

NOVEL

8



She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man

Written by
Ryusen Hirotsugu

Illustrated by
fuzichoco

SHE PROFESSED HERSELF PUPIL OF THE WISE MAN

– Kenja no Deshi wo Nanoru Kenja –

- VOLUME 8 -

-AUTHOR-

Ryusen Hirotsugu

-ILLUSTRATOR-

fuzichoco

[SEVEN SEAS]



"We'll charge in ourselves!"

Kagura declared loudly and plunged into the base without a backward glance.

"Well, it seems it's finally time."

"Sure is. Let's do our best."

Mira and Cyril nodded to each other and followed close behind.





Suddenly, someone appeared in the changing room. Curious, Mira turned the shower off just in time for the door to open.

"Good morning,"
Snake greeted her,
fully nude and sleepily
rubbing her eyes.



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Seven Seas Entertainment



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TRANSLATION: Benjamin Daughety
ADAPTATION: Adam Lee
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Jennifer Elgabrowny
COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen
PROOFREADER: Cheri Ebisu
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Kelly Quinn Chiu
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
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CHAPTER 1

MIRA AND SCORPION had successfully saved the wife and daughter of Johan. All that remained was to snatch the alchemist himself from Chimera's clutches—but when they returned to his mansion in Irene, the capital of Roslein, the man was nowhere to be found; all Mira and Scorpion found within the mansion was a ransacked basement.

The two also discovered what seemed to be his blood. After they gathered the haphazardly scattered documents, they leafed through them. They quickly realized that all documents relating to transactions with Melville Commerce were gone.

Mira glanced at the pile of documents and furrowed her brow unhappily. "They must've caught on to us."

"But how?" Scorpion glanced at the spirit Wasranel, considering his cheat code-like abilities. "He can trick human senses and cutting-edge mana-sensing devices. I don't know how they could've sensed us or eavesdropped on us."

The spirit of stealth was very powerful. They had taken great care to contact and negotiate with Johan only under total concealment, so there should've been no chance of leaks. It was always possible that Johan had betrayed them and reported it himself... but he hadn't lied when he'd said that his wife and daughter were being confined. That was proof that he was trustworthy. It seemed unlikely that he would betray his family's rescuers.

Yet... he and his documents were gone now.

"For now, let's search the mansion," Mira suggested. "There may be some clues."

"Yeah, good idea. Let's go!"

The chances of finding anything were slim, but it was better than doing nothing. Thus, they began to search the property. They searched the entire first floor, lighting the way with Mira's Ethereal Arts: Illumination—after all, there were no guards watching anymore. But they found no obvious clues. Angelique, accompanying them, simply gazed at the interior of her home nostalgically.

On the second floor, they proceeded to the laboratory where they'd first met Johan. At a glance, it didn't seem any different from when they'd left it just hours ago. He must have gone directly to look for the documents after their departure, and was presumably kidnapped in the process.

A search of the laboratory failed to turn up any stand-out clues. As Mira and Scorpion completed their investigation, Angelique stared at the shelf full of memories and cried. Next to her, Mira squeezed and mashed the sheep plushie in her hands to ensure that there were no eavesdropping devices hidden within. Such was a common cliché, in her opinion. After a good smooshing, she concluded that there was no magical tool inside.

The gang exited the laboratory and headed toward the remaining room on the second floor. They passed through the door, but as Mira and Scorpion approached the end of the hallway, they stopped in their tracks. When they'd first visited the mansion, they had found a suit of armor here, standing like an eerie spirit in the darkness.

Now it was utterly gone.

"There was armor here before... right?" With stilted motions and a nervous grin, Scorpion turned to Mira. Surely, this was where that full suit of armor had stood. Scorpion's tail stood on end in terror, and her eyes began to dart all around. "Where'd it go...? Do you think it started moving and...?"

"I wonder... Though it is clear that it's gone somewhere." Mira squatted down and examined the ground where it had stood. Some dust had accumulated around the armor's footprints.

"Excuse me? Did you say armor? Was there a suit of armor here before?" Angelique asked as she peered down from overhead. There had been no armor here when she'd lived in the mansion. It must have been placed in the hall after the abduction of Johan's family.

"Perhaps there was some device inside..."

"Yeah, maybe," Scorpion agreed. "They've got masks with location magic, so I'm sure they've got magic and magical tools that can watch people."

They could even put multiple devices inside a full suit of armor, which meant that something would always be keeping watch on Johan. They needed to monitor the inside of the mansion more than the outside, after all.

After frowning at this unexpected development, Mira and the others quickly searched the remaining room. Though they hadn't expected Johan to disappear, they used what remained of their time limit on Wasranel's total concealment to take Angelique and Anne to the King's Hideout to shelter.

* * *

A short time later, the group arrived at Ebatesse Commerce's home office, a four-story building of stone and timber, without being found or followed. A 300-meter-long redbrick wall surrounded the property's perimeter.

The street facing it was still busy even at this hour, but the shop itself was closed and empty—save for a drunk lying out front. Except for a few open restaurants, most of the surrounding buildings seemed to be in a similar state.

Scorpion led the group along the wall and into an alley that led toward the back of the building. They clung close to the wall, which towered above their heads, until they reached a back gate.

"We don't know where people might be looking. Can we keep Angelique and Anne hidden?" Scorpion asked.

"Good idea," Mira replied. "If nobody knows that they're being sheltered here, then we won't have to worry about being followed."

Mira and Scorpion agreed it would be safest if nobody saw them being transported here, and kept the two in total concealment while they entered the building. The fewer people who knew about their whereabouts, the easier it would be to keep their secrets.

Scorpion knocked on the gate and greeted the gatekeeper with some sort of medallion. That seemed to be their ticket in—the gatekeeper opened the gate and said, "Thank you for your work." Mira and Scorpion let their concealed guests in ahead of them and followed through the gate. As they passed, none among them seemed to notice the gatekeeper staring at Mira's lustrous, silky hair.

Lamps were spaced at regular intervals around the stone-paved grounds of the property, bathing the building in a gentle light. It was almost like a miniature city, with a passage wide enough for people and carriages to pass side by side. On the sides were normal homes, giving it a very residential feel. According to Scorpion, the residences

were for employees—perhaps they were company dorms.

There was a restaurant-like building as well. Supposedly, it served cheap but delicious food. Only employees were allowed to eat there, making it effectively the company cafeteria.

In this miniature city, two buildings stood out in the darkness. One was a shop selling medicines and magical tools, while the other was a bigger, sturdier-looking building made of stone. Scorpion led the group to the latter.

The building was an office that also served as a storage facility, with a very plain interior. It had no foyer, only a reception counter that was placed directly in front of the entrance. Directly beyond it was a staircase leading up, while to the left and right were stairs leading down to who knows where. There were doors to various departments here and there as well. Despite the late hour, the building was well-lit, and not a few employees were still working.

Scorpion stepped up to the counter and greeted the tidy-looking man there. “Good evening, Lenos.” Unsurprisingly, he looked a little sleepy.

“Welcome, Miss Scorpion!” His sleepiness disappeared at once—perhaps his fatigue had been caused by worry—as he jumped up and looked at her and Mira with an expectant grin.

“I’m here to borrow a room again,” Scorpion said, offering her medallion. She then introduced Mira, adding, “She’s on our side.”

“Ah, then you must be fighting great evil! How wonderful! Oh...” Lenos controlled himself, dialing his excitement down a notch as he grinned sheepishly at Mira. “Unfortunately, though, rules are rules. May I see some identification?”

Mira presumed her adventurer’s license would be good enough. She took out her cute card case and held out her license to the man at the counter.

“C-rank, really? It’s simply amazing how you combine both beauty and valor! Those who stand against great evil really are made of sterner stuff!” Lenos’s face lit up with enthusiasm again, and he snatched Mira’s hand and squeezed it tight, adding with a huge smile, “I’m cheering you on!”

Mira was a little taken aback by Lenos’s forwardness, but she accepted his praise with

good grace and replied, perhaps a little too smugly, “Please. Standing against evil is the natural thing to do.”

Once Lenos had finally released her—apparently satisfied after pumping her hand up and down several times—a medallion like Scorpion’s remained in her palm.

“That is your special overnight stay permit. Make sure you don’t lose it, okay? Oh, but it has Ethereal Arts cast on it to identify the owner, so you don’t have to worry about it being used for any nefarious purposes if you do lose it,” Lenos explained casually as he jotted Mira’s name down in the reception ledger. It seemed he’d cast that magic on the medal while he shook Mira’s hand.

“How convenient,” she mused.

The magic was clearly quite effective. When Mira tried handing it to Scorpion, the silver medal suddenly flashed red. When she took it back again, it returned to a silver shine. Mira was once again astounded by the progress of the Ethereal Arts in this world.

* * *

The secret base that they were renting in Ebatesse Commerce was an underground floor, somewhat like an emergency evacuation shelter.

Once they’d finished their business at the reception desk, they ascended the stairs directly behind the desk. Along the way, Scorpion laughingly filled Mira in on Lenos. It turned out that his full name was Lenos Ebatesse, and he was the grandson of the current CEO. According to Scorpion, he was a huge fan of heroic legends—the Divine Generals of the Three Great Kingdoms, the Forty-Eight Nameless Generals of Atlantis, the Twelve Apostles of Nirvana, and of course... the Nine Wise Men of Alcait. He seemed quite convinced that the Isuzu Alliance, who stood against the great evil that was Chimera Clausen, would make their mark as a new heroic legend. Mira was very pleased to hear the names of the Nine Wise Men listed alongside the most prominent heroes, but when she glanced to the side, the dark window reflected a young woman’s slender figure. She sighed at the reminder that she no longer resembled that legendary hero.

Mira and Scorpion climbed the stairs as they chatted, until they arrived at the third-floor hallway. There, a question suddenly occurred to Mira. “Why are we on the third

floor? Didn't you say it was underground?" she asked Scorpion, who walked ahead through the hallway with employees working here and there.

"It is, but it's kinda special. You can only get there from a third-floor staircase, and the entrance is hidden too. That makes it even better for sheltering people."

"I see. Very secure, indeed," Mira said. She now directed her interest toward the building and its interior, which seemed to be the result of an interesting history. Eventually, they arrived at the secret staircase and began their descent. Despite being entirely constructed of stone, this building's interior seemed to radiate a sense of warmth. The furnishings on each landing of the staircase gave glimpses of the decorator's immaculate taste.

Melville Commerce might be on top now, but that was only the result of their underhanded play in backing Chimera Clausen. This building was dripping with a dignity that proved that Ebatesse Commerce was the true king.

When they reached the bottom of the staircase, they arrived at a single door. They opened it and found that the room beyond was full of shelves of magical tools and medicines. It was hard to tell at a glance, but according to Scorpion, these were all prototypes and failed experiments. It was rather eerie, like a chemistry lab at night. Uneasy, Angelique leaned against Wasranel, who still carried Anne on his back.

The group passed through the labyrinthine arrangement of shelves. When they came to the back of the room, Scorpion stood in front of a particular shelf and beckoned Mira over.

"Watch carefully, Mira," she said. She reached out her hand and selected a box among those failed experiments. She opened it, then spun it around backward, closed the lid, and spun it once more. Immediately after the incomprehensible act, there was a small thud. The shelf then slid smoothly to the side, revealing a hidden door behind it.

"Ooh!" Mira was really excited now; this was a real-deal hidden base. Whether it came to ladies' clothes or hidden doors, the thought of the mystery concealed behind them always tickled her boyish side.

The open door revealed yet another staircase leading lower. Mira naturally ran in first. Once everyone was inside, Scorpion closed the door again, and there was another dull thud—the sound of the shelf returning to its original position.

The air held that chill particular to underground spaces. Plain stone walls and floors continued downward, faintly illuminated by lights here and there. But the heights of the stairs were irregular, which made their footing uncertain. Scorpion claimed that this was a measure against intruders.

They descended the hundred-meter-long staircase and finally reached an underground passage leading yet further into the gloom.

CHAPTER 2

THE UNDERGROUND PASSAGE split in two directions, with the staircase at the center. The faint illumination on the stone-reinforced walls looked almost like will-o'-the-wisps. Chilly air stuck to their skin as two sets of footsteps—Mira's and Scorpion's—echoed throughout the hall.

"At this point, nobody will see us. Well done, Wasranel. You may rest now." Mira glanced at the staircase, then to the path, as Wasranel released his concealment. He'd hidden Angelique and Anne the whole way here from the mansion, so nobody should know about their presence other than Mira and Scorpion.

Wasranel sighed regretfully. "I only wish we could use my powers more freely..."

"No worries, friend. Total concealment or not, you can still hide us somewhat, no? That alone is quite powerful. Let's do our best until our contract grows stronger."

"Right. We're in this for the long haul," Wasranel said and smiled, returning Anne to Angelique's arms. After that, he shook hands with Mira.

"Be ready. I may call on you often," Mira replied and dismissed him.

Scorpion could see the special relationship growing between Mira and Wasranel. "Wow," she murmured, "you two really hit it off."

Mira puffed out her chest proudly and smirked. "Isn't it nice? Being a summoner means you never lack for friends."

Summoners needed to prioritize bonds with their summons... and with the game becoming reality, Mira's summons had gained real consciousness, and their relationships became more genuine. She'd especially enjoyed that part of this new world.

* * *

The group continued onward with Scorpion in the lead, their footsteps the only sound breaking the oppressive silence.

"By the way, Scorpion, I'm surprised that you're fine in a place like this," Mira mused, recalling the way Scorpion had trembled in the face of the armor at Johan's residence. A space with limited escape routes, dim lighting, echoing footsteps—all the common horror movie elements.

"A place like this? How do you mean?" Scorpion seemed unperturbed. Though she'd shown her fearful side in the mansion, this place was apparently different somehow.

"I mean, you were terrified of that armor. I'd thought you were scared of ghosts. Are you not?"

Scorpion looked around at both sides of the corridor and strained her eyes. Perhaps Mira's words had aroused her fears a little. After confirming that there were no spectral figures in the hallway, Scorpion stood straight up with tail on end and protested, "Well, y'know... Like, it's just because I saw a weird figure back then, right? Besides... dark places are like my backyard. I'm not scared... I was just wary of what I thought was a suspicious stranger." It seemed that her fear was spurred not by the setting, but by seeing something she couldn't identify.

Figuring she ought to test her theory right away, Mira began whispering in Scorpion's ear. Why not talk about spooky things in a spooky place? "Oh, Scorpion, you didn't know? Evil spirits love dark, closed spaces like this. The most terrifying ones of all can't be seen from afar, either; they appear suddenly, right in front of you!"

"M-M-Mira, what are you talking about? Stop it. I can see just fine in the dark, so nothing can get close to me without my knowledge!" Scorpion declared, as if trying to convince herself more than anyone else. But she began to think about the possibility of unknown beings lurking nearby; after all, she knew from her experience with Wasranvel that it was truly possible.

Now that her mischievous side had taken over, Mira continued to fan the flames in a low and ominous voice. "Don't be so certain. These spirits are typically invisible, after all. If you can see them, that can only mean that they're ready to attack—"

Just as Mira was starting to get really carried away, a door opened next to them without warning. A grinning woman wearing white clothes, stained dark red with blood, loomed out of the darkness.

"Nwaaargh!"

“Mreooow!”

Terrified, Mira and Scorpion clutched each other as they screamed and jumped away from the woman. But this only caused them to collide into the wall behind them, collapsing on the spot from pain. The impact must have hurt quite a bit. Mira and Scorpion lay on the floor groaning.

Angelique simply stood there in utter confusion. It was then that the group heard a familiar, placid voice.

“What are you doing?”

Mira and Scorpion looked up through the tears welling in their eyes. An exasperated Snake gazed back down at them.

* * *

Though it might have seemed calculated, Snake’s appearance was a coincidence... mostly. The room she’d exited was being used to confine one of the people who’d attacked her at the hotel. She had just finished her interrogation and heard the other girls chatting outside, so she’d popped out of the room to greet them.

Mira and Scorpion did their best to laugh off their little scare, pulled themselves together, and quickly stepped away from the scene. That left Snake and Angelique to introduce themselves to one another since it was their first meeting. Angelique had at first been shocked by her bloodied clothes, but once Snake had removed her white coat, they exchanged a few words and dispelled the tension. It turned out that Snake had dyed the coat herself for use as a prop in interrogations.

Eventually, they all managed to reach the very end of the hallway, where a sturdy-looking iron door stood before them. According to Scorpion, it was an underground living facility for emergency evacuations that had been built ten years ago in case of demon attacks. It had countless magic circles that supplemented its already-astounding physical defenses.

“Watch this carefully too, Mira,” Scorpion said, repeating what she’d said when she’d operated the first hidden door. She put a finger into what looked like a keyhole. The door emitted light, and strange symbols appeared on its surface. She showed Mira every step of the process of operating the device. In about ten seconds, the door had opened.

"Aaand, there. Remember that; it won't open unless you do everything right."

Scorpion's explanation was thorough, but Mira had lost track of the complex operation somewhere along the way. She just grinned wryly and mumbled, "Oh, hmm. Very... helpful."

Snake leaned over and whispered that Scorpion had incredible talent when it came to these things; nobody else was able to memorize the operation of devices like this so easily. It would be no exaggeration to say that a person who had memorized the code to this door was a key in themselves. Snake had written down the code, and Mira made her promise to let her copy it later.

* * *

"My, it's... bigger than I expected."

They passed through the metal door and into a long, wood-floored living space. The walls were about seven and a half meters on each side, with four simple yet sturdy tables. Each one had a shining orb above it, hanging down from the ceiling.

"They made this space so it can be lived in for years at a time. Something about keeping it from feeling claustrophobic. Umm, y'know, being in cramped spaces for a long time can make people go a little... funny." After that oddly vague explanation, Scorpion gave them a tour through the underground facility. It seemed that corporations vying for the leadership of a nation had ample money to prepare for the worst. This underground space had all of the necessities for daily life.

The kitchen had a full set of cooking equipment, including water and fire-generating magical tools. Two of the three doors next to the kitchen led to the toilets and baths, which both seemed readily usable.

The third door led to a farm even bigger than the living space. It had no plants or lighting currently, but, indeed, it could provide for years of living as long as people tended to the crops. All of the magical tools involved could be recharged as well. As long as someone like a mage was there to provide mana, they had every-thing they needed to live there forever.

While Scorpion guided them around the facility, Mira thought back to the secret bases she'd dreamed of as a child and grinned. Perfectly sustainable as long as the people inside survive, hm? It would be perfect if it had a control room...

The next place they inspected was a corridor that led away from the living space. Five doors lined the walls on either side, each leading to a small room of about fifteen square meters. The wood floors on all of them were bare save for two, which held sturdy beds. Millene was in one of them. She seemed happily asleep, hugging her blanket. Angelique gazed at Millene nostalgically for a short while before tucking Anne in the bed right next to her.

With the tour out of the way, they returned to the living space and sat around a table. Their impromptu meeting began with a report of Snake's interrogation.

She'd learned that the two men who had pursued them to the hotel were guards who had been watching Johan's mansion. Furthermore, they were mercenaries hired by Melville Commerce, making them outsiders who knew nothing about the firm's inner workings. Their job was simply to keep Johan from leaving his mansion. If Millene did anything suspicious, they were to get to the bottom of it and restrain her if necessary. The mercenaries claimed they knew nothing about the company's ties with Chimera Clausen, and Snake was inclined to believe them. As such, none of the people there had any direct relation to Chimera.

"Aww... What a shame," Scorpion sighed. After all that, they had obtained no useful leads.

It was reasonable that Chimera would choose to station mercenaries there instead of their own people. Sending guards to watch Johan meant that the watchers would have to stay in one fixed place, and Chimera Clausen would not risk putting their own soldiers in a defenseless position. Even if someone on the outside learned about Johan, the hired mercenaries would just have to secure that one person to protect any secrets relating to Chimera. The flow of information could be cut off at any time.

"Hrmm. So we won't get clues that easily," Mira muttered in disappointment.

"They were just pawns," Snake replied with bored, biting words. She was clearly unhappy that her interrogation had been fruitless.

Once Snake had finished her report, Mira let out a big yawn, gulped down the rest of her tea, and blinked her eyes sleepily. Scorpion poked Mira's shoulder as the young summoner struggled to keep her eyes open. "Mira, it's really late. You can go to bed now if you want; I'll take care of our report."

Mira and Scorpion had worked together throughout this latest mission, so they would have exactly the same report. Now that Mira'd heard Snake's, there was no reason she had to be present—Scorpion could fill Snake in herself.

"Nngh, but I mustn't sleep first..." Mira protested, sincerely trying to be serious for once. But she was unable to defy biology and yawned once more.

"It's cool, it's cool! I'll wrap it up quick, and we'll go right to bed. The real discussion can start tomorrow."

"Mmh, very well... I must apologize, but I think I'll take you up on that..." The sleepiness was too much to overcome. Mira stood up. She sloppily pushed her chair back in, muttered a good-night, and tottered toward the door. She might as well have been sleepwalking.



“Mira, wrong way!” Scorpion had to carry Mira to the room opposite where Millene and Anne slept. She gently tucked the little summoner into bed and let her drift out into a sea of dreams.

CHAPTER 3

MIRA AWAKENED in the King's Hideout. She sat up and looked around the room in a daze.

They were underground, so there were of course no windows to see outside. The overhead light was faint, so as not to disturb one's sleep. Mira used the bangle on her arm to check the time; it was just past early morning.

Mira turned to her left and found an empty bed, but the one beyond it was occupied by Snake's seductive, half-naked figure.

Good, good. Wonderful.

The summoner put her hands together in prayer, grateful for this early-morning blessing. But she didn't stop there; she stood up to approach. When she did, she noticed that her own clothes were folded up by the pillows of her bed. She didn't remember taking them off—let alone what had happened before falling asleep—but it was then that she realized that she was herself in rather scanty attire.

One room, two half-naked girls... What a thought-provoking situation.

Perhaps thanks to the leftover haze of sleep, Mira's fantasies were a little wilder than usual. After pulling just her dress over her head, Mira gazed at Snake for a moment again before leaving the bedroom.

"Morning, Mira!"

"Good morning, Mira."

Scorpion and Angelique were already in the living room. The former seemed to be mixing some sort of concoction, while the latter was making breakfast. As expected of an experienced housewife, Angelique looked great in an apron. She was skilled as well, tending to multiple dishes simultaneously. It was truly a familial sight—though the stench of Scorpion's chemicals mixing into the aromas of breakfast did spoil it somewhat.

"Mm, morning," Mira replied. She shot a glance at Scorpion, who was hard at work on her concoction, and passed through the kitchen and into the toilet. Before long, she emerged once more, let out a big yawn, and mumbled, "Nnnh... Morning, indeed." She then plopped down in a nearby chair and let her mouth hang open slightly as she looked around with bleary eyes.

"C'mon, go take a shower or something and wake yourself up." Scorpion handed a towel to Mira, who was starting to act like a senile old man. She then helped the girl stand up and half forced her into the changing room, where she stripped Mira of her clothes and shoved her into the shower. They hadn't known each other for long, but Scorpion knew how to deal with morning Mira by now.

The shower room was only two and a half meters on a side, though that was big enough for one person. This facility even came equipped with plumbing and magical tools to heat water. Mira pulled the faucet lever, and hot water rained on her from above. Wet silver hair stuck to glistening, fair skin as the sensation of heat cascaded down her body and onto the floor.

"Aah, that feels good..." She writhed in the water, enjoying the ticklish feeling of her drowsiness being washed away.

Suddenly, someone else appeared in the changing room. Curious, Mira turned the shower off just in time for the door to open.

"Good morning," Snake greeted her, fully nude and sleepily rubbing her eyes. The tank-top-and-shorts combo Mira had once seen, the half-naked figure from earlier... While they were enticing, her nude figure was truly artistic, in a way that was explosive. Snake was as attractive as Scorpion, though in a slightly different manner; she was slender, with just enough meat on her bones to highlight her feminine curves.

Bewildered by the suddenness of this sight, Mira managed to squeak out a greeting: "M-mm, hey." The bathroom was enough space for one person, but too cramped for two. Faced with the naked Snake, Mira found her eyes glued to her fine, attractive form.

Snake ignored her and began her shower. Mira's brain was fully awakened by her female friend showering nearby, the water bouncing off of Snake's skin and raining onto the young summoner.

It seemed that people of the same gender often showered together here, just as they

bathed together. When later asked if she minded sharing, Mira replied with a big smile that she most certainly did not.

* * *

Mira exited the shower first and did her best to remain calm while she got dressed, even as she stared at Snake's underwear on the floor. She returned to the living room with the smile of an enlightened Buddha.

"Please sit, breakfast'll be ready soon," Angelique said. Mira did as she said and took a place at the table, enticed by the food already there.

It was truly a warm and familial morning. While she savored this atmosphere, Mira watched Angelique and wondered... did the phrases "married woman" and "housewife" truly apply to her? To Mira, those words had a more mature impression, yet there was something about Angelique that seemed almost... -childish. Why did Mira think so? She was the picture of a traditional housewife, after all.

After staring for a while, Mira hit upon the reason: Angelique lacked certain womanly curves. Of course, she didn't mean anything by that observation, though the phrase "child bride" did come to mind.

It seemed Scorpion had finished her alchemy, and she was now cleaning up her tools. Thanks to that, the chemical smell was all but gone; only the scent of cooking meat and spices graced Mira's nose.

Before long, Snake emerged from the changing room and sat next to Mira, clad in only her underwear. The summoner stole glances here and there; indeed, underwear was most enticing when worn as an outfit in itself.

"It's almost ready, everyone," Angelique announced, still skillfully preparing breakfast.

"Smells good," Snake said, stomach growling.

Mira sipped at her juice while she watched Angelique and answered, "Doesn't it?"

"Ack! Out in your underwear again? Go get dressed!" With her work done, Scorpion chased Snake off into the bedroom to find her clothes. Given how relaxed Snake was, this must have been a common occurrence. Even Mira had to admit it did seem very lazy of Snake.

Darn you, Scorpion! Foiled again! Mira cursed Scorpion internally as she took one last, good look at Snake's backside as she walked away.

Just then, another bedroom door opened.

"Now that smells nostalgic..." Millene, the young apprentice of Johan, poked her head out. Her nose twitched, catching whiffs of breakfast. Upon seeing Mira, she greeted her with a bow. "Oh, uhh, Mira? Good morning!"

She must have just woken up; her clothes and hair alike were disheveled. But her mind was perfectly clear. Perhaps Millene simply didn't care much about her appearance.

"Good morning, Millene," Angelique called out gently from behind Mira. At the same time, Millene's head shot up. She beheld Johan's wife, Angelique, standing in the kitchen.

"M-Mrs. Angelique... Mrs. Angelique!" Suddenly, a huge and tearful smile appeared on Millene's face, and she practically jumped into Angelique's arms. With a muffled voice, she cried, "Thank goodness you're safe!" Before long, Angelique's cooking apron was soiled with tears and snot. Angelique apologized for making Millene worry and hugged her like her own child. This was a reunion five years in the making; there must have been a real flood of emotions.

After some time, Millene finally stopped crying and looked up. She'd been sleeping when Mira and the others had come, so she hadn't known that Angelique was here. To her, she'd simply woken up next to a random little girl. "Wait. That girl who was in bed with me, was she...?"

When they were abducted, Anne was only three; now, she was eight years old. Realization slowly dawned on the apprentice.

"Yes. That's Anne," Angelique answered with a smile.

"She's grown so much!" Millene cried, but Angelique accepted her tears with a gentle smile.

Snake appeared again, now wearing basic clothing, and grinned as she took her seat again.

Mira and Scorpion looked at each other, silently sharing their happiness at having

saved Angelique and Anne. Despite how loud she was, Millene's sobs were comforting, indeed.

* * *

Once Millene had calmed down, the whole group sat around the table and ate breakfast. It was a big one, but everyone there was ravenous, so they managed to finish all the food without any trouble. During breakfast, they explained to Millene that Angelique and Anne had been found in Melville Commerce's compound, as expected.

Millene thanked Mira and Scorpion for saving the mother and daughter. Her gaze then wandered around the living room until she finally turned to the hallway and asked, "Is my teacher still sleeping?"

Angelique and Anne's escape would be discovered sooner or later. Once Chimera Clausen found out, there would no doubt be consequences for Johan now that they'd lost their leverage over him. That was why Mira and Scorpion had gone straight to the mansion to save him. Yet he'd already disappeared, along with the records of his transactions with Chimera Clausen. Given the traces left at the scene, it was likely that Johan had been abducted, Mira explained.

"Oh, no. I hope he's safe..."

"Johan's techniques are vital to them, so I'm certain he is safe, if nothing else," Mira explained. "We just don't know what else they might—"

She was interrupted by a tearful voice calling out, "Mommy!" It seemed Anne had awoken. She was all alone in an unfamiliar place; no one could blame the child for being worried.

"We'll call you if we have any questions," Scorpion offered. "Go be with Anne!"

"I'm sorry. Thank you." Angelique rushed to stand up, bowed, and ran off into the bedroom.

Millene watched as she went and then turned her eyes to the people around the table: Mira, Scorpion, and Snake. To her, they were two people who'd kidnapped her and one interrogator who used horrifying means despite her soft appearance. Indescribable terror and nervousness filled Millene, so she stood up to escape.

"Well, I'd better go check on Anne—"

"Sit," Mira commanded. "We have more questions for you."

"Okay..." With her excuse flatly denied, Millene slumped over again.

* * *

Having finished their meal, the group moved from the dining table to the sofas and sat around a metal coffee table to truly begin their discussion. This one concerned their plans from here.

They quickly agreed that saving Johan was the top priority. His techniques were necessary to Chimera's work with the black mist ore, so Mira theorized that there was no chance of them taking his life. Furthermore, the more Johan worked, the more weapons Chimera Clausen would have—and therefore, the more harm would be done to spirits.

As such, saving Johan would greatly reduce Chimera's power, something that would be a vital contributor to the Isuzu Alliance's victory in the coming battle. That's how important Johan was to both sides at this juncture.

But that wasn't the only value that Mira's side saw in him. On top of being a key figure to victory, he was family to Angelique, Anne, and Millene. It was only human to want to reunite him with loved ones.

Alive or not, though, the question remained: Where they'd taken him? As Johan was such a vital figure, he would not be in an easy-to-find location. One might imagine they might even take him to Chimera's headquarters.

There was another problem as well: How had Chimera realized that he was taking action against them?

"Incidentally, Millene," Mira turned to Millene and asked, "do you know anything about that suit of armor that was on the mansion's second floor?"

Thanks to total concealment, Mira's group had managed to sneak in and out of the mansion without anyone's knowledge. Their conversation with Johan had been held under concealment as well. It should have been impossible for a third party to notice them.

But Johan had been taken away, which seemed to mean that something had been monitoring him inside the mansion. The first suspect was the suit of armor that had disappeared with him. If it was empty on the inside, Mira surmised that it could house all sorts of magical tools.

"The armor on the second floor? Uhh, well..." Millene looked surprised at first. She seemed restless, or seemingly embarrassed for some reason. Then she told them about the armor.

According to Millene, she'd made the armor herself. Her father was an armorsmith, so she'd wondered if she could match his techniques using alchemy. The armor was the result of that experiment. It was an exquisite item—equal to her father's armor!—she added with a proud grin. The armor was made to privilege lightness and strength, and it had no magic cast on it. Despite being a full suit of armor, Millene boasted that it was actually very easy to handle.

Johan had praised her for the first time when she'd shown it to him, and a few days later, she realized he'd displayed it on the second floor. At the time, she'd rejoiced, believing that he'd recognized her as a skilled alchemist. Though, she added with a sardonic grin, he continued to be just as stern as before.

As for the contents, Millene said that it naturally should be empty given that it was a suit of armor. But she'd never looked inside after Johan put it up.

"What a mystery..." Mira mused.

"Right?" Scorpion sighed.

The only thing that was clear now was the source of the armor. Millene of course wanted to know why they'd asked her about it, but Mira just chuckled and replied that she was curious because it stood out to her.

Millene spent the next few minutes muttering to herself over and over, "Mages never get it."

CHAPTER 4

SCORPION CROSSED her arms and cocked her head. “This might be a dumb question, but why didn’t they keep Johan under stricter surveillance to begin with? Then they wouldn’t need all those watchers around the mansion. Wouldn’t that have been easier?”

“A fair question,” Mira agreed. “Perhaps something prevented them from keeping watchers closer.”

Scorpion was right; Chimera’s surveillance of Johan seemed inefficient. If they were willing to abduct his family, then it would be easier to lock the man himself up than to put a collar on him. Yet they had let Johan stay in a mansion on the outskirts of town, with a few hired guards standing outside. What reason would they have for that?

Mira suspected it had something to do with the black mist ore. She turned casually to Millene. The young woman—who was sipping a cup of hot cocoa—jolted up straight.

“Millene, are there any necessary precautions involved in working black mist ore?” Mira asked. “If so, it would help if we knew what they were.”

“Precautions? Uhh... sure.” Millene hesitated, but in the end she agreed to share this secret information for the sake of saving her teacher. What she said next made it very clear why Johan had remained in a surveilled mansion instead of being held prisoner elsewhere. According to her, black mist ore had to be kept away from any spirit-related items before being worked... otherwise, it would destroy the spirit items. Furthermore, there were five steps in the process. Each step increased the ore’s area of effect.

“It starts off with a two-meter radius, but in the end, it can extend an entire kilometer in all directions. I can only do the first step, though, so I don’t know the full details...” Millene explained as she gulped down the remainder of her hot cocoa all at once. She exhaled deeply, as if releasing a lot of tension.

“Thought as much. Quite the troublesome material, indeed.” Mira hypothesized that performing alchemy upon black mist ore meant somehow catalyzing the curse stored within. Anything within range that used the power of spirits would be neutralized.

Chimera Clausen had kidnapped many spirits to use their strength, which presumably meant that their HQ was bursting with the power of spirits. Doing this kind of work on the black mist ore there would be disastrous. As such, instead of confining him in a place where it would be easier to monitor him, they used his wife and daughter as hostages.

"You said you can only perform the first step of the process. Would you be willing to show us?" Mira produced the black mist ore she'd taken as evidence from the War-Torn Burial Ground and placed it in front of Millene.

"Okay... Umm, if you say so..." Millene agreed hesitantly. She brought a bag from the corner of the room that contained her belongings, which Mira and Scorpion had recovered when they took her away. She took some tools from the bag and began setting up what looked like a chemistry experiment. The tools here were all treasures that Johan himself had gifted her, so she kept them close at hand. Once everything was ready, she retrieved a white bag from her luggage.

"You don't have any spirit gear on you, do you?" Millene asked. Once the three confirmed that they had none, she said, "Okay, good," and returned the bag to the corner with her luggage.

Now that Millene was back in her seat, Mira asked, "What was that bag you had?" She gazed at the white bag in curiosity.

"That bag is made of a special material that protects spirit equipment from the process," Millene explained.

"Oho! I had no idea such a thing existed!" Mira piped up, impressed, and looked to the table full of equipment with interest.

"Like I said before, I only know the first step. I can only show you how it looks to turn the ore into liquid. Are you sure that's fine?"

"Yes, that will do." Mira nodded.

Although Millene was still learning, she had the bearing of a professional. She looked calmer and more serious than ever as she sat before her tools. Millene began processing. She shattered the ore, breaking one half down into fragments and pummeling the rest into powder. She then dissolved and boiled the powder in water. Black bubbles frothed, and she tossed the fragments in. Then, she mixed the solution

until the fragments were gone.

This was all Millene could do—the first step in the process. Four steps remained, and it had to be left like this for a full day before one could proceed to the second.

“It’s like gross, creepy soup.” Scorpion furrowed her brow as she gazed at the viscous, black fluid on the table. Snake frowned as well.

As far as Mira and the others could see, the process itself was quite simple. But along the way, Mira noticed that black ripples were spreading from the container into the air—just a little, not even far enough to reach the edges of the room. Still, she could tell instantly that this was the spirit-devouring curse.

“One thing comes to mind. That bag is made of a special material, isn’t it? Could you not perform this process anywhere if you covered the area in this material?” Mira gestured with her eyes toward the luggage in the corner.

“I think you could do it anywhere, yeah. The base materials to make the bags are expensive, but people as evil as Chimera would spare no expense to do more harm.” Millene stood up, then went over to her luggage and picked up some small white shards and a coat. “But I don’t think they know about the material. Johan made this himself, and he’d never tell people like them about it.”

She certainly had quite a lot of faith in her master.

Millene returned and dropped the white fragments into the black goop. The dark black of the liquid lightened, dyed by the white stuff until it was a light gray. Mira confirmed that the accursed ripples had ceased.

“What was that? What’d you just put in there?” Scorpion demanded as she strained her eyes to look into the container. The black liquid had now turned pure white; of course she was surprised.

“Um, those were fragments of white spirit ore. They suppress black mist ore, and that’s what the bag is made of,” Millene said just as she stopped mixing.

The liquid began to harden and soon turned as solid as a rock. The trainee alchemist picked it up with a smile and said, “Now you can just throw it out with the rest of the trash. By the way, this coat is spirit gear, but it’s been soaked in liquid white spirit ore, so the black ore doesn’t affect it.” Millene proudly showed off her gift from Johan.

"Wow, it can even do that? Cool!" Scorpion said.

"Yep. This is super important."

If Millene's claims were to be believed, then this ore could be the perfect defense against Chimera Clausen's abominable weapons. As allies and protectors of spirits, most members of the Isuzu Alliance wielded spirit gear—the yang kind, of course. This made it difficult to stand against Chimera Clausen's black weapons. But this revelation was a source of hope. Scorpion and Snake looked optimistic.

"Hrmm, I see..." Mira sat deep in her chair and put a finger to her chin, nodding in understanding as she summarized the important points:

The black mist ore refining process had to be performed in a place where it wouldn't affect spirit power, which Chimera Clausen HQ could not provide. The material that would solve this dilemma was developed by Johan himself, yet he had not informed Chimera of it. This meant that he couldn't have been taken to their HQ; they must have taken him to a place that didn't contain any items with spirit power.

With those conclusions drawn, Scorpion could surmise their basic course of action. "So do you think one of Melville Commerce's facilities would be the best place to look, since they don't use spirit power?"

"I believe so. That is the only reasonable first move," Mira agreed.

That would be much easier than searching Chimera Clausen headquarters. But Melville Commerce was the fastest-growing company in all of Roslein. They certainly had countless facilities all over the place, including ones currently under construction. The radius that would need to be searched was growing exponentially.

But they wouldn't shrink back from this challenge. If all they could do right now was to narrow down a list of places through investigation, then they would do just that.

"We might also be able to keep an eye out for any signs of black mist ore being used," Mira added. "If the last steps of processing give it a kilometer-wide radius, then those black ripples must go through walls, no? In that case, we'll know right away if we see them from outside. The only problem is figuring out when Johan—"

"Hold it!" Scorpion cut Mira off with a confused look, "Wait, wait, wait!" Snake and Millene looked just as perplexed as Scorpion.

"Hrmm? What's the matter?" Mira cocked her head and looked around at the group. Had they not been paying attention during the first step?

"There's a lot you just said that I don't understand, but... black ripples? And what do they have to do with the ore?"

"The ripples came from that thing while Millene was cooking." Mira pointed at the white mass Millene had made and went over what she'd just seen, gesturing to mimic Millene's work. From the moment she'd put the fragments into the powder solution, black ripples had begun spreading with a steady rhythm, like a heartbeat. That had stopped when Millene dumped the white spirit ore in.

Moreover, the black ripples seemed to be the very thing that devoured spiritual power. If their effects extended beyond walls, then it would be easy to spot them from outside as they grew larger during the later stages of processing. Mira explained this was how she could find Johan.

Scorpion, Snake, and Millene looked at each other, then back to Mira.

"I didn't see anything like that..."

"Neither did I."

"Yeah, me neither."

They really had no idea what she was talking about.

"Goodness... Was I the only one to see it?" Mira murmured. She sighed, crossed her arms, and leaned back to look up at the ceiling. If they couldn't see it while she could, then she would have to be the one to watch for ripples in the future. She wondered why she was the only one who could see it—then she recalled something she had that the others didn't.

Hrmm. Is this another effect of the Spirit King's blessing?

Through his blessing and the holy sword Sanctia, she could cleanse oni curses. If that was really the case, she would naturally need some way to perceive said curses.

Mira smirked to herself. She felt she was acclimating well to the Spirit King's blessing. His blessing was unprecedented, so her imagination ran wild at the possibilities it

contained. There were two general ways to acclimate to a spirit's blessing: either place yourself in an area ruled by that spirit, or make use of the element governed by that spirit. The more one grew accustomed to a spirit's blessing, the stronger its effects became.

Since she'd received such a wonderful blessing, Mira had endeavored to acclimate to it when she could. However, the method was rather simple; she simply played—er, trained with the holy sword Sanctia whenever she had free time.

Mira decided—without any real evidence—that her training must have given her the ability to see oni curses. With that, she proudly decided on her role in the upcoming operation. "Well, if that's how it is, then I will be the one to keep watch. I should know shortly after the process begins."

"O-okay," Scorpion said. "We'll have Mira look out for it while Snake and I will check Melville's facilities one at a time just in case they're not working with the ore. Does that work?"

"That seems best," Snake agreed.

"Hrmm, agreed. That seems to be our best plan," said Mira.

With that, their course was settled.

* * *

While everyone prepared for the mission ahead, Mira gazed at her map of the city of Irene and suddenly looked up. "Ah, right. Millene, might I ask you something?"

"What is it?" Millene stopped putting away her equipment and turned around.

"About that mask you were wearing... do you have any idea where it came from?" Mira was referring to the oddly designed mask with geolocation magic cast on it. They'd left it at the inn to avoid exposing their location.

"Where it came from? Umm, my teacher gave it to me and said it was like a badge to go into Melville Commerce properties, but..." Millene answered, looking up as she tried to recall the details.

"Hrmm, so you don't know. That would mean that Johan didn't make it, correct?" Mira

asked. The mask had a feature that allowed it to bypass Melville's mana-sensing device; Millene was right to call it a badge.

"He's just an alchemist. He doesn't know anything about magical tools." That wasn't his field of expertise. They were very different disciplines, after all, so that was natural.

"Then do you know of anyone who would be able to make them?" Mira pressed on. If the mask had been made on request, then perhaps finding the manufacturer might give them some clues.

Scorpion and Snake stopped in their tracks and watched Millene. The conversation was of interest to them too.

Millene crossed her arms and closed her eyes. She muttered to herself with a furrowed brow, "Anyone who'd be able to? Umm... Hmm." After making a fair few funny faces, she suddenly gasped, "Oh!"

It seemed she'd unearthed something deep in her memories. She performed some odd motions, apparently trying to recreate the situation, and muttered incomprehensibly to herself, "You know, I got this box... The box... Umm, I took it, and... It was white. What was it, again? Someone's studio..."

While they watched with bated breath, a door suddenly opened. Angelique peeked apologetically from behind it. "Um, excuse me? Anne is hungry..." Next to her was the girl, who looked to be a little confused.

Then...

The instant Millene saw Angelique, her eyes sparkled and she shouted, "That's it! Flattract's Studio!" She looked very satisfied, as if she'd had a eureka moment. But at the other end of her gaze, Angelique's face froze over.

"Wait, Millene? Why did looking at me remind you of this... Flattract's Studio?" In an instant, Angelique had closed in on Millene until she was right in front of the young apprentice. Quiet fire burned in her eyes.

"Huh? Uh, well, Mrs. Angelique, umm..." Millene stammered, and her eyes wandered down to Angelique's chest. This was the decisive blow, as the sunny joy surrounding Millene turned to abject darkness. She shrunk before the roaring thunder of Angelique's anger.

* * *

Once the storm had passed, Angelique made a quick breakfast and excused herself back to her room. Millene watched nervously as she went. Once Angelique was out of sight, the poor trainee collapsed onto the table. According to Millene, the usually sweet Angelique could turn ferocious when it came to that particular topic. Mira prayed that she and Millene would never end up bathing together, before risking an envious glance at Snake.

After this minor ruckus, the conversation returned to the mask's manufacturer. But it seemed its owner, Millene, knew nothing more about Flattract's Studio.

Snake, however, did. She had investigated Melville Commerce's connections in this city, and this workshop was among them. However, Snake claimed that they were not under Melville Commerce's umbrella. Melville had tried to invite them, but their requests had been denied.

The studio ostensibly specialized in various kinds of magical tools.

"Hrmm, they specialize in magical tools? If Melville tried to seduce them, then they must be good." Mira murmured. She hit upon a certain possibility: what if the mana sensor at Melville's compound was also from Flattract's Studio?

"So, Mira, why'd you wanna know about the mask?" Scorpion asked. Magical tool or no, the mask wasn't exactly a threat in and of itself. Scorpion had to wonder why she'd asked about it right before their mission.

"Oh, I was just wondering who had created such a thing," Mira answered. She then added that it didn't just have geolocation magic; it had mana sensor-nullifying magic as well. The mana sensor they'd gone through at the vault compound could easily serve as the foundation of a security web. If the studio could make a tool that could deceive such a sensor, then one could theorize that they had also made the sensor.

In that case, such a complex device would surely require maintenance and occasional repairs. That made it likely that the workshop would have information on the devices' locations and thus, information on their customers. That might help them discover the locations of vital Melville facilities that they wouldn't be able to find through their normal means. They might even have a chance of gaining some information on places where the studio directly worked with Chimera—or even where Chimera was keeping

Johan.

"That is the state of things as I see it. Trust is important when it comes to such things, however, so I doubt they'll tell us if we just show up and ask."

If this studio was what they thought it was, Mira's group could gain quite a bit of information. But that was exactly the problem. If the studio was in league with Melville Commerce, then their work was probably not evil in itself. And according to Snake's investigation, there were many customers who trusted it. The girls could play rough against Chimera Clausen, but a normal businessman was a different story.

"Then we'll just have to infiltrate, huh?" Scorpion asked.

"I suppose so."

Bothering civilians to this extent was out of the question, and they couldn't expect to get straight answers anyway. Revealing the truth of Chimera in an appeal to the business's benevolent side was an option, but there was a chance doing so would expose Isuzu's operation to Melville. No to mention, they couldn't guarantee that Flattract's Studio had a benevolent side to begin with.

But they needed information. At this point, stealing it was the only way.

Scorpion looked around at everyone and said, "Well, conveniently, we have three options!"

Their current top priority was to rescue Johan, someone who could directly testify regarding Melville and Chimera's relationship. Scorpion laid out the options for finding him:

The first was to spot the special ripples created through the process of working black mist ore. Unfortunately, only Mira could do this.

The second was to search based on the effects of said ripples. When working black mist ore, any tools nearby that used spirit power would be reduced to ordinary objects without power. This limited the locations where this sort of work could be done, making it easier to narrow down the search.

Finally, the third was to obtain information regarding the locations of any mana sensors provided by Flattract's Studio. This would allow Mira's group to find out

whether there were other Melville Commerce facilities using them. If there were, one could assume they were protecting something worth such tight security. And if there was nothing relating to spirits around such a facility, that would make it a very likely spot for the site of Johan's imprisonment.

"So I guess I'll take the studio job?" Scorpion said.

"I shall search for any facilities that don't handle spirits," Snake added.

"And so I'm stuck observing..." Mira sighed.

The three settled on their roles and polished off the last of the hot cocoa on the table. Scorpion, a master of infiltration, would manage the studio. Snake, who was a mage and could sense spirits, would search for facilities without spirit power. Mira would simply keep her eyes peeled for ripples.

However, it would probably take some time before Johan resumed his work. Judging by the evidence in the mansion, he appeared to have been kidnapped quite suddenly—he would presumably be lacking the necessary tools. Millene claimed that black mist ore required specialized equipment, so his new workspace probably wouldn't be ready overnight.

That left Mira with a possible delay.

The three decided on the day and time of their next meeting, promised to Angelique and Millene that they would get Johan back, and left the underground hideaway.

* * *

On the first floor of the Ebatesse Commerce's warehouse and office, Mira's group watched as the hidden door slid shut. Mira asked Scorpion to show her how to unlock it again and recorded the process on a sheet of paper she'd found in her Item Box. Memorizing puzzles never was her strong suit.

In the dark storage room filled with magical tools and documents, Mira and Scorpion looked it over and confirmed that Mira's notes were correct. Mira returned the paper and expensive-looking fountain pen to her inventory. Just then, a document happened to catch her eye.

"Oh, yes. I forgot about this." She retrieved the item. It was a bundle of dozens of sheets

of paper.

"Ah! Is that...?" Scorpion seemed to remember it too.

But Snake was not present when Mira had received it. "What is this?" she asked.

"A collection of materials on black mist ore that Johan graciously provided us with." Mira created light using Ethereal Arts and flipped through the documents. The three put their heads together and skimmed the notes. It listed how to work black mist ore, how to combine it with other materials, and various features that emerged based on Johan's multiple experiments.

But the latter half was what really caught their eye: these pages explained in great detail how to fight against a foe who used black mist ore, among other things. It was clear from these documents that despite being coerced, Johan knew that he shouldered some of the blame for creating such an abhorrent material.

The word oni was written several times within the notes. The connection between oni and spirits was precious information known to a scant few, greatly increasing the credibility of this document. Johan's sincerity and eagerness to help them in any way he could was obvious.

Once she'd skimmed the whole thing, Mira put a finger to her chin and grinned wryly. "This information could turn this whole war on its head. Perhaps we'd best deliver this to that brat... ahem, to Uzume as soon as possible." This information turned out to be far more valuable than Mira'd initially thought.

"Yeah, agreed. There are lots of artisans back at the base. The earlier they get it, the earlier they'll be able to replicate some of these countermeasures."

"We should prioritize that."

Scorpion and Snake agreed. Many of the potential counter-measures Johan listed might take a long time to construct. Analyzing the notes and preparing the materials would add to that time as well. They knew that they needed to begin preparing for the war as soon as possible.

"I might as well deliver it, since it will likely take a few days until Johan can begin any work again," Mira offered. "Even if he begins the process, the effects won't be widespread enough for me to see within the next day or two."

If she rode over on Pegasus, she could be back in two or three days. With such sensitive information, hand delivery was the best option.

The black ripples created by the process of refining the ore spread wider as the process progressed. Even if Johan had started immediately after his abduction, it would take two or three days before Mira could spot them from the outside. She had plenty of time.

“Got it. Okay, Mira, it’s all yours.” Scorpion agreed without a moment’s hesitation and proudly added, “But I know a better way to deliver a parcel of that size!” She explained that the Isuzu Alliance had a special delivery system. Apparently, one could go to one of the many Isuzu offices all over the continent and request an urgent delivery to HQ. It was used for only the most important matters, but they could deliver an item to HQ in half a day.

“There are no offices in this city.” Snake produced a map and pointed at the location of their branch office. “The closest is in Sentopoli, outside the southern business district.”

“Hrmm, understood.” Mira peeked at the map, confirmed the location, compared it to the view of the city from above, and picked out an area that she thought fit the description.

“There’s a code phrase as well: ‘Light to the forest, peace to the spirits,’” Snake added. “Say that to the branch manager, and you will be able to use their communication line to HQ and order the delivery.”

“Hrmm,” Mira replied. She took out her pen and paper again and wrote the code phrase carefully. “‘Light to the forest, peace to the spirits.’ Understood.”

CHAPTER 5

A FEW HOURS after departing from Roslein, Mira walked through southern Sentopoli just as the lunch rush was filling the city's restaurants. Unlike the center city and business district, this area was relatively quiet, with many drab factories and storage buildings lining the streets.

Ah, here it is.

Deep in the manufacturing district, Mira found a single one-story wooden building amid the giant constructions around it: the Sentopoli office of the Isuzu Alliance. Though somewhat annoyed by the placement of it, Mira knocked on the door.

After a short wait, the door opened, and a plain-looking woman peeked out. "Yes? Do you need something?" She wore an employee's uniform and black-rimmed glasses. As soon as she spotted Mira, she smiled gently and asked, "Umm... Are you lost, my dear?"

The imposing storehouses and factories stood in stark contrast to the more amiable-looking exterior of the office. As such, lost children occasionally wandered to it for help. Another waif had wound up on her doorstep.

"I'm not lost! I have business with the branch manager." Mira glared at the woman.

The woman squatted down to meet her at eye-level and said, now more serious than before, "I'm the branch manager. What do you need?" Her eyes were calm, but they had the sharp gleam of someone sizing up a threat.

"I... see. Good, that makes this easier. Light to the forest, peace to the spirits." Mira spoke the code phrase.

The woman stood up again, looked around, and quietly answered, "...All right. Come in."

Mira followed her into the branch office.

"My name is Matti. How about you, Miss...?" The woman turned around and shot a wary glance outside before locking the door behind her. She wasn't taking any

chances.

"I'm Mira." Blunt as usual, Mira took a casual glance around the office. "You know, this place is rather plain for a branch office."

It looked like any other family residence. The living space beyond the front door had a small dining table and a kitchen. Four doors lined the walls of the room, with two of them leading to a restroom and bath.

The more she looked at it, the less it looked like a professional office of a large organization. It was basically a residence; if not for the sign outside, nobody would think this was a place of business.

"I'm the only person here. So, well... I've made some quality-of-life improvements."

Are all Isuzu offices like this? Mira wondered.

They weren't. According to Matti, there weren't many spirits around Sentopoli, so Isuzu didn't have to devote labor to protecting spirits' natural environments here. A single person could maintain the office, allowing her to use it as a living space as well.

When Mira asked what she did here if she didn't have any spirits to protect, Matti answered that she was here to determine whether an environment safe for spirits could be created in the surrounding wastes. Matti was a botanist, and it was her lifelong dream to develop a lush forest from the grassless wastes. The Isuzu Alliance had taken a liking to her passion, and she ended up being made an office manager. Some might find her dream foolish, but if she could make it a reality, it would lead to a much larger habitat for spirits—this was Isuzu's dream as well.

Of course, that wasn't why the office existed here; it was a base for communication and information exchange among the boots on the ground. But, as it was on the edge of the continent, members rarely visited.

"That code phrase was a request to use our communicator, right?" Matti chuckled and added that she occasionally forgot the phrases due to how rarely she heard them. "Follow me."

She opened a door at the back of the room. It may have looked like a normal home, but this was still an Isuzu office, after all—behind the door was a hidden staircase leading underground.

Mira followed Matti down and through an iron door at the end of the stairs. Behind it was a communicator-like device.

"I'll be upstairs if you need anything." Matti closed the door and left.

* * *

The hidden room prepared for Isuzu information exchange was very gray—walls, table, couch, and all. The communicator alone was black.

It looks like the old telephones I've seen in museums... Come to think of it, how do you even use this thing? Mira stood at the back of the room and mumbled to herself. The machine itself was almost the same as the one Solomon had set up in her wagon, but she now realized that she'd only received calls and had never actually made one.

"Hrmm..." After yet another grumble, she tried picking up what appeared to be the receiver. It was normal for most landline phones to be picked up before dialing. Mira glared at the buttons on it and groused to herself, "Good grief. I don't need a full instruction manual, but you could at least label the buttons. How inconsiderate. Kids these days only care about form, not function."

At this point, Mira even began complaining about her old world. She'd internalized her Danblf persona to the extent that even her personality was a bit geriatric.

Just then...

"C'mon... Gramps, for real? I'm on the line. Pfft! Look, when you lift up the receiver, it automatically connects... Pffft, ha ha ha!" Kagura's voice came from the other side, unable to contain her laughter.

"Wh-what?!"

"Give me a break. You sound senile!"

Mira was stunned by the realization that Kagura had heard all of her grumblings. On the other end of the line, Kagura couldn't stop laughing. Whenever she seemed to calm down, she'd sputter and start giggling again.

Mira pouted and slammed the receiver down, hanging up on Kagura. The communicator began to ring. Mira picked up the receiver and heard Kagura's voice

again, much more composed this time.

"Sorry, Gramps. You're just too much."

"You could've said something as soon as you picked up. Good grief..." Mira mumbled again, still pouting. She wasn't truly angry; this was more like banter among friends.

Likewise, Kagura's tone was playful as usual. "I said sorry, okay? So, heh heh... What do you need so badly that you're willing to fumble with technology you don't know how to use?"

"Hrmm. I was hoping to request this urgent delivery service of yours," Mira replied and gave a quick account of events, including how Écarlate Carillon had helped them.

* * *

"Ahh, okay. Good stuff, Gramps! It'll take five or six hours to send someone there, so I'll get on it right away."

"Good. I'll be waiting." With those final words, Mira hung up. It seemed the urgent delivery system worked by having Kagura receive the requests and send personnel herself.

Waiting around here all day sounds boring. I might as well report to Aaron, Cyril, and the others while I'm here. Mira returned upstairs, told Matti she'd be back in five or six hours, and left the branch office.

* * *

When she reached the business district, Mira was confused—none of her friends were at the Epicurean Excess. Now that she thought about it, it was a little past noon now, so everyone was probably out gathering information.

Well, it's no rush. In fact, why don't I join in on the effort?

Mira quickly gave up on her initial plans and ran off into the city to play detective, thinking that she might run into someone along the way. However, she knew that this was a serious mission, so she managed to stop herself from being too playful as she sleuthed around.

A few blocks later, Mira “infiltrated” a magical tool shop and eavesdropped on a few customer conversations. One in particular happened to catch her interest.

Two large men spoke to each other in hushed tones. Mira hid nearby and listened in.

“It’s almost the day of the auction. Did you set aside some funds?”

“Yeah, I managed to scrape something together. Can’t wait.”

Oho, an auction? Where products gather, people gather. Perhaps a gathering of information as well. Mira knew this was a bit of a reach, but she decided to look into it nevertheless.

“Excuse me, sirs. Might I ask you something?” Mira questioned the two big men about the auction they’d just been discussing. They looked guilty for a moment, then claimed that they didn’t know what she was talking about and rushed to get away from her.

What’s their deal? I doubt they were too nervous to speak on account of my intimidating adorableness. Hrmm, perhaps it’s some clandestine affair? Given their reaction, it might have been some kind of black-market auction. Mira smirked to herself in the corner of the magical tool shop.

A black-market auction! Now doesn’t that sound thrilling!

It sounded as suspicious as could be to Mira, so she summoned Wasranel and had him use optical camouflage. Then she more or less randomly picked out people she thought looked fishy and listened in to their conversations.

After an hour of sleuthing—including some illegal entry in the name of the investigation—Mira discovered a few things. First, the auction would be held a week from now. Almost all of the people going there were adventurers.

The auction’s main business was selling items from dungeons or adventures that straddled a legal gray area—these things were better to sell away from prying eyes. But in many cases, there had been outright illegal items among those auctioned off: cursed magical tools, materials from holy beasts, forbidden tomes, illegal poisons, and so on.

The auction had run dozens of times, serving customers numbering in the thousands. But due to its superb management, it hadn’t been exposed even once. Furthermore,

nobody knew the host's true identity.

This is as fishy as it gets. Seems I've no choice but to get to the bottom of this.

Now that she knew the adventurers were up to something, Mira cast a wider net to probe even deeper.

* * *

It took Mira less than an hour to discover the venue where the black-market auction would be held. She used her optical camouflage to walk in through the front door, saving the last tiny remainder of total concealment for when she truly needed it. Optical camouflage alone was quite enough to get the job done—nobody suspected a thing.

Mira stopped in front of the prefab houses on the edge of town. There were ten of them, each able to house perhaps four people. They seemed to be temporary housing for the people who worked at the nearby warehouses, but according to what Mira had heard, the westernmost building concealed a large underground room that housed the auction.

She looked around and found a few people who looked a little too clean and tidy for warehouse work. Were they involved in managing the event? Armed with this hypothesis, Mira followed a well-built, important-looking man into the building at the west end.

It was a very plain, one-room space on the inside, but when the man pushed on a wall decoration, a hidden staircase appeared in the floor. As soon as he descended, it closed again.

Hrmm. Why do I feel like I've seen a lot of hidden doors and staircases recently? If she opened the door again right away, the man might notice. Instead, Mira waited until she could no longer feel his presence through Biometric Scan. Then, she checked twice and went down the hidden staircase.

At the bottom was an underground room—perhaps more precisely an underground facility due to the sheer size.

My word... This is the light of a spirit! The stone passage was as bright as the sunlit street outside. Mira looked up and felt spirits' power emanating from the fixture

above. It was the same as the light from the War-Torn Burial Ground. Seeing this, Mira smirked triumphantly.

Bingo, I say.

There were a few people within the facility, and they occasionally passed by Mira. She shifted from detective mode to phantom thief mode, sneaking furtively about as she cased the premises.

One room contained the auction items. There were many truly devious items, some of them easily understood and some of them incomprehensible to Mira. She eavesdropped on conversations to try to glean more detailed information, all the while using Inspect to see exactly who these people were. This was easy, as she could face them head-on without them so much as noticing her.

As she carefully proceeded down a corridor, she spotted a familiar man and froze up. Hrmm? That's...

The young man passed by without realizing she was there.

Isaac Meyer, right? I remember him... Indeed, he was the very sorcerer who had passed by while Mira and Scorpion had rescued Angelique and Anne from the Melville Commerce compound.

CHAPTER 6

LOOKING BACK, Mira had first encountered Isaac the night before at the Melville Compound in Roslein's capital, Irene. That was far from Sentopoli. It only took her two to three hours by Pegasus, but if one was to make the journey by land, travel would easily take over half a day.

Yet here Isaac was. That must mean he had some mode of transportation that could rival Pegasus's speed.

This one isn't to be underestimated. But what an opportunity! She could only assume that Isaac was related to Melville Commerce, which meant that the organization very likely had their dirty hands in this auction as well. It wouldn't be unreasonable to hypothesize that the mysterious host of the auction was Melville Commerce itself.

If Mira was careful in her investigation, she might just find decisive evidence. The summoner knew that this could be a valuable clue, so she cautiously followed Isaac.

* * *

Isaac conversed with a few other personnel as he circled the underground premises. But they mostly discussed the order of sales, fees, and other management-related issues. Mira's eavesdropping yielded no useful information on Chimera Clausen or Melville Commerce, but she did glean from these exchanges that this Isaac fellow was high up among the management.

After an hour of walking around, Isaac began climbing the stairs. He arrived at a metal door, which he opened and continued through. The door led to a craggy part of the wasteland. It seemed there were several hidden exits from this underground facility. This one led out to a jagged stretch of land north-northeast of Sentopoli, with rocky mounds reaching up like a miniature mountain range.

Isaac continued along a valley road without hesitation. The path was far from even, so Mira followed about twenty meters back to conceal the sound of her footsteps.

Another hour later, the hills had decreased in number yet grown taller in height. Suddenly, Isaac shouted, "I know you're there. Show yourself!"

Mira froze up and stared directly forward, ready for a fight. She'd hoarded her precious moments of total concealment, instead opting for optical camouflage to trick his sense of sight. However, it would not be surprising if someone with sharp senses had sniffed her out.

Hrmm... This won't be easy. If he knew she was there, then there was nothing else for it; she'd have to drag the information out of him by force. But just as Mira thought so, a man's voice floated down from atop a hill.

"So... you're not a small fry as I was told."

The man was tall yet slender, wearing a long, amaranth robe. On his hip were a slender sword and a crossbow. His most striking features were his red-rimmed elliptical glasses, silver hair, and gray eyes.

Wait... I know that guy! Mira recognized this individual. He was the Skyfolk man she'd met in the Citadel of Scales.

Isaac turned and glared at the man atop the hill. "Hmph. Who wouldn't sense such obvious malice?"

It seemed Mira was still in the clear. She stayed concealed and began moving slowly to avoid detection.

"I have many questions for you," the amaranth-robed Skyfolk man replied, "and you will answer them." He readied his crossbow.

"Questions? Even knowing that I'm only Layton Knox, a diplomat representing Sentopoli?" Isaac smirked back at him; he didn't seem very scared at all.

Layton? Diplomat representing Sentopoli? What is he going on about? This man's name was Isaac. Mira was confused, but luckily, the answer to her questions was quickly revealed.

"Wrong. I have business with Chimera Clausen's deputy head of development, Isaac Meyer," the Skyfolk man said.

Isaac raised an eyebrow, apparently shocked. But his shock lasted only a moment. His tone was calm as he said, "Then you've got the wrong guy. My name is Layton Knox. Sorry, but I've never heard of this Isaac person you're looking for."

Mira quickly surmised that Layton Knox, Sentopoli diplomat, was a cover identity.

"Don't play dumb with me. I've already gotten testimony from your three subordinates." The robed man whipped out his sword as well, pointed the tip at Isaac, and grinned slightly. It wasn't the triumphant smile of a detective cornering a criminal, however; it was the twisted look of a man who'd just found justification for murder.

"Three... Ah, so you're the reason they stopped answering my messages. I can tell you're willing to kill... but you're not with Isuzu. You're too impure. Who the hell are you?" Isaac frowned; he must have realized his ruse was futile. He ceased trying to deceive the man, took the short staff from his hip, and pointed it at his foe.

"That isn't for you to know," the amaranth-robed man replied, his voice as cold as ice. He pulled the trigger, and his crossbow bolt flew straight for Isaac's brow.

But before it could strike, it was enveloped in flames and burned to a crisp.

That was magic; Isaac's short staff had sent fire flying at the bolt. Even if he was her enemy, Mira had to admire the skill of his technique. She decided to continue to watch from afar for now.

Isaac fired off a second fireball without hesitation, and the Skyfolk man shot back blue flames. Mira knew instantly that this was an exorcist's fire. Red and blue collided, bursting outward as flames.

The battle had begun.

The fight between Isaac and the Skyfolk man was a true spectacle. As a sorcerer, Isaac had a slight advantage at long distances. He toyed with the Skyfolk man with the varied spells at his disposal. Worse, Isaac held a weapon made with black mist ore. According to the documents Johan had given Mira, this wouldn't just devour spirits; it could even exhibit certain special effects based on how it had been made. Isaac's weapon was a black dagger, twisted into a spiral shape. Each time he swung it, black mist emerged, deflecting all of the Skyfolk man's attacks. Thus, Mira easily guessed its special effect: attack deflection.

All of the amaranth-robed man's long-range attacks were deflected back at him, neutralizing his crossbow entirely—or so one might think. He fired another bolt, and Isaac swung his spiral dagger again to create black mist. But the moment the bolt touched it, there was a spray of water.

“Gah!”

The water glowed faintly. This was a catalyst of exorcists: holy water. The amaranth-robed man had detonated his holy water-filled bolt right before it could be deflected. Holy water had no offensive properties on its own, but it was a potent catalyst for magic.

[Banished Commandment: Flames of Atonement]

The robed exorcist wove his spell and fire billowed up as if running along oil, wrapping Isaac instantly in blue flames.

“Damn it! You think you’re clever?!” Isaac tore off his burning overcoat and jumped back from his attacker.

Now the tip of the Skyfolk man’s slender sword stabbed toward Isaac. The man had closed the distance in the blink of an eye. The flame that had taken his foe by surprise was a mere distraction. The sword went for Isaac’s shoulder. Suddenly, there was a shrill, metallic sound.

“You’ve blocked even that, hm?” the amaranth-robed man muttered, perhaps slightly impressed. The tip of the sword hadn’t hit its mark; it had merely dug a notch into Isaac’s short staff, which he’d raised in the nick of time.

“Hmph. Too bad for you, huh?” Isaac used his spiral dagger to fend off the crossbow and cast magic at point-blank range. This spell created a violent wind, causing both men to be blown into the air. The combatants landed almost simultaneously, almost exactly in the positions in which they’d begun the battle. This was an ideal attack range for Isaac.

Out of all magical disciplines, sorcery was the one that had the most instantaneous firepower. One solid blow could heavily wound a target, but this time, Isaac had calibrated his power perfectly to escape from that disadvantageous point-blank range. This sorcerer knew his limits well.

Isaac’s sorcery fell ferociously upon his foe once again. Lightning flashed, icicles rained, and raging winds suppressed the amaranth-robed man’s motions. The Skyfolk man tried to approach again, but the barrage of attacks put him fully on the defensive. Still, he didn’t look concerned. His narrowed eyes remained fixed on Isaac like arrows, as if he were the hunter.

Isaac, meanwhile, was beginning to panic. After firing off so many spells, he was reaching the limits of his mana, yet his attacks were still failing to hit their mark. Isaac knew the tide was about to turn. But then he spotted the perfect opportunity: the lightning his foe had just evaded had shattered the ground at the man's feet.

The amaranth-robed man stumbled. Isaac seized the opportunity; he promptly used the rest of his mana to fire off countless fireballs. "Die!"

With a roar like a cannon, flames struck one after another. Black smoke rose, and the ground shook slightly. This was the backbone of sorcery: overwhelming power. Even the toughest monsters could potentially be felled instantly by this.

Yet the target still stood, protected by a thin membrane.

"Impossible..."

It was a barrier. This one was [Veiled Arts: Fireproof Encampment], a type specially developed for occasions just like this. However, Isaac's magic was strong. The barrier flickered as the unscathed Skyfolk man began to slowly walk toward him.

"Grr!" Isaac was at his limit. He didn't have the mana to stop his foe, but he knew that all it would take to break the already weak barrier was something a little stronger than a fireball. He tossed his short staff aside and produced the trump card he'd carried in his pocket.

It was a dagger—but no ordinary dagger. This one had the power of a spirit inside.

Suddenly, a whirlwind of fire formed. It seemed to boom from the very depths of the earth, with heat that could vaporize its surroundings, whirling violently and sickeningly forward. A spirit's stolen power, torn from the spirit and turned into hatred to attack the amaranth-robed man.

This incarnation of destruction was truly overwhelming, far beyond what a human body could withstand.

"Rest," the amaranth-robed man said quietly.

At once, the violent vortex dispersed as if nothing had happened at all.

"What?!" Isaac's eyes went wide; he was certain that attack would do the trick. He

stared off into nothingness and his shoulders trembled. All that remained was the scorched, hot air, which was soon carried away by the wind. It was an almighty blow, yet something beyond Isaac's understanding had nullified it entirely. His shock was warranted, but it led to Isaac betraying a fatal opening.

The amaranth-robed man hadn't looked away from Isaac for a second; he would not miss this momentary slip. Isaac's surprise lasted less than a second, yet that second was ample time for a crossbow bolt to pierce the man's undefended knee.

A scream was wrung out from his throat as he fell. A second bolt pierced him, punching through his elbow. The spirit dagger in his hand clattered to the ground.

"You've failed." The Skyfolk man had hampered his mobility, deprived him of means to attack, and now knocked his weapon away using his own slender sword.

Isaac looked up at him bitterly and used his paltry remaining mana to cast Flame. It was elementary magic, but it couldn't be underestimated when used by a master. The attack was fired off from point-blank range, but the amaranth-robed man cut it down swiftly.

Yet Isaac did not end his struggle there. With his remaining hand, he threw the spiral dagger. It flew out, hidden amid the mess of embers from Isaac's spell. But the amaranth-robed man saw it too, and fired his crossbow to deflect it, aiming for Isaac's other elbow at the same time. The bolt passed through the joint, and Isaac screamed in agony once again.

The Skyfolk man's reaction time was so incredible that Mira had to wonder if somebody was by his side helping him. The man aimed his crossbow at the center of Isaac's brow and demanded coldly, "Answer me. There should be a man named Zell Schedal among your ilk. Where is he?"

CHAPTER 7

“ZELL SCHEDAL? Heh, like I’d know.” Isaac turned his eyes to the sky and told an obvious lie. But the moment he finished

his sentence, he shrieked from pain. His other knee had been pierced by a crossbow bolt.

The amaranth-robed man calmly loaded another bolt on the crossbow, never taking his eyes off of Isaac. He showed no hesitation.

With all four limbs injured, Isaac grimaced at the burning pain and looked back up at his assailant. As he peered into the eyes of the man before him, he shuddered. Twin abysses of raw hatred peered back. Nobody would look at a fellow human like that.

“I’ve made it clear that I have testimony,” the amaranth-robed man said coldly. He pressed his sword against Isaac’s leg. Seconds later, blood flowed out, and Isaac shrieked again. “Okay, fine! I’ll talk... I’ll talk!” Isaac’s defiant attitude disappeared, replaced by pure terror.

Upon closer inspection, the sword in the man’s hand seemed to gleam with a dark-red light. Mira recalled a certain spell. That gleam... Could it be Fatal Pain?

Fatal Pain was an Ethereal Art that magnified pain to deal additional damage. In the old days, players couldn’t really judge its efficacy in-game since there was no real pain—but based on Isaac’s reaction, it must have been pretty bad.

As the amaranth-robed man drew his sword back, the gleam subsided. In its place, blood flowed from Isaac’s knee.

“Speak quickly, now. Where is Zell Schedal?” The amaranth-robed man pressed the tip of his slender sword against the man’s other leg and retrieved a small vial from his pocket.

Mira recognized the green liquid within; it was a recovery potion sold at Dinoire Trading’s shop, one of the more expensive ones at that. It could easily heal all of the crossbow and sword wounds on Isaac’s body.

It seemed that Isaac knew that as well. His eyes roved from the drug, to the Skyfolk man, to the faraway mountains, and finally back to the drug. With a look of resignation, he finally spoke. “Right now, he’s...”

Just then, an arrow flew toward Isaac’s neck. It collided into a white tower shield that had suddenly appeared a split-second before impact. After the clash, the tower shield faded away.

“What the—?!” the amaranth-robed man gasped in surprise. He looked down at the red arrow on the ground, instantly calculated the trajectory of its flight, and glared back toward the source.

Standing among the rock mountains ahead of him was a single man, clearly furious that his perfectly aimed shot had been blocked. “What the hell is going on?!” the man spat. Clad in a discolored cloak, he nocked a second arrow onto his bow.

Mira stepped up behind him. “Silencing prisoners is a bit unfair, don’t you think?”

“Rgh! Who’s there?!”

But Mira wasn’t interested in pointless chitchat; a moment after she spoke, she planted a foot forward and slammed an [Immortal Arts Heaven: Pulse] squarely into the new man’s back. It was a torrent of pure destruction. The shockwave struck the helpless man, taking him fully by surprise and pummeling him mercilessly.

The man somersaulted and rolled down the mountain, as if knocked away by a humongous monster. Yet he still managed to move with the quick reflexes and acute balance of an assassin. In no time he’d righted himself, jumped off of the rock face, and fired another arrow back in Mira’s direction.

Yet as the arrow flew, he was speechless from wide-eyed shock. “What in the...?” He had aimed at a hulking white knight with a matching tower shield in hand. The tower shield bashed him backward, sending him falling to the ground with a thud.

Mira landed next to him and spotted the dagger at his hip—an item made from black mist ore.

“Hrmm. You seem to be Chimera, then.”

Due to the powerful blessing on the man’s spirit gear, he’d only lost consciousness

instead of dying. However, he had taken one of Mira's full-power attacks; one couldn't be too sure. After a quick inspection of the man's belongings, Mira decided to use her newly bought binding cloth right away. After securing the man, she instructed her Holy Knight to carry him and approached the amaranth-robed man.

The Skyfolk man shot a glance at Mira and said, "You're the one from the Citadel of Scales. So you came, after all." He seemed to lower his guard somewhat as he turned back to Isaac. He must have remembered that she was a member of Isuzu.

Mira looked down at Isaac and replied, "I'm in need of information as well." She then looked the robed man squarely in the eye. "Apologies for interrupting your little fight, but I cannot afford to let that man die so easily." Especially after she'd failed to get any information at the Citadel of Scales, thanks to a certain someone killing all of her party's targets.

The amaranth-robed man seemed to consider this for a moment before finally consenting. "Fine. Once I'm done with him, he's all yours."

"Thank you. We wouldn't want a repeat of past mistakes," she said with a smirk.

Given the horrific scene at the Citadel of Scales, the Skyfolk man must have harbored quite the hatred for Chimera Clausen. If left alone, he probably would've snuffed out Isaac's life without a second thought. But if he tried to do so now, he knew that Mira would interfere. And perhaps more to the point, he knew that he would have poor odds in a battle against her.

Before long, he began his interrogation of Isaac. But to Mira's surprise, he didn't question him about Chimera; instead, he focused his questions on a certain elite, Zell Schedal. According to Isaac, the man named Zell was a top-ranking member who was deeply knowledgeable about spirits. He was also the one behind many of the tools Chimera used to take advantage of the extracted spirits' power; in fact, he was the very man who'd developed the spirit bomb.

According to Isaac, Zell currently lived in a small village at the base of a mountain range east of Sentopoli.

"A small village, hm? And what is he doing there?" the amaranth-robed man finally asked.

Isaac claimed that he did not know. Unfortunately, only the top-ranking elites or

people close to him would have those answers.

With that, the amaranth-robed man sheathed his sword and turned to leave, as if to say that he had all the information he needed.

"What? Going alone?" Mira, who'd watched from a pace behind, asked as he passed her.

"...No. Before, I might have, but I'm not alone now." He stopped next to Mira and looked down at her with his cold eyes. For a mere instant, an almost imperceptible smile seemed to appear on his face.

"Oho. Then I'll—"

"Not you. And not your friends. A more... troublesome acquaintance has attached herself to me. We're acting separately at the moment, but she's such a ferocious beast that I doubt I could escape her if I tried."

Mira's momentary hope that he'd finally decided to work with Isuzu was dashed. He promptly and flatly denied that. But what did he mean, then? Mira asked, but he simply replied, "That is none of your business."

So he doesn't mean to actually tell me who this mysterious acquaintance is.

The Skyfolk man plus one. Mira didn't know who the newcomer might be, but she did know his next step: he was about to use this information to go after this man named Zell.

"Then you intend to execute your own plans, after all," Mira said quietly.

"Yeah. Gonna try and stop me?" the man responded with utmost calm. If he attacked a top elite carelessly, it could affect Isuzu's strategy.

That was Mira's first thought, at least, but she soon realized that this could lead to an even greater opportunity. "Not at all. If you attract Chimera's attention, that ought to take eyes off us for a while."

If this Skyfolk man and his unknown friend could cause enough trouble, Chimera would be forced to focus on them—even if it meant that they were warier as a whole. Meanwhile, Isuzu would have more room to work in the shadows.

"Though to be frank," Mira added, "it would be ideal if you'd coordinate with us to divert them." It was a casual request for his aid, though Mira didn't expect much.

"That doesn't matter to me... but I suppose I will need time to prepare, regardless. I will end his life in ten days' time. If you wish to work in step with me, then that is your timeframe."

Surprisingly, the man had agreed—though he made it clear that he wouldn't go out of his way. He handed the healing potion to Mira before walking off.

A Skyfolk priest, steadfastly pursuing a particular Chimera Clausen elite... Mira couldn't help but wonder why. She turned and shouted after his retreating back, "By the way, who is this Zell Schedal?"

Without turning to face her, he replied, "He's a traitor."

With that, he left for good.

* * *

Before feeding Isaac the potion, Mira removed the crossbow bolts stabbed in his joints. He groaned in agony with each pull, but he didn't complain—he knew this was necessary. He did, however, continue to moan that the Skyfolk man from before was "just not human, man."

After restraining Isaac with her binding cloth, Mira fed him the healing potion. Since it was a high-quality one, it healed him quickly and well. The lines of pain faded from Isaac's face, replaced with a measure of calm.

"Oh, uh... You saved me, huh?" he grumbled. "Or not. Guess you wanna interrogate me too, right?"

"Indeed. Do you plan to tell the truth?"

Isaac sat slumped in surrender. "Yeah, I will. What do you want to know?" Then he seemed to realize something and brazenly demanded, "Also, you came out of nowhere; who even are you?"

Mira ignored his tone and answered, "You ought to know the name 'Isuzu Alliance,' I presume."

"Aha. So you've already extended your influence this far, huh?" Isaac sighed deeply and looked up at the sky in understanding. In his mind, the swirling storm of despair and defeat within him was like a portent of the end of Chimera Clausen itself. Isaac looked at Mira again with resolve, as if he'd made up his mind to cut his losses. "So, what do you want? Do you want me to tell you where someone lives, too?"

"Right. First things first, do you know the alchemist Johan? If you're involved in research and development, I'm sure you do. He seems to have been abducted; do you know where he was taken?"

It was no coincidence that they'd passed Isaac while leaving the warehouse compound with Angelique and Anne. Mira stared searchingly at him.

"Yeah, actually... I heard they were moving him, but I don't know where to. Personal stuff like that... Y'know, they've got these specialized departments that deal with that stuff. I don't know anything else. I mean it."

"Oho. You do understand what will happen if you lie to me, don't you?"

"Yeah, of course. I know damn well. I may be second in command in development, but that doesn't mean I get a lick of information from the higher-ups."

"Hrmm, I see." Mira had no proof, but one look at him seemed to confirm that he was telling the truth. So she backed off from that point and moved to her next question. "Do you know where we can find the leader of Chimera Clausen?"

Isaac realized she was asking where Chimera Clausen headquarters was.

"Uhh... Sorry, but I dunno. Just so you know, I really wouldn't know that either. They've basically cut me off, so there's no reason for me to keep my mouth shut at this point." He shrugged his shoulders, a little sadly.

"It's almost as if they've tricked us into seizing a disposable pawn..." Mira muttered.

"Seriously... compared to those bigshots back at HQ, guys like me really are pawns. They'll find another guy to fill my shoes in no time," Isaac muttered gloomily. He then added, "Hey, I dunno if this'll help you much..." He told Mira everything he knew about headquarters. All of the information he gave her came from his direct superior, one of the highest executives: Zell Schedal himself.

First, Chimera's HQ was enormous, but it was hidden somewhere undiscoverable through normal means. Furthermore, they had many weapons and items full of spirits' power within. The locations of the HQ and its entrances were known only to a select few executives and trusted members who worked behind the scenes.

"You know that guy you just dealt with?" Isaac glanced at the assassin in the arms of Mira's Holy Knight behind her. He then continued his opinionated explanation. The man with the bow was one of Chimera Clausen's cleanup crew, known as the outcast hunters, and he was quite strong. His job was extremely simple: to dispose of members of Chimera Clausen who the organization believed could no longer benefit them.

Isaac added with a chuckle that they must have ordered a "cleanup" of him. He also confessed that, after seeing Mira topple the assassin so easily—someone specially trained for battle—he'd decided resistance was futile.

A decision like this was final. If Isaac tried to go back now, he'd be killed on sight. He had nowhere left to go, so he'd be better off seeking shelter as a valuable source of information for the Isuzu Alliance. With that, Isaac concluded his explanation.

"I thought you were getting rather loose-lipped," Mira mused. "That explains it." Mira had no evidence to determine whether he told truth or lies, but he didn't seem to be lying—not that she trusted him entirely, of course.

"Yeah. At this point, I can't do much but surrender. By the way, I bet that outcast hunter guy knows where HQ is. Good luck getting him to talk, though; that's how closely connected he is to the top." Isaac smirked triumphantly at the man, clearly excited to get his revenge on the assassin who'd tried to do him in.

"Oh ho ho. Well, how kind of him to come so obediently. Like a moth to flame." Mira rejoiced; the perfect captive had delivered himself right into her hands.

"Shame he never even got to touch the flame, eh?" Isaac, who'd just sold out a former ally without hesitation, looked extremely smug.

* * *

"While we're here, I have one more question for you." Mira suddenly remembered something, squatted in front of Isaac, and peered into his eyes. "You introduced yourself as some... diplomat from Sentopoli, no? Layton, was it? Do you lot have hands in this country's government?"

This question cut right to the core of a new and pressing issue. Layton Knox was a diplomat of the commerce nation of Sentopoli; if this cover identity was genuine, then that would be a major problem—it would mean that Chimera Clausen was directly in league with the nation's government.

"Oh, so you heard me talking with that freak. Heh, guess that's no surprise, given when you showed up." Isaac began divulging even more secrets. Indeed, the government was involved. Worse, according to Isaac, a good half of Sentopoli's government executives and mid-ranking officials were members of Chimera Clausen.

He then claimed that Sentopoli itself had been created by Chimera. He didn't know the details due to his joining later in the operation, but he had heard that Chimera had used the spirits' power to terraform this uninhabitable wasteland into a place where people could thrive. Commerce grew from there, and the plentiful money from the taxes collected by the government became operating funds for Chimera Clausen.

"So basically, this whole country's guilty. Dang... I thought Layton was more famous than Isaac. I did my damnedest, you know." Isaac grinned weakly in disappointment. A shadow fell over his face. He looked up at Mira once more and added, "Oh, by the way... let me tell you one thing, for my own safety. If you wanna keep me somewhere, don't take me to the Guild Union or any places managed by the country, okay?"

He was sure that if he was put anywhere the government of Sentopoli could reach into, he would be in danger. If the country was owned by Chimera Clausen, then it would make sense that they would snuff him out the moment he was in their custody.

"Hrmm. I understand government facilities, but why the Union? As I recall, they should be an independent organization outside political interference." The Adventurers' Guild Union, an organization with offices in every country all over the continent, had sworn to never involve itself in political affairs.

"C'mon, it's a no brainer! Chimera Clausen has plants in the Union too." He shrugged a little and explained. Some member of Chimera who'd infiltrated the Guild Union would report his presence to an assassin, or just assassinate him themselves. He didn't stand a chance there. He added that every major organization in the city had Chimera's fingers in it.

"Dazzling though it may appear, Sentopoli truly is a place of darkness..." Mira muttered.

"Gotta agree with you there. Not that it ever did me a lick of good."

The two chuckled dryly together.

Now, this is a much bigger harvest than expected. But what to do with it? If the other captive was tight-lipped, then he was best left to a professional. Mira decided to take both of them with her. But in order to avoid repeating the mistake they'd made with Millene, she first asked Isaac if he had any sort of magical tools on him that might reveal his location.

"They have devices like that? Hmm... Oh, they did give me this weird plate that they called a license to the conference hall. Think that might be it?"

"Oho! Suspicious, indeed. Do you have it now?"

"Yeah. It's under my robe, in a pouch attached to my hip." Isaac struggled to roll over and then added, "Should be around there." He had no chance of success if he tried pulling something now, but Mira cautiously reached out her hand and fished around under his robe.

A cute girl had her hand in his robe. Isaac couldn't help but offer his frank impression of the situation. "Heh... There's something fun about this."

"Cease your foolishness." Mira punched him, and tears formed in his eyes; the little summoner was a lot stronger than she looked. "Hrmm, this it?" Within the pouch was a plate with mysterious symbols etched onto its surface. Isaac gazed at it and added, "The weapons and gear are the only things they've given me."

Better safe than sorry. Mira hid the suspicious plate and Isaac's short staff, dagger, and other spirit gear under a nearby rock. She opted not to use her Item Box; she was unsure whether the tracking magic would still function inside it.

From there, she searched the assassin's belongings and hid what she'd found, a similar plate and spirit gear, in the same spot.

"Now, where will we go, and how will I get you there?" Mira looked to her two captives and wondered what to do next. The ideal destination would be the hideout in Irene, where she could hand the two over to Snake. But it was quite far. Hauling around two men would make her stand out quite a bit, so she would have to hide them with Wasranel.

Mira, Wasranel, two captives—Pegasus couldn't carry all four of them. She could try making a second trip, but even carrying three people would be difficult. Garuda was too big for her to hide with the spirit of stealth given how weak their bond was right now.

Everyone's just grown too big... Mira flipped through her mental catalog and excluded many of her other flying summons for the same reason. "Hrmm. I suppose we'll have to ask for help."

She ultimately decided that she couldn't make this decision on her own. She had her Holy Knight carry the men to the base of a hill and set it up to keep watch. She also had Wasranel stay there in order to hide them with optical camouflage. In the inconspicuous shade of the hillside, with optical camouflage, they wouldn't be found unless someone knew they were there.

Mira turned, looked with satisfaction upon the camouflage, and rode Pegasus back toward Sentopoli.

CHAPTER 8

IT WAS THE MIDDLE of dinnertime, and the food court floor of Epicurean Excess was packed full of people patronizing its dozens of restaurants. And as a place that brought together all the cuisines of the continent, it naturally served drinks as well.

Mira had returned to the Sentopoli business district in order to discuss plans for the Chimera Clausen captives. Now, she wove between hungry customers as she searched the bars within.

Ooh, this one is like an izakaya.

Food samples were displayed in a glass showcase, and branded liquors lined shelves. Reminded of the famous izakayas from her own world, Mira wasted no time and entered through the shop's low-hanging curtain.

"Welcome! How many in your party?" An employee greeted her brightly, prompting the other staff within to echo, "Welcome!"

It really was just like an izakaya. Mira was impressed. "Oh, my apologies," she said. "I'm actually searching for a friend. May I take a quick look, anyway?"

"Of course. Feel free to look around!" the employee replied with a cheerful smile. She informed Mira that the seats closer to the entrance were table seating, while the ones in the back were tatami seating. She was even kind enough to tell her the quickest route through all the tables.

Mira thanked her, then walked where she was directed, looking all around the establishment. She received many cheerful greetings along the way. The customers were just as friendly as the staff. After examining the place, Mira said to the employee at the entrance, "Seems he isn't here. Apologies for disturbing you." With that, she left.

"Come again some time!" the employee called, just as enthusiastically as before.

Now in a slightly better mood, Mira continued her search through the other bars.

* * *

The second and third establishments ended in failure as well. The fourth one that Mira stepped into was a fried food restaurant with a striking, Japanese-style interior. This one felt like a hidden back-alley gem... though it was hardly hidden given the crowd of people within.

Mira gave her now-practiced speech to the employees; she informed them that she was searching for someone and looked around inside. The sizzling sound of frying food could be heard from the kitchen. Mira glanced at the tables and saw deep-fried skewers and other crispy delicacies. When someone chomped on a thick chunk of fried meat, it made a satisfying crunch.

This restaurant served many kinds of seafood, including shrimp, squid, and shellfish, but its real draw was the hundred varieties of skewered meats on the menu. There were even some oddballs such as fried cake and ice cream available.

Mira wanted to sit and have a snack herself. But she managed to stifle the urge, swallow her disappointment, and avert her eyes from the delicious fried skewers. Halfway through the restaurant, Mira finally found her target.

“Ah! There you are!”

In the back of the establishment was Aaron, a jug in hand as he plowed through a heaping plate of deep-fried meat skewers. “Hm? Whoa, if it isn’t Little Miss Mira! Sounds like you were looking for me, huh?”

“That’s right. There’s something we need to discuss,” Mira said, glancing left and right.

“...Uh-huh. Guess we’d best go to my room, then.” Aaron caught on quickly and gulped down the rest of the beer in his jug before standing up.

Mira gazed at the mountain of food on the table. Aaron asked a nearby employee to box up the leftovers, ordered another glass of beer, and guided Mira to the room he was staying in. She followed him, practically drooling.

* * *

On the fifth floor of the Epicurean Excess, Mira savored the fried meat skewers and filled Aaron in on the current state of things. She explained everything, though she left out the finer details for the sake of time.

She told him of the relationship between the War-Torn Burial Ground and Melville Commerce, the alchemist named Johan, the documents about black mist ore, the communication with HQ, the black-market auction venue, Isaac and the outcast hunter she'd captured, and the truth about Sentopoli she'd learned from Isaac.

Aaron was astounded at first, but he accepted it surprisingly quickly. "Huh. I had a feeling someone was in league with them, but I had no idea the whole country was Chimera..." he murmured.

Aaron then updated Mira on the status of their investigation of Sentopoli. However, the investigation had only begun just over a day ago, so it had yet to yield much information. There was only one big lead so far: they'd learned of some mysterious government-run facilities, the purpose of which the residents couldn't tell them.

He added, "We've been looking for them just in case, but now that I've heard all this from you, it sounds like priority number one. Man, now I can see why this country developed so fast."

A cliff at the edge of an inhospitable wasteland had turned into a capital city rivaling those of larger nations in only twenty years. That should not be possible without both wealth greater than that of any other nation and cutting-edge technology. Moreover, this world contained magical powers that exceeded any physical means. And these powers could be quite versatile in the right hands.

"Hmm, yes. If one considers this grandeur a gift from the spirits, it all makes sense."

But if the leaders of this nation were Chimera Clausen, then that changed everything. They wouldn't need enormous funds or great mages; as long as they could control the power of spirits, that was sufficient.

Mira recalled the glorious sight of the coastline carved into a terraced shape. When she thought that it had all been created with the stolen powers of spirits, she couldn't help but look down sadly, unsure how to process it all. However, it was still only a theory; it was still possible that it wasn't true.

"So, you wanted help figuring out what to do with the assassin and the guy you got the info from, right?" Aaron, on the other hand, seemed convinced that this theory was correct. Fire burned in his eyes.

"Indeed. Where do you think I should take them?" The country and Union would be

sure to assassinate them, so Mira proposed using the hidden room at Ebatesse Commerce in Roslein. But she was unsure how to ferry them stealthily since she would have to use her summons.

"In that case, I'd suggest using the Isuzu Alliance branch office. They build them with jail cells, just in case."

The Isuzu Alliance office he referred to was the small building that looked like a residential home on the southern edge of town. It had a room deep underground, but Mira didn't recall seeing anything like a jail cell.

"Oho, really? It looked like any other cozy household to me."

"Yeah, most of 'em look like that. I've never used it, but the communicator was underground, right? I hear the jail is hidden behind it."

"You don't say! I had no idea." Mira pictured the communicator room again. She was surprised and overjoyed to know that such a useful room was so close at hand.

"No surprise you didn't notice it. They say Little Miss Uzume hides 'em with her barriers." Aaron's words were filled with rock-solid faith in Uzume. Mira could tell that he must have witnessed her doing something truly great.

"Barriers, hm? I see."

They were speaking, of course, of the magic sort of barrier. The barriers created by mediums were especially large and occasionally colorful. Naturally, the barrier around the Isuzu Alliance base at the bottom of the lake was a magnificent example.

"Well, let's get right to work," Aaron said and stood up. "I'll go to the office and get them ready to receive the captives. Little Miss Mira, you use that stealth guy when you bring them here. We don't want anyone seeing you." He poured water into his glass and downed it all at once, probably in an attempt to sober up. Then, he stuffed his mouth full of food to invigorate himself.

"Understood. Carrying around one of this country's leaders would naturally cause some unwanted attention."

It wasn't rare to see apprehended criminals being hauled about in this world, but it was a little different when it came to the leader of a nation. Add in the fact that Chimera

Clausen was involved, and Mira knew she couldn't let a single soul witness her transporting these prisoners.

With a stern look, she picked up a few fried meat skewers and considered when she might use total concealment. One mustn't go to war on an empty stomach.

* * *

Even after the sun set, the city of Sentopoli remained bright and lively. But now that she knew this was the result of countless spirit sacrifices, Mira no longer found it beautiful. She closed her eyes in silent prayer as she flew over the city on Pegasus's back.

Knowing that somebody might be searching for the two lost Chimera members, Mira landed a distance away and warily approached the spot where she'd left them.

"How was it? Any problems?" Mira asked as she stepped into the optical camouflage range.

Wasranel answered that one suspicious person had wandered by, but that they had not spotted the group. "Have you decided where to take them?" he asked.

"Indeed, I have. Discussing it with a friend was worthwhile; we've got the perfect place," Mira said, satisfied. She ordered her Holy Knight to pick up both of the captives. This summons wasn't as ominous as the Dark Knights, but it did still look an awful lot like an abduction when it came to transporting captives.

But that would only matter if anyone saw them. Mira and Wasranel took the lead, while the Holy Knight hauling the two men followed behind. With the whole group hidden by optical concealment, they ran through the mountains toward Sentopoli.

* * *

A little over an hour later, Mira took a wide detour around the city before bee-lining toward the southern district where the Isuzu office was. It was dead quiet here compared to the city center. But it wasn't uninhabited; laborers working overtime and occasional patrols could be seen here and there.

The streetlights were scarce, and darkness ruled; the sound of footsteps stood out all the more. Mira and Wasranel could conceal their own footsteps to an extent, but the

heavy clanking of Holy Knight armor would stand out in the worst way possible.

"About half a kilometer left," Mira noted. "Wasranel, how long could you maintain total concealment?" She didn't want any rumors spreading of mysterious footsteps or people being carried around in the southern district on the night of an important man's disappearance, so she steeled herself to use every last bit of total concealment necessary.

"Hmm... I would say I can hold out for about five minutes."

"That will do nicely." Mira judged this to be ample time, ordered him to use it right away, and began running pell-mell toward the Isuzu Alliance office.

Unfortunately, the price of running five hundred meters in just over a minute was that the two captives were violently jostled about on the Holy Knight's shoulders, resulting in some minor injuries.

* * *

When they were right in front of the Sentopoli branch of the Isuzu Alliance, Mira left the range of the total concealment and knocked on the door.

She heard a click as it was unlocked. Aaron poked his head out, having arrived ahead of time to prepare to take in the captives.

"I really couldn't see you. Heck, I couldn't even sense you." After looking around warily, Aaron peered behind Mira and noted that he couldn't sense the captives and spirit that should be there at all. "Are they really here?" he asked, just to be sure.

"Incredible, isn't it? I had him pull out all the stops since I didn't want our footsteps to stand out." Mira grinned proudly and entered the office, confirmed that everyone was inside, and closed the door. "You may stop now," she declared, prompting Wasranel to turn off total concealment.

Suddenly, Wasranel, a Holy Knight, and two pale men winked into existence before Aaron's eyes.

"Ooh! Now that's cool!" Even Aaron's honed senses had failed to detect them until now. He was astounded. "Little Miss Mira, I can't even count how many times you've surprised me by now," he said in earnest wonderment.

Though he was past the prime of his life, Aaron had continued working as an adventurer. The burning ambition that spurred him to aim for greater heights, despite already being ranked so highly among adventurers, made him excited to see power that he could never hope to comprehend.

“Please, you exaggerate.” Mira played dumb and shrugged off his compliment.

They passed through the hidden door and down to the communicator room. Mira had seen this room once before, with its gray furnishings and black communicator—but now, there was an unfamiliar iron door in the back. Aaron led the way into what seemed to be the secret jail cell.

“By the way, the urgent courier you ordered is here.” Aaron put a hand on the door and then turned, gesturing with his eyes at the corner of the communicator room.

When she turned, Mira saw a familiar red bird.

“Aha, I see. So this is how they achieve that speed.”

The bird was about a meter long, with vivid red plumage and glorious, golden tail feathers. The markings around its face were a watery blue, giving it quite a dignified appearance, for a bird.

Its name was Tweetsuke, an advanced shikigami used by Wise Man Kagura. It had a top speed of over two hundred kilometers per hour. A cord hung around its neck, on which dangled a box bearing a cute cat symbol and the phrase URGENT COURIER.

Mira was beginning to understand how this system worked. “Perhaps I should get this done first,” she murmured. Aaron understood what she meant: it’d be best to handle the mail right away. She felt bad making the shikigami wait any longer.

“Yeah, go for it.”

Mira entrusted the captives to Aaron and ordered her Holy Knight to follow his orders. The summons left her side and stood behind him in waiting.

“Whoa. I feel like a knight captain now.” Aaron gazed at his single subordinate a moment before finally stepping into the next room in a better mood.

* * *

"Now, Tweetsuke, I entrust you with this." Mira combined the documents she'd received from Johan with the black mist ore sample she'd harvested. She placed them both in the box hanging from the bird's neck. On the front, she wrote in large print, Dangerous freight! Do not open near spirits! After packing up the contents, all that was left was to send the bird away.

Right. Might as well.

Once she'd finished, she reached for the receiver to tell Kagura about the many dramatic developments of the past few hours. She knew now: when she picked up the receiver, it would connect right away. Thus she skipped the pointless niceties and declared, "It's me."

"Gramps, you're finally here! Jeez, I've been waiting foreveeer!" Kagura's voice echoed in the small room. Mira looked at Tweetsuke in surprise. "I waited a whole hour, y'know!"

The voice filling the room hadn't come from the communicator at all; no, it came from the mouth of the bird itself.

"Goodness," Mira sighed. "You scared me."

The bird shikigami spoke with Kagura's voice. It also looked different than it had before; now, it moved with absurdly human-like motions. Apparently imitating Kagura's body language, the bird put a wing on its hip(?) and glared at Mira. The shikigami was speaking with Kagura's voice and mimicking her actions. This was something Mira had never seen before, but she quickly realized that it was a new ability.

"What? How are you doing that?" Mira demanded. She put down the receiver and squatted in front of Tweetsuke. Apparently enjoying herself, she picked the bird up and flipped it all around to survey it from every angle.

"Ack! Hey, be gentle! My head is spinniing!" the bird cried. Its eyes spun as it slumped over lifelessly in Mira's arms.

* * *

Kagura had received a painful reminder that Danblf—now Mira—had always loved new abilities and features. In the bird's body, she managed to escape the little summoner's clutches. Mira's eyes were sparkling as she demanded an explanation.

Kagura assented with a sigh. This ability was apparently called Synchronized Senses. It allowed one to possess servants created by one's own mana and receive sensory information—mainly sight and sound—as if it had come through their own eyes and ears. The wielder could even synchronize motions once they were practiced enough.

However, this did not disable the wielder's senses while they used those of the servant. As such, when Mira had played rough with the bird, Kagura could still feel her own sense of motion. The resulting discordant senses led to extreme motion sickness.

After Kagura's explanation, Mira demanded of the bird, "If it works on servants created by your own mana, would weapon spirits be able to use it as well?!"

The bird backed away, lest it be shaken around again, and replied, "Umm... I think necromancers have managed to learn it a little, so maybe weapon spirits could do it too?"

Shikigami were all created by the mana of their mage, which meant that their creator could synchronize with all of them. Summons like Valkyrie, Eizenfald, and Wasranel were only transported to the summoner via mana-generated gates, rather than being created by mana themselves.

But weapon spirits—the summoning of manmade spirits into items made by human hands—were all constructed from mana, much like shikigami. Wise Man Danblf himself had researched this, and it was now a foundational part of the common knowledge of summoners.

Put simply, man-made spirits were merely software. Their hardware had to be created through mana. But the problem with man-made spirits was that they were still in the research stages.

"Hrmm. I see, I see. Then—"

"Let's talk about that later," the bird piped up to interrupt Mira. It seemed Kagura knew that Mira'd keep badgering her with questions if she didn't interrupt. "Anyway, Gramps! You picked up the communicator because you wanted to talk, right? Let's start with that!"

All of Mira's attention was focused on the new ability Synchronized Senses, but here she was, unable to beg for more information. Still, it was important to tell Kagura about the captives. Mira gave up on her quest for knowledge for the moment, stopped

pouting, and shared the developments so far.

* * *

Mira told Kagura everything about the auction, the Skyfolk man's plan to attack in ten days, and the truth about Sentopoli that she'd heard from Isaac. She concluded her story by saying, "And now, as you can guess, we plan to question the assassin."

"You're on a roll, Gramps!" After listening to all of it, the shikigami showered Mira with applause. It then patted her shoulder proudly; Kagura's joy was clear.

"Well, this much is the least I can do. I'd planned to contact you after the interrogation, but if you can see and hear, why don't I take little Tweetsuke in with me?" Instead of reporting what she'd heard, Mira could simply give Kagura a front-row seat through the bird.

"Leave the interrogation to me. I'll be right there!" Kagura left her with those words through the shikigami. Suddenly, the bird stopped moving, as if it had been sapped of a soul.

"Right there?" What do you mean by that? Aren't you already...?" Mira muttered at the lifeless bird. She cocked her head when it didn't respond. Has she stopped synchronizing her senses? Why not attend the interrogation? Mira wondered, picking the bird up and shaking it a little to see if it would react. She even tried speaking directly into its ear. "Heeey, what's the matter? Answer meee."

She shook it rather violently, lifted it high in the air, and even turned it over, but the shikigami did not respond. In the end, Mira decided that Kagura must have hung up. But what could she have meant when she'd said she'd be right there?

Just then, the shikigami in Mira's hands began to shine out of nowhere. In the next instant, it disappeared, and Kagura appeared in its place.

"Wha—?!"

"Huh?!"

Kagura was suddenly above Mira—and just like her shikigami had been, she found herself upside down.

What happened next was a matter of physics. Mira was not physically strong enough to support her, so Kagura fell head-first. Mira was trapped beneath her; the two banged into each other and fell to the floor.

“Ooouch! Why did I come in so high up?”

“Good grief. What have you done?”

Mira and Kagura lay on the floor clutching their heads. Truly, this was bad luck for both of them.

After Kagura had hung up, Mira couldn’t help but hold the surprisingly light Tweetsuke up high as she turned the bird this way and that. The result of this chance occurrence was what some manga readers might call a fanservice moment. How it differed from expectations, however, was that both of them were—at least physically—women.

Having heard a crash and felt the resulting quake, Aaron peeked into the room to check on Mira. “Hey, Little Miss Mira? I heard a loud noise. Is everything, uh... Bwuh?” He fell silent at the sight before him.

Mira lay with her back on the floor, and Kagura lay atop her. They were facing opposite directions, resulting in particular parts of their bodies being in each other’s faces.

Kagura wore what looked, at a glance, like Shinto-style religious garb. But it had a very unique feature: a chihaya overcoat with a cat-and-toe-bean pattern. Meanwhile, she’d boldly replaced the traditional hakama with a knee-length skirt. The whole effect gave the outfit a distinctly magical-girl style.

“My, is that you, Aaron? Good evening.” Kagura rolled her skirt back down to protect her modesty and turned to Aaron. She must’ve hit her head badly, as she was holding it rather dizzily.

“Could you leave the greetings for later...?” Mira poked her head out from under Kagura’s skirt, having badly bruised her own bottom, and grumbled for Kagura to get off of her.

“Uhhhh...” Aaron fell silent for a short while. He made up his mind to ignore the situation he’d found them in entirely, and instead asked why the Isuzu Alliance Grand Master Uzume was suddenly present. “Well, okay. Why is Little Miss Uzume here,

exactly?"

Uzume explained that she had used her magic to swap places with the courier in order to interrogate the captives directly. Mira added that she'd been holding Tweetsuke, which was why Uzume had ended up on top of her when she'd suddenly warped in.

Mira and Uzume stood up as if nothing had happened. At all.

"So you see, I'm here to help you interrogate the man."

"So it seems," Mira added. "And I ended up getting caught in the crossfire, resulting in a position like... that. Not that I minded overly."

"I had no idea you had spells like that," Aaron mused. "That's our Uzume for you, though. Well, this makes this easy; everything's ready, so let's get this interrogation started." He masterfully ignored their fumbling and pushed things along, turning around and striding through the iron door as if urging them to follow.

"Y'know, Gramps, I think those panties are a bit too flashy for you."

"You're one to talk. How old do you think you are, wearing a pair with a cat on the butt?"

Once Aaron was out of sight, the two stared each other down fiercely. But it didn't last long. Kagura simply called her a pervert, and Mira, defenseless, hung her head in defeat.

CHAPTER 9

THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE of Uzume left Matti, the branch manager of this office, in a tizzy. Uzume gently pried her off and managed to focus on the interrogation, which went astoundingly well.

Kagura used her independently developed Celestial Arts to put the target in a hypnotic state. She was the pinnacle of all mediums, after all; her power was too great for the captives to defy. They were forced to spill everything they knew. Their information extended even to national secrets and dark truths, surprising Aaron, Matti, Mira, and Uzume alike.

Isaac was unable to offer any more information than he'd given Mira—he'd already confessed everything he knew. That made his story all the more convincing: he had been quite honest, indeed.

As for the outcast hunter, his name was Jamal. Though he'd used a bow to attack Isaac, he was actually a demonologist. He'd developed poison through his magic and performed assassinations with it. Jamal seemed quite close to the core of Chimera, and knew lots of useful information. All of the national secrets and dark truths had come from him.

Out of everything, though, the most significant prize was the location of Chimera Clausen's headquarters. Uzume genuinely rejoiced, offering Mira her greatest show of affection: she hugged her as if doting on a beloved cat.

But unfortunately, Jamal was still just an assassin; he didn't know who Johan was, let alone where the alchemist might be confined. The interrogation yielded no information whatsoever on his whereabouts.

* * *

“They certainly aren’t making it easy...” Mira muttered.

“I figured it wouldn’t be; we could never find it in aerial searches, after all,” Uzume agreed. “Ugh... Guess I can’t do an air raid like this.” Uzume sounded especially disappointed that she wouldn’t get to use outright force. It went to show just how

much she loathed this particular enemy.

Though they had found the enemy's stronghold, the location itself was problematic. They had learned that the Chimera HQ was deep underground, below a great mountain to the east of Sentopoli. Even the Nine Wise Men would find it a tough nut to crack. Moreover, according to the assassin, there were no accessible entrances; the only way in was a passage connecting the HQ to Chimera's various other facilities. All of the entrances were hidden, so only a handful of people knew where to find them. Although apparently, once one was inside, there was no chance of getting lost; it was a single passage.

One of the facilities was very close to where Isaac and the Skyfolk man had fought. Many members knew of its existence, but only a select few, including Jamal, knew that a hidden entrance was concealed in the deepest part of the facility. Yet according to the assassin, the three entrances that he knew of were probably already sealed by now.

Unsurprisingly for such a cautious organization, even the bigshots with access to headquarters were only permitted to know three of the nearly one hundred hidden entrances. The reason was simple: that way, Chimera could quickly seal the passages that person knew about should they be captured by the enemy.

When Mira and Kagura had asked about the other two entrances, the man had answered that one was in a remote part of the wasteland, while another was right in Sentopoli's State Department. Even if they were sealed off by now, this was still useful information.

"The State Department, huh? That must mean there's more than just one in this city." Aaron grinned confidently. He'd only been here a few days, but he had already explored nearly all of the city's main facilities. Sentopoli was supposedly created by Chimera itself. If the State Department building held an entrance to the secret passage, then it was very likely that other government buildings would as well.

The assassin had corroborated this: though he didn't know exactly where they were, he was certain that they were there. That was another useful clue. If they could find even one entrance, they should be able to waltz right into headquarters.

"Now we just need to figure out how to find one," Mira said.

"Yep... The fastest way would be for us to kidnap some government bigwigs, but,

y'know." Kagura shrugged. The entrances were hidden by special magical tools, making it difficult to find them if one did not know their location already. It was clear that the most effective method would be to interrogate someone as fast as possible and charge in before Chimera had time to seal the entrance.

"Hrmm. It's not a bad idea," Mira agreed.

Wasranvel's optical camouflage was sufficient concealment, Mira's summoning magic could handle most situations, and Kagura's own magic was perfect for interrogation. On top of that, now that they knew that most of Sentopoli's government was Chimera Clausen, marks were plentiful. After all, anyone could tell you where to find a government official. Locating a Chimera member in and of itself would not be a difficult task.

Anyone involved in the nation's government would naturally be well-guarded. But the two strongest mages in the country would have no difficulty dispatching any bodyguards—Mira and Kagura almost felt bad when they thought about how feeble this security would be when faced with them. Uzume's proposal may have seemed extreme, but for these two, it would be relatively simple and feasible.

Normally, one would call it reckless. But oddly, Aaron saw nothing but success when those two were involved. He chuckled to himself. "Man, you two say the craziest things like it's nothing."

It was then that Isaac cut in. "Nah. That isn't gonna work. I know I said all of Sentopoli's government executives are Chimera Clausen, but I didn't mean the ones in this city." He then shared what he knew about the executives. The information was surprisingly unsurprising for an organization like Chimera.

First, the officials known to the common folk of Sentopoli—such as the prime minister and cabinet ministers—were all figureheads. Chimera's executives pulled their strings from the shadows, and none of the string-pullers had ever shown themselves to the public. As such, nobody knew the faces of the true puppet masters. In other words, abducting cabinet ministers would yield nothing but a puppet who would know nothing about the locations of the hidden passages—they might not even know that they were receiving orders from Chimera Clausen.

Furthermore, these representatives had been told that they were being managed by nobles from another country who merely wanted to improve the circulation of goods

around the continent. They saw these Chimera Clausen elites not as cowards in hiding but as heroes helping to develop the in-hospitable wasteland. Trying to win them over to get information on the people behind the curtain would be a fool's errand—they wouldn't believe the truth about their benefactors even if Mira's group told them.

"This is all stuff I've heard from the higher-ups. Basically, I don't think it's gonna work. There might be others like me in town... but at best, you'll find more middle management. They won't know where those entrances are." After obediently coughing up all these national secrets, he gazed at Mira and Uzume like a dog waiting to be rewarded for doing a trick.

Uzume slapped a talisman onto Isaac's brow and recited an incantation. Nothing happened.

"Hmm, so you're being honest. That's twice now that you've told the whole truth and nothing but the truth. For Chimera scum, you're not bad." It seemed she'd used magic to discern whether he was lying. Kagura's hypnotism only forced them to answer questions honestly; since he'd volunteered this information without being questioned, she had to confirm he was sincere. Her magic proved that he wasn't a liar. She coldly added, "Not that anyone's forgiving you for all the damage you've done."

It seemed Kagura's magic could discern one's intent as well. Indeed, Isaac had offered this information in hopes of getting a lighter sentence. As for Isaac, he grinned in surrender—the medium had seen through him.

"Well," Mira cut in, "perhaps I could put in a good word for you... if you answer one more question for me." After getting what info they could about Chimera's headquarters, Mira decided to ask for details on the individual the Skyfolk man had asked about.

When they'd met in the Citadel of Scales, Mira had assumed that the Skyfolk man simply hated Chimera Clausen because he was a priest from an Animist village. But she now believed that he had some other goal in mind. Perhaps all of his hatred for Chimera was related to one man in particular.

Although Isaac was a little sulky at being shut down by Kagura, he was still happy to answer that question. Perhaps Mira's offer had returned hope to his heart. His answer turned out to be unexpectedly useful.

First, the man's name was Zell Schedal. He was abnormally knowledgeable about spirits, and he used this knowledge and Chimera's vast pool of spirit power to create various magical tools and weapons. As for where he was, Zell Schedal used a small and inconspicuous village as the base for his grand laboratory. He spent most of his time holed up there, toiling away on his next creation.

That was everything Isaac knew about the man named Zell Schedal.

However, someone else found Mira's offer enticing as well—the assassin, who was still listening in. Indeed, the unexpectedly useful information was Jamal's knowledge of Zell Schedal's other role. Jamal shot an icy glare at Kagura and Aaron and said, "The spirit power tuner. That's his biggest accomplishment."

The development of the spirit power tuner was what had earned Zell Schedal his position among the elite members of Chimera. It was the catalyst for their dramatic growth. This device had myriad uses, but one of them was that it constantly maintained many of HQ's functions.

For some reason—something about ley lines, though he didn't know the details—the device itself was set up not at head-quarters, but in an underground control room below Zell Schedal's laboratory.

One thing was clear: destroying it would nullify all of the defenses at Chimera's headquarters, making the place a cinch to infiltrate. In fact, if they didn't deal with the device first, the spirit arsenal there would blow them away the moment they arrived. It would be the same as fighting thousands of spirits' power head-on. If they wanted to topple Chimera HQ, they would first need to go destroy this command room.

"Hrmm, I see... This guy sounds more important than I thought. If we want our victory to be certain, we'd better send personnel to aid that Skyfolk man." Mira had seen the man fight, so she knew he was quite strong. However, such an important location was sure to be protected by strict security and strong foes.

The Skyfolk man might fall before accomplishing his goal. If it was only a battle for personal revenge, Mira would understand that it was fate and simply pray for him. But now that Isuzu's plans also depended on the fate of Zell Schedal's base, that was no longer an option; they couldn't give Chimera time to redouble their defenses.

"By the way, Isaac here might have said it was a small village, but that's only on the

outside," Jamal continued. "It's actually a stronghold disguised as a village. Everything there—from the buildings to the villagers—is all for the sake of protecting his control room. Don't get too close unless you know what you're doing." He then fell silent once more. That was the last of the information he had to offer.

"Is there anything else you two want to share?" Kagura demanded, glowering at Isaac and Jamal. Her voice was cold; she might as well be asking if they had any last words.

"Uh, well, what do you want us to talk about?" Isaac replied. "Names of people involved in shady deals, or something? What kind of info do you want? We'll answer any questions you have."

"Yeah. We'd appreciate it if you could give us some questions to answer," Jamal chimed in.

Of course they were only being forthright because they wanted to get off easy. But thanks to Kagura's magic, it didn't matter if they intended to be forthright or not—though she did claim that it was easier if they spoke of their own accord.

"Then answer me this: how strong are the forces stationed at HQ?" Aaron asked them. Knowing the enemy's strength was a vital piece of developing a strategy.

Isaac shook his head bitterly. He didn't know the location of HQ, or even where the entrances were. One could hardly blame him for not knowing about its defenses. As for Jamal, though, he'd supposedly been there many times. He should have known the interior structure of the place like the back of his hand.

But Jamal said he didn't know for sure. Apart from five people—made up of chiefs and top executives—he'd never seen any fighting personnel there. He only knew of the stalwart dolls that had been modified to do battle.

"Stalwart dolls... They're those weird dolls that move with mana, right?" Aaron asked.

"That's right. A whole lot of them armed with different weapons were lined up in the plaza. I would've said there were more than two thousand. But I've never seen them move, so I don't know how strong they might be. They're all spirit weapons, though, so they must be stronger than middling monsters."

Stalwart dolls were strong enough that nations often used them for border security and monster exterminations. Jamal claimed Chimera had more than two thousand; if

all of them were mobilized at once, they could rival a nation's military.

Aaron was confident that he would win against such dolls in a one-on-one battle—but not if he was surrounded by thousands of them. “More than two thousand spirit weapons, huh? That’s rough...” He grinned weakly. Yet when he glanced at Mira and Kagura, they looked to be unshaken. He had to marvel at how reliable they were.

Jamal spoke again. “Oh, and one more thing: an engineer told me they all think and act on their own, which means they can still move even if you shut down the control room. And... that’s about all I know.” With that, he fell silent.

Kagura slapped another talisman onto his forehead and confirmed that he was being honest. So it looked like, if they wanted to conquer HQ, they had no choice but to fight those dolls. Aaron quickly began racking his brain to devise a strategy.

Mira, however, looked relieved. Hrmm. Two thousand fighting dolls? Then there’s no need to hold back. This sounds ideal. Even if they were Chimera Clausen, Mira didn’t want to massacre a bunch of people. But if her foes were confirmed to be inorganic weapons rather than humans... This sounded far easier than taking down a base full of flesh and blood people.

The look on Kagura’s face remained unchanged from start to finish; she simply listened to Jamal’s words in silence.

As for Isaac, he just muttered, “Ooh, really?” as if it had nothing to do with him at all.

Thus, having obtained at least enough information to work with, Mira and the gang left the captives with Matti and exited the Sentopoli branch of Isuzu. The three headed to the inn where Cyril’s party waited in order to share this information.

CHAPTER 10

THE HOUR WAS LATE, but Mira's group didn't plan to wait until morning to report their findings. The principal members of Écarlate Carillon gathered in Cyril's room to meet with the returned Mira and Aaron.

"Looks like everyone's here," Aaron announced. "Perfect. I'd like to introduce you all to someone before we start." He turned and looked toward the person who'd come into the room just behind him. It was Uzume, clad in her shrine maiden's outfit with a knee-length skirt and a cat-patterned chihaya overcoat.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Écarlate Carillon. I am Uzume, a... founder, of sorts, of the Isuzu Alliance." Uzume calmly introduced herself under everyone's curious gazes. She then slowly bowed. "I would like to thank you all for your help in this matter."

Emella and the gang gaped in amazement. The chief of Isuzu had suddenly come to their meeting—their surprise was to be expected.

"My name is Cyril, and I'm the leader of this guild. It's an honor to meet you," Cyril replied stoically. "And you've no need to thank us; the issue of Chimera Clausen concerns all of mankind, so it falls to us to do what's right."

Emella and the others managed to pull themselves together and nodded alongside him in agreement.

Once the leaders of both sides had completed their introductions, everyone else took turns doing the same. With that out of the way, the meeting finally began.

* * *

"I suppose I'll kick things off then." Mira was the first to speak. She shared everything that had happened since she'd first left for Roslein to investigate the War-Torn Burial Ground: the events at the burial ground and the Melville Commerce warehouse facility, the black mist ore and the alchemist who worked with it, and the abduction and rescue of Johan's family members. She then summarized what had happened after her return to Sentopoli, the battle she'd witnessed in the mountains, and the truth about Isaac and the government of Sentopoli. Thus, she concluded her report.

Emella and Asval spoke up first.

"Wow... This can't be real!"

"Hey, you're kidding, right?"

It was pretty unbelievable—how could the entire country they were in be created by Chimera Clausen? The others couldn't hide their shock either, but they were more easily convinced; perhaps they'd already had an inkling that something suspicious was going on here.

"I see... I had a feeling a lot of these government workers had dirty hands. That explains it." Zef chuckled in exasperation. He had been tasked with searching the dark underbelly of Sentopoli, so he'd witnessed many government officials taking bribes, embezzling, and the like. About half of them were bureaucrats like Isaac.

"The heavy presence of spirits here made me think they favored this land. But knowing the truth now..." Flicker murmured sadly. Spirits would occasionally bless lands where humans resided. This blessing imbued the land with the spirit's power and provided many benefits, such as bountiful harvests. The Three Great Kingdoms were all blessed lands, so Flicker was quite familiar with the feeling of the air in Sentopoli.

It was normal for mages to see spirits, but how well they could see spirits' power depended on each mage's abilities. Flicker had yet another skill: she had a sixth sense that allowed her to feel the presence of spirits to a limited extent. Because of this, she realized that the spirits' presence here had a different quality than those in the Three Great Kingdoms. This new information had confirmed her suspicions. Sentopoli was the opposite of the kingdoms. Its land wasn't blessed; Chimera Clausen had merely imprisoned the spirits here.

Flicker clenched her fist, a complicated expression on her face. She was filled with a mix of understanding and betrayal.

Cyril chimed in, "The fact that there are so many Melville Commerce facilities near the government buildings did seem odd to me... Well, I'm convinced." He had focused his search on the nation's government buildings and their surroundings. Now that he knew how Sentopoli, Chimera Clausen, and Melville Commerce were all connected, things clicked into place.

Ostensibly for the sake of crime prevention, people weren't allowed too near

Sentopoli's national government buildings. They couldn't build near them either without a special permit. The background checks to get said permission were very strict... but an awful lot of these permits were given to Melville. Now that Cyril has heard Mira's story, the reason for this was obvious.

Mira's information lined up perfectly with the results of their own investigation. When they put it all together, they suddenly had a much more vivid picture of their enemy's true identity.

Uzume was next to speak. "First, know that no one can keep secrets from me." She began by divulging the capabilities of her magic, especially the spell that allowed her to hypnotize people and force them to answer questions truthfully. With that out of the way, she shared the rest of the information she'd obtained from the two captives.

Since all of Sentopoli's public government officials were only figureheads, the gang couldn't expect any force applied against them to get results. As for the elites behind them, they almost never left HQ; to expose the puppet masters, Isuzu would have to go in themselves.

She explained that there were several entrances that led to Chimera HQ, but that they were so well-hidden that finding them without the guidance of someone who already knew their locations was next to impossible. Worse yet, even if they were to find one, there was a chance that their path might be sealed along the way if Chimera caught on.

"We've come this far, so part of me wants to take it slow, but..." Uzume murmured and glanced at Mira.

Mira nodded and picked up the explanation from there. "Regarding the Skyfolk man I mentioned before—he told me he plans to attack a base that manages several functions of the Chimera headquarters. If he succeeds, I'm told it will nullify their most powerful defense mechanisms. However, he is a bit... difficult to work with. Our enemy may be the same, but our goals are different. If we want to act together, it'll be up to us to follow his lead. As such, we'll have to find one of these entrances in the next eight days." She grinned wryly and added, "Apparently, he's going there to confront someone he hates. It didn't seem like he was willing to negotiate."

"Eight days..." Cyril murmured.

They hadn't managed to get any leads on Chimera's HQ in ten years, and now they were expected to find it in eight days. Otherwise, whether the Skyfolk man succeeded or failed, after his attack, the enemy would soon redouble their security. Depending on the circumstances, they might go into total lockdown and make any chance of infiltration impossible. This deadline was firm.

But despite the difficulty of the situation, Cyril thought to himself for only a moment before announcing, "We can manage it."

Everyone looked at him in puzzlement. That's when Cyril revealed that he'd already thought of a few locations for entrances based on the information shared so far...

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When Mira and Uzume finished their reports, Aaron went over his analysis of the minimum expected abilities and anything else of note regarding the stalwart dolls that guarded the Chimera headquarters. Normal stalwart dolls were often used for security; they weren't exactly made to fight fair like a human opponent. As a result, when they showed up in duels and the like, even skilled fighters could end up getting trounced by them.

The dolls might be hidden in other vital places with entrances outside of HQ, so Aaron had decided to inform everyone at once, lest they be taken by surprise.

"Eugh... Soldiers that don't feel pain, huh? I don't wanna deal with those." Zef usually aimed for monsters' vitals when fighting, so it would be especially difficult for him to fight an enemy with no weaknesses. He looked fed up already.

* * *

From there, the other members of Écarlate Carillon gave their reports, and the group discussed next steps.

Aaron decided to team up with Cyril's guild to perform an exhaustive search for any places that might lead to Chimera's -secret tunnel. Mira would leave Sentopoli to them and return her focus to Johan's rescue. Finally, Uzume would return to the Isuzu Alliance base and devise a plan based on the documents Mira had received. She would need to come up with countermeasures against black mist ore to protect everyone present.

"I hate to be the one to ask, but will you be able to make it in time?" Mira asked. "I've only skimmed the documents, but they seem chock full of specialized jargon and the like."

Black mist ore was a new material that had only recently appeared in the world. Isuzu might have Johan's research on it, but that research would have to be deciphered and analyzed. Could they advance their understanding far enough to neutralize black mist ore in just eight days?

But Uzume smirked confidently and puffed out her chest. "I wouldn't worry about that. We've got plenty of top-tier specialists from all kinds of fields. I'd bet on a day to analyze it and, hmm, maybe two days more to make gear for everyone here?"

It said a lot that Uzume believed her people could analyze the documents in a day, let alone fabricate gear based on the findings.

"Oho. Incredible," Mira said admiringly. "Uzume" certainly had a wealth of connections.

Apparently happy to be praised by someone she'd once fought alongside, Uzume's smile grew even broader. "Isn't it?! If you can believe it, the Albatinus, one and only founder and user of the Magnus style of alchemy, is staying at our base!" Her boast was intended to impress Mira, but someone else was even more impressed.

"Magnus style? Albatinus? You mean the Albatinus, for real?!"

It was Flicker. She pressed Uzume, astounded by this information. It was rare for her to be so enthusiastic toward anyone but Mira. But Albatinus, founder of the Magnus style of alchemy, was so famous that anybody who even dabbled in alchemy knew his name. Furthermore, as a vampire, he was a living legend. He had to be over a thousand years old by now.

To be able to recruit someone like him, so experienced that he'd become obstinate in his ways, was quite the big deal.

"Yep. I found him retired to a hermitage, so I asked him to join us. He accepted pretty easily," Uzume said quite casually. "I ask him to make stuff for me sometimes. Here's one." She pulled a pendant from within her clothes. It shone all colors—even black—based on the angle of the viewer. It was made of the extremely magical substance ethernanolite—a material that Albatinus was especially known for working with.

"Ooh, now that's rare!" Mira leaned over and took a long look at the pendant, clearly a little envious. She didn't know much of anything about alchemy, but she did know how rare this material was. It was especially conducive to Mira's refining techniques.

"Cool, right?" Uzume showed off the pendant some more. Mira stuck her lip out and pouted in frustration as it swayed enticingly before her.

At the same time, Flicker returned to her usual antics and gazed greedily at Mira. Naturally, Emella struggled to hold her back.

The others watched in exasperation. It seemed Mira and Uzume were the only ones that didn't understand just how incredible that pendant, which could easily go for a billion ducats, really was.

Cyril was impressed by the size and power of Isuzu—this organization allowed Uzume to acquire such an item with ease. At the same time, he saw hope: Isuzu had its priorities, assets, and personnel straight. If anyone could take down Chimera, it was them.

"So, we know that fabricating the materials won't be an issue. The question is what we should work them into. Hmm, an axe for Aaron... and a staff for Mira is fine, I assume? Would everyone else mind telling me their preferred weapons?" Uzume asked. She had produced a notepad out of nowhere.

It seemed she would procure gear to suit each person. Some of the guild members still worried about whether they could really learn to use this unknown material in only a few days. But Uzume seemed certain of it, so she must really have had some incredible people at the base. Aaron agreed without complaint, and Mira replied with a, "Sure," and a shrug. The others answered like so: a sword for Emella, a hammer for Asval, a dagger for Zef, a short staff for Flicker, and a long sword for Cyril.

"Okay, noted. I'll have them make one of each." After taking down each of their preferences, Uzume asked them for their heights and then closed her notebook. "Well, I'd better run. If anything comes up, just tell Tweetsuke," she declared. Her business here was done. She was suddenly enveloped in light.

Out of nowhere, she'd turned into Tweetsuke... or perhaps it would be more accurate to say she'd switched places with it again.

"Wha—?! Uzume's a bird now?!" Emella cried in surprise. It certainly looked that way

to anyone who didn't know better.

Mira decided to explain in the lazy Uzume's place that she'd used magic to switch places with her shikigami. She was probably back home at the Isuzu Alliance base by now. As soon as Mira shut her mouth, the shikigami spoke in Uzume's voice. "Thanks for explaining for me! There you have it; I'll probably pop over again sometime soon. Until then, I'm leaving Tweetsuke with Mira. If you need anything, go through her first!"

Emella and the others were startled by the bird talking in Uzume's voice, but perhaps because they'd just witnessed teleportation magic, this trick was a little easier to swallow. Mira simply frowned. She'd been stuck with Tweetsuke without any say in the matter.

"Anyway, laters!" Before the group's collective surprise could settle, Uzume spoke up again, carefree, and her bird began to glow. This time, the shikigami shrunk until it was small enough to fit in the palm of a hand. It was now an orb-shaped version of Tweetsuke.

"Ooh, it's all small now!"

The now tiny shikigami flapped as hard as it could and landed on Mira's head.

"Aww, it's cute!" Flicker cried. The rest of the group agreed that Tweetsuke's new form was extremely adorable—but that wasn't what Flicker had meant at all. She simply believed that the bird had enhanced Mira's cuteness even more.

Cute girls and small animals were truly a perfect combination.

* * *



After this, the group proceeded to hammer out the nitty gritty details. Cyril listed off his ideas of where Chimera Clausen headquarters entrances might be, and the group discussed how they could investigate and confirm his suspicions.

Mira took this opportunity to tell them about the mana sensors at Melville Commerce's compound, warning them that there might be more installed around the hidden entrances. She also added that there might be a silver lining to them—they might serve to distinguish important facilities from less important ones.

By the time night had overtaken the sky, the group had completely hashed out who would search where. They dispersed.

When everyone stood up to leave, Mira let out a big yawn and muttered, "Think I'll take a nice bath and go to bed." Flicker naturally champed at the bit, and Emella was dragged along for three-girl bath time.

As the rambunctious trio headed off to the baths, the men decided to follow suit and enjoyed a friendly bath among themselves.

Chapter 11

THE DAY AFTER Kagura's appearance and the influx of new information, Mira ate breakfast before lifting off on Pegasus's back. By afternoon, she had reached Irene, capital of Roslein.

"Hrmm. Nothing seems different at a glance." She strained her eyes to peer down at the ground, surveying the unchanged cityscape. On her head sat Tweetsuke, who chirped in response to Mira's musings.

It still hadn't been long since Johan's abduction. Chimera would need to set up a new facility for him to refine the black mist ore, so it should take a few days before he began working again. Perhaps that was why Mira saw no sign of the black ripples that were only visible to her.

Eight days remain. It's such a pain to keep waiting and watching for something that might take a long time to appear. That said, she couldn't think of a better way or place to search for Johan. Besides, Scorpion and Snake—actual professionals—were already on the case. If Mira stuck her nose in too far, she might end up getting in the way.

As such, she could only wait and watch. Just as she reached that conclusion, Mira's

wandering eyes happened to catch sight of Johan's mansion on the outskirts of town.
"Hrmm... Seems better than waiting up here, at least."

She suddenly realized something: preparing new tools from scratch would be a pain, but would it not be easy to simply transport the ones from Johan's mansion? The abduction must have been spur of the moment—Mira distinctly recalled that all of his tools had been left in the mansion. But if they moved those to wherever Johan was now, he could begin work right away.

With this theory in mind, Mira rushed to the mansion. She couldn't land right in front, of course, so had Pegasus touch down a short distance away, dismissed the flying horse, and summoned Wasranel in its place. The spirit of stealth was quite the busy man these days.

Optical camouflage alone was enough for her needs. Mira ran through the property, then gently sidled up to Johan's front door.

* * *

If things went as Mira hoped, someone would come along to recover Johan's tools. She could then follow them to find his current whereabouts. Even more optimistically, perhaps she could save him then and there. Of course, Mira considered the possibility that no one would come at all, but she decided waiting a day or two here would be acceptable.

However, when she entered the room where she'd first met Johan, she immediately froze upon seeing the desk inside. It should've had tools for working with the black mist ore left on it, but now, it was bare.

"Goodness..." She was too late. But with this knowledge, she changed her point of view: if they'd already recovered the tools, then Johan would soon begin his work anew. That would mean she'd be able to perceive the black ripples before long.

Very well. I'll just go back to plan A.

Either way, she had a chance to find him. With some annoyance, Mira left the mansion and mounted Pegasus once more to fly to the center of Irene. She landed clandestinely atop the tallest building, a Trinity church, and began her vigil—never forgetting her optical camouflage, of course.

The view may not have been as perfect as a bird's-eye view from Pegasus's back, but unsurprisingly for the largest religion in the world, the church commanded an omnidirectional view of the bustling city.

* * *

Hours passed, and the sun set. The city began to glow with artificial light.

"Hrmm... Today's a dud. Perhaps I'd best get going for now." It would obviously be difficult to spot dark ripples in the dark. Mira stood up with a yawn, thanked Wasranel for his efforts, and dismissed the spirit. She then muttered about being hungry and went off into the bright, busy city.

Sampling food from different stalls is a surprisingly luxurious way to pass the time.

The nighttime streets of Irene were a stark contrast from the daytime city. Mira browsed between the countless stalls, gradually filling her belly. She now accepted a bottle of mixed fruit au lait from a stallkeeper with a big smile on her face. Comparing the different mixed fruit au laits of each region, each with their own different fruits and ratios, was one of her personal pleasures of late.

Mm, this one's strong on sweetness and sourness. It works well with the milk. Passing marks. She reviewed the drink mentally on her way to visit the Ebatesse Commerce home office. She didn't go to the shop, though; she went to the so-called King's Hideout instead, where she planned to report what had happened in Sentopoli to Snake and Scorpion.

With notes in hand, Mira operated the locking mechanism, passed through the hidden door, and proceeded down the long hallway. When she reached the door to the hideout at the very end, she once again consulted her notes to open it.

Within, who should she find but Johan himself, who turned to her with a heartfelt smile on his face. "If it isn't Miss Mira! Thanks again for saving my wife and daughter. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"Bwah?!"

"Miss Mira? Is something wrong?" Johan asked.

"No, er... I'm glad you're safe." After spending her whole day in search of clues to rescue

this man, Mira was utterly confused to find him here of all places.

A certain cat-girl grinned smugly at the stunned summoner. “Surprised? As you can see, we’ve successfully saved Johan! Woooohoooo!” Scorpion gazed at Mira’s astonished expression with a satisfied smirk, puffing out her chest proudly. Mira always surprised her, so Scorpion was over the moon with joy to be the one doing the surprising for once.

Ultimately, she’d secured Johan’s safety—one of Mira’s most pressing concerns at the moment. This was to be celebrated, of course, but Mira was taken aback due to the suddenness of it all. Still, she had to compliment Kagura’s fantastic subordinates. “In only a single day. I have to say, I’m impressed.”

After the unexpected reunion, the group met to share their findings. Angelique and Anne stood by in another room.

Scorpion was the first to report; actually, she looked like she was dying to talk. She revealed what had happened after the start of their rescue plan. Ever a master of her craft, she’d snuck through countless security apparatuses and infiltrated Flattract’s Studio without much difficulty.

There, she’d quickly obtained the documents she was after. They revealed the locations of twenty-five mana sensors and their next dates of inspection. The challenge then was figuring out whether these sensors were related to Melville Commerce or not; apparently, they only had a single contact name listed for each one.

Scorpion added that the next part should actually be credited to Snake before continuing.

Snake’s job was to search for Melville facilities that didn’t house anything relating to spirits. She had used various means to explore the city and found a total of five locations: three on the outskirts of the city, and two along the Grand Lysion River.

When the two compared the results of their investigation, they found a perfect match—one of the facilities on the outskirts of the city. It was a Melville Commerce facility with very heavy security, including mana sensors. And since it had no spirit-related magical tools they could see, it was possible to refine black mist ore there. In other words, it was the ideal place to confine Johan and force him to work.

Earlier today, Scorpion and Snake had infiltrated the facility to perform recon. Their

guess was spot-on: they'd stumbled upon Johan in one of the rooms along the way. However, they could see he was being closely monitored; it would be difficult to spirit him away.

It was then that Scorpion and Snake hit upon a plan. First, they quietly let Johan know that they were there and signaled to ask if he could somehow get away from the guards. He thought about it, then told the people there that if he had the tools from his mansion, he could probably resume his work right away. This was exactly what his captors wanted, so they quickly agreed to get the tools.

Fortunately, the facility was somewhat short-staffed, and soon most of Johan's guards were conveniently sent to the mansion to pick up the equipment. This gave the girls a perfect opportunity to extract Johan, so they did just that. Nobody noticed, and they had managed to bring him back to the hideout. Johan, Angelique, and Anne were reunited for the first time in five years... and shortly after, Mira arrived.

"I bet they're going crazy over there now," Scorpion added with a chuckle. Snake seemed to be in high spirits as well, though she didn't show it on her face.

"Well done, you two!" Suddenly, everyone heard the voice of a person who shouldn't have been there. It was Uzume's voice, emitted by the orb-shaped bird atop Mira's head. It seemed she'd listened in on the whole conversation.

Instantly after, Uzume herself appeared in Tweetsuke's place.

"Whoa, that bird turned into a person!" Johan's eyes went wide.

Scorpion and Snake were unsurprised; they'd known at a glance that the being on Mira's head was Tweetsuke and that Uzume could switch places with her shikigami. Now it became clear why Scorpion sounded so proud of herself. She wasn't reporting to Mira at all... she was reporting to Uzume.

"You're Johan, correct? Nice to meet you; my name is Uzume. I am Scorpion and Snake's manager, of sorts. May I ask you to lend us your knowledge and techniques in the interest of toppling Chimera Clausen?" Uzume introduced herself without preamble and held out her right hand.

The Isuzu Alliance was analyzing Johan's documents even now, but having the person who'd written them on their side would make everything far more efficient. Asking for his help was the natural choice.

Johan still seemed a little flustered. He gazed at her outstretched hand for a moment and slowly looked to Mira, then Scorpion, then Snake. “I’d be glad to. Mira, Scorpion, and Snake here saved me and my family. It’s about time I repaid the debt.” Johan firmly shook Uzume’s hand. His eyes were full of powerful resolve, so much so that Uzume was slightly taken aback—she needed no magic to sense his sincerity.

There was no room for doubt. Uzume smiled in response and bowed. “Thank you.”

* * *

After that, Mira shared her account of the events in Sentopoli.

“You’re really something else, Mira,” Scorpion said with a grin. Mira’s job had merely been to send out a rush delivery, but she’d somehow managed to expose the shady origins of Sentopoli in a single day. What else could Scorpion say?

When everyone had finished their reports, they moved on to discussing the transport of Johan and his family. Isuzu’s head-quarters sheltered many of Chimera’s victims and targets, so it made sense to move Johan, Angelique, Anne, and Millene there until everything settled down. Uzume believed that, at the very least, it would be a much more enjoyable environment for Anne than a cramped underground room.

Getting them there was simple—Isuzu would send escorts for them, so Mira only needed to take them to a specified location under the protection of her optical camouflage.

With that settled, Uzume said that she’d make preparations to shelter Johan’s family and departed, switching places with Tweetsuke once again. She was quick to action once she had an idea. It could be difficult to keep up with her, but Mira smiled, thinking how her friend hadn’t changed in all this time.

* * *

“Well, it seems things might settle down here soon... or so I’d like to say. Do you think we’ll be able to deal with these Melville Commerce folk?” Mira asked.

Their objective in Roslein had originally been to find enough evidence to make the Melville-Chimera relationship public and see both convicted for their crimes. To do this, they needed to prove the relationship between them. Mira and the gang had one trump card now: Johan. He’d dealt with both sides over a long period of time, so his

testimony would be quite persuasive.

"I dunno," Johan replied. "Maybe we'd have a better chance if I could've given you those transaction records I promised you, but..." Johan himself believed that his testimony alone wouldn't be enough. Now that the transaction records were lost, what was his word in the face of such an influential firm?

"We need some sort of rock-solid evidence," Mira agreed. She began thinking about what they could do.

"I have an idea, though," Johan added. According to him, he'd been detained in a certain facility for a while after his abduction. The place happened to house many weapons made from black mist ore. He'd been kept there, then moved somewhere else after—to the facility where Scorpion and Snake had found him. That made Johan think that the abduction was so spur of the moment that they hadn't actually thought of a permanent place to take him at first.

He thought for a moment and brought up one possible opportunity. "The only people using weapons made from black mist ore right now are Chimera. If the place they took me to was a Melville Commerce facility, then that's real, physical evidence that could prove their relationship beyond a shadow of a doubt."

If it was true that Chimera Clausen's signature weapons were in Melville Commerce storage, then that evidence, on top of Johan's testimony, would put them in pretty hot water.

"Hrmm. Seems worth investigating, then."

"Yeah! It could turn out to be useful."

Mira and Scorpion were excited by this new lead. However, finding it was the issue. Johan claimed that he'd suddenly fainted in the middle of the night and woken up in a room full of black weapons, so he had no idea what path his kidnappers had taken to get there. However, he did think that it wasn't far from the facility where Snake and Scorpion rescued him.

"Just my estimate, but it's probably about a thirty-minute jog at most," he said, sifting through his memory. Then, with a sigh, he continued, "If I knew we'd need to know, I would've taken a better look."

"No worries!" Scorpion replied. "That's plenty. You don't have to feel bad, Johan."

It wasn't perfect, but if Johan was right about the distance, that narrowed things down quite a bit. Scorpion opened up a map of the area; it was her time to shine. The map had markings on it that showed the locations of all the Melville Commerce facilities they knew about. Scorpion drew a red circle around the location they'd snatched Johan from, and a few suspicious places quickly began to stand out.

There were three facilities nearby, but they easily narrowed it down to the most likely one. It was a storehouse positioned right in between Johan's mansion and the facility where Snake and Scorpion had found him.

CHAPTER 12

THE DAY AFTER Johan's timely rescue, Mira and the gang got to work just after sunrise. Scorpion and Snake left to investigate the black mist ore weapons Johan had seen. As for Mira, she escorted Johan, his family, and Millene through the wasteland as promised. Though she had a large group with her, as long as Mira dipped into her vast pool of mana, she could deploy optical camouflage at a larger radius than total concealment. This allowed Wasranel's synergy with other summons to really shine.

Johan's family and Millene rode on the back of Guardian Ash, a gray bear, while Mira and Wasranel rode Pegasus next to it. A bear and a winged horse ran through the wasteland at forty kilometers per hour, and not a soul saw them thanks to Wasranel.

Along the way, Anne gushed over the bear and Pegasus. She even started complaining about how she wanted to ride the beautiful horse. Johan and Angelique seemed apologetic, but Mira gladly allowed it. She didn't mind one bit; this was Anne's first outing in years, after all.

A few hours later, the group arrived at the meeting place Uzume had arranged. They dismounted and relaxed, as if merely out on a picnic.

* * *

Mira and Johan's group had waited for less than an hour when it finally descended from the skies. Johan and Angelique looked up, stunned.

"Ooh, that's awesome... I've never seen anything like it," Johan said in amazement.

"The outside world has changed so much! It's like a god coming down from the heavens..." Angelique added.

A wooden ship, about thirty meters in length, had sailed down from above. How could they not be surprised?

"These last few days feel like a long dream..." Millene grinned uneasily at the flying ship, finally giving in to the mental fatigue of recent events.

Meanwhile, Anne was clearly still excited. "It's so big!"

"Oho! Could this be one of those airships?" Mira knew of their existence only from the rumors Cyril had shared with her. Seeing one in person was something else; her heart danced for joy at the appearance of this fantasy flying contraption. She looked up at the sky with eyes sparkling.

"That is correct! This is the Isuzu Alliance's pride and joy, our own spirit airship!" Kagura's voice issued from Tweetsuke, who was still perched on Mira's head. Though Mira didn't ask, Kagura continued, "Bet you're wondering why it's a 'spirit' airship, riiight?" Kagura claimed that normal airships created through technomancy operated using mobility stones and specially refined fuel. However, the Isuzu Alliance's own individually developed airship flew through the air on the power of spirits alone.

Kagura suddenly switched places with Tweetsuke. She added as she appeared, gazing up at the landing spirit airship, "This ship was made a reality only through the deepest cooperation between humans and spirits. One might call it a symbol of the Isuzu Alliance's ideal future." Though she was clearly proud, there was a hint of melancholy in her eyes. She seemed to be looking past the ship, perhaps remembering someone.

* * *

"Mira, thank you for everything," Johan said.

"Let the other girls know we appreciate them too," Angelique thanked her and the couple stepped onto the airship. Along the way, Anne turned and waved.

"Bye-bye!" Mira smiled and watched as the four departed.

Kagura turned to Mira. "We'll keep Johan and the others safe at the base. Good luck finding their HQ, Gramps."

"Indeed. Are your preparations going smoothly?"

"We've always been ready and waiting for the final battle. I've already sent a few teams out. Making weapons to fight black mist ore is still a problem, but once Johan arrives, I'm sure we'll have that one solved in no time. All that's left is to give this battle all we've got."

"I see. Sounds like you're doing just fine. Well, I'll see you on the day of battle."

"Yeah. On the day of battle..."

The two held out their fists and declared at the same time, "For victory!" Those were once parting words used among the Nine Wise Men on the day before a major battle. It was essentially a unique way of praying for victory, but as Soul Howl was the one who'd come up with it, Mira could never shake off the feeling that it was a little too hammy.

This was their first time performing the gesture between only two people. In this rather relaxed mood, with none of the other Wise Men present, Mira and Kagura started to laugh.

Each left for their own destinations. Before long, light glowed once again behind Mira and Tweetsuke returned to its perch atop her head.

* * *

"Scorpion, Snake. The rest is up to you," Mira murmured to herself as she and Pegasus soared through the skies above Irene. She turned Pegasus back toward Sentopoli.

The job of the two Hidden was to dig up the final evidence needed to link Chimera and Melville. It was out of Mira's hands now. With the hand-off of Johan's family complete, Scorpion and Snake would want her to focus on finding Chimera's headquarters. She knew from experience that their skills were trustworthy. As such, she could leave this place to them without worry.

The moment she was back in Sentopoli, Mira would join the others there in their search for any entrances to Chimera's headquarters.

* * *

Two days later, they hit the jackpot—thanks to Zef, of all people. He had contacted a government employee working at one of the national government facilities. The employee had complained to him about the daily stress of his job, so Zef had taken him out for drinks, gotten the poor guy drunk, and then pried out some secrets about the facility he worked at.

Among those secrets was the source of the man's fatigue: a particular secretary to a certain bureaucrat. Said bureaucrat would show up at the facility as unexpectedly as the Spanish Inquisition, so one could never rest easy.

All of Sentopoli's publicly known bureaucrats were merely props. They didn't know about their own connection to Chimera Clausen; they simply believed they were doing what was best for their country. It would be wrong to do them any harm, and of course, they should know nothing about the entrances that Mira and the others were searching for.

But Zef found this fishy. The secretary would randomly appear in the building. How did he get there? A secret entrance, perhaps?

When that question came to mind, Zef suddenly had a flash of inspiration. If there was a secret entrance in that building, then who could freely go in and out without raising suspicion? On top of that, who could enter places that most people could not, at any time of day, without being questioned? The people who knew of the entrances couldn't be the bureaucrats themselves, but they would be close. For example... a bureaucrat's secretary.

Zef had probed for this irritating secretary's name. His name was Thomas, and he worked under the Minister of Finance, Oswald. It was highly likely that Thomas knew where the entrance leading to Chimera Clausen's headquarters was. Thus, Mira and Zef had decided to tail Thomas in his comings and goings the next day.

Even without the perfect cover of total concealment, optical camouflage was an incredible ability. Mira and Zef managed to find their target within the building in no time: a man with the look of an especially serious office worker. Mira discerned at a glance that the man was carrying multiple pieces of yin spirit gear. Based on this, it was clear that he was involved with Chimera.

That night, as Mira and Zef watched, the man stepped into a forbidden area and used an unknown contraption to open a cleverly hidden door. He stepped inside.

And with that, they'd succeeded in finding the location of one of the entrances.

"More hidden doors, hm?" Mira muttered to herself as she smirked at their success.

* * *

The next day, Mira and the others held a meeting regarding their strategy going forward. Uzume switched places with Tweetsuke again to attend. There were two major topics of discussion: who would charge in and who would serve as detached forces.

The former would be a small, focused group of elites consisting of Mira, Uzume, and Cyril. This was partially due to mobility concerns; the large, rocky mountain that housed Chimera Clausen's headquarters was thirty kilometers east of Sentopoli. They would need to cross this distance in a short time. Mira had Pegasus, and Uzume had shikigami that could be used for high-speed travel. As for Cyril, he had trained himself to specialize in speed, so he could run thirty kilometers in just thirty minutes.

But of course, the most important factor was strength. Cyril had once said that Mira was stronger than him, and Mira claimed that Uzume was her equal. Emella and the others were far too behind Cyril in strength to keep up with these two. They would only drag Mira and Uzume down.

With that decided, Aaron and the rest of Écarlate Carillon would lead mobile detached forces. Nobody protested, though Flicker was clearly a bit bummed that she wouldn't get to go with Mira. Their job would be to assist the Isuzu Alliance's First Company in taking down the control center. First Company would be led by Bellerophon Battalion leader Mizar and staff officer Alioth, along with Multicolor Platoon leader Diamond.

According to Jamal, the control center in the village had a defense force stationed there due to how vital it was to Chimera Clausen's operation. Moreover, Zell Schedal had spent the past several months developing something underground there. As their main developer and the man who'd produced so many spirit weapons, there was a high possibility that he had something big in the works.

Aaron's mobile detached force was positioned to be a reserve in case of emergency.

Uzume declared that she would devote half of the Isuzu Alliance's combat capabilities to this mission. The other half of them—Second Company—would charge in from the entrance after Mira's group infiltrated, in order to ensure that all foes in the vicinity were dealt with.

With the broad strokes complete, the meeting moved into more specific details of each team's mission. Mira, Uzume, and Cyril's mission was the most vague. Their plan was simply "respond to the situation as it develops"—but considering how capable they were, perhaps that was the best strategy for them.

Instead of worrying about these three, the group spent the bulk of this time working out the specifics of the detached force's mission. After all, they planned to attack a vital outpost of a massive organization; it was necessary to get everything nailed down. The

Skyfolk man was an unpredictable variable, and they didn't know the route to the tuner due to Jamal's lack of familiarity with the inside of the base. They would have to carefully work through every detail to ensure the force was ready for anything.

The First Company of Isuzu elites and the detached force led by Emella were to seize the control room and neutralize HQ's defenses. If they failed, Chimera's defenses around their headquarters would be too strong, and it would take too long to conquer the facility. Mira and the others would be rampaging throughout the base. Considering how careful Chimera's elites were, they would probably try to flee the instant they felt like they were at a disadvantage. Worse, they might even have some self-destruct option. For the sake of cornering Chimera swiftly, seizing the control center was a vital part of the plan.

* * *

Just as the hours-long meeting finally began to wrap up...

"All right! It sounds like the plan is set. How about I give you those weapons you'll need?" Uzume stood up triumphantly, retrieved a large case from her Item Box, and plunked it down onto the table.

"Could it be...?!" Emella piped up first. Days ago, Uzume had offered to have special weapons made for them to help fight off the black mist ore. As a lover of swords, Emella couldn't wait to see the weapons.

"The weapons we made for everyone are ready, so I brought them with me. They may be made to fight Chimera, but honestly, I think they're just as good as any other weapons!" Apparently quite proud of her connections, Uzume confidently opened the case. Inside was a weapon for every person there, each one as white as snow.

"Whoa! Awesome..." Emella leaned over the table. Her heart was immediately stolen by their beauty.

Zef reached out before the enraptured Emella and gazed at the white dagger in the box. It was worthy of being called an angelic weapon. He muttered, "They sure do look special."

Everyone took their weapon in hand. Emella returned to her senses and was the last to retrieve hers.

"They made all of these awesome weapons in just a few days... You must have so many skilled blacksmiths!" Emella narrowed her eyes and grinned maniacally at her blade.

The weapons Uzume brought were all beautifully made. They were truly the masterpieces of first-rate artisans. Their construction, honed perfectly for their purpose, made them look almost like art pieces when combined with their pure whiteness. As Emella had said, one would need a large team of first-rate blacksmiths working around the clock to make so many of these in so little time. But Uzume's proud grin grew broader. She declared, "Only two people were involved in the making of these weapons!"

"Now, that's incredible," Asval mused, impressed.

"Just two people?! How?! Who?!" The sword had set Emella's soul aflame. She'd believed it impossible to make such pieces without an army of first-rate smiths, and yet two people alone had done it. That must have meant that they were truly the cream of the crop. "What are their names?! What do they specialize in?! Mithril? Or adamantine?!"

"I'll tell you, I'll tell you! Just let me go!" Uzume, who had foolishly triggered Emella's berserk mode, shrunk away. This woman was more terrifying than any monster or fiend.

Once Flicker had calmed Emella down, Uzume spoke two names—though she remained wary of her attacker. One of these names was already known to everyone present. "Albatinus was the one who made Mira and Flicker's staves. I'm sure you remember that name."

Albatinus, an alchemist who'd become a living legend. It seemed he was well-versed in creating staves and magical tools, on top of his ability to synthesize materials.

Emella jumped out of her seat. "What about the blade?!" She could tell Uzume was about to say something incredible.

Uzume's cheek twitched slightly, but she still managed to puff out her chest and say the smith's name: "The dwarven blacksmith, Dvalin!"

Emella squealed and fell to the ground, boneless. She had fainted.

Uzume was... shocked, to say the least. Mira likewise stared, astounded, as Flicker

tried to wake Emella up. The swordswoman wore a blissful smile, as if she'd received the highest blessing in all the world. She was as peaceful as the bodhisattva.

Mira silently put her palms together in prayer.

As one might understand from Emella's reaction, the dwarven blacksmith Dvalin was one of the best blacksmiths in the world. As someone who'd sat at the pinnacle of his profession for many long years, he was a true living legend.

Cyril and Asval were surprised as well, if not to the same degree as Emella. However, their surprise was not because the man known as Dvalin had forged the sword; they were more surprised at Isuzu's ability to take two living legends under their umbrella.

Uzume decided to ignore Emella's collapse and told the group to pass instructions on to her later. She proceeded to give every-one a rundown on these anti-black-mist-ore weapons—now dubbed the Alabaster Oni-Slayer series.

"I couldn't get sheaths made in time, but everyone here can use Item Boxes, right? So it's fine. Okay, instruction time! This is all secondhand from Albatinus and Dvalin, but basically..."

CHAPTER 13

THE NIGHT PASSED after their lengthy strategy discussion. Aaron and Emella's detached force left early the next morning on their way to the small village that housed the so-called control room. Kagura's Byakko shikigami, Growlta, was to accompany them. This would allow Kagura to use her independently developed communication magic to exchange information with them.

Growlta had been working with another distant party, but Kagura had called it back in advance of this final battle to work as a glorified cell phone. First Company had her shikigami Henryu with them for the same reason.

"I still can't believe the master of Écarlate Carillon turned out to be a former player. Makes sense, though," Kagura murmured profoundly as she looked Cyril up and down. It was rather common knowledge in this world that former players were strong fighters. There were naturally some exceptions, but if someone was strong enough to stand out, chances were good that they were a former player.

Cyril gazed back at her. "I was just as surprised to learn that the Isuzu Alliance, a nature protection group of all things, stood up to fight Chimera Clausen—and even more astounded to learn that the founder was Wise Man Kagura!" Cyril had once seen her while working as a mercenary with Wise Man Flonne. The man smiled happily; the former players he'd met so far turned out to be such important people.

Cyril had realized at a glance that Uzume was really Kagura. She was famous, and she couldn't change her appearance, so it was unsurprising that people would recognize her. The fact that she'd appeared with Mira—ostensibly Danblf's pupil—only solidified that theory.

The infiltration team chatted as they fought monsters in a mountain range far from the city. They had come here for a team outing to get a better grasp of each other's abilities before they worked together.

"Keep your eyes on the battle, now!" Mira shouted at the two as they chatted. She rode on the back of her Pegasus and sicced it on the enemy, summoning countless Dark Knights and Holy Knights to assist her, and obliterating targets to show off the power

of summoning.

"Yeah, yeah, we're watching." Kagura waved her off. She knew just how strong Mira was as a fellow Wise Man, and they had already built up their coordination in battle together. As such, the real purpose of this little jaunt was to show Cyril their stuff and size him up in kind.

Unlike Kagura, however, Cyril was actually paying attention throughout the demonstration. He praised Mira for the cooperation between her Dark Knights and Holy Knights. Her mood was greatly improved by his words. She called out, "And this one's a new technique!"

She then partial-summoned a tower shield to block the charge of a monster that resembled a boar wearing rock armor, before using the same technique to slice it to bits with six black swords that appeared from thin air. Cyril was instantly awed by their power and potential to ambush foes.

"Yep, you used that one in your mock battle with Scorpion," said Kagura. "So you can do both at the same time? Very impressive."

Partial summoning was a new technique made possible by the removal of Ark Earth Online's video game limitations. Kagura acknowledged its power, but she knew her friend well, so she wasn't especially surprised. Of course Mira could do that.

That said, this only made Mira more eager to show off to her. So she wrapped up her performance and grumbled, "I've got a dragon emperor I've been holding off on using since it stands out so much. If I had to, I could blow the whole mountain away."

While Mira came back in a huff, Kagura took a talisman from her pocket and stepped forward. "Okay, guess it's my turn."

Three monsters approached up ahead. They were smaller than the rock boars Mira had trounced, but these lizard-like monsters had tough skin as well. They also moved at twice the speed of the boars.

The lizards approached in the blink of an eye. Kagura murmured something and threw her talisman. By using Soul Dispatch, a special ability of mediums, she could make her talisman fly freely through the air toward the monsters. Just before striking them, the talisman burst, and the ground all around the explosion immediately caved in. The three monsters fell dozens of meters down into the resulting crater. The speed and

scale of it were unthinkable for such a quick cast, providing a good example of a Wise Man's true power.

However, a Wise Man would not stop there. It was natural for these heroes to have counters upon counters.

Despite falling from such a great height, the monsters seemed undamaged. They quickly righted themselves and began running toward Kagura again. Kagura tossed two more talismans their way. These two were swallowed up by the collapsed earth, heralding yet another abnormal change. From the silt-and-crag earth erupted greenery that blanketed the entire collapsed area in the blink of an eye.

"Wow. It's incredible to see how different the Wise Men are from your average mage." Cyril watched with a mixture of excitement and admiration.

Kagura was at the apex of her magical discipline, and her medium magic was truly magnitudes beyond any other. Empty land had been replaced by a sea of trees.

Among the Celestial Arts was the forest-generating [Celestial Arts: Wood—Giant Forest]. This was a popular representative of the field-controlling spells that often gave mediums the upper hand. This spell was often used for support, such as aiding in a team's escape. It could be used to create obstacles and fend off long-ranged attacks, and create an opportunity for more mobile allies. But there were other hidden uses as well.

"Now, I just gotta set fire to it," Kagura said. "But if I do that to such a big forest we'll stand out, right?"

...Her plan was to literally create a forest fire.

Trees made by mediums burned especially well when lit by that same medium's fire—even better than natural trees, in fact. What would happen if Wise Man Kagura set fire to this localized sea of trees in this deep, wide crater? One didn't have to see it to believe that it would be devastating.

"Well, that would be too easy. I think I can stop here."

Knowing that their mission was in a few days, they didn't want to draw any extra attention to themselves. Kagura held her fire. Instead, the forest began to writhe, collapsing in on itself to engulf the three lost and confused monsters. Minutes later,

only the monster's corpses remained. The land had returned to its usual craggy self.

Kagura's skills hadn't lapsed in the slightest. Mira sniffed. "Not bad, I suppose."

Cyril, who would have to show his skills next, grinned wryly and muttered, "No pressure, huh?" He then whipped out his sword gracefully, lowered his stance, and faced forward.

Soon, a mob of monkey-like rock monsters appeared, hopping and leaping over the rocky mountains with ease. They were armored apes, among the strongest of the monsters that appeared in this area. They were all more than two meters tall, with the most dignified ones towering a whopping four meters.

As soon as the armored ape horde noticed the group, they displayed their hostility with a roar. It was not intended to intimidate or warn—they attacked without waiting for a reaction. The apes easily hopped about the mountain, unhindered by the poor footing. They closed in at lightning speed.

Just then, Cyril's figure seemed to flicker—and an armored ape shrieked in pain. A great gash had been carved into its chest, and fresh blood poured out. Cyril stood beside it with blood dripping from his blade.

He was quite fast. Mira and Kagura watched, impressed. But the armored ape seemed unbothered by the gash in its chest; in its rage, it roared and swung an arm at Cyril. Yet he was already gone, and its arm hit nothing but air.

Before long, the monsters began to scream one after another. All of them suddenly had major wounds—yet none were fatal. Every one of the injured armored apes glared odiously at their assailant.

He stood in the midst of the enemy, gathering all of their malice in one spot. Yet, unexpectedly, he shook the blood off of his blade and sheathed it. The wounded armored apes were all still alive and ready to fight, but Cyril turned and walked toward Mira and Kagura as if the battle were over.

The largest armored ape tried to attack his undefended back. Suddenly, as if on cue, blood spurted from every armored ape at once, and they all died on the spot.

"How was that? I'm confident I at least won't hold you back," Cyril said hopefully, a humble smile on his face.

"More than enough, I'd say," Mira replied.

"Yep, no complaints here. You'll be a boon to us," Kagura agreed.

Warriors' manifestations, the result of honing and giving form to their fighting spirit, could be chained into Crafts. Crafts were as diverse as the people who wielded them, making it difficult to judge them by any set standard. Nevertheless, it was clear to anyone with eyes that Cyril's sword strikes were the image of perfection. Mira and Kagura offered their genuine admiration and praise for his sharp swordsmanship.

"It's great to hear that from you two. An honest-to-goodness confidence boost." The powerful people around Cyril had shown him the limits of his long-honed sword skills. But he was truly happy that the strongest people he'd ever met would compliment him like this.

Once the two Wise Men confirmed that Cyril was strong enough to join them, the group spent the rest of the day training to make better use of their new Alabaster Oni-Slayer weapons.

* * *

Around noon the next day, just as the trio had begun making their last preparations for the battle, Scorpion and the others contacted them through Tweetsuke. They reported that they'd found a Melville Commerce storehouse full of weapons made from black mist ore. On top of that, they'd organized a raid to recover the evidence.

According to Scorpion, Ebatesse Commerce had helped them bring the Trinity Church's international legal affairs official to their side. Said official was essentially an international investigator under the banner of the church, tasked by the Holy Kingdom Alisfarius to uphold its religious commandments throughout the continent.

The current plan was for Scorpion and Snake to take this official to the Melville Commerce facility for the raid right when Isuzu's attack began. This way, Melville Commerce would be unable to react quickly to the attack, since they would be too busy dealing with the exposure of the black mist ore weapons they were holding for Chimera.

It would be no exaggeration to say that Melville's fate was sealed.

"Be ready to move at a moment's notice, even before the planned time. Also, let us

know if they make any unusual moves," Kagura ordered. She ended the call. "It seems that corporation helping us is in for one heck of a lucky day."

It wasn't certain yet, so they couldn't let their guard down. But Kagura sounded confident; after all, she trusted Scorpion and Snake completely.

* * *

That night, Aaron's detached force contacted Mira's group as well. Unfortunately, their report was not as favorable.

Aaron's group had gone in advance to take a look around the village where the control room was allegedly concealed. As far as they could tell, the village containing the control room truly had the appearance of a small village. The villagers that supposedly protected the area acted like real villagers, hospitality and all. They even sold their crops for a more than fair price. But when they looked upon the villagers as a garrison protecting a fortress, the detached force felt a wary suspicion in their gazes.

Flicker added that she'd felt an abnormal density of spirit presences, which seemed to be even thicker underground. She was certain that there was something down there.

Despite the group's best efforts, searching the village did not go as well as they'd hoped due to the enemy's natural suspicion of outsiders. This was thus all the information they could offer.

"We looked around the village and its surroundings, but we didn't see that Skyfolk guy. Either he's hiding or he's not there yet," Aaron reported. This was an additional complication. If they couldn't find the Skyfolk man, they would have no idea where or when the battle would begin. It wasn't even clear whether he'd come or not. Aaron believed that he'd be unreliable as a distraction for Isuzu's operation.

As a result, it was decided that Aaron's group would stay ready for the battle to begin at any given time—or worse, for the Skyfolk man to not show up at all.

* * *

The next call came from the leaders of the Isuzu Alliance First Company and control center attack force, Diamond and Mizar. Spirits helped them travel at high speed, but due to the sheer scale of the operation—Involving hundreds of people—it would still take another half a day until their group arrived on the scene.

However, even in the worst case, the operation should be able to proceed according to plan as long as they arrived within the day. Kagura provided an amended strategy based on where the First Company would meet with Aaron's group, the location of the entrance leading to headquarters, the wild card that was the Skyfolk man, and the actual situation and geography of the village based on Aaron's direct observations.

Once she'd heard everyone's reports, Kagura produced a green ribbon and gazed at it. It was the gift she'd hoped to present the wind spirit Lecia with for helping her when she was lost in this new world. "Soon, my friend. Soon..." Kagura grasped the ribbon in prayer, shook her head to ward off the tears welling in her eyes, and looked up at the night sky. The distant stars were ephemeral and beautiful—but nowhere near as beautiful as when she'd once looked upon them with Lecia.

Kagura slowly closed her eyes...

CHAPTER 14

ON THE NIGHT before the mission, the Isuzu Alliance army spread out among the hills, mountains, small groves, and other geographic features surrounding the village housing the control center. They stood hidden, yet ready to fight at a moment's notice—just as Uzume had ordered.

Even further out, two more people looked upon the village. In a mountain cave with a good view of the village, hidden behind an illusory barrier to disguise the entrance as part of the mountain's rocky surface, were Glad and Meimei.

There was a bright gleam in Meimei's eyes as she gazed restlessly upon the village. "So... someone really strong is down there?"

"No doubt about it. The powers of many spirits have gathered below. That beast from several days back was nothing compared to this," Glad replied, glaring down at the village.

So many sacrificed spirits were gathered in that control center. As a priest of a clan that worshipped spirits, Glad had special sight that could see the formless spiritual power overflowing from that village.

Heedless of Glad's melancholy, Meimei asked expectantly, "Will the strong one come out if we fight above ground?" Her head seemed empty save for thoughts of fighting a strong foe.

The "strong one" she spoke of was a being far more powerful than the giant fighting doll they'd encountered a week prior.

Glad's preliminary search had revealed a familiar construct below the ground of the small village. Yet the spiritual power it held was many magnitudes greater, revealing its nature as a true force to be reckoned with. He was secretly grateful to have such a powerful ally with him.

"It should. I'll set fire to the village first; that ought to get their attention. It may signal the other organization fighting against them to act as well," Glad said, before giving Meimei a quick summary of their plans.

Once fire had overtaken the whole village and Glad and Meimei had dealt with the village's many patrols, reinforcements were sure to come from below. After they took down those reinforcements, the giant weapon would definitely emerge for her to fight.

"Heck yeah!" Once many enemies had been defeated, the boss would appear. Meimei easily understood that... probably because of how video game-y it was. In short, if she went wild enough on the battlefield, her prey would come to her. "I'll take 'em all down!" she said enthusiastically. She could tell, either through feral instinct or some rare sense, that this enemy would be among the strongest enemies in all her journey so far. She was as excited as a kid at a carnival.

This girl seemed like she could trample everyone there if she wasn't careful. Glad worried over her enthusiasm, so he warned her, "Not everyone, now. People from an organization known as the Isuzu Alliance may join the fray. They aren't our enemy—at least not yet. Do not attack them. There may be strong people among them, but if you want to challenge them, wait until the mission is over."

"Isuzu Alliance? Okay. I'll be careful." Meimei was surprisingly obedient—perhaps because Glad had treated her to so many meals in these past few days. "Isuzu Alliance are friends. We can spar after." Meimei recited this to herself over and over to remember. Eventually, she smiled and said, "Piece of cake!"

* * *

Just after midnight, Glad and Meimei stole close to the small village.

"I'm about to kick things off." Glad took up position and held his crossbow toward the sky.

He looked over at Meimei, who responded, "Ready to go!" There was a ferocious, bestial gleam in her eyes. That was the gleam of a truly powerful warrior, one who'd give her all against even a bunny if that were her foe.

Now certain that the first stage of his plan would succeed, Glad fired a crossbow bolt. It flew silently through the air until it hung perfectly above the center of the village.

With a blue flash, it exploded.

The stars in the night sky and the gentle lights of the village were all snuffed out at once by Glad's bolt. The holy water within turned into a sea of great blue flames that

rained down like meteors upon the village.

"Okay. Begin with their patrols."

"Got it!"

The flame, full of Glad's fury, roared up in an instant. It bathed the village in a sea of fire. While the patrols began to panic, Glad and Meimei quickly got to work dispatching them.

Glad's slender sword pierced a man's throat, while Meimei's fists cleanly deprived two men of their consciousness. After this perfect surprise attack, Glad and Meimei did not hide; they strode openly through the village.

"What's going on?!" A man ran out of a hut in a flurry. But the moment he emerged, his throat was sliced open, and he fell to the ground.

"What's happening out here?!" Another man peeked out. When he saw his fallen friend in front of him, he looked at Glad and went pale. "You're that damned Sky—"

Skyfolk.

Before the man could get the whole word out, Glad threw a vial of holy water that shattered in midair and erupted into flames. The blue blaze burned the man and everyone else in the building in no time.

"Are you watching?" Glad cried. "Do you see this, Zell? This is your fate too." With swirling resentment in his eyes, Glad charged at the gathering crowd of patrols.

In the open square at the center of the village, the fire was weak; there was little here that could burn. Yet, as they were surrounded by flames, the world around them was lit a dazzling blue. Meimei was in the most conspicuous spot. This would draw the most enemies to her, but that's just what she wanted. "C'mon out! If you don't bring it out, I'll take everyone down!" she yelled at nobody in particular. She knocked every approaching enemy out with one blow.

She knew that directly below this clearing was Chimera Clausen's trump card, a gigantic fighting doll. So she waited here in order to be ready to greet it when it came. After she'd taken down countless attackers, suddenly, there was a war cry from the edge of the village.

“Mmm! I sense someone powerful!” Along with the voice, Meimei felt their presence suddenly expanding. It seemed Chimera’s reinforcements had finally appeared. But when she tried to run over, someone called her to a stop.

“Don’t go that way. Those are those Isuzu fellows I told you about. More importantly, look around.” Glad stopped Meimei and had her survey her surroundings.

“There are lots of them!”

“Be careful. These are stronger than the last.”

Meimei looked all around; fighting dolls had flooded the small village in the blink of an eye. Though they were weaker than the giant weapon, these dolls had humanoid forms and wielded spirit weapons. These were stronger and had more functions than the fighting dolls they’d battled previously. Glad knew that they had enough power to be threatening.

“Perfect for a warm-up!” Meimei’s fighting spirit burned hotter, stoking the fire before the main event. Without waiting, she plunged right into the mob of dolls.

CHAPTER 15

EARLIER THAT NIGHT: midnight of the day of the final battle.

“Gramps, wake up! C’mom, huuurry!”

“Nnh... What? You’re too loud...”

Mira had bathed, ate dinner, and gone to bed early as usual. But this time, she was suddenly forced awake by Kagura. “The fight’s begun. We need to get going!”

“What...?!”

Kagura told her that Alioth of the First Company had just reported that the Skyfolk man appeared and began an assault on the village. “I’ll issue orders to each unit. Gramps, you gotta go tell Cyril.” Kagura immediately used her Celestial Arts to begin contacting people.

Mira simply replied, “Very well,” and ran out of the room to find Cyril. She stopped in a fancy hallway full of suite-style hotel rooms, knocking urgently on Cyril’s door while she called out to him, “Cyriil! Are you awake? It’s me.”

“What’s going on? Has it... begun?” Cyril promptly poked his head out the door; he must not have gotten to sleep yet. He quickly surmised the situation based on Mira’s hurried summons.

“Hrmm, indeed. They’ve begun—”

“Hold on, Mira! I don’t think you should walk around like that.” He wasted no time on small talk. When Mira started to repeat what she’d heard from Kagura, Cyril took his cloak and wrapped it around Mira.

“Nnh...? Oh! I forgot entirely.” Mira looked down and realized that she was still in her underwear. But she laughed it off without any shame and explained that the Skyfolk man had begun his assault.

“Understood. Let’s go.” Cyril was already prepared; as soon as Mira finished telling him

what had happened, they left his room behind.

* * *

When they returned, Kagura turned to greet them, having just finished issuing her orders. She immediately frowned at Mira. "Wow, what's with the getup?" Kagura furrowed her brow at the far-too-big cloak hanging from the little summoner's shoulders. Mira's fair skin peeked out here and there, making for a rather enticing picture.

"Blame yourself for rushing me..."

Kagura sighed. "Fine, just get changed, please."

What fool would run outside in their underwear, rushed or not? But Kagura left it at that, picked up the clothes on the floor next to the bed, and handed them to Mira.

"Okay..." Mira replied, disheartened, and began putting on her usual outfit. Cyril had already left the room to wait outside.

* * *

Mira eventually finished changing, and Cyril came back in. It was then that Kagura finally divulged the details.

According to the reports, the Skyfolk man had begun his assault, sending the base into chaos. And though reports were fragmented, some said that he seemed to have an ally with him. The identity of this person was unclear, but they were apparently quite strong. This mysterious ally would likely raise the chances of his success greatly.

Their assault was quite effective, so Kagura had ordered First Company to charge into battle to take advantage of the confusion.

He did say he had a troublesome acquaintance. It seems they're more helpful than he let on. Mira recalled what the Skyfolk man had said when they'd met days ago. What sort of person would such an antisocial man allow to join him? The details were unclear from reports so far, but Mira was interested in whoever this person might be.

While Mira thought about the Skyfolk man's assistant, Kagura said, "So basically, it's time for us to get going. You haven't forgotten anything, have you, Mira?"

She looked up and saw her medium friend's exasperated face. All of her necessities were in her Item Box. Mira put on her coat and answered firmly, "Of course not. I'm as ready as can be!"

"All right, then. Let's get going." Kagura nodded and began walking.

Mira asked as she left, "Aren't you going to ask Cyril?"

"He doesn't forget to put on clothes like a certain someone. Why should I have to ask him?"

"Nrgh..." Mira grumbled and pouted in response. Cyril followed after the two with a smile.

* * *

The trio ran out of the hotel like the wind, toward the government building where the entrance to Chimera Clausen headquarters had been found.

They didn't need to slip through security with Wasranel's powers this time. The three ran boldly through the front gate, busted into the building, and sprinted through the halls. Whenever Kagura spotted an employee, she slapped a talisman onto them to put them to sleep. This would also help Second Company, coming in behind them, get through without issue.

They proceeded further in and soon stepped into the staff-only zone. In the back-most room was a door leading to the secret passage. The lock was an old combination lock, so Mira whipped out a set of notes and unlocked it.

They moved swiftly through the door and into a huge tunnel that looked to be for drainage in case of tsunamis. It was also incredibly well-lit despite an apparent lack of visible light sources, perhaps due to light spirit magic.

"It's bright in here, isn't it?" Cyril narrowed his eyes at the brightness, no dimmer than the daytime sun.

"They use light spirit power. Goodness, how awful can they be, taking spirits as slaves just for such things?" Mira stared hatefully through the tunnel.

Kagura, remembering Mira's habit of keeping Cleos close at hand, glanced at her as if

to say, You're one to talk.

Approximately thirty kilometers lay between their current location and Chimera HQ. Though there were some curves here and there, the tunnel itself had good visibility and no obstacles, so they could wield their mobility skills to the fullest.

Their charge was ferocious. Unlike the government facilities on the outside, the tunnel would only have Chimera conspirators inside, so they didn't hesitate to use force.

Whenever Mira's group ran into Chimera's people along the way, their adversaries ended up silenced and bound in seconds—or less. These people were supposedly strong, but they could do nothing in the face of two Wise Men and the leader of a top-ranked guild. They hardly even had time to see the trio before they were defeated and left in the dust.

* * *

Before long, they'd found and bound two more Chimera members and reached the end of the tunnel. This was the entrance to Chimera HQ.

It was quite a small door compared to the size of the tunnel. In fact, it was the same size as the front door of any common person's home. They almost wondered if they had the wrong place. Perhaps the door was so small because there weren't a lot of people going in and out. It would be easier to seal a smaller entrance, too.

According to Jamal, this door might have a special identification feature installed. Might. The reason he thought this was that once, when he'd gone through the door, he quickly realized he'd forgotten something and gone back to retrieve it. Upon his return, he'd been questioned as to why he passed through so many times. When he went through the door again days later, he'd focused his mind more and noticed a hint of discomfort, as if something were searching him. He'd realized that something must have been set up there to read people going through.

"Now, I wonder how they're doing..." Mira said.

"It's been an hour since they started, huh?" Kagura shrugged. "Well, no news isn't necessarily good or bad."

"We have plenty of reliable friends fighting out there. Let's wait patiently for them," Cyril chimed in.

They didn't know what might happen if someone not from Chimera passed through the door. They decided to stand by until the control center was seized.

* * *

East of Sentopoli, Emella and her unit hid in the midst of a great rocky mountain range, monitoring the village where the underground control center lay.

Shortly after midnight, Emella saw the village erupt into blue flame. She strained her eyes to try and see better. "What's that?! What just happened?!"

"Guess we'll just have to go and see!" Zef ran down the slope, and others jumped out behind him to follow. They ran three hundred meters in a single breath and used a hill in front of the village as cover. There they stared speechless at the horror before them.

The flames billowing over the village quietly yet ferociously burned everything they touched to ash. When the wind blew, the fire made an eerie whine and devoured yet more objects, continuing its indiscriminate destruction.

"Blue flames, a crossbow bolt... Looks like he's on the move." Aaron spotted a man's burning corpse and realized that this too was the Skyfolk man's doing. He had witnessed similar carnage upon first meeting the man, though this was obviously on a completely different scale.

"Is this really the doing of one Animist?" Emella asked. Aaron had told her once that this priest had no mercy whatsoever toward Chimera Clausen, but when she saw the scene of destruction, she had to wonder if this was truly religion or something else.

"No doubt about it. I've seen his abilities in action," Aaron said, surveying the corpses littering the village. He continued with a frown, "And he's the only guy I know who'd have a motive to do all this."

The First Company—including the Bellerophon Platoon led by Mizar and Alioth—had been waiting nearby. Mizar ran over shortly after Aaron's group and gazed at the village lit by blue flame.

He asked, "Aaron? Did the guy you mentioned a few days ago do this?"

"Yeah, he did. I didn't think he'd do it so soon, but, hey, that's not our problem." Aaron stood up and took the white axe from his hip.

"Right. As Lady Uzume instructed, we're all ready." Mizar whipped out his white sword as well. The two then turned around to face their comrades.

"We're going in," Aaron said quietly. Emella nodded, and her unit began moving toward the edge of the village.

As for First Company...

"All right, time for the final battle!" Mizar announced. The hundreds of Isuzu's elites in his unit roared with him. Their years-long conflict with Chimera Clausen would finally end with this battle. Everyone there had waited many years for this moment. They couldn't wait to get started.

* * *

While Aaron's side watched from afar, their battle cries ripped through the air, and the army tore through the village like lightning. Chimera Clausen's forces were cut down in swathes. At a glance, the population seemed to number about a hundred. But when Alioth used special magic to search the area, he found a thousand humanoid—yet inhuman—forces underground.

This discovery changed their strategy. Rather than fight inside a base that might conceal unknown traps, they would attempt to draw the enemy out into the open if they could.

Instead of charging into the control center, the First Company rampaged conspicuously within the village. Meanwhile, the seizing of the control center would be entrusted to Aaron's smaller forces.

Aaron took a wide detour around the village and infiltrated the laboratory from the side opposite the battlefield. It was quite the large facility, about a hundred meters long on all sides. Inside were perhaps a thousand experimental gadgets, including many with indiscernible purposes.

"Whoa... No way." Emella's eyes went wide at a tank with what looked like a human arm inside.

Flicker saw the same thing and said, rage evident in her voice, "It seems to be a spirit's arm."

"A spirit's? I thought spirits could only be seen by mages?"

"The liquid in that tube is what lets you see it," Aaron explained. Long ago, he'd seen something similar on an Isuzu mission and researched it after the fact. Now he shared that knowledge with Emella.

"It makes spirits visible? That sounds bad..." Something like that had the power to bend nature itself. Zef took a step back, but at the same time, Flicker stepped forward. She went to the tank and flung open the lid. At once, the arm inside turned into particles of light that spewed forth violently. They seemed to be enraged, destroying everything in the lab that they touched.

"Whoa! Careful!" Zef panicked when one grazed his cheek.

"What does this thing do?!" Emella squatted down in fear.

Both of them glared at Flicker.

"That one's real mad," Asval said, much calmer.

"Yeah. I bet you'd be mad stuck in a tank too," Aaron agreed.

They kept a close eye on the angry spirit light flying around as they searched for the path to continue deeper in the facility. But just then, the lights abruptly changed directions and closed in on Flicker from every direction.

"Flicker!" Emella screamed as the rays of light approached. Spiritual power was not meant to be handled by human hands; if she were showered in such power, the results could be tragic. Yet when Emella timidly looked again, Flicker didn't look to be wounded. In fact, she seemed clad in divine light.

"What the heck?" Zef said dumbly, totally lost.

The freed, rampaging spirit had attacked Flicker; everyone had seen that. But instead of being hurt, she was now glowing. It was as if Flicker and the spirit were nestled in close to each other, symbolizing the ideal relationship between humans and spirits. While everyone watched speechlessly, the light seemed to unravel, then gathered in Flicker's left hand.

"Even when they're ruled by anger, as long as we have love in our hearts, the spirits

will understand us,” Flicker said. “That’s the true nature of the spirits that have walked alongside us throughout our history.” She gazed at her hand, where a red pattern had appeared, and turned to her friends. “This is proof that the spirit understands my heart. A relationship that has stood the test of time.”

The pattern on her hand was a spirit’s blessing. It was usually evidence of a strong bond with a spirit, but it could also be given to a person when a spirit entrusted their hopes to them. Perhaps the rage of the spirit in the tank had been tempered by Flicker’s kind heart—perhaps seeing her, the spirit could trust in people again.

Flicker put her left hand to her heart and said firmly, “The spirit has told me where the core of the control center is. Let’s go.” The spirit had entrusted her with its deepest wish: the rescue of its trapped friends. That was Flicker’s original goal anyway, as someone who loved spirits.

“Got it. Lead the way,” Aaron agreed. He stood by Flicker to protect her.

As a result of their preliminary investigation, they knew that the control center itself wasn’t large, but the location of the core remained unknown. The spirit had given them the necessary information to take the next step. Armed with this information, the party renewed their determination and entered the control center.

* * *

Stone walls, stone floors. No visible light source, but the corridors were bright enough that Aaron’s group could see through to the end. Flicker guided the group down the halls.

“Look at him go. People with famous titles really are something else.” Zef took his order seriously, but he couldn’t help but laugh as Aaron showered every enemy in blows that crushed their armor.

“Yeah. Seems like our help’s not required.” Emella kept her white sword at the ready and grinned wryly; why not just leave the front line to Aaron at this point?

The enemy forces protecting the control center were focused mostly on the surface, thanks to the efforts of Mizar’s group and the Skyfolk man. But as a result, the remaining security here was armed to the teeth. Their adversaries used their spirit weapons and black mist ore weapons to the fullest, posing quite the threat. But Aaron’s fantastic technique and strategy in battle allowed him to fell them one after

another.

After neutralizing yet another enemy, Aaron glanced at his axe—all white, save for the handle—and his face lit up in a heartfelt smile. “Heh. Dvalin’s weapons really are something, huh?” The dwarven blacksmith Dvalin was often revered as the God of the Forge. His Alabaster Oni-Slayer series, though made specifically to counter black mist ore, were head and shoulders above any other weapons Aaron had used.

“Just give me... a chance to do something!” Possessed by the desire to swing her sword, Emella writhed as she watched Aaron mowing down their foes. She’d just acquired the perfect sword, yet she hadn’t had the chance to use it yet.

After defeating the tenth security guard, the group finally arrived at the core of the control center. It was a giant room with a domed ceiling.

“There it is. That’s the tuner.” Flicker pointed at a complicated-looking device in the center of the floor. It looked to be the very heart of this place.

“All riiight! Let’s get this over with.” The tuner undulated eerily, making odd noises that alternated between low and shrill. There was nothing around it, but Zef proceeded with the utmost caution—he knew it might be a trap.

Aaron stopped and furrowed his brow. “This is... a barrier.”

In the end, though, there were no tricks; they were able to walk right up to the device. Their goal was to either stop or destroy the device before them. But it was here that the party would face their greatest obstacle yet. They hadn’t been able to spot it as they approached, but now that they were closer, they saw that a wall composed of mana blocked their path.

“How about this!” Asval stepped forward and slammed his white hammer into it with a mighty roar. No matter how powerful the barrier, as long as someone had greater power, they could destroy it. Yet this barrier only made a dull sound; the hammer had no effect. Though the wall of mana was thin and transparent, it was quite sturdy.

Asval turned a little sadly, disappointed that his full-power attack had failed. “Not even a dent, huh? Flicker, did the spirit tell you how to deal with this?”

“No. They didn’t know anything about this.” Flicker shook her head and glared at the tuner. It was so close, yet so far. “Someone cast this magic, though. Someone who was

here recently," she added. Around the tuner, she saw small, shining fragments and droplets scattered about. "I think... this is an exorcist's magic." Flicker suspected that the stuff scattered on the floor were holy water and fragments of their vials. She squatted down to get a closer look.

Emella peeked over her shoulder and stared at the fragments thoughtfully. "Think you can do something about it?"

"If I overwrite them one at a time with my magic, removing the barrier may be possible, but... it could take a long time." Still, Flicker promptly got to work.

"Man, are exorcist barriers really this tough?" Zef grumbled in annoyance. He stabbed his dagger into the barrier, hoping to chisel at it even a little bit. But even Asval's brute-force attack had done nothing to it.

"It's probably just because we're dealing with Chimera Clausen here. They love to put spirits' power on top of their own magic," Aaron answered, also throwing his strongest attacks at the barrier. It seemed he couldn't stand idly by, either.

"Spirits' power, huh? No surprise, then. What a bunch of bastards." Undaunted, Asval swung his hammer again. That same dull noise rang out, as if laughing at their efforts, but he defiantly kept at it.

Just then, a security guard appeared up ahead. "They made it this far?!" As soon as he saw the group, he slammed some sort of orb into the ground. The ceiling opened wide, and innumerable humanoid figures rained down upon them. They were all fighting dolls, each armed with spirit gear.

"Seriously?! Come on!" Zef readied his dagger with a fed-up look.

"Good grief. There's the fight we wanted!" Asval smashed a nearby doll with his hammer and sighed.

"Just what I wanted! Let's do this, gang!" Enthusiasm oozed from Emella's every pore; finally, she could have fun with her weap—er, actually do her job as a front-liner.

"That's the spirit. You gotta be able to get up and go even in the most inconvenient circumstances to be a real adventurer." Aaron laughed, happy to be able to cut loose, regardless of the reason. He felled several dolls at once with a single swing of his axe.

"Flicker, you keep working on that barrier. Zef will protect you with his life!" Emella volunteered Zef for guard duty as she cut down a lunging doll.

"Aren't you supposed to offer to do that yourself?" Zef muttered and took Emella's place next to Flicker.

Flicker continued her work and said, unaffected, "I'm afraid you've already lost that argument, Zef. Now, watch my back for me."

"Yeah, yeah. I won't let anyone through." Behind her, Zef stabbed his white dagger into an attacking doll. It pierced through spirit gear and doll alike as easily as a knife through butter. "Whoa, this thing stabs good!" He was amazed by Dvalin's dagger.

A smile crept onto Zef's face as he watched Emella effortlessly cleave through doll after doll with her own white sword in hand.

CHAPTER 16

IN THE CENTER of the small village, Meimei rampaged wildly through approaching fighting dolls and Chimera's troops. She deprived foes of their consciousness with single blows and asked Glad, "If I take all these down, the big one will come out, right?"

"Sure will. That's their last defense, after all," Glad replied, mercilessly stabbing Chimeras.

Meimei wanted a fight with a strong foe, and she hoped the giant doll would provide that. Glad had felt it underground, the spirits' power trapped within. It had to be Chimera's trump card. If they defeated the enemies here, Glad believed that the enemy would have no choice but to send it onto the battlefield.

"You baddies can't stop meee!" Meimei trusted his assessment and fought even more fiercely, charging through Chimera Clausen's fighters, trampling them in the blink of an eye, and proceeding toward the next group of guards.

"Suppose I'll leave the rest to her." Watching as Meimei mopped up enemy forces, Glad figured he was no longer needed here. He switched focus to preserving and recovering his mana to prepare for his final battle.

There was a loud explosive sound, and a crowd of fighting dolls flew at him from behind. Their broken limbs, unable to maintain their original form, fell around him. Glad, who'd been quietly focused on recovering his mana, grimaced and turned toward the source of the blast. A group of people bearing matching white weapons had appeared.

They were a varied group, and were all dressed differently save for one thing: each of them wore a scarf with cat paw-print marks on them. It was a bizarre uniform, but they followed the man leading them like a real unit, putting the enemies to rout.

When this Isuzu group reached the village square, they immediately got to work cleaning up the remaining foes. Their leader, Mizar, stayed behind and gazed at Glad. "The way you dress... You're the Skyfolk man from the reports?"

Glad didn't know what these reports were or who'd informed this man about him, but

he replied curtly, “Probably.” He then glanced at the unit’s white weapons and muttered, “You have some interesting equipment.”

When the soldiers swung their snow-white weapons, they easily cut through Chimera Clausen’s black blades. Glad’s interest was piqued by weapons that could so easily defeat those black abominations.

“By the way, who is that? Looks like she’s on your side, yeah?” Mizar asked, watching Meimei as she mowed down hordes of fighting dolls. She looked like a little girl, but her ferocity was enough to make heroes quake in fear. Mizar’s reports had indicated the presence of a sidekick, but he hadn’t expected said sidekick to be so... overwhelming. It was natural to wonder who this young lady might be.

But even Glad himself didn’t know much about her. When asked point-blank, he had little to say. “I met her along the way here. She calls herself Meimei; that’s all I know,” Glad fell silent, staring back at Mizar.

“I see... Fate works in mysterious ways.” Mizar figured that there must have been some reason for the Skyfolk man’s vagueness, so he quit probing into the girl’s identity and instead simply asked if they could leave this front of the battle to her. Anyone could see that Meimei was strong. Rather than sticking close to her, Mizar would prefer to annihilate foes further away. This would be an effective way of splitting the focus of the enemy forces.

“Do as you wish. I leave the rest to you, Isuzu Alliance,” Glad answered. He left without waiting for a reply. Mizar called after him to ask what he meant, but Glad did not answer. He simply said to Meimei, “See you soon.”

“Don’t worry, I got this!” She blasted away the enemies nearest to her and used the resulting opening to pat Glad gently on the back, sending him on his way.

Meimei knew Glad’s objective—not the details, but the fact that he was here to get revenge on someone far beyond redemption. His target awaited him here, and Glad knew that this cowardly foe would run away if he thought he was at a disadvantage. What’s more, Glad already had an idea of how he would try to escape. Thus, he would wait there for his prey to show himself.

As someone with a warrior’s spirit, Meimei supported Glad in his goal; she believed revenge was a worthy reason to fight.

Glad departed the village to make his way to the ambush point. Meimei saw him off, then returned her focus to the enemies before her. “I can feel it. It’s almost here...”

Most of Chimera Clausen’s troops had already fallen on the battlefield, but there were still mobs of fighting dolls in the fray—to the point that one had to wonder where they stored so many. Dozens continued to appear from up ahead. But unlike the ones before, these seemed to be special models with spirit weapons.

Meimei sized up the power of their spirit weapons. Her eyes turned silver as she activated the sage’s Angel’s Eye.

“Is this their trump card? I don’t like the look of...” Mizar said.

These dolls felt different from the ones they’d fought thus far. Realizing that, Mizar had his troops fall back to wait and watch while he stepped to the front. Fortunately, only fifty of the new dolls had appeared; he and Meimei could probably manage them on their own. Or so he thought—unfortunately, the situation progressed faster than he expected.

“Meimei, you and I—” You and I can take half each, he tried to say... but Meimei’s next actions shut him right up.

“Almost boss time!” As soon as the fighting dolls appeared, Meimei yelled and glowered at all of the enemies up ahead with silver eyes. She thrust out her right hand, palm open, then clenched it into a tight fist.

“What is that!?”

Mizar and his subordinates were left speechless. The instant Meimei balled up her fist, all of the dolls stopped moving at once. Those that had kicked off the ground to charge, those swinging their weapons—all of them stopped as if held in place by an invisible hand, struggling to escape.

This was [Immortal Arts: Empty-Handed Reverie], which allowed the user’s grasp to reach everything in their radius of perception. Such an ability could only be mastered by those who suffered particularly arduous trials, but by doing so, they gained the ability to grasp targets, regardless of distance. One who mastered this ability could literally take hold of a battle.

“You can’t stop me that easily!” While everyone had fallen silent, the corners of

Meimei's mouth crooked up. Explosions boomed ahead of her, whipping up violent winds. There were as many blasts as there were dolls, dyeing the blue-tinted village and the night sky a dazzling red.

This was the power of [Immortal Arts Earth: Crimson Bouquet]. The close-range, high-firepower spell displayed its might, blowing every single doll to smithereens. Remains of dolls showered down as embers. Meimei stood in their midst and turned her eyes toward the edge of the village, praying for the victory of the one she'd spent these past two weeks with. The ephemeral crimson bouquet was like a parting gift of flowers for Glad.



Even setting aside the raw power of the attack, restraining a crowd of enemy constructs and calling forth those explosions without so much as an incantation were not feats just anyone could perform. This was beyond even the most advanced magic, perhaps even rivaling Uzume's true identity as Kagura of the Seven Stars. As the only person present who knew who Uzume really was, Mizar gazed curiously at Meimei. As he looked, half-interested and half-terrified, he realized something. Mizar gasped. "Could it be...?"

Long ago, shortly after the founding of the Isuzu Alliance, Uzume had told Mizar about the other apex mages who once stood beside her. All of the Nine Wise Men—except for Luminaria—had seemingly disappeared from the world. One of these missing mages, Kagura herself, led the Isuzu Alliance; it wouldn't be surprising, then, if others were out there somewhere.

On closer inspection, incredibly, this girl matched the features of one of the Wise Men Uzume had described. Such well-honed fighting techniques, the unique cadence with which she spoke, mastery of the Immortal Arts despite looking like a child—and most of all, the use of a technique that no one other than the Wise Man herself was known to have mastered. It was as if her entire existence was screaming the truth—that she was Meilin, the Controlling Fist.

Why was such a hero present here? And why as the helper to a Skyfolk priest?

"Could it be anyone else...? I doubt it." Mizar's brain couldn't keep up with it all. But for the moment, he decided to set the question aside, satisfied with the knowledge that this girl, whoever she was, was on their side.

* * *

"Now it's sure to spawn!" Meimei cried enthusiastically as she looked toward her feet. She'd shown off her strength plenty by now, so it was about time for Chimera to send out their ace in the hole.

It seemed this girl's top priority was simply to fight a strong foe. Not realizing that Mizar knew her identity, she kept searching underground for that one presence. "Back up!" Meimei suddenly called out and jumped backward.

Mizar reacted at once and quickly retreated as well. The ground burst open, and something shot out from below. Within seconds, a giant figure towered over the village

square, lit by the still-burning blue flames. It was a man-made construct with four arms and four legs, a beast far bigger than the many-legged doll she had fought back at Chimera Clausen's facility. It was more aptly called a weapon than a doll.

"Uh-huh... So that's their final defense." Mizar gulped when faced with such an oppressive, overpowering being. He readied his sword and urged his subordinates to stay on their toes. Vast spiritual energy powered this weapon of war—a warrior such as Mizar would not be able to sense it. But the man had two eyes in his head; he knew that this thing was a force to be reckoned with.

Yet he felt no fear. Mizar backed away and took up a defensive posture, waiting for the question that was sure to come. Within the many-legged weapon, there was a whirring noise. It was activating.

Just then, Meimei turned to face the group and called out, "C'mon, let me solo it! Please? Please!"

Yep—that was exactly what Mizar wanted to hear. Whenever Meilin encountered a rare strong foe, she would always say those words—this he knew from Uzume's stories. Mizar immediately replied, "Absolutely. All yours."

"Thank you, thank you!" Meimei hopped around, obviously excited, before taking a stance directly in front of the weapon to await its first move.

This was why Mizar had felt no fear. He knew just how strong Wise Man Kagura, the leader of the Isuzu Alliance, truly was. If he stood with an ally who could rival her strength, then there was no reason whatsoever to fear defeat. Mizar wouldn't refute that he was passing the buck on this one, but he was the sort of man who prioritized safety and success. That said, he wouldn't leave it entirely to Meimei; he watched over the fight, ready to assist if anything went wrong.

After ordering his subordinates to search the village for any remaining small foes and eradicate them, Mizar left them to it and focused his attention on the battlefield where Meimei had begun to fight.

CHAPTER 17

THE SOUND of the doll's engine was like a shrill scream, building up to a crescendo of horror. The hulking giant thrust out a single massive arm. This doll might look like it ought to be slow due to its size, but the spirits' power within allowed it to move even faster than the smaller ones. A metallic arm slammed into the earth with the force of a cannonball. The destructive power would have left even Meimei wounded if it struck the sage directly—if.

"Speed and power aren't too bad!" Meimei stood behind the weapon now, calmly analyzing her opponent's strength.

Another arm swung toward Meimei. This one was like a gun barrel; it seemed able to shoot real ammunition. As soon as it had set its sights, the doll's metallic arm shot a firebomb that exploded, attempting to swallow Meimei in its blast. The doll had managed to condense an immense amount of fire into the blast; as soon as it landed, it swelled like a miniature volcano and smoke spread all around.

The blue flames that had finally started to settle in the village were overwhelmed by a red blaze and burning winds. This fire, too, was strong enough to do real damage. Yet Meimei stood motionless as the fire split and spread neatly around her—as if some unseen force was protecting her.

Seeing this, the doll swung around and used its momentum to brandish another metallic arm. It once again failed to strike Meimei, resulting in little more than a storm of rushing wind. But the doll's attack did not end there; as Meimei jumped lightly to evade it, the doll fired its cannon once more.

"Great combat rotation too!" Meimei casually complimented the fighting weapon before vanishing in midair.

A split second later, the second firebomb detonated. It struck a vacant home and spewed fire everywhere. As hot wind blew, there was a dull, metallic noise accompanied by the giant lurching.

"Tougher than I expected. But two should be fine... and just my right hand."

Meimei circled around the doll once more, muttered to herself, put both hands together, and focused. Before the weapon could react, she used a technique that only she could perform. Meimei's body suddenly burst with light, which turned into something like a chain before being sucked into her once more.

"All ready. Time to level!" she announced. Her movements changed. Before, she'd seemed as if she were testing the waters; now, she was like a ferocious beast closing in on prey as she attacked the fighting weapon. Indeed, to Meimei, this was where the battle truly began. Before, she was just watching to see what the boss would do—and seeing how much of a handicap she should give herself in this fight.

The technique Meimei had used was [Honing Techniques: Risky Trade-Off]. She loved using it; in exchange for handicapping herself, it gave her greater growth when she succeeded. The effect did not just extend to one's body either; it was often involved in spell-learning requirements and the like. This time around, Meimei restricted both her stats and her magic, limiting herself to only two uses of Immortal Arts. Furthermore, she could only attack using her right hand.

* * *

It seemed this fighting weapon, with all the spiritual power it harbored, was an ideal opponent for Meimei. Ten short minutes after the battle had truly begun, the weakened Meimei and the weapon were at a stalemate.

As one might expect of an enormous weapon stationed at a vital outpost, the thing was stronger than most monsters out there. It commanded not just fire, but electricity, wind, and ice as well. Each blow was strong enough to neutralize Meimei if it scored a direct hit.

Against this force, Meimei used masterful motions and techniques that did not rely on stats to evade its ferocious assault. She struck joints and other vulnerable points with perfect precision. Thanks to her self-imposed limits, Meimei's attacks were far weaker than normal. The weapon's plating didn't have a scratch on it, but she had managed to deal some damage to its more fragile spots. To destroy it, though, she would need to hit it many times.

Fortunately, Meimei loved hitting things.

* * *

"I can't believe she can smile in a situation like that," Mizar muttered to himself in amazement as he watched from afar with his subordinates.

The battlefield was surrounded by an intense blizzard, with flames and lightning shooting through it every second. It was as if Meimei and her foe fought in a different dimension. When Mizar caught glances of Meimei's face, she clearly seemed to be enjoying herself.

He wondered to himself, what sort of strategy would he and his subordinates have used if they had to fight that behemoth? "Definitely not a close-range battle like that."

With almost inhuman movements, Meimei toyed with the doll. If she was even a fraction less agile, she'd have taken a fatal blow from the swings of those arms already.

After racking his brain for a while, Mizar found himself doubly grateful for Meimei's presence. Thanks to her, he wouldn't have to worry about it.

* * *

Twenty minutes had passed since Meimei began fighting. The moment finally came. Blow after blow had piled up until, finally, the weapon's two right legs buckled at once. Two of the supports holding up its weight had broken from the joint. It lurched violently as it lost its balance and almost collapsed. Its most nimble arm reached out to the ground, stopping it from falling over entirely.

"That's what I've been waiting for!" There was a fierce gleam in her eye. Meimei approached the doll's arm with a smooth use of Shrinking Earth and placed her hand on it.

[*Immortal Arts Earth: Contact Eruption*]

Meimei's first spell was one that sent shockwaves through whatever her hand touched. This was enough to shatter the -enemy's metal arm with ease.

With a loud crash and the shrill shriek of metal, the giant fell to the ground. Though it had lost the arm that served as its last source of maneuverability and defense, the machine had no option to surrender. Sitting on the ground, it waved its remaining arms and legs in an attempt to fight off Meimei.

"Good game. But it's over." Meimei dodged through the most intense fire and lightning

yet, weathering the blizzard as she slipped into striking range. She approached the thickest part of the doll's plating, which the thing had protected with its nimble arm at all times. Even Meimei would need to gather strength to break through it, especially given the obstacle that was its nimble arm.

Now, with that arm out of the way, this was her ideal opportunity.

The sage gently placed a hand on the weapon's highly guarded torso. She then put her other fist on the back of her hand—an unusual stance.

The machine realized something was coming and began attacking indiscriminately, even ready to hurt itself as it focused its firebomb and lightning strike cannons on Meimei. But it was too late; this flailing had only weakened its stance further.

Meimei's was a sublime blow—a blow so overwhelming as to prove the difference in strength between them.

* * *

As the battle progressed, Mizar's attention was gradually drawn away from his subordinates back to Meimei's fight. He realized along the way that Meimei was limiting herself. Despite that, she'd stood on equal footing with her opponent. Moreover, with every blow, she gained more and more momentum until she was overwhelming the huge doll.

Perhaps she'd learned everything she needed to know about her opponent in the heat of battle. That would take absurd observational abilities, but Mizar was certain that's what she had done. And now, she'd finally broken the fighting doll's legs and its defensive arm. At this point, Mizar had lost track of his own unit's battle entirely and found himself entranced by hers.

Finally, the end had come. This final salvo was more astounding and mystifying than anything Mizar had ever witnessed thus far.

[*Immortal Arts Inheritance: Šakra's Bloom*]

Meimei froze in place for a moment, emitting mana for just an instant. Immediately after, with no additional movement, the machine's torso exploded into smithereens. Mizar had paid close attention, never missing a detail—but this stupefied him. He truly had no idea what had happened.

Having lost its torso, the weapon fell to pieces with a glorious crash. Metal shards in the air fell like a shower of cherry blossom petals illuminated by the flames.

After confirming that the doll no longer moved, Meimei raised her hands happily and squealed, "Winner!" She patted the head of the giant fighting doll and complimented its fighting, "That was my best fight in a while. Thank you, thank you."

"I'm amazed. That's the renowned strongest warrior Meilin for you. Your fighting is every bit as incredible as I've heard!" Mizar excitedly ran over to Meimei. As a fellow martial artist, his heart was moved.

"Aww, shucks. I'm still training—" Meimei was stoic when it came to battle, but she loved compliments. She was clearly happy to hear Mizar's praise, but stopped mid-sentence. "Oh, hang on? Who's Meilin? My name is Meimei. You've got the wrong girl."

Did she think changing her name would be enough of a disguise?

Meimei stammered a bit, her eyes looking everywhere but forward. She then tried to change the subject, adding, "Oh, I forgot the most important thing!" and ran to the other side of the machine's remains.

"I see. My mistake." Mizar understood her intent and bowed. With a start, he suddenly remembered his duty and ran off to where his subordinates were fighting.

* * *

The battlefield was still bathed in flames, and Mizar's unit could be heard in the distance. But it was beginning to sound more like a rout than a real battle; the conquest of the control center was in its final stages. Now that Chimera's last defense had been trounced, their members were running for the hills.

It was too late. This village had already been surrounded by the Isuzu Alliance.

Meimei used her Biometric Scan, which boasted awe-inspiring range, and found people running away and others closing in on them. She decided to leave the rest of the job to Isuzu. "They got this."

She surveyed her own surroundings. Around her, she found enemy corpses and many fighting dolls that had become scrap metal. "Okay. Here goes." Meimei retrieved a rosary from her Item Box. On it hung a pale-green gem, like the winds of the clear

plains, which gave off a divine aura.

What Meimei had said before—that she'd forgotten the most important thing—was actually more than just an excuse to leave an awkward conversation. She pointed the rosary at the doll before her. Suddenly the remains began to emit light.

“Easier than I thought.”

The gentle light flowing from the weapon's remains drifted up and dispersed into the sky. Meimei watched as it disappeared. Then she approached the other fighting dolls and repeated the process over and over. This rosary had been given to her by Glad. It was a necessary religious object for various Skyfolk rites. But thanks to some of Glad's modifications, it was able to exhibit various effects beyond its original usage.

Those effects were detection and release. It could search for spiritual power, the souls forcefully bound by Chimera Clausen, and return them to nature. That was Glad's one desire, and he was willing to tamper with a religious object to see it done.

The rosary was the embodiment of his truest desire. Why, then, did Meimei have such a precious item? Simple: Glad had entrusted her with this duty.

Glad and Meimei knew from his preliminary investigation that there were many dolls and weapons confining the power of spirits in this village. However, Glad had an even more important duty to fulfill today—so he was unable to be here to free them.

Thus, he had entrusted it to Meimei. Faith, trust, or other emotions—Meimei didn't know exactly what was going through his mind, but she gladly accepted it so he could do his part without concern.

Meimei used the rosary for the next twenty minutes, liberating the fighting dolls, their remains, and the weapons of captured Chimera Clausen soldiers. Eventually, she had freed the spirits' power and souls from every one.

* * *

“That should be the last one here.”

Nobody noticed when Meimei left the village for the cave that was the spot they'd arranged for her to await Glad's return. She did not go toward the scene of Glad's battle. The priest had spent years of his life working toward this moment. She knew

the strength of his resolve, so she believed it would be best to leave him alone.

Earlier, Glad had told her, "If I don't return by morning... assume the worst."

Meimei sighed. "The stars are pretty tonight..." She looked up and waited patiently for his return.

CHAPTER 18

NOT LONG AFTER Meimei's victory over the giant doll, in a flat clearing amid a rocky stretch far from where Isuzu's main force fought Chimera's dwindling numbers, a man in a dark robe with a bag slung over his shoulder walked on, furtively searching his surroundings.

A voice rang down from above. "Zell. I knew you'd run this way." Glad jumped down and landed in front of Zell with a glare.

Zell swiftly put distance between them and whipped around. When he saw Glad, he grinned slightly. "Aha! Glad, my brother... I had a feeling when I saw those flames, but I never thought you had it in you to work alongside others."

At the far edge of his vision he could still see the small village, burning down in a blue blaze. The embers thrown into the air glowed for an instant before burning out, as if dissolving in the sea of stars.

"Mm. Well, I didn't; they followed my lead of their own accord." With his back to the burning buildings, Glad leveled his crossbow at Zell, his voice icy. All emotions except hatred had been wiped from his face. "Not going to run?"

"I'm not the man I used to be, Glad. You alone can't hope to stand against me anymore." Zell smirked as he unsheathed a black sword. "But look at yourself. Your eyes, your face... You've changed a lot too, haven't you? Have you spent all this time hating me?"

"Of course I have. You were a priest, but you took Altinea away from us. You left with the village's own patron god," Glad replied. Darkness flooded his eyes, like a sea of murderous ire.

But even in the face of such clear malice, Zell grinned with wicked joy. "That's an awful thing to say. At least call it eloping, brother. We were in love, but a faithful priest and a village's patron god could never be accepted. So we ran away—together." There was an affected tone in Zell's voice, and his motions were as theatrical as an actor's.

But what infuriated Glad was not his attitude but his words. "Enough lies!"

"Lie? Altinea and I loved each other. How can you call that a lie?" Zell made an exaggerated hugging motion as he grinned fearlessly at Glad.

It was taboo for an Animist villager and a spirit to have a romantic relationship, but in other parts of the world, it was not particularly rare. Yet Glad quietly glared daggers at him. He had ironclad proof in his heart. Glad quietly took out his own sword, either in refutation or as a way of saying that this questioning was pointless.

"Right, you can't say it. Then I'll say it for you!" The warped, gloating grin disappeared from Zell's face. A crossbow bolt hurtled toward him. He deflected it with his hand, then closed in on Glad with a single long stride.

"Altinea loved you, Glad!" Zell roared. "And you loved her back! Isn't that right?!" Their blades crossed, sending a shrill screech of metal on metal through the craggy rock. Zell's voice mixed with the repeated clangs. "No matter how much I opened my heart to her, she wouldn't return my feelings. Her smile, her tears, her words, her love, they were all for you instead! We're both priests, we're brothers; what made you so much better?!"

These were the screams of Zell's heart. Feelings that had smoldered for years now exploded when faced with their source. Zell's sword gained momentum thanks to the spiritual power flowing through it, gradually overpowering Glad. Zell wasn't inferior; he lived like Glad, and he worked just as hard as Glad at the same job. Yet, even knowing it was taboo, he had loved the same spirit and tried to share his feelings in the same way—and that was where the difference was born.

It became an irreconcilable gap between them, creating a deep, black hole in Zell's heart.

"Answer me! What, do you feel sympathy for me? After you stole everything from me?!" Zell's sword grazed Glad's cheek. But even wounded, Glad did not answer; or rather, he couldn't. Even if he knew about his brother's feelings of inferiority, Glad's mind was full of nothing but murderous malice.

The two continued to exchange blows over and over, sending steel screams throughout the mountain range. Zell wielded a black sword stuffed full of negative emotions, but Glad's well-honed slender sword was dyed with plain hatred.

In a pause between their sword clashes, Glad looked at his foe and asked, "Which one

of us is the real thief?" His voice remained detached, betraying no compassion or pity. Glad had something stolen from him as well. Zell saw his past self in Glad for a moment. Then he laughed and declared, "Ha ha... You're right. Altinea's all mine now, after all!"

The very air around them seemed to darken Glad's mood, and his sword drew an abnormal arc as it surged toward Zell.

"What in the...?! Kh... Graaaaah!"

The blade moved in complex patterns. Zell managed to deflect and parry for a while, but eventually he couldn't keep up with the peculiar motions that seemed to defy inertia, and took a barrage of grave wounds. Zell managed to throw out a vial of holy water just in time to put up a barrier and escape fatal injury.

As Zell sprinkled holy water and strengthened the barrier around himself, he laughed, "So this is Saintly Discipline, huh? You've dabbled in the Forbidden Arts... Is that a sign of your hatred for me? Heh heh, I'm honored."

This technique—[Forbidden Art: Saintly Discipline]—was, put simply, the ability to freely control one's own body. Control of one's own body might not sound out of the ordinary, but what mattered was just how free this control was. If one wanted to fly, they could fly. They could also cancel inertia at will, just as Glad had.

Within the barrier, Zell fished some medicine from his robe pockets and swallowed it at once. When he saw that his wounds were healing, he smirked. "What a shame, though. That was your chance to kill me. I won't give you a second one, Glad. Your Forbidden Arts will last a minute at most, and I doubt you can break my reinforced barrier before your time is up."

Zell was right; the spell would not last long. Worse, Forbidden Arts put a great burden on the body. The more Glad moved, the greater the price he would pay. In short, once the spell wore off, it would have drastic effects on his ability to fight. Zell was familiar with this technique, which is why he calmly strengthened his defenses and planned to wait out the effect. He was still the most skilled mage in his home village thanks to his time as a priest. He knew that this was the ideal way to buy time.

"I swear, I will see you dead," Glad pronounced coldly as he pointed his sword at Zell. As a fellow priest, Glad naturally knew about Zell's barrier as well. It was a strong one

that could even fend off the power of spirits, and as it protected him from all directions, it truly was an iron defense.

But Glad also knew the barrier's weakness.

A flash of steel, far too fast to behold with the naked eye. The super high-speed thrust struck the barrier with an audible ripping sound. A shockwave spread through their surroundings, and the earth itself rumbled.

Zell's barriers were all weak to focused strikes at a single spot. Glad's slim sword pierced perfectly through it and kept going, digging into Zell's shoulder. But this was far from a fatal wound; Zell pulled away, escaped the blade, and drank another potion. "Not bad, brother of mine."

No sooner had the blade left the barrier then it stabbed back in to graze Zell's cheek. This was Glad's second strike. "Ooh, close. Very scary."

Once Zell knew that Glad would use thrusting attacks, even if they were too fast to see, evading them became much easier. While repairing his barrier, Zell watched as the blade exited it once more and held his own black sword with both hands, ready to stop the next thrust.

As soon as Glad assumed his stance once more, the tip of his sword changed direction just slightly, and it easily pierced through the barrier again at nearly sonic speed. This thrust was even sharper than the last, grazing Zell's side as he twisted away at the last second. Blood sprayed, and he grimaced in pain. Meanwhile, he swung his black sword down, striking the slim sword with a dull, ringing sound.

Glad's sword broke cleanly in the middle, losing its sharp tip. For the first time in this battle, Glad wavered. "How...?!"

"Aww, you look so shocked to have your sword broken. Was it a keepsake? I'm very sorry, brother." Zell trod on the fallen sword and smirked. The slender sword was made for thrusting; now that it was broken, it could no longer pierce Zell's barrier in one blow.

But just then, another impact shuddered through the barrier. It repeated again and again, gradually tearing through it. Glad had taken a crossbow bolt in hand and furiously began smashing it against one point. "Move your damn foot!"

Zell lifted his foot theatrically. "Whoops. Now that I'm looking at it, that seems like a spirit's treasured sword. Isn't that the treasure meant to be given to Altinea's chosen guardian of the village?" He then swung his black sword down onto it again. The broken tip shattered like glass. "Wow, that's so fragile. Was it a fake?"

Zell brushed away the shards with his foot and proudly showed off his own black sword.

"Zell, you little...!" Glad roared in sorrowful rage and stabbed the bolt into the barrier again, but despite the Forbidden Arts bolstering his abilities, this attack was nowhere near as strong as the spirit blade. He was unable to break through the barrier again.

"You're stubborn, aren't you? Still, it should be about time for that spell of yours to wear off..."

The barrier, bolstered by the power of spirits, could not be pierced with ease. It was only made possible through the combination of [Forbidden Arts: Saintly Discipline] and the spirit's treasured sword. No matter how Glad tried, a crossbow bolt would not be enough to break it. Yet he continued to strike it over and over, using strength and mental acuity beyond his normal limit to hit one spot until the barrier began to flicker just slightly.

Finally, the bolt pierced the barrier. But its tip could not reach Zell; it was caught by the repairing barrier until it no longer moved.

"Even with Forbidden Arts, damaging my barriers without your sword is a hell of a feat. You're not bad, Glad. But it looks like you're out of tricks."

The mana around Glad began to disperse all at once. Zell watched with a grin from inside the barrier, fiddling with the bent tip of the crossbow bolt. It seemed the Forbidden Arts had finally run out.

But then, something happened.

"Graaaaah!" With a battle cry, Glad wrung out the last of his mana to force his body to move. He twisted his upper body around, clenched the hilt of his broken sword tight, and dug the nock of a crossbow bolt into it.

He struck with all of his strength. With an intense ripping sound, the crossbow bolt pierced through the barrier almost as fast as a bullet.

It was so close. Zell managed to pull away from the line of fire, evading the attack at the last second.

"Phew, that was a close one. Can't let my guard down for a second around you, huh?"

The crossbow bolt struck the barrier behind Zell, bounced off, and clattered to the ground. After looking down and seeing that it was no longer a threat, Zell warily watched as his brother curled up powerlessly. He looked as though his Forbidden Arts had run out, leaving him without the strength to fight. But Zell knew Glad well; he kept his mind sharp and his barrier up in case Glad tried to pull anything else.

"Aren't you... going to attack me?" Glad said. He slowly looked up and stood again. He then sheathed the dagger he'd pulled out at some point and retrieved a silver pocket watch engraved with a religious symbol of the sun. When Zell saw it, his face turned pale. He knew exactly what that silver pocket watch was.

But his shock lasted only an instant. Zell retrieved a mana potion from his bag, chugged it, and reinforced his barrier even more. "An argent stigmata... Why bother bringing that out now? You've felt just how strong this barrier is for yourself. What's the point of using a catalyst for advanced exorcism when your superior Forbidden Arts have already failed?"

No matter how powerful advanced exorcist magic was, it could not break through a fully powered barrier backed by the strength of spirits. If nothing else, Zell was confident in that. But he knew Glad never acted without reason, even if the actions themselves seemed meaningless. So he remained cautious as he readied his black sword again.

"Zell, you've always relied too much on your barriers. You lack knowledge of other magic." Glad pressed the pocket watch against the barrier and stared directly into Zell's eyes.

A warped grin crept across Zell's face again. "That's where you're wrong, brother. I've read every book on our field of magic because I knew it would eventually come to this. I know exactly what spells you can use with that catalyst, and I know that none of them can break this barrier."

Glad had extraordinary talent as an exorcist, to the point that it had made Zell feel inferior. But Zell had one thing over him: barrier magic. Now that Glad was essentially

unable to fight thanks to the effects of his Forbidden Arts, Zell was certain of his victory. His confidence was the result of his all-encompassing knowledge regarding exorcists.

“Very well. I have no need to break it.”

When those words left Glad’s mouth, an unspeakable chill ran down Zell’s spine. Had he overlooked something? Was there still something that exorcists could do to break through in this situation? Zell began to think as hard as he could—but when he looked forward again, he froze.

Glad’s expression was dark, his eyes overtaken by single-minded madness that sought only the death of his brother. Despite being safely behind his barrier, Zell stepped back from the incomprehensible malice.

“Ack!” Just then, something slid out from beneath his feet. He lost his balance and fell on his backside. The object rattled to a stop in front of him: it was the crossbow bolt, made all the easier to slip on thanks to its short, thick form. “Damn you!”

That he’d felt fear despite having the advantage, that he’d fallen over so pathetically—Zell screamed from shame, kicked the crossbow bolt away, and glowered at Glad.

The rage suddenly faded from Glad’s face. In its place, complete serenity rose as he began chanting in a low, calm tone:

In the name of the abominable envoy, lead this lost sinner to the blessed land.

Zell tensed up; he recognized this incantation. It did not use the holy symbol as a catalyst; it used holy water. Glad’s silver pocket watch was a ruse to hide something else. Although he realized at once that he’d been tricked, Zell managed to regain his calm. The catalyst may have been powerful, but he still knew that exorcism could not break through his barrier.

Eternal black stain upon the world, flames of condemnation that sever the chains upon the earth, surrendering judgment to the distant skies.

However, Glad showed no sign of caring. Zell was assailed by a sense of panic. Zell began to rush, searching his surroundings frantically. “Is this actually...”

He finally realized what Glad had meant when he said he didn’t need to break the

barrier. For he'd noticed a certain something inside the barrier. His face erupted with terror, while Glad's became ever calmer.

Let thy final mercy be this trial by fire.

[Banished Commandment: Ceaseless Azure Dirge]

Glad manipulated his heightened mana to cast the spell. The crossbow bolt at Zell's feet bounced, and blue flames erupted from the holy water within. The barrier was instantly filled with flames and hellish screaming. The barrier contained the raging fire, swirling and blazing brighter and brighter. But it didn't last long; the barrier was released, and the fire whipped up a gust of wind, swelled violently, and dispersed all at once. The holy water catalyst had been cast away.

"I didn't... think you'd go for that..." The wind magic tool Zell had used to dispel the holy water shattered to bits, and Zell fell to one knee and curled up in pain. He was hideously burned, and his spirit gear and robes had half turned to ash.

"Still alive?" After the undoing of his Forbidden Arts, Glad's whole body felt like it was breaking. He looked as though he was dying. But life still burned in his eyes as he gazed at his brother. He silently took the dagger from its sheath on his hip and dragged his weak body over to deal the finishing blow. Zell's agility from before was nowhere to be seen now. To the heavily wounded Chimera, Glad's footfalls were a countdown to death.

"Damn... you..." Zell desperately tried to do what he could, bringing a recovery potion to his lips. But it was not strong enough to match the severity of his wounds. It took all of his energy just to stand up. He forced himself to move, retrieving a package that poked out of his burned bag.

It was exactly the size of a human head.

"Didn't think I'd have to use this..." He put a hand on the package. "But I don't mind using it on you, of all people." He grinned maniacally. "Let me show you... the strength of our love!" With that, Zell revealed the contents of the package.

When Glad saw it, he screamed. "Damn you, Zell!" His rage shook the air. Zell had revealed a transparent container, but the contents... were very familiar to Glad. It contained the head of his beloved.

Glad fixed his fury-filled eyes on Zell and forced his nigh-useless legs to charge toward him.

"Heh heh heh heh! It's all over, Glad!" Zell tauntingly took a silver tube from his belt, grinned evilly, and threw it into the container. Explosive flames shot through the night sky, smothering the world around them in quakes and booms.

CHAPTER 19

THE SPIRIT BOMB: an inescapable torrent of raw destruction. In the midst of its roaring flames, Zell found himself drunk on victory.

He had used this spirit's power to create all-devouring flames. However, these flames had no effect on Zell, who was clad in a robe made of the same spirit's power—Altinea's power. That was the hidden, true power of this ultimate trump card: a bomb that destroyed all but the user.

"Farewell, Altinea and Glad! I've won! I'm stronger than you!" he screamed from the depths of his heart. Zell's greatest goal of all was to defeat Glad, to prove to himself—the self who could never shake the feeling of being inferior to his brother—that he was wrong. His older brother was strong, indeed. He'd always believed this goal to be nothing more than that: a goal. But now that he had overcome it and grasped victory, Zell's heart soared to new heights of joy.

"Actually, you've lost."

Zell had dropped his guard. No human could compete with the power of spirits; none could withstand this blow. That assumption was Zell's downfall. Spirits were humanity's kindhearted neighbor, existing side by side with them. They occasionally saved one another, understood one another. The power of spirits, the power of their bond, could not be erased.

Glad's arm shot from the flames, and the dagger it held pierced Zell's throat.

"Gah... Aaagh..." Zell grimaced, letting out weak groans. His lashes trembled as his eyes looked upon the assailant.

On Glad's extended arm were many complex symbols that gleamed even brighter than the flames. They were the proof of the blessing given to Glad by Altinea. As he gazed at the arm undamaged by the flames, Zell understood that her love had protected Glad.

* * *

In the Animist world, spirits' blessings held special meaning. When Glad and Zell

became the priests who'd represent their village, they received such blessings—proof of their duty to protect the village alongside its guardian spirit, until their deaths.

In exchange, the spirit who gave the blessing would bring the village many boons. Altinea, beloved by Skyfolk, was a spirit of wind. She would stave off wind and rain damage, bringing stability to their climate. As a result, their harvest was ever bountiful. The village people had deep respect for Altinea and her priests.

But even then, the difference between Zell and Glad began to become clear. A too-excellent older brother, a too-average younger brother. It was a difference made all the more conspicuous by everything they shared in common. At the end of it all, they fell in love with the same spirit. This put a gulf between them.

If things had been slightly different, it might not have ended like this. Unfortunately, tragedy befell these brothers.

Chimera Clausen had attacked their village, targeting Altinea herself. It was then that one protector, Zell himself, betrayed his people. He saw it as a way to settle things between himself and Glad—to steal his beloved Altinea away from his brother.

Despite the survivors' attempts to persuade him otherwise, Glad, too, had left the village. He had discarded home and kindness for the sake of the one he loved. Whenever he caught wind of his odious enemy, he went running, taking information and lives as he went. His very soul had been dyed with hatred, closing him off from all tenderness. All he saw was gray, all he discerned was the enemy. He kept on killing and killing; he became a monster.

Despite this, one thing remained in his heart: his love for Altinea. That was why the spirit's blessing still worked. When Glad was in peril, even if he didn't realize it himself, her blessing shone on him.

* * *

Meanwhile, now a member of Chimera Clausen, Zell used the great spiritual knowledge he'd cultivated in his village to make Altinea's power his own.

Animist villages had strong ties with spirits, and with those came great understanding. Zell created technology that could make use of every last drop of power within a spirit. It would be no exaggeration to say that eighty percent of Chimera Clausen's developments were thanks to his contributions.

That technology had led to weaponry, and the organization's power had increased exponentially. The spirit bomb was developed by none other than Zell himself. His exploits were recognized, and he climbed the ladder to sit among Chimera Clausen's highest elites.

When Chimera Clausen's members sent Zell captured spirits, their sacrifices served to accelerate the progress of his knowledge and technology. It was possible that nobody in the world knew more about spirits than Zell. However, there were many things in the world that knowledge alone could not get you—for example, the heart of another.

At some point, the blessing bestowed on Zell had lost its shine. He'd believed the cause to be the loss of Altinea's free will. But in his final moments, he was faced with Altinea's blessing shining brighter than ever on Glad's arm. He was forced to realize his mistake.

There was one other way to defend against a spirit bomb besides wearing gear made from the same spirit—a method that would never occur to Chimera, who'd used spirits against their will. It was a spirit's true blessing, proof of the bond between human and spirit.

Now this bond was the decisive factor in a fight between one who had chosen to abandon the bond, and one who could not.

* * *

Once the spiritual power filling the air dispersed, the flames disappeared like a mirage. What formerly shone red from fire was now cloaked once more under the curtain of night. The stars regained their luster.

Under the night sky, there was a dull, heavy sound. It was the sound of Zell falling to the ground. He gazed up at the sky as blood gushed from his neck, his eyes already clouding over. Glad stood next to him, bloodied dagger in hand, and moved his lips to speak. His words were too quiet for anyone to hear, fainter than a whisper and more ephemeral than a prayer. It was a saying from their home village, the funereal words for those about to die.

With an expression absent of rage, hatred, joy, or sorrow, Glad dropped a vial of holy water onto Zell's chest. Then, he poured the last of his strength into it to kindle blue flames.

It smoldered like an ember at first but gradually grew in force.

Glad turned and walked away from his fallen brother. His destination now was near the small village, where his friend awaited.

He would not make it.

Under the night sky, there was a dull, heavy sound. This time, Glad was the one to fall.

"Is this the end...?" Glad had reached his limit. He'd used his Forbidden Arts for far longer than intended, burning out the rest of his life force.

He managed to move his failing body enough to turn over and lie on his back. "Even after I promised you... I'm sorry."

They hadn't known each other long, but looking back, the past two weeks had been fun. Glad turned his eyes to the village. Some of the blue flames were still flickering. He knew that he would not be able to grant her wish to spar with him. He offered up a prayer of gratitude for her no-doubt valiant battle on this night.

He turned his eyes back to the sky, seeking the constellation he'd often gazed at with Altinea. But his fractured glasses distorted the sky too much for him to focus, so he gave up and closed his eyes. "I can't... see the stars anymore."

Only the sound of the wind grazed his ears. His body was as heavy as lead, and his consciousness was distant, as if underground. Glad had left nothing behind. His objective was complete. This was his plan all along, so he let go of his consciousness, ready to let the dark take him.

Just then, a quiet voice began to whisper in Glad's ear. It was indistinct, ephemeral. His eyes flew open as he looked for his beloved in his misty vision. He would never mistake that voice; it belonged to Altinea.

"Altinea... We finally meet."

There she was, next to his symbol-covered arm. Even in the distorted world beyond his lenses, Altinea looked just the same as in his memory. He sighed in relief. "I see... You've always been by my side..."

Altinea simply nestled close and smiled. Glad gazed at her face and wrung out one word after another, as if trying to take back the time that had been stolen from them. "You were... so close, but I... never realized. I... Oh, I know... Maybe my vision got too

bad for my glasses..."

He grinned and managed to move his arm, taking off his broken glasses. When the world was no longer distorted and Altinea came into view, he nodded slightly. "Oh... Sorry, they're broken. You picked them for me, and I... Well, at least I can see you now. It's okay... because I know you're here now. I won't lose sight of you again." The sentences came out broken. Glad's gaze wandered once more until he found Altinea and stared at her again. "We can just... buy new ones. You can... pick for me again..."

He grinned sheepishly, then slowly closed his eyes.

As all sound disappeared, quiet fell upon him. Glad's body—having gone beyond the limits of humanity, life, and mortal vessel—crumbled into dust that was carried away by the wind. All that remained were his singed clothing, his bloody dagger, and a pair of broken glasses.

Thus, one story came to its end. The blue flames blanketing the village gradually guttered and faded, and the night grew dark once more. Was it mere coincidence that the wind blowing through the crag began to rise and fall on the musical scale? That its tones, combining the softness of a lullaby and sorrow of a funeral dirge, echoed far across the sky under the flickering stars?

CHAPTER 20

WHILE MIRA and the others waited in the hidden tunnel leading to Chimera Clausen headquarters, they received a message from Aaron through their shikigami. Isuzu had seized the control center and stopped all functions. Now, HQ's defensive systems would be useless.

However, Flicker added that something seemed unnatural. She had been working to dispel the barrier around the core of the control center, yet the barrier disappeared suddenly before she was even halfway done. There were two possible reasons she could think of: either the person who'd put up the barrier had died, or they'd dispelled it of their own volition. The former would be fine, but if it were the latter, Flicker worried that they might have some ulterior motive. She urged Mira to be careful.

"Got it. We will. Well done on your mission. Leave the rest to us!" Kagura said and hung up. She turned to Mira and Cyril and summarized the report.

Mira stood up from her seat on the ground and yawned. "Hrmm. It seems everything's ready."

"We'd best not let their efforts go to waste," Cyril chimed in.

After mopping up the last dozen Chimera Clausen guards, Cyril dumped them by the HQ entrance and got ready to dive in.

Perhaps due to the attack on the control center, the hidden tunnel had been surprisingly busy. But that didn't last long; the Chimera members came one after another to where the trio lay in wait, so it was easy to capture all of them. It seemed they'd captured almost all of the remaining guards, as the tunnel was beginning to quiet down.

"Just a little longer, and my raid unit will be here. We can leave these captives to them..." Kagura muttered to herself and threw a talisman at the pile of Chimera members. She then grabbed the knob and flung the door open. "And charge in ourselves!" she declared loudly and plunged into the base without a backward glance.

"Well, it seems it's finally time."

"Sure is. Let's do our best."

Mira and Cyril nodded to each other and followed close behind.

* * *

Through the door was Chimera Clausen HQ. A vast underground space stretched into the distance, with giant structures neatly arranged throughout as far as the eye could see. It looked like an entire imperial capital stuffed into a room. Light spirit power seemed to be used here as well, as despite being underground, the place was well-lit from corner to corner. That made the towering wall before them look all the more unnatural.

"I'd assume the center one is the head office," Mira mused. "But where could all the people be, I wonder?"

"They must know that their defense system is disabled by now," Cyril replied. "I would assume they'd take cover in a place with strong walls..."

Among the cluster of large buildings, a single, conspicuous road led straight ahead, stabbing through the very center of the structures. It led to a gate in a wall in the center of the place—quite the enticing destination for these intruders.

Was it a ruse to make them think the enemy was defenseless? Or perhaps Chimera awaited the group beyond, fully prepared and confident that they could fight them off? Chimera Clausen was exceedingly cautious. There was no telling what methods their highest elites might use.

Mira and Cyril surveyed the vast space and thought of it as they would their first attempt of a dungeon: How can we clear this?

Meanwhile, Kagura stepped forward without hesitation. "Duh, we bust right in! Just crush them before they can do anything about it!" she declared, and ran off down the center of the road.

"Good grief. She's as hotheaded as ever," Mira muttered as she followed. Back when this world was a game, Kagura had always been the kind to plunge right in as soon as she saw an opportunity. Oddly, this would always lead to success for her.

Mira wondered if she had some kind of foresight. Though perhaps this charge was

simply because she was so close to laying her hands on her archenemy.

Cyril watched Kagura, the pinnacle of mediums, run ahead, then glanced back at Mira. “Perhaps taking decisive action would be better than overthinking things. They’ve only just shut down the control center, so we should be in the perfect position to take advantage of this. We have a Wise Man on our side, after all. Sometimes, brute force is the best option.”

Despite their charge being made up of just three elites, they had the strength to deal with most tricks with ease. Their small numbers made for greater adaptability, as well. Indeed, it would perhaps be best for these three to be proactive.

“Hrmm, very well. Based on my experience, they aren’t especially difficult to suppress. As long as we stay wary of spirits’ power, they won’t get one over on us.”

Mira looked up at the approaching wall and recalled the Chimera elite, Gregorius, she’d fought back at the Ancient Ring Gate. He’d wielded a spirit bomb, spirit gear, and a black sword. All of them were troublesome to deal with, but she had never considered any of it a real threat. And now that their group was armed with the Alabaster Oni-Slayer weapons, they were ready for anything. They simply needed to be wary of spirit-powered Chimera technology.

Kagura’s actions may have seemed impulsive, but now that Mira thought about it, they may have been close to optimal.

Though I imagine she didn’t give it that much thought herself, Mira sighed and grinned helplessly as Kagura blasted away the giant gate in her way. Ambush could have been an option if not for that.

* * *

Mira followed Kagura through the destroyed gate. When she went through, she smirked at the unexpectedly ideal state of things.

Beyond the gate was something like a castle entrance. It wasn’t luxurious, but it would be a lie to say it wasn’t impressive. There, Kagura stood facing three conspicuous figures.

As Mira and Cyril stepped up next to Kagura, one of the three spoke up. “Well, well, it seems two more have come. I was about to see what the commotion was, but it seems

we have intruders. This won't do." He was so heavily armored that he looked like a bear wearing multiple layers of clothing. Despite having such bulky armor, he could still move freely and wielded a heavy halberd. Of course, both of these items were spirit gear.

A rather young man with short, reddish-brown hair spoke -after him. "Our defense systems are down. Guessing that was your doing?" He had a sword and buckler hanging from his hip. In contrast to the first man, he wore light armor and a cloak. This one glared at the group with his arms crossed haughtily before his chest.

Finally, the third to speak was a man who wore a jet-black robe and wielded a black staff. "No, they can't possibly be that fast. More likely another unit took out the control area." He seemed to be a mage. Oddly, he frowned when he caught sight of Mira.

All three were armed to the teeth with spirit gear. There was no doubt these were three top elites. They'd encountered three of the five elites so soon. If this was the result of Kagura's sudden charge, then one could call it a success.

"So you're Chimera's top guys, huh?" Kagura demanded.

"Quite right!"

"Then get ready to get wrecked," she said coolly, already prepared to do battle. Chimera Clausen was her enemy, the evildoers who harmed humanity's greatest ally. In Kagura's voice, one could hear the sorrow of someone who'd had their own family stolen from them.

"Well, well, well. This looks like it's going to be a pain." In certain emotional states—like Kagura was in right now—people could occasionally wield more power than normal. That was what worried the heavily armored man.

But the red-haired one looked the trio up and down and said, "Pssh, don't be stupid. It's one scrawny man and two little girls. They must be pretty strong if they made it this far, but they don't even have special weapons. We're fully geared up. How the hell can we lose?"

He was right in some ways; the spirit gear wielded by the three elites held spiritual power that outstripped any of the spirit gear Mira's group had encountered so far. How many spirits had been sacrificed to fabricate even one of those items? The man's boastful words made Kagura even more furious.

"We'd better be careful," the robed man cut in, glaring sharply at Mira. "That silver-haired girl is the one who robbed us of the Spirit King's power." He was in fact the very man Mira had fought at the Ancient Ring Gate.

"Really? That little girl, of all people?"

"Wooow. Here I thought you were making excuses when you said you didn't expect her to be that strong, but there you go. Hey, I'd let my guard down, too."

All three pairs of eyes gathered on Mira. Their gazes contained some antipathy thanks to her thwarting their mission, but more than that, they were clearly cautious of her due to the robed man's testimony.

"I thought I recognized that voice," she said. "So it is you. Your name was... Gregorius, no?" He had been in full armor when they first met, so Mira didn't know what his face looked like at all. But his voice had lingered vaguely in her memories. She had totally forgotten his name, but now that she could examine his face, everything clicked into place. He was indeed Gregorius, son of the blacksmith Gregor.

"I left that name behind long ago. Now, I'm just a nameless head. No more, no less," Gregorius declared. After shooting a glance at Mira, he turned his eyes to Cyril. "And that other one there, the redhead. He's Cyril, the leader of Écarlate Carillon. Be wary of him and the silver-haired girl."

Écarlate Carillon had been formed in order to save people who were in trouble. Their contributions were so great that they were known far and wide across the continent. It seemed their leader was quite famous.

"The volunteer guild? I see, I see."

"And coming here is more volunteer work, huh? Sucks to be you."

After Gregorius's warning, the other two elites nodded in agreement and grinned slightly. The more famous one was, the more their abilities would be known. It was clear these men thought Cyril would be easier to fight than Mira, who they had little experience with.

"So you're famous," Mira said to Cyril.

"Well, I don't exactly enjoy having fans such as these," he -replied with a wry grin. "It

happens sometimes, when you have to fight over ideology.”

“I understand your feelings, but settle down, you two.” Gregorius urged his companions to be cautious. “A guild leader and that ill-omened girl... Together, they’ll be dangerous.” Even if one knew an enemy’s techniques, it didn’t mean that one could let their guard down. He watched Mira and Cyril carefully.

“One slip-up was all it took to scare ya, huh?”

“Indeed. That isn’t like you.”

Gregorius must have been strong enough to be worthy of their respect. The other two elites became tense and watched the trio with a new wariness.

“You’ll understand when you fight her,” Gregorius replied, steeling his resolve. “But right now, we need a secure win... It’s time to use the Chimera.”

“Oh? Is it finally time to deploy that strategy?” The old man in heavy armor sounded rather excited.

“Yeah. They look like the perfect adversaries for its first fight.”

“Are we allowed to?”

“I’m sure we will be. Now that they know where we are, we can’t hide any longer.”

With that, Gregorius and the armored man turned and ran. Kagura reflexively threw a talisman, and Mira fired off an [Immortal Arts Heaven: Pulse]. However, the young red-haired elite swiftly stepped in and fended off their magic. He looked at the gashes on his shield and smirked. “Pretty strong, for instant casts. But you won’t advance a step as long as I’m standing. Guys, leave this to me! You two get the Chimera ready!”

“We need eight minutes. You may retreat afterward!” the armored man shouted from beyond the stairs. He was already outside of their range now, but the heroes didn’t move; their attention was focused on the man before them.

The red-haired man glowered back at them and slowly backed away, murmuring, “Not that they’ll get through me, if that’s all they’ve got.” He stomped on and shattered a floorboard. The ground shook, and a giant rock wall suddenly rose up before them.

The rock wall rose all the way to the ceiling, blocking their path forward. In the now much-more-intimidating room, Kagura gazed at the man's foothold.

"Huh? Is the defense system working?" she asked. "So you can still use it manually?"

"That's right. The automatic defense system here may be down, but that doesn't mean we can't make it work," he replied smugly. He picked up the debris at his feet and tossed it behind the trio.

There was the sound of shattering. When they turned to look, the entrance behind them was blocked as well. Now they were boxed in from both directions.

"Okay, the stage is set. You've got nowhere to run now, and I have my weapons and whole stock of spirit power. Heh, I'm not stupid enough to think I can beat a guild leader and that silver-haired kid, but I can stop you for as long as it takes for them to get ready. Not that I'd mind taking you down," the man said—he was apparently a bit of a narcissist. He took out a vial of faintly glowing liquid and drank it. At once, he began to overflow with an enormous amount of mana. It seemed this was a buffing potion distilled from spirit power.

The red-haired man savored the feeling of power flowing through him and gleefully whipped out his sword. Then, with a deafening rumble, the man crashed into the rock wall behind him. Suddenly, he found himself in pitiful shape: his spirit armor had been turned into scrap metal, his sword was broken, and his buckler had shattered to pieces.

"You talk too much!" Kagura shouted what everyone was thinking. A member of Chimera Clausen acting all big and heroic, saying things like leave this to me and not that I'd mind taking you down had pushed her to the limit of her patience. She'd reflexively used her magic to strike at him without mercy.

Either as a result of the drug or his spirit gear, the redhead managed to survive the assault. But he was no longer in any shape to fight; he lay in a crumpled heap on the ground, eyes unfocused. "Wha... What's... going on?"

Mira then touched the rock wall, immediately transforming it into rubble and blowing it away. The redhead was speechless at the sight.

"Hrmm. Well, I don't think you'll be stopping us for eight minutes at this rate," Mira said. "It seems you don't quite understand who you've made an enemy of." She looked

down at the man with the Demon's Eye, infiltrating his nervous system.

"A-aagh... Help..."

Like an ominous moon in the night sky, her eyes bewitched and terrified the man. His face warped in fear and his lips trembled. He had no idea that his foes were two of the Nine Wise Men, those at the pinnacle of magic. They were beyond the realm of those who could be defeated by a mere gear advantage. Yet he was to remain ignorant. As paralysis traveled through his body, he was unable to even beg for his life. Darkness eventually shut off his consciousness.

He hovered between life and death, but he wasn't dead yet.

"I'm quite surprised by your self-control. I'd expected you to kill him outright," Mira mumbled to herself as she watched Cyril wrap him up in binding cloth.

"Killing people willy-nilly would get the church up in my business," Kagura replied with a sigh. "We'll need testimony and stuff from elites like this guy too. Apparently, they can expose related organizations or something? I dunno. Ask Alioth about it."

They'd decided ahead of time to capture everyone involved instead of seeking immediate and fatal revenge. Kagura explained that devising methods to protect spirits based on enemy testimony, such that spirits were never hurt again, was the true and ultimate goal of the Isuzu Alliance.

There was still a long road ahead, but this was a necessary first step.

"Well done, you two," Cyril complimented them. "I have my own dream, but it still feels so far from realization."

As the leader of a guild formed to lend a hand to all who needed it, Cyril found himself envious of both the Nine Wise Men's power and their perfect composure. It seemed others saw them as truly special, regardless of whether or not they were worthy of it.

CHAPTER 21

THE THREE CLAMBERED over the remains of the rock wall and ran up the staircase behind it. They arrived at a room five meters wide and ten meters deep—rather small for a battlefield. The heavily armored man awaited them there.

“My word! You made it through him fast. Gods, he couldn’t even buy time!” When he noticed the trio, he pushed the giant metal door in front of him harder to close it. Then, he locked the door in a panic and turned around as if nothing had happened, readying his halberd for battle. “Well, I suppose it’s no surprise. He is the weakest of us three.”

He’d hardly finished his sentence and already Mira was at point-blank range; she had used Shrinking Earth to approach.

“What?! How did you get there?!”

Though Mira’s sudden appearance startled him, he wasted no time and swung his halberd. The swing was surprisingly agile for the weapon’s apparent weight as it cut through the air, whipping up powerful winds.

The room shook. The attack revealed great power, but alas, his weapon failed to strike the summoner.

“I see. You have the skills to back up your claim that he is the weakest. That reaction was faster than I’d expected.” Mira returned to her original location and added, “Still, it seems your bulk makes it difficult to keep track of your own belongings.” She then revealed what she was holding.

“When did you do that?!”

Mira was holding the key to the metal door. Since she’d gotten so close, she took it before stepping away. The armored man looked at his empty hand and shouted in genuine astonishment. However, his shock didn’t last long. He began chuckling fearlessly and gripped his halberd tightly in both hands.

“With or without the key, you shall not pass as long as I, the great Ironclad Imperial, stand in your path! The beast is almost ready, and I will protect it with my life.” The

self-proclaimed Ironclad Imperial stood protectively in front of the door. His name was no lie; he was like an impenetrable mountain standing imposingly before their goal. He did not attack; it seemed his purpose really was to protect the door. He would wait and counterattack when they approached.

"Naturally, his armor is spirit gear as well," Mira muttered to herself, sizing it up—it looked tough. "In that case, there's no use in using middling or below. Even advanced may not get through..."

The armor was much thicker than when she'd fought Gregorius at the Ancient Ring Gate. It seemed like nearly the perfect defense.

"Hmm. I wonder what went into making that..." Kagura simmered.

If it had existed in the game world, this armor might've been labeled a cheat item. How many spirits had been sacrificed to make this single suit? The thought of it sent her into an almost palpable rage.

"One could call that unnatural strength the symbol of Chimera," Cyril murmured as he stared at the Ironclad Imperial. Kagura stepped forward, but he stopped her with a hand. "Mira and Kagura. We already have the key, so you two should go ahead. I'm worried about this 'beast' they're preparing. Allow me to deal with him."

Given how the executives spoke, it seemed they were quite confident in this beast. It might even be a trump card that could flip this battle on its head. Was he wary of that—or was Cyril more worried about Kagura losing her cool and refusing to hold back against this foe? Either way, he knew that the coming destruction would be great, so he offered to deal with this enemy himself and pointed his companions toward the door in the back. The tragedy that befell their first enemy reminded Cyril of a battle from long ago. It seemed even this guild leader didn't want to be anywhere near a Wise Man using her full power.

"Hrmm," said Mira. "Unlike the last one, breaking through those defenses will be tedious. I find myself curious about their 'beast,' as well. Hurrying through would be the ideal course of action."

"Fair. Even if the enemy is nothing special, they're using the power of spirits. We can't be careless." With that, Kagura parted from Cyril and circled around the middle of the room to make for the door in the back.

"Ahem! I said you shall not pass!" The Ironclad Imperial swung his halberd wide, sending violent winds swirling throughout the room and blowing the trio back against the walls. Mira used the air as a foothold, spun around, and righted herself again. With graceful motions, Cyril landed feetfirst on the wall and stepped down onto the floor again.

Meanwhile, Kagura used a mesh of tree branches to catch herself and gently descended, her face shining with the light of a cold grin. "Aha. Then that's why this room is so small."

"Unlike the first one, he's thought this through."

"This is a waste of time."

The three of them dealt with his attack like it was nothing and looked back at the man standing in the back of the cramped room.

"Well. Having my attack dealt with so easily does wound my pride," the Ironclad Imperial said. But he did not give up; instead, he changed his stance. His weapon had the power of a wind spirit, whipping up raging winds with each swing. It might have been inferior to other weapons in pure killing power, but it was quite versatile in a master's hands. And it was certainly useful for buying time—as long as the enemy was of relatively similar strength, that is.

"I'll suppress his weapon. You two just take advantage of the opening." Cyril slowly drew his sword and began walking toward the Ironclad Imperial.

"Once again, you shall not pass me!" His halberd ruled the room through the winds it created. When Cyril was halfway across, the Ironclad Imperial gripped his weapon tightly and swung. This time, when a gust of wind blew through the quiet, there was an unusually dense metallic noise.

It was Cyril. He'd swiftly closed in on the Ironclad Imperial and stopped the halberd mid-swing with his sword. Despite only being able to sprint for short distances, his speed was reminiscent of Mira's Shrinking Earth. The fact that he was merely running was proof of his training.

"That's fantasy for you," Mira mused. "It never ceases to amaze me when I see it."

"Right? Overcoming the limits of human strength is such a great trope," Kagura agreed.

They watched Cyril, impressed, for a moment. Then, the Wise Men ran together.

"We leave this to you, Cyril."

"All yours!"

They called out as they passed.

"I won't allow it!" The Ironclad Imperial swung his halberd up to bring it down on Mira and Kagura—but the halberd didn't move. The tip of Cyril's sword pressed against its hilt, preventing it from swinging down.

"Yes, they left you to me."

"You're an impudent one!" the Ironclad Imperial shouted. He exerted more force, and his halberd swung powerfully down, and raging winds swept through the room. But nobody was hit by their blast. Cyril had deflected the halberd, and the armored man's swing was ineffectual.

In the meantime, Mira and Kagura unlocked the door and slipped inside.

"Hmph! One mustn't be careless when dealing with the leader of a famous guild." The Ironclad Imperial swiftly put distance between himself and Cyril. He narrowed his eyes in frustration at the open door, but after a sigh, he turned to Cyril once more and grinned fiercely. "Still, I'd say I've done my job well enough. After all, I've managed to delay you, the strongest member of your little trio," he added, happily returning to his post in front of the door and readying his halberd again.

Cyril's guild, Écarlate Carillon, was known all over the continent for its exploits; there was no shortage of stories about them eliminating criminal organizations, defeating calamity-level fiends, and more. Some even called them an "evil-annihilating light." When it came to groups that shady people didn't want to run into, they always made the top of the list.

Écarlate Carillon operated on a large scale to match their fame, as well. Emella was but one example; the guild had vice captains leading groups all across the continent. Every one of them was extremely strong and capable, and their exploits were often mentioned as some of the world's most famous deeds.

Cyril was the one who had gathered all of these powerful folk. It was natural for

Chimera Clausen, an organization acknowledged as evil by all, to be wary of such a man. Stopping the leader of Écarlate Carillon was enough; he was the one who required the most caution to deal with, after all.

Cyril smirked at the man's misunderstanding. "You seem to be mistaken. I stayed here because I believed I could handle you alone. That I wouldn't need to waste their time on you."

"Mm... What is that supposed to mean? You make it sound as if you're inferior to those two children."

"Actually, that's exactly what I'm saying. Try as I may, I'll never be a match for them."

The Ironclad Imperial raised an eyebrow, and his face melted into an expression of obvious confusion.

"You... seem serious. If they're strong enough to make a man like you say that, then... Hmm. Perhaps I've misjudged the situation. It was my mistake focusing on you."

Cyril had told no lies. His tone betrayed hints of envy, and his demeanor told the Ironclad Imperial that he was being sincere. The Ironclad Imperial knew from Mira's victory over Gregorius that she was a threat, but he'd assumed her to be weaker than Cyril. Meanwhile, he knew nothing at all about Kagura. But perhaps due to Cyril's prominence, the Ironclad Imperial had unconsciously decided that he must be the strongest. And now the girls were gone.

He gritted his teeth at this blunder.

"Don't worry too much about it," Cyril said. "This was my plan either way, so there's nothing you could've done to change things."

Even if his foe had been fully cautious of Mira and Kagura, this one-on-one battle was inevitable. Cyril calmly readied his sword with a fearless smile.

"How kind of you. Well, all that's left for me to do is to deal with you swiftly and rejoin the larger battle!" The Ironclad Imperial swung his halberd right away. The blade growled and stirred up the surrounding air, creating a tornado.

But Cyril had already moved out of the way of the violent whirlwind. A flash of light struck the armored man's arm. There were two shrill noises, and the Ironclad Imperial

stumbled back to try to keep his footing.

"So the rumors were true. That spirit armor of yours is strong, indeed." Cyril pulled back his sword and returned to a ready stance. He'd aimed for the elbow joint where the armor was thinnest, yet only the sword's blunt impact had an effect. And even that was only enough to make him recoil a bit; it was far from leaving any sort of wound. Cyril had heard beforehand how difficult this spirit gear was to deal with, but he gazed at it impressed nonetheless.

"How interesting. Your skill truly is on another level. If not for this armor, that might have settled the match. But as long as I am protected, your sword—no, none of your attacks will work."

"Are you sure of that? Well, that only makes me want to try all the more."

Apparently confident in his armor, the Ironclad Imperial did not take any defensive stance; he simply held his halberd out straight ahead. Cyril was fully on the offensive, as well.

Thus, the battle between Écarlate Carillon and Chimera Clausen's top warriors began.

CHAPTER 22

WITH EACH SWING of his halberd, the Ironclad Imperial created rampaging storms. Cyril wove past with his superb agility and sharply swung his sword. The sounds of two, three, four strikes were lost in the buffeting winds, but each time, his strikes grew sharper. Finally, there was an intense crashing sound: Cyril had gradually strengthened his blows until finally unleashing a full-power strike.

“Nrgh!”

Cyril’s blow sent the Ironclad Imperial flying. Nevertheless, he landed safely on his two feet and grinned at the shallow scar on his shoulder plate. “That’s not bad, wounding my armor. You’re even stronger than I expected... But I’m afraid my victory is secure.”

The reason for the Ironclad Imperial’s confidence became clear at once: as he spoke, the scratch on his armor disappeared.

“Automatic recovery? Now that’s outright unbalanced,” Cyril complained.

On top of all-powerful defenses, the armor was self-healing. If this was still a video game, this item certainly would’ve warped the combat meta.

“Do you now understand this overwhelming power? Our ability to harness unimaginable power will pull the reins of the new world!” Chimera Clausen’s technology, which allowed them to use the power of spirits, did indeed harbor the potential to turn the world on its head. But that was something that Cyril couldn’t allow to happen.

“No, I don’t think I do. We will never need technology that requires such sacrifice.” Cyril dismissed the man’s words and pointed the tip of his sword at the armor’s shoulder. As he did, there was a metallic clang as the Ironclad Imperial went flying again.

“Nrrrgh!”

The armored man managed to land upright despite his broken stance. He gazed at his

shoulder in astonishment. The gash this time was much deeper than the last. However, it had already begun healing; before long, the shoulder piece returned to its original shine.

“Oh ho ho, how interesting. So this is the legendary Blade’s Pursuit, the namesake of Cyril of the Blade’s Pursuit. I see, I see. Now that I’ve experienced it, I understand. It certainly exceeds expectations—but what a shame.”

Cyril’s ultimate technique, Blade’s Pursuit, was known all through the world. Yet he had come out with only a scratch—this made the Ironclad Imperial laugh boisterously.

The common name for the warrior-only ability to hone and use one’s fighting spirit was manifestation. Among the many possible manifestations was one known as Blade’s Pursuit, which allowed the user to unleash a second, invisible attack as a follow-up to a regular strike.

Blade’s Pursuit was a beginner’s manifestation, but as it allowed the user to essentially deal double damage with every attack, almost every warrior had used it at some point. However, because it struck the same location at a later point in time, it was difficult to hit swift enemies with it. Moreover, most veterans had stronger manifestations, so they generally stopped using it over time.

Yet in this vast world, there was one who continued to use Blade’s Pursuit. That would be Cyril himself.

He had trained himself thoroughly in the art of Blade’s Pursuit, succeeding in researching and refining it until it was in the realm of an ultimate move. It had grown in power and even accuracy, allowing it to strike again in the exact location where Cyril’s sword had touched the target.

Cyril’s Blade’s Pursuit was nothing like that of beginners now; it was a master’s tool, all thanks to decades upon decades of refinement.

The Ironclad Imperial had easily fended off an ultimate attack from such a master. The spirit gear he wore far outstripped what Gregorius had wielded during his battle with Mira, to the point that one might call it the pinnacle of pure defense. Its toughness had been proven in this battle with the great Cyril. How could one not expect him to boast?

“Now, how long can you hold out?” The Ironclad Imperial, certain of his victory, pierced through part of the ceiling as he swung his halberd once more with finality.

The wind roared and blew madly, sending the ceiling's rubble raining down on Cyril like bullets.

"Well, this is a problem." Even with his movements suppressed by the wind, Cyril cut down the approaching debris and weaved through the storm coolly.

"Oh ho! Can you survive this?!" The Ironclad Imperial struck the ceiling twice more to meet his charge.

Even Cyril was unable to take the spirit-generated storm head-on by this point. He ran perpendicular to the wind's current and only stepped forward when there were openings. Once he'd escaped the tornado's range and slipped past halberd-striking distance, Cyril swung his sword like a flash of lightning. "Now it's my turn."

"Nrrrgh! You are a fast one. It's hard to even keep sight of you."

Diagonally, horizontally, vertically—Cyril slashed furiously in all directions. Each strike against the Ironclad Imperial's armor shrieked and sent sparks flying, gouging out dozens of scratches.

The Ironclad Imperial swung his halberd wildly, unable to keep up with Cyril's speed. But he didn't panic; he had no fear whatsoever of having his overwhelming defenses cut through—let alone feeling any amount of pain. That meant that he paid no mind to defending himself, allowing him to devote all of his strength to attacking.

"But can you escape this?!" Unbothered by the myriad slashing attacks he received, the Ironclad Imperial swung his halberd in a wide arc. The winds swirled in a circle around him instead of flying in one direction.

A true tornado had formed inside the cramped room. The wind spiraled into a cruel vortex of debris with the two men at the center, blocking off all paths of escape.

"You've made a real cage of wind here, haven't you?" Cyril shot a glance around himself as he struck head, arms, torso, waist, and legs. The vortex was beginning to shrink around them, and the shards of debris within would surely be fatal if it were to envelop him.

"That I have. I devised this perfect technique to guarantee my victory against a spry youth such as yourself." The cage of wind enveloped even the wielder, destroying all others within. The Ironclad Imperial smirked proudly, swinging his halberd round and

round through the air. None could withstand the winds created by spiritual power. But as he was clad in armor like an iron wall, it felt like nothing more than a breeze to him. That was what allowed him to use this technique.

"I get that. Such power to go with your defenses... It wouldn't be easy to bring this down." In the raging storm, Cyril's sword strikes came faster. The sounds of blows beneath the roar of wind grew in intensity. Little by little, the scratches on the Ironclad Imperial's armor became deeper.

He finally furrowed his brow in annoyance at the impacts he felt all over. "How stubborn!" the Ironclad Imperial roared. He accelerated his halberd-swinging. Its tip moved at double the speed now and aimed precisely for Cyril. The narrowing tornado grew even stronger.

Cyril pulled his sword back and parried the approaching blade, knocking it to the side. The impact sent sparks flying, though they were quickly smothered by the wind.

The Ironclad Imperial readied his halberd again and smiled. "Your swordplay is to be feared. I'm once again surprised at how well you've done." His strikes were like rampaging waves. The rate at which Cyril's sword dug into the Ironclad Imperial's armor was enough to make him a little worried. Still, in the short time that Cyril spent using his sword to defend himself, the armor had once again recovered until it was like new. "But I'm afraid it was all for naught."

As long as the man could stop Cyril for a moment, his armor would never be broken through. The tornado would finish the job; all he had to do was wait. Realizing that he now had everything prepared for his victory, the Ironclad Imperial's voice was tinged with triumph.

Cyril smirked back at him. "Purely based on my experience, a warrior becomes most open to attack when they've become certain of their victory." His tone was calm—not the attitude of someone in a life-or-death situation.

"What kind of joke is this?" It would usually be silly to listen to such a warning at this point, but the man was up against the Cyril. The Ironclad Imperial resumed his wary stance to cover up any openings and faced Cyril head-on. Did the guild leader still have another ace up his sleeve? But Cyril didn't seem any different before. His aura, spirit, attitude, breathing—none of it had changed.

"I don't know what you're hiding, but the moment this tornado closes in, you're done for. That's a guarantee."

The wall of wind only had a radius of three meters now, and it was shrinking still. In under a minute, there would be no safe space left. The swirling winds around them roared tauntingly, but Cyril's expression remained unruffled; he grinned coldly and pointed the tip of his sword at the Ironclad Imperial. "When this tornado closes in, hm? I think the fight will be over by then—with you defeated, of course," Cyril said blandly.

"You're quite confident. But at this point, there's nothing you can do to me, is there?" the Ironclad Imperial demanded, as if searching for an answer. "My armor can handle your Blade's Pursuit with ease. You can't use your agility to the fullest in this storm either." The swordsman might be able to dent his armor somewhat, but such perfect armor would never lose to a single blade.

"Is there nothing I can do? I believe it's more accurate to say that I no longer need to. It is done."

"What...?!" The Ironclad Imperial couldn't tell whether or not it was true yet, but he was becoming alarmed by Cyril's claims. This spirit gear had felled countless strong foes. Wearing it gave him confidence that he could win every time; even now, the armor's capabilities put him at an overwhelming advantage.

However, even with his victory seemingly set in stone, his foe showed no sign of fear. In fact, Cyril himself seemed convinced of his own impending triumph. This was the Ironclad Imperial's first time confronting such an adversary. He wavered.

His smugness faded. Suddenly, he realized what Cyril had meant. "You don't mean... you haven't..."

The Ironclad Imperial stuttered vaguely; one could hardly tell what he was getting at. But he had indeed hit upon Cyril's intent.

The gleam in Cyril's eyes turned sharper. He took advantage of the Ironclad Imperial's momentary shock and thrust out his sword. "That's right. I haven't activated a single Blade's Pursuit yet." The tip dug into the Ironclad Imperial's shoulder, but his perfect armor stopped its advance. Yet right after, the arc traced by Cyril's sword began to glow.

[Final Pursuit: White Night's Silver Specter]

In the blink of an eye, hundreds of invisible slashes manifested and assailed the Ironclad Imperial all at once.

Cyril's attack left wound after wound on his impenetrable foe, becoming countless Blade's Pursuits that dug into the armor. The enormous power of these concentrated attacks overlapped, even crossing with each other to create flashes of white light. There was the sound of metal smashing, and the heavy armor, with its absolute defense, creaked for one last second before bursting apart.

"Gnnngh!" The Ironclad Imperial groaned in agony and dropped his halberd. Cyril's sword stabbed deep into his shoulder; that arm was all but useless.

"I'd say it's settled now," said Cyril, looking down on him and picking up the halberd before swinging it once.

When he did, the wind stopped, and all of the debris clattered to the floor. The Imperial still lived thanks to his armor taking the vast majority of blows, but he lay crumpled on the ground, in no state to fight.

"Nobody told me... you had an ability like that..." the Ironclad Imperial muttered hatefully. He tried to lift himself with quaking arms, but fell powerlessly back down. Due to Cyril's fame, his fighting style was known widely—along with the fact that he was a master of the manifestation known as Blade's Pursuit.

Cyril of the Blade's Pursuit. All who saw his swordplay testified that he was as swift as the wind, and his single strikes were as powerful as lightning, tearing his enemies in two.

Indeed, single strikes. For when Cyril swung his sword with all his strength, the resulting Blade's Pursuit was powerful enough to finish them off in one blow. That was why all accounts of his swordplay focused on that single strike. But in truth, the stories only told a portion of the truth of Cyril's swordplay.

"I don't usually reveal this in front of people," he said. "If I'm using it, it's because I'm in a life-or-death situation or I need firepower."

"No wonder... I didn't know. Perhaps this is... power that can't be overcome through superior gear..." The man grinned breathlessly and collapsed onto his back.

"Okay. We'll be counting on you to testify, so I'm going to restrain you now." Cyril stood the halberd up against the wall and operated his User's Bangle to open his Item Box to retrieve a binding cloth from within.

"Nrrrgh!"

But before he could, the man swung his good arm in a wide arc, throwing a black, stake-like object at Cyril. The moment it left his hand, it changed shape and spread out like a net.

The black net was big enough to cover everything from ceiling to floor. This was the Ironclad Imperial's final gambit: a cage of black that could deflect even the finest swords and block even the greatest spell.

"This is..."

"When you've become certain of your victory,' was it? It's time for you to eat your words!"

Cyril jumped away from it, but the net was truly devious; once it had been thrown toward someone, it continued to pursue its target until it caught them.

"Black, is it...? You've even used the ore on this?" Cyril moved again—one slash of Cyril's sword and the net fell feebly to the floor.

With both his perfect armor and final play so thoroughly trounced, the Ironclad Imperial stared in astonishment at Cyril. "My word..."

"Worked like a charm. Lovely."

Cyril had seen at once that this black net had an odious air about it—this was a special weapon made from black mist ore. The Alabaster Oni-Slayer series that Kagura had ordered as a countermeasure had clearly worked just as designed, draining the weapon of its eeriness in a moment. Cyril watched the remains of the net disappear, then gazed at the long sword in his hand, murmuring in amazement.

From there, he knocked the Ironclad Imperial out and restrained him as planned. He also recovered the halberd—just in case—and strode toward the far door.

"Even after smashing it against his armor so much, it doesn't have a scratch on it." Cyril

had swung the snow-white long sword hundreds of times, yet it was as smooth as if newly forged. Cyril sheathed it... then took it out once more and muttered, "I hope I get to keep this..."

CHAPTER 23

AFTER PASSING through the door, Mira and Kagura bounded up the stairs by twos and threes until they arrived at the next floor.

Suddenly, their field of vision was dyed crimson. A deafening boom shook the air. It was a wave of bombardment. It made sense—once the armored man below fell, the Isuzu-sent trio would naturally have to pass through the door he guarded. A narrow passage, a small doorway—it was like shooting fish in a barrel.

“Well, this is quite the welcome party.”

“So these are the permanently stationed forces we were told about.”

Mira and Kagura brushed off the black smoke rising from below and walked on without a care. Once they were clear of the haze, they calmly looked around the clearing and glanced at the enemy forces lined up before them.

This level had metallic walls and flooring. It seemed about three hundred meters on all sides at a glance, and the forces there were emblematic of Chimera’s sheer size. In this space, even larger than the control center’s dome, stalwart dolls—technomancy dolls refitted for combat—stood fully armed, as far as the eye could see. Gregorius stood before them, the leader of this small army.

“It seems now is my time to shine.” Mira surveyed the force of over a thousand dolls and stepped forward with a small smile. Then, with the coolest look she could muster, she seized the opportunity to declare grandly, “Leave this to me. You go on ahead!”

This was the ideal situation—the perfect time to say a line she’d always wanted to say. It would perhaps rank among the top cliché fiction scenes. After Cyril had done the same before, Mira had waited for the perfect timing to get her line in. Best of all, this battlefield was actually perfectly suited to her, among all the Nine Wise Men.

Like with like—if the enemy had a vast army, then it was natural for Danblf, the One-Man Army, to stand against them. Power in numbers was Mira’s specialty, so this was truly the perfect place for her to shine.

"Okay. Have fun," Kagura replied.

Mira's excitement aside, Kagura knew from a strategic perspective that she was right. She didn't waste a moment entrusting this place to Mira, and swiftly rode Tweetsuke over the enemies' heads to pass through.

Of course, Gregorius would not stand idly by. He held his hand aloft, signaling the technomancy dolls to shoot fire at Kagura all at once. Over a thousand fireballs focused on one point and burst on impact, sending crimson flames flying in all directions.

The air shook. Faint heat brushed against Mira's cheek. "That's some impressive firepower!"

Eventually, the space above calmed.

"What...?" Gregorius looked up and gasped in surprise. Kagura and Tweetsuke had disappeared along with the fire. The technomancy dolls' attack was fierce, indeed, but it wasn't enough to totally erase a human from existence. There was only one other possibility—he searched around in a panic.

Behind Gregorius, across from the entrance where Mira stood, was Kagura. She was in front of the staircase leading to the next floor. In perfect health, she waved, turned, and skipped up the stairs. "Good luck!" she called out.

Normally, you'd protect someone as they escape after offering to let them go ahead... But it'd be stupid of me to protect a fake. Oh, how disappointing. The Kagura flying on Tweetsuke's back had been a dummy created from Kagura's magic. Mira knew that from the start, so she silently waved back and sighed.

"Well, it seems my job is clear." Mira glanced from side to side as she walked toward Gregorius. The man himself clicked his tongue in irritation, turned to Mira with hateful eyes, and approached as well. The distance between them quickly shrunk, and they stopped at the ideal firing range for mages: about ten meters apart. Now that Mira was getting a close look at them, the army of dolls was quite imposing. She recalled a game battle that she'd once taken part in.

How odd. This is all reality now, but it feels like I've gone back to that time.

Mira found herself excited by the scene before her. Her fighting spirit was heightened, and her concentration rose. The sensation seemed to flow from within her.

"So you're staying here all alone, against these numbers?" Gregorius asked searchingly. "You're confident. But how are you gonna deal with the difference in power? One Pegasus or Dark Knight can't make up for this disadvantage." He was painfully aware of Mira's strength, but now, she stood alone against over a thousand enemies. Normally, a summoner could make up for a numerical disadvantage somewhat by making their own numbers. However, these dolls were fully equipped with spirit weapons, so they were many times stronger than the average enemy. This was far from a normal situation.

"You're not wrong. Such a difference in numbers is not easily overcome. Just summoning one or two helpers would still result in me being crushed under the weight of your army." Even Mira would buckle alone against such an army. She knew that true one-man armies that could fell whole militaries on their own only existed in fiction. How ironic that she'd arrived at this answer in a previously fictional world.

"But you know... I happen to specialize in battles of numbers."

Though this may have once been a fantasy world, her perception remained: no single person could overcome these numbers. That was why the hero known as Danblf had been given the One-Man Army nickname.

"My preparations are already complete. While we're at it, I think it's about time you witnessed the true power of summoning." Mira's eyes suddenly changed color. From their deep green emerged a clear blue.

[Immortal Arts: Hermit's Cursed Eye]

This was an ultimate technique of the Immortal Arts that allowed the wielder to utilize the mana in nature as their own. Mira had built up her status as a one-man army through the combination of summoner and sage abilities.

[Evocation: Dark Knight]

She used the inexhaustible fount of mana without reservation, casting basic summoning magic. The summoning circle was like a black hole, from which a large black knight emerged. Waves of black flames covered its form, and two red lights were all that filled its vacant eyes.

One. Two. Ten. Twenty. A hundred. Two hundred. Magic circles linked together like chains, each spitting out a Dark Knight. It all happened in seconds. In this short of a

time, Mira created a thousand Dark Knights that stood obediently behind her.

"No way..." Gregorius had lost his absolute numbers advantage in a blink. Shock was plastered on his face; he was speechless before the endless army of Dark Knights.

This man had thought he had a good grasp of Mira's power. He couldn't underestimate her, couldn't let his guard down. That was why he'd gathered such a large force in one place. No matter how strong she was, she was just one mage; once she ran out of mana, she would be greatly weakened. The dolls were here to ensure she ran out.

But Mira had easily overcome that obstacle. Looking around, Gregorius surmised that he couldn't expect her to run out of mana any time soon. At the same time, he recalled a certain verse of a heroic paean regarding Wise Man Danblf. It claimed that he was like a reaper of death who could raise a horde in seconds.

We're not gonna make it in time, are we? No; we're close. She's no reaper. If I can keep her here for ten minutes, I've won.

Wise Man Danblf was but a legend now. Gregorius shut his eyes to shake off the nightmarish thought, suppressed his growing panic, and silently glared at Mira.

* * *

Mira glanced behind her, surveyed the army of knights, and murmured in satisfaction, "Hrmm, just as rehearsed. Perfect." In order to be ready for a battle against Chimera's full forces, she had practiced replacing the Dark Knights' weapons with Sanctia during the summoning process.

As weapon spirits, Dark Knights were inherently weak to weapons with oni curses. However, the holy sword Sanctia resisted the curse thanks to the Spirit King's power within her. At minimum, she could serve as a means of defending the knights. As a result, each of the summoned Dark Knights wielded their own holy sword. They were vastly stronger than any of Mira's previous armies.

Both armies stared each other down. Finally, Gregorius's side made the first move. The technomancy dolls all fired at once. Great fireballs rained down on Mira and her army, turning the battlefield into a hellscape in an instant.

"Even their fire is a big deal when you put a thousand together." Mira swiftly summoned a wall of Holy Knights in front of her, peeking out from a gap between them

to gaze at the waves of fire closing in. The Dark Knights swung their holy swords to shake off the flames, waiting for their opportunity.

There was a brief pause in the waves of fire. Mira seized the moment and emerged from behind her Holy Knights, spreading her legs wide to lower her center of balance. “Shall we begin our counterattack?”

[*Immortal Arts Inheritance: Waning Windmill*]

Mira thrust her right arm forward, whipping up roaring winds. They condensed into a tornado that pierced through the rain of fire and into the middle of the army of technomancy dolls.

“This again?!” As the whirlwind enveloped him, Gregorius withstood it by blocking it with his black staff. This spell had gotten him once before; there was no doubt the staff was a countermeasure made just for this purpose. However, it did not protect the technomancy dolls. Nearly a hundred of them were crunched into junk by the attack.

After confirming that the rain of fire had thinned, Mira healed the recoil damage on her right arm with a potion and finally gave the order to attack.

“Chaaarge!” she shouted.

All at once, the thousand-strong black army charged, shaking the floor with a low rumble. The technomancy-powered dolls ran to meet them with swords and shields in hand.

In the center of the battlefield, Mira’s army and Gregorius’s soldiers met. There was a boom as ruthlessly destroyed dolls went flying. Armed with the power of the holy sword Sanctia, the Dark Knights were more indomitable than ever.

“That’s... more than I expected.” Even Mira was surprised by this. She grinned at the newfound power of her army. However, they were up against Chimera Clausen’s technomancy dolls reinforced by the power of spirits. These abominations would not go down without a fight.

A burst of light glowed ahead. It was the light of desperation she’d witnessed at the Ancient Ring Gate.

Every single one of these dolls has a spirit bomb installed? Worse, they don’t harm

allies caught in the blast. Hrmm... I wonder how they made that work?

Faced with this new information, Mira quickly began analyzing the situation. The explosions themselves were smaller than the first one she'd seen, only extending about five meters in each direction. But as they had the incredible power of spirits within, they were strong enough to blow away a Dark Knight's armor. Meanwhile, they posed no danger to their fellow dolls.

Even when they fell, they got their revenge. That was truly an efficient strategy for disposable dolls.

"Hrmm. Not bad." Mira's lips curled upward as she recalled a battle from long ago. Strangely, this felt just like back then, even though it had all happened in-game. However, Mira did not dwell on the feeling; instead, she surrendered herself to the heat of the moment.

"I see... So they differ based on unit." Mira continued to analyze the battlefield. The dolls seemed to be divided into units. Only dolls of other units would be vaporized when a nearby spirit bomb detonated. It seemed that each doll within a unit carried the same kind of spirit bombs and wore spirit gear that would defend them from that kind. That meant they couldn't defend themselves from the spirit bombs of the other units.

Mira's analysis was only based on superficial observations, but it was enough—now that she saw how the dolls were divided, she moved her forces to disrupt enemy lines.

"She figured it out..." The brawl became more chaotic, and Gregorius's forces started to get wrapped up in each other's explosions more often. When he realized what was going on, he clicked his tongue angrily and gazed at his pocket watch. "Still not ready..." he muttered. "Time for plan B, huh?"

Gregorius knew well that if not for the spirit bombs, his forces would be culled in no time due to their lesser individual strength. He quickly gave his next orders.

* * *

Just as Mira had planned, the dolls stopped self-destructing. In hand-to-hand combat, the dolls armed with spirit gear were still quite strong, so there were some meager losses on her side. But all in all these were little more than a rounding error; it was only a matter of time before her army annihilated the enemy forces.

But the forces of Chimera weren't done yet. Gregorius still had options. He raised his staff, and the metal walls on either side of the floor swung open.

"My word. You still had more?" Mira asked.

Within the walls, technomancy dolls began to awaken. They numbered at least three thousand, and each was fully armed. The moment they were activated, they charged.

The dolls moved to surround Mira. Each individual was weaker than a single Dark Knight, but they outnumbered the knights nearly four to one. She could press on with her forces, but it would be a Herculean feat to control the whole army alone while they were being surrounded like this.

"This reminds me of the old days..." Superior numbers were an overpowering advantage. But as the One-Man Army herself, Mira knew that she could still make it through this.

A silent wake under the moonlight—the grave marker an unsheathed sword.

The myriad colors from the heavens guide your way.

Two rosary summoning circles met and overlapped. Even in the middle of a battlefield, Mira's chant carried clearly, reaching Gregorius's ears.

"Is that an incantation?! Stop her! By any means necessary!" Gregorius brandished his staff, and all of the dolls fighting Dark Knights turned toward Mira.

Ripped from the eternal wheel, the maidens called to battle.

Their swords play a dirge and cut a rainbow through the skies.

The dolls all fired at once; a rain of fire was directed at Mira. However, the majority of them were cut down by the Dark Knights' swift reactions and holy swords, while the rest were blocked by the Holy Knights at her side.

Gregorius did not give up. The dolls began throwing their own allies at Mira. Nearly ten of them flew straight at her, lighting the fuses of the spirit bombs stored within them as they sailed through the air.

Dark Knights caught the flying dolls and jumped into the air with them in hand,

carrying them away from Mira, where they exploded harmlessly with a blinding flash of light.

“Damn you!” Gregorius clicked his tongue again. The Dark Knights and Holy Knights protected Mira too well for him to interrupt her incantation. He’d wanted to stop it—especially now that he knew her true power more intimately—but all of his attempts ended in failure.

Descend to me from the evening sky, my chosen seven clad in light!

[Evocation: Valkyrie Sisters]

Energized by the last line of Mira’s chant, the rainbow-colored magic circles became gates connecting far-flung spaces. They shone brilliantly, and out stepped the oldest Valkyrie Sister, Alfina. With long, fluttering green hair like the wind itself, deep-blue light armor, gauntlets, and greaves, she was the very image of a war maiden clad in a divine aura.

Her presence was overwhelming. It took Gregorius’s breath away.

However, the evocation was not yet complete. Following Alfina, the second and third sisters emerged from the magic circles. They kept coming until the last one appeared, seventh sister Christina. Then the magic circles dispersed, their job done.

“The Sisters Seven answer your summons.” Alfina stepped forward, and the remaining six lined up behind her. They knelt as one. Though they were different in small ways, their gear all matched, and each item they bore was exquisite and beautiful.

“Right. It’s been a while, Alfina. I’m glad you all seem to be doing well.”

The virtuous warrior maidens served Mira just as retainers would their king. This was proof of just the sort of summoner Mira truly was. Gregorius was at a total loss for words. If even these divine apostles served her, was she truly human?

But what mattered most now was how to win this battle.

With the appearance of the Valkyrie Sisters, he was at a clear disadvantage. Still, his face held no resignation—only admiration. It seemed that, despite everything, his confidence in his own victory had yet to be shaken.

Gregorius glanced at the pocket watch in his hand, as if the object was the source of his confidence. With a smirk, he murmured, "Just a little longer."

CHAPTER 24

MIRA GAVE the seven sisters their orders: to lead her army for her and annihilate the enemy. Danblf had once ordered the sisters to learn the Troop Leadership ability. This allowed them to lead their own armies, which also applied to Mira's other summons.

"Orders duly received. I solemnly swear that we sisters will bring you victory in this battle." The seven sisters bowed deeply before spreading out and dividing the Dark Knights into seven formations. Then, they began their battle against the thousands of technomancy dolls closing in on them.

As expected of the seven Valkyrie Sisters, their forces cooperated much more intricately than when Mira had controlled them alone. They used the Dark Knights' potential to the fullest.

"As usual, their skill is simply incredible," Mira mused proudly. General Mira, her seven commanders, a thousand-strong army of knights—they were much like a real military, indeed.

Mira's army pushed back the closing encirclement. When a Valkyrie saw the signs of an impending spirit bomb explosion, she would quickly launch the doll away. Now that the army was more tightly commanded, they moved like an elite force as they culled Gregorius's horde of constructs.

Sensing her master's intent, Alfina parted the sea of dolls between Mira and Gregorius. Mira proceeded through this open path and called out to Gregorius, "Now, why don't we leave this battle to them and have our own little duel, general versus general?"

"You have the upper hand, yet you still come for a duel? You're insane." Gregorius still had the numbers advantage, but the troops led by the Valkyrie Sisters fought ferociously. It was clear to any who was winning this war. "But that's perfect for me. Let's do this."

Gregorius instructed the dolls waiting behind him to fall back and silently readied his black staff.

"I simply want to settle the score from last time," Mira replied. "The end was a bit

disappointing." Their battle at the Ancient Ring Gate had ended with Gregorius's escape, leaving her unsatisfied.

"What the heck? Is that a dig at me for losing the Spirit King's power and most of my spirit gear?"

From an objective viewpoint, failing his mission and losing or having his gear damaged would point to Gregorius's defeat. But Mira had considered it a draw due to her own injury. Gregorius glared at her in equal parts consternation and anger.

Meanwhile, Mira stared back into his eyes with a fearless grin and pointed her white staff at him. "That matters not. What matters in a duel is who stands and who falls."

"You have a more valiant way of thinking than your looks would suggest. Heh, not that I mind."

After exchanging those words, the two moved simultaneously.

A rock wall shot up between them. It was Gregorius's necromancy, aptly named Rock Wall. However, it was no obstacle for Mira, who ran through with ease using Shrinking Earth. She appeared in front of him out of seemingly nowhere. However, Gregorius hid himself with a second cast of the same spell.

"Hnh?!" Mira sensed something coming and reflexively jumped up. Instantly after, the first rock wall passed below Mira and slammed into the second.

"See if you can dodge this!" Gregorius glowered up at her and cast another spell, creating multiple walls at once.

Was the moving rock wall a new spell or did it work through some other means? Mira used Air Step to dodge and moved back to get a better look at this previously unknown attack.

Gregorius raised his black staff. The crowded rock walls floated upward and shot toward Mira.

"Ooh, now that's new!" she cried in amazement. Since she had the body of a little girl, Mira would be hurt pretty badly if they struck her. However, she was also a Wise Man, strongest of mages. She predicted the trajectory of the countless flying walls and smacked them away with her white staff. When they closed in from all directions, she

used partial-summoned tower shields. Finally, she shattered them all using sage techniques and Dark Knights' swords.

"You can move like that even in midair...?" Gregorius couldn't help but compliment her mobility, spell activation timings, and explosive power when she went on the offensive.

Mira descended alongside the rubble and fixed her eyes on Gregorius's black staff. "By my estimation, that must be the power of your staff. As I recall, those documents did say something about mana manipulation..."

Mana manipulation was one of the abilities listed in the documents regarding black mist ore that Johan had entrusted to Mira.

This came with the ability to control mana that had been manifested and given form. In other words, the user could take control of any spell activated by friend or foe. One could say that it was the perfect counter to mages, since it could turn their own magic back on them.

However, there were two things that it didn't work on: summoning magic and mediums' shikigami.

Summoning magic either gave mana physical form as man-made spirits or used mana to create gates that called primordial spirits forth. Man-made spirits, despite being made of mana, were still spirits at heart and could therefore not be controlled. Meanwhile, gates had some special phenomena that made it impossible to interfere with them. And as the beings they called were real, living things, they could also not be controlled.

As for shikigami, they were much like summons. Each had their own existence and volition, so the effect did not extend to them.

"How do you know that?" Gregorius demanded with equal parts irritation and surprise.

"Simple. An expert told me." Mira smirked.

"Hmm. I don't know when you came into contact with him, but it explains why that alchemist was acting so strangely. And why our experimental lab was attacked..."

As a top executive of Chimera, Gregorius of course had a grasp of all the latest goings-on—including how Isuzu had rescued Johan despite how well-hidden he was. The experimental lab was the place where they had confined Johan after his abduction. It was used to judge the effects of black mist ore-sourced equipment.

“But don’t think that simply knowing trivia means you’ve won the battle!” Gregorius roared. He used his necromancy to create ten golems at once.

“Oho,” Mira mused, impressed. Simultaneous creation of just five golems was worthy of joining an advanced party. Ten would be enough to gain a person entry into the Linked Silver Towers. “Quite the waste of talent, though.”

If nothing else, Gregorius could stand among the top necromancers in the world even without his spirit gear. What mattered most, however, was the willingness to use one’s magic to help the world. When Mira saw the darkness in his eyes, she muttered, “Truly a shame.”

The golems, each two meters tall, looked extremely bulky. They had stubby arms and legs, but their bodies were like giant rocks. It was clear that they would be quite sturdy if dedicated to defense.

However, Gregorius used them for offense.

He swung his staff, and one of the golems rose into the air and fired off like a cannonball. All around them echoed the low, dull sound of an impact. On top of the golem’s enormous mass, the creature had been fired with surprising velocity. It struck the Holy Knight’s tower shield with enough force to break its stance.

“Vanish!” Gregorius’s attack did not end there. He sent four more golems flying at Mira, promptly began concentrating mana again, and activated his next spell.

[Internment Arts: Scarlet Sear]

As the golems closed in on Mira’s Holy Knight, they suddenly glowed red with scorching heat. Shortly after, lava spewed from their torsos. It was like a volcanic eruption, shooting flames; then a boom, and a shockwave in all directions. It buried the Holy Knight in the blink of an eye. The heat was so intense that the knight, now too wounded to be healed, melted and sank into the lava.

The sight was like hell itself bursting open out of nowhere, a door to death that

swallowed all it touched. The Holy Knight in the center of it all disappeared without a trace.

However, the target who should've been there—Mira—wasn't.

“Damn it! Where'd you go?!”

That attack was Gregorius's special technique. He had put countless skilled enemies to death with it. But now, he panicked—perhaps because he believed in this little girl's strength. He couldn't imagine that she'd been helplessly devoured by the lava.

He felt certain that his victory would not be secured until he saw her face warped in agony, until he personally stabbed her straight through the heart. So he searched for her—not out of concern for her safety, but because he feared what she might do next.

* * *

I see. He used his Internment Arts' high effectiveness on heavyweight golems to make up for their slowness. What a delightful tactic.

Mira stood behind the five remaining golems. Her fully defensive Holy Knight had been crushed, and the world had gone red as golems continued to fly her way.

Mira knew her summons well now, so she'd opted to evade rather than rely on her Holy Knight for defense. Amid the raging, heated winds, she'd used Shrinking Earth to back off, slip through the rain of fire, and circle behind the golems.

Gregorius watched his surroundings warily. Mira peeked at him through his golems and put a hand softly on one golem's back.

[Immortal Arts Heaven: Refined Thrust]

Mana condensed in her hand and instantly became a multi-layered shockwave that blew the golem away. The spell's impact sent fissures through the creature; it burst and became rubble that showered down upon Gregorius.

“There you are!” Hearing the explosion, Gregorius whipped around. But the storm of rubble was right in his face, too close for him to evade or use his staff to control it. “Kh!” He held his arms up to defend himself, grunting in pain.

Mira blew away a second and third golem as payback for his previous attack. They became tidal waves of rubble that closed in on her foe. “Even without that suit of armor, you’re a sturdy one,” she mused.

“Hmph... It’s not as good, but I used this before I got that armor. Defending against this much is a piece of cake.” Even subjected to a storm of rocky debris, Gregorius withstood it and curled his lips up to grin at Mira.

Despite being made of cloth, the spirit-powered robe Gregorius wore was far sturdier than any ordinary metal armor. It seemed to absorb impacts as well, as even when large pieces of rock struck him, he didn’t budge an inch. Every piece of rubble that hit his robe lost its momentum entirely and fell to the ground.

Even with his lighter armor, Gregorius was as much of a brick wall as before. However, that did not mean Mira would give up. She held her white staff at her side and gazed at him, watching for an opening.

Gregorius stared back, clutching his own black staff. He raised his arm. The rubble around him floated and shot toward Mira like arrows.

So he can still control them even after they’ve shattered.

A dense shower of rocks rained mercilessly upon Mira. She protected herself from all of it by instantly summoning a Holy Knight.

Yet Gregorius’s assault was unceasing. Ten giant golems made for quite the volume of rubble, and using his staff, Gregorius accelerated every piece of it to incredible speeds. Each shard could be nearly fatal. Whenever they fell, they would rise again. Whenever they broke apart, they would rise as more pieces. The storm of rocks continued until they were little more than grains of sand. Even a Holy Knight could not withstand this, and the storm began to erode its defenses.

Just then, something came flying out of the rubble and struck the injured knight. It was a newly formed golem. With a powerful clang, the Holy Knight rose into the air—the golem had grabbed it. With Mira deprived of her shield, yet more rubble closed in, along with another golem. But she did not panic; she handled this too. In the space of a few seconds, a resummoned Holy Knight fended off the rubble with its tower shield and leapt upward. It swung its sword powerfully, destroying the incoming golem.

The incredible force of it stole Gregorius’s attention for a moment. But then, a chill ran

up his spine. He looked back down at Mira.

Below the Holy Knight who rampaged in mid-air, Mira had slipped through and approached Gregorius. She was now right in front of him. “Think you can withstand this blow, hmm?”

“Damn!” He clicked his tongue at his own carelessness and promptly put a rock wall between them. However, Mira would not be stopped this time; when she touched it, the wall crumbled instantly.

Beyond the collapsing wall, Mira held out her staff theatrically and flashed a taunting grin.

Mira had discerned his armor’s features and found a way to beat it in no time. Even with his spirit gear’s functionality, Gregorius knew that taking a hit from her would be dangerous. Yet now that she was this close, it would be impossible to evade. Left with no other options, Gregorius raised his staff.

It was then that he realized that was exactly what she wanted.

* * *

Mira’s white staff and Gregorius’s black staff collided. When they did, there was a shrill sound, like metal breaking.

“No way... My Onyx Oni staff...” The black staff in Gregorius’s hands bent and fell apart. He opened his eyes wide in shock.

Mira was just as surprised. “It works better than expected...” she murmured. She then puffed out her chest and proudly said, “You implied it was made of oni bones just now, didn’t you? Did you think we wouldn’t devise a countermeasure, knowing that you had such weapons?”

She boasted as if she’d made the white weapons herself. After that, she backed off to be ready for whatever he might do next.

Gregorius did not respond to her taunt; he glanced at his pocket watch and grinned in delight. Though he remained wary of Mira, he slowly turned to survey their surroundings. Around Mira and Gregorius, the Valkyrie Sister-led army of Dark Knights fought against the technomancy doll horde. Unlike their composed duel, the

large-scale battle was a chaotic mess on both sides.

In the heart of the brawl, one particular unit began to change tactics.

“We will bring victory! Everyone, charge!”

It was Christina’s troop. She had stolen several glances at Mira throughout the battle, even while she was occupied with the dolls. Now that her unit was closest to Mira’s, and the fight with Gregorius had settled down for a moment, she seized the opportunity, struck a cool pose, and ordered her troops to attack. It seemed she wanted Mira to see her exploits.

Christina’s unit chiseled away at the enemy’s numbers thanks to her leadership and the Dark Knights’ strength. Just as Mira had ordered, she kept an eye out for spirit bombs and led her unit to deal with the dolls when they were near detonation. As expected of a Valkyrie Sister, she did her job well even when the battlefield was a confused mess. Each time she succeeded, she looked to Mira with a smirk... Because of this, she had the lowest efficiency of all her sisters.

However, Christina did not mind. She was used to being in last place. More importantly, her desire to show Mira her successes overpowered any sense of inferiority. She may have looked like a child at an athletic meet, but it was an honor beyond any other to be praised by her master. Thus, Christina fought on valiantly. And though her order to charge had increased the speed of her unit’s doll kills, it also resulted in an opening in their formation.

A technomancy doll seized the opportunity and prepared to explode. Unfortunately, Christina happened to be looking at Mira just at that moment.

“Aah! Evacuate, evacuate!” When she realized it, she sent her unit back and closed in on the doll as fast as she could. Then, she punted the doll away as it activated its spirit bomb. White light swelled and wrought destruction on its surroundings, but thanks to Christina’s quick action, it did not destroy the Dark Knights as it had planned. However, because she’d rushed so much to get rid of it, she had no time to plan where it would land.

As a result, two Dark Knights that had been outside of the original blast radius ended up swallowed by the light.

“Aah! Andrew, Ferdinand!” Two buff, handsome, protective Dark Knights (in

Christina's headcanon) fell victim to the cunning attack. She screamed the names she'd given them, horrified by the terrible tragedy of it all. She then thought back upon her fond memories of the two knights who'd died for her sake, -despite... none of this really being true.

But Christina managed to bring herself back to reality, shuddered at her mistake, and timidly looked around. Every one of her sisters' eyes had gathered on her, each saying without saying, What in the world are you doing?

Worse, Mira had heard Christina's agonized scream and was also staring at her.

Oh, no... What do I do? Her sisters and master alike had witnessed her blunder. Though she was disheartened by the thought of the training Alfina would no doubt put her through later, she was most hurt by the possibility of Mira losing faith in her. She racked her brain as hard as she could.

In under a second, she hit upon a scheme to win her reputation back. Though Christina had blundered, everyone was watching her now; this was the ideal opportunity. She just had to fight harder than ever in order to cover up her failure. The key to victory was to always think positive, Christina told herself. Her fighting spirit burned hotter as she turned toward the dolls once more.

Throughout this, the battle between the knights and dolls had continued. But Christina struck a pose like the lead actress onstage. "How dare you take Andrew and Ferdinand away from us?! Odin may forgive your sins, but I will not!" After blaming the enemy for her own mistake, she declared, "I will avenge them!"

Mira found that an odd thing to say for a god-serving Valkyrie, but of course, Christina wasn't actually thinking that much about it. She raised her sword, still shooting the occasional glance at her master.

"This hidden technique has been passed down through Valkyrie bloodlines since creation. Now, for Andrew and Ferdinand, I shall unleash it!" Christina yelled. Her sword began to glow upon those words. She then slowly drew an arc with it, leaving a faint trail of light like an awkwardly formed magic circle. The battle raged on around her throughout all this, but Christina's theatrical build-up was not interrupted, like an ultimate finisher move that could not be stopped.

After performing a series of elaborate motions, her sword began to gleam brightly.

Finally, Christina caught a glimmer of expectation in Mira's eyes.

"Take this ultimate move!" Now was truly her time to shine. Christina roared and brandished her sword overhead. At the same time, the Dark Knights fighting ahead of her cleared a path.

"Christina Slaaash!"

She yelled and swung her sword down, manifesting a great blade of pure light.



Why did an attack that had been passed down through their bloodline bear Christina's name? Don't worry about that. The Christina Slash exhibited far more power than her undisciplined demeanor might lead one to think. Hundreds of dolls ahead of her were crushed by the attack.

She was frivolous and put more effort than anyone into avoiding training, but as the youngest sister of an elite set, Christina still had the natural talent of a Valkyrie. If pressed, one might say that she was head and shoulders above most veterans.

However, she was still inferior in terms of concentration, observation, and situational awareness. Alfina's ice-cold voice cut through the roaring heat of battle: "Christina. When this is over, we need to have a little talk."

It was the perfect attack, the ideal strike. No doubt Mira's appraisal of her was skyrocketing, Christina thought. But when she heard her sister's voice, she shuddered. She slowly turned her eyes to the direction of the voice. "Ulp..."

The voice came from ahead—the very direction in which she'd unleashed her Christina Slash.

Christina saw tragedy before her. The very blade of light that had cut down her own foes had kept going—destroying enemies and allies alike, resulting in the destruction of a portion of Alfina's forces. It was an even bigger blunder, the result of her attack simply having too much penetrative power for the job.

After saying her piece, Alfina returned to battle in silence. Christina wasn't sure if she was just imagining it, but it seemed as though Alfina's fighting was more violent and terrifying than before.

"I'll just have to stay by my master's side..." As long as she wasn't dismissed, Christina hoped, she wouldn't be lectured or receive special training. Unfortunately, her fate was sealed. "But I was doing so well..."

Things had been going great until she used that technique. But after that, she fell apart as Mira watched.

If only Alfina's unit hadn't been right in the way, Christina thought, shrugging off responsibility as best she could. She shuddered, imagining herself among the technomancy dolls being massacred by Alfina. Christina did her best to resume fighting, all the while internally crying over the knowledge that this round of training

would be the worst yet.

* * *

That finishing move was rather cool. I didn't think she'd have such techniques... Unfortunate that she overdid it.

After witnessing Christina's spectacular rise and fall, Mira found her appraisal of her lower than ever. She turned her attention back to Gregorius.

Gregorius himself was clearly furious to see hundreds of his soldiers destroyed by a single combatant.

This miniature war was nearing its end. Despite losing some numbers, Mira's side was still going strong. Meanwhile, Chimera's dolls had been culled to less than half of their original numbers. Christina's wide-range attack had only added to that. Gregorius knew that he had to do something before they could use anything so destructive again.

"Unfailing, unretreating. With you as my weapon, we seize victory!" he declared.

Mira hadn't heard that mantra before. Believing it to be some sort of unknown incantation, she steeled herself.

However, it was no incantation; it was more like a passphrase—an order to his technomancy dolls. When Gregorius said the words, the dolls all stopped at once. Suddenly, light, heat, and an accompanying shockwave swept their surroundings.

"What?! A vocal override?!"

Individual spirit bomb detonations were being dealt with by the Valkyrie Sisters' swift action. How could Gregorius counter-act this? By having many of them detonate at once, of course. In seconds, the majority of Mira's army had been enveloped in the blast.

It was a simple yet powerful strategy, but it meant destroying the dolls in the process. Yet Gregorius actively chose the suicidal attack. What was he planning?

The simplest answer would be that he wanted to cut down Mira's forces as much as possible before his own were eliminated. He'd started off with four times her numbers, and they'd been brought to even in no time. This was a sign of just how

different in power each individual soldier in Mira's army was. If it was just a matter of time before Gregorius went down, then he might as well take her down with him.

But Mira wasn't satisfied by this answer. Gregorius had been constantly checking his pocket watch. Based on how he'd acted each time, and given the timing of the explosion, the answer was more than clear: the moment he'd been waiting for had arrived.

What now? Alfina and the other sisters gathered around Mira and kept their guard up... though Christina was also extra-wary of Alfina.

"Master, something ominous approaches," the eldest sister declared.

Mira had anticipated Gregorius might use such a tactic and had warned them in advance. Thanks to that, all of the sisters had managed to escape the blast radius before they came to harm. However, the protection given to the seven summons had been damaged by the great power of the spirit bombs.

"Given the state of things, I assume it's his final salvo. Be cautious," Mira warned them.

"Understood."

With one eye on her surroundings, Mira first healed their protection. Alfina assented, swiftly gave orders to her sisters, and formed a security circle around Mira to be prepared for an attack from any angle.

Suddenly, Mira heard the thunder of footsteps. She whipped around and saw that Gregorius had climbed onto a more svelte golem and was running off in the direction Kagura had gone. Farther ahead, something burst through the metal floor.

Even from afar, it was clear what it was. It was a giant, metallic box more than twenty meters tall and wide. No, not a box—it was a gigantic cage with extremely sturdy-looking bars.

The cage blew open with a violent gust of wind.

"Now I see why they were so confident..." Mira strained her eyes through the dust and spotted a fiendish, deformed being.

Gregorius stood at a safe distance and raised his voice victoriously. "Do you feel it? The

pulsing of overwhelming power?!" His confidence was understandable if that thing was on his side.

"I see... It suits the name Chimera Clausen, indeed."

The creature coming out of the cage was truly worthy of the title chimera. But there was something fundamentally different about this creature compared to the chimeras of legend and the ones who existed as monsters in this world. The famed mythical chimera was a beast with a lion's head, goat's body, and venomous snake's tail. But the abomination before Mira now had entirely different features.

It had a lion's head made of rock, a body lush with vegetation, a tail that writhed like a fiery snake, and bone wings clad in wind. Lightning crackled around its feet, while freezing, white breath poured from its fanged mouth.

"This pulsating power... Are they spirits?" Alfina murmured as she gazed upon the creature. Her sisters cried out in alarm.

"They must have forcibly combined them together," Mira said. "Even worse, there's a tremendous number of spirits locked within." Thanks to the Spirit King's blessing, she could feel the pulsations coming from the abomination ahead. Despite its twisted appearance, familiar beings swirled within.

Indeed, all of the power inside it was that of spirits.

In general, the term chimera or chimeric referred to a combination of things that are different, discordant, or of different origins. Likewise, this beast was made up of all kinds of different, unrelated spirits sewn together—an apt embodiment of the word.

"This is our magnum opus. No matter how strong, there's nothing a human can do to stand against a chimera that wields the full power of nature!" Gregorius announced proudly. He was right; the ability of spirits to govern and control various elements and phenomena was essentially the power of nature itself. A spiritual chimera with all of those powers within was on par with a natural disaster.

The spirit chimera glowered threateningly at Mira and the sisters.

Mira looked back at it and grinned wryly. "I'll certainly pass on head-on combat with this thing..."

"Agreed. We are at a clear disadvantage." Alfina took a step forward and readied her sword to protect her master.

Mira trusted in her years of training, and she believed she had the power to defeat powerful spirits. But even she judged it reckless to fight a beast packed so full of them. No matter how strong a human might be, it couldn't stand up to the force of a natural disaster.

As such, Mira reached one conclusion: like with like, a calam-ity for a natural disaster. She would match this enemy with a -being far beyond human strength, once feared on the same level as an earthquake or a hurricane.

"Now, annihilate them!" On Gregorius's orders, the abomination with the destructive power of nature roared and charged.

"I'm going to begin casting," Mira said. "I'll need you to handle things for a moment."

The abomination closed in with an agility and swiftness that one would never expect from its size. Mira leapt away from it and created four summoning circles.

While Mira backed off, the Valkyrie Sisters readied their weapons and faced the calamitous beast. "Understood. We will hold this line with our very lives."

Suddenly, the earth rumbled and thunder boomed, and fire and wind swirled about. The great spiritual power had become an incomprehensible storm that rained hell upon Alfina and her sisters.

Alfina arrested its fangs with her sword of light. Her sisters put their lives on the line to block its lightning claws, windstorm wings, and fiery tail. They were at a stalemate for a moment, but it didn't last long. Multiple bolts of earth-shattering lightning flashed, followed almost immediately by ear-splitting thunder.

In the distant sky, closest to where the gods lived, the Valkyrie Sisters trained day by day. They were beyond human beings, yet even they could not stand against this incarnation of godly wrath. They were tossed away one by one.

Alfina alone kept the spirit chimera solidly in her focus and swung her sword powerfully. "Your skills have grown dull, sisters! We fought much stronger foes with our master long ago!" Alfina screamed, blocking and parrying the abomination's fangs and claws. She was stuck on defense now that her sisters had been scattered, but her

sheer determination was enough to make up for it.

As proof of that, she managed to break one of the beast's fangs with her sword.

"I just tripped, okay?!"

"The sound just scared me is all!"

They fought nature itself, a being that provoked instinctual terror. But Alfina's admonishment seemed to work; the sisters grumbled their excuses and stood back up. Their presences seemed different now, changing as if to prove Alfina's words. Their dulled senses had returned to their former glory.

"This struggle is... nothing compared to Alfina's training!" Among them, Christina was especially eager. If she added this to her list of failures today, her special training might never end as long as she lived.

The beast became a storm of wind once more. Its second charge came with those same violent winds, roaring thunder, and blazing flames as the first. Alfina and her sisters managed to fully withstand this round of nature's fury.

Well done. That will do, girls.

Mira could feel the beast's rampage even from this distance as she watched her reliable friends. She spoke the last words of her incantation.

Now, take to the skies, my beloved child.

* * *

The magic circle, now a great ring of light, shone brighter. A being took form within it, one even bigger than the chimera when it spread its own wings. Divine silver scales shimmered, and golden reptilian eyes that harbored the aura of a being with absolute power shone from within.

The Imperial Dragon—the most feared dragon bloodline in all the world, destined to rule all dragons. One of these extremely rare beings, Eizenfeld, had descended upon the battlefield.

Eizenfeld emitted pure dread that overwhelmed all instinct. When the spirit chimera

saw him, even that giant beast lost its previous fervor, backed away, and glared at the dragon as if sizing it up.

An enormous dragon had appeared from a great magic circle. Anyone could see that it had been called using summoning magic.

"No way... That can't be..." Gregorius knew. Thus, he shuddered, speechless. He had never seen an Imperial Dragon before this moment, but the moment he was faced with it, he knew that it brought ruin. With this, he realized that Mira was a far greater mage than him. He'd always known that she was stronger, but he'd believed it a small gap, one he could make up for with the right spirit gear and tools. Now, however, he was faced with this cruel reality. Eizenfald's presence was just that overwhelming.

The spirit chimera was wary, but it hadn't been overcome by terror. It was now attempting to intimidate its foe. The summoned dragon might be a powerful beast, but he had a powerful beast in his control as well.

Gregorius looked up at his reliable pet and managed to catch himself before he fell to despair. "No. I'm not done yet. It's not over. They're evenly matched... Yeah, they're evenly matched now!" he shouted, as if in an attempt to convince himself.

Steeling his courage, he ordered the spirit chimera to annihilate his foes.

CHAPTER 25

A FEW MOMENTS EARLIER, Mira and Eizenfald had been in conflict.

Due to the spirit chimera putting some distance between itself and Eizenfald out of fear, there was a slight break in the battle.

"My apologies," Mira was saying sheepishly. "Last time I flew on your back, I got a stern talking-to due to the commotion your size caused..."

The first time Mira summoned Eizenfald in this new reality, she'd told the dragon that she would probably summon him many more times to come. But unfortunately, Cleos had warned her that it would cause a panic if she flew on him near human settlements, so she hadn't summoned the poor emperor since.

"You could have told me that sooner. The thought of being forgotten by my mother left me so lonely."

It had been nearly a month of neglect. One could hardly blame the creature for pouting. Mira felt genuinely bad that she'd hurt his feelings.

"You are absolutely right. I'm so sorry. It may not make up for it, but I promise that I'll do anything I can to make it right. So... think you can forgive me?" She bowed her head in genuine apology and glanced up at Eizenfald. The dragon's demeanor changed all at once.

"Anything... Anything, Mother?! It's a promise! If you break another promise, I'll... I'll hate you forever!" He was clearly happy. However, Eizenfald did his best to feign stubbornness as he accepted Mira's proposal.

"My word is my bond. I swear I'll keep this promise. I wouldn't want my beloved son hating me, after all." Mira approached and gently touched Eizenfald.

"Mother!" He crouched down and nuzzled his face against Mira. Thus, the bond between parent and child was restored.

* * *

"Here it comes!" Alfina declared.

At Gregorius's command, the spirit chimera attacked. Its awe-inspiring presence, with power rivaling that of a natural disaster, sent tension running all throughout Mira's troops. But Mira herself laughed it off; she was used to that tension. She ordered Eizenfald, "Meet its charge, my son!"

"Yes, Mother!"

Soon the battlefield was ruled by the dragon's intimidating presence. The dragon's fighting spirit was enough to even make Alfina and her sisters shudder in despair; this aura contained something even stronger than the fear of death.

Clad in this power, Eizenfald leapt into action. He closed in in the blink of an eye, colliding with the spirit chimera's destructive storm. Eizenfald's black claws crossed with the lightning--enveloped claws of the spirit chimera. When they met, the air shook, and a hefty shockwave spread around them.

Either thanks to their difference in experience or as a result of Eizenfald's real intelligence, his claws and fangs began to dig into the spirit chimera with each clash. However, the spirit chimera armed with the might of nature itself had not lost. It healed itself with its enormous power and got its revenge slowly, using its clashing elements to dig into Eizenfald's own defenses.

Calamity versus disaster—the scene was beyond human ken. The world itself seemed to sway, each and every movement ushering forth greater destruction. In the face of this fierce battle, the floors and ceiling gradually broke, crumbled, and charred.

The duel was one beyond human limits. Eizenfald's tail, thicker than the biggest trees, swept across the spirit chimera's torso. There was a sound like trees collapsing as the chimera was launched away. The room in which the two fought was over two hundred meters long and wide, but despite being launched from the center of it, the chimera collided into the back wall without even touching the ground.

"It's not stable... Without the Spirit King's power, it's just not possible to hold that much power together," Gregorius grumbled to himself with a grimace as he watched the battle unfold. It seemed the Spirit King's power was necessary to bring the spirit chimera to its perfect, final form.

The battlefield, essentially an impenetrable domain at this point, had moved farther

away. Gregorius turned to watch the fight, giving Mira the opportunity to get behind him and swing her white staff. "Stay focused, now!"

Lightning crackled—the effect of Gregorius's spirit gear. He was being protected by the great spiritual power within.

"Nkh... You're nothing like a normal summoner!" He glared at Mira hatefully, whipped out the sword at his hip, and swung. It was a spirit blade, which created a vortex of fire that swallowed Mira.

This is quite a bit weaker than the last one.

When they first met, Gregorius had used a fire spirit blade that was originally a sword of his father's creation. Mira quickly summoned a Holy Knight to defend herself from the flames, but she noticed that this sword's fire was magnitudes weaker than the last.

Alfina took this opportunity to smack the sword out of Gregorius's hand. She held her own blade up to his throat. The spirit-sourced fire guttered.

"I'd say things are already settled between us." Mira stepped out from behind her Holy Knight, gazed into Gregorius's eyes, and said, "Your chance of victory is zero. It would be wise to admit defeat now."

Gregorius did not answer. He looked at Mira, then to the Valkyrie Sisters, and then to the distant battle.

The battle between Eizenfeld and the spirit chimera raged on, but Gregorius's power as a mage was far too inferior to Mira's for him to topple her with the aid of his gear alone. There were also seven Valkyries on her side who excelled at hand-to-hand combat. Mira was right; winning would be impossible. Gregorius was painfully aware of that. On top of that, he knew that the incomplete chimera couldn't defeat that dragon.

World's a lot bigger than I thought...

He recalled everything so far: the days he'd spent as a member of Chimera Clausen, the ultimate power he'd received as a result... And he chuckled. Their magnum opus, something they'd believed had the power to change the world, was in the process of being torn to shreds by one little girl.

"Fine..." He looked quietly down at the sword pressed to his neck and held his hands up. In this pose of surrender, he heaved a great sigh.

Then, his robes burst into flames and exploded.

The explosion was small, but it was still enough to make Alfina shrink back, giving him a moment of opportunity.

At the sound of the boom and the sight of the black smoke rising from it, Mira wondered if he'd decided to end it all in a suicide attack. However, seconds later, a figure tore through the black smoke. It was a horse-like golem with Gregorius on its back, running off at incredible speed.

It beelined for a door diagonal to the spirit chimera. Gregorius had accepted defeat and chosen escape. However, this did not mean giving up; his eyes had the gleam of someone plotting to return another day. And the further away he got, the stronger that gleam grew.

The horse golem sped away, faster than a racehorse.

"Allow me." The second sister of the Valkyries, Elezina, nocked an arrow and aimed for its back. Out of all her sisters, she was most skilled with a bow.

Her arrow was like a ray of light. It struck exactly where she'd aimed, digging into the golem and destroying it in one blow.

"Gah! This is madness!" Tossed into the air, Gregorius gazed at the shattered golem and fumed in anger. Golems could be healed with mana as long as they still had an intact core, but Elezina had perfectly pierced the core from over a hundred meters away. The core was only a few centimeters wide, and moreover, the mage chose its location upon creation. That meant she'd pinpointed its spot within the golem at a glance. Truly, she was beyond the realm of a master.

Gregorius couldn't help but grin slightly at the feat. At the end of his line of sight was the spirit chimera, even farther away now than it had been before. He sucked a deep breath in and shouted, "With your wings as sacrif—" But before he could finish, his mouth was sealed, preventing him from completing the incantation.

"Sorry. It's over." Mira had clamped her hand over his mouth. She'd seen him use voice commands to activate those self--destructing dolls before, and she wasn't about to let

it happen again. Shortly after, there was a slight rumble of thunder.

[Immortal Arts Earth: Violet Spark]

The merciless attack struck Gregorius, and he instantly lost consciousness. He fell silently to the ground.

“I wonder what he was trying to do there,” Christina murmured as she wrapped up Gregorius in Mira’s binding cloth. His last attempt had ended in failure, but she found herself curious about what he would have done if Mira hadn’t interfered.

“Move your hands instead of your lips.” Her musings were shut down by Alfina’s stern reprimand.

“Okaaay...” Christina poked her lip out in a pout.

Mira found herself smiling at the two sisters. Christina’s chatter had nothing to do with the battle; it was mere casual conversation. Mira was moved; the act showed that she had a real mind and feelings, something that would never have manifested in-game.

“He said something about a sacrifice of wings, no?” Mira wondered. “I would assume that he planned to use that chimera’s wings as a spirit bomb. Presumably, he’d put distance between himself and the chimera to keep himself from getting caught in the blast.”

“I see... You’re wicked smart, Master!” Christina smiled in satisfaction.

“Christina! Do not address the Master so casually!” Alfina scolded her once more.

An impish younger sister, a mature older sister. Mira’s smile grew wider as she watched their exchange.

“Master, please excuse my sister’s rudeness.”

Mira felt at peace, but Alfina considered her like a king. Even in this reality, her devotion could not be swayed.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. You sisters have saved me many times over by now, so that was trivial at most,” Mira responded.

"Thank you for your tolerance, Master." Alfina bowed her head even deeper, with an oddly ecstatic look on her face.

Her other sisters kneeled to Mira with happy smiles as well. Christina was the exception; she flashed a smug grin at her oldest sister. That was the face of someone who derived a great amount of confidence from the knowledge that Mira wouldn't get mad at her for speaking her mind.

CHAPTER 26

“NOW, AS FOR the other duel...”

Mira gazed off into the distance at Eizenfeld and the spirit chimera. Even from a hundred meters away, the unfolding battle was an intimidating sight. Despite their moment of peace, Mira and the Valkyrie Sisters were still in the middle of battle.

“Whoooa... I don’t wanna go over there.” Christina offered her perhaps-too-blunt impression of the situation. Naturally, Alfina scolded her. Yet they all secretly agreed with Christina’s comment. That was a duel between disaster and dynast. Even the Valkyrie Sisters would have trouble making any progress in the hell that was that battlefield.

As for the battle itself, Eizenfeld was at a great advantage. If they kept fighting as they were, there was seemingly no chance that he would lose. But that was the issue: he may have had no chance of losing, but one couldn’t say with confidence that he would win either. More precisely, he could not win at this moment.

Perhaps thanks to the Spirit King’s blessing, Mira could sense the abnormal spiritual power contained within the chimera.

Each time Eizenfeld attacked, some of the power faded. It was likely being consumed to heal wounds and restore lopped-off body parts. But Mira knew that Eizenfeld was merely chipping away at an iceberg.

Perhaps by using his dragon breath... No, that would be too dangerous.

The spirit chimera had ridiculous defenses, as if someone had slapped a few too many zeros at the end of a boss’s HP. At this rate, Mira roughly calculated that it would take a day at minimum to defeat it.

She again considered ordering Eizenfeld to use dragon breath, but she quickly kicked that train of thought off the track. It was simply too strong. It would take one, maybe two hits from an emperor’s dragon breath to blow the spirit chimera away, sure, but it had one flaw—ignorable in-game, but now that this was real life, it was something that would become a major problem.

“I think I’ll pass on being buried alive...”

Indeed, some attacks were too powerful. If it unleashed a dragon breath to blow away the spirit chimera, it would almost certainly destroy the base. That could result in the death of not just Cyril, but all of the Isuzu Alliance members who had come to the base following them.

Hrmm... Perhaps just a little dragon breath?

If Eizenfeld held back with his dragon breath, it should still be much more efficient than hand-to-hand combat. Mira could do that with her magic, so why shouldn’t he be able to with his breath? Such was her logic. Mira used her mental connection with Eizenfeld to see if the dragon thought it was possible.

“Hold back? Well, I won’t say I can’t.” His response was truly reassuring.

“Oho, good. In that case... Attack with the weakest dragon breath possible!”

“Understood, Mother!”

First, she would see what the weakest one did and go from there. Mira ordered Eizenfeld to use his dragon breath—but within an instant, she turned pale and speechless.

Eizenfeld held back as much as possible as he unleashed his dragon breath. A beam of light shot out, and before she knew it, the upper half of the spirit chimera had been blown away. There was a rumbling that sounded as though the world had met its end.

Everything in front of Eizenfeld, including the walls, had been annihilated. For a couple minutes after, the whole place shook violently, and powerful winds swept through the room.

Mira grimaced as the wind tossed her into the air. Alfina and her sisters were likewise thrown upward, unable to stand up to the aftershock of Eizenfeld’s dragon breath. But as experienced warrior maidens, they landed with grace, and Alfina herself even managed to catch Mira on the way down. Christina, meanwhile, twirled and spun in midair like a gymnast before striking a perfect landing. Unfortunately, nobody saw her “Ultra C” performance.

This... is actually dangerous. Mira grinned nervously as she gazed at the destroyed

battlefield.

Even at a glance, Mira could see that much of the power within the chimera had been drained away by that attack. However, there was no way she could use that attack again; even a minimum-strength dragon breath had nearly dealt fatal damage to the base. If Eizenfald did that once more, the whole thing was sure to collapse.

The cause of this miscalculation was that Eizenfald's basic dragon breath was far stronger than it had been in her time. He was a growing boy, indeed.

"What do we do now, Master?" Alfina asked.

"That last attack stripped the beast of much power. At this rate, it shouldn't take even half a day. If everyone here works together, we may be able to finish it off faster. However..."

That dragon's breath had blown away a surprising amount of spiritual power; based on how much remained and their current forces, Mira surmised that the battle would be over in a few hours. But then she happened to catch sight of something unusual.

What is going on here...

Formless spirits wandered about in midair. When she focused, she realized that they leaked out each time the spirit chimera was struck. They had simply grown much greater in number due to the sudden enormous hit to the beast, allowing Mira to notice their thick presence.

The spiritual power had simply separated from the chimera, rather than dying. Mira looked up at the wandering spirits with pity in her eyes. How she wished she could save them.

It was then that she seemed to feel something connecting within her. A voice appeared in her mind: "Will you rescue my kin?"

Mira recognized that grand and dignified yet kind voice. She immediately replied that she would love to. The symbols of the Spirit King's blessing appeared on her arm and began to glow brightly, and the method for saving the spirits naturally appeared in her mind. It was an odd feeling, as if she'd suddenly remembered a long-lost memory.

The Spirit King had a direct connection to her mind. Moved a bit by this fantasy trope,

Mira stepped forward and murmured, "I see..."

"Master? What's happened to you...?"

"Rather cool, don't you think? It seems the Spirit King is lending me his strength. It comes with a rather strict condition, though. Unfortunately, I'll need to ask your sisters to push yourselves even harder."

The blessing's symbols extended from the top of her head to her toes. It was truly an unusual sight, reminiscent of some kind of ritual. However, the power pulsing from her was so divine that it surprised even the Valkyrie Sisters, who shuddered before their master's new power.

The knowledge the Spirit King had bestowed on Mira would allow her to save not only the spirits wandering about, but also the ones within the chimera.

According to the Spirit King's wisdom, the spirit chimera was an amalgam of spirits who'd lost their sense of self. It would be impossible to bring them back to their original forms—but their souls could still be saved.

The method was a summoning contract. However, it was no ordinary contract; it was one formed through the king's blessing. The very pinnacle and caretaker of spirits, the Spirit King. His power would be especially effective on spirits who'd lost their sense of self, bringing them peace even amid their current state of chaos.

This power was activated through the Spirit King's blessing. By using it, though it would take time, she could save the souls of the spirit chimera and the lost spirits. The jumbled beings would then be reborn into a new spirit vessel.

Newborn spirits were extremely weak. But if Mira made a contract using the Spirit King's blessing, this connection would allow him to shelter the resulting baby spirit. Once the spirits' souls were freed from their chimeric vessel, the vessel could be transformed into something less harmful. That was the Spirit King's plan, which he entrusted to Mira.

The problem was the process to get there. First, Mira had to gather up all of the lost spirits. That in itself was not difficult; they followed the Spirit King's light and gathered around Mira even now.

So what was the problem? That would be the spirit chimera, of course. In order to

form a contract, Mira would have to stand right next to it and hold out her hand. Only Eizenfeld could get so close to it and remain safe; as someone with the body of a little girl, Mira couldn't exactly pull off such a stunt.

But this was the only course of action that would save the spirits. She had to find a way.

* * *

"And there you have it, Valkyrie Sisters. I leave the support to you." After Mira described the situation and her strategy, she began striding toward the spirit chimera.

"Understood. We will do everything in our power to back you up." The Valkyrie Sisters spread out on either side of her.

"Are you ready, my son?" she asked. She'd explained things to Eizenfeld as well.

"Yes, Mother. Any time!"

Mira gazed at her son still fighting valiantly in the distance, gradually quickening her steps. "Now, we begin!" she called out, and broke out into a sprint.

Meanwhile, Eizenfeld and the Valkyries leapt into action. With swords in hand, Alfina and her sisters swept ahead of Mira. They shot toward Eizenfeld, who had stopped attacking and was now simply trying to detain the giant chimera in his arms.

"The time has finally come."

The closer Mira approached, the stronger the winds blew. The world seemed to visibly change around her.

[Resonant Evocation: Sylphid]

Mira donned the power of a wind spirit to nullify the fangs of the raging gales. She tore through roaring flames with sage magic, used partial summoning to fend off lightning strikes, and pressed on without pause.

Ten or so seconds after she'd started moving, the battle changed drastically. Eizenfeld had pinned the spirit chimera to the ground with a dull thud.

Alfina and her sisters sprang into action. They spread out in a line and closed in on the chimera at once, stabbing their swords into its four limbs, tail, head, and wings. Their duty was to support Eizenfeld, doing everything they could to keep the foe down. The sisters could forcefully seal the spirit chimera's disastrous powers with their swords, though doing so put an incredible burden on them.

"Eeeep! Alfina, this is rough!" Christina complained as she desperately held firm.

"I... I can keep going! Compared to Alfina's training, this is... nothiiing!" Elezina grimaced in agony, apparently comparing the battle to some ongoing trauma.

However, no matter how they tried to withstand it, their protection would run out over time in this vortex of pain.

"I don't think we can hold on for long..." By Alfina's estimation, they wouldn't last even a few minutes. She struggled to keep her hold on the foe. However, she did not look worried—she had faith that Mira could finish the job in the time they had.

Rising to her expectations, Mira ran over and stopped under the wing of Eizenfeld, who was still holding the spirit chimera down with all his might.

"Mother, it's really fighting me!" Eizenfeld reported, taking the majority of the chimera's force. Though he was stronger than the enemy, restraining a foe in this manner was more difficult than simply overpowering them.

Even as an Imperial Dragon and the Valkyrie sisters used all their strength and skill to keep it pinned down, the spirit chimera struggled violently.

"Just a little longer, son!" Mira replied, putting her hand on the back of the chimera's head and activating Contract Forging.

The Spirit King's blessing told her how to do all of this. Although this was her first time, she followed the steps like an expert and poured the Spirit King's power into the spirit chimera.

The space under Eizenfeld's wing was an isolated, calm zone divorced from the chaos all around it. Thanks to this, Mira was able to finish her work without issue.

The results were almost immediate. The roaring thunder faded, the storm calmed, and the swirling flames dissipated into nothing. The spirit chimera and the lost spirits

gathered around Mira all began to shine like the stars above the Spirit Palace, growing in intensity until they gradually became one light.

Eventually, the orb of light containing all of the spirits had shrunk down to the size of a fist. It covered Mira's outstretched hand, and from it spread a magic circle that spread around not just her, but her and the fighting beasts. It was even larger than Eizenfald's summoning circle, prompting visible shock and astonishment from even Mira herself.

Suddenly, the great magic circle transformed into fire, water, wind, earth, and all of the other eight foundational spirit elements. Along with the orb of light, they were all sucked into Mira's palm.

"Hrmm. A success..." Mira felt the sensation of a contract being formed and the enormous power passing through her. For a moment, she had a vision of the Spirit King cradling a baby.

"You have my deepest thanks for rescuing my kin. One day, your efforts will be rewarded."

"Don't mention it. I only did it because I wanted to," Mira answered. The Spirit King in her mind smiled with sad, benevolent eyes.

* * *

The boss chamber fell silent.

"Splendidly done, Master." The Valkyries stood in a line before Mira and kneeled.

"You go, Mother!" Eizenfald sidled up next to Mira and shuffled restlessly, like a loyal dog awaiting orders.

"I couldn't have done it without your help, everyone. Well done. One couldn't ask for more reliable allies."

"Oh, Master!" Alfina was moved to tears. Her sisters weren't quite as emotional, but they, too, were proud and joyful.

"Motheerer!" Apparently taking that praise as his signal, Eizenfald transformed his shape into that of a young man and hugged Mira indulgently.

"Oho, and you're even wearing clothes this time. Well done."

Eizenfeld was no doubt the MVP of the day. He'd been waiting for her for a long time; Mira decided to accept her son's affection and stroked his hair. She'd expected this to happen, but she was relieved that Eizenfeld actually wore a robe in his human form this time.

Meanwhile, Alfina gazed at the happy family with just the slightest hint of envy.

CHAPTER 27

KAGURA LEAPT UP a long staircase in one bound and arrived at the peak of the rocky mountain—or more precisely, a smaller space within a rocky mountain. It was only small compared to the chamber Mira had remained in, however. For an indoor space, it was still quite large.

Based on its size and construction, it looked to be constructed in the style of a king's audience chamber. A short, wide staircase extended from the middle of the room up to a dais, on which sat a certain occupant.

"So you're the boss here, huh?" At the back of the room was a rough throne that seemed carved out of rock. Someone sat upon it. Kagura fixed her eyes on the person on the throne and warily approached. It was hard to see them due to the black mist that wafted through the air, but their presence was uncanny.

The figure seemed to sway. "So I am. I am the Oni Princess, the ruler of this domain. But who are you? An outsider? How useless my subjects are if they can't even keep intruders out." It was the voice of an almost-innocent-sounding little girl. She sounded more disappointed than angry, and more disinterested than disappointed.

Kagura stepped closer, and the room and the figure behind the black mist became clear. She stopped and frowned slightly. The leader of Chimera Clausen, she who had introduced herself as the Oni Princess, was but a child.

"I am Kagura, a friend to all spirits," Kagura answered. She gazed at the girl, deep in thought. That mist... Where is it coming from? Within her clothes? Weird... A single oni shouldn't be enough to emit mist that thick. Then...

In the days leading up to the final battle, Kagura had thoroughly studied black mist ore alongside the alchemists Albatinus and Johan. Kagura thought she knew all of its features and how to deal with its effects, but this came as a surprise to her.

The black mist was an oni's curse given form. Black mist ore was the catalyst, and thicker mist should imply a greater quantity of the catalyst.

"Friend? To those odious spirits? To be ignorant of their trickery must truly be bliss."

She grinned derisively. Kagura could see no signs of any items on her person made from black mist ore, let alone the raw ore itself.

The mist-spewing Oni Princess had a bob cut with hair as black as the mist itself, eyes as red as blood, and two black horns sprouting from her brow. Her skin was as white as porcelain. She wore gorgeous robes that called to mind a kimono, but nothing else. The princess was clearly inhuman at a glance, yet the fact that she looked so very like a human child only added to her complex beauty.

"Trickery? What's that supposed to mean?" Kagura glared sharply at the Oni Princess, She seemed to be implying the spirits were the ones deceiving Isuzu.

What's going on? She's obviously not a former player, but I can't see her name or stats...

Despite her growing anger, Kagura tried to Inspect the Oni Princess. Many displays came up in her field of vision, but all of the details were unreadable. Even if the target was stronger than her, she should at least be able to see their name. The fact that even that was unavailable was a first for Kagura.

Well, I'd better not let my guard down.

At the least, it seemed certain that the Oni Princess wasn't a former player; after all, nothing would display for them at all. Perhaps that meant she was an unknown being. Kagura swiftly turned serious and stayed on guard.

"Exactly what I said. Spirits claim to live alongside humans, but they hold your life and fate in their hands. How unobservant you must be if you fail to realize that." The Oni Princess looked down on Kagura with an eerie gleam in her eyes. The corners of her mouth crooked up in a smile as she continued to lecture her.

According to the Oni Princess, as beings who governed nature, the first priority of spirits was to maintain the balance of the environment. If humans became so plentiful that they began to destroy nature, spirits would surely turn against them. They had the power to do just that, and they were constantly gathering information in case the need arose.

"Do you understand, daughter of humans, that you are but a stunted and fragile species that the spirits allow to exist?" The Oni Princess whispered now, smirking, "Is that how you wish to live your life? According to the whims of spirits who could crush

you at any moment? If you join me, I will give you the power to defeat those spirits.”

The cold light in the Oni Princess’s eyes swelled. Kagura’s arms, at first held before her in a fighting stance, fell limply at her sides—she was suddenly defenseless.

“Hee hee. You are but a human, after all.” The Oni Princess twisted her lips into a gleeful grin. Magic dwelled in the Oni Princess’s eyes, and she could turn them into Demon’s Eyes with a blink. Her eyes could bewitch humans; if she could use her words to plant even the smallest seed of doubt in their heart, her eyes could make it explode into full bloom. The Oni Princess’s target’s fate was sealed the instant their faith wavered. Hers were among the most powerful of the hypnotic type of Demon’s Eyes.

“Now, join me. Together, we can expel the evil spirits.” With a sweet, merciful smile, the Oni Princess held out her hand. The black mist shrouding her thinned. Kagura approached as if drawn, like a moth to a flame.

When she finally stood face to face with the princess, Kagura reached out and took the oni’s outstretched hand.

“No! I refuse!” Kagura grasped her hand tightly, turned, and flung the Oni Princess as hard as she could. The princess’s eyes hadn’t worked on her—they couldn’t. Kagura had a talisman in her pocket to act as a body double at a moment’s notice, but she didn’t even need that. She was the leader of the Isuzu Alliance. Her faith in spirits was as solid as the earth.

“Why didn’t it work?!” The Oni Princess shrieked as she flew through the air. Kagura did not answer; now that she was certain this little girl was her enemy and the head of Chimera Clausen, she cast a spell without hesitation.

[Talismanic Arts Suzaku: Three Measures—Scarlet]

At once, Tweetsuke became a great blazing bird over three meters long and flew like a cannonball composed of overwhelming heat.

The princess fell to the floor, but she covered herself in black mist just in time. The moment the fire touched it, there was a dull thud, and it burst, dyeing the whole room crimson.

“Princess is certainly an apt title. You’re a special one, that’s for sure.”

Kagura's spell was not meant to explode; it was a repetitive charge from a flame-clad Suzaku. Yet, amid the scattering flames, Tweetsuke had fallen powerlessly. Kagura watched as the talisman at the bird's core fluttered to the floor. Her foe at least had the power to cancel out spells.

"You human twerp! Very well. That's enough questioning. We fight to the death!" The Princess leapt into the air, the black mist trailing behind her like a tail. It abruptly switched directions and rained down on Kagura from above.

A black mass the size of a human head struck the floor, taking a chunk out of the surface with a heavy thunk. Dozens more followed, each strong enough to break through rock.

"Oni Princess... and black mist, huh?" Kagura deftly wove through the black orbs and leapt out of their range. But she wasn't safe yet; the black shower swerved and closed in on her once more.

She swung her right arm wide. The white khakkhara staff in her hand jingled as it flew through the black mist, and the murk dispersed in its wake. "Thought so. You're the curse, aren't you?" The medium gazed at the Oni Princess with cold, yet pitying eyes.

The fact that the Alabaster Oni-Slayer khakkhara staff had worked on this mist meant that it was the same as that given off by the black mist ore. Attacking with the mist itself—a curse—was something that could never be accomplished with weapons simply made from the ore. Based on the volume and density of the mist around the princess, it was clear that her curse was much stronger than that of the ore.

"Well, you've found my true identity already. You're no ordinary human."

"That's not it. Beings like you are well known to us mediums." Kagura was well aware of the phenomenon of curses condensing and taking form; after all, she'd seen it countless times. It was very like a mass of built-up resentment turning into a vengeful ghost, an effect mediums were well-acquainted with. That was how Kagura had so quickly discerned that the Oni Princess was a collection and incarnation of oni curses.

"So you're possessing that body. I don't know whose it is or where it came from, but I hope she forgives me for knocking it around a little."

Rocks, boxes, mirrors, dolls—there were all kinds of possessed items that could be used to manifest curses and grudges. But in order to do so, the originator of the curse

needed to have a strong relationship with the object. Who was this little girl? The answer wasn't clear yet, but knowing she was possessed, Kagura didn't wish to kill her.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean she would hold back. She cast her magic on three separate talismans, and a barrage of fireballs, water bullets, and pebbles flew at the princess in quick succession.

Black mist spread out to protect the Oni Princess, deflecting Kagura's spells and tossing them all back at her.

Hmm, I see. This is that attack reflection that was in the notes. So that's how she does it...

Kagura defended herself from the ferocious onslaught with a split-second barrier cast. She considered what she had seen here today and compared it to what she'd learned before she came. That was her style: to corner the foe slowly but surely, and then to deal a decisive finishing blow.

Immediately after the hail of bullets came a cloud of black mist that easily shattered Kagura's barrier. It broke through her defenses in no time, but she blew the mist away with a swing of her staff and gazed at the barrier as it faded away.

Seems like that one destroys the mana used to create the spell. That means I can't defend myself with magic...

"Then how about this?" Taking five talismans in hand, Kagura focused her mana all at once and constructed a particularly high-level spell: [Shikigami Invocation: Qilin].

When the spell was cast, the five talismans turned blue, red, yellow, white, and black, created a pentagram in mid-air, and shone brilliantly. This spectacle heralded the appearance of something even greater.

The legendary beast, qilin. Its four-meter-long body formed around the talisman core, manifesting the head of a dragon, the tail of a bull, and legs of a horse. On its head were two gallant horns. Its mane was golden, and five different colors of fur adorned its back, while the rest of its body was protected by scales as lustrous as steel. The qilin Qilipepper, just as divine as in legends, stood proudly before the Oni Princess.

"Ho ho, now there's a heroic one. What a shame. If you existed in your true form,

perhaps you could have been a threat to me." The Oni Princess looked down from midair with a smirk and fired off another chunk of black mist. Qilipepper leapt over it just before it could strike, whipped around mid-flight, and fired a ball of lightning from its hoof.

The mist in the air fended off the ball of lightning. There was a flash like a lightning strike, followed by rumbling thunder. A metallic stench reached Kagura's nose.

"Not bad, but not close either."

Even Qilipepper's attack, as strong as a real lightning bolt, had no effect. The black mist wasn't damaged in the slightest; it still protected the princess seamlessly.

She didn't reflect it? Or... she couldn't? Instead of reflecting off like Kagura's last set of spells, the ball of lightning had burst when it hit the mist. Did it differ based on element, or could the oni not reflect it because it came from a shikigami? Kagura decided to investigate further.

Kagura and Qilipepper attacked in waves. Kagura brushed aside the mist with her white staff before casting spells, while Qilipepper wove through gaps in the mist and fired off balls of lightning.

"Humph... You're a bit of a pain aren't you," the Oni Princess muttered in annoyance. Then, out of nowhere, she began to chuckle. Her eyes opened wide as she screamed, "Now it is my turn!"

At this, Kagura stopped in her tracks. She cautiously fixed her eyes on the princess.

"Let us begin with this shoddy reproduction!" The Oni Princess thrust her hands toward Qilipepper. The qilin's powerful, swift legs froze in place, and it lost its momentum and fell straight to the ground.

"What was that?!" Kagura didn't have a chance to wonder for long; the black mist enveloped the qilin and returned it to its talisman state in no time.

It's as if something grabbed its legs. Not any normal spell, though. Unique magic, maybe...? But if the incarnation of a curse had unique magic, isn't that just a curse...?

Kagura had felt it the moment Qilipepper's legs froze, thanks to their shared senses. Her mind immediately started whirling with an idea. Unique magic was the common

name for special powers wielded by beings of non-human races. There were many varieties of magic—probably as many as there were races. As such, no one knew all of them; it remained a subject of research only for those who were especially interested in studying it.

"There. I've essentially sealed your magic now," the Oni Princess said haughtily. She grinned eerily as she spread both arms wide. Her arms began to blur like unfocused images, multiplying to become two, then three on each side.

Black mist hands? No, it's different somehow. Those are...

Kagura's barriers were like paper to the black mist, and her spells would be reflected back at her. Meanwhile, her shikigami were somehow captured and devoured by the mist. The princess was right; her magic was essentially useless. But Kagura was unruffled. She began thinking hard, keeping her eyes focused on the black mist wafting around the Oni Princess and the countless black hands spreading from it.

For a mage's magic to fail against a foe so completely was fatal. Yet Kagura remained calm.

"Taste my dharmic power!" The Oni Princess, apparently irritated by Kagura's unbothered demeanor, howled in rage as she swung her arms down. In the next instant, dozens of black hands fell upon Kagura.

"Dharmic? Oh, so that's what you call this!" The mysterious power wielded by the Oni Princess—her unique magic—seemed to be called dharma. Kagura leapt back from her position and grinned at the princess's words. Then, she swung her white khakkhara down upon the approaching hands. But before it could strike, there was an intense impact that deflected her staff and sent it flying.

That must be a condensed mass of power. I'll be in for a bad time if it hits me.

Kagura kicked off the floor, caught her khakkhara staff, and knocked down more approaching hands with her spells. She used barriers to block the rest.

Hmm. So if it isn't the mist itself, it can't reflect or destroy my mana.

While Kagura was thoroughly probing the properties of the hands, her barrier suddenly burst open. A black hand shot forth for her once more. She dodged and put up another barrier, but it shattered instantly when the hands—approaching like a

school of fish—touched it. Seeing that, Kagura understood one thing.

I had a feeling, but it looks like there are mist hands among them.

The black hands created by dharmic magic hid some hands of black mist. The dharmic ones could be shot down with spells, but the mist ones would reflect them. The mist hands could be deflected using the khakkhara staff, but the dharmic ones would deflect it. The strategy was simple, but quite difficult to handle.

Still, Kagura was unfazed. She kept her distance and gazed at the writhing mass of hands for a moment before affixing a talisman to the tip of her staff.

"If physical attacks won't work, then I'll smack you with magic!" With her face set in a serious expression, she whipped around and ran toward the black hands, swinging her staff wildly as fire burned on the tip. Everywhere it went, the black hands dispersed. "It's super-effective!"

The power of the snow-white weapon combined with her magic, blowing hands of both varieties away.

After watching Kagura fight for a while from her perch in midair, the Oni Princess seemed to become annoyed at her lack of progress. She spread her arms wide again. "You've lasted longer than I expected. But you will regret making me use my dharmic magic!"

"Don't bother trying that again." Realizing that her opponent would try to use dharma, Kagura immediately tossed a talisman straight up into the air. It transformed into Tweetsuke, who flew high up above, created an enormous fireball, and fired it at the princess, who was still preparing her magic.

The fireball swallowed the Oni Princess with even more intensity than the initial [Three Measures—Scarlet]. The air was heated to scorching, and their surroundings smoldered—for only a moment.

"What's the matter? You expect this to burn me?" As the Oni Princess spoke, black lines shot through the flames and tore them apart. Despite the blaze that had engulfed her, the mist-clad princess was unharmed. Worse, an eerie black figure stood behind her and continued the preparations for her dharmic spell.

But Kagura paid that no mind. It seemed clear now that the princess couldn't reflect

shikigami attacks. Kagura murmured, “Then how about this?” She swapped places with Tweetsuke up above and swung her burning white khakkhara down on the oni.

The attack from above was a perfect ambush. The Oni Princess had no time to evade—the staff pierced the black figure and mist before smashing into the princess’s head. Kagura’s staff rang like a clamorous bell, even louder than the princess’s scream. She landed lightly on her feet and beheld her target, surveying the damage.

“Grgh... Insolent whelp...” A drop of blood dripped out of the princess’s mouth as she opened her eyes ominously and glared at Kagura. Thanks to the khakkhara, the mist around her had thinned considerably, and the dharmic figure she’d created was gone.

So her body isn’t well defended, as long as you can reach it.

Deprived of some of her strength and clearly wounded, the Oni Princess looked like a little girl putting up a strong front. Her observation complete, Kagura jumped high up to retreat once more.

The princess seized this opportunity to fire off a hunk of mist and screamed, “You won’t escape me!”

Just then, a great blaze tore toward her again. This one was an attack from Tweetsuke, who had flown into her blind spot. Kagura smacked the mist away with her staff and watched the flames hit her enemy. When they finally calmed, the Oni Princess was revealed. Perhaps because of how thin the mist was, the fire seemed to have had an effect—her clothes were singed in multiple places.

Without the mist, the spells seem to work fine.

Even the spells that the black mist had nullified would work as long as they touched the princess herself. Kagura was led to one conclusion.

She now had a good grasp of her foe’s abilities. She appraised the Oni Princess’s power aloud: “I see. So basically, you’re only especially strong against spirits.”

Oni curses could nullify spirits’ power and spells alike, on top of myriad other effects. They served as the core of Chimera Clausen’s power, allowing them to trounce countless enemies with ease. However, even things that seemed all-powerful came with weaknesses—many of them fatal.

"You mean to make a fool out of me... Enough! I will see your soul shattered into dust!" The Oni Princess screamed demonically and tore off the burned portions of her clothing. Her pale-white skin was scorched in many places, proving that Tweetsuke's fire had successfully hurt her. But when she slid a hand clad in black mist over the burns, they disappeared and returned her skin to its eerie, glossy state.

So she can heal herself too? Guess I'll have to wear her down.

The oni's form was dyed black, and mist began to spew forth from all over. But there seemed to be a limit to its reach—when it spread too far, it thinned out and turned gray. Nevertheless, it blocked Kagura's vision, putting her at a disadvantage.

The medium ran forward without hesitation. Mist formed walls to block her path, but she smacked them down with her khakkara. She was surrounded, but she kept striding forward until she arrived at the mass of mist in the center of it all.

Kagura stabbed her khakkara into the mass.

"Oops!" She yanked it out, sliced through a misty snake that chased her, and jumped back to put distance between them again.

The Oni Princess's voice came from seemingly nowhere. "I -almost had you. You have good intuition, girl."

Countless thread-like black shadows writhed in the dispersing mass of mist. They were strings tied by dharmic power, blacker than anything Kagura had seen yet and so tough that they couldn't be broken by the magic-covered khakkara. When Kagura tried, they stuck to the khakkara and tore the attached talisman apart.

The mist surging in the room gathered into one spot. Kagura followed it with her eyes and spotted the Oni Princess, who was now in the very back of the throne room. She was able to control Kagura's field of view to hide her movement and set traps. It was a basic, yet effective strategy.

"So you're getting serious now. That was close," Kagura murmured calmly as she attached a new talisman to her staff.

"That staff seems to be some kind of special item. Perhaps I ought to break it next time," the princess said. The mist gathering around her gradually took form, becoming thicker and thicker. The dharmic strings and shadowy figures oozing from the Oni

Princess mixed in as well until, a few seconds later, she held an enormous obsidian sword that was blacker than pitch darkness.

“With that thing, I bet you could...”

Based on the creation process, Kagura could surmise that the sword was a combination of black mist and dharmic magic. But the weapon seemed magnitudes stronger than anything yet, leaving Kagura unsure whether her Alabaster Oni-Slayer could stand up to it.

“You are the first to make me use this. Allow me to compliment you on a job well done. As a reward, I promise to use your body to its fullest as a vessel.”

If that thing struck Kagura, it would kill her instantly. The look on Kagura’s face made it clear what she was thinking, prompting a fearless smirk from the Oni Princess in return.

“Vessel...? Aww, are you trying to give up that adorable body for mine?”

The Oni Princess was the vengeful ghost possessing that unknown little girl. If she claimed that she would use Kagura as a vessel, then Kagura’s assumption was the natural one.

“Heh heh... That’s not all.”

What the Oni Princess explained next was far more serious and terrifying than Kagura had imagined. She claimed that human bodies were oddly compatible with the oni race. Humans were also more fertile and plentiful than oni. Thus, the easiest and most convenient way to revive the oni race would be to use a human body as a vessel.

The Oni Princess flashed a twisted, ecstatic grin. “Once the spirits have met their end, I will give my kind new flesh, and we will rule this world once more. We will begin with the people in the city created by spirits’ power. My children’s souls are already prepared; all that’s left is to let the power of the spirits run wild and turn the surface into a mountain of soulless shells.”

“So that’s your organization’s... no, your goal.” The boss of Chimera Clausen, the Oni Princess, didn’t just want revenge on the spirits. She wanted to bring back the extinct oni race.

A world with spirits extinct and subjected to the oni's desire to devour nature would have no future. The Oni Princess's schemes could not come to fruition. Determined to put a stop to it once and for all, Kagura faced the princess and her terrible sword.

"Too bad, though. I'm ready to fight now." Kagura tossed her khakkhara aside and took a single talisman in hand, pouring vast mana into it. The talisman emitted faint light—this was stronger than any of the magic she'd used yet.

"I know not what you plan to do, but you're mistaken if you think it will work against this sword!" When the Oni Princess raised her hand, the black blade shot from her hand like an arrow. The Oni Princess steered its flight, and the sword flew forward, clad in spell-resistant black mist, with its features fully magnified. Even the highest-class magic could be nullified if the mana used to construct it was destroyed.

"To celebrate your accomplishment as my first human vessel, why don't I make you my attendant?" The sword flew, changing trajectory in accordance with the princess's hand movements.

Kagura jumped swiftly out of its way, talisman still in hand. It followed, she evaded. "This thing's stronger than I expected."

The black sword shook the mountain with each strike as it flew about, shattering everything it touched in pursuit of Kagura. Tweetsuke laid down some backup fire, but it was no help. Each time Kagura dodged and the sword collided into something, it slowly but surely narrowed its lead.

Keeping one eye on that five-meter-long sword, Kagura searched her surroundings. When she looked around, she realized that the distance between her and the Oni Princess was growing greater. Meanwhile, Tweetsuke had shrunk to the size of a sparrow and approached the princess from above.

After Kagura had evaded the sword's flight path a few more times, Tweetsuke arrived above the Oni Princess. Just as the sword gouged into the floor again, fire boomed. Kagura had switched places with Tweetsuke. Using the confusion of the moment to appear above the Oni Princess without a sound, she held out her mana-infused talisman.

The Oni Princess gazed at the blazing flames for a moment—but then, she turned her face upward with a wicked, gleeful grin.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice you?!" Her red eyes opened wide as she raised both hands. Countless chunks of black mist and black hands closed in on Kagura. She had no way to evade; she was at the mercy of gravity—or so one might think.

"Nope!" Kagura replied and activated the spell within the talisman. Powerful winds whipped up, sending her high again just before the black mist and hands could seize her. She looked as if she were taunting the princess. Kagura's answer seemed to contradict her actions. Her foe frowned.

But just then, something broke through the oni's black mist protection and slammed into her head. "What?!" The Oni Princess screeched and fell to the floor.

"If you were wearing that spirit gear you all love so much, you might've saved yourself from that." Kagura kept her eyes on her adversary, landed lightly on her feet, and picked up the khakkara staff she'd struck her with.

Soul Dispatch, the culmination of medium techniques and shikigami technology, allowed Kagura to fully control any shikigami or any item with a shikigami attached to it. She had used this to manipulate the white khakkara into attacking the Oni Princess from her blind spot.

However, Kagura didn't stop there.

She whipped out a talisman and sprinted over, reaching the tottering princess in no time and punching her directly in the stomach. "This is for Multicolor!"

Another scream, this one more like a sob, fell from the princess's lips.

Kagura still didn't stop. She admonished her foe as she swung her hand down, slapping the Oni Princess on the cheek this time. "This is for Lecia!"

There was an explosive, painful sound accompanied by a little girl's scream as the princess went flying and fell weakly to the ground. Her pale-white cheek was red and swollen now, and a single talisman was attached to it. Watching as the Oni Princess struggled and writhed with trembling limbs, Kagura finally said coldly, "And this one is for all spiritkind!" She readied her khakkara, which also had a talisman attached.

The air itself shook. The talismans that had scattered on the ground after their shikigami were defeated now rose thanks to Soul Dispatch, surrounding the Oni Princess. All six of them reacted to Kagura's mana, becoming cores that would

manifest new shikigami.

[*Shikigami Invocation: Seven-Star Withering*]

The moment Kagura cast her spell, the talismans gleamed for an instant and turned into six orbs of light of six colors. They formed a pentagonal, pyramid-shaped barrier around the Oni Princess.

Inside, the oni had healed herself with dharmic power and stood, attempting to use her black mist to wrench the barrier open. But her injuries made it a struggle to move, leaving her black mist to wander aimlessly.

At a glance, Kagura's spell was like a cage made from a barrier. But that wasn't quite right.

"Star of Alkaid, reveal the ways of nature. Bring to my hands the curse-breaking sword."

This was no cage; it was but a stage meant to help the main actor shine. For the Seven-Star Withering had not yet shown its seven stars.

The khakkhara in Kagura's hand began to glow in pulses. The talisman on it was clad in rainbow light that slowly enveloped the staff itself. Finally, the staff became the Seven-Star Sword, into which Kagura infused her power.

"Prepare yourself," she said, putting all of her feelings into those words as she held the sword overhead. Then, she clenched it tightly with both hands and smashed it down into the barrier.

It was like watching a shower of cherry blossom petals dancing in the sunlight. When the Seven-Star Sword sliced through the barrier, a pillar of light formed and swirled violently, showering its surroundings with brilliant particles of light.

CHAPTER 28

AFTER DEFEATING the spirit chimera and indulging Eizenfald

for a while, Mira met up with Second Company seizing Chimera HQ along with Cyril. She and Cyril left Gregorius with the support troops and continued onward together.

In the final room, they found Kagura cradling a naked girl in her arms.

“It seems the fight is over,” Mira said.

Evidence of an intense battle littered the whole chamber, painting a vivid image of the fight that had just unfolded here. Mira felt the traces of their struggle as she stood next to Kagura’s side and looked down upon the girl in her arms. Fair skin, slender arms and legs. She didn’t look strong in any way, but the scars of battle were fresh on her.

“Yeah, well, half-over,” said Kagura.

“Hmm? Half, you say?” Mira had presumed this was the boss of Chimera Clausen. She furrowed her brow at Kagura’s unsatisfying answer. What did she mean by that?

“I was able to chase her out, but after that...” Kagura said with a sigh. She looked toward the back of the room, where a rhomboid black fragment lay on the ground. Just looking at it sent a palpable chill down their spines. Mira and Cyril gazed at it from afar and offered their impressions.

“It’s not black mist ore, is it? It’s... thick.”

“Agreed. It’s... very off-putting, isn’t it?”

It was a bit longer than a finger and shrouded in mist, just like black mist ore. But it seemed far more ominous than anything they’d seen yet.

“That used to be her horns,” Kagura said to the wary duo and let out another big sigh. According to her, the little girl was only being possessed. The true identity of Chimera Clausen’s boss was the vengeful ghost that had formed as a result of so many curses.

As for the ghost itself, Kagura had expelled it from the girl's body with her special move. This move was the ultimate technique of mediums, [Seven-Star Withering: Altair]. It had the effect of drawing out a weapon's capabilities to the fullest and magnifying them by tens of times. With its aid, even a weak fire-elemental sword could unleash a blow rivaling that of demonic swords' hidden techniques. Kagura had used it to magnify her Alabaster Oni-Slayer weapon's power to drive off the vengeful ghost.

She'd annihilated the ghost, but the two black horns had fallen from the girl's head and fused into one on the floor.

"I dunno how to put this... I guess that thing is probably, like, crystallized oni curses. They went dormant due to the death of the vengeful ghost, which is why they fell off of her, I guess?" Though small, the black fragment had a terrifying presence. Even Kagura didn't seem to know too much about it, and the confidence gradually faded from her words. One thing was certain, though: it couldn't be left alone.

"Oni curses, hm? Can't ignore that," Mira mumbled as she gazed at the fragment.

Cyril stepped forward. "They devour spirits, after all. Someone might use it for evil, so I'd like to see it dealt with, but..." He whipped out his Alabaster Oni-Slayer sword and struck at the fragment. "Figures. This is nothing like what we've dealt with so far."

His swift strike had lost all momentum the moment it touched the black mist. However, Cyril had already assumed that they wouldn't be able to break through it that easily. He watched how the fragment reacted to the attack and slowly sheathed his sword.

"That's right. I even tried hitting it with another Altair, and it didn't do a thing." Kagura turned to look at her khakkhara staff, which lay mangled on the floor. Since Altair pushed a weapon to its limit, its power came with a hefty toll.

Yet even that had failed to destroy the black fragment. After Kagura sighed for the third time in consternation, Mira suddenly spoke up. "Hrmm... Then why don't I try something?"

When she saw Mira approaching the fragment, Kagura stammered in surprise, "Gramp—Mira, what's going on?"

Cyril turned around, eyes wide, and murmured, "This is..."

Their surprise was not unwarranted—the pattern of the Spirit King's blessing glowed in pulses all over Mira's body.

"I told you about the Spirit King, did I not? This is the mark of his blessing. I've been like this since the moment you swung your sword a moment ago. It seems the blessing reacted to the oni power." Mira walked up, stopped in front of the black fragment, and summoned Holy Sword Sanctia as casually as she would any other summon. "The Spirit King told me that his power, combined with the true power of this holy sword, can exterminate oni curses."

Mira gazed upon the symbols etched all over her and felt the flow of the Spirit King's power. She understood the meaning of it clearly now. Mira pointed the tip of the holy sword at the black fragment. "You said this was the crystallization of oni curses. Well, that was half-correct. It's strange, but I feel the Spirit King's wisdom pouring into me through his blessing. It seems this is the oni's raw power."

"Their raw power? How is that different from a curse?" Kagura cocked her head at Mira's words, but it seemed even the person who'd said it hadn't quite grasped all of this new knowledge.

"Don't ask me," Mira replied, as if it wasn't her problem. "Regardless, I believe this falls to me." Mira raised the holy sword and focused on the sensation of power flowing through the blessing. Strangely, she knew how to use the power now. In response to the pulsing of the Spirit King's blessing, the holy sword began to emit light as well. It was like a lighthouse, a guiding beacon that tore through the darkness and brought relief to those who looked upon it.

Mira swung the sword down. There was no technique involved; she just casually let gravity take the lead. Yet the arc of it gleamed like a master's sword swing, and it homed in on the black fragment. Dazzling light burst forth. Without a sound, without impact, it bleached their surroundings a pure white.

Kagura and Cyril had to shut their eyes, but only for a moment. Before they knew it, the light had contracted. The symbols on Mira and the holy sword winked out, their job complete.

One more thing had disappeared as well: the black fragment.

Just in case, Kagura gently put the girl down and ran over to where the black fragment

had lain. "Did it work?" On closer inspection, the disquieting presence from before was no longer there.

She couldn't say she was used to it yet, but Mira was beginning to get the hang of the effects of the Spirit King's blessing. The sensation of it told her that the cause of all this, the oni power, was indeed, gone. So she flashed Kagura a smile and replied, "It certainly felt like it did. And as you can see, the mark of the blessing is gone. I'd say it worked perfectly."

"Does that mean it's really over now?"

"Indeed. You fought well."

"...Yeah." Mira's reassuring words and easy demeanor brought relief to Kagura, who relaxed like a taut string given slack. She gazed off into the distance. The leader of Isuzu was the image of a flower blooming on the battlefield, fragile yet vivacious, with the promise of a budding future.

CHAPTER 29

AFTER SETTLING THINGS with the elite of Chimera Clausen,

Mira, Kagura, and Cyril left the rest to the conquering army who'd just arrived in the final room. The trio decamped to the surface, coming out at the peak of a great rocky mountain. As expected of Chimera, a thorough investigation of the final chamber had revealed a hidden exit. That seemed natural given their methods, as they would be cornered rats if attacked without an escape hatch.

Kagura contacted each unit. After hearing the last one's report, she answered, "Okay, got it. Thanks. Get some good rest." With that, she hung up.

"How were things? No issues anywhere?"

"Nope. Lots of wounded, but no deaths. It's a flawless victory for us!"

Worry had found its way onto Kagura's face many times throughout the reports, but now, she smiled wider than ever. The trio had fought a very localized fight, but when one looked at the full scale of today's battle, it was akin to a small war. Yet despite it all, they had miraculously suffered no losses.

However, that casualty figure didn't include the Chimera forces. Kagura didn't mention it, but Chimera had many deaths. One might say that they were necessary losses to attain this victory; after all, that was the common view of war in this world. It was almost dawn now, and the starry sky was beginning to lighten. Whether intentional or not, Kagura didn't touch on this last point much as she summarized each unit's report.

First, after Emella's group and the First Company had successfully seized the control center, they took over a hundred spirits captured below into protective custody. Emella had apparently been quite excited to destroy the black mist ore-forged prison with her Alabaster Oni-Slayer sword.

The spirits were badly weakened, but they were alive. The spirits who'd helped Isuzu in tonight's battle would share some of their spiritual power with their brethren and take them into their care.

Indeed, spirits had helped in this battle. Humans had protected them from Chimera's anti-spirit weapons, while the spirits used all of their power to support their human allies. Arrows could be deflected by spirits' wind, and magic could do nothing in the face of spirits' power. If the enemy took up black mist ore to fight them, human soldiers would block their way. They had come out with no losses in no small part because of the spirits' aid.

Isuzu's main goal had been to eliminate the evil known as Chimera Clausen, but they'd managed to rescue some spirits before they were sacrificed as well. That was good news.

"So we've managed to save a few? Well, now my effort feels worthwhile." Mira grinned proudly.

"Agreed. I feel like I've contributed to society today." Cyril touched the red bell embroidered onto the hem of his coat and closed his eyes in prayer.

The next report Kagura shared was the one from Mira's friends. "Oh, yeah! Scorpion and Snake did just fine too."

Defeating Chimera wasn't the only midnight mission in play. Isuzu's other goal had been to set Melville Commerce's downfall in motion.

Scorpion and Snake had taken the Trinity Church's inter-national legal affairs official and knights to a Melville Commerce storage facility and forced their way in to investigate the place in the name of the law. They succeeded in arresting Melville's people, who were flustered over the sudden nighttime appearance of the official, and confirmed that black mist ore weapons were being stored there.

After confiscating the evidence, Scorpion and Snake's team encircled Melville Commerce. Elvis Melville himself was in such a sleepy daze that he had no idea what was going on. Sleepy or not, he was arrested for conspiring with Chimera Clausen. The firm's assets were seized as well.

Those with ties to the company were to appear in court and forbidden from leaving, and all Melville facilities were shut down. They would be investigated in the coming days. On top of the firm evidence of the weapons, the testimony yielded by witness Johan would certainly lead to the dissolution of Melville Commerce. Their assets would be forfeited to the state—which meant that they would belong to Ebates

Commerce, now next in line for the throne, before long.

"Satisfying, right?" Kagura mused. It was almost a guarantee that Melville Commerce was done for. She then coldly murmured, "Serves them right."

Regardless of their success, it had been revealed that the leading firm of Roslein was conspiring with the world's greatest criminals. This would no doubt throw the country into chaos; even the most innocent citizen might be affected. This worried Mira. "Still, after such a major upheaval, this country's sure to be in turmoil for a while. Will they be okay?" she asked.

"Our guild plans to dispatch some personnel, but all we can really do is hope they do their best," Cyril said. "If we'd let Chimera get their roots even deeper, things would've been even more of a mess. Let's call it... ripping the bandage off. If we're too hesitant to make the hard choices, then we'll never get anywhere. We don't have to act like heroes; we're more like doctors. It'll hurt, but it's a healing hurt." He spoke sadly, perhaps because he'd seen and experienced things like this many times by now, yet he remained dignified. In the end, he smiled. They weren't here to force justice on people; they were simply following their own convictions. If that helped people in the process, then they couldn't ask for anything more. Cyril had arrived at this principle after many years of struggle.

"Mm, fair. All we can do is pray that they find a better future," Mira agreed.

"Yeah. It's up to them now," Kagura said.

The three narrowed their eyes and smiled at the day's first light stretching through the mountains. This morning's sun seemed to shine differently than any other, making them truly feel the coming of this new day.

"...Crap, I left them all asleep!" Kagura shouted out of nowhere, ruining the mood. When asked what she meant, she revealed that she'd left all of the government workers from their initial infiltration asleep.

"Ah... Right, you put those talismans on their heads," Mira recalled.

The door to the hidden tunnel leading to Chimera HQ was in a particular government facility. It had security, along with a few graveyard shift employees.

Mira, Kagura, and Cyril alone had entered without being detected, but the larger force

entered after them in order to fully conquer the base. Because they had prioritized stealth, Kagura had put everyone in the facility to sleep. Even worse, it was a spell cast by a Wise Man. None but her could undo it. Employees coming in for the morning shift would find the midnight shift all in a sleep from which they couldn't be roused... They might end up panicking.

"So, uh, I gotta run. Now. You two go meet up with the detached force, all right? I've already told them our next steps, so go wild!" Kagura climbed onto Tweetsuke and called out, "Oh, and thanks for all the help!" Then, she flew off toward Sentopoli.

"No sense of decorum..." Mira grumbled.

"Nope. Maybe that's exactly what we need, though," Cyril joked.

They'd just accomplished a historical feat in defeating the spirit-hunting Chimera Clausen, but these final moments felt almost silly.

"Things always turn out like this when she's involved," Mira muttered with a wry grin.

"I happen to like it," Cyril replied with a smile. As Kagura disappeared into the distance, he suddenly spoke up, "By the way, Mira?"

"Hm? What?" Mira turned around, smiling from a tinge of nostalgia.

Cyril smiled back and warned her, "You make it sound as if you and Wise Man Kagura are old friends, you know."

What was that supposed to mean? After a moment's silence, Mira finally realized her mistake and froze for a second. She then slowly, fearfully looked up at Cyril. There was yet another silence until she finally said, "You... seem like... you already knew that..." Then, she slumped over from despair.

"Given your strength, it's not too hard to narrow down candidates. If you mean to hide your identity, then you might want to be a little more careful. Only former players would see through it, so you'll be fine as long as you keep that in mind."

Former players could discern whether others were former players by examining them, and naturally, they knew of the existence of Vanity Cases. Not to mention, the Nine Wise Men were extremely famous among players. Given all these pieces of information, it wasn't exactly impossible to trace the facts and deduce Mira's identity. Vanity Cases

could change not just appearance but sex as well. It was like a perfect disguise—but it was only half as effective when people knew of its existence, especially when one's original identity was famous. Now that he mentioned it, it all made sense to Mira.

"Hrmm... Thank you for the warning. But how long have you known...?" she asked unhappily.

Cyril looked guilty for a moment and replied, "Well, I'd thought it might be possible since the day we first met."

"Goodness... You're saying you already had an inkling? That was fast... You could've said something, you know." Mira recalled their first meeting. She remembered Cyril had said something along the lines of, You aren't Danblf, are you? The thought of it made her chuckle to herself.

"I didn't have any proof, after all. Besides, you seemed to be hiding it, so I opted to earn your trust and ask you directly later on." Cyril didn't want to expose her secrets, but to be an ally with which she could share them.

"You are quite difficult to deal with, you know," Mira said with a grin. She turned to face Cyril once more, and cleared her throat once. She then proudly puffed out her chest and declared, "Mira, pupil of a Wise Man, is but a fake identity. For I am Wise Man Danblf himself!" Mira punctuated this statement with a desperate pose.

"Sure. Thank you for telling me that. I promise that I'll share this information with no one. Though, I feel like you could've said it a little more normally..."

"It's just too embarrassing if I don't do this..." Danblf had used a Vanity Case to create the beauty known as Mira. Which would wound her less: to say that with a serious look or to try and push through it with pizzazz? Unfortunately, the world might never know.

"Anyway, let's meet up with the others as Kagura directed," Mira suggested. She surveyed the rocky terrain around them. After a moment, she pulled up her map and checked their current location and their destination. "That way. Shall we?" After summoning Pegasus and climbing onto its back, Mira pointed behind her and offered, "You may sit here."

"...Sure. Thanks for the ride," Cyril said. After looking around and shuddering slightly, he put a hand on Pegasus and hopped up behind Mira.

On Mira's signal, the horse flapped its wings and ascended. Cyril wrapped his arms tightly around Mira.

"Is someone afraid of heights?" Mira asked, feeling his arms trembling.

"Well, I'm not exactly a fan..." He grinned mirthlessly and decided to keep his eyes fixed straight ahead.

"I see, I see..."

An unexpected weakness. Mira smirked at how tightly Cyril clung to her as Pegasus galloped through the air. They were like a prince and princess riding the holy beast through the sky, though the trembling prince and unconcerned princess were not exactly according to script.

They soared over the rocky mountains for some time, the morning wind blowing against them cool and comforting. Before long, their destination would come into view. It was then that Mira realized something was off. "The thought just occurred to me. Why did Kagura ride Tweetsuke? It wouldn't be able to go at maximum speed due to wind resistance if she rode it. If she's in such a hurry, she should've sent Tweetsuke first and then switched places with it, no?"

If Kagura needed to get back as quickly as possible, then Mira's proposed method would probably be fastest. Tweetsuke's maximum speed allowed it to go from the westernmost city in the continent to the center in only six hours, making it over 200 kilometers per hour. It would take less than ten minutes to get from here to Sentopoli.

However, Kagura had opted to ride Tweetsuke there. Kagura wasn't someone who would overlook the difference in efficiency, so Mira found herself confused. But Cyril seemed to understand. He gazed off into the distance and said, "I think she wanted to be alone for just a little while."

* * *

In the skies above the rocky mountain range, Sentopoli was just a dark smudge in the distance. Kagura rode Tweetsuke and contacted Mizar, who had led the siege on the control center.

"Say, Mizar. Was Lecia there?" Kagura asked. Lecia was the wind spirit who had extended a helping hand to Kagura when she'd arrived, confused, in this world. She

was also the reason that Kagura had established the Isuzu Alliance. Kagura's ultimate goal had always been to save Lecia from Chimera's clutches.

Mizar's team had found a prison holding the abducted spirits under the control center. Kagura had hoped that Lecia was there.

"She wasn't," Mizar said bitterly. "I asked the spirits we saved, but... unfortunately, they didn't know." He knew Kagura's wish, so the moment they'd discovered the spirits, he had asked around about Lecia. That was when Mizar learned the unfortunate truth.

"Oh... Well, is there anywhere else? Do they have spirits locked up in any other places?"

"No... We interrogated every single Chimera member in the base, but they all said there weren't any others. A prison to contain spirits takes some unusual construction, and it supposedly won't function unless it's close to ley lines like this place was."

A prison made to contain beings who controlled the power of nature had to be special, which made it difficult to set up multiple. Thus, all captured spirits had been sent to the prison below the control center. If a spirit wasn't here, then there was only one other option.

"But, you know... Maybe she escaped along the way there or something. Maybe... she's hiding somewhere far away..." Mizar tried desperately to console Kagura, but his voice began to falter, fading into quiet as he did his best to smile. In the end, he felt bad trying to make her believe something that even he couldn't.

They knew from years of fighting Chimera that they weren't the kind to let their captives get away that easily. Their methods up to this point had been watertight. That was why Isuzu had failed to so much as grab their tail all this time, and why Mizar's words incited more despair than hope.

"Yeah... You're right. Thanks, Mizar. Anyway, Mira and Cyril should be on their way there, so good luck with your next mission." Kagura's voice sounded cheerful once more. Anyone could tell that she was putting on a strong front, but Mizar did his best to respond firmly, "Heh. We'll make our entrance a grand one."

After cutting the connection, Kagura gazed at the city of Sentopoli, lit by the rising sun in the distance, and murmured to herself, "Sorry, I was too late..."

Finally, tears began to flow uncontrollably down her cheeks.

Was it regret or guilt? Kagura cried as she thought of her friends Lecia and Multicolor, who she'd spent only one night with. Her cheeks turned red, and she wailed like a child.

Her sorrowful voice echoed through the empty sky, distant and alone.



EX

INHERITED HOPES

BY DAWN, the battle that had begun at midnight at the control center ended with the Isuzu Alliance's total victory.

While the alliance members gathered on the main battlefield, Meimei remained alone at the site to the north where Glad and Zell had fought to the death.

Traces of a fierce battle were engraved in the earth. Meimei took a good look at each one until she gazed at the place where it had ended. All that remained were burned clothing, a bloody dagger, and a broken pair of glasses. Not far away were a cracked crossbow and a sword hilt with a snapped blade. Meimei recalled that hilt—it was Glad's beloved sword.

She slowly approached and picked up the hilt, searching for the rest of the sword. The broken blade lay nearby, next to a robe covered in black soot.

"Hm. Evenly matched."

The ash smoldering in that singed robe told Meimei that Glad had gotten the revenge he'd sought. From the fact that he hadn't returned, and from the scene before her, she could likewise tell that both of them had fought to their last, until they were both dust.

"Liar. We never got to spar."

Meimei sat down next to Glad's burned robes and puffed out her cheeks, pouting, as she looked at his glasses. She then began recounting, as if speaking to a friend, her battle with the giant weapon and some of the Isuzu Alliance work she'd seen along the way.

* * *

"...They say there aren't any more bad people to bully the spirits. You don't have to worry anymore."

The fight with the Chimera Clausen elites, the extermination of the Oni Princess who founded that evil organization... Meimei had a decent grasp of the situation based on some conversations with the people from Isuzu. After reporting to Glad, Meimei stood up and walked toward the other burned robe—the remains of Zell. “It’s coming from this direction.”

Meimei held out the rosary, releasing the spirit held within the robe: Altinea. The rosary shuddered, and pale light rose from the robe as it crumbled completely into ash. After seeing the light off, Meimei stood before the remnants of Glad once more.

“I’ll take this, along with your hopes,” Meimei said gently to the rosary Glad had treasured, an item that freed the power and souls of spirits.

Chimera Clausen may have been defeated, but the items they created lingered in the world. They still contained the trapped powers and souls of lost spirits.

Glad had told Meimei that he wanted to save all of those spirits after he got his revenge. Now that she had chosen to inherit his rosary and the hopes within, she looked up to the sky and smiled cheerfully. “Thank you. The food was delicious!”

From the moment they met until now, Glad had treated Meimei to three meals a day. She must have enjoyed them quite a bit. She screamed those parting words into the sky and began running off in the direction the rosary next indicated.

Releasing the sacrificed spirits would be no small task, but Meimei called this a part of her endless training. No doubt she’d have it done in no time.

AFTERWORD

HEY, SO, we're at the afterword. And you can never forget to thank people in your afterword, right?

First, to my readers who have bought this book, thank you! I get to continue eating delicious foods thanks to you all. Every day, I dream that my success will continue on to tomorrow and the next day.

Next, thank you to everyone involved in the release of this book. So many people really do help create the finished product. It's kind of incredible!

And my biggest thanks to fuzichoco, who always provides us with such wonderful illustrations. Oh, but let me be clear: the frontispiece and insert illustrations are always so great because it's my editor calling the shots rather than me. Goodness, what could drive a person to order such sexy illustrations from fuzichoco? Goodness. Certainly not me. (Aww, yeah, keep it up!)

Ahem! Next, dicca*suemitsu. They've taken up the task of adapting this series into a manga. I'm always so excited to see their rendition of things. Also regarding the manga, its second volume will be released alongside this eighth volume! Make sure you buy that too.

Now, we're finally at Volume 8. This marks the end of the long battle with Chimera Clausen. Even I thought, Hey, this is getting pretty long, as I was writing it... but they were all necessary parts, so I couldn't cut ANYTHING out! Heck, I started adding even more!

Thank you so much for sticking with it until the end. Listen, now: There maaay be some parts of this... that influence... future events. I hope you'll keep an eye on coming volumes for just that.

Incidentally... those who have listened to the second drama CD might have noticed something strange in this volume. That would be the scene where Eizenfeld is summoned.

Eizenfeld sulks when he's summoned. These events take place in the drama CD as well,

but his attitude there is different. There are actually some reasons that I left this scene as is.

I'd considered changing things a bit here to match the drama CD, where Eizenfeld is happy and excited to have his opportunity to shine. But if I did that, those who hadn't listened to the drama CD might be confused by his sudden change. Why would he not care that he'd been neglected again, right?

That would seem out-of-character for such a mama's boy. His mother had promised him, yet she still didn't summon him. Sulking is the natural thing to do. If Eizenfeld was more tolerant, I might've revised the scene to make his feelings a little more ambiguous. But that doesn't seem right as things are, so I've gone with preserving the book storyline here.

If you did listen to the second drama CD, just rewrite your memory a little bit for me. Eizenfeld is excited to be summoned again, and Mira warns him not to cause too much damage. When he sees Christina, the dragon reminds her of how much fun their last meeting was. Christina had reported this to Alfina as a major battle filled with many allied summons. But now, she cringes uncomfortably.

When Alfina questions further, Eizenfeld answers honestly. It turns out they were just playing with Mira back then. Christina is sad—her next week of training will be twice as harsh as usual.

Oh, by the way! Sorry to change the subject, but I started a diet in June. As of the writing of this afterword, I've managed to slim down enough to use the next hole on my belt!

My secret? Soybeans. Deep-fried tofu for dinner. Cold tofu as a between-meal snack if I get hungry. If I get acid reflux, soy milk. And I throw in boiled eggs, cheese, and the like here and there for flavor.

But apparently, if you diet for more than two weeks straight, your body goes into survival mode, and it gets harder to lose weight. To avoid that, I have one cheat day a week. That day is for roast pork ribs and donburi bowls! Despite indulging once a week, I'm still losing weight at a good rate. But maybe that's just because I was pretty heavy before...

I'm not very stressed about it, though. This probably isn't related to the diet itself, but

I've been having acid reflux, which means I don't get to eat chocolate... That's rough, because I love chocolate.

We're shooting for under eighty kilograms!

Oh, there's a bonus for people who fill out the survey. It's kind of like a sequel story, so check it out if you'd like!

Well, goodbye! May we meet again in the next volume!



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