

NOVEL

9

She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man

Written by

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SHE PROFESSED HERSELF PUPIL OF THE WISE MAN

– Kenja no Deshi wo Nanoru Kenja –

- VOLUME 9 -

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[SEVEN SEAS]



"Leticia, please perform Requiem for Your Distant Soul."

"Request received!"

Suddenly, souls began to rise from all over Sentopoli, joining the parade of lights in their journey to the Celestial Shrine of Nirvana. Leticia's requiem melted into the night sky, cradling the city and souls in peace.

Her voice continued to echo late into the night. And perhaps thanks to her skill as a songstress, or perhaps out of pity for the unfortunate souls, not a single person complained.

Mira ascended to the roof and watched over the souls in silent prayer. Two souls happened to catch her eye. They were far-off in the eastern sky, reaching for greater and greater heights. Yet they stayed nestled close together, never straying, loath to part again.





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Seven Seas Entertainment



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CHAPTER 1

EARLY THE NEXT morning after the victory against Chimera Clausen, Pegasus flew gallantly through the sky far to the east of Sentopoli with Mira and Cyril on its back.

The battleground where Isuzu's Emella, Diamond, and the rest had fought was clearly visible from the sky, still awash with charred blackness.

"What an awful mess..." Mira mused.

"Well, it was sort of a war, after all," Cyril replied.

Burned-down homes and the corpses of countless Chimera Clausen soldiers littered the place. It seemed someone had already begun collecting the corpses; things had probably looked even worse immediately after the battle.

Hate the sin, not the sinner. Though it seemed cold comfort, Mira and Cyril offered a silent prayer to the wastes below.

The two were headed for a nearby campsite. A portion of it was now being used to treat the wounded—and the injured soldiers were plentiful. The sight was a testament to the harsh battle that had unfolded, yet there was light in the eyes of the people here.

Mira couldn't imagine the joy they must be feeling to see this years-long struggle come to an end. She was only a temporary helper, but she could feel the deep emotion radiating from them.

"I suppose I should say, 'Well done,'" Mira murmured quietly. She ordered Pegasus to land in an open area nearby. After dismissing the beast, she headed to the other side of the campsite, which was filled with the sounds of celebration of their victory.

"I found yooou! Miwaah!" Suddenly, Flicker clawed her way through the crowd and seized Mira.

Cyril didn't even try to stop her. He just shook his head and said, "Sorry. As usual."

Mira was released a moment later as a gust of wind blew past. She watched in

amazement as Emella sprinted after Flicker, who fled from the swordswoman just as quickly. It seemed Flicker had finally mastered the art of savoring Mira's cuteness until the split second before Emella's karate chop arrived. She ran in a wide circle, approached Mira once more and scooped her into a hug, took a deep huff, and moaned, "Ooh, the smell of sweat..."

Then, she zipped away just in time once more.

"...She's getting awfully athletic." Mira turned around and grinned wryly.

Cyril maintained a smile as he replied, "Thanks to you, Mira." He mentioned that Flicker had become much stronger and faster as of late, all for the sake of embracing Mira just one moment longer.

However, she still had a ways to go. When she dared to attempt another squeeze, Emella finally caught up.

"You are incorrigible," Mira said with a smile.

The bystanders in the campsite were captivated by this impromptu game of tag. Then, apparently having discerned the rules of the game, two men stepped forward. It was a nightmarish turn of events for Mira—it seemed they were going to try to see how many times they could hug the poor girl before getting caught.

The two men ran madly toward her, while others began to wager on the outcome. Emella was momentarily too perplexed to react, but Flicker screamed, "Nooo, that's my Mira!"

Mira turned to run for it. "Settle down, you drunks!" she shouted, sprinting away from an approaching man. Between the booze and their victory, Isuzu's people had fallen to excess—but she was compelled to join in their games for now.

* * *

When everyone had their fill of chasing, Mira slipped away. It was time to pay a visit to the place where the Isuzu leaders had gathered; they needed to discuss their next plans.

While it wasn't as rowdy as the bigger party, the big shots' celebration was surprisingly lively. If there was one difference, it was that none of the attendees were

average party-goers in any aspect. Mira surveyed them; all were the veteran adventurers and Isuzu Alliance elites who had participated in the mission.

She soon found Aaron, who'd worked with the other forces. When he saw Mira, he exclaimed, "Ooh, Little Miss Mira! I hear you took down the big one. You're a real MVP!" When he spoke up, the others all turned to Mira at once.

It seemed the story of Mira's battle at Chimera HQ was well-known by now.

Mira took the full brunt of their quizzical, envious, and perhaps even frightened gazes, smirking proudly. "Of course. An easy feat for the power of summoning!" She puffed out her chest. Marketing came first, even among these veterans.

"You're the same as ever. C'mon and eat, Little Miss. Even after a big job like that, we have more work waiting for us." Aaron laughed her off as usual, shoving a grilled skewer and a glass from the table into her hands as he took another glass in his own. "To our little hero!" he toasted, knocking his drink against Mira's before proceeding to down it in one gulp.

"Goodness. Getting hammered this early in the day?" Mira sighed.

The others around them offered their own "Cheers!" to the toast. Those that had led platoons into battle celebrated joyfully alongside their subordinates as equals.

It hadn't been long since the sun rose. As drunks crowded the table, Mira gulped down another glass. It was the perfect drink to put her in high spirits.

Once Cyril had arrived as well, Aaron informed them of their next mission: important members and famous adventurers of the Isuzu Alliance were to ride a spirit airship into the sky above Sentopoli. After getting everyone's attention, they would announce that they were a volunteer army—omitting their identity as Isuzu—and proclaim that they had defeated Chimera Clausen's leader and elites.

They might've been a bunch of drunk hooligans at the moment, but Aaron and the other adventurers here were all famous—their story would be both newsworthy and trustworthy. The news of Chimera Clausen's defeat would surely spread throughout the continent. And when it did, Aaron surmised, there would be two kinds of reactions—at least among those who knew about Chimera in the first place.

First, many would be overjoyed by the defeat of the world's most vicious enemy.

Chimera Clausen harmed the spirits that most of humanity loved as neighbors, after all; the organization was naturally hated by the majority of people everywhere.

The oldest countries—the Three Great Kingdoms Grimsdale, Alisfarius, and Ozstein—had especially deep ties to the spirits, making them major stakeholders in this conflict. Depending on the circumstances, Aaron added with a chuckle, they might start giving out awards or throwing parades.

On the other hand, he estimated that there would be a different kind of reaction too: some would shudder at the news of Chimera's defeat. Those who'd profited from Chimera Clausen's existence would no doubt be thrown into panic. Chimera's defeat would bring their profits to zero... though at this point, that would be the least of their worries. They were co-conspirators. Chimera Clausen's shadowy troops might have made their problems disappear before, but now, nobody could protect them from the consequences coming for them.

"A whole lot of Isuzu spies have gathered in Sentopoli," Aaron said. "First thing they're gonna do is clean house."

Organizations who had until now enjoyed the benefits of partnership with Chimera—as well as those who had worked with them—would erupt into chaos. They would surely move at once to gather information, contact allies, and make plans. Isuzu's spies scattered throughout Sentopoli would monitor their actions and report in detail. Mopping up the remaining Chimera sympathizers crawling through Sentopoli was one of the primary goals of the show Isuzu had planned.

Once they captured said remnants and obtained their testimony, Isuzu would be able to drag conspirators from all over the continent into the light. It would take time, but the Isuzu Alliance was patient and unrelenting.

"And that's about the size of it. We just gotta make our announcement as big and bombastic as possible. You might have just the thing for that, Little Miss Mira. Tell us more."

The appearance of a large airship manned by famous adventurers was one thing, but flashy summoning magic would make the performance all the more powerful. The sooner they could convince Chimera they didn't stand a chance against Isuzu and their allies, the sooner the co-conspirators would panic and make a move. That was Alioth's theory, anyway.

As if summoned by the thought, Alioth appeared seemingly out of thin air. He picked up the explanation and looked at Mira expectantly. “Lady Uzume has asked me to request you use your most conspicuous summon. Would you do that for us?”

“Hrmm... Well. In that case—”

“Oh, but Lady Uzume has asked me to pass on one more request: ‘No Eizenfald.’”

“What...?” Mira’s jaw dropped. He was the strongest, most impactful, and *coolest* of all. Mira was dead certain he fit every possible demand Kagura could make, which only caused this prohibition to astound her more. “Eizenfald is *absolutely* the ideal summon!” Mira glared at Alioth spitefully, angry that her pride and joy wouldn’t get to take center stage.

“I’m sorry. Lady Uzume just told me to pass that on...” he stammered. Alioth didn’t know the reason himself, and now Mira was winding herself up to shoot the messenger. Even as she snarled at him, he asked in confusion, “Erm, what sort of summon is this Eizenfald of yours?”

Mira puffed out her chest proudly again and declared, “Eizenfald is an Imperial Dragon, and he is my greatest son!” She couldn’t possibly think of a more apt summon.

Alioth and Aaron grinned in apparent understanding and said in unison, “Ah.”

Mira didn’t care for that reaction. She frowned. How could they make light of her beloved summon?

“Mira! Mira!” Cyril interrupted. He leaned over and whispered the reason into her ear.

The common perception of Imperial Dragons was that they were harbingers of calamity. It would be like hanging a sword over the city’s head—more like an atomic bomb, really—and showing that she was ready to let it loose at any given moment. It might’ve been a different story back when famed summoners like Danblf worked openly, but in modern times, there was no immunity to the overpowering presence of an Imperial Dragon. The city could devolve into chaos before they could make their announcement.

“How could this have happened...?” Mira suddenly recalled that something similar had happened before. She cursed the pitiable position her summon had been put in, and swore to be kinder to him.

Her flawless plan ruined, Mira dejectedly munched through the food laid before her, then decided to take a nap in a tent set up for the purpose. When she'd last woken, it had been to go into battle. Now, this moment of calm allowed her sleepiness to creep back over her.

Though many others were in the same state, their drowsiness was drowned out by the day's joy. Very few others slept in the tent.

Mira chuckled at the commotion outside. She grumbled, "Can't be intoxicated by the victory alone, can they?" With that thought, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

* * *

"Mira! We gotta get going!" A voice rang through her sleepy mind as a gentle hand shook her awake. It took several repetitions for Mira to finally crack open her heavy eyelids.

"Nngh... Morning already?"

"It's noon, Mira. Still sleepy, huh?"

"No... I remember now..." She rubbed the sleep out of her vacant eyes and looked up.

Emella smiled sweetly down at her while Flicker wriggled like a worm in the next bed over. Her arms and legs had been bound—obviously apprehended during an attempted late-night snuggle with the little summoner.

After confirming that Mira was awake, Emella slung Flicker over her shoulder and exited the tent. "I'm gonna go ahead. I'll be waiting for you at the airship."

"Hrmm... I must've slept for quite a while."

It was just before noon. The rowdy voices that Mira had fallen asleep to were gone; in their place, she heard orders being given in the distance. She stood and walked straight out of the tent, narrowing her eyes in the dazzling sunlight.

"Such organized soldiers..."

The people who'd been singing and dancing just last night while flushed with intoxication were nowhere to be found; they'd all been replaced by disciplined troops.

The tent was struck in the blink of an eye, and they promptly packed up tables and cookware.

Impressed by how much had changed in so little time, Mira began walking toward the spirit airship parked nearby. It had just landed, and cargo was still being unloaded. But she noticed that something was off.

Mira spotted Aaron standing next to the spirit airship. "Say, what in the world is this cargo?" Carriages were rolling down a ramp to the cargo compartment, but for some reason, all of them were empty.

Aaron turned to greet her. "Finally awake, sleepyhead? Well, as you can see, it was hauling carriages."

According to Aaron, the majority of people at this campsite would split up, travel to the neighboring countries, and hunt down Chimera Clausen remnants. The carriages would serve as transportation. They were empty now so they could be stocked with the ample food stored in the village that had been Chimera's control center.

Although Isuzu had shattered the enormous organization known as Chimera Clausen, their battle wouldn't truly be over until they'd hunted down all of the remaining pieces. How many years would such a thing take?

"I see. Then there is still much to do. No rest for the weary, hrmm?" Mira murmured.

A man listening in answered, "There may be no end in sight, but it'll be smoother sailing from here on out. Bet we'll get a ton of clues from this next mission, too."

He was right; their most intense battle was over. All that was left were remnants that could no longer hide under the umbrella of Chimera. Isuzu's declaration of victory would flush the stragglers out, allowing Isuzu to capture them. That, in turn, would get them more information and expose many more of Chimera's hiding spots.

Chimera might've been slippery before, but now they had lost that advantage. It was only a matter of time before they were completely destroyed.

"Wounded beasts can still be dangerous. Be careful out there," Mira warned. They had room to breathe, but they couldn't be careless.

"I know it. Thanks." The man accepted Mira's warning, put a hand on one of the

carriages, and guided it to where his team waited.

"Meh, I wouldn't worry too much." Aaron shrugged. "The hunter teams will have spirits working with 'em."

"Well, at least that's reassuring."

"It's all thanks to you, Little Miss Mira, and those other two. Production of the white weapons is on track, and soon we'll have enough for everyone. It's the weapons that make it safe for us to add spirits to our fighting forces."

"I see. I'm glad I could help."

To spirits, the black mist ore weapons and their oni curses were an unbeatable foe. But now, the Isuzu Alliance had a way to neutralize those threats, making it possible to bring spirits to the front lines. This would flip the power dynamic considerably, to Isuzu's overwhelming advantage.

The man was right; the rest of this war would be smooth sailing.

Mira prayed for their success as she watched the carriages leave, one after another.

CHAPTER 2

AFTER THE CARGO was fully unloaded, Mira followed the Isuzu elites and famous adventurers onto the spirit aircraft.

She surveyed their surroundings from the deck, then asked Aaron, “Incidentally, what ever happened to that Skyfolk man? Given all the festivities, I have to assume the score was settled with the executive that was in the control center.”

She was, of course, referring to the top executive manager, Zell Schedal. The Skyfolk man had claimed he was after that guy. If the two had fought, it must have been in or near the control center. Aaron must have heard something about it.

“I dunno... Well, we know the executive is dead, but we’re not clear on the other guy.” As the spirit airship gradually rose into the sky, Aaron pointed back down toward the burned-out village with a perplexed look on his face. “You see the black, burned spot in the crag over there? We found the executive there, burned to death. But for some reason, the Skyfolk guy’s clothes, glasses, and weapons were also lying nearby. They were all tattered and broken... Scorched, too. A few of us theorized he might’ve abandoned the clothes so he wouldn’t get burned. Either way, he’s vanished.”

Upon closer inspection, Mira spotted a black smudge on the rocky crag in the distance. It was rather far from the village, so it wasn’t clear why they’d fought there. But the marks clearly indicated an intense battle, even from this far.

“Oh... I was hoping to get the opportunity to chat with him...” Mira murmured, gazing back at the scorched earth as the airship left it behind. She wanted to know about the Animist village, their relationship with spirits, and how they lived.

Spirits and summoning were closely related, so she might’ve learned something genuinely useful from that man. She had been excited by the prospect, but there had also been something Mira found herself even more interested in.

“I’m sure you’ll find him again, somewhere,” Aaron assured her. “He left those broken weapons behind because he didn’t need ‘em anymore; he must’ve gotten his revenge.”

“Hrmm... You’re right. Then I’ll leave my questions until we meet again.”

"Heh. When that day comes, I bet he'll say, 'Who the hell are you?'"

"...That does seem likely."

The battleground was no longer visible, but the two kept their eyes fixed in that direction as they laughed together, recalling the first time they'd met the Skyfolk man—that man whose eyes were chilly despite the simmering hatred within.

Now that he's gotten his revenge, how does he plan to live his life?

That was what she really wanted to ask him. It would be a harsh question for the Skyfolk man, bound so long by vengeance, but it was an important one. If he was but a shell with no direction, Mira thought she couldn't bear to leave him to such a life—but at the same time, she didn't know if there was something she could do to help him. Surely anything would be better than being alone, though.

The Skyfolk man Glad Schedal: the impetus for their rushed plan and a priest of one of the Five Anima. Mira would never learn his name, but his existence would remain stamped in her memory forever.

The spirit airship arrived in the skies above Sentopoli less than an hour later. Per Kagura's request, Mira had summoned Garuda and Rainbow Spirit Twinkle Pom to ensure the group stood out as much as possible. Garuda obeyed her orders faithfully, circling the airship. It flapped its wings proudly in the sunlight, reflecting brilliantly above the city. Twinkle Pom formed a great rainbow gate in the sky, drawing even more attention.

It was just past lunchtime, and the noon rush was dying down. Adventurers had begun heading out once more to resume the day's work. All of them looked up in confusion at the great airship, which looked like a descending god with an attendant divine bird. Citizens who'd been in their homes poked their heads out and looked up at the sky when they heard the commotion.

Once he'd seen that they had the city's attention, Alioth stepped up to the bow of the ship. "Shall we begin?" he asked, then said to the spirits, "Now, if you'd please."

Apparently having received his orders ahead of time, the spirits assented and began casting their magic. A thick cloud spread above the airship—but it did not end there.

"My word... Is this a screen?" Mira gazed at it from one corner of the ship, half amazed

and half astounded.

Within the cloudy veil raised by the water spirits, light spirits began to weave their spell. Soon Alioth himself appeared larger than life on the “screen,” like a movie projector.

The uproar on the ground below grew louder, and Mira felt the activation of spirit magic once more. The effect quickly became clear.

“Citizens, an announcement. Early this morning, a secret operation brought an end to the years-long war with the great evil, Chimera Clausen.” Alioth’s confident declaration of victory spread throughout the city. It sounded as if his voice was coming from right next to the listener, despite him being high above on the ship.

So... he's using wind spirits as a loudspeaker. I'd wondered how he would communicate from up here, but I suppose this is an easy feat with the power of spirits.

Onscreen in the sky, Alioth’s voice rang out over the city. His message succeeded in capturing the attention of all of Sentopoli. However, it seemed like the people below were more surprised by the show than the contents of the message itself. Most either couldn’t believe what they were seeing or were excited by the mysterious phenomenon, offering such pithy remarks as, “What the heck?!” and “That’s wild!”

These reactions were expected. Alioth waited for the voices of the crowd to die down and continued. “I will now announce the names of some of the brave heroes who aided in our victory. First: the famous adventurer known as the Dragon-Severing Slash, Jack Grave!”

One of the warriors on the ship’s deck appeared onscreen. “Greetings, everyone. I’m Jack Grave, and I led one of the squads in this mission. I’m genuinely relieved to have put an end to the battle with Chimera Clausen.” He looked to be an attractive young man in his twenties, with crimson armor and an enormous sword on his back. Despite his intimidating appearance, he had a gentle demeanor. After a quick bow, he flashed a big smile. Cheers in a distinctly feminine register floated up to the airship from below.

Strong enough to defeat dragons *and* conventionally attractive. This Jack fellow also had a sweet smile that pricked one’s motherly instincts. He was like a male idol or a hero straight out of a storybook.

I see... A reasonable choice to start this off. Mira grinned, watching the immediate effect on the city below. At times like this, it was vital to win people over. Having the hearts of the people on their side would be critical in countering the upheaval that would result from Chimera's disappearance from this city. After it was all over, the public would come to understand that what Jack Grave and the others had done was for the best—defeating Chimera Clausen was not a setback for the city, but a boon. Jack and the others understood this, as well.

While Mira analyzed the strategy, the next representative stepped forward.

"Next, I'd like to introduce the White Moon Knights. On top of their exploits in this battle, they're known for saving a capital from the Orc General's army. Their leader, Moonlit Cross Eleonora!" Alioth called a second name just as he had Jack Grave's, and a female knight appeared on the screen.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. As you've heard, I'm Eleonora, and I lead the White Moon Knights. Our guild joined this battle as part of the secondary force. The great evil, Chimera Clausen, fought hard. But with the help of our friends and allies, we've all managed to see the job through. I'm awfully grateful for that." She smiled gently and waved down at the crowd. Immediately after, the fierce cheers of men surged up from the ground.

Makes sense. Might as well choose both a man and a woman. It would be difficult for Jack Grave alone to grab the hearts of the city. His popularity with women would naturally earn the envy of men, so they chose the knight Eleonora to balance things out. Mira turned around and gazed not at the screen but at Eleonora herself. The summoner sighed at her divine beauty.

I can see why the men are excited.

Eleonora flipped back her long, blonde hair with one hand. She had strong-willed green eyes, yet a gentle smile. She was as tall and slim as a model, and her bosom was quite... *pronounced*. Her silver armor flowed like a skirt from hip to knee, below which she wore black leggings and silver greaves.

It wasn't especially revealing, but the way her armor thinned out here and there—probably for ease of motion—had a way of stimulating certain *thoughts*. And the enamel-like substance used to join the pieces had a fantastic way of showing off what little uncovered skin there was.

“...Simply exquisite,” Mira chuckled to herself as she zeroed in on two particular places: Eleanora’s cleverly hidden chest and thighs.

It was then that a few choice phrases reached her ears: “Princess!” “Please step on me!” “Glare at me like I’m trash!” There were even a few women in the crowd screaming, “Be my big sister!”

It seems this world doesn’t lack for freaks either. Mira chuckled again as she gazed at Eleanora, who calmly smiled and waved.

It was time for the next person. Just as the image on the screen moved on, Mira noticed Eleanora’s gentle smile shift to a shudder-inducing sadistic grin. A select few of the cheers had managed to identify her true nature. Now Eleanora’s grin seemed to hold a different meaning entirely. Mira felt an odd shiver creep down her own spine.

That’s one heck of a princess for you...

After that, other famous adventurers such as Aaron were introduced. While they weren’t as flashy as the first two, everyone had their own charms. At each introduction, the people of the city cheered enthusiastically, though perhaps not quite as enthusiastically as for the first pair. This continued until Cyril, leader of Écarlate Carillon, was called. The moment he appeared onscreen, thunderous cheers and applause echoed through the air. Mira was impressed again by his guild’s apparent fame.

With Cyril, they had worked their way through all the adventurers on board. The event was wrapping up—or so Mira thought.

“Finally, I would like to introduce one more person. She may not be a famous name, but her contributions to the effort cannot be overlooked. Allow me to introduce she who carries on Wise Man Danblf’s art, the one and only Wise Man’s pupil acknowledged by King Solomon of Alcait: the summoner Mira!” With this powerful declaration, Mira’s petite face appeared onscreen.

The people below stirred in confusion. They didn’t seem to know how to react to this unprecedented revelation. A Wise Man’s pupil acknowledged by King Solomon?

The only person more confused was Mira.

What?... What?! Nobody told me about this! What am I supposed to do?!

Blindsided, she panicked over how to introduce herself. When she saw herself onscreen, she managed to put on a show of confidence. She had no idea what to say, but she knew she couldn't stay quiet with so many eyes on her.

"I'm Mira. Er... Well... You know... This was but an easy feat for the power of my summoning!" Mira puffed out her chest proudly.

The city fell utterly silent.

Did I say something wrong? Just as the thought crossed her mind...

"Yeah, you tell 'em!"

"Miiiraaa!"

Cheers just as loud as the previous ones pierced the sky. But unlike the ones before—expressions of gratitude and congratulations for the heroes' good work—most of the people screamed about how cute she was. Mira failed to notice.

It seemed Isuzu had planned to introduce her from the start. The adventurers on the ship watched her with smiles, and Alioth looked satisfied with himself.

Urgh. This is bad for my heart. They should have told me sooner, she grumbled internally. Her lip poked out in a pout.

Just then, the marks of the Spirit King's blessing appeared and began to glow all over Mira.

"Nh? What's going on?!" It was as if she could feel the rushing of her blood as it flowed through her. Yet there was no pain; in fact, it was a comforting feeling. The mysterious sensation left Mira unable to do anything but observe as it spread throughout her body.

The blessing began to shine brighter; particles of light spilled out and rose into the sky, where they combined into an image over the ship.

"Goodness..." Mira muttered.

The figure, clad in snow-white garments, was quite familiar. How could one forget his overwhelming presence?

“Know me as the Spirit King, Symbio Sanctius. I have used Miss Mira’s power to make my appearance today,” the figure said in a voice that was weighty yet full of kindness. The voice and figure there were truly those of the Spirit King. Everyone on board kneeled at once, murmuring, “Your Majesty...”



Mira was amazed; she hadn't known such a thing was possible. But the Spirit King paid her no mind as he continued to speak. "Children of humanity, allow me to thank you for rescuing so many of my kin. As a representative of all spirits, I wish to express my gratitude."

As the Spirit King spoke, the airship was enveloped in bright light. Though the adventurers had been taken aback by his sudden appearance, they quickly regained their senses and watched as the light gathered and condensed, then disappeared into one spirit on board as if absorbed.

"I have lent my power to one of my kin. You may find that your deeds today have wrought many unintended effects; this power will be necessary in dealing with them," the Spirit King said in prophetic tones. He gazed at the spirit he'd given his power to, then added, "Endeavor to aid them." With that, he vanished into thin air.

The sky fell silent until one voice finally declared, "I will devote myself and see it done."

In the blink of an eye, the sky darkened, and their surroundings sank into shadow. The Spirit King's low, cold voice rumbled through the city once more: "I also offer a warning. Those who have wronged my kin, prepare yourselves for what is to come. Confess to your crimes now, and I will at least allow your souls tranquil rest."

The sky returned to its usual state, and the people on the ground went wild over the Spirit King's appearance. Their excitement was blended equally with doubt—was that the *real* Spirit King, or a show put on by the people on the airship? It seemed they weren't entirely convinced...

But for the people on the ship, it was clear that he was the genuine article. The spirits on board confirmed that it was undoubtedly the truth. Everyone aboard rushed to ask Mira what she'd done to make the Spirit King appear. She didn't know. He'd come and gone of his own volition. She had no answer for them.

The best reply she could muster was, "I suppose it's because I received his blessing."

"The Spirit King's blessing... I had no idea such a thing existed!" Jack Grave exclaimed, both astounded and amazed.

"A blessing from the king himself... It's just like a fairy tale!" Eleonora murmured. She sidled giddily over to Mira and whispered in the summoner's ear, "Hey... wanna be my little sister?"

Mira felt a hot shiver jolt her spine. Despite the dangerous temptation of Eleonora's sweet scent and seductive whispering, she managed to shake her head. "No thanks."

CHAPTER 3

DESPITE THE COMMOTION caused by the Spirit King's appearance, the declaration of victory over Chimera Clausen concluded without incident. Soon afterward, they received an invitation from Sentopoli's prime minister to join him for a feast.

At the prime minister's official residence, a Viking-style banquet had begun. All of Sentopoli's most important officials were in attendance.

These were all outward-facing officials—people who believed Sentopoli's founders to be benevolent people. They had worked as their representatives in good faith, hoping to genuinely better the country. These officials knew Chimera Clausen was evil and condemned the organization as such. This banquet was partially those who led the country taking responsibility for what had occurred in their territory... and partially a way for the remaining Sentopoli officials to confirm the truth about those who had controlled them from the shadows.

Given the prominence and reputation of some of the involved adventurers, the populace willingly accepted that Chimera Clausen had been defeated. However, when it came to the government, hard evidence would be required; some famous names were not enough.

This lunch banquet was held with all these concerns in mind, and the adventurers were not ignorant of these facts. There was only one person totally detached from it all, going from table to table to sample the many lavish foods and enjoy the feast to her heart's content.

Mira.

She left all the after-battle management and nation-building to Isuzu, walked right past august personages such as the prime minister, Alioth, and Jack Grave, and stalked her true prey: roast beef.

“Mm! Delicious!”

As expected of a prime minister's table, all the food was top-class. Mira planned to enjoy the luxury by sampling every single one. Unfortunately, she was soon

interrupted.

"Good job, Gramps," Kagura said, carrying a plate with a veritable mountain of food on it. "I was watching from below. Crazy that you can summon the Spirit King."

Mira turned and glared at her unhappily. "Please. You could have given me a little warning." She recalled her panic when she was ambushed by the unexpected introduction.

"If I did, you'd've just found a way to escape." Kagura shrugged her shoulders and grinned in exasperation.

Mira thought to herself. *Would* she have boarded the spirit airship if she was told they would create a giant screen above Sentopoli and introduce every single person on board to the masses? After a long pause, Mira realized Kagura was right. "Maybe..." she simply murmured. "Still, it was only a performance to persuade the city, right? There was no reason to introduce some unknown player like myself."

The grand declaration of victory was meant to incite the hidden remnants of Chimera Clausen into action, and Isuzu already had what they needed to make it believable. What was the point in blowing Mira's cover?

She'd simply been used to round out the introductions of the many famous adventurers present. What point had that served, Mira asked. That's when Kagura dropped a bombshell: apparently, it had been a request from Solomon.

Since Mira was to take over Danblf's position as a Wise Man, this would be a necessary step to burnish her name.

"He asked me through the branch office in Lunatic Lake. You have no idea how *nervous* the branch manager was." Despite everything, Kagura was still a Wise Man. She'd readily accepted Solomon's request; it was for the future of her country. Kagura would never have done it just because she thought it sounded fun.

Or so she claimed.

"Another of his schemes, hrmm... Well, I suppose I'm happy as long as I get to advertise summoning."

By putting a summoner on the same stage as those famous adventurers, they had

probably boosted the reputation of Mira's school of magic. She felt better once she decided to look at it that way, and reached over to the table to pop a vivid, gleaming slice of sashimi into her mouth.

"Anyway... Spirit King, huh? That was awesome! That's basically him giving his word that we really did beat Chimera."

"Ah, right. Frankly, I was surprised too." Mira cast a sidelong glance at the overly excited Kagura and transferred more sashimi onto her plate. It was too good to pass up.

"That *really* made them panic. Thanks to him, we've already snared a few Chimera. The operation's even more of a success than expected!" Kagura said with a big smile. Then her blatant interest broke through. "So like, is that new summoning magic?"

"That was *not* summoning. He dropped in on his own. Goodness, I wish he'd said something ahead of time." Mira was probably the most surprised out of anyone.

"Mmm, okay. Well, it's still pretty awesome. That's Gramps for ya..." Kagura murmured in apparent elation while filling her plate with roast beef and throwing some extra sashimi on top for good measure.

Mira frowned in disgust at the growing pile of meat, then had to laugh. Kagura never changed.

* * *

After the feast ended, Mira and Kagura left discussion of the finer details—long-term problems caused by Chimera, plans for the future, and so on—to Alioth and the others. The two of them instead went to visit the Sentopoli branch of the Isuzu Alliance. They had come to get information from the Chimera Clausen elites they had locked up in an underground jail beneath an unassuming home in an unassuming neighborhood.

Branch manager Matti joined them as a witness. The Chimera member Isaac, the man Jamal, and the three freshly captured top elites Mira had fought all glared at Matti as they cowered in the corner. But when Isaac and Jamal spotted Mira and Kagura, their demeanor changed, as if to say to their comrades, *Oh, you guys are done for!* They sidled closer, hoping to deflect any punishment onto their former leaders.

"You're in trouble, too, you fools." Mira slapped them both upside the head and looked

over at the three elites again. Chimera Clausen had five top elites in all, but one of them was the girl possessed by the Oni Princess, who was now resting in the spirit airship. The oni curse had taken root deep within her before Kagura could exorcise it—she wouldn't be waking up any time soon. For now, at least, her true identity remained unknown.

The other absent top elite was confirmed dead. It seemed the Skyfolk man had successfully carried out his revenge.

Fortunately, or perhaps *unfortunately* for them, the three other elites who had fought Mira's party were imprisoned here and awaiting interrogation. Despite their previous bravado, the three cringed as one when they spotted Mira and Kagura.

Gregorius, the one who'd personally fought Mira, straightened himself up like a warrior and said, "If you're gonna do it, just get it over with."

The heavily armored man Cyril had fought was now stripped of his armor. Despite their first impressions of him, beneath his armor, he was surprisingly slender, though reasonably muscular as well. He put up a brave front—"N-no matter what you do to me, I will not speak!"—but those were meaningless words; his hands and feet were trembling.

It took Mira and Kagura a while to remember the last one; they'd almost forgotten his existence entirely. The weakest of Chimera's top elites, who'd been toppled in an instant, looked at them with terror clear on his face. "I'll tell you anything you want to know! Just don't kill me!"

Both Wise Men felt something was off. It was true that they were about to do a forceful interrogation using Kagura's magic. But while the idea of a spell that made you confess to everything was fearsome, it wouldn't actually hurt them. The villains would only be sharing what they knew; it wasn't a situation in which they had to beg for their lives. Or did they really fear Mira and Kagura's strength so much that they expected to die here? The Wise Men found themselves perplexed.

Mira looked over and noticed Isaac and Jamal, who'd shrunk back into the corner. Their lips were pressed tight in a straight line, but their cheeks were relaxed. Their shoulders trembled, too, like they were holding back laughter. She stooped down in front of them and grabbed them by their hair, hissing, "You two look like you're having an awful lot of fun. Care to share with the class?"

Mira's threatening tone filled them with an indescribable fear, but they managed to squeeze out an answer.

"We just told them what to expect!"

"R-right! We told them about the interrogation they're gonna go through!"

They refused to make eye contact. *The interrogation they're gonna go through...* that would be the confession forced by Kagura's magic. However, her magic only hypnotized them and made them speak; there wasn't *any* pain involved. Knowing that ought to make them *less* fearful, but the three top elites looked upon Kagura with genuine horror.

"Well, their reactions seem rather odd to me. Is that really all you said?" Mira asked once more.

"Well... Then they got mad at us for leaking info. So we told 'em *this* interrogation would make *anyone* spill the beans."

"We told them the truth! No matter how strong you are, you can't defy Miss Uzume's questioning. And even if you could, she'd slice your stomach open and then keep you alive to suffer until your last breath..."

Isaac and Jamal spilled the beans without any need for Kagura's magic. It seemed their bosses had abused them quite a bit before Mira and Kagura's arrival, so the two had decided a little payback was in order.

Mira sighed in irritation. "You're acting like kids!" She whacked them in the head again and turned to the top elites. Isaac and Jamal looked ready to cry, but at the same time, there was still a hint of mirth on their faces.

Kagura grinned ever so slightly and murmured, "I see. But I sort of like that idea..."

Suddenly, a deathly chill filled the underground room. Kagura was overflowing with malice—her threat was no joke. Despite how calm she looked, a lust for revenge was boiling in her.

"Now, now. No need to resort to murder. We've decided to entrust them to this world's legal system, haven't we? For now, let's just do what we must. Right?" Mira said. She pulled Kagura into a hug, patting her back as she tried to soothe her.

The deathly aura gradually calmed, and the room returned to normal. The three top elites were as white as sheets, though they looked relieved to be saved. Isaac and Jamal, meanwhile, shuddered as they realized they'd gotten lucky.

"You're right. Sorry, Gramps," Kagura said quietly and smiled. It was a strained smile, but time would heal this. Kagura would be just fine.

"S okay," Mira answered as she gazed at that stiff smile.

A brief time later, Kagura used her magic to make the information flow from the captives like water. Matti collected the testimony in a set of documents as they coughed up everything. She was quite focused on her work—perhaps because she'd gotten a glimpse of that unknowable side of Kagura.

* * *

The information received from the three elites was, as one might expect, vast in depth and breadth.

Unlike Isaac and Jamal's interrogation, this one was carried out in a fully hypnotized state due to the three's fanatical loyalty to Chimera. They were unwaveringly devoted to the head of the organization: the Oni Princess. Actually, Chimera Clausen was a lot like a cult.

Their sacred aim was to bring the power of spirits back into human hands. The blessings of nature that nourished humanity were managed by spirits, which meant, in their doctrine, that humans were *allowed* to live by the kindness of spirits. If the beings forsook humanity and limited their blessings, humans would be helpless and face certain death.

Could humanity go on entrusting their lives to spirits? Could they not find a way to be the masters of their own destiny?

Humans were frail creatures. They could not achieve glory when they were subservient to others. As such, they needed to drive off these spirits who would master them. It was a necessary act for the sake of humanity's future. This idea was fundamental to the three elites.

Needless to say, it was an extremely selfish ideology. The idea that humanity should come first probably sounded sweet to some, but it was horribly conceited at heart.

It was then that Isaac chimed in. "What the hell are they talking about?" He claimed he'd never heard anything about these fanatical beliefs. To him, Chimera Clausen was just an organization that exploited spirits to gain money and power.

Jamal agreed with Isaac's assessment.

After more probing, Kagura and Mira arrived at a conclusion: this doctrine was deeply tied to the Archeological Research Group that Gregorius and the heavily armored man had once been a part of. In fact, it was why the Archeological Research Group had been formed in the first place. On the surface, the group was meant to excavate and investigate the ruins in the western wastes. But that was only a half-truth.

The real goal of the Archeological Research Group was to unearth the legendary City of Angels and obtain the power it contained. Those who had given the order had not shared their true reasons with those below, but the ARG was told that it was related to the death of this world.

Years into their investigation, they reached the War-Torn Burial Ground and met the Oni Princess. There, their group was persuaded to believe that they were unfairly beholden to spirits. Before they knew it, the death of humanity was equal in their eyes to the death of the world. They were tasked by the Oni Princess with annihilating these spirits who held the power of life and death. Fanaticism blossomed.

"What on earth..." Mira grinned humorlessly at the ridiculousness of it all. Kagura was so fed up she couldn't utter a word. Frankly, the top executives had been *brainwashed* by the Oni Princess.

All one had to do was look at recorded history and their modern relationship—it was clear that spirits would *never* forsake humanity. But from Chimera's perspective, all that was only proof that humanity had been brainwashed by spirits.

Even Isaac and Jamal were speechless. They had committed grave crimes, yes, but their crimes were the result of yielding to greed. They knew what they had done was wrong. But Gregorius and his peers had committed their crimes from a horrifically distorted sense of justice.

After further questioning, they learned that other members of the Archeological Research Group had refuted the claims of the Oni Princess. They knew spirits would never be so evil.

"We purged them," Gregorius said in the hypnotic trance. He spoke with the assurance of one whose actions were righteous.

Publicly, the Archeological Research Group was declared to have gone missing. There had been traces of a struggle, but no corpses had been found. The truth was far more horrifying. When asked what had happened to those who were "purged," Gregorius explained: they had been offered on an altar beyond a hidden door in the War-Torn Burial Ground.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHIMERA CLAUSEN elites constantly demanded to know why their noble mission was so hard to understand. They were fanatics through and through, poisoned by twisted dogma.

Kagura was forced to change her approach altogether; it was obvious that asking them any more in this vein would be fruitless. Instead, she questioned them about Chimera Clausen's organizational connections.

The hypnotic state worked perfectly, and the elites yielded information on bases all over the continent, corporate stakeholders, cooperating nobles, and more. Between the three elites, the number of names they named were in the hundreds. The information on the bases alone was of incalculable value. Moreover, each base Isuzu could take would yield yet more information from those running it. It seemed as if they'd be able to expose over a *thousand* bases, given time.

"In a way, this is where the battle really begins. I'm not gonna let a single one get away." Once she'd thoroughly dragged this info from Chimera's leaders, Kagura skimmed Matti's notes and smirked. Her eyes were those of a hunter watching its prey. "Matti, expect Trinity Church officials to come by in a few days. I'll need you to hand these hooligans over to them."

"Leave it to me!"

These five would be taken by a church transport troop in a few days' time to face judgment by divine rather than human law.

Mira and Kagura left the office after entrusting things to Matti. Their next destination was the Adventurers' Guild Union, where the hastily captured Chimera stragglers were being temporarily confined.

"Divine law, hrmm?" Mira asked along the way. "I've heard of it, but what *exactly* does it entail?"

"Uh, it's mostly priest stuff. It has nothing to do with fighting, so I see why *you* wouldn't know it," Kagura said, chuckling, and began explaining in a slightly patronizing tone.

Divine law involved conviction in a grand ceremony. Rather than being judged directly by God, judgment was handed down by God's apostles. As such, the decision could not be appealed by even the kings of the Three Great Kingdoms.

The judgment criteria did differ in some ways from human law, but the biggest difference was the weight of the punishment. The maximum sentence under human law was death, but the maximum sentence under divine law was *soul* death. That would be, literally, the extermination of the soul.

Some people might question if that was really any different from the death penalty. But in this world, gods existed as actual, perceivable beings, and the cycle of reincarnation was more than just a theory. It was common knowledge that death was not the end. However, soul death *was*. When this judgment was passed down by divine law, that meant a true end for the sinner. When reincarnation was real, this absolute end was the greatest possible punishment.

"If a soul is so corrupted by sin that even a god can't purify it, it's condemned to soul death. Artesia said they usually don't go that far. But this time? I dunno..." Kagura had a thoughtful look on her face as she turned back toward the branch office.

What sort of divine punishment would they receive? Mira and Kagura wondered in silence as they walked.

When they arrived in the busy part of downtown, Mira spoke up. "You mentioned that reincarnation is real here. Does that apply to people like us, as well?"

Those born of this world would return to the cycle of reincarnation when they died, but what about people who had come from another world?

"It's a mystery. You never hear about reincarnated former players, and we don't know what happens to people like us when we die. Some people think you just go back home... but we don't have any way of going back and checking for ourselves. People are researching it, but there are too many unknowns."

"Hrmm, I see. Well, I expected as much," Mira murmured in understanding. After a moment's pause, she added indifferently, "But is there really no way to go back?"

"Huh? You... you haven't heard about this from Solomon?" Kagura asked, turning to Mira in surprise. She explained that King Solomon of Alcait was not just a former player but a member of the Hinomoto Committee, a special organization of former

players who now led nations. The Hinomoto Committee was charged with researching how the world itself worked. They also researched ways to return to their former world. Naturally, Solomon would know how that research was going. He also had the right to reveal this information to other former players if he wished.

But Mira had heard nothing about this. Or rather, she hadn't really bothered to ask.

"I never looked into it. If there was a way, he'd tell me. Besides, Solomon's been in this world for thirty years, and Luminaria's been here for twenty. There probably is *no* way to leave. I've decided I should simply focus on enjoying myself."

Those were Mira's true feelings. Instead of going crazy trying to find a way to go back home, she'd make the most of the present. It certainly helped that she had friends like Solomon and Luminaria so close at hand.

"Uh-huh. When in Rome or whatever, right? You never change, Gramps." Kagura smiled nostalgically as she gazed upon Mira's defiant smirk.

At the Sentopoli Adventurers' Guild Union, Mira and Kagura followed an employee to the third underground floor. It housed a robust jail, built to temporarily confine wanted criminals and people with bounties on their heads. Currently, it was overflowing with Chimera Clausen conspirators.

"Now this is something else," Mira mused. "Seems like the big announcement was supereffective?"

"The Spirit King's final warning really did the trick. A lot of them came here on their own looking for protection from the vengeance of the spirits... How self-centered can you get?" Kagura said as she surveyed the jail, her disgust evident.

Some of the criminals were docile, some were loud, and yet others laughed at the ones who were in a quiet daze. For such a dismal place, it was surprisingly lively. Guild Union employees could be seen here and there, gathering information.

"I can't believe *you* were a mole. That's a real shame."

"...Hmph."

It seemed they'd even arrested some Chimera people who'd worked in the Guild Union. According to one employee, they'd thrown them in with all the other suspects

for the time being.

Mira and Kagura gazed at the cell block as they passed through. A staff member escorted them to an admin room in the center of the building. Several employees awaited them—an older man and woman, and another woman from the Isuzu Alliance.

The woman from Isuzu saluted nervously. “Thank you for your efforts, Lady Uzume.”

“Likewise.” Kagura had a gentle smile on her face, as if the tense atmosphere from before had never been. She then looked to the people behind the woman. “So, who are these two?”

At her cue, they stood.

“Sorry we didn’t get a chance to introduce ourselves sooner. I’m Gates, master of the Warriors’ Guild.”

“And I am Deborah, master of the Mages’ Guild. We’ve been waiting here to thank you for your work on the Chimera Clausen case.”

On closer inspection, the guild leaders’ clothes were of the finest quality. Their eyes were sharp, and they had the confident presence of VIPs. It seemed the Isuzu Alliance member’s nervousness wasn’t due to Kagura alone.

“No thanks necessary. I did it because I wanted to. In fact, I’d like to thank *you* for letting us use this space and for helping with the questioning.” Kagura faced the guild leaders head-on and added, “Thank you very much.”

Mira had already dropped into a nearby chair and was surveying the scene without a word. With the introductions out of the way, they began exchanging information. Kagura asked the Isuzu member to wait outside. She then looked at the guild leaders and said, “Sorry, but I need to be absolutely certain.”

Kagura explained her hypnosis magic and requested that they allow her to use it on them to confirm that they weren’t with Chimera. Rather than objecting, they complimented Kagura on how incredible her magic was.

However, they were clearly disappointed when she refused to teach them how to use it.

That done, the stage was set for the information exchange. Mira and Kagura explained everything they had managed to confirm about Chimera Clausen's headquarters and the dark truth of Sentopoli to the guild masters.

The guild leaders were shocked to learn that Sentopoli itself had been created by Chimera Clausen.

"Unbelievable... To think, the country itself..."

"It sounds like we have a lot of work ahead of us."

Chimera's information control was airtight. None of Sentopoli's higher-ups knew a thing about the organization. Even if some had their doubts, it seemed the people at the top were as innocent as could be. It would be nigh impossible to connect them to Chimera.

This was difficult news to the two Sentopoli residents. How could *their* country be so thoroughly corrupt?

"It's... hard to take this all in, but okay. Leave this city's safety to us. We promise our organizations will do everything we can to take care of it."

"I will take responsibility for passing this information on to the guilds of other countries. This is a big deal, so I'm sure they'll take what action they can."

"Thank you," Kagura said. "That helps a lot."

"Trust us, the feeling's mutual."

The work of excising the deep-rooted infestation that was Chimera Clausen would undoubtedly be extensive, and reach far beyond this country's borders. Kagura feared that even the Isuzu Alliance wouldn't be able to prevent the chaos that might ensue. The agreement of cooperation made here today was a great step in the right direction.

However, there was one more matter at hand: the bounty on Chimera Clausen.

Isuzu had captured an enormous number of Chimera Clausen members. If they turned them in, they would be worth a fortune. But Kagura had offered to give up this prize

money in exchange for the guilds' cooperation.

By saving the guilds the bounty, Kagura allowed them to allocate those funds to the cleanup work that was to come. It would be an advantageous arrangement for both sides.

Then the guilds offered what they had learned. They had a full dossier containing records of the testimony from all of the Chimera remnants who'd been arrested, the facilities and organizations tied to them, as well as nobles connected to Chimera.

"This is all new info from confirmed sources. You wouldn't believe what we went through to prepare this in just a few hours." Gates offered the documents with a weak, exhausted grin.

After the announcement of Chimera's defeat, the guilds had worked as fast as they could to get these documents together. Isuzu had petitioned for it so that they could clean up the remaining Chimera members and collaborators as swiftly as possible, providing the bulk of the labor required to hunt down the remaining operatives. In exchange, the guilds would share in the glory of having defeated the evil organization.

"Thank you very much." Kagura accepted the documents with a genuine smile and flipped through them. "When it comes to fighting Chimera, speed is king. Let me give these a quick look."

The guilds' information network ran all over the continent and could reach even royal families. These documents were the fruit of flexing it to the fullest to search even the darkest underbellies. It was as good as some countries' national intelligence, and it connected the dots of relationships between important figures.

Even the guilds were hesitant to collect so much information. But this was related to Chimera Clausen and their crimes—crimes that ran afoul of the laws that governed the Three Great Kingdoms. While disclosing this information might harm their relationship with other organizations, that was far better than earning the ire of the Three Great Kingdoms. These crimes were enormous and deadly serious; to hide them was a fool's errand.

And now, thanks to the international legal affairs official of the Holy Kingdom of Alisfarius, Isuzu had been publicly recognized as dealing with the Chimera Clausen case. The guilds couldn't afford to hand over any half-baked report.

After skimming the documents, Kagura offered a satisfied smile. “Wonderful. This should aid us greatly in capturing the remnants.”

Gates and Deborah visibly relaxed.

* * *

As the duo left the building, Kagura said, “I need to deal with these documents. Gramps, you can go back first.” Without waiting for Mira’s reply, she used her magic to switch places with a shikigami she’d left at Isuzu HQ. The shikigami that appeared was a Yatagarasu, which Kagura had named Yakkycrow. It perched directly atop Mira’s head.

“Good grief. She’s always on the go,” Mira muttered with a sigh. She walked along the main street and watched the streetlights turn on one by one. Then she gazed up at the sunset-stained sky and stopped, wondering where exactly this party was.

Those who had contributed to the defeat of Chimera Clausen still had celebrations to attend; they were to join a grand fete held by the country itself. Of course, Mira—the closing act of the declaration of victory—was an honored guest. She needed to get a move on herself.

She opened her map and checked the location. Then she jumped onto Pegasus’s back and flew gallantly off into the sunset.

CHAPTER 5

THE NIGHTTIME CELEBRATION hosted by Sentopoli was truly glorious. The planners had rented out the party hall and courtyard of the biggest inn in the city, and first-rate cuisine made from first-rate ingredients by first-rate chefs lined the tables. The attendees numbered more than two hundred, and half were influential figures of Sentopoli.

Government officials who knew nothing about their country's dealings with Chimera, the guild masters Gates and Deborah, as well as Sentopoli's merchant, marine, and medical guild leaders all attended. There were big-shot financial leaders, the boss of a shipbuilding company, famous guild leaders who hadn't participated in the assault, and more.

Amid all of these famous folk, there was the father of one of Chimera Clausen's top executives: the blacksmith Gregor. While the rest of the venue danced on the grave of evil Chimera Clausen, Gregor himself looked unwell.

Mira approached him as he drank expressionlessly in the corner. "Excuse me. Can we talk?"

Gregor looked at the girl in irritation, or perhaps only sadness. "You're that girl, huh?" He gulped down another glass. "Think I'll head out."

It almost seemed like he was sulking. Seeing him about to leave, Mira reflexively grabbed his arm and dragged him away before he could protest. They ended up in the courtyard adjacent to the party hall, in a quiet corner. Gregor watched the party going on beneath the night sky with a sad smile.

"What? You wanna seduce an old man like me?"

"Hmph. You still have enough nerve to make jokes. Then you'll be just fine," Mira said. Without another word, she summoned Pegasus. She climbed onto its back and urged Gregor to do the same. Gregor looked at her dubiously. Mira met his eyes and quietly said, "You can't say goodbye if you don't see him, you know."

Pegasus was beginning to draw attention. After a time, Gregor finally resolved himself

and said, "Take me to him." Pegasus looked a little displeased when he finally climbed on, but Mira promised to spend lots of time playing with the beast after this errand. Rejoicing, it spread its wings.

Just as they started to ascend, Emella spotted them and ran over. She was a little flushed, probably from the booze.

"Mira! And... Gregor? What's going on?"

"Just arranging a little meeting," Mira replied, looking off into the distance.

Emella seemed to understand. She nodded and smiled. "Good luck!"

Pegasus flapped its wings, climbing into the night sky. People in the venue began to exclaim as they noticed the departure, but Mira and Gregor had already gone. They were soon on their way to the Isuzu Alliance branch office.

* * *

"Father..."

"Idiot son of mine..."

In the underground prison, father and son were reunited after decades apart. They didn't say much; both of them looked down guiltily.

Thanks to Isuzu's restraints, the other two Chimera elites couldn't move or use their abilities. But they were still allowed to speak for the sake of giving testimony; now, they suddenly clamored and demanded to be freed.

"Ooh, I see, so this is your father. Then I'm certain he can get us out of here. Persuade the man to release me!"

"Hey, don't be selfish. Get me outta here too!"

This looks like it may take some time.

A gulf of recriminations and ill feeling had formed between Gregor and Gregorius over the years. Mira knew it would take time for them to cross it. She silenced the other elites using her Paralyzing Demon's Gaze.

Seeing this, Isaac and Jamal promptly huddled up in the corner of their own volition, swearing not to disturb the family reunion. Mira spared them for the time being, then had Matti help her move the silenced duo into the other corner. Matti suppressed a shiver of fear as the small girl used her Immortal Arts to carelessly throw the pair into a heap.

With the scene set, father and son faced each other. Silence ruled for a moment, but finally, Gregor spoke first.

Rather than ask his son why he would hurt spirits or side with evildoers, Gregor told him how his work was going these days, how Gregorius's childhood friends were doing, and about their relatives—as if speaking to a son who'd come back home.

Chimera Clausen's sins were innumerable. He knew they might never meet again.

Mira and Matti sat by the door together, watching over them. Though Matti had been surprised by Mira's sudden visit, she seemed to understand the situation now. Without saying a word, she pulled a volume of some manga from her pocket and began flipping through the pages.

Only one person's voice echoed in the underground room. Gregorius listened in silence to Gregor's words. He didn't beg for his life, argue, or try to justify his own actions.

When that long, one-way conversation was complete, Gregor turned his back on Gregorius. "Goodbye, idiot son of mine."

Mira stood up and asked Gregor, "Are you sure you want to end it there?"

"Yeah, that'll do," Gregor replied, a slight smile coming to his stern face. He didn't exactly look cheerful, but with this settled, his paternal nature had returned to join his sadness.

* * *

"Live a long life, old man."

Once they'd left and the door had closed once more, a single voice rumbled and melted into the silent room. It was a quiet, faltering voice, but there was a hint of pleading in it.

The bond between father and son was mysterious, Isaac and Jamal realized. They thought back upon their own childhoods.

No longer in the mood to return to the party, Mira and Gregor relaxed in the living space of the Isuzu Alliance's Sentopoli branch office.

One was a warrior who'd stood by Isuzu's leader and felled the Chimera Clausen headquarters. One was a master blacksmith known by all in this city. Matti deeply regretted not having bought any classy tea leaves for guests in advance. "It's just what I had lying around, but..." she said apologetically as she placed two mismatched cups on the table.

Matti felt a second tinge of regret: she hadn't prepared matching cups for visitors in advance.

"Apologies for the imposition," Mira said.

"Ooh, thanks, miss. I talked so much, my throat was getting dry," Gregor added.

"Gregor... Apologies for meddling," Mira said. "Maybe it's none of my business, but my mind wouldn't rest until things were settled."

"Well, he's still my son... I've got nothing but gratitude, Mira."

To Matti's relief, her guests didn't complain about the tea; they just gulped it down and chatted.

Mira's desire to reunite this father and son pair was wholly her own. When she saw Gregor's face at the party, she knew she had to arrange a meeting; it might be their last chance. Until the day Mira had come to visit, Gregor had presumed his son was dead. That same day, he learned that he was alive... but working with the evil Chimera Clausen. His feelings must have been inexpressibly complex.

Gregor seemed to be struggling with words. Finally, he said, "Also, sorry for all the trouble my son put you through. And thanks for stopping him."

Mira replied only with a silent nod. She sipped at her tea with a small smile.

* * *

With the heavy conversation out of the way, Gregor looked around the very lived-in little room. “By the way,” he said, “I’ve noticed you have a lot of potted plants. Rare ones, too. Mind if I take a look?” He was right; there were flowerpots placed here and there all over the place.

“Go right ahead! Look all you like.” Matti rushed to stand up and began bringing pots to the table. “Do you like plants, Mr. Gregor?” she asked with a big smile. Before she’d become the branch manager, Matti worked as a botanist. Her research had been focused on turning the wasteland into a forest. She was clearly excited to have found a fellow plant-lover, and gleefully brought one potted plant after another.

“Uhh... Well, I wouldn’t say I’m any kind of enthusiast. The ashes used in forging swords have different qualities depending on the original plants. When I was researching combinations, I ended up learning a lot about ‘em.” His interest in botany was purely professional, Gregor explained.

“Ashes... Oh.” Matti’s glee turned to sadness all at once. Ashes were a material used by blacksmiths, obtained by burning plants. In his pursuit of perfecting his own trade, Gregor made ashes himself. He’d burned through many, *many* plants.

“Uh, well, yeah. Plants are a pretty involved field, right? Like there are some that grow using mana,” Gregor stammered, as if trying to make amends, and looked at the plants on the table. These particular plants were all ones whose growth could be affected by mana.

“That’s right! Spiritaceae are all such mysterious plants. It’s a very rewarding field of study!”

His efforts bore fruit, bringing a smile to Matti’s face again. However, this led to the conversation spiraling into deep debate over botany. Listening in, Mira learned about the plants called spiritaceae. She thought back to the botanist, Gilbert, who she’d met on her way to the Celestial Ruins. She also realized she would be here for a while.

“I think spiritaceae are our best bet to transform these wastes into a bountiful land!” After about an hour of nonstop talking, Matti finally wrapped up her lecture. She wanted to use spiritaceae to cover the wastes in greenery. Their roots would pierce into the dried earth and allow water to permeate deeply into the soil. With time, these plants would give rise to an environment where normal plants could grow too. That was the foundation of Matti’s plan.

Mira was forced to sit through the whole lecture, clearly a little bored. But Gregor's interest seemed to have been piqued. He murmured, "The western half of the continent overflowing with life, huh?"

Matti paid his response no mind and continued, "Unfortunately, the small spiritaceae plants I've tried so far aren't strong enough to reform the soil... I need something bigger and stronger. For example, if I had seeds that could grow whole spiritaceae trees, I might finally be able to see dramatic progress in my research." It seemed like her efforts had been stalling lately; she was obviously frustrated.

"Tree seeds... Hrmm." Her casual remark jogged Mira's memory: she'd received fruit from the spirit residing in the Elder Tree, the Illustrious Elder of Wood and Shade. "Matti, I received fruit from the spirits residing in the Elder Tree. Would that be useful for your research?" Mira pulled the fruit from a forgotten corner of her Item Box and placed it on the table.

Matti's eyes were glued to the fruit as she screamed, "The Elder Tree?!" She gripped Mira excitedly. "Elder Trees are the greatest of spiritaceae! An Elder Tree, a tree that lived for ages and slowly mutated into spiritaceae over time, would be absolutely ideal for my research! Which Elder Tree did this come from?!"

"Ah, er, the Forest of the Devout—"

"You *met* the Illustrious Elder of Wood and Shade?! Legend has it he was once a cherry blossom tree. That's perfect! Elder Trees that have mutated into spiritaceae can transform nutrients into mana and vice versa! And on top of improving the soil, they even become the master of the plants that sprout after them, which means that in the distant future, we'll have a perfectly ordered forest! I'm certain of it! I'll make sure it happens!" Matti was surprisingly emotional as she shared her grand dreams. "It would also be an optimal place for spirits to live."

I don't understand what she means by "ordered," but I'm amazed the Elder Tree has such power. I certainly hadn't heard of it, Mira thought to herself, surprised by the potential of the fruit she'd so readily handed over. At the same time, she knew it would help Matti much more than it would her.

"Well, if that is true, it's all yours. I don't have any use for it."

Matti's eyes sparkled with both excitement and tears as she exclaimed, "Do you really

mean it?! These fruits don't go for less than five billion ducats!" She knelt down as if in prayer to some divine being and asked Mira one last time, "Are you *really* willing to just give it to me?!"

The summoner was at a loss for words; she felt like she was being treated as a savior for this small act.

Five billion ducats. That was an enormous sum, more than Mira had ever owned in-game. How luxurious would Mira's life be with so much money? She could stay in fancy hotels all the time, eat whatever she wanted, and splurge on whatever adventuring goods she desired.

"...S-sure. All yours. As long as you promise to put it to good use."

Tears streamed from Matti's eyes, but her reply was firm. "Absolutely! I promise! I swear, I'll fill this wasteland with life!" She gingerly accepted the fruit and bowed deeply.

Though Mira had been momentarily bewitched by the prospect of money, her pride as a Wise Man kept her from demanding the valuable fruit back. But she didn't regret her decision. Mira watched Matti's loving treatment of the fruit with joy. "Goodness," she observed, "what a pretty smile she has."

After being seen off by the overjoyed Matti, Mira and Gregor left the branch office. As they walked, Gregor said, voice full of respect, "You're as generous as they come, Mira."

Mira grinned helplessly and replied, "Please. I just know there are some things more important than money."

She summoned Pegasus and mounted it once more. Yet when she indicated Gregor should climb up too, he paused and told her to go on ahead.

"Think I'll take a stroll around town. Expect me back at the party in, say, an hour," he said, before lumbering toward the city center. His figure in the distance looked lonely, but before he left, he bore a bigger smile than Mira had ever seen on him. It didn't seem upset at all; rather, he seemed like he just needed some time with his feelings.

He must want to be alone. So Mira simply replied, "Very well," and returned to the party

alone.

CHAPTER 6

MIRA AND PEGASUS landed back in a corner of the courtyard, where she was instantly surrounded by a crowd of influential people. They excitedly asked how she knew the Spirit King; it seemed conversation had turned to the declaration of victory from earlier. On closer inspection, Jack Grave, Eleonora, and Cyril were all surrounded by little crowds as well.

“To think, the Spirit King’s blessing! You’re just like the Hero-King Forsetia!”

“A new hero for a new age... Incredible. Say, Mira, would you be willing to let me sponsor you?”

“Hey now, Miss Katina. It’s not nice to cut in front of others.”

“That’s right. We should have fair and equal negotiations first.”

Mira described her encounter with the Spirit King to the listening crowd. Before she knew it, she was at the center of a fierce debate. Mira was perhaps the only person in all the continent to have this blessing, and now all these influential folk were fighting to win her strength for their own side.

So involved were they in the debate that they forgot about Mira entirely. She took the opportunity to slip away unnoticed.

* * *

“You’re a star, Gramps.”

“Ugh. Don’t be stupid; you know I can’t handle those types.”

On the second floor of the party venue, Isuzu Alliance members and spirits were enjoying themselves to the utmost. The first floor was essentially a public-facing party where the heroes of the war were celebrated; the second was reserved for the central figures and spirits to celebrate their victory in private.

“By the way, are you sure you should be up here?” Mira asked Kagura. “Alioth looked

awfully busy down there."

When she'd escaped to the second floor, she'd noticed Alioth stuck in the busiest corner of the party—not because he was a representative of Isuzu, but because he was the general who led last night's war efforts. He was totally surrounded, fielding questions from the prime minister, government officials, and many other powerful people.

"Him? Oh, pssh, don't worry about him. I'm gonna make Alioth take care of *everything* from now on," Kagura answered matter-of-factly. She gulped down her drink and started telling Mira about the future of Isuzu.

In the short term, Isuzu's stealth forces would hunt down the remnants of Chimera Clausen. Simultaneously, they would work to smooth any disturbances caused by Chimera Clausen's destruction. Once they had made enough progress that they could leave the rest to the Guild Union, they would slowly reduce their armaments until they could finally disband as a fighting force. The plan was apparently to actually become the goodwill organization that Isuzu was officially known as. Kagura would leave the rest in Alioth's hands.

Alioth would take up position as the "true" ruler of Sentopoli, which had once been held by Chimera's elites. He would conceal the truth that the so-called anonymous nobles who'd formed Sentopoli were actually Chimera Clausen, and inherit the position of a "benevolent noble" himself.

"So you've won an entire country? This has turned into a big deal."

"At first, I considered letting the prime minister handle it all. But when I probed him a bit with magic, I realized his faith in those benevolent nobles was way too high. If we told him they were actually Chimera, he might have a mental break. So for now, we'll have Alioth take charge of things until he can cultivate some reliable statesmen," Kagura explained with an exasperated sigh. She added that, since Sentopoli's land and foundation were secured and maintained by the power of spirits, the loss of Chimera Clausen had cut off that source of support. Without it, unusual phenomena would probably start cropping up around the city soon.

From now on, Alioth and his people would have to secretly figure out a solution for the city. The spirits working with Isuzu would help. They were probably happy to do it now that they knew Mira had the Spirit King's blessing. Sentopoli may have been

founded by Chimera, but the people living there today had done nothing wrong. That was the opinion of the spirits, at least.

“They’re far too kind.”

“Yeah, for real.”

Mira and Kagura murmured to one another as they surveyed the spirits chatting on the second-floor venue. These spirits saw humans not as a monolith, but as individuals.

Case in point: warrior-class adventurers typically couldn’t perceive spirits. But that wasn’t absolute; spirits could reveal themselves to those they acknowledged. And it seemed that all of the warriors here could perceive the spirits at the party, showing just how much the spirits trusted Isuzu.

Despite the threat they’d faced from Chimera Clausen, spirits still remained humanity’s good friend. The two Wise Men were grateful from the depths of their hearts.

* * *

“So Gramps, just wait for me until things calm down a little, okay?”

“I don’t care as long as you’re home on time.”

Kagura would continue to lead Isuzu until their forces demobilized. After she handed everything over to Alioth, she would return to the Kingdom of Alcait as planned. Mira didn’t mind as long as she was back by next year; she had no intention of demanding she return sooner.

Either way, this was one more Wise Man to tick off the list.

“Well, I’ve found two of you...” Mira sighed.

Mira still had a long struggle ahead of her. She looked around the second floor again. Beyond the spirits, there were many other unfamiliar faces. Among them were a few members she recognized from Isuzu’s headquarters. She suddenly remembered something. “By the way, Kagura. Where are Scorpion and Snake?”

Mira knew the girls well. They'd helped her destroy the co-conspirator Melville Commerce in Roslein, but they didn't seem to be here today.

"Those two—or rather, all of the Hidden—have gathered in Roslein. Thanks to the country's connection with Melville Commerce, that place is probably a Chimera hotbed too. The Hidden have their work cut out for them," Kagura said.

She told Mira more about the situation in Roslein. According to Scorpion and Snake's report, the official from international legal affairs and the holy knights who accompanied them had clearly intimidated their prey into submission with their overwhelming power. Melville Commerce and the people who'd carried out their evil intent were being arrested one after another. The Hidden left these public-facing matters to the church, while they focused on apprehending those who tried to escape into the shadows.

"Anyway, today's a day for celebration. Ebatesse Commerce threw a party for them, and they're celebrating in shifts. Scorpion even sent me a message a little while ago: 'I let Snake drink too much. Help.' When Snake gets drunk, she gets very... *kissy*."

"Oho, *interesting*. It sounds like they're having fun."

The next duke of Roslein would be the CEO of Ebatesse Commerce, Urashis Teles Ebatesse. The party he was throwing to celebrate the defeat of Chimera Clausen—and perhaps his own rise to power—would be as glorious as any event sponsored by an entire nation.

Knowing her friends were celebrating as well, Mira imagined them enjoying themselves as she savored the endless tables of food at the party.

Hrmm... Snake's a kissing fiend? I'll have to keep that in mind...

* * *

The party went on merrily throughout the night. Everyone introduced themselves to each other, and Mira gulped her drink as she gazed down at the first floor. Adventurers and influential folk were signing contracts left and right down there.

Jack Grave and Eleonora, however, were turning people down one after another. Cyril was constantly refusing, as well, apparently used to this. Alioth had finished formally greeting the power brokers, but he looked exhausted as he chatted with the prime

minister. According to Kagura, this was the ideal time to start gathering the information he would need to govern Sentopoli.

"Final decisions technically fall to me, but I'm leaving all the brain work to Alioth," Kagura said with a smile. Mira began to genuinely worry for the man.

Just as the party was winding down, there was a clamor in the courtyard.

"What now?" Mira murmured, stepping onto the veranda to see what was happening. She looked down and found the courtyard overflowing with people looking up at the eastern sky.

While others crowded behind her to see what the commotion was about, Mira looked up herself and gasped.

"Well, this is new..." Mira's words prompted others to look up, and they likewise gasped in amazement. The night sky was full of gleaming stars, but even brighter were the innumerable rivers of light flowing through the eastern sky.

"Migratory glowflies, huh?" someone said. "If you can see them all the way out here in the west, that must mean summer's really here." Mira turned and saw Aaron with a jug in hand.

"Oho. Is that what that means?"

"Yeah, or so they say. I heard it from a knowledgeable spirit friend a while back. Apparently, they lay their eggs in the snow up in high mountains. The eggs hatch in spring and grow, and when the summer comes and snow melts, they all start heading north. So if you're seeing migratory glowflies, that means it's warm enough for the snow to melt even in the mountains," he explained, watching the seemingly endless strands of light. He added with a sad grin, "This is all secondhand knowledge, though."

Suddenly, the downstairs was filled with cheers. It seemed someone had finally won over the leader of a famous guild introduced on the airship and persuaded them to sign a contract. The adventurer had made a deal with a major maritime merchant group based in the Ark Continent. His guild was as famous as Jack Grave's and Eleonora's, so this was a big win for the clients. It seemed this party was going out with a bang.

"By the way, should you be up here on the second floor?" Mira asked Aaron, gazing at

the commotion below. “With your skill, you must be in high demand.”

Aaron shook his head and looked behind him for just a moment.

“Well... I was actually thinking I’d retire from adventuring once this was all over.”

“Gosh, really? You seem like you’ve got plenty of fight left in you.”

Once this was all over. In other words, Aaron was going to end his career with the defeat of Chimera Clausen. His body wasn’t a young man’s anymore, it was true, but having seen his abilities up close, Mira was sure he could keep going for a while.

“That’s exactly why. There are things I wanna do *before* I’m old and infirm.” Aaron wasn’t reluctant to retire at all; in fact, he grinned as if the *real* excitement was yet to come. What did he want to do? When asked, he looked up at the sky and brushed the question off. “I’ll tell ya next time we meet.” His voice held the firm conviction that they *would* meet again.

* * *

Time passed, the party ended, and the influential leaders of Sentopoli dispersed as things died down. All that remained were the main members of Isuzu and the adventurers who’d helped them.

As the party came to a close, Kagura stood onstage and addressed the adventurers. “Thanks for all you’ve done, everyone. Today, we’ve finally completed our long-held goal. Things might still be a little rowdy for a while, but our contract ends today. Make sure you get your rewards from Alioth.” With tears streaming down her smiling face, she looked out at everyone and declared, “Your work is done! Live long and healthy lives, everyone!”

Her radiant voice echoed through the venue, followed by a thunderous wave of cheers and applause. There was a tiny hint of sadness amid the joy as the adventurers of the Isuzu Alliance dispersed.

The work of the Isuzu Alliance wasn’t done, as they still had to hunt down the remaining Chimera members. But the adventurers’ contracts ended today with the destruction of the core of the organization.

“If you need anything, let us know!”

“We’ll come running any time for you, Uzume!”

One by one, they accepted their payouts from Alioth and headed back to the lodgings Sentopoli had prepared for them. Mira saw them off from the veranda and looked up at the sky once more.

Some time had passed, and the migratory glowflies’ lights had thinned out. The stars above twinkled all the brighter.

“Hrmm? Is that...?” As Mira gazed vacantly at the sky, she noticed something off. She strained her eyes to get a better look. On close, *close* inspection, there was a wavering light amid the stars. And it seemed to be slowly floating higher into the sky. “Well, that is odd...”

Mira’s eyes followed the light and noticed an even greater river of illumination. Unlike the light of the glowflies, it was almost translucent and changed colors like an aurora, rippling like the surface of water. It was extraordinarily vast, stretching across the sky from end to end.

“Oh, there’s more. Hmm, and more there. But what is it?”

She looked around again and saw more particles of light rising from the ground as if being drawn into the sky. Unlike the glowflies, this sight seemed somehow sorrowful. Confused, Mira gazed at the sky for a long time. She heard the Spirit King’s voice directly overhead.

“They are souls. The lights flowing through the sky are returning to their resting place, the Celestial Shrine of Nirvana.”

“My word... I can’t believe that I’m able to receive a direct response from you.”

“Proof of our strengthened bond. I often spoke with my sworn ally Forsetia in much the same way.”

“I see. So this is another effect of this blessing...”

Souls, and where souls were meant to return. Seeing them was a surprise in itself, but Mira was even more amazed by the fact that she could converse directly with the Spirit King. She gazed down in shock at the symbols on her arms.

"Miss Mira, I want you to witness this for me. Almost all of these souls are those of my kin. With your efforts, they've finally been released from their restraints."

"Understood. If that is your wish, then I will gladly see them off."

Chimera Clausen's technology had sealed not just the spirits' power but their very souls. Mira readily accepted the Spirit King's sorrowful request and suddenly hit upon an idea: summoning the spirit of song.

"Leticia, please perform Requiem for Your Distant Soul."

"Request received!"

Suddenly, souls began to rise from all over Sentopoli, joining the parade of lights in their journey to the Celestial Shrine of Nirvana. Leticia's requiem melted into the night sky, cradling the city and souls in peace.

Her voice continued to echo late into the night. And perhaps thanks to her skill as a songstress, or perhaps out of pity for the unfortunate souls, not a single person complained.

Mira ascended to the roof and watched over the souls in silent prayer. Two souls happened to catch her eye. They were far-off in the eastern sky, reaching for greater and greater heights. Yet they stayed nestled close together, never straying, loath to part again.

CHAPTER 7

IN THE WEEK after the final battle with Chimera Clausen, the situation changed rapidly.

First, the remnants of Chimera Clausen hiding in Sentopoli were all flushed out and arrested by the church. Those captured ranged from adventurers to civil servants. Each time, they were thoroughly questioned, and Isuzu's forces worked with the Guild Union to conquer bases one after another thanks to the influx of information. For the purposes of this effort, Isuzu began calling itself the Local Deity Corps. It seemed they planned to keep up their environmental protection organization façade to the end.

However, the arrests swept up so many government workers that they caused shortages in various departments. Apparently, the captured officials had actually been doing their day jobs even as they'd worked with Chimera Clausen.

Those who weren't deeply involved with Chimera Clausen were allowed to remain and train their replacements. Of course, they were given special surveillance devices created by Isuzu, minimum wage, *and* forced to work weekends; truly, the Isuzu Alliance was a harsh master. Yet if the church had taken them, they'd either have been sentenced to long-term forced labor or death. Most of them were happy to agree to these conditions, such as they were.

Isaac, former diplomat for Sentopoli, was one such example. It would naturally be impossible to return to his old position, but his knowledge of foreign affairs helped him train the new diplomats. Thanks to his innate character and cultivated abilities, he was able to acclimate to his new environment quickly and became a hard worker.

As for Jamal, he likewise accepted the conditions and, surprisingly, joined the hunt for remnants of Chimera.

His former job had been to hunt down and eliminate Chimera Clausen members that had either exhausted their usefulness or betrayed the organization. In a way, he was ideal anti-Chimera personnel. His abilities were used to the fullest, and he put in tremendous effort.

Once Isuzu had finished mopping up the remnants, Jamal would join the military

forces of Sentopoli—still with the same restrictions, of course.

Alioth was fighting hard, though he still had a long struggle ahead of him. It was just a matter of time until Sentopoli was settled.

* * *

Over in Roslein, which had had its leading family toppled overnight, things were heated. Companies and merchants that did business with Melville Commerce were investigated by international legal affairs. Half of them were found to have been working with Chimera and were arrested. Roslein was just as poisoned by Chimera's foul influence as Sentopoli itself. What's more, Roslein was a major conduit for trade with the Ark Continent to the west, which only intensified the resulting chaos.

But a ray of hope remained: Urashis, the pure and innocent CEO of Ebatesse Commerce, was unsullied by Chimera's influence. A few weeks later, he took the seat of duke and was welcomed with open arms by the people of Roslein. He used his skilled and elaborate handiwork to bring the economic crisis to an end in no time. Under his supervision, the trade routes were more lucrative than ever.

This was all thanks to being prepared for the fall of Chimera Clausen. The deep and vast roots of Chimera, the fall of Melville Commerce, the uncovering of accomplices, the resulting panic—Urashis had been ready for it all, with the help of his secret partner Solomon.

Despite the circumstances, Urashis managed to earn the trust of the citizens and corporations of Roslein. Then, he expanded the commerce nation's size and power. He took advantage of the opportunity to publicly declare positive relations with the Kingdom of Alcait and began trading with them directly. The reasons were kept vague, though he did state that they had played a major role in dealing with the national emergency.

The turmoil in Roslein was quickly put to an end. Though there was still some unrest, it wouldn't lead to any major problems. It was only a matter of time until everything was back to normal.

And what of the alchemist Johan, his mansion in Roslein, his family, and his pupil in Millene? They would stay at Isuzu Alliance Headquarters for the time being.

Research was the major reason. Albatinus and other alchemists were still at Isuzu HQ.

Despite the destruction of Chimera Clausen, the material that was the source of their technological advantage—the black mist ore—still contained many mysteries. Albatinus had shown great interest in it, and he would not allow the one who'd worked closest to it to escape his grasp quite yet. According to those who knew Albatinus well, he would not release Johan until his thirst for knowledge was slaked.

But equally important when it came to reasons to stay was Johan's daughter, Anne. She'd taken a liking to the underwater base, and she didn't want to leave. Who could blame her? She'd been locked in a tiny warehouse for so long.

The people at Isuzu headquarters spoiled Anne to no end, filling her days with happiness. Every day, she wandered around the city and the Forest of Seasons beyond.

Johan spent every day dealing with Albatinus. When he returned home exhausted, he took medicine created by Albatinus himself that would fill him with energy by the next morning, allowing them to repeat the process over again.

Millene joined the research effort as Johan's assistant. She enjoyed their daily new discoveries, and her skill as an alchemist was clearly growing.

Johan's wife, Angelique, spent her days lovingly watching over her family in quiet peace. She was the daughter of a farmer, and helped out with field work whenever she was able. Everyone noticed that the crops were thriving. Perhaps inspired by her alchemist husband, she experimented with various mixes of fertilizer. Before long, she began selectively breeding the crops.

While its main objective had been accomplished, the Isuzu Alliance home base wasn't going anywhere yet.

* * *

The elite Hidden had joined Scorpion and Snake in Roslein to expose and arrest all those who'd worked with Chimera Clausen via Melville Commerce. Things were going well; Scorpion complained that, while it was refreshing, the work was never-ending. Snake was always busy with daily interrogations. When she mused that she might go too far as a result, the captives shuddered.

Half of the Hidden would join the church to make rounds through other nations on the continent once Roslein was squared away. Investigation had found traces of Chimera knowledge and technology leaks, so the Hidden remained vigilant during their hunt

for Chimera remnants. They could not allow the spirits to be hurt in such a way ever again.

As for the other half that included Scorpion and Snake, they would join the international legal affairs group on their voyage to the Ark Continent once things were over. There, they would follow traces of leaked knowledge and technology to deal with any Chimera stragglers thoroughly.

The Ark Continent didn't have many churches, so international legal affairs had to step in. Due to the harshness of the environment, they would definitely be needing elites like Snake and Scorpion.

"The Ark Continent, hm?" Mira mused. "That place is teeming with powerful monsters. Watch yourselves out there."

"Yeah, leave it to us," Scorpion replied. "I think I've gotten stronger from this war, and Lady Uzume says we're ready for the challenge."

"Me too," Snake agreed. "I've learned a lot."

Mira and the Hidden duo were in a jail below a church. Scorpion glanced around at the cells filled with prisoners and sighed, "I think it's gonna be a while, though..."

Mira, who'd come to ask them how things were going, had to sympathize. This would take some time.

CHAPTER 8

THE ISUZU ALLIANCE'S spirit airship was currently parked in the prime minister's garden. Mira was stunned.

But about something entirely unrelated.

"An... angel?"

Next to Mira—and just as surprised—was Kagura. "Didn't expect that answer..."

Their astonished eyes were fixed on the person across from them.

"My apologies for the trouble. I'm truly sorry." The girl bowed. Her voice was much more subdued than her appearance would suggest. Her innocent nature made it difficult to believe she'd been possessed by the Oni Princess not long ago.



When they'd heard the girl had finally awoken, Mira and Kagura had immediately dropped everything to come speak to her. But... an angel?

The pair stepped away for a moment and began to whisper back and forth.

"Okay, Gramps. What do you think?"

"Hrmm. Given the circumstances, I don't think she's lying. The results when I try to Inspect remind me of an angel I once met, too."

They both focused on her and noted the result: *Information Not Found*. The same had happened when Mira met an angel during a quest related to the Three Great Kingdoms.

"Checks out. But why would an angel be possessed by a vengeful spirit? And why *here*, of all places?"

"I suppose we'll have to ask her."

They once again approached the bed where the angel lay. She looked up at them and smiled. "Have you finished whispering?"

"Yes," Mira answered. "We're sorry for making you wait."

"It's not a problem. Ask me anything, and I'll answer whatever I can." The angel gazed at them with serious eyes. Despite her youthful figure, her manners were that of a gentlewoman. Kagura's first question was, naturally, how an angel could have been possessed by the vengeful spirit of the Oni Princess.

"Allow me to start from the beginning," the angel said. She began to speak of days long past.

Long ago, there existed a small race known as oni, who all shared the ability to turn the power of nature—plants and the earth—into special mana. The oni race used this mana to protect themselves, to fight, and occasionally as nourishment.

When they were still few in number, they might have caused a forest or two to wither—but nature's healing power could easily respond. Monsters and fiends were much more prevalent than they were in modern times, so the oni struggled desperately to survive. As such, the spirits quietly accepted the oni's destruction of

nature and focused on rejuvenating what they could.

But one day, there was an explosive increase in the number of oni. The oni race had met primordial humans, the predecessor of the modern human race. Primordial humans had the rare ability to reproduce with other races.

The children resulting from unions between humans and oni might have been weaker than pure oni, but it was only the difference between *unthinkably* powerful and *unbelievably* powerful. This new generation of human-oni children were called demi-oni, and their increased fertility caused their population to explode.

Yet this created a problem: the traditional ways of imparting knowledge to oni children could not keep pace with the burgeoning population. This resulted in conflicting ideologies. Demi-oni split into multiple tribes and set off to follow their own respective philosophies. They spread to all the corners of the world, grew greater in number, and soon became the dominant race of the planet.

The tribes began to take on names of their own: the Abyssal Oni, Marine Oni, Steel Oni, and more. There were at least fifty tribes, though they were often called simply “oni” by outsiders.

Of course, all of them took the power of nature as sustenance. Each time the fires of war were kindled and the oni tribes clashed with other races, the world lost some of its life.

By now, the spirits could no longer ignore the damage. They revealed themselves to the demi-oni and pleaded for them to at least stop fighting others and destroying nature. But the oni believed themselves the strongest in the world. They burned with ambition, so they refused. They saw spirits as their newest enemy, leading to a war between oni tribes and the protectors of nature.

Just as the Spirit King had said, the oni were exterminated.

“But there was an issue. The power wielded by the oni suddenly changed.”

The angel explained that, after the decisive battle, the corpses of the defeated oni emitted a black mist—a curse that devoured spirits. It was far stronger in the days that followed the war. The spirits had no way of standing against it. Yet if left alone, the whole region would be tainted and die.

That could not be allowed. Thus, the remaining races and the spirits searched for a way. When they were out of options and at their wits' end, the angel had offered a helping hand.

She'd proposed a plan—lock the corpses in catacombs with oni-sealing coffins and shut them away until the curse dissipated. The angel would leave a piece of herself in each one, both to watch over the souls of the oni and to soothe them in death. The coffins were buried deep in the earth.

The War-Torn Burial Ground was one of those very catacombs. Its name referred to the oni tribe within, a warlike group with extreme combat prowess. They and their subordinate tribes had been buried there together.

"Hrmm... You're like a human sacrifice." Mira gazed at the angel and furrowed her brow.

According to the Spirit King, this battle had occurred tens of thousands of years ago. If this story was true, the angel had been trapped underground since then.

Angels were often seen as the opposite of demons, and in this world, they were exactly that. Mira and Kagura had met angels during quests related to the Three Great Kingdoms. Whenever they did, the beings were an awe-inspiring presence.

But the angel before them now seemed much weaker than those they remembered. Perhaps it was because she had been split into pieces, or perhaps because she had been trapped for so long. Just how much had this angel been through?

"I can hardly imagine..." Kagura was speechless. The angel's sacrifice was incomprehensible.

"I asked for this. Don't worry about me, please," the angel said, sensing their sympathy—or perhaps their pity. She then smiled. "But there is one thing I don't understand. May I ask you something?"

Mira and Kagura were struck by the angel's stalwart nature that seemed to defy her adorable looks.

After staring vacantly at the angel for a moment, Kagura finally stammered out, "Umm, sure. Go ahead."

"Thank you," the angel said with a bow. She cocked her head slightly and asked, "How did humans find the oni coffins? Regardless of the state I was in, it should have been impossible to find that place."

The angel explained in detail how the oni catacombs had been sealed. They'd been constructed with a material infused with angels' special powers, then a special barrier had been cast on top of them. The catacombs were only halfway in the corporeal world—humans shouldn't even be able to perceive them, let alone interact with them.

Yet still, the catacombs had been found, and the mist sealed within was seeping into this world. On top of that, thousands of oni grudges, which had been stable until that point, had coalesced into one being. The angel theorized that perhaps the restored connection to the real world had allowed the oni's resentment to bubble up once more.

The mass of grudges had possessed the nearest body: the angel herself. After suffering for so long under the oni curse, she was left without the power to resist, and the curse took over. And that's how Kagura found her.

"I'd planned to return the oni corpses to this world once I'd finished purifying the curses, but it seems we were brought back prematurely."

The angel had spoken rather calmly up to this point, but now she looked frustrated. She must have been confident in her sealing abilities. She explained that only a fellow angel, a god, or the Spirit King should have been able to open the catacombs. But that was unthinkable; those beings knew the circumstances of the sealing; they would never open the coffins. To the Spirit King, that would be doing direct harm to his kin. He, at least, would probably prefer to have the oni sealed forever.

"My seal had no flaws. So how...?" the angel murmured sadly. There was real emotion on her face now. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Mira found her adorable—like a little girl who'd had her perfect plans ruined. Still, she and Kagura remained silent in the face of her sadness.

After a few minutes, Kagura spoke up. "What if it was... love, or something?"

"Love?" The angel cocked her head, wide-eyed.

Tears formed in Kagura's eyes as she clenched her fists and explained her theory: what if there was someone out there who was in love with the very angel who'd sacrificed

herself for the sake of the world?

That person might have accepted it at first, thinking it was for the best. But as time passed, perhaps their feelings grew stronger, weighing on their heart more than duty ever could. Should they respect her status as an angel and prioritize her mission? Or be true to their heart and be with the one they loved?

“Conflict and regret. Worry and confession. After worrying and worrying over it for so long, they finally chose you!” That unknown angel, Kagura exclaimed, had opened the catacombs in order to save the one they loved. Kagura certainly had a soft spot for romance stories.

The angel just stared back at Kagura, stunned.

Mira mercilessly cut apart Kagura’s wild theory. “Your fantasy there is full of holes. I mean, where is this mystery angel? If they love her, why aren’t they here right now? Did they run away like a coward from the grudge?”

Kagura sniffed dismissively. “They fought for her, but they weren’t strong enough.”

“Going for the tragic angle now, eh?”

“No...” Kagura began to reconsider.

“All jokes aside,” Mira sighed, “are angels really the only ones who can open these tombs? What if a demon was involved? I mean, you’re antitheses, are you not?” Demons were often seen as the polar opposite of angels. The effects of this incident would be major and widespread, so it would be no surprise if demons had a hand in it. However, the angel looked even more confused.

“Demons? No, I don’t think that is possible,” the angel said. “Even they should know that undoing that curse would cause untold tragedy.” She sincerely believed that demons would never do such a thing.

“...Hrmm, I see. You haven’t had contact with the world for tens of thousands of years. You don’t know.”

“I know it surprised me when you mentioned it, Gramps. She’s gonna be shocked...”

Everybody in modern times knew that demons acted *specifically* to bring about

tragedy. But when Mira met Wallenstein, he'd told her how things had differed before: how, long ago, demons worked alongside angels to bring prosperity to humanity.

How do I explain this? Mira wondered. Right on cue, the Spirit King's voice echoed in her brain.

"You know the demons' past already," he said. *"However, this angel's long captivity explains her lack of knowledge. Miss Mira, allow me to speak to them. Take hands with Kagura and the angel."*

He'd obviously been eavesdropping on their conversation, but Mira welcomed his aid. If he could explain everything, that would probably be the fastest way to convince the angel.

"Friends, may I take your hands for a moment?" she asked the others.

"Huh?" Kagura gasped. "What're you up to?"

"Yes, of course," the angel agreed.

As commanded, Mira took their hands—ignoring Kagura's befuddlement—and focused on the voice in her head. Before long, Kagura understood and muttered, "Wow, this is incredible." She stopped struggling to get her hand loose.

The Spirit King described what Wallenstein had said in much more detail. He told them that, long ago, demons had existed to lead humanity into a better future, much like angels. But during the past ten thousand years, they had been infected by evil, mutating into their current malicious form.

The atrocities committed during the oni war had weakened the Spirit King's connection to this world. As a result, he was unable to find out exactly why the demons had undergone such a change, but they were now exactly opposed to their former goals.

The angel was shocked. "How can this be...?"

Now that she knew the truth, the angel grieved for the loss of demons' goodness. She remembered them as beings that shared in her and her comrades' joy while leading the world to a better future. The Spirit King's words had essentially turned her world on its head; no wonder she was shocked beyond belief.

"Regardless, that is how it stands," the Spirit King said. "Angel... Tyriel, was it? Allow me to answer the question Miss Mira posed. Miss Mira, you are exactly right."

They now had a name to go with the face, but Tyriel was spiraling into despair. The Spirit King understood her pain, but he confirmed Mira's suspicion that demons were most likely involved in this incident. Like angels, demons had powers beyond the mortal world; they would be able to perceive the sealed coffins just as angels could.

"However, let me share something that I would only know as someone who participated in the creation of the catacombs. To undo the seal, one would need the power of a member of the Trinity who created the seal. As demons have fallen to evil, they cannot receive the powers of gods... not even temporarily. I have not shared such power myself. So how did they undo the seal?"

In that case... modern demons would only be able to *find* the coffins; they should not be able to break the seal. Yet obviously they had. This was now a very vexing mystery.

"So we need to figure out how they got a key that they didn't have the right to anymore?" Kagura frowned in thought and tried to think of a method a demon might use. "Like... maybe they captured an angel and held them hostage, or something?"

"That would be difficult. The gods would not pass on their power to open a catacomb's seal, no matter what peril an angel was in." Even angels weren't valuable enough as a hostage, apparently.

"Then what if they said they were using the key for something besides opening the tombs? Like to defeat demons, or to save someone, or something?" Kagura offered another suggestion.

But the Spirit King refuted once more, "No god would fail to see through such a ruse, especially after they were betrayed. No... the gods and I would never lend our power to open the catacombs, which must mean that the demons used some other means."

"Hmm..." Kagura pouted and looked to Mira for aid.

"In that case, hrmm... What if their power was stolen? Like what Gregorius tried to do to you at the Ancient Ring Gate."

The Spirit Palace where the Spirit King lived was connected to the Ancient Ring Gate. Mira had defended him in the end, but Gregorius had been trying to siphon the Spirit

King's power there. Perhaps the demons might have done the same to a god.

"I cannot say it is... impossible. But such a thing would require a special location and much preparation. What matters most is the location; no matter how prepared you are, you can do nothing without a connection to the god you mean to steal from," the Spirit King replied.

Mira and Kagura thought about it. That sounded impossible too. After all, the only places with special connections to the Trinity were the Chambers of Revelation beneath the royal castles of the Three Great Kingdoms.

The Chambers of Revelation were the most secure places in all the continent, protected by the Three Divine Generals that even Atlantis's Forty-Eight Nameless Generals could not overcome.

The Forty-Eight Nameless Generals were each individually as strong as Wise Men like Kagura and Mira; the fact that all forty-eight of them had lost to just three people was a famous story among players. Even a duke-tier demon—or rather, *especially* a demon—could not approach the Chamber of Revelation and live to tell the tale.

The only other possibility they could imagine was that someone other than Gregorius had stolen the Spirit King's power, but the Spirit King confidently declared that Gregorius was the first to try such a thing. They were back to square one.

CHAPTER 9

TYRIEL SLUMPED OVER sadly, still stricken by the revelation that demons had fallen to evil.

Kagura patted the angel on the back to try to cheer her up as she summarized the information they had so far. "So whoever it was couldn't have stolen or willingly received the power, but without it, the coffins can't be opened. But they were. So the power to do it was out there somewhere. Where, though...?"

Mira murmured, "A god's power, hm...? Holy Sword Sanctia is the Spirit King's daughter... Could she have the power necessary to break the seal?"

Holy Sword Sanctia, made from the Spirit King's pinky, had so much of her father's power that she rivaled gods. And Mira had first seen her in the hands of someone with the oni curse. This was beginning to look like a plausible theory.

However, the Spirit King struck that theory down at once. Sanctia might be able to break the seal, but if she were used, there would be traces of her power. The Spirit King governed all of nature; if anyone would know, it was him. Was there any other way, then?

"Then what about this?" asked Mira. "Rather than breaking the seal, perhaps they simply *bent* it? As far as I can tell, there is no way for a demon to properly undo it. We should consider whether they poked a hole in it or something. Even if they still need a god's power to completely undo it, that would at least give them some access."

They had only considered ways of properly opening the catacombs so far. But looking back, the War-Torn Burial Ground had seemed almost as if someone had broken into it. Mira had noticed the difference.

"Poking a hole rather than releasing the seal, hm? I see. Perhaps that is possible," the Spirit King replied, impressed. In order to open the catacombs, one would have to neutralize the barrier that obscured its connection to the world and convert the special substance that surrounded it—the divine mineral—into mana.

That kind of power to neutralize and transform belonged to the gods. It was necessary

to open the catacombs the intended way. But if one could tear through the barrier and gouge out a little of the divine mineral within, then it was indeed possible to gain access.

“Either way, it requires power rivaling a god. Without that, one wouldn’t be able to interfere with the barrier at all. Such power isn’t easy to come by, but it is true that it does open up the range of possibilities.”

“Hrmm... So the minimum condition is to have power akin to that of a god. And destructive power, at that.” Mira racked her brain. Before long, she arrived at a conclusion: if one couldn’t *receive* a god’s power, then what if they obtained an item that already *had* the god’s power? “How about artifacts, then? As I recall, those are items given to man by gods.”

“Ooh, something crazy like Iris’s Holy Lance? Artifacts might work!” Kagura agreed. At least this line of inquiry stopped them from running in circles trying to identify a being with the power to open the tombs.

“Artifacts” were the common name for relics believed to be gifted by gods in ancient times. Each was unique and extraordinarily powerful.

The Spirit King’s response was unexpected. “Artifacts... Ah, the Heroic Weapons. Indeed, they were given to humanity by the gods, but they do not bear the power of gods. Rather, they bear the power of miracles. They resonate with the hearts of man and bring their dreams into reality. Their power is attuned to humanity; they cannot interfere with the seals.”

“Goodness... I had no idea artifacts worked that way.”

“It’s a shame that wasn’t the answer to this riddle, but, wow, what a thing to learn.”

Mira and Kagura had always simply thought of them as powerful items. The truth as revealed by the Spirit King left them astounded and moved. This might be a historical discovery.

“But you may be on the right path,” he noted. “There do exist divine items that truly have the power of gods within them; the three major nations in your world own several” the Spirit King said. That meant that Grimsdale, Alisfarius, and Ozstein all might have the means to open the tombs.

"Ooooh! Wow. Okay, so that's it!" Kagura piped up abruptly. She ignored Mira's surprise and said, "Wait just a sec," before running out of the room.

"What's with her...?" Mira muttered, gazing at the open door.

"It seems she's hit upon an idea," the Spirit King chuckled. He seemed to be in a chatty mood. This was the first time in many years that he'd had such an extended conversation with people. No one would have known, but the Spirit King felt warm in a way he hadn't in a long time.

Mira was still holding the angel's hand. The angel continued to look down, never pulling away.

Mira watched over Tyriel until Kagura returned. "Phew!" she shouted as she burst back in. "Found it. Take a look at this!" She confidently spread out a bundle of papers atop the table.

"Hrmm, what's this? Where am I meant to be looking?" Mira demanded.

"Here! Right here! Look!" Kagura took Mira's hand again and pointed at one of the papers. They all just seemed to be... documents.

"Hrmm, o-kay," Mira muttered as she gazed at it without understanding. Then she saw the sentence Kagura was pointing at. She gasped in amazement, "Goodness!"

Impressed, the Spirit King murmured, "Well. This is intriguing..."

The words were written there plain as day: *The divine item has yet to be found.*

"What is this about, exactly?" Mira asked.

"Heh heh. Weeell..." Kagura chuckled smugly as she explained that this was a report on an investigation of the Archeological Research Group.

When Mira had first contacted the Isuzu Alliance's Sentopoli branch office about the catacombs, Kagura had given the order to collect all documents related to the ARG's activities. This was one of the latest reports on the investigation.

During Mira and Kagura's interrogation a week prior, Gregorius had claimed that the bodies of the research team were offered up on an altar beyond a hidden door. Armed

with this information, Isuzu embarked on a more in-depth exploration of the War-Torn Burial Ground. At this point, Louise, one of the officials from international legal affairs, had asked to join in.

Behind the carefully hidden door, they had found a whole group of bleached human skeletons. The neatly arranged corpses still had their belongings on them, making them easy to identify. However, the report noted that the number of bodies did not match the official list of ARG member names in the country's archives. Of course, this took into account members who'd survived the massacre, such as Gregorius.

Who was missing, then?

"The captain, Ludwig Bernstein, seems to have disappeared. I asked Louise, and she said Ludwig had been allowed to borrow the divine Hadean Mace. So? Sooo? It's all coming together, right?" Kagura grinned with satisfaction at her discovery.

Captain Ludwig was the only one who hadn't been identified among the missing or the living, according to the documents. Furthermore, as the ARG's true objective was to find the City of Angels, their mission was of great national importance—so important that they'd permitted the use of a divine item.

Now the captain *and* the divine item he had in his keeping were both missing. The search continued in secret to this day.

"A mace, hm?" the Spirit King mused. "If it's a divine item that takes the form of a weapon, then it could break a hole in the catacombs."

This was the proof they needed to show that the ARG was able to open a path to reach the sealed oni coffins. The powers bestowed by the gods were manifold, but for items, they generally matched the form they inhabited.

The documents had unraveled one of the mysteries, and Kagura now proudly offered an answer to the next: How had the Archeological Research Group found a place that shouldn't be perceptible to humans? "What this means is... their captain was a demon!" Kagura declared.

Finally, the conversation was back on track.

"You may be right," Mira agreed. "There have been instances where duke-tier demons have impersonated kings in order to rule nations. It wouldn't be surprising if Ludwig

had been replaced. A captain has lots of influence, as well; he would easily be able to lead them to the tomb."

Mira felt Tyriel tense. It was inconceivable to her that demons might do such a thing. She looked down in pain, but she didn't release Mira's hand or try to flee; she simply resolved herself to accept the truth.

Perhaps because they were both still connected to the Spirit King, Mira could feel some of Tyriel's feelings through her hand. Mira asked, "One thing is still bothering me. Can demons wield these divine items? You did say that demons cannot be given the power of gods, didn't you?"

"Not easily. They may be able to simply carry such items around, but if they were to wield it, they would feel intense divine energy. No matter how powerful they are, a demon tainted by evil would be badly injured."

"I see... So they couldn't use it carelessly. Good; I'd hate to happen upon a demon swinging a divine item around." Mira breathed a sigh of relief. Then, she squeezed Tyriel's hand and said softly, "My friend knows a way to return modern demons to the way they used to be. Next time we run into one, I promise that I will neutralize it and entrust it to him. Don't you worry; it may take time, but some day, they will be the demons you knew once again."

It might be unthinkable for people of today, but demons used to be on the same side as angels. Ever since she'd learned this fact from Wallenstein, Mira had stopped thinking of them as humanity's greatest foe—and seeing Tyriel's dejection filled her anew with resolve.

Kagura took Tyriel's other hand, smiled, and said firmly, "Yeah. She's right; it's gonna be okay. He's my friend too; I know he's the kind of guy to see things through."

Tyriel might have looked like a little girl, but she was over ten thousand years old. She gazed into the eyes of the mortal girls before her, then held their hands to her heart and replied, "Thank you."

For the time being, the angel Tyriel would reside at the Isuzu Alliance headquarters. From there, she could help Kagura and her people to find out how her other pieces were faring.

The fact remained that there was a demon at large who could poke holes in the wards

around the tombs. If a second or third burial site started spewing oni mist into the world, a new Chimera Clausen might emerge. Just as the Spirit King expressed this concern, Tyriel offered to help.

There were seven sealed oni catacombs in total. The War-Torn Burial Ground was the smallest of them. Open or not, Tyriel suspected that none of them were in good shape. If the curse was weak enough that it could be purified, Tyriel asked for Mira's aid in doing so. Mira readily agreed and promised that she'd come running when called.

* * *

Once they'd learned everything Tyriel could offer, Mira and Kagura discussed future communication methods in the spirit airship's private cabin.

After a while, a member of the crew entered and asked where they should put the spoils looted from Chimera Clausen's headquarters. Apparently, they had considerable assets hidden in their base, and the cargo bay was already packed full.

"I'll go take a look." Kagura left to check the remainder of the loot and allocate passenger space to be used for the cargo.

"Loot, huh? Sounds fun!" What sorts of treasures had they recovered? Spurred on by pure... *curiosity*, Mira jumped out of her seat and ran after Kagura.

They first stopped by the cargo bay. At a glance, it looked more like an armory; it was full of precious weapons, magical tools, and other rare items

"Oho. This is quality and quantity enough to fell a small nation," Mira mused.

"So Chimera Clausen didn't just use spirits. I wonder how they collected all this stuff?" Kagura wondered. All the items were first-rate. Low-rank adventurers would never be able to get their hands on anything like this.

Most weapons that already had special powers or abilities couldn't be turned into spirit weapons; those awful enhancements required a blank slate. However, if a powerful holy sword or demonic sword *could* be made into a spirit weapon, one could only imagine its power.

"Perhaps they wanted to turn these into spirit equipment, as well?" Mira said half-jokingly.

But Kagura furrowed her brow and muttered, “I wouldn’t put it past them.”

No matter; it was all in the past now. Chimera Clausen had been exterminated, and there was no chance of any spirit being sacrificed for any such goal. They were curious how strong those weapons would be, but Mira and Kagura didn’t want them, nor did they care to find out.

After a quick look around the cargo bay, they checked the remaining loot. Mira gazed at it and suddenly exclaimed, “Ooh! Is that what I think it is?!” When Kagura asked what she meant, Mira picked up a sword and held it aloft. “This is the Sword of the Crimson Lotus King, isn’t it? Say, what if I were to take this as my reward?”

As the name implied, the sword was as red as a flame. It was one of the items Luminaria had requested in exchange for her *Encyclopedia of Skills*. Mira had to get her hands on that book. She immediately got down to haggling.

“Well, I don’t really mind letting go of anything in particular, but... How about, I’ll give it to you if you have a good enough reason?”

Wasn’t her defeat of a Chimera elite good enough to earn Mira an ample reward? Kagura was willing to let her take what she wanted... but her interest was piqued by Mira’s desire to have a *sword* of all things. Kagura had to know why.

“Ngh. Fiiiine.” Mira hated having to explain, but she quickly summarized her reasoning anyway: The sword would be a new catalyst for sorcery, and Luminaria had asked her to get it. In exchange, Mira would get the newest edition of the *Encyclopedia of Skills*.

“Ooh, really?! It’s so hard to get your hands on the *Encyclopedia of Skills* these days.” As a fellow Wise Man, Kagura was just as interested. Even *she* had been unable to obtain a copy. The *Encyclopedia of Skills* was created by the player-formed Hinomoto Committee and was extremely rare. It had a strictly controlled supply. As such, even most former players had trouble obtaining them.

Kagura was quite interested herself, so she tagged on one more condition. “Okay. You can take it, but you gotta let me read it when you’re done.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be done, but very well,” Mira agreed and deposited the Sword of the Crimson Lotus King into her Item Box. She realized something and asked, “You know, if these things don’t fit in the cargo bay, why not stow them in your Item Box?”

"I'm not going to be here forever," Kagura replied. "I want to make sure there isn't anything that relies on me when I'm gone."

"Ah, of course. Tidying up before your departure. You've thought things through." Mira's tone was complimentary.

"Heh heh, yeah, I have." Kagura puffed out her chest proudly—yet her posture contained just a hint of sadness.

CHAPTER 10

“HRMM... Still, I’m amazed at how quickly we ran into deep world lore.”

Though the angel Tyriel had been possessed by the Oni Princess, there were still pieces of her in other oni catacombs. It was possible that a second or third Oni Princess might appear.

Worse, there was a demon on the loose who was likely the root of Chimera Clausen’s evil, and whoever it was, he was equipped with a missing divine tool. It was entirely possible that this demon had already uncovered another catacomb and begun its dirty work there.

It seemed the threat of Chimera Clausen would not be put to bed so easily. Mira, already exhausted from all the problems and surprises, stepped out of the spirit airship and left the prime minister’s mansion in hopes of finding something sweet to gorge herself on.

Not long after she started her trek, someone accosted her out of nowhere.

“Danb—er... Mira! It’s been a while.”

When she turned curiously and saw the man behind her, she was equally happy and surprised.

“Ooh! Wallen—uh, Wally! What a coincidence meeting you here!” she exclaimed. He was still dressed in a black suit, black fedora, and sunglasses. Though he looked quite a lot like a secret agent, he was actually one of the Wise Men, the exorcist Wallenstein. “I see your attire is as... uncharacteristic as usual. You used to be so much more distinct.”

Wallenstein now dressed much differently than he had in-game. He laughed dryly and said with a hint of melancholy, “I was younger then.”

“What brings you here? Knowing your goal, I can’t imagine you came running due to the Chimera Clausen thing.” Wallenstein had been working to rescue the demons who’d been lost to evil. If he had a reason to be in Sentopoli, it was presumably related

to that.

Mira was correct; Wallenstein had come on demon-related business.

The prime minister's mansion was in a quiet residential district, so foot traffic was sparse. After confirming that nobody was eavesdropping on them, Wallenstein kept his voice low and explained, "I've received information that points to the presence of a duke-level demon here."

Demon nobles were likely to have subordinates with whom they shared a sort of special connection. When the demon's power was sealed, that connection was usually severed. But dukes were massively powerful, and so was their connection to subordinates. It even remained after they were sealed, if just barely. So once a duke was successfully sealed, that was the perfect opportunity to apprehend all of its subordinates.

"I see. Sounds important."

"Sure is. As it turns out, this one's a duke among dukes; it has two *hundred* subordinates."

"Oho. You can tell?"

Wallenstein had a grasp of not just the demon's status but its entourage as well. How in the world had he obtained so much information? Mira was dreadfully curious.

Wallenstein replied, "Actually, this girl knows their names—" He looked around. "Huh? Hey, Liliella?" Wallenstein called her name, worried. After a moment, a little girl jumped down from a streetside tree.

"Here!" A girl in a dress ran over and smiled innocently. She looked younger than Mira, with striking pink hair and red eyes. There was something about her that was bewitching, but it wasn't due to her appearance alone.

"Er, so, Mira. This is Liliella, and she's a... friend. I sealed her abilities just the other day," Wallenstein said, introducing her.

Liliella bowed. "Nice to meet you." After Mira introduced herself in turn, Wallenstein explained. Apparently, his information had come from this girl, Liliella, who had once been the subordinate of that very duke. Because of that, she was acquainted with his

other demon underlings and had a good grasp of how many there were. However, she did not know how many were still alive or waiting to reincarnate.

The duke also hadn't contacted her in quite a while, which meant she didn't know his current whereabouts. According to Liliella, when a demon had many underlings, they treated them differently based on their strength. The stronger ones would be used often, while the weaker ones would be ignored. Like her. She didn't seem to be a very strong subordinate, so she'd been left on standby and neglected without ever receiving orders.

"But honestly, I'm glad I sucked. I didn't have to do anything and I wasn't hurting anyone." Liliella smiled so sweetly that one could hardly imagine she'd been a nasty demon just days ago.

She gave off such a good girl aura that any thought of her being a tool of evil was immediately crushed. Mira couldn't help but put a gentle hand on her head, saying, "Yes, of course. You're so right."

Liliella didn't know where the duke was now, but she did have some information that might lead them to him.

First, the duke had been doing something in Sentopoli. Second, he had begun whatever it was *before* Liliella had been ordered to stand by. Apparently, back when Sentopoli was still a young city, Liliella had infiltrated it. Her job had been to exhaustively report on the development of the city to the duke.

"But the duke took me off the job eventually. As the city got bigger, I was ordered to stand by. That's when Katiella took my place." Katiella was a strong demon the duke had always favored. She might still be in Sentopoli to this day, and if so, she was likely still in contact with the duke.

Wallenstein had said before that, when their abilities were sealed, demons became docile, as if they'd become an entirely new person. But based on Liliella's testimony, it seemed like they didn't lose their memories. That meant that, if they could find and seal Katiella, she could tell them everything she knew. If she was in contact with the duke, then maybe that info would be enough to trace his location.

"I was really surprised to see that thing in the sky the day after our arrival. And you were there too, Mira!" Wallenstein exclaimed.

Wallenstein had come to pursue the duke but had stumbled into the Chimera Clausen chaos. He'd arrived the night before the declaration of victory and found himself in a city in turmoil the next day. All thanks to Mira.

"By the way, did Chimera Clausen have any dealings with demons?" he asked. If it was demons' job to do evil to humans, then that was a natural question to ask. In fact, he'd sought her out just so he could ask it.

And he'd hit the nail right on the head.

"They certainly did."

The timing was too perfect. Mira told Wallenstein and Liliella about the War-Torn Burial Ground and the demon she'd just learned about. When she'd finished, Liliella spoke up. "That's gotta be the duke!" If any demon would impersonate Captain Ludwig, she thought, it was sure to be the duke she'd served. She explained that the duke always carried something wrapped in a cloth soaked with the blood of fiends and holy beasts and never let it out of his sight. The cloth was said to suppress divine authority.

Even if they didn't use it, merely walking around with a divine item was difficult for evil beings. But with that cloth, it would be easy. What other reason could there be? And there couldn't be many demons holding onto divine items. Liliella must be right; that duke was at the root of Chimera Clausen's existence.

"We've got our connection. Maybe now is our chance," Wallenstein declared.

Until now, it had been unclear whether the duke's underlings were still in this city. But if the duke had contributed to the formation of Chimera Clausen, then Wallenstein was certain that he must have left someone to keep watch here. Cunning demons liked to place observers where they'd done their dirty work in order to get a front-row seat to the effects of their nasty deeds. Given that Chimera Clausen was such a large-scale operation, it was even more likely that the demon wanted to keep tabs on it.

One of the duke's underlings was probably still in hiding. And now that Chimera Clausen had been destroyed, that observer must be hard at work. They would have had to make contact with the duke in the past few days. And the more recent the contact, the more precisely they could narrow down the duke's current location.

"Hrmm... That makes sense. So now is the time to strike. But the problem is finding

the observer; do you have any way to search for them?"

The observer would almost certainly know the duke's current position. But how to find them... Sentopoli was overflowing with people; even if the trio knew they were hiding somewhere in the city, that was too broad to find their target.

"We need decisive proof. Unfortunately, we have nothing..." Wallenstein grinned sourly, though he added that he did know one place that might be connected.

"Oho. Then what are we waiting for?" Mira asked where it was, ready to tag along.

Demons were Wallenstein's specialty, but this was related to the origin of Chimera Clausen, so Mira intended to help him as much as she could. But knowing how busy she must be helping with the Chimera cleanup, Wallenstein was hesitant to accept her help.

"Ehm, are you sure? Aren't you tied down with other things?"

"Worry not. I've already finished my share of work for the day; I've got all afternoon."

If that was the case, Wallenstein gladly welcomed her company.

* * *

Along the way, Mira asked, "By the way, do you have some way of referring to demons before and after they've been sealed? It's a little confusing to call them *all* demons..."

There were two kinds of demons: modern demons who took horrible pleasure in harming humans, and those like Liliella who'd been sealed and lost their wicked desires. Mira had trouble keeping them organized in her head.

"Actually, we were thinking the same thing. We're considering calling them light and dark demons." Wallenstein and his people had also brought up ideas like "justice demons" and "chaos demons." Nothing had really stuck yet, though; they would hold a vote next week.

Mira could see that Wallenstein was having fun in his own way.

"It's a little uninspiring... But good enough. For now, we can make do with light and dark," she agreed.

"Let's do that," Wallenstein agreed. "But the thing is..."

Apparently, there were some contrarians who believed the two names should be reversed. They reasoned that the demons who'd forgotten their duty—those that were now evil—had blank-white minds.

"You sure are a... *unique* group," Mira chuckled humorlessly.

The trio arrived at Liliella's old base. It was near the center of the staircase-like residential district, a place where small homes were packed in one after another. Despite how jumbled it was, there was a certain charm to it. When she'd been relieved of this post, Liliella had handed it right over to the dark demon Katiella.

"It'll make things easy if she still lives here..." Wallenstein said hopefully. However, the home was in such a sorry state that it was hard to imagine anyone residing there. Still, Wallenstein wasn't giving up just yet.

"Let's hope we can find some info in here," Liliella agreed.

They must not have really expected to find her here, as neither seemed very disappointed. They got right to looking for a way inside. Mira helped too, and eventually they found an unlocked window that allowed stealthy entry into the home. Dust blanketed the inside, plainly showing its recent disuse.

Mira recalled the demons she'd encountered so far and murmured, "It's kind of, er... normal? I'd say it looks like any regular home."

A table, a silverware cupboard, a kitchen, a bed. It was all dirty now, but seeing all these domestic trappings, one could imagine the average life its resident might have lived. When Mira did imagine it, however, something felt off. She shied away from the thought of that demon living in such a *human* environment.

"Oh, you've never met a female demon, have you?" Wallenstein replied to Mira's murmuring. When she asked what he meant by that, he informed her of a new discovery in the field of demons.

Just as there were male and female humans, so too with demons. But male and female dark demons looked different and lived differently as well. Dark demon males were the demonic beings Mira had fought to this point. Anyone could tell at a glance that they were demons. Wallenstein added that whatever she was imagining in her mind

right now was probably a male dark demon.

"When I first met a female demon, I was really surprised by how different they could be," he added, glancing at Liliella. He explained that she had looked like this even when she was a dark demon.

Mira gazed at her. She was amazed by how human the girl looked. "Goodness... She doesn't look like a demon at all." She might have run into female dark demons in the past without even knowing it. The thought made Mira shudder.

"Right? It makes my job a whole lot harder."

The only demons of this world that Mira could imagine were like the one she'd fought at Nebrapolis. And all of the dark demons she'd encountered in-game were like that. She'd never considered gender differences.

But Wallenstein claimed that those were all just *males*; females often lived in human settlements without ever being discovered.

Sometimes, dark demons would take human form and visit despair upon mankind. Female demons lived the same lives as real humans, dissolving into human society and becoming cogs in the machine. From there, they gradually dismantled institutions from the inside. Very few knew this fact.

"Oh, do you remember the Chivalric Order of One that we all challenged together? You might recall that there was a concubine who started the civil war that led to the destruction of that country. *She* was a dark demon," Wallenstein revealed, as if it were nothing.

"You mean that seductive, beautiful, wicked woman..." Mira was stunned by his words.

Thinking back on it, Mira had known there was more to that concubine than met the eye. However, she was shocked at the truth that she was more than just a wicked woman, but an actual *demon*.

Wallenstein added that he and his people had already dealt with the concubine, and now she was one of their most reliable allies. When she became a light demon again, she retained all of the beauty and none of the nastiness.

"I'd... love to meet her some time," Mira said, concealing her ulterior motives.

Wallenstein replied genially, “I’ll show you around our base someday.”

Mira’s cover as an innocent little girl continued to camouflage her less-than-pure intentions.

* * *

With yet another revelation about demons discovered, they continued their search of the abandoned home.

Liliella’s abilities shone here. Since the house had been left vacant for so long, moving anything at all sent dust flying so they could hardly see. But by cracking a window, she was able to magically sweep all the dust outside with a single gesture.

It seemed she specialized in the magic of household chores. She could clean, wash and dry laundry, move objects, and more. The duke saw this as almost completely useless.

“Those are wonderful abilities,” Mira said, impressed. It might not have endeared her to demons... but for a human, these skills were solid gold.

“She’s a big help to us,” Wallenstein murmured, and patted Liliella gently on the head.

Liliella resented the childlike treatment a little, but in the end, she gave up and smiled happily.

Thanks to her, the home was much easier to search now. They moved furniture around for ten minutes or so, looking for any useful clues.

“Oh, what’s this?” Mira plucked up a sheet of paper that had been hidden under the bed. It was covered in words and numbers.

“Do you think... this is a receipt or something?”

“Hrmm... Maybe so.”

The words were smudged, but not unreadable. Mira and Wallenstein looked it over from top to bottom. It was a pay stub, and included the names of both the employer and employee.

If nobody had lived there since Katiella, then it must be hers. This would be a vital clue.

The name “Felicia” was written on it—perhaps her alias. There was a date on it as well, indicating that she had lived here until at least eight years ago.

Moreover, they knew the shop she had worked at. They didn’t know if she was still there now, but maybe someone at this “Moonlit Garden” knew about Felicia. They might be able to get some information if they asked around.

“Hrmm... Moonlit Garden. What kind of place is it, I wonder?” Mira mused.

“That’s a good question. It sounds like some kind of stylish florist. Or a seedy bar.”

What was the place this female demon had worked at like? The trio left the vacant house, ready to pursue their new lead.

CHAPTER 11

MIRA AND THE GANG made their way to the busy downtown of Sentopoli in search of the Moonlit Garden.

“Now, who might know about this...?” Mira murmured, surveying the passersby.

Instead of her usual magical girl-style outfit, Mira was dressed in normal city clothes. She was a local celebrity after the declaration of victory and Spirit King’s appearance, after all. It would be a pain if someone identified her in the middle of the busy city. Her current getup was meant to avoid that problem. With her plain clothes, glasses, and straw hat, she had put together a more mature-looking façade. It also helped that her hair had been braided by Liliella.

Either thanks to her efforts or to the straw hat covering half her face, nobody had identified her. Yet.

“We don’t have any hints apart from the name, so I say we just ask someone on the street,” Wallenstein suggested. He ignored the first woman who passed in front of him and instead asked a man whether he knew the name Moonlit Garden.

“Oh, that place?” the man began. He seemed to know something. But when Mira peeked out from behind Wallenstein, he quickly stammered, “Well... I... I dunno.” He then angrily glared at Wallenstein and stalked away.

The trio were baffled. Maybe he was in a bad mood? Either way, there was no point in dwelling on it, so Wallenstein accosted the next pedestrian.

Oddly, the man reacted the same way. And when they asked other people, none of them seemed to know of such a place. Moreover, when the men saw Mira and Liliella waiting behind Wallenstein, they all glared hatefully at him.

Why was Wallenstein only asking men?

And was he asking the question wrong, or was his crime being handsome in the company of two cute girls? Either way, Mira saw he was getting nowhere and stepped up to the plate. She’d kept silent to avoid blowing her cover, but at this rate she might

as well go for broke.

"This is getting us nowhere. Watch: leave this to me," Mira grumbled in irritation and stomped over to a man who looked to be an adventurer. "Say, you. I have a question. Do you know of a place called Moonlit Garden?"

He reacted very differently from the men Wallenstein had asked. Even incognito, Mira could not hide her innate attractiveness. A moment later she began to feel quietly satisfied that she'd left yet another man speechless at her beauty. Unfortunately, that was not why he'd fallen silent at all.

"Huh? Uhh... Well, yeah, I... Uh... I do know, but..." he stammered. Then, he glared at Wallenstein and said in a low voice, "What are you up to, buddy?"

"What do you mean?" Wallenstein asked, confused.

"Wait a sec... Do you legit not know about that place?" the man asked, shocked and equally confused.

They were looking for it *because* they didn't know where it was, obviously. But that probably wasn't what he meant. Wallenstein cocked his head in confusion, so the man beckoned him over.

"Umm..." Wallenstein obediently approached. The man turned away from Mira and Liliella and began whispering to him.

"Excuse me! I'm the one who asked. What's going on?" Mira pouted, finding herself suddenly ignored.

"Oh... O-ooohh..." Liliella gasped. Apparently, she'd figured it out.

* * *

The two men finished talking, and the stranger patted Wallenstein on the back as he left. "Later, champ."

"Thank you very much," Wallenstein replied. He trudged back with a complicated look on his face. It seemed he'd learned quite a bit. But this wasn't a good place to talk about it; he took the girls to a more secluded location to share the news.

"So? What did he say?"

Based on the man's reaction, he clearly knew something. He might've been a patron of the place. He might've been able to tell Wallenstein more than just the location. He might've known something about Felicia.

They'd talked for a while, so there must have been a lot of information passed on. Mira began to get excited. That's when Wallenstein grimaced and revealed what he'd learned: Moonlit Garden was the name of a house of ill repute.

"Oh... Oh, I see..." Now Mira understood why the men had reacted the way they did. Wallenstein had been asking about a brothel with two young women in tow. Most people would find that disgusting. They could hardly be blamed for glaring at him. Mira inwardly said a prayer for Wallenstein, whose reputation was definitely in the toilet after that little escapade.

Despite the hit to his respectability, however, Wallenstein had indeed gotten some very juicy information. It seemed the stranger had known an *awful lot* about the place, and was able to provide both the location and information about Felicia. Wallenstein shared the details: "According to him, many of her regular customers have been arrested by the Guild Union lately, so she's taking a leave of absence."

Felicia was so famous that she was essentially the main draw of the brothel, and she had connections with adventurers, heads of companies, and other influential figures. However, recently she had faced a major setback, as her business had taken a hit due to the destruction of Chimera Clausen.

If enough of Felicia's customers had been arrested to affect her business, that must have meant she catered heavily to those from Chimera Clausen.

"I bet she corrupted them," Liliella said. According to her, this was a common technique used by female dark demons—lure them in with sex, then tempt them into evil behavior. However, she also added with a glum look that it wasn't all thanks to the magic. The person being corrupted had to be a willing participant.

Liliella looked like a little girl. If she had looked like this when she was a dark demon, she'd only have been able to attract men who were already corrupt and depraved.

"Let's just say that when it came to Felicia, the duke's asset had *assets*." Despite being a light demon, she had a horribly lewd grin on her face. While she looked childlike, the

demon Liliella was probably the oldest one here, and she had a penchant for mature humor.

Mira and Wallenstein stared at her blankly, then they looked at each other and sighed.

After that, it didn't take them long to find the Moonlit Garden. They went inside to ask about Felicia's current residence. But given the nature of their business, the staff guarded her personal information carefully. She'd made them lots of money, and they refused to share anything—even the names of her closest coworkers.

They could try bringing in Kagura to force them to talk, but the staff at the brothel were just normal people. It wouldn't be right to go that far. And normal people didn't know anything about demonkind. It would be pointless to reveal the secret that Felicia was a demon.

"We'll have to try the Guild Union next," Mira said.

It might be difficult to get anything out of the brothel, but there were others who might know a lot about Felicia—her Chimera regulars, for example. Perhaps Mira and company could drag some information out of them.

Wallenstein and Liliella readily agreed.

"Good idea. Let's go."

"Yeah... I think that sounds best."

They quickly abandoned the brothel and shifted gears. Mira and Kagura had already interrogated the Chimera suspects once before, so she confidently declared as they walked, "I'm acquainted with management. Allow me to handle negotiations."

They arrived at the Adventurers' Guild Union less than ten minutes later.

Some of Felicia's regulars would no doubt be in the underground jail. But everyone was still on high alert; only those involved in the investigation could enter. She'd need to speak to the Guild leaders first.

"Excuse me. Could you get me in contact with the heads of this branch?" Mira asked, standing confidently at the counter as if she were important enough to need no appointment. Mira had already met the head honchos here once, so they knew the role

Mira had played in the destruction of Chimera. She was sure they would take a surprise visit seriously.

But the receptionist seemed totally baffled. She furrowed her brow and asked hesitantly, "Umm... What business do you have here?"

Mira needed to question criminals she believed to be in league with a demon... but she couldn't say that to just anyone.

"It's... confidential," Mira replied. "Just let them know that I am here, please." All she needed to do was talk directly to the bosses. The receptionist's response was unsatisfactory; she simply explained that they were busy. Mira would have to come back later.

She was being treated as if she were just a random person off the street! Suddenly, Mira remembered that she was still in disguise. "Oh! See? Look. I'm Mira." She yanked off her hat and glasses, struggled for a moment to shake out her braids, and puffed out her chest proudly.

Trademark silver hair and blue eyes. Despite the plain outfit, her face was well-known thanks to the declaration of victory. Many of the people here must have witnessed it, and there was a sudden commotion in the room when she took off her disguise.

"Oh, my apologies!" It seemed the receptionist finally understood. She ran off to tell her bosses right away.

"How silly of me to forget." Mira turned to her friends and smirked.

Wallenstein simply replied, "Typical Danb... *Mira*." But he seemed relieved that they'd be able to interrogate their leads after all.

As they waited, they heard the people around them murmur and discuss the hero in their midst: the girl who felled Chimera. Well, now that she'd revealed herself, there was no point hiding it. She eavesdropped with glee.

"That's the girl with the Spirit King!"

"That stuff was awesome."

"His blessing really makes this legit, huh?"

“I bet she thinks she’s a big shot now that she got to meet the Spirit King.”

No matter how many conversations she snooped on, she only heard people lauding the Spirit King. Mira’s name didn’t come up *once*, unless it was vague compliments about her being cute or pretty.

And the people that were complimenting Mira instead of the Spirit King seemed to have... *unique* inclinations.

Oh, come on! Seriously?!

Mira’s exploits were dazzling! Was the appearance of the Spirit King so impactful that it totally overshadowed her?

“You... Just you wait and see...” she fumed. Someday, *everyone* would acknowledge the power of summoning! And summoners would become the most popular mage class! With ambition burning in her heart, Mira renewed her resolve once more.

Eventually the receptionist returned with Gates and Deborah. Mira was about to receive yet another blow.

“Aha! I heard one of Uzume’s underlings was here. So, it was you? I’m sorry we made you wait.”

“We’ll do anything to help Uzume. If you need something, let’s talk about it in our office.”

The receptionist had obviously introduced Mira as Uzume’s subordinate. The leaders likewise recognized her more for that than for her status as a magician or adventurer. She was not Mira to them; she was just another Isuzu lackey.

“...Hrmm. Thanks,” she grumbled.

Kagura had nothing to do with her current goals, but protesting would only make things more annoying. For the time being, Uzume’s name was opening doors. Mira swallowed her pride and decided to deal with this pair as her inferiors.

“Goodness. I see...”

“We understand. We’ll let the person in charge know. Interrogate them however you

need."

"We really appreciate it."

When they explained that Uzume had sent them to investigate a demon possibly behind Chimera Clausen, along with the existence of his subordinates, they had received access to the prisoners in no time.

The trio followed Gates to the underground jail. They passed through the heavily secured door and down the stairs, where they arrived at an even *more* secure door. Beyond that were the holding cells, drearier than the last time.

Groans and angry bellows echoed in the darkness.

After explaining their purpose to the head guard, Gates said to Mira, "Let us know if there are any new developments." He then left to attend to his own business.

"Now, where are we going to find Felicia's regulars..."

Chimera Clausen's influence was far-reaching; as a result, hundreds of conspirators were locked up here. Mira worried this would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

But Liliella had the answer. "Those who have... *been with* demons have a lingering taint on them. If you can detect that, it'll be easy to identify them."

She scampered off and stopped in front of one cell, then pointed at a man within.

"Wh-what?" The rather unremarkable man glared at Wallenstein in confusion. Wallenstein indicated to the jailer that he had some things to discuss with the prisoner and opened the cell.

The moment the cell door opened, the man shoved Liliella to the side and sprinted past.

"Whoops." Wallenstein swiftly caught Liliella in his arms, confirming her safety.

Mira glowered at the fleeing man, furious. He screamed. Dark Knights now blocked his path and held him at the points of their swords.

"We were only planning to ask you a few questions, but I see there's no need to be

gentle about it. Prepare yourself," Mira said coldly before walking off to the interrogation room. The Dark Knights followed, dragging the man behind them.

"Mira seems mad..." Liliella murmured as the summoner stomped off. It seemed the little demon wasn't completely familiar with human emotions; she couldn't comprehend *why* Mira was so mad.

Wallenstein nodded. "Indeed. Mira hates people who hurt children."

"I'm not a child." Liliella glared at him sternly.

"Uh... Well, er..." Wallenstein stammered.

Her appearance and speech patterns were certainly childish. It was only her actual *age* that contradicted that. How could he talk his way out of this? Just as he started to think, Liliella muttered, "Fine... It's fine."

She'd been so far from human feelings for so long, she'd never been given time to understand them. But now that she'd known the kindness that could come from humans, she smiled at the warm feeling. Wallenstein had never seen her smile like that.

"Yeah, there you go. Good for you."

Light demons who'd just been sealed often had unstable emotions. But by interacting with humans, they could gradually acclimate. This event was a positive sign of things to come.

Looks like she'll stabilize faster than I thought. I'm glad I brought her along. Once again grateful for his reunion with Mira, Wallenstein watched as the summoner strode off.

"But I'm still not a child," Liliella repeated.

"Yes, yes, I know," he replied with a chuckle.

CHAPTER 12

THE MAN'S INTERROGATION went smoothly. Neither Wallenstein, Mira, nor Liliella had the inherent menace necessary to interrogate people—but Mira's Dark Knights certainly did.

The man turned out to be a repeat customer of Felicia's. He told them everything he knew as he trembled beneath the Knight's gleaming sword. Once they'd gotten enough out of him, Mira and her group returned him to his cell and took the next john in for questioning.

They didn't need to intimidate this one using Dark Knights like they had with the first man. They used polite conversation and gifts of small luxuries to induce him to talk. As they spoke to more and more, some were more tight-lipped, but Mira and Liliella used their feminine charm to gain an advantage. Nothing overtly sexual; that would have strained the limits of good taste. Instead, their strategy was to plead and cry, saying that they were searching for their long-lost sister. Emotional manipulation was highly effective.

Once they'd finished questioning each of the imprisoned men, Mira skimmed the notes she'd taken. "Hrmm... Well, I suppose that will do."

They had received a bounty of information on Felicia: her appearance, her measurements and physical features, hobbies, favorite shops, weekend activities, relationships, work... *techniques*, and more. The dossier they'd built up was a pervert's heaven.

All those who'd mentioned her techniques spoke especially highly of her. Then they squirmed under Mira's annoyed gaze and Liliella's scornful glare.

Wallenstein peeked at the paper over Mira's shoulder. "So we have this information, but nothing about her current residence. She keeps that information well-guarded." They'd obtained useful and useless information alike from the customers, but the location of the demon's home was still a mystery.

"At least we have some clues," Liliella said. Before her lay multiple sheets of paper, with a woman drawn on each of them. They were sketches of Felicia based on the features

each customer had given. All were full body rather than just her face, and every one of the men said the proportions were *just right*. Some of them even tried to negotiate buying the sketch.

“Right. Earlier today, we knew nothing but her name. This should boost our investigative capabilities greatly.”

Mira took one of the sketches in hand and stared at it. The dark demon Katiella, who called herself Felicia, was beautiful enough to seduce any man. Her figure was overflowing with the kind of charm that piqued men’s desire. However, she also had intelligent, limpid eyes, making her look like a model citizen at a glance. To think such a serious-looking beauty was so greatly skilled when it came to nighttime activities.

Hrmm... Interesting, indeed. Perhaps these men couldn’t be blamed for falling for her charms.

“You know, I almost have to wonder if it wasn’t their fault for being drawn into helping Chimera Clausen,” Mira said, then turned to Wallenstein with a smirk. “You understand?”

“Huh? Um, well... Uhh... Maybe...?” Wallenstein glanced at the sketch in Mira’s hand. Perhaps some men *would* lose their sense of morality if such a beauty came on to them.

“Do you like girls like her, Wally?” Liliella asked innocently, but there was an icy chill in her tone.

“Huh?! Um, I wouldn’t say *like*...”

“So you don’t?”

“I-I don’t *not* like girls like that either...” Wallenstein stammered like a man who’d been caught cheating. Mira suppressed her laughter and watched; she hadn’t expected her light teasing to have such a result.

“What’s your type then?”

“Huh?”

“What *do* you like, Wally?” Liliella stared intently at him. To her, he was like a prince who’d saved her from a lifetime of solitude. Now that she was a light demon with

unstable emotions, it was easy to see where this might be going.



Wallenstein had a sort of innocence about him. He genuinely considered the question, but was also hesitant to answer.

“I, umm...”

Time passed. Awkwardly.

Before he could muster a response, Mira saved him by bringing the conversation back on topic.

“We’ll see then...” Liliella muttered to herself. She’d figure him out eventually.

In the end, they only had their profile of Felicia; there were no decisive clues that could point to her current whereabouts. However, now they knew mostly what she looked like. One possible option would be to simply search for her by sight.

Information-gathering abilities would be the key to their success now.

It seemed Wallenstein’s organization was lacking in this regard; all the other members were light demons, which meant that they lacked human connections. Worse, Wallenstein wasn’t exactly the most charismatic communicator.

“I guess I could have everyone gather here...” Wallenstein began to consider throwing raw manpower at the problem. When Mira asked if he thought that would work, he replied that it would be a big gamble.

Light demons might look like people, but they were fundamentally different. One or two might be fine, but gathering such a large number in the city all at once would risk letting dark demons sense them. And if Felicia sensed them and went to ground, it would be even more difficult to find her. He added that intervening via public institutions would end poorly, as well. They needed an information network that could be deployed as secretly as possible.

Mira realized she had just the thing.

“Why don’t we ask Kagura? Her people are already searching Sentopoli from top to bottom right now; we might find this demon woman more easily than we thought.”

Kagura, aka Uzume, was the leader of an organization that spanned the entire continent. She had *plenty* of people specializing in information gathering at her

fingertips. They were searching for a person whose name and appearance were known. And that person had lived here a long time, too. Even if Felicia was a dark demon, as long as she was posing as a human, Isuzu had the resources to find her. So Mira suggested exactly that.

“Huh? Kagura? Is she here too?!” Wallenstein’s reaction was a bit more than Mira had expected.

“Oh, right. I suppose I forgot to mention it.” Mira suddenly realized her mistake and quickly explained events thus far.

“I see... I’d heard the name Isuzu, but the history behind it comes as a surprise.”

The public declaration of victory hadn’t referred to the Isuzu Alliance but to a combined force of adventurers. Isuzu’s information control seemed to have worked well, as Wallenstein claimed that he’d *never* heard their name in connection with the Chimera defeat. In fact, he was quite surprised. More than that, the person who led them was his long-time friend Kagura, of all people. He laughed; this was an even bigger surprise than when he’d seen Mira on the airship.

Either way, he gladly agreed to Mira’s suggestion. The three made their way to the prime minister’s mansion. The estate had high security, but Mira was quickly allowed in due to her hero status. Wallenstein and Liliella made it through without issue, too, since they had come with her.

Their destination was the spirit airship parked in the mansion’s courtyard.

There, they asked a crew member to get Uzume while they waited in a meeting room. The Wise Man emerged cautiously, worried she was about to deal with another pain in the butt. But when she spotted Mira, she cocked her head in puzzlement. That lasted only until the man sitting next to her took off his black hat and sunglasses.

“No way! Really?! It’s been so long, Wallenstein!”

In a marked contrast to how she treated Mira, Kagura ran over to him and spoke with a measure of respect. Mira pouted, but her irritation was ignored.

It was common knowledge that the two of them had a solid friendship. In real life, Wallenstein was a pet shop owner, while Kagura *loved* cats.

“It really has, Kagura.”

“Gramps told me all about the demons. That really shocked me...”

“I was surprised when I heard about you, too, Kagura.”

As they enjoyed their happy reunion, the two complimented each other’s exploits. Mira cut in—she didn’t want to be forgotten—and livened up the conversation with talk of memories. They took back their thirty years apart in no time; it felt just like the good old days.

“You dress a lot more normal these days, huh?” Kagura mused.

“Well... Yes, I suppose.” Back when he was a Wise Man, Wallenstein had dressed just like the card game depicted him. He’d worn a black robe and wrapped himself in black cloth like a mummy. He was meant to look like a hero who toed the line between good and evil.

“You dressed like a middle schooler’s idea of a ninja.” Mira chuckled at how plain he was now.

“You’ve changed *too*, Gramps,” Kagura rebutted. Wallenstein agreed that he’d been shocked when he met Mira. She’d turned from a dignified old wizard into a little girl who wore magical girl clothes. Mira slumped, remembering her lost avatar.

As they conversed, Wallenstein suddenly paused. Liliella was tugging at his clothes. She was frowning, as if unhappy at being left out.

“Whoops! Sorry, sorry. I was just so excited.” Wallenstein apologized and introduced the light demon to Kagura, informing her that she was a former dark demon who’d returned to her proper state.

“Oh, I had no idea! Nice to meet you, Liliella.” Kagura crouched down to her eye level and greeted her with a smile so sweet it would make most men swoon. But it only put the demon on guard.

“I’m keeping an eye on you,” she muttered to herself. It seemed she’d perceived Kagura and Wallenstein’s relationship as a threat.

Once they’d finished rejoicing over their reunion, the four sat and began talking in

earnest. Given his recent efforts, it was easy to guess why Wallenstein was in this city.

Kagura already knew he wasn't just popping in to say hi. "If you're here, I assume it must be related to demons?"

"That's right. You see..."

The friendly reunion had been delightful, but it was time to discuss business. Wallenstein retrieved the documents and sketches from their interrogations and filled Kagura in on what had happened so far.

The duke-rank dark demon was related to the origins of Chimera Clausen. The hunt for its whereabouts was on. And Wallenstein requested the use of Isuzu's information-gathering abilities for the sake of his search.

"Wow... So that's it." Kagura went silent for a moment. Before long, though, she readily agreed. "Sure. I'll help you out! This is related to our work anyway, so we'll make it top priority."

The spirit-protecting Isuzu Alliance needed information regarding the formation of Chimera Clausen—and information on a demon who might do more harm to spirits. They might have won the last battle, but Kagura's goal hadn't changed. She was prepared to continue her efforts to protect the spirits for as long as it took.

Kagura began taking down the details about their target on a notepad and grabbed one of the sketches on the table. "Mind if I take a few of these?"

"Be my guest," Wallenstein replied. He picked up another that emphasized Felicia's upper torso and added, "This one might be a little easier to work with."

"She sure is *pretty*, huh?" Kagura murmured as she gazed at the two sketches. Her voice had barbs in it. No doubt she had opinions about the people who'd been seduced into working for Chimera Clausen.

"Sure is," Liliella agreed with Kagura. Something about her voice was spine-chilling.

Mira and Wallenstein remained silent. They had no intention of defending the men who'd fallen prey to her. But they were particularly aware that men had a soft spot for pretty ladies.

The ice broke when someone called Kagura from outside. “Lady Uzume? Someone from the Guild Union is here for you.” Mira could feel the atmosphere in the room ease in an instant.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m coming,” Kagura replied, her attitude returning to normal. Liliella was back to herself, as well.

Mira and Wallenstein breathed a sigh of relief now that the danger had passed. That was one more thing they now knew to never bring up.

“Uh, so I’ll look into it. Mind coming back tomorrow?” Kagura asked as she collected the documents. “I think we’ll have a few leads by then.”

Wallenstein’s jaw dropped. “You work that fast?!”

Their interrogations hadn’t narrowed the location down at all, so Kagura’s people would have to cover all of Sentopoli. Yet Kagura claimed that she could have it done in a day. One couldn’t blame him for being surprised.

“Our elites are all right here, right now,” Kagura said proudly. She promised to mobilize all of her top forces to search for Felicia. She added that among the elites were half of the Hidden.

“That’s incredible... Thank you for this.”

Kagura’s intelligence personnel were so excellent that she couldn’t help but brag. Though amazed, Wallenstein relaxed as he entrusted the job to her. Mira was certain that it would work out fine, too; after all, they had half of the Hidden on the job. She knew just how good Scorpion and Snake were at their job.

“Anyway, I should get going. I’ll tell everyone you’re on our side. So come back any time, *Wally*.” With that, Kagura rushed off to her next order of business. Since these demons were closely related to Chimera Clausen, Kagura surely wanted to be directly involved. But she was too busy, and she didn’t want to delay them.

After Kagura left, Mira and the others took a detour to visit the angel Tyriel at Liliella’s request.

“You’re okay now... Thank goodness.”

Tears of joy pooled in Tyriel's eyes when she met the light demon. Liliella was emotional, as well. Tyriel was especially famous as an angel who'd worked to seal the oni, after all.

The two shared a lively conversation about the past—stories from tens of thousands of years ago. They talked about it like it was just yesterday. This was a stark reminder to Mira and Wallenstein of how these beings lived. It gave the pair an even more divine aura.

Suddenly, Mira heard the Spirit King's voice in her mind. Apparently, he wanted to join the conversation too.

Mira joined hands with the demon and angel.

Their conversation was as broad as could be, ranging from idle gossip to grand legends known to no mortals. Mira was astounded by how easily they told her these secrets of the world.

Wallenstein was left out of the conversation. He simply smiled and watched over the three girls who held hands and chatted.

Twenty minutes into the conversation, fatigue made itself evident on Tyriel's face. The angel was still recovering, so it was difficult for her to talk for long periods of time. They decided to cut things short.

"Let's do this again when you're healthy," Liliella said. "There's so much more I wanna talk about."

"Sure. Let's talk the day away. That's a promise," Tyriel replied.

"And we'll all be together!"

"Yeah. I can't wait."

Liliella and Tyriel smiled as they made their promises to each other. It might have seemed like any ordinary, ephemeral agreement, but to them, it was absolute and eternal.

After that, they said goodbye to Tyriel and left the spirit airship to make their way back to the city.

Under the twilit sky, the trio made for a very familiar inn: Epicurean Excess. Along the way, Wallenstein had grumbled about how crappy the inn *he'd* chosen was, so he took Mira's recommendation and Liliella's nagging under consideration and improved their accommodations. He soon decided that they'd also stay here.

"This is really something else," Wallenstein mused.

"It smells amazing!" Liliella squealed.

They must've chosen a *really* bad inn the day before, because the two stood stock-still in genuine awe as they stared into Epicurean Excess's dining hall.

"Now, what should we eat? Do you two have any preference?" Mira asked. "They have most everything here. Choose whatever you like."

The two were like country bumpkins who knew nothing about the city. Mira took advantage of this opportunity to act refined and cultured.

"We're certainly spoiled for choice here. I don't know where to begin."

"I wanna look at all of them!"

This floor had dozens of restaurants, each with their own draw for new visitors. Mira had been here awhile, and even she couldn't decide on a meal. That's how good all the restaurants were here.

It took about twenty minutes to decide on a place to eat. The trio didn't mind; in fact, they explored with excitement on their faces.

The restaurant they'd carefully picked was an expensive, Japanese-style establishment. Mira was drawn by the katsudon, Wallenstein was excited to treat himself to soba for the first time in a while, and Liliella's eyes sparkled at the anmitsu parfait and other sweets.

They sat in a tatami room and relaxed after they ordered. When Liliella was told she'd have to wait until dessert to have her anmitsu parfait, she decided to order soba like Wallenstein.

They chatted idly while the waiter placed their order. Their conversation ranged from differences in prices in different regions, to the difficulty of obtaining certain

medicines, to the people each had met along the way. Mira also reported to Wallenstein that she'd given some of the stones and threads to Kagura and Solomon.

Even after they received their food, the conversation continued to flow. They talked at length about Wallenstein's comrades, the state of affairs in each country they'd visited so far, mutual friends they'd run into, and more. They finally had time to relax and chat.

Liliella seemed to know about the former players' situations as well, so she listened intently to their conversation. She occasionally asked questions, prompting Mira to proudly puff out her chest and tell all her old war stories. Wallenstein would occasionally interject along the lines of, "I remember it a little differently..."

Dinner proceeded, and the conversation naturally moved to the dark demon Katiella. Once Kagura's investigation was finished tomorrow, Wallenstein and Liliella would capture and seal her as planned.

Sealing demons' powers had to be done both without struggle and without being noticed. As they talked, they noted that Wasranel's powers would be extremely helpful in that regard.

"I wish I could keep helping, but I have plans tomorrow," said Mira. "My apologies."

Mira had planned to leave for Roslein in the morning. She could have Wasranel help Wallenstein out if they weren't too far apart, but the distance between the cities would make that impossible. Due to the rules of summoning, the spirit of stealth would be unable to use his powers to the fullest.

The foundations of summoning included a barrier that protected the summon and a means of forcefully dismissing them. However, this required the use of the summoner's mana.

"Oh, it's no problem. You helped us find Felicia... You've done more than enough. We can handle the rest ourselves. Prioritize your own work, Mira," Wallenstein reassured her. He added, "Here I was, thinking it would take weeks to find her." The information network he'd mentioned before was still in development, so he greatly appreciated her connections with the Guild Union and Kagura.

"Hrmm, very well. If you need anything, make sure you tell me."

"Thank you. I'm grateful for your help."

They left the topic of dark demons and moved on to discussing the other Wise Men. Though most of this conversation was dominated by Mira grumbling, "What in the world are they up to?"

When they finished dinner, the anmitsu parfaits were brought out. Mira savored hers; she had a major sweet tooth. Wallenstein mused about how long it had been since he last had red bean paste. Liliella simply treated this as her main course—she devoured it in the blink of an eye.

CHAPTER 13

AFTER ENJOYING her dinner, Mira headed to the bath to wash away the day's fatigue. Since she'd come here with Wallenstein and Liliella today, Wallenstein was on the other side of the partition. Naturally, Liliella tagged along with the pint-sized summoner.

"Mira, Mira! Tell me more about Wally!" she pleaded, taking any opportunity to gather intelligence on her savior.

"Hrmm, very well. Then how about I tell you about the time we fought Grand Caecus, Lord of Fiends?"

Mira shared her stories of the past. No doubt Liliella was *actually* more interested in what sorts of things Wallenstein liked and what he favored in women. But Mira's stories were colored with heroism and living legends, and the demon girl soon found herself drawn in by them. To someone who'd never experienced battle, they sounded tremendously heroic.

Mira talked until the two were starting to get light-headed, so they got out of the bath. Mira changed into a simple after-bath dress, but Liliella hadn't brought any casual clothes with her. Mira retrieved an unused article of clothing from her Item Box and handed it over.

"This is a replica of the robes worn by the hero Danblf," she bragged.

"Ooh. Now I can be a One-Man Army, too!" Liliella gleefully donned the robe. After sneaking some details about summoning—and her past identity—into the conversation about Wallenstein, Mira had successfully won the girl over to Team Danblf.

When they left the changing room, Wallenstein was waiting outside. "Hey, I know that outfit..."

"It's a replica Wise Man's robe. She didn't have any clothes for getting out of the bath, so I gifted it to her." It was merely a kind gesture; Mira had no ulterior motive, of course. She pointed out that Wallenstein's hair was still wet. It turned out he hadn't

learned any of the Ethereal Arts people used for everyday tasks. The man spent so much time with light demons and so little time with human beings that he hadn't been keeping up with the trends.

It was true that Wallenstein never had been very interested in talking to others beyond his friend group.

"As introverted as ever, I see." Grinning, Mira used Ethereal Arts to dry his hair. "While we're at it, I might as well teach you how to do it. From now on, you can dry Liliella's hair."

"Thank you. I'll do that."

A smile lit up Liliella's face. This small gesture from Mira confirmed that she'd noticed the light demon's little crush.

They moved to Wallenstein and Liliella's room, where Mira casually took a paid drink from the minibar and taught Wallenstein a few other useful spells. After confirming that he could use them, the now-tipsy summoner returned to her own room.

"Mm... It feels good to do nice things for people."

She'd helped a bit with Liliella's crush and taught her friend some convenient magic. Satisfied by her exploits, Mira sank into bed and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Mira invited the pair to breakfast. After discussing future plans and making small talk over fancy-looking French toast, Mira finally said goodbye to Wallenstein and Liliella at the front door of the Epicurean Excess. As planned, the duo would check in with Isuzu regarding the investigation. Once they'd captured the dark demon Katiella, they would begin sealing her powers.

Mira prayed for their success, climbed onto Pegasus, and headed toward Irene, capital of Roslein.

Two hours later, Mira touched down at the storage complex formerly owned by Melville Commerce. It was in Roslein's territory, which technically put it under Ebates control. However, due to the many Chimera Clausen-related items found here, the whole place was currently locked down on church orders. Investigators employed by the church were busily taking stock of the area.

A woman was waiting at the entrance as planned. This was Louise, the international legal affairs official who'd worked with Scorpion and Snake to expose Melville Commerce.

"Miss Mira, I presume? I've been expecting you. Come right this way."

"Hrmm. Let's get this over with swiftly."

Mira had come all this way because Louise needed Mira's help for what she was about to do next. They entered the compound and headed straight for the hidden entrance to the War-Torn Burial Ground.

"Thank you so much for accommodating us today."

"Honestly, I was curious about this myself."

Louise's position afforded her a high level of respect. When the busy investigators saw her, they stopped what they were doing and bowed deeply. Mira walked boldly alongside her to the building where the War-Torn Burial Ground's entrance was hidden.

Several days ago, a problem had arisen with regard to the catacombs: how to deal with the black mist ore.

The church was divided into two camps. One side believed that anything that endangered spirits had to be dealt with permanently, while the other believed that the ore's possible utility outweighed the danger. The latter wanted to research its useful purposes. A major debate still raged on among the higher-ups in the church, threatening to break into full-on factional fighting.

Louise had panicked at the appearance of something that could shake the church. She'd brought her concerns up to Scorpion and Snake, who'd passed them on to Kagura, who informed Mira of the issue. Mira had already been thinking about how to best deal with the ore in order to fulfill her promise to the Spirit King, so she'd come running.

From the start, Louise had sided with those who wanted to dispose of the substance. She happily latched on to Mira's proposal, and her colleagues joined in as witnesses. Together, they had one job: to confirm that Mira had purified all of the black mist ore in the Spirit King's name, and to testify so to the church. The church already knew of

the Spirit King's appearance in Sentopoli, though they believed that the summoner known as Mira had summoned him with her own power.

"Let us begin. Frankly, I don't know if this will succeed, so watch carefully."

Either way, it was clear that she and the Spirit King were connected. The Trinity worshipped by the church were dear friends of the Spirit King. If the spirits desired something, the church would have no choice but to obey. Furthermore, this was the Spirit King's direct wishes they were talking about. It was the perfect justification to get the outcome Louise's group wanted.

In the center of the War-Torn Burial Ground, they stood in the tower full of black mist or. There, Mira summoned Holy Sword Sanctia.

When they saw the holy sword, one of the mages couldn't help but murmur, "Divine..."

To common eyes, the sword seemed to emit a glow like faint moonlight. The mage, however, could see the bountiful spiritual power flowing from it. That was the power of the Spirit King, materializing through Mira's blessing.

"I feel incredible pressure..." The warrior-class Louise could not see it, but it seemed she *felt* its presence. She gazed at the holy sword, certain that the Spirit King existed within. The others watched in silent agreement, ready to witness whatever was about to happen.

This would be the second time Mira purified oni curses, including the cursed crystal left by the Oni Princess. But it would be different this time... Instead of purifying just one spot, Mira would try to purify the entire catacombs.

"Now, I hope this works..." she muttered.

While Mira held the sword and murmured to herself, the symbols of the king's blessing appeared all over her, and she heard a voice—the Spirit King's. "*Do not fear. Simply stab the sword into the ground at your feet, and I will handle the rest.*" Only she could hear it; the others did not react whatsoever.

"You take every opportunity to show yourself... Not that I mind." She chuckled wryly. Taking this as her cue, she threw off her coat and showed the symbols on her arms to the onlookers. She declared, "Behold the evidence of the Spirit King's blessing."

Louise opened her eyes wider in surprise and put her hands together as if in prayer. "It's true... What a wonderful pattern!"

The purification of the ore would be evidence of the Spirit King's wishes, and their testimony would add weight to that. Louise and the others bowed their heads reverently.

"Now, I plan to invoke your name. I hope you don't mind?" Mira asked the Spirit King for permission, just in case.

"Of course not. Use it as you need," he readily agreed. There was no need to hold back now.

"With the Spirit King's wishes and power, I purify this place!" Mira said dramatically. Then she stabbed the sword downward.

Instantly, rays of light shot out from the sword. They increased in volume and intensity until their surroundings were blanketed in light. The brightness was overwhelming. When black shadows emerged in the boundless white, they were snuffed out without a trace.

The light spread beyond the tower. Black shadows appeared, only to be purified by the light. Like an expanding star, the light blanketed all. Yet it was also gentle; it did not blind the onlookers, and they witnessed everything.

When the Spirit King confirmed that it was done, Mira removed the sword from the floor and turned around. "I believe that we've purified everything here."

She noticed that the onlookers' mouths were agape; apparently, the event was flashier than they'd expected.

Mira dismissed the holy sword and shook Louise's shoulder gently. "It is done. According to the Spirit King, no curses remain."

The warrior finally returned to her senses and nodded vigorously. "Thank you, Mira! That was amazing! I felt the Spirit King's power wash through me!"

Her colleagues began to exclaim as well. In the light emitted by the holy sword, they had felt the Spirit King's presence. His sheer divinity rivaled even the Trinity—they were overcome with emotion.

"Well, it seems you're popular," Mira murmured.

"I did not expect they would be so overjoyed. Ample reward for my efforts." The Spirit King's gleeful voice echoed in her mind. It seemed this was his first time purifying oni curses at such scale. He had consumed a vast amount of power to ensure their success. But thanks to that, the black mist ore had been purified in the Spirit King's name.

The results were not just because of his own power; this was a team effort between him, Holy Sword Sanctia, Mira, and the angel Tyriel who'd weakened the curses over the course of tens of thousands of years.

"I'd best go report on this matter now." Upon returning to the surface, Louise bowed and left, a proud tilt to her chin. Her colleagues seemed to feel the same way, and they left with light, jovial steps.

Mira would later learn that it held enormous meaning for people of the church to be allowed to feel the Spirit King's power and presence. The experience could advance their careers in the church greatly. Not to mention the lasting sense of joy, which would be with them forever.

Later, when Louise and her colleagues reported these events to the church officials, those who wanted the ore disposed of rejoiced at the Spirit King's appearance and decision. Those who wanted to research it withdrew their objections, deferring to his divine wisdom. Despite the squabbling, the faith underlying it all was firm.

However, tensions within the church would not fade forever, Louise noted with a sardonic grin when she reported this to Scorpion and Snake. They couldn't get too comfortable just yet.

Ebatess Commerce—the owner of this land—played no part in the emergency prohibition of black mist ore. But CEO Urashis was relieved to have been spared the effort of dealing with this particular headache.

CHAPTER 14

THE CITY OF IRENE still contained many Chimera Clausen-related facilities that had yet to be dealt with. Once the War-Torn Burial Ground was purified, Mira worked with Scorpion and Snake to investigate these facilities one by one. Many of them still had functioning technomancy dolls within, so considerable firepower was necessary.

At sunset, Mira returned with Scorpion and Snake to the former Melville Commerce estate. After Chimera had been crushed, Ebatess Commerce bought it at a deeply discounted rate and let Isuzu use it as their largest base in the entire continent.

“Baths truly are wonderful...” Mira mused.

“Sure are!”

“Very wonderful.”

In the end, Melville’s excesses became an unexpected luxury for Isuzu. The enormous bathroom in this giant mansion was made of marble, and the faucets gleamed with silver and gold. The chandelier on the ceiling shone magnificently, adding yet another layer of extravagance.

The three girls relaxed together in the big tub. With their jobs done for the day, they’d beelined for the bath. Mira had been especially eager. Camouflaged as just another girl, she looked Scorpion and Snake up and down.

Truly... wonderful.

Scorpion was healthy and fit while Snake was unnervingly seductive. While Mira was busy appreciating her position as someone who could ogle girls as openly as she pleased, Scorpion suddenly turned to her as if she had noticed something.

Mira was shook; had she been caught? Habitual offender that she was, she managed to avert her eyes calmly and casually. There was no need for her to do so; Scorpion looked right past her.

“Hey... what do you think that is?” Scorpion pointed at something curiously.

"What?" Mira turned around to look. It was a door at the back of the bathroom, opposite from the entrance.

"Where do you think it goes?"

"Hrmm... I wonder."

A wooden door in the middle of a marble wall seemed out of place, making it even more suspicious. What was the deal? Mira and Scorpion began discussing it, but Snake stood up.

"Let's just open it."

She might have been a woman of few words, but she was just as curious. She got out of the tub and stepped toward the door.

"I'll look, too!"

"Me too."

Scorpion and Mira ran after her. They were all naked, making this the perfect peeping moment for Mira. However, she was so caught up in the secret hidden behind the door that she ran ahead of the others without even stealing a glance.

Mira grasped the doorknob and turned around to confirm with them. "Okay. I'm going to open it."

"Yep. Do it!"

"Any time."

What was hidden behind it? Scorpion and Snake tensed, as if expecting something to pop out. Once Mira was sure that they were ready, she slowly turned the knob.

"What is it?" Scorpion wondered.

"Dark," Snake deadpanned.

Their reactions didn't offer any insight, so Mira peeked inside. "Hrmm... It certainly is dark. But could it be...?"

Beyond the door was a long passage that was too dim to see down. Scorpion was a Miao; she didn't need a lot of light to see. But even she didn't know *what* exactly she was looking at.

"How about this? It ought to help." Mira lit up her Ethereal Arts: Illumination spell and looked around. Instantly, she gleefully ran in. "Ooh, ooooh! Isn't this just wonderful?!"

Despite Mira's excitement, Scorpion looked dubious, and Snake seemed to have no idea what was going on. They entered curiously, unsure of what this room was meant to be. When they saw what was inside, they were even more confused. What was Mira so wound up about?

"Hrmm. Do you mean to say you don't know what this is? And what a surprise to find it in a place like this..." Mira grinned wolfishly for a moment before finally revealing the secret of this room. "This... is a *sauna*!"

Indeed, the room beyond the wooden door was something very rare for a private individual to own. One might expect such luxury from a CEO. *At least his taste in accommodations wasn't so bad*, Mira thought to herself as she fiddled with the heater.

It was simple enough to tell how it worked, and she quickly succeeded in starting a fire.

"What's a sauna, though?" Scorpion asked Snake.

"Dunno."

It seemed Mira's explanation hadn't enlightened the girls any.

"Just wait," Mira replied with a smile as she turned up the heat.

"Are you sure that's safe...?"

"Hey, it's getting hot."

They watched Mira uneasily as the temperature in the sauna skyrocketed.

"Worry not, friends. Go on and take a seat, you'll soon understand." Mira finished adjusting the heater, plopped down on a bench, and urged the others to do the same.

"So... what does it do, though?"

"Tell us."

Though they sat, the Hidden were clearly still confused and growing increasingly annoyed. They offered Mira one more chance to explain herself.

"Well, you see..." Mira gleefully told them all about saunas and their effects—while they were also a fun pastime, they also had health and beauty benefits.

"Wow. So basically... you sweat in a hot room. And then good stuff happens?" Scorpion murmured in surprise. "Then how about we heat it up even more?" With that, she imitated Mira and began fiddling with the heater.

"Health *is* important." Snake was impressed by the sauna's effects. Her doubt had turned to interest as she gazed at the heater.

"...Say, Scorpion. Don't you think you're turning it up too much?" Mira asked.

The room temperature had climbed steadily from the moment Scorpion began her adjustments.

"It's fine. I think. I mean, I only turned it up like halfway." Scorpion stood up and pointed at the temperature control lever. Indeed, it had only been moved about halfway.

Surely that would be okay. Mira hadn't been to a sauna in a while, so maybe it just felt hotter. Instead of fretting, she decided to relax and enjoy this rare opportunity.

"Hey, Mira. What's this?" Scorpion asked after a while.

"Hm? Let me see."

On closer inspection, the heater had a hole meant for putting something in. The label next to it bore the word "Water."

Mira quickly discerned the meaning and replied, "Showing might be better than telling here," warned Scorpion to back off, and poured water into it using her Ethereal Arts.

"Aah! It just got hotter!" Scorpion's tail reflexively stood on end.

“Steam?” Snake coolly analyzed the situation. The heater hissed and began spewing fog. The temperature in the room spiked.

“Yet another means of savoring one’s sauna experience.” Mira explained that, because humidity affected how heat felt, it was important to find the perfect balance. Personally, she loved the humidity.

Indeed, *balance* was important. But Scorpion was having so much fun messing with the heater that she failed to hear. Struck by inspiration, Scorpion ran out of the room and returned with a bucket full of water. Mira didn’t notice; she laid on the bench and switched into pure comfort mode, muttering, “It warms even the soul...”

The room was filled with steam in no time.

“Whoa, hoooot!”

“You went too far.”

“Whaaaat?!”

With an anguished sound, the heater belched steam and clouded up the room. With the sudden rise in humidity, the sauna felt even hotter than it had before. Scorpion panicked, lost her balance, and fell onto Mira, who was still laying on her back.

“Oops! A-cups... Is that you, Mira?”

“Yes. Can you get off of me?”

While Scorpion squeezed Mira’s breasts, the summoner sat up and cursed Eros for not reversing the situation. When she spotted the bucket lying next to the heater, she quickly understood what had happened.

“You went all out, didn’t you?” Mira asked.

The blinding cloud lasted only a short time, and Scorpion’s naked body was soon in full view again. But the humidity remained high; she was sweating bullets.

“Umm, Snake said she wanted it hotter—” Scorpion began.

“I did not.”

"But it feels nice now, right?" she demanded. She then sat back down as if nothing had happened and quietly muttered, "Sooo hot..."

"Good grief..." Mira chuckled to herself. There was always someone like Scorpion at the saunas she'd been to. When she looked at her friends, her eyes went wide in shock.

The sudden rise in humidity had caused an outpouring of sweat. Not just for Mira, but for Scorpion and Snake too, who now looked more seductive than ever.

Long live saunas!

She may have lost the perfectly balanced temperature... but forget the health benefits! This was what *really* reminded Mira of just how wonderful saunas were. She hit upon an evil scheme to up the ante.

While it wasn't healthy to exert oneself in a sauna, there was one thing that was a time-honored tradition.

"I forgot! Did you know that saunas are also used for tests of endurance?" Mira mentioned it as if she'd just happened to remember it.

"Ooh, really? I'm pretty confident in my endurance," Scorpion bragged.

"This is nothing," Snake replied with perfect composure.

They'd fallen for it immediately. The plan could not fail—their auras seemed to change out of nowhere; they were in competition mode.

"Do not think you can easily best an experienced sauna-goer such as myself." Mira smirked and stared at Scorpion and Snake.

Somehow even Mira's competitive nature was awakened from its slumber. She'd set this up for the eye candy, but she soon found that victory would be sweeter.

* * *

"C'mon. You're basically at your limit, right? Go ahead and leave," Scorpion urged.

"Scorpion, your face is saying, 'I can't take anymore,'" Snake disagreed.

"I am just getting started!" Mira boasted.

Fifteen minutes into the test of endurance, the trio acted calm and collected, but they were *all* far past their limit. None of them dared stand up. It seemed all of them were in it to win it. They looked back and forth between each other, waiting for the others to show a hint of weakness.

They really are just like ninjas. Scorpion has impressive endurance. Perhaps I should aim for Snake. Even she's starting to buckle under this heat.

Mira eyed them both carefully. Based on how much Scorpion was sweating, she was clearly suffering. But her determined expression was unwavering. Meanwhile, the usually emotionless Snake was clearly struggling to withstand the heat.

Now, this... this is marvelous!

The moment she saw the look on Snake's face, resolve surged in Mira's heart once more. Hadn't this been her goal all along?

Mira began to gaze at Scorpion and Snake in utter silence with a serious look in her eyes. They, understandably, believed Mira's sudden silence was due to her being close to her limit. Unfortunately, seeing someone else's limits only made them more vividly aware of their own.

Scorpion and Snake began to realize that they didn't have much left in them. Mira was driven by lust rather than her tolerance to the heat. She noticed the lack of composure on Scorpion's face and felt her own limit approaching. At the same time, she glanced at Snake. Faced with her ample bosom, Mira spoke her greatest desire: "I want milk... coffee milk when we get out." The lewdness of the comment went right over the girls' heads, but it did cause Scorpion and Snake to waver.

By this point, it had become less of a test of endurance and more of a battle of stubbornness. Just then, they heard the sound of a bell from afar. Seven chimes. Scorpion's ears perked up as she declared, "Oh, it's almost dinner time!"

Thirty minutes from now, at 7:30 p.m., they would be treated to an exquisite meal made by a chef from Ebatesse Commerce. His repertoire was reportedly vast, and they could order most anything their hearts desired.

"...I think I'll ask him for coffee milk," Mira murmured to herself.

Scorpion and Snake agreed. It was then that their hearts, previously steeled by fierce competition, began to melt in the heat.

The three looked at each other. Finally, Scorpion said, “So we’re all hungry, right?”

“Food is best when it’s still hot,” Snake added.

“Indeed. We mustn’t keep everyone waiting.”

This new Isuzu Alliance base had a rule: everyone ate dinner together, as a way of making information sharing easier.

Each made an excuse for exiting the sauna that didn’t involve admitting defeat, and they unanimously decided to call it a draw. Delicious food was waiting for them. And post-bath coffee milk too. The trio excitedly moved toward the exit.

“Hot! Hot! Hot!” Scorpion ran out of the sauna, screaming the same word over and over again.

“So sweaty...”

“Saunas are meant to be enjoyed in moderation...”

Snake and Mira followed along behind the Miao.

The bath chamber was still humid and warm. Scorpion and Snake were comfortable—but it felt chilly compared to the sauna. Mira, however, knew that a sauna experience did not end the moment one left the room.

Urgh! I don’t see it! On closer inspection, this room only had baths full of hot water; it didn’t contain the pool of icy water she sought. *Seriously? You went through the effort to build a sauna in your home, and you didn’t bother with the cold plunge?!*

Deprived of the finishing touch and left in the heat, Mira looked all around in confusion. She spotted a big shower next to the sauna door.

“There we go!” Ah... So this place uses a shower, rather than a pool. She ran over and twisted the lever. Icy water rained down, soothing her burning body. “Brrrrr... that hits the spot...” Water flowed down her stressed body, washing the sweat away with it. It felt amazing as she shivered beneath it.

“Aww, no fair! I wanna shower, too!”

Hearing Mira’s elated voice, Scorpion quickly jumped into the shower with her. It was close quarters; the shower had been designed for just one person. Yet the Hidden still squeezed in with the small summoner.

“Wait your turn!” Mira pushed back, even as she was nearly shoved out of the shower. Scorpion didn’t give up; she fought for the opportunity to cool her overheated body. It was like two opposing athletes struggling to reach the goal.

“Seems nice.” Snake decided to join in. They’d all endured past their limits in the sauna, adding desperation to the battle for the shower.

“Ah! Snake, don’t push!”

Snake squeezed in from in front of Mira and moaned under the shower water, “Feels nice, too.”

Meanwhile, Scorpion had been totally pushed out. She shoved her way back in, hoping to retake her territory.

“I was here... first...” Mira struggled. As they pushed each other back and forth in the shower, she ended up stuck between Scorpion and Snake. Since the two Hidden were both taller than her, this greatly reduced the amount of water she received—however, she soon realized she was being exposed to another sensation.

“Goodness...”

She was sandwiched front and back, in contact with an alarming amount of skin. Mira’s whole body was covered by Scorpion and Snake. The heat began to rise once more.

Bare skin before her eyes, body heat enveloping her body. The dripping water, the friction. While Mira was violently shaken back and forth by their struggle, she experienced bliss as she ascended to heaven.

“Paradise...”

But once their heads had cooled a little, the three realized something. There were other smaller showers nearby. The first shower outputted the most water, but it was more efficient to use the others rather than keep fighting over the one.

The trio laughed sheepishly at their simultaneous realization. Maybe the heat had addled their brains, or maybe their competitive spirits were still aflame; whatever the case, they'd been fighting for no reason at all.

Soon, they were refreshed and dressing in the changing room.

"Ah, I just realized we left the heater on." Mira recalled now that they'd run out of the sauna without turning it off.

When she turned around to go back and take care of the heater, Scorpion stopped her. "I'll take care of it!" She was still buck-naked, as she'd forgotten her change of clothes in her room. The clothes she'd worn were already in the laundry, so she was out of luck. "Just make sure you bring me something to wear, Snake. Okay?"

"Mira, you go to dinner ahead of us," Snake added.

"Mm, very well. I'll order three servings of coffee milk."

On their way out of the changing room, Mira and Snake said goodbye and each went their own ways. Mira went to the cafeteria, while Snake went to Scorpion's room.

Back in the sauna, as Scorpion twisted the temperature control lever, she realized something.

"Whoa... We were right below maximum power..."

The lever pointed at the halfway point, naturally leading one to assume that it was at half power. But the lever could be turned three whole rotations, and it took her two-and-a-half spins to the left to shut it down. One more half turn to the right, and it would have been on full blast.

"No wonder..." Scorpion wiped away the sweat that was already forming on her brow. She decided to keep this little tidbit to herself.

CHAPTER 15

MIRA HELPED with the investigation into Chimera facilities for a week, until the bases in and around Roslein had mostly been dealt with. She purified all the gear they found, bringing her work to a pause for now.

“I wonder how Wallenstein is doing.”

In a room in Isuzu’s biggest base, Mira kicked back after a job well done. The sudden calm after many days of on the go gave her an opportunity to cast her mind back to Wallenstein and Liliella. Had they managed to find the dark demon hiding in Sentopoli?

“Well, I suppose I can ask tomorrow.”

Sentopoli still had some Chimera hideouts to investigate and gear needing purification. Mira was due to return the next day.

As she was thinking, Scorpion called out, “Miraaa! Let’s go take a bath.”

Bathing together had become a daily routine for the trio.

“Sure. Let’s go,” Mira replied, stood up, and collected her clothes and towel. Scorpion and Snake waited by the door. Mira smirked at the clothes in Scorpion’s arm. “Oh, you remembered them this time.”

“C’mom. I wouldn’t do that more than once.” Scorpion showed off her change of clothes proudly. Actually, she’d forgotten her change of clothes three times so far.

But as she boasted of her success today, she was betrayed. “She did forget, but we went back before we invited you,” Snake revealed as she rolled her eyes.

Perhaps because they knew each other so well now, or perhaps due to a change in herself, Snake was much more expressive these days.

Scorpion’s pride immediately turned into rage. “Traitor! Why’d you tell her?!”

“Because it’s true.”

When they arrived at the bath, someone was already there. It was Fox, a girl immediately recognizable by her deep-green hair. She was the one who’d summoned the shikigami Nyanmaru.

“Oh, Mira!” Fox greeted her. “I hear today is your last day? Thanks for all your hard work.”

Mira had spent quite a bit of time working in the same base as Fox and shared many meals with her. Besides Scorpion and Snake, Fox was the Hidden who Mira knew the best.

“Indeed. Tomorrow, I get back to cleaning up in Sentopoli,” Mira answered as she stepped into the shower. When she was done, she walked straight over to the bath and stretched out without reserve.

“Sentopoli, huh? I hear they found a mysterious underground room there three days ago,” Fox said.

“So they say. Supposedly, it was part of the Oni Princess’s scheme to turn humans into oni.”

The Oni Princess’s true purpose was to resurrect onikind. Since said room was made for that, it was a top priority to secure. Yesterday, it was decided that Mira would help investigate and purify it.

“They were gonna force the people of Sentopoli to become oni, right?” Scorpion chimed in. “Man, I’m glad we took care of them before they could.”

“We did well,” Snake agreed.

They smiled proudly as they stepped into the bath. Mira and Fox nodded in agreement; they had all done a good job.

After enjoying the bath and sauna to the fullest, they got dressed in the changing room.

“And as I recall, you all were planning to go to the Ark continent?” Mira asked.

The Hidden were divided evenly between Sentopoli and Roslein, and the group

currently assigned to Roslein would go with the international legal affairs official to the Ark continent once things were finished here. The Ark continent was dangerous, with powerful monsters. Former players only went there once they were experienced.

"Yep, that's right. It's my first time going, too, so I'm excited!" Scorpion looked like a child about to go on a field trip.

Snake and Fox agreed; it seemed they were excited as well. Their lust for adventure was written on their faces.

"Then take this. Call it a parting gift." Mira put down her change of clothes and took a small vial out of her Item Box.

"What is it?" Scorpion ran over to look, gazing at Mira's hand with expectant eyes. "Huh, what is this? Some kind of medicine?" She cocked her head. Snake and Fox were lured over by her curiosity, though they were equally confused by the strange item.

"This is Water of Life. Take it with you, just in case." Mira had casually offered them the strongest restorative that she owned. It was an extremely powerful medicine that could bring a person from near-death to full vitality in no time. These vials were a remnant of preparations for a large-scale raid back in the game era. She'd seen the power of the Hidden for herself, so she was sure they wouldn't lose to the monsters of the Ark continent. Still, better safe than sorry. She also had quite a few on hand, so she decided to share the wealth.

Mira spoke of it like it was just a friendly gift, but the Hidden were speechless. After a moment, they began to stammer in bewilderment.

"Huh? Wha...?"

"Could it be...?"

"Is this real? It is... Wow. Wow!"

Back in Ark Earth Online, one of Mira's friends had spent her time perfecting potion generation. Mira had placed bulk orders for the Water of Life, and these were higher quality than most people would ever encounter. There were very few alchemists around these days who could make it. And due to the effects of this world becoming reality, their prices had skyrocketed. The Hidden's jaws dropped.

Even Scorpion, who'd leapt at the parting gift at first, shrank back. "Uh, we really can't..."

Snake and Fox were stiff from shock. They tried to turn Mira down; this gift was far too expensive for them to accept.

However, Mira added with a wry grin, "Come, now. I'm a bit of a worrywart."

"Okay. We really appreciate the thought, Mira." Finally accepting Mira's feelings, Scorpion smiled and gingerly took the Water of Life. Snake and Fox managed to regain their senses and thanked Mira for her generosity.

Then Mira retrieved a second one from her Item Box and held it out toward Snake. Mira's parting gift was meant to be one per person. She even gave them more for the people who weren't there, trusting Scorpion to pass them on in her stead.

Snake and Fox were speechless. Scorpion smiled nervously as she accepted vial after vial of Water of Life.

Having finished her business in Roslein, Mira ate breakfast with everyone and said her goodbyes before departing for Sentopoli.

Before she left, she received parting gifts from everyone; it seemed they wanted to return the favor for yesterday. They were all heartfelt gifts; the feelings behind them made them priceless.

"Stay healthy, friends."

"Yep. You too, Mira."

"Goodbye."

Finally, Mira hugged her closest friends here, Scorpion and Snake, and the trio parted with smiles. Mira jumped onto Pegasus and flew away. As Irene faded into the distance, Scorpion and Snake shrank to the size of ants. They'd meet again someday in this vast world. Looking forward to their future reunion, Mira gazed at the boundless sky and smiled.

* * *

Soon, Mira landed in Sentopoli and busied herself with work. She was the only one who could purify the oni curses, so it was natural that the job would fall to her. In return, she was treated like a VIP and enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle. She had no cause to be dissatisfied.

As Mira discussed her plans for the day with Kagura, the medium brought something up. "Oh, by the way. We got a report from Wallenstein."

The search Isuzu had carried out had successfully helped Wallenstein capture the dark demon Katiella. He had already begun sealing her powers, too. Within a week, she'd be back to her original state.

"Hrmm, I see. So it's going well. I suppose I can breathe a sigh of relief." Mira had braced herself to help out again, but thankfully Wallenstein was the picture of competence. Her aid was unnecessary.

* * *

A few days later, the angel Tyriel had recovered enough to walk. She was taken on the spirit airship back to Isuzu's home base. This was partially because it was the ideal place for her to recuperate, but mostly to allow her to be present for strategy discussions.

The Isuzu Alliance headquarters had bountiful information, an abundance of skilled human resources, and legendary artisans. The time had come to devise a strategy for the other catacombs.

With Tyriel's knowledge, they might be able to close the holes in the other tombs until they could be purified. Furthermore, they wanted to develop tools to detect oni curses.

* * *

Eventually, the spirit airship—which had practically become a fixture at the prime minister's residence by now—took off, and the city of Sentopoli returned to its normal state. Diverse peoples traversed its streets, filling it with a life unaffected by Chimera's influence. Over time, it became known as a city where modern heroes gathered, drawing many sightseers.

Alioth managed the country well. He encountered no problems that he couldn't solve on his own.

Back when Chimera Clausen had posed as benevolent nobles to deceive Sentopoli's government, they'd used secret codes. By obtaining these from Gregorius, Alioth had been able to seamlessly step into their place as a "benevolent noble."

The Isuzu Alliance members who had replaced the captured Chimera middle management in various parts of the city were doing their jobs well. Despite so many workers being replaced, the city was functioning perfectly. Mira was amazed at how many excellent subordinates Kagura had. Perhaps that was thanks to her natural charisma.

However, Sentopoli's new administrators placed a limit on how much spirit power could be used. Since all of Sentopoli's lights and streetlamps used spirit power, this meant that the city couldn't be bright and busy all night as it had been in the old days.

Spirits in cooperation with Isuzu continued to lend their power during the busy hours, but they couldn't be relied on indefinitely. Work began to replace the streetlights, starting in the busy downtown. These expenses were paid for using the funds that Chimera Clausen had hoarded. Their headquarters and bases had abundant reserves of cash.

The city of Sentopoli was slowly but surely reborn as a place that didn't rely on captive spirits' power. Someday, Isuzu would let it walk on its own two legs—but that was still a long way off.

* * *

A few more days passed while Mira focused on investigating and purifying the facilities around Sentopoli. Finally, her work was done...

Early in the morning, Mira left the inn and ran into Écarlate Carillon, who stood in the midst of a merchant caravan. "Ah. You all were planning to leave today, as I recall?"

"We actually meant to leave sooner. But given the circumstances, we had to delay our departure," Cyril replied.

"Yeah. Seeing you at the very last minute, that's gotta be destiny!" Zef added.

While the merchants busily checked their cargo, Mira chatted with the guild—save for Flicker, whom Emella was heroically restraining a short distance away. Cyril and his guild were going to return the way they'd come—alongside this caravan. The

merchants had asked for round-trip service. For two weeks after their return to Karanak, they'd be teaching the kids there swordplay and magic before heading north.

"Oho. Instructing the younger generation?" Mira said, bringing a smile to Zef's face.

Once Flicker had started teaching Tact, the kids had started gathering. Cyril explained that, before long, the first floor of Karanak's Mages' Guild had turned into a cram school run by adventurers.

"We don't pay out a single reward to teachers, but somehow, someone's always there teaching. Bunch of weirdos, right?" Asval chuckled.

"I guess that makes you a weirdo, too," Emella shot back. "You're always making teaching materials."

Exposed, Asval blushed and stammered, "J-just a way of passing the time!"

"Still, I didn't expect to receive such a lovely gift." Changing the subject, Cyril stroked the pure-white sword hanging from his hip and smiled. "Mira, if you meet her again, would you mind thanking her for me?"

The night before the final battle, Kagura had handed out Alabaster Oni-Slayer weapons meant to counteract Chimera's gear. Once it was over, she'd allowed Cyril's guild to keep theirs as a reward. They were top-class weapons created by the greatest living alchemist and greatest living blacksmith. Besides being overwhelmingly strong against weapons made with black mist ore, they had no other special traits—but they were abnormally sharp and sturdy. And given the inscription of their creator, they could easily be worth billions.

Yet Kagura had simply *given* them away. Cyril was surprised by this, but Emella was overwhelmed.

"Thank her for me too! I'll treasure it forever! And thank Dvalin, as well, please!" Emella writhed ecstatically, remembering the joy of the moment. She wore a brand-new sash, bearing two sheathed swords. One was her Alabaster Oni-Slayer sword, and the other was the demonic sword she'd commissioned from Gregor. Zef grumbled that her twofold joy had resulted in reckless behavior.

"Stop... I give up," Flicker groaned. In Emella's arms, she slumped over with an agonized look on her face. It seemed the sword-lover had started squeezing her even

harder as she became overwhelmed with emotion. Emella quickly let go, and the mage slumped to the ground.

Then, with blinding speed, Flicker looked up and dashed forward until her face was buried in Mira's chest.

"Mmmmir!"

A combination of Mira's guard being down and Flicker's terrifying obsession made it impossible for the summoner to evade. She was like putty in her fellow mage's hands. On closer inspection, there was a tiny vial where Flicker had fallen before. Some kind of stimulant, it seemed. By quaffing it, she'd recovered from her half-dead state in the blink of an eye.

"I'll treasure it! Especially since we match now!" Flicker was even more intense than usual after being held back for so long. The white staff at her hip might have been shorter than Mira's, but it was the same style and shape. Indeed, they matched.

Some of the merchants watched the commotion curiously, but they all seemed to know what kind of person Flicker was. They looked at Mira sympathetically and then got back to work.

Seemingly satisfied with this session of Mira-loving, Flicker retained the blissful look on her face even when Emella savagely karate-chopped her and peeled her off of the poor summoner.

Mira fixed her disheveled clothes and grinned wryly. "I didn't think she'd be able to manage that." Flicker never changed... except for the worse.

At last, it was time for the caravan to leave.

"Well, this is goodbye, Mira. I hope we meet again someday," Cyril said.

"Bye, Mira!" Emella added. "If you see Dvalin again, could you get his autograph—"

"Later! I mean, we're definitely gonna run into each other again, anyway," Zef joked.

"Stay safe, little miss," Asval chimed in. "Things will be busy for you, but keep an eye on your health."

“Oh, Mira... Parting is such sweet sorrow. But at least I have this now!”

Flicker flashed a beaming smile that overcame all of her so-called sorrow and raised her hand. What she held was not the staff that matched Mira’s; it was a single lock of silky, silver hair. It seemed she’d snatched it while she was attached to Mira.

“Take care of yourselves, friends.” Mira shook her head in exasperation and saw off the caravan.

* * *

“It’s about time I get going, too.”

A few hours after Écarlate Carillon’s departure, Mira disguised herself and strolled around the city of Sentopoli. After enjoying herself one last time, she began preparing to go home.

Along the way, she visited a large building that used to be a Melville Commerce facility. Now property of the Sentopoli government, it was being used as the new Isuzu branch office. She had come with rather simple business: saying goodbye to Kagura and reminding her to come home eventually. This, however, turned out to be a mistake.

“So, Gramps... You got preeetty close with my elites, huh?”

Mira was greeted by ominous words. She went pale in an instant and sat as directed. It seemed Kagura had caught wind of Mira’s bathing and use of the sauna with the Hidden every day. Mira couldn’t deny her ulterior motives. It had been her own private paradise. She didn’t bother to refute the truth as she silently accepted Kagura’s scolding.

Though it began with a lecture, the two managed to say their goodbyes. From there, Mira returned to the parking lot of Epicurean Excess.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” She’d left her wagon in the inn’s care for some time, but thanks to the cleaning fee being included in the parking fee, her transport was spotless.

Mira summoned Garuda and asked it to take her home. She got herself settled in the wagon. It was then that Tweetsuke, who was perched atop her head, alighted onto the kotatsu.

Kagura had sent Tweetsuke with her when Mira reminded the medium to come home eventually. When it came to the question of exactly when that might be, Kagura believed she should discuss it with Solomon directly. So she sent her familiar with Mira, and she would switch places with Tweetsuke when they arrived.

The wagon, now containing one summoner and one bird, gradually rose into the air. Perhaps because of the rarity of a flying wagon, or perhaps because Mira was so famous now, the whole of Sentopoli watched its departure as if they were seeing off a hero.

CHAPTER 16

ON HER WAY back to Alcait, Mira took the rare opportunity to relax in the wagon. But just as she was getting comfy, the communicator began to ring.

Mira begrudgingly stood, opened the closet, and put the device to her ear. “Yes, yes... What now?”

“Ooh, you finally picked up!” Solomon’s relieved—if impatient—voice came through. “You weren’t sleeping, were you? It’s midday.”

“I was resting. You’ve already heard everything, I presume? I’ve been busy dealing with the fallout and cleanup of this whole affair.” Mira flopped onto the futon in the closet and let her limbs fall limply at her sides. She looked extremely slovenly; her short dress was hiked up so much that her butt was peeking out.

“Yep, I’ve heard. Sounds like you’ve been putting in some real elbow grease. And you even summoned the Spirit King? Nice. You’re really making a name for yourself.”

“He summoned himself. But thanks to *you*, I’m a celebrity now.”

The declaration of victory from atop the spirit airship was all Solomon’s idea. It was his way of creating a public justification for Mira to succeed Danblf as the Wise Man of Summoning. Mira didn’t appreciate being suddenly thrust onto the stage.

“Now, now. It’ll be good for you in the long run. Keep up the good work, ’kay?” Solomon’s voice was earnest, not teasing. He truly did think it was for the best.

Mira had no rebuttal; she replied curtly, “Yes, I know.” She then asked, “So what now? I assume that isn’t why you’re calling. What do you want? I’ve finally got a little time to relax, and here you go ringing my phone again. Good grief.”

“Sorry about that. Can I ask you for one last favor? It’s easy work: I just need you to get a document from Ebates for me. I’ve already told them, so if you pop by, they’ll hand it right over and you can be on your way.”

Solomon didn’t hesitate to dole out chores. He’d already volunteered her for this, and

she couldn't refuse.

"A document, hrmm?" Mira murmured self-importantly. Though it was an annoying request, she wasn't about to say no. It was a sort of ritual between them for her to play stubborn.

"It's an important certificate to wrap up our diplomatic agreement. Please? I promise, I'll treat you to all your favorite foods."

"...Hrmm. I'll hold you to that."

"Of course. Thanks! I'll be waiting."

After Solomon's pleased voice burbled through the receiver, the connection was cut off. Mira had extracted a promise for treats, and Solomon had a good grasp of her favorite foods. Excited by the prospects of the royal kitchen's best, she put down the communicator.

"Well, off to Ebates!" Mira dragged herself out of the closet and ordered Garuda to change course for Roslein while enjoying the scenery below.

While they slowly changed course, Mira gazed upon the mountains towering in the distance and wondered, *Is that it? I think Chimera Clausen HQ was around there.*

* * *

The Ebates Commerce home location in Roslein had an enormous compound behind the store, with many buildings surrounding the CEO's mansion. This was where all of the business's departments, facilities, and employees resided. From the sky, it looked like a small town unto itself.

Garuda carried Mira's wagon over the small city and landed directly on the plaza in front of the property. The compound must have already been informed of Mira's grand entrance. While some onlookers had gathered, there was no panicked commotion.

When Mira exited the wagon, a well-dressed maid greeted her, "Miss Mira? We've been expecting you. Come this way; the CEO is ready to meet you."

"Very well," Mira said curtly and returned Tweetsuke to the wagon to wait.

She followed the maid into the mansion. The interior was more understated than gaudy, demonstrating the taste of the person living within. Mira was escorted to the third floor. When the maid announced her arrival, a cheerful man's voice came from inside the room. The maid opened the door and ushered her inside.

"Pleasure to meet you, Miss Mira. I'm Urashis Teles Ebates, Ebates's CEO. I look forward to working with you."

It all happened suddenly. Urashis stood up as soon as she entered the room, seizing her right hand and offering a genial greeting.

"Ah, er, right. It is a pleasure to meet you too." His sharp gaze seemed to drag the words from Mira's mouth. Were all skilled merchants like this?

Unlike the rest of his mansion, Urashis was dressed extravagantly. Though he was surely reaching old age by now, he was taut and muscular, showing no signs of deterioration. His large build helped him look bigger than his average height might lead one to expect.

"Imagine my surprise when I learned that the famous successor-to-be was a friend of a dear friend. Hah, I'm a lucky man. It's an honor to meet you." He flashed a heartfelt smile and finally released Mira's hand. The "dear friend" he spoke of must have been Solomon. Mira understood that much, but the rest prompted her to cock her head in confusion.

"Famous? Successor-to-be? What do you mean?" Mira asked back.

Urashis had a thoughtful, confused look on his face for a moment before murmuring, "Aha, so it is true that you have trouble realizing when you're the talk of the town. Though personally, I notice quickly when people are talking about *me*." For merchants, rumors were assets that could greatly influence profits. As someone sensitive to such talk, he couldn't comprehend how Mira could be so clueless.

"What have you heard about me, then?"

"If you're so curious, let's have a nice chat." Urashis took a book from his bookshelf and began telling the story of the Hero-King Forsetia.

Long ago, around the time the king of monsters appeared, there appeared a little girl. Her name was Forsetia, and she bore the Spirit King's blessing. She used the power of

the spirits to fight valiantly for humanity, and was beloved by mankind. At the conclusion of the story, having achieved many exploits in battle, Forsetia finally used the power of the Spirit King to defeat the king of monsters and became a legendary hero.

“According to the rumors, you’ve received a blessing from the Spirit King as well. And summoners can summon spirits, can’t they? You defeated the great evil that was Chimera Clausen. Add all of that together, and you’ve become something of a modern Hero-King Forsetia. Understand?”

Urashis excitedly finished his explanation, opened the book to the final page, and placed it on the table. On it was an illustration of Forsetia, a beautiful knight, alongside another illustration of the Spirit King. Their depiction of Forsetia was overflowing with... *feminine* charm. That alone made Mira doubtful that she could live up to the legend. But Urashis was not the kind of man to focus on that.

“I *thought* I was getting a little popular these days, but this is why...?”

In the days after the Spirit King’s sudden appearance, Mira had begun to notice a lot more eyes on her. But she’d believed it was only temporary interest from standing out during the declaration of victory. If what Urashis said was true, then her fame was far greater than she’d imagined.

While she understood the reason now, she still grimaced at the trouble it would bring.

“Ah, right, I was meant to hand you the document. Apologies. Old age is catching up with me.” Urashis abruptly turned around and picked up a sealed envelope the size of a certificate from atop his desk. He turned back to Mira and offered it with a sincere look.

“Oh, no worries at all.” Mira had only come on a menial errand, so she accepted it casually and carefreely.

Hm, so this is the document Solomon mentioned. What a gaudy sealed envelope, though...

The thing was thoroughly shut with three wax seals, each bearing a different symbol. The front was adorned with a gold print of Roslein’s national crest. Mira finished examining the envelope. While she did find it a little too gaudy for her tastes, she shoved it into her Item Box regardless. Solomon’s request was fulfilled.

"Duly received. I'll just be going—" she declared in an attempt to make a quick exit.

"Ah, apologies, Miss Mira. Could I ask for your signature?" Urashis snatched a square, white plate from his drawer, circled around Mira in a hurry, and offered it to her with a pen.

Given Solomon's involvement in this, it must be a very important document indeed. Naturally, a signature would be required to accept it.

"Oh. Of course. Right. How silly of me to forget." Mira accepted the pen, murmured, "Received," and signed it in the very center.

Urashis checked the signature, held out a piece of ink-stained cotton, and added, "And your thumbprint, please."

"Why not? Is right here okay?" Mira obeyed, dipped her thumb into the ink, and held it next to her signature. Once she had the CEO's approval, she pressed her thumb down firmly. "Will this do?"

The white plate now bore Mira's signature and thumbprint. Urashis gave her a cloth to wipe her thumb and gazed at the plate in excitement for a moment before turning serious again.

"Yes, that's just fine. Sorry to keep you."

"I will ensure that this is delivered," Mira said firmly.

Urashis took the cloth back, shook Mira's hand again, and replied, "Thank you."

The handoff was completed, and the small errand accomplished. Mira left the room thinking about all the foods she'd be treated to.

Now alone in the CEO's office, the head of Ebatess Commerce gingerly placed the white plate *and* the cloth Mira had wiped her finger on into a frame.

"Successor of the Hero-King. I know you'll be a major figure someday. Oh, what a collector's item this will be. This calls for a celebratory drink!"

He went into another room beyond his office, stood in front of a large shelf, and embraced the frame with a smile as innocent as a child's. The shelf was packed full of

keepsakes signed by famous adventurers and generals.

"And I will not be washing my hands for the rest of the day!" He placed Mira's autograph among the others, recalling the touch of her fingers on his right hand. His eyes showed no sign of joking—only a burning will.

Urashis Teles Ebates, a man who admired and wanted to be like the heroes, had a strong sense of justice and a firm determination never to fold before evil. He was truly the kind of man to earn Solomon's respect.

However, his virtue bordered on vice. He sometimes asked the impossible of the people in his firm. Fortunately, the would-be victim had escaped danger... this time.

* * *

After leaving the mansion, Mira summoned Garuda and boarded the wagon again. Just as she was about to lift off, she heard someone calling her from afar: "...ra... Mira... Miiiraaa!"

"What now?!" Mira muttered and poked her head out of the wagon again. She spotted a man running madly in her direction with a bag slung over his shoulder and a large package on his back. Mira had wanted to duck back into the wagon reflexively, but when she caught a glimpse of his face, she realized she'd met this guy before. "Oh, is that..."

"Aah... Phew... Thank goodness I... made it in time..." His clothes, hair, and breathing were ragged. This was Lenos, grandson of Urashis himself. The young man was still wheezing, but he managed a smile. "Phew... It's been a while. Well, over a month, anyway."

"Right. Thank you for caring for Scorpion and Snake back then. Can I help you?" Mira asked.

"Umm, right. I'm afraid it's kind of embarrassing, but..." Lenos replied apologetically. But his excitement was more than clear as he opened the package he'd brought.

It was a drawing board—as in, a board used to draw on. But it was totally blank at the moment, prompting Mira to cock her head in confusion. What did he mean to do with it?

Lenos held out the board, bowed deeply, and shouted, “Please sign this!”

“O-oh. *That’s* what you want.” Mira was befuddled for a moment, but she remembered something Scorpion had said before: Lenos loved heroic tales of adventure. The destruction of Chimera Clausen was the talk of both Sentopoli and Roslein. Mira was a key figure in the victory. Maybe she was more famous than she’d thought.

And as she’d heard from Urashis before, people were claiming that she might be the successor of the Hero-King. Lenos would naturally jump at the opportunity to meet someone like her.

Mira didn’t mind giving autographs, so she accepted the pen. “It’s rather... large. Where should I sign?”

“Right here, please!” Lenos replied with a beaming smile and pointed at the center of the board. Mira nodded and scribbled her signature in grandiose strokes. “Thank you so much! I’ll never let it go!”

The white drawing board now bore the name “Mira” written diagonally across the center. Lenos thanked her ecstatically, cradled it in his arms, and opened the bag slung over his shoulder. From it, he retrieved a camera as big as his head. Lenos looked as if he’d met an idol or a movie star as he begged Mira just as enthusiastically as before, “May I take a picture too?!”

“A picture, hm? Very well.”

Put in a good mood by this shower of admiration and envy, Mira pumped a fist in front of her wagon and Garuda as she struck a pose.

“Thank you, thank you! That’s incredible, Miss Mira!”

Lenos readied his camera and showered her with praise, snapping pictures one after another from angles both normal and questionable. Egged on by his words, Mira bragged, “You’re lucky. An opportunity like this might not come again.”

And thus, jaw-droppingly high-quality pictures of Mira striking silly poses with Tweetsuke sitting on her head were added to Lenos’s collection.



CHAPTER 17

MIRA AND HER WAGON finally arrived at Lunatic Lake, capital of the Kingdom of Alcait. Garuda gently lowered the wagon in front of the imposing castle gate.

Mira alighted from the wagon and thanked Garuda before dismissing it. "You did well today. As you always do." She suddenly froze as she gazed at the castle for the first time in a long time. "What *exactly* is going on here...?"

Soldiers lined the path from the gate to the castle proper. It was a magnificent welcoming party, complete with an orchestra.

Mira had once been "treated" to a grand welcome on her return to the castle, owing to one of Solomon's pranks. But would he seriously try the same trick twice? Perhaps he was expecting a state guest. She'd landed right in front of the gate as usual; could she have blundered into some diplomatic proceedings?

But before she could move, Garrett—dressed in an immaculate ceremonial uniform—greeted her with a bow. "Welcome back, Miss Mira. We've been waiting for you. Come with me, please."

To her chagrin, she was forced to acknowledge that this ceremony was for her.

What is that man thinking...? Looking back, this would explain why he'd called her over and over and insistently tried to find out exactly when she was going to land.

While the orchestra played, Mira grinned humorlessly to herself and followed Garrett through the gate and into the castle. He guided her to the audience chamber where, naturally, Solomon sat on the throne, flanked by Knight Commander Reynard and strategist Joachim.

It was almost a perfect reenactment of the first time, but there was one major difference: there were formally attired nobles lined up at the side of the audience chamber, which was even more grandiose.

As she was brought to the center of the audience chamber, Mira looked around in flustered confusion. She shot a glare at Solomon, who'd no doubt contrived all of this.

Noticing her stink-eye, Reynard glared back and pointed at the top of her head, as if calling attention to something.

What is that supposed to mean? Mira wondered for a moment, but she quickly caught on to his intent. *Please. This is stupid.*

Mira grabbed Tweetsuke and surreptitiously dropped the little bird into her pocket. Reynard nodded in apparent satisfaction.

After that subtle exchange, Suleiman spoke up from beside Solomon. "Miss Mira, first pupil of Wise Man Danblf. Your efforts as a long-term special envoy are appreciated. Please present the written agreement."

A knight approached Mira and bowed.

The written agreement. Mira fell silent for a moment in dumbfounded confusion, before realizing he meant the envelope from Ebatess. She handed it over to the knight, who stepped back, bowed once more, and approached Solomon. The knight passed the envelope to Reynard.

Of all the overwrought, irritating, pointless...

Mira gazed vacantly as the envelope finally made its way to Solomon. The process certainly reflected the dignity of a king; perhaps these complicated doings were necessary for people in his position. That didn't make it any less annoying for Mira, though.

After checking the sealed envelope, Solomon stood up with a dignified demeanor and declared, as if speaking to everyone present, "Duly received. With this, a strong and lasting bond has been formed between our land and the Roslein Duchy. Commerce between us is certain to flourish." He added in a tone of affected dignity, "Mira, you have served Alcait well."

Mira read between the lines. She smiled serenely, knelt down, and placed her right hand on her chest. "I live for Alcait."

This was one of many poses meant to display loyalty. It was such a perfect, natural motion that even Reynard, who'd complained about her lack of manners before, was satisfied.

At her gesture, everyone but Reynard and Joachim knelt in front of Solomon and repeated Mira's words, "For Alcait!"

Mira had survived the sudden and overdone ceremony. It helped that what she said was something she and her friends had often repeated in-game. No matter when or where, when Solomon said, "You have done much for us," they would say that and kneel. But this time, it wasn't a game; or rather, their manners in-game had become formal etiquette. In a way, it was a masterful display on Mira's part.

There was also another version for when Mira initiated it...

* * *

"You must be tired from your journey. Come back after you've had a chance to relax."

After being released from the audience chamber, Mira headed for the great bath. She knew this castle well enough that she didn't need guidance, but a maid was sent with her as a formality.

Hrmm... It is every man's dream to be cared for by a maid, but there's something about the maids here that's a little predatory...

Lily, head maid of Alcait Castle, had left a deep impression on Mira. However, the maid who'd joined her this time was named Tabitha. She was a calm and prim-looking woman with medium-length black hair. When she looked at Mira, her eyes were much gentler than Lily's, showing just a hint of maternal instinct.

Still, Mira watched Tabitha's movements like a hawk. She remembered that this maid was *always* by Lily's side when she ended up surrounded and abused by the castle staff. They *all* subjected Mira to their whims, though none of them were quite as bad as Lily. However, Mira felt something inside Tabitha. There was *something* about her that rivaled even Lily.

Mira warily proceeded with her down the long corridor until they stepped into the changing room, where she found Lily waiting.

It seemed she would have to resign herself to her fate.

"Come, Miss Mira. We will get you cleaned up."

"Miss Mira, allow me to do your hair for you."

Stripped of her clothes in no time, Mira was hauled off to the bath by the two maids, who lathered her entire body. She knew that resistance was futile before Lily, who seemed to turn up at the most inconvenient times. She'd been so focused on Tabitha's aura that she'd been caught unaware.

The most terrifying thing about Lily was that Mira could never escape her, even if she was watching for her to turn up. She quickly surrendered; the easiest way out was through.

Thus, Mira became the perfect porcelain dress-up doll. Lily cared for her attentively with desire-filled eyes. Enraptured, she whispered just quiet enough so that nobody could hear, "Oh, you're so adorable... I could eat you right up."

It might be difficult to believe, given how problematic Lily was on the inside, but she was the very picture of propriety on the surface. Even as she succumbed to her deepest desires, her work was without fault. She was neither too forceful nor too gentle, washing Mira's body in the most comfortable way.

As Lily savored this moment of bliss—ahem, *the joy of fulfilling her duties*—her hand reached toward Mira's most sensitive parts.

"Lily!" Tabitha, who'd been carefully washing Mira's rear, suddenly hissed sharply and grabbed Lily's hand. The head maid glared at Tabitha for ruining her chance. "Miss Mira will catch on if you get too bold!"

If looks could kill, Lily would be a murderer. However, Tabitha stood firm and pointed to her fellow maid's hand. Lily's fingers were wriggling ominously, like tentacles ready to assault some poor maiden.

"What have I become...? Thank you, Tabitha. You pulled me back from the brink." Lily wrapped her other hand around the one that had defied her will—or tried to act on her base desires. Eventually, she managed to seal away the lust that had overcome her, and her eyes returned to normal.

Or at least something that could be described as normal.

"Now, Lily. Shall we?"

"Yes, Tabitha. Let's."

After Lily regained her cool, she and her co-conspirator enjoyed their moment of bliss together.

Having been thoroughly *taken care of*, Mira did her best to grin and bear it as she was subjected to the shame of having underwear forced on her in the changing room. She was then presented with an outfit she had never seen before.

"Now, Miss Mira, we would like you to wear this. Custom technomancy robes, created for this very day!" Lily proudly announced as she grabbed the maids' newest masterpiece from the shelf.

This design was a return to the former combination of dress and coat. It was an item that one might wear during the summer, with a simple yet stylish silhouette sprinkled with cute and coquettish magical girl-like elements.

"Y-you've really outdone yourselves..." Mira was shaken by the introduction of yet another new outfit. While she instinctively understood that it would suit her, she still had some reservations.

Heedless of Mira's feelings, Lily and Tabitha's perfect cooperation allowed them to force it onto her without her input.

"Go on, Miss Mira. Arms up!"

"Miss Mira, move your leg for me like so, please."

In the end, Mira became Lily and Tabitha's personal dress-up doll once again.

* * *

Once they'd dressed Mira, Lily and Tabitha naturally dragged her off to the maids' quarters. On the way there, Mira tried insisting that she had to report to Solomon on her mission, but Lily would have none of it. According to her, Solomon himself had told the maids to personally take care of Mira and help her relax after her long journey.

A direct order from King Solomon. Armed with this ironclad justification, Lily and Tabitha triumphantly dragged their prey into the beasts' den.

Obviously, an exhausted person needed sweets. With that excuse, the maids had Mira sit in the dining hall.

"Aww, she's cuter than I'd imagined!"

"We've finally created the perfect angel."

"The little birdie on her head makes her even cuter!"

The dining room was crowded with maids who'd come to see the new and improved Mira. Each of them squealed and offered their own opinions. When did they find time to do their actual jobs?

Among them were a pair of photographers, one armed with something like a reflector board, and the other madly snapping photos. Perhaps due to some secret agreement, even the maids who had crowded in first gladly cooperated with the photographers and allowed them to cut the line.

The camera they used was one of Luminaria's. It seemed that, after much pleading, she had kindly let the maids borrow it. Mira now found herself surrounded by onlookers as she ate tiramisu. With every bite, they clamored, earning annoyed looks from the helpless summoner.

If not for this, they'd be such good girls...

The maids were a noisy handful, but there was kindness in their hearts. Mira could chastise them if they were *only* acting on their selfish desires, but most of it was genuine goodwill. She didn't have it in her to be mean to them. Sure their goodwill had gone too far, but Mira was a little soft in that regard.

The real problem was Lily and Tabitha, the ringleaders.

The other maids spoke to Mira, but they didn't step within arm's reach. They simply watched and enjoyed. Lily and Tabitha, however, couldn't stop touching Mira. They would find any "helpful" reason they could to put their hands on her.

Mira would later learn that the maids had set limits between them. They'd realized

that always crowding around Mira would be a nuisance to her, so they decided to hold a competition. Lily had won, and Tabitha was the runner-up. That was how the two had ended up next to her today.

When she heard, Mira had murmured in genuine amazement, “You’re all too silly...”

* * *

After she was released by the maids, the summoner fell face-first into the large couch in Solomon’s office. He was behind his desk, burning through piles of paperwork as usual.

“I was away for a while this time, but I see the maids are still in top form...” Mira looked up and grinned wryly at the coat she’d just taken off.

The magical girl-style dress and coat were wonderfully made, so much so that they would impress even the finest crafters. And the maids’ *passion* for their craft was immense. It was probably a lot of fun for everyone but Mira. She recalled her trauma and shot a glance at Solomon as he cleaned the papers off of his desk.

“They’re fantastic. I’m lucky to have them.” Solomon smiled, playing dumb. While his smile was half-serious, the other half was clearly making fun of his friend.

But it was true that Mira had cast off her fatigue thanks to the maids. The sweets they’d provided were all delicious and satisfying. If not for her use as a dress-up doll, it would have been the perfect pampering session.

“I do wish they would be a bit more... *normal*.” Mira sighed wistfully.

“That is normal, though. For them, anyway,” Solomon replied, drawing only a deeper sigh from her.

“Fine. But I want you to explain that welcome party. And the audience. Was that really necessary for a simple handoff of a document?” There was no changing the past. Mira leaned wearily against the sofa in her adorable dress and wound herself up for a proper venting.

“Well, that’s for the future.” Solomon held up the document Mira had delivered and asked, “Do you know what this document means?” She didn’t. Solomon added, “It’s a pretty complex one.” He grinned fiercely and excitedly explained everything about the

papers she'd brought him.

This document formalized diplomatic relations between Alcait and Roslein, allowing them to begin a large-scale trade agreement.

Roslein, often called a country of merchants, attracted goods not just from the Earth continent but also the Ark continent far to the west. The cargo vessels unloaded in Sentopoli would see most of their contents go to Roslein and then the western continent. It was the center of trade between both landmasses. The amount of goods and cash that flowed in and out made trade with Roslein desirable, to the point that people and nations competed over it.

Roslein had an official alliance with the Three Great Kingdoms. With countries stronger even than the greatest player-controlled faction, Atlantis, behind it, trying to militarily bully Roslein was tantamount to suicide. That meant that peaceful exchange was the only option. However, Roslein itself was eminently aware of this, and could therefore afford to be picky with their trade partners. Only one nation had managed to establish such relations with it in the past thirty years.

"I had no idea. It sounds like you've accomplished something big." Mira was ignorant when it came to politics, but along with her surprise at the power of Roslein, she finally realized the value of the document in Solomon's hands. She gazed at it in surprise.

"Ooh looks like you get it now. That's right!" Solomon spoke more about the greatness of this feat, even prouder now that Mira understood its significance.

The continent was vast. There were many centers of commerce; so why was Roslein so revered? That would be because of its long history and the trade routes built through it over the years. Many hands were involved in bringing goods from Roslein through these routes and to the rest of the continent.

Special routes that safely connected many places... that was the greatest weapon of Roslein—one even the largest mercantile unions didn't dare interfere with. And the duke himself had full authority over these vital arteries: Urashis Teles Ebates, the man Mira had just met.

"The document you've delivered, on top of other diplomatic agreements, allows us to use their trade routes freely." That would be an incredible benefit to Alcait. With a big grin on his face, Solomon showed off the sealed envelope.

"Oho. Well, that *is* something."

They had a deal that allowed them to use something very exclusive. Such was Mira's simplistic understanding of the situation.

"Er, you still don't understand, do you? If you're with Alcait, you get to use trade routes for free. Normally, they cost a ton in taxes." Despite his innocent excitement so far, Solomon added with a deep grin, "And that's what we just made public."

But there was also a more secret pact that the two nations had exchanged.

If the Kingdom of Alcait desired any items, Roslein would give them the lowest prices. This was Alcait's reward for successfully bringing down Melville Commerce and robbing their CEO of the title of duke.

"I can't help but feel like we've stolen credit from the Isuzu Alliance in that regard," Mira chuckled. Scorpion and Snake had fought hard to destroy Melville. Mira wanted to praise them for their efforts rather than take all the credit.

Solomon just replied with a smirk, "International legal affairs and the church officials worked really fast, right? Didja notice that?"

"After we did all the hard work," Mira replied, still siding with Scorpion and Snake. She decided to drop the subject there.

CHAPTER 18

“SO, NEXT, I’d like you to tell me the things you’ve seen.”

Solomon gingerly deposited the document into a letter box and pulled the silver cart next to his desk over. It was a gorgeous cart full of tea sets, cookies, cakes, and accoutrement.

He took a tea set and cheerfully began preparing tea. Once he’d made enough for a whole tea party, he sat on the couch across from Mira. “You know, reports alone are pretty dry, don’t you think?”

Solomon already had an idea of what had happened in Sentopoli and Roslein through written reports. Did he want to hear Mira’s side in order to corroborate his reports with an eyewitness account? Or was it mere conversation? Either way, Solomon’s eyes had the glow of a boy excited for stories of adventure.

“If I must...” Mira muttered as she reached for chocolate cake. After wetting her throat with the milk tea Solomon had prepared, she breathed a long, comfortable sigh like an old man.

“Well, where should I begin? I feel like we discussed most of it through the communicator already.”

“We might as well start from the beginning, right?”

On the way from Isuzu headquarters to Sentopoli, Mira had explained the situation to Agent S. Of course, Solomon remembered their conversation, but he excitedly requested that she repeat it all from the top.

“Fine. Very well.” The story was quite a long one, yet Mira was in high spirits as she told her tale.

Finding Kagura, learning that she led the Isuzu Alliance. Meeting the elite adventurers and Hidden. New summoning techniques and encountering the Spirit King. Running into members of Écarlate Carillon. The alchemist Johan, his family, and his apprentice Millene.

From there, Mira described the dark dealings of Chimera Clausen, the War-Torn Burial Ground, oni, and their curse. The truth of Sentopoli, the final battle, their duels with the top executives of Chimera and the true identity of their leader: a vengeful oni spirit who'd possessed an angel.

* * *

"Well, I would say that covers everything that happened out there." After telling the whole story, from the point she'd left Alcait for Isuzu headquarters to the destruction of Chimera Clausen, Mira murmured, "Looking back, it's been a long adventure."

She stuffed a cream puff into her mouth.

"Yeah, now that I'm hearing it, that was a lot. Good work. Shame that Kagura isn't coming back immediately, but it doesn't sound like she has much of a choice. Gotta wonder when, though..." Solomon was satisfied after hearing the whole tale, though still a little uneasy about the Wise Men's return. He took a sheet of paper from his desk. Then he furrowed his brow and wrote down the information Mira had given him.

"Ah, about that. I believe it would be easier for you two to discuss details directly. That's why I had Kagura come with me."

The fight that had kept Kagura away from home had concluded with the destruction of Chimera Clausen. There was nothing necessarily keeping her from returning now—and she *wanted* to—but there was no end in sight to the cleanup work.

The reason Mira had brought Tweetsuke along was to discuss the general lay of the land and the possibility of sending support from Alcait.

Mira moved Tweetsuke from her head to the couch and said, "Come on, Kagura. It's your time to shine."

Tweetsuke looked all around. After confirming it was in the presence of Solomon, a moment passed. Then it was enveloped by light. Out of nowhere, Kagura landed on the couch.

"Umm... Hey, Solomon. Been a while," Kagura said sheepishly, likely feeling guilty because of her long absence.

Solomon was amazed by Kagura's sudden entrance, prompting a smirk from Mira. She

hadn't mentioned Kagura's ability to switch places during her report, hoping to surprise Solomon for a change.

"Yep, it sure has, Kagura." He didn't let his shock last long, and was no doubt already devising schemes to make use of Kagura's ability. Clearly interested, Solomon pressed her, "So... what was that just now? That was crazy."

"Umm, that was..."

Soon, a short greeting between the friends who hadn't met in decades turned into Kagura explaining her new magic. Solomon took ample notes.

Mira was left out of the conversation, so she grabbed a random handful of sweets from the cart and laid back on the sofa. She listened in while she chewed on cookies, wondering if she could imitate Kagura's medium-only magic with her summoning.

* * *

Unfortunately, the discussion about Kagura's replacement magic ended in disappointment for Solomon. He'd thought it could be used to support the country through transport, messaging, or surveillance. But his hopes were dashed by the difficulty of learning the spell. Other than Kagura, there were few people who could master this magic. The same went for her interrogation magic.

Although he was still a little let down, Solomon decided to focus on the situation at hand. "So, looking ahead. When do you actually think you'll be able to come back to us?" Mira had gotten Kagura to promise to return to Alcait, but what mattered most to Solomon was *when*. Solomon would have liked her back as soon as possible, to the point that he would offer whatever support necessary to speed things along.

"Hmm... We're still in the planning stage right now, so I can't make any promises," Kagura replied before delving into details.

Quite a bit of her explanation repeated Mira's recounting of events, but she was busy dealing with the aftermath of Chimera's fall and investigating the other burial grounds with the angel Tyriel. Furthermore, they had recently decided that they would collect all the spirit equipment created by Chimera. Many of these items still had spirits' souls trapped within.

"I'll contact Gramps once we have a large batch to purify. Our head of spirits said that

the Spirit King's power should definitely be able to free them."

Kagura handed Mira a talisman. She couldn't switch places with it or talk through it, but she'd cast a spell on it that allowed her to track Mira at all times. Tweetsuke could follow it, and Kagura could then bring her Item Box full of spirit equipment.

"Hrmm, very well." Mira frowned; she had even more jobs now, on top of purifying the oni. However, she willingly accepted the talisman. After all, she was more than happy to free spirit souls.

"If that's the case, I think I can do something for you," Solomon offered. If he used his connections with other countries and the information network of the player-run Hinomoto Committee, it seemed that Solomon could quickly map out the distribution of Chimera's spirit gear on a large scale.

"That would be huge!"

Despite being a former player and the head of a continent-spanning organization, Kagura had no formal connections with the Hinomoto Committee. It was an organization meant to help players take root in this new world. Its information network was sprawling enough to rival that of the Three Great Kingdoms.

Leveraging the resources of the Hinomoto Committee would be a major boon for Kagura. She and Solomon immediately began working out details. The details were too much for Mira, so she applied herself to the sweets. She used the pot on the table to brew milk tea and enjoyed its elegant taste.

Mira was about to dig in to her second cake when Solomon and Kagura finished their discussion. On top of working with the Hinomoto Committee, they also made various secret deals, like sending Tweetsuke to the castle regularly to exchange information.

"Well, Imma head out," Kagura declared. "Be in touch soon."

Even with her business concluded here, Kagura still had lots to do; she used her magic to swap places and go back to Sentopoli. Before long, Tweetsuke departed as well, leaving a talisman behind. It seemed the little bird, capable of flying at high speeds to deliver messages and items, was just as busy as its master.

"Well, I can contact Kagura now. That's one problem settled," Solomon murmured, as if a weight had been taken off of his shoulders. He casually snatched away the cake

and milk tea that Mira had just prepared. Then, he glanced down at his notes. “Still, a demon with a divine item... And Kagura’s got an angel on staff, huh? I’m not sure which should surprise me more.”

The matter of Kagura was settled, which meant it was time to focus on the next bad omen. Dark demons spread misfortune, so this mysterious duke couldn’t be allowed to run amok.

“Indeed,” Mira agreed.

There were various matters wrapped up in this case, but most concerning of all was that the fiend had been involved in the birth of Chimera Clausen. This opened up the possibility that there were other continent-spanning evil organizations connected to demons.

“Still, this isn’t exactly easy information to come by,” Solomon mused. “I guess the most important thing is that a demon started it all, right?”

“Right. The past is the past, and now is now. We can’t say for sure that there aren’t other demons causing similar trouble. They are so adept at working on the sly, after all...”

“You never know when another giant organization like Chimera Clausen might pop up. This is an annoying precedent...” Solomon slumped over, thoroughly exhausted. The War-Torn Burial Ground had been uncovered over ten years ago; that was plenty of time for the demon who’d disguised itself as the leader of the research team to uncover another similar site.

“Fortunately, we happen to have another reliable friend on the case,” Mira said, then described her reunion with Wallenstein in Sentopoli.

The Wise Man and Liliella were pursuing the duke-rank demon, the one that was certain to have been the root of Chimera Clausen. They had even successfully captured a dark demon who was likely an underling of that same duke. Now that they were sealing her abilities, it wouldn’t be long before they found the truth.

“Even if there are other uncovered tombs, it’ll be a moot point if Wallenstein succeeds,” she said confidently. “They can learn everything straight from the horse’s mouth.”

Direct testimony from the demon would be solid-gold intelligence. And even if there

were other demons beyond the duke-rank demon working to uncover the catacombs, Kagura and Tyriel were already planning to visit and reseal others. Mira declared that they could leave this matter in their friends' capable hands.

"But, you know... I think Wallenstein's work contains untold potential," Mira muttered. On top of stopping the duke-rank demon from doing evil, purifying it would get them the leads they needed. Solomon expressed his full agreement.

Duke-rank or not, demons turned into light demons would have information relating to dark organizations. That could lead to dismantling organizations like Chimera wholesale. And by providing this information to other governments, Alcait could effectively put other countries in its debt.

"Information known only to demons doesn't come around every day, y'know. I'd love to get in regular contact with Wallenstein too," Solomon said, showing his kingly side. Then a grin crept onto his face. *That* was the smile of someone who wanted to meet these light demon friends of the shy Wallenstein.

"Ah, by the way. Speaking of demons..."

Around the time they'd begun discussing a potential drinking party with Kagura's comrades and Wallenstein's friends, Solomon suddenly remembered something and retrieved a document from his shelf.

"What is it? Oh... this again?" Mira could tell the nature of the documents spread out on Solomon's desk at a glance. Ever since she'd spoken with a dark demon a while back, this had also been on her mind.

"I got a report while you were out. Here's what we know from the current investigation." Solomon took another bundle from among his countless documents and pointed at a diagram as he explained. The report detailed the investigation of the very bottom floor of Nebrapolis, where Mira had fought that dark demon. It contained plenty of information, but Solomon's intel groups had focused on narrowing down what a demon had been doing in a place like that to begin with. Unfortunately, he said they still had no idea at all.

"The investigation found something that seems to be an artificial tunnel at the bottom of the lake. And it's very deep down there, too," he added.

When Mira and the others had visited, the demon had come out of the lake. Naturally,

Solomon's people had focused their investigation there. The lake was about twenty meters deep, but a hole two meters wide had been dug in the bottom.

When they investigated, they found that it was a recent addition. The investigation team assumed it was the work of the demon and proceeded carefully until they finally found where it led. The tunnel reached a depth of a hundred meters, and had been dug diagonally in a particular direction.

Solomon continued, "The tunnel, which we *assume* was dug by a demon, went deep below that white castle."

After that, Solomon pointed to a cross-section of the white castle and lake. According to the sketch, the tunnel continued from the bottom of the lake. Then, it veered upward in a sharp V-shape to go toward the surface again. Its final destination was a suspicious chamber deep below the castle's foundations.

"But the big chamber here seems to have been there for a long time."

At the end of the tunnel was a space that had existed before the demon's interference. Everyone agreed that the tunnel must have been dug for the purpose of reaching this chamber. But why was the demon going there? In short, they did not know.

The underground chamber below the white castle was filled with shining crystals, just like the depths of Nebrapolis. They were so bright that one didn't need a light to navigate the underground space. However, the floor was covered in dead foliage. The plants there seemed to have died in the past few months, and they were contaminated with powerful mana, likely from the demon. It would take some time to identify them.

In addition to this, there was yet another mystery enumerated in the document: at the center of the chamber was a perfectly circular hole five meters wide. It looked to be fairly new based on the traces around it, but they found nothing when they searched inside.

"Putting aside the question of why the demon wanted to go there in the first place, the existence of contaminated plants means that it was using its power down there," Solomon summarized. "It's a very annoying puzzle," he muttered as he collected his documents.

After washing down a bite of cheesecake with milk tea, Mira paused for a moment and picked up one of the papers left on the table. "It is a surprise that such a chamber is

below the castle, but I find myself curious about the plants being grown there." The paper bore a cross-section of the mysterious chamber, showing just how deep the hole in the center went.

That's rather deep. And it really is perfectly straight... The hole went straight down for over a hundred meters. Jumping in would take quite some courage, Mira mused. She then noticed several smaller rooms above the chamber in the diagram.

On closer inspection, a narrow passage extended diagonally from the mysterious chamber and led to a large, square room. Another narrow passage continued upward, going through more rooms until it finally arrived in the cellars of the white castle.

The white castle at the bottom of Nebrapolis only had one underground level. This piqued Mira's interest, so she held the document up for Solomon to see and asked, "Say, what is this room?"

"Whoops, didja notice? Aww. Guess I have to tell you, then." Despite his faux reluctance, he looked as if he'd been waiting for her to ask. With a mischievous grin, he began to tell Mira about the *other* passage they'd found aside from the deep hole in the floor.

At the top of the staircase-like passage was a stone door that opened via a lever, leading to the castle cellar. When the exploration team found it, they were at a loss for words. Solomon, with a huge smile on his face, unfolded a document titled *Nebrapolis Underground Trove Inventory* and showed it to Mira. "Turns out the room was actually a treasure vault!"

"Oho... This is unbelievable!"

All of the treasures found in the vault were listed. In addition to simple things like gold and silver, there were others like Dragon's Crown of Light, Fairy Princess's Sanguine Holy Blade, elixirs, Goddess's Tears, Hermes's Shoes, Demonic Spear Brionac, and more. The list genuinely surprised Mira; it was full of impressive items.

"Crazy, right?! A ballpark calculation put the trove at over a billion ducats. I was so excited I couldn't even sleep."

"One can hardly blame you, given this haul..." Mira gazed at the list with starry eyes. The conversation about demons had seemingly been left behind.

Solomon explained that, because there were so many valuable and powerful weapons,

they'd been handed over to the military rather than used to fill up the national treasury.

Every captain, vice-captain, and even soldiers got new equipment, strengthening Alcait's army significantly. They were also able to distribute masterpiece-class weapons to patrol agencies and other peacekeeping organizations.

"Lately, monsters have been getting more active. I'm overjoyed to be able to bolster our strength with such an unexpected windfall."

On top of demons working behind the scenes, monster hordes had been turning rowdy. The latest rampage had been resolved in short order thanks to the treasure vault, which was quite convenient for Solomon. He laughed and added that it was thanks to Mira for going to Nebrapolis, then patted himself on the back for sending her there.

"Anyway, that's the first room done. It was a huge success. The investigation team found another floor above that one; as you can see on the diagram, there are still ten rooms left." Solomon pointed at the map to show off the many rooms under the white castle and the passages connecting them.

There was more than one inventory list. Mira leaned forward expectantly and asked, "You're not saying all the others were...?"

"I wish... Unfortunately, they were all empty." Solomon put down the map and shrugged.

"Hmph. I thought as much." Mira leaned back into her seat and nibbled on her chocolate cream puffs, shooting a glance down at the map and the passage extending from the mysterious underground chamber to the cellar of the white castle.

It was simple. The demon's original route infiltrated from the cellar, through the many rooms, and finally into the treasure vault.

"Yeah, seems like it." Solomon briefly described the remaining rooms.

The investigation team climbed to the top floor without issue. Once there, they realized that the doors leading to the rooms below were all cleverly hidden. The entrance from the cellar of the white castle had been connected to the first room's ceiling by a single floorboard in the corner. Moreover, there was a stone pillar

concealing the entrance in the first room, so just moving the floorboard would make it impossible to know that they were connected.

When they went back down through this hidden entrance, they found an empty room. After investigating that one, they found the next hidden entrance and continued to another empty room. After repeating this over and over, they'd found their way back to the treasure vault.

"If you went down the right way, you'd probably think you were done there," Solomon said.

"It does certainly seem like the final chamber..." Mira murmured, recalling the many difficult dungeons they'd conquered in their day. Naturally, treasure always lay in the final room. Beyond the end of Nebrapolis was a treasure vault. Most people would be satisfied and call it quits there.

Indeed, Solomon surmised that whatever the demon was *really* hiding must have been in the underground chamber beneath it all. The billion-ducat treasure was merely a diversion used to hide the demon's true purpose

So what *was* the demon doing there?

"By the way, do you remember what happened in Karanak?" Solomon suddenly asked as he tidied his documents.

"Karanak? Hrmm... You mean the zombie situation, I presume?"

The City of Requiem, Karanak, where Mira had first met the members of Écarlate Carillon. There had been an outbreak of zombies when she was last there.

"Yep, that's it. This is just my theory, but I think something down there in those chambers was that demon's goal, and those zombies might have been like a byproduct."

"A byproduct...?"

Mira thought to herself. What could the demon have been doing in the room with the big hole and dead foliage? Zombies had been born in the aftermath of its deeds. And looking back now, the zombies had been rather lacking in malice for theoretically working for a demon. The reason for this was that they were humanoid zombies.

While there were beast zombies that rampaged and attacked people, the humanoid ones didn't attack anyone.

"It's almost as if it were trying to revive *something*, but only managed to affect its surroundings," Mira said vaguely.

"Yeah, it kinda does feel like that," Solomon replied. He finished by saying that he'd continue to investigate this matter and see what turned up. "So many questions, yet so few answers..."

Since the demon had already been defeated, it was unlikely that anything more would happen. Still, Mira found herself uncharacteristically anxious.

"Anyway, just leave that to me," Solomon said. "You have your own mission to deal with. It's time to talk about a certain friend of ours." He returned the investigation team's documents to his shelf and grinned affably.

"*Mission*, he says..." Mira grumbled as Solomon retrieved yet more documents. Nevertheless, when he handed them over, she readily accepted them. After skimming, Mira murmured in amazement, "Oho... You've already learned this much?" It was a summary of information obtained from her past missions and the conclusions Solomon's people had drawn from them.

"Everyone's been working hard, just like you. As you can see, it looks like Soul Howl was trying to make the Holy Grail of Heavenly Light five years ago."

Solomon sat across from Mira, poured two cups of milk tea, and explained his team's conclusions. To create the Holy Grail, Soul Howl first needed to carve the Elder Tree's root into a cup. This had to be done in a special location, which had allowed Mira to find the traces of his work.

The specialist who had analyzed the shavings Mira brought back had concluded that more than five years had passed since the carving.

"Five years, hm? That's quite a while ago. Shouldn't he be finished by now?" Mira asked, taking a sip of milk tea.

If Soul Howl had been focused only on creating the Holy Grail, five years was a long time. And based on the materials Soul Howl had left behind, he seemed to be obsessed with making it; there was no doubt he was giving it his full attention. His friends knew

it was common for him to hyperfocus once he'd set his mind to something.

If he'd spent five years working on one item, surely it was done by now. So Mira thought, but Solomon shook his head. "Take a look at the last page."

"...I see."

It contained a list of procedures necessary to create the Holy Grail, directly from Soul Howl's handwritten notes.

There were 108 steps.

Following them all would take one all over the continent and even back and forth between the Earth and Ark continents. Worse, some of the steps required particular seasonal natural phenomena. Missing just one could mean waiting an entire year to make any progress.

Mira realized five years might not be long enough, after all. She found herself increasingly impressed by Soul Howl, who had taken on such an arduous project.

"That girl must be really important to him." Mira recalled the woman frozen in ice at the white castle.

Soul Howl had a particular affinity for the undead, but it seemed he'd changed somehow, Mira thought as she read the latter half of the procedures in the list. As a rule of thumb, these kinds of complex processes tended to become more and more difficult in the later steps.

Based on these notes, one could estimate the time necessary to complete the whole process, as well as the time since Soul Howl began working, and use that to estimate where he was now. That was the point of this entire exercise. Of course, Solomon probably already had the answer and was just being coy.

"So, where in the process is he? You've calculated that much, I assume." With the Chimera Clausen matter settled, Mira was already about to be saddled with another mission. She should've expected as much; she looked at Solomon expectantly.

"Hey, I love how proactive you're being here. And we've already identified where he is." Solomon shrugged off Mira's annoyance with a smile, brought his cup to his lips, and said, "Thanks to our fantastic scholars, of course."

Then, he revealed their conclusions.

Soul Howl was probably somewhere in the Holtland Hills, Rayswood Aquaforest, or Herfolk Mountains. Or would be, sooner or later.

“...That sounds awfully vague.” *Somewhere. Sooner or later.* Mira was well and truly annoyed now.

“Weeeell... Accounting for his abilities and growth, if the process is going well, we can guess he’s reached step eighty by now. But there are only three steps that have designated locations in the steps that come after. None of the other steps are tied to a specific place.” Mira had hoped to be told that she had *one* set destination, but Solomon averted his eyes sheepishly as he complained, “Even our finest scholars can’t read his mind.”

“Hrmm... Worst case, I’ll have to go to all three of them.”

Such haphazard information had led them to narrow the search down to three places. That was as much success as she could reasonably expect... But the problem was just how distant the locations were from one another.

Each step listed the actions one needed to take at that point in the process. In the hills, one had to find the ruins of an ancient underground city and obtain a fragment of the Chalk Orb that still guarded the city. In the aquaforest, one needed to obtain the Deathly Venom of the Serpent King. In the mountains, one needed the Flaming Core of the Fire Giant, who could be summoned with the extremely rare Molten Stone.

It looked simple at a glance, but anyone with a little knowledge would see that as foolish.

The ancient city’s guardian, the Serpent King, and the Fire Giant were all raid bosses back in the game—in other words, they were meant to be fought by whole *groups* of people. Even the Nine Wise Men would find them difficult to defeat in a one-on-one battle. One could hardly blame Mira for being fed up with this fetch-quest.

“But listen. All you really have to do is figure out whether he’s been there or not. There are plenty of ways to do that, right?” Solomon said casually, as if trying to distract her.

He wasn’t wrong; Mira didn’t need to fight. All she had to do was search for traces of Soul Howl. The ancient ruins were a dungeon, so they required a permit. That meant

that someone might remember Soul Howl's face from when he applied at the local Union office. The aquaforest had many spirits living in it, and the mountains had a dwarven city at the peak where one would watch for the Fire Giant to spawn. Soul Howl tended to stand out, and these three steps were especially conspicuous ones. It wouldn't be surprising if a few people saw and remembered him.

In other words, Mira could probably track his movements just by asking around a little. If she found any trace of his presence, that was a job done. If she didn't, he would be there before long if she just waited.

Solomon went on and on about these many options.

"Maybe you're right..." Easily persuaded, Mira agreed, and her frown eased.

Satisfied, Solomon forced three maps into her hands. "Here you go. Those are areas you'll be working in."

The three locations weren't just far from each other, they were far from Alcait, too. "Now, where should I begin?" Mira furrowed her brow and looked at each of the maps, pondering her next destination.

Solomon proposed a route, suggesting that she go to the ancient city first.

"Hrmm. The ancient city..." Mira didn't find it very enticing. Rather, she didn't find *any* of the three enticing.

But Solomon replied that she was most likely to find him there. "I did list three places, but according to Suleiman's calculations, it's almost definitely the ancient city. Given the distances and seasonal conditions, he'd be there now even if he went at top speed. Plus, it's the first of the three that require locations. If he's already been there, all you need to do is find out when, and we can narrow down his progress even further. If he hasn't arrived yet, well, just wait there and he'll come. So simple, right?"

"I see. That does make sense." Once again easily persuaded, Mira agreed and settled on her next destination.

Pleased at how smoothly this was going, Solomon smiled sweetly and held out a small pouch. "By the way, here's your next installment of funds."

"Ooh. This one's heavier than the last!" Mira accepted the hefty pouch and began

rummaging around inside. There were twenty gold coins within. “A million?! This ought to last me a while!” After counting the sum, Mira smiled warmly and cradled her new riches in her hands like a child with a new toy. She fantasized about the extravagant inns she might stay at in the future. No matter the situation, Mira always prioritized sightseeing.

“Kirori bird and potepote are famous around there. Have some fun.” Solomon gazed at her, a little enviously, and offered a genuine smile.

Mira deposited the maps into her Item Box and said excitedly, “So I shall. Look forward to souvenirs!” She recalled with a smile, “Speaking of which...” She laid a few items she’d brought at Sentopoli and Roslein atop the table. “Is Luminaria around?”

Mira had brought one more souvenir: the Sword of the Crimson Lotus King, to be traded for Luminaria’s *Encyclopedia of Skills*. She wanted to get her hands on that book as soon as possible. According to Solomon, Luminaria was busy at her tower today.

A shame, but understandable. Mira gave up on obtaining the book today and began to tell Solomon all about the many souvenirs she’d brought and the stories behind them. He listened intently to every word.

The two talked long into the night.

CHAPTER 19

ON THE DAY of Mira's return to Alcait, she exhausted every possible conversation topic with Solomon and then stayed a night in the castle. The next morning, Lily walked into her room as if it were perfectly normal, changed the sleepy summoner into her day clothes, and led her to the dining hall.

Tabitha and the others joined the group along the way. After breakfast, the maids prepared Mira for the day in their usual fashion before finally allowing her to head to Solomon's office.

"You're gonna stop by your tower on your way out, right?" he asked.

"Of course. It will be quite some time before I can return again, after all."

Last night, Mira had told Solomon that she would go back to her tower to check on things there. She did *not* share that she really just wanted to see Mariana.

"Oh, tell your wife I'm sorry for sending you out on business trips so often," Solomon joked.

"Excuse you. We're not in that sort of relationship..."

"Is that so? I wonder who you think I was referring to..." he said with a teasing smile as he watched Mira blush.

"I'll be going now."

"Yep. Be careful out there."

The pouty Mira and smug Solomon exchanged quick goodbyes. In the end, they grinned at each other like always. Then, Mira left the office, and Solomon sighed at the pile of documents on his desk.

* * *

Silverhorn, City of Mages. At its center, the Linked Silver Towers reached high above

the metropolis below. The great wall encircling them was imbued with special magic to prevent infiltration into the holy land of mages even from above.

This magic did not activate when one left from within, which allowed things like Cleos's wagon to leave by flying directly upward. When he returned, however, he would be blocked by the barrier.

"Oh! That's the place Solomon mentioned."

The plaza around the Linked Silver Towers was a tourist destination; and the front gate especially was full of people at all times of day. It wasn't a good place for Garuda to land. Instead, Solomon had directed Mira to use a different, less busy gate.

Mira looked around until she saw an empty spot where Garuda could set down. It was blocked off by a small, curved pond that kept anyone from approaching. She ordered Garuda to park the wagon there, jumped onto solid land, and opened the gate with her Tower Master Key. Then, she dismissed Garuda and prepared to summon Guardian Ash so the bear could pull her wagon to her tower.

Mira suddenly found herself being watched by the sightseers who'd gathered around the pond. Among the boisterous crowd were a few who looked like mages and gazed at Mira with envious eyes.

The Linked Silver Towers were the most magnificent landmark in all of the Kingdom of Alcait and drew huge crowds. This remote gate may have been comparatively quiet, but it was the place where Cleos, Amarette, and the representatives of the Tower of Divination often arrived out of seemingly nowhere. It had become a popular spot for those who hoped to witness the moment one of them appeared.

It may be easier to land, but there are just as many people here!

Exposed to countless eyes, Mira retreated to the wagon, summoned Guardian Ash, and had it dash into the tower grounds.

* * *

The back gate went wild in the aftermath of Mira's appearance.

Garuda had flown in, so they'd expected it to be Cleos. Who was that, then?

“I feel like that one was even bigger than Master Cleos’s!”

“Same. And the color...”

While the sightseers conversed, the mages among them realized that the summon that came after Garuda’s landing was so fast they couldn’t follow the spell’s construction with their eyes.

“Could that girl be the pupil I’ve been hearing so much about?”

Suddenly, the back gate overflowed with more speculation and fantasy.

A real, genuine pupil of Danblf. Danblf’s secret child. Cleos’s secret child. Danblf reincarnated, no, Danblf *himself*. People with powerful imaginations—some of them even striking dangerously close to the truth—continued to liven up the gates outside the Towers with talk of Mira’s sudden, comet-like appearance.

* * *

Upon returning to the Tower of Evocation, Mira proceeded through the too-quiet tower, grumbling to herself and wondering why the researchers weren’t at least around. She finally arrived at the top floor.

In front of her room, she felt nostalgic for a moment due to her long absence. The knowledge that someone was waiting for her return filled her with confused feelings.

G-goodness, why am I so nervous? At a time like this, you’d normally just greet them, right?

This was her place; a place to return to. Mira resolved herself and opened the door.

“I’m home!” She entered her room like a husband who’d just returned from a long job away from home.

No response.

Mira looked around the room curiously and even peeked into the bedroom, but saw no signs of Mariana.

“Could it be...?!?” Mira whipped around to face the changing room door that led to the

bathroom. An image of Mariana half-dressed passed through her mind. She tiptoed close to the door and put her ear up next to it. Even in her current form, there's no way this wouldn't make her look like a pervert to any onlooker. After confirming that Mariana wasn't there, she finally put her hand on the doorknob and listened in again.

"Not a sound..." Mira triple-checked, but she didn't hear anything from inside the changing room. She was sure it was clear, but she opened the door expectantly—unsurprisingly, nobody was behind it. "Hmm... Well, well."

The changing room was neat and clean, as one might expect of Mariana. Mira looked in the corner and spotted a shelf meant for her clothes. Many cute pairs of underwear, sorted by color, were neatly arranged there.

Grimacing, she averted her eyes and proceeded as if she'd seen nothing at all. She opened the door of the quiet bathroom and sighed.

"Figures."

Even if it was wrong, Mira had secretly hoped for a sort of romantic comedy twist. She managed to brush these dark desires from her heart, then looked around the empty bathroom. At the same time, she writhed with the knowledge that Mariana was in here every day—suddenly, she realized something.

It would've been much easier to just use her Biometric Scan. She grinned sardonically at herself, so poisoned by rom-com fantasies that she'd forgotten something quite simple.

Just then, Mira sensed someone right behind her. Before she could process it, Mariana's kind and comforting voice reached her ears.

"Welcome home, Miss Mira."

The object of her fantasies had appeared as if on cue. With a guilty conscience, Mira whipped around and yelped, "I'm home?!"

Mariana was there, looking the same as ever. The last time they'd met was almost a month and a half ago, but Mira felt a tinge of nostalgia and smiled at their reunion.

"Is something wrong?" Mariana cocked her head at the summoner's suspicious actions.

"Er... No, I'm fine." Mira managed to gather herself and tried to change the subject.
"Were there any issues in my absence?"

"Nothing in particular. If I were to name one thing, it would be that Luna hasn't been sleeping well lately. At night, she gazes at the stars and cries pitifully," Mariana said. She looked at Mira and said with a smile, "But I'm sure that won't be a problem anymore."

"Hrmm. Is that so?" Mira was worried that the bunny was sick, or that her living environment had changed for the worse somehow.

"Yes. Because you've returned." Mariana's sweet smile dispelled her doubts.

One week ago, Mariana had asked a pet shop for advice about Luna. But pure rabbits were unfortunately so rare that the staff had no point of reference to answer her question. Animals with outstanding intelligence, such as pure rabbits, often couldn't be diagnosed through their behavior alone. However, the staff did note that there were other intelligent animals like pure rabbits, so they advised her to try asking a specialist.

On the way back, she'd happened to run into Luminaria. The sorcerer could tell at a glance that Mariana was unhappy. When Mariana confessed about the problem with Luna, Luminaria provided an answer: apparently, there was someone at the new patrol office who knew about such things.

"The other day, Miss Luminaria inquired on my behalf. As it turns out, they think Luna misses her mother" Mariana added with a soft smile, "I'm sure she's lonely because you've been away so long." It seemed Mariana knew how she felt. The fairy had been watching over Luna all this time, surrounded by reminders of Mira—the couch where she sat, the bed where she slept, her clothes. So when someone brought up the possibility, Mariana realized they were on to something.

Now faced with the returned Mira, Mariana could say with certainty that everything would be okay. Her surety on this matter was born of empathy.

* * *

"Squeak squeak!"

Upon learning that Luna was currently in her aide's room, Mira opened the door and

immediately caught the blue ball that launched itself at her. It seemed Luna had sensed her mother's presence and been waiting by the door.

"Such a spoiled little baby..." Mira caught and hugged the bunny, gently stroking her soft, blue fur. Luna cried happily in response and nuzzled her face into Mira's chest. "Hey now, Luna, that tickles. Goodness, you're too cute!"

Given how long they'd been away from each other, both Luna and Mira lost all self-control. They played together for a while as Mariana watched happily, a little envious of Luna.

The difference between humans and animals was especially noticeable in how easy it was to be physically affectionate. Silently praying that she might get attention like Luna someday, Mariana brought over a set of toys she'd bought for the bunny. Then, she joined in playing with her as well.

Mira watched as Mariana and Luna played with something like a cat toy. Mariana chased the bunny around with it, and Luna deftly evaded.

Their play gradually intensified until it had turned into a sort of one-on-one duel between Mariana and Luna. According to Mariana, this was normal for them. They had even come up with their own rules for this game: Mariana would win if she managed to touch Luna with the toy called a "rabbit hand." If Luna dodged ten attacks, she would win.

"This is intense! It's hard to believe you can do this indoors..."

Unsurprisingly for a pure rabbit, Luna's agility was extraordinary. She sprinted and jumped in every direction around the aide's room. Mira followed with her eyes, but she began to feel something was off. Specifically, the interior of the room. She looked around curiously at her aide's chamber. It was a very feminine room, but Mira realized she'd cleaned up many of her feng shui decorations. On top of that, she'd installed multiple places that Luna could use to run and jump.

She'd noticed that Luna was having an easy time running around, but that was thanks to Mariana giving her footholds. The fairy had even moved her feng shui items, something she normally cared much about, just to give Luna a place to play.

They might have been overdoing it a little, but Mira watched woman and animal play and murmured happily, "You two must be getting along well. That's wonderful."

Mira was at peace, but the duel began to heat up. Luna stopped in place to lure Mariana into attacking. But Mariana did not, instead patiently closing the distance between them. After using her seventh attack as bait, Mariana finally struck with her eighth.

“Squeak!”

Luna spun around and fell onto her back in surrender. Mariana mercilessly rubbed her belly and proudly declared, “I win!”

“You really managed to capture Luna...”

Later, Mira lost spectacularly in her first attempt. Mariana and Luna had to console her together. However, she was prepared to use her sage abilities to the fullest the next time, as she accepted the toy from Mariana and faced Luna head-on. Five minutes after she switched to combat mode, Mira managed to get Luna on her fifth attack.

“Whew... This is... my true power...”

Solomon might’ve laughed if he saw this, but Mariana praised Mira, “Incredible!”

For most, it was difficult to even follow pure rabbits with the naked eye. They were the most agile beings in the world, and it was quite a feat to corner one not by repetition or memorization but pure ability.

However, Mira knew nothing of this. She breathed heavily from exertion as she doted on the surrendering rabbit.

Mira’s stomach growled. “Mm... Goodness, it’s already this late?” They’d been playing with Luna for a few hours. The sun had already set outside, and the sky was blanketed in darkness.

“I’ll make dinner right away. Any requests?” Mariana promptly answered, apparently having heard Mira’s stomach.

“I wonder...” Looking back, she’d only had a light breakfast in the royal castle, then totally forgotten about lunch. Mira was starving. “I would like a big dinner tonight.”

“I’ll see to it right away.” Mariana bowed politely, deftly donned her apron, and ran out of the room. She was probably heading to Mira’s room.

"Now, I think I'll take a nice bath as I wait."

That exchange just now... sounded like a married couple's, didn't it? Mira thought to herself, grinning as she cradled Luna in her arms and left for her room like a husband excited to be home.

CHAPTER 20

MARIANA WAS an efficient cook, and the kitchen was already prepared. Magnificently marbled cuts of meat, colorful vegetables, and white rice lined the counter. One could tell at a glance that tonight's meal would be a feast.

Mira peeked into the kitchen and murmured, "I can hardly wait."

Luna gazed at the sliced veggies on the side and added, "Squeak!"

"Anyway, bath first," Mira said. Even if they were just playing, her matches with Luna were intense. Mira was sheened in sweat, and she wanted to refresh herself. But just as she headed toward the bath, she heard the sound of something falling to the floor. "Ah... Right."

She turned and saw an empty bowl at Mariana's feet. The fairy was staring at Mira in astonishment.

Mira suddenly remembered: whenever she bathed, Mariana would always come with her. She'd half-force Mira to let her come along.

But right now, Mariana was in the middle of cooking to satisfy Mira's hunger. If she prioritized cooking, she couldn't serve Mira in the bath. If she prioritized the bath, it would delay dinner and make the hungry summoner wait. It was a real conundrum.

"Don't worry about the bath—" Mariana didn't have to do both. Or so Mira tried to say, but Mariana instantly looked down. Mira sighed in resignation. "Ah, well... I'm sure you're sweaty from that workout too. Shall we bathe first?"

There was no change to Mariana's demeanor, but the instant Mira said this, her face lit up. Still, conflict clouded her mind; preparing food for Mira was just as important. "But you're hungry..."

"Worry not. Hunger is just added spice, right? A bath first won't hurt anything," Mira said in a carefree tone, hoping to ease Mariana's worries.

"I will prepare at once." Seemingly persuaded, Mariana bowed, cleaned up the kitchen,

and ran into the changing room.

"I hope this was a good idea..."

Mira was a little surprised at herself for being bold enough to invite Mariana to a bath, but the clear joy that was on the fairy's face brought satisfaction to her heart.

In the bath, Mariana waited on Mira as usual. She scrubbed her hair and body from top to bottom before giving her a lovely massage. From there, Mira relaxed in the big bathtub and watched as Mariana washed Luna. Like last time, she didn't offer to wash Mariana's hair in return; instead, she retreated to the other side of the tub.

Mariana had mentioned an efficient way to wash Luna's fur without agitating it, so she was teaching Mira how to do that now.

"Don't go against the grain of her fur. Go like this..." Mariana explained earnestly.

"Squeeeak..." Luna looked blissful as bubbles covered her.

But Mira was a little uneasy—looking at Luna meant also looking at Mariana. "Hrmm, I see..."

Mira had been in many women's baths in all the inns she'd stayed in, and had by now built up a tolerance. But when it came to someone she liked, she couldn't help but be nervous seeing them naked. On top of that, she felt some guilt ogling someone who was so kind to her. Thus, Mira was careful not to stare.

Eventually, Mariana finished washing Luna. She put the rabbit in a special little tub, where she floated comfortably.

"Now, Miss Mira, please take your time." After waiting on Mira in the bath, Mariana quickly washed herself and tried to return to preparing dinner.

Watching this from behind, Mira made up her mind and spoke. "Listen, erm... Mariana, why don't we relax together once in a while? Like right now, for example." She patted the surface of the water, urging Mariana to come.

"But..." Mariana was conflicted. Even if Mira said it was fine, her hunger was a problem that couldn't be ignored. Still, relaxing in the bath with Mira did sound lovely. Hesitation was clear on her face.

"I still haven't told you about my adventure, have I? Come and keep me company, if you don't mind." Mira was leaving for her next mission tomorrow. She decided to be proactive for once. Despite her embarrassment, she wanted to spend as much time as possible with Mariana.

Perhaps sensing Mira's desperation, Mariana answered gently, "If you'd have me, I would love to." She stepped into the bathtub and sat next to Mira.

"First, you see, I met these enemies known as Chimera Clausen in the middle of a mission..."

The unprecedented closeness shook Mira somewhat, but she talked on and on excitedly like a chatty old man. Before she knew it, any thoughts of sexual desire were long gone, replaced by long stories about the past month and a half.

Mariana listened, quietly but happily.

Meanwhile, whenever the floating Luna started to drift too far from Mira, the bunny would slap the water in order to steer her little boat closer again—an incredible act for a small lagomorph. However, Mira was too focused on the conversation to notice.



Once she'd told Mariana everything from the beginning of her journey to the end of her battle against Chimera, Mira described her next mission and looked down apologetically. "I leave tomorrow. That means leaving everything to you again, I'm afraid..." She'd only just come home, and she had to get ready to leave again. Mira felt terrible leaving all the work to her fairy.

Mariana, however, responded with a soft smile, "Your missions affect the future of this country, Miss Mira. Don't look so sad; be proud, please." The loneliness still remained, but Mariana's greatest wish was for Mira to carry on without worry. Her words warmed Mira's heart.

"I see... Then I'll trust you, Mariana."

"Yes, please leave it to me."

This was a normal exchange between them, but Mira found herself feeling closer than ever to Mariana. She had total faith in the girl. *Is this how it feels to be a married couple?* Mira wondered to herself.

Suddenly, she noticed how *physically* close they were and jumped out of the tub. "S-so, shall we?"

Mariana followed right after, and the distance between them didn't change much at all. Mira soon found herself receiving after-bath service while still fully naked. As Mariana handed her a fresh pair of undies from the newly built shelf, Mira thought to herself, *Maybe she's more of a mother to me than a wife...*

Similar, yet very different relationships. Mira began to seriously wonder where she'd gone wrong.

* * *

After they changed clothes and dried each other's hair with Ethereal Arts, the romantic scene ended.

As they left the changing room, there was a knock on the door. Mariana answered it to find the acting elder of the Tower of Evocation, Cleos.

"So that unfamiliar wagon out front was yours after all, Miss Mira?" It seemed he'd noticed Mira had returned and visited her for a report. "My Cat Sith has especially

good hearing... We suspected you two were in the bath, so I took the liberty of waiting here for you."

His summon had heard Mira's voice and the sounds of water, allowing him to surmise that they were in the bath together. He had waited half an hour to try knocking.

"If I knew you were here, I'd have come out sooner," Mira protested. "You could have summoned a spirit of sound to let me know..."

As an acting elder, Cleos was an extremely skilled summoner. He'd have many means of announcing his presence politely. There was surely no need to wait outside for so long.

"Well, I could have... But you've only just returned from your long journey." He didn't wish to disturb Mira as she washed off her fatigue, he claimed, though his eyes came to rest on Mariana. He didn't mention that he would feel terrible if he interrupted Mariana's happiest moments.

"Hrmm... Very well. Anyway, come in. You have reports, no? And I happen to have some questions about the academy."

"Of course. Forgive the intrusion." Cleos bowed deeply to Mira, even deeper to Mariana, and cheerfully entered the room.

While Mariana prepared dinner, Mira sat lazily on her couch and asked Cleos about the current situation of the summoning academy.

"Thanks to you, Miss Mira, we've gained enough students to stand with the other departments," he answered.

According to Cleos, the equipment and blasting stones Mira had provided made learning elementary summoning magic much easier, which brought in an influx of new students. Those who'd previously given up due to the difficulty returned in droves, making things very lively in their department.

"Oh ho ho. Now that *is* good news."

If summoning continued to gain popularity and produce excellent students, they'd

soon overcome the stigma against it. It would take time, but Mira was happy to take this firm step forward.

“However, with more students come more problems...” Cleos sighed and revealed the main subject of this conversation: the current challenges of the summoning department.

Alcait Academy’s classes could be generally split into two types. There were classes that offered general education, and there were those that delved into specific magic. They were independent of each other, and students were placed in them based on their proficiency in either. A student could, for example, end up as a second-year student in general education and a first-year student in upper-level magic at the same time.

And in this case, the onrush of new students had resulted in a situation where both children and adults could end up in their first year of elementary summoning at the same time.

Magical skill was distinct from academic performance and age, which meant that adults often ended up losing to children in this combined class. Differences in natural talent stood out like a sore thumb. This resulted in many conflicts between students, which led to the formation of factions.

The situation troubled not just Cleos but summoning department teacher Hinata and the middle- and upper-level students as well.

Factions existed in other departments—but through many years, they’d established rules between them and had more or less settled their differences. This was the first time the summoning department even had enough people for factions to form. It was easy for the students to get carried away.

“And there’s a bit of a troublemaker among them...”

After quickly sketching the situation, Cleos brought up a particular student. She was a new student and the daughter of a noble from Ozstein, who’d come to lead the biggest faction in the summoning department.

“A noble’s daughter... Hrmm,” Mira mused. The word *noble* reminded her of a certain sorcerer who’d recently ambushed her.

However, Cleos chuckled and assured her that this case was different. “It is troublesome, but warring factions among the students aren’t necessarily something I can’t handle. They’re ultimately just internal disputes, so Hinata and I can smooth things over as long as we’re attentive.”

The girl’s family *was* quite powerful, but Cleos claimed that this problem had nothing to do with her family’s authority. The real problem, he revealed, was that she had been constantly picking fights with factions from *other* departments.

“So others are being annoyed by this,” Mira replied. “That is an issue... Still, a first-year student of the elementary classes can only be so reckless, no?”

“Yes, that’s true. Nobody has taken her bait yet because they don’t take her seriously. They’re mature factions, so they know better and have avoided violence. However, we don’t know what may happen once she’s gotten strong enough to pose a real problem.” Cleos sighed and added that, at the rate she was going, it wouldn’t be long. This troublemaker had talent that stood out among the departments.

He explained proudly that, a week after learning her first summoning magic, she could already perfectly designate a summoning point, and her spell construction and summoning speed were hardly different from those of the upper-level students.

“Oho! That’s impressive.” Mira could summon as easily as she breathed now, but she still remembered the pains it took to get there. From her perspective, that girl was worth calling a real prodigy. She had such talent that she might even be able to shoulder the future of summoning... But that also meant that acting out could turn into real violence before long.

Cleos continued, “The girl picks fights with students from other classes almost daily, even unrelated to faction disputes. Poor Hinata has to intervene constantly.”

Hinata, a teacher in the summoning department, was doing her best to be a role model to all the new students. This constant distraction had her at her wit’s end.

“That sounds tough for her... Still, do you think the girl causes so much trouble because she has a prodigy’s pride?” Mira found it common for geniuses to exhibit this kind of self-destructive behavior.

However, Cleos shook his head and answered, “If that were the case, my job would be a lot easier. There is an overly self-conscious side to her, but she’s the sort of

hardworking student who takes classes seriously. She also takes the initiative to help other students, which we do appreciate, but..."

"Oh. Not what I expected. Now you make her sound like a model student."

A noble's daughter and a prodigy—two features of a person that might lead to a twisted personality. Yet she seemed to be an exemplary student. Why, then, was she getting into so many fights with other departments' students and factions?

Mira cocked her head at the apparent contradiction.

Hesitant, Cleos said, "The thing is, erm, she's a fanatical devotee of Master Danblf. The faction she leads is, likewise, a collection of his fans... They're a club of sorts. And as for why they pick fights, it's always because people are making fun of summoning or of Master Danblf himself. And, well, there is a part of me that feels like I should stop them, given my position... but another part is cheering for them. I find myself hesitating..."

He sounded troubled, but the look on his face showed that Cleos was none too upset by it. Once he'd finished explaining, he asked Mira what she thought he should do.

"I think there's no other choice. *They* must be taught, not us—taught not to speak ill of me or my summoning. That will resolve the problem. I see no fault in our students!" Mira, clearly excited at the prospect of her own fan club, displayed her obvious bias. It was as if her preconceived notion of noble prodigies had been swept clean away; she was now fully on the girl's side.

And she was more eager than ever to show off the greatest summoning magic she had at the next Spell Symposium. She would display the power of summoning once and for all!

When Eizenfeld proceeded to destroy the ceiling—no, blow it away entirely!—she planned to brush it off, saying, *Please, it'll only bother you on rainy days.*

"I appreciate your enthusiasm, but we have plenty of students now. Please let them look forward to the opportunity to show off their own skills." Cleos gently brought her back down to earth, sensing that she might only create more problems.

If Wise Man Mira were to use all of her might, she wouldn't just impress the crowd—she would make them *terrified* of summoning. So terrified, in fact, that they'd never

speak ill of it again.

But that would defeat the purpose. Instead, Cleos believed that letting the students right these misconceptions themselves would be for the best in the long-term.

Fortunately, there were signs of change coming for the Symposium. Thanks to Mira's recent appearance, they were reconsidering the judging standards and rules. As a result, the competition had begun to turn its focus away from flashy magic and toward the growth of the students.

A stage where new students could show their stuff was gradually forming.

"Hrmm. Then I suppose I should leave things to my followers. I can't wait to see how they do." Quickly convinced, Mira fantasized about the sight of a revitalized Tower of Evocation and smiled.

"Yes. I expect these difficult times to continue for a while, but thinking about our bright future gives me the power to go on."

If the students showed off the power of summoning themselves, people would naturally speak less ill of the discipline, and there would be fewer conflicts as a result. It would take time, though, and meanwhile this noble girl would continue to run into trouble. Still, Cleos smiled; perhaps this was all part of the process.

* * *

At a conference days later, it was decided that the teachers of the academy would keep a closer eye on the students. They knew other students' rude remarks were part of what led to the fighting, so they couldn't *only* monitor the girl.

A certain teacher at the top of the sorcery department was especially eager to see interdepartmental relations improve. As a result, the noble girl's scuffles never evolved into major issues, and sorcery instructor Siegfried found himself quite grateful to Hinata indeed.

CHAPTER 21

“HERE, TAKE these with you.”

“Thank you very much. Generous as ever.”

Cleos had reported that the school was running low on blasting stones, so Mira got right to work refining more to replenish the lost stock. The kind of blasting stones the school needed were easy to make, so she refined nearly a hundred of them in no time flat.

Cleos placed them gingerly in a bag and put away the refining desk he'd set out for Mira's use. Taking advantage of their short break, Mariana brought out something that looked like a black plate and placed it on the cleared table.

Hmm? What could this be? Actually, I recognize this...

There was a hole on the surface, with a magic circle engraved on the bottom. It didn't look *familiar*, exactly, but Mira knew she'd seen it somewhere. She gazed at it, racking her brain to try to remember.

Mariana went to the kitchen and returned with a large pot, which she placed on top of it. Suddenly, Mira's mind honed in on a memory: she'd seen this item when she was looking around a shop for adventurers once upon a time.

Mira gasped in surprise. *If I recall correctly, this is an all-purpose cooking plate with adjustable heating! And it's the high-grade kind that uses special magic to save more energy than the average product! Wasn't this 800,000 ducats? I gave up on it at the time. To think we have one right here in my tower...*

One could've mistook her inner monologue for a sales pitch.

The all-purpose cooking plate was such an impressive item that even Mira—a very poor cook—wanted one. It seemed the main course of their dinner would be a one-pot dish made on the plate. Mira's beloved deep-fried foods lined the table as well, each on special platters that kept the dishes from getting cold. This came as another surprise.

Mariana brought out prepared ingredients one after another.

Can the three of us eat all this? Mira wondered as she excitedly watched Mariana cook. Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Mm? A visitor?” Mira looked up.

Before she could stand, Mariana announced, “I’ll get it,” and turned.

The summoner took this opportunity to snatch a fried morsel and toss it into her mouth. “Delicious!”

When Cleos returned from putting his refining desk away and saw Mira sneaking food like a little kid, he chuckled to himself and smiled.

Then, in walked Luminaria and her aide, Lythalia.

“Welcome back, Mira,” Luminaria greeted her. “I came running as soon as I heard you were here.”

“It’s been too long, Miss Mira.” Lythalia had been shocked when she’d first learned that Mira was Danblf, but it seemed she had adapted. She remained composed even when she saw the young summoner.

“Mm, it’s good to see you too. What business brings you here?”

“Nah, we’re not here on ‘business.’” Luminaria walked right over and plopped down next to Mira. She claimed that Solomon had told her Mira was home, so she just came to visit, and Lythalia tagged along.

But Lythalia was busy gazing at a long robe in the corner, murmuring, “So this is Master Danblf’s...” After overcoming her initial shock, her faith in the Wise Man was unshaken.

Never missing a chance to state the obvious, Luminaria looked over the table and finally said pointedly, “Sooo, you’re having dinner, huh? Hot pot? Nice.”

Mira realized that she’d come precisely to mooch a meal. This was a common technique of hers, so Mira replied, as usual, “If you haven’t eaten, would you two like to join us?”

"Aww, what a sweet offer. We'd love to."

"Thank you for allowing us to join you."

They replied without hesitation, as if they'd planned to do this from the start. Luminaria then took a few items, mainly seafood, from her Item Box and said, "Let's throw these in too." They were all delicacies that made Mira's eyes sparkle.

"Allow me to help, Mariana," Lythalia offered.

"Thank you. I'll grab another pot."

The two aides began preparing a seafood pot with the ingredients Luminaria had brought. They knew each other well, and they acted in perfect sync, finishing preparations in no time. Cleos seemed uneasy around two Wise Men, so he joined the chefs to busy himself.

While they worked on the second pot, Mira and Luminaria got right to chatting after not seeing each other for so long.

After summoning Sanctia and bragging about her for a while, Mira suddenly remembered the Sword of the Crimson Lotus King in her Item Box. "Oh, right. I finally got that thing you asked me for!" It was her ticket to Luminaria's *Encyclopedia of Skills*.

"Ooh, good job!" Due to her position as a Wise Man, Luminaria was naturally overzealous about all things sorcery. She snatched the sword from Mira, gazed at it with starry eyes, and said, "Yeah, this is it!"

While Luminaria confirmed that it was real, Mira said, "Incidentally, what became of that Yggdrasil Chip I gave you? Did you manage to turn it into charcoal? If so, I would say my job is done. Hand over *the item*." Now that she'd fulfilled her side of the deal, the *Encyclopedia of Skills* was rightfully hers.

"Yeah, we did it. They kept saying it was a waste and all, but I've got charcoal now." Luminaria held a hand out to hold Mira back while she retrieved her *Encyclopedia of Skills*. "Here. *The item*. Take good care of it, got it?" she warned Mira before finally offering it to her.

The *Encyclopedia of Skills* contained abilities that could be used for evil in the wrong hands, so it wasn't widely circulated. Moreover, one needed to be trusted by the author

in order to obtain it. It was among the most priceless of player-made goods.

"But of course!" Mira agreed wholeheartedly, grinned like mad as she imagined the thirty years of progress within, and took the book. "Finally, I have you..." Mira cradled the tome in her arms. She gazed at the cover and opened the book.

There was yet another knock at the door.

"Nrgh... What now?!" she grumbled.

Just as before, Mariana rushed to answer it. Mira closed the book and hugged it tightly.

"I wonder," Luminaria answered, wholly uninterested, as she squatted in a corner of the room. She had placed a sheet with a magic circle drawn on it on the floor, then put the sword and ashes on top.

Luna had curled up on the end of the couch. She glared with evident hostility at the book in Mira's arms. Cleos seemed unbothered; he was absorbed in placing the silverware for their meal together.

The visitor was Amarette, Acting Elder of the Tower of Necromancy. She wore an outfit worthy of the title *gothic lolita*. Amarette surveyed the crowd and said, "I heard Mira was here, but I didn't expect to find a party."

"Right, we're all just about to have dinner. Why not join us?"

"Hot pot at this time of year? Odd. I'd be glad to have some." Amarette glanced at the table and answered with a smile. Her eyes turned to Mira. "More importantly... Mira, is that outfit new?"

She ran over right away, looked the outfit up and down, and touched it all over. "The embroidery is just wonderful. And the lace is *perfect*. Wow, and even the inside is so intricate!" Amarette got deep into Mira's personal space as she got a look at every inch of the clothing. After checking the inner collar, she murmured in amazement, "They even paid close attention to the contrast of the parts you can't see..."

It seemed this new, all-out creation by the maids was perfect enough to impress even the most fervent enthusiasts.

I can't read like this...

Unlike with Flicker, Mira was reluctant to tear Amarette off herself, so she let her have her way as she looked down at the book in her hands. However, it had to be said that she didn't mind a gothic lolita girl getting up close and personal with her. Not one bit.

Suddenly, a red gleam filled the room.

Feeling a wash of intense heat for just a moment, she turned to face Luminaria and asked, "I presume it went well?"

"Yeah, just about perfectly," Luminaria answered with a big grin. She added proudly, "It's just a shame I can't show you here. Everything would turn to ash."

She had used elementary fire magic to burn the paper with the magic circle that had reacted to the catalyst. This process was how sorcerers learned magic. And given her attitude, it must have been powerful magic indeed.

"Ho ho, you sound confident. But my new summoning techniques are quite something, too, you know. By the time my enemy realizes their power, they're already in the ground." Apparently infected by Luminaria's pride, Mira talked smugly about her own magic. Unfortunately, since Amarette was in the middle of flipping up her skirt, her gravitas was somewhat diminished.

The two Wise Men grinned fearlessly at each other. Cleos panicked, wondering how things had come to this. Lythalia showed no signs of caring as she prepped ingredients. Amarette began examining the coat Mira had left on the couch. Luna seized the opportunity to jump into Mira's lap.

And in the middle of it all, Mariana struggled to carry a big pot into the room. The scents of broth and seafood spread through the air, and everyone loosened up at once.

"I'll bring the remaining ingredients. Everyone, please take your seats," Mariana said as she placed the pot on the all-purpose cooking plate and returned to the kitchen.

"Mm, that looks delicious. Maybe seafood hot pot isn't so bad, after all," Mira mused.

"Right? I know you eat nothing but red meat without me, so take this opportunity to have some real food, all right?" Luminaria teased.

"Excuse you. I eat a very balanced diet."

"Pssh, yeah, right."

Mira and Luminaria took their seats as directed. In front of the pot, the contents of which simmered enticingly, they argued like old friends. Their rivalry from before was all but gone. Relieved by the sudden calm, Cleos sighed and took a seat. Such contests of pride were all too common between those two.

Before long, additional ingredients were brought to the table for everyone to pick as they pleased, and the whole group sat down to enjoy a big summer hot pot party.

The deliciousness of eating with friends made Mira forget all about the *Encyclopedia of Skills*. For now, she savored the flavor of the present.

CHAPTER 22

ALL THE FOOD ended up in their bellies, and everyone finished their customary end-of-hot-pot udon to top it off. With the hot pot turned off, the party was just getting started. But just as it was starting to get fun, the tower's communicator rang.

"Mm... What, at a time like this?" The tipsy Mira had been playing with Luna, but now she frowned and glared at the communicator.

Luminaria, who was already drunk, shouted, "Shut uuuup." Cleos, Lythalia, and Amarette seemed well on their way to wasted as well.

Among them all, Mariana stood straight up and walked with perfect, steady steps toward the communicator. "Yes, this is the Tower of Evocation. Aide Mariana speaking," she answered.

Solomon's voice came from the other end of the line. There was an urgent problem. Kagura reported that information had come from Katiella, the demon Wallenstein had purified. It was clearly an emergency, and he wanted Mira and Luminaria to come to the castle at once. He'd explain the details in his office.

As soon as Solomon hung up, everyone rushed to move out.

"The demon... I have a bad feeling about this," Mira sighed.

"Aww, I wanted to get a good night's sleep too..." Luminaria complained as she took out a bottle and gulped down the contents. She then produced another and handed it to Mira.

It was a strong sobering cure. Mira gulped hers down as well.

"Ooh, the effects are immediate." Her hazy mind cleared up in no time, and the pleasant tipsiness was gone. Mira was back to sobriety. It definitely spoiled the fun of being pleasantly tipsy, though anyone who'd had too many would surely appreciate it. Still, this was an emergency; she couldn't face it without a clear mind.

Luckily, Luminaria carried these around just for times like this. That, she added with

a laugh, was what allowed her to drink with abandon any time she wanted.

* * *

Mira and Luminaria boarded the wagon together, and the others saw them off as they departed for the castle.

“Ride’s rougher than I expected...” Luminaria looked down, glad she’d sobered up before getting in. If she were still drunk, Mira would’ve witnessed a disaster in her precious wagon in about ten minutes.

“Well, we *are* in a hurry. It’s normally much smoother.” Given the urgency, Mira had ordered Garuda to make best speed. As such, the ride was shakier than usual. It was a recipe for motion sickness.

Twenty minutes later, they landed in front of the castle and emerged from the wagon, pale-faced. Garuda’s full power was quite a bit faster than they’d anticipated.

Mira managed to thank the worried Garuda and dismissed it. She then turned to Luminaria. “Say... Do you have any anti-nausea medicine?”

“Nope. Just the sobering stuff...” Luminaria never got motion sickness, even in carriages. But Garuda’s merciless flight was a first.

Still, the pair trudged onward. Despite the concern of the castle soldiers they passed on their way, they managed to reach Solomon’s office in one piece.

“Ah... Those two came, as well?” Mira asked, wholly unmotivated due to her nausea.

“Oh. It’s been ages.” Luminaria was no better off; even though she was surprised by the unexpected reunion, her tone of voice remained flat.

Beyond the door were Kagura and Wallenstein. Solomon had mentioned a report from them, but it seemed they’d given it in person rather than long-distance. Something must be terribly wrong.

“What’s gotten into you two...?” Kagura asked.

“Oh, Luminaria, it’s good to see you again. Umm... Are you okay?” Wallenstein sounded worried.

The pair were in awful condition after their tough journey. They tottered over to the couch, plopped down, and lay motionless.

“Bumpy ride...”

“Rough seas are nothing compared to that...”

“No surprise from you, Gramps... But Luminaria, you’re the same as ever, too.” Kagura rolled her eyes, walked over, and held out two small bottles. One had a green label, and the other was blue.

“What are these?” Mira asked.

“Motion sickness medicine. Drink up,” Kagura said. The label colors were different, but it seemed they had the same effect. Kagura’s spirit airship could face turbulence depending on the weather, so she always carried a few on her.

“Oh, thank you, Kagura!” The two put their hands together in prayer, snatched the bottles away, and gulped them down.

“Nnnnrg! What is this!?” Mira shouted and writhed on the couch. The flavor was incredibly sour, as if someone had distilled a whole barrel of astringent persimmons.

Luminaria looked at Mira in surprise. “Did you poison hers or something?”

“Of course not,” Kagura answered bluntly. But after a pause, she revealed that it was an experimental drug. According to her, it had been developed specifically as a response to the spirit airship’s problems. “As you can see, Mira’s kinda tastes bad. We improved the flavor, which resulted in the one you drank, Luminaria.”

Kagura shrugged. Then, she looked over at the summoner writhing on the couch and declared that she was going to get down to business, with or without her.

Mira glared murderously at Kagura. “Demon. Monster. *Kagura*.” However, she couldn’t complain too much; despite the awful taste, it *had* cured her motion sickness.

“Here, Gramps. You can have this.” This time, Kagura held out a bottle of some milky substance—perhaps a palate cleanser.

“And this is?” Mira asked warily. Kagura explained that Johan’s wife Angelique had

made it with fruit from the Forest of Seasons. She dubbed it “new four-season au lait.” “Oho, really?” Mira quickly accepted it and took a sip. The wonderful new flavor brought her back to life in an instant.

Once everyone was ready, Wallenstein spread a map across the table and spoke up, “Okay, I’ll begin.”

Come to think of it, Wallenstein used teleportation magic too... Mira remembered as she looked down at the map. Kagura had probably switched places with Tweetsuke to get here, but how had Wallenstein come all the way from Sentopoli? How did his teleportation magic work? Could Mira learn to wield that power?

These questions filled Mira’s mind, but for now, she needed to focus on the emergency at hand.

“This morning, after I finished sealing Katiella’s powers...” Wallenstein launched into his explanation. The issue he described was indeed worthy of this urgent summons.

Katiella was the dark demon who’d infiltrated Sentopoli under the name Felicia. With Mira and Kagura’s help, they’d found her faster than expected and succeeded in sealing her powers. The process had been completed this morning, and Katiella returned to her senses. Upon being questioned, she revealed the location of the duke-level demon and its goals.

The goals? Release the other sealed oni tombs, just like the demon had with the War-Torn Burial Ground.

Despite the destruction of Chimera Clausen and the exorcism of the Oni Princess, the duke-level demon Katiella worked for still had all of their achievements and research results. It planned to use this information to create an organization even more powerful than Chimera Clausen.

“The sealed oni catacomb it plans to open next is not far from here,” Wallenstein added as he pointed at Alcait Kingdom territory on the map.

Katiella had also reported that the Oni Princess had given the demon the method of reviving the oni race, so it would be sure to incorporate this in its future plans.

“Those plans will be executed tomorrow. Preparations are already underway, and it’s abducted people from a nearby village to act as vessels. By tomorrow, they’ll be dead,”

Wallenstein concluded. They needed to investigate and deal with the situation swiftly.

"Things are worse than I expected..." Mira mused.

Having a duke-level dark demon so close was already an issue, but even worse was the fact that a piece of Tyriel was dormant in one of those hidden oni coffins. Based on what Kagura had learned from Tyriel, it was normally unthinkable for an angel to be possessed by a vengeful spirit. However, things changed when a dark demon's power was involved. In other words, the Oni Princess was in fact a being created by the demon itself. It was not unlikely that a second Oni Princess already existed.

What would she do to the kidnapped villagers? There was no doubt that they had to save them as soon as possible.

"So, do we have a strategy?" Luminaria asked.

Solomon nodded, looked at the Wise Men around him, and said, "I think our best strategy will be to hit them with our strongest forces. What do you think, everyone?" In other words, Solomon and the four Wise Men, the greatest force in Alcait, would charge in personally. Simple, but effective.

"Well, we *are* up against a duke-level demon. I say it's for the best," Mira agreed. Duke-level demons had awesome power, but the five people here had defeated such creatures with similar numbers before.

"Yeah, I have to agree. Besides, this squad is well-balanced," Luminaria said. Adding to their numbers carelessly would just lead to losses, so they preferred to work with just these few elites.

"Duke or not, we're more than enough for a demon. I think we'll be fine." Kagura was sure that they'd win. After all, they had a reliable front-liner in Solomon, and they had plenty of supporting firepower.

"Don't forget the demon has a divine item in its possession. We can't be careless." Wallenstein was the voice of prudence. However, he didn't say they would lose; real confidence burned in his eyes. After all, dark demons were like incarnations of demonic power. If an exorcist were ever truly in their element, it would be up against demons.

Essentially, Mira, Solomon, Luminaria, and Kagura had no worries. They would

investigate the sealed oni catacomb on the outskirts of Alcait and eliminate the enemies therein.

Once the strategy was decided, Solomon summoned Reynard and Joachim and filled them in. When he finished, their eyes were wide from shock.

“Th-this is... unexpected, to say the least.”

“I’m certainly surprised.”

The demon issue wasn’t what had surprised them, however. It was the woman in Japanese clothes and the young man in the suit. They were the missing Wise Men Kagura and Wallenstein. Their appearance was bigger news than any demon.

“It’s an honor to meet you!” Reynard bowed, overflowing with emotion. He looked like a little boy who’d met his biggest heroes.

“I am Joachim, leader of the Mage Corps. It would be an honor if you remembered my name.” Joachim greeted them with calm humility. But his eyes sparkled, betraying his excitement.

The Nine Wise Men were legendary heroes to the people of Alcait. Kagura and Wallenstein greeted them sheepishly, and Mira fantasized about what would happen if they knew who she really was. She glared at Reynard as she recalled his attitude toward her.

Solomon gave Reynard and Joachim urgent orders: lock down the area around the tomb.

“Roger that.”

“Understood.”

At least with that, the place would be secured until the situation was resolved and a careful investigation completed. That was partially to keep anything nefarious from escaping, but it was also to prevent anyone from approaching. Reynard and Joachim would lead the effort; Suleiman had already organized their teams.

The pair saluted Solomon, bowed to Luminaria, Kagura, and Wallenstein, and left. The group in the study could hear them running away at top speed.

Thinking about the token half-salute she'd gotten from Joachim on his way out, Mira glared unhappily at her fellow Wise Men.

Gods, how I want them to know the truth!

* * *

After they left, Solomon stood up and said, "Welp, we'd better hit the road. Everyone ready?"

Their enemy this time was a duke-level dark demon, armed with a divine item, to boot. They would have to fight it with all their power, and that meant preparation was key.

Luminaria smirked. She was always ready. Kagura said she'd been ready since she got here, and Wallenstein added that he was good to go too.

"Ooh, right!" Mira piped up. She opened her Item Box and took out a particular robe. "We're up against a strong foe this time, so I'd best wear this."

Mira retrieved the Wise Man's Robe (Summoner) she'd left in her Item Box for who knows how long. It came with many powerful combat bonuses—it would be no exaggeration to call it the ultimate summoner's equipment.

However, now that there were replicas of this very same robe sold to children all over the world, she unfortunately looked like a little girl playing pretend when she wore it. This time, however, everyone was a Wise Man. She proudly wore her robe.

"Mira's giving us fanservice!" Luminaria joked. Wallenstein quickly turned away, and Kagura rolled her eyes.

While Mira struggled and writhed to put it on, Solomon chided, "You've got it on backwards!"

"It's been a while, okay? It's hard," Mira snapped as she straightened it. She wiggled around a little more until she was finally finished changing clothes.

* * *

They needed to get there fast, which meant traveling by air. Thus, they would all five be riding in Mira's wagon. It would be a little cramped.

As the wagon sped toward their destination, they began a more detailed strategy meeting. The five of them put their heads together and simulated various strategies revolving around the duke-level demon, a possible Oni Princess, and any other irregularities.

"Now, let's hash out all the variations we can think of..." Solomon said.

The Wise Men always did their best to be flexible, but it was their custom to discuss strategy before any battle in order to devise a general plan and be ready for anything that hit them. They had been the source of countless legends as a group of ten, not just because of their extraordinary power but because of their perfect teamwork.

"First, with Eizenfald—" Mira argued.

"Don't be stupid," Luminaria rebutted. "I'll use my new magic—"

"If the Oni Princess is there, let me handle her," Kagura said. "You all can—"

"Umm, if possible, I'd like to be able to seal the duke—" Wallenstein chimed in, trying to get a word in edgewise.

The four Wise Men were all over the place. They needed a single person to bring them together... and there was only one man who could do that.

"Okay, everyone, I hear you. Let's do this—"

The legends of the Nine Wise Men were built on the foundation of this central figure—Solomon. That was why the Kingdom of Alcait, despite being small, was famous in the world of mages.

Their strategy meeting lasted about ten minutes. Just when they'd settled on a plan, the wagon landed. On Wallenstein's suggestion, Garuda had set them down halfway up a mountain, surrounded by forest.

The group alighted, and a little girl appeared from between the trees and ran over to them.

"You're finally here!" Liliella shouted as she approached Wallenstein. "The preliminary investigation is done." Then, she turned to the others and bowed politely.

"Erm, this is my friend, Liliella." Wallenstein introduced her and explained that she was a light demon who'd had her abilities sealed and returned to her senses. He asked her to report the results of her investigation to everyone.

"There's a hole going deep into this mountain," she replied.

Wallenstein's comrades had been investigating the sealed oni tomb while they waited for him to arrive. They were certain that the duke was inside. And, as they'd feared, the team discovered what they believed to be an Oni Princess, alongside many lesser demons. What's more, ten of the abducted villagers had been gathered in one place.

Liliella wrapped up her report. "We expect the experiment to begin any minute now."

"We were right to hurry," Wallenstein replied. "Thanks for the report, Liliella. Meet up with the others and help the knights who come after us."

He had already filled his comrades in about Reynard and Joachim's units. That was the first time Wallenstein's people had met anyone from Alcait, and Solomon hoped that it would be a good first step toward welcoming them into the country. Even in emergencies, he never neglected to think of the future; that was Solomon's way of doing things.

"Okay. You be careful too, Wally," Liliella replied. She gazed at Wallenstein for a moment, then ran off to rejoin her companions.

Luminaria had plenty of experience with women, and that last parting glance told her everything she needed to know. She smirked and put a hand on Wallenstein's shoulder. "I think I get the vibe here..."

"Excuse me? *Vibe?*" he asked, confused. Luminaria didn't elaborate.

* * *

Liliella's report had given them a general understanding of the situation inside the oni tomb. Mira and the others modified their strategies accordingly, then entered the hole in the mountain.

The tunnel, which was clearly no natural feature of the mountain, bored deep underground. With their way illuminated by the light of Ethereal Arts, Mira's group descended until their destination finally came into view: an area blanketed in

darkness, where the narrow rock walls suddenly stopped and opened up.

Mira had seen this same thing at the War-Torn Burial Ground. Up ahead was the beginning of the catacomb. They didn't know who might be waiting for them, or where, so they stepped carefully.

"So many of them..." Mira muttered as she searched with her Biometric Scan.

While the entrance might have been different, the interior layout was identical to that of the War-Torn Burial Ground. There was no danger of getting lost. However, the *state* of the inside was quite different: the small rooms and corridors alike were bursting with oni skeletons.

"We'll definitely have to purify this later..." Kagura sighed unhappily.

If the War-Torn Burial Ground was also like this when the demon found it, just how much black mist ore had Chimera Clausen mined? And every ounce of it had been used to harm spirits—rage simmered in Kagura's stomach just thinking about it.

They could purify it now if they had the time, but saving the villagers was their first priority. If they purified the curse first, they could potentially weaken the Oni Princess. However, doing so would notify the demon of their presence, possibly leading it to use the villagers as living shields. Worse, it might begin its plan early and try to turn the captive humans into oni vessels right away.

The villagers were their countrymen, and they had agreed ahead of time that they'd prioritize saving them. They could work out the question of purification later.

CHAPTER 23

THE PARTY proceeded cautiously for some minutes. It seemed the demon hadn't expected them, since they encountered no patrols on their way to the center of the burial ground. The amphitheater-like central area was massive, with a tower in the middle. Just as the reports said, the duke sat in the clearing, lit by the faint light of flames.

This demon was quite a bit larger than the baron Mira had encountered in Nebrapolis, with six wings on its back. Most striking of all was its jet-black skin. It looked more like armor than skin, and its face was truly demonic and terrifying.

Peering into the clearing, Mira first confirmed the location of the villagers. About a hundred meters away, on the side of the chamber opposite, she found a group of people bound and terrified.

"Hrmm... They're pretty far."

If they wanted to rescue the villagers as quickly as possible, the optimal way would be to circle around this clearing. Once they'd confirmed the villagers' safety, they could analyze the enemy.

On closer inspection, they spotted the Oni Princess as well—she was on the other side of the demon as well, surrounded by nearly a hundred lesser demons. Unsurprisingly, this duke commanded powerful lesser demons. Each was two meters tall. "Lesser" was a relative term in this encounter.

Furthermore, black mist wafted about—probably emanating from the Oni Princess. Over and over, they watched as it tried to take form before failing and unraveling.

"It looks like she can't fully wield her dharma powers yet," Kagura observed as she eyed the black mist. She could tell from the Oni Princess's appearance that the vengeful spirit had yet to fully acclimate to this piece of Tyriel's body.

All this probably meant the Oni Princess had only just been born. She'd be quite a bit weaker than the one at Chimera Clausen headquarters. Kagura smiled; at this rate, she'd be able to get this piece of Tyriel without too much trouble.

"Looks pretty weak, huh?" Luminaria said, sizing up the duke.

"It certainly does," Mira agreed.

Surprisingly, the duke-level demon also looked unusually feeble. It sat with its back to a pillar, occasionally holding its body and trembling as if enduring some kind of pain. After a moment, the Oni Princess helped it stand, and it rose unsteadily to its feet.

"It would have had to use the divine item to dig this hole," Wallenstein explained. Once he said it, the situation made sense. The divine item radiated sacred power and was strong enough to gouge a hole in the side of the sealed oni tomb. Yet it was the polar opposite of dark demons' evil energy. Using the item shortened a dark demon's lifespan. The duke was still recovering.

"It's almost too perfect a chance," Solomon pointed out. Having their most fearsome enemy weakened was an ideal opportunity. Solomon turned to ask Wallenstein how he'd seal a duke-level demon.

"Good question. Though I'm unsure if we can avoid a battle in this situation..."

The demons' darkness was inextricably tied to their incredible power. By sealing that power, Wallenstein could return them to the light and awaken them to their duty. That was the reason he'd been searching for this duke. But if they fought, the demon's power could turn unstable. Trying to seal the demon in that state might damage its memories.

Normally, Wallenstein preferred to approach without his target noticing and begin the sealing process before the demon realized. This time, though, it was clear that they would have to fight.

Mira and Solomon were worried by this, but Wallenstein replied, "We can think about how to deal with that later. For the moment, we must prioritize stopping the demon's schemes and rescuing the villagers. Leave the question of sealing to me."

It was more important to put a stop to whatever the demon had planned here than to return it to its proper state. Wallenstein added that they should take advantage of the enemy not being aware of their presence and launch a preemptive attack. Weakened or not, dukes had overwhelming power. Battle was inevitable. There were innocent villagers who had to be rescued. They had to be thorough.

Wallenstein and his people would find a way to seal it, sooner or later. Solomon had full faith in him, so he agreed to the preemptive strike and began devising a plan.

“Okay, got it. Then how about we do this?”

Each Wise Man proposed their strongest firepower for the ambush, and Solomon brought them all together. Their plan took shape.

Solomon would circle around and use Shield Phalanx to cover the villagers; that would be the signal for their attack. Because they didn’t want to injure Tyriel, they would go for a single-target attack on the duke rather than a wide-range attack. They would put everything they had into it and hope to defeat the demon in a single strike.

A simple plan, indeed.

“I’m off. Give the signal when you’re ready.” Solomon squatted low, waved goodbye, and concealed the sound of his footsteps like a special forces commando as he circled around the amphitheater.

“How long has it been since we executed a joint preemptive strike?” Luminaria murmured with a nostalgic smile.

“Back then, this was an everyday thing for us.” Kagura remembered the old days, too, smirking as she watched Solomon sneak carefully around the edge of the chamber.

“You’d always jump the gun, Luminaria.” Wallenstein shot her a caustic glance, causing her to gulp nervously.

“Hah! You’re right. When we fought the Lord of Fiends, he avoided all our other attacks thanks to her.” Mira sighed exaggeratedly, smirked, and added, “You’d best get the timing down today.”

“Hey, big talk coming from you. You jump the gun almost as often as I do.” Luminaria glared at Mira. Kagura and Wallenstein agreed.

In truth, there had been countless occasions where their timing had been off. Mira insisted that she’d never done it on any top-level raids; she didn’t jump the gun when it mattered. Luminaria had done it way more often.

Kagura was surprisingly good at keeping pace with the others, and Wallenstein was a

pro at it. Neither of them had ever attacked prematurely.

"You're both awful at this," Kagura said.

"Agreed." Wallenstein sided with her.

"Nrgh..."

"Ulp..."

Mira and Luminaria fell silent. The other two Wise Men glared at them, as if to say, *You'd better do it right this time.*

Unable to bear the silence, Mira said, "Oops, I'd best prepare myself too," and ducked back into the corridor.

The demon and its cohorts might notice the mana and light of a summoning circle, so Mira summoned the youngest of the Valkyrie sisters, Christina, far from the central chamber. Christina would be the one to handle this ambush.

"Thank you so much, Master!" Christina's joy at being summoned only lasted a moment, replaced by fear as she timidly looked around in the dark. "Waaait. I thought I was getting out of training, but now I'm in this dark and grimy place? Spooky..."

"Speaking of dark, those are... a lot of black marks on your face. What happened?" Mira asked.

Christina's skin was normally bright and beautiful, but now, her face looked like it'd been scribbled on. She frowned deeply and answered, "This... is the number of times my sister bested me..."

Apparently, it was some kind of shuttlecock punishment game. Naturally, she'd lost over and over. Mira silently offered Christina a towel, which she accepted while issuing a steady stream of complaints about her sisters.

When they returned to where the others waited, Christina greeted them. "I-it's a pleasure seeing you all again..." To her, Mira's friends were worthy of nearly as much reverence as her master herself.

"Oh, hey, Chris."

"It's been a while."

"You're still a cutie, huh?"

The other Wise Men welcomed the tense Christina with smiles and informed her of her role: to deal an all-powerful blow to the duke-rank demon along with the other mages.

"Did you say... a duke?" When Christina spotted the demon in the middle of the chamber, she tensed up even further. Dukes had power that outstripped even the oldest Valkyrie sister, Alfina. Was she really meant to attack that thing at the same time as the Wise Men? Christina always boasted that she wasn't much weaker than Alfina, but now she started pleading, "I can't, I can't, I can't! Please, ask one of my sisters!"

"No, I think you're perfect for this," Mira declared, despite the unconfident Valkyrie's panicked protests.

Out of all the summons in Mira's arsenal, Christina might have boasted the strongest single surprise attack. Her Christina Slash from the other day, despite the silly name, had destructive power even greater than any of Alfina's strongest blows.

"Take a good look," Mira said. "It's weakened right now. All you have to do is give it a little Christina Slash. After that, our friends here will deal with it. It'll be okay. You can do this."

"With my power..." Easily flattered, Christina's eyes gradually filled with fighting spirit. "On my master's honor!" she declared, putting Mira's honor on the line for no particular reason as she roused herself.

"There you go. That's the spirit!" Mira cheered her on. With this, they each had their own offense decided. Now, they just had to finish the prep work. "Now, where is that Solomon right now?"

Solomon hid at the edges of the amphitheater as he advanced. His concealment was perfect enough that Mira couldn't see him, so she used her Biometric Scan to pinpoint his position.

They were up against a duke, after all. Solomon was clearly moving very carefully. He was two-thirds of the way there. At this rate, he'd make it with time to spare. Mira directed Christina to begin charging her power to the maximum. Even Alfina

acknowledged the power of the Christina Slash. But to wield it to the fullest, Christina needed to charge her mana.

But because of how much she'd stand out, she needed to return to the dark, lonely corridor to charge. "Eugh, so gross..."

Five minutes later, she returned fully charged. Not long after that, Solomon reached the planned position. Luminaria, Kagura, and Wallenstein quietly began constructing their own spells as Christina stood nervously next to them.

"Listen well. Unleash your attacks the moment Solomon deploys Shield Phalanx and draws the duke's attention," Mira reminded them. She stood among them as she prepared her own magic. She wasn't about to leave it all to Christina. Though she had almost no spells beyond summoning that would affect a duke, she could at least cull the numbers of the lesser demons behind it.

During the all-out attack, Mira's role was to throw the lessers into disarray. They could be a handful when they mobbed people, so it was common to divide and conquer when battling against demon nobility.

"Now, I'll send the signal." Mira used a magical device to send a message that couldn't be seen by the demons, communicating to Solomon that they were in position. He sent an affirmative reply.

The strategy was simple. After their first big strike, Wallenstein would deal with the duke, while Kagura would deal with the Oni Princess. Mira, Solomon, Luminaria, and Christina would mop up the lesser demons before joining the other lines of battle.

Solomon's spirited roar signaled the start of the operation. "We won't let you get away with this!" He raised his voice from atop a wall on the other side of the demon and jumped down with his shield at the ready, drawing the attention of all the enemies—just as planned.

The instant they all turned toward Solomon, the Wise Men seized their opportunity.

"Let all burn to naught but ash."

[Sorcery: Scorching Sledgehammer]

"In my hands, I wield the dynast's spear."

[Banished Commandment: Evil-Piercing Spear]

"Five Phases, take form in scorching heat."

[Celestial Arts: Fire—Scarlet Serpent]

The three of them finished the final lines of their casts and activated their spells. For once, they were unleashed with absolute perfect timing.

Christina swung her sword down in harmony with them. "Christina Slaaaash!"

The three spells struck the duke's back with awe-inspiring force, and the blinding blade burst into particles of light. It was a magnificent blow, equal to the spells accompanying it.

However, their attack did not end there. Mira's own Waning Windmill shot through the lesser demons, blowing them away.

"Now!" Mira roared as she and the others rushed into the fray—in the midst of the stunned duke, surprised Oni Princess, and down-but-not-out lesser demons.

"Outta my way!" Luminaria burned a group of fallen lesser demons to ash as she passed by. She then turned her attention further away and fired off spells to cull their numbers.

"We'll be taking that body back!" Kagura made a beeline for the Oni Princess and readied her khakkhara staff. Reclaiming Tyriel's body was her top priority.

An already weakened target, heavily wounded by their preemptive attack. Wallenstein would be able to suppress the duke alone now. He was hugely relieved. "This seems doable."

"Know me as Solomon, King of Alcait. I will see my countrymen, the true treasures of my land, returned!" After fending off the entirety of his compatriots' first attack's aftermath with Shield Phalanx, Solomon swung his sword, cutting down the lesser demons who surged toward him.

Fighting with his people at his back, Solomon must have looked like the very image of hope. The villagers, who'd been cowering in fear, watched his powerful figure from behind.

“Ooh, it’s His Majesty!”

“King Solomon is here to save us!”

“Oh, thank goodness! We’re going to make it!”

“We’re here now. You’re safe,” Solomon declared. The villagers rejoiced and burst into tears.

I suppose that is one of his kingly duties.

These villagers would be fervent supporters of Solomon for the rest of their lives. By protecting them, he earned their faith. Mira had to admit she was impressed.

“Now, I suppose I should clear the stage for their performance,” she mumbled to herself. Beyond rescuing the villagers, Mira’s role was to clean up the lesser demons so they didn’t interfere in Kagura and Wallenstein’s fights.

“This is fine!” Christina looked cheerful, perhaps because she wouldn’t have to fight the duke face-to-face. She used her sword and shield skillfully to engage multiple lesser demons at once, cutting them down one by one. It wasn’t flashy, but it was efficient.

“They may look strong, but they’re ‘lesser’ for a reason. Split them up, and they’re as good as dead.” Mira summoned Guardian Ash and Garm, as well, in order to throw enemy lines into disarray. Meanwhile, she toppled lesser demons with her fists.

“We’ve finished cleaning up over here. Please come this way,” Luminaria said with an unusually polite tone, perhaps because the villagers were watching, and pointed out an escape route.

“Thanks. I’ll be right back.” Leading the villagers, Solomon ran through an area cleared of enemies—there was only ash there now.

“Whoa, it’s Lady Luminaria...”

“She’s gorgeous...”

“I’ve never seen one of the Nine Wise Men up close!”

The villagers exclaimed happily, amazed, as they followed him. At the same time, they whispered to each other about who the people fighting alongside her might be.

After leaving the amphitheater with the group, Solomon advanced a little farther in the tunnels and turned. "It's dangerous. Wait here." He set his shield on the ground and light poured from it, creating a defensive barrier all around the villagers. "You'll be safe."

Leaving them with those words, he hurried to rejoin the battle. The villagers gazed at him, intoxicated by their sovereign's presence.

* * *

Back in the chamber, the duke repelled a wave of blue flames and jumped back. He surveyed the battlefield, his face warped in a grimace. "I wasn't aware such humans existed!"

Though wounded, the duke was still strong. Even Wallenstein's exorcist magic wasn't enough to bring him down immediately. However, the demon knew it was between a rock and a hard place.

"You dare make a fool of me?!" the Oni Princess screamed.

On the other side, the battle between Kagura and the Oni Princess was proceeding very much in Kagura's favor. This was no surprise; she knew all the Oni Princess's strategies from the last time she'd fought one, so an inexperienced princess didn't stand a chance against her.

However, Kagura was struggling to pin her down. The last one hadn't run away quite so much. "Give up and let me exorcise you!" she demanded.

After cleaning up most of the lesser demons, Mira and Luminaria focused on the last ten.

"These are annoyingly persistent..."

"They are the greater of the lessers, after all."

These demons, which had numbered nearly a hundred not long ago, were vastly stronger than the average foe. Even so, they were no match for the Wise Men. The ten

remaining were special among them; they'd withstood not one but three attacks. They were among the strongest lesser demons Mira and Luminaria had ever met. However, that was *all* they were. Mira, Luminaria, and Christina prepared to finish them off.

Realizing that they were at a disadvantage, the duke suddenly shouted, "We have no choice. Oni Princess, use my lackeys!"

What did he mean? What scheme could he devise in this situation? By lackeys, did he mean the ten lesser demons?

Mira and the others raised their guard. The answers to those questions came quickly.

"I'm loath to use such defiled forms, but very well..." the Oni Princess muttered. Black mist spewed from her, enveloping the remaining lesser demons.

"What is that? Damn, what are they trying to do!?" Luminaria was curious, but she wasn't about to wait around and find out; she pointed at the lesser demons and began casting.

"I don't know, but it can't be good," Mira said, then gave new orders to Garm. No matter what the demon was plotting, they couldn't afford to wait for it to come to fruition.

[Sorcery: Crimson Greatsword]

[Banquet of Fire]

A sword of flames birthed by Luminaria's sorcery swung down. At the same time, a fireball launched by Garm exploded violently, sending flames flying. The black mist dissipated, and the lesser demons were charred and fell lifelessly to the ground.

"You all really just do things willy-nilly..." Solomon returned from evacuating the villagers and sighed at the sight before him. He pointed out that the black mist probably had a magic-reflecting effect.

Mira gasped in recollection. "Oh, you know, it might have. Though really, I just used Garm."

"It didn't work, though, so who cares?" Luminaria shrugged with a smirk.

There was an eerie sound—no, an eerie *voice*. "Gh... Gaagh..." The party looked over

and watched as half of the lesser demons they'd blown away stood back up.

"That still wasn't enough?" Luminaria clicked her tongue.

Garm's ultimate move and Luminaria's sorcerous incantations should have been strong enough to kill even tough lesser demons with ease. As proof of that, half of them were motionless. Yet, despite having sustained fatal damage, some still moved.

"Wait... What did you do?" Kagura demanded of the Oni Princess, who ducked behind the duke with a giddy smile. What had this creature done to the lesser demons?

Her grin turned evil. "Ooh... Ooh, my adorable little children..." She seemed to be talking to herself, but Kagura immediately grasped the meaning of her words.

"Everyone, be careful. The oni have been reborn!" she warned them. The Oni Princess had successfully brought some oni to life, though she used the bodies of lesser demons as vessels instead of the villagers. The five figures before them clearly had a different aura than before. "I see. So humans are optimal vessels, but that doesn't mean you can't use something else in a pinch."

How strong the oni race was, no one knew, but at the very least, they were powerful enough to challenge spiritkind. Solomon observed these five new enemies carefully with a sword in either hand.

The creatures before them still resembled the lesser demons they once were, but their demonic features had now been replaced with oni-like features. Two horns on their heads, fierce visages, and increased stature that increased their height to three meters tall. It was clear at a glance that these resurrected oni possessed power far beyond the lesser demons they had inhabited.

They seemed groggy as they began to look around. When they spotted the lesser demon corpses, the Oni Princess, and the duke-level demon, they whipped around toward Mira's party and roared. There was no intelligence in their eyes. Yet, perhaps due to the instincts of the lesser demons they subsumed, or because they felt the curse of the Oni Princess, or even because they sensed the power of spirits within the Wise Men, they lunged at the party with murderous rage.

Lesser demon, oni, or otherwise—whatever they were, they still had to be defeated. As the oni charged forward with a speed that defied their large forms, Luminaria fired off spells to intercept them.

"We know what we gotta do!" Her spells struck one after another, the raw impacts blowing the oni backward.

"We do, but our job has just become much more irritating," Mira complained.

The oni flew back, but soon stood up as if nothing had happened. It seemed they were much more durable than the lesser demons.

"Be careful, now. That black mist around them weakens your magic by a lot."

Kagura had resumed her game of tag with the Oni Princess. She'd been watching the five oni, so she shared what she knew: Their mist didn't reflect magic like that of the Oni Princess, but it *did* seem to have higher resistance to spells and physical attacks. It worked especially well against magic, unfortunately.

Kagura had anticipated a day like today might come, so she'd had Tyriel and the old spirits teach her about oni. Now she could assess the evolving situation.

"Ugh, for real?" Luminaria frowned.

Mira reached up, patted her on the shoulder, and grinned. "Now, now. Leave the rest to us."

On her command, Garm, Guardian Ash, and Christina charged forward. They each took on one oni in an intense head-to-head battle. In the midst of Garm's howls, Ash's roars, and Christina's complaints of, "Hey, this one's a little too strong for me!" Mira took out her Alabaster Oni-Slayer staff and leapt into the fray.

If the oni were protected by the black mist, then this weapon ought to be highly effective.

She wove between the three duels and ambushed oni with strikes of the staff. When she did, the black mist faded for a moment. In that instant, Garm and Ash unleashed powerful blows to corner the weakened target.

"Masteeer! Over here! Help me too, please!"

Mira had prioritized helping Garm and Ash, and Christina was stuck dealing with a mist-protected oni. However, the oni had clearly taken damage. Christina was quite the excellent war maiden, even if she was the youngest. Despite her protests, she

honestly didn't seem to need the help.

Mira cheered her on and got back to culling oni with her two furry friends.

CHAPTER 24

WHILE MIRA'S forces, consisting of Christina, Garm, and Guardian Ash, fought off three oni, the other two blocked Solomon's path.

"You're tougher than I thought." He grinned as he attacked again. No matter where he struck—neck, arm, torso, head, or anywhere else—it was like hitting steel. Even his beloved holy sword could only scratch their skin. However, the more he swung his sword, the more momentum he gained. "Good... Very good."

Solomon flashed an evil smile; this was the first time in a long time he'd had enemies worth his best. He took out a third and fourth sword and put them on his back and hip. Before long, he had six swords equipped like an asura.

The oni were strong. Worthy of their reputation, even. Their power and ferocity were no less than that of higher-ranking fiends. Only a handful of people could hope to fight them off in single combat. Yet Solomon faced them head-on and soon began to beat them back. Indeed, after fighting with the Nine Wise Men for so long, his abilities were nearly peerless.

"You can withstand even this? Then how about this one?" Solomon skillfully wielded his six swords as he cornered the two oni. This fighting style took advantage of Elemental Release, a paladin skill that he'd mastered. It heightened and released the power dormant within his swords. That was why paladins synergized so well with special weapons like holy and demonic swords. It gave Solomon unparalleled offense and defense when armed with all six of his holy weapons.

When one of the oni swung its powerful arm, he'd halt its momentum with a water holy sword and then stop it with an earth holy sword's rock wall. When they tried to use their speed to outwit him, he'd slow them with his ice holy sword, hold them back with his wind holy sword, and then shoot them down with his lightning holy sword. When the oni tried to go on the defensive, his fire holy sword overwhelmed them.

Despite being a paladin, the quintessential tank, Solomon had abandoned shields and formed his own unique fighting style. He was also a true lover of battle, clawing his way to the top with his unusual build.

"Let's start with one."

Using the propulsion of wind and fire, Solomon accelerated with explosive speed and stabbed one oni in the chest. The fire holy sword pierced through its skin and burned the struggling oni from within. Soon it was a pile of blowing ash. Right away, the arm of the second oni pierced through its back and reached for Solomon. It was a perfect surprise attack. The oni's hand rushed toward the paladin at such speed that he'd have no chance to evade.

Yet it never reached him. Just as it was right in front of his face, the hand stopped and began to shake.

"And there's two," Solomon said as he raised his lightning holy sword. The oni was already covered in ice.

Solomon's ice holy sword lay at his feet. The oni had stepped into its icy field and frozen in the blink of an eye. It was totally unable to move. But even so, the oni didn't give up. Its bloodshot eyes were proof that it would never surrender. Heedless of its inability to move, it tried desperately to kill Solomon.

Solomon's lightning holy sword began to crackle with electricity that intensified until it became a blinding manifestation of divine judgment. The frozen oni struggled in vain. In its trembling form, one could catch a glimpse of genuine fear.

A flash of light, a roar of thunder—the being before Solomon disappeared without a trace.

"Thanks. It's been a while since I got to enjoy a real battle." Solomon turned and surveyed the battlefield, satisfied. "I'd say I'm done over here."

Of the five oni, Solomon had felled two himself. The other three had just been overwhelmed by Mira and her summons' teamwork. All that remained were the duke and the Oni Princess.

Or so he'd thought. Unexpectedly, another figure began to move.

It was one of the fallen lesser demons that had been struck by Mira and Luminaria's relentless assault. They'd thought all but the five that had become oni to be dead, but it seemed at least one was still kicking.

"Whoa. Still alive, huh? Well, one more of you won't change much." Solomon strode forward with a holy sword in both hands.

A ray of light shot past him. The dazzling spear struck the newly resurrected oni. With the black mist covering its skin, the spear couldn't deal much damage. Yet someone sprinted past Solomon, heedless of that fact.

"Leave that one to me!" It was Luminaria. She must've been simmering for a while now since she didn't have any enemies to fight. Now she charged ahead, ready to enter the fray once more.

"Didn't you hear Kagura? She said magic won't work."

The effects of the black mist weakened any magic that struck it. Physical attacks were better, which was why Mira—armed with her special weapon—and Solomon stood on the front lines. But it seemed Luminaria wasn't satisfied.

"Not quite. She said it won't work *well*. Fine by me!" It didn't nullify magic *completely*, she pointed out as she slung spells at the oni.

"You're too much," Solomon muttered with a sigh. He turned his attention back to the duke.

The oni quickly perceived Luminaria as an enemy. It glowered at her with bloodshot eyes and charged.

"Ooh, very fast," she chuckled.

The three-meter-tall oni was startlingly powerful. However, Luminaria didn't falter; she gently pushed her right hand forward.

[Sorcery: Fiery Barrage]

The spell activated, sending out countless bullets of fire. Every one of them closed in on the oni and burst as they struck.

"Ggh... Gaaah..." Caught in the powerful blasts, the oni stopped running. And it didn't stop there; with every explosion, it slid back another few inches.

"Knew it." Luminaria smirked to herself. She'd noticed that, though the black mist

greatly reduced the effects of spells, that didn't apply to the spells' physical aftermath.

The newborn Oni Princess's power was still incomplete in many ways.

The aftereffects didn't deal much damage. But Luminaria continued to push the oni back with her hail of bullets. Once it was far enough away, she swung her left arm in a wide arc. Simultaneous use of sorcery was an extremely rare, high-level ability.

The spell, a product of her extreme skill, took perfect form in midair.

[Sorcery: Glacial Mallet]

It was nothing but an enormous hunk of ice—but that only made the destructive power when it fell all the more brutal. The glacier crashed down on the oni, who had no way to evade. This construct of sorcery slipped through a loophole in the black mist, its raw mass physically crushing the oni.

But the oni's giant form wasn't just for show. It caught the glacier and slowly began to raise it back up. Lifting a ten-ton iceberg required unthinkable strength. However impressive it was, though, that was as much as the oni could handle. It was in no shape to stop Luminaria's next attack.

"When odes ring distant in the sky and holy maidens are dyed in blood,

The stars sing a nameless song, the moon performs a nameless dance.

The time for annihilation falls into my hands.

Do not look upon it; death is brought by the light itself.

This is for you, and annihilation is for me.

Take flight and echo through the world, verses of the skies."

While Luminaria began quietly chanting to herself, Mira and Solomon rushed to get away from her.

"Wait... You're doing that *here*?!" Solomon gasped.

"Luminaria, you idiot, what are you thinking?!"

They knew that incantation, and they scrambled away as fast as possible. On the way, they warned Kagura and Wallenstein, who were still in the heat of battle. Their shouts echoed through the air as the spell took form.

[Ancient Sorcery, the Third: Princess of Catastrophe]

Light gathered in Luminaria's hand, swelled, and became a current that engulfed all before her. That light contained nothing but raw destruction. An eerie noise tore through the space, swelled, and disappeared into nothing. When it was gone, so, too, was the oni—leaving not a single trace.

Harsh winds blew through the space where the light had disappeared. The destructive light had obliterated even the air in its path.

Mira held tight to Guardian Ash to keep her footing, while Solomon stooped low. Kagura and Wallenstein were fortunately far enough away that they could just chuckle watching the others.

"See? How 'bout that?! I got through it!" Luminaria herself was blown back by the raging winds, though she didn't seem bothered at all.

It didn't matter if magic didn't work *well* against it. Even if it blocked 99 percent of her power, she just needed to use enough power for that last 1 percent to crush her foe. It was a power play that could only be done by a sorcerer—they had the most raw force of all mages. And Luminaria was the pinnacle of sorcerers.

"Good grief... You always go over the top," Mira sighed.

Luminaria had only gotten away with creating some strong winds because they were in a sealed tomb protected by divine power. If this were any other location, she'd have created a huge cavern or sinkhole out of nothing. It would be outright disastrous.

Luminaria's full power rivaled Eizenfeld's dragon breath. That was why she was forbidden from using it except in very specific situations.

The sorcerer flipped in midair and landed cleanly on her feet. She examined the floor

and walls, unmarred by the destructive light, and grumbled, “Aww, man. Nothing?!” It seemed that was her way of testing her own strength compared to that of gods.

She was still nowhere close. Still, she grinned at her handiwork. Wise Man Luminaria, the Natural Disaster—one mustn’t be fooled by her womanizing nature; she had unworldly and powerful magic worthy of her title. On this day, she’d awoken to a new goal: to have her magic rival even the power of the gods.

* * *

Thanks to Mira, Solomon, and Luminaria’s efforts, the resurrected oni had all been destroyed. There were no signs of any new ones appearing. Now, the duke and the Oni Princess were *really* the only ones left.

“I’ve got you now!” Kagura’s clear superiority had turned her battle with the Oni Princess into an uneven game of tag, and even that was coming to an end. Her Soul Dispatch had allowed her to enclose the Oni Princess in a barrier created by talismans she’d laid down in advance.

“To think, a mere human...!” The Oni Princess glared hatefully at Kagura, but Kagura did not respond to her taunts. Instead, she quietly cast a spell.

[Shikigami Invocation: Seven-Star Withering]

In that moment, the barrier that had held the Oni Princess in became an execution ground. As with the last Oni Princess, Kagura readied her Alabaster Oni-Slayer khakkhara staff. This one was made to be even stronger than the one she’d bent.

The power within the star of Alkaid purified the Oni Princess instantly. The horns on her head tumbled to the ground.

The now-unpossessed Tyriel slowly opened her eyes. “Umm... What’s going on? Am I...?”

“Yeah... You’re okay.” Kagura gently hugged her and breathed a sigh of relief.

After spending so many years guarding these catacombs, she was clearly fatigued. So fatigued, in fact, that she dozed off right there. Since the tomb had only been discovered recently, her recent transformation into an Oni Princess hadn’t hurt her too much. Her sleeping face was truly as peaceful and gentle as an angel’s.

Kagura wrapped the angel in her chihaya robe. Then she stepped away to think for a moment, and beckoned Mira over.

* * *

The duke had tried to step in to save its Oni Princess, but it was stopped by one of Wallenstein's barriers. Rage simmered in its eyes. "What manner of beings are you...?"

Wallenstein confronted the duke, filled with the desire to expel the evil from the dark demon. "People who want to save you." No matter what he said, his genuine desire to help would not reach the demon.

"Enough nonsense!" it roared, brandishing its strength. The duke was clearly wounded, but its power was still beyond that of any common demon. Each blow, loosed like raging waves, had enough power to kill.

However, Wallenstein wouldn't be beaten. This foe should have been beyond a single Wise Man's power, but exorcism was especially powerful against demons. He carefully used his barriers to fend off attacks, using alternating white flames of purification and black flames of destruction to fight back.

The duke was now the only remaining enemy. The rest of the group watched the final duel together.

Solomon spoke first. "It was clear at a glance that it was weak, but it's even worse than I thought."

"Indeed," Mira agreed. "Compared to the duke I once fought, it seems two whole ranks lower."

The divine item it had used to break through the catacombs had clearly taken a toll. With the added damage of the preemptive attack, the duke's motions were dulled.

Wallenstein alone would be able to handle it without their help at this point. But he had plans for the demon, so trying to help him might only cause more trouble.

"For sure. Since he wants to seal it and all, how about we just leave it to him?" Luminaria said, parking herself down on a random rock.

"Right. Let's do that," Kagura replied and walked back to clothe the previously naked

Tyriel. Unfortunately, the underwear and other clothes she gave her were all Mira's.

Angel or no, Kagura insisted that they couldn't just leave her naked. Since Mira was close to her in height, she would have to provide a change of clothes. With Christina's help, she got Tyriel dressed while the four watched the fight between Wallenstein and the duke. Based on what they could see of Wallenstein's strength, he would surely prevail.

However, five minutes passed, and they began to feel that something was off. The fight between Wallenstein the Shadow and the demon duke had turned into an unexpectedly close battle.

Wallenstein's attacks weren't as biting as they had been, Mira realized. She cocked her head curiously. "It seems to me that his attacks aren't quite getting through..."

"Maybe he's too focused on that sealing stuff?" Solomon guessed. Wallenstein was working to save demons, and this duke was an opportunity to nab it and all of its subordinates at once. Was he perhaps being too cautious?

"Maybe. They say capturing someone alive is three times harder than killing them." Luminaria misquoted a statistic as she watched over the battle. "Still, he's holding back, right?"

Once Kagura finished making Tyriel decent, she reminded them what Wallenstein had told them before the battle. "Yeah, it's weird. Didn't he say he'd focus on stopping the duke?" Now that she mentioned it, Solomon and Luminaria agreed.

"Then why's he holding back like this? It feels... off." Luminaria watched his fighting even closer.

"I wonder why..." Kagura shrugged.

"It's beyond me," Mira agreed.

They had fought alongside Wallenstein many times by now. They had to wonder what was going on here. Then Solomon noticed something. "Y'know, that suit... Would it happen to be Residence Noir's Formal Premium line?" He was referring to Solomon's clothes, a black suit and white shirt that made him look like some kind of secret agent.

"What? What are you, er...? Premium?" Mira asked him.

Solomon informed her that it was the name of a luxury clothing brand that sold formal suits like the one Wallenstein was wearing. Apparently, their designs were popular even with nobles and royalty due to their simple yet stylish silhouette. Though they weren't worn to traditional events or ceremonies, they were a common sight at smaller banquets and less formal occasions.

While there were many stores that sold suits, Residence Noir was designer fashion. As far as he could tell, Wallenstein's suit was one of theirs.

"I've seen it here and there in catalogs, but... that thing costs over ten million ducats," Solomon said.

"Ten million..." Mira was speechless. Spending ten million ducats on a single suit was beyond insanity. She supposed it might make sense if the suit was special in some way. "That's quite the item he's wearing. Am I to assume that the suit has some added effects?" It must have had various stat boosts or something.

But Solomon refuted that entirely. "It shouldn't have anything special, actually—just the usual defenses against blades and magic to protect him from assassinations or ambushes. I don't think there are any effects that would help fight a duke."

It seemed Wallenstein's suit had close to zero added value in terms of defense. The price point was purely for the tailoring, material, and brand value.

"So he's going toe-to-toe against a duke with no added effects," Mira said.

"As long as he hasn't customized it himself, yeah... As far as I can tell, it really is just the default item."

It was natural for this world's equipment to come with combat buffs—that's why Mira had changed into her Wise Man's robes ahead of time. If one planned to fight a duke, even a weakened one, they'd pull out their best equipment.

It was unlikely for Wallenstein to lose at this rate, but it was true that he was wasting time. Luminaria rolled her eyes. "Well, no wonder he's having trouble."

"So, he wasn't taking a duke seriously at all?" Mira chuckled in exasperation. He looked to be doing just fine, yet he couldn't quite overcome the demon with his attacks.

"I do get why he doesn't wear his Wise Man outfit everywhere, since it would expose

his identity," Kagura chimed in. "But he could at least use it for important battles like this." Kagura's outfit was made by tailors working with the Isuzu Alliance. Its capabilities rivaled those of her robes.

While replica robes were sold as souvenirs, it wouldn't take long for someone—especially a former player—to figure out who Wallenstein truly was if he wore the real thing and went wild with his magic. But there were only fellow Wise Men and Solomon here today. Why hold back?

"We'll have to get him to take this more seriously," Solomon said.

He'd said he could handle the duke, but at this rate it would take all night. The four called out to him, "Heey, Wallenstein!"

"Yes? What's wrong?" he replied, even in the midst of intense battle.

His fellows shouted back that he seemed to be having an awfully hard time. They asked in unison, "Should you be wearing that suit?"

His face grew overcast—the look of a man who didn't want to dredge up buried memories.

"Though wounded, it's still a duke," Mira reminded him. "Why would you hold back?"

"Mira's right," Luminaria pressed him. "What idiot doesn't bring their strongest gear to a fight like this?"

"Wallenstein, change your clothes and finish this properly, would you?" Kagura pleaded.

"Come on," Solomon urged. "We'll take over for a while, so go get changed."

One after another, the group shouted at him. But Wallenstein's response was unsatisfying; he seemed hesitant.

"This fight is booooring."

"Yeah! The soldiers are waiting outside, too."

"It's late. I'd really like to get Tyriel to bed, y'know..."

"I gotta get to work early in the morning, too."

They continued to press him. The heckling lasted until Wallenstein finally folded. "Fine. *Fine!* I'll change clothes," he said, resigned. He erected a barrier between himself and the duke and swiftly retreated. After striding past his four companions with a scowl on his face, he retreated into the corridor.

"You dare... make a fool of me?!" cried the demon. Faced with four identical smirks, the outraged duke shattered the barrier with its bare hand. The air shook, and black mana poured from its body. This was a state that former players generally called *berserk mode*.

"That wasn't our intent at all." Solomon stood before the duke and raised two of his swords. Berserk demons attacked ferociously, so the Wise Men behind Solomon set up a defensive perimeter.

Their battle began.

The demon swung a black axe. Solomon's holy sword and Kagura's barrier met its attack. Kagura's barrier weakened the attack, and Solomon's defense did the rest. Luminaria and Mira took this opportunity to fire off magic, and Christina followed up with her sword, forcing the duke to back down.

Solomon on the front line, Luminaria as their main firepower, Kagura on support, Mira as a guerrilla attacker. Their formation drove the enemy back with ease—no duke could hope to break through it.

They bought time for Wallenstein, giving him the opportunity to change. A few minutes later, the man of the hour returned. By that time, the duke was nearly dead.

"I'll finish this quickly," Wallenstein murmured. He leapt over his friends and attacked the duke, heedless of its berserk status.

His new outfit was a robe as dark as night, and all of his body was covered in jet-black cloth, save for his eyes. That was the true form of Wallenstein the Shadow: a black mummy, basically.

The Wise Man's Robe (Exorcist), made perfectly to his specifications, was the culmination of everything a middle schooler might find "cool." As someone who'd graduated from those dark times, it was a relic of his unwanted past. Still, one couldn't

argue with its effectiveness. It stabilized his overly powerful spells, allowing them to harmonize rather than interfere with each other.

"Woo! This is what we've been waiting for! Wallenstein the Shadow!" Luminaria catcalled.

Much like dreams, one eventually had to wake up from the dark depths of middle school. For Wallenstein, this awakening had happened long ago, which was why his friends took this opportunity to hoot and holler at him now. They recalled how the usually timid Wallenstein had always been so lively when he wore that getup.

"That's it! Superb! This is the Wallenstein the Shadow we know!"

"Woo, go! You're too cool, Wallenstein!"

"This is the man you were born to be!"

Their battle progressed quickly to a climax, and soon Mira and her friends witnessed a scene like the one that had once been the source of his title: the Shadow.

White flames of purification filled the chamber. Wallenstein flitted to and fro, shooting black flames of annihilation all over the place. This sight, like a shadow shifting and changing form, was emblematic of Wallenstein's fighting style.

Amid the sounds of his friend's cheers—or jeers—Wallenstein fought fiercely. He flawlessly drew out the special traits of his field of magic to overcome the duke-level demon.

The demon, however, did not take this new attack lying down. Its power raged yet greater, creating a swirling black mass of energy.

This was the most powerful technique usable by demons, available only to a handful of those with noble titles: Everlasting Erasure.

"Now's your chance!"

"Go, Wallenstein!"

"If you don't finish it now, you're not a real man!"

"That's gotta be it. That has to be the finisher."

The duke's attack was one that could force-dismiss even Eizenfeld in one strike, blowing away all kinds of protection with ease. Pure annihilation. If it struck, it would be catastrophic—it was the attack this party was most wary of.

However, the exorcist Wallenstein was a different story.

"Phoenix! Phoenix!" the onlookers chanted in unison. No, perhaps it was too wild to call cheering; it was more like a fanatical incantation.

Though Wallenstein was reluctant to validate the peanut gallery, he knew this really was the best way to deal with the attack. He grudgingly thrust his right hand forward, prompting even louder cheers from his audience.

Their excitement was like kids at a festival, with a hint of childishness. But perhaps because of this, Wallenstein's state of mind shifted. Memories of the days when they were all together bubbled to the surface. Memories of friends who'd played along with all of his silliness.

"Destroy demons, snuff out evil, seize victory! Blaze, flames of exorcism!" Wallenstein roared, voice filled with equal parts nostalgia and shame. He grinned defiantly under his dark mask. Cloaked in white fire, he charged into the swirling black mass. His audience applauded; the Wallenstein of the old days had returned.

"Burn for all eternity!"

A fissure ran through the black. Wallenstein leapt out with his cloak of blazing white, shooting black and white flames from both palms as he charged the duke. He'd pierced through the demon's most powerful attack—the demon had no way of stopping him.



White and black blazes spread wildly, engulfing the enemy like the wings of a phoenix. Truly a spectacle worthy of the Shadow.

* * *

When the flames faded, there lay the duke demon, tied up with the black cord used to restrain demons.

“Wallenstein really is incredibly strong.”

Once upon a time, Mira had defeated three dukes solo. But that had only been possible due to enormous amounts of time and money spent preparing. Wallenstein could do the same thing on the fly; that was ironclad proof of just how powerful exorcism was against demonkind.

Solomon, Luminaria, and Kagura all showered praises on him as they eyed the restrained duke. Wallenstein glared back at them, but it wasn’t long before his eyes softened into a smile.

CHAPTER 25

IN THE EXPOSED catacombs, the duke-level demon had schemed to revive oni. Its preparations had been going well, and oni were extraordinarily strong. If it had been allowed to succeed, it would surely have created an organization that surpassed even Chimera Clausen.

Yet Mira and company had thwarted his schemes. The duke, who'd been working in the shadows for many long years, was decisively defeated.

"Still, what comes next is the real problem... How can I go about sealing it?" Wallenstein wondered aloud.

The demon's power was unstable from the battle. To seal it, he first had to stabilize the duke's power—but that would take time, and it wasn't possible while the demon was restrained.

In these kinds of cases, Wallenstein would normally release the demon and have someone watch over it. However, he worried that releasing a duke would pose too great a risk.

"Tough question..." Mira said.

"Yeah..." Kagura agreed.

The group watched the fallen duke and thought to themselves... was there any way to cleanly return it to light demon status?

As everyone fell silent, a voice echoed through Mira's mind. *"Miss Mira, you all have been discussing this 'sealing' process. What does that mean?"* It was the Spirit King. Apparently, he'd been using Mira's eyes and ears to monitor the situation. Once things had calmed down, he became curious about this term, "sealing," and decided to ask Mira about it.

"Oh. You see..." Mira began to respond telepathically.

Perhaps the Spirit King, with all of his vast knowledge, had a way of resolving this

issue. Mira summarized the sealing of demon powers that Wallenstein had described.

"Hmm. I wasn't aware of this." It seemed even the Spirit King hadn't heard about Wallenstein's techniques. He listened intently and mused, *"How to calm the demon...?"* After a moment of thought, he declared that if that was what was needed, he might be able to help.

The Spirit King had come through again. "Goodness! How would you do it?!" Mira cried.

The solution was actually much closer at hand than she'd anticipated. According to the Spirit King, Leticia's songs had the power to soothe more than just the body and mind. They even worked on angels and demons too.

"My word..." Mira thought she knew Leticia well, but she was surprised by this revelation. She smirked; it really was a perfect solution. "It's my time to shine!" she declared proudly.

Solomon, Luminaria, and Kagura all looked at her, annoyed. But Wallenstein seemed more open. "You have a plan?"

"I do. The Spirit King has given me some useful information," Mira said.

Solomon's attitude changed entirely. "Wow, that sounds promising."

"Sick!" Luminaria said.

"That's good news for you, Wallenstein," Kagura agreed.

They clearly trusted the Spirit King's ideas far more than Mira's. The group got excited, as if the sealing was guaranteed now. Wallenstein himself was quite relieved; before, he'd been grasping at straws.

"You guys are rude..." Mira pouted, but she summoned Sanctia.

She couldn't summon Leticia or any other spirits yet due to the oni curse wafting around the place. The only thing she could summon right now was Holy Sword Sanctia, heir to the Spirit King's power.

"Let's get this place cleaned up." Mira took the sword in hand, and the Spirit King's

blessing pattern appeared all over her body.

"Whoa... So *that's* what you were telling me about," Solomon exclaimed when he saw the brilliant divine pattern. Luminaria and Kagura were likewise amazed by the power of the Spirit King emanating from her.

"This is incredible." The sight filled Wallenstein with hope. Between the Spirit King's power and this new idea, victory was within their grasp.

Light gathered around Sanctia and swelled. Once it was blindingly bright, Mira swung the sword down.

Gentle yet vivid light washed over the chamber. It emanated like waves from Sanctia, permeating every inch of the catacombs. The light engulfed the curse, purifying it—it even melted the fallen horns of the former Oni Princess.

"Whoa, so this is what the place looked like before?" Solomon gasped, faced with the sudden change of scenery.

The purified catacombs had returned to their original snow-white. What had once looked and felt like a cursed lair now felt like a sacred space.

"So they turned this all dark? How spiteful can you get...?" Luminaria thought of just how hateful the oni must have been to accomplish that feat.

In the past, the oni race ran wild and endangered all of nature, forcing spirits to put an end to them. It seemed the oni still hated the spirits enough to cause all of this. Kagura, believing the oni had earned their punishment, spat, "They're really the worst."

"By the way... That sword is cool and all, but we gotta work on your form... Pfft!" Solomon sputtered and started laughing. Rather than finding her brandishing of Sanctia divine, Solomon was amused by her amateur moves. Mira's axis of rotation was off, and she was bent forward. While Solomon laughed, Mira retorted that it didn't *matter* since it was ritual, not combat.

While they argued, Wallenstein said impatiently, "So, Mira? Is it working?!" He was already standing in front of the duke preparing something, probably getting ready to seal it. On closer inspection, his collection of tools was likely worth tens of millions of ducats.

"Don't rush me, please. I was only cleaning up; the real work begins now." Mira hoped Wallenstein wouldn't jump the gun as she drew a summoning circle. Purifying the catacombs was only preparation to summon Leticia.

If you can hear my voice, feel my thoughts,

Perhaps, will they wake you?

How I long to hear your words, to listen to you sing,

Echoing like a bell, right here in this moment."

Her incantations echoed, became a melody, dissolved into the air, and formed a gate.

"Woo! Hi everyone, here's my original song, 'Ode to My Master'!"

The moment Leticia emerged from the summoning circle, she began singing the prelude to her favorite song.

"You're really gonna make her sing a song about you?" Solomon said half-jokingly. He shrugged. Luminaria and Kagura made a few cracks about how vain Mira was. However, Wallenstein kept his eyes fixed on Mira, demanding she explain her plan.

"She... I can't help... She just *does* this sometimes..." Mira tried to make an excuse; she could never predict what Leticia might do when she appeared. She requested the spirit sing "Lullaby of Peace" instead.

"I love requests!"

The odd, pop-like melody from before stopped and was replaced by a gentler, classic tune. It was soft and sweet enough to touch any heart, filled with something that evoked a mother's gentle love.

As everyone was drawn in by her song, Mira asked Wallenstein, "Is it working?"

Despite being in such an impatient mood before, it seemed the song had calmed even

Wallenstein. "Hmm? Let's see..." He suddenly remembered his mission and checked on the duke. "This is... Wow, it's unbelievable! The duke is fully stabilized." It seemed the Spirit King's idea was a huge success. Wallenstein took a moment to confirm. With surprise on his face, he exclaimed, "It's as if we hadn't fought at all! It's as stable as can be. At this rate, I could do it in one go—"

The duke didn't look much different to their eyes, but it seemed it was in the ideal state to be sealed. Its perfect stability meant that the sealing wouldn't take a mental toll on it, so instead of splitting the process into steps, it could be accomplished all at once.

"Then hurry and do it now," Mira said. Wallenstein swiftly prepared and began the sealing process.

While Wallenstein worked, Kagura suddenly looked around and asked, "By the way, where's the divine item?"

"Ah, good question. Where could it be?"

To enter the oni catacombs, the demon would have had to use the divine item's power to gouge out a tunnel. In that case, it should be nearby... but they hadn't seen anything.

The group began searching while they waited for the sealing to finish. "Maybe it's in there?" Solomon found the tower in the center suspicious, so he checked inside.

"At this point, I'd bet it's farther away." Mira ran off to check the small chambers on the outer rim.

Kagura and Luminaria began poking around nearby as well.

"Hmm, where is it...?"

"Don't ask me."

But they found no clues to the divine item's whereabouts. The four all turned their eyes to Wallenstein, who was still working to seal it. They might not find it, but once the demon returned to its senses, it would be able to tell them. Eventually, Wallenstein stood up. The process had taken exactly as long as he'd predicted.

With Leticia's singing as background music, Wallenstein called out with a big smile, "It's done. And it's... perfect!" He was quite satisfied; the sealing would have zero effect

on the demon's memories.

"Oho, finished?" With his demonic powers sealed, the duke looked nearly human now. Moreover, Mira noted with a frown, "He's a handsome devil..." She was especially wary of handsome men.

Luminaria gazed at the light demon for a moment and declared, "Yeah, he's a real heartbreaker." She and Mira were similar in their outlook.

Hearing their jealous complaints, Kagura peered curiously down at the demon lying on the ground. "What? He seems like a gentleman to me..." She evaluated him as someone born a woman. He was a very knightly, heroic-looking man.

"Nah," Luminaria disagreed. "He'll leave a trail of inconsolable women in his wake wherever he goes."

"Agreed. Do not be fooled," Mira warned Kagura.

What was it that drove the two of them—now a beautiful woman and a cute girl—to treat a man like this when he wasn't even competition? Was it a learned reflex? Either way, Mira and Luminaria disliked the light demon on sight.

"Men are so weird..." Kagura sighed in exasperation and turned her attention to Wallenstein. "What do you think, Wally? Doesn't he look like the kind of guy to take good care of the people he loves?"

When Kagura asked the question, Mira and Luminaria focused on him as well.

"Umm... Dunno... I guess we won't know until it happens?" Wallenstein stalled and hoped someone would change the subject.

"So, when should we wake him up?" Solomon asked.

Wallenstein whipped around as if he'd been thrown a life raft and replied, "Morning, at the earliest."

"Then, shall we ask him where the divine item is then?"

"Looks like we're camping."

"Guess you gotta let a guy get some sleep."

"That sounds like the quickest way to find it..."

Everyone agreed with Solomon's assessment. The debate about hot men was left unsettled.

* * *

"I sensed a sealing. Could it be?" These words were spoken by Faust, the off-duty knight who'd just wandered in.

"That's right. It went great," Wallenstein answered. Faust peered at the light demon, and a smile spread across his face. Perhaps as a fellow demon, he could tell that he'd been fully awakened. The comrades rejoiced over their completed mission.

"Hey, is that guy...?" Solomon asked. Was this the light demon Mira had told him about?

Now that he thought about it, Wallenstein realized this was their first meeting. "Whoops, sorry. Let me introduce you." He introduced Faust to the group, and the group to Faust.

After everyone exchanged greetings, Faust asked, "By the way, Wally, what's with the... uh, the getup?" One might think Faust had known Wallenstein for a long time, but it seemed this was his first time seeing his friend dressed like *that*. Faust stared at the black mummy curiously.

"It's just special equipment... Don't ask. Please." Wallenstein averted his eyes and tried to give off a "change the subject" vibe again.

This was an outfit he'd requested back when his eighth-grader syndrome was at its peak. Now that he'd been rehabilitated, he'd become a pretty normal, if not outright docile, adult man. That made this all very embarrassing. He'd rather not bring it up.

The Wise Men and Solomon were smirking smugly at Wallenstein, which was enough to tell Faust that he should drop it.

With that settled, Faust hoisted the duke over his shoulder. He planned to take the new light demon back to headquarters, where he'd have peace and quiet until he woke up.

"I'll be off." With that, Faust was suddenly clad in a mysterious light. In the next instant, he disappeared. He had used teleportation magic.

"Ooh! Oh! That's it! I've been wondering about that!" Mira had seen this once when they were riding the train. Faced with it again, she pressed Wallenstein for details. "You came from Sentopoli with that same spell, didn't you? Teach me! Now!"

Mira wasn't the only one; Luminaria and Solomon were also watching, rapt.

"Umm, well. Okay..." Wallenstein explained that it was indeed teleportation magic. However, it wasn't all-powerful; it required a sort of landmark at the destination. There was also a limitation on the number of markers.

It functioned similarly to Kagura's own magic that allowed her to switch places with her shikigami. In comparison, Kagura's actually seemed much more convenient, since she could send Tweetsuke anywhere at high speeds to serve as a mobile landmark.

But according to Wallenstein, it was actually an Ethereal Art, which meant that any mage could learn it. Moreover, he'd given his travel marker to Kagura. After she switched places with her shikigami at Alcait Castle, he was able to teleport to the marker.

Even more excited by the existence of such awe-inspiring magic, Mira watched Wallenstein eagerly. "I see... In other words, if I put one of those down, I could use that magic myself!" Solomon and Luminaria watched with bated breath, too.

"Umm, look... I kind of had to promise I'd never teach anyone else how to use it..." he replied nervously. He'd already shared all the information that was safe to disclose. How to learn it, and how to create the magical tools used as markers, was confidential.

"Mm? Who was it? Who has silenced you?" Mira quickly decided that she'd just have to ask the person who taught him.

"I'm not allowed to divulge that information either..." Wallenstein looked away. He insisted that it was a secret. Mira could tell from his stubbornness that whoever it was must be quite important, and the spell itself must have been quite powerful. So she gave up.

What would happen if teleportation magic usable by any mage spread throughout the world? Mira was focused on its convenience for transportation, but the magic could

be dangerous if used for criminal purposes. No doubt whoever taught Wallenstein kept it secret because they were afraid of it being used for nefarious ends.

She couldn't rightfully interrogate him further.

"I suppose that's that then..." she sighed.

Teleportation magic was so tempting... she'd be willing to go rather far to learn it. But knowing that it would put Wallenstein in a tough spot made her reconsider.

"Well? We've done what we must here. Shall we return to the castle?" Mira turned to go, as if trying to shake off her disappointment. Luminaria shrugged it off as well.

"You two are just gonna have to learn it for yourselves." Kagura followed after them with Tyriel on her back. She wore a composed smirk on her face, as if to say that *she* didn't need to rush; she could already teleport, after all.

Mira and Luminaria glared at her. Behind them, Solomon approached Wallenstein, who was in the middle of changing back into his suit.

"Hey, so, what about me?" he asked.

"Sorry. No can do," Wallenstein apologized.

It seemed this information was too confidential, even for a king.

CHAPTER 26

AFTER REUNITING with the villagers waiting in the tunnels, the party left the oni catacombs. Reynard and Joachim had already arrived, since they'd rushed over in the armored car. Not far away, they spotted the FAV and its driver, Garrett. Next to him were Liliella and another beautiful woman.

She looked like the portrait Liliella had drawn; this must be Katiella. The two of them seemed upset. In contrast, Garrett looked gleeful as he talked to them about something. Nothing romantic. Given how often he gestured toward the vehicle, the subject of the conversation was clear.

"Thanks for coming," Solomon called out to Reynard and Joachim. He succinctly described what had happened in the catacombs. Though the danger had hopefully passed, he requested they perform a quick search.

They knelt in answer.

"Understood."

"As soon as our units are ready, we'll begin combing the inside."

According to their report, troops from a nearby fortress would be arriving soon. As soon as they finished preparations, they would lock down the surrounding area and begin their investigation.

After handing off the villagers and debriefing, the party boarded Mira's wagon and returned to the castle. When they were all gathered in Solomon's office, they sat down and heaved a collective sigh.

Perhaps because she finally got to relax after a hard day's work, or perhaps due to the limitations of her young body, Mira was assailed by sleepiness. "Goodness, I'm exhausted."

"One heck of an urgent mission, that was." Luminaria stretched.

"I'm sleeepy..." Kagura yawned. It was late in the night—far too late for good boys

and girls to be awake. But if not for their help, things wouldn't have gone so smoothly. Wallenstein thanked them from the bottom of his heart. "And I mean it."

"Well done, everyone. I had rooms prepared for all of you, so sleep tight," Solomon said. He told Kagura and Wallenstein where they might find their sleeping quarters.

More detailed planning could wait until tomorrow. With that, they dispersed, and Mira headed straight to her usual room. Overcome by the day's fatigue, she soon fell fast asleep.

* * *

The next morning, Mira woke up with her face still smooshed right into the pillow. Right away, she realized something unpleasant: since she'd gone to bed right after a big job, she was still sweaty and unclean.

"First things first: bath."

After doing her business, she headed for the large group bath without so much as a glance at her private one.

"Okay... Should be safe." After peering down the hallway, she proceeded cautiously. Lily and Tabitha were surely on the prowl. If they found her, she'd be forced to endure their services. Not that she especially *minded*, of course. But she was in the mood to take a long, leisurely bath to clear her mind. Mira stayed wary of any and all maids as she pressed on.

However, it was difficult to evade maids in this vast castle. The staff spotted her here and there, and before she knew it, they'd begun to form a crowd. But due to the agreement among the maids, they only watched. In other words, as long as Mira could avoid Lily and Tabitha, she'd have her chance at a comfy bath.

She stopped in front of a corner and peeked around it. After confirming it was safe, she zipped down the hall like a ninja. This was serious business to Mira, but to others, it might've looked like she was playing detective. Those who she passed smiled as she ran by.

When she was halfway there, she sensed something ominous approaching.

No...! I know it... It's them!

She searched with Biometric Scan and found two signals charging her way at incredible speed. Mira had a bad feeling about this. She rushed away, sprinting forward. Before long, the signals stopped, hovering around the spot she'd just been in. She shuddered—Lily and Tabitha were hot on her tail.

The signals began stealthily moving again. However, their antics were so unusual that it was like putting a spotlight on themselves. Biometric Scan could only capture motion, so if there were many signals at once, it would be difficult to pick out a particular one. But the conspicuous way these two moved made it far too easy to tell.

Their outstanding physical prowess had become their downfall. Mira skillfully avoided them as she finally reached the hallway leading to the bath.

“Good... No ambushes, as far as I can tell.”

There should be no risk of being seen on this last stretch. Mira advanced carefully through the hallway.

A hand came down on her shoulder.

She shuddered, expecting the worst. But when she timidly turned around, a finger jabbed into her soft cheek.

“Oh, it’s just you? Don’t scare me like that!”

It was Luminaria. It had seemed all too possible for Lily to appear behind her out of thin air, which only contributed to Mira’s frustration.

“What? I wasn’t trying to scare you.” Luminaria raised an eyebrow at her sullen friend, then quickly guessed what was up.

“Fair. That head maid is something else,” she chuckled. “Anyway, you’re going to the bath now, right? I doubt it’d be an issue even if they caught you.”

According to Luminaria, only she and Solomon were allowed to use the bath at this time of day. Mira was also allowed, since she was on close terms with Solomon, which meant that the maids would have backed off when she got close to it.

“Ugh, really...?” What had she gone to all that effort for? Mira slumped over sadly and trudged off to the bath with Luminaria.

* * *

When they arrived, they noticed a set of clothes left in the changing room—proof that someone was already there.

“Is Solomon here too?” Mira asked.

“Seems like it.”

Based on what Luminaria had said before, it must have been. Knowing that, Mira and Luminaria felt comfortable enough getting naked. They headed to the bath.

As expected, Solomon was in the bath. “Hey. Good morning.” He waved to them as he relaxed in a corner of the tub. He was used to seeing them naked, and didn’t react at all.

Mira and Luminaria greeted him back, likewise unbothered. Mira felt she had nothing to lose by being seen, and Luminaria loved to brag about her assets. Besides, it was a shared bath with only close friends around.

However, the person sitting across from Solomon immediately froze—Wallenstein. He must have come to the bath with Solomon, not expecting these two to join in. Far too late, he realized that the bath hadn’t been separated between genders. He turned his face away from Mira and Luminaria and repeated aloud to himself, “It’s just cosmetic, it’s just cosmetic...”

Mira and Luminaria were women in this world, but Wallenstein desperately reminded himself that they were men in their old one.

Watching him made Luminaria itch to do a little mischief. “Yo, Wally. Didn’t see you there,” Luminaria greeted him, standing in his periphery.

“Yeah, uh... Hey,” Wallenstein replied. He turned further away, flustered.

His childish reaction only spurred her on. “What’s the matter, eh? C’mon, you can tell me.” Luminaria circled around into his line of sight again, showing off her alluring form.

“Goodness, what do you think you’re doing?” Mira grumbled. How could they be so energetic so early in the morning? Deciding to leave them to it, she sank into the water

and relaxed.

"She's clearly worse, but I think you should be a little more careful too..." Solomon sighed as he watched the girls. Intentional or not, Mira's wide-open stance—arms and legs outstretched—wasn't unlike Luminaria's teasing.

Eventually, Wallenstein shouted, "Oh, give me a break!" Unable to endure Luminaria's onslaught, he ran away, covering his groin as he went.

"Nice try, but I'm not done yet!" Luminaria continued her assault by turning the floor into ice with her sorcery. Wallenstein took a step and slipped.

When he saw Luminaria approaching with a wicked grin, he desperately scrambled away again. However, because he was in such a hurry, he slipped once more, this time diving straight into a tub.

Caught in the splash, Mira glared at Luminaria. "Good grief... Leave him be, would you?"

"Aww, my bad. It's just funny how he gets so flustered." Luminaria apologized insincerely, then added with a laugh, "Looks like you finished him off, though."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mira raised an eyebrow and followed Luminaria's line of sight. It was then that she realized Wallenstein had landed face-first in her chest.

It was some time before Wallenstein finally came to. He'd frozen in place; his innocence couldn't take this kind of overstimulation. Mira had traumatized the poor man.

"I didn't think he was this weak with women!" Luminaria laughed uproariously.

"A troublesome affliction, to be sure." Mira grinned wryly.

They managed to drag the stiff Wallenstein out of the tub and lay him on the ledge. His face was peaceful, as if he'd been delivered from this mortal coil.

That reminded them—why wasn't Kagura here? It turned out Luminaria had actually invited her to come along this morning.

“Kagura, wanna go relax in the bath with me?”

“No. Why would I do that?” She’d already bathed in her private suite.

CHAPTER 27

AFTER DRYING off, the gang gathered for breakfast. Wallenstein had come to his senses, but some symptoms of his affliction remained. As soon as he saw Mira, he blushed and chanted, “It’s just cosmetic, it’s just cosmetic.”

Kagura cocked her head in confusion—she’d missed the morning activities.

“All right. Thank you all for your hard work yesterday,” Solomon said to the group. “We still have some work to do, but for now, it looks like we can breathe easy.”

Unsurprisingly for a royal castle, breakfast was luxurious. The five of them enjoyed a meal and a chat around the table together. While it started as mere chitchat, the conversation gradually shifted to yesterday’s events, turning this breakfast into a bit of a debriefing.

After discussing their rescue of the villagers, the state of the oni catacombs, the powers of the revived oni, and the duke-level demon, Wallenstein handed Mira an odd, cylindrical object.

“Would you mind hanging on to this for me?” he asked, averting his eyes nervously.

“What is this?” Mira accepted the object and studied it curiously. At a glance, it looked like a magical tool, but she couldn’t feel any special mana within.

“It’s one of those travel markers I told you about yesterday.” Wallenstein explained that he wanted Mira to hang on to it in case he needed Leticia’s power again in the future. The power of Leticia’s song had allowed him to seal the duke in no time. That was a tremendous boon, and he hoped he’d be able to rely on her again the next time he ran into a duke.

“Hrmm, I see. Then I will take it.” Duke-level black demons were among the greatest threats to mankind. Mira promised she would do all she could to help and stored the stick in her pouch.

As they continued to discuss yesterday’s events, the conversation became a debate centered around Luminaria’s use of ancient magic—specifically, how maybe she

should stop using it in confined spaces.

"Hey, it turned out fine, right? Who cares?" Luminaria was as carefree as ever, but the other four glared as if to ask, *And what if it hadn't?*

Around this time, Wallenstein stood up and said, "Oh, I'm getting word that he woke up." It seemed his comrades were keeping him updated about the light demon. "I'll be right back," he said before teleporting away.

Mira gazed at the spot where he'd stood a second ago and muttered, "Must be nice..."

"Maaan, if I had that, I'd save so much travel time," Luminaria complained.

"Makes going to the tower and back easier, too," Solomon mused. The conversation naturally proceeded to how they could best convince Wallenstein to teach them the spell. Kagura listened, but as someone who already had her own teleportation magic, she didn't care much. She smiled blissfully as she chowed down on a mountain of raclette cheese.

* * *

In the end, they came up empty on ideas before Wallenstein's return. He popped into existence right next to Mira—he must have used the marker he'd left with her.

This time, someone else stood beside him: the former duke. Mira had already noticed his good looks when they sealed him, but as he stood there on his own two feet, her heart filled with fresh hostility toward the unfairly handsome man.

"Thank you all for waiting," said Wallenstein. "Erm, first, this is the duke demon I turned into a light demon. His name is Barbatus—"

Before Wallenstein could finish, the duke suddenly fell to the floor. "I can never apologize enough!" It was an unimaginably perfect apology. Barbatus remembered all the sins he'd committed as a dark demon, and now, he began rattling off genuine apologies for everything he'd done relating to oni. "I've caused you all so much trouble." He bowed especially politely to Kagura; no doubt he'd already been given an earful about the matter of forming Chimera Clausen.

He's, er... very serious about this. Barbatus was almost frustratingly handsome, but the sincerity of his apologies lifted some of the hatred from Mira's heart.

"Okay, okay... It's fine, all right?" Kagura, a bit annoyed at how he was prostrating himself before her, accepted his apology.

"You couldn't help it," Mira added.

"Yeah. That's how demons work, right?" Solomon chimed in.

"Well... depending on how you act from now on, we could *maybe* forgive you," Kagura finally relented.

There was nothing to be done about the past, but now that he was a light demon, there was much that he could do in the future. It was Kagura's opinion that he'd just have to do his best to make up for his wrongdoings, and she told him as much.

"Thank you all! I'll do everything I can to live up to your expectations!" He shed tears of joy as he bowed one last time.

"Anyway, erm," cut in Wallenstein. "I've asked Barbatus here a few questions. A problem has become clear." Wallenstein introduced the light demon once more and revealed a shocking truth regarding the divine item.

The duke Barbatus took over the explanation from there: "I remember. It must have been three days ago by now..." He explained what had happened to the divine item after he'd opened a hole in the sealed oni tomb. Barbatus claimed that the item continued to emit divine power even after it was used to make the hole. Because of this, a dark demon could not keep it close. He had entrusted it to a human collaborator—someone who also knew how to resurrect oni, *and* the locations of the other oni catacombs Barbatus was aware of.

"Goodness... More human collaborators?" Mira gasped. There were a multitude of problems here, but that detail was especially troubling.

Light demons were one thing, but working alongside a dark demon was unthinkable. However, Wallenstein told her there were many organizations that worshipped demons.

"This is my fault. I swear, I'll retrieve the divine item," Barbatus declared. "And I'll also erase the resurrection method and the catacombs from his mind so the information doesn't fall into even more evil hands." He also boasted that, since he remembered the mana wavelength of the person he'd given the item and information to, he'd be able to

locate them easily once he was close enough.

"We'll do our best to find them," Wallenstein promised. There was no telling how much damage this person would do if left alone, so he and his comrades would prioritize finding the mysterious human collaborator over sealing more demons.

"My people will help too." Kagura declared that she'd join in the search. If this person knew how to resurrect oni and where to find their burial grounds, she couldn't sit idly by. If this information spread and oni were successfully loosed on the world, spirits would be endangered. They had to nip this in the bud.

The Isuzu Alliance's information network had found Katiella in one night. Kagura's offer was truly reassuring to Wallenstein. "Do you mean it? Thank you!"

"Sounds like we have an alliance."

"Yes, of course. Thank you."

With that, the Isuzu Alliance and Wallenstein's light demon team officially joined hands.

"That's convenient," Solomon said. "How about you let me slide right into that alliance too?" Two organizations with boundless potential had formed an alliance under his nose, and he absolutely wanted to get in on it too. As a nation, Alcait could not overlook the dark dealings of demons. They'd managed to fend the oni off at the critical moment this time, but the oni remained a threat. The Kingdom of Alcait wished to support Wallenstein and Kagura's efforts in order to resolve these problems once and for all.

"I'd like you two to carry out this special mission as my agents. How about it?" Solomon's suggestion had another meaning as well: while Kagura and Wallenstein had acted independently of their nation of origin before, Solomon was telling them he wanted them back under his direct control as assets of Alcait. That meant that Kagura (also known as Uzume) and Wallenstein (also known as Wally) would be appointed as special envoys. If the need arose, they would be able to use the name of King Solomon to their advantage.

"But that would mean..." Kagura began to protest. She had already worked with Solomon in the pursuit of spirit gear created by Chimera Clausen. However, he had only acted as an intermediary between her and the Hinomoto Committee; things were different this time.

Though Isuzu presented themselves as an environmental protection organization, they secretly had a large military force under their control. If their founder was known to be an envoy of Alcait, things could turn ugly.

“My work is an act of betrayal, in a way...” Wallenstein was essentially giving demons salvation. But people ignorant of the truth might not think of it that way, and it was impossible to tell if people would ever accept the truth about demons.

That was why these two had avoided returning to their homeland all this time. When they gave their reasons, Solomon smiled sadly. “C’mon, let’s not act like strangers. We’re friends. Let me help you two out. I wish you’d rely on me a little.”

He cared about his friends; some small risk didn’t mean he needed to push them away. Sticking together through thick and thin would allow him to try his hardest, he claimed. Solomon’s words were magnanimous, yet a little lonely.

Kagura and Wallenstein fell silent. Perhaps they felt the same about these thirty years of separation.

“Okay? And how do you *really* feel?” Mira interrupted the silence, prompting Solomon to be more sincere.

“Your organizations’ information networks, strengths, and specializations are tip-top. I’d love to have a good relationship with them. If possible, maybe they could join Alcait...? Just kidding... Unless?”

All that he did was for his country. Isuzu’s information network reached all over the continent, surpassing even those of large nations. On top of that, Wallenstein’s people could turn demons into friends, and he could *teleport*; he would be a major help, too. If Solomon wanted to make things better for Alcait, he’d have to bring both of them to his side.

And since both Kagura and Wallenstein had teleportation spells, it would be easy to share secrets. There was almost no way for information to leak. The benefits outweighed the risks, Solomon added with a smile. But there was no ill will; everyone knew that he was doing this for the people he cared about.

“Wow. I guess that’s just the kind of guy you are, Solomon.”

“The same as ever, I guess.”

Kagura and Wallenstein smiled and accepted their assignment.

"Oh, yeah. I don't just mean to only put you to work; when the time comes that you need help, let me know right away," Solomon added. If needed, he would offer the full support of Alcait. That might even include dispatching his secret firepower, the Azure Sorcerer. In other words, Luminaria would provide backup.

"Well... That certainly is a boon," Wallenstein said nervously.

"We don't know who we might end up having to fight, so sure, I guess that helps." Kagura shrugged.

Backup from a Wise Man would be ideal if they faced a situation they couldn't deal with alone. They were grateful for that in itself, though they seemed a little bit nervous that this help might come in the form of Luminaria.

"Ouch, that hurts..." Luminaria pouted exaggeratedly at their reactions. However, nobody came to her defense—especially not after her sexual harassment of Wallenstein. "Reeeeally hurts..." Out of desperation, she turned to Mira and begged, "C'mon, cheer me up!"

"You earned this," Mira said coldly.

Ignoring Luminaria, Solomon continued the conversation. "Oh, and one more thing. Give me a situation report once a week, okay? It would be nice to know how things are going."

Their work would probably have an effect on Alcait in the long term. Solomon's special mission for them was mostly for the sake of getting their reports, so he proposed exchanging information in his office once a week.

"Well, okay. I guess that makes sense."

"Understood. We tend to have an easier time gathering information, after all."

Kagura and Wallenstein readily agreed. Thus, Uzume and Wally became special envoys of Alcait. This opened up the kingdom's access to their organizations' information networks. It seemed Mira's running about had borne fruit.

"I'd best get going to talk to my partners."

“I need to hold a meeting now, too.”

Wallenstein and Kagura left; they had many things to discuss with their organizations regarding future cooperation.

“Hoo, boy. Things are about to get busy-busy,” Solomon muttered to himself with a big smile. He was in high spirits, no doubt happy to have met his friends for the first time in so long.

Luminaria seemed to be enjoying herself too. Perhaps that was because three of her friends had returned after so long of her being stuck alone with Solomon.

“They haven’t changed a bit, huh?” she chuckled. She turned to look at Mira, and laughed even more.

CHAPTER 28

AFTER KAGURA and Wallenstein left, Luminaria was dragged off to help with Mage Corps training. While Mira made additional magic stones on Solomon's request, the first report on the local tomb arrived.

"Thanks. Let them know to keep up the good work."

"Understood!" The messenger bowed and left.

The investigation had reported no issues.

Mira looked up. "That's a relief for the time being."

"Yep. That means our only problems are the divine item and the demon worshippers."

Just by existing, duke-level demons could exert a negative influence on their surroundings. However, perhaps thanks to his use of the divine item, they hadn't found any adverse influence from Barbatus. Mira's purification efforts had worked perfectly as well, removing all traces of black mist ore. There were no negative influences on the spirits in neighboring areas either.

It seemed they would have no unexpected work to do.

"Well, then. I think I'll be returning to my tower." Mira had left in such a hurry last night; Mariana was sure to be worried about her. She wanted to spend at least a day with Mariana and then leave the next. She stood up and handed the finished stones to Solomon.

"Yeah, thanks for your hard work. I'll call you if anything comes up."

"I'm sure you will. Goodbye, then."

Mira boarded her wagon in the castle garages and returned to her tower.

When she arrived, she found Mariana and Luna waiting for her.

"Welcome back."

"Squeak!"

It seemed Solomon had contacted the fairy in advance to inform her that Mira was coming home and the urgent matter had been resolved. However, he'd shared no further details.

"In that case, would you like me to tell you about it?" Mira offered.

After settling down in her room, Mira put the bunny on her lap and began to speak. Mariana sat across from her and listened happily.

Mira, Mariana, and Luna spent a wonderfully lazy day together.

* * *

In the early morning, when the sky had just started to brighten, Mira slipped out of bed and into the bathroom.

"Goodness. How long has it been since I got to relax for a whole day?" she murmured into the dark living room. The room was completely calm. And with only the slightest hint of morning sunlight seeping in, one might wonder if the air itself was still in slumber.

Recalling the joy of every second she had spent playing with Luna and Mariana yesterday, Mira checked the current time. It was five in the morning; only six hours had passed since she'd gone to bed. Still, she felt a measure of loneliness—her time asleep made it feel as though her day spent with Mariana had happened long ago.

"Ooh. Those are subtle changes." She spotted a decorative shelf with various small items arranged on it. It was organized based on Mariana's unique sense of feng shui. One might call it a symbol of her hope for Mira's safety.

When Mira searched further, she found more evidence of Mariana's feelings hidden here and there—a yellow turtle figure in the middle of potted plants, a tiger plushie under the table, and more. Every one delighted her.

Eventually, Mira returned to her bedroom and slipped back into bed.

"Miss Mira?" Mariana whispered from right beside her. As one might expect by now, she'd steadfastly insisted that she sleep by Mira's side. Luna was curled up comfortably by Mira's pillow.

"Apologies. Did I wake you?"

In the dim morning light, she could barely make out Mariana's silhouette. Unable to see her, Mira found the feeling of the fairy's breath beside her even more conspicuous, causing the embarrassed Mira to back off slightly before lying next to her.

"No, I was already half-awake."

"Hmm."

Their voices crept faintly through the quiet room. Gentle silence emerged between them once more, and they spent warm time together—a gentle moment disturbed by none. It was mysterious, without words or touch. They simply enjoyed being together.

Suddenly, there was the sound of rustling. Mira turned to find that Mariana had rolled over to face her.

"Miss Mira, are you leaving today?" The sadness in her voice made Mira look down reflexively.

"Hrmm, I suppose I am," she replied.

"Then I will prepare for your next journey," Mariana said as she stood up.

"No, there's no need to rush." Mira stopped her. "I made you listen to so much of my talking yesterday. Besides, I'm not leaving until after noon, so we have time... How about we sleep in a little together?"

Mira hesitated to set Mariana to work so early in the morning—though one might point out that she'd done so on many occasions before. At the same time, her face betrayed some faint desire to lie with her just a little longer.

Mira's spur-of-the-moment request brought a smile to Mariana's face, and she slipped back into bed. "Understood. If that is your wish, Miss Mira." The distance between

them closed just slightly. When Mira felt Mariana's breathing on her once more, she panicked for a moment.

But that was *only* for a moment. She screwed up all of her courage, held Mariana's hand, and faced her head-on.

"I mean... We've yet to do this, no?" The summoner smiled sheepishly.

"You're right," Mariana agreed with a smile as she grasped Mira's hand back.

Before long, the warm light that was proof of their bond began to swell around them. Luna awakened to the strange glow and sleepily looked at Mira and Mariana. Then, she snuggled between the two of them.

"Sleepy or not, she's still a spoiled little baby."

"Luna loves you too, Miss Mira."

The girls smiled at each other, then patted the squeaking bunny.

* * *

At some point, Mira fell back asleep. She woke up again rather late in the morning. When she opened her eyes, Mariana was gone; only Luna was still curled up and sleeping there.

"What a pleasant nap." She stretched in her sunlit bed and, drawn by gentle sounds and scents, drifted out of the room.

"Good morning, Miss Mira."

"Mm, good morning."

How many times had she seen this sight by now? The words *newlywed life* came to mind as Mira spent a morning pampered by Mariana.

After a shower, Mira changed into the maids' newest creation and ate breakfast with Luna. Their morning, although perhaps full of everyday things, was precious and blissful to her.

When breakfast was finished, they prepared for the summoner's coming journey. Mira retrieved necessities from storage and put them into her Item Box. Meanwhile, Mariana packed changes of clothes into her suitcase. At one point, Luna arrived with a blue hairball and put it carefully in a corner of the suitcase.

"Good job, Luna," Mariana praised her. "One must never forget a good-luck charm." Pure rabbit fur was known for bringing good luck, so it was sure to be quite effective.

Mira returned from the warehouse and glanced at Mariana's efforts. She was awestruck when she saw the array of pink undies prepared for her. Apparently, Mira's lucky color was pink this month. Mira may have been getting accustomed to womanhood, but maidenly undies were the ultimate hurdle. But before Mira could dwell too much on it, a horrifying thought crossed her mind. *If pink is this month's lucky color, then does that mean she's already...?!*

Mira furtively checked the underwear she was wearing and laughed at herself, dressed in such innocent, blush-colored attire. Through bravely allowing Mariana to take care of her and dress her, she had already primed herself for this indignation.

Well, I'm not surprised. It is me, after all; at least I make it look good.

Knowing that she wore both pure white and seductive black well, Mira did her best to convince herself that she'd get used to the pink before long.

* * *

Two women and one bunny spent more peaceful time together preparing for Mira's journey. Before they knew it, afternoon had come.

Lunch was over in no time, since Mariana had prepared the ingredients in the morning. She also set aside a meal for Mira to eat during her travels. The summoner gingerly accepted the housewifely fresh-cooked meal.

Midday came. It was finally time to set off.

"I'll be back before long."

"Good luck, Miss Mira."

At the foot of the Tower of Evocation, Mira and Mariana exchanged goodbyes in front

of the Garuda-drawn wagon. Mira would return in a week or two if all went well, but this farewell was still a sad one.

In that moment of silence, Luna jumped into Mira's arm with a sad squeak.

"Whoa, there. You poor baby. Be on your best behavior until I return, okay? That means listening to Mariana." Mira caught the bunny and rubbed her face against its fur. Luna squeaked happily in response and licked her cheek. "Mariana, I hate to put you through so much, but please continue to take care of Luna." After hugging Luna once more, Mira handed her over. The rabbit looked at her in satisfaction.

"Yes, of course. Leave it to me." Mariana accepted the bunny, though she gazed enviously at that freshly snuggled fur.

Parting came with sorrow, even if the separation wasn't long. But thanks to Luna, Mira realized that one thing could soften the blow—so she did just that, by giving Mariana the biggest hug she could muster.

"Miss... Mira?" Mariana murmured in surprise. Luna, who'd jumped down from the fairy's hands, looked up to them and squeaked gleefully.

Mira knew that she was doing something very bold, so after a moment, she made an excuse: "You see... Err... It wouldn't be fair if Luna were the only one to get a hug!" She whispered into Mariana's ear, "I'd best be off now."

"Of course. Safe travels."

After filling their hearts with love, there was no more space for loneliness. It had become the perfect day for a departure, colored by sunny smiles.

AFTERWORD

AND THERE you have it: Volume 9. Time sure flies, huh? Before you know it, you're nine books in.

Of course, we've only made it this far thanks to every reader who's bought my books. Thank you all. And thanks to everyone who helped make them happen, too.

Also, a big thank-you to fuzichoco, who always fills these books with such lovely illustrations. I'm sorry for changing outfits so often, but I get to see such lovely art of Mira every time... I hope you'll bear with future wardrobe changes!

Now, there's something my web novel readers might have noticed about this volume. That's right—I've made quite a few additions! Not to bother you every time I make a little change, but I wanted to bring it up since I worked hard on them! This volume probably had the most additions so far. Did you like them? I hope so... I'd really appreciate it if you just said you did, actually, even if you're lying.

But you know, this book is being released with a special edition that comes with both a keychain charm *and* a bonus booklet.* Add that to the additions, and that's quite a bit of text! I deserve to treat myself a little by now, right...? I think so! What should I eat? I know... Maybe I'll go to KFC on a regular day, instead of only doing it on Christmas? Heck, I could even order a special menu item for once. Now this is dreaming big!

It's to celebrate a new volume release, so I think it's forgivable enough. Oh, I can't wait for the release date (three-and-a-half months from now)!

Oh, and speaking of release dates! The third volume of the manga will be released on the same day, so check that out too. I hear it even has the chapter that was left out of Volume 2!

Anyway, changing the subject a little... Remember how I told you about my diet in the last volume's afterword? I'm still sticking to it! I managed to win another belt notch since then. It's all thanks to the power of exercise bikes and soybeans. I think I'm getting less tired when I go out, too. But I don't have a scale, so it's kind of impossible to tell how much weight I've actually lost...

On the other hand, maybe that's what helps me keep going at a steady pace instead of worrying about stagnation. I still let myself cheat once a week, so it keeps me from getting stressed. In fact, I'm getting quite accustomed to my new culinary lifestyle!

Even better, my acid reflux has really calmed down. That's definitely an improvement, right? So I ate chocolate for the first time in half a year. The wait made it taste even better. But I need self-control so that I don't eat too much...

How will I be doing when the next volume comes out, I wonder?

Anyway, let's meet again then—hopefully, you'll find I'm a little thinner!

**Japanese edition*



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