

NOVEL

7

She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man

Written by

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fuzichoco

SHE PROFESSED HERSELF PUPIL OF THE WISE MAN

– Kenja no Deshi wo Nanoru Kenja –

- VOLUME 7 -

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-ILLUSTRATOR-

fuzichoco

[SEVEN SEAS]



The Nine Wise Men of Alcait

Sorcerer

Luminaria the Natural Disaster

Demonologist

NO DATA

Missing

Cleric

Artesia of Dissonance

Missing

Exorcist

Wallenstein the Shadow

Necromancer

Soul Howl the Great Wall

Missing

Medium

Kagura the Seven Stars

Summoner

One-Man Army Danblf

(Mira)

Sage

Meilin the Controlling Fist

Illusionist

NO DATA

Missing



As she stripped in the changing room, Mira stole glances at Emella and Flicker. When she did, Flicker's eyes almost always locked with hers for an instant. It was so fleeting that she almost wondered if she'd imagined it. Knowing Flicker, though, it was no coincidence—even now, she had her eyes peeled for an opening.

Regardless, Mira had long since shed her embarrassment at being seen nude, and Flicker's ogling did not bother her. In fact, it might have even excited her somewhat.

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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CHAPTER 1

MIRA DREDGED UP her consciousness from the depths of sleep, feeling an odd sensation of floating and sinking at the same time. She slowly opened her eyes and saw a gray-haired, dignified-looking man under the gloom of a dark sky.

What is going on here?

The mission at the Citadel of Scales had ended in failure due to the unexpected appearance of a Skyfolk man. However, the gang had managed to deduce Chimera Clausen's next destination from the contents of the corpses' belongings. As they gave chase, they were forced to take a break on the shore of a lake, and Mira had dozed off in her wagon.

Now, she found herself in a totally unknown place.

With her brain unable to process the situation at hand, Mira simply glared at the man unhappily as he politely carried her in his arms like a princess.

"Is this a kidnapping?" she grumbled groggily.

Noticing that she'd awoken, the man smiled affably and answered with a slight bow, "Don't worry. I'm not dangerous."

Mira found that to be an entirely unsatisfactory answer. He had stolen her away in her sleep—how could he not be dangerous? Apparently aware of the lameness of his statement, the man looked away. His visage showed no signs of malice; instead, he seemed rather embarrassed.

"Could you at least put me down?" Mira kicked both legs in an attempt to escape his arms.

"Whoa!" As she slipped out of his grip, the man struggled to keep her balanced in his arms. Suddenly, a woman emerged from behind him to hold Mira's flailing legs down.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, honey," she apologized. "Hold on just a little longer. We're in a lake right now. If he lets go of you, you'll sink!"

The woman had pale, light-blue hair and was draped in a transparent robe. The sparkle of her hair was familiar.

"Inside the lake, you say?" Mira muttered dubiously. The woman's familiar, striking hair and earnest insistence made her pause; for the moment, she stopped resisting and surveyed her surroundings. Upon closer inspection, what she'd thought was the gloom of night was actually a landscape of deep navy blue. When she listened closely, she heard the muffled sound of distant waves. "I suppose you're right. Does that make you a water spirit, then?"

"Yes, dear! My name is Anrutine."

"Thought so. And you...?"

The man nodded. "Indeed, I am a spirit, too. Call me Wasranel."

Hearing this, Mira stopped struggling entirely. Spirits would never willingly hurt humans; they used violence only in cases of self-defense or a great emergency.

"I see... But you do not have the aura of a spirit." Mira gave Wasranel a hard look, eyeing his hair and body.

All spirits shared a singular trait: their sparkling hair, from which faint particles of light spilled forth. Anrutine's hair was shimmering as expected, but Wasranel's was most certainly not.

"As a spirit, my domain is what you might call *stealth*," he explained. "I'm a master of concealment and camouflage. Hiding has become a bit of a... *habit* for me." The man grinned wryly.

Mira's eyes widened in surprise, and joy slowly crept over her face.

"Spirit of stealth, you say? I've never met a spirit like you! I didn't even know you existed!" she said with a squeal of delight. She put a finger to her chin and composed herself. "Now that I get a good look at you, you are quite dignified."

"Well, it's no surprise that you didn't know of my existence... Even my friends tell me I'm forgettable." In contrast to Mira's joy, Wasranel was clearly put out. Anonymity had its downsides.

Now in a bright mood at having encountered a new spirit, Mira pressed on. “You must need me for some reason! Go on and speak.”

“Ahh... *that*,” Wasranel murmured and slumped over slightly.

Mira squinted as the surrounding light grew suddenly brighter. As she slowly reopened her eyes, she was taken aback by the sight before her.

They had reached a small space, perhaps thirty paces across. On the other side of the cavern-like room was a shrine entrance that looked as though it was in the middle of being excavated. Though all but the entrance was still buried in dirt, the shrine had an overpowering presence. The passage of time hadn’t seemed to diminish the place at all.

“What is this? This is beneath the lake?” Mira asked. “It looks underground to me.”

Wasranel turned around and gazed at a small puddle.

“To be precise, this is a narrow passage extending horizontally from beneath the lakebed. An and I have concealed this cave with our power, so it isn’t a place just anyone can enter.” He walked through the entryway as he spoke, then finally put Mira down. “Only those with power greater than ours can intrude. Now, as for the reason we brought you here—we need you to save a friend of ours. The one over there.”

Wasranel turned pained eyes toward the place of worship. Anrutine gazed over as well, her expression just as somber. In the very back of the chapel, something like a black mist wafted in the still air. A conspicuous pedestal stood there, and beside it was a skeleton, curled up with a sword in hand.

“Your friend, you say?” Mira asked, taking in the scene before her.

“...Yes,” Wasranel slowly replied, eyes fixed on the skeleton.

“Hrmm... Seems a little too late, no?” Mira wasn’t in the resurrection business. But something about the situation seemed... *off*. So, Mira asked searchingly, “Or is this some sort of ‘save her soul’ business?”

“Oh! No, she’s still quite healthy. She is the sword.”

“The sword?”

This was unexpected. Upon closer inspection, the sword so lovingly held by the corpse didn't just *look* fancy: despite being unsheathed, it didn't have a spot of rust on it. It was obviously a legendary sword.

"Your friend is a weapon spirit, then?" Mira inquired.

Spirits could spend long periods of time within weapons, especially finer weapons. It seemed the spirits' friend was a spirit themselves, after all.

"Not precisely... but that's an acceptable assessment of the situation," Wasranel replied.

"I'm not sure I like that answer." *So... she's a weapon spirit, but not the usual kind.* Mira gave Wasranel an expectant look.

"Her name is Sanctia. *Holy Sword Sanctia,*" the man answered, gritting his teeth in frustration at his inability to help his friend.

"Holy Sword Sanctia. Hrmm, I don't believe I've heard the name before."

Now that this world had become real, there were many things still unfamiliar to Mira. She considered that perhaps this was one of them. She turned her eyes back to the sword with renewed interest.

"It's been years since she hid herself from the mortal world," Wasranel added, "and she's only ever been swung once. It's not surprising that you don't know of her."

"I see..." Mira agreed.

Any legendary sword, holy sword, or demonic sword was almost guaranteed to have an interesting story behind it. They were weapons that had cut down demons, swords that had pierced the hearts of evil dragons, blades passed down through centuries of royal bloodlines—and yet never seemed to tarnish or scratch. As absurd as these stories sounded, they were true.

No matter how powerful, a weapon would fall into obscurity without a worthy legend. There might be many powerful swords out there that were simply unknown.

Mira looked at the sword and shuddered with excitement... which quickly turned to guilt as she realized the worried friends of the sword were still staring at her, awaiting

a response. She pointed at the disquieting black mist and asked, “I presume saving her entails dealing with that?”

Though Mira could see no apparent light source, the chapel was full of brilliant light that banished all shadows. This was the power of a light spirit; Mira was sure of it. Yet in a place with no darkness, this one particular spot remained murky and dim—the very spot where the black mist and the sword-bearing corpse lay.

“That’s right. That thing is a spirit-devouring curse, so we can’t get near it. Sanctia has taken shelter deep within the sword, so she’s managed to maintain her existence. But we don’t know how much longer she can hold out...” Wasranel’s face clouded over as he cursed his own inability to help.

Mira glanced at him sidelong, heaved a sigh, and began stretching. “Now, as for saving her. Are we in agreement that I simply have to defeat that skeleton?”

Wasranel looked aghast for a moment before finally whipping around and asking, “Would you *really*?!”

“That’s why you brought me here, isn’t it?” Mira’s tone was unbothered, as if defeating mist-wreathed skeletons was the most natural thing in the world to her.

“Yes, but... this is a vicious oni that has hunted over a thousand of our kind. You should know that before you make a decision. My apologies for the outburst.” Wasranel chuckled in relief at her absolute confidence.

“Oho... This must be a powerful foe. Be ready to leg it in the worst case.” The young summoner smirked defiantly and advanced slowly toward the corpse.

By the time she was halfway through the chapel, the air had grown heavy. The writhing mist crept along the ground as if in search of prey, dyeing the white floor black in its wake. The two spirits had moved to perch fearfully on a crossbeam high above, out of the mist’s reach.

“We’ll watch from up here. Let us know if we need to run; we will do our best to bring you with us,” Wasranel said apologetically.

“Sure, sure.” Mira looked up and replied before again stepping toward the black mist. Yet before she reached it, she stopped.

In the game, boss battles were triggered by proximity. Once one entered a specific, visibly marked radius, the boss would attack. Even if one used ranged attacks from outside that circle, it would still retaliate.

Mira stopped just short of where she expected the line to be, curious if the old system was still in play. The skeleton lurched to a standing position, exuding a heavy aura. However, it only stood ready for battle; it did not seem as if it would attack just yet.

Hrmm... I suppose that confirms my suspicions?

The skeleton stared blankly at Mira, unmoving. It seemed to be judging the distance between them. The battle had already begun, even if neither party had yet moved to attack.

Mira gazed intently back at her enemy. "Hrm?" She furrowed her brow with a slight grumble. She had received no information on this foe.

In-game, players could bring up a status menu by locking sights on an enemy. Even now, former players could do so—but it didn't work on fellow players...

If the punchline is that this is a former player, then it isn't funny. Either way, there's only one thing to do. Those two will have some more questions to answer once this is over.

According to the man, this foe had already snuffed out countless lives. Mira stretched her muscles, then summoned one Dark Knight and one Holy Knight. She stared down the unknown enemy of unknown strength.

It may be ferocious beyond measure. Perhaps I ought to get serious for once.

Mira took a step toward the black mist.

CHAPTER 2

THE INSTANT MIRA'S FOOT crossed into the boss's range, the black mist suddenly swelled and covered the floor of the chapel. When the Dark Knight and Holy Knight touched the fog, they decayed and collapsed instantly.

"Ngh... What is this?"

"That mist is a spirit-devouring curse!" Wasranel called from the ceiling. "It works on summoned weapon spirits, too!"

He hadn't been lying about the curse that devoured spirits. Wasranel and Anrutine couldn't stand against that, so they were unable to save their friend residing in the sword. It threw a wrench in Mira's plan as well.

Mira glared at the skeleton, a little annoyed. If the enemy struck now, she would be forced into close-quarters combat. Something she very much wanted to avoid, since she did not know the power of the sword.

But still, the skeleton did not advance toward her. It was fully on guard, but it seemed she was still outside of its aggro range.

After confirming this, Mira fixed summoning points around her once again. If she couldn't use spirit-type magic due to the black mist, perhaps some other summons would do the job.

[Evocation: Garm]

[Evocation: Alraune]

[Evocation: Wise Popot]

Three distinct magic circles appeared, glowed, and revealed reliable allies.

From a vortex of flames stepped a wolf that came to stand at Mira's side. Following that, a burst of light in midair heralded the appearance of a small owl that flew over to perch on her shoulder. At the same time, verdant green foliage spread and covered

the floor and walls alike until they resembled dense hedges.



Garm was a three-meter-long wolf with black fur and a tail thicker around than Mira's arm. It beheld its enemy, then looked to its master, satisfied to see Mira after so long. Garm turned to the skeleton and then back to Mira again. Something about its master was... *different*.

"Master, you're *too cute!* I love the new vibe!" A little girl's voice rang out next to Mira's ear, and Garm nodded along. The voice had come from the beak of the small owl, the Wise Popot. As the name implied, the creature was quite intelligent. Like Cat Sith, it was one of the few lesser summons who could speak in human language.

"You might say that," Mira replied. "You seem to have picked up a new... *vibe* as well."

"I learned lots of new words! And lots of new magic! Cool, huh?" The Wise Popot cocked its little head back and forth, blinking its big eyes all the while.

"Oho. Well, aren't you clever!" Faced with such cuteness, Mira couldn't resist snuggling the small owl.

Popot narrowed its eyes in delight and hooted gleefully. Watching jealously, Garm raised its tail boastfully and exhaled a billow of fire. Mira turned to face the sudden red light and intense heat, then looked up and spotted the two spirits in the rafters, who were suffering the effects of the rising flame.

"Easy, Garm. Don't be so impatient." Mira calmed the enthusiastic wolf, and the two spirits, now in the shelter of a large bubble, breathed a sigh of relief. Seeing them safe, Mira breathed a sigh of relief of her own.

Garm slumped down and whimpered like a sad puppy. Though she'd stopped the wolf, she was genuinely surprised by its unfamiliar technique. She patted Garm's snout affectionately.

"It's okay... I am very impressed. You've been putting in quite the effort. Well done."

Garm was overjoyed that its hard work had been noticed, and whipped its tail back and forth at dangerous speeds.

Meanwhile, a single vine unfurled and extended into the space between them. At its tip was a doll with a flower blooming on its head—this was Alraune.

"You seem healthy," Mira complimented it. Alraune rubbed its flower against Mira's

cheek in response, emitting a sweet scent as it did.

Alraune expressed emotions through aromas. Back in the game world, Mira had been unable to recognize them, since the game couldn't replicate scents—but now, as Mira inhaled deeply, its meaning was very clear.

Sweet scents were for familial love, as I recall? It... smells wonderful, actually.

All were ecstatic and nostalgic in this harmonious reunion. Overhead, two very confused spirits looked on.

“Now,” Mira called out to her summons, “I understand it has been a long time, but do you recall how this formation works?”

Garm and Alraune nodded, and Wise Popot asked, “Are we exorcising a spooky-scary?!”

Although hardly any time had passed for Mira, it had been thirty years for these summons. She was unsure whether they would recall their old coordination, but it seemed they did.

“Then let us proceed as usual,” Mira commanded.

Taking that as their signal, the summons’ auras changed. Garm faced forward, crouched low to the ground, and growled like a rumbling earthquake. Alraune, who had sunk into the surrounding greenery, cast countless vines throughout the chapel. The Wise Popot launched from Mira’s shoulder and alighted on a vine, staring down the skeleton with wings spread.

This was Danblf’s anti-undead formation for enclosed spaces. Garm was extremely powerful against the undead by nature and took the front line, while Alraune filled the battlefield with the vitality of plants to counteract the aura of death. The Wise Popot had experience hunting in hellish places, and it grasped the battle state at a glance and was prepared to act as a mobile spellcaster.

The Wise Popot hooted to alert Mira that all three were in the ready position. She gave the order to attack, and Garm charged in.

It closed in on the skeleton in a single bound and swung a sharp-clawed paw. However, the paw stopped in its swing with a heavy *thunk*—or more accurately, it *was stopped*.

The skeleton had raised its sword and created a barrier of light that blocked Garm's attack.

The wolf was unshaken. It growled ferociously and renewed its offensive with vigor. The barrier made a sound like cracking glass, but miraculously held firm under the onslaught.

The skeleton unhinged its jaw and laughed. Its cackling was filled with glee, as if drunk on the sword's power. The sword indeed harbored great strength—but such conceit would be the skeleton's downfall.

In a flash, Mira ran up Garm's back and leapt high above to unleash [Immortal Arts Heaven: Refined Thrust]. A raging swirl of shockwaves approached from above and behind the skeleton, where its barrier could not reach, and struck true.

Its poise broken by the impact, the skeleton screeched and swung its sword in a power arc, deflecting Garm's claws as it staggered back. But then, it stumbled—a vine had stretched out and wrapped around its leg to bring it down. The skeleton groaned with deep hatred and reflexively hacked at the vine with its holy sword.

This was the opening Garm had been waiting for. The wolf closed in right before the skeleton's eyes, jumped hard enough to shatter the floor stones, and swung a clawed paw. Even if the skeleton wanted to use its light barrier to block the attack, there was no way for it to bring the sword up in time. It had no way to defend itself.

The dull impact of claw against bone resonated throughout the chapel. The claw attack backed by powerful muscles had dug into the skeleton with perfect precision, launching it into the air. The enemy tried to right itself, but could find no foothold and wriggled ineffectually in midair.

There Mira met it, using her Air Step to run smoothly above the ground. She circled around the skeleton and placed her hand on the back of its skull.

[Immortal Arts Earth: Crimson Bouquet]

Mira's mana condensed into a red flash of light and a *boom* shook the chapel as the skeleton slammed into the ground.

“Flame Barrage!”

Wasting no time, the Wise Popot launched a hail of fiery bullets that rained down on the skeleton. Embers flew through the air.

These coordinated attacks could not be evaded nor blocked, and every one was strong enough in itself to eradicate enemies of moderate strength. Yet still, the skeleton rose again to its feet, apparently unaffected.

“Hrmm. This thing’s sturdy,” Mira muttered as she landed on the opposite side of the enemy from Garm. A faint grin stole over her face.

Mira behind, Garm ahead. Wise Popot above, Alraune below. The skeleton swiveled around to confirm their locations and charged first at Garm. The wolf dug its hind legs into the stone and lunged, closing the distance between them and swiping swiftly with its razor claws. The skeleton held the holy sword sideways to block it with a barrier of light, then flowed into a forward slide aimed at Garm’s torso.

Its fierce kick sent Garm flying. Seeing that it had succeeded, the skeleton held its sword in a two-handed grip and took a firm step forward to strike the wolf’s unprotected belly.

The tip of the sword swung unerringly—but before it could stab the wolf, the skeleton’s arms stopped, frozen in place. Alraune’s vines had wrapped around both arms and held fast for a few critical moments before the skeleton’s great strength managed to shake the tendrils off.

That was all the time Garm needed to escape—and it bought the others another perfect opening to attack. The Wise Popot unleashed a hail of pebbles.

“Stone Barrage!”

Though they were only pebbles, they flew as fast as bullets. The skeleton raised its sword again, and the attack battered the barrier ceaselessly, as loud as an avalanche, completely disguising the sound of approaching footsteps behind.

The skeleton only noticed when it felt her breath at its back.

Too late.

Mira smirked and put her hand on the back of its skull again.

[Immortal Arts Earth: Violet Spark]

The spell's activation was accompanied by blinding purple light and a destructive *bang*. It was as if a real bolt of lightning had struck from the sky. The light faded in an instant, but the concussion echoed throughout the chapel for a long while. It was so oppressive and powerful that even Anrutine, who had evacuated herself to the crossbeams above, had tears in her eyes.

This attack was strong, yes, but it also had a different characteristic from Mira's previous attacks. It lacked a knockback effect—Mira's hand remained firmly on the skeleton's skull. This gave her an advantage, but it came with a risk: she could weave in a second attack, but the enemy could quickly counterattack as well.

The skeleton whipped around as it raised its holy sword in one fluid and swift motion. But before it could bring its sword down, Garm roared in and chomped down on its foe. It sank its teeth deep, shaking and slamming the skeleton about to tear it apart.

The skeleton swung its sword desperately in an attempt to escape, but Garm locked its jaws like a vise. A great cracking sound could be heard between the creaking of bones. The skeleton shrieked balefully and raised its sword high overhead.

At this, countless swords of light appeared in midair, gleaming like the sun. When it swung its holy sword down, they all rained down at once. Mira leaped back from the attack, watching with great interest.

“Hrmm? Is this some sort of unique skill?”

Most holy swords and demonic swords came with such a skill. Sometimes, it was more useful than the weapon's regular attacks. The meteor shower of light fell before Mira and backed up her hypothesis.

The raging storm of light pierced through Garm, weakening its grip and forcing it to release the skeleton. Garm looked regretful, having lost its prey—but only for a moment. The wolf soon glowered hatefully at the skeleton and growled.

I can't believe it shook off Garm. This enemy is no joke.

She'd expected a unique art as soon as the weapon was revealed to be a holy sword, but it was far stronger than she'd surmised. After admiring the damage, Mira restored the protective barrier around Garm with [Evocation Support: Benevolent Touch].

One quirk of summoning magic was that summoned beings could not be physically harmed for the duration of the summoning. Instead, their summoning circles came with defensive barriers and a method of forcefully dismissing them. While Garm could not be injured in the fight, he could be forced to un-summon.

Renewed by Mira's technique, Garm charged fiercely forward and swiped its claws at the skeleton. It was lightning fast as it aimed for the enemy's neck. Seeing the shape of Garm's attack, the skeleton countered. Instead of deploying the light barrier, this time it held the sword at an angle and deflected Garm's claws with the tip. the wolf's claws dug into the floor, and the skeleton used the holy sword as an axle of rotation to jam its knee into Garm's ribs, tearing through the defensive barrier as Garm was hurled away.

At that moment the Wise Popot launched a fireball at the skeleton from the other side. Its timing was perfect—yet the skeleton caught the fireball with its free hand and crushed it, screeching all the while.

Mira closed in from its blind spot. But as the skeleton twisted around, it faced her head-on and raised its sword aloft.

Such speed! It may be stronger than that demon...

Mira grinned wryly at its maneuvers. It was almost as if the skeleton had foreseen her charge. These moves—this behavior, this reaction speed—reminded her of a certain demon she'd fought before.

The small summoner's eyes turned bluer than the sky thanks to her [Immortal Hidden Arts: True Sight], and a white tower shield materialized between her and the skeleton.

The foe planted both feet and swung the holy sword from its hips in a crushing downward blow. There was a flash of light as the blade effortlessly tore through the shield, and particles of light fell to the floor like a bright rainstorm.

The overpowering attack destroyed everything in the blast radius, where Mira had just been. But now she was somewhere else.

The skeleton appeared to be confused. It quickly scanned its surroundings for her location, but found only another oncoming fireball and Garm's fangs. Focused on finding Mira, it had already missed the opportunity to evade.

It held up its sword to block Garm's fangs with its light barrier while it caught the fireball in its free hand. But this fireball was bigger than the last, and the enemy's boney arm struggled and creaked with its force. Even worse—Garm's ferocious bite would not be easily denied. The skeleton was forced to stand still to defend against the assault.

A small hand reached out to land on one of the skeleton's spread arms. Mira grinned fearlessly and grasped the skeleton's sword hand with both of hers.

"I've got you now."

[Immortal Arts Earth: Twofold Raging Strike]

As the spell activated, mana spiraled and concentrated in Mira's hands. Her small palms focused the power into one place a moment before a vicious, destructive shockwave rippled through the air and shook the entirety of the chapel.

The skeleton's arm shattered into smithereens, and the holy sword dropped down into the thicket created by Alraune.

Their first objective was complete. Garm leaped back from the skeleton, and the Wise Popot's fireball changed direction, careening toward the ceiling to burst harmlessly in midair.

An enraged screech could be heard over the explosion as red light bathed the chapel.

CHAPTER 3

AS THE BATTLE SPED toward its inevitable conclusion, the skeleton spewed even more black mist from its body and rampaged wildly.

Mira put some distance between them, and the Wise Popot hovered outside its range while it watched for an opening. But Garm was still locked in battle with the foe.

Now that it had lost the sword, the skeleton's movements were simple and therefore easy for Garm to fend off. When it screeched and punched out one arm, it caught nothing but air. Soon, Garm's powerful claw-strike had knocked the boney thing to the ground.

Its vacant eyes beheld the fallen holy sword nestled amid the greenery. The dark gleam shone for a mere instant, but it was enough to set the skeleton single-mindedly clawing for the sword. It was drawn to it like an addict.

Alraune's vines wrapped around the weapon before their foe could snatch it away. They drew the sword deeper into the foliage to hide the object of the skeleton's desire. Yet the enemy still searched for the holy sword, running around defenselessly before Garm.

Garm's tail was enveloped in flames, a raging beam of crimson that swept toward the skeleton. The wolf whipped around, using momentum to perform a vicious attack that sent embers flying throughout the air. The skeleton was launched gloriously away, smashing into the back of the chapel hard enough to crack the wall and shake the building.

"Oho! Now there's a powerful blow," Mira cheered in admiration, patting Garm's snout as the skeleton slumped over. Garm woofed happily and wagged its fire-covered tail. "There, there. I understand you're happy. Please calm down."

Mira brushed away the embers and turned her attention back to the skeleton. The firelight brilliantly illuminating the chapel had dissipated. Calm ruled the building for a moment.

There was a dry, rasping sound. The skeleton stood up.

Even after that ultimate technique combining the explosive power of fire and Garm's raw strength, it still lived. But now, as it moved, its skull rattled. There were cracks all over its torso; it had clearly taken serious damage.

Mira turned and confirmed the location of the vine-covered holy sword, then looked toward the skeleton again. She sighed before taking a step forward.

"You seem awfully tough. But now that I don't need to worry about the sword, there's no sense in holding back."

Garm and the Wise Popot backed as far away as they could. The green surrounding them writhed, and dozens of vines extended from below, wrapping and restraining the skeleton before it could charge again. Their foe groaned and struggled, tearing at the vines. But it had suffered too many wounds; this was an impossible task. It left a fatal opening in its defense.

Mira slowly pointed her fist toward the skeleton. The Bound Arcana appeared and shifted to the Mark of the Rosary. This was the preparation for advanced summoning... but there was something slightly different about this one.

Luster of the vast seas, primordial flames that lap at the sky.

Beating eternal, breathing ceaseless.

When a thousand skies are imbued, let dawn shine again!

[Spiritual Evocation: Cherubim Heart]

Spiritual Evocation allowed humans to use the enormous power of a greater spirit, something far beyond human capacities, just once per battle. Responding to the incantation, the summoning circle grew brighter and shone red with spewing crimson fire. The fire swirled as if alive, coalescing into a human form. This form, created by Mira's mana, was made to be inhabited by the greater fire spirit Demiurge.

The figure made of fire looked straight ahead, mimicking Mira's motions, and raised its crimson arm toward the skeleton. An incandescent fireball enveloped the skeleton like a miniature sun, burning so hot it shifted from red to white. As it burned, it sounded like a furious windstorm and gave off a harsh light, yet the heat didn't touch anyone else in the room.

[Spiritual Evocation: Cherubim Heart]’s effect only engulfed a specified area in flame. The smaller the area, the more powerful the effect. Nothing else would be burned. Mira specified the minimum size and therefore maximum power.

When the dazzling light finally faded, the area formerly covered with lush greenery held only a circle of scorch marks and the stench of burned bone. Even the skeleton’s spirit-devouring curse was no match for the power of the sun. Only scattered black ashes and a dissipating black mist remained after their foe was burned with such overwhelming heat.

Mira smiled in satisfaction. “Hah. Couldn’t handle *that*, now, could you?”

She and her summons had won. Garm roared victoriously, and the Wise Popot perched on her shoulder to pester her for praise. Alraune leaned against Mira’s chest lovingly.

“Indeed, you’ve all done a wonderful job.” Mira complimented them and dismissed them one by one. To each she said, “Well done.” Garm howled proudly, Wise Popot spread its wings happily, and Alraune wriggled bashfully as it was dismissed.

As the greenery around them disappeared like a fading illusion, Wasranel and Anrutine descended. They stood shoulder to shoulder in front of Mira and bowed deeply with the biggest of smiles.

“Thank you so much for helping us get our friend back.”

“We can’t thank you enough.”

“Thanks are unnecessary,” Mira replied with a smile. “Go to your friend now.” She gestured with her eyes to the holy sword lying in the chapel corner. Now was a time for joy.

“San! San!” Anrutine cradled the sword carefully in her arms.

Wasranel put a hand gently on the hilt and called to her, “Sanctia! You’re gonna be okay!”

The change began gradually. Particles of light drifted up, as if the sword was breathing softly as it woke from sleep. Then, the holy sword began to tremble, and the light particles became dazzlingly bright. In the next moment, a woman stood next to the sword as if she’d always been there.

"Ooh! The mist cleared!" The woman raised both hands excitedly.

"Sanctia!" Wasranel took her hand, overcome with emotion.

"San!" Anrutine pulled her into a hug with relieved tears in her eyes. Her friend had returned.

"It's been so long!" Sanctia hugged them both with a big, surprised smile.

What a touching reunion. Mira gazed at the group of friends overcome with emotion. *Well, at least they seem to be happy.*

* * *

After they told Sanctia about everything that had happened, she ran over to Mira and squeezed her in the tightest hug. "Thanks for saving me!"

Perhaps because she'd inhabited a holy sword, Sanctia wore Valkyrie-like armor. With the hard breastplate pressed against her face, Mira answered with a groan, "Ah, urk... Just glad you're safe."

After breaking the embrace, Sanctia backed away a few steps and bowed respectfully. "Hi, I'm Sanctia. Thank you so much!"

Her white and blue clothes and gold-adorned armor were truly like those of a paladin, and her bobbed blonde hair fit her gallant look quite nicely. But in terms of personality, Sanctia was bubbly. It created an odd contrast with her appearance, made only stranger by her innocent smile.

This was Mira's first time meeting a holy sword's spirit. She was oddly expressive and human for a weapon spirit, not at all what Mira would have expected.

"I'm Mira. This was nothing, honestly," she answered and gazed at Sanctia with a finger placed thoughtfully on her chin.

Evidently overjoyed, Wasranel nestled in close to Sanctia and said with a broad smile, "We'd love to thank you somehow. What would you like from us, Mira? We'll do anything in our power."

"Hrmm..." Mira muttered to herself in thought.

"How about these? These treasures contain much value in their history." Anrutine came from the back of the chapel dragging a large, heavy-looking chest. She opened it in front of Mira and added, "Please feel free to take them."

The items inside certainly looked like what one would imagine to be valuable treasures.

"Oh, my. These could easily be worth over a hundred million..."

The dazzling contents took Mira's breath away. But for good or for ill, it was mere treasure. Mira's tastes skewed more toward the *magical*—implements with special powers or other equipment that would help in an adventure. There was nothing like that in the chest.

After picking through the contents of the chest, Mira looked up at Sanctia with fascination burning in her eyes. "Hrmm. To be frank, I have more interest in the sword than the treasure."

Sanctia cocked her head and stammered, "Erm? You mean me?"

"I thought as much. Okay. We owe you everything, Mira, so if that's what you want..." said Wasranel.

Anrutine looked a little sad but added, "Yeah. She saved Sanctia's life, so we have to pay her back."

They hugged Sanctia from both sides. They murmured to their friend as fresh tears welled in their eyes.

"Don't cause any trouble for Mira, now. Also, don't talk to strangers. Oh! And remember to eat your greens."

"Good luck, San. Be sure to write us letters every now and then."

They looked like rural parents seeing their daughter off to the big city. While Anrutine continued to say her goodbyes, Wasranel moved to pick up something from the pedestal in the center of the chapel.

Hrmm? Er, what's going on here?

This was completely unexpected, and a sense of mild dread filled her as the spirit of stealth walked back to her.

"Take care of Sanctia for us." Wasranel held out the sheath he'd taken from the pedestal. It had lovely decorations in the same color as Sanctia's armor. The sheath was meant for that holy sword and no other.

Mira gazed at it, stupefied. Accepting it would mean becoming Sanctia's owner. But Mira wasn't a fighter; a sword would do her no good at all.

"Ah, er... I'm a summoner. Not much use for swords, actually," Mira said, refusing the offer.

Wasranel looked completely bewildered.

"Oh? But didn't you say you were interested in it?" Had he made a mistake somewhere? Behind him, Anrutine and Sanctia both cocked their heads in confusion even as they embraced.

"Oh! That would make sense. Sorry... That's my fault for being unclear. I meant that I am interested in *Sanctia*." Mira looked at Sanctia again. A holy sword, lying dormant in a chapel in the depths of a lake, with a weapon spirit within. All of these were firsts for Mira. And as a summoner, the spirit drew her interest in particular.

"*Sanctia... herself?*" Wasranel said slowly. She was beautiful. But Mira was a woman too... Suddenly, Wasranel imagined what might bloom between the two women and heard a door open in his heart.

"Wha? But, um, er... Okay, but be gentle!" Sanctia blushed shyly, but agreed, apparently not totally against it. It seemed her mind had gone there as well.

"I will assume you're still half-asleep," Mira responded with a tired sigh before explaining. "I am a summoner, and you are a *weapon spirit*. One from a holy sword that I have no memory of ever seeing."

Mira stepped forward, stopped in front of Sanctia, and looked up with a glimmer in her eye and a sly grin on her face.

"Would you be willing to make a *contract*? Summoning a holy sword's weapon spirit... Sounds exciting, doesn't it? Come on! What's the worst that could happen?!" Mira

pushed for a response, pressing harder and harder as if possessed.

"Umm... I've never done it, so I don't know, I guess...?"

"Then this will be your first?! How wonderful!" Mira was acting erratically, seizing Sanctia's shoulders as the obsessive little summoner's grin turned maniacal.

"Why are you so scary now?!" Overcome by the pressure, Sanctia looked to her friends for help. But Wasranel and Anrutine backed away and offered only verbal support, hoping that this would be enough to return Mira's favor.

"I can feel it. Our meeting here was fate! How about we just see what's possible? Can you agree to that?" Seeing an opportunity, Mira pressed further, hoping to be Sanctia's first. Perhaps spirits of holy swords couldn't form contracts. But perhaps she'd just never *tried*.

Even if she couldn't understand Mira's obsession, Sanctia could see her enthusiasm. She assented with firm resolve, "Okay, that's... fine. I don't know if it'll work, but I'll do my best!"

CHAPTER 4

“LET US MAKE that contract!”

Mira, now in the best of moods thanks to earning Sanctia’s consent, thrust out her right hand and activated Contract Forging. This was the starting ability of the summoner class, and worked as advertised.

As warm light enveloped her right hand, Mira slowly approached Sanctia. Wasranel and Anrutine watched from afar, tense. As for Sanctia, she had both hands folded on her chest, eyes closed and lips pursed as if expecting a kiss.

Mira reached up to place her hand on Sanctia’s forehead.

Summon contracts could not be formed without both parties’ consent. If one party refused, it would fail, and the light on Mira’s hand would disappear. This would also happen if one attempted to form a contract with a being that *could not* consent.

Even after being on Sanctia’s forehead for a while, Mira’s hand still shone with the light of the contract. In fact, it was growing brighter still, becoming many rays of light that danced across the chapel. It was like a miniature light show.

“Ooh! I’ve never seen it shine this bright!” Mira squinted, her voice full of excitement.

The reaction to the contract differed depending on the summon. Effects were typically flashier the stronger the partner, but this was beyond anything Mira had witnessed.

“Is this the light of a summon contract?” Wasranel watched the scene in fascination.

The light gradually gathered on the ground surrounding them, inscribing a magic circle. In the next moment, the circle scattered into particles of light that were sucked into Mira’s palm.

“A-are you gonna do it or not?” Sanctia’s lips trembled as her face grew redder. Her eyes were still clamped shut, and she’d missed the whole thing.

“Success!” cried Mira.

“Wha?!”

Mira raised her right hand in triumph, shouting with joy. Sanctia’s shoulders jolted up at the sound, and she cracked an eye open to see what was going on.

“A holy sword’s weapon spirit! Now this is exciting!”

Ecstatic over learning a new spell, Mira focused her attention on where she would use the summon and promptly cast it.

[Evocation: Sanctia]

A shining, white magic circle rose into the air. It contracted into one point and then burst apart, sending fragments of rainbow-colored light spinning across the walls of the chapel. From there, Mira’s new power took form.

“What...?”

...And fell to the ground with a dry, metallic *clank*. As Sanctia was a weapon spirit, Mira had expected her to create something like a Dark Knight or Holy Knight. She picked up the object, stunned.

Mira had summoned a sword.

It was clearly the spitting image of the holy sword itself. But as the true holy sword lay at Sanctia’s feet, she obviously hadn’t summoned the real one.

“What is the meaning of this?” Mira demanded, feeling betrayed. Her mood had gone from an all-time high to an all-time low. She barely even bothered to hold the sword she’d summoned.

“How should I know?!” Sanctia answered, cringing. She had to wonder if Mira had been possessed by some bewitched sword.

“I can’t use swords...” Mira muttered with a sigh and stared at the sword in confusion.

Well, I have only just learned it. If I keep using it, maybe it will grow into a knight.

Mira maintained hope. The problem was how to make it grow. Since it was a sword, she would probably have to fight wielding it. But she had no idea how to wield a

sword... and besides, she was a mage.

"Hrmm... Maybe I should give it a try?"

Leaning on her wealth of experience, she hit upon one idea. She summoned a Dark Knight. The three spirits watched from afar, speechless, as Mira had her Dark Knight release its greatsword. She handed it the summoned sword instead.

Hrmm. It looks a little small.

The Dark Knight held the sword firmly. After confirming that it had a good grip, she ordered it to use a sword technique. It ran into the center of the chapel and swung the sword. The simple sword technique, involving lifting and swinging down, left an arc that glowed like a rainbow as a bell-like chime rang out.

"Ooh, now that's something new!"

Despite the difference in weapon weight, the Dark Knight's swordplay remained sharp—but its echoes and afterimage were quite different. Mira mumbled in admiration; truly, the holy sword's weapon spirit was on another level.

Then the rainbow arc exploded, unleashing harsh light accompanied by a shrill tearing sound.

Mira managed to wrench open her eyes, whipped around, and demanded of Sanctia, "What was that?!"

"That's one of my powers! When my mana resonates with the air, it goes *BOOM!*" Sanctia explained with some pride. She added with a beaming grin, "So, this is what summoning can do, huh?" The summoned sword seemed to be just as strong as the real one.

"Oho. And that's the power of the holy sword? Incredible indeed!" Curiosity gripped Mira, and she ran over to seize the sword from the Dark Knight before raising it overhead. "Hi-yaah!"

With a shout, she swung it down. The sword was drawn by gravity and smacked into the floor, leaving neither a rainbow trail nor a bright explosion.

Mira's arm strength and skill alone could not wield the sword well enough.

She turned to Sanctia wordlessly for an explanation.

"Well, I am a holy sword. Y'know? It's not like just anyone can use me. You're a summoner, so... right?" she rattled off.

"Hrmm... Either way, I am glad to have a new spell in my arsenal." Mira relaxed her frown and gazed with feeling at the summoned sword.

Sanctia looked upon it like her own child and blushed. "You're my first time, so treasure it, okay?"

"Only if it ever comes in handy..." Mira sighed and dismissed the sword. "Now," she muttered, and approached Wasranel with a grin, "I recall you were the spirit of stealth?"

Wasranel understood from her grin that her sights were now set on him. He smiled sheepishly. "Er, yes...?"

"I've never met such a spirit. Can I assume you are a primordial spirit?" Primordial spirits were a subcategory of spirits who inhabited the natural world and governed phenomena and elements.

"Yes, that is correct."

Mira looked up at Wasranel and grinned wider. "And you said you'd do anything within your power...?"

The spirit of stealth met her gaze unflinchingly and answered, "Of course. If you desire my power, Mira..."

"Indeed I do!" Mira gave her heartfelt response and slowly reached her hand out to touch his brow. There was a small flash of light: the light of the contract. Before long, a summoning circle appeared and dissolved again. "Hrmm, it's complete. Wasn't very flashy, though."

Unlike Sanctia's contract, this one was just as low-key as the spirit of stealth's name would imply.

"Yes, I'm surprised, too..." Wasranel was evidently disappointed by the difference between his and the previous one.

Having felt the formation of the contract, Mira held her hand out with a satisfied smile.
“Well, I’ll be counting on you.”

“And I, you,” said Wasranel as he quickly recovered and accepted the handshake.

“Incidentally, I see you’re a greater spirit? I could tell during the contract process.”

“More or less.”

The words to summon the spirit of stealth had appeared in Mira’s mind like a forgotten dream. Greater magic was essentially beyond the reckoning of humans, and the incantation was like a ritual used to elevate one’s mana to that level. It wasn’t just there for show.

“*Stealth* alone isn’t much of a descriptor. What sort of power do you have, exactly?” Mira asked with great interest.

With a forlorn look, Wasranel answered, “It’s sort of hard to describe, isn’t it...?”

“It’s awesome, but it’s as plain as his presence!” Sanctia laughed behind him.

Wasranel shot a glare back at her and continued, “Allow me to explain.”

The power of the spirit of stealth was the ability to create quiet in any situation. And not just in regard to sound, either; it also extended to light, mana, and the like.

As it turned out, he had the ability to erase all sounds, hide one’s form, and make one’s mana and presence undetectable. In other words, the spirit of stealth’s power was to be a perfect recluse.

“Oho...” Mira said thoughtfully.

Hearing her understated response, Wasranel sank into sadness yet again. “Pretty boring, right...?”

But Mira broke out into a sunny smile. “That is incredible! I’d thought from your name that you would only be able to erase sound, but what you described is incredibly powerful!” Mira thought over the many applications of his powers, and arrived at the conclusion that his power was among the greatest. She was overjoyed at this chance encounter.

"Do you think so? Thank you." Wasranel beamed.

From there, Mira turned to the last spirit. Anrutine tensed visibly under Mira's gaze.

"Might I ask that you return me to where you found me?" the summoner asked. Regardless of her good fortune, she was still under a lake, and only one spirit here could safely get her back on land.

"I was ready for you to demand a contract from me, too..." Anrutine seemed almost disappointed.

"I already have a water spirit."

Contracts with different spirits governing the same element were impossible. If Mira tried to make a contract with Anrutine, she would have to give up her contract with Undine, whom she'd raised so lovingly. And that she could never do.

A mixture of relief and sadness crept across Anrutine's face.

* * *

"Thank you for saving me!" Sanctia piped up before enfolding her in another bracing goodbye hug.

Mira grimaced at the breastplate pressed up against her face, but responded, "Of course. I'm sure this was fate."

Then she grumbled about being princess-carried the whole way to the surface. As they emerged, the sky above the forest-ringed lake was starless—but in the air, there hung countless lights. They painted over the black of the night sky, flowing in a bright river like the Milky Way.

"What... in the world is this?" Mira asked.

"Migratory glowflies. This time of year, they all head north like that."

"Goodness. What a magical sight." It was an unexpected bit of good luck to see them. Normally she'd be fast asleep at this time of night.

After gazing at the night sky until she was satisfied, Mira strode back to the wagon.

She passed by Aaron, who slept leaning against the wagon's driver's seat, and peeked at Scorpion and Snake, who were snuggled together atop the wagon's roof.

"I can't believe they're still asleep. Even when I'm this close, they haven't woken up at all..."

"I can even do *this* while they sleep." Wasranel flung open the door to the wagon with a clatter.

"How useful."

Not even a veteran like Aaron reacted to the sudden noise. Mira was quite impressed by Wasranel's abilities.

"Well, Mira, I suppose this is goodbye."

"Indeed. Tell the girls I said goodbye, too."

"I'll do just that," Wasranel promised as he closed the door. He then turned around once and bowed deeply before gliding back into the water with Anrutine.

After seeing the spirits off, Mira wriggled out of her dirty clothes and nestled into her futon. It was well past midnight, and she soon fell asleep once again.

CHAPTER 5

“IT’S MOOORNING! Wake uuup!”

The voice was faint, as if traveling through the water’s depths. But it gradually grew louder and closer until it reached Mira’s consciousness.

“Nngh... What now?” Still tired from her late night, she opened her eyes a crack before sleepily cocooning herself in her futon.

Unlike the groggy Mira, Scorpion was as energetic as ever this morning. She jostled the small summoner. “Jeez, c’mon! The sun’s up! We gotta get going!”

“Why are you so loud?!”

Mira sat up lazily, annoyed that she couldn’t enjoy her peaceful rest. The clock on the wagon wall read just a bit past six, and morning light was streaming through the windows. The surface of the lake reflected dazzling sunlight. Mira narrowed her eyes at the brightness, then frowned as she rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands.

“...Too early,” Mira muttered and flopped back down.

“Wake uuup! We gotta gooo!” Scorpion cried again, pleading as she shook the summoner. They couldn’t travel until Mira summoned Garuda.

“Fine, fine.”

They still had a long way to go. There was no time for a leisurely rest now, but Mira knew she could sleep once they were in the air. She groggily stood up as Aaron peeked inside.

“Did you get the young lady up? Ah... My bad.” He realized his mistake at once and looked up and away from Mira’s fair skin and pretty underwear. Scorpion threw a cushion directly at his face as he ducked his head back out of the wagon.

Now that Mira had been rousted from her bed, the four finished their morning preparations and resumed their journey to the Illusory Corridor. Thanks to Garuda,

the trip continued smoothly, and Mira was able to get back to sleep.

Yet after a few hours of flying, Garuda suddenly sounded an alarm.

“Hrmm? What’s the matter?” A newly awakened Mira stood up and pushed past the rest of the group to open the door to the driver’s seat. Though they were high in the sky, Garuda’s power made the air around them calm, granting her a clear view of what lay ahead.

And ahead was an enormous tornado that pierced the clouds.

“Oh, what now?” Mira muttered.

Despite the warm sunlight streaming down everywhere else, that spot alone raged like a miniature apocalypse. It was clearly no natural phenomenon.

“What’s wrong?” Aaron peeked out over her head. “What the heck is that?”

“Whuzzat?”

“Incomprehensible.”

Scorpion and Snake seemed just as baffled when they managed to get a look. The sight was so overwhelming that they could offer few other words.

Aaron pulled out the map to check their location and looked to the base of the whirlwind. Verdant greenery spread in all directions below, cut in two by a sparkling stream that flowed from the base of a white mountain range stretching into the distance.

“Hey, wait a second. Isn’t that the Illusory Corridor?” he asked.

Mira compared the positions of the mountain range and tornado, and agreed, “Hrmm... You know, you’re right. That does look familiar.”

The tornado enveloped not just the entrance to the dungeon, but the whole area around it as well. The storm was of such scale and force that the Illusory Corridor was entirely sealed to them.

“Is that bad, or...?” Scorpion’s face clouded over.

If Chimera Clausen were in there now and they could not pursue, then this was an emergency. It was possible that the tornado was a measure by Chimera to keep outsiders from entering the dungeon. And if an organization moving in the shadows had done something so flagrant, that meant they didn't care if people saw what they were doing anymore.

The gang needed to hurry.

"You said Garuda can control wind. Can it do anything about *that*?" Aaron looked up at Garuda, leisurely flapping its wings as usual.

Garuda certainly could control the wind; that was why the wagon remained calm and stable in flight. It could potentially deal with smaller-scale, natural tornados—but as Mira gauged the scale of the storm, she shook her head.

"Even Garuda has limits. It cannot suppress something of that size."

"Ah! Mira, bring us down at that bend in the river!" Scorpion said, apparently having seen something the others hadn't. She pointed at the riverside.

"Hrmm, very well." Mira glanced at the spot and ordered Garuda to descend. The flapping of its great wings sent waves rippling through the water and grassland as the wagon landed.

Scorpion jumped out of the wagon and stabbed her dagger directly into the soil. After wrapping the hilt in yellow cloth, she held both hands out toward the forest, then brought her right hand down.

Mira dismissed Garuda and furrowed her brow at Scorpion's incomprehensible actions.

"What sort of ritual is this?" she asked Snake.

"A signal to allies. There is no danger here, and she wishes to talk directly." It seemed to be code used between Hidden. Then Snake sent a signal of her own into the forest. Mira asked what she'd said, and Snake replied, "It means there are two of us."

"Does that mean other Hidden are in the forest?"

There must have been... otherwise, who would see the signal? But Mira spied nobody

in the lush forest, and it was outside the range of her Biometric Scan.

"Given the location, the ones dispatched to the Illusory Corridor should be here."

"Hrmm..."

Perhaps the Hidden stationed here would have a clue regarding the situation, then.

A babbling brook behind, the rustling of leaves in the wind ahead, and the chirping of birds above. Amid the peaceful scene, Mira gazed at the raging whirlwind up ahead.

Suddenly, the forest's shade wavered. It wasn't the wind's doing—several people had leapt out while Mira was focused on the storm. They sauntered toward Mira and the others and came to a stop in front of Scorpion.

"You make a hell of an entrance, Scorpion," a man said, gazing at the wagon. His face was fatigued.

"I knew it was you, Spider!"

It seemed this man was a member of the Hidden. He had short hair and a toned figure, and wore a camouflage coat that enhanced his military look.

"And Snake is here, too? Who are the others?" Spider looked back and forth between Aaron and Mira: one man, clearly a warrior, and one girl, a mage who had summoned the monstrous Garuda.

"They're here to help. The big one is Aaron, the tiny one is Mira." Scorpion twirled around and introduced them... confidently, if imprecisely.

"Nice to meetcha." Aaron gave Spider a sharp, searching look and grinned proudly.

"I'm Mira." Mira puffed out her chest with a similarly bold, fearless smirk.

Aaron had the air of a ferocious warrior with years of experience, and Mira oozed magic far beyond her small stature.

"Real strong crew this time, huh?" Scorpion said with a chuckle.

After committing their names to memory, Spider suddenly realized something. "Hey,

Mira... That's the same name as the girl who got Capture Number 1... Is this the lady herself?"

Chimera Clausen would abandon their prey to prioritize escape. But thanks to Mira, Isuzu had finally managed to capture one of them: Capture Number 1, the first Chimera Clausen member they'd ever apprehended. It was the very reason that the Isuzu Alliance had finally been able to take the offensive.

It seemed all of Isuzu had heard her name by now.

"Yep, that's her!" Scorpion answered.

Spider gazed at Mira in admiration and muttered, "I see..."

Even someone so adorable, with such perfect, delicate features, could summon beasts such as Garuda. With her on their side, maybe things were finally going to go their way.

"But the report from HQ said you'd gone to the Citadel of Scales... Why are you here? Don't tell me you got lost."

"About that. The situation has changed..."

Scorpion launched into an explanation of what happened at the Citadel of Scales.

* * *

"Huh. And that brought you here?" Spider surveyed the four again, even more impressed than before.

"Yep. Now, I've got a question for *you*." Scorpion pointed at the giant tornado deep in the forest. "What is that?!"

"Yeah. That..." Spider looked at the tornado with eyes filled with exhaustion, sighed, and waved a hand toward the forest. A few seconds later, a woman dressed in ascetic clothing emerged soundlessly from between the trees.

"You want me to explain, right?" She spoke in the same tired voice as she filled the gang in on what she knew.

The whirling tornado had already been there when the team had arrived at their post.

And as Mira and the others had surmised, it was artificially created, rather than any natural occurrence. But their search for the source had proven fruitless. Spider's team had tried every means of entry they could, but all had failed. When Scorpion probed, it was clear that they had really tried *everything*.

All they could do was wait and watch for Chimera Clausen to enter or exit. But they couldn't get near the storm, and the team had ultimately ended up at a loss.

"Hrmm... Well, there's no use waiting here. Why don't we get a closer look?" Mira suggested to the befuddled group and began walking without waiting for an answer.

Perhaps their combined forces could find a way... but they'd need to get close and take the full measure of the situation first.

"Sure. Let's do that," Scorpion agreed, falling into step behind her.

"Yeah, guess so," Aaron grumbled as he joined them.

Snake tagged along diagonally behind Mira without a word.

Spider and the woman now had a good idea of who was in charge, and they silently followed the four toward the storm.

CHAPTER 6

THE TORNADO INSPIRED even more awe up close. The vortex was perfectly controlled; it gave no openings to enter, but neither did it damage anything around it.

This allowed them to stand twenty meters in front of it, unharmed. The sound of the dark wind rumbled like a low roar.

Aaron heaved a deep sigh at the overpowering vortex. “Yeah, this seems like a *no* to me.”

This storm was strong enough to be calamitous, and no human—let alone a single adventurer—could hope to fight it.

“Definite *no*.” Spider laughed dryly next to him.

“Can’t run through that one...”

“A rock golem would not be able to withstand it, either.”

Scorpion and Snake did not believe that their powers could overcome it.

Right there, Spider, the unknown woman, Aaron, Scorpion, and Snake began an impromptu strategy meeting to figure out if there was any way they could all deal with cooperatively. Behind them, Mira put a finger to her chin and stared at the tornado thoughtfully as she listened in.

The cage of wind raged with such force that it barred all entry. Given the situation, it was all but certain that this had been created by Chimera. And no doubt they were making headway on their schemes within the Illusory Corridor while the group stood here and chatted.

Waiting would only put them at a disadvantage... but what was the alternative? Their discussion failed to reach any agreement.

I suppose it wouldn't be impossible... Mira appraised the situation and stepped out in front of the group.

"I believe that I could break through it alone," she announced, walking toward the whipping wind. "Could I ask you all to stand by out here?"

"Wait, wait, *wait!* We couldn't do anything even with our combined efforts. There's no way you can—" Spider's protest was cut short by Scorpion.

"You mean it?! Once you're in, try and dispel the tornado, if you can!" She looked at Mira expectantly. All the power of the Hidden had failed to break through it. But Scorpion saw hope in Mira.

"I was planning to prioritize thwarting their schemes, but... Hrmm, that's not a bad idea."

If Chimera was using some method to create this tornado, then its source must be somewhere that Isuzu couldn't easily reach—such as *inside* the vortex itself. But it would defeat the point if Chimera Clausen achieved their goal while she searched. After a pause, Mira seemed to hit upon an idea. She answered confidently that she would think about it.

"Well, I mean..." Spider began to speak again.

"Given the scale of the storm, the source must be large. I believe it is within the mountains surrounding the dungeon rather than inside the vortex of the tornado."

This time, Snake stopped Spider's objection. She had caught glimpses of Mira's power on the way here, and she had a feeling that perhaps the young summoner could indeed break through the barrier. She retrieved a fist-sized orb from her pouch and handed it to Mira, as if entrusting her with their hopes. "This is an implement that seals the power of spirits with negative energy. Simply throw it at them."

"Hrmm. I should use this on the source, then?"

Whoever made this tornado would have to be incredibly powerful. Only a small handful of mages in all the world—those in the same class as the Nine Wise Men—could possibly create one of such size and ferocity.

But there were others who could create phenomena such as this: spirits. And since Chimera Clausen was involved, it was likely that this tornado was the result of abusing spirits' power in ways that went against all their wishes.

"If you can, please," Snake replied and gazed at Mira with pleading eyes. Mira accepted the orb and squeezed Snake's hand.

"Leave it to me," she said with a confident smile.

"What in the world...?" Spider grumbled. He had been interrupted twice now; he felt left out of their warm little circle of mutual understanding.

"You can't really grasp this young miss's power unless you see it for yourself. No worries, buddy." Aaron patted Spider's back reassuringly.

"Yeah, so you say, but..." Spider stared dismally at Mira, who was clad head to toe in trendy magical girl-style clothing.

Spider had faith in the abilities of himself and his allies. Yet even combined, they could not find a way to break through the barrier. And now Mira was going to do it alone? He knew he should trust Scorpion and Snake's judgment, but...

"I won't rest unless I've done everything I can. You'll have to let me do exactly that." Mira understood Spider's feelings, but her resolve was unyielding. She returned his stare with a fearless smirk.

Spider looked away, somewhat taken aback by her confidence, and finally answered with a sigh, "Fine. Do what you want."

"Aww, what's the matter?" Aaron joked. "Your ears are red."

"Nothing!" Spider yanked his hood over his head and looked down.

"Let's do this." Mira approached the tornado and cast a spell to assist her crossing.

[Resonant Evocation: Sylphid]

A magic circle flared to life beneath her feet, rising from the ground and enveloping her before dispersing as wind. This was not one of her usual summons. Mira felt the power of another covering her body. With that, she became certain that this would let her enter the vortex.

Ah, I feel much lighter. So, this is how it feels to use it in real life.

She acted swiftly now, running forward and leaping into the raging winds.

* * *

Scorpion and the others watched, astounded. They saw true hope in that moment. If all went well, the tornado would soon be gone. Spider ran off to report to his remaining comrades that they should be ready to act at a moment's notice.

Aaron, Scorpion, and Snake remained where they were and gazed at the towering wall of wind.

"Whoa, what the hell was that?" Aaron asked with a faint grin.

"Uncertain." Snake remained expressionless save for a gleam in her eye.

Scorpion added, "I wonder what happens when Mira really gets serious?"

All three of them shuddered at once.

* * *

The inside of the vortex was ruled by roaring, mercilessly savage wind. Yet Mira paid it no mind as she ran through, secure in her magic. Resonant evocation was a technique that temporarily allowed the user to incorporate a spirit's power into themselves. And Mira had harnessed the power of a wind spirit.

It was a rather advanced technique; it commonly lasted less than a minute and consumed vast amounts of mana. Even Mira could only maintain it for two minutes. But while she did, she could ignore any damage dealt by wind.

Mira dashed through the raging walls of air with ease.

When she'd proceeded a hundred meters, the wind suddenly calmed. Sprawling ruins came into view—she had arrived at the center of the vortex. Towering ancient edifices stood carved from an enormous mountain. It was a work of craft beyond human reckoning, a glimpse of long-lost civilization and unimaginable sculpting technique.

Seeing it again in the flesh really gives you an idea of how incredible this place is.

As she walked along the sloping road leading up to the mountain, Mira was amazed by

how overwhelming it all was. She had seen this place many times in the game, but now that it had real substance, its awe-inspiring presence was a tidal wave that crashed against her heart.

Nobody keeping watch, hm? After surveying the ruins, she concluded that nobody was present. Perhaps that was proof of how much they trusted their barrier.

She looked around for the source of the storm, just in case. Nothing popped out at her. Perhaps it was hidden somewhere in the ruins? With that in mind, Mira searched again.

“Seems I have no choice.”

Searching the whole mountain would be ridiculous. She didn’t have time for that. So, she called forth the perfect person to whom to delegate the task.

Mira cast her summoning magic, and a magic circle appeared. It rose to reveal Cat Sith, who sat with his legs tucked beneath him like a loaf of bread. The sign on his shoulder read, FIRST FELINE SOLDATO! FUHGEDDABOUDIT! He was a walking mafia cliché, though it was a mystery where or why he’d learned such things.

“Ya wanna put a hit on a guy, meowstress?”

Mira gave him a hard look. “I have a *lot* of questions, but they can wait. First Pupil, listen well. Something around here is creating the tornado that surrounds us. I want you to deal with it.”

“Leave it to me-ow, Boss!” Cat Sith grinned. At some point, he’d turned his sign’s stick into a sword cane.

“Just throw this at it, and that should take care of it.” Mira maintained a straight face and handed over the orb she’d received from Snake.

“Roger that! I’ve got the goods!” Cat Sith took the orb dexterously in his padded paw, wrapped it in cloth, and tied it to a sling over his shoulder.

“Make sure you get it done!” Mira called out.

“I’m gonna whack ‘em good, boss!” Cat Sith called back excitedly as he charged into the ruins. The sign on his back bore a drawing of a cute cat and the text, WARNING:

DO NOT WHACK CARELESSLY.

"I'd best get going, too."

After seeing Cat Sith off, Mira grinned wryly to herself and summoned Pegasus. The creature wordlessly nuzzled her, and she absently stroked its soft nose as she beheld the enormous gate in the center of the ruins.

"It's been a while, but I hope you're still up to this," Mira said as she mounted Pegasus. The flying horse whinnied happily, flapped its wings, and flew toward the gate.

CHAPTER 7

THE ILLUSORY CORRIDOR existed within the mountain ruins beyond the gate. It was constructed of over a hundred corridors layered upon each other like floors of a skyscraper, making it wide, tall, and deep. It was an open construction that looked as if it had been dug straight down from the peak of a mountain.

Mira currently rode Pegasus directly through the middle of the corridor. They rose almost as high as the mountain's peak as seen from the outside.

Is there nobody here? I haven't even seen any monsters...

As she searched her surroundings for a certain landmark, Mira realized she had seen neither human nor monster about. The lack of monsters could be explained by Chimera's elites exterminating them. But Mira hadn't even seen a corpse.

Have they been disposing of them? Or else... Hrmm. Either way, I have to assume this is the enemy's doing.

From her impression of Chimera, Mira assumed that they would not dispose of monster corpses. Another reason came to mind: overkill. Chimera had used extreme force and destroyed them without a trace. She renewed her focus—if that was the case, she couldn't let her guard down here.

It was then that she found the landmark she was searching for: a rectangular pillar surrounded by countless circular ones.

"There, Pegasus. Take me to the passage beyond that pillar." Mira pressed herself against Pegasus's neck as she pointed at the rectangular pillar. The horse neighed in assent and galloped nimbly through the air toward the passage.

The corridors were as rocky as the mountain itself, but all of the hundreds of meters of walls were covered in beautiful reliefs. The passages themselves weren't especially wide, just barely allowing Pegasus's wingspan. But her mount displayed its excellent aerial mobility, flying through without slowing down a mote.

* * *

Before long, they had gotten through the passage and arrived at the same corridor as before. Or rather, it *seemed* to be the same corridor as before. Mira knew how the Illusory Corridor worked and showed no surprise as she ordered Pegasus to descend.

Like the Citadel of Scales, one had to traverse the Illusory Corridor via a particular route in order to reach its depths. But this dungeon was easier than the Citadel, since it offered visible landmarks in the form of the pillars.

Pegasus flew lower while Mira kept her eyes on the surrounding pillars. She still saw no signs of life. The second corridor was almost exactly the same as the first; it was a loop that continued endlessly until one fulfilled a certain condition.

“Hrm?” Mira spotted a black stain on the stone and ordered Pegasus to approach. “...A burn mark.”

The scorch mark had been left in the center of the corridor. Upon closer inspection, it looked to be the result of extremely high temperatures. Mira had an inkling as to whom the victim might be, too.

An enormous, spider-like monster lurked in this dungeon—a sort of mid-boss. Mira had a feeling that this burn had come from a battle with that monster.

“Hrmm... Chimera must have *immense* firepower to cause this sort of damage.”

We've got some big enemies on our hands. Mira gazed up above, at the black circle far beyond the corridor, and thought of the foes that lay in wait for her.

She lowered her gaze and continued downward. Her eyes swept across the stone, searching for the correct pillar, until she spotted the next landmark.

“Pegasus, go that way next.” Mira pointed at a triangular pillar. Pegasus promptly flew into the dim passage behind the pillar. The pair traveled hundreds of meters before they emerged at another corridor like the one before.

This time, Mira had Pegasus go up. They saw the same scenery over and over, but Pegasus forged ahead without hesitation. Before long, Mira spotted a place where the pillars abruptly stopped. Her faithful mount flew straight toward it.

The third passage was quite long. After some time, it suddenly grew wider, and the elegantly decorated walls became rough and craggy. It was as if they'd suddenly

wandered into a natural cavern. They continued ever onward. At length, a bright light came into view ahead—sunlight flowing in through the exit.

Finally...

Mira would probably encounter strong enemies ahead. Faced with the light of the exit, she dismounted from Pegasus and used her Biometric Scan to ascertain enemy locations.

Only one?

Mira had imagined Chimera's elites working in tandem, so this only put her further on guard. That one person plainly had the strength to clear the Illusory Corridor all alone.

She steeled her resolve as Pegasus leapt out into the sunlight.

The deepest depths of the Illusory Corridor, called the Ancient Ring Gate, were like the bottom of a crater surrounded by boulders and stone pillars. Across from the entrance was a collapsed stone staircase, and in front of it were two figures: a knight with a Viking-like helmet and gaudy armor, and an ashen warrior clad in black mist.

Wait, what? Two of them? No, this is... Things weren't quite as she'd expected from the scan. More importantly... She looked down at what lay at their feet: a casket, and around it, the guardians of the Spirit Palace they must have defeated.

"What in the world...?"

Mira had come knowing that she might not find Chimera Clausen here at all... but upon seeing the situation, it was clear that these people were her enemies. She had to take the initiative.

"We fight!" Mira commanded Pegasus.

Sensing her presence, the knight in front of the stairs whipped around. "Who's there?!" His reaction speed was unnaturally fast.

But he was too late; Mira had already slipped into point-blank range. As she activated [Immortal Arts Heaven: Refined Thrust] to attack the knight, Pegasus's lightning struck the ashen warrior with a *crack*. The impact and subsequent *boom* shook the air, reverberating through the cavern.

"Oho. You're a tough one." Amid the echoes, Mira's voice was as clear as a bell as she looked the man up and down.

The knight had withstood Mira's signature strike without injury; he had only been forced back a few meters. His armor was more powerful than that of demons she'd fought before. Trying to check his status yielded nothing.

Hrmm... Is the helmet the key?

Former players alone had the ability to check a target's basic stats. But Mira had learned from Solomon that there were several conditions attached to this ability. One could not investigate other former players, and according to him, one could not investigate someone whose face was concealed. It seemed a mouth alone would not suffice.

"Isuzu, huh? Guess they've got some cuties there. You're here earlier than expected, too. I'm surprised," the knight said with a cocky smirk. He shot a glance at the burned warrior and grinned, obviously unruffled. The man glared at Mira through the openings in his helmet, his eyes as sharp as daggers.

Under the deep blue sky, Mira stared at the man dead-on and curved her delicate lips into a smile. "Given your words, I suppose you're a dog of Chimera?"

"Hardly a *dog*. I'll have you know I'm one of the three heads." He shrugged and smirked again as he pulled out his sword.

"Oh, I see. You're Chimera, three animals in one. Would you be the goat, then?"

Chimera Clausen was named after the mythical creature with the head of a lion, body of a goat, and tail of a serpent. Mira looked at the horns on his helmet and grinned.

"More like the serpent." The man readied his sword.

"Hmph. I already know a Snake, thanks."

As Mira spoke, another of Pegasus's lightning strikes cracked through the air and boomed as it struck the man. Despite the incandescent bolt, he was fine—not a scratch on his armor. He looked up to see no clouds in the sky, but Pegasus circling overhead.

"Gotta say, that startled me."

Even Pegasus's lightning couldn't make him budge. Is he naturally this powerful, or is he being powered up by his armor? This is more trouble than I expected...

"You've got pretty hefty defenses. Is that the Spirit King's power that you stole?" Mira probed.

"I wish," he laughed. "Unfortunately, he's stubborn. It's only a matter of time, though." He turned his eyes to the destroyed staircase. Nearby sat a jar with mysterious symbols etched into it.

So, there's still time. I just can't believe it's already begun...

Above the jar, far up in the sky, hung a gate. Particles of light fell from it like snow, creating shining smears in the sky.

"Wonder how much more we'll need?" The man pointed up, and the balls of light suddenly rained down and were sucked into the jar.

"Hrmm. Is that how it works...?"

It seemed they'd already begun draining the Spirit King of his power. That meant the sketches of the pillars in the control room back in the Citadel of Scales weren't necessary for this purpose. But the Spirit King's power was enormous; this alone would not be enough to fully drain his power, and since he was so strong, the power they did drain could not be easily controlled.

The collection method was inefficient—that was why they needed the sketches from the Citadel of Scales. As understanding dawned, Mira became certain: she could still make it in time.

"I'm afraid I'll have to thwart your schemes!" After a slight smirk, Mira glowered at the man. As if in response, Pegasus unleashed its fighting spirit with a powerful neigh.

"Try me!" The man laughed and lifted his sword. The arc of its swing gleamed red before spewing a tidal wave of fire.

It was a fire-attuned spirit blade, and its attack shot toward Mira like dragon's breath.

Now this is getting ridiculous.

It struck the Holy Knight's tower shield that Mira had summoned in a blink, sending its remnants flying wildly in all directions. Hot air from the blast blew past and brushed Mira's cheeks with searing fingers.

The crackles of the fire washing over Mira were full of anguished cries. Hearing that, Mira put a finger to her chin and stepped out from behind the warped and melting Holy Knight shield.

"This fire... That's a yin spirit blade. Why do I feel like I've seen another of these recently? That's one more for the interrogation."

Mira resummoned her Holy Knight and stared at the man's sword.

Yin spirit equipment was rare even within the market for already-rare spirit equipment. Caerus, the man who had attacked Mira before this all started, had yin equipment in his possession as well. She'd had a feeling back then... and seeing two examples in so little time, it was clear that this was no coincidence.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm not answering a damn thing."

"Figures."

The Holy Knight leapt forth at Mira's call. In the blink of an eye, it swung its sword at the Chimera member.

It may have specialized in defense, but the Holy Knight's attacks were by no means weak. Its offense was nearly equal to the Dark Knight's, and its slashes were wickedly sharp, drawing perfect half-moon arcs.

"I had a feeling this would happen." The man laughed as he effortlessly deflected the attack. When the Holy Knight tried another strike, he parried with his sword. Mira's knight tried swinging down upon him once more, but the enemy caught it with his own blade, simply holding his sword up before him.

The Holy Knight's powerful blow made a loud, metallic *clank* as the weight crashed down on the man's arms.

"Strong blows for a lesser summons. You're a tricky little thing. But..." Having grasped the power of Mira's lesser summon—the one that used the *least* power in her arsenal—he grimaced. But his lips curled upward once again as he took one hand off

of his sword and held it to the side.

The man's hand glowed faintly, and the ashen warrior felled by Pegasus's lightning stood up and immediately charged forward. The warrior lifted his sword and cleaved the Holy Knight's tower shield into two clean halves.

Or rather... it looked as if the middle of the shield had simply *disappeared*.

Is this phenomenon similar to what happened with Sanctia?

The warrior was enveloped in black fog—a fog much like the one Mira had seen in the lake chapel just the day before. She could assume that this warrior's fog was the same.

This will be a pain to deal with.

Just as the defensive Holy Knight had been easily destroyed by the fog in the lake, weapon spirits could do nothing here. The ashen warrior stepped forward to protect the knight. But Mira showed no sign of surprise, instead flashing a knowing smirk. The facts were falling into place—the ashen warrior wasn't a person, but rather a golem made through necromancy. *That's* why it hadn't appeared on her Biometric Scan.

"So, you're a necromancer. You know, I happened to meet another mage wearing knight's armor recently."

She kept an eye on the fog's uncanny swirling as she stroked Pegasus's mane.

"I'll leave that thing to you," she said, prompting a valiant neigh from Pegasus as it kicked off the ground and leapt forward.

Pegasus accelerated to top speed as it closed in on the fogged warrior. It kicked its powerful hooves and launched the golem into the air, then galloped through the air in swift pursuit.

In battle, Pegasus was ferocious and ran as fast as any horse in midair. It was a far cry from the carousel horse it impersonated when Mira rode it. The man glanced over to see the warrior standing back up some distance away, and chuckled at the incongruity of Pegasus's beautiful appearance and violent actions.

"That thing's a real beast."

"How dare you? Pegasus is a sweet animal who gets lonely so easily," Mira retorted.

The man laughed. "Suit yourself."

Mira glanced around, braced herself, and glared daggers at the man. "Now it's finally a one-on-one fight."

"Hell of a thing for a summoner to say." With his lips still pinned in that vicious grin, he held the sword out with one arm and pointed it, along with a glare, at Mira.

"Don't be a jerk." Mira stuck her lip out, sulking. But beneath that willful expression, she watched the man closely—gaze sharp, as if honing her aim.

CHAPTER 8

BEFORE THE ANCIENT RING GATE in the depths of the Illusory Corridor, Mira faced off against one of the three heads of Chimera Clausen.

Their gazes crossed and sparked as they probed each other. In an instant, the battle shifted from stillness to motion. Three Dark Knights appeared to surround the man and swung their swords in unison. Mira had used simultaneous summoning.

Although somewhat flustered by the speed of her summoning, the man caught all of the blows with his own sword. He then snatched another sword from his hip and cut through all of the knights in one motion.

"You're pretty fast," the man said, sheathing his second sword again as the Dark Knights dispersed like fog. "Too bad for you; golems aren't the only ones that can cut through spirits."

Mira caught a glimpse of the blade, and it too was indeed covered in the writhing black fog.

"Yet another topic for the interrogation." She glared hatefully at the man. The black fog and Chimera Clausen both stood against spirits, and Mira was certain there was some deep tie between them.

"Again, you know I'm not answering a damn thing."

He smirked boastfully and raised his spirit blade again. He swung it down, slashing directly toward Mira. The sword's arc gleamed red and spewed fire. A storm of glaring red blotted out her vision. Mira defended herself again with a Holy Knight and, amid the flames, activated a spell in a summoning location she'd fixed ahead of time.

A Dark Knight appeared and swung its sword down at the man from his blind spot as he prepared his follow-up attack.

"Same thing again, huh?!"

Perhaps thanks to his spirit equipment, the man noticed the Dark Knight's presence

without even looking and evaded with a slight turn of his body. He swiftly unsheathed his fogged sword and cleaved through the summons's torso in one strike.

The fog turned the Dark Knight into dust. But before the man had a chance to draw back from his strike, a black greatsword swung down on his extended arm. It had been timed exactly for the moment he stretched out, giving him no opportunity to evade.

The blade touched his arm with a dull, metallic *thud*—then the sword disappeared like an illusion before the noise had even ceased to echo. It should have been a direct hit. The man gazed at the spot in midair as he returned his sword to its sheath.

“Did I just see an arm show up out of nowhere? You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?” It seemed his gauntlet, infused with spiritual power, was strong enough to totally defend him against a blow from the Dark Knight.

After the flames disappeared, Mira stood next to her half-destroyed Holy Knight, gazed at the man’s arm, and muttered, “Not so much as a scratch, hm? You’re hurting my confidence here.”

Despite her words, the fearless smirk remained on her face.

The man changed his stance to show off his unharmed arm and smirked back. “You’re one to talk.”

“Cute, aren’t I?” Mira put one hand on her cheek and struck a pose.

“Cute, but not my type,” the man spat and moved to continue his offensive.

“Oh, please.”

He was surprisingly agile for someone in heavy armor. Mira met his attack with repeated Dark Knight summons—yet he fended off the endless, omnidirectional assault of greatswords as he approached Mira. For a mage, he had a surprising range of physical techniques.

In the blink of an eye, he arrived before Mira. Her final defensive line waited: three Dark Knights.

“Do you have unlimited mana or something?!”

"Wouldn't you like to know?" These Dark Knights moved differently. Instead of striking at once, they surrounded him and kept a careful distance before beginning a wave attack.

Yet he dealt with this, too, handily. His spirit blade fended off the first greatsword, and he cut the Dark Knight clean in half with his fogged sword. He then whipped his arm back to cut down another approaching from behind.

Two had fallen in no time. Only one Dark Knight remained.

It unleashed a full-power downward swing. The man easily caught it with his spirit blade and tensed, his other hand clutching the fogged sword.

A shrill ripping sound rang out and light flashed as metal met metal. It was Sanctia's power—the final Dark Knight held not a dark greatsword, but a summoned holy sword.

"What?!"

The power of the holy sword tore the spirit blade from his grasp and unleashed dazzling light that robbed him of his vision. In that moment, a hole opened in his iron defenses. The ease with which he'd dispatched Mira's Dark Knights, and their inability to harm him, had made him overconfident.

"Now, I think it'd be best if you shut that mouth of yours," said Mira.

The man forced his dazzled eyes open. But Mira was no longer before him, and her voice sounded blurry and distant.

Knowing that he was now at a disadvantage, the man took a defensive posture. He was ready for a combined Dark Knight attack—or perhaps even something worse. Whatever it might be, his armor could likely stand up to it without a scratch—still, he was cautious.

But that caution would be his downfall.

Mira had slipped into striking range directly in front of him. Crouched in a low stance, she looked up at the man with gleaming golden eyes and a smirk on her petite face.

"One more surprise, just for you!" Mira planted her legs wide and lowered her center

of gravity. She thrust her open right palm into the man's torso.

[Immortal Arts Inheritance: Waning Windmill]

A powerful wind sprang up like an explosion.

“What?!”

The air raged like a sideways tornado, engulfing the man and sending him flying to slam against the ground with each whirl.

Mira had created a whirlwind with her hands. It roared and raged like a dragon as it sped along, ravaging everything it touched. Mira's arm itself was no exception.

Does it hurt this much? Inheritance really is troublesome...

Mira glanced at her bloody arm and furrowed her brow from the intense pain.

Immortal Inheritance was special even among the Immortal Arts. Mira was strong, but even she could not suppress the aftermath of the mana expenditure that led it to hurt the user as well.

But the effects were incredible. She had braced for the pain, then unleashed wind so barbaric that, when it disappeared, it left behind a straight line of innumerable claw marks dug out of the ground.

“Ngh... Didn't expect that...”

After being tossed by the cruel winds, the man had been pushed back against the destroyed staircase. He put a hand on the edge and managed to stand up, but his expression was warped with agony as he rose.

“It looks like that one worked, hrmm?” Mira boasted as she picked up the fogged sword from the ground and tossed it behind her.

His armor was strong enough to fully block even blows from a Dark Knight. Since it had blocked Pegasus's lightning as well, it must have had some pretty strong elemental resistance. His defenses were unparalleled.

However, there was no enemy that could stand up to a Wise Man with defense alone.

Even with the hardest armor—*especially* with the hardest armor—being slammed against the ground over and over would come with unavoidable blunt trauma.

“Whoops. Seems they’ve finished things up over there.” Mira looked just in time to see Pegasus kicking and shattering the enemy’s golem with lightning-sparking legs.

“How did this happen...? Did I get too greedy and miss my chance to escape?”

The sound of the golem crumbling to pieces filled the air. The man must have been badly hurt; he gave up trying to stand and watched sidelong as the golem returned to the earth. He then turned his eyes back to Mira, in them a mix of awe and hatred.

“With so much defensive gear, one can hardly blame you for getting a little cocky,” she said.

After seizing victory, Pegasus ran over to Mira while she walked. When it saw her arm, wounded by the recoil of her spell, it panicked and spread its wings, enveloping her in healing light.

“I’m fine. Thank you,” Mira said to Pegasus. “Though this isn’t bad either.”

She picked up the man’s spirit blade with her healed arm as she glowered at the man. She tossed it behind her.

“Too cocky, huh? Maybe that’s right.”

So, Mira was equipped with healing abilities, as well. The man laughed helplessly in the face of her versatility and struggled to climb the stairs, where he picked up the jar and looked inside.

It’s not much... but it’ll have to do. I can use it as a core, at least. Time to report a change of plans.

The man placed the jar in a pouch at his hip as he considered his next move—how was he to get out of this situation? He held out his right hand, and mana began to gather in his palm. The fallen golem began to rise once again.

“What’s this? The shape is different,” Mira mused.

Now the golem was bestial rather than human. But it had no fangs, and its legs were

slim—it didn't look awfully powerful.

What's he up to? Mira wondered. As Pegasus glared at the golem warily, the golem walked on four legs toward the man.

"Recovering this is our goal, after all," he muttered. The golem stepped into the casket next to the destroyed staircase. He promptly closed the lid, picked up the casket, and staggered to standing.

"You look like you're getting ready to leave. Do you think I'll let you out of here so easily?"

The Ancient Ring Gate was surrounded by a five-meter-high slope. As he trudged toward it, Mira activated her Demon's Eye.

This is... The man was temporarily stunned. I get it. I'd better hurry. Damn, has Isuzu always had a monster like her? Is there any way I can get out of here in one piece?

The cursed power unleashed by Mira's Demon's Eye was dampened by the spirit-bolstered armor, but it still gradually seeped in and deprived the man of control over his own body.

Having realized what was happening to him, the man looked up to the sky as if in surrender. Then, he took a step forward.

"Well? If you're going to run, now's your chance," Mira said.

He pulled a silver tube off of his belt and showed it to Mira. There was no menace on his face; instead, he had the tragic composure of someone resolved to carry out a final act.

"What is that?" Mira stopped in her tracks when faced with his inscrutable determination and focused in on the tube. It was about as big as a thumb, and a long cord hung from its end.

"Let's call it a fuse." The man grinned. He pinched the cord with his fingertips and pretended to tug it as if to say, *Don't get any closer.*

"A fuse? Without explosives, it won't do much of anything."

Mira knew a bit about these sorts of things thanks to her connections—or, more accurately, because Solomon had forced her to attend a military goods showcase once.

Fuses were only threatening when combined with explosives. Mira looked the man up and down dubiously, checking to see if he had any on him.

Her reaction made his grin widen still further.

“Oh... I’ve got explosives.” He turned his eyes to the ground and clutched the fuse for emphasis before continuing, “This place is full of drops of the Spirit King’s power—and this is a spirit bomb’s fuse.”

Confidence was evident on his face; this bomb must have been especially powerful.

“A spirit bomb...?” Mira frowned and glared as she began to imagine the worst.

“Yeah. Does what it says on the tin.” His lips curled up even more as he savored Mira’s reaction and added in a provocative tone, “It’s a bomb made from either a spirit’s power or the spirit itself.”

That wasn’t just bad... it was an *atrocity*.

“This isn’t the time for jokes!” Mira yelled, outraged at those who treated the lives of spirits so lightly—as if they were mere tools.

Ecstasy crept onto the man’s face. He laughed derisively as he deliberately pulled the cord.

“Feel its power for yourself!”

Before Mira could move to stop him, he slammed the fuse against the ground. The silver tube bounced with a clang and exploded into a small firework. In an instant, Mira reflexively summoned three Holy Knights and mutated them into Holy Lords—her strongest instant defense.

As the air condensed, she could only hear the ringing in her ears as her vision was dyed white.

CHAPTER 9

THE LIGHT BLOTTED OUT even the sun, and the shockwave spread in all directions, destroying everything in the path of the blast. A shrill sound like dying screams and extreme heat wove together into a burning tidal wave.

Finally, the storm of destruction passed. Despite being in the center of it, when Mira peeked out from beneath Pegasus's wings, she was unwounded.

"Incredible... That was the Spirit King's power indeed," she muttered in awe as she checked the damage around her.

The sky remained that same perfect blue, yet her surroundings had transformed. The fallen remains of guardian spirits that had lain here and there had been erased without a trace, and the destroyed staircase had turned white. Likewise, the scorched ground beneath was white with ash.

It all gave Mira the impression that she'd been spirited away to another place.

"Drops of his power alone caused all this..."

Before Mira were her Holy Lords, also covered in ash after accomplishing their duty. These white knights held fortress-like shields in both hands to protect all behind them, but their upper halves were burned away. The ground at their heels was undamaged; not even a speck of soot fell at Mira's feet.

"You did well." Mira touched their backs gently and dismissed them. The ash covering them fell to the ground.

Suddenly, a shadow covered her surroundings, and a sudden wind whipped up the new-fallen ash like a blizzard. Pegasus used its wings to cover Mira and prevent any from touching her.

"Some timing you've got." Mira looked up at the sky expectantly from between Pegasus's wings and spotted a certain massive bird.

It was Garuda. She had summoned it far behind her in secret when the man began his

attempted escape. And it seemed her plan was successful. When Garuda descended before her, it placed the bloody casket it held on the ground and offered something in its beak to Mira.

“Oho, now this... You’ve done a fantastic job!”

It was the jar that had been placed in the pouch. It seemed Garuda had caught them both in midair.

The Chimera elite’s last resort was using a spirit bomb’s powerful explosive wind to blast himself to safety and using the strength of his armor to protect him. Judging by the blood, he’d taken quite some damage despite the armor’s attempts to resist the Spirit King’s power... but he had nevertheless successfully escaped.

Yet he had made one miscalculation: Garuda. The wounded man was unable to resist the gargantuan bird and both lost the all-important jar and sacrificed the casket to escape death.

Not to mention the spirit blade and fogged sword still lying on the ground behind her... The elite might have gotten away, but she had managed to stop him from escaping with the Spirit King’s power. With luck, this loot might lead them to more of Chimera’s secrets.

“You’ve both done wonderfully.” Mira thanked and dismissed her summons.

Then, she picked up both swords and placed them next to the casket.

Spirit blades were fine weapons, but this one obtained from the Chimera Clausen elite was a yin weapon. It had certainly come from an unwillingly sacrificed spirit; no member of Isuzu would want to use it.

What really piqued her interest was the black fog.

Fogged sword, fogged golem... and the fogged skeleton from the chapel. There was something going on here.

A spirit-devouring curse, was it?

Back at the chapel, Wasranvel had called the black fog a curse. Did that mean that someone had cursed the spirit? Or was it a phenomena with no causal relationship?

And how was Chimera Clausen able to use it?

She racked her brain, but none of the dots connected, so Mira abandoned this line of thought. What mattered most was the composition of the fog. Without that knowledge, the problem was unsolvable.

Mira turned back to the casket. It was locked. Instead of trying to force it open and possibly destroying it in the process, it would be best to leave it to a specialist.

Thinking she'd take it home, Mira tried to secure it for travel. But it seemed this casket was an item that could not be placed in the Item Box. She tried pulling the handle. It would not budge.

Should I summon Garuda again and have it carry it down? But just as the question occurred to Mira, the ashen world around her suddenly changed.

“What’s going on?!”

She whipped around in confusion. Millions of particles of light gleamed in the sky, and when she turned, a vast city resplendent with rainbows spread behind her. Ahead, a palace that sparkled like gemstones towered into the sky. It was like a land of dreams floating in outer space.

“Am I... dead?”

Who could blame her for thinking so? The motes of light ran through the sky all at once, creating countless beams. The sight was almost beyond human reckoning. This unfathomable situation gave even Mira pause. She began spinning around in circles out of confusion. But just then, a voice spoke:

“I suppose I’ve startled you. My apologies.”

With that, the palace gate opened. Behind it stood an enormous man with an awe-inspiring aura and striking appearance; he was clad in white vestments and was easily twice Mira’s size.

“What is going on here...?”

At first, Mira was puzzled. But another look at him told her all she needed to know. Her senses, her instincts, the situation... This was Spirit King Symbio Sanctius, the

ruler of all spirits.

"I witnessed all of it—the bleeding of my power, and your efforts to stop it. On my name, Symbio Sanctius, I offer you my heartfelt thanks." The Spirit King strode up to Mira and stooped down to thank her... though, even crouched, his face was still a head above the little summoner's.

The Spirit King had thanked her! Though Mira was excited, she puffed out her chest, prideful as ever. "I only did what was natural."

"What was natural, hm?" he murmured joyfully.

Mira's words had contained the implicit claim that helping spirits was the natural thing to do. The Spirit King offered a faint smile as he emitted beaming light.

"Oh, right. Your power is sealed in here. I believe I should return it to you." Mira opened the jar covered in mysterious symbols and offered it to the king. Light spewed forth. "Whoa?! My goodness..."

Mira watched, astounded, as the unstoppable current of light filled the air around them, like a waterfall flipped upside-down. Had so much power been stuffed in this tiny jar?

As soon as the current calmed, the jar shattered into sand and disappeared. Then, the lights sprang up and arced like shooting stars into the Spirit King.

"I should have expected no less from the Spirit King's power." Faced with the sight, Mira recalled the spirit bomb and chuckled to herself; she was amazed that her Holy Lords had stood up to such a blast.

"Power returned. I must thank you."

After the Spirit King absorbed all the light, and tranquility returned, the sky was spangled with stars again. Overwhelmed by all of the sights she'd seen so far, Mira simply muttered again, "I only did what was natural..."

"Of course, of course," the Spirit King grinned. He looked upon Mira with the warm fondness of a grandfather. Seeing the many spirits' blessings residing within Mira, the Spirit King added happily, "It seems you are beloved by my kin, as well." Then, as if remembering something, he added, "Oh, yes. There is a reason I've called you here: I

would like to aid you in your struggle against those evildoers.”

“Really?!” She could never have dreamed of such an offer. The man with the spirit equipment was strong, and he wielded weapons like the spirit bomb that were downright unfair. Mira imagined that he had plenty of other weapons that exploited spirits’ power, as well. How much power did Chimera Clausen conceal? Having the aid of the Spirit King himself would be a major boon in the war against them.

“I saw that you used my daughter’s power, did you not?”

“Hm...? Who?” Mira had never heard that the Spirit King had a daughter, but he spoke as if she was common knowledge.

“Sanctia. You’ve met?”

“Goodness... Just the other day, yes! But I only remember her as a weapon spirit...”

Mira had seen her as just a holy sword’s weapon spirit. Weapon spirits were just spirits that resided in weapons, and therefore essentially weapons first. That a relationship existed between Sanctia and the Spirit King was surprising... and a little befuddling. Was every spirit his child in some grand sense? After thinking about it, that seemed to make the most sense.

And yet, she was wrong.

“Do you recall the holy sword she resides in? That was fashioned from my own finger bone. That was the moment of Sanctia’s birth.” The Spirit King showed Mira his left hand. Indeed, his pinky finger looked a little short.

“A holy sword made from the Spirit King himself... That is astounding.”

It was also a much less esoteric conclusion than Mira had reached. She was amazed by both their relationship and the rarity of the holy sword itself. The apex of all spirits—perhaps equal to a god!—had created that sword. It was far beyond any of the holy or demonic swords that Mira knew of. It wasn’t just a holy sword; it was a *godly* sword. She couldn’t help her shock at this revelation.

“Normally, my spiritual power is something that humans cannot wield. But as you are already connected to my daughter, who is a part of me, you ought to be able to control some of it if you combine your power with hers.” At that, the Spirit King held out his

right hand. Mira's clothes suddenly fell from her body, as if every button and clasp had been undone.

"Eh?!" Mira gasped at the sudden sensation of being fully naked.

"You will now receive my blessing. Stand still." The Spirit King put a fingertip on Mira's chest; heat ran through her body.

She promptly stopped moving and replied, "Understood! I deeply appreciate it!"

Each spirit's blessing came with a different symbol that would be etched invisibly into the receiver's body. This one was no exception, and the Spirit King etched his symbol into Mira. But one thing was different: it extended all throughout her body from her chest, like roots spreading deep within the earth.

Mira gazed at the symbol and gasped happily, "This is really on another level..."

The Spirit King pulled his hand away. "Through this blessing, you should be able to use my power as it resides in Sanctia. It will be burdensome until you are used to it, but I trust you can manage."

Then, he held out his left hand, and Mira's clothing magically rose and covered her again.

"By the way, my daughter... Erm, how is she? Is she well?" The Spirit King straightened up and glanced down nervously. Despite his massive, awe-inspiring form, his consideration was truly that of a father.

"Rest easy. She is smiling and blessed with friends."

Mira saw no reason to mention the fact that she'd been trapped by a spirit-devouring black fog until just yesterday. That situation was resolved.

"I see. Good, good!" The Spirit King smiled in relief and added, "Thank you."

* * *

As their conversation continued, Mira recalled something. "Incidentally, I have a question for you. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Ask me anything," the Spirit King agreed sincerely.

"It's... about the fight before. That man's sword, his golem... They had the power to eat through spirits. Do you know the composition of that black fog, Your Majesty?" Mira almost brought up the fight at the chapel, but steered the question back to the Chimera Clausen man's tools as examples.

He slowly closed his eyes and replied, as if seeing into the distant past, "Indeed, I know of it. That mist is the residual emotion of oni, a hatred that lives on even after death."

"Oni? You mean like...?" Mira stuck her pointer fingers out and held them up like horns overhead.

"That's right. Oni do have two horns." The Spirit King laughed at her silly imitation, then told her of the history.

Tens of thousands of years ago, the oni had fought against spirits. Oni devoured and ravaged nature selfishly, multiplying and destroying the land over time. Due to their nature, they clashed with spirits without cease and caused trouble at every turn.

However, the spirits eventually compromised, and the species decided to live segregated from one another. But soon, the oni broke their promise and began robbing the spirits of their homes. The conflict worsened over time until it turned into all-out war between oni and spirits.

Obviously, the spirits had emerged victorious. But the ending was tragic. Great swathes of nature had been lost, and the spirits' numbers had been thinned terribly. And because he had used forbidden magic that interfered in the natural world, the Spirit King himself had been exiled from the mortal world.

As for the losers, the oni lost their food source and died out.

"But their hateful emotions live on even today as curses," the Spirit King said, wrapping up the story.

"Oni, hm? I didn't know they had such a history..." It was so long ago, and on such a scale, that Mira was astonished.

"Anyway, it's in the past now. Let us discuss the curse itself. Sanctia's power combined with mine should be able to eliminate it. Too late now, perhaps, but I'd like you to

destroy it if you happen to see it again anywhere. You will be rewarded."

"I can do that now? I swear, I will deal with it!"

It seemed she held the keys to defeat the spirit-nullifying curse. Mira rejoiced at this good news and gladly accepted the task.

* * *

The Spirit King faced Mira and said in parting, "Now, I leave my kin to you."

"Indeed. I will do all I can," she replied firmly, standing straight and meeting his gaze head-on.

My daughter has a good eye, after all, the Spirit King thought to himself. He recognized Mira's love for spirits.

He added, "Oh, by the way. Come back once the blessing has settled into you."

Those words caused a sudden change in Mira's attitude. *Once the blessing has settled into you*—that meant once she could use his power to the fullest. In stories, those words would mean that he was promising her greater power in the future.

"Goodness! I most certainly will!" she said gleefully.

"You sound a lot more enthusiastic now." The Spirit King seemed to enjoy the sudden joy that swept over her.

"You're imagining it, I'm sure. I simply love spirits." Mira feigned ignorance and puffed out her chest.

The Spirit King smiled at her confident act and gently tousled her hair. "May we meet again."

The world changed again—she had been returned to the ashen gate.

CHAPTER 10

MIRA RETURNED to the white scenery, like a winter wonderland decorated with a conspicuously bloody casket. Just as she resumed pondering how she would move it, she heard two incongruous voices behind her.

“Oh, it’s Mira!”

“There ya are, Boss!”

Mira turned to see Scorpion running over with light steps. Cat Sith was clinging to her shoulder, raising a sign that read, TOUCHING REUNION! APART FROM... ALL THIS.

“Aha, Scorpion. And Cat Sith... So, you survived?”

Mira’s words shot a hole through Cat Sith’s heart. He fell from Scorpion’s shoulder into the ash-covered ground to form a cat-shaped silhouette, his black fur now dusted white.

“Don’t be so harsh to me-ow, Ringmeowstress!”

“You dealt with the tornado, I see.” Mira picked the cat up by the scruff of his neck and lifted him from the ash.

Cat Sith shook the debris off and, as if raising an enemy’s decapitated head, raised up a placard saying, HUGE SUCCESS! “Whacked ‘em good, boss!” he said before coughing violently.

Mira patted his back and said, “Thank you. You’ve done well.” Then she dismissed him.

Cat Sith held up his sign, which now read, GIVE ME MORE CHANCES TO SHINE! His eyes were expectant, but Mira didn’t notice; she was busy welcoming the rest of the Isuzu gang. Cat Sith’s lonely mewls echoed sadly through the area.

As the Isuzu Alliance members surveyed the damage and the snow-white ashes that now covered the Ancient Ring Gate, Scorpion asked, “So, Mira, what’s the situation like?”

“It’s been a busy day.”

Mira gave them a quick summary of what happened: the Chimera Clausen knight, the spirit-devouring black fog, the theft of the Spirit King’s power, and the spirit bomb and escape.

* * *

When Mira finished her story, Scorpion was the first to speak.

“A bomb! Are you okay?”

It was a good question. A single look at their ash-covered environs would tell anyone just how powerful the explosion had been. It would be unnatural for anyone to come out unscathed from that destruction.

“I’m fine. As you can see.”

Despite Scorpion’s worries, Mira was as proud and energetic as ever. She never changed. Scorpion turned her eyes to their surroundings. All that remained on the burned ground were the striking right pillar and broken staircase of the Ancient Ring Gate.

“F-fine...?” Scorpion murmured, amazed. The white world around them was pretty at a glance, but the white of it was eerie; the longer one looked, the more uneasy one became.

“By the way, are those the swords you mentioned?” Aaron poked his head from behind Scorpion and gestured toward the man from Chimera’s two swords, which still lay next to the casket. Sinister black fog curled around them.

“Right. One is a spirit blade, and the other is a sword cursed to destroy spirits.”

“Destroy spirits, huh? So, those bastards aren’t happy with merely harassing them?” Aaron spat as he squatted before the sword and glared at the black fog from inches away.

“Oh, by the way. The casket contains a golem corpse with similar power, but it’s locked. I’d like to take it home to be examined, but I can’t lift it myself. Mind giving me a hand?” Mira’s physical strength was... that of a mage. She gazed enviously at Aaron’s

impressive biceps.

"A golem that destroys spirits, huh? Weird." Aaron sprang to his feet, seized the handle of the casket, and pulled up. He lifted it without difficulty. "Lighter than it looks. I think I can handle this just fine."

"Well done! Those muscles aren't just for show!" Mira patted Aaron's bulging arm proudly.

"Course not," he said with a smile as he hoisted the casket over his shoulder and struck a pose. It seemed he was proud of his many years of training.

"Huh? This is just a sword." Scorpion picked up the spirit blade at Aaron's feet and swung it around a little. Normally, spirit blades would leave visible signs of their status in their arc when swung. Yet the sword Scorpion picked up merely cut through the air.

"What?" Mira stared at the sword in confusion. She had witnessed the billowing flames that had erupted from it before.

The sword in Scorpion's hands was clearly a fine item of excellent craftsmanship. She was certain it was the same sword she saw earlier. But now that she looked closer, the particles of spirit power had totally disappeared from the sword.

"Indeed, it looks like any other sword now. What happened?" Mira muttered in confusion. Then her eyes turned to the black fog at her feet. It was the sword with the spirit-devouring fog.

The spirit blade and fogged sword had lain side by side until just now. Could it be that the black fog had eaten all of the spirit power inside the sword? Now that Mira thought about it, she remembered how the man had fought. Whenever he used the fogged sword, he always returned it directly to its sheath. He must have known it would affect the rest of his equipment.

"Perhaps it's because of this thing." Mira kicked the fogged sword angrily away. Spider jumped out of its path, as if trying to avoid a tainted item.

Spider glared at Mira, who responded, "Sorry, sorry." Although really, she didn't look very guilty at all.

Aaron followed the fogged sword with his eyes, looked back to the former spirit blade,

and muttered in disappointment, “So, it ate the spirit blade’s power?”

Yin or yang, he would use any items that he could. Hell, as far as Aaron was concerned, it would be a form of justice to use it against Chimera Clausen.

“Hmm, mind if I hold it?” Then, apparently realizing something, Aaron put the casket down and requested the sword from Scorpion. Deep creases appeared on his brow as he ran his eyes up and down the sword.

“What’s the matter, Aaron?” Scorpion watched as he dismantled the former spirit blade into hilt, guard, and blade. “Whoa! Cool!”

Aaron shoved the hilt and guard into her hands while he surveyed the base of the blade.

“This is... Heh. I see,” Aaron murmured with a hint of pleased surprise.

He turned around with a look of understanding and showed the group the blade. The sword that had served as foundation for the spirit blade was a one-of-a-kind special item. Unlike mass-produced, cookie-cutter swords, it had clearly been a special order crafted with care by an artisan’s hands.

Bespoke swords like this could sell for dozens of times the price of mass-produced swords. They were by no means easy to obtain. Depending on the weapon, even the hilt and guard might be made by the artisan. The most famous swords often had dozens of artisans working on a single weapon. Most one-of-a-kind swords had the artisan’s name engraved on the base of the blade.

And there was one smith who stood head and shoulders above the rest.

Aaron had discovered exactly that on the blade of this sword. The artisan’s name engraved on this blade was *Gregor*.

“They say nobody can make elemental demonic swords like this guy. And I hear he’s working in a studio in Sentopoli these days. There’s no way we can call that a coincidence, right?”

The Skyfolk man at the Citadel of Scales had claimed that Chimera’s headquarters were in Sentopoli. The sword wielded by their elite member was likewise a sword made in Sentopoli. Something was definitely going on there.

"If an elite from Chimera had that sword, then... does that mean Gregor gave it to them?" Scorpion asked.

The problem was the position of that blacksmith. Was he working with Chimera, or had he simply sold it to them? If he was working with them, then Chimera Clausen's weapons would both be those of a master artisan *and* imbued with the power of spirits. In other words, their headquarters might very well be full of warriors just as powerful as the one Mira had fought.

"I think it'd be fastest to ask the man himself," Aaron answered, gazing at the sword enviously. "They say Gregor forges swords to fit the user, and he only works for his closest friends."

It wasn't easy to earn recognition and a sword from Gregor. Many warriors dreamed of getting a sword with his name on it.

"I see... So, this Gregor might be a close friend of the man I just fought." After looking again at the signature on the sword, Mira turned her eyes to the sky, as if following the trail of the Chimera man who'd been blown away by the bomb.

If the bespoke sword in Aaron's hands had been made for the man she had just fought, that meant that, if they traced the sword back to its maker, they might get inside info on a Chimera Clausen elite.

"I sense an impending mission..." Mira murmured to herself.

The Chimera man might have escaped, but they had secured a vital clue. Perhaps it would even be enough to drag Chimera Clausen out of the shadows. Indeed, that was everyone's hope.

Thus the Isuzu Alliance's current mission ended in success.

CHAPTER 11

AFTER LEAVING THE ILLUSORY CORRIDOR, Mira and the gang boarded the wagon and began their journey back to Isuzu HQ. Spider's group stayed behind to investigate the corridor, just in case.

As the hour grew late, the four in the wagon began an impromptu strategy meeting. In particular, they discussed what they would do after they delivered information to HQ. Everyone was more than willing to press on to Sentopoli, and they had a spirited conversation as they planned out who would search where.

Just then, a familiar ringing tone sounded in the wagon.

"Wha?! What's going on?!" Scorpion's tail shot up as she peered all around. Finding nothing, she hid in Snake's robe. Could it be that she was scared of loud noises?

"That sound..." Mira moved toward the sound's source and opened the closet door. The ringing grew louder, and Scorpion's tail began to twitch madly.

"When did this get here?"

Mira opened a box in the back of the closet and found a black communicator inside, just like the one in her room in the Linked Silver Towers. Its shape was similar to a telephone, so it was pretty intuitive for former players. Mira picked up the receiver.

The annoying tone finally stopped, and a familiar voice echoed through the wagon. It was someone Mira knew well: King Solomon.

"Hey, you finally picked up! Hiii, can you hear me?"

Scorpion peeked out of Snake's robe and squealed, "Huh? Wha?! Who was that?!"

"A communicator, huh? Awesome. Bet that set you back." The receiver in Mira's hand, the voice that belonged to nobody present—Aaron connected these two pieces of information instantly. It seemed he knew not just what they were, but also how *expensive* they were.

"Huh? I hear a lot of voices out there. Heeey!"

"Yes, yes, I hear you. And I have some members of Isuzu present." Mira answered as she turned around and looked upon her guests.

"Yeah, okay, gotcha. Roger that, you're working together right now. Uh, hi, everyone. I'm... Agent S, and I help Mira out once in a while. Nice to, uh, meet you. Sort of." Solomon fake-introduced himself with a flippant fib.

Aaron laughed while Snake explained the communicator to her cowering partner.

Mira threw the closet open and jumped up to sit on the second level. She kicked her legs back and forth as she lay back and relaxed.

"So, what do you want?"

"Well, remember that thing that happened? The guy who got mad and attacked you?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

The guy had been Caerus of Alcait Academy, armed head to toe in yin spirit equipment. Hard to forget, especially since she'd just fought someone similarly armed.

"Wow, you do? I'm kinda surprised." It was rare for Mira to give such a quick answer; she usually had a bad memory. "Well... great. Makes things easier. So, we found out where he got the stuff."

"Aha! That was fast. Let's hear it, then!" exclaimed Mira.

The yin spirit equipment was almost certainly connected to Chimera Clausen. This information was likely to bring them even closer to their target.

"Wow, you're more eager than I expected. Okay, so basically, I'm gonna tell you everything in chronological order because I want you to know how hard I worked on this."

With that preface, Solomon shared the results of his interrogation of Caerus and his parents.

First off, the full set of spirit equipment had all been bought from separate merchants.

There was no connection between the vendors, but Solomon's people had traced their suppliers a few layers back. Everything pointed to three merchant caravans. Shockingly, that was where one shared trait had been found: they were all under the umbrella of Melville Commerce.

Melville Commerce was a long-standing firm that specialized in traveling merchants. Until ten or so years ago, they had been more or less a middle-of-the-road firm within the Merchants' Guild. However, in recent years they had expanded operations to become a firm that rivaled the Great Three of Commerce.

Melville Commerce mainly traded in weapons and armor. When Solomon's investigators began to dig in, several suspicious details emerged. Somehow, some of the equipment they traded was *becoming* spirit equipment in transit. Over half of the goods in one particular transaction had been affected. But when they were delivered to the merchant caravans, they were treated as normal equipment and gradually laundered into spirit equipment during the journey with no one the wiser.

According to Solomon, this was a closely guarded secret of the traveling merchants. It would have stayed hidden, too, if he hadn't already suspected something and probed deeper.

"So, yeah, Melville Commerce is pretty suspicious," Solomon summarized. He also added, "I was thinking it might be related to Chimera Clausen."

"Indeed, it seems likely," Mira answered and told him all of the information she'd obtained in return. She gave him plenty of details on what she'd seen at the Citadel of Scales and Illusory Corridor.

This could be seen as a leak regarding a top-secret mission, but Aaron and Snake didn't try to stop her. Scorpion decided to follow their lead and kept her mouth shut too.

"Huh. Yeah, I'd say it's likely, too." Solomon sounded convinced. "Sentopoli is not far from Melville Commerce's HQ, either—just in the neighboring country. Sounds like a cut-and-dry guilty verdict to me."

"Oho. They're in neighboring countries? They get full marks for suspiciousness."

"Right? They're stationed in the Roslein Duchy, where business is booming. Almost all of the nobles there are also merchants, and they're in the middle of a power struggle. The closest to earning the title of duke is Elvis Melville, head of Melville Commerce.

That's a mouthful, right?"

His facetious comment echoed in the wagon.

Aaron replied with a chuckle, "Very interesting." A company that had suddenly jumped up in the ranks, Chimera Clausen lurking in their shadow—it was certainly quite suspicious.

"Is that all you wanted?" Mira asked.

"Yep, that's it."

"That's rare. I expected you to load me up with chores again."

After all, he'd gone through the trouble of setting up a communicator in her wagon and calling her. Mira had expected him to bring her some more trouble. She found herself almost disappointed that it wasn't the case. Almost.

"This is more like a warning. So far, we only know that Chimera and Melville *might* be connected. It's unclear who's really in charge. If you took down Chimera and they happened to be Melville's peons, Melville might just cut their losses and find someone else to do their dirty work."

"Hrmm. A game of cat and mouse."

Melville would be weakened if they lost Chimera Clausen—but if they had created Chimera, then they would most likely still have the technology and knowledge. They'd just create more shadowy organizations over and over until they themselves were destroyed.

"Now, if the opposite is true," Solomon continued, "they might lose some of their revenue, but Melville Commerce is big enough to live without a parent network by now. Heck, they might just see it as good PR to be rid of Chimera Clausen. Meanwhile, they've learned everything they need from Chimera, so they might end up picking up where their shadowy bosses left off."

That was certainly possible. If they were working together, defeating one alone would be meaningless. Both Chimera Clausen and Melville Commerce had to be cut down if they wanted to destroy them at the roots.

"Right. In short, we must confirm their connection and crush them once and for all," Mira said.

"Exactly."

"Still... How do we prove any of this?" Mira flopped back and lay down in the closet, burying her face in a blanket. Though she'd asked the question, she didn't plan to think too hard about it; that sounded like Solomon's work to her.

"I think infiltrating them is the best way. Look for records of transactions with Chimera, account books, evidence of spirit equipment manufacturing... Find any of that, and I'd say you have your evidence."

"Do you think they'll be so easy to find?" Mira asked with receiver in hand as she wrapped herself up in the blanket like a bagworm cocoon.

"Dunno. I think it's worth trying, though."

"Hrmm. Perhaps you're right," Mira agreed, her head barely poking out of the blanket. Aaron and the gang watched her relax in total ease, legs still kicking all the while.

"Aaand, if you happen to find evidence, I'd like you to send it to Ebatesse Commerce. I'll let them know ahead of time."

"Leaving commerce problems to the commerce giants, eh?"

"Pretty much. You won't have trouble fighting Chimera Clausen even if they're armed, but the head of Melville Commerce is next in line to be Grand Duke of Roslein. The whole *country* would be your enemy. This has huge ramifications for the future, so we need to make their relationship with Chimera crystal clear. Then, we'll have Ebatesse—second in line to the title—on our side."

Solomon was right; no matter how just the reason, fighting an entire country was not ideal. Not to mention, attacking another country was forbidden thanks to the temporary non-aggression pact. Using the Isuzu Alliance's military power to subdue Melville Commerce could be seen as breaching the treaty, and that would put them in a dangerous position.

However, Ebatesse Commerce—a faction *within* the same country—could corner them without military power as long as they had clear-cut evidence. And in helping Mira's

allies successfully corner Melville, Ebates would eliminate their own top rival, all but guaranteeing themselves the seat of Grand Duke.

"I see... And they'll owe *us* as well." Mira smirked in the darkness of the closet. She was beginning to see Solomon's real goal here.

"Ooh, do you *think*? I've kinda known him for a while. Figured this was a good opportunity."

"You're awfully frank. Have you forgotten that I have three companions present?"

"No worries, no worries. After all, I'm only the mysterious info provider Agent S, right? I'm sure they don't mind." Solomon's playful voice resounded through the wagon. Mira sat up in the closet and looked at her friends' faces.

"It peeves me that he's using us, but we need his connections," Aaron said. "And if we wanna get Melville Commerce out of the picture, we couldn't ask for a better ally than Ebates."

The Isuzu Alliance was an outsider and ostensibly a goodwill organization. Ebates was a merchant firm with great sway in their homeland. The latter would clearly be much more influential with the same evidence.

Snake silently expressed her agreement as well. Scorpion simply looked confused.

"Seems so," Mira agreed. "In that case, we can leave the rest to them as long as we get a hold of evidence, yes?" she asked the receiver and nestled back into her blanket.

"Of course. Don't you worry; I'll make sure you can focus on kicking Chimera butt," Solomon declared. Even through the communicator, his confidence came through loud and clear. His voice was full of a dignity befitting his great status.

"Fine. Then we will search for this so-called Melville Commerce. Ah, one more thing." Mira looked down to the paper she'd taken from her pouch and spoke in code. "K 2132, 6, 18 is their leader."

The letters and numbers were the first initial of a Wise Man and the date they'd arrived in this world. She had communicated to him that Isuzu's founder was Kagura.

"...Wow. Okay. Got it." It seemed he'd understood. This time, his surprise was plain

through the communicator. “I’ll see if I can do anything about that on my end, but you keep up the good work. Anyway, been nice chatting. I’ll call you if anything changes.” With that one-sided goodbye, he hung up.

It seemed this revelation had provided him with new inspiration for their overarching strategy. Quick to think, quick to act. That was very Solomon.

Mira returned the receiver and closed the box before peeking her head out of the closet. “I presume you all heard that. Apologies for making promises on your behalf.”

“It’s fine. The deal is acceptable,” Snake said.

“Yeah, I think it’s fine,” Aaron added. “Now that we’ve decided they’re suspicious, we can’t exactly leave them alone.”

They seemed to be fully on board—they obviously believed the information was likely accurate. It seemed the two had some idea of just who was on the other side of that communicator.

The biggest hint of Agent S’s identity was the communicator itself. Mira had implied that it had been put in without her knowledge. Who would do something like that, and with such an expensive item? That narrowed down the list of suspects considerably.

Besides, even nobility would have trouble tracing the history of a single product all the way back to its origins. Who would both have connections with merchants *and* benefit from their leader being in charge?

And Mira *was* an envoy from the Kingdom of Alcait.

“Although it still ticks me off that he’s pulling our strings,” Aaron muttered.

Solomon hadn’t used his real name, but he also didn’t seem to be too keen on hiding his identity; in fact, he had at times seemed to be teasing them with it. Solomon was making sure not just Ebatesse Commerce, but Isuzu as well owed him some favors. But that was not a major burden for Isuzu. After all, they had been given a stake to drive into the enemy’s heart. Peeved or not, they would happily grasp the weapon offered.

“Sentopoli and Roslein. We have two destinations now,” Mira murmured as she hopped down from the closet’s second level and closed the door. Frankly, she didn’t care about things like favors and debts. She simply saw this as another line on the list

of places she'd need to investigate.

Aaron chuckled at Mira's total lack of concern. "Yeah. How about we split up?"

The four began their strategy meeting again, armed with this new information.

CHAPTER 12

IMMEDIATELY UPON THEIR RETURN to the lake-bound Isuzu Alliance headquarters, Mira and the gang met with Uzume to report on their mission.

Uzume sat at the other side of a large table in a Japanese-style room as she listened to their recounting. She looked Mira dead in the eyes.

“So, if we look just at the tangible results, you failed. Maybe it was unavoidable given the situation, but it has always been a bad habit of yours—uh, I mean, *Danblf’s*—to get carried away against strong enemies. Maybe you... inherited that from him.”

“Urk...”

“I bet you even bantered with him like when you fought Leviard the PKer, right?”

“Ummm... Just a little...”

The spirit bomb had been overwhelming, so it was understandable that she’d let him escape. But if she had been more wary to begin with, it might never have come to that. Kagura knew her well enough to point out Mira’s bad habits, even if indirectly. Mira looked down like a sad kitten.



"Still, he would've been too much for anyone but you, so... whatever. You brought *these* instead of him?" Uzume directed her gaze toward the casket and black sword that had been in the Chimera elite's possession.

"Right. This spirit-devouring oni's curse may be the source of Chimera's power. I believe it's worth investigating."

Spirits were extremely powerful beings, too strong to be hunted so easily. But Chimera Clausen had hunted them successfully so many times now. Perhaps their secret, the thing that gave them an advantage over spirits, was that black fog. If Isuzu could figure out how it worked, perhaps they could devise countermeasures.

"Oni, huh? Now this is getting crazy." Uzume bent back and stared at the ceiling.

Mira told her what she'd heard from the Spirit King. It was a part of history that was not present in the history books or oral traditions.

"I was surprised, too," Mira said with feeling as she thought back on the tale.

But Aaron, Scorpion, and Snake were less surprised by the oni than the fact that Mira had gained a direct audience with the Spirit King. He was a grand being that could stand with the gods. Only two people in recorded history had spoken with him, and that was only for a short time during an ancient war.

One of them was the leader of the humans at the time who led the battle alongside the Spirit King, the legendary King Hannibal Ex Earthkra. The other was ancient hero Forsetia, who had channeled the Spirit King's power and acted as his vessel to defeat the king of the monsters.

Nobody had ever met with the Spirit King before or after. If what Mira said was true, this was a historical event!

But Mira herself had only commented that she was "surprised." Uzume herself didn't dwell on it much either, instead focusing on the oni. The others waited in stunned silence while they finished their baffling conversation.

* * *

They were now only waiting on a report from the Isuzu members who had gone to the Garrison's Vault. Ideally *they* would have captured an elite, but no one was sure.

Mira's team shared the information they had received from the mysterious Agent S. As they had returned long before the other teams and had nothing else to do, they would use the new intel to begin a second mission the next day.

The group made their decision: Mira and Aaron would investigate Chimera's base and the owner of the former spirit blade in Sentopoli, while Scorpion and Snake would infiltrate Roslein.

After that, they acted fast. The four temporarily dispersed. Three went to the business district to make their own preparations. Mira had little need for supplies; instead, she spent a long evening learning how to use Sanctia in the courtyard.

* * *

The next day, Mira, Aaron, Scorpion, and Snake accepted their new missions and took flight, heading west from the Isuzu Alliance headquarters.

Most of the western side of the continent was a wasteland, desperately lacking in greenery. But in exchange, it was blessed with ample mineral resources, drawing just as many people and as much industry as any other place.

After a full day of flying over the territory of Ozstein, one of the Three Great Kingdoms at the base of the mountain range, the Garuda-drawn wagon made an inconspicuous landing among the foothills of Roslein.

Flying cooped up in such a stuffy wagon with so many people was tiring in its own right, so they needed a break. But this was also the spot where Mira would part ways with Scorpion and Snake.

"Well, we'd better get going!" Scorpion said.

"Right. Do your best," Mira replied.

"Good luck out there," Aaron added.

"Leave it to us," Snake said shortly.

After saying their goodbyes before the wagon, they stretched, donned their adventurer outfits, and strode off into the night. If all went according to plan, Scorpion and Snake would infiltrate Roslein before dawn.

After seeing them off, Mira and Aaron began making dinner. Of course, Aaron did all of the cooking. Mira simply summoned a Holy Knight to act as a lookout and handed Aaron the food she felt like eating. She retired knowing she'd fulfilled her duties.

After eating, Mira lay on her futon in the wagon while Aaron quickly fell asleep in the driver's seat, too tired to enjoy its excellent view.

* * *

When dawn came, Mira and Aaron continued on toward Sentopoli. After about half a day of flying, night encroached upon the crimson sky and a large city came into view on the wasteland's horizon. Beyond it, the vast ocean reflected the sky in its gentle ripples.

They were less than ten kilometers away, so they landed the wagon in an inconspicuous place. After a moment's thought, Mira decided to summon Guardian Ash.

A red magic circle rose into the air and expanded, and a gray holy beast in the form of a bear appeared. The bear was as big as the wagon, with extremely large claws and fangs. It gazed at Mira with gentle eyes.

"Ash! You are as impressive as ever," Mira said to her friend, who had not seen her in thirty years. She put a hand on the beast twice her size.

The bear whipped around with startling speed and began licking Mira's cheek. Soon, it had accepted Mira's request to pull the wagon the rest of the way. Bears are much faster than they appear; they reached the city in under an hour.

The mercantile country Sentopoli was still a growing province. Its only city was its capital of the same name, but its vitality rivaled that of the Three Great Kingdoms. The unwalled city was still developing; many half-built structures could be seen in the surrounding wasteland.

Broad, four-lane roads passed through the town, all full of traffic from merchants and adventurers alike. Mira's wagon joined the flow and followed the crowds into the city. Sentopoli had neither gate nor walls; it simply had large guard posts at the sides of the road.

The people passing by gazed in fascination at Guardian Ash, but despite all the attention the bear gathered, Mira's wagon got through the security checkpoint

without issue.

Soon, Mira and Aaron watched their surroundings in amazement from the driver's seat. Sentopoli seemed... *modern*. Put simply, it was tall. Before their eyes was a sea of buildings more than five stories high.

The city was perfectly divided into organized districts, all connected by a web of major and minor streets. In the center, many storefronts crowded together. Inns surrounded the downtown area, and further out were smaller-scale shops.

Mira checked their surroundings and looked at the map in Aaron's hands. She was astounded by the scale, speed of growth, and incomprehensible jumble of modern reality and fantasy all around her.

Noting her astonishment, Aaron took the reins and asked, "Something the matter, Little Miss Mira? Confused by what you see?"

"Ah... Well, erm, I suppose. I'm surprised such cities exist," Mira said, gawking at the surroundings. Before her was a cityscape quite unlike the orthodox fantasy she knew, yet up above was that same night sky.

"It threw me for a loop when I first came here, too. This is just what I've heard, but apparently, they modeled this place off the country of Atlantis."

"Goodness. Atlantis?!" Mira was surprised, but it made sense.

Across the sea from the Earth Continent where Mira currently resided was the Ark Continent, another major land mass. It contained many dungeons for veteran adventurers, along with the largest nations players had formed: the Kingdom of Atlantis to the north, and the smaller Nirvana Empire to the south.

Atlantis had attracted lots of players like Mira—it was no surprise that modern technology was fashionable there. Now that she looked at Sentopoli through that lens, she could see hints of what a modern Atlantis might look like now.

They must be having quite the time over there.

Mira had been acquainted with many of Atlantis's top players. She opened her Friends List as she thought back on that time. Noticing that the names there were white, she smiled and looked upward again.

Mira gazed vacantly until she spotted faint stars in the sky, their light almost drowned out by the streetlights around her. She grinned wryly; even in this world, it was hard to see stars from the city.

Sentopoli was enormous. Each of the districts had one-way main streets, alternating in direction between districts. The ground, paved with flat stone, was engraved with arrows at regular intervals indicating the direction of traffic. According to Aaron, it was confusing at first, but once you got used to it, it was easy, since there was no oncoming traffic.

The wagon proceeded a while under Aaron's guidance until they arrived at his preferred lodgings. It was an eight-story structure that looked like a Showa-era hotel. Immediately next to it was another inn built like a Rococo-style palace. The incongruous sight seemed like a cultural relic of the central city, even if they were still functional places of business. Upon closer inspection, this whole area seemed to be a fifty-fifty mix of the two distinct styles.

While she gazed at the sights as if she were in a theme park, Mira ordered Ash to proceed into the underground parking garage. Soon they checked into an inn with an odd name: Epicurean Excess.

The two chose to share one large room to make planning easier. As soon as they settled in, discussion of the next day began. They agreed to visit Gregor's studio the next morning—they couldn't very well show up this late at night.

That decided, Aaron left for the second-floor dining hall in search of food and drink. Mira made her way to the giant bath and enjoyed scrubbing herself clean for the first time in days... as well as savoring the sight of her fellow bathers.

With heart and soul refreshed, she departed the bath and arrived at the second-floor dining hall. She surveyed the room with a deep sigh.

"What a peculiar inn this is."

"Dining hall" didn't do it justice; it was a full food court like one might find in a train station. It was truly an odd sight to see so many restaurants *inside* a hotel.

Mira knew most places simply provided a bed and a single style of food. But this place had entirely delegated the cuisine. As a result, the price of an overnight stay had been particularly low, and the customers could eat whatever they felt like, as well as order

drinks from specialized bars.

What do I feel like eating tonight? Omurice sounds good... Or maybe Hamburg steak. Fried chicken and katsudon sound good too... They even have deep-fried skewers and liquor. Ooh, and a packed lunch shop! What a mouthwatering selection!

Mira stepped into the line of restaurants bustling with people and feasted her eyes on each store's displays, consulting her stomach all the while. After she'd looked around the dozens of restaurants, Mira finally picked one and stepped through the curtain.

"Welcome!" an employee called out jovially.

Mira stood in front of the counter and pointed at the menu item she had her eye on. "I'd like the large teriyaki double cheeseburger meal, please. And melon soda for my drink. Oh, and ketchup for the fries, please."

"Understood, miss! Will you be eating inside today?"

Mira had chosen the king of junk food: a burger joint. Former players had to be behind this.

Peering around the nostalgic-looking interior, Mira replied, "I think I shall," and paid for her meal.

She received an order number and sat down at a window seat. The eyes of the other customers followed her as she went. Perhaps their interest was piqued by the sight of such a lovely young woman ordering junk food. The majority of the patrons here were adventurers, and their curious eyes were drawn to her fine lips—surely unable to fit a burger between them—then to the fair skin of her upper chest, which would make any sauce that dripped onto it all the more conspicuous... and finally to her glossy silver hair.

But Mira remained ignorant of their gazes, too busy rejoicing over this rare opportunity to enjoy proper junk food.

Before long, a staff member brought the meal she'd ordered over on a tray. It wasn't quite what she expected; instead of being wrapped in paper, the burger and fries were on real plates. The drink was also served in a large glass. It seemed this hamburger shop was fancier than she'd anticipated.

Mira wasted no time; she plucked the hamburger off the plate and chomped down. It was bigger than her mouth, but the taste took her home for a nostalgic few moments.

This is it! That's the exact flavor! Mira smiled in momentary bliss, kicking her legs back and forth unconsciously as she moaned in pleasure. Unbothered by the sauce on her lips, Mira stuffed her cheeks full of burger—devouring not just that familiar flavor, but the memories it revived.

While at a glance she might have seemed like a refined young woman, Mira overflowed with innocent charm as she happily chowed down.

Perhaps it was because so many eyes were fixed on her. For as long as she ate at this burger joint, business boomed.

CHAPTER 13

AFTER SPENDING THEIR FIRST NIGHT in the mercantile city-state of Sentopoli, Mira and Aaron ate breakfast and promptly departed for Gregor's studio in the city.

They were off to squeeze the smith for details on the sword possessed by the Chimera Clausen elite.

It seemed Aaron had visited this blacksmith a few times before, as he already knew the location. Mira followed him there, looking all around the cityscape in deep curiosity as they went by. She was truly like a country bumpkin.

"Little Miss Mira! Don't get lost, now," Aaron turned and warned Mira, who was currently plastered to a storefront window display.

Even in the morning—or perhaps *because* it was morning—Sentopoli was bustling with activity. If they became separated, it would be impossible to find Mira amid the crowd. Aaron kept turning to look for her as he went. But every time he turned, he realized that space had opened between them, even when he adjusted his stride to her pace. Each time, Mira would give a token apology, but she showed no signs of remorse.

The next time Mira jogged to catch up with him, Aaron offered his right hand and a slight grin. "You really are gonna get lost. Do you want me to hold your hand?"

"Nh... I'm fine. I'm just fine!"

Holding hands to avoid getting lost... Mira shuddered at the unbearable indignity of such a thing, and chose instead to stay close.

* * *

Gregor's studio was deep in the city, near the coast. The neatly defined districts were easy to navigate. As the pair proceeded between the tall buildings, they reached a precipice lined with a steel fence.

Beyond the fence was the other face of Sentopoli.

Sentopoli's coastline, the westernmost point of the continent, was originally a cliff three hundred meters high. But what Mira witnessed today was something quite different: a set of man-made terraces in the shape of a staircase, each twenty meters tall. Each step of the staircase was packed with residential homes and small shops.

The duo had previously been in a city built to receive adventurers and other guests. Up ahead was a city for the citizens of Sentopoli.

"This view never ceases to amaze me." Aaron stopped at the fence, turned right, and continued on while gazing at the ocean.

"Stunning..."

Mira was wowed by the sight before her. The terraced district ahead had a much more subdued color scheme than the gaudy, towering metropolis behind her. It was truly the image of a fantasy city. Previously a cliff over the harbor, this area was even dotted with trees, adding spots of color to the picturesque scene. Seeing it like this felt like a miracle to the summoner, who had seen it long ago in its original state.

The lowest level was especially vast; it was home to an enormous port where many ships were moored, countless garages, and a grand wholesale market.

The faraway ends of the terraced city had been left as a shorter cliff, creating a clean divide between city and sea. Mira had no idea how they'd leveled this land so beautifully, but the incredible sight of it was proof that they had the ability to expand even further.

They followed the fence-lined road along the cliff until they arrived at a staircase that would drop them into the lower city.

Mira descended the beautifully sculpted stone walkway. Suddenly, the air seemed to change. She turned and looked upward; only blue sky and white clouds dotted the expanse. The colorful city above was no longer visible.

* * *

Aaron continued to guide Mira down until they reached Gregor's studio. For the preeminent smith of demonic swords, the space was surprisingly humble.

They heard the sound of metal striking metal. White smoke rose lazily into the sky.

Seeing the brick building, barely bigger than a normal house, Mira said, “I expected it to be as big as a Union building, but it’s quite compact.”

“Right, yeah? But this is just a piece of it. He’s got a hundred of these little workshops scattered all over the continent.”

“My word!”

According to Aaron, there were a wide variety of materials that could be used to forge demonic swords. In some cases, materials could only be obtained in certain regions. Gregor had built studios in countries all over the continent and staffed them with well-trained apprentices to manage each one. Some of these apprentices ranked among the top hundred craftsmen on the continent, so it was clear that Gregor was a superb teacher.

The man himself currently resided in Sentopoli, where he simultaneously trained apprentices and put his own skill to use.

“Makes me wanna order one from him myself...” Aaron muttered as he waited for a pause in the ringing strikes of the anvil to knock on the door.

A few seconds later, the door opened, and a young Galidian man with a soot-soiled leather apron appeared. “Hello there! What brings you here today?”

Aaron took a look at the man, then peered around him into the workshop and asked, “Is old man Gregor in?”

“No, I’m sorry. My master received a request for a bespoke item the other day, so he’s holed up somewhere working on the plans.”

The young man seemed to be Gregor’s apprentice. He explained that his master only took requests for swords from very close friends. When he accepted such a request, he took his job very seriously and would create a totally unique sword. He would relocate to a secret base he’d set up somewhere and plan the sword exhaustively until it was a perfect match for the hands of its wielder-to-be.

Mira and Aaron of course inquired as to where the secret base was, but the apprentice responded that if he knew, it wouldn’t be much of a secret; all they knew was that it was in a place with a nice view somewhere outside—though not far from—the city. Gregor apparently valued the spot for its immersion in nature, but none of the

apprentices knew where it might be.

"Honestly, I have no idea at all when he might come back," he finished with a somewhat troubled grin.

While Gregor was out working on requests, his apprentices were left to run the place without him. They also received no instruction, so problems were common, and they never knew when he'd return.

"Damn, all right. Sorry to bother you while you're busy."

"Not at all! I'm sorry I couldn't help you more." After bowing in apology, the young man returned to the workshop. Before long, they heard the pounding of the anvil once more.

"Man, this timing couldn't be any worse..." Aaron grinned helplessly at their bad luck.

It was rare for Gregor to accept such one-of-a-kind weapon requests. And if he'd received it just the other day, they could imagine it might be a long time indeed before Gregor returned.

"Then I suppose we'll just have to search for him," Mira said.

"Fair enough. I've still got stuff to do, so how about we split up?"

They hadn't only come to Sentopoli in search of Gregor, after all. They also had a tip that Chimera's base was in the country.

Gregor had seemed the easier one to locate, but if he wasn't there, then they would have to search for him as well. Fortunately, they had a few hints. He was outside of the city, but not *too* far from it. And wherever he was, it had a nice view.

"You can fly using your summoning magic, right?" Aaron asked, handing the cloth-bound former spirit blade to Mira. "Mind if I leave the search for Gregor to you? That's a lot of ground to cover for one man's legs."

"Fair. I will see it done." Mira accepted this task, put the sword into her Item Box, and summoned Pegasus.

"Whoa, so this is the holy beast Pegasus? It's just as extraordinary as I remember."

Faced with Mira's solemn beast, Aaron murmured excitedly. It seemed he'd met a Pegasus before. However, Mira's was even more awe-inspiring.

"Isn't it? I think so, too," Mira said, proudly puffing out her chest. Pegasus neighed in agreement.

"Good luck. I'll work my connections and see what I can do."

"Right. Good luck to you, as well." With that, Mira mounted Pegasus and took flight in search of Gregor.

Aaron watched in amazement as Pegasus lifted off before leaving in search of some old acquaintances that might have a lead on their elusive smith.

The hunt was on.

* * *

From a bird's-eye view, the city of Sentopoli was plainly divided between an eastern European fantasy-like stone-and-lumber residential district and a newer, Rococo-style business district. The raw scale of it was so grand that it was hard to believe this was all new. Twenty years was a short time for a nation, yet it rivaled the capitals of the longest-standing kingdoms out there.

One almost had to wonder if human hands alone could build something so grand in so little time.

After taking off from the residential district, Mira flew north. Below, she could see the five-story buildings housing various shops. Larger shopping centers were interspersed here and there, and there were even some unique brick-built constructions.

The business district was overflowing with people and products alike. On the perimeter, inns lined the streets. Mira even saw another Starry Villa, the Japanese-style ryokan inn where she'd once stayed in Silverside.

I wonder if it's any different?

She managed to quell her curiosity and left the skies above the town, shaking off her regret. Yet she still hoped beyond hope that she could find Gregor quickly, so she could

make time for shopping after.

Mira began to circle the outskirts of Sentopoli. Small groves in the wasteland, green lakesides, taller hills with panoramic views, cliffs overlooking the ocean—she paid special attention to places where it seemed one might be able to be “immersed in nature.”

* * *

Hours passed. Sunset encroached on the city, and the sun melted into the western horizon over the sea, painting the sky a vibrant red. The clouds were lit on only one side, crimson bleeding into gray.

It was as if the sky were a picture of Sentopoli itself.

As night approached, the business district grew gradually brighter while the residential district retained only the minimum street lighting necessary. The city really was a mysterious place of two opposite extremes; the effect was so stark, it was almost funny.

Mira watched from the sky as she began her final circuit. Though the business district was filled with light even at night, the outlying wilderness was dark. If any light were to appear there, it would surely be the work of a human—so Mira prayed that she might see Gregor lighting a campfire or something.

Her prayers went unanswered; there was not a single glimmer in the wilderness. Wheeling around under the starry sky, she gave up and returned to Sentopoli. Mira looked at the resplendent business district below and suddenly felt a bit flustered. Where was the inn they’d checked into? But then she caught sight of a familiar design.

It was the sign of the Adventurers’ Guild Union, bearing both the Mages’ and Warriors’ Guilds’ marks. The sign hung on a large white five-story building. From the air, she could see that adventurers thronged endlessly in and out.

It seemed they were *busy* tonight.

A thought struck Mira. Supposedly, Gregor was head and shoulders above the rest when it came to making demonic swords. He’d have to be sort of a celebrity among the adventurer crowd here, wouldn’t he? Perhaps someone would remember meeting him outside of town. Heck, even if they’d only passed by him, that would narrow down

a direction at least.

With that thought, Mira promptly ordered Pegasus to alight on the roof.

CHAPTER 14

MIRA JUMPED OFF the roof of the building and landed lightly on her feet, then plunged into the crowd of adventurers with complete nonchalance.

Adventurers who had finished their work for the day strolled the street in front of the building. Up above, the stars were muted by the bright streetlights. Though the building looked modern, the people streaming in and out of it all looked like they belonged in a fantasy world. Though it was an odd sight at first, it became fun to watch before long.

While the crowd gawked at the girl who had fallen from the sky, Mira slipped through the door.

The first-floor hall was wide with many couches, and was used as a reception area and waiting room. In front of the entrance was a large staircase with windows and signs for guidance on either side.

Most Union buildings were reminiscent of public offices, and this building's style only amplified that impression.

Mira smiled at the adventurers obediently waiting on the couches and chatting with each other as she stepped up to the directory.

Oho. It's bigger on the inside.

According to the sign, the second floor was the Warriors' Guild, the third was the Mages' Guild, the fourth was for sale of goods, and the fifth was an infirmary. The sales and infirmary floors especially were far bigger than those of the Karanak Adventurers' Guild Union.

Given the number of people here, I suppose it's necessary, Mira thought as she surveyed the hall once more. As she was making her way to the stairs, she overheard adventurers discussing something.

Apparently, a Deadeye Scorpion had appeared in the valley to the southeast. The guild was gathering a hunting team to deal with it.

Deadeye Scorpion, hrmm? That's the strongest monster around here. I think it used to pop up once a week...? But it's anyone's guess now.

Mira thought back on those days. The Deadeye Scorpion spawned once a week *and* dropped valuable materials. It was a reasonably formidable foe. Or at least that was her memory of it; in this world, it seemed dangerous enough to send hunting parties out.

Yet based on what she'd heard as she walked, they had found some capable adventurers to deal with it. Mira decided her assistance would not be necessary and began climbing the stairs.

She paused with her foot on the first step. Gregor was a swordsmith. Even among adventurers, the Warriors' Guild would perhaps be more knowledgeable. Mira climbed to the second floor.

* * *

Despite its name, the Warriors' Guild was awfully diverse.

Mira had expected it to be overflowing with burly men with stubbled faces hoisting large axes. She was surprised as she looked around the room; out of forty or fifty warrior-class adventurers, only two or three matched her expectations.

Handsome knights who might elicit the squeals of women, taciturn swordsmen, lightly armored dagger-wielders—even lancers clad in magical girl outfits—it was a mixed crowd indeed. Mira had also expected to find a lot of hot-blooded folk hooting and hollering, but it was far quieter up here than in the first-floor hall. And given the interior design, it really was like a government office.

...What Mira didn't realize was that the place *had* been much louder until she'd suddenly appeared.

Mira reconsidered her mental image of a “warrior” as she looked around, searching for any shrewd adventurers. Some of them might know Gregor or even have received a sword from him. Mira locked eyes with adventurers here and there. Why were so many people staring?

Hrmm. I suppose it's rare for a mage to have business here. Unfortunate, Mira decided, but nothing she could do about it. She was beginning to get used to being the center

of attention, so she pressed on in search of any knowledgeable swordsmen.

"Huh? Mira, is that you?" Suddenly, someone addressed her from behind. Mira recognized the voice.

"Ooh, it's you!" Mira turned and found exactly the person she'd expected to see—Emella, vice-captain of Écarlate Carillon. She was a kind-hearted adventurer Mira had met back in Karanak. They had gone together to Nebrapolis in search of Soul Howl, and then they'd been reunited at Hunters' Village near the Forest of the Devout not long ago.

"I knew it was you, Mira! You're easy to recognize from behind." Emella stepped over happily.

"And I recognized your voice, too." Mira returned a smile.

"What brings you to the Warriors' Guild?" Emella asked, leaning coolly against a wall.

Mages naturally couldn't receive requests at the Warriors' Guild, so she would normally have no business here. Something else was up, and Mira's obvious survey of the room had piqued Emella's curiosity.

Emella was a swordswoman and a helpful friend. This was a stroke of luck. Mira rapidly explained her reasons for coming.

"Hrmm, good question. You see..."

She related how the blacksmith Gregor was away from the city, and how though she had searched for him, her investigation had ended up fruitless. And then how she'd wondered if someone here might know the location of a sword-forging blacksmith.

"So, do you have any leads?" she asked.

A big smile spread over Emella's face. "Oh, I have a lead. To tell you the truth... I just came back from seeing Gregor myself!"

"Truly?!"

When Mira pressed for more details, Emella revealed that she was the very warrior who had requested the one-of-a-kind sword. She and Gregor had agreed that he would

forge a fire-elemental blade using the demon materials Emella had recovered at Nebrapolis.

Emella had spent the day in Gregor's hideout swinging her own sword in order to help him grasp her quirks, center of balance, and swordplay style. His swords were perfectly calculated to maximize the wielder's power, so this was an important part of his process.

Mira had hit the jackpot.

She leaned in excitedly. "Then that would mean you know where Gregor is. Can you please tell me?!"

Emella recalled Mira's prideful rant about how she'd *never* use weapons back when they first met. She hesitated. "Umm, I do know where... but why is a summoner looking for a swordsmith?"

"There's something I want to show him. It won't take long at all, I promise." Mira hurried to reassure Emella that it wouldn't intrude on her own sword's creation.

"Really? Well, okay. I'll show you the way... but can we do it tomorrow? When I left, Gregor said he'd draw up the blueprints in one spurt. I don't wanna bother him right now."

Something she wants to show him. Emella was pretty curious as to what that might be... and truth be told, she was unwilling to refuse a request from Mira. It was also more than a little gratifying that Mira had finally taken interest in her field of expertise.

It was already nighttime anyway, so it would be rude to push Emella to take her now.
"Yes, that will do just fine."

"Tomorrow, then. Uhh, so, where should we meet? Are you staying at an inn somewhere?"

"I believe it was called the Epicurean Excess, or something of that sort. Not to spoil the surprise, but their dining hall is a real sight to behold."

"That's the same inn I'm staying at!" Emella put her hands on Mira's shoulders. "Hey, wait here a sec. We can go back together!"

Mira looked around while she waited, fascinated all over again by the myriad adventurers in the guild.

* * *

“Thanks for waiting!”

A short while later, Emella had finished her paperwork and returned. The two departed side by side.

The inn was a stone’s throw from the Guild Union building. Between its prime location and its showstopping food offerings, it was plainly very popular among adventurers.

“I’m amazed that we’ve run into each other in such a faraway place,” Mira murmured joyfully. Emella and the others were so delightfully down-to-earth.

Even at night, the business district was dazzlingly bright. Its streetlights and signs lit up the night sky. The early evening was brimming with adventurers returning from their day’s work. Compared to the daytime’s merchants and shoppers, it was lively in a fresh and rowdy way.

The two weaved through crowds as they proceeded along the bustling nighttime road.

“Maybe you and I are tied by fate!” Emella replied just as gleefully. Her words seemed to imply that she hoped it was so.

The two swapped tales of what they’d seen after they’d dealt with the distortion in the forest together.

Mira described her first ride by rail, going into extra detail about the comfort of first class. Emella listened enviously. She replied that she’d only ridden in economy a few times and premium once.

After Mira shared her adventures, Emella told Mira about what she’d done after Hunters’ Village. She and her group had accompanied the merchant caravan to Ozstein, then proceeded farther west. They’d arrived at Sentopoli just days ago. Emella sounded ecstatic when she mentioned that she’d gotten the Écarlate Carillon’s leader, Cyril, to use his connections to ask Gregor to forge a sword for her. Emella was far more devoted to swords than anyone should be, and talking about them brought a certain gleam to her eye. When it came to obsession, she was rivaled only by Mira, who

was just as bizarrely devoted to summoning as Emella was to swords.

* * *

They strolled, chatting happily, until they reached the inn. Before the entrance was an enormous, glowing sign that read EPICUREAN EXCESS in large letters. To Mira, it looked like a skyscraper. Something common where she came from, but a rare style of construction in this world.

“Ah!”

When they came to the door, for some reason, Emella reflexively assumed a fighting stance. Curious, Mira followed her gaze. She saw Emella’s guildmates, Flicker and Zef. It seemed they’d just returned, as well.

“Ooh, hey!” Zef caught sight of them and immediately recognized Mira alongside his guildmate. He smiled innocently and waved as he jogged over.

“It’s Miwaaa!” With an odd scream, Flicker shoved Zef aside and charged at Mira—Mira could practically see the hearts in her eyes. Driven by lust, she charged toward Mira at jaw-dropping speed. She was no longer a mage—she was a beast.

Flicker had assaulted Mira many times by now, but each time, Emella dealt with her. Emella would surely do something this time, too... or so Mira thought.

Emella stood in a ready stance and unleashed a knife-hand strike with perfect timing. Yet before it could reach Flicker’s head, the lovestruck mage dodged minutely to evade the direct hit.

Faced with such beautiful reflexes and split-second decision making—and Flicker’s raw desire for Mira—Emella hesitated before her next attack.

“Aaah, that’s the smell! Mira’s musk!” Flicker slipped by Emella and yanked Mira into a hug, burying her face in the summoner’s chest and taking deep sniffs. Her hands began to wander all over Mira, and bewildered eyes watched from all directions.

Subjected to this treatment, Mira screamed, “Hurry up and do something!”

The swordswoman struck once more, this time precisely hitting Flicker’s head and dropping her.

* * *

They moved their reunion to the lobby, where Emella tossed Flicker onto a couch and looked away, ashamed.

"Umm... Sorry about that." According to Emella, this was Flicker's first time being so... *obsessed* with someone. Her feelings for Mira were only growing stronger by the day.

With a wry grin, Emella guessed that the power of her love gave her the ability to evade the first attack. As she talked, she wiped Flicker's drool from Mira's chest.

"Well... fine..." Mira watched Flicker rise up like a zombie and sighed. If not for her obsession, she would be a lovely person.

"Still, it's been a while," Zef mused, changing the subject. "Heck of a coincidence, running into you on the edge of the continent!"

Distracted by Zef's casual attitude, Mira ignored Flicker's gaze and answered, "Indeed, it has. I'm glad you're all... in such high spirits?"

After the first minor disaster, the four shared a happy reunion. Flicker was uncharacteristically obedient, perhaps because she'd finally gotten a dose of Vitamin Mira. But that didn't quench the flame still burning in her eyes as she gazed at the small summoner.

"Since we're all here, how about you come eat with us, Mira? The captain's here too," Zef offered.

Perhaps it was natural for rare meetings to lead to meals together, but Flicker's desperate look seemed a little too impure. Still, running into friends in far-off lands and enjoying their company was one of the many perks of adventuring.

"Of course. You don't get opportunities like this often," Mira happily agreed. Besides, she had something she wanted to discuss with Cyril.

CHAPTER 15

ON THE SECOND FLOOR of the Epicurean Excess, in the lounge of the restaurant-lined dining hall, they found Cyril and Asval conversing on a couch.

“We brought a special guest!” Zef called out, leading the gang to them.

Cyril and Asval turned and smiled with surprise when they saw Mira. Quite a few strangers looked over too.

“Well, this is *quite* a coincidence.”

“Ooh! Of all people!”

“You all seem well.” Mira smiled back at them. “I never expected we’d meet in a place like this.”

Asval looked a lot like a ruffian with his short red hair, but he had been there during the trip to Nebrapolis as well. Écarlate Carillon’s leader, Cyril, stood out with his delicate features and long red hair. Like Mira, he was a former player.

“I’m surprised, too,” he said. “But this city does draw crowds, so maybe such coincidences aren’t so uncommon.”

“You may be right. Where opportunity gathers, people follow. And the dungeons nearby are bountiful, as well,” Mira agreed, surveying the different sorts of customers gathered in the dining hall.

As a nation of commerce, Sentopoli drew people and products from all over the continent. And there existed many dungeons around the city. It was the ideal intersection of means and opportunity; to adventurers, it might as well be perfect.

“So, what brings you all the way out here, Mira? Is it related to those dates you asked us to look into?” Cyril said. He knew Mira had been given clues to follow the trails of the Nine Wise Men.

He didn’t know that her current mission was to work with the Isuzu Alliance to defeat

Chimera Clausen—a messy situation, frankly, but necessary to return Isuzu's leader, Wise Man Kagura, back to their homeland.

"Hrmm... You're not entirely wrong," Mira finally answered after turning the question around in her mind for a while. "Ah, right," she added as she produced the date-filled memo that she'd once shown Cyril. "One of them, 2132 June 18, has been dealt with. You can ignore that one for now."

That was the date on which Kagura the Seven Stars—also known as Isuzu's leader Uzume—had returned to this now-real world. For better or for worse, people with the power of Wise Men tended to cause large disturbances in the world when they arrived, which meant that the dates themselves were useful clues.

"That so? Understood." Cyril took his own copy of the memo from his pocket and drew a line through that item.

"Now, as for why I've come to Sentopoli. I'm not entirely sure if this is something we should discuss here..." Mira looked around and stood up. "It's your decision," she said to Cyril, then leaned in and whispered to him what the Skyfolk man had told her: Chimera Clausen's headquarters were somewhere in Sentopoli.

Cyril's expression became grave.

"I see. We don't know where they might have eyes or ears, so I say we shouldn't talk about it here. But it's incredible news. I'd love to hear more details."

Understanding the seriousness of the situation, Cyril stood up to leave. Though it wasn't publicized, national authorities and the Guild Union considered Chimera Clausen to be a major threat. If they continued to harm spirits, it might provoke the spirits to take revenge against all humanity.

Worse, no nation was able to catch Chimera Clausen. It was like grasping at mist. Yet now, Mira claimed to know their whereabouts. That information lit a fire of conviction in Cyril, who loved spirits just as much as he loved humanity.

"Hrmm, very well."

It could take ages for her and Aaron alone to find Chimera's secret base with only the vague knowledge that it was *somewhere* in this country. And now that Chimera had begun taking direct action, time was of the essence.

Fortunately, Cyril and his guild were trustworthy. She could safely request their aid, and Cyril understood her implicit hopes.

The group of six began to make their way up to Cyril's room in order to continue their secret discussion. As they went up, they happened to run into Aaron, who had just returned, near the stairway. He was on his way to the second floor, and he looked exhausted.

"Ooh, Little Miss Mira. Back already?" he asked.

"Hrmm, perfect timing. Could you come with us?" Mira pointed up the stairs, smiling at the coincidence. Aaron had been gathering information on Chimera Clausen's base, so Mira figured this would be a good opportunity to introduce him to Cyril's party.

"Hm? Uh, yeah, sure." Aaron glanced at the people tagging along with Mira and assented with a sigh. He'd been looking forward to a well-deserved meal.

The group sat around the table in Cyril's room on the fifth floor. It was large enough to fit seven people with space to spare, even if the room's furnishings were fairly plain.

Once Emella had fetched tea for everyone, Mira spoke. "Let me introduce Aaron. He and I are working together on this mission."

All eyes gathered on him.

Aaron looked them each in the eye one by one as he introduced himself. "Hi, nice to meet you all."

"Now, these folk are—"

Before Mira could introduce Cyril's party, Aaron interrupted, "The guild Écarlate Carillon. Cyril and his subordinates, I presume?"

"Oh? Do you already know them?"

"They're famous. What really surprises me is that *you* know them personally, little miss," Aaron leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. He was amazed by Mira's connections, which even included the poorly disguised King Solomon.

"We've run into each other a few times," Mira said. "Now, my apologies for acting

without consulting you first, but I would like to tell them about Chimera's headquarters. If all goes well, I would also like to ask for their help. What do you think?"

Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission was her usual style. She should have consulted Aaron before sharing any information about the mission, but she had already told Cyril some of it.

Aaron shrugged off her worries and answered, "Sounds like a damn good idea to me."

Écarlate Carillon was an extremely popular guild among adventurers and well-known for their righteousness. Cyril attracted like minds. The Isuzu Alliance would see them as welcome sympathizers in the battle against Chimera—Mira had valuable connections indeed.

With their many members, they could also search larger areas. Aaron was exhausted from a full day of walking and more than willing to accept their aid.

"How about I start things off?" Aaron wearily explained everything—including Isuzu—hoping to earn their help.

* * *

The instant Aaron had finished speaking, Flicker exclaimed, "I'd love to help!" As a mage, she loved spirits more than the average person, and Chimera's deeds enraged her.

"Yeah. I'll help, too," Emella said. She was the kind of person who had once joined two kids on a trip to a dungeon for free. Her kindness extended to spirits as well.

"I guess it's my time to shine," Zef added.

"I wouldn't be a man if I sat by," Asval muttered.

"There you have it," Cyril said. Écarlate Carillon was of one mind. "We'll do everything in our power to support Isuzu's efforts."

Freed from searching around by his lonesome for days on end, Aaron heaved a sigh of relief. "Wow, really? Thank you all so much."

The Isuzu-Écarlate Carillon partnership was sealed, and they began discussing strategy. They went over how and where they would search in order to keep Chimera's prying eyes off of them.

They ate dinner together in the middle of the meeting, then continued it late into the night.

* * *

With the meeting and meal complete, Zef stood up and said, "Well, we've got a new friend. How about we get better acquainted in the tub? It ought to be open at this time of night."

It was a bit past ten now, but since the inn's bath was open at all hours, it was easier to relax during the late-night off times.

"Good idea." Asval stood up in agreement. "We'll be fighting together soon enough."

"Agreed. What do you think, Aaron?" Cyril chimed in.

They could get to know their new comrade while soaking in the big bath. It was more or less a common practice among adventurers to rub shoulders like this.

"Sounds fun. Let's do it," Aaron agreed and headed to the bath with the other men.

Flicker saw them off with a hungry grin. It was common etiquette for adventurers to bathe together... and she hadn't bathed with Mira yet!

"Well. Why don't we relax as fellow adventurers, too?" she suggested, a little too casually. Her eyes betrayed her true intent as she looked at Mira.

A few moments later, Flicker found herself tied to her chair with a sturdy rope, thanks to Emella's brilliant handiwork.

After making sure the rope had no give, Emella said, "All right. How about that bath?"

"Mm, I suppose. Shall we?" Mira slowly stood, making sure to hide the gleam in her own eye.

Flicker had telegraphed her intent like an amateur. Despite keeping her speech calm,

she wore the excited look of a girl about to go to an amusement park.

"Please wait! I swear I won't touch you for the rest of my life! Please, I'm begging yooou!" Flicker wailed as the two got up to leave. She struggled violently in her chair until it fell over, yet she kept pleading as she scooted along the ground after them. Even Mira found it pitiful. Emella visibly cringed.

"What if we had mercy? Can we trust her?" Mira wondered, unable to bear the sight.

Emella heaved a big sigh and untied Flicker's restraints, grumbling, "Fine. I guess. Do you *swear*?"

"On all the gods of heaven and earth!" Flicker kneeled like a knight and swore, her face more sincere than ever.

* * *

Mira, Emella, and the subdued Flicker returned to the inn's first floor. The space between the entrance and the bath was free of the crowd at this time of day. Sparse customers in plain clothes dotted the lobby.

It felt a little dreary now that the souvenir shops on this floor were mostly closed. But still, there was something thrilling about the late-night trip.

The bath was split into men's and women's sides. While some male customers cast longing glances toward the women's entrance, Mira unabashedly opened the door and stepped into paradise. It was a line that men could never cross, yet that rule no longer applied to her.

Mira smirked back at the sidelong glances from her male counterparts.

As she stripped in the changing room, Mira stole glances at Emella and Flicker. When she did, Flicker's eyes almost always locked with hers for an instant. It was so fleeting that she almost wondered if she'd imagined it. Knowing Flicker, though, it was no coincidence—even now, she had her eyes peeled for an opening.

Regardless, Mira had long since shed her embarrassment at being seen nude, and Flicker's ogling did not bother her. In fact, it might have even excited her somewhat.

It was the savage groping she could do without.

After she'd finished shedding her clothes, Mira got a good look at Emella and Flicker before walking leisurely off to the bath. It seemed that Flicker was the type who used clothes to conceal her assets—now that she was naked, her bosom was overwhelming compared to Emella's.

The baths were nothing particularly special; they were simply furnished, in keeping with the rest of the hotel architecture. In the back was a large stone bath with a mural of a field of flowers in a forest clearing. The near side featured washbasins. To the left were the sauna and cold plunge. This bath couldn't be described as luxurious, but it was a calming place of respite.

And it was large, accommodating nearly thirty people at once. But at this time of night, fewer than ten people were taking advantage of the facilities.

"I love baths..." Mira stretched out and relaxed in the water.

"Riiight?" Emella expressed her agreement languidly.

Flicker sat across from Mira and obediently soaked, sitting stock-still in the water. Emella had confiscated her glasses before they'd entered the bath, and she had tears in her eyes.

"Y'know, Mira, it really took me by surprise when I saw you were with Aaron the Unfaltering," Emella said.

"Oh? Is he a big deal?" Mira made her surprise and respect evident.

It seemed Aaron was rather famous among adventurers. His stalwart strength and years of real experience were acknowledged by many nations. They had tried to hire him for government service quite a few times.

She heard his voice from the other side of the wall. "Not as big a deal as you, Little Miss Mira."

This bath was much like a public bath, complete with a slight opening at the top of the barrier between the men's and women's sides.

Mira stood up from the bath and yelled over to the men's side, "Whatever could you mean? I'm only a humble adventurer."

Aaron's voice, tinged with laughter, returned. "Sure. Have it your way."

After that short conversation, Mira grabbed a bath stool and a bucket to head off to the washbasins. Suddenly feeling eyes on her, she looked up to the top of the wall and saw Zef's face peeking down. Seeing that he'd been caught, he hid the lust on his face and stared into Mira's eyes gravely.

"Peeking? Oh, the indiscretions of youth." Mira put down the stool and bucket and smirked fearlessly up at Zef. She was honestly impressed at his juvenile stunt.

"Ah... larger than I expected... ma'am." Zef suddenly looked serious and spoke politely, like a man interviewing a prospective bride.

"You like them on the bigger side, as I recall?" With a provocative grin, Mira pushed her breasts together.

"Yes, ma'am. I like it when they're too big to fit in my hands." Zef responded truthfully.

Mira honestly supported Zef's position on that. Feeling a sense of superiority now that *she* got to be in the forbidden paradise, she warned, "Well, you'd best make sure nobody sees you."

"I appreciate your consideration," Zef thanked her as eloquently. Then his face froze in horror. Wielding a bucket and clearly furious, Emella had him in her crosshairs.

A hollow thud echoed through the bath, followed by a groan of pain.

I hope it was worth it. Mira silently saluted Zef, who had disappeared beyond the wall.

As Mira sat at the washbasin, Emella approached as if nothing had happened. "Mira! Leave it to me!"

Emella washed Mira, Flicker washed Emella, then Mira washed Flicker—who nearly fainted from pure bliss. Thus, the girls developed their friendship.

CHAPTER 16

JUST AFTER EARLY MORNING, the crew set about their investigation of Chimera Clausen. But as planned, Emella and Mira followed their lead to meet with Gregor.

"This place ought to work." Mira came to the parking area next to the inn, affixed her summoning location to an empty spot, and summoned Pegasus.

The snow-white horse appeared at once, its wings spread gallantly.

"Whoa! So cool..." Emella was taken by its beautiful, dignified form. "May I touch it?"

Mira told her to ask Pegasus itself. When she did, Pegasus nodded slightly and Emella stroked the beast's mane. The joy on her face was like that of a starry-eyed maiden.

"Okay, I think that's enough. We'd best get going." Mira climbed atop Pegasus's back and said, "I hope you're willing to carry two today."

The horse neighed energetically in assent.

Listening to their exchange, Emella looked up with sparkling eyes. "Do I get to ride?!"

Mira scooted forward and pointed to the now-open space. "This will be much faster, after all."

A huge smile broke over Emella's face. She may have been obsessed with swords, but that admiration was rooted in her worship of heroes. And what defined heroes more than the companions they kept by their sides?

Pegasus was *legendary*—it didn't allow just *anyone* to ride it. For Emella, this was a dream come true.

"Thanks for carrying me!" She bowed respectfully, took Mira's hand, and hopped onto Pegasus's back.

"Now, we go." On Mira's signal, Pegasus spread its wings wide and slowly ascended into the sky.

The rising perspective, the radiant warmth of Pegasus between her legs, the wind brushing across her body, and the scent of the ocean—all of these were new sensations that one could never experience on a normal horse. Emella drank in the panoramic world around her and rejoiced at having a secret wish granted.

“Thank you, Mira!” Emella hugged her gleefully from behind.



"Um, sure. Anyway, could you tell me where Gregor is, please?" Mira raised an eyebrow in slight confusion, eager to get on with their mission.

Pegasus sulked a little, jealous of Emella's connection with Mira, but the girls failed to notice.

All the way to Gregor's secret base, Emella was elated by what she saw from their bird's-eye view.

* * *

"We're so high up! So, this is how the world looks from the sky! Mira, this is awesome!"

"Indeed, it is *awesome*."

The view from Pegasus's back *was* beautiful. But Mira was playing the role of guardian today, so she remained calmer than ever while Emella struggled to control her emotions.

After leaving Sentopoli and flying along the coastline for some time, Emella pointed to the top of a cliff and stated that that was the place.

Mira had Pegasus land when she began to see a hollow in the cliff. On closer inspection, it was a steep staircase going down.

"Well, that's scary..." she muttered.

"Isn't it, though?"

The cliff was spine-chillingly high, and the meter-wide staircase was carved right out of the precipice and had no handrail. Terrified, Emella glued herself to the wall as she began her descent. Below, the billowing ocean waves crashed into the cliffside. They were so far away that they looked small, but the sounds of waves were very clear.

Since Mira could use her sage abilities to run atop the air, she wasn't as nervous as Emella. But when she peeked down at the ocean, the sudden vertigo filled her with terror and thrill alike.

Emella descended the stairs gingerly, and Mira followed behind, battered by coastal winds with every step. The two finally arrived at a small cavern where the path, wide

enough for only one person, led into the continental shelf.

Emella ran in with light footsteps, and Mira followed. About ten meters from the entrance, a door appeared before them. It was like any normal household door, lit by faint light—but it looked extremely out of place in the cave. Whose curiosity wouldn't be piqued by such a sight?

"Here we are! Gregor's home away from home," Emella said, opening the door without hesitation and stepping inside.

Interesting. One would never find this from the sky.

Deep in a cavern on the side of a cliff—it would be impossible to spot from above. Why had she wasted her entire day yesterday? Suddenly a bit downhearted, Mira grimaced.

* * *

Beyond the door was another cave, but this one was quite spacious. Though it was the same height, it was four or five meters wide. Inside stood many pedestals, each with swords piled atop. Every sword was so fine that even amateur eyes could tell that they were first-rate—these were no mass-produced commodities.

In front of a drawing board hung on the far wall sat a gray-haired man.

"Good morning, Mr. Gregor" Emella said.

After a beat, the man turned around. When he saw Emella, he stood straight up. The man wore black overalls, and he looked to be well beyond seventy years of age.

"Back so soon? Good! I need you to test the grip." Gregor wore a broad smile on his deeply wrinkled face. He began excitedly rummaging through a pile of swords atop a pedestal.

Then his hands stilled. He looked up and stared at Mira for a moment, narrowed his eyes, and slowly walked over.

Gregor looked her up and down before glaring at Emella with a frown. "Who's this?"

"She says she has business with you." With that quick introduction, Emella stepped back.

Mira gazed directly at Gregor. His glorious white hair was left long, and he had stubble around his lips. The man was the very picture of an artisan wholeheartedly devoted to his craft. Despite being a bit different from what she'd imagined, Mira believed that she had much to learn from him.

"I'm Mira. Apologies for the intrusion, Sir Gregor; there is something I would like to show you."

Mira stepped forward, confidently faced Gregor, and produced the cloth-wrapped sword that had served as the foundation for the Chimera elite's spirit blade. It still had Gregor's signature engraved on it.

"A sword? Well, I don't know why a mage would show me a sword. Don't expect me to appraise it. I'm not in the identification or pawn business," Gregor grumbled. What he cared about was making swords for people he deemed worthwhile—no more, no less.

"I think you should take a good look. It should be familiar to you, after all." Unbothered by Gregor's curt attitude, Mira removed the cloth. She unveiled first the hilt, then the handguard, and finally the blade. Once the cloth was all gone, a fine sword was revealed.

His attitude changed the moment he saw it. Gregor's brow furrowed, and he glared daggers at Mira. "Where did you get this?"

"Oho. So, you do know it," Mira said, as if testing him.

"Of course I do. I made it, after all." Gregor narrowed his eyes again and gazed at the sword nostalgically.

"Huh?!" Emella ran over to Mira before looking the sword up, down, and all around. But when she noticed Mira and Gregor's irritated looks, she backed away.

The sword truly was Gregor's work. In that case, much weighed on Mira's next question.

"Would you be willing to tell me who you forged it for?"

Gregor's swords were each the result of a thorough examination of their prospective wielder, made to suit their hands perfectly. No other person could hope to wield them to their fullest, and the more advanced the original wielder's swordplay, the more

evident the difference would be. They were like weapons that could only be equipped by a particular swordsman.

As such, Mira knew that the man she'd met in the depths of the Illusory Corridor had to be the only owner of that sword.

"And what would you do with that knowledge? What are you after?" Gregor's low voice was like a growl, and the sharp gleam in his eyes seemed poised like a dagger at Mira's neck.

No craftsman would readily betray the confidence of his clients. Gregor would need a good reason—Mira was quite aware of this. She met his glare squarely, took the sword's hilt in hand, and raised its blade to block their intersecting gazes.

Then, with a smirk, she said, "To bring down Chimera." The glint in her eyes was sharper than any blade.

Gregor knew that name. He had heard it from an acquaintance who was an adventurer. He knew that they did ill to spirits, as well.

Compared to those with fighting occupations, craftsmen did not interact with spirits much. But a relationship with them became essential if one wanted to truly master their craft. By earning spirits' blessings, one could make incredibly fine equipment.

Throughout Gregor's long life, he had received several spirits' blessings. Chimera Clausen's actions were something he could not overlook.

"Tell me more." Gregor sat in a nearby chair and crossed his arms.

"I shall." Mira placed the sword on the stand in front of Gregor and explained how it had come into her possession.

Mira gave him all of the important information: her battle with the necromancer Chimera Clausen elite in the Illusory Corridor wearing yin spirit equipment, how she'd obtained this sword, how the man had escaped at the end of the battle, and how she believed the sword was a clue to his true identity.

"Hm..." Gregor grumbled in response before picking up the sword.

He gazed at the blade, heaved a long sigh, and closed his eyes as if lost in memory.

After a while, he opened his eyes and returned the sword with a grave look upon his face. He sat back deep into the chair, crossed his arms again, and gazed off into nothingness as he spoke.

“I gave this sword to Gregorius. My son.”

Gregor’s eyes shifted from those of a proud master of his craft to those of a weary old man.

From there, he spoke as if confessing. The sword was a gift he’d given to his son Gregorius thirty years ago in honor of his promotion to vice-captain of the guard for Ozstein’s Archeological Research Group. Gregorius was a necromancer—mages couldn’t wield fighting spirit—so this sword was quite different from those he made for the swordsmen who entrusted their lives to his wares. It was a sword that would only be useful for decoration or self-defense—something that he swore he’d never make.

But he had broken his ironclad rules and forged *one* peerless self-defense sword in all his career. It was the very sword Mira had brought to him.

“So... kid’s still alive, huh?” Gregor muttered and gazed upon the sword again. The relief of a father was evident in his eyes.

It had been reported that the Archeological Research Group and its escort had gone missing while searching ruins. Only a few corpses were recovered; the others remained missing to this very day.

And now, Gregorius was a top member of Chimera Clausen. Gregor could tell from how the sword was maintained that it had been wielded by his son.

“But I can’t believe he...” Gregor’s shoulders slumped sadly. “I’m sorry. You’ll have to let me rest for today.”

He stood up and trudged over to his plain bed, where he lay down. His son—who had reportedly died in the middle of nowhere—was now an elite member of an evil organization that harmed spirits. It must have been a lot to process.

After another glance at the sword atop the stand, Mira turned around, thanked him tersely, and left. If Gregor was going to rest, then he would be delaying his business with Emella as well. She followed Mira to the exit, disappointed.

"Mira, isn't that sword important evidence? Shouldn't we take it with us?"

"We've gotten the information we need." Mira had no attachment to Gregor's weapon, but Emella kept her eyes glued to it until they were finally out the door.

Since Gregor's one-of-a-kind swords were made to suit a single user, they would be difficult for anyone else to wield. But Gregor's swords had value beyond practical use: artistic value. They were as powerful as raging waves, yet collectors thirsted for his swords based on aesthetics alone. Especially if the wielder happened to be famous.

Emella estimated that this sword would have sold for over a hundred thousand at auction.

But Mira had left it behind, detached as a Buddha. Emella knew by now that this was just the kind of person Mira was.

"You're one of a kind," she said with a laugh.

CHAPTER 17

AT ONE IN THE AFTERNOON, everyone who had been running around town in search of information gathered once more in Cyril's room.

Mira and Emella were first to arrive, but they'd stopped at the food court and picked up enough for ten people so the others would have plenty when they showed up.

Everyone eventually gathered, and a working lunch began.

Aaron was the first to make his report. He had asked his adventurer friends and Guild Union employees if there were any places around that seemed suspicious or criminal. He was right to leave his questioning vague; if rumors spread that he was searching for Chimera Clausen's headquarters, the enemy would likely catch on.

But simple questioning would not shine light on an organization that had lurked in the shadows for years. He reasoned that if suspicious organizations were well-known enough to be named so easily, they couldn't be related to the crafty Chimera Clausen. Thus, his questions were actually meant to eliminate these entities from the search, under the assumption that they weren't related.

"This afternoon, I'll search the port as planned. That's all I've got for now." Aaron stretched an arm out to grab a juicy burger, which he stuffed in his mouth, sauce dribbling from the sides. "Mm, now that's good."

Nobody had touched the food during his report. Only Mira had sipped at a caramel au lait. But Aaron's move had led to the birth of a new rule: those who had finished their reports were allowed to eat. Everyone eagerly competed to be the next to deliver the news.

Asval and Flicker had combed the surrounding wasteland, while Zef had watched the flow of traffic. But at this point, they had no particularly useful information.

It wasn't long before Mira's turn came. She surveyed the people enjoying their bountiful lunch and began to share the information she'd received from Gregor. It seemed certain that the Chimera Clausen elite who had wielded the sword was Gregor's son. And though he had once been vice-captain of the Archeological Research

Group's escort, that organization no longer existed.

"The ruins that they investigated do ring a bell. I plan to look into them this afternoon." Mira finished her report and reached for the fried chicken.

As Mira chomped away, Zef plucked up a french fry and asked, "Those ruins wouldn't happen to be the War-Torn Burial Ground, would they?"

"Do you know it?" Mira washed down her chicken with the caramel au lait and leaned toward Zef expectantly.

"Well, yeah. Everyone loves archaeology." Zef tossed the fry into his mouth, folded his arms on the table, and grinned like a little boy before launching into an impromptu lecture.

Ozstein was in the western portion of the continent, which was mostly covered by wasteland... but the wastes were actually home to many hidden ruins. The Archeological Research Group was an elite archeological team formed to excavate and investigate those sites.

Their results were jaw-dropping; the group had discovered ten ruins in only a few years.

But six years after their founding, while they investigated their tenth site, the group and their bodyguards had suddenly disappeared overnight. The ruins they had been investigating in the Roslein Duchy were called the War-Torn Burial Ground.

"So, nobody knows why it happened. The academic world thinks they were spirited away, but I'm more the conspiratorial type. I think they found some crazy ancient weapons there, and they were *disappeared* to cover it up. They even found blood they thought might be from the research group."

After Zef told the story, he scooped up another handful of fries and sat back in his chair.

Emella leaned over the table. "You mean... like an ancient demonic sword?!"

If "everyone" loved ancient ruins, then Emella loved ancient swords.

"Some people think so. The public theory is that they were all killed by traps. Roslein

claims the group was eliminated in one fell swoop by some trap set in the War-Torn Burial Ground.”

Emella slumped over sadly. “Aww, man...”

“So, this is where Roslein comes in? Smells fishy...” Mira murmured and put her chin in her hand. Melville Commerce, next in line to the throne and believed to be related to Chimera Clausen, operated in the Roslein Duchy. And Mira had just met the second-in-command of the very research group who had been “killed by traps” in the duchy’s territory.

“Yeah. When I heard your report, it got my blood pumping. If a member of that group is still alive, then...” Zef’s eyes sparkled. He launched into an explanation of the current situation at the War-Torn Burial Ground.

The place was under strict lockdown by the Roslein Duchy. The reason was ostensibly both to prevent theft of precious artifacts and to avoid any further deaths by traps. But according to Zef’s friends with similar interests, there was an awful lot of security around the place—as if they were concealing some *greater* secret.

It was clear that there was something hidden there. At least now all the signs pointed to one place.

“I think I ought to investigate this,” Mira decided, matter-of-factly volunteering herself. How could she not?

“Yeah. Easiest for you since you can fly, huh?” Aaron agreed as he picked at his remaining food.

It would take two full days by land to reach the Roslein Duchy. But by air, it would only be half a day. The longer the search took, the greater risk that the enemy would notice them. Time was of the essence.

Zef glanced at Mira. “You can get there fast if you fly... but the problem is getting *in*. You stand out way too much.”

She was as adorable as a child yet had the bearing of an adult. With long, fluttery silver hair that looked like woven threads of light, Mira looked like an angel. Even in a crowd, she stood out. She’d learned to ignore the stares, but the fact remained.

"No worries about that. I happen to have a trick up my sleeve," Mira said proudly. She'd only just acquired it, but she was excited to test it out right away. She puffed out her chest with a smug grin on her face.

"Seems like she'll be fine to me." Asval laughed.

"How omnipotent can you be?" Zef sighed with a smile.

"Aww! Mira, your smug grins are so *adorable!*" Flicker—who had been holding it together admirably—suddenly fainted from the ecstasy.

"Sorry again for her," Cyril apologized.

* * *

While everyone chatted, Emella looked at a map of Roslein before furrowing her brow and turning to Zef.

"Where is this War-Torn Burial Ground? It's not on my map." It seemed she hadn't given up on the ancient demonic sword theory.

"Oh, uh... It's in northwestern Roslein, but you can't enter from ground level," Zef said. He explained that it was a catacomb with no direct entrance—the enormous structure was entirely closed off and buried.

To reach it, one would need to head through the tunnel dug by the research group. Every checkpoint before the tunnel had security stationed within. Its one entry point offered nowhere to hide; even those who specialized in covert ops would be hard-pressed to make it in.

"Hrmm, I see. And where is this tunnel?" Mira probed.

"They... didn't tell me." Zef leaned back in the chair and looked up to the ceiling, disappointed. However, since the Roslein Duchy managed the War-Torn Burial Ground, she could probably get the details by investigating there.

"Well, I'll just have to search when I arrive," Mira decided, as if that were no obstacle.

"We've got allies there, anyway," Aaron agreed.

Scorpion and Snake. If Mira met up with them, it probably wouldn't be difficult to find the entrance at all.

"I will depart for Roslein this afternoon," she announced. "That means you all will have to search for Chimera's base alone, but I trust you can handle it."

The members of Écarlate Carillon all nodded in assent and replied that they could indeed.

The meeting proceeded into a discussion of finer details as they ate the ten people's worth of meals Mira had bought. After finishing the last crumbs, they dispersed.

* * *

After the other members had scattered into the city, Mira stopped by the merchant on the fourth floor of the Guild Union building to buy a map of the areas around Sentopoli and Roslein.

She walked up from the first floor, took a look around at all the adventurers, and was instantly reminded of the train station. Like the train station and Epicurean Excess, the fourth floor of the Adventurers' Guild Union was chock-full of shops that adventurers loved.

I'm amazed that it's like this...

Mira had expected it to be a union-run store. But instead, it was full of various specialized vendors. It seemed like the fourth floor alone could supply any and all adventuring needs. Heart pumping at the lively scene before her, Mira forgot her initial objective and charged toward the nearest shop.

Hrmm. I've heard of this vendor before.

Despite being only one shop, it took up 40 percent of the floor. Mira stared at the sign and cocked her head. After ten seconds of racking her brain, she finally recalled a chance meeting in the train station a few weeks earlier.

Cedric Dinoire had greeted Mira at the train platform on the first day of her travel by rail. The shop before her was Dinoire Trading, Sentopoli Branch. It was a well-known establishment that marketed manufactured goods to adventurers.

* * *

White walls and hardwood floors—the shelves within the store were perfectly organized, each displaying various goods. Mira took a quick look around, smiled excitedly, and began a systematic survey of all the shelves from one end to the other.

Dinoire Trading had every item fit for man or beast. There were security devices that could sense approaching monsters when you set them up around your camp, technomancy-powered lanterns, frying pans that could heat themselves, portable technomancy-powered stoves, easily-assembled kits for smoking food—even basic staples like insect repellent and scent blockers. The more Mira searched, the more sure she was that shopping convenience had made incredible strides in the past thirty years.

She couldn't stop herself from picking up a basket and browsing the merchandise.

Oho. So, this is what they call a magic cell?

A shelf near the cashier's counter contained a wealth of blue items that looked awfully like AA batteries. Placed conspicuously on the shelf were signs that said *Only 3,000 ducats per magic cell! Buy one, get two medium mobility stones!* These magic cells were the optimal items for technomancy-powered products.

Three thousand ducats, hm? In that case...

After seeing the price, Mira about-faced and returned to a shelf she'd passed earlier. She looked at the label on another product there.

It was a technomancy-powered water purifier. This popular item from Dinoire Trading could filter water from rivers, lakes, ponds, the ocean, and even *urine* to make it potable. It required magic cells or mobility stones to operate, but the description claimed that it could filter up to a hundred liters of water with a single magic cell.

Three thousand ducats for one hundred liters, so... thirty ducats per liter. Hrmm, I can see why it's a hot seller.

As long as one had a water source, they would have safe drinking water no matter what. This was essential for adventurers, and water itself was awkward to carry in large quantities. The technomancy-powered purifier would cut down on that burden greatly. In the time that Mira was reading the label, three adventurers had come and

picked some up for themselves.

I'm sure I'll need this eventually.

Mira promptly tossed a green one into her basket. She then returned to the counter and snatched up three magic cells. Yet she did not stop there; she continued to circle the store. After putting in a hundred thousand ducats worth of items—naturally including scent blockers and the like—she finally lined up at the counter.

“Welcome!”

Soon, it was Mira’s turn to pay, so she placed her basket on the counter. Just then, she remembered something. She fished around in her pouch to retrieve her adorable card case and showed the card she’d received from Cedric Dinoire to the cashier.

“I believe I have a coupon. Will you accept this?”

The cashier nodded. But when they looked at the back of the card, their eyes went wide for a moment. They waved it over some sort of device.

Is this going to be a problem? Mira began to worry.

“This will be a twenty percent discount from your order total,” they said and resumed totaling the goods. That sounded promising.

Mira thus paid her 80,000-ducat bill and smiled at both the change and the card that had been given back to her. It seemed she could use it more than once.

What a lovely shopping trip. Maybe I'll visit Dinoire Trading again when I need something else.

Having fallen hook, line, and sinker for Cedric’s scheme, Mira gleefully left the Guild Union building.

...Only to rush back in a panic to buy the map for which she’d originally come.

CHAPTER 18

MIRA MOUNTED PEGASUS, and together they flew over the wasteland for hours. Once the sun set, the sky filled with stars like distant embers. Every night in this world was full of stars, but tonight they were especially vivid. This was second only to the sky she'd seen from the Celestial Ruins.

"Pegasus, isn't the starry sky wonderful tonight?" Mira said, awed by the endless scenery before her. Pegasus neighed happily, shedding particles of electricity from its charged tail to create an arc of light in the sky.

After savoring the glimmering nighttime scenery, Mira caught sight of a faint light on the horizon.

Rivers flowing from the towering mountain range to the south overlapped and combined to create the Great Lysion River. On that river's edge stood Irene, the capital of Roslein.

* * *

Upon reaching her destination, Mira landed in a vacant lot in a back alley. After thanking and dismissing Pegasus, she casually slipped into the shopping district.

Irene's busiest street was dazzling even at night. Lit by spirits' fire, it was extremely bright. Crowds of people traversed it as if drawn by the light, and it seemed just as busy as Sentopoli.

This place has changed quite a bit, too.

People of many races and occupations mixed in the streets. With few exceptions, everyone was in good spirits as they shopped. It seemed the same as Mira's thirty-year-old memories, save that the city was enormous and overflowing compared to its old self.

The shopping district was a ten-meter-wide boulevard sandwiched between two lines of shops crowded together, and the street was full of a disorderly mess of stands. But that did not disturb the flow of traffic as the rowdy crowd milled about.

Mira proceeded along the street, rubbernecking at the occasional commotion, until she casually entered a Melville Commerce-managed shop. She almost missed it.

Hrmm. So, this is the stronghold of Chimera's co-conspirators?

The shop was selling many types of equipment. From short swords to battle-axes, from leather clothes to full-body armor, they had all the warrior-class essentials. One could come here and leave totally kitted out for an adventure.

Many adventurers thronged within the subdued building of stone and wood. Judging from appearances alone, they were of all ranks, yet each of them was wholly absorbed in picking out gear.

Oh? What's that back there?

Mira noticed something unusual. There was a staircase leading down, and above it was a sign that said AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. High-rank adventurers occasionally descended.

"Authorized personnel" would refer to employees... but a man who was clearly *not* an employee had just gone down the stairs.

Was that a membership card?

The man had presented something to an employee. Mira surmised that, beyond that staircase, there might be a black market dealing suspicious goods to members. Of course, this hypothesis was heavily biased by her knowledge that Melville was conspiring with Chimera.

She decided on a direct approach. "Say, excuse me. Might I ask a question?"

The employee turned around. When she saw who had addressed her, she stooped down slightly and smiled at Mira. "Yes? What is it, miss?"

"I've seen some customers going down those stairs. What's down there?" Mira pointed to the staircase.

"I believe they sell special equipment to members only down there."

That seemed like an awfully vague response to Mira. She asked for more information.

It seemed the underground sales floor was run by senior Melville Commerce employees and relatives of the CEO himself. Unfortunately, none of the low-level staff knew anything about the gear they sold or how they decided who to allow in.

“Hrmm, thank you. Apologies for taking up your time.”

“No worries! Ask me anything, any time.”

Mira left the shop and turned back to look up at the building she’d just exited. She grinned to herself—they were in her web now.

* * *

Mira swaggered proudly along the shopping street—she was smug about having gotten some juicy information on Melville’s shady dealings so quickly. After deciding that shop was suspicious based on her own biases, Mira began exploring every other place that caught her eye. She was like a little girl playing detective—while some people looked on warmly, others scolded her and told her to go home already.

When the night grew late, Mira arrived at the end of the shopping strip. Ahead of her was the residential district. Small streetlights faintly lit up the homes there. The neighborhood was quiet, as if covered in translucent black cloth—a world divorced from the noisy shopping street across the road.

Where is that War-Torn Burial Ground, I wonder?

This space seemed like the border of a dream. Now recalling her original goal, Mira left the joyous, bright street behind and entered a shady back alley.

It was immediately darker than the street before, and the people here seemed more sinister. If the shopping street was the surface of the city, these dark alleys were the underbelly.

Where is that War-Torn Burial Ground? Mira thought to herself again as she wandered aimlessly through the alleys. If the archeology-loving Zef didn’t know, then who would?

If she were to investigate normally, then the quickest way would probably be to contact specialists or higher-ups in the duchy directly. But she would have to be extremely careful; if she asked at random, rumors might spread of someone searching

for it. That might tip Chimera Clausen off that she was up to something.

Mira had no intention of doing that. Now that the versatility of summoning was greater than ever, she had plenty of other options. But first, she proceeded through these dark, shady alleys in search of another clue.

“Hey there, little lady. Willing to do it for five?”

Mira turned to face the big man and quickly understood what he was after. He was plump and wore a gaudy coat—rather affluent for this part of town. He looked Mira up and down, flashing a silver coin at her excitedly. The dullest of people could tell that he was gazing lasciviously at her. Even Mira took a step back in disgust.

“Er, I’m not selling. You’ll have to try someone else,” Mira answered. She turned back around and power-walked away.

Others who had been loitering nearby laughed, and someone muttered, “Oof, rejected!”

But one of them shouted, “No, this bet isn’t settled yet!”

It seemed they were betting to see if the man would succeed or not. Now, some less-than-savory folk started giving Mira underhanded compliments.

“Girl, you’re worth more than five silver!”

“Best go home, girlie!”

“A little thing like you? He’d break you.”

“I can still do this!” the plump man said and ran after Mira.

Mira turned swiftly, looked up at the man and said, “Is this the part where you assume you have strength in numbers, surround me, and say, ‘Heh heh heh, you’ve got a nice body, little lady. How about you play with us?’”

“That’s downright criminal! I wouldn’t be able to do business in this country after a stunt like that.” His eyes were those of a ruffian, but the plump man stopped in place and said the most common-sense thing he could at this point. Then he opened his eyes wide in realization. “Wait a second... Unless... unless you’re into that sort of thing?! ”

He huffed excitedly and gazed at the slender legs extending from Mira's skirt as he snatched a gold coin from his pocket.

"Of course not!" Mira took several steps back and gestured toward the coin as he removed it from his pants. "And *that's* not a crime?"

The man suddenly stooped forward, flustered. "This is just a natural reaction I can't control! I'm not touching it or trying to show you it. It's fine!"

Mira snickered at how proper the man tried to act despite the lust plastered on his face. "No, not that. I mean trying to buy me."

The man finally seemed to understand. He gazed at the gold coin in his hand and muttered, "Are you serious?" Laughter erupted all around him. "Here in Roslein, it's an accepted form of business. It's really fine. So...? I'll be gentle, and I promise I'll satisfy you." The man withdrew two more gold coins and urged Mira.

"See, I told you to hold out for more!" someone shouted.

Another voice yelled, "I bet I could satisfy her!"

"Another form of business, hm? Well, I'm afraid I'm not in that industry. Again, you'll have to try someone else." Different world, different customs. Mira pushed the man's hand away and smiled. Then, after looking around, she said, "Goodbye, then," and left.

The others laughed at how weird she was and started yelling about who'd won and who'd lost. The plump man alone gazed at his hand, recalling Mira's touch.

"An angel," he murmured to himself.

* * *

Mira continued on. Whenever people bothered her, she would toy with them or scold them. The dim alleys had occasional shops without signs, selling items that weren't quite *illegal* but were at least too morally gray to sell out on the main strip.

Mira had caught word of information dealers during her shopping, so she'd come to see if she could find what she needed.

The back-alley shopping street was bereft of light, but it wasn't abandoned. People

could be seen walking here and there, though no one here seemed quite trustworthy.

What morally gray products were they looking for? Those could be military items put on the black market, stolen items, and even ones illegally excavated from ruins. Direct information would be great, but Mira had also come here in search of any illegal items from the War-Torn Burial Ground. Then she could track down whoever had initially found them and ask for details.

It seemed the task might be easier than she thought. In this country, information was just another product. Anything could be had for the right price.

The issue would be finding actual stolen items from the War-Torn Burial Ground and confirming that they were genuine. There were no guarantees.

Mira casually asked a few shopkeepers. After ten or so stores, she finally found a lead.

“Yeah, we’ve got that. Corner shelf right over there.”

As directed, she checked the corner shelf. It took only a glance to see that it was genuine. Trapped in a glass vial were small fragments covered in black fog.

“Like it? That’s real pretty black mist ore. Perfect size for interior decoration. I’d normally charge 250,000 ducats, but you’re too cute for me. I’ll let you have it for 200,000 ducats, fair?” The lanky shopkeeper rattled on with an agreeable smile.

Had he *actually* given her a discount? That would also require a good eye to discern... but regardless, Mira wasn’t here to purchase it. She wanted info on the seller.

“Too expensive for me. Instead...” Before Mira could ask to be introduced to the person who’d brought it in, she was interrupted.

“I said I’d buy it! Why are you trying to sell it to someone else?!” a woman’s voice rang out with indignation, then abruptly went silent. “Huh? Why is Mira here?”

Mira turned and stared at Scorpion. It seemed that great minds thought alike—Scorpion had been out gathering funds to secure the sample.

“Ah. Well, you see...” Mira began. But she glanced over to the shopkeeper, who was shamefacedly hiding behind the counter. Mira suggested they take the conversation outside.

Though it was late, the flow of people through the back alley was still steady. This was not a place they could discuss sensitive matters.

"Where would be a good place to chat...?" Mira muttered as she looked all around.

Scorpion suggested they go to her room at the inn she was staying at. "It's costing me an arm and a leg, but I bet nobody will be able to eavesdrop on us."

"Hrmm. Fair."

Mira followed Scorpion back to the shopping district.

CHAPTER 19

SCORPION GUIDED MIRA to an imposing stone building.

There were four major shopping streets in this city. The most vibrant among them was adjacent to the inn Scorpion and Snake had been using as their base. However, it seemed Snake had yet to return.

In the third-floor room, Mira sat across the table from Scorpion and discussed the results of her investigation into the sword.

It had indeed been made by Gregor and was a present given to celebrate his son Gregorius's promotion—right before he had gone missing in the line of duty.

"It happened at the War-Torn Burial Ground," Mira explained. "And the fragments with the black fog seem to have been looted from there." She retrieved two mixed berry au laits from her Item Box and offered one to Scorpion. "Want one?"

"Sure!" Scorpion took a sip and sighed. "So, you're here to investigate the War-Torn Burial Ground, then?"

"That's right. But I don't know where the place is. My plan was to have the shopkeeper tell me who'd found those fragments and get *them* to tell me the location." Mira chugged down her drink, sank deep in the chair, and looked outside. The sky was dark and still, only highlighting the hustle and bustle of the shopping street.

"So, that's why you were there..." Then Scorpion puffed out her chest proudly and said, "Then you can leave it to me!"

She and Snake had begun the search for solid connections between Melville Commerce and Chimera Clausen. But they soon realized just how tight Melville's security was. That was natural, given that their leader was next in line to be the duke... but to Scorpion, it almost seemed like they were putting *too much* effort into it.

They had an absurd number of security guards surrounding a specific place at all times, constantly on surveillance. She'd learned that the facility she was investigating housed a number of secure warehouses—yet there was never inflow or outflow of

goods.

She had found that suspicious, and had kept watch to figure out what was up. Then she'd noticed one of their security guards leaving the area and going into a back alley. And that's how she'd arrived at the very place she'd met Mira. After bribing and questioning the shopkeeper, she learned that the vial of foggy fragments was sold to the shop by that same security guard.

Believing that familiar black fog might be some kind of clue, Scorpion had come back to the inn to borrow the needed funds from Snake. When she'd returned, she found Mira.

And now here they were.

They'd discovered a facility shrouded in mystery, owned by Melville Commerce, with connections to Chimera Clausen. And now fragments from the War-Torn Burial Ground were being sold by a security guard to a shady back-alley dealer.

Mira organized the information in her mind and grinned to herself. "I see... That warehouse you mentioned has the stench of intrigue."

"Right?! Super stinky!" It seemed Mira's testimony had led Scorpion to the same conclusion. "But like I said before, their security is suspiciously tight. I might be able to slip into the warehouse if you give me enough time, but unless we know what to expect inside..."

According to her, they didn't *just* have guards patrolling; entrances and other vital places also had security devices that could sense magic. When it came to infiltration and intelligence, Scorpion stood head and shoulders above the rest of the Isuzu Alliance. And now even she was hesitating before the amount of unknowns.

While Scorpion fretted, Mira stood up in excitement. "Eyes and magic sensors, hm? Now that sounds like fun! This is the perfect opportunity to test a certain something!" With a mad grin, Mira promptly created a summoning circle.

Close thine eyes, ears, and mouth. My one desire is all-encompassing calm. Stifle even the slightest stir.

Quietude be my peace, solitude be my companion. Let my name and form fade into the wind.

All of creation, sink into the quiet depths.

[Evocation: Stealth]

When the spell was cast, the summoning circle fell to pieces and disappeared without a sound.

"Wha? Was that was summoning magic?" It seemed as if the summon had misfired, but this was Mira, after all. Scorpion looked around the room to see what she'd summoned. When she looked back, Mira was gone. "Huh? Where'd you go?!"

Suddenly panicking, she began searching every nook and cranny of the room. "Miraaa!"

The summoner smirked to herself, satisfied by Scorpion's response.

"Right here," Mira called out.

Scorpion whipped around. "Bwah?!"

Mira had been gone, yet now, there she was. An unfamiliar man stood next to her, as well.

"I am the spirit who governs stealth. Please call me Wasranel." He smiled gleefully and bowed to Scorpion, who was frozen, every hair in her tail on end.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Mira bragged.

The summoning hadn't failed at all. Mira had simply figured that showing would be faster than telling.

Now Mira explained the powers of the spirit of stealth. She had just made the contract with him, so there wasn't much she could do yet. But she could use his ability of total concealment from the start. It allowed her to hide light, sound, aura, and even magic. Its effects extended in a radius of about three meters from Wasranel.

It would make her invisible to allies as well, but as long as she told Wasranel ahead of time, he could make it so that specific people could see her. They could even converse, as long as the ally was in range.

"The concealment is still active, but I've made it so that you can see me and speak with me." Mira concluded her explanation and sat on the chair nearby. She retrieved a wad of cloth from her coat's inner pocket and spread it out. It was a pair of small black undershorts.

"Ack! My undies!" Scorpion yelped in surprise, then turned her face to the corner of the room. There were two beds; on one of them was her suitcase, wide open. "Whaaa... But I closed it and left it on the floor!"

Scorpion ran over and looked at the lightly packed suitcase. She was indeed missing a set of undergarments—the pair that Mira held with a dubious grin on her face.



"This is another show of my abilities. You didn't even notice, did you?" Mira balled up the panties and lobbed them at Scorpion before smirking proudly.

The spirit of stealth could do more than just hide one's presence; it could even conceal their actions, to an extent. But as Mira had only recently made the contract, she was limited to things that required little movement for the moment—like pillaging a suitcase while Scorpion looked all through the room for her.

"Wow! I didn't notice at all!" Scorpion said in admiration. Espionage was her specialty, as was counterespionage. Despite her best efforts, she hadn't even perceived that the summoner was in the room digging through her things.

Anyone who knew Scorpion would think that was impossible.

"Right? Don't you think this would make it easy to infiltrate that mysterious warehouse?"

Scorpion returned her shorts to the suitcase, closed and reopened it repeatedly, and agreed, "Yeah, this should work!"

Opening a suitcase and taking clothes wasn't a conspicuous act in itself, but it wasn't something one could normally do right under the nose of a trained spy. Scorpion was certain that the spirit of stealth's ability could get through the thick mesh of security.

"Couldn't we have picked something other than underwear for this demonstration...?" Wasranel muttered to himself, ashamed that his first job had been a panty raid.

* * *

The shopping street still bustled with light and activity deep into the night. Yet as Mira, Scorpion, and Wasranel jumped from rooftop to rooftop, they were noticed by no one.

Scorpion led them through the back alleys, the restaurant streets, and gradually away from the city center. Along the way, as they proceeded along an avenue that felt like a red-light district. Scorpion suddenly stopped and gazed forward.

What did she see? Just before Mira could ask...

"Stupid! Dummy! Meat-for-brains! Baldy!" Scorpion suddenly screamed abuse at an approaching adventurer. Due to Wasranel's power, the adventurer could not hear

her... but she kept on screaming.

The adventurer heard nothing and passed right by. Scorpion continued to hurl abuse at him from behind.

“Ooh, that felt good! What an awesome power!”

“What are you doing?! Good grief.” Mira chuckled and urged, “Let’s hurry.”

“The other day, that guy would *not* leave me alone. He kept trying to touch me, too. So freaking creepy!”

Remembering the lecher’s advances, Scorpion pouted and glared at the man as he walked off.

“Chew on this, cue ball!” She picked up a pebble at her feet and threw it as hard as she could.

“Ah!” Wasranel gasped.

The pebble flew in a perfect arc, striking the man on the back of the head. He whipped around, but since they were under Wasranel’s spell, he couldn’t see them—or so Scorpion thought as she giggled to herself.

“That’s one way to get my attention. You love playing hard to get, don’t you, kitten?” The man grinned lasciviously and began stalking toward Scorpion.

“Huh? Bwuh? How?” Scorpion panicked at this unexpected result.

Meanwhile, the man charged at her with a very clearly perverted look on his face. “I’ve got cuddles for my little kitty!”

“Get away from me!” Scorpion yelped and ran as fast as she could. She used every bit of the three-dimensional mobility she’d displayed at the Citadel of Scales to escape.

But the adventurer was no slouch. He was more agile than he looked, dodging through the crowd with incredible speed. The chase was thrilling.

“What a waste of time. Idiots...” Mira sighed and muttered to herself, watching the two disappear into the red-light district.

Ten minutes or so later, an exhausted Scorpion hopped down from a roof above. Now that she was under the blessing of stealth again, she immediately yelled at Mira, “Why... did that happen?!”

“Well, you see...” Mira explained that moving, talking, and even yelling insults were no issue. But if one directly attacked a target, then the concealment would be nullified the moment the target became aware. “That’s what happens when you go too far.”

“You should’ve... told me sooner...” Scorpion panted pathetically.

“I *planned* to! But I didn’t expect you to jump the gun.”

The main event would begin with the mysterious warehouse; this was only a showcase of Wasranel’s abilities. Scorpion had learned the limits of his ability the hard way.

After waiting for the exhausted Scorpion to catch her breath, the group continued running through the city toward the warehouses.

CHAPTER 20

A FACILITY SURROUNDED by high walls stood on the city's outskirts. Within was a cluster of countless secured warehouses.

The trio stood atop a building a fair distance from the facility and gazed at the site—about as big as a small village.

"Everyone says this place stores a lot of Melville Commerce's goods. Nobody said anything about any ruins, though," Scorpion murmured, apparently disappointed. For all her skill at espionage, she hadn't been able to infiltrate the site without help.

"It is only very likely," said Mira. "I can't guarantee that they're in there. Even if they are, you had already found the fragments. It would've only been a matter of time until you found this."

If Mira hadn't run into Scorpion at that shop, Scorpion would have purchased the fog-covered fragments, found where they had come from, and eventually hit upon the location of the War-Torn Burial Ground. In fact, they had only found this cluster of warehouses thanks to Scorpion's investigation.

Mira's consoling was successful. Scorpion stood tall and proud. "Prepare yourselves, Melville Commerce!"

Behind them, Wasranel surveyed the cluster of warehouses with a smile. "Broadcasting the fact that they have valuables and using overt security? The best security is *obscurity*."

* * *

The group jumped down from the roof and walked toward the facility. The entrance was open, protected by two armed guards. Beside the entrance was an unfamiliar device that looked like a satellite antenna made from glass balls. Scorpion said it was a magic-sensing device.

The group walked straight up to it. Not one security guard reacted.

They pressed on, getting close enough to hear the guards' idle chitchat. They were talking about dinner. Their conversation included how nice yakitori and liquor were together, how they liked rich ramen, and how one had a craving for a hefty yakiniku beef bowl.

Mira heard a rumble from behind her. She turned around to find Scorpion desperately avoiding eye contact.

"Will it be able to conceal our magic along with our growling bellies?" Mira asked as she set off toward the entrance. Wasranel and Scorpion followed, and the group sailed right past the guards.

They had evaded the checkpoint with ease, and the device failed to notice their presence. They were in.

Scorpion looked behind them and grinned happily. The guards hadn't reacted at all.

"Wooow. So easy!"

"Thanks for not throwing any rocks this time," Mira teased with a smirk. Scorpion only protested with a silent pout.

"So, where do you think the War-Torn Burial Ground is?" Wasranel asked, trying to change the subject.

The place was full of neatly organized brick storehouses. In the darkness of the warehouse compound, streetlights set at regular intervals lit the silhouettes of each row of five.

The level stone pavement extended far ahead, where they could see many patrolling security guards. And because it was so quiet, the dim, swaying light of their lanterns made for an eerie sight, as if the compound was guarded by Will o' the Wisps.

Mira surveyed the warehouses—which looked to be completely uniform—and asked Scorpion, "About that guard who you said sold the fragments. Do you know which warehouse he came from?" Otherwise, it would take all night to search every one of them for the entrance to the ruins.

"Ahh... I was just watching the entrance back then." If the guard had unearthed it and gone straight to sell it, one could assume that they would have come from the entrance

of the warehouse. But there had been no way for her to see the entire facility at the time, so watching the front gate was the best she could do.

"It seems we have no choice," Mira muttered. Then she realized something and looked around again.

"Mira, what's the matter? Have we been spotted?" Scorpion tensed up and stood on guard.

"No... It's the guards' movements. I can't help but notice..." Mira followed the lanterns in the distance with her eyes. Scorpion followed suit, paying close attention to their patterns.

Mira knew something was off. With Wasranel, they jumped to the roof of a storehouse and strained their eyes to see into the distance.

Less than a minute later, Scorpion said, "Ah!"

There were many guards—more than enough to patrol the whole facility. But for some reason, none of the patrols came near the entrance. Perhaps that was because the two at the gate could cover it well enough. Or perhaps their route had already passed through there.

But Mira's intuition said something else was going on. As she stood on the roof, she followed the lantern light to watch their paths.

There were two guards patrolling in the general direction of the entrance, but for some reason, all of the others were clustered farther back. They must have been a reason they needed more security there.

"This may be the ticket," Mira mused.

"Yeah, for sure!"

"I see. So that's it." Wasranel had noticed it as well.

Having found a destination, the gang jumped back onto the path and ran.

* * *

Finally, Mira and the others set foot in the heavily guarded area. They leisurely walked up to a small window and peeked inside a warehouse, thanks to Wasranel's abilities.

The streetlight's illumination stretched into the building, which was packed full of wooden boxes large and small. It was the same as the other warehouses they'd seen so far, but the number of boxes was clearly different.

"Hrmm. Odd."

"Yeah. These aren't warehouses."

Mira and Scorpion realized that these buildings must have some different purpose. For inside were not wooden boxes, but *tables*.

They looked to be living spaces. Mira searched with her Biometric Scan and found two signals inside.

"Guard housing, maybe?" Scorpion said after getting a good look at everything she could through the small window.

That was plausible; the security here patrolled night and day, so they would need shift workers. It was more efficient if they simply lived in the secure area. It would make reinforcement of key points easier, too.

"It could be, but it doesn't quite look like that to me..." Mira wondered if this *really* was security guard housing. Her eyes were drawn to the clothes drying in the corner of the room. Scorpion asked if something was on her mind, and Mira pointed to the clothing. "That laundry... Doesn't it all look like women's clothes? Especially the underwear—it has a bunny pattern on the back. That is clearly underwear meant for little girls!"

It was hard to see in the dark, but Mira's detective work had turned up puzzling evidence. It wouldn't be unusual for the guards to have girlfriends, but surely they wouldn't have their families here.

"Umm... Is that really underwear? And do they even make underwear just for kids?" Scorpion's response came as a surprise to the eager summoner.

"Y... yes? Is it... not?" Her confidence wavered. Maybe in this world, women of all ages wore underwear with patterns of bunnies on the back.

But in truth, it was Scorpion who lacked understanding of normal panties.

"I dunno," she replied. "I've never tried wearing any other kinds of underwear than what you saw back in the inn room."

Mira cast her mind back to the black shorts from Scorpion's suitcase. It seemed like that was the true version of underwear in the cat girl's mind.

"Functional, but not very enticing..." Mira gazed at Scorpion in disappointment before launching into a long lecture...

According to her, panties had a mysterious charm that worked its wonders even when they could not be seen—for the *knowledge* of their existence alone had a powerful effect. But that only made fashion even more important. Of course, she did not mention that the ultimate reason for choosing fashionable underwear was to make it exciting when someone *did* get to see them.

"Then do you wear panties like those, Mira?" Scorpion asked, infected by Mira's enthusiasm. She had been subjected to relentless military training since childhood, so she was unfamiliar with femininity. But her friends had dropped some hints along the lines of what Mira just said.

In the end, it seemed that femininity somehow revolved around panties.

"Don't be silly. I've found something even sexier." Mira showed off her own baseless confidence and flipped up her skirt. In the faint light, one could see her fair thighs. A little higher, and the region normally hidden by her skirt came into view, revealing the perfect contrast between her fair skin and designer panties.

Scorpion squatted down, took a good look, and reached a hand up to feel Mira's underwear. She was astounded by the difference. This was truly a revelation.

"Wow! Those're nothing like mine. Would I be more seductive if I wore something like this?"

"Now you're cooking!" Mira agreed wholeheartedly, giving Scorpion the final push to up her undergarment game.

The two made plans to go shopping together soon as they walked to the next storage building. Whether it was housing or not, it seemed unrelated to the ruins.

Wasranel followed after them, stone-faced.

* * *

"Hrmm. This doesn't seem to be a warehouse, either."

The next building they looked into had the outward appearance of a warehouse, but instead of tables, the small window revealed a rectangular hole in the center. The interior was brightly lit as well.

"For real. There are guards inside, too. Suspicious..." Scorpion looked the whole place up and down. She narrowed her eyes at the tight security and smirked evilly.

They decided that this was worth investigating right away. Without hesitation, Mira put her hand on the door and pushed.

"Ah!" Scorpion gasped. There were guards inside; if they opened the door, their presence would surely be revealed.

However, the door did not open, although Mira both pushed and pulled. It seemed it was locked.

"Jeez, you scared me," Scorpion complained with a sigh of relief.

Mira paused to explain that, as with Scorpion's suitcase, the total concealment could also hide the opening and closing of the door. Scorpion recalled all the strenuous work she'd put into perfecting her craft and gazed at Wasranel in despair.

"Oh. Cool, I guess," she muttered dismally.

"Now, what should we do about this?" Mira wondered aloud. No matter how powerful the spirit of stealth's concealment was, it couldn't get them past a locked door.

"This is an awfully intricate lock." Holding a slender metal rod, Scorpion peeked into the keyhole and tried picking it. But after a while, she stood back up and said, "Not gonna happen." According to Scorpion, the lock was as secure as a castle's treasure vault.

They wouldn't be able to open the front door. The gang tried circling around in search of a back door, but they found nothing and had no choice but to return to the front.

Mira took a long look at the door and said, “It seems we must use our last resort here.” She then slowly raised her right hand.

“Last resort? Mira, what are you doing?” Scorpion imagined that it would be child’s play for Mira’s slender arm to blow the door right off its hinges.

The summoner balled up her fist and put it against the door.

“Why don’t we just knock?” Mira said and mimed knocking on the door.

There were guards inside the storehouse. If she knocked, they would think that somebody had come, open the door, and look outside. They could use that opportunity to slip in.

“You know, that’s not a bad idea...”

It certainly beat searching for a key that they did not know the whereabouts of. And destroying the building would only notify the enemy of their presence.

If they were *really* lucky, the guards might even think they’d just imagined it.

“You don’t think they’ll just poke their heads out, look around, and slam the door?” Scorpion asked. The idea was simple and effective, but she wasn’t sure that it would go quite as planned.

If they were just checking for someone at the door, they would only need to open it enough to look outside. And if the person who opened it did not move from that spot, it would be impossible to slip past without making contact.

Mira grinned and thrust a hand into her pouch. “That is where this comes in.” She held out a silver five thousand ducat coin.

“We’re... bribing them? They do steal from ruins, so I guess they love money. But it seems a little cheap.”

“Not quite,” she said as she guided her companions a short distance from the door. “We put this... here.” She made sure the silver coin glinted under the streetlight. Then, she returned to the door and puffed out her chest in satisfaction.

“Whooooa. Nice plan!” Scorpion said in understanding.

When the guards peeked out the door, they would catch sight of the coin under the light. And if they were avaricious, they would certainly go pick it up. *Everybody* loved money. It would be enough to make them risk abandoning their post for just a few moments.

"Now all that's left is to knock!" Scorpion stood in front of the door.

Wasranel warned them that to allow the noise of the knocking to reach the guards, he would have to undo his concealment effect for a brief span. They would have to be wary of their surroundings to avoid being seen.

"Roger!" Scorpion replied. Shortly after, faint light appeared around the corner. They spotted a security guard rounding the building.

"Hang on," Mira said. "Someone's patrolling here."

The two waited patiently for the guard, who walked past with a yawn. His path took him directly in front of them.

"Ooh, a silver coin. Lucky me." He suddenly stopped, looked all around, and put the shimmering silver coin into his pocket. Then, he left with light footsteps.

"That *jerk...*" Mira watched, astonished, as he left. Raw sorrow seemed to emanate from the girl, and tears formed in her eyes. Scorpion and Wasranel just grinned wryly behind her.

CHAPTER 21

THE COIN-PILFERING security guard's light eventually disappeared behind another building. Mira went to retrieve a second silver coin from her pouch with shaking hands.

Scorpion gently pushed her hand away. "Umm, here, I'll cover this one. Okay?"

The summoner did not refuse.

After confirming that there were no more guards about, Scorpion swiftly set the silver coin under the streetlight and returned.

Now they just needed to draw someone out before another guard walked by. Once they did that, they would use the opportunity to charge inside. At least now they knew the silver coin was more than enticing enough.

Scorpion stood before the door again and searched her surroundings. She listened carefully, catching snatches of conversation from within. She couldn't hear what they were talking about, but it seemed they were in high spirits.

"I'm gonna do it... okay?" The cat girl raised her hand while Mira gazed motionlessly at the coin. It seemed she had yet to recover. "Miraaa? Hey! I'm about to knock!" Scorpion shook Mira's shoulder and spoke directly into her ear.

The summoner seemed to finally notice her; she turned slowly and nodded, still utterly inconsolable.

There were no signs of guards approaching. Scorpion temporarily left the concealment and knocked twice on the door. The response was immediate: the voices inside stopped. Noting that, Scorpion knocked louder and slower this time.

"Who's there?" a guard called out from inside.

The first step of their plan had succeeded. Scorpion dashed back into the concealment radius and stood with Mira and Wasranel.

Four people began arguing inside.

"Well, go look."

"Hell no, you do it."

Just then, another faint light appeared from behind another storehouse. It was the light of a patrolling guard—a sign that they were coming this way.

For guards, they're awfully lazy!

Lazy guards were traditionally ideal for infiltrators, but their laziness was a problem for Mira's gang at the moment. It was beginning to look like they'd waste another coin. Mira panicked.

Just then, someone cut through the squabbling. "Hell, you're the closest one. You do it."

Finally, a security guard moved. But the patrol was fast approaching. Soon, they would turn another corner and step onto the path where the coin lay.

The door opened.

"Huh. No one's out here." A guard's face poked out; now, all he had to do was notice the coin and get out of the way. But the patrolman was still approaching, and the coin would be conspicuous to both of them.

The suspense was awful.

The man poking his head out of the half-open door looked around in confusion. Meanwhile, Mira and Scorpion faced him head-on—although he naturally could not see them.

"Oh, hey?"

He flung the door open before scampering toward the streetlight. It seemed their plan had worked.

"There, now's our chance. Let's go."

"Yeah!"

Mira and Scorpion seized the opportunity with Wasranel close on their heels. Success—they were in.

"Whoa. Too bright..." Scorpion groaned.

Inside was a stone floor with a squared-off staircase that led deep underground. As they'd seen from outside, it was too empty to be a storehouse. Yet, excluding the man who'd gone to snatch the coin, there were three security guards inside.

And despite the late hour, the stone-walled space was brightly lit.

"Hey, what're you doing out here? What've you got?"

Suddenly, there was a voice outside. They turned around and saw that the patrolman had accosted their guard.

In response, the guard replied honestly that he'd found it on the ground. But the patrolman pretended to fish around his pants pockets.

"I dropped that. Thanks for finding it, bud." He snatched it away from the guard and began walking again, muttering, "Heh heh, free money."

"Don't you lie, punk! That was mine!" Mira shouted at the patrolman, fortunately protected by the concealment.

Next to her, Scorpion said quietly, "Er, it was actually mine..."

The guard glared hatefully at the patrolman as he left. It wasn't impossible that maybe he'd dropped it; this path was on his route. But the guard knew that this man had just gambled away all of his money earlier that day. He didn't have a hundred ducats, let alone a silver coin.

But he couldn't push too hard; the patrolman was his senior, after all.

"Ugh, good grief. Must've been the wind or the birds." The guard returned and clicked his tongue as he slammed the door shut and locked it.

"Hey, it happens. Sucks, though," one of the guards tried to console him, having heard

the exchange. The others simply teased him.

"I hope that damn gambling addict loses everything," the man said, irritated, as he plopped down in a seat in the corner.

The other three guards mumbled in agreement before returning to their own posts.

A chair was positioned at each corner of the room. The guards were generally unbusy, each having brought books to pass the time.

Most importantly, they hadn't noticed the intruders at all. Satisfied, Mira looked around until her eyes caught on an orb hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room. It looked like some kind of a shimmering ball.

I'd bet that has the power of a light spirit in it.

Light filled the area around them without casting shadows. As someone familiar with the sight, Mira was certain she knew the source. At the same time, she thought to herself, *How can I so clearly perceive the power of the spirit?*

Her *senses* had screamed that it was a spirit the moment she'd laid eyes on it, as if it was the light spirit itself. It was like a stroke of intuition instead of any sort of logical thought.

This was a sudden new sense beyond her five existing ones. What if...

Could this be... the effect of the Spirit King's blessing?

Had she acclimated to the blessing already? She did not know whether it was a matter of time or if there was some condition, but Mira decided to accept it for now.

Mira pointed at the orb and asked, "Scorpion, that orb has a light spirit's power sealed within. Are such objects common?" She'd only known spirit equipment to contain the power of spirits, but perhaps in modern times it was usual to see them in more mundane items.

But Scorpion shook her head. "Using light spirits as a... light source? We'd *never* use spirits like that." It seemed an incredibly wasteful and disrespectful idea to her.

"Hrmm. Is that so?"

"Oh, but I heard this one person used to travel with someone born of a light spirit and an elf. He kept them around to use as a light source in dungeons or something. Uzume told me about it one time," Scorpion continued.

"I-I see..." Mira said shortly and turned her attention away from the light source.

Apparently, Kagura had been telling tales about Danblf and Cleos. When she heard the story that way, it made her feel bad for her former assistant.

Maybe I should try being nicer to him from now on...

"So, if this really is the power of a light spirit, then this place is even more suspicious," Scorpion said. "They're already under suspicion of having ties to Chimera, so if they have captive spirits, then it's basically confirmed."

Scorpion grinned fiercely at the light. As far as she was concerned this was undeniable proof of the connection between Melville Commerce and Chimera Clausen.

"It seems there's no doubt of their connection. I'd say we've struck gold early." Mira peered into the dark staircase in the center of the room with a smirk.

Scorpion looked as well and replied excitedly, "Oh, you're right! This is totally the way in."

An empty warehouse, a hole in the center, a staircase leading underground. The War-Torn Burial Ground was an underground catacomb, and given what they'd learned so far, it was incredibly likely that this staircase was the entrance.

Now certain, the two exchanged a nod and stepped forth.

* * *

Perhaps thanks to the spirit light up above, the stone stairs were well-lit even hundreds of meters down. Now the landing was visible about a hundred meters ahead. When they finally reached the bottom, a tunnel stretched before them. It was so long that the end was lost in the darkness.

Scorpion sighed. "There's still more..."

They continued walking for twenty more minutes until they stopped in front of a black

wall... or at least it looked that way.

"What's the deal with this?" Scorpion furrowed her brow and peered into the black before timidly pushing against it—only to watch her hand pass directly through. "Maybe... this is just the end of the light source, or something?"

It was a surprise that the light could reach this far, but perhaps even light spirits' powers had their limits. When she pulled her hand back, it seemed fine.

Despite the abundant light behind them, darkness filled the area up ahead. Mira stood before the boundary and tried using her Ethereal Arts to create light. It immediately brushed away the darkness and revealed the outline of what lay ahead. The group gasped in unison.

The path covered by darkness was *black*. While the tunnel to this point had been gray with the stone reinforcing it, the ground, walls, and ceiling ahead were all pitch black.

"They say the War-Torn Burial Ground is a catacomb far underground," Mira noted. "Perhaps it begins up ahead?"

"Seems like it..."

The black tunnel exuded an ominous air. Mira and Scorpion sensed that and grinned at one another; they were drawing closer and closer to Chimera Clausen's secrets.

"There may be some other reason why the light cuts off here," Mira suggested, gazing at the boundary on the ground. Rather than this just happening to be the edge of the light spirit's range, perhaps something was *blocking* it.

As they gazed into the dark, Wasranel finally spoke up. "Pardon me, girls?"

"Hm? What's the matter?" Mira turned to him.

"My apologies, but it seems I will be unable to go any further." His brow furrowed in frustration.

"What...?"

It was clear from Wasranel's words and attitude that his inability to go on was not due to cowardice. Suddenly she understood. "I see," she murmured. "This area is full

of that curse, isn't it?"

"It is. I've been familiar with that curse for years now, and there's no mistaking it." The stark line where the spirit light stopped was because the curse simply erased it. Not only could Wasranel not enter, Mira would also be unable to summon any spirits from this point on.

"Huh? So, does that mean we won't get the concealment anymore?" asked Scorpion. It was late at night, but that didn't mean nobody would be there.

"I'm afraid not."

"Dang..." Scorpion slumped over sadly; they'd been on the easy road up to here, but this was as far as it would take them.

Now was the time to show off her own skills... but after experiencing Wasranel's awe-inspiring total concealment, it was tough going back.

"Well, we've no choice. I'll call on you again when it is time to go." Mira dismissed Wasranel and strode forward, unbothered. If anyone was up ahead, she would have plenty of warning from her Biometric Scan. Magic-detecting sensors were large and conspicuous as well, so they would be easy to spot.

She just needed to be mindful of her light being seen. Mira set her ethereal light to the minimum brightness and walked onward into the War-Torn Burial Ground. Scorpion followed close behind, dialing her senses to high alert as she went.

CHAPTER 22

THEY CONTINUED DOWN the pitch-black passage until they spotted faintly wavering lamplight in the distance. Someone was up ahead—Mira doused her light and prepared for battle as she pressed on.

But when they drew near, it became clear that the light was just an unattended fixture. It was quite lacking compared to the light spirit's illumination, unreliable and eerie. And instead of being placed at regular intervals, these were seemingly placed at random, adding to the spookiness.

However, nobody would set up and maintain pointless light sources. Mira and Scorpion followed the lights farther in.

Along the way, they looked into the sparse rooms and searched for clues. But though this was supposedly a burial ground, they didn't find any skeletons or grave goods. Perhaps because of that, they found no security guards as they warily searched deeper and deeper.

* * *

Twenty minutes after they'd entered the catacomb of the War-Torn Burial Ground, Mira and Scorpion came across a staircase leading yet deeper underground. It was only a hundred meters down, but the stair heights were irregular, and the small blue flames along the walls flickered uncannily.

"I wouldn't be surprised if these stairs took us straight to the underworld," said Mira casually.

Scorpion put her hands over her furry cat ears with a worried look and sidled closer. "Mira, shut up..."

She was fine with the dark but... but the occult was a bridge too far.

They gradually descended until they arrived at a wide-open area.

"Now we come to the heart of the mystery," Mira murmured.

It was built like an amphitheater, with a staircase leading to the lower level below. To the left and right were spiraling staircases that circled the central open space. Along those walkways were many openings to small rooms. At a glance, it became clear that this was the true center of the burial ground.

"So, all of these holes are supposed to be graves?" Mira looked all around and sighed at the extraordinary burial place. Just how many corpses lay within?

The amphitheater was filled with bright light courtesy of a tower that stood in the very middle of the giant room.

"Seems like that place is really special, huh?" Scorpion gazed up at the tower, which extended all the way to the ceiling. She was right; it was obviously significant, with myriad figures and symbols etched into its surface.

"Agreed. We should search for clues."

The lowest level of the tower had an opening which seemed to be an entrance to its interior. It seemed to be the nexus of the War-Torn Burial Ground—it would surely contain some valuable clues. The two proceeded to the central tower. But when they finally reached the clearing at the bottom and stood before it, Mira suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"Somebody is inside."

Something had triggered Mira's Biometric Scan. Though obstacles could interfere with its range, she had felt no responses other than Scorpion's all along the way. But now she had found someone inside the tower. It seemed they hadn't moved for some time, and they seemed to be above the duo.

"Oh, they're up above, huh?" Scorpion focused her senses and listened carefully. It was already late into the night, and there were no patrolling guards.

Who could it be? The two wondered if someone was illegally stealing artifacts again.

But if *someone* was there, then that must mean that *something* was there.

"I would say this merits investigation," Mira declared.

"For sure!"

They might find a valuable clue. The pair suppressed their rash impulses and stepped warily into the tower.

The inside was bright as well, with a spiral staircase leading up. There was a central room on each floor with an entrance to the staircase. The layout meant there was only one way up and one way down, leaving a chance they might stumble into the stranger unprepared—but their keen senses would hopefully prevent that.

They tiptoed through the second and third floors, arriving at the fourth. The stranger was ahead.

Mira and Scorpion stuck close to the wall and peered into the room.

In the fourth-floor room were three coffins. Two of them were open, while one was still closed. There were hollows in the walls where the coffins had been stored. And it was clear who had dragged them out—inside was a suspicious individual wearing a mask that concealed their features completely.

Hm? That seems to be spirit equipment. Its element is fire, and its effect is... probably reflection? And it's yin again... Noticing the person's coat, Mira immediately intuited its traits. She could definitely discern the effects of spirit equipment just by looking at it; this was clearly the effect of the Spirit King's blessing.

But something seemed off. This place was full of oni curses that kept Wasranel from entering—so why was that spirit equipment safe?

“Making me... do this... so darn late at night!” the masked figure grumbled angrily as they wrenched open the third coffin’s lid. Based on the high soprano of their voice, they seemed to be a woman.

Mira stopped thinking for a moment and focused her attention on the stranger’s actions. After opening the coffin, the woman, whose short, purple hair was visible above the mask, grumbled some other complaints and rummaged around inside.

Mira watched for a moment before backing away. She made a *go down* signal to Scorpion and descended the stairs. From there, the two hid in the third-floor room and began a hushed strategy meeting.

“She’s not a security guard, right?” Scorpion asked.

"Right. The coat she's wearing is a powerful piece of yin spirit equipment. And it isn't weakened even in the thick of this curse. It may be even stronger than what that elite from the other day had with him."

The woman on the fourth floor didn't look especially strong at a glance, but her equipment screamed that she was no normal foe. Her coat emanated spiritual power that felt equal to that of the Chimera Clausen elite whom Mira had fought so recently.

"If she's really that well-equipped, then I guess she's no underling, right?"

"Right. And if she's here, we have to assume she's with Chimera."

Chimera's relationship with the War-Torn Burial Ground was all but confirmed. A suspicious masked woman was doing some unknown work inside, and she had spirit equipment equal to or stronger than that of a Chimera elite—all evidence that led to an obvious conclusion.

"Do you think... this is our chance to bag an elite?" Scorpion asked. She narrowed her eyes like a hunter, focusing her senses on the floor above. The woman had not moved; she seemed to still be rummaging through the same coffin.

"The ideal chance, I'd say."

It was their opportunity to take another crack at the job they'd failed to accomplish before. The two exchanged slight smiles, then ascended the stairs slowly, ready to investigate the woman further.

* * *

When they returned, the masked woman seemed to be gathering something from within the coffin. Mira and Scorpion remained pressed to the wall, each girl peeking a single eye around the doorframe to examine every detail. After watching for a while, they pulled back and returned to the room below to resume their meeting.

This time, they discussed their angle of attack. But they were still befuddled; the unknown woman didn't appear to have any weapons on her, making it impossible to discern her class. Even worse, Mira's ability to examine others' stats only worked if they could see the target's face, and this stranger was wearing a mask.

Combat against other humans always came down to quick wit and application of

strategy, so Mira and Scorpion would be at a disadvantage if they didn't know who they'd be up against. But the coat the woman wore was so thick that it was impossible to tell what lay under it, and they couldn't tell from her appearance whether she was a warrior or mage.

"We mustn't underestimate their gear. If she has some spirit blade that she could use despite the curse... the damage would be enormous in this enclosed space."

Mira thought back on the flame spirit blade the elite had wielded. If something of that strength was unleashed in here, they would be left with no escape and a very troublesome enemy.

Mira explained the information she'd gleaned to Scorpion. Spirit equipment's abilities varied based on the power of the spirit. That was important to keep in mind for both weapons *and* armor. Especially so for a coat possibly bolstered by a flame spirit; half-baked attacks would deal no damage and result in a scorching counter.

Even without knowledge of the enemy's weapon, Mira was confident that she could trounce her. But they had to keep her from going on the defensive and possibly fleeing before they could capture her. A captured elite would not *necessarily* yield useful information—but this situation called for careful action that allowed them to keep their options open.

They had to end this with a single decisive strike. In the silence, Mira racked her brain for the best way to accomplish this.

"I dunno how much spirit equipment could change things, but I don't think she's very strong," said Scorpion. Despite her carefully noncommittal phrasing, she looked confident.

"Oho. Is that so?" Mira asked.

"Yeah. I watched her posture, footwork, and so on. She doesn't look like she's trained." Scorpion's judgment was based on her lifetime of experience and training.

"Fascinating. So, you think we'll find an opening to take advantage of?"

Scorpion's observational abilities were so advanced that even Mira had to acknowledge them. She put a finger to her chin and began devising a strategy. It was then that Scorpion produced a ball from her pocket.

"I bet we could suppress her before she can deploy her spirit equipment. In fact... Mind if I try something?" Scorpion curved her lips in a mischievous grin.

"Hm? What are you thinking?" Mira gazed at the black ball with knitted brows as her companion toyed with it. At a glance, it looked like deer poo... but it emitted a sweet scent that only served to confuse her further.

"As you'd expect from a country with a completely free market, they sell all *kinds* of stuff here. This is a sleep drug I made from some rare materials I found in the city's shops. Light it on fire, and it starts to emit smoke. Just one whiff should put even grand bears to sleep for a whole day." Scorpion emphasized the *should*, but she puffed out her chest like Mira always did. She must have been quite sure of it.

"*Should?* Have you not tried it?"

"The materials are so rare that I couldn't get my hands on them before, so this is my first time making it. But I followed the recipe exactly, so I think it'll work!"

Mira looked to her dubiously, which elicited a slight twitch in Scorpion's self-assured facade... but her confidence didn't seem to waver much.

The source of her surety lay in the recipe. Every item in the formula was extremely effective, and this particular drug supposedly had a long history of working well.

"Very well. If it doesn't work, we can simply take her down as previously planned."

If the drug worked, their objective would be a piece of cake. If it didn't, then they just went back to Plan A, Mira concluded. Besides, it would be a good chance to observe Scorpion's spy techniques.

There was some spirit equipment that raised one's resistance to status effects, but given her new and improved blessing from the Spirit King, Mira had sensed that the woman in question carried no such items. She presumed that the sleeping drug would be more than effective. And if it wasn't, she could just use her Demon's Eye and abundant mana to subdue this foe by force.

"But we do have another issue," Mira noted. "Even if this goes well, taking her back will pose some difficulties. The guards at the entrance must be aware that she's in here. If she disappears now, it'll be noticed."

An executive enters, nobody returns... There were four guards stationed at the entrance; no doubt one of them had seen this woman going into the ruins. If she failed to return, someone would come to search for her. And if they found traces of a battle here, they would realize she had been abducted and tighten up security even more. The investigation of Melville Commerce was ongoing—if they incited a panic here, it would only make their job more difficult.

However, leaving traces of a struggle was no issue for Mira and Scorpion—if they could deal with her before a struggle occurred.

“Should we wait for her outside?” Scorpion suggested. “We can probably buy a few days if she goes missing *after* she leaves.”

“True. We may get a chance to capture her if she’s still alone when she leaves. But it may make things more difficult...”

If she disappeared from here, the guards would notice and raise the alarm by tomorrow at latest. But if they snatched her after she left Melville Commerce’s compound, no one here would have any idea that she’d been abducted. It would make it possible to cover up the abduction’s relationship with the ruins.

Technically, this was a kidnapping. It would have to be done without anyone seeing. Total concealment would help immensely, but they were still up against Chimera Clausen. Putting too much faith in a spirit’s power could easily be their downfall.

After considering their options, they decided. Their current situation—no prying eyes, nowhere to escape, and nobody to help her—was an ideal opportunity.

Moreover, their target looked to be a Chimera elite who might have valuable knowledge... a source of information that the Isuzu Alliance would do anything to get their hands on. They had to take action while they could.

Scorpion fell deep into thought for a moment. Finally, she said, “I’ve got an idea. Wanna hear it?”

CHAPTER 23

“OHO, INCREDIBLE. Can you really do that? Perfect.”

Amazed by Scorpion’s versatility, Mira agreed to her idea. If this was the most likely place to catch her, then Scorpion’s plan would deal with what came next. If Scorpion did her job well, nobody would notice the disappearance, and Melville Commerce would be none the wiser. Scorpion’s spycraft would come in handy.

They got right to work. The duo left the room and cautiously made their way back to the fourth floor.

Inside the room, the woman was still searching through the coffin. But one thing was noticeably different: the white sack next to her was now stuffed full. It seemed she’d been transferring her loot into the bag.

The two peeked in from the door, got a good look at the enemy’s current position, and nodded to each other. With that as her signal, Scorpion lit the ball on fire and rolled it like a marble toward her.

It stopped perfectly at her feet and began emitting white smoke. Mira and Scorpion backed away, keeping the entrance

well within view. They had to avoid breathing in the smoke themselves, after all.

* * *

After watching for a full five minutes, Mira asked impatiently, “So, did it work?”

Things were surprisingly quiet. In those five long minutes, nothing had happened—no woman noticing the smoke and running away, no kicking the ball out of the room, not the slightest resistance.

“It should’ve burned out by now... I think.”

The drug was powerful. Even if the elite had noticed it and tried to get away, once she breathed it in, it would be too late to save her from a day’s sleep. Anyone would notice

smoke suddenly rising from under them or a totally new smell, so even an amateur ought to react a little. Yet they hadn't sensed the slightest response from within the room.

If this person was a Chimera elite, it was entirely possible that she'd held her breath this whole time.

The two became even more wary; she might be a difficult opponent, after all. They prepared for battle as they slowly approached. Mira and Scorpion stopped beside the door and, with perfect timing, they charged together into the room.

Mira promptly fixed a summoning point, and Scorpion whipped out her dagger and took a low and ready stance. But in the next instant...

"Well... That's anticlimactic," Mira sighed.

The woman was right next to the coffin where they'd seen her before—except now, she was slumped in sleep against the side of it. She breathed in and out in a comfortable rhythm, and a strand of drool hung from her lip. She was fast asleep.

But what if her strategy was to feign sleep and take them by surprise? The thought crossed Scorpion's mind, so she carefully and silently approached from behind. Once she was close enough, she sprang, holding the woman down.

There was no resistance.

Now lying flat on the floor, the woman didn't move a muscle even when Scorpion pressed down hard on her. She poked and tickled but got no response. Scorpion's final analysis: the drug had worked.

"Now that's truth in advertising!"

The recipe for the sleep drug had been passed down in Scorpion's village. It hadn't given the woman even a moment to struggle. Scorpion found herself a little stunned by just how well it worked, but settled on throwing out her chest proudly with a big smirk. What mattered was that *it worked*.

Enemy neutralized, Mira and Scorpion promptly set to work. They first removed the woman's mask, baring her face. Mira's spirits were lifted by the sight of her pleasing features.

Ooh. She's quite the beauty!

"Not very striking for an elite, huh?" Scorpion muttered, peering at her face. It seemed Scorpion had different tastes.

Sure, the woman may not have been beautiful enough to turn *all* heads, but she had a certain charm that attracted Mira. Her short purple hair was glossy and well-maintained, giving her an air of neatness and intellect. Yet deep sleep—drooling all the while—gave her the charm of youthful innocence. She was just the kind of girl to be popular with certain types of men.

Now that they'd seen her face, Mira and Scorpion began stripping her of her possessions. Scorpion removed her spirit-blessed coat, and Mira took off her shoes with a lascivious grin. Once her coat was off, Mira grinned even deeper and pulled down the woman's slacks.

After stripping the woman down to her underwear, Scorpion took a bundle of cloth from her toolkit. The item, covered in what looked like magical symbols and patterns, was a restraining tool called binding cloth. Those bound and wrapped by it had 50 percent of their power sealed, making resistance difficult. It was like police handcuffs; many security officers kept one on hand.

But the binding cloth used by Isuzu had been powered up by Wise Man Kagura's own Celestial Arts. It sealed a full 90 percent of the target's abilities and made it all but impossible to escape.

"I'll tie her up. Mira, lift her legs for me," Scorpion instructed.

"Oh, I certainly will!" Mira readily took the opportunity to savor the warmth of the woman's skin as she lifted up her legs. Truly, these were the actions of a pervert.

But nobody was there to notice Mira's ulterior motives. Even the depraved look on her face was not enough to betray her true identity, except to those who knew her already. Scorpion was none the wiser.

"Keep her just like that for me," she said as she bound the woman's legs. "Okay, done! Now help me tie her hands behind her back."

"Oh, I certainly will!" Mira replied. She gingerly set down the woman's feet and moved to her upper body. Mira straddled her, wrapped her small hands around the woman's

chest, and lifted her up.

"Umm... Okay. Interesting technique... I'll start tying, so just keep doing that, I guess." Scorpion had assumed that they would simply flip the woman onto her stomach, but she appreciated Mira's *enthusiasm* as she quickly tied the cloth around the woman's hands.

Mira, meanwhile, appreciated the woman's body heat. "Of course! You can count on me!"

Scorpion's dexterous hands had the woman trussed up in mere minutes. After a few other finishing touches, their mark was fully restrained.

Mira took a step back and surveyed their work. No part of the woman especially stood out, but she was curvy in all the right places. Clad only in her skivvies, smooth skin on display, arms and legs bound... and the pièce de résistance, a gag in her mouth.

Truly, this was less than wholesome.

This is what happens when you join the likes of Chimera! Mira tried to convince herself of her righteousness as she ogled the poor woman.

"Okay, on to the plan..." After spot-checking to make sure that the restraints were properly secured, Scorpion began stripping herself. "I'll need you to hang on to these for me, Mira." She handed over her clothing.

"Right. I won't let them out of my sight!" Mira said firmly and accepted the still-warm clothes. She watched closely as Scorpion donned the clothing their mark had been wearing.

Scorpion's undergarments were a pair of tight black shorts and a short black tank top. Neither was particularly sexy on its own, but when combined with her toned body, they highlighted her fit physique despite their simplicity. The result was a surprising level of sex appeal.

This is just as wonderful, Mira thought to herself as she gazed dumbly at her partner and placed the clothes in her Item Box. As it turned out, Scorpion's Item Box was at maximum capacity from her various tools; that was why she'd carried her clothes in a suitcase.

Best of all, she did not notice Mira's prying eyes as she got dressed.

* * *

"I... I, I... I? There, that's it. I... am... not... Scooorpion." After changing clothes, Scorpion practiced her voice. The tone changed with each word until it sounded like someone else's voice entirely—the voice of the girl sleeping next to her. She had memorized and perfectly replicated it just from briefly listening in on the woman's earlier complaining.

"That's fantastic!" Mira was genuinely amazed. She was like a phantom thief from a novel.

"I've practiced imitations ever since I was a little girl." Happy to receive Mira's praise, Scorpion proudly donned the mask as the finishing touch. Her mimicry was flawless, far beyond the realm of mere imitation... but it seemed that was all in a day's work for Scorpion.

The strategy they had devised was for Scorpion to pretend to be the woman and leave. This would make the guards at the entrance think that she had simply gone home. They would no doubt testify to seeing her if it came to it. This would hide the fact that she'd been kidnapped while within the Melville Commerce compound and allow them to avoid alerting the enemy.

Fortunately, the woman had worn a mask that hid her entire face, making it quick work to hide the difference in their features. She was also about as tall as Scorpion, and the spy could mimic her voice. Now they could use this ideal situation to capture the elite *and* obscure their objective. This enterprise would not have gone nearly as well if Mira had tried to do this on her own.

While Scorpion gathered the woman's belongings and tools she'd brought, she suddenly looked into the coffin and beckoned Mira over. "Oh, Mira! Look at this."

"Hrm? What is it?"

She obediently approached and peered into the coffin. Inside lay a figure wrapped in a dirty, tattered cloth. Mira couldn't see what it was exactly, but she could guess its identity from a single glance.

A mummy.

But it was no ordinary mummy. Some of the cloth had been peeled away, likely by the woman's hands, revealing an arm shrouded in black mist.

"This mist... Does that mean...?" Surprised, Mira reached out and slowly peeled layers of cloth away from the mummy's head.

The closer she got to the head, the darker the cloth became. As she pulled off the final layer and exposed the corpse's face, something black spewed out.

It spurted out with enough force to take both girls by total surprise, sending Scorpion jumping back to the wall with a muffled, "Eeep!"

Mira's shoulders twitched, and though she had managed not to scream, she threw the cloth away and froze in place. She had been so tense as she focused on the mummy that the sudden dramatics were a huge shock. But it had only spewed that same black mist, which hit the ceiling and melted away into nothing.

"That scared me..." Scorpion complained. She laughed off the shock and approached the coffin again.

"Likewise. This is bad for the heart." Mira pouted and stared at the corpse.

This mummy had almost no skin remaining on its face. It might be better described as a skull under cloth. However, it was nothing like a normal skull—this one was as black as darkness. And though it no longer spewed any out of the coffin, it was still enveloped in more eerie black mist. Most striking of all, however, were the two horns on its brow.

It may have been human-shaped, but its skull made it clear that this was no human.

Scorpion gasped. "Could this be...?"

"So it seems. But then, that means all of this is..."

The question in their minds was answered. Mira turned from the mummy and looked into the recesses in the walls around her, all filled with coffins. The cursed black mist, a corpse with two horns... There was no doubt—this was an oni.

Mira enlisted Scorpion to help her search the other coffins. All were the same.

"I see. So, this was how they were able to defeat so many spirits." Mira looked down at the sack by her feet, checked the contents, and nodded in understanding. Inside were the fragments called "black mist ore"—in truth, the bones of long-dead oni.

These catacombs were an oni burial ground. The roots of the spirit-devouring curse—oni corpses—slept in great numbers here. Chimera Clausen had been able to suppress such powerful prey as spirits by using all these cursed items. And if the weapon Mira had snatched from the elite she'd fought was anything to go by, their research had progressed quite well.

Mira and Scorpion returned the cloth they'd pulled away, closed the coffins, and put them all back in their original positions. Then, they looked around to ensure they hadn't forgotten anything that might serve as evidence in case the enemy realized someone had been abducted from this room.

After her final checks, Mira surveyed the coffins present and thought, *I really can't just leave such a terrible curse untouched... but now is not the time.*

If she drew out Sanctia's true power through the Spirit King's blessing, she could exorcise the curse. That was why she'd used her free time to practice with the sword. But unfortunately, she hadn't felt it working yet.

She knew it would take more time. The Spirit King was a being beyond human reckoning, and Sanctia was his daughter. Mira had just contracted with them; she could barely use even their basic abilities, let alone their true power.

Someday, I will see that promise fulfilled.

But not today. Mira smiled with determination and swore an oath to the Spirit King's power within her.

CHAPTER 24

MIRA AND SCORPION had succeeded in capturing a supposed Chimera elite with much less difficulty than expected. After erasing any traces of their presence, they began the trek home in high spirits, leaving the War-Torn Burial Ground behind.

They made their way back through the long tunnel full of spirit light. Behind Mira was Wasranvel, who she'd resummoned, and behind *him* was a Dark Knight.

The Dark Knight was carrying the sleepy, underwear-clad woman. Mira couldn't have carried an unconscious person alone, woman or not. And they needed Scorpion to mimic the woman to show the guards that she'd left. That was where the Dark Knight came in. But with its large physique, it looked like the incarnation of a demon carrying a young woman to sacrifice.

After a twenty-minute walk through the tunnel and a climb up hundreds of meters of stairs, they returned to the empty storehouse. Scorpion lifted the hood of her coat to cover most of her masked face and emerged first; the concealed group followed close after.

If they left this place without issue, the first part of the plan would be successful. Mira watched tensely from behind.

When the disguised Scorpion appeared, one of the guards greeted her casually, "Hey, good work, kid. I know it's gotta be rough going in there so late."

Mira and Scorpion were confused by this kind of address. Should he not be referring to her as a superior?

Did Chimera Clausen elites and Melville Commerce security guards have a familiar relationship? Or was it that only the most elite security guards were placed in such a vital location? Or worse: was the woman actually a super low-ranked elite?

It was impossible to know right now. Scorpion quickly regained her composure and replied, "All part of the job."

"Careful on your way home." The guard by the door stood up, took out a key, and

opened the door. At least the disguise was working.

Scorpion stopped and replied rather slowly, "Yes, thank you," giving Mira and the others ample time to slip through before her. Once they'd exited, she passed through herself.

The cluster of warehouses seemed even darker now that Mira had gotten used to the spirit light. As she surveyed the area, she murmured in satisfaction, "That's done."

"Yep! We just gotta get through the compound's gate, and we're set," Scorpion replied. She straightened her mask and walked out the gate without hesitation.

This time, she made sure that the patrolmen saw her. She didn't avoid them enough to be suspicious, but neither did she stray close enough that she'd have to greet them. She hadn't had enough time to observe the woman, so she couldn't imitate her perfectly. It was best to avoid conversation lest she reveal any cracks in her disguise.

Yet she did her best to let as many people as possible see her. She would hopefully make them think that the disappearance was unrelated to the company.

Ten minutes or so later, they arrived at the compound entrance and proceeded through the magic-sensing barrier without breaking stride. But then disaster struck. Suddenly, countless marble-sized orbs of red light surrounded Scorpion where she stood.

She froze in surprise. The two gatekeepers, who still looked as bored as ever, turned around to stare at her. They sighed and walked over, evidently annoyed that the detector had reacted to her presence.

"Man, look at you. The detector got you again." One of them stopped in front of her and reached for her brow.

What was he planning? Her face was hidden by the mask now, but he would probably know she was a fake if he removed it. But if she ran, the game was *really* up. Scorpion braced herself, and Mira stood by for a battle.

The man's hand touched the mask and pressed it against her nose. She was pushed a few steps back.

"We keep telling you to press the switch *before* you go through."

The gatekeepers then turned around and returned to their post.

"Thanks. Sorry. Slipped my mind," Scorpion replied without missing a beat. It seemed the mask had a switch to nullify the mana detector. Before she knew it, the red orbs of light all around her were gone.

After thanking him both for kindly flipping the switch *and* not noticing that she was an imposter, Scorpion and her group passed through the main gate.

* * *

"So, I guess we've got them fooled?"

Once they reached a back alley a few blocks from Melville Commerce, Scorpion checked her surroundings and entered the total concealment field. She removed her hood and peeked at the face of the woman on the Dark Knight's shoulder. Then she smirked, already looking forward to making her cough up everything she knew about Chimera.

"We don't know how long that'll last," Mira warned. "Let's get her out of here... but to where? Should we take her to the inn?"

Like Scorpion, Mira looked the woman up and down—though for different reasons. A defenseless woman in her underwear, totally bound... Mira felt something stir inside.

"Yep. It's expensive, so it's got really good security. We can lock her up in our room for now," Scorpion answered, ignorant of Mira's dubious desires.

* * *

It was already past midnight, yet the lights of the city still shone. The streets remained just as busy as earlier. Mira and the gang continued to use the power of the spirit of stealth to hurtle across the rooftops and returned to their inn without anyone catching sight of them.

They entered confidently through the front door, weaved through the lobby, and climbed the stairs to the top, where Scorpion unlocked her room's door and found that Snake had returned in their absence.

She lay on her stomach in bed, organizing some kind of documents. The total

concealment continued to be incredible; Snake hadn't even noticed the door opening. Instead of her usual robe, Snake wore a loose tank top and shorts. It seemed she was the type to wear clothes that hid her assets, as the wide openings in her tank top showed that she was quite well endowed. Her lower half wasn't bad either; her long, fair legs were pleasantly plump, and her thighs were parted as she made herself comfortable.

Mira's eyes were glued to her. This defenseless state was a far cry from her usual buttoned-up demeanor.

"We're back!" Scorpion said.

Snake continued to arrange her documents, unperturbed, as Mira ogled and Scorpion called out to her. But as they were still in total concealment, she couldn't hear a thing.

"Oh, heh," Scorpion murmured. Her lips curled into a wicked grin. "Psst. Come over here, you two."

It seemed she had mischief on the mind. Scorpion donned the mask again and beckoned Mira and Wasranel over to the bedside. She leaned so close that her face was right next to Snake's and then chuckled evilly.

Having realized what was going on, Mira took another peek at Snake's bosom and said, "She has no idea."

"Mira, turn off the concealment." Giddy, Scorpion gave the signal. Mira then ordered Wasranel to drop the concealment aura.

Perhaps it worked *too* well.

Though she was relaxing, Snake, an elite member of the Isuzu Alliance's Hidden, would never totally drop her guard. It was unthinkable for her to not notice something approaching right before her nose.

Scorpion appeared out of nowhere. What person wouldn't be surprised if they suddenly noticed someone right beside them wearing a suspicious mask? Snake was only human—and thanks to her carefully honed senses, Scorpion's prank was super effective.

"Wha?!" Snake suddenly screamed like a little girl and fell from the bed.

Scorpion began laughing boisterously—but instantly froze as balls of fire glowing with pale light appeared all throughout the room.

Ooh?! Is this the necromancer's Will o' the Wisp? Mira admired the number of balls she'd summoned all at once.

Will o' the Wisp, one of a necromancer's spells, was very adaptable magic that could be used for offense or defense. But its true value lay in something greater: it served as preparation for various advanced Necromantic Arts. It was much like Mira's Mark of the Rosary.

The fireballs gleamed red and began to form magic circles. That was the sign that she was fully prepared. Even as Snake cowered in the corner of the room, she was ready to fight.

Seeing this, Scorpion rushed to throw off the mask and coat. Then, for some reason, she began an odd dance and repeatedly shouted, "It's me! Just me, Scorpion!"

Given the shapes of the magic circles, Mira knew that Snake was preparing to summon something *big*. So she added, "I'm here, too!" and jumped and danced along with Scorpion.

* * *

Scorpion, Mira, and Wasranel kneeled obediently in the cramped room and apologized to Snake.

"I'm sorry."

"We apologize."

"I have no excuse."

Perhaps as a result of the dance, the spell had been interrupted just before it could be cast, so everyone had survived unscathed. But the expressionless Snake was clearly ticked off. Her cheeks were flushed... though that may have been more due to embarrassment than rage.

"Fine. Explain the situation, please." Snake glared at each of them in turn, giving Scorpion the worst treatment of them all. Then she looked at the restrained girl on the

floor behind them. Despite their antics, she understood at once that they had abducted an elite.

"Allow me..." Mira volunteered, figuring it was best for someone who wasn't even supposed to be here to do the talking. She told Snake why she was here and about Wasranel's power, the War-Torn Burial Ground, and how they had abducted the woman.

* * *

After cooling down, Snake returned to her usual reserved self and replied, "Understood."

"So, how about we question her now?" Relieved, Scorpion sprang up and whipped a small, white orb out of her pouch. "Tadaaa! This is the mystical antidote passed down in my village, which—"

"Don't care. Hurry up." Snake cut her off. It seemed she hadn't entirely forgiven her partner for the ill-conceived practical joke.

"Kay..." Scorpion slumped her shoulders sadly. She pried open the bound woman's mouth and pushed the ball in with further ado.

After a short wait, its effects came on all at once.

"Nnngah!" The woman's eyes flew open and she screamed. Then, she began choking, writhing, and thrashing, all the while continuing to shriek through the gag. She was reacting as if she'd been poisoned outright.

Mira took a few steps back from the horror and asked Scorpion, "Say, are you sure that was an antidote?"

"Yep, just a stimulant!" Scorpion answered proudly, unruffled. "Give her a few and she'll be able to talk," she added, watching the woman's violent spasms with a smile.

Snake seemed unbothered as well, silently producing a number of terrifying tools and implements. Nobody wanted to know what she might use them for.

Given their reactions, it seemed this was the normal effect of Scorpion's legendary village antidote. Mira gulped, understanding that this was only a glimpse into the

unsavory world these pros worked in every day.

* * *

When the stimulant finally wore off, the woman groaned; now it was her turn to not comprehend the situation. She'd fallen asleep while gathering materials at the War-Torn Burial Ground, and now she felt like she'd been poisoned while scary strangers looked down on her. One of them was wielding a tool that looked more dangerous than a weapon. The only people who could stay calm in a situation like this would be extreme masochists.

Now that they were ready to talk, Mira ordered Wasranel to soundproof the room.

Once Mira gave the signal, Scorpion whispered in a chilling voice, "Now you can scream all you want!"

As soon as the gag was removed, the woman started bawling like her life depended on it. "Don't kill meee!"

Instead of asking where she was, who they were, or why they'd kidnapped her, she begged for her life first and foremost. She quivered so shamelessly that Mira and Scorpion found themselves a little disappointed.

"Tell us the truth, and we'll let you live." Scorpion produced a dagger and placed the flat of it against the woman's throat. An onlooker might think the real villain here was Scorpion.

"I'll tell you the truth! I'll tell you anything you want!" The woman struggled to crane her neck away from the dagger. Tears poured down her cheeks, she promptly wet herself.

She was terrified, especially for a supposedly dignified elite. Faced with such a sorry sight, Scorpion and Snake exchanged a glance. Was this real or a performance meant to make them drop their guard?

As for Mira, her eyes were glued to the soiled underwear. Was this another kink she never knew she had?

Even if they were planning to interrogate the girl, they couldn't leave her like this. Mira and Scorpion hauled her off toward the changing room while Snake cleaned the floor.

After further thought, they passed right by the changing room and went into the bath.

Upon seeing a bath full of hot water, she started wailing, "I don't wanna drown! Save me, please, I'll do anything!" Her face was covered in a mix of tears and snot.

Was this actually an enemy ruse? By this point, Mira was starting to feel legitimately bad for her. A ghost of a doubt crossed her mind.

After laying the woman on the floor, Mira gazed at her again and slowly asked, "You are Chimera Clausen... correct?"

The woman looked confused for a moment. Then, shaking her head wildly, she cried, "My name is Millene! You've got the wrong person!"

CHAPTER 25

ANYONE MIGHT THINK that a woman in the heart of the War-Torn Burial Ground, with its hidden entrance in Melville Commerce's storage compound, was worthy of capture, an elite member of Chimera Clausen. Scorpion and Mira certainly had.

But Millene wasn't just *not* an elite; she wasn't even a member of Chimera.

In her underwear with hands and feet bound, she answered every question asked of her.

First, she explained that she was an alchemist in training.

When asked what she'd been doing at the catacombs, she explained that her instructor had asked her to collect necessary materials for alchemy.

When asked if she knew what those black bones were, her terrified reply was simply, "My instructor told me that ancient mummies have special mana in them!"

The coat she'd worn was powerful spirit equipment, but when asked where she'd obtained it, she said that her instructor had given it to her as a gift. They'd claimed that the coat would protect its wearer when it sensed danger, but she had never run into danger until now. Given the outcome, Millene grumbled that it hadn't helped at all.

It was starting to sound like her instructor was actually the suspicious one, so they steered their inquiries in that direction.

They asked what this mysterious person was using black mist ore for, and Millene answered that they were mixing it into sand and various metals. Black mist ore was a very unique material that could not be combined with other substances without the power of alchemy.

No matter what the base material was, once they added the ore, the completed product would end up a deep black and envelop itself in its signature black mist. Millene added that, according to her instructor, it could produce powerful armaments. Her instructor would then sell the transformed materials to Melville Commerce, who

paid quite handsomely.

They continued to ask more detailed questions.

Scorpion asked if she knew who was entombed in the War-Torn Burial Ground.

Millene only knew that they were “super, super ancient people,” and added that this was another thing she’d been taught.

Scorpion observed as Millene said she did not know of oni. Then Scorpion asked a few questions that she thought elites would know the answers to and watched her expression closely.

By her judgment, it was extremely unlikely that Millene was an elite.

Mira occasionally lobbed some questions in, as well. Her favorite foods, where she washed herself first in the bath, if she liked anyone, if she *liked* liked anyone, her bra and panty sizes—despite the clear sexual harassment, Millene answered every question honestly.

Once the questioning was mostly over, Mira put a finger to her chin and concluded, “It’s as if she knows nothing at all about Chimera.”

“Seems like it...” Scorpion agreed.

“Excuse me? What is that ‘Chimera’ thing you’ve been mentioning?” Millene asked, relieved to know that they wouldn’t do anything more to her now. This situation was the result of her being mistaken for a “Chimera,” so naturally she wanted to know what exactly that was.

“They’re called Chimera Clausen, and...” With cold eyes full of suppressed rage, Scorpion counted off Chimera Clausen’s misdeeds.

* * *

Upon learning just what sort of organization Chimera Clausen was, Millene was furious as well. “That’s awful... Just awful! Is that why I’ve been doing this?!” Learning that she’d been supporting their heinous acts, she was lost for words due to a mixture of disgust and shock.

She told a story of how a spirit had saved her life when she was a child. She agonized—how could her teacher create things that hurt such sweet beings?

Even to the suspicious Mira and Scorpion, it seemed she truly had no idea and was genuinely horrified to hear what she'd become caught up in. But on the other hand, it was clear that whoever was teaching her alchemy was involved with Chimera.

Mira crouched down to eye level with the sitting Millene and asked gently, "Your instructor may be working with Chimera. Would you tell us where we can find them?"

They may be working with Chimera. Millene couldn't stand the thought, and her shoulders began to quiver.

But soon enough, she raised her head, gazed into Mira's eyes with resolve, and spoke: "He has a big mansion on the northeastern outskirts of town. It has a huge garden with lots of different kinds of plants. I... I think you'll recognize it easily."

Millene offered to do anything in her power to help. Scorpion requested every last bit of information she had, adding that she would keep her captive until that information had been confirmed.

Whether she was aware or not, it was true that she had been an assistant to a Chimera co-conspirator. Furthermore, Scorpion still couldn't say with certainty that she wasn't lying. No matter how superb her observational abilities were, she would not put her full faith in them except in the worst of circumstances.

Millene understood. She accepted her lot without resistance.

* * *

After consulting a map, Mira and Scorpion left Millene with Snake and departed for the mansion. It was already well into the night, but they didn't know where the enemy's security might be, so they jumped from roof to roof under Wasranel's concealment as they headed toward the outskirts of town.

Scorpion could already run on walls and ceilings, and Mira used her sage powers to run on air, so they both were swift. Wasranel was no slouch either; he used his full power as an advanced spirit to keep up with them without hesitation.

Unlike the busy streets, the outskirts of town were cloaked in quiet dark. The stars

that were invisible from the busy city center now stood out brightly, even though the sprawling residential district ahead was lit by faint streetlights. A discerning eye would see that, unlike the spirit lights downtown, these lights were quite normal magical items.

At times, the chittering of small animals could be heard. Other animals seemed to answer their calls.

There was almost no pedestrian traffic, save for the occasional red-faced drunk stumbling home.

"There it is," Mira declared.

Beyond the quiet residential district, in an even quieter area, was a luxurious garden of trees and flowers nestled in the dark. At the very center of it, standing tall among its surroundings, was the mansion Millene had described. She was right; it had been very easy to find.

A grove stretched through the property, which was encircled by a stone wall. Mira and the others followed the wall, then used Wasranvel's ability to simply open the front gate unheard and stroll into the property.

They walked up the long approach to the mansion. When they arrived, they found security guards stationed around it. Nobody noticed the party as they stopped before the front door.

Mira and Scorpion turned and calmly surveyed the security around them. Something was off; the people here didn't seem like they were watching for intruders.

"Weird. They're all staring *at the mansion*, huh?" Scorpion said.

"Right... You'd be free to steal all of the alchemical materials in the garden at this rate," Mira added.

There were five security guards stationed here, but none of them paid any mind to their surroundings; every one faced the mansion.

Mira hadn't felt any other presences since the gate. The mansion's guards were all accounted for. Mira was right; the plants were fair game.

However, the guards didn't seem to be slacking off. They were watching *something*.

"Well, we'll be fine as long as we're concealed."

"Yep. Let's hurry!"

Mira and Scorpion turned back to the mansion. Despite the expansive size of the garden, the mansion itself wasn't large. However, it was clearly too big for a normal person. Assuming he had secured this property to prioritize space for cultivating materials for alchemy, one could easily guess that the owner was a powerful man.

Mira used total concealment to the fullest and flung open the front door. It hadn't been locked... though perhaps that wasn't necessary given all the security. They entered without difficulty and began a leisurely search for the man himself.

There was no light on in the mansion, so the small entrance hall was pitch black. Unfortunately, now wasn't the time to turn on a light.

"I can't even see my feet..." Mira complained.

"Take my hand. I can see just fine in the dark, so I'll lead the way." Scorpion held out her hand, unfazed by the total darkness.

"Oh, really? Thank you." Mira graciously accepted and reached out, grabbing the first thing her hand met.

"Ack! Mira! That's my tail!" In the impenetrable dark, Scorpion's back jolted straight as she yelped in discomfort.

With an apology, Mira let go—for now. Mira narrowed her eyes mischievously.

Soon Scorpion calmed down and focused on searching the mansion. She ran her eyes around the room, searching for any traps.

Mira used the pretense of searching for Scorpion's hand to cop a few more feels of her toned body. Her hand gradually traveled up, but just as she set her sights on Scorpion's bicep...

"I'm right here, Mira! Here." Scorpion snatched Mira's hand, bringing an end to its wanderings. The summoner would have to be satisfied for the moment.

* * *

There were neither traps nor servants in the mansion. Mira used her Biometric Scan and got only one response, for a person on the second floor. That must have been the master that Millene spoke of.

The entrance hall was dark and quiet—almost as if no light had ever been lit here. Scorpion guided Mira through and up the staircase.

At the top, hallways extended in either direction. Windows along the long walls allowed some of the night's light inside, just enough for Mira to see vague outlines. The dim lighting gave one the feeling that something was lurking in the shadows, even eerier than complete darkness would have been.

"Mira, look." Scorpion stared deep into the hallway and tightened her grip on Mira's hand, unconsciously pulling her closer.

"What? Did you find something?" Mira obediently sidled up and stared down the hallway. Her eyes were adjusting to the dark now, but it was so dim she still couldn't see much. Now that Scorpion mentioned it... there seemed to be *something* up ahead. What was it? Curious, Mira stepped forward—but she stopped at once. Scorpion grasped Mira's hand and refused to move.

Mira turned. "Could it be... that you're afraid?"

After an uncomfortable silence, Scorpion answered, "No!" She threw her chest out in defiance, tail standing on end. Then, she pushed Mira forward.

Mira and Scorpion proceeded down the hallway opposite the room Mira had gotten the biometric response from. Not even their footsteps could be heard, thanks to Wasranvel. Only the faint starlight lit their path.

Usually, you see people putting expensive knickknacks all over places like this. I'm amazed by his restraint.

Mira's idea of rich people's mansions included carpets, vases, and gaudy jars. Their absence here was a little distracting. To be honest, the place didn't seem lived-in at all. *Is the person living here truly human?* Mira wondered.

But that feeling faded when they reached the end of the hallway.

Scorpion stepped out from behind Mira, suddenly brave again, and said proudly as she gazed at the two-meter-tall object, “No traps!”

It was a fine suit of armor, so brightly polished that it reflected the starlight. From afar, it had almost appeared to be a human standing there—especially to someone who could see in the dark.

Visibly relieved, Scorpion turned and guided Mira onward again. This time, they made their way toward the target.

Suits of armor are another staple, aren’t they? What a lovely decoration, Mira thought to herself as she turned and gazed at the suit of armor again. But when she looked forward, something suddenly felt wrong.

The hallway up ahead was uniform in one way: it had no furnishings whatsoever. It seemed very much like a rich person to have a suit of armor in their home... but wasn’t it odd that it was the *only* thing in the home? Especially since it had been shoved to the end of a hallway.

Then again, this was someone else’s house. Who knew? Perhaps the man was a minimalist.

While Scorpion pulled her ahead, the summoner glanced back. The suit of armor standing behind them looked even eerier now than it had before they’d gotten a close look at it.

CHAPTER 26

WHEN THEY OPENED the door on the second floor of the alchemist's mansion, bright light poured into the hallway—along with a unique, disgusting stench.

The group entered the room without fear of being caught, thanks to the concealment.

Shelves lining the walls of the room were stocked with vases full of all colors of *something*, with books interspersed between. There were monster materials, jewels, cages with small animals. And for some reason, one sheep plushie.

Before the desk in the center of the room was a man. He looked to be around forty years old with messy black hair, a white coat, and silver-rimmed glasses. Truly, a stereotypical researcher.

He was mixing something in a large cauldron with a troubled look on his face. The awful stench seemed to come from the thick, soupy mixture inside. This looked more like witchcraft than alchemy. As they approached, the smell got worse. Mira and Scorpion frowned and circled around to approach the man from behind.

Once they'd enveloped the man in total concealment so that nobody outside could hear, Scorpion lifted a dagger to his throat.

"Be very still."

The man froze in place and gasped, dropping the rod he'd been holding. He then raised both hands where she could see them and spoke slowly.

"What's going on here? I'm just doing the work as I was told." The man's voice was extremely calm. But that wasn't because *he* was calm; he spoke deliberately, obviously controlling his emotions.

Scorpion was immediately suspicious, but she prioritized information gathering and demanded coolly, "How about you tell us more about that 'work'?"

After a moment, the man carefully turned his head. When he caught sight of Scorpion and Mira, his brow furrowed.

"Who are you? You're not with those Chimera bastards, are you?"

A flicker of surprise appeared on his face, mirrored in Mira and Scorpion's. They had thought this man was an important member of Chimera Clausen, but he spoke like he wasn't part of them at all—and he didn't sound like a fan, either.

Scorpion was infuriated at being mistaken for her worst enemy. "Don't lump us in with those evildoers!" Raw rage found its way into her voice.

"Oh... I beg your pardon." The man raised his hands higher in a show of surrender.

"What about you? You're a big-shot Chimera, right? We have evidence." Scorpion pressed the blade against his neck.

"Big shot? Evidence? What are you talking about?" The man showed no sign of fear, only more confusion.

They were at an impasse.

Mira slid in from the side and broke the silence. "Are you claiming that you're *not* an elite member of Chimera Clausen?"

The alchemist turned to her and looked her square in the eye. He said clearly, "I'm not any kind of member, let alone an *elite* member."

Of course, they couldn't trust him so easily. They had no real way to tell how many of his words were fact or fiction.

"Let me ask you one thing. Do you know what that stone is being used for?" Mira pointed at the black mist-covered rock atop the desk.

"Yeah. I do," he answered, his expression clouded. The alchemist's apprentice, Millene, had only been told that it was used to make strong weapons and armor.

"This material is used to make Chimera's equipment, is it not?" It seemed the man was aware of its spirit-devouring properties. Mira fixed her eyes on him and said deliberately, "You make weapons for them, and yet you claim that you are not one of them?"

The man averted his eyes and grimaced. After a beat, he looked at her once more and

sighed.

"...I do," he finally declared. His words were firm, yet it obviously pained him to say them.

Mira glared into his eyes for a moment before nodding to Scorpion. Scorpion's rage subsided somewhat, and she pulled the knife back from his neck—though the tip remained conspicuously pointed toward him. He paid it no mind and only thanked her.

"Why do you cooperate with Chimera? It's not for money, I presume. Are you working for them under duress?" Mira asked. The reproach was gone from her voice, but she remained merciless in her interrogation.

"Well... Pretty much," he muttered. He looked down for a while again, then gazed off into the distance. With determination on his face, he turned his eyes to the window. "Now it's my turn: Who are you people? How'd you get through those guards? Only my apprentice and Chimera should be able to get in here."

He refused to say another word until his own questions were answered. The mansion's security was tight; it shouldn't have been easy for outsiders to enter. And as master of the estate, he knew that better than anyone. Mira and Scorpion's presence was bewildering to the point that, at this moment, he considered them even more dangerous than Chimera.

"Hrmm, very well. My name is Mira. I am working with an organization that opposes Chimera."

"I'm Scorpion. A member of said organization."

The man's eyes went wide, then determination burned within them.

"You oppose Chimera, eh? That's no surprise, given the things they do. No surprise at all. And that led you to me?" the man muttered, as if talking to himself. Despite his calm front, he was clearly elated—in a way that implied more than the mere relief of knowing his life was no longer in danger. He glanced at the window and whispered, "How did you get in here? Did they not notice you?"

The alchemist seemed awfully worried about something. Mira turned and saw that the window's curtain was drawn. Beyond it, his many guards stood by. He could signal that there were intruders without Mira and Scorpion even knowing, but given the look

in his eyes, Mira suspected that he wouldn't.

"How we arrived here is a secret. However, I can guarantee that nobody knows of our presence here." Mira felt an odd sense of understanding. She trusted her intuition and confirmed that nobody had noticed their entry.

Indeed, things were quiet outside. Nobody was searching the inside of the mansion. That meant there was no need to worry about Chimera listening in. Mira and Scorpion knew that they could be certain of that if they used Wasranel's power, but instead of trying to convince the man to trust some spirit he'd never heard of, they decided to take advantage of the current situation.

And just in case, Mira had already ordered Wasranel to ensure that nobody would hear if he screamed. But the man didn't need to know that.

* * *

"My name is Johan. I'm an alchemist being used by Chimera." The man introduced himself and, with a resigned smile, explained the grim situation he had found himself in.

It had started when his father and master, an alchemist who he'd deeply respected, received a request from Melville Commerce. The request asked him to investigate the properties of new materials Melville had obtained through their trade connections. His father gladly accepted the honor of being entrusted with a material nobody had ever seen before.

His research uncovered the properties of this new material, so he next immersed himself in researching potential applications. At the time, though Johan had assisted his father, he hadn't known what this material was being used for. All he knew was that it would create powerful weapons.

His father found a great many applications for the material and received great sums of money for his effort. Johan was proud of his father for being able to create so much wealth.

But one day, everything changed. His father had passed away—but not due to any illness. And though his true cause of death remained a mystery, Johan had his own thoughts. "I know it was punishment," he said.

After his father's death, Johan dove into the papers he'd left behind in order to carry on his research. They were vital documents, his father's life's work, though he'd never deigned to show his son.

It was then that he learned the truth: the new material his father had researched for so long and worked with so often, the black mist ore, was meant to devour spirits and deprive them of their power.

A material that would harm humanity's greatest ally was unconscionable. Having learned this, Johan begged Melville Commerce to abandon the project entirely and recover as many of the related products in circulation as they could.

But they refused. On that same day, his wife and daughter disappeared.

The next day, Melville Commerce delivered the wedding ring he'd given his wife, along with a message: *Continue the work.*

He'd known nothing about what the ore could do, but he knew how to create materials with it, since he'd helped his father. To Chimera Clausen and Melville Commerce, he was only a useful tool—even if his cooperation needed to be coerced. Johan received letters from his wife and daughter twice a year, so he knew they were alive, but he didn't know where they were.

His wife would always write about their daughter's growth and tell him not to worry about them. She would also include some words from his daughter, whose previously shoddy penmanship was slowly improving, Johan added with a sad smile.

So, he obeyed—hoping that someday his family would be reunited.

"I have no choice," Johan added, cursing his own powerlessness.

"I understand. They've taken your loved ones hostage."

Johan had worked with them in hopes that his wife and daughter would be spared. Mira looked next to the desk at the sheep plushie they'd seen on their way in. There was doubt that it belonged to his daughter.

"This is insanity, right? The people outside are not there to protect me. They're *watching* me in case I try to run," Johan said as he glared hatefully out the window.

He added with a humorless chuckle that he hadn't left the mansion in years; he had to have his apprentice do all of his shopping and material-gathering.

"We had a feeling something was off about them," Mira noted.

The security outside was there not to keep others out, but to keep Johan in. Mira recalled the strangeness they'd noticed when they'd first entered the property.

A father who had worked with Chimera Clausen, a son who'd suffered tragedy because of his own righteous heart and been forced to obey their orders purely because he'd followed in his father's footsteps... It was difficult to imagine the pain he must have felt being torn away from his family for such reasons.

Mira pitied Johan. As she surveyed the room again with her new knowledge, she found many remnants of his loved ones: a shelf that contained kids' picture books, a woman's cooking apron, and the wedding ring that had been returned to him.

It seemed that this shelf was there purely to remind him of his family. Mira silently approached and gazed at the objects on it. Compared to his messy work shelves, here, there was no dust; he must have cleaned it every day. That only made it stand out all the more, reminding her of the futility of his struggle.

The sheep plushie looked sad atop the desk.

Mira cradled it in her arms, gazed at its adorable face, and said, "Don't look so lonely, friend." Perhaps those words were meant for both the sheep and Johan.

"Huh? What's the matter?" Scorpion said softly. Mira turned and saw a single tear rolling down Johan's cheek.

"Oh, nothing. I was just remembering how my little girl used to talk to that thing." A watery smile found its way onto Johan's face as he watched Mira holding the plushie. He turned his face aside to hide his tears.

"Damn..." Scorpion murmured.

CHAPTER 27

MIRA SUMMARIZED the story so far:

Johan the alchemist was creating the material used in anti-spirit equipment, despite knowing that it was being used for evil. He continued doing this for the sake of his kidnapped wife and daughter, who were being held hostage to guarantee his cooperation.

"In short," she concluded, "your decision would be easy if your family came back safely?"

If his family were rescued, he could cease working for Chimera and live a life of virtue. That would leave Chimera without their source of anti-spirit equipment, a critical tool that gave them the power to fight spirits. If production stopped, the enemy would be nigh instantly crippled.

Furthermore, bringing Johan to their side and using his knowledge could potentially help them discover weaknesses in the equipment. Isuzu would no doubt be desperate to have an ally like him.

Johan understood the truth of Mira's words and replied, "If my family is returned to me, I swear, I'll gladly help your organization." A note of hope could be heard in his voice.

"We will do our utmost," Mira promised.

"We'll find them!" Scorpion chimed in.

"You're the only chance I have. To seal our deal, I'll give you a few documents," Johan said happily as he sat down in the chair by his desk.

"Oho, documents? Sounds fascinating... but what sort of documents?" Mira found a chair to sit in as she sipped at some of her all-season au lait. This was a new flavor she'd happened to find at Isuzu's headquarters.

"Everything I have on the black mist ore. Depending on how you process and mix it, it

can do more than just eat spirits. Knowing its properties in advance should help you fight them when the time comes.”

“Oho. That would be useful indeed.” His explanation satisfied Mira.

“Awesome! So, we’ll get to know all of those secrets?!” Scorpion was truly excited to get to the bottom of Chimera Clausen’s evil weapons after they’d been shrouded in mystery for so long.

Isuzu had little to no information on black mist ore. And in her run-ins with it, Scorpion had struggled against its troublesome effects, and ended up letting enemies slip away as a result.

If an elite like Scorpion struggled against it, foot soldiers of Isuzu would end up sustaining major injuries or worse. But if they could exploit this knowledge, the pendulum might swing in the other direction.

“If you bring my wife and daughter home safe, I’ll give you a list of transactions I’ve had with Melville Commerce. All the times we’ve purchased materials to make their weapons. Use it wisely, and I bet you can bring them both down.”

Johan offered a handsome reward for a successful mission. Mira and Scorpion knew that such information would tie Chimera Clausen directly to Melville Commerce. It was perfect. There was only one problem.

“We appreciate that, but... are you sure? You may end up being implicated alongside them.”

No matter the reason, if Johan’s name was on those documents, he would be in the line of fire. There was room for extenuating circumstances, but the materials derived from Johan’s work had led to far too many deaths for sentimentality to explain. Even if the law did not find him guilty, someday, somebody might seek personal revenge.

“I don’t care; I know what I’ve done. But if my wife and daughter are safe... well.” Johan sat up straight and bowed to the duo.

Mira and Scorpion faced Johan and replied sincerely.

“I’ll do whatever it takes.”

"Same!"

"Thank you both." Johan looked up, nodded in satisfaction, and smiled wanly.

* * *

But how exactly would they save his wife and daughter? Unfortunately, Johan did not seem to know where they were, but he was certain the handwriting on the letters was his wife's. She had to be alive... at least he hoped so.

"A wife and a daughter. Hmm, where would you lock up two women? Hmm..." Scorpion mumbled to herself, arms crossed and tail swishing back and forth.

Mira finished her all-season au lait and put a finger to her chin, muttering to herself as well. Suddenly, she had a flash of inspiration.

"Incidentally, how old is your daughter?"

"She'll be eight this year." Johan looked off into the distance. It must have been difficult, not being able to see his daughter grow up.

"Hrmm. Eight years old, you say?" The corners of Mira's lips curled into a grin. "I think I might have an idea of where they are." If she was eight, then it all matched. Mira compared this new information to her memories and, satisfied with the result, smirked.

"Do you, Mi—?" Scorpion tried to speak, but she was cut off by Johan jumping out of his seat.

"Where are they?!" His tragic desperation was proof of his love.

Scorpion closed her mouth and let Mira speak.

"There's a storage compound managed by Melville Commerce. We found a warehouse with women's laundry next to the entrance to the War-Torn Burial Ground. If two women were being held there, that explains a lot," Mira replied. She put a hand on Johan's shoulder and urged him to sit.

"O-oh, you mean those little girl's panties!" Scorpion remembered the most striking part of that discovery.

"It's worth investigating." Mira puffed her chest out proudly, as if it was all but confirmed. She was the very image of confidence.

The compound where Melville and Chimera conspired had tight security and numerous patrolmen. It was the ideal place to watch over someone they had confined.

"They've been in a place like that, all this time...?" Not the best of situations, but at least he had a clue to their location. That was wonderful news for Johan. He put his trembling hands in his lap and gritted his teeth, muttering, "But how am I supposed to save them?"

Melville Commerce's compound was famous for being the most tightly-guarded place in all of Roslein. Even the most cunning thieves couldn't pilfer anything under their watch.

"What good will sitting there in despair do?" Mira tried to lift his spirits by explaining just how they'd learned that his family was in the compound.

"You infiltrated that place?!" Johan cried, eyes gleaming with hope. He jumped out of his seat, prompting Mira to gently push him back once again and remind him to calm down.

"We have our ways. Anyway... it won't be difficult at all to go and bring them back."

"It's kind of cheating," Scorpion added. "The hardest part will be getting into their quarters. If they're trapped, then the door must be locked. I hope it's the kind I can pick, but..." She frowned down at the lock-picking tool in her pouch.

The warehouse containing the hidden entrance to the catacombs had been secured with a lock used in royal vaults, so the room where they were being held might be just as pick-proof. If so, that was a serious wrinkle in the plan.

"If we must, we will resort to force. But we've barely begun to explore our options. If we can, I'd prefer to do it with stealth."

The lock might be impenetrable, but the building itself was not. If needed, they could simply break a window. But if they did that, the enemy would be alerted to the hostages' escape and come straight for the mansion. If they spirited Johan away first, or if the people in the room happened to be a different family, Johan's own wife and child would end up in grave danger. Even if they were *almost* certain, these were

human lives in their hands; they couldn't be too cautious.

"Maybe you can use this." As Mira and Scorpion discussed the problem, Johan suddenly stood up. He opened a strongbox in the corner of the room and lifted a smaller box from within it. This he placed on the table. He opened the lid.

"What is this?"

Mira and Scorpion peeked into the box, both craning their necks to peer in. Inside were a smooth, black metal rod about fifteen centimeters long and a sheet of paper.

"My father made this. It's a lock-picking tool with special magic in it." Johan took the metal rod from the box and held it out for Mira and Scorpion to see. A few seconds later, lines of light ran across the rod, and the tip split into dozens of branches.

"Ooh!" the girls gasped in unison.

"Dad told me you can crack any lock if you use it skillfully. As you can see, it's... complicated. So much so that it's hard to use. But I think someone with enough skill should be able to draw out at least some of its features." Johan returned it to its normal state, deposited it back into the box, and stared into Scorpion's eyes. "It's got an instruction manual. Take it. It might help."

He handed the box to Scorpion.

Difficult it might be, but it was an awesome piece of equipment that could be the very thing to break into the locked containment room. The fact that he had given her something so valuable was proof that he was willing to risk it all on them.

"Thanks. I'll use it well." Scorpion accepted both the box and his hopes.

* * *

"By the way, I've got a question for you. How did you know I was working for Chimera?" Johan asked. "Even my apprentice didn't know, and she's with me all the time."

By now they had warmed to one another and established a rapport. He was right; Millene hadn't even realized that Chimera Clausen *existed*, let alone that he was in league with them.

"Actually, we traced your apprentice to you," Mira began. She summarized all of the events that had led them to him.

In the course of their investigation, they had hit upon the idea that Chimera Clausen might be connected to the Melville-managed War-Torn Burial Ground. They guessed that the entrance might be in the storage compound, infiltrated it, and discovered the site. There, they found Millene. She'd worn powerful spirit equipment, so they'd assumed her to be among Chimera's elite leadership and captured her.

But when they interrogated her, they learned that she wasn't even a member. She claimed that her teacher worked with black mist ore for Melville Commerce, so they set their sights on him instead.

"And that leads us to now. We happened to find the room where your family might be held during the very same infiltration," Mira added to close out the story.

"I see," Johan muttered in understanding as he looked sharply at the pair. "Where's Millene now? And she should've had a mask on—she still has that, right?" Johan stood as he spoke, approached the window, and peeked out through the curtain.

"We've got her confined in our hotel room. I used the mask for a... prank. But I think it should still be next to the bed?" Scorpion answered. Why did Johan care so much about a mask?

"This is bad," he replied, then rushed to the bookshelf. He retrieved a bundle of papers, returned to his seat, and held them out to Mira.

"Here's the deposit I promised you for saving my wife and daughter. But listen: Millene's mask has magic that tracks her location. Chimera's goons are probably on their way to your inn room as we speak. You must go, now," Johan insisted, struggling to keep calm.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Mira.

"I had no idea..." Scorpion was also surprised—they had been too focused on the spirit equipment. They both rushed to stand up.

Snake was with Millene. She wouldn't be bested easily, but there was no knowing who she might be up against. Scorpion believed in Snake's abilities, but she still couldn't hide her worry.

Mira, on the other hand, had a different reaction. She was more interested in this GPS-like magic she'd never heard of.

"They've probably sent at least two members. If you can, I want you to keep hiding her for now." Johan sidled over to the window again and peeked outside as he asked them to protect his apprentice.

"Yeah, no prob. We'll take care of her," Scorpion answered firmly. That had been the plan since the start.

"Thanks. My wife's name is Angelique, and my daughter is Anne. I'll get the transaction documents together. Come pick 'em up once you've saved my family."

"Angelique and Anne, understood. I promise we'll see them returned to you," Mira replied, bringing a smile to Johan's face. It was the expression of a relieved husband and father.

Mira and Scorpion left, bolstered by Johan's determination. They ran from the mansion without sound, sign, or trace.

CHAPTER 28

THE GROUP EXITED the property without security noticing a thing. When they reached the residential zone, they leapt atop buildings to take the shortest route back to the inn. Mira and Scorpion were moving with such speed that they occasionally slipped out of concealment. Nevertheless, they continued their headlong rush.

They reached the inn in under ten minutes. Careful not to leave Wasranel's radius now, they hurried to the room where Scorpion and Snake were staying.

Mira and Scorpion leaned in and pressed their ears to the door. Millene's mask would lead their pursuers to them, but there was no sound from within the room.

"It's quiet."

"Do you think we made it in time?"

"Or the opposite..." Now that they were so close, Mira could sense people other than Snake and Millene behind the door. Their enemies had arrived in their absence.

The two nodded to each other, prepared for battle, and flung the door open. They leapt into the room under the effects of concealment and took in the sight before them.

"Oh, my..." Mira gasped.

"So... they beat us here," Scorpion murmured.

Nothing was broken, but the room looked as if twenty cats had fought a war there. They'd sped back as fast as possible, but still arrived too late. However, their tardiness didn't seem to be a problem.

Atop the frayed carpet lay two men clad head to toe in black. On closer inspection, they resembled the guards who watched Johan.

They were thoroughly restrained, even gagged. One of them was unconscious and immobile, while the other wriggled on the floor like an earthworm. Snake sat at the table beside them, a cold smile on her face as she arranged her implements on its

surface.

"I had a feeling it might go this way..." Scorpion glanced at the men on the floor before nervously turning to face Snake.

"Seems our concern was unnecessary." Mira had expected Chimera to send elite fighters, since they had a strong presence here. She sighed in relief to see that they'd sent normal goons.

Snake was still in the same tank-top-and-shorts combo from before. She was dressed so casually that you wouldn't think she'd just trounced two thugs.

Meanwhile, Millene was fully dressed and sitting obediently on a bed. For some reason, she was blushing bright red.

"I see we've missed a lot," Mira said as she disabled the concealment.

Millene yelped. They couldn't blame her for being startled—Mira, Scorpion, and Wasranel had appeared out of nowhere.

Snake, however, had seen that trick before. She didn't jump like Millene; she simply shot Scorpion a blank look. Snake nodded once to Mira, then put a bare foot on the neck of one of the pursuers.

Mira ticked the box of another kink discovered.

"They came in through the window. I'll be interrogating them regarding their motives, if you're willing to wait," Snake said. She brandished some very inhumane-looking metal implements as she ground her heel into the man's neck. He groaned and struggled even more in a vain attempt to free himself. "The first one was well-trained; he didn't breathe a word. So, I'll have to be rougher with this one."

Snake glared coldly at the man on the floor. He froze and gazed back with wide eyes before letting out a feeble, pleading scream.

Mira began to pity them... though since they were with Chimera, her sympathy was short-lived. However, since she already knew their motive, she believed she could spare Snake the trouble.

"If you want to know why they're here, I'm pretty sure it's related to this." She picked

up the dubious mask on the bed and summarized what had happened at Johan's mansion.

Millene's instructor was aiding Chimera Clausen, but only because his family had been abducted. Mira and Scorpion had gotten him to promise that he'd help Isuzu if they saved his wife and daughter.

But before Mira's group could leave to save Johan's loved ones, they were informed that Millene's mask had tracking magic on it. Johan's prisoners would surely send pursuers if she did anything unexpected. That being the case, Mira and the others rushed back.

Once Mira finished her story, the quiet Millene was first to speak up in surprise. Not about the Chimera spell cast on her mask, but about Johan's family.

Millene had been told that Anne had been sent to a school in Ozstein, and that her mother had accompanied her out of worry. She'd heard all of this after returning from a trip to Sentopoli to buy alchemical materials, so she'd never had the chance to see them off personally.

"You might've gotten kidnapped too if you'd been at the mansion then," Scorpion said.

"Yeah..." Millene agreed weakly.

"That's why we returned in such a hurry... but I suppose it was unnecessary." Mira tossed the mask back onto the bed and chuckled at the fallen men on the floor.

"I see. So, these are the pursuers." Snake returned her metal rod to the table, prompting the gagged man to nod vigorously in confirmation. But when Snake took an odd pair of scissors in hand, he immediately began to struggle again.

"Wanna take that out? I think he's had enough." Scorpion looked down at the writhing man and pointed at his mouth.

Snake snipped the scissors a couple of times, then nodded and looked coldly at him. He fell totally silent, then bobbed his head a couple times in a pleading way.

"I suppose." It was obvious by now that he'd yielded, so Snake squatted down and removed the gag from his mouth.

"I'll tell you everything I know! Give you anything you need! Please, please, just no more!" He must have suffered quite a bit before Mira's return. But right after he said it, the gag was stuffed back into his mouth.

"Silence. You're too loud," Snake thrust the scissors forward.

The man kept his eyes fixed on the shears as he nodded once.

"I thought she was the quiet type. This is... unexpected." Mira was surprised by Snake's unusual intensity. The situation and her scant clothing made this all very exciting.

"She used to hate doing interrogations, y'know..." Scorpion said.

When Scorpion'd first met Snake, the girl's personality was as plain as her looks. But she wasn't unsociable by any means, and she had a talent for absorbing anything she was told.

When interrogation became necessary as part of her work, the inexperienced Snake would usually leave it to a professional. Unfortunately, that professional had a problematic style of interrogation. Scorpion stared off into the distance with glazed eyes and laughed at the memory.

Still, Snake took an interest in the art form and learned all kinds of methods, which eventually led to her current style.

During the conversation, Mira glanced at Snake and happened to hear the man say, "I will not disobey you, milady," as she stepped on him with a bare foot.

"There's another pervert among us," Mira muttered with a smirk. *Is it just me, or does this seem more like a fetish than an interrogation?*

Scorpion added that, when there were two captives, Snake would usually make an example of the gagged one. But the truth was she did nothing inhumane; the tools on the table were all just for show. After terrifying them out of their wits and making them scream, she would put them to sleep with a drug.

But Scorpion refused to say how Snake actually made them scream. She simply murmured that Snake was "a skilled operator" then clammed up, blushing. After learning all this about Snake's exploits and hearing the man promise to be Snake's slave, Mira decided to change the subject.

"First things first, I believe we'd best relocate."

Despite everything, the pursuers had done no harm; in fact, they had become two valuable sources of information. Mira wanted to question them at length, but the enemy already knew they were here. They needed to move before Chimera sent more people.

Scorpion glanced at the sleeping man. Her mouth twitched and she backed away as he groaned slightly. "Let's do that. I bet we've got lots of stuff to ask them."

"I'll move them to the King's Hideout. Mira and Scorpion, you two go rescue the family," Snake said curtly. She summoned a humanoid golem with her necromancy.

The golem took the sleeping man in its arms and tossed him into the hollow in the back of its own body. The other man gazed up at it, quivering in fear.

"It's only a transport golem. Don't struggle," Snake ordered.

The man straightened his spine immediately and replied, "Yes, milady, I won't!" It seemed she had broken him completely.

Once he'd been thrown into the golem too, Snake turned to Millene and asked, "Inside or outside? Choose." Her words were as terse as ever, so it took Millene a moment to understand—or perhaps *misunderstand*. She began to blush for some reason.

"O-outside, please!" she screamed.

"Fine," Snake replied. Her golem cradled Millene in its arms, and Snake picked up her bag and climbed onto its back.

"Oh, *that's* what you meant..." Millene blushed again and curled up in the golem's arms, embarrassed.

"Leave them to me," Snake said to her partners.

"Good luck," Mira answered, looking up at Snake.

The necromancer nodded and jumped from the window.

After seeing her off, Scorpion took her suitcase in hand and leapt onto the veranda.

"Now, let's go on that rescue mission!"

But Mira stopped her and asked, "Should we leave the room like this? It's a disaster!"

This was an inn room, after all. Mira's responsible side reared its head; surely they couldn't simply leave it such a mess?

"Yeaah." Scorpion stopped, sighed, and slumped over. It seemed her plan had been to use the momentum of the moment to escape before anyone noticed.

They could no longer use this room as a base, since the enemy knew about it. They also had no plans to return once they left, so it would be faster to leave it as it was. And though it would be annoying for the inn staff, the damage was the fault of the enemy who'd attacked them.

But... it also wouldn't have happened if they hadn't stayed there, and anyway, the inn would only care that their room had been trashed, not whose fault it was.

Scorpion knew that too. Once they'd made a decision, she acted quickly and headed straight for the lobby. Mira used her Biometric Scan to confirm nobody else was lying in wait and then followed.

In the lobby, a very apologetic Scorpion bowed to a very annoyed inn employee. Mira pretended not to know her as she watched from afar.

Estimating the damages would take some time. If they just waited here, more Chimera Clausen pursuers would no doubt come after them. They could evade pursuit with total concealment, but they would likely be seen before they used it, which might make the rescue effort more difficult.

Scorpion opted to skip the wait and instead paid a hefty sum from her own pocket to cover any repairs.

"Oh, don't worry." Mira put a hand on the sad Scorpion's back and consoled her. "You can get it reimbursed as a necessary expense once this is all over. I'll vouch for you."

"I guess... Thanks..."

At the same time, Mira had to admire Snake, who had trashed the room and made a smooth escape.

* * *

"That reminds me, where is this 'King's Hideout'?" Mira asked Scorpion as they made their way through the sleepless city back toward the Melville compound.

When Snake had said she'd take the Chimera goons there, she'd acted like Mira and Scorpion would understand. Mira hadn't paid it much mind at the time, but looking back, she had no idea what she was talking about.

"Uh, well, you know that company Agent S said he was talking to? Turns out they were willing to let us use an underground room in their head office."

"I see. Perfect for an interrogation."

Ebatess Commerce, a company that rivaled the Chimera-affiliated Melville Commerce, would be an ideal ally. Even Chimera Clausen would find it challenging to raid their underground office.

Mira didn't know why it had been given a name like King's Hideout, but she did have to mentally praise Solomon for his good work.

CHAPTER 29

AFTER PAYING the repair costs for the hotel room, Mira and Scorpion once again dashed through the nighttime city and arrived at the warehouse compound. And just like last time, they passed through the magic sensor and security checkpoint with ease.

Mira was getting cocky—what *couldn't* she do with Wasranel's power?

As if on cue, the spirit spoke up. "By the way, Mira? I know this is a bad time, but I'm running out of power."

"What?!" She was startled by the sudden confession.

Wasranel explained, rather apologetically, that his concealment was essentially hiding oneself from the very world. It was more of a bug than a feature. On top of that, Mira hadn't been contracted with him for very long, and the time limit unfortunately reflected that.

Recovering would take quite a while, though it did depend on one's affinity with mana. With time and experience, their contract would grow stronger and allow her to use his power longer and recover faster. But at the moment, it would be surprising if he recovered a single minute in a whole day.

If he could feed off of Mira's mana, he could continue to conceal the sounds they made, their figures, or their mana and presence. She could pick one, but not all three.

Finally, he strongly recommended they save whatever time they had left in case of emergency.

"Nrgh... We'll have to hurry."

Total concealment may have been a powerful ability that could erase one's presence, mana, and any trace visible to the five senses, but it turned out she couldn't leave it running forever. Hopefully they at least had time to spirit the family away.

Mira accepted this unwelcome news and rushed even faster through the compound,

trying to buy as much time as possible.

* * *

They wound their way through the compound until they reached the heavily secured area that housed the War-Torn Burial Ground. From here on, Scorpion took the lead, as Mira's memories of the area were fuzzy.

Scorpion navigated the twists and turns without hesitation until they reached the correct storehouse. They peeked in the window and again spotted a child's underwear hung out to dry. This had to be the place.

Mira used Biometric Scan and confirmed the presence of one adult and one child. Unsurprisingly, at this late hour, they were immobile—presumably asleep.

"This seems the most likely to me..." Mira murmured as she looked around the room.

She just couldn't say for certain that those sleeping people were Johan's wife and child. Chimera Clausen was the kind of cowardly group who kidnapped people's loved ones for their own ends; there might be *other* families here besides just the alchemist's.

But Mira and Scorpion had no way of determining this from where they stood, so there was only one option. They crept to the door, which was obviously locked. Scorpion got ready to try picking it, first looking around for patrolmen. She was still under the effects of concealment, but it was her lifelong habit to be wary of her surroundings.

"Mmm... This one seems pretty tough. Not as bad as the other one, though," she murmured, shooting a glance in the direction of the storehouse with the entrance to the catacombs. The lock used there was as sturdy as those used in royal vaults, but even this lesser design was still quite the challenge.

Faced with such a foe, Scorpion did not back down. She gleefully opened the box that Johan had given her, which contained the alchemical lockpick.

It seemed she was in the mood to try her new toy right away. Scorpion took the metal rod in hand and read the instructions under the faint lamplight, skimming them from top to bottom in the space of a minute.

"Okay, got it!" She folded the instructions back into the box and returned it to the pouch at her hip.

Her face scrunched as she inserted the black rod into the keyhole. Silent and unmoving, she focused her senses on the task before her.

The black rod's tip split into many branches, filling the complex mechanism. Each branch gathered information about the lock's construction and fed it back to Scorpion. Normally, one would gradually obtain this information through the use of several lockpicking tools, analyzing it bit by bit, and devise a strategy to overcome the puzzle.

But this special device communicated all that necessary information at once. Someone with no experience would naturally not understand it, and even many *with* experience would be overwhelmed by the information and unable to analyze it.

However, Scorpion was exceptional; she perfectly understood all of the data it poured into her mind. In less than a minute, she exhaled long and slow, turned, and said proudly, "Piece of cake."

The door was now slightly ajar.

"Fantastic work," Mira praised her.

Scorpion looked over to the warehouse that hid the catacombs and said with a grin, "I bet I could open that one, too!"

* * *

Beyond the door was a one-room apartment. The only illumination came from the streetlamps outside the windows, so it was dark and difficult to see clearly. But as far as they could tell, the place was full of the essentials for living. Perhaps it was the ideal space for a shut-in.

In the corner of the room, at a blind angle from the window, was a bed. That was where Mira had felt the biometric responses.

"Let's undo the total concealment. Soundproof the whole room, please." Mira checked that the door was securely shut and issued new orders to Wasranel in order to economize. As the spirit of stealth, soundproofing was as easy as breathing; it wouldn't run down the clock on his power.

"I'll switch now," Wasranel replied. After a moment, he signaled to Mira that he was done.

Though there were no visible changes, she could tell it had worked. Still, Mira thought, it *was* a quite plain ability.

At his signal, Mira and Scorpion walked slowly toward the bed. First, they had to confirm whether they had the right people. But just then...

“Oof!”

There was a soft yet bone-chilling noise in the quiet room, and Mira started hopping all around while holding her shin. She had accidentally knocked into a table in the darkness. Scorpion internally praised her for not screaming, though she noted the tears in the small summoner’s eyes.

Discounting this accident, they managed to reach the bed in one piece. As expected, a little girl and a woman in her thirties slept together under the quilt.

Mm, I can’t see them well... Mira tried to get a good look at their faces, but it was too dark to see. She had no way of knowing their names, either.

At this point, the fastest way would be to simply ask them. Even if they were the family of a victim other than Johan, finding them would give Mira and Scorpion the opportunity to identify more people being forced to work with Chimera against their will. And if they happened to be members of Chimera themselves, they could at least serve as another source of information.

Mira and Scorpion nodded to each other. Mira reached out and touched the woman’s shoulder. Then she did it again. After the third jostle, the woman began to roll over. The fourth prompted her to slowly open her eyes.

“Mmh... Anne? What’s the matter?” the woman murmured sleepily. When she saw the girl sleeping next to her, she cocked her head in confusion. Had she just imagined being poked?

While the woman gazed at her daughter and stroked her hair, Mira spoke gently to avoid startling her.

“Psst. Over here.”

As soon as Mira’s voice reached her, the woman jerked fully awake.

She slowly turned. When she locked eyes with Mira, her voice squeaked out. “Huh...?”

The dim light seeping through the windows illuminated Mira’s fine silver hair and fair skin, bathing the adorable girl in an otherworldly glow. At a glance, she might easily be mistaken for an angel. Despite the situation, the woman found herself staring.

But that did not last long. When she saw the catlike eyes of Scorpion floating behind this “angel” in the dark, everything changed.

Her eyes and mouth alike opened wide, but Mira’s hand shot out to cover her mouth before she could scream.

“Mmph!”

Nobody would hear anything thanks to the room’s soundproofing, but it would be hard to have a conversation if the woman freaked out now.

Still holding her mouth closed, Mira gazed deep into her eyes and asked confidently, “You are Johan’s wife, Angelique, correct?”

She had said the name of Johan’s daughter in her sleepy daze, after all. What were the odds there were other captive daughters named Anne?

Angelique nodded in response.

“Your husband asked us to save you. We are friends—but please stay quiet.” Mira waited for Angelique to nod again. Then, she removed her hand from the woman’s mouth.

Mira took a step back, but Angelique leaned toward her and begged, “My husband... Is Johan safe?!” Her trembling hands seized Mira’s shoulders and refused to let go.

“Yes, there’s no need to worry. Settle down, please,” she replied soothingly, as if talking to a child, and put a hand on Angelique’s head.

* * *

After Angelique calmed down, they managed to discuss a few things.

It turned out she hadn’t been given a proper explanation of events at all. She’d been

told that a mishap had occurred during an experiment, and that she and Anne would need to be isolated from Johan for their own safety. On the strength of that vague lie, they'd been confined here for nearly five years.

So, Mira told her the full truth... the short version of the full truth, anyway. An evil organization known as Chimera Clausen had joined forces with Melville Commerce, and Johan's father had created the weapons that gave them power.

After the loss of his father, Johan was the only one who knew the sorts of things his father had been making, thanks to the research notes he'd left behind. They were monstrous creations made to harm spirits. Once Johan learned this, he refused to continue manufacturing them.

But as he was the last person left who could make them, the evildoers kidnapped Angelique and Anne. With his family held hostage, Johan had no choice but to continue making their tools.

"We learned all of this from speaking to Johan himself. We believed him and came back here to save you two." Explanation complete, Mira took a step back, puffed out her chest, and added, "Everything's going to be okay now."

Mira's smile was kind, oddly comforting, and brazen all at the same time.

Angelique gazed at her as if she were an angel of salvation and simply answered, "Okay."

They had just come to this place of mutual trust when the young Anne woke up. She sat up in bed and locked eyes with Mira.

"Mommy, what's going on?"

It would be a pain if she made a scene now, but Mira couldn't just clap a hand over her mouth in front of her mother. She smiled a big friendly smile like a staff member at a theme park to keep from scaring the child.

It seemed Anne was still half asleep. She gazed at Mira for a while before mumbling, "Too weird." Then she hugged Angelique and snuggled back down to resume her slumber.

"Well... Shall we make our exit?" Mira was privately rather wounded by Anne's remark.

Then again, she never was good at forcing smiles.

Mira shook it off and explained the next part of the plan to Angelique.

First, she told her about Wasranel's power—the effects and range of total concealment, what would nullify its effects, and the like. Scorpion grinned wryly; she had firsthand experience accidentally nullifying it, after all.

The strategy itself was simple. They would escape the compound while concealed, then head back to the mansion and meet up with Johan. They would then take the family to a safehouse and shelter them until the situation with Chimera was resolved.

“Given the circumstances, they may not be the most comfortable accommodations.”

Angelique and her daughter would simply be moved from confinement to confinement. It might be painful for them, but Mira and Scorpion knew what Chimera was capable of—if they wanted to keep Anne and Angelique safe, this was their only choice.

“No, I understand. We'd only slow you down. I'm just grateful for your willingness to rescue us.”

If they merely wanted to strike a blow to Chimera, they could have simply taken Johan away without saving his family. But they didn't do that.

Angelique bowed deeply to her saviors.

CHAPTER 30

JOHAN'S FAMILY was successfully located. Mira and Scorpion worked with Angelique and Anne to gather everything the family would need to survive in the coming days.

In order to avoid alerting the guards, they worked in darkness. Soon Mira ended up hitting more than just her shin. After considering her options, she decided to take a supervisory role before she started crying.

Finally, Mira put the necessities they'd collected into her Item Box.

"Mira's bangle can fit so much stuff! Mine is already too full to handle anything else," Scorpion said enviously as the pile of luggage disappeared in the blink of an eye. User's Bangles were precious items only given to veteran adventurers.

"Then raise your rank. I'm certain that with your abilities, you could reach B or even A with ease."

Scorpion was much stronger than the average veteran adventurer, and the higher one's rank, the more capacity their User's Bangle would have. Scorpion should be able to rise through the ranks in no time.

"I would if I had the time. Work has been nuts."

When one joined the adventuring profession, they were typically rated as G-Rank. Depending on the number and difficulty of their completed requests, and success rate of the requests they undertook, they could be promoted. Though the details varied based on difficulty, it typically took a minimum of three years to rise from C-Rank to B-Rank, save for some very special cases.

Scorpion was exceptional, but not *extraordinary*. And since she was so busy traveling around on Isuzu Alliance work, she didn't have time to take requests. Scorpion punctuated her complaints with a sigh.

"That does sound difficult. Perhaps I ought to bring it up with Uzume. I doubt she wants to make things harder for you." Mira deposited the last bag in her Item Box and grinned mischievously.

Scorpion seized her shoulders and begged, "Please forget I said anything."

* * *

With that, they were ready.

"We should go. Remember, the concealment area is small, so make sure you don't stray too far." Mira activated total concealment again and stepped out the door.

In the dim light of the nighttime compound, patrolmen plodded around on their routes. Angelique gasped in fear when she saw their bright lanterns. She clammed up and hid her face until Mira gently reminded her, "Worry not. The range may not be wide, but its effect is flawless."

She was right; the patrolmen passed them by without so much as a glance. Angelique had listened closely to Mira's description of the total concealment, but now that she saw it in action, her jaw dropped in astonishment.

Scorpion led the way through the compound. Anne continued to sleep on Wasranel's back. Scorpion had given the girl a sniff of a weak sleeping drug so she wouldn't wake up and get scared. She likely wouldn't stir until morning.

"Incredible..." Angelique murmured, watching yet another patrolman pass by.

"Basically cheating, right?" Scorpion replied with a chuckle.

"Isn't it? This is the true power of summoning!" the exceedingly proud Mira declared.

"I've never heard of the spirit of stealth, but spirits truly aren't to be underestimated..." Angelique smiled sweetly at the cocky young summoner before turning to Wasranel, who carried Anne as tenderly as a father.

Mira was a little displeased that her efforts at promoting her art had been ignored. Wasranel, too, was a little put out upon being reminded that his fame was so... nonexistent.

Scorpion chuckled at Angelique, who seemed to be a bit of an airhead. Then she turned her attention back to leading them before she became the target of an unintentional insult herself.

* * *

As they proceeded along the final stretch to the exit, the lights ahead suddenly got brighter—something was going on.

“What’s this?” Scorpion whispered upon seeing the fuss near the entrance gate. It was still far enough that she couldn’t tell. But once they got closer, it was all too clear.

There were more patrolmen. Five of them had left their posts and gathered right at the exit. As they watched, the group began to move directly toward Mira’s party.

“I don’t know what’s going on here, but let’s get out of the way,” Scorpion suggested. The gang moved to the edge of the path and waited for the guards to pass.

Hrmm? Who is that...? Mira narrowed her eyes as she looked at the leader of the group. She reflexively looked at his face and read the status that appeared for her.

His name was Isaac Meyer, and he was a handsome young sorcerer with long black hair and hawklike eyes. Mira frowned; although she couldn’t put her finger on it, there was something repulsive about this man.

“Do you think they’re on to us?” Scorpion asked her.

“I don’t know, but it seems we’d better hurry.”

The sudden change in the movements of the patrolmen was definitely suspicious, especially at this time of night. After watching them pass, Mira’s group picked up their pace and left the compound as quickly as possible.

Once they’d slipped into the back alleys, Mira had Wasranel switch from total concealment to optical camouflage before they continued on to Johan’s home. They proceeded on through the nighttime roads for some time, keeping to a slower pace for Angelique, until they arrived at the mansion. Taking care to tread soundlessly—they were invisible now thanks to the optical camouflage, but they couldn’t hide the sounds they made—they slipped through the open gate and stepped onto the property.

“Hey, Mira?” Scorpion noticed something was off.

“You noticed too, right? The watchmen are gone,” Mira said.

No matter how much she searched with her Biometric Scan, she couldn't sense the watchmen who had been here before. Even when they walked all the way to the front of the mansion, they found no sign of anyone.

Something was wrong. Johan's jailers were gone. They cautiously opened the door and stepped inside the mansion. As before, the entrance was cloaked in eerie darkness.

"What's going on here? Johan's presence is gone, too." Mira focused on her Biometric Scan and confirmed that there were no reactions in the entire building. She furrowed her brow and put a finger to her chin in thought. "He did say he would be gathering evidence of their dealings."

"Yeah, he did. Maybe he keeps his papers somewhere else? Do you think we got here too early?"

Perhaps the documents were in another location. Johan went to pick them up, and his watchers had gone along to supervise. That was plausible.

While Mira and Scorpion theorized, Angelique spoke up. "Excuse me? Did my husband say he would be preparing documents?"

"Yeah, evidence of his transactions with Melville Commerce. He said he'd hand it over if we saved you two," Scorpion explained.

Angelique looked down in thought for a moment, then turned to the corner of the foyer. "I see. Um, I believe those documents should be stored in the basement library. He has special magical shelves, so they should all be in there." It seemed there was a staircase leading down, though they hadn't seen it in the dark.

If he went to retrieve his papers, then perhaps he would be downstairs. And if the door there was very thick, it *could* reduce the reliability of Biometric Scan. But that still didn't explain why his minders were gone.

"Shall we head down and see for ourselves?"

They could leave the theory-crafting for after they'd searched, Mira thought as she groped for Scorpion's tail in the darkness. She needed the cat-woman to lead the way, since she couldn't risk making too much light.

"Mira, stop grabbing my tail!" Scorpion screeched and snatched Mira's hand as she

strode toward the stairs. Angelique took Wasranel's hand and followed.

Fortunately, the staircase wasn't completely dark. There was only enough light for one to see their feet, but that at least meant nobody would tumble down the stairs.

"Perhaps Johan went down here, after all," Mira said. On closer inspection, there was a light switch on the wall. Had Johan turned it on to go downstairs today? "Still, this is strange..." she muttered, gazing dubiously down into the dark. She had yet to sense anyone below.

"It was a good idea, but it definitely doesn't *feel* like anyone is down here." Scorpion focused her senses and came to the same conclusion. Perhaps he'd indeed come this way, but nobody was here anymore.

If he'd only gone to retrieve documents, then he should be back in his workroom, waiting for Mira's return. It was possible that he was *still* gathering them, yet there were no signs of life anywhere in the mansion.

Johan surely wouldn't escape by himself without ensuring his family's safety first. It seemed clear to Mira and Scorpion that something unexpected had occurred. They descended the staircase with careful steps.

* * *

Beyond the basement door was a room surrounded by stone walls. A feeble light hanging from the ceiling was the only illumination in the room, and it revealed that the place had been trashed. Shelves had fallen over, and documents and books were scattered across the floor, though there were no signs of them having been trampled on.

"Something happened here..." There was no way Johan would leave his room looking like a tornado blew through it, even if he was a naturally untidy person. Mira grimaced as uncomfortable thoughts ran through her mind. The room was a mess, but nothing was overly damaged—it looked as though the room had been torn apart specifically to *give the appearance* of being trashed.

As soon as she entered, Scorpion began examining the scene. She squatted in one corner and pointed at a bloodstain partially concealed under a pile of papers.

"Mira, look at this!"

Mira peeked down and noted, “Hrmm. It’s still fresh.”

The blood on the floor had yet to dry. Some of it had even stained the papers Scorpion had picked up.

Whose blood could this be? Even as the question crossed their minds, they knew—it had to be Johan’s. He was the only one who lived here.

How could this have happened? If Johan had been attacked now, of all times, it could only be because they’d learned of his rebellion. He’d have been attacked when he came down to retrieve the papers, and presumably, the attacker would have been one of his watchers.

But if so, how did they find out? Mira and Scorpion had used total concealment when they’d come and gone earlier. There should have been zero chance of getting caught.

Yet here was Johan’s blood, and Johan himself was missing.

While Mira and Scorpion examined the grisly scene, Angelique slowly approached, face stiff with terror. When she saw the red blood sticking to the documents on the floor, she hid her face behind her hands.

“Is that... my husband’s?”

Mira put a hand firmly on Angelique’s shoulder and prompted her to raise her head. She gazed into the woman’s eyes and declared, “Don’t worry. It looks bad, but it doesn’t seem like he lost much blood here. Besides, his expertise is vital to Chimera’s operations. Taking his life would be unthinkable.”

“Mira’s right. If they kidnapped him, I promise we’ll save him.” Scorpion flashed a genuine smile. She wasn’t just trying to console Angelique; she was truly confident that they could do it.

“Thank you both. Please help us... I’ll do anything.” Recovering herself a bit, Angelique put on the bravest face she could muster and bowed deeply. Her shoulders quivered as she prayed for her husband’s safety in that dim basement.

Mira watched her and thought to herself, *If not for Chimera Clausen, this family could have lived a happy life together. I’ll see that they regret making enemies of us.*

She felt Angelique's sorrow keenly. Mira swore anew to see Chimera Clausen defeated—both to save the spirits and to prevent any further tragedies like Johan's.

EX

ONE FINE LUNCHTIME, a man sat in the corner of a dining hall quietly eating his lunch. The food on the table was all simple fare; all that mattered was that it filled his stomach.

He was a tall, lean man who wore a long robe that bore striking symbols. Behind his silver-rimmed glasses blinked gray eyes, and his deep-blue hair was messily pulled back.

The man's name was Glad. He was the Skyfolk who had ended the lives of four Chimera Clausen members at the Citadel of Scales. Currently, he was on his way to his next destination. He had stopped in a town on the road between Roslein and Sentopoli to take a break.

As he quietly ate his meal, he heard the voices of two people sitting nearby.

"Hey, have you heard? A Deadeye Scorpion appeared!"

"Yeah, I heard. If it's true, they'll recruit a hunting party sooner or later."

Based on their manner of dress, they looked to be adventurers. As they chattered on, the eavesdropper learned that the Deadeye Scorpion was near the valley roads in southern Roslein.

It was quite rare for Deadeye Scorpions to exist, and even rarer to encounter one. Still, their strength and aggression were legendary in this region. After all, they were among the top class of monsters appearing on the western side of the continent. To hunt such a beast, one would need a group of five A-Rank adventurers—ten if one wanted to be certain of success.

And the dangerous monster had been seen just south of here, according to the strangers.

There were many small settlements in the area where it had been sighted. As such, once the reports were confirmed, the Adventurers' Guild Union would begin recruiting for a hunt with all speed.

South...

Glad finished his meal in peace despite the din around him, quickly paid, and left. He mounted the horse he'd left out front and sped westward toward Sentopoli. Naturally he took the northern road in order to avoid danger.

Despite his caution, after a few days of riding along the northern road, he ran straight into the Deadeye Scorpion as the behemoth emerged from a mountain valley.

“Why here...?!”

It wasn't especially far, sure, but there were steep mountains between the northern and southern roads. They couldn't exactly be scaled with ease.

“Why me...?”

No matter how he felt about it, there was a Deadeye Scorpion before him. Glad sighed, left his horse at a safe distance, and prepared for battle.

When the scorpion spotted him, it raised a giant pincer to attack.

It's wounded. Maybe I can make this work.

If there was any silver lining, it was the fact that this scorpion was missing its tail. It had lost its most dangerous, venom-tipped weapon.

But its two pincers were still quite healthy. The scorpion brought its claw down sharp and fierce, gouging a furrow in the earth.

Glad managed to survive the Deadeye Scorpion's first blow. As he darted by and tried to put some distance between him and his foe, he surveyed the enemy.

“Now that I'm getting a closer look...”

The scorpion hadn't just lost its tail; on closer inspection, it was heavily wounded.

He wondered if the scorpion had happened to run into a skilled adventurer, gotten hurt, and fled in this direction. Glad became even more cautious as he faced the enemy. Wounded monsters were the most dangerous.

At the same time, its injury also revealed a route to victory. Glad skillfully deployed magical barriers to fend off the Deadeye Scorpion's assault, keeping a careful eye on its motions.

Its right leg... and its back. After repeating this process ten times, Glad saw that one of its three right legs wasn't moving. There was a large wound on its dorsal side, as well.

Two weak points, no venom. With that knowledge, the priest immediately took the offensive.

The scorpion's giant pincer easily tore through his barrier. Glad ran out and lobbed a vial of holy water at the Deadeye Scorpion's flank. He had set his sights on its injured right leg.

Whether it was because it was a top-tier monster, or whether it was simply wounded and panicking, the Deadeye Scorpion reacted at lightning speed. It held its pincer up to block its right leg and caught the vial. There was a shattering sound, and holy water seeped out onto its pincer. The holy water lit with blue flames as Glad cast the spell [Banished Commandment: Flames of Atonement].

Azure fire coiled around the scorpion's pincer and traveled down its body, sending it up in a glorious blaze. Lesser monsters would be turned to ash in an instant by this magical fire.

Even wounded, the Deadeye Scorpion showed that it was made of stronger stuff. It slammed its burning pincer into the ground, the resulting shockwave so powerful that it blew away both fire and holy water.

Glad beheld its unwounded leg and muttered, "Not a scratch..."

Its thick carapace served as both weapon and armor alike. There was no choice but to continue to aim for its weak points. Yet his magic and crossbow bolts all failed to get past its pincer shield.

Such quick reactions... How did they manage to wound that thing's back?

The Deadeye Scorpion moved at a speed one would never expect from its size and wounds. Glad was once again reminded of how annoying wounded monsters could be as he fended off the creature's ferocious attacks.

The battle went on for an hour before Glad finally completed his more detailed observation and attacked once again. He threw holy water that erupted into flames, but the scorpion extinguished it. The giant foe then counterattacked, as if mocking him.

Glad stood his ground and defended himself from the Deadeye Scorpion with a multilayered barrier. Each strike of its giant pincers tore into the barrier, but Glad smiled viciously and looked up.

There was the sound of glass breaking—another vial of holy water. He had thrown it straight into the air right after the first one burst into flames. The vial rolled down a barrier he'd strategically placed above the creature before falling spectacularly onto the Deadeye Scorpion's back.

Instantly, water turned to fire that spread and devoured the beast's back—concentrated directly on its biggest wound. The Deadeye Scorpion released an ear-piercing cry. It lunged with its pincers to attack; if it was going down, it was planning to take Glad with it.

“Now, that’s a bad idea.”

There was a difference between a last-ditch effort and self-destruction. Glad aimed his crossbow at the Deadeye Scorpion’s right leg and fired. This time, his bolt struck true, at exactly the spot he’d been aiming for all this time.

Flames billowed over its right leg—the crossbow bolt had been dipped in holy water. Soon, the Deadeye Scorpion was burned inside and out. Eventually, it collapsed, no more than a lifeless husk.

* * *

“Looks like I survived that one...” After ensuring that the thing was well and truly dead, Glad slumped down on the spot.

Wounded or not, that was a top-class monster. Maneuvering himself into an advantage against such a creature had taken a real mental toll and put his abilities to the test. He was spent.

He looked into his bag. “What do I have left? Not... much at all.”

The consumables he'd prepared, like magical tools and chemicals, were few in number now. He'd exhausted most of them in the battle. Glad clicked his tongue angrily, unhappy that he'd wasted so many supplies right before searching for Chimera Clausen's headquarters.

"I'll have to restock."

At this rate, he wouldn't be able to crush them. He stood up and began butchering the Deadeye Scorpion at his feet. At least he could sell the loot to replenish his supplies. This Deadeye Scorpion lacked the venom that would've earned him the most money, but he still had healthy pincers, fangs, and the head of the carapace left—all valuable items.

Glad expertly butchered his kill.

"Aww! Beaten to the punch..."

Just then, a girl appeared from nowhere, apparently distraught that the beast was dead.

"Who are you?"

He hadn't sensed anyone until the moment she spoke. Though there were mountains all around, they were far enough that visibility was not a concern. He should have noticed someone approaching; it was like she appeared right before his eyes.

She appeared to be a young girl in a cheongsam. However, it was clear that she was more than met the eye. Glad cautiously stopped his work.

The girl stared at him for a moment before finally saying, "You're a strong 'un!" Her frown from before had turned into a bright and expectant smile. "I'm looking for strong people to fight. The other day, I heard about that monster. I fought it, but it got away just when I was getting to the good part..."

She launched into an impromptu story that he could have done without. The main thing was, Glad now understood that *she* was the one who had wounded the Deadeye Scorpion.

Apparently, during her fight with the creature, the Deadeye Scorpion had lost its tail and sustained heavy injuries on its leg and back. It had scurried into a hole in the

ground to escape. The girl waited there for a long time, assuming it would try to ambush her.

"Now I catch up, and it's already dead..." When she finally realized it was gone for good and gave chase, she'd found this.

"So...? Do you want to say you earned half the kill? Take the rest, then," Glad urged, having stopped his work halfway. He gathered his things and moved to leave. He'd rather lose half the loot than deal with this person.

"Naaah! Like I said, I just wanna fight strong enemies." Rather than the scorpion's corpse, the girl seemed more interested in *him*. After all, it was hard to fight a Deadeye Scorpion that was already dead.

"Then go look somewhere else. There's nothing stronger than that thing around here." Glad brushed her off and resumed butchering the monster. If she didn't want it, he'd take it—more money meant more power to bury Chimera Clausen.

To Glad, this little girl was just a pest.

"What about you? Fighting people is more fun than fighting monsters. C'mon, let's spar!"

She wasn't taking his hints. Glad must have been strong if he had felled the Deadeye Scorpion, wounded or no. But Glad refused, cleaned up his spoils, and walked away.

"Just a little, pleeeease!" she begged as they walked along, obviously starved for real action. "Ten... No, *five* minutes! That's all I want. I've been fighting so many monsters that I'm losing my skills when it comes to fighting people."

"A major battle awaits me. I can't afford to expend the effort," Glad said, refusing to entertain her nonsense. The final battle between Chimera Clausen and the man who had pursued them for many long years was on the horizon. That was all that mattered to him. Anything else was a waste of time.

A spark of hope lit in the girl's eyes.

"Could we spar *after* the big battle?!" She gazed up at the priest expectantly.

Glad looked down at her. *What an odd girl. Why is she so adamant?*

He finally relented; once his battle was done, he would spar with her. “But there’s no telling how long that might be,” he warned.

“As long as it means a good fight, I don’t care. I’ll be waiting! Thank you! You’re the best!” The girl hopped around excitedly. She looked more like a child than a fighting addict.

* * *

But the promise to spar didn’t seem to get her to go away.

The girl continued to tag along behind him on his way to Sentopoli. When Glad took a break, the girl took a break. When he walked, she walked.

After a few cycles of this, he finally asked, “How long do you plan to keep following me?”

The girl matter-of-factly answered, “Until we spar!”

“This isn’t child’s play.”

“I’m not playing! And I’m not a child.”

Glad began to regret the promise he’d made to this weirdo.

I’ll find a way to shake her off in the city. He hurried on his way, telling himself to be patient.

* * *

A night passed. They were on a well-traveled highway between major cities, but still, danger was not unheard of. And while Glad continued on his way to Sentopoli, some reared its head.

“Salaags... What a pain.”

Salaags were carnivorous beasts like leopards but a little smaller. By themselves, they weren’t especially threatening foes. The problem was their numbers; salaags hunted in packs.

Now, which direction will they come from?

Only one blocked his path up ahead. But seasoned adventurers and travelers knew that this was the salaags' favorite hunting technique; while their victim focused on the salaag they could see, the others would come from the sides and attack. The other salaags had to be lurking all around him.

Depending on how strong a traveler was, their fate might be sealed the moment they saw the single salaag up ahead. But Glad would not go down so easily.

With a sudden whoosh, Glad's crossbow bolt pierced through the skull of the salaag on the road. It died instantly. The ones in hiding all leaped out at once.

Five, ten... Thirteen or more, I'd say.

Glad quickly grasped their number, unsheathed his slender sword, and cut down an attacking salaag. When another tried to bite at his foot, he kicked it into the air before firing a bolt into its heart.

Two salaags fell lifeless to the ground—both of them struck directly in the heart. But Glad did not admire his handiwork; he turned to his next victims.

“What...?”

It was already over. It hadn't been five seconds since Glad had loosed his first bolt, yet all of the remaining salaags lay dead around the girl.

He'd had a feeling this girl was strong, given that she'd both wounded and pursued the Deadeye Scorpion. But this was ridiculous.

She hadn't made a single sound. In five seconds, she had finished off *eleven* salaags without even revealing her presence. Glad hadn't even realized she moved.

Despite her near-inhuman exploits, the girl simply said, “They picked the wrong fight today!”

What kind of monster was this little girl?

This is how it felt when I met that other girl...

Glad thought of the person he'd met the other day, back at the Citadel of Scales. After he'd finished off the Chimera members who had infiltrated the place, Isuzu Alliance operatives had wandered onto the scene. One in particular stuck out to him: the girl with the long, silver hair.

She looked weak and helpless, yet her presence far outstripped the others'. Glad felt the same sensation when he looked at this stranger.

Maybe I was too hasty. He was beginning to regret his rushed promise more and more. But it was too late to take it back, and there was no telling what might happen if he did.

"All done!"

Employing some odd technique, the girl had already dug a hole, hauled off all the salaags, and buried them.

Glad shut his eyes to the unbelievable sight and began walking again. He then chuckled to himself. Were strong little girls a common thing now?

"*Sooo...* what's this big battle you were talking about, huh?" A few hours after the salaag attack, perhaps in order to break the silence that had ruled most of the journey, the girl tried to strike up a conversation. She then added, "Ya need backup?!"

To a girl who journeyed in search of strong foes, a major battle sounded like a good time. She practically oozed excitement.

"After all, sooner it ends, sooner we spar!" She grinned. She seemed to be a keen problem-solver, as long as the problem was a lack of sparring.

Backup, hm?

Normally, Glad would have refused without a second thought. But now...

He had witnessed this girl's power more than once, and it was clearly overwhelming. If she sided with him, she was sure to pose an incredible threat to Chimera Clausen.

Glad stared at the girl, weighing the pros and cons. He saw the blessings of many spirits within her.

"Are you aware of a group known as Chimera Clausen?" he asked.

Glad knew that Chimera's defenses would be stronger than ever in the coming battle, so he told her the truth. He spoke at length about the many atrocities perpetrated by Chimera.

* * *

"That's awful! Yeah, I'll help. We're gonna beat up those dumb Chimeras!" After hearing the whole story, the girl was furious and formally offered her assistance.

"I see. Well, it's much appreciated. You may call me Glad."

Glad would accept her help, as long as she could control herself and stay with him.

"And I'm Meili—uh, I mean, *Meimei*! Nice to meetcha!" the girl replied with a firm, confident smile.

That was suspicious.

But Glad knew that he was just as suspicious. So he replied, "Right. Good to be acquainted," and walked on.

Along the way, they began to converse a bit more. All of their conversations were only a few words long—but for Glad, it was the most he'd talked on a trip in a very long time.

Finally, Glad and Meimei arrived at the city of Sentopoli. Meimei was excited; it had been a long time since she'd gone near any large human settlement. But even as she dragged him around every which way gawking at the sights, they eventually made it to the Adventurers' Guild Union.

There, they sold the materials they'd gathered. Since Glad was selling parts of the rumored Deadeye Scorpion, there was a bit of a stir. He lied and said that he'd gotten them a long time ago, and thereby managed to get through it without answering too many questions. He didn't want any trouble; he just needed money for resupplying.

After obtaining a large sum, Glad set out for the shops to buy necessary goods for the coming battle.

Each time they stopped, Meimei over all around the merchandise with sparkling eyes. Much was new to her, since she hadn't been to a big city in so long.

"There's so much stuff I've never seen!"

"Those are pretty common..."

The things Meimei claimed to have never seen before were popular items. Exactly how long had she been away from human society? Glad wondered for a moment, then decided he didn't care. He proceeded to the next store.

"This looks neat! I bet it could kick some serious butt!" Meimei ran over excitedly, carrying a powerful item that could manifest destruction rivaling that of advanced magic when fed only middling magic.

It was strong, but also expensive. It also required a license to purchase. Several shopkeepers were staring at the duo.

"Yes," Glad confirmed. "Put it back."

"Aww..." Meimei trudged over and returned the item to its shelf. Before she could bring any more items over, Glad dragged her out of the store.

* * *

They visited shops until Glad had finished replenishing his supplies. Next on the agenda was to take a break at a restaurant. As before, Meimei looked all around the place excitedly.

Inspecting the menu, Glad saw the restaurant served everything from savory feasts to fancy sweets.

"We do have work to do. Might as well eat first." Glad handed Meimei a menu and ordered food for himself, choosing whatever would most efficiently fill his stomach. He noticed that Meimei's face had suddenly clouded over with sadness, so he asked, "What's the matter?"

"I'm broke..."

The menu came with pictures of the delicious-looking food, which only amplified

Meimei's disappointment.

Glad asked how she'd survived to this point, to which Meimei replied that she'd been living off the land.

"The materials sold for more than I expected," he said. "I'll have plenty left for the rest of the supplies. Don't worry; it's on me."

As soon as the words were out of Glad's mouth, Meimei's frown turned upside-down. She looked over the menu gleefully and ordered enough to fill three people.

Indeed, she had not worried at all.



After the meal, Glad walked around the city to gather information. Meimei went with him, much less fidgety now. Perhaps having a full stomach had calmed her down.

And to his surprise, Meimei's presence was rather helpful. Glad might have looked suspicious asking questions alone, but having an innocent-looking little girl with him fixed that. Nobody feared him, and his efforts were a success.

* * *

It was nighttime when Glad and Meimei arrived at the outskirts of Sentopoli and hid behind a row of warehouses. They had fixed their sights on the biggest research facility in town.

That should be the last one. Glad smirked in anticipation as he watched someone leave the facility.

He hadn't *only* come to Sentopoli because Chimera's headquarters were nearby. Glad had obtained another piece of information from the people he'd dealt with at the Citadel of Scales—and it was of vital importance to him.

A particular man worked for Chimera Clausen, and his laboratory was in the very facility in front of Glad.

During their investigation, Glad had learned that this place was known throughout town as a laboratory that researched restoratives. It also employed people unrelated to Chimera. That part of the business was only a front; Glad had gleaned from his victims that the facility's true purpose lay underground.

At first, he'd considered subduing everyone, Chimera or not. But Meimei had complained that such conduct was not befitting of a warrior, and he worried that she might try to stop him. Thus he suppressed his rage and waited until late at night for all of the common folk to leave.

Glad spotted figures who seemed to be security guards on patrol. He chuckled; it was exactly as he'd been told.

Good... Only Chimera goons should be inside now.

He'd learned that below the lab was a facility where they manufactured fighting dolls that used the power of spirits. Confirmation of this lay right before Glad's eyes in the

form of the patrols.

Glad's eyes were imbued with the special senses of a Skyfolk priest, allowing him to see the ripples of spiritual power spreading from the security guards. Their wavelengths were clearly abnormal—each and every one was a fighting doll powered by spirits.

"O spirits, I swear that I will free you." Glad offered a prayer and turned to Meimei, who had been behind him, patiently standing by. "There's no doubt about it. That place is under Chimera Clausen's management."

Meimei grinned manically, ready to thoroughly trounce the dolls.

Glad managed to calm her down before she could leap out to attack. He needed to at least inform her of the strategy.

"Now, the plan is..."

It was late at night, so there were no regular employees around... and accordingly no need to hold back. Better yet, his one concern—the security guards—were dolls instead of regular people. This battlefield had no risk of collateral casualties beyond Chimera Clausen.

There might be some members of Chimera left inside, but Glad and Meimei were in full agreement that nobody would mind if those jerks got wrecked.

It only took a few minutes to agree on their strategy: Meimei would dash in and break through their front lines. While she rampaged, Glad would follow her lead and decide how to proceed on the spot. Depending on how things went, he might search the place while she wreaked havoc and drew their attention.

In short, the strategy was to use Meimei as bait.

"A fighting doll... I've never fought one of those before!" She was clearly thrilled.

The attack on the facility began quietly and swiftly. Meimei wouldn't truly let loose until they were inside the lab.

The duo began with the security guards out front. They could have opted to simply sneak in, but Glad requested that they take this detour.

Glad leapt out from hiding and ambushed the first fighting doll, successfully neutralizing it.

"Return to the shrine from whence you came." When he put a hand on the doll's surface, pale light began to flow from it and rise into the sky. As a priest, he had the power to return wandering spirits to the heavens.

Glad looked up to find his next target, but... there was none.

Meimei had neutralized every single one of the dolls without making a sound. Glad thought he knew what to expect from her by now, but she had outdone herself.

She can even do this against foes that harbor the power of spirits?

Yet Meimei herself sighed in disappointment. "Too easy..."

"What really matters is inside," Glad reminded her as he returned each spirit's power to the heavens. "No doubt the strong ones are all in there."

"Ooh! Can't wait!" Meimei's motivation skyrocketed once more.

* * *

The duo dragged the remains of the dolls out of sight and finally set foot inside the facility.

When they entered, the laboratory seemed empty. But as they penetrated deeper, more patrolling guards appeared up ahead. Unsurprisingly, these guards were fighting dolls as well. Seeing them, Glad growled, "How they waste the spirits' powers..."

What truly enraged him, however, was the spiritual power inhabiting them; it was far greater than the ones outside.

Meimei took down the first of these dolls and noticed right away that something was different. An expectant smile spread across her face.

"Now *this* is more like it!"

Meimei neutralized doll after doll, all in perfect silence.

When Glad had suggested that they would have stronger ones inside, he'd only been trying to cheer her up. But in truth, the dolls inside the facility were head and shoulders above the mooks outside.

He was satisfied to just follow after her and release the spirits' power from the dolls as planned.

* * *

Finally, and with very little difficulty, the two arrived in the depths of the facility. The room looked brand-new, bare of people or furnishings—but Glad felt the power of spirits leaking from beyond it.

The hidden door in this room would not open without either using a key or deciphering the spiritual power within. It was a very Chimera Clausen way to do things.

“They waste such power on these trifles...”

Regardless, a contrivance like this was meaningless before Glad. His eyes could decipher it in an instant.

“Seems this is where the main event begins.”

“What are we fighting next?!”

The door opened without difficulty, and Glad and Meimei strode in. This was Chimera Clausen's true secret lab, quite unlike the façade up above. Here was where they manufactured the fighting dolls.

A hallway stretched before them. Beyond it, the air was different—heavier, gloomier.

“What is this...?” Glad's face warped in agony. The oppressive sensation was a remnant of suffering spirits. Faced with this horror, his rage intensified. “Leave no doll uncrushed.”

Glad resolved himself to free every last bit of spiritual power trapped in this prison. He snuck up close to a fighting doll and pinned it down. Although it struggled, he held it in place as he sent the tormented spirit within back to the heavens.

But just as that doll stopped moving, a whole crowd of them appeared around Glad

and Meimei. Worse, these all held lethal weapons.

"Heck yeah! This is gettin' good!" Confronted with the murderous dolls, Meimei only grinned more ferociously.

Glad prepared to back her up, knowing that this would be a difficult fight. "How many are there—?"

There was one Meimei. And there were many dolls.

But when Meimei kicked the air in front of her, the fighting dolls up ahead were blown away, to a one, like so many dry leaves.

"You... did that in one blow?" he asked, stupefied.

Meimei's momentum was unstoppable as she took out the trash. She seemed to grab the empty air before her, and the dolls ahead of her exploded at once. Some attacked from behind, but a single turning back kick mowed them down.

Meimei's strength was out of this world—no, it was out of this plane of existence.

I guess I should just be happy that she's on my side...

Feeling a small measure of terror as he realized that this was the true nature of the little pest he'd been traveling with, Glad set about freeing the spiritual power from the ever-growing pile of disabled dolls.

Soon, hundreds of fighting dolls' remains had piled up, and the hallway was silent once more. It wasn't especially tiring, but it had taken longer than he expected. Job done, Glad hurried down the hallway and put a hand on the door at the end of it.

"Kh...!" When he peeked through the crack in the door into the large room beyond, he instantly threw up a barrier.

There was a dull noise. Then, the barrier shattered.

"They'd go this far?"

An inorganic, metallic arm broke through. At the other end of the arm was a huge fighting doll—but this one was not humanoid. Unlike its compatriots before it, it was

a beast made in pursuit of raw power with four arms and four legs.

The giant doll was infused with spiritual power incomparable to that of the previous dolls. How many spirits had been sacrificed to this abomination?

Glad quivered with rage, but the foe was a real threat. He hesitated. They might've had an easier time than expected up to this point, but the final boss would not be so easy.

Glad braced himself for the battle ahead.

Meili... er, *Meimei* did not.

"Maybe this one will be strong!" Meimei slipped by him and immediately engaged the gigantic fighting doll solo.

He thought he even heard her say something about fighting with one hand behind her back for the sake of "training."

How can she stand against a foe with this much spiritual power?

Meimei fended off the giant's attack with one hand and retaliated. By Glad's estimation, she was fine.

After watching another moment, Glad asked, "Is it okay if I leave this to you?"

"Yeah, I got this!" She turned to him, and her eyes seemed to say, *Go do what needs to be done.*

Glad nodded and ran ahead. Along the way, he realized with some surprise that he was *smiling*.

Before now, he had seen Meimei as a useful pawn. All he wanted was for her to act as bait when convenient. But before he knew it, he found that he trusted her enough to turn his back on a dangerous enemy.

He'd never relied on someone before, never turned his back on a battlefield. Trust was a strange new feeling that confused and frightened him a little.

Glad decided that maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

* * *

Glad passed through the door and reached a hallway connected to several more rooms. He searched the rooms one by one, hoping to find either the man he sought or some information on him.

He finally found what he was looking for in a room at the end of the hall. This one was enclosed by walls more secure than those of the others.

What was inside? Not his mark.

But what he *had* discovered was something that he as a priest could not overlook.

"How could you... How could you do this?!" Glad screamed. Within the room was a large, black, metallic podium, upon which sat a crystal-like ball. Most who saw it would not know its function, but Glad's eyes showed him the truth.

The large ball was full of so many spirits that his heart broke. The spirits inside had lost their forms and existed only as raw power. It might be too late to save them.

"I'll release you now."

If nothing else, he could let the spirits' power, their original form, fill nature and flow back into the current from which it had come. Glad approached, hand extended, as he had with the dolls.

Just then, a figure hiding silently in the corner attacked from the shadows, taking him completely by surprise.

A dull noise, bright-red blood spraying onto the floor. Then a man clad in black collapsed in a puddle of crimson. He'd thought he had the perfect opportunity to liquidate Glad—but the priest had reacted in the nick of time.

This room was full of spirits' power. To Glad, it was like having a sensor network, making it easy to notice the assailant's charge. That slender sword of his almost reflexively found its way into his assailant.

Glad clicked his tongue at the man who lay in a pool of his own blood. He was not a fighting doll, but a human. The keen edge of Glad's sword had snuffed out the man's life in an instant.

The fact that he was here surely meant that he was with Chimera Clausen. Glad had finally found a real human, and he'd killed him before he could ask a single question.

"What a waste." Glad glared coldly at him before using his exorcism to burn the body away. After that, he approached the orb full of sealed power and offered a prayer, releasing the spirits within.

The enormous spiritual power erupted out of the heinous object, dispersing into the greater world. Glad watched until it was done before searching around the room, hoping to find some information that the useless assailant could no longer offer. The room had shelves, desks, and the like—it seemed rather important.

Glad searched carefully. Ten or so minutes passed while he pillaged the shelves and pulled out desk drawers. Eventually, he happened upon a useful-looking document placed casually atop a desk. It seemed to be a report of some kind.

It listed detailed business correspondences involved in the delivery of certain goods. When he read further, it became clear that these "goods" were spirits. Glad's indignation only grew.

His hatred-filled eyes landed on a list of names: the facility's three managers. There was another, as well. It seemed the man he was searching for left management to the other three. All signs indicated that he rarely, if ever, visited this facility in person.

But this gave Glad a useful lead. The three managers listed here would no doubt have some relationship with the man Glad sought. Even if he had just disposed of one of the three, he would have two more interrogation opportunities.

Glad kept the document as evidence and snatched up a few other eye-catching ones along the way. He burned the rest and left the room.

* * *

When he returned to the large room, he found Meimei yelling unhappily at the giant fighting doll lying motionless on the floor. "C'mon! Get back up already!"

"What's the matter?" Glad asked.

Meimei angrily replied that the thing had suddenly stopped moving mid-battle, just as she was practicing a new technique. This fight, to put it bluntly, *sucked*.

I guess that's my fault...

The giant fighting doll had no spirit power left anymore. The thing was trashed after its fight with Meimei. Despite all the power it had once contained, she'd really given it a thorough trouncing.

But that wasn't why its power was gone—no matter how beat-up the vessel, the spiritual power would stay inside until it was freed, and Glad was the only one present who could free it. It must've already been released... and the only thing that came to mind was the orb in the room from before. No doubt that was the core of this giant doll.

"It was probably incomplete," he muttered.

Though unintentionally, he'd deprived Meimei of her fun. Now she was antsy again and desperate for an outlet. He'd be in real trouble if she directed her pent-up energy at him, so Glad told a little white lie, pretended to release spiritual power from the doll, and turned to leave.

"I've gotten some useful info. Let's go get some food," he said to Meimei, who still seemed regretful. As expected, those words made her eyes regain their sparkle. "I'll pay for everything. Eat as much as you want."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Meimei rejoiced, and Glad breathed a sigh of relief.

How am I going to deal with this troublesome girl?

AFTERWORD

HI, YOU ALL KNOW how this works. It's the afterword-slash-page-padder. Since we didn't have one last volume, I want to send you off with a bit extra this time. Though honestly, I don't know how many of you actually read this...

First, all of my gratitude to those of you who have purchased this book. It's because of you all that we've released Volume 7. I'm so blessed that I can never thank you enough. But again: thank you!

Next: thanks to the people involved in the release. You can't imagine how many people have a hand in the final release of a book like this... I am forever grateful to you all!

For example, fuzichoco, who's handled all of the illustrations. I'm sure some of you out there picked this book up just for the beautiful art!

Did you get a good look at the cover? That's 'choco for you! Just overwhelmingly incredible.

The setting of the cover is the Isuzu Alliance's HQ. I had only envisioned a normal Heian-style building, but things are never quite that simple when fuzichoco's in charge!

As many of you might be aware, fuzichoco's true style comes out in fantasy Japanese settings. As a fan, I was more than happy to let them design the image of the Isuzu Alliance from the ground up. And that resulted in the cover you see today! I am truly happy that 'choco revamped it. Thank you!

Now, I've already put a lot of my joy into words, but we're not done yet!

Next up: dicca*suemitsu!

Amazingly, this series has received a manga adaptation! Its first volume will be released alongside this volume of the light novel. Incredible!

So many things about Mira's adventures that I couldn't fit into words alone have been beautifully depicted in the manga. Every little thing is drawn in such vivid detail. And

as the author, I always enjoy seeing our adorable heroine in so many different ways.

You'll also get to see characters like Reynard and Joachim who might be harder to envision from text alone! Especially in their cases, their designs are just leagues beyond anything I'd ever imagined. It makes it a lot easier for me to envision them, too. (Jeez, so they were hunks all along, huh?)

But most of all, the feeling of having my writing made into a manga is indescribable. I've always loved manga, which only adds to the joy. Make sure you give the manga version a try!

Okay. I've said a lot by now, but I've still got page space! While we're here, how about we discuss some behind-the-scenes stuff?

First... Ooh, I know. How about the latifward bonsai that Mira brought home to Solomon?

Solomon named it Dragon's Cloud and takes very good care of it. He has other bonsai trees as well, which he likes to display in the castle courtyard. The courtyard isn't just for Solomon; it's a place of rest for the maids and servants as well. However, many find the bonsai corner rather unapproachable; they often call it the Little Forest and treat it as a sacred place.

Solomon laid out his many prized bonsai plants in the courtyard in hopes of showing everyone, but unfortunately... he doesn't seem to be getting many takers.

Now as you might recall, Mira brought another souvenir home: the figure of the goddess of mercy she gave to Luminaria. It has a new home in the Mage Corps' conference room. Luminaria decided to put it there to bring some life to the drab setting.

Perhaps because Luminaria was the one who did it, or perhaps because people agreed with her sensibilities, it was quite the popular decoration.

As a result, it became a popular topic of conversation among the Mage Corps. They believed that the Trinity needed to be reunited, and to that end, they needed the remaining two deities. Indeed, the goddess of mercy was not the only figure to be obtained; all three of the Trinity had images carved in their likeness. Call it a Trinity series.

Speaking of the figure, Mira may have obtained it with ease... but that was only because she came at a lucky time. Given how popular the figures were, they were actually quite hard to find. And now, such a rare item adorns the conference room all alone.

Like a virus spreading through the Mage Corps, it awakened their completionist spirit. The clerics were especially motivated to complete the set. To this day, the Mage Corps toils to obtain the remaining two and complete the Trinity.

How's that for behind-the-scenes knowledge?

And there you have it: the full release of *She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man* Volume 7! I hope you enjoy it.



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