

She moves, gliding with grace under a longsword while leaning away from a dagger. Her tail flicks and swivels, giving her better balance than a human would have if they were to copy her movements. She then twirls, lowers her posture and extends her arms. Her two swords of wood simultaneously strike two Gejan. One on the belly, the other on the thigh.

She glides back into an upright position, her breathing even as she gazes at the two exhausted opponents.

“Ferris, Nalia, nice try but your coordination is lacking. Ferris, you need to keep your distance more. Your weapon has a better range than mine, so use it. Nalia, if an opportunity to strike is open, don't always take it. It may be a feint. Leave yourself the option of backing off if a trade of blows might end badly.”

Ferris nods and seemingly accepts the advice, but Nalia folds her arms, “Thorous, you're a [Swordmistress] and I'm a level 81 [Skirmisher]. Your class is much stronger than mine.”

Thorous frowns and shakes her head, “My class doesn't matter Nalia. No skills were being used and I was restricting my speed to yours. The problem here is that you are overconfident.”

Nalia listens, but her face shows that she is not convinced. Thorous continues.

“Nalia, you are strong. Your class lets you take many opportunities in combat. You are great at going in and getting out, but that only applies to monsters. Anything that can think, like another Gejan, could bait you into attacking.”

Nalia shows her teeth. Her tail flicks in annoyance.

“Well, we have only been fighting monsters. Why do I have to learn to fight something that can think?”

Thorous, annoyed at the woman's irritating tone, opens her mouth to explain, but another voice speaks first.

“Because you will level faster if you practice. Monsters are too simple to fight. They are subject to their instincts which can be easily taken advantage of. Once you learn to fight a monster, then almost all others of that same species can be dealt with similarly. Fighting something that can think and adapt will force you to improve and thus level.”

Nalia's eyes widen as she notices the commander standing at the edge of the makeshift arena. His arms are crossed, a frown on his face while a new type of undead stands next to him. This one is humanoid, albeit with unique legs, no eye sockets, and a prominently smiling expression.

Nalia's hand, as well as the hands of the audience members shift to their foreheads.

“commander!” they all yell in unison with a perfectly practiced military salute.

The commander sighs. He raises and lowers his hand in the correct military gesture, “at ease.”

Hands come down, all eyes are focused now on the commander. His presence alone demands respect and recognition.

He nods, “Good idea on the training ring, Thorous. Changing up the enemy types will improve adaptability and level gain.”

He then looks around the camp in its entirety. The other leaders are missing as are a decent portion of the Kitsune.

“Where is everyone?” he asks.

“The other [Captains] have taken their teams and went out to hunt. The Kitsune are with them to avoid any unnecessary deaths,” Thorous explains.

A chuckle is released from the commander’s lips.

“More like the Kitsune are using the Gejan to collect corpses for me. Heh, cheeky girls.”

His eyes return back to Thorous while his hand directs towards the ring.

The undead with the smiling face begins to move opposite Thorous.

“Well, that’s fine. You’re the one I needed for testing anyways.”

He points at his undead, “This is my new undead named Joker. I just made him and I want to test his combat ability. Go grab your actual weapons, you’re going to need them if you want to keep up.”

Thorous takes a gander at the undead before waving at the two Gejan to get off the stage. She turns and raises her hands. One of the Gejan on the outskirts of the arena throws two swords to Thorous. She catches them with ease and smoothly moves into a combatic form.

“That was pretty fluid. Nice,” the commander remarks.

He jumps onto the stage but stays at the edge of the ring.

“Alright. The rules are simple. No skills and aim to kill. I’ll stop Joker if he is about to instantly kill you. Thorous, aim to win regardless of what may happen to my undead. I can always create a new one. I can’t create a new Gejan though.”

He pauses.

“Well, actually I can, but that's not important. Fight to kill, Thorous, no skills.”

His comment raises a lot of scales but is quickly forgotten by his next word.

“BEGIN.”

The ground cracks as Joker’s legs bend and extend, allowing him to traverse the distance in the blink of an eye.

A couple of days ago, such an instantaneous movement would have given Thorous pause. She would begin second guessing herself, questioning her chances of winning.

She did not this time.

Upon hearing Quasi’s yell, she shifts to the side, narrowly avoiding the silent sweep of the undead. Her immediate reaction upon dodging is to swerve and attack. She does so but her blade, instead of missing or being blocked by the fast moving undead, is instead shifted slightly away. Her other sword in her other hand misses as the undead steps forward into her space. She attempts to lean back but its speed matches hers. Its other bladed hand extends out, only stopping half a centimeter from puncturing her neck.

She stops moving, her eyes are wide with fear and astonishment.

The undead moves back and takes a stance.

“Thorous, amazing form and movement, but you are too cocky. You’re used to being faster than your opponent. Unfortunately, Joker is a bit faster. You’re going to need to adapt if you want any hope of winning.”

Thorous says nothing but slowly nods to the commander’s statement. This is what she wants. To get stronger, better, to be able to deal with anything. Just a new hurdle for her to leap over.

He raises his hand.

“BEGIN.”

The battle begins again, but with Thorous instigating an attack. She probes with her blades while constantly moving and keeping a distance. Joker reacts by dodging slightly or repositioning her blades. It does not block her strikes but instead redirects with the least amount of movement and stamina expenditure. If she has an opening, even a small one, Joker takes it. There are currently several gash marks on Thorous's scales so far, but none have struck blood yet.

Still, they are close and none of her feints are working. On the contrary, it seems to her that Joker is switching its style of combat to counter her different attacks.

The crowd watches as the two fighters move at blurry speeds, striking and dodging in a maelstrom of movements. Unfortunately, the fight ends when Thorous makes a mistake that results in a blade poking her left thigh.

The commander claps, "Nice try Thorous. Using your tail to try to trip Joker was smart, but not without expectation. Your tail, like a leg, is needed for posture. So as long as the tail is noticed, then you are putting yourself in a predicament. Joker was easily able to capitalize on your damaged footing."

Joker jumps back and takes a stance again.

Thorous does the same.

"A word of advice. I imprinted several dozens of different kinds of martial arts into Joker. He is currently far more trained than you will ever be, so I suggest you don't try anything simple. If you want to win, you're going to need to adapt instinctually."

Thorous nods. Her grip on her blades loosen as she changes her posture. She begins jumping from one foot to the other.

The commander smiles.

"BEGIN."

They meet, or it may be better to describe it as Joker meeting Thorous as her blades begin to spin and twirl. Her body moves with them. Like a dance, she weaves away from Joker's thrusts, her blades being redirected upon nearing them, but they do not slow down.

Thorous twirls defensively while Joker is moving constantly at his highest speed. He is jumping around and attacking, taking no risks while taking every opening. Regardless, Joker makes no headway against Thorous. All the knowledge of weapons and movement become inadequate against the reactionary instinct.

The fight continues, and to most, a clear winner cannot be announced. Both fighters are taking no damage whatsoever. Still, to those with a keen eye, a winner is already guaranteed.

“Thorous, I’m very impressed. What you are undergoing is hyperfocus.” the commander speaks while the combat continues, “It is a mental state referred to as flow. It is where you are able to focus solely on one thing. In this case, that thing is blade dancing. So congratulations Thorous, you have mastered the first *Sacra of Blade Dancing* in record time... Several years early.”

The commander pauses, his mind whirring with an annoyed look that only lasts for a second. For those watching, they may have seen a hint of jealousy.

“You are still not done. Now, you must work on the second sacra.”

The commander stops, staring at the slight disruptions in the dance as Thorous attempts to listen and process his words.

“The second sacra of blade dancing is more complicated. The second part requires you to transfer all of that hyperfocus of blade dancing into a completely subconscious entity. You need to be able to think and act while performing the dance.”

In response to the commander’s words, Thorous’s movements become less refined and less fluid. It is clear that she is attempting to multitask.

Joker takes the opening and the dance stops with a blade to her throat.

Over several hours, the fights begin and stop continuously. All of them end in Thorous’s defeat. Most of those watching have gotten bored because they see no improvement. Those Gejan have instead left and began sparring against each other.

The few that continue to watch the fight are those who can see the difference. Those miniscule improvements in the [Swordmistress]’ movements. It takes at least a Perception of 80 before such small changes would be noticed.

One such watcher is the Kitsune Illumina. As a [Luminomancer], she excels at being able to manipulate light and create illusions. Her class is one of the few that gives significant bonuses to her Perception, which greatly assists her in observing the fight, despite its speed.

Regardless, she is not here for the fight but to instead speak with the Patriarch.

All she would need to do is walk up to him and ask. Nothing complicated. All it just involves doing is undoing the illusion she has on herself to look like a Gejan, walk up to him and ask her questions.

"I can do it," she whispers

"He is super close now," she adds.

She was making progress. Three hours ago, she was on the opposite side of the ring. Now she is on his side. Progress is being made.

Illumina's tails flick in excitement. She is so much closer. Another three hours and she could practically touch him!

She takes a deep breath. Her right leg extends, landing on the ground to her right. She then slowly drags herself an entire foot closer.

Her heart is beating a mile a minute. Her gaze focuses on the Patriarch who does not move or notice anything.

She nods to herself and allows a good five minutes of breathing room. She progressed a lot just now. An entire foot at once. No inches for her now!

Progress!

"Alright, that's enough for today Thorous."

No, no, no...

Her eyes turn to the ring. The scarlet Gejan falls on the ground while the undead stands unmoving.

He's going to leave. I need to do something!

She looks at the patriarch, her eyes widening like saucers as he strides towards her direction.

I'm not ready.

Damn, Thorous is a freaking savant. She's improving every fight. She may even master the second sacra by the end of the month. Even I can't do that. Well, I can't do it physically. I don't even think a human body can. You need serious flexibility for some of those moves, after all.

Once Thorous collapsed from exhaustion, my gaze turns towards a decent illusion of a Gejan. The illusion is great as a passing detail, but it does not hold up to my scrutinous eyes.

I begin walking towards what I believe to be a Kitsune.

The illusion, upon turning to me, stops completely. No breathing, no movement or blinking.

And then it fluctuates for a half second. In that half second, I saw the general outline of a Kitsune.

I walk up to her, the illusion completely rigid now.

“So, I noticed you show up a couple hours ago and I watched you slowly shifting around the arena.”

The illusion begins to fluctuate quickly. Practically blinking before giving out and revealing to me the naked body of a Kitsune with four tails.

Then she collapses at my feet.

My gauntlet begins to glow a dark purple...