



She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man

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NOVEL

4

SHE PROFESSED HERSELF PUPIL OF THE WISE MAN

– Kenja no Deshi wo Nanoru Kenja –

- VOLUME 4 -

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[SEVEN SEAS]





After exchanging greetings, the members of Écarlate Carillon ordered a late lunch. Between bites, they conversed and doted on the pure rabbit. Knowing that its fur was a good-luck charm, Zef begged Mira for even a single hair. She responded by offering to give him one if it came off while she finger-combed the bunny.

She began stroking the rabbit's fur with her slender fingertips. Perhaps out of luck, or perhaps because it was shedding, she was able to give everyone a single blue hair of good fortune—including one for Tact.

"When we get back, I'll make sure to give it to him," Flicker promised, accepting the fur and managing to squeeze Mira's hand in the process. After many failures, her strategy to capture Mira was starting to improve.

The lake was not especially deep; Mira could stand up in the shallows. She lifted Cat Sith by the scruff of his neck, placing him on her head. That done, she climbed out of the water.

It was nearly sunset, and darkness gradually crept over the forest. Mira stood naked on the lakeshore, wringing water out of her hair. The flowers blooming around her made her allure even more magical. Once she'd wrung her hair out, she pulled the large bag with her clothes inside from her Item Box.



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Seven Seas Entertainment



TABLE OF CONTENTS

-
- Chapter 1
 - Chapter 2
 - Chapter 3
 - Chapter 4
 - Chapter 5
 - Chapter 6
 - Chapter 7
 - Chapter 8
 - Chapter 9
 - Chapter 10
 - Chapter 11
 - Chapter 12
 - Chapter 13
 - Chapter 14
 - Chapter 15
 - Chapter 16
 - Chapter 17
 - Chapter 18
 - Chapter 19
 - Chapter 20
 - Chapter 21
 - Afterword

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CHAPTER 1

PEGASUS SOARED LEISURELY over a small mountain range in the western skies of Alcait. With her silver hair blowing in the breeze, Mira straddled his back and gazed down at the lush green forest below.

“It’s like it goes on forever...” Mira mused, admiring the sheer size of the forest as she looked into the distance. Then she felt a light shudder below. It was followed by the sound of something shattering. “Oh, no! Not again!”

It had sounded like when Garrett’s carriage rolled over zombies or wayward summoned carbuncles... but Mira was in the sky. The only things she could collide with were birds, and birds would be too terrified to come near Pegasus in all its majesty. In fact, Mira had *seen* flocks of birds part like the Red Sea so they could pass.

So, what could the sound have been?

Mira commanded Pegasus to stop and looked below. There, she saw a bird tumbling toward the forest; its wings were snow white, and its beak was blood red. It seemed familiar.

Is that a blizzard eagle?

Blizzard eagles were technically monsters. This particular specimen’s wings were dark crimson, which seemed unusual, since blizzard eagles were usually white. Unless...

Mira checked Pegasus’s hoof and found it covered in monster blood. It seemed Pegasus had struck the blizzard eagle with only a slight bump for her to notice.

Relieved, Mira watched the eagle spiral down until it disappeared into the hazy treetops. She put a finger to her chin and cocked her head in wonder.

Hrmm. Strange to see blizzard eagles this far south. Is that another effect of the world becoming reality?

Mira stared down at the forest suspiciously. To her recollection, blizzard eagles only

appeared in the forests and mountains of the continent's far northern reaches. Their white wings were camouflage for living in a world of snow. It seemed preposterous to find one flying around the southern lands—it would have seemed preposterous in the game, anyway.

Then again, thirty years had passed without Mira in this very real world, and there were many things she didn't know. That also gave her lots of opportunities to savor the changes to the world. She decided that monsters changing spawn locations was probably common and directed Pegasus to resume their flight.

Mira's destination was the Forest of the Devout, where she would hopefully find traces of the Elder of the Tower of Necromancy, Soul Howl. She would also collect Primordial Pips for Solomon in the nearby Primal Forest.

Inexperienced at riding, Mira soon found that long hours on horseback caused discomfort in delicate areas. She decided that taking a break would be a wise thing to do.

Hrmm. Besides, we won't arrive until nighttime, even at this rate.

The young mage soon found herself recovering inside a small restaurant she'd spotted from above. Lunchtime had already passed, so diners were sparse.

Mira had thought that she looked like any other patron, but she was attracting the crowd's curiosity. Her attire was too well put together, too uncommon for a small, no-name town outside the capital. Normally, the only people who came through were wandering adventurers, and it was rare to see such a beautiful young adventurer traveling alone.

Moreover, it was extremely unusual for an adventurer to visit a place with no famous dungeons, hunting grounds, or even Adventurers' Guild Union branches. A few people in the restaurant wanted to get to know Mira better, but the User's Bangle on her left wrist—proof of her status as a veteran adventurer—sapped them of the courage to introduce themselves. Her admirers simply watched from afar.

Mira did not notice the onlookers' eyes as she opened her map, compared how far she'd come with how far she had left, and calculated the time it would take to reach her destination. It seemed she wouldn't be there until after ten o'clock at night. She pondered that for a moment—in a dark forest, she wouldn't be able to see much at all,

so she might overlook clues.

She also wasn't in the mood to work overtime on one of Solomon's errands.

Nursing a berry au lait, she searched the map for adequate lodgings near the forest.

Ah. This village is perfect. The village she chose was about two hours by Pegasus from her current location, making it an ideal place for an overnight stay. *That should be a reasonable day's journey.*

She was lucky to have found such a village just before the forest. The Forest of the Devout was vast, and the Elder Tree was deep within. Even if she'd flown straight there, she wouldn't have made it until after midnight.

After relaxing for a half hour, Mira took the opportunity to use the bathroom before leaving town.

* * *

Astride Pegasus once more, Mira looked off into the sunset. Its brilliant red light dyed the trees and plains below—save for one part of the forest that was blanketed in fog.

With each moment, the color of the earth and sky changed. Once night covered the sky, a sea of stars spread their twinkling ripples through the heavens. Mira was entranced by the sight of the dark forest swaying in the wind. She spotted countless manmade lights not far in the distance. They looked like bonfires in a small village.

She used the lights as her guide and eventually landed in the tall grass on the outskirts of town.

"A job well done," she said to Pegasus. "I hope you'll help me again."

The beast spread its white wings and neighed, as if to say it was no big deal. After dismissing Pegasus in a flash of light, Mira began her short trek with light steps, excited to see what sort of settlement lay ahead. The location was called Hunters' Village; it was slightly too big to be a proper village, yet still too small to be called a town.

Mira walked on a well-trodden dirt path through a rickety gate framed by wildflowers. The place seemed almost *too* rural at first glance, but it was surprisingly well traveled.

One stone building stood out conspicuously among the lumber homes and shops—it bore the sign of the Adventurers' Guild Union.

She began to notice that the village was full of fellow adventurers. After exploring the unexpectedly bustling place a bit, she located an inn and opened the door. The light chime of the doorbell was quickly followed by a young man's jovial greeting.

"Welcome!"

It was an average inn with a restaurant attached. Based on the brisk atmosphere and the clothing of the clientele, the inn was very popular with the adventurer set. With Mira's arrival, several customers stopped eating and reflexively turned toward the door to size up the newcomer. She rushed to the counter, aware of the unwelcome stares.

"Well, aren't you adorable?" the inn's proprietor said with a soft smile, continuing to cook. Despite his booming welcome, he appeared to be a delicate family man. "How many in your party? Just here for dinner, or spending the night?"

"Just one. I'd like to stay the night. A meal too."

"Alone, eh?" A young man sitting next to the proprietor observed her, interest and envy sparkling in his eyes. "Miss, I'm surprised you could reach such a remote place all by yourself. So, you're... a mage? Mages really are something."

A behemoth of a greatsword was propped against the counter next to the young man, and the muscles under his black leather coat indicated that he had the strength to wield it. His chestnut-brown hair was in desperate need of a comb.

"Uh, sorry for barging into your conversation," he said quickly, then plastered a smile on his well-groomed face. "The name's Alfail. As you can see, I'm a swordsman. I've always admired mages. Mind if I ask what kind of mage you are?"

The smile remained on his face. Mira was initially put off by his overfamiliarity with her, but at the same time, he seemed genuinely friendly.

Deciding that she liked the man, she proudly puffed out her chest and declared, "I am a summoner!"

The surrounding conversations went silent, and patrons looked at the girl with pity

and compassion. Mira shrank back dejectedly and sighed. It seemed that her planned summoner's renaissance hadn't reached Hunters' Village yet.

But Alfail had a different reaction than the other customers.

"And that let you come all this way alone? Summoners are awesome!" The admiration in his eyes intensified. This wasn't a place where newbie adventurers could arrive solo.

His words prompted a similar realization from the other adventurers, and murmurs of surprise rippled through the crowd.

"Alfail," the proprietor cut in, having picked up on the swordsman's boundless curiosity. "How about you let me take her order first? She must be hungry."

"Whoops—yeah. Sorry about that."

The proprietor offered Mira a menu, which she gladly accepted. Within moments, she ordered herb-grilled chicken and honey au lait.

While waiting for her food, Mira learned that Alfail seemed to truly love mages. He talked on and on about how convenient the Ethereal Arts were to daily life, how he wished he could feel what it was like to be a mage, how he'd gathered several items that could substitute for spells, and more.

Items that contained spells were commonly known as magical tools. Shops sold them in limited quantities, and since people without mana could use them, they were treasured among adventurers.

Advanced magic couldn't be easily replicated, but many lesser spells had equivalent magical tools. Unfortunately, there were no magical tools for evocation, divination, or necromancy. That was a major source of frustration for Alfail.

After Mira's order came, Alfail changed the subject to evocation. After all, it had neither magical tools nor many practitioners, so he seemed *very* interested in seeing a truly skilled summoner at work.

"Please, you gotta show me what you can do. I'm begging here!" The man pleaded and bowed before the little girl.

The proprietor muttered that it wasn't the first time he'd seen this. Alfail always

implored the mages he met similarly. Most of the adventurers who were already in the inn chuckled at the sight, but a few eyes narrowed in disapproval.

After Mira finished her dinner, she and Alfail headed to a training ground within Hunters' Village. They were followed by a handful of people from the inn who came along to gawk.

Alfail held a magical tool to light the darkness of night, grinning as he explained that this spot had been set up for self-guided adventurer and hunter training. It was the perfect place for Mira to demonstrate her summoning magic.

"Hrmm. If you insist, I suppose I could show you," Mira replied, trying to play it cool for the crowd. However, she was secretly elated that she would have an opportunity to show off her summoning prowess.

An instant later, a Dark Knight appeared from a magic circle floating before her.

"Oooh! So, this is summoning! He's very... black! Looks strong too!" Alfail shivered in joy as he inspected the knight.

The rowdy crowd of onlookers fell silent, however. Most of them were already aware that Mira had been strong enough to make it to Hunters' Village on her own, but whatever the little girl had just summoned from the ether was truly terrifying.

"Can I duel with him?!" Alfail fidgeted with the restless excitement of a child and looked at Mira with puppy-dog eyes.

Mira could imagine just how disappointed he would be if she refused. "F-fine. You may," she answered.

Alfail literally jumped with joy. A cheer went up from the nearby crowd, which only served to draw a larger audience.

Mira sized up Alfail to ascertain his strength. Like all former players, she could Inspect a target. Unsurprisingly, she found that Alfail's stat values were perfect in terms of swordsmanship, but below average for magic. His resistance to magic was especially worrying. Still, what mattered most was whether he had the skills to make use of his stats.

Alfail took ten or so paces from the Dark Knight and unsheathed his sword. It shone

silver, and a fog of cool air enveloped it.

Mira detected a spirit's power inside the sword. *Oho! An ice spirit blade, eh?*

As Alfail held his sword, the air around him grew heavy with tension. It was clear to Mira that he was shifting into battle mode. His raw, intimidating aura now made Mira reconsider the stat values she had seen before.

"It seems there's more to you than meets the eye," she mused.

"I should say the same to you, miss. If this didn't make you budge, then I can only imagine your strength."

They grinned at each other. With that, Mira left the battle area and leaned against a wall to spectate. Alfail took a few deep breaths and clenched his sword in both hands.

"Now, shall we begin?" Mira called, and her Dark Knight lobbed its greatsword high into the air. Almost immediately, it reached into a magic circle that appeared next to it and drew a new sword. The Dark Knight brandished the blade and pointed the tip toward Alfail.

The greatsword in flight slowed as it reached the apex of its arc. The crowd, now numbering in the dozens, looked up in silence and heard the quiet sound of the blade slicing through the air.

At once, the onlookers caught sight of the blade falling from the dark sky, and a murmur spread through the group. The sword left a black contrail behind as it stabbed directly into the ground.

Combat had begun.

Alfail bent his knees and charged. He closed the distance to the Dark Knight in an instant, swinging his icy sword upward as he came. The silver blade traced a sharp angle toward the knight's stomach.

The young man's speed was first class. His sudden initiative forced the Dark Knight to defend itself, but its own black sword easily fended off the adventurer's attack.

His power is true. He must be stronger than Emella. He's fast too. Perhaps faster than my Dark Knight? Mira gauged Alfail's abilities, trying to determine just how much of the

Dark Knight's power she should display.

The knight, still fending Alfail off, swung its sword forcefully. The swordsman was unable to withstand its strength and reeled back. The spectators chattered.

"Dang! Now, that's a strong one!" Alfail cried, utterly elated. He dug into the ground to stop his momentum and stared his foe down, overt aggression and absolute joy in his eyes.

Soon, the sound of clashing swords rang out again as the Dark Knight advanced and swung his weapon down upon Alfail. The young man had rarely experienced a blow with such a strong impact, causing him to groan under the weight of the attack. Still, a grin crept onto his face.

An instant later, Alfail parried and sliced through the Dark Knight's defenseless stomach. The two-handed swing cut deeply, and the blow's powerful impact launched the knight back.

"Now that's Alfail for you!" an onlooker cheered. It seemed the young man was famous here in Hunters' Village.

A taut smirk formed on Mira's face. This was an ideal opportunity to show off her magical power.

"I doubt that's all you've got, miss. Don't hold back!" Alfail called without turning, standing ready for the next attack with a titan's resolve.

"Hrmm... How long has it been since you've put your all into a fight and lost?" Mira asked before making her final decision. Alfail was right about one thing: that wasn't the Dark Knight's full power. Now that the game was real life, however, Mira had to pull some punches for fear of killing a sparring partner.

Alfail shook his head and answered, "Hasn't happened recently. I'd say it's been... five years?"

Mira understood one thing as she watched Alfail from behind: the man was starved for powerful foes. Based on his conduct, he must have challenged many people just like this. She assumed he had won each time, yet kept searching for stronger sparring partners, remaining unsatisfied until he found a true opponent. That reminded her of Meilin, Elder of the Tower of Immortality.

"I apologize for taking it easy on you earlier," Mira exclaimed. "In exchange, I hope you'll savor this experience—even if it is five years overdue."

"Heh... I can't wait!" Alfail grinned at Mira's words. Icy fog covered his sword again, as if matching his determination.

The onlookers held their breath as they sensed something similar within Mira, although she still leaned arrogantly against the nearby wall.

Magic billowed from within the Dark Knight facing Alfail, healing the damage the young man's strike had done. Then Mira held her hand out toward the knight, manifesting a magic circle at its feet. The magic circle extended upward and swallowed every bit of the evocation.

A spell prepared, Mira finally let it loose.

[Mutated Evocation: Dark Lord]

The change was... *abrupt*.

Spirits commonly resided in weapons and armor made by human hands. How those weapons and armor had been used essentially determined the spirits' abilities. Dark Knights were born of armor worn by fallen warriors who died in pitched battle.

For the Dark Knight, combat was *instinctual*, and years of service with Mira had only honed it into an even deadlier form.

But Mira's spell of transformation had changed the Dark Knight even further. In the dim light, its samurai-like armor was as black as the void. Blades now covered its helmet, cuirass, gauntlets, and even leg guards. It was a being designed purely to usher enemies to their doom.

The abomination held a greatsword in either hand, but a single strike of its arm or leg would do the job just as well. Ironically, it was less protected now that it was optimized for offense, but the sheer horror of its appearance would frighten any enemy that might consider attacking it.

Indeed, the boisterous crowd was now lost for words. Even Alfail looked at the transformed Dark Knight in shock. He almost regretted his decision to ask for more.

But this was what he wanted—Mira's full power.

So he shuddered. All his body hair stood on end, and he thanked the heavens for this day. This was the summit—a new personal goal.

Alfail swallowed his feelings and charged. He didn't need a signal to start the match; why should he give something as oppressively powerful as the Dark Lord any advantage?

He faced the enemy head-on, putting all his strength into one blow and slicing down diagonally. A shrill clang rang out as his sword scraped across one of the many blades on the Dark Lord's armor.

The spirit looked almost entirely unfazed by the attack. It began to move as it went on the offensive. The mighty hands that wielded those greatswords manifested only annihilation, never retreat.

Alfail visualized the arc the Dark Lord's sword would take and raised his own blade. As the Dark Lord's blow struck, its powerful impact assaulted his entire body, seeming almost ready to tear his arms off. Still, Alfail forced his numb hands to fight and put the last of his energy into hanging on to his sword.

The Dark Lord's armor moved again, and Alfail grimaced as he pulled his sword back. He had to last as long as possible.

CHAPTER 2

AS MIRA DISMISSED the Dark Lord, Alfail fell onto the training ground, arms and legs splayed. He had been thoroughly trounced, but he heaved one breath after another as a look of satisfaction swept across his face.

“Aww, man,” he said, panting. “I couldn’t even make a dent. *Phew...* That was great. Say, um... Damn. I don’t think I asked for your name.”

“Mira.”

“Mistress Mira, eh? So, how was I?” The title of respect seemed to come naturally to Alfail. After all, he’d finally found someone who could best him in combat.

On the other hand, Mira was slightly taken aback by the sudden honorific. She decided to pay it no mind, squatting down next to Alfail to hand him an apple au lait. “You put up quite the fight against one of my best, so I would say you have some talent. Still, you will have to remain diligent.”



"I see... You think I can still get stronger?" Alfail meditated on her words for a moment, side-eyeing Mira. He hadn't lost a fight in five years. He'd never been able to truly measure his best against someone.

"Hrmm. I'm no swordsman, so I can't answer that for sure. But, if pressed, I would say that... it depends on your effort. I know a fool who's quite like you, and he has felled my Dark Lord many times now. If you're just as stubborn, then it may be possible."

Back when this world was still a game, and Mira was a player, she had many other friends beyond the Alcait gang. Among them was a swordsman who loved fighting just as much as Alfail. She smiled nostalgically, remembering how they would spar.

"He defeated... that? *Multiple* times?" Alfail chuckled at his performance moments ago and gazed off into the sky. "Do you think I can be like him too?"

"Again, that all depends on your effort."

"Huh... Yeah, you're right. Y'know, effort's kind of my forte. Trust me when I say that I *will* be able to overcome that creature someday." Determination and passion swirled in his eyes as he looked up at Mira. They were the heroic eyes of a man who had hope for the future. "When that day comes, will you fight me again?"

"Of course. I look forward to seeing your growth."

"Ha ha! I'll blow your mind!" Alfail laughed in satisfaction. As he looked appraisingly at the small mage who had bested him, his eyes wandered to the hem of her skirt... and he noticed how high it had ridden as she knelt beside him. He abruptly jumped to his feet and sheathed his sword, as if covering something up.

"What's the matter?" Mira raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, n-nothing! Thanks a lot for today. I'm gonna go swing my sword around a bit, then head home. And thanks for this too!" Alfail picked up the apple au lait and downed it in one swig. For some reason, his cheeks were a little flushed.

Mira thought that was a tad sudden, but she had to admire his devotion to the sword.

At the very least, he seemed more confident with it than he did with the ladies.

* * *

Heedless of the remaining spectators, Mira left Alfail at the training ground and headed back to the inn.

The restaurant was starting to empty out, and the proprietor sat at the counter. Mira ordered herbal tea and a honey tart.

"You two took an awfully long time. Everything go okay?" The proprietor asked, glancing at Mira as he poured herbal tea into a cup for her.

"I thought he was just a fan of magic, but that man's a full-on fool for fighting. He wanted to spar as soon as I summoned my Dark Knight." Mira shrugged, but the smile on her face showed that she'd enjoyed herself. After all, Alfail reminded her of a friend she once had who was always direct about the things he adored. She recalled how he'd loved the katana.

"Oh, so that's what happened?" The man at the counter placed the herbal tea and a honey tart in front of Mira. "You know, I think Alfail's love of magic started when a mage beat him in a one-sided fight."

That couldn't have been any normal mage, since Alfail was confident in his swordplay. Even accounting for his skill growth since then, the mage must have been quite strong.

"Now, that is interesting." Mira urged the proprietor to continue, poking at her tart all the while.

The proprietor thought to himself, arranging the story in his mind. "That mage came through about five years ago. Big rumors were spreading around these parts. Some forager collecting medicinal herbs in the mountains said they'd run into a humanoid monster that nobody had ever seen before. A real nasty one too. The forager thought they'd die that day. But suddenly, a woman dressed in a cheongsam with a long slit up the thigh jumped from atop a mountain and blew it away with a single strike. According to the forager, she was a sage with a funny dialect. As for the monster... Well, her attack burned it to a crisp."

Alfail must have fought that woman and lost. If she'd trounced him, as this man claimed, then one could assume they had a significant difference in power.

"Indeed? She sounds like quite a sage."

"Right? When he heard that rumor, Alfail up and grabbed his things and left. Back then,

he was arrogant and willing to challenge anyone strong. About a month later, he returned a new man—a swordsman who admires mages, as you saw. I have to wonder what the fight was like.”

Wrapping up the story, the proprietor started washing dishes. Mira savored the sweetness of the honey tart and occasionally wet her lips with the herbal tea, all the while recalling the very familiar mage from the proprietor’s story: Meilin the Controlling Fist.

What is she up to? Mira agonized over the question of how she would catch this friend of hers, a woman hellbent on training against strong opponents all over the world.

After that, Mira changed the subject and enjoyed a bit of small talk with the proprietor. She learned that this village had been built by hunters who made a living in the Forest of the Devout. Powerful monsters didn’t appear except in the deeper areas, so skillful adventurers could earn their keep comfortably.

Those who desired even more money used a fortress deep in the forest as a base. Excluding Alfail—who wasn’t always around—the proprietor’s own son was the strongest warrior in the village.

Pondering that lifestyle in admiration, Mira finished her meal and headed up to her room. She made her plans for the morning and went to bed.

* * *

The next morning, Mira rushed to get ready and down to the restaurant before breakfast ended. After buying additional pastries and stuffing them into her Item Box, she departed from Hunters’ Village.

An endless sky hung over the Forest of the Devout. Far ahead, the clear blue heavens became clouds and fog that seethed on the horizon. They were only disrupted by an enormous tree that pierced through the clouds.

That was the Elder Tree.

Wriggling on Pegasus’s back, Mira busily adjusted her clothes. She had been in such a rush that morning that the garment around her chest was far too loose.

With great displeasure, she fought the garment desperately for a while using the

tactics Mariana had taught her. Eventually, she settled on a fit that provided reasonable support, yet didn't reveal too much. She sighed, disappointed that she had so little to hide.

What's the big deal, anyway?

Satisfied with her now-fitting bra, she turned to face the awe-inspiring nature stretched out before her and mumbled something about it being perfect. She was filled with strange satisfaction.

* * *

Mira had been flying for over two hours directly toward the Elder Tree, but it felt like she hadn't approached it much at all. She constantly changed positions atop Pegasus to cope with the inevitable chafing from riding bareback. She rode cross-legged, on her knees, hugging her knees to her chest, on her stomach, slumped across Pegasus's back... After some brutal trial and error, she finally settled on lying forward, head against Pegasus's neck.

Just past noon, as the sun was at its brightest, Mira caught sight of a clearing in the woods. She squinted at it and saw a small fortress.

That must be the place the proprietor at the inn mentioned, Mira assumed. Out of curiosity, she approached slowly from above.

"Hrmm? Well, that doesn't look good..."

It was hard to make out from afar, but on closer inspection, she realized the fortress was falling apart. The stone structure's exterior wall was shattered in some spots, with the interior wall just managing to stay upright. The surrounding walls, marred with gaping holes, were unable to defend the fortress as intended. To say it was in poor shape would've been an understatement.

Something didn't feel quite right to Mira.

As she got closer, she spotted a group of hunters. The men and women were gathered near a large hole in the outer walls, doing... something. At first, they seemed to be holding weapons, so Mira assumed they were a hunting expedition setting off into the woods. However, that assumption soon proved false.

Are they repairing the holes?

The hunters were gathering debris and timber pieces to patch up the walls. Mira looked back up; it was a clear day, perfect for hunting. That meant things at the fortress were bad enough that repairs now took priority over adventuring.

Is there some sort of emergency?

Led by curiosity with a pinch of officiousness, Mira descended into the middle of the fortress courtyard to find out just what the problem was.

“Hey! Reinforcements?!?” one hunter called as he noticed Pegasus touch down. The other hunters turned at once and looked at Mira with eyes full of hope and astonishment. Unfortunately, the sudden attention and approach of the crowd spooked Pegasus.

“They pose no danger, friend,” Mira said, soothing her angry mount before dismissing it. “The name is Mira; I’m just an adventurer.” She pulled a cute card case from her coat pocket and flashed her adventurer’s license.

“Oh. An adventurer, huh?” One man checked her license and noted the rank listed, then sighed dejectedly. Every other hunter seemed just as exhausted, despair evident on their faces.

“Tell me more of the reinforcements you expected. I stopped by because this place seems, er, rather damaged. Is something wrong?” Mira surveyed the collapsing fortress, crumbling walls, and despairing hunters.

“Well, y’see...” As pain clouded his face further, the man explained. Rare monsters—ones not from the Forest of the Devout—had begun appearing two weeks prior. At first, the hunters had rejoiced at the potential profit, but things took a turn for the worse only a few days later.

Monsters had ranks, much like adventurers, and it seemed there was a high-ranked monster among the creatures. Alone, the fortress hunters could hunt D-Rank monsters, and they could hunt C- to B-Rank monsters as a group. But one particular fiend in this group of newcomer monsters easily trounced the entire lot of them. They barely escaped with their lives, and only after losing five companions.

“That *thing* is a different sort of beast,” the hunter continued.

That was only the beginning of the nightmare. For some reason, the new beasts' ferocity intensified at nighttime, and they began to assault the hunters' fortress. The powerful one was, fortunately, the only of its kind, and it wasn't able to jump over the stone walls... but with each passing night, its overwhelming strength crushed the fortress walls and wore down the defenses.

The hunters were unprepared to deal with this situation; monsters from the Forest of the Devout were never so strong.

Worse, the monsters roamed the area around the fortress, cutting off any hope of escape. All routes led to annihilation. The hunters had left their final hopes with one comrade, who took the fortress's fastest horse to plead for reinforcements from the nearest village.

No one knew if he'd even made it. If he had, who could say whether the reinforcements would arrive in time? The man frowned at this part of the story before continuing.

Only a few days later, the monsters had begun to destroy the fortress walls. The hunters had managed to hold the fort so far, but it was clearly in untenable shape. It would fall soon. Therefore, the hunters were using materials from monsters they killed to reinforce the walls in a feeble attempt to buy time.

"When you landed, here I was, hoping you were reinforcements..." The man grinned joylessly as he concluded his story. Given Mira's listed rank and lack of knowledge of the situation, she clearly was not what they'd hoped for.

Of course, the hunter who had gone to request reinforcements would have known that a C-Rank adventurer couldn't handle these monsters. He also would've communicated the state of the fortress to the reinforcements, so the faint hope that Mira was a single reinforcement sent in advance was extinguished when she revealed that she knew nothing of the situation at the fortress. The hunters' disappointment was palpable.

What they did *not* know was that Mira was far more powerful than any reinforcements a nearby village could scrounge up. More importantly, she was one heck of a busybody.

* * *

Now that she understood the hunters' situation, Mira surveyed the walls and the fortress itself, judging that they would be lucky to survive one more assault. The walls were completely covered in damage, threatening to collapse with the next attack. Mira

could probably have knocked them down with arm strength alone.

Many hunters busied themselves with repairs. One carpenter in particular was a fantastic artisan, putting wood together without a single nail or screw. He made supports to line the inside walls, reinforcing them against outside attack. He didn't seem to take any measurements at all, yet as if by magic, everything he constructed was perfect down to the inch. His handiwork would serve as a decent bulwark.

As astonishing as his skill was, however, the hunters were still up against something that could smash stone walls. No doubt the carpenter's wooden repairs would fall by the break of dawn.

After circling the fortress once, Mira gazed into the woods where the powerful monsters hid, a finger on her chin.

It bothers me that I don't know what I'm up against, but... Nah, everything will work out fine.

Although she was technically the Elder of the Tower of Evocation, there were foes that Mira could not handle alone. Looking at the damage to the fortress, she decided that she could probably handle *this* monster. It clearly couldn't shatter stone walls with a single blow. That meant it wouldn't be able to break through her Holy Knight's armor.

She couldn't abandon these hunters. Eliminating the problem monster would be the fastest solution, and there was no better time than the present.

"Hey, you," someone accosted her as she began to make her way out the gate. "You can fly on that horse, right? Mind if I ask you for a favor?"

The young man who'd explained the situation to Mira before now blocked her path. On his face were panic, unease, and the faintest hint of hope.

"Sure. Let's hear it."

"One of ours is badly hurt and needs to be taken to the Medical Guild in Hunter's Village as quickly as possible."

"Medical Guild?" Mira asked.

"You... you've *never* heard of the Medical Guild?"

The young man patiently explained that people with superb magic and healing skills belonged to the Medical Guild. It served mainly as the last resort for patients with terrible diseases; such high-level treatment cost large sums of money. Still, the results were worth the price. If someone paid the guild a monthly fee—essentially an insurance premium—they could receive treatment for a greatly discounted price.

The system was suspiciously like national health insurance. Mira smelled former players behind it, but regardless, she put a finger to her chin in thought. What mattered now was that the wounded hunter paid for insurance, so the Medical Guild would be sure to save her.

"Hrmm, I see. Perhaps I can help. But first, may I examine the wounded woman's condition myself?" Mira asked, apparently having hit upon an idea.

"Y-yeah, of course. She's not well, but she should still be able to travel."

Until Mira knew that for sure, she wasn't willing to take the risk. Still, the wounded hunter's odds of surviving transport might be better than her odds of surviving here through the next attack.

CHAPTER 3

LED BY THE YOUNG MAN, Mira descended the fortress's hidden staircase. They arrived in an underground room filled with more hunters.

Although the space was clearly *lived in*, it was by no means *lively*. Some people wept, others sat in quiet resolve, and others still hid their fear and tried to rally their comrades. However they showed it, all despaired.

There were around twenty people present, including the injured and the people attending them. Almost no one reacted to Mira's entrance; they simply kept their eyes down. The dim firelight worsened the gloomy mood.

The air feels so heavy in here.

One hunter looked up at Mira. His eyes were like a dead man's as he muttered something and slumped back down. Mira surveyed the room again, in all its eeriness, and forced a smile.

"How's Melissa doing, Old Dran?" the young man asked an older fellow looking after a few injured folks in the corner of the room.

"Is that you, Latry?" the man asked. "She isn't well... How are the walls? Are the repairs done?" As the old man turned, Mira saw that fatigue was heavy on his face. No doubt he had taken on the role of caregiver due to some meager amount of medical knowledge.

"Not yet. Anyway, this girl—er, Mira—wants to see how Melissa is doing. Show her, please." The younger man, Latry, backed off to let Mira step forward. She took his place and bowed slightly to the old man.

"Aren't you a pretty young lady? What are you doing in a place like this, and now, of all times?" Dran smiled vaguely at Mira, but it didn't reach his pained eyes. He could tell that she had come from outside the fortress. With the monsters patrolling, she would have no way to escape now, so Dran had the grim realization that she was just as doomed as the rest of them.

Mira had a different outlook.

"Mira flew in by way of Pegasus. She'll be able to fly away from here." Latry was facing death too—but unlike the others in the fortress, he had hope in his eyes. His words stirred some of the despondent people for the first time since he and Mira had entered the room. "I've explained everything to her. We're going to have her carry Melissa out. If Mira can get her to the Medical Guild, they're sure to save her."

Latry circled around Dran and took the hand of a woman—evidently Melissa—who lay on the floor.

"Maybe so, but..." Dran hesitated, his pain evident. Even someone with no medical experience could tell that Melissa was in bad shape. One might wonder if she would even survive the night.

"This is worse than I expected," Mira said. She wanted to look away, but she crouched next to Melissa and confirmed that the woman was still breathing.

"Please take her. Even if you don't make it in time... at least her family could see her again." Latry bowed deeply, still holding Melissa's hand.

Just then, a large man walked over to Mira. His arm seemed to be injured, since it was covered in a blood-soaked cloth. He was pale, but there was still life in his eyes.

"Hey, you. I hear you can fly," the man said and knelt. "I'd like to ask you to help her too. Melissa acted as bait while the rest of us got away. We owe her our lives."

The deep wound Melissa had suffered required rare, expensive medicine to heal. Though Dran and the other hunters had some other medicine, none was powerful enough to help Melissa. Her injuries remained potentially fatal.

The man glared at an empty vial lying in the corner. Then he bowed his head and added, "If we're all going to die, that is the least we can do to repay her bravery."

There was a murmur of disagreement among the others, and one of them spoke up.

"Bard, I understand how you feel," the slender man said carefully. "But if we want to honor Melissa's sacrifice, shouldn't we do whatever guarantees the most survivors? We have a way to fly now. I think we need to get everyone who can still move out of those monsters' detection range before they come for us tonight." His voice was grief-

stricken, despite being that of the silent majority.

"How could you?!" Bard glowered at the others furiously before swallowing his rage. If they bet on taking Melissa to the closest village, nighttime would come before Mira's return. Instead of rescuing Melissa, who might not even live, one might say it would be wiser to have Mira do whatever it took to ensure the other hunters survived. Bard couldn't blame them for thinking pragmatically, even if his heart wished otherwise.

"Hrmm. The medicine didn't work well, you say?" Mira's eyes were fixed on Melissa, whose breathing was so feeble that it seemed ready to stop at any moment. Bard had explained the medicine situation, and something about it stuck out in her mind.

When this had all been a game, players could use cheap medicine to rally back to full health. The changes to the gameplay Mira was used to never seemed to stop coming. Still, she opened her Item Box and checked how much medicine she had on hand.

Hrmm. Come to think of it... A grin spread across her face. Oh ho ho! Looks like I've still got a small fortune here! Only just got it all too.

In Mira's Item Box were nearly a thousand panaceas of either the highest, or nearly the highest, quality. Many years ago, she'd ordered this heaping helping of medicine from a friend who had styled themself a master of alchemy.

At the time, Danblf had been planning to solo-clear quests meant for parties. But then Danblf became Mira, and thirty years passed by before that plan could be realized.

Mira returned her attention to Melissa. She had a hunch about why the hunters' medicines had not healed her. She decided to check the stricken woman's status with her player-exclusive capability to make sure.

Upon checking the status window that appeared, she saw that her instinct was correct. "I thought as much. But why?" This raised another question: how come Melissa was afflicted with the *crippling poison* condition?

"Hm? What've you figured out?" Latry asked, unnerved by Mira's mumbled musings.

Silence fell upon the underground chamber as the rest of the group listened to Mira offer a quick explanation.

"It seems that Melissa is suffering from crippling poison," she said. When one was

afflicted with crippling poison, it dramatically reduced all the healing they received, including natural recovery. Even high-quality restorative medicine had barely any effect, so healing Melissa would require specialized medicine or magic. Mira wrapped up her lecture by noting the strangest factor of all. “But... there shouldn’t be any carriers of crippling poison on this continent.”

A strait separated the enormous continent of Ark to the far west from their home continent of Earth. Players often called Ark “the frontier continent,” and many player-made nations had expanded there. Some monsters in Ark carried crippling poison, but for them to spawn in the Forest of the Devout was unthinkable under normal conditions.

“What do we do about it?” Landry demanded in astonishment and grief. He clenched Melissa’s hand in prayer.

Would the Medical Guild even have the antidote necessary to cure a condition not found on this continent? Would they have a mage who knew how to treat it? The more Mira thought about it, the more hopeless it all seemed.

Dran was lost for words, and Bard looked down sadly. Even the slender man, who should have had even more reason to abandon her, stood wordlessly.

Nobody dared object to Mira’s diagnosis; it fit Melissa’s condition perfectly. Furthermore, the monster that had attacked Melissa clearly was not indigenous to the Forest of the Devout, and the hunters knew nothing of its abilities. Nobody could refute Mira’s claim, since the arrival of a monster from Ark was plausible, if unexpected.

A new gloom spread through the assembled hunters as their tiny ember of hope began to fade.

“Well, now that we know the cause, Melissa’s condition is much easier to treat,” Mira said casually, ignorant of the hunters’ swirling despair.

That much was obvious to her. Latry had explained that the Medical Guild didn’t just use medicine; they used healing *magic*. And if Mira knew anything, she knew magic. That was why she had come to check on the girl, after all—at no point had she planned to put a heavily wounded person on Pegasus’s back.

“Wh-what are you talking about?” Latry sputtered in surprise and anger.

Mira formed a rosary summoning circle on the floor. “Observe,” she said to the flabbergasted hunter, smiling, as the magic circle floated.

From your coil come,

Pure-white healer.

[Evocation: Asclepius]

Following Mira’s short incantation, the summoning magic activated. Imbued with her mana, the magic circle glowed dimly and formed a ball of white light that uncoiled into a glowing white snake.

The meter-long serpent, known as Asclepius, undulated its way up Mira’s body and wrapped around her arm. Even though it assumed a strange avatar, Asclepius was a reliable ally with eminent prowess in all the healing magics. It raised its head slightly and looked Melissa up and down.

“Forgive Asclepius’s bedside manner,” Mira grumbled. Despite not having seen Mira in thirty years, the snake ignored all pleasantries and simply examined the patient.

“Goodness. Summoning magic?” Seeing the snake emerge from the magic circle, the older hunter gawked in surprise. He had seen summoning magic a long, long time ago.

The younger hunters simply frowned and whispered to each other. Many sounded disappointed that the poorly regarded discipline of summoning held their friend’s life in its hands. Just what could a single white snake do?

At least Alfail appreciated my magic. This is just sad. Mira sighed and refocused on improving the situation.

“Er, you said Melissa is ‘much easier to treat’ now. Mind telling us what you mean by that?” Latry asked, keeping a wary eye on Asclepius as it drew closer to Melissa. His voice had a pleading edge.

“Ah, apologies,” Mira replied. “It’s simple; all we have to do is extract the poison and heal her.”

“Heal her? With a snake?” Latry gazed at Asclepius timidly. The snake had completed its diagnosis and turned to face Mira, awaiting her orders.

"The snake is a fantastic doctor. Just stay calm and watch." Mira decided showing was faster than telling and directed Asclepius to treat Melissa. The snake glowed with white light, then struck. Its fangs sank into Melissa's neck.

"Hey!" Latry shouted, lunging at the serpent. However, Dran was faster and seized his wrist. Bard and the other hunters shouted, unable to see what was going on.

"Don't you want to save her?!" Dran shouted as he pulled Latry back. His voice echoed through the underground chamber, causing the younger folk to quiet down. "This will do the trick. Don't worry."

Slowly, the panic subsided, and a hush fell over the room. Seconds passed. Then minutes. Everyone watched with bated breath.

After three minutes, a change finally occurred: Melissa's pained, ragged breathing calmed, and peace found its way onto her face.

"Melissa..." Latry stroked her cheek. Some of its flush had now returned.

A few minutes later, Asclepius removed its fangs from Melissa's neck and returned to Mira's arm.

"Well done, friend," Mira told Asclepius. In response, it slithered to her neck and coiled itself like a scarf, then rubbed its snout against her cheek. "I must've worried you too. Don't worry; I'm not leaving again." Mira petted the snake as she spoke.

Asclepius responded with a happy-sounding click of the throat.

While Mira cuddled her summon, the hunters gazed in worry at Melissa. Was she truly okay? Was this actually healing? Could they trust Mira? Though the situation seemed to be improving, lingering tension remained.

Then Melissa—once so wounded that she might not see tomorrow—opened her eyes and sat up.

"Melissa! Are you okay?!" With confusion and worry etched across his face, Latry put an arm around Melissa to support her. The gathered hunters felt both anticipation and unease as they leaned forward to see. Many could not believe their eyes.

"How strange... The pain is all gone. Am I finally dying?" Melissa spoke softly as she

gazed at the ceiling. A teaching of the widespread Church of the Trinity held that, in the last moments before death, all one's pain disappeared. She lay back down and closed her eyes.

"Hey, what's going on?" Latry asked Mira pleadingly, his voice trembling as if he was about to cry. The image of Melissa on death's door wouldn't leave his mind, and a wave of pent-up despair crashed over him.

"You shouldn't have any problems now. If anything, you should remove her bandages and check her wounds," Mira replied. She pointed at the blood-soaked bandage on the huntress's arm as if to emphasize the point—if anyone was still in doubt, they could look for themselves.

Latry nodded and began to undo the bandages as the crowd watched in rapt silence. Melissa's now-bare skin had not a single scar, let alone wounds. Only the bloodstains remained as a horrifying reminder of how close she had come to death.

At a glance, Melissa still looked frail and ephemeral, but only her stamina was drained.

"No way! She's healed!" Latry exclaimed. He undid her other bandages, revealing that the other wounds had disappeared as well.

Shock turned to joy. Following Latry's lead, the other hunters closed in and demanded to see, scrutinizing Melissa's skin. Her body, formerly so badly beaten that one could hardly bear to look, was whole again.

"Stop staring, boys!" shouted one of the women, causing the men to scurry away.

Latry had stripped Melissa half naked. He now sat there, crying over the bandages in his hands. The ladies didn't dare chase him away with the other men; they simply patted his back and consoled him.

As for the men, they picked themselves up and rejoiced at Melissa's safety. Mira side-eyed them and finally relaxed her stiff shoulders. It seemed she had reflexively tightened up, lumping herself in with the men, when the woman yelled.

I am fine. I am a cute girl, she reassured herself. *Nobody would ever suspect me.*

"Yes, indeedy," she mumbled, touching Melissa's skin under the pretense of examination—though her intentions may have been less than pure.

"I don't know what the hell is going on, but that snake did something, right? And it saved Melissa?" Latry asked, rubbing his eyes frantically with his arm. He wanted a guarantee that Melissa was truly okay now.

Mira pulled her hand back and stood up straight. She quickly cleared her throat and explained, "Hrmm, yes. There's nothing to worry about. This little snake has the power to heal. However, it only removed the poison and mended Melissa's wounds. Given her blood loss, she's still low on stamina. Allow her ample food and rest so that she recovers."

"I-I had no idea summoning could heal people, too... Thank you so much. Melissa and I are... really close friends." Latry gazed at Mira and Asclepius before bowing deeply. Then he collapsed in heartfelt relief, took Melissa's hand, and repeated "Thank goodness" over and over. Next to him, Melissa slept. Her breathing sounded truly comfortable.

"It's my first time seeing Holy Snake Asclepius, but it's more incredible than the rumors said. Summoning isn't a dead profession, after all." Dran said with a big smile. There was clearly a different perception of summoning between generations. It seemed that, this time, Mira had succeeded in changing some younger hunters' perceptions, while reminding the older folks that summoning still existed.

"But of course. Now that I am here, the future of summoning is secure!" Mira declared, proudly puffing out her chest in satisfaction. The hunters sent smiles and cheers her way. She had saved a life and shown a fortress of people the glory of summoning.

"Can't get more confident than that," Dran murmured to himself.

CHAPTER 4

“ALL THAT’S LEFT NOW is the monster, right?”

Mira’s sudden change of subject caused the occupants of the underground room to grow gloomy once more. Who could blame them? Melissa’s life was saved for now... but when night fell, they would all certainly die.

The powerful monster was still watching over the fortress, waiting for the perfect chance to snap up its prey. Even if it stopped attacking the walls, Mira could tell that the hunters didn’t have enough food to last very long. Sooner or later, someone would have to leave to get something to eat, and that person would most likely end up *becoming* a meal instead of finding one.

But the most immediate issue was that the fortress’s durability had reached its limit. The walls would collapse long before reinforcements could arrive—assuming that the hunters’ messenger had even made it to town with their request.

“So, the monster watching the fortress... Anyone know where it is?” Mira asked the room. No one answered. The hunters, now awoken from their fleeting dream of salvation, were vividly reminded of the terrifying monster and trembled from fear of death.

“It ought to be patrolling the nearby forest at this time of day,” Dran said finally. He had left a female hunter to clean Melissa’s skin and now reached for his bow and arrows, which leaned against a nearby wall. “You’re going, aren’t you? Well, this old bag of bones can be your shield, bait, or whatever else.”

With that, he stood up straight. Though Mira hadn’t realized it before, the man was a giant. He seemed easily two meters tall.

“I’ll help as well.”

“Me too!”

Two more older hunters joined the cause. They were visibly weaker than Dran, but the resolve in their eyes burned just as strongly. The pair stood before Mira, a sword

and an axe in their hands.

"Are you certain? We may not be able to win," Mira lied, looking up at them and failing to conceal her smirk. Yet her words were not meant to test their determination.

"We've found an opportunity to try, and we're going to take it. Can't live a long life without some cunning," said Dran, and the others spoke up in agreement.

"We all saw your summoning. It snapped us out of our funk."

"How could we call ourselves hunters if we didn't rally behind you now?"

The three turned to gaze silently upon the younger hunters. They had to show the youngsters their will to fight.

Now armed with a powerful trump card, they were going to battle a foe they hadn't been able to stand up against before. Would they taste victory? Could they be any use to Mira at all? Would the hunters become the hunted? The questions hung in the air, unspoken.

I happen to like these silly, testosterone-filled developments.

As for Mira, she'd planned on handling the monster alone. However, she abandoned that thought as soon as the older hunters spoke up. If she fought the monster solo, she would be stealing away the hunters' chance at justice and vengeance.

The hunters of the fortress were beaten down, terrified of the monster. If she killed it, they might be happy to be alive, but the experience would leave an eternal weight on their souls. When Mira considered their future, she realized that she should prioritize helping these men and women overcome their fear over showing off the glory of summoning.

The hunters desperately needed to regain confidence. Dran and the others had given them the opportunity; now, the young hunters simply needed to rally their courage.

"Hold on a second. We finally saved Melissa's life. Instead of picking a fight we don't know we can win, wouldn't it be better to carry people out of here one by one?" The slender hunter stepped toward Mira and the others, offering the choice with the highest probability of survival.

His reasoning wasn't wrong either. What good would come of the hunters dying here?

Then again, the slender man had never watched a properly trained summoner fight, so he failed to see the opportunity for victory that Mira brought. A summoner of her ability—as evidenced by her summoning Asclepius—had undoubtedly been in many battles against long odds and prevailed. Unfortunately, the other young hunters didn't realize that either.

"Come on! We can win this!" Dran admonished him. "You saw Mira summon. The fact that it required an incantation means that she's got high-level magic."

"Yeah, I know. I did see it. But no matter how good at healing she is, that... *thing* can half kill you with a scrape. Direct hit, and you're dead. We can't stand up against that."

Dran did not get through to the slender man—simply because he lacked understanding of *all* magic, not just summoning. While a skilled mage almost always had to be a skilled fighter to learn high-level spells, that didn't necessarily apply to summoners. It was a difficult path to tread indeed.

"Healing isn't the only thing a summoner can do. Isn't that right, Mira?" Dran asked.

"But of course. Resourcefulness is the true value of summoning." Mira puffed out her chest and grinned smugly.

She assumed she looked rather dashing, but it seemed the young hunters only saw her as a little girl trying to appear taller. Even Dran chuckled at the sight; it inspired little in the way of confidence. Still, it didn't shake his trust in her.

Meanwhile, the younger hunters began to change their minds. Latry turned from Melissa and stood up.

"I'll go," he declared, fire in his eyes, and walked over to Dran. In his heart burned one emotion: pride.

"Listen to reason, Latry! We saved Melissa, and we can escape! We don't have to fight or stay here anymore." The slender man drew close to Latry, pleading his case. Desperately, he argued that fleeing into the sky while they could was a far better choice than recklessly throwing themselves into battle with the unknown.

"Mira saved Melissa's life. If she says she can defeat the monster, then I'm going to

follow her. If the going gets rough, I'll buy her time," Latry replied, his mind made up. "She has a way to fly, if nothing else. If we have to flee, I'll circle back to you guys, and we'll run as far as we can."

No matter what happened, Latry wouldn't let Mira die—even if it meant sacrificing himself. He was resolute in his decision. His words and the fire in his eyes silenced the slender hunter.

"Besides, we have a chance. And I don't plan on dying—Melissa's all right, and there's plenty of fun I want to have," Latry laughed, banishing the heavy air in the room. "Honestly, I don't know a thing about summoning. I just know that Mira's magic is incredible. Someone once said that all veteran mages are strong, no matter their discipline, and Mira has to be *really* damn strong."

His words sent a ripple through the other young hunters as they all reflected on the person he was talking about: Mira. Latry was the strongest person at the fortress, and the young hunters only knew of one other stronger than him—not counting Mira, who they considered a wildcard. Slowly, hope took root where only despair had existed before.

"Can you... beat that thing?" the thin man finally asked Mira. The other young hunters focused directly on her and waited to hear her answer.

"That depends on how much effort you're willing to put in," she replied, simultaneously summoning a Holy Knight next to her. Over the sudden clamor of surprise, she added, "My summon can guard against the monster's attacks—as you can see, he specializes in defense. But whether the monster goes down is up to your attacks. What do you say? Do any of you have the courage to try?"

Mira laid a hand upon the knight's tower shield and looked at the young men appraisingly. This was all for show, of course; even if the Holy Knight wasn't as strong as her offense-oriented Dark Knight, it was up to the task. There were very few enemies it couldn't overpower.

However, her goal was to let the hunters regain their courage through their own deeds. Easily defeating the monster in just a few moments would fail to achieve that. If she tanked for them, on the other hand...

Gazing upon the imposing Holy Knight—which was larger than Dran, with sturdy

armor and an enormous shield—planted the seeds of courage in the younger hunters.

“I’ll give it a try,” one piped up. “We’ll never get a chance like this again.”

“I’m a real hunter,” another added. “With that thing on our side, I’ve got no reason to run.”

Fear still gnawed at them, but hope had kindled small fires of bravery within. The fires spread as those two voiced their willingness to fight, and more people stepped up to volunteer. Soon, the underground room was full of life as the hunters checked their weapons and made ready. Asclepius treated those who needed healing one after another.

That’s right. This is how young people should act! Mira plopped down and watched them in satisfaction.

“Your assistance is much appreciated,” Dran said quietly as he sat next to the grinning young woman. The other two older hunters who had stood alongside him bowed their heads in gratitude simultaneously.

At first, Dran had considered using himself as bait to give the hunters an opportunity for an all-out attack on the monster. He knew a veteran summoner like Mira ought to deal serious damage to the creature if given the chance, if not kill it outright. If she crippled it, the young hunters would be likelier to move in and finish it off. His two partners seemed to have felt the same way—if Dran fell in battle, they’d been willing to act as bait to give Mira two more shots.

The moment they beheld the Holy Knight, however, the three hunters realized that Mira was far more powerful than they’d thought. It wasn’t lost on them that she was rallying their younger companions to restore their broken spirits, either.

“Really? Don’t mention it.” Mira shrugged with a tilt of her head. She never knew the desperate measures the three elders had been willing to go to, although they had been able to read her plan to goad the younger hunters into action.

Choosing to save the hunters would have been the right thing for Mira to do. But standing them up and making them walk on their own feet was even more important. A sheltered sprout could not grow into a great tree, but neither could a sprout bent to the breaking point.

Mira admired the hunters' philosophy, informed by their meaningful experiences. It wasn't something that could be easily replicated. She smiled and committed the scene of the remotivated hunters to memory.

* * *

As the chamber bustled with people preparing for battle, a group appeared before Dran.

"Hey, is it true that we're gonna fight that monster?" questioned a man who had been working on the outer wall. Curious, Mira looked up and noticed that the whole repair crew was there.

"That's the plan." Dran nodded and stared them down, his gaze firm.

For a moment they gaped in disbelief. "B-but... that's not gonna work. We were fixing the wall because we knew an assault would be suicide. We gotta hold out and wait for reinforcements—th—that was the plan!" The man stammered a bit as he made his case. His caution was only natural; this moment was pivotal.

"What if I told you we now have a chance? Would you fight then?" Dran asked them after glancing at Mira and the Holy Knight standing silently beside her.

"We've heard all about it," the speaker for the crew replied. "That white thing is our key to victory, right? But I just don't get it. I mean, it *looks* cool, but I don't know jack about summoning. There's just no way it can stand up to that monster."

Despite the Holy Knight's intimidating air, the fear of facing the monster again was still strong among those who hadn't witnessed Dran's offer to volunteer. The work crew were battling with their emotions, torn between a desire to fight like real hunters and to do the prudent thing and wait for reinforcements.

If only they were certain they could win, they would take up arms. Even if they weren't, they would struggle to the last. But their fatigue from the nightly attacks had yet to abate, and the monster was an enormous threat.

Unfortunately, Dran and his fellows weren't quite up to the task of convincing these hunters. They needed one last push.

Then, a man stepped forward. He wore a leather apron, gloves, and black coveralls—

the very picture of a craftsman, with fine features to boot. Mira recalled that he was the one who had been using his incredible techniques to work the lumber.

He looked up at the Holy Knight and then down at Mira before saying confidently, “I think we can bet our hopes on this girl. Then again, I’m not much of a fighter. I’ll be leaving that to everyone else.”

“You think so?” the leader of the repair crew asked. “Hmm. If Tomoki says so, then she must be the real deal.”

The carpenter’s friends seemed to trust him. Almost instantly, his words alone had ignited their fighting spirit.

But what evidence did he have to determine Mira’s strength?

Tomoki was a *very* Japanese-sounding name. Mira paused and focused her attention on the carpenter, rather than his now-lively companions. The two locked eyes, confirming Mira’s suspicions.

Tomoki approached Mira and whispered in her ear with a smile. “You’re a former player, aren’t you? I leave everyone in your hands.” He threw in a meaningful wink.

A normal woman might’ve blushed at the act, but this was Mira. She simply curled her lip and spoke with confidence. “You can count on me.”

Tomoki was *also* a former player. Just as he’d realized that they were two of a kind, he’d also surmised Mira’s strength.

When this world was a game, there had been no true death for players. They could fight recklessly without a care, crossing the line between life and death multiple times. Thus, they had easily reached levels of skill that the world’s normal people could never hope to match. Although there were differences between them, most if not all former players were strong in battle, and Tomoki had judged that Mira was capable of felling the monster.

Mira made her own estimation of him. *If he can’t fight the monster himself, he must specialize in crafting.* That explained the miraculous woodwork. It wasn’t unheard of for a person who loved crafting—or metalwork, or some other trade—to ignore combat completely in the game. Hence, in *AEO*, a number of people could hardly fight at all.

Some player craftsmen could even create items equal to those of legendary rank. Mira thought about all the legendary items she'd left with Cleos to rebuild the Department of Evocation at the academy.

She could imagine that Tomoki was quite a woodworker—and surely his skills and experience far outstripped his strength. His presence also spoke well of his companions, the hunters. First-rate craftsmen were also first-rate judges of character.

* * *

Soon, the hunters finished preparing for battle. They lined up in front of Mira, and their strategy meeting began.

The planning wasn't particularly complex. They discussed simple yet necessary things: where they would fight, that they would travel there in single file, how they would react to emergencies, how to assign roles based on skills and weapons, and so on.

As she concluded the meeting, Mira gave the hunters one major warning: whatever happened, no one should hide behind the Holy Knight. She would protect them no matter what, but this battle was meant to restore the hunters' dignity. They would have to face the monster head-on.

In response, the hunters all replied in unison, "Yes, ma'am!"

Tomoki's directions were to remain in the fortress and watch over Melissa. With a bowed head and a solemn word of thanks, Latry expressed his gratitude to the carpenter. Finally, Dran and the other elders rallied the young folk, their energized voices shaking the chamber.

They charged out of the fortress, renewed and revitalized by Mira's presence.

CHAPTER 5

“THE MONSTER’S STRAIGHT AHEAD from here,” Latry said quietly about half an hour later. “We don’t know when it might notice us, so let’s hurry.”

Ahead was a clearing wide enough for all the hunters to fight as a unit. When hunting in a small group, it was common sense to hide among the trees and set traps. However, they were now traveling in a group of thirty, and the forest left little elbow room between them. They needed to move someplace optimal for teamwork.

Once they left the fortress, the monster was sure to pursue them eventually. As long as they reached the clearing before it caught up, they could wait and prepare.

Latry and two older hunters took the lead. The youngsters followed behind, then Dran and Mira. The Holy Knight took up the rear guard; if the monster ambushed the hunters from behind, it would be in for an unpleasant surprise.

Mira searched the area with her Biometric Scan as they ventured forth.

[Immortal Arts: Biometric Scan]

“Hrmm. Not so much as a bird.” The lack of any animal or monster life was unsettling.

“I’m not surprised. I bet the wildlife all turned tail and ran,” Dran replied when he overheard Mira’s muttering. Though they moved at a brisk pace, his breathing was unlaborated. He had shocking stamina for a man over sixty years old.

“Hrmm. I see, I see.” Unsettling or not, this was ideal for Mira. It meant that any pings on her Biometric Scan were almost undoubtedly threats.

The party continued through the uncomfortably quiet forest. Surefooted, the experienced hunters dashed along with incredible speed and awareness. Young though they might’ve been, they had fantastic skills.

[Immortal Arts Movement: Shrinking Earth]

Mira deftly maneuvered in midair, keeping up with the fast-moving group. It was much

easier to run above the forest floor than on it. The young hunters in front occasionally glanced back in amazement. The fact that Mira was dashing through the air in a short skirt above their eyelines caused much fascination.

Behind her, the Holy Knight made headway by brute force, crushing the foliage as it went. Small trees toppled, and branches snapped loudly as they flew off in all directions. Even though the summoned behemoth was on their side, the hunters made sure to stay ahead of it, and its intimidating advance only sped their movement.

The Holy Knight was also the most conspicuous thing in the silent forest. Sooner or later, the monster would notice that their group had left the fortress, and Mira wanted the Holy Knight to draw its attention first.

By the time they had advanced halfway to the clearing, the monster arrived.

A violent roar echoed through the forest. Some hunters flinched in reawakened terror, trembling. Dran and the others patted their backs and urged them forward. The roars continued, each one making it clear that the beast was gaining on them.

Finally, Mira sensed the monster's presence. "I'll delay it here for a bit. You all keep moving forward and get into position." Hearing the hunters behind her agree, Mira descended to the ground and started walking toward the monster.

Dran worried about whether he should stay with her, but the moment he saw her display of determination, he quickly turned and ran to catch up with the younger folk. He knew his work lay ahead, not with Mira.

* * *

Mira stood next to the Holy Knight and stared into the forest as the monster approached. It leapt wildly at a speed faster than a human could run, and the trees swayed as the earth shook. The light, cheerful breeze seemed out of place as the malevolent presence stormed ever closer.

Then a storm of violence and noise split the silence.

The Holy Knight's tower shield caught the monster's first attack with a dull thud and a powerful tremor. Indeed, this monster had the power to break fortress walls. The beast's roar was fierce as it assailed its prey, but the Holy Knight held fast.

Taken aback, the monster leapt away. The two titans now stood outside each other's striking range.

The monster had two thick, black arms. Enormous muscles bulged visibly even through its fur. Legs as thick as great trees supported its three-meter-tall frame.

"Aha! A tyrant spikeback, eh?"

The gorilla-like giant's most striking feature was the enormous crop of spikes sprouting from its back. As Mira suspected, the native of Ark was the source of the crippling poison from which Melissa had suffered.

In the blink of an eye, the beast closed the distance to the Holy Knight in a single bound. Now directly in front of the knight, it twisted to body-slam its spikes into the armor spirit with the destructive power of a siege engine. There was a boom; the sound of the impact reverberated powerfully through the air. No doubt a monster this powerful would have crushed the crumbling fortress in an instant.

However, Mira did not need to worry over such piddling power. The Holy Knight was not easily pierced, even by high-ranking monsters such as this one. Her concern was not the danger the beast presented, but *why* a tyrant spikeback had appeared in the Forest of the Devout in the first place.

The video game had simulated surprisingly robust ecosystems. Monster distribution was part of that, and various factors had balanced that distribution to form the world of *Ark Earth Online*.

Now this was a realistic, living world. However, deviance from local spawns was highly unusual. This tyrant spikeback's presence was an aberration that only had a detrimental effect on the environment. At this rate, the monster would reign supreme over the Forest of the Devout's ecosystem and throw it into disarray. It had to be eliminated.

First the blizzard eagle, now this. According to the hunters, they've seen other unusual monsters. What in the world is going on? Mira pondered the question as she engaged the monster.

A quick use of Biometric Scan let Mira know the hunters were still charging for the clearing. She resumed delaying the tyrant spikeback, but as she fended off the monster's attacks, she began to fall back toward the hunters' location.

* * *

A resounding boom caused one hunter to turn around in terror. Others turned to look with him.

"That was a hell of a noise. Think she's really fine?"

A few seconds later, another blast shook the forest. The sounds of heavy battle drove stakes of fear into the hunters' hearts, and their faces were taut with terror.

However, they didn't stop moving, even as their legs grew heavy. Above the cacophony, Dran shouted, "Hear that sound, fellows?! The white knight hasn't fallen! They're still fighting! One could hardly ask for a more stalwart ally! Now run! Our destination isn't far!"

They'd hoped to make it to the clearing before the monster found them. Still, from the sound of battle to their rear, Mira was improvising well enough. Taking heart, the young hunters mustered their courage and put more force into their legs, advancing step-by-step in pairs.

Soon enough, they broke into the clearing where they would make their stand.

* * *

It seems the hunters' preparations are complete.

Thanks to her Biometric Scan, Mira saw that the hunters had spread into a circle; they were in position. She began retreating in their direction. The Holy Knight, cutting a trail through the foliage, followed her.

Thinking its prey was trying to escape, the tyrant spikeback let out a haughty roar and gave chase.

Suddenly, the forest fell away, and Mira found herself in a circular meadow, thirty meters in diameter. Dazzling sunlight poured into the clearing from overhead.

Mira ran in midair and landed in the clearing's center. There, her Holy Knight stopped and turned just as the tyrant spikeback's fist fell like a hammer on the knight's tower shield. A solid, high-pitched clang spread through the clearing like a wave.

"Now the true battle begins." As the hunters ran in to surround the tyrant spikeback, Mira backed away, leaving her Holy Knight where it stood. With the Holy Knight as their shield, the hunters would fight the beast as if it were a raid boss. Mira simply watched and kept Asclepius on standby.

The tyrant spikeback's eyes remained fixed on the motionless Holy Knight as it backed away. The hunters behind the monster backed up as well. The knight remained, implacable.

When the monster glowered at the hunters, they began to lose their nerve. There were stifled cries, and legs began to quake; some hunters shrank back further. Still, the Holy Knight remained motionless.

In the face of the knight's unfaltering bravery, the tyrant spikeback slammed its arms against the ground and let out a ferocious roar. Its display of power unleashed primal terror deep within the hunters' hearts. Nearly a dozen dropped their weapons, pure horror on their faces.

But who could blame them? What was a pep talk or two, next to certain death? They were already risking life and limb. If they failed here, there would be no second chance.

The tyrant spikeback watched the hunters' lines crumble with glee. Then it charged forward with inhuman speed, swinging an arm down to crush a female hunter who had sunk to her knees in fear.

She screamed. The beast's fist accelerated toward her and slammed against a massive rampart of steel—the Holy Knight's tower shield. A low thud echoed through the clearing as the tyrant spikeback reeled back in pain and confusion.

The huntress watched the magnificent sight in utter shock. Meanwhile, Dran smiled as his suspicions about the Holy Knight were confirmed.

"Damn, it's fast!" Latry noted. He was astounded, not by the Holy Knight's defensive power or strength, but by the fact that it had closed the distance so quickly.

"I told you I'd protect you, didn't I?!" Mira goaded the stunned hunters, hoping to spur them to action.

"See?! That's the power of summoning! Now take up your weapons!" Dran hollered.

The two other old hunters and Latry brandished their weapons at the monster. As they did so, one person after another stood up, grabbed their own weapons, and dug deep for their courage to face the very embodiment of their fear.

Righting itself, the tyrant spikeback attempted to stare down the Holy Knight. Yet the knight stood carelessly, showing no sign of movement or fear.

The beast glared at the hunters around it, shrieking and slamming its arms against the ground to terrify them. Instead of terror, however, it was met by the hunters' own righteous roars.

The first blow struck the monster from its blind spot.

Swords, axes, spears, and arrows joined in, gouging more wounds into the beast. The monster gave a shrill roar—no longer boasting of its strength, it was simply expressing raw fury.

Berserk with anger, the tyrant spikeback swung its thick arms wildly. It struck nothing as the hunters nimbly feinted back, and the beast's own inertia soon threw it off-balance. At once, the hunters moved in to take advantage of this opening. Blows rained down upon the monster, though none proved fatal.

Now the tide of battle had truly turned, and the hunters remained optimistic. Mira had gifted them a chance they would never have had to get back at their tormentor.

Enraged by the counterattack, the monster tried to strike the hunters yet again—only to find the Holy Knight standing between it and its quarry. The tyrant spikeback let out an annoyed cry and swung at the knight. Again, its blow was powerless against the massive tower shield.

The Holy Knight obstructed any attack against the hunters. So, the monster began attacking the obstruction, no matter how futile the fight seemed.

Mira watched from a distance. "Hrmm. This seems to be working quite well." She had given the Holy Knight one order: to strike lightly to regain the tyrant spikeback's attention by force when the enemy shifted targets. Therefore, the tyrant had no choice but to prioritize the knight, allowing the hunters to strike from its blind spots. The situation was optimal, to say the least.

Nine out of ten people might call it cowardly to rely on someone much more powerful

to gain a victory—and the hunters were no exception. Regardless, they knew that this was the only way to overcome their fear and move forward. They fought with renewed vigor and not a lick of hesitation. Still, the beast would not go down easily, and they rotated fresh fighters on and off of the front line.

“Couldn’t do it without you,” a man who’d had to back off after breaking his arm told Mira. Her glowing white snake set about healing him right away. Once the man’s fingers regained feeling, he took his weapon in hand and returned to the fight.

Asclepius slithered around the battlefield, treating the wounded like a combat medic. Each treatment took time—but it drove fear from the hunters’ hearts.

* * *

Two hours later, the battle still raged, and fatigue was clear on the hunters’ faces. Half of them were away from the front line, waiting to be treated. Still, no one looked ready to surrender.

“Keep it up!” one elder hunter shouted. “It’s working, slowly but surely!”

The Holy Knight fended off deadly blows, the old hunters continued to support and encourage, and Latry’s skillful attacks wounded the monster more and more deeply. Their successes continued to rouse the spirits of the novice hunters.

Meanwhile, the tyrant spikeback’s attacks gradually slowed. Though the hunters’ strikes only cut the surface of its skin, hundreds and then thousands of tiny cuts soaked the grass at the monster’s feet in a pool of red blood. The beast’s breathing grew ragged, even as it raged.

It still had plenty of strength, however, and a swing of its arm could gouge the earth or strike a hunter dead unless the Holy Knight blocked it.

Then things changed. As the monster leapt high into the air, dirt and dust rained upon the Holy Knight as if to obscure its vision. The tyrant spikeback brought its hands together and swung them down like a hammer.

The full-power blow passed over the tower shield and slammed directly into the Holy Knight’s head. No matter how sturdy a warrior, the knight surely couldn’t survive an impact like that. The tyrant spikeback roared, assured of its victory.

However, its celebration was suddenly cut short—the Holy Knight emerged healthy and unfazed. As a weapon spirit, the Holy Knight had no human weaknesses. The tyrant stared in a state of shock as it realized its attack had proven futile.

Latry instantly closed in, stepping between the knight and the tyrant spikeback. From there, he could reach the monster's throat, eyes, and nose. With a roar of his own, Latry raised his blade and stabbed it directly into the tyrant's neck.

Soon, blood dripped from his sword's hilt, and the beast began to lurch. Everyone stopped moving, and silence fell across the forest clearing. Latry had struck a fatal blow. Then, with a final burst of strength, the monster's arm thrashed and sent Latry flying.

“Latry!” one hunter screamed, prompting everyone to run toward him at once.

Rolling across the ground, Latry swiftly stood up straight and thrust his arm toward the sky. The spikeback's final attack had been so weak that the Holy Knight did not need to react.

At that moment, the ground shook under the hunters' feet. The monster's body had fallen. The sword remained stabbed through its throat, a final and undeniable sign of victory.

The tension drained from each hunter in the clearing, as if they had been awoken from a nightmare. Replacing that tension was a collective shout of joy.

CHAPTER 6

AFTER DEFEATING THE MONSTER that had terrorized them for so long, the hunters headed home in high spirits. They were fatigued from the long, hard-fought battle, but their expressions were livelier than ever. The hunters at the back of the line glanced over their shoulders at the four Holy Knights carrying the carcass of the tyrant spikeback back as a trophy.

It wouldn't have done for true hunters to abandon such enormous game, but as the younger hunters prepared to lift the behemoth, Mira had told them that she would handle transport duty for the return trip.

Now, along with three additional copies, the very Holy Knight that had fended off every one of the monster's attacks was carrying the remains of their enemy home. To see such an intimidating summons used as a pack mule... How could the hunters not laugh?

"That was nothing like I'd heard of. Who says summoners are weak?"

"Beats me. I'd say people haven't seen the real deal."

Mira smiled, knowing upon hearing the hunters' voices that she had sown more seeds for summoning's revival.

"Thanks. I think they're gonna make it," Dran said to her quietly, watching the joy return to his young hunters, now freed from their fear of death.

"Don't mention it. This couldn't have happened without their willpower. It takes guts to be courageous when you're battered and broken," Mira replied, happy that the hunters were back on their feet.

"Think so? Maybe you're right."

"Damn right. They did great," one of the older hunters next to Dran agreed, emotion welling up within them as they watched their juniors.

* * *

Upon their triumphant return to the fortress, the hunters split into two groups. One group would prepare for the monster-slaying celebration that Dran had proposed on the way home. The other would begin processing the tyrant spikeback while it was still fresh.

Dismissing her knights, Mira headed to the butchering room. It positively *reeked* of blood. Ten hunters were already hard at work cutting the beast apart. Loot drops were considerably messier than they used to be, Mira realized. Now people actually had to cut monsters apart to get their materials.

In *Ark Earth Online*, players stored defeated monsters in a special section in the Item Box. After that, they could use the butchering ability—a selectable option from the Item Box menu that essentially traded a monster's carcass for materials—to reduce the beasts to materials, or they could take the monsters to an NPC to have the job done.

After checking, Mira found that she could no longer put monster carcasses in her Item Box. Her Ethereal Arts: Itemization spell simply had no effect on them. The butchering ability was thus rendered unusable.

Once the beast was properly butchered by the hunters, it would become material items such as hide, bones, and meat. If Mira recalled correctly, Solomon's hypothesis was that they were perhaps treated as living things—rather than items to be broken down for crafting and whatnot—while their carcasses remained intact.

Despite having the butchering ability, Mira could not participate.

"That's hunters for you. They know what they're doing," she mused as she watched them work.

Although this was the hunters' first time butchering a creature like this, their handiwork did not falter once they got a good grasp of the tyrant spikeback's anatomy based on its external features. That was all part of being a good hunter.

"Are you sure you're fine with just the monster's core? This one's a big deal," Latry said, taking a break from butchery. Since the hunter's savior had only requested a single item from the kill, his expression wavered between joy and concern.

"Not a problem. Besides, you're the ones who did the hard work. I simply offered my aid. If I leave you the corpse, it'll feel more real too, right?" Mira laughed, her face a picture of composure and somber kindness.

"Well, that's fair. Thanks! We'll take you up on that."

Mira hadn't attacked the tyrant much, only had her Holy Knight bash it with its tower shield to keep its attention. It was no lie that the hunters were the ones who had finished it off, although the means of their victory didn't quite satisfy them. They knew that Mira had spent considerable time and effort and asked for little reward.

After accepting the tyrant's core, Mira left the butchering room and went out front. At his comrades' urging, Latry left a few moments later to check on Melissa.

The sky was dyed a golden hue, and soon the curtain of night would fall. Bright, merry bonfires lit the celebration. Mira watched the hunters rejoice with a sweet smile on her face.

Just then, a woman walked over rather timidly and addressed her in a humble tone.
"Excuse me, Miss Mira? May I ask a favor of you?"

Distracted from her internal musings, Mira turned to find a cute girl in her late teens.
"Hrmm, what now? Let's hear it," she responded.

Unbothered, the girl smiled and lifted her shirt up, pointing at her bare skin. "Do you see this? Umm, I noticed that there weren't any scars left when you treated Melissa. Can you remove this too?"

Her finger traced a scar along her ribs, where it looked as though she'd been lacerated. It wasn't the work of the tyrant, but an old wound that had healed long ago. Still, the scar stood out boldly on the girl's side. A man might show it off as a badge of honor, but perhaps such blemishes bothered even huntresses.

"I haven't tried, so I can't say whether it can be removed. Shall we see what we can do about it?" Mira leaned forward, secretly enjoying the view while inspecting the site of the wound. Although the girl's exposed flesh was... *distracting*, Mira was quite interested in seeing how this test of Asclepius's skill would work out.

Oblivious to Mira's ulterior motive, a big smile bloomed across the huntress's face.
"Yes, please! Thank you so much!"

After Mira summoned it, the snake slithered from its magic circle up Mira's body. It coiled around her right arm and awaited orders.

"Asclepius, you can heal this woman's scars, can't you?" Mira held out her arm. The white snake turned its head and nodded to her immediately. Its eyes seemed to say that this would be an easy job. "Oho, then by all means, go ahead!"

Asclepius opened its mouth and bit down on the skin next to the woman's breast.

"Ack!" The prickly pain made the huntress gasp and shudder, but soon the discomfort abated, and she loosened up. She looked down, and another smile graced her face as the treatment worked.

Ripples spread from the spot where Asclepius had bitten the girl, causing the scar to disappear. In its place, skin as smooth as a child's emerged.

"Such fast-acting medicine," Mira murmured to herself in admiration. "I had no idea it could do that."

Asclepius finished, and neither a scar nor bite marks remained.

"Thank you so much! I really appreciate it!" The patient told Mira and Asclepius with a grin.

"That is the true power of summoning," Mira said, never one to let an opportunity to promote her craft slip past.

"Wow. Summoning is incredible, huh?" the girl replied, to Mira's gratification.

"Me too, please!" came a second voice.

Then another asked, "Can you fix this?"

"Got room for one more?"

Seven other young women closed in on Mira. They'd watched her treat Melissa, and now this procedure. Their minds were made up.

"I do not mind at all," Mira answered magnanimously. She pointed to the first newcomer who'd requested healing and asked, "Where is your injury?"

The woman looked sheepishly at the people around her preparing for the celebration. "Erm, could you do it inside?" she asked apologetically, her cheeks slightly flushed.

Mira turned and noticed that many of the men running around were glancing over curiously. At the same time, the first girl she'd treated realized she had just bared her skin in public, in front of onlookers.

"Why didn't you stop me?!" she cried to her friends.

"We were too interested in seeing how it worked..."

Mira soon found herself shepherded to the underground room, and she began treating the women.

"Here it is." The first woman half-lowered her culottes, leggings, and finally underwear, presenting Mira with her backside—an awkward thing to show outdoors indeed—and requesting, "If you'd please..."

Mira saw a circular scar—likely the result of some sort of horn gouging the woman.

"Hrmm, all right." Mira reached out and squeezed the location under the guise of "examination." It was round, firm yet pliable, with all the womanly softness that one would expect. She savored the feeling and grinned in sheer delight. Her hand moved swiftly, and she felt emboldened by both the woman's consent and the fact that her petite, feminine form would not be perceived as a threat. "This should be no problem at all!"

After enjoying herself—er, "confirming the problem"—Mira nodded and had Asclepius heal the woman. Once the scar disappeared, the women squealed with delight.

Mira healed one young woman after another, taking each opportunity to feel inner thighs, cleavage, and more. She was truly enjoying the perks of being able to summon a physician.

* * *

After the treatments were done, the stars in the sky began to twinkle, and the celebration finally started in earnest. Outside, a grand feast was underway. Now that the hunters didn't have to stay huddled inside, they'd taken all they could from the fortress's stores for this happy occasion. Their faces were truly joyful as the party raged on. Confidence had swept in and banished their worries.

Mira jovially enjoyed the drinks made from the bounty of the forest and talked at

length about the power of summoning, savoring the hunters' praise. Not even half of them listened to her whole lecture, yet Mira still got herself nice and drunk and enjoyed the party.

One by one, the hunters fell to drunkenness and fatigue, consigning themselves to peaceful sleep.

As things wound down, Tomoki approached Mira and sat next to her. "Thank you so much for saving us."

"Oh, please. With my summoning powers, it was easy." Even inebriated, Mira was still a committed hype-girl for her discipline.

"Of course. I specialize in production, so I always envy fighters such as yourself." Tomoki said, politely brushing past her bragging as he began to tell his own story.

Tomoki had specialized in woodworking—specifically staves and bows. Then, one day, he tried sculpting and fell in love. Soon, his sculptures sold for prices equal to his painstakingly made weapons, and demand for them surpassed that for his other wares.

Tomoki explained that he had modeled statues after the three gods, making him something like a Japanese Buddha sculptor. He added with a wry grin that he had the honor of sculpting for the Three Great Kingdoms. Something he'd started for fun had taken on a life of its own.

For that reason, he had resolved to come to the Forest of the Devout in search of the perfect wood for carving. Indeed, if any forest had the right material, it would be the one that contained the Elder Tree.

"From there, I managed to get the hunters' help. I have an idea of where I can find the right wood, but... well, all this happened," Tomoki said with a sigh.

Expressed as an adventurer's rank, Tomoki's strength would be somewhere between C and D. He wouldn't have stood a chance against the tyrant spikeback, but if he really tried, he should've been able to flee. When Mira asked why he stayed, Tomoki replied that he at least wanted to be there with the hunters to the end.

She nodded in understanding, then asked him about the thing that weighed heaviest on her mind. "Incidentally, I have a question. Long ago, monsters wouldn't appear in

places that weren't their habitats. Is that a common occurrence now?" Perhaps Tomoki knew more about what was going on, now that the game was reality.

After a moment of thought, Tomoki finally answered, "Monsters only inhabit areas that aren't their habitats when they're forced to. Usually, that has to do with humans' impact on ecosystems... but this time, I'm totally stumped. With these attacks, the types of monsters and the habitats they come from are far too diverse."

"I'd say so too. What could the cause be?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

The two brainstormed, staring into the dark forest beyond the bonfire.

Once Tomoki's drunkenness spirited him away, Mira sipped her own drink and noticed Melissa sitting next to Latry. Melissa wasn't fully recovered, but color had returned to her face, and hunger had returned to her belly.

Noticing Mira's gaze, Latry and Melissa came her way.

"Melissa can walk around on her own now! It's all thanks to you, Mira. Thank you so much," said Latry.

"Um, Latry told me everything. Thank you for saving my life," added Melissa.

The pair bowed deeply. Melissa's face betrayed nothing but gratitude; Latry's was a mix of gratitude, joy, and returned confidence.

"Don't mention it. It's good to see that you're better," Mira replied before diving into a lecture about summoning's usefulness, abilities, and applications. An outsider might've processed it as gibberish, but to those in the know, it felt as if they were listening to the great Danblf himself.

Or at least it would have if anyone actually *listened*. Mira's words simply melted into the ongoing commotion, cool night wind, and twinkling night sky.

CHAPTER 7

THE NEXT MORNING, Mira said her goodbyes and climbed onto Pegasus before leaping into the clear blue sky. The hunters belted out their thanks and watched as she went. Since they were all hungover, though, that made for quite a painful cacophony.

Only three people could say goodbye without wincing at the light: Dran, the perennially heavy drinker; Melissa, who had abstained while she healed; and Latry, who had abstained in solidarity.

* * *

In the skies above the forest, Mira slumped on Pegasus's back, hungover as well. She recalled advice that Solomon once gave her: "When you drink, you need to hydrate." She withdrew an apple au lait and sipped it delicately.

However, what goes in must come out, so she was forced to land several times. Due to her powerful metabolism, however, she recovered her composure in the space of a few hellish hours.

Now able to properly enjoy the view, Mira sighed in awe at the landscape that covered the world before her. *One never tires of such glorious sights.* Directly ahead was an enormous wall that outdid even the bastions of Grimdart Castle, the largest on the continent. Instead of being stone, though, this was a single enormous tree—the Elder Tree—that merely looked like a wall.

Mira looked up and saw that the sky was now blotted out by the Elder Tree's thick canopy. Yet strangely, the space underneath the tree was well lit. Glowing particles of light like motes of sunshine slowly fell from the treetop. Those were pieces of mana the Elder Tree dropped, which allowed the trees below to grow despite the shade. When the particles touched the ground, the countless flowers that littered the forest floor absorbed them, setting their petals aglow. Consecrated by the falling mana, the ground below became sacred.

Pegasus landed at the base of the imposing Elder Tree. Particles of light fell from far overhead like gentle snow as Mira descended from her mount.

The flowers perked up at her presence, as if looking at their visitor from above. Pegasus worriedly rubbed its face against Mira, and she reassured the winged beast before dismissing it. Then she faced a great wooden wall—the trunk of the Elder Tree.

“Elder, I come bearing a question. Show yourself.”

At her voice, the wind blew like a whisper and caressed her cheek. The trees behind Mira rustled and swayed. The breeze spread gradually through the sacred grounds, until all at once it stopped, and silence ruled.

The air became heavy. Mira was familiar with this situation; she simply waited for the Illustrious Elder of Wood and Shade—the lord of the Forest of the Devout—to appear before her.

Before she realized it, the incessantly falling mana had disappeared, covering her surroundings in quiet darkness. There was the sound of something creeping along the ground, closing in behind her. In the next instant, the shadow of a young girl—Mira’s own shadow—appeared on the tree trunk in front of her.

She turned to see an orb of light floating behind her, just big enough to fit her arms around. It darted left and right, as if sizing her up, then fell abruptly to the ground in front of her.

The soil where the light fell slowly swelled as a sprout emerged from it. The sprout grew rapidly, becoming taller than Mira in a few moments, then transformed into a human, maturing completely in just over ten seconds.

The Elder had appeared before her. Though roughly humanoid, he wore a robe of leaves and had a strangely *mechanical* appearance.

“What brings you here?” The Elder’s voice was low and muffled. His eyes gleamed in uncanny suspicion as they beheld Mira. Though she had seen him once before, he was still unsettling enough that she unthinkingly stepped backward.

“I apologize for my impertinence. I’ve come to inquire about any who may have come in search of your root... though I do not know how long ago they might have come. If you’ve any idea, I would appreciate your help,” Mira said.

The Elder gazed at her in silence for a moment. Despite Mira’s discomfort at his vacant eyes gazing through her, she awaited his response. Then her surroundings abruptly lit

up.

"Wh-what's the meaning of this?" She looked around and spotted three orbs of light sinking to the ground. Each caused the ground to swell, sprout, and create another human form.

A woman in a cherry-blossom robe, a man in bark armor, and a little girl wrapped with nothing but vines appeared in the same manner as the Elder had. All three had the same biomechanical look as the forest lord.

"I remember him," said the cherry-blossom woman with a gentle, feminine voice that soothed Mira's apprehension. "It was the first time anyone had ever asked, so he sticks out in my mind. The exact date eludes me... but he asked for my root, and I agreed."

"I remember him too!" the girl chimed in, waving her vines around. "He paid us back by bringing us a ton of tasty food. I hope he comes again..." Unlike the other three, she was completely nude, and the vines did a poor job of covering her—but she seemed not to care at all.

"Hmm, I do remember that," the bark-covered man agreed, his voice deep and his appearance reminiscent of a warrior's. He put his hand on the shoulder of the vine-covered girl and scolded her. "It's rude to be naked in front of guests!"

Mira took all this in. It seemed that someone had come here after all; he had received the root in exchange for food. Unfortunately, the timeframe was still unclear... but the visitor had been the first person to come in search of the Elder's root. All signs pointed to the mystery man being Soul Howl.

"Hrmm. And you're certain about all this?"

"It is certain," the Elder answered emotionlessly. As if reacting to his voice, the earth rumbled, and a root hundreds of times bigger than Mira split the ground and emerged. Its tip was severed unnaturally.

"I see... This is where it was cut?"

It was too dim to tell for sure, but Mira did indeed see signs of the root having been sliced. The wound also appeared to be old, which meant that Soul Howl must have been here long ago.

"That may be the person I'm searching for," Mira said. Now that she'd completed her main objective, she asked for more information. "Do you remember any details about him?"

The Elder again thought to himself with his eyes fixed on her, but said nothing.

"I think... he had black hair. And a white mask that covered his eyes," the armored man spoke up. He added that he couldn't remember anything else. The other three agreed that those were the only features they recollect.

"Hrmm. I have to assume it's him."

Black hair and a mask that covered his eyes... Soul Howl did have black hair, as long as he hadn't changed his appearance. As for the mask, Mira had some ideas. Soul Howl was devoted to role-playing a shady character, so the mask was likely part of the performance.

"Did he mention anything else at all?" Mira asked, probing for details.

The woman answered hesitantly. "I wonder... I was curious what he wanted to use my root for, so I asked him. Erm..."

The girl took up the story to help fill in the specifics. "A grail, right? And he needed, um... something black to carve it with?"

"Something... black?" Mira repeated. "Hrmm. I've no idea what that could be."

Unable to fit that in with what she'd learned, Mira decided to tell Suleiman about it and let him handle the rest. He had read Soul Howl's documents, so surely he'd be the right person to make the connection.

Recalling the hunters in the fortress, Mira added, "One more thing. This is unrelated, but I've heard that unusual monsters are appearing in this forest. Do you know anything about that?"

"Ah, we know few details, but we do sense a distortion to the east. If there's a cause, that might be it." The man looked east and opened his eyes wide as if seeing something. Mira only saw the dark forest and the falling particles of light.

She knew that these three could grasp everything in the realm of the Elder Tree and

its sacred grounds, but since the distortion was located outside that area, they could only make broad observations.

"A distortion, eh?" Mira put a finger to her chin and pondered the curious news. She decided to check it out once her work was done. Now that she'd asked the last of her questions, she continued, "Illustrious Elder of Wood and Shade, your aid is appreciated. I offer this to you."

Mira removed a baked treat from her Item Box. She'd summoned a god, so she had to pay tribute. Since gods born from nature tended to love offerings made by the hands of man, Mira had procured plenty of sweets.

"Human sweets!" The little girl leapt for joy and snatched away the treat. She threw it into her mouth and chewed with a blissful smile.

Knowing now that she'd chosen the right offering, Mira produced more from her inventory.

The girl reached again for the ever-growing mountain of sweets, but the fatherly man seized her vines to stop her. "It is improper to seize an offering before it is complete," he admonished.

He, the woman, and the Elder weren't quite as excited as the little girl, but they all seemed quite pleased.

"It's been so long since we were last offered sweets. If I might be so bold, I would've been just fine with you relieving yourself a little. With your mana, that would have born fine fruit," said the Elder, speaking at length for the first time since Mira arrived.

Mira winced at the suggestion, which the Elder delivered with no hint of emotion at all. Perhaps he only wanted a sample of her mana to feed the earth, but it still seemed so... *perverted*. Apparently, this botanical god of countless years did not have the delicacy to phrase the comment better. The man and woman nodded solemnly in agreement, making the situation even more awkward. The little girl simply gorged herself with pastries, oblivious to it all.

Suddenly, Mira was *very* glad that she'd brought the sweets as an offering. If she'd forgotten her tribute, it might've forced her to do... *that* in front of them. Gods were terrifying beings indeed.

Now disillusioned with deities, Mira came to another very important realization and shuddered with regret—for she had enjoyed far too much apple au lait on her flight from the fortress.

CHAPTER 8

THE UNUSUAL MONSTERS in the Forest of the Devout were still a mystery, but Mira had learned that Soul Howl had come this way in search of the Holy Grail of Heavenly Light.

If she followed this trail, she should catch up with him. Eventually.

As she left, Mira thanked the plant folk, who were now enjoying the banquet of sweets. The little girl gave Mira fruit from a nearby tree as an added thanks for bringing so many. She said the fruit had grown from the offering given by the man who wanted the root.

Mira put the fruit in her Item Box. She'd never received a gift from the gods before, although she now wished she hadn't.

Next up was collecting the items Solomon requested. It would take an hour on foot to get to that location, so Mira summoned Pegasus to speed things along. The beast seemed to have been worried about her, since it happily licked her cheeks over and over.

Once Pegasus finally calmed, they flew for several minutes to the lakeshore closest to the sacred grounds. The forest clearing below was overgrown with flowers of all colors.

Each time the wind passed through, the flowers danced and emitted sweet fragrances. The rippling lake reflected the sunlight and glittered like crystal. A waterfall tumbled down a cliff on the opposite shore, creating lovely background noise.

Small animals scampered about. Given the serenity of the glade, this must have been a sanctuary for the little creatures.

Was this place always so gorgeous? Shocked and a trifle emotional, Mira took in the sight.

In-game, this was merely a lake with a meadow. But now, it was a beautiful field of dazzling flowers—nothing short of paradise. Mira stood upon the shore, feeling the

thirty years that had gone by.

As she did, a golden-furred squirrel approached Pegasus, sneaking around its hoof before clambering onto the horse's body. Atop Pegasus's back, the squirrel heaved a sigh of relief and fell into a deep sleep.

That opened the floodgate, and soon more small, furry creatures approached. Mira was surprised, but she had to giggle at the sight of Pegasus decorated like a Christmas tree. The winged horse seemed unbothered as it accepted all the animals.

Pegasus was a holy beast—a Buddha-like figure to the creatures—and truly the safest, most sacred place they could be.

Mira watched with a smile and found herself gazing at a blue baby bunny. It was an extremely rare animal called a pure rabbit, which had fur famous as a good-luck charm. Uninterested in that, Mira gazed at the bunny's adorable, round eyes and spherical form. Pure rabbits had always been considered one of the cutest species in *Ark Earth Online*.

This was Mira's first time meeting a live pure rabbit. They were naturally timid and rarely revealed themselves to anyone. With enough of a strained search, someone lucky enough might catch a glimpse of one, but most people only saw this rare animal in screenshots. Now one was right before her eyes, and she couldn't tear her gaze away from its adorableness.

I never knew real pure rabbits were like this. It's so... round and fluffy. Unbidden, Mira found herself reaching a hand down. But before she could touch the pure rabbit, it jumped away in fear and took refuge behind Pegasus's leg.

“Urk...” The clear rejection wounded Mira. Pegasus neighed quietly to the rabbit, and the bunny timidly showed itself again. “Goodness, Pegasus... Did you tell it to come out for me?”

She tore her eyes away from the pudgy bunny and looked to Pegasus. It responded with a nod and cocked its head as if demanding praise.

“Aren’t you the best?” Mira patted Pegasus’s head once and returned her gaze to the pure rabbit. Long blue ears poked out of its head, bobbing occasionally as if to search its surroundings. Unable to bear the temptation any longer, Mira patted the blue orb and savored the fluffiness of its fur.

Despite its size, it was unbearably soft and warm. A pure bunny, right there beneath her hand, alive as could be!

Mira stroked it as gently as possible, taking care not to agitate it. Soon she was rewarded, as the pure rabbit judged that she was not dangerous and leaned into her petting.

“Aww, what a cutie you are! There, there. Good baby.”

The rabbit’s cuteness never ceased. Mira pulled it into a soft hug, single-mindedly doting on the creature. Then Pegasus suddenly neighed, scaring the rabbit enough to send it leaping out of Mira’s arms. The bunny composed itself before bowing down as if in apology to the winged beast, showing submission to its god.

“What did you say this time?” Mira asked, cocking her head in confusion. “What’s gotten into you, Pegasus?”

As she stroked its mane, Pegasus pushed its head into her chest. *Hrmm. That doesn’t tell me much.* She continued to pet the beast and looked down. The bunny squeaked, still groveling at Pegasus’s feet.

Mira wanted to dote on the blue fluffball once more, but she knew that if she started again, she might never stop. If left to it, she would have been tempted to play with the rabbit all day, but she had come with a goal in mind. She couldn’t frolic with little woodland creatures forever.

With no small feeling of regret, she shooed the animals off Pegasus’s back and dismissed it. However, the creatures gathered around her. It seemed they recognized her as Pegasus’s master, and as she walked toward the rocky mountain that served as the labyrinth’s entrance, they scurried after her.

“No, no. Go away. I’m going to a dangerous place.”

Naturally, they did not understand her speech. The bravest animal among them, the golden squirrel, sat atop Mira’s shoulder in blissful relaxation. She glanced down to find the pure rabbit begging her to carry it as well.

It wouldn’t do to go into the labyrinth like this. Trying her hardest to withstand temptation, Mira decided to summon the perfect being to negotiate with the creatures.

[Evocation: Cat Sith]

Right away, a small magic circle appeared in midair. With a pop, a kitten dressed like a magician emerged. He spun three times before landing, feet perfectly aligned, and revealed a placard that said *10.0*. His magic circle spewed confetti, making the performance just a touch more elaborate.

“I answer your summons, meow meow meow! It’s been so long that I wanted to make it a little mew-re of a treat. How do you rate it, Ringmeowster?”

“Eh. A six at best.”

“Mreeeow?!” Cat Sith spun his placard to create manga-like speed lines. Mira chuckled; she admired the meticulousness of his performance.

The cat fairy, Cat Sith, was one of the few summons below top-tier that could talk to people. His abilities weren’t directly useful in battle, but he was a fantastic scout and translator with the rare ability to speak to animals. He could gather information from them as needed.

“Goodness! Ringmeowster... or should I say Ringmeowstress? You’ve turned into a little girl! Simply purrfect! Ten outta ten!” Cat Sith waved the *10.0* placard with both hands, jumping around and mewing wildly. The display made the animals wary, causing them to back off somewhat.



"It bothers me how easily everyone accepts it... Ah, whatever. Might I ask a favor?"

"Pawsitively!" Cat Sith put his feet together and saluted. The hand behind his back held a placard that read *Standing by!*

"I want you to tell these animals that I'm going somewhere dangerous, and they shouldn't follow me. Can you do that?"

"On my nine lives, it will be done!" Cat Sith doffed his top hat and held it over his heart with one hand, the placard in the other hand now reading *Cross my heart and hope to die!* He jumped into the center of the animal crowd and spoke to them with words that Mira could not comprehend.

After a while, the animals seemed to get the message and sadly dispersed. Cat Sith then addressed the golden squirrel on Mira's shoulder, and it obediently jumped down and climbed a nearby tree.

"All done, Ringmeowstress."

"Indeed. Good job."

Cat Sith leaped off Mira's shoulder, doing three flips and twirling to face her before landing directly on his head. With faltering steps, he managed to right himself and salute again. Mira thanked him for his work and pulled him into a hug. She was sad now that the animals were gone, and Cat Sith made a cuddly substitute.

"Mya ha ha! That tickles!" Cat Sith whined, but he kicked his legs joyfully. His placard shone with the word *Tighter!*

Mira scratched the chin of her summoned party member and resumed the trek to the rocky mountain.

* * *

The Primal Forest lay within a fissure that ran through the mountain adjacent to this lake. Mira entered the canyon, walking carefully down the steep path with Cat Sith atop her head. The space was barely wide enough for a full-grown adult, and the bare rock was cold and echoed with each footstep.

Deep inside the fissure entrance, the waterfall was just barely audible. No sunlight

penetrated the canopy, but Mira's path was well-lit thanks to Cat Sith. With his special searchlight ability, he emitted light from his eyes. Sitting on her head, he naturally and conveniently lit whichever direction she faced.

Ten minutes in, the slope became easier to traverse, and soon it was a flat path. Cat Sith glared toward the end of the path, where countless engraved symbols shone fluorescently in the rock wall.

"Veeery suspicious. There's magic afoot!" he growled.

At Mira's feet were the words *Primal Forest Management District, Adventurers' Guild Union*.

"Hrmm... This must be the barrier," Mira muttered to herself. She patted Cat Sith's back and retrieved the restricted-area pass she'd received from Leoneil at the Karanak Mages' Guild. "Ah, here we go."

"Meow, meow! The magic is weakening."

The moment Mira took the permit in hand, it shone, causing the symbols on the wall to fade. She had no idea how the restricted-area pass worked, but she surmised that it was now possible for her to keep going. Mira took one step at a time, and with each step, the symbols ahead faded. At the same time, the ones she passed regained color.

Another ten minutes in, a faint light came into view and the passage ended, depositing Mira in a large chamber. Within was a small yet dense forest. Light like sunbeams shone from overhead, but there was no sun above. Oddly, the ceiling was dark; it was nothing but bare rock from which luminescent ivy hung.

The foliage in the light was vibrant, with flowers of all kinds growing everywhere. The small forest's trees extended so high that Mira had to crane her neck to see their tops. She gasped at the sight.

"Ringmeowstress, we've discovered new frontiers!" Cat Sith jumped down from Mira's head and yowled "Yahoo!" to the forest. Despite his enthusiasm, this was hardly an unexplored area.

"Thank you for all you've done." Mira returned the restricted-area pass to her Item Box and put her hand on Cat Sith to dismiss him.

"But mew adventures lie in wait!" Cat Sith grumbled, ducking under her hand to prostrate himself. His placard now read *Haev mersy!* No doubt the spelling errors indicated his distress.

He suddenly reminded Mira of Twinkle Pom, who had done the same thing. Realizing that each summon had its own thoughts and feelings, she pulled her hand back, saying, "You're impossible."

"You're the best, Ringmeowstress. I'll tail you as long as I live!"

"Don't you mean 'follow'?"

"That too!" Cat Sith threw a *Boundless devotion!* placard high into the air, jumped, and spun. When he landed, he had changed into an expeditionary outfit. Then he caught the falling placard... on his head. It fell to the ground next to his dazed body, reading: *Here lies Cat Sith, dead of embarrassment.*

"Well, shall we get going?" Mira surveyed the area and picked an enormous leaf from a nearby vine. Using it as a parasol, she walked to the edge of the clearing.

"You're leaving me alone in the wilderness?! Me-owch, that's harsh!" Cat Sith shouted and jumped to his feet, scrambling to catch up.

Mira and Cat Sith stood facing a rock wall. Before them were a fissure and a slope that led even deeper down. This was merely a primal forest; *the Primal Forest* was deeper still.

The path ahead was steep and as smooth as glass. Once they descended, they could not come back up via the same route. That was true of all Devils' Labyrinths—their entrances and exits were always in different locations.

Mira patted Cat Sith's head as he perched on her shoulder. "Light the way."

"It's clawfully dark up ahead." Cat Sith swung his legs excitedly as he aimed his glowing eyes at the path. He'd given up his placard in favor of clinging to Mira with both hands. He knew exactly what was about to happen.

Mira squatted and spread the leaf underneath her.

It's always a thrill to come here!

The path ahead was a long, long slide. Mira grinned with excitement and scooted her butt forward until she was inches away from the slope edge.

“Now!” She kicked with both legs, hurtling onto the slope.

“Our adventure begiiins!” cried Cat Sith.

Mira accelerated at an alarming speed, and her muscles tensed with anticipation.

This was fun in the game, but in reality, er...

Wind buffeted Mira’s whole body. Each corner and turn tugged with such centrifugal force that she thought it would throw her off the slope. Though she negotiated the turns smoothly, the way she was forced to take them at high speed terrified her. Being unable to see very far in the dark didn’t make it any more comforting.

“Meowstress, I’m gonna pee myself!”

“Hold it in!”

Like a perpetual pain machine, the slide curved left and right, and Cat Sith screamed each time. Perhaps thanks to his exaggerated shrieks, Mira was able to keep her cool. After five whole minutes of sliding, the light of their goal finally came into view.

As the too-long slide ended, it tossed Mira and Cat Sith abruptly into blinding light. Mira squinted as the ground disappeared under her, and she flew in an arc before finally succumbing to gravity and crashing into the ground.

She had landed on her backside, and Cat Sith finally slipped off her shoulder. A muffled cry came from beneath her. “Pfmeow!”

“Ah, sorry about that. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine... You’re light, now that you’re a little girl.”

Mira jumped aside, and Cat Sith stood up. Tottering, he did his best to show that he was just fine. He picked up his placard, which declared *Every tom wants a queen to sit on him!*

Girl and cat surveyed their surroundings. The spectacle before them was peculiar.

They had landed on a branch so high and long that they could not see the forest floor below, nor where the branch started or ended.

This place was quite different from the forest before. Though deep underground, the lush green space was full of light. Mira looked up and saw a full canopy obstructing her view. Here and there, vines as thick as trees hung down; the light once again seemed to come from them.

Behind Mira and Cat Sith, a rock cliff stretched high above. Branches crossed it in all directions, and vines thick with leaves were tangled around them. Unidentifiable bird cries echoed in the distance.

The air seemed thick with a lifeforce of its own. In this place, ruled by natural laws beyond human knowledge, an oppressive serenity hung heavily around the pair.

“A whole new world! We’ve discovered the depths of these uncharted lands!” Cat Sith declared, deeply moved by their “discovery.” He planted a placard labeled *Cat Sith Expeditionary Team* in the ground—or at least he tried. The wooden branch was too hard, and the placard simply fell on its side. Cat Sith—Mira’s one and only party member at present—stooped down dejectedly to pick the placard back up.

Now, how many will I be able to find? Mira began walking around, looking for the item she had come to harvest, and Cat Sith rushed to follow.

* * *

After searching the dense forest a while, Mira finally found the purpose of her visit below a leaf: a seed large enough to wrap her hand around, pulsating with deep-green light. This was a Primordial Pip; Solomon had asked her to gather them.

“There you are. Finally.” Mira picked up the Primordial Pip with a sigh and looked around again.

The Primal Forest was commonly known as the very first forest, although strictly speaking, it was not a forest at all. It was merely the countless branches of the father of all trees, the Gopher Tree.

Indeed, everything before Mira’s eyes was the Ancient Gopher Tree, which meant that she could potentially find Primordial Pips *anywhere*. In practice, that made it impossible to identify a suitable gathering point.

Long ago, former players had shuffled through here, staring fixedly at their feet. Remembering such simple, everyday occurrences, Mira sighed again at the Primordial Pip in her hand.

Cat Sith clambered up Mira's shoulder, pointed at the Primordial Pip in her hand, and asked, "Ringmeowstress, do you need more of those?"

"Nine more. But I have no idea where they'll be. Argh! This is so irritating," Mira complained, though the cat's soft fur soothed her slightly.

Unexpectedly, Cat Sith walked along Mira's arm, sniffed and licked the Primordial Pip, and jumped down to search his surroundings.

"There's one right over there!" Cat Sith announced, pointing confidently with his paw a few branches ahead. For some reason, he was sticking his tongue out with tears in his eyes. Mira's gaze shifted to his placard, which read *Flavor: AWFUL*.

"Oho. Really?"

"Those have a pawsitively pungent smell. With such refined senses as mine, it's easy to find them!" Cat Sith responded with the best thumbs-up his toe beans could muster. His eyes were sharp and confident, but his tongue still poked out.

"Fantastic work, Party Member One!" Mira cried as she snatched up Cat Sith.

[Immortal Arts Movement: Air Step]

Mira dashed through the air to the spot he had pointed out.

"It's near here!" Cat Sith piped up, cradled against Mira's chest, and he looked down at the branch stretching out before them. The little guy was right; Mira discovered a Primordial Pip in a spot where the branch's vines had tangled.

Up to this point, she had only used Cat Sith for scouting and recon—she never knew he could be so useful. Mira rejoiced at this newly discovered power and raised the cat with both hands, demanding, "Where's the next one?!"

Cat Sith's eyes darted back and forth until his unique, unparalleled, masterful senses homed in on the scent again. "Hmmm... Mya ha! Over there!" His cat searchlight lit the way to the next Primordial Pip.

"Good job!" Mira's mood had lightened immeasurably, and she petted, cuddled, and praised the kitty with each new discovery of a pip. This harvest was going much more smoothly than she'd expected.

CHAPTER 9

THANKS TO CAT SITH'S DIRECTIONS, Mira had already secured five of Solomon's desired Pips. It seemed she would finish sooner than she planned. In a cheerful mood now, Mira ran through the trees with light steps.

As she was locating the sixth Primordial Pip, the greenery began to rustle, and something emerged from the foliage.

"Careful, meow. Something wicked this way comes..." Cat Sith glared daggers at the ambushers, fully in danger mode. He put on rather a brave display for a cat hiding behind Mira's head.

"So, they've come," Mira murmured, glancing at those who blocked her path.

Treemen existed not just in the Primal Forest, but in all wooded areas. Their figures were humanoid, but their bodies were made of withered wood. Since this was a Devils' Labyrinth, all the monsters that appeared were *subspecies* of their respective overworld monster species. This subspecies of treemen were called Nildreants, Mira seemed to recall.

Tree bark covered their faces, and their faux skeletons were all wood. Wriggling vines held them in a humanlike form, giving them an even more uncanny appearance than normal treemen.

When the Nildreants walked forward, their vines writhed more aggressively, and their bodies warped eerily. Their wood creaked as they approached, spear-sharp arms at the ready.

"Stay still for a moment," Mira commanded Cat Sith, pulling him from her neck. She used her free hand to pull down the neckline of her dress and shoved Cat Sith in.

"Understood, ma'am!" Cat Sith settled in and saluted, only his head peeking from within.

"And control your tail, please. It tickles." With that, Mira pushed Cat Sith's head down and shuddered.

"Yes'm!" Cat Sith answered, curling it under him.

While Mira was busy with Cat Sith, the situation was evolving. One of the three enemies facing her leapt into the air to attack.

Spotting it as it descended, Mira quickly jumped backward. The Nildreant—focused on nothing but hunting its foe—attacked precisely where she had been. Its spear-like arm dug into the ground.

Its arm would not move again, for suddenly, a black hand appeared behind the monster and brought a jet-black sword down upon it. The blade was heavy, its impact sending bark, splinters, vines, and green liquid flying. That was certainly a Dark Knight's blow, although the Dark Knight was only a partial summon.

It seems the summon's power doesn't suffer, thought Mira. She'd tested the strategy at the academy's gymnasium, but this was the first time she'd tried it in a real battle. Satisfied with the result, she quickly started thinking of applications.

The two other Nildreants cut her pondering short. They kicked aside their fallen friend's corpse and ran toward Mira; their thudding steps echoed through the forest. One sprang upward, bending its limbs at horrifying angles. The other rushed forward.

A pincer attack from above and ahead. Unfortunately for the Nildreants, it ended in failure. The one that had jumped collided in midair with a large, white shield—another partial summon, this time a Holy Knight.

Hrmm. With the right timing, this could be very useful!

As her mental gears whirred away, Mira noticed the enemy still charging at her. Its spear arm carefully aimed a strike, which she evaded with practiced ease, placing a hand on the monster's torso as it passed.

[Immortal Arts Earth: Crimson Bouquet]

Fire billowed forth and turned the Nildreant to ash.

Only one Nildreant remained. The shield-blocked treeman stood up awkwardly, but just as it righted itself, another black sword cleaved it in two from the top. The executioner's arm disappeared into nothing, and a green pool spread where the monster died.

This is surprisingly convenient...

All of partial summoning's potential applications tickled Mira's inquiring mind. Since partial summons immediately disappeared after use, she didn't have to worry about keeping track of one that might get in the way later. A partial summon also appeared soundlessly, making it useful for ambushes. The ability seemed especially useful for battles in tight spaces, such as this one.

"That's my ringmeowstress for ya!" After confirming that the monsters were gone, Cat Sith jumped from Mira's dress and puffed out his chest. This time, his placard read *Back in action!*

"Now, where was the sixth Pip again?" Mira wondered aloud. The ambush had thrown her sense of direction off, and she couldn't discern one branch or vine from another.

Her party member didn't answer immediately—he was busy rummaging through the Nildreants' corpses. Before Mira could ask what he was looking for, Cat Sith deftly pulled an object from a corpse.

"Got you something!" In Cat Sith's raised paws was a black chunk of tangled ivy.

"Oho. You can recover loot too?"

The tangled ivy was a Nild Heart, an item obtainable only from this subspecies. Cat Sith offered it to Mira and ran to the next corpse. In total, he recovered two hearts; the heart of the Nildreant that had exploded was unsalvageable.

Mira put the increasingly useful Cat Sith on her shoulder and followed his guidance to the next Primordial Pip.

* * *

A little over an hour into their foray in the Primal Forest, Mira had secured all ten Primordial Pips that Solomon had requested—thanks to Cat Sith. After felling countless more Nildreants, she felt she had also deepened her understanding of partial summoning.

Three basic kinds of Nildreants existed: ones with spear-like arms, ones that lobbed poisonous fruit, and ones that launched toxic pine needles. Countless black stains now covered the area, the remnants of crushed poison fruit that the second Nildreant

variety had thrown at Mira.

Meanwhile, Cat Sith recovered yet another Nild Heart and offered it to Mira. He was quite used to this work now.

Mira was currently at the outer edge of the Primal Forest. The deeper she went, the rarer the items that awaited—and the rarer the monsters too. In the forest's innermost depths were beasts that even Wise Men would struggle to handle solo. Mira had no need to go that far this time, since Primordial Pips were evenly scattered throughout the labyrinth.

"Well, our work here is done. Shall we get going?"

"Yes'm!" Cat Sith climbed up to Mira's shoulder again.

Devils' Labyrinths had separate entrances and exits, so Mira would have to search for the latter in this forest of random branches. Any *normal* person would immediately have lost their sense of direction—but since Mira had been here many times already, she knew a way to find the exit.

She strained her eyes and looked around before putting Cat Sith back on her head.
"Mm... I don't see it. Can you spot any blue flowers, Party Member One?"

"Blue flowers? Hmm, purrhaps." He widened his eyes and held a placard that read *Searching!* His gaze scanned every last branch, under every leaf, and behind every vine. Only ten or so seconds later, Cat Sith used his cat-eye searchlight to point toward the flowers. "Found 'em! Right over there."

Mira offered him a word of praise, then made a break for it. Beyond a few branches that she could use as footholds, an especially thick vine bore four blue blooms, each the size of Mira's palm. It was only a matter of time until she and Cat Sith reached the exit.

Mira found the next blue flowers; they bloomed at set intervals, as if guiding her. If she followed this trail, she would be out of here in a flash.

* * *

Mira and Cat Sith followed the flower trail for a while; Mira used any Nildreants they encountered as test subjects for partial summoning. Finally, they spotted a worn chest

at the end of a branch.

“Meowstress, we’ve got treasure!” Cat Sith’s eyes sparkled. In one hand, the feline held a placard with a suspenseful phrase: *Pandora’s box?! An ancient chest hidden on the frontier. Does it hold hope, or despair?!*

“Mm-hmm! A treasure chest.”

Faced with the chest, Mira remembered the words of Leoneil, the leader of the Mages’ Guild. Specifically, he’d said the reason the Primal Forest was restricted was none other than the box before her. This strange treasure chest reappeared even after one took its contents. In-game, respawning treasure chests were the norm, but that sort of behavior was an aberration in a real world.

Mira pointed her palm toward the treasure chest.

[*Immortal Arts Heaven: Pulse*]

Roaring winds collided with the chest, denting it before dispersing.

“Hrmm. Seems safe enough.”

“Such violence, Ringmeowstress!” Cat Sith hopped down from her head. However, the impact of landing had numbed his legs, and he toppled over. “Y’know, identifying treasure chests is kinda *my* thing.”

Cat Sith managed to raise his upper body and gazed at the treasure chest, red light shining from his eyes. His placard, which supported him like a cane, said *Moment of truth!*

Now apparently recovered, Cat Sith turned around and declared confidently, “No purr-blem!”

“Well, no. I just tested it.”

“You sure did!” Cat Sith collapsed dramatically at Mira’s blunt answer. On his placard now was a set of speed lines around the words *Totally rekt...*

“I understand your point, though. You can see inside chests, eh? I had no idea, but that is incredible.”

"That's what thirty years of training gets ya!" Cat Sith stood and twirled his placard—now reading *Harder, better, faster, stronger!*—as he ran to the chest.

There were two chest types in Devils' Labyrinths: actual treasure chests, and mimics. To tell the difference, one simply had to attack the chest, like Mira had. If it was a real treasure chest, nothing would happen; if it was a monster, it would counterattack. The treasure chest didn't react this time, so it was normal.

Cat Sith opened the chest and passed Mira the contents, whereupon the box faded to dust and disappeared.

Mira eyed the fist-sized piece of wood in her hand. "Hrmm. What is this for?"

The cat climbed up her shoulder and peeked at the wood before saying, "Meow what have we here... Hmm. An Yggdrasil Chip, it looks like."

To Mira, it looked like a mere block of wood, but Cat Sith knew more. "Oho. You can identify items now too?"

"I've seen an Yggdrasil Chip in an encyclopedia." He proudly patted his chest, holding his updated placard aloft: *A one-cat appraisal machine!*

Yggdrasil Chips served as materials for powerful potions. They could also be used to make weapons that boosted healing power and gave users the strength to heal ailments such as poison, paralysis, and curses. The weapons sold for high prices among veteran adventurers.

Yggdrasil, hm? Come to think of it, Luminaria wanted Yggdrasil Charcoal as a catalyst. If I burned this, would it turn to charcoal?

Luminaria had asked Mira to bring her certain catalysts, for which Mira would receive the *Encyclopedia of Skills, 2146 Edition*. One such catalyst was an item called Yggdrasil Charcoal. The item was just what its name said, but Mira wasn't sure if burning a Yggdrasil Chip would create the "right" charcoal.

Well, I might as well show her. Deciding to leave it up to Luminaria, Mira tossed the chip into her Item Box.

* * *

The pair found no other treasure chests—but plenty of Nildreants—before arriving at the exit.

At the end of the chain of blue flowers was a large hole in the rock face. Mira and Cat Sith proceeded through and arrived in a chamber with dirt walls. Bioluminescent vines blanketed the ceiling, making it as bright as midday. A pool rippled in the corner; lotus-like leaves floated on its surface. The whole chamber seemed very out of place, with foliage unlike any Mira saw along the way. Everything was overgrown with colorful wildflowers.

Enshrined in the center of the chamber was a guide to the Primal Forest's exit, which spoke. "People rarely come here. Out searching for something?"

"It talks!" Cat Sith gasped.

"We were hoping to leave," Mira answered, looking up at the towering blue flower before her. Her feline companion watched excitedly.

The guide was easily as large as a house. It was bluer than the sky and emitted an herbal scent. Blooming in the rays of vine light, it beautifully made its presence known.

"I see, I see! Well, I think I can help you with that. Bring me a source of power, and I'll send you to the surface." The flower, which had a stem many times stouter than Mira, shook its immense petals as it spoke. Its voice seemed to echo from below, reverberating through the whole room.

All Devils' Labyrinths guides demanded a power source. Along with having to find the exit, one also needed an item to leave. That wasn't too difficult if one had the power to fight the monsters inside the labyrinth. Any item those monsters dropped could be used to escape.

"This ought to do it." Mira offered up a Nild Heart.

"Perfect. Toss it into the pool there, and I can send you to the exit!"

Mira once again tucked Cat Sith into her dress and threw the Nild Heart into the pool as the guide directed. Ripples spread across the pool's surface, and the heart gave off pale light as it sank.

"Power source received. Off you go!" The thick-stemmed flower wrapped its petals

around Mira as if devouring her.

"What the meooow?!" Panicking at the sudden darkness, Cat Sith clung to the closest thing at hand: Mira's bra.

"Relax. All it's doing is taking us to the exit." Mira remained calm and allowed the flower to do its thing, though she frowned at having her bra pulled.

The room rumbled, jostling the lights above and sending ripples through the water. Finally, the blue flower with Mira in its "mouth" was sucked into the ground—or, more accurately, it dug downward. With Mira in tow, it plunged through the earth. After a few minutes of unnerving vibration, they stopped.

The flower spat Mira out, and she landed butt-first on the hard rock floor.

"Couldn't you be a little gentler?" she grumbled, standing and rubbing her aching backside.

The flower paid her no mind. "Follow that river, and you're out. Goodbye, rare visitor!" it called before returning below, sending tremors though the ground once more.

* * *

They were inside a small cavern closed off by rock walls. The light shining from the river in the very middle was the only thing that suggested a connection to the outside.

"Guess that's the tail end of our journey. A real shame." Cat Sith leapt out of Mira's dress, looking at the river. Now, his placard read *Homeward bound*.

"There will be more to come." Mira smiled. "I hope you'll join me."

"Yes'm!" The cat jumped for joy. He looked thrilled as he twirled his placard, which now said *The adventure never ends!*

Amused by Cat Sith's excitement, Mira began to undress. She removed her robe, dress, and even underwear, throwing it all into her Item Box.

"Now, Party Member One, let's go."

"To the ends of the Eeearth!"

With that, Cat Sith and Mira—who didn't even try to hide an inch of her skin—jumped into the river together. They found themselves swept over the very waterfall that flowed into the lake next to the labyrinth's entrance. Thrown by the river's rushing current, Mira plunged into the lake.



"Um... Emergency! I... can't swim!" Cat Sith screamed, clinging to his placard—which read *SOS!*—like a life preserver.

"Now, now. Calm yourself."

The lake was not especially deep; Mira could stand up in the shallows. She lifted Cat Sith by the scruff of his neck, placing him on her head. That done, she climbed out of the water.

It was nearly sunset, and darkness gradually crept over the forest. Mira stood naked on the lakeshore, wringing water out of her hair. The flowers blooming around her made her allure even more magical. Once she'd wrung her hair out, she pulled the large bag with her clothes inside from her Item Box.

As she tried to retrieve a towel, she noticed a sound. Using her Biometric Scan, she confirmed something unusual. There were countless pings in the forest—likely small animals—but only one on the mountain peak above. The latter was well hidden and unmoving.

Mira glared toward the summit. "Who goes there?"

Realizing they'd been beaten, the stalker jumped down to meet her. He was dressed in a mantle as black as night. The man's toned arms were tense, and black cloth was wrapped around his hands. He had rectangular glasses, and a mask covered the lower half of his face; he looked like a genuine ninja.

Wary of Mira, the man kept his eyes fixed on her searchingly, holding something behind his back. "You're... not a spirit?" he asked, glancing at the bag at her feet.

"A spirit? What part of me looks incorporeal?" Mira glowered at him, annoyed.

"Yeah, she ain't a spirit! She's the ringmeowstress!"

Apparently letting his guard down somewhat, the man relaxed his shoulders and stared at Cat Sith, who peeked out from behind Mira's leg.

"Is that a cat fairy?" he asked.

"Indeed. I am a summoner, you see."

"That she is! The ringmeowstress is unbeatable!"

Mira's reply caused the man, who now totally dropped his guard, to frown with guilt and look away. "I see. Er, my apologies. You're as beautiful as a spirit, so I was... mistaken."

"Oho! Is that so?" The flattery lifted Mira's mood somewhat; clearly, this man had what it took to notice her current form's charms. Then she remembered just how suspicious this character was. "If you mistook me for a spirit, why did you act so cautiously?"

"Yeah! Unlike the ringmeowstress, spirits are actually nice!"

The stranger raised his eyebrows nearly imperceptibly, then cleared his face of all emotion. "Oh, well... once upon a time, I stepped into a testy spirit's territory and ended up getting chased out." He punctuated this with a laugh. "Hoo boy, that was a riot."

"Hrmm, I see. Well, I suppose you aren't to blame," Mira said. She opened her bag and retrieved a towel.

Cat Sith cackled at the man's expense. "You're a big dummy!"

"Pipe down."

"Yes'm..."

After wiping herself dry with the towel, Mira wrapped it around Cat Sith.

Spirits are free; they don't have territory, she reflected. He's just making up excuses because he thinks I'm a child. What could he be hiding?

As a summoner, Mira often mingled with spirits, and her knowledge of them was profound. Something about this man made her incredibly suspicious. "So, what were you doing in a place like this?" she asked him.

"Just collecting herbs and fruits, y'know. I was about to head home." He patted a pouch at his hip. Mira didn't know what was inside, but the pouch didn't seem very full for someone who was allegedly foraging.

"Hrmm, I see. If you came this far, I'm sure you found plenty of quality items."

"Yeah, more or less. Oh! By the way, have you seen any, uh... *spirits* hanging around?"

"No, I have not. Why do you ask?" Mira asked, scanning his face.

"I just want to avoid them," the man said matter-of-factly. Based on his words, he must have been awfully worried about spirits. "Anyway, I'm going back to the village close by. See you."

Immediately, he spun around and ran into the woods. When he turned his back, Mira spotted a black shortsword with mysterious emblems on his hip.

The man was just too suspicious. Aside from his appearance, his odd geniality, obsession with spirits, and blatant lying added up to one shady fellow.

"Hrmm. Perhaps I should investigate."

Following the man with her Biometric Scan, Mira noted that he abruptly changed direction and sped up. Then she deftly put away her towel and bag, thanked Cat Sith, and dismissed him. The cat's indignant cries echoed through the glade.

CHAPTER 10

MIRA RUSHED TO PUT on her underwear and plunged into the woods without hesitation. Based on his appearance alone, she figured that the man was a trained scout. Thus, she stayed in the trees to hide her presence and tailed him using Biometric Scan rather than her eyes.

Along the way, she retrieved and donned her technomancy robes. Although she could've worn her Elder robes, she'd really taken a liking to the other set.

Her Biometric Scan noted a lot of wildlife in the forest. All the pings on the ground and in the trees were likely small animals, while the ones cutting through the sky were birds evading the incoming humans. Behind her was one rather large signal, but whenever she turned around, it backed off.

Mira focused on the ping at the very edge of her detection range, which belonged to the suspicious fellow. Her heart thrummed wildly in her chest all the while.

She hid and looked around the woods once again. Flora and fauna burgeoned thick. Forests were troves of materials, full of valuable things: precious herbs used as bases for recovery items, pretty fruits that could be juiced for deadly toxins, especially sturdy trees that could be used in defensive gear, and more.

The lively sounds of the forest muffled Mira's footsteps as she weaved through the trees after her target.

* * *

How far had she tailed this man in a straight line now? A lake appeared ahead, and its surroundings were unnaturally quiet. It was smaller than the one by the Devils' Labyrinth, and purple flowers floated on its surface. To Mira, it seemed incredibly peaceful.

As her mark approached the lake, Mira tucked herself behind a tree and poked her head out to observe.

Is that a child? No, it's a spirit!

Near the center of the dim lake was a spirit who looked like a little girl. She must have been young. Her light-blue hair was long enough to cover her whole body. The spirit also wore a sparkly, translucent gown—little better than wearing nothing at all. She bore a shocking resemblance to Mira earlier that day.

The spirit girl leapt around, using the purple flowers as footholds as she played. She reached for butterflies flapping past her and laughed with joy. Watching from afar, Mira smiled in a rather grandfatherly way.

Meanwhile, the man hid in between the lake's grassy shore and the woods.

I knew it. He wasn't just foraging!

Spurred by unease, Mira ran toward the man, hoping to stop him. But poor terrain and the need to stay out of earshot had already slowed her approach. Now she was too late, too far away.

The man jumped into action as soon as Mira started sprinting. He crouched low and darted toward the spirit with the shortsword reverse-gripped in his hand.

"Ah... Am I too late?!"

Mira tried to advance by casting Shrinking Earth, but she couldn't use its full potential in the thick woods. The assailant closed in on his target.

A shrill noise ripped through the silence of the lake. Mira grimaced, but what she saw next was *not* a young spirit's corpse with a dagger in it.

The shortsword with suspicious glowing symbols tumbled wildly through the kaleidoscope of escaping butterflies. Someone had thrust a gleaming silver naganata between the man and the spirit.

The polearm that had repelled the man's shortsword instantly twirled and struck like lightning. The ninja barely caught his weapon as he fell onto the lake shore. Perhaps grazed by the naganata, his mask fell into the grass when he stood.

The clash had happened in an instant, but the intervention allowed the spirit girl to flee. Now the ninja wouldn't be able to get his hands on her.

Who is that?

After confirming the spirit's safety, Mira hid again and watched the situation unfold. The spirit's savior wore white-and-purple robes and a headdress; the outfit resembled a Shinto priest's garb. His hair was black, and the naginata in his hand was engraved with a pentagram. When he landed miraculously atop the lake, the golden braided cord that hung over his bangs bounced before his eyes.

"Chimera Clausen," the spirit's rescuer said. "Why don't you answer a few questions for me?"

"You must be from the Isuzu Alliance," the ninja replied. "You sure went through a lot of effort to chase me out here, huh?"

Their words reached Mira's ears as they stared each other down from a safe distance. The tension on the air hinted at the adversaries' strength.

A Chimera Clausen! I thought as much. But who is that other man? I heard the ninja say "Isuzu Alliance," but that tells me little. Either way, they're clearly not friends.

While Mira pondered what was going on between the two, they leapt into battle.

* * *

The Isuzu man running across the lake suddenly stopped, bent over, and touched the water at his feet.

[Talismancy Arts: Serpent]

The talisman in his hand siphoned water from the lake; the liquid swirled upward, scattering droplets as it coiled into the shape of a snake. The priest curved right as he sprinted, while the watery snake curved left—a simple pincer attack.

His opponent observed the action, removing a vial from his pocket.

Naginata met blade, sending sparks flying. At the same time, the black-clad man tossed the vial hidden in his hand backward. The moment it touched the incoming serpent, the vial exploded and created a cascade of sand.

That alone blasted away the serpent, and the Isuzu man's hand dropped the talisman limply to the ground. The priest looked frustrated, but he knew the name of the tool that had stopped his attack. "An Earth Spirit's Vial?!"

Behind the black-clad man, the sand cascade had reduced the serpent to droplets.

"I heard you lot have plenty of mediums, so I came prepared!" the ninja stepped forward into striking range, using his momentum to deal the priest a piercing blow.

The priest's left hand reached out to protect his vitals, and the brigand's blade bit deeply into his arm. Yet even as the priest's lips curled into a grimace, he activated his next talisman.

[Celestial Arts: Wood—Soul Divination]

As the spell activated, magic erupted from the talisman and wrapped the black-clad man's left arm. He scowled and glared at the priest, jumping away. Shockingly, as he did so, the priest's magic dispersed.

"Gotta be a real pain in my ass, huh?" the would-be kidnapper groaned.

Soul Divination, one of the Celestial Arts, shared the user's pain with their target. The closer together they were, the more effective Soul Divination was. Realizing this, the ninja put distance between them to lessen the spell's effect. Whoever this black-clad man was, he knew quite a bit about the Celestial Arts.

Despite the ninja's swift escape, the spell still made an impression. Covered in cold sweat, he held his arm. That only lasted a moment, however, as his body recovered from the shock.

The priest used that opening for a strike.

[Celestial Arts: Water—Aquatic Reflection]

He rapidly formed a seal, prompting his opponent to go on the defensive.

The spirit-napper squinted and searched, yet he saw no medium for the priest to cast the spell from. Then he shuddered—something mysterious was wriggling his way. The priest had definitely used his magic.

"That's... the serpent talisman?!" As if urged by something, the black-clad man began to flee.

Just as he started to run, the priest appeared behind him and wrestled him down.

Pinned to the ground, the ninja glowered at the foe standing above him. The priest stared back dispassionately; the Isuzu man seemed to have captured the ninja.

Chimera Clausen goons had the power to capture spirits, and the man in black was no exception.

The Isuzu fellow had seemingly been working to arrest the ninja from the start. The serpent had been bait all along—a distraction to place another talisman behind the ninja without his knowledge. Then *[Celestial Arts: Water—Aquatic Reflection]* created a watery double of the snake. It was nearly impossible to escape its grasp, so it was an effective tool for apprehending targets.

Although the priest had sustained a heavy arm injury, he had succeeded in arresting the enemy—or so he thought.

The priest turned his attention to the lake. He didn't feel the spirit's presence, so he decided that she must have escaped. Just as he felt relief, however, his naganata fell into the grass with a thud.

"Paralyzing toxin?" The priest dropped to his knees and strained to speak as numbness spread through him. His face froze in a wince, and his eyes drifted aimlessly. His concentration shattered, the spell he was using dispersed.

"Correct." The black-clad man readied his shortsword, looking down with devious excitement. "Time to wrap this up."

With that, he thrust his blade downward in one practiced motion. The weapon, so black it seemed to absorb the light around them, shrieked as it slid along the face of a white tower shield.

"What?! How?!"

As the black-clad man's eyes bulged in shock, he detected someone behind him. That seemed unthinkable, and he whipped around. Before he could fix his eyes on the assailant, a fiery blow sent him flying.

The white shield disappeared, and the priest saw a silver-haired girl with a black coat standing before him.

"You're paralyzed, right?" she asked. "Wait there a moment." Ignoring how her clothes

fluttered from the shock waves, Mira focused on the black-clad man.

* * *

Mira was unable to sit and watch as the priest-looking fellow was suddenly overcome.

She knew nothing of the priest's background or what the Isuzu Alliance was. But it was clear that Chimera Clausen, people who targeted spirits, were her enemy. Thus, it wasn't difficult to decide who to side with.

"You—"

Before the priest could speak another word, Mira vanished in the direction of the ninja. A moment later, there was a muffled groan, and the black shortsword stabbed into the ground.

"Damn it... Aren't you just a *summoner*? Why are you here?!" The man in black clenched his teeth in pain as he glared up at Mira, pouring the contents of another vial onto his badly burned arm. The liquid seemed to be a restorative, mending the injury a little.

"I should ask you the same. Why, I recall you saying you were going back to your village, hm?"

"I got a little lost, okay?!" His voice hoarse, the man withstood the pain and threw the vial aside before facing Mira head-on. As he stared her down, he palmed another vial behind his back.

"Either way, you're clearly up to no good. Why don't you tell me more?"

"There's nothing to tell. Besides, why should I say anything to you?" His eyes held harsh contempt for Mira—and vengeful bloodlust.

In a flash, Mira picked a technique to close the distance between them.

[Immortal Arts Movement: Shrinking Earth]

As she blinked out of existence for a split second, the ninja attacked wildly in all directions. It seemed he knew how to combat this sort of technique as well.

Based on the magic he'd seen so far, he realized that Mira was a sage—and a strong one at that. With a bitter chuckle, he understood that he'd failed the moment he believed her lie that she was a summoner, the weakest of all mages. Now assuming that she was a member of the Isuzu Alliance, he prepared the perfect means to deal with her.

In his hand was a Lightning Spirit's Numbing Vial. Once he broke it, the motor nerves of any living thing nearby would go haywire. The vial would also affect him, of course, but he wore gear equipped with lightning and paralysis resistance. That would minimize the vial's effects and allow him to move while the girl was paralyzed completely.

He squeezed the vial until it was close to cracking.

As he did, Mira appeared directly in front of him. She thrust out her fist, wrapped in raging winds, and tore into the black-clad man with merciless cutting air. Somehow, he withstood it. He desperately held her back, even as his limbs screamed in agony. Then he crushed the vial before the impact could throw it out of his hand.

"I... win!"

Electricity surrounded the man. Assured of his victory, he smirked, blood trickling down his cheek and into his mouth. As numbness crept through his body, his muscles contracted, and he fell backward.

With each second that passed, the effect faded. He'd come prepared, so he would recover before anyone else. Soon enough, he would be mobile, and the girl would be helpless. That was his ultimate strategy.

But the paralysis turned to pain before it could dissipate.

[*Forbidden Immortal Arts: Unsealed Demon's Eye*]

[*Forbidden Immortal Arts: Paralyzing Demon's Gaze*]

"Ngh... Ah! Aaagh!" Unbearable agony coursed through him, drawing a howl from the depths of his gut. Next to him was Mira, standing tall with eyes glowing gold. She had used the Demon's Eye. The man writhed in pain and a hefty dose of paralysis thanks to her Paralyzing Demon's Gaze.

"I had a feeling you were hiding something." Mira prodded his hand with her foot to open it. His fingers were dyed with blood and pierced by many shards of glass—proof that something had shattered in his hand.

"How? How... can you still move?" the black-clad man asked, looking up at Mira.

His vial's paralysis effect *must* have hit her. Even when one wore gear specialized against paralysis, the Numbing Vial still couldn't be fully resisted. Yet it showed no sign of actually working on her.

Mira revealed the back of her right hand to the man as he glared. The lighting made it difficult to see, but he laughed with regret and surrender, apparently understanding exactly what was going on when he saw the faint mark of a feather on her skin.

"Ha ha! A blessing, huh? You're no joke."

The feather mark was the symbol of the fairy's blessing that Mariana had given Mira—the symbol of their bond. Fairies' blessings existed in as many forms as there were fairies, and each was as strong as one's bond with the fairy.

Mariana's blessing conferred resistance to status ailments, and she loved Mira so much that it created total immunity. The Lightning Spirit's Numbing Vial was among the strongest paralysis-inducing magical tools. If Mira could withstand that, she could withstand anything.

It was then that the Isuzu Alliance man approached with tottering steps. The paralysis had seemingly worn off. "I don't know who you are, but you saved my life. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. I happen to have some beef with these Chimera Clausen fellows myself," Mira replied, moving her gaze from her feet to the priest. Her eyes had returned to their usual light blue.

A woman appeared before Mira and offered the priest her shoulder. In her white outfit, she reminded Mira of Japanese Yamabushi—white-clad, mountain ascetic hermits who sought enlightenment and rejuvenation in the peaks. However, her long blonde hair and blue eyes made her seem less a hermit and more a noblewoman.

"So, who are you people?" Mira asked. "This man called you 'Isuzu Alliance.' Is this woman one of your allies too?"

"Yes, she's an ally. And it's true, I'm a member of the Isuzu Alliance. You may call me Blue."

"Likewise, call me White," said the woman.

"I know it's rude to give you fake names after you saved my life," Blue continued, "But there are... *complications*. I'd appreciate some discretion."

"Blue" and "White" seemed to be code names. To be fair, though, Mira wasn't exactly using her *real* name either.

"Very well. I'm Mira." She introduced herself before glancing down. There, she saw the paralyzed man in black looking directly up her skirt with vacant eyes. She gave him a light kick in the head before asking Blue and White, "What do we do about this fellow?"

"If you don't mind, we'd like to take him in," Blue replied. "We'll haul him off to our base nearby and interrogate him."

Mira pretended to think for a moment before answering, "Your base? Might I tag along?"

The Isuzu Alliance—an organization that opposed Chimera Clausen—might be related to Meowmaru, the cat shikigami who protected spirits. Mira had encountered Meowmaru on the way home from Karanak.

Blue frowned. "Hmm. I would love for you to, given what you did for us, but I'm unfortunately just a grunt. I can't make any promises. We will stop at a camp along the way, though. I'll see if the captain agrees. How about that?" Though he was indebted to Mira, Blue couldn't take someone he'd just met to such a vital location.

Mira understood their need for discretion and accepted the terms, then handed the man at her feet over to Blue and White.

The pair were quite skilled at their work. They wrapped the man in a blanket, stuck a stick through it, and carried the stick on their shoulders. The pattern on the blanket was a magic seal; when someone was wrapped inside, it reduced their abilities to a mere 10 percent. This magical tool was indispensable for escort and capture missions.

* * *

After leaving the lake, the party pushed through the greenery toward the Isuzu Alliance's camp. Along the way, a thought struck Mira.

"Come to think of it... White, yes? You appeared out of nowhere. Where were you during the fight?"

The two agents smiled at each other and began to explain. First off, the Isuzu Alliance typically worked in pairs. Blue and White had been watching the man in black for a few days, tailing him.

Today, they had witnessed Mira talking with the man. However, since they'd kept their distance to avoid him discovering them, they hadn't been able to make out the conversation. They assumed it might have been a knowledge exchange between allies. As such, they were forced to split up.

"Blue followed this man, and I followed you," White explained. "But it's weird; whenever I got close enough, you'd turn around. I thought you might've just had good intuition, but it looks like you use Immortal Arts. You must've noticed me by using your Biometric Scan."

Mira murmured, "So, that was you." She'd had a feeling.

"Once I knew how far back I needed to stay, I kept my distance and followed you. That's why I realized what was going on so late..." White puffed out her cheeks, sulking.

Blue simply shrugged and said, "Good grief. All that runaround for nothing."

Now understanding just how long they'd been onto him, the man strung up on their shoulders stared into the distance with misty eyes.

"By the way, miss..." White said. "With your fighting style, and the range of your Biometric Scan, you must be great at Immortal Arts."

She looked at Mira—or rather, Mira's clothes—with great interest. The young woman's outfit was in the very popular magical girl style. White was rather disappointed in her own yamabushi-like hermit garb's lack of cuteness.

"Actually, I'm a summoner!" Despite a feeling of *déjà vu*, Mira would not budge on this point.

"Hmm?" White cocked her head in confusion.

"Sure! And I'm an accountant!" Blue added with a laugh. One could hardly blame them for their reactions after they'd seen Mira's skills.

Swearing to herself that she wouldn't be mistaken again, Mira summoned a Dark Knight directly in front of them. However, because she required no preparation before summoning, Blue and White thought that a true Dark Knight had appeared out of nowhere. They instantly readied themselves for battle, a credit to their skills.

The man in black groaned as he hit the ground.

"No! Wait! This Dark Knight is one of my summons," Mira cried out, a tad too late. The Dark Knight waited calmly by Mira's side as proof of her words.

"Jeez... Don't surprise us like that."

"Really! You could've said that first."

Blue and White backed away from the rather terrifying Dark Knight and gradually let down their guard.

"A-apologies." Mira swallowed her pride for a moment, even though she'd literally said she was a summoner only a few seconds earlier.

Meanwhile, the man in black struggled in vain against an enemy of a different sort. Blue and White had dropped him directly onto an ant nest, and now the angry insects were swarming him.

CHAPTER 11

NIGHT FELL, and nocturnal animals began to stir. Impenetrable to moonlight, the forest felt even darker. However, the party's surroundings were almost dazzlingly bright.

[Ethereal Arts: Illumination]

Mira infused this ability with multiple times the necessary mana to illuminate their way. For the most part, mages tried to waste as little mana as possible. If there was any chance of danger, they relied on magical tools rather than spells. That was true when using ethereal magic as well.

But Mira was a far cry from “most” mages. Her maximum mana and recovery speed were above and beyond—a result of her training as Danblf. For the same reason, her non-magic stats were a bit different than those of common mages. Fortunately, summoning went hand in hand with a magic specialization, but Mira had picked up Immortal Arts to cover for other deficiencies back when summoning was in its infancy.

On the way to camp, Blue and White had a lively conversation about Mira’s fighting style.

“Combining summoning and Immortal Arts... That’s crazy. Didn’t someone else do that?”

“Danblf, the One-Man Army, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the one! Are you a fan of the hero Danblf, Mira?”

“Oh! You know him? He is my master, in fact. It’s only natural that we’d have the same fighting style!” Excited at Danblf’s fame, Mira swelled with pride.

“Hah! That’s a good one! Let’s say my master is Kagura the Seven Stars.”

“Then I get Meilin the Immortal Fist!”

Blue and White laughed together.

Annoyed at being disbelieved for a second time, Mira glared at Blue and said, “Clearly, the earlier lesson failed to sink in.”

“Fair point.” Blue smirked self-deprecatingly.

“You did lose, after all!” White giggled.

“Well, remain diligent,” Mira grumbled.

They conversed throughout their walk to camp, and Mira asked some inoffensive questions along the way. As a result, she obtained a few pieces of information.

Chimera Clausen personnel were currently appearing in the center of the southern part of the continent. Their exact motives were unclear, but many of them had popped up. They’d all had special anti-spirit weapons too.

It was unclear what Chimera Clausen did with kidnapped spirits. As such, capturing one of their members was an unprecedented windfall—so much so that Blue and White might be rewarded.

* * *

The Isuzu Alliance’s transit camp was next to a perfectly clear river. Lamps were lit here and there, and there were two big tents. Each was propped up by four trees, so they looked quite sturdy. A simple stove, with six chairs and three tables around it, took up the space between the tents.

A middle-aged, brown-skinned man with a shaved head and noticeable stubble sat in one chair, cooking a cut of meat. Despite his age, he looked to be in great shape, and his muscles rippled with vitality. His metal armor was light green, and he wore two straight swords at the hip.

When he saw his comrades, the man’s light-brown eyes sparkled with excitement, and he piped up, “Hey, you’re back. Who are those two? Wait, don’t tell me—!”

“Er, let’s start with her,” Blue began. “This is Mira, and I owe her my life. Meanwhile, this man is a member of Chimera Clausen. Thanks to Mira, we successfully captured him.”

“I had a feeling! Damn fine work, young lady!” the man said, leaping up from his chair.

He was incredibly tall—more than two meters, by Mira's estimation. Based on his appearance, she could tell he was Galidian. Though he might've looked like a bit of a meathead at first glance, he was a sincere and caring person.

"Well, ain't he quiet? He still alive?" The Galidian man peeked at their captive and then looked at his comrades, worried. The bound man's face was swollen from the ants' merciless attacks, and he was immobile to boot.

"We think he's paralyzed," White answered. "According to our friend here, the skill she used went so deep that he won't be able to move for a full day."

"Oho ho! Good stuff." The Galidian man inspected the Chimera Clausen lackey's face once again. Confirming the fellow was paralyzed, he stood and turned to Mira. "The name's Red. Fake name, obviously. You saved Blue's life, so I gotta thank you."

"I'm Mira. And thank fate instead. I tagged along because I may have business with your group."

The fellow calling himself Red extended a hand, and Mira returned the favor. His tight handshake was warm and gracious. "Business, huh? Well, let's get this guy over to the captain first, and we can talk after. You mind?"

"Nope. Do what you need to do," Mira said.

"Thanks, kid." Red shot a glance at the captive Chimera Clausen. "Blue and I will take him and report to our superior. But, hey, I just finished cooking this quality game we got earlier. White, how 'bout you treat Mira to a meal?"

Red pointed at the stove. The hunk of meat had obviously been cooked with care.

"Okay!" White squealed with excitement.

Red took the pole from her, put it on his shoulder, and walked to the left tent with Blue.

"You came all this way. Why don't we have a little feast? I'm dying to get a taste of this!" White rushed to the stove and flipped the deliciously fragrant roast. Grease dripped from it, sizzling perfectly. Unable to wait any longer, White beckoned Mira over. "Come here, quick! We have to eat this all before they get back."

"I'm not so sure we should do that..." Mira came closer and sat near the stove. Seeing

the meat, she chuckled; it was certainly too much for them to finish. Wasn't it?

"Don't you like meat?"

"No, no, I do." Mira thought White was missing the point, but the woman seemed totally unbothered as she took a knife and began carving the roast.

"Then eat up! There's plenty more." White placed a plate in front of Mira and then cut her own piece, happily stuffing her cheeks with it. "Mmm!" She kicked her legs and moaned with every bite.

Mira's stomach grumbled, prompting her to finally jab a fork in her portion.

More of the savory flavor filled her mouth with each chew. Every bite came with that feeling of *satisfaction* that only a good roast could provide. Its exquisite deliciousness caused Mira to let out her own moan of delight as she shoveled another bite into her mouth.

* * *

"So, what were you doing in a place like that, honey?" White asked as she wolfed down her last bite.

Mira had eaten quite a bit, but more than three quarters of the original roast were currently in White's stomach.

"Foraging, that's all. A friend asked me for some things." Mira had been in a Devils' Labyrinth, so "that's all" was a stretch, but it wasn't a lie.

"Oh, I see. Did you get everything you needed?"

"Indeed I did. The job is done." Mira leaned back in her chair.

"You've proven that you can't judge a mage by their looks." White was apparently a sage herself. "By the way, I'm guessing you're a summoner main and sage sub?"

"Well, yes. Summoning is my main."

"And you've learned endogenous sense at your age? You're really something! I haven't heard of many summoners lately, but it's good to know they still have ones as strong

as you." Despite seeing Mira as someone younger than her, White showed sincere respect rather than jealousy.

"Hm, well. Things happen, you know." Mira grinned proudly and leaned forward. Then something registered about what White had just said. "Incidentally, what is 'endogenous sense'? I don't remember learning such a thing..."

White had uttered the phrase as if Mira were in the know, but she'd never heard it. Had it been discovered in the past thirty years? If so, Mira had no hope of knowing.

Puzzled, White raised an eyebrow. "Hm? Didn't you say your sub was Immortal Arts?"

"Y-yes."

"You chose that because you had an aptitude for it, right?"

"Um...?"

"Huh?"

They looked at each other in head-cocked confusion, unable to reach the same wavelength. Wondering where she'd gone wrong, Mira decided to ask for clarification.

"How about you tell me what this 'endogenous sense' is? Once I know that, I think we'll figured out the rest," she said.

"Sure! I'll do that." White thus launched into an explanation.

Endogenous sense was an ability that those with talents for multiple kinds of magic could learn. Once they did so, they could use another category of magic as the "sub" to their chosen "main." For people with endogenous sense, magical aptitude described the flexibility of one's magical talent; choosing a "main" was the first step toward molding that talent into the desired form.

One began by learning basic spells and abilities; the specifics depended on the type of magic. That was true of people with only one aptitude as well—the magic they were born with only allowed them to use Ethereal Arts until they honed their skills. After learning base spells, however, those with endogenous sense could fork a portion of their talent into another discipline they had aptitude for as a subspecialty.

In doing so, they decreased their main specialty's power. Naturally, their subspecialty was even weaker. Despite that, increasing one's tactical options usually led to a higher probability of survival in a fight, so those with multiple aptitudes were seen as elite mages.

The most popular combinations were sorcery main and holy arts sub, and vice versa.

Once White's explanation was over, Mira thought for a while. As she expected, endogenous sense was something discovered in the past thirty years. It was similar to the Dual Class system that Mira knew of, but not quite the same.

Choosing a Dual Class came with almost no drawbacks. From Mira's perspective, she had just learned a second class's skills. If there were any negatives, they were the increased difficulty of learning new magic and the heavier burden of mana management.

"Hrmm, I see. Still, I think I'm perfectly skilled at Immortal Arts." Mira didn't feel like explaining *why*, though. Dual Classes were a product of player privilege, after all, and it would be too hard to explain anyway.

"You learned endogenous sense without even knowing what it was! That's really interesting."

"I suppose so. But I'm sure it's not too rare."

"Maybe not," White said quietly as she gazed at Mira's magical-girl getup. There was some envy in her eyes. Meanwhile, Mira looked vacantly into the forest and didn't notice at all.

* * *

Ten minutes or so after Mira and White finished their meal, Blue and Red returned. Red ran for the stove, frantically looking around, and then glared at White.

"You... you ate the whole thing?"

"It was delicious!" White said with a smile.

"Indeed," Mira agreed. "Quite the surprise."

"Oh. Well... Good for you." Red plopped down in a chair and slumped over, depressed that he wouldn't get a single bite of the roast he'd cooked so carefully. White rubbed her stomach, devoid of sympathy.

Blue remained next to the tent and called out, "Mira, do you have a moment?" She turned and saw him beckon. "The captain wants to talk to you."

"Really? Sure." Mira stood up, and Blue urged her into the tent.

Behind her, White revealed a surprise to Red: a plate stacked high with a generous portion of the roast. Red was beside himself with joy as he dug in, and White smiled slyly.

* * *

Inside the tent were three simple beds, a chair, and a table. The corner housed tools for weapon maintenance. In a sturdy-looking cage, the Chimera Clausen man slept, still wrapped up and possibly drugged.

Commanding Mira's attention now, however, was the massive man at the rear of the tent. He was even taller than Red. Despite his imposing, burly figure, the man wore a white vestment with a holy design. It was no doubt the garb of a priest.

"The name's Silver. I'm captain of the Fifth Multicolor Platoon of the Isuzu Alliance. First, allow me to thank you for saving Blue." Speaking in a soft yet powerful voice, Silver bowed deeply to display his gratitude.

A jeweled circlet adorned Silver's short blond hair. The well-chiseled features of his face really were like those of an enlightened priest.

"Don't mention it," Mira assured him. "If the Chimera agent never stopped to talk to me, Blue and White wouldn't have been forced to work separately to begin with. They would have won with ease in a two-on-one fight." She might have saved Blue, but he had only been in danger because of her.

Blue shook his head. "Perhaps. But Chimera's goons always flee when they're at a disadvantage. If we fought two against one, he would've escaped immediately. You got us something we never had in all our fights with Chimera before—a victory."

Silver offered a wry grin of genuine gratitude.

Blue continued, "At first, the fight was one-on-one. I was paralyzed. Then Mira jumped into the battle, and the Chimera agent assumed he could fight her off. Honestly, I was surprised by her strength myself. I'd say that miscalculation worked in our favor this time, since it caught us some prey."

"Oho, interesting," Silver mused.

Apparently, Chimera Clausen's members knew exactly when it was time to flee. Thus, they had never once been captured.

"Anyhow, through you, we gained an incredible source of information. Truly, thank you. Blue tells me you want to visit our base. May I ask why?" Silver stared pointedly at Mira. The Isuzu Alliance's base was a closely guarded secret. No matter how much they owed her, visiting it was a big ask, and Mira understood that.

She answered honestly. "I'm searching for someone. Days ago, on the road connecting Lunatic Lake and Karanak, I met a spirit playing with a cat shikigami. According to her, the cat saved her when your enemy, Chimera Clausen, attacked her. I'm searching now for the owner of that cat. Upon meeting Blue and learning that your organization is fighting Chimera, I had a feeling. The shikigami's name was Meowmaru; does that ring a bell?"

Silver and Blue were lost in thought; they seemed to search their recollections. Then they heaved a sigh in tandem.

"Sorry. I don't."

"Me neither."

"I see," Mira muttered. Unfortunate, but she hadn't expected much to begin with. Going to the Isuzu Alliance's base would be the quickest way to find out, after all.

"I cannot say for sure," Silver began, "but based on your story, that shikigami *might* be one of ours." With that, he looked to Blue and nodded without a word. He then turned back to Mira. "Now, Blue suggested I trust you and tell you a few things. You've already seen our camp anyway, so there's not much I have to hide from you. Here's what you need to know..."

The Isuzu Alliance's counterforces, which it kept secret from the general public, were composed of four broad organizations.

Silver's group belonged to the Multicolor Platoons, the largest organization. They tracked Chimera Clausen's movements and secured spirits' safety. They were more scouts and wardens than actual soldiers. Those belonged to the Bellerophon Platoons, which specialized in fighting. Another set of platoons controlled information released to the public about the Isuzu Alliance.

Finally, one organization did not form platoons at all, since its members worked as individuals.

"We call them the Hidden," Silver explained. He was willing to disclose that information out of respect for Mira, assuming that she might be searching for one of them. "Since they work alone, they have the highest individual skill levels. If the person you're talking about is one of ours, their ability probably puts them among the Hidden's ranks."

Mira thought that was quite likely herself.

"In that case," Blue added, "you'll have to go to the base. Only the top of the top brass know where the Hidden are at any given moment. They wouldn't even tell me if I asked." He looked to Silver, pleading wordlessly to let Mira come along.

"I'd love to take her there. Really!" Silver said. "But we can't afford to let anyone leave camp, in case Chimera Clausen tries to get their man back."

"True..." Blue reluctantly agreed.

Besides, there were still vulnerable spirits in the forest. Even searching for their lost comrade, Chimera Clausen wouldn't ignore a spirit if they came across one.

"Hrmm, right. In that case, what about *him*? Perhaps dragging him to your base would be a good opportunity for me to tag along?" Mira pointedly flicked her gaze to the man sleeping in the cage. Knowing that the Isuzu would take him to their base, she tried to find out whether she could simply join the trip.

"We've already sent a runner to request an escort for the prisoner transfer," Silver told her. "Since we caught a member of Chimera, they're sure to come quick."

"I see. How long will it take them?"

"Two, three days at the most."

"Hrmm." Mira's plate was pretty full with missions at the moment. She could afford to stay at the camp overnight, but three days of waiting wasn't going to work for her schedule. She thought for a moment, then asked, "Would you be willing to tell me where the base is? I can go alone."

It was a long shot, since a secret base was *secret* for a reason. But riding Pegasus would be much faster than tagging along with a prisoner escort. Going alone on her own time was the most efficient option by far.

"Hmmm... Blue says you're trustworthy, but I can't make a decision like this on my own. Even just joining us on a trip there would require permission from the higher-ups." Silver's face was conflicted as he weighed his responsibility to the organization against his gratitude to Mira.

"I understand," Mira sighed. Nothing he said was unfair. Any responsible leader would probably respond the same way. Nevertheless, she hated giving up on a promising clue.

"Our victory today was all thanks to Mira. Can't we do something, Captain?" Blue pleaded, hoping to repay her even in the slightest.

Pressured by his imploring comrade and the cute-but-disappointed summoner girl, Silver groaned. "Well... I'd need *something* to prove your trustworthiness. Some concrete evidence that others vouch for you, without relying on a single good deed to tug at my emotions."

Mira racked her brain for something substantial that could prove to anyone that she was a trustworthy person. A thought occurred to her—hadn't Solomon had given her something?

"What about this?" Mira asked, pulling a metallic disc from her Item Box. It gleamed silver, engraved with the Alcaitian coat of arms and the number nine.

"That's some sort of... medal?" Silver asked, judging the disc based on the national emblem on the front. "May I see?"

"Be my guest."

When he turned the medal over, Silver gasped. His eyes widened with shock, and he looked at the front and back over and over.

"I've never seen one in person," he mused, amazed to confirm that the medal was genuine.

"So? Think it will work?" Mira asked.

Astonished, Silver heaved a big sigh. "Yeah. I don't think anyone could refuse this, actually. Nobody wants to snub the Kingdom of Alcait." He gingerly put the medal back in Mira's hand as she cocked her head in disbelief at his reaction. Then he continued, "Rather than the base, let me tell you the location of our headquarters. I'll write a letter of introduction too. It's the least I can do for you."

"Oho, your headquarters? Are you certain?"

"Absolutely. I can't guarantee that you'll get any useful information at the nearest base. And I can hardly do any less, having seen that ID."

Not just the base, but the Isuzu headquarters—the place where they all gathered! And Silver would throw in a letter of introduction! Truly, Mira was going to get even more information than she'd expected.

Well, isn't that nifty? This came in handy right away. Satisfied by the result, Mira gazed at the medal for a second, then returned it to her Item Box.

"Wait a moment while I write this letter," Silver said. He retrieved paper and an envelope from his large bag before sitting down to write.

"Phew! Nice. I guess we've returned the favor after all?" Blue smiled.

"What?" Mira raised an eyebrow. "Were you truly worried about that?"

"Well, yeah. It's a matter of pride, y'know? I couldn't leave a debt unpaid."

"You seem like quite an anxious person," Mira smirked.

Blue shrugged and laughed it off. "I get that a lot."

The two continued to chat while Silver wrote. After some time, Silver announced, "Okay, here's the letter. I've also recorded the location on this map."

"Thanks," Mira said as she accepted both items.

"I'm glad to know someone like you cares about spirits, young lady. Those spirits brought us together, you know. Let's work to protect them."

"Heck, why not join the Isuzu Alliance?" Blue offered. "We'd welcome you with open arms."

"Hrmm, I'll think about it." With those words, Mira smiled and left the tent.

* * *

Once Mira was gone, Blue and Silver looked at each other and discussed something on both their minds.

"So, Captain... It's not my place to ask, since I pushed for this, but should you have told her so much? She knows where HQ is now."

Silver chuckled at Blue's question, cleaned up the papers on his desk, and answered, "She already saw you fighting Chimera and picked her side. Instead of trying to hide things, we might as well treat her politely. She fought for a spirit once; I think she'll do it again. Besides, that medal was... special. It was the Supreme Honor of His Majesty of the Nine Towers. I'd never seen one in person before. It was engraved with the Alcait coat of arms, a nine symbolizing their towers, and Solomon's own symbol. A medal with country, emblem, and king on it represents a whole lot of power. It means King Solomon of Alcait vouches for that girl's identity, and she bears the authority of his title."

"Whoa."

Evidently, Mira reported directly to King Solomon. Defying whoever held that medal was the same as defying the king himself.

"The way I see it," Silver began, "that young lady's position has her talking directly to King Solomon. No doubt he's gonna hear about what we said here."

"But we keep our existence secret from the public. If you think that, why didn't you keep her in the dark?"

"She *captured* a member of Chimera. That's something we never have done before, and it'll have enormous effects. No matter how stubborn and tight-lipped this guy is, the grand master will get him to spill the beans. This will change everything; we'll have to

alter the way we operate in the long run. That may cause problems, and it's good to have allies, but you can only trust so many people. As you know, Alcait is a kingdom of mages. Once they know our situation, they're sure to help us. Or... *she* will, at least."

Silver was confident in the value of what they'd accomplished today, and he knew that it would cause sweeping changes in the situation with Chimera Clausen. What their enemies did with captured spirits, who called the shots, what country backed them... Once the dust settled, Chimera Clausen would change their tactics. They might become more aggressive, or be too wary to act. Either way, Silver's organization would need aid.

Silver had chosen Alcait as the first candidate for an alliance... or rather, he was *forced* to choose them. Lying to Mira after she showed him the medal would have been a slap in a potential ally's face. Sincerity was the only option.

No matter what came next, she was HQ's problem now.

Having explained himself, Silver smoldered with fighting spirit. Blue, though not the biggest fan of these cat-and-mouse games, mulled over what Silver said. Then he nodded in assent and glared at the Chimera Clausen man sleeping in his cage.

CHAPTER 12

UPON STEPPING OUT of the tent, Mira found that things were getting lively outside. She spied four people: Red, White, and two whom she did not know. Red was at the center.

“I cut the veggies!”

“Ooh. Put ‘em in here!”

“The teppanyaki grill is washed!”

“Hold on a moment. The frame’s almost ready.”

It seemed the four were preparing for a barbecue. Though they were busy, their excitement was infectious.

While Mira gawked, an unfamiliar person approached.

“You’re Mira, right?! Call me Green. Nice to meetcha! Listen, it’s getting late, yeah? Does that mean you’re staying the night?”

Green was a bubbly young woman with shoulder-length chestnut hair and a high-pitched voice. She wore a camouflage coat with armor sewn over vital spots. Dozens of weapons could just barely be seen within the garment.

Her question gave Mira pause. If she had taken flight immediately upon leaving the Devils’ Labyrinth, she might have reached Hunters’ Village by nightfall. However, if she left the Isuzu camp now, she would get to the village past midnight.

Mira thought for a moment, then affirmed, “Hrmm. I suppose I better ask permission to stay.”

“Of course you may!” Apparently privy to Mira’s achievements, Green welcomed her with a big smile.

“But we don’t have enough beeeds!” someone cut in. “What will we dooo?”

Mira turned toward the drawn-out voice and spotted another unfamiliar woman carrying a kitchen knife in one hand. Her other hand held a poorly cut vegetable that looked like it might have been a pumpkin once. Mira almost never cooked, but it was clear that this woman's technique was... lacking.

She was a little taller than Mira, but firmer and stouter. From her unkempt reddish-brown hair and thick eyebrows, Mira knew she was a dwarf.

"Oh, you're Miraaa? I heard about you from Whiiite. I'm—"

"Hold on. Let me guess!" Mira interrupted the dwarf woman and recalled the names of the other members.

This is a Multicolor Platoon, and they all use color-based code names. So, we have Blue, White, Red, Green, and Captain Silver. It makes sense that Gold or Silver would be in command, so... Mira considered other basic colors that she hadn't heard the platoon members use as code names so far. A few possibilities came to mind.

Black... isn't really feminine enough. Pink, then? No, that's a little too spicy for her, no offense. And she has such a laidback personality... Mira's train of thought chugged along with personal biases and opinions. Based on her peculiar notions of color, she came to her answer.

"You must be Yellow!" Mira declared confidently.

However, the reply she received was a color that hadn't even come to mind. "Puuurple, actually."

"Drat." Crushed, Mira squatted down in the lamplight to hide her shame.

Blue walked from the command tent and approached the rest of the platoon. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Mira crouching and mumbling to herself.

"What's gotten into Mira?" he asked White.

"Basically, she pulled the equivalent of a detective declaring that a murderer is in this very room, but naming a culprit who isn't even in the same building."

Mira shuddered at the heartless analogy.

Blue frowned. "What?"

"She embarrassed herself for no reason," White said with a giggle, and then gave Blue the short version of the story.

"That does sound embarrassing. Why *did* she think Purple was Yellow?"

"Who knows?"

Mira sank deeper into a spiral of self-doubt as their conversation continued.

Silver joined the gathering a few minutes later. The others immediately told him about what Mira had said. He scowled for a moment, then burst into laughter when he saw Mira curled up on the ground.

"C'mon, young lady," he whispered to Mira so the others couldn't hear. "Don't be a drag at dinnertime. Besides, there's nothing to be embarrassed about! Blue's made mistakes at least three times worse, and he doesn't know the meaning of shame. Look at him! Shameless!"

Mira lifted her head and glanced in the direction Silver gestured toward. There, she saw Blue joining the barbecue preparations as calmly as ever.

"Listen, he might look normal, but..." Silver told Mira all about Blue's gaffs.

A few minutes later, she stood up, seemingly rejuvenated. "How could I *possibly* have been embarrassed by something so minor?"

"Damn right. No need to be ashamed about that with *our* platoon members." Silver smiled.

Mira watched Blue sympathetically for a few moments.

"Captain! Mira!" Red called, having nearly finished preparations for dinner. "Get over here. It's almost ready."

"Right. Let's hurry," Silver said, raising an arm to signal that they were coming.

"First, a toast," said Blue, offering them cups. "Captain, you sit where you always do. Mira, next to Green."

"Right this way!" Green wrapped an arm around Mira and guided her to the ladies' side of the table as soon as Mira accepted her drink.

A barbecue was set up over the stove, with a large circular teppanyaki grill in the center surrounded by wooden plates of various ingredients. Once Silver took his place at the table, Red began the toast.

"Today, we reached a turning point," he announced. "We captured a member of Chimera! The people responsible are Blue, White, and most of all, Mira here. We've set a seat at our table for her today. This calls for a feast, so eat all you like. Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

Everyone's voices echoed through the night as their raised cups clacked together. Drink sloshed and rained onto the teppanyaki grill, sizzling to add to the moment's enthusiasm. Soon, the meat began to sizzle as well, enveloping the camp in savory scents and boisterous joy.

* * *

Once they'd cleaned up the party, they dispersed for the night. Since everyone was on duty, they hadn't consumed alcohol, so the platoon members walked steadily to their beds.

The sleeping tents were divided into men's and women's quarters. Having eaten far too much, Mira rested for a moment before White began to guide her to the women's tent.

On their way there, something approached.

"Mm?" Mira heard a slight rustle in the forest greenery. When she looked, she noticed eyes peeking timidly at her.

"It's small," White said. "Whatever it is, it isn't dangerous."

"Hrmm, perhaps not."

Biometric Scan soon revealed that it was a small animal, and perfectly safe—but an instant later, it leapt straight for Mira.

“You little...!”

The creature, so timid that even veteran adventurers would have had difficulty capturing it, now nestled up to Mira’s foot. It was the pure rabbit, a rare symbol of luck.

“What are you doing here?”

The pure rabbit squeaked at Mira and begged to be held. With a melting heart, she squatted and pulled it into her arms.

“Is that a pure rabbit? I haven’t seen one before! I heard they never approach people. Maybe this one is different?” White peered over Mira’s shoulder at the blue rabbit.

Startled, the pure rabbit buried itself in Mira’s chest to hide, then squeaked and cuddled up against her. White slumped over sadly, seeing that the rabbit’s affection only applied to Mira.

“Don’t tell me... You followed me here?” Mira murmured lovingly to the tiny animal. This was odd, and she needed answers.

Mira summoned Cat Sith. Several kittens leapt out of the small magic circle and did a perfect line dance before disappearing in a burst of confetti, leaving Cat Sith holding a pose in the center. He looked at Mira with expectant eyes.

“Hrmm, not bad. Eight out of ten.”

“High scooore!” The cat, dressed like a stage magician, proudly raised a placard: *To the moon!*

“What an adorable little guy!” White butted in, eyes sparkling.

Cat Sith was surprised, but he quickly rested his placard on the ground, leaned on it, and said, “You’ve got a good eye, kitten.” The placard now read *The ladies’ cat*.

“Sorry to butt in, but I need your interpreting skills.” Mira pointed the pure rabbit in her arms toward Cat Sith.

The cat put a paw to his chest and replied, “Easy-peasy.”

"Do your thing," Mira said, patting his head once. Cat Sith then asked the pure rabbit why it was here.

After a short chat between the two furballs, Mira petted the blue bunny's head with equal parts concern and happiness. The pure rabbit really *had* followed her all the way to the camp, then waited until fewer people were around to show itself. The reason was simple: it wanted to be with Mira.

Though overjoyed at the pure rabbit's motivation for coming, Mira had to think realistically. She was on a mission that took her all sorts of dangerous places. She couldn't have a bunny tagging along.

"I am happy to be loved, but I can't guarantee that I'll be able to protect you. So..."

Cat Sith translated Mira's words to the pure rabbit. Its expectant eyes gradually saddened, and it let out a noise not unlike weeping. Its ears folded down, and its happiness evaporated as it curled into an unhappy ball of soft blue fur.

Mira was deeply conflicted. Even with her strength, there were places where she couldn't let her guard down. Could she protect a pure rabbit too? What if it got hurt? What if it died?

"Maybe you could leave the pure rabbit with someone when you're in dangerous spots?" White suggested. "I have a friend who takes care of my cat, Pinya. Oh, Pinya is way cuter than your pet." White gushed about Pinya more affectionately than she would a lover.

"Whaaat!?" Upon losing to another, Cat Sith dropped his placard, which now read *Forever alone*.

White had a good point. There might be other ways to make this arrangement work. The bunny could be a pet, not a party member.

Now rethinking the situation, Mira had Cat Sith tell the pure rabbit her conditions. She could not always be with it, but it could have a place to call home. There would be someone else there, so it had to listen to them and be good. If it did that, Mira could see it whenever she came back. Truth be told, Mira wanted to have the adorable bunny at home too.

Cat Sith passed her words on to the bunny. The pure rabbit looked up and jumped into

Mira's arms. It squeaked joyfully, snuggling her as much as it could.

"The rabbit says it's fine with that. It'll do anything it has to, as long as it gets to stay with you," Cat Sith relayed.

"Aww, good for you!" For some reason, White teared up.

Mira thanked and dismissed Cat Sith, then hugged her new pet and went into the tent with White. Green, who was preparing for bed, came over. She broke into a huge smile when she saw the blue bunny. The rabbit showed no sign of fear now that it was under Mira's protection, so Green and White took the opportunity to dote heavily on it.

As for Purple, she had fallen asleep before they arrived. Since she had been awake longer than anyone else that day, she had crashed in the middle of the barbecue. The dwarf now snoozed away in her bed.

Multicolor Platoons didn't usually have guest accommodations, which meant that Mira would have to share a bed with someone. They weren't real beds, either; instead, they were like large sleeping bags with little in the way of comfort. The sleeping bags would be rather cramped for two adults, but Mira's small figure would probably fit just fine.

"I'm all right with sleeping in the corner," Mira said. "I have a very warm coat. That will do just fine."

White and Green both offered to share their beds with Mira, but she gratefully declined again, taking the fur coat she'd brought for airborne travel to the corner of the tent.

White frowned. "Y'know, it gets really cold at night this time of year!"

"She's right. Besides, you'll ache in the morning if you sleep there. Sleep with me! It might not look like much, but it's totally comfy," Green promised.

Mira stubbornly shook her head, however. She'd gotten used to her new life for the most part, but she was certain of one thing: sharing a sleeping bag with a woman would mean she didn't do much sleeping at all.

Eventually, the ladies made peace with Mira choosing to sleep by herself, and she got ready for bed. She wrapped herself in the fur coat and lay down. It wasn't very comfortable, but it wasn't terrible either. She closed her eyes and found restful sleep with the pure rabbit nestled against her.

When Mira's breathing slowed, White and Green carefully carried her into bed. The pure rabbit watched as they hauled her off, then waddled after her. Once Green and White lowered Mira into White's bed, the bunny secured a place beside her and curled up in the very center of the comforter.

"We've been outmaneuvered," White frowned.

Since the blue bunny took up the very center of the bed, White and Green were forced to sleep together, hugging each other.

* * *

When morning came, Mira woke up and looked around sleepily.

"Aaah... Wait, what?" she muttered to herself. She remembered that she had stayed the night in an Isuzu Alliance tent, but she was unsure how she'd woken up in a different place than where she went to sleep. Next to her was the pure rabbit, sleeping comfortably.

She looked around. White, Green, and Purple were absent, but she heard women's voices outside.

They certainly are busybodies. Mira realized what the women must have done with a slight grin, then pulled on the coat folded next to her pillow. She tiptoed out of the tent to let the pure rabbit sleep.

The women seemed to be making breakfast. When they spotted Mira, they stopped and greeted her with smiles.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?" White asked, smoothing Mira's hair to cure her bedhead.

"It's almost time for breakfast. Are there any foods you don't like, Mira?" Green inquired, holding a plate with several ingredients.

"Mooorning. I got the shower ready so, you can uuuse that." Purple pointed to a cone-shaped tent hanging from a large tree branch.

"Ah, good morning. Thank you for giving me such good sleep. My, all this food looks wonderful!" Mira said as she took a large towel from Purple.

"There's a towel hanger insiiide. Just hang it there once you're dooone."

"Understood. Much obliged." Mira headed into the dark-green shower tent. It was split into two chambers: a changing room and a shower.

Mira stripped off her coat, dress, and underwear. She folded them and set them atop a stand next to her. A lever caused water to pour from a hole in the ceiling. She pulled it, and comfortably hot water began to flow.

Faint light illuminated Mira's fair skin as the water wet her hair, then trickled down to her cheeks, neck, chest, and... other cheeks. The shine of the water accentuated her modest curves.

As the shower gradually drained her of sleepiness, she let out a big yawn. The sound of water falling muffled the voices outside and wrapped her in a peaceful embrace.

Once she'd washed every part of her body, Mira enjoyed the plush towel as she dried herself. She then pulled out her bag, picked the plainest pair of underwear possible, and got dressed.

When she exited the shower tent, the entire Multicolor Platoon had gathered around the stove.

"Oh, sorry. Did I make you wait?" Mira asked them.

White shook her head. "It's okay. The men are still waking up. And your hair is wet! You'd better dry it." She sat Mira in a chair and combed her hair from behind.

Before long, Mira's hair was drying bit by bit, and the dampness on her neck slowly disappeared. She felt her hair and realized it was even getting warmer.

"Oho... Is this an Ethereal Art too?" Mira asked as White dried her hair.

"Yeah! Do you... not know this one?"

"This is the first time I've seen someone use it."

Ethereal Arts spells could dry hair and clothes or even light small fires, but almost all of those spells had been developed in the past thirty years. No one had bothered with them when getting wet in the game had no real consequences.

"You gotta dry your hair quickly, because it can get damaged while it's wet. Don't let such beautiful locks get split ends," White murmured with a sigh, gazing at Mira's hair with envy.

Leaning away from White's suddenly covetous touch, Mira toyed with her glossy silver hair and thought, *I suppose knowing such spells would be convenient. I'll just have to figure out how to learn them.*

"Ethereal Arts" was the title given to spells that did not fit into the categories of sorcery, holy arts, evocation, immortality, divination, necromancy, demonology, or exorcism based on how they were learned. There was no unifying prerequisite to learn ethereal arts; in fact, Mira had just happened to discover many seemingly at random.

For example, to learn the spell that created a ball of light, she'd stood in total darkness for ten hours. Learning other spells had been anywhere from simple to jaw-droppingly difficult. The Ethereal Arts, while often based in illusion magic, had the most diverse range of spells of any category.

"Say, that spell—" Mira began to ask how to learn it.

"I'll teach you," White interrupted. "I *must* teach you. You *need* to dry your hair." It seemed she simply couldn't take Mira's lovely silver hair going to waste due to sloppy maintenance.

Mira nodded reflexively as White launched into a long lecture about Ethereal Arts hair care techniques and many other maintenance tips.

* * *

"When you wanna wash your scalp..."

"When you wanna wash your hair..."

"When you wanna dry it..."

"When you're going to bed..."

"When you wanna wash your bunny..."

Mira stared into space like a brainwashed ghost, muttering repetitions of what White

had taught her. Her long hair was tied into two perfectly symmetrical pigtails. Behind her was White, smiling a wide grin as if she'd just accomplished the impossible.

By then, the men had finally awoken. They realized that something had happened when they noticed Mira's state, but they pretended to see nothing as they got to breakfast.

Then a creature leapt out of the women's tent. The men clamored for their weapons as the blue lump jumped into Mira's lap and squeaked away.

"Ooh. Finally awake, hm?" Mira petted the bunny's head and body, letting the stress of the hair-care lecture drain from her mind.

White and Green reached out when they could find an opening to stroke the rabbit, and even Purple timidly touched its fur. The men simply watched.

"Is that one of those pure rabbits I've heard of?" Silver asked. "Maybe it's a sign our luck has taken a turn for the better."

"The rumors about pure rabbits being blue are true," Blue added. "We're color brothers!"

"Look how round he is! A lot of meat on those bones," Red added. If looks could kill, White and Mira's glares would certainly have been lethal. "Hey, I was kidding..."

Feeling an urge to change the subject, Red's eyes darted all over. He snatched up the rest of his salad and held it in front of the pure rabbit.

"C'mon, eat all you want!"

The rabbit's nose bobbed as it sniffed the salad before nibbling a leaf. Each little bite caused everyone to break into smiles. Red heaved a sigh of relief as attention shifted away from him.

CHAPTER 13

“WELL, THANK YOU ALL for everything.” With breakfast and cleanup done, Mira thanked the group for the information and the night’s stay.

“We should say the same to you,” said Silver, his voice weighty with gratitude.

“I hope you find who you’re looking for!” Blue added, wishing her safe travels.

Mira said goodbye to the others, summoned Pegasus, and ascended with the pure rabbit in her arms.

Blue and Silver watched as the celestial horse sped off, spreading lightning. Between Pegasus and the medal, the little mage might be a useful trump card in their upcoming battles.

HQ, please don’t screw this up, Blue prayed from the bottom of his heart.

* * *

After a few hours of soaring away from the towering Elder

Tree, Mira decided to enjoy a late lunch at the inn in Hunters’ Village. Soon, she was tucking into a sandwich with herb chicken, cheese, and vegetables along with a honey au lait. The pure rabbit chomped away at carrots on the tabletop at her side. Mira couldn’t help but smile when she looked over.

As Mira wolfed down the sandwich, she gazed at the map Silver had given her and confirmed the location of the Isuzu Alliance’s headquarters. *The Forest of Seasons, eh? The Isuzu Alliance must be a big deal if they secured a base in the spirits’ sacred land.*

The Forest of Seasons was situated in a valley in the center of the continent; four mountain ranges surrounded it. It was said that the spirits of seasons lived there. Some people called it the Forest of Spirits, since tribes of spirits made their home there.

That’s a long way off...

The Forest of Seasons was far north of the Forest of the Devout. Even riding Pegasus, it would take days to get there. If Mira went directly to the Forest of Seasons, she would not be home for quite some time.

She still had to deliver the Primordial Pips and vital information on Soul Howl and the Isuzu Alliance. After a moment of thought, Mira concluded that it would be best to report to Solomon first.

She closed the map, licked sauce from her finger, and asked the proprietor, “Has Alfail already left?”

“Yeah. The day after you beat him, he gathered his things and headed out. I’d never seen him look so excited.”

“I see,” Mira said. She washed down her last bite with honey au lait, excited for the day she’d see Alfail again.

“I thought I heard some conversation! A customer at this time of day, huh? Whoa, hey! Is that you, Mira?!?” Mira turned to find Latry—the man she’d met back at the forest fortress—bearing a load even larger than himself on his back.

“Ooh!” the proprietor called out. “Good to see you made it home safe, son.”

“Father, I’m sorry for worrying you,” Latry said with a forced smile before turning back to Mira. “Thanks again for all you did. It’s only due to you that we made it back in one piece.”

Mira recalled that the proprietor had said that his son was at the fortress, and was the second-strongest young man in Hunters’ Village after Alfail. It seemed he had been describing Latry. It made sense that the young man was the one who struck the killing blow against the tyrant spikeback.

“Do you know her, Latry?” the proprietor asked, rather surprised.

“Yeah. I owe her my life.” Latry placed his things next to the counter and explained what had transpired at the fortress.

* * *

“Incredible. I had no idea,” Latry’s father muttered in relief. He bowed to Mira and said,

"Thank you for saving my son and his fellows."

The older man had known that unusual monsters were appearing, and that the hunter the fortress sent to call for reinforcements had arrived safely. According to the proprietor, Hunters' Village had formed and dispatched an emergency-expedition team two days later.

After Mira left, Latry said, those who still had the energy had departed the fortress by horse. Along the way, he'd met the expedition team and told them the situation was resolved. Then he'd continued to the village to deliver the good news.

"Mira, I know this is a poor reward for everything you've done, but take all the food you like. My treat." Latry offered an appreciative smile as he sat at the counter.

"Don't be silly, son. Anyone who saves my kid's life eats on *my* tab. Mira, anything you want, on the house." The proprietor poked his son's head lightly and grinned at Mira.

"Really? Then might I have a second helping of honey au lait?" Mira requested. There was a squeak next to her wrist. When she glanced down, she noticed her pure rabbit had finished eating and was looking up with pleading eyes. "And another carrot for my friend here, please," Mira continued, still petting the bunny.

"Uh... that's a pure rabbit, isn't it?" Latry stared at the blue rabbit sitting with Mira with equal parts curiosity and astonishment. Such creatures always stayed far from humans, yet here was one right before his very eyes—how could he not be blown away?

"Yes, it is."

The proprietor placed honey au lait and a carrot stick before them. The bunny lunged at the vegetable and gnawed it for dear life. Mira took a sip of honey au lait and patted the rabbit's blue fur, savoring the relaxing moment.

"Wowie. You're just full of surprises, Mira," Latry said with a chuckle.

* * *

Just as Mira and the rabbit finished their meal, there was a clamor outside.

"Looks like they're here," the proprietor said as he glanced out.

"Ooh. Just in time, eh?" Latry replied with a big grin.

"Who's here?" Mira asked, curious about their exchange. She strained to see through the door and spotted a crowd of people running by.

"How about you go and see for yourself, kid? It'll be fun." The proprietor smiled and winked.

"Guess I'd better get going now." Latry stood, picked up his heavy luggage, and trotted out. The clamor outside grew louder.

Mira slowly stood up and muttered, "Whoever they are, they seem to be enjoying themselves." She instructed the pure rabbit to stay put and followed Latry out the door.

A crowd had formed on the main street in front of the inn. Seeing the boisterous group, Mira quickly understood what was going on. *Looks like a merchant caravan.*

"Once every two months, the caravan goes through Hunters' Village, and we return from the fortress to sell what we've hunted," Latry explained excitedly. With his pack full of game and pieces of the tyrant spikeback, he walked away to sell his goods. "Have some fun, Mira!"

The many carriages began to sprout stalls and shelves, which were soon dotted or heaped with products. Latry started negotiating, while a man in fancy clothing—likely a well-off merchant—surveyed the hunter's loot in admiration.

"Hmm?" Mira noticed a familiar man next to said merchant. She jogged over and accosted him from behind. "Cyril, is that you? What a coincidence!"

Cyril, the leader of the Écarlate Carillon Mira had met in Karanak, was hard to mistake with his tall stature and long red hair. Hearing his name, he turned around, and a smile burst onto his face.

"If it isn't Mira! Coincidence indeed," he answered happily.

The carriage behind him lurched.

"Mira's here?!" The scream came from inside the vehicle, and out lunged Flicker with a predatory look in her eye. Her advance was cut short by the figure following behind: Emella.

Mira was grateful for the swordswoman's impressive reflexes. "You haven't changed."

"Mira, it's been so long! Wait there a sec." Emella peeked over and greeted her before popping back into the carriage. After a long bout of the carriage rocking back and forth, Emella showed herself again, Flicker-free. "I never imagined we'd meet in a place like this!" she said, voice bubbly with excitement.

"Neither did I. Are the others here?" Mira returned Emella's smile and looked around. The area was full of merchants and villagers gathered to purchase their wares. Hunters like Latry haggled to sell their loot.

"Asval and Kilic are with the second party of bodyguards, so they're not around. But Zef is here! He's running around delivering messages right now." Asval had journeyed into Nebrapolis with her. Kilic was the dark knight to whom Mira had given the scythe the demon wielded. It seemed they'd left after the rest of the party.

"Aha, I see."

However, Zef *was* there. Mira looked into the distance, but there were too many people to make him out. Still, she decided she would probably see him sooner or later. As she turned around, there was a bang, and Flicker emerged from the carriage after wriggling free of the rope meant to bind her.

"Mira's here... I wasn't dreaming!" Flicker shot a wary glance at Emella and managed to maintain her cool as she alighted from the carriage. "Mira, may I have a hug?"

"Hard pass." Mira's blunt answer caused Flicker to stop in place, arms held wide open, then collapse into a heap of despair. Cyril chuckled and apologized for her, and Emella shoved her back into the carriage.

After Flicker was dealt with once again, Mira added, "I see you're guarding caravans? How adventurer-ly of you!" It was clichéd, but intriguing work nonetheless.

"Isn't it, though?" Cyril grinned, sharing Mira's excitement.

It seemed other adventurers had originally been meant to do this work, but they were wounded in the zombie outbreak at Karanak. Cyril's relatively unscathed party took the contract in their place. They would accompany these merchants all the way to the Ozstein territory in the western part of the continent.

"So, Mira, what brings you here?" Cyril asked.

"Hrmm, well, an acquaintance asked... *a favor* of me. I'm on my way back from doing it," Mira grumbled with a smile, annoyed at Solomon's whip-cracking nature.

"That so? Last time, you went all the way to the bottom of the catacombs. I wonder where you went this time?" Cyril mused aloud, genuinely intrigued.

"The Elder Tree and a Devils' Labyrinth, but I can't tell you why!"

"A Devils' Labyrinth, hm?" That certainly sounded special. "I hear they don't give permission to just anybody."

Cyril didn't probe any further, although he was rather surprised to hear that one of Mira's destinations was a Devils' Labyrinth—a highly restricted area. Even first-rate adventurers such as himself would have had trouble obtaining a restricted-area pass.

"The acquaintance I mentioned pulled some strings—but only to foist his work onto me, of course." Mira might have easily gotten a permit thanks to the king, but it came with all sorts of caveats.

"He sounds like *quite* the guy. Though I do hear you're the pupil of a Wise Man..." Cyril winked. "Guess that's why you get the tough jobs."

Mira sighed and nodded.

While the two conversed, a male merchant stepped up. "Sorry to interrupt, friends, but these negotiations will go on for a while. Could I trouble you to tell the other guards that they're free to rest and stand by?" He had seen Latry's vast quality *and* quantity of loot. This stop would take some time.

"Understood. I'll let them know," Cyril replied.

"Thank you," the merchant said, ushering Latry into his carriage. No doubt they would soon be hard at work negotiating the finer details.

"It looks like we're off for a while. Since we've reunited, how about relaxing with us for a bit, Mira?"

Any other woman might have swooned at Cyril's dazzling smile. Just as Mira began to

ponder his offer, Flicker burst from inside the carriage once more.

"Agreed!" she shouted. "Let's talk about lots of stuff, like how Tact is doing!"

"Not fair!" Mira cried.

Bringing up Tact was a low blow. Mira had been planning to accept Cyril's proposal anyway, since there were things she wanted to discuss with this group, but emotional blackmail was cheating.

Mira's pure rabbit was still waiting for her at the inn, so they decided to chat where she had just eaten. While Cyril and Emella informed the other bodyguards, Flicker accompanied Mira inside. The pure rabbit leapt into Mira's arms, and she took her seat again.

"Mira, is that...?" Flicker gazed at the pure rabbit with consuming envy and fell facedown onto the table.

"Isn't it adorable?" Mira responded proudly.

"Not fair..."

* * *

After a while, Flicker finally recovered. At Mira's urging, she shared the news about Tact. It seemed the people of Écarlate Carillon had looked after him after Mira left.

"He's my responsibility now as an apprentice of Écarlate Carillon," Flicker said. "We got permission from his gramps, of course. We're delighted to have him; more priests mean we can save more people, after all."

Tact had chosen to be a priest so that he could heal his allies. It seemed that Flicker was passing on the study techniques she'd used as a child to teach him the basics.

"Hrmm, I see. It feels like I dropped a burden on you, but... thanks. And good luck to Tact." Mira quickly bowed her head as she reminisced about Tact's carefree smile.

Just as Flicker was about to pounce again, Cyril, Emella, and Zef appeared.

"Whoa, it really is her! And she's even cuter than before!" Zef's lack of filter was the

same as ever when he saw Mira's perfectly tied pigtails and new wardrobe. The two women glared daggers his way.

"You're terrible..." Emella groaned.

"Mira's *mine*," Flicker growled.

"I didn't mean it like that." Zef sighed, slouching at their prickly words.

"She is actually cuter than last time, though," Cyril agreed. The ladies' response was nowhere near as hostile when he said it.

When Zef noticed that, his shoulders slumped even more.

* * *

After exchanging greetings, the members of Écarlate Carillon ordered a late lunch. Between bites, they conversed and doted on the pure rabbit. Knowing that its fur was a good-luck charm, Zef begged Mira for even a single hair. She responded by offering to give him one if it came off while she finger-combed the bunny.

She began stroking the rabbit's fur with her slender fingertips. Perhaps out of luck, or perhaps because it was shedding, she was able to give everyone a single blue hair of good fortune—including one for Tact.

"When we get back, I'll make sure to give it to him," Flicker promised, accepting the fur and managing to squeeze Mira's hand in the process. After many failures, her strategy to capture Mira was starting to improve.

"Incidentally, you said you were going west," Mira said. "Does that mean you'll travel through the Forest of the Devout?"

To reach Ozstein from here, one had to either go through the Forest of the Devout or take a wide detour. The direct route was faster, but the detour was much safer. There were fewer suspicious folks and monsters prowling outside their territory that way.

"That we will. After a few days here, we plan to go through the woods to Ozstein. Why? Is there... something we should know?" Cyril asked, wondering why Mira would pose a question she already had the answer to.

"Two things. First, I fought a tyrant spikeback in the Forest of the Devout a few days ago." Mira gave them an account of the events at the fortress. She expressed her dismay that monsters were showing up in places they shouldn't be.

"Is that happening here too?" Cyril asked. As it turned out, he had seen monsters outside their habitats as well. He thought he might have been mistaken... but given Mira's story, he was now sure he was right.

"Oh, so you've seen them? Depending on the conditions, stronger monsters might appear. Be cautious."

"Of course. If monsters from Ark are appearing, we can't let our guard down." Cyril looked outside, his face stern. If another tyrant spikeback appeared, his strength could manage it, but the other bodyguards might not fare as well.

"Anyway, that was one problem," Mira continued. "As for the other... Do you happen to know of Chimera Clausen?"

"Yes! The Adventurers' Guild Union told us a few things about what's going on."

Solomon had mentioned that he shared information about the situation with adventurers of A-Rank and higher. Surely that included Cyril.

"Oho, right. That makes this easier," said Mira. "So, about that... I ran into a member of Chimera Clausen in the forest yesterday, but I also happened upon an organization fighting against them. We caught the Chimera member, and I handed him over. But it will take them time to transfer the prisoner. Chimera might be lurking in the forest to save their ally. Don't underestimate them. I'm warning you now," Mira spoke in a low voice to keep the secret as discreet as she could. Members of Chimera Clausen were powerful and cruel; since they could hide in the woods, one could never be too cautious.

The group leaned in to listen. Flicker took this opportunity to try to get close to Mira, but Emella stomped her foot to keep her in check.

"Really?" Cyril replied. "That's shocking, to be sure. I agree that we should be careful. Thanks for the warning, Mira."

Cyril considered telling the caravan leader what he had heard in hopes of finding any suspicious folk among them. He sipped his tea, then lowered his own voice. "I wish I

could share some useful information with you in return... but we still don't know anything about the dates you gave us."

He was talking about the dates on which the Wise Men Mira was searching for had arrived in this world. Cyril's guild had people with access to historical records searching the archives for unusual events surrounding those dates. So far, that had proved fruitless.

"It's no big deal. I didn't expect it to be easy." Mira had never assumed that clues would come up so soon. She downed her third cup of honey au lait.

"By the way... Are you a fan of fantasy clichés, Mira?" Cyril suddenly asked.

The question set her heart ablaze. "I'd never have come here if I wasn't," she answered obliquely, though she really meant *I'd never have played Ark Earth Online if I wasn't*.

Her present circumstances were the result of her love for magical worlds. That was true of both her and Cyril, though Emella and the others could only tilt their heads in confusion at the sudden turn in the conversation.

"That's good," Cyril replied. "This might not be enough, but I do have three rumors to offer you."

"Oho, rumors? You know I love a good rumor." When it came to fantasy clichés, rumors were truly some of the spiciest.

Knowing that Mira had not been here long, Cyril had decided to offer her some juicy rumors he'd heard during his travels. Solemnly, though with a childish gleam in his eye, he began to weave the first of the three tales.

CHAPTER 14

“NOBODY KNOWS EXACTLY WHEN, but something has been appearing in the sea around Cadiasmight Isle.” Cyril leaned in, lowered his voice, and added, “A ghost ship.”

“Oho... Ho ho ho! That’s good stuff!”

Cadiasmight Isle was an island between the Earth and Ark continents. It was well known as the home of the logically named Cadiasmight Alliance. The alliance was led by the port nation of Vali, which boasted the most powerful navy in the Schmegoffe Region—the “known world” of Ark Earth Online.

“This is a common rumor among sailors,” Cyril continued. “A captain I know told me about ten years ago, I think. Every single witness says the same thing: fog surrounds them out of nowhere at twilight, and a decrepit galley ship comes up alongside them. The derelict raises a Jolly Roger flag, and some say they see a captain wearing red on deck.”

Roping Mira in, Cyril went on, “There’s a lot of speculation. Some say if you follow the ghost ship, you’ll find a pirate hoard. Or that people who died at sea sail on that ship. Others say lost

legendary weapons are sealed inside it. One of the better bits of gossip is that it contains the Vali navy’s secret weapons. As a swordsman, I gotta cast my vote for the legendary-weapons theory.”

Cyril meant it as a joke, but Emella took him more seriously. “Throw my vote in for that too!” Her eyes sparkled, delighted by the thought of legendary swords.

“Remember, it *is* just a rumor,” Cyril reminded them. Flicker grinned in slight exasperation, while Zef looked at the ceiling.

“Still, it is an *interesting* rumor. In the past, I might’ve rejected it. But now...” Mira trailed off.

“Right? It’s exciting, isn’t it?”

Rumors of ghost ships amounted to nothing in real life—but now that fantasy was reality, even hearsay came with real credibility. Knowing that they were of like mind in that regard, Mira and Cyril laughed together, fantasizing about ghost ships.

After they ordered refills of honey au lait and herbal tea, Cyril moved on with the same tone as before. “Now for the next rumor. We had the sea, so let’s go to the sky. Airship pilots tend to believe this one—yes?”

Mira had raised her hand upon hearing a certain word. Cyril, immediately understanding the bit, pointed to her like a teacher.

“Uh, airships?”

“Yes, airships! Ships in the air—the result of cutting-edge technomancy. Their development was only just finished recently, say... three years ago? They’re expensive as heck to make, so only five large airships exist: one for each of the Three Great Kingdoms, one for Atlantis, and one for Nirvana.”

“Oho... Of course the Great Kingdoms have them first.”

The Three Great Kingdoms, which had once been the players’ starting point, boasted the greatest military might. The other two places Cyril named, Atlantis and Nirvana, were large player-made nations that constantly fought to be at the top.

“There are a few more small airships, but this rumor came from a large one,” Cyril continued. “It all started on a voyage carrying a VIP. It was a clear, lovely day, perfect for flying. About halfway into the trip, though, an enormous storm overtook the ship. It turned dark as night, with only the roaring lightning to illuminate their path. Exposed to harsh winds and rain, the crew tried their best to escape the storm. That was when they saw... it.”

Cyril paused for a moment. The proprietor took this opportunity to bring the refills they’d ordered. “Your friend sure knows a lot of tales. I love ‘em too.” He smiled with deep interest as he put down their cups and glasses.

“It all comes with the job, but also, I just love collecting stories,” Cyril replied, sipping from his cup and smiling at the man. It seemed the two had found something in common.

Thanks to the innkeeper’s own job, he had heard plenty of yarns from other

adventurers. After a quick bow of appreciation, he returned to his counter.

Cyril took another sip, and Mira followed suit. The other members of Écarlate Carillon were drawn into Cyril's story despite themselves... barring Flicker. She was hard at work slowly sliding her seat closer to Mira with every chance she got.

"Now, where was I? Uh, I think I said everything right up until the incident," Cyril resumed. "As the airship tried desperately to escape the storm, a great flash of lightning lit the whole thunderhead. Even while the raging winds and rain worsened their visibility, the flash illuminated the thick, dark cloud to reveal a castle. It wasn't just one or two people aboard the ship; *everyone* saw it. High above them, an enormous castle floated in the middle of the storm. They didn't only see it once, either—they witnessed it in other places too."

When Cyril finished his story, Mira envisioned the cliché to end all fantasy clichés—the pinnacle of high fantasy, in her mind. "Is it what I think it is?!"

"Yes, Mira. A castle in the sky." Cyril affirmed Mira's hopes and dreams.

So, rumor number two was a castle in the sky. Mira jumped out of her seat at the introduction of the perfect fantasy trope and looked out the inn window at the heavens. Flicker wasted no time in dashing after her.

"I bet a castle floating in the sky would have tomes full of magic nobody's ever seen before," Flicker mused.

"Oho! Now you're sounding like a mage!" Mira smirked mischievously at Flicker's words. Finally, she cared about something *other* than Mira.

"If you can believe it, she's legitimately serious about sorcery," Emella said as she approached, grabbing and twisting Flicker's wrist as the girl reached toward Mira.

There were a few big white clouds in the sky. Ignoring Flicker's sudden yelp of pain, Mira felt her heart leap in joy as she imagined how a castle could hide behind any of them. She fantasized about the day when she might find it.

The three went back to their seats. Mira noticed that a chair had been scooted too close to hers, so she pushed it away. Flicker slumped over wordlessly. Emella simply sipped her drink as if nothing had happened.

"I've found myself looking at the sky more often since I heard that rumor too." Cyril grinned, understanding Mira's desire.

Mira smiled as she daydreamed about her future. When she rode Pegasus, no doubt she would watch the sky above instead of the ground below.

"Now," Cyril continued, "everyone's eyewitness testimonies mention the sudden storm. All of them were caught up in a storm and saw the castle in the midst of it. I'd bet that foul weather is protecting the castle in the sky."

"Hrmm, right. That must be it," Mira agreed.

The two fantasized about the grand castle in the storm and shared their thoughts on what it *must* be like.

The other guild members had been ambivalent to the conversation at first, but it gradually sucked them in. Soon, the whole gang of five was talking about their ideals for the castle in the sky.

Sealed inside was a holy beast. In the floor below lay a sword a hero had once wielded. The library shelves were full of ancient magical tomes, the treasure vault had mountains of gold and silver, and the courtyard fountain spewed the dew of life...

The possibilities were endless.

"Anyway, this next rumor is the last," Cyril said bashfully. "I heard this one from a fellow adventurer, and it's less gossip and more his own experience. He usually works in the northern part of the Ark continent. One day, he lucked into buying a waystone attuned to the Mirage Temple from a wandering archeologist. He charged straight into the Oriat Desert toward the temple, but the waystone turned out to be a dud! Along the way, it suddenly stopped reacting."

"*I hate* it when that happens!" Mira sympathized; she had been through something similar herself.

The Oriat Desert was in the southern portion of the Ark continent. Deep in the dunes lay the Mirage Temple, which could not be found on any map. Only a properly attuned waystone would reveal its location, but duds weren't uncommon.

Despite its rarity, all the best players had known that quirk in the system.

"Right," Cyril said. "He cursed his luck, but since he had come so far, he assumed he might be close. So, he decided to look around before going home. When he did, he stepped into quicksand and sank down into the depths of the earth."

"Seems about right."

The quicksand pits that dotted the Oriat Desert forced their victims into underground dungeons modeled after ruins. *What an unlucky customer.* Mira chuckled to herself as she drank her honey au lait.

"I tried to make him feel better about his luck, but he smirked and showed me a chunk of gold. I asked what it was, and he said he found it in the place he landed. As it turns out, he didn't fall into ruins; he fell into a huge underground city where everything glittered.

"At first," Cyril continued, "he said he just stared at the sight in total shock. But he saw a black figure in the distance heading his way. An awful chill went through him, and he ran like hell until he surfaced in an oasis. In the end, he only brought back the chunk of gold. When he had it examined, it was pure. He called the city 'El Dorado,' and he's been trying to go back ever since. He still hasn't figure out how."

"A city of gold, hrmm?" Mira mused. "But what was the black figure?"

One could assume it had been there to eliminate Cyril's acquaintance, perhaps as a guardian of El Dorado. And *that* would be the perfect time for a summoner to shine.

"Oh? That's the part that grabs you?" Cyril asked.

"I wonder if I could form a contract with it?"

"Aha. That's what you're after, eh?"

Guardians were often spirits who resided in and protected certain places. In those cases, they could be contracted. Mira's eyes burned with desire, and Cyril wondered if avarice for summons instead of gold was the key to her strength.

The others piped up about what they'd want to find, just as they had with the castle in the sky. Soon they listed every single whim imaginable, and nobody dared stop them.

"A city of gold! If I could find that, I'd never need to worry about money again."

"Does it have golden weapon shops?!"

"A golden library of books!"

Once their fantasizing ended, Cyril cut in, "By the way, this isn't quite a rumor, but..."

He brought up a place in the northwest of the Earth continent called the City of the Shrouded Hero. It had once been an average city of no particular note.

Demons had assaulted it during the Defense of the Three Great Kingdoms. The city lacked the ability to defend itself, and citizens worried the demons would slaughter them wholesale. Then a mysterious hero clad entirely in black arrived, making liberal use of exorcism spells to overwhelm and obliterate the incoming demons. When he was done, he left without ever introducing himself. Citizens simply called him the Shrouded Hero and marked the spot where he'd turned a noble demon into ash as a historical landmark.

Though that had happened ten years ago, not on any of the dates Mira had given Cyril, he thought it might bear some relevance to her mission.

"The Shrouded Hero, hrmm?" A name floated to Mira's mind: Wise Man Wallenstein the Shadow. She stared out the window at the clouds and mulled it over.

Clad in all black. Used exorcism magic with the power to overwhelm demons. Left without introducing himself. One person fits all three of those descriptions. He was always rather shy around strangers, too...

Wallenstein had worn black clothes to obscure his features, but that only made him stand out even more. He could hardly talk to others, but he enjoyed it when people appreciated him... although he couldn't take a thank-you. He was poor at PvP combat, but overwhelming when it came to defeating monsters and demons. The Black Hero sure sounded like Wallenstein.

Where were her friends now? What were they doing? Slightly annoyed, Mira decided to circle back to the City of the Black Hero at some point in the future.

Once the meal was over and the group was simply chatting, an agitated woman—presumably a caravan guard, judging by her uniform—rushed over. "Oh! There you are, Cyril!"

"What's the matter?" Cyril turned around and urged her to calm down. Emella and the others tensed.

The woman took a deep breath. "Please, we need to hurry to the caravan leader. There's a problem."

"Let's go." Cyril immediately stood, paid the bill, and thanked the proprietor for the meal. He then dashed out with the woman. Emella and the gang followed right after him.

"Hrmm. Could I bother you to watch my little rabbit friend again?" Mira asked the proprietor.

"Sure. Not a problem."

Entrusting him with the comfortably sleeping furball in her arms, Mira followed the party with a mix of worry and interest.

CHAPTER 15

THE MAIN STREET was livelier than ever with customers searching for quality wares. Cyril and the others stood off to the side with seven merchants—including the one Latry had negotiated with—and two guards.

Mira approached and eavesdropped behind Emella, gathering the gist of the situation from what she could hear.

Apparently, monsters had stolen cargo from the last car in the caravan. The two guards chased them, but there had been an enormous number of monsters, many unfamiliar. The guards had rushed to report, while one merchant and eight bodyguards remained at the scene to fight.

"The last car was... Noland's, right? I can't believe monsters stole from him rather than the three wagons ahead. Those all sold food, after all," Cyril murmured to himself and glanced at the bustling main street.

Every large carriage was drawn by two horses. On the carriage roofs, a sort of family crest marked the owner of each.

Eight merchant houses—owned by a mix of individuals and trading firms—had joined this caravan. In the village square, seven sets of three carriages bore different crests, making twenty-one total cars for the front seven firms. However, only two carriages parked in the square had the eighth crest; the monsters must have attacked the missing carriage.

"It's strange that *monsters* were the thieves," one merchant muttered. Monsters instinctively attacked living things, rather than objects. It was clearly unusual for them to ignore guards in favor of theft.

"Noland works in shipping, right? I wonder what might've been in his third carriage... This could make sense if he was transporting small pets, but still," another merchant suggested, turning back to the main street. A shipping company owned Noland's cars, which explained why there were no customers there—only the coachman watching over it.

"No living things. The freight should've all been rock fragments and the like that some scholar requested," said the first merchant Mira had seen. He seemed to be the leader of this caravan, since he knew the general contents of each vehicle.

"Why would monsters want rock fragments?"

"Maybe they thought the carriage had food, since the ones in front did too?"

Monsters that devoured crops did exist, so it would be understandable if they were after food. But none would ever mistake stones for crops. Were the rocks their aim, after all? That was unlikely, given their tendencies so far, but stranger things had happened.

"Well, standing around won't get us our answer," the leader declared.

Nobody here was an expert, so they had neither the knowledge nor the qualifications to compare the incident to prior monster behavior. As such, the caravan leader decided there was only one thing to do. He turned to Cyril. "We'll have to send a scouting team to get a detailed grasp of the circumstances. Can I trust you with that?"

"Of course. We'll confirm the situation," Cyril agreed and faced the two guards who had come to report. "Lead the way."

"Yes, sir!" The bodyguards nodded in agreement.

Finally, Mira peeked out from behind Emella and approached Cyril. "Might I come with you?" She was curious and apprehensive about the unfamiliar monsters.

"You'd be most welcome. You sure?" Cyril asked happily.

"We'd love to have you, Mira!" Flicker also said cheerfully, but for different reasons.

Mira side-eyed Flicker as Emella moved to hold the girl at bay, then directed her attention to Cyril. "Yes. You could call it professional concern, I suppose."

As the incident with the lesser demon proved, monsters occasionally did strange things when demons were involved, but most people believed demons to be extinct. Only a select few—namely, veteran players—knew the perils beginning to crop up across the continent.

It was important to check... just in case. Besides, Mira liked Cyril's guild and wanted to lend a hand.

"Sure thing, and thanks for your help." Cyril asked the bodyguards to lead on once again, but they stared at Mira in disbelief. She clearly looked too young to be involved in this sort of business.

"Er, should we really take her? There are monsters out there. It'll be dangerous..."

"She might hold us back..."

After all, Mira looked like a normal twelve-year-old girl. Mages couldn't be judged by strength alone, but she was clearly too young to have much experience.

"She'll be fine. She's probably the strongest person here." Cyril's tone carried some envy along with its sincerity.

The guards looked at Mira rather uneasily and then back to Cyril. "Seriously? Including you?"

"Including me," he answered promptly.

"And us," Emella chimed in. Zef and Flicker backed her up with grins. The guards' confusion must have reminded them of when they first met Mira, and how her strength blew them away.

The guards looked shocked. The leader of the famous guild Écarlate Carillon was nearly legendary. If he said that Mira was stronger than him—assuming he wasn't joking—then they were clearly out of their depth.

Mira was not yet aware of Cyril's full strength, but she confidently puffed her chest out and smirked at the two guards. They shuddered.

* * *

The guards guided them back the way the caravans had come, changing paths and pushing through brush to take shortcuts.

It was midday. The sun still blazed in the sky, but their surroundings were dim, and fog covered the forest. The deeper the group went, the thicker it became. Yet the

guards never got lost as they proceeded. Red marks had been made on trees here and there, showing that they were experienced scouts who knew how to tag a return trail.

Monsters occasionally attacked the group, but Mira's partially summoned Dark Knight's sword cut them down with ease. Each time, the guards were amazed.

"Aha. Indeed, these monsters should not be here," Mira noted.

After marching deeper for a while, the group arrived at a grassy clearing as the fog receded. Ahead was the bodyguard team sent to search for the lost cargo. Many were lightly armored warriors, and there were three mages among them. Fatigue was evident on their faces, and things seemed to be going poorly.

One of the two bodyguards ran to the merchant and reported, "Noland, we brought reinforcements."

Noland was in his early forties, and he looked so brawny that one might think he was a guard instead of the manager of a shipping firm. He turned around and let out a joyful cry that swept away all the wafting despair at once.

"Why, it's Écarlate Carillon! Your presence is much appreciated!"

Likewise, the other bodyguards saw Cyril and breathed sighs of relief before thanking him. Based on their reactions, Écarlate Carillon clearly had a reputation.

"Sorry to rush, but can I get a summary of the situation?" Cyril asked, and Noland nodded. Soon they were looking over a large map of the territory marked with detailed scouting information.

Noland traced the part of the forest where the fog had spread. Scouting had revealed that the cargo was taken that way. As the scouts approached the center of the location, the fog had grown increasingly dense, and monster attacks came more frequently. Stranger yet, whenever they tried to push to the center, they found monsters attacking them on all sides—then, abruptly, they walked back into the clearing.

"It's as if we've wandered into some looping trap. We have no idea how to solve it, and we're at the end of our rope," Noland finished, excusing himself and sitting down.

On closer inspection, half the group were wounded and receiving treatment from a priest. But fatigue had taken a greater toll; it was clear that they had been fighting a

difficult battle.

"I think we've got a grasp of the situation. We'll take a look for ourselves. You all rest for now," Cyril suggested. He pulled a few bottles of honey lemonade from his Item Box for everyone. Cyril figured that if they hydrated with something sweet, they might perk up a bit.

Noland and the others accepted the drinks graciously and downed them.

Entrusted with the map, Mira's party stepped into the foggy forest.

* * *

"Noland was right about the horde of monsters," Mira mused.

As the group proceeded into the fog, monsters attacked over and over. Worse yet, none were native to this forest. The monsters came in all types, with numerous attacks and special traits. That made fighting them a complex task.

It was clear why the guards had struggled. That said, Cyril and his Écarlate Carillon had Mira at their side. Their progress was dramatically faster than the previous attempts.

"They're all numbers and no power, really," Cyril added.

Mira and Cyril mowed down monsters in single strokes. Emella and the others maneuvered with ease as well. The party had strength to spare.

Mira's Dark Knight was perhaps the biggest help. Made purely to topple foes, it easily cut through the brush. Maneuvering around the forest was more difficult than dealing with the trifling monsters, so the Dark Knight was quite beneficial indeed.

It stoically cut through the foliage, clearing a path. Reduced to being a glorified machete, sorrow seemed to waft behind it as it went.

After ten or so minutes of progress, they suddenly realized they were heading back toward the clearing and stopped. It seemed they'd turned around at some point.

"Ah!" Cyril exclaimed. "It really does feel like a loop."

Loop traps were common in dungeons... but in a forest?

Cyril looked around and turned to face the way they'd come, noting that the downed foliage was still there. The path the Dark Knight had cut extended into the forest. One could hardly imagine that the group would've randomly taken a wide turn along the way.

Yet here they were, back where they started, and they had no idea where the loop had occurred.

"The number and variety of monsters are strange too," Emella agreed as she wiped the blood off her favored sword. This was weirder than anyone had expected.

Mira and the gang tried a different path, but the result was the same: after fighting countless monsters, they found themselves back at the clearing.

"This clearly isn't your average forest," Zef grumbled, looking down at a carcass they'd stumbled across. It had once been a large ursine beast known as a Papa Bear. It was an animal rather than a monster, indigenous to the Forest of the Devout.

The Papa Bear was at the top of the food chain here, even preying on monsters. But *something* had left it a mere pitiful husk, as if it had been chewed up and spat out.

Everyone was speechless.

Dense fog, non-native monsters that threw the ecosystem off-kilter, and a loop that kept anyone away from the center. The Forest of the Devout was all wrong. It would have been foolish to continue without a plan, so Cyril and the gang paused to think.

"Hrmm. An abnormality in the forest..." Mira gazed into the foggy woods. Suddenly, the word "forest" brought one possibility to mind.

When in doubt, ask an expert.

Mira announced, "I'm going to summon a little something."

[Evocation: Korpokkur]

Two magic circles appeared as portals heralding the appearance of twin leaf buds. The leaves gleamed once, and twin korpokkurs leapt out.

"Aww, cute!" Flicker smiled.

However, Mira gaped in astonishment at the twins.

"A fine day to you, Madam Chief! It's been ages!" one cried.

"Ohmigod, Chief! How's it hanging?" the other korpokkur asked.

Mira had made a contract with the twin korpokkurs. They had been short, somewhat airheaded rural girls wearing traditional shrine-maiden garb. At least, that was how Mira remembered them. Yet these sisters, once less than a meter tall, had undergone serious changes since she last saw them.

What's with these two?!

The older sister, Uneko, wasn't much different; she was like a granddaughter who had come back home after a year working at a big company in the city. She was just a little taller now, and her trademark red ribbon was unmistakable. The real difference was the younger sister, Etenoa.

"Ah, um... I'm glad to see you haven't changed much, Uneko. But you... Er, you are Etenoa, yes?"

"You're, like, *hilarious*, Chief! I literally can't even!" Etenoa answered, shaking her blue ribbon.

She looked as though she was going out clubbing—revealing clothes, loud accessories, and a flashy pose. Most devastating of all was that she was nearly twice Uneko's size. Etenoa embodied a high-school girl strutting around a bustling city of young people.



"You've, erm... found your style, I see." Mira stared at Etenoa in awe. She was the other granddaughter come home from the city... the one who spent all her time partying.

"Aww, you're so sweet! Speaking of style, you look totally—"

"Not now, please!" Mira rushed to stop Etenoa from speaking. If the korpokkur spilled the beans, she'd truly blow Mira's cover. Cyril seemed to have an idea, but Mira was desperate not to confirm his suspicions.

"They're... *unique*," Cyril said, bringing things back on topic. "But korpokkurs are among the spirits most versed in matters of the earth and forest. I see your reasoning, Mira."

"Uh, er, right. Yes, that was the plan. Best to ask the experts instead of speculating among ourselves, no?" Mira put Etenoa's new appearance aside for the moment as she explained why she'd summoned the sisters, trying to convince herself that she'd made the right decision.

Uneko and Etenoa were residents of a village in the space between forest and earth. As such, they had great general knowledge of forests—even if one sister no longer looked the part. Mira was happy to meet them again, but the change was still too much for her.

* * *

"Yes, Madam Chief! We'll look into the matter immediately."

"You got it, Girl Boss. Leave it to us or whatever."

On Mira's orders, the korpokkur sisters looked into the forest. They raised their human-sized butterbur sprouts aloft and closed their eyes, focusing and searching throughout the woods. In that instant, the air seemed to change. The gang gazed at the spirits as if observing a religious ritual.

Etenoa's showy outfit certainly didn't fit the mood, but the sisters hit upon the cause of the issue within a few minutes. They saw how the flow of mana around the forest had been disrupted, causing one portion to distort. That distortion warped the space nearby, becoming a portal that summoned all sorts of monsters.

Most forests had spirits who maintained the proper flow of mana. However, for some

reason, the sisters sensed almost none here.

Mira hit upon it immediately. "Chimera Clausen!" she exclaimed. The abnormality of the forest was the result of kidnapped spirits. "But what do we do about it?"

"We can't just leave it. At this rate, the stagnant mana could cause untold harm to countless people," Cyril said as he gazed into the depths of the forest. As someone who believed in working for the greater good, he couldn't overlook the issue.

"Right. We can't abandon this forest," Mira agreed, remembering the tyrant spikeback and fortress hunters from the other day.

"Yeah! We gotta solve this," Emella chimed in.

"Yep, let's do what we can!" Flicker said.

"Can't just ignore something like this," Zef added.

Their goal now established, they discussed how to tackle it. Once again, Uneko and Etenoa's knowledge came in quite handy. As it turned out, a traditional korpokkur rite could undo the stagnation. Once that was done, the forest would go back to normal... but only for a year. This would be a temporary measure until the spirits returned. Additionally, the sisters had to perform the rite next to the center of the stagnation.

Temporary or not, this was their best and only option.

"So, how do we get to the center? The place is looping, isn't it?" Zef asked, pointing out the most pressing issue.

According to the korpokkurs, this distortion was deep within the forest—past the loop the group had failed to make it through thus far. Mira wasn't quite so bothered by that as the others; she could always fly.

"Whoocaa. Yeah, it's wicked warped, but I bet we've got this," Etenoa said.

"We're happy to lead you on a stroll through the forest, Madam Chief," Uneko added.

The sisters offered to play the role of guides. They claimed that once they read the forest air, they could find the source of the distortion.

"Hey, awesome!" Zef piped up. The others thanked the korpokkurs as well.

"Very well," Mira said. "If you'd please."

"Leave it to us, Madam Chief!"

"Aww, yeah!"

The sisters responded eagerly and walked up front. Incredibly, the foliage parted for them as they went, as if they had power akin to Moses's here in the forest.

After a while, Mira dismissed the Dark Knight that had been slicing open a path for them. Surely the visible depression emanating from the summon had just been her imagination... right?

CHAPTER 16

ALONG THE WAY, the korpokkur sisters displayed their prowess in battle. What less could one expect from Mira's summons? Upheaval of the earth, flying pebbles—since they were spirits who governed the land, no monster could rival the korpokkur sisters on their home turf.

However much the fog obscured their vision, the korpokkurs were unaffected in the forest. They occasionally pointed into apparent nothingness, which was quickly followed by monsters' dying cries. Even Zef, who had some confidence in his ability to sense incoming danger, knew he was hopelessly outclassed.

"You're on another level, Mira."

"Another level of cute!" Flicker had relapsed at some point along the way. Now she gazed needily not just at Mira, but at Uneko as well.

Emella stood dutifully between them. The sisters would warn the group if too many monsters were coming, so Emella could focus on defending against the party's own predator. That was becoming a full-time job.

As they walked on, the number of ambushes ramped up dramatically. More monsters slipped past the sisters' attacks, and thanks to the poor visibility, Mira and the others had their hands full. Yet the party continued without any major issues until they stepped into the depths of the forest at the heart of the stagnation.

It was a field about the size of a small village, overgrown with blue flowers. Strangely, the fog lifted to hang above the field—leaving the writhing crowd of monsters within quite visible.

Standing right at the boundary between the flower field and the forest, Emella pointed to the center of the meadow and piped up, "I-Isn't that the stolen cargo?"

"Hrmm. I do see something over there." Mira strained her eyes and spotted a multitude of sacks beyond the mass of monsters. The enemy was so focused on the sacks that they didn't seem to notice the party.

"Forget that for now. I see two real pains in the ass..." Zef muttered as he beheld the horde. A pair of especially large beasts towered over the other fifty-plus monsters.

Noticing their striking features, Cyril and Mira quickly surmised that they were fiends.

"Those look like an Argent Wolf and Aureate Lion," Cyril said.

"They do," Mira agreed. "I'm surprised to see fiends in the monsters' ranks."

Their comments were as calm as if they were merely admiring wildlife, but their friends tensed in horror at the word "fiend."

Generally, adventurers fought monsters. How those spawned was a total mystery. The only common features among monsters were that they attacked living things indiscriminately, and they were good at it.

Fiends, on the other hand, were native animals that had mutated for some reason. They were essentially creatures that had been exposed to magic and possessed enormous magical power. They generally didn't stray far from where they manifested and often became the leaders of herds.

Still, fiends possessed unusually strong fighting abilities. Powerful wild animals were physically strengthened by magic mutation, and they could learn spells specific to their species. Even the weakest known fiends required at least five B-Rank adventurers to defeat.

While Emella and the others gazed grimly at the beasts, Cyril and Mira divided the work between them with simple hand gestures.

"Okay, you take care of the Aureate Lion, Mira."

"Hrmm, right."

Both fiends were foes worthy of multiple A-Rank adventurers' attention. Cyril and Mira would leave the rest of the party to deal with the surrounding monsters. Emella, Flicker, and Zef didn't object. They knew well how strong Mira and their leader were.

Still, they were frustrated to see the two decide which enemies to fight by playing rock-paper-scissors.

To defend the party from any sudden ambushes from the forest, the korpokkur sisters split up and kept watch. Thus began the battle to defeat the monsters, recover the lost cargo, and stop the ecological damage from spreading.

Mira and Cyril charged into the flower field. They vaulted over the crowd of monsters and dealt the first blows to their respective fiends. Soon, the sound of their strikes and the roars of the fiends echoed through the clearing.

Emella's group and two of Mira's summoned Holy Knights came right behind, ripping apart the monster horde.

None of the creatures were as big as the tyrant spikeback, but Cyril knew that three adventurers against fifty monsters was a hard task no matter how skilled his guild was. Mira had suggested summoning twenty or thirty of her closest friends to end it quickly, but Cyril responded, "Let's let them get *a little* bit of experience." In the end, they settled on Mira summoning a pair of Holy Knights to act as tanks.

Emella and the Holy Knights served as the front line while Flicker stayed a step behind and culled the monsters with magic. Zef acted as a floater next to Flicker.

With perfect cooperation and flashy magic, the three successfully attracted the monsters' attention and kept them clear of Cyril and Mira.

Mira's opening Immortal Arts blow knocked the Aureate Lion backward. Even though it was a powerful strike, the fiend quickly regained its footing and counterattacked.

That was no problem for Mira, who swiftly got to summoning. Between her and the Aureate Lion appeared a white tower shield, blocking the fiend's claws with a fierce metallic shriek. Its job done, the partial summoning vanished, leaving Mira only a few meters from the lion. She faced it head-on.

The Aureate Lion's body was massive, perhaps three times larger than a normal lion's.

They're scarier in the flesh...

Mira felt the fiend's breath, and its roar reverberated through the air. Then the behemoth made a mad charge straight for her. Once again awash with the awe of facing dangerous beasts in reality, Mira fended off the assault with another partial summoning. Then, wasting no time, she lunged forward.

[Immortal Arts Heaven: Refined Thrust]

Multiple shock waves made direct contact with the lion, sending it flying back again. It smashed helplessly into a tower shield that appeared in its path.

Mira pressed the attack. A magic circle appeared above the collapsed lion's head a second before two arms sprang forth and swung black swords down.

The unavoidable blow pierced the Aureate Lion, which perished.

"Hrmm. Works just fine on fiends too." Mira smiled. Her partial summonings had proven their worth against a more powerful foe.

Mira's innate curiosity and ingenuity—the two factors that had led her to become a Wise Man—spurred her to find any opportunity to test new techniques.

Her skirmish over, Mira turned around and spotted Cyril finishing off his Argent Wolf.

Ah, fantastic.

Mira saw only a single gleam of steel as Cyril deftly dodged the wolf's fangs and swung his sword against its stomach. The wound went deep, but it didn't seem like enough to be fatal. A few beats later, however, the fiend's torso suddenly tore open, and it breathed its last.

The fatal blow was, in fact, from Cyril's blade, although it seemed to come from elsewhere to the naked eye. Members of the warrior class could focus their fighting spirit in battle, manifesting various powers such as setting their weapon ablaze or shooting cutting beams of light from their sword.

In general, these were called "manifestations." As a fighting technique, warriors could use one or more manifestations to create "Crafts"—basically, ultimate moves. The variety of Crafts was nearly endless, since they were combo skills. Warriors tended to use them as a calling card.

Mastered Crafts had effects almost like magic, and Cyril's proficiency in this particular Craft supremely impressed Mira.

Their work done, Mira and Cyril hurried to back up Emella's group. Unsurprisingly, it took under a minute to finish off the monster horde after they joined the fray.

"This many corpses could cause some nasty problems," Cyril said. "Let's get them dealt with quickly."

"Gotcha," Zef agreed. "I'll lop off the useful bits."

The blue flower field was dyed with blood and littered with monster remains. The party could leave a few corpses without causing a problem, but dozens were a different story. If they didn't burn the cadavers, that could lead to a rise in undead monsters or other negative effects on the area.

In the meantime, Zef quickly and skillfully picked and sliced off valuable monster parts. On closer inspection, his work seemed to be another kind of Craft. Mira's admiration grew as she realized that Crafts could be used for things other than battle.

Before long, Zef finished his grim harvest, and it was time to burn the monster remains. As the sky filled with smoke, a monster landed before the group: a great rhinoceros. Its thick leather armor could deflect even steel swords. When it caught sight of Mira's party, it charged.

Since there was only a single great rhinoceros, Emella and the rest of the party quickly cut it down. Zef took a moment to dismember it as well.

Meanwhile, part of the sky turned black again, and monsters descended once more.

"This is annoying!" Emella groaned as she cut down the additions. Their numbers seemed inexhaustible, so her complaint was perfectly reasonable.

Once the gang finished cleaning up the monsters yet again, they realized that this was the distortion the korppokkur sisters had warned of. Time and time again, new monsters spawned as they killed the last. If they didn't do anything about the distortion, this cycle would never end.

"Uneko! Etenoa! Start the ritual!" Mira called out.

"Leave it to us, Madam Chief!"

"Toootally. But it's gonna take, like, a while. So watch our backs, 'kay?"

Once the sisters began their rite, the air changed instantly. The forest rustled, and light gathered.

Mira and the party watched the process, but monsters continued to pour in. The adventurers could do little but mow them down as they came. After several waves of monsters, the sky warped yet again, and something more terrifying appeared. A fiend—much larger than the two from before—fell a short distance away, let out a hideous roar, and charged.

“Ack, the cargo!” Emella shouted as the fiend kicked the scattered crates and bags around.

Then there was a great rumbling crash, and two Holy Knights held the beast at bay.

They swung their swords down on its head. Mira heard a thud, as if they’d hit it with blunt weapons, and the fiend dropped to the ground for a moment... but it did not stay down. In a fit of rage, it shook off the Holy Knights and stormed into their tower shields. The knights took the impact head-on.

Cyril closed the distance in the blink of an eye and swung his sword. A single flash of steel, and countless wounds opened across the beast’s neck. Blood sprayed as it fell to the ground.

“That was something else,” Mira mused.

“Ah, it was nothing compared to you, Mira.”

She and Cyril chatted with total composure. The rest of the gang watched in equal parts exasperation, envy, and lust. The latter was directed toward Mira, and only by one particular person.

* * *

After that, the party left protecting the korkokkur sisters to Mira’s Holy Knights. They spread out, defeating the monsters that appeared and cleaning up the corpses when they could.

After they’d burned yet another crowd of monsters, Mira noticed a sack laying among the blue flowers and picked it up, assuming it was part of the cargo.

“Hrmm, what’s this?”

The damaged bag was quite heavy. When she lifted it, its contents spilled out.

Lithographs? Hrmm... What would monsters want with these?

Mira didn't know much about archaeology, but familiar symbols were inscribed on the stones. "Wait a second. Is this...?"

The hexagram with unique marks and shapes was the spitting image of the symbol known as the Demon's Blessing—the presumed reason Soul Howl sought the Holy Grail of Heavenly Light.

Why are those markings on this stone? Mira reached out, curious.

As she touched the lithograph, vertigo assailed her. She felt as if she was floating and the ground had disappeared under her. Then the world swayed. She managed to hold herself up and not get sick, but when she looked ahead, she was speechless at the sight.

What used to be a small blue flower meadow surrounded by forest was now an endless field of dazzling blooms.

CHAPTER 17

WHEN MIRA TURNED AROUND, Cyril and the others were gone. The lithographs scattered at her feet had disappeared too.

What's happening to me? Did I warp somewhere else?

The field stretched in all directions, and Mira realized that she was on a low hillside. A hundred meters ahead, at the top of the hill, was one large tree.

In the colorful field of flowers, the tree stood almost as a beacon. Drawn toward it, Mira began to walk. Once she reached the tree, she once again looked at the scenery. Beyond the hill was grassland as far as the eye could see. As the wind whooshed past, she spotted a group of people walking in a line.

Ah. Who could they be?

The group wore white robes with hoods, making it impossible to see their identities. The line extended all the way to the horizon.

Where were they heading? Curious, Mira ran toward the line. Nearly ten minutes later, she had her answer.

As the grassland continued on, there was an enormous manmade structure in its very center. It seemed perhaps *too* grand to have been made by human hands.

The foundation was four layers of stone piled up like the bottom of a pyramid. That wasn't anything special, but what truly astounded Mira were the pillars atop the structure. They rose to pierce the clouds.

"But what is it?" she muttered to herself, taking in the structure ahead.

Stranger yet, Mira noticed that there were *two* structures: one black, and one white.

What's the story here? she wondered. What had happened to her? Who were the people dressed in white? What was the mysterious structure? It was all so bizarre.

"Maybe I should just ask." Mira ran to the line of folks in white.

"Oh? Here's an unexpected visitor." One individual noticed her before she could say a word. Speaking with a voice neither masculine nor feminine, they removed their hood and continued, "So, what do you need?"

Two twisted black horns grew from either side of the stranger's head. Mira panicked at the sight and got into a fighting stance. *Wh-what's going on here...?*

The horns were very familiar—almost *demonic*. Mira froze and stared at the person's face. The stranger had skin as white as porcelain, graceful features, and eyes that sparkled like jewels. They wore a gentle, reassuring expression. They looked so divine that the horns seemed out of place.

"You look surprised. All the travelers who come here these days make the same face." The person smiled.

Mira had been standing there dumbfounded, but she shook off the daze as the person spoke to her again, trying to make sense of their words.

"These days'? Apologies, but... I have no idea what's going on! Can you tell me anything?!" Mira blurted out, her curiosity finally bouncing back with her composure.

"Sure, I don't mind." The person continued moving with the line as they explained what had happened to Mira. According to them, a time-space distortion's effects had thrown her soul into the past. "You could say that all this is like a dream! Do your senses feel dull, or your movements sluggish?"

"Now that you mention it..." They did. Mira finally realized what felt wrong; though she heard the wind blowing hard around her, she didn't feel it against her skin.

It was actually eerie—her senses were distorted, unable to truly *feel* anything. This was just the way it had been when she was in the game. If she focused on her senses, she found she couldn't bear the illusory nature of it at all. Uneasy, she broke into a jog to keep pace with the stranger.

"How do I return to my time?" she asked.

"No need to rush off. This happens occasionally. People wander in, get stuck for a while, then go back home. Just relax; it will happen when it happens."

Mira looked around, and the others in line nodded in agreement. She saw smiles beneath their hoods.

"I... see. Then that is a relief, at least." Mira relaxed at the stranger's voice and the warmth she felt from the group at large.

"Still, this isn't exactly ideal," the stranger responded. "You were sucked into an anomaly, after all. Any idea why this happened?"

The distortion had divorced Mira's soul from her flesh and tossed it into the past. Having the stranger point that out to her again reminded Mira that it was an anomaly indeed. "Well, I do have an inkling."

The mana distortion in the Forest of the Devout had caused plenty of anomalies. With nothing better to do, Mira told the stranger at length about the deep fog, loop, monster appearances, and lithographs in the bag.

* * *

"That seems to be the culprit," the stranger concluded. "The distortion interfered with space-time, and that lithograph you touched brought you here. Or something like that, I'm sure."

It seemed Mira was right. "Hrmm, understood. It's a nuisance, but mana does influence space and time, after all."

That's a fantasy world for you, she thought as she mulled over the enigmatic force that was mana.

"Mana is both nothing and everything," the stranger said cryptically. "It's a pillar that fixes space as space. I don't know how it's seen in your world, but that is our concept of mana."

"This is getting esoteric..." Mira muttered with a wry grin, realizing that the conversation was straying into metaphysics. "By the way, you seem well informed. Who are you—or rather, who are all of you?"

According to this person she'd met, Mira was in the past. Yet they seemed more knowledgeable than the people of the present. Perhaps Mira simply was not smart enough to keep up, but that was the feeling she got from their conversation.

"No offense, but you look nothing like the people of my era," Mira added. "Well, *most* people, anyhow. Might I know the name of your people, if you have one?"

She couldn't help but look at their horns one more time as she asked.

"No offense taken. We're called devils." The being introduced their race, their features like a work of art save for the twisted black horns. The devils' figures were nearly the same as humans', but their skin was almost translucently white.

"Devils? Really?" That made an odd sort of sense. The word was surprising, whether there was a real connection to Devils' Labyrinths or not. Mira surveyed the long line of devils and wondered about the link.

"Sounds like you've heard of us." The person looked at Mira, their eyes glimmering with interest.

"Right. In my time, the main use of the word 'devil' is in 'Devils' Labyrinths.'"

The Primal Forest Mira had visited on Solomon's request was one such labyrinth. Monster subspecies patrolled the halls of Devils' Labyrinths, and treasure chests reappeared after enough time elapsed. Only the quality of the artifacts waiting to be found matched the potency of the enemies lurking deep within. Devils' Labyrinths were very difficult places to traverse.

"Wow, they named labyrinths after us? That sounds exciting." A surprised smile came to the devil's face.

"They're very *unique* labyrinths too." Mira's lips curled into a mischievous smirk. Then, out of nowhere, she felt the sensation of being lifted. "Whoa!"

She looked down in a panic and noticed that she was fading like a ghost.

"Oh. Looks like you'll be home before long."

"I see... So this is how it feels..."

Mira's senses, thoughts, and consciousness faded. It felt less like waking up from a dream, and more like falling into one. Realizing that she was being drawn back to her own time, she struggled against the sensation so that she could keep learning about what was going on here.

“We’ll talk more soon!” called the devil. “See you then!”

“What is that supposed to mean?! Wait!”

Mira fought to follow the talkative stranger. She realized they’d stepped into the white structure she’d seen from afar.

Is it some sort of altar?

Mira had thought that the structure looked like one of those fictional space elevators. But now that she saw it up close, she realized it was something else entirely; the devils were climbing a massive staircase.

“What is this place? Why is everyone coming here?!”

Alien magic circles, symbols, and mathematical formulas covered the square floor. Countless lines of light ran up the towering pillars.

“This is the gate of reincarnation. We’ll be reborn as new beings,” the stranger said, with the gentle expression of an enlightened monk.

Mira could hardly believe it.

“Reincarnation? What will you become?” She watched as a devil just a few places ahead walked to the gate, transformed into faint light, and disappeared.

“Everybody who reincarnates in this white gate becomes an angel.” The stranger stepped forward, closer to the gate.

“An angel?! Then what about the black gate?!”

Just after Mira asked the question, vertigo again overcame her. She was overstaying the time her soul could remain here. Some colossal force was pulling her consciousness away, and she struggled to hear the stranger’s answer.

“Every... black... demo—”

As she was dragged to the future, Mira saw the same hexagram she had spotted earlier etched in the floor.

* * *

Mira looked around the blue flower field.

"Hrmm. It seems as though I was just talking with somebody." She had the strangest feeling that she'd had the most remarkable conversation, but the details were fleeting.

Then she heard a familiar voice she couldn't identify. "*When the time comes, you'll remember.*"

"Who was that?" She searched for the voice; it was so clear that she couldn't imagine it was a hallucination.

Now she recognized the flower field. The korpokkurs were performing a ritual to disperse the mana distortion. Emella and the others were fighting the monsters spewing from said distortion. Cyril had finished fighting a fiend.

The voice Mira had heard in her head, however, didn't belong to any of them.

I can't have imagined it. Somebody said I would remember "when the time comes." Guess I'll just have to wait...

Although Mira had forgotten what her soul experienced, the fact that she'd had an important conversation remained in the corner of her mind.

"Mira, handle that big guy over there!" Cyril shouted while Mira was lost in thought.

She looked up and saw undulations in the sky spawning another fiend. "Right. On it!"

No matter how much she tried, Mira couldn't recall what she and the voice had talked about. Somehow, though, she knew that she could trust whoever it was. She only had to wait for the answers to become clear.

Right now, she had more pressing concerns. She put those thoughts in the back of her mind, threw down the empty sack in her hand, and faced the fiend.

* * *

Emella and the others continued to handle smaller monsters while Mira and Cyril took care of the larger fiends. The process seemed to go on forever. By the time the

korpokkur sisters finally completed their rite, the pile of corpses was taller than Cyril.

Uneko and Etenoa raised their leaves aloft, and dazzling light filled the vicinity, driving away the darkness of the distortion.

"Whoa! What's happening?" shouted Emella.

Zef was equally startled. "What the heck did they just do?"

When the group could see again, the fog had lifted, and they realized they were in a grassy clearing in the forest. With the distortion gone, the area had returned to its usual state. The blue flowers had disappeared as well.

Neither Mira nor Cyril's party had ever encountered this phenomenon, so they had no idea why that had happened.

"I had a feeling those blue flowers weren't from around here. They must have come from somewhere else, like the monsters," Flicker hypothesized as she surveyed the area.

"Yeah, but... nah. Well, it's like, you're kinda half right," Etenoa replied. She seemed satisfied with a job well done as she walked back to the group. "The flowers are still here, they're just like, not *now*, y'know? The time boundary gets totes fuzzy in mana warps."

That made sense; the adventurers felt like they'd stepped back from another time.

Mira was unsure whether she should be surprised that, despite Etenoa's ditzy attitude, the korpokkur knew exactly what had gone on. Meanwhile, Uneko busily investigated the area to ensure the rite had gone as planned.

The party had solved the problem... for now. They checked to make sure there weren't any monsters wandering around the area before they returned. The cargo itself was just too plentiful and scattered for them to gather alone, but at least now it was safe to enlist Noland's help.

On the way back, whenever the party spotted normal blue flowers growing in the forest, a chill ran down their spines.

CHAPTER 18

WITH THE KORPOKKUR SISTERS' precise guidance, Mira and the others returned to where Noland awaited and reported their success.

"Ooh! We noticed that the fog lifted—so, that was you after all! Beautifully done!" Noland called as they approached. He shouted for the cargo-recovery team to get ready.

"Really, it's all thanks to our friend and summoner, Mira," Cyril said.

"Ah, of course! A temporary member of Écarlate Carillon, and a summoner at that! Rare indeed. Thank you for all you've done, young friend. You've saved the day!"

Cyril's words carried weight, and Noland thanked Mira without doubting her abilities for a moment, sparing her the disappointment of summoning's present reputation.

"Don't mention it. I was simply helping out my friends, so there's no need to thank me," Mira responded, puffing her chest out proudly nonetheless.

"You're well connected, eh, Cyril?" Noland said mysteriously before swiftly turning his attention to the cargo team.

"Huh?" Mira froze, head cocked in puzzlement.

* * *

With the cargo collected, the gang returned to Hunters' Village. Mira went to the inn first, whereupon the pure rabbit immediately hopped across the table and into her arms.

"Whoa! Affectionate today, aren't you?" Mira smiled as she caught the pure rabbit and petted its belly. Flicker writhed as she watched, desperately trying to self-insert as the rabbit.

"Welcome back. Good to see you're all safe." The proprietor offered the group drinks on the house, which they gratefully accepted. Everyone was in high spirits thanks to

their job well done.

After wetting their whistles, the gang stepped back to the main street to say their goodbyes.

"Well, Mira, see you again someday," said Cyril.

"I haven't gotten enough Mira yet!" Flicker cried as Emella shoved her back into the carriage.

"See ya." Zef winked.

"Bye-bye, Mira!" Emella called, trying to close the carriage door behind her.

"Indeed. Good to see you all again!" Mira called. "Safe travels."

Cyril had offered to report what happened in the forest to the Adventurers' Guild Union, so no doubt a more permanent fix would happen sometime soon. The party would also sell the monster parts they had obtained and send Mira her cut through the Union network.

Even in such a big world, chance reunions happened. Fate worked in mysterious ways, but Mira knew she would meet Cyril's group again. She wondered what stories they might be able to share when they saw one another next.

After waving to her friends, Mira found a secluded place to summon Pegasus and left Hunters' Village.

Once aloft, Mira heard only wind and wings. Grassland stretched out below, and in the distance behind her, she saw the Elder Tree through the haze. Traversing the endless blue skies, Mira continued on her way—though she made sure to look carefully at any big clouds she spotted.

* * *

A few hours after her departure from Hunters' Village, Mira sat in the middle of the vast grassland and gazed at a map, leaning against Pegasus.

I can wait until tomorrow to report in, I'd say.

Even traveling by Pegasus, Mira's fatigue built up over successive days. Although Pegasus was the one doing the hard work, she felt the need to rest for a half hour now and then after long stretches of flight. Next to her, the pure rabbit worriedly licked her finger.

"I'm just so sleepy..."

Pegasus shifted its neck to support Mira's tired body. She patted the gentle creature and nestled in further, pulling the pure rabbit into a hug in the process.

"Sorry. Let me stay like this a while," Mira mumbled as she rested against Pegasus. Its big, white wings enveloped her. As she was embraced by the wings' pulsating warmth, sleep washed over her.

* * *

Mira's nap lasted for the better part of an hour. When she awoke, she saw little birds peeking through Pegasus's white wings.

The winged horse's wings slowly unfurled. Before Mira was a vast flock of multicolored birds. Yet not one made a sound; they simply surrounded Pegasus in silence. All Mira heard was the rustling of the wind.

"You've got a real audience." Mira smoothed Pegasus's mane and laughed at the crowd it had drawn, even bigger than the one by the lake. "Aren't you popular?"

Pegasus neighed comfortably and pressed its head into the smiling Mira's chest. Likewise, the pure rabbit happily squeaked in her lap.

"I feel a lot better now. Thanks," Mira said, and Pegasus neighed in acknowledgement.

Instantly, the once-silent grassland was a symphony of chirps. The many birds' little voices joined to make an uproar, waking Mira up fully after her nap.

"Were you good while I slept, sweetie?" she cooed, lifting the pure rabbit with both hands. It squeaked gleefully as she pressed it against her chest. "I think I slept too long. Let's get going. Pegasus, I'll need your aid again."

Her fatigue banished for the moment, Mira stood energetically. The birds resting atop Pegasus's back scattered at the sudden motion, all taking flight at once. The sight was

as beautiful as a blizzard of cherry blossoms. In the middle of the colorful display was the snow-white Pegasus.

* * *

In the evenings, the plaza before the Linked Silver Towers saw few sightseers. Mira alighted in the middle of Silverhorn, soothing Pegasus as she dismissed it.

The big gate opened, and nine towers stretching into the sky welcomed Mira. It was a grand sight—though perhaps not as grand as the Elder Tree. Mira squared her shoulders like a returning hero and stepped forward, walking quickly without realizing it.

She looked next to the Tower of Evocation and noticed that there was no wagon.

Hrmm... Cleos must be away.

Mira was currently awaiting the completion of her own specialized wagon. She had hoped she would come home to find it waiting, so seeing the street in front of the tower empty was a little disappointing. Finally cheering herself up with the knowledge that there was always tomorrow, she raised her pure rabbit aloft before the tower.

“This is your new home, little friend.” The pure rabbit squeaked cheerfully, perhaps understanding Mira’s words, or perhaps just satisfied with the attention it was getting.

Mira headed inside to her apartment on the highest floor. Using her Master Key, she opened the door to her rooms, threw her coat on the sofa, and set the rabbit down.

“Stay here a moment, please.” She ran to the bathroom. Seconds later, the sound of water flowing could be heard.

Feeling like a new woman, Mira looked at the changing-room door that led to the bath.

“Why don’t we freshen up together?” Scooping up her pure rabbit, she threw open the door, anticipating a soothing bath. “What the—?!”

“Miss Mira, welcome ba—!”

“S-sorry!” Panicked, Mira slammed the door shut. The afterimage of an underwear-

clad Mariana was burned into her memory.

Once upon a time, the sight of a half-naked maid would have been the stuff of dreams. When it came to Mariana, though, she just felt guilty.

While Mira struggled with the mix of remorse and desire, Mariana opened the door and greeted her anew. "Miss Mira, welcome back." The maid's smiling cheeks—still rosy from the bath—complemented her bound blue hair and plain white robe.

"Right. Thank you." The maid's smile brought Mira back to her senses as Mariana's eyes stopped on the bunny in her arms.

"Why do you have a rabbit with you?" Mariana gazed at the pure rabbit and reached her hand out slowly. The bunny reacted with uncertainty at first, but it seemed to sense that the blessing within Mira came from Mariana. It leaned to press its cheek against her hand.

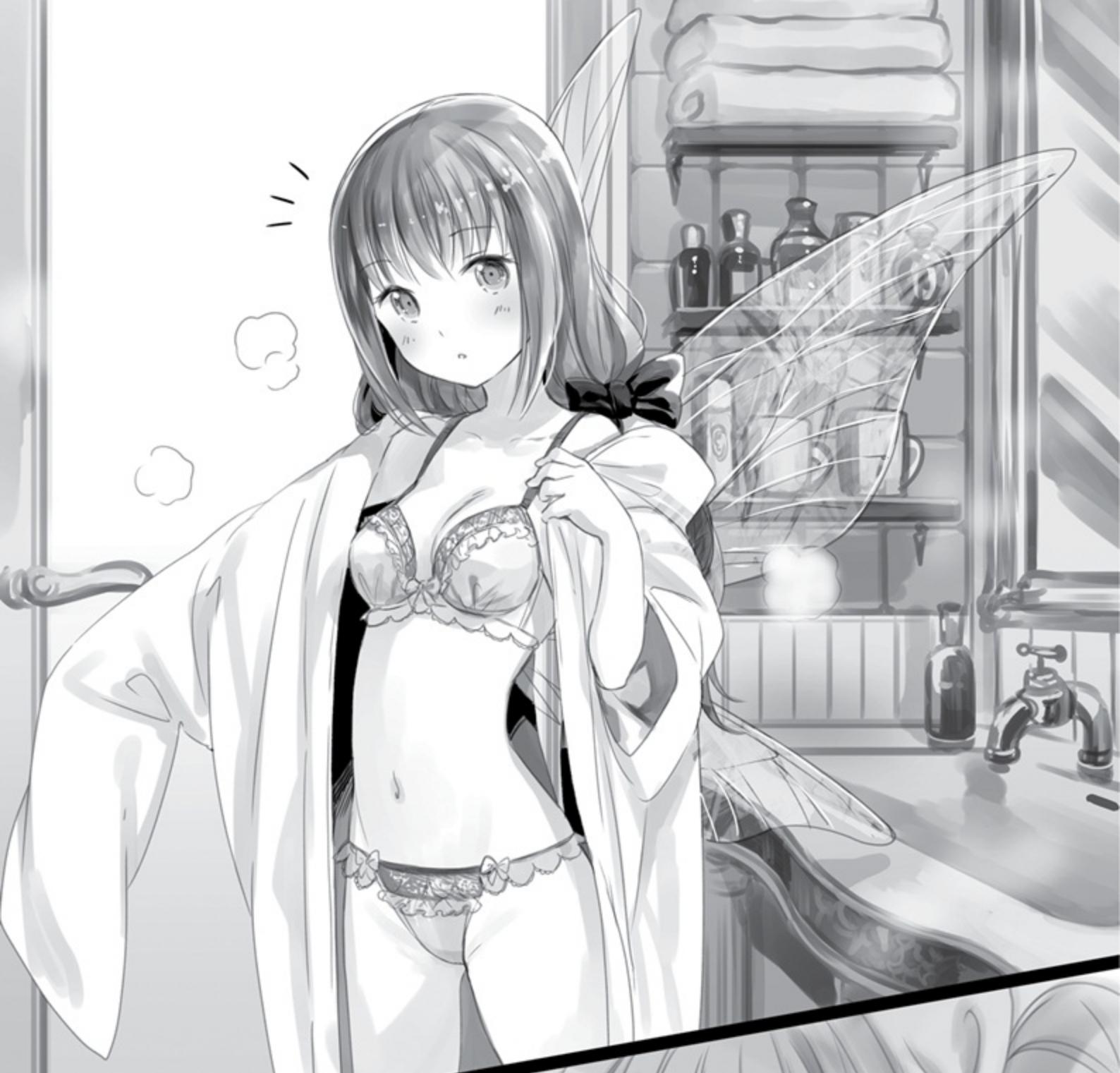
"It followed me home from the forest. Erm... Can we keep it?" Mira pleaded, like a child asking her mother. Though she was the lord of this tower, she would be leaving the rabbit in Mariana's hands. She had to appeal to the fairy's good nature.

"Of course. I'd be glad to take care of it while you're away."

"Really? Thank you!"

At that, Mariana headed back into the changing room and took off her robe.

"Wh-what're you doing?!" Mira shouted, averting her eyes. In her peripheral vision, Mariana had already stripped down to her underwear again.



With total composure and a touch of eagerness, Mariana replied, “You *are* going to bathe, yes? I will wash your back for you.”

“Right... But... Very well.”

It was impossible to stop Mariana once she was in service mode. Resigned to her fate, Mira skipped the token resistance and trudged into the changing room. Like last time, Mariana helped her strip, piling the dirty clothing in a laundry basket.

“Do you have any other laundry, Miss Mira?” After putting Mira’s underwear in the basket, Mariana looked at her expectantly.

“Ah, actually, yes,” Mira remembered and removed a worn pair of underwear from her bag. “Here you go. Thank you.”

With that, she tried to swiftly enter the sudsy water to save herself from the agony of being nude in front of Mariana. But a hand on her shoulder held her firmly in place as Mariana’s gaze locked onto Mira’s head.

“Miss Mira? What happened to your hair?” She ran her fingers through Mira’s beautifully tied silver locks. They were still in pigtails from when White had taught Mira to dry her hair using magic. The maid’s fingers paused on the white ribbons.

“Oh—I met a girl named White in my travels, and she, um, helped me with my hair.”

“Is that so?” Mariana said curtly as she unfastened the pigtails, pursing her lips in jealousy. Mira, however, was too busy averting her gaze to see it.

* * *

Once in the bath, Mariana washed her from head to toe. The sponge in her hand was slick and soft, covering Mira in tiny bubbles.

Despite the awkwardness, Mira relaxed as the fatigue from her journey came back in full force. Mariana smiled as she gently poured hot water across her master’s body to wash the bubbles away.

Next, it was the pure rabbit’s turn. It received the same treatment—and, amazingly enough, it didn’t resist. Mira held its ears down to stop water from getting inside, and Mariana gently washed the rabbit’s blue fur.

Mira patted down the pure rabbit with a towel while Mariana tied Mira's wet hair up.
"That does it. Miss Mira, have you had dinner yet?"

The question made Mira realize that she *was* hungry. "No, not yet. Could I bother you to prepare something?"

"But of course. I'll get dinner ready right away. Rest easy until then."

Mira snuck a glance at Mariana as the maid walked off cheerfully to make dinner; then she headed to the large bath. Within was a tub made from black pyroxene, a high-quality stone with patterns like stars floating in space. It was a popular home-decor material.

The tub was full of hot water, clear as could be. When Mira sank into it, the water overflowed a little.

"Ah, paradise..." The water tickled her skin all over.

This bathtub was so wide that ten people could have stretched out their legs and relaxed. Mira starfished and bobbed on the surface. The pattern of the stone made her look like she was floating effortlessly in space.

"Aaahh... True bliss." She basked in luxury with an apple au lait in hand, humming to herself as she enjoyed sublime comfort alongside her pure rabbit.

CHAPTER 19

MIRA DRIED HER FLUSHED SKIN and wrapped her bath towel around the pure rabbit. It peeked out of a small gap and squeaked happily. She then put the rabbit down gently on a shelf and opened a bag nearby. Inside were sexy lingerie and a babydoll slip, but Mira pretended not to see them and searched until she found a pair of real underwear.

Hm...? Ah, this must be the laundry I gave Mariana the other day. Mira appreciated that it was there, as she was running out of normal underwear. With mental thanks to Mariana, she took out a pair and put the bag into her Item Box.

Now partially clad, Mira untied her hair and recalled the magic White had taught her.

Mm... Might as well just try drying it for now. White had forced her to learn other hair-care methods, but Mira chased them off into the corner of her mind, deciding to start with baby steps.

“Ooh!” When she activated the spell, each brush of her hand through her hair dried it more and more. She tried the spell on the bunny, and its sky-blue fur was dry and soft in no time.

It was truly practical magic. Just using it reminded Mira of one *very* popular film and book series about a magical school of witchcraft and wizardry. Now *that* was proper use of fantasy. Not just flashy battles, but magic in everyday life.

Mira donned a bathrobe and left the changing room, cradling her companion in her arms. In the living room, a bouquet of delectable spices greeted her. The cooking was done except for some finishing touches, and Mariana was setting the table.

“Miss Mira. It won’t be long, so please have a seat.”

“Very well. By the way, I noticed you put the other day’s laundry in my bag. Thank you.” Mira approached the fairy, looking at her hair. It gleamed like sapphire, fluttering with every little movement.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s all part of the job.”

After getting a good look, Mira rather reluctantly stepped away and sat on the sofa. Her rabbit jumped up as well and curled on the seat next to her.

"Is something the matter?" Mariana asked, head tilted to one side. Even distracted from her task, she moved flawlessly as she placed teacups on the table and poured black tea.

"Ah, nothing. I learned magic that dries hair, so I was going to use it if yours was still wet. But, no, it's dry already," Mira said and sipped at her tea.

As she did, Mariana suddenly pulled off her apron and dashed to the changing room.

"Erm, what are you doing?" Mira called.

"I'm going to wash my hair again!" Mariana cried, reaching for the doorknob.

"No, wait! Wait!" Mira managed to stop her, scooping up the apron to hand back to Mariana.

"My apologies. I should have prioritized the meal," Mariana said as she tied the apron around herself and resumed preparing dinner.

Mira murmured with an exasperated grin, "No, that's not why I stopped you..."

"You never touch me, Miss Mira." Mariana looked down sadly, avoiding eye contact with her. "I... I want you to touch me more."

Mariana still had the memory of Mira's warmth as she wiped away her tears, but that was *all* that she had. She yearned for more than just that.

Mira's offer to dry her hair had been too tempting to pass up. Mariana knew that she was being impudent, but to feel her master's touch, she'd thought she had to seize the opportunity. Perhaps these thirty long years had more of an effect on her than Mira had thought.

Mira realized that, although they had felt each other in the bath and in bed, Mariana had initiated all that. She was even a little surprised at herself for offering to dry Mariana's hair, despite being overtly aware that she would have her hands on a woman. Moreover, the person she was touching would likewise be hyperaware of it.

She followed Mariana with her eyes, gazing at the devoted fairy. Two impulses struck her at once: to hug this adorable lady, and to protect her beloved aide.

Noticing Mira's conflicted gaze, Mariana prompted, "Miss Mira?"

"Oh, erm. Right, uh..." Mira stammered and looked away for a moment, but she steeled herself and focused again. She felt warmth spread through her—crystallizing, gaining form—as she decided what to do. "Now that I think about it... I may have held back."

Mira reached out to touch Mariana's cheek, taking a moment to feel the girl's warmth through her palm.

"This is the second time..." Mariana closed her eyes tenderly, and a big smile bloomed on her face.

Mira realized that her hand was now on a woman's cheek. When she moved her fingertips, Mariana reacted as if it tickled. They made eye contact again.

Why do I feel like we skipped a few steps?!

Perhaps caressing a woman's cheek was an overly drastic action. As she stared at Mariana, Mira realized that they had breezed past too many stages in the "normal" flow of things. She should have started with holding Mariana's hand or stroking her hair. But the first time she'd touched her had been to wipe her tears, so she might as well take things from there.

"Anyway, how about that dinner?!" Mira dropped her hand and rushed to the sofa to cover up her awkwardness.

"Yes, of course." Mariana put her hand on the spot where Mira's had been and smiled. With a renewed spirit, she resumed preparing dinner.

Before long, Mariana placed a meal so intricate that it would have put a high-class restaurant to shame in front of Mira.

Mira couldn't believe just one woman had made it. "How luxurious."

"I had a lovely selection of ingredients, after all," Mariana replied, cutting the exquisitely cooked roast. Indeed, the ingredients she'd used were all first-class.

"This is fantastic," Mira said, salivating at the sight and smell.

The roast was cooked perfectly, and it had an absolutely gorgeous profile when Mariana sliced it. Also gracing the table were a colorful salad, golden soup, and thinly sliced bread. There were veggie sticks for the pure rabbit as well.

"Here you go. Eat to your heart's content." Mariana bowed.

Mira dug in with great pleasure. *Mmm! I never understood when people said something melts in your mouth—but this is it!*

"Ah, wonderful," Mira muttered around the bite. A broad grin of pure contentment spread across her face.

"Thank you very much." Mariana smiled and bowed before wiping Mira's chin with a napkin.

"I can do that myself, thank you," Mira protested, though it didn't stop Mariana in the slightest. "Aren't you going to eat? Come and join me."

"I've already had my fill."

In serving her master, Mariana was truly in her element. Her incredible service even extended to the pure rabbit, allowing the mage and her fuzzy friend to enjoy a satisfying, peaceful time together.

* * *

Now full, Mira lay on the sofa in her living room and stared at her map with the comforting sound of dishwashing in the background.

Traveling will take an awful lot of time without my floating island. So many nights spent away from home... I may even have to camp occasionally.

Mira checked the distance and time to reach the Forest of the Devout, then calculated how long it would take to get to the Isuzu Alliance headquarters. Adding in breaks and camping, she concluded that it would be at least three days. She buried her face in a pillow on the couch, dejected.

Three days of riding Pegasus! My poor thighs can't handle that.

She had thought that on the way back too. Pegasus was fast, but even half a day of riding took a toll. Mira had taken plenty of breaks, and yet she still found herself exhausted now. There was no way she could manage three days of that.

Surely this trip can wait until the wagon is complete.

Once her wagon was finished, she knew she could travel in comfort all day long. She fantasized about flying through the sky in luxury, watching the clouds and land slip past.

Mira leaned back and cradled her pure rabbit against her face. "You'd prefer that too, wouldn't you?" The bunny squeaked joyfully in her hands.

Just then, Mariana finished cleaning and peeked from behind the rabbit. The maid's appearance startled Mira; she jumped and froze.

"By the way, Miss Mira..."

"Y-yes?!" Mira put the pure rabbit in her lap and gave it a pseudo-calm pat on the head. Unfortunately, it was too late to hide her lovey-dovey doting on the pet.

If Mariana noticed, she didn't say so. Instead, she asked, "What's the bunny's name?"

It was then that Mira realized she hadn't named the rabbit yet. "Ah, come to think of it... Do you have a name?" she asked her furry friend.

The rabbit shook its head.

"Oho! Did you see that? It understands me!" The rabbit's reaction prompted Mira to hug it and turn to Mariana with excited eyes. She repeated the question; the bunny once again shook its head.

"Who's a good baby?" Mira put the rabbit back in her lap and played with it.

"Yes, very good!" Mariana watched lovingly, smiling at Mira's excitement.

When Mira stared at the pure rabbit, it returned her gaze and squeaked. Then it rubbed its face against her hand and licked her fingers.

Aargh! It's too cute! She battled to maintain a semblance of cool and stop the grin from

spreading back onto her face. Then inspiration struck, based on a character from *Crayon Something-or-other* starring a little boy named Shin.

“How about Hopzaemon?!”

Imagining itself with such a name, the pure rabbit turned away with a pout. Mariana glared at Mira sourly.

“Forget I said anything. It just, er, came to mind.”

Since she’d spent time with the Isuzu medium known as Blue, thoughts of the medium Kagura had infiltrated Mira’s head. Chuckling that Kagura’s naming sense had poisoned her brain, Mira thought of other ideas.

“What would be a good name? Hopnoshin? No, I’m just kidding! Hmm... Hop, rabbit, blue...” Mira furrowed her brow and grumbled to herself as she beheld the bunny. It looked up at her expectantly.

Mariana had an idea. “Actually, Miss Mira... Is the rabbit a boy?” The maid had been wondering whether it was male, given Mira’s name suggestions. To Mariana’s knowledge, this bunny was much rounder and had longer ears than most male pure rabbits.

“I... don’t know.” The idea had never occurred to Mira. “What are you?” She slowly cocked her head, maintaining eye contact with the bunny. Next to her, Mariana followed suit. The rabbit had no comment. “Well, faster if we just look, I suppose.”

Mira laid the pure rabbit across her lap, pinching and opening its little legs. Because of its thick blue fur, however, its defining bits weren’t readily visible. Mariana leaned in to assist.

“Miss Mira, perhaps you could be a little gentler...?” Mariana suggested, soothing the pure rabbit as it panicked at being flipped over suddenly. She then got to work divining its nature. “Ah. He seems to be a *she*. ”

The rabbit, freed from restraint, stood on two legs atop Mira’s lap. It pushed its front legs against her stomach, giving her a look of reproachment.

“You were a girl all this time? Hmm... Hoppette?” The rabbit shrank back. Mariana once again shot a rather cold look Mira’s way, so she gave up on the joke names at

once. "Kidding! Just kidding. What kind of name, though? Hop—mmgh. Blue Bunny, Four Lucky Feet, Blue Thumper, Blue Blur, Noriko, Blue Mossball, Alive or Alive..."

Mira recalled nicknames players had given pure rabbits back in the day. The bunny looked up at her with its round eyes and twitching ears, occasionally squeaking. Its adorableness stole Mira's concentration away until she was petting the rabbit's head, ears, back, and legs single-mindedly.

"Um, Miss Mira..." Mariana whispered, bringing Mira to her senses.

"Don't worry, I'm still thinking. This is necessary to find her true name." Mira slowly looked up, and before her eyes was Mariana's face. The maid seemed to be searching for words she couldn't find.

Relieved that she wasn't getting another stern look for goofing off, Mira followed Mariana's gaze. "Want to pet her?" she offered.

"Yes!" Mariana instantly squatted and put a hand on the pure rabbit's fur. A grin spread over her face as she looked up at Mira. "Have you decided on a name yet?"

Mariana lowering herself to be at eye level with the rabbit also offered an exquisite view down her top. After a few seconds of staring, Mira averted her eyes and weakly replied, "Not yet..."

"There's no need to rush it, though you will have trouble addressing her. A name received from someone you love is a real treasure. I'm sure she'll adore any name you give her, as long as you put care and thought into it," Mariana said, doting on the rabbit as she brushed her fingers through its fur. The pure rabbit closed its eyes and let out a long squeak, as if agreeing with Mariana.

"Hrmm... This is a big responsibility."

A name is a treasure. Mira had never thought of it like that, but Mariana had driven home the importance of the situation. She tensed up and faced the rabbit again.

"Ah! Is this...?" Mariana murmured. She untangled a hair from her finger and put it in her palm. The vivid blue hair stood out against the pale skin of her hand.

"Must have come out while you were petting her," said Mira. "Why don't you take it? They say it's a good-luck charm."

“Can I really have it?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you so much. I’ll treasure this.”

Plenty more where that came from. Mira watched Mariana place the hair gingerly into a handkerchief, still thinking of a suitable name.

“Oh!” Mariana gasped. “Miss Mira, there are some on your clothes as well.” She pointed at Mira’s robe. There, Mira saw several blue lines. The hairs must have come out naturally, since she had been playing with the rabbit on her lap.

“Cleaning up after her may be difficult,” Mira mused. Whether she was home or not, Mariana always tidied this room. That was her job, after all.

“It seems this spot will be packed full of good luck soon, doesn’t it?” Mariana picked off the hairs and grinned.

The movements of Mariana’s hands entranced Mira for a moment before she blurted out, “Very true!”

The rabbit squeaked for more petting, and finally, a name came to Mira’s mind. The pure rabbit—a girl who brought good luck wherever she went. What better name than the Goddess of Luck’s?

“I’ve got it. Your name is Fortuna! For short, we can call you Luna!” With that declaration, Mira peeked furtively at Mariana.

“Fortuna! A name passed down among fairies. I think it’s the perfect name for her.”

“Isn’t it?!” Mira swelled with joy, happy that her choice finally met with approval. She lifted the pure rabbit high into the air. It wiggled gleefully in her hands, having received a true treasure from her.

Perhaps out of relief, or because she’d relaxed now, Mira yawned and closed her eyes atop the couch. *I am too tired.*

Mariana placed a hand gently on her shoulder. “Miss Mira? If you’re going to sleep, perhaps you should head to bed. You might catch a cold here.”

"Hrmm... Ah, right. That is true." Dragged back from the cusp of dreams, Mira shooed Luna off her lap and sluggishly stood.

Mariana led her master off and helped her get ready for bed, closely followed by the blue bunny. Once in her pajamas, Mira picked up Luna and went into her bedroom.

On the bed were a cushion and two pillows, one of which was clearly the pillow Mariana had brought in the other night. Mira turned to see that Mariana had changed into sleepwear as well.

"Ah, this again," Mira sighed.

"If you're against it, then... I'll sleep somewhere else," Mariana replied, her tone suddenly dejected.

"No, I... I don't mind."

"Thank you!"

Mira didn't mind; she even enjoyed it! The problem was simply that she was very tired, and she wasn't used to sleeping with someone.

"Now, I'll be going to the castle in the morning," Mira said. "Better get right to sleep." She set Luna on the cushion, swapped pillows so she'd be sleeping on the other side of the bed, and lay down.

"Of course." Mariana, perplexed by the last-minute change, slipped into bed. "Ah... Miss Mira?"

"Come now, you know how this works. So...?" Mira said bashfully. Under the blanket, she reached her right hand out to hold Mariana's left.

Restoring a blessing required a right hand holding a left hand, and Mira's change in position made that much less awkward. Only the moonlight coming through the window illuminated the room. It wasn't enough to reveal Mira's full figure, leaving her bright-red face blessedly in the dark.

"Of course. Good night," said Mariana. Though she saw little of Mira's face, she felt the girl's blush in the warmth of her hand.

Mariana was not ignorant of romance, so she did not wholly miss the point of Mira's gesture. Still, she didn't fully understand the weight of Mira's intent either. Mariana offered body and soul to her master, and she considered herself Mira's possession. Such feelings were far deeper than simple romance.

She appreciated being valued as a woman, but more than anything, Mariana wanted *to be wanted*.

Light seeped through the gaps under the blanket. Snuggling with Mira, Mariana gently closed her eyes and prayed that this warmth would never leave her again.

CHAPTER 20

MIRA AWOKE FROM her comfortable sleep to sunlight radiating through the window. As she did, her mussed hair rustled and gleamed silver. Mira patted her hair and glanced next to her. There, she saw only Mariana's empty pillow.

Already awake? She's an early riser.

Luna was curled up, still snoozing. The sight of the adorable bunny sleeping calmed Mira as she opened her bangle's menu to check the time. It was already half past nine.

Or am I just a late riser...?

Mira closed the menu, let out a big yawn, and got out of bed to head to the living room. As she did so, she noticed clothes folded atop the nightstand. They were her technomancy robes.

Well-prepared, I see.

Mira slipped her arm through one sleeve, figuring she might as well get dressed now, but a knock on the door interrupted her.

Mariana, dressed in her maid uniform, peeked inside. "Good morning, Miss Mira."

"Morning."

"Allow me to help you."

Mariana didn't even give Mira a choice as she walked over and began happily dressing the girl. She had perfect timing—almost as if she'd been waiting.

After the change of clothes, Mariana's extra-motivated hands tied Mira's long silver hair in pigtails with blue ribbons. Mira herself was quite satisfied with the style as she looked in the mirror; it accentuated her cuteness. A smile spread across her face.

Once Mariana had toyed with Mira's hair to her heart's content, she also grinned at her work. The two made eye contact through the mirror, sharing their smiles.

* * *

Having woken up just in time for breakfast, Mira ate with Luna and explained her general plans to Mariana.

First, she would go to the castle and report to Solomon. Depending on how decoding Soul Howl's documents was going, she might be off on a new adventure. She might also be gone for a while, based on where the clue pointed.

Mira was apologetic over this, but Mariana smiled and responded, "There's no need to worry about me."

Her melancholy was replaced with the joy and purpose of protecting her master's home until Mira's return. After all, a few days was nothing, compared to the thirty years she had waited.

Relieved, Mira gazed at the emblem of the blessing on her hand, feeling the depth of their connection. "Well, I'd better get going soon."

Once she had her fill of rabbit-petting and black tea, Mira stood up.

Mariana quickly brought a basket from the kitchen and handed it to her. "I made you lunch. Please enjoy it when you get the chance."

"Oho, really? Thank you." Mira accepted the basket, casually patting Mariana on the head. The action was natural, unhesitant. Mira realized this was proof that the wall between them was crumbling. Seeing Mariana break into a smile under her hand, she decided that was for the best. She gave Luna a hug and added, "I leave her in your care."

The maid gingerly took the bunny from Mira and bowed. "I wish you safe travels."

Their concise exchange was like a married couple's. They were quite at home with each other for a pair of girls.

However, Mira did *not* notice Mariana's cheek-puffed pouting. She'd forgotten to hug someone very special.

* * *

Oh, I almost forgot!

Upon leaving, Mira saw the neighboring tower and recalled an important stop she needed to make. She'd promised to tell Amarette that Lily wanted to measure her when she had time. Before heading to the capital, Mira entered the Tower of Necromancy to finish that errand.

The sudden appearance of the silver-haired girl caused a clamor. Unlike the Tower of Evocation, this tower was full of mages doing research day and night. Subject to many curious glances from folks wondering why she'd come, Mira sighed and headed to the top floor, hearing murmurs of, "Is that who I think it is?"

On the top floor of the Tower of Necromancy, Mira knocked on the office door. Soon the door swung open, and Amarette appeared—though she was not wearing her red hood.

"Aha, Mira! I already know why you're here." Amarette smiled. Without her red hood, her intellectual air was shockingly magnified.

Amazed, Mira replied, "You do? Well, Lily seemed quite enthusiastic. She wanted to measure you, so she asked that I send that message along."

"Oh, my! I suppose I should pay her a visit today," Amarette answered, smiling more broadly than Mira had ever imagined she could when they met. She picked up a package from the door-side shelf and handed it to Mira. "A token of my thanks."

"Oh, you really shouldn't have."

"It's part thanks, and part a token of my feelings. I thought it'd suit you."

"Suit' me? I wonder what it could be."

"Hee hee! I'm sure you'll *love* it."

Mira quickly glanced at the package and put it into her Item Box with a sense of dread. "Well, I'll be going, then."

* * *

"Porcelain skin, shining silver hair... Black is the perfect choice. Don't you agree, Charlotte?" Amarette asked, prompting a tall woman to emerge from a side office.

Charlotte was the aide of the Tower of Necromancy, and a daywalker—a type of vampire. Her slender frame was bedecked with black clothes, as if she were in permanent mourning. She had perfectly sculpted facial features—save for her vacant right eye, which an eyepatch covered. She looked every bit the part of a vampire.

“I would have suggested nothing but white.” Charlotte gazed toward the bottom of the tower, as if trying to follow Mira as she took the elevator down. Her eye flickered with spectral sight, beholding Mira even through the floor and other obstructions.

“Goodness. A difference of opinion?”

“I will not yield this, even to you, Miss Amarette.”

As they smirked fearlessly at each other, a haunting air filled the room.

* * *

Mira left the Tower of Necromancy and made her way to the Tower of Sorcery to see Luminaria. The girl had obtained an Yggdrasil Chip, so perhaps that would do in lieu of Yggdrasil Charcoal.

“Heeey, Luminaria! You there? Open up!” Mira shouted, banging her hand against the door as hard as she could. She dodged back as the door was kicked open.

“Give it a break, already! Ack, why is this nostalgic?!“ Luminaria said with irritation and amusement as she lowered her leg.

“Isn’t it? That’s why I went all out this time.”

“Really? Well, I hope you didn’t expect me to thank you.” Luminaria seized her smug friend’s face, but put no power into her grip, as it was merely playful. “So, what brings you here?”

She gently pushed Mira’s head away and leaned on the door, turning only her face toward Mira as she toyed with her own hair.

“Among the things you requested was Yggdrasil Charcoal, yes? Well, I happened to find this,” Mira said, fiddling with her bangle to produce an Yggdrasil Chip.

Upon receiving it, Luminaria looked it over and asked, “Is this an Yggdrasil Chip?”

"Correct. I don't recall ever doing this, but is there any way to turn a Yggdrasil Chip into charcoal? If so, that's one objective complete."

"I wonder. Never tried it myself, so who knows? Anyway, it'll probably be fine if I just ask the Artisans' Guild. I tell you, that place is a zoo; they'll experiment on anything, no matter how rare it is. Betcha they've tried it."

Yggdrasil Chips had many uses, making them precious materials. Yggdrasil Charcoal was mainly used for a special item called a Purification Stone, which was less in demand.

"Artisans' Guild"? Does that exist?"

"Of course. Farmers' and Fishermen's Guilds, too."

"This world is starting to look a lot like our old one. I expect a UN in the near future," Mira joked, shrugging.

Luminaria laughed. "We actually have something like that already!"

When Mira asked about it, Luminaria explained that the organization was called the Hinomoto Committee. It was a secretive gathering of the monarchs of player-made countries. Since they were former players, they had modern ideals of peace. Now that this was a real world instead of fantasy, the general idea of *not* treating it as a war game had appeared.

The Hinomoto Committee had begun when the largest former-player faction, Atlantis, invited the leaders of every other nation to a summit. They'd reached a general agreement to ban war declarations, and conflicts sharply decreased as a result.

Naturally, that did not end war altogether. After all, there were non-player-led countries, and some had existed in this world longer than players had. The committee called those "native countries"; they far outnumbered player-controlled territories.

There was a major difference in the philosophies of war between those people born in this world, and those in player-controlled countries, who mostly shared Japanese ideals. In the worst cases, player-made countries surrounded by native countries could be attacked, and only diplomatic whims kept the peace. Some player-led nations grew so tired of native-country invasions that they declared preemptive war themselves.

Unfortunately, the Kingdom of Alcait was one nation surrounded by native countries.

In response to this phenomenon, the next meeting of the Hinomoto Committee had added a stipulation that they would mutually support smaller countries. The committee banned wars between former players, alongside many other arrangements. These bans extended beyond military activities, exerting economic effects and the like as well.

"The real problem is relationships with native countries," Luminaria explained. "They don't stop fighting until the underlying problems of a conflict are resolved. They fight for country, wealth, survival, and better lives. That's not necessarily bad, per se, but it ends up looking wrong due to our values. There are a lot of ideological differences that we can't seem to work out. But, hey, it's not like I understand any of that."

Then she added, "We can only fight the fires as they blaze up. Not much else."

"I'm no good at this stuff either," Mira groaned. "Why don't we leave it all to Solomon?"

"That's the best way to do it."

They snickered together, mentally thanking Solomon for taking the brunt of politics and keeping them in the shadows.

To bring things back on topic, Mira said, "Anyway, if you can make that Yggdrasil Chip into charcoal, all that remains is the Sword of the Crimson Lotus King."

"Yep. Good luck!"

The two said a quick goodbye, and Luminaria went to summon Lythalia to get in touch with the Artisans' Guild.

On the elevator trip down, Mira thought about Alcait's position—specifically, the fact that native countries surrounded the kingdom.

If war breaks out, it'll be ugly for sure. That's why we need deterrents.

* * *

Newly aware of the weight of the duty laid upon her, Mira left the Tower of Sorcery and rode Pegasus away from Silverhorn. A few hours later, she reached the royal palace in Alcait's capital city, Lunatic Lake.

After a quick exchange of greetings with the gatekeeper, Mira was in the castle. She looked around the entrance hall to find someone who could tell her Solomon's whereabouts.

The interior amazed Mira yet again. She saw endless luxury, as befit a royal palace: chandeliers, paintings, suits of armor, lamps, and a wonderfully embroidered red carpet leading up the central stairs.

Precisely as extravagant as an entrance should be. But who made those paintings over there, I wonder?

The largest was a painting of half-naked spirits gathered around a lake. Mira was unsure whether to call it tasteful or trashy. The second was a lively, medium-sized depiction of girls running around a river. Next was a smaller one, in which a girl in thin clothing and a flying angel just barely touched each other's outstretched hands. Finally, there was a portrait of a *very* familiar-looking silver-haired girl wearing a bunny costume.

Mira scowled. In their old world, those paintings might have stayed in the realms of fan art. Here, however, they were magnificently framed and put on display.

Pointless, perhaps-lewd thoughts swirled in Mira's mind as she gazed upon the paintings until she noticed someone familiar approach. It was Solomon's aide, Suleiman, pushing a hand truck full of books.

"Oho, Suleiman! Perfect timing." Mira ran over, prompting Suleiman to stop and return her affable smile.

"Well, well, Miss Mira! Welcome back."

"Thank you. I just returned last night."

Suleiman let go of the hand truck and saluted. Mira returned his greeting and glanced at the books on the cart. They had a wide variety of titles, but every one seemed to be about ancient history.

"Apologies for making you do all this," Mira said. "I would love to help, but code-breaking is decidedly not my forte."

"No worries! Honestly, I should thank you. I never thought my knowledge of ancient

history and spirits would ever be of use. Work is fulfilling of late, and it's all thanks to the materials you delivered." Suleiman was overflowing with joy, for he was truly one of *those* people. "Are you here to make a report, Miss Mira?"

"Indeed. Speaking of which, where is Solomon now?"

"At this time of day, probably in his office. Would you like me to escort you?" Suleiman offered, dragging the hand truck to the corner.

However, Mira did not want to intrude on his decoding. "Ah, no, thank you. I'll let you get back to work. I can see myself up," she said, glancing in the direction of the office.

"Very well. I'll be in the reference room for a while. Call me if you need anything."

"Right. Apologies for detaining you here."

Mira made her way up the central staircase toward the office, while Suleiman pushed his cart across the hall.

* * *

In the king's office, Mira and Solomon exchanged quick greetings, and Mira lined up the Primordial Pips atop his desk.

"Here're the goods."

"Whoa! Nice! You really got ten of them. Thank you." Solomon checked the Primordial Pips over and put them in a box he pulled from a desk drawer.

"Cat Sith found almost all of these. He knew just the right places to search. It was easy work after we discovered that ability of his." Mira leaned back into the sofa as she praised her minion.

"Really? That's an incredible ability. I almost felt bad for you... but if it was that easy, maybe I should ask you to find more stuff for me. Man, this is great."

"Urk... Perhaps work closer to home would be better." Mira kicked her feet up on the table, telling herself to cease bragging.

Solomon smiled excitedly. "Sooo, how'd it go?"

"Well, the Elder offered his testimony. There's no doubt that Soul Howl is searching for the Holy Grail."

"Fantastic. If we keep this going, maybe we can catch up to him after all."

There had been reason to think Soul Howl had only collected information, *not* actually made a move on the Holy Grail. Now that Mira had followed his trail firsthand, though, they were clearly on the right track. Given this good news, Solomon's mood improved immeasurably.

"Furthermore," Mira added, "when I saw the state of the Elder Tree's sliced root, it looked to be an old cut. Knowing that might help narrow down where Soul Howl is now. The Elder did not seem to remember when he'd stopped by."

Mira could not figure out the exact date, nor did she know enough about the Elder's growth rate to estimate one. Thus far, she had worked hard to procure leads for Solomon to follow Soul Howl's original path, but if the necromancer's work was progressing smoothly, she figured they could skip past his preliminary steps.

In fact, the idea had already occurred to Solomon. "Agreed. I was hoping the Elder would reveal something, but you know gods; they're all careless. As for the next lead, we'll need specific information to figure it out."

Solomon couldn't afford to waste so much time on one runaway necromancer either. He was eager to move on to more promising clues to expedite the search.

"Hrmm..." Mira said. "The best information we have now is that Soul Howl apparently said that he needed something black."

"Something... 'black'?"

"Right... Something to carve the Grail, I believe."

"Carve, huh? Something black, and something that can carve. But why black?" Solomon cocked his head at the incoherent information, repeating the words to himself.

Mira leaned back in her seat and looked up to the ceiling, repeating "Black... Black..." as if meaning would somehow fall out of the word.

"All the mumbling in the world won't get you or me anywhere. This is new info, so let's

call our specialist." Solomon flicked the call bell. Before long, there was a knock at the door, and Suleiman peeked inside.

"Suleiman, what's the status of your decoding?" Solomon asked, lowering his voice as if to sound dignified.

"I just determined that we'll need some sort of natural material to process the root. And it must be done in a specific place. Unfortunately, the location itself isn't named." Suleiman bowed apologetically.

"Hmm. I don't know if this'll help you, but Mira received information from the Elder that Soul Howl wants to carve the Grail with something black. Any idea what that might mean?"

"Sorry to ask this while you're busy," Mira told Suleiman. "But we're stumped."

"Oh, no! All part of the job. I'm honored that you would consult me." Suleiman bowed again.

Mira succinctly repeated what she'd heard from the Elder Tree. With a cryptic expression, Suleiman mentally squared his decoding work against what she said. A few minutes later, he announced cheerfully, "I see. Thank you, Miss Mira. I think we know our next destination!"

"Wow! That is fantastic."

"Where is it, Suleiman?"

That's Suleiman for you, Mira and Solomon thought as they leaned in to listen.

"Pardon me," Suleiman said. He produced a complete map of the Earth continent from his pocket, spreading it atop the desk. He pointed to a mountain range in the east, north of the Holy Kingdom Alisfarius. "I theorize that these ruins are the place we need to search."

"Hmm. Why those?" Solomon asked.

"First, Soul Howl would need a natural base to carve the Grail. Based on the difficulty of processing the Elder Tree's material, we can assume it is quite hard. Next, he would only be able to enact this process in one location. Miss Mira, your 'something black'

hint gave me the final piece of the puzzle."

Suleiman shot Mira a thankful glance and continued. "I recalled a place in these ruins known as the Crystal Shrine. When sunlight hits the deepest floor, the brittle black crystal there changes into white crystal harder than any gem. That could carve the Elder's root, but the white crystal changes back after a few minutes, so the carving would need to be done onsite. That fits all the clues!"

Mira and Solomon nodded, finding Suleiman's evidence convincing.

"I believe it," Solomon said. "Even steel has trouble cutting the Elder's roots, but those crystals should be able to do it. Good work, Suleiman."

Suleiman bowed reverently. "Your praise honors me, King Solomon."

Just then, Solomon remembered something that came up before. "Suleiman, if Soul Howl processed the root at the Crystal Shrine, there might be shavings left over. Could we tell when he did it by examining those shavings?"

"Tell from the shavings? Hmm... I *think* so. I can make no guarantees, but the location is a ruined city—and the crystals are deep within the shrine. The Crystal Shrine shouldn't be disturbed by wind or rain, so if Soul Howl just abandoned the scraps there..."

"Hmm, I see. It's decided, then." Solomon nodded and looked at Mira.

She knew what he wanted already. She shrugged and collapsed on the sofa, waving one hand in surrender.

CHAPTER 21

HIS ROLE COMPLETE, Suleiman returned to his decoding work.

"Okaaay, so it's the Celestial Ruins next. Given the distance, this'll be a long one." Solomon had returned to his casual tone.

A question crossed Mira's mind. "I noticed that you changed your diction with Suleiman to sound more authoritative. He's a longstanding friend of yours, right? Do you actually need to do that?"

Just as Cleos and Mariana remembered everything that had happened in-game, Suleiman probably did as well. It was unnecessary—perhaps even too late—for Solomon to act imposing now.

The king heaved a deep sigh and began, "You'd think not, right?"

According to Solomon, he hadn't paid his tone much mind when he first came to this world. But when Luminaria appeared, she'd said he lacked authority. She told him that, now that he had an important role, being laidback would only lead to trouble. If he wanted respect as the king, he needed to sound like a king.

When Solomon had discussed this with Suleiman, the aide was surprisingly pleased to hear it. Suleiman even coached Solomon on how to sound more regal, correcting him when he slipped up.

"He still gets me sometimes," Solomon chuckled.

"What a loyal vassal." Mira smiled; that was very like Suleiman.

Solomon shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"Anyway, back on topic... The Celestial Ruins are going to be a hike," Mira said.

She recalled her journeys by sky up to this point. The sights were wonderful, and she wasn't cold as long as she wore her fur coat. It was also far faster than going by carriage. But riding Pegasus for hours was exhausting... and chafing.

"How is the wagon coming along? Will it be ready soon?" Her hopes and dreams balanced on Solomon's reply.

He simply shook his head. "We miiight've gotten a little ahead of ourselves and loaded too many new features into the request. It'll be a while longer."

"Hrmm. I see."

It seemed Mira was stuck riding Pegasus for a while yet. The celestial horse enjoyed flying with her, so that wasn't an issue. Pegasus just lacked certain... *comforts*. Napping in a field midway certainly hadn't been ideal. Mira lay on the sofa face-up and fantasized—if only the sofa could fly.

"You seem disappointed. What's the problem?" Solomon asked, noticing that something was wrong.

Mira remained supine and only turned her head to answer. "I've been traveling on Pegasus's back. Clinging to it for hours at a time is... *tiring*. If I'm off to the Celestial Ruins, it's going to be a rough trip. Try sympathizing with your elders every now and then." Despair emanated from her.

"Ah, I getcha," Solomon sympathized. "Fast or not, riding on horseback is definitely tiring. It's been a long time since I heard that 'elders' joke, by the way. I got that reference. Anyway..." He spread a map on his desk.

Mira stood and approached to get a closer look. "It's... a map, but different. What are those lines?"

The regional map of the eastern portion of the continent centered on the Holy Kingdom Alisfarius. Apart from simple place names, lines cut through the map, occasionally dotted with city names.

Solomon pointed at a location beyond the mountains north of Alcait. "This is a map of the continental railway. If you're tired of traveling by air, why not go by rail? The closest station city to Lunatic Lake is Silverside here. If you take the train from there to Alisfarius, then take Pegasus..." He traced a finger along the map with his explanation, lifting it when he reached Alisfarius and tapping the mountain range where the Celestial Ruins were located. "That should reduce the time you're stuck on Pegasus's back. I think it'll take you three or four days to reach Alisfarius, but there are plenty of inns along the way, so you'll have places to sleep."

Mira gazed at the railroad map in shock, following the city names. Once she recovered, she looked back up at Solomon. “We’ve got trains?!”

This method of transportation hadn’t existed before. Players had traveled by floating island, while natives could only go by carriage or boat. Though Solomon’s lust for technology often exasperated her, Mira giggled to herself, smacking the desk in excitement.

“Good, good. Stupendous!” she exclaimed. “I had no idea there were railroads here. But I suppose, if there are airships, why wouldn’t there be trains?!”

“Oh! You already know about airships, huh? There goes one surprise.” Solomon groaned in slight disappointment that he wasn’t the first to break the news.

After she’d had her fill of victorious shouting, Mira looked at Solomon in search of details about the railroads. He assented and gave a quick explanation.

The continental railroad was another gift of technomancy; it had originally been laid out to connect the Three Great Kingdoms. Station cities managed the railway, immigration, and customs matters; the Three Great Kingdoms gave those locations free rein as sovereign territories. Today, they were flourishing towns and villages near the railroad.

“You’ve all adapted well,” Mira mused. “So, I’ll go by rail to Alisfarius... Ah. I did have one more destination.” Recalling the people she ran into in the Forest of the Devout, Mira tamped down her enthusiasm and put her own map atop the rail map.

Now it was Solomon’s turn to ask questions. “What’s going on here? I see you marked the Forest of Seasons.” The center of the continent, where the mountain ranges met, was marked red. The king looked at Mira, totally confused.

“We spoke about Chimera Clausen once, right? I ran into them two days ago.” Mira explained what had transpired after she left the Devils’ Labyrinth. “Thanks to that medal you gave me, I was able to prove my identity. The Isuzu even told me where their headquarters are!” She chuckled.

Solomon continued to stare at the red mark, surprise evident on his face. “Those people really called themselves the Isuzu Alliance?” He furrowed his brow in deep thought. The name seemingly caught him off guard.

"Yes, they did. Why do you ask?" Mira questioned.

In response, Solomon pulled a booklet from his drawer and laid it atop the maps. The cover read *Protect the Environment of Spirits*.

"Protect spirits' environment, hrmm? Is this an environmentalist pamphlet? What of it?"

Mira picked up the booklet and flipped through. It did indeed advocate for environmental-protection efforts, and it included a donation address, with little else. However, the organization name on the address drew Mira's attention: it was listed as the Isuzu Alliance.

"Well... What do we have here?"

"Exactly what it looks like. The Isuzu Alliance is a famous goodwill organization founded to protect nature. They're hard at work too—the forest north of Grimsdale, which had almost all its spirits abducted, is now under their protection. They're preparing it for the spirits' return. They plant spirit trees and the like as well. Their work extends to other places, however. The group has made real headway, and they have good hearts and organizational power to boot. We've got a few Isuzu delegates here in Lunatic Lake, in fact. All of what I've told you is their public image, though. If what you saw and heard was true, the people you met might be their shadow organization."

"Hrmm..." Mira thought that over. "I didn't know they had such a reputation."

Through this discussion, Solomon had learned about the private side of the Isuzu Alliance, and Mira had learned of their public side. Both realized one thing: no matter the protection efforts, spirits would not return to stabilize the environment unless they tackled the root cause of the problem. No doubt the people Mira met in the forest belonged to a group formed to do just that.

"I can't say for sure, since I haven't done the research," Mira continued. "But based on what you said, that sounds likely. Now that I think about it, such a large-scale environmentalist organization would resist Chimera Clausen most of all. Guess it isn't weird that they have a paramilitary side to fight them head-on, huh? That might put some countries on guard, though. I think the environmentalist facade is good cover."

The Isuzu Alliance apparently put up an environmental-protection front to work

across the continent. Like Solomon said, even if they had good reason to stop Chimera Clausen's spirit-pilfering evil, no military organization so far had worked across such a wide area. Mira agreed with him. She closed the booklet and tossed it onto the desk.

"Incidentally, about those spirit disappearances..." Mira began.

She told Solomon what had happened in the Forest of the Devout—specifically, the unusual monsters and fiend sightings. She then described the disrupted flow of mana due to the spirit's disappearance and the resulting anomaly.

"Interesting," Solomon mused. "You've seen a lot, huh? If spirit disappearances result in the ecosystem collapsing, that's a real problem. Hmm. I'll send an expedition team to make sure there aren't any more dangerous monsters there." He wrote a reminder in the corner of his notes.

Although the anomaly had ended, it had wrought havoc on the surrounding area. Monsters might have fled into the woods before Mira and the others arrived.

"Still, the Isuzu Alliance, huh?" Solomon repeated. "I wonder which is their true face: the one protecting spirits' environments, or the one that wants to annihilate Chimera Clausen?"

"Good question," Mira agreed. "They don't seem bad, as far as I can tell." No matter the exact state of things in the Isuzu Alliance, they still worked to save spirits. Mira only knew their secretive side, but she didn't sense danger from it.

"True enough. I don't see them doing any harm, so in that case, maybe I should up my donations a teensy bit." A gleeful smile spread across Solomon's face.

He may be strange, but he's good at heart, Mira thought. "Oho. Already sent a donation, eh?"

"Of course. Protecting the environment is protecting spirits, and spirits are a summoner's best friend. How could the Kingdom of Alcait not help them out?"

"Very true."

Alcait was famously a country of mages. There was no doubt that they would look better if they supported the Isuzu Alliance—Good-Samaritan types who extolled the protection of spirits. In fact, *not* supporting them would be unacceptable.

"Besides, you showing them the medal means they know I'm involved," Solomon added. "They gave us their HQ's location, so they must be after my—or rather, Alcait's—support. If we send a donation now, and whenever this is settled, it bolsters our reputation."

A calculating move, but now that Solomon knew of the Isuzu Alliance's militant side, he had to consider a future in which they beat Chimera Clausen. When they *did* succeed, being the backer of those who'd defeated evil would be ideal.

Mira's turning out to be a fine ambassador as well. Solomon chuckled to himself as he looked down at the map marked with the Isuzu Alliance's headquarters.

"What? Does this medal have your signature or something?" Mira pulled it out and stared at the markings, trying to interpret them.

"It just shows that I awarded it to you," Solomon said, leaning back in his chair as he evaded the question. "Take care of it, though."

Mira decided that was probably close enough to the truth and gave up on further questioning, refolding her map and throwing herself onto the sofa again.

"Anyway, the Isuzu Alliance locating their HQ in the Forest of Seasons makes sense," Solomon said, moving things along. "It's not somewhere you can just walk into, and it's got plenty of spirits. With enough power, you could use it as a base and protect spirits at the same time. Add in the right transportation, and it's the perfect place."

"Right. Without an Isuzu base there, the Forest of Seasons would be Chimera Clausen's favorite hunting ground."

The Forest of Seasons was practically a holy land for spirits—many inhabited the place. So, naturally, it was paradise to those who hunted them as well. Because the Isuzu Alliance built a base there, however, Chimera Clausen couldn't carelessly intrude. Even if getting there was difficult, it was the perfect place for the Isuzu to be.

Mira thought things over. Her two destinations were both north of Alcait, but there was quite a distance between the east and the center of the continent. They weren't exactly close enough to detour, like she did to reach the Devils' Labyrinth.

"So, which would you like me to deal with first? The Celestial Ruins, or the Forest of Seasons?" Mira would have preferred heading to the latter until the wagon was

complete, but she decided to sound out Solomon's opinion.

He spun his chair around once and proposed with a smile, "Wanna start with the Celestial Ruins? Dating any scraps you recover will take a while, after all. You could use that time to hop over to the Forest of Seasons."

That would lead to a lot of waiting time, wouldn't it? Mira thought, before realizing something and glaring at Solomon. "How hard do you plan to work me, exactly?"

Although Solomon's proposal meant giving Mira less time to rest, he responded with a stilted, "Now, now. Either way, I know you're not the kind to just sit around. Think of it as a nice railroad trip. It's not all that bad. Each station has its own quirks, so I'd say you'll enjoy it. Picture it—a delicious regional specialty to sample at every station."

"Hrmm, well, I suppose that does sound nice." Mira imagined chowing down on a perfect meal, gazing out the window at the perfect view. It seemed lovely. "Very well. I'll play along this time," she assented, trying to sound reluctant, but fighting a smile creeping onto her face.

"Get a feeling for how vast this world is while you're at it." Solomon looked at Mira like a kid going on her first field trip. He cleared off his desk. "I'd say that's enough of a report. It's about time for lunch. Wanna eat together?"

"Ah, is it already that time? Actually, I have lunch with me." Mira pulled the basket from her Item Box, wearing the smuggest of grins. With a victorious flourish, she placed the basket ostentatiously on Solomon's desk.

His eyes widened as he gazed upon it. "Did a *girl* make that for you?!"

"Indeed!" Mira answered haughtily, though she was a bit embarrassed. She shot Solomon a challenging glance and opened the basket in front of him.

"She put a lot of effort into this, huh?" Solomon admired the contents. Inside the basket was a well-balanced, beautifully colorful meal full of love.

"Gorgeous, isn't it? And you can't have any." Mira promptly monopolized the love contained within.

Disappointed, Solomon shrugged and called a maid. He informed her that he'd like lunch in his office. Before long, she brought his food, and he and Mira enjoyed a

relaxing meal and chat.

* * *

With lunch done, the pair enjoyed a cup of the finest tea fit for a king.

Solomon checked the time. “By the way, I think Silverside’s train leaves for Alisfarius at some point in the afternoon,” he noted. He got up to rummage through his shelves.

Mira watched him as she opened her bangle’s menu. The time displayed was 2:30 p.m. It was *already* afternoon. Judging by the rail map, Mira wouldn’t reach Silverside until evening if she left now. Getting there in time was out of the question.

“The train only comes once a day?” she asked in disbelief. “What kind of amateur operation is this?”

“You joke, but we’ve made huge strides. Once upon a time, trains only came through once a week.”

“Hrmm. Well, it’s better than nothing. What time exactly should I expect the train, though? ‘Afternoon’ isn’t precise.”

“Mm, I dunno. The times are pretty vague... Aha! Found it.” Solomon pulled a booklet from the shelf and tossed it to Mira; it landed directly in her lap.

She flipped through the pages. “Is this... a timetable?”

“Of sorts. It’s a railway schedule with the times they try to keep.”

Mira checked the Silverside departure time. A few pages in, she found a table that said, *Eastern loop, 8:00 a.m. Western loop, noon to 3:00 p.m.*

“Very imprecise,” she complained.

“They do the best they can. Again, it’s a world of difference compared to not having it.”

“Either way, it doesn’t seem as though I can catch the train today.” Mira closed the booklet, downed the rest of her fancy tea, and kicked back on the sofa.

“You’ll have to ride tomorrow’s train, then. If you leave now, you can stay overnight in

Silverside. Like I said, station towns have inns as far as the eye can see. You'll be able to spend a night in luxury. You're free to stay here too, of course," Solomon said, placing three gold coins atop Mira's chest and winking. "Here're your war funds. I look forward to your success."

"Hrmm. I suppose I could at least try to meet your expectations." Mira shot him a glare, palmed the coins and dropped them into her waist pouch. "I might as well get going soon. I need to see what these inns are like."

She sat up and patted her clothes flat, setting her heart on one goal: getting to a nice inn early to unwind over a lovely meal.

"Good idea," said Solomon. "Silverside is pretty far from here, after all. The inns should be close to the station, so head that way once you get there."

"Hrmm, right. See you again."

"Yep, see ya."

Mira opened the door and waved without turning back. Solomon remained seated as he watched the door close, then arranged his many documents and resumed his kingly work.

The young summoner left Alcait Castle quickly, ready to check into an inn as soon as possible. She summoned Pegasus in the plaza out front and lifted off, beginning her flight to Silverside.

Mira wouldn't be back for more than a week. She stared sadly at the Five Elements shrinking in the distance behind her, knowing that she would not get to check them out for some time yet.

AFTERWORD

THAT BRINGS US to the afterword! First, I'd like to thank everyone involved in this publication. Of course, that includes everybody who bought and read it.

Thank you so much, really. Because of you, I think I'll be able to eke out a living this year. I hope I can do that again next year! My fate's in your hands, everyone!

My ultimate goal is to eat at restaurants whenever I want to. To be able to get hungry while I'm out, and *not* have to remember what I have at home and formulate a plan based on that. To enjoy a lovely meal at whichever place catches my eye. Don't you love the thought of being a familiar face at a restaurant?

As such, if this book sells well, I wanna buy KFC for Christmas this year. As I write this, it's October 28th. I barely have two months to make it happen! Imagining what I'll eat on Christmas Day gets me giddy.

I'll still be *alone* as always, but I do just love the atmosphere of Christmas. All the Santa-hunting normie couples will be wandering around that time of year... but they actually don't bother me.

Let's say it's less "Christmas" I love, and more "the time right before Christmas." When the whole city lights up with a fantastical atmosphere, that's just really fun to me.

For real: KFC. I seriously want to make it happen this year. I hope you're listening, all you Santas out there!

Speaking of Christmas... You know how, as soon as the twenty-sixth comes, you get that sudden "the year is ending" feeling? "On this day next week, it'll be next year!" What a sensation.

Two more months! I guess, when this book comes out, it'll only be one month. Lately, each year seems to go by so fast. Maybe that just shows how little I'm doing with my life right now.

Still, there's something nice about that end-of-year feeling. It seems like the last episode, y'know? Speaking of, it's the last-episode rush in anime right now. What an

emotional time of year.

Sorry to change the subject, but do you know about Google Street View?

It's lovely. You can vacation in other countries from the comfort of your own home. Ever since I learned about it, I've become something of a globetrotter myself. Just the other day, I took a nice stroll through Prague. What fantastic times we live in.

Lately, I've found a new way to enjoy Street View. Something I've always done for fun is to look up a building's information and floor plan, and imagine what a day in the life is like there. If you combine that with Street View, you can even replicate taking a walk in the neighborhood!

A luxurious life with millions of homes at my disposal. Deluxe vacations! What's so wrong with me enjoying a fulfilling pretend-vacation once in a while?!

Anyway, as usual, fuzichoco brought us such perfect illustrations. Thank you for that. I'm always unbearably excited to receive the rough drafts from my editor. When I saw the finished cover image, I threw that bad boy up as my desktop wallpaper immediately. Words can't express how fulfilling that was.

Bye-bye! I'll see you next time.



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