

Tsukikage Story



Art  
Chyko

# ← Let This Grieving Soul Retire! →



Woe is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party

4



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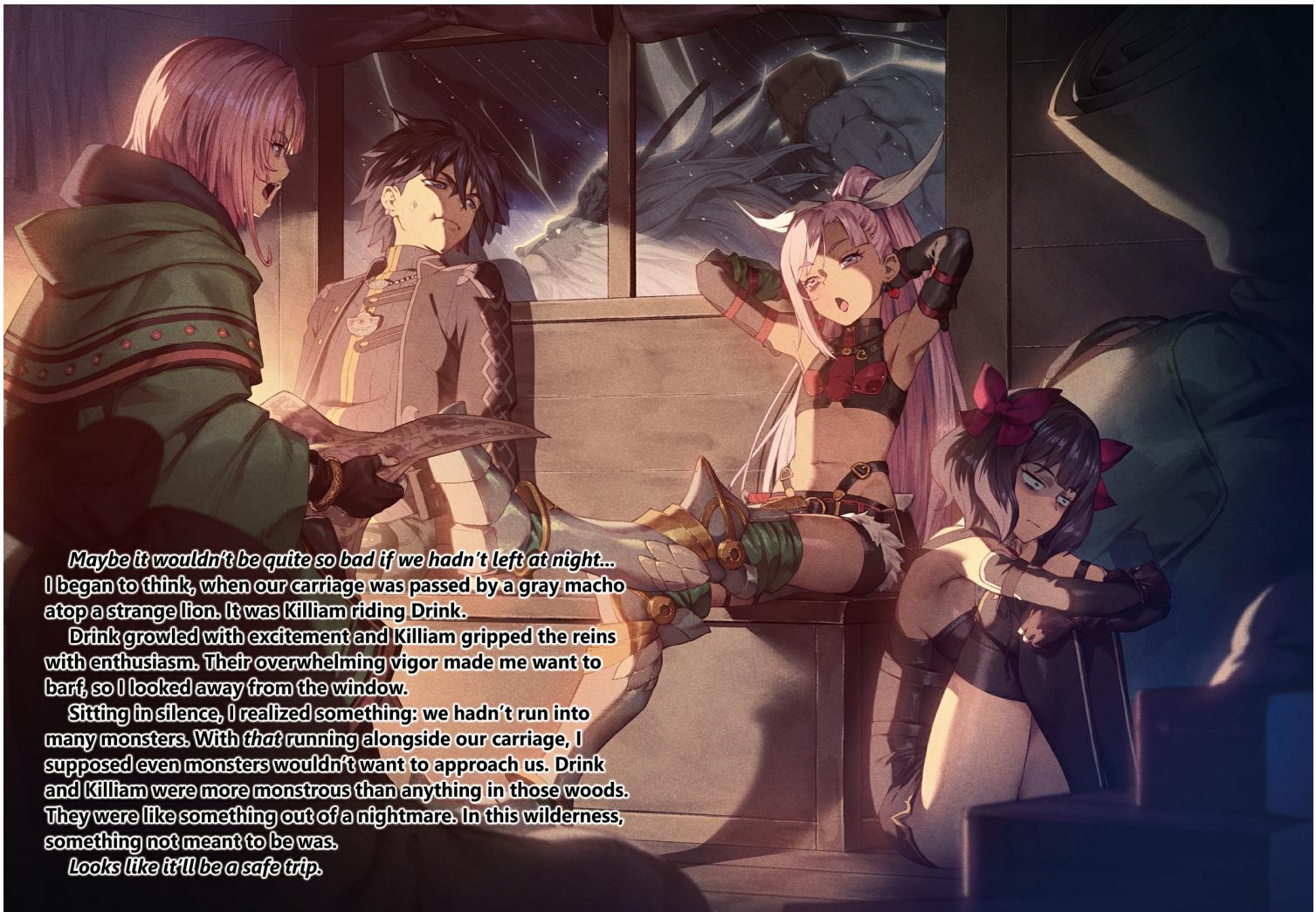
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# Let This Grieving Soul Retire!

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4





*Maybe it wouldn't be quite so bad if we hadn't left at night... I began to think, when our carriage was passed by a gray macho atop a strange lion. It was Killiam riding Drink.*

Drink growled with excitement and Killiam gripped the reins with enthusiasm. Their overwhelming vigor made me want to barf, so I looked away from the window.

Sitting in silence, I realized something: we hadn't run into many monsters. With *that* running alongside our carriage, I supposed even monsters wouldn't want to approach us. Drink and Killiam were more monstrous than anything in those woods. They were like something out of a nightmare. In this wilderness, something not meant to be was.

*Looks like it'll be a safe trip.*



**Her beloved master saw her,  
and as though looking upon proof  
of preestablished harmony,  
he muttered:**

**"Super Tino."**

**As usual, she  
failed to understand him.  
Feeling a strong but ambiguous  
sense of satisfaction, she flew  
towards the Trial that  
awaited her.**

# CONTENTS

## Part Four Named Quest

Prologue  
**Ever-Reliable Master**

Chapter One  
**The Responsibilities of a Level 8**

Chapter Two  
**A Strange Trial**

Chapter Three  
**A Vacation and Some Pursuers**

Chapter Four  
**A Fun Vacation**

Epilogue  
**Let This Grieving Soul Retire, Part Four**

## Interlude Vacation

## Side Story Tino Shade's First Steps

Afterword  
Illustrations by Chyko  
Illustrations by Hebino Rai

# Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Prologue: Ever-Reliable Master](#)
4. [Chapter One: The Responsibilities of a Level 8](#)
5. [Chapter Two: A Strange Trial](#)
6. [Chapter Three: A Vacation and Some Pursuers](#)
7. [Chapter Four: A Fun Vacation](#)
8. [Epilogue: Let This Grieving Soul Retire, Part Four](#)
9. [Interlude: Vacation](#)
10. [Side Story: Tino Shade's First Steps](#)
11. [Afterword](#)
12. [Afterword Short Story: Hang in There, Siddy!](#)
13. [Bonus Short Story](#)
14. [Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)
15. [About J-Novel Club](#)
16. [Copyright](#)



## Part 4: Named Quest

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# Prologue: Ever-Reliable Master

“Krai, we’ve received a thank-you note from the House of Gladis...”

“Mm, ah, just set it over there.”

“Make sure you actually take a look at it at some point, okay?”

A week had already passed since the unexpected tumult that was the Zebrudia Auction. I had been holed up in the clan master’s office and relishing in tranquility when Eva brought in an elaborately adorned envelope. I checked the envelope and immediately averted my eyes once I had confirmed it bore the seal of the House of Gladis.

Just recently, the daughter of Earl Gladis, Éclair Gladis, and I had butted heads. Thanks to the bond shared between Ark and myself, our battle for the Relic was resolved quite peacefully and without undue harm to our relationship with Éclair or Earl Gladis.

I couldn’t ask for a better resolution and, as far as I was concerned, that should have been the end of it. However, unlike hunters, nobles and merchants would waste no time sending you a letter, and that’s something I could’ve done without.

I let out a brief, hard-boiled sigh. Not that there was any reason I should receive a thank-you note in the first place, but wasn’t this awfully fast? I hadn’t even recovered from my fatigue from the last ruckus. I just wanted to rest.

There was already a pile of unread letters lying on the desk in the clan master’s room. As a result of my high level, I was receiving more and more letters every day and it had gotten to a shocking number.

Particularly, once I had taken the role of clan master and almost completely stopped leaving the capital, I began getting buried in letters. Letters begging for some sort of assistance, invitations, thank-you notes, letters issuing challenges, resumes, I was up to my neck in correspondence I wasn’t happy to receive or could even do anything with.

I knew that I had to take a look at these letters eventually, but somehow my hand just wouldn't go near the pile. I was someone who puts things off as much as they can. Because I had neglected too many, Eva had begun to open and even reply to some in my place.

However, that improved the clan's reputation so I thought I was right to let her take care of it.

"C'mon, I'm busy too..."

"I'm fine with correspondence addressed to the clan or your party, but I don't like the idea of opening something addressed to you specifically," Eva said. "I might, for instance, see something confidential..."

That wasn't gonna happen. I hid nothing from Eva. Shouldn't she understand that after being around me so much?

If there was one nice thing you could say about me, it was that I didn't keep secrets. I even trusted Eva to carry around the clan seal.

I gave a small shrug and Eva just sighed. She looked down at the stack of letters that had accumulated even after ensuring only the most important ones reached me and began to speak in a faster tone than usual.

"It would seem Lady Éclair...took quite a liking to the cake you provided."

"Well, of course she did!"

Eva had no response.

Oh, that's right, looks like there was one other nice thing you could say about me. I nodded confidently.

Not to brag, but I knew all there was to know about the confectionery cafés of the capital. No matter the style or variety, I had personally visited each one. The only café I didn't know much about was the one that Eva had previously told me about, the one in the decaying district.

I had complete confidence in the cake I had treated Ark to. It was a new product from a confectionery that I fondly remembered finding when I had first arrived in the capital. The shop was set up around the edges of the city, so it didn't have a whole lot of customers back when I had first found it. Now there

was almost always a line extending from the shop and it was always possible they might sell out before your turn came.

The service and food both got a solid ten out of ten and I was personally acquainted with the owner. I might not have been able to recommend a good weapon store, training grounds, or information broker, but I could find you the perfect sweets shop.

Lady Éclair was a noble, but good sweets required more than just high-quality ingredients.

Still, for even an earl's daughter to be impressed by my selection... I felt as though my talents were being recognized for the first time in a while and that made me really happy. Maybe it was because they were often ingesting poisonous substances, but hunters seemed to have dull taste buds and their preferences never overlapped with mine.

I realized Eva was looking at me and hastily cleared my throat.

"Yeah, I don't care much for sweet things, but there's nothing I don't know about this town."

How's that for hard-boiled?

"...Yes, indeed."

*Now hold on, I thought. It seems I've made a new cake companion. I had assumed she would be some stuffy noble girl, but it looks like she has a fine palate. I can't drag her around with me like I do Tino, but I hope she'll at least introduce me to some shops that cater to the nobility.*

*But I'm getting off topic.*

I decided to deal with all the letters on my desk.

"Just go ahead and reply to these letters in a way that won't ruffle any feathers. Decline all requests and invitations. I'm a busy man, y'know."

Eva gave me a cold glare.

*Busy. What a convenient word.*

I felt bad turning down the letters without even looking at them, but reading

text made me sleepy. Not to mention nobles and merchants all used nothing but stiff and roundabout expressions and, frankly, I could barely understand them. Leaving this to my excellent vice clan master was the best way to ensure a smooth resolution.

I didn't want to be dragged into any petty power struggles, and dealing with conniving merchants was scary. When the letters first started coming, I thought they would stop if I just ignored them, but that didn't seem to be working out. I could take care of it all by myself, but I just kept making more excuses.

Ideally, I wanted Eva to handle all the letters, but it seemed that would be a hard no. Eva, who knew my schedule better than I did, furrowed her brow.

"But your schedule's empty," she said.

"It's necessary to rest from time to time. And besides, don't you think everyone's sending too many letters to just one hunter? Are the other Level 8s all this busy? I thought they spent most of their time in treasure vaults..."

"Speaking of which, Sven has been demanding that you do something about Drink."

"Tell him to treasure the critter."

*Dealing with monsters is Sven's domain more than it is mine. I'll talk with Sitri about it next time I see her.*

I let out a big yawn, and a pure white puzzle framed and mounted on the wall entered my vision. I had asked Eva to help me finish it. You were supposed to draw your own image on it once you finished, but that part just seemed like too much trouble at the time.

"Oh, right. I also need to draw something on the puzzle. Hmm, I don't even know where to start... This isn't going to be easy."

I stared intently at the puzzle. I had no artistic skills, my imagination was pathetic, and I didn't even have any tools to draw or paint with. I didn't even know why I bought a white puzzle. The more I thought about it the more I wanted to slap my past self.

I was furrowing my brow and tilting my neck when Eva decided to change the

subject.

"That reminds me, Krai, there are still a few slices left of the cake we served to Ark."

"Huh? Oooh, I forgot about that. How many slices?"

"Two slices. I placed them in the refrigerator."

*Maybe the puzzle can wait... It's not like someone's gonna die if I don't do it immediately.*

My thoughts were now on the cake. Two slices...not a lot you can do with just two slices. I had treated Ark and Éclair each to a slice, had one myself, and gave one to Eva. That left two slices.

It was a new product released the previous fall and I had no idea when I might get to have some again. How troubling.

This was no time to sit around reading letters. I could give the cake to Liz and Sitri, but they didn't like sweet things. In fact, just about every hunter lacked a palate for refined sweet flavors.

I thought and thought and in the end, I did what I always did: give up because I was tired of thinking.

"Tino. Who else but Tino?" I said.

"Who else but Tino?"

What a kind master I was. And a hard-boiled one at that.

Out of all the hunters I knew, Tino was one of the few who shared my appreciation of sweet things. Two leftover slices from a new product. You could even say this situation came about specifically for Tino.

One slice for me, one for Tino. All was right in the world. Tino would be pleased and I was glad to make up for all the trouble Liz and the others caused her. I felt bad for Tino, she always seemed to be in some form of distress.

*I'm on fire today.*

"Sorry, Eva, but could you wrap those up for me? I'm gonna bring them over to Tino's place."

“Huh? Right now?”

*Oh, Eva, you don't get it at all. If I don't hurry, the cake will lose its flavor!*

Eva seemed to notice my exasperation and quickly corrected her posture.

“Understood. I'll be just a moment.”

She didn't need to be *that* hasty. Eva was an exceptional individual but she was always too serious about things.

I was going out, which meant I wanted to have some protection, but unfortunately, Liz was nowhere to be found when I needed her. Tino's house wasn't that far, however, and I didn't think there'd be many people out and about.

For the first time in a while, I got ready for an outing and left the clan house with a bounce in my step as Eva saw me off.

*I've been making a pathetic display of myself lately. Maybe for the first time in a while, I can show Tino how considerate I am.*

\*\*\*

“Get it, T? If you're feeling bad, it's because of your own lack of strength. Whether you're short on experience or talent, if you've trained enough you won't find yourself feeling down!”

“Y-Yes, Lizzy, but—”

“No buts! Not one! How many times have I said that? How many times do I have to say it until you get it?”

Eyes alight with flickering flames looked down on Tino.

Her mentor, Liz Smart, was even shorter than Tino but when the two were face-to-face, Tino always shrunk back.

They were in the living room of Tino's house, but Liz, sitting comfortably with her legs crossed, looked more like the master of the abode. In fact, the house Tino was renting was one of the places Liz would stay when she was in the capital. Because of this, Tino had two beds, chairs, and sets of cutlery even though she was technically the house's only resident.

Liz leaned back in her chair and fiddled with a palm-sized treasure chest. She inserted a needle-shaped lock pick into the keyhole and moved it about with delicacy. Stacked up on the table were more treasure chests with locks of various shapes. These were used by Thieves as a way to practice lockpicking.

On the rare occasion a treasure chest was found in a treasure vault, it was the Thief's job to break into it. A single treasure chest could often hold a few items, so hunters considered it very lucky to find one.

You would also hear humorous tales of Thieves being unable to open a treasure chest, leaving the party no better option than to bring back the entire chest itself. For a Thief, there was no greater dishonor.

Opening a treasure chest required the means to open any one of the numerous varieties of locks that might appear in a treasure vault. Before opening the chest, the design and materials should be confirmed and traps needed to be checked for. Thieves were also required to make judgment calls such as when it might be best to ignore the lock and simply destroy the chest. Compared to simple combatants, Thieves had to wear many hats.

Strength alone wasn't enough for a Thief. The Stifled Shadow was feared for her bloodthirst but she was first-class in more than just fighting. Lockpicking was something reinforced through experience but it also required plenty of studying.

"All adversity can be considered a trial. People who only run from adversity will remain a whelp no matter how long they continue as a hunter. People grow by overcoming trials! If you've got complaints you can save 'em till after you've done what you need to do!"

Liz tossed the treasure chest towards the table. Tino quickly caught the chest and it opened in her hands without making a sound.

"If you're struggling now, then that's what you get for slacking off earlier. At least learn to pick up after yourself!"

Tino thought these were wise words. Liz's training was fierce and instilled fear in Tino, but she didn't begrudge Liz for it because she knew her mentor was even harsher on herself. Even if she didn't show it, it took more than natural talent to become a high-level hunter.

But something was bothering Tino. She placed the sample treasure chest on the table and spoke hesitantly.

“But, Lizzy, Greg’s a hunter, not a merchant...”

“Like I give a damn. Wasn’t it Krai Baby who said you need to learn more than just how to be a hunter?”

“Well...”

At the auction some days prior, Greg had stood in for Tino and placed the winning bid on a golem. Just remembering the sight of her fellow hunter looking so weary was enough to dishearten her. Tino didn’t harbor any special feelings for Greg, but she wasn’t coldhearted enough to be content to watch someone else bear a burden that should have been hers.

The golem had gone for one billion gilds, the highest price of anything sold that day.

The source of his troubles likely stemmed from Greg bidding as an individual, and being a mid-grade hunter at that. Ever since he bought that golem, Greg had been dealing with all sorts of nuisances. He had people asking for loans of considerable size, shady characters buzzing around him, merchants asking for advice, and he had even grabbed the attention of some nobles.

Just recently, Tino happened to run into him. He looked quite haggard from trials he was unaccustomed to and said he was avoiding uncrowded spaces as much as he possibly could.

It sounded quite unlike any of the Thousand Trials that Tino had endured thus far. It might not have been as life-threatening as being flung into a dangerous treasure vault, but it could be more nerve-racking.

You might say it was proof of Greg’s long experience as a hunter that he didn’t let it slip that he was only the standin or give away the name of his employer. His ability to judge a situation and when to run might even surpass that of Tino.

Which was exactly why, even though the current circumstances might be hard on him—

Tino found her train of thought cut off by Liz's glare. Without breaking her imposing demeanor, Liz continued.

"That's not something you need to worry about anyway. Siddy's got people looking into it right now. Why do you think Krai Baby used a hunter not part of First Steps?"

"...Huh?"

Tino didn't know what to say. When she had let Greg stand in for her it was due to her own lack of preparation and because he happened to be there. If nothing else, she hadn't expected things to turn out like this.

"Cause we're dealing with pros, we have to be on guard even when participating in auctions. They tried investigating us but we used a standin and covered our tracks. They tried questioning the standin but that didn't get 'em anywhere. But we've got the goods and if they want to take 'em back they're certain to use people who specialize in getting rough. When that happens, the knot around their neck will tighten just a bit more."

"B-But it was my decision to have Greg stand in for me."

"Ah, but Krai Baby can see through all your weak points."

Tino had no response.

"I'm sure deep down he wanted to set you right, but if he went that far then I wouldn't be in any position to scold you. Does that make sense?"

Tears welled up in Tino's eyes. A thin smile formed on Liz's lips and she cracked her knuckles.

If that were true, well, it wouldn't be too surprising. To Tino, it had all seemed to be nothing more than a coincidence, but on many occasions, she had witnessed what her master was capable of. She didn't think her mentor was lying to her.

Tino adored Master. She respected him as a hunter and was grateful for all the times he had come to her rescue. However, those abilities instilled more fear than admiration in her. It also made it apparent to her why even the terrifying Lizzy had a disciple but Master didn't.

"Well, Siddy will deal with anyone really scary, so Krai Baby doesn't think it's anything you need to worry about. You should avoid our enemies as much as possible; if they grow suspicious and pull back it'll make things worse. I don't think it'll totally screw up Krai Baby's plans, but dealing with people is a different sort of pain than dealing with phantoms or monsters. Do you understand me, T?"

"Y-Yes, Lizzy..."

Tino couldn't do anything but go along with her mentor's words.

Liz wasn't only an extraordinary Thief, she was a bounty hunter who had taken down numerous criminal organizations and ghost parties. In the name of training, Tino was occasionally brought along with her mentor, but, compared to phantoms and monsters, humans could be tricky.

Even if they were on the weaker side, humans were intelligent and malicious. Criminals paid no regard to the law, but that didn't mean Tino and Liz could do the same. It was only the difficult criminals that found their faces on a wanted poster.

Tino felt bad for Greg, but she didn't think there was anything she could do.

"I've been thinking about letting Krai Baby work you to the bone for a bit. After this incident, I've realized there are *certain roles* that a whelp like you can fill that I can't."

"Training from Master..."

The training her mentor had been subjecting Tino to had left her with one foot perpetually in the grave. She couldn't even imagine what being "worked to the bone" might entail.

She was frustrated that Krai had seen her weakness, but what Liz was suggesting still sounded like a bit too much for her. Being let into Grieving Souls was her goal for the future, but she didn't want that realized until she had become strong.

She had nearly met her end in White Wolf's Den, but to Master that hadn't even been a Trial, which meant...

*...I'm not ready. I'm not ready for such a Trial, Master. It's all I can do to get through Lizzy's training.*

Just thinking about it made her want to cower in fear, but suddenly she heard a knocking sound.

Tino looked in the direction of the door. She had many acquaintances, but not many who would visit her house. That was because her fearsome and capricious mentor could be found lurking in her house.

Making sure that her mentor's mood was on the better side, Tino opened the door.

Liz's eyes went wide when she saw who had shown up. At the door was an old man with white hair and a stern face—it was Matthis Cardol, the owner of Magi's Tale. He was wearing a smudged apron and carried a small box at his side.

His expression became a tad more gentle when he saw Tino. Matthis cleared his throat and began to speak in an apologetic tone.

"Oh, sorry about the sudden visit, young miss. I finished my appraisal of the Relic you and the kiddo requested. I know you've been up to your necks in it lately so I thought you might've forgotten. I could just hand this directly to the kiddo, but you were the one who found this, weren't you?"

Tino's eyes widened. Matthis was right, the appraisal request had completely slipped her mind. At the time, her master's interest had shifted entirely onto the mask and away from everything else.

Technically the Relic had already been offered up to Master and was no longer Tino's. If Matthis was taking the time to hand it over to Tino, it was probably because he thought she might want to be the one to hand it over to Master.

Liz looked over at Matthis and very clearly furrowed her brow.

"Hey, Matty, how about you keep your hands off T if you don't have our permission? You wouldn't want your wife to hear about this, would you? If you don't, then bring Krai Baby a nifty Relic. I'll be generous and let you borrow T one day for every Relic you send our way, but I'll put you down if you leave

even a scratch on her.”

Matthis went red in the face and began to yell.

“How long have you been there? And I’m not laying a hand on her, you damn half-wit! You, the kiddo, nobody has any respect for their elders anymore!”

Exchanges like these happened all the time between these two. Because Matthis was one of Liz’s oldest acquaintances within the capital their bickering never escalated to anything more.

Matthis opened the box. Inside was a form detailing the results of his appraisal and a familiar bracelet.

“How come you’re bringing this to T and not Krai Baby? Creeeeeepy. You wouldn’t want your granddaughter to hear about this, would you? What was her name? Cecy? If you don’t want her getting word of this then bring Krai Baby a Relic that would make him happy.”

“Wh-Where did you hear— Oh to hell with it! The young miss found the Relic, didn’t she? And I barely get any Relics that interest the kiddo! If you’re really a hunter then go find your own Relics!”

“Didn’t you once have mountains of good Relics? I was just saying to Gark the other day that I think you might be losing your touch.”

“That’s because the kiddo went and bought up my whole stock! How about you tell him to sell me something worthwhile!”

After giving the fighting pair a sideways glance, Tino looked over the form explaining the Relic.

“Mirage Form? A light projection device? Effective range: one meter. Proper use can let one have a human figure dance on the palm of one’s hand,” she murmured. “It’s a Relic that creates mirages?”

...It seemed like this wouldn’t be an easy Relic to evaluate.

Hunters preferred Relics that were simple as well as powerful, such as a canteen that produced an infinite supply of water or swords that accelerated when swung. The easier it was to use and the simpler its effects were, the higher a Relic would be valued.

"It's a rare piece. At least, it's hardly the type of thing you'd find at Alleyne Pillars Ruins."

This bracelet was a tricky piece. Conjuring mirages seemed like it would have its uses, but the range was pretty short and it seemed unwieldy. If they were to sell the Relic, it was hard to imagine it would go for very much.

If you wanted to create mirages then it would be far simpler to just use magic; any Magi with a bit of talent could pull it off. For something Master had instructed her to retrieve, this Relic was rather unremarkable.

All of a sudden, Tino realized the bracelet was no longer resting in the box. Liz had snatched it up and was looking at it scrutinizingly. After a few wordless moments, she slowly turned her head towards Tino.

"...I'm gonna be the one to hand this over to Krai Baby. Any objection, T?" Liz said.

"Huh? N-No, none at all, Lizzy."

As she always did, Tino complied almost entirely out of reflex. Looking far happier than she ever had in recent memory, Liz clutched the bracelet to her chest and twirled around.

While Matthis was looking with bewilderment at the disparity in excitement between Tino and her mentor, Liz shouted in a voice overflowing with joy.

"Woo-hoo! Krai Baby's gonna love this! Good job, T, I'll buy you a new dagger later."

"Huh? That much?! Ah, umm, Lizzy, w-wait a minu—"

Liz almost never gave Tino presents. This bracelet must've really been something.

Tino was about to try to decline Liz's offer when a voice from behind cut her off.

"Wait a moment, Lizzy! This should be handled fairly. Right, T?"

It was a voice very familiar to Tino. At some point, the other sister, Sitri Smart, had appeared behind Tino, a grin on her face.

Tino felt a hand on her shoulder and she began to shiver. The smile disappeared from her mentor's face.

"Hah? T's my apprentice so it's only natural that her finds belong to me. Why are you butting in, Siddy?"

Liz had a voice that could intimidate just about anyone, but not her sister.

"I'm the one who caused so much trouble for Krai and that all started because you said you wanted to train on a golem. Therefore, you should hand the Relic over to me. You agree with me, don't you, T?"

Sitri gave her reply smoothly, almost as though the matter was entirely settled and then asked Tino for her assent. Sitri's voice lacked the roughness of Liz's but it was still a voice that brooked no argument.

In a hushed tone, she whispered something extra into Tino's ear.

"If you hand it over to me then I'll buy you a new dagger and a veeeery pretty dress."

Within the cozy little house in which Tino lived, dreadful words of slander were flying this way and that.

"Who gave you permission to go and seduce T?! Krai Baby put her in my care! He said I could do what I wanted with her!"

The owner of the house, Tino, was huddled in a corner and watching the argument unfold.

On principle, hunters gain more and more physical strength the more treasure vaults they clear. By absorbing mana material they will at least find their basic capabilities improved, but they will also gain experience. This makes it very hard to win out against a high-level hunter.

Tino had some confidence in her abilities as a mid-grade hunter. However, she was still well below Liz and Sitri, who had been carrying out a grueling lifestyle well before Tino had become a hunter.

With a vein bulging on her forehead, one sister was shouting in a shrill voice that inspired dread as well as any dragon's.

"T's your apprentice because you threw a tantrum! I was supposed to have her originally. If she had been mine from the start then by now she might be an unprecedented super hunter capable of flying and shooting lasers from her eyes!"

The other sister replied in a lower tone than usual. Compared to Liz, Sitri was maintaining her composure, but her body emanated the same power as her sister.

If two individuals had the same talent, were in the same party, and had mostly similar experiences, their levels of mana material would be the same. The Smart sisters had completely different jobs, but, from Tino's perspective, their power was about the same.

Tino had braved treasure vaults solo which, by normal metrics, had allowed her to develop her skills remarkably. However, she was like a speck of dust compared to either of the Smart sisters. In these sorts of situations, all she could do was tremble in the corner and wait for the storm to pass.

"After all, it's better to have a rich mentor who can easily give you power rather than a mentor who makes you do weird exercises," Sitri argued.

"Huh?! There's no meaning in power that's just handed off to you! And you wouldn't just give her powers—you'd take as well!" Liz retorted.

"I'd be careful about what I'd take! With T, I wouldn't have to relieve her of her free will and she's always been an agreeable one! What more could I want?!"

"Enough, you brats! You shouldn't be fighting, you're scaring the little miss!"

Matthis had been watching with a grimace as the two sisters grew hostile, but had decided he should intervene. But neither Liz nor Sitri seemed to be growing any calmer.

"T and I found that Relic, so stay out of this!" Liz said.

"You didn't find it, T found it after looking very hard! She said she'll give me the Relic, so I have the right to choose what to do with it!" Sitri countered.

*I never said that, Sitri... Tino thought.*

She was about to protest when the sisters both turned their gaze on her, leaving her unable to get a word in.

The ownership of the Mirage Form Relic seemed to have become a matter entirely unrelated to Tino's thoughts on the matter. She liked the sound of new knives and a dress, but if this Relic would make Krai that happy then she wanted to be the one to deliver it. Except there seemed to be no use in asking for that Relic to be returned to her.

Still, to think such a fight would break out over who would deliver a Relic...

"Honestly, why do you have to always swoop in like a vulture?! Go hide out in your lab!"

"It's because you're always, alwaays causing trouble! No matter how hard I try, I can't stamp out all the fires you start!"

"Huh?! That goes for Luke too, doesn't it? Besides, nobody's asking you to stamp out any fires!"

"It doesn't matter in Luke's case because the people he causes trouble for tell no tales! You're the only one creating work for me!"

"Ah, um... I have no ulterior motives, maybe you could compromise and let me deliver— Ah!"

Liz showed no sign that she heard Tino's small voice as she picked up a treasure box off the ground and flung it at Sitri. The box was hurled without an ounce of restraint, but Sitri, displaying excellent reflexes for an Alchemist, grabbed a tray from the table and used it as a shield.

The deflected box destroyed a cupboard and cratered in the wall. There was a harsh cacophony of breaking glass.

Tino mustered the last of her courage and spoke up in a weak voice.

"Stop it, you two! I'm the one who the neighbors will be angry at!"

Using both hands, she quickly caught a teacup and pot propelled by kinetic energy. Fortunately, Liz must not have gone all out, because with a little concentration, Tino was able to keep up. Amid the flying furniture, she would instantly determine if something was fragile, and if so, catch it and place it in

the corner. Everything else she batted down.

Tino was desperate. She was grateful the fight hadn't broken out during a meal. She could manage pots and cups, but if forks and knives were to be sent soaring then she could easily end up with a fresh wound. Tino felt she had to at least protect Matthis.

While the objects continued to be flung, the two sisters continued to insult each other.

Matthis trembled as he watched the fight, which had gone from zero to one hundred in an instant.

"What does it matter who hands it over..." he said.

"Both of you, please calm down! If you're going to battle over it, then, then I'll hand the Relic over!" Tino said.

She had worked up her courage to shout like that and yet her voice didn't even reach the Smart sisters.

It wasn't too bad so long as they continued to throw whatever was nearby, but if Tino didn't intervene then they might begin to hurl knives and potions. That would leave her house half destroyed, and if that happened then she'd be living in those ruins until she could use her meager savings to get the place fixed.

It wouldn't be feasible for her to intervene with force and neither sister would stand down if only Tino were to get between them. Stopping this would require a member of Grieving Souls or someone like the vice clan master; someone connected to Krai and capable of common sense. Unfortunately, those sorts of people rarely graced Tino's house with their presence.

Confused and desperately trying to knock down any flying projectiles, Tino racked her brains as she tried to figure out how to keep the damage to a minimum. Then, suddenly, she heard what sounded like a knock at the door.

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"Master, I've missed you sooo much!"

*What's going on?!*

With the cake still held at my side, my eyes went wide.

I looked down at Tino after she had jumped on me, surprised by her uncharacteristic exuberance. She returned my gaze with teary eyes and I felt a strange urge to protect her.

I was entirely confused. Sure, I had decided to play the part of the hard-boiled and considerate master, but I hadn't been expecting such a zealous greeting. Still bewildered, I patted Tino's head, just like I would with Liz, and stepped inside.

Tino's house was a complete mess. Last time I visited, her place was neat and tidy, but now it barely looked like the same house. Scattered across the floor were open treasure chests, broken glass, and a cupboard. It reminded me of an abandoned yet pretty ruin.

*Did I come at a bad time?*

In the center of the living room stood a familiar sight: the Smart sisters facing off. When they noticed I had arrived, Liz, for some reason, began waving her knife like a fan and Sitri puffed up her cheeks and hid a burning red potion behind her back.

"Ah..." Liz said. "Morning, Krai Baby."

"Goodness, Lizzy, because you had to make a fuss you made Krai come out here," Sitri said. "Good day to you, Krai."

"T-Took you long enough, kiddo! Hurry up and do something!"

There was nothing strange about Liz and Sitri being in Tino's house, but for some reason even Matthis was here. Red in the face and clearly agitated, he glared at me intensely. I just wanted to bring some cake over, yet here I was at the center of a mess...

I placed my hand on a conveniently placed Tino and calmed myself by running my fingers through her hair while I tilted my head.

*I have no idea what the circumstances are, but...*

"For starters," I began. "Sit. Formally."

"No, Krai, this is all just a misunderstanding..." Sitri protested.

"Uhh, to put it simply, Siddy and T were trying to steal my thunder. So I didn't do anything wrong, see?" Liz argued.

With their legs folded beneath them, Liz and Sitri sat on the carpet and tried to defend their actions.

I leaned back in my chair and sighed deeply. Tino, who had calmed down by now, sat next to me and for some reason stared at me with admiration.

"No, no, no, that's not how it's done."

I didn't know quite what had happened, but I knew that wasn't how you apologized. As the master of apologizing, I felt safe giving them failing marks. Liz and Sitri sat in tear-filled silence as I pointed out their mistakes.

When they were right next to each other, it became clear that these two were sisters. Since they were young, Sitri and Liz had always been fighting. Whether verbal arguments or full-blown scuffles, I was quite used to it, but even after becoming powerful hunters they were still just as quick to start bickering. I was sure other people found it unbearable.

"Why are you..." Sitri began. "Never mind. It's not like our fight was serious or anything."

"She's right," Liz added. "This is just a kind of warm-up exercise! T's used to it, so there's no need for you to get involved."

It looked like they felt some guilt regarding their actions. Unlike me, they rarely had any need to apologize so their words weren't coming out easily.

*But I just wanted to deliver some cake.*

Matthis seemed exasperated by the sudden one-eighty in attitude displayed by Sitri and Liz.

"The kiddo's still their weak point..." he muttered.

"That can happen when you've been acquainted with someone for a long time," I said.

"I don't think that's quite it..."

*I'm sure Liz fired the first shot this time as well. She's so quick to get violent*

*over nothing...*

*But she's not unmanageable, you can get through to her with words...she'll just immediately forget what you said.*

"I knew I could count on you, Master," Tino said. "Thank you so, so much. Only you can stop their fights."

Tears gathered in Tino's eyes. She looked at me with what I wouldn't call adoration so much as worship.

*Sorry. Really sorry.*

"Remember this well, T," Liz said. She clenched her fist and glared at Tino.

"I was merely considering what would be in the interest of both of us..." Sitri said. She looked at Tino with an upward glance that almost seemed to beg for compassion.

It didn't look like there would be any repenting.

I wasn't telling them to stop fighting altogether; their fights were proof that they were close. However, I was having fun scolding them even though I didn't even know what they had been fighting over.

Sitri seemed to derive something from my silence. With complete nonchalance, she expertly shuffled close to me while still keeping her legs folded under her. She tightly hugged my legs and spoke in a high-pitched voice. Even when compared to Liz and Tino, she had a nice figure. She had a large chest, to be specific.

I felt something soft press against me. It was awfully uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, Krai. We weren't trying to cause trouble for you. With a little bit more time, we would've resolved things peacefully!"

I was weak to soft sensations, but I wasn't sure there was a man who wasn't.

Still, there was no way things would've resolved peacefully with a little bit more time. Was she planning on using some sort of magic?

"Same. I didn't wanna cause trouble for you, Krai baby. If T and Siddy had just been less selfish..."

Competing with Sitri, Liz stood up, flung herself at me, and wrapped her arms around my legs. I felt like a king of sorts.

I didn't know a thing about what they were fighting over but I nodded understandingly and snapped my fingers.

"Yeah, uh-huh. For now, you two shall clean."

Sitri and Liz both stood up. I could take care of things, even if I didn't understand the situation.

"Oh, I love cleaning! I'll do my best!"

"Siddy, you arrange for more glass. I'll take care of the cleaning," Liz said. "And this time, save us some hassle and buy stronger glass."

"Goodness, Lizzy, that was the strongest— Ah, oh, forget I said anything."

Sitri sped out the door while Liz picked up scattered cups and replaced the cupboard. This wasn't the first time this had happened so they were accustomed to cleaning up like this.

*Give them a bit of time and this room will be its old self again.*

The only new thing I learned that day was that Liz and Sitri weren't entirely incapable of guilt.

*...I really like it when Sitri presses her chest against me.*

As I stared off into the distance, Tino, who had finally recovered somewhat, timidly asked me a question.

"Oh, Master, what brought you here in the first place?"

"Ah, I brought some cake. It's a new product. Think of it as my way of saying thanks."

*Since Liz and Sitri are always causing trouble for you, was what I planned to add on, but I noticed tears of rapture streaming down Tino's face.*

"Th-Thank you, so much, Master," she said with a sniffle. "I'll follow you to the end of my very life."

"Y-Yeah. I mean, it's just cake. Hey, don't cry."

*Tino sure is overreacting. All I did was bring some cake... Maybe I should be nicer to her.*

Sniffling and rubbing her teary eyes, Tino opened the box. Her eyes widened for a moment when she saw the two slices of cake inside, but then she nodded with satisfaction.

“You never fail, Master. The other slice is for Matthis, isn’t it?”

*Huh? It’s mine? That extra slice is for me? I had no idea Matthis would be here.*

“Psh, needless sentiment. If you had time to worry about my feelings then you should’ve just arrived earlier,” Matthis said.

*There’s no sentiment at all. I don’t plan to give you any cake and if you don’t want any then all the better.*

Matthis’s unexpected statement had me frozen still, but my capable junior Tino immediately backed me up.

“Master’s very rigid when it comes to formalities. Don’t worry, he has the best taste when it comes to cake.”

“Tch. Well, if you insist. It’d be rude to turn it down and I can just give it to my granddaughter or something.”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

*If you insist, there’s no way for a chicken like me to refuse you. Just what does Tino think I came here for? I just wanted to enjoy some cake with her.*

It was then that I noticed that on a desk rested a box containing a familiar bracelet. Tino seemed to realize where I was looking. She hesitated for an instant before a smile blossomed on her face.

“Perfect timing, Master. Matthis finished his appraisal of the Relic and brought it over! Look, it’s the Relic that I found earlier! The one I found!”

At some point, Sitri had returned. She was wearing an unfaltering smile and staring directly at Tino.

“Lizzy, have we failed to discipline her?” she asked.

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My world glimmered.

I was unperturbed by the stress of my many responsibilities as clan master. I had no worries about the future.

I was humming a tune to myself while walking down the hall to my office when I happened to come across Eva. I had been trying to keep up my usual poker face, but she must've sensed something was up.

"Has something happened?" she asked with wide eyes. "You seem to be in excellent spirits."

*Right now, I want to...sing and dance. But I'm hard-boiled, so I won't.*

It only made sense that I couldn't hide anything from Eva; we had known each other for a long while. Eva looked at me dubiously and I showed her the black band on my right arm—the Mirage Form.

In the end, my share of the cake had gone to Matthis, but now I could just laugh it off. I was so glad I went to Tino's house.

Eva's expression changed in an instant. She walked right up to me with a stern look on her face.

"Huh?! You bought another new Relic?"

"What? Oh, no, Tino found this and gave it to me. My debt hasn't increased."

Eva sighed. "Well, I've got my own misgivings about that, but..."

I, too, had misgivings, but it wasn't my place to intrude in Liz and Tino's mentor-apprentice relationship. I had tried to offer Liz a number of soft warnings, but she never listened. All I could do was try to keep a close eye on those two.

But none of that mattered to me at the moment. I was enamored with my new Relic. Tino had found it in Alleyne Pillars Ruins and it was quite unique; its function was to produce mirages. There were tons of bracelet-type Relics, and even a few in my collection, but I had never encountered one that produced mirages. Demand was the main factor behind a Relic's market value, so I couldn't be certain what this one would be worth.

*However, I've never heard of a Relic like this before so it must be pretty rare. I like that.*

Matthis had even been kind enough to fully charge it up for me. Eva still looked somewhat unsatisfied so I decided to show her the wonderful things the Relic was capable of. This wasn't my only bracelet-type Relic, so I knew the trick to activating it. I stared intently and concentrated, then the bracelet began to heat up slightly and light danced about on my open palm.

"Look, Eva. Cake!"

"Uh, uh-huh. That's cake..."

The mirage was of the cake I had brought to Tino. It was a delicacy covered in a special golden cream and fruits that could only be found in forests dense with mana material. Mirage Form was a Relic that could project three-dimensional images.

There were two broad categories for illusory arts: ones that affected a target's mind and caused them to see images and ones that actually projected an image. This Relic was the latter. It was a niche item and it seemed like it would require a decent amount of training to use effectively, but I could think of a few uses for it.

Eva looked at the cake which looked oddly unrealistic and tried to touch it. When her fingers sunk into the image, she made a funny face. There was something distinguishing it from the cake I had given to Tino. It was a mirage so there was no getting around its lack of taste or aroma, but even its appearance wasn't quite there.

The real cake was practically a work of art; it had been thought up after numerous rounds of trial and error, and had been put together by a skilled hand. The mirage I had conjured up was just something that had a similar shape and color. A side-by-side comparison made it clear just how much worse my mirage was.

*...It's because I struggled to visualize the cake's form. I had been so swept up by the flavor that I hadn't paid much attention to how it looked. I want to believe I can get better with practice.*

"Hey, don't make a face," I said. "Here, I'll make you, Eva!"

As far as Matthis had been able to discern, the Relic's effective range was one meter, or, to be precise, one meter and twenty centimeters. This distance was both how far one could project a mirage and also the size limit of a mirage. In other words, you could use this Relic to project a life-sized human.

With the range of one meter and twenty centimeters, you could create a mirage up to two meters and forty centimeters by placing the Relic in the center. Not to mention you were free to make them look however you wanted!

You could only recreate about half of Ansem, but that range would be more than enough for someone like Gark. That you could only place a mirage right next to you was an issue, but clever usage could still allow one to intimidate or hold back enemies in a treasure vault! The only issue was that a Magus could still make mirages more easily and across a wider range.

The mirage Eva that appeared was identical to the real Eva. The slim glasses and glaring eyes were a perfect match. Looking closely, I realized that some details were off, but they were still close enough to be called twins.

*Except it's only her from the neck up...*

Without batting an eye, Eva swung at her disembodied head and then glared at me with eyes identical to those of the mirage.

"Please quit playing around," she said.

"I'm not good at bodies," I said. "Without a proper view, I can't be certain, but maybe if I just cover it with a robe..."

Eva saw that the mirage of herself now looked like a sort of ghost decoration and reiterated her earlier sentiment.

"PLEASE. STOP!"

\*\*\*

I was in my personal hidden quarters.

I added "Mirage Form" to my collection's register. Aware that I might be getting my hopes up, I wondered if this Relic could let me disguise myself and serve as a substitute for the Reversible Face that I had failed to acquire. The

possibilities were limitless.

I wanted to start training with Mirage Form immediately, but without Lucia, it wouldn't be easy getting it recharged. Just to try it, I projected Ark's face over my own and burst out laughing when I saw the awful results in the mirror. The sight of my black hair sticking out past the edges of Ark's blond hair was too bizarre.

Unlike Reversible Face, Mirage Form only produced images, so it looked like I would have to be careful when using it for disguises. Perhaps I would need a hat that could keep my hair out of the way.

*Now that I think about it, Sitri said she keeps her hair short so she can disguise herself more easily.*

I needed to confirm how long I could maintain a mirage, so I began to browse my register while wearing the appearance of Ark. I was looking for a Relic that would be a good match for Tino. After receiving such a nice item from her, I felt the need to give something in return. After all, the Relics Liz and Sitri mainly used were all from my collection.

I was a Relic collector, but I wasn't the type who got pleasure simply from staring at them like decorations. I was the type to take joy in seeing my collection being put to use by my friends.

As her mentor, Liz had the final say in whether Tino would use a Relic, but Tino would eventually join our party so it didn't hurt to pick one out for her. I was giddy at the thought of doing fun work for the first time in a while and looked over each one of my Relics.

*Tino's a Thief so maybe she should have the same type of Relic as Liz? Or maybe a different Relic since they'll be in the same party?*

My collection was vast. I had powerful Relics and I had ones that could be used as a substitute for magic. Choosing your main Relic was an event that could change the course of a hunter's life. Tino was a serious girl and if I was going to share from my collection I wanted to share it with someone who would put the Relic to good use. I couldn't be haphazard about this.

I was on my bed, flipping through the dense register when I heard a small

knock at the door. It must've been Tino. I told her to come in and the door opened just slightly. A small black eye peered fearfully through the crack.

"Pardon me, Master..." she said in a small voice.

It was unusual for her to be so nervous. It wasn't like I planned to give her a Relic on the spot, I just wanted to talk to her. I would take our conversation into account during my selection and, depending on the circumstances, I might buy her a new Relic.

*If it's for Tino, then, with enough begging, Matthis might even give us access to his collection.*

Tino and I silently stared at one another when Liz came flying in. Tino let out a short cry as she was knocked forward. She must have changed clothes since my visit; she now wore a short black skirt which fluttered as she fell.

"Krai Baby, we're here!" Liz proclaimed.

"Have you finished cleaning?" I asked.

"We hired a reliable cohort, so it's all taken care of. The damage wasn't too bad after all..." Sitri said with a grin as she entered.

I'd only called Tino to see me, but for some reason, the Smart sisters were accompanying her. The opinions of a mentor and fellow party members were important in picking a Relic, so I didn't have any real objections.

Liz took one look at me and began to snicker.

"What's up with your face? Is that supposed to be Ark? Hilarious!"

"...I'm impressed you could tell it was me."

"Ha ha ha! I can tell by your scent and presence. It's gonna take a better disguise than that to hide you from me!"

*Come to think of it, Liz also immediately saw through my disguise when I first used the Reversible Face.*

The Reversible Face did more than just project an image, yet it didn't work at all on her. The senses of a high-level hunter were something truly fearful.

Except that didn't explain why Eva was able to see through the disguise.

Sitri also took a moment to scrutinize my disguise before giving a slight nod.

“Krai and Ark have different physiques,” she said. “It might work on someone who doesn’t know you, but I don’t think it would fool anyone from our clan.”

*I was right—I need more practice. Maybe I’ll have Sitri and Liz train with me later. Considering the traits of the Relic, there might be more functions, such as the ability to save preset mirages or something. Well, for now, let’s focus on Tino.*

Flanked by Liz and Sitri, Tino fiddled with the hem of her skirt and occasionally glanced in my general direction. Her gaze was alternating between me and the neatly organized glass case behind me. I had already told her what I wanted to discuss with her; she probably had a few suggestions of her own.

“Uh, um, Master—”

“Krai Baby, can you get us a super powerful Relic? T hasn’t absorbed much mana material and she’s still a whelp in training. Get something that can cover for her weakness! There’s no point in handing her something like Apex Roots, y’know?”

Liz spoke without a hint of ill will and knocked on her legs. Her Relic was a simple one without any features that might reverse the tide of a battle. Apex Roots simply enabled one to kick off against nothing. It was a Relic which required relentless effort before you could make use of it. Even I had struggled to use Apex Roots, thus I could see how it might be a bit early for Tino to use something in its class.

Sitri, who used a low-power water gun, nodded and added her own two cents. “Liz’s right. We can only cover for Tino to a certain degree. If there’s a Relic that simply improves her endurance or basic capabilities, then that might be best. Preferably, one that makes considerable improvements...”

“Lizzy, that’s—”

Tears had formed in Tino’s eyes. For a hunter, improving one’s basic capabilities through a Relic was considered proof that they were still a novice. This was because basic capabilities were something that could be improved just by absorbing more mana material.

I didn't really think much of it, but there were some hunters who would look down on or be rude to those who did use those sorts of Relics. As a result, Relics that enhanced one's base traits weren't very popular, in spite of their usefulness.

I nodded in agreement. I felt bad for Tino, but I didn't think Liz and Sitri were completely joking; Level 8 treasure vaults were vicious things. Liz and Sitri weren't just saying things to be mean.

### *What to do?*

Personally, I wanted to base my decision not just on Liz and Sitri's opinions, but also on Tino's. Hunters could be more compatible with some Relics than others. I closed my eyes and considered the matter, but then I remembered that there was no need to decide immediately, so I just nodded.

The Relics weren't going anywhere. I could call Tino over and we could think it over a bit at a time.

*Still, basic capabilities, I thought. This could be difficult. Tino's working hard, but the pace Grieving Souls clears treasure vaults is still far above her. It's possible she might never catch up.*

"I, for one, would like to hunt with T as soon as possible. But frankly, I think she still falls short in some aspects. Though there are ways to make up for those shortcomings..." Sitri said. "Krai, would you be so kind as to entrust me with Tino for a bit? I'm certain you won't regret it."

Sitri's cheeks were flushed and she fidgeted while struggling to look me directly in the eye. Tino stood next to her, quivering.

It was then that I remembered I had just gotten hold of something special. "I've got it!" I exclaimed. "I've got something that'll make Tino super strong!" "Huh?!"

I didn't yet know if it would suit Tino, but there was no harm in trying. I was pretty sure it even still had some mana in it. Sitri's shoulders slumped and Liz looked at me wide-eyed as I brushed past them and opened one of the glass cases.

When Tino saw what I had extracted she went pale and took a step back.

“Huh? Master?”

“I just got my hands on it not too long ago.”

Liz let out a whistle and Sitri clapped her hands while smiling like a flower in bloom. What I held in my hands was Evolve Greed, which had worn a pathetic expression ever since I had put it on.

*Doesn’t this thing have any motivation? Even when I lift it up, it shows no signs of life. What a terrible Relic.*

Tino looked horribly confused.

“Huh? Huuuh? I-I’m going to— This is a joke, isn’t it?”

“It looks creepy, but I think it’s really strong. It turned a young noble girl into someone with the strength of a mid-grade hunter. Ha ha, but when I wore it, it said it couldn’t make me stronger...”

I made an empty smile, but Tino wasn’t at all smiling back.

Ark said this mask had put him and others in danger, but a Relic was nothing more than a tool. Problems might arise from how one uses a Relic, but with Sitri and Liz at my side, I wasn’t concerned about the slight possibility of something happening. We had already learned that the mask can be ripped off from the outside.

“Give it a try,” I said. “Here, just a bit? I hear it activates simply by being put on. Also, I wanna see its effects with my own eyes.”

“That’s... Master, do you hate me?”

Tino backed off further, but Sitri, who had sneaked around her at some point, grabbed her shoulders. Liz had a twinkle in her eyes as she looked at the mask. With excellent timing, Evolve Greed awoke and spoke in a raspy voice.

*“Oh, new sustenance? What a steadfast soul I sense! Lionize me. Unleash your fury, your hidden strength. I am the one who advances mankind. Your existence, your everything will become the blade that cleaves your foes.”*

“Eee! Save me, Master! I’m certain! This thing is definitely cursed!”

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt. It didn’t hurt...” I began. “I tried wearing it earlier. Calm down, okay? It’s just a Relic. Take deep breaths.”

“N-NOOOOOO!”

Conveniently, writhing tendrils stretched from the mask which helped keep Tino still.

Echoing throughout my room was an earsplitting scream.

# Chapter One: The Responsibilities of a Level 8

I was on the top floor of the First Steps clan house in the clan master's office, a space for only myself and the clan's office workers. I had a grin on my face as I looked down at my desk. Five small human figures, each about five centimeters tall, were racing about on my desk. The figures were so intricate they looked like some real human beings had been shrunk down.

They were each dressed for a different role; there was a Magus, Paladin, Swordsman, Thief, and an Alchemist. I was using robes and armor to cover up some of their minor flaws, but I was overall quite pleased with myself.

While rubbing the warm bracelet, I made the figures tread quietly along the edge of the desk. These weren't dolls, which have mass, but mirages produced from my new Relic, Mirage Form. The race track and small mountain on my desk were also mirages.

At first, I had struggled to get shapes and colors right, but after days of practicing, I was successfully producing fairly elaborate mirages.

It appeared the Relic was equipped with a feature to correct for user error to a small degree. However, that didn't take away from my delight in seeing my practice produce results. It was a bit gaudy looking and I couldn't be sure how much practical use it had, but as a Relic used for fun, I could hardly ask for anything more.

I poked one of the mirages with my finger and at the same time made it move like it had fallen over. I made the other mirages act like they were protesting. Even though I was just manipulating images I felt like the leader of a pack of small elementals. I couldn't stop grinning.

I wanted to show off to someone, but, unfortunately, I had to refrain. Being seen playing with dolls would destroy my hard-boiled image.

Into the mix, I added a dragon small enough to fit in the palm of my hand, but then I decided to not stop at just one. I added another and another and another

until I had four dragons, all different colors of course. I had encountered many dragons when I used to tag along with Grieving Souls. I couldn't be certain I had all the details down, but I was sure I had the general outline perfected.

The dragons flapped their wings and flew around my head. I concentrated and tried to make their flying look more realistic. Creating mirages was difficult, but actually moving them wasn't too bad.

The only flaw of Mirage Form was that its range was limited to one meter and twenty centimeters.

*If I could just expand that range, I could open up new possibilities for playing around. I wonder if there are versions of this Relic with wider ranges.*

Because they were mirages, they were unaffected by physical barriers. I flew one through the window, and it disappeared into thin air the moment it got out of range.

"Not a very tough dragon," I said.

Not that it was the dragon's fault.

I was grinning to myself and flying dragons around when the door to my office suddenly opened. I couldn't help but shiver. It was Eva entering the room. I didn't have any work I was supposed to be doing, but I didn't like being seen engaging in childish games so I quickly erased the dragons.

I must have been a second too late because Eva's eyes were wide open.

"Wh-What was that just now?" she said.

"...Nothing. I was just surprised by your sudden entrance, that's all."

"Huh? I did knock..."

...I had been so busy playing with the dragons that I failed to notice a knock at the door. Maybe it was a bad idea to mess with mirages in my office.

I didn't even need to bother asking what Eva wanted, I could tell by the excruciating pile of letters in her arms. Normally, Grieving Souls didn't have much contact with nobles when compared with other high-level parties. But for some reason, we started getting more correspondence after we got involved with Earl Gladis during the auction.

According to an investigation by Eva, it seemed that somehow there were circulating rumors about how I had supposedly saved Lady Éclair. Never mind that it was Ark and not me who'd saved her...

Hunters with dreams of moving up in the world or in want of connections might be glad to receive a letter from a noble, but, unfortunately, I was a hunter with dreams of retirement. I would just have courteously turned down any letters I received.

“There’s gotta be someone better for them to bother...”

I could see myself fleeing Zebrudia altogether if things got really bad.

“These nobles really have no judge of character,” I grumbled to myself as I shifted around in my chair. I then realized Eva’s gaze was on my desk, or to be specific, her gaze was on the small mirages that I had forgotten to erase.

Eva looked up at me. She seemed to be doubting my very sanity. The small people all hurried across my desk and jumped off the edge towards me. I cleared my throat, crossed my legs, and leaned back.

“...So, did you need something?” I asked.

“You’re just going to try to brush it off? What were those just now?!”

Eva came around behind me and peeked under my desk, but the small people were already gone so there was nothing for her to find.

I decided I would try to not only be hard-boiled, but also mysterious. I clasped my hands and smiled nihilistically.

“Hmph, even I have a secret or two,” I told her.

“Well...” Eva replied. “I know that...”

She tilted her head side to side and then nodded as though forcing herself to accept the situation. Putting the matter aside, she cleared her throat.

“We seem to have received a number of letters from the nobility. If you could give them a look over...”

Eva’s face grew stiff. On my desk was a figure identical to me and it hadn’t been there a moment ago. The figure was holding his arms above his head as

though it wanted her to set the letters on top of it. Slowly, Eva's eyes turned upwards towards me. I gave her a nod and she carefully placed the letters on top of the mirage—but it was crushed under the weight.

Eva's face was instantly drained of color and she hurried to lift the letters up, but naturally, there was nothing left. It was like the figure had been nothing but a mirage...and that's because it had been nothing but a mirage.

“Huh? Uh? Wha—”

“Ah, don't worry about it. Now, what about those letters?”

Eva looked puzzled, which was rare for her. I responded with a mellow smile.

*This is going to be really fun...*

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They were in the southwestern decaying district. In a corner of a street that no respectable person would ever walk, Liz clicked her tongue with irritation.

“Aaah. Hah. This is the issue with magic syndicates, they refuse to meet you head-on...” she said.

“Most magic syndicates survive by being cautious. Though I think Akashic Tower was still a cut above in that regard...”

This response was given by a person wearing a hood that concealed most of their face. It was Sitri Smart.

The two sisters were following conflicting leads obtained during the auction to track down the remnants of Akashic Tower. The golem produced by the disgraced sage Noctus Cochlear was a revolutionary weapon and had grabbed the attention of the other labs of Akashic Tower. There was no doubt that the bandits who broke into the auction storehouse were after the golem. They didn't steal anything, but that was because Sitri wasted no time retrieving the golem once the bidding was over.

They had investigated whoever bid against them, how the golem went from the Vault Investigation Bureau to the auction, and lastly, they had investigated anyone who had had contact with the golem's winner—Greg.

Liz and the rest of Grieving Souls were all used to dealing with criminals. They

had often tangled with ghost parties, and this wouldn't be their first time crushing a criminal organization or a magic syndicate. But this foe put their previous opponents to shame.

For one thing, there were only so many people who could make deals with the Vault Investigation Bureau. This meant that whoever their enemy was, they were connected with powerful people.

Kneeling before Liz were three people, all with bodies clearly honed in battle. Even through their well-worn armor, they gave off the sort of overwhelming presence you only saw in those who had absorbed high amounts of mana material. Lying to the side were high-quality daggers and blades painted black. New weapons of this quality could go for over ten million gilds.

The imperial capital was the hunter's holy land, but as there is light, there are also shadows. Liz had chased the faintest of threads, leading her to these failed hunters. They were shady hunters who did discreet work of dubious legality and excelled at fighting other humans. Their strength was above that of the average hunters and they occasionally proved a problem for the Explorers' Association.

But, if you asked Liz, they were just some washouts. She considered them losers who forgot what being a hunter was about and chose to prey on weak humans instead of challenging monsters, phantoms, and treasure vaults riddled with traps. It wasn't that Liz didn't abide by preying on the weak, she just felt no fear towards wimpy who only ever took on lesser foes.

The three assailants had their hands bound behind their backs and paper bags placed over their heads. Their expressions weren't viewable, but their bodies trembled nervously and the stench of blood and sweat permeated the narrow street.

This was a band of professional hired blades who knew to never let their guard down, but Liz had no trouble beating them down. Just finding them had been harder. However, after very very carefully overpowering, binding, and interrogating their precious prey—Liz couldn't have them dying on her—they obtained unexpected information.

The mercenaries knew nothing about their client. They had been contacted with a letter and paid in advance. If they had been able to steal the item in

question then their client might have shown themselves, but it was a bit too late for Liz and Sitri to change their plan of attack.

The sellswords didn't seem to be lying. Sitri had employed an illicit potion meant to make them speak and they coughed up their names, members of their families, work experience, and more. It didn't seem like they had any sort of resistance to these potions.

After the past few days of investigating had ended fruitlessly, Liz was losing motivation.

"And you don't know anything, even though you used to work for that bunch?" she grumbled to Sitri.

"We were entirely cut off from other labs, and I wasn't able to stay as long as I had planned for..." Sitri said with a troubled expression.

Akashic Tower was built upon secrecy. Fundamentally, all magic syndicates were secretive, but Akashic Tower could be considered extreme in that regard.

Magi who had been ostracized for one reason or another were all pursuing their own theories; without contact, they wouldn't be able to learn anything specific about other labs. Coordination between labs was handled by specialists for that purpose, ensuring that members mostly only knew what their own lab was up to.

As Noctus Cochlear's first disciple, Sitri had participated in a variety of research projects but she never left that lab. She had intended to one day reach out to other labs, but that need was dispersed by the facilities, budget, and grandeur of Noctus's lab.

If Krai hadn't ordered her to come back then she would be at that lab happily working away. If she had known things would turn out like this, she would have slowly gathered intel a bit at a time. Noctus might have known something, but he had lost his memories and was now in prison. Not much Sitri could do on that front.

They were dealing with a large organization that had long been considered an enemy to the world. Liz and Sitri were strong, but theirs wasn't the right sort to take on this foe. It was clear Akashic Tower had its claws sunk somewhere in

the highest echelons on Zebrudia. Investigating and showing proof of this wasn't going to be enough.

If they were going to be dealing with people with connections in high places, Liz and Sitri could no longer consider the law to be their ally. Not that there was any proof they could find.

Liz let out a feline yawn.

"I'm tired of this. Should we call it quits?" she said indifferently. "We're wasting time, and Greg's safe. Probably safe. I don't have time to waste on chickens. We've got the golem so who cares what happens next?"

Putting aside strength, a magic syndicate with friends in high places just sounded like a pain in the ass. If they weren't thorough, it could come back to bite them, and, frankly, Liz just wasn't that interested. The risk and reward just didn't match up.

"Goodness, Lizzy, you're too quick to lose interest!"

"If you want new materials, then we've got three people right here. Can't you just use them?"

Liz nodded towards the three hired blades. Sitri furrowed her brow and protested.

"How are we supposed to transport them?! We're sure to draw attention if we carry them to the lab. Besides, for my next experiment, I want Magi—"

"Hell if I care. Can't you just catch some Magi when you need 'em?"

"Huh? Lizzy, don't you know the party's rules?"

Grieving Souls had three rules. Everyone gets along. No harming the normies. Democracy; if there's a difference in opinions, decide by vote (the clan leader had five votes, by the way).

They were a bit much on the prudent side, but Sitri considered them sensible. As long as that second rule existed, she would be unable to lay a hand on normies. Even when she had been a part of Akashic Tower, she hadn't directly participated in any human experiments performed on people abducted from the decaying district. She had left those to the other disciples. This led to her

mentor, Noctus, regarding her as soft, but Sitri had no choice but to accept it.

From the side of the road, from windows, the locals watched Liz and Sitri with cloudy eyes. While Sitri seemed lost in contemplation, Liz clapped her hands together with elation; she had a good idea.

“...I’ve got it! I don’t really want to, but how about we ask Krai Baby for help?”

Sitri wasn’t sure what to say.

“It’s fine,” Liz continued. “Krai Baby’s nice and I bet he saw this coming. If you’re afraid to do it, then I’ll ask him! This way, we won’t waste any time, I can spend some quality time with him, and Tino will get some training in. It’s perfect! Matter settled!”

Without Sitri saying a thing, Liz reached her own conclusion and crossed her arms with abundant confidence.

Sitri looked at her sister and began to think.

Bothering Krai was something she wanted to avoid at all possible costs, but at their current rate, their investigation wasn’t going to get them anywhere. Not to mention she had already caused plenty of trouble for Krai since becoming a hunter. She had a long history of going to Krai for all sorts of advice, and they were long past the point where she should fret over bothering him a bit.

She mulled it over a bit, but she wasn’t able to come up with any better ideas. She ended up at the same conclusion as Liz. This happened a lot, even when their opinions initially differed.

When she realized what Sitri was thinking, Liz stood up straight and pointed at their three captives.

“And what are we gonna do with these guys?”

“Mmm, we can’t carry them home...”

They were bound, drugged with a truth serum, and covered with wounds, but with time their bodies would recover. Their hearts were another matter. Truthfully, Sitri didn’t care. Her lab was far away and there were too many risks in carrying them home. They had made enemies of these three, but for Grieving Souls, what was three more at this point? Sitri put a finger to her lips and

blinked a few times.

“If we kill them and leave their corpses, people will gather and by tomorrow not even a chip of their bones will remain...”

“Hmmm, so should we go with that?”

They spoke with the nonchalant air of peers discussing dinner plans. The captives must have heard this; their breathing grew more ragged. They had gone pale, but Sitri couldn’t tell through the paper bags.

Sitri and Liz’s nonchalance made one thing clear to the captives: their lives were worth nothing to the two sisters. These were people who could kill with malice. The captives began to tremble, when Sitri’s voice rang out with a revelatory air.

“Ah, hold on, Lizzy. Rather than kill them, maybe we can make them into our henchmen! I’ve been looking for underlings used to getting their hands dirty. They’re not up to par for making another Killiam, but it’d be better to recycle rather than throw them away, don’t you think?”

“Huh? Henchmen? What am I supposed to do with weakling henchmen?”

“Well then, I’ll just take all three of them! Ah, but wait, I need to ask for their thoughts on the matter. If they’re not interested in being henchmen, I’ll have to dispose of them...” Sitri paused in contemplation. “But Krai doesn’t seem to approve of killing...”

Sitri went up in front of the three captives and gently touched one of their exposed necks. She thought she heard the sound of someone holding their breath. The paper bags weren’t like the one worn by Killiam; they were just some grimy paper bags without eyeholes.

Breathing steadily, Sitri posed them a question.

“Hey, you three, how about you become my henchmen? You can continue your work as hired blades. Of course, I won’t force you, this is just if you’re feeling up to it.”

“Eh, who’d wanna be your henchman, Siddy? Nothing good waiting for you in that life, you might even be better off dead. Right? Hey, answer me, you

worthless bunch!"

A bald man looked down on me grimly. Even though the soul soother Kaina was next to him, her presence wasn't enough to balance out the man's ire. I knew that this demeanor was necessary so hunters would take him seriously. I knew that Gark didn't mean to look like he was glaring at me. Yet, I was a coward who couldn't help but retract when placed before him.

It had been a while since I had been waylaid by the Explorers' Association. Gark was the manager of the Association's branch in the capital, meaning he was an extraordinarily busy man. I couldn't imagine a single good reason he would come all the way to the clan house just to get a hold of me. I also had a few choice words for Eva, who had led my archenemy straight to me.

I was placed in the Association building's reception room and spent a few minutes on the receiving end of a gaze that could kill a phantom. Gark slowly opened his mouth and began to speak in his usual intimidating voice.

"So, Krai, I hear you went and picked a fight with the House of Gladis?"

"No," I said. "It wasn't a fight."

Even still, I was prepared to kowtow.

"Sir, you sound as though you brought Krai here simply to chastise him," Kaina interjected reproachfully.

*Oh, it looks like they called me here for something else. Color me surprised.*

I was too used to being scolded and Gark was too used to scolding others. Looking a bit awkward, Gark cleared his throat.

"That's not what this is all about. Gladis sent us a thank-you note. It's for you and Ark."

I didn't know why I was receiving a thank-you note, but if it was to both me and Ark, then they should have snagged Ark. I was, unfortunately, quite busy. Truly, I was. Producing mirages was a deep art form.

*I have to get home and continue practicing my miniature of the imperial capital—*

“Another thing, along with the thank-you note was a named quest addressed to you. A named quest from the earl, despite his distaste for hunters. The contents of the quest don’t come off as a walk in the park, but the pay is enough to make up for that. I guess it’s a test of both your strength and etiquette. Take it.”

A named quest was a quest that was designated to a specific hunter or party. Receiving a named quest was proof that a hunter had become well-known, was trustworthy, or had recognizable strength. Named quests tended to be difficult, but paid out hefty sums, and, depending on the client, could even bring someone prestige.

When I received my first named quest everyone congratulated me for it. I, of course, declined the quest because it seemed dangerous.

This was a formal quest done through the Explorers’ Association. As the client was a noble, I had to choose my words wisely. With a serious expression, I confirmed the most important thing.

“And this quest can be accepted by anyone?”

“Are you out of your mind?” Gark said.

This was a quest from a noble who disdained hunters. This was likely a chance for the Association to show Earl Gladis how useful hunters could be, but I wanted no part of it. I didn’t need to hear the contents of the quest to know that it was beyond what I could tolerate. On top of that, a quest like this could only be a hassle for someone looking to retire from treasure hunting.

I pretended to give it some serious thought and then fell back on my usual tactics.

“Right now only two others from my party are available,” I told Gark. “It’s not that I don’t want to take this quest or anything, but wouldn’t it be better to leave this to Ark?”

I tried to gauge Gark’s reaction while I spoke. He let out a deep sigh and behind him, Kaina gave a pained smile.

When Gark spoke, it was in a calmer voice than I had expected.

"You should take this quest. Krai, you haven't taken a single quest this term, have you?"

"Ah, my quota? That time already?"

"This isn't a laughing matter."

Hunters belonging to the Explorers' Association were required to meet a quota adjusted for their level. They could do things like delve into treasure vaults, exterminate powerful monsters and phantoms, or complete quests brought in by outsiders. If they failed successively to meet these quotas, they would be disqualified as a hunter and be expelled from the Explorers' Association.

Initially, these quotas were implemented simply to prevent a proliferation of "hunters in name only"—people registered as hunters but not engaged in any relevant activities.

The quotas were low enough that the average hunter didn't even need to acknowledge them. Exceptions were made for those with injuries or other sufficient reasons for taking a break. Even if someone failed once to meet their quota, they'd be fine if they fulfilled it during the next term. As a result many hunters outright forgot that this system existed.

However, this system was hell on people who didn't undertake quests; people such as myself. As their leader, I accumulated accolades semiautomatically from the actions of First Steps and Grieving Souls. Quotas, however, could only be filled by things you were personally involved in.

The difficulty of a quota was based on your level. I wrinkled my brow and thought hard, but I couldn't remember what my quota was.

*Right. I probably never learned it in the first place.*

"How many terms has it been?" I asked.

"Three terms, you moron! Dammit, Krai, you're gonna get expelled!"

One term was half of a year, so, according to my calculations, it had been a year and a half since I had done anything.

*Come to think of it, I remember having this conversation both half a year prior*

*and one year prior.*

“We don’t think you’ve been idle,” Kaina said with a troubled smile. “But as far as outward appearances go, you’re the only hunter not taking quests...”

“No need to apologize to him, Kaina. If he wants to hand off all his accolades, that’s his business.”

*But I have been idle, I thought.*

For instance, the carcass collection in White Wolf’s Den was handled by Tino and her party, and it was Sven and his party who investigated the anomaly. Why would I try to take credit after I had foisted those quests onto others?

Furthermore, quests often had rewards set beforehand; my participation would only decrease the amount allotted to the other hunters. I was technically a Level 8 and that meant I would get a large payout, further lowering the value of the rewards granted to the others.

If I could just register for a quest with other hunters without decreasing their pay then I’d go for it, but that wasn’t the case. I understood that I was a no-good human being; I foisted quests onto people, I buried myself in debt, and I left the management of the clan to Eva. However, I wasn’t so shameless as to cut into someone else’s pay.

“It would be unprecedented for a Level 8 to be expelled for not reaching their quota. So doesn’t this sound like a good chance to prevent that? And I know if we didn’t call you out here, you’d never come on your own.”

*Gark himself brought me to the Association building. Talk about VIP treatment.*

*I’m so sorry about the trouble I’m always causing.*

Still, I had absolutely no motivation to do this. Really, as far as I was concerned, being expelled from the Explorers’ Association was just fine by me. Even if I was going to start taking quests, I would do easier ones, not this named quest from the earl. On top of that, I held the naive belief that even if I failed my quota, Gark would do something to brush it under the rug.

*Yeah, I’m no good.*

*Someone, please put in a request for a miniature imperial capital recreated with mirages.*

“Mmm, the truth is, I’ve got a lot on my plate right now,” I said.

“Oh, Krai, you always have a lot on your plate,” remarked Kaina.

“Ah? And what are you wrapped up in this time?” Gark asked. His lips twisted and his cheeks twitched; it was a smile meant to overwhelm.

*That smile... He can tell I’m lying.*

I glanced at the calendar on the wall. There were still three months left in this term. Whatever the case, even on the off chance I were to take a quest, I couldn’t take one from a noble; failure was not an option when it came to them. There was nothing I could do on my own, I had to do whatever I could to buy time until the rest of Grieving Souls came back.

I had just gotten my hands on a fun new Relic, and yet this headache just had to arise. I looked at the cup of tea before me, swallowed its insipid contents in one gulp, and then offered up some insipid words.

“Well, there’s still time and I have plans of my own. I’ll do what I can to see if I can fit it into my schedule.”

“This is an important quest. You’ve got one week to decide. If you don’t come to me by then, I’ll come to you. Right, for now, I’ll give you the file we got from the House of Gladis,” Gark said.

“I don’t need it right now. I’ll come get it when I’m ready.”

I had allies I could rely on. I didn’t take any pride in it, but I could kowtow before Ark so that he might accompany me on a quest. The rules of the Explorers’ Association had their loopholes; I knew I could do something about the quota. My problem was how to brush off the named quest Earl Gladis had so graciously sent my way.

“Oh, that’s right,” Gark said. “This is the first time Earl Gladis has ever put out a named quest. We plan to send along a member of the Association for support. They’ll do everything they can to stay out of your way. Is that fine with you?”

“Mmm, yeah, it’s fine. But I’ve got a lot to do, and I still haven’t decided

whether I'll accept the quest."

*I'm no good at dealing with nobles. Nothing could be more reassuring than having a pro come along.*

Still, I hadn't done anything, and I was already tired. I decided I would return to my room and play with Mirage Form while trying to come up with a good idea.

As I walked across the lobby of the Association building, I rotated my shoulders which had gone stiff from all my nervousness. Because of the odd hour, there was hardly anyone in the usually bustling lobby.

When I first came to the capital, the Association building was an imposing place, but even I managed to get used to it after five years.

There was the quest board—I gave it a sideways glance as I passed it by. There was the news board—I gave it a sideways glance as I passed it by. There was the bounty board—I gave it a sideways glance as I passed it by.

I already knew that there was nothing I could do to fulfill a Level 8's quota all by myself. I walked about the lobby and I checked in front of the counter, the appraisal desk, and the library, and still didn't find what I was looking for. I let out a deep sigh.

I was looking for protection. To be more specific, I was looking for hunters with the mark of First Steps who might help me. As a general rule, I didn't like going outside by myself. The roads you took to go from the Explorers' Association to our clan house were often crowded, and it was just about guaranteed that I wouldn't be attacked going between the two buildings. But I still didn't want to risk it.

When I would leave the clan house for my own purposes, I'd find a good enough bodyguard and give them a good enough reason to come along with me. In other words, I only went out when I had protection.

However, after being abducted by Gark, I was left with few options but to go home unaccompanied. On the way to the Association it had been fine because Gark was with me, but I would have to brave the return trip by myself. Of

course, I was equipped perfectly; I was covered head to toe in Relics, but that was more of a placebo.

“Good grief, I wish Gark wouldn’t always call upon me so suddenly. It wasn’t even that urgent,” I grumbled. “I know about my quota, he doesn’t need to tell me.”

I jangled the chain at my waist and peeked out the lobby door to the world outside. In front of the Association building was a street wide enough for multiple carriages to pass through. Merchant carriages bustled this way and that and pedestrians squinted in the blinding sun. Nobody seemed to be feeling the same unease that I was.

The scenery alleviated a bit of my tension. It was strange for a hunter—which I technically was—to be so nervous when even civilians were without fear.

*I guess I have no choice. Surely nothing’s going to happen.*

I puffed up my chest and put on a calm facade before mustering my courage and taking a bold step outside.

Within Zebrudia, a decent amount of prestige came with being a high-level hunter. The term “hunter” encompassed a group of people with widely varying jobs, levels of experience, and specialties. Even still, hunters around or above Level 5 were considered first-rate and would be contacted by countries, nobles, large trading companies, and the like. The higher their level, the more weight they had to throw around.

It was also around Level 5 that hunters began to attract fans. This naturally included people like Ark, who was the descendant of heroes, but even someone as violent as Liz had fans. In the golden age of treasure hunting, hunters were both warriors as well as a sort of idol.

This sort of fame was one of the many things that could bring a hunter abundant wealth and honor. On the other hand, I, who had become a Level 8 through mysterious contrivances, had almost no fans to speak of. This was because once I realized I was beginning to draw attention I sensed danger and began to hide my face as much as I possibly could.

While my face had never been in the newspaper, it wasn’t like I could keep

every last person from knowing my countenance. There were a few people who could recognize me, but by and large, the true identity of the Thousand Tricks remained unknown. The other two Level 8s in the capital were among the numbers who didn't know my face, something I was sure few other high-level hunters could claim.

This was all so I could avoid making the sort of, well, enemies that came with being a high-level hunter. This included bloodthirsty maniacs like Luke, who would challenge someone to a duel the moment they learned they were strong. This also included criminals who held a grudge because it had been hunters who caught their cohorts.

There were criminal organizations that would specialize in going after hunters' Relics, and there were bottom-feeders looking to ride off hunters' coattails. I could spend all day listing all the enemies of hunters, and unlike other high-level hunters, I didn't have the strength to deal with these nuisances.

Who could blame me for hiding my face and taking a bodyguard when I went outside? I would equip as many Relics as I could and I would avoid uncrowded streets as much as possible. I was a chicken, but I didn't think anyone would understand that.

Very very carefully, I made my way to the clan house. I wanted to hide my face, but under these circumstances, doing that would only make me stand out more. Unfortunately, I still wasn't at the point where I could use Mirage Form to disguise my face. With the Reversible Face, this had been possible from the beginning, but this wasn't a matter of the Relic's strength, just what it was and wasn't made for.

Fortunately, nobody was looking my way. When it came to looking like your average civilian, I was second to none. Liz once said to me "You're incredible, Krai Baby, it's almost like you're a normal person!" That's how good I was. Of course, my levels of mana material were almost as low as you could get, and I didn't even carry myself like a warrior.

And that's because I wasn't a warrior.

While thinking these pointless thoughts, I walked along the street, when, suddenly, a hand was placed on my shoulder from behind.

A shiver ran down my spine and I slowly turned around.

“Krai, it’s been some time.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while.”

The cordial person behind me was an effeminate young man with an icy gaze and blue hair. I placed his age as being the same or a bit below Tino’s. He was dressed like a civilian and didn’t wear any notable protective gear or carry a weapon. That simply made his sharp gaze all the more unnerving.

But even more than his appearance, something was bothering me.

*Who are you?* I thought.

“I’m sorry to bother you all of a sudden. It pains me to say this after not speaking with you for so long, but there’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

*Who are you?*

Without really thinking, I had said “It’s been a while,” but I didn’t remember this person at all. I’ve said it before, but there weren’t many people to whom I could match a name to a face. However, I didn’t think he was a member of First Steps. For some reason, there was a rule in our clan that I personally meet every new recruit.

That I didn’t know his name wasn’t too strange, but I had trouble believing I would forget someone’s face. From the sound of it, I was acquainted with this young man in some way or another, and it didn’t seem like a case of mistaken identity.

I wondered if he might be a fan of mine...but I immediately dismissed that idea. He had a smooth face and frigid blue eyes. He was a handsome man with a cold aura; not the type who would join our party.

*Who are you?*

“Given the timing, I imagine you already have an idea of why I’m here...”

*Who are you?*

I decided to put on a mellow smile in spite of my confusion while the young

man continued to chatter. I wished he had introduced himself, or at least wore a name tag like Chloe did.

*You think I'm gonna remember you? I barely remember my own clan members.*

"I know that Gark called you on business, so I won't take too much of your time. If you could just come with me—Krai?"

"Ah, I see," I said. "What a coincidence. I was just thinking I need to meet with you too."

The young man looked surprised.

I had decided to grin and go with the flow, one hundred percent. I had no idea who this person was, but they didn't seem like they would just casually walk away if I tried to turn them down. No way I could tell him I didn't remember his name.

If I was bullish like Liz, I could just tell the man I didn't remember him, but, unfortunately, I was a wishy-washy man. It also helped that I didn't share Liz's bloodthirst.

The young man briefly looked caught off guard, but he quickly returned to this original demeanor.

"I should've known you'd understand, Thousand Tricks. Well then, please come with me, this isn't a conversation to have while standing around. Perhaps a nearby café would—"

*This is it!*

I wasn't against accompanying this man (on second thought, I was) but I had no intentions of going alone, even if it was just to talk, even if this was just an unarmed younger man!

I was hoping he would talk with me on my way to the clan house, and thus by my protection.

"Sorry," I said. "Could we stop by my clan house, it's right over—"

A sudden interloper cut me off.

"There you are, Arty! You just ran off so suddenly! Huh? Did you find him?!"

From the other side of the street came a young girl with hair blonde like sunlight. She had large green eyes and skin bereft of a single wrinkle. Her outfit wasn't particularly noteworthy, which made me assume she wasn't a hunter. Of course, I didn't recognize her either.

The young man called Arty maintained his cool expression even after hearing the girl's bright voice.



"Ah, Mary. It seems Krai was looking for us as well. It looks like he'll come with us."

"Oh, thank you so much, Krai! I'm so glad. This means one less worry on my mind..."

The girl named Mary placed a relieved hand on her chest.

It seemed that whatever that worry was on her mind was now going to be on mine.

*Could you take it back?*

Mary and Arty. Even after hearing their names, I still didn't have a clue who they were. I felt like I was gonna barf.

*I have to do whatever I can to get myself out of this situation, I thought.*

We settled on a café near the clan house for our conversation. I had previously gone to this place during a date with Chloe and I quite liked their black tea-flavored pound cake.

I decided to take solace in the fact that I hadn't been abducted. You might think that I was worrying too much, but I had been carried off once or twice before. To make things worse, because I would offer so little resistance everyone always assumed I had let it happen on purpose. Like hell! Who wants to get kidnapped?

It seemed the refreshments were their treat, so, without hesitating, I ordered cake and black tea. I had to eat sweet things to restore my derelict brain. At the very least, I wanted to try to remember just who these people were.

We finished ordering and Arty narrowed his eyes.

"I heard you weren't overly fond of sweet things," he said.

After a brief pause, I said: "It's not good to be overly picky."

*Looks like my hard-boiled image is getting around.*

I shrugged my shoulders and masked my feelings of satisfaction. Arty's at-best-frigid gaze became sharp as a blade.

"There's no use trying to bargain with someone such as yourself. I'll cut

straight to the heart of the matter, we'd like to request your assistance."

*Uuuh? That's cutting a bit too much, I have no idea what you're on about.*

Still completely lost, I furrowed my brow.

"The capture of Noctus Cochlear has indeed brought you one step closer to being a Level 9," Arty continued. "You also have Earl Gladis in your debt. Cleaning up the remnants will put you ahead of the other Level 8s. However, that would be a bit, well, hasty. Wouldn't you agree?"

I had no idea.

"Initially, Akashic Tower was our prey," Arty went on. "It's possible that Gark is considering changing out the old guard. Except, experience is one thing you lack when compared with the other Level 8s. You needn't remind me of the steady growth enjoyed by Grieving Souls, but even with that in mind, I don't think you're ready for Level 9."

"You may not think that someone from another clan should be pointing this out to you. However, it's still the conclusion we have reached. If you go on like this, we'll be looked down on."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

My tea arrived and I took a sip of it. *Delicious.*

While I was in total reality avoidance mode, Mary frantically tried to stop Arty.

"Arty, you're being too confrontational..." she said.

"This needed to be said eventually, Mary," Arty responded. "Besides, I don't think we're capable of bargaining with the ingenious Thousand Tricks."

Looking fearful, Mary tried to gauge my expression, but I was entirely out of the loop. Arty's face was strained with tension. I grinned and waited for whatever they might have to say next, but no words came even after a long wait.

*Well, what to do?* I wondered.

Even after hearing Arty's explanation, I only understood about half of it.

Rather, I understood the words he was using, but we seemed to be thinking under different assumptions.

Under these circumstances, a normal person might confirm every unknown point one at a time so as to clear up any misunderstandings. However, I had cultivated conversational skills that allowed me to keep a dialogue running smoothly even when I didn't get what was being discussed.

"So, basically, Arty—"

Arty's face became stiff and his eyes twitched.

*Huh?! I've barely said anything and I've already screwed up?*

Mary's lips quivered like she was fighting back the urge to smile. I pretended not to see this.

"You want me to pull back," I said.

"Yes. That's what I said at the start."

I didn't remember ever pushing forward, but I decided to put it aside. From my experience, these sorts of situations always arose because Liz did something and I was forced to share the responsibility.

"K-Krai!" Mary said in a trembling voice. "It's true that we were needlessly biding our time. However, I still think it's improper that you would encroach on our domain. So, would you stop?"

She seemed to be trying to guess what I was thinking.

I folded my legs, stabbed my fork into my cake, and nodded.

"Yeah, uh-huh, we'll withdraw," I said.

"Oh? Really?! Thank you so much!"

*Man, this cake's delicious.*

Arty and Mary both looked at me wide-eyed and hastily bowed their heads.

Because I wasn't involved in whatever this was, pulling out from it was just fine by me. But I figured I would have to apologize to Liz or Sitri; it had already happened many times before.

*I still don't understand it all, but I want to hurry up and go home.*

"Gee, sorry you had to come all this way to talk to me," I said. "Truth is, I don't have much interest in getting to Level 9 or in those, uh, remnants? I'm still interested in this pound cake, though."

I was tired of getting dragged around over matters I didn't know anything about. By the sound of it, Arty and Mary were bounty hunters or treasure hunters, but I was the leader of Grieving Souls only in name and didn't keep close tabs on their actions.

*If they have complaints they should take them directly to— No, scratch that, it's just fine if they want to complain to me.*

With their objective fulfilled, Arty and Mary seemed to have loosened up a few notches.

I saw an opportunity and used it to try to make clear my harmlessness.

"I was only called out by Gark because I haven't been fulfilling my quota. I think you've got the wrong idea."

"Quota?"

"E-Er, it's not like I've been slacking. There just haven't been any good quests."

*If only I could meet my quota by collecting medicinal herbs.*

Arty and Mary both looked bewildered.

*I don't know where you learned my name and face, but I can assure you that I'm not the sort of person you think I am.*

The kerfuffle of the auction had settled down and I just wanted to rest for a bit. I let out a big yawn, and Arty suddenly stood up with a grim expression on his face. At the almost exact same moment, a shadow entered my vision.

"Do you need something?" Arty asked.

"Quiet. I didn't come to talk to you."

From right behind me, I heard a very familiar voice. First Arty had sneaked up on me, now this; it seemed my ability to detect people was as bad as it could

get. With practiced movements, hunters surrounded our table. Unlike Arty and Mary, this bunch were decked out in armor and carrying weapons.

The other customers in the café all held their breath at the sight of the sudden intruders.

From above me, I heard a growly voice.

“It’s been a bit, Thousand Tricks. You really played us for fools the other day.”

“Who might you be?” I asked.

“You Level 8s. Dammit. You sure don’t seem to have a care in the world.”

*Sorry. I know who you are. Of course, I know who you are.*

The man behind me was a Level 7 and surrounding our table were the members of Falling Fog—the people we did negotiations with regarding the auction. I was under the impression that our negotiations had ended on good terms, but, for some reason, everyone was glaring at me while red in the face.

*Did I do something to warrant these glares?* I wondered.

After all, in the end, the mask went to Éclair, but that wasn’t my fault and these guys should’ve known that.

I turned my head upwards and looked at the owner of the voice. Arnold had the face of a demon. His eyes were alight with a burning hatred. His large exposed arms, multiple times the size of mine, were trembling as though aching to unleash their power at any moment.

*This looks bad. This looks very bad. I have no room to negotiate, and no room to kowtow.*

“Level 8. You may be a higher rank than us, but even we won’t take that last humiliation in silence,” Arnold said.

“We had a promise,” I said. “I’ll accept your challenge once you’ve defeated the rest of my clan.”

*Wait. Don’t tell me he already defeated them...*

*If he did defeat them, I’ll surrender. If he didn’t, I’ll still surrender.*

“Shut up! To hell with the promise!”

*How brutish.*

Not that he showed the composure befitting his level back during our negotiations. It occurred to me that if things turned violent, I could be banned from the café and that would mean I'd lose a place of healing. I desperately tried to placate Arnold.

"Hey, calm down, calm down. Sure, we were at odds once before, but we made up after that, didn't we?"

"You— You've got a lot of nerve being so calm!"

*Just what is he so mad about?*

Arnold had a beastly expression and he sounded like he was trying to fight back his rage.

"Those women," he said. "They're not with you today?"

"Could you wait for me while I call them?" I asked.

"Sure, and they'll arrive to find you halfway to death's doorstep."

*Oh, come on. Did Liz or one of the others do something?*

Arnold's pals simultaneously drew their weapons with little concern for all the attention we were attracting. My heart pounded so much it hurt. I was ready to wave the white flag. I couldn't think of any way I could turn the situation around. I didn't even have the emergency stock spell Lucia had prepared for me.

*Wait a minute.*

I remembered something: the Aspiration Manifest gifted to me by Sitri had some sort of magic imbued into it. This Relic could be stocked with a spell, but there was no way to confirm the nature of the spell once it was inside. It had a crystal that would indicate whether it was an offensive spell or the like, but nothing more than that.

This one's crystal shined with a sort of black haze. When produced by a treasure vault, Aspiration Manifest shouldn't come with a spell already stocked, so this spell must've been input at a later point.

I hadn't asked where she got it, but Sitri had been at Night Palace not too long ago. If she got it there, then this spell was most likely from Lucia. From the looks of it, it wasn't Tyrant's Order, the spell I had previously used on Arnold and his gang, but I guessed it was a pretty powerful one.

I was wearing plenty of Safety Rings. Even a Level 7 hunter probably wouldn't be able to get through all those before I released the stock spell.

I made up my mind, let out a small sigh, and looked up at Arnold, who was angry for some reason.

"I'm not quite feeling up for a fight," I said. "Will you let me go if I kowtow?"

"What are you— Are you joking?!"

"Did you forget what happened last time? If I release my power here, it may cause a bit of damage."

I couldn't even win against one of Arnold's lackeys, but that didn't matter at the moment. But I wasn't lying when I said I didn't want to fight. It would've been more correct of me to say I wasn't at all up for a fight. I was a pacifist, not to mention I didn't even know what the spell even did. It was possible the spell's effects would extend all the way to the clan house.

I wore a tranquil expression, but I really wanted to barf. I was just trying to stay out of the way, why did these things keep happening to me?

While I sat there in a withered state, Arnold closed in on me. However, after watching us in silence, Arty stood up and blocked Arnold's path.

"You there, did I hear you correctly when you said you'd put our guest halfway to death's doorstep?" he asked in a sharp tone.

"Get lost. I don't know who you are, but I'm only here for the Thousand Tricks."

Arnold was a head taller than Arty, who was on the slender side. Arnold was extremely intimidating, but Arty didn't seem afraid in the slightest, he just looked up with a disdainful glare.

"A rustic, are you? Very brave of you to challenge a Level 8," he said. "Krai, please leave this to us. Consider it thanks for overlooking our earlier

discourtesy.”

“Yeah,” I said.

I had been drawn in by what seemed an appealing suggestion, but I quickly began to reconsider.

*No, this is a terrible idea. Arty may not know it, but Arnold's a genuine Level 7. Falling Fog also has the advantage of numbers. Arty won't stand a chance. But I guess there's not much I can really do about it.*

Arty saw that I was concerned and smiled slightly as he pointed to Arnold. When he did that, I noticed Arty was wearing a dull silver bracelet around his wrist. It bore an insignia with a three-pointed staff.

Arty glanced my way.

“We may not be the most experienced, but worry not,” he said and then directed his attention to Arnold. “Now, engrave this well into your pitiful brain, my name is Artbaran. Artbaran Henning of Hidden Curse.”

“Arty?! You said you wouldn’t cause any discord...” Mary said before reconsidering. “Likewise, I’m Mary Auden, also of Hidden Curse. To be clear, we’re not from the same party as the Abyssal Inferno however...”

The moment I heard that, I felt like I had been knocked over. I finally remembered Arty—Artbaran—and Mary, and couldn’t help but press my fist against my open palm. I must’ve looked pretty dumb, because everyone began to stare at me. I took a deep breath, looked around at everyone, and made an apologetic face.

“Sorry, but would you all mind if I went to the bathroom before we begin?” I asked.

Arnold must’ve known the name “Hidden Curse” because he seemed to be focused on Arty.

I had been drawn into something I wanted no part of. Hidden Curse was one of the capital’s oldest clans and highly selective of its recruits. What’s more, their clan master, the Abyssal Inferno, was considered one of the capital’s strongest Magi and one of the capital’s three Level 8s—the same rank as me.

*I've had nothing but bad luck today, it's just been one thing after another...*

It was truly a good thing that we had chosen a café I had visited many times before. With a little bit of struggling, I managed to slip out the large window in the bathroom and make my escape. I let out a breath of relief.

I no longer had any idea what was what. I hadn't expected Falling Fog to take such great offense over such a trifling matter, nor had I expected Hidden Curse to approach me. If I had seen this coming I would have brought Sitri or someone along with me.

*So Falling Fog and Hidden Curse are probably still staring each other down in the café right about now, I thought.*

As someone who was, technically, a high-level hunter who lived in the capital, I knew about any other hunters Level 7 and above. I was fairly sure Mary and Art were below Arnold's level. But I wasn't too worried; Hidden Curse was a unique clan in that it was composed only of the most exceptional Magi.

Hidden Curse's activities tended to lean more towards academics and the clan had strong connections with magic schools and militaries that recruited Magi. A product of these academic tendencies was that Hidden Curse's members often had low levels relative to their actual strength.

Besides, right in front of my own eyes, they said they'd handle Arnold, so my disappearance shouldn't have mattered. It would've been impudent of me to worry about the well-being of two elite Magi from one of the capital's top clans.

*Are all hunters devoid of sense?* I thought. We had been in a café filled with civilians and yet they had been ready to throw down. Just remembering Arty's cold glare sent a shiver down my spine.

Falling Fog was terrifying, but Hidden Curse was even more so. Even if Arnold and his allies were all high-level, they were just one party and couldn't hold a candle to the size, quality, and influence of Hidden Curse.

I wasn't even paying attention to my surroundings, I was just trying to steady my breath and hurry to the clan house. The only thing on my mind was getting to a safe place as quickly as possible.

Hidden Curse's clan master, the Abyssal Inferno, was a fearsome hunter. She

was said to boast the highest destructive capabilities of anyone in Zebrudia. She had the temperament of a blazing fire and, unlike Liz, was also conniving. Not to mention we had previously had a tiny little schism. Forgetting about Arty and the others was my attempt at running from reality.

The Abyssal Inferno had reached Level 8 long before I had even dreamed of becoming a hunter. Her fight with us occurred during the founding of First Steps. I was looking for parties to join us and picked one semirandomly, but at the time Hidden Curse was already scouting this party. For some strange reason, that party chose to join First Steps, all without me being aware of these conflicting interests.

We hadn't broken any laws, but hunters have this extremely obnoxious thing called pride.

I was really losing my head back then. I was a Level 6 and master of a new clan and it was unbelievable that I would start a fight with a renowned Level 8 hunter. Nor could I just change my mind and say I didn't want the party after all. Back then I felt like barfing just about every day. I'd put it in my Top Thirty Traumatic Experiences since Becoming a Hunter.

Fortunately, the commotion somehow settled down and I managed to retain all my limbs, but my burning fear of Hidden Curse wasn't going away so easily. I thanked my lucky stars that I didn't refuse Arty's request. If we got into another fight with Hidden Curse, then that scary old lady might gleefully burn down the clan house.

I arrived safely at the clan house. I could see my tired face reflected in the finely polished glass. I felt like staying holed up here for the foreseeable future.

My head hurt at the thought of all the things I needed to do. I had the quota, the quest from Earl Gladis, our fight with Arnold, I had to figure out what Arty was talking about, and I still had a lot of improvements to make on my miniature imperial capital.

The first two of those matters I figured someone would take care of somehow, so I figured my first priority was to check if Liz and Sitri did anything to Akashic Tower or Arnold. I was really missing my allies; having Ansem or Lucia around at a time like this would have been very reassuring. Even Luke

would've been enough to put me at ease.

*Just what are they up to right now?* I wondered.

I climbed up the stairs and took a seat in the clan master's office.

*Well, before searching for Liz, how about we work on that miniature imperial capital a bit more?*

As though waiting for that exact moment, the door burst open the moment I activated Mirage Form. Eva entered, she was short of breath and her cheeks were flushed with excitement—a rare state for her. In her hand was an ornate white envelope bearing the crest of Zebrudia. She didn't even glance at my miniature capital and looked straight at me.

"Krai!" she yelled with excitement. "You've finally received an invitation to the Gathering of the White Blade. Congratulations!"

I sat in confused silence. All of the day's commotion instantly vanished from my thoughts. The Gathering of the White Blade was the most famous meeting among hunters in Zebrudia. Only a small handful of hunters who had contributed to the empire were allowed to attend. Receiving an invitation was said to be proof that one was recognized as being among the top hunters in the empire. Most important, however, was the gathering's host—the emperor himself.

"I've heard that Grieving Souls are kept at a distance due to their poor reputation, but the other day—"

Eva rapidly explained things to me but I wasn't processing it at all; I could no longer make sense of anything.

There were rumors surrounding whether hunters from other countries were ever invited, whether there were duels between hunters and elite knights, and whether delicious desserts would be served.

I had absolutely no desire to attend. I didn't want to meet other high-rank hunters. I was a little curious about the desserts, but I would just have to let those go. I had no idea why these horrible things were happening to me. Why not Ark? They should've invited Ark.

*Really, what have I done? I haven't done anything! I'm not being modest, I seriously haven't done a single thing!*

I might have had a high level, but I wasn't actually anything special. I had already had a few run-ins that day, and then the invitation on top of all that. It shouldn't be possible to have such bad luck.

I didn't hesitate, I immediately made up my mind.

"...Ummm, is something wrong, Krai?" Eva asked, looking at me intently.

I cleared my throat and mustered my strength.

"Ah, sorry. I have a bit of an important matter to take care of and it'll keep me away from the capital for a while. It's a major honor to be invited to the Gathering of the White Blade, but I don't know if I'll be able to attend. That goes for any other invitations as well. I hate to ask this, but could you proceed under that assumption? I'll try to be back as quickly as I can."

"...Huh?"

*I'm getting out of here. I've got my kowtow skills and excuse skills, now I'll show you my graceful evasion skills.*

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"He's— He's gone?! What do you mean?!"

"Yessir, Arnold. This was in the bathroom."

One of Arnold's party members held out a piece of paper folded in two. Arnold ripped it out of their hand and unfolded it. The paper was the type used to write a check, but there was a message scrawled where the monetary amount would go. It said:

*I'm busy, so I'm going home.*

Words failed Arnold.

"It looks like he escaped through the bathroom window..." said a member of Falling Fog.

"Is he really a Level 8?" asked another.

Arnold's cheek twitched as he crushed the paper in his hand. He had never

even imagined that the Thousand Tricks would run away.

Arnold might have been prepared for this if he was after a civilian or an ordinary hunter, but this was someone of higher level and renown in the hunter's holy land. It was disrespectful for the Thousand Tricks to not give him the time of day, but Arnold was well acquainted with how powerful he was.

Arnold tried to understand why a proud hunter would run away through a bathroom window before the fighting had even begun. But when he really thought about it, Arnold remembered that the Thousand Tricks had previously made those women fight on his behalf. He should have expected an outcome like this.

Arnold looked up at two glaring individuals. When he first arrived at the imperial capital, Arnold did what many hunters would do and looked into the country's notable hunters, parties, and clans. Naturally, he had come across the name "Hidden Curse."

Hidden Curse was a powerful clan of Magi, run by one of the capital's best hunters. Standing before Arnold were two members of this proud group. They were still young, but that didn't mean they could be trifled with.

Falling Fog had the advantage of numbers. Typically, one might think that the Thousand Tricks had thrown the two Magi under the bus. However, even after seeing the note on the check, there was no shift in the woman who introduced herself as Artbaran. They let out a slight snort, showing no sign of unease.

"What's with the face? Listen well, rustic," they said brimming with confidence. "The truly strong don't draw their blades over trivial matters."

"So the Level 8s of the capital..." Arnold began. "They flee out the bathroom window?"

*And nobody sees a problem with this?!* he thought. He was after revenge against the Stifled Shadow and the others who had picked a fight with his party. With their leader, the Thousand Tricks, no longer at the café, there was no reason for him to stick around.

Mary and Artbaran were well-dressed, but not for combat. Except weapons weren't always necessary for an adept Magus. Looking closely, Arnold could tell

that Artbaran and Mary, who was wearing a strained smile, were on guard. In this regard, they were quite unlike the Thousand Tricks, who never looked in any way like he was prepared to fight. Arnold figured that for members of Hidden Curse, casting spells was as natural as breathing.

However, Magi were best at long-range attacks. No matter how strong they might be, a Swordsman would have the upper hand at this range. There was no chance Arnold would lose in this situation. But such a victory would have no meaning to him, for he wasn't after Hidden Curse.

The other members of Falling Fog kept their weapons drawn and awaited orders from Arnold.

Artbaran kept their icy gaze on Arnold and continued speaking.

"You said he fled? Don't be absurd."

"No, he absolutely made a break for it," Arnold replied in a low voice.

He couldn't think of any other way to interpret the situation. It was such a smooth and practiced retreat that Arnold was more surprised than angry.

"Didn't you read the paper?" Artbaran shouted in a dignified voice. "He didn't run, he...he's busy! A Level 8 in the capital doesn't have time to waste, it was all he could do to even spare time for us. Don't get the wrong impression and assume he's weak. Someone like you just isn't worth his time."

*How absurd, Arnold thought. In this land, hunters short on time just flee out the bathroom window?!*

It made no sense to him. It didn't match up at all with the heroic images in his mind. Arnold knew the strange powers that the Thousand Tricks had and that made it all the more difficult to understand why he fled. Shaking with fear, there was something he had to ask.

"Then, in the same situation, would you flee out the bathroom window?"

*Don't tell me all hunters in the capital would do this?! he thought.*

It was an honest question. Artbaran's eyes briefly widened, but then they put on a sardonic smile.

"I still have a lot to learn," they said. "Krai isn't someone I could imitate."

Silence ensued.

“Arnold, let’s withdraw. We have no reason to waste time on these two,” Eigh, Arnold’s second-in-command, advised in a hushed voice.

Arnold gave him a sharp glare, but Eigh was still looking at the two young Magi.

“We came here for the Thousand Tricks,” he continued. “If we get into a fight with Hidden Curse, we’ll just be playing into his hand again.”

Grieving Souls had plagued them since coming to the capital. They took Falling Fog by surprise at the tavern one time and practically extorted them another. Between them and the two Magi they had just met, it was obvious which one Arnold wanted to destroy.

Looking around, he realized the café staff and customers were all looking at them fearfully. Some of the clientele had probably already run outside, perhaps to call for the knights.

Eigh was right, only a third-rate hunter would forget their objective and turn violent in this situation. They might have already been manipulated during the auction, but it still was in their interests to proceed with prudence.

After quickly thinking it over, Arnold clicked his tongue.

“Fine. For now, our sights are on *him*.”

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I’d run as far as I could. Deciding this made me feel very much at ease.

Of course, I wouldn’t go by myself; outside the capital, there was the possibility of being assailed by monsters and phantoms. I heard it wasn’t too dangerous as long as you stuck to the roads, but getting attacked wasn’t something I wanted to risk at all. I had already been attacked multiple times in the past.

Finding protection before going out had just about become second nature to me. If I was strong or capable of flying or something then things might be different, but my low mana prevented me from going far with Night Hiker, and that Relic could only be used at night.

I began preparing to leave town. I left my office and was walking down the stairs when I ran into Liz. She was looking like a hearty hunter, as she always did. When she saw me, a smile blossomed on her face and she approached me.

“Good timing, Krai Baby! There’s something I want your advice on...”

*I’m happy to offer advice, but this won’t take long, will it?*

I didn’t have much time. My first priority was getting away before my worries increased any further. The more I hurried, the more legitimacy was lent to my excuse for declining the Gathering of the White Blade. It was a battle against time. I had to get out before Arnold lost all inhibition and came after me.

I wrapped an arm around Liz’s shoulders and spoke like we were discussing something clandestine.

“The advice can wait. Liz, do you have any plans for the immediate future?”

“Huh? Mmm, not really. Is something up?”

This was the answer I had expected. Liz wasn’t likely to turn down an invitation from me. I ditched the formalities and cut straight to the chase.

“I’m leaving the capital. Come with me.”

Liz looked at me with shock and then wrapped an arm around my waist. Her face was close to mine and I could detect a faintly sweet aroma. Her moist lips opened faintly and she spoke in a whispering tone.

“Veeery well. What’s our objective?”

*Our objective? To flee? To escape? To make a tactical retreat? Well, all of those are correct, but...*

*That’s it.*

After mulling it over, I began to smile.

“A vacation, I guess,” I said. “Ah, but keep it a secret, okay?”

Liz’s eyes sparkled and she wrapped her arms around me as though she was keeping all her excitement contained in that one movement. As always, her skin felt almost like it was on fire.

“That’s perfect!” she said. “How many people are we gonna do in? Who else

is coming? Just me? When do we leave? It feels like a million years since you left the capital with me!"

*We're not gonna kill anyone. And that's too many questions.*

Having Liz onboard was reassuring, but I figured the more protection I had, the better. I was leaving the capital, after all.

*That's it. Why not make it a clan trip?*

If I declined all those invitations, I couldn't bring the administrative staff along, but I thought it might be fun to bring all the hunters. If all the hunters of First Steps were gone, it would look like there was a good reason for my reclusiveness. A reason so good that I even turned down the Gathering of the White Blade.

"I don't want to inconvenience anyone, but I would like to bring as many as possible," I said. "We leave today. Also, you're right. It has been a long time since I've left the capital."

"Woo! I'm super excited! Can we bring T along with us?"

"Huh. Oh, yeah, of course. As long as she agrees to come, that is."

She had seemed really depressed after the incident with the mask. I wondered if perhaps we should just let her be.

Liz gave me a bewitching smile. Was she really that excited to travel with me again? I wondered what sort of face she'd make if she knew that I thought of this trip as a means of avoiding reality.

Because it was the middle of the day, only a small number of people were gathered in the lounge. Unfortunately, that didn't include the Starlights, who'd previously charged my Relics. It sure would've been helpful to have them along...

At a table in the back, Ark's party members Isabella and Ewe noticed us and looked displeased about it. Ark himself was nowhere to be found.

*All right, I want them to come along with us, but how do I justify it to them?*

I'd lose their trust if I lied to them, but telling them the truth would invite its own problems.

*I didn't really think this through... I thought.*

While I was being fickle, Liz began to shout in high spirits.

"Krai Baby's leaving the capital for the first time in a while! He said we're taking a vacation. A va-ca-tion! He wants as many people as possible to come along. Is there anyone who wants to come with us?"

The lounge froze. I had told her to keep it a secret, yet she just went and yelled it out...

Confused gazes fell on Liz and myself. They must've been wondering what I was thinking, taking a vacation when I already spent so much time playing around in my office. My esteem had reached an all-time low.

I wore a resigned smile while Liz continued on.

"Oh, right, we're leaving immediately! This is only for people handy in a fight. We don't need any weaklings slowing us down! Ah, I'm so excited. I've been so worried I might be getting rusty. What a relief."

There was an extraordinary gap between Liz's excitement level and that of everyone else.

It wasn't the reaction I wanted, but it was too late to change that. I looked over to a table of guys playing cards and spoke to Lyle, who I was somewhat well acquainted with.

"Sorry about bringing this up so suddenly," I said. "You'll come, won't you, Lyle?"

Lyle quickly held his hands over his stomach and groaned with a strained look on his face. He moved his arms in an exaggerated manner and his cards fluttered down to the ground.

"Sorry, Krai. I've got a sudden stomachache, I don't think I can go."

Part of him looked like he was acting, but his complexion was deathly pale. Maybe he really wasn't feeling too good.

I looked around at the other hunters at the table and they all looked away simultaneously.

“Sorry, CM, my sister’s wedding is coming up...”

“My grandmother’s funeral is soon...”

“I, uh, my sword broke and I’m waiting on a new one...”

“Then what’s that sword on the table?!”

“Shaddup! This is, uh, it’s a spare! Its blade is dull.”

“Huh?! You were always saying that thing’s your soul and whatnot!”

“Quiet! Really, CM, I can’t fight right now! You gotta believe me!”

*What’s the matter, everyone? It’s just a vacation...*

I checked the other tables and saw that the room had cleared out a bit. I turned around and caught sight of some hunters practically falling over each other as they rushed out of the lounge. Perhaps they had all remembered some sort of urgent business? Liz watched them go with a miffed expression.

I decided to let them go and made my way over to Ark’s party members. They weren’t as strong as Ark, but it would still be a major waste to not bring them as protection.

Isabella immediately turned the other way. Sitting across from her was the party’s Saint, Ewe, who wasn’t so blatant as Isabella but still kept her glance off of us.

“Hey, Isabella...”

“Absolutely not.”

“Hey, Ewe...”

“P-Please go to Ark for matters concerning our party!”

*I’d be talking to Ark if I could.*

Isabella brushed back her long hair, folded her arms, and looked up at me.

“I’ll have you know we’re on a break right now!” she said. “Ark’s visiting his family and we’re taking a reprieve from hunting!”

“Yeah, and we’re going on a vacation,” I replied.

“A vacation to you, perhaps!”

*What's that supposed to mean...*

Sure, I invited everyone simply because I needed bodyguards just in case something happened. I didn't consider it work. It wasn't a total vacation, but it wasn't entirely work either.

As I stood in befuddlement, Isabella rattled on like a machine gun. I had heard that in her homeland in the north, women tended to be more strong-willed, but I wondered if that might actually be true.

"And what do you plan on fighting this time? Phantoms?! Monsters?!"

"N-No—"

"If it's not phantoms of monsters, then—humans?! You're going to be fighting humans? How awful! I didn't train as a Magus so I could fight people!"

*It's just a vacation. Honestly.*

Isabella looked at me with complete distrust. Ewe also looked taken aback and moved away from us. In their lack of faith, I detected not just a lack of respect, but even disappointment. Liz darted in front of me and came to my aid.

"Hah? Is that contempt I detect?" she asked in a voice ready to boil over. "If he says come, then come. If your safety means that much to you, then how about you just quit being a hunter?"

That didn't aid me at all.

Isabella stood up and began to open her mouth, but Liz, with a shimmer in her eyes, began to yell at her.

"And what's even wrong with fighting humans? If you only deal with phantoms and monsters, you won't be able to fight against people when the time comes! It's good to kill a fellow human being once in a while, that's what Krai Baby always says!"

*It's just a vacation...*

*Just what sort of person do they think I am?* I asked myself.

I had returned to my office, but I couldn't clear the clouds over my head. Indeed, I had bad luck. Before even becoming a Level 8, I had on many

occasions been wrapped up in various spots of trouble.

One time, a treasure vault appeared during a flower-viewing outing, and another time an earthquake struck while exploring a cave. When exploring treasure vaults, I would often run into what were supposed to be bosses with low spawn rates. I had even run into an extremely difficult vault that moved about the entire world. When walking in a storm, a sudden bolt of lightning landed close to me (it hit the largest thing in the vicinity, which was Ansem).

But even bad luck had its limits, and I was leaving the capital to avoid that bad luck. I had no plans on fighting phantoms or monsters and I certainly didn't plan on killing any people. I had just wanted to invite some people on a vacation, but I guess they didn't trust a seasoned hunter's definition of vacation.

I was ruminating over the lack of esteem I had when Eva entered the room.

"Krai, I've reserved a carriage. It's a large armored carriage pulled by six platinum mustangs," she reported.

Typically, when traveling as a party, we'd go in our own carriage. However, it was currently with Luke and the rest of Grieving Souls. Therefore, I asked Eva to procure a carriage, but the results took me by surprise.

Platinum mustangs were a monster with the strength of roughly one hundred normal horses. As their name implied, they had platinum fur. They could run across any land, no matter how rugged the terrain, and were the best variety of horse out there. They naturally commanded an extraordinary price, but my bigger concern was that Eva procured a carriage pulled by six of them. A single platinum mustang was enough to easily pull a large carriage.

"Isn't that a bit over the top?" I asked a bit fearfully.

Platinum mustangs and large armored carriages weren't typically used by clans.

"Well, yes," Eva said with glimmering eyes. "But this way, you'll be able to escape even if chased by a swarm of dragons."

*I don't anticipate being chased by dragons!*

I realized it wasn't too strange that Eva had the wrong idea; I hadn't told her

that this would be a vacation. Even still, I was pretty sure even the emperor of Zebrudia rarely made use of six platinum mustangs and an armored carriage.

I couldn't even imagine how she got her hands on it all. I put my hand to my chin and pretended to think.

"I think we should go for a more discreet look," I said. "We won't need the armor and six platinum mustangs would be overkill. A normal carriage will do. Actually, a slightly shabby one would be better."

Leaving the capital at a time like this was bound to cause trouble for Eva. I felt terrible that she had prepared us something so extravagant.

"Yes, but... Very well."

She seemed like she wanted to say something, but in the end simply nodded with a look of dissatisfaction.

I gave a vague smile and tried to make a joke.

"We gotta cut costs where we can, right?"

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"Oh, a vacation? Of course I'll accompany you!"

Sitri was in the clan house's lab and accepted my invitation without a hint of displeasure. She seemed pleased with the idea, but without Liz's intense fervor.

*This, this is it. This is the reaction I've been hoping for.*

"Will armaments be necessary?" she asked.

"No, this is just a vacation. No weapons necessary," I said. "Er, actually, I guess you might want to bring the bare minimum necessary for self-defense."

"Understood."

What a pleasant, agreeable response. I wished the other members of Grieving Souls would follow her example.

Sitri's grinning expression grew cloudy and she looked at me with upturned eyes.

"Ah, but, I'm still working on my investigation into Akashic Tower—"

## *Investigation into Akashic Tower? Is this what Arty and Mary were talking about?*

I was right, it looked like Sitri did something without me knowing about it. It wasn't like I could understand what she did so maybe it was a moot point, but I still wished she would tell me before doing anything dangerous. But it was too late for that now.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that. I got Hidden Curse to take care of it," I said.

"Thank you so much! And forgive me for forcing you to go out of your way."

"No, it all just fell into place. I mean, they asked me to leave it to them, so I figure they'll do a good job."

Hidden Curse was an old clan. Sitri might have been just as capable as any of their members, but they were more suited to large-scale investigations. Not to mention, I had no interest in Akashic Tower, nor did I want Sitri doing anything dangerous.

I had left it to Hidden Curse without asking Sitri's opinion and I was worried that might bother her, but that didn't seem to be the case.

For a moment, I let myself be healed by Sitri's grin. Further back, Talia was putting a flask over a flame and looking at us with a smile. I had found true restoration.

Killiam was off to the side standing still as a statue and creating an eerie atmosphere, but I could stomach that.

"By the way, what's the objective of this vacation?" Sitri asked while slipping her arms out of a protective robe.

*Objective? Can you guys not go on a vacation without some sort of objective?*

Maybe it wasn't so strange; unlike me, Liz and Sitri were busy people.

"Well, uh, we could go to a hot spring?" I said.

"Understood. This is for fire resistance, correct? Will there be magma?"

"Actually, we'll sort of be running away..."

“I see. So there’s a chance we’ll be pursued by dangerous foes.”

“That’s right, Eva, you see, tried to prepare us a carriage pulled by platinum mustangs. Ha ha, how overboard is that? I told her we’d stick out like a sore thumb.”

“Hm, so we’ll need to be discreet. By the way, is anyone else coming along?”

“I invited everyone at the lounge, but they all ran away. I couldn’t believe it.”

Sitri seemed to puzzle that over for a moment, but her smile returned and she did her usual clap of the hands.

“How fortuitous,” she said. “I have three people I’ve been wanting to take for a test run. I only just gained their cooperation so I’ve got my concerns about their capabilities, but I could suffer to lose them... Please leave the preparations to me!”

*Looks like Sitri’s got some people she can bring. That makes sense; unlike me, she has lots of acquaintances.*

Her unique choice of words bothered me, but I figured it’d be fine to leave it to Sitri.

Then, I hit upon a good idea.

“While we’re out and about, why not stop by to see Luke and the rest of Grieving Souls? Aren’t they about to head home?”

It would be my first excursion in some time. I didn’t plan on entering any treasure vaults, but I saw nothing wrong with going to meet them outside of one.

Killiam flexed its well-developed biceps. Sitri’s smile suggested that she concurred with my idea.

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“Nooo,” Tino said with a groan. “Master, Lizzy, that wasn’t the real me...”

The curtains were drawn tight. Tino lay on her bed and writhed about with her face buried in a pillow. She felt terrible. She often felt bad after Lizzy’s strenuous training, but this went beyond that. At least after Lizzy’s training, she

didn't have enough remaining energy to be worrying about things.

The cause of this dejection was the mask that her master made her wear the other day. Evolve Greed. It was a horrific Relic that he had gone so far as to participate in the auction to try to obtain. Tino had never heard of or seen the Relic before.

As her master had said, the mask granted Tino power. But it granted more than just that.

When she closed her eyes, she could remember it vividly. The power that flowed into her the moment the tendrils connected to her, the feelings of invincibility and intoxication. The mask incited both strength and fervor. At that moment, Tino was the center of the world. Or to be precise, Tino and her beloved master were the only ones in the world.

"No, Master, that wasn't my doing," she continued. "The— The mask, it talked on its own, of its own will..."

She wanted to crawl into a hole and then die down there.

Tino twisted and turned in regret, but she wasn't feeling any better. She was even taking a break from her usual independent training. At this rate, she'd never become a splendid hunter like her master. She began to loathe herself for her failures.

Putting on the mask cut Tino off from her sanity. If it hadn't, she wouldn't have declared war on Lizzy and Siddy. But Tino was aware of something: that Relic was made to enhance things. As the person who wore it, she understood this well.

Evolve Greed could enhance something so drastically that it seemed like something else, but the source of Tino's words and actions were the feelings deep down within her. Her head had been clear. The mask had whispered to Tino of its capabilities.

In other words, Tino had, of her own will, declared, "Who but me is truly fit for Master?" in front of Lizzy, Siddy, and, worst of all, her master.

At the time, Tino had been filled with confidence. She was certain that she had been chosen by her master. The mask had given her enough power to

overcome her usual timidity and be resolute.

Even after the mask had been ripped off, those memories remained fresh in Tino's mind. Hence her wish to die. Her master and the Smart sisters had laughed it off and forgiven her, but that didn't make her feel any better.

"I don't believe any of those things I said! Aah, Lizzy, please forget all about it. I don't think you're unfit for Master because your chest is small and it probably won't grow any further. Siddy, I don't think I'm a better long-term choice because I'm younger than you!"

Tino was only three years younger than Siddy after all. What possessed her to brag about that to her master? She didn't have anything that would let her compete with the Smart sisters, who were both longtime friends of her master's.

It was the fault of that horn, the one that sprung up when Tino put on the mask. It must've been an antenna that caused her brain to receive all sorts of weird signals. She could no longer face her master or the Smart sisters. If Lizzy hadn't knocked her down and ripped the mask off, Tino definitely would've done something abhorrent to her master.

Rumors supposedly had a lifespan of seventy-five days, in which case, Tino couldn't face her master for that long. She also couldn't approach the clan house during that duration; it was possible word of her disgraceful display had spread. She didn't think Lizzy and her master would say anything, but Sitri's expression suggested she wasn't to be trusted so easily.

She had stepped on the tiger's tail and she had no idea how to earn its forgiveness. It would surely take more than a simple apology. It'd most likely involve being an accomplice to some crime that her master would find despicable. Really, it was possible her master already found her despicable.

That Relic was no doubt a powerful one. If Tino had been able to control her emotions better, she definitely wouldn't have made such a disgrace to herself. Her master was always so nice, that must have been what he expected of her.

This meant that Tino had failed one of the Thousand Trials. It was her fault for getting ahead of herself after finding a Relic that she was sure her master would appreciate. He and Lizzy were always telling her to never let her guard down,

but she had failed to put that lesson into practice. Tino was a failure as a hunter, and yet she had been filled with confidence when the mask had been put on her. It was all the fault of that horn.

She was spinning about in a pit of self-loathing when she heard a small noise at the front door. She raised her head a bit and buried herself under the blankets. The door was locked and she wasn't in the mood to see anyone. She hadn't left her bed in a bit, so she was in no condition to be meeting anyone.

Then she heard something loud, the harsh sound of something shattering. She quickly poked her head out from the blankets, and at the same time, her bedroom door was broken down. A hot wind rushed into her once sealed-off room.

Lizzy, whom Tino had been wanting to avoid, stood in the doorway. Tino had worked so hard to save up the money for this house; who else would destroy it just to see her?

"Hey, T! Get up already, we've got places to be!"

"L-Lizzy?!"

Unaffected by Tino's earlier disgrace, Lizzy looked just as she always did: alight with the same threatening glimmer that they showed when Tino's training left her face down in the dirt.

Tino had thought that her embarrassment would drive her to flee if she came face-to-face with Lizzy, but instead, her embarrassment faded away.

"What's this about? Wh-Where are we going?"

"We're going on a vacation. With Krai Baby. We're leaving immediately, so hurry up and get ready!"

"I-I can't do that," Tino said. "I can't show my face before Master after I made such a disgraceful display..."

Lizzy ignored Tino's protests and ripped the blankets off the bed, unconcerned that Tino was still clinging to them. When Lizzy realized that Tino was still attached to the blankets, she began to slam both against the floor. Tino's bones crunched loudly. She let out a groan from the blunt pain, but that

didn't deter Lizzy in the slightest.

"Hah?! Save your arguments and do as I told you! Besides, Krai Baby sees your disgraces on the regular! What difference does it make now? C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!"

"Augh! I-I-I can't! I'll die of embarrassment!"

Some things just weren't possible. Tino had listened to her mentor until now, but this time was different. Seeing that Tino refused to let go, even after being slammed into the floor multiple times, Lizzy let up.

*Did I... Did I get through to her?* Tino thought. She let herself relax a bit.

Lizzy looked at Tino like she was looking at a goblin who didn't know how to give up even after their allies were all killed.

"Krai Baby said to bring you. You've got five minutes," she said in a cold voice. "If you're not ready by then, I'll drag you out even if your hair's still a mess."

"Huh?!"

That woke Tino from her stupor. She felt like cold water had been dumped on her. If Lizzy said she would do something, she would do it. If she went out like this, Tino would feel even more ashamed than she did the other day.

"W-Wait, five minutes isn't—"

"Four minutes left."

Tino panicked.

*I don't have time to be thinking*, she said to herself.

She cast aside the blankets and began to get ready in a flurry.

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The sun was setting, casting a thin shadow over the capital. A single carriage was in front of the clan house. It was a nondescript box-shaped carriage pulled by two horses. It lacked the First Steps insignia, proving that it wasn't property of the clan. This meant the carriage's passengers wouldn't be immediately obvious.

Eva, who had gone beyond her usual duties and procured the carriage, tried

to gauge my reaction.

“You said you wanted something that wouldn’t stand out too much...” she began.

“Yeah, this looks good,” I said.

Trusting Eva had paid off. Carriages usually had to be reserved in advance. The Explorers’ Association could be a bit more flexible, but this didn’t look like one of theirs. I had asked her not even a day in advance, but she delivered with spectacular results.

“It’s a rental, so there will be a fee if it’s destroyed,” she said. “While it’s not an enormous sum...”

“I won’t destroy it.”

“Okay, but how many carriages have you destroyed thus far?”

Eva looked at me with a sharp gaze. It seemed she had absolutely no faith in me.

“They weren’t *destroyed*, they just *broke down*,” I said with a cough.

*It wasn’t my fault. There was nothing I could’ve done.*

I once thought of carriages as sturdy things. I later learned just how frail they are. Even one reinforced with metal plating wouldn’t last a minute against the attacks of a swarm of monsters or phantoms.

Of course, we weren’t intentionally catching the ire of monsters, nor were we charging into their homes, but treasure hunting was still a dangerous job. Not too long prior, I had even been denied a carriage insurance plan specifically intended for hunters. It was the strangest thing.

Eva looked over my Relic-covered attire with a scrutinizing gaze and spoke in a fast, clinical tone.

“It would be of great help to me if you were to return as quickly as you can.”

“Mm, of course.”

There wasn’t a hint of antipathy in her eyes. Eva was wasted on a person like me.

*Yeah, I'll return as quickly as I can. You bet I will. But I didn't say just when that'll be.*

My return would, at the very least, be after the conclusion of the Gathering of the White Blade.

"When's the Gathering of the White Blade?"

"Huh? Oh, it's the same every year, so...three weeks from now."

*Three weeks, huh? That's further out than I expected. This is looking like it could be a long vacation. That should be more than enough time to meet up with the others. It might be nice to actually take some time to rest.*

In the end, I failed to find any other clan members to join us. I guess I couldn't complain, I brought it up out of the blue after all. Still, what terrible timing, everyone had funerals, weddings, or just wasn't feeling well.

Depending on how you looked at it, you could also see fewer people as a good thing. It meant we only needed one carriage.

"Krai, forgive my tardiness."

From the other side of the road, Sitri ran to us in traveling clothes. She was in a green robe and had a large gray bag on her back. Behind her, carrying a sturdy-looking trunk and wearing a robe that was meant to be discreet (but maybe had the opposite effect) was Killiam.

Preparing for a journey, gathering supplies and information on treasure vaults, was always Sitri's job. Luke and Liz were especially prone to forgetting things, so it fell to Sitri to assist on that front. The bag on her back wasn't an infinite storage Magic Bag, but it was still a mysterious thing that held everything you could want. Sitri was second to none at support.

I smiled and looked back on good memories when Sitri turned around.

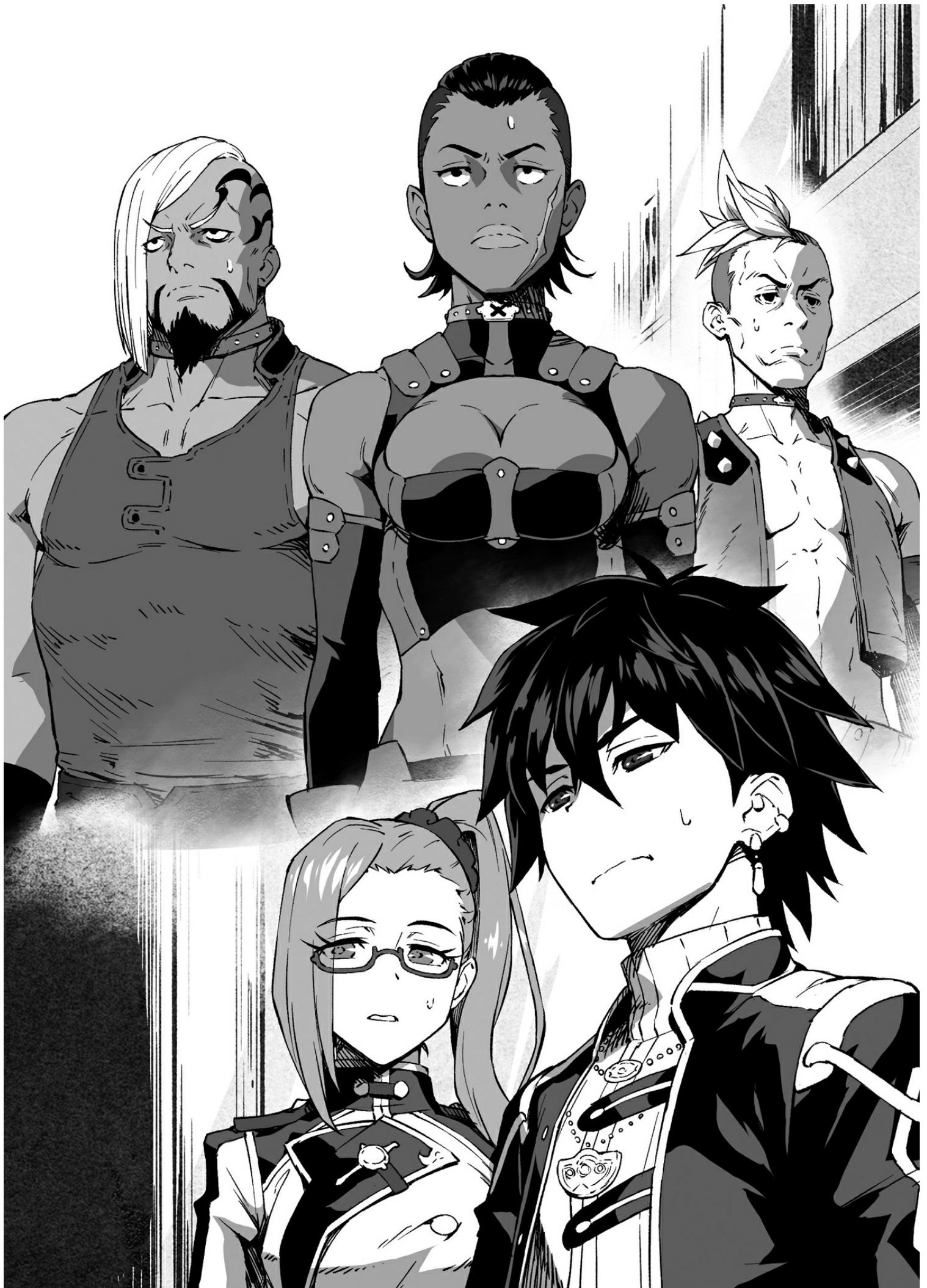
"Krai, allow me to make some introductions. Meet our new associates."

"Huh?"

Three people who looked like bad news eyed me with intimidating glares. I had seen them when Sitri first arrived, but I hadn't thought they were with her. They were all bigger than me; even the one woman in the trio stood over me.

They all differed in hair and eye color, but each one looked quite vicious. One had a scar on her cheek, another had a tattoo covering a large swath of his exposed shoulder. The last one had no scars or tattoos, but I could tell by his eyes that he was a cunning one. All three wore around their necks distinct metal chokers that gave off a strange glow.

If I ran into this bunch on the street, I'd keep my distance. I definitely didn't want to be riding in the same carriage as them. Not one of them said a word, even after looking at me. There was just an oppressive silence. Eva looked put off.



Only Sitri was grinning. I was impressed by her ability to smile while being surrounded by such obvious ruffians. Long ago, she would've started crying in such a situation...

"Umm, this is Black, White, and Gray," she said.

"Are those their real names?" I asked.

"Think of them like code names."

*Black, White, and Gray. I guess those are based on their hair colors. It's easy enough to understand, but how do they feel about these code names? Not that I even know their connection to Sitri.*

The three of them looked clearly displeased when Sitri mentioned their code names. A vein bulged on one of their foreheads and I heard the sound of grinding teeth. One of their hands began to tremble. I wondered why they weren't saying anything.

Sitri was a cautious person. I didn't think there would be any problems, but I still had something I wanted to confirm, just in case.

"Uh, these associates, they've agreed to this?" I asked in a hushed voice.

"Of course. They're indebted to me," she said.

It didn't look like that at all. They looked at us like they were looking at enemies. They even seemed intent on murder. I didn't know what sort of debt they had to Sitri, but they didn't seem like the type to bring on a fun vacation. Honestly, I didn't want them coming along at all.

"You're bringing all three of them?" I asked.

"Oh, I thought I'd test them out..."

Sitri once again turned around, looked at the trio, and then clapped her hands as though she had an idea.

"If there's anyone not to your liking, Krai, I'll liquidate them," she said. "I'll figure something out before Lizzy arrives."

*Liquidate. What a funny word to use, I thought.*

The faces of the three ruffians instantly became stiff when Sitri said this. I

figured they most likely had been hired by Sitri. Sitri had a degree of sway in the capital; it was only reasonable that those three might worry at the thought of losing work.

I understood how they felt. Even unpleasant work must be done; living is difficult, and as much as it pained me to say it, three more people were too many. Liz and Tino were coming, and Killiam would be joining us as well, there was no room left in the carriage.

“Don’t hold back on my account,” Sitri said with a thin smile. “You needn’t worry about hurting anyone’s feelings.”

“Right...”

I folded my arms and looked at the one woman of the trio. She was tall for a woman, half a head taller than me. Her skin was dark and her body was toned. Her black hair was cut close and she had a large scar on her cheek.

She didn’t look at all endearing, but she seemed even stronger than Liz. My guess was that she was a mercenary. Either way, she had the air of someone who had survived many battles and looked just as dangerous as the other two.

Without softening her expression, she spoke up for the first time. Her voice was deep, but it was indeed a woman’s.

“C-Call me Black. I’m a capable killer,” she said.

What an unexpected response. My eyes widened.

*Killing, huh? Will we have a need for such a specialty? Well, she seems more than fit to protect us.*

I pretended not to hear her and moved on to White, who had white hair flowing over the right side of his head. He had a well-trained body and one of his shoulders had a tattoo. He looked quite like a bad guy.

“C-Call me White,” he said in a dry voice. “It’s an honor to meet you. I-I’ll do anything you need me to.”

“Anything?”

“Er... Anything!”

*Hmm, he isn't short on motivation. So he'll protect us and carry our luggage? You wouldn't tell by looking at him, but he seems like a good guy.*

I looked at the final one, the man with the gray hair—Gray.

Gray was smaller than the other two. It seemed possible that he was a Thief. He didn't seem like he could fight as well as the others in the trio, but he looked at me with sharp, appraising eyes.

Considering that all three were hired by Sitri, it seemed safe to assume they were reliable...which wasn't to say they *should* be relied on.

But when I really thought about it, wouldn't Liz and Tino be enough for protection? Killiam would also be with us and I just didn't think I could relax with unfamiliar faces along for the ride.

I looked at Sitri and made a half-hearted smile.

“Sorry, but could the three of them—” I began.

Sitri's eyes went wide and she held a hand over her mouth.

I opened my mouth to say the rest, but, out of nowhere, White and Black slammed Gray. They attacked without hesitation and it made a terrible sound like someone being hit with a blunt weapon. Gray flew across the street and landed all the way on the other side. I stood frozen as the other two yelled with rage.

With intense expressions, Black and White started mercilessly kicking Gray while he was down. It sounded awful.

“You sack of shit! We promised we'd behave! Die!”

“Apologize! Apologize to Sitri! You worthless garbage! Think you're too good for this?!”

Gray's head was slammed down and a crack formed in the ground. Blood splattered all over. I felt like I was having a nightmare. Eva went pale. Sitri, however, didn't even flinch.

*Just how much does Sitri's employment mean to them?!*

I continued to stand still in fear of the sudden bloodbath before me.

"I thought it might be best to make an example of one of them, but all three..." Sitri said, sounding troubled.

"I-I'm joking. I'm only joking."

*Yeah, a joke. They can come along with us, it's fine. I just need to bear with it. I should just bear with it.*

Sitri rested a relieved hand on her chest.

"Hmm, so it was only a joke? That's a relief," she said and looked over at Gray being beaten to a pulp. "The truth is, they're not yet fully trained. I'll do what I can, but please understand if they're a tad rambunctious."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

*Is this really okay?*

Watching Sitri stand between Black and White, I had serious doubts about it all, but I shook my head and forced myself to forget about it. There was nothing I could do so there was no use worrying about it.

Sitri made a face so scary you'd think she was a different person than the one I had just been talking to.

"Not to me! If you're going to apologize, then apologize to Krai!" she shouted. "You're no use to me, acting like you are! If you embarrass me then you'll be getting the axe."

Even though the sun was setting, there were still a fair number of people walking about. They had started keeping their distance, but it was possible someone might call the knights on us.

I turned away from Sitri and smiled at Eva.

"It's gonna be a super fun vacation," I said.

"Uh, huh. I hope you have a good time," she replied. "And please come back as quickly as you can."

*It looks like even Eva won't share in the joy. I just want to stay inside.*

Some familiar people came running out from the clan house. Perhaps they wanted to join us? Was I grasping at straws? An older hunter covered in

bandages clung to me while tears flowed from his eyes.

“W-Wait! CM, is it true you’re headed out of the capital? If you are, then bring that creature!”

“Creature?”

“I’m talking about Drink! We can’t handle it anymore! At this rate, someone’s going to get killed!”

His eyes were bloodshot. If memory serves, this fellow was a Level 5. Behind him were many other hunters, all haggard and nodding repeatedly. Every one of them was wearing bandages somewhere on their body.

Drink. I had foisted every aspect of its care onto the other hunters. I wasn’t sure what to think if it had grown enough to be too much even for pro monster killers. Maybe it was just too much to try to keep it in captivity without killing it. But I considered that to be entirely Sitri’s responsibility.

Drink’s caretakers didn’t await my response and went inside. They came out again with five of them pulling Drink by chains thick as a person’s finger. It hadn’t even been a month since I last saw the critter, but it had already become an adult, growing with eerie rapidity.

When Sitri first brought Drink in, it fit in a crate small enough for a person to easily carry, but now it was nearly two meters long. I could probably ride on its back. From that back sprouted wings and they had even grown a splendid mane. Even as a cub, Drink was strong enough to kill me, but now it had become an outright monster.

Drink looked at me and let out a sweet *meooow*, something entirely unexpected from such a creature. But the large fangs in its mouth didn’t escape my notice.

The color drained from the faces of Sitri’s trio when they saw Drink. I was about to lose my will to go on when I heard some loud voices.

“Nooo! Forgive me, Lizzy! I can’t see Master after all!”

“Learn when to give up! You’ll always remain a whelp if you don’t pull yourself together! How many times have I told you? Krai Baby already knows

how pathetic you are! If you keep feeling sorry for yourself, it affects my honor as your mentor!"

We hadn't even left, yet I had a bad feeling forming in my gut. I looked at Liz as she dragged Tino along, then I wordlessly entered the carriage, pretended nothing had happened, and hugged my knees.

*I already wanna go home...*

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"About that potion you asked me to identify, it's a potent hangover cure."

"Huh?"

Arnold was talking with a famous apothecary, well-known even within the imperial capital. The blood rushed to his head and the rest of Falling Fog were abuzz. Sitri Smart had pulled the wool over their eyes. The potion she had charged upwards of one hundred million gild for was a hangover cure. It was, in a sense, a sort of antidote, but that was beside the point.

Thinking about it with a cooler head, it did seem improbable that a hunter, no matter how dangerous, would poison another hunter's meal. She had been mocking them. Arnold considered getting revenge through legal action, but it would be hard to win with just the appraisal results.

However, Arnold decided that didn't matter. He decided he would put all other plans on hold for the time being. Grieving Souls had invited the wrath of the Crashing Lightning. They had wounded his pride. It didn't matter that the Thousand Tricks was of a higher level than Arnold. If he didn't settle this matter, he would both remain unsatisfied and possibly lose party members.

He would take down Grieving Souls as quickly as he could. He didn't care about any past promises; he preferred to keep things simple. Arnold looked back on all the misfortune he had run into since arriving at the capital.

At the tavern, Liz Smart attacked him without warning and his defeat had been witnessed by other hunters. In a public area, he had been defeated by the Thousand Tricks. Sitri had all but extorted him into buying a hangover cure at an exorbitant price. He realized that these schemes had led to Falling Fog's being at odds with Hidden Curse, a well-known clan—another incident that had been

witnessed by many.

What bothered Arnold more than anything was that he hadn't once been able to display his strength. There was nothing more important for hunters than strength. A weak hunter was worth even less than a hunter prone to stirring up trouble. If he didn't get an opportunity to show his might, it would be hard for Arnold and Falling Fog to make a living in the capital.

Things weren't looking good. They were a strong party, but that didn't change the fact that at this rate they might fall apart.

If they wanted to turn things around, they needed to do something that would make everyone realize what Falling Fog was capable of. At their current rate, Falling Fog was at risk of being belittled not just by high-level hunters and the Explorers' Association, but also by low-level hunters and civilians.

They could resort to a more physical means of stopping people from bad-mouthing them, but that could only go so far. Taking down Grieving Souls would solve their problems in a flash. Arnold had briefly buried the hatchet, but it was Grieving Souls who provoked them. That gave Falling Fog plenty of reason to go after them; they had no obligation to hold back either.

Grieving Souls had picked a fight and Falling Fog couldn't just ignore it.

They would beat their opponents. The names Falling Fog and Crashing Lightning would shake the capital. Even if their chances of victory were slim, they would fight back. That was just how hunters lived. The Thousand Tricks had escaped them at the café, but that wouldn't happen a second time.

Arnold was training at their lodge. He was swinging his beloved sword in an effort to shake off their earlier humiliation when his right hand Eigh Lalia ran in.

"Arnold, we've got bad news! I was listening in on a conversation about First Steps and it sounds like the Thousand Tricks has left the capital. He's going on a vacation and nobody knows when he'll be back."

Arnold's mind went blank.

After making fools of Falling Fog, he was now taking a vacation? What a clown.

The blood rushed to his head, but Arnold's breath was ragged and he instead gave a concise order.

"We're going after them. Get everyone ready."

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"Krai left the capital? Another sudden departure..."

In the Explorers' Association branch manager's office, Gark once again found himself busy processing documents. One report had taken him by surprise.

The Thousand Tricks was a hunter who deserved his status as a Level 8, but his one failing was his tendency to be slow to take action. It seemed he had everything planned out, but he was always causing people out of the loop, like Gark, to worry.

The named quest from Earl Gladis carried tremendous significance. Successful completion of the quest would likely make the earl more affable to hunters and that would benefit hunters in ways that money couldn't buy.

*Even Krai wouldn't put off such an important task*, Gark thought, his scowl still affixed to his face.

"However, Krai didn't take the quest brief with him, did he?" Kaina asked after blinking a few times. "And Chloe was supposed to accompany him, but—"

"Ah?! Dammit, Krai!"

Quest briefs were documents that laid out the details of a task put forward by the Explorers' Association. These papers were usually handed off to hunters undertaking a quest. They had tried to hand off the brief to Krai earlier, but he had turned it down.

It was unlikely that he had left the capital without knowing the details of the quest. Krai Andrey wasn't that stupid and he had on multiple previous occasions completed quests without looking at the brief, though how he managed this remained a mystery.

Except, this quest was unlike any other.

This named quest was a joint operation between Krai and the earl's personal knights. The quest brief wasn't just to explain the nature of the quest, but also

to act as proof of identity. The Thousand Tricks was famous enough that perhaps he could get by without it, but not having the brief would make it harder to leave a good impression. That could be fatal when dealing with a client who already disliked hunters.

Gark had figured things would go smoothly because Chloe would be accompanying them. However, Krai suddenly departed without bringing her along, even though he had initially been quite open to the idea.

With a grimace, Gark made up his mind to really let Krai have it the next time they met.

“Even Krai can prove to be clumsy at unexpected times,” Kaina said with a strained smile. “I hear he said he’s going on a vacation.”

“He’s too damn free-spirited. Can’t we do something about these habits of his? What kind of guy accepts a named quest from a noble and calls it a vacation?”

Even after a few years, Gark couldn’t get used to the bizarre nature of Krai’s behavior and results. He was certain Chloe hadn’t been left behind on purpose; it seemed possible that Krai had simply forgotten about her.

Gark held his hands against his throbbing skull.

“Have Chloe go after them,” he ordered Kaina. “No matter what, she needs to rendezvous with them before they arrive in the earl’s domain. We can’t leave a bad impression on Earl Gladis! Ah, but it’d be dangerous for her to go alone, send some hunters along to protect her. Their pay can come out of Krai’s.”

## Chapter Two: A Strange Trial

Even when lined up against those of other neighboring nations, the imperial capital of Zebrudia was among the most prosperous capital cities. Its streets were clean and lined with street lamps. With the exception of the decaying district, the capital was well illuminated at night. It had a large population and, because of the many rowdy hunters, knights patrolled the city fairly frequently.

However, should you take even a step outside the walls of the capital, you'd find yourself in a dog-eat-dog world just as you'd find in any other country. There was no light from man-made sources and monsters appeared frequently.

There were phantoms wandering from their homes, just as there had been with the recent White Wolf's Den incident, and there were bandits who might choose to strike. The empire diverted resources into peacekeeping, but even their inability to stamp out threats should help indicate how dangerous the outside could be.

With our carriage going at a steady pace, we left the capital and I was already beginning to regret my decision to go on a vacation. I looked out the window and saw dense clouds covering the sky and hiding the moon from view. The scenery outside was cloaked in almost total darkness and therefore inscrutable to me because I had no form of night vision.

*We should have at least departed in the morning, I thought. I'm an idiot. This isn't like the incident with White Wolf's Den. I had the freedom to choose when to depart, yet I chose to go at night for some reason. I want to go back and deck the me from a few hours ago.*

It was common sense among hunters to leave in the morning unless you had a specific reason to leave at another part of the day. After all, most monsters and phantoms could see in the dark. Liz, Sitri, Tino, and even Eva all knew this. I wished they had at least once asked if I was certain about leaving at night. Sure, the fault was mine, but they seemed to have too much faith in me.

I barely left the clan house much less the capital itself, so this was my first

carriage ride in some time. The particular vibrations I felt through my body were strangely nostalgic.

Once a treasure hunter started to get financially comfortable, they often began using carriages. This wasn't for transporting themselves, but mainly for conveying their spoils. Hunters who made use of carriages, and were competent enough to keep them safe, saw explosive rises in their income.

Grieving Souls used a carriage, but Ansem was too big to fit inside and both Liz and Luke would run along outside, so it would be only me, and occasionally Lucia, riding inside. Looking back, that was fun in its own way. I wasn't too fond of the recent crucibles I had been thrown into, but those old adventures were fond memories of mine.

The carriage Eva procured was a medium-sized one and one likely made with hunters in mind. It wasn't roomy enough that I could stretch out my legs and sleep, but it was sturdy and the roof was furnished with a seat for a lookout. There was also suspension which helped reduce the vibrations. When taking luggage into account, there wasn't enough room for a full party to fit in the cab, but that was typical as far as most hunters were concerned.

The carriage continued to move along regardless of my regrets. Black and White were in the driver's seat, and Gray was in the lookout seat. I was impressed at their ability to keep the carriage running in such darkness.

It looked like I was once again the only one unable to see in the dark. Owl's Eye was charged up, but this wasn't really the time to use it.

Sitting across from me, Sitri had the map unfolded and she was glancing at her sister, who sat next to her.

"Why aren't you running, Lizzy? You always run..." she asked.

"Huh? That's because if I leave you alone with Krai Baby, you'll lay your dirty hands on him. You think I'm gonna let that happen?" Liz responded.

"I'm just a bit uneasy having White, Black, and Gray being the only ones outside. I was hoping you would run along outside."

"You think you're uneasy?! Besides, what's it matter? Killiam and that

chimera are outside. How come you're inside this time, Siddy? You usually take the driver's seat."

"That's because I'm testing White and Black—"

Amid the darkness, Liz and Sitri began bickering with flames in their eyes.

In one corner of the carriage, Tino, who had been more or less abducted by Liz, was sitting and hugging her knees just like I was. It seemed she still wasn't over the incident with the mask. She hadn't said a word beyond some initial greetings and apologies. It was lonely not having anyone to talk to, but it was hard to address her when I knew I'd just be turned down.

One thing I could be thankful for was that I didn't have to look at the three ruffians Sitri had hired. Still, I didn't think there was a person alive who would look at us and think we were headed out on a vacation.

*Maybe it wouldn't be quite so bad if we hadn't left at night...* I began to think, when our carriage was passed by a gray macho atop a strange lion. It was Killiam riding Drink.

Drink growled with excitement and Killiam gripped the reins with enthusiasm. Their overwhelming vigor made me want to barf so I looked away from the window.

Sitting in silence, I realized something: we hadn't run into many monsters. With *that* running alongside our carriage, I suppose even monsters wouldn't want to approach us. Drink and Killiam were more monstrous than anything in those woods. They were like something out of a nightmare. In this wilderness, something not meant to be, was.

*Looks like it'll be a safe trip.*

"Krai, which route will we be taking?" Sitri asked.

She placed the open map next to a glowing vial, vaguely illuminating it. The map was centered on the imperial capital and showed its surrounding areas. Sitri's own notes were scrawled here and there.

Our current objectives were to buy time, enjoy a vacation, and meet up with the rest of Grieving Souls. They were currently at Night Palace, which was

within Zebrudia but a good distance from the capital; even a straight trip there shouldn't be too arduous.

"Does anyone have any opinions?"

Liz gladly answered without delay.

"I'll go where you go," she said.

Sitri also nodded with a grin.

They had always been like this since we became hunters. I kept on failing as a leader, but they were either just too resilient or had far too much faith in me, something I wasn't sure how to feel about.

I looked at Tino and, with tears in her eyes, she raised her head and nodded.

*I want to protect her. Not that I can.*

"I'll go where you go," she said.

"Eh, sorry about T. I guess she's lost her confidence," Liz said.

"Yeah, it happens," I replied.

Liz sounded even more gleeful than usual.

*I haven't shown Tino my good side in a while. On this trip, I need to at least once remind her she can count on her master.*

I reached out and drew a large circle around an area between Night Palace and the capital.

"For starters, let's not pass through here," I said.

"Understood, we won't pass through here," Sitri said. "Might I ask why?"

"Gut feeling. Let's not take a single step into this area."

The area in question was the domain of Earl Gladis.

I might have been talentless, but I had experience. The Thousand Tricks never faltered. I had caused a fair bit of trouble with Lady Éclair, so I went and looked up the boundaries of her family's domain. I hadn't accepted it, but they had given me a named quest. Even without accepting them, those things were bad news; I didn't want to think what would happen if I did.

Sitri didn't seem to mind that I offered no rational explanation for my decision and just smiled warmly. That made me feel better.

By not entering Earl Gladis's domain, we would be taking a much longer route to the treasure vault. Really, the worst thing that could happen would be not running into the rest of Grieving Souls, but my policy was safety first.

"Understood. Then we'll either cross the mountains to the north or pass through the forest to the west. Mountains or the forest, huh?" Sitri stopped to think. "Where do you stand on this, T? Which sounds better, a thunder dragon or a roving ogre?"

"Huh?!"

Tino looked up and for some reason, looked at me and not Sitri. She wore a timid, squirrelly expression. The thunder dragon, needless to say, was a powerful and elusive dragon capable of controlling thunder and lightning. The roving ogre was, uh, actually not something I had ever heard of before, but its mention was enough to paralyze Tino.

I quickly tried to deny Sitri's implications.

"There's not gonna be any dragons or ogres or anything bad!"

Thunder dragons were a rare breed. Sure, they did live in mountainous areas—I had even encountered one in fact—but they were rare even compared to other dragons. Normally, you couldn't find one even if you tried.

As for the latter monster, even its name was unfamiliar to me so I couldn't say. However, I knew a fair bit about forest monsters, so I figured it must be rare if even I didn't know anything about it. Sitri was worrying too much.

Liz puffed her cheeks, crossed her arms, and offered me fire support.

"We're not gonna run into any of those things, Siddy. Didn't you hear Krai Baby? We're out for other humans! Quit making half-assed predictions!"

*I said there's not gonna be anything bad! I guess they just don't have any faith in me.*

"What's wrong with trying to follow Krai's line of thinking? Sure, I often miss the mark, but I think these are reasonable guesses," Sitri said. "Am I wrong,

Krai?"

*There's not gonna be anything. I'm certain of it. This is a vacation, not an adventure!*

I decided I might as well err on the side of caution. I didn't reply to Sitri's eager question, I just dragged my finger along the map. Avoiding the Gladis Earldom on the way to Night Palace would involve either traversing a forest or mountains. The forest route would be the longer of the two detours, but it's not like we were in any hurry.

"Isn't that the longer way around?" Liz asked.

"We'd take far too long getting to Night Palace that way," Sitri protested. "The flatlands aren't a good place to find rare monsters. Our earnings will be minimal. I may be overstepping my bounds, but I'll remind you not to hold back on the account of Black, White, and Gray. I believe in taking risks in moderation."

Sitri rarely said no to me, but her reasoning was sound.

*She's a scholar, but I guess she's a treasure hunter at heart. What does she mean by earnings?*

Usually, I'd let myself be swayed by their arguments, but this was different. I decided to make my stance clear.

"It's fine, our objective is to have a good vacation! Here, don't be so worried, Tino. Trust me on this."

"M-Master..."

I looked at Tino, who had tears in her eyes, and then at the other two before letting out a sigh.

"This really is nothing more than a vacation. Life's been hectic recently, and not just for you, Tino. Liz, Sitri, you two have both been working too hard. I brought you all out of the capital, but I think you should take this opportunity to rest your bodies. This is just a trip. A vacation. A break from monsters and phantoms. We'll eat good food, take it easy, and do fun things—nothing dangerous. I'm serious."

It probably sounded funny hearing that from a guy who only ever took it easy—I had just recently foisted a carcass collecting job onto Tino after all—but it was how I felt. I was both the man who foisted work onto them and the one urging them to rest afterwards.

Tino's shoulders shook and she stared directly at me.

"C-Can I believe you, Master?" she asked.

*Yeah, of course you can, Tino.*

The moment I began to nod affirmingly, I heard the sound of raindrops. I checked the window and saw that a number of droplets had hit the window in the span of a moment. It was hard to believe that there hadn't been any precipitation just a few minutes ago.

There was the intense howling of wind and pounding rain. The sudden change must've startled the horses because the carriage rocked. The cab was well sealed so no rainwater got in, but those horses out there were living creatures. This would probably be nothing to a platinum mustang, but it was impossible for a normal horse to run under these conditions.

Amid the wind and rain, I heard some small irritated voices. I began to wonder if Black, White, and Gray were okay.

I was struggling to decide what to do about the inclement weather, when a bolt of lightning flashed across the sky. Then came the thunder. Then the carriage bounced and came to a halt. I managed to hold back a scream. It'd look really lame if I screamed when nobody else seemed to be perturbed.

The carriage continued to be slammed by wind and rain and it didn't seem like it would be stopping anytime soon.

*What to do...we might die out here. If this storm had arrived a bit quicker, we would've delayed our departure. What awful timing.*

I began to get cold. I pulled on a jacket and buttoned it tight. This wasn't the first time I had been hit by a storm while outside. In fact, the rain was attracted to me. It was because my luck was so bad.

"What a sudden torrent..." I said.

“Shall we step outside for a moment?” Sitri asked. “The horses are rentals, so we should take good care of them.”

“All right, T,” Liz said abruptly. “We’re gonna run.”

“Huh?” Tino’s mouth hung open.

Liz paid her no mind and stood up and did some light stretches. Perhaps because of the cold weather, faint wisps of steam rose from her body. She took another look out the window and nodded with satisfaction.

“What a storm... What more could you want for a training session?” she said. “You always come through, Krai Baby! Siddy, you’ve got some potions, don’t you? Aah, we’re gonna be building lightning resistance so could we get a liquid lightning rod, please?”

“Sure thing,” Sitri said.

*Come on, you can’t pin even the weather on me.*

Sitri pulled out a white glimmering potion from her bag. Liquid lightning rod. I had seen it before, it was an insane potion made to attract lightning. I had also heard the basic principles of it, but I couldn’t really remember them.

On top of the lightning rod, Sitri quickly lined up a variety of other potions, put them in a unique circular box, and handed it to Liz.

Tino was stiff as a board. She looked at Liz with a vacant expression as though this were all some sort of dream. Perhaps her life was flashing before her eyes.

“Liz—”

I tried to stop the madness, but Liz looked at me with her brightest smile that day.

“Don’t you worry, Krai Baby! T’s got plenty of mana material and she’s been training, she probably won’t die in a single hit!”

“Huh?! Master...”

“Juuust a moment!”

I stopped Liz on instinct. I couldn’t let her inflict such a harsh trial on our junior. Tino looked at me with misty eyes.

*Don't worry. It's fine.*

"You're such a worrywart, Krai Baby," Liz said. "It's fine, T's not a kid and she's responsible for herself. My calculations say she has enough resistance, and as long as she doesn't instantly die, Siddy can come to the rescue with her potions."

Her eyes shined as she put forth this insane reasoning. It was incredibly harsh, but this same training was what Liz's mentor had once subjected her to. The only difference now being Liz's participation. What lunacy.

There was far too much of a power differential between Liz and her disciple. Tino looked at me with eyes that pleaded for help. It was then that I remembered I had the perfect item on me. I reached into my pocket and pulled out something slimy.

The color drained from Tino's face. It was Evolve Greed, my special something for unleashing one's latent powers. I hadn't been sure if I should take it with me, but it was new to my collection and I thought I might be able to find a use for it so I brought it along.

I couldn't use Evolve Greed, but when Tino wore it, it had enhanced her abilities. Her speed, strength, and her resistances had, most likely, all increased. Excluding the slight elation it caused, it was a powerful Relic and I had a feeling its psychological effects could be acclimated to.

Evolve Greed spoke in a weary voice after spending so much time stuffed into my pocket.

*"How dreadful that was. Oh, am I to take the stage?"*

I was certain Tino's lightning resistance would go up if she wore the mask. She seemed a bit traumatized by it, but I hoped she could overcome that. I looked at her with great expectations.

"Lizzy, I-I've decided I want to start training right away!" she yelled.

"Ah—"

Tino almost fell over as she flew out of the carriage. Liz sat there wide-eyed, and I held the mask in my hands. Tino had left the door open so strong winds

blew into the cab and showered us in rain. After a minute of silence, Liz clapped her hands.

"Way to go, Krai Baby! Only you could stamp out T's cowardice so easily. I'm gonna join her, okay?"

"Lizzy, T, I made sure to leave some liquid lightning rods out, so don't forget to take them!" Sitri called out. "Honestly, T, you're so prone to escapism."

*Is that really escapism?*

Liz grabbed a liquid lightning rod and disappeared into the darkness and out of my vision. Burned into my memory was the look of betrayal Tino gave me just before leaving the carriage. I looked down at the gloopy-faced thing I held.

*Precious things always slip from my hands. Always.*

"I'll go and prepare the tent. Krai, feel free to wait in the carriage for a bit," Sitri said.

And as if nothing at all strange had happened, Sitri began preparing our camp, wearing a grin all the while.

Through the window, I saw Killiam riding atop a large white chimera and howling in the storm. It was like the end of the world. What a horrible vacation. Thunder boomed as though in an attempt to block out my thoughts.

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Fierce winds and rain beat against the windows in the lounge of the First Steps clan house. Dense clouds covered the sky and thunder rumbled from time to time.

The lounge was filled to capacity. There were people who planned to undertake quests but turned around the moment the storm began. There were people with nowhere to go after their usual inn closed due to the weather. There were people who decided they wouldn't be able to go outside the next day either and holed up in the lounge.

They all sat at tables and watched the sky through the lounge's large windows.

Lyle, whose stomach had made a full recovery, held a bottle of liquor in one

hand and rambled in a loud voice.

“‘Vacation’ he said. Goddamn Krai. It’s all going to hell right from the start,” he said.

“Nothing good ever happens when the CM begins to move of his own accord,” said one of Lyle’s party members.

It was common knowledge that the Thousand Trials were not something you wanted to get involved in. No matter how much time passed, they never got any easier. It was normal for a treasure hunter’s work to get easier the more powerful they became. The Thousand Trials, however, were different. Because they were “Trials,” they aimed to always push one to their limits.

Members of First Steps were considered special because they had overcome these Trials. That was fine, but they were sick of being wrapped in these Trials without even being asked if they wanted to.

“Besides, didn’t we just do one of his Trials?!” Lyle shouted in a drunken voice. “He didn’t give us any time to rest. Don’t make us risk our lives on a regular basis!”

Other clan members began to join in.

“You’re right!”

“I haven’t even finished resupplying!”

“He’s always hiding information!”

“We shouldn’t stand for it!”

“He thinks we’d go out in this storm?”

“He conflates us with people of his level!”

“He conflates us with Liz!”

“Tell us what you’re planning!”

“Pay us!”

“Teeell us!”

Even though Krai himself wasn’t present, everyone in the lounge became riled

up. They stood shoulder to shoulder and shouted to the ceiling. Isabella and Ewe, who had both chosen not to participate, faced each other and let out exasperated sighs.

“Everyone here sure gets along nicely...” Ewe remarked.

“I suppose Liz and Sitri are fine, but I wonder about Tino,” Isabella said.

Grieving Souls were used to these sorts of Trials, but she was worried about the junior clan member who had been swept along. Once you were caught up in one of Krai’s Thousand Trials, there was no escaping. The sky seemed to almost respond to Isabella’s worried gaze as it suddenly began to light up.

A panicking clan member dashed into the lounge. They didn’t seem to care that they were drenched head to toe.

“Hey, everyone! Big news!” they shouted in a hoarse voice. “Hidden Curse is going to war with Akashic Tower. Their top members are on the move and we’re gonna be feeling the shock waves!”

This caused an instant shift in everyone’s mood.

Hidden Curse was an old clan and considered one of the best even in Zebrudia. Their clan master, the Level 8 Abyssal Inferno, was known for her intensity that matched up even with Grieving Souls. If Hidden Curse came into direct conflict with another group, there would be no telling how much collateral damage might occur. The Explorers’ Association might start dispatching their own.

Lyle scratched his head and wore a look of despair.

“Damn Krai,” he shouted. “He said he’s going on a vacation!”

Other hunters joined in.

“Aaah! We’ve been had!”

“And we had just been freed from Drink!”

Isabella let out a deep sigh as she watched as her fellow clan members began to once again scream and shout.

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Tremendous rain and wind blew across the dark plain. The continuous bolts of lightning and their thundering impacts seemed almost lethal. Hunters were still human and therefore in many ways helpless before nature's might.

"Shit, a storm?! You've gotta be joking."

The storm hit him from the side, his single jacket only doing so much to protect him. His loud curses disappeared into the winds and went unheard. From the top of the carriage, Gray, the unwilling lookout, hopped out of his seat and down to the ground. In the driver's seat, Black and White were drenched in rain and trying to calm the startled horses.

From the corner of his eye, Gray caught sight of that infernal woman calmly setting up a tent, unbothered by the storm. She removed the tent from the piled-up luggage and assembled it with practiced hands. Through wind and rain, mud and darkness, she moved without pause.

She wore a thick robe and a large backpack. She didn't particularly resemble a hunter with her refined looks and lack of weapons, but her skills removed any doubt that she was indeed a hunter—and a first-rate one at that.

But what distinguished her more than anything was her expression—she didn't look perturbed in the slightest.

Her eyes suddenly shifted towards Gray as he alighted from the top of the carriage. Lightning flashed and those pink irises flitted from Gray to White to Black. She was just one small woman. The three of them had been taken down by the other one, the infamous Stifled Shadow, and she had left the carriage in spite of the raging storm. That indescribable chimera was nowhere to be seen either.

This looked like a good opportunity to flee. Visibility was low, but they hadn't gone too far from the capital and it would be hard to pursue someone in the storm.

As Gray considered this, Sitri Smart furrowed her brow with displeasure.

"White, Black, Gray, you've finally gotten your chance. Don't do anything to embarrass me," she said.

There was just one issue and that was the collars around their necks. The

grimy collars were a form of magical artifact and they were originally intended for restricting the movement of slaves. Slavery wasn't practiced in Zebrudia so these collars were a rare sight, but after spending many years in the underworld, Gray was familiar with what they could do. By pressing a remote switch, the wearer would feel a strong electric shock.

It wasn't as strong as a Relic, but it could deliver a powerful and stable flow of energy for a long period of time. Even someone with high levels of mana material wouldn't be able to hold out forever.

The collars were durable and relied on in certain countries that employed slave labor. They were also designed to give a strong shock if they were hit hard enough, so one couldn't even attempt to remove them. Gray and the others were bound by an invisible chain and Sitri didn't seem like the type to hesitate before giving them a shock. In fact, this sort of item wasn't even something you could obtain in Zebrudia through conventional means.

Gray figured White and Black had both reached the same conclusion. If they had all responded to Sitri Smart's sudden summons, it meant they were all in agreement—they had screwed up. They shouldn't have taken that job to retrieve the item from the auction.

It was too late for regret, the die had been cast. Some hunters were good people, but Grieving Souls, the ones who had caught Gray and the others, were clearly the opposite.

These hunters could've just handed Gray and his cohorts to the guards, but instead chose to keep them under their control. If they did that, then these hunters probably wouldn't even hesitate to kill them. They could consider their lives forfeit if they didn't comply. Really, it was possible they might even be liquidated without any particular reason.

All Gray and the others could do was what they were told and pray they didn't invite the hunters' wrath. Even if all that awaited them was their demise, they had no choice but to pretend otherwise and keep on living.

Then, a thought occurred to Gray. If all three of them attacked Sitri, couldn't they take her down before she could press the switch? They could take her down and steal the switch. If they could just do something about the collars, it

was possible they might obtain even a small degree of freedom.

White, Black, and Gray all specialized in dealing with hunters. They rarely took targets head-on, but they were confident enough in their strength. The fearsome man in the carriage seemed like he could be a problem, but he didn't seem too interested in Gray and the others so perhaps he could be negotiated with.

This might be the first and last time they'd see Sitri defenseless and separated from her comrades. They could keep obeying her, but things would only get worse if they continued down that route. Fortunately for Gray and the others, their weapons hadn't been confiscated.

Gray made up his mind and raised his head, but at that moment blinding light tore the darkness and a tremendous rumbling echoed about. The sensation shook Gray's vision and he stumbled. White and Black desperately tried to calm the terrified horses.

Lightning struck nearby. Gray instinctively closed his eyes and covered his head. He heard a quiet voice.

"Still not used to lightning, are you?"

Gray hesitantly opened his eyes. Sitri was standing close and looking up at him. Under the circumstances, her calm eyes and the smile on her lips didn't look fearless but rather insane.

Sitri removed a potion from her pocket and pressed it into Gray's unsteady hand.



"You see, I became used to the lightning long ago," she said, voice just a whisper. "The trick to developing resistance to lightning is—listen well now—to be continually struck by lightning. The first time it happens you'll nearly die, but if you repeat the process then your mana material will strengthen your body in that direction. The liquid lightning rods were developed for that purpose."

Madness. Inconceivable. Suicide. Gray wanted to write off her ideas as any of these things, but Sitri didn't sound like she would permit that.

It was well-known that a hunter's will could affect how they were strengthened by mana material. It was also well-known that all high-level hunters made use of that function. However, even with that in mind, what Sitri was suggesting didn't sound like it could be described with a tepid word like "training."

Gray remained speechless and just looked at the potion in his hand.

"Oh, that's right," Sitri compounded. "If you develop greater lightning resistance, the shocks delivered by the collars might become bearable. How troubling. This weather is optimal, isn't it? Perhaps it's a message from Krai. Perhaps he's saying, 'If you've got the resolve then you can run.'"

A message. Lightning struck again. What a thunderous night it was. Gray thought he heard a faint scream somewhere. Gray, White, and Black were all standing stock-still. Sitri smiled.

"I hate to ask this of you, but could I ask that you guys look after the horses? I can't rely on Killiam for these sorts of matters. Ah, and don't worry about the tent. I'm used to these sorts of situations, I'm afraid you'll only get in my way."

Sitri turned her defenseless back to them and went back to setting up the tent. Within the glass vial shoved into Gray's hand was a glowing white liquid that he had never seen before.

He decided to rethink his escape plan.

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The Thousand Tricks. The leader of Grieving Souls had reached Level 8 at a younger age than any other hunter in the empire. His strength and cunning

knew no bounds. He was an elusive figure with innumerable victories to his name. Yet, despite his prestige, nobody knew anything specific about his powers.

Chloe Welter had picked up many rumors of this man throughout her time as an employee of the Explorers' Association. His preternatural intellect caused him to be feared not only by his enemies but even by his allies. Among the hunters of First Steps, his incomprehensible power and almost prescient schemes were referred to as the "Thousand Trials." On occasion, Chloe would also hear preposterous tales of this hunter from her uncle Gark, the Association Branch Manager.

Yet, despite all this, she still hadn't expected the Thousand Tricks would just leave her behind. She understood that expediency was necessary in a hunter's line of work, but this was just far too absurd. To think she had been nervous about accompanying him on his duty, all for it to lead to this. The rumors were right, he was unpredictable.

The sun had set a while ago and a storm raged outside. This wasn't the sort of weather to be traveling in. What awful timing, the clouds had just begun to gather when Chloe had been given her orders to go after the Thousand Tricks.

The carriage was all ready and waiting for her. Chloe quickly finished her preparations and ran off to the gate.

She spent most of her time in her Explorers' Association uniform, but had now eschewed her professional garb for travel-appropriate attire. These were clothes she had prepared long ago, back when she aspired to be a hunter. Now for the first time in a while, a sword hung at her hip.

Near the gate was a carriage bearing the insignia of the Explorers' Association and the hunters that had been hired to escort her. They stood beneath a rudimentary shelter and looked at the sky with dissatisfaction. The red-haired man at the front of the group noticed Chloe and called out to her.

"Are we really gonna go in this awful weather?" he asked.

"We are. This is urgent business," she answered.

"Gilbert, that's no way to speak to a client!" chided Rhuda Runebeck, the

well-endowed brunette hunter standing next to him.

"No, I don't mind," said Chloe. "I understand that there are conditions which hunters prefer to avoid."

"R-Right. Still, I can't get over how quickly I got an order directly from the Association," said Gilbert.

The other hunters behind him all nodded in agreement. The sky was dark and rain was coming down, but a certain brightness shone in their faces. Quests issued by the Explorers' Association paid very well and were only offered to hunters who were deemed to have potential or to be trustworthy.

Chloe's guard consisted of the promising solo hunter Rhuda Runebeck as well the party Scorching Whirlwind, which included the well-known Gilbert Bush. Chloe had few complaints about a party like this.

Gilbert had once been known for being a disagreeable sort, but he had purportedly calmed down recently. However, the primary reason they had been selected for this job was that Rhuda and Gilbert knew Krai through the White Wolf's Den quest.

This task wasn't a particularly difficult one and they knew their final destination. The only aspect warranting concern was that they needed to catch up to Krai. Chloe clenched her fist and looked over the party before her.

"Speed will be paramount for this quest. We have to do whatever we can to meet up with Krai before he arrives in the Gladis Earldom."

Of course, the Thousand Tricks would most likely be fine even without Chloe, but he tended to be rather flippant when it came to matters of authority. He was perhaps even as flippant as Solis Rodin, the ancestor of Ark Rodin. The Thousand Tricks had shown an inclination towards giving credit to others and that was cause for concern at the Explorers' Association. Modesty was laudable, but everything had limits.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that this task would be pivotal for future relations between Earl Gladis and the Explorers' Association. One reason Gark had sent Chloe after Krai Andrey was that it would be a good experience for her. The bigger reason was so she could ensure that Krai took his paycheck. Of

course, Chloe's previous attempt to join First Steps was also a relevant factor...

"I still can't believe that even a Level 8 would— No, let me rephrase that. *Because* he's a Level 8, I can't believe he'd go out in this weather. There's not just monsters, but also lightning to worry about," said Carmine.

Carmine Syan. He was a Heavy Warrior with a calm demeanor and the leader of Scorching Whirlwind.

Carmine wasn't wrong, but Chloe knew better.

"Considering his past experience, I don't think the Thousand Tricks would be scared of a storm," she boasted. "In fact, I've heard stories of him leading charges straight into storms."

"Really..."

It was a true story, believe it or not.

It was common sense that even a hunter was no match for the forces of nature, but apparently, this didn't mean much to a Level 8. It made a degree of sense: rain was no issue and a lightning bolt wouldn't do much to someone of a high level.

"There's no need to worry, lightning doesn't strike that frequently," Chloe said.

She didn't particularly want to go out in this storm, but she felt Krai was sending her a message by leaving her behind. This was one of his Thousand Trials. These Trials would occasionally pull in people from outside First Steps and now it was happening amid inclement weather.

Chloe both hated to lose and had once aspired to be a hunter. It would be impossible for her not to be excited under these circumstances.

"The Thousand Tricks is also in a carriage, so we should be able to catch them," she continued. "Not to mention, our horse is of a different sort. If we hurry we'll be just fine. Rather, the more time we give them the more complicated their route might become and that will make it harder for us to rendezvous."

Their carriage was hooked up to an iron mustang—a powerful equine

monster. It wouldn't lose to a normal horse.

"Understood. I don't really see the monsters in the area won't give us any trouble," Rhuda said with a nod.

As an employee of the Explorers' Association, Chloe knew her way around a battle and she regularly absorbed mana material. She also was adept with a blade; she wouldn't prove a hindrance to Scorching Whirlwind.

"But be careful," Rhuda continued. "Tino, an acquaintance of Krai's, said he likes to get himself wrapped up in trouble."

"That's just fine, the work of a high-level hunter is of interest to us at the Association. Besides, per our initial plan, I was to accompany Krai on this trip."

"I wouldn't count that as a good thing."

The White Wolf's Den quest must have been quite an ordeal, because Rhuda's smile was a fatigued one.

Just then, a boorish voice called to them from behind.

"Krai. Did you just say, 'Krai'?"



The voice had come from a large party. It consisted of eight men and two carriages. Chloe looked wide-eyed at the tall giant standing firmly in the center of the group.

It was the Crashing Lightning, Arnold Hail, along with everyone else who had been in the recent clash with the Thousand Tricks.

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"Tsk, what rotten luck. I guess this sort of weather comes even in Zebrudia."

They were near the gate. Just barely managing to fit under a shelter with everyone else, Eigh Lalia looked to the sky with disappointment. The sudden storm reminded him and his party members of their homeland Nebulanubes, the Land of Fogs, a place with a rainy season that went year-round.

Judging by the winds and the volume of rain, this wasn't going to just blow over, it would probably go on all day. The members of Falling Fog were used to fighting in the rain, but that didn't mean they enjoyed it. In the Land of Fog, storms were a hunter's worst enemy. Leaving town on a stormy night was something they wanted to avoid.

In the past, it would often be during storms that the Thunder Dragon would attack Nebulanubes. To them, a sky shrouded in dark clouds was a bad omen.

Arnold's expression was bitter and, if you knew where to look, extremely irritated. He was certain his nemesis had already left the capital. Arnold wanted to begin his pursuit as soon as possible and he knew Eigh and the rest wouldn't hesitate to come with him.

This wasn't just a matter of Arnold's pride, but of everyone in Falling Fog. The Thousand Tricks's high level put some fear in them, but they were all united in their desire for revenge. However, pursuing a target in the rain was still tremendously difficult, so Arnold refrained from giving the order to go.

They didn't know where the Thousand Tricks was heading. They had sought out info, but all they learned was that he was going on a vacation. There were only so many towns that were connected directly to the capital by roads, but if they chose the wrong one, it would be too much time lost to recover.

Furthermore, Falling Fog was eight men spread across two carriages; with all their weapons and items, it would be a tight squeeze to put them all in one. Having so many in a party was good in a fight, but it also made them slow to get around.

“There’s no way this will continue for months on end like it can in Nebulanubes. It might be best to rest a night and see what happens,” Eigh proposed.

Then at the same moment, he heard someone say the name of their nemesis. He turned around and saw a party of young hunters. A smile formed on his lips when he saw among them a familiar face.

It was an employee of the Explorers’ Association. Chloe, he was pretty sure. She was the one who had delivered the declaration from the Thousand Tricks. She seemed to remember them as well because her eyes widened.

Eigh realized that he hadn’t seen her since she first delivered that declaration. He didn’t recognize any of the party members with her.

“Falling Fog,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. There was something mysterious about her voice. “What’s a party with an average level of 6 doing at an hour like this?”

The sun had set and rain was falling. No normal hunter would go out at this time. Arnold narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. That meant he was going to leave everything to Eigh. The Crashing Lightning was his party’s symbol, having him speak on every minor occasion would be a sign of weakness.

This was a chance for Eigh to show what he was capable of. He gave his introduction and looked over the young party.

“So you geezers also have business with the Thousand Tricks,” said the red-haired man, Gilbert. “What a coincidence.”

Coincidence. Indeed, a coincidence. It was also fortunate. Apparently, Chloe and the rest had to meet up with the Thousand Tricks for a job and it seemed they knew his destination. Even if they didn’t, the information network and the authority of a large organization like the Explorers’ Association dwarfed that of a single party.

"It's our lucky day, Arnold. If they're fine with it, what do you say we tag along with them?"

"Very well," Arnold said with a nod.

Rhuda opened her mouth, but then closed it, perhaps because her client was right in front of her. Chloe had a thoughtful look on her face. She was likely considering the schism between the Thousand Tricks and Falling Fog.

However, fights were an everyday occurrence in the savage world of hunters. The Explorers' Association would tacitly allow them as long as no crimes were committed. Perhaps "noninterference" would be more accurate than "tacit approval." They naturally didn't approve of murder, but as long as no civilians got caught in the cross fire then inflicting even serious wounds went unpunished.

Even if the young party turned them down, that was no problem for Falling Fog. They were a first-rate party; pursuing the Thousand Tricks would be difficult, but hunting down Rhuda and co would be a simple task.

Falling Fog also had the advantage of strength. They wouldn't resort to such meaningless violence, but if they wanted to they could wipe the young hunters out for good. Weakness was a crime among their ilk.

Chloe thought it over quietly. She nodded with a smile.

"In that case, I see no reason for the Explorers' Association to decline. However, I must inform you that even should you protect us during the journey, we won't be able to compensate you for it."

Her smile didn't extend past her lips. She was a bold one. Eigh had heard that she was the niece of that branch manager and he had no trouble believing it.

Chloe could tell what Falling Fog was after. Even still, she saw nothing wrong with showing them the way. This was because she knew they were weaker than their quarry. Naturally, she also realized there wasn't much she could do to prevent them from simply trailing her party.

A fierce, lopsided grin formed on Arnold's lips.

"Hmph, I like it. Eigh, we're going with them."

Chloe smiled and held out her hand.

"I trust you'll keep your men in line, Arnold," she said.

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I grimaced at the smell of something burning.

*We really shouldn't have gone out in the storm, I thought.*

I knew that from the start. Even I didn't need to be told that this was a bad idea. But, if you'll grant me the opportunity to defend myself, what could I have done when the storm came up so suddenly?! I was a victim! A victim!

However, I found it hard to keep calling myself such when I saw the black smoke rising from Tino's body.

She must have been struck by lightning multiple times while being forced to run through the storm. She opened her eyes just slightly and smiled faintly.

"Master," she said. "Did you...see me? I...did my best."

"Yeah, you did."

"Thank you for everything. You... Lizzy... I'm so glad I met all of you..."

Her breath was halting and the strength had left her body. Partway through I began to mentally check out, so I couldn't be too sure, but it was an extraordinary amount of lightning. It was enough that I gave up counting.

*Gee, Siddy, you sure have gotten good at making potions.*

Tino's final words were ones of gratitude despite everything we'd done to her. What a good kid.

I looked at the bad kid, Liz, as she hoisted a smoldering Tino over her shoulder.

"Krai Baby, look, look!" she exclaimed. "It's just as I said! There was nothing to worry about. She's alive. Even T's growing day by day!"

"Yeah, uh-huh. But go a bit easier on her," I said. "Remember, this is a vacation. No more lightning runs, okay?"

I'd probably be raising a bigger fuss if I wasn't used to seeing people get

struck by lightning.

“Okaaay! I’m sure this was enough to raise her lightning resistance, so we’ll call it there.”

*Tino’s wounds wouldn’t be so bad if she just wore Evolve Greed. I’ll definitely make sure she gets some rest at the next town,* I swore to myself as I watched a recovery potion get forced down her throat through a straw.

We camped out on the side of the road and spent a few hours there. By dawn, the rain had let up just a bit. The sky was still blocked out by clouds black as night but there was no more thunder, which was an improvement.

In the drizzling rain, Drink, now used to having a rider, dashed this way and that. Apparently, the rain didn’t mean much of anything to a chimera. No matter how many times I saw it, the sight of a two-meter-tall, half naked giant wearing a paper bag and riding atop a chimera struck me as a sign that the end was nigh.

“Don’t worry, this potion will prevent fatigue, even in the rain. Worst-case scenario, if the horses give out we can have Drink pull the carriage.”

Sitri’s usual smile was blinding. I figured it’d be best to leave everything to her.

I climbed into the carriage and removed my water-resistant jacket. It appeared they wouldn’t be running today, because Liz and Tino came in after me. From head to toe, every inch of Tino seemed to be exhausted. Last, Sitri entered and then the carriage got moving.

It seemed that Black and the others would be on driver duty again. They were all deathly pale and seemed in poor health, but I figured it was nothing to worry about.

I had my reservations, but I took a deep breath and spoke up when I was ready.

“I’m banning all training.”

“Huh?!”

Liz had been hugging her knees and smiling, but my sudden mandate caused

her to purse her lips with dissatisfaction.

Looking back, my childhood friends had always been going full throttle. From when we weren't even hunters and still in our hometown, to when we had overcome many obstacles and made names for ourselves, I had never seen them ease up.

That was probably a part of their success, something I had only ever witnessed while cowering from the sidelines. This time, however, I would be imposing limits. Tino had been covered in wounds. Sitri's potion had somehow managed to keep her breathing and she had been given time to rest, but there were bags under her eyes and her dainty shoulders were visibly shaking.

Considering smoke had been rising from her body the previous night, that potion was something incredible. However, our objective was not to develop lightning resistance. It was not any form of special training. I hardly needed to say it, but it also wasn't to test out Evolve Greed.

I wanted Tino, Liz, and Sitri to rest once in a while! I had brought them along as bodyguards, but I hadn't been thinking only of myself. It might not sound convincing coming from a guy who's always taking breaks, but it's important to occasionally forget your training and rest your body and soul.

Looking out the window, I saw a vast gloomy plain. I could see no other carriages or travelers in the vicinity and there was something lonely about the misty grasslands. I didn't know if another storm was on its way or not, but it was a vacation so I wanted to avoid camping out anyway.

*Right, this is a vacation! Just an excursion! No training necessary!*

"Our objective is to go on vacation! Have some pity for Tino!" I said with passion.

I had already said this a number of times, but nobody seemed to understand that.

Tino looked at me in disbelief. Liz didn't seem to be repenting in the slightest. I might mention here that she had also been struck by lightning but, as luck would have it, she was unharmed. Who knew that was possible?

"But, Krai Baby, that was the perfect opportunity," she said with upturned

eyes. “If you don’t train when you can, you might not be strong enough when it really counts.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Probably.”

I had heard of people training under falling water, but not under falling lightning.

*If you wanna get hit by lightning, that’s fine but please stop trying to transform Tino.*

Sitri had been sitting with her hands on her knees and legs folded beneath her when she clapped as though struck by sudden inspiration.

“Could this be practice binding?” she asked.

*Well, there’s a word I’ve never heard before...*

“By electing to refrain from training, we’ll keep our strength low and therefore experience more life-threatening battles. Am I correct?”

*Not at all.*

Sitri sure came up with some, shall we say, abnormal ideas. My childhood friends were hunters to their very core. For some reason, the bizarre suggestion had Tino looking at me with a look of shock.

“Am I correct in assuming that you don’t think we need anyone who couldn’t survive such an affair?” Sitri said. “I think it’s quite logical! We can’t always go easy on ourselves.”

“Leave it to Krai Baby to come up with something so harsh!” Liz said. “Give it all you’ve got, T! It’s not my fault if you get killed!”

*That’s not at all what I was getting at. And why do you two look so happy?*

Tino dragged her body towards me. Apparently, she had been quite calm and collected when she was a solo hunter, but thanks to Liz she always looked at me with teary eyes. I wanted to hug her and thank her for all her hard work.

“Master, I want to continue training,” she said.

“Hah? If Krai Baby says jump, you ask how high! How many times do I have to repeat myself?” Liz yelled as she ripped Tino off of me and flung her to the

ground.

*She's become a villain. I didn't even say for her to jump, but it seems she'll be airborne anyway.*

It had been over a year since I had gone on an adventure with Liz or anyone in Grieving Souls. While I had been in my office eating ice cream, polishing Relics, and messing with Eva, they were hunters past the point of recovery. I had felt that way before, but I had never imagined they would get to the point where they couldn't distinguish training from a vacation.

*This is bad. They're going to lose what few social skills they have. They might even infect Tino and the other clan members.*

"It looks like you all need to be straightened out," I said with a hard-boiled smile.

Our vacation gained another objective. I would make sure they thoroughly forgot all about training and make them rest. I would teach them how to relax. This was the perfect job for me, the master of loafing about. These hunters were far too hungry for adrenaline.

Liz's eyes glimmered.

*Nope, even if you look at me like that, I'll still stop you. No matter what. And isn't it a bit strange that you smiled when I mentioned straightening you out?*

Tino was quivering.

*Don't worry, I'll protect you.*

"Like I said earlier, this is a vacation. You're all banned from training."

Liz threw up her hand.

"Hey, what counts as training? Where does physical exercise land?"

"That's banned too."

"Running?"

"That too."

"Okay, okay, but what about, say, wearing heavy clothes?"

“That too.”

*Please stop trying to poke holes in my mandates.*

“Mmm, how about light sparring? Does that count as training?”

“Does the application of potions fall under training?”

Even Sitri got in on the dumb bit.

*I said this was a vacation and yes, it does count. It all counts. Let's enjoy this vacation. Let's relax.*

“Anything you do to become stronger counts as training.”

“Huh?! What about breathing methods? Walking methods? What if it's something I do unconsciously?” Liz went on.

“Does thinking about tactics count as training? How about giving orders and synthesizing potions?” Sitri asked.

I was a bit put off by just how concerned they were.

*You guys are far too attached to your daily training. What do you even mean by tactics?*

“Yeah, it's all training, and therefore banned.”

Both sisters looked heartbroken. I cleared my throat. This was supposed to be a fun vacation, at this rate I was putting the cart before the horse.

“W-Well, I allow it if you really can't help yourselves...”

“You're the best!” Liz cried.

“Indeed. It might be bearable for Lizzy and myself, but it could prove an ordeal for T,” Sitri said.

“Master, thank you very much.”

I didn't know why Tino was thanking me. I looked at Liz's broad smile, Tino's tears, and Sitri's expression of concern, and just sort of stopped caring. It was a bad habit of mine.

But if I were to pull back here, nothing would change, so I closed my eyes and, though it pained me to do it, continued with my next mandate.

“Next, I’m banning violent behavior.”

“Okay, how about a light, like a reeeeally light kick? Does that count?” Liz asked. “How about giving cocky bastards what’s coming to them? Does pounding T during her training count?”

“Does it fall under violent behavior if it’s done in self-defense?” Sitri said. “For instance, what about using authority to quash opposition? And what about the application of potions?”

“Master’s Trials...” Tino mumbled. “They’re far worse than simple violence.”

*Those are all out.*

It would defeat the purpose of the ban if I just made exceptions. Besides, I didn’t see how violence was necessary for a vacation. Tino’s words had been like a stab to the chest. I had to do whatever I could to recover my glory as her master.

“And the final, and most important, thing is to have fun.”

*Never mind the circumstances that brought us here, we’ve left the capital and it’d be a waste not to enjoy it.*

Once we met up with the rest of Grieving Souls, I wouldn’t have to worry about protection any longer. It had been some time since the entire party went out together. I expected some bumps along the way, but I was certain we would have a good vacation.

Liz and Sitri both smiled, but Tino looked somewhat uneasy.

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The rain showed no sign of abating.

However, we didn’t run into any monsters. When we arrived at the first town, it was a few hours later than anticipated.

The town was Elan. Compared to the capital, it was quite small and served mostly as a stopping point along the way. Even still, there should have been a fair number of people lined up outside the gate, yet, perhaps due to the weather, we didn’t see a single person.

I climbed out of the carriage and stretched my limbs and stiff body while enjoying the feeling of standing on solid ground for the first time in a few hours. It was still daytime, but large dark clouds concealed the sun.

“What terrible weather...”

To have so much precipitation when it wasn’t even the rainy season, well, I wasn’t going to call it a bad omen. However, after sitting in the rain that whole time Sitri’s hired hands all looked to be at their wits’ ends.

Only Killiam and Drink both seemed entirely unaffected. Perhaps they enjoyed the run in the rain because they both looked quite in their element. I also learned that Killiam’s paper bag was apparently waterproof.

“Krai, did you notice that we had the wind to our backs the entire time?” Sitri asked as she got out of the carriage.

I couldn’t tell what she was getting at. Such a thing didn’t sound possible, but either way, I didn’t care about the direction of the wind. Of course I didn’t notice.

“Oh? That’s nice.”

My first concern was the cold and weary horses. I thought we should spend a night in this town and let them rest. We weren’t being chased by anyone, nor were we in any hurry.

“Aah, that was bugging me. The rain just kept falling and falling,” Liz said with a gleeful clap of her hands. “This storm’s totally following us. When we got to this town, the wind stopped.”

*Did I do something to deserve this?!*

We finished our paperwork and were let into town. There was a bit of a fuss about Killiam and Drink coming in but apparently, we had a license to bring monsters with us. This license was normally for Monster Tamers, but Sitri’s thoroughness knew no bounds.

The buildings were smaller and the streets less crowded, but other than that Elan didn’t look too different from the capital. Except this wasn’t the capital. Nobody in this nondescript town knew who I was.

I didn't have anything against Zebrudia, but I had far too many ties to the capital. Everyone in that city was watching me and waiting for a chance to strike. I thought back to that time I became tangled up in Arty's affairs while simply walking down the street.

But now I was in a town where very few people might recognize me. It was also raining so I wore a hood that obscured my face; my chances of being noticed were next to none. The thought of this made me feel like a weight was off my chest.

Thinking on it with a clear head, there was no way that storm was following us. It had been nothing more than a simple case of bad luck. Even if I were to get struck with lightning I knew I could withstand multiple hits because Kris had charged my Safety Rings.

I took a deep breath and let myself brim with excitement for the coming vacation.

*I am a free man!*

Liz abruptly began spinning in circles for no clear reason. Without actually tripping on anything, she stumbled and fell forward. She landed in a puddle and splashed water on my legs. Not a common sight. I wondered if she might be feeling ill. I looked at her with a furrowed brow.

"He he he, sorry about that," she said with an awkward smile. "I forgot how to walk with my guard down. I haven't walked like this in years."

"Y-You haven't?"

This wasn't quite what I was hoping for, but I pushed those thoughts aside. I just wanted her to enjoy a relaxing vacation, but if I told her just to be herself then she'd return to the usual walking genocide. Liz only had one pedal and that was the accelerator. I would just have her endure the vacation and make it up to her later.

Despite her stumbling, Liz clasped her hands behind her back and gave me a bright smile.

"But, this is something new. I think it's kinda fun?"

I didn't say anything.

*It's good to find joy in everything you do. Maybe I should try to learn from her example.*

I was watching Killiam, who was breathing heavily and holding Drink's reins, when Sitri and Tino returned from their errand. Sitri's light pink eyes glimmered from beneath her hood.

"My apologies for the delay," she said.

"Don't worry about it. Did you have an errand or something?"

I figured it must have been important if she ran off to take care of it while it was raining and we still hadn't secured any lodging.

My question had been an innocent one, but Sitri held a hand over her mouth and looked bashful.

"No," she said. "I cut myself off from my information network."

"Huh?"

"I had arranged so I would be contacted should something happen, but that goes against your orders, doesn't it? I also retracted any initial groundwork done regarding the landlord. Ah, I haven't been this defenseless in so long. It's a bit thrilling. This will be another good experience."

Being unable to hold back was something you could consider to be both a strength and weakness of those sisters. I had wanted to seal off their arms—their actions—not their eyes and ears, but it was hard to say that when I had given the order in the first place.

*Just act normally. Normally.*

Liz whistled.

"Hmm, you're not messing around, Siddy," she said and looked at me. "Hey, Krai Baby, maybe I should bind my legs or something?"

"You don't need to bind your legs..."

*This isn't a game where you give yourself handicaps. All I'm asking is that you spend some time at rest.*

It seemed only Tino understood the vacation. I glanced at her and saw that she was cowering behind Sitri, but due to their differences in height, she couldn't conceal herself entirely. This came as something of a shock after the deference she had been showing the past few days.

*Maybe she still isn't over the incident with the mask... Don't worry, Tino. A Relic is simply a tool, and with practice, you should be able to control it. Even if you lose control, Liz or Sitri will stop you, so don't be afraid...*

"Krai, what shall we do about lodgings?" Sitri asked. "Since this is technically a vacation I think we should find somewhere of an appropriate rank..."

"Can we get lodgings without booking in advance? I bet there are tons of people stuck here due to the rain."

"I'm sure we can if we use your name," she answered with a thin smile. She didn't even take a moment to think about it.

I wondered what value could be attached to a name like mine, but pondering that only made me sad. Within the capital, high-level hunters received preferential treatment. I rarely took advantage of this because doing so made me feel bad, but Sitri had a point, invoking my level might allow me to secure a room or two.

But I couldn't do that. I was out on vacation because I was shirking my duties.

"Not gonna happen," I said in a hushed voice. "We're on a trip right now. Think of it like this, we're not currently hunters."

We wouldn't be taking quests, going to battle, or working. If someone on the street asked me if I was the Thousand Tricks, I planned to tell them they had the wrong guy. We wouldn't do any training either. That's what vacations were all about.

"That sounds very refreshing. What a wonderful idea," said Sitri.

Even though I thought I was suggesting something dumb, Sitri offered her approval without hesitation.

*You're going to spoil like this. No, I should be apologizing. Somebody set me straight.*

"Oh, we're gonna be hiding our true identities. That sounds so fun! It'll be like we're undercover! What do you think, T?" Liz said.

"I-I can't pretend to understand Master's true intentions," Tino said.

"You've gotta put more energy into it. Later we can brag to Luke about this."

It was then that I made a terrible realization: there was nobody in this group who would offer me their opinion. If I fell into a hole, everyone here would fall down with me. I should have at least brought Eva.

The right thing to do would be to just take responsibility for my actions and tread carefully, but I wouldn't be the only one affected by that. An indescribable sense of dread swept over me.

"I understood your intentions, Krai. Leave the arrangements to me," Sitri said while gripping my hand.

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Perhaps anticipation really was worse than anything that might come after.

Even after her disgraceful behavior, Tino's master and the Smart sisters acted no differently towards her. It was possible they were just being nice to her, but Tino struggled to believe it. Treasure hunters needed to be strong both physically and mentally, and Tino's master and the Smart sisters were fortifying her on both fronts.

Tino had been worried she might die when she had been made to run about in the storm and get struck by lightning. However, seeing how nonchalant Liz and Sitri had been, she was now only embarrassed at how much more she had to learn.

Her master's words were worth more to her than any amount of gold, but they were also something to be feared. Every Trial of his up until now had been a hellish barrage of adversities. But on the other hand, Tino was glad she had looked death in the eye and survived to tell the tale and she trained daily with this sort of resolve.

However, this current Trial differed from any other so far. This was a training bind; she was supposed to put aside the skills she worked to the bone to

develop and place herself in the position of someone weak.

Initially, she failed to understand the point of this, but she figured it out by watching Lizzy and Siddy. She didn't know what was going to happen on their vacation, but she could tell it wasn't going to be anything good. What might be a vacation to the capital's strongest Level 8 would surely be a gauntlet to her.

Now she would be going in defenseless to the sort of Trials that she barely managed to complete with her life intact. She wouldn't be risking her life, she would be throwing it away. It was a Trial unprecedented and perilous.

Naturally, the Smart sisters would have a better understanding of Krai's words than Tino. So why was there not a shadow of concern on their faces? It was beyond Tino's understanding. The two sisters weren't accustomed to leaving themselves defenseless and it showed in their every movement, but Tino saw even that in an admirable light.

Surely this must be the difference experience makes. Tino couldn't hope to emulate them. It had become second nature for her to be aware of her surroundings, make no footfalls, and always be prepared for combat. To throw that away would be throwing away everything she built up until this point.

The humiliation she had felt when Lizzy dragged her to the carriage had faded without a trace now that this new Trial lay before her. This wasn't simple combat training, this was refinement of the soul. This was so that her soul might be as fluid and placed as water, that she might stay calm even in the worst of situations.

Tino had been unable to quell the emotions inflated by that mask and secluded herself in her room after she had been overwhelmed by the shame that followed. For someone capable of such failures, this would be a Trial far more grueling than being struck by lightning.

Then she found herself floored when she recalled the usual demeanor of her master. She checked once more, and, sure enough, he was defenseless. More so than even Lizzy or Sitri. Not only that, she remembered that he was defenseless in any situation, no matter how dire. Just what sort of bold spirit was necessary to calmly expose oneself to danger so many times?

Tino felt a fear that defied description.

Suddenly, her master turned towards her and she corrected her posture.

“I’m sorry that Liz forced you to come along,” he said.

“Think nothing of it, Master,” she said. “But...am I not a burden?”

Tino was still lacking. Not counting the three obvious sacrifices Siddy had brought along, she was by far the weakest of the four people on the trip. She was short on experience, strength, everything. She probably even ranked below Killiam.

But she had faith in her master to come to her aid should she be faced with certain peril.

She was worried that she might be a burden. She was both scared and nervous at the thought of this new Trial. She had to fight these thoughts back when she asked if she was a burden, but her unerring master looked at her in surprise.

“Of course not, I was hoping you would come with us,” he said. “After all, Liz is always being so hard on you.”

His mellow smile caused Tino to shiver almost instinctively. She felt indebted to her master and she was very fond of him, but that didn’t mean she was always happy to accept his strenuous Trials.

She saw only goodwill in his eyes, but that made him all the more terrifying. It was with perfectly good intentions that he inflicted his Trials, that he brought her on this out-of-the-blue vacation and put her in mortal peril.

Once, he said he was going on a trip and ended up slaying a dragon. Another time, he said he was going flower-viewing and arrived at the moment of a treasure vault’s appearance. He lived by common sense quite different from Tino’s.

She had intended to not be so easily swayed but that didn’t pan out.

“Oh, Master, I’m so glad to hear that,” she said with a sniffle. A pleading tone entered her voice. “I’m reaching my limits with Lizzy’s training.”

Tino thought both her master and Lizzy to be incredible people. She didn’t complain about their Trials because they didn’t just blindly assign them, they

also participated. Lizzy was glad to do this and Tino found that incredible.

However, there was one thing she had to say: that it was all too much for her.

“Yeah, uh-huh. That’s why I want you to spread your wings this time,” he said.

“How nice is that!” Liz cut in. “T, you’re getting a shot at redemption! C’mom try to look a bit happier about it, you’re being rude to Krai Baby.”

Just what did her master want of her? As Tino wondered this, Liz’s shrill voice seemed quite distant.

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Led by Sitri, we spent about half an hour walking down back roads until we arrived at a cozy little house.

It wasn’t anything fancy, but it was far from shabby. There was no name plaque and it was the sort of unremarkable building you’d forget the moment you looked the other way. Walls lined the perimeter and the metal gate was shut tightly.

Sitri pulled out a jingling bundle of dozens of similar-looking keys and didn’t hesitate to select one before sliding it into the keyhole.

“I prepared this place because I was certain it would be useful to you one day,” she said.

“Look at you, stooping to lying just to earn points,” Liz said. “Don’t you have any pride?”

“Oh hush, Lizzy, it’s not like you’re being of any use!”

The key turned with a click.

“It’s a base for emergencies,” Sitri explained while opening the gate. “Nobody but me knows of its existence. If there’s any place better for you to hide then, hmm, I can’t imagine it.”

“A base? Or a vacation house? And you bought this, Sitri?” I asked.

“Indeed. You never know what might happen in this day and age.”

*Just what in the world did you have in mind?*

This was far more than I would have expected. It was a small, sturdy house. There was even a garden. It didn't seem like she was renting it, which meant she must have put a fair amount of money into this. Even I had been considering changing our base of operations once we all retired, but Sitri was operating on an entirely different level.

"You see, no matter how hard you try to avoid it, staying at a lodge will leave some form of trail," Sitri said.

I wondered just what sort of pursuers she was anticipating. I had my doubts, but they just faded away when I saw Sitri's effulgent smile. I was fine, I just needed to not do anything bad that might cause someone to come after me.

"If you'd like, I can prepare a new family register," she said. "I already have multiple on hand."

"No, it's fine."

"If you say so..."

Sitri seemed a bit let down, but I wasn't going to change my family register all in the name of playing hooky. I wasn't even sure if that was legal.

Liz pursed her lips and tugged on my sleeve.

"Hey, Krai Baby, does preparing a hideaway count as violence? If it doesn't then this is way in Sitri's favor."

"It doesn't count as violence. Nor is it creating trouble for anyone."

"But it creates trouble for me? Does it count as training?"

"It doesn't."

It was then that I realized something: I didn't have much money. I didn't know how long this vacation might go on, so I needed to cut costs where I could.

The house must have been long unused because it had that particular scent of an abandoned building. The rain gently tapped against the roof. My eyes wandered about the room. There was an entrance hall and a living room. A kitchen, bathroom, and two bedrooms, each with two beds.

It didn't feel lived in, but it did have the bare minimum of necessary

furnishings. The low ceiling made it a tight fit for Killiam, and Drink couldn't even enter the house. It stayed in the garden.

It didn't seem like there would be enough space for Sitri's hired hands, so she sent them somewhere else. Four people was already plenty for a place this size. It wasn't luxurious, but it was perfectly livable.

The amount of preparation made for a hideaway that might not even get used was a good glimpse into Sitri's sense of perfectionism.

Sitri set her bag down and removed her hood.

"The house is stocked with food," she said with a grin. "It's all shelf-stable food, so you might find the taste wanting."

*Well, this isn't so bad. It's not what I had in mind, but it's a fine way to spend a vacation.*

Staying in a fancy lodge was nice, but there was something exciting about sleeping in a little house. This wouldn't have been possible if we had brought other clan members with us. Breaking from our daily norms wasn't so bad when it didn't involve peril.

The word *hideaway* (except it wasn't really hidden, it was more of a vacation house) was a romantic one. There were also beds and that made it leagues better than spending a night in the carriage.

Even Liz seemed to be enjoying herself as she knocked on the walls.

*Wait, why's she doing that?*

"Siddy, this looks like an ordinary house. Are the walls up to snuff?" she asked.

"Lizzy, that sort of thing was banned by Krai, remember? Now, they are reinforced, so it should take more than an ordinary weapon to break them..."

"Ah! S-Sorry, Krai Baby. It wasn't on purpose. It's just a habit."

Liz quickly bowed her head, but I wasn't angry at her or anything. I didn't want to make things harder for them, I just wanted them to have a peaceful vacation.

"I'm fairly confident all the bare necessities are in order," Sitri said.

"Way to go. Though it pisses me off to think you did all this and I never knew about it."

Perhaps following her instincts as a Thief, Liz hummed a tune and searched the house. I decided to take Sitri up on her offer and took off my coat and sat on the couch. Our trip had only just begun and I hadn't even done anything, yet I somehow had a satisfying sense of exhaustion. I let out a yawn as Sitri boiled water and began to put on tea.

*If I was god, I'd be considering divine punishment for Krai Andrey right about now.*

"Master, your guard's completely down. I shouldn't have expected anything less," Tino said.

"Yeah, uh-huh."

I couldn't tell if she was showing respect or making fun of me.

Liz let out a low whistle while moving a bookcase. She lightly pressed her hand against the back of the bookcase and one of the walls slid to the side without making a sound. Neatly arranged on the newly appeared wall were a plethora of weapons. Longswords, knives, staffs, guns, crossbows. There wasn't anything large like a battleaxe or a spear, but it still looked like something out of a weapon show. The room's bright lighting reflected off the polished blades.

*Have I walked into a weapon store?*

There was also a shelf lined with vials containing liquids of all the colors of the rainbow. It was a startling contrast between the shelves and the simple room.

"Lizzy, nobody said you could touch that!" Sitri said.

"Hmmm. What's this? A paralytic agent and a sleeping potion? And an...aphrodisiac? What were you planning to use this for?" Liz said.

"Cut that out! I have my own steps I need to take! I planned to explain it to Krai later."

*It seems this isn't a normal vacation house.*

From the floors to the ceiling, Liz didn't hesitate to touch everything and Sitri yelled at her every time. Even in a room that looked normal at first glance, a Thief could find layers of secrets. Rolling up the carpet revealed a door to a cellar, and hidden among the spices in the kitchen cupboard were various poisons. Sitri's level of preparation left me more impressed than surprised.

*I wonder if all hunters are like this...*

"Look, Krai Baby! Siddy keeps her hideaway stocked with salacious underwear! So, Siddy, why's this in your safe house? Is it a necessity? What do you plan to use it for? Don't tell me, seduction?" Liz said while rooting through a dresser.

"Stop it! It's none of your business!"

Liz ignored Sitri's protests and gripped a bit of black fabric with a cheer, which was all but drowned out by a piercing shriek from Sitri. As usual, I pretended not to notice. Tino looked quite bewildered, but this sort of horsing around was normal for these sisters.

Responding to Liz would only encourage her, so, in an act of mercy towards Sitri, I ignored her.

*Salacious underwear, huh?*

"Tino, is there anywhere you want to go?" I asked, mainly in an effort to keep my mind off the fighting sisters.

Our vacation had no specific destination and I wanted to do something nice for her since she was always getting the short end of the stick. Her shoulders jumped and she struggled to hide her confusion.

"Ah, um, wherever's easiest," she said.

"Easy? What do you mean? We're not planning to go anywhere difficult."

She wasn't being very specific. For instance, maybe she wanted to go for ice cream. I couldn't tell why she answered with a word like "easiest."

"S-Somewhere not too dangerous," she said in a voice so low I had to strain my ears to hear her.

"I've already told you, we won't go anywhere dangerous. Have I ever tried to

go anywhere dangerous in the past?"

Tino let out a stifled groan.

I tried to put her at ease in clear terms, but for some reason, she seemed like she was going to fall apart. Her white throat bobbed up and down and her lips were pressed together almost as though she were trying to hold back tears. It seemed she didn't believe me at all. All things considered, perhaps I deserved it but I still didn't like it.

I offered her a seat on the couch opposite me. She warily sat down and placed her hands on her knees.

"Tino, I've said this before, but this is a vacation. You can take it easy. That time with White Wolf's Den was just a bit of a screwup on my part."

"Just...a bit?"

"Sorry. A huge one. A huge screwup. What happened then was entirely beyond my expectations."

I gave in to Tino's teary eyes. I stopped giving a damn about my esteem as her master. I didn't think she'd forgive me just because I hadn't expected all that to happen, but what mattered was honesty. And the future.

"The mask too. If you don't want to, then you don't have to wear it. I promise. Though I'm certain you could put it to good use."

When Tino wore the mask she wasn't at all like how Ark described Éclair's transformation. Tino appeared embarrassed over what had happened but I thought that by comparison, she was relatively stable. But if she didn't want to wear the mask, then that was fine.

"I said it back then, but when you wore the mask you became Mad Tino."

Her emotions had been boosted. Her sense of loyalty had amplified and she became more assertive. That's all.

It seemed I brought back bad memories because a shade of crimson tinged her cheeks. I thought that if I made her remember that event any more then she would refuse to wear the mask ever again, so I returned our conversation to the initial subject.

“This time, there will be absolutely no danger. We won’t even fight any battles. At least, you and I won’t.”

That turned out to be a loaded sentence.

With my abysmal luck, there was no way to guarantee that we wouldn’t be dragged into some sort of skirmish. But come what may, we had Liz and Sitri on our side as well as Killiam and the fully grown Drink.

“Master...”

Tino called to me, but the tears in her eyes still hadn’t gone away. I wondered what I had done to her to prevent her from ever believing me. I had a few guesses, but I swear I had never intentionally put Tino in danger. It was for her sake that I tried to put the mask on her back in the carriage!

“I swear. No matter what happens, we’ll retreat to the sidelines. It was never my intention to put you in danger. Right—”

*—if something happens, I’ll protect you.*

In desperation, I was acting quite out of character, when my vision went white. At the same time, thunder rocked the house, causing me to jump.

*Was that thunder? It sounded really close. Am I sure it was just thunder?*

The house itself hadn’t been struck, but the impact still left me dizzy. I was thinking this was bad timing because I had just said something cool, but then I thought back on it and realized it was actually pretty embarrassing. Perhaps that thunder was for the best.

“Huh?! How come you and Krai Baby are sharing a bedroom?! Anyone can tell that makes no sense!” Liz yelled.

“This house is my house and T’s your apprentice!” Sitri yelled back. “Unless you plan on giving T over to me?”

“You can have her and then Krai Baby will be all mine! That sounds fair! Now stay away from him forever!”

I was impressed by their ability to continue arguing as though there hadn’t been a deafening boom just a moment ago. Besides, if we had two rooms then couldn’t we just sort by gender? It seemed like it was about time I played

mediator in their argument; it was always the bystanders who were hurt most during their fights.

I was about to call out to them, but I noticed Tino seemed to be acting strangely. There were still tears in her eyes, but she wasn't cowering like she had been earlier. She was looking at me with an empty expression. It didn't seem like the thunder had bothered her. She had just trained by letting herself get struck by lightning but she didn't seem traumatized by it.

Then her cheeks flushed.

"Master..."

"Don't tell me you heard all that?"

She nodded. She had heard my voice despite the din. What terrifying creatures hunters could be. It wasn't a big deal that she heard me, but that didn't change the fact that it was still embarrassing. Really, it wasn't the first time Tino had seen me act in an unflattering manner. In fact, the thought of being protected by someone like me might be more embarrassing for her.

"Well, I'm talking more about sentiment," I said. "You might not need my protection, but I'll offer it just in case. Sorry if that made you uncomfortable, you can just forget I said anything."

"No, I'm grateful, Master. And I'm sorry."

Tino lowered her head and wiped her tears with her sleeve. When she looked up again, there wasn't a single droplet remaining. Her eyes were still a tad red but now had the unwavering strength of a solo hunter.

"You don't have to worry anymore, Master," she said as she stood up and clenched her fist. "Whatever comes, I'm certain I won't lose. I'm still weak and inexperienced, but I'll overcome! Just watch! Bring on the lightning!"

I didn't really get it, but she seemed pretty riled up. Liz and Sitri paused their bickering and looked at Tino, but she didn't mind one bit. She had her lips drawn tight and looked determined. Now she looked like someone I could depend on.

*Well, this is nice—wait. I said nothing dangerous would come our way. Were*

*you even listening to me? Was everything I said for nothing? What can I do to make you believe me?*

I didn't have much room to complain, but it still hurt for her to have so little faith in me. I sat there with slumped shoulders and then, as though to mock everything I had just said, a warning siren began to ring.

*I just wanna retire.*

I sipped Sitri's fine black tea and turned away from reality. The concerto of thunder and the warning siren seemed to go on forever.

The red had faded from Tino's cheeks and they were now a bit stiff. She didn't seem angry with me, she just looked out the window uncomfortably. Lightning flashed and I gulped down more tea.

I was fairly used to storms. It was because I ran into them no matter where I went. However, it was still rare to hear a warning siren blare for so long in a residential area.

Zebrudia was a relatively safe place. Towns above a certain size were protected from monsters and criminals via knights dispatched by the country or the landlord. Elan, of course, was no exception. In the holy land of treasure hunting, knight orders often had a former hunter or two in their ranks. That was enough to deal with your everyday troubles.

So I had to wonder, what was causing the siren to continue ringing nonstop? I didn't think the storm was enough to warrant it going so long. It seemed safe to assume that something major had happened.

I let out a big yawn and folded my legs.

"Sitri, are there any snacks?" I asked.

"Ah, there are! I have some chocolates I think you might like!"

Sitri took a bowl and filled it with chocolates wrapped in shiny paper of all different colors. They seemed like an import from some industrious country. I did everything I could to ignore the siren and unwrapped a chocolate.

"Master," Tino said timidly. "Are you sure about this?"

*The siren? It's got nothing to do with me.*

Nobody had requested that I do anything, and even if they did then I had the right to refuse. Maintaining order in a town wasn't even a hunter's main job, it was raiding treasure vaults. This was the domain of the knights, it was why they received taxpayer's money. I didn't want people coming to me with every little problem just because I was a Level 8.

Tino was fretting, so I beckoned her over and offered her an unwrapped chocolate.

"Don't worry, I anticipated this much," I said with a reassuring smile. "I promised no battles on this vacation, didn't I?"

I was used to getting wrapped up in accidents and this wasn't the first time I had heard a siren. I knew the best thing to do in these situations was just to sit still. Usually, someone would come along and resolve everything. Even among our clan, I was confident I was among the best at sitting still.

Presumably, a first-rate hunter would hear the siren and rush to offer their assistance, but there was nothing I could do that would be of use. I'd just get in the way so I stayed back.

"I'm sure there's someone in town more suited to the task than me," I explained.

"Whaaat?! We're not gonna see what's up?" Liz said in a saccharine voice as she leaned forward.

"We're not. Have you forgotten our objective, Liz?"

"Objective?"

"This is a vacation. A VA-CA-TION!"

There was no way she could have forgotten after I had explained it so thoroughly. Her love for commotion just exceeded the bounds of any normal human being. I wasn't going to stumble after taking my first few steps outside the capital. If I went and stuck my neck into that mess I might give myself away. If someone came to us and made a direct request I would be obligated to respond as the clan master of First Steps, and that was something I needed to avoid.

"Sitri, no one knows that we're here, right?" I asked.

"But of course. I didn't even inform the Explorers' Association," she said. "We registered at the town gates so that might tip someone off that we're here, but they still wouldn't know about this hideaway."

Unlike me, Sitri was no fool. It seemed I didn't have to worry about Tino being wrapped up in something after all.

"Let's not leave this house until things outside have settled down. Is there any food here?"

"We have enough to comfortably last a month. For other resources—"

*A whole month, huh? That's plenty. Actually, that's way more than plenty. Is Sitri preparing to withstand a siege?*

"Tino, I understand your concern," I said. "However, it's best to stay calm in these situations. I already said it, but we're not getting involved in any battles. This isn't our place. The siren will wind down soon enough, so take a seat."

"Hmm. So you anticipated this as well, Master. Didn't you?"

I didn't think Tino was the type to want to stick her neck into trouble no matter what. She looked at me with unfounded trust and sat down on the sofa.

"Yeah, uh-huh. Liz, you too. Take a seat. Absolutely nobody goes outside."

The problem wasn't someone obedient like Tino, it was Liz. She was the one who wanted to stick her neck into trouble no matter what. She was the one who would immediately forget everything I had just said. She was the one who would fly into trouble like a broken spring toy. And for some reason, it was always my fault.

"Huh? Come ooon," Liz whined.

She still did as I said and sat down next to me. I made sure to grab her wrist and hold tight. She squealed and pressed her body against me. I pacified her by running a hand through her hair.

I was filled with a renewed determination to make sure this vacation went without incident. And then I would brag to other clan members once we got home. Once that happened, Tino might once again have an iota of faith in me.

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It was impressive. The sort of thing you could expect from a Level 7 hunter's leadership. They sped down the road in spite of the rain and darkness—two conditions most hunters preferred to avoid.

It didn't show on her face, but Chloe was deeply impressed by the sight of Falling Fog fighting back nocturnal monsters like it was nothing. The rear guard, Scorching Whirlwind, didn't even get a chance to help out. They rarely even had to stop the carriage. From the start, she understood that Arnold wasn't weak, but now she understood why he was known as a champion.

The rest of his party was quite adept as well. It was a stormy night, visibility was minimal, yet they moved quietly and didn't let a single monster get close. Even in the hunter's holy land, there weren't many this fierce.

A member of Falling Fog remained in the carriage as a guard.

"Back home, in Nebulanubes, we had to work with low visibility all the time," he said with a smile.

"I see," Chloe said. "I hear conditions there are quite harsh."

"The monsters were also stronger than what you find out here. But, I suppose in Zebrudia they come in greater numbers."

Peculiarities of an environment greatly affected its monsters. A harsh environment would produce tougher monsters. It made sense to Chloe that those same conditions would keep the population from growing too much.

Falling Fog was vanquishing monsters without the slightest struggle. The Crashing Lightning wasn't even lending a hand, but the rest of Falling Fog proved more than enough.

Chloe knew what Arnold was after. He was keeping his emotions under control, but after watching over many hunters she could tell that he still had a score to settle with the Thousand Tricks.

Letting his party come along wasn't ideal, but it was the next best thing. At Level 7, a hunter had few reasons to obey the Explorers' Association. Someone like the branch manager might be able to do something about it, but there

wasn't much someone like Chloe could do to stop him. She didn't even have the authority to intervene before he did anything. Therefore, her best option was to let him start his fight right in front of her eyes; he probably wouldn't do anything too extreme while being watched by an employee of the Association.

What's more, it was quite possible that the boundless cunning of the Thousand Tricks had let him anticipate such an event.

"That's because there are numerous treasure vaults here in Zebrudia," Chloe said. "Including high-level ones unlike anything in Nebulanubes."

"Mmm, indeed. We've had a few obstacles thrown in our way, but there's not a treasure vault that we can't conquer. I'm looking forward to seeing what the empire has in store for us."

Lightning flashed. There wasn't a trace of uncertainty on the man's illuminated face. Actually, there was some uncertainty, there was just far more confidence. Confidence in oneself, their leader, and the rest of their party. He knew fear but pressed on anyway—the ideal mindset of a hunter.

*Krai, just what in the world did you do to anger these people?* Chloe wondered. It must have been quite something if they were chasing after him in the middle of the storm.

"It still seems like there's a whole lot of monsters creeping about today. I don't see a single corpse either. Is the Thousand Tricks really in Elan?"

"The Gladis Earldom can not be reached without passing through Elan and I don't think he'd run his carriage too hard in this rain. Remember, we're trying to rendezvous with him as well."

The man gave an ambivalent reply.

Chloe was all but certain of Krai's location. Indeed, the number of monsters and lack of corpses still bothered her, but she, too, was in a hurry. She wasn't going to start lying.

Thunder rumbled again and Rhuda looked out the window with a forlorn expression.

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They reached Elan late into the night. The rain had intensified and lightning bolts streaked across the dense clouds. It would have been a much more trying journey without Falling Fog, who were used to combat in poor weather. A voice suddenly called out from the carriage in front.

“Hey, something’s burning!”

Chloe stuck her neck out the window and saw that the bulwarks of Elan were on fire. The flames would fade in the rain, but faint wisps of smoke floated upwards. Lightning continued to strike in rapid succession and chip away at the enchanted stone walls. The sound of the commotion reached the carriages. The thoroughly trained horses cried out.

Chloe felt a strong presence of mana; this clearly wasn’t a natural phenomenon. As soon as they arrived at the gate, she jumped out of their carriage and went to ask what the situation was.

The Explorers’ Association wasn’t managed by the empire but they shared a close relationship. When problems stemming from monsters and phantoms arose, the Association would dispatch hunters. But more than that, Chloe just didn’t feel she could look the other way.

The town was a chaotic mess of shouts and cries, but even a young girl could demand attention if she wore the Association insignia. She and the hunters with her were quickly let through the gates and what they heard was far from anything they had expected.

“Huh? A lightning elemental? Out here?”

Chloe forgot about the surrounding clamor and stood still in shock. The person who had informed them looked as if he were having a nightmare. Even Arnold was taken aback.

A lightning elemental was one variety of elemental, a supernatural being considered to be a natural phenomenon with a will of its own. They rarely showed themselves around human settlements, nor were they prone to making random attacks. They were generally very powerful with even their weakest being Level 6. Even among the most formidable elementals, those of the lightning variety still stood apart from the rest.

A lightning elemental wouldn't normally appear in such a populous town. It was possible the being was doing the bidding of a Magus, but within all of Zebrudia, there were only a small number who could control a higher-elemental.

Chloe started to wonder what could be the cause of such a catastrophe, but then shifted her focus. Whatever the reason, it didn't change the fact that the town was currently being attacked and she couldn't sit by and do nothing. A lightning elemental was more than the knights stationed in Elan could handle. Even the best hunters operating out of this town would struggle to defeat it.

To win against, to drive back, a higher-elemental required a champion. As luck had it, a champion who had defeated another lightning-wielding mythical beast, the Thunder Dragon, was right here. Chloe wasted no time turning towards Arnold and his party.

"May I request your aid, Crashing Lightning?"

The mention of that moniker drew eager attention from the nearby knights and city officials. A lightning elemental would be a tough foe for a Level 7 hunter, but, with all eyes on him, Arnold nodded in agreement.

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A night spent under the pressure of uncertainty and fear gave way to a morning of blue skies, yesterday's storm gone without a trace. Feeling refreshed, I sat up in bed and looked out the window.

Peace had returned to the area. The siren had stopped and nobody was screaming.

*See, what did I say? It all resolved itself without us doing anything!*

I looked, with considerable relief, at the bed next to me. Nobody was in it. Sitri's hideaway contained two bedrooms each with two beds, but in the end, we sorted by gender. I didn't really care one way or another, but there would be discontent among the others no matter who I shared a room with. I offered to sleep on the couch but that got shot down too.

Liz had a bad habit of sneaking into my bed, but with Sitri around I didn't have to worry about that. Killiam, by the way, was outside. Apparently, it was built to

operate even under harsh conditions. Being a magical creature put it on the same level as Drink.

I yawned and changed into the clothes Sitri had washed for me. The house was comfy enough that it felt like a waste to use it as a hideaway. There was a sizable bathroom and with Sitri's fine skills, even the provisions tasted good. You might even say it was more luxurious than an inn. The fatigue I had built up during the journey in the rain was now gone.

I left the bedroom and entered the living room, where I was greeted by a Tino in casual wear.

"Good morning, Master," she said.

"Morning," I said. "What happened? You've got bags under your eyes."

I had slept quite well, but it didn't seem like the same could be said of Tino. She wasn't wobbling on her feet and she sounded fine, but her face showed signs of deep exhaustion.

"Did you have trouble sleeping?"

"Just a bit. I was supposed to sleep on the couch, but I was so worried about what was happening outside. It's all because I'm such a novice."

Her enunciation was stiff. I wondered if she couldn't have borrowed a bed, but I remembered Liz wasn't the type to share her bed with her apprentice, and sharing with Sitri seemed like a dangerous venture. Perhaps I should've given her situation more thought before going to bed.

However, hunters were trained to be able to sleep anytime and place (this was my strongest skill) and I didn't think the noise outside was all that bad.

"It's fine, Master," Tino said. "I'm a hunter, one night without sleep isn't enough to hinder me."

"Well, that's good..."

Tino wasn't a child, she understood what condition she was in better than anybody else.

Depending on the situation outside, I had intended to stay inside but it seemed what was out there had been resolved.

We ate a breakfast prepared by Sitri, got ready for the day, and departed the hideaway. With the abnormal figures of Killiam and Drink following us and our faces hidden by our hoods, we walked down the main street. Bits of conversation about yesterday made their way to our ears. The merchants, hunters, knights, townsfolk, everyone was gossiping about it.

“A lightning elemental,” Sitri said with wide eyes. “Why would a higher-elemental appear out here?”

“A lightning elemental?! Aaaah, I wish I coulda fought it. That was our chance to test our new resistance, right, T?”

“Huh?! Oh, y-yes, Lizzy.”

For some reason, Tino looked at me with misty eyes.

*It's just a coincidence. It was Liz who made her go through that training and I was the one who stopped us from getting involved. And in the end, it got resolved without our involvement.*

Elementals were sentient clusters of energy and were one of the most troublesome opponents a hunter could find themselves up against. They weren't always antagonistic to human beings, but they had strength and endurance far above even high-level hunters and some possessed the might to bring a country to ruin.

They were supernatural beings with the ability to manipulate natural phenomena, a trait that caused them to be conflated with gods in some parts of the world. Drawing upon the powers of elementals was a trick used by Magi, but those were known as being among the most difficult spells.

Typically, elementals resided in the wilderness. As Sitri had said, it was rare for one to be found in a populated town, but it would explain the raging storm and the buzzing sound like that of a bee's nest.

“Perhaps the liquid lightning rod was too potent? It shouldn't have lasted so long...”

Siddy muttered some extraordinary things, but I pretended not to hear. Luckily nobody died from the elemental and I didn't want to tell anyone about the potion anyway. But boy was I glad I stopped Liz from getting involved.

Elementals weren't something I wanted to deal with.

I let out a sigh of relief and headed towards the town gate only to find that the sturdy checkpoint had been turned to rubble. I stopped and stared. From scattered bricks, burnt craters, and splattered blood I could tell how horrible it must've been last night. Most of the houses near the gates were also damaged badly. With the gates themselves gone, soldiers were running about trying to keep people in line.

I was glad we ignored the siren. Even simple communication became challenging when fighting an elemental; I probably would've been turned to dust.

I was just relieved the elemental had been vanquished, but Sitri had a very different impression of things.

"For a lightning elemental to strike yet leave this much damage...someone must have put in quite the effort," she said.

Indeed, lightning elementals could fly, so gates did nothing to keep them out. Elan was a fairly large town, but they weren't equipped with the type of soldiers who could drive off such a threat.

One of the soldiers managing the crowd seemed to hear Sitri.

"Quite right," he said with pride. "We weren't at all prepared to handle a sudden assault from an elemental, but a high-level hunter happened to arrive on the scene and he gave us a hand. It was a brutal fight but the elemental was safely driven back. Thanks to that godsent hunter, not very many people were hurt."

*A hunter who can fight off a lightning elemental. They must be someone incredible. Just who could it be? I'll have to thank them if we ever meet.*

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A fierce showdown with a lightning elemental. It had been the worst night in Arnold's career as a hunter. The battle against the Thunder Dragon had been intense, but that was fought with thorough preparation and steely resolve. The battle with the elemental had occurred suddenly and without any prior information.

Falling Fog hadn't even fought an elemental before. They didn't have insight about the creature. They weren't prepared. They even lacked raw strength. Their one stroke of luck was that it was a lightning elemental; in order to fight the Thunder Dragon, the members of Falling Fog had all built up lightning resistance. Even still, it was something of a miracle that they fought the elemental off before anyone was severely hurt.

As thanks they had been put up in the best lodge in town, but that wasn't much compensation for risking their lives in battle.

In the spacious living room, they all sat still as corpses. They must not have slept well for many of them had bloodshot eyes or were bereft of energy. Their expressions varied, but they all had one thing in common: they lacked the ambition that all hunters should have.

Their large burns and wounds had been healed with potions and magic, but mental fatigue wasn't dealt with so easily. He wasn't as bad off as the rest, but even Arnold wasn't fully recovered after the night's rest. He could still move, but he was far from being at his best.

They had also burned through a considerable number of supplies and their gear needed maintenance. Their defensive items had taken an exceptional beating and some things would need to be replaced altogether.

"Like back home, they say it's rare in Zebrudia for elementals to appear around human settlements," Eigh said with a look of utter exhaustion.  
"Couldn't find worse luck if you tried."

"But we had to help."

The lightning elemental was strong enough to be no easy foe for Arnold. Even a party like his rarely encountered them.

It had destroyed the bulwarks with a plethora of lightning bolts, and in a single attack, it incapacitated half the knights who had arrived. It flew at high speeds which prevented most arrows and magic attacks from landing. In the time it took to drive it off, everything in the vicinity of the gates was turned to ruins.

It was thanks to Arnold and the rest that it didn't get any worse. If they had

arrived just a few hours later, the elemental might have advanced farther into town and inflicted fatal damage on all of Elan. It seemed a miracle that nobody died in the whole affair.

Chloe had been there. A crowd had been there. If the Explorers' Association made a request, it wasn't easy to turn it down. But more than that, some things were just expected of a first-rate hunter.

"Well, it wasn't all bad. It's not how we planned it, but this helped spread the good name of Falling Fog," Eigh said.

"Hmmm."

"Not only that, people know that we're enough to take on a higher-elemental. And we did it without any major injuries. I'd mark this down as a success."

Arnold snorted. Hunters needed to know how to stay positive.

Elementals were like natural phenomena. They weren't capable of the same destruction as a dragon but nothing was harder to pin down than an elemental. Also, they were just as rare, if not more so, than dragons. Lightning elementals were rare enough that you would need to search long and hard in the deep wilderness, far from any human habitations, in order to find one.

But what bothered Arnold more than that was someone's behavior.

"Why didn't the Thousand Tricks show himself?! Isn't he one of Zebrudia's Level 8s?!"

Higher-elementals were powerful. They weren't something an ordinary hunter, much less a knight, could handle. Only a best-of-the-best Magus or a first-rate hunter with ample mana material could win against one. Such a person wouldn't reside in a place like Elan. If Falling Fog hadn't shown up the townsfolk would have been helpless. And that's why Arnold couldn't fathom why Krai Andrey hadn't appeared during the chaos.

The other members began to weigh in.

"Maybe he was scared of the elemental? We only managed to deal with it because of our experience with the Thunder Dragon."

"It seems they also neglected to stop by the Explorers' Association. Could they

have not noticed the elemental?"

"But how could they not hear the siren?"

"Going off their reputation, you'd think they'd take care of the elemental immediately."

Eigh appeared deep in thought. He knew of the accomplishments of Grieving Souls and the Thousand Tricks. Based on their history, he could imagine them: heroic but also discerning, laying waste to hordes of phantoms, conquering treasure vaults, taking on difficult quests—a model for all hunters. Considering he had held back Falling Fog with a single spell, it was hard to think the Thousand Tricks would shy away from a lightning elemental.

More than anything, he couldn't imagine that man with his constant vague smile panicking in the face of a lightning elemental. The rest of Falling Fog continued to voice their thoughts and Eigh nodded. He had reached his conclusion.

"We don't know exactly where he is, but his name's in the entry register so we can be sure he's in town. Chloe's also searching for him. Remember, this is a small place compared to the capital, he won't be able to hide for long."

Arnold remained silent.

Eigh was right. From the start, they had the advantage in this chase. It wasn't as though Falling Fog was particularly skilled in hunting down people, but their quarry wasn't running in the first place. Even if it was a coincidence, they also had Chloe to guide them and she knew where the Thousand Tricks was headed. It was only a matter of time before they caught up.

Arnold fought back his body's fatigue and looked over his party members.

"Replenish our supplies and get ready for combat," he ordered.

"I've asked the sentries to stop the Thousand Tricks if he leaves," Eigh said. "If he tries to make his departure, we'll know. The mayor of Elan wants to congratulate us on our victory, what should we say?"

"We don't have time to accept congratulations."

"Very true."

Normally, it would be the right thing to accept, but Arnold and the rest had something that took precedence over everything else.

“How about equipment repairs?” Eigh asked. “It’ll take time and it won’t even be possible in a small town like this. Luckily, our weapons aren’t too worse for wear. It’ll be a downgrade, but maybe we should just replace our armor if it’s broken?”

“Very well. Our weapons will be enough. We won’t need the same defenses that we needed for the elemental.” After all, Arnold’s offense made for a better defense than most armor. “The Thousand Tricks is right in front of us. Once we crush him, we’ll have a good long rest.”

Eigh gave his usual light nod.

“Urgh, I couldn’t sleep at all...” Rhuda said.

“Me neither,” Gilbert, with dark circles under his eyes, agreed.

Rhuda had just recently attained Level 4. For her, last night’s battle against the lightning elemental was even more trying than her experience at White Wolf’s Den. She and the other intermediate hunters had naturally been assigned support roles and didn’t directly engage the elemental. However, a simple brush against the being was enough to knock one of them out, so they ended up putting a tremendous strain on their bodies through all their running about.

The rest of Scorching Whirlwind all looked quite awful as they lumbered out of their rooms.

“I knew we shouldn’t have accepted this quest,” one of them complained.

Rhuda thought back to something Tino had once said.

*Master is god. Master won’t turn his back on trouble or those in need. If you follow trouble to its source, you’ll also find Master. Do you understand?*

At the time, Rhuda hadn’t understood, but under the current circumstances, it seemed like maybe Tino really had been serious. After all, a lightning elemental was a godlike being that rarely appeared in areas populated by

humans. She figured if she ever ran into one then it would be in the distant future.

“And *he* didn’t make an appearance,” Gilbert said in a weary voice while maintaining his usual attitude.

“Yep...”

In all likelihood, Rhuda and Gilbert had the same thing on their minds. In White Wolf’s Den, Krai hadn’t appeared until they were certain they were done for. Now they had Falling Fog for an ally, but the circumstances were otherwise startlingly similar.

“The Thousand Trials,” these were called. Rhuda wanted to believe even Krai wouldn’t expose civilians to danger, but back then he had been more than willing to put hers and the other hunters’ lives at risk.

*Master is a god.*

Those words reverberated in the back of Rhuda’s mind. But she knew that the gods of myth were mostly scoundrels who thought little for the lives of weak humans.

*That’s right, Rhuda thought. I heard Tino’s accompanying Krai on his trip. I wonder if it’s going well for her.*

“I wonder how the old man’s doing,” Gilbert said with genuine concern.

“I wish we had brought him with us. He probably wouldn’t have been too happy about it though...”

Rhuda let out a sigh as she thought back on Greg, the one member who had managed to avoid getting caught up in this.

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“What? He’s already left?”

Arnold looked tense.

“Indeed,” said Chloe with a bitter expression. “I looked into it and it seems he departed shortly after dawn.”

“Just after dawn?!”

"Why would he leave so early?!"

Eigh furrowed his brow. Rhuda and the rest looked dumbfounded.

"I don't know," Chloe answered. "There's no indication he stopped by the local branch of the Explorers' Association."

The lightning elemental had been driven off just before daybreak. Just in case, they had stayed on alert and moved to a better spot to treat their wounds after dawn. After all that, Chloe asked the sentry to detain the Thousand Tricks if he tried to leave. It seemed that Krai had already left by the time she had made her request. She couldn't blame the sentry for not knowing that she was too late; everyone had been busy dealing with the chaos caused by the elemental and the hunters hadn't been the only combatants.

The revelation had taken Chloe quite by surprise. Even if Krai was in a hurry, she still couldn't understand why he would leave just after dawn. Hunters were skilled at picking up signs of danger and disaster. She couldn't imagine how a high-level hunter could not show interest in the uproar caused by the elemental's attack.

More than that, it was bizarre that he hadn't shown up during the battle itself. She had considered an attack by a powerful creature to be something a Level 8 should take the lead in resolving. But he hadn't. Even though he had been in town, he had been absent from the fight.

Then Chloe realized something: it was almost as if Krai had known that another high-level hunter would resolve the matter. She looked at the battle-fatigued hunters. She was just being delusional.

The battle with the elemental had been so trying that it was almost strange that it ended without any casualties. No matter how intelligent the Thousand Tricks might be, it wasn't possible for him to accurately predict when Arnold and company would arrive. However, Chloe was also aware that many of the Thousand Tricks's accomplishments had exceeded the boundaries of the human intellect.

He was enormously powerful, but that was also why he rarely involved himself personally. He used his near prescience to train his clanmates and turn First Steps into one of the best clans around. The current circumstances seemed

eerily like one of his Trials, except the subjects were Falling Fog, a rival and potential enemy—

“That’s right, the sentry he— Ah.”

It was all so confusing to Chloe. Thus the words slipped out unbidden.

“What is it?”

*Darn, Chloe thought. I did this before and now I’ve done it again.*

She had been quick to stop herself, but not quick enough. Arnold gave her an imposing look. What she heard from the sentry was likely to further Arnold’s rage, and maintaining peaceful relations between hunters was another duty of the Explorers’ Association.

“Now, Chloe, I don’t take you for the type of girl who would tell a lie,” Eigh said with exasperation.

“Out with it,” Arnold said.

She felt her face grow red. A half-hearted lie wouldn’t work on a high-level hunter. Not to mention, Arnold probably already had a good idea of what the sentry had said.

Chloe accepted her fate and said in a small voice, “He’s impressed.”

“What? Once more,” Arnold said, a tremble in his voice.

*Why does Krai have to always be so inflammatory?! Chloe thought.*

Grieving Souls had previously exterminated all sorts of elementals. Even without their full retinue, they should have been able to take on a lightning elemental. They should have appeared when the siren rang.

“He said he’s very impressed. The fact that we managed to drive off the elemental without any casualties was really something special!” she answered in a trembling voice of her own.

Arnold’s face contorted. His demonic visage elicited a small yelp from Rhuda.

What Krai said was blatantly condescending. It wasn’t immediately insulting, but his intent was obvious under the circumstances. Wherever in town he was, it would’ve been impossible for him to not notice the siren, but he had ignored

it and then offered his praise to Arnold. It wasn't hard to guess what the meaning of this might be—the Thousand Tricks had deliberately chosen not to come out and help.

He probably watched the battle from a distance, like a parent watching over their child, planning to intervene only if someone faced mortal danger. His decision to leave town immediately without asking around about the battle made sense if he had already seen it from a distance.

The only part Chloe still didn't understand was why he ignored an employee from the Explorers' Association.

Arnold stood up; he seemed to have reached the same conclusions as Chloe. His towering figure betrayed not a hint of his earlier fatigue.

"We're going after him. We should still be able to make it. Hurry up and get ready! We're not letting him get away!" he said, his voice still showing hints of anger.

"Aye aye, we'll get ready at once."

Eight and a few others ran off.

"That goes for the rest of you. And hurry! If you're too slow then we'll take only Chloe, understand?"

A vein bulged on Arnold's forehead. His skin prickled. During the fight with the elemental he had fought like a demon, but now he truly looked the part. Chloe had seen the faces of many hunters but never one this angry. Not even she could bring herself to smile or say anything in defense of the Thousand Tricks.

"Very well. Let's hurry, everyone. On this route, his next stop should be Gula," she said.

## Chapter Three: A Vacation and Some Pursuers

I saw a vista of rolling hills from the carriage window. It was idyllic and quite unlike the scenery of the capital. I felt at peace as I watched the sights drift by. The road was the only sign of human infrastructure and there were no other travelers besides us.

I saw the occasional animal or monster, but they all ran off the moment they saw us. Killiam, riding atop Drink, must've really had them terrified. I was somewhat anxious myself, but I supposed they were a good form of monster repellent.

A day had passed since we had left Elan. The weather was fair. Our carriage moved along under a translucent sky. I had my doubts during the storm on the first day, but traveling on the road could be nice.

"Chimeras are quite intimidating to most monsters," Sitri explained. "I imagine most of them will flee from us."

I was pretty sure such a large lion would scare off anyone, even if it wasn't a chimera. What a grave sin Akashic Tower committed when they created that creature.

*If Drink didn't have a habit of horsing around I could see myself traveling on its back. The empire's generally a safe place, except there are still monsters, phantoms, and bandits, but none of those would get close to Drink. I know I wouldn't if I was in their position. Killiam seems more suited to the bandit life. I wonder if I should be more worried about it...*

As I leaned out the window and yawned, I heard a low, displeased voice.

"There's nothing to do."

Liz wasn't good at sitting still. In all my memories of her, she was on the move. She would usually run along outside when we traveled long distances in a carriage. If we stopped at a town she would start training if she had even a moment to spare. She never struck me as being bad at learning methods and

theories but she clearly found it boring. She much preferred putting her lessons into practice.

For someone like her, being banned from training and shut up in a carriage was almost unbearable. She still managed to hold out for a day and that was more than I had expected. Quietly reading a book in a corner, Tino looked up at her mentor, dark rings still under her eyes.

"T, I've got nothing to do," Liz said. "If something doesn't happen, I'll die of boredom. Why don't you do something interesting? And quickly!"

"Huh?! Um, would you like to study Relics? Matthis was kind enough to lend me an introductory book," Tino suggested.

"No waaay. Forget about that, just do something interesting."

"Huh? Uh, okay. Then I'll do a, um, impression of Branch Manager Gark."

I watched Liz make her unreasonable demands and Tino make her unreasonable attempt to go along with those demands. I was curious how someone as small as Tino might mimic that brute, but I also didn't think it would help Liz's mood. After an instant, her attention shifted to me, and Tino quickly stopped her performance.

"I'm so bored," Liz said as she crawled my way with a smile and rubbed against me. "I've got an idea. I'm gonna run outside. I'll hold some ropes tied to a box and you can ride on top of the box. It'll be so much faster, you can feel the wind, it'll be great. And this isn't training, okay?"

That was a game we used to always play. It was a part of the training our group did, so I was always the one on the box. Except now Liz was way too fast, I was sure I'd just get thrown off the box.

"C'mooon. We haven't traveled together in so long, T and Siddy are just in the way, and this restriction is too strict. My muscles will weaken if I don't use them. See? Aren't they getting smaller?"

Liz lay on her back and indicated her exposed suntanned midriff. It was the same old flawless skin. It didn't look particularly muscular, but there wasn't a bit of excess fat either. It had a sleek, feral beauty.

If someone was strengthened by mana material it wasn't necessarily visible from the outside. Just by showing me her stomach, I couldn't tell if she had gotten weaker or not, but I suspected she was fine.

Liz stretched out her alluring arms towards me.

"Hey, play with me?"

"Lizzy, you're acting like a child!"

Sitri interrupted her writing to stretch out her legs and let her heels fall on Liz's stomach. Tino scooted backwards. Liz jumped up.

"Ah, what are you doing?! Mind your own business!"

"I can't if you're causing trouble for Krai! You're always, always—if you want to run outside so badly, you can just run with T! Krai said you can train if you really can't help yourself. Why not have a race with Drink?"

*Here we go again. You know what they say, they fight because they're so close, or something like that...*

"I already told you I'm not gonna fall for that! It's no use anyways, Krai Baby's head over heels for me so it doesn't matter what you try! So get out! Begone! Just because Lucia's not here you think you can get away with this," Liz yelled.

*I see. They're fighting because Lucia's not here. Stopping fights in our party always falls to her or Ansem. But Ansem's one weak point is that he's soft on his sisters, so in times like these it's Lucia who has to step in. And then, for some reason, I get scolded.*

Tino panicked as she watched the spat heat up. Perhaps my restriction was also putting stress on Sitri; she usually didn't get so riled up. Perhaps I needed to rethink the restriction.

"Unlike you, I'm not a burden on Krai! And besides, I've already said it dozens of times, you and Krai have poor genetic compatibility!"

"Don't we have the same damn genes?! You're just saying that to try to swipe him away from me, you thief!"

*Genetic compatibility. That's a phrase new to me.*

In a rare turn of events, Sitri's face was flushed. The blood rushing to her head, she automatically pulled out a white potion. Before anyone could stop her, she hurled it at Liz. The liquid shimmered in the sunlight, and Liz dodged as if it were the most natural thing in the world. We had a window open to let in fresh air, and the potion went out that window and hit the ground. I heard what sounded like breaking glass.

"Why did you dodge it?!"

"The hell did you expect me to do?! All you make are shifty potions! Even if I caught it, you'd totally just sit back and watch me die!"

The carriage rolled along as they bickered. I leaned out the window and looked behind us, but the potion was already distant enough that I couldn't see it.

*Is it okay to just leave it there?*

I really wished Sitri would stop hurling potions during her scuffles with Liz. It'd be fine if they were healing potions, but offensive potions made up half of Sitri's stock. Offensive potions that worked on phantoms. Goodness.

"Okay, that's enough," I said as I cut in, albeit a bit late. I was reprising my role as leader. "Liz, it won't be much longer until the next town so just hang in there. Sitri, do we need to do something about that last potion?"

Sitri and Liz would often fight, but rarely escalated to going for the throat. I could tell by whether or not Liz's words were getting unhinged.

As they often did, the two sisters quickly calmed down.

"Okaaay," Liz said.

"I'm sorry, I just got a bit worked up," Sitri said. "You asked about the potion?"

*A bit worked up, she said. These two really are cut from the same cloth.*

Liz fell back against the bench and looked the other way. Sitri steadied her breath and soon enough started talking in her usual tone, like that fight had never even happened.

"That potion is called 'Danger Effect.' It's an improved version of the monster

lures used for training. If you need one, I can make more.”

A monster lure? I wanted to ask her if that wasn’t a tad intense for training and what she hoped to accomplish by throwing it at Liz.

What I ended up asking was: “It looks like it broke on the ground back there. Isn’t that bad?”

“Don’t worry. Even with the wind, I don’t picture it spreading too wide and it’ll fade with time. For a brief while, monsters might appear *a little* more frequently,” she said. After some thinking, she added: “There’s also no proof that we were the ones who used it.”

Was this not an issue? I tilted my head and Sitri gave me a reassuring smile.

From the driver’s seat came word that the next town had come into view. I had been worried about Sitri’s potion, but nothing came of it. It seemed I had been worried over nothing. Not that my predictions were ever accurate. Still, my luck was bad and I was a coward at heart so I worried anyway.

While feeling Liz’s body heat as she pressed against my back, I squinted and looked for the town. Our destination, Gula, was a town I had never been to before. It wasn’t large, but it was famous for its chocolates. Its products were sold in the capital, as many things were, and I had tried them before, so I was looking forward to this visit.

Filled with childish excitement, I spotted it: a town with a terribly overwhelming presence. Even from a distance, I could tell that an unusual number of guards, and even Magi, were patrolling outside its cocoa-colored walls. There were also guards posted atop the walls and a red flag with a horizontal line was flying. That flag meant the town was on alert.

The town’s gates weren’t being locked down so it probably wasn’t anything too bad, but there were clearly many more carriages exiting than entering.

Sitri also stuck her head out and her eyes widened at what she saw.

“Oh my, it looks like something’s happening,” she said. “That flag—it seems it’s something related to monsters.”

“Huh? What is it, what is it? Something crazy?” Liz asked as leaned over me to

get a view. Then she saw the flag. "Oh, it's just the red flag. It doesn't even look like anything that serious. Boooring."

*You're way too used to danger. Even if we have run across more of these flags than we can count.*

The red flag was a universal symbol used throughout the land. We had seen it both within the empire's borders and beyond, even in small villages. These flags were raised fairly often in towns located close to monsters' habitats. Gula was next to a forest that seemed like it might be populated with monsters so there wasn't anything too strange about this situation.

In my experience fifty percent of the time, that red flag that indicated monsters would lead us to trouble. Of that, only twenty percent of the time did we actually run into anything dangerous. My senses might've gone dull from not leaving the capital for so long but I was certain this was something we didn't want to get involved in.

"On our way to Night Palace we didn't stop here. You see, we weren't certain how long it might take to clear the treasure vault," Sitri said.

"We weren't tired and this wasn't a very good spot to take a break anyway," Liz added.

"Master..." Tino let out with uncertainty.

It was quite nice. I felt safer with Liz and Sitri around but with Tino I had someone I could relate to.

Our driver must have sensed my hesitation because the carriage came to a stop. I folded my arms and thought hard for the first time in a while.

The situation was different from Elan. We couldn't have predicted that lightning elemental, but this time we knew that something was going on. Granted, we didn't know much more than that. We didn't immediately need to resupply and there wasn't anything in Gula requiring our presence. Normally, this would have been a no-brainer. Liz and Luke already drove us into plenty of trouble as it was.

There was just one problem.

Normally, I would just err on the side of caution but Gula was a town known for its prized chocolates. As a hidden sweet tooth, I couldn't just go on by. The chocolate itself could be acquired in the capital, but I had heard from confectioners that there was a shop in Gula with a special chocolate parfait. There was no way to try this parfait without visiting the town.

I was stuck. Should I choose safety or should I choose sweetness? I knew from experience that there was a decent chance that the state of alert wouldn't lead to anything serious. There would be more commotion if it was something comparable to an attack from a lightning elemental.

*I want to eat sweet things.*

"Wh-What's the matter, Master?" Tino asked.

I looked at her. She had seemed so small and timid during the past few days. I wasn't driven just by my own desire for sweets, I also wanted to treat my valiant junior hunter to a scrumptious chocolate parfait. Actually, that was my primary motivation. Liz and Sitri weren't fond of sweets but maybe they'd go for them once in a while.

"Tino, I want to treat you to something sweet and delicious," I whispered as I propped my elbows against the window frame.

"Huh?! Y-You want to treat me?!"

"You're way too kind, Krai Baby," Liz added. "But I still don't like this. T, give me two thousand push-ups later."

The problem was that our assistance would most likely be requested when we entered the town. We would have to show proof of identity during that process and hunters' ID's showed their level.

With an emergency declared, we could almost be certain someone would ask us for help. I found it annoying but I couldn't complain much when I, as a high-level hunter, enjoyed such favorable treatment. I could refuse them, but I represented Grieving Souls and First Steps and more than that I was just someone who had trouble saying no. Then I'd hand the problem off to Tino.

"Hmm, well, this is a vacation..." I said.

Maybe things would just work out. Maybe the cute and reliable Sitri would take care of it. Without looking at her, I made an exaggerated sigh and the cute and reliable Sitri clapped her hands.

“Krai, I may be presumptuous here, but I’m guessing you’d like to enter Gula without revealing our identities? I have two options. Which better strikes your fancy, altering yourself or altering others?”

“Ah! We can just sneak over the wall! I’m a genius!” Liz said.

*Altering myself or altering others? What’s she up to?*

Sitri awaited my answer with a smile. I always had to be the one making decisions. I rubbed Liz’s head, loose screws and all, and nodded.

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“This is our chance to show how good we’ve gotten at walking unguarded,” Sitri said.

“Hey, where do you even buy something like this?” I asked.

“You just need money and connections.” she happily answered.

The plan was to use different ID’s. Apparently, she had prepared these a while ago, just in case. The new ID’s even had our pictures on them so this was clearly some sort of crime. There was one not just for me and the sisters but even for Tino. It all seemed a bit much. Our names and date of birth were made up and no level was written down. I turned the ID over multiple times and looked at it closely but it didn’t look at all like a fake.

When pursuing criminals, hunters sometimes found it necessary to break the law. It could be a dirty job. I wasn’t under any false impression that proper methods were always enough to resolve something smoothly. Murder might be going a bit far, but the use of a fake ID could be overlooked. Even if we were caught, this was minor enough that we’d be off the hook if we gave a decent explanation. That was the sort of favoritism a high-level hunter from the capital could receive. However, nobody would ever interfere in a fight between two such hunters...

Even Sitri didn’t have fake ID’s for her three hired hands, and Drink and

Killiam stood out like a sore thumb, so they all stayed outside the town. A pretty reasonable solution.

"Well then, I leave Drink and Killiam in your care," Sitri said. "I believe I've taught you everything you should know about them."

Silence. The monochrome trio all wore faces like they were on death row. I felt bad but there wasn't much I could do for them. I hoped they would just think of it as a truly unique job experience. They seemed as fierce as any seasoned hunter so they would surely be fine.

*I think I'll buy them some souvenir chocolate.*

For the first time in a few days, I stroked Drink and the chimera stood on its hind legs and stumbled towards me. Drink's fur was hard and shiny, almost needlelike, and not at all fluffy. I was afraid I would be crushed so I stepped back, but I had already used up a Safety Ring.

*Looks like even I won't be able to stomach this Drink.*

I was a bit worried but I stepped from the carriage and headed towards the gates. All I could do was place my faith in Sitri.

The guards outside of Gula were on high alert. Magi were reinforcing the bulwarks with spells and drawing magic circles on the ground, just like how I'd see Lucia do sometimes. It looked like monsters were stirring up trouble. It happened all the time.

Our turn for inspection came up. I was a little uneasy but Sitri's ID's were identical to legitimate ones (maybe they technically were legitimate), and the guard let us pass without showing any particular suspicion. It seemed my cover hadn't been blown. All that effort spent hiding my face had been worth it.

"I saw the flag. Is something happening?" Sitri, who also looked quite unlike a hunter, casually asked.

She never missed a thing. I loved it.

"Yeah, there's a pack of orcs livin' in an abandoned village up in some mountains nearby," the soldier answered without hiding how much he didn't want to. "Apparently they set up a fort and now it's believed they got a higher-

orc as their leader. Just in case, we've spent the past couple of days preparing for an attack."

Orcs were a variety of Sapien. To be precise, they were a humanoid apelike monster. They had a similar intelligence to goblins but had physical strength far above a normal human and were covered in thick fur. They were an obnoxious sort of monster; they were pugilistic, attacked humans for pleasure, propagated rapidly, and ate just about anything.

Generally, orcs were among the weaker variety of monsters and could easily be dispatched by a Level 2 or 3 hunter. Occasionally an exceptional one would be born, a higher-orc, but they still wouldn't be too strong. However, they tended to form large packs and if left alone they could even build a vast kingdom. Sizable towns had been destroyed by large packs of orcs and that was likely what Gula was worried about.

"A-And will the town be all right?" Sitri asked with a tinge of fear on her face. It was a laudable performance.

"We're contacting neighboring towns for assistance," the soldier answered with a wry smile. "Some cold-blooded folk are putting the town behind them but there shouldn't be any problems for the duration of your stay. Enjoy your time in Gula."

The town exuded the sort of tension you see during a war. All the armed hunters, presumably called over from other towns, didn't help. But knowing the source of the fear let me relax a bit.

A fort of orcs. There wasn't any need to worry. A pack containing higher-orcs was bad news but it seemed pretty mellow compared to a higher-elemental. I guess from a civilian's perspective a wandering elemental wasn't as scary as something that attacked on instinct.

To me, they were both beyond the realm of anything I could handle, but I stopped being afraid of them long ago. I couldn't even remember how many packs of orcs I had fought. They always appeared in packs and they always attacked when I was already exhausted. I hated them.

Liz's mood seemed to have soured when she heard the mention of orcs.

"Aaah, boring. I had gotten my hopes up, but I grew past orcs forever ago. I'm not a butcher, I'm a hunter," she said.

"If Lucia were here she could roast them all in one go," Sitri said.

Wide-range obliteration was the domain of Magi. No matter how many orcs banded together, it was all the same to Lucia. It seemed Tino didn't have any experience with orcs; her eyes were darting this way and that with fear.

"Lizzy, how many packs of orcs have you defeated?" she asked timidly.

"Dunno. Luke and I were competing to see who could take out more but we got tired of keeping track."

I didn't know which battle that was but I knew that orcs did appear in swarms too big to count the individuals. Our first encounter happened before Lucia had learned any wide-range magic attacks and I thought I was going to die when we got swept up in a wave of them.

Of all monsters, goblins propagated the most rapidly but orcs weren't far behind. They would teach you the difference numbers can make in a battle. They were the reason Lucia learned wide-range offensive spells.

Liz had sounded indifferent when she spoke of her competition but that made it all the more believable.

"That's quite terrifying," Tino said as her body trembled.

"Well, we won't be fighting them this time around," I said.

"Eh? We won't?" Tino looked at me with wide eyes.

What did she think the fake ID's were for? They were so nobody would realize we were hunters who didn't want to work.

"It's fine, other hunters will take care of it instead," I said in a low voice so nobody would overhear us. "If we really have to, we might rely on Liz and Sitri but that probably won't be necessary."

What's more, the town was preparing to withstand an attack; a pack of orcs wasn't worth worrying about.

"Orcs are also far more delectable than you might expect, but most people

don't care for them," Sitri mumbled. She sure had become a tough person.

*Orcs aren't much compared to a lightning elemental. Let's just relax and focus on sweet delights.*

While trying to comfort Tino, I watched the sun set over the town and took in the faint sweet scent that drifted through its streets.

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*The battlefield was a place where weaknesses were exposed.*

Tino recalled these old words of Lizzy's. They rang true to her. She had thought that she had developed an enduring spirit after overcoming her master's various Thousand Trials, but it seemed she was mistaken.

Tino had barely gotten a minute of sleep since the night in Elan. Before that, she had also lost sleep due to her mentor's whims and the matter of that mask. Her body was reaching its limits. The only time she hadn't spent awake was after being knocked out during the lightning training.

She struggled just to walk straight and her vision wavered like she was having a dream. The rays of sun that came after the other day's storm were blinding to her sleep-deprived eyes. Her guard was down but it wasn't because of her master's restrictions on training.

Her condition was dire.

It was unease and anxiety that were keeping her awake. Under these abnormal conditions, she was restless because she had no idea what might happen to her and she was nervous that she would embarrass herself in front of her master and her mentor. It was a struggle unlike any she had faced yet. Through sheer will, she somehow managed to maintain her composure and not let her eyes stray from her master.

She had heard of the red flag that meant to beware of monsters but this was the first time she had ever seen it. This was in part due to the fact that she rarely left the capital but more than that most cities avoided indicating that they were in trouble. It was a matter of pride but it also revealed a moment of weakness that other countries or criminals might try to take advantage of.

The larger a city, the less it tended to raise its flags. Tino had heard that in the long history of the Zebrudian capital, the city had only raised its flags a handful of times. Gula wasn't nearly as large as the capital but it was still famous for its chocolate production, so it was possible something truly dire was threatening them.

Through the number of knights and Magi by the gates, Tino got a glimpse of how cautious the town was being. Employing so many people couldn't have been cheap. This wasn't the sort of caution you would take over a slight misgiving; there must be a very real fear of the orcs. She realized that the words from the guard at the gate were simply meant to dispel their worries.

Tino hadn't believed a single word of her master since their vacation had begun. She didn't think he was being dishonest but experience had taught her that "no big deal" for him was "no big deal" for the impervious Thousand Tricks. Tino was neither of these things so it was very much a big deal for her.

If they weren't going to participate in any battles then there was no reason for them to come to Gula in the first place. Everyone in First Steps knew that the Thousand Tricks liked to get your hopes up before crushing them. Tino couldn't even begin to guess as to when her master might've learned of a flag being raised here, but if he hadn't known then why else would he have chosen to come to this town when there were so many alternatives?

Thoughts swirled about Tino's mind.

*I understand, Master. To you, a battle with an army of orcs isn't even worthy of the name. But it's too much for me.*

She was certain that her master was going to send her after a band of orcs for the fun of it. In her usual state, Tino could wipe out a number of them with ease. She could manage even the tougher of the bunch as long as she took them on one at a time. But Tino was exhausted. It might have been her own lack of experience that prevented her from resting during the journey but it would still be suicidal for her to challenge a band of orcs in her current state.

Thieves weren't suited for fighting multiple foes at a time. It was easy to forget this while watching Lizzy in action, but their main duties were tasks such as sneak attacks, reconnaissance, and disarming traps.

*Master wants to teach me the secrets to multitarget combat—one of my weak points. I can't do it.*

Tino found herself jealous of the gleeful Smart sisters. Her sleep-deprived brain failed to keep her thoughts in order, preventing her from making any sound judgments. Her extravagant spartan training once again made her want to cling to that back she was always walking behind. In Elan, some hunters had defeated the lightning elemental but Tino didn't think that same miracle would happen twice.

She had to fight. If her master was subjecting her to a Trial then it was because he thought she could overcome it, because he expected her to. Tino had undergone hellish training so she could live up to those expectations.

Her master had said he would protect her if it became necessary. That had let her forget her fatigue for an instant but she couldn't depend on him forever. Her goal was to stand by his side as an equal, not be protected.

She didn't know just how many orcs there were but, considering previous Trials, it would be a considerable number. It could very well be too many for her.

*Maybe there are unlimited orcs. Possibly. Master, I can't do it.*

“Huh? You have another hideaway in Gula?” she heard Krai ask.

“But of course,” Sitri said with a hearty nod. “You never know what might happen.”

It was then that Tino felt she had an idea as to why Siddy was so overprepared. With a fuzzy feeling, she made up her mind: if she got the chance, she would prepare for any contingency. But first, she had to live to see the next day.

Tino had an idea. Unlike Lizzy, who brute-forced her way through everything, Siddy specialized in more underhanded methods. She might teach Tino how to fight multiple enemies at once. Tino had trouble interacting with Siddy but that didn't mean they were on bad terms. Siddy required caution and awareness but the two of them had a common ally in Krai. Sometimes she could be a bit touchy but there seemed to be a line she wouldn't cross.

She would probably help Tino if she asked. What Tino didn't know was what sort of compensation Siddy might demand.

When would the battle with the orcs happen? Night? An hour from now? Would they attack? Or would Tino have to hunt them down? Would she get a chance to rest? Would she get time to prepare? Or would she have to manage in her current state? With the current training restrictions in place, this last possibility seemed feasible and also the most strenuous. With her master's Trials, it was safe to assume the worst.

*I can't do it.*

Tino desperately tried to work her tired sleep-deprived brain. Suddenly, her master turned around. His pitch-black eyes almost seemed to stare straight into her mind. Unlike Tino, he looked calm and without a single worry.

"Well, Tino's also looking tired. Let's have a good meal and relax for the rest of the day," he said.

"M-My last supper?"

Perhaps the orcs would attack during the meal?

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As if mocking Tino for her cowardice, no sign of trouble ever came.

Siddy's hideaway in Gula was identical to the one in Elan. The supplies and the furniture were the same, you almost had to make an effort to notice the differences.

"Universal specifications make things easier," Siddy had said with a bit of pride.

She handled the cooking and made an exceptional meal out of the stocked provisions. It was hard to believe she was related to Lizzy, who never cooked. Tino had some confidence in her culinary skills, but nothing she made compared to this. Siddy must've practiced so she could find her way to Krai's heart through his stomach.

On the surface, this vacation really was just a vacation. Tino hadn't fought any monsters and she hadn't had to pay for her food or lodging. It would be so

wonderful if the free ride was payment for her services as a bodyguard. The word “vacation” ate away at her, it was a word normally associated with fun.

She felt like she was falling apart. She was on edge. She just wanted to train, even if it was something so savage as to make her lose her lunch, it would still be better than the current situation.

Her head wobbled side to side, burdened with these thoughts, when she found herself interrupted by Krai clapping his hands together.

“Oh right,” he said. “Tino, why don’t we get chocolate parfaits tomorrow? There’s a famous place in town.”

Tino hadn’t expected this. Her response came after a brief delay.

“Huh?”

She liked sweet things and she had accompanied her master many times before on these sorts of outings. However, she hadn’t yet done anything warranting a reward. Both Lizzy and Siddy’s expressions clouded when they heard his suggestion. They didn’t care much for sweet things and so it was only Tino who got to enjoy these occasions.

As a sort of protest, Lizzy jumped on Krai’s back and wrapped her arms around him, but his expression didn’t change. Siddy’s smile returned to her face but the glare in her eyes made threats on Tino’s life.

Tino wanted to join her master but she couldn’t permit herself to agree.

“Master, I haven’t done anything to warrant a reward,” she said.

“That’s ridiculous, I think you’re working very hard. Besides, sweet things are good for when you’re tired,” he said.

Krai’s smile was genuine, he was always so kind. He wore that kind smile when he gave Tino challenges to overcome.

“But...”

“I don’t really care about accomplishments or whatever. But if it really bothers you...here, if something happens you can just do your best when the time comes. It’s important to rest every once in a while. Tino, you don’t look well.”

Tino vaguely looked towards Lizzy with a questioning glance. Her master's words were sacrosanct but she had to show respect towards Lizzy if she didn't want to be subjected to brutal training.

Lizzy noticed Tino's glance and furrowed her brow as she collapsed on the sofa.

"Sounds like a good time," she said.

"Huh?! Uh, Lizzy—"

"I'm not stupid. If I go along then I'll just be in the way."

Lizzy was known as the Stifled Shadow and was feared throughout the capital. Krai was perhaps the only person who might be able to think of her as "in the way."

"Krai's right, T," said the other Smart sister. "It's important to rest. I'll plan out all the details for tomorrow so you can relax."

In those pink eyes, the same color as Lizzy's, there glimmered a light. It threatened to end Tino's existence.

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The sun began to set. With the bulwarks of Gula in the distance, Black, White, and Gray pitched a tent, moving quickly and silently. A sullen mood hung over them. They had a carriage, plenty of food, and the person who collared them was nowhere to be seen. Yet they still couldn't make their escape.

A pair of eyes stared at them. They had seen a plethora of odd creatures but this one was entirely unlike the rest. The creature had bothered them ever since they first caught sight of it running alongside the carriage, but they made an effort to not think about it too much.

It had gray skin and a well-built body. It wore nothing but a red banana hammock and a brown paper bag with two eyeholes cut in it over its head, as if put there as a joke. It was unmistakably a monster, the loyal beast of that demonic Alchemist.

They didn't think they could win it over to their side. To their attuned senses, an enormous amount of mana material radiated from it, its muscles clearly

weren't just for show. And then there was its gaze, devoid of any trace of emotion.

Apparently, its name was "Killiam," but that didn't really matter. Black tried to imagine what sort of methods that Alchemist must have employed to build such a beast, but she immediately stopped herself. She was certain that the Alchemist had dirtied her hands with much more heinous acts than she, White, or Gray had ever done. She was also certain that those hands might come at any time for her and her cohorts.

Sitting near Killiam was a white lion—a chimera—almost two meters long. It let out a growl. The chimera wasn't nearly as bad as Killiam but it was still something they would generally avoid fighting, as the creature's strength was an unknown quantity. All the monsters on the road had fled when they saw it. It probably wasn't weak, she could see it catching up to them if they tried to flee with the carriage.

"She told us to look after this thing. How the hell are we supposed to do that?!" White asked with a ghostly pallor.

Gray didn't say anything but he looked just as much at his wit's end.

Black had done a variety of jobs in her career as a criminal but she didn't know how to take care of a chimera. The Alchemist had said they should be able to handle everything on their own but she hadn't even told them what to feed the thing. The provisions in the carriage didn't seem like they would be enough to sustain such a large body. Sitri didn't seem to be feeding it and they didn't know how it had nourished itself during the journey so far.

Black made up her mind and approached Killiam and the chimera (Drink, was it?).

"What do you eat?" she asked.

Killiam slowly turned towards Drink.

"Kill, kill, kill..."

"Meow."

"Kiiill."

“Meow meow.”

Perhaps being monsters gave them a sense of camaraderie? Killiam had a very high-pitched voice for such a large creature, while Drink’s meow was quite endearing.

“What’s going on? Are they talking to each other?” Gray whispered with a tremble.

The conversation ended after only a few words. Killiam turned to Black and Drink lazily stood up.

“Kill.”

With that one word, Killiam leaped into the air. With surprising flexibility, it landed atop Drink. The chimera dashed off at extraordinary speed, the two silhouettes gradually grew smaller. Black didn’t know what to say. Neither did White or Gray.

“They ran off?” White whispered.

There was no reason for them to run, neither Black, White, or Gray had done anything. This wasn’t good.

“They ran. We gotta go after them!”

“B-But!”

“We were supposed to take care of those things! We’ll be killed if Sitri finds out that they got away.”

Proof wasn’t necessary. All Sitri needed to liquidate them was a hunch. There was no doubt in their minds. A cold, ominous wind suddenly blew over them. A black forest lay in the direction they had seen Drink and Killiam run off to.

“How are we gonna chase them? Where’d they go?”

“How should I know? Let’s just get a move on!”

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The beast dashed through the forest. It was a chimera, an accursed creature born by warping the fundamentals of life. It resembled a lion but the wings on its back made it clear that it was something far less conventional. Someone with

a good nose might notice the perverse scent it gave off.

It ran like the wind through a mountain road lined with dark trees, a berserker riding atop its back. The Rider's gray skin and muscles were fortified, its body burning to the touch, in stark contrast to its dull color. It had the scent of a human but its monstrous form was the result of the profane. Chimeras usually only took a liking to their creators, but if it was running along with the berserker then it must have instinctively known that the two were, in a sense, kin.

"Kill, kill..."

"Grrr..."

They felt no fear. Even if they did, it wouldn't show. Drink and Killiam were made to be exceptionally strong, to be a shield if necessary.

The smell of monsters was everywhere on the mountain path, it was the smell of orcs. Drink was a merging of the best parts of various mythical beasts, as far as it was concerned, this was the smell of food.

They were hungry. They were both designed so they could work even without eating for limited stretches, but that only meant they could endure the miserable pangs of hunger, not ignore the feeling entirely. They had caught and eaten monsters while traveling but those that got near the road didn't amount to much. Drink and Killiam had empty stomachs and ever since arriving at Gula the smell of orcs had been nagging at them.

"Kill, kill, kill..."

"Meow."

To interpret:

"Let's get this over with quickly."

"No need to tell me."

Or something like that.

Drink caught a sign of their prey and sped up. A fort illuminated by torches came into view. The building was a simple construct, about what was typical of orcs. There were lookouts but Drink and Killiam had no cause for concern.

Killiam acted as the vanguard. Its muscles began to ripple and expand and Drink held its tail straight as a blade. Both creatures were amalgamations made to fight. Show no fear, kill, eat. The beasts of the Ignoble set upon the fort.

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It was like a natural disaster.

The orc pack had been formed by multiple smaller packs joining together. On the slope of a mountain, they had built a sturdy fort atop the ruins of an abandoned village.

Reigning over the fort was King Schwarz, an aberrant orc born in a remote region rich in mana material. His strength and intelligence far exceeded normal orcs, he could comprehend the words of humans, and had the charisma to lead a coalition of multiple tribes. Cementing his status as unique among his peers was his weapon: a powerful sword he had stolen from a human he had slain.

However, the orc hero's kingdom crumbled in an instant. The disaster came in the form of a bone-chilling monster. It had a scent that invited doubts that they were truly of this world. The vile creature jumped the outer walls with ease, ignored the lookout, and headed straight for the deepest reaches of the fort. This was where the orc women and orc children were kept.

By the time Schwarz realized what was happening, it was too late. The wretched beast had eaten the pack's future—its children—and torn its beloved women to shreds. The orc king had seen many tragedies but he still couldn't bear to look upon this travesty. The stench of blood permeated the air and screams layered atop more screams. The creature let out a feline cry.

It wasn't even fit to call a battle. Against a human, the orc warriors would have bravely risked their lives if their king ordered it, but the wretched form and otherworldly scent of the creature had them frozen with fear.

Only Schwarz properly understood the situation, for he possessed the rationality to not be driven by instinct. This was a trap laid by the humans; they had realized they wouldn't be able to take the fort head-on so they resorted to cowardly methods.

There was just one beast, and Schwarz had a thousand hardy warriors at his

command. They couldn't lose as long as they kept their composure. His instincts, rationality, and intelligence all gave him confidence.

However, his orders didn't get through. He was the only one with the strength and intellect necessary to resist his instincts. Screams drowned out his commands and his soldiers and the remaining women turned their backs on him as they raced to abandon the fort. Only Schwarz understood how foolish that was. The beast's objective wasn't just to eat, it was to destroy. With wings and a lion's head, its eyes displayed savage glee. It was the same sort of glee Schwarz felt when attacking a human settlement.

"Fight!" he yelled to no effect.

Like a zephyr, the beast charged after the appetizing backs of the fleeing orcs. It easily outpaced its prey and its claws tore through both armor and flesh in a single swipe. Every part of it was made to kill, even its whiplike tail and its roar.

Schwarz let out a howl of rage. He didn't want any more of his pack to die. With thunderous footfalls, he charged at the beast, his black greatsword raised above his head. His foe was an abomination but he was a veteran of many battles.

With fierce determination, he was about to strike at the beast's weak point, its flank, but suddenly something fell from the sky. He instinctively raised his blade and blocked it; despite his readiness, his arms grew numb from the immense weight pressing against his blade.

"Kill, kill..."

A large warrior, of comparable size to Schwarz, had fallen. It had an outline close to a human's and it smelled like one, but it was no human. He could tell that its might exceeded that of any of orc under his command.

Reinforcements had arrived for the other beast. Schwarz bit his lip and took a step back. He couldn't win this. In spite of his boiling rage, he accepted defeat.

The gray warrior bunched his fists and took a fighting stance. The beast stopped feasting on the orcs and moved around to surround Schwarz. He could handle one at a time but two at once was impossible. His death was certain.

Corpses of allies, warriors, and women were piled up throughout the fort.

Even though the attackers had been only a single beast and humanoid, the bodies in the fort far outnumbered those who had successfully escaped.

As king, Schwarz couldn't allow himself to give in to rage and perish here.

"You die..."



A beast and a fistfighter. Running away wouldn't be difficult. Schwarz deflected an attack from the beast's tail and fell back. The two attackers didn't get any closer. They were eating the corpses, almost as if to say they already had what they came for.

And so the orc fort was decimated before it could ever attack the town of Gula.

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The first thing she noticed was the repugnant scent. It was well into the night and Chloe and her companions were stopping to rest on the road to Gula. They wanted to avoid traveling at night as much as they could afford to. It was only common sense among hunters.

They had been in a hurry and the tough, equine monsters pulling Chloe and Scorching Whirlwind's carriage had reached their limit. Falling Fog, on the other hand, seemed to have energy to spare.

Even still, they hadn't stopped to set up camp, only to take a brief rest. Arnold was clearly willing to do whatever it took to catch his prey.

They built a roaring fire and sat around it. This was something most monsters wouldn't get close to, even the least intelligent of them could still sense danger from a concentration of mana material.

The sight of hunters sitting around a fire and passing the time by sharing tales of adventure was exactly how Chloe had always pictured it. Naturally, she shared a story about the Thousand Tricks. Treasure hunters valued their pride. Fights between them were inevitable but the Explorers' Association did what they could to lessen the resulting damage. She figured Falling Fog's anger might subside a tad if they knew of Krai's accomplishments.

He had resolved a number of incidents, slain fiends that had killed champions, and was feared by his contemporaries. His name struck fear in the hearts of criminals. Some had even turned themselves in simply because it was rumored that the Thousand Tricks was after them. He was a mysterious hunter who rarely took quests or showed up at Association branches and nobody knew what it was that he did instead.

Chloe tried to tell her stories in a way that wouldn't agitate Arnold but he still looked displeased. However, he could be calculating when the time called for it and probably didn't stop her because her tales contained useful information.

"He rarely accepts quests? What does he do instead?" he asked.

"We don't infringe upon hunters' privacy," she said. "However, there are rumors of him training his clanmates."

"You mean those 'Thousand Trials'? Total nonsense," Eigh said.

Treasure hunting was something that required constant self-improvement, hunters didn't have time to do things like take on apprentices. The only people who taught the trade were those who retired from it.

However, plenty of people had taken on the Thousand Trials, even people from outside First Steps. The bitter expressions worn by Rhuda and Gilbert were likely due to their experience at White Wolf's Den.

Even though it wasn't the sort of thing the Association would permit, there was something Chloe was trying not to think about too much. It was within the realm of possibility that the troubles with the lightning elemental in Elan were incited for reasons similar to that of the White Wolf's Den incident.

"You mean it's possible the Thousand Tricks might have been manipulating that elemental?"

"What?! Not at all! He's not a criminal," Chloe protested.

"If you say so," Arnold said with a furrowed brow.

A sudden wind swept over them. The mustangs whinnied and Arnold stood up. The members of Scorching Whirlwind all gripped their weapons and checked their surroundings. The wind was warm and carried a repulsive stench. It was a common scent even at the Explorers' Association: the smell of a beast.

"What's that stench?"

"Damn, I've got a bad feeling about this."

Eigh, a Thief, looked in the direction of the wind and narrowed his eyes. This was a scent more common to closed rooms than the open plains.

"It's the scent of an excited beast—and it's getting closer."

The ground rumbled minutely. The members of Scorching Whirlwind wore tense expressions. Chloe remembered something she had heard in Elan: apparently, Gula was busy figuring out how to deal with a pack of orcs. The monsters had built a fort near the town and quite a number of them were inhabiting it.

*Gula is still some distance away. There's no reason orcs holed up in a fort would come all the way out here,* Chloe thought. But she immediately found her expectations betrayed.

"It's a pack of orcs!" Eigh yelled. "There's a ton of them and they're coming straight for us. There's nowhere to run!"

The thundering got closer, they realized it was the sound of footsteps. A black wave moved across the moonlit road. Chloe drew her weapon. It was a shortsword her uncle had given her, and the light of the fire reflected off it.

Arnold yelled and his sword began to crackle with lightning. He showed no signs of his earlier fatigue.

"Get ready! Stoke the fire and prepare offensive spells," he said. "Chloe, if you can't fight then get back."

"I'll fight."

"Very well. These aren't much smarter than wild animals. They should turn tail if we show them who's stronger."

This was a high-level hunter. He didn't even seem to waver in the face of a horde of monsters.

"Tear them to shreds!" Arnold ordered.

The rest of Falling Fog responded with a roar and they took the horde of orcs head-on.

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A new day began. Just like the previous one, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. It seemed the storm had passed. Well rested, I got up and stretched when I heard a banging sound from the other bedroom.

"Well, it's not like Krai Baby's gonna have any interest in a kid like T. And this isn't a date, she's just his protection. I don't think I need to tell you this, T, but don't get any funny ideas just because he's nice to you. When you get back, I'll train you body and soul so that you never feel that way ever again."

"I'll manage your outfit, T. Even though you're going as his bodyguard, your usual outfit will be a hindrance. If you and Krai contrast too much then it will make him look bad. For both yours and his sake, you can't show too much leg. Regardless of how you might feel, the people around you..."

*Why are they causing such a fuss when we're just going out for parfaits? If those two care so much they should just go with us...*

When Tino exited the bedroom, she looked quite different from her usual self. She wore a long gray coat that concealed the dagger at her waist. Her normal outfit made it clear she was a Thief, but I wasn't sure how to describe this look. For some reason, her red ribbons had been swapped out for white ones and the circles under her eyes had disappeared.

Sitri made a troubled smile when she noticed me staring.

"This was the best I could do while ensuring she could be an effective guard and hide her identity. If I let her go in a skirt and casual clothes then it would almost seem like you two were on a date. My apologies, Krai, I don't have many inconspicuous Relics like you do. She's equipped with the bare minimum, if you could do your best to compensate..."

"No worries, if trouble arises then we'll just come back here."

Unlike Tino, I was in my usual clothes and thus fully kitted out. From head to toe, I was equipped with Relics that Kris and the other First Steps Magi had worked themselves to the bone charging. I was still useless but I could at least serve as a wall.

"I don't think I need to worry, but keep your hands off of T, no matter how cute she is," Sitri jokingly warned me.

*What kind of person does she think I am? Even if she's joking, Tino might not see it that way.*

I was about to protest but Sitri shifted her gaze to Tino.

"Listen well, T," she said with a smile. "If you lay a hand on Krai, I'll make sure such deviant thoughts never again cross your mind."

Sitri's convincing performance caused Tino to take a step back, her face a deathly pallor. There was no way I was going to lay a hand on her, so it was even harder to think she would do anything to me.

"Come back the instant you finish your food, okay, Krai Baby? Then we can have our date after that," Liz said.

"I'll make preparations for the next leg of our trip, including ensuring that T can sleep very well," Sitri said. "Don't be gone long, you two."

For reasons unknown to me, the two sisters looked restless as they saw us off. I had never seen Tino so uncertain as I led her through the vaguely solemn town.

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As you might expect for a town famous for its chocolates, the streets of Gula were filled with shops offering sweet treats. There were some with signs brightly proclaiming that they specialized in chocolate. I specialized in eating.

Even though I kept it a secret, I loved sweet things. Heavy cream, sweet beans, chocolate, I loved it all, I loved it more than anything else. I made sure I always had a chocolate bar handy. I wanted to take my time and check out all the shops, but unfortunately, that wasn't in the cards.

The raised flag had the town a tad on edge, but I was relatively used to it. In my early days as a hunter chocolate would have been the last thing on my mind at a time like this. However, I was a prime example of how sheer experience could allow even the most incompetent of us to grow accustomed to something.

On the other hand, Tino seemed to be making herself small. She liked sweets just as much as I did, but she didn't keep it hidden. Usually when we went out for sweets her joy was infectious, but maybe she wasn't used to walking around a town when a warning flag was raised.

"Don't worry, Tino. I know you haven't left the capital much, but you see those flags all the time if you travel around enough," I said and then began to

chuckle. "I can't even remember how many of those flags I've seen."

"Huh?! You can't..."

And once we saw the flag, Luke or someone would dive straight into trouble. I would just sit in the back and wear Safety Rings so I always came out unscathed, but it wasn't easy to watch my friends get roughed up. But Tino wasn't the type to run headlong into danger so I had nothing to worry about.

Her eyes were darting around nervously, which was a bit different from her usual manner. I was, technically, the more experienced hunter so I figured I should provide a good example.

"If you're still bothered by it then, hmm. Here, close your eyes and cover your ears, take deep breaths, and think about something fun," I suggested.

*And if someone's speaking to you, fold your arms, nod your head, and pretend to be deep in contemplation.*

This was a technique I used to avoid reality. There was only so much a man could do on his own. There were plenty of other excellent hunters out there so I let them take care of anything that I wasn't responsible for.

Tino wasn't saying a word, so I got a bit ahead of myself and kept on rambling.

*Right, I've been thinking about this a lot. Tino overthinks things, she takes things too seriously. She's a talented hunter but there are also plenty who surpass her. If she takes on too much by herself, then she'll just be crushed under the weight.*

"You've still got a long road ahead of you and I don't think there's any use overthinking things," I told her. "And now Liz and Sitri are with us so you should relax a bit. You haven't looked well today or yesterday and it's got me worried."

"I-I see, thank you very much."

The rings under her eyes had disappeared but she couldn't hide her fatigue. I pointed this out to her and she looked away bashfully.

A little bit of pep returned to her step as we strolled through the town. Our destination was along a major street and had a fashionable exterior. There were

plenty of people passing through the street but, under the current circumstances, there weren't any other customers. How convenient.

This wasn't just an outing to get a parfait, this was also a chance for Tino to mentally recuperate. Liz's treatment of her had been bothering me. I didn't think she was subjecting Tino to anything too awful, but I figured that whatever it was, Tino would find it easier to talk about while enjoying something sweet.

*Good grief, sweets aren't my thing but I guess I can go along if it's for her sake.*

We were offered seats with a good view of the street and ample sunlight. Just like the exterior, the interior was furnished quite stylishly. This clearly wasn't a place you'd frequently see hunters at. I was familiar with all of the confectioneries of the capital, but this still seemed like a place I could have high hopes for.

Tino's eyes glimmered as she looked around. Bringing her along appeared to have paid off. I was letting myself bask in the cheery scene when she looked at me with upturned eyes.

"Master," she began. "Um, Siddy gave me some money. She said to use it however I wanted."

I didn't respond.

*Does Sitri think she's my guardian or something? I wish she'd at least let me pretend to be a cool master for Tino.*

Sitri's meddling took some of the wind out of my sails but that didn't make me any less excited for the parfait I was about to enjoy. I made sure to conceal my excitement as I placed my order. The sweet scent wafting through the café made me so glad I chose to leave the capital. This had all started because I was running away from that conference but things turned out pretty well.

*Am I actually having a lucky day? Whatever's waiting for me at the capital can wait until I get back.*

"Master, thank you so much," Tino said. "I believe I've embarrassed you."

"I don't mind. It's no trouble for me and, besides, I'm always causing trouble

for you.”

“Oh no, not all.”

There was nobody better than me when it came to depending on others, but it felt nice to be depended on once in a while. Particularly Tino, since my influence was part of what drove her to become a hunter. I couldn’t understand why she was so unwilling to rely on me. Really, I thought it would be perfectly fine if she did.

We waited for our parfaits and, to little surprise, mostly talked about things related to treasure hunting. It wasn’t really the sort of thing you’d talk about on a date but Tino took things seriously. She was aiming to become a first-rate hunter and I had experience, if nothing else, as a hunter so telling her about my experiences was the least I could do.

“Huh? You’ve never been wounded in combat before?” she asked wide-eyed and surprised.

“It’s just because the rest of Grieving Souls are all so strong.”

Ansem would put up barriers, I had Safety Rings, and not many attacks came my way in the first place. My mana material was a step below everyone else’s so I didn’t stand out much in a battle. With nothing to do, I would sometimes just sit down and watch.

In the wide world of treasure hunting, I was probably the only hunter who had ever done such a thing.

“I shouldn’t have expected anything less, Master. I could never hope to emulate you.”

I didn’t know why, but Tino’s eyes shined with admiration as she spoke. I hadn’t done anything that warranted admiration or was worth emulating. Her misdirected admiration made me feel bad so I tried to shift some of it towards Liz.

“There’s nothing praiseworthy about being unscathed. Instead, you should strive for the strength to keep going even when you’re hurt. With enough effort, you’ll even be able to master Evolve Greed.”

“I’m not so sure...”

“No, no, that Relic is really strong and valuable. Just by putting it on it almost made you as strong as Liz. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen. It’s just a shame that I can’t use it.”

*Just how weak am I if that mask rejected me even after I put it on...ah, no, no, no.*

Tino shrank back when she saw I was getting worked up.

“So, what I’m trying to say is that Liz’s training might be brutal but I think it’s to your benefit,” I said in an attempt to quickly change the subject. “She can be strict but I don’t think she does it to bully you—”

“Huh? Oh, mmm. Lizzy’s doing the right thing. I’m very happy to have met you and her.”

“Sitri’s not a bad person either, she’s just a bit odd. Most Alchemists are. I don’t think she intends to bully you—”

“Hm? It embarrasses me when she touches me in front of you but I don’t she’s bul— Er, it’s not like she does it all the time.”

Tino’s responses were more relaxed than I had expected. I thought Liz’s pressure had been driving her to the edge but that didn’t seem to be the case given her current attitude, and she wasn’t the type to lie.

*Huh? Was I wrong to think there was a problem?*

“Is there anything bothering you?” I asked just to be sure. “If there is something, tell me and I’ll handle it.”

“I’m quite fine. If anything, it’s your requests that hurt the most—” Tino mumbled as she looked at the floor. “Ah, but I understand that you’re looking out for me.”

*Did I do something? Did I do something worse than make her drink a liquid lightning rod and run through a storm?*

Sure, I had shown poor leadership in the past but I never did anything out of malice. I hadn’t meant to make her uncomfortable when I put Evolve Greed on her and I didn’t plan to make her wear it ever again unless she wanted to.

*Wait. Then what's been causing Tino to feel so down? I haven't asked anything of her during this trip. As far as I can recall, I've been particularly harmless lately.*

I tilted my head, when Tino's expression suddenly shifted. She stood up, noticed I was looking at her, and sat back down.

"S-Sorry, Master. There were voices outside, I wasn't listening for them or anything but they were loud and Lizzy teaches me to always pay attention."

"What's the matter?"

How good were her ears if she was hearing things outside? I was next to the window and I didn't hear a thing.

Tino became red in the face and a flurry of words began to spill out from her mouth.

"I haven't been able to believe your words entirely. But that's because of everything that's happened and something easy to you is life-threatening to me, and you were supposed to always be with me—I'm sorry. I just did something very embarrassing."

Her hands were clenched into fists and pressed against her knees as she tried to make herself seem smaller. Considering her embarrassment, I was really sorry that I had no idea what she was talking about. What I could tell was that her faith in me was abysmally low and that she looked really cute when red in the face.

With Tino so worked up, the waiter lost their chance to bring our parfaits.

Tino looked up with determination and declared: "I've made up my mind. I'll never doubt your words ever again!"

Except I didn't remember doing anything to deserve such trust. Really, I was such a bumbling fool I didn't think I could handle all the trust. More than anything, this wasn't the first time she had said this to me.

*I'm sorry I've betrayed you so many times. It's all my fault.*

"I don't think that's the first time I've heard that," I said.

"Th-This time for sure. If you say a crow's white then it's white! Your will is my

own!"

*I think there's too much of a gap in our excitement levels. Well, as long as she's happy.*

I pushed back any doubts in the back of my mind and was about to give my usual "Yeah, uh-huh," but Tino cut me off.

"Also, Master," she said while fidgeting with her fingers. "I know it's not my place and I might not understand even if you told me, but I'd like to ask for the sake of education. It's about what those hunters were discussing. How did you drive those orcs out of the fort?"

*What's she talking about?*

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"It's delicious," Tino said with a blissful smile.

The chocolate parfait was even better than I had been led to believe. A glass about thirty centimeters tall had been filled with ice cream, chocolate, flaky cookies, and then topped off with an almost gratuitous amount of cream. At the tip-top of it was a piece of chocolate shaped, very fittingly, like a crown.

The quality of the chocolate was what you might expect from a place famous for its chocolate production, but the sheer volume was also extraordinary. I was sure Liz or Sitri would've grimaced at the sight of it.

However, what really elevated the taste was the information Tino had overheard. The orcs had gone somewhere. Even the best sweets were hard to enjoy when something was on your mind. I couldn't be sure why, but I felt really lucky knowing that trouble had left in the same direction it had come from. I had proof that I could avoid a tumult as long as I kept my childhood friends under control.

*Good job, me!*

Tino smiled, I smiled, everything was going well. I wanted to do a little dance, but I didn't because I was hard-boiled. Instead, I just smiled silently. I *didn't* feel like I was going to barf.

*There's one issue, however. I don't think I'll be able to finish this parfait.*

I looked down at the dessert. I had a hidden sweet tooth, but unlike most hunters, I wasn't a big eater. I had moved my spoon at a considerable pace but the pretty glass was still half full.

Meanwhile, Tino, who ordered the same thing, had finished hers and watched me without saying a peep. Hunters tended to both eat a lot and quickly. I wondered just how she stored it all in that small body of hers.

*I'd feel bad leaving it unfinished. Maybe Tino will finish it for me? No, hold on, it might be okay with Liz or Sitri, but I can't have my junior finishing off a guy's food.*

Traversing the harsh world made hunters resilient to many things a normal person might balk at. Tino might not necessarily mind finishing my parfait, but it might damage my hard-boiled image. Unless it was already too late to be worrying about that.

Tino's black eyes stared at me, they still glimmered with genuine respect.

*Hmm, if she's still hungry then she'd just place another order.*

After giving it some thought, I tried removing one of the rolled cookies from the parfait and thrust it before Tino. My mouth hadn't touched it so I figured this was more or less fine. Her eyes bulged and she looked around.

"Uh?! Um, huh?" She looked puzzled. "Th-Thank you," she eventually said and bit on the cookie. Her face became red all the way to her ears. This was a side of her I didn't often see and I somehow felt like I was feeding a wild animal. But I, too, would be embarrassed if I was in her position.

"Is it good?" I asked.

"Yes, it's very sweet," she said in a small voice as she nibbled on the cookie. She really liked sweet things.

*I need to earn what favor with her I can on this vacation and then make sure not to lose it.*

I was beginning to relax when a man with a large white hat and a white apron wrapped around his rotund body appeared from the far end of the café. He seemed nice enough, but I was also used to being surrounded by stern-faced

hunters.

He headed straight for us, his gaze never leaving us. Tino seemed a bit apprehensive.

“Pardon me,” he said in a hushed voice. “I might have the wrong person but would you happen to be the Thousand Tricks?”

I had used a fake ID and yet my cover still ended up blown. I didn’t let my surprise show as I looked at his face—just as I expected, I had no idea who he was. Hiding my shock seemed to work against me because the man smiled and nodded with satisfaction.

“I knew it! I’ve waited so long for this day! I’m the manager of this café.”

He sounded excited. He asked to shake my hand and I just let it happen. He must have been the chef as well as the manager because his hands smelled of sugar. I had been recognized by hunters before, but never had a civilian identified me because I was enjoying something sweet. Not to mention he was so impassioned for reasons I couldn’t figure out.

Tino looked at him with wide eyes.

“You’re very famous in this industry,” the excellent pastry chef said in a fast voice. “You’re the legendary treasure hunter who’s been to confectioneries all over the map! They say that a shop visited by you will be prosperous and happy! You get the moniker Thousand Tricks because you try every last item on the menu!”

“As expected of Master...”

I did a double take; this was all news to me.

*My identity was supposed to be hidden, why is it so obvious to this guy? I don’t get why he’s treating me like some sort of lucky fairy. This isn’t hard-boiled at all. With this reputation, maybe I should stop going outside unless I have a very good reason to. I want to crawl into a hole. What did Tino mean “As expected”? What did he mean my moniker comes from trying every item on a menu?*

“I could tell it was you by your black eyes and hair, as well as the young lady with you,” the chef continued. “I was looking forward to the day you graced our

establishment with your presence, but to think it would happen under such circumstances..."

"Don't worry. Master's already dealt with the orcs, you can relax," Tino said unprompted. "The chocolate parfait was delicious, sir."

"Wait, I haven't done anything!" I interjected.

I could live with this guy being grateful for my visit but I couldn't let him be grateful for something I hadn't even done. That would put a responsibility on my shoulders.

"It was other hunters who fought the orcs, not me. Don't forget that," I said. "It's, uh, just a coincidence that they left their fort. See, Tino? I haven't done anything."

"If you say it's a coincidence, then it's a coincidence. My apologies, sir, forget what I just said," Tino said, proudly twisting my words.

"I-I see. Understood. If you say it's a coincidence," the chef said with a knowing nod.

In a mood that words fail to describe, I returned to the hideaway with Tino. I opened the door and Liz sprung on me, almost as if she had been waiting for that exact moment.

"Welcome back, Krai!" Sitri said with a smile. "We've been waiting so long. Lizzy wanted to tail you, but I put a stop to that idea."

"Excuse me?! You were considering it too!" Liz yelled. "Welcome back, Krai Baby! What's that, did you bring us a gift?"

What a sudden shift in atmosphere it was. I put an arm around Liz and handed Sitri the box we received from the pastry chef. It was packed to the brim with famous chocolates produced in Gula. If I had to accept gifts, I might as well accept the throne of the chocolate fairy.

Tino's grin was replaced with a look both vague and expressionless. I had known Liz longer, but Tino had still been around her for a few years. You'd think she would know how Liz is around her friends.

Liz grabbed my arm and rubbed her cheek against mine.

"I was so bored I thought I might go after those orcs," she said. "I heard they caused some real damage and it seems they've got that fort locked down."

"Ah, apparently it's been emptied out."

"What?! How?"

Just in case, Tino and I had asked around after leaving the café. We'd feel pretty bad if the pastry chef got hurt because he had been given bad info. In the end, we found that what Tino had heard was true. The orcs had indeed abandoned their fort. Apparently, they were seen scrambling across the plains near the town, but not attacking it. The cause was unknown, but it sure was a lucky break for Gula.

If an orc pack started rampaging along a highway, then the empire's highest authorities would get involved. That would dramatically increase the funds and manpower poured into resolving the problem, not to mention more hunters would gather to help. Attacking a fort nestled in a forest was grueling, but on the plains wide-area magic attacks could be utilized.

Our only misgiving was that a number of battered corpses had been found in the fort, almost as if it had been attacked by something. These sorts of unknowns always caused trouble for our party and my gut told me this might be another one of those times.

*Will we be okay? Gula seems like a well-fortified town, but even still...*

Sitri listened to our explanation with a grin and then clapped her hands as though she remembered something. Without saying anything, she looked at Tino and gestured towards a potion placed on the table.

"Here, T, I've prepared a sleeping potion for you," she said.

A potion to usher someone into a deep sleep. Sitri's concoctions were synthesized with the intent of being used on monsters who were resistant to potions. They were far too dangerous for a human to consume. Surely that wasn't the sort of potion she was planning on giving to Tino?

"Sitri, let's leave. Is everything ready?" I asked.

"Oh? So soon?"

“We’ve done what we needed to.”

And that was eating the chocolate parfaits. There were still confectioneries I wanted to visit, but that was hard to do when the name Thousand Tricks was so well-known in the area. The matter of the orcs was also bothering me and I was worried about Sitri’s hired hands.

“Agreed! Without the fort, there’s nothing for us to do here,” Liz said with her hands pressed together. Not that we ever planned on getting involved with the fort and the orcs in the first place.

Our luggage was all ready, but we hadn’t fought any monsters so it wasn’t like we had much to restock anyway. Together we all headed for the exit. News of the orcs must have spread because the town was oddly abuzz.

“Sounds like the orcs were pushed out by hunters. Lame. I thought we might get a chance to fight,” Liz grumbled while carrying a large case next to me. It seemed she had been listening to the nearby chatter. She had completely forgotten about my restrictions on training, but I decided it was fine as long as we stayed out of trouble.

“Excitement was indeed the intended result,” Sitri mumbled to herself. “But it must have been insufficient if they were so quickly driven off by mere hunters. I’ll have to make a note of it. As I expected, making it easier to disperse negatively affects the efficacy.”

I, for one, was happy. With the orcs gone, we could leave the town without worry. I just wished the issue could’ve been resolved before we arrived. We passed through the gate right as the warning flag was being lowered. It must have been a rare occurrence because there was a crowd gathered. I chose to ignore it and focus on the proceedings necessary to leave but I suddenly heard a crowd cheering nearby. The soldier processing me looked up with shining eyes.

“They were the main exterminators of the orc pack,” he explained. “The rampaging orcs happened to run in the direction of some high-level hunters and they wiped them out. They’re heroes to Gula.”

My eyes widened. This was unexpected. Sitri seemed to share the sentiment. There weren’t many high-level hunters in Zebrudia, these might have been people we knew.

"That's, uh, amazing," I said.

"Isn't it?! It was a pack of orcs and, nobody knows why, but there were other monsters too. Like an elemental, a fire one even. What a feat," the soldier said. He seemed awfully excited.

The hunters were amazing too. It was no small accomplishment to take down a surprise pack of orcs but you also needed terrible luck to run into one. It was bad enough to be traveling on a collision course with a swarm of monsters, but it was almost hard to believe that they also ran into an elemental. I wondered what they did to get such rotten luck. It was almost as bad as mine.

Within me, I felt both admiration, pity, and empathy. The orc pack wasn't my fault, so it didn't go any further than that.

Sitri nudged me with her elbow and whispered into my ear: "The fire elemental couldn't have anything to do with Danger Effect. Is this according to plan?"

"Huh? Uh, mmm, I guess so?"

I wondered what she was talking about. I wasn't the type to plan things out and even if I made one it would always fall apart. Needless to say, I hadn't made a plan for this vacation.

While I puzzled over what Sitri had said to me, the crowd around the heroes parted for just a moment, giving me a brief glimpse of them. I did a double take.

It seemed like it had been a tough battle. The champions were roughed up, their armor covered in scratches and dents, blood soaked into their coats. Their expressions were exhausted, their gazes vague. Some were leaning against each other. However, they also had that special look you only see in people who had just fought with all their might. They were the spitting image of champions.

But the most surprising thing was that they were hunters I knew. In and of itself, that wasn't too strange; being one myself, I knew many high-level hunters. But standing at the head of the group, looking as though he might collapse at any minute, was Arnold, leader of Falling Fog. His imposing, to put it nicely, figure was battered and drenched in blood making him look like a seasoned warrior.

I was certain, it was Arnold. Arnold, who had caused nothing but trouble in the capital. Arnold, who was one of my reasons for leaving the capital. I didn't know why he was here, but what a coincidence it was.

Behind him was Rhuda and her party, all looking like they might keel over at any minute. Just what was going on?

"Aaah, I get it," Liz said with a click of her fingers. It seemed she had figured something out. "I thought it was strange that we weren't attacking the orcs, so I figured—"

"Let's hurry up and get going. Nothing good will come from being seen. I'd like to renew old bonds but it seems they've got their hands full," I said.

"Okaaay!"

I held my breath and waited for our processing to finish. It seemed like some bigwig was about to lead Arnold and his band somewhere. I kept glancing his way, checking to see if he had noticed us. Then his cloudy eyes suddenly seemed to catch sight of us. He looked dumbfounded for a moment and his mouth twitched. I quickly looked the other way.

*Did he see us? Maybe not? He did, didn't he?*

I was too scared to turn around and check. Luckily, our paperwork was finished and we were able to pass through the gate. He was tired, he probably didn't have time to be worrying about us. Just as I was letting myself relax, Liz gracefully turned around. She blew a kiss to Arnold's back and, before I had a chance to stop her, shouted in a cheery voice.

"Okaaay, good job out there! Must've really worked hard if you're still kicking! Sure, it was just an orc pack but that's pretty good for a bunch of rustics! I hate to say it, but we're real busy right now. We'll see you around though!"

"H-Hey, Liz, don't antagonize him," I said. "Sitri, let's hurry up and get going."

A couple of seconds later we heard what sounded like an animal's roar from the other side of the gate.

I hurried off to our carriage, which awaited us just outside the town.

# Chapter Four: A Fun Vacation

Never in his career as a hunter had Arnold seen such a large pack of monsters in one place. There were more glowing eyes than anyone could count. The stench of beasts and blood was carried on the wind. Most were orcs, but plenty of other monsters were mixed in.

The well-trained mustangs cried with fear. Chloe and everyone in Scorching Whirlwind was pale as a ghost. Who could blame them? Even for the seasoned hunters of Falling Fog, this was a gathering of monsters vaster than any they had ever seen.

Under normal circumstances, a single party would never run into a pack of such a scale. At least nobody was fleeing. A personification of chaos, the monsters moved across the plain like a tidal wave. They trampled one another and moved almost as if something were drawing them in.

“They’ve gone completely insane. Did a spell do this? Or some sort of drug?” Eigh speculated.

But this was no time to be worrying about the cause. Eigh’s comrades formed a defensive formation, and a Magus began the incantation of his most powerful spell.

Falling Fog was a party that specialized in hunting large monsters and mostly contained members trained for close-range combat; they had no Magi who could use wide-area spells. Everyone looked ready to die, but that resolve was unnecessary. They would fight through and win like they always did.

“We won’t be able to protect you,” Arnold told Rhuda and the others. “You’ll have to look out for yourselves.”

His sword was made out of the bones from the Thunder Dragon they had defeated. He tightened his grip and the blade crackled with lightning almost as if it could still remember when it was a part of a dragon.

Equipment made from the parts of monsters possessing powerful magic

exhibited some of the same powers the monster did. Arnold's sword, the source of his moniker "Crashing Lightning," was one of the finest examples of this. Equipped with a weapon only permitted to a Dragon Slayer, orcs were a trifle, no matter their numbers.

"Arnold, take a look," Eigh said with trembling shoulders and a stiff smile. "The monsters are covered in wounds. Maybe they're running from *him*."

Orcs weren't completely stupid, but they were also savage and foolhardy. Such an immense pack of them wouldn't choose to run from just anything. This made clearing orcs out of their forts difficult. But that fact only lent further credence to Eigh's suggestion.

Arnold knew better than anyone that a Level 8 hunter couldn't be understood through the lens of common sense. He also knew that powerful hunters saving towns was a regular occurrence.

"That man, what did he do?"

How did he chase them from their fort? And if he did that, then why didn't he also kill them all? Chasing them out was preferable to fighting them in their fort, but a rampant orc pack posed a danger to travelers.

There was no time to think about it any further. The Magus let loose a volley of fireballs that hit the orcs dead-on and sent a dozen of them flying back. But the pack didn't stop.

Arnold noticed a broken potion vial. It must've been left by a traveler. He made up his mind, almost as if encouraged by the litter. It was a valuable item he was about to use, but this was no time for hesitation. As the leader, it was his responsibility to take the lead and cut a path open.

From his belt, he pulled out a potion that enhanced his powers and gulped it all down. His insides shook, and a warm strength coursed through him around his heart. A sense of tremendous strength calmed his nerves.

The orc pack saw Arnold and detected his overwhelming sum of mana material, but they still didn't stop. It almost sounded like an earthquake. Particles of dirt knocked into the air reduced visibility.

Arnold tossed the vial aside, stood at the vanguard, and shouted in a

thunderous voice as lightning crackled about him.

“Very well! You’ll see that it isn’t the Thousand Tricks, but me, the Crashing Lightning who you should fear!”

“You!” said a strange voice.

Arnold held his sword above his head and blocked a sudden attack. The stench of a monster came over him. Murderous, bloodshot, golden eyes looked at him up close. The lightning enveloping his blade seared the monster’s body, but it didn’t budge an inch.



It was an orc, an unusual one covered in black armor. It towered over the average orc, its black skin was covered in scars, and its left eye was gone. The large sword it gripped was crude but well maintained and it was clearly no common weapon if it withstood a hit from the Crashing Lightning. But what truly separated this one from other orcs was the glint of intelligence in its eyes.

It was exceptional, an outlier, a monster that naturally surpassed the rest of its kind. Each of its attacks had weight, its superb strength making it clear that an average hunter couldn't hope to cross blades with it.

Bold enough to face a Level 7 hunter and the strength to back it up. No doubt, this was the boss of the pack. Faced with such a strong foe, Arnold mustered his strength and swung his sword. If he defeated the boss, maybe the pack would come to a stop? No, they were clearly out of control. The crush of orcs and monsters were intercepted by the other hunters.

The black-furred orc took a big step back and screamed, sending spit everywhere. Its speech was fragmented but its intense feelings were clear enough.

"This scent, fear, animosity. This scent, won't stop. Treacherous. Strange potion, this is the way of humans!"

What was he talking about? Doubts floated through the back of Arnold's mind but he was in no position to be getting his facts straight. Before him was a monster who had attacked him, his only choice was to respond in kind.

He blocked another strike. Again and again, they clashed, and Arnold confirmed his suspicions. Before him was an orc unlike any other but he was the stronger of the two. If only by a small margin, he had the superior weapon, physical strength, and mana material. With the potion enhancing him, there was no way he could lose.

The orc's face twisted with shock; it had probably never fought someone so strong, someone better than it. The orc jumped back. Arnold immediately followed up with another attack, lightning enveloped his sword and shot forward. Unperturbed by the attack, the orc began to move. The lightning would be enough to finish a lesser opponent but even burnt skin wasn't enough to stop the orc.

Its lunge was one made only by those prepared to die, made with the desire to kill your opponent even if it meant sacrificing yourself. Arnold's reaction was delayed; he hadn't expected the orc to make the move it did. The orc wasn't going to swing at him.

This wasn't good. Arnold tried to dash for it but it was clear he wouldn't make it in time. The orc's sword was directed straight at Chloe and the monsters she was fending off. She noticed the charging orc, but its strength was on par with that of a high-level hunter; she wouldn't be able to defend against its attack.

It was no use, Arnold wasn't going to make it in time. Chloe's eyes opened wide. The large blade came down, it was about to connect with her skull—

Tongues of flame falling from the sky swept over the orc. It was almost cataclysmic, more than one, more than a downpour of flames poured over the monsters immolating them all. Clearly, it was no natural occurrence. Fire engulfed the plains, instantly turning the area into an inferno. The monsters' cries of agony echoed throughout the heat and pillars of smoke.

Of course, Arnold and his comrades didn't get out unscathed either. One of them must have erected a barrier because they were somewhat shielded from the heat. However, their fight was over.

"What's that?!" one of them cried.

Looking up at the dark night sky, bright blue flames floated about.

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It was a miracle they were still alive. Even the next day, the events of that night felt like nothing short of a nightmare. Even still, there were certain things expected of a first-rate hunter.

"Goodness, it might have been unfortunate for you, but I don't think anyone would argue that it was a stroke of good luck for us," said the portly mayor of Gula. "What a coincidence it was that a Level 7 hunter happened to be visiting."

Arnold agreed, though he didn't show it on his face. Within the center of the town was its town hall, and there in a room for special guests was Arnold and his party.

The mayor and his subordinates all wore shining expressions—the exact opposite of those on the hunters. They had survived two successive journeys through hell and their fatigue was more than they could hide from view. Scorching Whirlwind was the less experienced of the two parties and over half their members were fast asleep. Chloe had declined to attend as well.

Arnold leaned back on a luxurious sofa.

“Defeating a pack of orcs with so few allies at your side, you live up to your level,” the mayor said as he layered on the praise. “I hear you once slew a dragon in Nebulanubes, but you’re a hero to this town as well.”

“Mr. Mayor, may I remind you that it was more than just orcs.”

“Ah, that’s right...”

The hunters had already changed out of their bloodstained garments and had their wounds treated. However, within Arnold, there was still a boiling rage, a fighting spirit. The mayor was oblivious to it, but the other hunters could see in his eyes that Arnold was ready to explode at any minute.

First-rate hunters excelled at many things and one of those was control over their emotions. But every time he remembered what happened at the gates, his anger came close to getting the better of him. In moments of weakness, he felt the urge to abandon everything and continue his pursuit, but his party members were wounded and he couldn’t just abandon Chloe, Rhuda, and Scorching Whirlwind.

“I hear a fire elemental appeared,” the mayor said. His eyes were wide and his voice trembled, almost as if he were before a rampaging hero.

The mayor was right, one had appeared. Arnold closed his eyes and he remembered it clearly, the incandescent flames burning in the heavens. As they had been locked in a brutal fight against orcs and other monsters an elemental appeared. It was of comparable strength to the one they’d fought the day prior. It was a fire elemental, as opposed to a lightning one, but that made little difference.

If this was a coincidence then Arnold was probably experiencing the worst luck of his life. The only thing he could consider fortunate was that Chloe had

survived. The bright elemental had playfully spread out a blanket of flames over the orcs and hunters and then simply flew off.

If it wanted to, a high-elemental could cause destruction surpassing what even a first-rate Magus was capable of. If it had continued attacking then the hunters would have all been turned to ashes along with the monsters. Even if Arnold had survived, it was extraordinarily likely that many more would have perished.

The road and its surroundings had been turned into a blaze. Anyone traveling the road would come across the shocking sight of a charred land buried under a pile of monsters' corpses.

A grimace formed on Eigh's face, he was likely remembering the battle.

"What a joke. I dunno much about this land, but are elementals that common? We've never run into two in such a short span," he complained.

"Oh, no, not at—the elementals of Zebrudia can only be found deep in the wilderness. If not that, then being commanded by a Magus. I can't recall ever seeing one so close to somewhere so—"

"Okay. I understand. If they were such a common sight then there'd be no trade out here, right, Arnold?"

Arnold nodded but his thoughts had already moved on to other matters. He was preoccupied with considering how he might take revenge on the Thousand Tricks. The sequence of events and the words of the orcs made it clear that he had set the monsters upon Arnold and his companions. It had ended without tragedy but what he had done was still against the ethics of hunters. Even if it wasn't, staying quiet would sully the name Crashing Lightning.

Arnold ground his teeth.

"Whatever the case, the orcs threatening the town are gone and the damage was kept to a minimum," the mayor said with an obnoxiously big smile. "It's hardly a sufficient thanks, but we as a town would like to extend our gratitude. Of course, we can offer some reward—"

"No," Arnold said. "We'll be leaving immediately."

The mayor's eyes bulged. It wasn't every day you received the collective gratitude of a town as large as Gula. This was also a chance to spread the good name of Falling Fog and Scorching Whirlwind. Normally, Arnold would have gladly accepted the offer but the Stifled Shadow's provocation had made him far too agitated to enjoy such an occasion.

More than that, however, the Thousand Tricks had seen them covered in wounds. Keeping one's body in top form was fundamental to treasure hunting; even someone as far-sighted as the Thousand Tricks wouldn't expect them to continue pursuing him. In other words, he would be getting complacent.

Arnold's top priority was to make him regret looking down on Falling Fog. The Thousand Tricks wasn't traveling on foot, but he could leave now and still catch up. No, he *had* to leave now if he wanted to catch up. Even if the Thousand Tricks didn't cover his tracks, the more time he was given the more his lead would grow.

"Apologies, but I have something I need to do. I can't stay long," Arnold said with force.

The bewildered mayor's eyes bulged. He looked at Arnold, who was scowling and only just managing to keep his anger in check.

"I understand," the mayor said. "As a Level 7 hunter, you must not have much time to rest. Are you perhaps in the middle of a quest?"

"A-Arnold, giving chase to those guys isn't going to be easy in our current condition. We need to rest, three of us nearly died back there," Eigh reported in a whisper. "We're all out of consumables and our equipment's beat up. Even our better-off members are still exhausted. Chloe, Rhuda, everyone in Scorching Whirlwind are also at their limit."

Though they had managed to scrape by, being attacked by a horde of monsters while carrying lingering fatigue from Elan had done a number on them. The carriage they had purchased shortly after arriving in the capital was almost beyond repair, their horses had been killed, and their weapons and armor were badly damaged. They were barely in any condition to be traveling, much less fighting powerful foes. The same went for Chloe and Scorching Whirlwind. It was something of a miracle that they had even managed to walk

the rest of the way to Gula.

The mayor seemed to misunderstand what their objective was for he took on a serious expression and said: “Allow us to assist you in any way we can. If there’s something you need then we can arrange for it.”

Resupplying consumables and preparing a carriage might have been possible, but full maintenance of their gear would be hard in a town of this size and would take time. The stopgap measures they took back in Elan wouldn’t be sufficient here.

On a scale, Arnold weighed the lives of his comrades against their injuries, his pride, and his future. After a few moments of silence, he clicked his tongue and turned around.

“Damn it. Do what you can with two—no, one day. Eigh, start resupplying immediately. Get plenty of consumables and a large carriage. And better horses too. We’ll finish this soon.”

No matter where the Thousand Tricks had run off to, Arnold was certain he would catch him and get his payback for everything that had happened so far. Even after looking Arnold in the eye, the Thousand Tricks had turned away indifferently. Amid that crowd, the Stifled Shadow had yelled humiliating things at them.

Just remembering the sight of his nemesis caused Arnold to clench his teeth.

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From the top of the carriage, I heard a low, slightly garbled voice.

“It, uh, appears we have lost them. I do not detect any pursuers. We are traveling on the same road as they were, so I think they might catch up to us.”

They must not have been used to speaking politely because they sounded awkward. Still, I breathed a sigh of relief. Next to me, Liz folded her legs and smiled with genuine amusement.

“Didya see that? Did you, Krai Baby? His face was totally red,” Liz said between giggles. “He’s just a Level 7 from the countryside and I put him in his place!”

I wished she would give me a break. If she wanted to start fights that was her business, but for reasons beyond me I was always held responsible. This was a Level 7 she was antagonizing. A Level 7! That was higher than her! This was someone I couldn't hold a candle to as I was, in practice, a Level 1 hunter (there was no Level 0).

"Quit trying to start things," I told her. "You shouldn't be doing this even if it was somehow my fault that they ended up fighting a pack of orcs, and it's not my fault."

"Quite right, Krai. It wasn't your fault. It was thanks to you," Sitri said with a smile, backing up Liz in an odd manner.

*It's not my fault, nor is it thanks to me. It's their bad luck and their responsibility, just like my bad luck is my responsibility.*

I had no allies in this argument. If there was one, it was Tino and she was completely wiped out at the moment.

"Do you think they'll come after us?" I asked.

"I imagine they will," Sitri answered. "If they don't, then they're lacking something vital to a hunter."

I agreed with that. A good hunter was like a good hunting dog; once they had a target they would chase it forever and not give up even after a setback. Some really obnoxious ones were on my tail. I wondered how Arty had resolved things with them back at the café.

It seemed possible that they might keep chasing me even if Liz or Sitri gave them a beating. If that was the case then it would be fastest to kill them but that was the one thing I wanted to avoid. That would mean my end not just as a hunter but also as a human being.

I couldn't tell why, but Sitri wore a bright smile even though she fully understood the situation we were in.

"Mmm, however, they seemed quite exhausted. It doesn't seem likely they'll immediately continue to pursue us," she said in a voice that made me want to give up on thinking about things and rest easy.

She was right. If they had immediately come after us then they would have caught us before we reached our carriage.

I was able to calm down a bit. Outside our carriage, Drink and Killiam were running along with us.

Hunters needed to make thorough preparations before doing anything and some members of their group were injured. In those conditions, I didn't think they would try to take on Liz.

Furthermore, I didn't see how they could know where we were headed; the only people who knew our destination were in the carriage with me. And we had been hiding our identities with fake (real) ID's. Perhaps I should have also hidden my face with Mirage Form. We were in a carriage which meant our wheels would leave tracks. But this was a road, there were plenty of carriage tracks.

Liz stretched out her legs and swung them back and forth as she pursed her lips.

"I'm boored. Let's play freeze tag," she said.

*I wish I could've frozen you back there. Arnold looked like he wanted to crush my head like a fruit. I'm certain of it.*

Tino's head wavered side to side as she looked at me through swollen eyes. She was at her limit.

I steeled my resolve. It didn't seem at all possible that we might be caught but I decided to take what cautions I could. I unfolded the map. I had initially planned to head along safe roads and pass through multiple towns on the way to Night Palace. After all, I wasn't in a rush and I considered safety to be a top priority.

However, if we were being pursued then we would have to change our route. Even if it would be hard for our pursuers to catch us it was still possible as long as we simply stuck to the road. So I decided we would take a shortcut. Leaving the road would increase our chances of running into monsters, but we had Liz, Sitri, Drink, Killiam, and Sitri's hired hands with us. Dealing with monsters seemed better than worrying about a high-level hunter.

"Dammit, I wish Ark could have come along. That dandy is never around when I need him. Maybe he doesn't like me?" I wondered aloud. What was the point of being the strongest in the capital if he couldn't help me?

My grumbling caused Ark's self-proclaimed rival, Liz, to puff up her cheeks, making her look more childish than usual.

"What, am I not good enough for you, Krai Baby? If I'm not, then just say so? You know I love you."

"No, you're fine, yeah, you're plenty. Plenty strong," I said. "All right, time to change our course. We're no longer sticking to the road!"

Liz's eyes glimmered and she leaned forward with a wide grin.

*You'll see, Arnold. I'm gonna enjoy my vacation no matter what. I'll show you, I can flee even better than a Level 8 (probably).*

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*Is he serious?* Black thought. Sitting in the driver's seat, she received orders that made her momentarily doubt her ears. Every order she had received so far had been benign. They hadn't run into any particularly strong monsters and, with the exception of the first day, the weather had been good. The incident of Drink running away had been trying, but the chimera ended up coming back around dawn, albeit covered in blood. It was a lot better than the sort of treatment she expected when the collar had been put on her.

Roads were generally safe as monsters tended to keep their distance from them. They also had the fearsome chimera at their side. On the rare occasion she did spot a monster, they didn't come any closer.

But to leave the road would drastically increase the potential danger.

"B-But, the Galest mountains are teeming with—I mean, your chimera is strong but it's too dangerous for us to enter those mountains with so few people," she said.

A window opened and a smiling girl poked her head out.

"And what of it?" she asked.

Her flawless porcelain skin and fine features might have made her a target for

Black and her companions under different circumstances, but now that smile looked demonic.

The Galest Mountain Range ran across the northern regions of the empire. They weren't terribly steep but there were ley lines running through the mountains and, outside of treasure vaults, the local monsters were some of the strongest in Zebrudia. A forest spread out from the foothills of the range and it was said to be inhabited by monsters not found anywhere else.

"There is a path, though only in the barest sense of the word," Sitri said. "The Galest mountains aren't much compared to some of the treasure vaults we've cleared in the past. If we're quick to dispatch the monsters then this will be a nice shortcut. And besides, we have done this before."

"A short...cut?"

Unbelievable. Black opened up her map and looked at it with eyes wide as saucers. Crossing the mountains would indeed be a shortcut. Leaving the safety of the road and passing through the forest and then the mountains would shave a day or two off their trip. But you might also say it would *only* shave off a day or two.

Travelers normally opted not to pass through the Galest mountains. Hunters strong enough to fight their way through also avoided the mountains. The risk was too high and the benefits too low. Black, White, and Gray were confident in their strength and it was possible they could make it through but they still preferred to avoid these mountains at all costs.

"What's our destination? Our ultimate destination?" Black asked in spite of her surprise.

They didn't even know where they were headed. Insofar they had simply been told to follow the road and had been given the name of the occasional town.

"Do you have a need to know? Please just go. This is what was decided by Krai, by the Thousand Tricks," Sitri Smart said with a meaningful smile.

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"They weren't here?" Chloe Welter asked the municipal admittance officer.

This wasn't the response she had expected.

"Correct. I checked all the ledgers and I didn't find the names you requested..."

Every entry to departure in every city in Zebrudia was recorded in a ledger. If someone had entered or left a city, then it was reasonable to assume their name had been written down, and Arnold had seen the Thousand Tricks with his own eyes. It didn't make any sense.

"If a high-level hunter had entered our town we would have requested their aid. In a state of emergency we wouldn't have let them pass without at least trying to enlist them," the officer said.

"I understand," Chloe said.

One of the roles of the soldiers stationed at a municipality's gates was to pick out combat-capable entrants. They would have noticed a high-level hunter passing through. While Krai Andrey regularly disguised himself as a civilian, the other members of his party did not. If they hadn't been stopped at the gates then it meant the Thousand Tricks was intentionally hiding his identity, and, apparently, even using a fake ID.

*Just what in the world are you up to, Krai?* Chloe wondered.

Faking one's identity was a violation of imperial law. Becoming a Level 8 hunter came with special privileges and he would likely not be punished so long as he had a good reason for his actions. However, that still didn't make it laudable behavior.

Initially, she was just supposed to accompany the Thousand Tricks and keep an eye on his progress. Yet somehow things had ended up like this. She let out a deep sigh. That battle had been like a scene out of hell. Though she had once aspired to be a hunter she ended up becoming an employee of the Explorers' Association. For someone like her, such a battle was a first.

She was supposed to have been protected but the situation hadn't allowed it. Instead, she had drawn her sword and fought for her life, slaying many monsters in the process. But then death came for her. The pitch-black monster was more than just a higher-orc. When that blade was swung at her she was

certain she was going to meet her end. It was a miracle that such a doom had been avoided.

Just remembering that moment caused a shiver to run down her spine. Arnold hadn't made it in time to save her—if it weren't for the fire elemental then she would have perished.

The fire elemental had been blue, an indicator that it was exceptionally strong. Just like their lightning counterparts, the fire elementals were elusive beings and very few people in Zebrudia could command one. The only such person that came to mind for Chloe was the Abyssal Inferno, the clan master of Hidden Curse and one of the three Level 8s in the capital. However, she was supposed to be in the capital and Chloe hadn't seen any evidence of her nearby.

Arnold had said it was a miracle that nobody had died but Chloe wasn't so sure. She had seen the elemental roast both the orc pack and Falling Fog. She and Scorching Whirlwind hadn't even been targeted. It might have been just a coincidence, but if so it was a coincidence that had saved them from some severe burns.

She didn't know why or for what purpose they might have been spared. Of course, she also had no evidence. Neither did she have evidence to suggest what chased the orcs out of their fort, why the monsters ran towards them, or who sent the fire elemental their way. Nothing. All she had were facts with no clear meaning. She didn't know if she should defend the Thousand Tricks or join the Crashing Lightning in his quest for revenge.

In the inn, everyone in Scorching Whirlwind was completely exhausted. That was what happened when you managed to barely avoid being annihilated. Gilbert and Rhuda weren't as bad off as the rest but deep fatigue still showed on their faces.

"You've gotta be kidding me. Does Tino go through stuff like this every time?"

"White Wolf's Den was bad, but this..."

They didn't even have the energy to be angry. That was perfectly reasonable; that battle wasn't something most intermediate hunters could handle. It was only because the other hunters had eased her burden that Chloe could still move.

But they couldn't split up here. Arnold still planned to go after Krai and she hadn't completed her objective yet. It seemed they would have to stick together a bit longer. After giving it all some thought, she forced a smile onto her face and entered the room. Treasure hunters sure had it rough.

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Some places are so dangerous you should avoid entering them at all costs. Chief among these are mountains and forests not under any state's jurisdiction. At least, they are for normal travelers. Adventuresome treasure hunters tend to forget this.

Areas crossed by ley lines, the veins through which mana material flows, are especially abundant in valuable resources. Since they're populated by powerful monsters and phantoms, items recovered from those regions tend to go for high prices.

The Galest Mountain Range in the northern reaches of the empire was one of those dangerous places that humans tended to steer clear of. The almost nonexistent road was ancient and had not been maintained for a long time. It was barely wide enough for a single carriage to pass through. Plus, even inside the carriage, I could tell just how fraught the terrain was. It must have been almost completely unused.

While being rocked side to side, I averted my mind from reality by pondering the idea that this trail might one day fade away, just as everything does.

Loud cries echoed back and forth outside the carriage. The curtains were closed so I couldn't see out there, but I could hear the horrific growls and screams of monsters and feel the carriage wobble. The horses' whinnies overlapped with some sort of metallic sound. Drink howled and Killiam sounded excited.

Liz lay on her back and rubbed her tummy with a lackadaisical smile.

"Hey, Krai Baby, what should I say to those guys next time? What'll really piss 'em off? What'll make them fly at us with rage? Let's think about it!"

"Oh, that's right, Krai," Sitri said. "I hear a roving ogre lives in the Galest mountains. It's not much more than a rumor though. Not many have

encountered one and lived to tell about it after all. However, those rumors might be why so few pass through here.”

I might also mention the reason treasure hunters tended to forget the dangers of forests and mountains: they were always clearing treasure vaults, some of the most treacherous places in existence. I suppose monsters, which left behind profitable meat when killed, were preferable to phantoms, which manifested almost without end and left nothing behind. It was sound reasoning, but I thought both warranted caution.

I didn’t think I’d be able to get through to Liz so I looked at Sitri and tried to pivot the subject from her terrifying ideas.

“Hey, uh, are we going to be all right?” I asked.

“We will. I think. We’re not very far into the forest, you see. Is there something concerning you?” Sitri responded.

“Huh. No, if you think we’re fine then that’s enough.”

“This is also a good opportunity for Drink’s combat training! I was quite uncertain when to start. At the clan house, I was able to let it practice against humans, but I struggled to find a good chance for it to fight monsters. Orcs are cowardly and wouldn’t be of any use but the aggressive monsters of the Galest mountains are a perfect fit!”

“Ah. So that blood, that was orc blood?”

“It was! Drink just loves the flesh of orcs! Having a full stomach seems to have put it in a very good mood!” Sitri said as she gleefully clapped her hands together.

Apparently, when we met up with the carriage and found Drink and Killiam covered in blood, it was because they had just been eating orcs. I wondered if perhaps they had attacked the orc pack that had fled their fort. Not everyone could do that and come back in one piece.

*We sure are running into a lot of monsters. Funny to think we didn’t run into any on the way here. It’s not like I want to stop Drink from training, but isn’t this a bit too many?*

The only person who might share this sentiment was Tino and she was looking down and clutching her knees. She wouldn't face me and her only movements were from the vibrations of the carriage. The constant screams and sounds of battle couldn't have been good for her peace of mind. It was all I could do to just pretend to be calm.

The Galest mountains seemed to have far more monsters than I had imagined. On top of that, they were vicious monsters who saw Drink and still considered us prey.

"There are far more monsters than I had anticipated," Siddy said with a smile. "Perhaps this is a sign that something much stronger might appear!"

*You sure seem happy about that.*

The carriage would occasionally come to a sudden stop and, judging from the screams outside, it seemed we didn't have enough guards out there. I had anticipated monster attacks, maybe not this many, but I had still considered the possibility. What I hadn't expected was...

I looked at Liz, rolling around and resting her cheek against my knees. I looked at Sitri, her eyes glimmering. I looked at Tino, clutching her knees and off in her own world.

*How come you three aren't helping?*

I had chosen the mountain route because I didn't think monsters would be a problem. After all, we had not only Drink, Killiam, and Sitri's hired hands, but also Liz, Sitri, and Tino. Usually, Liz would be itching to go out into the fray.

I was about to ask them when they planned to go out and fight, but I lost my chance. The carriage shook violently and I heard roars and loud cursing. Even if we were their clients, I thought Black, White, and Gray were being treated a bit harshly. Perhaps the terms of their contract hadn't been black-and-white enough?

I briefly hesitated before summoning my courage and asking Sitri a question.

"Hey, Sitri, about what's going on outside..."

"Oh, yes. Drink's combat training and meals are being conducted alongside

my capability tests for those three. It's incredibly efficient! I've been meaning to find out how well Killiam and Drink operate in tandem. You always come through, Krai!"

She seemed bashful as she gave her bizarre reply. Maybe that was the correct attitude for an Alchemist to take and I knew they cherished efficiency, but I still thought it was a bit much. Drink and Killiam would probably be fine but I didn't think her hired helpers would be.

"I could bear losing Killiam but what about if your hired hands die?"

"Hm? Umm..."

Sure, death and hunters were never far apart but that didn't mean this was a good idea. Confused, Sitri thought for a few seconds. She put a finger to her lip and tilted her head.

"I'll...search for more?"

"I don't think you understood the question."

"Huh? F-Forgive me. Um, are you perhaps trying to suggest there's another use for them?"

What peculiar sensibilities she had.

I averted my gaze and looked at Liz, who was still lying around the carriage. Her clear pink eyes looked at me questioningly. She was wearing her usual combat gear, Apex Roots, equipped to her dangling legs.

"Hm? Whatcha looking at?" she asked. "Ah, would you like to rub my belly? Here."

She ran a finger along her exposed midriff, but I refused to play along.

I got straight to the point.

"Liz, don't you want to fight?"

"Mmm, of course I do. Doing nothing like this makes me feel like I'll go soft."

*Then why—*

Still lying down, Liz lifted her head with a smile and rested it in my lap.

"But," she said, "I can bear it. You banned violence on this trip, right? Look how great I'm doing. Am I great? Aren't I great?"

*Oh, right.*

I finally remembered what I had said a few days ago. I had indeed prohibited violence and training, but that was so we could have a fun vacation. I had invited Liz and the others because I wanted them to have a good time. But I also wanted them as protection.

I had my reservations, but at this rate, Black, White, and Gray were going to die. I had to say it.

"Uh, the restrictions don't apply to fighting monsters."

"Huh?"

When I banned violence, I meant violence against humans. Really, I had just wanted to prevent them from getting in any scuffles. I had just been trying to stop them from picking any fights with any civilians, hunters, or apprentices. Sure, I wanted them to avoid doing dangerous things at all costs. However, it seemed counterproductive to let them laze about the carriage and leave the defense to a few hired helpers who were (most likely) at a disadvantage.

*Besides, Liz, you provoked Arnold back there, remember? That was verbal violence.*

Liz's eyes widened. Even Sitri looked caught off guard, an unusual expression for her.

*Maybe it was my fault for not being clear enough but it only makes sense that I'm not allowed to fight. — Huuh? Did Liz think I was telling her not to resist even if monsters attacked her? No way. Does she think I'm some sort of sicko?*

Tino looked up and stared at me. I put aside my self-recriminations and spoke in a hard-boiled voice.

"Exterminating monsters isn't violence, it's getting rid of what's in the way. Isn't that right?"

The carriage rocked wildly, almost as if to make my point.

"I love you, Krai Baby!" Liz said with shining eyes. "Be back in a biiit!"

She must have really been holding it in; she flew out the door, forgetting to bring Tino along. The force of her exit caused the carriage to screech across the ground. Following that was a litany of shouting just as rough as the preceding vulgarities.

“Hey, you dumbass pissants! Get back, this isn’t goddamn amateur hour! Just protect the horses!”

“I’m sorry, Krai,” Sitri said, a bit embarrassed. “Lizzy, she’s, well, had a lot of stress pent up.”

The sounds outside took on a whole new level of intensity. I also heard screams from Sitri’s hired hands. Liz must’ve really been going all out.

*Well, I was the one who gave her that weird order...*

“Ah, may I also step outside?” Sitri asked. “I’d like to check on Drink’s growth and perhaps gather ingredients. There are some rare resources I can’t gather when you’re around.”

“Yeah, of course. Go ahead.”

Sitri dipped her head and sprang out the door with just as much energy as Liz. I wondered just what sort of materials she couldn’t gather when I was around.

I figured things would quiet down soon enough. I let out a yawn and my eyes met Tino’s.

“Master, is this where the real battle begins?” she asked, pale in the face.

“Hm? No, there’s no real battle or anything,” I said. “Right, Tino, maybe you should get some sleep. You might need it.”

“All right...” she said with a trembling voice as she hugged her knees and closed her eyes.

I wondered if she would really be able to rest like that.

The battle intensified, yet we were entirely safe in the carriage. I heard less of Black, White, and Gray, and heard more of Liz’s roars and Sitri’s orders. It could’ve been my imagination, but the carriage seemed to speed up.

The next time we stopped, it was at a fork splitting the road to the left and right. One way led to a rough stretch that could only generously be called a path. The other way was overgrown with weeds but seemed to be receiving some degree of maintenance.

“Krai, which way shall we go?” Sitri asked me from outside.

It was always my job to make the decisions. I poked my head out, took a look, and pointed to the relatively clean one. Of course I did. I wasn’t going to pick the rough path, that one had fallen trees which we would have to clear out of the way. Sitri gave me a pure smile and directed her helpers.

We continued down the lonesome path. If it weren’t for the monsters, the abundant trees and fresh scent of nature would’ve been healing for me after spending so much time in the capital. Unfortunately, it was dangerous so I couldn’t hold my head out the window. I had my Safety Rings but I still wasn’t interested in being attacked out of the blue.

It seemed I had managed to make the right decision for once as the rate of monster appearances had dropped immensely. Not that I cared why, but I thought they were possibly scared of Liz.

Sitri came back inside the carriage. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement and she proudly held up a black fang, it was roughly thirty centimeters and covered in blood and bits of flesh.

“Look, Krai! It’s the fang of a general-class troll! Even in the great Galest mountains, it’s hard to find such a valuable specimen! Those trolls are violent and troublesome even for hunters so you can almost never find these on the market. They should normally be deep in the woods but this one came to us. It was an old one, but still, what luck! You can boil it, cook it, grind it down, it’s a superb find!”

Trolls were a Sapien monster just like goblins and orcs. They were one of the stronger varieties of Sapiens as they boasted exceptional strength, size, toughness, and regenerative powers. I hadn’t known that they were in the Galest mountains, but it wasn’t too surprising since trolls lived in forests. And if we met a troll, we were unlikely to meet any other travelers.

Tino opened her eyes slightly and recoiled at the sight of the fang...or maybe

it was at Sitri's excitement. Sitri gingerly placed the fang in a leather bag and came up to me. She was smiling ear-to-ear, just like she was on vacation.

"So, Krai, what might we find at the end of this path?"

"Huh?"

"No, don't tell me, I've got an idea! If it's smart enough to make a fake path as part of a trap, it must be a fairly advanced monster! The number of monsters has fallen so I'd hazard that its territory is quite large..."

*Huh? What? What's she talking about? This is all news to me. She said, "fake." This path is fake? Tell me these things sooner. I thought this path was well-off for one that looked untraveled.*

"However, it tried to hide the other path simply with fallen trees and some debris, and this path is quite neat so I don't imagine it's too smart. Perhaps less than a goblin? And this wasn't here when we first headed to Night Palace so it was probably hastily thrown up after we passed by..."

*Less than a goblin? Then what does that make me if I completely fell for its trick? And if it wasn't here the first time you passed through then say something. Don't try to protect my feelings.*

Sitri's smile was genuine; it didn't seem like she was making fun of me. Overall, I would've preferred it if she were.

"Well then," I said with a hard-boiled smile. "I think it's time to turn around and take the other path."

"As you wish. Black, put us in reverse! Carriages can't go in reverse? It's hard to turn around like this? Well, figure something out, that's what you're here for!"

Sitri gave her egregious commands without a hint of displeasure. All I could do was smile.

*Criticize me or something. Just don't believe me.*

The carriage came to a stop. Once I heard someone outside give the okay and I stepped onto the ground for the first time in hours. The sun was setting and

the moon shimmered in the cloudless red sky. I heard a river nearby. It seemed this was where we would be resting.

It seemed a good thing we had turned around since we hadn't met the big monster Sitri had been anticipating. But turning around also meant we didn't make as much progress as we had planned. Crossing the mountains after sunset would be suicide; even Sitri wouldn't insist we attempt it.

We were at a clearing with just enough space for a carriage and a few parties to stop and rest. It seemed likely that many travelers had once used this as a stopping point while crossing the Galest mountains. Drink carefully sniffed the ground.

Sitri began to unload our bags and gave me a blossoming smile even though I hadn't done anything but sit in the carriage. Next to her, Liz stretched her arms with satisfaction.

"Fine work out there, Krai. That was a very good experience."

"Mmm, ahh. That was worth the wait! Last time we barely ran into any monsters. You're the best, Krai Baby!"

"Lizzy, that was because we had Ansem with us last time."

"Yeah, he really sticks out. And if any monsters did show up then Luke would take them on."

Liz was in high spirits for someone who had just been locked in nonstop combat. Meanwhile, Sitri's three hired hands were all sitting on the ground looking close to death. Their heads were hung so I couldn't see their faces but their armor was splattered with blood and their muscular limbs had gone limp. The contrast between them and the Smart sisters was startling.

When we first became hunters these sorts of accidents (powerful monsters appearing, natural disasters, etc.) would leave them exhausted. I wondered when they just stopped minding them altogether. And then there was me. I didn't know if I should be thankful for such strong friends or feel left behind.

"Oh right, Lizzy, you were far too violent. Don't make such a mess, it ruins the path for the next people who come along!"

"I don't care about that! The next people to come will just be Arnold and his gang, won't they? So it doesn't matter. That's why Krai Baby lifted the ban on combat, right?"

"No, that wasn't quite it."

It wasn't even that likely that they would succeed in catching up to us. It seemed much more likely to me that they would just wait for us at the capital. Which was all the more reason I needed to have the rest of Grieving Souls with me when I came back.

Even while chatting with us, Sitri's hands kept busy. She started a fire, fed the tired horses, and set up camp. Her fluid movements showed that she did these same chores regularly. Liz wasn't screwing around either. She was patrolling the perimeter while whistling to herself. Sitri didn't care for people butting into her work anyway.

When we used to travel as a party, Sitri and Lucia would set up camp while Liz, Luke, and Ansem would patrol or hunt for food. It was my job to check in with everyone to see how they were, which is to say I didn't do anything.

"Krai, where's T?" Sitri asked me.

"Asleep. She seemed really tired so let's let her get a bit of shut-eye."

I didn't think she'd be able to stay awake much longer. She had been nodding off occasionally and we didn't need any more people to be on guard so this seemed a good time for her to rest. She was tossing and turning in her sleep but there wasn't much I could do to help with that.

"Hmm, if you say so, Krai Baby," Liz said.

Surprisingly, even she could show compassion.

Sitri set up a portable cauldron and pulled out a large knife.

"Now then, with Krai joining us for the first time in a while I have all the more reason to prepare something revitalizing. I've gotten my hands on plenty of great ingredients," Sitri said with a grin.

"You're right," I said. "It's been so long since we've eaten together like this."

Until Eliza joined us, Sitri was the only Grieving Soul who could cook and her

skills were top-notch. At first, I expected it might take some time for her to become any good but she developed her skills in the blink of an eye.

The spices she used were ones she got at the market and the other ingredients were mostly from animals and vegetables that happened to be nearby. Yet her food somehow seemed to always agree with me. I hadn't eaten her cooking in some time and just the chance to feast on it might have been enough to make this trip worth it.

I found myself a bit moved. I smiled and let out a sigh. Before we formed a clan, back when we traveled together as a party, I always felt like I was going to die from the stress of monsters, harsh environments, and treasure vaults. But I wouldn't say I only had bad memories of that time. Sure I was talentless, so much that Evolve Greed rejected me, but back then Krai Andrey was a hunter. This trip made me remember those adventures like they were yesterday.

My trip down memory lane was interrupted when I noticed Sitri looking at me.

"Uh, I'll go grab some water," I said, scratching my cheek. "Since I'm just standing around anyways."

"Oh. Please do."

"Ah, Krai Baby, let me go with you! There might be fish," Liz said and casually linked arms with me.

After following the scent of water for a few minutes we came to a large river. Sources of water were important to humans, animals, and monsters. Except for phantoms, nothing could survive without it.

"Woo! It's so pretty. Stuff like this is the best part of being a hunter," Liz said as she looked at the river with wide eyes.

We must have picked the right time because there weren't any monsters nearby. The river was a calm one, and the moon reflected off its dark surface.

"Does this look good?" I asked.

"Yeah, and I can see plenty of fish!" Liz answered with glimmering eyes.

Just because it looked clean didn't mean it was necessarily fine to drink. Hunters with plenty of mana material had strong stomachs but I was no such hunter. Liz didn't hesitate to step in. The water should've been cold but hunters weren't easily bothered by these things.

Liz cheerfully stretched her arms.

"It's so cooold," she said. "I've still got some blood on me, maybe I'll wash it off!"



Right in front of me, she began to undress. She tossed her gauntlets onto the riverbank and reached around to her back. She took off her armor (which only covered the top of her torso to begin with), her belt, and her shorts.

The moonlight shined on her fine skin, though I could only see her back. All that remained on her was her thin black underwear. I wished she had shown a bit more hesitation about undressing. Even if she was a hunter, she was still a girl and I thought she could be a bit more discreet. Her fingers made their way to the hook on her back and then stopped.

I regained my self-control and chided her.

“Liz, you shouldn’t do that.”

“What’s the matter? We’re comrades, aren’t we?”

Sure, I had known Liz since we were young but that didn’t mean rules of decency didn’t apply between us. If she only wanted to wash off the blood then she didn’t need to undress any further and I wanted to get water, not watch her strip.

I was puzzling over how to stop her but she suddenly looked over at me.

“Still, maybe I will stop for now,” she said. “This is a bit embarrassing and we haven’t been on an adventure together in so long.”

With a bashful and slightly alluring expression, she reached up and undid her ponytail, letting her pink hair fall across her back. Without waiting another moment, she jumped into the river. It seemed the river wasn’t that deep as she was able to stand with the water just up to her chest.

She turned around and asked me: “Are you gonna join me?”

“No, I need to get this water.”

“Oh. Darn. Well, I’m gonna catch some fish!”

She quickly dived into the water, her legs briefly kicking the air. Even at times like this, she kept Apex Roots on.

*Maybe she has grown up a bit.*

With feelings I wasn’t sure how to describe, I began to fill Sitri’s canteen with

water.

I felt indebted to them. When operating as a party, one person's mistake could decide the fate of everyone. Incompetency was a sin and I was incompetency made manifest. But the rest of the party never held that against me. When I quit adventuring, they never pressed me for a reason as to why. That allowed me to look back on those days as fun, if only just barely. Liz might seem inconsiderate, but even she was thinking of me. I couldn't thank her enough.

"It's so much more fun when you're around. I'm glad you came," Liz said to me.

We were enjoying a brief respite. She was sitting on the riverbank and I was combing her plentiful hair with my fingers. Her damp locks had a strange weight to them but they were without any damage in spite of her regular battles. She shivered every time my fingertips pressed against her scalp.

"Mm, it looks all right. It looks like you got the blood out."

"Thanks. Giving off a funny smell might cause me to screw up when it counts."

She sounded awfully relaxed when she said that.

We had completed what we came to do but it felt like a waste to head back immediately. Liz and I weren't lovers or anything, but she wasn't saying anything about returning and it was nice to just sit around from time to time. There was nothing uncomfortable about our silence and I wasn't getting tired of looking at the unspoiled natural beauty around us.

I was letting my gaze fall on the water when Liz abruptly spoke up.

"Hey, Krai Baby," she said in a serious voice. "I'm gonna become a powerful hunter."

"Mmm, I know."

I thought she was already plenty powerful but I didn't doubt the determination in her voice. She was powerful, humble, dedicated, and

beautiful. She was feared in the capital but she also had a number of fans.

Something about her grabbed people's hearts and made her stand out from the rest. It was something all champions had and therefore something I would never have. I knew I wasn't fit to be a hunter but I was still jealous of Liz's straightforward dedication.

"And I'm definitely gonna make a hunter out of Tino," she continued. "You made her my apprentice, so just watch."

"I believe in you. You've got my full support."

Of course, there was almost nothing I could do to help but I was glad to see Liz had grown.

She stood up and turned towards me, putting her underwear-clad figure right in front of me. I looked away reflexively but she simply smiled.

"Will you stay with me forever?"

*Of course.*

I felt indebted. I was certain I was one of the reasons for the explosive growth of her and the rest of our friends. If I had talents like they did then maybe they would have grown up a bit more "proper." But that guilt wasn't the reason I accepted all their invitations even after I stopped adventuring with them. Even if they were feared in the capital, even if there was an astronomical difference in our strength, they were my precious friends, no matter how much time passed.

Wearing my usual smile, I was about to give Liz her answer—

When the sound of an explosion came from the direction of our camp.

The forest shook. Liz's bright expression became dark.

"Ah, c'mon! That's some bad timing, we had such a good atmosphere going!"

"Huh?"

"It went in the direction of the others, I guess. This thing's really hard to pick up. I gotta train more..."

I sat there bewildered. Liz let out a small sigh as she squeezed the water out

of her hair and tied it up. She then put her clothes and armor back on. Within a few seconds, the alluring girl had changed into a fearsome hunter. Liz smiled at me, a look brimming with its usual confidence and brilliance.

With Liz pulling my hand, we ran through the darkness. She could see in the dark and I had activated Owl's Eye so visibility was no issue but the nighttime forest still unsettled me. I probably wouldn't have been able to run through those woods if she hadn't been gripping my hand.

"Siddy's noticed it, I think we'll be fine! She's an Alchemist after all!"

It seemed Sitri knew we were being followed by something. Liz had said it was "hard to pick up." It must have been something considerable if a Thief had trouble detecting it. For what it's worth, I was getting chased all the time. At that very moment, I also had Arnold pursuing me.

A hard-boiled line seemed a good way to escape reality.

"Sure is tough being so popular," I said.

"Ooh, that was cool!" Liz cried in a shrill voice.

The man who uttered that cool line was currently being pulled along by her and at risk of tripping at any moment. I wondered if Liz would still like me if I did something so lame.

Fast as the wind, we returned to our camp and saw a monster slugfest unfolding before us.

"Took you long enough, Lizzy!" Sitri yelled.

Killiam ripped a tree from the ground and hurled it like a javelin. Drink let out a roar and went on the attack. They were both fighting a creature I had never seen before.

It had deep green skin and abnormally long limbs. Horns protruded from multiple spots on its body which was partially covered by a crude cloth. Its face was unique but it seemed to be a sort of goblin. Its looks were creepy, but what truly unsettled me was its swift and silent movements.

Killiam was strong, it excelled through pure strength and endurance and was

the equivalent of at least a Level 5 hunter. Drink's lionlike form suggested it was formidable as well. And yet their attacks weren't leaving a scratch on the strange monster. With eerie, slippery movements it dodged the incoming tree and deflected Drink with a refinement atypical of monsters.

All three of Sitri's hired hands were cowering by the carriage. Tino had awoken from her sleep and was already in a combat stance but seemed unable to find an opening for her to attack. It was too fast for me to even properly follow it with my eyes. I would have completely lost track of it if it weren't for my night vision Relic.

"What's that?" Liz asked with wide eyes.

"A roving ogre," Sitri answered.

*I see, so this is the roving ogre Sitri was talking about. Looks like I've got another entry to the list of rare monsters I've encountered.*

"It would seem this is the monster that made the fake path," Sitri continued, not taking her eyes off the monster. "I imagine it came after us because we entered its territory. Just as Krai calculated."

*My calculations suck.*

Killiam roared, clenched its fists, and charged. However, the difference in reach was too large. Multiple large bruises were left on its gray body. The roving ogre looked at us and in almost the same instant its long arms shook.

It had thrown something. It had thrown a rock. By the time I had realized what was happening, a red burning rock was closing in on my face. But the comet-like projectile stopped before it could hit me and it wasn't thanks to a Safety Ring.

Liz's slender arm entered my vision, her small hand catching the flaming rock.

"Die," she said.

She sent the stone back at the monster at the same speed it had flown at me. Not expecting such a counterattack, the blazing stone hit the roving ogre dead-on. It flew backwards, not stopping even after crashing through a few trees. Once again, Liz had displayed absurd strength for a Thief.

Silence returned. Killiam looked about the vicinity and Drink growled. There seemed to be no sign of retaliation. Liz clapped her hands together, knocking off any dust or dirt.



“Tsk, that barely damaged it,” she grumbled. “It must be resilient to physical attacks. Explain this, Siddy.”

“I don’t have much to go off of, but I hear it’s a cautious and tenacious monster. It’s safe to assume it hasn’t given up yet. It’s most likely retreating into the darkness so it can plan an ambush.”

I couldn’t tell from where, but I heard the eerie sound of leaves rustling. I couldn’t tell if it was just the wind or a creepy monster stalking us. If it was a monster capable of fooling me, I figured it safe to assume it was reasonably intelligent. And if it was capable of striking so swiftly we would have to keep an eye out.

“Even Killiam’s attacks were almost entirely without effect,” Sitri said while examining its bruises. “It’s probably a revenant-type monster seeing as physical attacks don’t do much to them.”

“Ah, and we don’t have Ansy or Lucia. Dammit.”

Hunters all had their own strengths and weaknesses. Working as a party usually solved this issue but among us, we had no Magus who might be able to dispatch a foe resilient to physical attacks. I had Shooting Rings, but they wouldn’t do much.

Liz, Sitri, and Tino all looked at me. They were expecting me to make a decision.

“We’ve repelled it for now, let’s take this opportunity to run for it,” I said without hesitating.

“I wish we didn’t have to, but it is a troublesome monster. I suppose you’re right, Krai,” Sitri said.

“Mmm, I guess it’s for the best?” Liz said. “We can probably take it, but who knows what might happen to T? It’s so stealthy and I promised Krai Baby that we’d turn her into a proper hunter.”

“Lizzy, I...”

We weren’t being paid to come out here, there was no reason for us to take on a monster we weren’t suited to handle. On top of that, we weren’t

surrounded for once.

Tino seemed taken aback, but this wasn't a monster we should have been fighting. There was no way she could have overcome the roving ogre and I needn't say that the heaviest dead weight was me. I was surprised Liz was so willing to fall back but maybe she was still thinking about our conversation from earlier.

A quick retreat was ideal in these situations. Even if traversing mountains at night was a bad idea, we didn't have any better options available to us.

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They were strong. Sitting atop the verdant branch of a massive tree, the roving ogre contemplated its unexpected intruders. Its body was wracked with the scorching pain from the impact of the rock. The injury wasn't going to be fatal, but pain was something it hadn't felt in a long time.

No human or other monster in the Galest mountains had ever proved a challenge for the roving ogre. It was resistant to physical attacks and it could deftly move its long limbs at speeds nobody had yet been able to keep up with. Even that belligerent troll stayed away from its territory.

But that pack of humans, they were different. They would require caution. Even if they were strong foes, the ogre couldn't just let them get away. This wasn't because they had entered its territory, it was because they had caught its eye. Its instincts compelled it to capture and slaughter any prey that it took an interest in.

It took pleasure in using its wits to accomplish this. Attacking head-on was no way to go about a hunt. It still believed in its ability to win a direct confrontation, but that simply wasn't its way.

Of course, it started by going after the weak ones but that pack had plenty of strong members. When it hurled a rock at one of them it wasn't just caught, it was thrown back at a speed that matched the roving ogre's.

Its best option would be to look for an opening. The Galest mountains were vast; a chance to strike was bound to present itself. The whole mountain range was like its own backyard. It knew all the routes across and it could safely trail

its prey by moving from tree to tree.

The roving ogre had been one with the shadows atop a tree, but at last, its prey began to move. So did the ogre, leaving only the faintest rustling in its wake.

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The carriage was shaking violently. Tino hugged her knees.

She felt pathetic. She knew she was still inexperienced. She knew what a wide gap lay between her strength and Lizzy's. Even still, she couldn't accept that it was her faults that caused the party to flee in the face of a monster.

Nobody in the carriage spoke to her. Krai was keeping a watchful eye on the window. Knowing that he was probably trying to be considerate of her only made her feel worse. Some obstacles could be overcome with encouragement, others you had to overcome all by yourself. This Trial was most likely the latter.

That monster was strong. If it was able to prove a match for Killiam, then it was probably too much for Tino to take on solo—she just wasn't suited for it. But she should have summoned every drop of strength in her and fought it. She realized she had been constantly spoiled during this vacation. She hadn't been in any fights and the only strenuous thing she had done was run around while being struck by lightning.

She had been too wary, wondering when she might get attacked, and therefore missed the meaning behind the reprieve granted to her. Hunters weren't permitted the chance to come to a stop. Success required that you constantly moved forward. That was how Grieving Souls had become one of the top parties in the capital.

Her master had chosen to retreat and Lizzy went along with him. Normally, this was unthinkable. It was all Tino's fault; they had seen her fears and her weak spirit. Subconsciously, Tino had believed that she had no need to fight if she was with the Smart sisters and the all-powerful Thousand Tricks. Most people would know that being the weakest meant she should see such an encounter as a learning opportunity.

"What's the matter, Tino? Did you get hit back there?"

It was her master, looking at her with concern.

How could she have gotten hit? She had just stood at the ready, only intending to attack. His question was like salt rubbed in a wound. She wanted to say something but kept her lips sealed and just shook her head. Perhaps he had also been sarcastic earlier when he told her she's got "a long road ahead." She wished he would scold her in clearer terms.

"It couldn't be helped, that was a tricky monster," he said.

"Intelligent monsters are capable of detecting mana material and therefore often go for the weaker ones first," Sitri added.

Their words of comfort dug into Tino's heart, though that probably wasn't their intention. Especially Siddy, she just tended to speak frankly. Not that it made Tino feel any better.

She had to fight. At the beginning of the vacation, Lizzy had mentioned her getting a shot at redemption. Next time, she had to step forward. She had to show she was worthy of joining Grieving Souls, even if it cost her an arm or two. She had to do it while they still had expectations of her.

She heard Lizzy's wild voice atop the carriage.

"It looks like we're still being followed! But I don't know where it is!"

"That's no good, perhaps I'll throw an explosive potion."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

The roving ogre was terribly persistent. It was hard to believe it hadn't given up after fighting Lizzy. The blast from Siddy's explosive took down nearby trees, but they were still being chased by a pursuer they couldn't even see.

"This would be much more manageable if Lucia were here," Sitri said. "That would make such a difference—"

"Can we outrun it?" Krai asked.

"Hmm, I can think of a proper solution and a risky one," she said, then clapped her hands together. "We can use a scapegoat. Roving ogres are both persistent and ruthless but they apparently have a habit of playing with their catches. If we offer it a scapegoat, we should be able to escape with ease. In

fact, I hear that without exception, villages located near roving ogre domains all have a folktale involving a fairy demanding sacrifices..."

Sitri wanted to throw someone under the bus. This was far beyond anything Tino had expected. She couldn't imagine herself winning against a monster that so greatly surpassed her, even if she fought until her last breath. She had summoned the will to fight, but that meant little in the face of reality.

*Master, it's too much for me. I'll die,* she thought.

"So what's the proper solution?" Krai asked.

"Hm? Oh, Krai," Sitri said with a giggle. "That was the proper solution."

Krai laughed with her. It must have been the sort of joke only high-level hunters could see the humor in. Tino wasn't laughing at all.

"Thinning the herd would be two birds with one stone, wouldn't you say so, T?"

Sitri looked at Tino with a knowing gaze. Her eyes sparkled with a light that wanted Tino dead. Maybe Sitri was still holding a grudge for Tino's date with Krai back in Gula.

"So what's the risky solution?" Krai asked, sending Tino a lifeline.

"Um, instead of a person, we lure in monsters to act as a scapegoat. I don't think it would be as effective as a human lure and luck will factor in so I'd advise against such a plan..."

"Yup, let's go with that plan. Sitri, human life is something to be treasured."

"In other words, there's more we can get out of Black, White, and Gray. I see."

Looking immensely disappointed, Sitri once again looked at Tino and carefully pulled out another vial of Danger Effect, the monster-luring potion.

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The sun began to rise. The mayor and townsfolk of Gula saw Arnold's company off as they departed. Their bodies were still tired but their mental fatigue was even worse. Their new carriage was much larger than their previous

ones, so even someone as big as Arnold could comfortably fit in. The horses were also much stronger. It was a notable upgrade but it was still uncertain whether or not they would be able to catch up to their quarry.

"You sure get better treatment when you hit Level 7," Gilbert said, impressed. Perhaps due to his youth, his exhaustion didn't show on his face.

"We saved a town in crisis, this much is only natural. If we had more time we could've received further thanks," Eigh said. He sounded wistful but he knew what the life of a hunter could entail.

Hunters didn't use fancy carriages. A higher-priced one might be more comfortable, but hunters' carriages were always being damaged and buying a new one could drive up expenses. As hunters were already spending large sums on potions and weapons, expenses from carriages were a constant source of headaches.

With only a day's notice, the town had only been able to procure one carriage. Though it was a large one, it wasn't spacious enough to fit all of them. As Chloe was their client, they couldn't make her walk so the members of the vanguard took turns walking and riding in the carriage.

The members of Scorching Whirlwind were especially tired. Aside from Gilbert, none of their members were yet able to move and were instead piled up in the carriage.

Technically, these groups were separate parties; Falling Fog wasn't obligated to let Scorching Whirlwind ride in the carriage while they walked. However, surviving fierce encounters together had created a bond between them. Nobody complained about the arrangement.

Eigh didn't mind, he was used to walking. The bigger issue was whether they would catch the Thousand Tricks. With everything that had happened so far, he was on the lookout for trouble but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. It seemed a safe assumption that the Thousand Tricks had taken this road; a carriage had left obvious ruts.

They were moving at a brisk pace. Gilbert, who had grown used to being with Falling Fog, had a question.

"Hey, old man, you killed a dragon, right? How crazy is it to fight a dragon?"

"Hey, Gilbert!" Rhuda cut in. "S-Sorry, he doesn't mean anything by it."

Arnold was no stranger to lively youths who didn't know fear. Gilbert's words were endearing compared to some of the incendiary remarks from the Thousand Tricks. He wasn't so petty or idle as to get angry over some impolite word choices.

"Ah, even a normal dragon is pretty bad but what we fought was no normal dragon," Eigh cut while still keeping a watch of their surroundings. "The Thunder Dragon back in Nebulanubes once routed an army of more than a thousand soldiers. The lightning elemental back in Elan and that orc pack weren't much compared to the Thunder Dragon."

Such a young party had probably never taken on anything comparable to the elemental or the pack of orcs. Gilbert's expression changed when he heard that a thunder dragon was even worse.

"Dragons really are something else," he said. "One day, I'll become a Dragon Slayer. Just watch me! I swear on my blade!"

"You need more than a good blade to slay a dragon. You might get away with it if the dragon can't fly, like an earth dragon or something, but otherwise, you need to bring it down to the ground first."

"That so? Wait, if my blade can't reach it then what if I was able to jump high enough to reach it?"

"Sure, that sounds possible, but how are you gonna dodge its breath while in the air?"

Their defeat of the Thunder Dragon was both the pride and source of confidence of Falling Fog. The dragon's roar, its rage, the blinding flashes of lightning, its burning enmity, Eigh could remember every moment of the battle until the dragon fell.

The lightning elemental and the orc pack had been tough but no foe was tough enough to scare off a party that slew a dragon capable of destroying entire countries. Even if that foe was a higher-ranked hunter, sometimes pride came before anything else.

They weren't bad people. They were excellent hunters who were full of confidence and had survived many battles. That was Chloe's evaluation of Falling Fog. At first, she had thought them to be a rowdy bunch but they had proved to be reliable and had been courteous to the townsfolk. They might have been behaving only because she was present, however, she had seen how Falling Fog treated Scorching Whirlwind—like senior look after junior hunters. You really couldn't judge a book by its cover.

This, however, made it all the more disheartening that they were at odds with Grieving Souls. If the two parties worked together then some of those difficult quests collecting dust at the Explorers' Association might finally get done.

But the die was cast. Falling Fog would continue their pursuit in spite of their ordeals and wouldn't stop until they got their closure. When the time came, Chloe would have to stop them even if it meant putting herself in harm's way.

After traveling for a few hours the carriage came to a stop in the middle of a field dotted by the occasional tree. Chloe stuck her head out the window and saw Arnold and a few others examining tracks left in the road.

"Excuse me," she said. "Has something happened?"

"These marks," Arnold said. "They're diverging from the road. Eigh."

"No two ways about it, this is their work."

With a tense expression, Eigh looked off in the direction indicated by the marks. Chloe exited the carriage and took a look for herself. Next to the wheel tracks were markings, arrows drawn into the ground. The very deliberately placed arrow and heart symbols pointed away from the highway. Next to them were wheel ruts that were very recent.

If they were heading for the Gladis Earldom then they could have just kept to the highway. That was what common sense dictated and it was what Chloe had planned to do. It was what made the tracks so conspicuous, the arrow was hardly necessary. The tracks were faint, being mere depressions in the soft grass, but not faint enough to escape a hunter's notice.

Chloe looked at the tracks and referenced the map in her head.

“The Galest Mountain Range,” she said. “It’s teeming with dangerous monsters and is one of the most dangerous places in the empire. Even high-level hunters avoid it. Some of the monsters out there have bounties on their heads.”

Arnold’s body shook and he stamped out the mocking heart mark in the ground.

“They’re inviting us to follow?!” he said.

“If they’re crossing the mountains does that mean they’re in a hurry?” Chloe wondered aloud. “No...”

If their destination was the Gladis Earldom then crossing the mountains wouldn’t save them a significant amount of time. When you accounted for the amount of time spent fighting off monsters, it wasn’t even a realistic option for anyone without complete confidence in their strength.

Considering the Stifled Shadow’s parting words, there was only one possible explanation: these marks were a challenge for Arnold and his companions. If they took the time to draw an arrow then they were no doubt taunting them.

Arnold clenched his teeth and glared off in the direction of the tracks.

“If you’re not a coward then come on! Come after us!” Is that it, Thousand Tricks?”

“What do we do?” Eigh asked. “We can’t entirely write off the possibility that it’s a trap...”

He had a point. Considering everything that had happened so far, this could possibly be a trap. But even Eigh didn’t seem to believe what he was saying.

“Gilbert. Tell me this, would that man fear a pack of monsters?” Arnold asked in a strained voice.

Gilbert seemed to briefly consider the sudden question before answering in a loud voice.

“He wouldn’t. No way, not when he wouldn’t even draw a weapon before a phantom! Would you fear one, old man?”

Arnold didn’t plan to stop now and nothing was going to get in his way. It

wouldn't have made any difference no matter how Gilbert answered. He had made his decision.

"We're going. We're crossing the mountains."

Daring and audacious. That was what Chloe expected from hunters.

The old road leading to the Galest mountains was just large enough to accommodate their new carriage. The dense trees flanking the road limited their vision and they occasionally heard the cries of monsters in the distance. But what took Chloe by surprise was the sheer number of dead monsters.

The fresh corpses of a wide range of monsters were scattered about. It was an extraordinary number and that was before considering that some of the carcasses had likely already been eaten. It wasn't just Chloe, veterans like Eigh and Arnold also grimaced at the sight.

"Did they do all this?" Arnold wondered.

"Mountains are dense with monsters but this is still way too many. What even happened?" Eigh said.

Monster carcasses could be sold and this much would earn a tidy profit, but there was no sign that they had taken a single corpse with them. Had they simply considered it not worth the effort?

To make things stranger, not a single monster attacked Chloe and her entourage. So much scattered carrion would normally attract monsters looking for food, but it was almost as if they had all fled somewhere. This was the polar opposite of their experiences thus far.

There were supposed to be plenty of dull monsters in the mountains. Had they run from the Thousand Tricks? Had they sensed his power? The situation defied understanding, but it didn't bode well. It was like they were sending some sort of message. Of course, the Crashing Lightning was also capable of creating such a mess but that would first require him to be attacked by so many monsters.

Arnold had flashbacks to the encounter with the orc pack. This was enough to take even him by surprise.

“What did you do,” he whispered. “What are you after, Thousand Tricks?”

“Arnold, should we turn around?” Eigh asked in a small voice.

Arnold’s gaze followed the bloodied path. He silently shook his head.

The road was safe as could be, its lack of monsters unsettling. They moved along far quicker than they had expected to.

“By the way, what sort of monsters have bounties out here?” a member of Falling Fog asked out of the blue.

Bounties came in two varieties. There were ones governments placed on what they deemed dangerous and ones placed by individuals. The management of bounties was entrusted to the Explorers’ Association as they had many powerful hunters among their members.

The orc king back in Gula, for instance, very likely had a bounty on its head (however, Chloe didn’t have time to confirm this). Any bounties in the Galest mountains would be monsters. It wasn’t uncommon for powerful monsters from other countries to flee to mountains to evade hunters.

“There’s multiple,” Chloe said, recalling documents she had seen earlier. “For instance, there’s a general-class troll who fled after destroying an entire village. Of course, there’s no guarantee it’s still in these mountains. After all, any hunters that can handle the Galest mountains normally prefer treasure vaults.”

“Just like in Nebulanubes, huh?”

“Bounties on monsters, well, their pay doesn’t match their difficulty.”

It couldn’t be helped a lot of the time. Monsters that ended up with bounties on their heads were almost always fairly intelligent. Even if they were weak, an intelligent monster might bolster itself with mana material and become something most hunters couldn’t handle.

Though Bandit Squad Barrel weren’t monsters, similar circumstances likely drove the earl to issue a named quest. Also, Arnold slaying that powerful orc was a stroke of good luck for the Explorers’ Association, but Chloe wasn’t going to tell him that.

Nothing stood in their way. It seemed safe to assume that nobody ever had traveled through the Galest Mountain Range as quickly as they were. Along the way they ran into an unfamiliar fork in the road, but that was an obvious trap. There was most likely an intelligent monster in the vicinity.

They reached a clearing with obvious signs of recent use. Eigh investigated a fallen tree and an extinguished campfire.

“Signs of battle and a campfire,” he said. “They were here not too long ago. I’d say a couple hours or so.”

“Hmm, have we finally caught up to them?” Arnold said.

They had made it. The sun was almost entirely beneath the horizon but their easy day on the road had left them with plenty of stamina. They wouldn’t be stopping their advance. Just as Chloe expected, Arnold wore a vicious smile.

“We’ll rest. One hour only. Then we move again, they’re within our grasp.”

They had never intended to enter the Galest Mountain Range. Just why had it come to this? For the first time in recent memory, Chloe had a headache induced by fatigue and stress. She let out a sigh.

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When the carriage stopped shaking and the ground beneath us became level, I finally let myself relax. It had been the worst night of my life. Sitri’s Danger Effect had kicked all the monsters in the area into a frenzy. The resulting bloodbath swallowed up our carriage as we desperately tried to descend a mountain.

We had been unable to account for the breeze. Shortly after Sitri threw the potion, the wind changed directions and spread the potion over a wide radius. Unfortunately, it proved much more effective than she had anticipated. Monsters had surrounded us on all sides. If it weren’t for the valiant efforts of everyone (except me) then we would’ve died in the Galest mountains and nobody would have known it.

*But we made it. I’m alive.*

During my days as a hunter I had survived dozens of perilous situations like

this one, so I was able to stay calm. Tino, however, wasn't so used to it and was trembling in the corner of the carriage, her face a deathly complexion. A strange mucus had drenched her head and her clothes were covered in green blood splatters. Liz had grabbed a hold of her and tossed her into the melee.

At first, I thought she'd be fine considering how she fought with such intensity but her close brush with death really left her out of breath. I was worried she might have lasting trauma.

*The roving ogre's presence disappeared during the kerfuffle. And hey, wasn't that brawl better than fighting the roving ogre?*

"Monsters. Scary. Shadows. Scary. Save me, Master. Master..." Tino mumbled.

Meanwhile, her mentor didn't seem the least bothered.

"Woo, that was a blast! Let's do it again sometime!"

Like Tino, Liz was covered in blood (and to think she had just washed out the previous bloodstains) but didn't seem to mind at all. I couldn't bring myself to argue with her.

"Yeah, uh-huh," I said.

"We should stop to bathe and wash our clothes. And, primarily for the sake of Black, White, and Gray, I think we need to rest," Sitri added, almost like she was a good employer or something.

There was a lot I wanted to say, but for now, I couldn't deny that we needed to rest. I decided to use that as a chance to talk about Sitri's treatment of her helpers.

"Good idea, Night Palace is still some distance away," I said.

Then something occurred to me. I wanted to get off that cursed mountain as quickly as possible but was that really a good idea? Sitri's potion had been extraordinarily effective, so much so that I wasn't sure "monster lure" was really the right word for it. Those monsters had completely lost control and continued to blindly charge at Liz even after she had already killed dozens of them. If those frenzied monsters descended the mountain they might attack

nearby villages and that would have been very bad.

I knew that the Galest mountains were distant from any settlements and it was unlikely anyone would get hurt if we left the monsters alone. But it still felt irresponsible just to leave them out there. I wanted to at least stay in the vicinity and keep an eye on the monsters until the potion wore off, even if I wasn't sure what I hoped to accomplish by doing that.

"Sitri, how long does that potion last?"

"It varies per individual, but roughly a day."

*That's not too bad. Luckily the roving ogre seems to have given up on us.*

I checked the map and saw there was a small lake at the base of the mountains. It was connected to the river Liz had bathed in the previous night. We could get water, it would be an ideal spot to set up camp, and it was close by. The sun had only just set, but our horses couldn't go much farther. Considering both our circumstances and those of our surroundings, this seemed like the perfect plan.

*I'm on fire today.*

"All right, let's rest by this lake. From there we can tell what's going on in the mountains, albeit vaguely."

"Hmm, so we'll rest and wait for a bit. Excellent idea," Sitri said.

*Right, you understand. You could tell in an instant. We'll wait until the potion's effects have worn off. I wish you could always be so intuitive.*

"I knew you'd understand," I said. "Maybe I'm worrying too much but I think we should sit still for a little bit."

"Perish the thought. Considering the strength of our valiant foes, I think it's a sound idea! We are quite tired after all."

*Valiant foes.* What a strange choice of words.

"Oh, Krai Baby!" Liz said, breaking her silence. She snapped her fingers and her eyes glittered. "How about we make a bonfire? It's been so long. We'll make a roaring one that you can see from the mountaintops. T and I can catch some food that we can roast. How about it? Doesn't that sound fun?"

*Good grief, she's full of energy. But a campfire? That doesn't sound half bad.*

When I still went on adventures with everyone, bonfires were a regular occurrence. If you've always got your guard up then you won't have your energy when you need it. A first-rate hunter knows to rest when they can. Many monsters and animals are scared of fire, making campfires appropriate resting places. And at the very least, I wanted Liz and Tino to wash themselves off.

"It's settled. We'll enjoy ourselves as much as we can while still making sure we're prepared to move when we need to."

"Water. There's water. We made it. We're alive!" White yelled as he stumbled towards the lake.

He looked like he might collapse at any moment. The other two joined him and plopped down on the lakeshore. They had had it worse than anyone in the group.

*Thanks for all your hard work. I'll try to get through to Sitri so just hang in there a bit longer.*

The shore was gorgeous and the chill water of the lake was transparent. It was a perfect spot for camping. I could imagine it being a very popular location if it wasn't so remote. There wasn't a hint of human civilization around us and it felt almost sumptuous having it all to ourselves. Drink stared with fascination at its reflection in the water.

In the distance, I could see animals of all sizes drinking from the lake. Neither they nor any monsters fought, creating a small bubble of peace. I couldn't spot any evidence of yesterday's tumult; it looked like the monster lure's effects hadn't reached all the way out here.

I could look up and see the mountains we had descended just the previous day. At this distance, I couldn't tell what became of the frenzied monsters or the roving ogre but I would at least be able to spot them instantly if they came our way.

Liz let out a cheer as she dropped her bags and began to disrobe. Her healthy skin glimmering in the sunlight was like something out of a painting.

“Yay! Krai Baby, look, look, it’s beautiful! I’m gonna go for a swim. C’mon, T!”

“L-Lizzy?! Master’s right there!”

Returning to her senses, the young flustered apprentice tried to stop her master but her efforts were in vain. In the blink of an eye, Liz was down to her underwear and splashing into the lake.

*You forgot to stretch before getting in...*

Tino looked at me and I gave her a small nod. While Liz could have benefited a tad more discretion, it was true that hunters couldn’t let themselves be bothered by something like the sight of a party member in their smallclothes. In my early days as a hunter, I let that sort of thing get to me but I got used to it at some point or another.

Tino momentarily hesitated but then reached for the button at her collar.

“No, Master, I can’t do it!”

And then she dived into the lake, still in her clothes. She could have at least removed her belt and shoes.

“I suppose that’s quite like her.” Sitri giggled to herself. “Thief gear emphasizes mobility and doesn’t obscure one’s figure, yet she’s still embarrassed over something like this.”

I hadn’t really thought about it until then, but Thief gear was the polar opposite of the bulky robes worn by Alchemists. It was probably to help them narrowly evade attacks. How Tino was able to go around like that would forever remain a mystery. I hoped she would never lose her sense of modesty.

As always, Sitri swiftly set up camp. She let the horses rest and fed them, and then got a fire going. With that done, she came to the shore and used a stick to draw a small image in the sand near me.

“About our bonfire, Krai, what if we shaped it like this? And we’ll face it towards the mountain.”

“What’s this?”

It was a strange shape and not only that, it was divided into three segments.

*A dot, a dot, and a curved line?*

“It’s a smiley face!” Sitri said with a grin. “It will require a bit of work, but what do you think?”

Making a bonfire was already a fair amount of hard work, this would triple the effort required.

*Very playful of you, Sitri. Who would even see the face? I guess I don’t have any reason to say no...*

“Yeah, why not? Sounds fun.”

“I believe we’ll hit the apogee tonight so I’d like to prepare a feast to match. Let’s make sure the whole mountain range hears us.”

*Apogee? What apogee? I don’t think we’ll be crossing any peaks higher than what we crossed last night.*

I was about to ask Sitri what she meant but I heard Liz yelling from the lake.

“Krai Baby! Look, a crocodile! I caught a tasty-looking crocodile! Look, amazing, isn’t it?”

*A crocodile? And you plan to eat it? There’s gotta be something better tasting out here!*

I turned around and saw Liz riding atop a thrashing five-meter-long crocodile. She was completely feral. Tino tried to stop her. Black, White, and Gray looked bewildered. Overwhelmed with fear and confusion, I said something completely worthless.

“So there are crocodiles in this lake.”

Nature sure is full of dangers. I was glad I hadn’t blindly dived in. A crocodile was just too much for me.

The fires didn’t snap and crackle so much as they roared and billowed. It was late into the night and the moon shone in the sky, but it was bright as day on the lakeshore. Simple bonfires had been built with wood (gathered by Black, White, and Gray) which Sitri enhanced with a potion. Even in the face of a gale, the flames continued to burn bright.

As Sitri suggested, we arranged the fires to make a smiley face. The design wasn't apparent up close but someone in the mountains would notice it immediately.

At these hours, nocturnal monsters would normally be active but not one of them appeared. It was probably because Liz had killed so many for our dinner. Even in this ecosystem, our feral child came out at the top of the food chain.

Not too far from the bonfires, Liz's catches were piled up. The pools of their drained blood were a bit off-putting. Sitri deftly carved out the edible portions but it was clearly too much for a group of our size to finish.

It was without a doubt the most bizarre bonfire I had ever experienced. The fires seemed like they could burn forever and felt like overkill for a group of our size. Blood dripped from skewers of meat roasting by the fire, and a cauldron bubbled audibly.

What added most to the eerie mood was Black, White, and Gray sprawled on the ground and Tino's look of anxiety. An outside observer might think we were conducting some strange ritual or a dubious sabbath. Of course, this was just a fun bonfire, but even I had trouble enjoying myself with those three collapsed and Tino's clear uncertainty.

Only Liz and Sitri were their normal selves; Sitri was cooking and Liz was playing in the lake.

"What do you think, Krai? I'd say things have gone perfectly!" Sitri said to me as she proudly nodded to the bonfires. "I'm certain someone on the mountainside can look down and see a big smile."

I didn't have anything against her playful spirit but I had something else on my mind. I was worried about our three helpers who had been forced to gather a plethora of firewood and now looked on the verge of death. It seemed perfectly reasonable that gathering wood after an expedition through the mountains would be tough on them. It was true one of our members immediately started hunting big game, but she couldn't be considered within the norm.

While I had been preoccupied watching Tino and Liz play in the lake, Sitri had been dishing out orders. I would have stopped her if I had noticed in time, but I caught on too late.

It was good to take joy in small things. Under the right circumstances, I could see myself arranging bonfires in a smiley face. But I also believed in causing as little trouble for other people as I could. Even if Sitri was within her rights as their employer, I found it abhorrent that she would push Black, White, and Gray so hard in the name of her personal enjoyment.

While roasting a skewer of crocodile meat for me, Sitri grinned; it was an expression of earnest joy and devoid of ill intent. A bit melancholic, I let out a small sigh.

“Sitri, aren’t you working those three a bit too hard?” I whispered to her.

“Huh? You think so?” she said with wide eyes.

I knew from the start that her treatment of Black, White, and Gray wasn’t driven by malice. She probably just didn’t consider their exhaustion to be anything noteworthy. Our adventures were always putting us in mortal danger so gathering firewood after a battle probably didn’t seem like much to her.

Excessive treasure hunting had affected her way of thinking. It was our first trip together in some time and I was determined to use that short period to return her thinking to the realm of common sense.

“But they’re, well, criminals?” she said with a troubled look on her face.

This was unexpected. Criminals? When she mentioned it, I realized they clearly didn’t look like civilians. But there were plenty of hunters who looked like crooks so I never imagined that those three might actually be criminals.

Except why was she hiring criminals? Had the empire offered them a job as part of their reintegration into society? I didn’t know much about the sort of personal connections Sitri had, but maybe this was a form of penal labor? I still thought she was going too far. But I couldn’t easily interfere if it really was penal labor. I furrowed my brow but Sitri just smiled reassuringly.

“But if you’d like me to, I’ll stop pushing them so hard.”

“Huh? This isn’t a form of punishment for them?”

“It is, of course. In a manner of speaking. However, thanks to you, I’ve determined their capabilities.”

With a smile, she tilted her head and added a bit about something not being worth swapping out parts or holding on to too tightly. I didn't know what she was on about but I figured their contributions over the past few days were sufficient punishment for them. It was possible they hadn't even done anything serious and they seemed to have done everything Sitri asked of them.

"Don't you think it's time to let them off the hook?" I suggested.

I had wavered when I learned they were criminals but my initial feelings hadn't changed. I had many experiences of being targeted by criminals, I was of the opinion that they should all be thrown in jail. But the labors of Black, White, and Gray had elicited a bit of sympathy in me. It would be different if they were murderers but if they were petty criminals then I felt they had served their time. Of course, it wasn't my place to judge if they should be forgiven.

After a moment of contemplation, Sitri removed a key from her pocket and pressed it into my hand.

"They haven't done anything serious," she said. "You can release them. I'm sure they'll be very grateful."

Sitri gripped my hand for a few seconds before gently letting go. A small golden key was left in my palm.

"That's the key to their collars. Removing their collars will set them free."

That warm smile of hers that I had seen so many times didn't seem to carry any deception.

*A key is all it takes? I held it between my fingers. But they're criminals? Hmm. Considering their exhaustion, I'd like to set them free as soon as I can. But they're criminals. Well, even if I let them go they might not be able to get to a town in their current state. Setting them free out here would just be cruel. There's still time to...consider it.*

"I'll have to wait for the right timing," I said.

Sitri nodded repeatedly with a sparkle in her eyes. Maybe she had already reached the same conclusion as me? Or maybe she had been unable to let them go until I said something? It was possible. Sitri, Liz, just about everyone I knew really, they all paid too much regard to the words of a figurehead clan leader.

"You can leave them to me," I said. "They look a bit tired, so I'm going to let them rest. Is that fine?"

"Very well. I'll inform Lizzy, and those three, that I've left matters in your care," Sitri said. Her face was flushed and her breathing was a bit heavy.

*Now then, what am I going to say to Black, White, and Gray?*

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It was while the roving ogre was reconsidering its approach to dispatching the first group of humans that it noticed the arrival of a new group of humans. The wind, the noises, every bit of the Galest mountains was an ally and informant to the roving ogre. Even at a distance, it could tell this new party was a capable one. Especially the large man at the front. He seemed on par with the girl who'd hurled the burning rock.

Clearly, one group entering these remote mountains after another was no coincidence. The roving ogre knew it had to destroy both of them, but it couldn't do that alone. So what would it do? The answer was simple, it didn't require a moment's consideration. It would pit the two parties against each other. The roving ogre was intelligent. Intelligent enough to discern its prey's weaknesses. Intelligent enough to parse human speech.

From a mountain's peak, the roving ogre narrowed its small eyes as it watched the large carriage move along the path. Its body churned and shifted, its green skin slowly changed color. Its flesh groaned as it expanded and sprouted hair. After a few seconds, its transformation was complete.

Silently, a savage grin formed on the monster's lips. With its long limbs, it descended the mountain with incredible speed.

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Being arrested would have been better than this. They had been angry when the shackles were first put on them. When they had been told they would be carriage chauffeurs, they started to consider ways they might remove the collars and resist if given the opportunity. Now all they felt was profound despair and resignation.

Black, White, and Gray all had long histories of fighting knights and hunters.

They couldn't remember how many lives they had taken and had even laughed as they finished off someone begging to be spared.

Yet even they considered the infamous Grieving Souls to be insane. They'd lost all will to resist. Now they understood why they had been so easily caught by those sisters, it was a simple matter of how many crucibles they had overcome.

Those early days of the vacation spent being treated like slaves now seemed heavenly compared to the hell that the previous night had been. After being pitted in a life-or-death battle against an unending horde of monsters, they had reached their limits physically and mentally.

Their swords were coated in blood and fat, and their blades had gone dull. Their coats had been drenched with blood; a good wash probably wouldn't be enough to remove the stains and scent.

If they found themselves in the same situation again, one of them would surely die. Really, all three of them might die. They were certain that even if they died, that carriage would probably keep moving like nothing had even happened. Something about that idea was absolutely terrifying to them.

They knew the Thousand Tricks was a Level 8 hunter who had resolved a number of incidents. They were reminded of this as their "vacation" turned into a brutal gauntlet of monsters and calamities. There was the lightning elemental, the mass of orcs and their fort. There was the blatantly absurd number of monsters attacking them on the path through the mountains. Then there was the one attacking indiscriminately, the worst of them all—the roving ogre.

Given the choice, an encounter with any of those would have prompted Black, White, and Gray to flee immediately. However, the Thousand Tricks and his party members deemed it a "vacation."

Sometimes they avoided the trouble, other times they shoved it onto other hunters, and sometimes they forced their way through. On the mountain path, they laughed as they rolled down the path Black, White, and Gray had risked their lives to open up. During the escape from the roving ogre, they had nearly been handed over as a sacrifice.

Black had sensed a strong air of normalcy from their behavior. The Stifled

Shadow, the other hunter, they were accustomed to near-death encounters. They had probably encountered even worse. So they laughed. So they didn't stop.

The Stifled Shadow was registered as a Level 6 but that obviously wasn't an accurate reflection of her strength and experience. It didn't seem possible. No matter how hard they tried to see it, her appearance didn't betray a single hint of her strength, experience, determination, or even her malice.

Black hugged her knees and ruminated as a means of avoiding reality. There was no way out of this despair. The only light awaiting them was that of their own demise. But would that woman, that grinning, remorseless woman who collared them, would she permit such succor?

"Um, are you okay?"

Black was instantly pulled from her stupor and she accidentally let out a small shriek. White, who had been still as a corpse, and Gray, whose consciousness had been a matter up for debate, both jumped up as though the reaper had come knocking.

The voice calling to them had been feeble, unintimidating. This voice was the most terrifying of them all. Krai Andrey. The Thousand Tricks. The leader of Grieving Souls and the man who commanded absolute loyalty from both the Stifled Shadow and the Ignoble. He was the only one whose strength Black and the others had been unable to gauge.

As always, he didn't show even a hint of power. His physique was frail and not all like a hunter's, nor did he have the distinct aura of someone who had absorbed large quantities of mana material. He didn't wear armor or carry a weapon and his stance was wide open. If they saw him on the street they would have just taken him for another civilian.

But that was what made him scary. His deep black eyes were mellow. Unlike the Stifled Shadow, he never yelled, and unlike the Ignoble he didn't grin at every little thing, but he also wasn't a clear anomaly like Killiam.

On the road, they had constantly watched and observed him. He hadn't done anything of note. He never showed any particular regard for his comrades or engaged the hordes of monsters. He didn't do anything exceptional or show any

shift in his emotions. He seemed ordinary.

However, he was the one who established the vacation's objective. The Stifled Shadow and the Ignoble were no doubt his mistresses. They looked at him with expressions tinged with lust, their actions made with the desire to avoid his wrath.

There was no way that man was sane. At their first meeting, he nearly had them liquidated for no reason. If he had those two at his beck and call then Black didn't want to imagine what might happen to those who opposed him. Whatever it was, it probably wouldn't be over quickly.

"Wh-What is it, sir?" squeaked Gray as he prostrated before the Thousand Tricks.

This was the man who had been so audacious before their departure. Black knew how he felt. The scariest people were the ones who didn't blow up immediately. She followed Gray's example and lowered her head. If only a little bit, she was trying not to acknowledge the situation, to not look at it directly.

"You don't need to bow down or anything," the Thousand Tricks said. "But let me get straight to the point. I've decided to release you all. I've got Sitri's permission."

Black looked up in surprise. White and Gray also looked at him with vague expressions.

*"Release"? Did he just say "release"?*

The Thousand Tricks's eyebrows twitched and he narrowed his eyes. A small key was in his hand, it was the key to their collars. He was full of openings. From his spot, Gray could snatch the key in the blink of an eye, but he didn't move a muscle.

"Of course, I won't let you go this minute," the Thousand Tricks continued. "It's dangerous out here and I heard you guys are criminals, apparently. You wouldn't really be repaying your debt to society if I let you go so easily, right?"

Black almost asked him where he got off saying things like that, but stopped herself. They were indeed criminals and it would be bad news for them if all their crimes were brought to light. But Sitri and Liz already had that covered.

The Thousand Tricks smiled faintly. It was a smile that looked completely natural, genuine. He held up the key and dangled it in front of them.

“But I also know that what you guys did was nothing serious. You’ve done a good job following Sitri’s orders these last few days and I think that’s enough to repay your debt to society. If you behave, I’ll remove the collars and let you all free once we get somewhere safe.”

Taken at face value, those seemed like incredibly kind words. But Black saw White’s cheek twitch with fear. They were criminals. They had scraped by breaking laws of all sorts and even by killing. They knew their offenses were grave. But this man had just written those deeds off as “nothing serious.”

They couldn’t be sure how the Thousand Tricks interpreted their silence but he quickly waved his hands.

“Oh, don’t worry. The road from here on is fairly safe and I don’t think we’ll be fighting anything. I still need you to drive the carriage but you can go slowly, we’re in no rush. This is a vacation after all. Got it?”

*Vacation.* That despicable word caused Black to shiver. It was a sweet word. A word clearly meant to stoke the flames of hope. But she and her cohorts never had any say in the matter. All they could do was nod along like loyal soldiers. White and Gray nodded wordlessly. She followed suit. The Thousand Tricks saw their expressions and looked relieved. And as though he had been waiting for that specific moment, a light glimmered from the direction of the mountains.

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“Here you go. It’s been so long since I last made stew. I had a limited range of spices and potions available to me, so I don’t think it’ll be up to par.”

“Ooh, thanks.” I took a bite. “Mm, it’s really good.”

“Thank goodness. Lizzy only brought me strange meat. Blending the flavors was quite troublesome.”

*What in the world caused that flash of light in the mountains?* I wondered as I savored Sitri’s delicious stew. Next to the campfire, Liz sat with her legs folded and ate some unidentified meat straight off the bone. Next to her was Tino, contrasting starkly with her mentor as she ate with impeccable manners.

The light had faded after only a second. Nothing came after it, which made me think I might be paying it too much mind, but it still bothered me. Could it have been a natural phenomenon? The Smart sisters didn't seem to be worried about it.

Sitri was smart, she would be able to offer an educated guess. I sat down next to her, which seemed to catch her off guard. Looking strangely pleased, she moved over so our shoulders brushed against each other. A sweet and soothing scent drifted from her well-maintained hair.

"Sitri, about that light..."

"Huh? Oh, indeed, the usual light."

*Hm?! The usual light. The usual, huh?*

The outdoors sure is dangerous. We were supposed to be on vacation but our stops at Elan, Gula, and the Galest mountains all had us narrowly avoiding danger. How did traveling merchants and road-bound people get by? If only I knew their secrets.

*They're being awfully quiet. If that light is normal then do we really need to run?*

"Are we gonna run?" I asked.

"Uuummm. I'd say it's still a bit too early to be moving. And we're still eating."

Unlike me, Sitri wasn't afraid. She was accustomed to traveling.

There were multiple chunks of meat skewered over the fire and there was also stew and fish. It was way too much for us to load into the carriage. My plan was to spend a night at the lake. If we got up and left, that would mean another trek in the darkness. And I had just told Black, White, and Gray that I wasn't going to work them too hard.

As I wondered what to do, I grimaced and ate my stew. Then Sitri had an idea. She sure seemed to be having fun, considering the circumstances.

"Judging by the position of the light, I think their arrival shouldn't be too much longer. Oh, I know! It's only a bit, but I do have some liquor. Shall I bring it out?"

*I see. So it won't be much longer. Wait, why's she so certain it's headed our way? It might just be a natural phenomenon. And what even was that light?*

I swallowed my pride and checked with the all-knowing Sitri.

"By the way, Sitri, what do you think is out there?"

She pulled out a fine-looking bottle and glass, then smiled while she poured a drink.

"It's Arnold and company," she said.

I smiled. I found myself accepting the drink she was offering me. It must have been something strong because I felt a burning heat on my palate. Sitri grinned and looked up at the night sky with flushed cheeks.

*What? Whaaat? Why's Arnold out here? I don't understand.*

I didn't understand why Arnold was in the mountains. I didn't understand how Sitri discerned that from just a flash of light. Even if I did somehow understand either of those things, I still couldn't possibly fathom how Sitri could sit there and laugh about it. I grinned back at her, my head filled with question marks.

"I imagine that light was from that sword made from a thunder dragon," she said. "Materials recovered from dragons truly are first-class. According to one theory, even after dragons and similar mythical beings die, their flesh remains unaware and continues to retain its power. Don't you find that incredibly romantic?"

Sitri's voice was rosy and enraptured, but I couldn't say I shared her sentiments. I guess we had different sensibilities. All I knew about thunder dragons was that they were immensely powerful, even by dragon standards, and that they were delicious when Sitri roasted them with teriyaki.

*Hold on a minute. Did she just say Arnold's coming our way? And with a super powerful weapon in hand? Can this get any worse?*

Liz looked up from the meat she was digging into and shouted at us while waving a skewer of crocodile.

"Siddy! Get away from Krai Baby, you're too close! Scoot, scoot. I've got eyes

in the back of my head, y'know!"

"Forgive me, Krai. We'll have to continue at a later date."

"Ah?! Like hell you're gonna continue! Were you born without common sense? You too, Krai Baby! Why are you getting cozy with her, didn't we just promise we'd be together forever?!"

*What does she mean by "getting cozy"? How can I do that when Arnold's approach has me shivering?*

Oblivious to my state of panic, Liz shoved Sitri aside. Because she had just been in the lake, she was a bit chilly, causing me to shiver even more.

"Liz, your clothes are cold. Go dry them off or you'll get sick," I told her.

"Huh? How could they be cold if I took them off before getting into the lake? Are they in the way? I see, should I take them off then?"

Liz didn't hesitate to start, but Tino worked up the courage to jump on her from behind.

"Lizzy, stop that, it's improper!" she cried.

She was immediately thrown off, but just as quickly, she got back up and tackled Liz. It was a shame they had to fight like this even though they had just bathed in the lake. I was watching their siblingesque scuffle, unsure what to do.

Then something burst from the trees.

It had blond hair, a muscular body that stood almost two meters tall, and its eyes glimmered with a yellow hue. Its arms and legs were well-developed but oddly long. But what took me by surprise was its lack of clothes. A simple rag around its waist was the only hint of good sense. Sitri and Liz looked at it with wide eyes. Tino was frozen in place.

Instinctively, I smiled and asked it a question. Smiles were one of my defensive techniques.

"Who might you be?"

The mysterious blond macho narrowed its eyes and looked strangely confident.

“Arnold. Been a while.”

*A-A-A-Arnold?! I leaped up from my spot by the fire. He sure has changed. But I guess that long hair does look like his. Same eye color as well. But he still looks different enough that I never would've guessed it was him. Something's off.*

I looked him over and then it hit me.

“Did you lose weight?”

“Krai Baby, is that really the first thing you should ask?” Liz interrupted.

“What happened to your sword?”

“Ditched it. It was junk.”

Apparently, he threw away an ultrapowerful sword made out of the parts of a thunder dragon.

“First, we need to get you some clothes,” Sitri interjected.

“Siddy?!” Tino cried.

*What to do? I had been keeping an eye out, but I wasn't expecting him to show up half naked and unarmed.*

What in the world had happened to Arnold? I took a close look but I just couldn't reconcile with the idea that it was him. It occurred to me that, just maybe, I might have been tired.

*Calm down, Krai Andrey. If he's not Arnold, then he wouldn't be calling himself Arnold. If it was someone pretending to be him then they would probably do a better job. Which means this must be Arnold.*

“For starters,” I said. “Why not have some stew? There's also meat.”

“Krai Baby, I love this part of you!”

“I should take notes.”

“Master is god. Master is god.”

Killiam, a solitary eater, appeared from nowhere.

“Kill, kill.”

“Meow?”

Arnold dashed forward, kicked the roasting meat with his long legs, and knocked over the cauldron of stew. He pointed at me and smiled like a savage beast.

“Tonight, you die.”

*Ah, no doubt about it, this is Arnold.*

“Die! Die! All of you!”

“Arnold, calm down! If I’ve done something wrong, I’ll apologize!”

He swung his arms with a wild fury that you don’t see very often. He smashed our bottles and knocked our dishes onto the ground. I tried desperately to apologize but he didn’t listen. He shoved his arms into a bonfire we had worked so hard to set up and flung the burning wood into the air.

*Is he really human?*

“Fight. Fight me,” Arnold said.

“Calm down, Arnold! Nothing I’ve done to you has been on purpose! Why are you so angry? It’s my fault. It’s all my fault. I’ll apologize, so forgive me!”

“Quiet. Now die!”

Arnold swung his arms at incredible speed, but he didn’t hit me. He seemed to be deliberately avoiding me. Our camping gear was bashed and battered but I could tell his conscience was holding him back. Still, his strength was incredible, but in a different sense than what I had seen before. I thought this must be what happens when a Level 7 from the Land of Fog gets serious.

As he thrashed around with movements almost inhuman, I desperately tried to placate him.

“Arnold, this won’t solve anything! If something is bothering you, I’ll hear you out! Okay? Aren’t we both men of the imperial capital? Should I grovel? I can grovel. I’ll grovel so just stop that creepy convulsing!”

I’m a pacifist. I want to resolve everything without fighting and I won’t hesitate to put my forehead to the dirt if it’s necessary.

I put my arms forward, bent my knees, and quickly prostrated. I didn’t know

what I was apologizing for but I didn't need a reason. I put as much sincerity in as I could.

"Arnold, I'm so sorry for everything! Please forgive me!"

"Wh-Wh-What are you doing?!"



I heard a familiar voice. An angry voice, like a pot about to boil over. I looked up and there I saw—

“Ar...nold?”

It was Arnold, as I remembered him, and friends. His face was pulled taut and burning red, but he always looked like that so I was certain it was him. In his right hand was a sword as long as he was tall and glowing yellow. It was that super strong sword he'd made out of the parts of the thunder dragon.

Except, I wasn't afraid. I was surprised. I quickly realigned myself so I was groveling to the other Arnold. The naked Arnold stood boldly, with his arms crossed.

*What in the world is going on?*

The newly appeared Arnold had the aspect of a demon. Steam rose from his tempered body as it shook with rage. His companions behind him looked equally fired up, except for Chloe, who stood a ways away, pale and simply watching.

“J-Just how much of a f-foo—”

“Foo?”

“—fool do you take me for?! Perish!”

Arnold roared with all his might and came at me. I thought his sheer anger might be enough to erase me from existence. Blinding light overwhelmed me and I heard the crackle of lightning as a golden sword closed in on my skull.

The blow was deflected by a Safety Ring. In my confusion, I asked for help from the squishy Arnold.

“Save me, Arnold!”

“Mock me again?!?”

That thunderous shout informed me, on an instinctual level, that the one with the sword was the real Arnold. It was a matter of their violent behavior quotient.

Killiam dashed towards me, but some familiar hunters blocked it and Sitri off

from me. Arnold's right-hand man, A (I think that's what his name was), stood before the gray macho and snickered. The other hunters quickly got in formation.

"Hold it right there, you're gonna have to get through us first," Eigh said.

*Why are people always so quick to attack us?*

"Calm down, real Arnold. We can talk this through!" I pleaded.

"LIKE HELL!"

He was out for blood, a whole ocean of it. Chloe looked at us nervously.

Arnold kicked at my stomach. A Safety Ring prevented me from taking any damage, but any successful blow from a Level 7 would be fatal for me. Experience had taught me that I couldn't manage an attack from anyone higher than Level 3. In a one-on-one fight, I couldn't evade, no matter which way I dodged; I couldn't even think of trying to counterattack.

My only choice was to take the hits head-on. Instead of trying to dodge, I let my Safety Rings activate. The blade and its lightning were deflected by a thin barrier surrounding my body. It seemed Arnold's fighting style emphasized fewer but more powerful blows, but he still struck multiple times in the span of a second. But that was fine. I was no stranger to the strength of hunters.

No matter how many times he struck, my knowledge of Safety Rings kept me unharmed. Everyone stood frozen, just watching his flurry of attacks. But he couldn't keep that pace up forever.

After making one last furious swing, Arnold stepped back. His razor-sharp eyes contained hints of not just anger but caution as well. Finally, I saw a chance to negotiate. Arnold was strong, but I had Liz and Sitri with me, not to mention Drink and Killiam as well, so I could be bolder than usual.

"Do you feel better now?" I asked.

"Why are you still standing? I can't understand it," Arnold said between breaths.

Why was I still on my feet? A smile formed on my lips.

Arnold's speed and power were extraordinary. Some treasure hunters had

fame but not the strength to back it up (like me) but that wasn't Arnold. Even still, it wasn't enough. He didn't seem to understand it, but Arnold wasn't up against me. He was up against the history of Safety Rings! The history of a Relic considered far and wide to be among the best defenses!

Safety Rings were absolute, unopposable. As far as I knew, a Safety Ring's barrier had never been broken through. Luke's strongest hits could cut through metal as though it were cheese, but even that wasn't enough.

I was small and insignificant, but I had seventeen eye-poppingly expensive Safety Rings on. Well, ten had just been used up, leaving me with seven. That meant I could only take another seven hits, but you might also say I was still safe from seven hits of any variety.

I had been attacked many times by scary-looking bad guys and each time I had come out alive while resisting the urge to barf. It wasn't anything worth bragging about, but I was still a bit proud that an average guy like me had made it through hell and lived to tell about it. So I just accidentally bragged about it.

"Arnold, calm down. This is a, uh, a matter of experience. I've been attacked lots of times and nobody's ever gotten a scratch on me," I told him.

Arnold looked at me with eyes that could kill. It was super scary. But if I held out a bit longer, someone would come to save me.

Liz, who had just been watching quietly, cleared the dirt and dust from her hands and smiled just as savagely as Arnold. If she wasn't enough, Tino was nearby. It would be two-on-one.

"Do you get just how far behind you are?" Liz said. "Why do you think I went to the trouble of drawing an arrow to show you the way? Because I knew you wouldn't be able to handle Krai Baby!"

"It was you who drew that damn arrow?" Arnold responded.

"You might not have found us without it! I'm so nice!"

*Wait, what arrow?*

Liz clenched her fist. At some point, she had put on her gauntlets.

"But it ends here," she continued. "Even if your hits aren't getting through, it

still pisses me off to see you swinging at Krai Baby. Even if I'm supposed to be slacking off, I don't think I can do that right now."

The blood had gone to her head. Her cheeks were stiff and her eyes twitched. Also, my ban on violence wasn't an order to "slack off."

Just as Liz began to approach Arnold, something sent her flying back. It was Arnold, or rather, Fake Arnold. But the creature I had assumed to be Arnold now had green skin and its hair had disappeared. What stood there was the roving ogre that had harassed us throughout the mountains.

The ogre practically vanished as it dashed at Liz. It swung its whiplike arms, which Liz blocked and returned with a high-speed kick. The ogre contorted its body and evaded the attack.

I couldn't believe it. The ogre could change its appearance and we had been fooled by it. Monsters capable of deceiving humans weren't at all rare, but I had never seen one so intelligent and capable of rapid transformations.

"Arnold, put away your sword!" I said, trying to sound as calm as I could. "It seems that monster's been tricking us this whole time."

I got a kick for a response. A Safety Ring blocked it.

"Calm down! There's no point in continuing to fight!"

"Don't joke with me! Who the hell would be fooled by that?!"

*I would be fooled by that! I'll grovel, so just forgive me, okay?! Can you even blame me for getting tricked by that fake? And it's not like I did anything bad to Fake Arnold.*

Arnold let out a roar. As though in response, more lightning emanated from his sword with all the calamity of a thunderstorm. Nobody would be coming to help us. I was fine, I had my Safety Rings, but Tino was awestruck by the amount of energy being channeled by Arnold.

She was close enough to get hit by a shock wave. I sprinted towards her. Running in these situations was something I was accustomed to. The moment I grabbed hold of Tino, one of my rings activated. Arnold's lightning had struck us with a loud rumble, something you don't get used to no matter how many

times you hear it.

It all happened in the span of a moment. The thunder resided. I was unharmed and so was Tino. Arnold looked at us with bulging eyes.

I don't want to brag, but I was confident nobody was as adept with Safety Rings as I was. Even in an age rife with powerful hunters, I doubt anyone used those Relics as much as I did.

Safety Rings were broadly thought of as Relics which deployed unbreakable barriers to protect against fatal attacks, but that wasn't entirely accurate. It was a little-known fact, but Safety Rings had multiple functions. One of those functions was "Voluntary Activation," which let you activate a ring of your own will, instead of letting it deploy automatically. A voluntarily deployed barrier could be adjusted slightly, something impossible with an automatic barrier.

In short, effective use of one of the barriers could let you protect yourself and someone close by. I was a bit proud of myself, protecting someone else for the first time in recent memory.

"Satisfied now? Let's stop, there's no point in us fighting like this," I proposed now that I had regained some composure.

The light faded from Arnold's blade, but his will to fight was undiminished. I thought it safe to assume he could only channel so much energy in rapid succession through that weapon of his. But if he burned through all my Safety Rings, it wouldn't take a powerful attack to kill me. I needed to buy myself time, just a few minutes would be enough.

"Draw your blade, Thousand Tricks!" Arnold demanded.

"I don't have anything of the sort on me."

I knew that wasn't what he meant, but I still chose to beat around the bush. There was no such thing as a pacifist hunter, theirs was a profession that talked through the fist. If you couldn't show your strength, you wouldn't be given the light of day. If I actually had the powers fitting of a Level 8 and showed that to Arnold, he would have been pacified much earlier. It was one of the reasons I wanted to quit being a hunter.

"With all your strength, you still don't attack? Why go so far?!"

It wasn't that I didn't attack, I *couldn't* attack.

"Because I believe," I said with a smile.

I threw out that phrase haphazardly because it sounded nice, but Arnold still charged at me. He really couldn't discern mood or atmosphere.

I knew running would be useless, so I let go of Tino and moved forward. Experience had taught me that I would just get hit if I fell back. However, if I advanced, I might put him on his guard and be spared an attack. Such was my survival strategy.

I caught hints of caution in Arnold's eyes, but he didn't stop. Having faith in his strength when he needed to was what made him a first-rate hunter. He prepared to thrust, but just before he could, he was sent stumbling forward.

"Not happening!" shouted a quivering voice.

As Arnold stumbled, his blade bumped into me. Another Safety Ring was expended.

Arnold clicked his tongue and quickly fell back while he reoriented himself.

Tino had protected me. Her exposed shoulders. Her worn, beat-up ribbons. Her body was shaking and I couldn't tell if it was out of anticipation. Her feet, however, were planted firmly on the ground.

"Move. I have no business with you," Arnold said as he glared at her.

"But...I do, with you," Tino replied.

"Hmph. You can't stop me a second time."

A cloud of dirt had been sent into the air, but apparently, she had gone for a leg sweep. I had still been hit by Arnold's sword anyway, but I was impressed by her good timing.

"I won't let you attack Master any further. He's always protected me, but that changes here. If Lizzy's not here, then I'll have to be his blade."

I felt bad for thinking it during her moment in the spotlight, but we already knew that Tino alone was no match for Arnold. She just wasn't equipped to deal with him; even buying time would be a struggle for her.

"You've got guts, but you can't win against me. Besides, is there anything about that man worth protecting?"

"Of course there is. But I won't say what."

There was no uncertainty in her. I was taken aback by the determination I could detect. Except determination wasn't enough to make up for their difference in strength, and Tino knew that.

"You're right. I can't win like this. That's why—"

Tino raised a hand in the air—in it she held Evolve Greed. I couldn't see her face from where I was, but I could see her hand trembling. Still, she held the mask with resolve.

"Master, lend me your strength."

And then Tino thrust the mask onto her face.

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*"O valiant warrior, does your soul yearn for my power?"*

Tino heard a voice. She felt a creepy, sticky sensation both covering her entire face and permeating her flesh. An unknown strength welled up within. Previously she had resisted, but now she accepted every bit of power, her beloved master at the center of her thoughts.

She was no longer afraid. Her master's training was spartan, but it was all for her sake. This meant Tino's only choice was to reciprocate his efforts. Her inexperience had prevented her from noticing something so simple up until now. Now, she understood everything. It had all started at the beginning of the vacation, no, it had started when the mask was first brought to the capital.

She had been struck by lightning in preparation for her battle with Arnold. The training bind was meant to temper her spirit and give her the resolve to wear the mask. And luring Arnold to them was done in the name of her own growth. Arnold had been brought to their camp and Krai's farcical behavior had been done to draw out his full strength.

It sounded so simple when put into words, but, truly, how many people were capable of such a feat? Lizzy and Siddy were most likely being kept at a

distance, a considerable distance at that, in order to prevent Tino from trying to rely on them. It wasn't until after her master used his own body to protect her that she finally made her decision.

Seeing her master protect her gave a bigger shock than the lightning that struck her earlier in the trip. Her master believed in her and so he chose not to fight. Tino couldn't let herself depend on him any more than she already had.

*"Cast aside your trepidations, do not fight it. Surrender yourself to chaos."*

It was a disturbing voice. It brought Tino back to the last time she wore the mask.

"Master, that wasn't the real me," she had said back then. "The mask made me do it!"

Seeing her strain her voice and make a disgrace of herself, her master had simply smiled and said: "You're fine, calm down. I understand that wasn't the real you. Uh, right. That was Mad Tino."

After that, Lizzy took the mask and casually slipped it on, only to immediately take it back off.

"I can't use it," she had said. "It said something about an unanticipated excess of strength and how it won't activate for security purposes."

The mask was nothing more than a Relic. It was a dangerous and aberrant one, but it was still just a Relic. It was her lack of experience that previously stopped her from suppressing the impulses of the mask. She had been unable to resist those novel sensations and was driven mad by it. But this time would be different.

All she needed was unbending resolve, the resolve to use the Relic of her own accord.

*"I won't surrender myself. You're nothing but a Relic that I'm going to use,"* she told the mask.

*"Oh, quite right you are. Nonetheless, for safety purposes, auto-mode is*

*recommended for new users.”*

*“No. I’ll stay in control.”*

*“Very well. Switching to manual mode. Please be aware, physical side effects may occur as a result of usage on an unaccustomed body.”*

A burning strength coursed through her body, her soul rocked by a sudden sense of omnipotence. But she kept calm. Her perspective was higher than usual. The tight sensations around her body suggested that she had grown.

Arnold was dumbfounded. Looking behind her, she saw that by the power of the mask, her short hair had grown, its tips white as snow. Bringing her hands to her face, it almost felt like she was touching her own skin. The only thing that felt different was that a horn now sprouted from above her right eye.

Last time she put on the mask, it only covered her face. This time was different. Her mind was clear, she had full control of her body and its strength was there for her to use. *This* was how Evolve Greed was meant to be used. The Relic was a device that drew out one’s latent powers, which meant more than just pure strength.

*Now, I can win, Tino thought. No, I will win.*

Her beloved master saw her, and as though looking upon proof of preestablished harmony, muttered: “Super Tino.”

As usual, she failed to understand him. Feeling a strong but ambiguous sense of satisfaction, she flew towards the Trial that awaited her.

## Epilogue: Let This Grieving Soul Retire, Part Four

A pleasant breeze blew across the land. Not another soul could be seen across the endless plains that spread out around us. Next to our carriage, Killiam rode atop Drink, both of them content as could be. If their appearances were more, shall we say, normal, then they would probably make for a very picturesque sight.

I let out a big yawn and idly ran my hands through Tino's hair as she rested her head in my lap. Her hair was so silky, just touching it put my spirit at ease. As I did this, she let out a small groan.

"Oh, good morning, Tino."

Tino slowly opened her eyelids. The dark rings that had been under her eyes were now entirely gone. She looked up at me vacantly but tried to sit up when she realized the position she was in. However, her body wouldn't comply and all she could do was writhe in pain.

"O-Owww."

"Most people wouldn't be able to move at all in your condition," Sitri said. "I'd advise you to keep still, okay, T?"

"Huh, what do you mean?"

With teary eyes, Tino looked at me in confusion. She didn't show the slightest bit of the courage she had as Super Tino. But that was fine, too much time in that state would destroy her.

"Wh-Where am, er, what about Arnold?" Tino asked while convulsing slightly.

Apparently, she had forgotten what had occurred. I wasn't sure what to say, but Liz butted in before I could come up with a good answer.

"You got your ass kicked so badly it was comical. If you could move, I'd be training you to the bone," she said, exasperated.

"Lizzy, there's no need to put it like that," Sitri chided.

Tino froze with shock. I stroked her head again and smiled.

“Arnold’s a Level 7, I knew you wouldn’t win against him. Still, you looked very cool back there.”

“Master, Master, please don’t be so rough on me.”

I’ll jump to the conclusion and say that Tino lost. Put simply: Super Tino was super strong, but Arnold was super-*duper* strong. Super Tino attacked with superhuman speed, a rate comparable to Liz’s, but Arnold blocked each hit.

According to Liz, Super Tino’s defeat was because of her technique, or lack thereof. The mask had unleashed the strength within her, but her technical knowledge couldn’t keep up. Super Tino was super fast, but not as fast as Arnold’s super lightning. Even still, Tino’s super impressive latent powers were enough to prevent his lightning from leaving any lasting injuries.

It wasn’t a close battle, though you could still say she fought well, considering she had been up against a genuine Level 7. Even if she lost, she still bought time, which meant victory for Liz and Sitri.

Liz dismantled the roving ogre and Sitri knocked out Arnold’s friends with some suspicious potion. Liz then hurled a dismembered part of the ogre at Arnold, we grabbed the unconscious Tino, got in the carriage, and booked it out of there. Nobody chased after us.

The last thing I saw was Arnold fighting off the roving ogre after it regenerated and attacked the unconscious hunters. I felt a bit bad for them, but they attacked first and I figured they would manage somehow. Chloe shouted something at me that I pretended not to hear. I was on vacation, I didn’t want to hear about named quests and whatnot. We then headed towards my initial destination, Night Palace.

Tino remained silent after hearing my explanation.

“I’m sorry, Master. I failed,” she mumbled.

“Don’t worry about it, Tino. Failure’s a part of getting stronger,” I told her. “Even Grieving Souls have had their share of defeat. Even Liz got stronger through failure.”

“Lizzy did?!”

Liz bashfully elbowed me as though telling me to cut it out.

My childhood friends were extremely talented, but they weren’t infallible. I didn’t share that talent, so I didn’t bother, but I watched over every bit of effort, every defeat, and every victory my friends had. Unyielding effort and an iron will were the keys to getting stronger. The path my friends had once walked was no doubt the same path Tino was walking.

“You’ve gotten really strong, Tino. It’s not all about wins and losses. I’m sure that one day you’ll become a superb hunter.”

I was surprised to see just how powerful she had become when she put on Evolve Greed. I could only recall a few other Relics in my collection capable of something so impressive.

But I couldn’t imagine the mask drawing so much power from anyone. A Relic’s compatibility could vary from person to person, and Evolve Greed seemed like a perfect match with Tino. I hoped she’d wear the mask again so I could test it out a bit.

I found my thoughts interrupted by Tino.

“Will I be able to join Grieving Souls one day?” she asked, lying still.

I answered immediately as I stroked her hair.

“Of course.”

Liz and Sitri were both smiling.

I was certain that as long as she continued to hope for it, her dream would certainly come true. Hope was integral to becoming an excellent hunter.



Tino's cheeks took on a faint red hue and, as though trying to cover up her embarrassment, she changed the subject.

"Oh, Master, have you ever lost a battle?"

A mellow smile formed on my lips.

"Nope."

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To Chloe Welter, the scenery before her was both difficult to believe yet also gave credence to many rumors she had heard.

The Thousand Tricks developed hunters' talents. He used his vast intellect to determine their specialties and then used near precognitive schemes to guide them into his Trials. The result was First Steps and Grieving Souls.

Developing talent in people wasn't easy. Humans all had their own personalities and discrepancies. More importantly, they all had their own natural talents. It was absurd to think someone might be able to take into account so many factors, most of which weren't immediately obvious, and show someone down the right path.

However, that Level 4 hunter, Tino Shade, made it seem believable. Even if she lost, it should have been impossible for a Level 4 to even put up a fight against a Dragon Slayer. It wasn't a matter of technique or whatnot, the difference in mana material was simply too vast.

Yet the Thousand Tricks somehow made it happen. There was, of course, the power of that mask and Tino's own talents, but even still, what he did was ingenious. It was all calculated, all done in the name of growth. Looking at it from a distance, it was all proceeding smoothly.

They had just survived two major battles, the likes of which were rarely experienced. For Scorching Whirlwind, and Chloe as well, those were valuable experiences. They saved a town and took down a monster that likely had a bounty on its head. The roving ogre had also been a notable adversary. The ogre's death probably wouldn't bring more people to the Galest mountains. However, the esteem that came with it would be a boon for Falling Fog as they

were still new to the imperial capital.

And what benefit was there for the Thousand Tricks? Needless to say, it was the development of Tino Shade. She had the potential to one day join Grieving Souls and Falling Fog had been used to aid her growth.

They had been dancing to his tune. He exerted immense power and ignored all the rules. It was self-righteous behavior, but there was no way to resist nor was there any reason to. This was what you could expect from someone of a level obtained by only three people in the capital. What a scheme it was.

To Chloe, the hapless smile of the Thousand Tricks had become something terrifying.

Standing next to the ashes of the roving ogre, Arnold and Eigh were having a conversation.

“I’m really sorry, Arnold,” Eigh said.

“Hmph, don’t worry. We can just catch them again.”

Even after fighting the Thousand Tricks, Arnold’s anger had yet to subside. It was only natural; Arnold hadn’t gotten his closure. He might have been satisfied if he had been given even a glimpse of the Thousand Tricks’s strength, but he didn’t even get that. As a champion, he had to push forward, even if he had his doubts.

It was rare for a clash between two high-level hunters to result in so little bloodshed. Naturally, hunters were careful to avoid any casualties, but nobody was even wounded in this fight, including those knocked out by Sitri’s potion.

All this meant that the Thousand Tricks’s “vacation” wasn’t over yet.

“Ah, they went and destroyed the damn carriage,” Eigh said with a click of his tongue.

The carriage had been crushed when Liz hurled the roving ogre at it. The horses had been killed as well. It seemed she had been trying to deprive them of a means of escape. It was all terribly unfortunate for them, but they could at least consider it fortunate that nobody had been pummeled by the monster.

“We’ll rest for the evening and then head out on foot,” Arnold said. “Once

we've got a carriage, we'll go after them. Chloe Welter, I take it you have no objections?"

Before leaving, Krai had left them with a few parting words: "Sorry, I don't have time for this, I've got to go meet up with my friends."

"We head for Night Palace," Arnold declared.

"That's fine by me. Entering the dungeon may prove an issue for me, but I have orders to deliver this quest brief," Chloe responded.

Arnold furrowed his brow as he looked at the young woman. Chloe found herself wondering what the Crashing Lightning would do once he realized what the Thousand Tricks was after, but she pushed the thought from her head. Arnold Hail was a proud man; still, she had also seen he was capable of thinking things through. By now, he should have noticed something was off. But even if he had, his only choice was to press onward.

Arnold was already caught up in the Thousand Tricks's trap. Escaping would require him to cast off something important to all hunters. Only someone less valiant might consider it an easy choice.

Arnold started giving out orders and their camp began to take shape. Chloe smiled, it made her think back to when she used to aspire to be a hunter. However, as an employee of the Explorers' Association, all she could do was pray for good luck.

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Amid pounding rain, we headed for Night Palace. Sitri lowered her binoculars and looked at me with a troubled expression.

"Oh, it looks like they aren't there anymore," she said. "I don't see a carriage. We must have missed them."

"You're kidding me."

They had gone to the dungeon for the sake of Luke's training. Once Luke was able to beat the boss in a one-on-one, they would head straight home. That was the sort of passionate and stoic man Luke was.

*So he managed to solo the boss of a Level 8 treasure vault in such a short*

*time? Well done.*

I thought it a shame that we had missed them, but there wasn't much we could do about it. After spending days surviving storms, commotions, Arnold, and whatever else, a disappointing reality awaited us.

"Well, that's that. Let's continue as planned, we'll take it easy at a hot spring and then head home."

I sighed deeply and stood up so I could talk to Black, White, and Gray.

## Interlude: Vacation

It all began with two bandits in an impoverished country at the fringes of the continent. They had no weapons, no capital, not even food to eat. All they had was their might and intelligence. One of them was strong, the other clever. And that was worth a fortune.

By absorbing other bandit squads into their own and acquiring patrons, they expanded rapidly. They broke free of their tiny homeland and spread across the continent, plundering wherever they pleased. Their strength saved them from defeat, their cleverness saved them from incarceration.

Their bandit squad's symbol was the first thing they ever stole: a barrel, the type used to store alcohol.

Bandit Squad Barrel. What had started as just two people had become a menace feared throughout the land. They had three iron mandates: confrontations are to be avoided, success is to be expected, and quality is to be maintained.

Therefore, with the information obtained from ninjas infiltrating the Gladis Earldom, Geffroy Barrel, chief of Bandit Squad Barrel, knew exactly what to do.

"The time is nigh. There's no point in confronting a Level 8 hunter."

They didn't fight anyone formidable, so they never lost.

They always made thorough preparations, so they never panicked.

They followed the ley lines as they traveled and always trained hard, so they were strong.

At the chief's command, his subordinates all moved in perfect sync. They were confident, almost like an army.

## Side Story: Tino Shade's First Steps

To those of us in Grieving Souls, Tino Shade was somewhat special.

We first arrived in the capital when we were around fifteen years old. You see, that was the age at which we were considered adults. We decided that should mark the beginning of our careers as hunters.

However, in the holy land of treasure hunting, there were plenty of hunters yet to reach adulthood. It was part of the capital's culture. There were people who had been raised for treasure hunting and began training before we even dreamed of it. We had trained for just a bit in our hometown before coming to the capital. When we arrived we found we had rivals both older and younger than us.

At first, we barely had enough breathing room to spare a thought for anyone but ourselves. Everyone else in our party was desperately trying to get stronger and I was struggling more than ever to avoid mortal peril.

Tino was the first young hunter to make our acquaintance. I don't remember our first meeting very well, but I think we rescued her from some unwanted challengers. Back then, Liz and the others were always quick to resort to violence, so they were always getting involved in scuffles.

Initially, Tino was just an acquaintance we'd run into on occasion. We would sometimes bump into her after our adventures and sometimes we'd tell her tales of our escapades. I remember being surprised when she suddenly declared she wanted to become a hunter.

I tried to stop her. I tried really hard to stop her. To me, she represented normalcy. But her mind was set. So she asked me how to become an excellent hunter.

Let me be frank. I didn't think for a minute that she had what it took to flourish as a hunter. But I had a responsibility. Just like we had been inspired by stories told by hunters passing through our hometown, she had been inspired

by us. It was our *fault* she wanted to become a hunter.

I made Tino into Liz's apprentice so she would get stronger, so Liz might develop some social skills, and hopefully to make Tino give up before she got herself killed. There's nothing harder than trying to be a hunter when you aren't cut out for it. Liz clearly wasn't the teaching type. She only knew how to get stronger by constantly being the first to shrug off her wounds and leap into danger.

You might think it cold of me, but I expected Tino to throw in the towel immediately. Instead, she survived Liz's brutal training. She quickly outpaced me and became an active solo hunter.

At some point, I gave up on convincing Tino to quit. If I was going to stick to being a hunter despite my incompetence, it wouldn't make any sense if I tried to convince someone with talent to resign.

Sitting in the carriage, I realized how long ago that was. Five years had gone by faster than Liz could hurl a stone, but it all felt so distant.

As we rode along, I looked at the peaceful face of my sleeping junior hunter.

"You've really gotten strong, Tino," I whispered. "I can't believe you used to be Small Tino."

The mask no doubt enabled her to take on Arnold, but her strength still made a difference; I couldn't have fought Arnold, even with the mask.

Then Sitri said something quite unexpected.

"Indeed. Hmm, however, if that's as far as she can get in spite of all your training, I can't help but think she might be better off quitting."

"Huh?"

Her head still in my lap, Tino twitched.

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*She's right, Master,* Tino thought as she pretended to sleep.

It was an early memory, one she didn't care to remember. It was back when she was still Small Tino.

"Huh? You want me to train Tino? But, Krai Baby, you know I don't know anything about, um, restraint?" Liz said.

Tino adored her master (though at the time, they had only just established their clan so he wasn't called Master back then). He has saved her dozens of times and his name always came to mind when asked if she looked up to any hunters. She took every chance she could to tell people about him and she wanted to see him every day.

He was god, but a fierce and demanding god. At the time, Lizzy hadn't been excited at the thought of receiving an apprentice. At the time, Tino was still being held back by the nervousness and expectations that came with entering a new world.

"No need to hold back," Master said with his usual harmless smile. "Tino's determination is genuine. Just make sure she doesn't die."

"I'm not really qualified to be teaching people, y'know?"

"I think there's lots to be gained through teaching."

"Hmmm. But I think she really might die if I don't hold back. Like, Tino doesn't even have that much mana material."

Tino used to picture treasure hunters as being both fun yet strict and her experiences had generally agreed with this notion. But her master took only a day to obliterate those naiveties.

"Well, then why not just train her in treasure vaults? That way she can also absorb mana material," he said as though he had just hit upon something brilliant.

"That's brilliant..."

In retrospect, Tino was certain that Lizzy was mildly shocked when she said that. She also realized that was only the beginning of her days packed with both struggles and joys.

Master was god; he did not belong to the likes of mankind. No man could fathom the heart of god. Since being put under Lizzy's tutelage, Tino always felt like she might die at any moment. Hunters were built differently than normal

human beings. Liz's teaching methods were a tad off-kilter but Tino would take a while to realize this.

She never had the spare time to think, begrudge, or have regrets. It was a miracle that she had survived her sparring sessions. Grieving Souls had a superb healer by the name of Ansem, so they considered any wound or injury to be just another thing in need of mending. In fact, some of them found it convenient that more injuries provided Ansem more chances to practice his skills.

Every day, her master would say in a kind voice: "Treasure hunting isn't all fun and games. There are safer and more pleasant paths open to you. Feel free to quit this whenever you want."

Surely, he had said that out of pity. If she had given in to temptation and nodded, she would probably be living peacefully, not as a hunter.

With all that said, she just wanted one thing: for her master to not be so hard on her.

Keeping her eyes shut tight, Tino listened to Siddy and her master.

"Huh? Did I do something?" he said.

Siddy remained silent.

"No, no, it's Liz who's been training her. I haven't done anything!"

Lizzy's training had been brutal, but Tino believed her mentor had at least been taking steps to ensure she wouldn't die. It wasn't fun, not by any stretch of the imagination, and that didn't change with time. Even still, Tino was grateful to her mentor and never once resented her. Probably.

As an average person who hadn't been very active, Lizzy's training was transformational for Tino. The mana material she absorbed and her training gave her a body optimal for a Thief. She also had all the essential knowledge drilled into her head. Any mistakes during practical training would invite more pain and bruises.

Day and night, she was dedicated to becoming a hunter. Sometimes Lizzy

wasn't around, but that just meant Tino would practice on her own those days. Playing hooky was unthinkable.

After half of a year, that changed.

One day, after finishing her training, her master came to talk to her. He always did this.

"Huh? You don't take breaks, Tino?" he said. "That won't do. Training hard is good, but it's also important to take it easy. It's a matter of having both highs and lows. You should rest at least once a week."

Tino could distinctly recall the confusion she felt when he said that. How could she become a good hunter by taking breaks?

Looking back, the endless training had nearly broken her. By going so far, she had shown her master how resolute she was, which simply ushered in another phase of her training. Now, real combat was mixed into her regiment. This wasn't training that involved real combat, it was plain and simple combat.

If she had started as Small Tino, she had now ascended to Medium Tino. She would spend less time training, but she didn't anticipate her days becoming any easier. Her master probably just saw diminishing returns after training so many hours a day.

He had said it was also important to take it easy and he lived up to that by adding color to her gray life. Indeed, color. He clearly had good intentions, but any outside observer would see it as mean-spirited.

Hope is what deepens despair. Tension can be noticed because we know what it is to relax. The color added to Tino's life both soothed her body and soul while also teaching her what's necessary to being a hunter. Her master loved to get people's hopes up before crushing them. It was probably his way of helping them grow. Tino didn't mind if he raised her hopes to the sky, but that wasn't the way of god.

It happened on her first day off, an unforgettable day. She didn't know what to do with her first break in so long, but her master invited her out for sweets. Feeling like she was in a dream, she went along with him. Then she was kidnapped.

Tino later learned that the culprit was a fearsome criminal who had been raising hell all across the capital. She had been devoted to her training, but only for six months, and she wasn't even an adult yet; she had no hope of winning against a pro. If Siddy hadn't trailed them, something terrible might have happened to Tino.

Sure, she was wrong to let her guard down, she should have been on alert, but who would anticipate being kidnapped during a date? However, that was only the prelude of her long journey to greatness. Medium Tino learned the important lesson that complacency kills.

Lizzy had told her this any number of times during training, but true wariness can only be learned through experience. Tino would find herself attacked, ambushed, and poisoned. Of course, sometimes nothing at all happened. This is what her master meant by the importance of "highs and lows" and he made his point perfectly.

When it comes to memories, quality trumps quantity. Most traumas will disappear; humans wouldn't be able to survive otherwise. However, fun memories aren't so quick to fade because they can motivate humans to overcome hardship. Thus, Tino continued to accept just about any invitation she received from her master. She held on to the hope that a fond memory would be made.

Lizzy, by the way, apparently believed that even struggles and hardships would become good memories once you got used to them. Tino didn't care to find out if that was true.

"Tino's a good student, she's obedient, and there wasn't much I could teach her."

"Well, Krai, that's true."

Siddy had overcome her exasperation and was simply agreeing with Krai. She was currying favor with him. If Lizzy were present, she might've said something but she was standing guard outside.

However, her master was right, in a sense. He hadn't taught Tino very much. He wasn't the type to instruct with words, but instead make his points through

actions.

Tino naturally became stronger from her hellish training and fierce battles. By this point, the name Grieving Souls had become well-known. Being their disciple incited other hunters her age to pick fights with her, but she never lost. Without noticing it, she had become stronger than any other hunter her age. It made sense; who else had been tempered by god?

Tino ended up becoming a bit full of herself. All that training had made it pleasant to utilize her strength. It wasn't talent but layers of effort that brought her to this point so she couldn't help but develop an ego. She wasn't going to compare herself to her master and her mentor as they were both far beyond her.

Then one day, her master had a proposal for her.

"Would you come with us to the next treasure vault?"

This had never happened before. At the time, her master had been quickly clearing higher and higher-level vaults. Uncertain, Tino asked him why she was being invited.

"You've gotten stronger, I think it might be time for you to join us," he said.

How sweet those words sounded. Tino agreed, not that she ever had a choice in the first place.

As she expected, she was put through hell. The treasure vault was one capable of giving even Grieving Souls a run for their money. There was nothing Tino could do. The other hunters were busy fighting and didn't plan on protecting her. She ended up devoting all her energy to running around like a cockroach.

Thanks to this experience, Tino learned just how powerless she still was and that there was no meaning in comparing herself to weaker hunters. But even Tino couldn't stop herself from complaining after this ordeal. Her master seemed deeply apologetic.

"Sorry, I was certain you would be able to handle that treasure vault. I guess I miscalculated," he said.

Her master was a god, and he was a fierce one.

“But I was really off the mark this time,” Krai said meaningfully. “I thought of her as being a fledgling, but she’s really a proper hunter.”

Tino somehow found herself a bit embarrassed by this.

“Well, she is an adult now. But don’t think you can lay a hand on her, she’s mine.”

Tino only just barely fought back the urge to speak up and object to belonging to Siddy.

She wasn’t really interested in Tino, her sights were on Krai. She wasn’t worried about Tino being taken, she was worried about Tino taking Krai. But that was a minor difference as far as Siddy was concerned. She was wary of Tino, and Siddy was not someone you wanted as an enemy.

She was put through all sorts of trouble and it only became worse after she began delving into treasure vaults.

She had been poisoned, struck by lightning, set ablaze, and had her limbs cut off. Tino learned the durability of the human body. She learned how to resist pain and overcome fear. She became Grand Tino. Her master might have still seen her as Medium Tino, or maybe he even still saw her as Small Tino, but she wanted to believe she was now Grand Tino.

Her training was still strenuous and she still had close brushes with death, but now she knew that wasn’t enough. To join Grieving Souls, she couldn’t just satisfy her training regiment, she had to advance. She had put herself in peril. She was certain, the key difference between her and Lizzy was the number of gauntlets they had survived. Her master, the god that he was, had given Tino Trials to overcome. But Lizzy walked alongside that god.

Tino had to think. Evolve Greed hadn’t just given her a temporary boost, it showed her what was possible for her. Super Tino was the future that awaited her. Super Tino would be the fruit of her efforts. This meant that her effort and determination still weren’t enough. How deep the world of treasure hunting

was!

When Tino first decided to become a hunter, she only felt a faint admiration for the profession. Even after all the trials and tribulations she had been through, that admiration hadn't faded one bit.

One day, she would be the best hunter. Then she would walk alongside her master as an equal. She would do anything to achieve that goal. She couldn't let herself falter.

By the way, what did "Small Tino" and "Super Tino" and those other names even mean?

Tino fortified her resolve as she continued to feign sleep. She felt a hand brush against her hair, making her heart skip a beat. Then her master said something alarming.

"Oh, maybe it's time she learned the Stifled Shadow? She might be able to win against Arnold if she used that."

Tino froze. The Stifled Shadow was the name of a combat technique created by a famous Thief. It let one move so fast as to not even leave a shadow behind. The trade-off was that it was difficult and risky. Very few people knew it.

Lizzy held the title of the same name because she'd learned the technique from her mentor. The Stifled Shadow was such a difficult move that just learning it warranted a title. But it was also a move in which failure resulted in a ruptured heart. Overuse could also result in death.

"She could die," Siddy said after a brief silence.

"You're exaggerating. Tino should be fine. She might be in danger if something like this happens again. And, uh, maybe Ansem could manage something if we keep him nearby?"

*Master, that's too much, Tino thought. That's absurd. Even Ansem can't heal a ruptured heart.*

Oblivious to Tino's silent terror, Siddy clapped her hands.

"Very well. If you think it's fine, I suppose we can give it a shot. Don't worry, it

might be a shame to lose her, but I won't let T's death be for nothing."

*Siddy, please try a bit harder.*

Resigned to her fate, Tino opened her eyes and slowly sat up.

# Afterword

Thank you very much for taking the time to read my work. It's Tsukikage, and I'm very glad to meet you all again for volume four. At this point, I've run out of things to talk about in the afterword. I had an excess of pages so I wrote a little short story at the end. By doing this, I get to both fill up the afterword and write a short story. Am I...on fire?

Well then, with this volume being what it is, it's hard to say too much, but this was the first half of the vacation arc. This will be a special set containing a joyful Krai, Liz, and Sitri; Tino at her wit's end in spite of her best efforts; an energetic Killiam and Drink; and Arnold in a mad frenzy. There will be new characters but it'll be a bit chaotic.

It's probably a bit late to say this, but this volume was mostly to set the stage for the following one. Plans for the next volume include finally meeting more members of Grieving Souls and Tino taking a dip in a hot spring. I hope to see you all then!

(Sorry if I can't finish the next volume.)

I feel like I say this every volume, but the illustrations were wonderful! Chyko's versatility is already plenty apparent, but I'm also constantly impressed by the range of my editor's talents. For those who bought a physical copy, if you remove the obi along the bottom of the book, you can spy a sorry-looking Tino, so please remove it. Do it for Grand Tino.

Regarding the contents, we had a variety of monsters appear this time, such as Killiam and Drink. Maybe I should add more girls to this series? Well, the next volume will have chaos at a hot spring so that will make up for this volume. Of course, the ever-adorable Lizzy was in this volume! Look forward to that, those of you who start a book at the afterword!

In other news, a manga adaptation has been ongoing, volume one came out October 26, 2019. Hebino Rai's talents have done wonders for the cool, cute,

and cruel moments of this series! Tino's very hippity-hoppity, Krai's very slovenly. Please give it a look if you haven't already!

As always, I'd like to round things off with some thanks.

I'd like to show my deep gratitude to Chyko for providing excellent illustrations for both this volume and the previous ones. I can't thank you enough for drawing my vague requests like "I'd like to have Super Tino in the volume" and my absurd requests like "Can we have Killiam riding Drink?" Next volume will (probably) have a hot springs dragon. I look forward to continuing working with you.

Next, I'd like to thank my editor Kawaguchi along with everyone at the editing department of GC Novels and everyone else involved in the publication of this book. Once again, you've all done so much for me. Your continued dedication to fulfilling my requests regarding the cover illustrations makes you the best out there. Thank you very much, I hope we can continue working together. Please make sure to get enough sleep.

And, finally, I'd like to offer my deepest thanks to all the readers who have supported me thus far.

Thank you very much!

PS: As with the last volume, following the QR code on the acknowledgments page will lead you to a survey, which has a side story waiting for anyone who answers it. Please take a look!

[Note: Said QR code and survey are unavailable in the English edition.]

Tsukikage, December 2019

## Afterword Short Story: Hang in There, Siddy!

I folded my arms and groaned as I watched Sitri whip up a meal in the kitchen.

“What does Sitri like?” I wondered aloud.

“Hm? What’s this?” Liz asked.

“I was just thinking how amazing Sitri is.”

Sitri was amazing. She had her act together. I had just piled extra work on her, and this was hardly the first time. Sitri’s alchemical talents kept her busy with requests from all sorts, yet she didn’t show the slightest displeasure when I suddenly invited her to go on a vacation.

She even prepared our luggage and brought along Black, White, and Gray. Eva secured us a carriage, but I was sure Sitri could’ve done it if I had asked her instead. She also did most of the work setting up our camps, she had a hideaway in Elan, and another one here, in Gula. In the carriage, she had comforted Tino when she secluded herself. I was constantly finding myself indebted to her.

Now, I was letting her prepare dinner for us. I heard her knife chopping with what sounded like a cheerful rhythm. We had been friends for a long time, therefore I had been used to relying on her for a long time. Still, even I had second thoughts about letting her go this far out of her way for me.

“Mmm, Siddy’s always been good at using her brain. Lately, she’s been worrying a bit much about this and that. She’s the ideal candidate for too many jobs,” Liz said as she swung her legs back and forth on the couch.

She was strong and dexterous, but she didn’t work unless she had to. Tino, meanwhile, seemed quite sad after being chased out of the kitchen when she tried to help.

“Siddy’s incredible. I wish she would share some of her secrets with me,” she said.

“I just want to give her an overdue thanks,” I said.

We were friends, but that didn’t mean I could take her for granted. No matter how capable she was, I still felt pathetic relying on her so much.

“Eh, you don’t need to do that, Krai Baby. Siddy does these things because she likes to. I bet cooking a meal for you is a sort of reward as far as she’s concerned. I offered to make something, but she booted me from the kitchen.”

I wondered what kind of reward cooking duty was supposed to be. But Liz had a point, Sitri did look like she was enjoying herself and she always seemed overjoyed when I told her that her cooking was good. And I wasn’t flattering her —it was genuinely good.

Sitri Smart was a well-rounded person. There was nothing I could do that she couldn’t and she usually did it better. Most of the time, there wasn’t even anything I could do to help, I would just get in the way. So what if I just gave her a gift?

“Is there anything Sitri wants?” I asked.

“Mmmm,” Liz pondered. “Krai Baby?”

“What?”

I looked at Liz. For some reason, she had called my name. She blinked and shook her head.

“Never mind. I think Siddy would be happy to get anything from you.”

That seemed true, but that was the issue: she was too considerate towards me. I started to loathe myself when I realized that, in spite of our decade-long friendship, I didn’t know what to get Sitri for a gift.

“She probably doesn’t really want any accessories,” I said.

She was orderly and attractive, but she didn’t seem to concern herself with fashion very much. She was a researcher and a merchant, what she prized was efficiency.

As I mulled it over, Liz looked at me with wide eyes. Her contemplative expression faded as she pulled herself up and crawled towards me.

"Ah, you're right, she wouldn't go for something like that. So why not give it to me? I know I'd be reeeeally happy."

Like Sitri, Liz would be happy to receive a gift of any sort. I could probably count how many times she had ever shown me any looks of displeasure.

Liz enjoyed shopping and would sometimes even drag me along with her. I could safely assume she'd be happy to receive an accessory, but I couldn't be so sure about Sitri. I then heard a loud crash from the kitchen. I wondered what Sitri was making.

"Umm, Master," Tino said while glancing towards the source of the sound. "Don't you, well, owe Siddy a lot of money?"

"Urgh."

She was right. I had totally forgotten about my debt. How arrogant would it be to give a gift to someone you owed money to? Besides, Sitri was rich. She could buy herself anything I might be able to give her. She would probably say the sentiment pleased her, but I wasn't so sure I'd believe her.

"I guess presents are a no-go, then. But I can't think of anything I could do for her."

The orderly sounds from the kitchen were replaced by banging and rattling.

Liz stretched out her arms and leaned into me.

"Here, how about you rub my belly?" she said in a saccharine voice. "Give it a try."

Apparently, she remembered her past life as a wolf. Tino's cheeks flushed.

Back then, I was young, and—I mean, that wasn't the sort of thing I'd do to my childhood friend. Instead, I stroked her hair.

"For now, I'll think about what I can do for Sitri. I can't imagine she'd want her belly rubbed."

Unlike Liz, Sitri always wore a thick robe. Even when she didn't have the robe on, she still conducted herself like a proper lady. She would never want her belly rubbed. She might think less of me if I tried.

"Yeah, Siddy probably wouldn't be a fan. She's strict about things like skinship and all that. C'mon, since she's all stuffy, why not play with me instead?"

"I can't do that," I said. "If Sitri doesn't like sweets, taking her to a confectionary won't do us any good."

We were in a town famous for its chocolates so I wanted to try some, but there was no point in taking Sitri along if she didn't enjoy those sorts of things. She was always grinning, but that just made it hard to discern what actually made her happy.

"Hmm, I'm not getting anywhere."

I heard something that sounded like a knife hitting something. Maybe Sitri was cutting something hard?

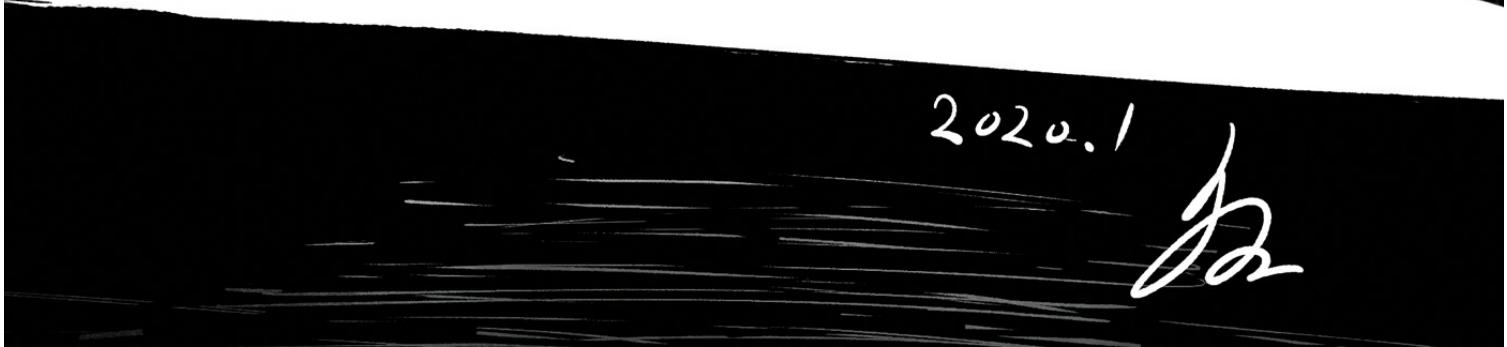
Quivering, Tino looked at me with upturned eyes.

"M-Master, do you have something against Siddy?" she asked me.



Sleepy  
Kris

2020.1



JR



# Bonus Short Story

## The Relic Collection of Thousand Tricks

Even compared to other Relics, those that can be used as powerful weapons were especially coveted by treasure hunters.

A hunter could only handle so many Relics at once. They could be heavy, difficult to operate, and, most of all, they needed to be charged with mana. The greater a Relic's power, the more mana it required. Therefore, most treasure hunters looked for Relics that could be used as a trump card. Most often, weapon-type Relics were chosen to fulfill that role.

Weapon-type Relics weren't a rare find in treasure vaults; some statistics suggested they accounted for a third of all recovered Relics. Not that I could say this with certainty, but I supposed it spoke to the violent nature of human history if weapons made up such a large portion of the traces left behind by previous civilizations.

Nonetheless, it would be incorrect to suggest that every weapon-type Relic was a powerful one. Most Relics had powers with no clear purpose and were fittingly called "scrap Relics." Just like any other type, the majority of weapon-type Relics had impractical effects and only a small handful could do something that might be useful to a hunter.

Therefore, any hunter lucky enough to obtain a Relic that matched their strengths and ideals protected it like their life depends on it. Weapon-type Relics sometimes came to symbolize the champion who wielded it. Perhaps the reason I stubbornly continued to collect weapons I couldn't use was because I was clinging to the hope that I might find the Relic that turned me into a champion.

Today I'll be introducing weapon-type Relics, just like those that so many hunters have become enamored with. However, "weapon-type" is a broad term encompassing all sorts, so for now, I'll limit myself to swords. Don't worry,

sword-type Relics come with all sorts of different powers. I'm sure you'll all be duly impressed.

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Now then, with sword Relics—actually, this applies to all weapon-type Relics—a basic level of competency was required from the wielder. This was true of normal weapons as well, but Relics were far more powerful and therefore posed a much greater risk when misused. This was why I rarely used this sort of Relic. It wasn't just me; very few hunters tried to master multiple weapon-type Relics. They were just that dangerous.

For instance, there was this flame-like, crimson two-handed sword. This was the Purgatorial Sword, entrusted to me by a certain intermediate hunter. This sword was capable of manipulating fire. It could envelop its blade with flames, which could be controlled to a certain degree. When it came to sword-type Relics, elemental powers were very popular.

It might have already been fairly apparent, but these weapons were extremely dangerous. It was already hard enough to stay conscious of where you were pointing a normal blade, but with this you also had to watch out for the accompanying flames and the state of your surroundings.

Elemental effects might not have been the most interesting out there, but they were very useful. Most Swordsmen couldn't use magic, but an elemental weapon would open up new ways for them to go on the attack.

With the Purgatorial Sword, flames could be used to burn through monsters with a high physical resistance. It was pretty hard to pull off, but you could even launch the flames like a projectile and turn enemies into ash before they reached you. With enough heat, you could even melt your opponent's sword. Of course, this all required a fair amount of mana.

Gilbert must have been an extremely lucky boy if he found a weapon like this on his first trip. Ideally, it would have been even better if this sword had an element like ice or lightning—something less likely to cause unintended collateral damage. But that was just me being greedy.

Did you know that our modern civilization had actually managed to recreate these sorts of elemental weapons? However, their power was lacking compared

to Relics and they were often very brittle, so they weren't yet ready for actual combat. The only exception were weapons made from the parts of slain mythical beings, but those couldn't be mass-produced and were even more fickle than Relics.

Being a product of coalesced mana material, it was impossible to analyze the components of Relics. Supposedly, these items had been made without mana material long ago, but nobody had found a metal capable of recreating the capabilities of Relics. I guess modern technology still had a way to go before it caught up with that of ages past.

By the way, the most popular elements were ice, which could slow a target's movements, and lightning, which was extremely effective in fights where both sides were using metal weapons. The least popular element was water.

Weapons with a water element could shoot streams of water, but that had almost no practical value in combat. It was very rare to find a Relic that could shoot water at a high enough velocity to inflict any sort of damage, so water-aspected weapons sold for very low prices. In an emergency, you could use one of these Relics to slake your thirst, but most hunters were careful to avoid those situations in the first place.

Now then, onto the next Relic I'd like to introduce: the straight sword, Silent Air. Its fine, transparent blade made it a visually pleasing Relic. The blade was roughly a meter long.

It might have looked like a piece of art at first glance, but as I held it in my hands, it was clear that this was no ordinary sword. This sword had no weight—indeed, it weighed absolutely nothing and it could also negate the weight of an opponent's weapon.

This was quite a rare ability among sword-type Relics, but just how useful was it?

I got this Relic at an auction where it fetched a high price. But all those collectors bidding on Silent Air were drawn to it for its beauty. Its strength remained uncertain.

Was weightlessness actually a merit? Sure, it was handy for a wimp like me,

but most hunters and Swordsmen wouldn't have any trouble swinging around your usual meter-long blade. If they did have trouble, they might have been better off finding a different class.

So what about making an opponent's sword weightless? Was that worth anything?

I would answer in the negative. It was pretty rare for two Swordsmen to lock blades, and this Relic could only take the *weight* from a weapon—it couldn't nullify the pressure exerted by its wielder. As I said earlier, the weight of a sword like this made little difference to most hunters. An effect like this was probably better than nothing, but calling it useful would have been going too far. An elemental weapon would have been far better.

This might have been a powerful effect if it could neutralize any pressure exerted by an opponent, but such useful Relics rarely went up for auction. Maybe the opposite effect, increasing the weight of a weapon, would have been handy, but sadly this weapon couldn't do anything of the sort. You couldn't even make a weapon slightly lighter, only remove its weight entirely. But I'm just rambling.

However, though this weapon might have seemed useless, some clever application could turn it into a rather convenient Relic.

It occurred to me while I was testing out Silent Air. I clashed it against another blade and my body felt lighter. This wasn't even a mock battle, just a simple test. I wasn't wearing any armor, just normal clothes, but with my frail body, I noticed a definite change.

After running thorough tests, I was certain: the power of Silent Air could be applied to objects besides swords. With the exception of the wielder's body, this Relic could make just about anything weightless. Not only swords, but armor, shields, and even baggage could be made as light as a feather.

It was a bit finicky, but there was no need to manually activate this Relic. As long as you had it on your body, you could shoulder the heaviest burdens without feeling a thing.

I was delighted when I discovered this. It might not have seemed special to treasure hunters with their superhuman strength, but for us weaklings, a Relic

like this was a blessing. You couldn't apply the effect to items resting on the ground, but that was just fine.

Ever since I'd obtained this Relic, I'd made sure to carry around with me as much as I could. With Silent Air, you could also pretend you had monstrous strength. If you've obtained one of these Relics, make sure to test it out. As a proud owner of one, it would be an honor if the reputation of this sword improved even a bit.

Just remember, you can't reduce air resistance to zero.

Now, I've shown you a popular sort of Relic and an abnormal one, but there were more to sword-type Relics than just those. In all places and eras, swords have been used by humans to vanquish evil. When discussing sword-type Relics, it would be impossible to avoid bringing up Holy Swords and Devil Swords.

Next up, I'll be introducing a sword from each of these categories. They are not, however, part of my personal collection.

First, we have Thousandfold Rage. This was a Demon Sword that was once owned by a bounty target dispatched by Grieving Souls. What an ominous sword it was, its blade colored shades bloodred and an abyssal black.

One swing of that sword could bear the strength of a thousand strikes. Even a champion would struggle to withstand such an attack. That armament was what enabled the bounty target, a man named Zabieli, to go from being a single lowly bandit to the "King of Bandits," with a thousand lackeys at his command. Only a Devil Sword could bring about such a change in a person.

Normally, a sword alone wasn't enough to make a champion; the sword was just what the champion swings. But Thousandfold Rage was a vexatious Relic that bucked that trend. If Zabieli had relied a bit less on his weapon and trained a bit more, he might have become unstoppable.

Even though we toppled its owner, Thousandfold Rage didn't come into our possession. The sword crumbled to dust once Zabieli was defeated. Luke said it was because the sword had accepted defeat, but I had my own thoughts on the matter.

I was certain the weapon had a limited number of strikes and it coincidentally hit that limit at the same moment of its owner's defeat. Powerful Relics frequently had some limit to their usage.

Because they often brought about their owner's ruin like in the case of Zabieli, Devil Swords earned their name.

Moving on to our next item, we come to the opposite end of the spectrum: the Holy Sword. I'm sure even non-hunters will be familiar with the name I'm about to mention. It was the blade once wielded by Ark Rodan's ancestor, Solis Rodan, the grand champion who contributed heavily to the transfer of the imperial capital. That's right, I'm talking about Historia, the Pathcarver, the revered sword-type Relic.

An heirloom of House Rodan, Historia was passed down through the generations to the house's most capable hunters. Currently, the promising young Ark Rodan has been entrusted with Historia.

Someone like me would never even have the chance to lay eyes on such a Relic, but being in the same clan had given me plenty of opportunities. It was a gorgeous white, and anyone could tell by a glance that it was a holy object.

Historia's power was a simple one: it could capture and release energy. When crossing blades, Historia sapped the target's power. This energy could be freely released with destructive force.

The myriad monsters and phantoms of our world were powerless in the face of this blade. Swords and magic posed no threat when this sword was in the hands of an expert like Ark Rodan. The light unleashed by Historia could incinerate wide swaths of land. There were rumors of this blade being used to flatten mountains and part oceans and I didn't doubt it.

The abilities to absorb energy and release were both very powerful on their own. Being capable of both made Historia a top-tier Relic. But Ark didn't rest on his laurels or neglect his training. Such a person couldn't even wield a Holy Sword in the first place. Perhaps that's the difference between Zabieli and Ark, between a Devil Sword and a Holy Sword.

You might be interested to know that Ark recently said there was something

even Historia couldn't cut through: young women who were being manipulated. If the champion said so, then I saw no reason to doubt him.

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Well then, I've gone on long enough. I think we can wrap things up here. After spending so much time talking about the appeal of sword-type Relics, I'd like to finish by bringing up some of their flaws. This would be their narrow attack range and, as I mentioned earlier, that they demanded refined techniques to use effectively.

Compared to a Magi, a sword wielder could only attack a very narrow area. Even the wide-area attacks of an elemental weapon couldn't compare to spells of a high-level Magi, which could be cast from multiple kilometers away.

The best way to handle a talented Swordsman was to keep your distance and rain offensive spells on them, that is, if you *could* keep your distance. Even Historia could only absorb what it directly cut through; a wide-range attack could easily put its user at a disadvantage. Solis Rodan, who vanquished a god, was renowned as a hero because his feats were extraordinary even for someone wielding a mighty weapon.

It hardly needed to be said, but the second fault was that it took a master to bring out a weapon's true potential. Sure, Thousandfold Rage could grant power to even an average person, but a skilled hunter could still outdo them. That Devil Sword caused so much destruction because it ended up in the hands of Zabieli, a fierce bandit.

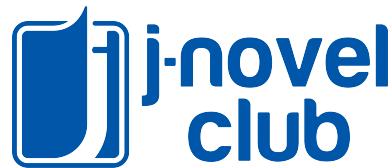
To recall the first point, not only did swords have a limited range, the blade often needed to make contact with a foe to unleash its true power. So I gave up on using sword-type Relics. I still collected them and my pride as a collector compelled me to at least learn how they worked. But I'd never see the day I used one of these Relics to lay waste to hoards of bad guys.

I hope anyone out there aspiring to own a sword-type Relic will take what I've said into consideration as they search for a Relic that suits them. I've already gone on about it, but finding your ideal Relic is something akin to fate. I pray that for both the sake of you and all the swords out there that just once you find a suitable match.









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Let This Grieving Soul Retire! Woe Is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party Volume 4

by Tsukikage

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