuse to take from me instead, and thus get the tail back.

But nobody stood to gain if he took Kris. The tail was a chunk of mana that could be used to incredible effect, but I didn't care about that. At this rate, I was going to walk away with something I didn't need.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and prayed. This tail is what's important to me. It's what I value most, way more than Kris. Way more? Okay, maybe just a bit more. It's fairly valuable and it's got a nice luster. I also like the ears that spring up when it attaches to you. If only Lucia didn't always punch me when I touch them.

I opened my eyes. I saw Big Brother Fox looking just as troubled as he had been just a minute ago. Much to my disappointment, it looked like he wasn't going to be taking the tail.

"I see," the phantom declared. "It seems, Mr. Caution, that what you value most is a...carpet. Perhaps it sounds strange coming from me, but are you all right in the head?"

And so, I did as I was asked and obediently handed it over. I had no choice. I was so nervous, I thought my heart was going to burst from my chest. As I hung my head, the phantom rolled the item up and held it at his side.

"And now our exchange is complete," Big Brother Fox said. "I hope you've learned your lesson and never come here ever again."

"I'm not here because I want to be. You guys ran into me."

I meant every word of that, but the phantom shrugged as though he didn't believe me.

"It makes no difference," he said.

It didn't matter how much he said his exchanges were fair, their idea of fair wasn't the same as ours. All he really obeyed were the rules of the treasure vault. However, these rules didn't apply to us, they only dictated the phantoms' behavior. For instance, if I had the necessary strength, I could overpower them and escape without giving anything up. That, of course, was a moot point.

We didn't say goodbye. The world abruptly changed back and the phantom disappeared. Before me was one of the airship's hallways. It was as though the vault had been nothing more than an illusion. Outside, the sky was blue and cloudless. Once I was certain we had made it out of Peregrine Lodge, I sighed with relief.

With minimal losses, we had survived something very few people come back alive from. However, we had one tragic sacrifice in the form of a certain textile. I didn't know where that treasure vault would go from here, but if they remained airborne, then we would probably never run into them again. I just had to pray that assumption would prove correct.

As I gazed out the window, I felt a hand grasp my no-doubt mournful back. It was Kris. The color had returned to her face and she was no longer nauseous.

"Wh-What were you thinking back there?! Sir?!"

I had done something bad to her. But I really had thought she was what I valued most. In the end, that turned out to be my Carpet, something not even on my mind. The mind-reading skills of that phantom were extraordinary.

"Hey, calm down. That was definitely a scheme meant to drive us apart!"

"Do you think I'm an idiot? Sir? Can you quit playing with fire?!"

I didn't think she was an idiot, but I really did feel awful about what had happened. I had a number of things to apologize to her for and I wanted to do what I could to make it up to her.

"But, Kris, now's not the time to be fighting. We need to make sure the emperor is all right. That phantom wouldn't lie to us, but any first-rate hunter would still want to make sure."

"If you don't take this seriously, I'm going to hit you."

Following the map in my head, we made our way back to the earlier room. Knights, administrators, servants, Magi, all sorts of people were collapsed in the hallways. These people were most likely not the victims of phantoms but of Telm. Kris ran up to one and felt for a pulse, checked their eyes, and listened for a heartbeat.

"They're alive," she mumbled. "They're still alive. Sir. I don't understand."

Telm's magic was some of the best out there. I failed to understand how someone could be hit by one of his spells and survive this long.

"Oh, was this the mana material? Sir?"

That would explain it. Mana material enhanced bodies. If you wanted to be fortified in a specific manner, you could. Whether it be magic prowess, strength, or the power to protect people, you got what you desired. If it was absorbed by someone on the brink of death, they would gain a stronger grip on life. These changes were usually slow to take effect, but with Peregrine Lodge's extreme concentration of mana, anything was possible.

And what exactly was going on if I wasn't being affected, even when civilians were being strengthened? It was possible the phantom had done something. He had said he would send us all back unharmed. If one of us had died while in the treasure vault, they could hardly be considered "unharmed." But now that we had left the vault, there was nothing I could do to know for certain. I just wrote it off as a stroke of good luck.

When we reached the room, we found it hadn't changed since we first departed.

"You're back, Thousand Tricks," the emperor said when he saw me. Whereas everyone looked like they were on the verge of death, he was still maintaining an air of dignity. The man didn't sit at the top of the empire for nothing. "Have you resolved the situation outside?"

My eyes swept the room—and let out a sigh of relief. Behind the emperor was my Delinquent Carpet.

Good. We didn't lose anyone.

Trembling, Kris whispered threateningly in my ear, "Seriously, quit playing

with fire. What if you had failed? Sir?"

The phantom only mentioned a carpet. Buying that other carpet as a companion for my Relic had paid off big time.

What mysterious creatures humans are. Especially that cautionless young man. The number two of Peregrine Lodge was Big Brother Fox. On behalf of the great Mother Fox, he was in charge of much of what went on in the vault.

He looked scrutinizingly at the blue carpet. Humans valued all sorts of different things. For some it was items, the life of someone else, and some people even chose memories. But when that man had so many allies and a tail from Mother Fox, Big Brother Fox couldn't understand how a carpet could be what he treasured most.

Humans rarely entered Peregrine Lodge, and nobody had entered since that man's previous visit, meaning this was Big Brother Fox's first confiscation. The Noble Spirit next to Mr. Caution had very reasonable values that Big Brother Fox could comprehend, so he felt safe in his belief that there was something wrong with that man.

He was beginning to wonder if the rug was an heirloom or something when his eyes flew open.

"I've been had."

This wasn't it. He could tell. This was indeed a carpet, but not one significant to Mr. Caution. Big Brother Fox had been tricked. He let out a sigh of disdain. The airship had already been released. He had lost, lost in a battle of wits. He never imagined that man would hand over a fake.

Though the human seemed to have the wrong idea, they had played by fair rules. It was a *fair* game of cloak-and-dagger, a *fair* battle of wits. It was his first attempt, so Big Brother Fox was still learning the game, but that didn't change the fact that being slipped the wrong item made him the clear loser here. He wasn't permitted to take revenge. In fact, as the loser he had to compensate the winner, just like Mother Fox had offered up one of her tails.

Now Big Brother Fox was certain—that human was a wily one. His lack of

caution only made him all the more difficult to handle. Appalled by his failures, Big Brother Fox began to consider what to do next.

He needed a strategy. For someone to enter Peregrine Lodge twice in such a short time was abnormal. Maybe that man's luck was truly awful, maybe he had some powers that dwarfed those of Peregrine Lodge. While that man showed no hostility to them, Big Brother Fox still didn't like the idea of continuing on in the sky. At the same time, he also didn't want to go somewhere beyond the reach of humans. It was an unfamiliarity with humans that had led to the defeat of his younger brother. It was a fine line to walk.

His mother, younger sister, Big Brother Fox, all of them had lost. The one bit of solace in all of this was that the humans' airship was undoubtedly going to crash. Its propulsion systems had been demolished. The only reason it had remained airborne so long was because it had been caught by Peregrine Lodge. Now that it had been released, it was once again subject to gravity.

That man had taken one of Mother Fox's tails. Big Brother Fox wasn't resentful, but he wasn't indifferent either. Mr. Caution was a fascinating individual, but not someone the phantom was obligated to rescue. The phantoms of Peregrine Lodge were bound to their rules, after all.

With a sniff, Big Brother Fox dissolved into the air. He still had to receive compensation from those two who had been left behind.

Then the airship suddenly began to shake and angled downward. Franz tumbled across the tilting floor. The only one at all comfortable was me.

"Shit! We're going down! Sir!" Kris yelled.

My world shook. The furniture was bolted to the floor—the people weren't. I hadn't understood how we had been able to fly in the first place, but that didn't mean I was satisfied to see us falling. Not all of the passengers had been treated yet. Everyone had been confirmed to still be alive, but only a small few could actually move.

"Kris, can you cast a spell or something to save us?" I asked.

"No! Magic can't do everything! Sir!"

Causing a commotion wouldn't do any good, so I sat down on the rattling floor. So we were going to crash. With my Safety Rings and Flying Carpet, I knew my life wasn't in danger, but everyone else was pretty screwed. Mana material could do incredible things to people, but you'd still have to be as durable as Ansem to survive a fall like this. Not to mention the fact that many of these passengers were civilians.

"Do you think you guys can make it through this?" I asked Franz.

"How the hell could we?!"

Even his banter was blunt.

"It's no good!" said a crew member as they entered the room. "All the parachutes have been destroyed!"

Telm sure knew what he was doing. If only I could have gone back in time and chosen someone else.

"If you jump for it just before we crash, maybe you'll make it," I suggested. I wasn't being entirely serious, but all the knights became pale as ghosts.

"Thousand Tricks," Franz said as he crawled across the floor, "you need to save His Imperial Majesty!"

"You're a better person than you seem," I told him.

"I'll kill you!"

"Now, now, calm down. We still have time. Maybe my magic powers will awaken. Maybe we'll land in water."

"We're in the desert!"

"Oh, I've got it! We've got beds on this ship, right? You can tie your hands and feet to a sheet and float like a flying squirre!!"

"Are you for real?! Sir?!"

My brilliant idea was rejected. I bet everyone in Grieving Souls would've given it a go.

I got up and looked out the window. Already, I could easily make out the ground below. Just as Franz had said, we were over the desert. I didn't know

how long it would be until we made impact, but it was probably a matter of minutes.

"That sand sure looks soft," I said.

"Is there really nothing you can do?!"

"You guys really shouldn't depend on me so much. Honestly, I said the ship might crash."

I kept trying to cast a spell to turn the airship into a bird, but that plan just wasn't panning out. All the while, I felt some very intense gazes on me. It wasn't easy being a preterhuman artificer.

I decided my first priority should be getting the emperor and the imperial princess aboard the Carpet. But if the emperor could use Safety Rings, maybe I should have handed him one? Kris was a Noble not-weakling, so she could take care of herself. Everyone else...would have to make a last-minute jump. The top portion of the airship was a balloon, and while I felt bad having no evidence to back this up, I had a feeling they might be able to survive, depending on where they landed. Or maybe I was getting my hopes up.

Then my gaze wandered to the window and my eyes flew open. Outside were the sheetwraiths. They weren't actually wearing bedsheets anymore, but they were riding a comically large kite. It seemed they had managed to avoid getting dragged into the treasure vault.

I smiled and gave a hard-boiled snap of my fingers. "Well, I guess I can lend a hand if it's come to this."

Lucia! Lift the ship with your magic! If anyone can do it, you can! This thing is like a big balloon! I'll never ask for anything again, just save this ship! LUCIAAA!

"Waaah!"

The ship jerked violently. The furniture was secured to the floor, but boxes and tableware were tossed about. Everyone was desperately clinging to chairs and desks. Franz was shielding the emperor. Everywhere, I saw faces of people prepared to die. The only person who looked comfortable was the imperial princess, who was atop the Carpet. How I envied her. The Carpet hadn't

accepted me, but her? Well, in fairness, the imperial princess was still a child.

Then the ship was rocked by an exceptionally strong blow, like it had been hit by a massive wave. I heard glass breaking, the shaking continued, and then it all went silent. I no longer felt like I was floating through the air. For a moment, I stayed on the ground and observed the situation, but it didn't seem like another shock was coming. I wobbled a bit as I stood up. I took a deep breath.

We're alive. WE'RE ALIVE!

The interior was a mess. I guess the knights had never experienced crashing before; they had been unable to manage the violent turbulence and had all been tossed into a pile in one corner. But they were alive at least. Pressing his hands to the ground, the emperor got off the floor. I heard a groan from Franz.

Kris and the other Magi had cast a shock-absorbing spell before impact. Atop the Carpet, the imperial princess was safe, if frazzled. The carpet (somehow) gave me a thumbs-up. What a competent Relic I had in my employ. Plenty of people had been injured, but this was a good outcome, considering the height we had fallen from.

"Wh-What happened?" Kris said between heavy breaths. Holding her arm—she must have hit it—she opened her eyes. Her gaze was vague and unfocused, her voice lacking its usual vigor. It was almost like she was an amateur when it came to surviving crashes.

In these situations, you'll just get vertigo if you open your eyes, so you're better off keeping them closed. It also helps to crouch down and cover your ears. We call this "evading reality."

I timidly reached through a broken window and touched the sand. I felt a hint of the sun's intense rays. With so many people injured, I couldn't just sit around and do nothing. I braced myself, then stepped outside.

While making sure not to lose my balance on the sand, I left the shade provided by the large hull. I gulped when I saw our surroundings. Before me was the desert, but there was more than just sand between here and the horizon.

Through the shimmering air, I could see a large town a couple hundred

meters in the distance. Beyond some trees and a low bulwark, I could see white buildings. There were shadows at the gate; with my eyesight they just looked like little beans, but they were most likely people who had seen our crash.

Fluttering near the gate was a flag of five spears on a yellow background. I had been shown this flag before beginning the escort quest—It was the flag of Toweyezant. It looked like we had crashed in a good spot. No need to camp this way. I had been uncertain about this job, but we had made it all right in the end. I nodded to myself, then returned to the ship so I could share the great news.

"Hey, everybody! We've arrived in Toweyezant!"

Perhaps still suffering from dizziness, Franz rubbed his temples. "Urgh. I have nothing more to say to you," he said in a garbled voice.

Epilogue: Let This Grieving Soul Retire, Part 6

And so we had safely reached the desert country of Toweyezant. We had no fatalities (but many injuries) and had time to spare before the conference. A perfect job. All's well that ends well.

"I'm going to hit you once I have the strength to," Kris said from her bed. Casting defensive spells over everyone just as we crashed had drained every bit of her mana.

After that crash, my stock had begun to plummet, but Kris's was through the roof. Because she was a Noble Spirit, everyone in the caravan had kept a respectful distance from her, but they were much more comfortable approaching her. Some of them even openly stated that they owed their life to her.

Deep down, Kris was a good person, so she deserved this treatment from the start. I'd have to formally thank Lapis for lending out one of her party members to me, but I still wasn't going to hand over Lucia.

Now that we were in Toweyezant, our job as guards was over. The civil servants would take over from here. We had experienced our fair share of troubles on this journey. We had some unexpected traitors and an encounter with a treasure vault. But think about it, before I departed I had said to my vice clan master, "No. There might be bandits, there might be monsters, a treasure vault might spring up, there could be a natural disaster. Eva, I could be in serious danger."

And look at what happened: we didn't run into any of those. Sure, we had traitors, but we weren't assailed by any bandits. There were dragons, but I didn't have to deal with those. There was a treasure vault, but not a new one. There was a storm, but I don't know if I'd go so far as to call that a natural disaster. Nothing I had mentioned had actually happened. What could that possibly mean?

"Wait? Was luck on my side this time around?"

"Huh?!"

"No, no. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We're at our most vulnerable when we relax. Something could still happen."

"Would you quit it with the bad jokes? Sir?"

Kris weakly reached for me, her white slender arm entirely bare. For a moment, I wasn't quite sure what she was doing, but then I figured it out. I leaned forward, and obediently let her hit me on the head.

If Kris was the hero of the day, then the sheetwraiths were the unsung heroes.

I headed to the inn designated by Sitri. I entered a large bedroom and saw the Lucia-wraith collapsed on a bed, glaring at me. She was dressed comfortably, without her usual coat. Her complexion, however, wasn't so great.

"You idiot..." she mumbled.

"It appears keeping a ship that large airborne for three hundred meters is no easy task," Sitri, no longer donning her bedsheet, said as she carried in an iced beverage. "You were so far off course, we couldn't just let you land in the middle of the desert."

So Lucia had directed the ship for three hundred meters, all while keeping it aloft. I hadn't noticed at all. I had been desperately trying to endure the turbulence.

"Yeah, uh-huh," I said. "I can always count on Lucia! I knew you'd come through!"

So that was why we had landed so near our destination. It must have been a tremendous strain, but we had my sister to thank for our zero fatalities. If she hadn't gone to such lengths, some of our injured members probably wouldn't have survived.

I sat down on the bed and casually reached for the white ears sprouting from her head, and got hit for it.



"Stop that," she protested in a faltering voice. By the looks of it, if I touched her tail, she'd do a lot worse than hit me.

"No amount of mana potions can help Lucy recover after she's absorbed the tail," Sitri said with a wry grin. "And she can't remove it until after she's recovered her mana. There are temporary boosters, but those have severe drawbacks."

The tail and ears protruding from Lucia were side effects of the Fox God's Final Tail. After the first encounter at Peregrine Lodge, Sitri had investigated the tail and handed it to Lucia. With some training, she figured out how to successfully draw out a portion of the tail's power.

She usually kept it affixed to a rod, which she used as a broom, but if she ever ran out of mana then the tail could provide her with a large supply. (I didn't know how she attached the tail to herself and asking only resulted in flying fists. But it didn't seem like she needed to disrobe to use it.)

Conscious of her fuzzy ears, Lucia hid them under the covers.

"Well, take care of her," I said to Sitri. "It seems like things have settled down for the moment."

Protection during the conference was apparently going to be handled by a different group. And no matter what happened, I would do whatever I could to avoid asking anything more of Lucia. And that was fine. Even without her, there was still the very energetic sword-wraith. He was off playing around somewhere, but I knew he would come if I called. We were a party; my friends would be there when I needed them.

"You can count on me," the alchemy-wraith said with a grin. I wondered if that also went for the nearby, emaciated Killiam. "This was a very beneficial journey for us as well. Leaving Killiam in your care has made him smarter and stronger."

I still hadn't recovered from the shock of seeing a gaunt Killiam emerge from Sir Killigan's armor.

"Oh, I just remembered," I said, "I've got a present for you, Lucia."

The magic-wraith squirmed under her blanket, her ears twitching.

Here you go, now you'll have two tails.

I nodded to myself, then pulled the new tail out from the bag I had brought.

"W-Wait! Hear me out!" I cried.

The Carpet lunged forward and walloped me. As I lay on my back, she punched me over and over again, but being socked by a textile is a painless thing. If anything, it was sort of fun. Being straddled by a Carpet was a far crazier experience than the inverse.

"I said I was sorry! There wasn't anything else I could've done back there! I don't like it any more than you do!"

It seemed the Delinquent Carpet resented my decision to give her girlfriend (or boyfriend?) to the fox. But I didn't have any other options. Anyone would've done the same thing in my position.

"I had a duty to protect the emperor," I continued. "And what did you do, besides hide in the back?!"

My protests fell on deaf ears. I didn't even know where a Carpet's ears were. She whacked me on the cheek. How tragic that this had to happen just as we had begun to get along. But I was at fault here, so I let the Carpet have her way.

As I lay on my side, being beaten by a Relic, the door opened and Kris came in. She wasn't in her usual robe but instead in some thin pajamas. I raised my arms, fending off the Carpet. Kris looked briefly shocked, before a stern look formed on her face.

"H-Human weakling! What are you doing?! Sir?!"

"You're feeling better? Oh, that's good."

"I asked you a question. Sir."

"I think you should be asking the Carpet."

The frilly edges of the Carpet were whacking against my face. I didn't know of any creature that attacked with their ears, so I figured her ears must be

elsewhere.

I guess there's nothing more I can do. Playtime's over.

"All right, all right, I give," I said. "I'll buy you a new carpet. One that's real easy on the eyes."

The Carpet stopped attacking but remained atop me. I sighed.

"Okay. Fine, you needy textile. To show how sorry I am, I'll buy you two, no, three carpets. How's that? Will you forgive me?"

The Carpet patted my head a few times and then got off. It seemed her mood had improved. Honestly, she could be really demanding for someone the size of a welcome mat.

"Please. Quit horsing around. Sir."

"I know how it looks, but I'm not horsing around."

Kris knit her brow and let out a sigh, dispensing with her previous dark expression. I noticed her pale limbs protruding from her pajamas. I thought about how being a Forest Noble gave her pale skin, but in the desert, there were Noble Spirits with tan skin (hell, I knew one: Eliza). If Kris spent enough time in the desert, would she get a tan?

"Listen to me, human weakling," Kris scolded me, cutting off my train of thought. "I'm not your ally, but I've got my orders from Lapis. Anything that sullies your name will do collateral damage to our honor as well. Sir."

"Very diligent of you, Kris."

If all Noble Spirits were like her, then maybe it was inevitable that they looked down on humans.

"We just had a close call. Sir. I think we need to discuss that. Don't you agree? Sir?"

"Hmm. I don't think it was a particularly close call. We made it here just fine."

"It was close! You brought two traitors into our ranks! Sir!"

"Aah. That was, uh, an oversight."

"I'm going to hit you. Sir. If you've got a good idea to prevent this sort of stuff,

I'd love to hear it. Now, do you? Sir?"

"Nope. Y'know, now that you mention it, I forgot all about Telm and Kechachakka."

They hadn't been aboard the airship after we left. The most likely possibility was that they were still inside the treasure vault. I blinked and tilted my head. Rubbing her temples, Kris sighed with an expression that reminded me a lot of Lucia.

"Where are we?"

"Hee hee hee..."

Telm had a long history as a treasure hunter. Once he had become a Magus, he'd immediately become a hunter and stayed on that path. After that, he became a Fox, which further expanded his wealth of experiences. But something this unnerving was a first for him.

He was certain they had jumped from the airship. They had intended to retreat so they could regroup. But when they stepped out that door, they saw something unexpected. The dense presence of mana material made it immediately apparent to Telm that they were in a treasure vault. Not only that, it surpassed any of the Level 8 vaults he had entered.

He was certain this was no illusion. Even someone as enigmatic as the Thousand Tricks needed time to conjure up an illusion capable of fooling Telm. This also explained why his spells hadn't been working. Entering the treasure vault had made them subject to new laws. They were in dangerous territory, but staying put wasn't an option. Fortunately for Telm, his strengthening spells were still an option.

Taking extreme caution, the two of them investigated the building. It was wide, with a high ceiling. They found it unsettling. This was clearly a space designed for humanoids, but they didn't detect any signs of life.

"Stay sharp," Telm said. "There should be an exit somewhere."

Kechachakka chuckled in response.

The hallway seemed to go on forever and was certainly wider than the airship they had just been on. The space around them was most likely being warped, which wasn't a rare occurrence among high-level treasure vaults.

Something strange caught Telm's eye—it was a picture. Decorating the wall was an abstract painting. Telm slowly approached it and took a good look. At first, he didn't understand what all the crisscrossing streaks of yellow were.

He narrowed his eyes. "A fox?" he muttered.

"Heh heh!"

Hearing Kechachakka's warning, Telm turned and moved away from the painting. Further down the hall, he could see a small human outline. It was a child in a white kimono. It was a phantom. Their face was hidden by a polished white mask modeled after a fox, and the mana material emanating from their body was extraordinary.

When Telm realized what he was looking at, an indescribable chill ran through him. "Impossible. Could this really be..."

"Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox," the name of the secret organization Telm belonged to, was derived from a treasure vault. Said vault was host to a vulpine god. Misfortune had brought the organization's founder before something that was once divine. They survived the encounter and went on to name their organization after the being whose might and bearing had enraptured them. They made fox masks their signature item. The mask the founder had brought back from the vault was still used to prove who stood at the organization's top.

Kechachakka looked nervous, suggesting that he had reached the same conclusion as Telm. It didn't seem possible that they could be here. The vault's location wasn't just uncertain, its very existence was disputed. Telm had heard that the founder had never managed to come across the vulpine god's domain a second time. Luck alone wasn't enough to bring someone here; fate had to play a hand. This encounter was the mandate of destiny.

Telm hadn't looked away for a moment, yet the fox child had still disappeared without him realizing it. Then he heard a voice behind him, "Welcome, visitors."

"There's no need to be so wary. We're aware of your circumstances, Telm Apoclys, Kechachakka Munk. You pitiful humans, cast aside by Mr. Caution."

He had no presence. A young man in a fox mask was standing behind them, almost as if he had always been there. One glance was all it took for the two hunters to understand that they couldn't win here. This was a being far beyond them. Telm's instincts urged him to step back, and he only barely managed to resist that urge.

It was too soon to abandon hope. A word of advice left by the founder regarding dealing with this treasure vault was to *never give up*. If there were people who had survived and brought back a mask as proof, there was no reason Telm the Counter Cascade couldn't do the same.

"Are you...a god?" he asked in an attempt to distract the phantom.

He could touch it. Many phantoms that looked human also resembled humans on the inside. If that were true here, there should be water inside this phantom. If Telm could directly touch that water, he could manipulate this phantom. This should be well within the realm of possibility for a man who had mastered the control of water. There was nothing else he could do.

"You can relax," the phantom said. "We're fair here. I'll guarantee your safety, but I'd like to be compensated for it."

"Compensation?"

"I'll be taking what you value most. Fear not, this is a fair exchange. I've already conducted a similar trade with Mr. Caution."

Telm could see openings, dozens through which he could strike. This phantom wasn't watching for potential attacks.

The young man saw that his two guests were still on guard. He nodded, then slowly opened his mouth. "I'll take Hydrogod's Grace and Dragon's Reprisal."

Telm broke out in a cold sweat. The phantom was reading their minds! Those Relics were central to Telm and Kechachakka's operations and no known replacements existed for either item. If they were taken, then Telm and Kechachakka would lose any chance of beating these phantoms.

"What shall it be?" the phantom asked with a smile.

"Suppose I refused?"

Telm could reach for the phantom's internal water. If he could just manage that, he could control the phantom, and that would settle this. All it took was one finger.

Telm's provocative question brought a simple laugh from the phantom.

"Indeed, you certainly have that right. After all, we're very fair."

I received permission to search the airship's crash site for Telm and Kechachakka. The omnipotent Sitri-wraith and Killiam Smart, now half its original size, accompanied me.

With the conference approaching, Toweyezant was getting lively. I was seeing more and more knights and Magi that appeared to be from other countries. I could feel an undercurrent of tension amid all the excitement.

Toweyezant was a vast country, but not so prosperous. I didn't know much about their history, but I had heard this had once been a land of ceaseless conflict. It was like a slice of hell. Most of the land was a desert climate with very little rain. What little food the region produced was fought over, and powerful monsters unique to this region could be found everywhere.

Those days had been brought to an end by the golden age of treasure hunting. Toweyezant wasn't an optimal land for human habitation, but that climate brought about treasure vaults unlike any other. And the mana material that ran along the leylines provided a nearly limitless source of energy, giving this land an almost infinite resource, so long as someone was around to extract it.

In search of untrodden treasure vaults, hunters flocked to this once-poor country, and a number of towns popped up to welcome them. The people of the land stopped fighting and united as one. And that's how this country came to be.

"Though it seems only a certain portion of cities are growing," Sitri-wraith

observed. "As I expected, food production still makes all the difference. Food is rare in treasure vaults, and importing is difficult with all the monsters."

"Sounds tough," I said.

"I understand they're planting trees and other greenery, but the results have been less than ideal," Sitri-wraith explained with a smile. She was supposedly as new to this land as I was, but she was oddly well-informed.

We left the town. The Black Star couldn't be moved or repaired quickly, so it remained where it had landed. Seeing the ship for the first time in days, the balloon at the top was slightly deflated and its majesty was gone without a trace.

The hull, sticking out of the ground at an angle, had been dug up, but it looked like it had a long way to go before it could be considered fixed. There were guards posted around it, but we had already received permission to enter, so we went ahead and entered through a broken window.

The ship was as it was when it had crashed. Before leaving, I had given the interior a sweep and found no signs of Telm or Kechachakka. However, I didn't have the sharpest eyes, so I figured something might turn up if I brought Sitri here. We also wanted to retrieve the supplies on board. Left like this, the heat would ruin them and they weren't needed anymore as the Black Star wasn't going to be bringing the emperor home. Likewise, we had already received permission to retrieve these supplies.

"Thank you so much!" Sitri said. "This country is constantly short of food and potions."

"Well, they're your supplies to begin with. Do you think you'll be able to cover your losses?"

"Of course! All thanks to you, Krai!"

Sitri's smile stretched to the edge of her face. She really had an enterprising spirit. The two of us (plus Killiam) carefully examined the inside of the ship. Sitri's eyes shone as she looked around an airship for the first time.

"Come to think of it," I said, "I'm surprised you guys weren't pulled into the treasure vault."

"Well, we tried to get pulled in, but we couldn't gather enough speed."

"Huh?"

"We had been losing speed, you see. When we got close, Luke tried to cut a hole from the outside, but nothing he did had any effect on the vault. And so we couldn't link up with you."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

"It appears Peregrine Lodge's boundaries aren't marked by physical barriers. If that experience is anything to go off, Luke's sword does not affect opponents that can warp space. He says he'll train more."

"Yeah, that happens sometimes."

I nodded along, deeply relieved that I hadn't met up with them. If that had happened, what I valued most wouldn't have been a carpet, but rather my friends. I could never have handed them over, which would have left us no choice but to fight the phantom head-on.

Wait, so the reason I could only find Lucia and Sitri is because everyone else is off training? Do they have muscles for brains?

"I suppose Peregrine Lodge is still a bit much for us," I commented, entirely in perfectly comfortable mode.

"But let me say this, Krai!" Sitri protested in a trembling voice. "My preparations were flawless! I even made some considerations for a possible encounter with Peregrine Lodge!"

"You're incredible, Sitri," I said at length.

If she had thought it was a possibility, she should have said something. Maybe I wouldn't have needed to go through all that. Sitri seemed to think she had made a mistake, so I patted her on the back. Any mistakes she had made were nothing compared to mine.

Sitri-wraith's expression softened slightly. She looked at me with upturned eyes and hesitantly asked, "So, Krai, did the fried tofu I packed come in handy?"

Huh? Fried tofu? Was there some aboard? I had no idea.

It didn't sound like she was joking and she was fidgeting as though she was hoping for a compliment. Yeah, I should've read the manifest, but who would have expected fried tofu to be among our supplies?

I decided to avoid the issue. I rubbed her head, letting her soft hair pass through my fingers. Her droopy eyes became a little less anxious.

"Yeah, you saved me back there," I said. "Really, I mean it. If not for that fried tofu, uh, I would've been in serious trouble."

"You used it to escape Peregrine Lodge last time, so I was certain it might come in handy. Oh, I'm so glad. Tofu's not exactly a staple dish in Zebrudia, so it took some effort to obtain it."

I couldn't let her realize I hadn't even noticed the tofu. I couldn't do anything that might dampen her smile.

Sitri's what I value most. That's right, it's Sitri. I screwed up here. It's all my fault.

"By that way, for future reference," she said, elated that she had been helpful, "was five crates enough?"

"Five?! Uh, mmm, it's hard to say?"

Was five crates really necessary? Was she planning to throw a party or something?

As I listened to Sitri cheerfully chat away, we looked around the airship. I didn't see Telm, Kechachakka, or any sign of what might have happened to them. My initial prediction that they had remained in the vault was looking more and more likely. But if they were in the vault, I didn't have any way of knowing that for sure.

Then, my insensitive ears picked up a faint noise. It came from the cargo hold. Normally, this section was for luggage, but the vast majority of it ended up being used to store the food I had brought. It certainly didn't make for a good hiding spot.

Sitri slowly drew her Relic water gun and Killiam raised its slim arms in a fighting stance. I had the Safety Rings, so I took the lead. I opened the door and

peeked inside. The cargo hold hadn't changed much since I last saw it. Unlike the luggage in the other rooms, the boxes here had been fastened down just in case. The gratuitous mountains of crates were sturdy and wouldn't collapse easily.

I took a few cautious steps in. I looked around but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Maybe the sound had come from outside.

"Everything's all right," I said to Sitri. "It looks like it was just our imaginations
_"

Without making a sound, the lid of the large crate before me slid open. The first thing I saw was a white triangle. Once the lid was removed, a small figure stood up. Before me was a girl in a white kimono and a fox mask. In her hands was a large cut of fried tofu. I simply blinked in confusion.

Use some chopsticks. Eating with your hands is bad manners.

The phantom looked at me and calmly munched on her tofu. Smiling, I approached the box, pressed her head down, and replaced the lid on the crate. Taking deep breaths, I hoisted up the crate. Wooden crates weigh a bit, but that was all I felt—no additional weight from the contents. And that's because it was empty. There was absolutely nothing at all in this crate.

I turned to Sitri and smiled. "All clear. Should we take these crates outside? Maybe five crates wasn't enough."

Maybe that had been a heat-induced mirage. Or maybe stress was to blame. This called for a cool drink and playing with the Carpet. I just wanted to quickly get our supplies and get out.

"A-A captive?" Sitri said. "Krai, you never cease to amaze me. I could never manage a feat like this."

Uh-oh, Sitri's reeling. And what do I do with this? Why is the sister here?!

"While I was hoping for a captive fox, I meant a criminal, not a phantom..."
Sitri said.

Sure, but it wasn't my doing that had brought this phantom from her vault.

I felt rumbling from inside the crate. It sounded like Little Sister Fox (I didn't know her name, so I was calling her that for convenience's sake) was gorging herself on fried tofu. Sitri almost always wore a smile, but even she looked grim.

And I still didn't have a clue what I was supposed to do about this little fox. The phantoms of Peregrine Lodge weren't something that could be taken lightly. Most phantoms didn't leave their vaults because they couldn't survive long on the outside, but that sort of common sense apparently had nothing to do with this fox girl.

"Maybe if Lucia uses the tail, she could do something?" I proposed. "Like, if she had fox ears, this phantom might think they're kin or something."

"I think you'd just be asking her to punch you," Sitri said. "Hmm. If it's just one, we might be able to take it down if we all work together."

The sun was beating down on us. Heat waves warped the surrounding scenery. The box was awfully calm, considering that we were talking about killing the phantom inside.

Yeah, I'm not sure I can kill something that doesn't mean any harm.

"I'm coming up empty," I said.

"Indeed. I could try tossing her in the blender, but that might just break it."

"Huh? What's a blender?"

"I'm conducting experiments that involve grinding down phantoms into liquid mana material. Typically, they dissipate into the air—"

"Ah, sorry. I think I've got the idea."

Of the two little sisters, the Smart one was far more dangerous.

The way I saw it, the quickest resolution was to have Peregrine Lodge take her back. We turned down an inconspicuous alley, where I set the box down. I braced myself and slowly opened the crate. I prayed that the contents had vanished at some point, but inside was a phantom quietly hugging her knees.

She didn't have the ears or tails of a beast. At first glance, she just looked like a person in a mask, but her presence wasn't anything like that of a human.

I took a deep breath and asked her, "Hey, are you able to contact Peregrine Lodge?"

And why are you here in the first place? This makes no sense. Take your tofu and go home!

Little Sister Fox didn't say anything, but after a moment she reached into her pocket and pulled out a small green board about the size of a small notebook. It was smooth and numbers appeared when she touched the black surface. It seemed to be displaying the time. My eyes flew open. I recognized this thing. I knew what it was!

"That's a Smartphone. A telephone Relic."

"A telephone?" Sitri said. "Like what you talk through? It doesn't look anything like it."

Telephones were a communication device used in technologically advanced countries. They were still in the experimental stage and there were a number of obstacles preventing them from becoming common in the empire, but they were like a Sounding Stone that could be used to contact multiple locations. And the Smartphone was an item from the Era of Physical Arms that had similar functions!

"Well, it's a Relic after all," I reminded Sitri. "With these, every terminal has its own number. You enter the number of the desired terminal and you can talk to them over long distances."

"But you can only contact people who own the same Relic, and you also have to know their number?"

"Right, so it's less practical than a Sounding Stone. And yet these things sell for a lot among devoted enthusiasts."

What's more, they were an odd strain of Relics with a number of defects. For instance, they couldn't be used far from towns (it would say "no service") and they would break if dropped or submerged in water. Though I wanted a Smartphone, there was no point in buying one because none of my friends had one. I didn't know why Little Sister Fox had one, but Peregrine Lodge's origins might have been in the Era of Physical Arms.

"You're very well informed, Krai," Sitri said. She was looking at me with admiration, but I didn't really know much about these things. Still, the adoring gaze didn't feel half bad, so I couldn't stop myself from showing off.

"This, I believe, is a new model," I said. "These newer versions have cameras. It's small, but comes with plenty of features."

"I see. What sort of features?"

They were only rumors, but I had heard that there were a variety of Smartphones that didn't all do the same things. But I had heard they could do most things, like a magic staff.

"The cameras can shoot magic beams that mow down monsters, and, right, they can also keep food cold. The people of the Era of Physical Arms used their Smartphones to protect themselves, making them very useful in their daily lives. They're really a versatile Relic."

"They can do anything? What about, say, something like marriage?"

"Yeah, probably."

Little Sister Fox suddenly moved, snatching the Relic from my hands. She silently tapped at the screen and then handed it back to me. "Calling" it said on the screen. Her movements had been so efficient that it was almost beautiful. It was *cool*.

"Whoa. Are you a Smartphone pro or something? You've got the better of me here," I said to the phantom. "I'll have to get my own sometime soon."

Little Sister Fox spoke for the first time. "You hick. How embarrassing," she said. Her voice was flat, but her neck was flushed and her body trembling.

"Darn," I said. "It sounds like he's not coming to get you."

When I told Little Sister Fox the outcome of my conversation with Big Brother Fox, she didn't seem bothered in the slightest. It seemed Big Brother Fox was very busy at the moment. When he heard my voice, he said "Ugh." *Ugh.*

He had sounded incredibly upbeat when he told me that he finally had some proper intruders. Those "intruders" were Telm and Kechachakka. By the sound

of it, those two weren't doing so well. That gave me one less thing to worry about.

"I guess he prefers a hands-off approach. Maybe phantoms and humans have different sensibilities."

He didn't even ask me to look after his sister or anything. He said the matter of the carpet was his loss, but he didn't come off as angry about it. Yeah, I was pretty sure phantoms saw the world differently from us.

While I was worrying about all this, the little phantom casually opened a bag and removed some fried tofu. The inside of the crate was filled with discarded paper wrappers. She danced to her own unfathomable, otherworldly tune.

"Oh, is fried tofu even common in the empire?" I asked.

"It's not," Sitri responded immediately.

Little Sister Fox froze, a partially eaten block of tofu falling from her hands. Of course, it wasn't common. Sitri seemed to have managed to find some, but I couldn't think of many countries where it was a common dish. I began to wonder what would happen to this phantom once she ran out of tofu.

And why don't you just go home already? You can fly, can't you? If you can't, then, hmm, I've got it. Lucia didn't want the new tail, so maybe you can fly if you use that. It'll be two birds with one stone.

I was just tired and I felt like an idiot worrying about this. Just as I was thinking I was ready to pack my bags and go home, I felt a tug on my shirt. I turned and saw Little Sister Fox holding on to me. She wasn't saying anything, but her pitiful state was obvious enough. Not that that made me any more suited for looking after a phantom.

What sort of phantom has a weakness for fried tofu? Go find the fried tofu kingdom or something.

She reached into her pocket. When her hand came out again, she was gripping a silver board—another Smartphone. Could she be a dual-wielder?! As I stood there in amazement, she held the second Relic before me.

"Take it," she said.

I felt a sense of shame that dwarfed mountains and sank deeper than the sea.

Remember, Krai Andrey, you're a hunter. Saving the weak is one of your jobs.

She was a phantom, but not a bad one. I felt sorry for her, now that she had stumbled into the human world. I thought hard about a way to make everyone happy. I was certain there had to be one. Now was the time for me to awaken those slumbering powers of mine.

I placed the Smartphone in my pocket, resisting the urge to fiddle with it.



"Well, it'd be irresponsible to abandon you now that you've come all this way," I said, clenching my fists. "I've got an idea of how to make sure everyone can be happy."

The intense glare of the sun cooked the desolate desert landscape of Toweyezant. Men were outside, laboring, coats protecting their skin from the oppressive heat. Except now, they were still, their tanned faces looking at the cloudless sky through narrowed eyes.

This had once been a land of endless conflict. While the influx of treasure hunters had caused the people of Toweyezant to unite as one, the fact remained that most of their land remained unusable, due in large part to the lack of water. You could easily count the number of times rain fell in a year, and intense shifts in temperature occurred as day became night.

Powerful sandstorms assailed travelers, dangerous monsters adapted to the harsh climate roamed everywhere, and even laying down highways wasn't feasible. The only wealth in Toweyezant was found in the small number of cities built around large oases. Other locales in the desert nation didn't even have enough food.

These laboring men were members of an organization attempting to save this nation.

"Shit. This one's not doing well either," one of them said.

Another awful day. These men were working about ten kilometers from the capital, in a village built along ley lines. They were striving for something long yearned for in the desert—afforestation. Atop rust-colored dirt, lanky trees were planted at even intervals. However, they didn't look at all healthy. Their leaves were brown and withered, their branches thin as a person's pinky finger.

The villagers wore dark expressions. Toweyezant's climate wasn't friendly to plant life. Water was precious and the soil was lacking in nutrients. The main plants that managed to survive such harsh conditions were the man-eating monster cacti.

Even expert Magi had trouble bringing rain to this land. The only hope of

bringing about foliage came from mana material, which was capable of bolstering life. Its effects extended to more than humans and monsters. By planting trees along ley lines, the veins which mana material coursed through would strengthen the plants, improving their chances at afforestation. It was the only option left for Toweyezant.

The odds had never been in their favor. The desert nation lacked water, among other resources, and even technological prowess. Talented Magi had been recruited to help out, but their successes were never more than temporary. Even if it was all for nothing, even if those directly involved in the greening had stopped believing, there was nothing they could do except cling to this last thread of hope. The desire for greenery was just that strong in the desert.

Off in Toweyezant's capital, there was some excitement about a conference, but that had nothing to do with the men out here. They urged their weary bodies to push on as they did battle with the sun-scorched land.

Then, the man arrived. He wore a gaudy shirt that left his arms exposed. His skin was strikingly pale—proof that he wasn't from the desert. He didn't carry any weapons and didn't look at all like someone equipped to traverse the harsh climate. Compared to the villagers, who spent their days absorbing mana material, and to say nothing of hunters, his presence was weak and out of place in the desert.

This was a dull town established for the purpose of afforestation, not somewhere that often received visitors. But when that man, with the child and a beautiful woman following behind him, was shown to the organization's leader, he introduced himself as a Level 8 hunter.

"We're going to prepare a small shrine and lend you a god," he said with a resigned but peaceful smile. "I'm sure that'll turn this land into a bountiful one."

What nonsense. However, the designation of Level 8 carried weight, and this man had the documents to prove his legitimacy. He was the same level as the strongest hunter in Toweyezant. This man didn't look like much, but his accolades were too great to ignore.

"Give her one serving of fried tofu once a day, and she should work for you,"

the hunter, bearing the name Krai Andrey, said to the stunned villagers.

"Three servings," said the girl in the fox mask as she tugged at his sleeve.

"Three servings," Krai immediately corrected himself. "Oh, also, I'd like you to bury this. Bury it deep, and really pack the dirt, okay?"

The pink-haired woman's eyes widened. "Oh, Krai, what a waste," she wailed.

Within the box proffered by the champion was a mysterious white tail.

With the satisfaction of a job well done, I looked to the sky. Feeling the bright rays streaming from the blue expanse, I was perfectly comfortable.

"Everything's been resolved," I said.

Little Sister Fox, and the fried tofu duty, had been shoved off onto people who needed her powers. I had also managed to take care of the tail. Buried so deep in the ground, I was sure it would eventually return to the land. And to top it all off, I had gotten my hands on a Smartphone. I was on fire, more than I had ever been.

"Sometimes, I fail to understand your thinking," Sitri told me. "We could've used that tail."

Little Sister Fox was one of the most basic phantoms of her vault, but her powers were still godlike in the lowly eyes of a mere human. I didn't know exactly what she was capable of, but causing rainfall seemed like something possible for her. And if it turned out she couldn't, she could still protect the village from its harsh surroundings. For a phantom, she was quick on the uptake.

Ah, it feels good doing something nice.

"Not that we have anything to apologize for, but I think we should give those people the extra supplies from the airship," I said.

I had heard that raising trees in the desert was brutal work, and those villagers were awfully thin. Most of the supplies were shelf-stable rations, but they were better than nothing. Perhaps there was still some fried tofu somewhere in those crates.

"As you wish," my dear friend Sitri replied in a pouty voice, something rare for her.

"That tail's too dangerous for experimentation."

"And yet you gave it to the villagers?"

"That's beside the point."

I didn't give it away, I threw it away. I took the tail, and all the responsibility that came with it, and threw it in a hole. That's what you do with stuff you don't know how to deal with—you bury it deep in the ground. All I had left to do was think up a good excuse for doing this and I'd be all set.

Then my newly acquired Smartphone made a beeping sound. I quickly pulled it out and tapped the screen. I was receiving a call from Big Brother Fox. He had been automatically added to my contacts. What could he want? I hesitantly touched the button, and the screen began to shine brightly.

It was close to midnight and I was hanging around in my room when I got a call from Franz, and brought Kris along with me. This was the first time this had happened in the past few days, but I had gotten used to his summons. And it seemed Franz had gotten used to the sight of me in Perfect Vacation.

"Glad you could come, Thousand Tricks," he said, then looked to his men. "Leave us be."

Per his orders, every member of the imperial guard except Franz left the room. As usual, the only people who remained were him, the emperor, and the timid imperial princess. I had a few notions as to what I had been called for. However, Franz didn't seem at all angry, so I assumed they hadn't found out about Little Sister Fox and that whole mess.

"There isn't much time before the conference," Franz continued, "First, allow me to express my thanks for keeping His Imperial Majesty safe. We called you to discuss this job and the future."

The future, huh? That makes sense. Come to think of it, that would explain why Kris was so worried.

Franz's face grew grim. "Because you brought members of the infamous Nine-Tailed Shadow Fox on this assignment, the Black Star, one of the empire's most prized assets, crashed. Under imperial law, these failures warrant severe punishments. No matter your purpose, using His Imperial Majesty to lure out a foe is unforgivable, and guiding us into a treasure vault was without precedent."

Most nobles were imposing and had little concern for common people. Imperial law was strict, but I had heard many tales of violent behavior from nobles bringing commoners to tears. However, what he was saying was quite logical.

"I see," I said.

But if you'll let me say my piece, I didn't use the emperor as bait, nor did I lead us to a treasure vault. I didn't think they'd believe me, but if I was guilty of anything it was incompetence.

"Wait! Sir! Sure, the human weakling went too far, but we ultimately made it to our destination safely. He brought Foxes along in order to draw them out. In light of that, I think he deserves a lighter sentencing—"

"No. I just didn't have any idea they were Foxes."

"Huh?!"

Excuse me for being bad at my job. But I think it was pretty reasonable to assume the famous Hidden Curse wouldn't have a terrorist hidden among their ranks. And Kechachakka was very suspicious. Who would ever think that someone that shady was *actually* a bad guy? And wasn't something wrong with Franz if he and his guys had just accepted my team, no questions asked?

While I shifted the blame around inside my head, the emperor asked me a question. "Hmm. Tell me, Thousand Tricks, what do you think was our biggest failure?"

The look in his eyes was dead serious. I could think of a number of major failures, but I had to watch what I said here. After some brief consideration, I was left with the impression that they'd get angry no matter what I said.

With no better options available, I sighed and said, "There were many

failures, but our biggest was that we were very unlucky."

"Huh?! The hell does that mean?!"

Well, uh, what else could it mean? I'm not wrong here, though I'll admit that doesn't mean that was the right answer.

My desperate attempt at an answer caused the emperor to knit his brow. After a brief silence, I saw him nod.

"Bad luck is indeed something we cannot prevent," he said.

"It is as you say," Franz chimed in.

"Whahuh?!" Kris cried.

I was just as surprised as her. The emperor was one thing, but accepting that answer didn't seem at all like something Franz would do.

"His Imperial Majesty is graciously willing to forgive your mistakes," Franz said in a clear voice. "Normally, this would be unthinkable."

"That is unthinkable," I agreed.

"Just be quiet and listen."

I had a bad feeling about this. I just couldn't accept that they would be so forgiving. Even if our troubles had been caused by oversights, even if they had all been resolved smoothly (they hadn't), I simply didn't believe they would let me go unpunished. I wasn't totally oblivious to my failings here. There had to be a flip side; this was too good to be true.

"The conference's security is ironclad," Franz continued. "Even an attack by the Counter Cascade won't be a problem. However, we are guests of this nation, and we don't want to cause a fuss. Do you understand me, Krai Andrey?"

"Hmm. Oh, that's right. I don't think they'll be coming after you."

I had my trepidations, but I didn't see what else I could do. Atop the table, I placed two Relics sent to me via the Smartphones' attachment feature. There was a jet-black gem and the bracelets Telm had been wearing. Franz became still and Kris looked astounded.

"These are the Relics that Telm and Kechachakka were using. Without them, their powers are cut in half."

"Wh-What?! Where, how, no—when did you do this?!"

As confused as Franz was, I didn't think I could tell him I received the items from a phantom. I didn't know the details, but it seemed they had paid a price after losing a battle of wits.

"That's a trade secret," I said. "The bracelets will go to Lucia, but I'm willing to part with the gem. It appears to be capable of summoning dragons—"

"What?!"

I had no need for something so dangerous. I suppose I would've handed the bracelets over if they demanded them as well.

The room was still. Kris's look of shock made me feel incredibly guilty, but I still couldn't explain how I came into possession of these Relics.

The emperor's gaze was sharp. After a moment, he seemed to come to a decision and said, "Thousand Tricks, after witnessing your talents, I've decided I'd like you to protect and mentor Murina."

That made no sense. It felt incoherent, disconnected from our current conversation.

"What was that?" I eventually said.

I looked at the imperial princess, and she ducked behind the emperor. If she needed protection, there was the imperial guard. In fact, Franz had been protecting her from the Counter Cascade. And what was all that stuff about the conference having ironclad security and not wanting to cause a fuss? Wasn't she going to the conference?

I didn't keep up with politics, but whereas I still occasionally heard about the emperor, I didn't know anything about the imperial princess. She wasn't known for some grand accomplishments or a famous beauty or anything like that. This might be rude of me, but she was really easy to forget. I hadn't even known her name until recently.

Hold on then.

Just as a thought crossed my mind, Kris spoke up.

"Now that you mention her, I have to ask why you even brought her along in the first place. Wouldn't she be much safer at the Imperial Castle? Sir?"

That was exactly it. I didn't think the imperial princess was involved in politics or anything, and I didn't think she was going to inherit the throne. I saw no reason for the emperor to bring her along.

When he heard Kris's question, Franz's expression changed. He wasn't angry, but a shadow fell over his face. For a brief moment, a look of hesitation broke through the emperor's usual dignity. I felt like I was looking at a bomb that was moments from detonating.

Then, as though disclosing a national secret, the emperor whispered, "Thousand Tricks, you are not to tell anyone of this. The truth is, Murina is incredibly unlucky."

Interlude: The Supreme Warrior Festival

We lived in an age of treasure vaults, phantoms, and treasure hunters. An age where numerous champions were produced by the mana material that coursed through ley lines. Talent could create immense differences, even between members of the same race. The efficiency with which someone could absorb mana material was sometimes referred to as their "skill value." A single hunter with a high skill value was far more powerful than one thousand mediocre hunters with no mana material.

I don't know if it's true or not, but supposedly there was once a period where the world was almost completely devoid of mana material. The creatures of that time had a set limit on their maximum strength and only small gaps in power existed among members of the same race.

But I lived in a different age, one where those who absorbed high amounts of mana material were strong and deft, and therefore lauded. It wasn't effort that determined the extent of their strength. Those of the upper classes regularly paired with people of high skill values, so that they might be succeeded by stronger children. The prevalent demand for talent placed much more pressure on the upper classes than it did on commoners like us.

"Huh? How did this come about?"

Lucia's eyes bulged. In an unusual turn for her, she had been distracted by the new Relic I had given her and had only been partially listening. I didn't really know how to answer her question. Before I knew what was going on, I had been thrust into the position of guarding and mentoring the imperial princess.

I didn't know how much truth there was to it, but according to the emperor, Princess Murina had very bad luck. To make things worse, she was also timid and didn't easily get back up on her feet. And the emperor wanted me to do something about that. That was, if you ask me, a terrible idea. How the hell had he kept his position with such a bad eye for people? I, Krai Andrey, was a man

who pushed the envelope of incompetency and misfortune. I was the wrong man for the job.

"I can't imagine there's anything you can teach her," Lucia said.

"But I can't just turn down a request from the emperor," I replied. "And it can't hurt to have him owing me a favor."

While I might have been weak, Grieving Souls were anything but. They were also well connected. Finding the right people to protect and guide the imperial princess should be easy for them.

"But enough about that, I got something really neat from them. What could it be? A ticket to the Supreme Warrior Festival, that's what."

The Supreme Warrior Festival was one of the many combat tournaments out there. Just like the name suggested, warriors from around the world gathered to fight for the right to be called the strongest, to be called the Supreme Warrior. This ticket was probably so I could take Princess Murina to see true might up close.

The timing couldn't have been better. My friends had all been interested in the tournament, and I had always wanted to spectate it. Tickets weren't easy to come by, but things were different for the emperor. I was all pumped up, but I noticed Lucia was looking at me doubtfully.

Now it begins, the fight to be the best.

Side Story: Fortune and Misfortune

It hadn't happened the way I had envisioned, but I had fulfilled my dream of becoming a treasure hunter. One month later, I was walking through the capital, when I suddenly heard a voice.

"Ooh, isn't this something? I've never seen fate pull so strongly on someone!"

The eerie voice brought me to a halt. I turned and looked in the direction it came from and saw a shady old woman in a purple hood. On the side of the road, she had set up a table with a crystal ball atop it. She had wrinkles set deep into her face and her bulging eyes were dead set on me.

Was she a fortune teller? I normally would have walked right by someone like her, but something about her grabbed my attention. My bodyguard for that outing, Lucia, cast a suspicious gaze at the old woman. The fortune teller's job of divining futures and fortune required a different skill set from Magi. The two groups tended not to get along.

I shrugged and approached the fortune teller.

"Hm? You're going to talk to her?!" Lucia asked.

"Nothing wrong with doing that much," I told her.

I didn't believe in fortune-telling or anything, but things hadn't been going my way lately and I didn't see any harm in having someone predict the future of our party. As I casually stood before the fortune teller, her eyes nearly leapt from their sockets. I'll admit I was a bit excited. What had she meant when she mentioned fate pulling on me? It could've been just a sort of catchphrase, but maybe I was destined to become some sort of champion.

"Ooh, this is extraordinary. Truly extraordinary. Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but, sir, you'll meet your end before long."

I just stood there, unsure what to say.

"What the hell are you talking about?!" Lucia cried, picking up the slack for

me.

The fortune teller, however, was unfazed. She didn't strike me as a fraudster and sounded genuine.

"Ooh, the tragedy. Fifty years of experience and a success rate of ninety-nine percent has led some to call me the Eye of God, but I've never seen anything like this. Not even that princess could compare. How cruel the divine can be. However, it would be unjust of me to leave you in ignorance. You're a hunter, correct?"

"Uh, yeah, but I only just started—"

"Sir, that job isn't for you. It's your false calling."

False calling. That was a new one, and ominous to boot.

"Sir, your fate is already a dark one, but becoming a hunter makes it infinitely worse. You walk a path that leads to hell. Before your lies one misfortune after another. A bad luck bargain sale."

All my tension left was sapped in an instant. What a funny choice of words for a woman called the Eye of God.

"Why did you pick a job you have no aptitude for?!" she continued. "Your folly astounds me and your fate is black as night. That you still live is nothing short of miraculous. I'm tempted to say that all the world's bad luck has coalesced around you."

What a terrible thing to say. Except she was right about my lack of aptitude. In my defense, I had tried to quit, but I just kept getting swept along by the currents of my friends.

"Whatever your divinations tell you, I think you're being incredibly rude!" Lucia barked. She gave the fortune teller a savage glare. "Do you have a grudge against my brother?!"

We hadn't been hunters long, but she had already developed an evil eye that could cause me to shudder. But it didn't seem to have any effect on the fortune teller.

"Listen to me. I take no pleasure in saying any of this and I won't ask for your

money," the fortune teller said in a merciful voice. "But, as someone who can see the future, I'm doing the right thing by telling you to quit hunting. If you don't, you'll be sent to an early grave."

Hm. Maybe I can use this to justify an early retirement.

I heard Lucia gulp.

"All sorts of misfortune will fall upon you, as though pulled by gravity," the woman said hesitantly.

"What sort of misfortunes?" I asked.

I thought it was a very reasonable question. "All sorts of misfortune" sounded like an exaggeration. I wasn't particularly talented or lucky, but I felt I had done my best in life. I couldn't buy the idea that that would lead me to a premature death.

The fortune teller looked severe. "If you go out on hunts, you'll be hit by storms, lightning will aim for you specifically. You'll go out for walks and be assailed by bandits, but other times you'll be mistaken for a bandit. If you go in search of treasure vaults, you'll eventually find yourself faced with a phantom you'll be hopelessly outmatched by."

"Huh?!"

"You'll never win the lottery, every hunting mentor will reject you, you'll incur an enormous debt, and your friends will dirty their hands with evil deeds. And worst of all, you'll always fall behind your friends. I'm certain of it. Oh, sir, all you can do is wait for death."

"Anything else?" I asked. I couldn't help myself, what she was describing was just too wild. In fact, I was starting to enjoy myself. Was this normal?

"Every prediction and projection you make will be off, creating frequent disasters. The desert, the forest, the ocean, you'll find yourself stranded in all of them. You'll walk into developing and roving treasure vaults.

"Hordes of monsters and phantoms will frequently attack you and criminal organizations will come after you as well. Man and monster alike will despise you and you won't be able to escape. Oh? There's even trouble with women?

Sir, are you an avatar of misfortune?"

For some reason, Lucia was giving me a very nasty look. Trouble with women sounded a bit hard to believe. Outside of my little sister, the only women I was close with were Liz and Sitri.

"Even if you never go to battle, battles will come to you. Drugs and poisons will be hidden everywhere they can. Your superiors will deplore you. Every action you take will be at the worst possible time. Whether you act as a leader or a party member, nothing you do will have the intended result. Truly, a one-sided coin—"

"Wait, hold on! Stop, just a moment," I said.

This beggared belief. There wasn't a single bright spot in any of her predictions. It was like all the world's bad luck was coalescing—oh, wait, she'd said that at the start. Still, I'll admit I had no motivation or talent, but I felt like she was going too far.

"I get that I'm unlucky," I said, "but isn't there anything I can do about it? Like a good luck charm or something?"

Fortune tellers usually also taught ways to avoid the misfortunes they envisioned. But this old woman shot down that avenue.

"There's nothing you can do. Your bad luck is a matter of destiny. That's not something that a good luck charm can change. But if you quit hunting now, you might meet a less horrific end."

Huuuh?

This was one irresponsible fortune teller. Just telling me my luck was bad wasn't very productive. All she said was that I would die less horribly if I quit hunting. Hell, she probably wasn't even a real fortune teller.

If I really was as unlucky as she claimed, I would have died on my first hunt, but I had been a treasure hunter for a full month. It was true that I had some bad experiences, some abnormal experiences, and had been hit by storms. But the fact was that I had overcome all of those, and I had never expected treasure hunting to be easy.

"But, I'm doing just fine," I told her. "I haven't gotten hurt once since becoming a hunter."

The fortune teller looked puzzled. "That is very mysterious. With the bad luck that hangs over you, you should've died hundreds of times by now—"

"In other words," Lucia cut in, "nobody knows what destiny has in store for us! Come on, brother, let's not waste any more time with this third-rate fortune teller."

"Yeah..." I said as she grabbed my arm.

The fortune teller let out a small groan and tilted her head as her glimmering eyes stared into mine. It seemed she really found me perplexing. Still, she had gone to the trouble of calling out to us. Even if her prognostics were off the mark this time, it didn't change that she had decades of experience behind her. I didn't see any reason to antagonize her.

"Well then," I said in a deliberately cheery voice, "is it all bad? Is there anything good? Like do I have any strengths or something?"

"Oh?"

It was a shot in the dark, but everyone was good at one or two things, at least. I wasn't good at physical or academic activities, nor was I particularly brave. I suppose the one thing I could brag about was that I had neat handwriting. If this fortune teller really was one of the best, then it shouldn't have been hard for her to identify a talent that I had yet to discover.

The old lady looked at me through narrowed eyes. I waited for a moment, and eventually, she said, "Sir, you have excellent interpersonal luck. You are very fortunate in that regard."

For a moment, I wasn't sure I believed my ears.

"What?" I eventually said.

Was interpersonal luck really a talent? That was just a form of luck. Sure, it was definitely better to be lucky than unlucky, and I knew how lucky I was to have the friends I did.

"It's incredible," she said fervently. "Just as you'll have droves of enemies,

you'll have scores of friends. But don't forget what I just said. Your friends—and your enemies—will be swept up in your misfortune and experience hardships. Your destiny isn't satisfied to afflict only you. It defies understanding."

So in summary, I'm an avatar of misfortune.

"There's more," the fortune teller continued. "Sir, your romantic luck is extraordinary. You'll be admired by many for no clear reason. Young and old, men and women, and not just humans, you'll be adored by all sorts. You're predisposed to troubles with women, and anyone who gets close to you will be another victim of your misfortune. But if you live a long life, you may leave behind as many as one hundred descendants. It doesn't seem as though you have the inclination to, however. Oh, I wonder and wonder just what sort of star you were born under..."

I wasn't sure being adored by the same sex and other creatures was really good fortune. But more importantly, I couldn't even remember having any luck of that sort. This woman was definitely just saying whatever came to mind. And that's when I remembered that I had once heard that saying vague statements that could apply to anyone was a common tactic among shoddy fortune tellers.

"Come on now!" Lucia said as she pulled my hand. She did not look very happy. "There's no point talking to her any further!"

"You too, young lady, have a dark future ahead," the fortune teller said to her. "You pitiful thing."

I guess I really am an avatar of bad luck.

Afterword

Thank you very much for kindly picking up my humble work! We've already reached volume six, which I am relieved to see published. Hello, it's Tsukikage.

The previous volume saw most of Grieving Souls reunited. With that, we're finally getting started for real. This volume featured all the childhood friends, a Flying Carpet, and a perfectly comfortable and *BRAND NEW* wall spaghetti party! We saw carpets, the desert, airships, and foxes. Last volume was also heavy on humor, and once again we had new characters, old characters, chaos, and intricacies, all layered into a big jumble.

As an aside, the Carpet and Fox were both elements I had been wanting to introduce for some time. In the world of *Grieving Soul*, treasure vaults are past information made manifest by the power of mana material. That information is drawn from real civilizations lost to time, past memories, as well as folklore, fairy tales, ghost stories, mythologies and more. At the end of this volume, Krai obtains a certain item. You might say the setting is starting to show its true colors at last. Our illustrator, Chyko, has their work cut out for them.

Also, with this volume we're doing a collaboration with another series. On top of that, we're putting out special editions (that come with an acrylic key chain and bonus content!), releasing another volume of store-exclusive bonus content, and more is in the works!

Furthermore, this series received the honor of ranking number seven for the tankobon category of the 2021 *Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi*! This and all the support I've gained are far beyond anything I expected. I hope you'll all continue to enjoy my work!

As this volume comes out, the fourth volume of the manga adaptation should also be coming out. It's filled to the brim with cute shots of Liz, pitiful shots of Tino, and easygoing shots of Krai, so please give it a look!

Now it's time to finish up with the traditional thank yous.

Thank you very much to Chyko for once again providing excellent illustrations. The Carpet almost looks alive, but what about the Carpet's master?! I hope I can continue to see my volumes blessed by your work.

My editor Kawaguchi and everyone at the CG Novels editing department and related companies, you've once again all done so much for me. I'm sorry for the high page counts. Next time, well, it's too early to say. It might be as thick as a dictionary (I'm joking). Thank you all for your invaluable assistance!

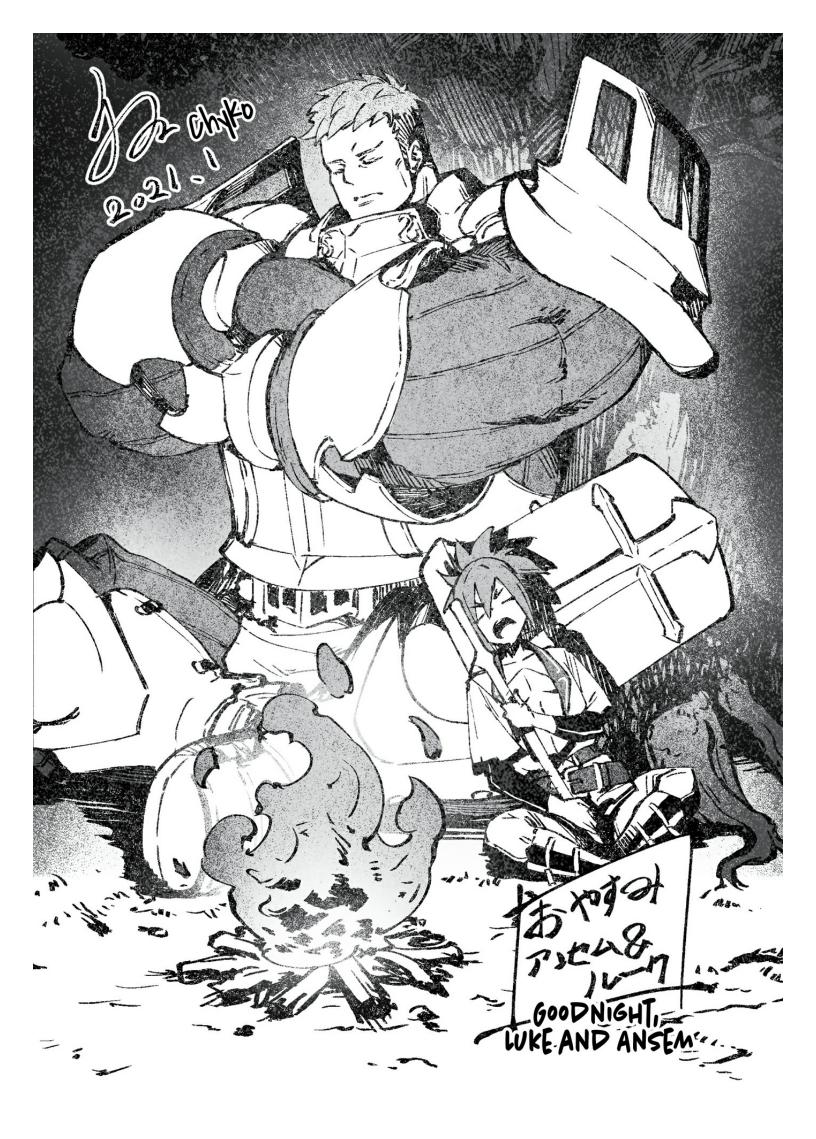
And finally, I offer my profound thanks to all the readers who have stuck with me so far. I'll do everything I can to continue putting out something you can enjoy, so I hope you'll all pick up further volumes of both this and the manga!

(On the acknowledgments page, you can find a QR code for a survey that you can fill out to read a short story, so please give it a look!)

Note: QR Code not available in the English edition.

January, 2021

Tsukikage





Bonus Short Story

First Steps Clan Bulletin: The Thousand Tricks's Advice Column

"Krai, regarding the results from the public comments box—"

"Huh? Oh, right. That."

I hadn't expected to see Eva carrying a large box in her arms. First Steps issued a regular bulletin as part of an information-sharing initiative. Just a few days prior, there had been discussions about including an advice column penned by me.

I didn't get it, but apparently, there was interest in the advice offered by the preterhuman artificer. I wasn't sure if there really was that much demand, but I agreed to it. And it appeared preparations were already finished.

"The box in the lounge is filled to the brim, so I thought I should bring it to you," Eva explained.

"Really?!"

Eva opened the box and turned it upside down. I couldn't help but furrow my brow as a mountain of papers formed on my desk. Funny to think I had only agreed to this because I didn't think anyone would bother sending anything in.

Damn, these people work fast.

I wasn't a fan of the situation, but I didn't see what else I could do. I picked up a pick envelope that sat at the pile's summit.

"What do we have here? 'I adore my master. He's strong, kind, and smart. There's almost nothing to complain about, except the brutality of his trials. I know it's his way of looking out for me, but I'll die sooner or later if he keeps this up. I know his intentions are good, but how can I get him to ease up? Signed, Cute Junior Hunter."

Eva looked at me, baffled. So much passion and dissatisfaction were packed

into that letter. I wasn't sure if this was appropriate for the public comment boxes. And who even wrote that? Tino surely wouldn't describe herself as cute.

"Well, let's just set this one aside. Next up, let's see. 'Please put people I can cut in the training rooms.' Yeah, this is from Luke."

"He's got no shortage of dedication."

This was out. Obviously. Onto the next one.

"Let's try this yellow letter. Let's see. 'Could you place cuttable criminals or magical creatures identical to humans in the training rooms? Luke keeps asking about it."

"You're not going to agree to that?!" Eva asked.

Needless to say, I wasn't. I considered who might have even submitted that letter. Our clan was filled with lunatics. Since I didn't want to think about it anymore, I moved on to the next letter.

"Human weakling, pull yourself together! I have cohorts constantly asking me about you and I never know how to answer! Sir! Signed, Noble Spirit of Extreme Beauty.' So even in writing, she uses 'sir' like that."

I read another one.

"'Please place booze in the lounge.' Why? Everyone's always bringing in their own!"

And another one.

"'Unmotivated clan members are a waste of space and should be chased out. That would give us less work, more time to hunt, and I'm sure managing weaklings is a pain in your ass. C'mon, Krai Baby, tell me it's a great idea!' No, no, no."

And another one.

"'Quit buying Relics all the time. Please, think of your future and save a little bit! Do you even understand how deep your debt is?' Wasn't this box for, y'know, comments?"

I was hoping for more constructive submissions. Maybe the preterhuman

artifice would have to wait for another day. Eva shared my exasperation. It seemed a lot of people figured they might as well write something simply for the novelty.

"I hesitated about submitting this, but I believe something needs to be made clear. Do you favor Sitri, or Liz? Both have their problems, so I deeply understand your desire to avoid the issue, but I'm not sure it's right to remain so indecisive.' So, was this written—"

Eva shook her head. "D-Don't look at me!"

Hmm. Looking at this handwriting, maybe it was Ansem? Or maybe not?

What a terrifying thing the public comments box had turned out to be. I declared the advice column DOA.

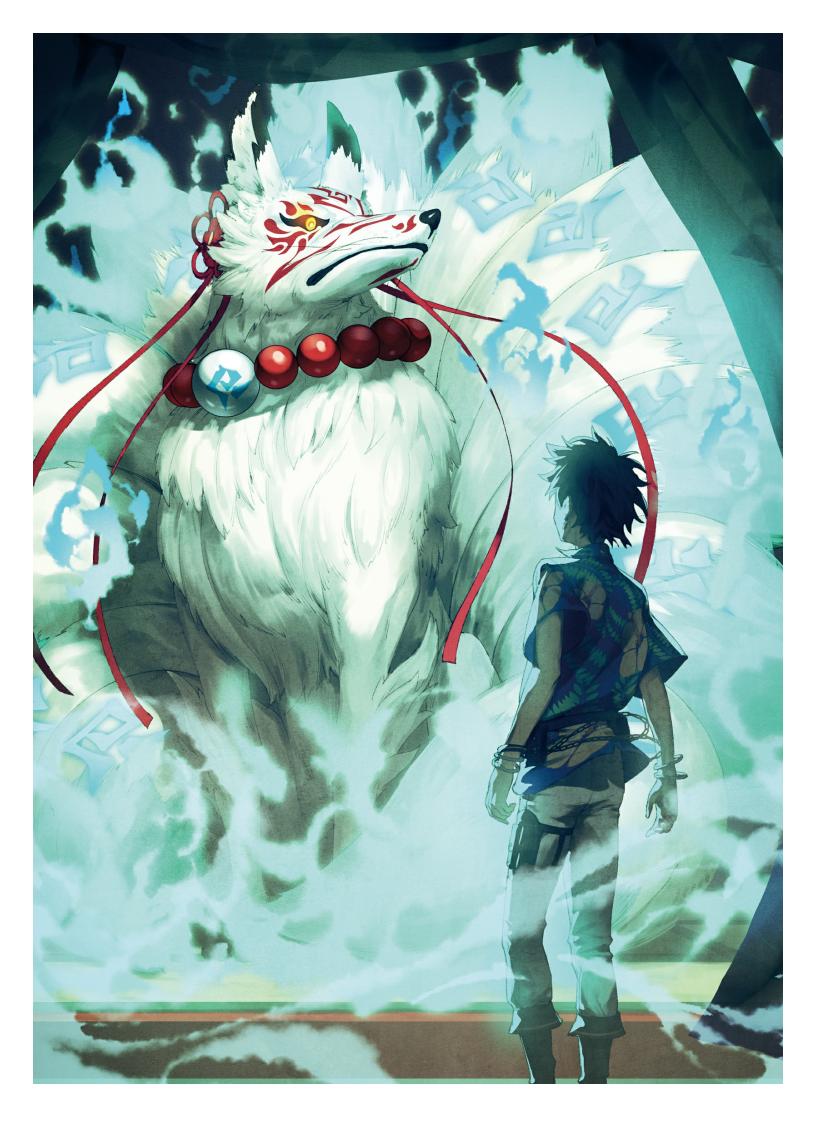
Finally, I opened up a letter folded in two. The handwriting was lazy and reminded me of a tangle of worms.

"'Everyone keeps disappearing without me. Where are you all going? Eliza Beck.'"

Hell if I know!









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Let This Grieving Soul Retire! Woe Is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party Volume 6

by Tsukikage

Translated by Grant U

Edited by Aldia Elwood

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