

Of all the tengu under my command, Tomiki Hirokazu was my favorite sparring partner. He was not the fastest, or the strongest, or even the most skilled. But when he fought, he fought with everything. He focused on it with such single-mindedness that nothing else existed for him. His world was restricted to himself and his opponent. That it was only a practice bout meant nothing. That he was sparring against his liege meant nothing. There was only the fight itself.

We had been practicing for some time, and I had reached the same state. He cuts at my face and I do not see the sword, do not think about the sword, merely allow myself to move. Step in, turn, redirect his momentum, bring my own blade up to threaten. He steps back and I follow, step in, pivot and execute a floating hip throw. He hits the ground but almost immediately regains his feet. He is too zealous in his counterattack, too impatient. I give way before him, my movements fluid, calm. He cuts, cuts, cuts, and each strike comes closer to me than the last, until I am only inches from the weapon.

Then he overcommits, placing too much weight on his leading foot. I don't consciously observe or react to the mistake, so much as I sense and recognize the movement. He expects me to retreat, as I have been doing, but instead I step into him, moving inside the arc of his cut. My own blade taps against his ribcage and he nods, conceding defeat.

I stepped back, closing my eyes and breathing deeply, giving myself a chance to return to normal. That mental state—perceiving without consciously recognizing what you observe, responding without consciously choosing to act—is the strongest and most efficient attitude to have in combat. But it can be difficult and bewildering to sustain for very long.

Tomiki could enter that state of mind without even seeming to notice the difference. I could only envy him for that. One day, if he developed his skills to match, he would be my superior in a duel. One day. Perhaps then he would challenge me for my mountain, or go and find another place to call his own.

"Kikuchi," a voice called after a few moments, reminding me that I was not alone. "The jarl is here to see you."

I opened my eyes and turned to face them. He was indeed standing there, watching me with an expression of interest. Standing by his side was Matsuda Kimiko, the only kitsune in my service. I had known it was her, simply by her greeting. None of my tengu would have addressed me so casually.

I didn't bother chastising her for it. She might be subdued by the standards of her people, but Matsuda *was* still a kitsune. She'd been raised in a very different culture, where formal courtesies were not only unusual, but typically used as insults. Expecting that not to have an effect on her behavior would be absurd.

"Thank you, Matsuda," I said, sheathing my sword and walking to the side of the field where they were standing. "You may go."

She nodded to me, not deeply enough to call it a bow but enough that the distinction was minor, and then turned and left. The jarl was left standing by himself as I approached.

"Dai-tengu," he said, nodding slightly less deeply than Matsuda had. "I apologize if I interrupted."

"Winter jarl," I said. "We were sparring. You are welcome to join us."

"I would be honored, but I'm short on time at the moment."

Was he being dishonest? I considered the possibility for a moment, but only for a moment. He wasn't the type to lie without a reason; if he didn't want to participate, he would have simply said so.

Unfortunate. I'd seen him fight, and it had been interesting to observe. His style was straightforward, almost brutal in its simplicity. I was curious to see how my techniques would fare against such a radically different approach.

"I understand," I said. "Come, let us sit and you can tell me what you want."

"What makes you think I want anything?" he asked. His tone was hostile, but touched with amusement, as though this was something he'd often had cause to say. Perhaps it was; I would hardly know.

"As you just said, your time is short," I said, sitting on a fallen tree in the shade. I drew a dipper of water from the barrel there and drank some of it, then offered it to the jarl. He sipped at it before returning it to the barrel. "Why else would you have come here at such a time, if not because you want something?"

"That's fair," he said. "But for once, I actually don't. This is more of...I guess you'd call it an offer, really."

"An offer," I repeated. "What manner of offer?"

"Well, look at it like this," he said, with what was probably intended to be a disarming smile. "You know that Sojobo has a major hate on for that woman that was in town back when the territory war was going on last month, right? De Sousa, her name was?"

"I am aware of this," I said cautiously. "I fail to see the relevance."

"She's hunting supernatural things," he said. "So I figured she probably puts most of her effort into hiding from supernatural means of locating her. It only makes sense, right? So then I called in a favor from the Khan, and he talked to some people and got various governments to start looking for her. Nothing official, nothing she'd hear about, just people paying attention to things they otherwise might not have."

"I still don't see the relevance."

He leaned forward, his smile growing wider and more predatory. "I got her," he said quietly. "She's in Singapore, and she's *going* to be there for at least a day. So here in about an hour, I'm going to get together with some other people and we're going to go take her down."

"And you want me to be a part of this group," I said, understanding what he was getting at.

He shrugged. "I at least wanted to make the offer. I figured, you know, Sojobo is basically your boss, right? Or your shogun, or whatever you want to call him. Considering how personal this is for him, I think coming to help would probably be good for your standing with him."

"It would also give you a chance to see me fight," I pointed out. "Possibly allowing you to learn something that you could then use to harm me."

"Yes," he said, not seeming to take offense. "And that goes the other way, too." He sighed and stood up. "Look, dai-tengu," he said. "I'm not saying we have to like each other. I'm not even saying we have to get along with each other. All I'm saying is that at this point, it's looking like we're going to be stuck with each other. And it might be better for everyone involved, or at least more stable, if we can find some way to coexist." He stood up, placing a scrap of paper on the log. "That's where we're meeting up," he said. "Come if you want to."

"Do you truly believe that is possible?" I asked, before he could walk away. "That you and I could coexist in peace, without an enemy to unite us?"

He was silent for a long moment. "I don't know," he said, sounding tired. "If you'd have asked me a few years ago, I'd have said not a chance. That I was too much of a werewolf to share territory, even if we are keeping ourselves separate. Now, well." He shrugged. "I have to hope we can do better, or what's the point?"

I nodded. "You leave in an hour, you said?"

"Yeah."

"Very well," I said, picking up the piece of paper. "I will be there."

I had expected a fairly large group, but when I approached the rendezvous point, the only people I could see waiting for me were the jarl, and the kitsune and the hound who appeared to be his closest advisors. "Is this all?" I asked, looking around curiously.

"The others will meet us there," the jarl said. "Are you ready to head out?"

"Yes. How are we traveling?"

"Otherside portal," he said, not sounding pleased. "Anything else is too slow."

I had expected the jarl to be the one to actually make that portal, but it was the kitsune that began working on it. She was skilled with that style of magic, forming the structure of the portal in only a few minutes.

I watched with interest as she did. I knew the basic concept underlying the technique, but it wasn't one that my people commonly used. It seemed disrespectful to the gods, to abuse the world they had built by exploiting a loophole in such a way.

But it was efficient, and I understood that sometimes it was necessary to put efficiency above aesthetics. So when the kitsune finished her working, I followed the jarl through the portal.

I knew from experience that it wouldn't be pleasant, so I wasn't surprised to lose consciousness. Glancing into the void can be stressful, even when you've spent much of your life trying to embrace it on a philosophical level.

The kitsune and the jarl evidently used this means of travel more often than I, as both of them were already standing before I woke up. The hound wasn't standing, and she appeared more uncomfortable than the other two, but she was also conscious before I was. "The next portal should be open soon," the jarl said as I stood, although I wasn't sure how he knew I was awake. "Reynard's opening it from the other side."

About two minutes later, he nodded with some satisfaction. "There we go," he said, walking towards what seemed like any other patch of air between two massive trees. He disappeared as he passed between them.

I must have been staring, because the kitsune smirked at me as she walked into the same gap. I was watching closely enough this time to see the exact point at which she ceased to be in the same place I was. There was *something* in the air there, a sort of haziness, but nothing like the void I was more accustomed to seeing within portals.

The hound still didn't look happy, but she stood and growled at me until I did the same. Then she began herding me towards what was apparently the next portal, her attitude impatient.

This one was less harsh than the last; I didn't even lose consciousness, so much as briefly drift through a sort of grey in-between state before returning to full awareness.

"Is this the place?" the jarl was asking, somewhere near me. I blinked and the visual came into focus. He was looking at a small building, apparently a garage of some kind, and his stance suggested that he was expecting to be attacked.

"This is it," the person he was talking to agreed. This person looked like a bipedal fox, although he was taller than me. I had seen kitsune take a similar form, but there was something odd about one with only a single tail. I blinked again, shaking my head, but the image refused to resolve into something that made sense.

It took me a moment to recognize that this must be Reynard. The fox was showing his true colors this evening, more openly than before.

The only other person present was Sojobo. My liege was standing at a slight distance, drumming his fingers on the hilt of his sword.

"Is she alone in there?" the jarl asked, looking around.

"Yep," the fox agreed. "Shockingly, the psycho killer doesn't have many friends. I'm about ninety percent sure there's nobody else in there."

"Good," the jarl said, with more satisfaction than I had expected. Had he been harmed by this woman, or did he have some other personal stake in the matter? I didn't remember having heard about something like that, but then, he wasn't the type to have said anything. I hadn't spent much time with the jarl, but I had gotten that impression very clearly.

He started for the door, and was almost immediately stopped by the fox's grip on his shoulder. It looked casual, but from the way the jarl jerked to a stop, that grip must have had less give in it than iron.

"She *does* have plenty of traps," the fox said dryly. "Including some that even I thought were unnecessarily vicious."

"Right," the jarl said, glancing in my direction. He seemed flustered, perhaps chagrined at having been chastised by the fox. "Let's do this smart. I don't want her getting away, which means we want people watching the exits. Dai-tengu Kikuchi, if you would be so kind?"

I regarded him for a moment, then shrugged. It wasn't a bad tactical decision, and of everyone here, I had the least to lose if this went wrong. "I would be honored," I said, drawing my blade. I had only a vague understanding of the threat we were dealing with, but my understanding suggested that I didn't want to take it lightly. If de Sousa tried to escape, I would want to be prepared.

"Good," the jarl said, gesturing slightly for the fox to proceed. The fox did so, entering through the same door that the jarl had attempted to use a moment ago. I wasn't sure if he did something about the traps, or they were further in, but nothing untoward happened when he entered. Sojobo followed a moment later, sword in hand, followed by the jarl and the hound.

I looked again to confirm, but it was as I'd thought: the kitsune was not with them. A quick glance didn't find her outside, either. When I focused on it I could feel the telltale glimmer of kitsune magic, suggesting that she was also watching the door, but didn't want to be seen.

They were using me as the bait, the sentry that our quarry was *supposed* to see. She would not necessarily think to look for the second guard, which meant that she wouldn't necessarily think to hide from more than one. It was a simple tactic, but not a thoughtless one.

I did what I could to help, not looking for the kitsune any further. I might not have any stake in this matter myself, but my liege did, and I wasn't going to have it said that I had done something to interfere with him claiming it.

The next two minutes were quiet. Apparently the fox was able to deal with whatever traps the quarry had set up; as I understood it, she wasn't the type to use a quiet trap, so if they had triggered one, I would have known about it.

Then there was a hint of movement within the garage. I looked closer, and a moment later I saw a human female approaching. She was carrying or wearing a variety of trinkets, all of which felt like magic of one sort or another, but I hardly noticed them. I was more struck by her bearing, her *aura*, than anything.

In my youth, I'd heard stories about a great many monsters. Most of them are fictional, and most of the rest have always been uncommon, so that I never bothered to learn a great deal about them. I couldn't even recall the name of the one I was thinking of at that moment. They were known for possessing people, wearing them like garments. You'd look at one of those people and they would look normal, look like someone you knew, until you saw them from behind and realized that they'd been hollowed out, that they were just a husk.

This was like that, on an entirely different level. Physically, this woman seemed fine. Not only intact, but healthy; as far as I could tell she was entirely fit.

Physically.

But on another level? She was a husk, animated without being meaningfully *alive*. She'd gone so far beyond obsession that it hollowed her, burned out every trace of life or passion or beauty and replaced it all with hate. Even a glance was enough for me to see that.

And then she took another step, moving closer to me, and I realized that she was my friend. It was the strangest sensation; on a mental level I knew that she was a stranger, and I recognized that she was almost certainly the quarry I was here to watch for.

But when I looked at her, or thought of her, I knew that she was my friend. No, more than that; she was my friend on such a profound level and to such an overwhelming extent that all other friendships might as well not exist, in comparison with it.

She took another step forward, moving within reach of me. I saw a delicate silver chain dangling from her fingers, with a large black stone at the end of it. Some part of me recognized it as a deadly weapon, and told me that I should move or do something to counter it. Most of me, however, was incapable of perceiving it as a threat. My friend would not do anything to threaten me.

She flicked her wrist, drawing the stone up into her gloved hand, and then tossed it at me. I watched it come, feeling oddly numb despite knowing that it was about to kill me.

At the last moment, I managed to convince myself that it was a prank. My new friend was pulling a prank on me.

She would be disappointed if I didn't duck. I would be a boring friend if I could be pranked so easily.

I could make my new friend happy by getting out of the way.

In that context, I was able to move. The stone passed by my head, so close that it displaced my feathers with its passing. Then it swung down to dangle, spinning, at the end of its chain.

My friend paused. "Interesting," she said, and I felt an odd warmth in my chest. I had done right. My friend had been pleased; my actions had interested her.

"Don't move," she said, drawing the stone up into her hand again. I watched, and knew on an intellectual level that I was doomed this time. I wouldn't be able to play that kind of mental game again, not when she'd given me an explicit directive.

Except that a moment later, before she could kill me, we both clearly heard the sound of gunfire. Neither of us was hit, but she startled slightly, and a moment later I heard movement within the garage.

"Damn," my friend said, looking over her shoulder. A moment later she began to run away, moving faster than a human could.

It took about ten seconds before that irrational feeling of friendship began to fade. I shook my head, clearing it, and then shouted, "She's out here, getting away," as my mind continued clearing.

The kitsune must have been affected similarly, I thought, or she'd have shot our quarry. As it was, she must have been able to frame what she did as helping the quarry in some way. Warning her that there was someone watching, perhaps.

In any case, this was something that the others needed to know about. So I waited for them rather than running off after the quarry, although it chafed at me to know that she was getting away. Hopefully the kitsune was following her, preventing her from making a clean getaway.

Almost a minute later, the others exited the garage in the same order they had gone in. "She ran that way," I said, indicating. All four of them instantly began moving in the direction I had indicated, and I had to run to keep up. "She's got something that makes you think of her as a friend," I said. "You can't do anything to harm her."

"That won't be a problem," the jarl said. He sounded amused, if bitter.

The hound lead the way as we chased after the quarry. Apparently the incredible speed she'd shown was short-lived, because we caught her up soon, in a dirty alley less than a mile from the garage.

The jarl and the hound stepped into the alley first. The jarl was holding his sword, a weapon which I'd been given to understand was considerably more dangerous than it seemed. Something about

having been made with the intention of killing and destroying things. It seemed to me that was essentially true of all weapons, but I wasn't a swordsmith.

"Hey," he shouted. "De Sousa, right?"

She paused and looked over her shoulder long enough to say, "Stop following me!" I drifted to a stop, unable to disobey, but the jarl and the hound both kept moving. For my part, I made sure that my blade was drawn and waited. I thought I knew what she would try, and I also thought I might know how to respond.

"That's an interesting toy," the jarl said. "Makes people regard you as a friend, right?"

"Yes," the quarry said, slowing. She sounded cautious, and she was watching the jarl carefully. "Why didn't it work on you?"

"Oh, it did," the jarl said cheerfully. "It's just that I've had to kill friends before. It's kind of a given, for a werewolf. You have to learn how to keep that part of your mind separate."

The quarry nodded and then swung the stone at his head, apparently hoping to take him by surprise. If so it failed; his sword was ready, slicing neatly through the chain, and he dodged aside from the stone as it flew away. I didn't see where it went, but my liege did; he was on it almost before it fell, holding it close. My understanding was that it was supposed to kill anyone who touched it, but I wasn't surprised when it did nothing of the sort. My liege was not an easy man to kill.

The jarl cut at the quarry without slowing, and I almost moved to protect her, still trapped by whatever magic was interfering with my perceptions. I managed to restrain the impulse, watching as she leaned away from him. A moment later the fox stepped in the other end of the alley, holding a knife in one hand. His other hand was raised as well, his attitude suggesting that it was armed although I couldn't see anything.

The quarry, disarmed and outnumbered, stepped away and turned to flee. Seeing the fox blocking her path, she paused and then threw something at the ground. I felt no hint of magic to suggest what it was, but a moment later there was a loud noise not unlike an explosion, and a very bright flash of light. The jarl and the hound both reeled away, clearly incapacitated, and the quarry bolted in my direction in the window of opportunity this afforded.

She clearly didn't perceive me as a threat, knowing that I'd been incapable of attacking her before. The jarl and the hound were still staggering, the fox seemed hardly better off, and my liege was occupied with the stone. I hadn't seen the kitsune again, and in any case she'd also been unable to threaten the quarry.

Not so strange, then, that she didn't produce another weapon as she ran, focusing instead on speed. I watched her approach, clearing my mind as she did, so that I felt only a blank detachment. There was still the same feeling that she was my best and only friend, but I made my mind empty so that it was more an afterthought than an important focus of my thoughts.

As the quarry neared me, she inexplicably lost her footing. There didn't seem to be anything obstructing her, but she stumbled over her steps, almost losing her feet entirely. She recovered quickly, but for a single moment she was stumbling, too busy catching her balance to adjust or dodge.

I couldn't choose to attack that moment of weakness. The mental paralysis she induced was too strong. But I could keep my mind empty, allowing my body to act instinctively without consciously deciding to do so.

Honed by endless hours of practice and training, my instinct was as polished and practiced as a dancer's. My blade reached out and licked at her throat, blood blossoming crimson in its wake like the opening of a flower in the spring. I followed the weapon, slipping my hip under hers and sending her to the ground before she could recover her balance.

I felt a surge of shame and grief as I did so. I didn't recognize what I was doing, consciously, until it had already happened, but when I did the shame at having betrayed my friend in such a manner was intense. I stood still, almost paralyzed by the intensity of the feeling.

Then, a moment or two later, it began to fade. Not even magic, it would seem, could make me regard a corpse as my dearest friend.

The jarl reached me a moment later. He regarded the quarry for a moment, then nodded in my direction. "Excellent work, dai-tengu," he said. Then he knelt and carefully removed the quarry's head. I didn't object to this. It was slightly shameful, perhaps, to treat the body of a fallen enemy in such a way, but on this occasion I thought it could be tolerated in the name of expedience. It was best not to take chances with an enemy like that.

About a minute later all of us were standing there, looking at the body of the quarry. "Thank you," my liege said. "To have finally recovered my love is...thank you."

"I am glad to have helped," the jarl said. "I think the rest of what she stole should be returned to the Keepers for safekeeping. Unless anyone objects?"

"Nope," the fox said, sliding one arm under the body. He lifted it easily, as though it weighed no more than a child. "I'll see that they get them."

The jarl was looking at him with a wary expression. "Promptly? And without removing anything?"

"Yes," the fox said, rolling his eyes. "I'll take care of it without doing anything you wouldn't approve of. You have my word."

A few moments later, the jarl, the hound, the kitsune and I were alone in the alley. "Thank you, dai-tengu," the jarl said. "I think we can provide transportation back to Colorado, if you would like."

"Yes," I said. "And thank you, jarl, for inviting me here. I think we have achieved something worthwhile today."

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I think so."