

Tenkai, The Bulbous Ninja

As night fell on the country, the reception hall of the Imperial Court fell full swing into another party. Quite typical for the Gold General, Buta, who has hosted at least one party every week since his appointment—sometimes twice a week. So many parties can get to be a little expensive, especially for such a small township, which is why Tenkai stood in the crowd now, fully cloaked to remain anonymous. He still remembers a few days prior when a young squirrel sought him out, telling him the despicable actions of the newly appointed general: increased taxes, frequent fines, and even downright thievery, stealing money from the people's homes as they slept! As even headed as he was, hearing that the general would go as far as stealing from his own people made this less of an assignment for Tenkai and more of a duty to him. He would gladly depose of the general, doing so at one of his very own parties.

He almost wished that he would have planned to just kill the man in his sleep, but he felt this way would send a louder message to the empire. At least, as a partial upside, he would be able to help himself to some free food, no matter how unnecessarily decadent. "Move it, you behemoth!"

Tenkai gave a menacing scowl towards the obnoxious bull who walked up to him. "Can I help you?"

"I just think the rest of the guests would like a turn with the food. Looks like you've already had your fill and then some, anyway!" The bovine fellow stood his ground, hoping his higher place in society would back him up, but, after a few seconds of the fox's eyes driving daggers into his ego, the bull let out a nervous cough as he walked around, pretending he could not be bothered to deal with the rotund fox. A huff of annoyance came from Tenkai, "This place is just filled with annoyances. That bull better be the worst of all these peop—"

"Welcome, everyone!" The haughty voice of the general rang out like nails on slate to the fox as he entered the reception hall. Turning from the buffet, Tenkai kept a watchful eye on the infamous Gold General. "I graciously thank you all for being here! I've got quite the entertainment prepared for us all, but we shall get to that when we do. Before that, I have a few announcements." With a snap of the pig general's hoofs, an accompanying soldier stepped forward onto a raised platform, opening the scroll slip he was carrying.

Clearing his throat, the soldier began. "Starting with fiscal matters, tax rates have been raised from 60% of the village's crop to 70%. Attempts to bribe inspectors will be heavily fined." Those in the crowd who lived in the village could only look on, knowing that any sign of dissent could get them in much more trouble than a fine. "A strict curfew will also be enforced, beginning tomorrow. Those who wish to be out after nightfall will need to purchase a Red Pass or be fined." A few audible groans came out from the crowd, to which the porcine general cleared his throat, prompting the small group of soldiers to change their stance, hinting that any continued noise will not end well. "The last article of discussion, General Buta himself has opted to announce." The soldier stood aside, saluting the general as he took his place on the same platform. The group then made their departure, leaving the general by himself.

"Thank you! I'm proud to say that I have successfully led this village in the name of the empire for six months now! However, one stain still remains to be removed from this glorious place." Tenkai immediately became suspicious. Why had all the guards left? Is the "Gold General" so arrogant to think

he does not need protection? "As some of you are aware, there are many rogue agents that seek to undermine the empire, and I have reason to believe that one of them has entered this village." The fox's ears had perked up. *Could he have known? There's no way!* Tenkai began to walk through the back of the crowd, proving surprisingly light on his feet if based solely on the size of his form. Whatever is going on, he needs to think quickly if this is going to be his chance to take out the general. "My informants tell me this agent is a ninja, a white fox, named Kuro Tenkai." *Shit! He knows? Whatever I do, I need to do it now!* The fox hastened his approach, almost pushing people aside with his bulk. "In fact, we have reason to believe that this man is here with us right now!" Making it to the front of the crowd, Tenkai readied a knife to throw at the general, planning to pierce his throat. The crowd gasped around him as he wrenched his arm forward, the general giving the cloaked figure an almost crazed smile, as if he knew that he was already going to win.

THWACK

CLANG

Silence fell over the crowd as they saw another masked figure in front of the large cloaked fox. One hand clasped the fox's shoulder while the other had a firm grip on his arm, having made him release the knife before he could complete his throw and letting it clatter on the ground uselessly. A quiet chuckle grew in the silence before turning into a full cackle. "HAR HAR HAR!!! Are you really this stupid???" The fox could only look in a stunned panic, unable to believe that he let himself get caught so easily. He looked down at the one who blocked his arm, quickly noticing the bushy tail behind them and briefly recognizing who they were: the same squirrel who approached him with the job. He was the informant...this was all a part of the general's plan!? "Since you've decided to turn yourself in, I shall begin your sentencing Kuro Tenkai!" The general put on a mock face of thought, finger tapping his chin as he let out an exaggerated, "Hmmmmmmm." Tenkai attempted to struggle, but the small squirrel held him steadfast. "You know what? If it was any other day, and any other person, I would simply sentence you to be put to death! However, since you are the guest of honor, death might be too good for you. Risu?" The squirrel keeping hold of Tenkai looked to the general. "I think this party needs a balloon."

The squirrel gave a nod before turning back to Tenkai, rearing a fist back and punching the fox in the gut hard enough to knock the wind out of him. Tenkai could only hack and cough as Risu let him go, trying hard to catch his breath. After a few wheezes, the fox was finally able stand himself back up to take in a deep breath through his mouth. A...surprisingly deep breath. Tenkai's chest grew as his eyes did, the ceaseless inhale confusing the fox as he fruitlessly tried to will himself to exhale. All the while, Buta watched the fox, waiting for the real show to start with a gleeful chuckle. Tenkai almost thought his chest would burst open if his lungs took in anymore air, but just before that could become a real issue, his throat opened, allowing a torrent of air a new cavity to fill as the already rotund fox began to look even more plump.

"AAHAHAHAHAHA!!!" The general broke into a hearty cackle at the sight, prompting some of the other dignitaries to laugh along with him as the fox watched his belly swell with air. With his cloak growing taut, Tenkai tried, in a last-ditch effort, to push on his gut in an attempt to simply squeeze the air out. The attempt was sadly useless, as it only slowed the intake instead of stopping it, let alone reversing it full stop. Regardless, he would have continued his efforts had it not been for his increasingly cumbersome form growing so large that they pushed limbs away, his arms and legs almost becoming engulfed by his spherical torso. Before Tenkai could think of what more humiliation could befall him, his

body began to tear at his cloak, shredding it apart, much to the amusement of the court members present. Now having had a good laugh, General Buta gave a snap of his hoof. The traitor squirrel then walked up to Tenkai and, to the fox's shock, shoved a deft fist into the fox balloon's belly button and rapidly pulled back out, causing it to stick out as an outie. With that, Tenkai's deepest breath ever came to a close. He could finally breathe normal, but, to his dismay, he couldn't breathe out all the air in him. It was stuck! As panic came over him, wobbling in place as if trying to run away somehow, the general began to slowly clap. "Now THAT...was quite a show! Only thing now is to decide what to do with you next.~"

Outside the town, a couple of travelers made their way down the country road in hopes of reaching the next town soon. As the village made it into view, the two hastened their pace as thoughts of the extravagant parties that have become the talk of the country motivated them to get there as quickly as possible. As they got closer, they could see a large, round display at the village's gate.

"Do you think this is the one?"

"I think so! That guy at the post station said we'd know when we see a large balloon in front of the village."

"Well, that looks pretty big to me! High tail it!"

Meanwhile, at the village, Tenkai's shame was only as well hidden as his belly, having been made into a display for the village. As kids ran by, giving his belly some heavy thwacks with the sticks they toted, he could only blush as he wobbled back and forth. A painter loudly rebuked the kids for disturbing his work, but he was otherwise pleased with himself as he stood back and read out what was painted on the fox's belly.

"May the Empire grow large and bountiful."