

NOVEL

6

She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man



♥ UNIZUMI! ♥
BIZUMI 600
BLIZUMI 500
DIZUMI 650

Written by
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SHE PROFESSED HERSELF PUPIL OF THE WISE MAN

– Kenja no Deshi wo Nanoru Kenja –

- VOLUME 6 -

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Ryusen Hirotsugu

-ILLUSTRATOR-

fuzichoco

[SEVEN SEAS]



♥ ドリンク! ♥
ミルク 600
オレンジ 500
レモン 650
ドリンク
ドリンク
ドリンク



"Miss Mira? Time to wake up, Miss Mira."

The maid addressed her in a whisper, putting a hand on her exposed white shoulder and shaking the summoner gently. Mira groaned and barely opened her eyes. She saw the canopy's embroidery and the pale face of Lily leaning over her like a ray of gentle moonlight.

"Good morning, Miss Mira."

"Mmh... Mornin'." She sat up, willing her heavy eyes to open. "Wh' time is it?"



Isuzu Alliance – Grand Master
Uzume

Isuzu Alliance – Hidden
Snake

Isuzu Alliance – Hidden
Scorpion

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Seven Seas Entertainment



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CHAPTER 1

SOUTHWEST OF THE STATION CITY SILVERSIDE, a seemingly endless mountain range loomed on the horizon over a vast, grassy expanse.

Though she had no idea how she'd been located, Mira had just received a letter from someone claiming to also be a Wise Man's pupil... even though it had been delivered by their butler. The gist of the letter was that this person wanted to meet Mira, who also professed herself pupil of a Wise Man.

With great anticipation, Mira made her way to the abandoned garden where the meeting would occur. She didn't know who this pupil could be, but if all went well, she might learn the whereabouts of one or more of the other Nine Wise Men.

She flew for nearly ten minutes, checking her map along the way. In the middle of a field, dotted with trees like day-old stubble on a man's face, she spied a mansion that looked to be in a state of disrepair. Once the home of some feudal lord, it now contained only hints of its past glory. The abandoned garden lay behind the mansion.

Mira ordered Pegasus into a slow descent until she alighted in the clearing behind the mansion. After giving the anxious beast a reassuring pat, Mira took in her surroundings.

This enormous garden might've once been among the continent's most gorgeous. Now, it was but a shadow of its former self. Weeds owned the place, even stretching their roots across the paved paths. In every sense, this was an abandoned space.

"Now, where are you?" Mira muttered as she took out the letter and read it again. But it offered no more specifics than "the abandoned garden." Unfortunately, the years had done nothing to diminish the garden's size, and it might take her twenty minutes to cross to the other side on foot.

The weeds and trees blocked her from seeing too far. But a stone amphitheater rose like a hill in the center of the garden, visible between the gaps in the trees.

"Pegasus, let us make for that hill." Mira mounted once more as Pegasus neighed happily and covered the distance in a single bound.

Though the stone was decaying in a few places, nature had yet to reclaim the amphitheater, which was constructed of sturdier material than most other things in the garden. Long ago, this might've been the perfect place to savor a luxurious view. Now it felt very out of place among the wilds.

If I wait here, I'm sure they'll find me. They summoned me here, so they can put in the legwork.

Mira dismissed Pegasus and plopped down atop the base of a fallen stone pillar. She was surrounded by the ruins of a fallen arch, but none of the rubble seemed to offer a more comfortable place to sit and wait.

Under the deep-blue sky, she sipped a sweet berry au lait, musing to herself that this was the first time in ages that she'd truly sat and done nothing. She watched the little birds flying and the occasional ripples on the water. She grew drowsy from the sheer tranquility of her surroundings.

Suddenly, light enveloped the world around her in a dazzling aurora.

"What the hell? Some sort of barrier?" Mira stood up abruptly and observed the phenomenon. It encircled the amphitheater like a membrane. As she glared about suspiciously, the heavy sound of metal clanking against the ground approached from behind.

Mira turned to see a full suit of armor wielding a sword and shield. A quick Biometric Scan confirmed that it wasn't an armor spirit. But if not that, then... *what?*

The menacing suit of armor gleamed with a dull, metallic luster. The identity of the figure before her was unknown—the full helm concealed the eyes and face. Whoever they were seemed ready for battle, despite the peaceful surroundings. The serene feeling that had enveloped her a moment before was now replaced with an eerie sense of foreboding.

Mira could think of only one person who would come to such a remote place. She faced the suit of armor and produced the letter.

"I presume you penned this?"

The suit of armor stopped. From the helmet came a man's muffled voice.

"I did."

The deadpan answer seemed quite contrary to the tone of the letter. She'd expected someone glad to meet a fellow "pupil." Something was fishy.

Mira stared down the armored man and said, "You claim to be a pupil of a Wise Man, but you're not dressed like a mage."

If all he wanted was to disguise himself, there would be many more comfortable options. He seemed more like someone dressed for a fight...

"Just an excuse to draw you here." The man confirmed as he pointed his sword at Mira. Though she could not see his face, she could tell from his voice that he was wearing a triumphant grin.

She looked around and sighed in irritation. Despite the weapon pointed her way, Mira was unmoved. "This seems like a pretty intricate scheme just to pick a fight."

"I'll do anything if it means getting you back for the disgrace you put me through!" Her scolding tone seemed to have touched a nerve, and his fury was evident even from behind the wall of armor.

Hrmm? Disgrace? Where have I met this guy before?

Mira hadn't been in this world for long. She didn't remember causing any personal grudges that would call for this sort of response.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "And what do you think I've done to you? I don't recall doing anything worth this sort of treatment."

Had he misunderstood a kind deed and misdirected his anger toward her? Mira cast an annoyed glance at his sword before turning her eyes to his helmet.

"Oh, right. You can't see my face. One second." Opening his faceguard with his shield hand, he screamed in rage, "Remember what you did to me and rue the day!"

Behind the helmet, his sunken blue eyes were full of ire and lacking reason. His lips split into a dope fiend's crescent grin. It seemed he *really* hated Mira.

She put a finger to her chin and furrowed her brow in thought. There had to be some

mistake. Mira stared at his madness-tinged visage and searched her memories again. “Hrmm... Are you sure you have the right person? I still don’t recognize you.”

The man shuddered from top to bottom and roared, “Don’t toy with me! Do you mean to claim you’ve forgotten how you dishonored me at the academy symposium?!” With unbridled fury, he slammed his sword into the ground.

“The symposium...?” A memory began to surface through the fog. The *symposium*—an event held at Alcait Academy. Like a student arts festival, but for magic. The pieces began to fall into place. “Aha, I remember! You’re that young sorcerer kid, aren’t you?”

Specifically, Caerus of the Department of Sorcery. Mira *had* met him, even though she couldn’t remember his face. She never bothered to remember people she didn’t care for. And she certainly didn’t care for Caerus. All she remembered was that he’d challenged her, or some nonsense.

That had been nearly two weeks ago. Caerus was so used to sorcerers always coming out on top while summoners finished last. Mira’s sudden appearance had crushed his achievements and his pride.

And now, armed with the most thorough of plans, he had come to get his revenge.

CHAPTER 2

CLAD IN FULL ARMOR, Caerus stared at Mira with pure hatred. The two couldn't have looked more different as they confronted each other within the decrepit amphitheater.

"As I recall, that was an unbiased symposium," Mira said. "You dug your own grave. I don't see the logic in getting mad at me."

Caerus's accusations against Mira had led to his crushing defeat in a duel witnessed by the entire academy. The fact that Mira seemed to regard him as no more than a yapping dog infuriated him even more.

"You're one to talk after how much you insulted me. I needed to keep my first place! And I was beaten by a summoner, of all people?!"

Caerus's dreams had been plagued by the gleaming red eyes of the Dark Knight looking down upon him. That Mira didn't even remember the incident was insult added to injury. No, he could not let this stand.

Hrmm. This kid is annoying me.

"So you've come for revenge," Mira sighed. "I'm amazed that you'd go through all of this for something so insignificant as that symposium."

"Shut up! You came in out of nowhere and messed everything up. Then I hear you're some Wise Man's apprentice?! Thanks to you, I've been branded as a short-sighted failure! Everything is your fault!" Caerus' voice grew hoarse as he raged, and he slammed his sword against the debris next to him.

Crimson light rose from the sword and gathered at one point, creating a heat wave that crushed and detonated the debris with a shriek that reverberated through Mira's entire body. Despite standing right next to the burst, Caerus's armor was unscathed. Face filled with ire, he chuckled to himself as he looked upon the wreckage.

Admiring the fire that tore through the debris, Caerus vented the fury that had been stoked by Mira's words. "Incredible, isn't it? This place is surrounded by a magic-sealing barrier. No matter how good a mage you were... now you're just a little

pipsqueak without any magic.”

Oh. It seals magic, hm? I've seen traps like this in dungeons. I suppose they've been actively developing such technology.

It seemed the membrane surrounding the amphitheater was a barrier, after all. Mira attempted to summon, but nothing happened. Her magic was indeed sealed. She surveyed the barrier and felt the passage of thirty years in this new technology.

It would be most advantageous for one to seal the other's magic, but... Mira asked the armor-clad Caerus, “You're a sorcerer, as I recall? Doesn't it defeat the point if you seal your magic as well as mine?”

“Can't you tell by looking? I don't *need* magic. This sword, shield, and helmet are all spirit weapons. They do just fine in barriers. I think I can handle the likes of you.”

It was true that Caerus's sword was a fire spirit's sword, and his armor and shield harbored spirits' power. However, Mira was neither surprised nor panicked. If she felt anything at all, it was exasperation. How could a sorcerer and citizen of the kingdom of magic surrender his magic and rely on weapons instead?

“Why're you just standing there like that? You don't understand the situation you're in, do you?!”

Caerus swung his spirit blade. The blade ignited the air as it sliced through with a crimson gleam and launched flames toward Mira. When it landed in the debris close by, there was another shrieking explosion and hot air enveloped Mira.

As the inferno died down, all that remained was Caerus's muffled laughter.

I thought I heard something in that explosion... That was a voice, wasn't it?

Mira had heard a bitter cry tinged with hints of rage and hatred. She had heard it faintly the first time Caerus had slammed his sword into the debris, though it was overpowered by the explosions instantly after. But this time, Mira clearly heard that chilling voice.

“Do you see the power of my spirit blade? If it so much as grazes you, that delicate little body of yours will be burned to a crisp. Now you finally see the difference in power between us. But hey, even I can be merciful.”

Intoxicated with power, Caerus grinned condescendingly behind his face guard. He then leered at Mira's youthful yet charming figure. As he ogled her, he swallowed the saliva gathering in his mouth and fantasized about how he might make her scream. The only decisions she could make were the ones he allowed her.

"If you apologize now, I could let you be my servant," the lust-crazed Caerus commanded as if looking down on her from far above. He took a large metal ring from the pouch at his hip and threw it at Mira. It was a collar bearing the same sealing markings as the binding cloth that the Isuzu Alliance had used once before. "Put that around your neck. Do it—and I'll let you live."

Mira peered down at the collar at her feet. Planting her left foot, she punted it back at him with her right. Then it flew fast and low before it smacked into Caerus's greaves, making a low metallic *clunk* before falling to the ground.

"Denied," she replied flatly. "Now, listen up. Surrender now, and we can call this water under the bridge." Mira looked at Caerus head-on, neither staring nor glaring.

Her words only caused Caerus's lust to turn into pitch-black animosity. He began to swing his sword wildly with no form, proper swordplay, or aim.

"Damn yooou!" He screamed as shrilly as a steam whistle venting pressure to stop a boiler explosion. Fire spurted from the hideous arc of his sword's swing and a wild blaze flew out toward Mira. Caerus fell onto his backside, blown back by the aftermath of the attack.

His aim was off, but the raging hellfire billowed outward to engulf all around it. No one could possibly be left unsinged by the inferno.

"Hah! Ha ha ha! I told you—this is what happens when you defy me! Hah! Hah hah! Ha ha ha!"

Then Caerus's face went blank. Overwhelming strength, murderous malice, the realization that he had killed someone with his own hands... and some very minor guilt all intertwined. The emotional gravity began to tug him back to earth.

"Hrmm. Ample firepower, but no finesse. It would be no laughing matter if it hit me, though. Do you understand what you've just done?" Mira's chilly voice cut through the superheated air like an ice storm.

Unable to find Mira through the limited view of his visor slit, Caerus fought the weight of the armor as he tried to regain his feet. Once he managed to stand, he held his sword and shield close and spun around, looking for his prey.

Mira stood to his left, watching him scornfully. Her form, her eyes, and her very presence detonated the minuscule guilt that was previously within him.

"Aaaah!" The chaotic mix of emotions—the thought of his assassination attempt and the slight relief of seeing his victim survive—turned into fear at once.

As if trying to dispel the nightmare in front of him, Caerus single-mindedly swung his sword. Each time, however, the expelled flames only hit Mira's afterimages.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it!" He lost sight of his target as Mira evaded each swing with Mirage Step. Each time the hellfire incinerated one illusion, she appeared in a new location.

Her magic was sealed... but her skills were not.

Worse still, with each of Caerus's failed attacks, the distance between them shortened. As she slowly but surely approached, he shuddered and stepped back, yet he could not stop his arms from swinging.

That voice nearly muffled by the explosions wasn't a hallucination; it was a clear voice of resentment. Listening close to the unbearable sounds of the voice, Mira hit upon one possibility.

This spirit blade... Could it be yin?

Spirit weapons weren't just elemental; they were also divided into yin and yang. It was partially dependent on the properties of the spirit within, but they were generally associated with either negative or positive emotions. The vast majority of spirit weapons in circulation were yang, and they were obtained because a spirit took a liking to and blessed their wielder. But yin weapons... Such *blessings* were the product of hatred and anger in a spirit's dying moments.

A voice appealing to hatred was mixed in the flames emitted by Caerus's sword. Mira was sure of it.

It varied from person to person, but among a mage's powers was the ability to see and

converse with spirits. This theoretically applied to spirit weapons as well, but this was the first time Mira had heard the voice of one. Odd as it was, there could be no mistake.

As Mira analyzed the sound, she weaved through the baleful fireballs and gradually approached her attacker. Caerus kept trying to back away—his terror giving way to frustration—but he eventually stumbled over debris and fell backward spectacularly, armor rattling like a fistful of coins scattered across the ground.

With a grating metallic noise, Caerus righted himself and screamed, “Why can’t I hit you?!”

His emotions reached a crescendo. Reacting to Caerus’s fury, his armor began to cycle through the elements.

The spirit elements overflowing from his armor mixed and gathered at his blade. Curses filled the air so thickly that their madness seemed infectious.

“Ack... Is his gear *all* yin?” Mira asked herself. It certainly looked that way. It couldn’t be a coincidence that so many rare items were gathered around him.

I think I’ll have to question him regarding where he got these. Mira decided she would not be gentle in her interrogation. But for now, she kept her eyes fixed on Caerus, who laughed madly as the raw power of his spirit gear seemed to intoxicate him even more.

Using the sword as a vector, the elements whirled into a misshapen, unstable spiral resembling a miniature typhoon. Shooting a quick look at the incomprehensibly destructive sword, Mira relaxed her shoulders and leapt directly in front of Caerus.

“Damn! How are you so fast?!”

Barely able to control the torrent of energy enough to clench his fists, Caerus was unable to control his sword enough to swing it as his abominable enemy. Instead, he gritted his teeth as the elements began to coalesce. He was essentially stuck holding an open umbrella in the middle of a windstorm.

Mira did not miss this opening. She thrust out a slender arm and punched Caerus right in the stomach.

A mage’s fist with no reinforcement or magic cast on it ought to have had no effect on metal armor. Yet her punch caused a chaotic feedback loop to form, decreasing the

sword's stability. A red line of blood ran across Mira's hand—it seemed the wind spirit in his armor had counterattacked.

"Heh, ha ha ha! Those puny arms can't dent this armor! You don't stand a chance!"

Caerus had worried for a moment, but Mira's punch reminded him that he was at an overwhelming advantage. His enemy's attacks were totally ineffective. He only had to hit her once, and he would win. Nothing had changed. He basked in delight as he saw the trickle of blood on her hand. This battle was decided the moment she'd walked into that barrier. Caerus gazed at the raging sword in his hands and smirked. He had no idea why the sword was doing this, but he realized that unstoppable power was literally in the palm of his hand.

Once the sword stabilized, his victory was certain. Caerus's grin warped into a mask of hatred.

Mira's face showed no signs of fear. She glared coldly at Caerus with her arm still outstretched.

"Time for a quiz: Do you have any idea *who* I'm the apprentice of?" she asked.

Behind his wall of armor, Caerus recalled the despair of that day at the symposium. Mira was the pupil of Danblf.

He hadn't known that then, but he knew it now. The knowledge had done little to quench the fire of his hatred for the diminutive summoner.

Feeling a sense of superiority even as he struggled to hold the sword aloft, he said, "You're Danblf's pupil, aren't you? He was the best summoner, and he made up for his frailty with the Immortal Arts. Of course I know that. Based on how you act, you must use Immortal Arts, too. But if you can't activate magic, then you can't hurt me."

Mira laughed. "Sixty points, at best. You have no idea who you're dealing with."

"Eh? What?"

"I'm saying you only scored a sixty out of a hundred on that quiz. My master was Danblf. But he was *also* the inventor of modern refining techniques!" For someone so short, she was certainly looking down on the humiliated sorcerer.

"So what?!" Goaded, Caerus lifted the shield in his left hand instead of his unprepared sword. A bash from it could do serious damage as well.

Mira flicked a pebble in his direction.

"Wha—" Before Caerus could react, the pebble scored a hit on his shield. Unbelievably, the shockwave knocked him back and sent him reeling! The impact ripped the shield from his grasp, nearly taking his entire arm with it.

Caerus was thrown to the ground. He skidded to a halt, the blow softened by his armor's stats. But the crushed remains of the shield crashed to the ground nearby—the thing was totaled. He abruptly realized this might be but a small taste of the battle to come. With that horrifying thought in mind, Caerus hurriedly searched for his enemy.

He didn't need to look far—she was right in front of him. Now he could only look up at her, while she looked down at him with cold eyes. She fidgeted with a handful of blasting stones as she considered him. The refined bullets caused immense destruction when they exploded on contact.

"Damn you! Don't toy with me!" Caerus screamed, scooting back along the ground to get away from her. Mira ignored him and kept her eyes fixed on one point.

He followed her line of sight to the spirit blade in his hand. Its condensed elemental power warped the space around it like a mirage, and the raging tempest from before had been replaced with calm. It was... eerie.

This is it! I will be the victor! I'll blow those stupid pebbles away! Caerus thought.

He could tell at a glance that the sword had abnormal power. With a win close at hand, his enraged heart regained its calm. His fear evaporated—he truly could not lose.

I doubt I'll get out of this unscathed, Mira thought to herself. *Might as well get this over with.*

Powerful or not, Mira knew that sword was a dangerous item. She might be more resistant to elemental damage than most people, but if she took a hit from these weapons, it would *hurt*. Only one option remained.

Caerus saw the daggers in her eyes grow sharper and instinct spurred him to scream,

jump up, and raise the sword high. Five meters lay between them, but Mira could use her Immortal Arts to reach him in a single step. Caerus knew his only option would be to swing his sword before she even started moving.

The sword responded to his will, allowing its hidden power to surge as the mirage surrounding the blade turned darker, intent on devouring the light. It roared as he swung, and Caerus saw victory within his grasp. He felt as though he were leading an unstoppable army.

It all happened in an instant—a tornado suddenly emerged above Caerus's head, its awesome winds tearing Caerus's sword from his hand. The tornado then disappeared as suddenly as it appeared... another fun use of Mira's blasting stones.

Though Caerus had seen their power with his own eyes, he'd underestimated those little rocks. He'd watched Mira's feet in anticipation of her approach and therefore missed the flick of her wrist.

"What...?! Whaaat?!" Caerus cast about for his sword in vain. He finally spotted it, far beyond his reach. The power of the sword gleamed darkly... he had to have it back. He sprinted, his armor clanking as he made his mad dash.

Another foolish move.

Just as Caerus drew near to his salvation, the ground at his feet exploded like a land mine. He fell pitifully onto his back and stared at the ashen sky.

"What...?! No!" His feet should've been protected by spirit armor, but they felt nothing but overwhelming heat and pain.

Though the concussion left him reeling, Caerus sat up and assessed the situation. He saw his feet covered in soot. His tassets, cuisses, and greaves were bent and shattered. When he fearfully looked up, he shuddered at the sight of Mira closing in calmly.

"Shit!" he screamed, dragging himself away from her frantically. "I've had enough! Get her!"

Two figures emerged from behind the debris in Mira's blind spots. Cloaked and masked in black, with daggers treated so as not to reflect light, they approached Mira from either side. The duo bent low to the ground as they sprinted toward her, like long shadows cast by the setting sun.

Without sound, without voice, these snakes creeping along the ground eagerly bared their fangs to strike. But before they could close in, there was an explosion of flame accompanied by a thunderclap.

The two crumpled like ragdolls.

Without pausing, Mira lowered her arms even as she continued her advance. When she reached Caerus's feet, she asked, "Was that really your last resort? Pitiful."

She couldn't see his expression through the face guard, but his armor clattered as he trembled beneath it. She had foiled his plan at every turn. Magic-sealing effects weren't rare in the hardest of dungeons, and a true Wise Man would have been well prepared for the occasion. One-versus-many situations were expected under such circumstances. Frankly, the whole encounter was... *boring*.

Moreover, she had known of the ambushers' presence all along. When she'd used Biometric Scan earlier, they showed up as clear as day. For a surprise attack, this was hardly very surprising.

"What the hell? What the hell...?!" Caerus muttered. In this moment, he finally realized the gravity of the title of Wise Man, one of the nine heroes of the Kingdom of Alcait. "Y-you're a monster..."

Then he broke into the manic laughter that accompanies true enlightenment.

CHAPTER 3

IN THE BARRIER-CLAD AMPHITHEATER at the center of the abandoned garden, only Mira remained standing. Caerus lay on the ground, the lower half of his armor shattered. His two cohorts were now clad in singed rags.

Mira put a finger to her chin and looked down upon the armored man with her aquamarine eyes.

First, I'd best deal with that sword. Mira turned her eyes to the spirit blade still full of elemental power. She picked it up casually and held it aloft.

A torrent of countless elements appeared like a rainbow, yet the cries it emitted turned a thing of wonder into a thing of horror. As the beam of destructive light struck the magic-sealing barrier, it caused the seal to evaporate and vanish. She'd managed to both discharge the power of the weapon and solve the problem of the barrier in one fell swoop.

"Two birds with one stone," she muttered.

After looking into the now deep-blue sky, Mira turned her attention to her suddenly lighter right arm. Drained of the spirit's power, the blade shattered to pieces. With only the hilt remaining in her hand, the burned metal scraps crumbled to the ground.

The resonance and fusion of the elements—weapon and armor alike—were all yin. Mira turned to Caerus.

"Now, I have some questions for you. You'd best answer honestly." She put her left foot on his right arm and sat her right knee on his stomach to pin him down. With her free hand, she knocked on his metal face guard like a door.

"What do you want to know?" Caerus muttered in surrender. He offered no resistance and stared weakly into the sky.

"Where did you obtain this spirit equipment?" Mira demanded, her voice low as she held his helmet's chin in place and glared between the gaps.

Caerus seemed confused for a moment. He had expected her to ask why he'd done this, who the ambushers were, and how he would make up for this. Her question was puzzling. After cocking his head, Caerus felt his consciousness clearing. He then realized that Mira was no longer holding any of the stones that had so easily destroyed his armor.

"I wouldn't tell you even if I knew!" Caerus spat, allowing his pride to surge despite what had just happened.

Yes, Mira's blasting stones were gone... but so was the barrier sealing her magic. Another grave miscalculation.

"You young people just don't know when to cut your losses." Mira shrugged in annoyance at Caerus's answer and thought of how she should punish him.

She could slap him... but the helmet would take all the fun out of that. Spirit equipment came with a feature that prevented forced removal, so she could only remove it if he was willing or unconscious. She could demand he remove his helmet so she could slap him, but he would only obey if he was into that kind of thing... which would sort of defeat the purpose. Putting him to sleep so that she could remove it was an option, but he couldn't answer questions if he was unconscious. She could destroy the helmet, but that might seriously hurt or kill Caerus. That would put punishment above interrogation, which she didn't want to do.

Mira looked around, seeking a solution. Something caught her eye and brought a mischievous grin to her face.

"If you're going to talk, I suggest doing it now," she warned.

"Never!"

He couldn't say she didn't give him the option...

Mira pulled away and moved her hand, traveling down from his stomach to his lower half, where his spirit armor had been broken. Unease ran through Caerus, and he began to cower with fear. His fear quickly took the form of vivid disgust and arousal accompanied by pain that plucked all the nerves of his body like a stringed instrument.

"Aaaaargh, stop! You're crushing me! You're crushing mee!" He writhed in agony, but he was unable to escape Mira's grip. Sweat poured from him as he howled like a

cornered beast, instantly regretting his naivete.

While swords and Immortal Arts might be too extreme for an interrogation, she had found a place where even a mage's feeble muscles could draw ample pain. She knew firsthand how horrifying it was—despite her current form. Though surprised by her own callousness, she steeled herself and pinched her thumb and pointer finger a little harder.

It certainly was enough to make Caerus yield.

"Be honest, now. Otherwise..." As she spoke, she slowly but surely drew her grip tighter again. Since she'd released him once, there was no real pain. Yet.

"I'll talk! I'll tell you anything you want! Just stooop!" shouted Caerus as he shook in his armor.

"I'm glad we understand one another," Mira answered and eased her pinch, and the armor clattered as he relaxed. "Now, I'll ask again: Where did you obtain this spirit equipment?"

"From a merchant."

"Ho ho. And who is this merchant? And where did you meet them? And where did they claim *they'd* obtained it?"

"I don't know," Caerus said lamely.

Mira's fingers closed like a vice.

"I mean it! I'm not lying!" his voice rose an octave as he screamed desperately. "My mother knows the merchant, and she got it for me! Only she knows the details!"

He probably wasn't lying. His mother? Not his father? Hrmm, I suppose the details can wait for later. I'll put Solomon on the case for now.

Somewhere, a merchant had acquired a whole set of yin spirit equipment when it was rare to find just one piece. Horrors crossed Mira's mind... all yin spirit equipment came from a spirit's dying breath. Who was producing so many rare, cursed items?

That's Solomon's problem... which means he'll probably make it my problem, Mira

grumbled mentally, finding this all rather fishy. Her thoughts turned back to Caerus.

No matter what, this man *was* a noble. Disposing of him carelessly would likely cause trouble later, and that wasn't her style in the first place. Only one thing to do—have the appropriate public institutions deal with him.

Decision reached, it was time to return to Lunatic Lake. Mira looked at the two black-clad men on the ground. They were still out cold, but they would be valuable witnesses. She couldn't just leave them here. Thankfully, she had one method to ferry them all at once.

She released Caerus from her less-than-tender grip and summoned Garuda.

Caerus yelped as Garuda gazed down at him, annoyed. The sorcerer gasped at its beak, big enough to swallow him with ease.

"Is she about to feed me to this monster?!" Caerus whispered to himself. Incorrect, but Mira certainly didn't mind letting him think so for the moment.

"Garuda, could you give me a ride again? I'll also need you to carry this man," Mira gave Caerus a quick kick in the stomach as she gestured across the amphitheater, "and the two over there."

Garuda nodded without a sound and offered its neck to Mira. Amid a warm, gentle wind like a spring breeze, Mira hopped onto its neck. Her vantage point rose as the massive bird stood upright. Garuda casually picked Caerus and the other two up with its claws like fallen prey and spread its wings to fly. Overwhelmed by the sudden vertigo, Caerus gradually lost consciousness.

* * *

By the time she arrived back at Lunatic Lake, Mira was ready for a snack.

Garuda's presence was awe-inspiring, even compared to Pegasus. But the locals were used to Cleos coming and going in his bird-drawn wagon, taking a little of the excitement out of the occasion. As Garuda landed in front of the castle gate, the two gatekeepers looked on, trying to put their finger on what was different this time.

Then they realized that the monstrous bird was not carrying a wagon, but captives.

When the dignified Garuda leaned down, a girl alighted from its neck. Though they'd become accustomed to her coming and going on Pegasus, they didn't seem very surprised to see her ride in on Garuda.

"Welcome back, Miss Mira. Do you plan to meet with His Majesty?"

"Indeed I do."

Mira was rapidly becoming known around the castle as being just as capable as any Wise Man, and the king seemed to hold her in the same esteem.

"So... what's the story with those three?" the other guard asked as he eyed Caerus and his cohorts suspiciously. They were currently being lightly stomped into the ground by Garuda.

Mira prodded Caerus with her foot. "The armored fellow is a noble named Caerus. The other two seem to be his hired assassins. Long story short, they summoned me over a misplaced grudge and attacked me. It didn't turn out like they hoped."

The guard wrinkled his nose in mild disgust. Caerus was widely known and loathed. He was arrogant due to his skill in sorcery and his father's major role as a sorcerer of the Kingdom of Alcait, and he tended to use his power against anyone of a lower social status that he came to dislike. But attacking a future Wise Man and friend of the king was taking it a little too far... even if he hadn't been successful.

"I thought he might cause some trouble in the future," Mira added. "And since he's a noble, I brought him here. Could you call someone who knows how to handle people like him?"

"Certainly. I'll fetch just the people to deal with this. Please wait here, miss." After a proper military salute, the gatekeeper ran into the castle.

His partner kept a watchful eye on Garuda as it held down the three criminals. "I suppose the time has come to settle accounts," he murmured with a small, satisfied smile.

"Oho. The little man has had this coming, then?"

"That would be an understatement. I'm only a gatekeeper, but my son goes to the academy as well. Caerus is talented, but he's also a bully. He's used his status to avoid

any real discipline for years.”

“Well, that’s about to change. You tell your son that he can focus on his learning now.”

“And I’ll tell him that it’s thanks to Miss Mira!” The gatekeeper grinned. Though she didn’t know it, her stock at the academy was about to rise.

* * *

“Apologies for the wait, Miss Mira.” The other gatekeeper returned with a capable person in tow. Two capable people, in fact.

“Oh, well done.” Mira looked up and saw Suleiman trailed closely by Luminaria and her eye-catching red hair. Several guards followed along, as well.

Suleiman shot a glance at the three perpetrators, then bowed to Mira. “I heard you were assaulted. May I ask for more details, Miss Mira?”

Mira gave a brief summary of events. After her explanation, Suleiman looked exceedingly frustrated and heaved a long sigh.

“I had heard that you put on a good show at the symposium, but I’m amazed he took it that poorly. That’s one of the silliest grudges I’ve ever heard of—even if your entering the symposium *was* borderline cheating. Still, it’s not exactly cause for an *assassination*.”

The symposium existed to show off the potential of magic. And Mira certainly showed potential. Unfortunately, the nature of the symposium forced all the other students presenting for their schools of magic to compete against her. Caerus could neither prevail, nor cope with the loss.

“Do you happen to have the letter he sent you?” Suleiman asked.

“It should be in my pouch...” Mira fished around for the evidence. “Ah, here it is.”

Suleiman took the letter from her. “Now, I’ll need to hear testimony from these three. Let’s get them to the questioning room.”

“Very well,” Mira answered and dismissed Garuda, releasing the three.

Caerus obediently remained where Garuda had pinned him down... largely because he was still passed out from the trauma of the flight. The other two had awoken, but at the sight of Luminaria looming over them, they opted to continue to feign sleep.

With Suleiman in the lead, the guards hauled Caerus and the others off into the castle. Mira and Luminaria strolled together behind them.

"This seems a bit petty to warrant your attention. Feeling bored these days?" Mira asked quietly so that only Luminaria could hear her. The sorceress patted Mira's head as the small summoner tried to look up at her counterpart.

"Hardly." Luminaria leaned over, theatrically covered her eyes with her other hand, and faked a sob. "I got worried because I heard my beloved friend got attacked."

"Oho. What's the real reason?" Mira grumbled.

"When I hear a man has attacked a woman, I gotta know what's going on," Luminaria answered with the same smirk she'd used for thirty years. "But it doesn't look like he was man enough."

As they casually conversed, they descended the stairs to the castle's basement.

* * *

The interrogator opened the door and bowed, having finished preparations to take custody of the prisoners and question them.

"This way, please," he instructed.

A steel door lay ahead. The room behind it was small and dark with neither windows nor ornamentation—if one ignored the selection of physical restraints. A profound sense of claustrophobia descended once the door swung shut, intensified by the occasional flickering of the lights.

"I had them remove what remained of his spirit armor while he was unconscious," Suleiman said to the group. "All that remains is to question them, so we'll have to wake them up. Miss Luminaria, would you please do the honors?" he requested.

"Sure. I'm not used to doing this sort of thing gently, but I'll give it a whirl." Luminaria stepped forward to stand in front of one of the black-clad men who was propped in a

chair.

The man's eyes flew open and he cringed away from her. "Wait! I'm already awake. That's not necessary." His eyes were fixed on the silent sparks of electricity that were forming between Luminaria's fingers.

The other man quickly popped awake and added, "Me too."

When Luminaria looked at the two black-clad men, they vigorously shook their heads to indicate they were fully awake.

"Dang. Guess he's the only one I get to zap," she said calmly as she put her hand on Caerus's head. With a sudden flash of light and a small thunderclap, Caerus convulsed and crumpled like a broken doll. His sudden scream confirmed that he was indeed awake as well.

Luminaria removed her hand and the interrogation room returned to its previous peace, barring the sound of Caerus's panicked hyperventilation. The black-clad men broke out in a cold sweat.

"Where... am I...?" Caerus mumbled as he felt equal measures of numbness and pain course through his body. He stared vacantly at the floor, unable to see much else due to the lack of light.

"This is Alcait Castle's interrogation room," Suleiman declared, his manner clearly different now. Hearing him, Caerus looked up and saw Suleiman, Mira next to him, and Wise Man Luminaria—someone all sorcerers recognized. He shuddered. "Do you understand the situation you're in? For your sake, I hope so. And I'd appreciate it if you answered our questions honestly."

Suleiman stared at them with a professionally icy gaze. Luminaria ran electricity between her fingers as if playing with a toy. Mira alone remained the same as ever, making her the most eerie of the three.

The steel door opened, and a small silhouette appeared in the sudden light pouring in from the hallway. "Pulling out all the stops for this one, aren't you?" The light should have been reassuring, but the newcomer only added a new feeling of dread for the three prisoners—King Solomon himself was now in attendance.

This should have been beneath the notice of a king; normally, his subjects would carry

out the interrogation and report to him. That he had taken a personal interest was terrifying. Their horror could not have been more complete if a skull had rolled into the room out of the darkness.

Without giving his first statement much time to sink in, he quickly turned to Mira with a chastising look. “You finally come back... and *bam*. More trouble. I guess we’ve got a lot to discuss.”

“Not my fault. Blame them for starting it.”

Watching these two bantering with one another only made Caerus feel more dread—he’d attacked a close personal friend of the king. He now realized just how important a person Mira was. But it was far too late to undo his mistake.

“So? Why are you here?” Mira’s dignified tone had completely changed. Her attackers became more flabbergasted by the second.

“Aw, I was just excited to hear your stories. We can leave the interrogation to the experts.” Solomon gestured to the interrogator, Suleiman, and Luminaria, designating them *the experts*.

It was mostly coincidence that they were all present at the same time, but no one could stand up to the three of them. The interrogator restrained the prisoners as needed, Suleiman directed the questioning, and Luminaria was a manifestation of their greatest fears.



Solomon had appeared by chance, but Suleiman took the opportunity to add some additional weight to the proceedings. “Your Majesty, by all accounts, this man plotted the assassination of a future Wise Man and pillar of this kingdom. I request the First-Class Interrogation Exception.”

Luminaria caught on and brought her right hand to her chest, performing the royal salute as her eyes burned with cold flame. “As a Wise Man, I second his request.”

“Granted,” Solomon declared imposingly.

Caerus rocked in his uncomfortable chair, unsure what was taking place. But the two black-clad men seemed all too familiar with what this exchange meant.

“Unbelievable,” one muttered incredulously as they felt their blood chill to the freezing point.

Like Caerus, Mira had no idea what was going on right then. But she would learn the meaning later: The First-Class Interrogation Exception was used against assassins and traitors to the kingdom. It required a special request by someone of greater rank than a duke *and* the king’s permission. It allowed interrogation subjects to be injured in the course of their questioning—better known as torture.

The noble began to cry, beg, and plead for forgiveness. His pleading could be heard until the door closed behind Mira and Solomon.

The pair chatted amicably in the now-silent hallway as they headed up to their usual spot in Solomon’s office.

CHAPTER 4

WHEN THEY REACHED THE OFFICE, Mira sank into the sofa.

"Did you enjoy the train?" Solomon asked as he took a leisurely seat in his own chair.

Mira thought back over her journey. "I did! It was magnificent to see how even though much has remained the same, I could truly see the progress you've been making. The people I met here and there were delightful, as well. I *love* trips."

Given how long it had taken her, it would have been far faster to fly on Pegasus on a direct route. But nothing beat the charm of rail travel. It took the sting out of the loss of her floating island.

"I see. Well, I'm glad you enjoyed yourself." Remembering how overwhelming it had been for him when this world became real, he was happy to see that Mira was finally beginning to settle in—even if he felt a little left out of the fun. "But now on to the important question: Did you get the stuff?"

Duty called. Mira was a friend, but sometimes Solomon had to lean on his friends to make sure this new world stayed safe for people like them.

"Indeed I did," she replied. "But it's not what we expected." She stood up from the sofa and dropped the leather bag full of wood shavings onto Solomon's document-cluttered desk. They were the key to dating Soul Howl's activities and travels.

"You're right; that's not quite the state we expected. I'd believe you if you told me you'd just shaved them yourself. That's the Elder Tree for you, huh?" After inspecting the bag, Solomon plucked one of the moss-covered yet vividly textured scraps.

"Do you think they'll do?" Mira asked.

Solomon returned the shaving to the bag, tied it shut, and replied, "Probably. Our scholars are the best there are." He seemed proud of himself for picking the best of the kingdom's talent.

Mira could only leave it to them, so her job here was done. She was happy to leave it

for someone else to puzzle over the evidence. After sitting back down on the sofa, she grinned pompously. “Now, I’ve got an extra-juicy report for you. Would you like to hear it?”

“Oh yeah? Whaddya got? I wanna hear it!” Either playing along with Mira or earnestly interested, Solomon leaned forward and responded just the way she wanted.

She let him hang for a moment before finally blurting out, “I met Wallenstein!”

“No kidding?! ”

When Mira said something was juicy, she really meant it. But this was even juicier than he’d expected, so he looked more astonished than ever.

“You seem surprised. Well, so was I!” Satisfied to see that she’d pierced Solomon’s usual calm, Mira recounted the tale of her encounter with the wayward Wise Man.

* * *

“I see... Demons harbor some fascinating secrets.”

Finding Wallenstein in the train... The demon Faust, who had taken back his true duty... Solomon was struck with awe, though he also seemed slightly perturbed. Mira couldn’t blame him; anyone would be surprised to hear all this at once. After all, it concerned *demons*.

“So,” Mira continued, “he’s not in a situation where he can come straight home. But he did give me his word that he’ll return within the year. I’d say we can check Wallenstein off the list.”

“Agreed. If he’s busy right now, then we’ll have to settle for what we can get.”

Solomon’s shock wore off. His friend Wallenstein was doing important work and Mira had vouched for him. A king had to trust his operatives.

“What a stroke of luck, though,” he mused. “He was about as impossible to find as Meilin. Excellent work getting him to promise that he’ll come back soon, too. He’s never broken a promise.”

“Indeed. He is sincere to a fault.”

Mira and Solomon smirked fearlessly. The Wise Men knew Wallenstein as a man who would always keep a promise once he'd made it. Forcing him into rash promises had been an effective method of keeping him under control back in the old days.

"And while I'm here, I ought to share some of these with you." Suddenly remembering, Mira placed two round white stones and two black strings on the table.

"What are these?" Solomon leaned in and peered at the items.

Mira explained their purpose with pride in her voice: the stones would call one of Wallenstein's demon friends, and the strings could restrain even duke-level demons. "Wallenstein said that now that we know the truth, killing demons is going to be a tougher moral choice. So he gave me these. Take some in case a demon appears here while I'm gone. Also, if you need something from Wallenstein, you're free to call a demon of his with one of the stones and have them pass the message along."

After that, Mira explained how to use both items. They were simple: the stones were to be shattered, and the string was used to bind.

"How convenient." Solomon, who was gazing at the stones with great interest, abruptly looked up and asked, "By the way, what are those demon friends of his like?"

A friendly demon seemed... *counterintuitive*.

"Well, I only really met one, but..." Mira described the station bento-devouring knight Faust. "He seemed trustworthy."

"Sounds like they change a lot," Solomon muttered. "Yeah, it will be hard to kill them now."

Still, he was the leader of this country. As much as he might sympathize with Wallenstein and his endeavors, he couldn't permit any danger to his land.

"He did say that if needs must, we should do what needs to be done," Mira noted. "According to him, demons are reincarnated after death. Killing them isn't the end of the world, if it comes to that."

Wallenstein had seemed prepared to wait for every demon's reincarnation if that meant helping them reclaim their duty. Solomon was impressed—Wallenstein had a long war ahead.

"If that's his plan, then we'll have to prepare the country—no, the whole world—for that news."

"Yes," Mira agreed. "I only hope we can."

The demons who had caused countless tragedies were so different from the demons who had reclaimed their duty. They might as well be different beings. But that was going to be a hard pill to swallow for those who had been terrorized by demons in the past. They would have to gradually change the world's mind if these new demons were to live among humans peacefully.

Wallenstein likely had this in mind, too. They would have to discuss it whenever he returned.

Solomon mused, "That shy guy, of all people!" He had to laugh thinking about how their friend was mingling with demons now.

* * *

"Oh, one more thing," Mira remembered. "I decided to head over to Alisfarius while I was out. Guess who bought souvenirs!"

"Wow, you really bought something for me! What is it, what is it?"

As exciting as it was that Mira had found one of the Wise Men, the topic of demons was still a heavy one. With that conversation over, the atmosphere in the room lightened.

Mira lined up the souvenirs she'd bought on the table in front of the sofa. Solomon watched with shining eyes.

"Snow-white peach? That's one of their specialties, huh? You sure bought a lot of stuff."

Snow-white peach cookies, jam, candy, juice, manju, and tarts lined the table. But Mira hadn't just bought food. She took out one more item and handed it to Solomon.

"This one is all yours," she said with a smile as she handed over a small potted latifward tree, the holy plant of Alisfarius.

"Wooow, you've even brought me one of these? Thanks. I'll take good care of it." Solomon accepted the potted plant, placed it on the table, and examined it from all

angles.

"They had quite a quantity of them, but only two had enough character to draw my eye." Mira produced another potted plant.

Solomon inspected it like he had the other, and the two discussed potted plants at length. It was as if they were building their own world in their own little pot, deepening their friendship by talking over a shared interest. During these shared moments, Solomon thought it felt just like the good old days.

* * *

The great potted plant chat ended with the pair deciding to see whose looked better in six months. From there, Mira began haphazardly making piles of souvenirs.

"Would you pass this stack of confections on to the people who made this outfit?" she requested. "I'd like to thank them."

"Aha. I was wondering what you were going to do with all this. I don't mind playing messenger, but don't you think they'd be happier if you gave these to them directly?"

"Hrmm..."

"Head on over to the maids' quarters. I'm sure you'll find that the designers are *delighted* to see you."

"I'm not sure I like your tone... but I suppose you're right. I'd best thank them in person," she grinned.

The maids' quarters were forbidden territory that only women could enter. Now that Mira had gotten more used to her form, that seemed less daunting and more enticing than before.

"I get some too, right?" Solomon asked, casually opening a box and stuffing his face with snow-white peach manju. It only seemed fair, since he and Luminaria had given Mira the funds for her trip in the first place.

"Speaking of souvenirs, I bring one more: a story."

"A story? Not work-related?"

"Yep." Mira took a manju bun and sat back down on the sofa. "I happened to meet one of your fans at an inn."

"A fan of mine? I guess there're all sorts of weirdos out there. Would they happen to be... a woman?"

"That's right! A real curvy one, at that."

"Curvy, huh? This story's getting interesting!"

Mira described the young lady's personality and... *assets* while Solomon used his imagination to fill in the details. The two of them fantasized about her irresistible nurturing nature.

They both agreed that size didn't matter. But since Luminaria was out of the room, the pair also agreed that it was every man's dream to bury his face in bosom, ample or not, from time to time.

"I think her name was Aselia?" Mira recalled. "Her admiration for you led her on the path to become a paladin."

"Well, I'm honored," Solomon replied happily as he sat on the sofa next to Mira and reached for another manju.

"She has a problem, though: she's trying to imitate your current style. Her technique is suffering as a result."

"Copying my moves, huh? That is a problem. I'm as far from a model paladin as it gets."

"I told her as much. I tried explaining to her how you were when you started off, but she's smitten with you. She's determined to relearn the basics with a shield this time."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. Wow, thanks—I'm out here changing the lives of women I don't even know... Guess I'm not too shabby after all, huh?"

They chowed down on manju. The buns were the perfect size for stuffing into one's mouth whole, and the springy texture and melt-in-your-mouth sweetness of snow-white peach all came together in perfect harmony. Before they knew it, they'd each eaten several.

As they enjoyed their snack and chatted idly, someone knocked at the door.

Solomon washed down the manju with snow-white peach juice and switched to a more kingly tone. “Enter.”

Suleiman and Luminaria walked into the room.

“That was fast. How did it go?” Solomon asked.

“Somewhat anticlimactic, your Majesty. His two followers weren’t especially loyal, and they gave up every detail of the attack without a fight.” Suleiman bowed before sharing the story the attackers had told about the ambush on Mira.

The motive was Caerus’s personal grudge from the symposium, as he had mentioned... but what stuck out was *why* things had escalated so much. Marquis Alfonse Verlan—father of Caerus and head of the Verlan family—was off on an expedition, leaving his wife in charge of the estate. She was overly doting on her son and tended to agree to whatever he asked. Had Alfonse been home, the whole affair might never have happened in the first place. But with his mother in charge, Caerus was able to bring his plan to fruition.

“It seems he made off with a prototype sealing barrier from the Mage Corps’ storage. It was left on the scene, so we’ve sent a party to retrieve it,” Suleiman added.

Solomon thanked him, eyed the manju, then cleared his throat. Suleiman was constantly monitoring his kingly conduct when he was present, so the young ruler had to be careful.

Ignoring Solomon’s plight, Mira tossed a manju bun into her mouth and mused, “If it’s a prototype, then it must have been developed here, no? You’re up to all sorts of things, aren’t you?” She chewed the soft, fluffy bun and chased it down with juice. The sweet flavor of peach relaxed her cheeks.

Solomon side-eyed her angrily, but Suleiman was in his periphery, standing there like a strict test proctor.

“More precisely, we want to develop countermeasures,” the king explained. “We’re a country of mages, and having one’s magic sealed can be fatal to a mage, as well you know. We must understand these barriers’ construction and find a way to nullify them. That prototype was part of our research.”

Solomon walked away from the sofa to put the temptation of the manju buns at arm's length and sat back down at his desk. The mountain of souvenirs on the table was quite the sight. He secretly plotted to thin out their numbers later.

"Whatever keeps you busy, then," Mira muttered and ate yet another bun.

"I might not look it, but I *am* a king," Solomon answered. Suleiman gave him a sharp look. He'd been warned about using self-abasing language before. Best to change the subject quickly. "...Hmm. Er, what of the spirit equipment?"

"It seems it was entirely procured by his mother, so none of the prisoners know the details," Suleiman answered.

"You're certain?"

"Since Miss Luminaria was kind enough to assist, I believe they told the truth."

Solomon agreed—that was probably true. Mira had to wonder what they'd done to the trio. For her part, Luminaria suddenly appeared next to Mira, shoveling a manju bun into her mouth. Solomon and Luminaria were both meant to use their cultivated personas around outsiders, but it seemed Suleiman wasn't as strict with her.

"I suppose we'll have to ask the good marquess, then," Solomon grinned. "Suleiman, send a summons to their estate. Have her come tomorrow at noon."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

"Oh, one more thing. These wood shavings... can you hand them over to the research team?" Solomon pointed to the leather bag on the table.

Suleiman approached and checked inside, picking up one fresh, moss-covered wood shaving.

"This promises to be a difficult analysis. Best get started right away." His pessimistic words belied his intent to solve the mystery, no matter what. "Now, I shall take my leave."

For Suleiman, work was rewarded with more work.

* * *

"That Caerus guy was a hot mess," Luminaria said, now with a bottle of juice in hand.

"It's certainly been an annoying experience. He's been an arrogant jerk from the first time I met him at the academy. How haven't you dealt with this guy already?" Mira knew that bullies cropped up in any school system, but Caerus was out of control. Given the summoning instructor Hinata's view of him, Mira had a feeling he'd been abusing his status for a long time now. She also knew that Luminaria would never let something like that slide if she knew about it.

"My deputy handles the school." She paused with a manju bun halfway to her mouth and narrowed her eyes, then awkwardly added, "...But that guy pays more attention to the research than the kids."

With all of the Wise Men missing, the duties of overseeing the academy had largely fallen to deputies like acting Elder Cleos. But the Tower of Sorcery's Elder was present and healthy—this job should have fallen to Luminaria. That said, having a single Elder among a council of deputies would unfairly bias the curriculum of the academy. Or so Luminaria claimed, anyway.

In the meantime, her deputy was a researcher first and foremost. Being relieved of duties at the Tower to oversee the academy, he shut himself into a lab and devoted all his time to his own research. The students were, unfortunately, a neglected afterthought.

The discipline of sorcery was flourishing thanks to his research, but the students in the program were riding high on his achievements, not their own. They'd become needlessly cocky and condescending to their peers—as was the case with Caerus.

"Cleos has been checking up on them," Mira reassured her. "When we toured the school, it seemed to be tense. If Caerus gets expelled for this, maybe there's just another bully waiting to take his place. You should check up on them once in a while."

Mira remembered her stroll with Hinata, Cleos, and Amarette. She also recalled how the students respected the deputies and how they all looked at the group with envy. Having positive role models around was a good thing for morale and behavior. Mira remembered a similar experience when she was a student. Recalling how she'd felt back then, a mix of admonishment and parental protectiveness crept into her tone.

"Well, maybe you're right. Guess I should plan a visit and pop in once or twice,"

Luminaria said casually as she swallowed another manju bun.

“Regularly,” Mira insisted. Once or twice wasn’t going to cut it.

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.” Despite her irritation, Luminaria grudgingly made the promise in front of Solomon.

“The school, huh?” Solomon said all too casually as he reached for yet another bun. “I only know how it’s doing from paperwork. Maybe I’ll go with you.”

“Good. There are some things you can only understand by seeing them in person,” Mira agreed, recalling her own visit.

None of them even considered what a fuss it would be having an actual Wise Man and the King show up for a tour.

“Incidentally, what *is* the deal with that symposium?” Mira asked. “Hardly anything in that talent show would have been useful in a real battle.”

She recalled what she’d seen at the symposium, the whole reason for the ambush in the first place. She’d wondered if all-flash-and-no-substance magic was trendy with the kids these days, but Solomon and Luminaria just looked at each other and shrugged.

“The kingdom isn’t really involved in that symposium,” Solomon said. “It got started when the teachers needed to put on a show for some influential visitors.”

“Yep,” Luminaria confirmed. “After that it sort of changed to become a place for student presentations. The students can show off their imagination and adaptability, while the teachers can show off how good they are at teaching. All so people with money and clout can pretend they understand what’s going on with magic. And there’s an unspoken rule that the deputies don’t get involved to try and swing the outcome.”

For someone with so little interest in the academy, she seemed to know a lot about the symposium.

“So that’s how it happened?” Mira mused.

Though the deputies managed school policy, much was left to the teachers’ discretion. The symposiums were meant to bring student and teacher interests together for

demonstration purposes, and to test the imagination when it came to magic.

"It seems like they just got carried away over the years. The mastermind of the whole thing was probably the one who exacerbated that, too. Things ought to calm down soon," Luminaria said as she opened a new box of snow-white peach tarts, much to Solomon's delight.

Mira smiled. If her friends liked the treats, then they were worth the expense. She just made sure to snag the first tart once the lid was opened.

* * *

As the three happily sat on the sofa and gorged themselves on tarts, Mira pulled an idol of the goddess of love from the pile of souvenirs and handed it to Luminaria.

"For you."

"Ooh, thanks. I'm surprised they're selling stuff like this. Things must have changed a lot since the last time I visited. Oh huh, this carving is very... *detailed*. And very *white*." Luminaria turned the carving around and admired the artisan's craftsmanship. The two then locked eyes and nodded.

After gulping down some more snow-white peach juice, Solomon sighed with satisfaction and stood up. He plucked a report from Leoneil from the mess of papers on his desk.

"You remember Leoneil from the Karanak Mages' Guild, Mira? I got some pretty interesting info from him." Solomon flipped through the pages of the report and continued, "Apparently, they've identified some adventurers as being related to Chimera Clausen. They're investigating, but they say they've found some shared characteristics."

This information could be obtained by none other than Leoneil, head of the Mages' Guild. In fact, the methods he used to dig this up likely bordered on abuse of power on Leoneil's part.

"Those characteristics being...?"

"All of the adventurers they've designated as persons of interest have recently been getting multiple permits for specific dungeons. Three, to be exact: the Citadel of Scales,

the Garrison's Vault, and the Illusory Corridor."

The dungeons listed by Solomon were all advanced dungeons.

"Hrmm. I've been to those dungeons a few times. What business do they have with those three in particular? As far as I recall, there's nothing that connects them."

Mira couldn't recall any quest line that would take someone to each of those dungeons. None of the three even had spirits living inside, so why was Chimera Clausen sending people into them?

"Oh yeah, you usually skipped lore dialogues and cut scenes," Solomon mused. "They do have some shared history. But that's all in the report from Leoneil. He did a lot of digging for us." He looked down knowingly at his documents and smiled; he must've been happy that Leoneil had done so much work for him.

"Well then, how are they connected, exactly?" Mira chuckled and urged him to continue, as she always had when he acted this way. Luminaria seemed to be letting them do their usual song and dance while she kept herself busy poking around the mountain of souvenirs.

"First, the Citadel of Scales. It was the site of the decisive battle between ancient people and the king of monsters, right?"

"I believe I heard something about that in a quest..."

"According to historical texts, spirits assisted the ancient people in that final battle."

"Oh. Do spirits appear there?"

Historical documents were dispersed throughout the world and acted as lore dumps for anyone interested enough to read them. But now that this wasn't just a game, the history they contained took true form and influenced current events in this world. Mira's reality took on a new layer of color.

"During that battle, the leader of the spirits was Spirit King Symbio Sanctius. He descended at the Citadel of Scales and took command of the army."

"The Spirit King. Another major figure takes the stage, hm?" Mira mused. As she recalled, that battle had ended with the ancient people winning, but there wasn't much

information on the Spirit King himself.

"Next, Garrison's Vault. This dungeon has tons of texts and documents about old times. That includes information on the battle I just mentioned."

"Hrmm, I see. I suppose you could find those if you bothered searching."

The Garrison's Vault was a massive underground dungeon that was rumored to contain all documents ever recorded, alongside tomes of research for all sorts of fields of study. Guardians wandered within, protecting the texts the vault contained. However, the vault and dungeon proper were separate. One required a special permit to enter the vault itself.

"Finally, we've got the Illusory Corridor. For this one, the dungeon itself isn't the goal; it's what lies beyond."

"Beyond the Illusory Corridor? What was there? I remember some sort of stone circle..." Mira only vaguely recalled the striking, circular tower of rocks.

"The Ancient Ring Gate. It's believed to be the gateway to the Spirit Palace."

"Goodness. That seems very important."

When Mira last visited, Danblf had been there hunting the Elemental Eater subspecies that haunted the place. But now that she'd heard more, she could see why Elemental Eaters, monsters that devoured spirits, were there in the first place.

"Leoneil used this information and the tendencies of the Chimera Clausen that he's observed to speculate on their next target." Solomon closed the document and put it back on his desk. Then, his face tensed up with a look of extreme concern. "The Spirit King."

CHAPTER 5

“I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE IT,” Mira said.

Mages had an innate connection with spirits. As one of the Nine Wise Men, the greatest of mages, Mira knew exactly how important the Spirit King was to magic in this world.

Spirit King Symbio Sanctius possessed power that was nearly godly, and his very existence shaped the world. He dwelled on a different plane, in a place known as the Spirit Palace.

“I had the same reaction,” Luminaria agreed. “We know what happened to Atlantis when it picked a fight with the Three Great Kingdoms. And they had just a small fragment of divine power. The Spirit King is nearly a full-blown god—there’s no way humans can fight that.”

Atlantis was the strongest player-controlled country in terms of territory and military might. It had generals who even rivaled the power of the Nine Wise Men. But even with all of that, it had failed in battle against the divine power of the Grimsdale Empire, strongest of the Three Great Kingdoms.

And Luminaria was right—Grimsdale’s power paled in comparison to the Spirit King’s. Military might alone could not match that power.

“Well,” Solomon sighed. “Anyone with a normal head on their shoulders would never think of attacking the Spirit King—it’s dangerously reckless. But Chimera Clausen’s already succeeded in plenty of reckless acts, so they probably have a plan.”

Solomon sank deep into his leather chair, furrowed his brow, and crossed his arms as he stared down at the documents atop his desk. The report regarding the Citadel of Scales lying in the pile contained a hint about what that plan might be.

The Spirit King had an astronomical influence on outcomes whenever he appeared on this plane. But *how* did he take command at the Citadel of Scales? Leoneil had a hypothesis: he had to have some sort of control system that allowed him to limit the influence he had on the world... If one unraveled its workings, they might be able to repurpose it into a cage to contain the Spirit King.

"Chimera Clausen tends to retreat immediately if they realize they're in danger," Mira mused. "They must be certain of their victory if they're ready to act."

"Based on a few sources, we can expect them to either be in the research stages of creating a cage or early in the development. Meanwhile, I think they're searching for the location of the Spirit Palace," Solomon said, summarizing Leoneil's hypothesis neatly.

"So if they succeed and harness the Spirit King's power," Luminaria thought aloud, "That could mean the birth of a faction as strong as or even stronger than the Three Great Kingdoms. I know I'm not gonna sit idly by and let it happen."

"This is all hypothetical, of course, but we can't afford to ignore it." Solomon knew the price of inaction would be too steep to pay.

"Agreed," Mira said, and grinned as Solomon pulled a drawer open and retrieved a letter in a fancy, well-sealed envelope.

He stood with the envelope in hand and walked over to Mira. Putting a hand on her shoulder, he flashed her a grin in return. "As I recall, our next plan was for you to head to the Isuzu Alliance's home base. Why don't you deliver this to their top brass?"

"I thought you'd have something to send along..."

To fight Chimera Clausen, who now had adventurers on their side, they would need both information and personnel. The Isuzu Alliance would be a natural ally, and Solomon's letter contained both a proposal for a formal alliance as well as all the information he'd gathered from Leoneil.

It wasn't clear how much assistance the alliance could provide, but the information Solomon had in hand ought to be a welcome token of friendship. At this point, it would only be prudent to strike up a formal alliance with them.

Mira was already acquainted with some members of the alliance, and she even had a letter of introduction. She was aware that she was the obvious choice for an envoy, so she accepted the letter with no complaint.

"You never give me any time off to relax..."

Well... almost no complaint.

"I've got good news regarding your journey to the Forest of Seasons, though," Solomon said. "Your special-order wagon was completed just yesterday! Join me in a round of applause!" He clapped, though nobody else joined him.

The wagon was a Garuda-drawn carriage based on the one Cleos had made to ferry him between the Towers and the capital in speed and style. Manufacturing had begun initially as a reward for Mira's special mission, but her requests for custom features had delayed production long enough to force her to take the train.

"It's already done?!" Mira shot from her seat like a bolt. This was good news.

"I know, right?! It still needs some finishing touches, but that shouldn't take very long."

"Wagons are those things you fly in, right? What a lucky little laborer you are." Luminaria recalled the occasional sight of Cleos's wagon and mussed Mira's hair with a little envy.

Mira, unbothered by the manhandling, grinned victoriously. "Lucky me, indeed!"

Laborer. It was a word for a mage who could create or summon life. The category included summoners, necromancers, and mediums. Now that they were free from the yoke of video game systems, such laborers were quite versatile. Take wagons, for example: once necromancers learned to create golems, extremely speedy helpers, wagons became a cost-efficient mode of travel that only consumed mana. The convenience of modern living meant that such laborers were in demand.

"C'mooon, make a nice ride for sorcerers, too!" Luminaria let go of Mira's head, shook her red hair, and flopped sulkily down on the couch in a pout. She'd have looked like a child throwing a tantrum if she wasn't so voluptuous.

"Soon enough," Solomon answered half-heartedly as he patted Mira's hair back into place.

The majority of mages were specialized toward firepower, so they didn't have much magic that could be used for transportation. Steam engines using their magic had been considered, but they were a low priority at the moment.

Once he'd finished fixing Mira's hair, Solomon smirked knowingly. "Wanna see it? It's gotta be glorious."

"Of course I do." Mira stood up, her excitement swelling.

Luminaria stood as well. "Sounds fun. I'll go with you."

Solomon watched sadly as Mira began sweeping the remaining souvenirs back into her Item Box.

* * *

Mira's special-order wagon was being stored in a carriage house. As they made their way there, a mage in a blue robe turned toward Mira's group with a frown on her face. Luminaria groaned.

"Miss Luminaria, I've finally found you!" The woman squared her shoulders and stomped over to the group. She had serious eyes, but the way they shot daggers at Luminaria made it clear she was unhappy. When she reached the trio, she performed a crisp military salute.

"Something amiss?" Solomon asked, concern in his voice.

The mage saluted again and spoke. "My apologies, Your Majesty. Today is group training for the Mage Corps, but we're unable to start without Miss Luminaria to be our targe—*instructor*. We were just searching for her."

"Ah, right. I did receive a request along those lines, didn't I?" Solomon had stamped his approval on a request to use the special training grounds for battalion training. But with all that was going on, he'd lost track of what day it was. He shot a quick glare at Luminaria behind him, and she let out a long, languid sigh.

"Does Miss Luminaria have special business to attend to?" the woman asked. "If so, I can find Joachim." Seeing Luminaria was with the king and Mira, a rather legendary figure of late, the mage surmised that there might be some urgent business afoot.

But of course, checking out a friend's new ride was not worth breaking a promise over.

"I'm sure she doesn't mind," said Mira, and signaled to Luminaria with her eyes to go.

"Indeed. Go ahead and take her with you," Solomon added, pointing with his chin to communicate the same.

"Hmm, yes, I quite understand. I suppose I have my obligations," Luminaria answered sullenly, then leaned toward Mira and whispered, "You owe me a ride sometime." She put an arm around the blue-clad mage's shoulder and said, "Shall we?"

The pair walked briskly away.

"She seems busy," Mira mused.

"As lazy as she can be, she does a good job. Though things will get easier for all of us if you can find more of our friends."

"You make it sound easy. I found Wallenstein by accident, and all we have on Soul Howl and Kagura are some vague leads. But... I did happen to hear a rumor."

"Ooh, what kind of rumor?"

Grinning, Mira recalled the story of the orphanage that Emilio had told her. As they watched Luminaria and the mage walk off, Luminaria's hand drifted down from the mage's shoulder to her waist and hip.

"Are you sure they should be doing that?" Mira asked, a frown on her adorable face.

Solomon watched as the female mage leaned into Luminaria's touch and chuckled, "You'd be surprised how few problems that causes." Clearly, he planned to do nothing about it.

"I'm jealous," Mira muttered.

Returning to the matter at hand, she told Solomon about the story she'd heard from Emilio and Lianna—without even trying to hide her obvious envy toward the happy couple.

* * *

"That does sound like her, huh?" Solomon mused. "But we don't know where it is, do we?"

"All we know is that it's a nameless village to the northeast of Grimsdale."

"That's a hike. Sounds like a pain to investigate..."

The northeast reaches of Grimsdale were vast, and it would be hard to find an excuse to justify such a search when the disappearance of the Wise Men was still a state secret. Solomon turned the problem over in his mind.

Sensing his worry, Mira added, "If anything takes me that way, I'll look into it a little."

They continued through the hall down a flight of stairs and stopped at the door to their destination. Their conversation came to a natural end as they prepared to enter.

Carriage storehouses were situated on both the western and eastern sides of the castle. The eastern side was used by nobility, while the western side was for the military. Mira and Solomon now stood in the western wing.

The space was directly connected to the workshops and garages. It was a wide stone area where technomancers performed repairs, inspections, and development. Currently, only a few carriages were being worked on within.

Next to the door was a control room. The king's sudden appearance prompted the manager of the carriage storage and stables to leap out of the seat where he'd been taking a brief rest.

"If it isn't Your Majesty! And this is Miss Mira?"

"Sorry to bother you during your break, but that's right. May I introduce Danblf's pupil, Mira."

"A pleasure to meet you," Mira greeted him.

"Name's Dag, I handle the vehicle storage here. It is a pleasure to meet you, as well."

The manager was an adult Galidian man with a deep voice and a dark complexion. His muscles rippled under his coveralls, and his work apron was opened at the top, baring his broad chest.

Even on his knees, Dag was as tall as Mira. With a deep red beard and a bald head, his face looked extremely kind, almost giving off the impression of a living daruma doll.

"If the guest of honor is here, does that mean it's time for the great unveiling?" Dag's eyes shone confidently. The special-ordered wagon, finished just the day before, was the product of the artisans' hearts and souls.

"That it is. Could you bring it out?"

"Of course. It's currently receiving final adjustments, so it will be a short wait before I can bring it."

"Sure. No problem."

"I'll have it out as soon as possible, Your Majesty." He stood up, bowed, and ran off into another room calling his coworkers, his muscles rippling all the way. Despite his size and stature, there was a cheerful, almost childlike, spring to his step.

Before long, the workshop was alight with excitement. Machine parts and tools made by human hands were hauled off to the sides to clear a large space in the center. Then, another large door opened, and workers pushed in a white wagon.

It was just a bit bigger than the average. The sides were rectangular with beveled corners, and its four metallic wheels rolled along the ground. Though the carriage was tall, the door handle was low enough for Mira to reach with ease. It seemed basic, but very sturdy—somewhat like an armored car.

"All right, Dag. Take us through the features."

"You got it."

Dozens of the messy, sweaty workers grinned proudly as they puffed out their chests and lined up next to the wagon. Dag stepped forth, his voice full of excitement as he pointed to the work of his artisans, who had poured their all into this project.

The tour began with the braces, which allowed for the wagon's main feature of flying and hauling. Next came practical features—a pressurized cabin, ventilation, and the springs built into the axles that reduced shocks and bumps. From there, he explained the technical and specialized touches. Its frame was made from a newly developed material, a mithril alloy. It was easy to work with, light, and resistant to changes in temperature. Yet it was also strong enough that the brace would not break when held by Garuda.

Mira found herself drawn into the particulars, the specialized artisan knowledge, and most of all, the passion of Dag's speech—the man really had a craftsman's spirit. Once he'd exhausted every detail of what could be seen on the outside, Dag dramatically opened the wagon door. "Please, take a look inside."

"Right. Let's see what you're made of." Infected by Dag's zeal, Mira poked her head inside.

The interior of the vehicle had the empty, somewhat sterile smell of an unused vehicle along with, surprisingly, the nostalgic scent of tatami mats. The inside of the wagon was a perfect Japanese room, cozy and exactly as she'd ordered. There was a black stone step for taking off shoes at the entrance. Up ahead was a big window, installed so the rider might enjoy the sun's rays. But the thing that Mira was most excited about was the majestic kotatsu with a scroll-patterned blanket. Atop it was not a mikan orange, but a flowerpot flush with green leaves.

Mira felt for a moment as if she'd gone home to Japan, and said exactly what she was thinking: "This is even greater than I'd expected."

Hearing those words, the artisans' eyes gleamed as they balled their fists in triumph. "Yes!" It seemed the interior decorator was present among them, too.

Mira took off her shoes and lifted one slender, fair leg to take her first step onto the tatami. It was soft, yet firm, with that deep tatami mat elasticity that she knew well. Then she stepped all the way inside to inspect the rest of the wagon.

Next to the kotatsu was a violet legless chair. They had also installed a closet with a paper sliding door decorated with a light flower pattern. On the front side of the cabin, there was a small door that would be the entrance to the driver's seat in the event that the wagon was drawn like a coach.

Mira looked around excitedly before turning to the closet and sliding it open. It was divided into an upper and lower half. The lower was empty, but she spotted a folded futon and blanket on the upper half.

"Oho!" Mira turned and asked, "Does that mean I can sleep in here?"

Dag poked his head in the entrance just slightly, answering happily, "Yes, ma'am. If you move the kotatsu to the side, you should have plenty of space to stretch out." He claimed that the futon in the closet was ordered to Mira's exact size.

"Depending on your destinations from now on, you might end up having to camp. With that in mind, you can add whatever furniture and decorations you want. That's part of the fun, right?" Solomon poked his head in below Dag and grinned childishly. "So, what do you think? It's like a mobile home, but with more secret base flavor."

It wasn't just a vehicle for transportation; it was a true mobile home. It was a dream come true.

Mira closed the closet and touched the wall, with its white, lightly textured pattern, and answered with great satisfaction, "I love it!"

"Seems a whole lot more calming than being at home with my old lady," Dag muttered, apparently in agreement with Mira. He seemed to be planning to construct one of his own.

After finishing her look around, Mira sat in the legless chair to see how comfortable it was. Her eyes landed on the potted plant atop the kotatsu.

"What is this plant?"

It looked like a Japanese morning glory at a glance, but without the flowers. A small trellis had been inserted in the white planter, allowing the vines to twine around it and fill it with leaves. Mira found it rather strange that this alone was placed in a room with no furnishings beyond a kotatsu and a legless chair.

"That's called mist weed," Dag explained. "It's a plant native mainly to volcanic regions. This particular variety is efficient at using photosynthesis to create oxygen. Even in an airtight space, as long as you have light, the plant will be enough to recirculate the carbon dioxide in your breath."

"Now that sounds convenient." It was like a natural air purifier. Amazed at how well-thought-out this all was, Mira pinched and prodded the leaves of the mist weed before finally muttering, "My life is in your hands."

"They're also easy to grow—using the installed lights will work just fine. For details, you can consult the instruction manual. Be sure to give it a read."

Mira noticed a stack of papers next to the potted plant. "Right."

"Now, let's take a look through the garage. I figured I'd secure you your own parking space while we're here," Solomon said. The artisans moved in unison as they hauled the wagon off to another room, probably to continue the finishing touches.

"So, it's finished... but when will it be *finished*?" Mira asked.

Dag thought for a moment, then said the work was already more than halfway done, so it would probably be complete the day after tomorrow.

"Seems silly to head right out without waiting for it to be done, don't you think?" Mira said loud enough for Solomon to hear her. Her next mission would require more long-distance travel by air, and the wagon specially made to resolve this problem would be done in little more than a day. In that case, there was no reason not to wait for it.

"It does, yeah? I suppose that means tomorrow's your day off." Solomon looked at her with envy.

"Hrmm, a day off? I might as well return to the tower for a breather." Mira smiled excitedly, though part of her felt like a salaryman who could only come home on the weekends. "By the way, why are we worried about finding a parking spot? Shouldn't I just itemize the wagon and put it in my Item Box? It seems much easier."

Solomon shook his head and answered, "Sorry, but you can't. Wagons count as vehicles, so they can't be itemized. There're some other exceptions, too."

"Hrmm. It has its limits, then."

As they whispered to each other, they passed through the enormous door in front of the workshop. The sky was dimming to twilight. After a quick look around, Mira spotted the stable where the horses were relaxing. Across the parking lot, there was a row of small buildings with carriages inside. Among them, she spotted the Pegasus Carriage she'd seen long ago.

"Miss Mira, this will be your own personal garage," said an artisan as they guided her to the front of the leftmost stall. It wasn't much different in size from the other garages, but it was very shiny and new looking.

"When you drive through the castle gates from now on, they'll haul it here," Solomon said. "Remember where you parked."

It was empty for now, but Mira and Solomon crossed their arms and fantasized about the sight of the wagon parked within.

"Indeed. I'll keep that in mind."

"Your Majesty, Miss Mira." Dag's voice came from behind them. It wasn't as excited as

before; it now held a certain gravity, and his face had grown solemn.

Mira and Solomon turned. The artisans had lined up neatly, with Dag in the center of them. He took one step forward and addressed the pair.

"It would be no exaggeration to say that this wagon is the culmination of all our hard work and skill. We believe that we've grown more capable as a result of this endeavor. Your Majesty and Miss Mira, we offer you our utmost gratitude for trusting our abilities and granting us the opportunity to pour our hearts and souls into it."

Dag brought the team's presentation to an end and bowed deeply. The other artisans in line followed suit and shouted all at once, "Thank you!" All of them flashed their manly, yet somewhat shy, smiles.

Strange... I asked on a whim, so I wasn't expecting them to thank me. Rather, I should be the one thanking them all for doing all of this for me.

Solomon looked at the craftsmen proudly, one at a time, and said, "You've done wonderful work here. I'd be gratified if you'd continue to serve the kingdom as you have been."

"We devote ourselves wholeheartedly to you," Dag replied with dignity.

"Amazing, right?" Solomon asked Mira with a proud smirk.

"They're what makes this kingdom great," Mira answered, remembering all of the incredible things she'd seen up to this point.

After that, they discussed wagon maintenance and how to collect data on its usage. As this wagon incorporated some of their newest technology, they wanted to gather as much information as they could for future research.

As the sun set fully, they finished their talk and dispersed.

Now that he and Mira were left alone in the garage, Solomon looked at her expectantly. "It's getting late. You should stay the night and head out tomorrow morning."

Mira turned her eyes from the castle walls, faintly illuminated by the surrounding light, to the river of stars cutting through the sky. Finally, she answered, "I think I'll take you up on that."

Solomon returned to his office to finish up some work, while Mira headed to the maids' quarters to hand out souvenirs before the end of the day. Entering the maid's quarters always felt a little scandalous, like a lecher intruding on the women's dorm.

But no one batted an eye. When Mira asked for directions, everyone answered kindly, and she passed by the *No Men Allowed* sign without a single objection. It was perfect. Mira smiled. She decided she didn't mind her new body at all.

Is it just me, or does something smell really good?

Mira swaggered about as if she owned the place, looking for a familiar face. Before long, the maids all gathered around her, just as Solomon had predicted. Among them was Lily.

"Well, if it isn't Miss Mira!"

After being taken to the lounge, Mira told them about her trip to Holy Kingdom Alisfarius and piled the table with souvenirs and treats, explaining that they were her thanks for making the technomancy robes.

"I know these are a rather poor reward, but I'd like all of you to share these little souvenirs."

"Wow! Thank you for thinking about us! We really appreciate it!"

The maids all rushed to reach their hands out, but Lily held them back and took Mira's hand. She swore that she would not let Mira's wishes go to waste and promised that she would ensure that even those who weren't present would get their share, too.

Afterward, Mira went with the off-duty maids to the palace baths to soothe the day's fatigue. She found herself doted upon by Lily and the other maids, as expected... but past experience allowed her to stay calm and composed, unlike previous times, when she'd been overwhelmed by the attention.

It's not enough to let them pamper me; I must be like a ruler who demands to be pampered! Maintaining her cool despite the crowd of maids around her, Mira leaned back and relished paradise.

* * *

When she was out of the bath, she was given a temporary dress to replace her technomancy robes that had been sent to the laundry. But more was in store.

"Now, Miss Mira, prepare for our ultimate creation!" Lily held out what was unmistakably a new magical girl costume. They'd obviously noticed that she'd liked the last one more than expected, so they went all out this time.

She had to chuckle; it was another incredible outfit.

I suppose I'd better not mention how pleasantly surprised I am that this is normal instead of being ridiculously frilly...

No sooner had she thanked them for the second one than they had a third ready for her! While shocked by the speed with which they worked, she was also struck by the realization that the maids cared about her more deeply than she realized. Under the maids' expectant gazes, Mira smiled tightly and muttered, "Well, I'll have to bring souvenirs again soon."

The maids gave Mira the full rundown on their new creation—though it was pretty much exactly like the last one with its special technomancy features. Now she could switch between them depending on her mood without sacrificing function.

As they explained, they helped her into her new outfit. When they finished and stepped back, Mira was more adorable than ever.

Hrmm... From an unbiased perspective, I suppose I am overwhelmingly cute. More proof of my perfect taste. Mira fell in love with herself in the mirror all over again. Her expression betrayed some remaining bashfulness, but her satisfaction shone through. The maids were beyond moved.

This outfit wasn't a dress; it was divided into blouse and miniskirt, its design reminiscent of a school uniform. Throw in a long-sleeved robe on top, and it was complete. It was the academia version of a magical girl outfit. Mira could tell at a glance that Solomon was involved in the design. He'd always loved schoolgirl outfits.

"Oh, that's our Miss Mira! She wears it perfectly!" Lily peeked out from behind Mira and excitedly admired her in the mirror.



The color scheme of this outfit was more flamboyant than the last, and the overall design was intended to accentuate cuteness while retaining coolness. Lily and the other maids were proud—they'd perfectly threaded the needle, keeping it neither too strange nor too subtle.

Even Mira could find no flaws in their design. Magical girl wear was popular in this world, so she had seen plenty of outfits in town and at stations. They were all very well-made, but in terms of pure cuteness, the more subdued designs from before were unfortunately a step behind.

This time, the maids had made up for that. And while the outfit fit perfectly into the magical girl mold, it also seemed to broadcast that it wasn't an off-the-shelf outfit. It was *designer*.

Well, I suppose this will do...

As she admired herself, Mira noticed the maids grinning brightly behind her and smiled. If they were this excited over it, then she ought to be excited too, right? It was the chivalrous thing to do.

* * *

Dinner had been prepared in the lounge next to the king's office, so Lily guided the newly attired Mira up to the castle's top floor. Along the way, they ran into Luminaria, who would be joining the meal.

Luminaria looked Mira up, down, and all around until there was a broad smile on her face. After muttering, "You're looking pretty cute. Keep it up," she patted Mira's shoulder. Luminaria thoroughly enjoyed being a woman in this world and was happy to see Mira was finally getting with the program.

But she could see that, while the fashion was slowly growing on Mira, the small summoner had already learned to enjoy other aspects with much less... reservation.

Luminaria leaned down and whispered, "Did you enjoy your bath?"

"Oh, you know it," Mira replied. This was one thing they agreed on.

With that, the two looked each other in the eye and grinned evilly.

* * *

That night, the maids and servants left the three friends to enjoy their rare dinner date.

And enjoy it they did. They chattered on about things of no consequence, held serious discussions about the kingdom, spoke of the invention of dolls using Shimmering Seedpods, and more. They even threw in some silly stories about how other former players were doing now.

The jovial dinner party gradually morphed into quite the heated discussion of all manner of state secrets.

CHAPTER 6

THE LONG-AWAITED DINNER PARTY ended with Luminaria getting far too drunk. Apparently, the training from earlier in the day had been quite stressful, and she was eager to blow off some steam. The maids had to carry her away.

Mira had indulged heavily herself, and Lily escorted her to her room.

"Kinda sucks being able to hold my liquor so well," Solomon muttered. With both his companions shuttled off to bed, he returned to his office to do more work.

* * *

The sunlight leaking through the curtains reflected off the floor, banishing the last vestiges of the night from Mira's room. The maids had been up and busy for hours already, and now most gathered in the lounge as their morning chores were completed. One maid found herself entranced by Mira's defenseless sleeping face, and crept close.

"Miss Mira? Time to wake up, Miss Mira." The maid addressed her in a whisper, putting a hand on her exposed white shoulder and shaking the summoner gently. Mira groaned and barely opened her eyes. She saw the canopy's embroidery and the pale face of Lily leaning over her like a ray of gentle moonlight. "Good morning, Miss Mira."

"Mmh... Mornin'" She sat up, willing her heavy eyes to open. "Wh' time is it?"

"It's currently 9:40 a.m."

While Mira's body tried to drag her back off to sleep, Lily peeled the bedding off, baring her body that was covered only by a black negligee. The smooth, black silk did a fantastic job of emphasizing her fair skin and long, flowing silver hair. The salacious contrast of it was a crime of Lily's own doing, as she had changed the tipsy Mira into this little black number the night before.

Without taking her eyes off Mira, Lily began pulling her out of bed.

"Goodness. So late already...?" Due to last night's festivities, she'd woken up much later

than expected. If she was to head out this morning, Mira would have to rush through her morning routine.

* * *

Once she'd finished basic grooming, Lily dressed Mira in her new clothes. Seeing herself in the mirror, Mira cocked her head at the unfamiliar black negligee—but Lily's presence in itself told her all that she needed to know.

From there, Lily led Mira to the dining hall. Breakfast had passed, so it was rather empty. The only people who remained in the hall were the cooks preparing lunch and maids looking to pilfer sweets for tea breaks.

"Wait here, please," said Lily as she pulled out a chair.

Mira obediently seated herself, and the maids soon brought her late breakfast.

"Thank you for the souvenirs and treats, Miss Mira."

"They were delicious."

"Thank you for thinking of us!"

Mira replied with a soft smile, "As long as you're happy, I'm happy."

Lily poured black tea into a china teacup. "I forgot to tell you yesterday, but thank you for your help with Miss Amarette. We got the measurements done right away."

Mira recalled that Amarette, acting Elder of the Tower of Necromancy, had taken a liking to her outfit and asked to be put in contact with the maids. For their part, the maids had already been waiting for an opportunity to make clothes for Amarette, and Mira had handed them the opportunity on a platter. Her popularity was skyrocketing.

"Sure, sure," she answered quickly and wet her lips with black tea. She dug into her breakfast as the maids fussed about her.

* * *

Mira left the dining hall after her meal, and the maids busily dispersed. It seemed they'd been shirking other duties to take care of Mira. The small summoner left them

to their chores and made her way back to Solomon's office.

Solomon put his documents down and looked up as she entered. "Hey, good morning. You look well-rested."

"I slept like a log," Mira answered cheerfully as she plopped down on her usual place on the sofa. Perhaps as expected of alcohol fit for kings, the hangover was nearly nonexistent.

"Good to hear it. Here, I forgot to give you this... Your reward for the last mission." Solomon picked up an envelope on his desk and tossed it toward the sofa. It arced through the air and landed next to Mira with a slight metallic jingle.

"Ooh. My purse was getting light." She picked it up and dumped the contents out into her hand. Inside were ten gold coins: 500,000 ducats.

"I look forward to more souvenirs," Solomon said shamelessly.

"Oh, please... Well... I suppose if I find anything worth buying."

Solomon really did look forward to Mira's souvenirs. The items and stories she brought back allowed him to feel the joys of travel vicariously through her, as if drinking from a bottle of her destination's essence.

Mira rolled up the empty manila envelope as she considered the point of her last mission. "So, were they able to date the wood shavings?"

"I just got a report regarding that. It'll take more time, but they think they can do it."

"Hrmm. I'm glad that wasn't a waste of effort."

Mira would have run back to her tower and cried herself to sleep in Mariana's arms if she'd learned that all the effort she'd just gone to was for naught. But lucky for her, the castle's scholars were truly a cut above.

"Now you can begin your next mission on a high note." Solomon grinned at her teasingly. Mira let out a long, exaggerated sigh and rose from the plush couch.

"Okay, fine. See you tomorrow." Mira placed her hands on her hips and stretched, rolling her neck to loosen it up. Solomon mused inwardly that she didn't act her apparent age

much at all, though he also knew he was one to talk. The need to stretch was infectious, and he rolled his neck as well.

"See you tomorrow. Oh! Cleos has been busting his butt over in your tower. Be nice to him, okay?"

"Oh ho, really? Don't worry about it, I'm always nice to him," Mira said with a wave as she walked out of the office.

She wondered what had happened with Caerus and his goons, but they weren't worth stopping to ask about. That was Solomon's problem now.

* * *

Mira departed from Lunatic Lake and had landed at Silverhorn by the afternoon.

At the top floor of the Tower of Evocation, she elatedly opened the door to her room and savored the feeling of returning home. Inside, she saw Mariana holding a basket.

"Miss Mira! Welcome home." Mariana smiled sweetly and bowed.

"Thanks," Mira responded. She instantly felt more relaxed. A moment later, Luna lolloped over and jumped up for Mira's attention. "Ooh! I see you're doing well, too."

Mira caught the pure rabbit in her arms and nuzzled it, breaking into a smile. It was so cute! After getting her fill of Luna's cuddly softness, Mira sat on her sofa and asked Mariana, "Were there any issues during my absence?"

"None at all, if you don't count Luna not getting along with Miss Lythalia..." Mariana answered after some thought, gazing at the rabbit in Mira's hands.

"Oh, really? Well, pure rabbits are timid. There's not much we can do about that."

Pure rabbits almost never showed themselves in front of people. They were known to flee from any noise. Mira's special relationship with the holy beast Pegasus must have drawn Luna to her, and she imagined that Mariana was simply favored by extension. Mira's assumptions, of course, were quite incorrect.

"Well, it's not that. Um, Miss Lythalia's expressions of love are a little too *intense*..."

Lythalia loved the adorable creature so much that when she'd first spotted it, she was like a woman possessed. Luna invariably kept her distance.

"I see..."

Lythalia was also a zealous fan of Danblf, so she was shocked to learn Mira's true identity. Luna's rejection must have been quite a blow.

I feel a little bad...

"Incidentally, Mariana—were you about to go shopping?" Stretching out on the sofa, Mira looked at the empty basket in Mariana's hand. It was her favorite style of shopping basket. Mira recalled that Mariana had several in different colors.

"Yes. It's not all that urgent, though, especially now that you're home," Mariana answered. She put the basket down on a nearby rack and removed the apron she'd donned for her outing. She was ready to focus on Mira.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'll just be relaxing here for a while. Prioritize your own business, please," Mira replied as she stroked Luna, already feeling listless.

Mariana wouldn't stand for it. "No! You've just gotten home from your trip, and you're tired. No errand is more important than taking care of you," she declared, resolute in her convictions. She'd shifted entirely to service mode.

Mira still felt guilty for interrupting her errands. After a moment of thought, she finally hit on a new proposal. "Well... why don't we go shopping together?"

If she stayed home, Mariana would never leave.

"Oh, no. I could never trouble you like that, Miss Mira." Mariana's sense of duty was battling against the intriguing word *together*.

"Lazing about all day might be fun, but shopping with you sounds far more productive. I'm tired, but it's more than I'm tired of work. Besides, I still haven't gotten a good look at the new city. What do you say? Would you like to show me around while we shop?"

Mira still hadn't gotten to enjoy the sights of Silverhorn as a tourist destination. She was actually speaking from the heart. Mariana couldn't refuse.

"Very well. I would love to show you around." Mariana still seemed conflicted, but there was a slight smile on her face.

* * *

Mira and Mariana left the tower together and walked along the main street. Luna stayed at home, as she was skittish of crowds.

Mariana had intended to shop for the perfect decor to ensure the ideal feng shui arrangements for Luna's new home.

"That's a big responsibility," Mira mused.

If it was for the sake of Luna's health and happiness, Mira would have to get a little more serious about this shopping trip. But as she was an amateur when it came to interior design, all she could do was tag along with Mariana.

Mariana strolled down the main street, entering shop after shop. She only bought one or two things from each one. All of them were general stores, and based on how the employees treated her, Mariana must have been a regular. There were several stores that seemed to have sections devoted specifically to her personal design needs. It seemed to be far from the first time she'd shopped for such things.

Mariana had adjusted well to life in this city. Mira felt strangely safe alongside Mariana as the woman spoke familiarly with the shopkeepers, though she bristled at any male shopkeepers who seemed to get a little too flirty with her assistant, using her glare to make her displeasure clear.

They explored the city with Mariana acting as the perfect guide, pointing out shops with cheap items, shops with high-quality wares, shortcuts, roads that would lead to the Adventurers' Guild Union, and the like. After a while, they arrived at another home goods store. It seemed this was today's main destination.

The spacious shop smelled pleasantly of wood. Tables and chairs were displayed prominently near the entrance. The first price tags Mira caught sight of were staggering, but as they went deeper into the store things got more reasonable.

As she wandered the aisles, Mira came across a display full of colorful clothes and robes. The clothes were arranged behind a glass door, and were so well-displayed that Mira thought they must be very high quality. Yet she could see no prices listed

anywhere. She cocked her head curiously and happened to catch sight of an item tag, which told her everything she needed to know.

"Ooh, is this a wardrobe?" she wondered aloud. "It almost looks like a display shelf." The clothes were simply meant to show how the furniture ought to be used.

"That item has gained popularity among nobles recently," Mariana explained. "On top of making it easier to pick out clothes, it also allows the clothes inside to be a part of your interior design."

"I see..."

The wardrobe was wide and not very deep, so it could only be placed in bigger rooms, but the way it displayed the clothes made it a formidable item for any interior design. One could change how their room looked just by switching out the clothes inside.

I want this!

Mira's room in the tower had plenty of equipment she'd chosen during her Danblf era just because they looked cool. A display cabinet would be the perfect thing to show them off. But when she saw the price, her jaw nearly hit the floor: two million ducats! She gave up—keeping up with noble trends was clearly beyond her means.

Mira and Mariana continued to browse the store, looking at curtains, shelving, and wardrobes. Mira felt like a newlywed picking out furniture for her first home.

After an hour of having fun window-shopping, they purchased some items for Luna and gave their address for a delivery order. With that, Mariana had finished her errands.

"Well, we've taken the time to come out here. Do you know any less popular sightseeing spots?"

It was only a bit past midafternoon, so they had plenty of time until nightfall. Mira wanted to see as much of her new hometown she could. Right then, her stomach began to growl—come to think of it, they hadn't even eaten lunch!

"Miss Mira, my apologies!" Mariana looked horrified to have failed to notice Mira's hunger. "Let's hurry back and—"

Her words came to a halt as she looked out at the plaza across the road. It was full of food stalls and sightseers. But what really drew her eye was the clientele.

"Miss Mira, would you like to eat over there?" Mariana asked. Mira turned to look, and her eyes began to sparkle.

"Ooh, street food! Good idea. Let us go!"

Mira made a beeline for the plaza.

* * *

The food stall plaza served as not just a sightseeing spot, but a date destination as well. The crowd was full of couples.

Mira proceeded through the crush of people, looking into each stall to see what she wanted to eat while Mariana followed along a little closer than usual. After a few minutes of looking, Mira stopped at a stall that served korotamayaki. There was a couple flirting brazenly in front of it, but Mira paid them no mind as she approached with Mariana in tow.

Korotamayaki looked exactly like takoyaki. Where it differed was the filling: instead of octopus meat, it could be filled with various other ingredients.

I can't get enough of that saucy scent!

Takoyaki was the true star of food stalls, and if korotamayaki was a derivative of it...

"I choose this one. Mariana, have you decided what you want?" Mira quickly turned to the fairy.

"I think I would like it, too." She wanted to have what Mira was having.

Mariana actually had many tastes similar to Mira's lately. Even her underwear already perfectly matched Mira's, down to the color.

"I see, I see. Then what would you like inside?"

Mira elbowed the lovey-dovey couple in front of the stall aside and looked at the posted menu. When Mariana followed suit, the person running the stall piped up in

surprise, “Ooh?! If it isn’t Miss Mariana! I’m honored. Let me know whatcha want, okay?” The kind old man at the stall bowed to Mariana and then looked down at Mira with curiosity.

It seemed the aide of Mira’s tower was famous. He assumed that she was probably some researcher’s daughter who Mariana was babysitting.

Totally oblivious, Mira gazed at the menu with Mariana.

“Okay, I’ve made my decision,” Mira said ten seconds later. “What about you, Mariana?”

Mariana’s eyes landed on a particular item on the menu. “I’ll take the cheese mi—” Before she could finish, her ears perked up at the passionate couple from before.

“Ooh, that looks good!” said one lover.

“Wanna try it?” asked the other.

“Yeah!”

“Okay. Open up.” She popped a morsel into his mouth. “Do you like it?”

“Yeah, it’s delicious! How about I return the favor?”

This kind of flirting was a cliché routine, but it seemed it was still going strong. The tradition had survived the transition to this world.

Mariana, who had been casually eavesdropping on the pair, knew what she had to do. “Miss Mira, which have you chosen?” she asked.

“I went with the cheese mix.”

“Then I’ll have the green onion mochi.” Mariana quickly scanned the menu again and chose her second option without hesitation.

“One cheese and one green onion mochi, got it. Comin’ right up!” The stall keeper got right to cooking. With skillful movements, he flipped the ingredients and cooked them into perfect little balls. Mariana watched, entranced.

* * *

The pair accepted their completed korotamayaki and sat on a bench at the dining space in the center of the food stall plaza.

Mira stuffed one in her mouth right away and cried, “Mm, that’s good!”

Mariana tried one of her own. Then she said invitingly, “This one is delicious, too.”

“Yours is green onion mochi, yes? Glad you love it!” Mira threw another bite of her cheese mix into her mouth.

Mariana stared, remembering the sight of that passionate couple exchanging bites. This wasn’t going as planned. It was time to try plan B.

“Actually, I was debating whether I should try this or the cheese mix before,” she hinted. Acting so bold like this was new territory for her.

“Is that so? Well, would you like to try a bite of mine?” Mira asked, clueless as to Mariana’s ulterior motive.

Finally, Mariana saw her path to victory. “You don’t mind?” She was eager, but she had to stay cool. She couldn’t rush this.

“Why not? Sharing food is another joy of food stalls, after all. Here.”

The words Mariana had been waiting for...

Mira held out not a ball of korotamayaki to feed to Mariana, but the entire container. Mariana froze.

Mira cocked her head. “Hrmm? Something wrong?”

“Oh, um, nothing. Thank you.” Though disappointed at her failure, she didn’t let it show. Mariana plucked one of the balls from the container and ate it. “This is delicious, too.”

“Isn’t it? I think so.” Mira grinned.

The fairy stared back at Mira and plotted her next move. “But I can’t just take from you, can I? Miss Mira, would you like to try mine?”

It was natural to return the favor, wasn't it? Mariana wasn't yet ready to accept defeat.

"Oho, really? I was rather interested in yours. I'd be glad to take one."

Consent created opportunity. And as her aide, it was already ideal for her to serve Mira rather than to let Mira serve herself. Mariana stabbed at a ball of korotamayaki with a toothpick and made ready...

Only to miss.

"Mm. These green onion mochi balls are stupendous!"

Mira had snatched the container from Mariana's hand and eaten one of the balls with lightning speed. Mariana sat stupefied, toothpick still in hand. Mira didn't seem to notice the look of astonishment on her face.

* * *

"Mm, that was delicious. But I don't think it was enough to fill me up," Mira muttered once she'd finished her korotamayaki. She began eyeing the stalls again. Six cheese balls were enough for a snack, but they weren't a proper lunch.

Mariana seemed rather dejected, but just being able to be next to Mira allowed her to rebound. Furthermore, Mira's remaining hunger offered a ray of hope. She scanned their surroundings while she thought up her next plan of attack. A pair of girls nearby seemed to be good friends. Mariana's ears picked up the sound of their conversation.

"Oh, that looks tasty! Hey, let me have a bite."

"Whaaat? You'd better gimme some of yours, then."

The two argued playfully over the size of bites that were taken and received, and Mariana watched them closely. She was struck with a realization: they were friends rather than lovebirds. But the actual item they were eating had potential.

Those things are called crepes, aren't they? Mariana thought to herself.

The friends were exchanging bites with crepes in hand. Since the crepes were folded over to keep all the filling inside, one had to remain holding them as they brought it directly to the other person's mouth. She'd been let down by the bite-sized

korotamayaki, but the crepes would win the day.

"Miss Mira, might I suggest something sweet?" Mariana asked.

"Sweet? Yesss. *That* could be a good idea." From salty to sweet—a flavor progression that was as old as time.

Mariana pointed to the crepe stall as if she'd just spotted it. "That one looks nice, doesn't it?"

"Oho, crepes? Perfect."

They were just big enough, and they had plenty of different flavors. Finding this the ideal choice for her current hunger level, Mira stood up and headed straight for the crepe stall. Mariana followed her, waiting for her opportunity to strike.

Mira stopped in front of the stall and stared down the menu. Mariana peeked out from behind her and swiftly made *two* choices in case hers overlapped with Mira's again.

"I would like the chocolate banana milk, please."

"I'll have the mixed berry yogurt, please."

"You got it. Coming right up."

The woman at the stall began making the crepes. She spread the batter thinly over the teppan grill, and before long, it was baking in a perfect circle. She then put the ingredients in and folded up the dessert with quick, neat movements. The pair watched her skillful hands, waiting excitedly for their orders.

* * *

Crepes in hand, Mira and Mariana returned to the seating area in the center of the plaza.

Mira took a bite of her crepe the moment she sat down. Her face lit up. "This is exquisite."

Mariana took a bite of hers as well and added, "Yes, they're lovely."

She watched as Mira took a second and third bite. She'd already used the excuse that she couldn't choose between items at the korotamayaki stall. This time she'd just have to ask for a bite directly like the girl she'd observed. Or...

"Mariana, what's got you staring so much? Could it be... that you're interested in my chocolate banana milk?!" Mira assumed that Mariana's eyes were locked on her crepe out of envy. For Mariana, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"Umm, yes! I've never eaten these 'crepes' before, so I was curious," she answered swiftly. She wasn't lying, either—she'd really never eaten them. This was her first time seeing them made too, so she was rather interested.

"Ah, right. You've never had crepes before? Then you'd best try this one, too. It's deliciously sweet." Mira held the confection in her hand out to Mariana. If one wanted to share a crepe with another, this was the only way to do it.

"Okay... I'll have a bite." Mariana tried to calm her fluttering heart as she readied her aim and approached Mira's crepe. Finally, she took a hesitant bite.

"It tastes wonderful." But the moment itself was even better.

Mira watched Mariana, then smiled and said, "Doesn't it? I say it does." Then, she turned expectant eyes to the crepe in Mariana's hand.

"Go on, Miss Mira. It's your turn."

"Oho, really? Then I'll have a little bite..." Eyes sparkling, Mira took a generous bite from Mariana's crepe—more like a chomp. "Mm. The sour-sweet flavor is fantastic!"

Mira smiled, satisfied. Her cheeks were stuffed with crepes. She'd probably been aiming to get some of Mariana's mixed berry yogurt from the start.

"You certainly love food, Miss Mira." Having succeeded in feeding and being fed by the small summoner, Mariana wiped away the cream left on Mira's lip and smiled gleefully.



CHAPTER 7

“SAFE TRAVELS, Miss Mira.”

“Squeak squeak!”

“I’ll be back before you know it.”

The morning after her day off with Mariana, Mira had a leisurely breakfast and prepared for her journey. After saying goodbye in front of the tower, she mounted Pegasus and turned to gaze upon Mariana and Luna once more before departing for Alcait Castle.

* * *

Mira arrived at the castle before noon and swiftly ran up the stairs to Solomon’s office, where she rapped on the door. She barged in without waiting for an answer.

“Is it finished?!” she shouted.

Solomon’s hands, which were tidying his stack of documents, stilled as he grinned.
“You’re just in time.”

As planned, the wagon’s maintenance check and final adjustments were completed yesterday. Now it was ready to depart at a moment’s notice. Solomon apologized for not being able to take her down to the workshop himself—he had a meeting, which meant he wouldn’t be able to see Mira off in person.

“I’ll give you my thoughts on the wagon *and* plenty of travel stories when I get back.”

Stories? Boasts? Who could tell which Solomon would be subjected to. Mira grinned fearlessly as she left the office. She made straight for the workshop where her new wagon awaited.

* * *

Mira trotted along the red, gilt-embroidered carpet lining the castle’s hallway. It was

finally time. Her heart leapt for joy as she ran for the carriage garages like a child on Christmas.

As Mira approached the boundary between the castle and the garages, an artisan seemed surprised to see her tiny form sprinting through a workshop full of burly men.

“Good morning!” The man turned to Mira and greeted her in an extra-loud voice before she could say anything. The sheer volume of it made her shoulders twitch, but she quickly gathered herself and greeted him in return. And it didn’t end there; drawn by his shout, other men began to gather and offer their greetings too. Mira ran a gauntlet of waiting well-wishers. The men had planned the signal to announce her arrival so they could all see their masterpiece flying off into the sky.

“...Morning.” A little overcome by their enthusiasm, Mira greeted them weakly.

“You’re about to launch, yeah?!” Dag, manager of the craftsmen, emerged from the crowd and looked at her expectantly. The others awaited her answer with bated breath.

“Y-yes, that’s right.”

“Then let’s get it ready!”

There was a smattering of applause, and all the craftsmen scattered off in different directions to make the moment happen. They weren’t just going to watch—they were preparing to gather data, too. While the men all put their sweat and passion into their work, Mira left the workshop and walked out to the garages.

Anemometers to measure wind speed, cameras to capture the moment it launched, and other technomantic devices had been set up in front of the garage. As for the wagon itself, the men had pushed it into an open area.

“Go on ahead, Miss Mira. It’s all ready.”

“Ah, you have my gratitude.”

She looked up at the new vehicle—this mobile home slash secret base—that belonged solely to her now. The way its white body gleamed in the sunlight, its clean design, and its similarity to an armored car gave it the air of a chariot piloted by a goddess of war.

Mira looked at it proudly and wondered what to summon.

Hrmm, perhaps Garuda is best after all. Any others would probably cause... panic. Cleos always uses Garuda, so they ought to be used to seeing it by now. Let the people see what they already know.

Mira made her decision. A pillar of light stretched up from the magic circle, and wind began to blow out of nowhere, heralding the appearance of the brilliant beast-bird. It was a fair bit bigger than Cleos's Garuda summon, and its royal authority and phosphorescent light made the artisans stop and watch with mouths agape. All of them were reminded of the true power of a Wise Man's pupil.

"Garuda, I have a request for you. Will you hear my plea?" Mira asked.

Garuda looked her in the eyes, then lowered its head to her level as a show of respect. Mira knew that it was ready to obey her order.

"Good baby. Now, I would like you to carry this while I ride inside it. What do you think? Can you do it?" Mira stroked Garuda's beak and gestured with her eyes to the nearby wagon.

Understanding her words, Garuda lifted itself and easily picked up the brace atop the wagon with its beak to gauge its weight. The wagon was about the size of a normal carriage, but it was lighter due to its materials. Still, Mira had to ensure that the summon could carry it safely.

Garuda placed the wagon back down and turned back to Mira. It gave a slow affirmative nod. A refreshing wind blew through the area. Garuda had accepted the job.

"I leave myself in your care."

As Mira finished speaking, Garuda spread its powerful wings. It looked confident, so Mira boarded the wagon without worry. Meanwhile, the artisans had recovered from their shock and were recording everything, careful not to let any data slip by unnoticed. They wanted data on Garuda as well, as it would be the one carrying the wagon.

It was a Japanese-style wagon, so Mira took off her shoes and entered barefoot. She felt the woven reeds of the tatami with her bare feet, grinning at the springy softness.

She padded up to the driver's door at the front and poked her head out to give Garuda his orders. She noted the shafts that were used if the wagon needed to be drawn by horses. Those didn't matter now.

"We're off to the Forest of Seasons. From here, it will be... that way." She pointed Garuda in the general direction. The wind grew stronger as the great bird prepared to take flight.

Having seen Cleos's wagon take off many times by now, the craftsmen knew from the powerful winds that liftoff was imminent. The loud shouts rang out over the wind, even as they continued to diligently take notes.

"Miss Mira, take care on your trip!"

"Careful out there!"

"Yes! I'll see you again before long!" Mira peeked through the window and waved, happy this kingdom was full of such wonderful people.

Garuda flapped its wings and launched itself upward, using its talons to hold the wagon tight as it ascended into the sky. The artisans cheered, watching the wagon until it became no more than a white speck in the heavens.

* * *

"We won't be able to cover the distance in a single day. If you get tired, don't hesitate to rest," Mira called out to Garuda and looked down.

From this high in the sky, Alcait Castle looked like a toy model. Having finished her instructions, she ducked back inside the wagon's main room. She took a deep breath of the welcoming scent of tatami mats. Struck by the incredible view from the window, she almost forgot to exhale.

Things look very different this way.

When she rode on Pegasus or Garuda's back, she had a panoramic view of all directions. The wagon window was very different. From inside the room, the limited view from the window looked like a painting. Because she could change her posture and viewing angle whenever she chose, Mira decided that this was the most luxurious view of all so far.

For some time, she did nothing but savor the view and sip sweet berry au lait, all the while searching for that castle in the clouds and thinking to herself.

* * *

When she finished her first sweet berry au lait and put it down on the kotatsu, she noticed the booklet on the corner of the low table. It was the owner's manual. Mira picked it up and opened it.

It even comes with illustrations. How thoughtful.

Each function and use of the wagon was listed in great detail in the manual. She decided to go all-out and attentively read the entire thing—she planned on using the delightful vehicle for a long time to come, after all.

Mira looked through all the different components. The manual stated that the hanging lamps burned mobility stones as fuel, and the kotatsu also burned mobility stones to heat itself. The booklet even included instructions on adjusting the light and heat.

As for the little pot of mist weed, the manual said that it was ideal to water it once every three days, and that it should occasionally be given charcoal ash. It could also photosynthesize using lamplight alone.

The manual also contained detailed notes regarding additional furniture installation and earthquake-proofing. It seemed the craftsmen had thought of everything.

* * *

Before she knew it, the red light of sunset had stolen into the wagon. Mira put down the manual and looked up at the antique-style silver lamp hanging right overhead. After reading the entire thing, she now knew it was a technomantic creation. Luckily, she had already procured plenty of the mobility stones needed to fuel it in Nebrapolis.

Mira stood up, slotted in a mobility stone as described in the manual, and fiddled with the light switch. At once, a warm-colored fire sprang up in the lamp, which reflected off the silver hood and divided the upper and lower halves of the room into light and dark. A warm, green hue dyed the Japanese-styled interior of the wagon. Impressed by the illumination, Mira continued to fiddle with the light and observe how it changed the ambiance.

When she happened to look down, she spotted the mist weed, which had begun emitting the mist alluded to in its name. This phenomenon, too, had been mentioned in the manual. Unlike other plants, mist weed did more than just create oxygen—it could also convert noxious gasses and toxins into harmless substances. This was all done through photosynthesis. The mist was proof that the purification process was working.

Recalling more notes from the manual, Mira turned over the kotatsu's tabletop. Shapes and figures were carved into the bottom, allowing it to function as an improved refinement desk. The design was based on notes Mira had given Solomon a long time ago. There was a single sheet of paper stuck to the center of it

This ought to help you make magic stones during your travels. Make some extra for me too, I'll need them.

- Solomon

Mira frowned, tore it off, crumpled it up, and stuffed it into her empty bottle of sweet berry au lait.

The nerve of him. Still... it is quite convenient.

Previously, Mira had spent entire flights hanging on for dear life. Now, she was free to move and had plenty of time to relax. With that in mind, she sat at the refining desk and took two items from her Item Box: a demon horn and the pearl of lightning she'd won during her fight with the Gargoyle Keeper. She got to refining.

Demon horns could accumulate extreme amounts of mana and had many uses. To Mira, most of those uses were totally unnecessary. What mattered to her was that they could be turned into refining stones. This one yielded fourteen of the magic pebbles.

These demon horns really are efficient.

Normally, one would combine multiple jewels to make a single refining stone, but one horn could create multiple high-quality stones at once. She could hardly think of any better uses. Anything else actually seemed like a waste.

But ultimately, this was merely preparation. Mira began refining using a pearl of lightning.

After some time and concentration, she created three advanced lightning-attuned magic stones and two advanced blasting stones. Once upon a time, Danblf had massacred populations of Gargoyle Keepers for those useful pearls of lightning.

As for the blasting stones, she had learned that they could be used not just as traps, but also to seal magic. With that in mind, she made a few extra as insurance. These packed more than five times the power of the ones she'd used against Caerus. Clutching one of her new, powerful blasting stones in her hand, Mira's lips warped into a dark grin.

If anyone seals my magic and thinks they've won, they've got another thing coming. Hah, I can just imagine the shock on their faces!

She put the remaining materials back in her Item Box and let out a long, tired sigh as she looked out the window again. The sky was already draped in the curtain of night. Amid the endless sea of stars, the moon and its halo seemed to hold up all the galaxy. It was like a big eye watching over the world, shining brighter than all the stars in the sky.

The lamp lit the wagon so brightly, Mira had totally missed the arrival of the night. She checked her system menu to find that it was almost 8:00 p.m. That was enough work for the day! She looked outside again at the dark, vast grassland below. It rippled as it was blown by the wind, showing shadowy glimpses of green here and there. Beyond, she saw a long, broad river that resembled a dragon creeping along the earth, its scales glittering in the moonlight.

Mira called out her orders, and Garuda landed next to the shining river.

* * *

Mira exited the wagon and listened to the calming sounds of the river, the trickling of the water reminiscent of rainfall. At the same time, the fresh scent of grass tickled her nose. These were sensations one never encountered in the city.

After breathing deeply for a spell, Mira turned and reached out a hand to touch Garuda.

"Well done today. Are you tired, friend? Rest well," she said.

Garuda made a quiet, throaty noise and spread its wings wide in response. It seemed to be saying that the flight was an easy one. Mira smiled in relief and dismissed the

enormous bird.

"Now..." Mira muttered, looking around the moonlit grasslands. She began walking toward the river.

After taking care of some pressing business in the river, she summoned a Holy Knight to keep watch while she returned to her wagon. Once settled inside again, she took out the deep-fried sausages covered in tartar sauce that Mariana had packed for her in a food basket before her departure. Several other baskets onboard were full of Mira's favorite foods. She stuffed her cheeks and smiled blissfully.

With dinner taken care of, Mira gazed through the window at the moonlit flowers. Thanks to the wagon, she could enjoy free, comfortable leisure time anywhere she wanted.

Perhaps I ought to train a little.

At a loss for anything else to do, she stood up and exited the wagon.

The grassland was devoid of people. All that lay around her were the smells of earth and plants and the sounds of wind and water. Amid the silent landscape, the rustling of Mira's clothes and her soft exhales rose like bubbles and faded into the dark. These sounds were repeated multiple times, getting more and more intense until they were finally punctuated by the *whoosh* of something cutting through the air.

Mira lowered her fist, exhaled, and moved to her next stance.

This was martial arts training that would support her use of Immortal Arts in close-quarters battle. Back when she was Danblf, Mira had done this often during travel via Floating Island. Lately, she'd been slacking due to not having many opportunities to practice, so now was the perfect time. She'd learned these techniques from Meilin, a fellow Wise Man who had martial arts drilled into her at her home dojo since childhood. Mira never bothered to remember what these techniques were called, though they were apparently quite famous.

By this point, Mira had realized that her skills were getting rusty, so it was time to review the basics.

I'm getting a little hot.

By the time she'd finished the third kata, Mira realized that she was sweating from the exertion. She looked around and saw that nobody was nearby. The only things watching her were the distant sky and moon, and the speechless Holy Knight.

Deciding that a little nakedness was no problem, she took off her technomancy robes and resumed her training, now in only her underwear to let the cool wind touch her skin. After finishing her katas, Mira launched into her proper training, which was based on the universal standard in this world. These moves were made to match sages' abilities.

She got her body used to leaping off the ground and running atop the air again. As she went through her training, Mira remembered her new technique: partial summoning. She could use partial summons as footholds, like she had during the battle against the Gargoyle Keeper.

Mira continued training with that in mind.

* * *

Mira dunked herself in the cold river, washing the sweat from her heated body. Once she was done, she grabbed the underwear she'd left on the riverbank, dried herself with a towel from her bag, and returned to the wagon. When she entered the welcoming little Japanese room, her fatigue turned to satisfaction, then sleepiness.

"Mm?"

As she reached for a new set of underwear to get ready for bed, she stopped. All the underwear in her bag had been changed out. She'd given the bag to Mariana back at the tower to have her laundry done, and it seemed her aide had taken the liberty of providing her with a new *intimate* wardrobe.

Ngh. It's all absurdly... cute.

Mira picked the least offensive, most comparatively plain underwear she could find. A difficult choice, since they were all extremely girly.

"Not much I can do about it now."

It wasn't entirely terrible. When she wore the thin, lacy underwear, a lascivious grin spread across her face. Clad in her new underthings, she lay out her futon and

wrapped herself in the blanket's soft embrace. Soon, she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 8

THE NEXT MORNING, Mira laid a breakfast picnic out for herself on the grass outside the wagon. Fortified, she boarded again to continue her journey to the Isuzu Alliance headquarters.

Though she'd instructed Garuda to rest whenever it needed to, flying was the same as breathing to the massive bird. It had no need to rest. By midday, they were halfway there. Thanks to Garuda, Mira would arrive much sooner than expected.

The direct journey by sky was as smooth as could be. Mira read manga, practiced partial summoning tactics, and more in the cozy shelter of the wagon. The journey was pleasantly relaxing.

Another day passed by uneventfully, and the sun once again set below the horizon. The sky turned dark and began to wink with glimmering stars. As the last vestiges of sunlight disappeared, Garuda soared through the moonlit sky... and Mira's stomach began to growl. A vast precipice came into view in the distance, standing like a tall, dark wall in the moonlight.

"Are we already there?"

Mira poked her head out of the driver's door. Mountain ranges on the left and right collided and intertwined up ahead, creating a towering cliff. Its dark form was silhouetted by the starry sky at its back. Mira knew that this was her destination, the center of the Shiho mountain range.

She checked the time—it was past 7:00 p.m. It wasn't too late in the evening yet, so Mira considered going straight to their headquarters. But after a moment she rethought it, deciding it would be sketchy to arrive after nightfall.

She asked Garuda to land next to a lake at the base of the mountains and set up camp for the night.

* * *

Wind rolling down the mountains washed the night fog away, filling the valley with

chilly air that brought some temporary relief from the early summer heat.

Early in the morning, Mira awakened at the base of the ridge where the two mountain ranges met. She exited the wagon, yawning, and washed her face beside the lake, which reflected the surrounding peaks like a mirror.

“Phew...”

She wiped away her sleepiness and looked up at the enormous wall of stone before her. The tall cliff gave off a totally different impression in the light of day. It shone in the sunlight with a brilliant white luster, as if threatening to unleash an avalanche at any given moment.

Mira turned her back to the mountains and strode back toward the wagon. Just then, three black forms entered her field of vision—upon closer inspection, they appeared to be the remains of tiger-like monsters called night raiders. Usually nocturnal, they hunted in packs to find prey. They were powerful enemies that the Guild Union designated C-Rank.

When she turned her head, she saw her unsleeping Holy Knight standing with a bloodied sword. Its massive, tower-like shield shone dully in the sunlight. It had done its job swiftly, yet quietly, while Mira slept.

How reliable.

Witnessing the utility of her Holy Knights once again, Mira thanked it—despite knowing the pointlessness of doing so—and dismissed it.

After completing her morning routine and eating her breakfast, Mira gazed at the faraway mountaintop where the Forest of Seasons lay. Clouds gathered around it like ever-present fog, and snow sparkled at the peak. It was even higher in altitude than the Celestial Ruins. But when Mira turned back to her wagon, she knew ascending to such heights was no longer a problem.

She entered the wagon, peeked out the driver’s door, and once again summoned Garuda, ordering the bird to fly to the Forest of Seasons.

As they rose gradually into the air, Mira ensured the wagon was airtight using the method described in the instruction manual. Even at high altitudes, the mist weed would prevent the cabin’s air pressure from changing, meaning she wouldn’t have to

worry about altitude sickness.

Exulting in the feeling of overcoming her previous failures, Mira cheerfully watched the mountainside slide away below.

* * *

How far up had they gone now? While she waited idly in the wagon, Mira realized that things were suddenly rather loud outside. When she looked through the window, she saw a red ray of light shoot down from above.

“What was that?”

She pressed herself against the window and looked up in the direction they were heading. Near the summit, she could see a lesser wyvern. Now she remembered—this area was a habitat for wyverns.

Lesser wyverns were the lowest tier of flying dragons. They weren’t technically monsters, but as they were dragons, they were ferociously strong. By the Union’s standards, they were B-Rank foes despite the “lesser” tag. And unfortunately, they were extremely rowdy.

That red light had been the lesser wyvern’s fire breath.

“Picking a fight with my Garuda, hm? How bold,” Mira muttered.

Just as she was about to order Garuda to kill the aggressive wyvern, however, the red fire breath roared through the air again. Something was off—the lesser wyvern up above wasn’t shooting at *her*. What was going on? She strained her eyes to search the sky.

It seemed the lesser wyvern was fighting something else. It tore through the sky and shot fire over and over before gliding in for an attack.

Is that... a person? No, I’ve never seen anybody who moved like that.

Looking toward the area of the sky where the lesser wyvern was directing its assault, she saw something human-shaped. Indeed, a human-like figure was floating in midair. It was moving as fast and freely as the lesser wyvern was, so she really had to strain her eyes to see it.

The only one I know who can perform such feats is Flonne... but that fighting style is too plain to be her. What is going on?

Wise Man of Ethereal Magic, Flonne the Supernatural. Mira knew of nobody who could fly unassisted as well as she could. If the figure was a spirit, then a mage like her ought to be able to tell from afar. If it was a fairy, then she would see glowing wings. One could perform similar feats with Immortal Arts, but that was simply running on the air. The figure fighting the wyvern out there was maneuvering like a fighter jet.

Who was it? As Mira wondered, the battle above came to a close.

The lesser wyvern fell powerlessly from the sky, and the figure slowly pursued. Based on their distance and angle, it seemed they were both falling toward Mira's destination, the Forest of Seasons.

"What in the world?"

Whoever that figure was, they'd defeated that lesser wyvern with ease. Not a human, not a monster—Mira had never seen magic like that, either. All that she could say was that whoever they were, they had real skill.

And given where she'd encountered them, they were also likely related to the Forest of Seasons, home to the Isuzu Alliance's headquarters. If so, she'd have to proceed with caution to avoid angering... whatever it was.

Mira ordered Garuda to continue on—cautiously.

* * *

"Now what should I make of this?"

She crested the mountain range and emerged in the skies above her destination. Mira's eyes widened in shock at the sight below.

The snow-capped mountain range below was divided into four sections by a large depression in the earth that looked like a volcano's caldera. It was as if a titan had gripped the world, leaving its mark behind.

The deep hollow was surrounded by the highest precipices, and inside lay the Forest of Seasons—or it *should* have.

The Forest of Seasons was, as the name implied, a paradise where all four seasons were simultaneously at their peak. Mira remembered its beauty well, which only made the sight below her even harder to stomach.

Where the forest had been was now nothing but a thick bamboo grove.

Have we flown off course? Mira wondered. She looked around and checked her map again, but all signs pointed to this being the Forest of Seasons.

She continued to glide over the Forest of Seasons, gazing down curiously.

But then, suddenly, it came. The person she'd seen before—no, *more* of them, *hundreds*—erupted from the bamboo and surrounded Mira's wagon in the blink of an eye.

"I see. These are... shikigami, then?"

They were indeed human-shaped shikigami. Sheets with pentagrams were affixed to their faces like seals. The shikigami, wearing Shinto garments and woven kasa hats, slowly circled around the wagon as if searching for something.

This magic must have been invented in the past thirty years. Human-shaped shikigami hadn't existed back in Danblf's day. Animal-shaped ones were the best they could do.

So even Celestial Arts have advanced quite a bit...

She could tell they were wary of her. But she was so interested in these human-like shikigami that she couldn't help but stare.

Immediately after, Garuda's ear-piercing cry echoed through the sky. It was trying to intimidate them in order to protect Mira. The shikigami immediately backed away slightly. Mira snapped out of her musings.

"I don't think they mean any harm," she said to Garuda.

It may look different now, but this should still be the Forest of Seasons. If it was, then the Isuzu Alliance's home base should be here. These must be a defense mechanism of some kind. With that thought, she ordered Garuda to suppress its wind—that would hopefully prove they meant no harm.

After a moment of waiting and watching, it seemed to do the trick. One shikigami broke out from the group and slowly approached the wagon window.

"Come with us," a voice said.

With that as their signal, the rest of the horde of shikigami formed an orderly line and descended into the bamboo. Mira ordered Garuda to follow their lead. The massive bird and the wagon with Mira inside descended under the watchful eyes of the shikigami on either side.

They passed through the canopy of bamboo leaves and landed on the forest floor. Despite the early hour, it was dark and dreary inside the forest. Before Mira knew it, her guides had vanished. What now? Mira emerged from the wagon and surveyed the lonely forest, which made no sounds even when the wind blew.

I doubt they trust me yet.

Suddenly, Mira found herself encircled by spirits.

Spirits usually looked happy and were glad to help when one met them in the forest, but something was different about this group—the dozens of spirits present here kept their distance and sized up Mira with glassy eyes. Their caution was evident. Some even manifested their power in an attempt to intimidate her.

This was the home base of the Isuzu Alliance, enemy of the spirit-hunting organization Chimera Clausen. These spirits were likely affiliated with them. Even though Mira tried to show she was no threat, she still must have seemed suspicious, appearing out of the sky. But Garuda couldn't stand idly by.

The wind died down and silence filled the grove, broken only by the noise of Garuda digging its powerful legs into the dirt. The massive bird stood protectively next to Mira, colorful feathers standing on end as it glowered at the enemy. Faced with the overwhelming power of the ruler of the air, the spirits froze and held their breath.

"Garuda, we're all friends here." Mira's even voice reverberated through the quiet air. She looked up and raised her arms to Garuda. The bird calmed its aura and put its beak between her hands like a sword sliding into its sheath. She accepted its loyalty and dismissed her protector.

"You've nothing to worry about," Mira declared to the spirits.

The disappearance of the bird calmed the guardians. Fragments of the spirits' power that had been fluttering about now dispersed. Mira bowed slightly in thanks as she turned her attention to the spirit who seemed to be the strongest.

"Apologies for scaring you," she announced.

The spirit before her stepped forth and bowed in return. "We apologize, too. It is rare for humans to visit us."

The one who seemed the most authoritative among the gathered spirits looked like a long-haired ghost. Her clothes were as shabby as a white bedsheet, and hair as green as the sunlit bamboo leaves fell to her knees. That veil of hair only offered the faintest glimpse of her face. Her voice was low for a woman, and it had little of the amiable tone common to most spirits.

Even if people didn't visit often, spirits were usually affable. Had Chimera Clausen changed the ancient relationship between humanity and spirits so much?

"You're the leader of this group?" Mira asked.

"I am. That you can tell means you're no ordinary mage," the green-haired spirit responded emotionlessly.

Mira shook her head; she had merely seen that this one had the most vibrant particles of spirit power.

"Let me assure you that I mean you no harm," she declared. Then she got right to business. "I've come to find the home base of the Isuzu Alliance."

The spirits began to murmur amongst themselves. They sounded surprised, and their attention turned to the green-haired spirit.

"May I ask your name?" The green-haired spirit's eyes peeked cautiously between her long locks. Her gaze was both inquisitive and oppressive.

"I am known as Mira."

The instant Mira answered, the pressure that seemed to be bearing down on her from all sides relaxed at once.

"Ahh... you. And you have a letter of introduction?"

"Indeed. Right here." Mira produced the letter Solomon had entrusted her with and handed it over.

It seemed Silver—the man from Isuzu she had met some days ago—had already informed them that she would visit.

The green-haired spirit checked the seal and signature. "All appears to be in order. Wait here, please." She bowed politely and disappeared, as if fading into mist. All that remained was a scent like young leaves in the spring.

Half of the spirits here had been saved from Chimera Clausen's attacks by the Isuzu Alliance. Their friendly personalities were overshadowed by fear created by the acts of heartless people. But once they knew Mira was a friend, they became curious and observed her keenly—even if it was still at arm's length.

* * *

Ten minutes and change after the green-haired spirit left, a great bird with crimson wings descended from the canopy. A kimono-and-headdress-clad woman clung to its legs. When it landed, the bird seemed to erupt into flames and disappeared like smoke. A talisman appeared in the outstretched hand of the woman.

"What exactly is going on here?" the woman demanded of the green-haired spirit, who had returned with her.

But the spirit was just as clueless. "Not sure," she admitted.

The grove appeared to have become some sort of concert venue. The performer was Leticia, the emcee was Mira, and the audience was made up of the spirits and animals present.

The spirits had been interested in Mira, yet couldn't bring themselves to approach. Noticing they were acting strange, she racked her brain for how she might make them relax. Then Mira realized: if humans made them nervous, why not have a fellow spirit bridge the gap?

Music had no boundaries, and the invisible wall between parties vanished when Leticia's song, *Ode to My Master*, filled the grove. The tune was so beautiful that it

threatened to steal the hearts of listeners and make them beat to its own rhythm.

Mira's plan had succeeded, and she was now surrounded by a bevy of happy spirits.

The kimono-wearing woman pushed through the listeners to approach the small summoner. "You are Miss Mira, I understand? I'll need to see the medal to prove your identity."

"Hmm... This one?" Mira took out the medal Solomon had given her and handed it over.

The woman looked over both sides.

"Thank you." She handed the medallion back to Mira. "Your identity is confirmed. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Acadori, captain of the Forest of Seasons patrols."

The woman wore what one might call a minimalist version of a green kimono and headdress. It sort of resembled long-sleeved ninja garb. Her inky black hair was tied behind her in a long tail, which only made her look more like a ninja.

"Captain Silver has given me a rough summary of events. The Isuzu Alliance welcomes you, Miss Mira." Acadori bowed and retrieved a crystal bell from her kimono. She rang it once.

The gloomy bamboo forest seemed to disappear like an illusion. In its place stood the paradise-like Forest of Seasons that Mira remembered.

"What in the world...?" Amazed by the change, Mira breathed in, and the scent of lush greenery filled her lungs. She slowly exhaled and gawked at the forest before her and the lake behind her.

All the seasons were on display at once. A rainbow of flowers bloomed all about, heralding the birth of spring. Summer was evident in the lush, strong growth of leaves and stems. Lovely-smelling round fruit hung from trees, representing autumn's bounty. And finally, winter's rest could be seen in the dormant, closed buds. All four seasons jumbled and grew into each other. Though chaotic at a glance, the wonderful array of colors repeated with subtle order, like a visual poem that spread across the forest.

"I'm relieved that we could reveal it without issue," Acadori said.

According to her, the bamboo forest from before was but a hex, a visual barrier cast by the grand master of the Isuzu Alliance and dispelled by the ring of her crystal bell. However, if someone had come into the forest with malice in their heart, the illusion would only have grown stronger. Their only way out would be death.

"That's... *terrifying*," Mira mused. It wasn't clear how the barrier could distinguish good from evil, but she breathed a sigh of relief that her concert had not counted as evil.

It looks like somebody here is capable of using incredible barrier magic. Anticipation swelled with her. Perhaps Kagura was involved in this after all?

"Now, Miss Mira, we would like you to meet our grand master. Are you willing?"

"Oho! I get to meet your grand master now? I couldn't have asked for a better welcome."

One of Mira's reasons for coming here was to find out whether the shikigami Meowmaru was from Isuzu. But she also had a letter from Solomon to deliver to their grand master. It seemed like the ideal opportunity to get some of the answers she sought.

"Erm, well..." Acadori glanced at Leticia, who was using this rare chance to sing her song on an endless loop.

Mira took the hint and dismissed a satisfied but also somewhat sad Leticia. She'd only just met all these spirits, and now she had to part with them.

"Now, shall we go?" Acadori said.

The gathered spirits said their goodbyes to Mira and scattered into the woods. The wounds dealt to them by humanity had yet to heal, and their smiles before had shadows cast over them. But now, they smiled gently and infectiously—it was these very smiles that the Isuzu Alliance hoped to win back.

That warmed Acadori's heart as she looked on, facing the lake.

After Mira said farewell to the spirits, she rapped her knuckles against the wagon sitting on the lake's shore and asked Acadori, "Mind if I park it here?"

Acadori was rather overcome by emotion after seeing the influence Mira had on those spirits. After shaking her head a bit harder than was necessary, she came back to reality. "Huh? Yes, it's okay. No problem. Shall we go?"

A few minutes' walk later, Acadori stopped on the shore of the lake. The wagon was still visible off to their right.

"Please wait here." Acadori produced the crystal bell again and rang it toward the lake. The peal of the bell, sharp as glass, disappeared into the wind without an echo. Yet in the water at their feet, ripples spread out dramatically.

They began at the edge of the lake and rose up, drawing an arc toward the center. As the ripples collided, they formed an ephemeral line on the surface of the lake. Then the line sank into the surface and tore the lake in two, as if some invisible wedge had been slowly driven into the water.

"Now *this* is incredible..." Mira muttered in astonishment as she watched. It seemed the legend of Moses was within the realm of possibility in this world.

"Come this way, please. There will be a staircase at your feet. Tread carefully."

"Hrmm, understood."

The water on either side of the passageway flowed upward, blowing in the wind like liquid curtains. The staircase was translucent blue and seemed to melt into the water. It looked like something that had fallen from the sky in a downpour of rain.

They descended into the misty spray, and their surroundings changed from blue to white.

I never dreamed I'd enter a lake like this. Inside a lake, which is inside a barrier hex! Magnificent. Mira admired how strict their security was. No doubt the Isuzu headquarters lay up ahead.

Suddenly, Mira remembered something. "By the way," she asked, "there was a horde of human-shaped shikigami on my way here. Are those your grand master's magic, too? I've never seen anything like that."

Acadori confirmed her suspicions with a nod, obviously proud of their defenses. They were indeed a new type of shikigami the grand master had developed. The ones Mira

had seen were defensive fighters that could use various Celestial Arts.

"Oho, shikigami using Celestial Arts? That is quite incredible."

Animal-like shikigami had a much more limited selection of abilities. Acadori added that the mana consumption of the human-shaped shikigami was much greater to compensate, but they were the pinnacle of versatility.

Surveillance shikigami had also been stationed throughout the forest. When monsters or people approached, they would automatically alert the grand master.

If anything entered the forest, the grand master would personally take control of the shikigami and respond appropriately. And the barrier was on top of that. The Isuzu Alliance headquarters was so strictly guarded that it rivaled a royal castle.

However... using such shikigami and maintaining the barrier at the same time—their leader could almost certainly not leave headquarters for long.

"Given the level of magic, there's nothing that can be done about that," Mira mumbled.

Even for Mira, a Wise Man standing at the pinnacle of her field, the magic used in this defense system was so complex and difficult that it brought Kagura to mind. She wasn't surprised that their leader couldn't leave.

Impressed beyond measure, Mira chuckled as she watched Acadori. Should she be talking about such important things so casually?

* * *

They talked as they descended the stairs for a few minutes. The sound of the rushing waters grew louder as they went farther down. Mira looked ahead and saw that the staircase came to a stop at a small gate.

Looks like the end of the road.

She gazed at the endless waterfall. The bottom of the lake was lower still. Somehow, the liquid surface below caught the falling spray without ever rising in elevation.

The gate stood in the middle of the lake, as if floating atop the water. Acadori touched it with her crystal bell, then pressed her fist against it. There was a quiet yet sonorous

metallic clink as the gate opened.

Mira followed her through the gate, and suddenly, a small city lay before her eyes.

The city seemed an imitation of ancient Kyoto, but much more magnificent and dramatized. The people strolling about here and there looked foreign, and spirits with hair and clothing in all colors of the rainbow added to the unusual allure of the place.

It's very Japanese, isn't it?

The entrance was an observation point above the city. Mira looked down at the town from this vantage point until her eyes came to rest on an especially conspicuous pillar. The meticulously planned city had stone pillars extending into the "sky" at equal intervals. There were twelve pillars altogether, each one reaching higher than the gate. Mira followed them upward with her eyes and saw the rippling water above held overhead like a sky.

Sunlight reflected off the distant water's surface and diffused as it permeated through, piercing the water barrier and pouring down onto the city like early summer rain. Mira looked down at the ground and saw the refraction of the rippling water up above. The light undulated like an irregular kaleidoscope.

Mira followed Acadori down a spiral staircase and into the city. As they made their way toward the most imposing building Mira could see, Acadori gave a quick introduction of the Isuzu Alliance headquarters. She mentioned that the personnel here and there weren't just Isuzu Alliance members—some were outside collaborators or spirits under their protection. The young spirits were especially weak in battle, so they had to be proactively taken in and sheltered.

That made sense, of course. No matter which direction Mira looked, she found at least one nearly naked young spirit. It was a sight that made her question her own morals.

As for the collaborators, Acadori explained that most were involved in building and developing technology. They could do especially good work with the spirits' help, so the city was popular among artisans.

Whenever they passed Isuzu's soldiers along the way, Acadori would exchange a quick greeting with them. Some asked if the girl at her side was Mira. It seemed the tale of the first-ever Chimera Clausen arrest had spread.

But even under these circumstances, what stuck out most to Mira was a young man holding hands with a spirit. When she asked, Acadori said such sights weren't rare. Humans and spirits fell in love and got married. They may have been born to different lives, but love brought them together.

Their walk ended at the deepest part of the city, where two gatekeepers bowed to Acadori. In Heian Kyoto, the place would have been called the outer palace. It was surrounded by roofed mud walls, but the front gate was open, and through it, Mira could see several palace buildings. While Acadori and the gatekeepers spoke, she peered around to get a better look.

"Miss Mira, let's first head for the main temple," Acadori said, stifling a grin as she noticed the small summoner's curiosity.

"Ah... Right. Sure," Mira, who had been squatting and cocking her head, assented with a guilty smile.

Inside the gates, more roofed mud walls divided the area into sections. As Acadori guided Mira deeper into the complex, the number of people and spirits they passed went down drastically. The place seemed lonely, yet solemn and dignified at the same time.

Their footsteps continued on quietly. They took a right at the second turn and arrived at another gate.

The grand main palace stood beyond. Mira and Acadori took off their shoes and proceeded down the wooden hallway until they stood in front of an audience chamber. Here, it seemed, Acadori's journey came to an end. She opened the sliding door, took a step back, and kneeled seiza-style.

"Please go in, Miss Mira. Our grand master awaits."

"Thank you for guiding me here." Mira thanked her and stepped through the door.

From there, another long hallway led to a large room. The floor was polished wood, while the walls were painted a clean white. In the center of the room was a long, low table that stretched the room's length. On the floor near the end closest to herself was a sitting cushion. A person sat at the far end, and two others—likely aides—sat on opposing sides of the table.

"Please sit," one of the aides said with a gentle smile. Mira did as she was told and approached the low table. She sat on the cushion with legs crossed.

She looked down the long stretch of the table at the figure opposite her. They were dressed in purple and wore something like a bamboo hat with a thin, white veil draped over it. The veil hid their upper half completely, making it impossible to see their face. Nevertheless, Mira was certain that this was the individual at the top of the Isuzu Alliance.

No doubt about it, this person must be from Japan.

The aesthetics of the city left little doubt in her mind, but the person behind the veil was still a mystery.

"Allow me to welcome you to the Isuzu Alliance's central headquarters. My name is Uzume. You are Mira, I presume. I heard you put great effort into capturing a member of Chimera for us. You have my thanks." A woman's voice came from behind the veil.

"It was nothing. I only happened to interfere in one of your fights," Mira answered.

"How modest," Uzume laughed softly. "By the way, the letter of introduction mentioned you were searching for someone? And that they might be one of ours? May I ask for the details?"

"Right. I met a shikigami protecting a wind spirit... about three weeks ago now, I believe?"

Given the unique name of that shikigami, it was likely that one of the former Wise Men was involved. With that preface, Mira explained what had happened on her way back from Karanak.

"Karanak, hm? Tell me one thing before I answer: why are you searching for this person?" Uzume asked after Mira finished talking. They may have been indebted to her, but they weren't about to sell out an ally.

Of course, that was not Mira's intent at all. "I wanted to discuss something with them. I'm actually searching for a different individual, but I thought they might be related. Honestly, even the clue in the shikigami's name is a tenuous one. But as I have no other leads, I'll take what I can get."

"I see. Searching for someone to help you find someone else does sound tedious."

"The one I'm looking for is annoying, so it fits." Mira let her true feelings slip for a moment. One of the aides glanced at Uzume quizzically. Uzume, who had been staring deeply at Mira as if trying to see into her soul, finally relaxed and nodded.

"Wait just a moment." She took a document from her aide. "We have a few people around Karanak right now. And since you've mentioned a shikigami, the person you're seeking must be a medium. Perhaps it's one of these two here?" Uzume flipped through the documents and confirmed the names of two mediums currently out in the field.

"Oho, two? Do either of them give their shikigami bizarre names like Meowmaru?"

If not, this would be a short conversation. But two candidates raised the probability greatly. The moment Mira said the name of the shikigami aloud, the two aides shuddered and slowly turned their eyes to Uzume.

"Meowmaru?... *Bizarre?*" Uzume's voice was lower pitched than before as she repeated the name. Her two aides visibly trembled.

"I know, right?" Mira confirmed. "The name is somehow both uninspired and weird, isn't it? A name you can't forget."

"Yes, I know who uses Meowmaru. But is it *bizarre*? It strikes me as rather wonderful, no?"

Mira swelled inside—finally, a solid lead! If she recognized the name Meowmaru, one of those two people was definitely the person she was looking for!

"Oh, so you know them! Where might they be now? May I meet them?" Mira asked rapidly, without pausing to receive answers.

"They're probably out in Grimdart on business. More importantly, though, do you *really* think it's bizarre? Don't you think it's just the tiniest bit *cute*?" Uzume only answered Mira's questions with more of her own. Her voice was also starting to sound more like a normal girl's than a mysterious woman's. The grand master of Isuzu slammed both palms on the table and turned her veiled face to Mira in what was unmistakably a glare.

Was it something I said...?

Uzume's obsessiveness and anger seemed oddly nostalgic... Mira felt as though she'd met someone like her before. Now that she was looking at the figure at the other end of the table with new eyes, the memory in Mira's brain overlapped slightly with Uzume before her.

Mira smirked. "I know somebody who gives their shikigami names like Tweetsuke, Kushellge, Henryu, and Growlta." She rattled the names off the top of her head. "Do those familiars seem... *familiar*?"

Uzume pointed an accusatory finger and rebutted, "They're simple and cute! Gold-star names, in my humble opinion!" Her voice leaked with raw emotion.

Now this conversation was going places... With her eyes fixed on that white veil, Mira made her next move.

"The *cat café siege*," she muttered like a curse. Only one person would know the meaning of these words from her dark past.

The phrase had an instant effect. Uzume's back arched as if she'd been struck by lightning, and she jolted out of her seat. Realizing what she'd done, she cleared her throat awkwardly and quietly sat back down.

"You may leave us," Uzume commanded calmly. Her two aides stood, bowed, and left without a peep. Remembering the one person she'd shared that story with, she asked incredulously, "Mira, huh? Is that really you, Gramps?"

Bingo.

"It's been a while, Kagura."

A high-level defensive battalion using Celestial Arts, quirky shikigami names, and most of all... the way she slammed both hands on the table in anger. That was one of Kagura's personal quirks.

In an underwater palace in the style of Heian Japan, two long-lost friends were reunited.

CHAPTER 9

“VANITY CASE, HUH. You’re like the exact opposite of what you were before! Jeez, how did you expect me to figure that out?”

Now that she had no need for her formal persona, Kagura relaxed and sat with her legs outstretched. The bamboo hat lay sadly discarded. When she’d removed it, her tied-up obsidian hair had tumbled down gracefully, blowing in the breeze.

“You’re one to talk, hiding behind that veil. If I’d seen you from the start, we’d have been able to skip the preamble.”

Kagura’s face showed no signs of having used a Vanity Case; it was exactly as Mira remembered. Her bangs were cut in a ruler-straight line above her eyes, which were round and black, and framed by eyebrows so thin they almost looked penciled on. Her eyelashes were long, and her lips were eternally knitted into a displeased frown. At a glance, one might take her for a rich young girl from one of Japan’s old-money families. But now that she had let down her guard, she looked like a younger sister who had left the family’s legacy and all its troubles to her older sibling.

“I *am* famous around here, you know,” Kagura said with a boastful smirk. “You never know who might start sniffing around us Wise Men, so I’m keeping it on the D.L. Only those two and three others in the organization know who I really am. Oh, and... I guess now you, Gramps.”

She looked the small summoner up and down and grumbled, “So you call yourself Mira, huh. Gramps is a Mira now. Feels wrong... What should I call you?”

“Whatever you like.”

“Mmgh, the cognitive dissonance is too much.” The desire to use Danblf’s old nickname was strong, but it was also *weird*. Mira looked so different now, calling her by the old moniker felt as awkward as using new chopsticks.

She leaned in and narrowed her eyes at Mira. “So? If you find *her*, who are you going to use *her* to search for?”

"Who would *her* be?" Mira asked.

Kagura glared at Mira as if they were enemies. Mira was just so happy to have finally found another Wise Man that Kagura's words totally failed to penetrate—instead they just bounced off her brain.

"You said you were searching for Meowmaru's mage, weren't you?" Kagura urged.

"Oh, right. But that's no matter now. When I heard the name Meowmaru, I thought you or one of your friends might be involved. You're the one I was looking for in the first place. Ha! Thank you for saving me the effort." Mira relaxed and stretched her legs out, too. This riddle was solved.

Meowmaru's mage happened to be a female medium who Kagura had personally trained. Their master-pupil relationship hadn't lasted long, but it would be no exaggeration to call her an actual pupil of a Wise Man. When the woman had made her contract with the black cat shikigami, Kagura had said decisively: "That one's Meowmaru."

Unable to defy her master, the pupil had decided to keep the name. And lucky for Mira that she did. Now that Mira had stumbled across her true target, it was all coming up roses.

"Oh? Fine, then. Then what do you need from me?"

"It's a request from Solomon, actually. We're coming up on the end of some treaty or another. War will break out again soon, he thinks. So he's having me search for you all. Can't have the very pillars of the kingdom's defense absent in its time of need."

"So that's it, huh?"

The Nine Wise Men were heroes who had protected and led their country to victory countless times. Kagura knew as much.

"Though now that I've found you, I presume you can't just drop everything and hurry home." Mira looked around the room and casually turned toward the door the aides had exited from.

"Yeah. I can't abandon them, you know."

And with Chimera Clausen still out there, Kagura couldn't just back off. No one at the Isuzu Alliance would let her drop the reins of such a powerful organization, anyway.

"I am amazed that you've built this whole organization from scratch," Mira mused. "You never struck me as the type that wanted to be a leader. You've changed."

Mira remembered Blue and White's operation in the Forest of the Devout, the pamphlet Solomon had shown her, and the people and spirits filling the headquarters at the Forest of Seasons. She was honestly impressed.

Mira's words reminded Kagura of why she'd created the alliance in the first place. At first she'd tried to return to Alcait, but now she couldn't... *wouldn't*. "You know... Sometimes, you can't sit idly by and let things happen."

The words came out like a murmur, but they shook Mira like a scream.

* * *

Outwardly, the Isuzu Alliance performed charitable acts such as protecting forests all across the continent. But the truth of Isuzu was that it was a military force opposing Chimera Clausen's spirit-hunting campaign.

It all began more than ten years ago.

Like Mira and the other players, Kagura had suddenly found herself in the world of *Ark Earth Online*. Her life here started in the large, forested region north of Grimsdale. No people were around—just endless wilderness isolated from civilization.

Kagura was awestruck by everything around her and how it all stimulated the five senses—something that should have been impossible for a fantasy world.

Unable to grasp the situation, she had traveled to a nearby city in hopes of asking someone about it. She had tried to use her Floating Island as she always had—but it would not respond. The option was entirely absent from her menu. It was then that she'd noticed another change on the menu screen: there was no option to log out of the game.

With nobody to discuss it with deep in the forest, and nobody responding to her direct messages, Kagura realized that she was well and truly stranded in this unfamiliar land. She was completely alone.

But her training would not go to waste. She was strong enough to be called one of the Nine Wise Men, and there was no monster in this forest that was a danger to her. It was extremely unlikely that any other player would pose a threat either.

Time marched on ceaselessly, and the sun began to set. Amid the forest's sun-blotting trees, night came even earlier. Once dusk began, darkness blanketed the forest in the blink of an eye. Kagura's ethereal light was but a candle in a yawning void; she could hardly see her feet in front of her, much less tell where she was going.

Kagura was at a loss. After a long time wandering and mulling over the situation, she arrived at the answer. Though this seemed like a dream, it was the real deal. She was truly lost in a desolate forest.

The medium took several deep breaths, trying to expel everything from her lungs. She held her head and collapsed on the ground, not from frustration or fretfulness, but from the sheer ridiculousness of it all.

Just then, a face poked out from the treetops. Where Kagura had before only heard the noises of wind, birds, and insects, there was suddenly the sound of language.

"What's the matter?"

Kagura reflexively looked up. Using her Ethereal Arts to see in the total darkness, she spied a human face peeking at her vacantly from behind a tree.

She screamed.

But Kagura wasn't the only one surprised. The owner of the voice screamed right back and fell into the long grass. They scrambled up, looked all around, scampered back behind the tree, and peeked their face out once again.

She'd only caught a glimpse, but the mysterious figure's features marked them for what they were. Particles of light covered their long hair. Their clothing was made of thin cloth yet still gave them a noble air. And their face was kind—her visitor was undoubtedly a forest-dwelling spirit.

Kagura was perplexed. Spirits had never conversed with her of their own volition. Well, not counting when they had run around healing people and asking if they were okay during a fight in a limited quest.

Suspicious, Kagura looked warily at the spirit. The figure was still hiding behind a tree, but she soon smiled and waved at Kagura. Spirits were never hostile creatures, but this was completely new behavior for an NPC.

Kagura decided to respond in kind.

Once Kagura broke the ice, the spirit emerged from behind the tree and launched into a million questions. “Are you hurting anywhere? It’s dangerous here, y’know? Are you alone?”

Kagura answered each one and explained her current circumstances. She’d lost her transportation, so she was stranded here. After venting her frustrations, she heaved a big sigh.

“You’ve had it rough, huh?” the spirit said, seeing the player’s exhaustion. She introduced herself as Lecia, then added, “There are monsters here. Let’s go somewhere safe.”

Kagura introduced herself back, nodded, and obediently followed Lecia through the forest. Before long, they arrived at a big lake.

The forest opened up slightly, and starlight bobbed on the water’s surface. Silhouetted against the meager light was a massive form: a boar nearly as large as a house, its twin fangs stained a dark red from the blood of past prey. It was the ferocious Greatlance Boar.

Suddenly faced with this new enemy, Kagura struck a fighting stance... but Lecia smiled happily and introduced it as her friend.

Upon closer inspection, the Greatlance Boar was lying down on the shore of the lake, relaxed yet imposing. When it cracked open its eyes and spotted Kagura, it spoke in a low, gruff voice. “Well, well. A visitor?”

This boar had undergone spirit evolution. Animals that spent long periods of time in the company of spirits could obtain special powers and learn to talk. In-game, players only ever saw them during events.

When Kagura introduced herself, the boar replied with a smile, “Call me Multicolor.”

Lecia had taken to calling it that, and it had taken a liking to it.

Lecia sat and snuggled against Multicolor, then beckoned for Kagura to join them. She sat next to them.

"You can sleep here! When it's bright out, I'll show you to a place where other humans are," the spirit said cheerfully.

Kagura thanked her and lay against Multicolor's stiff, yet warm and soft stomach. They fell asleep gazing at the starry night sky together.

* * *

Kagura woke up early.

As promised, Lecia escorted her to a nearby city. She was a wind spirit, so she flew with Kagura in her arms. It still took a long while—they'd been deep in the forest, and they needed to take frequent breaks. But they managed to make it just before nightfall.

When they landed near the city, Kagura thanked her over and over. She also asked Lecia to thank Multicolor for her.

They hadn't known each other long, but Kagura knew she owed a debt to these two she could never fully repay. After promising that she would try to reward Lecia someday, Kagura took her leave, and human and spirit parted.

Kagura found herself in Greengate, a city at the northernmost end of Grimdart. A member city of the Three Great Kingdoms, it was a large settlement where one could gather ample information.

A month after her arrival there, Kagura finally gained a grasp of the current circumstances. This world was just like *Ark Earth Online*... and more than ten years had passed since it became reality. Many other players had come to this world just like her. She also was beginning to understand how things had changed.

Kagura concluded that she needed to return to the Kingdom of Alcait. As Grimdart was positioned on the opposite side of the Earth Continent, it would be a long journey without her Floating Island.

Before leaving the city, Kagura turned her eyes to the forest. She wanted to thank Lecia and Multicolor for their help before she departed.

After buying plenty of souvenirs, she rode the Suzaku phoenix Tweetsuke back to the lake where she'd spent the night.

* * *

Kagura was speechless.

It was nothing like how it had been before. The surrounding trees were flattened, as if a typhoon had mowed them down. The lake that had once reflected the stars now gathered no light, churned to mud and covered by thousands of leaves.

She wondered for a moment if she'd come to the wrong place. Then she ran.

There on the lakeshore, there was a mound covered in grass and mud. Broken tusks poked out here and there. This wasn't the wrong place—this was the very spot that had given her a night's respite.

The shape of the mound became clear. Kagura didn't want to believe it. Terror made her want to flee. She opened her eyes wide, lips quivering.

It was Multicolor.

The boar was covered in countless wounds, and sword tips were broken off in the remains of its thick hide. The sight of Multicolor lying motionless was too much for Kagura to comprehend—she simply stood there, petrified.

Just then, there came a muffled, faltering voice. It was raspy and barely intelligible, but she was certain she'd heard it.

"Young... lady?"

Kagura's head jolted up. "Y-you're alive? What in the world happened?" she questioned Multicolor, sprinkling the boar with all the restoratives that she had on hand.

The boar was breathing, however feebly. It ground out its words, gasping between them as it told her the tale. Armed humans had suddenly appeared in the forest. They had abducted Lecia while Multicolor had fought to save her. But even the great boar couldn't win.

Bitterly, painfully, it spoke its last words: "Take care of Lecia for me." Then, the light

faded from Multicolor's eyes.

* * *

Kagura cried all night. They hadn't known one another for even a day—hardly even half a day!—but Lecia and Multicolor had saved the stranded Wise Man. To her, they were dear friends.

When morning came Kagura, eyes still red from crying, dug a great hole in the lakeside. She removed the blades from Multicolor's body and cleaned away the mud before burying the boar. She hoped it might find some respite.

Kagura returned to the city and aggressively resumed her search for information. She gathered stories about those who hunted spirits and took action. Others joined her. They evolved from a party, to a guild, to the powerful Isuzu Alliance of today.

* * *

Mira looked into Kagura's eyes, which shone with resolve. She didn't know what had changed her friend, but the strength of her conviction was palpable. Mira suddenly felt like a total newcomer to this world.

"You seem to have your reasons," Mira finally said.

"Yeah. Sorry to Solomon, but this is my fight until it's over"

The firmness of will in Kagura's eyes—born of pain and sadness, sustained by a desire to protect—told Mira that she was truly sincere.

"Understood. In any case, we may have a mutual enemy," Mira said in agreement.

Mira knew Chimera Clausen, an organization that hunted and harmed humanity's best friend, could not be left as they were. The spirits she had met along the way here were now under the Isuzu Alliance's protection—without Kagura's efforts, they would have been abducted by Chimera Clausen. That reason alone made Isuzu a vital organization.

"Listen," Kagura said. "It's been a long road, but we're almost there. It's nearly time to settle the score, yeah?" Determination burned like fire in her eyes, her emotions like a cascading current. "We could say that's thanks to you, Gramps."

This was the result of Mira capturing the man from Chimera Clausen.

A few days after Mira had left Blue and the others, the transport crew reached their base. The Chimera Clausen agent was then taken to Isuzu headquarters. Kagura herself had forced him to tell her all he knew before sentencing him for his crimes.

It seemed the man was but a peon. He could only provide information on a few of their acting bases, their passwords, and the like. She couldn't wring out any information on executive members of the organization or what they were doing with the kidnapped spirits, so that remained a mystery.

"I can't say we've gotten all of them, but we've seized a few of their bases. They know we're onto them too—some of those bases were totally empty... but not all of them. We capture one or two people at a base, we make them tell us where *another* base is. We're grinding them down. And once they're weak enough, we go in for the kill," Kagura explained, elation seeping into her voice.

They had been reducing the enemy's ability to fight bit by bit. This was a show of strength made possible by Isuzu's existing upper hand. Chimera Clausen was being forced further into the shadows, desperate to retreat.

"Does that mean you've located their headquarters?" Mira asked her passionate friend.

Kagura slumped forward onto her low table lifelessly, like a toy that had run out of battery. "Well... Chimera's pawns aren't given jobs beyond moving between smaller bases. But if we keep rolling those up, sooner or later we'll get a hit. Besides, even if we can't find their HQ, we're still saving spirits."

"Hrmm, indeed."

Pawns weren't worth much. They needed to get a hit on the big players. Mira recalled the envelope that Solomon had given her. She'd forgotten about it amid the excitement of reuniting with Kagura. But this was a letter meant for Isuzu.

"Perhaps this will be of aid to you." She stood up and approached Kagura.

Kagura turned her head to the side, still languishing in despair. "What is it?"

With her head slumped down on the table, Mira's fluttering hemline was right before

her eyes. The thought that this tiny girl was really Danblf made her burst into laughter.

"What's gotten into you?" Mira grumbled. "Take this." She plopped down next to Kagura and thrust the sealed envelope in her face. Kagura gloomily accepted it and read the sender's name.

"Oh? A letter from Sol?"

"More precisely, it's addressed to the head of Isuzu."

"Ooh, huh?" Kagura replied shortly, unsealed the letter, and read the contents.

The letter explained what Mira and Solomon had discussed about the Spirit King before. It posited that Chimera Clausen was after the Spirit King, laid out how they had come to that conclusion, and listed the names of the three dungeons involved.

Kagura read quietly at first, but as she continued, her expression became more and more grave. At the same time, the fire in her eyes burned brighter. She stared at the letter so intensely that it seemed she might blast a hole in it at any moment. Once she'd finished, she slammed the letter on the table.

"The Spirit King... So that's it." Now certain of Chimera Clausen's target, Kagura smirked fearlessly. She saw a ray of hope in the darkness.

"It seems I've helped out," Mira said quietly.

"You don't know the half of it..." Kagura answered, a triumphant smirk creeping across her face under predatory eyes. "It says you're mine to command, Gramps. I'm expecting great things from you!"

"Wh-what...?" Now she would never get a break! Mira took Kagura's place, collapsing over the low table. She waved a hand in silent assent: they had to prioritize routing Chimera above all else.



Mira thought idly that she should make a list of things to keep in the wagon so she could get at least some proper rest and relaxation during her travels.

"If we're gonna move, we'd best move fast," Kagura said. "I'm going to call the executives for an emergency meeting. I'll introduce you as our... *helper*, Gramps. But seriously, *Mira* instead of Danblf? How'd you turn out like this?" She seemed suddenly curious.

"It's a long story."

"Sounds rough."

"You have no idea."

"Well, yeah. I literally have no idea."

"Mm-hmm."

Deciding to cut this pointless exchange short, Mira explained that she had hidden her identity because Solomon had asked her to. It would be more difficult to maneuver as Danblf, and this was perfect cover for searching for the other Wise Men.

"You'd go that far for Sol? You're awfully devoted," Kagura answered suspiciously. "Still, this is an important mission. You don't look too intimidating in this form. Don't you have a title or something I can give to my people so they take you seriously? 'Special Envoy from Alcait' and 'Attendant to King Solomon' kind of lack the necessary gravity, yeah?"

Kagura was well aware of Danblf's powers, so she fully trusted the now-young summoner. Anybody would rejoice to have Danblf on their side. However, her subordinates would not have trusted Mira with their lives without that knowledge, and this job would entail crossing the continent.

But Mira had a very convenient title.

"Hrmm? I've been introducing myself as Danblf's pupil up to this point..." Mira answered.

Kagura looked her up and down incredulously for a moment until, with a sound like gunpowder exploding in her mouth, she burst into laughter again.

"What the heck?! You're calling yourself your *own* pupil?! I gotta admit, it's not half bad. Let's go with that."

Now armed with the perfect pretense for Mira to be present at the meeting, Kagura gathered the Isuzu Alliance's leaders to discuss their next move.

CHAPTER 10

THE MOST IMPORTANT FIGURES in the Isuzu Alliance sat surrounding the low table in their imperial palace, ready to hear the news.

Beyond Kagura—referred to as “Uzume” once more—were the captain and staff officer of Isuzu’s main fighting force, the captain of the Multicolor Platoon, an administrative representative, and two members of the elite Hidden.

As for Mira, she was currently waiting in another room. Though Kagura trusted her, and she was there on the orders of King Solomon himself, Kagura would need time to explain a few things to her executives before Mira made her grand entrance.

While she waited, Mira took a few moments to savor the Japanese stylings around her. She was bewildered by the prospect of navigating a Japanese-style toilet in a skirt, enjoyed Japanese sweets for the first time in a long time, and more.

She also got another chance to chat with Acadori. It was then that she heard Meowmaru’s mage was someone who had received Kagura’s instruction personally. It turned out that the name Meowmaru was the price of that mentorship. Acadori had fallen victim to this, too—the Great-Phoenix Zhuque shikigami that she had come to meet Mira on had been given the unfortunate name of Cheepcheep.

“She is a majestic beast, but...” Acadori muttered, staring off into the distance.

Mira found no words to console her. All she could do was sympathize.

* * *

Before long, a man called Mira into the meeting room.

The room was similar to the one she had met Kagura in, the only difference being that the low table in the center of the room was a square instead of a long rectangle. The executives surrounding it were quite imposing, and their eyes all fell on Mira as she entered.

While Mira fought the urge to turn and run, Kagura beckoned. “Come here.”

The eyes followed her as she went. At Kagura's urging, she sat next to "Uzume," grand master of the Isuzu Alliance.

"This young lady is the envoy from the Kingdom of Alcait who brought the information you've just heard," Kagura—now Uzume—told the group. "She is also the one who captured a member of Chimera Clausen. You should know her name."

Mira spoke up. "I'm Mira."

The attendees murmured, impressed. The news about the Chimera capture had spread through the organization quickly, and everyone had extolled her work. They owed her for their recent successes, after all. Everyone present was deeply curious about the power her tiny form harbored.

Uzume took this opportunity to boast further. "Mira is also the pupil of Danblf, one of the Nine Wise Men."

The room fell silent at once, though only for an instant. The one executive who knew Uzume's true identity immediately took her words to be true.

"I have heard rumors of fakes... but if Lady Uzume says she is genuine, I will believe it. That would also explain how she outfoxed Chimera." The middle-aged man sitting closest to Uzume spoke up to vouch for her. Mira was deeply envious of his luxurious beard, which shook majestically as he spoke.

His words swayed the other executives. They all praised Mira, and used the opportunity to introduce themselves.

"I'm Mizar, and I lead the Bellerophon Platoon. Good to meet ya," said a tall, rugged-looking man. He wore simple leather armor and looked slightly over forty years old, his face lined lightly with wrinkles.

"And I am the staff officer of the same Bellerophon unit. Call me Alioth." He was the one who backed up Mira's claim to be Danblf's pupil. He wore an undecorated robe, and his graying bangs were combed back from his face.

"I've heard about you. You helped Silver's troop, right? I'm Diamond, captain-commander of the Multicolors. Honored to meet you." With eyes perhaps a touch too small for his face, the man smiled pleasantly at Mira. He was a model Galidian, with his dark skin and large stature. His white hair was cut short and well-maintained, and

the stubble that covered half of his face looked like specks of snow.

"I'm Coffin. Guess you could call me supervisor of the supervisors." He waved a little in greeting. Coffin wore common street clothes—a shirt and pants—with a happy coat on top. He looked to be the youngest of everyone present... barring Mira, of course. But as he had the trademark pointed ears of an elf, his age could not be judged from appearance alone.

"I'm Snake, of the Hidden."

"Likewise, I am Scorpion."

The two members of the Hidden were dressed like any adventurers walking through the city. Snake wore a long black robe, while Scorpion wore a breastplate made from beetle carapace. They were both women, though there the resemblance ended. Snake had long black hair and sharp eyes, while Scorpion was a miao with short pink hair and a sweet smile.

"I'd say introductions have been made," Uzume said. "Let's get back to business."

When everyone had settled back down, she continued the meeting. Though the adorable Mira's presence had lightened the atmosphere, Uzume's voice brought the tension back to the room. The group refocused their minds on the problem of Chimera Clausen.

"Regarding the three dungeons we discussed, we'll send our elites to investigate them." It seemed she had already briefed the executives on the situation, and Mira had been summoned for the actual planning.

"Agreed," Mizar said. "This is precious information. If we can capture their leaders, the situation will change enormously. Still, shouldn't we investigate these claims a little further? Their supposed attack on the Spirit King could be just a hypothesis. Or it may be a trap meant to force our hand."

He wasn't wrong, as proven by the collective thoughtful sigh of the group. The exotically dressed people sitting on cushions around the low table all fell silent at once. The presumption that Chimera Clausen was after the Spirit King was deduced from their actions, but perhaps they were clever enough to ensnare the Isuzu Alliance by leading them to a conclusion they planned.

But it was Alioth who made his own hypothesis. “It’s possible, yes... but I believe the information we’ve gained on *our* end also points to Chimera’s plan to attack the Spirit King.”

Alioth was staff officer of the Bellerophon troop and the brains of the Isuzu Alliance. He was also one of very few people who knew Uzume’s true identity. The members of Isuzu trusted him implicitly. When he spoke, they listened. Mira watched him with keen interest, as well.

“Let’s hear it, Alioth,” Uzume urged.

“Very well...” Alioth took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and spread it atop the table. It was a large map of the continent, covered with countless notations. “As you know, we are currently attacking Chimera’s many bases and harvesting their assets and information. The marks on this map are locations where their bases once were. We’ve already found fifty, and we expect to find many more. It comes as no surprise that Chimera is quick to run. Consequently, despite their many bases, we’ve captured very few of their personnel. However, our captures are still directly chipping away at their fighting ability. I would say it’s just a matter of time at this point.”

Diamond, captain-commander of the Multicolors, chuckled and grinned confidently. “Yeah. They’re all grunts, but we’re still reducing the harm done to spirits. Our soldiers complain every day that we’re not even giving them time to sleep between bashing Chimera heads in.”

Attacks on Chimera Clausen bases were primarily carried out by the Multicolors, while transport personnel would follow and meet up with them along the way. The work seemed never-ending, but Diamond always motivated them with laughter and tough love.

“Now, I’ll get to the point,” Alioth continued. “As we can all see from the current situation, we have a tailwind and they face a headwind. But remember that this is Chimera. I can hardly imagine that things will end like this. It seems that the adventurers supporting them are a recent development. As recent as our attacks on their bases, in fact. Perhaps an act of desperation by Chimera. But if they gain the power of the Spirit King, the war will be turned on its head. We’ve always had the upper hand in military might, so they must be scheming to overcome that. Their plan is undoubtedly already in play.”

Uzume nodded through his explanation. When he was done, she spoke first. "Right. We hold an advantage like none before. But they're not going to sit by idly and let us win."

Chimera Clausen always prioritized escape when they were at a disadvantage. But now that they were cornered, fighting was the only option.

"If we think it may be true, then we should not risk letting them succeed," Mizar said, expression taut.

The dungeons listed in Mira's letter were all advanced dungeons. Their difficulty was too great for even some expert adventurers to clear. The people Chimera Clausen sent would be heavyweights. This job was vital to them—it would be no surprise to see some of their top people at the front. Isuzu's strategy would take advantage of that.

If Isuzu succeeded, it was possible that they would finally learn the whereabouts of Chimera Clausen's headquarters. As Mizar said, it would be critical to try, even given the danger involved.

Alioth could not deny that it might be a trap, but everybody present agreed on the next course of action. The conversation proceeded to the question of who could handle a mission with so many possible dangers.

"We may not be able to fight them off if we don't send enough firepower, and their numbers are unknown. These three locations are some distance from each other, as well. We could go personally, but we can't leave this place unguarded." Coffin glanced at each individual around the table and then turned his eyes to Uzume. "You say send elites... but who, exactly?"

If they wanted to guarantee the enemy's capture, then they would need twice the enemy's fighting ability. This would be Isuzu's biggest mission yet—they would require the best of the best.

The others looked to Uzume. She wetted her lips, allowed the silence to linger for a moment, and finally spoke. "We shall gather all the Hidden, form them into teams, and send them to the dungeons."

At those words, the tension on the executives' faces eased visibly.

"They are perfect for the job," said Alioth.

"We can leave it to them," agreed Mizar.

The other four quickly expressed their support.

"Right?!" Uzume smiled broadly like a child who'd just gotten perfect marks on a big test.

The executives had been inwardly nervous that Uzume would go herself. She was notorious for using any excuse to leave, so their shared job was to prevent that. They were prepared for that this time as well... but they were relieved to see that she had in fact chosen the least problematic personnel for the job.

"Where are the Hidden now?" Uzume asked.

Alioth was informed of their movements and promptly drew a few lines on the map atop the low table.

"According to reports as recent as yesterday, they should be dispersed in these areas," he said.

He made ten marks in total. Including the two here, that meant there were twelve Hidden. As Uzume stared at the map, Alioth added three more marks.

"These are the positions of the Citadel of Scales, the Garrison's Vault, and the Illusory Corridor. As far as we've seen, there are no issues at the Vault or Corridor... yet. Given a day or two, they can all arrive at the dungeons nearest to them. All that remains is getting permits. As for the Citadel..."

The symbols marking the Hidden from before were not too far from the newly added marks. But as with all dungeons, they would require permits from the Guild Union. With his eyes still on the map, Alioth paused to untangle some problem in his mind, then offered his conclusion.

"Fortunately, we have several people with A-Rank certifications or above scattered about. If we have them get the permits, the Vault and Corridor should be no problem. But the Citadel is too far. With our current positioning in mind, if we want to get there quickly, we must send personnel from headquarters."

"Right. Snake and Scorpion... I worry about sending you two alone," Uzume said.

The other two locations could be handled by five people each, but that left only these two for the Citadel of Scales. The pair were strong, and confident in their abilities, but this was a vital mission. As long as enemy numbers were unknown, two was an iffy number.

"You two stopped at C-Rank, didn't you? We'll have to secure an A-rank escort," Alioth added. Snake and Scorpion nodded silently.

A-Rank adventurers were truly capable adventurers like Heinrich, who Mira had met on her way to the Celestial Ruins. They weren't exactly easy to find just hanging around, but the Isuzu Alliance headquarters had many adventurers on staff. Uzume decided to simply pick someone suitable from among those. She then turned to Mira.

"You said you came to the Forest of Seasons by air. How did you do that, exactly?"

Mira took her eyes off the continental map, repeated the question in her mind, then answered with a smug grin. "I boarded a wagon and had my summon Garuda bring me here."

"Thought so. Sounds like you have a big, flying helper, huh? I'm jealous."

Uzume fantasized about boarding a fairy-tale pumpkin carriage and flying through the skies. Mediums could use laborer magic as well, but they had nothing as powerful as Garuda. All they could do was cling to their flying servants. Uzume longed for a comfortable, princess-like mode of travel.

"Sooo... how many people can fit in your wagon?" Uzume asked.

"Hrmm, good question... Three, perhaps?" Mira answered, picturing the inside of it. She imagined herself sitting and two others positioned standing in the space. Any more people would probably make it too cramped.

"Three, huh? Are you registered with the Guild Union?"

"Indeed I am." Mira knew where this was going, adding, "But I'm only C-Rank, so I won't be able to get a permit."

Uzume whispered in response, "Oh, c'mon! It'd be easy for you, Gramps. Just take the certification!" She looked to the two Hidden. "I've decided, then. Snake, you'll be staying home. We'll have Mira go with Scorpion and an A-Rank to get the permit. You'll

take the shortest distance possible by flying wagon. Everyone satisfied?"

Uzume looked to Mira and Snake for confirmation.

"I don't mind," Mira answered reluctantly.

"...Understood," Snake toyed with her long, black hair, but the look on her face was dissatisfied. She would be the one member of the Hidden left out of an operation that would determine the future of their organization... all because of a simple limitation on how many people could ride in a wagon. She respected Uzume deeply, but it was a bitter pill to swallow.

Unable to bear the sight of the crestfallen agent, Diamond chose his next words carefully. "Er, well, y'know... Chimera is gonna expect us to send some strong folks. A-Rank dungeons mean strong monsters, too. I could see it if this were any other investigation, but just three people is kinda slim margins, right?"

Snake quickly looked up and nodded her agreement. "This mission is vital. *Success* is vital. I beg you, let me come." She struggled to add gravity to her words, but she sounded younger than her looks implied. At the end of each sentence, she thumped her hand against the table emphatically.

Conflict was brewing at the planning table. Uzume knew Mira was her strongest piece by far—this mission would bring along one of the Nine Wise Men and all the strength that entailed. But the executives saw her as just a Wise Man's pupil. She might be strong, but she was still an unknown quantity.

"I must agree," Alioth chimed in. "This will be our biggest operation yet, and we must have victory by any means necessary. I am already reluctant to have an envoy handle our work, but... if Miss Mira has agreed to it, then I presume there is some arrangement I don't know about. Even so, I'm uncertain about leaving such important work to an outsider."

It was clear from Uzume's attitude that she had total confidence in Mira. But trust still needed to be built with the Isuzu Alliance if they were to work hand-in-hand with the Kingdom of Alcait. Alioth understood that Kagura came from Alcait originally, and that Mira was the pupil of one of her former comrades. Perhaps there was room for compromise.

He glanced at the letter from Solomon that remained on the table. Making a quick

guess at what was written therein, he turned his eyes searchingly to Mira. When he did, he accidentally made eye contact with the girl, who seemed to be sizing him up at the same time.

How strong was she? Alioth tried to feel for her strength from appearance alone, but he wondered if that did her justice. What if Mira was so strong that *she* was the one who would judge whether *they* were worthy?

"That won't be an issue," Uzume replied. She knew how powerful her executives were and how capable they were. She continued, "I can vouch for her character and her strength. If she decided to make trouble here, she and I would probably be the only ones left standing ten minutes from now."

Alioth, Mizar, and Diamond, who knew Uzume's true identity, looked at Mira in disbelief. The others seemed confused. How could they know that she was a pupil in name only?

Meanwhile, Mira had been staring at Alioth. She was still enchanted by his ideal old-man appearance, and wondered if she'd ever return to normal again. Feeling the discomfort of having all eyes on her snapped her out of her daydream.

She smiled grimly. "Hrmm, you may be exaggerating. Still, I won't lag behind these young people just yet. Now, the Fortress of Scales, yes? We won't have to worry about the monsters in there. The real problem will be just how elite Chimera's elites are."

Snake frowned slightly, and Uzume smirked as if she'd accomplished something. The other executives caught a glimpse of Mira's confidence in that casual statement. One person reacted to her final statement.

"I know the answer to that." Scorpion raised her hand to answer. "I've bumped heads with a Chimera elite once. I don't know where exactly they fell in the organization, but they were clearly unlike Chimera's pawns. I'd say they were about as strong as me. I'd definitely have won if they didn't run away!" Scorpion's pride bubbled to the surface.

Unfortunately, Mira had no basis for comparison since she didn't know how strong Scorpion was. Scorpion seemed just as keen to test Mira—especially given Uzume's claims—and made a proposal.

"Of course I trust Uzume, but why don't we see a demonstration from Mira?" she suggested. "I can be your opponent. Then, everyone can feel safer entrusting the

mission to you. Snake will feel better, too."

"Perhaps that would be best," Alioth promptly agreed. "Let us take every precaution."

Uzume understood how her subordinates felt, but she knew the outcome very well already. "Very well. Mira, would you mind indulging them?" Uzume asked Mira, secretly praying that she wouldn't *totally* shatter Scorpion's pride.

"Sure. I don't see why not." Mira welcomed the opportunity to size up Izusu's people, and Chimera's elites by extension. The meeting came to a recess, and the party headed for the courtyard at the center of the palace.

CHAPTER 11

THERE WAS NO WIND as the sunlight filtered through the trees and the surface of the lake, casting dappled light on the courtyard. It gave the surreal impression of being inside an aquarium. In the lake's depths, a small crowd of Isuzu Alliance leaders gathered as Mira faced Scorpion. The miao woman held a dagger in her hand.

Wise Man Danblf stands at the pinnacle of summoning, Scorpion thought to herself. Mira must be a summoner, too. Keeping my distance will leave me vulnerable to any summons... I'm no good at long-range combat, either. But the legends of the Wise Men also say that Danblf uses Immortal Arts in close combat. Has his pupil studied this as well?

Faced with an enemy she couldn't read, Scorpion slowly devised a strategy.

"You both ready? Aaand... begin." Uzume sounded slightly bored, but Scorpion immediately sprinted forward at the signal. The best plan was to force Mira into close quarters combat from the start. Scorpion had the agility to make it possible; she flew low and fast like a loosed arrow targeted at Mira.

Having come within arm's distance in the blink of an eye, Scorpion flashed her dagger like lightning. If she could thrust the blade at her opponent's neck, that would decide the fight. The blade struck true—but in that instant, Mira faded and disappeared like a mirage.

"Huh?!" Scorpion gasped. She whipped around and began running again. She recognized Mirage Step and located Mira's true aura in seconds.

* * *

These elites aren't half bad.

Mira analyzed the situation and found that Mirage Step was an effective first move when wielded by a skilled user. At the same time, she was impressed by Kagura's hand-picked elites. Unlike the proud Caerus who had chased her mirages, frantically swinging his sword around, Scorpion adapted immediately. She zeroed in on Mira's aura and ran directly toward her. This was someone with real experience and training.

They repeated this dance multiple times. Once Scorpion was close enough, she thrust her dagger with whip-like speed. It took the shortest path to her opponent's throat, only to be blocked by a partially summoned tower shield. Unable to stop her momentum, Scorpion slammed right into it.

* * *

"Where'd it come from?!" Scorpion just barely managed to catch herself and minimize the impact. Mira had yet to teach anyone else the skill, so this was truly new to the agent.

Just as suddenly as it came, the shield disappeared, and Mira with it. Scorpion remained calm and searched for her aura. She felt a disquieting chill run up her back, like a spider scuttling up her spine, and swiftly jumped back. In the next instant, the ground where she had been caved in as if smacked by a hammer. The shockwave and thunderclap shook her to her core.

This must be the Immortal Art Pulse!

Discerning the magic from its effect, she traced its arc and looked up, wary of a second attack. She saw Mira overhead. She had used the partially summoned shield as a diversion to leap above Scorpion's head using Air Step.

* * *

Mira continued to be impressed. Despite attacking from her opponent's blind spot, Scorpion evaded the moment before the attack could hit her. She was also pleased to note that the strategy she'd cooked up in the wagon on the way here was a resounding success.

"You're still in my range!"

As Mira admired the Hidden soldier, Scorpion summoned up her fighting spirit in the blink of an eye and held her blade skyward. A whirlwind in the form of a serpent struck out toward Mira, who remained in midair. The young summoner caught it with her hands covered in the winds of Immortal Arts and crushed it, smirking down at Scorpion.

"You're not bad." As Mira walked atop air, she handily deflected another of Scorpion's whirlwinds and smiled.

The serpent, having missed its mark, dispersed in midair and became a gust of wind that whirled through the courtyard, flipping up leaves and Mira's skirt alike. Coffin cheered—only to face Snake's immediate wrath. Mizar and Alioth averted their eyes to avoid similar fates.

"Precocious for her age," Diamond muttered to himself and put his hands together in prayer, resigning himself to his impending punishment.

The two combatants fought on, unaware of the commotion.

This time, Mira canceled out Scorpion's whirlwind before it could even reach her. But this third whirlwind hadn't yet lost its fangs. Scorpion had thrown a thin, round, saw-like blade after it. It pierced the winds of the snake and closed in on Mira. Such blades were normally coated with poison, but since this was an exhibition, Scorpion had left it off. But if she could only graze Mira...

The blade flew at Mira, arcing sharply toward her feet. Scorpion had hesitated to aim for the head—not for safety reasons, but because Mira seemed to deflect any attack aimed for her upper body.

There was a shrill metallic sound as the blade shattered against an unblemished tower shield and fell like leaves.

"Again?!" Scorpion whined.

Mira once more disappeared along with the shield. She'd summoned another shield in Scorpion's blind spot, utilizing it as a foothold for [Immortal Arts Movement: Shrinking Earth] to vault over her opponent's head.

Scorpion sensed her aura just in time and turned. She reacted a split second after the first shield faded. Mira privately both lauded and welcomed that sharpness.

* * *

"Gack!" Scorpion winced and made an annoyed sound.

She was confident that she'd reacted as quickly and efficiently as possible, but before her eyes stood just what she'd feared to begin with: Mira's summons. Scorpion now realized how different her opponent was from her friends that were summoners.

And she summoned two of them... When you summon, you're supposed to select, target, consume, and cast, right? They told me it takes two seconds even for low-level ones! They told me!

Scorpion mentally yelled at her summoner friends and furrowed her brow, wondering what to do now. Before her were a black knight and a white knight. Their eyes glowed red as they stood protectively before their princess.

* * *

No, no, Mira mentally chastised her. This is no time to freeze up. You're too naïve. I'll have to use my summons well.

Mira put her hand on her chin behind the two knights and re-energized herself as she turned her attention to the spectators.

“Time for the main event,” she announced. With only the tiniest moment of build-up, the Dark Knight leapt forth at maximum speed. It aimed for Scorpion, who faced it with no openings in her stance.

* * *

“Yikes!” Scorpion yelped. Though shocked by this summons’s inhuman features and actions, she coolly defended herself.

She dodged around the Dark Knight as it tore through the air, weaving through the slightest of openings as she swung her dagger. She knew she couldn’t take a blow from that sword, so she focused on evading and waited for an ideal opening.

Scorpion was skilled enough to strike deep blows, but her enemy was an artificial being made from magic. As long as the mana within didn’t run out, it would regenerate any damage she dealt. Every time it quickly healed from her strike, another annoyed furrow creased her brow. She was lucky to have a summoner friend, so at least she knew what to expect—but even so, she grumbled as she fought.

Scorpion felt a twinge of regret at challenging Mira. The Dark Knight wasn’t just an excellent swordfighter; its regeneration was also far faster than anything she’d seen in the past.

Yet Scorpion pressed her attack. Using all her skill, she guided her enemy into certain

positions and used her blade once the conditions were right. Her full-power blow gouged into the Dark Knight's stomach, finally injuring it beyond what it could regenerate.

The construct shattered like glass, each fragment dissolving into fine particles that faded away.

Scorpion was elated by the sight. She grinned for a moment, then her eyes turned sharp again and she began to run.

“No way...”

Or she tried...

She jumped back instinctively—the Dark Knight she'd just defeated stood right before her eyes. Scorpion thought she only had the Holy Knight left to deal with, but she'd forgotten the true power of summoning: as long as one had mana, they could summon endlessly.

She knew that casting advanced summons took time. As long as you forced close quarters combat and didn't give the summoner time to cast, you were depriving them of their greatest strength. Lesser summons like armor spirits could be summoned in as little as two seconds—but Mira's Dark Knights were clearly leagues beyond lesser summons in terms of raw strength. Scorpion thought she was fighting an advanced summon, but even that powerhouse was little more than a replaceable pawn to Mira.

Mira poked her head around the side of her Dark Knight and smirked. The usual trick of summoners was to use lesser summons to give one time to summon advanced ones, but Mira carried herself as if she didn't *need* advanced summons.

Mira's attitude was infuriating, but... Scorpion looked at the Dark Knight before her and the Holy Knight behind it and began to laugh. Was this what it meant to be the pupil of the continent's strongest summoner? Scorpion had never thought herself conceited, but she had to admit: she'd overestimated her own abilities.

“How long is that gonna go on?!”

Abandoning her initial purpose, Scorpion charged at the Dark Knight, treating it like a training partner.

* * *

The fight intensified. Scorpion destroyed Dark Knights through various means, and each time, another was summoned in their place. She was roiling with motivation, but fatigue was starting to set in. Yet her techniques only became sharper as she managed to cut down her twelfth Dark Knight.

This is getting pretty hard now... Why was I fighting, again?

No matter how many she felled, more appeared. It was as if she was being forced to keep eating long after she was satisfied. Her exhaustion brought back her clarity of mind. When she saw the next unwounded Holy Knight, she heaved a sigh. The five spectators sighed in sympathy with her.

"Oof. This is tough to watch," somebody said. The others made similar remarks.

Mira had been using her spare time to fantasize about all the new, creative ways the magic of this now-real world could be put into practice. This was her first chance to truly, flamboyantly put her experiments to the test. This experience was a reminder that imagination was different from reality. She prepared to continue her experiment.

"You are not bad at all, friend," Mira praised her. "But I'm afraid the fight has only just begun!"

She was intoxicated by this ideal opportunity to put theory into practice. Uzume had to grin wryly as she recalled such scenes from the past. Then Mira summoned five Dark Knights at once.

"Come oon..." Scorpion despaired. This was clearly beyond her limit. "I yield, I yield!"

Scorpion's surrender echoed clear as a bell throughout the courtyard. Her dagger already lay on the ground, and she raised a white handkerchief like a drooping flag.

Mira groaned. "Fine, I suppose. So? My summoning passed the test, did it not?"

She climbed up on her Holy Knight's shoulder and struck a pose. She was satisfied. If this was how she stacked up against an Isuzu elite, they'd be forced to acknowledge the power of summoning.

But the top of Isuzu was, of course, Wise Man Kagura. She knew Danblf well from how

often they had both worked together and competed with each other. She *already* had a deep understanding of the utility of summoning. Summoners made up a not-insignificant portion of the Isuzu Alliance forces. Scorpion was friends with one, after all. None of the people here shared the common view that summoning was an obsolete practice.

But now they all had a *new* impression of summoning.

"Her summoning magic sure is... effective, isn't it?" Mizar chose his words carefully.

"Seems very one-sided," Alioth agreed with a chuckle.

"Ah ha ha ha ha! Wow! That was *sick*!" The tense mood was swept away as Coffin laughed. He wasn't wrong.

"What's going on...?" Mira's smirk turned to a small frown. These weren't the reactions she expected.

"Is that the result of summoning, or is it the result of her personality?" Diamond muttered, gazing at the clearly dispirited Mira sitting atop her Holy Knight's shoulder.

No matter. They were glad to have such a powerful ally on their side.

* * *

With the duel concluded, they went back to the meeting room, and Mira discussed the spectators' view of events with Diamond. According to him, she was like a cat toying with a flightless bird. Scorpion slumped her shoulders, unable to think of a way to defeat summoners now.

"Hey, she's an exception, okay?" Uzume consoled her quietly.

Mira glanced at their backs and wondered what they were talking about, all the while racking her brain over future public relations attempts.

The secretary distributed tea shortly after the party arrived at the meeting room. When everyone sat, Alioth cleared his throat and spoke.

"I'm amazed that you could overwhelm Scorpion with lesser summons alone. Lady Uzume was right—we're no match for you."

Uzume responded with a proud, “Right?!” She’d never doubt a fellow Wise Man.

“You’re not lacking in firepower. We’re glad to have you along.” Mizar gulped down his entire cup of tea at once and glanced at Scorpion, who lay exhausted atop the table.

Now nobody objected to sending her to the Citadel of Scales. However, Snake still looked disappointed. Diamond had proposed the duel as a way of taking Snake’s feelings into consideration after she’d been told to sit out the mission. But he hadn’t known her real feelings at all. Snake never cared about Mira’s ability; she was upset that she would be left out of Isuzu’s biggest mission of all time. She just wanted to go with them.

Noticing she was still down, Diamond asked, “What’s wrong, Snake? They’ll be fine.”

Snake slowly lifted her head, occasionally taking sidelong glances at Uzume. “I have no problem with Mira. But not being able to go... I’d be the only Hidden left out.”

“Oh...”

Now Diamond finally understood. This mission would mobilize the entire Hidden forces, save for Snake. All because of the passenger capacity on a flying wagon. She’d have felt *better* about it if they’d simply said she was too weak.

“Hmm...” Diamond crossed his arms in thought. He turned his stern yet kind face to Mira. “Missy, that wagon you rode in is one of those that’s pulled by something created by a laborer, right? I haven’t seen it, but when you said three people, was that due to weight concerns?”

“No, weight should not be an issue. It’s a simple matter of size. It would be cramped already if three people sat.”

At least that’s what Mira assumed. When she’d first shown Garuda the wagon, the great bird had lifted it up easily with one talon. She didn’t doubt its ability to haul more weight, only the space to cram more people.

Hearing that, Snake slammed her hands on the table and leaned forward eagerly. “I don’t need to sit. I can stand out of the way. Hang me off the side if you’d like. Just please allow me to come.” She gazed at Mira with pleading eyes, looking as though she’d burst into tears if refused.

"You think it's doable?" Uzume asked Mira from the side.

Mira pictured the inside of the wagon. Once she'd mentally sketched a diagram of her, Snake, Scorpion, and a (hopefully female) mystery A-Rank adventurer packed in closely together, she chuckled to herself... maybe the small cabin wasn't so bad, after all.

"Right. It'll be tight, but if that is acceptable, then I say fine."

"Hm. Okay, I guess Snake can go with you, then." Uzume sighed inwardly as Mira's lascivious grin betrayed her mental calculus.

"You have my thanks." Snake bowed so deeply her head almost hit the table.

Thus, the Citadel of Scales party grew to four people. Then the meeting moved into proper strategizing.

An hour later, they'd settled on their plans. The executives dispersed and busily contacted people to prepare, leaving Mira and Uzume alone together. They put the strategizing aside and had a frank discussion about their current situation.

When Kagura spoke of the importance of Isuzu, the expression in Mira's eyes was like someone watching over a dear friend's children. She said simply, "Leave them to me."

To Kagura, Mira was a friend she hadn't seen in ages. Despite Mira's different appearance and voice, those words lit up Kagura's world. Their bond may have been born in a fantasy world, but it had crossed the boundaries of time and space to become real.

Kagura hid her embarrassment and smiled. "Thank you!"

CHAPTER 12

MIRA AND UZUME emerged from the palace and stepped into the submerged city. Uzume's face was once again concealed by her white veil. They were off to the district where adventurers gathered, in hopes of finding an A-Rank to join Mira. Fate of the world or not, the Citadel of Scales required a permit, and rules were rules.

Civilians greeted the two as they passed. There was nothing unusual about the citizens greeting the grand master of the Isuzu Alliance, but the way they spoke to her was unexpectedly friendly.

"Uzume, you're looking as healthy as ever!"

"Hi there, Uzume! And hi to you, little miss!"

Uzume would wave, exchange a few words with them, and leave. This happened several times.

This headquarters currently housed members of the alliance, adventurers, artisans, merchants, and the people they protected. The people they passed by were collaborators. They were people who aided the alliance knowing Uzume's beliefs and goals. Uzume interacted with them not as a leader, but as a kindred spirit. As such, there was no wall of status between them. Everyone was equal here.

After exchanging more greetings, the duo arrived at the biggest building in the western district. The blue-roofed, white-walled buildings with vermillion pillars were truly emblematic of the Heian Kyoto aesthetic. When one looked up toward the eaves, they saw the luster of the lake above. Mira was very much in a sightseeing mood.

"Now... Will he be here?" Uzume cheerfully opened the door, seemingly looking for a specific A-Rank adventurer. As she did, waves of boisterous noise erupted from inside.

This building was both a rally point and a tavern for the people collaborating with Isuzu. Inside the formal zashiki-style banquet room, everyone sat directly on the tatami floor and chatted comfortably. The mood was especially jubilant due to the alliance's recent successes.

"If it isn't Miss Uzume! Got some work for us?" a man called out to Uzume from the kitchen. He seemed to be the tavern master.

"Yes. An important mission this time," Uzume answered, her eyes turning just slightly sharper behind her barely translucent veil. She stopped at the front of the room and raised her hands emphatically. "Okay, everyone! Attention!" she called out, clapping her hands above her head.

The clamor stopped like waves receding from a shore. Countless eyes gathered on her.

"Ooh, is it my turn?!" someone called out expectantly amid the confusion. Several other cries like this shortly followed. After waiting for them to settle down, Uzume succinctly stated her business.

"We need an A-Rank. Preferably a tank."

The people gathered there were used to this process, so those who didn't fit her conditions grumbled half-jokingly, while people who did fit the requirements stepped forward. There were five men and three women, ranging in age from their twenties to their fifties.

"Oho," Mira muttered, impressed by the lineup.

A-Rank adventurers would be roughly on par with Heinrich. There would naturally be differences in their skill levels, but this was a quick way to sort the applicants. Heinrich, who she now used as her standard, was quite strong. And they had *eight* such people here, even after limiting the call to tanks. This was a glimpse of the sheer power of the Isuzu Alliance.

Uzume surveyed the group, satisfied, and continued, "This mission will take you to the Citadel of Scales. Have any of you been there before?"

"I have. It was ten years ago, though," one man among them answered. He had fine gray hair combed neatly back from his forehead and carried himself like a veteran. His chiseled features showed his age, but his physique was in no way inferior to those in the prime of life. He wore light armor now, allowing his muscles, the result of many years of training, to stand out.

What a fantastic specimen...

This elderly man was quite similar to the old gentleman that Mira had met at the train platform, but he had aged more to her tastes. This man seemed more vigorous and kinetic.

"Hired," Uzume snapped, and the elderly man nodded firmly without a word. The remaining seven dispersed, visibly disappointed. "Your name was Aaron, right? Welcome aboard."

He nodded, and Uzume offered her right hand. He shook firmly. "I'll see it done. What are we doing at the Citadel, anyway?"

Uzume emphasized her next words with a pointed finger. "This mission is of utmost importance. We've gotten vital information. It's not guaranteed, but it's very likely to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

With that preface, Uzume succinctly explained their mission: that Chimera Clausen was targeting the Spirit King, and that the Citadel of Scales was involved.

Aaron, the other seven adventurers, and even the ones who hadn't fit the conditions listened quietly. Once Uzume's explanation concluded, silence fell upon the room.

* * *

"The Spirit King, hm? Those scoundrels have gone too far." Aaron put into words the rage that burned in everyone's hearts. Others shouted their anger at Chimera Clausen.

"Silence!" Uzume's yell halted the billowing uproar, and the room fell silent once more. After confirming that everyone had settled down, she suppressed her own fury and spoke again. "We won't let them have their way. If it is true, it's likely that Chimera's elites will be in play. Capture them if at all possible. If it goes well, we'll get our hands on even more crucial information."

"That sounds like a big responsibility. The biggest yet. Who else is going? If I'm the only adventurer you came for, then I must be coming along for the permit. Are the others going to be Hidden?"

"Indeed. Scorpion, Snake, and this girl." After naming the two Hidden, Uzume introduced Mira, who had been staring at Aaron for some time.

All eyes came to rest on the young summoner. She looked away in surprise as Aaron

made eye contact with her, but she ended up looking right into the eyes of someone else who was staring at her. She was stuck.

Mira was startled for a moment, as she had only half-listened to Uzume's long explanation. But she quickly plastered a smile on her face and stood proud before them.

"Miss Scorpion and Miss Snake, huh? Not bad. I don't recognize this young lady, but if she's accompanying us, I assume she can take care of herself?" Aaron took a good look at Mira, clad in her trendy magical girl outfit. He knew Uzume wouldn't pick anyone unfit for this mission.

"This is Mira. She's the one who caught our first Chimera, and she's Wise Man Danblf's pupil. You'll be supporting her." Uzume nodded, slowly and confidently.

The people in the tavern stirred. Aaron was a cut above all of the adventurers here. He could be the foundation of a party, yet Uzume was asking him to support *Mira*.

"Heh. All right, then." Aaron consented with a cheerful grin on his face. He turned his eyes to Mira, wondering just what sort of stuff a Wise Man's pupil was made of.

* * *

The three moved to the meeting room on the second floor to share more details with Aaron. This meeting room was made for conferences with adventurers who had come to help Isuzu. They all took seats around the table and got comfortable.

Uzume spoke first. She told Aaron about the evidence that had led them to the near-certainty that Chimera Clausen was targeting the Spirit King. She also outlined how the Kingdom of Alcait and the Mages' Guild would be assisting in the matter.

Alcait was famous for being a kingdom of mages, and the Mages' Guild had its finger on the pulse of all adventurer movements. Mages had high affinity with spirits, so the union was publicly an enemy of Chimera Clausen. Aaron agreed that the information's sources were ironclad.

With that over, Uzume finally got to the details of the specific mission, while Aaron occasionally gave affirmative answers and pressed for more information. Mira enjoyed an all-season au lait that had caught her eye in the tavern.

Uzume ran through all the details: transportation to the destination, the people who would be joining, and even an analysis of expected resistance. She wrapped up by adding that the two Hidden would take care of restraining and transporting any captured enemies.

"All right. I'll get ready. When do we set out?" Aaron organized each piece of information in his mind and made a mental list of the luggage he would need to take.

Uzume took her eyes off of Mira relaxing while sipping her drink and answered, "Tomorrow morning at nine."

"That's not much time. I'd better start preparing."

They didn't know when Chimera Clausen might appear in force. Depending on the circumstances, they might have to lie in ambush for days on end. But that was better than arriving *after* Chimera had done all their dirty work. The sooner they left, the better. Aaron stood up to go.

"I should give you this now." Uzume also rose and handed Aaron a blue, card-like sheet of paper.

"Ooh, thank you. I'll make good use of that." He happily accepted it.

"Then I'll see you at the usual spot when the time comes tomorrow."

"Got it." Aaron's words were concise, but his tone was firm. He left for his inn, where he would get ready for the trip ahead.

Mira and Uzume left right behind him.

* * *

As they left the tavern, Kagura turned and asked, "How about it, Gramps? Are you ready?"

"Hrmm. I would say I've got enough restoratives on hand." Mira glanced at her inventory and checked her stock of emergency healing items. She took out a certain item to show Kagura. "I've got these, too. I'll be fine, even if they nearly kill me."

Mira shook the crystalline vial, which contained a pink liquid. It was Goddess's Charity,

a top-tier restorative that instantly brought the user to full vitality. It remained effective even in this new reality.

"You've been here for less than a month, right, Gramps? You haven't suffered any real injuries."

"Well, yes. And?" Mira answered, putting the Goddess's Charity back in her Item Box. Kagura weakly slapped Mira upside the head. It was a light impact, but it came with some real pain. Mira pouted and protested, but Kagura replied with a series of slaps on both cheeks. "What the hell?!"

"Okay, question. How much damage did you take from that, Gramps?"

Mira glared at Kagura, but her question was low and serious. Mira pushed down her displeasure.

"Hrmm... Maybe around ten?" She didn't know what the point of this was, but she answered based on the sensations on her head and cheeks.

Hearing her answer, Kagura let out a big, ostentatious sigh and looped her pointer finger and thumb into the shape of a circle. "The answer is zero. Now, as your senior in this world, allow me to enlighten you. First, whether or not you take damage is based off of how much it affects your body. Light slaps pose no danger to your life, so you take zero damage. Though if I did it a lot, it might add up." Kagura paused for a moment and then flicked Mira's chin. "That's zero, too," she said, ignoring her friend's glare.

She continued, "Taking damage is the same as getting closer to death. When this was a video game, taking damage just meant watching some numbers go down. But now? If you take damage worth half your hit points, the pain will leave you unable to fight. If you're near death, good luck being lucid enough to drink a potion without help."

"Hrmm..."

In real life, pain, blood loss, and fuzzy consciousness associated with injuries were to be expected. No matter how effective medicine was, it was meaningless if you couldn't use it. Mira reflected on some past risks that might have turned out... poorly.

"You're right. I'll be careful." Realizing that she still had gamer brain, she took Kagura's advice seriously.

Kagura then took an item from her own inventory, a bottle with a yellow-green liquid, and thrust it in Mira's face.

"That's where this panacea comes in. Take a dose beforehand, and it'll both numb pain and reduce blood loss. It's a really useful item for people like you and me," Kagura said, catching Mira's attention before stowing it back in her own Item Box. "You won't be immobilized by injuries or poison; you can fight like you always have. But know that you're *just* tricking your body. You're just buying time to use potions."

The panacea Kagura had shown Mira was invented by players. Pain suffered in battle had made them afraid like never before. Some players had even given up fighting entirely. But in a world where monsters thrived, there were times when one was forced to fight. Though expensive, these new elixirs were treasured as something you *always* wanted to have on hand.

Especially in battles between near equals, these panaceas could make the difference between victory and defeat.

Mira immediately understood the utility of the panacea and asked, "How much does that little thing go for?"

"Two hundred thousand ducats a pop. Most big retailers sell them."

"Two hundred thousand for a single one? Given its function, I suppose that isn't too steep..."

"That's on the *cheap* side. When I first got my hands on one, they were more like *five* hundred thousand. It's not just panaceas, either; all of the best restoratives are several times more expensive than they used to be. Not for nothing, either... They're literally the difference between life and death, y'know."

All the best restoratives were in hot demand. Many former players hoarded them as insurance, and because their raw materials were rare, they continued to be scarce at markets.

"Anyway, let's get back to your preparations. Restoratives aside, how are you doing on food? Depending on how things go, you might need several days' worth."

Mira opened her Item Box and checked her foodstuffs. After a quick glance, she let out a big sigh.

"Alas, all I have is mixed berry au lait," Mira answered.

Kagura offered her a blue card like the one she had given Aaron a short while ago.

"Take this—it's an exchange chit. Give it to a grocery store in the business district, and they'll give you a week's worth of food. Unlike before, we need to eat to live. *Always* keep food on hand, Gramps."

"Hrmm, indeed. Then I will gladly make use of this." Mira accepted the exchange ticket and realized just how slapdash her approach had been up to this point. She also remembered Gilbert, who she had met on her way up to the Celestial Ruins. He had brought cooking implements and prepared items they had harvested there. That seemed to be common among adventurers. Cooking sets were sold specifically for them.

"Cooking isn't really my forte, but maybe I should buy a kit just in case..."

Mira had no confidence in her cooking skills beyond basics like boiling, baking, and frying, so she vaguely imagined curry. At least curry always tasted a certain way unless you *really* messed it up.

"Unlike the User's Bangles supplied by the Guild Union, items in our Item Boxes won't go bad. You can stock up on precooked foods if you want." Kagura rolled up her left sleeve and pointed at her bangle.

"Oho... That is a good idea," Mira replied, a little surprised. She'd known that things in the Item Box wouldn't go bad, or at least she'd intuited that. But she had no idea that the User's Bangles loaned out by the Guild Union would let the food inside rot.

At that point, she remembered Emella, who she had joined on the trip to Nebrapolis. Even though she had a User's Bangle, Emella had prioritized non-perishable foods when she went grocery shopping.

This is surprisingly convenient.

The new User's Bangles came with other restrictions as well, such as weight limits. Mira looked down at the silver bangle on her arm and wondered what exactly these Terminals *were*.

"Do you ever stop to think about these things? They should be devices that let you

interface with the game's system, but the system doesn't work anymore, does it?" Mira asked, flicking it with her fingertip.

Kagura pulled her left sleeve back over her wrist and responded, "I dunno. But we've convinced the world at large that it's an artifact—the original incarnation of User's Bangles."

"I can't say that's incorrect."

Gifts given by the gods. Mira chuckled, impressed that they had used the same excuse she'd used to explain the effects of the Vanity Case to Cleos.

"We can leave deep thoughts to the experts," Kagura shrugged. "You'd better make sure you're prepared. There are lots of things you can't solve with strength alone."

"Right. I'll take that to heart," Mira said.

Her friend nodded in satisfaction and gestured to the road that stretched before them. "Go straight and you'll get to the business district. Once you finish shopping, come back and I'll be waiting at the building where we first met." Kagura swung her arm to point back to the palace.

Mira followed where she pointed and said, "Sure."

She watched as Kagura strode away with dignified steps, greeting people as she went. After watching her go, the small summoner walked toward the business district.

CHAPTER 13

MIRA LOOKED UP and saw a place bustling with people under the blue, aquarium-like sky. The business district was full of all manner of goods for both daily life and adventure. Many of these merchants were working alongside Isuzu, too.

Shops lined the street, each with signs advertising the store's wares. Mira saw stalls here and there, too.

She wandered about the district, window shopping.

It's awfully busy here.

It reminded Mira of a big fair. There were all sorts of people—miao, Galidian, dwarven, and elven. Occasionally, she even spotted rare beings such as fairies, dragonkind, and even asuras. Their clothing was just as diverse. Some wore practical armor and carried well-used weapons like adventurers, while others sported more unique native dress. The artisans wore aprons with emblems that allowed passerby to distinguish their livelihood at a glance. Heck, some people even wore casual shirts and pants or tracksuits.

Spirits wove through the hectic, never-ending flow of people as if dancing.

Mira exchanged the ticket she'd received from Kagura for a large quantity of food, though she did wonder if so much was necessary. Then she peeked into weapon shops, pharmacies, and the like. Once she had a good grasp of how they differed in this world, she strolled about and gawked.

A tempting scent from a food stall wafted through the waves of people and past Mira's nose. She stopped and looked around for its source. When she spotted the enticing stall in question, she peered inside.

Hm? That spirit...

Mira had spotted the young spirit she'd seen in the Forest of the Devout. It was the very one that had reached for the butterflies at the lake where Mira had first met a member of the Isuzu Alliance. Now she was frolicking, chasing the dappled light that

shone down onto the ground from the rippling lake sky above.

Mira was relieved by the sight. It seemed Isuzu had taken her safely into their custody. Then an impact against her back knocked her down onto her face.

“What was that?!” Mira lifted her head and glared all around.

“Aah, sorry! I’m really sorry.” Hands wrapped around Mira’s hips and lifted her back up. When she turned around, she saw a woman with braided, light-purple hair, young features, and a robe in pale colors. “I’m super sorry!”

The woman apologized over and over, vigorously brushing the dirt off of Mira’s clothes.

“Now, now. It’s okay.”

Mira took a good look at the woman’s face. Something seemed... familiar. The woman finished brushing the dirt off of Mira and looked back up. They maintained eye contact for a moment, then suddenly, the woman wrapped Mira in a tight embrace.

“What in the world?!” Mira was surprised by the abrupt hug—not that she didn’t enjoy it. She could feel the woman’s plump softness through her robes in the moment before she reflexively slipped out of her grasp.

“Oh, sorry! I couldn’t help myself...” The woman slumped sadly, and her hands remained hanging in the air from hugging Mira. Mira recalled the warm feeling and likewise slumped a little.

A man timidly approached the pathetic scene. “Leene... I finally found you. What are you doing here?”

Leene replied, “I ran into her...” and then reached for Mira again. Her hands were gentle, and when they touched the summoner, they were enveloped in white light. “I’m *really* sorry. Did I hurt you at all?”

The light in Leene’s hands was the shine of holy magic. When they touched Mira, the light scrape she’d received—hardly worth noticing—disappeared. After she finished healing Mira, the man nudged Leene’s head.

“I bet you were staring at spirits again instead of looking where you were going, right?

Good grief."

"I was." Leene made no excuses. She then apologized and bowed to Mira. But when she looked up, her arms naturally seized the girl and pulled her into a hug again.

This time, instead of resisting, Mira looked more closely at the woman and noticed the sadness in Leene's eyes. She turned to the man that was presumably her friend and asked, "What am I meant to do about this?"

"No, Leene. Bad," the man whispered. Leene reluctantly released Mira and sighed deeply.

The man looked a little over thirty, with a well-muscled physique. His hair was short and the shiny gold of flax, and he wore light armor with swords on both hips. Narrow glasses perched on his nose before his slit-like eyes, giving him a calm, thoughtful impression. Overall, very handsome.

"I'm Ashley, and Leene here is my wife. Sorry about all this." Ashley bowed, his face clouded with guilt.

"Well, I don't mind... much. I am sure she has her reasons."

She had startled Mira, sure, but she hadn't actually hurt her. Mira felt a little guilty over how many times Leene had apologized.

"Thank you," Ashley said, standing straight again. He went on with a hint of sadness, "We have a son who's turning ten this year. But due to our circumstances, we haven't seen him for years. Leene is suffering from it. She'll always stare at young spirits and impulsively hug kids who look his age. Who knows how many times she's run into people by now? I scold her every time, but..."

Ashley held Leene gently. He looked like he was protecting her from something... or perhaps protecting everything else from her.

"That is awful..." Now knowing the reason for Leene's actions, Mira was sympathetic and curious. Why could she not see the child she loved so much? "If it's no inconvenience, might I ask what happened?"

"Yeah. That's fine," Ashley agreed without hesitation. He gently let Leene go and put a hand on her head. "You see, Leene is half-spirit and half-elf."

"Oh... Is that so?" Mira looked at Leene, who seemed not to mind the topic of conversation. When Leene noticed her gaze, she opened her arms wide with a big, inviting smile.

Mira looked back to Ashley. Leene quietly put her arms down and slumped over sadly.

"I don't know if you've heard about this, but when someone of a different race has a child with a spirit, the child is born with special abilities. Leene was born with the ability to call spirits. Chimera came after her in order to use her power for their own ends, but Isuzu saved us and took us under their protection. That's why we're here now."

From there, Ashley surveyed the lake-bound city that was the Isuzu Alliance's headquarters and grinned weakly at his own inability to protect the people he loved.

"Chimera still hasn't given up on Leene. They tracked us. Now we never know where their eyes might be, so if we leave carelessly, they might see us meeting our son. And if they find out that he's Leene's son, those cowards would probably kidnap him for leverage. We've decided it would be best not to contact him until this war is over..."

Ashley looked like he was in pain from his inability to see his son. His hand on Leene's head was gentle... He understood why she did what she did.

Leene would be of incredible value to Chimera Clausen. They stubbornly stalked her, attacking the married couple dozens of times back when she was escorted to headquarters. Unable to retrieve her son along the way because of the danger, they were forced to keep their relationship a secret.

Understanding the situation now, Mira embraced the dispirited Leene once more. From a distance, the three might've looked like a happy family.

* * *

"Oh, if it isn't Ashley and Leene. And hello again to you, young lady," Aaron called out to them. It seemed he had gone on his own shopping trip.

Ashley and Leene recognized him and answered with a smile, "Hi there, Aaron."

"Looks like the wife's caused another scene." It seemed she was famous for such behavior. Aaron glanced at Mira, who had received such a vigorous head-patting that

her hair was now tangled. Then he turned to Ashley with a serious look on his face.

"But you won't have to suffer much longer," Aaron declared firmly. "We're about to begin an important mission that'll change everything. You'll see your kid soon, I swear it."

Ashley and Leene looked at each other, surprised. "Do you mean it?!"

"Yeah, I do. We've got an ace up our sleeve this time, too. Have you two heard who this young lady is?"

"Come to think of it, we never got your name." Ashley and Leene looked expectantly at Mira.

Mira proudly puffed out her chest and put a finger to her chin. In a theatrically dignified voice, she declared, "I am Mira."

"You heard that we captured one of Chimera's soldiers, right?" Aaron said. "That was this young lady's work. Miss Uzume says she's capable, too. There's hope yet, right?" His face lit up with a cheerful grin. This was a rare sight indeed; the hawk-like Aaron rarely smiled. Ashley and Leene couldn't help but smile with him.

"Reassuring, indeed!" Ashley's eyes opened wide in admiration and delight.

Uzume had extremely high standards. He knew she would only acknowledge the strength of a small handful of A-Rank adventurers or the greatest of those who rivaled them.

Ashley gazed at the adorably dressed Mira before looking up at the rippling lake-sky. He laughed—then sighed—at just how vast the world was.

"Leave it to us, friends," Mira said. "I promise as well that I'll see this to its end. Your suffering will go on no longer." She could not comprehend the pain of parents unable to see their child, but she knew how it hurt to be a child who couldn't see their parents. Her promise was sincere.

"We can see him soon, then?" Leene, eyes fixed on Mira, drank in her display of confidence. She closed her eyes and put her hands over her heart, as if protecting something important. Ashley lay a hand on her shoulder and bowed silently to Aaron.

"I'd best go. You just wait for the good news." Aaron watched the couple take each other's hand, then said his goodbyes—he needed to continue his preparations. His eyes were as sharp as a blade, yet full of kindness... like a guardian's sword.

"Well, there you have it. You two just hang on a bit longer," Mira said. She took her leave as well.

They couldn't join outside missions even if they wanted to. The two could only offer a prayer as they watched Mira leave.

* * *

Mira began her stroll back along the main street, where the streetlights had just begun to shine. She recalled Ashley and Leene's faces.

Ashley and Leene, hm? Have I met them somewhere? Mira repeated their names in her mind over and over...

Where had she heard of them before?

* * *

Having finished her grocery shopping, Mira returned to the palace as Kagura commanded. A maid servant guided her to the private room of Isuzu's leader. Kagura was waiting within, now without the fancy clothes.

"You dress the same as ever, I see," Mira said.

"Nothing makes me feel more relaxed, y'know?" Kagura, sporting a red tracksuit, took her eyes off of the documents in her hands and glanced at Mira. "So? All set?"

"More or less."

"Kay." Kagura stood up, took a cushion from the pile in the corner, and tossed it down next to the low table. She regarded Mira with the look of a curious child. "Tell me about you, Gramps."

"I happen to have some questions for you as well." Mira was thinking the same thing: she wanted to know how Kagura had adjusted to this world. Mira plopped down onto the cushion and faced Kagura.

The two shared their experiences. Mira told Kagura about her past month in this world, and Kagura told stories of her last ten years.

* * *

"It sounds like the world is about to undergo major change. I'm doing my best to help out." Mira told Kagura about her frantic search for the other Nine Wise Men. She shared her encounter with Wallenstein in detail, especially regarding what he was doing and the truth of demons.

"So that's what Wally's up to? I knew he was working behind the scenes, but I would have never thought it was about demons. That's a shock."

By sealing the very powers that made the demons what they were, they could regain their mission and lose their antagonism toward humanity. Mira had seen the proof of that herself in Faust. Kagura showed both sincere surprise and distress.

"Actually, I killed a demon that infiltrated this forest a while back..." Kagura explained that its motive was unclear... but it had hurt spirits, so she dealt with it without mercy. It seemed demons came even to the Forest of Seasons.

"Well, there was nothing else you could've done there. I'd never have known without being told myself. But demons will reincarnate as demons again. Don't beat yourself up over it," Mira reassured her.

Demons still lost to malice could bring nothing but disaster. Humans couldn't afford to let them run free and cause greater damage.

"Reincarnate, huh? So all of those demons that died in that one big battle could all come back at once?"

In the Defense of the Three Great Kingdoms, humanity had triumphed over demons. So many demons had been felled in that battle that humans believed for a time that demons had gone extinct.

"Now that you mention it, you're right. A rush of reincarnated demons... Sounds nightmarish."

They would come at slightly different times, but close enough to pose a real threat. Although they had always been known to work in the shadows, and they vastly

preferred it, demons had acted openly during the Defense of the Three Great Kingdoms. If the whole continent were teeming with them again out of nowhere... that would be a problem, indeed. Ideally, Wallenstein would bring every demon he could to the side of humanity before then.

"Well, we have to do what we can to protect our continent," Kagura said. "Even if it's gotten a little harder now."

"Right, I thought the same. Wallenstein gave me these. Perhaps I ought to give you a pair, too."

Demons were essentially good people brainwashed into doing evil. Knowing that made fighting them much harder on the heart. Mira gave Kagura one of the black strings and a white stone and taught her how to use them. With luck, they would serve as an alternative to battle if she happened to run into a demon.

The black string would bind even duke-rank demons, and the white stone could call Wallenstein's friends. Kagura seemed surprised at how convenient these tools were, and she gladly accepted them.

"If I find one, I'll make sure to use these."

* * *

After that, the two talked pleasantly for a while. Mira succeeded in getting Kagura to promise she would return to the Kingdom of Alcait once the Chimera Clausen issue was resolved. In return, Mira promised to take care of the problem once and for all.

From there, the conversation gradually shifted to chatting. Kagura was especially interested in Luna, the pure rabbit Mira had taken to her tower. Just as she was getting the details, however, one of her maidservants came to inform her that her bath was ready.

"I'll be right back," Kagura said. "You'd better tell me everything about little Luna later, okay?" With that, she went to bathe. When she closed the door, deep silence fell across the wooden-floored room.

Mira looked around, wondering what to do. A low circular table was placed in the center of the room, and a few documents were laid atop it. A shaded lamp hung from the ceiling, lending its glow to the space. In the corner of the room was a planter filled

with mist weed, which emitted mist in the light.

How peaceful.

It was a stark contrast to her recollections of the disaster that was Kagura's room in real life. She gazed at the mist weed as it continued to billow white clouds. The memory of a certain night crossed her mind.

While I'm here, I might as well try that before I take a bath.

Mira stood up and excitedly left Kagura's room.

After getting turned around a few times, Mira arrived at the courtyard where she and Scorpion had their mock battle. The light of the stone lanterns in the hallways crept through the hedges, dyeing the darkness of night in the courtyard just slightly with their yellow gleam.

But just then, a brilliant ball of light popped into existence, whisking away the dark. Illuminated by her Ethereal Arts, Mira stood atop the ocher ground, took a deep breath, and readied her stance. She once again began her training.

* * *

Mira had already been training for some time when Scorpion noticed the unnatural light in the courtyard. She watched as Mira leapt about in ways unthinkable for a mage, leaving silver trails of light in her wake.

Is that... Mira? Are those motions some sort of martial art? It looks just like the Tomoe style...

Scorpion thought at first that she might be practicing some set martial arts forms, but Mira wove summoning into her Immortal Arts, attacking in novel and unexpected ways.

Interest piqued, Scorpion effortlessly leapt over the hedges surrounding the courtyard and landed on the other side without a sound.

"I didn't know you could move like that. Is that some kind of fighting style?"

"It is, yes... Though I forget the name of it." Mira was impressed by Scorpion's ability

to sneak up on her—she was quiet as a cat.

“Oh...” Scorpion replied, shoulders sagging in disappointment. “Did you learn that from your master, too?”

“Hrmm, you could say that.”

In truth, she had learned it from the Wise Man of Immortality, Meilin. Scorpion didn’t seem especially bothered by her slippery answer. Far from it—if anything, she watched Mira with interest.

“Could you use a training partner? I can be your martial arts buddy,” Scorpion offered, performed a midair somersault as a warmup, and landed in a fighting stance a few paces away. Her powerful leg muscles were evident in how high she jumped with so little preparation. Mira knew she was strong; after all, she had defeated ten Dark Knights. When it came to technique, she might’ve been stronger than Mira.

“Hrmm...” Mira faced Scorpion and steadied her breathing. She smirked and replied, “Very well. Perhaps I’ll avail myself of your aid.”

Scorpion’s face lit up. Without further ado, she tossed all the weapons she’d hidden on her person onto the ground.

“Sneaky!”

Their training began. Mira did not use her magic, and Scorpion did not use her weapons or skills. The two simply fought hand to hand in a straightforward clash of abilities.

* * *

Mira and Scorpion’s training continued until a maidservant arrived to inform them that the bath was open. The two had been totally caught up in their training; now, they both collapsed the moment they heard the woman’s voice. Mira sat and looked up at the sky, hair disheveled, and wiped the sweat from her face with her sleeve. Scorpion ignored the sweat running down her body and squatted down, breathing heavily as she watched the beads patter to the ground.

Mira allowed the maidservant to show her the way to the bath. Scorpion joined them as if it were the obvious thing to do.

The interior of the palace bath was all stone, making it almost look like a cave. The tub itself, full of hot water, was enormous enough for ten people to comfortably soak.

Condensation dripped from the rough ceiling and made ripples in the water, but the sound melted into the waterfall-like *whoosh* made by the flowing bath water. The relaxing swish of water filled the room, wrapping around one's body like fine silk.

Though her vision was obscured by steam, Mira still got a good look at Scorpion's curves and hummed in satisfaction.

Oh ho ho. Now that's a nice figure!

As the two soaked in the hot water, they had an even hotter debate about the quirks and features of each other's fighting styles that they'd noticed during training.

Though they bathed together, revealing their naked forms without reserve, their conversation lacked any sex appeal whatsoever. Just as their discussion reached a fever pitch, the grumbling of their stomachs brought it to a close. They parted ways, and Scorpion left for her room.

Mira shrugged on a yukata offered by the maidservant and followed the woman back to Kagura's room. When the maid opened the door, an enticing scent poured out. Atop the low table lay a lavish spread of food.

"Hurry up!" Kagura beckoned from the other side of the table, clad in her red track suit once again. It seemed she had been waiting, and she was *hungry*.

"Now *this* is luxurious," Mira mused, faced with such a feast. She slipped onto the open cushion with the agility of a cat and gazed at Kagura.

Despite Mira's many changes, Kagura still welcomed her long-lost friend with open arms. Over a shared meal, the two toasted and celebrated their reunion.

CHAPTER 14

AFTER DINNER, Mira spent the night in a guest room in the

palace. The next morning, the palace kitchen prepared her a massive breakfast: one main course and five sides.

After meeting up with her new party members Scorpion and Snake, Mira walked with Kagura to the tower that marked the exit of the Isuzu Alliance headquarters. Mira looked up, the thought of climbing it nearly eliciting an audible sigh. Then she followed the three onto the spiral staircase.

Before long, they arrived at the gate between the lake and the headquarters, where Aaron already awaited them. He wore light armor—though this set was reinforced with metal—and seemed as dignified as ever. He stared up at the lake-sky gleaming and rippling above.

“Good morning, Aaron,” Uzume greeted him.

“Hey, morning.” When he turned and saw the four, he grinned. It was alliance tradition to meet up here before missions. “Real luxurious send-off today, huh?” he chuckled.

A rare chance to be in the presence of the leader of Isuzu, two of her elites, and the pupil of a Wise Man... He had been so excited for this trip that he’d woken up early.

Scorpion smirked confidently as Snake glanced in Aaron’s direction and looked down before muttering, “He’s big.” She suddenly seemed more worried about everyone fitting in the wagon.

“Okay, time for the final checklist, everyone.” Uzume’s expression turned serious, and she began going over the parameters of the mission. “Your destination is the Citadel of Scales. You’ll be traveling by sky in Mira’s wagon. Your top objective is to capture a Chimera Clausen executive. Am I clear so far?”

“Yeah, all good,” Aaron answered, and everyone nodded in agreement.

Uzume then looked to Mira. “You’ll have Garuda carry your wagon, I assume?”

"That I will!" Mira puffed out her chest, waiting for the praise to roll in. Summons weren't just for fighting—they had the incredible utility of being able to carry wagons.

Uzume remembered Garuda and knew Mira—or rather, Danblf—well, so she just shrugged.

"You'll have to stop by Sarut's Guild Union to pick up the permit, so go by carriage there. Your huge bird stands out too much. It might tip off Chimera agents," Uzume added.

"Mrgh, okay..." Mira slumped sadly like a curled-up kitten, tragically deprived of another chance to display summoning.

Uzume continued undeterred. "And no flying straight into town, either. Travel by land as soon as Sarut comes into view. We can never be too cautious."

Mira grumbled but acquiesced.

"We don't know when their elites might appear, so you'll probably need to hide in the dungeon for a while. Scorpion and Snake will take the night watch; Aaron and Mira need to stay fresh and ready."

"All right, understood," Aaron answered and shot a glance at Mira.

Based on Uzume's words, she must have had incredible faith in Mira. Aaron had high expectations.

"With this group, you won't want for fighting power. Scorpion and Snake have the restraints, so all *you* have to do is immobilize them," said Uzume, seemingly directed at Mira.

"Hrmm. You mean I can just focus on fighting, then." Mira smiled a little, understanding the implication. This was a perfect chance to show off some of her nastier summoning magic.

"Leave it to me," Scorpion said to Mira, having already heard the particulars of the mission beforehand. Snake said nothing, but nodded firmly.

* * *

"Well, shall we? I've got my daily errands to do, but I can escort you to the forest," Uzume said, and touched the gate to the outside world. The transparent boundary between water and city disappeared, and a waterfall appeared up above. It was truly an impressive sight to see the waters part from below.

"What are these errands of yours?" Mira asked as they climbed the transparent staircase, now about halfway up the parted lake. What chores could such a sloth as Kagura have?

"That's for me to know and you to guess..." Uzume turned and grinned mischievously. It seemed Scorpion, Snake, and Aaron already knew.

Well, I guess I'll find out sooner or later.

Mira pretended not to care... *much.*

They reached the top of the staircase and arrived at the Forest of Seasons, where clear blue skies awaited the group of five. It was a refreshing morning, and the grass glittered with dew.

But of course—this was a forest where spirits resided, after all. Mira filled her lungs with the clear, crisp air and surveyed the woods, which were still blanketed in white fog, like a scene from a dream. It clung to the trees like the breath of the forest itself. At other times such fog might be eerie, but here, it was solemn and refreshing.

This is such a lovely place.

As Mira basked in the misty air, Acadori emerged from the forest. She ran over to Uzume and reported, "Preparations are complete."

"Well done. Let's get started!" Uzume turned to Mira and added confidently, "Allow me to blow your conception of fiend-hunting wide open."

"Fiend-hunting?"

It seemed Uzume's daily errand was fiend-hunting. Mira had her doubts. Fiends were powerful creatures, but they mostly resided in backwoods regions far from human settlements. You couldn't find them very easily. To make it one's daily chore would require running around the continent at supersonic speeds.

Where was she going to search for them, then?

With a smirk, Uzume pointed to an area in the Forest of Seasons and said with a challenge in her voice, “Do you know what that is?”

Dense fog hung over that part of the forest. Darker than the morning mists all around, it seemed somehow... threatening. Based on Uzume’s demeanor, Mira could tell that the answer was something special. What was it, then?

Unusual fog... Suddenly, Mira remembered where she’d seen something like this before.

“Is it one of those... space-time distortions, perhaps?”

If the fog reminded her of anything, it would be what had happened in the Forest of the Devout. Mira answered with that in mind, but she wasn’t certain. The fog at the Forest of the Devout was caused by the loss of the spirit who had purified mana stagnation there. But what of *this* forest? The Isuzu Alliance’s headquarters was lousy with spirits, so surely it wasn’t a matter of being unable to purify mana.

But time-space distortions shouldn’t occur in an environment with such a blessing. While Mira continued to rack her brain, Uzume looked at her in irritation and stuck out her bottom lip.

“Wait, I was right?” Mira grinned triumphantly. Uzume was far too easy to read.

“Yeah, you got it. How’d you know?” Uzume glared at her, thoroughly annoyed. Surely nobody should realize that fog was a space-time distortion their first time seeing it!

Mira had, of course, had no idea when she’d first witnessed it either. But fortunately, she’d had the Korpokkur sisters, masters of the forest, with her.

“I’ve already encountered one!” Mira puffed out her chest defiantly and gave a quick summary of what she’d seen at the Forest of the Devout. The story amounted to little more than her bragging about the korpokkur sisters—beings able to control the plants of the forest, walk through space-time distortions with ease, and ultimately erase them.

* * *

"Wooow, that's *super* interesting. Not." Uzume was still clearly annoyed. But her displeasure lasted only a moment more. Then she smirked fearlessly again. "Well, I bet you've never seen *this*."

Uzume waved a hand toward the foggy forest. When she did, the fog grew denser still, and an earth-shaking roar shook the Forest of Seasons.

"What?!" Mira saw a beast towering above the trees. It was a Dorgis Fang, a lion-like fiend with teeth sharper than mithril swords.

The Dorgis Fang was a powerful foe very rarely seen in the depths of the Ark continent's mountains. It was so strong that even top players struggled against it... and the thing had appeared from a space-time distortion, of all places.

Mira prepared for a difficult battle, but Uzume held her back.

"Like I said, this is just a daily chore for me. Watch," Uzume said, utterly confident. She took a single step forward. A ring of light appeared below her right foot and quickly spread to engulf the entire Forest of Seasons.

The light called forth magic etched into the trees, and an instant later, the whole region was aglow with illuminated symbols used in Celestial Arts.

"Now this is a surprise. You've made this entire forest into your encampment?" Mira muttered, eyeing the glowing seals.

Mediums fought by setting up encampments—put simply, they created environments that worked to their benefit. Setting up an encampment that surrounded even one person took quite some time. But perhaps unsurprisingly for the grand master of Isuzu and one of the Nine Wise Men, Uzume had created an encampment that enveloped the entire forest.

While Mira was busy being impressed, the battle before her was suddenly turned on its head—rather one-sidedly, at that.

The Dorgis Fang spotted Uzume and attempted to lunge for her. At once, countless bands of light extended from the forest itself to restrain the fiend. The monster was nothing compared to Kagura, and had no way to defy her.

Uzume lifted a hand, and the shikigami from yesterday emerged from all over the

forest. When she dropped it, they overwhelmed the Dorgis Fang completely, leaving only a corpse in their wake.

Uzume turned to Mira with her proudest look. “How do you like that?”

“I’ll start cleaning up,” Acadori called from afar.

“I hate to say it, but it was pretty spectacular.”

For all the time it took to set up, a medium with a perfect encampment was almost unfairly strong. Even Mira would have no chance of winning against her. Though she was a little annoyed to have that rubbed in her face, she had to praise her dear friend.

But after seeing the whole thing, Mira still had a few questions.

“You called this fiend-hunting, so the appearance of that Dorgis Fang can’t have been a coincidence. Right?”

One could never predict what a space-time distortion might do. The one Mira had seen in the Forest of the Devout had spit out all kinds of monsters at random. But given the situation, she could only assume that Uzume had done this on purpose. What were the inner workings behind all of this?

When Mira asked, Uzume answered with a somehow-even-smugger grin.

Space-time distortions were phenomena caused by stagnation of mana. Stagnation of mana was caused when spirits could not correct its flow. In other words—spirits had the power to change the flow of mana. If they disrupted the flow *intentionally*, they could create distortions at will.

Uzume had worked with the spirits to determine the limits of these distortions. The result was as Mira had seen: they could now connect their surroundings to locations as far as the Arc continent at will. But due to the stress it put on the surrounding environment, such activity was limited to once per day.

One application of this research Kagura had eagerly exploited was collecting valuable materials from faraway fiends. Both continents were home to many Isuzu bases. Almost every day, detailed reports of newly discovered fiends would come from these bases, including their habitat and coordinates. Knowing those, she could hunt fiends from all over the world and use the raw materials to bolster Isuzu’s fighting strength.

Fiends had a way of causing trouble for countries, just like regular monsters, so Uzume proudly counted this as a meritorious service contributing to the common good.

"It's like a cheat code..." Mira muttered, then chuckled darkly. They weren't just drawing in fiends from far away; they were forcing them into a perfectly prepared trap. It was almost unfair.

"We can make a few suits of high-quality leather armor from this fiend's hide," Uzume said. "Its claws will work as swords, too. Perfect, perfect."

She smiled as the Dorgis Fang was hauled off. It was truly a perfect, unblemished corpse. She'd held back just enough.

"We could even deal with raid bosses using this technique," Mira murmured as she looked on.

"Oh, I bet we could," Uzume answered confidently. Then she added with a chuckle, "It's a little harder to keep a raid boss tied down, though, so we'd have to keep in mind the danger to the forest."

She added to the Isuzu Alliance's power day by day. Mira smiled as she watched Kagura work. She really was a reliable ally.

* * *

"Well, good luck out there!" Uzume had meetings right after her errand, so this was as far as she could go. As Acadori rushed her off, Uzume sent the four-person party off with just a few words. They were the strongest force she could possibly send on this mission, so there was not a hint of worry on her face.

"See you soon," Mira responded pleasantly before beginning their walk along the lakeside.

The forest had a gentle woodsy scent, and the fairies peeking out here and there blessed the four as they walked by. Mira felt the calm of being at home as a faint warmth inside her.

There were two kinds of spirit blessings: those that worked continuously, and those with limited-time effects. The former type was given when one had a close relationship with a spirit and was a requirement to learn various special abilities. The

latter was almost always given by spirits on a whim. The blessings washing over the party as they made their way through the forest were certainly the latter.

"What a gracious send-off," she mused.

"We're all friends here. Plus we're kinda saving them," Scorpion responded, waving back at the spirits.

As Mira received the myriad blessings, their kindness and warmth only strengthened her desire to take down Chimera Clausen. The group thanked the spirits and continued onward, arriving at the wagon...

...Which was surrounded by children.

"What?"

"Well, would ya look at that? They're using it as a playground," Aaron chuckled.

They were young spirits of the forest. Some hung from the braces, while others climbed up and jumped down from the top of the wagon. The gaggle of kids smiled as they played.

The wagon looked even whiter against the forest's green and the water's blue. It seemed such a thing was a rare sight in this place.

It took time to peel the playful spirits away from the wagon, and even after they did, the kids tried to draw Mira and her party into their games. Mira felt bad leaving them as she handed them over to a caretaker spirit.

Mira refocused herself and opened the door to the wagon with a grand flourish. Scorpion scrambled over to peek around her and sighed in admiration. Snake and Aaron followed.

"I've never seen a Japanese-style wagon, but this is nice," Aaron mused. "Looks comfy."

"This is unexpected," Snake muttered.

Aaron seemed to like the serene atmosphere of the interior. He was impressed by the wagon's furnishings, which seemed to have compressed the hallmarks of Japanese style in such a compact space. Snake seemed a little taken aback by the unexpected

interior, but Scorpion's eyes were locked on the expansive window up ahead. She was already eager to glimpse the view from the air.

"Shoes come off here, please," Mira called out. Scorpion and Aaron's eyes shone like excited children. They obeyed orders, took off their shoes, and entered the wagon.

Mira's special-made wagon was already pretty cramped with just her, Aaron, and Scorpion inside. Snake entered sheepishly and stood in the corner.

"Hm? What's wrong with you?" Aaron asked Snake, who was currently pressing herself against the wall.

In place of the silent Snake, Scorpion explained: the wagon wasn't very big, and they had planned to send just three, but Snake had begged to come along and now she was trying to take up the tiniest amount of space possible. Aaron said "I see," and asked no further questions, while Mira seemed embarrassed by the whole situation.

"Snake, could you pick up that end for me?" she asked, stooping down and putting a hand on the edge of the kotatsu.

"Understood." Snake answered and grabbed the kotatsu. On Mira's signal, she lifted it up, and they moved it to the corner. The space looked quite a bit bigger now that it had been moved.

"That ought to make more room, eh?" Mira said. She gestured for Snake to sit.

Then, she poked her head out of the driver's door and prepared for liftoff. Suddenly aware of his own size, Aaron looked down at the girls and said nothing. He sat as close to the wall as he could. Once she'd finished, Mira moved her legless chair next to her kotatsu and sat there. There was a sudden sensation of heaviness on the four in the room.

"Whoa, we're going up!" Pressed up against the window, Scorpion squealed in delight as the colorful forest shrank below them.

"It's kinda scary, huh?" Aaron took a look outside. Snake, who kneeled seiza-style next to him, peeked over and looked directly down. Her eyes shone at the vast expanse below.

* * *

They flew four hours from the Forest of Seasons before their destination came into view.

"We are near the town of Sarut," Snake reported to Mira, who relaxed in her legless chair.

"Mm. I suppose we should land, then," Mira responded. She ordered Garuda to land near a road.

The wagon slowly began to descend and eventually touched down in a field a short distance from the thoroughfare leading into the city.

Now, who should I get to pull the cart?

They were to travel by land in order to avoid unwanted attention from Chimera. They couldn't use anything too flashy. Mira flipped through her mental catalog.

Hippogriff... no. Pegasus might work if it folds its wings. It's basically a horse. But it hates walking and it might not be strong enough. Umgarna would be best... but that snake could devour a horse. I'd be stupid to think that wouldn't stand out.

Mira stood in place, mumbling and grumbling to herself.

Seeing that they were stalled, Aaron asked, "What's the matter, Little Miss Mira?"

"Well, I'm having a difficult time thinking of something that could pull the wagon without standing out..."

Before his eyes was Mira, supposedly the pupil of famed summoner Wise Man Danblf. Recalling the gleaming wings of Garuda, he realized that it *would* be difficult if all of her summons were like that.

"Ahh... Yeah." Aaron said, gleaned some understanding.

As Mira got back to thinking, the restless Snake seemed eager to be useful. "If you need someone to pull the wagon, leave it to me."

"Ah, that's right. A necromancer, aren't you, Miss Snake?" Aaron murmured with a knowing look.

Snake nodded, her gaze sincere. Mira presumed necromancers must have their own methods. “Go for it.”

The quiet woman thanked her and opened the driver’s door. She was normally emotionless, but now there was a faint smile on her face—she was clearly eager to help. Stepping away from the wagon, Snake cast a spell to create a four-legged golem.

Mira peeked out of the driver’s door, interested to see how she would solve this conundrum. She spied a thick-legged golem with a lizard-like body and three tails that each ended in a hook. She furrowed her brow at the horrific little creature and turned back. Surely a golem like this would stand out?

Yet Aaron and Scorpion appeared relaxed. Mira knew there were more things she *didn’t* know about this world than things she did. If everyone thought so, it must be fine.

Snake’s magic was a newly developed Necromantic Art made for physical labor. It had spread all across the world and was now used by everyone from adventurers to merchants—even nobility.

Mediums and summoners could use similar laborer magic, but necromancy was especially stable. Draft golems were a no-brainer for travel these days. Their ubiquity made it easy to accomplish the goal of being inconspicuous.

The wagon began to move. The golem had wrapped its hooked tails around the braces and pulled the large vehicle with apparent ease.

“I’ll leave it to you then.” Mira was amazed that the golem was so nimble with such a stout body.

Snake responded shortly, “It will be done.”

The comforting vibration of the rattling wheels crept up Mira’s body from the wagon floor. Riding the wagon uphill had a different, soothing feeling. The rhythmic sounds calmed Mira, whose only thought until now had been speed. *Perhaps this isn’t so bad after all*, she thought to herself as she cast her gaze out the window.

The wagon proceeded apace, and they arrived at the town of Sarut around noon.

Snake had confirmed the Guild Union’s location ahead of time. She skillfully drove the

wagon onward through town. Storefronts lined the main street, and other people and carriages came and went. Mira gazed out the window and saw other draft golems passing by. She could see Snake's point now—they really didn't stand out at all.

Most buildings in Sarut were wooden structures, while the big buildings and important landmarks were made of stone. The designs were awfully reminiscent of a Wild West movie in some respects. But somehow this didn't throw off the harmony of it all. The town benefited from the unique aesthetics of both wood and stone.

While Mira admired the architecture of the town, the wagon came to a stop before two stone buildings standing side by side. The imposing exterior bore the well-known symbol of the Guild Union.

"I'll be right back, ladies," Aaron said. He alighted from the wagon and strode inside to secure a Citadel of Scales entry permit.

* * *

The administrative work was taken care of in five minutes. Once Aaron was back in the wagon, Snake resumed the ride. Their next destination was a large inn. It had a grand stable and garage for parking wagons.

Snake had chosen it yesterday while looking for a trustworthy place to leave the wagon and noted that it allowed visitors to use the garage. If they rode Mira's wagon all the way to the dungeon, they'd have to leave it somewhere near the dungeon entrance. And if Chimera Clausen discovered it, the enemy might realize somebody was there and keep their guard up. They needed total surprise.

Snake exchanged some words with an inn clerk, then drove the wagon into the garage. There, they worked out how much the fee for storage would be while they were gone.

The remaining three adventurers left the wagon.

The wooden garage had all kinds and sizes of wagons parked within. Employees in coveralls carefully maintained them here and there. Mira watched them awhile, satisfied. She knew that her ride was in good hands.

* * *

"Thank you for waiting." Wagon arrangements complete, Snake returned to the group.

Mira accepted the parking pass from her. “Apologies for making you do all the work.”

“It’s no problem.” Snake’s voice was deadpan, but she looked gratified to be thanked.

Sarut was full of adventurers. The parties they passed were made up of members who were obviously strong even at a glance. Mira idly sized up their team balances as she followed Snake, who was making her way confidently through the main street.

Along the way, they turned down a side street. Many carriages had formed a line up ahead. On closer inspection, quite a few adventurer parties had gathered as well, and they seemed to be discussing something with the drivers of the carriages.

“Oho. A station bus?” Mira murmured.

Snake turned and shook her head. “Not quite. This is a carriage taxi stand. They’re more expensive than station buses, but you can pay for an individual taxi. Adventurers use them for transportation pretty regularly. This should suit our current needs.”

Station buses traveled along a set route, and riders would get on or off as they went. They were essentially a form of public transit. In contrast, carriage taxis were a new yet already common form of transportation for individuals or parties who needed a ride to a specific destination. For this top-secret mission, they would need to limit contact with strangers as much as possible. And with a common taxi as their transport, they wouldn’t stand out. It was perfect for their needs. They didn’t know where Chimera’s cohorts might be, but at least this way, they might not have to worry about them just yet.

“Oh ho ho! That does sound more comfortable,” Mira agreed, and Snake plunged into the line of people waiting for carriages in high spirits.

She returned a few minutes later after a short discussion with a carriage taxi driver. Her steps were light as she showed them to their ride: she’d chosen a good one.

The many carriages were so varied that one hesitated to put them all under the same umbrella. There were plain ones, light ones, heavy ones, and more. The beasts leading them were just as diverse—some were drawn by bulls with awe-inspiring horns, others by great big boars, and more. Some had draft golems hitched up, as well.

Each had their own strengths in terms of range and speed. The Citadel of Scales was in the middle of a rocky mountain range, so it would require some real pulling

strength. With this in mind, Snake had chosen a taxi with two drivers and two draft golems even bigger than the one she had used to get them here.

* * *

The taxi proceeded from city streets to mountain roads with Mira's party on board, combining power and speed. Snake occasionally cast glances at Mira to gauge her reaction, but the summoner said little throughout the ride. Did she not like the carriage? Was she annoyed at Snake for forcing them to bring her along? The shadow of worry hung over her mind.

* * *

So many golems, and I even saw shikigami... Why wasn't there a single summons, though? Will summoning decay just like these fallen leaves?

Mira put her chin on her hand in the window seat and watched as the foliage became more and more sparse as they climbed the mountain.

Aaron seemed to notice the gloomy mood and asked the two if they were okay. Mira vented that she was worried, as a summoner, over the dearth of summoning magic out here. The clouds of her melancholy parted somewhat when Aaron countered that the summoning of Garuda had been a great help to them already, and that flying had felt much classier than bumping along in a taxi.

Snake's own depression lifted as well upon hearing this.

Before long, the party of Isuzu operatives masquerading as an adventurer team arrived peacefully at the Citadel of Scales.

CHAPTER 15

THE GROUP LEFT THE TAXI behind and climbed the rough, rocky mountain terrain for a while. Eventually, their destination appeared before them, nestled into a rock wall. Unkempt grasses surrounded it. To its left lay a wide lake, and to its right was a sharp precipice. The cliff was so steep and deep that the bottom was impossible to see.

The Citadel of Scales stood blocking the land, sandwiched between the water and the long drop.

It was a large, gray castle with a rampart that extended from lake to cliff. Though the color of the stones had faded from years of weather and wear, its presence remained awe-inspiring. Wind blew down from above, cutting through the narrow passage before the fortress, as if to refuse all entry.

Long ago, this was the castle of the Impregnable King. When war broke out between humanity and monsters, the last line of defense was drawn here. Legends held that even the biggest of monsters were forced to yield when they looked up and saw the enormous size of this rampart, representing absolute defensive power. Yet the war left its mark here, too; the mighty castle's gate was so badly bent, it could no longer function as an entrance.

"Pretty big, huh?" Scorpion broke the silence, neck craning as she looked up at the towering rampart.

Mira only glanced at it; her gaze was focused on Scorpion's swishing tail. "Big... is a word," she answered distantly.

Scorpion was in a sightseeing mood, but she got a hold of herself when they entered the small fort next to the lake. They stopped just in front of the barrier that blocked the stairs descending deep into the darkness. Since the gate leading into the Citadel of Scales was unusable, this hidden path once used as an emergency exit was the only way in or out.

All right, let's see what you've got, Aaron thought to himself.

He had come to this A-Rank dungeon once before. Back then, he had participated in a

search as a member of a six-person party. He'd fought on the front lines, swinging his favored weapon.

But this time, the mission given to him by Uzume was to support Mira. The stars of the show today would be Mira and the two Hidden. He could more or less imagine the strength of Scorpion and Snake based on rumors he'd heard at the Isuzu Alliance headquarters, but a Wise Man's pupil was an unknown quantity.

Aaron, who had earned his strength through years of diligent training, was excited to get a close look at a prodigy who could overcome him at such a young age. Prodigies like Mira worked and thought in ways incomprehensible to the average person. Being able to witness such things and aim for such heights was, in Aaron's opinion, one of the greatest goals an average person could strive for.

Aaron had not yet realized that his own ability to comprehend and incorporate the techniques of prodigies at a glance was rather incredible in itself.

* * *

The party passed through the Guild Union's barrier and filed into the narrow corridor. It was barely wide enough for two to fit side by side, and was reinforced by stone pillars and blocks.

Each time the lantern at Aaron's hip flickered in the dim, humid air, the black insects gathering around its light would disperse. And every time that happened, Scorpion made an annoyed sound, and Mira frowned in displeasure.

When the echoes of their voices faded, their footsteps stood out all the more. After what seemed like an age of walking in this manner, they arrived at a small room. The lantern light struggled to pierce the gloom. Apart from decaying candle stands set along the bare rock walls, there was nothing within.

It was a hidden room meant to conceal the existence of this very secret passage. Through here lay a path into the citadel proper.

"Okay, which one was it?" Aaron muttered, taking out a folded sheet of paper and comparing it to the walls to search for the mechanism. "Heh, they've made it easy now."

He saw a spot on the wall that was clearly eroding due to how many hands had touched it and, with a sigh, pressed it with his palm. That portion of wall swung open like a

door, accompanied by a small rumble of stone on stone. A breeze flowed into the hidden room, fluttering through Mira's hair.

It's been a long time since I last came here, Mira mused inwardly.

They stepped through the doorway and were at once faced with paths leading left and right, branching off into yet more paths. The first stratum of the Citadel of Scales was a complex labyrinth, with the hidden room situated at the very middle.

"So I can leave all the fighting to you ladies, right?" Aaron confirmed again.

"Totally!" Scorpion answered cheerfully. Snake nodded silently, smoldering with fighting spirit as she created a golem to assist her.

Taking this as another opportunity to show off the power of summoning, Mira summoned her Dark Knight with a swish of her coat, then mutated it into a Dark Lord. Unlike her normal staunch protector, the Dark Lord looked specialized toward slaughter, like a knight who had sold his soul to the devil for the sake of defending his master. The bladed armor covering its body had a dull, bloody gleam.

"Ooh. So that's mutated evocation, huh?" Scorpion said when she saw the Dark Lord. She was in the middle of her pre-battle warmups. Hidden typically performed missions alone, so she had an encyclopedic knowledge of the capabilities of warriors and mages that she might face.

She had heard of mutated evocation, but never seen it done, so she examined every inch of the Dark Lord with great interest. The Dark Lord's entire body was a weapon. It was a hedgehog with none of the cuteness attached.

"Careful, now," Mira warned her disinterestedly, noticing that Scorpion had just narrowly missed getting her face sliced between two of the Dark Lord's blades. She turned her attention to Aaron, who was glaring at the paper he held with a furrowed brow.

"That's quite the expression," she commented, standing on her tiptoes to peek at the paper just above eye level.

"I could read this fine last time, but I'm not getting any younger. There's a lot of tiny print." Aaron looked down at Mira, sighed, and rubbed the inner corners of his eyes with a chuckle.

On the paper was a roughly sketched but intricate map of the first stratum of the Citadel of Scales, with the correct path drawn in red. It also included important notes from players who had cleared it.

In the time of Danblf, a map like this would only be bought and sold between players. But now, such maps were available in any old shop for adventurers. The sketches had only increased in detail since Danblf's time... but perhaps the Citadel of Scales map had gotten a bit *too* elaborate.

It seems too detailed to be useful. Perhaps that's my age showing, too...

The addenda were so multitudinous and extreme that they even included information on unnecessary routes. Mira averted her eyes from the map and blinked a few times. Then, she turned back and focused in on the correct route through the citadel.

The passage was three meters wide, with blue lights of unknown contrivance placed along the walls at regular intervals. The cold, desolate stone walls showed no sign of deterioration despite their age—the only blemishes on their surface were stains and scratches of battle.

The Citadel of Scales could be broadly split into three sections with different roles: front, center, and back.

The back was a wall even higher and thicker than the rampart they'd encountered on arrival—it could fend off even the strongest of fiends. The center was a large chamber connected to the gate in the castle's front wall. This area was marked by ancient remnants of trenches, with broken weapons and crumbled bulwarks lying about. It was once where the bloodiest part of the battle was waged. Finally, the front was split into four stacked strata, with the highest being the control room where the Spirit King had once descended.

"Leave it to me. I can guide you," Snake said to Mira and Aaron as the two mumbled amongst themselves. She beckoned to her golem and took up the vanguard. In her hand was a map she had procured beforehand, which featured a neater depiction of the proper route.

Mira and Aaron looked at each other, shrugged, and laughed. They obediently followed Snake.

Ten minutes after they'd entered the labyrinth, Snake's golem stopped before an

upcoming corner.

"Enemies," Snake announced. At the same time, the golem sped forward with footsteps so loud it sounded like a thunderstorm. Pale smoke wafted from the corner, but the golem slammed a heavy fist into it.

"A brute force approach, I see," Mira said.

The smoke was a monster called a night ghost. Constructed purely from thoughts, its body should have had a resistance to physical disruption. Yet the golem's blow dealt visible damage.

The night ghost dispersed and slipped through the air to escape, reforming at a safe distance from Mira's party. It had taken the shape of an armored knight, but they could still see the damage where the golem's fist had struck it.

"I brought astral oil," said Aaron, "but it looks like we won't need it at this rate." The oil would nullify physical resistances when applied to weapons. It was less efficient than magic, but made brute force a viable strategy against incorporeal monsters.

"Perhaps not," Mira agreed as she watched over Snake's efforts.

Aaron put his axe back on his hip and returned the vial he'd taken out to his pouch. The jade green, crescent-shaped blade swayed sadly at his hip. It had missed an opportunity to show its stuff.

While Mira and Aaron conversed, the golem's powerful right jab blew the night ghost to smithereens, and it melted into the air. When the next one appeared, the golem held it down for Snake to destroy it with [Internment Arts: Molten Rebirth].

Fine embers danced in the air as Snake created a new golem and turned around proudly. But the person she'd most wanted to show off to—Mira—was currently peering excitedly into Aaron's pouch, obsessed with the many items he'd brought. There were quite a few she'd never seen before.

Snake was clearly crestfallen.

"C'mon, you worry too much," Scorpion called out, noticing Snake's over-the-top efforts. "You're trying to show your stuff because you're worried you've butted in, right? You don't have to try so hard."

Scorpion had seen this behavior from Snake many times by now—her hesitance in the carriage was only one example. Snake had a good head on her shoulders, but it was dangerous to bite off more than she could chew in battle.

“That’s not true,” Snake said. “This mission is of utmost importance; this is only what’s required.”

Scorpion grunted in annoyance at her stubbornness and gave Snake a light smack on the cheek. “This mission falls on *all of us*, okay?”

Snake had no rebuttal then. She simply nodded.

“What’s the matter, friends?” Mira, having finished getting a good look at all of Aaron’s tools, called out to the pair.

Scorpion and Snake turned around and shook their heads. “Nothing,” they said in unison. They then saw the item Mira was holding.

“Call these insurance,” she said. “It’s pretty rare, but some monsters may cast curses.”

Mira handed them each a sheet of paper covered in handwriting so elaborate it was difficult to read. They were warding talismans, which could nullify a specific number of curses cast by high-level incorporeal monsters. Because they weren’t needed frequently, they weren’t found in many markets.

“Wow, thanks!” Scorpion accepted it, gazed at it interestedly, and stowed it in her side pouch.

“Much appreciated.” Snake took the paper gingerly in both hands and placed it in her robe’s inner pocket.

The warding talismans had been gathering dust at the bottom of Mira’s Item Box for who knew how long. She’d only remembered them after looking through the items Aaron had brought.

Adventurer classes that focused on physical damage typically neglected the stronger incorporeals, but mages loved to have a go at them since their maximum health was inherently low. This trend was so prevalent in-game that mages were often called ghostbusters. These slips of paper were from the last time Mira had farmed such monsters.

That said, it was still the first stratum. No need to worry quite yet.

Snake continued to lead the way. Even when night ghosts appeared in groups, her golems acted as a wall while Scorpion leapt about, using the surrounding walls as footholds to join forces with the Dark Lord on the attack. The monsters were easily massacred with countless strikes. Aaron looked on, enjoying the show while keeping watch, while Mira mercilessly sicced her pawn on the hapless monsters.

She can even run on walls? Mira was amazed watching Scorpion. *I wonder what sort of training it takes to learn that...*

In the three-meter-wide passage, even as the rock golems and blade-studded Dark Lord rampaged, Scorpion deftly weaved and leapt through the dangerous crush. She seemed able to move in any direction at will, like a spider on its web. Her rapid strikes were truly befitting of her name. Soon, the mob of night ghosts they'd eradicated had reached the double digits.

Their conquest of the first stratum was proceeding well. By the time they reached the latter half, their team had adapted to each other's styles seamlessly. And if anything, Scorpion's moves had only become more precise.

"Scorpion, where did you learn those techniques?" Mira asked.

Running up walls wasn't all she could do—she even ran with both legs on the ceiling. Mira had never seen anything like it. This might be *the* most impressive new technique she'd witnessed.

Scorpion leapt back from the front and landed upside-down on the ceiling next to Mira. "Back home at Karasawa Village," she answered. "It's a traditional technique all kids learn when we reach a certain age."

Glancing over at the dying night ghosts, Mira turned to Scorpion and questioned her further. "Everyone in your village can run and jump like you?"

"Hmm... Maybe not everyone. Everyone *can* stick to walls and ceilings, but anything more takes a heck of a lot of training. Whether you get that training or not depends on your talent. And... well... They told me I was the top talent in the village," Scorpion said, pride creeping into her voice as she jumped up and landed on the ceiling again, and then walked forward, still hanging like a bat.

Mira followed her, fascinated—though she feigned nonchalance as she asked her most pressing question. “That is incredible. I’d love to do it, too... Can you teach me?”

Scorpion twirled and landed upright on the ground. “I dunno... They let me learn everything since I was the best in the village, but they told me never to teach outsiders this stuff. Or more accurately, they begged me not to. Sorry!” she answered, ruffling Mira’s hair.

“Hrmm. That is a shame,” Mira murmured in disappointment, paying no mind to the silver hair now falling in front of her eyes.

A Wise Man’s pupil acknowledged by Uzume herself had shown interest in her techniques—Scorpion was ecstatic.

“But if you ever make your way over to Karasawa Village, you might convince them to teach you. Only if the chief acknowledges you, though. But they say it’s happened before!”

Hearing that, Mira rebounded instantly. In some rare cases, outsiders *could* learn traditional techniques.

“Oho! Oh, ho ho ho! Is that so?!”

“Yep, It’s not unheard of. Though the conditions are apparently really strict.”

Mira grinned excitedly. “I’ll have to give it a go. So, where can I find this mysterious Karasawa Village?”

“Uh, in the forest north of Grimsdale. The closest continental railroad station should be Forest Hide, I think.”

“In the forest, hrmm? I recall that forest being pretty dense. So the railroad runs even through there?”

“It used to be so small and hard to find that they called it a hidden village. But these days, it’s gotten pretty big.”

The railroad running across the Earth continent naturally had to pass through mountain ranges and forests. In the course of overcoming and carving a path through such difficult terrain, it sometimes brought people closer to formerly obscure places

like Karasawa Village. Of course, the discovery of some of these places had led to a few problems... but those were long dealt with by now.

"A hidden village, eh? Sounds rather thrilling." Mira added Karasawa Village to the long list of destinations she'd never get around to and poured more mana into her Dark Lord. With its special abilities awakened, it freely controlled the black mana flowing from its blades and swept up encroaching hordes of night ghosts in the blink of an eye.

Mira had a pile of plans by now. She decided to get this job done quickly, so she could start making some dreams reality. Feeling her intent, the tempestuous summons devoured all monsters who approached at an even faster clip. Scorpion and Snake were dumbfounded, unable to slip so much as a single attack in through the overwhelming tide of violence.

Behind them, Aaron's eyes shone as he murmured, "So this is what Uzume has planned."

The first stratum's monsters were minced into smithereens the moment they entered the party's line of sight. As someone who had experienced fighting Mira, Scorpion winced. Snake simply decided to focus on leading the way.

* * *

With the overwhelming combat power of their fighters and the speedy guidance of their map, the party exited the labyrinth in no time and came to a crossroads. This was a major junction in the Citadel of Scales, with corridors branching up, down, left, and right as well as continuing straight ahead.

If they went directly forward, they would reach the central area connected to the front gate. If they turned left, they would reach an opening where the Legion Ghoul would attack—but only if they had the quest to defeat it. If they turned right, they would come out halfway down the precipice beside the citadel. Using special tools, one could climb deep underground from there.

If they continued downstairs, they would reach the altar where the right scale was housed. But that was *all* that was there. To Mira's knowledge, there were no quests related to it.

Each passageway was lit only faintly, the way forward disappearing into darkness. Mira turned her eyes to the staircase leading upward.

The control room should be up from here, no?

The objective of their mission was to capture a key figure from Chimera. They'd used their travel time in the wagon to discuss the ideal place to set an ambush, and come to one conclusion: if the enemy were really after the Spirit King, lying in wait in the place most closely related to him would be best.

The four continued up to the second stratum without even glancing at the other paths.

CHAPTER 16

WITH HEAVY CLANKS, the Dark Lord clad in ominous blades and the hulking, steel-gray golem stepped into the small second-stratum chamber. They thumped forward into the center of the room, followed by Mira and the others, who had just crested the last stair. Pale blue flames flickered on the otherwise unadorned walls, a feature unique to this dungeon.

The doorway to this chamber from the stairs was indistinguishable from the entrances to other rooms around the edges of the chamber. Looking in any direction yielded the same view—without care, one could lose their sense of direction immediately.

The second stratum of the Citadel of Scales was composed of a hundred rooms connected by short corridors. In order to reach the third-stratum staircase, one had to take a specific, maze-like path through them. The magic cast on this stratum during the war still lingered, causing those within to wander in circles and return to the entrance if they chose poorly.

“First, go right,” Snake ordered, and directed her golem toward the right corridor. There was another sketched map in her hands. This one displayed a hundred rooms, ten per row and ten per column like a chess board, with a red line outlining the correct route.

RLLRURURLLRU, was it? Ah, nostalgia.

Upon first encounter, the second stratum might seem impossible to clear without a guide. However, thanks to the accomplishments of the most curious players, this dungeon had been cleared long ago, and maps were available for low prices today. Mira peeked at the map in Snake’s hands and remembered the popular chant recited by those who had cleared the Citadel of Scales back in the video game days.

The golem led the party through the maze. Snake guided them right, left, left, right, forward, right, and forward again. Along the way, stronger night ghosts with more varied attacks materialized to block their path, along with an elemental subspecies aptly known as Elementals.

All these enemies were mowed down by a barrage of ever-adapting black blades and

destructive steel fists, along with relentless twin daggers and an axe wreathed in mana.

"Aw, yeah. That's the good stuff," Aaron said with deep emotion. He'd hung back from the battle in the first stratum, but on the second, he finally got to swing his favorite battle-axe. He had grasped the rhythm of his allies and their servants just from watching, and worked smoothly alongside them from his first move.

This flexibility was Aaron's specialty and secret weapon. His fighting style was to watch and learn, then relentlessly use that knowledge to his advantage. Aaron struck the monsters with his axe, testing each hit's effects on his enemies and noting the sensations in his own body. With Aaron's strength added to the party, the group handily defeated another mob of monsters and entered the next room.

"Hrmm? Is that...?" Mira muttered, noticing something unexpected within.

"A sword? Did someone forget it?" Scorpion asked and jumped down from the ceiling.

Right in the middle of the room was an unsheathed sword. The blade was red with rust, but the edge of the blade itself was sharp, glinting like a bloodthirsty predator's fangs. Yet the most striking feature was its hilt. It was a basket-hilt in the shape of a lion's head, designed to both protect the wielder's hand and serve as a weapon in itself.

Appearing suddenly amid this endless string of rooms with no distinguishing features whatsoever, this sword was uncanny.

Mira was wholeheartedly devoted to magic, so she couldn't tell much about the sword at a glance. However, it was clear that it was a high-quality blade. But why had it been left so unceremoniously on the floor—and here, of all places?

Having some idea of what its presence meant, Aaron glanced at the girls and called out joyfully, "Hey, it's our lucky day!"

"Seems like trouble to me." Mira gazed dismally at the sword, which was now slowly floating upward.

Scorpion's ears and tail stood straight up in shock at the naked blade's sudden movement. But she quickly fell back into a fighting pose, feigning nonchalance.

As for the usually expressionless Snake, she unsheathed her own dagger with a faint

grin. The undulating blade was covered in arcane symbols, clearly magical implement.

Black, wraith-like clumps of darkness began to gather in the middle of the room. The sword at their center was no ordinary sword.

The dark mist expanded and inflated like a balloon, becoming denser and denser until it was a smooth obsidian orb. Despite floating in midair, it looked extremely heavy. Black waves pulsed from it like a demon's heart, each throb like the strike of a hammer, driving its tendrils into the veins of the world.

The orb began to warp and writhe, hovering higher as it stretched and condensed like molten sugar. The four watched as it rose until, with a wet, squishy *plop*, something fell from the black mass and hit the floor below. All eyes zeroed in on the figure.

"Seems it's a mage type this time," Mira surmised from its familiar characteristics.

"Aha! You can tell at a glance, little miss?" Aaron asked, eyes never leaving the uncanny object.

"Warrior types are thicker. They have five fingers, too."

"...Interesting."

The black object on the floor lay silent, as if it were stillborn. It resembled a human skeleton, adding another layer of eeriness to the scene unfolding before them. But there was one major difference: it lacked fingers.

Now that Mira had drawn attention to it, Aaron checked the figure's hands and realized she was right. Meanwhile, the black skeleton was slowly rising from the floor. Its motions as it attempted to stand were unnatural; it looked like a puppet pulled up from the ground by unseen strings—lacking realism. Yet when the skull turned toward them with a rattle, its enmity was real enough, eye sockets burning with a cold, baleful malice.

The black skeleton, standing with an inhuman posture, raised its fingerless right hand. The floating black orb compressed itself into fine threads that traveled down its right arm and wrapped around its body, transforming into tattered black clothes.

This was a monster called the Legion Wraith, the result of countless ghosts possessing a single powerful object all at once. This was one of the strongest, if not *the* strongest,

enemy in the Citadel of Scales. Defeating the creatures yielded special weapons and equipment, but their appearance rate was quite low. Aaron had called it good luck because the force they currently had could make short work of such a monster. The concept of defeat did not even cross his mind.

The Legion Wraith screamed with a bitter rasp, though its mad cries were so quiet, they were almost impossible to hear. Taking that as a signal, Snake slipped behind the golem and beckoned for Scorpion, whose tail was puffed up in alarm, to get ready.

“Here it comes!” Feeling the air around him shift, Aaron tightened his fist around his axe handle and slipped behind the Dark Lord. He fished a vial containing a clear liquid from his pouch, never taking his eyes off of the skeleton.

After ensuring her allies were well equipped to withstand this attack, Mira focused her attention on the enemy’s movements.

The Legion Wraith’s eyes gleamed, and it silently roared its resentment as it raised a fingerless hand. Crimson flames billowed forth from its palm, rolling themselves into a ball of fire. This was how the fight with a Legion Wrath began: a wide-area finisher move that was known for instantly killing ill-informed players.

The orb lit the whole room red, expanding faster and faster. Once it was as large as its caster, it suddenly shrank. There came a flash like a camera accompanied by a room-shaking boom as flames spread instantly throughout the chamber. It whipped up wind within the small space, the fiery tempest raging until it had sucked all the moisture from the air.

“Well it’s certainly flashy.” The tall white tower shield disappeared, and Mira emerged in its place.

“I’ve heard stories about that move. What a sight to see it firsthand, though.” Aaron backed away from the Dark Lord’s side and looked around the charred room. The vial in his hand was now empty.

“Phew, I’m safe! Hang on... You three all knew what was coming? Was I the only one who didn’t?!?” Scorpion timidly peeked out from behind the golem. Her unscathed companions nodded in confirmation, eliciting a relieved yet exasperated sigh.

“Forewarned is forearmed.” Snake’s expression was unruffled as she reconstructed her crumbling golem.

Recalling the enemy's movement patterns from past experience, Mira had timed a partial summon of her Holy Knight's shield to block the fire. Aaron had heard of the danger from his adventurer buddies, so he used a vial that created a watery protective film to raise his fire resistance while using the Dark Lord as a bulwark. Snake had researched the Citadel of Scales extensively and used the fire-resistant golem as a shield. Scorpion just followed Snake.

Once the destructive storm passed, the four again faced the Legion Wraith as if nothing had happened. Before the room even began to cool down from its heated assault, both sides launched into the battle proper.

The Legion Wraith's arms fired bullets of flame like machine guns. Aaron jumped to the side and watched coolly, gripping his battle-axe as the Legion Wraith continued its relentless barrage. Scorpion leapt all about, weaving through the rain of fire and throwing disk-like blades toward her enemy. When the golem charged head-on, its surface was blasted with flames, peeling and falling away with every boom—yet it wasn't destroyed. Snake followed right behind it, cursed dagger in hand.

Gatling wasn't used until the end of the fight before, but I suppose its moves are different from the game. Mira watched the fight from a distance for a few moments, sizing up the Legion Wraith's new moves before ordering her Dark Lord to attack.

The Legion Wraith fired madly, but a blade flying in at a cunning angle pierced its shoulder, interrupting its casting and bringing the attack to a halt. None of its four opponents would miss this opportunity.

Aaron charged forward, keeping low to the ground. His movements were perfect, the product of years of front-line experience. The Legion Wraith's chilling gaze clung to him, but it didn't move—it couldn't. A vicious black blade was approaching it head-on.

There was a sound like glass cracking as the Dark Lord's sword collided with the Legion Wraith's full-power barrier. The skeletal creature had blocked the attack it deemed the most threatening and turned to mow down the second attacker with its special move. But the crack in its barrier spread like ripples in water. It had blocked the attack, but the incarnation of slaughter would not be denied. The Legion Wraith's attention was diverted for a mere instant—and that's when Aaron went in.

He came from the side and unleashed a full-power, full-momentum blow. The fighting spirit driving the attack was honed sharp for the sole purpose of slicing. When it

touched the Legion Wraith's thigh, all the energy converged on that point, severing its leg clean.

The Legion Wraith teetered off balance and reflexively deployed its fire magic. But Aaron was already out of reach, having hurried to put distance between himself and the monster as a—wise, it turned out—precaution. The wraith glowered at him odiously from where it crouched on one knee. When it looked up, its glowing sockets beheld an inorganic giant, stomping on and shattering the skeleton's lost leg. Even in the weak light, the golem's enormous figure was ferocious.

The golem slammed into the Legion Wraith, its whole body serving as a powerful blunt weapon. The crack of bones shattering echoed throughout the room.

“Brute force continues to be ideal for skeletons, I see...” Mira chuckled and watched the skeleton and the golem tussle, sending bits of bone and pebbles flying with every clash.

The momentum from the golem's charge bowled the Legion Wraith into the wall. At the same time, a tremor shook the room. The Legion Wraith's body had been torn apart by the golem, yet it continued to move.

A handless arm thrust into the golem's torso. The golem easily brushed it away with its own fractured arm, and the bullet of fire it released flew off course and burst on the ceiling like a wayward firework. The scattered embers slowly burned out and rained down like the lowering of a curtain, heralding the finale of this fight.

The golem moved first. It pinned the Legion Wraith down, its inorganic arms shattering more by the second.

“I'll finish this,” Snake declared.

She leapt forth with her magical dagger in hand, her speed in no way inferior to Scorpion's. She muttered a string of words, and mana gathered in the golem's right arm. When it reached critical mass, the blast blew part of the Legion Wraith away completely.

The skeleton's jaw gaped wide, and thick voices of resentment oozed out from the black mouth like sonic sludge. The sound was almost unbearable, but nobody paid the voices any mind. Mira was simply used to it by now, and the other three were long beyond the point where they'd fear the broken monster.

Snake struck the final blow, a perfectly aimed uppercut that crashed through the wraith's skull from jaw to cranium. The fire burning in its eyes finally went dim, and the corpse began to melt away into the air like ashes, leaving only a weak trail of light behind.

The ear-splitting noise ended abruptly, bringing the battle to a silent conclusion.

Snake had remained expressionless throughout the fight, but when she saw the trail of light pouring into her dagger, she had to grin just a little.

The wraith emitted a pale glow when it died. Is that the effect of her weapon?

Mira had seen many Legion Wraith deaths by now. Normally, the thing would turn into sand and flow away in a quiet, ephemeral display. But this time was different—each particle that had made up the black skeleton had emitted a small light that was drawn into the dagger.

An unfamiliar phenomenon, an unfamiliar weapon. Mira gazed at Snake's dagger with keen interest. Was this something that had been developed in the past thirty years?

"Something wrong?" Aaron asked her.

"I've never seen a dagger quite like that before."

Aaron followed her eyes to the dagger and said knowingly, "Ah, that? That's some kind of special dagger, I think. Necromancers do something with it... I think..." he grumbled with a frown, unable to remember much more than that. After a few moments, he gave up. "Hey, Miss Snake. What is that dagger?"

Snake gazed with satisfaction at her dagger and, still grinning, gladly explained.

"This is an occult dagger. It's a tool for extracting and binding mournful spirits. It's essential for expanding magic." Snake held up the dagger so they could see the blade before sliding it back into its sheath.

In this battle, Snake had claimed the Legion Wraith's "colony" trait, one that could power up her own magic. Elated at this unexpected harvest, Snake became much more talkative than usual, eager to share information about her magic.

Mystic daggers were first developed by the Linked Silver Towers. They were necessary

for the new magic that had spread in recent years. According to Snake, they were only effective against special souls like that of the Legion Wraith.

"Hrmm. I wasn't aware such things existed," Mira mused, impressed. This admission put Snake in an even better mood, prompting her to proudly create a fresh golem on the spot. This new stone golem was even bigger than the last, with arms as thick as tree trunks.

"This is a stone golem I've given the 'strong arms' trait to. There are others, too, like 'keen legs,'" Snake added, then downed a vial of green fluid and frowned slightly. Mana potions were typically bitter.

"Necromancers are evolving, too, I see," Mira said thoughtfully, placing a hand on the cool surface of the strong-armed golem.

I wonder if summoning has something along these lines. As she looked up at the golem, she fantasized about the future of summoning.

"Ah, right." Aaron seemed to suddenly remember something and picked up the sword at the golem's feet. If the Legion Wraith had colonized it, this object must contain special power. He held the rust-colored blade toward the ceiling and smirked. "Fiend King's Red Tusk, huh? This'll make a fine souvenir."

After defeating the strongest enemy in the Citadel of Scales and receiving ample reward for rather little effort, the four-person party did not tarry. With the new destructive power of Snake's golems, they cleared the second stratum without issue.

CHAPTER 17

MIRA AND THE OTHERS took a quick break in the chamber at the top of the third-stratum staircase.

She commanded her Dark Knight to kneel down and used its leg as a chair, sighing with a mixed berry au lait in hand. Aaron plopped down on the ground and drank from his canteen. Those with experience in the Citadel of Scales kicked back and relaxed.

Meanwhile, the first-timers Scorpion and Snake peered around as they ate their snacks nervously.

Aaron turned his empty canteen upside down and shook it. He reassured the two Hidden, “It surprised me, too. But this room is harmless. Relax a little.”

“There aren’t monsters hiding around here or anything?” Scorpion held a cookie in her left hand and her dagger in her right, narrowing her eyes as she kept watch.

“It’s just so eerie.” Snake had slipped between her golem’s legs, using them as an iron wall.

“Even if another Legion Wraith popped out, we’d be able to leave as long as we made it back to this room. You can tell they really didn’t want people getting in when they used that spell on this place.” Aaron looked around with a grin and reassured them. He remembered how he’d felt his first time here all too well.

Around the party were a group of intimidating knights, running around with expressionless faces and swords at the ready. They were an illusion made to throw off invading monsters, the remnants of spirit magic cast in ancient times during the war with monsters.

“A type of barrier, huh? I’ve heard of these, but I still can’t relax like this,” Scorpion said. She threw a disk at one of the illusions. It sliced through the wind directly toward the knight and passed through its legs, making a shrill noise as it screeched across the gray stone floor.

“See? Just illusions.” Aaron smirked as the noise echoed through the room.

“I guess, but... let’s just hurry!”

The spirit magic cast on this stratum was high-level stuff. On top of normal enemy attacks, adventurers also had to deal with terrifying, sword-bearing illusory knights. As they were illusions, they dealt no physical damage, but they were just as intimidating as the Dark Lord. Scorpion’s tail puffed up in alarm as she stepped closer to her comrades.

Scorpion’s fear also reminded Mira of her first time here. She stood up and looked at the too-high ceiling.

* * *

The third stratum of the Citadel of Scales was actually a three-dimensional maze that spanned from the third to eighth floor in one open space. Staircases stretched wildly here and there, intermingling like spider webs, occasionally diverging, and running all over the space above.

In the very center of the tangled mess of staircases was one big, cuboid room supported by a tower. The added third dimension made it even easier to get lost in this maze.

“Go all the way up this staircase, then take the left staircase down to its end. There should be a bend along the way.” Snake read the complex map of the third stratum and guided the group along the correct path.

Preferring not to waste her energy climbing stairs, Mira sat on her Dark Knight’s shoulder and had it fold its arm in front of its chest. There she rested her legs, reclining luxuriously as the group trudged along.

Aaron stood behind Snake, peering at the sketched map and furrowing his brow at the complexity of it.

Scorpion got a little more tense each time the illusory knights charged at her, but she pressed on, managing to face them head on without turning tail. With each success, she stood up straighter, and soon enough was swishing her tail happily and waving at the hostile knights.

The illusory knights were no problem once one was accustomed to them, but the defense mechanisms of the Citadel of Scales didn’t end there. Barriers were placed on

staircases and sometimes in midair, refracting light and making it difficult to know where one was going with each step. Above, illusions of knights ran up and down stairs, some even appearing to run upside down. It was like being inside an optical illusion.

This third stratum was the main stratum of the Citadel of Scales. Even monsters didn't appear in this stratum, nor would they follow adventurers into it.

When first visiting, one might find this place fairly annoying. But many forebears had already cleared this dungeon. Even in this three-dimensional maze where their path seemed to disappear due to visual tricks and traps, it would be fine as long as they followed the map.

They repeated this process several times, climbing staircases, passing through hallways, and going through the big square room until they finally stopped. The group looked down—though it was hard to tell what was up or down at this point.

"The map says this should be it," Snake said, her confidence wavering.

"Seeing isn't really believing here, is it?" Aaron looked down the stairs and frowned.

"It looks familiar, but I can't say for certain," Mira added. Even in-game, this wasn't a place players came often. Her memories would have been vague even without the illusions.

They stood in the middle of yet another staircase, exactly like all the others they'd traversed to get here. According to the route map, they were twenty percent of the way there. Scorpion squatted at the edge of the staircase and peered down. She waved to the reflection of herself below and suggested, "We can just go down and find out, right?"

"Oho. How handy."

"Glad to have you around."

"Good luck."

The other three happily volunteered Scorpion to test the theory. Their expectant gazes made Scorpion wince—perhaps she'd made a mistake.

Below their feet was a set of staircases built like a lattice, though it was difficult to see due to the refraction of light from the barriers. Depending on where they landed, they could take a huge shortcut by jumping down.

The third stratum was such a vast labyrinth that it could take all day going the normal way. If they took all day to clear it, Chimera Clausen might take a shortcut and overtake them. As long as they didn't know when their enemy would show up, they would have to take the fastest path possible and be ready for their arrival.

The shortest route was marked on the map, but their sense of sight couldn't be trusted here. Though Snake was sure this was the right spot, she struggled to take the final step. Aaron had experience clearing this dungeon, but back then, his party had taken the time to go the long way. He'd never used the shortcut and could now only stare down the staircase.

Mira was the only one who had firsthand knowledge of this shortcut. But either due to the citadel's annoying nature or due to how much time had passed—probably both—her memories were vague enough that she couldn't say for certain that this was the exact spot.

"We won't see you, but we can hear you. When you're down, tell us how it is." Snake checked the map over and over and nodded to Scorpion, as if to say, *This absolutely must be the place.*

"Mmm... 'Kay..." Scorpion grinned wryly at Snake, then laughed quietly to herself. Steeling her nerves, she jumped down with a hearty war cry. "See ya soon!"

The three leaned over the side to watch the odd illusion of her being sucked into the mirror below, then fell quiet, listening intently.

"Whoa, that was closer than I thought!" Scorpion called up to them. "Jeez!" They couldn't see her, but her voice came through loud and clear.

Aaron looked back to the group and shrugged. "Sounds like we've got the right spot, at least."

Mira also straightened up. "Right." She repositioned herself comfortably on her Dark Knight.

"Report situation," Snake called out after the initial wave of relief.

"Ooh. I can't see you, but I can hear you! This is weird!"

"Hurry up."

"Okaaay! Uh, so this looks like a stair landing. It was really close. There's a staircase going down, and there's another that goes up. The one going up splits into two along the way. Does that sound right?" Scorpion gave a clear account of what she could see.

Snake compared her description to her map, and dropped her shoulders with a sigh of relief—this was the place.

"Looks like we got it," Aaron called out. "We're jumping down, so you get out of the way, Little Miss Scorpion."

"Got it!" Scorpion promptly answered.

A few seconds later, Aaron was the first to leap down. Snake followed right behind, taking a step forward and disappearing into the staircase.

This is quite the run. Mira had only ever cleared the Citadel of Scales alone. She grinned with pleasure and jumped down the staircase on her Dark Knight.

"First, we go up and take the path to the right." When they reached the landing, Snake swiftly ascertained their location and began climbing once again.

"How much time did we save?" asked Aaron.

"About six hours."

"Whoa. That much?" He peered over Snake's shoulder to peek at her map.

Everyone pretended not to see what had just happened. Scorpion played along too, asking performatively, "It sounds like we're close, then, right?"

In the middle of the landing lay Mira, writhing with her hands on her butt and tears in her eyes. Scorpion said it wasn't a long fall... but it was still a *fall*. This one was about two stories, which someone with any training could take with ease.

Scorpion had her acrobatics, Aaron's muscles were well trained, and Snake was no slacker either. With Mira's sage abilities, a simple fall shouldn't have hurt her so much.

The problem was the Dark Knight she'd sat on. It was shaped like a human, but as it easily performed inhuman maneuvers, it had no need to bend its knees to cushion a fall. As a result, Mira had taken the entire impact on her petite rear end.

The other three were a bit worried, but the ridiculous sight of it left them with no words to console her. The only option was to turn away as if they never saw a thing.

* * *

Setting out to follow Snake's directions up the stairs and right, the three slowly climbed until Mira finally recovered and caught up with them.

Snake opened the sketched map and examined it. "There are two more shortcuts after this point."

Aaron used the opportunity to take a look as well. "At this rate we'll be there before dinner this time."

This was nothing but a performance meant to put the adventure back on track. Though his motions were stilted, Aaron played his role well. Snake rarely showed emotion anyway, so her blank expression was not suspicious.

"Woo-hoo," Scorpion said. "Can't wait for din dins."

The problem was Scorpion.

Even Mira was blown away by her poor line delivery. Calling her amateurish would be an insult to amateurs. Yet Scorpion's eyes held the confidence of someone who was certain she'd aced her role.

That said, Mira seemed wholly aware that they had put on this little pantomime as a way of pretending she hadn't embarrassed herself.

"Okay, let's go."

"Right. Let's."

"Straight ahead here, then turn right."

The silence lasted only a moment. Aaron and Snake tacitly agreed to say nothing more

about it and moved on.

But Scorpion kept trying. "Snake's suuuch a goood cook!" At least her smile seemed genuine.

"Oh. Well, er, I can't wait...?" Mira tried to conceal her grimace.

Aaron and Snake refused to turn around, dutifully gluing their eyes to the map.

* * *

About four hours after Scorpion showed off her lousy acting, the group overcame the second shortcut without difficulty and proceeded on, taking short breaks here and there, until they reached the third and final shortcut.

"This is the last one," Snake announced. "The map says we'll reach the hall before the grand staircase to the top." At a landing with six divergent paths going up and down, she stood on the only side with no staircases and indicated that this was their destination.

"Ooh. So this is linked to there?" Aaron remembered the full day it had taken to explore the first time and jumped down with now-practiced footwork from the landing.

"It's finally over... I wanna eat soon!" whined Scorpion.

"You've talked about nothing but food for a while now," Snake sighed before jumping down herself. "Will curry do?"

The quality of her acting aside, it was true that Scorpion was starving.

"Yes! I love you!" Scorpion's tail stood straight up, and she leapt for joy, hopping over the edge and down the shortcut.

Mira alighted from her Dark Knight to follow. But as she stepped forward, she stopped and pulled her foot back.

Come to think of it... I recall the left corner was best here. A vague memory surfaced from her long-ago runs. Mira went as far left as she could from their jumping-off point and then jumped.

Once she was through the light-refracting barrier, a large hall appeared below. The moment it was within view, Mira landed on a circular platform. Her Dark Knight followed shortly after, landing with a low, metallic thud.

The area before the grand stairs leading to the top of the Citadel of Scales served as the last line of defense. It was a hall made entirely of stone. Deep gashes on the walls and floors told the story of an intense battle. Defensive towers stood all over to slow and counter the monster intrusion, with rotting ballistae peeking out of each.

The battlefield was crumbling and chipped in places, but it was by no means shabby. It was a grand sight, worthy of the heroes who had fought and died here.

Mira stood at the top of one defensive tower. Nearly ten meters high, it commanded a splendid view of the ground below... as well as the three who had jumped first.

Aaron leaned forward, his hands on his knees, looking pained.

Scorpion stamped over and over, yelling, "You could've warned me!"

Snake was hunched over in the same posture as Aaron, lips pressed tight and tears shining in her eyes.

The final shortcut was three times as long a drop as the others, making it impossible to avoid fall damage. Mira had landed atop a defensive tower and managed to avoid the pain.

With a private, self-satisfied grin, she took the spiral staircase down the tower and rejoined the group. Aaron and Snake remained immobile in their curled-up postures, as if they'd been nailed to the spot.

"Uh... My apologies. I only remembered right before I jumped," Mira said sheepishly in the face of their condemning gazes. She looked away toward the grand staircase.

CHAPTER 18

AFTER THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL LABYRINTH was the great hall they stood in now, which was then followed by the grand staircase to the top. The staircase really was *grand*—ten meters wide, with some of the steps having rounded edges as if something enormous had once rolled down.

Mira and the others reached the top of the staircase and looked ahead. Before them stretched an open hallway lit by flames that expanded and contracted rhythmically like breathing.

“That’s enough stairs for me, I think.” Aaron sighed and turned around, looking down at the distant hall below. The grand staircase had not disappointed, even after the three-dimensional labyrinth. Even Scorpion and Snake sat back-to-back in exhaustion, silently agreeing.

Mira, however, had grown even more skilled at being lazy. She had her Holy Knight hold its shield horizontally, where she sat cross-legged and even napped through the climb. She wasn’t tired at all.

“Laborer mages sure do have it easy,” Aaron grumbled as he saw Mira pop jauntily off of the Holy Knight.

Snake glared at him and rebutted harshly, “That is not true. *Typically*, we reserve our mana when monsters aren’t present.”

She was right; after her golem had disappeared naturally due to the passage of time, Snake had not created any more. Meanwhile, Mira was profligate with her mana consumption. She had even compared the relative comfort of Dark Knights and Holy Knights before settling on the Holy Knight as her porter.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. I hadn’t even noticed her using her summons as a ride... Little Miss Mira, are your mana reserves okay?”

Mira stretched and yawned as if she’d just done hard labor, despite not doing much at all. Aaron furrowed his brow. On top of Mira’s enormous amount of mana, she also recovered it far faster than the average person.

"She's special." Envy was obvious in Snake's eyes as she watched Mira.

"Heh. I guess that's what it takes to be a Wise Man's pupil, huh?" Aaron gazed in admiration at the little girl as she sipped an all-season au lait, looking for all the world like an old man on his veranda.

* * *

"Hrmm?" The exhausted Mira spotted a blue light coming from the hallway up ahead. She leaned forward and squinted, trying to see what it was.

Before she could get a look, a deep boom sounded, as if welling up from the belly of the fortress itself. It was followed shortly by a tremor that rattled the hallway.

"What was that sound?" Aaron stood up, instantly alert. Scorpion and Snake reacted swiftly as well, sharp eyes fixed in the direction of the sound.

"There shouldn't be any monsters in there," Snake noted.

This hallway led to the deepest part of the Citadel of Scales. As Snake said, the floor was devoid of monsters. Mira and Aaron remembered that detail, as well... yet the sound had definitely come from the direction of the hallway.

As the four watched, the blue light swelled again, and the sound and rumbling repeated. In the blink of an eye, the blue light washed over them.

"That was a hell of a fireball. Was it magic?" Aaron asked in a low voice.

"It certainly was. Mana remnants confirmed," Snake said.

"We've got company. Did Chimera beat us?!" Scorpion stamped angrily and glowered, ready to pounce at any moment.

They'd sped here as fast as they possibly could, but there had always been a chance that Chimera Clausen would clear the dungeon before they arrived. They'd lost the race before it had even begun. Still, there was something strange about this.

"Maybe so," Mira said. "But then—what are they fighting?"

The light they'd seen was definitely from battle. But no monsters were meant to

appear up ahead. What was going on?

"Let's go!" Scorpion ran off first, unable to wait a moment longer. Snake followed right after.

Aaron did a quick check of the items he had on hand, sighed deeply, and sprinted to catch up to them. His eyes, fixed on Scorpion and Snake, were full of fighting spirit.

"I hope there's something to be gained for us in this battle, whatever it might be." Mira dismissed her Holy Knight and ran atop the air so she made no sound, overtaking Aaron in the blink of an eye.

Scorpion and Snake waited for them next to a door at the end of the hallway, pressed up against the wall and craning their necks to see what was happening beyond. Their faces were masks of confusion. Mira took up position behind them and peeked inside.

The room was flooded, as if it had been subjected to an isolated thunderstorm. Despite the deluge, blue flames danced and crept along the ground. They crackled, as if burning something up within their depths.

What in the world...? Mira's eyes went wide. She was totally speechless.

"The hell's going on here...?" Aaron said as he caught up and saw the situation.

In the deepest room of the Citadel of Scales, which had once served as the war room, five figures were locked in battle. Or rather, four figures were battling against a single one.

Standing amidst the sea of blue light was one man. He was tall and lean, clad in a long amaranth robe. In his left hand was a slender blade, and in his right was a crossbow. His ash-gray eyes were narrowed behind silver-rimmed glasses as he looked down at the people lying at his feet.

"Did they have a falling out?" Scorpion wondered.

The five were all dressed in different styles of clothing, with no shared features. If one were pressed to name a commonality among the group, it would be that four of them had crossbow bolts lodged in their ribs and now smoldered facedown in the fire.

Had Chimera Clausen's people turned on each other at the very moment of their

success? Before Mira's group could ponder it, one of the lightly armored men on the ground stood up, stumbled over, and attacked the robed man from behind.

Even wounded, his moves were so sharp it was like watching a movie frame by frame. The armored man clutched a familiar-looking black dagger that swung straight for the central figure.

Yet just as the onlookers thought he'd successfully stabbed the robed man from his blind spot, the robed man disappeared, leaving an illusion behind. There was a dull *crack*, and the lightly armored man was launched into the air, his body bent at an unnatural angle.

He could not stand against the robed man. The slender sword stabbed directly into his chest, sending blood flying. Even those red drops of blood were burned away, disappearing with the man's last breath in the sea of blue flames.

The tang of metal and ash reached the party's noses, yet the robed man paid the spray of blood no mind as he withdrew his sword and cast his gaze elsewhere. His face was as dark as the new moon and as cold as ice.

The other man's corpse fell to the ground, and his black dagger rolled away. Seeing that, the robed man's eyes were filled with rage. His coolness from before suddenly shattered, and he violently stomped on the black dagger until it shattered as well.

But his rage quickly subsided, and soon the man's face froze into an emotionless look once again. He circled around to the corpses, stabbing each one to ensure they were well and truly dead.

"That symbol... Skyfolk?" Snake spoke up. She'd spotted the unique design on the back of his robe as soon as he'd turned away from the doorway.

"Skyfolk?! Why is a guy like that—" Aaron was familiar with the Skyfolk. After a moment of thought, he realized the answer was simple: this man had come with a similar goal to their party's. The only differing point was whether he would let the enemy live or die.

Aaron looked at the corpses in the room in panic. The robed man turned... and locked eyes with him.

"Are you with them?" he demanded coolly, with the slightest hint of simmering rage in

his voice. He swung his crossbow around and pointed it at Mira's party.

"No! Please wait. We're not your enemy." Aaron stepped out to let the robed man see him and slowly put his weapon away. Following him, Scorpion and Snake showed themselves as well.

Skyfolk... What were those, again? I feel like I've heard of them before.

Mira remembered the word, but she couldn't remember what it meant. It must have something to do with this man's background. Aaron and the Hidden seemed to think they were on the same side, so after a moment, Mira followed their lead and stepped out from the doorway as well.

Now that the whole party had come through the door, the man glared at them with cold, searching eyes, apparently trying to get a read on them.

"You're not normal adventurers. Who are you?" Relaxing his guard somewhat, the robed man eased his crossbow up so it pointed at the ceiling. It was clear he was still wary.

Aaron took another step forward, surveyed the room a little, and jerked his thumb at the dead man lying next to the man with the robe. "Those are Chimera's goons, aren't they?"

The robed man lowered his eyes just slightly to the man sprawled in a pool of his own blood at his feet. "...Yeah. They are... *were*," he spat, his eyes filled with a complex mixture of ire, hatred, and other unfathomable emotions.

"I thought so." Though he didn't let it show on his face, Aaron was dispirited to hear that. With Chimera Clausen's soldiers dead, the party's objective was impossible. He sighed in irritation. *At least let one live, damn it!*

"You wanna know who we are, right?" continued Aaron. "Well, we came to capture those guys right there. Do you know who we are now?"

Any mission carried the risk of encountering something totally unexpected. Given the look on his face and his status as Skyfolk, one could surmise this man's reason for being here. But this mission was one of the most critical, if not *the* most critical, in all of Isuzu's history. Aaron's frustration was understandable.

But the robed man didn't care about his anger. He thought for a moment. "Isuzu, then?" he finally muttered and sheathed his slender sword, no longer wary. After all, the robed man saw the Isuzu Alliance as a group with the same objectives but different methods.

Feeling the atmosphere ease, Aaron stepped more fully into the room. Scorpion and Snake followed close behind.

What a dreadful sight... Mira shuddered.

Mira only took one glance at the Chimera Clausen troops—bloody, hideously burned corpses with agony plain on what was left of their faces—before she grimaced and turned away. From the moment she decided to fight Chimera Clausen, she knew she might witness death... but she hadn't expected such horror to be the *first* thing she saw.

"Well, there you have it. Mission failed," Aaron sighed.

He swiftly checked each of the ruined corpses for any possible hint of useful information. After that fruitless endeavor, he sighed heavily and glared at the robed man again.

"Guess I should apologize for that," the man said, clearly not apologetic at all, and began walking past them toward the exit. "Well, this isn't much of an apology, but I'll share some information I obtained from this trash." As he passed through the doorway, he stopped. Without turning, he said, "The mercantile country Sentopoli. That's where their home base is."

With that, he disappeared into the darkness without a sound. All that remained was a swish of air like a whisper. Yet in that gentle gust, Mira caught a murmur that sounded like a sorrowful voice.

"Somewhere in Sentopoli? That's not very useful, but I guess it's better than nothing." Aaron shook his head helplessly, took a sheet of paper from his pocket, and dutifully recorded the information.

"We could've gotten more details if we caught them alive..." Scorpion said, her voice lower than usual as she squatted next to one of the corpses. "We can't just go home like this. Let's see if there's anything else left around here."

"Yeah. It's awful here, but if we search carefully, there's still a chance we might find something." Aaron deposited the paper back in his pocket.

"I'll look farther in." Presuming that two would be enough to investigate the corpses, Snake strode toward the control room. Given a choice between manhandling dead bodies and searching houses, only the strangest of people would choose the former.

"I-I'll join you," Mira decided and hurried after Snake, overtaking her and running into the control room first.

* * *

In the center of the control room was a large stone pedestal surrounded by the remnants of destroyed chairs. Beyond it was a row of pillars, all studded with many holes—this was the place where the Spirit King had taken control of the army. The pillars seemed to be arranged like the bars of a cage.

Mira gazed at the pillars at the back of the control room and felt something was wrong. *Wait. Were there holes there before? I recall little orbs being in those places...*

There wasn't much to do here, so she had only come two or three times in-game. Her recollection was fuzzy, but it was clear that those pillars were part of the device meant to control the Spirit King's power.

Snake also made straight for the pillars and looked closely at both the mysterious symbols and the holes. Sifting through her memories of previous visits, Mira circled the pillars as well. It was then that she remembered something that had been bothering her earlier.

She stopped, put a finger to her chin, and asked, "By the way, I've heard the name, but I can't remember. What exactly are Skyfolk, again?"

Snake, who had been intently focused on the holes in the pillars, whipped around and hurried over to Mira to explain.

"Skyfolk are the smallest of the tribes known as the Five Anima. These tribes all practice Animism, the worship of spirits. Each is headed by a high-level spirit. The other four are Earthfolk, Seafolk, Firefolk, and Moonfolk." Snake rattled off everything she could think of even tangentially related to Mira's question. Her lecture finally refreshed Mira's vague memories.

"The Five Anima! Right, right, of course. I remember now. So that's why those Chimera fellows ended up in such a sorry state."

Back during the game days, there were quests that had players fighting alongside Animists, but only the largest faction had appeared at the time. The Five Anima—and their subgroup names, such as the Skyfolk—had been mentioned here and there, but back then, they had yet to come up in detail.

Once upon a time, Mira had researched all of these little worldbuilding elements. She recalled a certain peculiar friend who had introduced her to the term Skyfolk and couldn't help but smile a little. But now that she knew the origin of the robed man, Mira understood the horrifying scene from before.

"To them, Chimera Clausen's actions are the ultimate evil. The death penalty is the only option." Snake looked down in frustration, angry that they had failed to capture even one live Chimera member.

"It's an extreme way of thought. All the more dangerous because they're skilled enough to make it happen."

Mira frowned, thinking of the state of the room they had just passed through. It wasn't clear whether the four Chimera Clausen felled by the robed man were significant players in the organization or not, but they were at least capable of reaching the top of the Citadel of Scales. If the robed man could take them all on and win, apparently unscathed, he must wield overwhelming power.

Snake nodded in agreement and, after thinking a moment, spoke again. "But there is one odd thing. That man had the emblem of a priest on his cheek. It is taboo for priests of the Five Anima to kill. The Five Anima have a special unit, called the Sin Quellers, charged with executing those who disturb the natural order. What we just saw is normally their job."

To the devout, the priest's actions would be an enormous stain. If what Snake said was true, it would be no exaggeration to say that his crime was just as severe as Chimera's.

"Hrmm... Maybe he had a goal so important that this was the only option," Mira wondered aloud.

"Maybe so. Either way, it's too late now."

“Right.”

That man’s abhorrence of Chimera had oozed from every pore of his body. When Mira had crossed paths with him, she had caught a glimpse of some emotion beyond mere religious faith.

Mira and Snake both lapsed into thoughtful silence, and the pair split up to search the control room.

CHAPTER 19

SNAKE AND MIRA searched the room, but found no especially useful clues. After several more fruitless minutes, they left in hopes of better news from the two examining the corpses outside.

In the war room, Aaron and Scorpion were crouched down looking at some items lined up on the floor.

“How did it go?” Mira asked Aaron while Snake and Scorpion had a quiet discussion.

Aaron turned his face slightly to her and answered, “Well, take a look,” before returning his gaze to the floor. Before them were the possessions of the dead Chimera Clausen troops: three short swords covered in strange symbols, several vials of liquid, a cloth with magic circles, eight maps, and a stack of dungeon permits.

After looking them over, Mira took one item in hand. “There are eight maps, but it seems as though there are only two variations.” She unfolded the map and saw that it was far more detailed than the ones she had used in-game. Unable to remember what it was a map *of*, she furrowed her delicate brows and searched her memories.

“Yeah. One is a map of here, the Citadel of Scales. The other is—”

Before Aaron could answer, Mira finally recalled the dungeon that fit the layout of the second map. With a glint in her eye, she said its name: “The Illusory Corridor.”

“That’s right. All four members of Chimera had one of each map on hand. Those are their permits to the Illusory Corridor, too.” Aaron gestured with his eyes to the cards on the floor.

“All four of them had the same?” Mira picked one up curiously. If they were acting as a group, one permit should be enough.

“Yeah, one of each. Chimera goons usually act alone, so it’s not that strange. These four probably all left for this mission individually.”

“I see. That would make them stand out less, I suppose.”

"Exactly. Oh, hey, how was it in there? Find anything?" Aaron looked at Mira expectantly.

She sat in front of the dead men's belongings and shook her head. "Nothing in particular, I'm afraid. The only unusual thing was that the orbs usually set in the pillars are gone. But it's impossible to tell whether that was their doing." Mira put the map back in its spot on the floor and sighed in disappointment.

"Hm... The pillars, huh?" Aaron mumbled to himself. After thinking awhile, he scooped up a bundle of papers and held it out to Mira. "Take a look at these."

Mira took it and flipped through the pages. "Sketches of the pillars?"

Every sheet in the bundle was familiar—they were drawings of the control room Mira had searched moments ago. There were dozens of them, drawn from every possible angle, including a bird's-eye view. Numbers in the corner of each page indicated what angle they were drawn from compared to the top-down sketch.

"Seems like it. I don't remember anything about orbs, but if these pillars have something to do with the Spirit King, then you must be right." Aaron grabbed another bundle of papers and flipped through it. There were similar sketches of the pillars in this stack, as well.

"Are those drawings of the same room again?" Mira peeked at the one he held and compared it to her own. It seemed to be drawn by another hand, as the style and angles differed. However, the reference numbers were shared between them.

"Yeah. There are two more like it. I don't know what these pictures mean, but hopefully the fact that we have them now instead of them will set them back."

"Indeed."

Even if Mira and the others couldn't tell what the sketches were for, they must have been necessary for Chimera's objective of hunting the Spirit King. Mira put the bundle of papers back in its spot and flipped through the others.

They all had different styles, but they were all sketches of the pillars.

"Hrmm. Shall we take a quick look?" Mira stood and headed back to the control room with a bundle in hand. Aaron, excited that Mira seemed to have hit upon something,

followed silently.

After a fresh look around the control room, Mira once again scanned the sketches. She matched the numbers on them to the bird's-eye view diagram, stood in those positions, and compared her view to the pages. She repeated this process for ten minutes and change until she finally muttered, "I see." She turned and flashed Aaron a confident smirk.

"You look like you've figured something out," he said.

"Only a hypothesis," Mira answered and folded herself down onto the floor next to Aaron. "Put simply, these sketches were made to get an accurate view of the positions of the orbs and where they fit into the pillars."

Mira and Aaron sat facing each other. After glancing up at him to make sure he was following, she shifted her gaze to the paper in her hands.

"The positions of the orbs, huh? Does that mean they were important, then?"

"Right. Actually, now that I'm looking more closely... this is *precisely* my forte. It seems that each of those pillars represents a spirit."

"Represents a spirit? What do you mean—I can't make much sense of it." Aaron stared at the sketch with a frown. He had the natural gift of being able to remember something perfectly after seeing it once, but as spirits were invisible, his knowledge of them was only surface level.

"That's understandable. I didn't realize it at first, either. But upon closer inspection, this is something I'm rather well acquainted with," Mira added with a triumphant smile.

Fighters couldn't see them, after all. But as a summoner, Mira had seen them many times—and had to fret over them constantly.

"What do you know about skill trees?" Mira began, then launched into her explanation. A common concept in games, they were a display of the complex, divergent ways in which one could develop their skills. They'd existed in *Ark Earth Online*.

"Skill tree? I think I've heard some intellectual types mention that, but I don't know much about it."

"I see," Mira murmured, opening the bundle of papers and tossing some out in front of her. "Put in broad terms, a skill tree is a simplified visual representation of the many routes one could take from the bottom to the top. This should help make it clear."

Mira pointed at one of the pillar holes in a sketch. "We summoners understand the latent abilities of contracted spirits through skill trees. Looking at this again, I can see that the holes on this pillar are laid out in a skill tree's shape. There are some I don't know mixed in, but then again, I have not made a contract with *every* spirit out there."

At this point, Mira stood up and touched a few of the control room pillars. "This is wind, this is fire, and this is water. But I have no idea about this one, this one, or this one!" She smacked the last few pillars in irritation. As a summoner, a mage attended by spirits, she couldn't stand the fact that there were spirits she did not yet grasp.

Though they were in different fields, Aaron sympathized with both Mira's pride and frustration. At the same time, he was amazed by the number of spirits she claimed to have grasped. Having grasp of a spirit essentially meant having made a contract with it. It meant Mira already had dozens of spirits serving her.

"What an amazing world we live in..." Aaron murmured with heartfelt joy.

So there was a meaning to the positions of the holes, after all. With this lead, Mira and Aaron narrowed down the possibilities.

* * *

After exchanging ideas for nearly ten minutes, Mira and Aaron came to a hypothesis they agreed on: The orbs themselves were not the most important factor in the barrier suppressing the Spirit King's influence. It was the *positions* of the orbs.

Perhaps Chimera had tried stealing the orbs themselves earlier, or had created something similar and realized the barrier wasn't functioning properly. From there, they must have discerned the meaning of the holes' positions and sent people in to investigate. That would explain the detailed sketches of the pillars.

Armed with this new theory of the case, Mira and Aaron returned to the war room and shared their findings with Scorpion and Snake.

"The four sets of sketches must have been insurance—they expected us to interfere." Aaron looked around at the charred corpses, and chuckled darkly, "I bet they didn't

expect *this*, though."

"All of them were elites, and they must have thought they had a better chance since they sent a bunch," Scorpion said. "Chimera members may work alone, but since they were all on the same mission, they all wound up meeting the same dead end." Now with a new understanding of the four sets of sketches, she looked down at the nearest body.

These corpses were in an awful state, but they were all fresh. The one Scorpion was looking at and his compatriots were all killed at nearly the same time. These people visiting the same place for the same reason had died by the same person's hand. Those sketches would never find their way back to Chimera, and they wouldn't learn how to seal the Spirit King.

"Now, what do we do? If they don't get the sketches, they'll send more people. We could wait here and make sure we capture them this time around, but..." Aaron glanced at the others searchingly. The mission Isuzu gave them was to capture Chimera Clausen elites. But due to third party interference, their mission had ended in failure.

What next? That was up to the four entrusted with this mission.

To send more elites, Chimera would first need to learn their plan had failed. That decision would only be made after the expected date for the delivery of these sketches had passed.

The most efficient path forward would be to capture whoever the sketches were meant to be delivered to rather than waiting around here. Given the existence of the maps and permits, it was fairly obvious where that person might be found.

"I say we go to the Illusory Corridor," Mira said. "If they had permits on hand, then they must have been planning to go there directly from here. Why don't we deliver the sketches in their place, hm? Sounds like a fun idea to me." She rifled through a bundle of sketches and grinned far more evilly than should have been possible for such a tiny person.

"Yeah. That might be the best plan." A sly grin crept onto Aaron's face, almost as evil as Mira's. Snake had quietly opened a map of the Illusory Corridor and was already memorizing the structure.

"But a team of five went to the Illusory Corridor straight from headquarters, right?"

Can't we just leave it to them?" Scorpion trusted her comrades from Isuzu to a fault.

Legend had it that the Spirit King resided in the deepest depths of the Illusory Corridor. It was another of the three places the Hidden had been sent to.

"I would like to, but things are moving a bit too fast," Mira replied. "If these elites were planning to go straight there with these sketches, they must already be putting the finishing touches on their plan. Their hands may be closing around the Spirit King's throat as we speak."

"Agreed. Their mission here must have been to gather information for the sake of sealing his power. Little Miss Mira is right: if Chimera's plans are in their final stages, they're sure to go into the Illusory Corridor in force."

Aaron picked up and opened a map of the Illusory Corridor. These sketches could be the key to Chimera's plans. Mira, Aaron, and Snake had deduced all this from the belongings of the dead.

"Umm... So basically, they'll be putting so much into this mission that five people won't be able to handle them?" Having understood the plan only in the simplest terms, Scorpion cocked her head and looked to Mira and Aaron for answers.

"More or less, yeah," Aaron confirmed and picked up another stack of paper. He added another hypothesis. "This is assuming they've only commissioned four of these though. If one used the four here as bait and escaped, then there will be a fifth set of sketches."

If they disposed of the sketches, they could stop Chimera Clausen's plans in their tracks right here. But Chimera had been nothing if not cautious and thorough up to this point. It was certainly possible that another set had slipped by.

Mira cast her eye once again over the four corpses littering the war room floor and recalled how they'd met their end.

"This is just my opinion, but I think a fifth is unlikely," she said.

"Oh? What's your logic?" Aaron asked, deeply interested.

"When that Skyfolk man learned who we were, he gladly gave us that information and left. Snake tells me he's a priest, and for priests, murder is strictly forbidden. Yet he

still dirtied his own hands." Mira recalled the man's face and added, "Do you remember the look on his face?"

"...I get it," Aaron agreed, impressed. The long-robed man, with his ice-cold expression and eyes sharp as daggers—Aaron recalled the understandable malice on his face. "He wouldn't have stopped to talk to us if he was pursuing another, right?"

"Exactly." Mira nodded, satisfied.

It was decided—they would go to the Illusory Corridor. Before they left, the party disposed of the dead's belongings. Scorpion recovered the daggers meant to harm spirits and wrapped them in white cloth, Snake used necromantic arts to burn the corpses, and Aaron tossed the sketches into the fire, where they curled to ash.

Mira left them to it. She walked back to the control room and stood in front of the central pedestal. It was an emergency evacuation device.

It had a strict usage requirement: one needed the blessing of at least five spirits. As far as Mira could tell, it showed no signs of recent use. If there was a fifth person, they didn't exit through here.

* * *

When they left the Citadel of Scales, the sky was already blooming with stars. The Illusory Corridor lay over a mountain range and to the east. It would probably take a full day of travel by flying wagon.

Mira's party arrived back at the town of Sarut well after dark. They drove the wagon via land to the city's outskirts and took flight from there, all to get to their destination as soon as possible.

By midnight, they had already been flying east for several hours. Having cleared the mountains, the wagon touched down on the shore of a lake surrounded by a dense thicket.

The wagon was extremely comfortable—so comfortable that one could sleep soundly while riding. But with four people stuffed inside, it was too cramped to stretch out. They decided making camp was a better option.

Aaron was used to life on the road, and Scorpion and Snake often traveled solo. As

well-appointed as the wagon was, they found it easier to relax with their feet on terra firma.

Mira summoned a Holy Knight to guard them overnight and laid out her own futon inside the wagon. She slept soundly within. Scorpion slept atop the roof, and Snake—who felt cozy in narrow spaces—made her bed under it. Aaron stretched out on the driver's seat.

Next to the sleeping quartet, the lake was as calm as an innocent heart, reflecting the distant, starry sky. It was deep and gentle, allowing the mind to relax and fly up into the heavens.

The water's surface rippled ever so slightly, and a shadow stole close to the wagon. It slowly approached until it entered the Holy Knight's perception range. The Holy Knight did not react.

The shadow flitted by their armored guard and passed the sleeping Aaron. Then it slipped, ever so quietly, into the cabin...

EX

“SO WE FOUND this big space below it. But you gotta go through the bottom of the lake. You need diving gear. You can read the report for the details.”

Luminaria sank into the couch in Solomon’s office, exhausted. She had joined the investigation into the demon Mira encountered in Nebrapolis, and she had just gotten back after what turned out to be a long job.

There was no guarantee that a second demon wouldn’t appear there. She had joined the team to guard the investigators and dispel any fears of a second demon appearance.

After Luminaria’s explanation, Solomon skimmed the report in his hands. “Okay, got it.” He asked the most pressing question: “Any signs of another demon?”

“If there is one, I sure didn’t sense it. Didn’t seem like anyone at all has been there since Mira tore up the place, demon or otherwise.”

“Then it was a demon with no lackeys, huh? I guess we can relax a little, then. Thanks for lending a hand.” Solomon smiled brightly at Luminaria in thanks.

Luminaria grumbled about finally getting some sleep and let out an enormous yawn. But just as soon as she was getting comfortable on the plush couch, there was a heavy knock at the door.

“Your Majesty, there’s an emergency!” a woman shrieked. “Near the border, a fiend... a fiend has appeared!”

“Aw, what the hell?”

Solomon and Luminaria looked at each other. Then came another rap at the door, this one much calmer. The voice from behind the door was even and familiar. “Your Majesty, there is an urgent situation outside.”

“Enter,” commanded Solomon with great dignity. The door opened, and three people

entered his office: messenger Karl, a woman, and Suleiman.

"Apologies for Rio's lack of decorum," Karl said. "Please don't blame her; I should have trained her better." He bowed in apology, and Rio followed suit.

"I am very sorry," Rio apologized, her voice trembling.

According to Karl, the woman had panicked due to her lack of experience as a messenger. But Luminaria found herself more interested in the dread so clearly evident on her face.

Karl bowed again, indicating a return to the business at hand, and read his report. Just as the woman had screamed out moments ago, a fiend had appeared in the northeastern forest near the border. What's more, the fiend was a Gorey Marquis.

"The surrounding towns are taking emergency measures, and the soldiers posted there are in a defensive formation. We don't have an accurate report of how many townsfolk were wounded yet. However..."

Karl paused for a moment before continuing. According to him, a merchant caravan had unfortunately bumped straight into the fiend. They had abandoned their cargo and fled north. The terrain to the north was rough, with many mountains and caverns. Fortunately, there was an exorcist among their bodyguards. If they had made it into a cavern and put up a barrier, they might still be alive. But unfortunately, at this point, no one could confirm the caravan's safety.

Thus concluded Karl's report. Behind him, Rio looked ready to burst into tears.

"A Gorey Marquis, huh? That's an Ark continent fiend..." Solomon muttered thoughtfully. After a moment, he asked Karl if there was any unusual fog around the forest.

His instinct was spot on—that portion of forest had been blanketed in deep fog since the day before the fiend's appearance.

Fog had appeared, and monsters from other regions spewed from it. It was another distortion in space caused by the loss of the spirit who normally corrected stagnation of mana there... the very same phenomenon Mira had reported.

Solomon had countermeasures prepared for such events, and quickly ordered

Suleiman to deploy them. “That leaves the fiend and searching for those caravan survivors. It’ll take some time to form hunting and search parties.”

Fiends were created when animals awakened to magic and gained great power. They were extremely powerful enemies, difficult to cull without the help of skilled adventurers. If you hoped to defeat one, it paid to be prudent and carefully select the ideal party to confront it. Adding on the time it would take for the adventurers themselves to prepare, assembling the team would take at least a day. More days would be required to transport the hunting party to the nation’s border, and it would also take time to warn neighboring countries and get permission to move troops close to their borders.

“It’ll be four days, at best...” Solomon sighed. Government work came with so much annoying bureaucracy.

Even if they rushed, it would take four days for a hunting party to reach the border. Every day that passed reduced the likelihood of the missing merchants’ survival.

Karl’s face clouded over. The quivering Rio collapsed and began sobbing. Karl bowed deeply and apologized again for Rio.

Luminaria, who had remained silent until now, stood up. She sidled up to Rio, wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and said gently, “You’ve been in a state for a while now, honey. Wanna tell me why?”

Either because she’d been finally given permission or because she’d simply reached the limit of what she could bear, Rio wept even harder as she explained. Her family was among the merchant caravan attacked by the fiend.

As soon as Rio finished speaking, Luminaria turned to Solomon politely. “Your Majesty, might I recommend a cover-up instead of a hunting party?” That could only mean one thing: she would be leaving to deal with the fiend herself.

Wise Man Luminaria was currently the strongest military force in the Kingdom of Alcait. Her influence was enormous. If she went out in battle—even the smallest of skirmishes—it would set off alarm bells in the neighboring countries.

But as long as her action was limited to internal affairs, Solomon could cover it up. As such, he was prepared to do just that in an emergency.

"Got it. Fiend's all yours." Solomon nodded solemnly. A ray of hope shone on Rio's face. She was still new around the palace, so she didn't know what this "cover-up" truly meant. But she understood the most important part. *Fiend's all yours*, Solomon had said, directed to none other than the Wise Man Luminaria—what could be more reassuring?

"Thank you. Thank you!" Rio collapsed into Luminaria's arms, thanking her over and over.

"It'll be okay," Luminaria whispered as she stroked her hair.

Things progressed quickly. Solomon ordered the messengers to prepare for the Azure Sorcerer's departure. Karl and Rio rejoiced and sped out of the office to do just that. The "Azure Sorcerer," of course, was none other than Luminaria herself—the code name she used to act in secret within the country's borders.

* * *

"You seemed pretty beat. Are you sure you're fine with this?" Solomon asked when they were alone again.

"It's cool. Cool, cool, cool. All I did in Nebrapolis was stand around, anyway. Gotta get a little violence in, y'know?"

Luminaria had joined in the trip to Ancient Temple Nebrapolis as a glorified bodyguard, but as no demons appeared, she'd been bored with nothing to do the entire time. Waiting around idle was exhausting in its own way.

"I guess I can send you off with a clean conscience, then."

"Hey, you can thank that Rio girl for crying in front of me!" Luminaria joked and took out a bottle. She opened it and emptied the liquid within it over her head. It was a special hair dye created from magical implement research, and before long, her striking crimson hair had turned a brilliant blue.

"Don't go too wild out there, okay?" Solomon warned with a chuckle. The victims of Luminaria's collateral damage were innumerable—yet perhaps due to her heroism, this never seemed to cause problems or lead to the spread of rumors.

"I know, I know," Luminaria answered with an airy wave of her hand. Hair taken care

of, she next saw to her clothes. She exchanged her rich attire for a plain robe and adeptly tied up her long hair with a white clip.

With this, her transformation into the Azure Sorcerer was complete. In contrast to her usual flashy appearance, she now looked rather subdued. It would be hard for anyone to tell it was her at a glance.

“Okay. I’m off then.”

“Good luck. I’ll have the patrols gather what information they can.”

“Cool. I’ll be waiting to hear.”

After giving herself a once-over in the mirror, Luminaria hotfooted it down to the garage.

* * *

On the first floor of the royal castle, Karl and Rio waited in front of the garage. Karl bowed to the disguised Luminaria, but Rio was at first shocked by Luminaria’s appearance and Karl’s actions. Luckily, she was quick on the uptake and soon bowed deeply herself.

“Everything is ready,” Karl said. “This way, please.”

As Karl went to open the door to the garage, Rio steeled herself and stepped forward. “Please—take me with you! I can use scouting magic! It’s more accurate since I’m blood-related, too! Please!” Rio was desperate, clearly worried for her family.

Karl admonished her for being selfish. She would only slow Luminaria down.

But Rio repeated, “Please...” her shoulders trembling. Though he grimaced guiltily at her stubbornness, Karl looked to Luminaria, leaving the decision up to her.

“Sure. You can come with me, sweetheart.” She was off to fight a fiend. It would be a dangerous venture, but Luminaria gladly assented. If she had any guiding principle at all, it was that she always accepted sincere requests from women.

“Th-thank you!” Rio was stunned for a moment, but she promptly bowed again with tears in her eyes.

"Right this way," Karl repeated. Though he didn't show it on his face, he was relieved.

Their destination was the front of the garage. That was where the carriage was kept for when Luminaria acted as the Azure Sorcerer—or it should have been. But today, Luminaria spotted something unusual in its place.

"Wait, you want us to ride *this*?"

"Yes. His Majesty has asked that this be dealt with as swiftly as possible, so we've prepared this transport for you. It is the fastest one available."

Before them was an armored FAV standing tall, its engine rumbling and ready to go. Luminaria recalled Mira's former complaints as she gazed upon its crude exterior.

Garrett leapt out of the vehicle and saluted. He looked as happy as a clam. "I've been waiting for you, Lumin—Azure Sorcerer!"

"Hiya. We're counting on you to get us there in one piece. *Safely.*" Luminaria hoped he took the hint.

She knew it was futile when Garrett replied, "Leave it to me! I'll have you there in no time! Step right up, Azure Sorcerer!"

Garrett opened the door and motioned her in. Left with no choice, Luminaria sighed and entered.

A major change had occurred inside the car. The back row, which had once been a sofa, was now a row of bucket seats, like some kind of a fighter jet.

"Wow. It's changed a lot, hasn't it?" Luminaria mused, eliciting an ecstatic grin from Garrett.

"It sure has! This is His Majesty's new design, based on Miss Mira's review of the previous one!"

Her review after she'd been bruised up by it. That meant it was probably *better* now, if not *good*. Luminaria hardened her resolve and sat. It was Rio's first time inside such a vehicle, and she looked around the interior curiously. Every surface was covered in cutting-edge technomancy, so there were many things she'd never seen.

Garrett jumped into the driver's seat and started up the FAV with a practiced hand. The engine roared—the kind of noise that was... oddly worrying. Rio looked tense, and clutched her seat with a vague sense of impending doom.

"It's time to put the pedal to the metal!" After turning to ensure that his two passengers were seated securely, Garrett floored the accelerator.

The g-forces of the sudden acceleration shoved them back into their seats. When it came time to turn, Garrett cut the steering wheel hard. Luminaria and Rio were thrown all about the vehicle.

Luminaria was beginning to understand why Mira had been so angry about it. *I've already got some complaints to make myself.*

After jostling them enough for a lifetime, Garrett finally reached a straightaway. Luminaria managed to right herself and asked Rio, who was sprawled on top of her with unfocused eyes, "Hey, you okay?"

"S-sorry..." Rio sprang back as soon as she realized she was hugging Luminaria.

Amid this commotion, Garrett turned around to check on them. "Oh. It has seat belts, so please buckle up. It should be on the seat there at your hip."

"Tell us before you hit the gas!" Luminaria grumbled as she checked next to her seat. Something protruded there. When pulled, it indeed turned out to be a seatbelt. "This should make things a little safer at least."

Solomon had designed it, so the layout was familiar to Luminaria as well. She showed Rio where the seatbelt was and fastened her own. Rio imitated her and managed to snap in safely.

Not long after, there was a sudden curve. Despite the centrifugal force working against them, the seatbelts kept them from another tumble.

"Incredible." Rio was impressed by how the device kept her in place.

Meanwhile, Luminaria glared daggers into the back of Garrett's head as the vehicle rattled on. She recalled Mira's complaints from before.

Heh. He does need to go to driving school, huh?

Sudden acceleration, sudden braking, sudden curves, and much more. So much of Garrett's driving would lose him points during a driving test. Luminaria chuckled... Mira was absolutely right.

After that rocket start, the armored FAV zoomed at jaw-dropping speeds toward the border town.

* * *

Comfort aside, the speed of the FAV was certainly incredible. It was sturdy enough that difficult terrain was no impediment; it rolled over any small obstacles in its way. Garrett took the shortest possible path—regardless of the danger involved—and they reached their destination in a mere hour.

"We made it out alive..."

"Yeah..."

Luminaria and Rio stumbled out of the vehicle, pale and nauseous.

"Oh, Natalie, you're running just as wonderfully as ever." Oblivious to the plight of his passengers, Garrett had a big smile as he rubbed his cheek against the vehicle. Even as a woman of specific tastes, Luminaria wanted nothing to do with that spectacle.

Before the group stood an impressive stone structure. It was a patrol outpost. A single officer was stationed in front of the gate.

"The Azure Sorcerer, I see? Right this way, please." He saluted and opened the door as they approached.

Luminaria and Rio left Garrett alone with his beloved and followed the official into the chief officer's admin office. Solomon had already contacted them, so they were able to update Luminaria's group on the situation as soon as they arrived.

First off, the evacuation of the surrounding villages and towns was already eighty percent complete. There were no casualties except for the aforementioned caravan.

The fiend itself had made no major moves yet, so the observation stations could not report any exact movements. However, they were certain that it was still in the northern forest.

The chief officer brought them over to a map of the area and indicated where it had been encountered, where it had last been seen, locations where its tracks had been investigated, and where it was likely lurking now.

"Given the habits of Gorey Marquis fiends, we believe that it's hiding around here and waiting for its prey to come out of safety," the chief officer said. Its prey was almost certainly the missing caravan.

"Dad... and my brother..." As soon as she heard that, Rio started murmuring and shaking with anxiety.

"Is something wrong?" the chief officer asked, noticing her reaction.

Luminaria gently consoled Rio and explained that her family was in the caravan.

"Oh, I see. I apologize, that was insensitive on my part. I'm very sorry." He looked pained. "But this is a ray of hope, too."

The fiend was waiting for them to come out into the open. That meant that the people in the caravan were still alive, and also that they were well hidden enough that the fiend couldn't find them. They couldn't leave since the fiend was watching, but as long as they stayed put, they were safe. The only question was whether they had enough food and water to hold out until help came. Fortunately, the Azure Sorcerer had arrived far sooner than expected.

The chief officer theorized that the missing caravan's likelihood of survival was now extremely high. "The Gorey Marquis is about to go from hunter to hunted. Everything's gonna be okay."

"Your magic will be a big help," Luminaria said, smiling at Rio. "Let's find them and give 'em a big surprise."

"Okay!" Rio, who was on the verge of tears yet again, recovered her energy and her hope.

The chief officer had left one thing unsaid, though Luminaria understood it well: although the caravan had successfully gone to ground, depending on the circumstances, it might already be too late for some of its members.

* * *

Leaving the patrol outpost, Luminaria and Rio ventured north, into the forest, and traveled to the coordinates where the fiend had last been spotted. Though Rio's scouting magic was more accurate when used to find members of her own family, its range was not especially wide. And unlike Luminaria, Rio had mana limitations to contend with. They needed to narrow down the area before they could search effectively.

"I feel something! But it's so weak that I can't tell which direction..." Rio used her magic as soon as they arrived. She had gotten a response, but it was too faint to discern their position.

Weak reactions. Either the target was dead, or some outside influence was jamming their signal. Rio's face clouded over from fear, but Luminaria was quick to reassure her.

"It's bound to be because they're behind a barrier," Luminaria soothed her. "Their exorcist must be doing a hell of a job."

It was true—barriers could also interfere with and jam scouting magic just enough that family would only get a faint reaction. If they were still alive, then they must have a barrier strong enough to hide their presence from the fiend.

"*My* magic wouldn't even have been able to tell which direction," Luminaria added. "You're doing great."

Scouting magic was affected more by one's relationship with the target than by skill, so Luminaria herself would've been hard-pressed to locate the caravan group. Rio's efforts were worthy of congratulation.

"I'm sorry, Lady Luminaria. I need to stay strong, but..." Rio was thrilled at the praise, but also realized that Luminaria was trying to make her feel better. She pulled herself together and refocused her magic.

"It's okay. It's normal to be worried. You're doing a tremendous job keeping it together so far." Luminaria put a hand on Rio's head. She truly was soft when it came to women.

"Th-thank you very much!" Though a little unsure how to respond to Luminaria's overt kindness, Rio blushed happily.

Gazing at her, Luminaria said, "Also, that was fine just now, but make sure you call me

Azure Sorcerer in front of others. I'm undercover, you know."

"Oh! I'll be more careful!" Rio corrected herself, her face bright red.

* * *

Relying on the general direction gleaned from Rio's scouting magic, the two walked deeper into the forest. As far as they could see, the time-space distortion wasn't especially large. Most of the forest had sunlight filtering through the trees. The perfect setting for a nice, relaxing stroll in the woods.

Yet once inside the forest proper, the atmosphere abruptly changed. As they proceeded north, the woods were dripping with murderous malice—any person with even a little bit of training would be terrified to their very core. The forest was unnaturally quiet, and as they walked they heard no chirp of animal nor buzz of insect. Only the wind winding through the trees broke the silence.

They couldn't know exactly where, but the fiend was somewhere nearby. Luminaria was certain of it, but she stepped forth without fear. Rio was *full* of fear, so she clung to Luminaria's robe and tried as hard as she could to keep up.

After walking for some time, they came to a clearing. Or more accurately, a place that *had been cleared*. All of the trees within a ten-meter radius of the clearing's center had been mowed down as if they were blades of grass.

"Looks like the merchants came through here," Luminaria noted.

Burlap sacks were scattered here and there, all badly torn—likely a portion of the caravan's cargo. Based on the scattered items, the sacks had mainly contained ingredients for medicines and the like.

The soft ground and the fallen tree trunks in the clearing were marred by hideous claw marks. The fiend had rampaged and attacked the caravan here... and it was clearly a very one-sided battle.

"A-ah..." Rio imagined what might've happened and went silent, trembling.

Luminaria analyzed the awful scene coolly. "Rio, look. There are no bloodstains at all despite all these claw marks. And the contents of the bags are all things that contain a lot of mana. They must have taken advantage of the fiend's natural attraction to mana

to use their cargo as bait while they escaped. Looks like some people in that caravan have good heads on their shoulders.”

Luminaria was fairly certain that the traces of the fiend’s rampage here were the result of it attacking goods, not people. No matter how horrid the sight might be, there wasn’t a single drop of blood to be found—just a bunch of torn bags. Using mana-rich items as bait was a proven tactic. The caravan’s safety was looking likelier by the minute.

Rio’s face lit up as hope bloomed again. “It must be my brother! My brother always idolized adventurers, so he studied monsters and fiends in great detail.”

“How reliable! I bet he’s doing a great job of hiding.”

Using mana-rich items as bait didn’t work if a fiend was in its battle state, but if it was in its pursuit state, then it was an effective means of deceiving them. Based on this scene, someone from the caravan certainly knew that.

I think we can avoid the worst result now.

The Gorey Marquis lingering in the area, an exorcist among the group, and now this knowledge about how to escape from fiends—all of these facts pointed to the caravan’s survival. The only question remaining was which they would encounter first—the caravan or the fiend.

With real hope in their hearts, Luminaria and Rio stepped deeper into the forest, where the air was thick.

* * *

As they proceeded, monsters began to show themselves. But instead of running to attack Luminaria and Rio, they seemed to be rushing *away* from something. Among them were monsters that would usually never show up in this environment. No matter—every one of them blazed to ash the moment Luminaria raised her hand, victim of her overwhelmingly fast magic casts. Rio watched her godlike sorcery, fascinated, and gradually forgot her fear of the monsters.

They eventually arrived at the hilly northern edge of the forest. The geography here was marked by harsh changes in elevation, with rivers, waterfalls, cliffs, and caves of all sizes occasionally blocking their path.

I bet she'd summon Pegasus and fly right over all of this.

While she thought enviously of Mira's many modes of transportation, Luminaria cradled Rio in her arms and easily hopped over the high precipices. This technique was a combination of Ethereal Arts that allowed her to nullify gravity for a few seconds and wind sorcery cast at her feet.

Experiencing these leaps and bounds for the first time, Rio was surprised into silence. Luminaria couldn't fault her for that. Gravity control was an Ethereal Art that took great concentration on its own. Doing it while carrying someone was an even more incredible feat.

However, Luminaria did it as if it were as natural as breathing. Rio gazed at her in admiration. Truly, the gap between a normal mage and a Wise Man was vast.

* * *

"I feel them nearby," Rio reported about an hour into the forest trek. She believed the caravan was hiding somewhere close by.

"Where do you think? I definitely can't tell from looking." Even Luminaria couldn't find any traces of their magic. The caravan's exorcist must have been skilled. But they were definitely nearby. The duo followed the faint responses from Rio's scouting magic, hoping to find any caves they might be hiding in.

They checked several caves, yet found nothing. They tried another, and another, until ahead of them, a man suddenly appeared out of thin air.

"Are you two here to save us?" The man stared at Rio—or more accurately, her armband—and spoke. She was currently wearing the uniform of a messenger, so the band on her arm bore the Alcait Kingdom's coat of arms. It seemed the man believed her to be a civilian member of the army.

"Yes, sir. I am a trainee messenger of Alcait, Rio."

"And I'm the Azure Sorcerer, an adventurer working with her."

The man was visibly relieved. "Ooh, so you're the legendary Azure Sorcerer? I hear you're as strong as they get. I'm Harold, leader of this merchant caravan. Thank you for coming to our rescue."

The escape must have been a desperate one. His clothes were coming apart at the seams despite their obviously high quality. Even in their current state, his taste in clothes marked him as a merchant.

Harold bowed his head in prayer and asked expectantly, “How long until the main force gets here?” He seemed to think Luminaria and Rio were an advance party.

“It’s just us, buddy,” Luminaria said outright.

“It can’t be... Does the kingdom plan to let this fiend run wild?” Harold looked both disappointed and flabbergasted. Fiend appearances were the highest priority in the kingdom. That was why hunting parties were always sent swiftly.

Harold had expected that, if rescue did come, it would be after the fiend was dead. And he believed, quite correctly, that would take at least a week. When Luminaria and Rio came earlier than anticipated, he assumed they were there to confirm the existence of survivors and lead the hunting party.

No such luck. The only ones who had come were a single adventurer and a military civilian.

“We’ve seen the fiend. It’s an awful, horrifying creature. It’s not something we can let roam free. You need to form a hunting party at once!” he pleaded, face blanching with terror. “It’s waiting nearby for us to run out of energy. And it won’t stop here, either! It’ll go to nearby villages and towns! We’re powerless in the face of that monster, but if you go now, we might still make it in time!”

One could only imagine the horror he’d seen, but to his credit, he seemed to care about the wider damage the creature would do even more than his immediate safety.

While Harold grew desperate, Luminaria was totally nonchalant. “Nah, I got this. I told them to just send me instead.”

“Instead? Listen, I hear that you are incredibly powerful. But think about the enemy this time. It’s a Gorey Marquis, one of the most fiendish of fiends! I don’t think you can do this alone...”

The Azure Sorcerer was a powerful adventurer, but her name was only known within the Kingdom of Alcait. Merchants heard many rumors—if she were that good, they’d be talking about her beyond the kingdom’s borders, too. There was no reason for her

to get cocky!

Harold's line of thought was common sense... but Rio knew the truth of the Azure Sorcerer.

"Excuse me... I think the Azure Sorcerer will be fine on her own."

Harold had no idea what she was thinking, so he was even more perplexed by Rio's unfounded confidence.

Just then, a great cloud of birds flew up out of the forest, spreading their wings wide to flee into the sky. Not a moment after, they began falling back into the forest, dropping one by one.

"It's found us! It's here! Hurry, this way!" Harold panicked and screamed before jumping through the cliff wall.

It seemed they'd indeed found the caravan.

"Aha. They're using both a barrier and an illusion, eh?" Luminaria was impressed at the skill behind that magic.

"The fiend will never find them like that!" Rio was surprised by the excellent concealment, and soon realized something: her family must be alive!

"Let's get this over with. Lucky this thing saved us time by coming to meet me." Luminaria looked toward the forest and smirked fearlessly as she listened to the approaching earthquakes. "I feel something big coming..."

An uncanny aura was clearly pressing out from the forest directly toward them. The pressure was too much for Rio to withstand, forcing the newbie to back away.

The aura and pressure grew greater by the second, until the waves of magic were almost palpable. Knowing this was something normal people couldn't withstand, Luminaria stood to face it head-on.

Harold poked his head out from the barrier and shouted, now hysterical, "Hey! Hurry and get in here! Run!"

At that moment, it showed itself—the fiend, a Gorey Marquis. Even an A-Rank

adventurer would be a fool to challenge it alone. It was a beast so powerful that even a group of six would struggle to defeat it. Its form was as majestic as a lion, while its fangs and claws were the ominous black of dried blood. Its body was more than seven meters long, and its blood-red irises looked down at Luminaria from on high.

“Ooh, a big boy.”

Fiends of the same type could vary in strength depending on their growth. Luminaria took a look at this particular Gorey Marquis and judged that it was much larger than the average. It was an overwhelming beast that would take at least twelve people to defeat.

Twelve *normal* people.

She glared at it, sizing up the giant. The Gorey Marquis glowered back at her.

Its roar resounded through the forest as it locked eyes with the sorcerer. The sudden blast of sound was like a shockwave. The distance between them was still great, and Luminaria, Rio, and Harold all watched as the trees around the Gorey Marquis were blown to smithereens.

“Wh-whoooa!” Harold was shaken to his core by the sight.

“Ack!” Rio froze up from terror.

And with good reason. The Gorey Marquis was a truly terrifying creature. Now that the forest had been cleared, there was nowhere to hide from its pure malice.

A single roar. That was its prelude to battle, meant to show its absolute confidence as the strongest being around—to communicate to its prey that it couldn’t escape, and to sow the seeds of terror and break the hearts of its foes. This fiend did not display the grit of a survivalist, but the swagger of an all-powerful hunter about to enjoy itself toying with its prey.

While Rio and Harold were paralyzed with fear, Luminaria shot a cool glance at the Gorey Marquis and smirked.

That thing’s lost its mind. Guess I don’t have to feel guilty about what I’m about to do.

There were two broad categories of fiend. One was the “free” type that turned into a

fiend yet retained its mental faculties. The other was the “predator” type, which had all its animal instincts replaced with the single desire to attack all that lived, much like a monster.

Free types were extremely rare, so the majority of fiends were predators. Whenever they appeared, bringing them down took top priority for any nation.

Either type, of course, was extremely strong. Even without the awareness of free types, predators still became cunning, brutal hunters. And this was certainly one hell of a predator.

“L-listen... There’s still time! Quick, into the cavern! That thing can’t fit inside.” Despite his fear, Harold strained his voice to call out to Luminaria and Rio.

But Rio was so terrified she couldn’t take her eyes off of the Gorey Marquis for even a second. Harold saw that she was unable to move, but he couldn’t muster the strength to step out and drag her inside. He gritted his teeth from fear, shame, and regret.

Luminaria turned back to the panicked pair with a smile and answered, “Nah. Relax.”

Taking advantage of Luminaria’s inattentiveness, the Gorey Marquis chose that moment to pounce. It crossed dozens of meters in one jump, flying swiftly over like an arrow. The power behind it was far too much for any person to fend off. In the face of that strength, Harold stumbled back into the cavern despite his near-paralysis.

Rio couldn’t help but scream, “Lady Luminaria!”

Luminaria’s grin widened. Mana gathered in her right hand.

“Take this!” Luminaria faced the fiend again and raised her hand. When she did, a blast of wind swirled in midair, howling through their surroundings and causing trees to rustle violently.

Luminaria’s wind sorcery hit the Gorey Marquis with a blast of sheer power. It lost its momentum and crashed against the ground.



There was a loud quake as the wind slammed the seven-meter behemoth into the earth. Yet the Gorey Marquis stood up, unaffected, and once again glared at Luminaria with bloodshot eyes.

It roared again. This time, it wasn't boastful; it was a declaration that it would kill her, an expression of pure rage. It was even more destructive than the last roar, not only blowing away trees but warping the very clouds in the sky.

Rio fell to the ground, unable to remain standing. The Gorey Marquis's power was beyond reckoning. No matter how carefully selected the hunting party, it couldn't defeat this beast.

It was probably for the best that Luminaria came out to deal with it face to face from the start.

"...Huh?" Rio gasped, astonished.

Before she knew it, it was over. She had no idea how, but suddenly that all-powerful Gorey Marquis had been stabbed between the eyes by a pillar of ice.

"What... just happened? How?" Rio stared at it, dumbfounded. After some seconds standing with mouth agape, she finally recognized that it was sorcery. The cast had been completed in an instant, finishing off the hideous fiend in a single blow.

Her eyes couldn't even follow the attack. Predicting it would've been impossible. It wasn't just a speedy cast—it was so strong it had slain the fiend in one move. Luminaria was on a level that nobody but her equals could comprehend.

"Welp, let's get the survivors now. Come on, Rio," Luminaria called out to the astounded trainee and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder before passing through the illusory cliff wall.

Having finally returned to her senses, Rio rushed after her.

The cavern entrance was cramped. At most, it could fit three adults entering single file. Before them was Harold, still petrified. He gazed at Luminaria in abject shock and then turned his gaze to the scene outside. The view was fuzzy from inside the barrier, but it was clear enough to see the dead fiend.

He finally looked back at Luminaria.

"A moment ago, Miss Rio..." he stammered. Faced with Luminaria's wide, perfect smile, he understood why they hadn't sent a hunting party. "You're... No. Clearly a hunting party was unnecessary. We appreciate your efforts very deeply."

Suddenly much more polite, Harold bowed deeply to Luminaria. It seemed he'd figured out the Azure Sorcerer's true identity somehow. Perhaps Rio's...

"Say, Rio," Luminaria addressed her. "You said my name a minute ago, didn't you?"

"Huh?... Oh!" Rio finally realized her mistake and went pale.

Harold listened to their exchange and stated, "Another job well done. I will have to tell them of your exploits, *Azure Sorcerer*. Now please, friends, come in." The implication was clear: he had heard nothing and noticed nothing.

"Sure. Let's go."

Despite her previous warning, Luminaria didn't seem mad. She smiled gently at Rio and patted her on the back. In truth, though she'd been hiding her identity, some people already knew. Those who knew had the discretion and good sense to keep it to themselves. It helped that she was popular.

Even as the strongest sorcerer, she had a soft demeanor. She was gentle and beautiful, but in battle, she was fierce and overpowering. Rio gazed at Luminaria from behind with respect... and something more.

* * *

In the depths of the cavern sat the rest of the members of the caravan. Many were wounded, but miraculously, none had been killed by the fiend. According to Harold, they were fortunate to have an exorcist with them who could use that barrier to keep them concealed from the fiend. They were also fortunate that the fiend had tried to toy with them like a hunter instead of going straight for the kill.

Though nobody had died, some were heavily wounded. They didn't have much food on hand, either. If Luminaria had come three days later, their numbers might have dwindled.

After the rescue, the heavily wounded were taken directly to the Medical Guild. According to the medics there, they had brought the wounded not a moment too soon.

Their recovery was only made possible by the swiftness of the rescue mission.

Rio's family was safe, as well. Her father and brother were proud of her growth and bravery, if a bit surprised she'd come to rescue them in person.

And so the crisis of the fiend's appearance at the border was swiftly resolved. There were great monetary damages, including totaled freight carriages and half of the cargo destroyed, but the people of the caravan were optimistic. They could make the money back, but Harold and his folk all agreed with a laugh that their lives were their greatest asset.

After watching over them long enough to ensure they were in good hands, Luminaria left Harold's group and returned to the patrol outpost. Rio joined her, of course. After crying her eyes out after her safe reunion with her family, Rio returned to work.

By the time Luminaria finished her report to the chief officer, twilight had long passed. The group set out on the road back to Lunatic Lake. Along the way, Garrett complained at length about missing the opportunity to shoot the fiend with the armored car's equipped artillery.

No one else in the FAV seemed to care.

* * *

After returning to the castle and making her report to Solomon, Luminaria bumped back into Rio. "Are you free tonight? How about we get some late dinner?"

"S-sure. I would be glad to join you!" she happily accepted.

The two disappeared into the nighttime city.

* * *

The next day, a formal report was made on the fiend disturbance.

All merchants in the caravan had survived. The unexpectedly powerful Gorey Marquis was dead. The resounding success was not just the work of the Azure Sorcerer, however—the efforts of the exorcist who had guarded the caravan were also lauded.

That was Luminaria's suggestion. After all, the caravan had only survived long enough

for her to get there thanks to the barrier. As recognition for their efforts, the exorcist was given half of the Gorey Marquis's materials. That was also Luminaria's idea.

Though it was only half, the fiend's materials were extremely valuable and high quality. According to Solomon, the exorcist was speechless at the sudden windfall of hundreds of millions of ducats' worth of material.

On top of that, the space-time distortion that had caused the crisis was dealt with by several spirits working with the Kingdom of Alcait. The Azure Sorcerer accompanied them to protect them from the danger posed by Chimera Clausen while they worked.

Thus, the disturbance came to a close. Days returned to unchanging normality. If anything had changed, it was that one more woman would visit Luminaria's bedchamber in the castle every now and then.



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